

Chase the Wind and Touch the Sky

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Chase the Wind and Touch the Sky

by [PrimordialPaper](#)

Summary

*I will explode, you'll see me rise
You may not even recognize
I just can't wait for this reveal
Exploring, now I've opened up a door
Finding so much more in me
When I look inside, I'm liking what I see*

Wendy had carried on after Grandina's disappearance. She had endured the loss of Mystogan and Cait Shelter. She would survive Fairy Tail's disbandment, too.

In fact, she would do more than survive.

The sky wasn't the limit. It was her domain to rule. And she was eager to begin her reign.

When the Sky is Falling Down

At this moment, there are 6,470,818,671 people in the world. Some are running scared. Some are coming home. Some tell lies to make it through the day. Others are just now facing the truth. Some are evil men, at war with good. And some are good, struggling with evil. Six billion people in the world. Six billion souls. And sometimes, all you need is one.

- Payton Sawyer

The departure of the last known dragons in Earthland was heartrendingly beautiful, their forms dissolving into countless motes of scarlet-hued light, floating upward and swiftly out of sight. It was fitting, in a way. Dragons were empyrean creatures, rulers of the blue expanse they claimed as their domain. Even in death, they refused to be earthbound.

Wendy allowed herself a few moments to weep quietly at how short the fulfillment of her seven year long wish had been, before other recent events clamored in her mind for their chance at acknowledgment. Just today, she and Carla had breathed their last words to each other, bracing for oblivion, only to be snatched out of death's jaws at the last moment. She'd awoken under the watch of a man whose face was now lined with seven missing years of grief and remorse, but who's kind eyes and gentle touch remained the same. She had gazed at the instruments of their world's destruction, stared down her own despair, cut her hair, witnessed the dragons return to triumph over their enemies, saw Natsu's father fall, and finally watched her mother rise.

She would've gladly cried until her tears ran dry, until the unfeeling void at the pit of her stomach began to abate, but Wendy knew the luxury of grieving wasn't afforded to healers. The scent of *hurt*, of blood and pain and suffering, burned in her nose as she drew a fortifying breath. She had wounded, battle-weary comrades to attend to.

"There ya go, half pint." the gruff, rasping commendation, along with the steadfast, grounding palm atop her head, gave her a place to start.

The bones in Gajeel's right hand were a spider web of fractures, the end result of "punching some sturdy fucker in the face" he attested. If he thought Wendy was oblivious to the lingering dampness in his eyes, or the way his gaze intermittently roved over to where Levy was standing beside him, his expression infinitesimally less guarded and brooding, well... she wasn't about to inform him otherwise. She gave his hand a squeeze once the bones were mended, not trusting her voice to convey what needed to be said, as fellow Dragon Slayers. As friends.

The gentle pressure of his much larger fingers around hers returned the sentiment in equal silence.

It didn't quell the frisson of pain in either of their chests, but Wendy hadn't really expected it to. She'd long since grown accustomed to the slow, crawling ache of her own injuries healing

over time. Such was the price of being a healer. The knowledge that, for once, she wasn't the only one with pains deprived of her magic's restorative touch sat heavily in her stomach.

She had no remedy for a broken heart.

Numbly, Wendy began making her way through the crowd of mages, instinct drawing her towards the most heavily wounded. She soon found herself kneeling over an unconscious Lightning Dragon Slayer. Laxus was fighting to draw in air past the blood coating his lungs, and it looked as though a battering ram had been driven into his sternum. It was a sobering sight, seeing the titan of a man almost suffocating under his own weight.

Wendy could feel the expansive scarring left behind by the Barrier Particles as she drew the fluid from his lungs, guiding him to roll on his side when he began hacking up the foul refuse. Shortness of breath. Respiratory issues. Intense chest pains. Heart failure. Laxus had thrown himself atop the proverbial grenade- inhaling the majority of the fumes from Tempester's suicide attack- in a desperate bid to save his teammates and the surrounding townspeople. And for his efforts, his body might never fully recover from the trauma it had been put through.

A seething, protective anger reared up within her-

Those demons dared to harm her precious people?

- which she ruthlessly tamped down. Her friends didn't need a wrathful Sky Dragon. They needed a composed and focused healer.

Just think of a quiet, cloudless sky... serene and peaceful...

Moving on, Wendy left behind a gentle gust of fresh air for Laxus's aching lungs.

She had taken care of an additional two broken bones, four stab wounds, an expansive burn, and a damaged spine in the minutes it took to reach her next high priority patient.

Half of Gray's body was black as pitch, as though his flesh had been charred. The knowledge that he'd most assuredly be dead had that been so, not leaning against a broken wall in a would-be casual pose, kept Wendy's panic at bay.

"I like the new look." his right eye obligingly held shut as Wendy worked to mend the abrasions spanning the side of his face, it was with his purple, faintly glowing left eye that Gray appraised her now chin-length bob.

Making pointless conversation to skirt having to put words to the horrors they'd both witnessed? It wasn't a permanent solution, but Wendy wouldn't begrudge him this coping mechanism.

"Thank you. Your's is certainly... something." even as she spoke, the black markings were receding from his skin, flowing like ink towards an intricate crest on his left forearm. *Something* indeed. As it passed under her fingers, Wendy was uncomfortably reminded of the specters summoned by her Milky Way spell. Residual Thought energy was unobtrusive at the

best of times, but she could just barely detect a faint echo of will, the signature of another soul, within this new magic of Gray's.

His right eye opened, this one unable to conceal the raw redness left behind by prior tears, and any questions she might have posed quickly died on her tongue.

Who had hurt him? What miserable creature had heaped additional suffering onto this already scarred soul? She would tear them-

The glow emanating from Wendy's hands waned ominously, forcing her to grit her teeth as she cast about desperately for her control.

Cloudless skies... soft breezes... keep ahold of the healing magic...

"Don't push yourself too much, kid." Gray's voice was innocently cautious, and yet, Wendy almost wanted to laugh derisively at his pronouncement. She couldn't afford to *not* push herself to her absolute limits. No one else in the guild was capable of doing what she could. As long as there was even a whisper of ethernano within her body, what choice did she have but to use it to ease her comrade's pains? It wasn't as though *she* needed it; her wounds would heal with time. Better she exhaust herself than leave her friends to suffer when they needn't have to.

Wendy opened her mouth to reassure the Ice Make wizard when she felt it. A shift of air pressure. It registered as a blip, a signal, like the work of some internal barometer that attuned her to the slightest fluctuation in the surrounding atmosphere. She felt it in the same way she could *feel* people drawing breath, air currents sweeping and coiling, storms forming and dispersing. It had long ago become second nature for Wendy to close herself off, to disregard the overwhelming tide of sensory input, but it seemed her floodgates had buckled some under the combined weight of recent events and her own growing fatigue.

Air was rapidly being displaced a few yards away, a pocket of space expanding within already existing space in a bold act of defiance towards physic's laws. The sensation almost reminded her of Mest's teleportation magic, but where his appearances were notable for being nearly instantaneous, there was now what felt like a lingering rift hanging in the air.

This warning- received and processed in the space between heartbeats- was enough for Wendy to whip her head around and observe a strange shimmer appear in the air, like an up close heat haze. It expelled two figures with little grace into the ruined courtyard. One was easily identified as a bruised and beaten Erza, with hardly an inch of skin not marred with lacerations or other wounds-

This was unacceptable... Whoever had done this to Titania would feel the recompense of Wendy's fangs in their throat...

Keep calm... Keep your head... Healers don't tear throats out...

Don't claw at the eyes of those who tried to harm what was her's...

- and leaning heavily on the other newcomer.

Dark, braided hair... Features that might have once been coldly regal, now strewn with black markings... Clawed fingers cupping Erza's shoulder...

The stranger's scent reached Wendy's nose just as her eyes fell to the guildmark displayed proudly on their left hip.

In that moment, Wendy forgot that she was a healer. Forgot that she abhorred using her magic to inflict harm. Forgot that she was exhausted, and injured, and all of thirteen years old. Forgot everything save for all the heinous acts Tartaros had committed against her guild. They had caused Wendy's family unimaginable suffering, such that she truly questioned whether or not a full recovery was even possible. They forced her to watch her guild contend with the kind of pain she was helpless to alleviate.

Someone bearing the mark of the guild that had hurt her loved ones so deeply stood before her, holding hostage the woman who'd brought her into her new home.

