

Power and Regrets

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Power and Regrets

by [Fallen_Ark_Angel](#)

Summary

Erza weighs her strengths and failures. Jellal helps.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

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The new year welcomed the youngest Dreyar daughter and her truest friend much the way it had since they were children; watching the drunks up at the bar overly enjoy themselves and being convinced they shared in the joy through osmosis. Surely, that was how it was best achieved, right? Not by drinking yourself?

Because Marin would never ever do that, even if it was, actually, kind of easy to accomplish now. Her sister had been gone for a sizable bit by that point, but still, her father spent most of his days in his office, maybe mourning this, maybe just mourning his life in general, while her mother was slowly become less and less a regular up at work, leaving a massive amount of unsupervised time for Marin to run the bar on her own, even, some days.

And she'd definitely seen both her parents and her Aunt Lisanna (who worked the bar at times, to pick up easy back) sneak drinks during their working hours. And being an underage teen serving alcohol, the temptation to at least *try it* had to exist quite heavily, didn't it? Especially on New Years, the night you were supposed to get the drunkest, forget all of your transgressions from the previous year and promise to commit yourself to fallacies of having a better one, yes, certainly. Everyone else in her family seemed to use it as an escape and it was presented to her, day in and day out, to start early and finally, for once, fall in line with her namesake.

No, though. Marin didn't really know that word too well. Temptation. She never had. And as she watched her family and guildmates all give into theirs, partying it up as the year ticked away, she found all she could focus on was the tasks at hand; serving all the drunks and keep track of their quickly growing tabs.

Kai was supposed to be helping. Kai was always supposed to be helping. But he actually did have temptations of his own that he gave into far too easily; namely, the ones that led him to goof off instead of work.

Which was annoying, but expected and Marin handled the same she handled it on typical days. She just had to focus on working twice as hard, for the both of them, so that Kinana and her mother, who'd actually shown up for her shift that day thankfully, didn't have to. Haven's departure from the guildhall had really been the final dark cloud over the guildhall for Marin and, in her older sister's absence, she embraced every single moment she had there.

Even if it was just as a lowly barmaid.

That didn't mean that there wasn't a slight awkwardness that seemed to be arising the past few days in the hall.

Haven leaving had sent Locke into something of a tailspin of sulking and brooding, which Marin originally watched from afar, in concern, but not quite sure what to do for him other

than give him his space. Locke had always been Haven's friend, not really hers, and even though she regarded him as a very important person in her very small circle of acquaintances, neither had much to offer one another. Especially not in the situation they were in currently, where the thing causing him so much pain was what relieved Marin of her own.

Still, for all she wanted to feel happy for him, as the others all sat around in the guildhall, drinking out the final hours of the year and Locke, in particular, doing so in the company of one of the young women in the guild in particular, it still felt...twinged with something else. He'd dated other people that Haven before they got together, but never someone else in the guildhall, and that wasn't even necessarily what he was doing at the moment. But it was something close to it. Flirting, at least, with the idea, if not downright with the woman, and she was nice. Really nice. She'd joined the guild a few years ago and though Haven hated literally every other teen or young person in their age range (or just in general, honestly), Marin found that a lot of the young members were really kind. While she never really found herself friendly with any of them, none seemed too bad.

And Locke deserved to move on from Haven. If that's what he was doing. Who was Marin to judge if he was or wasn't, anyways? She knew nothing about relationships, hardly even anything about friendships, but still, it did bring a blush to her cheeks, when she came over to refill his beer and caught the woman rubbing her hand on his arm and that goofy look Locke got, when he thought a pretty girl was talking to him. When Haven was talking to him, because he thought that Haven was really pretty, but Haven was gone now and Marin couldn't feel jealous on her behalf.

Haven caused all this. Not Locke. And if she wanted her boyfriend back, then it was her job to come back and get him.

Locke must have felt it too though, as his eyes caught Marin's and he seemed almost ashamed, as he pulled away, suddenly, from the woman he was talking to, looking stricken as he muttered something of thanks to the younger teen.

"Are you gonna work till midnight?" he asked then over the boisterous horde in the hall that night. "Marin? Don't you wanna do something better on the last night of the year?"

The woman he was with looked on Marin with something of pity then as she added, "Wouldn't you and that boy you hang out with have more fun if you went to see the fireworks? At midnight? I'm sure the park isn't too crowded yet. It's the best place to see them."

"I have to work," Marin told them both with something of a shrug, but as her eyes fell from Locke's, they lingered instead on her sister's necklace, tied tightly around his wrist, eyeing the stone just long enough to make Locke frown and glance down at it as well. When he realized what she was eyeing, he turned away from her finally, to look back at the woman, and Marin blushed once more, wanting to apologize, but unsure how.

"You should take time off sometimes, Marin," was all he told her. "It'll do you some good."

"Yeah," she sighed softly. "Maybe."

She hadn't meant to cause the man so much discomfort and decided maybe it would be best to ask Kinana to serve him, at least for that night, but as she looked around for her fellow barmaid, Kai popped back up, grinning brightly in her face.

"You know how your dad won't let me serve alcohol anymore?"

"Because you're constantly spilling it or breaking the bottles?" Marin was rushing around him, trying to get over to the bar to refill her pitcher. "Yeah, Kai, I know."

"Well, I don't want to break that rule."

"Great."

"So you should serve me a beer."

"Kai, what?"

Apparently, Kai was feeling more than one temptation that evening.

It wasn't like anyone could really call foul on them, for sneaking drinks. Haven had started around the age Kai was now, Marin was pretty sure, and no one ever made a big deal, really, anyways, about those sorts of things. Anywhere in the city, honestly. She imagined her parents, who should be the ones on top of these things, considering it was their hall, probably had something of a hard line in their heads of an age that was unacceptable for such a thing and she figured hers, edging into fourteen, was probably it, but at the same time, someone would have to be paying attention to care.

And no one ever seemed to be paying attention to anything anymore.

But Marin had little desire for this and, as she gave Kai an incredulous look, he only deflated some.

"We should be able to have fun too," he insisted to her and Marin didn't want to, at all, but when she made it back over to the bar, her mother happened to be behind it at the moment and gave her a bright grin, reminding her that it was only about an hour until midnight struck.

"You two can go up to the roof, like normal," she told her daughter. "In fact, you can now, if you want. Kinana and I-

"No, Mom that's-

"Perfect." Kai was at her side and was quick to nod his head. "We've been working hard."

Well, one of them had. But Mirajane only giggled at the assertion. She always had a soft spot for the two of them and, even though she was still rather distraught in those days, over Haven's leaving, she did find that seeing the two of them together still, falling into their same old routines, made it a bit easier.

"Take some snacks with you," Kinana called to them as she came over to the bar as well, to refill her pitcher and serving tray. "And it's a bit cold, Marin."

So, as Kai told it upon himself to go into the kitchen and grab them something to eat, Marin slipped her jacket on and pulled a hat down, over her head, waiting until her mother and Kinana disappeared into the crowd once more before snagging one, single mug, filled to the brim of cold, foaming ale to bring with them up to the deck.

It had snowed earlier in the day and while, yes, it was quite cold up there, it was also so pretty, to look at the town in the pale moonlight of the coming new year. After passing off the drink onto Kai, Marin was quick to pull her gloves from her back pocket and slip them on, blowing gently onto the fabric to warm her fingers further.

"I don't know if I can stay out here an hour," she remarked softly to the other teen as Kai, now with his prized beverage right there in front of him, only looked nervously down into the golden liquid with a bit of hesitation.

"You sure you don't want a sip? Mar?" he questioned, but the girl was too busy leaning against the rail then, staring out over Magnolia to verify his redundancy.

Gulping at the air, Kai brought the drink up to his lips then, hoping to do the to it, the second his tongue was awashed with the liquid, he immediately spit it back into the cold night air.

"Kai," Marin complained with a frown, but he only looked sick from just one taste.

"That's awful!" he declared with a frown. "Why would anyone-"

"Ahem."

His loud exclams of displeasure had distracted the pair of them from the door to the balcony opening once more and a new person walking out onto the deck. Both looked in shock and fear at the disappointing gaze of Erza Scarlet, who stood there in all her armored glory with her arms folded across her chest.

Apparently, there still was someone around who was paying attention to them.

"Sorry, Erza," they were both quick to say without any words spoken from the swordswoman, Marin bowing at the waist and Kai quick to hold the drink out to her.

"We won't do it again," Marin was quick to add.

"It was my fault," Kai was sure to include.

But after snatching the drink, the Erza only looked down into it herself, with no hesitance, but rather pure disinterest as she said, "There will be plenty of time for this later in life. Life is much more fun before it's ruled by meaningless escapism."

They both nodded, Marin and Kai did once more, but both found sighs of relief as Erza's dark gaze faded with ease and she moved to stand between them then, at the railing, and look over the city instead.

"I am glad to find the two of you having fun, all the same," she assured the two children.

"The end of this year has been rather...hectic, but it is my hope that the upcoming will bring

something brighter."

"This year was boring," Kai grumbled a bit. "And now Haven's gone and everyone's all upset."

"I liked this year," Marin remarked softly. "I...like how it's ending. Too. And you should too, Kai. You're happier now, aren't you? That you told everyone how you feel?"

"I guess that's true," he remarked, grinning again at the thought. Then, making a face at Erza, he added, "At least some people cared. Like Ever and Elfman."

"I cared," Erza huffed simply. "I just wasn't surprised."

Still, Marin only sighed, leaning against the railing then as she said, "I promised Haven, before she left, that I'd start...training. Seriously. So...I think in the new year, I want to do that. I think."

Kai beamed over at her from around Erza then, nodding his head as he said, "You should, Marin! You'll be the best slayer ever, probably."

It wasn't as easy to draw praise from the swordswoman. She only stood there for a moment, looking down curiously at Marin for a few long moment before remarking simply, "You have a lacrima. It will be good for you, to begin taking that more seriously. I am certain you feel it at times, do you not? Now? That...intensity, surging through your being? Do not let it pass you by, Marin. You are gifted. Or at least have the potential to be."

This brought a blush back to the white haired teen's cheeks and, eyes falling to her feet, she whispered something of agreement while Kai only turned his grin up to the moon.

"I bet," he vowed, "this year will probably be the best year ever. I've been planning big things, for my gardens. Just you guys wait."

Erza narrowed her eyes at that before sighing, relenting, and remarking, "At least promise me you'll try and incorporate some of your magic into this, yes?"

"Oh, sure, Erza," he agreed easily. He'd had a whole sip (that he spit out) of alcohol and figured that meant he could just claim drunkenness for any promises made that night. "I'll definitely be doing that."

"As for me," the woman was quick to go on, "I hope to take a few heavy jobs in the coming year. Your brother, Kai, has been doing the same and I hope for him to accompany me on many higher level requests. That means you will be in charge of yourself most days."

"Erza, I'm not a little boy."

"And I expect you to make your own meals with your own jewels, as well as keep house-"

"Erza, I'm just a little boy," he complained with round eyes. "I can't do all of that! It's not fair. Erza-"

"I said it was my hope."

He wasn't (pretend) drunk enough to let that hope live for long.

Not that it mattered. The woman seemed to be right onto the next topic then as she said, "Speaking of your brother, it was originally him I was in search for. I hoped the two of you might know where he has gotten off to."

"I haven't seen Ravan all day," Marin told the woman with a slight shrug. "I don't think he's come to the hall at all in a few of them, actually."

"Ravan's at home, today, I know for sure," Kai told the woman easily. She'd only just arrived back into town and clearly wasn't privy to what had been transpiring. "He's been a real jerk for the past few days, too, since you've been gone. He called me a brat and kicked me out of the house today. He said he wanted to be alone."

Taking in a deep sigh, Erza only remarked, "The closure of this year has not been easy for your brother. Hopefully the new one will hold as high of expectations as the two of you have. From Marin's quest to become a true mage and you, Kai, wish to....garden better, I hope that Ravan has found a resolution of his own."

"I hope he's not gonna be as big a butt in the new year," Kai whispered.

"I hope he's happier."

Both Erza and Kai glanced at Marin for that one, but she only looked away as she blushed once more.

"I just meant... He misses Haven, I think. A lot. And so do my parents. And...Locke, so... I just want them all not to. Anymore."

"It will be a year of continued changes," Erza assured the children. "But as always, it will be for the better, I assure you."

But Ravan wasn't missing Haven that night, as he sat around, alone, at home. But he was thinking about her, at least. In a roundabout way. He was thinking about all of them. The slayer kids. Haven was gone now and Navi was still all beat up, from her job, but Locke's dumbass was still around and...

He'd debated it, after acquiring the lacrima from where Haven and Locke had buried it, back in Incidio. What he should do with it. Well, he knew what he was going to do with it, but just wasn't certain of how to go about it. He wanted it inside of him, as soon as possible, but was also aware of the risks associated with that and was fearful, if he brought up the topic to Erza, of being dissuaded or her attempting to convince him to wisely sell the lacrima as it would surely sell for a nice price.

He'd heard as much, when he went a few towns over to find someone to examine it for him, to be certain there was some sort of powerful magic attached to it, that would benefit him in some way. The man behind the counter assured him of this, though he was uncertain of what

exact power or element possessed within, but it didn't really matter. To Ravan. What it was. It only mattered that it made him stronger.

With that substantiated, he could give a shit what else it was going to do.

Still, it was costly to get a lacrima implanted by a professional and though he'd considered waiting until he'd amassed the jewels for this, he'd been having...issues, at the hall, with Locke again. And he just wasn't strong enough to kick the other guy's ass, so now he was stuck avoiding him and he felt like a coward, doing that, and plus...

Erza was already S-Class, by his age, and he knew if he could just get more powerful, even if he couldn't capture that (it seemed unlikely, given how much Master Laxus hated him, even now with Haven gone...maybe even especially), the woman would at least be in awe of him for once. In stead of only sighing disapprovingly.

He'd fucked up, going to Incidio. And though Erza had forgiven him and they'd even begun taking jobs together once more, he could still tell she was at least disappointed in him. And he wanted to right that completely. Finally.

It was all he'd ever wanted. From the woman. For her to look at him the same way he refused to allow himself to do her. She was strong and powerful and upright. He wanted to be that. He wanted to eclipse that.

But he'd more power to do that.

That's what Erza didn't get. Couldn't understand. Yes, she understood on a basic level that he just didn't have the same magical depths as others born to proper mages, but she also seemed to think that meant he should just struggle more. But what the fuck did Erza know about that? Nothing.

She didn't get it.

She never seemed to get anything.

Like his need to smoke in the house because it was too damn cold out. It was why, even alone, he was smoking with all the windows open, which yes, made the house colder, but hopefully captured any of the smoke rather than letting the scent linger for the woman to pick up on later. At the moment, he was brooding in the living room, thinking, in the darkness, not celebrating or relishing in the new year, not feeling any remembrance over the passing of another. No, Ravan care about those sorts of things. He only cared about one thing and, suddenly invigorated, he decided his days of deep contemplation (and being an ass to Kai) were coming to an end right then.

Jumping up, he headed to the bathroom, where he took out the medical kit from under the sink. Erza had been patching herself up for years, as well as him and his brother, whenever they came home beaten and bruised, him from training or a job, Kai typically being a massive klutz. She could stitch up any small wound and had actually done so for him, not too long ago, after discovering he hadn't been treating a wound on his arm properly. Along side it, he'd

taken to boiling one of his daggers, the day before, as that was the only way he knew to, hopefully, ride it of any bacteria.

He'd read up a bit on lacrima implants and spoken to Marin, even, one night when she stayed over at their house, about what she remembered from when she had her own put in. She was rather young, but did tell him what she could remember as Erza and Kai sat around with them, asking questions of their own, thinking he was just being kind to the girl. He typically was, for the most part, but was thankful for this hiding his true intentions. It felt rather deceitful, to sit among the three of them and speak in vague terms on the topic, knowing what he was planning, but at the same time, he did plan on explaining himself. Eventually.

Once it was too late for any of them to talk him out of it.

He put his cigarette out in the sink before staring himself in the mirror for a long few moments. Tension had infiltrated the tiny space so heavily that he jumped, quite heavily, at the sound of the booming fireworks in the distance.

It was finally the new year.

And while all his guildmates partied it up, down at the hall, and his younger brother and Marin stared in awe at the bright lights in the sky, Ravan only pulled his shirt over his head, traced a finger over his guild marking, took a deep breath, and got to work.

He'd set the lacrima up on the corner of the sink and gave it one final glance before going to sit on the lip of the tub and summon his dagger from his reequip space. It was an awkward angle, having to make an incision on his side, but also not being able to lean over completely to see it. It stung, at first, which he was expecting, when he first drew the blade over his flesh, but he knew this was hardly going to be the worse of it.

