Poison Fairy

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Summary

Released from prison in part for his assistance during the Eclipse Gate, Cobra is forced to join a guild to keep him in line; specifically Fairy Tail. While it's not entirely ideal to work with the ones he's tried to kill two separate times, the blonde Celestial mage on Team Natsu thoroughly intrigues him. Maybe Fairies aren't so bad after all.

Notes

Please keep in mind that this story is rated as such for a reason.

There will, at times, be darker parts to the story. I don't do trigger warnings on individual chapters, and there's no guarantee I'll catch all the appropriate tags here on AO3, so be a responsible reader and turn back if you think there's something going on that will trigger you.

Feel free to message me if you have concerns about the content of a chapter, and I can let you know if there is a triggering event in it -- as long as you're comfortable telling me which
specific trigger you're trying to avoid.
Prisoner 100977

He grinned when he caught the faint sound of footsteps making their way down the spacious hall just outside of his cell. The single brazier off to the right of the door only gave off so much light, but it was still enough for him to be able to see perfectly. "Two thousand and four. Two thousand and five. Two thousand and six," he whispered to himself. The steps came closer and closer, and it took everything in him to bite back his chuckle when he heard just who was coming to pay him a visit. 'Interesting,' he thought, 'I can't hear why…'

"Prisoner 100977," Doranbolt sighed as he looked up at the little metallic placard above the cell. He lowered his gaze to find Cobra in much the same position he'd been in the last time they had seen each other with bars between them – when he'd broken the lunatic out to assist in the dragon invasion during the Grand Magic Games the month before. He was sitting on the floor with his back against the wall. One knee was pulled up with his arm draped over it, while the other leg stretched out comfortably in front of him. "How are you, Cobra?" he asked solemnly. Honestly, maybe Lahar was rubbing off on him. He felt far too rigid and stuffy, but that could be sorted out later.

"Peachy. I love the five-star accommodations," Cobra sneered. "In fact, you missed it. Last night's dinner was served on a golden platter. The caviar was exquisite, by the way, so please do send my compliments to the chef. This morning I was bathed and fed by scores of virgins that catered to my every whim. Really, I have no idea why anyone would want to leave this place."

Doranbolt sighed and shook his head, wondering just why the hell he'd decided it would be a good idea to come down and talk with the ornery one-eyed psychopath. "Diplomacy is for chumps," he muttered to himself.

Cobra chuckled and tilted his head to the side. It had been a while since anyone had spent more than a few moments in his presence – including the guards that rushed down, scooted his meal through the small gap in the bars along with his daily allotment of poison, then ran the fuck away – so he felt it was high time to have some fun. "I've got a question for you... It's been bothering me for a while now," he said, stretching both of his legs out with a sigh.

"O... kay?" Doranbolt said cautiously.

"Does Lahar give you a reach around when he's fucking you?" The baleful glare that was directed at him was more than enough to keep going. "What?" Cobra asked in feigned innocence, "If he's not, then you should ask for a raise…"

"Hilarious," Doranbolt deadpanned, getting ready to turn on his heel and forget all about speaking with the prisoner concerning what had happened with the Eclipse Gate.

"Alright, alright," Cobra sighed in defeat, throwing his hands up to placate the pissy Direct Line mage. "I do have a serious question…"

Doranbolt crossed his arms over his chest. Then nodded shortly.

With a face that was a mask of contemplation, Cobra's tone was grave as he asked, "If one Doctor doctors another Doctor, does the Doctor who doctors the Doctor doctor the Doctor the way the doctor he's doctoring doctors? Or... does the Doctor doctor the way the Doctor who doctors, doctors?"
Doranbolt slowly blinked and picked his jaw up off of the floor. Cobra had been crazy, sure. But, in just a month, it seemed he'd gone from being a prick to jumping right off the deep end into the heart of the funny farm. Clearly, the guy had lost touch with reality.

"You see," Cobra continued with a wide grin, "I think the answer is that the doctoring Doctor doctors the Doctor the way the doctoring Doctor wants to doctor the Doctor. Not the way the doctored Doctor wants to be doctored... But, I wanted to get a second opinion..."

Doranbolt sighed as Cobra began cackling wildly. He ran both hands over his face in frustration and prayed to whatever deity would listen that he was able to just get through the encounter without stabbing himself in the eye with a fork. Maybe it would get rid of the pounding headache that was starting to form. The immediate silence that ensued had his eyes slowly opening to see a dark grin on the prisoner's face.

"Professional opinion? Use a spoon to pop your eye out, then a knife to get to your brain," Cobra said, pausing only to wet his chapped lips – something, he realized after the fact, that had Doranbolt's stomach churning when he mistook it for an animalistic wetting of his chops, so to speak. "Or you could just give me a knitting needle, and I'll pull your brain out through your nose. It's pretty quick if it's done by someone with experience, so I'm your best bet."

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Doranbolt groaned in disgust.

Cobra shrugged. "Boredom?" He slowly turned and laid himself out on the cold stone floor, staring up at the dark ceiling of his cell with his hands beneath his head. "Did you need something, or have you just come to watch my slow descent into madness? I can tell you right now, it might be more entertaining for you, if you watch grass grow... Also, I've heard that grass isn't nearly as big of an asshole as I am, or plotting your death; although that's entirely debatable. No one really knows just what grass thinks about... It could just snap any fucking day and revolt. All because it's tired of getting walked all over."

Doranbolt rolled his eyes when Cobra started chuckling. "You're already insane," he shot back. "That just proves it..."

"Far from it," Cobra replied, his eye dancing with glee. "Otherwise, I would have broken out and tried to take over the world again. Define insanity..."

"Doing the same thing over and over again, and expecting different results."

"Exactly. I broke out. I got caught." Cobra shrugged. "Not much else to do now, since I'll just get caught again."

"You're pretty talkative today."

"Yep." Cobra made sure to thoroughly annunciate the 'p'. And then kept smacking his lips together to make short, high-pitched popping sounds that he just knew would piss Doranbolt off. It got to Lahar something fierce when he did it, as with pretty much anyone else, and it took only ten (a surprisingly high number in his experience) little pops for Doranbolt's soul to flare in what constituted as a hilarious amount of annoyance. 'Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen. Wonder how long 'til he bashes his head into a wall...'

"So, is that why you've turned yourself in twice now?" Doranbolt asked, doing everything in his power to ignore the Poison Slayer's obnoxious pastime of pissing everyone right the hell off. "Have you finally figured out that there's no point in running?"
Cobra growled and glared at the pompous shit-goblin out of the corner of his eye. "I don't run. Never fucking did."

"What do you call it then?" Doranbolt asked with a cocky grin.

"Tactical maneuvers for the betterment of my goddamn existence," Cobra quipped. "Not once did I actually run from you little shits. In fact, I distinctly remember several Rune Knights running from me. If memory serves correctly, the only time they haven't run from me was when I was already cuffed."

They were silent for a time, with Doranbolt trying to decide just how he was going to word his questions, or what questions he really wanted to ask in the first place. He could see Cobra watching him, and knew from the curious (but no less guarded) expression on his face that the Poison Slayer must have picked up at least a small tidbit of what was going through his head. Finally, Doranbolt crossed his arms over his chest again and said, "What was your reason for willingly going into custody?"

"Which time?" Cobra drawled with a smirk. "You said it yourself, I've done it twice now."

"Both."

"Inconsequential details," Cobra sighed contentedly. He suddenly sat up and stood to his feet, then began pacing in his cell on the same circuit he used daily, from one wall to the other in a figure eight pattern. "None of my reasoning is important to you. You think I'm insane, and insane people don't make much sense to anyone but themselves, now do they?"

"You said you're not insane though," Doranbolt replied. "And, even if you are, you seem lucid enough to answer some questions."

"Valid point," Cobra grinned. He slowly walked over to the bars and rested his head against them while narrowing his eye at Doranbolt. "Quid pro quo, Pedobear. It's the only way you'll get answers out of me. Give me something worthwhile, and I'll do the same."

"Did you just call me—"

"Yep." Cobra's grin widened. "You've got the little sky dragon on your mind every time I see you. Highly inappropriate, if you ask me."

Doranbolt sneered and had to fight to hold himself in place. "That's vile," he spat. "Answer my questions, or I leave. You like hearing souls, don't you? I can have them increase the hold on your cell, and then you won't hear anything at all."

Cobra snarled at the self-assured smirk that plastered itself on the fucker's face. Of course he liked hearing souls. It had been far too long since he'd been able to absorb so much pain and suffering from the people around him, and he'd thoroughly enjoyed just being able to hear other people in general. As it was, he was completely secluded in his cell. The walls and bars that surrounded him put a very heavy damper on his magic, to the point that he was only able to catch small whispers of what someone was thinking about. The concept of not hearing anything aside from himself, not even the footsteps of the guards when they came to drop off his food or that incessant dripping noise from somewhere further down the hall, would actually drive him insane.

"That's our trade," Doranbolt chuckled. "You answer my questions, you can hear my soul. How's that for quid pro quo, Hannibal?"

"What is it you fucking want?"
"You turned yourself in," Doranbolt repeated, "Why?"

"Like I said," Cobra answered as he closed his eye, stretching his magic out in a vain attempt at latching onto the soul right in front of him... and failing miserably. "I don't run."

"That girl," Doranbolt prodded, cocking his head to the side slightly when Cobra tensed, "The one that was with you the first time. You said you don't know her?"

"I've never met that girl in my life. That was the first time I had ever seen her," Cobra answered with a smirk. His eye slowly slid open, his face not showing the surprise he felt when he heard what Doranbolt was about to say.

"She's a member Fairy Tail," Doranbolt supplied, "And you've never met her?"

"I wasn't sitting in that shit guild and getting all chummy with them. We just needed the blonde."

"And after the Eclipse incident... Why didn't you just make a break for it? We could have easily lost you in the aftermath of the dragons attacking. Or assumed you were dead if you had just laid low."

"Why exactly are you stuck on me letting you fuckers take me in? You're not getting anything else on that, so move the fuck on already."

"Alright," Doranbolt nodded. "Hypothetically, if you were set free tomorrow, what would you do?"

"Slitting your goddamn throat is at the top of my fucking list right now," Cobra growled. He absolutely hated that he couldn't just glean the information from the mage in front of him. His whole life had revolved around his ability to hear what people thought, felt, or desired deep down. He'd always known what someone's ulterior motive was – Brain's in particular notwithstanding, since that bastard had found a way to block Cobra's Soul Listening magic with Zero's help – and this 'in the dark' bullshit he was being subjected to was nearly painful. "Maybe slaughtering all of you," he added wistfully. "That'd be nice."

"Anything else? Or is death and dismemberment the only thing you think about?"

Cobra sneered and pulled away from the bars, walking back across his cell to sit back down in the same spot he'd been in when Doranbolt showed up. "All I do in here is think, you fucking prick," he grumbled under his breath. "Get back to your boyfriend. I'm sure he's wondering why you're late for his daily adjustment to that stick up his ass."

Doranbolt sighed again and shook his head. There was just no way to get around the fact that Cobra was indeed a raging asshole. "Just a few more questions."

"What was your motivation for agreeing to help in the fight that day?"

Cobra blinked, his single indigo eye glinting in the bare sliver of light from the brazier.

"Are you planning on finding a way to break the others out?"

Nothing more than the sound of steady breathing was Doranbolt's reply.

"What exactly are you thinking about right now?"

"I thought a thought," Cobra answered thoughtfully. "But the thought I thought wasn't the thought I thought I thought. If the thought I thought had been the thought I thought, I wouldn't have"
thought so much…" He paused and a wicked grin turned up the corners of his mouth. "Dontcha think?"

Doranbolt groaned and turned to walk away. There wasn't anything else he was going to get out of the bastard, and he definitely had some thinking to do. "Enjoy yourself, Cobra," he muttered as he walked away, the voice of the prisoner echoing along with his footsteps as he made his way to the door at the end of the hall.

"I'm not the pheasant plucker, I'm the pheasant plucker's mate. And I'm only plucking pheasants 'cause the pheasant plucker's late," Cobra muttered to himself with a wide grin. Doranbolt was definitely fun to fuck with, maybe more than even Lahar. Actually, definitely more fun than Lahar. That puddle-jumping cum-bucket would just walk away after only a minute instead of engaging in any conversation that was even remotely worthwhile. It's just too bad no one ever asked the right questions. Out of sheer boredom, and because he already knew he wasn't going to be getting out of prison any time soon – since he still hadn't decided just how he was going to break the Oracion Seis out yet – he would have answered their questions about his motives… Cobra chuckled and shook his head. All they had to do was stay long enough to wade through him being an asshole, and they'd get the answers they wanted. "I'm not the pheasant plucker, I'm the pheasant plucker's son. And I'm only plucking pheasants till the pheasant pluckers come."

Three days had gone by since that encounter, and Doranbolt had been thinking about it constantly. He came to an odd conclusion while he was brushing his teeth that third morning, and it had stuck itself right on the forefront of his brain until it was quite literally the only thing he could focus on.

Cobra wasn't actually insane… he was just an asshole.

Yes, he had no issues with torturing and killing people, and he enjoyed inflicting pain on others – whether mental, emotional, or physical – but he wasn't crazy. Even the pointless things he'd said that had frustrated Doranbolt to no end, the things that made no sense to him whatsoever at the time, weren't a sign of him being crazy. He was just bored. Cobra had even said as much. It seemed the Poison Slayer found ways to pass his time by playing word games, reciting tongue twisters, thinking of riddles… Okay, so he was also probably thinking of all the ways he was going to torture people as well, but so far it was only threats.

'He likes hearing someone's soul,' Doranbolt thought as he stared at the stack of papers in front of him, 'Maybe he says things like that to get a rise out of people, just so he can hear it…'

"You're more introspective than usual, Doranbolt," Lahar said as he stood from his seat and picked up a file. "Don't forget, you still have two months before that vacation of yours starts."

"Doranbolt gave him a tight smile, and waved just before his old friend walked out of the room. With a heavy sigh, he looked down at the papers again. He couldn't believe he was actually considering this, but since he'd decided against erasing the Council's memories of everything that had happened with the Eclipse Gate, it only seemed appropriate. Aside from the royal family's involvement in that machine's creation and use, everyone in the Council was fully aware of the dragons that had laid waste to the land, along with Cobra's not-so-legal release to help fend off the beasts. Yes, that particular detail had resulted in a week of sorting and organizing the files of every other Enforcement Officer in their unit – something, he realized was a true punishment, since no one was as organized as Lahar was – but Doranbolt took the punishment willingly since Cobra had at least turned himself back in afterwards.

Doranbolt shook his head to clear away his stray thoughts, and silently prayed that there wouldn't be someone gunning for him after this request was officially submitted. He decided to read through it
once more, then signed the bottom of the page. It was very likely that nothing whatsoever would come of his request, but at least he would have tried. And that was something. Everyone deserved a second chance – a true second chance – and Doranbolt felt that his actions had warranted this.

He quickly stood up and took long strides to the door. He could very easily have rolled the paper up and sent it through the interdepartmental mailing system that had a tube running from every office to the mail processing center, but those people were incredibly inept. They lost more mail than he thought humanly possible. So, Doranbolt decided to take the initiative and make sure his request was set in the proper hands. He could do that much, at least.

"Doranbolt." The Direct Line mage kept his gaze forward as Gran Doma's voice boomed across the Council's meeting room. "Explain yourself."

"What precisely would you like me to explain, sir?"

"This… request…" The aged man sneered at the paperwork in his hand that he and the other Council members had been reviewing for the past month. "What exactly is this supposed to be?"

"It's exactly what it looks like," Doranbolt replied. He cleared his throat and lifted his gaze to look into the Chairman's eyes in defiance as he continued. "I personally feel that Prisoner 100977 – otherwise known as Cobra of the Oracion Seis – should be released on probation."

"That's absurd!" a faceless voice shouted indignantly. "He's a psychopath!"

"I don't think so," Doranbolt answered. When Gran Doma lifted a brow in question, he sighed. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

Gran Doma didn't spare a single glance at the other members present, and simply nodded. He was very curious to see just what had possessed Doranbolt to submit something so off-the-wall, and he refused to let any of the others try and stop him.

"The prisoner has shown himself capable of performing good deeds, as evidenced by his assistance during the Grand Magic Games to stop the dragon attack," Doranbolt said firmly. "He's willingly been taken into custody twice, and actually sought out the Rune Knights after the dragons disappeared so he could be returned to prison – something he had promised he would do. The guards that see him on a daily basis say that he doesn't cause problems—"

"That's not what I've heard," one Council member grumbled.

"Indeed… He does have quite the mouth on him," another member answered.

"His previous crimes notwithstanding, it's not like we can just keep him locked up for being an insufferable ass," a third said thoughtfully.

"But his previous crimes are withstanding! That's why he's in prison to begin with!"

Doranbolt cleared his throat again and waited for everyone's attention to get drawn back to him. "I believe he does that simply to get a rise out of people. Maybe even boredom. It's very likely that he's not actually doing it for any reason other than the fact that he likes to do it, but he's more than served his time."

"How?! Because you broke him out and he got to cause destruction and mayhem?!"

"That's a good point… I'm starting to think you have a soft spot for him, Doranbolt. Is there anything
else we need to know about your sudden interest in his prison sentence?"

"I have no ulterior motives where the prisoner is concerned," Doranbolt answered, "If that's what you're implying. I am a firm believer in giving people second chances, especially when they've proven that they're willing to do the right thing."

"How can we be sure his motives for following orders were selfless?"

"We can't," Gran Doma said solemnly. "However, a person's motives for anything are hardly selfless. We cannot necessarily fault the prisoner for selfishness…"

Doranbolt's eyebrows wanted to quickly vacate his forehead at the disconcertingly pensive look on the Chairman's face, but he was lucky enough to be able to school his expression before it showed his surprise. "I've requested for Cobra to be released on probation because I believe that, given the right circumstances, he can turn over a new leaf. Obviously, there would need to be heavy restrictions and stipulations in his case, but his particular magic could be a huge benefit to society."

"And how exactly do you suggest controlling him?"

"Simple," Doranbolt shrugged, "Have him join a guild. One that can keep him in line, or subdue him until Rune Knights arrive to take him into custody." He watched as the Councilmen and women began arguing with one another, and when he looked back to the Chairman, Doranbolt actually gulped. Gran Doma definitely didn't look pleased by what was happening, but it was a rare thing to see the man smile anyway. "I feel this is the right thing to do, sir," he said over the increasing volume of the other voices in the room.

Gran Doma steepled his fingers in thought, then sighed and dismissed Doranbolt with a wave. "Return to your duties," he said. "We will discuss this matter."

Doranbolt bowed his head, then turned and walked out. 'Well, the hard part's done,' he thought with a heavy sigh as he closed the door to the Council Chamber slammed shut behind him. As he started walking down the hall, feeling just a little bit lighter, the pep in his step suddenly faltered when his stomach decided to plummet to the floor. "Oh god," he whispered in horror, staring at the floor and slowly shaking his head. "If they agree… Oh god, no… The paperwork!"

A keening cry of despair was heard throughout the Magic Council's headquarters, and a small smirk lifted the corner of Cobra's lips when the volume of it reached even his ears down in his cell. He'd know that voice and soul anywhere, and there was no way in hell he could stop himself from laughing when one thought stuck out like a sore thumb.

'Paperwork. So much paperwork! What have I done?!'

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Doranbolt was done. Officially finished. His desk was so spotless, he was sure even Lahar would be willing to eat off of it. Okay, maybe that was an exaggeration. Lahar would consider eating off of his sparkling desk that was free of paperwork, and then promptly snort and push his glasses up before walking off indignantly while giving a backhanded compliment that ran along the lines of, 'I'm pleased to see your desk is so organized. Why is it you can't manage to keep it like this any other time?...' Yeah, that was more like him. Regardless of that, Doranbolt was immensely happy.

There wasn't a single file that he needed to attend to. Everything was finished. He looked up at the clock and grinned when he saw that he only had five minutes to wait before his vacation officially started. Nine whole days of no stress about work. Nine of them! Which mean that he would be able to spend several days with Wendy before returning to get a few repairs done on his home.
Doranbolt sighed contentedly and leaned back in his chair, lacing his fingers together over his stomach and closing his eyes to just enjoy the utter tranquility of that moment. Three minutes left.

The door to his office suddenly opened, and one of the many delivery clerks rushed in. Doranbolt's eyes shot open when there was a loud thunk on his desk, only to see a file that was several inches thick sitting right in front of him. "No," he sneered, turning his attention to the messenger to tell them to take it back until he returned... only to find that they had rushed out as quickly as possible. "Noooo," he whined dramatically, "Come on!"

He glanced at the clock and shook his head at the unfairness of it all. Two minutes. He had two minutes before he was finished! "Might as well see what this is," he muttered. The folder itself didn't give him any information on the contents, so Doranbolt quickly opened it and a wide grin settled itself on his face.

Request for Probationary Release: Granted

Inmate: 100977
Name: Cobra
Previous Affiliation: Oracion Seis

This was definitely a surprise. Doranbolt had assumed that the Council had simply dismissed the request as soon as he'd left their meeting chamber that day. A whole month and a half had gone by, and there hadn't been any word whatsoever on a decision from them. It seemed that his little speech had done wonders in convincing at least a couple of the Council's members that Cobra had the ability to be rehabilitated, and it took everything in his power to hold in the literal jump for joy that wanted to escape and vault him into a whole song and dance over his success.

A quick perusal of the contents revealed that it was all of the paperwork that needed to be filled out and filed for Cobra to be released back into society, along with a copy of his extensive record – well, at least what the Council had been able to charge him with. Doranbolt was sure there were plenty of crimes they were either unaware of, or didn't have enough evidence to pin on the Poison Slayer. A groan slipped past his lips when he glanced at the clock and saw that his vacation had officially started three minutes prior. He could easily take the file with him to work on at home before leaving for Magnolia, but that would cut into his time off... Also, he really didn't want to deal with filling out all of this paperwork, especially when he saw it was double-sided, and there were triplicates of everything.

He rubbed his hands over his face, internally torn on how to best handle this flaming bag of shit that had been dropped in his lap. Cobra would be none the wiser if he left it until he returned, but he just couldn't bring himself to keep the man locked up for his own selfish reasons. A heavy sigh spilled from him and he slowly stood up to leave, tucking the enormous file under his arm. As he trudged to the office door, he glared at Lahar's pristine desk. It was always like that, but the sight of it sickened him. His old friend was terrifyingly skilled at getting through piles of paperwork before the day was out, and he seldom left with anything waiting for him the next day.

A dark chuckle sounded out through the room when he paused. Lahar... That could work. There was no name on the file for the person assigned to handle the case, which meant he could leave it for Lahar to find and take his vacation. He would do the paperwork, ensuring everything was perfect, and he would have no clue that Doranbolt had screwed him over until it was too late.

He moved to stand in front of the desk, then grinned and carefully settled it right in the center of his friend's desk. He took an extra minute to ensure that not a single paper was askew, and that the edges of the file lined up perfectly with the edges of the desk, then took a step back. "Oh yeah, this is perfect," he chuckled to himself. What better way to help Cobra out and mess with his friend?
"Absolutely perfect."

Doranbolt left the office with his head held high, a jaunty tune being whistled while he practically skipped out of the Council's headquarters. This was going to be the best vacation ever.

Keys lightly jingled in the early morning silence that permeated the halls of the Magic Council. There were very few employees that were actually present at a quarter to seven, since no one's shifts really started until around eight, but Lahar had made it a habit to come in early and ensure that he had everything he would need for the day in perfect order. Besides, it gave him time to just sit and relax before Doranbolt came in and started to annoy him.

A small smirk pulled at his lips when he realized that he would be Doranbolt-free for the next nine days, which meant that he wouldn't be tempted to throw his old friend into a cell every five minutes for his nearly nonstop tomfoolery. He sighed contentedly as the locking mechanism in the door to their shared office was released, and made his way into the room. It took no time at all for Lahar to realize that there was something seriously wrong even before he flipped on the lights, but he couldn't place precisely what it was.

His eye narrowed as he immediately looked at Doranbolt's desk and closed the door behind him. It was spotless, nearly shining with its lack of piles of paperwork that the Direct Line mage had yet to file or complete. That feat alone was practically a cause for celebration, but he just couldn't place why its lack of paperwork was suddenly so irksome.

It didn't take long for him to figure it out, though. One file was sitting on his desk. There hadn't been any paperwork there when he'd left the previous day – as was the case every single day when he was leaving. The several inch thick folder was settled so neatly, directly in the center of his desk, that he felt it was mocking him. Long strides had Lahar closing the distance in a matter of seconds, and he scowled down at the file.

"Doranbolt," he ground out between tightly gritted teeth. He couldn't prove that Doranbolt had actually done this – that he'd been stupid enough to try and pass off this file as one that had been assigned to Lahar – but there really was no other explanation for its presence. At least, not with it sitting where it was. Clearly, the man that had been his partner and friend for years had never noticed that when new files were left for him, even after he'd gone home for the day, they were set on the bottom right corner of his desk. Perfectly aligned with the corner itself. With two rubber bands around the file to ensure nothing slipped out and got lost. Lahar had refused to accept them unless they were prepared to his specifications – a caveat he was afforded due to his impeccable record concerning the diligent work he put into any and all files that bore his signature – which could only mean that Doranbolt had decided his vacation was more important than whatever this monstrosity held.

While Lahar would have loved to simply put the folder back on Doranbolt's desk and make the Direct Line mage handle it when he returned, the sheer thickness of the file had piqued his interest. It was clear that Doranbolt wanted him to handle the paperwork on this case, and that either meant that he was being lazy… Or that he knew it would be handled quickly and with the utmost care if it was entrusted to Lahar in his absence. Possibly both. In fact, most likely both.

"Damn," he cursed under his breath. Leave it to the man he had befriended so long ago to remember his obsessive tendencies where things of this nature were concerned. Doranbolt knew that he wouldn't be able to turn this away, no matter how much he really wanted to. He slowly sat down in his seat and opened the file, then blanched when the picture that was fastened to the inside cover of the folder caught his eye.
'Cobra?! Why in the name of all that is holy would he receive a file on that monster?!' he thought incredulously. The very first page was what gave him the answers he was seeking. Probation. Someone – namely Doranbolt and the entire Council – had lost their ever-loving mind, and actually granted Cobra a probationary release. Surely, this had to be another one of Doranbolt's pranks. It seemed they only got more elaborate as the years went by, but deep down… Lahar knew that he would never take it this far. Which could only mean that Doranbolt truly felt Cobra deserved to be released into society. The signed statement to that effect was proof enough of that.

The one good thing about Fridays for the Head Captain of the Custody Enforcement Unit was that there wasn't usually much for him to do, unless someone was trying to take over the world. 'Much like this abomination,' he sourly reminded himself. It didn't make much sense to him that this day of the week in particular was so slow, and that Tuesdays were the busiest, but he refused to question it; especially when he had something of great intrigue to read.

Two hours later, after having gone over the folder's contents in their entirety, Lahar had come to realize two things.

Doranbolt's apparent mental instability was contagious, and had clearly affected everyone on the Council.

This file was sure to be his ticket to finally taking down Fairy Tail once and for all.

Cobra was to be placed in a mage's guild for them to monitor his rehabilitation and acclimate him to society as a law-abiding citizen. While he was loathe to admit that Fairy Tail would be the most effective in at least detaining the deranged criminal should ('More like when,' he thought) he get out of line, that bunch of drunkards was surprisingly effective when it came to that. The coup de grâce, however, was that Fairy Tail was also very well known for causing destruction and mayhem. Should Cobra be arrested again, he would be locked up in an instant. And if that bothersome guild was claiming responsibility for him, then Lahar would hopefully have enough ammunition – along with however many damage reports were incurred that involved the Poison Slayer – to request the Council's cooperation in ridding them of the nuisance known as Fairy Tail. With Cobra's inability to play nice with anyone, it would only speed along the process of finally locking that barrel full of lunatics away for good.

