

Lost Magic

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Lost Magic

by [ChaosreigN](#)

Summary

In a world where magic was locked away years ago, Lucy Heartfilia runs away to a boarding school in order to escape her abusive workaholic father. There she discovers she may just be the one able to unlock the door and let magic flow through the world again. There's gonna be blood, maybe some gore, and eventually a whole lot of nalu with a few other pairings if i can fit them in!

Chapter 1

Lucy

“Long ago,” momma started, voice a little soft as she looked at me, “there was magic in the world.”

“Real magic momma?” I jumped up onto her bed, holding my sewn mermaid doll to my heart, eyes big.

“Real magic. It was spread all across Fiore, and almost anyone could learn to use it. You couldn't take a step without the power flowing through your body. Magic did wonderful things, making the lives of everyone easier.” her voice shook, like jello but sad. “There were those that were born with the gift, Mages and Wizards with long lives that had lots of adventures and traveled everywhere and anywhere to help those in need. And then there were bad people, as there always are, that would make life worse for others. The good Mages would fight against the bad, and do everything they could to keep others safe.”

“I bet the good guys were wonderful!” I bounced on the edge of momma's bed and she laughed, but it sounded like it hurt.

“They certainly were,” momma agreed, my favorite smile on her pretty face. “But, not everyone is as they appear, dear Lucy. There was an evil man,” momma's voice was sad now. “He grew to hate the people of the world and that hate festered until there was nothing but one desire; to strip the happiness from everyone in Earthland away. So he found a Celestial Wizard and tricked her into opening a gate to the world of spirits. He slipped into the gate without anyone noticing and took control of the Celestial Spirit King.”

"The king's power was mighty and soon that evil wizard began using the king's power to destroy Earthland. However, the wizard's hold on the king was not eternal. The second the bond broke the king destroyed the wizard. In his fit of anger he locked away the magic of Earthland, punishing all of the wizards who were unable to stop the evil wizard."

“That star king did that?” I stopped jumping and frowned down at my mermaid doll, the symbol for momma's favorite stars sewn into her dress. “I thought he was a good guy momma.”

“The Celestial Spirit King is a very good man that had to make a very difficult decision. And one day baby, you too will have a difficult decision to make.”

“What kind?” I sat down, looking at momma very hard. Her pretty face was looking red and her voice was shaking again, going in and out a little. Momma's brown eyes focused on me, but they weren't as sparkly as they usually are. They were flat like crayon coloring and not like Momma's favorite stars.

“One day you will be given the choice to bring back magic and fix the mistake made long ago.”

“How long ago Momma?”

“Almost two hundred years,” Momma’s voice was soft and shaky, her eyes no longer looking at me. Her fingers dropped a key on the bed in front of me, it was gold with swirls coming off it, a door set into the handle. “Keep it safe, keep it hidden,” Momma leaned back against her pillows, fingers reaching out for the bell on her bedside table. She managed to knock it over and I jumped down from the bed to pick it up because Momma’s bell didn’t belong on the ground!

“Lucy, darling, I’m so sorry,” her voice was small as I placed the bell on the table, the noise from the shuffling of maids entering Momma’s room making it hard to hear. “Please fix the mistake I made. Remember I love you.” there was wet falling from Momma’s eyes as she pulled me close and kissed me, her lips cold against my forehead.

I was dragged away from her then, even though I kicked and screamed and fought. Momma’s key stayed safe in my hands.

Even when they wouldn’t let me see her. Even when they told me she was gone I kept it safe, hiding it between my mattresses or in my dollhouse with ‘Quaris, my mermaid, when I had to go to lessons.

I kept the thought of my mother and her soft words at the forefront of my mind as I did my best to ignore the pain radiating from my body. Tears streamed silently down my face as I dabbed at my smeared makeup, my ribs hurting from the discipline my father had meted out. My eyes dropped to the delicate gold chain around my throat, my thoughts flitting momentarily to the key hidden within my dress pressed tightly against my heart due to the corset I am currently stuffed inside.

I looked practically indecent in the ball gown, not nearly enough fabric covering my bosom which had caused the need for discipline in the first place. I shuddered at the thought of Lord Dan’s hands running up my waist to grab hold of the front of my dress. His touch made me feel vile, disgusting. I only acted accordingly,slapping his hand away as proprietary dictates.

Lord Dan was to be my betrothed. Lord Dan had a right to my body. The thought had my fingers trembling against the countertops, my father’s words seared into my brain.

I am a worthless girl.

My sole use is to further the Heartfilia name.

I am to provide an heir by Lord Dan.

I am to remain silent unless spoken to.

I am not to disobey my father's words.

Sometime after my mother's passing my father grew angry and distant, lashing out whenever he felt as though he were being disobeyed. The abuse had started soon after. His temper, unable to be controlled by mere words and screams any longer, was exercised with his fists. We soon grew distanced from each other, my father working himself tired until he felt the need to punish me harshly, and me refusing to bend to his will when his demands were made. Because that is what they were, demands not requests. And now I am to be married to a man much like him, with lecherous looks and wandering fingers.

I have to escape, to get out from underneath my father's thumb before he kills me. The aching from my ribs was testament to the power behind his controlled beating. What would happen if he snapped one day when no one else is around? And what of my *betroted*? Should he truly be like my father my life is on the line, the clock ticking against me.

My mother, Layla Heartfilia had been a strong and courageous woman, never backing down from a fight. I stared at my reflection in the mirror, trying to find the resemblance our maid Spetto spoke of so highly. Mother had been a fighter, the only thing to ever defeat her was death itself. If I could channel just a fraction of the willpower mother possessed I could do it. I could leave and never come back.

I did my best to keep my teeth from grinding as I applied powder to my reddened face. The ball to announce my engagement was still going on and I must attend to my duties. My brain was fuddled, filled with the desire to find a way out, an escape, but unable to focus on any single one as they were all so unlikely. Luckily my steps were even and sure as I made my way back to the main ballroom, passing hushed murmurs as I did. Little snippets of conversations, most about the opulence of the party, drifted to me, but one in particular stuck out to me. I slowed my steps as I neared the couple talking.

"Enrollment will be soon, I heard they have a very highly valued Business course load."

"Fiore University isn't just for Business classes you know," the girl giggled, eyes bright. "There are all sorts of classes available."

"Of course, but they say if you graduate from there with honors in business it makes running a company like my father's look like a breeze." They laughed and I continued on. I had heard of Fiore University, it is set hundreds of miles away near Crocus and is an esteemed academic academy. I had never had the opportunity to get proper schooling, only learning from tutors on things that would help a lady of my station. But a Business Degree, could my father refuse such an opportunity? It would look good on him, having a daughter graduate with a degree in Business, seeming willing and ready to take over his business. Docile and ready to put the family needs first.

It would also put me out of his immediate reach and allow me a modicum of freedom. Maybe even enough to escape!

I did my best to keep the excitement from my face as I approached my father. He stood with Lord Dan, an apologetic look upon his face. Of course it wasn't aimed towards me. Oh no, he was certainly apologizing for my behavior after than man practically mauled me.

I took a deep breath and let it out. Without thought I turned directly to my father, gaze steady to maintain eye contact.

“Father I just heard the most interesting tidbit of information,” I accepted a flute of champagne from a passing waiter, swirling the bubbling liquid as my father turned a frown towards me. “Fiore University has Business classes that would be most enlightening for my situation.”

“What situation,” he scoffed at me, face turning slightly red as if in warning. He must think I’m stupid enough to speak out against him in a room of his highly esteemed peers. While it *may* have the desired effect of having him ousted as a horrible father and abuser it is much more like it will only garner him sympathy.

“I simply don’t understand what it is you do for the company, the sacrifices that need be made. I feel the University could help me understand better, so that I may serve the greater good.” I sipped on the champagne as my words sunk in. Appealing to his need to *sacrifice* me may just be what I need to get out of here.

“I shall consider it.” was his gruff reply. I knew a dismissal when I heard one and bowed gracefully, ignoring the pain in my ribs before leaving his presence. Almost immediately I was swept away to dance, pulled around by nameless man after nameless man. My feet began aching hours ago and my side never truly stopped protesting the movement but soon I was able to ignore it and simply lose myself to something i did enjoy.

Momma and I use to dance together, sometimes formally but most of the time they were fun dances. The made up kind Momma’s Mage and Wizard friends would do at parties and celebrations.

As I was carted around the dancefloor my mind drifted back to my sixteenth birthday party two years ago and how much fun it was to simply lose myself. It has been the only Ball or extravagant party i’ve enjoyed. I had wished so hard for mom to be there, to enjoy the day with me. Long after the guests had left I found myself beneath Mother’s beloved stars, tracing the constellations with my fingertips. They all glittered like diamonds against dark felt.

“Miss Heartfilia,” my dance partner slowed and I was brought back to the present, “it appears your father is ready for the announcement.” as he spoke the music came to a quiet halt. I nodded my thanks to the man before making my way to the dias where my father and a rather peeved looking Lord Dan stood. I ignored his scathing glare to stand primly, as a lady should.

“Tonight was for the engagement of my daughter and Lord Dan, to strengthen the ties between our companies.” My stomach lurched at his words but I ignored it, my eyes instead scanning the crowd. “That was, until my daughter made an excellent point. The engagement shall stand, however the marriage shall be postponed as my daughter has taken an interest in studying for the business she is bettering by her marriage.”

I blinked owlishly.

We were soon bombarded with congratulations, which I accepted dazedly.

He had said he would consider it. I had expected to wait days, even weeks to get a response. Instead I was treated to a wonderful surprise. Suddenly the smile on my face didn't feel so heavy. I was being given the chance to leave, to have a sliver of freedom from my oppressive father's tyranny.

If I played my cards right I could sneak away without father or Lord Dan noticing.

Chapter 2

Natsu

It was hot.

It hurts.

Those two things are an always. It is never not hot. I am never not hurt.

First it was the fire and the house. Mom and Dad weren't waking up and Zeref- I couldn't find Zeref through the fire and black smoke.

There was darkness after that, but no pain. It was just empty.

But then the pain was back, shaking through me from fingers to toes to nose.

There were black flames this time, running over my skin leaving dark marks like the tribal tattoos of our village. They swirled from my neck, down my left arm and across my chest.

Zeref was there. He was smiling, but it wasn't his normal one. This one had sadness and pain. Pain like mine whenever the fire touched me.

I had tried to figure out what was going on, to see why my big brother was so unhappy, but it was hard. Everything hurt and it made me mad.

And when I got mad the black flames came back. They stung against my skin and destroyed everything they touched.

Zeref didn't smile after that.

And then I was alone. It was dark again, but this was the darkness of night in the wilderness, the chirping of crickets and evening call of birds sounding through the air. There were my tears too. Hunger rumbling my tummy as i grew scared. I loved Zeref, trusted my big brother. He wasn't there when the fire happened. I wasn't able to wake mom and dad. And then I was hurt. Nothing was okay.

The birds and crickets grew silent as the ground under me rumbled like a beastie was growling. The echoes of heavy footsteps caused me to lift my head, eyes puffy and sight blurry from my tears. There was a beastie out there, hidden in the shadows. Fear had me shaking and then there was pain again, black flames running up my arms, scorching my skin as i tried to scoot away. The monster poked its head to where I could see it. It looked like a giant lizard with horns, black smoke swirling around it as sharp teeth glinted in weak moonlight.

“Why do you trembled hatchling?” a voice called out, low and rumbling. My back hit a tree and the fire seemed to spread to the grass around me, the heat searing. More panic filled me as the beast approached, large and lumbering like a...

“Dragon,” I warbled out, pain lacing the word.

And then the fire was gone, sucked into the dragon’s mouth as if it were air.

“I am a Dragon, and you are no ordinary hatchling little one,” the rumbled tone sounded surprised. “Those were some impressive Demon flames. Where did you learn old magic like that?”

“I-I don’t know any magic,” I stuttered out. I should be being eaten right now. I mean the Dragon is huge!

“How interesting, the Dragon rumbled before being covered in bright flames. A scream bubbled out of me, fear that the black fire that he had breathed in had hurt him. But once the flames went away a man stood in his place, a large fur cloak draped over his shoulder with wild red hair that reminded me of the flames he appeared from. “My name is Igneel, and I would like to help you.”

“You can’t help me,” I shook my head as the man came near. “I’m not worth saving! Zeref told me that!” my heart hurt, remembering my big brother’s hard look and cold words before dropping me off in this forest. He brought me back, he said, but I wasn’t worth the magic cost.

I was useless.

“I do not believe he knows what he’s talking about,” the man laughed, stepping closer again. “You look hungry, and I have plenty of food.” My stomach growled at his words but I did my best to push further into the tree, hard bark scraping against my skin.

“Dragons eat people.”

“Some Dragons do, you’re right. I’ve never had the taste for people.” the Dragon man crouched down in front of me. He had tan skin like dad but happy eyes like mom. New tears began spilling as I thought about my parents. Zeref said it was my fault they were dead. I was the reason they would never wake up.

“My parents are gone,” my mouth made words without permission and they wobbled just like me.

“If you let me, hatchling, I’ll take care of you,” the Dragon man Igneel offered me his hand and I took it slowly. I was hungry and alone. I didn’t deserve to be saved. If the Dragon decided to eat me then that would be okay. Then I wouldn’t be a burden to anyone. The Dragon man smiled wide, showing off sharp teeth. He scooped me up easily, a laugh rumbling through him as the fire came back, spreading across his skin as he grew bigger and bigger, his hand turning into a giant claw.

I was too busy being interested in the change to be scared again. He rumbled a warning of 'hold on' before we were in the air, flying above the trees and unfamiliar towns. Excited yells left me as the Dragon flew faster and faster, my fear and sadness being left behind for the moment.

My time with Igneel had been amazing, and short lived. He taught me Dragon magic, fire magic to be exact. I was never able to control the black flames, every time I tried they burned me in a way the magic Igneel taught me never did. I learned how to transform into a Dragon, to eat fire just like he did.

Igneel taught me my letters, how to read and write and interact with other Wizards as well as regular people that weren't gifted with magic. He quickly became my father, taking an interest in me in a way my own family never had. Zeref had been the oldest, the favorite. Zeref was gifted with all sorts of magic knowledge. I was the little nuisance. Igneel tried to keep the happy memories of my family alive for me, but it was hard after everything I'd been through.

When I was old enough to begin transforming into a Dragon myself Igneel felt the need to have quite a few embarrassing talks about mating.

I ignored just about everything he said.

And then one day Igneel was called away, something urgent and dangerous that I wasn't allowed to help with. So he left me in the hoard to handle business, promises that he would return said with conviction before he was gone. He was absent for months, years, before worry started seeping in. I was finally an adult by human years, but still a child in the eyes of Wizards and Dragons alike. So I sought out the assistance of a Magic Guild, A place filled with powerful people that might be able to help.

I had stumbled upon Fairy Tail on accident. They were a new guild founded in the heart of Igneel's territory. They took pity on me, allowing me to join and promised help.

That's when I met her, Layla Ashley, a Celestial Wizard renowned for her care and compassion for the spirits she contracted. Fifty years worth of friendship grew between us, but my worry for Igneel's safety never abated. I traveled back to the hoard often, checking for signs of my wayward father. Leaving notes in a tattered leather bound journal in case he returned while I was away.

And that's when Zeref returned. By then he had made a rather big name for himself, creating demons that were overall unpleasant, constantly terrorizing people and were just generally awful. They did horrible things in his name. He had done horrible things himself.

Fairy Tail, for better or worse, was a place of second chances. A place of redemption. After grudging approval from me they allowed the Dark Wizard to join on a trial basis. Everything seemed to be going so well, everyone was getting along, there were no horrible happenstances.

And then Layla fell in love.

Then the world ended.

Everything was stripped away from me once again, magic burning its way out of me until I was cold. Very few had escaped the Celestial Spirit King's wraith, those who hadn't were turned into large Lacrima crystals, scattered across the world. The King also took the memory of magic from common folk. He left us with our long lives, to punish us for not being able to stop the evil Zeref had wrought.

And boy had he wrought it.

Zeref had abused everyone's trust. He had taught Layla how to harness her Celestial magic to open gates for travel, then slipped through one. Before anyone had realized what he had done Zeref had taken control of the Spirit King, using the man to kill many innocents. Lives were lost in the Celestial Realm as well as on Earthland. When the King was finally able to wrench his freedom from my brother he lashed out.

The burden fell heavily upon Layla.

And then she was gone too, leaving in the dead of the night after weeks of silent weeping, mourning for the friends lost and trapped. Mourning for the loss of magic for everyone. Mourning for her Spirits that she would never get to meet again. There were so few of us left in the guild not trapped in magic crystal. Happy, Levy, Gray, Mira, Master Makarov and Cana. There were few in the world not trapped, the royal family had managed to escape lacrima, as did a few members of Sabertooth and Mermaid Heel.

The world quickly became a vast and empty space.

I quickly lost interest in the adventure that once called for me, the burning in my blood to fight and train. To find my father.

Zeref had ruined everything.

And if i ever get the chance I'll make him pay for hurting my dearest friend and trying to destroy the world.

"Natsu," Levy's voice called from the doorway of the tiny house Happy and I shared on the outskirts of Magnolia, on the border of Igneel's land and close to a hoard I hadn't visited in years, "are you here?"

"Where else would he be?" Gray scoffed, the sound of his shoes scuffing against the wood floors signaling he had entered. "Hey hot-head, Master thinks it would be a good idea to go to the University this year."

"What good could that do?" I huffed and Happy meowed from my back, his words no longer translating to us as they once had. It was odd how we could keep certain magical parts of us,

like Gray's aversion to clothes and immunity to most chilly temperatures and my sense of hearing and smell, but Happy couldn't talk. The blue cat stretched, little claws digging into my shoulders and I huffed.

"Cana and Mira miss you, and well it would keep you out of trouble," Levy offered lamely from her spot still firmly outside. She knew the importance of not overstepping boundaries into a Dragons den. Something Gray blatantly ignores on a good day. More scuffling steps and the smell of frost alerted me to the fact that Gray was closer. I looked over my shoulder to see Gray scanning the photos pinned to my wall. Our friend's smiling faces gazing back at him.

"He hasn't gotten in trouble in a while. That's the problem," Gray sighed, slanting his beady eyes at me. "Master's worried about you, figured you'd be easier to watch if you're close by."

"If it'll keep the old man off my back," I sighed before standing, stretching out sore limbs.

"I'm sure it won't hurt," Levy chirped, a fragile smile on her face. She had been closest to Layla. 214 years and she was still hurting over her friend's disappearance.

Hurting over the punishment Layla was living out alone.

We all are.

Chapter 3

Lucy

The last three days had been hell on my concussion and bruised ribs. They were slowly healing, but riding in a carriage paired with unpaved roads and knots in your stomach from starting school with actual people were not helping, nor making for a very enjoyable ride. I was nervous. More than nervous I was terrified. What if this was just a way of showing me freedom before slamming the door in my face? And what if my father found out I wanted to run away?

My hands worried the handkerchief in my lap once again, firmly changing its shape from a square of fabric to a twisted wadded up mess. My eyes fell on the worn picture of my mother on the seat opposite of my own. A small smile found its way to my lips as I thought about her strength. I would need to borrow some of it for the next few days.

Most heiresses don't have this sort of social anxiety about being around large crowds of people. I myself didn't have it until after my mother died. I use to attend all of the Heartfilia balls and events, but was dissuaded not to by my father. I was of more use to him where I couldn't be seen. And so that trend had continued until my sixteenth birthday, where a huge ball was held in my honor, filled with work clients I was to meet. It had started so wonderfully until I had blundered on my greeting to the guests. After that I had three panic attacks and was beaten so severely that I couldn't leave my room the next day. I took a shaky breath, pushing the memory from my head. I was just going to have to be better. I am simply going to have to push past it if I'm ever to make it on my own.

"We're approaching the Academy, young miss," the coach driver called. A frown set into my face as I moved closer to the window, peering out at my new home. Expanses of greens my father would sell his soul for were laid before me, lined with beautiful cherry blossom trees and accented with the occasional student studying or napping. The building was huge with two dorms, each flanking the building, standing almost as impressive as the academy itself. They don't get used often due to the fact that most of the students have simply decided to move to the neighboring town or have lived there already. Fiore Academy was my last ditch effort to keep myself alive. Even though I was using this place as a way to escape my father I swore to myself I would at least take classes I was interested in, that maybe I could build my own life on.

As the carriage rolled to a stop I began fretting, shoving all of the mangled papers I had strewn around the cab back into my bag as the doorman offered me his hand. I smiled, taking it gingerly in my own and stepping outside. It was a little disorienting standing on solid ground after being shook continuously for three days. He gave me a warm smile and I nodded dropping my eyes to the ground.

"So where are we taking all of this stuff?" one of the movers my father hired asked, his voice gruff.

"Oh, Umm..." I rifled through my bag, looking for that stupid piece of paper. When I finally found it all eyes were on me, making my face turn red. "Right, um, Female Dormitory room 519" I finally answered. They all shrugged as I pulled the room key out of my pocket and walked in front of them to unlock the door. I could hear them complaining about 'rich girls and their things' but I decidedly ignored them in favor of running up five flights of steps to mechanically place the key in the hole and unlock the door. I wasn't sure what kind of splendor I was expecting from being on the top floor but there was absolutely no furniture, which was only a slight irritation. Otherwise the room was huge, more of a suite than a room exactly. There was a space big enough for an informal sitting area, small dining table, and there was already a kitchenette. I walked through the large open area to one of two closed doors. The first opened into an empty linen closet, complete with dust. The second was a bedroom, half the size of the one at my father's home, complete with a bathroom and a walk in closet.

Every inch of counter, windowsill, and fireplace mantle, was covered in dust that continued down to the warm wood floors.

A knock at the door between the thunderous sounds of feet and grumbling men alerted me to the dorm adviser. She was a petite girl with large inquisitive eyes and a forced smile.

"Your father wanted our largest room for you, we were expecting you to be gone for a couple more days so please excuse the mess."

"It's no problem," I did my best to smile, remembering to tug my lips up at the corners.

"This particular room hasn't been rented out since the school's founding so please let us know if there are any issues with it." She adjusted her bow and made a small noise in the back of her throat.

"I certainly will," I nodded, placing my bag on the counter and looking around the room at all of the boxes. "Is there anything else I can do for you?" I tried to keep my voice even. The girl ticked off a few boxes on her clipboard then shook her head, looking sated.