The lacrima, though it fit in the palm of his hand, was still quite heavy and would force the wound open. He had to psyche himself up a bit, before he got to that, and he just kept thinking about him. Locke. And Haven. And all their stupid power that was just given to them. Not like him. No. He'd worked for every ounce of magic he had currently and it was time for him to collect his reward. His gift. His chance at unadulterated power.

He'd waited and suffered and struggled for so fucking long, but if this gave him even half of what he had currently, he knew he could become stronger than both of them. He would become stronger than them. Then he'd he the one slamming stupid Locke's head into the ground and, if he ever ran into Haven again, he'd do the same to her if she gave him any trouble.

Or, maybe, if she came back and saw how strong he was...

Maybe.

But if she didn't, fine. Fine. This was about him. Finally, with Haven gone, he could focus on himself. Fully. She'd been a pain in the side of Fairy Tail for so long, but everyone had always begrudgingly admitted that, out of the younger teens, she was by far the front runner for most powerful. Now with her denouncing her family guild and venturing off on her own,

the spot at the top was vacated and he'd die before he let Locke claim it. Or any of those other losers that shit on him for so long.

He didn't hate the others at the guild, like Haven, not anymore, but he definitely wanted nothing to do with them. Especially not those his age. To establish his dominance, his presence, now not just as the guy who hung around the Master's daughter, but his own, actual established mage, who others should fear and revere...

His teeth clenched, heavily, as he'd only taken one deep breath before quickly shoving the lacrima in as hard as he could. Eyes water, the relaxing of his jaw brought out a loud yell as fireworks continued to boom and it hurt so fucking much.

But he still had work to do. He needed to get the wound all stitched up. The shaking of his hands did little to aid in this and it was all just such a mess. His side was burning and he knew it was in his mind, maybe, but he felt like he could feel it in there. The lacrima. Floating around. Inside of him.

For some reason, it didn't feel him with as much joy as he thought. Just dread. And pain. He knew as he absorbed and became accustomed to the lacrima, it wouldn't be that way, but as he stumbled through cleaning up the bloody mess he'd left in the bathroom, he just wanted to climb up in his top bunk and fall asleep.

It's where he thankfully was only about five minutes after Erza arrived home. He hadn't planned on her begin back so soon and had figured Kai would follow Marin home that night. So when she passed his bedroom, he only laid facing the wall, hoping she didn't come in to speak to him.

And she didn't.

From outside the closed bedroom door, she did sigh some, a bit sad, as she always was, whenever she was forced to note his solitude. She imagined things would only worse, now that the oldest Dreyar girl was gone. And yet this left him mostly alone, she hoped it would force him out of his comfort zone a bit and, hopefully, into friendship with some of the younger people down at the hall.

She'd always wanted him to be happy, but even more, she wanted him to be well-adjusted.

But Erza was finding herself less bogged down by the boys in those days. Ravan was old enough to live on his own, honestly, and Kai, well, he required a lot of attention still, of course, but the guild and Marin kept him so busy that he was hardly underfoot constantly any longer.

Each passing year was just her getting closer to possibly not even having them in her home at all and, though it felt a bit silly to be saddened by this, she couldn't help it. She'd hardly ever counted herself as maternal to the boys, much closer to a mentor, for Ravan, and...something weird, for Kai, but Kai was weird so that checked out, and yet, as they grew...

For all the times in the early days of them living with her, that she'd wished she'd shipped them away, that she'd never opened her home to them, that she could just get one minute

alone without the two brothers, now it was hard not to feel a bit down when Ravan didn't want to accompany her on a job or Kai was too busy goofing off at work to have dinner with her. They'd both still come around, eventually, because they still relied heavily on the woman, but the bit lost every year would never be regained.

"I usually don't feel so morose, at the start of a new year," she whispered softly to herself as she slipped off her armor. "Is this age? Or something more?"

Still, the idea of having her first workout of the new year in only a few hours was enough to give the swordswoman far better dreams than those of her student as he laid awake mostly, honestly, sweating out his worries and fears.

He must have fallen asleep at some point as it was Erza awakening him, sometime the next morning, nearly noon, truly, as she left for the day.

"Do not sleep away your fresh start, Ravan," she called after knocking at his bedroom door. "Make a resolution. And keep it. Also, take out the trash. And do some laundry. I'll be down at the hall most of the day."

Being literal shit had to be better than what he felt like, when he tumbled off the top bunk. Unstable on his feet, he found most his day spent in the bathroom, vomiting up everything in his stomach. Kai and Marin, who came by some time after lunch, both took note of this and while he snickered at his brother's state, the white haired teen only rebuked him.

"He probably drank too much last night," Ravan heard Marin whisper softly to Kai as they walked down the hall, apparently having gotten whatever it was they wanted from the bedroom. "Don't you feel silly now, for wanting to do the same?"

"I feel like there should be some sort of in between."

Coming from a family that lacked moderation, of anything, honestly, doubted such a things existence.

Ravan emerged eventually from the bathroom and tried to do as Erza had asked, but he felt so weak and ill and...

He knew what was wrong, deep down. His body was rejecting the lacrima. But... If he went to a hospital, they'd just remove it. No.

No.

He couldn't let that happen.

If he just toughed it out long enough, they couldn't remove it and, hopefully, given some time, his body would start to adjust.

Yeah.

He just had to suck it up.

This is what he wanted. Power. And there was a price to pay for that.

There was a price to pay for everything.

When Erza arrived home to find the trash taken out, but the laundry not hung, she decided to be forgiving. It was a resolution Kai suggested to her that afternoon when he slammed into her while running around at the hall. They were boys, truly young men, but mistakes were something even she found herself making at times.

Ravan could hardly hear her, the next morning when she knocked on his door, just like the one before, and once again, perhaps in a harsher tone, suggesting he get over his lazy faze least she do it for him. And when he literally fell off the top bunk, it was only to slink off to the bathroom where the cool tile floor was far more welcoming.

His fall had popped his stitches and they were didn't look so good as he labored to pull off his shirt. Something was wrong. The lacrima...what was it doing to him? He wanted to go and get someone, but Kai was working his shift down at the bar and Erza had left for the day it seemed. He didn't feel like he was strong enough to make it to the communication lacrima Erza kept in her room, much less a hospital on his own. His sweat felt cold and spent hours, it seemed like, falling in and out of consciousness.

If he was in a better state, perhaps he could ponder his fate and it's justifications, how deserving he was of his punishment or not, but all he could think about, all he could dream about, how powerful he'd feel, how great, if this had all just worked out.

Why didn't anything in his life just ever fucking work out?

"R-Ravan?"

He hardly heard it, his brother's entrance into the house, but at the sound of his name being whispered in such fear and concern, he did let out something of a pitiful groan. Then Kai yelled, first falling forwards, onto the bathroom floor with his brother, cupping his clammy cheeks in his palms before doing, honestly, the only thing he knew what to do when there was trouble.

"Erza!" he yelled loudly, knowing the woman was just outside. They'd arrived home together, but Erza was just there to do her stretches before beginning her workout. He had to get her before she took off. But as he looked down at his older brother, he knew he couldn't leave him, not even for a second. "Erza, hurry! It's Ravan!"

She heard him, of course, and even rolled her eyes as she bounded into the house, expecting something ridiculous to await her. The boys were known for their dramatics. But as she stood in the doorway over the two brothers, she was hardly treated with their typical antics.

"Ravan," she whispered softly, "what have you done?"

We skipped over a lot, after the Incidio stuff, because we were mainly focused in on Haven, since Remember Me is really her story, but obvious some big things happened while she was gone. Now that the overarching plot is tied up, we can go back and fill in the blanks. This will just be five, pretty small chapters I imagine. Then we'll cover them going back to Kai and Ravan's home in a separate, five chapter story (or maybe a oneshot?). Then we'll just have a couple of one-shots to round out some of the adult characters who were neglected when I chose to focus on the kids more. Jellal and Erza have really had any interactions since Time Away either, so there'll be some of that in this story.

Also, TheMelodicEnigma had his sisters draw some art of Haven and Locke, back right after Forgive Me ended. You know Fanfic hates links, but their name on instagram is shortypink_ink and then I also reblogged it back on my tumblr (Fallen029) when they first did it. If you just search Remember Me, it'll be one of the first things to pop up over there. You should check it and their art out, it's pretty cool.

Anyways, I'm glad to finally get to this story. Haven'll be completely be removed from this (and the next one), so can kinda just focus on Erza and Ravan (and Kai too, of course). I think I enjoy their trio plus Marin more than any other dynamic in the series.

Chapter 2

For a person who'd dealt in much tragedy throughout her life, Erza had never rightly figured out how to properly address it in any form. She typically would contain any emotion not beneficial to the current scenario, only to unload it once she was somewhat removed and alone, as to handle it privately. Grief wasn't meant to be a public affair and neither was panic or concern. Immediate concerns must be handled before anything else.

Only, this wasn't a massive battle. There was no monster, no bad guy, no one she needed to chase down, or a piece of the puzzle to figure out. There was nothing more she could provide to the situation at the moment, nothing she could busy herself with, no aid she could provide. Erza, for once, was completely powerless to the situation before her and had to act as those beneath her would in times of trouble; sit and wait for news.

But she couldn't sit. Or stand. Just walk around, silent for the most part, unable to comfort Kai, even, who was rather distraught about the whole thing. He was seated, there, in the waiting room, and flanked by both the Master's wife and youngest daughter, each doing their best to make him feel better, but nothing could, in those moments. Kai wasn't even crying for once. Just nodding his head every single time Mrs. Master raised her hand to stroke it, whispering softly to him about how she was sure his brother would be fine and that the doctors would do the best for him that they could.

"Once," Mira spoke softly to both children as Marin was rather tearful over the whole ordeal as well, "when I was a kid, my brother, Elfman, got very sick. He'd gotten bit by a bug, playing out in the fields surrounding the village. The priest visited our house and prayed over him for hours, as well as some of the other men from the village. I guess maybe that's what helped. Or it might have been Papa, who went to the big city and got an actual doctor... But either way, Elfman's still here, right now, because we needed him still. My sister and I. And you still need Ravan, don't you? So it'll be okay."

Kai nodded numbly, mostly just comforted by Mirajane's soft tone, but this story on depressed Marin, because she also knew that eventually, her mother's parents had both become sick and no amount of prayer or medicine had cured them, and weren't they still needed? Need had nothing to do with it; if someone's time was up, that was the end of it. And while Marin hadn't gotten a chance to see Ravan yet, from what Kai stumbled through telling them about what had happened, things just didn't sound good.

While Marin and her mother were there for Kai though, Lucy had shown up for Erza and stood around a bit awkwardly, offering a random word or two to the swordswoman. While she still considered herself rather close to her teammate, things were just...different. In those days. Her daughter was slightly younger than Ravan, but had a rather vocal distaste for him and honestly, even before all the Incidio things, Navi had kind of been falling out of the guild. Which meant Lucy wasn't too fond of Ravan on that level, but also...well...

He was weird. And extremely straining on Erza for a good few years. He was better in the past two or so as, like most, he was finally maturing into an adult, but most everyone avoided

speaking about him to the woman. It was a separate part of her life and, though Lucy found herself quite joyfully sharing things about her own children, when out on jobs, Erza seemed to leave the boys behind mentally, keeping both parts of her life separate. Minus the random anecdote, she kept most things to herself and that was fine. That was okay.

But it made moments like this, seeing her completely stricken with worry over one of the boys, somewhat out of body. Even seeing her interacting with one of them around the guildhall, it was hardly in a mother manner, like Lucy would with her own sons. And while it wasn't shock, to see the reaction she was having currently, to Ravan's accident, Lucy felt completely out of place, when it came to providing any sort of comfort to the swordswoman.

There wasn't much anyone could see, anyhow. Erza hardly heard it, any time Lucy or Mirajane did speak to her. Randomly, her pacing would stop, just long enough for her gaze to linger over Kai and Marin, try to think of something uplifting or encouraging to provide them with, before just sighing, shaking her head, and going back to pacing.

Hours felt equal to minutes, but at times, the reverse felt equally as true and as the light outside Magnolia's hospital dwindled, it wasn't surprising, but still not welcomed. Erza just didn't understand it; why was no one coming to tell her anything yet?

It wouldn't be much longer, however, until this occurred. A rather tired doctor came to stand before Erza and though, surely, he'd faced many more gruesome than the swordswoman, very few were as widely known. Especially in Magnolia. His slight expression of fear at first worried the woman as she was certain he'd come to bear bad news, but rather than requesting she step into somewhere more private (the definite sign of such a thing), the man only bowed his head slight before he spoke.

"The teen is in stable condition," he told her simply, but there had to be more, she was certain, as he seemed unable to meet her eyes. "It was an infection, a severe one. However-"

"I knew it," Erza whispered harshly, turning from the man slightly then as her jaw clenched. She could see Mirajane, who'd gotten to her feet moments before, take a step towards her, but Erza couldn't help it. "He'd had another wound, not long ago, that he wasn't caring for. Damn it. I should have been more vigilant of-"

"It was not the wound itself," the doctor spoke up, glancing around, clearly uncomfortable with the news he was delivering, "that brought about the infect. It was... Do you know who it was that implanted his lacrima?"

"His what?" Kai asked as he jumped up too. "What lacrima?"

"You must be mistaken," Erza told the man then. "He has no lacrima."

"He recently had one implanted in him," the man insisted to them all. "Recently. His body rejected it. We have stabilized him, but the decision must be made to either have it removed or to allow it stay."

"This makes," Erza complained, "no sense. Ravan made no mention of-"

"What would it mean?" Lucy had finally come over to rest a hand on the woman's arm, silencing her. Speaking instead, the blonde asked, "If you left it in? Would his body eventually accept it? Could it...kill him?"

"We would keep him under, as he is now, for a period of a few days," the doctor offered, "receiving fluids to assist his body in adapting, as well as allowing it adequate rest as it reconfigures itself. Lacrima implantation is much...simpler in young children, as their bodies are much hardier. The surge of magic energy is a lot less hard to handle, as they are able to grow with it. Some teenagers are still receptive to them, but his body was just not properly prepped and it appears as if an unskilled person attempted the implantation. Here in the hospital, under supervision and proper care, his body should learn to adjust in a matter of days. But even then, when he awakens...it will take some time. To become himself again."

This all felt like too much, all at once, but instead of answering the original question, Erza merely shook Mirajane off before asking the doctor, "Can I see him?"

"W-Well, he is still under and it is rather late, but...for you, Titania, of course. I'll have a nurse lead you back to him."

As Erza was eventually led off though, Mirajane and Lucy only turned to the two children, planning on questioning them on their knowledge in all of this, but before either even could, Kai looked to Marin with a question of his own.

"Where did Ravan get a lacrima?" he asked, sniffing a bit, but she could only shake her head.

It didn't matter to Erza though, where this lacrima had come from, nor how he attained it. As she stood over the teen then, in the tiny hospital room, looking at all the tubes and machines, she couldn't shake this deep, burning sensation inside. Not to know or understand why he did this, but for him to wake up, get over this, through this, so she could wring his head for even causing this.

She'd never watched Ravan sleep before, the state in which one looked their most peaceful, and found it disconcerting, somehow, to see him that way. Glancing away and to the nurse, she only asked, "What are these...markings? Along is neck?"

"The lacrima is like a poison, in the body," the woman told her softly. "It's a side affect. I...don't actually know much, about lacrimas in particular. I've never dealt with a patient whose body has rejected one. I can get you the head nurse or doctor if you-"

"He'll survive it? Here? If the lacrima is left in it?"

"That's what they say, yes," the woman agreed.

For all the comfort she'd provided Kai over the years, she'd never made such a gesture to Ravan. Not truly. But reaching out then, as she ghosted a hand over his cheek, she hoped that this provided something close to that. Maybe.

"He made this decision for his own reasons," she spoke aloud. "It is not mine to take it away from him. Assuming his improves, lacrima will stay."

Erza sent Kai home with the Dreyars that night as, despite the boy's protests, she thought he would feel best around Marin. She held his hand, anyways, the whole walk home, and when they arrived, she only led him straight to her bedroom, where he fell into her sister's discarded bed with little care.

"So," Laxus was asking out in the living room, where he'd been glancing over the paper (but mostly the time) as his wife, following a long sigh, took her place beside him on the couch, "what happened?"

"Well, Ravan will be okay, for now," she informed the man, but there was hardly even a sigh of relief from the man, "but I just... I worry, Laxus, and I know you don't want to hear it, but Haven..."

"What does this have to do with her?" And suddenly, he was far more interested. At his dark gaze though, his wife was quick to shake her head.

"Nothing."

"Mira-"

"Not that I know of, anyways. Ravan just...found a lacrima, or something, and stuck it inside of him. Without even telling Erza about it. His body rejected it and was making him ill. If Kai hadn't found him or Erza was out on a job, I just... Were we this stupid? And dumb? About magic?"