Without a moment's hesitation, Lahar formulated a plan and activated the lacrima on his desk. If he didn't have to keep up appearances, he most likely would have been prancing around like a giddy little schoolgirl over the prospect of removing every thorn in his side in one fell swoop; however, he still had official business to attend to. His uncharacteristic prancing – that could very well turn into a full musical production later on when he was at home – would have to wait. He had some Fairies to deal with.

Not a moment after that though crossed his mind, Lahar made sure his standard stoic mask was in place just before Makarov Dreyar's ancient visage appeared on the orb. "Guildmaster Dreyar," he said with a formal bow of his head.

"Ah, Captain Lahar," Makarov chuckled. "What did my brats destroy this time, and how many pounds of their flesh should I send to the Council to help pay for the debt?"

Lahar blinked slowly, then said, "Actually, this has nothing to do with your guild's destructive tendencies."

Makarov's jaw popped open in surprise, then he grinned and raised his hands into the air. "It's a miracle!" he shouted to the ceiling of his office. "I'm not being called to bail anyone out, or give you my mon – I mean, the guild's money!"
Lahar sighed when Makarov began blubering and thanking whole scores of deities for what was clearly a great honor that had been bestowed upon him. Finally, he cleared his throat and said, "I have been given orders that your guild will be receiving a new member."

"New member?"

"Yes. Cobra of the Oracion Seis is being released on probation, and has been assigned to join Fairy Tail as he adjusts to living in society normally."

Makarov blinked several times in surprise, then narrowed his eyes. "Why my guild?" he asked suspiciously.

"Furthermore," Lahar continued as he looked down at the paperwork in front of him, writing down a small addendum that would need to be copied into the official final draft, "He will not be able to work as a solo mage based on his history of—well, you know his history fairly well—which means he has also been assigned a team." He lifted his gaze to see Makarov waiting with barely contained anger etched into his very pores. "Team Natsu will gain one additional member."

"Absolutely not!"

"This is not up for discussion," Lahar replied coolly. "The Magic Council has decided that—"

"Why?" Makarov asked with a sneer. "Why precisely has he been assigned here? To the same place his previous allies have already attacked twice."

"Because both times your guild faced the Oracion Seis, you have come out victorious," Lahar answered. "Team Natsu, based on eyewitness accounts of the Nirvana incident and the few statements we've received from the criminals themselves, successfully defeated them in both instances. Erza Scarlet and Natsu Dragneel have faced Cobra in battle, so if he gets out of line at any point, they are the best equipped to subdue him."

"And what of their feelings concerning this?" Makarov asked. "Lucy Heartfilia was a victim to their depravity earlier this year. Do you expect me to stand aside and let the Council force this burden on her as well?"

"That is not my concern. You have no choice in this matter, Guildmaster Dreyar. It has already been decided, and your guild will just have to deal with this inconvenience."

"This is unacceptable."

"While I personally agree with you," Lahar lied through his teeth, "This is just the way it must be. No one is better equipped to handle this case than your guild." He looked back down at the statement that Doranbolt had submitted to start this whole thing, then added, "He was released temporarily to assist in the dragon attack, and has willingly gone into custody twice. The Council believes that, under the right circumstances, Cobra can be rehabilitated to function normally in society. Your guild prides itself on forgiveness and camaraderie; therefore, he will have the greatest chance of success there."

There was a long pause before Makarov finally sighed and said, "Very well. It can't be helped. I will inform Team Natsu of their newest addition. How long until he is here?"

"You have one week." Lahar watched with no small amount of amusement as Makarov slid a hand over his face before nodding. "I will see you then." With the small guildmaster's nod, Lahar cut off the lacrima and sat back in his chair, a wide grin spreading across his face. The hours paperwork to release Cobra would be well worth it, along with the extra paperwork when Fairy Tail failed to keep
the Poison Slayer in line. He would finally be rid of them once and for all.

"I love Fridays," Lahar whispered to himself.

Makarov glared at the lacrima once the call was ended, clenching his fists again and again to try and calm himself down. He knew there was something more to this than Lahar was admitting, but there was no way to know for sure just what it was. He was very well aware of the Council's dislike for his guild, and could easily assume that assigning Cobra to Fairy Tail was just another ploy of theirs to try and dismantle his family once and for all.

"It does seem suspicious," Mavis said thoughtfully from her position on the corner of his desk. "But who are we to deny someone a second chance?"

"He's not coming here of his own free will, First," Makarov sighed. "Gajeel and Juvia were our enemies once, but joined because they wanted to change for the better. That isn't the case with Cobra."

"How can you be so sure he doesn't also want that?" she asked. "He could be willing to make amends and live a good life, but there's no way for him to do that in prison."

Makarov ran a hand over his face and nodded. She did have a point. Maybe Cobra was willing to do this, and his wishes had been taken into consideration when the Council had placed him with them. "I need to talk to Team Natsu," he sighed. "This… isn't going to end well…"

Mavis giggled and kicked her legs back and forth as Makarov made his way to the door of his office. "They are a rambunctious group," she said with a wide smile. "Definitely full of life."

Makarov chuckled and shook his head as he closed the door behind him. "That they are," he whispered. Once he reached the balcony on the second floor, he hopped up onto the banister and took in a deep breath to get the Team in question's attention, only to gape at the intensity of the guild brawl that was happening.

Ice flew in a wide arc through the air and decimated a pillar. Fire shot off in the opposite direction, having much the same effect on a pillar across the room. The pile of dust and flailing limbs was a common sight, but it was the inclusion of both Erza and Laxus that had Makarov at a complete loss for words. Even Cana had joined in!

A quick look around showed that there wasn't a single occupied seat anywhere else in the guild – especially since there weren't many intact tables or chairs – and he glanced down to see Mira happily polishing glasses at the bar. And then he saw Lucy. She was the picture of serenity and happiness while she sat at the bar and sipped her strawberry smoothie, chatting away with Mira Jane and seemingly oblivious to the massive battle ensuing behind her. Makarov couldn't help but grin when he looked at her. The young woman was always so vibrant and somehow managed to keep her teammates in check (to a point), which was definitely no small feat. No matter what hardships she faced, Lucy always came out with a smile and buckets of optimism. Of course, she was human and it took some time for her to return to her bubbly personality in full when some disaster occurred, but she never lost that beautiful light in her eyes that so easily set others at peace. It was no wonder she was called the Light of the Guild.

"Listen up, Brats!" Makarov shouted, his voice booming across the guild and halting everything in an instant. When everyone's attention was on him, he cleared his throat and said, "I need to see Erza, Lucy, Gray, Natsu, and Happy in my office immediately." With his announcement complete, Makarov hopped down and made his way back to his office.
It only took two minutes for Team Natsu to file into his office, each of them taking on a look of trepidation and curiosity for the reason they’d been called in there. Makarov took a look at each of them for a long minute, then sighed and said, "It seems we will be gaining a new member, children."

"That's awesome!" Natsu shouted with a wide grin. "Now I'll have someone new to fight!"

"Shut it, Flamebrain. Let Master finish!"

"Enough, you two," Erza said sternly, smirking when the Fire and Ice mages clutched tightly to each other.

"As I was saying," Makarov continued, "The Council has decided to release a prisoner back into society, and we have been tasked with assisting him in turning over a new leaf.” He paused and let the news sink in, then added, "He will be joining your team, as you five are the most capable of handling him in the event that he reverts to his old ways."

"Master, who is this prisoner?" Erza asked, earning a chorus of agreement in her curiosity from Natsu, Gray, and Happy.

Makarov turned his gaze to Lucy to see that she was just as curious, but he wondered why she had stayed silent this entire time. "Cobra."

That one word was all it took for everyone to lose it.

"No way, Master!" Natsu shouted defiantly, his fists instantly igniting in tandem with the raging inferno of his anger. "That guy's tried to kill us twice now!"

Lucy took a small step back, staying otherwise silent, as the heat radiating from her partner increased on her right while Gray began dropping the temperature in the room to her left.

"You can't be serious!" Gray bellowed, tossing his shirt to the side and clenching his fists tightly. "That bastard and his friends nearly killed Lucy!"

Erza took several steps forward. "Master, we refuse to let someone like him join us. You can't ask us to do this and just forget what's happened."

"This is bullshit!" Natsu roared. "Did they all just forget that Luce was nearly sacrificed to a damn clock because of him?! Why the hell are they letting him out to begin with?!

"Because they've lost their goddamn minds!" Gray replied with a sneer. "No way are we letting that monster come anywhere near Lucy again. She could have died, all because Cobra and his buddies are a bunch of psychopaths!"

Happy flew down and cowered in Lucy's arms as Erza, Natsu, and Gray continued shouting. He looked up at the blonde worriedly when she simply held onto him while staring blankly at the floor. "Lushy?" he whispered, "Are you okay?"

"ENOUGH!" Makarov bellowed, increasing his size and slamming a hand down on top of the three uproarious members of Team Natsu before they could cause any damage. "You will listen to me, and then this discussion will be over. Are we clear?!

"Master, you can't do this!" Natsu shouted once Makarov lifted his gargantuan hand. "Think about Luce! She's gonna have to work with that guy?!

"Natsu!" Erza ground out. "Let Master finish!"
Makarov sighed when Natsu fell to the ground after receiving a gauntlet to the head. "I have called you here to inform you of his assignment to our guild. There is nothing we can do to change this, but I would like each of you to take a moment and decide where you all stand concerning his presence here."

"Well, Ash Breath is clearly against it," Gray muttered as he looked down at the unconscious mage on the floor. He definitely agreed with Natsu on this one. Cobra was a monster that had no right to be released back into society. He had no clue what the Council was thinking in letting someone like that go, even if they were forcing him to join a legal guild. He turned to look at Makarov again and sighed. "I don't want that guy here at all, but orders are orders, Master," he finally said. "I'll just have to deal with it."

Makarov nodded solemnly and looked at Happy. For his part, Happy simply hovered in the air above the now unconscious Natsu and shrugged. "I guess there's nothing we can do about it… I just hope he's not gonna try to hurt anyone…"

Erza thought long and hard about what was being forced on them, then cleared her throat. After really thinking about it all, she wanted to give Cobra the benefit of the doubt concerning his change of heart. He was a product of the Tower of Heaven, and the horrors inflicted upon the slaves there could cause anyone to lose their path. She had very nearly gone down a darker path because of what had happened back then, but it was because of Fairy Tail that she hadn't descended into darkness. Jellal was proof enough that someone could change for the better, and if Cobra was willing to put forth the effort to atone for his past, then she was willing to help him. If not… She still had that hammer. "It is shocking, Master," she said after a few deep breaths to keep herself calm, "But, I will assist him in any way possible as long as his intention is truly to change his life around. If not... The Council will have little trouble detaining him once I am through with him."

Makarov smiled at his children, pride filling him that they hadn't gone on a complete rampage. Their initial reactions to the news had been something he'd expected from them – the lively little stinkers – but there wasn't any property damage. That was always a plus in his book. The one he was most concerned with, however, had stayed completely silent. Lucy had simply been staring at the ground while the rest shouted over one another, and even while everyone gave their opinions on Cobra's presence in the guild. Before he could ask for Lucy's opinion, Erza clapped her hands and began ushering the team out of his office. A frown pulled at the corners of his mouth when Lucy stayed in place, worrying her lower lip between her teeth.

"Lucy, you comin'?" Gray asked as he dragged Natsu's limp body toward the door.

"I—"

"There is something I must discuss with Lucy," Makarov said firmly, never taking his eyes off of the Celestial mage in question. He waited until her team was gone, with the door closing quietly behind them, before he stood from his seat and made his way over to the young blonde. "Lucy, child… What is your opinion concerning Cobra joining our guild, and your team?" he asked softly.

"I…” Lucy sighed and slowly lifted her gaze to Makarov's ancient face, taking in his caring eyes that always made her feel safe to speak her mind – so much different than her father's had been for most of her life. "I'd like to make a request, Master," she said softly.

"What is it, my child?"

"I want to see for myself that he's really changed… Before he gets here."

"What?" Makarov asked in shock. He dumbly followed Lucy as she sighed and walked over to a
small couch along the far wall, then sat himself down next to her. "Could you be a little more specific?"

Lucy slowly nodded and looked back down at the floor. "This just seems so sudden, Master," she said softly. "I want to believe that he's changed, and that the Council is sending him to us because we can help him get back on his feet. And everyone deserves a second chance…" She paused and smiled while looking over at Makarov. "Sometimes a third or fourth, even."

Makarov chuckled and held Lucy's hands with his own when she turned to fully face him. "Go on, child. I can see there's more you have to say."

Lucy nodded, her smile fading into a mask of determination. "I never directly interacted with Cobra like Natsu and Erza did. I've only ever seen him in passing – like when I was being absorbed into the Clock – and I only know what they've told me about him. I want to see for myself what kind of person he really is. I refuse to make a decision on what I've been told by others, and I think that… If he's really willing to put in the effort to live a good life, then he should get that chance."

"But, you wish to speak with him to see if you feel he's sincere about it?"

Lucy smiled sweetly. "Exactly. Do you think it would be possible?"

"I think we can work something out, Lucy," Makarov replied softly. "I care for your opinion the most in this instance." When Lucy jolted in surprise and just stared at him, Makarov gently patted her hand and added, "You were targeted by the Oracion Seis earlier this year. If Cobra's presence here will be too much for you to handle, I'll take on the entire Council to make sure he's sent somewhere else."

Lucy giggled and lunged forward, wrapping her arms around the tiny guildmaster and staying utterly oblivious to the fact that his face was wedged between her breasts. "Thank you, Master! You're the best, y'know that?"

Mavis giggled and shook her head, then said, "Lucy, I fear you're cutting off his oxygen supply with your Erza-hug."

Lucy squeaked in alarm and pulled Makarov away from her, wincing when he started gasping for air. "I'm sorry, Master!"

Makarov waved off her concern and stumbled to his feet. "I'll be sure to check that off of my bucket list later on, I thought. He made his way back over to his desk and hopped onto the top of it. "I will contact Captain Lahar—" He paused and chuckled when Lucy groaned her displeasure at having to deal with that particularly rigid man. "—And see what we can do to work out a meeting for you."

Lucy moved to sit in front of Makarov's desk while he activated the lacrima, and curled her lip in disgust when she heard Lahar's voice.

"Guildmaster Dreyar," Lahar answered.

"About this Cobra business," Makarov said, a smug grin crinkling his aged face when Lahar raised an eyebrow at him. "I'd like to arrange a meeting between Lucy and Cobra before he's released."

"… What?"

Lucy bit her lips to stifle her laughter. Only Lahar could pour that much derision, condescension, and confusion into a single word. While the idea of Cobra joining the guild was nerve-wracking and
cause for quite a bit of concern on her part, apparently Lucy was so far gone that Lahar was bringing her dangerously close to a hysterical giggling fit.

"You heard correctly," Makarov chuckled, glancing at Lucy to see her throwing her hands over her mouth to contain her mirth. That was what he wanted to see from the sweet blonde, all smiles. "I've spoken with Team Natsu about the Council's decision, and Lucy has explained to me that she would like to speak with Cobra before he is released."

"Why, exactly?"

"Well, he did try to use her as a sacrifice," Makarov deadpanned. "I'm personally leaving it up to her discretion on whether or not we will accept him into the guild."

Lucy froze, her eyes going wide in shock before she started violently waving her hands in front of her to stop Makarov from continuing. Of course, he ignored her.

"Should Lucy decide that Cobra's intentions are not sincere, or if she feels that she cannot work with him because of their history, I will personally take the matter up with the Council and see about having him assigned to another guild."

"The Council has already decided—" Lahar started, only to narrow his eyes when he was interrupted.

"And the Council can easily change their minds," Makarov said firmly.

"I highly doubt we will be able to accommodate Team Natsu for a meeting," Lahar stated.

Lucy cleared her throat, smiling when Makarov turned his attention to her. "Well, I was actually hoping that we could keep the rest of the team in the dark on this," she said. "Otherwise, they'll probably end up attacking him before we get any answers, and then we'll be charged for any damages to the building… Or buildings, really…"

Makarov nodded and looked at the lacrima again. "Only Lucy will be present for the meeting."

Lahar sighed heavily as he pushed his glasses higher on the bridge of his nose. "Very well. I will be arriving in one week to escort Lucy Heartfilia to Era for a meeting with Cobra. Is this acceptable? Or do you have anything else you wish to add…"

Makarov grinned and shook his head. "That's all for now." Without warning the lacrima disconnected, and he quickly snapped his fingers as he said, "Drat! I meant to remind him to see a proctologist for that stick situation…"

Lucy dropped to the ground and laughed hysterically. In all honesty, she sort of pitied Cobra if he was going to be joining their big ball of crazy. She had been sane when she joined, so how would someone with several screws loose fair with the Fairies? 'Guess we'll find out soon enough,' she thought.

'Today's the day,' Lucy thought as she sat at the bar. One week had flown by, and now she was simply waiting for Lahar to show up and take her to Era for her meeting with Cobra. She would be lying if she said that she wasn't nervous. She was pretty sure a kaleidoscope of butterflies had taken residence in her stomach, and wouldn't be leaving until the day was out. She hoped.

"You'll do fine, child," Makarov said gently.
"Sure, Master," Lucy sighed, giving him a strained smile. "Except his freedom now rests on my shoulders..."

"That's not the case, child," Makarov replied. He looked out across the guild and smiled when he saw just how lively all of his children were. "We are a family, Lucy. Many of us have made mistakes in the past," he continued as he turned to look back at the young blonde, "But it is our ability to forgive that sets us apart from the rest. Take a look around at the ones who were once considered our enemies, and tell me what you see."

Lucy slowly turned on her barstool and surveyed the guild. Gajeel and Natsu were locked in a mildly friendly arm-wrestling match. Gray was running stark naked across the hall with Juvia chasing after him, holding his clothing to her chest with hearts in her eyes. Evergreen smacked a cackling Bickslow with her fan at the Raijinshuu's new table on the first floor. Freed sat next to Levy with several large tomes surrounding them, the pair totally engrossed in their conversation with matching smiles on their faces. Laxus stood on the second floor, his arms supporting his weight on the banister as he looked out across the guild with a barely noticeable smile on his face. She sighed happily and said, "They're all part of our family, and they're happy."

"How did they gain the ability to show their happiness so openly, child?"

"Forgiveness." Lucy turned back to her nearly empty smoothie. It wasn't that she didn't think she could forgive Cobra for his past transgressions. She had forgiven everyone else in the guild for their mistakes. It was that she didn't know if he was sincere about wanting to start over. She had no idea what he was really like, if he was as psychotic as Natsu and Erza made him out to be. 'Maybe he just needs the chance to prove they're wrong about him...'

"Each and every one of them," Makarov said with a small smile on his face, "Gained forgiveness from us. It wasn't just their willingness to change, to prove that they can do the right thing. It was also our own belief that they were capable of accomplishing that goal. We gave them all a second chance, but we also had faith in them. And now... Each of them is thriving where they never could have before."

Lucy nodded and smiled over at Makarov. "As long as he's willing to do the same, then I'll have faith in him, Master."

"I hope that he does then," Makarov replied. "His reception will most likely be..."

"The apocalypse," Lucy sighed.

"Precisely," he chuckled. "He will need to have someone on his side, Lucy." He watched as a suddenly fierce look of determination took its place on her delicate face, and pride for the woman before him swelled until he felt as though he would burst. Lucy was most definitely the best-suited for this task. She would be able to (hopefully) find the truth in Cobra's motivation for being released from prison, and the ex-criminal would gain a very powerful ally in regards to relations with the rest of Fairy Tail. "I can already tell that you'll be that someone."

Lucy grinned and got ready to agree with Makarov when the doors to the guild suddenly opened, causing an eerie hush to fall over the building's occupants. She turned in her seat to see Lahar with far too many Rune Knights walking through the center of the room, on a direct path to herself and Makarov.

"Guildmaster Dreyar," Lahar said with a small bow of his head. "We have come for Lucy Heartfilia."
"What?!” the guild shouted collectively.

Natsu, Gray, and Erza rushed forward just as Lucy was standing up from her seat, and she grunted when she was suddenly crushed to an armored chest while Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum stood protectively in front of her. "Guys—"

"No, Luce," Natsu growled. "Don't worry, he's not gonna take you away."

"Yeah," Gray commented, narrowing his eyes at Lahar. "He's gonna have to get through us first."

Lucy looked pleadingly at Makarov and rolled her eyes when he simply shrugged. "Guys—"

"What is it you want with Lucy?" Erza demanded.

"Guys, wait—"

"I'm all fired up!"

Lahar, for his part, stood before Team Natsu entirely unfazed. Well, almost entirely. He did find it rather humorous to see Lucy's fruitless attempts at extricating herself from Erza's suffocating grasp. "If you would release your teammate before she loses consciousness, Erza Scarlet."

Erza glanced down to see Lucy's face turning blue and quickly let her go. "My apologies, Lucy. You may strike me for my impudence!"

Lucy waved her off while gasping for air, tightly gripping the bar and sending a withering glare at Makarov's cheeky grin. "You suck, Master," she whispered, her voice filled with not a single drop of venom. After another moment, she couldn't help but smile at him. This was exactly what he'd meant. If someone like Lahar received this sort of welcome in the guild, then Cobra's was sure to be much much worse.

"Let her pass," Makarov said solemnly, nodding when Erza whirled around to stare at him in surprise. "She must go with them."

"Master, what the hell?" Gray asked incredulously.

Lucy sighed and rolled her eyes. She placed a gentle hand on Natsu's shoulder when he continued glaring at Lahar, smiling when he relaxed and looked at her. "I'll be back soon, okay Natsu?"

"Luce… What's going on?" he whispered worriedly, quickly pulling her into his arms. "Why's he trying to take you away?"

"I'll explain everything once I come back, Natsu. I promise."

"And you'll be back… Right?"

Lucy giggled and poked her toasty partner in the side. "Of course I will! No one's gonna keep me away from my family."

Lahar cleared his throat again. "Sometime today would be preferable, Miss Heartfilia."

Lucy sighed again and pulled herself from Natsu's embrace, only to be tucked into a cool chest with a pair of familiar lips pressing lightly against the top of her head. "Be careful, Lucy. Whatever's going on… Just be careful."

"Will do, Gray," she answered sweetly. "Try not to fight Natsu too much, okay?"
"Heh, no promises there. Sulfurbreath over there is an idiot."

"What did you say, Popsicle Dick?"

Lucy quickly dodged an attack that was sent at Gray, and stumbled right into Lahar. She squeaked in surprise and righted herself as quickly as possible, then impatiently motioned for him to lead the way. "Really?" she grumbled to herself as the pair of them were completely surrounded by Rune Knight as they made their way out of the guild and to the train station.

As soon as the doors were closed behind the large entourage, everyone turned to look at Makarov in question. "Listen up, brats," he said as he stood to his feet. "Lucy will explain exactly what is happening when she returns. She will be returning in the next few days, so you all…" He paused and looked directly at Team Natsu. "Will listen to me, and not follow her. That is an order, and you don't want to know what the punishment will be if you should disobey it. Is that understood?"

When he was only met with silence, Makarov nodded and made his way up to the second floor to stand next to Laxus. "You're not telling them?" Laxus whispered as he looked down at his grandfather.

"No," Makarov replied, shaking his head when he saw Natsu and Happy sneaking out of the guild. "If they knew, then there would be no stopping them from following her."

"They'd destroy everything," Laxus chuckled, turning to watch the guild again. "You'd probably have a heart attack when you saw the bill."

"Exactly," Makarov said gravely. "So, with my own health in mind, I've decided to just let them wait."

"Still can't believe you're letting Blondie do this, Gramps…"

Makarov smiled proudly as he watched the guild with Laxus. "She will do fine, Laxus. I have faith in her."
Lucy sighed as she looked out of the window to the carriage she and Lahar were occupying. Honestly, she had thought that the guy would have used a little more discretion while coming to escort her from Fairy Tail. "You know," she mused softly, never taking her eyes from the passing scenery, "You didn't need to treat this like I was a criminal."

"It is common practice to have a guarded escort, Miss Heartfilia," Lahar said blandly. In all honesty, he had been hoping for more of a ruckus from the guild so he could use the Rune Knights' presence to his advantage and take a few of those hooligans into custody. Sadly, it hadn't worked out that way. Still, he had hope that Cobra's ne'er-do-well attitude would be enough to get rid of the Fairies once and for all. "I would have thought someone like yourself would appreciate the thought."

Lucy's eye twitched when she heard the small bit of derision in his voice. For quite some time now, she'd heard enough about how she should act because of her upbringing and family name, and she was damn well tired of it. "Well, excuse me for not living up to your expectations, Captain," she spat.

"You're excused."

Her teeth ground together in agitation, and she finally turned to level Lahar with a glare that would make any of the Slayers in the guild proud. Only for it to falter when she saw the small, nearly imperceptible quirk to his lip. 'The fucker thinks that's funny?!' she internally screeched. "I wasn't aware someone like yourself was authorized to have a sense of humor," Lucy shot back. "Then again… Maybe it was just that knobbly stick up your ass that jiggled a little bit when we went over a bump in the road."

His amusement died in an instant. Lahar's face was wholly blank as he pushed his glasses higher on his nose. "I assure you, Miss Heartfilia," he said calmly, "That is not the case."

"Oh, so the stick didn't jiggle?" Lucy taunted. "Huh. Maybe it's just gas then."

"There is no stick."

Lucy's head tilted to the side while she scrutinized him. The man before her was always so rigid and proper. She had never seen him lose his cool over anything before, and she could tell he was even more of a perfectionist than Freed and Rufus put together based on his appearance alone. Not a single strand of hair was out of place on his head, even though there had been quite a few turbulent gusts as they had made their way through Magnolia. She couldn't help but wonder just what hair products he used to give it that shine and still make it seem as though his hair naturally fell into that particular style.

"Discipline is a virtue, Miss Heartfilia. Perhaps you should strive for that."

Lucy blinked, finally realizing that she had clearly been talking to herself while staring at his hair. Maybe that was how he had managed to gain the position of Captain, though. She was sure that the gleaming, deep mocha strands she had been looking at had caused her to have no filter whatsoever. If that was the case, then she wasn't going to be caught in the web of that hair's gaze. She leaned back in her seat and looked out the window again. There was no point in trying to give him a witty comeback, regardless of how many she came up with. She would just have to settle for mentally strapping him to a chair and forcing him to watch as she cut each and every hair from his head, then burned it before his eyes.
Lahar eyed Lucy warily after she went silent, and was thankful that there were only two hours left of their journey to Era before they would need to switch out horses and continue on their way. He had a feeling that she was plotting against him, he was sure of it. Yet another reason that having the Rune Knights as an entourage was useful. After spending years learning to detect when Doranbolt was trying to hatch some harebrained scheme, he had picked up what nearly constituted as a sixth sense for it.

That small trickle of trepidation increased into a steady stream as time dragged onward until Lahar was nearly ripping his hair out while trying to figure out what the woman before him was planning. Her posture was slightly rigid, but not from agitation. There was a small quirk to her lips that he just knew would be spreading into a malicious grin at any moment. Her fingers tapped lightly on her legs, and he spent several minutes trying to find some sort of pattern or the use of Morse code.

Lucy bit the inside of her lip and finally couldn't take it any longer. The silence was driving her insane. 'I wonder...' she silently mused.

Lahar's eye twitched as the first small popping sound filled the carriage from Lucy's lips. Again and again, those incessant little pops sounded out, and it took everything in him to not just throw her out of the carriage. 'Why does everyone do this?!' Finally, he just couldn't handle it any longer. "Miss Heartfilia! If you would please attempt to control yourself!"

Lucy snickered as she stared out the window. "Discipline is a virtue, Captain Lahar," she said with all the poise and articulation of the debutante she was raised to be. "Perhaps you should strive for that."

Lahar's jaw snapped shut with a loud clatter as his teeth ground together. His jaw clenched repeatedly, and he could quite literally feel a vein sticking out on his forehead. He turned to look out of the opposite window of the carriage, and took a slow, deep breath. Lucy Heartfilia was going to be the first person he arrested once Fairy Tail was finally taken into custody. He would make sure of that.