"Curfew is midnight on non-school nights and ten on school night. No men after eight." She looked pointedly at the movers before turning on her heels and bounce-stepping out of the room. My eyes lingered on the counter for a moment until the last of the men made their way out of the room, grunting goodbyes as they did. The last man shut the door with a very final sound, leaving me completely alone for the first time in my entire life.

Of course I had felt alone in my father's large estate with no one I could really talk to, but there had always been someone there, waiting for my call, waiting for an order. At first I used to confide in them until one day they turned on me, telling my father everything I had told them in confidence.

Their constant comfort turned to torment as I no longer had anyone I could turn to. I worried my bottom lip for a moment before looking around the room one more time. It would be

difficult to put anything up without the proper furniture to do so. I decidedly slid all of the boxes against the back wall and dug into my side bag, pulling out all of the important school papers and small comforts I kept with me for the carriage ride until all that was left was my coin purse and a list of stores my father had undoubtedly paid to suit my needs for comfort.

For as much as my father loved his unholy fortune he loved spending it even more. Allowing me occasional trips to the nearby dressing stores to buy expensive lavished gowns and jewelry, most of which I brought with me to sell in order to gain my own small fortune. I didn't need an empire's worth of gold, just enough that I could buy my own place, or maybe even rent an apartment. Just enough to get away from my father.

I made my way slowly down the five flights of stairs, stopping only to lock my door or give someone an awkward greeting. The walk through the quaint town surrounding the Academy wasn't unbearable in the early morning heat and after slightly less than an hours' worth of wandering I was able to locate the shopping district. Flower boxes filled every window and the early summer sun shone happily down upon the little buds and blooms. Warm winds blew my skirts, swirling them around my ankles as I studied the little town. It didn't yet have a name, young and slowly formed around the Academy as it were. This whole area had once been nothing but empty land and rolling hills until the founding of the school.

I could see how this could be a wonderful place to settle down in. It was so peaceful I could almost forget the pain in my side should I breathe in too deeply.

Almost.

Children skittered by me, laughing and dancing as an older man let out a rather loud laugh. It was warm, but the pattern and depth reminded me too much of my father's and suddenly all the peace within me left, evaporating like early morning mist.

' You're not just going away to enjoy the view now, Lucy. You're going to learn a thing or two about running a business and then you'll see why this marriage is good for you ,' My father had said before I left on my carriage ride. *' You'll understand it all when you come home .'* I frowned looking down at the piece of paper clutched in my hands. I really didn't want to think about going back to that place. To marrying that man.

I sighed and made my way to the nearest vendor, asking for directions to the first name on my list. The shop was small, but filled with lush furniture. I was greeted warmly by an older man.

“We are awaiting a very special guest, but will be more than happy to assist you in the meantime, although no sales will be final today,” His smile was bright but he seemed uneasy.

“A special guest, that sounds rather exciting,” I smiled in reassurance. “I was sent here by my father to procure some furniture, but I can absolutely understand the need to hold off on a sale. What kind of customer is it?” my curiosity got the better of me. The man looked a bit sheepish but answered nonetheless.

“We’re awaiting the arrival of the Heartfilia Heiress.”

“Well you’re in luck!” I clapped my hands together before pulling the rolled parchment out of my bag. The Heartfilia family crest stamped in dried wax at the bottom. “Sorry to keep you waiting fine sir! I seemed to have gotten side tracked earlier and lost my way here.”

“Oh fine lady, thank you very much for gracing our establishment with your presence!” The man bowed and I panicked. I may be an heiress, but I am not a princess or even upper nobility. That sort of respectful behavior should be saved for ones far more worthy than I.

“It is my pleasure, but please, just Lucy is quite alright,” I pulled the man up from his bowed position and he nodded fervently.

“Well please, let me show you around. Let me know if there’s anything that catches your eyes.” I nodded once and followed the man around, browsing his stores and carefully selecting items that would fit well with the warm wood floors and bright white walls. After everything was selected the shop master assured me of its delivery and pointed me in the direction of the next shop on my list.

I entered the uniform shop a little flustered, there were so many different options as the shop did not exclusively cater to the Academy, but it did hold the different styles the academy allowed. I was a bit surprised to see the short length of the skirts, just barely above the knee! A kindly woman assisted me without fuss, assuring me that the uniforms were comfortable and breathable, two things the stuffy dresses I have long become accustomed to are not.

“What about the impropriety,” I sighed as I once again studied the beautiful light green fabric, worry eating me. The last thing I needed was my father pulling me from the school due to the shortness of uniforms.

“There are many noble women that attend the Academy, none of which have had any issues with the uniform. If you do wish to, though, they allow leggings to be worn beneath the skirts. It will keep your skin hidden from sight.”

“Yes please, a darker color if you have it.” I smiled and the woman shuffled into the back, pulling out various leggings in a dark shade of hunter green. She too, advised all purchases would be delivered directly to my dorm room and refused a tip. The last required stop was the shoe store to get fitted for proper school shoes and to hopefully find something without such a drastic heel in it.

The shoe maker was a kind young woman that fit me in shoes faster than I could blink. They were unfortunately uncomfortable, but she explained it could be difficult to fit into flatter shoes if I have worn heels most of my life. Instead she took a little liberty with the dress code, providing me comfortable boots with a slight heel. They fit like a glove and I almost wept I was so incredibly happy.

I wore my new shoes out on the pretense of breaking them in. The loud bell of the nearby chapel alerted me to the fact that it was one in the afternoon and that I still had a whole day to waste away after what had felt like a small eternity of shopping and an even longer stuffy carriage ride. For the first time in my life I had time to waste, and so waste I did. I bought food from side vendors, I ran around the park with children, I even went dress shopping in a bridal boutique on accident, confusing a very helpful sales clerk.

When I arrived back at the dorm I was pleased to see everything had been delivered as promised, but was quickly struck with the realization that I would not only have to unpack everything but clean the dust as well. I took a deep breathe, steeling my resolve, before putting myself to work. I started in the kitchen, wiping down surfaces and cleaning out the cupboards of cobwebs and dust motes.

Once that was finished I pushed the wrapped boxes of delivered cutlery as well as plate and bowls into a corner of the kitchenette to be dealt with later. Then was the bathroom. More wiping and scrubbing as the dust clung to the bathtub creating an almost mud as it was wiped away. I had never before felt so much respect for the maids that cleaned up after us as I did once the bathroom was completed and sparkling like new. I had also never felt such accomplishment in my life as knowing I was capable of such a feat as simple as cleaning.

A knock at my door pulled me from my concentration and I scrambled to answer it, tripping over boxes and stray cleaning rags. I opened the door without delay, startling the petite woman on the other side. She smiled weakly at me, her large doe eyes widening before her smile turned sad.

“Sorry for startling you,” I bowed low, racking my brain for proper etiquette when it comes to treating guests. She seemed to be at a lost too, muttering before clearing her throat.

“Oh it’s quite alright,” She waved off my concerns before running her hands through her tousled blue hair, bangs falling stubbornly in her eyes, shielding them from view. “I overheard our dorm adviser say we had someone new in the dorms this year, I thought I could introduce myself and maybe bring over some food!” she motioned to the wrapped tin in her hands. My eyes fell on it as a delightful scent hit my nose. My stomach turned traitor, letting loose awful noises like that of a starving whale.

“Please do come in,” I motioned and opened the door wider.

“Oh wow, this room really is huge. Most of the ones on the fifth floor haven’t ever been used.”

“So I was told. I wasn’t expecting guests, so please do ignore the mess.”

“Oh it’s no problem at all. I have a friend whose home looks like this daily, I swear he’s never heard of a broom in his life,” She laughed, the noise cheery and I joined in, feeling a little more at ease. “My name is Levy by the way, Levy McGarden,” she offered me her free hand as I shut the door. Nerves crept within my stomach at the thought of this woman finding out who I am and deciding to like me only for my father’s money.

“Lucy,” I took her hand and shook it firmly. “Just Lucy,” I decided before motioning to the small Kitchenette. I tore into one of the boxes, looking for a plate as my mother’s key slipped out from beneath my dress. The gold swinging back and forth like a pendulum. My eyes followed the movements, almost mesmerized by it as Levy shuffled boxes around.

“You have such lovely furniture,” her voice broke me out of my momentary trance and I scrambled once more for plates and silverware.

“Thank you, I had it brought from home so I could be more comfortable here,” I lied without thought, wiping the plates before setting them on the breakfast bar.

“This is such a good school, I truly hope you enjoy it here, and that we might even become friends,” Levy turned to look at me. Her eyes fell on my mother’s key and an odd expression passed her face, her large eyes seeming to water before it was blinked away and a smile took over. An uneasy feeling took root as I slipped the key back beneath my dress.

“I would like that,” I answered automatically, not yet sure if the sentiment was true. Regardless my mother’s key was not brought up on conversation, and Levy even assisted with cleaning up the living room, wiping the walls and surfaces close to the floor so I could focus on dusting the corners by the ceiling. By the time night had fell in its entirety We were exhausted, but well fed. Promises to meet again before school began at the end of the week were sleepily muttered with farewells.

I decided against unpacking, instead taking a quick bath and falling into bed with nothing more than a plush robe wrapped around me and the warmth of my mother’s key against my skin.

Chapter 4

Natsu

The room I shared with Gray was too cramped, his scent clinging to just about everything. My nose wrinkled in disgust as his pants slid down his hips while he walked around trying to get ready for orientation. I watched as he stepped out of the fabric in a fluid motion, not even noticed by the ice idiot, before he slipped his boots on. He stared in annoyance at his bare legs before a laugh bubbled up inside me.

“You’re such a pervert!” I laughed from my spot on the worn chair in my corner of room.

“Says the one watching me,” he had a stupidly smug look on his face and it ticked a nerve.

“How did I even get stuck with your stripping ass anyway?” I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest as Gray wrestled with getting his pants back into place.

“Gramps wanted me to keep an eye on you. It’s not like I enjoy it,” Gray growled back. “Just don’t be late or Levy’ll come drag you by your ear.”

“How many times is she gonna make me do this?” I stretched out, propping my feet on the lumpy mattress I shared with Happy. The tiny cat was curled in on itself, purring contently.

“Until you actually pass a class,” Gray made a rude gesture before leaving the room, the door slamming in finality as he left. I breathed out, not for the first time missing the ability to make smoke rings on command. My body still runs hot by human standards, but not hot enough. While the cold doesn’t affect me to the same degree it would Levy there’s an indescribable hole where my magic once settled, leaving me hollow and bereft, even more so than Igneel’s loss had.

214 years is a long time to stay bored, motionless in time as the Humans seem to whiz by. Without magic to rely on they had created fascinating, and horrible, things. Like trains and carriages that run off loud engines instead of horses. They still can’t go far yet, the contraptions awful smelling and required fuels to move. I scrunched my nose at the thought of riding on one of those hell traps for a job and the hollow feeling was back.

I pushed myself up, leaving Happy alone in the room to go to the stupid orientation four days before classes start. The halls to the boy’s dormitory were empty as the ceremony was probably underway. Gramps would be making one of his grand speeches about ethics and honor and cheating is bad if you get caught. I shoved my hands into the pockets of my faded pants, not minding that I stuck out like a sore thumb. The uniform is itchy and too tight around the thighs so I barely bother to wear it.

Wide eyed stares followed me as I made my way to the ceremony grounds, pushing through throngs of people to find Levy and prove I was here so she couldn't bite my head off later. I pulled my scarf, made of Igneel's scales, tighter around my throat to hide the swirling marks on my neck. My asymmetrical jacket's long left sleeve covering the marks trailing down my arm, down my back and across my ribs. The marks didn't look much different than any other Tattoo someone could get, just black ink against skin, but they were a reminder of my sins, my inability to keep my parents alive.

My failure as a demon.

My link to Zeref as more than just his little brother.

I kept my face neutral as the thought flitted across my mind.

It was thankfully drowned out by the cheering of the student body as Master released them. I frowned, unable to find Levy in the crowd due to her small stature.

The sight of gold crossed my eyes and an almost familiar smell had my heart clenching. Stardust assaulted my nose and I turned frantically to find the source. Layla had shared her terrible burden with Levy and disappeared so thoroughly I wasn't even able to track her to bring her back. Of course Levy was sworn to secrecy, not willing to break a promise with a Celestial Wizard.

That she would come back was a relief, a burden lifting from my shoulders. I never got to apologize for letting her get too close to that scoundrel, for trusting him long enough for him to destroy the world.

My eyes fell on a girl, covered from neck to toe in cloth, even in the summer heat, speaking to the female dorm adviser. Pale fingers clutched tightly in front of her as a frail smile tugged at her lips. At first glance she looked so devastatingly much like Layla I had almost screamed out her name, but there were differences, big enough that an angry growl curled up my throat. Who was this imposter?

Her scent held Stardust, vanilla, and sadness, fear, anxiety.

I frowned at the girl, not liking that she shared my friend's face.

"See Levy, I told you Flame Brain wouldn't get lost," Gray's voice rose over the din of the students around us making plans. If my heart had plummeted realizing that girl couldn't be Layla I could only imagine how awful Levy would feel. I quickly spun to face my approaching friends, looped my arms through theirs, and began towing them away quickly before either could notice not-Layla a few yards away.

"What are you doing you pyro?" Gray tried to wiggle away but I latched onto his arm and walked faster, practically dragging them.

"It's just so loud here," I complained, steering them to the very edge of the mass of students. Once I was sure the scent of Stardust was faint I let go, rubbing the back of my head.

“You’re such a freak Dragneel,” Gray huffed before straightening out his shirt, only to begin unbuttoning it.

Levy smacked at his hands before turning to me, concern written all over her face.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, just hungry.” I shrugged, a brilliant idea to keep my friends far away from not-Layla for a while popping in my head. “We should go eat, celebrate before we get bogged down by homework.”

“You don’t even do homework,” Gray snickered but turned towards town anyway.

“Waste of time,” I shrugged. “But you guys do and it gets so boring when you guys are busy writing papers and whatnot,” I rolled my wrist. Levy sighed before marching forward, taking the lead.

Food had been an excellent idea. After beating Gray to an arm wrestling match he was charged for the meal and left grumbling over future rematches. I cackled at his back as Levy shook her head at me.

“You guys are the oddest of friends,” she sighed, large brown eyes slanting towards me for a moment before she began making her way back to the Academy.

“We’re not friends!” I growled out after her. She waved my words away, not bothering to look back. I stood outside the restaurant, hands shoved in the pockets of my white pants just enjoying the smells of food. This place was nothing like Magnolia, but it wasn’t awful either. Not as many memories of friends I can no longer see because of-

“Oh dear, please excuse me!” Stardust and honey eyes derailed my train of thought as not-Layla straightened herself out. One hand resting on my arm where she had bumped into me. For a second I was completely stunned, so close to wrapping her in a hug my fingers actually twitched, and then the vanilla accompanying her scent instead of sweet lavender had a growl rising in my throat.

“Watch where you’re going,” I snapped, pulling my arm away from her.

“Why I never!” There was fire in her eyes, the fierce determination making me almost wish to step back.

“Damn right you never!” I snapped and the girl actually cringed back, all that fire dying so quickly. “It’s rude to just run into people.”

“I am *trying* to apologize for the slight.” She looked near tears before she let out a shaking breath and she schooled her face into cool indifference. The tears were still gathered in the corners of those too bright eyes, but she turned her nose up in a way only Nobel folk bothered with and crossed her arms over her chest. Her shirt looked close to unbuttoning

itself and I had to force myself to look anywhere else. She was bustier than Layla, her waist slimmer, no doubt squishy with a lack of muscle. "I'm sure a brute like you wouldn't know what to do with an apology if it ran right into you." She didn't look at me, her eyes focused on something just passed me.

"Wha-"

"If you'll excuse me, brute, I need to make my way back to the Academy." She stepped passed me quickly, her heart thundering in her chest even as her face remained blank. I scowled at the back of her head as she went, her steps careful and poised like princess Hisui's had been last time we visited the castle.

"Stupid snobbish prude. Should watch where she's going with those fat ankles," I muttered under my breath, my eyes trained on golden tresses making a straight line for the Academy.

Anger threatened to take me at her tone and overall attitude of being *better*.

Before I knew what I was doing I began following her. Once I realized my body was moving on its own an angry growl began building in my throat. How dare she think she could act like that just because she had some kind of fancy manners!

A kid barreled into her legs, almost knocking the top heavy girl over. She managed to right herself though. I half expected needing to step in but the golden haired Not-Layla simply smiled at the child, patting them affectionately on the crown of their head before speaking sweetly with a rather flustered older woman.

I watched the exchange with shrewd eyes, looking for any deceit or slight against the child but the woman was kind, her smile warm and lighting up her whole face causing honey eyes to twinkle like stars. She stayed with them a while, laughing and smiling. Every second she threw her kindness around carelessly like Layla once did my anger seemed to grow and flicker like a flame. She was too similar to my missing friend for it to be simply coincidence. There's no way she just stumbled her way here with her pretty hair, 'too good for riff raff' manners and those twinkling eyes. Something was going on and I'm determined to figure out what it is.

I followed her as she made her way back to her door. I waited patiently for the lights to dim outside before climbing the building, the scent of Stardust pulling me to the top floor. Light humming drifted from an open window, the sound of heavy objects being slid across the floor accompanying the almost pleasant sound. It was a familiar tune, one that pulled at old memories under the stars with stories of the constellations and their keys. Of late nights around a campfire with friends after a long job.

Of Layla long before Zeref destroyed her.

I suppressed a growl as Not-Layla sighed and moved close to the window. I scrambled to move around the edge of the building, just barely making the corner as the girl leaned out to study the night sky.

“I miss your stories on nights like these, when the stars are so bright and clear I could almost pluck them from the sky.” Golden hair fell from her once immaculate bun, pooling messily around her face as starlight eyes looked pleadingly up to the heavens. “I miss you mom. But I’m going to keep going because It’s what you would do.” her soft voice was little more than a whisper accompanied with sniffles. “I’m going to do my best to be strong like you, even if it means I can’t follow in your footsteps.” A wistful sigh left before she began humming the lullaby Layla would use to calm the rowdier guild kids where their parents were away on jobs.

My heart grew colder as dots slowly began connecting.

And then my anger bloomed anew.

How dare this weak little girl hold Layla’s blood within her unworthy veins.

Chapter 5

Lucy

Being away from home and around so many new, and rather rude, people was very nerve wracking. Regardless I pushed through, not allowing myself to be swept up in the panic that gripped at my heart with every new encounter with fellow Academy students. I was very much regretting agreeing to spend the day before classes began with Levy, meandering around the small college town filled to the brim with students doing last minute shopping or street vendors screaming about special deals.

“I forgot how busy it gets the day before classes,” Levy seemed to deflate as she picked up on my reluctance to travel on the more populated streets.

“It’s quite alright, I’m sure everyone is just running around to get a bit of last minute shopping in.” I gave her a reassuring smile.

“You’re probably right.” The petite blunette seemed to perk up once again. “So tell me a bit about yourself Lu.”

“Well there’s nothing really to tell,” I blushed at the nickname, unable to remember the last time such a thing was used on me.

“Well what classes are you taking, what brought you all the way out here to Fiore Academy?” She kept her eyes forward as we walked through the residential district of the small pop-up town around the Academy. The sun shone brightly above us and the weather was just perfect for a stroll.

“Mostly business classes,” I frowned. “I’m very interested in an introduction to writing class I signed up for and the Mythology class taught.”

“No way! I’m taking the Mythology class,” Levy spoke so plainly, I was a little envious of her easy verbiage. She is always so casual and carefree. Maybe it will become easier with time. “Which block are you in?”

“Third on Monday and Wednesdays,” I spoke slowly as I attempted to remember my schedule. She squealed happily before taking my hands in hers, the thought of reaching out to touch someone coming so naturally to the other girl that I wasn’t even sure if she noticed she was doing it. I didn’t bring attention to it, even as my heart was pounding in my chest from the sudden contact.

“Oh this is going to be so much fun!” she beamed at me, releasing one hand while pulling me forward with the other still firmly in her grasp. “That class is so interesting, and we’ll have it together. I heard there’s a final paper due but we’re able to work on it in pairs.”

“Are you sure you’d want to work with me on it?”

“Well yeah Lu. My other two friends will be too busy fighting each other every step of the paper to even bother offering to work with me. Besides, it’ll be nice to get closer to you while we take the class. I don’t have a lot of female friends,” she hummed the words, her smile turning a bit sad. “My friend Cana doesn’t really count, she prefers to be one of the guys.”

“Interesting,” I spoke softly for lack of anything else to add.

Levy finally pulled me into a little shop on the edge of the business district her smile falling completely from her face as she looked around for something.

“That’s odd, they were supposed to meet us here.”

“Who were?” I asked timidly, wrapping my arms around my torso.

“My friends Natsu and Gray. They must be running late or something. Anyway, this is the best ice cream parlor on this side of Fiore, if you completely ignore the one in Magnolia. I was going to treat everyone to celebrate the school semester starting, but I guess they’ll just be missing out.”

“Oh it’s not necessary to pay for me.” I began but was quickly waved off by a very focused Levy as she began reading the flavor board.

“Nonsense. You can treat next time.” she tapped her index finger to her chin as she contemplated the flavors.

“Well what’s good here?” I stepped forward a bit unsure. She gave me a wide smile before gesturing to the board.

“Just about everything,” there was a giggle to her voice and slowly I loosened my grip on my torso, feeling a bit more relaxed in light of Levy’s good mood.

“I’ll take a scoop of the strawberry and Vanilla,” I decided after quickly becoming overwhelmed by all the different choices, flavors, and combinations of cones and sprinkles. I figured something simple and plain was probably best.

“Excellent choice Lu.” Levy complimented before doubling the order.

“So what do you usually do for fun?” The girl prodded gently as we waited for our cold treats.

“I don’t do much,” I admitted. She gave me a skeptical look, but it was a true statement. Instead I reached for something, anything that might seem a bit normal. “I want to be a writer though. Sometimes I’ll write a short story or poems.”

“I’d love to read your work sometime!” Levy lit up. “I’m actually a pretty avid reader myself.”

“I don’t know if any of it is actually ready to be read.”

“That’s fine, I’m always available for feedback and to bounce ideas off of,” she grinned before bouncing off to grab our treats.

Her smile was contagious and slowly helped me loosen up the worry building in my heart. Levy didn’t seem to be prying into my life, looking for Heartfilia secrets like father had warned. Instead she was just looking for things to talk about, things we may share in common. To grow a friendship on. I’m still rather apprehensive of her interest in me, but her actions and behaviors were helping to drown out all the warnings my father had given me before allowing me to go.

“So have you ever had a boyfriend?” Levy asked upon her return, immediately pulling me from my thoughts.