He snorted, Laxus did then, but just as quickly he was shaking his head and getting back to his paper.

"We had power, demon. So we didn't have to seek it out." Then, relenting some, he added, "But we were cocky as fuck with it too. So yeah, I guess we were."

The next few days felt like a singular, long, drawn out one to Kai. He didn't really wanna go up tot he guildhall and work (if he ever wanted that, anyways), and Mrs. Master was very understanding of that. She told him that he could sit up at the hospital and wait for his brother to awaken, if he wanted, or maybe, since they were sure Ravan was alright now, maybe he could find something to occupy his mind and keep him from worrying. But it was winter and the river was frozen over, so fishing was out, and while he still could go to Hargeon and rent a boat, he didn't want to get too far away from Ravan, in case anything came up. So Marin, who never rightly liked to stay away from work so long, decided not to go in either and instead took him to see her favorite aunt and uncle most days.

Elfman and Evergreen felt a lot like an uncle and aunt to him as well. The latter had always doted on her youngest niece and, considering since their introduction Marin and Kai spent nearly all their time together, it was rather difficult to not include the boy in their activities. And though Elfman loved his nieces dearly, he'd always thought it would be fun, too, to have a nephew, maybe.

Kai always considered Mrs. Master something close to what Erza was to him, just lacking a bit, so it made sense that Elfman and Evergreen were something like an aunt and uncle, if not

lacking some as well.

Neither cared much for his brother (honestly; they had no opinion on him whatsoever), but knew this was a trying time for the boy and were extra nice to him. Even Evergreen. She even let him sit in during tea with him and Marin and didn't complain too much when he knocked his plate to the ground, where it broke in two.

"You're lucky," Elfman assured him. "That got me kicked to the couch for weeks."

But Kai didn't feel lucky. At all. He felt useless. And not in the normal way.

"How come Ravan would do something like that?" he asked Evergreen that evening as the woman sipped at a glass of wine and he rested his head against the kitchen table. They were waiting for Marin and Elfman to get back with something for dinner and had mostly stayed quiet during this rare moment of being alone, but for some reason, he thought she could at least give him some sort of guidance.

Ever frowned though, instead of answering right away. Then, with a shrug, she said, "It's power, Kai, I'm sure. That he wanted. Who does?"

Kai didn't. At all. And even if he did, he definitely wouldn't have just gone about it in the worst way possible. They were brothers! He told Ravan everything. Everything. Even though Ravan quite clearly didn't care about most of the things Kai felt worth sharing. Ravan was the last real relative Kai had in his life and even though he considered Marin his sister and Erza... They weren't the same. He loved them both a lot, yes, and didn't know what he'd do without them, but if he lost Ravan...

And his brother was almost taken from him, not from some stupid job or evil monster, but just because his brother wanted to get stronger? Wanted even more magic? How selfish was that? He didn't understand it. *He couldn't understand it.* Ravan had to have known the risks with the lacrima. But he still went through with it. Without telling anyone about it. He risked dying and leaving Kai all alone just for magic?

What kind of brother does that?

But Kai didn't get it. Because he couldn't get it. He wasn't a mage and he was a brother, fine, but he wasn't the older brother and didn't understand what that meant. Even if he pretended to be one to Marin, there was no sacrifice in that. Ravan's whole life since his parents died had been in sacrifice for Kai. All of it. The reason he stayed in Magnolia, put up with all the fucking fairies, the slayer kids, was because his little brother liked it there. Because they accepted him. Kai. And Ravan could live with being the outcast, if it meant Kai was okay.

Erza only ever took them in because of Kai. She would have let him go, Ravan knew, if it wasn't for his little brother. She pitied him, fine, but it was Kai that she worried the most over and bonded with the easiest. In the current days, yes, Erza valued and treasured them both in different ways, but in the beginning... Ravan knew it was his fault. That he was the one that pushed her away. Everyone away. And it was only right that he paid the price for that.

He just always wanted her to look at him. Erza. Not in exasperation and disappointment. Or even pride, really. Just as an equal. Like, wow, you did it, Ravan. You're done. You don't need to be taught anymore or lectured or looked after. Because you can take care of yourself. Finally.

But he wasn't going to get that on his own. He was never going to be strong enough. His magic was never going to fucking catch the damn slayer kids and it wasn't fair for her to never let him know that. To let him work his ass off, constantly, to compete in a class he was only ever going to fail.

He wanted Erza to feel like her job was finished and she could move on with her life.

As he laid there though, blinking in a daze up at the swordswoman, he saw that she hardly found this to be the case.

"Erza," he whispered and his chest burned, deeply, and why did he feel so weak?

"Rest," the swordswoman ordered softly, yet sternly as he noted another woman, a nurse, on his other side, poking a needle into his arm. As whatever substance she injected him with set his entire arm aflame, it felt like, he squeezed his eyes shut, but still heard Erza loud and clear as she added, "You're going to need it."

Even in his current state, he could tell from her tone that whatever awoke him when he truly awoke wouldn't be pleasant.

Kai found his uselessness became restlessness as, after Ravan awoke, he still wasn't up for leaving the hospital just yet. And even though he could go visit him, the younger boy refused.

"I'm not going to," he insisted to Marin with a shake of his head, one day up at the bar. He was still using being sad about his brother as an excuse to mope around, but his friend was actually getting back to her shifts that day. It was while she was busy wiping down a table that he explained this to her. "I don't want to see him."

"Why, Kai?"

"Because he doesn't care about me, so why should I care about him?"

"Kai-"

"You can't talk me out of it, Marin."

She made a face at the boy then before saying, "Well, I'm going to see him. After I finish her. I'm going to bring him some of his comics. Are you not going to come with me?"

"Nope."

"I'm still going."

"Good. You should. And make sure when he asks where I am, you tell him...something really snarky, okay?"

"Kai-"

"At least witty," he bargained. "Please?"

He took her sigh as agreement.

Still, explaining Kai's very complex and disjointed feelings were far from Marin's mind when she saw Ravan laying there in the hospital bed and looking so ill and frail with all those...markings on his face and she teared up a bit as he looked away, clearly uncomfortable with this.

"I'm not dying," he grumbled as she hugged him, "Marin."

But he could have.

He patted her on the head though, rather return the hug, and she caught it, the way he grimaced when he moved. Just slightly.

"Are you... Do you have more magic? Now?" she asked softly as she sat the comics in his lap, but the best she got was a shrug and Erza, who was in the room as well, made something of a grunt as the assertion.

"W-Well, I hope you feel better, at least, Ravan," Marin offered up as she took a step back from his cot. "I was really worried about you. And so was everyone else. Really." When he looked unconvinced, she added, "Even my dad. Honest."

This didn't seem to convince him anymore and, as Marin looked disappointed, Erza only came to tap her gently on the head.

"Ravan will be more up for talking when he returns home," she told the girl simply. "Perhaps the two of you can have a more in depth conversation then, hmm?"

Marin was quick to nod and it wasn't until she was back with Kai, who was waiting for her at the bar, that she remembered his request.

"Did Ravan ask where I was?" he asked, trying to mask his hope, but she was lucky in the fact Mirajane was coming over then, to ask a few questions about the older teen herself and, well, Kai never was known for his memory.

For all the concern into Ravan Kai was pouring, however, his older brother had none in return,. Erza was the only person that Ravan could think about and, as he sulked through his weakness for a few days in the hospital, she always seemed to filter around, something posed on the tip of her tongue, to be hurled his way, but never rightly getting it out.

It was when she came by to walk him home, right before he was to be discharged, that Ravan had enough. There was that glint in her eyes and he knew what would be awaiting him, back home, but for some reason, he just didn't want any longer. He couldn't.

"Just say it, Erza," he complained as he winced some, slipping on his shoes. She was standing over him, as he sat on the edge of his cot, silent, but judging. Just like always. "Whatever it

is-

"Hush."

"I'm going to pay you back," he grumbled. "For...everything. I'll be stronger now, once I get better, and I'll take enough jobs to-"

"It is not about that, Ravan."

"Then-

"You don't even know what it means," she told him with a heavy frown. "To be it. Stronger. And you're far from it, I assure you."

"What are you even talking about?" He never right seemed to know. "I will be. You heard the doctor. My body just needs to adjust for a few weeks and then... I know what I put into me, Erza. I'm going to be-

"You did not earn it."

"How can you say that? I almost died."

"Yes." And even though he was sounding increasingly angered by their discussion, her tone was still perfectly even. "I know."

"Why can't you ever just-

"We'll finish this at home."

"Yeah, well, maybe I don't want to."

But he had no other choice as, not only was her gaze intensifying, but the nurse was back then, to finish his discharge and, well, it was a long walk back to Erza's place. The stony silence did little to give his mind something to focus on other than his pain.

Kai wasn't around at the house when they got there, but Marin was for whatever reason. Ravan was too tired to really question it much. In actuality, she really didn't plan to be, but Kai was going full on ahead in his swearing off of his brother and, well, she just felt so bad for Ravan, with both Erza and Kai mad at him, so she thought that she'd do something nice for him.

"You can sleep on Kai's bunk," she told him with a grin as he limped into the boys' shared bedroom. Erza didn't follow after them, apparently deciding he'd suffered enough for the moment. Either that or she didn't want Marin to see her be a complete jerk (because Ravan felt like she was being a complete jerk). "I washed the sheets for you. And I made you cookies. Did you need anything else?"

Falling into bed, he winced some before pulling out the pill bottle the doctor had given from his pocket, quickly flicking it open and popping two of them. As he reached for the glass of

milk Marin had said on the nightstand, beside his cookies, he only muttered around the pills, "Bandanna."

Marin turned quickly, easily placing one of the many strewn around the room and moving to hand it off to the older teen. Rather than folding and tying it, Ravan just threw it over his whole face, offering a rough, "Thanks," from beneath the fabric.

She waited for a moment, for him to say something else, but when she didn't get anything, Marin was quick to rush from the room and it was for the best. He really wasn't in the mood for playing nice for long. And considering she seemed to be the only one extending that towards him in the moment, it would suck to lose it.

The pills, or maybe the exhaustion, put him right back to sleep though and, when he woke up next, it was dark out and he was alone. Pulling the bandanna off, he sat up far too quickly, causing his sore body to remind him that, yeah, he still was recovering. After falling back into bed, he only reached blindly over for a cookie and hoped it would give him the strength he needed to limp off to the bathroom.

It didn't quite, but he was managing, at least, but it was as he got to the door that something held him up. He couldn't quite remember it as, everything was pretty blurry after the first morning after he implanted the lacrima, but a cold chill ran down his spine as bits and pieces came back to him, of falling in the bathroom and the feeling off it, the foggy thoughts and fears that had kept him company until Kai found him.

"The clean up was not too nice," he heard from behind him and he knew she was there, she always seemed to be at the worst moments. "It was awaiting me, that first night I arrived home. But somehow therapeutic. It made it much easier for me to channel my anger at you."

Hand still resting on the bathroom door knob, he didn't even look back at the woman. He didn't have to. She was standing in the doorway to her bedroom and he bet it was without her armor, but still so imposing, with her arms folded across her chest and that *same damn glint* in her eyes.

"Am I supposed to say thank you or something?" he grumbled and he knew exactly what he was doing. He always did. Because if she was going to be disappointed anyways, he might as well make the best of it.

"No," she said tautly. "You're meant to recognize what you have caused me, and your brother, to feel in your recklessness. Again."

He knew she was referring to Incidio and that was so fucking aggravating because it wasn't fair. To bring that up again. You shouldn't be able to do that, forgive something and then bring it back up. Why did she get to do that?

"I'm sorry, okay? I fucked up. Is that what you want?"

"I told you what I want."

"You're acting like I meant for this to happen. I didn't. And you know that. I just... I wanted more magic. And now I'm going to get it. Everything worked out. So why are you so mad at me? I'm alive. And I'm going to be even stronger than before. You should be happy for-"

"That is not strength."

"Stop saying that. What do you even mean? Of course it is. Having more magic will let me-"

"It feels as if I am constantly teaching you the same lessons over and over, Ravan, without any indication of you learning a single thing." Erza let out a short huff of breath then. "I am glad that you live, Ravan. Of course I am. And whatever new power this lacrima brings you is a welcomed one. Had you spoken to me on it prior, I would have assisted you in getting it implanted correctly in the first place. But you, once again, took the coward's way out and hid it from me. And if you think that it will impress me, that you have more...magical power now, then you are sadly mistaken."

She knew how much he hated that word. Coward. It fucking enraged him. And as he took in a breath then, he turned, to face her, to say something, to scream at her or attack her, maybe, but instead he only said, "You don't understand what it's like. To not have it. They all get it, so much stupid power because their dumb fathers are legendary mages, but I have to work and struggle for every fucking thing I've ever gotten and it's not fair. This lacrima is my equalizer. So fuck you, if you think it makes me a coward to take what's mine. Maybe I haven't ever learned anything from you."

He wanted her to rebuke him. To yell at him. Maybe even to pull a weapon on him. Something. But she just looked as equally disappointed as she had since he awoke, all those days ago, and he hated it.

He hated her.

It was easy for her to decide, from her place of endless magic, what was and wasn't a legitimate method of obtaining it. Of who did and didn't deserve it. She was one of those fucking legendary mages, just like the dumb slayers, but unlike their kids, he hadn't gotten anything passed on from her. Because she wasn't his mother. She couldn't give him power. He had to go out and take it.

And as he stood in the bathroom once more, lifting his shirt up just enough to see the far more professional stitches that laid over his side, sealing in his lacrima, Ravan didn't give a shit what Erza thought of him. Or anyone else.

He wasn't a coward.

Dropping his shirt, he vowed right then and there that, once he regained full control over his magic, he'd fuck up anyone who thought he was.

Chapter 3

As far as the Scarlet household went, Marin hardly considered herself a member. Maybe a pseudo member through another pseudo member, but definitely not anything more. And yet, as the three main sides were fracturing away from one another, she saw herself as a linchpin of sorts. The smallest part of a machine, yes, but key in preventing a collapse.

So between working her shifts up at the hall, tentatively learning how to channel her magic, and placating Kai's foolhardiness, Marin was now forced to walk the tightrope between Erza and Ravan, caring for the injured teen during her off hours while still being very reverent of the swordswoman hanging around with her palpable disappointment.

It was a lot.

Worst of all, her typical security blanket was being a massive wet one these days, instead causing her more stress rather than helping alleviate the issues between his brother and Erza, which meant Marin had to find someone else to assist her. Her Aunt Evergreen was out because, well, now that they all knew Ravan wasn't on death's doorstep, she would probably take far more joy in Titania struggle to wrangle in her unruly children and her other aunt, Lisanna, was actually gone off on a job with Bickslow which also left the bar without a backup, adding even more stress, and...and...

"Mom," she whispered softly when she got home that night to find her mother and father already in bed. Creaking open their door, she called softly to the woman like when she was a young child, "I need you."

After only a few days of trying to help her pretend brothers and their equally as pretend mother, Marin was tapping out. She couldn't do it anymore. Which was fine, of course, her mother assured her as they spoke softly in the kitchen over a late night tea, very cautious of the fact Kai was, still for some reason, bunking in Haven's discarded bed.

"You just go into work tomorrow," Mirajane assured her youngest daughter eventually with a soft grin, "and I'll deal with the others, okay?"

Marin was appreciative, but as she left the kitchen, she passed her father who'd no doubt come to find out what was wrong. After making sure his daughter had disappeared into her bedroom, he only came to eye his wife suspiciously.

"Are you going because Marin needs you to?" he asked with a frown,. "Or because you wanna snoop?"

"What difference does it make?" she retorted with a frown as she went to set their cups in the sink. "And a person can do both, you know."

He was doubtful, but at the same time was glad Mira was doing something other than sit around and hope Haven wrote to them. He didn't think another letter, passed the one assuring she was at the very least safe (in that moment), was going to be coming their way any time soon.

Erza was just arriving back from her early morning work out when Mirajane came by that morning, the other woman smiling brightly even when the swordswoman was unable to return it.

"I heard," Mirajane sang in a far too youthful voice for Erza's taste, "that a certain someone received a letter from a certain someone else."

With a frown, Erza only replied, "Your daughter talks too much."

"Normally, no," Mira retorted though her grin was ever present, "but in this case, you're rather lucky she has."

"How do you figure?" Bounding up the porch steps to join the other woman, Erza said, "Ravan is injured. I will write back to Jellal, explain this, and that will be that."

"I'm not letting you do that."

"I do not recall asking your opinion on the matter, much less permission."

"And yet I'm here."

"And yet," the other woman agreed dryly, "you are."

"C'mon, Erza," Mirajane insisted with bright eyes. "You need to get away. At the very least, you and Ravan need some space from one another."