Lucy sighed heavily when she saw the station coming up where they would be switching horses out. She looked down and fiddled with her keys while the switch was made, then looked up at Lahar once they started moving again. "Lahar?" she asked softly.

"Yes, Miss Heartfilia."

"Are we there yet?"

"No, Miss Heartfilia," Lahar answered. "We have another hour before we reach the city, then a thirty minute walk to the Council."

"Oh," Lucy sighed, deflating slightly and staring at her boots. Only a few moments went by before she asked, "Are we there now?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"But... This is so boring," Lucy whined petulantly. When Lahar turned to level her with a glare that she knew was meant to shut her up, Lucy's eyes were wide and innocent. "What?" she asked, throwing her hands up in the air, "I'm not making that popping noise now!"
"There must be some other way for you to entertain yourself," Lahar said in exasperation. He wasn't sure how much more of this he could handle, but dealing with Lucy Heartfilia was making him realize that he never wanted to have children. "Is there nothing you can think of to find some semblance of pleasure that doesn't involve annoying me?"

Lucy's face fell into an eerily stoic mask. "Captain Lahar," she said slowly, "Did you just suggest I start masturbating? Right here?"

Lahar blinked, his eyes widening in shock. His lip curled in disgust and he opened his mouth to dissuade her insinuation, only for it to clamp shut when Lucy burst out into a hysterical fit of laughter. She collapsed on the small floor of the carriage, her ridiculously short skirt riding higher on her slender thighs. He shook his head and spent the last hour of their journey thinking, 'Everyone in that guild is absolutely insane…'.

Lahar placed the stack of paperwork on the table in front of Lucy, and watched as her eyes widened in horror. "Here are the forms you will need to fill out before we can release him into your custody, Miss Heartfilia," he said, doing absolutely nothing to hide the amusement in his voice. He was immensely happy with the prospect of driving the young blonde quite literally insane, to the point of needing to be locked in a padded cell for the rest of her life, and by the look in her eyes… This paperwork was the key to it.

"This…” Lucy mumbled. "Huh?"

Lahar nodded, then placed another packet of paperwork on top of the several inch thick file in front of her. "You will need to fill these out before you are able to meet with the prisoner. Standard procedure for any visitors for the more…"

"Evil?" Lucy supplied weakly.

"I suppose that is the most fitting word." Lahar smirked. "Or violent… Your choice. We'll need to have your visit logged properly, several medical waivers, a—"

Lucy raised an eyebrow as she looked through the paperwork, singling out one page and giving Lahar a pointed look. "Is this really necessary? A death and dismemberment form that clears The Council of any responsibility?"

"… Yes."

Lucy sighed and rolled her eyes. This was going to take a lifetime to read through, but one thing that she had always remembered from her father was that you should never sign something without reading it thoroughly first. And if you didn't understand something, then ask questions. "So, fill this first one out, and then I can meet with him?"

"Yes," Lahar replied, pushing his glasses higher on his nose. "I will leave you to it, Miss Heartfilia."

"Wait!" Lucy nearly shouted, turning to gape at the stuffy prick while he walked to the door. "Where are you going? What if I have questions?"

Lahar paused in the doorway and glanced back at her. "I will be heading to collect the man you're here to visit. Once he is in the proper room, I'll be back to retrieve you."

"You mean he's not just meeting me in here?"

"No."
Lucy groaned in frustration, a derisive sneer pulling at her plump upper lip as she watched Lahar walk out of the room. The door slammed behind him, and she stared at it when she heard a heavy lock being settled in place. "Did he just lock me in here?" she whispered incredulously. "What does he think I'm gonna do… Decimate the build—" Lucy paused and shook her head with a scowl. "I'm not that bad… Natsu's worse…"

With a heavy sigh, Lucy picked up the pen she'd been given and started working on the first packet of forms. Lahar had been right. She was filling out form after boring form that had everything from medical waivers to legal documentation on more than she really thought necessary.

One for accidental and/or intentional arson upon her person. Did they think he was going to set her on fire? 'Where would Cobra get what he needed to even do that?' Signed.

Another that stated she would not ingest anything given to her by the prisoner. Really, that was a no-brainer. Signed.

Waiving her right to sue the Magic Council in the event of bruising, lacerations, broken bones, et al. from being less than two feet from the prisoner. 'Well, that's encouraging.' Signed.

Another liability release form for reparations from the Magic Council for mental distress in regards to her visit with Cobra. She was to claim all responsibility for future psychiatric visits, should she need them, after her meeting. 'Lovely.' Still, Lucy signed it.

The Council was definitely overly cautious, but she couldn't really blame them. At least, not with Cobra's reputation.

A brush of her hand over Horologium's key once the smaller packet was done, let her know that she had been locked in that room for an hour and a half. 'Just how long does it take to get a guy from his cell?' she thought. 'Unless…' Lucy's eyes went wide. It could be taking so long because Cobra had broken out, and they couldn't find him anywhere. That would most definitely put a serious damper on her already less than stellar mood.

Deciding it would be better to at least start on the mountain of paperwork she needed to handle in the event that she agreed with Cobra joining Fairy Tail, Lucy opened the large file. She would have preferred using her Gale Force glasses to get through this a lot faster, but her father's teachings were ingrained in her from her youth.

"One must never rush through documents, Lucy. No matter how tempting it might be to speed your way through it, you can easily make a mistake. Be thorough. Be extraordinarily critical. Do not settle for the first offer."

She couldn't rush through something this important. Who knows, The Council might even be counting on her making a mistake. Then they would find some loophole to exploit in their favor to lock her away for good. She hadn't necessarily done anything wrong, but if she wasn't careful… She might end up signing something that said she actually did.

The first thing that caught her eye as odd, aside from the fact that the charges against him took up a quarter of the file, was that she was apparently expected to act as Cobra's only escort back to the guild. She grimaced at the thought of her team not being with her then. If Cobra tried to make a break for it while they were heading back to Magnolia, Lucy wasn't entirely sure she would be able to handle taking the Poison Slayer down on her own. Erza could hit him with that hammer again. Natsu could… Well, he could just be Natsu, and he'd come out victorious, she was sure of it. Same with Gray.
'Lahar's probably just being a dildo,' she thought sourly as she marked the top corner of the form with a check mark to note that she had already reviewed it. She ignored the signature line at the bottom, and instead marked any places that she would need to initial as she continued reading through everything. There was no point in signing the forms for his release if she didn't agree to his presence in Fairy Tail. She had no doubt that she was being set as Cobra's sole escort simply because Lahar wanted the potentially soon-to-be-ex-criminal out of his hair as quickly as possible. Still, if she really did agree to Cobra joining the guild, then she would have to have faith that the Poison Slayer wouldn't try to kill her.

Lucy flipped the page over and moved on to the next form, her eyes narrowing while she tried to focus on the smaller than average print on the page. "Lahar is such a fucking asshole," she muttered to herself. He had made the print smaller on purpose. She was sure of it. 'If I ever get the chance, I'm scalping him…'

Cobra's single eye opened when he heard several sets of footsteps coming down the hall. That was something new. Normally, it was just a single guard coming to give him the meager rations for his meals or a bowl with some water and a small washcloth to bathe himself once a week—something that he thought really should have happened a little more often. Honestly, was it that hard to let a guy bathe properly? He didn't even want to think of how Angel was faring if she was being kept in similar conditions, but he would be sure to find out once she was freed whether or not they had been a little more understanding of the need for proper hygiene for women. If they didn't… Well, he'd be adding a few more people to the body count.

But this wasn't just a single guard. The steps at the front of the group – five men, he realized as he listened intently to the slightly different cadences – was definitely familiar, and a smirk pulled at the corner of his mouth when he thought of just how much he could possibly piss Lahar off before the guy stormed off as usual.

"Prisoner 100977," Lahar stated as soon as he was standing in front of Cobra's cell, "Hands through the bars."

Cobra stayed seated, stretching his Soul Listening magic as far as he could in the hopes of figuring out what Lahar's intentions were. That was when he realized the hold on his cell that blocked his magic had been increased to the point of nullifying it completely. With a sneer he asked, "Why?"

"Because if you don't, then this cell will continue blocking all of your magic until you die in here."

He growled low in his throat and narrowed his eye, then slowly stood to his feet. "Try to cut my fucking hands off and I'll rip you to pieces, motherfucker."

Lahar simply waited, watching as Cobra made his way to the bars of his cell. Once the Slayer's hands had finished their cautious entry to the world outside of his cage, Lahar nodded to one of the Rune Knights at his side. He kept his gaze trained on Cobra's face, watching for some sort of reaction as the magic-cancelling handcuffs were placed on his wrists.

Cobra slowly tried to pull his hands back into his cell, only to growl again when he found that the large block the council used as handcuffs was too large to fit through the opening. "What the fuck is this?" he snapped.

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Lahar narrowed his eyes and took a step forward, maintaining a little more than arm's length distance from the enraged prisoner. "You're coming with us, Cobra," he said flatly.

"Hell fucking no, I'm not!" he snarled. He pushed his hands forward, then yanked back as hard as he
could, grinding his teeth together at the jolt of pain that shot through his wrists and arms. "The fuck are you playing at, pencil dick?" His hands shot forward to try and make a grab at one of the Rune Knights, but they were just out of his reach. He didn't care if he had to break every bone in his fucking hands to get these things off. He used every ounce of strength he possessed to pull his hands through the bars, suppressing the hiss of pain when the cuffs cut into his skin.

"Open the cell."

Cobra planted his feet and pulled back on the door. He knew it opened outward, and that there wasn't much he could do to stop it from opening, but he would be damned if he just went along with their shit because they told him to. He was pulled forward as the door to his cell swung open, and nearly stumbled, but caught himself just in time to glare balefully at Lahar.

He poured every ounce of hatred he could muster into his single eye, then snapped his jaws at the nearest guard when all four started coming closer to him. The man backed up slightly, and Cobra let out a string of profanity while kicking at another one. "Don't fucking come near me, asshole!" He pulled on his restraints again, only to find out that the door to his cell was locked in its open position. "I'm gonna fucking kill you bastards."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Lahar replied, watching as one of the Rune Knights used the Slayer's distraction to jab a long rod into his side. He sighed when the first jolts of electricity ran through the prisoner's body, and waited until Cobra finally collapsed. His face was screwed up in agony, a garbled groan barely breaking past his clenched teeth, and the handcuffs rattled against the bars while his body was wracked with spasms. After another few moments, he was unconscious, hanging from the cell door by his arms. Lahar waited another minute before nodding to the other men with him.

"Fucking asshole," one of the Rune Knights muttered with a scowl, kicking Cobra in the ribs just to make sure the sadistic prick was really out.

"That is entirely unnecessary," Lahar said firmly with a scowl of his own. "You will uphold the Council's image by not abusing the prisoners, is that clear?" He could never understand what made some people think that adding physical pain and suffering was an acceptable form of treatment for the criminals they kept locked up. Regardless of the person's crimes, that sort of torture was highly inappropriate. And against the rules, in general. These were still human beings, after all.

"But, Captain—"

"No," Lahar interjected. "There will be no arguments or rebuttals on the matter. You have the authority to use equipment to incapacitate prisoners only when necessary, as it was in this case. You will not cause further pain to any prisoners without due cause. In the event that more force is necessary when dealing with a prisoner, it will only be under the strict guidelines set out by the Council." His eyes narrowed while looking from one man to the next. "Is. That. Clear?"

The four Rune Knights present began quaking and nodded quickly, stuttering a simultaneous, "Yes, Captain." After gaining a much more thorough tongue lashing from Lahar, the Rune Knights removed Cobra's handcuffs to pull his arms free of the cell door, then swiftly put them back in place and half dragged the unconscious mage down the hall.

Cold tile flooring lay beneath him as water pounded down on his body, and Cobra winced when he felt his muscles still spasming from the electrical current that the little fucker had snuck in on him. Sadly, his biggest weakness was having his Soul Listening magic stripped from him. He couldn't hear attacks coming his way as well, and the normal auditory cues only went so far for him. He'd
trained himself based on his original magic, and his Slayer abilities only enhanced what he already had.

He stiffened when he felt small hands moving over his bare flesh, and he finally realized that he was completely fucking naked. Water, small hands, a washcloth, and the scent of cheap soap. Someone was actually washing him. He couldn't even begin to understand why it was happening, and he couldn't bring himself to move in the slightest. Instead he just listened and hoped that maybe they had taken the cuffs off.

Silence. Not a single fucking soul.

Of course they wouldn't take the shit off of him. He had the potential to kill a whole lot of fucking people... if he could move. Even his normal hearing was distorted, but he could tell that there was a woman whispering something to him. It took every ounce of strength he had to turn his head toward the sound of her voice when those small hands started brushing through his hair. Shampoo. Actual fucking shampoo was being used on him.

"Okay... lax... Care... you..."

Cobra groaned, not caring in the slightest that he probably looked like the weakest little piece of shit in the world right then. He'd been itching for a proper bath for months, and he was finally getting it. It just sucked something fierce that he couldn't even fully enjoy it. Slender fingers grazed his scalp in slow circles, making his skin tingle and a small shiver run through him. He hadn't felt something like this in years, not since the Seis was still locked in the Tower and Macbeth had helped clean him up after a serious beating by the guards. The water was cleaner this time, instead of a brackish muddy puddle that was probably equal parts piss and water. The hands were more steady, clearly accustomed to performing this very task. The woman systematically scrubbed every strand clean, and he sighed when he was actually able to smell the lack of sweat and oil in his hair.

As his hair was rinsed, he finally found it in himself to open his eye. Everything was just one big blur, but he could at least make out the vague shape of what he assumed was the woman that was cleaning him. He wasn't one for thanking people for a fucking thing, but right then? That was all he wanted to do. Not many people had been kind to him in his life, and maybe it was the shock that had rattled his brain a little bit, but he was willing to thank the faceless woman for days just because she was willing to fucking wash him. A cloth-covered hand brushed over his face, moving in slow, tender circles. His forehead, down the left side of his face, taking special care not to get soap directly in his only functioning eye, his cheek, jaw, even behind his ear. She repeated everything on the other side, surprising him when he felt the pads of her fingers brushing over the scar on his face instead of the washcloth. It wasn't necessary, since he lost all feeling where his eye had once been, but it seemed the woman was aware of the fact that scars had the potential to be more sensitive.

His lips parted, and he took a breath to do just what he'd been thinking, to thank this faceless woman – even though he had no idea if he could get his voice to work – only to get cut off by a masculine shout of something he couldn't make out. Not a moment later, Cobra realized that his voice did, in fact, work. Another jolt of electricity shot through him, and a scream ripped itself from his throat when the water that was still beating down on him increased the intensity of it. He barely registered the burning sensation in his side where he was being electrocuted as his vision was spotted with black dots, and it darkened completely once two pairs of rough hands grabbed his arms and dragged him across the floor.

"That was entirely unnecessary, sir!" the nurse shouted after the Rune Knights while she turned off the shower. She quickly rose to her feet and sprinted after them as they carelessly dragged the prisoner to the change rooms. "He was barely conscious! And you used that while he was in water!
"You could have killed him!"

"Lady, do you even know who this guy is?"

"... No," she said with a frown. "And it doesn't matter who he is." She clenched her fists as the tan prisoner with only one eye was dropped to the ground next to a towel and pile of clothes. "Leave him here, and I'll dress him. You're clearly incapable of—"

"How do you plan on getting his shirt and shit on, huh?" one of the Rune Knights asked with a smirk. "You'll need to take the cuffs off."

"Then remove them."

"Heh, right," the other snorted. "No fucking way are we letting one of the Oracion Seis lay around without fucking cuffs if he's not in his cell."

The nurse's eyes widened as she looked down at the unconscious man. He was a member of one of the strongest dark guilds out there? The one that Fairy Tail took down all those years ago? Regardless of who he was, or what sins he'd committed in his lifetime, she took her job very seriously. She firmed her resolve and walked towards the Rune Knights, then knelt down and started drying the prisoner off as carefully as she could manage. He hadn't seemed all that scary when he'd started to regain consciousness. If anything, he looked almost grateful when he'd looked at her.

It took some work, but she was able to manage getting him dressed in the clothing that had been provided for him. At least from the waist down. With a scowl, the nurse turned to look at the two guards that had done nothing but watch with disdain, and said, "Remove these things long enough for me to get his sleeves on, then you can put them right back on if he's so dangerous."

She sighed when they quickly complied, and pulled his hands through the sleeves of the two shirts that had been set with the other clothing. After pulling the shirts over his head and situating them properly on his torso, she put the long white coat on him, then placed his wrists back in the handcuffs. Her scowl only deepened when the large block was locked around his wrists, and one of the guards paused before tightening it more than was necessary.

She shook her head as the prisoner was dragged out of the room, and decided then and there to check on the other members of that guild that were being held in their cells. If his treatment in her presence was any indication of what they had to go through, she would be filing a complaint very soon with the head nurse. It didn't matter to her what they had done in the past. They were still people, and they deserved to be treated better than livestock being sent out to the butcher.

'Kill me with paperwork? HA! I'll show you, you little fucking four-eyed fartmonger!'

'What the hell are we doing up here with Cobra?'

'Is he really this stupid, or did he get his dick stuck in a door to stunt his brain stem?'

'This level of insubordination is highly disturbing. I'll be sure to make a note of these two. I'm keeping a close eye on them.'

'Yep, he really is that stupid. Like fucking hell am I signing off for being responsible for collecting a weekly urine sample... I'll bring his ass back and let him piss on that fucker's leg first.'

Cobra groaned as he regained consciousness again, his stomach roiling with each step the assholes that were dragging him down the hall took.
"It seems he's beginning to wake up," Lahar mused softly. "Don't think I've forgotten your direct disregard to my order…"

The quick flash of fear that Cobra heard from two of the Rune Knights was like music to his ears. He could still feel the handcuffs around his wrists, and feel just how goddamn tight they were, but he was able to hear the souls all around him. His head was hanging limply, so he let a feral grin spread across his face while he listened in. Maybe he could finally get some goddamn answers on where the hell they were taking him.

'One of these days, I'll punch Doranbolt right in his smug little face for making me put up with Cobra…'

Oh, Lahar's thoughts concerning Doranbolt were always fun to listen in on. The guy was torn between punching the Direct Line mage, and kissing him senseless. And Doranbolt hadn't a fucking clue just how often Lahar thought about the latter.

'This guy deserves more than a couple shocks and a kick to the ribs. He killed my whole family…'

The mental image of some ratty little family - a woman, two middle-aged men, and an elderly couple - manifested itself in Cobra's mind from the Rune Knight's memory, but they weren't familiar in the slightest. It didn't really matter, anyway. He'd killed plenty of people in his lifetime.

'I'll get this little shit to talk. Thank god these rooms are soundproofed.'

'Why won't they believe me?! I'm innocent! I don't want to go back in that cell… Please, someone help me…'

Oh, now that was something he'd missed hearing. There weren't any prisoners in the entire cell block that he was kept in, so Cobra missed out on quite a bit of their pain and suffering. Over the years, it had become one of the sweetest sounds he'd ever heard. Those deliciously dissonant wails of suffering souls could lull him to sleep on any given night. He could listen to that person in particular all goddamn day. Especially since the guy really was innocent, and he was getting one hell of a beating while the Rune Knights tried to get him to confess. 'He's about three minutes from snapping,' he thought. 'Damn, what I wouldn't give to just stay right fucking here and listen to that…'

'Okay, really?! A FUCKING STOOL SAMPLE?! What, is he testing for worms? He's not a fucking Exceed, you pompous cock wobble!'

He actually had to hold himself back from laughing out loud over the woman's train of thought. Her soul was oddly familiar, but he couldn't place it. The idea that someone he had actually encountered before was near him in any capacity was disconcerting. The only souls he knew like the back of his hand were the other Seis members, Doranbolt, Lahar, Salamander, and Titania. And that purple-haired woman he'd met after being knocked a few miles away from the Infinity Clock by that goddamn hammer; he'd never forget Cubellios' soul, now that he'd heard it. This one wasn't any of them, so just who the fuck was she?

'A hundred Jewels a month for fucking socks? A fucking condom costs more than that and that won't cover a foot… Lahar must have been high as a goddamn kite when he wrote this shit out… Or he got the most amazing adjustment to that stick up his ass… Hmm, maybe both. No, definitely both. Probably at the same time…'

It didn't really matter who the hell the woman was, because her inner monologue was fucking hilarious. Finally, someone in the world that actually understood it!
'Urgh… There aren't enough staples in Earthland to inflict the kind of pain that bespectacled paperwork junkie deserves for putting me through this. That's what I need. One huge stapler, a box of office supplies, and fifteen hours alone with Lahar. Paperclip his lips shut, shove thumb tacks under his nails, then staple those stupid goddamn glasses to his face so he stops pushing them up all the damn time! Then I can just take the blade out of a pencil sharpener and slowly… Oh so fucking slowly… Skin him alive… Bastard. OH! And manilla envelope papercuts to his genitals. Can't forget that.'

Cobra really did end up laughing at that. He just couldn't help it. The list this mystery woman had just made in her head, along with the most beautifully detailed mental picture he could have ever hoped for, was too perfect. It was everything he could have wanted to hear from someone. And now he was even more curious to find out who she was. That sadistic little streak in the otherwise pure soul was an enigma, and he just had to find out what made her tick. Hell, he'd pull her apart piece by piece if it would help sort it out.

"What is so funny?" Lahar asked as they drew nearer to the interrogation room that Cobra was being taken to. He paused and turned to face the two Rune Knights that were supposed to be carrying Cobra, watching as they lifted him higher until he was standing, albeit rather shakily, on his own two feet.

"He'd better appreciate what I'm willing to do for him. I swear to fucking god, this room is going to drive me insane if I don't get out of here. I wonder if Lahar would be pissed that I made some of these forms into origami. A crane, a flapping crane, a heart, a tank… That one was fun… A frog, a puppy, a knife, a noose… Hmm… Maybe I could use this thick ass folder of papers to strangle him for locking me in here. Asshole.'

"Nothing," Cobra chuckled as he slowly lifted his head. "Just thought of a great joke."

"And what might that be?" Lahar sighed. He just knew he wasn't going to like the answer.

"Paper asphyxia. Who knew origami could be so entertaining?"

Lahar blinked as Cobra started laughing harder, then turned around and continued on their way down the hall. He did everything in his power to ignore the room he had left the young blonde in earlier as they passed it.

The action didn't go unnoticed by Cobra, however. His eye shot toward a single door and he smirked when he heard a woman sighing heavily followed by the light scratching of a pen over papers. So that was where that familiar soul was at. 'Good to know… Now I just need to get outta these fucking handcuffs and get that door open.'

"Enjoying the souls, Cobra?"

Cobra kept his face blanked as he staggered along, sneering as one of the Rune Knights jostled him roughly when he started to fall behind. "Yeah, these shoes are pretty comfortable," he replied. "Lots of traction on 'em. Definitely some good soles."

Lahar sighed and shook his head. He had been the one to decide that they should decrease the limiter on Cobra's handcuffs to at least allow him the ability to hear souls again. His offensive magic – both the Poison Slayer magic and his ability to use sounds as a weapon – were completely nullified. He couldn't really explain why he'd thought that the insane mage deserved any semblance of comfort right then, but it was too late to try and sort it out.

"Because you feel fucking guilty," Cobra said. "You should."
'Men are fucking idiots. The lot of them… Completely inept. I don't care how organized Lahar is, he's fucking retarded. And this stupid paperwork… It had better be worth it. Taking all this time to read through it all, just because Dad was fucking right about them trying to screw me over… He had better be nice… Or… Mildly civil, I guess. No way will I agree to actually sign this if he's not… Maybe…'

Cobra shook his head while they stood in front of a door at the end of the hall. He watched as Lahar slowly opened it, and he was finally relieved of his shitty little guard detail once they crossed the threshold.

"Take a seat, and place your hands on the table, Cobra," Lahar said, gesturing toward the single table in the room. He watched as Cobra slowly shuffled further into the room, then took a step forward when the wobbling mage had to steady himself once he reached the table.

"Don't fucking touch me," Cobra growled. He ground his teeth together and fought the wave of nausea that was threatening to make him puke his brains out, then continued on his slow journey to the opposite side of the table. He refused to sit down with his back to the door. Years of being with Brain and the others taught him that turning your back on anyone could easily be the last thing you do.

'If Lahar doesn't come back soon, I'm going to start screaming. I wonder what would get someone's attention faster… Bloodcurdling screams? Terrified screams? Pfft, nevermind. Those Rune Knights are so fucking perverted, I bet the only thing that would make them open the door is me screaming like I'm being fucked six ways to Sunday, until my limbs start dropping off like I've got leprosy. Bloop, there goes an arm. Bloop bloop… Both of her legs. Hey, better access! God, I've been in here too long…'

Cobra smirked as he slowly sat down and set his hands on the table. Well, it was more like he placed the handcuffs on the table, while his fingers just brushed over the metal surface. Instead of giving Lahar a single glare, Cobra sighed and rested his head on top of the metal monstrosity around his wrists. That last jolt from that cattle prod had really done a number on him, and all he wanted to do was sleep for a solid three days.

'I guess it's time to go get his visitor…'

Cobra furrowed his brow as the door to the room was closed. He stretched his magic out and found that, yet a-fucking-gain, he was deaf to the souls that he knew were all around him. There was no point in trying to move or get the jump on Lahar when he opened the door again. These cuffs locked right onto the table as soon as he set them down, and only Lahar would be able to unlock them.

Still though… What had Lahar meant by ‘visitor’? Anyone that would want to possibly visit him while in prison was already locked up, and it was obvious that Cubellios had realized being associated with him would put her in a world of shit, so it couldn't be her. There was no one else in the world that gave a single flying fuck about him, so just what the hell was going on? There was a very strong possibility that it was a victim of one of his many crimes, or even some rich bastard that wanted to pay to have him sent off to an island so he could fight for his survival while being hunted like an animal. Any number of possibilities, really.

For some reason, Cobra found himself really hoping that it would be that woman whose soul was familiar to him. He honestly pitied anyone that had to deal with her, considering the kind of pain she was mentally inflicting on people was some seriously dark shit. He could only wonder just how much of it she actually let out though. Her soul was pure. It had soothing waves of emotion flowing through it, with harmonies that layered themselves on top of one another in the most intricate pattern he'd ever come across. The small bit of exposure he'd had while coming down the hall had burned it
into his memory. There were only the occasional twangs of something from her past that caused a note to fall flat, but those were drowned out by everything else.

An entire symphony in someone's soul. That was something he hadn't realized he wanted to hear. Then again, he was curious to see if there was more to her soul than those surface thoughts he'd caught. If there was something lying beneath the symphony. If he ever got out of this place, he'd be finding her as quickly as possible so he could lock her up and listen to that shit for hours on end. He didn't give a damn about trying to take over the world like Brain and Midnight had. He just wanted to listen to souls. And he just wanted freedom.

Lucy sighed as the lock on the door finally turned over, and she closed the folder that held all of the paperwork concerning Cobra's release. She also made sure to hide the origami pieces at random points in the folder. Lahar deserved to find that shit later on. It served him right for locking her up and taking forever to come back.

Lahar opened the door and slowly walked into the room to see Lucy Heartfilia standing from her seat with the forms he'd given her held tightly to her chest. "Have you signed everything, Miss Heartfilia?"

"In the first packet, yes," she answered with a sweet smile that was oddly reminiscent of the one Mira used at the bar to get people to cooperate. She handed the smaller packet over and followed him out of the room, sighing in contentment once the long hallway was surrounding her.

"And the second?"

"I haven't finished reading it. Besides, I'll need to speak with Cobra before I decide whether or not I'm going to sign it. That's why I'm here in the first place, remember?"

Lahar nodded as he looked over the medical waivers, his eye twitching when he saw small drawings in the bottom corners of each page. While the forms were still technically legally binding, those little doodles seemed to be mocking him. And that irked him to no end. Every single page had one. Every one! From rabbits to stars, flowers to slightly disturbing depictions of stick figure homicide. With a shake of his head, he closed the small folder and continued on his path to Cobra's holding room.