“Not truly,” I spoke quietly before shoveling a spoonful of the frozen dairy in my mouth.

“Me either. I had a couple of friends that seemed pretty interested in me but I never really felt that connection you know? The way romance is written gives me high expectations for if it were ever to actually happen.” She began talking about her ideas of a romantic meeting. Of eyes meeting across a crowded room and everything seeming to fall away as both parties are just drawn to each other, as if by magic. The way she sighed the word magic, so reverently, pulled at a memory from childhood, one kept locked away like most things connected to my mother. To be looked at from afar, but not to be dug into unless one is willing to feel the pain of her loss as acutely as if she were passing away all over again.

Spending the day with Levy worked wonders on my nerves as the hours ticked away. Her friends never showed but I enjoyed our time as Levy shared stories of her friends and fanciful myths that reminded me much of the stories my mother would share on long nights when the stars were hidden behind clouds before she became too sick.

As I stepped back into my room my feet brought me to the box I had hidden within my closet. It was heavy and made of lacquered dark wood. Golden clasps and an intricate handle glittered in the low light. I had been gifted the box by an odd pair at my mother’s funeral, the memory so distant that the details were fuzzy. I remembered the sharp pain of her loss and the overwhelming feeling sadness surrounding the rainy day. ‘Even the heavens weep for her loss,’ I recalled one of the servants said between sniffles. My mother had been a wonderful, vibrant woman taken too soon by sickness.

The box was just as I remembered it, heavy and firmly locked, requiring a key. I had never bothered trying to open the box before. Walking through the empty halls of the manor I had enough reminders of my mother everywhere, in commissioned paintings and a sculpture in the rose garden of mother in flowing silks, looking radiant and lovely always. But now I was far away and all of Levy’s fantastic myths had something stirring deeply within me, begging for me to find something of my mother’s to cling to and remember her stories.

The golden key tucked carefully beneath my shirt seemed to warm as I studied the keyhole. I had never been handed a key by any of the members of the staff, nor had I ever brought the box’s existence to their attention for them to be able to provide one to me. I had packed the box as an afterthought, with no real plan to ever open it. Now I brought the key out with

shaking fingers and slid it within the embossed keyhole. There was no resistance as I turned it carefully, not wishing to damage the precious keepsake. I held my breath as the latch popped with an almost inaudible click, releasing the golden clasps.

The box opened silently and revealed within a golden key with the symbol for Aquarius etched into the ivory disc set into the handle, a similar silver key with a vaguely familiar constellation etched into its ivory disc, two thick bound leather books, and what looked like a photo album. My fingers brushed reverently over the keys as I had seen my mother do every time she spoke of the heavens. She kept them on a thick silver ring in a leather pouch, and after removing everything in the box I was happy to see both were tucked safely underneath the heavy tomes and the large album. I slipped the two keys back onto the key ring, the action feeling right, before slipping them into the leather pouch and sliding them into drawer of my bedside table. They had been warm to the touch, the gold and silver sending tingles up my fingertips, the feeling lasting long after the keys had been safely tucked beneath the picture of my mother and my worn Aquarius doll.

Whispered memories of my mother pleading for me to take the golden key around my neck and bring the magic back to the world echoed within me as I closed my eyes. Levy's myths of dragons and ape creatures living in the woods with the abilities to take over another's body or flying fish with glittering rainbow scales that sail across the sky as if it were the sea were all seeming more plausible by the second. I took a deep breath, slowly releasing the air from my lungs before I turned my attention to the photo album, finding that it was full of pictures of wondrous things like flying cats, terrifying dragons and the bright sparks of magic. I was quickly beginning to believe in the lost magic mother spoke about in her stories. The daunting request to bring it back to the world seeming all too real as if it were crashing down on my shoulders right this moment. I decided instead of dwelling on the possible dread such a daunting task was sure to eventually dredge up I would focus on the album before me.

There were photos missing on every page, but the ones remaining held everyday objects like trains and carriages as well as, people dressed in the relaxed garb of the common folk, or odd revealing clothes, even long heavy robes. Often in the background were rowdy fights and a worn looking tavern. The very last page was a sign that read 'Fairy Tail.' The spelling was odd, but engraved in the sign next to the wood was what appeared to be a fairy with a tail. I studied the photos for a while as my dread began to fade, wonder and hunger taking its place.. The cold treats with Levy were fantastic, but not as filling as a true meal and I soon found myself hungry again. I reluctantly set the photo album down on top of my bedside table before carting the remaining two books with me to the kitchen.

The life of an Heiress did not provide much education in the way of cooking but the last couple days had borne a desperation to be able to survive as a normal person would. After cleaning my new home and feeling the simple accomplishment of completing the mundane task I burned to learn to do more on my own. And so I pulled out a cookbook purchased on my third day of freedom and began walking through the steps of creating a simple, thick stew. I chopped the potatoes into large chunks, adding them to the simmering broth, before beginning on the carrots and onions. I worked quickly on the onions as I soon learned they emit something that caused tears to sting and well within my eyes.

After adding all the vegetables and horribly cut meat (it truly isn't easy to cut uncooked meat, how do people get it into such even square pieces?) I sat at the breakfast bar to wait for the stew to finish cooking. I studied the two leather bound tomes, cracking the first open to find what appeared to be a beginners guide to celestial summoning magic. The art of summoning ethereal beings from the stars to do anything from point you in the correct direction to battle beside you against other mages and monsters of ferocious origins. I set the guide aside, intrigued but not wishing to delve too deeply into the lore of Star summoning. The idea that I could do this was fluttering in the back of my head was beginning to buzz in my bones as well. But *how* does one learn to open a magic door in a world bereft of magic.

The second leather bound tome seemed to be very similar to a cookbook, the words were scribbled in splotched black ink and most of the book was in a completely unfamiliar language, but the first page seemed to be a list of ingredients as well as a brief description of what such ingredients would make when distilled properly. It seemed to be a spell or a draught of some sort to enhance the body. Everything was written in code and so very taxing to decipher but at the bottom of the page, scrawled in my mother's familiar looping handwriting were three simple words.

' Open the Gate. '

"If mom thought this was real, and important, then I'm going to do it," I said aloud, my voice trembling a bit. The ingredients on the page were foreign to me, but with a little luck I might be able to do some research and locate them or good substitutes. I shut the book slowly, letting out a long breath as I did. I studied the book thoroughly.

'Ways to train inner magic' the title read. I found a pencil and some paper and jotted down the ingredients for this particular spell, feeling it was necessary before I could try anything else. The timer near my stove began buzzing, vibrating against the counter tops and startling me out of my focused note taking. I turned the heat down on the stove to keep the stew warm in case i wanted seconds before grabbing a bowl and serving up a large portion. The stew was warm and delicious. It wasn't the same level of cuisine I am used to as an heiress, but it was passable, edible. If I could make a stew I could follow the directions in these books and rewrite the wrongs of the past.

If the only thing I do with my life is bring magic back to the world then I can die happy as I'll be fulfilling a promise to my mother.

The key against my chest warmed at the thought as I continued to study the Art of Summoning Celestial Spirits.

Chapter 6

Natsu

Gray grabbed me around the middle, lifting me from the ground before attempting to drill me into the ground. I squirmed out of his hold, kicking him in the shin as a did. He grunted in pain before lunging at me once again, his stupid icy hands missing me by seconds as i kicked my sandal at him, cackling as it made solid contact with his face.

“Foul,” Cana called from her spot on the park bench, flask in her hand and face glowing from her buzz.

“How?” I cried out, so focused on trying to get my point to count that Gray was able to toss me to the ground and get a solid pin.

I groaned out as his elbow dug into my kidney, shooting pain through my back.

“Gotcha Flame Brain.” Gray cackled.

“I swear to Mavis if that’s your dick touching me I will light you on fire in your sleep,” I growled. Gray jumped off me, scrambling to find his clothes as Cana cackled from her perch. “How does that not count as a fowl but the sandal does,” I complained at the referee. She shrugged her slim shoulders before tossing her empty flask back in her bag before pulling out another one, this one bejeweled and a toxic green. Probably an old gift from Bixlow.

“I don’t make the rules kid, I just enforce them.”

“Where’s the rulebook that says sandals are a fowl!”

“It’s in the guild hall. I believe it’s section 5 under ‘Clothing cannot be used as a weapon’ after you tried suffocating Gray with his own underwear.” Levy spoke as she approached, a frown tugging down her blue eyebrows. “Where were you guys? I was at the ice cream shop waiting forever for you to show!”

“Oh that was today?” I scratched my head. “I thought that was next week.”

“You didn’t even tell me we were going for ice cream today,” Cana complained before belching. It was a solid 7.

“I told Natsu,” she countered.

“That was your first mistake,” Gray crossed his arms, his recently buttoned shirt nowhere to be seen. At least his pants were back on.

“What’s that supposed to mean!?” I cried out. Gray just rolled his eyes and my anger flared. I stepped towards the Ice Princess when Levy stepped between us, the scent of Stardust and

Vanilla hitting my senses causing me to see red for a second. I lost all control of myself, my body began shaking as something old and magical was trying to break free in the magicless world Zeref gave us.

“Calm down there Dragon Dick,” I could hear Gray yelling but I couldn’t really tell where it was coming from. Everything was blurring together as my blood seemed to be boiling in my veins. It was so hot that I could almost conjure a flame.

And then a bucket of freezing cold water was startling me out of the blind rage. I sat there soaking wet and shivering on the ground as everyone looked at me with varying degrees of pity and confusion. I haven’t felt so out of control since I was a hatchling under Igneel’s care, first learning how to use the brilliant red flames he gifted me. I blinked at the sky, trying to figure out what the hell could have caused it.

“What -um..” I began, turning towards Levy.

“You started growling like a monster and lunged like you were going to rip me apart.” Her voice was so calm and yet the words floored me.

“Gray managed to keep you held down while we got some water. What the hell set you off?” Cana frowned at me, her hands glued to her side firmly.

“I’m not sure,” I lied. Not willing to admit that there was a Layla look-alike running around. But if Levy was covered in her scent then... I studied the Blunette as she furrowed her brows in concentration.

“Regardless of what set him off we’ve got class tomorrow and the Master will be pissed if we don’t show.” Gray pointedly looked at me and I forced a grin and nonchalant wave.

“Whatever you big baby.” I stood, making a big show of stretching my limbs and keeping the smile in place even as my stomach was churning. “Let’s get you tucked into bed.”

“Oh, are you finally admitting you two sleep together,” Cana’s frown quickly grew to a smile, her eyes gleaming in a way that says she’s put money on such a statement and is waiting for confirmation of a payout.

“Pshh. The stripper couldn’t handle me. Besides, cold fish isn’t my type,” I began leading us back towards the dorms. Gray sputtered at Cana the whole way, but Levy quickened her pace to walk next to me, her brown eyes studying me as if I were words on a page.

“Natsu are you sure you’re okay?” concern laced her words as she studied me.

“Nope,” I admitted softly as Cana and Gray started arguing about Mavis knows what. “I have no idea what started it, it was a feeling I haven’t felt in a while.”

“Do you think it’s a part of your dragon heritage or...” she clamped her mouth shut but I interrupted her before she could begin apologizing.

“I’m not sure. It might be a little bit of both.” I sighed as we approached a fork in the path. Levy frowned as we waited for Cana and Gray to quit their bickering.

“I’m going to do some research.’

“You really don’t have to.” I groaned but she wouldn’t let it go.

It was ungodfully early when Gray began stomping around the too small room looking for his uniform (part of which I’m one hundred percent sure is hanging outside the window with his underwear for no reason whatsoever). It was too hard to sleep through his morning routine, which insists of undressing and redressing as he attempted to style his hair as if he had just woken up.

“Why do you even bother if you’re just going to give yourself bed head stupid?”

“Just because you’ve never taken a brush to that rats nest on your head before doesn’t mean some of us don’t know what style is.”

“Listen here Ice Dick, there’s no reason for you to peacock around for girls when it’s obvious you’re into dudes.”

“Don’t project your sexuality on me Flame Brain.” Gray threw his hairbrush at me as his pants fell around his ankles once again.

“Whatever.” I dodged the brush as Gray tripped over his pants on the way to the door. The sound of my cackling filled the room as Gray made a very expressive hand gesture before slamming the door. The sound quickly died once I was alone. I didn’t really want to go the boring classes Levy and Gramps signed me up for, nor did I want to dwell on my almost demonic response to Not-Layla’s scent all over Levy.

I sighed before forcing myself out of bed and slowly stripping before pulling on the too tight uniform. The boots were too restrictive on my feet, but it’s not like I had to worry about the material burning to my skin. 214 years and it still feels like I lost my flames yesterday. On warm summer mornings I can wake up and almost convince myself that they’re still within me if I ignore the gaping void in my chest.

There was a distinct lack of meowing as I began slowly gathering my books. I gave the room a quick once over, not finding blue fur or a lump of cat anywhere in sight. The window was still wide open from my prank of hiding most of Gray’s clothes out there. Finding Happy would be far more productive than sitting in some boring history class that I lived through. A wide grin spread across my face as I left the bag full of books and grabbed my scarf to hide the markings on my neck before I ran out of the door, not bothering to lock it.

The Academy grounds were mostly empty and quiet as most students were already in class, leaving me plenty of empty space to search for the tiny blue cat. It’s not really like Happy to run off unless he smells fish but we’re so far from the sea that it should be hard for him to find it unless the market sets up in town.

I wandered around for a bit, not really worried as Happy could take care of himself, but when my nose locked on the scent of Stardust a growl began growing in my chest that I quickly put an end to. I followed the fading scent into the Literature building where my first class was

supposed to be held. I slipped silently into the room, ignoring the hair raising on my arms as the professor continued his lecture. Most eyes were on him, including the pair of honeyed eyes set in Not-Layla's face. I discreetly took the empty seat two rows behind the golden haired imposter.

Did Levy know this person? Did she think she was Layla?

The girl seemed ordinary in the way most non mages always had, but there was an air about her that spoke of something beneath the surface. She calmly took notes and kept her head down when the teacher asked questions to the class. She didn't act anything like Layla, so why did she get under my skin? All thoughts of Happy left me as the class ended and I followed her to the next one, a boring accounting class in the Business center. From my vantage point I could see her handwriting was neat, but nothing like the fancy looping curves Layla would make. She was studious and focused.

And absolutely terrified of being called on. Her voice wobbled as she answered, her face quickly turning beet red as the professor praised her well thought out answer. She shied away from contact with those near her and did everything so slowly so she wouldn't make a single noise.

When she met up with Levy outside the Mythology class I stayed out of sight, climbing the building outside to observe from the window instead of risking Levy noticing me. Not-Layla was a little more relaxed around Levy, her eyes bright and a small smile painted her glossy pink lips. They traded notes in class, their interactions similar, but not the same as the way Levy would hang all over Layla.

So Levy was familiar with the girl and hadn't bothered to mention her to us. What could Levy possibly get from keeping a friend from us?

"Yo Dragon Dick what the hell are you doing?" Gray's voice cut through my concentration and I almost fell from the building.

"Mind your business Popsicle." I growled out to him, but the prick wouldn't leave. He just stood there staring at me like I was crazy. Reluctantly I climbed down the building to stand next to the man, my agitation spiking as he silently raised a brow as if that was the same thing as asking a question.

"What are you doing out of class?" He asked after I refused to make any effort in answering the question he hadn't asked.

"I can't find Happy anywhere," I answered, lacing my fingers behind my head and shuffling my weight. "Lookin' for him is way more interesting than some dumb class." He bought the lie easily, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his pants as he began stepping out of his shoes.

"Now that you mention it, I haven't heard him for a couple days. You think the little guy is alright?" Gray seemed genuinely concerned and that made me feel like shit as I just noticed my best friend was missing.

“I’m sure he’s fine but I figured I’d look for him anyway.” Gray nodded in agreement as he dropped his backpack to begin taking off his shirt.

“I’ll help, I’m free the rest of the day anyway.”

“How’re you going to help if you’re naked?” I cackled at him as class let out. “Come on Popsicle Dick,” I tugged on the back of the shirt he was trying to re-dress himself in to keep him out of Levy’s sight. Gray grumbled profanities but didn’t fight against me for once and I would have been grateful if it would have been anyone other than him.

Chapter 7

Lucy

Two weeks into the semester it was difficult not to feel overwhelmed. There were so many papers and projects due and life being schooled by private tutors had not prepared me for such a heavy workload. My tutors had been less than useful seeing as they simply spoon fed me information then 'tested' me right after to make sure I got high marks. I guess I wasn't the only one scared of my father's hand. Absently I wondered exactly how much my father had been paying his employees for them to accept such terrible abuse as Levy was talking about this week's report. It was nice being away from such a toxic environment. My ribs were finally healing from father's last beating what felt like months ago and this is the first time since my father began taking his frustrations out on me that I haven't had to carefully conceal any bruises to be seen in public.

"Lucy are you listening?" Levy's voice cut through my muddled thoughts as I sat up straighter, scratching the back of my head while trying to look apologetic.

"I'm terribly sorry Levy. I've never been so overloaded with work before, how on Earthland do you manage it all so easily? If it weren't for your help I would probably be failing." I frowned at the thought, my ribs suddenly hurting from the thought of my father finding out his money was going down the drain because his daughter was failing a class. My hands were on my ribs as Levy began explaining the 'wizard war' and its significance in history.

"I really think we should use that topic as our final report." Levy finally said as she jotted a few things down in her neat handwriting on a piece of paper.

"Final report?"

"You weren't listening to the teacher again were you?" Levy sighed and shook her head. I shrunk into myself, wondering why exactly she would put up with me. "At the end of the class we have to write a seven-page report on a topic we think is important and explain why we think that. That paper can make or break your grade." I groaned, my head meeting the table with a very light smack. Suddenly I was feeling very nauseous and I was not too happy about being in school. "But don't worry, I'll help you." Levy's voice was soft and apologetic.

My stomach began rumbling and I sat up quickly, covering it with my hands as if the act would silence it's cry for food.

"Can we take a break?" I asked, looking down at the mostly finished homework on the table. Even though I had been lost in thought most of our study session I had managed to get most of my work for the week done. Levy, the wonderful saint that she is, usually helps me get most of our Mythology and History work out of the way Monday night so I can focus on my financing class and the business class my father has forced me into. They were both boring, with one requiring a lot of math and the other being a rather dry subject. The only good thing

was I also took my literature/creative writing class on the same day as those so I had a spark of sunshine in an otherwise miserable day.

"Yeah. We can finish this in your room," Levy smiled as she began neatly packing her things away. She looked lost in thought as she did, almost forgetting her books as we left the table. As I was busy wondering what was on her mind I didn't notice the small cat darting in front of me as I walked.

I did notice the floor as I tripped over said cat and landed on my face.

"Oh, Lucy! Are you alright?" Levy asked, trying not to laugh as I pushed myself up into a sitting position, eyeing the small cat in front of me. It was an odd shade of sky blue with a white stomach and eyes that looked almost too big for its face.

Levy also eyed the cat, a thoughtful look on her face. The cat let out a pathetic whine as it sniffed the air, padding towards me gently.

"Do you know who this cat belongs to?" I asked as it rubbed up against my arm. Its fur was soft and warm but its body felt like bone. I reached out to pick it up gently, meeting no resistance as my fingers curled around its slim frame.

"He looks like my friend Natsu's cat, Happy," the cat meowed happily at the name and Levy grinned. The cat refused to leave my grasp as Levy attempted to take him into her arms. A frown formed on her face as she decided to pet him instead. "He feels so skinny. I think Natsu's been looking for him since school started."

"Poor thing. Don't worry, I'll get you nice and cleaned up before we have a stern talking to with your owner about keeping an eye on you." I cooed to the little cat, my smile growing as the cat began purring. "What do cats eat?" I asked as we began making our way to the dormitory.

"I read in a book once that felines are carnivores, but this one will eat just about anything." Levy smiled at the little cat as he began meowing loudly.

"Hey Levy!" an unfamiliar voice called out as we were walking up the steps to the Dorm entrance. We turned to find a rather attractive brunette showing off far too much skin. Chestnut hair fell in waves over sun kissed skin which was barely covered by the thin scrap of fabric being held up by even thinner strings. The smile on her face fell as she studied me, brown eyes seeming to sparkle in the light as if tears were forming.

"Cana," Levy quickly made her way down the steps. "This is my friend Lucy, Lucy Ashley." she put emphasis on my pseudo last name. I didn't want anyone knowing of my heritage as a Heartfilia so instead I signed my mother's maiden name on all of the school forms to avoid any unwanted situations arising.

"Lucy Ashley," Cana repeated my name aloud as she and Levy seemed to have a silent conversation through facial expression alone. "Well it's nice to meet you Lucy. Sorry about the waterworks, thought I ran out of booze," the smile was back on her face, but it seemed

forced. “What are you two hotties doing?” She threw her arm around Levy’s shoulders and dragged the Petite girl back up the steps to the dorm.

“We were just going to Lucy’s room to study,” Levy stated, a strain in her voice. Cana seemed to really pep up after that as her grin spread wide across her face.

“That sounds fun, why don’t I join you guys!” and so she invited herself along, whispering to Levy as we walked the five stories up to my room. She whistled as we entered before stealing the leather armchair.

“Cana, that’s rude,” Levy scolded.

“It’s alright. I’m not really used to having people over, please excuse the mess,” I said nervously as I shut the door behind us and set the tiny blue cat down on the counter.

“Hey where’d you find Happy, Natsu’s been going nuts about him.” Cana called from the chair before sipping out of a small metal container.

“He tripped me over by the Library,”

“Sounds like something the little shit would do,” Cana laughed in the sitting room.

I sighed before opening my icebox. “I have some leftover fish, do you think he’d eat that?” I called out to no one in particular. The cat began meowing happily, and rather loudly, so I took that as a good sign and began looking through the icebox until I located the wrapped parcel.

“Cana are you hungry?” I offered as I plated the fish for the little cat and set them both on the ground so I wouldn’t have to worry about the poor creature hurting itself trying to get down.

I wasn’t allowed to have animals in my father’s home, but maybe if the cat isn’t too hard to handle, I’ll consider getting a pet of my own. It would certainly make the long nights studying less lonely. And I would have someone other than my journal to tell my fears and hopes that I may be able to keep mom’s promise.

I’m still far too shy to ask Levy what she thinks of the recipe sitting in my school bag. She’s a kind girl but I’m terribly scared she’d laugh at me outright.

“No thanks,” she called as she began shuffling what looked like a rather large deck of cards. Levy began making a couple sandwiches while I studied the little cat. Its fur was remarkably soft for something that’s been missing for two weeks.