"I just told you, he is-"

"A man, now. Far more than any of us were, whenever we were forced to deal with these sorts of things." Reaching out, she grabbed Erza's hands in her own, insisting a bit more forcefully then, "He'll be fine. I'll come by each day and look in on him. And you can go see Jellal. You know you want to."

"Why are you doing this?"

"Because we're friends," Mirajane insisted then, her grin faltering a bit. When Erza seemed unconvinced, she added, "And Marin is feeling extremely torn between Kai and Ravan right now, who maybe you didn't noticed, are fighting or something. And she's already going through much."

"What else is she going through?"

"Her sister's runaway," Mirajane complained then, dropping the other woman's hands as the frown fully took over. "Of course she's going through a lot because of that."

Erza widened her eyes and looked off, deciding not to reveal just how gleeful Marin actually seemed to be following this.

"Regardless," the swordswoman went on, "I cannot just abandon Ravan right-"

"He's a big boy, Erza," Mirajane insisted, but the play was gone from her voice. Clearly, the other woman had hit a nerve. Still, the barmaid did take a glance at the house, as if fearful of being overheard, before whispering, "And besides, he did do this to himself, after all."

She took a breath then, Erza did, and glanced at the house herself before slowly nodding. "After all."

Allowing Mirajane entrance into her home (unadulterated, at that, until her return) was difficult for the scarlet woman, but the other only insisted she was merely there to look after Ravan until he was well, so Marin didn't have to. And, well, Erza was still reeling a bit, even as the event was waning down, but she did need to get away. To process everything. The fact that Jellal had written to her felt serendipitous, but she'd been ready to pass it up, give it up, to stick around and care for the boys.

But was she really doing that currently? Or only heightening the tension around them?

"Good. You're here," Kai remarked when, after packing up her things, Erza swung by the guildhall, to inform him of her departure. "I hope it hasn't been hurting your feelings, that I haven't come by the house."

"The only thing I've noticed is you not shoveling the walk like you're supposed to."

Oh, right. That.

Still, Kai only told her, "You can just say you miss me, you know, Erza."

"I'm going away for a few days."

"You're what? No!"

"Kai, you haven't even been home."

"But who's gonna take care of Ravan?"

"Why do you care? If you're so upset with him?"

"W-Well-"

"Make up with your brother." She tapped him on the head then, to get the teen to look her in the eyes. "Do you hear me? And shovel the walk."

"Yes, Erza," he grumbled down at his feet. "But only if he apologizes. To me. First."

"*Make up*," she repeated in a harsher tone then, "*with your brother*."

He found it best to just nod that time.

Before she departed, the swordswoman did note Marin nearby, busing a vacated table, and went over to speak to her as well.

"While I appreciate your helpfulness, I would appreciate it more if it did not include your retelling private matters to your mother."

Marin dropped the mug from her hand then, having not noticed the woman, but flustered by her words. It was the swordswoman's quickness that saved it from crashing to the ground and possibly shattering. As Marin raised her eyes up to the woman's though, there was not nearly the same amount of displeasure as had been directed at Kai only moments before.

"I'm sorry, Erza," she whispered softly. "I just...when I got the mail, I saw the letter from him and I know he only writes you those when... But I shouldn't have told my mother."

"It's not as if I have not seen him recently. He was by, only a month ago, now." Erza let out something of a sigh then, shaking her head. "This situation with Ravan has...brought up certain things, for me, that I wish to think about, away from the home. So I suppose I should thank you." But just as Marin began to smile, Erza was sure to add, "But do not let such a transgression occur again."

Nodding then, Marin softly wished the woman well before watching her depart. Kai wasn't so soft in his farewells, yelling them out loudly as Erza only groaned, passing him, and yes, maybe it would be good, for all three of them to escape one another for a few days.

"Me and you should go away sometime," Kai declared to Marin as he came over, finally, to at least somewhat help bus tables. "Together. Without Erza or Ravan."

Marin made a face, but then relented as she said, "Locke told me that too, the other day. Before... That I should get away."

"Locke's always right about stuff," Kai insisted then. "He's really smart."

"Yeah, well-"

"You pick the place, okay?" he insisted then with a bright grin. "And the time. And we can go and just hang out. Who would stop us?"

Probably her father, who was making a face over them then, from his table, but was too busy halfheartedly going over bills to put an end to their little charade just yet.

But oh, he would.

Ravan, for his part, was only just waking up that late morning and had to groan some, as his chest still felt sore and, when he climbed out of bed, his body begged him not to. He'd gotten the a rather gnarly illness, once, when he was a little boy, out on the coast, that kept him in the hut for days. His body felt a lot like it then, completely fatigued and exhausted. If it wasn't for the fact he refused to call for Erza, to get him something to eat (and knew Marin wouldn't be around yet), he probably wouldn't have left his bed.

It was as he did though, and limped into the kitchen, where the smell of pancakes awaited him, that he found out the intense magical energy he felt was slightly off. Yes, it still belonged to one of the guild's top female wizards, but this one, thankfully, didn't seem nearly as pissed by his presence.

"Good morning, Ravan," Mirajane called to him cheerfully and bleh; he knew why Haven had run for the hills.

Forced positivity was the pits.

"What are you doin' here?" he grumbled as he fell into his seat at the kitchen table. "Where's Erza?"

"With Jellal."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that she's headed out to meet with Jellal."

"About what?"

"I really don't think the two of us wanna ponder that, silly."

She was right, if not disgustingly so, but he'd kinda, maybe, thought that for some reason... well... Maybe Erza was going to tell Jellal that he was super powerful now and maybe he should come around more, to check it out? Not that Ravan would care if she did, but...

Man, those pills were really fucking with his head.

"But why are you here?" he decided to ask instead, thinking that would at least force the woman to give him something close to a real answer.

Oh, though, he didn't realize just how long Mirajane had spent giving half answers and avoiding truths.

"Because you and your brother don't seem to realize that my daughter is still a little girl and not your little maid."

He frowned then, but when he reached up for his mouth, he found that he hadn't brought his bandanna out with him to hide behind. Normally, he'd retreat back into his room to get it, but it had taken a lot out of him to get there to begin with and Mirajane was turning then, to present him with a plate piled high with pancakes and bacon.

"I didn't... Marin's the one that's been hanging around," he told the girl's mother then with a frown. "No one asked her to."

"Marin can't help, but try to take care of people. And I don't appreciate when people take advantage of that."

She was just standing there, over him, and for all the growled conversations the woman's husband had directed his way in recent years, he'd found Mirajane to mostly leave him be. She wasn't cold towards him, like most others.

"Still," she went on then, "I don't necessarily blame you. I know you're all shaken up, about what happened. So is Erza. And your brother. But I don't want Marin feeling like it's her job to get that all sorted out. So I'm going to be around, until Erza gets back, okay? Hopefully I'll get you back on your feet before then. Or at least the right track towards it."

Ravan didn't want the woman's help, at all, but at the same time new that he had very little choice in the matter. With Erza gone and Kai missing in action, Mirajane was apparently his last hope. The horror.

But, after stomaching what he could of his meal (he was still prone to upchucking), he slunk off back to bed where, after curling up under blankets, he passed out for awhile. If he could just sleep through the majority of the day, until he strength was back, he figured he'd probably hardly even notice the other woman around.

The woman he wanted around, to scowl and argue with, had a much harder time relaxing from the situation, however. The train ride out, she found it impossible to lose herself in a novel and, even after arriving, thoughts of what awaited her were sparse. She knew that Ravan was fine, of course, but...

"What's wrong with you?" Jellal laughed, just a bit, upon seeing one another some time later, Erza didn't seem to wish to release him from their customary hug of greeting. "It is not that long ago that we saw one another. Surely you have not missed me much since."

"It is not that," she agreed, which made him laugh again, but in a bit of discomfort as, when the woman withdrew from him, it was with a troubled look clouding her face. "It is...Ravan. He's fallen ill."

"Erza, I didn't... You didn't have to come. I merely thought that-"

"No, I did. I wanted to." That time, she shook her head, explaining, "It's through his own volition that he's... But I...I fear it's at least partially mine as well."

It was in their inn room that they met and, with a slight nod, as if in recognition of what their few days together would be encapsulated by this revelation. As he gestured then to the single bed in the room, he waited for her to take a seat on the edge before doing the same.

There was always a faint awkwardness, no matter how long or short their time away from one another was, and it carried on, year after year, decades bleeding into one another. It was a toss around, what their relationship might mean to the other upon each meeting.

Sometimes it was a distant affair, meeting up in the most random of places, almost like a planned chance encounter, and time was short, so what was done with it relied on them being on the same page. When they were younger, when this was just beginning, that was all there was, usually, really, and it felt passionate, at times, remorseful in others, but it was understood. What it was. Even if they didn't really understand what they were doing or what

they felt or thought, they could pretend as if they did, because oh, between the two of them, they could pretend to be content and pleased with the worst of situations (mostly because they'd both lived through them already), but as they aged and grew, this type of meeting felt...fleeting.

The other most common was when he had time to actually be with her and she was free for him and the pretense given then wasn't that they were happy with their current situation, but rather, that it didn't exist. Now, given time to freely reflect with one another on any topic they so chose, somehow, this was rarely the one either found discussed. He'd always enjoyed her blunt opinions on topics and she, likewise, appreciated his softer approach, but of the many things pondered, it was best not to dwell. On this. Their relationship. It was depressing to think about, to talk about. To consider.

Because there truly wasn't much to consider at all, was there? There was this, what they had, or there was nothing. Both were too honorable to abandon their own convictions for such a fleeting concept as love or any of its entanglements. Even if, all this time out, they were still caught up in it, neither would ever risk a failure of a conviction on their own happiness. And they wouldn't want the other to do so either. His mission with his guild and her status within her own came paramount to anything they might feel between one another.

It didn't mean they didn't long. It didn't mean they didn't want. But it meant they had to wait. Even if it was until the end.

For two people who felt as if their entire lives had been spent indebted to the well-being and care of others, the attachment of the two boys in hers hardly felt like much.

Things were just easier, was all, both knew, back when their times together were shorter and spaced longer apart, because they could just excuse it, their connection and need, being based on little else than desire. And when it was over, when it had to end, the passion was hardly dissipated, but sated, on both ends, as he had to get back to his travels and her the guild, when a tentative promise, a basic understanding, that time would come again.

Only somewhere along the way, this wasn't desired so heavily. It still was, of course, a key desire whenever they happened along one another, but the fulfillment wasn't the same. Even if they only had hours, minutes, moments, they were spent just as well in silence, not breathy or hushed, but complete. The understanding changed and the inclinations shifted. He'd always liked so many things about her, most everything, honestly, but now it was just being close to the woman that brought him some form of comfort. Contentment. And there was a peace, in their closeness, that he offered her, that she found so rarely in other forms. For all her solitude and inner sanctity, she never felt as calm as she did beside him.

This hung between them, all of it, as they sat together in the middle of winter, in some far off inn, her away from her guild and boys, and him only just far enough from his teammates to provide him privacy. Erza didn't speak for a long few moments while Jellal waited, neither touching, but connected, still, somehow.

"He found a lacrima," she finally spoke, the man glancing over at her in turn. "Well, he... I told you, before, of what happened in Incidio. The Master's oldest daughter and her boyfriend buried it, the reward they had received, after I took Ravan home. Apparently, she hated this

with him and he went back to get it. Dig it up. Then he waited until a week or so ago, to make the incision himself and implant it."

Jellal absorbed this in the same way he took in any new information; silent contemplation. As Erza merely sighed, finished in the moment it seemed, he only offered, "I take it this did not go according to plan."

"His body rejected the lacrima. He nearly... But he's pulled through, of course, and is healing up. Or else I would not have come."

"Of course."

"Mirajane Dreyar is watching over him now. He's still rather weak." She raised her eyes then, Erza did, to look into the man's. "But he lives."

A moment passed, where the pair just looked at one another, before Jellal said, "Forgive me, Erza, if I have not understood this correctly, but I do not see where any blame would be fall you in this matter. Ravan took the lacrima without even consulting you, I imagine."

"That is correct."

"Then-"

"I am not blaming myself for him taking on the lacrima," she said. "I am finding fault in myself that he found the need."

His pause that time stayed as Jellal found no words and Erza only slouched forwards. Just for a moment though. It was rather awkward in her armor, to sit such a way, so she rose to her feet then, filling the silence instead.

"You don't," she accused though, truthfully, she didn't wish her tone to be so, "understand."

"But I wish to."

Her hand came up then, to her shoulder blade, where she found the catch in her armor rather easily, releasing the plating's hold. It was a bit awkward, given she usually didn't partake in this. It was much easier to just reequip into whatever she desired. But, as she looked over her shoulder and caught Jellal's gaze, he seemed reminded of the benefits.

Rising, he moved to take over in ridding the woman of her armor. His breath was soft and nice, against the back of her neck and helped Erza to remember to do it as well; breathe.

"I've always told him," she whispered softly as the man unlatched the other side of her armor, "that he must get better, to get stronger."

"Must he not?" he questioned back, just as soft, but only answered his own question in his next exhale. "No. He must."

"Of course he has to, but-"

"You did not tell him to go about it recklessly, did you?"

"No, but-"

"Then you are not at fault."

"I am his... I watch over him and his brother. This happened under my roof. That makes it my fault."

"Perhaps." Her armor fell then, Jellal apparently finished with the final clasps, and as it crashed down to the ground with perhaps too loud a bang for their cramped inn room, Erza finally turned to face him. "But I don't see it that way."

"Of course you don't." She sounded accusatory again, though he took no offense; only stared back at her in curiosity. "You are not a..."

"A what?" Shes wore a thin black shirt beneath her armor, always, as he moved to brush a hand along the hem of it while the other came up to ghost under her chin. "Erza?"

She seemed sour at him then, turning her head, but he only grinned in response as he lowered his own to rest it against the side of hers.

"You don't," she told him flatly this time, "understand."

"Okay," he agreed instead.

This seemed to be the correct response as, when she turned her head again, it was to press her lips against his, and it didn't matter. Any of it. Just for a bit.

"I just didn't think," she whispered to him, late into the night, as he dozed intermittently and she laid awake, troubled, "that I...cared. For them. Him. Ravan. I knew that I... When I thought that he was going to die, I worried that, this entire time, I have been too harsh. On him."

He was hardly awake then, but Jellal did peek his eyes open to watch as the woman sat up in bed, pulling her knees to her chest as she frowned. Softly, he offered, "Why do you think you have been?"

"Why else would he risk death, Jellal? Just to get more powerful? Unless he felt pressured to do so?"

"Why are you so certain you are the pressure? He resides in one of the most coveted wizard guilds in the land. He sees those with much higher, unattainable magic every day. That is not your fault, nor your burden. The most you can do is lead him to what is attainable, for him."

"And what if I haven't?"

"How? You train with him, allow him on jobs with you, and forgive the many slights he has made against you over the years. Even recent ones. Tell me what other mage of such a high

standing would do that? For someone like him? Or his brother? You have done the best you can. That anyone could."

"It wasn't," she retorted, "enough."

"Why do you say that? And why are you so upset? He could have died, but he did not. And now, with his lacrima, he will be given the power you felt he was unable to achieve alone. You were upset, by the risk he took, and the risk of losing him. But you have not."

"I have."

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't ask to be a mage, Jellal." She didn't look over at him then. She didn't want to. "I needed to be. To be strong. To save the people I care about. Ravan is not... He does not hold those same values. He cares little for his friends or anything else. The Master sent his daughter away from the guild for the same reasons; to protect it from her. If I was forced to do the same, I... I couldn't. I wouldn't." Turning her head then, she stared down into his eyes as she vowed, "I won't."

"Why are you so certain you must?"

"Power corrupts." She looked away again. "Or at least the chase of it. The pursuit. You know this. He has gone beyond discovery; to shove a lacrima inside of you, in secret, risk your own life over it... That's the beginning of it. Corruption."

"You are paranoid."

"You have not seen him. In some time. I always thought that he would outgrow it. His...anger. The way he seals himself off from others." Shaking her head then, Erza said, "I failed him. He's become a man and is no closer to ridding these qualities. I thought if I was strict and kept him busy, but... What if I was merely harsh? And uncaring? I have always seen myself as acting towards both Ravan and Kai as what I needed, in my life when I was young, but they are not me. What if they needed something different? Something I'm unable to give them?"

It was in herself, for once, that she found the disappointment laid and when Jellal didn't speak, she only sighed, resting her head on her knees.

"Sometimes," she admitted to him, "I wish things were different. I've thought of it, at least. In...weakness. If the two of them were never in my life and instead, I had... If you and I had..."

He sat up then, at least somewhat, and reached for her as he said, "It is not too late for-"

"It is," she told him with finality. "And there is no point in pretending otherwise. There was never a chance, for us to be...normal."

Jellal let his hand slide down her arm then, before falling onto the mattress between them. "I am sorry. I just thought-"

"It's fine. It's not good. To play into delusions."