Lucy tilted her head to the side as they stopped in front of a door at the end of the hall. She frowned and turned to look back, then said, "You brought him up here and walked past the room I was in… Why didn't you just bring him into that room?"

"Because this one is better equipped to handle him in the event that he needs to be incapacitated," Lahar replied. "You may have signed a form that relieves the Council of any liability in the event he kills you, but that does not mean we will condone it." He quickly punched in the code to unlock the door, then opened it and walked in.

Cobra lifted his head and blinked away his exhaustion once he heard the locking mechanism shift. If he had a visitor, then he wasn't going to look like a pathetic little shit when whoever the hell it was came in. He narrowed his eye when he saw Lahar walking into the room, and then the guy moved to the side to let the visitor he was waiting for follow. Blonde hair, huge brown eyes, a mouthwatering set of tits, hips that were practically begging for his hands to wrap around them, and more visible skin than was socially acceptable. He knew this chick, and the fact that her soul was the one he'd been listening to earlier threw him for a fucking loop. He didn't remember hearing this kind of shit in her soul when she was being used as a sacrifice. That was something that definitely would've stuck with him. 'What the hell is a Fairy doing here?'
Lucy made her way into the room, and she was instantly drawn into Cobra's gaze. That single amethyst eye held so much in it that she found herself standing completely still and unable to move. He looked pissed, which was something she didn't really blame him for considering he'd been locked up for a long time, and like he was ready to kill pretty much everything. Somehow, Cobra was able to appear as bored as though he was sitting and waiting for a train, while his eye spoke volumes of his actual alertness to his surroundings. What struck her as odd though, was the curious and barely visible hopeful glimmer in his eye. Hadn't anyone told him that she was coming? Or why?

"No, I've been left in the dark."

Lucy blinked repeatedly when she heard his deep baritone voice for the first time since the Clock, then she shook her head and rolled her eyes. "Really, Captain Lahar?" she sighed.

"I thought it would be best to-" Lahar started, only to clamp his jaw shut when Lucy spoke as she walked further into the room and took the seat opposite of Cobra.

"Take off the handcuffs, then leave."

Cobra and Lahar both jolted in surprise, matching expressions of profound confusion on their faces. While Lahar was busy openly gaping at the blonde, Cobra found that his own thoughts were mirroring the Enforcement Unit Captain's perfectly.

'This woman is fucking insane.'
"E-Excuse me?" Lahar stuttered uncharacteristically as he pushed his glasses higher on his nose. "You must be joking, Miss Heartfilia."

'Stupid fucking dick fingers. I didn't fucking stutter! Get the cum out of your ears and listen to me, you incommodious cock weasel! God, I hate those fucking glasses.'

If ever there was a time Cobra would have choked on his spit, then that would have been it. Luckily, he had spent years perfecting his ability to keep his face neutral and his saliva from trying to have a chat with his goddamn lungs.

Lucy sighed and paused just before she sat down, then carefully laid the thick file on the table and turned to look at Lahar. She slowly pointed at her face and said, "Does it look like I'm yucking it up right now? Handcuffs…" As an afterthought, she added, "Please."

'Leave it to a Fairy Tail mage to have a death wish this early in the day… I wonder if they all just wake up and think 'Today's the day I'm going to do something exceedingly reckless. This should be fun!''

Cobra could only blink and try to maintain some sense of his own pride by keeping his jaw clamped fucking shut. The blonde had obviously caught Lahar off guard by demanding that his cuffs were released, but she'd gotten him just as fucking good by blurtng that shit out before she even really thought about it. And then, instead of freaking right the fuck out over it, the chick just went with the flow and moved right the hell on as though she'd been thinking that the entire damn time. 'Why the hell is she here?' he wondered. 'Probably come to fucking rip into me over that shit. You fucking won, woman. Get the hell over it.'

"You know, I distinctly recall signing a waiver about death and dismemberment," Lucy hummed. She grinned at Lahar when he continued blinking in surprise. "The Council's free of any liability if I'm slaughtered, Captain Lahar. So there's really no point in keeping Cobra chained to the table like some wild animal."

"Miss Heartfilia, I don't think you understand just what you're asking me to do."

"No, you don't understand," Lucy said slowly. She turned to look into Cobra's single indigo eye, then smirked triumphantly. "I'm not asking you to do anything. I've signed the paperwork for this meeting, so…"

'She's absolutely crazy. If I take those handcuffs off of him, he'll kill both of us and escape.'

When Lahar continued gaping at her, Lucy rolled her eyes. "What? It's not like we're gonna go fucking on your dirty table here, and I'm pretty sure he's not running."

'Of course she would have absolutely no regard for her own safety around a certifiable psychopath like Cobra.'

Cobra raised an eyebrow and let his eye rake over the blonde, taking in every inch of her scantily clad body again while she continued talking with Lahar. 'Damn right I wouldn't fuck her on this nasty ass table,' he thought as his gaze rested on the mouthwatering swell of her ass. 'Lahar's creepy ass would probably wanna watch.' Now, if he had something to wipe the table down, and a
guarantee no one was watching? Definitely. As long as he could gag the little blonde so he wouldn't have to listen to her screaming while he fucked her senseless, he would jump on the chance to get a piece of ass. Cobra had been locked up for a very long time, after all. He was sure he could find it in himself to ignore her status as a legal guild mage to get his rocks off. 'No point in running anyway... Stupid fucking Fairies just keep popping up outta the woodwork every time I catch a goddamn break.'

"Wonderful," Lucy chirped. "I'm so glad you see things my way." With a sweet smile, she turned around and finally took her seat, then watched as Lahar moved around the table to finally remove the lock on Cobra's handcuffs. Her dad was right, it seemed. All she had to do was explain just why someone was wrong – repeatedly, and in a different way every time – until they agreed with her. "I'll be sure to let you know when we're finished in here, Captain."

"I hope you know what you're doing, Miss Heartfilia..." Lahar leveled Cobra with a stern glare, nearly sneering when the Slayer gave him a wicked grin as the restraints were finally released. "Don't think I won't be watching you closely, Cobra," he hissed.

"I'll miss you too, snookums," Cobra growled, pulling his hands up and rubbing at his wrists. He hated those things more and more every time he was forced to wear them, and the scars on his wrists from his time in the Tower would end up itching for fucking days afterwards. He glared at the stuffy prick as the door closed, then shifted his gaze to the blonde woman across from him. All it would take was for him to let out one roar of poisonous gas, and the bitch would be down in a matter of seconds. The only problem with that was that he still had no fucking clue why she had even showed up in the first place. It seemed that his curiosity was going to win out for the time being.

Lucy's brow furrowed as she laced her fingers together and placed her chin on top of her hands. She wasn't sure how long they sat in complete silence while having what appeared to be a staring contest, but Lucy finally broke away from Cobra's intense stare to look around the room for cameras.

"No sound, just images," Cobra said softly as he sat back in his chair. As he continued, he nodded discreetly behind him. "Corner over my right shoulder."

"You seem more amenable to talking now that Lahar isn't here," Lucy mused. She raised a brow when Cobra shrugged. "I don't think we were ever properly introduced before."

"Well, you know who I am, and I know that you're the bitch that fucked up Midnight's plan," Cobra said with wicked grin. His eye closed when her soul flared angrily, and he could hear those carefully tuned notes in her soul warbling sadly as the memory of being trapped in the Infinity Clock rose to the surface. "Mmm... Much better..."

'Lucy, you need to be logical about this. Keep your biases to yourself, and only use information that you already know about him as factual and nothing more. No assumptions. Ask him questions to gauge his responses, and see where he stands. Lock your emotions up just like Dad taught you, because those won't do you any good right now.'

Cobra's eye slowly opened when the saddened tones of her soul started to fade, and was met with chocolate eyes that could have bored a hole through his skull faster than sulfuric acid. "I can still hear it, Jugs," he growled. "Be as logical as you think you fucking can be, but—"

Lucy's head slowly tilted to the other side while she watched Cobra ranting. She remembered what both Erza and Natsu had said about the kind of man he was during the Nirvana incident, and how he had changed for what appeared to be the worst. He went from being cocky as hell and energetic to boot, to simply hating everything in his path.
"Now you're gettin' it."

"Why did you agree to be a part of Midnight's plan?" she asked softly.

"What does it matter?"

Lucy smirked. "I thought you could hear everything, Cobra. Why ask questions when you clearly already know the answer?"

"Why are you answering my question with a question, Blondie?" Cobra leaned his forearms on the table, and inched closer to her, watching as she didn't even budge. "What, no answers?"

"I could ask you the same thing, since you did it first," Lucy replied. "But that would just continue the vicious cycle, and leave me questioning my sanity more than I already do." She was determined to figure out just what made Cobra tick, even if it was the last thing she did. Then again, if she ended up pissing him off enough, it really would be the last thing she did.

She didn't want to place all the blame on Cobra for the sins he'd committed in the past. They said Brain took the Seis in and raised them... Maybe Cobra was just molded into what Brain wanted. Then again, she supposed it was that whole nature vs. nurture debate all over again. Was Cobra simply hardwired to be a murderer, or was it the way his life had gone between the Tower of Heaven and Brain's own fucked up teachings that had caused him to turn out this way?

Cobra sat back in his chair a little too abruptly when he heard what she was thinking about. This chick's mind went a mile a minute, and there were so many different thoughts running through her at the same time that it was like he'd stuck his head in a damn beehive. She'd hit the nail on the head when she thought about Brain molding him. It wasn't just him though. All of the kids he had taken in from the Tower of Heaven were insanely vulnerable, and the bastard had used that to his advantage to make them do whatever he wanted. Cobra knew that he used to be a good and innocent kid, but there was only so much someone could take before they finally snapped. And that was something he'd done a long time ago.

"You never answered my question," Lucy said softly.

"I never said I would."

She pursed her lips, then nodded. "Got me on that one. How about quid pro quo, then? Question for question, and a guarantee to answer truthfully."

Cobra narrowed his eye at her. Doranbolt was the only one that was willing to exchange for information, but he never agreed to letting Cobra ask him anything. If he had, then maybe the guy would have figured out Cobra's motives for getting captured again a whole hell of a lot sooner. "You won't know I'm telling the truth."

"Right again," Lucy smirked. "But you'll know that I'm telling the truth. I won't be asking you anything that's too personal – I don't think... Then again, I don't really know much about you."

He took another minute to just stare at the blonde, listening more intently to see if he could figure her out. What he came to realize was that her soul was layered. The surface consisted of raw musical intonations, but the deeper he went, the more that symphonic chaos seemed to even itself out until he was able to get a wonderful mental image of the next layer. Her soul was organized to a fault, carefully cordoned off sections all ordered in rows upon rows of filing cabinets as far as he could tell with a little sign at the entryway off to the left that said, "Logos". Then there was just one huge section of it on the right that he could only call a clusterfuck of emotion, and rightfully
named “Pathos” with a similar sign. ‘Well, that's fucking weird…’ He'd never met anyone like that before. It almost felt like he could just dip right into that nearly sterile environment and just bask in the utter silence of it. One look at the Pathos side had him instantly picturing a goddamn rave party inside of a storm cloud made of fucking glitter. No way in hell would he be dipping into that side while he wheedled his way through her soul.

"Enjoying yourself?" Lucy asked casually. ‘I wonder how his magic works. It must get really annoying hearing what everyone's thinking or feeling all the time. Natsu told me about how he could attack with sound waves… That must really come in handy.‘ She could tell he was most likely poking and prodding at her soul to see what he could find out, and had even asked Bickslow if something like that was possible before she had left the guild. From the Seith mage's perspective, it wasn't. His magic gave him the ability to manipulate souls and see them, but he couldn't get any information out of them. Bickslow couldn't hear a person's soul unless it had already left them once they died. 'He does look like he could be a nice guy… Well, if I'd just gotten a lobotomy…'

Cobra snorted. "Yeah, I'm enjoying myself. I'm not in a fucking cell, and there's no annoying fucking dripping noise in here." He paused and smirked. "That's two for me, Blondie."

"Only if you actually answer the first question," Lucy shot back calmly. "Why did you go along with Midnight's plan?"

"If Salamander had a plan to get you outta prison and keep it that way… Would you go along with it?"

"I would."

"There's your answer."

Lucy's eyes narrowed while she watched him. He knew she was working through what he'd just said, but it didn't take her any time at all to figure out what Cobra had meant. Natsu was her best friend, the person she trusted the most in this world because he had also been the first real friend she ever had. There had been plenty of times that she'd gotten locked up – or kidnapped – and he'd been the one to come to her rescue. Always with some half-baked scheme to free her, then his usual 'we'll play it by ear' attitude afterwards in the ensuing battles. Cobra had known the other Oracion Seis members a lot longer than she had known Natsu though. It stood to reason that he was much closer to them than she and Natsu were to each other. Especially with the conditions they were raised in. 'Victims that are in confinement together bond quickly, irrevocably. The more dire the circumstances, and the longer they're exposed to those circumstances, the deeper the bonds go.' After only a moment, she saw him nod almost imperceptibly at her conclusion.

This chick was a fast thinker. Intelligent, even. Most people would have stopped at the best friend thing, and would have just assumed that he and Midnight were best friends, therefore he went along with that plan of his. Not her. Tits McGee decided to take it a step further and get down to the root of it all. He was loyal to Midnight because of the shit they went through together. They were best friends before leaving the Tower, and that didn't change even afterwards. Locked in prison for a couple years? As soon as they were out, it was like they'd never been apart. That was what he wanted to have in his life again. "What's your name?"

Lucy blinked in surprise. "You guys broke into my father's estate and stole a doll of mine, then tried to sacrifice me to end the world, and you don't even know my name…"

Cobra shrugged. "Wasn't important. Midnight knows it. Angel too… If that's any consolation. I just didn't give a shit what your name was. Not like you were gonna need it for much longer if everything had worked."
"Lucy Heartfilia." When Cobra raised his eyebrow and gave her a pointed look, she rolled her eyes. "Lucy Eris Heartfilia. Keep that to yourself…"

Cobra blinked in surprise. "Discord… Seriously? What the fuck is… was… wrong with your parents?"

Lucy found herself grinding her teeth together and clenching her fists beneath the table. "Absolutely nothing," she whispered. "At least my parents weren't fucking psychopaths that were determined to kill everyone. Can't say the same for you, Cobra."

His head cocked to the side only slightly, and that was when he heard it. It was, by and large, the sweetest and most sinfully delectable despair he'd ever come across. Lucy apparently really fucking loved her parents, and any semblance of badmouthing them got her goat so easily that it was almost no fun to do it. Almost. "Midnight's the only one that saw Brain that way," was all he said on the matter concerning his own lineage. No way in fucking hell would he ever have viewed that lying bastard as anyone other than just what he was. Before Brain knew how to keep him from hearing his soul, Cobra had heard enough to know that there was no way to fully trust the bastard. "Time for my second question."

"Actually, it isn't," Lucy said with a smirk. When Cobra raised a brow in challenge, her smirk widened into a devious grin. "To answer my question about Midnight, you asked a question. I answered that question, and also gave the answer for the question that I asked you. Technically, you never actually answered my first question; I did. Which means that I answered two of your questions while you only answered one of mine. You owe me one answer."

Cobra had to fight with everything in him to keep his face blank. This was the kind of shit that he wanted when he started fucking with pricks like Doranbolt and Lahar. Neither of them did it though. Opportunity after opportunity, fucking wasted on them because Lahar was too fucking stuck up to realize what he was playing at, and Doranbolt just didn't actually have the wherewithal to do it while so much of his mind was blocked off. "Ask away then, Logos."

Lucy gave him a genuine smile. She had no clue that he'd quite literally picked the word from her soul, since she had subconsciously created those little sections that Cobra had found, but hearing it made her happy. He hadn't looked confused in the slightest when she started circling around with her response. She had to admit, it was definitely frustrating to be surrounded by people that just didn't understand what she was talking about, with the exception of Levy and Freed. Then again, her team didn't really pay much mind to what she said in the first place. Every plan she put forth on a mission was thrown by the wayside in favor of Natsu's 'storm the castle' mentality, Gray's rivalry with him, or Erza's incessant need to hack and slash her way through their enemies. After a moment, she asked, "What's your real name?"

"Cobra." Lucy gave him the same pointed look he'd given her, but he wasn't going to budge on that particular answer as easily as she had. He told Cubellios - the purple-haired woman that had tried to help him after Titania hit him with that goddamn hammer - his name because she had every right to know it. And use it. Not even Midnight and the others thought of him as Erik, and they definitely never said it. "That's the only name I'll answer to, so quit giving me that fucking look."

Lucy rolled her eyes and nodded, then motioned for his next question. "Looks like we've been properly introduced, at least."

Even though he wanted to know what the little blonde was doing here, this was the first time in a long while that he'd found someone's soul even remotely intriguing. The fact that he was actually having a hard time following what she was thinking about could probably keep him entertained for hours, especially if she was going to be threatening people in her head. Instead of just the words, the
blonde accompanied them with extraordinarily vivid images. When he realized that he had been staring at her, completely lost in thought for a change, Cobra decided to try and pick out some of the shit she was thinking about. Maybe it would give him something to ask her so he could draw this meeting out.

'Hm, what happened to his eye? Erza mentioned something about him losing it, but... Oh well, that scar makes him kinda hot though. OH SHUT UP, PERVY BRAIN! Welllll, alright I can at least admit he's attractive. Maybe...'

A smirk turned up one corner of his mouth. He was definitely tempted to ask her to expand on that train of thought concerning him being attractive. Deep within her soul, branching off from Pathos in its own swirling mass of deep crimson clouds, was another section. Something that Lucy clearly kept under wraps as much as she possibly could. 'Eros, huh?' he thought. A big ball of lust, perversion, and fuck only knows what else. Apparently, the blonde's subconscious had a habit of labeling things in fucking Greek. Why it did that, he wasn't sure he would ever know. There was no fucking way he was going to delve into that one right then. Not unless he wanted to find out just how fucking perverse she was. It was strange to hear how she had actually segmented herself, but... He still needed to think of a question.

'I wonder if it hurt to put a lacrima in... What happened to the snake Natsu told me about? I hope his snake is okay since he's been locked up for so long. Erza didn't mention his snake though. That was months ago... Where did it go during the seven years we were gone?'

Perfect. Something he was curious about, that wouldn't give away too much if he was careful. He hadn't a fucking clue why she would start circling around that particular topic so intensely, but he decided to just get his question out before he changed his mind. "There's a woman in your guild," he started, watching as Lucy focused on him more intently; although, her body language didn't change aside from a hardening to her gaze. Everything in her seemed to come to a crashing halt while she waited for him to speak. 'That's fucking weird...' he thought. He didn't realize it was possible for something like that to happen. Then again, he clearly had her full attention. "Purple hair."

Lucy raised an eyebrow, internally running through her guild mates that had purple hair. She only came up with two women.

"Green eyes." Cobra paused and got the mental picture from Lucy of the woman in question. "This is a two-part question…"

"Then I get two questions as well."

He nodded and leaned forward slightly, his own gaze intensifying. "How long has she been in your guild?"

Lucy frowned. "I... don't know the answer to that one, actually. I guess she joined at some point while we were all gone, because we came back and she was the new bartender."

Damn. He was hoping to get some sort of answer out of that one. The first time they got locked up - after the Nirvana bullshit - Cubellios was taken away. Well, more like he told her to hide and that he would come back for her. She had been too large to hide in his shirt like he had done when they were still in the Tower. He had been so sure that he would get away from the Rune Knights, but he hadn't. And when they finally broke out, he didn't have a fucking clue where to look for her. "What's her name?" he whispered.

Lucy's eyes narrowed. "For someone who supposedly hates everything, you're pretty hung up on people's names."
Cobra snarled and clenched his fists. "Answer the goddamn question. What's her name now?"

'Now?' Lucy watched as Cobra went from appearing bored and cocky to downright fuming in a matter of seconds. Barely restrained rage burned in the depths of his single eye. If nothing came of this visit, then she would be reporting to Master Makarov about his interest in... "Kinana," she said softly. "Her name is Kinana."

"I'm not interested in hurting her," Cobra said as he sat back in his seat. He just wanted to know what to call the woman when he was finally able to break out of this place and see her. He wanted to know what happened to her. Why she wasn't his snake any longer. He had scores of questions for Kinana. The name sounded wrong in his head and in his soul, so he decided to just call her Cubellios for the time being. That's who she really was, anyway.

"What's your interest with her, then?" Lucy asked. Kinana didn't have any magic to defend herself with, and Lucy refused to let someone like Cobra anywhere near her if he was planning on hurting her. Regardless of her status as a mage (or non-mage), Kinana was a member of Fairy Tail. A member of Lucy's family.

The astounding amount of fierceness and that desire to protect would have normally sickened him. It was something all those goddamn Fairies had in common. The difference now though was that Lucy's protectiveness was surrounding his dearest friend. The one being in the world whose soul he had longed to hear for years, and finally got a small glimpse of it. Two small glimpses, actually. He'd been able to hear Cubellios while he was fighting that Rock dragon, and it had given him even more of a reason to kill the shit out of the thing. Too bad he hadn't succeeded.

"I won't let any harm come to anyone in the guild, Cobra. So you-

"I heard her soul before," Cobra said softly, unaware of the rare genuine smile that was on his face. "Trust me, I'm not planning on hurting that one. She gets a free pass."

"So you're planning on attacking Fairy Tail, then?" Lucy asked. 'He's got a nice smile...'

"It's on my list of things to do once I figure out how to get the fuck out of here," Cobra answered with a sneer. "Pretty sure it's somewhere between getting a lap dance and going out for a cyanide burger."

"With formaldehyde fries and a strychnine shake to top it all off, I hope," Lucy shot back. The bark of laughter from the maroon-haired mage across the table completely surprised Lucy. So much so that she nearly fell out of her chair.

"I hadn't considered that combination, but now I think I'll need to try that shit out..."

'He really does have a nice smile... even if he looks like he's about to rip my clothes off with just his teeth... No. No no no! We're not going into the fucking gutter! Man, fucking in a gutter... NO! ABORT ABORT ABORT! Stay right the hell away from that, you skanky little brain!'

Cobra's lips twitched in amusement. Listening to her scrambling to control her inner pervert was astounding. And hilarious. "My turn." He watched her nod, albeit a little shakily, then smirked. "Let's see how she handles this..." He cleared his throat, then said, "'Ed Nott was shot and Sam Shott was not. So it is better to be Shott than Nott. Some say Nott was not shot, but Shott says he shot Nott. Either the shot Shott shot at Nott was not shot, or Nott was shot. If the shot Shott shot shot Nott, Nott was shot. But if the shot Shott shot shot Shott, then Shott was shot, not Nott. However, the shot Shott shot shot not Shott - but Nott. So, Ed Nott was shot and that's hot! Is it not?"
"Obviously, the shot Shott shot shot Nott, and all it would take is a halfway decent forensics expert to check the rifling on the bullet in Nott, then match it to a shot from Shott's gun. If it's a handgun, then there would even be residue on Shott's hand, unless he was wearing elbow-length gloves that he disposed of after he shot Nott," Lucy said calmly, watching as an intrigued grin spread across Cobra's face and his eye danced with wonder. "But, we should probably consider the possibility that Nott was not shot by Shott. If Nott was shot, and Shott was not shot, then Nott could have shot Nott, then threatened Shott with a shot if Shott did not say that the shot was shot by Shott and not Nott."

Cobra was extraordinarily happy that the camera was behind him. That way the only person that was able to see just how much he was enjoying himself was the person making it happen. He had to hand it to Lucy. She'd not only followed along with the tongue twister he'd loosed on her, but Logos tore that shit to pieces and analyzed it, then rearranged it into some seriously fucking eloquent rebuttal.

"If you want my honest opinion," Lucy continued with a smile of her own, "I think that Nott should have shot Shott for being a dickbag." When Cobra laughed, she found herself joining in. "My turn."

He nodded, still chuckling. That was funny as fuck, and completely out of left field. And damn did he like it.

"I heard that you let yourself get taken into custody twice," Lucy said slowly. "Why would you do that if Midnight's plan was to make it so you wouldn't be locked up anymore?"

And just like that, his good mood left. She didn't need to know his real reasons for returning to prison, but this game of theirs was more interesting if he gave her portions of the truth at least. Then he could listen to her trying to piece together what he had left out. "I made a promise," he said softly while looking down at his hands on the table, noticing a small bit of irritation showing on his wrist from beneath the sleeves of his clothes. "I don't go back on promises."

Lucy smiled while she watched his face. That was something they had in common then. "Alright. Your turn."

His head shot up in surprise at that. She didn't try to figure him out at all one that one. That vague fucking answer was apparently enough for her. He wanted to keep drawing this out, but finally he asked the question he just couldn't seem to put off any longer. "Why the fuck are you here?"

"To find out what kind of person you are."

"That's a stupid fucking reason to come all the way out here, Blondie. You already know the answer to that."

Lucy smiled and shook her head. "No, I know what kind of enemy you are. How you act in a fight against someone and who you really are… Those are two completely separate things. Where do you stand concerning people getting second chances?"

"They don't," Cobra said automatically. The direct route wasn't going to give him the answers he wanted. He knew there was more to her reasoning for coming here, but he just couldn't pick it out of the fucking clusterfuck that was inside her head. It didn't make any sense. Her soul was so organized, and he should have been able to just jump right in and pull out whatever information he wanted or needed. But the neverending stream of consciousness - or five, where the blonde was concerned - was creating a blockade of sorts. His first thought was that she had multiple personalities, but each thought was identical in its patterns and dialect. She just had an insane ability to multitask. "No one really gets a second chance at anything."

"What about when they ask for forgiveness?"
"People don't forget what you've done. And they sure as shit don't forgive you, even if they say they do. I can hear it, I know what they all think deep down."

Lucy's brow furrowed, the smile on her face falling. Even though Cobra looked and sounded exactly the same as he had before, without a single hint about what he was really thinking or feeling, there was something else that she just wasn't seeing. "Do you want to be forgiven?" she whispered. The way he had worded what he said almost sounded like he wished he couldn't hear what others were thinking, then he could be just as ignorant as everyone else was of the depravity and insincerity that had taken root in the world.

"That's three questions now. What's in the folder?" When in doubt, redirect. She was too goddamn perceptive, that was for sure.

"Answer the third one."

"No point wanting something that doesn't exist." He paused. "So, what's in the folder?"

Lucy leaned forward marginally, then stopped. Normally, she would have placed a comforting hand on whomever she was talking to, offered them kind words and support. But Cobra wasn't just anybody. Based on how he tensed, he clearly didn't want her touching him. "Lahar gave me some paperwork to fill out for this visit."

"Well, it's not medical waivers and shit. You already gave that to him. So what is it?"

"Your criminal record," Lucy answered with a smirk. She lifted the folder and weighed it in one hand. "Pretty impressive."

He shrugged. "Not nearly big enough." When she snorted, he couldn't help but give her an answering smirk.

"I figured as much."

"Are you here about that shit with the Clock?"

"Nope. Well, not entirely. It's part of the reason I came, but there's more to it."

"So then what the fuck is the rest of it?"

"You really wanna know?"

"Yes."

Lucy grinned. "Answer my next question as honestly as you possibly can, and then I'll tell you. What happens next will depend entirely on your answer, so think it over. No vague bullshit. No redirecting. I want the truth."

His eye narrowed in suspicion.

"If given the choice between joining Fairy Tail and staying in prison, which would you choose?"

"... What?"

"Which would you choose?"

"Almost anything is better than being in prison, Busty," he said slowly. "So, I would have to say joining that shit guild of yours would be preferable to staying locked in a fucking cell."
"But you would need to be forgiven if you were going to join."

"Which is why this is purely hypothetical."

"Alright. Let's stay in the hypothetical world then. Forgiveness exists." Lucy leaned forward, her elbows resting on the table. "Is that something you would want to have?"

"For the shit I've done?" Cobra asked. When she nodded, his eyebrow lifted. "No. I don't regret what I've done, so I don't want to be forgiven for it."

Lucy sighed and nodded, then stood from her seat and grabbed the file before turning to walk to the door. She made it two steps before she whispered, "What about a second chance at life? A fresh start where you wouldn't be forced to follow orders every second of the day..."