“Lucy, have you ever had your fortune read?” Cana turned to study me. I shook my head as Levy handed me a plate with a thick sandwich on it. I silently took a bite as Levy made herself comfortable in my sitting room next to her odd, barely dressed friend.

“It’s pretty fun sometimes.” Levy admitted. I followed their lead and got comfortable in the sitting room, leaving my study material in the kitchenette to be purposely forgotten.

“How do you do it?”

“Depends on what you mean by it,” Cana gave a suggestive wiggle of her eyebrows that got her a smack in the arm from Levy. “If you mean read fortunes then it’s really easy. The cards do all the work.” I watched as the woman shuffled the cards expertly before she offered them to me. “Cut the deck.”

“I don’t believe I know how.” I admitted and she gave me a soft smile.

“Just think about what you want to know about your future and separate the deck into two.” I nodded, setting my plate down to accept the cards as Levy passed them to me. I stared at the heavy stack of cards in my hand before closing my eyes. There were so many different things one could possibly wish to know about their futures, and yet there was one that was burning against my chest.

‘ Will I be enough to open the gate and release the magic back to the world like Momma wanted?’ I separated the cards with my eyes closed before passing the two halves to Levy who set them carefully on the table before Cana. The brunette studied the two halves before expertly shuffling them back together a few times.

“Now keep your desire at the front of your mind,” her voice dropped a bit as she began setting individual cards on the table in a semicircle. “This card,” she tapped the last card she set above the other five, “Will answer your question.” I nodded as she began flipping cards over one by one, leaving the last card alone for a moment. There were odd squiggles and drawings on the cards that I couldn’t see from my seat on the other side of the table, but the smile stretched across Cana’s face allowed me to relax a bit.

“Looks like you’ve got a hunk and a hard road in your future.” she winked at me as a blush began to rise, painting my cheeks a light pink.

“Cana quit teasing her,” Levy puffed out her cheek at the Brunette.

“Yeah yeah.” the girl turned back to her cards, studying them intently as if she were looking for something. Her smile slowly fell, her eyes darting up to meet Levy’s before she turned to me. A pained expression twisting her beautiful features. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“I- Um- thank you,” I stared at the girl as she seemed to be trying to hold back tears. Levy also seemed to be welling up, their reactions causing my heart to clench. “It was a long time ago.”

“Cana,” Levy’s voice was shaky as she sent the girl a pointed look before patting her watery eyes.

“Right,” the girl shuttered before taking a large drink from a different container. “And the crowning jewel, Tadah!” she flipped the remaining card over, confusion lighting her face for a moment before she turned to Levy. “I don’t remember putting this card in my Deck.”

“You don’t remember a lot of things,” Levy said in a dismissive tone before handing the card to me. On it was painted a beautiful golden gate, cracked open with stars and constellations painted on the thick cardstock. There was no border or edges on the card, just the picture of an open gate. A smile spread across my face as the gate almost seemed to sing to me. True it

was just barely cracked but it was still open. "We should go shopping for cat stuff tomorrow. You don't have classes on Friday right?" Levy asked as I studied the card.

"Wouldn't we just bring the cat back to Natsu's?" Cana asked as she began shuffling her cards once more, the sadness that once hung heavy on the two girls had faded into something softer.

"I don't mind keeping him for now," I said, tearing my eyes away from the card. "Why don't you come with us Cana, we can get some lunch together," I offered the card back to her. She studied me for a moment, a smile of her own slowly spreading across her face.

"I'd love to. You can keep that." Cana motioned to the card still in my outstretched hand.

"Oh I couldn't possibly," I shook my head. "It's far too beautiful to be removed from your deck."

"A friend of mine painted it as an addition. I think she'd want you to have it."

"Thank you," I held the card against my chest as the girls turned to speak quietly to each other.

"Hey Lu, have you ever been to Magnolia?" Levy asked after they seemed to come to some kind of agreement.

"No, I can't say I have," I admitted.

"Would you like to join me and a couple of friends next weekend? They're having a fall festival and it's a lot of fun." Levy asked tentatively, shooting a warning glance at Cana. The brunette puffed out her lower lip.

"I would be delighted."

"Excellent!" Cana, jumped up from her seat. "I'll start planning our route!"

Chapter 8

Natsu

Levy had her eyes trained directly on the back of my head. I could feel it. She was furious after I skipped the first week of school to tail Not-Layla. Of course she only thought I was looking for Happy. I am starting to worry a little bit as the little guy's never been gone so long before. Levy assures me he's fine. It is most definitely a tactic to keep me in class instead of out following golden hair and the scent of the stars. So far Not-Layla has been extremely boring, much like the history class Levy's forced me to sit in.

She still hasn't said anything about the girl even though she's been covered in her scent almost every day this week. Instead she's been begging Gray and I to go along with her and Cana to Magnolia for the Changing of the Leaves festival they've held every year since the magic has been sucked from the world. The sakura petals no longer fall in magically enhanced colors, instead the leaves just fall from the trees and everyone begins the harvest.

It's never quite made sense to me why we as Wizards have kept our long lives but most of the magic in the world has vanished completely, replaced in some areas by large concentration of crystals that humans just seem to overlook as a whole.

"I don't see why you want to drag us along." I grumbled as the class finally ended.

"Gray's agreed to come," Levy's voice trailed behind her as she picked up her pace.

"You act like that's going to convince me to come. If anything it only gives me more of a reason to stay right here and look for Happy."

"I've already told you, Happy is going to be just fine." I could hear the eye-roll in her voice as we left the History department behind and began crossing the Academy's campus. "You don't even have to pay for food."

"That sounds nice, but you guys always put restrictions on how much I can eat." I huffed as I followed after Levy. There wasn't anywhere else I needed to be now that classes were out.

"No restriction," Levy turned to look at me for a moment. "We will have to take a carriage to get there, but I won't even make you ride back with us."

"How long are you planning to be there?"

"The whole weekend!" Cana yelled her answer as she threw her arm over Levy's shoulders. The smell of alcohol was wafting off her heavily, a good sign that she's been drinking since at least the beginning of her last class.

"Just go get your things packed and meet us by the main entrance." Levy sighed at me as we slowed to a stop in front of the dorms.

“I really don’t want to go.”

“Your loss,” Cana waved behind her as she began entering the Dorm building. “I guess Gray will get all the glory of keeping us safe this weekend.”

“Like you really need Gray’s pansy ass to keep you safe! We’re members of Fairy Tail!” I growled out.

“While that’s true,” Levy began, a frown creasing her forehead, making it all wrinkly, “Cana and I aren’t as strong as you and Gray, not without our magic.” And with that Levy followed Cana into the building, not even bothering to look back. I stared at the door with my own frown tugging at my face.

“Like Gray could really keep them safe all weekend,” I huffed before turning and heading to the boys Dorm. The place was loud and full of adolescent humans, the scent of their hormones tickling my nose. I used my scarf to drown out the heavy scent of yearning and repression. It made my head fuzzy.

“You coming with, Hot Head?” Gray asked as I entered the room.

“Don’t have much of a choice, it’s not like I can leave the girls to be protected by you,” I grunted, my vision swimming about with the thick scent of desire in the air.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Gray yelled back.

“Exactly what it sounded like!” I growled, stuffing my comfortable pants and vest into my bag before stomping towards the door.

“Levy and Cana sure are taking their time,” Gray grumbled when he finally met me at the entrance. He threw his bag in the back of the rented carriage before crossing his arms to study me.

“If they don’t hurry up I’m staying,” I leaned against one of the horses, earning a disgruntled whinny and a chomp to the hair. I ignored the beast to study the paths approaching the entranceway.

“Since when are you so whiney Flame Breath?”

“Since your mom’s stopped putting out Icicle Dick,” I grunted back.

“You don’t have to be such an asshole Lava Brain.”

“And you don’t have to be so nosey Ice Princess.”

“I take it you’re Natsu and Gray?” Not-Layla’s voice startled me from lunging towards Gray to slam his mouth shut.

“Yeah who wants to...know?” Gray turned to look at the girl and quickly lost all his bravado.

“My name’s Lucy. Levy and Cana said they’d be here but they haven’t shown up yet I take it.” Not-Layla looked nervous as she fidgeted from foot to foot, her large doe eyes studying us both as if we were vicious monsters.

“Lucy,” Gray repeated like a parrot. There was pain in his voice, something the girl seemed to take as confusion.

“I’m new to the school and Levy invited me to witness the festival,” she spoke softly as she began wrapping her arms around herself. She was once again dressed from head to toe in heavy fabric, much like she had that first day I saw her.

“Lucy there you are!” Levy called as she and Cana approached the carriage as well. “I see you’ve met Gray and Natsu.”

“Hey Levy, mind if I have a word with you,” I grunted out. She blinked at me once before frowning at me.

“Sure Natsu. Cana why don’t you help Lucy get comfortable.”

“Oh I’ll be sure to help her get extra comfy, c’mere Luuuuucccyyyyyyy~” Cana draped her arm over the poor golden haired girl. A growl built in my throat as Cana corralled Not-Layla into the carriage, covering the girl’s scent in the stench of alcohol.

“What’s up Natsu?”

“That girl, she looks exactly like Layla.”

“I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me,” Gray muttered as he approached, his face a little blank.

“Her *name* is Lucy Ashley and she has nothing to do with Layla,” Levy spoke calmly but there was an edge to her voice.

“She smells just like her,” I growled out. Levy furrowed her brows before looking over her shoulder at the carriage and then up to the sky. “She looks just like Layla, and you never did tell us where she went.”

“I made a promise to Layla. I can’t tell you just yet.” Levy kept her eye on the sky and the stars hidden behind the bright blue.

“Well why the hell not, it’s not like it’s magically binding Levy. There’s no magic.”

“I just can’t tell you, not yet.” Levy stood her ground, brown eyes hard and unyielding against Gray’s icy glare.

“Well I don’t like her,” I growled out.

“You don’t have to like her.” Levy sighed before she pointed at me, “but you do have to be nice to her. She’s a friend and she’s done nothing to you.”

“Whatever. Can we just get this over with.” I grumbled before stomping off towards the carriage.

“Cana I don’t think this is appropriate,” *Lucy*’s voice called from the other side of the shut door.

“Oh please, you don’t look comfortable in all those layers,” Cana slurred out. I threw the door open to find Cana removing the girl’s jacket, revealing the thin blouse underneath.

“Cana quit molesting her,” I grunted, ignoring the somersaults my stomach was already pulling before the carriage even began moving. I forced myself down on the free bench before Gray climbed in, jostling the carriage further. Levy followed soon after with a yell to the driver.

I kept my mouth clenched shut and my eyes forward as the continuous rocking motion of the death trap caused a riot in my abdomen.

“How long is it to Magnolia?” Lucy asked quietly as she folded in on herself. She had plenty of room on the bench to make herself more comfortable, but with Cana practically laying on the girl she seemed content with making herself as small as she could.

“It’s a day’s walk or a four hour carriage ride.” Levy answered brightly.

“I see.” The girl with golden hair murmured. She clutched at her chest before shrinking further into herself.

A bump in the road had lunch fighting to escape my mouth but I suppressed the urge to groan. I will not show weakness to this Layla look-a-like. I don’t care what Levy says, she’s no friend of mine.

“Natsu calm down,” Cana grumbled as I pushed her out of the way to get to solid ground. Four hours of sitting in the rocking death trap with Lucy’s smell mixing with Cana’s the whole trip was wrecking my nerves. Once my feet were back on solid ground my stomach began to calm down, but my anger was spiking. It’s one thing to have to look at a face similar to Layla’s, but to watch her almost twin be scrunched in on herself without the backbone to stand up and tell Cana to get off her just boiled my blood.

“I’m surprised he wasn’t groaning the whole ride like a baby,” Gray was next off the carriage.

“It was a rather quiet ride,” Levy’s voice was grating my nerves further.

“I think I need some air, could you point me in the direction of the hotel.” Lucy’s voice was next, it was shaking and small. I turned to study the group as Cana exited the carriage. She was about to throw her arm over the girl again when a growl began building in my throat. Lucy was a trembling mess just on the outskirts of the loose circle my friends had created. Her starlight scent was masked with alcohol and the sour stench of nerves.

“Um sure,” Levy shifted awkwardly before turning towards Cana with a frown on her face. “It’s near the cathedral in the center of town. You can’t miss it.”

“Thank you,” the girl clutched her once discarded jacket to her chest as she bowed. And then she fled like a frightened deer.

“What’s her problem?” Cana grumbled under her breath.

“You really shouldn’t have been all over her,” Levy sighed. “She looked really uncomfortable.”

“What do you know about Lucy?” Gray asked as he began to unload the carriage. I listened intently, the growl in my chest loosening to a low rumble.

“Not a whole lot, she’s very guarded. I was hoping inviting her with us would help her come out of her shell a bit, but now I’m worried it wasn’t such a good idea.”

“If Cana could keep her hands to herself,” I spoke without thought, the growl in my voice deepening, “The girl wouldn’t have such a problem.”

“Oi, it’s not like you were helping with your creepy staring Salamander.” Cana puffed out her cheeks angrily before letting out a long breath. “I just can’t help it. She reminded me so much of Layla.”

“They’re nothing alike,” I grunted before turning away from the rest of them. “I’ll meet you at the inn.”

“Where are you going Natsu?” Cana yelled out.

“To check on things,” I grunted back before stomping away. My feet took me through the familiar walkways of magnolia to the outskirts where the guild was built. The building stood, in good repair but completely hollow. All of the lacrima crystals our friends became were moved to the basement in case any humans could see the guild. I checked the doors, glad to see they were still solidly locked before following a little dirt path into the woods. Familiar scents calmed the anger burning within me to a small ember, something far more manageable than the raging storm it had been before. My steps led me through the darkened forest surrounding Magnolia to the edge of my hoard. The way was clear and untouched by the humans surrounding it. The cave was cool and dark as I entered. Igneel’s warmth had long since left, as well as the enchantment keeping it hidden from others. Luckily it’s far enough in the woods that regular people don’t usually stumble upon it.

I stalked my way through the dark, reflexively rolling my wrist to produce a flame to see by, but nothing sprouted. Even without the light my feet led me on to the deeper caverns, lit naturally by little bugs that glow in the dark. Within the deepest cavern my fingers found a wooden box, left by Layla with a cryptic note. Open the gate. Even in the darkness i could feel the letters carved deeply into the lid.

“How the hell is someone supposed to open the gate without any magic?” I grumbled to no one in particular.

Chapter 9

Lucy

I had to get away for just a moment just to breathe. My heart was pounding in my chest and my hands were shaking something awful. My feet led me through the bustling city of Magnolia to nowhere as I did everything I could to remember just to breathe. The confined exposure was too much for me to handle, constant contact, the loud voices, everything was sending my flight response into overdrive.

I knew Cana didn't mean anything by it, it seemed to just be part of who she is. I hadn't truly gotten a chance to get to know the two boys that had sat across from me for 4 hours. I didn't truly get a good feel for what they're like as people. Their faces just seemed permanently stuck in a constant frown. I couldn't stop myself from worrying that they would lash out at me. I couldn't make myself small enough, couldn't take in enough air, couldn't do enough to stop the thoughts.

After a few moments of wandering everything started to slow and the thoughts and worry seemed to ebb away. I was left instead tired and aching. My ribs, now mostly healed, sent shooting pain through my side as a reminder of what could happen. If my own father was capable of such violent recourse over small things then what could strangers do? What if I offended them with my hasty retreat?

I forced the thought away, remembering Levy's worried look as I bolted from the carriage.

"Not everyone is like father," I breathed aloud. "I can give them a chance."

"Pretty lady!" A child no taller than my hip bounced toward me with bright eyes and a gap tooth smile.

"Are you speaking to me?" I asked, confused and concerned. I took a frantic look around to actually take in my surroundings and was surprised to see that I had made it to an open field where children were laughing and playing all around.

"Yeah!" The child jumped, messy black hair swaying in the warm breeze. "You wanna play with us?"

"I really must get back to my friends," I noted, looking around nervously. The hotel is by the cathedral but... "oh goodness."

"Are you okay?" One of the other children stepped forward, little brows furrowed and face full of worry.

"I believe I'm lost," I admitted, biting my lip as new worry took hold.

“Where are you going?” The first child spoke, swatting away another friend that had joined to check on the stranger invading their games.

“My friends said we’re staying near the cathedral but I’ve no idea where it is.”

“We can show you!” A new child spoke with big round eyes and dark green hair.

“We know the way!” Another with pink hair and blue eyes jumped forward.

“Oh I couldn’t possibly ask you to do that.” I shuffled away. “Won’t your parents be concerned you’ve left?”

“Nah, we play all over the city!” The first child spoke. “My name’s Gracie and I’ll be your guide.” The child took my hand and began pulling me away from the field and back toward the city.

“Gracie are you sure this is alright?”

“Yupp! Magnolia is small so everyone knows everyone.”

“That’s nice.”

“Ooh look the candy cart!” One child laughed happily and began leading the herd, along with me, towards the poor candy seller.

“Well look who we have here,” the Candy woman stated as we appeared. “Gracie and her friends and whose this?” The woman’s eyes found me, a soft smile gracing her face.

“My name’s Lucy,” I stayed, pulling at the fabric of my skirt.

“She’s lost!”

“Oh well we can’t have that now can we?” The candy woman began dishing out suckers and lollipops and little chocolate candies to all the children. “Where are you headed my dear?”

“My friends are staying in a hotel near the cathedral.” I answered. I could feel my face growing warm under all the new attention.

“Well you’ll want to follow this path straight to the center of town. The cathedral’s got the biggest spires this side of Crocus. Once you find it you’ll want to turn right and it’ll be right there.” The woman handed me a sucker as well.

“How much do I owe?” I asked, pulling my coin purse from my bag, the jingle of my Mom's keys was muffled by the fabric but they still chimed like bells.

“It’s on me.” She smiled before sending me on my way and shooing the children back home as the sun would be setting soon. I followed the woman’s directions but quickly became distracted by the charming little city of Magnolia.

When the sun began setting around seven thirty I was so distracted by how much fun I had been having that I had strayed from the main path, finding myself lost on a back alley street. I scanned the buildings around me, finding one with an open storefront.

'Magical Oddities and Rarities Sold Here' the sign read in faded blue letters. I frowned but entered anyway, hoping someone inside could help me find my way back to the main road. I was already late as it is and it's not proper to keep a friend waiting for long.

There was a fine layer of dust around many of the things on the shelves and the air was musty, making me want to cough. I was worried, even though the sign on the door said open it could very well have been closed. Maybe for some illegal back door type deal. I inched my way towards the front counter until my eyes caught on three very sparkly things just below the dusty glass. I used the sleeve of my dress to clear away the fine layer of grime, giving me the ability to see three very beautiful keys, each individually carved. One silver and two gold, dancing in the firelight of the lamp.

"Oh I'm sorry," A sweet voice called behind the counter. "I didn't hear anyone enter." I jumped up, studying the woman in front of me. She was eyeing me suspiciously, as if she wasn't sure how she should act. Her eyes were sharp for a moment, before they softened and looked somewhat sad.

"I'm sorry to intrude. It seems I've gotten lost again and..."

"Say no more!" the girl smiled, all of the sadness erased from her features as she brightened like the sun. Without further prompting she brought up a piece of paper and a pencil from by the register and quickly drew on it.

"Would you mind telling me what these are," I asked, my eyes drifting back to the keys, not wanting to seem too interested. Though I certainly was. What could possibly be the chances of stumbling upon such rare things in such a small town?

"Those are celestial spirit keys. Wizards used them to call forth spirits to aid them in battle." The girl paused, her large blue eyes tinged with something dark for just a moment. Then a look of curiosity touched her features. "Would you be interested in them?" I nodded, pulling my wallet out of my bag. My heart was pounding in my chest with excitement on just how lucky I was to find more of the same keys my mother had gifted me. "Celestial spirit magic is quite rare."

"I thought magic didn't exist," my voice was a little shaky as my eyes were completely entranced by the keys the woman pulled out of the counter.

"Some say it never existed at all, others say it was locked away by the celestial king after a rather wicked human abused it." The words were spoken as if she truly believed someone had done the world such an injustice. Her eyes were studying me again, looking for something. "Only a celestial wizard has any hopes of getting an audience with the king and fixing this mess." The girl sighed wistfully, as if she once had magic herself.

"How would one do that?" I asked, pulling the appropriate bills from my purse as the girl carefully boxed each key. We traded goods at the same time.

"First they have to believe they can," Her blue eyes engulfed my entire gaze and I lost myself to her sadness. She had lost something precious. Something almost as wonderful as magic itself. "Here's a quick map to get back to your friends. Let me know if I can do anything else for you," She smiled, closing her eyes and breaking me from my momentary trance. I took the crudely drawn map and thanked her, never once wondering why she knew where I was staying.

When I finally arrived at the hotel the pink haired man, Natsu I believe his name is, was waiting with arms crossed.

"What took so long?" He growled out.

"I got turned around," I mumbled.

"You had Levy worried sick." He frowned at me, arms still crossed.

"I should go apologize immediately," I went to step inside but paused before my fingers clasped the door. "Which.. um.."

"You've got a backbone somewhere in there. If not I suggest you grow one if you don't want Cana laying all over you." He grunted without looking. "Second floor third door on the left." I nodded and followed his directions, counting carefully before I knocked on the door.

The hotel was small but beautiful, with colorful paintings dotting the halls and each door had been painted with different kinds of trees or flowers.

"Natsu did you find her?" Levy called before pulling open the door. "Oh Lucy I was so worried!"

"Hey she's back!" Cana's flushed face lit up as she was stretched across the bed. "Sorry if I pissed you off." Her smile fell quickly as I stepped into the room.

"I'm so sorry for the worry. And you didn't make me mad I am simply... unfamiliar with such casual displays of affection among friends."

"You sure?"

"Yes." I gave her a sincere smile.

"Lucy just needs time to get use to us. Best to keep your grubby hands to yourself." Levy chastised Cana, cheeks puffing out and blue brows downturned.

"But my grabby hands want Lucy!" Cana sighed in exasperation before sending me a wink.

"That's not what I- oh I give up." Levy rolled her eyes before dropping down onto the bed. It was then that I realized that it was a single bed room, and it was rather small.

"How are we all to sleep?"

“You sound too formal. Lighten it up,” Cana rolled closer to the edge and Levy gave her a slight nudge with her bare toes which caused the brunette to fall loudly to the ground.

“Leave her alone.” Levy griped. “We should be able to all fit,” Levy motioned towards the bed.