"Erza-"

"It doesn't matter," she cut him off. "Anyways. If things were different. When I saw him, there, on the bathroom floor and I thought that he was going to... I cannot imagine caring more something, someone, a child, than I did then. It's only been, what? Eight years? Nine? That feels so short. And yet..."

"You love him," he tried then, for her. "Both of them. Ravan and Kai."

"I love all of my friends. In my guild. And I understand the concept of time, very well, and what it means. People have come and go through the hall, many times. People I consider myself very close to. Even those who have not left it, but take a lesser role in it, that I find myself interacting with less and less each day, I understand that role as well. I know loss. I have felt much loss. I know it's need and necessity, but when I picture them, exceeding their needs for me, I just get... Especially when I feel like there is so much more that I should have shown them and taught them, but time is running out and I don't know what to do."

"I never knew what it felt like. What it would feel like. Paternal. Maternal. Master...the real Master, not Laxus, but his grandfather, Makarov, he and Grandpa Rob, they were the only people I ever saw in that roll, but it was different. Than this. Is it because there are only two of them? And I do not have to spread around these feelings across many? Or is it because I'm a woman? And am naturally drawn to such things? Either way, I do not like it. This weakness. But I cannot reject it. It is not something I have control over. And I hate things that I do not have control over."

She paused then, now actively refusing to look at him, no matter how much his eyes pleaded for her to do so, as she instead glared at the opposite wall.

"How do I stop feeling this way? Jellal?" she asked him tersely. "And how do I stop him from going down the wrong path?"

He sat up fully then, shifting over the tiny space between them so that he could wrap his arm around the woman. As she fell into him, however, he said simply, "I do not know."

While it wasn't necessarily difficult to stump the man, it was strange for him not to come back with at least some sort of twisted word salad of a response. As Erza turned her eyes up to glare at him however, he only looked back at her in honesty.

"I do not," he insisted. "It is as you say. I do not...know these feelings. Whatever my feeling towards the concept of them doesn't matter. I do not know what you should do because I have no role to draw reference from."

Her eyes fell once more and she was prepared to try and change the subject, but then Jellal went on.

"But," he said as he reached with his other hand to this time actually grab her chin, forcing her to look up at him, "I do not think you should surrender to your feelings. You are not

subjected to the same rules as your master. His duty is to his guild, but if you feel as you claim, then yours is to Ravan. He is not gone. No matter how destructive, how selfish, how corrupt you may view his actions at times, it is never too late to set someone on a new path. And if you think you have been too harsh, too uncaring, then treat him the opposite. I do not know you to just give up, Erza." He smiled then and when his forehead fell into hers, she was nuzzling back against it. "Especially not on a person you care so deeply for."

"I still feel as if I have failed," she confided softly. "Him. To get to this point."

Jellal hummed. "You told me that sometimes, you wish for the two of them not to be in your life. I imagine, for it to only be sometimes, then every other moment is spent the opposite? You love them. Even if you cannot say it. And they do you as well. Even him. Ravan. If he cannot either. So begin again. And again. Until you right things." Shifting back then, he released her chin and the woman turned away once more, blushing slightly. Still, he only added, "And if that does not work, then I was intercede."

"Is that right?" she whispered, glancing over at him. "You'll step up and-"

"If he were to overpower you now, with his lacrima-"

"In no possible realm-"

"-then I suppose I would be forced to defend your honor. And put him in his place once more." Jellal even shrugged. "He might outgrow your guidance, but no one escapes divine punishment."

He got a look out of the woman, at least, before with a sigh she slipped back down then, to rest her head against a pillow. While she'd given him her back, the man only laid close to her, watching the back of her head silently.

"I never want to look back on these times and feel the same failure I feel now."

He made a sound of agreement before snuggling up closer to her, the woman stiffening at this for a moment before relaxing into her hold.

"You won't," he told her with a confidence that felt unearned.

"How can you promise that?" she challenged back. "What makes you so certain?"

"I know you, Erza." He let out a long breath then, glad when he felt her do the same. "No matter what I don't know or don't understand, I know you. You will always do the right thing. You have always done the right thing. Do not make me a liar."

She hoped not.

As she finally drifted to sleep however, the long period of laze was beginning to draw heavy on Ravan's mind. The Master's wife had taken off awhile ago, after treating him like some sort of mortally wounded kid or something. She gave him Erza's lacrima and insisted he call her on it, if he needed anything, and even after nearly dying on said bathroom floor only a

few days ago, he imagined he'd have to be in just as dire straits before he called on the Master's home in the middle of the night.

He was being a bit of a dick though, maybe, in his boredom and considering how ill he felt, decided it was fine to smoke a cigarette not only in he and Kai's room, but also in the other boy's bed as he sat up in the bottom bunk, mostly glaring down at the blankets while debating if he was cold enough to drag the ones from his bunk above down. It was after flicking his cig stub into a soda bottle on the nightstand and starting to reach above, to his bed, to get this done that it happened.

His blankets were tucked under the mattress and the angle along with his weakness made it difficult for him to tug them down and it was so fucking annoy and he just was getting so...

Frustrated. Fed up. Rather than spending the day expending his energy by grumbling at Erza or shooting her dirty looks, he'd been forced to contain it (he'd long heard stories of Satan Soul and wished to never meet her) and now it was grating on him because where did she get off, anyways, huh? Leaving him when he wasn't feeling well? And where the fuck was Kai anyways? He hadn't seen his brother in days. What the fuck was up with that?

Why was everyone so fucking mad at him if apparently, they didn't even want to be around when he needed them? What the fuck did they care anyways, what he did? What did anyone? Huh?

Something pulsed.

Inside of him.

The lacrima, maybe, or something more, and he thought he was going to pass out, the feeling was so intense, so unique, making him fall backwards once more, back into Kai's mattress. Weakened now by something more, he moved to hold his hand over his face, watching as wisps of some sort of light blue, almost white magic dripped faintly from his palm. Under the magic's pale light, he saw as well, all along his bare chest, the dark scarring into his flesh, seared into him, permanently. Just like his lacrima.

It dissipated, just as quickly as it came upon him, and left alone in the darkness once more, Ravan only blinked back a wetness in his eyes the intensity had brought about as his hand fell back down, thudding heavily against his chest while he only craved sleep once more.

Rest.

And, as he feared, even just slightly, whatever that feeling was, that had over come him, so intensely, so suddenly, maybe he even wished his brother was home. Or Erza.

Maybe.

Just so he wasn't so alone.

Chapter 4

"Were you watching me?"

Marin nodded warmly at her cousin as she sat on her front porch step beside Kai, the pair having been doing just that. Watching Ajax. The little boy had just mastered a new spell and was nothing, if not a showoff. This had only increased in the passing few months as, with Haven's absence, the little boy felt like if the others could just get stronger, him specifically, then when she heard about how great they all were, what other choice would she have? Than to come back? And be a fairy again?

"Yeah, I learned it front Aunt Ever," Ajax told the duo as he stood out in the yard. "Well, I learned it from watching her, anyways. She's not too good of a teacher, I don't think, but-"

"Is that snow?"

Kai didn't meant to cut the younger boy off, but as a flake drifted down from the mid-morning sky, he could only groan. It wasn't so much that he disliked snow (he liked it quite a lot), but it hadn't snowed since Erza left and, after shoveling the walk that once (while being very cautious to not let Ravan, who was just inside the house onto this fact), he'd hoped to avoid having to do it once again.

Clearly, this just wasn't going to be the case.

"What's wrong, Kai?" Marin asked with a bit of a frown, glancing up at the sky as well. The sun had been hiding behind the clouds all morning, but they weren't dark and didn't look too menacing. "I'm sure it'll only snow a little."

She was actually hoping for this as well. Her Aunt Lisanna had arrived back the night before and had made a deal with the girl that she'd take the morning shift the next day, so long as she covered the evening. Though a heavy snowfall would have no direct effect on this, should it continue to snow into the night, especially if it were heavy, then her mother and father would make a big fuss about her closing up all alone. It was only recently that they'd begun to let her do it and they seemed to call it off for the most random of things. She felt like a big snowstorn, for some reason, would be one.

"Nope," Ajax assured them both where, attention misdirected for a moment, he took to flipping over, into a handstand, to reclaim it. "My dad said it was gonna start up in the afternoon and keep up, til tomorrow morning. At least."

As Kai groaned, Marin frowned as well. For two teens who had only the most inconsequential of problems, they felt as if the whole world was turning against them. This happened, on occasion, when they both found themselves in foul moods and therefore lacked the other to pick them back up. Kai had spent years being the one forced to do this for Marin and, though she could return the favor on occasion, in gridlocks like they were at the moment, their teenage angst could quickly become cyclical.

But Ajax rarely felt any pressures in life. At all. His mother told him that he was carefree and his father told him that he had the heart of a real acrobat, but Ajax mostly just felt like he didn't have a lot to complain about. He liked both his parents, he had some of the strongest aunts and uncles a kid could ask for, a family guild to grow up in, and the best older cousins to teach him everything about anything. Whenever he got too sad about something, he just had to think about all the other people, who he'd helped out on jobs, who had way more to be sad about.

"It doesn't mean that you shouldn't feel sad too," Aunt Mirajane explained to him once, "but it helps to put things in perspective."

From his parents to his other relatives, everyone's perspectives seemed to be pretty horrible these days, but Ajax had a goal and a simple plan to achieve it; get stronger by beating badder bad guys so that you could beat badder bad guys because you were stronger. See? Simple. Ajax had been blessed with the confidence of his oldest cousin, but been passed over when it came to the Dreyar smite this carried. Instead, he was blessed with the lack of common sense of his father and the Strauss motto of never getting down on yourself; something better was always right around the corner.

This would be beaten out of him, eventually, as it was every other person, but in those joyous early days of mastering his magic, no one could convince him otherwise. Time felt as limitless as his potential and there was nowhere he'd ever rather be.

Marin and Kai, however, felt like being a lot of different places. Namely any that weren't where they were at that exact moment. As the afternoon came around, they made the trek back to the hall, where she was meant to relieve her aunt and he had to get very busy doing his typical busy work. For that day though, Kai found difficulty in stressing over his guild jobs when what awaited him at home was so much worse.

Erza had told him to make up with his brother. And to shovel the walk. He'd avoided the former because the latter had yet to be necessary once more, but now he felt like, if he came by the house more than once, then he was definitely going to have to interact with his brother and that would suck because then he couldn't lie to Erza and say that Ravan had just been sleeping each time he tried to make up and whose fault was that then? Huh?

But now he was probably going to have to either straight up lie to Erza (which would suck; he was much better at just slightly altering his words just enough to change the truth, not outright go against it) or actually make up with his brother (which would also suck because he was upset with Ravan and wasn't ready to forgive him yet).

Still, the Master seemed to be getting more and more annoyed with his presence around the Dreyar household and it was getting kind of awkward between him and Marin, cause she kept trying to hint at the fact she too wanted him and Ravan to make up, but seemed unsure of how to get that to happen, which he hated for her, but was also so great at playing aloof to things he hoped to avoid that he managed it with such ease, there was hardly time to lament Marin's feelings.

His life was a mess.

He had literally zero going on and it was a mess.

Marin, who had a million things going on, even with her mother's help, felt like hers was much the same. But today's struggle, the worry over the impending snow and her parents babying her over it, turned out to be a rather non-issue. It seemed, as the day wore on and Mirajane, in preparation for the snow, headed over to check on Ravan early and Laxus, in preparation for not giving a shit about anything, left work early just to go home and drink, that Marin had forgotten one thing; her parents didn't care about her.

Which was harsh and she felt bad for even thinking about it, but it was true in some ways too. Not because she felt like they should be concerned about her in the heavy snowfall that night; more so because they would have been, before Haven left. But now Haven was gone and that meant that her father was even more despondent than he had been in years prior and her mother only seemed sad, for some reason, to Marin now, even when she was smiling.

Was it that Mira was sadder? Or was it that Marin now finally saw through the years of facade?

It didn't feel fair. Any of it. Haven's departure, while premature, wasn't completely out of the realm of what a teenager her age should do, and yet her parents were acting like they were mourning the dead. Marin always had a hard time feel as important as her older sister, but the shadow Haven cast only seemed to grow, the further the teen got.

So while Marin felt like she should be feeling good, maybe, in the idea that her parents finally weren't treating her like an absolute invalid all the time, incapable of caring for themselves, there was also a sharp feeling of abandonment. Too strong a word, perhaps, but something close to it. For all the independence she wanted, being given so much so quickly was really beginning to get to her.

Kai offered to wait around, after closing, for her, but Marin didn't want him to do that. She knew he was stressing over his own issues and sent him on his way before she even began to close up. It was while she was busy counting the jewels that she noticed Kinana still hanging around.

"Oh, I can close up myself now, you know," she told the woman with what, on a normal night, might have been pride, but that night felt much too sour. "You don't have to-"

"I know." The older woman smiled at her, as she sat at one of the tables for once. It looked strange, anyways, to see her here; sitting. She never did that. She was almost always up and about. "I thought that I'd walk you home tonight; it's so frigid out. And have you looked outside? The snows coming down so hard-"

"You don't have to do that."

"I want to."

Marin couldn't help it. She blushed some, down at the stack of jewels she was counting, and Kinana giggled into her palm at this. For all of Marin's life, the woman had worked in her father's guild and, recently, they'd even begun working together, but never had they been any

closer than that. Her mother and the woman had a close relationship, Marin thought, but Kinana mostly kept her head down which, considering Marin did as well, meant very little was ever discussed between them.

They were sort of in completely opposite stages of life.

"Your mother looked out for me, you know," Kinana told the girl as they drifted through the streets of Magnolia that night, the snow very close to obscuring their vision. "When I was young. Older than you, in some ways, but still, I... She made sure I was alright. She's just really worried about your sister right now and I'm sure that doesn't always feel fair, but Fairy Tail's a big family. You know? I know it's grow and sometimes it doesn't feel like it, the real members always take care of one another. And there's a lot of people who are looking out for you, Marin. Even if it doesn't always feel like it. Do you understand?"

She wasn't sure, but Kinana didn't seem to need an answer. It was only important to be heard in that moment; understanding could always develop later.

Her father seemed to have been kicked to the couch when the girl got in, but he was snoozing or...passed out, oblivious to her late night arrival. And though she didn't peek in at her mother, she could sense her magic there as well, no doubt gone to the world as well.

Kai was up though. Sort of. At least, when she pushed open the bedroom door, it bumped loudly against his boots that he'd just left in the doorway and, with a yawn, he decided to apologize.

"I'll pick up," he assured her sleepily as Marin only stumbled through the dark room. "Tomorrow."

She didn't believe him.

"In the morning," she whispered softly as he blinked over at her in the darkness, from her sister's former bed, "you can come open with me and then, after, go home and shovel the walk. I dunno when Erza's coming back, but if she does today, that'll give you time to be over there and doing it, before the first morning train comes in."

"Are you sure that shoveling the walk wouldn't help you with your new magical journey?" he tried to persuade her.

"W-Well, I don't-"

"No," he sighed before she could be convinced otherwise.

"I could help you, if you-"

"Erza told me to do it. I's just tryin' to get out of it, but... You don't cross Erza. Or else she makes you polish armor. And not pay you. Or do that thing where she won't talk and she just keeps letting me talk until I get myself even more in trouble. She's really good at that one."

"Kai..."

"What?"

"I... Please make up with Ravan?"

"Marin-"

"I don't like when you fight with him. Especially not right now. He's hurting and-"

"So am I."

"And you have me," she pointed out then. "To talk about it to. Now that Haven's gone, who does Ravan have? He needs you. Even if he doesn't realize it."

Kai wasn't so sure of this. But when he noticed Marin shivering on her side of the room, he pulled one of the blankets off his bed to go toss it over her as well, even against her complaints. He could forget sometimes, that she was right.

He was needed.

Of course he was.

The next morning, Marin yawned through opening while Kai tried hard to stay upbeat and focused. Err, well, he had always just been a better worker, in the spring and summertime, when he could shift more focus on landscaping. Scrubbing toilets and mopping floors during the winter was nice, fine, because it was much warmer inside, but still.

"Go," Master grumbled at him though, when he came in, "shovel the walk."

And ugh, life was so unfair.

Especially because none of the fire mages seemed to be around that day, to take care of the problem for him...

This made the timeline Marin had offered him, to avoid having Erza arrive before him should she be that day, malfunction and now, behind schedule, he found himself skidding through the slick streets all the way home where he found...

The walk already cleared.

And oh shit, Erza must be home and inside and that meant he better go plead his case and explain how he had been keeping the walk clean (or, well, nature had, at least) and today was just a fluke, see, but as he was working up the courage to do this, Mrs. Master came walking out the front door.

"Oh, Kai," she greeted as she bundled into her coat on that cold winter morning. "Have you returned home?"