"That's impossible. No such thing as a fresh start."

"Hypotheticals, remember?"

Cobra growled when she took another step forward. "You didn't answer my question." He stood to his feet and stalked around the table, placing himself between Lucy and the door. He refused to let little miss fucking priss just walk the hell out before answering his question. They had a deal. Answer for answer.

"There's no point in answering it," Lucy said sadly. She was surprised to find that she had been hoping for Cobra to give her a different answer. Just some small kernel of hope that he wasn't all bad. That he wasn't insane like everyone thought.

Cobra froze and stared at her, his amethyst eye widening only slightly. Why would someone like her, some Fairy that he had tried to kill several times, want to know that about him? Everyone assumed he was insane. It very well could have been the case if he didn't already know that he just gave no fucks about other people. If someone pissed him off enough, they'd get killed. If he needed information, he would just get it from their soul. Other lives didn't really matter to him, and he relished the pain and suffering of those around him. But that was because they still had nothing on what he had endured. All those people with their 'woe is me' bullshit didn't know the half of it.

Lucy sighed and got ready to walk around Cobra, then paused and looked up into his eye. She took in his strong features in her peripherals, the spiky maroon hair, pointed ears, rich caramel skin pulled over high cheekbones. She unconsciously took a step closer to him, watching as the reptilian slit of his pupil thinned to a hairsbreadth. "I don't think anyone has ever asked you..."

'Cobra... What do you want out of life?'

His jaw dropped open in shock. Cobra didn't give a shit about the fact that Lucy could see she had caught him off guard again. The bitch was right. He had never been asked that question in his entire existence. No one ever cared about what he wanted. Sure, Midnight had said that they would all be free when they broke out the last time, but then the Reflector mage had a plan to get rid of all of their pain and suffering. Brain hadn't asked what he wanted, but he had used young Erik's wish to hear Cubellios' voice to his own benefit. That wasn't really a life goal though. It was just something short term.

"You've never even thought about it... Have you?"

There was one thing that he had always wanted out of life. Even before finding Cubellios when he was trying to recover from a recent lashing in the Tower. Every time he tried to imagine what the sky looked like that day (or night). Picturing in his head how a breeze would feel, or sand beneath his
bare feet. It was what each of the Seis had wanted at one time, but he found out that Brain had corrupted each of them differently. Now, Cobra was the only one that truly wanted it. But, he wouldn't tell her that.

"You've lived your life based on following orders, being used for your power," Lucy whispered as she took another step forward, inadvertently pushing Cobra closer to the wall when he kept the distance between them. "You enjoy hearing people suffer. But... Did you ever consider the fact that your magic could be used to end people's suffering? To make it so no one has to go through what you and the others did?"

"I..."

"What is it that would make you happy? Deep down. Past the tongue twisters and riddles. Past all that asshole bullshit you constantly spew to keep people at a distance. What is it you really want?"

He bumped into the wall and gasped slightly. "I... don't know..." That was as close to the truth as he would get. Which, sadly, was a downright lie. He did know what he wanted, but there was no way he was going to get it any time soon.

"All this time spent in prison, alone with only your thoughts for company, and you don't know what would make you happy?" Lucy asked softly. "I find that hard to believe."

He couldn't understand just what the hell was going on. The blonde had switched tactics completely without him even realizing it until he hit the wall. She had quite literally backed him into a fucking corner, and he wasn't even fighting back. Before had been a game of sorts, something that he had thoroughly enjoyed. This shit though... She was dead fucking serious now. He could see some sort of determination in her eyes to understand him, and her voice was so soft and gentle that he didn't know how to handle it. Not once in his life had someone spoken to him like this, and if that didn't send a bunch of blaring warning signals in his head, then he didn't know what would. Why wasn't he ripping into her, or just ripping her face off to begin with? This shit wasn't like him at all, but he had a feeling it was how she was talking.

"I'm not like other people, y'know. What you tell me here won't make it past these walls. You value privacy, I can see that much. So, if it helps... I promise not to repeat whatever it is you tell me."

'A celestial mage never breaks a promise. That's what mom always taught me. I've never done it in my life, and I won't do it now. All he has to do is trust me. Then again, that's probably a long shot for him. I can't really blame him for being wary. If the tables were turned, I'd probably keep everything hidden too...'

He searched her soul again and again, trying to find one instance in her memories that she had actually gone against what she was just thinking. What he found instead was countless memories of Lucy using that exact same line with the same underlying conviction to uphold her promise until the day she died. "You're serious... About that?"

Lucy nodded. "What is it that you really want, Cobra?"

He took a slow step to the side, then made sure his back was facing the lacrima in the corner. When Lucy turned around to look at him, he found that he had completely switched their positions. But she wasn't even afraid of being cornered by him. She was far too focused on the fact that she hoped he would take a chance and put some faith in her. Finally, he whispered, "What I want is freedom. To make my own choices, live normally. All of it. I never had that option."

Lucy nodded, then went to sit back down at the table. "If you were going to do that, you do realize..."
that you wouldn't be able to just kill whoever you wanted, right?"

"Yeah, but that hypothetical Fairy world you've got going would probably be enough... If it meant I
didn't have to go back to prison..." Cobra was never this open with anyone, but there was still quite a
bit that he was keeping to himself on the matter. "If I ever find out you repeated this shit, I'm killing
you myself. So fucking slowly that you'll wish for death long before I even really get started."

Lucy smiled. "I wouldn't expect anything less. Have a seat, alright? I need to finish going through
this file Lahar gave me."

Cobra slowly returned to his own seat, watching as Lucy opened the folder and pulled a pen out
from the place she had been using as a bookmark. There were only a few pages left, from what he
could tell. "You gonna answer my question now?" he asked.

"Oh yeah!" Lucy laughed. "I-" She paused and scowled down at the paperwork in front of her.
"Stupid asshole. No, I will not be responsible for that. Or that. Or... This!"

Cobra watched as Lucy opened the pen and started circling sections of the paperwork, then writing
notes in the margins. Her mind was back to running in enough different tangents that he was stuck
just gaping at her, unable to pick out a single thing aside from her growing hatred for all things
Lahar. Like glasses, shiny hair, and...

'Well, that's some colorful fucking language... I'm actually
impressed...'

"Do you like origami?" Lucy asked without looking up from the papers in front of her.

"Uh... I guess?" Cobra cocked his head to the side when the paper Lucy had just been marking up
was slid across the table.

"Have at it. Lahar needs to learn his goddamn lesson about trying to screw people over."

"Huh?"

Lucy looked up at the utter confusion on Cobra's face, then found herself giggling. "Get your
origami on, Cobra. Fold that thing all to hell, and give Lahar some payback."

"That's a little on the passive side for me, Tits." He pushed the paper back toward her. "I'm good."

Lucy raised an eyebrow, then shrugged and picked up the paper. She continued reading the last
couple pages in silence while she started making a monkey, pausing in her folding only to mark up
anything she didn't agree with. She finally got to the last page, and saw handwriting that was
completely different from all the others. A soft smile graced her face while she read through the
statement, and at the very bottom was the signature of someone that she was going to be having a
long talk with. Doranbolt. It seemed he was the one that started all of this. Months ago from the date
on his statement.

Lucy placed her origami monkey back in its original place in the folder, then closed it and sighed
with a wicked gleam in her eyes. She waved to the camera over Cobra's shoulder, motioning for
Lahar to come back in. Not a minute later, there was Captain Dickass himself.

Cobra bit his lips to hide his laughter. He still hadn't gotten his answer from Lucy, but damn it all, the
names she had for Lahar alone were reason enough to postpone asking again.

"Hello, Captain."

"Miss Heartfilia."
Lucy turned in her seat and stood up, holding the folder out to him. "I'll sign it. But, there are several changes that need to be made before I do."

"I'll have you know," Lahar said slowly, "I drafted those myself. Everything in that file is well within the Council's parameters for this sort of situation."

"Yeah, well that needs to get handled then," Lucy said with a scowl. "You guys are trying to give him the short end of the stick here, and I won't stand for it."

'This is ludicrous. Just sign the papers and get out of my hair.'

'Fucking asshole. You're not getting out of this that easily! I made my decision. Cobra's got me on his side now. Natsu helped me when we met, and now it's time I pay it forward. Master said to have faith, and I do. Whole-motherfucking-heartedly!'

Cobra was well and truly lost to the outside world when he heard what Lucy was thinking about. He hadn't a clue what she and Lahar were talking about, aside from the fact that it concerned the file she was holding, but that wasn't what concerned him. Her soul flared to life more brightly than he'd known possible. Logos dimmed and faded into the background, and he was suddenly pulled into that fucking glitterstorm that was her emotional side. Pathos. Determination, faith, trust, protection. Emotion after positive emotion flowed through the blonde, all centered around one concept. One person. Himself.

He couldn't even begin to understand just what the fuck had caused the sudden shift for Lucy where he was concerned. She had gone from curiosity in the beginning, to anger and agitation while talking to him. Empathy and compassion to... This. There was only one negative emotion swirling through her and into him. Rage that was directed at Lahar. She considered that dickwad an enemy in this scenario - although Cobra hadn't a clue why she would feel so strongly about it - and a whisper of a memory filtered in.

"Lucy. When you believe in your cause, no one can stop you. Conviction and ruthlessness are your allies. Remember the reason for your name. Bring strife to those who would oppose you with your words. The apple's seed sows discord when utilized properly. It is the crux of a proper argument."

"Daddy, why would I want to argue with people though? It's not nice to argue."

"Think of a true argument as a debate. You are not necessarily angry with your opponent, but working to make them see reason. While you can use your emotions to your advantage, do not let them govern you. Remember your namesake, little Lucy. You are Lucky. You are one with Discord. You are full of Love. Never forget that."

"That doesn't make sense, Daddy..."

"It will. One day, when you're older, you will understand."

The memory faded into the background, along with Pathos. A grey mist filled her soul, a large pedestal standing tall and proud above the fog with an open tome sitting atop it. Lucy's morals, her conviction, everything the blonde stood for filled the pages. A bronze plate was affixed to the front of the pedestal, a single word etched into it. Ethos. Wave after wave of the blonde's resolve washed over him, and it strengthened until he saw a brilliant torch shining down onto the tome. 'Nike,' he thought. The Greek goddess of Victory.

When Cobra finally pulled his focus away from Lucy's soul, he was greeted with the sight of her roughly shoving the file into Lahar's chest.
"Fix what I've circled in here," Lucy said quietly. "I've even put notes in the margins for you to make the adjustments easier. Bring it back once you're done, and if I agree to the new terms, then I'll sign it."

"What the hell are you two going on about?"

Lucy's scowl melted away into a triumphant grin when she turned to look at the Poison Slayer. "Hypotheticals, Cobra. Sometimes they can become a reality. Fairy Tail's busting you out of here. Legally."

"What?!" Cobra asked incredulously. Surely she was fucking with him. Either that, or this whole thing was one fucked up dream that he was having after getting the shit shocked out of him by the guards.

"Yep, that's why I came here today. I'll tell you about it when we're on our way to the guild... But, that can't happen until I agree to the terms of your release." Lucy turned to look back at Lahar, her eyes narrowed.

Lahar sighed. "I'm not sure what you expect to accomplish, Miss-" He froze when an eerie smile spread across her face, and actually had to suppress the urge to gulp when Lucy started to speak.

"You were the ones that contacted us, Captain Lahar. If you want Cobra to be released, and join a legal guild... And if that guild is going to be Fairy Tail... Then as a future member of our guild, I won't stand by and let you give him the shaft just because you and the Council want to be stingy, jewel-pinching bastards with ribbed yard sticks shoved so far up your asses that you can't even see that what I'm suggesting you change will cost you less than what you normally have to pay to keep him imprisoned. I refuse to let you send him out of here with the clothes on his back and a flimsy promise of a bare minimum stipend for living expenses during his first month out of prison. If you want Cobra to be successful, and to stay out of prison, then make the changes."

The sheer amount of curses that her soul was spewing while she spoke had Cobra's jaw dropping open. What Lucy had said out loud was enough to affect Lahar, but he was sure that the addition of what she had kept to herself would have actually brought the guy to tears. She was seriously giving his own sadistic tendencies a run for their fucking money with how much she was internally fuming.

'Why would they want him to join Fairy Tail? I bet Lahar's just trying to find a way to lock him back up again... what a prick.' The emotional part of her had been screaming from the get-go that she should have left this place a long time ago, because Cobra had done enough in his life to warrant being locked up. He had hurt her friends, nearly killed Erza with his poison, slaughtered scores of people - including Celestial mages - all to further Midnight's plans with the Infinity Clock. And the Oracion Seis had tried to erase her from existence. Still though, she wanted Cobra to have a chance, a real chance, at getting what he wanted out of life.

Doranbolt's statement only helped to solidify that for her. He dealt with Cobra more often than anyone else, and even he had seen something in the Slayer that made him realize that he deserved a second chance.

'Fairy Tail would be a great place for him. Gajeel and Juvia both joined, and they were our enemies once... Hell, Gajeel tortured me, but it turns out he was just really lost at the time - he's actually a pretty great guy. Maybe Cobra just needs someone to believe he can do something good for a change... He just needs us to have faith in him.'

That explained why Doranbolt had been down to his cell those few months ago. Why he'd been asking about Cobra's willingness to be returned to prison. Why he'd brought up Cubellios. Hell, the
asshole had even blatantly asked what he would do if he was set free! Cobra had taken it all as just another tactic for interrogation, and maybe that's still what it was at the core.

'I have faith in Cobra. He can turn his life around if he's given the opportunity to do it. Fairy Tail will help him get what he's always wanted. I'll make sure of it.'

She sounded so fucking sure of herself that he wanted to bash her head into the damn wall. Except… He couldn't. Physically, he was more than capable of getting that particular job done, but… 'She's trying to get me out of prison.' It wasn't just that she was getting him out, though. Lucy was going to wring the Council for everything she possibly could before he was released, and she apparently wasn't fucking budging on that.

When Lahar just stared at her in shock, Lucy continued. "Master Makarov sent me to make the decision on whether or not Fairy Tail will accept him, so if you want Cobra out of this place, then I suggest you hop to it. Because we're not leaving until that paperwork is finished... And that can't happen until I agree to the terms of what I'm signing. I refuse to sign that pile of circuitous, legal bullshit, so... Make. The. Changes."

"I'll... see what we can work out," Lahar said absently. He only received a nod from Lucy before she turned and sat back down at the table with Cobra. When he looked at the criminal in question, Lahar was further surprised to see him openly gaping at the blonde woman. They had both apparently underestimated Lucy Heartfilia, but Lahar would make sure he never made that mistake again. One tongue lashing from a teenager that had him quaking in his boots was enough.

Cobra really had no fucking words for the shit he'd witnessed in the last several hours. Lucy had read through the newer version of his release paperwork again, found more errors that needed to be dealt with, and sent Lahar back. Twice. The first time, she had signed a total of five pages. The second only three more. Apparently Lahar couldn't bring himself to deal with her any longer, and finally said that he had attended a meeting with the Council. They had given a blanket agreement to whatever Lucy had changed in the first set of papers. Except Lucy reminded him that there were additional changes that she had signed off on. It seemed that being an heiress with a ruthless bastard of a father like hers was had paid off. The crazy wench could have been a fucking lawyer. 'If I ever need one, I might just have to ask her to do it... That shit was unreal.'

In the end, Lucy came out on top. Lahar was barely hanging on by a thread. Cobra just couldn't stop laughing inside. Once he saw the handcuffs, Cobra's fists clenched in disgust. Still, he started raising his hands to get the fucking things slapped on him. If it meant he'd get to walk out of this god forsaken place and never have to wear them again, he'd deal with it.

"I don't think so, Lahar," Lucy said with a scowl. "Cobra's a free man. Well, okay... He's on parole for the next five years, but still. There's no need to restrain him."

Because he was standing a little ways behind Lucy, since she had moved in between himself and Lahar, Cobra let his eye rake over her body again. It had been a while since he'd gotten laid, several months before they tried to sacrifice her in fact. Months of nothing but his damn hand and spit for company to work himself off when he needed it, paired with the fact that the little Eros section of Lucy's mind kept popping up at random times and trying to get her to rip his clothes off, had left Cobra nearly salivating while he looked at her ass. 'Holy fuck, and her mouth. What I wouldn't give to fucking gag her with my-'

A loud slap sounded out in the small interrogation room, and Lahar dropped the perfectly organized file in his hands. Sure, they had been trying to get Cobra's attention, and the criminal had been looking at Lucy's backside as though he was about to eat her alive (and not in a cannibalistic way,
for once), but he never would have expected the young Celestial mage to slap Cobra. Or for the hit to actually connect.

Cobra blinked and met Lucy's glare with one of his own. *This is going to be fucking hell. I've died, and this is my goddamn punishment...* 'He didn't know whether to punch the bitch in the face, or be turned on by the fact that she'd actually landed a halfway decent hit on him and he hadn't heard it coming. Apparently there was just too much shit running through her crazy rat's nest pile of grey mush between her ears to keep track of. *What the fuck was that for, Pathos?*

Lucy's mouth had opened to start ripping into Cobra about looking at her as though she was a piece of meat, and then she stopped. That was twice now he'd used Greek when talking to her, and in the proper context. *He's still a fucking pervert,* she thought with a roll of her eyes. *We're done here, so get your ass moving."

"Are you sure about wanting the cuffs off?" Lahar asked slowly as he started collecting the papers from the floor. "I'm sure we can arrange having them on him until you arrive at the guild."

Lucy sighed and shook her head as she brushed a hand over Horologium's key. "No, that won't be necessary. Besides, it looks like we're going to be in town for the night." She gestured toward the door, and led Cobra out of the interrogation room. "We'll get a room for the night and leave tomorrow morning. Since *someone* had to take hours to get this handled."

"What time is it, anyway?" Cobra asked.

"Nine-thirty. We'll stop and pick up some food before checking in."

As they continued on their way down the hall, Cobra gave the guards from earlier a malicious grin when they walked by. "Don't think I'll forget what you fuckers did," he whispered as they passed. The sheer amount of fear that radiated from both of them, along with the sound of one actually pissing himself, had him cracking right the fuck up. He was going to have more resources available to him if he was out of prison, which meant that he had a better chance of finding a way to get the other Seis members released. It was just a matter of timing.

"Well, it's been a real pleasure, Captain Lahar," Lucy said in feigned sweetness once they reached the entrance to the building. "I would say we should do this again sometime, but I don't think you can handle having your ass verbally handed to you twice by a teenager."

Lahar's mouth thinned into a line. "The pleasure was all mine, Miss Heartfilia." He turned to look at Cobra. "Try to stay out of trouble, Cobra."

As Lahar turned to walk away, Lucy leaned closer to Cobra and whispered, "How many different office supplies to you think he shoves up his ass to walk like that?"

Cobra snorted in response. "Honestly, I don't think you want the answer to that one."

Lucy blanched at the knowing smirk on Cobra's face, then gazed at Lahar's retreating figure in horror. "I bet he starts with a hole punch."

"Hm, I'd say rulers first."

They turned and walked out of the Council building, both pausing and taking a deep breath of the fresh October air. Lucy internally cursed the chill of Fall, but took a step and said, "Makes sense. Then he has something to hold his ass open while he gets the hole punch in there. Pens next though."

Cobra chuckled. "Definitely."
Lucy sighed heavily as they walked away from the Council building. They would have to stay the night in town and leave the next day to head back to the guild, since the final train for the night had already left. She could already tell it was going to be a long night when she also found out that this god forsaken town essentially closed down at nightfall. They could either trek all the way across town to the single bar that was open, and hope to get some halfway decent food, or just head to a hotel and hope they had an available room.

She and Cobra walked in complete silence, which, oddly enough, was rather calming. She had grown so accustomed to Natsu and Gray constantly bickering, Happy's taunts, and Erza's… Erza-ness… that having total silence around her while being in someone's company was strange. Still, Cobra didn't seem to be in the talking mood. Or maybe he didn't talk much in general when he was out in public. He'd been pretty talkative while they were in the interrogation room, but he'd been a prisoner then. It was a possibility that he talked to her simply because there was someone for him to talk to.

Lucy smiled when she saw a hotel that had a vacancy sign up, and her steps quickened as they drew nearer to its entrance. She was starving, and needed a bath to de-stress from the day. All of that paperwork had been a cruel form of torture, and the fact that she was forced to think back on the things that her father had taught her had pain spearing through her heart. She had forced it to the background earlier, and knew that it was only a matter of time before it came rushing back to the forefront of her consciousness. She just hoped that she was actually alone when it happened.

Cobra pulled Lucy to a stop before she was able to open the door to the hotel's lobby. When she turned to look at him in question, without a single fucking ounce of fear in her questioning gaze, he said, "Not this one."

She frowned. "Why?"

"Because there's five different people inside that are bitching about it being overpriced for shitty rooms."

Lucy blinked in surprise and turned to look back up at the building. It looked like every other hotel that she and her team stayed in while they were out on missions. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with it at all. A quick glance around showed her that there weren't any other places they could go.

"There's one three blocks away," Cobra sighed. When she turned to look at him again, he smirked at her. "Unless you feel like paying for a room with no running water."

She blanched and shook her head while backing away from the door. "Hell no. Do you know where this other place is at?" At his nod, she sighed and fell into step beside him while he walked through town. Lucy was tempted to steal a glance at him several times during the walk there, but tamped it down. She'd spent hours with the guy, knew hardly anything about him aside from that one small confession that he'd made when she had backed him into a corner, and now she would be spending the night with him.
Man. If only I was spending the night with him like that. I bet he's a damn beast in the sack... God, Lucy. You need to get laid. Looks like I'll be adding that to my to-do list in the next week. Operation Dildo Replacement.'

Cobra smirked when the hotel was in view. He hadn't considered the fact that he would actually be spending a night with the busty blonde. Sure, her thoughts were pretty much a nonstop commentary from multiple perspectives - which, he was determined to figure out just how the fuck she pulled that off - but if she gave him any indication that she wanted to get a proper fuck, he wouldn't hesitate to jump her bones. Thoughts were one thing; everyone had that perverted portion of themselves that they tended to ignore. The only way he'd make a move was more than just her thinking about it in passing. Intent was essential. He was a lot of things, and used his Soul Listening magic in plenty of ways to take advantage of people, but that was one line he always refused to cross.

Lucy pulled the door to the modest hotel open and walked right up to the front desk, smiling brightly at the little old woman. "Hello, ma'am. My friend and I would like to get a room. Preferably one with two beds?"

"Just for tonight?"

"Yes, ma'am. We were delayed at the Magic Council, so we missed the train," Lucy said with a small chuckle of embarrassment. "We'll be leaving in the morning to head back to our guild."

The old woman smiled back at the sweet and polite young blonde, then gave her handsome companion a quick once over before turning to get the keys for the room that met her specifications. After receiving the money for the room, she handed the keys over and said, "Checkout is at eleven o'clock, in case you two decide to get a little more rest before leaving."

Lucy grinned and politely thanked the clerk as she took the room keys. 'Room 202,' she thought while reading the small keychain and heading toward the stairs with Cobra right behind her.

'Ooh deer. I gave her the wrong key. Oh well, I'm sure they won't mind. They're getting a good deal for that one.'

Cobra followed Lucy up the stairs and bit his lips to hide his amusement. He couldn't wait to see how the blonde would react when she saw where they would be staying for the night. He really didn't give a shit either way, since he knew that this place would be a hell of a lot more comfortable than sleeping in that damn cell. A glance up as they ascended the stairs had him rethinking this shit actually being a good idea. 'Holy fucking hell, her skirt is short...' For the first time in quite a while, Cobra found himself having to contain his drool when he saw her skirt sway to the side, baring the bottoms of her deliciously rounded cheeks for only a moment. And then another when she took her next step. He was torn between hating her choice of clothing for making him have to struggle to control himself, and wishing that they had gotten a room on a higher floor so he could stare at her ass longer.

"Quit staring at my ass, Cobra," Lucy said, never taking her eyes from her path. When he scoffed, she gave him an answering snort. "I'm not an idiot. I know that's what you're doing back there."

"Hate to break it to you, Blondie," Cobra growled, "Not everyone's interested in your ass. Metaphorically or literally."

"Uh-huh." Lucy turned and opened the door for the second floor, then walked over to the room they would be staying in. Sending out a silent prayer that there was nothing wrong with it, she opened the door and turned the lights on. Then came to a crashing halt when she saw that there was only one
"You gonna keep goin'?" Cobra asked gruffly, shouldering past the stunned blonde when she just kept standing there. It took everything in him to keep his laughter to himself, and instead let a small, devious smirk pull up one corner of his lips. "It's the only room they have, so just suck it up." No way in hell was he going to tell her that there were actually several vacant rooms in the hotel that had two beds. Or that one just so happened to be in the room right next to theirs. Not when he could have so much more fun fucking with the little blonde about having to share a bed.

"O-Okay," Lucy said weakly as she shut the door behind her. She walked through the room and sighed when she realized that Cobra had commandeered the bathroom, and that the shower was running. At least it would give her some time to figure out how they would make this single bed situation work. And she needed to find some semblance of food before her stomach decided to start cannibalizing itself. It would probably be best to start with the food. With her plan firmly in place, Lucy walked into the small kitchenette that consisted of a hot plate, a counter, and a mini fridge. There was no food though. "Well, damnit…” she muttered turning back and sprawling out on the king-sized bed with a huff.

For his part, Cobra wanted to get a fucking shower. He vaguely remembered some woman bathing him while he'd been out of it, and getting his ass shocked again while he was still under the shower's spray, but he could still feel some grit in his hair. Or maybe he just mentally needed to clean his own damn body. Regardless of the reason, it gave him a chance to make himself relax a little concerning having to sleep anywhere near someone he didn't know. It had been years since he'd slept by a stranger, not since he was locked in the Tower, and for the first time in his life, he would be next to a woman with a rocking fucking body. Crazy as hell from what he'd already heard during the day, but no less sexy. And damn it all if that didn't piss him right the hell off.

How the hell was he supposed to sleep? Aside from her being physically attractive, he would hear what she was thinking about, even what she was dreaming about. Granted, part of him considered waiting until she was wracked the hell out and then making a break for it. Except, if he did that, then he'd be a wanted man again. It was a better choice to just go along with this probationary shit, pretend to be the good guy, and then get the Seis out of prison as soon as he fucking could. Then they could do whatever the hell they wanted. They would be free. He sighed in resignation, and dare he say contentment, as the steaming water beat down on him. He had never been one for taking long showers, but he was damn well going to enjoy it now that he had access to hot water.

Once he was finished, Cobra spent only another minute in the shower before turning it off and toweling himself off. It wasn't even a question about what he would wear to bed. He'd spent enough time sleeping on the go, so crashing in the clothes the Council had provided him with was fine by him. He'd keep the jacket and shoes off though. Once he was redressed in the black pants and black long sleeve undershirt, he decided that he was covered enough. He quickly rolled up the maroon shirt and black socks inside of his jacket and walked out of the bathroom only to pause when he saw Lucy talking with a pink-haired maid.

"Thank you so much, Virgo," Lucy said with a smile. "Really, you're the best."

"It's no trouble, Princess," Virgo replied with a small bow, her shackles rattling softly in the otherwise silent room. Movement in the corner of her eye caught her attention, and she glanced over to see Lucy's companion placing a rolled up jacket in the corner of the room. 'So he's the one my Princess will be sleeping with tonight. I can see why Leo's so upset over it. I'd let him punish me in an instant.'

Cobra blinked and slowly turned to face Lucy and the spirit, then felt his lip twitch before becoming
a full-on sneer when he saw the heavy shackles around the maid's wrists. He fucking hated shackles. Especially ones that rattled like that. It only served to remind him of the times he was locked in solitary with Brain. Still, he knew from experience with Angel that there were certain quirks about celestial spirits. Apparently shackles were this one's. Joy. There were two things warring for her attention: Lucy and being punished in some seriously masochistic shit. Preferably by the blonde, apparently.

"Cobra, this is Virgo," Lucy said softly. "She brought us some food."