“I’ve never shared a bed with someone. Not since my mother..” my tongue tied itself in my mouth and my stomach began to ball up.

“Then we’ll make it special!” Levy bounced up.

“How about ‘nother reading?” Cana asked from her sprawled position on the floor.

“No no that won’t do.” Levy shook her head as she began pacing, stepping over Cana with ease.

“Well what kind of activities do you normally do?”

“Well back way before, OUCH.” Levy stepped heavily on Cana’s stomach, something dark and dangerous in her eyes. The brunette frowned while rubbing her stomach, a loud sigh escaping her before she turned back to me. “I mean, back when our friends lived closer Lisanna and Mirajane would do makeovers and we’d play card games or spin the bottle, or... well really anything. Sometimes there’s even be wrestling matches.”

“That all sounds so different from what I grew up with.” I spoke without thinking and was rewarded with questioning stares.

“Well what kinds of things did you do during a sleepover?”

“Just sleep I guess. They were very dull things. I haven’t had one in so long... I don’t... I’m not truly sure if they were really sleep overs.”

“Don’t sound too fun.” Cana crossed her arms and studied me upside down from her position on the floor. “Maybe we should get you drunk. Let you let loose a bit. You seem too wound up.”

“I’ve never really enjoyed the effects of alcohol.” I shook my head at the suggestion.

“What about makeovers! It’ll be fun. I even brought some of my makeup with me,” Levy jumped across the bed, feet kicking in the air as she pulled something from her large bag.

“Sounds fine to me, just no lipstick, I hate the way it tastes.” Cana grunted as she began pushing herself off the ground. Levy returned bright eyed, dumping her bag of cosmetics on the bed. “Hey Lucy, you look a little stuffy in that uniform, whaddya say you borrow some of my clothes when we go out tonight?” Cana asked as she patted the space beside the bed. “It’s gonna get hotter and I’m not sure if Natsu or Gray will be in any condition to carry you home if ya faint.” I studied my clothes as Levy began chirping about colors to match Cana’s skin tone and clothes.

“I’m not sure. I... Yes.” I swallowed hard. I’ve lived my life in stuffy dresses and stiff corsets. Levy and Cana seem to be so free in their clothes. While I’m not sure I would actually look good in any of Cana’s clothes it would be nice to pretend for a night that I’m not Lucy Heartfillia. In fact. I can be Lucy Ashley.

“That’s the spirit. And I promise to keep my grabby hands to myself as much as I can.”

“I’ll help keep her off you,” Levy offered as she began to look through her pressed powders, comparing each to Cana’s shimmery silver top.

“I appreciate it, but I think I can handle her myself.” A smile spread across Cana’s face, it was wicked and sharp. I forced myself not to think about it as she dove into her bag for her spare clothes. “I can help with the makeup, I’m quite good at it.” I kept a smile on my face as my stomach churned thinking about the reason why I had become good in the first place.

“Oh, thanks Lu.” Levy smiled at me before pushing a few pressed powders and her brushes towards me. Cana muttered to her bag as I began carefully applying fine layers of the shimmering dust to Levy’s pale eyelids. She chose a smokey grey and a shimmering pearl color, so I applied the pearl close to her eyelashes and the grey carefully on the edges, smudging the colors together in the middle. Once I was finished I very carefully lined her lids with charcoal, highlighting her eye shape.

“Daammnnn. Lu can you do me too?” Cana asked once I was finished applying a little bit of blush to the apples of Levy’s cheeks. “She looks like one of those fancy girls at those rich people parties.”

“Sure.” I said simply. Cana grinned wide, choosing colors out of the stack. I carefully applied the pearlescent pink and silver to Cana’s eyes, carefully smudging the charcoal to match her tough attitude. When I was finished she admired my work in the mirror while Levy applied a light gloss to tint her lips.

“Your turn.” Cana handed me a stack of clothes and pointed to the adjoining restroom. I began feeling nervous once I shut the door and looked at the scraps Cana had picked out for me. A shimmery gold top, much like the one Cana was wearing, and a pair of tight white shorts that could barely be considered underwear were her choices. They were little more than lingerie, the types of things father would never allow me to wear.

‘ *But father’s not here.* ’ I thought while chewing on my bottom lip, contemplating the clothing in my hand, comparing it to the uniform I still donned. “It’ll be like wearing a swimsuit, but shorter.” I told my reflection. The Lucy that looked back at me didn’t appear to be any more convinced than I felt, but she did look healthier than the last time I had dared to stare in a mirror too long. Cheeks fuller, eyes not quite so dull.

I took a deep breath before removing the layers of my uniform, carefully folding them until I was down to the essentials. I pulled the shirt on first, amazed at how light the fabric felt and the way the color seemed to shine and dance as it moved. It hugged my waist, but was loose enough around the top that I wasn’t spilling out of it. In a lot of ways it was more decent than the dresses father forced me into. Next I shimmied into the shorts. They were a little loose

around the waist and a bit restricted on my thighs but they were comfortable overall, if a bit revealing.

A lot revealing.

I took another deep breath before leaving the bathroom, folded uniform in hand. Cana hollered, a new drink in her clutches as Levy carefully studied her pile of makeup, looking for something to match.

“I feel very naked.” I admitted. Cana laughed.

“You get use to it. It’s very freeing.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it.” I tugged on the hem of the shorts to pull them down a bit. When I stepped forward they just rode back up.

“I’ll go check on the boys, make sure they’re not killing each other.” Cana eyes me for just a moment before she grinned wide and left with a wave and a decisive shut of the door.

“You don’t have to wear it if you’re not comfortable,” Levy’s voice was soft. Comforting. Almost like she was reassuring a child.

“No. I like it, it’s different. Like Cana said it will just take some getting used to.”

“I take it you’re from a well to do family, with parents that dictate what you can and can’t wear and how you’re to act.”

“Something like that.” I agreed. It was alright to give that much away isn’t it?

“Cana and I can take you shopping tomorrow, help you pick out some regular people clothes.”

“I’d like that.” I smiled.

Levy smiled back before motioning to the makeup she gingerly picked up. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

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

Natsu

There was so much gold. From her long hair left in waves to the sparkling shimmer around honey eyes, even the top that blatantly showed off her assets and the fact that her bra was lace. It was all gold. And gold is a dragon's weakness.

I frowned at Cana, the obvious mastermind as we walked through the chilly night air. It was cool for late summer, the crispness of autumn showing its presence with the change in the temperature. Lively voices and sounds nearly deafened me to the girl's quiet words. Her voice was far too soft, she is far too soft, for us to be dragging her to a bar well past this pampered princess' bedtime. She already looked tired and spooked.

I definitely didn't want to be the one carrying her home, especially if Cana manages to get her drunk.

"What's the matter Salamander?" Cana raised her eyebrow at me.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I huffed, keeping my eyes everywhere but the girl walking ahead of us.

"I've never seen you so bothered before." She laughed and it grated a nerve. Frosty bumped into the blonde girl's shoulder, muddling her scent with his. "If you keep growling like that she'll think there's a feral dog nearby." I coughed, trying to kill the subconscious growl building in my throat.

"Why don't you just leave me alone?" I grumbled.

"What's your problem?" Cana grabbed my arm tightly, her nails digging into my skin.

"I don't trust her. She looks just like Layla, who we haven't heard from since the day our magic was taken, and she just weasels her way into our group."

"I don't see it that way." Cana frowned at me. I jerked my arm out of her grasp, thrusting my hands into the pockets of my pants. "Levy's been dragging that poor girl around since they met. Lucy is shy and sheltered. She's not weasling her way anywhere. Don't you think she deserves better than all this hatred you're misplacing?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Look Natsu, you've had well over a century to get over it. We all make mistakes, but it's not your fault Layla was fooled by Zeref. You need to get over your anger before it's all you are." Cana sighed before stomping off to join the rest of the group at the entrance to the bar. My

feet felt like lead as I watched them all laughing together, all except Lucy, who seemed to have set herself apart from the others. She shimmered in the light of a nearby gaslamp, the fire dancing across her pale skin.

The anger bubbled up again, but I pushed it back down. So far, Lucy has been nothing but nice to my friends. There's no real reason for me to be so mad. Gods do I hate to admit when the fortune teller is right.

She shivered in the chilly night air as the wind blew her scent to me. I stepped forward, the scent of stardust and vanilla overpowering everything else, until it was smothered by the scent of the stripper. Gray offered his jacket. I continued on into the bar without bothering to look back.

She couldn't hang. Not the way Cana wanted her to. The poor girl was already nearly intoxicated when the house band began playing. Cana dragged Levy to dance on the dusty worn floor, leaving Lucy to nurse her drink at the bar alone with Gray. I tried to keep my attention off the girl, but something just didn't sit right in my gut. She swayed in her seat, shimmying to the music from the safety of her barstool.

Gray turned to ask her something before a girl with green hair and a short skirt pulled up next to him, quickly stealing his attention. He looked back at me briefly, asking with his eyes for me to watch the girl before he joined short skirt in the crowd of dancers. I frowned as he left, my frown only deepening as the girl seemed to deflate at being alone. Though she wasn't alone for very long.

My fingers tightened on the empty bottle in my grasp as a creep with dark purple hair and a stupid eyebrow tattoo leaned on the bar to her right. The golden girl spared him a single glance before turning her body away and sipping on her drink. I sighed as the man kept trying, going so far as to grab her arm before she jerked away from him to stumble into the throng of people dancing, her back ramrod straight. She spun on her heels precariously, swatting his searching hand away as anger and righteous fire lit her glassy eyes, giving the girl some life.

My feet moved me of my own accord, moving me through the tavern towards Lucy and the creep with no real pain other than pain. I may not like her, but she was Levy and Cana's friend.

"You've got me all wrong doll," the man's voice was thick like syrup as he leaned closer to her. The disgust was so clear on Lucy's face the bartender almost intervened. "I'm just looking to share a good time"

"She's taken, back off," I lied. My voice was gruffer than I've ever heard it, a growl lacing my words with lethality.

"Oh, is she with you?" The man turned his attention to me before raking his eyes over Lucy once more. The blonde seemed to be at the end of her patience as she raised her hand to slap the man, a resounding smack silencing those immediately around us.

“All that matters is I’m not interested in you,” her words were clear and clipped, her face blushing from anger and alcohol. I grabbed her hand on impulse as the man sputtered and stared. She followed without complaint or resistance, which would have been worrisome if the little worm hadn’t followed us out of the bar, face stinging red from Lucy’s well placed slap.

“Don’t you dare run away,” he yelled as he slammed the door shut behind him, eyes only on Lucy.

Rage fueled me as he advanced on the girl with resigned fear in her eyes. I let her hand go, replacing the warmth of her skin with the heat of his throat. He scraped at my wrist as I slammed him against the brick building.

“She’s no simple prey for you to stalk.” I tightened my grip as the man finally seemed to realize the situation he had put himself in. “If I ever see you near her again I will not hesitate to rip your throat from your body and leave you for buzzard food.”

“He’s not worth it.” Lucy’s soft voice held steel as her fingers grasped my wrist and tugged it away from the now sniveling man. My eyes jumped to her, startled to see that same look Layla would give me when I was young and filled with anger, going after Gray for being an idiot. I let him fall to the floor, not bothering to look at the disgusting filth again as Lucy gave me a small smile, the first she had ever directed at me, before she tugged me in the direction of the hotel.

I walked with her, ignoring the sudden desire to rip Gray’s jacket off her. His scent was so much stronger than hers, it was hard not to get second hand annoyed due to the bastard’s stink.

We were halfway to the hotel when the warmth of her palm left my wrist. The cold had never hit me as hard as it did when she let go.

“I know you don’t like me very much, though I’m not entirely sure what i’ve done to deserve your ire,” Lucy looked down at her feet as she slowed her pace, coming to a stop just under a lamp post, “but i appreciate your help with that man. I’m not sure he would have stopped if you hadn’t made him. You have my gratitude.” She bowed to me, stiff and formal. Golden locks obscuring her face.

“It’s not that I don’t like you,” I began, but didn’t know where I was going from there.

“It’s fine Natsu,” Lucy interrupted, standing from her bow with sad eyes. “I should be fine to get to the hotel from here.”

“Like hell.” I grunted, walking ahead before she could say anything else that was stupid. Or might make me feel bad. She’s too much like Layla. Too close in mannerisms. Maybe she’s one of Layla’s cousins. Or a sister.

“How can they function so early after being out all night?” Gray grumbled over coffee as the girls loudly discussed shopping plans. Lucy seemed to have acquired some pet that she

needed “cute” supplies for and Levy and Cana were determined to buy Lucy more clothes like last night.

The blonde seemed more comfortable with the girls as they sipped tea and coffee and made their plans. Her shoulders weren’t as tight.

“So what happened last night,” Gray asked through a yawn.

“Some creep couldn’t take no for an answer, so I made him.” I shrugged, eyes roaming the small restaurant for any lurkers. “Was short skirt worth it?”

“Eh, she was nice but not really my type.” he shrugged out of his shirt as Lucy approached, his jacket in hand. She eyed him critically, but didn’t comment on his half dressed appearance.

“Thank you for your jacket last night.” Lucy handed it to the man, her face a bit flushed as she forced her eyes towards me. Something hot and almost angry bubbled in my chest for a brief moment before she spoke to me directly. “We’re headed out soon if you would like to join us, though I’m hoping there will be less... creeps out during the day.”

“Covered up like that you shouldn’t have any problems,” I nodded towards her full length button dress that reached up her neck. She frowned at me before turning expertly on her heels to stomp away, huffing.

“You’re such a dick,” Gray laughed before pulling his jacket on and joining the girls. I rolled my eyes and reluctantly followed.

Shopping had never been a favorite of mine, especially not with Cana and Levy. Those two always buy the heaviest shit. With Lucy it wasn’t so bad as she just paid for things to be delivered to their shared room. But that just meant they could drag us more places. They spent hours trying on clothes and jumping from store to store. In our two days in Magnolia they managed to buy enough to fill our whole carriage, so naturally we chartered a second one.

We split up, girls riding in one carriage, and Gray and I riding in the second.

“I think I liked it better when you were suffering in silence,” Gray stated as another bump rocked the carriage.

“Fuck you,” I grumbled from the floor, clutching my stomach as it rolled and tumbled.

“Hard Pass.”

If i thought following them around Magnolia to buy all this crap was torture I hadn’t thought about lugging it all up to Lucy’s room on the top floor. The girl seemed to have something on her mind as she walked slowly up the steps. When she noticed I was waiting on her that seemed to spur herself into motion. She fumbled with her keys, the jingling agitating my nerves until I couldn’t take it anymore. I took the keys from her as gently as I could, the

warmth of her skin only agitating me more as I unlocked the door easily as pushed it open, waiting for her to enter. She dropped her bags on the kitchen counter and I followed suit.

Carefully I dropped the keys in her hand, fingers brushing her skin. Her face seemed flushed. Maybe she had a fever, that would explain why she was so hot. Warm. The less conservative clothing she wore, under the guidance and demands of Cana no doubt, fit her curves rather snugly, reminding me of the women Igneel would warn me of, the kind that stole your soul from your still living body.

“Would anyone like to watch a recording before curfew?” Levy asked as she began messing with the projector in Lucy’s sitting room. It wasn’t as clear as a lacrima, but it worked to show films and short recordings.

“Can’t, I’ve got a test to study for in geometry,” Gray made a laughing noise in the back of his throat, his eyes drilling into me as I stood near Lucy, as if trying to say something. The girls had managed to force him back into his shirt but his pants were currently sliding down his legs, pooling at his ankles. I grunted at him, motioning towards the floor. His eyes fell before panic ensued in an attempt to spare Lucy his shame. The girl seemed to get use to the man’s quirks quickly, sighing before turning away to begin unpacking her multitude of bags.

Familiar meowing came from Lucy’s room. Levy opened the door, revealing a sleepy, but fat, Happy.

“What’s he doing here?”

“I found him a while before we left. He seemed hungry so I bought him some food and fed him some fresh tuna before I left. It seems he found the rest of the food I had bought him.” Lucy sighed towards the cat.

“He’s my cat.” I grunted.

“So you left him starving for weeks? He was skin and bones when I found him.” Lucy frowned at me, almost reprimanding.

“He’s a fully functioning cat, he can hunt for food, plus he knows where he lives.” I grunted back in response. Cana snorted before pulling a bottle of wine out of Lucy’s bags.

“Well I’ve got plans with a man or I’d love to watch this little train wreck.”

“I just remembered I have a paper to write too,” Levy sighed, putting the box of films back under the projector.

“Well I’m staying.” I huffed, staring at Happy as he wound his way between Lucy’s feet.

“Are you sure, we have that test tomorrow,” Gray frowned at me.

“Like I care. I’m not leaving without Happy.”

“Well you’re not leaving with him,” Lucy placed her hands on her hips, her eyes sparkling like it had the night at the tavern. “You can visit him whenever you’d like but he’s obviously

not equipped to take care of himself and I won't risk him starving."

"Then I guess I'm just not leaving." I stomped over to where Levy was still half bent over the recordings, an odd look on her face as she looked between Lucy and myself.

"Lucy's not a big fan of scary movies," There was a warning in her voice before she, Cana and Gray made their way to the door. I grunted a goodbye and bent down, taking Levy's spot to rifle through the movies. Ignoring Lucy's weird looks, an evil plan already forming.

"You don't have to-"

"I'm not leaving without Happy," I grunted, looking over my shoulder as the girl huffed at me.

"Well you're not leaving here *with* Happy." She threw her golden tresses over her shoulder before she stomped off to her room. I rolled my eyes at her door, before turning towards the cat in question. He had a puzzled look on his face as he studied the dusty recording I had in my grasp.

"She won't want to keep you for long," I grinned at the tape as I began the arduous process of starting the projector. I then rummaged around her kitchen for snacks, finding the popcorn tins and carefully trying not to burn the tasty buttery treat on an uncontrollable flame. I'll never get used to not using my own power to cook or burn things. It's so hard to gauge when things are done without that extension of myself.

I ignored the feeling and settled into the plush couch, waiting for Lucy to come out of her room before starting the recording. She hadn't technically agreed to it, but she also didn't seem like the type of person that would snub a guest. I flipped the switch on the projector when Lucy exited her room in fuzzy pink night clothing smelling strongly of creme lotions, masking her natural scent. The strong smells made me a little dizzy as she sat tentatively beside me after dimming the lights to make the projection easier to see. The girl seemed to study me carefully before getting more comfortable on the couch. Her mind must of been elsewhere as the blood curdling scream from the recording almost had her jumping out of her skin. Blood oozed down a white wall in the projection, bright and chilling against the soft, almost hominess of Lucy's sitting room. I lazily stroked Happy's back while stuffing my mouth with popcorn as Lucy seemed to ball in on herself, curling around one of the many pillows covering her couch.

"I love scary movies," I said as innocently as I could, a smile stretching across my face as I studied the almost shaking girl on the other end of the couch as the bloody scene began, depicting a serial killer stalking their prey. I turned back to watch the recording when Happy decided to slink from my lap, across the couch to curl himself up to Lucy, letting out a soft purr for the frightened girl. She studied him carefully before she lifted him to her own lap where the traitor quickly got comfortable, shooting me a smug look.

"Give me my cat back!"

"Looks like he chose me," she huffed, grabbing a handful of popcorn and stuffing it in her mouth, almost triumphantly.

“For now.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry. I'm trash.

Chapter 11

Lucy

I awoke with a start and almost screamed as I found Natsu standing over my bed, blood dripping from his face. I pushed him away, almost effectively knocking him over and that earned me a growl. Natsu was more like a feral dog than a human boy I decided as I sat up, looking around the room. It was only eight in the morning, an hour earlier than I wanted to be awake, and Happy was curled into my side, purring.

"What's your problem?" I asked, keeping my eyes level with his. I was not going to get distracted by the fact that his entire torso was visible because his shirt was nowhere to be seen. The swirling tattoos running up the side of his body were almost enticing and I almost wished to trace them with my fingers in my half asleep, fogged state. No, instead I was going to be tough Lucy and stand my ground.

I wasn't one hundred percent sure how to do that but there was never a better time to learn than now.

"You stole my cat."

"You didn't feed your cat," I countered, for the millionth time this week, looking down at the pile of fur. One of Happy's dark eyes were open and he was appraising the situation. He did not appear to be happy with what he saw. Since the movie night Natsu hasn't left for longer than it took to bathe and change. Instead he was a near constant thorn in my side, finding new ways to make my heart stop, whether it be scaring me from a dead sleep or some of his grosser eating habits.

"He's still my cat!"

"You can come visit him whenever you want but I'm not letting you take this animal so it can starve!" I ground out, trying not to wince at the dark look that passed by Natsu's eyes. We were both startled out of our staring contest when Happy began meowing. I simply studied the small cat, wondering what was making him so vocal. Natsu looked grumpy.

A knock at my front door caused us both to freeze.

I wasn't really sure why I was so worried to answer it, but I was. Something in my bones was telling me that this was a very bad situation to be in.

Mechanically I got out of bed, leaving Natsu to have a weird-off with the cat. I shut my bedroom door to keep the brute out of sight. When I answered it, however, I was relieved to see that it was only Gray.

"You seen Natsu around, he didn't return to the room last night or the one before that," Gray leaned against the door frame, his shirt on the ground behind him. I nodded, my voice not

really ready to work. Natsu seemed to want to answer for himself though since he threw open my bedroom door and began stomping over to me, fire set in his eyes.

"Fine, you can keep the stupid cat, but I'll have you know I won't be leaving here until he willingly comes back with me." New scratch marks were adorning Natsu's face and chest and this time it was definitely hard not to stare. Gray took one look between us and began laughing, clutching his abdomen as he doubled over onto the floor.

"Umm..."

"What's so funny you overgrown icicle!" Natsu growled as he rushed forward, pulling Gray up by the silver chain around the laughing boy's neck.

"Mira's gonna flip when she hears you stayed the night over here," Gray kept laughing and Natsu went pale. It has been a rather busy week but I haven't been able to get Natsu to leave, not even for class. How had Gray not noticed his friend had been gone so long? I simply stood by the door, waiting for an explanation for the weirdness. When none came, I shrugged and decided that getting ready for my day would be a better use of my time.

I began making a simple breakfast, smiling as Happy joined me through my routine. As I pulled things out one at a time, explaining to him exactly what each thing was for the cat purred along next to me. I realized the bickering was over a little too late and when I finally looked away from the cat I was greeted with two pairs of staring eyes. I just stared back, waiting for someone to say something. Nothing happened for an uncomfortably long time. The spell was broken when Happy began pawing at my hand and meowing demanding-ly. I turned to look at the cat, deciding I'd rather look crazy than have a staring contest with idiots.