"If Erza has," he whispered softly, but Mira only frowned at him.

"Oh, no, sweetie, I'm sorry, but she hasn't yet," the woman comforted him (though honestly, at first, he saw this more as a blessing). As she came to a stop before him, Mirajane patted at his cheek. "But if there's something you wanna talk about, you know I'm always here."

"It's not that, it's... If Erza's not here, then who did cleared the snow? From the sidewalk and stuff? Did you? Because I'm sorry. I's gonna do it, see, but then the Master-"

She giggled that time, Mirajane did, patting at his shoulders to cease his worries. "Your big brother did, silly."

"Huh?"

"He's been feeling much better, the past two days, and wanted to see if his strength would hold. No one stays sick forever." Then she frowned, moving to walk passed him then. "Well, I guess some people do."

But Kai didn't even call out a farewell to his second favorite woman behind Erza. Nope. Because as, first, fear of said favorite woman fled, something else began to fill him instead. And it wasn't relief either.

"Ravan."

Kai found his brother in the kitchen, eating the breakfast Mrs. Master had provided while idly flipping through a comic. This was something Erza would definitely have growled his name over and, at first, the man jumped, misplacing his brother's dark voice for the swordswoman. When he looked over and saw Kai though, he just frowned.

"Kai," he retorted with what was kind of close to equal disdain, but missing the mark, just a bit because, actually, he had very little for his younger brother. As the other guy only continued to glare at him though, Ravan did begin to sour a bit and added, "What?"

"Shoveling the snow is my job, Ravan," he complained, still just glowering there in the doorway.

"Yeah and you suck ass at it."

"Erza told me to do it! She always tells me to do it!"

"Then you're welcome, idiot, for doing it for you."

"I didn't ask you to!"

"What is your problem?"

It was pretty evident he had one. Though Ravan hadn't really noticed Kai's absence at first, it was becoming crystal clear something was up with the other guy, given his avoidance and now, here he was, red in the face while literally screaming at him for taking over some of the manual labor in his place.

And while Kai actually had a lot of problems, that had been building up, in the weeks since he first found his brother dying on the bathroom floor, they seemed to be escaping him now as he only glared over at his brother, tears pricking his eyes as they fell over the many scars that littered his brother's jawline. Would he always have to look at him? Like this? Those stupid ugly scars and quite literal reminder?

"You," he whispered harshly at his brother. "You're the problem, Ravan. You and your stupid selfishness."

Ravan only made a face at him though. "For shoveling the damn walk?"

"You know that's not what I'm talking about!"

A tense silence fell over them then as Kai just kept waiting for it, his brother to say something else dismissive or inflammatory, but Ravan just kept looking at him, in that deadpan way of his, and they were so opposite, for two brothers, weren't they? Ravan's man method of avoidance was long stretches of silence intermingled with seething anger and lashing out. Kai, however, found it best to laugh in the face of the gauche portions of life, pretending they didn't exist, that it didn't hurt, whatever it was, because if you could just ignore something long enough, then it would just go away.

Wouldn't it?

Kai ignored unpleasanties while Ravan sulked in them, brooded in the darkness his brother shut out, soaking it all in, because he would need it, eventually. He needed it now, Ravan did. All that darkness. It had been what pushed him into the lacrima. Gave him the power he felt now, terrifying and all consuming, fine, but there, and that was what mattered. That it was there. It paid off. For him. Or it would. Once his body finished adjusting. Every single slight and insult he'd suffered through, endured, all the self-loathing and hatred had brought Ravan to the brink of the end and, now, as he backed away once more, it was with all of his dreams answered.

But what of Kai then?

What always of Kai?

Kai had few dreams. Desires. Literally his biggest hangup the past year was coming out to people who apparently already knew. And his prospects for the upcoming year were no better. But that didn't bother Kai. At all. Or at least it hadn't up to this point. Because he thought that they were all fine and content. At least between him, Erza, and Ravan. Marin too. Eh thought that everyone was getting exactly what they needed now, what they wanted, and maybe this next year wouldn't even have a single bad moment at all, maybe, or at least not a super depressing one.

But no.

No.

Because apparently Ravan was so miserable in the fact that he had a stable job and income and place to live and a family that loved and cared for him that he had to undergo a super serious lacrima implanting that nearly killed him, but oh, wasn't it just so great? Now he was so powerful and strong and happy. He was going to be happy now, right? And leave? That's what older siblings did, anyways, wasn't it? They got strong and left behind their weak useless younger siblings and Kai wasn't going to thrive for it, like Marin had; he was going to become even more of a weenie.

He hadn't cried before. Over this whole thing. Ravan getting hurt. He'd been in too much shock for his typical dramatics and, by the time it had worn off, anger had taken over and, unaccustomed to it, Kai let it ride with dry eyes. But his anger was gone and now he just felt empty and alone and it just sucked.

All of it sucked so much.

He thought his brother would call him a baby, like he always did when Kai's tears started up, but Ravan only sat there, perhaps a bit uncomfortable, but not moving either. Just watching. As the tears welled in his little brother's eyes and the sniffing started.

"Why do you have to be such a big jerk, huh?" Kai whispered scornfully as he rubbed at his eyes. "I tell you everything, Ravan. Because I care about you. But you can't even tell me that you're going to shove a freaking lacrima in your body and just hope for the best? What if you died? Then what? Huh? You're so fucking selfish."

Ravan snorted then, looking off, unable to take his brother being in such obvious pain. Mostly because he knew, in some roundabout way, even without meaning to, he'd been the one to cause it.

"You don't know," was all he grumbled as he pulled it up then, the bandanna that hung around his neck, "what it's like."

"You don't know what it's like," Kai retorted through his tears which only made his brother glare at him.

"What? Huh? To be such a fucking baby that I make everything about me? I'm the one that almost died and yet you're the one-"

"That's not fair, Ravan!" It had been a long time since they'd had such a screaming match. Over a year, maybe. And without a single soul to break them up. "You can't just do that. Say that I can't feel something. I can feel whatever I want."

"What do you feel, Kai? Huh? Like a little baby? Because-"

"Shut up!"

"You shut up!" And he felt it then, Ravan did. The surge. The pulse. Of his lacrima. As he jumped to his feet, his body protested some, even over his adrenaline, as he had just exerted himself for the first time in a long time, out there in the snow. But still, something about this...giving into it, the pressure, just felt so fucking good. As his dark eyes found his

brother's, he only growled right back, "I did this for me, Kai. And I'm not going to feel fucking sorry about it. So you and Erza can both-"

"I don't care about Erza!"

"Neither," Ravan retorted though, clearly, their meanings weren't meeting up, "do I."

"All you ever do is things for yourself, Ravan."

"That's not true."

"It is! You're the one that makes everything about you. All I ever am is nice to you, but-"

"Shut up."

"Ravan-"

"If this is about me not being the perfect brother who cares about all the dumb ass shit you blather on about constantly, fine. I'm not. Happy? That's what you have fucking Marin for." Shaking his head, he repeated again, "You don't fucking get it."

"Get what?" his younger brother asked that time, his sniffles that time as his tears were running their course. "Huh?"

Ravan weighed it too. For a moment at least. His next words. He meant it though. And didn't know how long he'd wanted to say it to him, Kai. Every single time for the past nearly decade that he whined or cried about this or that, complained about all his stupid shit, expected his brother to just figure it out, all of it, for the both of them. It was more than just the weight that Ravan felt, hanging from his shoulders. It was the combination of it with all the mental anguish and pressure, the constant fucking pressure, from everyone in his life, and it...

It was more. Than just teenage angst. Rage. That they all just wrote it off as. He wasn't going to out grow this because it wasn't just a phase. A part of his adolescence. It was something inside of him that he'd felt for so fucking long and sometimes it just took over everything and...

No one noticed it. Or understood it. Acknowledged it. Or, well, someone did. For awhile. That he'd thought had the same thing. Different in some ways, but unified enough that they could get through it together. But her solution for it, for all of it, was to just runaway. Escape. Deal with it alone.

But that wasn't an option for him. It was never an option. If it was, he'd have done it a long time ago.

No.

He had a little brother that he couldn't just say, "Fuck it," to and abandon. He had to stay behind and he had to find a way to deal. Again.

Now he had. In his lacrima. It was going to give him strength and power and he was going to channel it, finally, all of it, through it, and the idea that they were hating him for this, blaming him, just proved it.

"To be alone," he told his younger brother softly then, looking away as Kai's eyes only fell, down to his clenched fists.

Opening his hands slowly, so he could just stare down at his palms, the younger of the two teens sniffled for the last time as he nodded, softly, in agreement.

"Yeah, Ravan," he agreed in a hushed breath. "I don't know what that's like. 'cause I've never been alone. At all. Because I've always had you. Always. And I thought you felt the same way."

He left space then, Kai did, for Ravan to correct himself. His statement. Explain. Expand. Alter the meaning of his words. So they weren't so hurtful or at least weren't taken in such a way. But Ravan didn't feel like offering anything up to his brother, at all, not even as Kai turned and left the house once more.

Marin was waiting for him back at the guildhall, of course, hopeful, but doubtful (this was her typical default in most situations though), and knew when Kai arrived back to the hall so quickly that clearly something had gone wrong.

Lexus stewed at his typical table, when the boy came to cry to his clearly working daughter, but as she made pleading eyes at the man, the slayer only ground out that she could take the day off; the heavy snowfall meant most had hunkered down in their homes for the day anyways.

He cried to Marin for a long time, back at home, in her bedroom, where she only patted at his shoulder and tried, at first, to insist that he'd misunderstood Ravan, before switching tactics and explaining that the other guy was just going through a lot right now.

Like a serious lot.

"Lacrimas take time,," she explained softly to Kai who begrudgingly nodded. "It makes you feel all...warm and different. Inside. And Ravan's just mean. Sometimes. Especially if he's mad about something else."

That was true enough.

"I just want Erza to come home," Kai admitted softly then. "Even if she gets mad at me for not making up with Ravan."

Marin wouldn't have minded the woman's typical levelheadedness either. Between her distant parents and now the warring brothers, Marin felt like a lot was still being asked of her, no matter how many times she begged off a task. And, after Kai fell asleep sometime in the early afternoon, Marin went to tag back in to what had been her mother's task, the past few days.

Mirajane was working up at the bar for her, that day, after all, and, well, someone had to make sure Ravan didn't shove another lacrima in himself, didn't they?

Boys were dumb, Marin found a lot. Especially the ones she was typically involved with. Most the girls she knew, like Navi or Haven, had something close to self-preservation, where no matter what they were doing, if it became obvious they weren't going to win, they'd pull back; do something else. It was why Navi was shying away from the hall and Haven had run away. But boys didn't have that. Or at least these ones didn't seem to.

It just took them longer, maybe, to understand what wasn't good for them. Maybe. Or to admit, once you found out something wasn't good for you, that you couldn't change it. Couldn't force it to be. Holding on was fine, but sometimes, eventually, letting go was the only option; or else whatever you were gripping so tightly would only bring you under.

Ravan was asleep when she came into the house, stretched out on the couch for once, bundled up under blankets and with his bandanna resting over his face. He seemed at peace and she had no problem with leaving him to it.

It was the smell that awoke Ravan. Of the fire. At first, and maybe influenced a bit by his already forgotten dreams, he thought he was out on a job. In a forest somewhere. And had fallen asleep, while the others sat up, around the fire. Navi would probably be asleep, or at least sulking about having been tricked to go out on an adventure while Haven and Locke either did that disgusting thing where they flirted with one another, rather than rested, or that worse one, where they argued endlessly, and kept the others from resting.

But those days were behind him, the man remembered as he shoved his bandanna off his face. Blinking up at the ceiling, he could sense her easily. Marin. She had a weird magical energy about her. She always had. Probably because she had such an abundance of it, magical energy, hiding in her lacrima, that rarely got exerted, and he wondered if she felt it too.

What he did now.

Those bursts.

And how did she deal with it for so long?

Without exploding?

"Where's your mom?"

"Working," Marin sighed from over at the fireplace, where she was poking at the wood and watching it with something of discontentment. Not even glancing over at where he still was stretched out, she said, "She took over for me today, there, so I'm taking over for her here. Right now. With you. And, I don't wanna intrude, but did you not know you should, you know, burn a fire? When it snows so hard? That way, the roof gets less snow on it, you know? W-Well, unless you wanted someone to get up there and knock it off. Or if Erza did. She didn't mention-"

"Can you get me something to drink? Marin?"

He just didn't wanna hear her talk anymore, honestly.

But that didn't seem to be an option.

The girl did as he asked, but upon her return, yes, she presented him with a bottle of soda, but she didn't just disappear. Like he wanted. Like she should. Instead, she stood there awkwardly, as he sat up, waiting until the man shifted, so his feet were planted on the floor, and gave her room to take a seat on the couch as well.

He could tell something was bothering her.

He knew what was bothering her.

But he just didn't know how to get her to not bring it up.

"Kai always told me...he still tells me that...that we're all... But we're not. You know?" Marin swallowed, at her own words, never too good at finding them. But she'd always mustered courage, when it came to protecting Kai's very sensitive sensibilities, and if that meant confronting Ravan (if that's what she was doing; she still wasn't too sure), then so be it. "Brothers. And sisters. I meant. I mean... I never thought of you. As my older brother. Not really. Not like how he meant it. You were really nice to me, sometimes, I guess, but I think I just thought that because you weren't as mean as Haven. But... I'm sorry. Ravan. If you really did feel that way. This whole time. A-Alone."

She let out a long breath then, as if it had taken her a lot, to get there. Ravan had been just staring blankly down into his soda, but did steal a glance over at the girl then, as she sighed at her lap.

It was to it that she went on.

"I know you're not really my friend. That you were Haven's friend. But sometimes, I just... I don't have a lot of people either. You know. I mean, I don't- I'm sorry. Because I do. I have my parents and my aunts and uncles and... And you don't and that's not fair to say, to compare, but Kai's my only real friend. And I don't know what I'd do. If he just left. If he was just gone. I bet I'd feel just as bad and angry as you are. Or as...alone. And I know this doesn't all have to do with my sister. That it's more than that. But... I don't want you to hurt. Or feel bad. Or like no one cares. Because I do care. About you. And Kai. Sometimes, especially recently, since Haven left, the two of you feel like the only people who actually care if I'm around or not."

This time, what hung between them was different and Marin didn't like it. What she was saying. But Ravan had turned to look at her fully then, staring at her, heavily, silently, and she shivered as the fire wasn't enough, not yet, to warm the house completely.

"I'm not silly, like Kai, you know," she added then, turning her eyes up to meet his as well. "I don't...understand power. Like you do. Or Haven. Or Locke. Or.. But I do have it. And sometimes, when I'm by myself and I feel...sad, I just... I know it's there. With me. My lacrima. It made me better. When I was little. And weak. Sick. When was sick, it cured me. But...not until I believed in it. So... I'm not mad at you, Ravan, for what you did, like the

others, but... They love you. A lot. And it scared them. To think about. To really think about. So please, just think about them more. Next time. Before you do something. Before you say something. Kai always feels left out and weird and...but he knows that you're there. And I'm here. And Erza. And if we all just remember that, about each other, the way that he does..."

She wasn't quite sure what it was that she wanted to say. Or if she was even conveying the parts that she did know well. Kai was usually the one that spoke for her. Not the other way around.

His eyes fell again then and Marin was crushed, momentarily, thinking she'd failed. But it was as Ravan was staring down into his drink once more that his words made this clear that this wasn't the case.

"My lacrima's been hurting me. Not in the infection way." He wanted his bandanna then, Ravan did, but didn't reach for it. Just kept on as Marin glanced at him. "Like...randomly, if I'm feeling something...intense, then it-"

"Pulses?"

When he nodded, Marin smiled, feeling more at ease then.

"I get that too," she agreed. "I asked my father about it, once, since he has one, but he didn't know what I was talking about. Not really. I think it's because I've just let mine get all...pent up, over the years, and... And that's how your is, right now, and... I told Haven, before she left, that I was going to start training. Now. My magic. And hopefully that will release it. And once you start training again, when you get well, I bet... I just mean..."

"I guess you're the person I'll have to go to then," he told her. "About my lacrima. If I have any questions. Anymore."

"Y-Yeah. And I... You can... Would you..."

"I'll help you. Marin. If I can. Start to train." He wasn't sure if he could keep up this promise, honestly, or what it meant, but he knew, should he fall through, the exact person to steer the girl in the direction of. "We'll help each other."

He sipped at his soda while she warmed in the fire, knowing she'd have to head off soon, back home. To his brother. But for a moment, perhaps an awkward one, yes, but content in other ways, the two of them sat together, in the same silence each found so much comfort in.

The fire would finally be dwindling, however, sometime later as Ravan was alone again. Not snoozing this time, but something close, on the couch, watching the dying flames, knowing he'd have to be sure of their natural extinction, before he rose and headed off to bed. But it was while he was sitting there that he felt it.