Cloudless skies be *damned*. The dragon under Wendy's skin wanted blood.

It almost surprised her when she actually got it.

It was barely a thimble's worth, easily overlooked, beading sluggishly from the shallow cut Wendy had left behind with a wild swipe at Minerva's cheek. In the next instant, a listless Erza had been released into Wendy's arms, and the woman turned demon had retreated several yards away.

The ease with which Minerva relinquished her hostage made the Sky Sorceress wary. It wasn't as if she hadn't stooped to such tactics, and even lower, at the Games. Wendy wasn't nearly so arrogant as to believe her scratch had been enough to intimidate her foe. It had been a lucky shot, made from the right side where Minerva now lacked an eye. (Wendy didn't know if she was more disturbed by her own ruthlessness, or the fact that Minerva's new guild had sacrificed one of her eyes while transfiguring her.)

"She needs healing. Badly."

Wendy knew that. It was her job to know these things. She could *smell* the hurt that had seeped into Erza's skin. She knew which of her wounds were fresh, and which had been with her beyond this past day. She knew the characteristic rings of abraded skin left behind by heavy shackles. She knew the neat, orderly slices across her stomach, tallies of every failed attempt to break the indomitable Titania. It didn't stop her eyes from going wide, because she *didn't* know Minerva was able to express anything other than contempt in regard to Erza.

She almost sounded... concerned.

"So will you, if you don't clear out now."

There was a timbre of unfamiliar magic curled around Gray's voice, sharp and heavy with finality, that seemed to resonate in Minerva's very bones. *Now* the ex-Sabertooth mage looked intimidated. From her periphery, Wendy saw her teammate advance to her side, his left forearm brandished like a warding sigil.

In a blink, Minerva was gone, her departure heralded by the same disorienting sensation of compounding space.

Wendy violently shook off the vertigo, along with any musings she might've had on Gray's new abilities, as she began tending to the first Fairy Tail mage she'd ever treated.

It was challenging work, correcting the disordered chaos that had become her nervous system, cruelly remade to send almost constant messages of pain to her brain. Tracing her magic along Erza's neural pathways, Wendy was able to reorient them away from perceiving every physical stimuli as intensely painful. It wasn't until she worked her way up to Erza's face, that Wendy realized both her optic and vestibulocochlear nerves had been muted. Erza had been fighting while blind and deaf, with her physical senses attuned to only recognize greatly magnified pain.

Somewhere along the course of this war with Tartaros, such feats of strength no longer felt like the heroic overcoming of odds. It just felt like cruelty. Why was her guild the object of such ire, the custodian of such duty? Why did the world seem so intent on testing them, pitting them against foe after foe? Crisis after crisis? Why had Wendy been made to accept what should have been her death alongside her oldest friend, because it was either that or the end of the world? (She wasn't even *fourteen* yet. She wasn't ready to die.)

Physical exhaustion was only partly responsible for the tremors running through her hands as she withdrew them from Erza's person. Her palms and fingers ached with how much she'd been channeling her magic, and her mind was growing hazy. Still, she persisted. There were many more wounded to treat.

Lucy's leg was burned and blistered (what worried Wendy more was the dull, yawning voids of loss behind her eyes). Juvia had been infected with Barrier Particles (more than once, the rain woman choked out an apology into her hands that Wendy knew wasn't meant for her). Alzack had broken his forearm (she had to maneuver to heal it when she realized the man was not going to lower the arms he'd wrapped desperately around his wife, Auska huddling between them like she might have in the aftermath of a nightmare. Wendy sent her into an easy, dreamless sleep when she'd heard the child's frightened whimpers). Mirajane was covered in nearly as many scratches as Erza (Wendy cursed her heightened hearing when the Strauss sisters began murmuring to their despondent brother, quiet coos of "It wasn't your fault."). She had yet to even *see* Natsu...

She was healing Jet's shoulder, with half a mind to double check the bandages she'd applied to Droy's thigh, when the darkness that had been slowly encroaching on the bounds of her vision closed in, and her consciousness was snuffed out along with the light in her hands.

Wendy didn't hear the panicked calls of her name as she wilted, a delicate hydrangea- what with her scrawny limbs and mop of blue on top- lying sprawled out on the ground.

She didn't hear when Carla, quiet but utterly uncompromising, declared that she would take her back to her room at Fairy Hills.

When next Wendy awoke, it was to a world where the guild Fairy Tail no longer existed.

Disbanded... The muttered words of a wizened, tired old man did what countless enemies had failed to accomplish... put an end to their guild.

Erza, even in the aftermath of the debasement she'd endured at Tartaros's hands, had kept a stiff upper lip, and took it upon herself to square away the financial matters of each resident of Fairy Hills. They had a week before the law dictated that the city of Magnolia gained ownership of all property held by their guild. Wendy had always been prompt and fastidious in handling her rent, and thus was allotted a sum of 75,000 Jewel in back payments.

It sat where Erza had left it on her kitchen table. Wendy refused to touch it.

Her obstinance extended to her packing as well. Within the first day they'd received notice, Carla had collected her things- mainly Exceed-sized clothing and packets of the tea she was so fond of- and stored them neatly in her bag. Both of Wendy's suitcases sat empty in the middle of the room.

Carla had been understanding the first two days, but Wendy doubted her benevolence would extend past her third day spent with minimal excursions from the company of her bed.

Wendy knew she had to get up. The world wasn't going to stop turning on her account. She was going to have to move on, forge ahead like the rest of her friends.

They weren't family anymore. Not with Fairy Tail gone.

She had started with nothing more than once before. So what if, this time, she didn't have another home waiting in the wings with open arms, ready to receive her? That kind of luck couldn't be counted upon excessively.

Etymologists define the name Wendy as one meaning 'friend'. Perhaps that was all she was meant for... Families had a habit of not sticking with her, after all...

A series of knocks sounded behind her door. Wendy was tempted to ignore it, until...

"Wendy, it's Mest. Please open up. I was hoping to talk to you before I... head out."

The Sky Sorceress couldn't help but smile faintly at his attempt to phrase things more delicately. Mest was far more tender-hearted than his pensive, solemn demeanor would suggest.

Casting off her shroud of covers, Wendy quickly gave up on looking at all presentable- with her hopelessly mussed hair and rumpled, days-old clothing- and padded across the room to let her friend inside. Her awareness of her own unkempt appearance redoubled when the door swung open to reveal Mest; his heavy, somber attire immaculate and arranged with an impeccable neatness that might have impressed even Carla.

It was in this moment, her first time meeting face-to-face with someone wholly unaffected by the dissolution of her guild, that Wendy realized she hadn't a *clue* what to say. Should she endeavor to assure him that she'd be alright? (Could she manage to, despite having failed to convince even herself?) Avoid the topic entirely? (Perhaps they could talk about the weather?)

Except, she'd spent the past few days without even glancing outside...) Question *him*? (So, Mest, have you considered finding a new career path after the bombing massacre at your headquarters?)

Thankfully, Mest spared her from having to make the first move when his eyes, wide with distress, flitted to her left arm.

“Wendy, have you not changed your bandages?”

The girl blinked, head slowly swiveling to glance at her arm, bound in a cocoon of crooked, yellowing bandages. While she had prevailed in her duel against Ezel, she hadn't escaped without more than a few injuries courtesy of the blade wielding demon. Among other less serious wounds, mainly pertaining to her hands and feet, her left arm had been marred by a pair of deep gashes. The pain had barely registered during the battle, and in the aftermath, with Mest having bandaged the worst of it while she was unconscious, Wendy had paid her own injuries little mind.

Mest, it seemed, took great umbrage at her casual disregard. Thus, it was in short order that Wendy found herself seated on the edge of her bed, while Mest knelt before her, carefully unwinding the bandages wrapped around her arm.

“I'm sure you know as well as I do, if not better, how important it is to keep your injuries clean and free of anything that might cause infection.” Mest chided, not unkindly, as he examined the state of her now bared arm. Wendy already knew he wouldn't find anything amiss- all it took was a glance to confirm that her wounds were healing normally- but she allowed him to fuss over her all the same. At least one of them could do something productive...

“You're right,” Wendy kept her eyes fixed on some point over his shoulder. “I've just been a little aimless, now that...”

“That's understandable.” Mest kindly didn't force her to elaborate. From one of his coat's many pockets, he withdrew a roll of medical bandages, and set about reapplying her wrappings. “I know I was- feeling lost, I mean- for a while, after the attack at the Council's headquarters.”