"You hungry?" I asked as if he could answer me with actual words. He simply continued meowing, his paw playing with his water bowl still on the counter from last night when I had cleaned it out. I nodded as if I could understand and picked both of his bowls up. I could feel eyes on my skin as I walked around the kitchen. Once both bowls were full, one with food and the other with water, I set them down on a towel on the floor for easy cat access. Happy pawed over to the bowls and sniffed them tentatively, meowing what I hoped was thanks.

He is such a vocal cat.

"You're such a weirdo," Natsu broke the silence. I paused to look at him for a second too long and sighed.

"Don't you have places to be today?" I gave both of the boys a pointed look, hoping and praying it would get Natsu out of my hair for a little while, waiting for some kind of gesture, vocal or non, that would tell me I would have my dorm to myself again.

"Oh, that's what I came here for," Gray's face lit up and he turned to Natsu. That's when I noticed they both had matching tattoos. Each was a different color but it was definitely the same shape. The shape was hard to make out at this distance, but it was unique, the type of thing you remembered. Gray's rested over his heart while Natsu had his on his upper arm. I squinted at them for a moment and was rewarded with a weird look from Gray. Were they new? How had I not noticed them before?

"You alright?" He asked, ignoring Natsu.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I said, deciding pointing out their tattoos would be silly since they both knew they had them. He shrugged it off, but Natsu was studying me.

Gray and Natsu were arguing about their plans for the day when Levy arrived at noon with lunch. She wasn't expecting the boys to be here, and as she berated them I noticed the same tattoo peeking out of her dress on her back.

It was so weird. And was almost familiar but I couldn't quite make out what it was.

Maybe they were a part of some cult. With as an odd a group as they are I wouldn't doubt it.

While they were all distracted I escaped to my bathroom to breathe for a moment. They were nice people, a more genuine kind of nice than the variety back home. No hidden plans to stab me in the back. Well, maybe Natsu had plans. My reflection caught my eye, the gold chain holding my mother's key so bright against my pale skin, skin that hadn't been bruised or neglected in a while. Skin that almost looked healthy instead of the ghostly pallor of an heiress. It reminded me to be grateful. Even with these loud ruffians I'm much better off than I am back home.

When I exited my bathroom I froze. Levy was in my room, holding my mother's book, eyes glued to the pages. My brain couldn't come up with an excuse so instead I just shut the door loud enough to startle her.

We looked at each other for a long time, eyes locked in a staring contest. A smile slowly spread across Levy's face as she was the first to look away, shutting the book and setting it down on the bed.

"It's alright Lucy," she sat down as I continued to stare at her. "You know; I use to be able to use magic." Her words were a soft whisper as a sad look spread across her face. "Zeref took that away from us." She sounded so genuine, her voice filled with longing.

Denial had been on the tip of my tongue. *I haven't the slightest idea what you're referring too.*

"But that happened... over a hundred years ago," I said instead.

"I know." Levy shook her head, her eyes shut as if ashamed of something. "Wizards live a really long time." Levy looked up at me again, a soft smile on her lips. "These are pretty advanced spells, where did you get these?"

"I found them," I half lied. "I read a legend about how a celestial wizard could bring magic back as a kid and I've been a little... Interested in it since." my fingers wrapped around my mother's key through my shirt. Levy studied the motion for a moment until something inside that bright beautiful mind of hers clicked.

"Maybe I can help you," Levy jumped up, her voice rising in volume just a bit. Loud arguing began in the living room, changing the focus of attention for a moment.

Cautiously we left the safety of my bedroom to find Natsu and Gray in the middle of a wrestling match.

"You guys need to stop, you're going to destroy Lucy's furniture."

"This asshole won't leave well enough alone." Gray rolled out of Natsu's grip and stood up with practiced ease.

"Yeah well this idiot doesn't know when to shut the hell up!" Natsu countered, huffing in anger. They were both shirtless and the view was a little distracting. I tried to avert my eyes like a proper lady but it was just....

Happy decided that it was time to start meowing again. It was almost like he was interjecting in the trio's argument. They all froze, staring at the cat like he was some kind of demon.

"We should get going," Gray said, wrapping an arm around Natsu's neck to drag him out of the dorm. Natsu didn't fight back, but he did shoot me a glance before he left. Silence fell over the dorm and for a moment I was happy for the peace. Until Levy turned to face me, so many questions bubbling in those big eyes of hers.

"So about Natsu-"

"Nothing's happened. He just won't leave," I answered before she asked. I had heard Gray mention that Natsu had stayed the past week in their earlier argument before I took a breather and caught Levy snooping. "We were watching the projections and he passed out. It's not like I can move him. And what was I supposed to do? Every book I've ever read has warned me about poking sleeping monsters. And then he just.... He's been driving me crazy!" I turned to the bag with food, my stomach feeling like it could devour itself if I didn't eat soon.

"He's not a monster," Levy said in a small voice. I shrugged, not really caring. As far as I was concerned Natsu was her friend and I was only stuck with him because I was keeping his cat alive.

"So I have questions," I turned around as Levy picked at her hairband. She perked up, her big brown eyes shining bright. "This potion thing I'm supposed to be drinking, how do you even make it." I pointed vaguely to the book once again in Levy's grasp. She quickly flipped it open before scanning down the page.

"It's supposed to be set in the sun for two weeks and then it's distilled for three moons. And you only take it once." Levy smiled her eyes flitting across the page like she was devouring every single word. "Let me make it for you. In the meantime I'm sure there's another way to help you with all this, if you're serious." I nodded. "Perfect but first let's eat!" She set the book down, deciding that eating was only slightly more important than fixing the magic issue of the world. You know, for the moment.

Levy had been talking about meditation. Aligning your body and mind to be one. She stayed with me for a few hours, picking my brain on what I knew about magic, supplying me more information and building on the little bit I did know.

“It’s best to choose a focal point when you do this, something to help you channel the energy you want to bring forward. This is actually easier for Celestial Wizards as they channel their magic through Keys to bring Celestial spirits into our world. Do you happen to have any keys that look like this?” She asked, flipping to the page in the book showing the different types of keys. I nodded slowly, thinking of the keyring still hidden in the bottom of my purse.

“Great. Try meditating while holding one of the keys. It might help,” she smiled at me before her eyes scanned the clock. “Shoot. I need to meet Cana to study.”

“Thank you for your help Levy.” I smiled at her, sad she was going but looking forward to the momentary solitude.

“I’ll see you tomorrow in class yeah?” She didn’t wait for a reply as she was out the door in seconds. I let out a grateful sigh before stretching and heading to my room. After a quick dig through my purse I pulled out my keyring.”

“I should probably only try one,” I murmured to myself, pulling Aquarius’ key away from the others. I made myself comfortable on my bed before running through my mind everything Levy had told me. I sat tall, the key firmly grasped in my right hand as I took deep breaths in and out, trying to find some sort of peace. I tried to find the push and pull of energy Levy was talking about but I just couldn’t seem to grasp it. Regardless I stayed still, breathing slowly. Happy’s own sleepy breaths my companion... until it wasn’t.

Even though I knew I was still in my bed something told me I wasn’t. As I opened my eyes I was welcomed with the sight of fluttering fireflies dancing above tall grass. Water lapped at a sandy bank and I could feel goosebumps forming on my bare arms as a cool breeze rustled the grass around my head.

I stood up slowly, waiting for something to happen. When nothing did I walked towards the bank, dipping my toes in the water. The air around me was warm, but the water at my feet was warmer and I was drawn to it. The thin material of my dress did little to stop the cool air from the strong breezes blowing through the valley. I had never seen a place so enchanting and amazing outside of books or painted pictures. A familiar humming from my childhood caused me to turn my head so fast it almost snapped my neck.

A woman stood at the edge of the pond I was currently hip deep in. Her blonde hair blew in the wind and her voice carried to me, even with as far away as she was. A huge tree with looming branches and hanging vines was located in the middle of the pond. I decided that would be the perfect place to hide and still be able to see the woman.

I made slow movement towards the tree, doing my best not to make any noise. When I finally reached the safety of the tree I was surprised to see that I wasn’t the only one spying on the blonde woman.

"It not nice to sneak up on people you know," a woman clad in nothing but a bikini top said as she looked through the vines towards the girl. The humming had stopped and I joined her, interested in why. My unspoken question was answered immediately as a man with dark hair approached her and swept her into his arms. The blue haired bikini woman snarled at the man, her dark eyes would have shot death rays if she was capable.

"My name's Aquarius," she finally said while my attention was firmly on the couple in front of me. Something was calling me from the woman, something familiar and painful.

"Like the constellation," I said, finally turning away to get a better look at her. She nodded, looking irritated.

"You summoned me to this dream you know," she frowned. "I haven't been summoned in a long time."

"How did I do that," I asked, confused for a moment. "Oh wait, the key!"

"You're not too smart are you?"

"I'm new to this magic thing, cut me some slack!" I would have yelled if not for the couple at the edge of the lake. Aquarius and I shared death glares until giggles began rising in volume. I was worried we had been spotted when I turned to see the two still very invested in their own little world. It was gross and affectionate and I had to admit I was jealous. I had never had that with anyone and at the rate I was going it wasn't going to happen any time soon.

"Who are they?"

"That's the man responsible for all of the terrible atrocities my king was forced to commit." Aquarius ground out, her jaw was clenched as she went back to shooting daggers at him with her eyes.

"And the girl?"

"That," Aquarius sighed, closing her eyes and massaging the bridge of her nose. "That is the poor girl he convinced to open the gate," when Aquarius opened her eyes again, they were sad and full of pain.

"I'm sorry," I said, my eyes turning away from the couple once more and instead focusing on the warm water around me. "It must have been terrible, what you went through."

"What's worse is that now I'm essentially useless." Aquarius huffed and leaned against the tree. A dark blue fin rose to the surface as she adjusted herself, alerting me to the fact that she wasn't entirely human in appearance. I decided I could save that info for later as I turned to her fully.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked. It was interesting to watch surprise flash across her face for just a fleeting moment before she smiled.

"You can summon me," she said firmly and finally.

"I don't have any magic," I sighed. "And until I can figure out how to get open the gate to see the king I won't be able to do that." A frown set into my face as I looked down at my reflection in the water.

"You summoned me to this dream," Aquarius sounded thoughtful. "Maybe not all of the magic is gone." I perked up for a moment, a smile spreading across my face.

"I read that you need a contract to summon spirits," I racked my brain trying to find the right words. "Would you mind..."

"The fact that you asked is enough," Aquarius held up her hand, looking embarrassed. "Just never summon me when I'm on a date," she grinned as she began fading away, gold sparks of power gleaming around her as her image began rippling, like water whose surface had been disturbed by a stone.

"Wait, how will I know!" I stepped forward but found no purchase in the sandy ground. I fell forward through the water as Aquarius' voice reached me.

"Don't worry, you'll know."

Giggling was the last thing I heard before the world was dark again.

2 long months later

I was having a terrible day.

I had a test in my business class that I wasn't prepared for and somehow I had managed to get the attention of the professor because he kept calling on me to answer all of the oral questions.

I was going to fail out of college before I could even figure out a plan on running away. I have to admit I've gotten so swept up in the whole magic thing I've completely forgotten the rest of the world. Gray and Natsu were waiting outside of my classroom for me, no doubt wanting to go back to my place to have another one of their epic arguments filled with name calling and possible broken furniture. I was too upset with myself to even care at this point.

Natsu seemed to notice my mood first as we walked from the main building towards the dorms because he kept poking at my shoulder.

"What?" I finally growled at him after the thirty-something time he poked me. He kept hitting the same spot and I swore I had a bruise.

"What's wrong you weirdo?"

"Nothing that concerns you," I answered, crossing my arms as I walked up the steps in the impossible shoes Cana had picked out. They were almost as uncomfortable as the heels worn with ballroom dresses, but much taller and completely impractical. Wedges, I think they were called. All I can say for certain is if I ever need to beat someone to death with a blunt object I

won't have to look very far. Natsu went back to poking my arm, getting very close to testing my shoe theory, when my footing slipped. Well, more like my ankle twisted out from underneath me, and I was left looking up at the ceiling, waiting to feel the stairs smack me in the back of the head.

Instead I was treated with warm calloused hands grabbing my waist and pulling me upright.

"Thanks," my mouth spoke without permission as Natsu looked away.

"Maybe you shouldn't wear such stupid shoes," Natsu mumbled. I huffed and turned away from him, immediately regretting the action because my ankle protested with a fierce pain lancing up my leg. This time I did fall, but with grace and in a sitting position. Gray was stopped a few steps ahead of us, but he quickly ran down them to inspect my ankle. It was weird having him in my personal bubble as he liked to keep on the fringes or as far away from Natsu as he could within reason. The soothing cold feeling of his hands against my skin was weirder, but I wasn't going to complain.

"You should be more careful Lucy," he frowned at my ankle. I nodded, not wanting to open my mouth and say something stupid like 'you too.' Over the month or so I've had to spend with Gray and Natsu as 'friends' I've learned very little about them. Mostly just that Natsu has no idea what personal space is, Gray is a pathological stripper, and they both have the weirdest love hate relationship I've ever seen, or even read about. They yell and call each other names all day but are always there for each other.

And now Gray was staring at me with those dark eyes of his waiting for some sort of response and I was speechless. I couldn't quite figure out why they were always hanging around me when Levy wasn't here. I mean they were her friends.

"I think I'm gonna go up to my room alone for a little while," I finally decided. I took my shoes off and stood, despite protests from Gray. Natsu said nothing as he crossed his arms and leaned against the wall.

"I'm going to see my cat," he mumbled. I ignored him and kept walking, a little too 'in my own world' to concentrate on finding a way to tell him off. I limped up the stairs, ignoring Gray's offer of help and turned the corner a little too fast, smacking right into Levy. She looked startled to see me alone, but wasn't surprised when she heard Natsu and Gray arguing on the stairs.

"Hey Lucy, are you alright?" She asked, worry suddenly coating her voice. Her big eyes stared at me until I opened my mouth.

"I just need to be alone for a little while," I sighed, looking at the floor.

"Oh, okay," Levy gave me a small smile before walking down the steps to interrupt what had probably evolved into a fistfight. I just kept on limping, not interested in the shenanigans of the two idiots behind me.

When I made it to my dorm I realized that Happy was already fed and resting on his favorite pillow on the couch. I smiled at the little cat as I set my books on the counter and decided my

room was a good place to be. My mind was still trying to figure out why two people who didn't really seem to enjoy being around me were always hovering just within sight when I flopped down on my bed. I was rewarded with something jabbing me in my side. A whimper of pain escaped my lips as I sat up and dug through my covers to find a book I hadn't thought of since opening mother's box.

I was surprised to find that there were more photos in the album than before. It was now full of people, all bearing the same tattoo Levy and her friends had. I turned the pages slowly, drinking in every face. There was a fierce looking woman with red hair smiling next to a man with a tattoo over his left eye. There was a girl with short silver hair and a smile that looked too familiar and even a man arguing with his son while said son had different colored fires sitting in his hands. There were still plenty of empty spaces, as if it were missing more pictures. As if there were people missing from the album.

I flipped through the book quite a few times, staring at the photos for long periods of time before flipping to the next page. All of these people had lived in a world with magic. Did they fight against the wizard that stole magic from the world? Was he one of their friends? Maybe even a sworn enemy.

What was it like to be surrounded by so many smiling faces? To be a part of something so big?

I felt a little sad, and a little tired once I finally put the book down. So much was already going on with my life between tests and trying to make sure I did well enough in school so that I didn't warrant a visit from my father that just the thought of anything else took too much energy.

And then there was the magic that is so lacking in this world. My mother counted on me to bring it back, and all I had to go on was old spells and the help of someone I barely knew.

Levy is great. But I just met her... And this friendship could be an act. I didn't want to believe that, but living the life of an heiress has taught me a few things. People will do just about anything if they want something badly enough.

I overslept, missing my study session with Levy. When she showed up, worried and with food, I wanted to kick myself for doubting her intentions at being my friend. You can't fake the kind of worry that those big brown eyes have in their depths. Natsu and Gray followed her in, and only Gray greeted me. I did my best to seem welcoming, but with the pain in my ankle I just didn't have the energy to muster up more than a 'hey' back. Gray didn't seem to mind and the two idiots went straight to the projector to put in the latest sports recording.

As usual they were rooting for opposing teams.

We did our best to ignore them as we whispered about the magic increasing potion and the side effects of use. Levy explained that it didn't really increase magic, but it simply speeds up the rate of growth enough to catch you up to where you should be for your age, height, physical state of body and mental state. There were a lot of factors. I tried to pay attention but the food in front of me was taking precedent for the moment.

There was a chance I could become addicted to the stuff, which had Levy a little fidgety as she read over the page for the billionth time. Finally she looked up at me. "I'm not a celestial mage so I'm not really sure what kind of training you would really need to focus on for this..." She worried her bottom lip for a moment, her eyes focusing and unfocusing until finally she snapped her fingers, momentarily taking Natsu's attention away from strangling Gray over a winning score.

"What are you two weirdos doing?"

"Advanced math," Levy answered without missing a beat and that earned a disgusted look from Natsu.

"Nerds," he mumbled plenty loud enough for us to hear before he went back to wrestling with Gray. At least they moved the furniture this time.

A loud knock on my door startled all of us. Everyone at the academy that I knew was right here, minus Cana (but she never knocks). Shakily I stood up, hoping and pleading it wasn't who I thought it was. Slowly, I reached my hand towards the door knob as the knocking increased. Once the door was opened my worst nightmare was realized.

Jude Heartfilia, in all his splendor and forced calm, stood in my doorway.

"Father, what a pleasant surprise," I forced my voice not to jump up an octave as I opened the door wider to allow him to step inside. Levy quickly gathered all of her magic notes together and stuffed them inside of the book, which she forced into her bag before he could get a good look at her doodles of the various keys and ingredients. Natsu and Gray separated from each other, each looking nervous. I haven't spoken a lot about my father, mostly because there's not a lot of nice things I can say and more importantly I don't want them to figure out who he is... who i am.

My father took bold steps into the room, his eyes scanning everything. Secretly, I was glad people were here, but by the look on his face and the anger slowly burning in his eyes I had a feeling it wouldn't be lasting very long. Everything was tidy, to my relief, as I did my own quick sweep of the room with my eyes. The only offending thing I could think of would be Happy... Because my father hates pets. Well, any pets smaller than a horse.

Sure enough my father's eyes fell on the cat and an angry sigh escaped his lips. The exhale of breath wasn't lost on the crowd as everyone turned their eyes to face the small cat nuzzled into the pillow on the couch.

"What is that pest doing in here, and who are all these people?"

Before Natsu could open his mouth and say anything that could warrant an extreme reaction from my father I found a little bit of my backbone and stood up straighter, stepping into my father's line of sight.

"He keeps me company at night so I'm not lonely, and these are the members of my study group. I was sick a couple of days this week so I fear I did poorly on a recent test. I plan to make up for the failure on the next one." My words were all so prim and proper and I was

thankful that I was wearing something that my father would consider acceptable. He eyed me once and then let out another annoyed sigh, some of his anger leaving him.

But not nearly enough of it.

"I'll see you at dinner tonight. We have much to discuss." His words were crisp and clipped. Efficient. Just as efficient, he pulled out a single piece of paper, no doubt telling me what time, and location, I would be meeting him.

"Of course father," I gave a small bow as he turned and left the room, almost slamming the door behind him. Silence fell across the dorm for a long moment before I let out a shaky breath I hadn't realized I was holding. Everything was going poorly. Very poorly.

Chapter 12

Natsu

Lucy was acting weird, weirder than normal as the stiff business man left her dorm room. Instead of deflating like normal her back seemed to stay ramrod straight as she looked down at the paper in her hand. There was an almost imperceptible shake of her hand until she balled the paper up, before sighing and straightening the paper back out with the kind of dejected look that didn't match her at all.

"Lu-" Levy began before the blonde forced a smile that didn't come close to reaching her eyes. She shook her head once.

"I have to get ready for this. It's important. Feel free to stay if you'd like." And then she was gone, retreating to her room with almost reluctant steps, the door shutting almost silently. Like she had died and left behind a ghost.

"Maybe we should give her some space," Gray suggested, giving me a pointed look. I growled out a response but got up from the couch anyway to leave. Happy refused to leave so I have been a little heavy in bothering Lucy. I even feel a little responsible for the fact she hasn't really been focusing on studying as I've been keeping her up late with Horror recordings and bothering her in general.

"Who do you think that guy was?" I asked, shoving my hands in the uniform Lucy convinced me to wear after a rather annoying argument with her squealing at me. The fact that I haven't been caught in her room after hours while arguing over recording choices late at night is almost a miracle.

"Her father you idiot," Gray responded dryly.

"I know that, I mean, what does he do. He seemed really official and..." I frowned, trying to describe the awful feeling he gave off, "... kind of like a dick."

"If anyone's a dick it's you. You're rude to the poor girl and don't even give her a chance to breathe in her own home 'cause you're always there. If I didn't know you so well I'd almost say you were obsessed with the girl."

"Puh-lease. If Happy would just come back I could leave."

"You barely spent any time with Happy before he left." Levy noted as we exited the dorm building.

"Go read a book or something," I grunted back. Levy gave off a sly smile as she skipped ahead of us, stopping for just a moment before looking over her shoulder.

“I think you liiikkkkeeeeee her,” she said before waving her good bye and running off to wherever nerds go.

“Come say that to my face!” I called out, almost running after her, but finding a heavy hand clapping down on my shoulder.

“You need to be more careful with Lucy.”

“I thought you trusted her,” I grunted, not following the popsicle’s line of thought.

“I do. I think Lucy is a nice girl. But based on how slowly she’s opened up to us and how sheltered she’s acted I’d say if you’re not interested in her you might end up hurting her. I mean, you spend all day every day with her, in her room alone. Non Wizards are weird about things like that. Their courting rituals involve chaperones and long exposures and grand gestures.” Gray let me go before he followed after Levy with no other explanation and his tie at my feet.

“Who knows what the fuck that guy even means,” I groaned, leaving the stinking peice of cloth where it was and following my nose to the old man. It was late in the day, most students gone and enjoying the beginning of their weekend.

I wound my way through empty hallways filled with so many different smells it makes my nose itch. But it was quiet enough to hear delinquents making out in abandoned classrooms. Gray made a big deal about normies courting rituals but they go at it like rabbits when no one’s watching. Lucy’s not like that. She’s reserved and quiet and doesn’t seem to be interested in any of the annoying little normies that try to shower her in attention while she’s trying to study in class. Sometimes they get so close they rub their scent all over her, muddling the vanilla undertones of the starlight.