That he knew.

Erza keyed into the house with a slight sight, maybe in disappointment in what she'd had to leave behind or maybe relief, to find it still standing, but regardless, Ravan and her eyes met,

as she did so, whether either wanted them to or not.

Their break had done something though, apparently, for each of them, as the tension wasn't in either's belly. But still, there was a lot unsaid and neither seemed to want to dive into it that night. So Erza only nodded at him and Ravan huffed, looking back at the fire, but both knew what awaited them in the morning.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

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

She knew he'd leave the next morning.

No.

Before the morning.

At least before dawn.

It was how it was. How it had always been. There was no need for goodbyes, not in their lives, given that they both knew, with certainty, they would never experience one. Not between the two of them. Every moment of their lives up to that point proved this. Saying farewells would be false and only a denial of the inevitable. And needlessly sentimental moment.

So they avoided them.

No words were spoke to insure this, no vows or promises. Just a joint decision, like most in their near perfect union. He disappeared, always when she was busy with something else and, that night as she drifted to sleep, she was certain that would be it.

So she fought it.

Just a bit.

Not because she didn't want it. Him leaving. While it wasn't ideal, he did have his own life to get back to and, given that he allowed her freedoms in her own, it was wrong to keep him from his. But... She just wanted him close. Or at least the feeling he brought. For a little bit longer.

When they were together, yes, still she felt like she was in control of most things (leadership was ingrained in her), but he had a sense of authority as well. Dominance. She was conjoined with her true equal in Jellal and Erza felt an immense sense of relief from it.

"I don't know," she whispered softly to him as the man laid awake, that night, no doubt dreading his own departure and return to reality, "what I'm going to do. When I go home. Back to..."

Jellal hummed, deeply, before saying simply, "The right thing. I imagine. Always, yes?"

"Yes," she repeated, though miserable in it. "Always."

But the night felt far from her then. After awaking to find him departed, she made haste herself, for home, where she was now, waking up in her own bed once more, not to start

anew, but to resume. What she'd fled from.

Ravan was in the home, she knew. She could sense him now, so much easier, as his magical power only seemed to be growing, each day, as his body absorbed more of the lacrima and adjusted to its presence. Though she couldn't hear him, she knew he was in his room, no doubt still slumbering, given how late she'd seen him up the night before.

Which was for the best. Part of her body craved diving right back into her routine, an early morning workout, rest for a few hours, and then one just as intensive, but no. There was much else to attend to.

And they were there to be attended, Marin and Kai, when she arrived at the hall quite early that day. Marin even raised her head, for a moment, to inform whoever came in of the early hour and how the bar wouldn't be officially opened for another hour, but when she noted the swordwoman, she merely bowed her head and kept right on scrubbing at a stain on a table.

"I am glad to see that not much has changed for you, it seems, while I've been away," she remarked simply. This was not directed for Marin, but rather Kai, who she found to be snoozing, quite literally, on the job. He'd followed Marin in as an act of good faith towards the Master, after his whole meltdown the day before, but upon arrival found himself to still be rather sleepy and, well...

Well.

Kai bolted up into a sitting position, at the woman's voice, but she only stood over the table he'd been drooling on with *that* look in her eyes. But as he returned it immediately with a toothy grin and raising to his feet, to hug her, Erza broke a bit.

"What is wrong with you?" Erza asked, though she didn't push the boy away. Frowning down at him, she asked, "Has something happened?"

Not a lot. Really. Honestly. Not when you considered the short amount of time it typically took for things to go to shit in their lives. But as Kai only rested against her cool armor, he found a certain comfort there, that was always lacking, when the woman wasn't around to reprimand and rebuke his typical antics.

"I's just missin' you real bad, I guess, is all," he muttered softly as, though she did roll her eyes, Erza was kind enough to give him a pat on the back in return. "I know you told to...before you got back...but I just..."

"I saw the walk." And she disentangled herself from him then. "It looked in tiptop shape."

"Yeah, but Erza-"

"This bar, however, is looking worse for wears."

And Marin frowned then, over at them, unable to help but overhear, but it still wasn't her that Erza was directing her displeasure. It rarely seemed to be. Rather, Erza was now frowning at

Kai and her disappointment, while still evident, was less harsh and more teasing, maybe, as they seemed to devolve more into that.

"Have you been doing your fair share of work?"

"Of course I have! Ask anyone."

"The Master?"

"...Ask anyone else."

"Kai-"

"My brother almost died."

"But did he?"

"Well, that's what almost means, Erza. So no."

"And have you bathed? Recently?"

"My brother almost-"

"Go. Now."

"But Erza-"

"*Now.*"

And it sure beat explaining to her that, no he hadn't been the one to shovel the walk and he also had yet to make up with his brother.

It was with him out of the way though that Erza finally came over to address the youngest Dreyar girl. She was debated internally ignoring the woman's gaze for a very few short seconds there before chickening out and raising her eyes. At least somewhat.

Softly, she said, "I'm glad you're back, Erza."

She sighed some in reply at first, the swordswoman did, but eventually did smile somewhat, for the girl's benefit.

"Yes, well," she huffed some, relenting her attitude towards Kai, "I am sure your mother will be thankful. Ravan can be quite a handful."

"I-I saw him," Marin was quick to add, dropping the rag in her hand then as she addressed the woman fully. "And talked to him."

"Did you?"

Nodding then, she was still a bit nervous, for some reason, addressing the woman she'd spent just as much time around as anyone else in her life, as she added, "He was... He's feeling

better. I think. But... He told me that, maybe, now, since we both have lacrimas and I wanna...learn magic more or better or... That he would help me. So... I don't think that you should be that mad at him. If he's going to be better now. Overall. From this."

This was as close to being at odds as Marin had ever allowed herself to be with the swordswoman, but Erza only considered her words.

"Ravan," she asked slowly, "has offered to train with you?"

"We both have lacrimas," Marin reiterated. "That we're learning to use. I just thought...maybe it'll make us close."

Somehow Erza doubted it, but still, she nodded at the girl. Finally someone in the duo of Marin and Kai were at least taking some steps to furthering their magical ability; in no way was the Scarlet woman ever going to interfere in that. Not when she seemed to be the sole person pushing for it for so long.

"I think I will enjoy seeing this," was her one response and, while Marin blushed, dropping her eyes to the table she was scrubbing once more, Erza left her with a passing remark to send Kai home sometime around lunch.

She'd wish to speak with him by then.

Erza was thankful to run into Mirajane on her way home, who seemed disappointed in her presence and the lack of any juicy gossip that had been supplied in the other woman's time away (so Erza and Ravan were fighting; literally who cared), but was somehow less pleased to find Ravan up making his own breakfast when she arrived.

Usually this was the sort of thing she praised. It was a reasonable hour, at least. But as she found him there, wincing some as he moved around the kitchen, it only served to remind her of the issue at hand.

It was true enough, anyways. The idea of time healing some things. Not wholly, of course, but the tension had died somewhat, over the topic, and it was difficult for the woman to draw any anger forth. There was a wrongness associated in her mind with leaving Ravan behind, to heal on his own (or at least without her), but she could at least accept that they might be better for it.

"If you think that my time away has-" Erza began in her commanding voice, the one that usually made the boy, at the very least, grit his teeth and look away. This time, however, he only shook his head, not even glancing over his shoulder as he interrupted her.

"I don't," he grumbled in reply, "want to listen to one of your stupid speeches."

It wasn't like this was the first time that Ravan had ever made something like this known to her. At all. It had been something he'd growl and griped nearly the entire time that they'd known one another. But this was no longer the complaint of a scared little boy; and it had little to do with his lacrima.

"No, perhaps you do not," she replied slowly and calmly. If anything, their break had granted her poise once more. "But I do not care for what you desire. I-"

"Look, I'm sorry, alright?" And he did turn to face her then, no grimace at all. Staring the woman straight in the eyes, he said simply, "I'm sorry that I fucking...fucked up your life or whatever. Like always. But that's not going to fucking happen anymore. Alright? Don't you get it, Erza? The only thing I ever needed was more power. And now-"

"The only thing," she retorted with a frown, "that you have ever needed is more humility. And this lacrima has done very little to assist you in this endeavor."

"Why can't you ever just be happy for me? Or happy about me? I did something for myself that didn't hurt any-"

"It hurt me to see you hurt, Ravan. I thought that you were going to die because I...taught you inappropriately. That I messed up. Somewhere. If I have spoken on my accomplishments and accolades in a way that has wrongfully taught you to value my strength above all."

"How are you still bragging on yourself," he complained, "while talking about-"

"I am not." Or at least she knew no other way. It was hard, after all, for her to pass off that humility when she seemed void of it at times herself. "It is not my power or prowess that has led me down this path; it is my friendships and faith in my guild and-"

"I don't have," he told her then, flatly, "that, Erza. I've never had that. Ever. My only fucking friend in the entire world is gone. Because your stupid guild and...and because I... Fairy Tail doesn't mean anything to me. Erza. Like it does to you. So no, I don't find strength in those around me or your stupid entity; I find it in myself. And this lacrima is going to be the best thing that ever happened to me. I'm...sorry. Really. This time. For hurting you and my brother. I was wrong. For worrying you. But...I'm not a little boy anymore. I can decide what I want to do. And I wanted to do this. I wouldn't be as reckless, but if I could do this all again, I would. This power is all I've ever wanted. You're not going to make me feel badly about it either."

It was so aggravating, to Erza. Or he was, rather. He always had been. Even when it felt as if she were making strides with getting him to understand something, in the end, they find themselves right back at square one. And for what? She didn't understand. She couldn't understand. What it would take to make him do so. She'd spent nearly a decade now, hoping to trend him in the correct direction, but at every turn...

"You're right," said then, quite suddenly, he felt and the teen took a step backwards, towards the stove, at her words. But the swordswoman merely nodded her head sharply, seemingly certain of herself. "You are not a boy. And no longer my responsibility."

"E-Erza-"

"This is what you want. Yes? Ravan? You feel as if you have exceeded my guidance? Because your power is out of my realm?"

"I didn't say-"

"If you do not wish to listen, Ravan, then you are finally old enough to choose your own path." When she turned from him then, it was with something more called over her shoulder. "But I will always be here. If you decide you need me."

He did grimace now, when he turned back to the stove, and watching his bacon sizzle only turned his stomach. Only Erza could make winning the fucking world feel like ash in his mouth.

She left, anyways, not soon after that. To train, he imagined, honestly, though they didn't speak to one another on her way out. After picking at his meal, he only slumped off to the backyard where he sat down, on the frosty back porch steps, with a cigarette dangling from his frown.

So far, this had felt like the worst fucking winter of his life.

He felt it though, then, on an inhale. A pulse. From his lacrima. And his body was still so worn out and weak, but he didn't feel like he could contain this for much longer. He needed somewhere to test out his powers. Or at least someone.

And he immediately thought of them. Still. Haven. And her dumb boyfriend. But she was gone, doing what he should be, carving her own path, and if he and fighting with stupid Locke was no longer just fighting with stupid Locke. It was something more. Something he didn't feel like getting involved in.

He'd felt invigorated, before, to lay it all out in front of Erza. That he had no friends, no strong connection to her guild. But removed from strong emotions, it was just a depressing fact about himself that had only ever made him feel worse.

This was much the case as he blew smoke out into the cold morning, watching it with a bit of a glare. Thoughts not too far gone, he did hear his brother, anyways, before Kai approached, but still looked rather disinterested as, after yelling for Ravan inside the house, the younger of the two found the older on the back porch.

"Well I hope you're happy," Kai growled in the best annoyed attitude he could manage. While he could move through his range of emotions quite effortlessly, it was always difficult for him to call upon one at will. "Ravan. You stupid jerk."

He wasn't. At all. And hadn't been, not really, in quite awhile, but still only took a deep inhale before remarking around his smoke, "I'm busy."

And they studied one another then, the two brothers did, as if willing the other to storm off. But Ravan was still too weak for storming, it seemed, and Kai had been wronged (apparently), and was going to get it resolved then. Finally.

"You are not. You're smoking."

"Busy smoking."

"Ravan-"

"What do you want, Kai?" Glaring up at his younger brother then, he told the other guy simply, "You're on my fucking nerves."

He stayed on them, honestly, typically.

"You're on my nerves," Kai retorted. "It's your fault that I had to stay at Marin's house and got the Master all mad at me because- Well, see I's tryin' to do the right thing and take a shower, but then I might have kind of broken the handle on the shower and then Marin was making me go in early this morning, so I's gonna tell her about it, but then Erza came in and made me go bathe at the bath house and I was there when the Master, who I guess must've not been able to shower at home, on account of I broke the handle and all, well, he came to bathe at the bath house before it opened and saw me there, doin' the same, and then laid into me, real bad, and said that I'm not allowed to go back to his house no more and it's all your fault, Ravan."

This time, it was less of them studying one another equally, but rather Ravan eyeing his brother, really hard, in an attempt to see if maybe, if he just tried really hard, concentrated to the max, he could make the idiot disappear.

Unfortunately, this didn't work.

"You're," Ravan finally assured his younger brother, "an idiot."

And Kai had been having a shitty few days. A lot of them. All in a row. Which is why, at his brother's words, he only reached down, hardly even gathered the snow in his hands, just bunched it a bit, before throwing it in Ravan's face.

Which was the exactly wrong thing to do.

"No, Ravan, leave me alone!"

"You're a little shit, Kai!"

He didn't think Ravan could chase him, Kai didn't, and honestly, the older guy probably couldn't have, but Kai somehow got tangled up by his own feet and the snow, which allowed Ravan to jump on him, pinning his younger brother to the ground.

"Let me go!"

"You're such a brat," Ravan growled as the younger boy squirmed beneath him. "You think just because I'm laid up I can't still kick your ass?"

"No!"

Well, yes, but now he wasn't so certain.

"And you made Marin come over here, because you're so fucking pathetic."

"I did not," Kai whined, still pinned to the ground, wincing as Ravan shoved his head into the snowy grass. "I didn't make her do anything."

"So she just saw you were a pathetic little moron and took pity on you."

"Ravan-

"She ain't here now, Kai," the older guy growled. "So what are you going to do?"

Cry.

And it was at the sound that, finally, Ravan rolled off him, falling into the snow himself as he grumbled softly under his breath, the sound intermingling with his younger brother's cries.

"Knock it off," Ravan complained eventually. "You big baby."

"It hurt!"

Still, Kai did roll over as well, back onto his butt, where they both sat then, beside one another, one scowling and the other wiping away his tears.

"You're so mean," Kai whispered into his woolen gloves while Ravan only started patting at his jean pockets, searching for his pack of smokes and a lighter.

"You've been an ass to me the whole time I've been recovering," Ravan retorted, wishing for his bandanna. As his brother only continued to refuse his attempts at a shared gaze, the older of the two added, "You're mad at me over something I can't change. You and Erza both. I'm not going to apologize. And I'm not going to learn a lesson. I did something to improve my life. Be happy for me."

"Why should we be?" Kai sulked around his glove. "You're never happy for any of us."

Snorting, Ravan retorted, "Do something for me to be happy about."

"I've done a lot."

"You don't even do your job. Your one job. Marin does it for you. And then you come home to whine and beg Erza to give you attention. And if she's not home, then you do it to me. And if I'm not home, apparently you go and fuck up at the Dreyar household. What should I be happy about, Kai? That you caught a cool fish, maybe, one time, if I even believe all your fucking lies about that shit? Good job, Kai. Great job. I'm sure Mom and Dad are so proud of you."

It felt like it came out of nowhere. Not his critiques, but rather the quip at the end and as Kai sucked in a breath, he felt the heavy weight of it. Before, he'd cried out of pain (sort of; he was a bit of a wimp), but also had a hollow tone to it. When he began to tear up then, there were no dramatics from it and, honestly, it was somehow on par with how much pain he'd felt only a few weeks prior, in that waiting room.

Ravan was a lot of things, but secure in all his decisions was not one of them. He could be rather cavalier with his actions and words, but deep regret and remorse was always likely to follow. His brusque attitude was more attributed to his own poor self-image and, after insulting someone, he was more than likely going to reply that, multiple times, and only get even more down on himself over it.

When his brother started crying then, truly crying, Ravan felt the lowest he had in a long time.

"Kai-"

"I hate you."

"Stop saying that."

"I mean it."

"No, you don't." Groaning, he shifted closer. "And didn't mean what I said."

"Yes, you did." With a sniffle though, Kai did find some resolve when he said, "Mom and Dad wouldn't think anything of you either. I bet. All you do is sulk and whine and complain about your life. You're a loser mage who had to use a stupid lacrima to even make you as powerful as your dumb friends."

"Shut up."