Despite knowing it wasn't his intention, Wendy felt a measure of shame burn in the pit of her stomach. Mest had borne witness to the wholesale slaughter of the upper echelons of the Magic Council, surviving only by chance and still just narrowly escaping with his life. Had *he* taken refuge in his bed? Ensconced himself away from the world?

Had he too feared he might disappear?

“For a while?” Wendy fisted the fabric of her skirt in her right hand as she fought to keep her voice steady. “How did things change?”

There was silence for a moment, and Mest lowered her left arm, neatly bandaged once again. Then, he reached out to place his hand over hers in her lap. Wendy drank in the sight of it: easily larger than her own, rough and calloused from extensive use, digits nimble and

dexterous. Her eyes traveled up his arm: previously on the lanky side, now filling out thicker underneath a heavy black sleeve. His shoulder: a previous habit of poor posture betrayed by the slight hunch it was held at.

Finally, Wendy forced her eyes up to Mest's face. The amount of care she saw directed at her from within captivating blue-green irises- even while being tempered by those seven ever-present years of guilt- was second only to the ardent gleam of something Wendy could only describe as pride.

The sight further stoked the shame boiling in her core. She didn't deserve an ounce of Mest's admiration. From their brief stint as partners in the S-Class Trial, to her acclaimed goal of tackling the country's worth of Faces head-on, Wendy's performance had been severely lacking when it came down to it. She didn't have Natsu's overwhelming strength, or Erza's indomitable will. She wasn't broadly versatile in her abilities like Lucy, or clever and innovative like Gray. She was just a shy, scrawny little girl who's greatest contribution to her guild was patching them up so they could carry on fighting. If she were to call herself a dragon, her bite would be even more pitiful than her roar.

"I decided to follow the example of you and your friends." he said it with more warmth than Wendy suspected any Council member had ever used in reference to members of her guild. "No matter the odds against you: an attack by the Barum Alliance, the Magic Council's vendetta, the Grand Magic Games... you've faced dark wizards, dragons, *demons*, and you prevailed against them all."

"No we didn't!" some of the anguish Wendy was fighting to hold behind her teeth slipped through the cracks in her voice. It wasn't fair of her, she knew, to expect Mest to be able to relate. To know the feeling, like a cold draft on the back of his neck, every time he thought of how fragile the foundation of his life truly was. How could Wendy explain to him the way her chest ached with the prospect of leaving behind yet another home, another piece of the heart she couldn't seem to refrain from opening to those around her? "We didn't win this time, Mest. We all fought so hard, we all sacrificed things in this war, and in the end, we still lost. Tartaros is gone, but so is Fairy Tail. It's over. I lost my guild again."

Mest's smile faded, replaced by something more somber. Quietly, he moved to sit beside her on the edge of her bed. Wendy's eyes didn't lift from her lap until she felt the warm weight of Mest's arm settle around her shoulders. It was a comfort she wasn't sure she deserved, but accepted greedily all the same.

"That's right. I forgot that you're familiar with this." this time, Mest was the one with his gaze trained on a stretch of floor in front of them. "The pasts of guild wizards are often less than pleasant, but to have already lost one guild, and now another... I'm sorry, Wendy."

"It's not your fault." Wendy sniffed, blinking valiantly against the growing prickle in her eyes. "It's just... I'm not sure how I can move forward on my own. I've only ever been a guild wizard. It's all I know. Am I supposed to just try again in a new guild?"

"Possibly." Mest employed the same tone that Carla used- warm, but decidedly pragmatic- when she tried to deliver her coolly logical deductions in a more kindly manner. "Many of us

are going to have to strike out on our own, shortly. To succeed at that, you need to consider what it is you want, and what you're capable of. You have to play to your strengths."

Play to your strengths... Wendy glanced at her hands. Like nearly all mages, she was capable of wielding her magic for combat, (not that she'd ever particularly enjoyed doing so). What set her apart from the rest, however, was her aptitude for the restorative and healing arts. In all her life, she'd only ever come across one mage who was capable of anything similar...

"Take me, for example," Mest went on. "What I want, I've decided, is to restore the Rune Knights. My familiarity with the organization, and my skill at gathering information, are well suited to my goal. I'm going to rebuild them, the Knights and the Magic Council, from the ground up. Make it better than it was, better for the people it's supposed to serve. Its purpose, helping to oversee and guide the mage guilds of Fiore, is too important to just fade away. And, honestly," here, a warm look made its way onto his face. "I think the same applies to your guild. Fairy Tail is much more than just some group of mages on a roster. It's made up of some of the most extraordinary wizards of this age. All of you, you're already legends in your own right. That isn't going to go away just because your guild disbanded. I expect the Sky Sorceress will fast become a favorite among the mages the new Rune Knights partner with."

Wendy's eyes widened. The origin of her moniker had always mystified her. She knew neither where it had come from, nor how she, a little girl from a non-existent guild, had even garnered the attention necessary to be bestowed a title. Salamander, Titania, Black Steel. *Those* were the appellations known throughout wizarding circles both light and dark. The kind of titles used to instill fear in their enemies and trust in their clients. That Mest would invoke hers with such assuredness...

"Tell you what, I'll even stake something on us seeing each other again." Wendy was brought out of her reverie to see Mest fiddling with the clasp of his earring.

"I'm rather fond of this, to be honest. I've had it since I was a child." he confessed, successfully removing the piercing from its place on his earlobe. It was a relatively understated piece of jewelry; a thin, elongated pendant that hung from a ring of metal. And yet, it was apparently something he'd owned since before they'd even met. "But if you're in need of proof that I believe what I'm telling you, then it's a sacrifice I'm willing to make."

Wendy couldn't bring herself to smile, not yet, but the easy grin on Mest's face still caused something to lighten within her chest, and she obligingly tucked her hair behind her ear, allowing Mest to implement the earring.

"This time next year, I'll be back for that." he informed her jovially, rising to his feet. "And don't worry about me needing to find you. I've carried out more than a few manhunts in my time with the Rune Knights. You could leave the country, change your na- *oof!*"

"I'll look forward to it." Wendy would admit to some potential overzealousness on her part in the way she launched herself at her friend, almost tackling him in a hug. She'd always been a rather tactile person, and it was far easier to let a hug speak for her than attempt to verbally express the myriad of emotions surging within her. And if she happened to be blinking away

any excess moisture in her eyes while she hid her face against his chest, well, it was no one's business but her own.

She felt a chuckle rumble within Mest's chest, and his arms descend around her to return the embrace. Wendy took a moment to commit everything she could- his scent, his voice, the feel of his magic- to memory. She'd have to keep an eye out for it a year from now.

He was coming back. No one had ever come back to her before.

Eventually, the two friends parted, and Wendy showed Mest to the door. It wasn't until he disappeared around the bend of the hall that she returned to her dorm. The two barren suitcases in the middle of the room caught her eye, and her hand curled into a fist. Mest's words had given her a perspective she hadn't considered, and already, a plan was forming in her mind.

She wanted to help others. She'd known this since the very first time she had called upon her magic, mending a bird's broken wing under her mother's guidance. But it wasn't enough, being able to ease the pain of others. She wanted to protect, to stand in the way of any harm that might come to those dear to her. She wanted to be strong enough to keep her loved ones safe.

To that end, it was clear just where she had to go; where she could both undo some of the lingering damage left behind by Tartaros, and hopefully gain the insight she needed to further improve her abilities.

There was a certain measure of doubt, an inkling of apprehension towards what lied ahead that was impossible to shake. No one, not even Carla, could be wholly certain of what the future held in store for her. But Wendy hadn't fought alongside her friends through every battle and catastrophe that followed their guild like a loyal hound dog without developing a certain disregard for whatever forces might try to stand in her way.

Let the world attempt to stop her. Just let it *try*. She was the Sky Sorceress, Wendy Marvell, and she *dared* anyone to try and arrest her climb towards the heights she knew were hers to claim.

With that proclamation held firmly in the forefront of her mind, Wendy set about gathering up her belongings. It was far more than she'd been left with after her time with Grandina, and Mystogan, and Cait Shelter. Back then, she'd retained nothing more than the clothes on her back.

This time, the various trinkets- indelible evidence of the home and family she had fought for- amassed into a satisfyingly-sized heap on top of her bed.