“Why does that even matter?” I huffed at no one as I approached Makarov’s office. He was buried behind a pile of paperwork taller than he is, which isn’t much different than back when he was the Master of a magic Guild. He’s still our master, even as our Marks have faded so much that Normies can’t even see them embedded in our skin. ““Sup gramps!”

“Natsu?” the old man looked up from the paperwork all over his desk. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen you in my office. You’re not accompanied by a staff officer, so I’m assuming you haven’t been getting in trouble?” he raised one ancient eyebrow and I sent him a beaming smile.

“You’ll be happy to know I haven’t been in any trouble at all!” I took the seat across from him, throwing one of my legs over the armrest and flicking one of the moving baubles on his desk.

“That’s very unlike you,” Makarov noted, setting his paperwork down to study me. “And you’re in uniform.”

“So what?” I furrowed my brow as the old man began studying me a little too hard.

“There are few things that could cause such a change in a man. So tell me, Natsu, what have you been up to while keeping yourself out of trouble.”

“Well there’s this new girl Levy made friends with. Lushi Ashlyn, or something, and she looks just like Layla, but not.” I began to fill Makarov in on Lucy. About how her hair looks in the sunlight, and how mad she gets when I leave a mess in her bathroom, or how loud she talks in her sleep. I explain my theory on how she must be a secret sister of Layla’s or maybe a cousin, but she hasn’t said anything about our guild marks and seems rather set in this century’s ways. I explained her stuffy clothes and how Cana has her dressing like most of the Wizard women use to and about how Happy won’t leave. The whole time the old man stayed quiet, listening and only rarely asking for clarification.

“Are you sure she’s Layla’s cousin or sister? I seem to recall the girl had no family that survived the attack of the dark guild that brought her to us.” Makarov finally asked after I told him about Lucy’s weird reaction to her father which effectively kicked me out of her room so she could get ready for this fancy dinner with the stuffy, formal man.

“Well that’s what I thought too, but what else explains how much they look alike.”

“Well she could have had a daughter.” Makarov said thoughtfully, sharp eyes looking down at the folder on his desk.

“After what Zeref did to her?” I crossed my arms and sat back in the chair, pulling my scarf up over my mouth. “He broke her heart.”

“It’s been a very long time since then, long enough that the Celestial King’s memory spell wouldn’t even be needed to erase that day from the memory of most men. No one that doesn’t have the blood of a wizard running through their veins remembers the day the sky broke.” Makarov sighed. “Who’s to say our Layla didn’t find love and have a family.”

“Then why isn’t she here with her daughter?” I grunted, sinking lower into the seat.

“I don’t have an answer for you Natsu.” Makarov shook his head before sighing. “Now I still have quite a lot of work to do, go run along. He waved me out of his office. I grunted and stood to leave when he looked back up at me with a mischievous smile spread across his wrinkled face. “And do introduce me to this Lucy of yours. If she’s anything like Layla I’m sure she’s quite a fine thing to look at.”

“Don’t be gross old man.” I huffed before leaving.

I managed to track Gray down to Cana’s favorite hangout. The brunette was busy drinking some idiot under the table, easily taking his wallet as the man hit his head on the table on his way down. The small crowd cheered as she took on more bets for who she could outdrink next.

“When do you think they’re going to learn?” Gray asked, sipping on his beer.

“I’m not sure they have enough brain cells to learn anything,” I grunted before ordering from the frazzled girl behind the bar. I decided to forgo the uniform shirt from my vest, showing off my demon marks. The swirling tattoos garnered attention from blushing girls in swirling skirts. The scent of their desire was hard to miss, but it wasn’t interesting to me as it may have once been.

I haven’t felt the need to find someone to warm my bed in a while.

“So are you ever going to tell me what’s going on between you and Lucy,” Cana threw her arm over my shoulder. “Because if you don’t want her I’d love to show her a good time. That girl needs to loosen up.”

“Cana I’m not sure you’re Lucy’s type. She seems more interested in tall, dark, and brooding.” Levy joined the conversation. I blinked at her, not sure what she could possibly mean, and also wondering when she arrived. “I saw her with her father and a man with dark hair and a frown over at Cloud Nine, that fancy restaurant you need to call months in advance to get a table at.” Levy answered my blank expression.

That red hot feeling burned in my chest at the thought. I drowned it with the warm cinnamon beer the bartender slid my way after a timid smile.

“I was sure she was getting it on with Flame brain over here,” Cana poked me in the shoulder with a frown.

“Lucy’s not that type of girl,” I growled.

“I thought you didn’t like her,” Cana said, draping herself over Levy’s shoulder to look me in the eye. To anyone that hadn’t spent the last two hundred years with her she might appear to be intoxicated, but her brown eyes were bright and searching, looking for anything she could use as ammunition.

“I like her more than I like you right now.”

“Someone’s touchy.” Cana grinned, dark and conniving. “I wonder what she’s doing with tall, dark, and brooding right now.” she stood up and stretched, ordering another drink with the roll of her wrist and a wink to the flustered girl behind the counter. “I wonder what it’ll take to really have her let loose.”

“I really don’t think that’s any of your business,” I growled while drinking the rest of my beer. Not able to find comfort in the spice like any other day. I just didn’t feel right sitting here in the bar. It felt like something slimy was crawling across my skin, a shiver running down my spine.

“I’m going to call it a night,” I interrupted a rather charged conversation between Gray and a girl with curly red hair a couple shades darker than Erza’s. He waved me away, Cana and Levy were nowhere to be seen. How long did I sit there staring at the same grain pattern on the sticky bar top sipping on the same beer?

I grumbled to myself as I walked back to Lucy's, slinking in the shadows as I made my way up to the top floor. I went to open Lucy's door, but found it wouldn't budge open. That sinking feeling hit me again as the soft sniffles and the scent of salt in the air hit me.

"Lucy?" I tried to keep my voice soft, like talking to a hatchling. There was no response. The doorknob turned, but there was resistance against the door, not moving even a little bit. Something cold settled heavy in my stomach, almost frantic whines trying to bubble up my throat, instinct so strong it was hard to ignore taking over. I slid the hall window open and scrambled onto the steepled roof.

Long strides brought me to the edge of the roof over Lucy's sitting room. I dropped over the ledge, grabbing onto the edge tightly as I studied the distance between where I precariously hung to the ledge of Lucy's window. It was tightly shut, but never locked as I made sure of that in case of emergencies. I quickly checked the distance to the ground below.

When magic still flowed through my veins a drop like that would be nothing, but without the ethernano in the air there's no guarantee I would heal the same.

Or if I would heal at all.

Instead of worrying, I followed the pull of my instincts, swinging towards the room and letting go to grab onto the window sill.

The drop pulled at muscles I haven't worked in years, the strain of pulling dead weight up and attempting to open the window at the same time was almost enough to have me fall. Instead I tumbled into the living room to find all the lights off. Lucy was covered in one of her stuffy dresses, the kind with more fabric than what's sensible. The kind of thing a princess would wear for fun. She was crumpled against her front door, Happy clutched to her chest as quiet sobs shook her body. The only thing illuminating her was the weak moonlight streaming through the windows, but even with just that I could tell something wasn't right.

"What the fuck happened?"

Chapter 13

Lucy

“What the fuck happened?”

As Natsu and Gray reluctantly left Levy stayed, a frown tugging at her lips.

“Lu are you sure you’re going to be alright?”

“I’m sure It’s nothing,” I lied, forcing a smile on my face. It felt so wrong to lie to Levy. “He’s always that intense.” I brushed off her concern with forced ease.

“You know you could tell me if it wasn’t,” Levy followed me to my room as I began looking for an appropriate evening dress. Phantom pains and aches spread from my stomach and ribs, memories pulled to the surface as I picked out a dress I haven’t worn in months.

“I know.” I kept my voice steady. Levy sighed before leaving as well, her concern palpable in the air. It didn’t help the feeling of hopelessness tightening my chest or the phantom aches. Could I survive a night with my father after such a long time away?

Would i survive if i didn’t meet him at the requested time and place. My eyes flicked to the paper sitting almost innocently on my bedside table requesting my presence at the Golden Hour, a rather expensive tavern for the traveling business men that were often seen on campus and as guest speakers for classes. It makes sense father would know about such a place. I forced myself to remain as calm as I could while applying light makeup, dusting my cheeks a soft pink, all the while trying to ignore the dress now hanging in the bathroom.

The dress itself wasn’t so bad, moreso what it represents. Years of fear bubbling up making it hard to breathe. My hand shook as I lifted the mascara brush. Black smeared across my temple. The tin container fell to the floor, sending chunks of black across the polished stone.

“How am I going to do this?” the sob almost broke through but I swallowed it down. Taking deep, slow breaths I bent down to pick up the container, closing it with a resounding click. I moved without thought, like I was in a waking nightmare reliving my life before I had tasted this slim slice of freedom.

“I can’t lose this,” I breathed out as I cleaned, picking up the pace as the damned hour approached far too quickly. I forced my hair into a curled updo, a few stubborn pieces refusing to stay pinned. Before wrestling with the dress I dapped away the smeared makeup from pale skin, not bothering to reapply it.

After a deep breath and a sinking feeling of dread I slipped into a pair of heeled slippers and made my way out of the building to call a cab.

The ride was far too short and then I was standing in front of the Tavern. I entered cautiously and was immediately ushered to a back room where I was met by my father and my... Fiance. Dan sat with his back straight and his chin high as he blathered on and on about good business practices.

"Lucy, it's nice to see you've decided to join us." My father interrupted Dan, the latter of which did not seem to mind as his eyes began roaming over me. My skin crawled but I did as expected, curtsying in greeting before waiting patiently to be asked to sit.

"It is my pleasure as always, father," I sounded so dead, my voice holding no inflection at all. I am much like a lifeless doll to be set upon a shelf. Only to be looked at.

"Well sit so we can begin discussing your future." My father demanded. I slid carefully into the offered chair as the poor waiter flustered about the table, refilling my father's wine glass. Sharp eyes studied me as I sipped the water, grateful for something to help sooth my suddenly dry throat.

"What would you like to discuss father?"

"Pulling you from this school. I have done a review of your grades and I do not find them adequate. This school doesn't even appear to be teaching you about proper business techniques." My heart constricted at the thought.

"I truly believe the education provided is vital to my inheriting the company," I swallowed hard before returning my father's burning stare. He looked less than impressed, a severe frown pulling at his face.

"Perhaps it would be best if i were to join her, after all we are to wed once all this school nonsense is over," Dan interrupted, his eyes glued to the neckline of my dress. The thought had bile rising to the back of my throat.

"The idea has merit," my father mused aloud before his eyes shifted from me to the man he intended to be his son in law. "If I didn't know your reputation with women I might even consider it. As it is one of the conditions your father signed to this merger is Lucy's virtue, which I will not allow you to sully before your wedding day."

"Oh Jude, who's to say it hasn't already been sullied at this school. You did say there were men in her room when you went to fetch her." the air at the table seemed to drop in temperature as my father fixed the disgusting man with a rather frigid look.

"How dare you insinuate that I would allow such a thing to take place." My father's voice was dangerously low as the waiter brought out the food. The poor man has a rather frightened look upon his face, which i would have mirrored if not for years of practice and endurance. As it stood, I felt utterly disgusted by the conversation that seemed to be taking place without any regard for my opinion in the matter.

A salad was placed silently in front of me as steak was placed carefully in front of my father and Dan. They hadn't even bothered to ask me what I wanted to eat. Anger filled me as a tense silence took over the table. My fist tightened around my fork as my father began loudly

cutting his steak. 'You've got a backbone somewhere in there. If not I suggest you grow one if you don't want Cana laying all over you' Natsu's words flitted through my head.

"Father I'm not interested in this marriage." my voice was clear and steady, which was the opposite of how I felt as they left my lips with little thought and no permission. It was too late to take it back, however, as anger took over my father. He stood abruptly, his plate clattering against the table as a loud resounding smack rang through the air. My cheek stung harshly, tears welling up within my eyes. I refused to let them fall. Not in front of this monster.

"How dare you speak out of turn. You will do as demanded for the good of this company. If your grades are not sufficient by the end of the grade period you will be returning home and you will wed whomever I choose for you. You will produce an heir and you will not complain." My father showed restraint as he sat back down in his seat, the anger pulsing at his temple. I sat dumbly in my seat, my salad untouched as Dan and my father picked up a new discussion, one I had no interest in checking into.

I had always known I would be used to further my father's holdings, but to have my life spelled out ahead of me in less than three sentences, with no regard for what I wanted out of life made me sick to my stomach. How could a father choose such a life for his own child? How did my mother fall for such a man?

Once dinner was cleared away I excused myself from the table, ignoring the glare from my father, and followed the waiter to the back door of the Tavern so I could breathe for a moment. The man gave me a pitying look before stating the next cab wouldn't be here for quite a while. The tavern wasn't so far away from campus that it would be impossible to walk the distance. I leaned against the back wall, thinking over my options as the back door opened once again to reveal Dan, his tie loosened as he ruffled his brown hair.

"I was hoping to find you back here," his voice was heavy and dark as his eyes fell upon me. "I can understand your reservations about the wedding, after all we know so little about one another." I studied the man carefully as he approached. I pushed away from the wall to stand taller, thinking that I could escape before he got too close.

That was not the case as the back of my head made solid contact with the brick wall. Dark and bright spots danced across my vision as Dan's hand wrapped around my throat, constricting my ability to breathe. The surprise took all the air from my lungs, and I fought to gain it back, clawing at Dan's arm.

"You are a very beautiful woman, Lucy Heartfillia, however I'm not sure if you alone will do." My vision dimmed and I choked out a sob as he loosed his grip enough for air to flow, but not enough for me to fight my way out. "I do so hate the archaic view on sex most humans have. With lives so short you would think they would want to experience more of it. Instead they stand behind their traditions and diplomacy. Treaties for land and trading children for more standing. It's disgusting really." The monster talked to himself as I fought to breathe through my panic. His free hand began hiking up the tiered skirt of my dress until he found purchase, pawing at the skin of my thigh. His hand felt like a brand against my skin, a disgusting mark of ownership as he pushed himself closer. "I'm sure a sheltered thing like you is dying for a taste," he smelled heavily of alcohol. I only had a second to process the thought as his lips and tongue invaded my mouth. Bile rose once again in my throat as he

released my neck to grope at my breasts over the thick material covering me. He tugged at the fabric in an attempt to get directly to my skin, his touch bruising. His other hand worked its way towards my undergarments in an attempt to remove them.

I bit down as hard as I could on the invading tongue, which caused the brute to push me to the ground in an angry yell. My side hit heavily on a crate corner, causing a sharp pain across my side.

“Stuck up bitch.” Dan loomed over me, anger alighting his features into a terrible mask. He kicked into my side, forcing the air from my lungs again. “Your father doesn’t have much choice but to take this deal. He’s backed himself into a corner, and if you keep being disagreeable I may just tell my father that it’s not worth the investment.” He crouched down, pulling me up by my hair. “Such a pretty face, would be such a shame if I ruined it so no one else would bother looking at you.” his hand was crushing my cheeks in painfully making it impossible to speak. I fumbled around for anything I could use to get free, anything at all that could gain me just a second to get away. As Dan reared his arm back, his hand forming a fist, my fingers made contact with cold metal.

Dan’s punch connected with hard precision as I gripped the metal pipe. When the man leaned down to examine his work I put all my power into the swing, connecting solidly with the side of his face. A loud curse exploded, but I didn’t bother waiting around to find out if I hit him hard enough to knock him down. Instead I scrambled to my feet and ran, cursing at my own pain. As I rounded the nearest corner I kicked off my impractical shoes, leaving them where they fell as I forced myself to continue forward. Breathing was like a frozen knife stabbing into my lungs repeatedly, but I continued on. Fear for my life is much more pressing.

Surely Dan would tell some lies to my father to paint me as the aggressor. Would returning to the school be safe? I could just leave. I could take a carriage far away and live on a farm tending to livestock and father would never find me... I could run away from all of my problems.

But then I would never figure out if I have what it takes to bring Levy the happiness she deserves. She wants so desperately for the magic to return to Earthland. I promised her I would try my hardest.

I had also promised my mother.

My pace slowed as I approached the gate to the women’s dormitory, the indecision killing me. I could be free and safe, or I could risk it all for the chance to bring magic to the world. I leaned against the gate for a moment before looking up at the stars. There was a whole realm of magic locked in those twinkling lights, waiting for someone worthy to bring it back to this world. What if I’m not good enough to keep my promises? What kind of Celestial mage would that make me?

My tired feet dragged me through the gate to the women’s Dorm and up the steps.

The five flights up to my room was pure agony, and once the door was firmly shut and locked behind me the stress and pain of the night crushed me to the floor. Tears I had been forcing

back and pain that was still being processed flooded my system. Happy's faint meows called out as the kitten padded over to me, curling into my lap. He began purring as my fingers ran lazily through soft fur. It was a mechanical motion but it helped quiet the sobs ripping through my chest.

Soon it was blessedly dark and it was almost like I didn't feel a thing.

I startled awake at the loud noise, dislodging Happy from the warm spot he had made in the bundle of cloth I was still wrapped in. I scanned the room frantically, my heart pounding in my chest at the thought of Dan or Father finding me here. My heart rate slowed as the crick in my neck from sleeping awkwardly in front of my door and the warm wood of the door registered to my frazzled brain.

But there was someone in my dorm. Tall and menacing looking, backlit by the moon, Natsu stood in the middle of my sitting room, the shadows hiding his expression. Even still there was an anger to his gaze as he stalked towards me. Happy stood his ground between us, the little kitten whining and hissing at Natsu. The man didn't stop as he advanced towards me, a growl like that of a hellish monster building in his throat. My hands gripped for anything to defend myself, fear running high but I was backed into a corner. Natsu stepped over his cat and glared down at me, the anger palpable.

"Who did this to you?" his teeth clicked together and for the first time I noticed how sharp they must be. He truly was a feral monster.

"I-i," I struggled to breath as he crowded my space, the sounds of his growls grew in frustration. His hand lifted towards me and I flinched away, expecting a blow. I screwed my eyes shut, waiting for the pain.

Natsu grew silent.

Happy's yowling and hissing stopped.

For too long there was a heaviness in the air as I waited and nothing happened. When I finally dared to open my eyes a stunned Natsu looked back at me, a lock of my hair lightly grasped in his hand. He took a deep breath and let it go, the tangled strands falling from his grasp.

"I'm sorry," Natsu's voice was unusually soft and quiet as he took a step back. "You need to tell me who did this to you Lucy." the softness sounded forced, there was an edge underneath it, sharp as steel.

"There's nothing you can do Natsu. Besides, it's not as bad as it seems." He flared his nostrils angrily at my statement before turning away. I studied him quietly as he threw himself down on my couch, anger ebbing out of him. A cold breeze blew through the room, ruffling the curtains of my open window. The warm wood at my back sparked a thought I wasn't quite ready to face, but I asked the question anyway.

“Natsu how did you get in here?” he sent me a bored look and motioned carelessly over his shoulder towards the source of the breeze.

“Through the window of course.”

“Of course,” I repeated the information bouncing around dumbly in my head, echoing around until they settled. “What do you mean through the window?” something close to panic overtook me as I rushed to said window, eyes scaling down the building to the flowerbeds below. “That’s a five story climb, how on Earthland did you manage that?!?”

“You say it like it’s hard,” he huffed out, crossing his arms over his chest and frowning at me. “I don’t like that you won’t tell me who did this to you.” his tone was petulant, almost like a child. Exhaustion, frustration, and nerves built inside me to a breaking point and I yelled at the pink haired man.

“What do you even care? You’re not even my friend.”

“While that’s true you’re important to Levy and Cana. And I won’t let you get hurt so long as you continue to be important to them.”

“I hate you. I hate you just as much as I hate my father!” Natsu’s eyes grew big like saucers as I stormed away from him to the safety of my room, slamming the door firmly behind me. I stripped angrily out of the dress, leaving myself in nothing but my undergarments as fresh tears threatened to spill. “I won’t cry over you,” I whispered angrily to myself as I searched my bedside table for my keys. The warmth of the metal brought me some comfort as I climbed into bed, ignoring the throbbing pain in my head. “I won’t cry over my father ever again. That’s a promise I make to the stars.”

Natsu was still in my dormitory room when I awake late for class the next morning if the heavy snores from the sitting room was any indication. With the previous night’s adrenaline fully faded from my system the pain was near intolerable. I whimpered softly as I crawled out of bed, deciding firmly that a few days missed from class would be necessary to properly heal.

“Maybe I should just run away.” I grunted while opening my bathroom door.

“Running away is for cowards.” Natsu’s voice scared the skin from my bones, his warm breath ghosting over my exposed neck. I turned around too quickly and pain from my ribs lanced up my side. Natsu’s usually bright eyes darkened as he took in the damage I had yet to assess myself. “Are you sure you’re not going to tell me who did this?”

“It wouldn’t do any good. Besides, what do you get out of helping someone that’s not even your friend? Stay out of my room you creep!” I slammed the bathroom door in his face and was rewarded with a sigh from the pinkette.

“Well that’s just not going to happen Luigi. Happy will be watching you while I get the rest of my things. I won’t be letting you out of my sight until you either learn how to defend yourself or you tell me who did this to you.”

“My name is Lucy!” I yelled at the door. There was no response. I stood silently, staring at the blank door, not prepared for what the mirror would show. My fears bore truth as I turned to stare at the girl in the mirror. The familiar face looking back at me broke my heart. Mottled purple and yellow bruised around my eye. The same discoloration hung around my neck like a collar, reminding me of my place so long as I stayed here where father could reach me.

“I have to leave. I can’t go back to this,” my voice broke as I carefully touched the tender skin around my eye, wincing at the pain. Natsu’s words briefly flitted through my head. Natsu is a lot like a feral animal. I’m sure it wouldn’t take much for him to get back at a man like Dan, but would that really solve the problem? No, it won’t solve it at all.

The root of the problem is my father’s abuse and my inability to do anything about it. How would I even go about learning how to defend myself? I left the thought to brew as I reached for my foundation brush and began the arduous process of covering my marks. I took my time applying the makeup, being careful only to use what was necessary. It was sad to say I had become good at this. Hiding the evidence of my father's abuse so I could attend forced social gatherings and not bring shame upon the Heartfillia name. I winced every so often when I applied too much pressure to a sensitive area.