"You shut up!" His sniffle sounded drier then, matching his eyes as the younger of the two brothers said, "You always treat me like a little kid. I'm not! I'm a man too. I'm grown too. And I make my own opinions. And I have lots, on you, just like you have on me. I think you're mean and only getting even meaner and I don't think that you're cool, because you got that bike or that nice armor. I heard Navi call you creepy the other day and I hate to say it, but I agree. You're creepy, mean, and... And... I love you and you don't love me."

Ravan had been ready to slam Kai's face back into the snow, smear it right in there, and then go back to, well, sulking and lamenting, like his brother had diagnosed, but then he added that little bit on the end and Ravan just...

Kai had turned his back on his brother then, shifting in the snow so he didn't have to look at him, but that didn't seem to make a difference to Ravan who only reached for him then. Not in malice though. Rather, his hand didn't just still around his brother's shoulder, shaking or shoving it, but instead snaking around his neck and Kai thought he was about to get put in the nastiest of headlock.

But he wasn't.

"R-Raven-"

He was hugging him. Awkwardly. But Kai couldn't make too many complaints as he was pretty certain this was one of the first his older brother had given in, oh, ever. Kai felt himself tear up again, even if he didn't want to.

As his hands came up then, to grasp at the forearm his brother had wrapped across his chest, Kai only sobbed, "I know Mom and Dad. What they would be proud of and what they wouldn't be. Just as much as you do. And if I don't, then that's your fault."

"I know." Ravan's head fell then as he pulled his younger brother tighter to him. "I'm sorry."

There was nothing else added to it. No explanation. Counter point. A but. Just a flat, sincere apology. Kai didn't think he'd ever gotten one of those from his brother either.

When Kai arrived back at the guildhall later that day, his face showed the remnants of the pair's earlier quarrel (if you could call such a one-sided battle such a thing), which really upset Marin, who abandoned work to go tend to him in the infirmary.

"Why did Ravan do this?" she asked with a frown and maybe something else, hidden beneath that. Kai understood though. Marin didn't like when people bothered him. His brother was usually okay though, 'cause, you know, they were brothers, but Ravan usually had something of a reserve. "I talked to him last night and-"

"I'm okay, Marin. I'm even better than okay!" Other than his bleeding lip, which she was dabbing at with some gauze. When he grinned, it hurt and spread the cut further, which got her annoyed with him as well. Still, Kai only insisted. "Ravan and I made up."

"What was the retribution then? He got to pummel you?"

That didn't come from Marin, of course, but rather Erza. She'd arrived at the hall after her workout, expecting to either see the two teens working or perhaps just getting off their shifts. Hearing from the Master's wife that Kai and his brother had gotten into a fight and Marin was patching the loser up, well, this was not what the swordswoman wanted to hear. Especially not when she'd just announced to Ravan she was giving him free reign of his life.

"I was going to give them a few moments alone," Mira sighed as she led Erza up the stairs, "but I guess we could check on them now."

They both expected Kai to be a, well, sobbing mess. Or at least one or the other. He typically fluctuated between the two. But what they found was him in his true form, grinning and assuring that worried Marin that what she foresaw as a horrible outcome, had something of a silver lining to it.

"No," he answered Erza as she and Mirajane came into the infirmary as well, Marin giving them a weary glance while Kai only continued to beam, right through the pain (which he was definitely going to milk later, of course; just not now). "That was before. When we's fightin' and all. After that though, he apologized to me."

"Yes." Erza seemed rather unimpressed. "He's done a lot of that recently."

"And," Kai kept up. "Ravan told me that he loved me."

"He did not."

Mirajane hadn't meant to say that. At all. She even blushed a bit, when her youngest daughter turned to eye her, looking off as she muttered something of an apology. Not that Kai minded. Mostly because, well, he didn't.

Ravan hadn't told him that he loved him.

But he had shown him. More so than he had in a long time. And, after swearing him to secrecy about the whole hug business, Kai had to have something to tell the others. This just so happened to be what he chose.

"He did so," Kai insisted to the doubts of the others. "And he does. He's my big brother. And... He told me that he was sorry for not talkin' so much. About our family. Not you guys, but..." He didn't wanna call one realer than the other and found himself at a loss, for a moment, as the women all just stared. Eventually, he said, "The other one. From my other home. Before. And...I thought I was still mad at him. I think I am, at least. But...I forgive him too. If that makes sense."

Marin nodded sympathetically, as she did to most of Kai's epiphanies, while the Master's wife only giggled and Erza sighed, giving him little else.

The boys seemed to need their spat, or whatever exactly had happened that day (Erza was rare to believe Kai wholly on any subject), so the swordswoman left it alone. After being certain Kai was alright, she met the boy back downstairs where she instructed him that he was to be back at her house that night (and for the time being) as well as funding whatever cleanup was required at the Dreyar household to repair the damage the Master had mentioned to her.

"And it is prospected to snow in the tonight," Erza kept up as Kai kicked at his feet, the woman so easily stealing the wind from his sails. "I expect some shoveling to be going on, tomorrow."

"Yes, Erza," he sighed after being dismissed. The woman had yet to have a meal though and only ordered him to request her one, from the back on duty (if not forever on duty) Marin, who he saw conversing with her favorite aunt and uncle across the bar.

After doing so though and sliding into a seat beside Elfman, he was welcomed to some light ribbing from the man, about his busted up lip, as well as a passive glance from Evergreen.

"Marin tells us that you're thinkin' about your home, huh?" Elfman asked as the girl in question blushed. She still stood by the table, pouring a mug of ale for her just arrived uncle and planning to go get a bottle of wine for her aunt. But Kai only beamed at her, to a lesser degree though (his busted lip was starting to bug him).

"I guess so," Kai replied to which Elfman laughed heartily, grabbing his mug the second it was filled to the brim to take back a big swig. Kai, who'd tried such a thing only a few weeks prior, on the even of the new year, was wholly disgusted by the act now.

"You ever think about that? Ever?" Elfman asked his girlfriend as Marin lingered a bit, to hear her aunt's answer. She'd never really heard from the woman about where she came from. At

all, really. She knew of her mother's family village, her Uncle Bickslow's nomadic lifestyle, and even Freed's upbringing across Fiore, but Ever always held her cards close.

This didn't change then either as she remarked simply, "Not in the slightest."

"Well, I do," Elfman sighed some as Marin scuttled off then, to get the wine and put Erza's order in with Kinana. "I think about it all the time. When I was a little boy, running around in the fields and forests. Wish I could go back. But...well... Somethings are just better left in the past."

"The very distant," Evergreen agreed as her eyes followed Marin across the bar, in need of her wine more urgently then, "past."

"I liked my home. A lot. Or at least I think." Kai frowned some then, down at the table. "I would go back. If I could. But-"

"What's stopping you?" Elfman asked.

"What's stopping you?" Evergreen countered. Not because she didn't want to hear whatever Kai said (though, truthfully, she didn't), but mostly because she wanted to make sure Elfman knew exactly what was stopping him. Barring him. What memories he left behind. Or else she might have to spend the rest of the day and evening listening about his dinky little village that was ripe with disease and morons.

But Kai wasn't sure. On his end. As the two adults diverged into belittling one another, Marin arrived back with the wine and Kai only looked to her.

"Do you need help?" he asked as he rose to his feet. "With anything? Marin?"

Yes. Everything. Always. But she was uncertain about enlisting him given the fact that, well, the past few weeks he'd been rather unhelpful. In all aspects of the word. But as she only suggested he get back to his neglected janitorial work, Kai snickered good-naturedly before agreeing with a nod.

He worked most the day and into the evening, getting the bar back into tiptop shape, much to the joy of Marin and the chagrin of Laxus, who really wanted to squish the little bug under his boot already. But still, as Marin yawned through her final few patrons, given her Aunt Lisanna was coming on to close for the evening, Kai was ready to continue bustling away.

"You guys should both do something fun," Locke suggested as he made sure to close out his tab with Marin specifically, before he too took off for the night.

He was drinking and with that girl, well, woman, that he'd seemed so close with, on New Years Eve, and they were ready to leave. The awkwardness seemed gone for Locke, as he wore a coat now, covering up what Marin knew was still tangled around his wrist, and she only blushed at the sight of the jewels the inebriated man slid across the table to her, tossing some to Kai, who'd come over to clean up some spilled beer, as well.

Locke had been in high spirits since the last time Marin had seen him, as he'd not only completed a rather high level job all alone, but also found himself splitting the profits with all of no one and was able to do as he pleased with his jewels. Which so happened to be drinking and spending time with his new lady friend.

Marin found it easier this time, not to judge.

"It's like I told Navi," Locke kept up. "She can sit around and sulk forever, or she can get back to what she wants to do. Anything she wants to do. I have." And he reached out to tap them both on the shoulder. "So should the two of you."

But neither of them ever seemed to know what they wanted to do. Or at least required more stringent guidance in the discovery. Which was why it was so nice of Erza, they always figured, to decide for them.

Well, most of the time.

And this time as well.

As the waves settled and Ravan seemed to be getting back to his old self (or some new version, at least), Erza found her time not spent sparring in the yard or combating with the teen to be rather empty. She thought he'd spend his time sulking around the house, but only a few days after her return, he was off in the woods, all alone. Training. Testing. Getting rid of that damn pulsing in his chest.

It was one day when he returned from that and came to the bar for the first time since his new lacrima implantation that he was reminded of something.

"Kai told me you were training again," Marin remarked softly as Ravan mostly hid behind his bandanna, feeling a few heavier gazes than usual from his fellow guildmates. Secrets were hardly kept in the hall (especially when a Strauss was involved), so a lot more than just his failed endeavor had gotten around to the others. Plus, he knew, they could all feel it. He could tell. His new power. "Ravan. And I know that it'll be awhile until you're, well, ready to get back to taking jobs and stuff, and I don't wanna get in your way or anything, but, w-well, you did promise..."

Shit.

He had.

But the last thing he wanted in those weeks of testing his limits was to be bogged down by Marin. Don't get him wrong, he liked the girl enough. She was around enough, at least. But...if he was going to get himself back on center, without the help of Erza, that he needed to put all his time into that; not placating the baby Dreyar's Dragon Slayer dreams.

Plus...Kai would wanna tag along and fucking gross.

So that was how he found himself speaking to the swordswoman again.

He arrived home that evening to find her there, with Kai, arguing over dinner preparations. The past few days, he'd just slunk off to the shower or his bed, but this time, he fell into his normal seat and though they both paused their bickering for a moment, neither drew attention to this fact. Just continued on.

Once they were all seated around the table together, just the three of them, for the first time in the new year, Kai immediately tried to launch into some sort of boring story about himself, but Ravan was quick to cut his younger brother off and instead address the swordswoman.

"Erza," he began, her name feeling heavy on his tongue now, with all that hung between them. "There's kinda...something I wanted to ask you."

The woman was all ready for it too. What was coming next. The boy to throw himself at her feet, beg for mercy and forgiveness, admit his wrongs in rejecting her teachings, and assuring her that all her fears she'd shared with Jellal was misplaced.

But instead, much like he'd never admit to Kai just how much he truly did love him, he skirted around all the things that woman wanted to hear and instead supplemented them with a few words of his own.

"I kinda might have promised Marin that, since we both have lacrimas, that, ell, I'd be willing to help her with some beginning training stuff, but... I'm not a teacher. Or anything like that." At all. Everyone at the table could agree. But as Ravan glared off, he did add, "And...you taught me. A lot. So I just thought...you could teach her too."

He had his bandanna up, hiding his scarring as well as the tint to his cheeks, but as Kai stifled a laugh into his palm (as well as some disappointment; he was hoping to tag along with Marin to watching her train with his older brother), the swordswoman only bowed her head in contemplation.

"I suppose," she began slowly as she held her head higher, "it would be up to Marin, no? But once you inform her that it was from me that you have learned every single thing you know-"

"I didn't say that," he complained as Kai laughed openly then as Erza's eyes had a glint, but not *that glint*. Glistening, really, was what they were.

"-then she would definitely heed your advise," the woman finished.

And as Ravan rolled his eyes, it finally felt to Kai, even with more looming power in the room, as if they were all starting to get back to their normal. Maybe.

Grinning toothily, he added, "Speaking of Marin, Erza, she and I had been thinkin' 'bout takin' off."

The woman had mistakenly chose to take a sip of her water then, but choked on it a bit as she asked, "For where?"

"Well, I dunno. We think that we should go on vacation. Just the two of us."

"Yeah, I'm sure Master will be real glad to hear that," Ravan snorted.

"Yeah, I think so too," Kai agreed as, apparently, he was back to ignoring any and all sarcasm, regardless of it's density (or his own). Still, he did sigh then as he said, "But I will be set back some, on our plans, given that I gotta pay 'im back and all, for breaking that handle in his shower..."

"You say that," Ravan kept up with a glare over at his brother, "as if someone here would think you shouldn't."

"I'm just a little boy."

"You called yourself a man the other day!"

"Not a fully grown one!"

But Erza seemed lost in thought for a moment before remarking, "I actually had been thinking of a trip of sorts myself."

"Way to rub it in," Kai muttered as Ravan only rolled his eyes.

"I meant for the three of us," she told the boys then. "And...Marin, I suppose, if her parents allow her to accompany."

"To where?" Ravan asked with a bit of suspicion, but the woman smiled warmly at him then which put the older of the two even more ill at ease.

"Kai mentioned to me that the two of you have been craving your homeland as of late," she remarked simply, but as Ravan turned a deep glare over at his brother, Kai only blinked.

"You make use sound like aliens or somethin'," he remarked. "When you put it like that."

"I wasn't," Ravan responded instead to the woman, but it was too late. Erza had already made up her mind.

"And yet you should," she insisted. "The two of you fled as young children. Boys. If you are men now, as you say, then let us return and view your former home for what it had grown into as well. I am certain that they will welcome you back with open arms." But then her gaze changed as she added, "And if they do not, I will remind them of what guild you belong now."

Ravan snorted, loudly, and almost protested this, reminding the woman he was no longer under her control and could do as she pleased, but, for some reason, he couldn't find it in himself. To storm of. Rebuke her. Just sit there, pissed about the woman offering up a nicety, like usual.

Kai though only glanced between them, the swordsman and his brother, staying silent for once as he thought this over himself. Glancing down at his hands, he balled them both into fists and felt a bit like Ajax, maybe, as he tossed them in the air in excitement.

He laughed as Erza and Ravan both sent him looks, feeling very little like a man as he assured the woman, "I would really like it. Erza. If I could go back home. My old home. And

take you and Marin there with me."

"It will be good for us all," she assured both teens. "A new year and a new perspective. It's what we all need."

And though they were having vastly different reactions to the news, she was certain then this is what Jellal meant, when he said she would always find the right conclusion. Eventually. They stumbled at times, her boys did, and she found herself doing so as well, but deep down, she was certain they were good. That they were just. The same as she was certain of this in herself.

It didn't matter how many tries something took, only that, in the end, the right decision was made. And between Ravan's lacrima and Kai's apparent homesickness, to visit the start, so they continue on in the future, sounded like exactly what they needed.

"I bet," Kai yawned that night as he fell into his bottom bunk and Ravan made the trek up to the top, "everyone will be so surprised to see us. And happy. I always thought that... You just never mentioned going back, so I thought that maybe... I thought we weren't allowed to. But if Erza says so-"

"If you wanna go home, Kai," Ravan muttered against his bandanna, giving in, so easily as, maybe, past the cravings of power and magic, he had another longing, maybe, that had long been unfulfilled, "then we can."

"I am home," he told his older brother before yawning, loudly, sleepily. "But I'd like to go back to the old one. Shadebay. Just to see it."

It was hard for him to admit it, so Ravan didn't, as he buried his head in his pillow, but...

Yeah.

So would he.

Chapter End Notes

I know this is super late. I usually don't leave Remember Me stuff unfinished for so long, but December was shitty and I got lost in some other stuff.

Anyways, don't expect the next piece of this too soon. I think I'm going to take a few days, if not a week or so, to plan it out better. There's gonna be a lot of one time OCs mentioned, given their going back to the coast for the first time, so I'm gonna have to think about a few things and probably, kinda, make everything concise, if that makes sense. It's always kinda been this weird piece to Kai and Ravan (kind of more the latter, honestly), that with all the freedom in the world, they never once think about returning back to Shadebay. I just kinda put off dealing with it forever, but I feel like it'll be a nice companion to this portion of Ravan's little arc.

I know 2019 was kinda the year of Remember Me, but I dunno if that's gonna be true for this year. I think we'll finish up next story, then do some one-shots, maybe, and then just let things settle for a bit and focus on some other stuff. I know I don't have a real, open story right now, but I was thinking about doing some stuff with the Dragon's Roar series and this is the year I wanna finally finish Closure (because I'm really close to that and it really wouldn't be that hard, honestly). But I could just be bullshitting and we end up Remember Me stuff, who knows? Just give me a few and we'll start the Shadebay story though.

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