Her own treasure hoard...

With the utmost care, Wendy packed away the purple hair ribbons Lucy had given her while easily waving away the questions about her rent. Erza's pocket knife, gifted to her after her first mission (along with two mandatory weeks of lessons on proper form and technique with a blade). The pale pink scarf Natsu had eagerly presented her with at the very first sign of

winter. An ornate iron comb that Gajeel had passed to her- something he'd crafted for practice that he *supposed* she might enjoy- with carefully maintained disinterest. The darling, heeled Mary Jane shoes Levy had given her with a proclamation of solidarity as a fellow girl lacking in stature.

These mementos- and the memories attached to them- pained her as much as they invigorated her, but Wendy couldn't bear to leave them behind. She had no desire to forget even a moment of her time with Fairy Tail, and would take every sentimental scrap she could get.

She'd make them all proud, Wendy promised inside her head. Them, and herself.

Ninjas, Tigers, and Stairs

Chapter Notes

Just an FYI: Carla is going to be largely absent from this fic. The Exceeds are often hard to implement when it comes to any non-comedic writing for the Dragon Slayers (Carla especially, since she and Wendy are almost never apart) and tend to take up space in the narrative meant for the Slayers by virtue of always being around them. This might change if Carla winds up having a role to play, but Wendy is the focus of this fic, and I'm not good enough as a writer to split the focus of each scene between the two of them if they were partnered together like normal. So, just assume that Carla's somewhere offscreen doing her own thing for the majority of this fic.

Also, below is the link to the fanart that I envisioned for Wendy's outfit this chapter.

<https://kimbeekitty.tumblr.com/post/137206323063/shes-grown-so-much-as-a-character-and-as-a-wizard>

"Some girls are full of heartache and poetry and those are the kind of girls who try to save wolves instead of running away from them."
- Nikita Gill

As the adopted daughter of a dragon, and a former member of the notably spartan, reclusive guild Cait Shelter, Wendy had spent the majority of her life without many of the trappings characteristic of modern society. Her sleeping had been done outside (or in one of Cait Shelter's huts), her food had been cooked over a fire, and it wasn't until her relocation to Magnolia that she discovered the wonders of unremitted access to indoor plumbing.

She didn't realize how her time surrounded by the creature comforts of modernity had spoiled her until around the second hour of her current predicament, being confined to a horse drawn carriage, when she found herself thinking longingly of the trains she'd frequented on missions with her team.

Sleek, mechanical marvels, those trains covered distance in record time, and with such unbelievable smoothness that riders could barely even tell they were in motion. They offered the length of their interior as a tract for passengers to walk and stretch their legs, along with various compartments stocked with an assortment of confections and beverages.

Trains had *air conditioning*.

The same could not be said for Wendy's current method of transportation.

The carriage jerked and shuddered with the gait of the steeds it was hitched to, forcefully enough that Wendy had almost certainly acquired bruising with how often her luggage was battered against her legs. She'd have moved her suitcases, if not for the fact that the carriage's cabin was roughly the size of her washroom back at Fairy Hills, and afforded her barely enough room for both herself and her belongings.

The heat, however, was far worse than the lack of space. In no time at all, the carriage had quickly transformed from a quaint traveling apparatus into a prison of sweltering torment under the harsh June sun. Even at its reduced length, her hair was still plastered to the back of her neck with sweat. She had long since rolled up the sleeves of her dress, and was dearly regretting her choice to include black stockings as part of the ensemble.

Maybe observing the passing scenery would help take her mind off her discomfort?

Turning to gaze out the nearest window, Wendy was initially less than impressed by the view of craggy slopes and intermittent foliage she was presented with. The scenic panorama such mountain ranges were often lauded for must only be visible from the summit, it seemed.

She spotted a thin stretch of river, a cluster of roosting birds, chunks of starkly white rock-

Despite the stifling bubble of heat surrounding her, a sudden chill dripped down Wendy's spine.

Several yards off to the side of the road, the shattered trunk of a Face monument jutted up from the ground. The component pieces, ranging from small stones to fragments larger than the carriage, dotted the landscape in a perimeter extending further than Wendy could see. Fault lines marking the monolith's breakthrough from below the surface stretched out like spidery fingers, as if inviting her to descend into their depths once more.

Wendy found she didn't much mind staring at nothing in her lap until the carriage drew to a halt, and the driver announced, "We've arrived at Hawthorn Town, miss."

"Thank you for your service, sir!" more than ready to escape her sweltering confines, Wendy hefted up her belongings before hopping out onto the cobblestone street below.

It was the abundance of such material that stood out in Wendy's first impression of Hawthorn. The buildings- architecturally styled in both traditional, boxy structures and other taller, more rounded edifices- were hewn from stone. The streets were neatly paved with stone, rising and falling with the natural slopes of the terrain. The backdrop of mountains that overlooked the city were no doubt comprised of stone.

In keeping with this theme, so too was the massive tiger, baring twin oversized tusks from its perch high atop a particularly grand, important-looking building.

Sabertooth must have reserved quite a hefty sum of Jewel for their mason.

Either that, or they possessed quite a skilled Stone Make wizard among their ranks.

If things go right for her today, Wendy told herself, she'd learn the answer soon enough.

Wendy wasn't entirely sure what she'd been expecting after knocking (hopefully not too quietly) on the large set of doors that made up the entrance to Sabertooth's guildhall. Would she be greeted as a prospective client? Would anyone here recognize her from the Grand Magic Games as a member of their most contentious opposing guild? Had word of Fairy Tail's disbandment reached this part of the country?

Her expectations weren't so much defied as they were utterly trounced by the jarring one two combo that was the sudden, deep-voiced inquiry from behind her of, "What business do you have with Sabertooth?" followed by the revelation- after Wendy whirled around, narrowly biting back a shriek- that the question was posed by a man who's only features not hidden behind thick black fabric were his eyes, and head of spiky chestnut hair.

Not in even her wildest, most outlandish musings had Wendy been expecting *ninjas*.

Or, that is... *a* ninja. One... Singular... Not many...

Wendy's gobsmacked silence carried on a few moments more, long enough for the ninja- should she ask his name? Would that be rude of her?- to raise his eyebrows, somehow conveying his eroding patience despite half his face being covered. Regardless, it was enough to jolt Wendy into action.

"I'm here to see Sting! About matters involving the recent conflict against Tartaros, that is. Is he in right now?" Wendy folded her hands before her to keep them from adjusting the lay of her dress out of nerves. Why hadn't she rehearsed this ahead of time?!

"While *Master* Sting is indeed present," the title, and the dissatisfaction Wendy had wrought with her neglect to use it, was clearly heard as the ninja spoke. "he is quite busy with his many responsibilities as the leader of this guild. Not to mention, he's only just returned from a very hard-fought battle, and needs to recover." hard brown eyes assessed her up and down. "How is it that a teenage girl like yourself is aware of the war waged by a dark guild?"

A teenage girl. He didn't even consider that her knowledge of Tartaros's actions could hint at her profession? He thought she was a *civilian*? Wendy was accustomed to people being surprised by her status as a Dragon Slayer, or that she was actually capable of fighting like one. She didn't like it, but she could at least understand that people didn't expect such things from a mild-mannered thirteen year old. But to have even the possibility of her being a mage at all dismissed out of hand, without even attempting to sense any magic power from her?

"I know about it because I was *part* of that battle!" a few weeks prior, Wendy wouldn't have adopted such a bellicose demeanor with what amounted to a total stranger. The old Wendy would've waited before demurely explaining her presence, probably apologized for causing an inconvenience, and humbly sought this man's assistance in her endeavor. This new Wendy, with a war, a dead mother, and the loss of yet another home under her belt, was not nearly so forbearing as to be brushed aside by a man clad in dark linen pajamas.

"I'm Wendy Marvell, Dragon Slayer, and my Sky magic could have set Sting right as rain twice over in the time I've been talking to you! I have urgent matters to discuss with your

Master regarding our battle with the dark guild Tartaros. Now, are you going to delay me further, or can I see to my business with him?"

It felt... good, asserting herself like that. Good enough that she was willing to overlook her slight stretching of the truth. She *had* come here to speak with Sting, and the topic *did* relate to Tartaros, in a way, but to phrase it in such a manner... Well, granting Sting a clean bill of health during their meeting ought to make up for any dramatization on her part.