'And she brought me a fucking nightgown that I will not be wearing! Honestly, if I was trying to get laid that'd be one thing, but I'm not gonna wear see-through lace to bed with a stranger here! Even though I can already picture him tearing it off of me... Oh god, shut up!"

"Uh-huh." Cobra walked over to the small table and took the open seat, warily eyeing the plates and drinks.

Lucy rolled her eyes and sighed heavily. "It's not poisoned, ass..." Lucy paused and tilted her head to the side. A Poison Dragon Slayer would actually want his food to be poisoned, wouldn't he? That would be his element, and he'd need to consume that on a regular basis. "Virgo?"

Virgo's lips twitched and she disappeared, then reappeared only a moment later with a special cleaning agent she used in her own home. It was harmful to spirits if they ingested it, and downright deadly if a human ever were to get their hands on it. She set the bottle down on the table, then bowed to Lucy. "Punishment, Princess?"

Lucy smiled softly up at her spirit. "No, Virgo."

Cobra shook his head when he saw a small bit of excitement in Virgo's eyes just before she disappeared back to the Spirit World. That one was more than a little fucked in the head. She was a damn masochist through and through, loved physical punishment in the form of canes and bondage, and she actually liked it when Lucy denied her. And from what he could tell, Lucy hadn't a fucking clue that even her denial got the spirit going.

Lucy sighed and looked over at Cobra again, then kicked his leg under the table with a smirk. "Eat. She brought you some poison too. Besides, I still have to tell you about what's gonna happen tomorrow."

Cobra watched as Lucy took a small bite of her food, then just decided to go with the flow. He hadn't found anything in her that would indicate she was going to try and fuck him over. Especially not when she had fought so diligently to make sure he wasn't completely screwed during his probation. He took a small bite of the food that was sitting in front of him, then actually let his eye close when he sighed. This shit was so much fucking better than what he'd been eating lately.

'Wow, a Slayer that can eat with manners. Whodathunkit! Well, I've never seen Laxus eat... I don't think. Then again, he wasn't actually raised by dragons. He just got that lacrima. I'm sure Master would have forced at least some semblance of manners on him though.'

"Just because I'm a criminal doesn't mean I can't control myself."

Lucy jolted in surprise, then flushed when she realized he'd been listening in on her thoughts. "No, that's not it," she said quickly. "I'm just used to Natsu being a slob. Gajeel's better though. He at least uses a napkin."

"Uh-huh. So what's this shit situation I've gotten myself into, Blondie?"
"Right," Lucy said with a nod. She carefully wiped her mouth and took a sip of water. "So, you'll be on parole as a member of Fairy Tail for the next five years. The Council can, at any time, review your case and decide that you've met their requirements to end your parole early, meaning you won't have to go back to prison. At the end of five years, you'll have to go down for a review, and they'll decide whether they're extending it, or setting you free. During the review, you'll have an opportunity to speak for yourself concerning your parole, and they've agreed to take your statement, along with an officiant statement from Fairy Tail, into consideration while deliberating their course of action."

Cobra nodded.

"For the first three months, you'll get a check from the Council to help with living expenses. Your first one should be at the guild when we get there tomorrow. As a member of Fairy Tail, you'll have to go on job requests to make money, but I'm sure Master has something in mind as far as getting you situated in your own place. If not, then I'm willing to help you look for a place and get you settled." Lucy paused and took a bite of her food. "Oh... And you've been assigned to Team Natsu."

Cobra snorted and rolled his eyes. "No fucking way am I working with Salamander."

"There's no getting around it, Cobra," Lucy sighed. "Natsu, Erza, Gray, Happy, and myself make up Team Natsu. You're on our team because the Council needs to have a group that can incapacitate you, should you decide to blow a head gasket and try slaughtering everyone."

"They got lucky," Cobra growled. "It won't fucking happen again."

Lucy's eyes hardened, and she slowly set her fork down on her plate. "Cobra. You said you wanted freedom. And that you wanted to make your own choices in life. No one else was exactly pleased with the situation when we were told about it. Hell, Natsu's just as against you joining the guild, let alone the team, as you are. You're getting this chance, so don't fuck it up by going on a rampage just because you're out of prison now."

"I'm not planning on it, Blondie. I'm just saying that Sriracha Dick and Hammer Time won't win if we end up fighting," Cobra sighed and sat back in his chair, shaking his head while he looked at the half-empty plate in front of him. "Trust me, I'm glad I'm out of prison. And I sure as hell don't wanna get locked up again."

"Then it looks like you'll have to suck it up," Lucy said with a small smile. "Yes, you've still got some orders that you have to follow, because you're on parole, but when your parole is finished, you'll have even fewer restrictions on you. For now, you're stuck with the team. We had just as much say in it as you did. Erza's gonna be keeping an eye on you, but she's Erza. Gray says he doesn't like it, but he's following orders. Happy, Natsu's Exceed, just hopes you won't hurt anyone. Natsu… Well…"

Cobra rolled his eye. "Yeah, I haven't deluded myself into thinking I'll be getting a warm reception, Tits."

"Well, I'm on your side, Cobra," Lucy said softly. "I came down here because I wanted to see for myself what kind of person you really are. I didn't want to just take what Natsu and Erza have said about their fights with you as an indication of who you are. It's why Master made me the deciding factor in all this, I guess. The others might not be too jazzed up about this, but you've got my support. And you've got Master Makarov's."

He didn't really see why either of them would be willing to vouch for him. They didn't know the first thing about him, but they were accepting him as though he hadn't tried to kill all of them. He didn't
really know what to say about all of this. He couldn't understand why the guild's master would give a flying fuck about whether or not he was free, or why Lucy would for that matter. "Why?" It was the only response he could come up with, the only thing that wouldn't show just how little he understood about what was happening.

"Because, unlike you," Lucy said with a smirk, "We believe in giving people second changes. Real second chances. You have to be willing to work for it so others can see what I already do, but we'll help you out. You were honest with me when you told me what you really wanted. It showed me that you're capable of opening up, even a little bit, when given the proper motivation. I still have no idea how I got you to admit that about yourself, but you did it. That's what matters most."

'A and he didn't try to skin me alive right when I walked into the room… That was a definite plus for his case.'

"Well…" Cobra said slowly, leaning forward and taking another bite of his meal. "Alright then."

"I feel like I should let you know though," Lucy said with a grimace. "The team can get a little… Overly excited?"

Cobra raised an amused eyebrow. "Uh-huh. Is that a statement or a question, Jugs?"

"Both?" Lucy laughed. "They're pretty destructive, so… We don't usually get the full reward for the job. It's an even split though, no matter how much we walk away with."

Dozens of memories flitted through the little blonde, and Cobra's jaw actually dropped open. "That's more than fucking 'overly excited'," he said slowly. "I don't think I'm the one you need to worry about rampaging."

Lucy rolled her eyes and laughed again. "I'm not worried about you rampaging. To be honest, you don't look like the 'rampagey' type."

"Then what do you think I'd do?"

"Poisoning people in their sleep and slipping out the window seems more like your cup of tea."

A wicked smirk played across his face. The first thing that came to mind for her, the most logical choice, and what he'd actually considered doing. Fuck, did he like how her mind worked. "You're sick. I would never do that."

"Hm," Lucy hummed in mock thought. "Maybe not. You're just as likely to poison someone while they're fully conscious. Then you can watch them squirm before you make a break for it." She watched as his smirk turned into a full blown grin filled with malice, his single eye gleaming with sadistic joy. "And on that note, now I know that not only are you capable of doing it, but you like the idea of it."

"You're goddamn right I do. I spent fucking years doing it. Sure hope you Fairies know what you got yourselves into."

"We're scrappy," Lucy shot back. "I'm sure we'll manage." She glanced down to see that both of their plates were empty, then said, "You should really have some of that poison Virgo brought."

Cobra jolted in surprise, then looked down at the bottle the spirit had brought. How the hell had he forgotten about the fucking poison that was sitting right in fucking front of him? He blamed the blonde. It had to be her fault… somehow. Without preamble, he lifted the bottle and took a small sip
of it. There was no telling just how potent this shit was, since he'd never smelled anything like it before, and he wasn't going to chance overdoing it when he could make it last longer by being a tad on the reserved side. That is, until he fucking tasted it.

Cobra's mouth burned, his eye watered, and he found himself fighting against the cough that was tickling the back of his throat. It was like he'd just gotten the lacrima put in all over again. Back then, the first few months of ingesting poison had been painful, because his body had yet to adjust to the stuff after it stopped rejecting the lacrima. "What the…" he whispered, slowly putting the bottle back on the table while he stared at it in shock. After that initial acidic burning subsided, he was left with the strangest combination of flavors swirling around in his mouth. Lavender, hemlock, arsenic, and… mint? He could tell it wasn't actually any of those things that were in this weird fucking concoction, just that those were the only things that came to mind that he could compare it to.

"Is it… Is everything alright?" Lucy whispered.

He slowly nodded and took another sip. It didn't burn nearly as much, but damn it all if it wasn't feeding into his deep hunger for poison. The bastard guards only gave him the bare minimum while he was locked up. Just a couple ounces of bleach every other meal. He needed a hell of a lot more than that, had even told them as much, but they didn't give a shit what he needed. "What the hell is this shit?"

Lucy tilted her head to the side, then shrugged. "I dunno. What does the bottle say?"

Cobra took another sip of the poisonous cocktail, then peered at the bottle. "You're shitting me," he whispered. "It's all-purpose cleaner…" His tongue and lips had gone slightly numb, but his body was already thrumming with energy. Much more than he'd had in quite some time. "Where the hell did she get this?"

Lucy stood up and grabbed the empty plates, then peered down at the bottle. She smiled and shook her head while walking to the trash can. "From the Spirit World," she laughed.

"Damn," he whispered. Cobra decided to take one full swig of the stuff before he capped the bottle for later. He didn't know when he would be able to pick up some shit of his own, and he had a feeling that this was going to have him feeling absolutely fucking fabulous soon.

'Ugh. What am I supposed to do about this sleeping situation?!' Lucy definitely didn't want to share a bed with a man she knew almost nothing about. Well, she didn't want to sleep next to one. There had been several nights she'd spent the night with someone she knew next to nothing about, but there had been a severe lack of resting going on. And that was not happening with Cobra, regardless of what her inner man-eating succubus was saying on the matter.

There were only two guys she had ever actually slept next to. Natsu had repeatedly broken into her home and crawled into her bed, much to her eternal annoyance, and Gray had actually fallen asleep with her after their one night of romping in the sack a few weeks after she joined the guild. At least Natsu didn't also try to get into her pants. That was one of the reasons she didn't tell Erza about it. He just wanted someone to cuddle with.

Still, Lucy hadn't a clue what to do in this situation. Finally, she decided that there was absolutely no way she would sleep in the bed with Cobra. She didn't have anything against him, and she didn't necessarily distrust him, she just… Well, she didn't know what her reasoning was.

"Calm your tits," Cobra said as he walked over to his rolled up jacket and took a seat on the floor. "I'll sleep over here. I really don't fucking care." Personally, he would much rather sleep in the bed, but if giving in and letting the blonde take it without any argument would get her mind to stop
branching off in twenty different directions, then he was more than happy to fucking do it. That shit was starting to give him a headache.

Lucy blinked in surprise, then promptly closed her gaping maw and locked herself in the bathroom. She still needed that bath, after all. It was while Lucy was soaking in the bath that she started feeling guilty about taking the bed for herself. Sure, Cobra had pretty much made the decision for her when he actually offered to just sleep on the floor, but she was sure they could figure something out so he didn't have to be uncomfortable.

Lucy spent the entire time in the bathroom mulling over the situation again. Then, when she walked out dressed in her clothes from the day, the sight of Cobra so easily laying on the floor made her pause. And something occurred to her. Cobra had been locked in his cell for months, and she highly doubted that they provided prisoners with a proper bed. His eye was closed, his hands were on his stomach with his fingers laced together, and he was using his jacket as a pillow. She didn't know when the last time was that he would have had a chance to sleep in a bed.

"Carpet is more comfortable than stone. Just go the fuck to sleep already."

Lucy jolted at the sudden sound of his voice, then flushed with embarrassment. That statement alone proved that she needed to just sac up and deal with this. She could be an adult and just get the hell over it. It's not like Cobra was going to take advantage of her. He would have done it already if that was the case, like while she was taking a bath.

Cobra's eye slid open when he heard Lucy's keys jingling softly, and he looked over with a raised brow and a whole slew of insults at the ready when a pink puff of smoke appeared. His mouth clamped shut right away when he saw which spirit came out though.

Lucy smiled gently. "Hi, Aries. Could you do me a favor?"

"I-I'll try my best... I-I'm sorry..."

Great. This one. Cobra remembered when Angel came back with Aries' key. The spirit had been timid before, but after Angel's talons were sunk into her... She had become nothing more than an apologetic blubbering mess more often than not. And that only served to make Angel rip into her twice as often. He hadn't really given a shit at the time, since it was Angel's business to begin with, but he couldn't help but watch curiously as Lucy and the Ram spirit interacted.

"Thank you so much, Aries," Lucy said with a wide grin. "I know you'll do an amazing job."

"Of course I will. I'd do anything for you, Princess. You're so good to me and the others. You have no idea how much we all appreciate what you do for us. Anything to make you smile like this."

"So, I've gotten myself into a bit of a pickle here. There's only one bed, but it's big enough for me and Cobra to-

Aries froze, a full-body shiver taking over her, and her eyes quickly darted around the room until they landed on the maroon-haired mage lying on the floor. 'No... Not him... Oh stars... Does that mean she's here too?! No... No I don't want to go back to her. Please...' She watched as he scowled and slowly sat up, and Aries swiftly cowered behind Lucy while she tried to keep herself even remotely calm. It didn't work in the slightest. She wanted to just force her gate closed, but Lucy might need her help. She couldn't just abandon Lucy. Not after everything the sweet blonde had done for her and the others.

As the first stirrings of a sob echoed through the room, Lucy whirled around and looked down at
Aries' teary and fear-filled eyes. Her arms shot out and wrapped around her spirit, pulling her closer. "Hey, it's okay," she whispered soothingly, her fingers running through the soft pink hair that was so warm and inviting. "I won't let anyone hurt you, Aries."

"I'm s-s-sorry, P-Princess," Aries cried, clutching tightly to the blonde. "D-Did I make you m-m-mad? I-I'm sorry..." She remembered very well just how twisted Angel was, and how her friends had simply watched while the mage abused her spirits in any way she saw fit. Karen had been cruel, but Angel... She was an absolute monster. And Cobra had been one of the ones that watched it all unfold, and he hadn't tried to stop her. She had even been forced to spar against him several times, with Angel ordering her to see how potent his poison was by not blocking.

"I'm not mad, Aries," Lucy whispered. "I'm worried. What's wrong? Why are you upset?"

Cobra leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest while he watched Lucy and Aries. The blonde was completely different from Angel when it came to her spirits. She asked for their help, thanked them, and in this particular instance, comforted them. He vaguely remembered the times that he had been forced to use his poison on Aries. Brain had wanted to see how much his magic had progressed, and that meant he had to give it his all. If he didn't, then he would have been locked up as punishment. He hadn't enjoyed hurting her in the slightest, but that was because his poison didn't actually kill her. That, and he hadn't gained a penchant for enjoying suffering nearly as much by then. That hadn't really happened until he lost Cubellios.

"Please, Princess. I-I'll do whatever you w-want!" Aries sobbed. "I-I'm so s-sorry!"

Lucy's brow pushed together while she carefully lowered her spirit to the floor. She couldn't understand what had gotten Aries to this state. Sure, she was timid. She stuttered and apologized after nearly every sentence, but that was slowly disappearing the longer they were together. So what had caused the sweet spirit to break down like this?

"That would be me," Cobra said.

His statement was only confirmed when Aries squeaked and curled herself further into Lucy's embrace. Lucy turned a baleful glare that was tinged with questions at the Slayer. "What happened?"

Cobra shrugged blithely. "Angel was a fucking cunt. I watched her act that way. Had to poison this one a few times."

"You... Poisoned her?" Lucy whispered angrily. "Why-"

"My reasons are my own. She just needed to suffer a bit before she disappeared."

"That's no reason to torture her!"

"Better her than me." Cobra shrugged again. "Angel could have told her it was okay to block instead of standing there and taking it full force, but I was just following orders." By that point in his life, he had realized that listening to what Brain told him to do was a safer bet than trying to be stubborn. The kid he used to be in the Tower was gone, and he'd truly become Cobra. It was either rebel and get tortured himself, or attack a defenseless spirit and listen to her suffering. Obviously, self-preservation was his choice.

Lucy's mouth opened to respond, until his words hit her full force. Cobra didn't sound sorry for what he'd done to Aries, not even remotely apologetic. She wasn't sure what to make of his statement though. It seemed like there was a lot he was leaving out, and it wasn't nearly enough to calm the Ram spirit down. "That's..." she said slowly as she gave him a calculating look. She just couldn't
figure him out. "That's not really a good enough reason... Orders or not, you could have refused."

"I could have," Cobra nodded with a smirk. Sure, he could have told Brain to go fuck himself with scores of rusted utensils until Zero's bloodlust was sated. And Cobra would have been thrown on any number of the bastard's 'toys' for disobeying him, locked up in shackles in solitary confinement again, or made to watch him do something even fucking worse Most likely all three. "But I didn't." His single eye bored into her fiery mocha orbs, silently challenging her to do any of the things she was thinking about. Inventive and sadistic, a beautiful combination. Too bad he already knew that she bottled shit like that up and locked it away. He wouldn't get the chance to rip her to pieces when she got too close.

"Why not?"

"Because it's neither the strongest, nor the most intelligent," Cobra replied. "Malleability and adaptability is key."

'Oh, if I didn't actually give a shit about my spirits, you'd be getting several keys right down your damn urethra, you one-eyed snake fucker!' Lucy sighed and turned to look down at Aries again, then slowly lifted her spirit's chin and wiped away her tears. "Aries… Sweetie…" she whispered tenderly. "You know I won't hurt you like Angel did, right?"

Aries nodded meekly.

"Cobra's joined Fairy Tail, and he's a part of my team now," she continued. "He won't be using his poison on you again. Isn't that right, Cobra?"

He lifted a brow at her, and just waited.

'Cobra, please. She's terrified of you. You guys will have to work together in the future, so please. Just say you won't poison her again.'

He sighed and forced himself to meet Aries' timid gaze. "I have no intention of poisoning you again. Pass that shit along to the other ones that Blondie's got. Except those fucking creep-ass dolly twin shits. I fucking hate those things."

"Gemi and Mini are not things," Lucy ground out as she turned to glare at him again. "I have no intention of poisoning you again. Pass that shit along to the other ones that Blondie's got. Except those fucking creep-ass dolly twin shits. I fucking hate those things."

"Or what?" Cobra growled. "Are you gonna have my ass locked up again?"

"No," Lucy answered with a dark chuckle. "I'll have Gemini come out and tell me all your secrets. I've refused to do that with them before on principle, but I'm sure they'd be more than happy to help me."

Aries whimpered when she saw Cobra snarl, but Lucy was putting herself in harm's way. She remembered that look on the Poison Slayer's face, although he had been so much younger the last time she saw him. It was the same look he'd given her every time he'd attacked her. It was the same look that she knew she would have if she fought back when being backed into a corner instead of cowering. 'I'll fight him off if I have to. Anything to protect her.'
Cobra's eye flashed dangerously before he reined himself in. The Ram had hit the nail on the head, which was odd since he'd never heard more than her being scared shitless from the spirit. With a sneer, he turned to the table and opened the bottle Virgo had brought for him, taking a large gulp of the celestial cleaner and sighing when it burned his throat. "Touche, Ethos," he muttered. "They're not things."

"Thank you," Lucy whispered sternly before turning back to Aries, her face instantly softening. "So, like I was saying… Could you maybe make some pillows to go down the middle of the bed? That way Cobra and I can share it without being in each other's bubbles. And he won't have to sleep on the floor."

Aries blinked in surprise, then nodded quickly. Without another word, she got to work creating a fluffy set of pillows that bisected the bed. "All finished," she said with a timid smile and a sniffle. "I'm sor-"

Lucy threw a hand lightly over Aries mouth and shook her head, smiling gently. "No need to apologize. You did great. Just like I knew you would. Thank you so much." Aries beamed and blushed behind Lucy's hand, ducking her head slightly, and Lucy leaned forward to whisper, "I'm sorry for not telling you sooner, Aries. I'll make sure to summon Gemini and Scorpio when I'm alone to talk to them, okay?"

Aries nodded, then sighed when Lucy hugged her again. Once the blonde let her go, Aries closed her gate and was pulled into another pair of arms. Her eyes opened to see orange hair, and she sighed while her arms wrapped around Leo's waist. "I'll be fine," she whispered. "He seems nicer than last time…"

Lucy sighed as she stood to her feet. She refused to look at Cobra while she crawled under the covers on one side of the bed, and instead chose to turn off her light and close her eyes. The bed dipped not a moment later as he did the same, and the room was bathed in darkness when he shut off the light on his nightstand. "Cobra?" she whispered softly after a few minutes of silence.

He grunted, his eye open while he stared at the ceiling.

"I don't expect you to be someone you're not, y'know. Just… My spirits are very close to me. I don't like it when people talk about them like that."

"Uh-huh."

"If I said your snake was just a thing, you'd be pissed right?"

His teeth ground together. "Immensely," he growled.

"I'm not saying it."

"She. Not 'it'."

"Right. I'm not saying she is a thing. She's a snake," Lucy reasoned. "My spirits aren't things either. They're spirits. They mean just as much to me as she does to you, I think…"

Cobra wasn't going to tell her how wrong she was about that. Lucy didn't need to know that Cubellios was the only one in this world that had kept him even remotely sane and safe. She had given him companionship when he had no one to turn to, gave him poison when he got his lacrima, and made sure he could feel some small sense of comfort from her cool scales while she coiled around him at night. Those spirits hadn't done anything like that for Lucy. He didn't even bother listening in to find out what he already knew to be true. "Uh-huh."

"Thank you," Lucy whispered sternly before turning back to Aries, her face instantly softening. "So, like I was saying… Could you maybe make some pillows to go down the middle of the bed? That way Cobra and I can share it without being in each other's bubbles. And he won't have to sleep on the floor."
"Were you telling the truth though?" Lucy mused. "You won't try to hurt Aries and the others?"

"I said I won't. Take it or leave it," Cobra replied. "Then shut the hell up and go to sleep."

Lucy nodded and rolled over to bury her face in the wall of pink fluffy pillows Aries had made. Just this small reminder of her spirit had her recalling what Cobra had said before. She thought that it hadn't been enough information, that his vague responses didn't warrant even a modicum of attention because he was simply being evasive. Still though…

"Better her than me… I was just following orders… Because it's neither the strongest, nor the most intelligent… Malleability and adaptability is key."

When Lucy put everything together that way, she realized what he'd been trying to tell her. She'd thought he was speaking in riddles, just trying to trip her up. But he was telling her exactly what she wanted to know without saying it outright. It was sneaky as hell, and not everyone would catch onto what he'd actually meant by how he'd phrased it. 'Survival,' she thought, 'Everyone does what's necessary to survive. Self-preservation by following orders. Survival of the fittest by being adaptable. Is that what you meant, Cobra?'

For his part, Cobra smirked while he rolled onto his side, resting his head against the wall of pillows from Aries. He didn't say a single word, instead choosing to keep his breathing completely even as though he'd already fallen asleep. Lucy didn't need to know that she was right, or that he'd phrased it that way to see how long it took for her to come to that conclusion. Sure, he'd told her something about his past with Brain, but it wasn't anything that she couldn't have already figured out on her own. It's not like he had openly said that there was a part of him that had always been terrified of the bastard. No, that shit was something he'd take to his fucking grave. Not a soul in this world or the next would see him as anything other than who he chose to let them see. And for now, he guessed it would be a modified version of Cobra of the Oracion Seis. Starting tomorrow, he would be Cobra of Fairy Tail. 'God, I think I'm gonna be fucking sick...'

Lucy's eyes slid open slowly to reveal a wall of pink fluff, and she found that the room was oddly silent. There was no snoring from the man on the other side of the pillow wall, no mumbling in his sleep. The shower wasn't going, and there weren't any rustling sounds from fabric shifting while he moved. Either Cobra had decided to run while she was passed out, and had taken advantage of the trust she was putting in him... Or he was just eerily silent.

"Eerily silent," Cobra said.

Lucy's head turned quickly only to find a deeply tanned face hovering several inches above hers while one indigo peered down at her. She wasn't sure how much time passed between the realization that Cobra was watching her and the ear-piercing shriek she let out, but it didn't really matter when her terror-and-surprise-induced-falsetto was accompanied by her vaulting from the bed and toppling onto the floor while dragging a good portion of the pillows down with her. Before she had time to come to terms with the sheer amount of ridiculousness that was her morning so far, a deep baritone of belly-bursting laughter came as an answer from the bed. And goddamnit was his voice insanely sexy like that.

Cobra peeked over the edge of the bed, his normal smirk firmly in place while gazing down at the flustered blonde. "That was..."

"Oh, shut it!" Lucy scowled while chucking one of the pillows at him. And missing horribly. He didn't even have to dodge... He just watched as it flew over his head.
"I should say the same to you," Cobra answered coolly while laying his head on his arms. "I'm more partial to reds and purples, but blue lace works too."

"Blue..." Lucy whispered in confusion, watching as the Slayer simply continued smirking and raised an amused eyebrow. And that was when she remembered that she’d slept in her clothes from the day. Just for good measure, Lucy lowered her gaze. Sure enough, she was spread fucking eagle in a goddamn mini skirt, and giving Cobra a perfectly uninhibited view of her blue lace thong. She shrieked and promptly shut her legs, then grabbed a pillow from the floor and put it in her lap.

"Do you have a habit of waking up and screaming your face off?"

"No!" Lucy shouted. At his pointed look, she scowled and then froze. Natsu slept in her bed nearly every night, which resulted in her yelling at him in the morning. If it wasn't her best friend and his blue furball of a foster son sleeping in her bed or eating her food, then they were raiding her drawers to peruse her unmentionables for 'proper Ninja-wear', or pranking her, or trying to burn the place down, or hiding fish in said underwear drawer. "On second thought," she sighed sadly, "I think I do... I blame Natsu."

Cobra nodded sagely. "A wise choice. And this other business of showing strangers your cookies... You should probably cut that down to a minimum. Trust me, I'm flattered that you'd offer me a glimpse of your cookie jar, but really... That was a bit forward."

"Did you just..." Lucy slowly shook her head in disbelief. She had to be dreaming right now. That was the only explanation for what was happening. Then again, if she was dreaming, then she was sure Cobra would be naked, and his face would be between her legs. A deep flush crossed her cheeks when she heard him snickering while he rolled into his back to look at the ceiling. The bastard was listening in on her! "I'm about to suffocate you with a pillow..."

"Liar."

"No," Lucy said slowly. "I really am."

"I'll believe that when I - Mmph!" Cobra's eye went wide when one of the fluffy pink pillows Aries had made was brought down over his mouth and nose. He could still breath through it, but there was a triumphant gleam in Lucy's eyes that he honestly couldn't even be pissed about. She fucking got him.

Lucy laughed smugly and leaned down until she was able to whisper in his pointed ear. "I hate liars, Cobra. But... Do you know what I hate more than that?"

He shook his head minutely, doing everything in his power to keep himself still. Hopefully she would stop breathing right in his fucking ear soon, otherwise that bit of lace wasn't going to be doing a whole lot of anything aside from lying in tatters on the floor.

"Skim milk," Lucy giggled. "It's just water... That's lying about being milk." She slowly lifted the pillow and grinned when he turned his head to look at her. "I can't stand it when liquids lie to me."

"Really... Do they do it often?"

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "Often enough that I've started whispering threats to them on a regular basis."

"And just how the hell do you threaten a liquid?"