The work was slow and thoughtless, almost like muscle memory, so I turned my thoughts instead on wishfully half baked plans. My father had been sending me large amounts of money the past few weeks, so large in fact that I hadn't spent a single jewel of it. It was safely tucked away in my mothers box. School was paid for the next year and all of my furniture was paid off as well.

I could go find an apartment in Magnolia with my cash, but I would have to find a job in order to pay rent every month.

I could easily leave and my father wouldn’t be notified until it was far too late. The only thing truly stopping me is the fact that I have no marketable skills. How would I keep myself fed once the money I’ve hidden away runs dry. Maybe leaving school isn’t the best plan. It is much more likely to keep me alive than sitting here doing classwork is.

And then there’s the magic, an empty feeling building in my stomach every time I think of my unfulfilled promise to my mother. Levy is here, and while I’m sure she wouldn’t mind taking trips to Magnolia it is out of the way to discuss magic and her almost completed potion.

As I was putting the finishing touches on all my visible skin I wondered how many wizards were left. Levy's over a hundred years old, I wonder how many un-aging humans still walk around, waiting to feel their magic return to them. Did any of them give up hope? I wonder if the celestial wizard that got tricked is still alive. They probably feel terrible about what happened. I know I would.

Loud banging on my dorm door signaled the arrival of someone, and at this point I could only guess who. I walked to the door warily, looking through the peephole only to be greeted with a pile of what looked like clothes.

"Let me in Luigi!" Natsu's voice called from the pile. I sighed, but decided that opening the door would be better than telling him to go away. He had a temper that could match my fathers and who knows what he could do when provoked. I'm not exactly sure how Gray is still alive.

I opened the door wide and watched him waltz in, dropping all of his clothes on my couch.

"My name is Lucy. Natsu, what exactly are you doing?" I raised an eyebrow as he stared at my face. His staring continued for a long, silent moment before Happy decided to begin his never ending meowing. I sighed, giving up, and made my way back to my room; already too tired to deal with Natsu's weird mood swings and staring habits. Whispering answered Happy's meowing, and I was almost curious enough to see what Natsu was saying to the small cat. Instead I decided to find something to wear for the day that wouldn't show too much skin but would be comfortable enough to leave the room in if need be. I hissed as I attempted to pull a loose-fitting top on.

"You shouldn't ever let anyone do this kind of thing to you," Natsu's voice was deep and almost soft coming from the sitting room, , but there was a heavy warning in his words. His mood seemed to have calmed somewhat.

"I didn't have much of a choice." Was all I could say. Because it's true right? This is my lot in life until I can find a way to change it. I worried my bottom lip as the sounds of Natsu shuffling clothes on the couch came to a stop. I pulled on a pair of loose fitting pants quickly in case he barged into my room as he often has in the past.

"You always have a choice. And you should always choose to fight back," his voice was much gentler on the other side of the door. "Until you're strong enough to protect yourself I'll do it for you," his words were like a declaration. Bright like hope.

Chapter 14

Natsu

How could someone do such a thing? I watched Lucy wince as she reached for a cup, her ribs obviously hurting her. She's a defenseless girl. Why would anyone target her? An unfamiliar stench had covered her dress and hair. When she discarded the frilly monstrosity to take a bath I memorized it. The fact that Lucy refused to say who it was didn't bode well with me, but it didn't quite match her father's scent.

That makeup she wore to cover the marks stunk, smothering her natural scent of starlight and vanilla.

"What's got you so on edge?" Gray whispered as he watched Lucy and Levy in the small kitchenette. They were cooking dinner, Levy taking lead and Lucy watching with interest, helping when she could. She didn't tell anyone someone hurt her, but you could see in her mannerisms something wasn't right. She was back to jumping at every quick movement, her breath shallow and fast to overcompensate for the pain. Her smile never fully reaches her eyes.

"Lucy was attacked the other day, and she won't tell me who did it." Dark eyes narrowed on the girl, Gray's jaw clenched at the thought of someone hurting one of his friends.

"Have you been able to find them?" his voice remained even, if strained.

"No luck. They left town that night." I unclenched my fists and forced my eyes back on the recording currently playing in Lucy's sitting room. "He reeks of Crocus and the Palace."

"I'll keep an eye out." Gray sighed before turning back to the television himself. His face twitched into a smile before he bumped his shoulder into mine. "Y'know, for someone who doesn't like her, you sure are awfully concerned about her. You haven't been taking advantage of her hospitality have you?"

"Pu-lease. That scrap of a girl doesn't interest me at all. She's Levy's friend and she's connected to Layla somehow." I rolled my eyes. "You're sure Layla didn't have a twin?"

"Pretty sure. No other living relatives either. Besides, Lucy acts like a girl from this age would, albeit more sheltered. I just don't like the last option."

"What last option?" I frowned at Gray.

"Lucy might be Layla's daughter."

"There's no way Layla would fall for a man that treats his daughter so coldly and allows her to get harmed while she's in his charge."

“Natsu shut your mouth,” Gray elbowed me sharply in the ribs.

Levy

“Are you sure this stuff isn’t poison?” Lucy asked quietly as she stared at the tiny vial Levy had snuck into her apartment.

“I’m sure,” Levy stirred the pot of pasta, sure to keep the noodles from sticking together. “You need to eat and then take it all in one quick drink.”

“It looks like poison.” Lucy’s voice was flat as she poked at the delicate crystal vial.

“Would I poison you?” Levy let out a long sigh. Lucy seemed to be closing back in on herself, holding herself away from everyone else like she had when they had first met. Natsu had been acting strange too, but Levy never really could pin down the dragon.

“Maybe. I am kind of a burden,” Lucy’s voice was almost too quiet to hear. Before Levy could refute the claim the timer began shrieking and shaking, pulling her from her thoughts.

“Oh, could you stir this for a moment.” Lucy reluctantly took the wooden spoon from her short friend. Levy began buzzing around the kitchen, checking on the baked bread and meat sauce.

“You don’t have to do so much for me, you know.” Lucy sighed out as she stirred the noodles, stopping Levy dead in her tracks.

“I don’t quite know what you mean,” Levy sighed before setting down the bowls she had piled high in her arms. “You’re important to me, and you don’t look like you’ve been eating.”

“What if I’m not able to bring the magic back,” there was a pained look in Lucy’s eyes, much like a scared cat.

“So what if it doesn’t come back. You’re still my friend Lu. I don’t want you to think I’m here helping you and spending time with you just because you have dreams of returning magic to the world. It’s not what your mother would have wanted.” The words slipped out so easily, and Levy wouldn’t have even realized she had said anything if Lucy’s eyes hadn’t widened to the size of saucers.

“What do you know about my mother?” Lucy’s voice was like a pained whimper as she rushed to Levy’s side. The boys were so engrossed in their own discussion they didn’t even notice the odd behavior of their friends.

“I can’t tell you. I’m bound by a Celestial Wizard’s promise.” Lucy swallowed down the lump in her throat, her mouth suddenly feeling dry.

“Mom was a Celestial Wizard.” Lucy stepped back from her friend, her eyes darting to the vial sitting innocently on the counter and then back to her friend. “Did you know who I was when you met me?”

“I had an idea,” Levy said truthfully. “I’m sure you’ve heard it before but you look so much like Layla. But that’s not why I wanted to be friends with you.”

“I believe you.” Lucy was looking pale faced and scared, which didn’t reassure Levy one bit that her friend believed her words. “It’s just a lot to take in.” Levy closed her eyes and nodded, understanding that it would all seem so far fetched and dreading the day when she would have to share everything with her friend. “I think I’m going to lie down for a moment.”

“Of course. I’ll bring you some food in a moment.” Levy opened her eyes to see the sad look in her friend’s eyes.

“Thank you Levy, for everything.” Lucy reached forward and gave her friend a brief hug, surprising Levy with the contact. She pulled away with a sad smile on her lips before hurrying off to her room. Her door shut almost silently, but it still seemed to draw the attention of Natsu, who now had Gray in a full on headlock.

“What’s wrong with her?” He asked, eyes narrowing in the direction of the door.

“She seems to be more tired than normal, I think she just needs a break. We did study really hard earlier.” Levy sighed at her friend before she began the arduous process of straining the noodles. Gray jumped up to help, but Natsu stayed rooted to the spot, his eyes glued to the door, a dull whine seeming to grow from him until it cut off sharply and he was jumping over the back of the couch to pound on Lucy’s door.

“Open up,” he growled, almost frantic. “Lucy, open the door.”

“What’s your problem, flame brain? She’s probably trying to get away from you. I get why you’re being all over protective but you don’t even like the girl. Give her some space.”

“I smell blood,” was Natsu’s only response before he threw his shoulder into the door and invaded Lucy’s room.

“What do you mean you understand why he’s being protective,” I shot Gray a sharp look and he frowned, eyes turning towards Lucy’s room and Natsu’s weird reactions.

“Someone hurt Lucy pretty bad the night her dad came storming in here. He says he doesn’t think it’s her dad, but maybe it was the guy I saw her with that night.” The blue haired mage’s stomach sank at the thought.

“She won’t wake up.” Natsu growled from the other room. The bluenette’s eyes darted to the potion, fear spiking up her spine as she realized it wasn’t there.

“Finish this,” Levy handed the pot of noodles to Gray before running into Lucy’s room, finding the vial broken on the ground and Lucy’s foot bleeding from a piece of stuck crystal. “Oh god, I told her she had to eat first.” Fear building in her bones at the sleeping form of her blonde friend.

“Levy what the hell is going on?” Natsu growled, dark and low. It was the kind of growl he focused towards their enemies. Levy chanced a look at her friend, suddenly worried for more than just her friend. The cold look in Natsu’s eyes was fixed on Levy, much like a predator before the strike.

“I can’t tell you everything, you know that.” Levy breathed out, trying to sound much calmer than she felt. “Lucy has a dream,” Levy couldn’t physically finish the sentence, her tongue tying in knots as she tried. “I’ve been helping her as much as I can.”

“What did you do Levy?”

“There was a recipe for a potion that would unlock her second origin, even in a world without magic.” Levy began to explain.

“How would that even work Levy?! There’s no ethernano! How is she supposed to absorb magical energy if there is none?! What the hell would Lucy need magic for anyway, she’s just a human!” The amount of rage seething from Natsu was almost overwhelming. It frightened Levy, terrified her to no end, but she pushed past it, pulling a glowing stone from her pocket. A lacrima crystal, one that had appeared soon after the celestial gates sealed the magic in the stars, sparkled and pulsed within her small palm.

“With this. It still holds magic. Help me get her on the bed so I can get these placed.” Levy kept her composure, answering only the questions she could. Natsu gave a stiff, angry nodd, picking up Lucy with no problem at all. He settled her into her bed. His care with Lucy was so at odds with how cold he’s acted towards the girl up until now. It was an interesting sight to the blue haired girl, one that she filed away for later as she began pulling more lacrima crystals from the deep pockets of her dress, positioning them around the sleeping girl as Natsu began tending to the injury on her foot. He studied it carefully before leaving to the bathroom, returning shortly with a wet rag and a bundle of bandages. As Levy measured out the spaced between the stones so they were equidistant from the next Natsu carefully removed the piece of crystal from Lucy’s foot before cleaning and bandaging the wound.

“How long until she wakes?”

“I don’t know. She was supposed to eat before taking it to sustain herself through the process. It can take hours.. Or days.”

“Levy there’s something you’re not telling us,” Gray’s voice was almost calm from the door, but there was that cold edge to it, reserved for his anger.

“There’s a lot I’m not telling you,” The bluenette sighed. “Until this is over I can’t say anything.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it Levy.” The bluenette didn’t argue against him, instead she sighed out, her eyes trailing from the angry Ice Make wizard to Natsu to her sleeping friend.

There was a part of her that wanted to come clean, to tell them who put Lucy on this path, to let them know her fears for their dearest friend. Instead she stayed silent. The old vow

branded into her skin by the last magic she had felt. Magic from the Celestial Spirit King himself.

“I just can’t,” Levy’s words were soft and defeated. Just like her.

Natsu

It’s been so long since I’ve felt this kind of rage boiling within me. I haven’t been this angry since Layla walked away without saying a word to us, leaving us with a tear streaked Levy that could barely talk. Unable to tell us anything, under contract with the Celestial Spirit King himself.

The scent of magic was strong in Lucy’s blood, the stained piece of crystal rolling between my fingers as my rage began to simmer into something more manageable. How had I not noticed the scent before? Was it because she was so much like Layla that I simply expected it to be there?

And what of her lineage? That disgusting man who treated his own flesh and blood so coldly, is that the kind of person Layla would have children with?

That only brought my blood to a boil.

“Where the fuck are you Layla. What the hell did you do now?”

Chapter 15

Lucy

It was like I was floating in a dream, all the aches and pains of the world fading away. It was soft, almost serene.

Images seemed to flash before my eyes. Some were of the Celestial Spirits I held loose, undefined contracts with, some of my life in father's care, and some of things I had never experienced before. Suddenly that serene peace melted away as I grew cold, my limbs almost freezing over.

I was nowhere, a black abyss around me on all sides, no floor to speak of, simply floating and freezing. Is this how I die? Was it all a mistake. Fear may have clouded my judgement, just the thought of father getting his hands on me again had steeled my resolve. I was going to open the gate and bring magic back to the world, and then he would never be able to harm me again. But was that at all true? Did I act too rashly and now all of Levy's hard work would go down the drain as I float here in this nothing and freeze.

"Mistress, this is no place for you," a soft voice said, just out of sight.

"I won't be contracted to such a weak girl, get up," This voice was harder, reminding me of Aquarius.

"C'mon miss Luuuuuccyyy."

More and more voices joined in until it was nothing but noise. Slowly the darkness of the abyss began to lighten to a gray and then slower still it became brighter and brighter until I longed for the darkness once more. It was so bright my eyes hurt, so I clamped them shut. Heat came with the bright light and soon instead of freezing I was sweltering, wishing to be rid of these restricting layers of clothes.

"Open your eyes Lucy," the soft voice from before said, drowning out the rest of the noise. I obeyed, compelled to do so, and found myself staring at a bright blue sky. Soft grass beneath me and the heat dimmed to a warm spring day. The type mother loved to sit outside and tell stories of fantastical things that could never have been true in a magicless world.

I sat up slowly, fear striking me to see my father's manor just over the horizon, but a man donning shining gold armor stood between me and my former prison, a sad smile upon his face.

"Princess Lucy," he spoke softly before bowing in my direction.

"I'm not a princess," I mumbled, scrunching in on myself. "We're not really here are we?" The man studied me carefully before standing tall once more, the cape attached to his back fluttered in the warm wind as dandelion tufts floated away all around us.

“No, we’re not really here. My name is Leo. I’m the leader of the Northern Zodiac spirits and an old friend of your mothers.”

“You were contracted to her. But I don’t have possession of your key, how are you even here?”

“Which keys have you found?” He asked instead, avoiding the question.

“Aquarius, Taurus, Cancer, Nicola the little dog, and Lyra, I think” I answered, thinking of my keys safely hidden in my room. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“As the strongest of the Zodiac I am able to open my own gate without a Master. With there being no magic in the world it’s been near impossible. But in this place of dreams, with the magic currently coursing through you I can be here for you now.”

“I see,” I spoke quietly studying the man. He had unruly orange hair with cat ears. “Why are you here?”

“To ask you a question.” he paused, studying me as well.

“Well, what is your question.” I sat up, stretching out my legs in the warmth of the sun.

“Do you wish to open the gate?”

“I do.” I didn’t hesitate. I could feel it was the right thing to do.

“Even at the cost of your life?” his eyes narrowed at me and my confidence faltered. Would that be the result? Was I born just to be sacrificed. I thought of my life before believing in mother’s tales. I would be sacrificed for my father’s company. Or I could give up my life for the world to have the gift of magic back.

“Yes, even then.” I nodded. He sighed, but gave a solemn nod of his own. “The gate is hidden in a place you know all too well. It’s easier to see in the light of the stars and moon, but you can find it at any time if you look hard enough.”

I nodded, and he vanished from view in a puff of golden stars. I sat there for a long moment, just breathing and trying to puzzle out his words. A place I knew well? Easiest seen in the light of the moon and stars?

I looked at the dream manor on the hill, memories of mother coming and going like the breeze when a bit of gold glinted in the distance. In mother’s upstairs suites. I narrowed my eyes in the direction, before standing. Mother had all sorts of golden things decorating her room, but there was a peculiar painting that seemed to get shinier at night when all the lights were out and the moon was at its fullest. A painting depicting a field of stars and a rising moon.

And then the scene around me came crumbling down as abruptly as it had formed.

I awoke cold and shivering under a mountain of blankets. Glowing stones all around me. It hurt to move but I did so anyway, feeling my body's need for the lavatory rising with each moment of clarity. I dashed awkwardly to the powder room before anything untoward could happen. Once my body had settled I stretched some more, feeling a bit light headed and extremely hungry.

For the first time since Natsu barreled into my life with demands of his cat's freedom my dormitory was silent.

It felt unnatural.

I stiffly made my way to the kitchen, finding it odd that the pile of clothes that had dominated my living area were neatly packed and folded away. Happy's things were all neatly situated, but there was no sign of the little cat. I frowned at my surroundings but made my way to the ice chest to find something to fill the gaping hole in my stomach. I found nothing. Not even a trace of the pasta Levy and I had been making right before I snuck the potion away in a panicked attempt to not chicken out.

But now I'm determined. Even if it means my death.

Not that I will whisper a word of it to Levy.

I sighed as I shut the icebox, but familiar yelling in the hall alerted me to Natsu's approach. He surely wouldn't be coming back without food. He swung the door open a bit angrily, huffing to Gray about something or another and then stopped dead in his tracks, eyes wide and fixated on me.

"Where is all the food? I know I took a nap but I had at least a week's worth stored in here and now it's gone." My voice was hoarse and scratchy. Gray came to a halt right behind Natsu, nearly slamming into the pink haired man. He also turned and immediately stared at me like I had grown two heads. I quickly took stock of myself. My clothes were rumpled from sleep, but it wasn't like I was indecent. I checked over myself again to make sure I hadn't fallen out of my clothes somehow, but everything remained as it was.

"Lucy, you've been asleep for a week," It was Gray that answered, pushing past Natsu and studying me carefully.

"There's no way." the words tumbled from me. A week. That was too long. Father would be notified, my grades would crumble... The thought of enduring another beating at his hands had me shaking.

"Lucy, what's wrong?" Natsu asked, suddenly pulled from whatever had him near frozen.

"I couldn't have been asleep for a week. I just couldn't have. If father finds out... I..."

"Let's go back to Magnolia." Natsu said it with such conviction, like it was the correct course of action.

“How does going to Magnolia fix the fact that I've been asleep for a week?” I was trembling now, my legs buckling under me as I crumpled to the floor. All my hard earned strength left me at once. All my conviction that I could do what needed to be done faltered at the thought of his hands on me once more, or being married off to that awful man for the good of father's assets.

“He won't suspect you being there.” he knelt down beside me, his warm hands almost gentle. Gray left the room silently as I broke down in hysterics. “I won't let him touch you again even if we stay here, but I think it would be good for you to stay away, and... There's something I want to show you.” I nodded weakly. Natsu helped me stand, his arms encircling my shoulders as he pulled me from the room, not bothering with the food he had left on the counter. As we began our descent down the stairs we passed Gray and Levy who were taking the ascending stairs two at a time.

“Lucy-” Levy began, worry clear in her eyes, but Natsu interrupted before she could say anything else.

“Pack her a bag and meet us downstairs. We're leaving for Magnolia.”

“Natsu... Are you sure?” something silent passed between them and then there was a single, sharp nod from the man holding me up. We continued down, my brain still trying to process the loss of time, the path we were currently taking. Could I really go through with the magic at this point? If I was truly this scared of my father how was I to return home to find what I needed.

“Lucy, you need to calm down, I'm not going to let anything hurt you.”

“Why?” The word was barely a whisper but I know he heard it. “You don't even like me Natsu, why are you being so nice?”

“Cause you didn't deserve my anger in the first place. It was misplaced.” He grumbled as we approached the front of the school and he located a carriage driver. I retreated into myself as he handled the ordering of the carriage and paid for our trip. I stayed that way until Levy and Gray rejoined us with my bags in their hands, nothing packed for themselves. Levy handed me my purse where my Keys were nestled safely, along with the book from my mother and what was left of the money from my father.

“Why don't you have any bags,” I asked, my voice a little quieter than I would have liked.

“We have most of our belongings in Magnolia,” Levy explained quietly before motioning me to enter the carriage. I did as she requested and soon we were on our way. As the carriage was pulling out of the school I could see the Heartfillia crest adorning my father's personal carriage and my heart plummeted in my chest. Natsu whined in his corner, the jostling of the carriage making him sick, even still he recognized my father and pulled the blinds shut.

I smothered my cries, the fear so palpable I thought it would consume me. Levy pulled me into her arms, her hands rubbing soothing patterns in my back as she did her best to calm me.

“We will keep you safe, so don’t worry Lucy,”

The carriage ride felt shorter this time. The sun was down when we arrived in Magnolia, the carriage taking us through the town as Natsu had given the driver specific instructions on where to bring us. The town was asleep as we were driven through the city, the clapping noise of horse hooves on cobblestone almost soothing. When we did finally stop it was high on a hill overlooking the town. I followed my friends out of the cab, grabbing any remaining bags as we went.

We stood in front of a building that was almost hard to look at. Like it was both there and not at the same time. The name scribed on the sign was Fairy Tail. The same as the picture album. There was a little symbol next to the name, the same symbol tattooed on my friends. It all seemed to click into place at once, and with the realization the fog around the building seemed to lift.

This was the name of a wizard’s guild, which made Levy, Natsu, and Gray wizards. It didn’t explain why they were still around if magic had died out so long ago, but then again until mom got sick she had still been around as well.

Natsu moved us forward, grabbing the door and heaving it open. The hinges creaked from disuse, but allowed us to enter.

The place was just like the photos I had seen, but the life that seemed to spring from those pages was absent here now. I stepped inside, setting my bags on the nearest table while Natsu, Levy, and Gray spoke quietly among themselves.

“Lucy,” Natsu’s voice cut through the quiet of the place. I turned to him, still feeling empty inside, still reeling from everything that had happened in such a short time. “There’s something I want to show you,” he said it quietly, sadly. “And there’s something I need to tell you.” I nodded, stepping closer to him.

“I’m listening.” I spoke earnestly. He seemed lost in thought for a moment before he sighed, looking at Levy with a pained expression.

“Follow me.”

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