Mr. Ninja's eyes had gone a little wide over the course of her outburst- *serves him right*, Wendy thought heatedly- before they glanced down and away, narrowing in deliberation.

Wendy had all of three seconds to fret that her harsh words had severely damaged her chances of entry, before the black-clad man brushed past her with a mutter of, "Follow me."

Stooping to take hold of her traveling cases- she'd dropped them in shock when he first spoke to her- Wendy trailed after her guide as he pushed open the entrance to Sabertooth's guildhall. Inside, Wendy was almost taken aback by the sheer *opulence* she observed before her. The walls of the cavernous main hall were draped with lengths of fine silk, and richly colored rugs were laid out across the floor. Two ornate fountains trickled gently at opposing sides of the room, and the prideful visage of tigers was carved into works of stone at multiple points within the hall. Great windows higher up on the walls let in natural light, causing the polished marble surfaces to gleam and the various accents of gold to sparkle.

Scores of mages occupied the hall, clustered into groups at tables or leaning against walls and columns. Wendy knew the names of less than ten Sabertooth wizards, and those with whom she could decidedly claim to be on speaking terms were even fewer, so it was with a measure of relief that she turned to follow Tall, Dark, and Irritable towards the wide spiral staircase to the left.

Her relief curdled into dismay when a glance upwards revealed the heights to which they'd have to climb to reach the landing above, while she lugged both of her weighty suitcases with her.

If Mr. Ninja felt the way her eyes were boring into the back of his head, he didn't show it. In fact, he didn't even glance back at her as they reached the landing, instead rapping smartly on the official-looking oak door before them. "Master Sting, pardon the interruption, but you have a... very insistent visitor."

Through the grace of her heightened hearing, Wendy could perceive a short sigh and a muttered, "'Being Guildmaster is an honor' they said..." followed by a louder, "Bring them in, Dobengal."

With poise and decorum that went beyond her years, Wendy didn't make so much as a chortle at the disclosure that this stuffy, uptight man was named *Dobengal*, and followed him past the threshold into the office of Sabertooth's Guildmaster.

Said Guildmaster was currently studying a stack of documents on his desk, his posture hunched to a degree that Wendy felt her neck twinge in sympathy. She saw the moment his nose twitched, registering her scent, and his head whipped up to look at her.

At the sight of his face, Wendy immediately lost her grip on her collectedness, as well as her suitcases.

“Oh, *Sting*,”

The injuries marring the Dragon Slayer’s face- currently multiple days into their own healing process- had been given sufficient time to present themselves fully against his skin. The end result was almost hard to look at. Dark purple splotches surrounded both of his eyes, no doubt the result of multiple broken capillaries. His upper lip was split and partially scabbed over. A deep cut angled downwards from behind his hairline. Worst of all, his nose- clearly broken- sat crookedly in the center of his face.

“You should see the other guy.” the blond dismissed breezily, flashing what might’ve been a charming smile were it not for the way it pulled at his split lip. He leaned forward on his elbows, regarding her amicably. “I’ve gotta say, I wasn’t expecting to see you again so soon. To what do we owe the pleasure, miss Sky Sorceress?”

All at once, Wendy found herself tongue-tied, fingers knotting anxiously as her words clustered somewhere in the back of her throat. Any conviction she’d invoked against Dobengal guttered and died like a matchstick in a rainstorm. It felt like she was standing on a precipice; toeing the line between the life she had come to know, and the treacherous, unfamiliar unknown that was laid out before her. Her fears, her losses, and her hopes all warred behind her ribs, and Wendy tried to breathe them out alongside a measured sigh.

She ended up forcing a swallow past the lump in her throat, instead.

“As... as you know, due to recent events... Fairy Tail i-is-” Wendy bowed her head, eyes squeezed tightly shut as she wrestled for her composure.

Because of this, she failed to see the exchange of gestures and facial expressions silently taking place between the two Sabertooth mages occupying the room.

There was a *pop*, then another, a light clattering of dishware, one final *pop*, and when Wendy raised her head, the room was one Sabertooth wizard poorer, and two delicate china teacups richer.

“Dobengal doesn’t enjoy it much, but his magic is really convenient for fetching drinks.” Sting remarked as he finished dragging a wooden chair over to rest opposite the one behind his desk. “I normally offer my guests ale, but I thought you’d prefer tea, just like *I’d* prefer to avoid a visit from the authorities for the intoxication of a minor.”

“Tea...” Wendy could detect the subtle scent of jasmine. The darjeeling tea Carla loved so was most certainly an acquired taste, one the Sky Dragon Slayer hadn’t quite managed to emulate in all their years together. Sweeter, floral teas were more to her liking. She was aware Sting couldn’t possibly have known that, but Wendy decided to accept the kind gesture as an optimistic omen.

‘There is no trouble so great or grave that it cannot be diminished by a good cup of tea.’

“Tea sounds lovely, thank you.” Wendy was about to claim the proffered chair, when she paused. “But first...”

Cup of tea in hand, she rounded the desk until she was standing before Sabertooth’s seated Guildmaster. Sting gave her a puzzled look, and received only a smile in response before Wendy raised the steaming teacup to her lips, hands glowing softly, and blew the vapor in a gentle stream towards his face.

No sooner had the steam made contact with his skin, than his wounds all began to fade from sight. The dark tissue around his eyes lightened and returned to normal. The gashes on his lip and forehead stitched back together seamlessly. Without so much as a twinge of discomfort, his nose was properly realigned and the break was mended.

Satisfied with her work, Wendy turned and strode back to sit in the chair she’d been offered, allowing herself to grin at the sight of Sting prodding experimentally at his face, expression slack with awe.

“Alright, you’ve officially landed yourself in my good books.” Sting informed her, that winning smile restored to its former glory. “Consider yourself a beneficiary of the White Dragon Discount, if you came here to hire some of my wizards. Or is this a social visit?”

Taking a lengthy sip of her tea in a last minute bid for clarity and calm, Wendy met Sting’s gaze head on.

“I lost my guild this week. It wasn’t the first time, but that doesn’t make it any easier. In fact, I think the only thing that saved me from giving up was a promise from someone very important to me. He promised that he would come back to me in a year, and I promised I would have made something of myself the next time we saw each other. Sabertooth is the best place I can think of to do that. With you and Rogue here, I’ll be able to train with other Dragon Slayers to improve my magic. And, aside from that...” here, Wendy found she couldn’t look Sting in the eyes, and instead dropped her gaze to his teacup. “I’m a healer, but so much of the pain caused by this war with Tartaros is the kind I can’t do anything about. I want to do whatever I can to reverse the harm I’m capable of healing. I think the person most in need of my help... is Minerva. I want to try and undo her transfiguration.”

Her motives and ambitions confessed, Wendy looked back up at Sting, and felt her heart abruptly sink like a stone.

“Wendy,” Sting’s expression was pained in a way that a broken nose and busted lip hadn’t managed. “I’m sorry, but... I don’t think you know what you’re asking for.”

“What?” it was as if all the warmth was draining from Wendy’s body, tongues of fiery panic beginning to lick at the dry tinder of her assuredness. “No, no, I do! I’m a fast learner, I promise. It’s okay if you don’t have time to train with me- you’re the Master after all- just watching is enough for me to learn. I swear, I’ll pull my weight as a guild member, and I can heal whoever needs-”

“No! Not- that’s not what I meant!” Sting’s eyes had gone wide, and he waved his hands as if physically dismissing her misunderstanding. “Wendy, Sabertooth would be more than happy-

honoured, really- to accept you as one of our wizards. That's not the part I have concerns about."

Her initial distress mollified, Wendy was able to draw her own conclusions as to what subject had earned Sting's apprehension.

"Has... has something changed with Minerva? Is she not here?"

"Oh no, she's here all right." Sting huffed a completely mirthless laugh. "We put a lot of work into making certain of that. But she's... she isn't..."

Running a hand over his face, Sting abruptly got to his feet. His expression as he met eyes with Wendy held more seriousness than he'd displayed at any other point in their meeting.

"I think you should see things for yourself before deciding if you can help her."

"We're going underground?"

It was the first utterance Wendy had made on their journey.

Previously, she'd been content to silently follow behind Sting as he led the way to Minerva's quarters, not particularly eager to attract the attention of the various Sabertooth mages they passed. If her interaction with Dobengal was anything to go by, it seemed that these Tigers weren't exactly fond of odd young girls taking up their Master's time. (She hoped Dobengal was just an irritable anomaly, though).