"Plenty of ways. Mostly it's by saying I'll be sure to use it in an enema for Master Bob..."
The mental picture that accompanied her statement had Cobra openly blanching. He didn't care that his unflappable mask had shattered. That shit was absolutely terrifying. The worst part of it all though? He couldn't tell if she was being serious about any of it. If she was joking about talking to liquids, she could still be serious about the enema thing. There was just too much ricocheting in her head for him to find out. "You're seriously fucking twisted..."

Lucy winked and stood to her feet, combing her fingers through her hair. She glanced at the clock and frowned. "It's only seven..."

"So it is." Cobra rolled back onto his stomach and watched as Lucy started picking up the few pillows that were strewn across the floor.

"Did you wake up before me?"

"Yep."

"How long have you been up for?"

Cobra tilted his head from one side to the other. "It was still dark out, so... Four thirty?"

Lucy's frown deepened. "Two and a half hours ago?"

"That would be the answer to seven o'clock minus four thirty," Cobra sighed.

'What was he doing for two and a half hours while I slept?'

Cobra groaned in frustration when her mind started running a mile a minute again. "Oi, before you get started on that shit, I was just fucking laying here. Nothing creepy. Fucking hell..."

She crossed her arms under her chest. "That's all?"

Cobra smirked and gave her a half shrug. "Unless it's creepy to watch you while you're sleeping..." That was something he actually had done. He just couldn't help it. Her dreams were fucking terrifying.

"That is fucking creepy!"

"Oh. Well, then what about sniffing you in your sleep?"

"You didn't..."

Cobra's smirk widened slightly. "I might've..." He'd thought about it, but only because he could smell her roses and dew scent wafting through the air, and he wanted more of it. Luckily, Cobra knew the meaning of self-restraint. Sort of.

"Yes, that's also creepy!" Lucy shuddered.

"Damn, then I guess I shouldn't mention that lock of your hair I took..." He hadn't. "Or that I jerked off right next to you..." Again, he'd considered it. "Twice..." Cobra watched as her mouth slowly dropped open and her face went pale. "I might've moved the pillows to do that..."

"Oh Mavis," Lucy whispered in horror, fighting the bile that was swiftly rising in the back of her throat. "That's just..."

"I'd suggest not smelling your hand," Cobra added with a dark chuckle. "Mine was too rough, and I didn't have any lotion, so it's possible that I also spit on your hand and used it to finish up round
"Please tell me you're joking..." Lucy whispered weakly.

Cobra chuckled and gave her a noncommittal shrug. "You could smell your hand and find out..." He really hoped she did. Just so he could laugh about this shit.

Lucy stared at her hands in horror, then whirled around and rushed off to the bathroom. She wasn't even going to test it. She threw the taps on the sink to scalding, and scrubbed her hands clean. Only when the skin was red and raw, did she finally shut off the water. It took another minute for her to regain some color in her cheeks, since she had gone white as a ghost, but when she felt a little more normal, Lucy walked back out of the bathroom.

Cobra couldn't help it. He really, truly tried to stop, but he just couldn't. Once he saw Lucy's face, he started laughing hysterically. "You... Holy fuck! You actually... believed me!" he wheezed. "Fuck, you're gullible!"

The look on Cobra's face when he saw a pillow being brought down on his head at the last possible second was more gratifying than it should have been for Lucy. Especially when he rolled off of the bed from the second pillow attack and groaned in discomfort. It was too bad he was still chuckling... Too bad for him...

"I still think it's weird that you don't have motion sickness," Lucy mused while popping a piece of gum into her mouth, then offering Cobra the pack. She and Cobra were mostly through their journey to Magnolia on the train, and they had spent almost the entire time either arguing, making fun of people, or astutely ignoring one another.

He shook his head with a raised brow. "I'm nothing like your piddly shit Slayers, Blondie." Cobra smirked and leaned his back against the window. He refused to tell her that he felt like he was about to upchuck all over the fucking place, and that the only reason he wasn't letting it happen was because of her memories of the countless times she'd witnessed other Slayers doing just that. He'd never been on a train before, and the only form of getting from point A to point B faster that he'd really used was Cubellios when she was still with him. Still, his ability to hear souls was actually coming in handy in this particular instance. He'd tucked himself away into that Logos section of Lucy's soul, listening and picturing in his mind how she would open different cabinets to access information and make connections between things.

"Well, I've heard even Laxus has motion sickness," Lucy mused. "So it's not just the first and third gen Slayers. Then again, he probably just listens to his music and ignores it..." She really couldn't wait to get to the guild. Sure, she was nervous to see how everyone would react to Cobra joining, but she loved her guild mates and missed them already. She was sure that she would be needing a spare set of clothes with the upcoming brawl she would be dragged into though. Honestly, she might as well just start getting naked before she fought people. It seemed her clothing always disappeared or was in tatters within minutes, so she figured it would save quite a bit of money if she just wore her birthday suit. "Maybe that's why Gray is always stripping... Then again, he spends more money than I do on clothes since he's always losing it in general..."

He had no issues with Lucy getting all kinds of naked. The memories of her clothes being disintegrated, ripped, burnt, and a whole slew of other inventive ways to remove clothes filtered through his head from her soul, and he really had to give it to her. The bitch had one fine body. And apparently some of the worst fucking luck ever. "Wait... a dragon made your clothes disappear?"

"Ugh," Lucy groaned in disgust. "Yes. Zirconis. Apparently, he prefers eating women, and hates the
taste of clothing. Rolling around in a bell with Natsu pressed up against me was absolutely mortifying.” Lucy looked Cobra dead in the eye and added, "I think I have more nightmares about that than anything else."

"I don't blame you." Cobra sighed and looked out the window at the passing scenery. Lucy kept thinking about the guild he was about to be a part of, and he was getting tons of information on the members so systematically that he almost thought she was intentionally doing it for his sake. Except Pathos was hopping all over that shit and adding her emotions to her memories with them. She was by far, the most fucking ludicrous person he'd ever met. Ordered chaos reigned supreme within her. And to top it all off, she forgave people like no fucking other. "Is there anyone in this shithole that you haven't forgiven for trying to kill you?" he whispered.

Lucy smiled fondly when Cobra looked at her again. "If someone's sincere in their apology, looking for forgiveness, and wants to turn things around... Who am I to deny that to them?"

"Tortured…"

"Gajeel did it. And Edo-Erza. And Minerva... Jury's still out on whether or not she's sorry for it, and I haven't exactly forgiven her yet."

"... Drowned…"

"Juvia, but that wasn't so much drowning as it was knocking me out with a lack of oxygen in a bubble of water... Okay, so I kinda drowned..."

"... Possessed…"

"Bickslow almost did that. Loke and I still beat him."

"... Nearly exploded when you were turned to stone..."

She laughed. "Evergreen apologized right away. Laxus isn't like that now."

"... Burned and blackmailed…"

"Flare's actually really sweet, but she's not in the guild."

"... Locked in prison…"

"The princess apologized for the whole Eclipse thing," Lucy shrugged. "Future Rogue was really to blame for that."

"... Used a sacrifice," he finished in shock. He didn't want her forgiveness, or anyone else's for that matter, but he'd gotten it anyway.

Lucy's smile widened while looking at him. "Cobra's kind of an asshole, but I know there's some good in him somewhere. I've got faith in him."

"Pretty sure you're crazier than I am."

Lucy shrugged. "Maybe. But, I think whatever screws you have loose are gonna wobble right out of that head of yours after being in Fairy Tail for a while. It's contagious. I used to be normal."

"Great…" Cobra kept his gaze trained on the glass. "Tell me something. I still can't figure this one out."
"Sure."

"What the hell is it that makes all you Fairies so fucking gung ho about your guild?"

Lucy smiled and traced her finger over the light pink guild mark on her hand. "Well," she said softly, "Our first master Mavis always says that Fairy Tail was held together with the bond of souls that ran deeper than blood. Even now, after the passage of time, our hearts have inherited that spirit from her and the founding members. It has nothing to do with success or failure, and everything to do with those bonds we create with each other."

"That is some of the most pansy ass bullshit I've ever heard," Cobra sneered. "You're telling me that being all buddy-buddy with each other is what gives you guys any semblance of power?" He scoffed and rolled his eye. He didn't think it was possible to form the kinds of bonds she was talking about with so many people. Bonds that reached all the way down into one's soul. It took vast amounts of trust and time for shit like that to happen. "Gimme a break."

Lucy looked up at him and cocked her head to one side. "If that's the case, then what about the Oracion Seis? Wouldn't you consider them your nakama? Don't you have enough history together to have that sort of bond with them? That's what we are in Fairy Tail. For most of the members, the guild is the only family we've got..."

Cobra refused to answer that line of questioning. Who and what the others were to him was inconsequential. She didn't need to know anything about them. That could only complicate things for him when he started working to get them out of prison.

He didn't have to say anything for Lucy to see that she was right about him, that they were a part of him in some way. "Master Mavis once told us that 'Nakama' is more than just a word. 'Nakama' is heart. And it's believing in your partners unconditionally."

"You'd be stupid to rely on others though," Cobra shot back. "Doing shit like that will only get you stabbed in the back." Literally, in his case. He and the other Seis members had relied on each other long ago, but with everything that happened over the years... They came to realize that they had to look out for themselves, because no one else was going to do it for them. Yeah, he was going to get them out of prison if it was the last thing he did, but he knew that Midnight and the others weren't waiting for him to do it. They were probably trying to figure out how to do it on their own.

Lucy shook her head with a sigh. "Fairy Tail's not like that. We care for each other. I want you to rely on me, Cobra. I'm sure I'll rely on you someday, too."

Cobra watched as some sort of shift took hold on her face. There was that determination of hers again. It was identical to the look she'd given him when he was cornered in that interrogation room, when she had gotten him to admit what he really wanted in life. He steeled himself against the soothing voice that accompanied her penetrating eyes, and found that it actually took a lot more effort than he'd assumed.

"Cobra, even when you're suffering," Lucy said softly, "Even when you're sad... I'll always be at your side. In Fairy Tail, you're never alone. Maybe physically, but we're all part of one another in spirit. We all have as many hopes as there are stars that light up the sky. The wind that brushes your skin and mine is a presentiment of tomorrow. I don't expect you to jump on the Fairy bandwagon straight to Crazy Town right away, but I hope you can at least try to open yourself up to the idea of having people that aren't trying to stab you in the back."

"Not likely," he whispered, although he wouldn't admit that his voice had a slight tremble to it.
She giggled softly. "I think you'll change your mind about that. Pretty soon, you'll be walking in time with the song of the fairies."

"That sounds more like some shit with tutus and tiaras, Jiggly Bits."

Lucy snorted, then downright cracked right the hell up. "That's... That's a new one! Oh my god!" she laughed. Usually the nicknames she was given by people had no sense of originality, and even though the most recent addition was still talking about the size of her chest, it was fucking hilarious.

"What," Cobra asked with a smirk, "Jiggly Bits?" When Lucy nodded, her laughter only increasing, he had to force himself not to at least chuckle a little. Smart, sexy, sadistic inside, and apparently a weird sense of humor. Maybe this Fairy Tail shit wasn't going to be so bad. After all, he was going to see Cubellios again.

"Happy," Natsu whispered, glancing around the guild hall and grinning when he saw that Erza was fully engrossed in her cake. "Let's go find Luce."

"Aye," Happy whispered back. He perched himself on the his foster father's shoulder once Natsu had wrapped his scarf around his head, then the pair snuck out of the guild in complete silence.

Natsu was grinning like crazy while they made their way through town. Lucy's scent was pretty much nonexistent, but he figured he could go to the Council first and blast through every wall until he found where they were keeping her. That was the only explanation he could come up with for Lahar hauling her off the day before. 'I'll save you, Luce. Just wait for me, and I'll-'

"Natsu… Is there somewhere you need to be?" Erza asked slowly once he came to a screeching halt in front of her raised blade, the tip of her sword barely an inch in front of his scarf-covered head.

"Huh?" Natsu asked in feigned innocence. "Nah! Happy and I are gonna go fishing!"

"Y-Yeah, fishing!" Happy chimed in nervously.

"Why are you dressed like a ninja then?"

Natsu froze, then gulped.

Erza's eyes narrowed dangerously. She knew that guilty look on the Fire Dragon Slayer. "You're going to go against Master's orders to leave it be," she whispered. "We are not to pursue her, Natsu. She will be back soon."

"You don't know that, Erza!" Natsu shouted indignantly. When her scowl deepened and the magic surrounding her increased, he let out an agitated huff. "If Luce was here I wouldn't be so worried about her. She's always getting into trouble…"

Lucy was in the middle of reading the latest Sorcerer's Weekly edition during the last leg of their train ride when she sneezed. Violently. The gum she had been chewing was forced out of her mouth, and her head flew forward at just the right time for a portion of it to lodge itself under her eyelid. Never in a million years would she have expected something like that was possible, but it happened. With far more composure than should have been possible in that moment, Lucy slowly set her magazine down on the bench next to her and brushed her hair away from her face.

Cobra actually felt his stomach rolling while he watched her. She gently grasped her eyelashes, her eyes rolled back, and then her other hand came up to pull the offending little mass of spit and sugar
from suffocating her eyeball.

Lucy blinked a few times, then frowned at the gum in her hand. She didn't have anywhere to throw it away at the moment, and she had only started chewing it ten minutes prior. 'I wonder...' With an internal shrug, Lucy popped the piece of gum back into her mouth and started chewing again. It didn't taste any different than before, which was - surprisingly - a bit of a disappointment. She was kind of hoping there would be an eyeball aftertaste, just so she would know what it tasted like in the first place. Just before picking her magazine back up, Lucy chanced a glance at Cobra, and found him staring at her with his mouth hanging open and what she could only assume was as close to a look of horror as he could manage. "What? It's still got some flavor!" she said defensively.

"You were curious," he said slowly, "About what your fucking eyeball tastes like..." When the crazy bitch just smiled at him, his own eye somehow widened. "And people call me crazy..."

Lucy shrugged and kept chewing. After another moment of silence, she lifted the pack of gum. "Are you sure you don't want some?"

"I'm sure."

"Really? It tastes pretty good."

"I only have one eye... I don't need that shit trying to take control of it."

"That... is not what happened."

"That's what it looked like from over here..."

"Then you should get your eye checked."

"So should you."

Lucy sighed, and threw the pack at Cobra, then picked up her magazine and studiously ignored him.

Cobra glanced down in his lap at the gum. He shook his head slowly. Strawberry bubble gum. He could smell the sugar through the fucking packaging.

Lucy didn't pull her gaze from the article she was reading as she asked, "Did you know that sugar is considered a poison?"

"Yep."

"You're welcome."

Cobra blinked slowly while he looked from Lucy down to the pack in his lap. With a sigh of resignation, he pulled a piece out and popped it in his mouth. "If I lose my eye because of this shit, I'm taking one of yours."

"Uh-huh. Enjoy your gum, Cobra." Lucy bit her lip to hide her amusement as much as possible when she actually caught Cobra mocking her while he turned to look out the window again. 'Lucy, I think you've won this round...'

'Great... Now she's talking to herself... You're so fucking screwed, man... Goddamnit, now I'm talking to myself!' Maybe being able to see Cubellios again wasn't enough of a reason to join Fairy Tail and think of it as a good thing. Clearly their insanity was rubbing off on him already. 'Fucking kill me now... Shut up.'
Something that Lucy hadn't considered when they had left the Magic Council was that Cobra would be bothered by the sheer amount of people milling about in Magnolia during the day. He hadn't necessarily been pleasant during the entire train ride, but he'd been willing to talk even a little. As soon as they disembarked, he shut down completely. His face was blank, and bordering on downright pissed. Even though he looked utterly relaxed, with his hands in his pockets as they walked to the guild, she did see that he was more tense than he'd been when it was just the two of them. 'If this is bad, I wonder what it'll be like for him in the guild...'

"We'll see."

Lucy's eyes widened at the sound of his voice. Two words, clearly ground out between clenched teeth, had scared the shit out of her. It wasn't because he sounded like he was about to eat someone's face - which, he really fucking did - but it was more that he hadn't spoken a word since they got off the train. And it showed just how difficult this was for him.

"You're wrong on that one," Cobra said softly. He glanced at the curious blonde and shook his head. "It's just annoying. Not painful. That shit hasn't happened in years."

Lucy frowned and cocked her head to the side. "Painful?" Much to her surprise, Cobra nodded. It seemed he was willing to give her some semblance of information about himself. That had to be a good sign, right?

He couldn't explain why he had told her that, or even why he was willing to fucking explain anything to the blonde to begin with. "Don't worry about it." He had to get some serious fucking distance from her, because this shit of him just randomly giving out little Cobra trivia facts was starting to piss him off. She shouldn't be able to get fucking anything out of him, but she had. Several times, in fact. He didn't want to dwell on it, and it seemed that Lucy wasn't going to rub in his face that he had actually opened up to her in any way, shape, or form.

But she was right about one thing. If walking through town was bad, it was going to be worse when they were at the guild hall. Less people, sure. But they would be in a more confined space, and everyone was going to have shit about him on their minds. Their souls were going to be one huge clusterfuck of annoying, bee-buzzing bullshit. He would have to invest in some industrial strength aspirin. Except, he couldn't take the shit. His body registered it as poison, so it didn't do a damn thing to stop any pain he might be in. He could take medication and have it work for him if it wasn't something that inhibited his body from producing shit. Which mean that numbing his pain was a no-fucking-go. Drinking would have been his next choice, but that was the same goddamn thing. Alcohol is a poison, therefore he just got his element absorbed into him instead of enjoying that drunk, numb feeling he'd gotten to experience only once before getting the Dragon Slaying lacrima forcefully shoved in his chest.

Lucy smiled and jumped up onto the canal wall as they got closer to the guild. She could only hope that this first meeting at the guild with Cobra and the others didn't end in complete disaster. 'If only I had a communications lacrima,' she thought, 'Then I could have called Master and told him we were on our way. He could at least be prepared for it then.'

"Be careful, Lucy!" one of the fishermen yelled across the canal. "Don't want to fall in!"

Lucy grinned and waved wildly at the boatmen. "Hey, guys!"

Cobra shook his head as they continued on their way. "That's a common occurrence, huh?"

"Yep," Lucy laughed. "Same thing every day. I haven't fallen in yet, but I'm sure it's only a matter of
time."

"Uh-huh." Cobra had to suppress a wince as they rounded a corner and walked through the entry gate to Fairy Tail's guild hall. The structure itself was magnificent, the architecture something that most would marvel at for ages to come, but the sheer amount of motherfucking noise coming from that place was already starting to hurt his ears. And that wasn't even including their souls. Just the boisterous bullshitting, cacophonous caterwauling, the decimation of at least twenty glasses, splintering wood, and... "Did I just hear someone say 'shoo-bi-doo-bop'?"

Lucy blanched and stopped dead in her tracks. This was the definition of a catch-22 if she ever fucking saw one. "Y-Yeah..." she said weakly. On the one hand, Cobra's arrival would most likely stop Gajeel from performing on stage, which meant none of them would be subjected to whatever the hell it was he called singing. On the other hand, if Gajeel decided that the other Slayer's presence didn't warrant enough of an interruption, he'd simply use it as an interlude to drag her backstage and force her into that bunny costume... again. And then she'd have to dance until he was booed off the stage... again. They could very well just stay outside until he was done performing, but then there was a higher chance of someone walking up and flipping their shit before she had a chance to explain everything. Fairy Tail was exceptionally good at blowing things up first, and asking questions later.

'This is gonna be the day I die... We'll walk in, and I'll get caught right in the middle of it all.'

"I highly doubt they're going to attack you." When he turned around to look at the blonde, he couldn't help but just fucking stare at her as her inner monologue continued.

'Hopefully my corpse will still have some clothing on... That'd be a nice change. Then the whole guild won't be staring at Little Miss Necro-Snatch... Then again, if I'm blown to pieces, there's a chance that my body won't be discernable aside from small bits of viscera and brain matter. And feces. Can't forget the feces... With any luck, it'll land on Happy's fish.'

"There's a higher probability of your cunt landing on someone's plate," Cobra chuckled, "But good luck with that. I'll be sure to use you as a meat shield."

Lucy absently nodded. "Probably for the best..." She sighed heavily and started walking toward the doors of the guild with Cobra falling in step right next to her.

'He's fucking here. I can smell the bastard. I don't smell Lahar though. Luce? She's with him? He better not have hurt her... Why does she smell scared?! SON OF A BITCH!'

Cobra rolled his singular eye as Lucy pushed the doors of the guild open. Of fucking course Natsu was going to blow this shit way out of proportion. The guy was more spastic than a geriatric colon, and had the attention span of a gnat on meth. How he had managed to lose to this fucking prick was still beyond him, and he could only chalk it up to being overly cocky and relying far too much on Cubellios and Brain.

"Natsu! NO!" Mira shouted.

Lucy's eyes went wide when her vision was bathed in a wall of infernal flames and searing heat that was careening toward her and Cobra. The air dried up in an instant, her eyes watered, and the roar of her best friend's flames filled her ears. 'I knew I was gonna die today...'

Chapter End Notes
A portion of what Lucy says to Cobra, while they're on the train, is actually taken straight from the show! In the episode titled Song of the Fairies (Episode 58, 2014), after the close of the Sun Village Arc.
Fear consumed her. This was it, the moment she was finally going to kick the bucket, all because of her best friend. Both her and Cobra were dead meat. 'Shit, Cobra!' Lucy's mind shut down, her body going into fight-or-flight in an instant and pushing her higher functions to the wayside so she could save her fucking hide. Literally.

Cobra's eye widened when the blonde's soul went on lockdown, not a single peep of just what she was about to do coming through. He was barely able to register her turning toward him, let alone her fucking leaping at his ass and wrapping her leg around his, then kicking her heel into the back of his knee to make it buckle. What he did hear from her though, just before his head collided with the ground and that fucking inferno that came from Natsu shot out of the open guild doors, was a screech of pain. The sizzling of flesh. Human flesh, while burning - or being cooked, more accurately - had one of the strangest smells he'd ever come across, but he knew it well. His stomach roiled once he inhaled to get the air back into his lungs, and burning hair was layered on top of it all. And cotton.

Lucy was lying on top of him, his face pressed into her stomach and the underside of her breasts. Her legs were wrapped around his waist, partially tangled with his, and one arm was cradling his head. It apparently hadn't hit the ground at all. No, that crunching sound he'd heard was most likely Lucy's arm being crushed between his head and the pavement. Cobra was just about to push her off of him, because she just wasn't fucking moving, but that was when everything in her soul came rushing right back out.

'Holy fucking shitballs! Ow ow ow ow ow! Oh god… Rip my skin off! FUCK! FUCK ME! Son of a bitch. Oh god, just fucking kill me now… Shit, is Cobra okay? FUCK! Natsu, you stupid fucking matchbox, I'm setting your goddamn treehouse on fire and gagging you with your own motherfucking testicles! Oh god, it hurts. Just amputate! My legs… My arm… All of it! Oh, fuck me… Cobra's breathing right? He didn't get hurt, did he? Shit! Shit shit shit! Make it stop. Oh man, I'm gonna pass out. No… No, don't pass out. Don't… You haven't murdered Natsu yet… Fuck!'

And that was when he felt it. He felt her body trembling, her ragged breaths puffing out across his hair. He didn't hear her whimpering in pain or hissing through tightly clenched teeth. No, he fucking felt that too. Vibrating right through her bare, and way too damn soft skin that his face was pressed against. "You good?" he whispered, his lips brushing over the bare skin.

Lucy whimpered when she tried to shake her head. No. No, she definitely wasn't good. Her pain receptors were working double-time to try and take her out once and for all. She could barely hear the shouts of her guildmates as the smoke cleared, Natsu's being the loudest. It was surprising that she was able to even hear Cobra. "Just fucking poison me… Put me out of my misery."

"You haven't murdered Salamander yet," he chuckled darkly. While she outwardly whimpered again, the deep, throaty laugh within her soul had a wide grin fighting to spread over his face.

"You okay?"

He nodded, then raised an eyebrow when Lucy sighed in relief. She was genuinely fucking concerned about him. About whether or not he'd been hurt. The fact that she'd pulled him down with her - tackled his ass, was more like it - hadn't really registered until that moment. She'd saved him. Something that nobody else had ever tried to do before. Lucy could have left his ass standing there,
getting burnt to a fucking crisp, but she didn't. Okay, well he wouldn't actually have gotten burnt in
the first place, since he'd moved out of the way when she was about to open the doors to the
guild. 'Actually, asshole... You would've. Fire doesn't come out in a goddamn column, that shit
spreads.'

"Luce, did he hurt you?" Natsu shouted as he pushed past the other guild members and rushed
outside. His nostrils flared angrily when he smelled her tears, but he froze at the sight of his best
friend curled up around Cobra. "Why are you guys cuddling?" he asked curiously.

Cobra's growl of annoyance was cut off. That shit died in his throat when Lucy's soul quite literally
fucking roared as she vaulted off of him. His eye followed her movements, listening intently to the
raging beast within her that had surfaced while she tackled the Fire Dragon Slayer to the ground.
Lucy had apparently forgotten all about how much pain she was in. That shit wasn't even registering
in her soul. Well, for the time being, at least. No, instead she was solely focused on beating the ever-
loving shit out of the person she'd dubbed her best friend.

Natsu put his arms up to defend himself when Lucy started punching him. "Luce, c'mon! Stop!" he
shouted. A low growl left him when she forced one of his hands down and hit him right between the
eyes. Just as he was about to grab her wrists to stop her, he saw the blackened and peeling skin on
her forearm. He smelled her blood and her tears. Felt her body wracked with silent sobs of pain. He
froze then. 'I... I hurt her... Oh shit... Luce!'

Cobra rolled his eye and slowly sat up. The little healer, the guild's smallest and surprisingly the most
menacing of all the other Slayers - if the way that dragon in her was roaring angrily was any
indication - was stuck in the back of the crowd that had gathered by the burnt doors, unable to make
her way through to help the blonde. Lucy's body was on the verge of giving out from the shock to
her system, and she was pushing herself way too damn far as it was. It wasn't that he cared, because
really... He fucking didn't. He just didn't like owing people favors. He could have said that he didn't
owe her a goddamn thing, but she'd quite literally put her ass on the line to stop him from getting
hurt. He was a sadistic asshole, but shit like that? It definitely counted for something.

'Oh Mavis, isn't that Cobra?!

'What's he doing here?'

'Holy shit, Natsu hurt Lucy!'

'Someone needs to get Master! They're out of prison again!'

'Oh, Salamander's gonna get it now. Bunny's gonna eat his ass alive... Gihi - Oh fuck, she's really
hurt! Bunny!'

With a heavy sigh, Cobra rose to his feet and dusted himself off, then made his way over to Lucy
and Natsu. "Seriously, psycho? Chill the fuck out already," he said, his tone flat and a sneer pulling
at his upper lip.

Lucy yelped in pain when an arm wrapped around her waist and lifted her into the air. Just that small
brush of cloth over her skin had her head swimming again. "O-Oh god... I'm... Uggh..." She was
set on her feet and leaned heavily against whoever had pulled her off of Natsu as her eyes drifted
closed while her stomach did a few somersaults.

"Don't you fuckin' puke on me, Barbie," Cobra growled. When Lucy's legs started to buckle, he
sighed and lifted her into his arms completely. "You Fairies are fucking useless," he grumbled, "You
do realize that, right?"
Lucy couldn't answer him though. Not even in her head. She was too focused on trying to push past the pain and keep her vision even remotely clear. She could hardly feel her left arm, but she knew it was dangling limply at her side. The skin on the back of her thighs and part of her ass was burnt, but that mild pain was nothing in comparison to her arm. Third degree burn, she was sure of it. She just hoped that Wendy would be able to heal her up, at least a little bit. Just to make her arm stop hurting.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Cobra growled at the gaggle of Fairy Tail's member that were staring with a mixture of shock, anger, and confusion at his presence there. "Move!" Nothing. Fucking zilch. A bunch of crickets could have been heard chirping away the entirety of *The Marriage of Figaro*. Not just one song, but the whole goddamn opera. Start to finish. Twice.