They'd traversed across the main hall, and through a series of passages and doorways, until Wendy abruptly found herself standing at the top of a staircase that went so far down, it might as well have been the entrance to the underworld.

Deep, dark caverns full of sickly sweet air... An oppressive, cataclysmic force, bearing down on her senses as it slowly grew in power... Her heartbeat ramping up as she mentally kept track of the countdown...

"I know. You must think we're monsters." Sting's voice- filled with a tired sort of resignation- pulled Wendy back into the present. He'd taken her words as an admonishment towards Minerva's presumed lodgings, instead of a dread-laden realization in regard to their undertaking. He didn't seem to have noticed her brief lapse back into... *then*.

"I wish things could be different, but down here's the only place that can hold her. You'll understand when you see her."

In any other circumstance, such a foreboding remark would've sent Wendy into a flurry of apprehension.

As it were, the act of forcing herself to descend after Sting, one supremely tense step at a time, demanded the majority of Wendy's attention. Her body didn't have any additional dread to spare.

Breathe in, and out... There's more than enough air... You can do this...

Wendy didn't know whether to be mortified, or grateful, when a missed step on her part encouraged Sting to take her hand for the rest of their descent, his other held aloft and shedding more than enough white radiance to ensure the remaining steps passed without incident. It may have been at the cost of her pride, but Sting's warm, steady hold on her hand made it a little easier for Wendy to traverse further underground.

At the bottom, Sting set to work opening an imposing-looking iron door, its surface glinting faintly with line upon line of runes. Wendy's understanding of the symbols was rudimentary at best, but she caught multiple references to 'contain' and 'demon'.

She knew what had become of Minerva. Wendy had seen her new form up close and personal. Still, she had to fight to contain a shudder when Sting finally cracked the door open, and a fierce tide of demonic energy spilled outward from the room within. The sensation carried with it a trace of the foul, skin-crawling essence unique to demons, but was also tinged with a fury so deep it bordered on bloodlust.

Wendy looked at Sting, wide eyed, but his gaze was fixed resolutely ahead.

Like he was preparing himself.

"Wait here until I call you in."

And with that, the Master of Sabertooth slipped through the door, pulling it nearly shut behind him.

It was less than four seconds before Wendy heard a mighty crash of wood splintering and breaking.

"That was even slower than last time. You're losing your touch." that had been Sting's voice, carefully conversational.

"You'll lose your *tongue* the moment I'm free, you bastard!" that enraged bellow could have only been Minerva.

"I'm so glad you chose a more kid-friendly bodypart than yesterday to threaten to remove," Wendy had to admire Sting's gall, adopting a cheery tone in the face of such utter rage. "I'm sure our new friend appreciates it."

"What are you prattling about, cur? Have you brought more fools to gawk at me? Am I to be the captive beast in the circus you've made of this guild?"

"You said it, not me." Sting snickered. This time, the shriek of rending paper could be heard before two objects smacked harshly against the wall.

"*Treaties and Armistices of Fiore's Second Trade War*". I'll keep your review in mind before I add that one to the nightstand. Now, where were we... Ah! Yes, our new friend. She came a very long way to see us, so make sure to give her a nice big Sabertooth welcome!"

Minerva's retort was lost amidst the screech of metal that heralded the door swinging open. At the threshold stood Sting, who ushered Wendy inside with a hand on her shoulder that stayed there after she was moved to stand beside him, a few feet back from another bold rune barrier that lined the edges of the room.

At first glance, Wendy could tell that a great deal of effort had been made to ensure the room was comfortable for its occupant. Multiple lacrima lamps mounted on the walls belied the lack of any natural light, and the stone floor was swathed in soft rugs and carpets. A lengthy shelf of books took up the majority of one side of the room, with other spaces reserved for a seating area, a serviceable kitchen, and two curtained off sections that could only be the lavatory and the bedroom.

And it had all been ravaged.

Deep gouges had been carved into the floor and walls, along with what looked like multiple scorch marks. An armchair had been reduced to a heap of leather and kindling, and the sofa bled fuzzy gore from several tears and slashes that marked its surface. Less than half of the books housed on the shelf remained, their brethren gutted and left scattered across the floor in heaps of paper and the husks of covers. Two kitchen cabinets had been fully divested of their doors, a third dangling by one hinge, with their contents crushed, decanted, splattered, and otherwise discarded at various points within the room.

The only area that seemed to have been spared was the bathing section, and to a lesser degree, the bedroom. The bathroom's curtain was untouched and sufficiently in place, leaving the condition of that section somewhat ambiguous. (But not greatly so. Even without her enhanced senses, Wendy was confident she would've been able to smell if Minerva hadn't bathed or properly relieved herself during her stay here). The curtain for the sleeping area bore a few rips and tears, and Wendy could see three slashes down the length of the mattress, but it was still relatively serviceable for sleeping.

"Minerva, this is Wendy-"

"I remember this little shrew." time hadn't done much (read: anything) to improve Minerva's physical condition. She was still trapped in a form that resided somewhere in between the bounds of humanity and the demonic. What the past week *had* done, it seemed, was drain her of anything even resembling the spark of compassion she'd displayed in her handling of Erza. Something hard and jagged seethed in the remaining eye she regarded Wendy with, and the small upward curl of her lip was anything but authentic. "We had a bit of a scuffle, when last we met. Are you here to see it through, or do you need your Exorcist nearby to stand against me?"

Like with Dobengal, had Wendy been the subject of Minerva's ire before the war with Tartaros, she would've reacted far differently. She might've simply ignored her goading, or even placated her antagonist out of a sense of pity for her condition. The Wendy from before would have allowed the belittlement in favor of not making waves, and potentially obstructing her path towards providing treatment.

Now, Wendy found herself grateful for her many years of exposure to the crisp wit and razor-sharp tongue that Carla so readily employed.

Observation had always been one of Wendy's most ardent instructors.

"I came here with a far more important goal than finishing a spat with you, Minerva." the Sky Sorceress put everything she could into an affectation of apathy, gazing coolly at the woman across from her. "Quite the opposite, actually. I plan to do what I can to reverse your transformation."

At this, Minerva bared her now-pointed teeth, lunging forward until her claws were splayed out against a barrier none of them could see. The runes that lined the floor between both parties were clearly at work, absolute in the enforcement of their rules.

"This is no mere 'transformation', you foolish girl." Minerva spat the words out in a low voice. "I was baptized in a vat of darkness- such that surpasses human comprehension- and born anew into this vessel. Demonic energy resides within my heart, my skin, my very veins." she raised a hand to the web of black lines that spanned her face. "These are not scars, they are my heritage as a being infernal. The woman known as Minerva Orland is no more. My existence is a malady beyond anything your pitiful charms or spells could hope to cure."

Wendy fought not to visually react to the tinge that colored Minerva's voice. It sounded suspiciously like... regret, a word Wendy would have previously been hard pressed to associate with the woman before her. Haughtiness, pride, uncompromising unrepentance, those were the terms that came to mind when she considered the Territory mage.

As she contended with the alluring, seductive power Minerva had found in new form, Wendy had anticipated having to fight to dissuade her from fully renouncing her old life. From becoming a monster.

Wendy never thought she'd have to convince her that she wasn't one already.

"You aren't a demon." Wendy made sure to look Minerva steadily in the face as she spoke, calling to mind the details Mira had provided regarding Tartaros's laboratory facility. "No more than I'm a dragon. Tartaros most likely imbued you with some degree of their power, enough to alter your body to this extent, but the fact that you still possess your Territory magic alone is proof of your humanity. These runes apply to you because of the presence of whatever demonic essence Tartaros imparted to you during the transformation. It's going to take a while, but I'm confident I can undo the changes they wrought in you."

"And then what?" it was undoubtedly to Sting that Minerva posed the derisive query. "Restore my looks, and everything returns to normal? You'd only be making my darkness less visible on the outside. I was a monster long before I aligned myself with Tartaros, and everyone above us knows it. Am I to be welcomed back into the guild that I abandoned? That my father terrorized?" drawing her tattered cloak around herself, Minerva turned and stalked away. "This girl might be able to repair my body, but my soul is far beyond saving."

"That's not true." despite his words, Sting's voice was weary and tired sounding. This was evidently a frequent debate between the two of them. "Jiemma had his hooks in *all* of us, yourself included, and we've all had to work to get on the right track after that. Whatever guilt you're feeling, we can work through it with you. We don't want to lose you, Minerva."

“This cage I’m in has made that very clear, Eucliffe.” Minerva’s tone was clipped. “When will you learn that demons don’t long for the company of others? I rescinded any bonds of camaraderie alongside my humanity.”

At this, Sting could only heave a dejected sigh.

“Let’s head back, Wendy.”

Wendy had turned to follow the man, when she paused. She had quite a daunting task ahead of her, working to undo the corruption Tartaros had inflicted upon Minerva, made more onerous by the woman’s cynical dismissal of her potential for redemption. If only there was something that could pierce through the veil of her despondency...

“Minerva, you said you gave up on any bonds,” she kept her gaze facing the door as she spoke. “but I think you’d like to know... Erza made a full recovery from her injuries.”

There was no response to be heard from the brooding woman, but Wendy could sense the quick flutter of air that was Minerva’s gasp at the news.

It wasn’t much, but for now, that would have to do.

“Believe it or not, this was actually one of her *good* days.” Sting confessed once they reached the stairway’s lofty summit. “Sometimes she’ll refuse to see anyone, or do nothing but tear apart the room until she exhausts herself. It happens quicker on the days she refuses to eat.”

It seemed as though their brief encounter with Minerva had done more to wear Sting out than the previous hours spent cloistered in his office, leaving him unable to fully disguise the signs of his growing weariness. Even with the effects of Wendy’s healing magic, there was notable tension around the Dragon Slayer’s eyes and mouth, with a crease already beginning to form between his brows. The easygoing grin from before was nowhere to be seen within his dour, pensive expression.

Wendy wondered how often it was that Sabertooth’s young Guildmaster allowed himself to be seen looking so tired.

If his talk of Jiemma’s lingering influence was anything to go by, it was a very rare sight indeed.

The sight of another person in pain was something Wendy could never abide, and thus it was with little thought that she reached out to lay a hand on his arm. While she didn’t flush his body with another dose of healing energy- no matter how much she wished otherwise, alleviating emotional fatigue was beyond her purview- she had long since learned that gestures of compassion had a restorative power all their own.

Sometimes, rather than a healer’s hand, there were pains that called for the presence of a friend.

It was a role she’d gladly fill for the kind, fiercely devoted man beside her.

“Sting,” she murmured when cobalt eyes found her own. “it’s clear to me just how much the welfare of your guild, and it’s members, means to you. It reminds me of how Fairy Tail had been. Seeing that- someone trying to make their guild into more than just a workplace- it makes things feel a little more hopeful after everything that’s happened.”

The tightness in her throat returned again, but this time, Wendy found it easier to swallow past it and proceed. “I don’t know what will become of Fairy Tail in the future, whether or not it will stay gone, but for now... I’d very much like to work to become better alongside you and your guild.”

And just like how her magic had chased away the scrapes and bruises from Sting’s face, her words now rid him of the melancholy slant to his expression, allowing him to flash her a grin before he straightened, adopting a more formal bearing as he rose to his full height.

A hand was held out in the space between them.

“Wendy Marvell,”

Like earlier, on their trip down the stairs, the grip of Sting’s hand around her own was reassuringly steady, and invitingly warm.

“it is my pleasure to welcome you to Sabertooth.”

All Manor of Changes

*“Friendship is always a sweet responsibility, never an opportunity.”
- Khalil Gibran*

“- *that speed through the heavens... Vernier!*”

With the customary accompanying shimmer of blue light, the Enchantment was cast, and the two suitcases hanging from Sting’s grip suddenly became a great deal lighter.

A useful side effect of the *Vernier* spell, Wendy had previously discovered, was its ability to reduce the weight of its subject as a means of further boosting their speed. Under normal circumstances, she wouldn’t utilize her magic for a task as mundane as carting around luggage, but her overly-polite nature demanded that she do *something* to compensate for the lengths her new Guildmaster was going to in order to accommodate her.

And, if the past quarter of an hour had proven anything, it was that Sting took his hospitality *very* seriously.

By the time the two Dragon Slayers had concluded the last step of Wendy’s induction- applying the sky-blue Sabertooth guild mark to her right shoulder- night had fallen. Upon catching sight of the late hour, Wendy had attempted to graciously take her leave, remarking that she had a search on her hands for the most moderately priced inn to stay the night.

(And by ‘most moderately priced’, she meant the cheapest rentable space with four walls, a roof, and the barest commitment to basic cleanliness. It would be some time before she could accrue enough Jewel to afford more permanent lodgings.)

Sting, it swiftly became apparent, had other ideas.

With the uncompromising, well-meaning stubbornness that seemed to be woven into the very genes of every male Dragon Slayer, he plucked both of her suitcases off the floor, and made for the door leading out of his office, declaring, “No need for that. The Guildmaster’s manor is nearby, and has plenty of empty rooms for you to crash in.”

Her protesting squawk having gone unheeded, Wendy had dashed after the retreating blond.

“Sting, I’ll be perfectly fine on my own. This really isn’t necessary-”

“Of course it is.” like before, the White Dragon Slayer assumed the bearing of a true Guildmaster, gazing at her with perfect seriousness. “You’re a minor, and as your Guildmaster I’m legally obligated to make sure you have someplace decent to stay. Surely, you didn’t live by yourself at Fairy Tail?”

“No, we...” Wendy had frowned. The notion wasn’t entirely insensible. Guilds were labeled as Light or Dark based on their commitment to the rules laid out by the Magic Council, after

all. Somewhere among them, there were surely guidelines on the handling of underage guild wizards. Given Fairy Tail's less-than-esteemed outlook towards Fiore's highest legal authority (which was not entirely unearned), it had never occurred to her that there might be rules in place regarding how to accommodate young mages without parents to care for them. "... we had a dormitory for guild members."

"A dormitory, huh..." Sting lapsed into thoughtful silence, and Wendy, who's desire to not cause any legal troubles for her new Guildmaster outweighed her wish to assert her independence, didn't argue further.

It wasn't until they left through one of the guildhall's backdoors that Wendy realized Sting was still carrying her luggage. She doubted, based on his fervor towards acting as an exemplary Master, that he'd allow her to reclaim them until they reached their destination, and decided thusly that a bit of frivolous Enchanting was more than warranted in her pursuit of not being a bother.

Once the light of her spell faded, Sting- upon finding he could now swing her suitcases back and forth at his sides with ease- looked at her with his brows raised, and mouth slightly open.

"So, that's what an Enchantment looks like?" there was something simmering beneath his casually voiced query, something she thought sounded oddly close to... glee?

"Oh, um- yes." Wendy- not quite nervous enough to begin full on hand wringing- instead tapped her fingertips together as she pondered how to explain this facet of her abilities. Her command of the wind was an easy concept to grasp, and the power to heal even moreso, but Enchantment... even *she* didn't fully understand the art. No other mage- or Dragon Slayer, for that matter- had displayed similar talents as far as she knew.

"My Enchantments aren't really all that impressive, honestly. It's mostly just attaching my magic to things, or people, and... changing them. Making something stronger, or faster, or tougher. *Vernier* is actually a hastening Enchantment, at its base, but part of the way it functions is by reducing the weight of whatever it's cast on. It can actually be a challenge, sometimes, to balance out the weightlessness with the secondary propulsive effect, but it wouldn't be much use as a speed spell without it. I've managed-"

It dawned on Wendy, then, that she had begun rambling, prompting her to trail off lamely as she felt heat climb up her face. No one but Carla had ever professed an interest in hearing Wendy drone on and on about the intricacies of her spells, and even the Exceed's indulgence had limits.

Sting, though, didn't seem all that fatigued by her spiel. In fact, he looked rather awestruck.

"I thought Enchantment magic sounded impressive when I was younger, but getting to see it up close," he murmured, before smirking. "Rogue's gonna be so jealous."

Choosing to overlook the implication that the Twin Dragons had both heard of, and been impressed by, her magic prior to the Tenrou Island incident (it was easier than attempting to wrap her brain around the idea that two powerful, senior Dragon Slayers had at any point

found *her* admirable) Wendy questioned, “Where is Rogue, now that you mention it? On a job?”

Sting nodded, sobering as he confirmed, “Crocus, to be specific. They’re always putting out job requests there, with all the work still needing to be done after the dragons came through.”

Wendy frowned. She had no reason to believe Rogue had been any less worse off than his partner after the battle with Tartaros, but he was already away on a job in the capital? Taking a job while you weren't at your best was a good way to get hurt, or otherwise underperform for your client. Even the most stubborn Fairy Tail mages had known better than to embark on a mission without letting her see to any injuries they'd accrued first.

Wendy suddenly felt keenly aware of just how rare a gift her magic truly was. She'd always been conscious of the fact that true healers were exceedingly hard to come by, but she'd yet to put much consideration into how the rest of the world's Guilds functioned without one. How few in number mages like her were.

It stirred in her a strange mix of commiseration and loneliness.

Thankfully, her mind was pulled from those dour thoughts by the sight of their destination coming into view around the corner.

It was incredibly difficult to miss.

‘Guildmaster’s manor’ indeed! The place was bigger than the whole of Fairy Hills!

A grand, sprawling edifice of ebony wood, the manor resided within the bounds of a stone-walled enclosure, the gate of which Sting led her through with stunning nonchalance.

Before she'd become a Fairy Tail mage and acquired her modest, perfectly lovely dorm room, Wendy had been sleeping in a hut. On the ground. Beneath a straw roof she'd helped thatch herself.

Was she worthy of even setting foot inside such an opulent abode?

Sting certainly seemed to think so, for he threw the polished double doors open with a crow of, “Welcome to the only good thing I inherited from Jiemma with this job.”

The manor's interior was no less lavish and stately than the outside would suggest, all gleaming hardwood and fine furnishings. Wendy would've probably spent longer gawking at the undisguised wealth around her, were it not for the second appearance of Sting's predecessor's name.

(She had heard, whether she wanted to or not, what Yukino had confessed to Natsu on that empty street in Crocus. She'd been appalled, revolted, at the revelation of just how callous Sabertooth's Guildmaster was; to not only expel a wizard for the crime of *losing*, but to subject her to such debasement beforehand? Learning that same man had fathered Minerva hadn't been enough to earn the woman much sympathy from her then after what she'd done to Lucy, but it had given her insight into where she'd inherited her cruel streak from.)

“This used to be his, then?” she questioned, her voice sounding small in the expansive foyer.

“Only the best for the Master of Fiore’s top Guild, in his mind.” Sting recited dryly, his face unreadable as he looked across the room. “To be honest, I had half a mind to tear the whole thing down my first week as Master; get rid of any trace of him for good. But then,” a grin tugged at his mouth. “I figured making it my own was a better idea. He never did like my style.”

Wendy peered around with new eyes, only then catching signs of what Sting meant. Chunks of crystal stashed haphazardly on shelves and countertops. An egregiously feathered lampshade or two. A magnificently garish, blindingly white leather armchair.

All very prominent evidence of the presence of a man who’s regular attire consisted of crop-tops and fancy coats.

“I can’t imagine why he had a problem with it.” Wendy huffed exaggeratedly, trying not to smirk. “He clearly must’ve had poor taste.”

“More than you realize.” Sting grumbled, though he was grinning when he turned back to look at her. “But I think that’s enough talk of dead men for one night. You must be tired. Let me show you to your room.”

It wasn’t until he said it that Wendy took note of the weariness that had settled over her. It wasn’t a bad kind of exhaustion, more like the sort of fatigue that accompanied big changes, of which there had been several for her that day.

A new Guild, a new town, new accommodations...

She glanced at Sting’s form a few feet ahead of her, both her suitcases still held gallantly in his grip.

... new friends.

“There’s an adjoining washroom through there, and the kitchen is nearby, just follow your nose.” Sting informed her, standing at the threshold of her room after he’d placed her luggage by the bed. “We can look into your future living situation sometime later, but until then, consider this place yours. The manor’s door is always open to guild members- literally, it’s a spell- so there’s no need for a key or anything. My room’s a few floors up, same with Rogue’s, so just knock if you need anything.”

Wendy nodded to convey her understanding, even as she silently promised herself to *never* take Sting up on that offer. The mere thought of badgering her host further after he’d already been so generous made her feel like breaking out in hives.

“Thank you for doing all this... Sting.” In spite of herself, Wendy couldn’t bring herself to call him ‘Master’ (she’d been conditioned to think of Guildmasters as men who were far more advanced in age and shorter in stature) and made up for it by including a deep bow towards the man.

“We’ll have to discuss what I owe you later. It’ll depend on how long I stay here, of course, but-”

“Oh no, that’s not necessary.” Sting breezily cut across her perfectly reasonable effort to establish some kind of repayment. “I’m not collecting rent for letting you stay here, Wendy, that’d be absurd.”

At once, Wendy straightened up, eyes wide. “Sting, there’s no way I could just-”

“Crash in one of several empty rooms no one’s using while you find your footing?” the White Dragon Slayer raised an eyebrow. “I’d say these are extenuating circumstances, what with everything that’s happened recently, so I don’t see the problem with accepting a bit of help that’s offered freely.”

She wasn’t good at that, Carla had told her before. Accepting help when she needed it. Ever the humble do-gooder, never one to take aid that could go to someone else. She’d endeavored to work on it.

But surely, this was a bridge too far? What kind of reliable guild member was she, if she mooched off her Master’s hospitality without even the option to pay him back?

It seemed Sting could read the conflict playing out on her face, for he reminded her, “Don’t forget; thanks to you, I won’t be waking up with bloodstains on my pillow tomorrow like I’ve been for the past week. Not to mention what you’re trying to do for Minerva. Healing people might be second nature to you, but it means a lot to the rest of us. Let me thank you for it.”

Again, despite her best efforts (the idea of being repaid for healing someone, an act that was both largely effortless and uncomplicatedly *good*, had never quite sat right with her) Wendy felt her face warm a bit, unexpectedly flattered. Sting made her out to be a lot nicer than she really was, when all she was doing was what she’d been raised to do, nothing special, not really...

“I...” Wendy couldn’t think of a way to refute him, not without sounding needlessly contrarian, and huffed out a tiny laugh when she saw Sting fighting a grin. They both knew he had won. “Thank you, Sting. Just... thank you.”

“You’re most welcome, Miss Marvell.” he replied loftily, making them both snicker, before stepping back into the hall.

“I’ll let you get settled. First day as a Sabertooth wizard tomorrow, you’ll need your rest.”

The door clicked shut, and Wendy had the room to herself.

It really was a nice room. If Sting ever wanted to make some extra income, he could rent this place out as a luxury inn. The headboard of the large canopy bed sat flush against the middle of the wall, pale gold sheets perfectly tucked and arranged. A heavy looking armoire stood in the corner, inside which Wendy carefully hung her clothes as she unpacked them from her suitcases. The waist-high bookshelf was graced by her small collection of tomes and

medicinal encyclopedias (their contents had long since been committed to memory, but she'd been unable to part with them).

After a quick shower to do away with any remains of her sweltering carriage ride earlier that day, Wendy donned a pale blue nightgown, and sat down on her bed to begin her nightly ritual of brushing her hair.

She wasn't used to it being this short. (It normally reached past her waist, the physical evidence of many years of careful maintenance and growth.)

She wasn't used to her bed being this large, or for her sheets to be so silky. (It was normally smaller, fitted with more careworn, less luxurious bedding.)

She wasn't used to sleeping in such an enormous, empty house. (It was normally a cozy, well-lived dormitory with multiple other tenants, each one warm and loud and present.)

All this change... how much of it had been because of her own efforts, and how much had happened against her wishes?

She had chosen to cut her hair after Ezel had lopped off half of it. (She decided to grow, to keep fighting, to not give in to despair.)

This unfamiliar bed had been offered to her by a kind man who'd sought to thank her for doing what anyone should've done, with her power. (But almost no one had power like her. It meant something, when she decided she would use it to help others.)

This large, empty house had been the dubious gift that same man had received when he'd claimed responsibility for those around him. (A reminder of someone who'd hurt him, hurt all of them, that he was working to reclaim every day.)

The new guild mark on her shoulder had been her decision, too. Wendy hadn't wanted to lose the one she'd had before (or the one before that, either), but Fairy Tail's dissolution wasn't something she'd had the power to stop. All she could do was strive to make good decisions, find good company, in the aftermath that followed.

If the rest of Sabertooth was anything like their Master, she thought with a smile, Wendy would consider those goals to have been quite assuredly met.

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