Lucy's eyes slid closed slowly, and she hissed in pain when Cobra's hands tensed where they held her. He was so fucking done with this shit. Hell, he'd been done with it since before they'd even gotten off the train, but he also didn't feel like going back to prison. *Don't kill them. Don't fucking kill them. It'd be so damn easy, but don't do it. There you go, just picture it. Heads rolling, blood everywhere, people crying. Fuck, that's nice…*

A large wave of multi-hued energy burst from around the Poison Dragon Slayer, knocking everyone in his path down to the ground and away from him. A chorus of despairing sobs echoed through the guild hall, causing the other Slayers to cover their ears, and the normal members to groan uncomfortably as they were tossed even further away. "Bunch of fucking idiots," Cobra growled as he walked down the path he'd created. He came to stand in front of the little blue-haired Slayer as she picked herself up from the floor. "Infirmary."

Wendy quickly looked over Lucy's injuries, took a whiff of the air and listened intently to her shallow breaths. "No time," she said, her eyes keenly observing the blonde. "She'll go into shock. On the bar over there."

Cobra turned and carefully laid the blonde down on what he realized was the cleanest surface in the entire guild hall. Beer and fuck only knows what else was all over every single table, but the bar? That shit was nearly sparkling, and he could smell the chemicals that had been used to keep it that way.

The only problem was that, with Lucy lying on the bar in front of him, he was able to see just what Natsu's flames had done to her. Her left forearm was more than lightly scorched. He could see her skin peeling off, the exposed muscle, maybe even a bit of the bone; third degree burn. Her right wrist was swollen and turning a deep purple on the underside of it; broken. There were large blisters already forming on the backs of her legs; second degree burns. Her golden hair was shorter and brittle on one side. The skin along her waist was a bright red; first degree burns. Lucy's earlier comment about her clothes constantly being ruined reared up in his memory. The blonde really did have some pretty shitty luck where that was concerned. Even though she was lying on her back, a good portion of her clothing was completely burned away, leaving only the smallest sliver of cloth covering her breasts and the apex of her thighs.

'God, this shit hurts. Damnit... Why is this always happening to me? Oh, Wendy... I fucking love you, you little airy godsend. You're getting the biggest snuggle ever once I can move without wanting to upchuck. Damn, that feels amazing. I love your magic, Wendy…'

Cobra shook his head, then raised an eyebrow at the tiny, old man that moved to stand next to him. His head tilted to the side only slightly when he heard the red-headed hammer fiend ripping into Natsu as the rest of the guild went back to their business. The sounds of metal on metal, high-pitched yelps, shrieks of terror, and one very amusing lecture from Titania reached his ears. He couldn't hear a damn thing from the geezer's soul though, but the level of power he could sense... He knew exactly
who the guy was.

"Cobra, child," Makarov sighed. "Thank you for helping her."

"Yep."

Makarov chuckled at that, earning a sideways glance from the Slayer next to him. It seemed their soon-to-be newest member was going to be a good addition to the guild. He could feel it. While Wendy continued healing Lucy, her hands glowing a pale blue and hovering over the most severe wound on her arm, Makarov turned and looked at the rest of the guild. "Listen up, brats!" he shouted. "The Council has decided that we will be taking Cobra in as a member of the guild during his probation. He has been assigned to Team Natsu, and I'm sure you will all give him a warm Fairy Tail welcome."

Cobra ignored the outraged cries of the guild and instead focused on the blonde. He didn't have anything else to do, after all. Lucy was the one that was supposed to walk him through this shit, and she'd told him that she was going to make sure everything was handled. He'd never lived a normal life, and it was a goddamn miracle that he hadn't already just offed the majority of the bastards in the place.

"Cobra… You need to get your stamp," Lucy said silently. "Time to join the guild, officially."

He rolled his eye and sighed. She was right, but it pissed him off. He didn't want some blonde bimbo trying to hold his hand and make sure he did shit right. It wasn't like he didn't know how to control himself. He just preferred not to hold back. Well, he was trained not to hold back; otherwise, there were some serious fucking consequences.

"Master, you can't be serious about this!"

"He's our enemy!"

"People like him don't change!"

"This isn't manly at all!"

"He's one of the ones that tried to kill Cosplayer!"

"Silence!" Makarov bellowed, his voice booming across the guild and rattling the windows.

"Fucking hell, you crusty dickbag," Cobra growled, throwing his hands over his ears. "Calm that shit down."

Makarov turned angered eyes toward the Poison Dragon Slayer. He knew it was going to take some work to get Cobra to function at least relatively normal, where society was concerned, and he needed to make sure he had a nice chat with the boy in his office before the day was out. Softly, knowing the other Slayers would hear him regardless, he said, "Child, I'm not sure what your life was like in the Oracion Seis, but I will tell you now... There are many freedoms you will find in Fairy Tail, but I am - or will be - your guild master for the next five years. Do not forget that."

Cobra let out a low, terrifying growl at the implied threat in his tone. This was exactly like being with Brain all over again. Give it a couple months, maybe weeks, and he'd be chained to a wall in the basement being whipped. "Maybe I should just fucking poison your ass then. Put you out of my misery," he spat. He knew it wasn't going to be any different. He was just moving from one prison to another. This was just bigger, with fresh air and the name of 'Light Guild' attached to it. Same fucking thing. Another old man that he had to bow before, or face the consequences. People that
didn't trust him, and would let him die in a goddamn ditch if given the chance. No one had his back here, just like before.

"C-Cobra," Lucy rasped, wincing as she turned her head and slowly sat up. "Don't be mean."

He kept his gaze trained on Makarov, watching one far too bushy eyebrow raise in amusement.
"Kinda my thing, Jugs. Shut the fuck up." Another growl left him and his hands clenched into fists. He hated that he couldn't hear the bastard. The other Slayers though... They could hear his ass growling, and they probably knew that he was ready to just fucking sock the old man in the face.

"If you wanna go back to prison, then hit him," Lucy said silently while watching Wendy heal up her lesser burns - the worst burn on her arm and her broken wrist already having been mended. "Cobra... You wanted a chance. Everyone's watching you, and waiting for you to fuck up. So prove them wrong. Show them that you can do the right thing."

But he didn't want to do the right thing. He wanted to kill the shit out of all of them. The souls around him turned into a dull buzz as he blocked the rest of the guild out. He could feel his teeth being coated in poison, ready to strike. Except, he couldn't. And goddamnit, the bastard in front of him knew it. Lucy did, too. Makarov was part of the reason he was out in the first place. 'I fucking hate this shit already.' With another growl, Cobra forced his body to relax. Being in this place was making his ass crazy. Crazier than normal. He was acting like he did seven years ago, easily agitated and ready to jump down everyone's throat. 'Get your shit together, asshole. Quiet malevolence. Keep it to yourself. Keep a low profile and just go with it.'

Makarov grinned at the Poison Slayer. "Much better, child. Now..." He turned to the rest of the guild. "Team Natsu will meet me in my office in one hour. That... should be enough time for Wendy to tend to Natsu's wounds."

"Yeah, if Erza's done maiming him by then," Laxus chuckled from his place at the bar.

Makarov sighed. "Right. Well, back to what you were doing!" He slowly turned to the blonde that was still sitting on top of the bar. "How are you, my dear?"

"Crispy," Lucy laughed softly. "That was one way to welcome someone warmly though, huh?"

Cobra fought the laugh that wanted to bubble out of him. Puns. Fucking puns. He'd spent way too much time in prison, by himself, playing fucking word games. Maybe he really was crazy after all.

"Indeed," Makarov chuckled. "I see you made sure to keep him relatively intact."

Lucy's smile widened as she carefully hopped off the bar, giving Wendy a hug and kissing the little blunette's head in thanks. She looked over at Cobra's scowling face, then rolled her eyes.
"Physically, yes. Mentally? He was already a little screwy before I got to him."

"Fuck you," Cobra hissed.

'Yes, please... Oh shut up. Now's not the time for that!' Lucy kept her smile in place. "Master, he needs to get his guild mark."

"Ah, yes." Makarov thanked Mira when she popped up out of nowhere with the stamp, and he held it with pride. "Where and what color?"

"You're not fucking touching me, asshole."

"Master," Makarov said happily. This Slayer was going to be a combination of Laxus and Gajeel in
stubbornness alone. He could already tell. "That's Master Asshole, Cobra."

He rolled his singular eye. "Not fucking happening."

"Seriously?" Lucy silently asked. "Now you're just being difficult." She sighed and shook her head at the ridiculousness of the situation. Cobra glared at her, but he was tense as hell just at the mention of Makarov's hands being near him. And that made her pause. "Master," she whispered, leaning down and missing the way most male members of the guild leaned with her, "Why don't we just go up to your office? Cobra can get his stamp up there and you can talk to him."

Makarov nodded, then silently walked off toward the stairs. Cobra and Lucy followed behind him, neither willing to say a single word. As soon as they were behind the large doors and standing in front of Makarov's desk, Cobra took off his coat and tossed it on a chair. "Don't touch me," he said slowly, his jaw tensing. "At all."

Makarov frowned at that, but watched with Lucy standing just to Cobra's side. "The stamp will need to touch you for your mark, child."

"Good luck with that," Cobra laughed darkly. Still, he lowered his hand and pulled up the hem of his shirts just enough to expose his left hip and a portion of his stomach. It was one of the few spots that was free from scars, and he sure as shit wasn't going to let any of these bastards see him without a shirt on. Oh, he was tempted, just to make them sickened by the sight of it, but he refrained. People already thought he was a fucking monster. He didn't need them to know that he looked the part more than they'd seen already. "And I'm not a fucking child."

The guild's Master gave him a wrinkled smile, carefully pressing the stamp to the skin between Cobra's navel and his left hip. "What color?" he asked softly.

"... Purple," Cobra answered. Just like Cubellios. He waited until Makarov pulled the stamp away, and spared a single glance at the deep purple Fairy Tail emblem before righting his clothes.

Makarov walked over to his desk and jumped up onto the top of it, carefully setting the stamp down on a large stack of paperwork. "And, while you might not be a child in regards to your age," he said as Cobra turned to look at him, "Every member of my guild is one of my children. You are part of Fairy Tail now, which means you are a part of our family."

"Yeah, I've heard shit like that before. Only one of us was stupid enough to actually believe that family bullshit, though," Cobra spat.

Makarov sighed and shook his head, then motioned for the two mages before him to sit down. "A good portion of the members here call me 'Gramps'. Do you know why?"

"Because you're old as fuck, and they're waiting for you to kick the fucking bucket?" Cobra asked with a wicked grin. "Maybe you'll hit your head during a storm, and not wake up the next day…"

Lucy blinked in surprise at that. 'It's raining, it's pouring. The old man is snoring… Really? He just pulled out a nursery rhyme?'

Makarov laughed and shook his head. "No, child. They call me that because they view me as a grandfather, of sorts. I view each member of this guild as a part of my family. I care for each and every one of you."

"Save it, Master," Cobra sneered. "Look, you can keep all your hippy dippy, love and peace, save the world, kumbaya bullshit. I'm here because they didn't feel like keeping my ass in prison, and you stupid fucking Fairies are where my ass got kicked to. I don't really feel like going back to prison, so
just tell me what my orders are, and I'll be on my fucking way."

Makarov stared at him for a long moment, tilting his head to one side. "Orders?" he asked with a wide grin. "What orders?"

Cobra blinked. "What?"

Lucy smiled softly at the confused expression on the Poison Slayer's face, failing to suppress a small laugh. When he turned to glare at her, she shook her head. "Master doesn't really give orders," she said. "Not unless it's something really serious. I told you, Cobra. You're going to find what you want here."

"And what might that be?" Makarov asked. He looked from Cobra to Lucy, watching as both of their faces became eerily blank as they looked back at him. With a raised brow, he continued looking at the Celestial mage, waiting for her to give him an answer.

Lucy blinked slowly. "That's not a question I can answer, Master," she said. "I promised I wouldn't."

He couldn't help but smile at that. Lucy was one of the smartest members of the guild, but her conviction always made him swell with pride. "Very well, Lucy."

"What the hell am I doing then?" Cobra asked.

"Well," Makarov said slowly, "The Council has sent your stipend, and you have the option of depositing it into an account that's associated with the guild - which is something I highly suggest doing, as it will make payments from clients easier - or just carrying the money with you. For the women in the guild, we have the Fairy Hills dormitory; but I've made some calls and you have an apartment waiting for you."

Cobra narrowed his eye suspiciously. "How do you know I'm not just gonna bolt?"

Makarov chuckled. "You would have done so already, if that was your intention," he said simply. "You've already passed the first test, child."

"... Test, huh?"

Lucy frowned and tilted her head to the side. "Test?" She wasn't aware that Makarov was going to be testing Cobra in any way. Unless… 'Oh, don't fucking tell me…'

Makarov grinned. "You came to the guild with only Lucy here as your escort. Why do you think it took so long at the Council yesterday?"

'You've gotta be shitting me! Fucking asshole! You mean I could've slept in my own bed last night?! Fucking pervy bastard probably had someone tailing us, too."

"No one was tailing us," Cobra snorted. "I would've heard them."

"True," Makarov sighed. "We couldn't have anyone follow you, simply because of your ability to read m-"

"Souls," Cobra growled. "I don't read fucking minds. I hear souls. Big fucking difference. You want mind-reading shit, then go downstairs and talk to that hotdog-lipped weirdo with the crazy fucking cow lick."

Lucy threw a hand over her mouth and clamped her eyes shut. She had no idea how many times
she'd thought the same thing about Warren. Poor guy. He was a sweetheart, but really… His hair was ridiculous now.

"Souls, then," Makarov amended. "Regardless, I put my faith in you to not only come to the guild, but return Lucy safely. Which you have done… Natsu's overreaction, notwithstanding."

"Gee, thanks," Cobra drawled.

"Now, we'll be having Team Natsu meet in here," Makarov continued. "You will all discuss whatever needs to be discussed, and then someone will show you to your home."

"It's Tiggle Bitties here, or no one," Cobra scoffed. "From what I've heard, the only ones that are alright with me being here in the first place are the two of you. You want a fight and half the town getting poisoned, then send me with Titania or fucking Flame Shits."

"And Gray?"

Cobra's eye narrowed. "He doesn't trust me. And I don't fucking want him to. I'm good."

Lucy sighed and shook her head. "It's fine, Master. I'll show Cobra to his apartment."

"Good. I trust you won't try anything, Cobra," Makarov said sternly. "Lucy is your… probation officer… of sorts."

"Fabulous," he answered sarcastically.

Makarov's grin returned tenfold. "Lighten up, my boy. If I had a probation officer like her, I wouldn't complain."

Lucy blinked slowly, watching as the old guild master openly eyed her. She looked down at her clothes and squawked when she realized the reason she'd felt a slight chill this whole time was because they were nearly nonexistent. "Master! Why me?! Why is it always me?! I would invest in a parka, but that would just end up the same way!"

Cobra watched as she flailed helplessly before finally giving up, then he shook his head. "You seriously just fucking figured out your clothes were like that?"

Lucy scowled at him.

"Wow… You realize your ass is hanging out, right? Like… The back of your skirt is gone." When the blonde went an alarming shade of white - which was saying something, considering Midnight was his best friend - he chuckled. "Yeah. What your thinking? Yes. So much fucking yes, it's not even funny… Well… Maybe not to you. But, yes. They all watched. Pretty sure everyone in the guild just got more spank bank material. Except maybe-"

"Okay!" Lucy shouted. "Moving on. I'll um… Heh, I'll just uh… Call Virgo, and… A-And um…"

She shrieked in terror when a flash of golden light appeared, and somehow stumbled over the back of the couch while she was getting ready to stand up, Virgo's key in hand.

"Clothes, ebi," Cancer said with a small chuckle as Lucy's head peeked out from behind the couch. "Virgo sent me to fix your hair."

Lucy's face lit up excitedly, and she vaulted over the couch and wrapped her arms around Cancer. Well, as much as she could, what with the crab legs on his back.
Cobra was officially a lucky son of a bitch. Lucy was on his left, which meant he could watch her ass - literally - out of the corner of his eye with the guild master being none the wiser. Then again, she was turned to the side… So, Makarov was able to see just as much as he was… And the fucker was openly drooling. 'Okay, so idiots and fucking perverts. And a secretly psychotic blonde with a delicious-looking fucking ass… Fuck me, I need to get laid…'

"Cancer, you're the best!" Lucy squealed. She took the clothes and kissed her Crab spirit's cheek, giggling softly when he smirked at her and attempted to hide the slight flush to his face and ears, then ducked behind the couch to get changed. Once she was dressed again, Lucy sat down and sighed happily as he walked around the back of the couch.

Snip snip. Snip snip snip. Snip snip.

Cobra watched curiously as short, brittle strands of Lucy's hair flew in every direction, disappearing into thin air before coming into contact with anything. More and more hair was tossed every which way until finally…

"All done, ebi. You look beautiful, ebi."

Lucy ran her fingers through her hair and grinned. It was perfect, as it always was when Cancer did her hair. "Thank you so much," she said gratefully. She gave him another quick hug, and Cancer disappeared just before the door to Makarov's office was opened to reveal the rest of Team Natsu.

And they didn't look happy.

"Ah," Makarov chuckled, "Good. You're all here." He motioned for Gray, Erza, Happy and an extremely bandaged Natsu to take a seat, not missing the way Gray positioned himself between Lucy and Cobra. "Now, we have some things to discuss if you'll be working together as a team, and I want each of you to keep an open mind."

Cobra rolled his eye. This shit was going to take forever. And Natsu and Erza were already starting to give him a fucking headache with their never-ending internal chants of "Protect Lucy. Protect Luce. Protect Lucy…" And then cake. Or fire chicken. He already knew enough about the two of them, and could easily drown their bullshit out… If he wasn't busy trying to keep an ear out for anything that would result in the room being filled with poison.

Gray, Cobra came to realize in a matter of moments, was a brooder. Made sense with the type of magic he used. Ice Make, that was different. He'd apparently also banged Lucy a couple times, completely casual. He was protective of the blonde though - as the others were - and it was strictly platonic. Not an ounce of actual romance was between those two. He also didn't fucking trust Cobra being anywhere near her, and was beyond pissed that the Poison Slayer had been around Lucy without the team to protect her. Aside from brooding, his thought patterns ran nearly parallel with Natsu's. With only a little more control. That is, unless Natsu himself was involved. The rivalry between those two might end up being some fun to fuck with.

Happy, the little blue Exceed that was floating around over Natsu's head. That thing was a fucking asshole, and not in a good way - from Cobra's perspective. A naive little asshole that deserved some serious time locked in a room so he could get smacked around. Fish and teasing people were his forte, apparently. He cared about the team, but he was mostly devoted to Natsu. Also, calling Lucy fat. The little thing's vision was clearly skewed. 'Maybe I should gouge his little fucking eyes out… That'd be fun…'

That was it. Gray, Erza, Natsu, and Happy. Cobra had already gotten a marginally decent read on Lucy herself, but she definitely had the most intriguing soul to pick around in. The others were
linear. One thing after another, all in a little row. Well, except Natsu. That motherfucker was pure chaos. Shit rattled from one side to the other, with no sense of order whatsoever. Unless he was thinking about fighting, then it was raw. Powerful even. Sounds; just purely animalistic, feral noises.

If Lucy's little Logos wasn't available, Cobra might end up needing to take refuge in that shit. If only to drown out Erza's perpetual "Cake, Lucy's honor, cake… Jellal… Cake, Jellal, cake, Lucy, cake, cake and Jellal…" That shit would be giving his ass nightmares. And he really didn't need to have more of those, thank you very much.

"I still don't like this," Gray muttered.

"I concur," Erza said, her voice stern and her eyes narrowed at Cobra. "How can we be sure that we will not need to have him returned to prison?"

All eyes fell on Cobra, and he smirked. "You can't," he chuckled, "But I'd like to see you try."

Makarov sighed when Erza drew her sword and jumped to her feet. "Enough," he said, watching as Lucy screeched and scrambled out of the way when a stray sword went flying in her general direction. This was going to take a while.

By the time Makarov's little meeting with the team was finished, Cobra was more ready to kill something than ever before. Countless times in what he realized was well over an hour - mainly because Natsu, Erza, and Gray had become rather prone to agitated outbursts, and needed to be calmed the fuck down by the guild master - he'd been forced to resort to picturing each of the three mages, and the little Exceed just because he could, being slaughtered. Maimed. Tortured for hours on end. Between his own imagination and listening in on Lucy's soul, since it had been cataloguing information nonstop, he'd somehow managed to keep his shit together.

"That is all," Makarov sighed. He watched as the five mages slowly stood up and started making their way towards the door. "Cobra, please stay for another moment."

He sighed and stopped in place, and Lucy furrowed her brow while looking from the Poison Slayer to Makarov. "Master?" she said curiously.

Makarov smiled kindly. "Just for a moment, Lucy. Wait outside for him."

She nodded, and Cobra waited until the door was closed before turning to look at the little old man. "Yes?"

Makarov sat down on top of his desk and carefully regarded the mage before him. He'd been quiet for a good portion of the meeting, aside from taunting the others. There hadn't been any outbursts from him, just a dark and malicious quirk to his lips. "There are some things we need to discuss, Cobra."

"I figured as much."

"My first priority is the safety of my children, my guild," Makarov said slowly. "As you are now part of Fairy Tail, I need to know that you will not harm them."

He shrugged. "Only if I need to."

Makarov's eyes narrowed. "And what might constitute 'needing' to?"

"What's this shit really about?" Cobra asked.
"It is my job to ensure the safety of the members of this guild," Makarov repeated. "You have been placed here, against your own will from what I can tell-

"You got that shit right," Cobra grumbled.

"-But Lucy has judged you to be a good match for our guild, regardless of what you and the Oracion Seis have done to her in the past." It was strange to see just how few expressions Cobra actually allowed to cross his face. He was completely under control after the threats he'd been shelling out down at the bar. It seemed his neutral face was a scowl, and he only allowed a quirk to his lips here and there. Nothing else gave away what he was thinking. The mention of hurting Lucy didn't even show an ounce of remorse, or anger. Cobra was blank. "You are a convicted felon, Cobra. I need to know that we can trust you."

"You..." Cobra paused and raised an eyebrow at the old man. "You really just asked someone that's tried to slaughter all of you... Are all you Fairies fucking retarded?"

"No."

"You sent some little blonde that we tried to kill to see if I was a good fit," Cobra said. "Put her ass on the line with no backup to make sure I wasn't a complete psycho. What would you have done if I just killed her, huh? You'd be down a 'child', and you'd come after me? She'd still be fucking dead. Ripped to pieces, and her body fucking gone. But, all for the sake of some test, right? So you could prove the Council wrong? Maybe rub that shit in their faces? How exactly does that not make you a total fucking idiot?"

Makarov's head tilted to one side and he grinned. "It sounds as though you care a great deal for Lucy's wellbeing, Cobra."

Cobra sneered. "No." He just couldn't understand how the bastard could spout all that shit about caring about the members of the guild as his family, then quite literally put one of the members' lives at stake. Okay, so he'd never had a family. But even he knew that shit wasn't fucking normal. You don't use the ones you give a shit about as fucking bait. He never would have done that shit with Cubellios. "You just don't make any fucking sense."

"It makes a good deal of sense," Makarov chuckled. "You, along with everyone else that meets her, underestimates Lucy's strength."

Cobra scoffed. "I can hear her. I know what she's got in the way of strength."

"Then you also know that even Lucy doubts herself," Makarov said, nodding his head sagely. "She doesn't possess the same physical strength as you, or the rest of Team Natsu, and she hasn't had nearly as much time to grow in regards to her magic. Nevertheless, she has strength that others overlook. It makes her perfect for situations like this."

"So she's a pawn then," Cobra nodded. "Just like everyone else, right? Move your fucking pieces into place and watch what happens?"

Makarov chuckled. "Quite the opposite, actually. Lucy, in a game of chess, would be a queen. She's a tactician, able to move wherever she's needed, and holds more power with the help of her spirits. Only fools aren't wary of her."

"Is that why you kept me in here?" Cobra asked. "To talk about fucking chess?"

"No, I would like to have a real conversation with you," Makarov answered.
"Good luck with that. You wanna know if I'm a fucking psycho. Don't beat around the bush."

Makarov shook his head slowly. The Slayer reminded him more and more of Laxus, with hints of Gajeel, as the seconds ticked by. He was just curious though. He wanted to know who Cobra really was. What it was that Lucy had seen to make her decide that she trusted him.

Lahar had sent him a copy of the lacrima recording from their meeting. She had trusted Cobra almost instantly, and had his shackles removed. Maybe it was another tactic to gain a portion of Cobra's trust, but he knew that Lucy was never that reckless. He'd watched the entire thing just that morning, all over again. From Cobra walking in with Lahar and laying his head down on the shackles that were bound to the table, to Lucy telling the Captain to take them off as soon as she was in the room. Cobra and Lucy just staring at one another for several minutes before they finally started talking. The lack of sound had made it impossible to tell what they were saying, but Lucy had been laughing and smiling a good deal. He'd watched as Lucy deflated, then made her move to leave the room. How Cobra had all but jumped to his feet and cut the blonde off with a menacing scowl on his face. Then, the strangest thing had happened. Cobra's jaw dropped open in shock in the silent recording, and he was slowly backed into a corner by the blonde Celestial mage. Whatever she'd been saying had stunned the Poison Slayer, and then, once their positions were switched with her being in a corner, Lucy had listened to whatever Cobra had said. Then smiled. And that was that. She'd gone back to the table and started working on the file for his release.

"If that's not it, then what?" Cobra asked with a sneer. "Tell me what the fuck it is that you want from me. I can't hear you, so tell me. That way I can turn your ass down, and get the fuck out of here."

"What happened to make you so angry, Cobra?"

"You fucking Fairies, is what."

"No, I don't mean agitated right now," Makarov said softly. "You put everyone at a distance, and hide behind your ability to hear souls."

Cobra snarled, his fists clenching. "I don't hide from anything, you fucking cockstain."

"Why is everything bathed in such negativity for you?"

His teeth ground together in agitation. "You don't need to know, old man."

"I believe I do," Makarov said solemnly. "You, along with several others in this guild, have a darker past. That is not something you will be judged for. We all know from personal experience just what the Oracion Seis was capable of. But, you are not the first person to be accepted here after being an enemy. I would like to get to know who you really are."

'No one does. He's fucking lying...’ Cobra felt himself shaking in anger by that point. "Yeah, your own grandson did a pretty good job of being an enemy," he spat. "Good job raising him, by the way."

"Laxus had his reasons, however misguided they may have been, for what happened," Makarov replied calmly. "So, what are your reasons? Why have you done the things you've done?"

"Why not?" Cobra asked with a dark chuckle. He slowly uncrossed his arms, not realizing that he'd crossed them in the first place, then took one slow step after another over to the guild master on the desk. "It. Was. Fun."

"Was it?" Makarov asked. "Did you truly find joy in causing so much pain?"
"Yes," he growled, his teeth glinting maliciously. "How could I not? The souls alone…" His eye closed, and he chuckled again at the memories of all those souls wailing in despair. "Music to my ears."

When Cobra's eye opened again, Makarov's head tilted to the other side. "Is that it, then?" he whispered. "You enjoy pain and suffering, just because it's there? How does something like that sound?"

Cobra's grin widened. "I could show you," he hissed. Makarov had yet to pull out whatever trump card he had. Whatever trick there was up his sleeve that made it so he wasn't intimidated in the slightest. Cobra wanted to know just what the fuck it was, so he could find a way to exploit it later. He needed to. Those years of being with Brain and the others… It's what he was trained to do. Listen in on someone, find their weakness, then take advantage of it until they broke. Unless he had orders to do something different.

"And how might you do that?" Makarov asked, his voice calm while he watched the young man before him. He already knew about Cobra's different types of magic, and the majority of his paperwork had been filled out already. Makarov really just needed a couple signatures on the forms, and any missing information that the Slayer could provide - things like his date of birth, burial arrangements, his real name, among a rather long list of others - then he was free to go about his day. Still, he wanted to know more about their newest member.

"By taking the shit in everyone's soul and blowing out your fucking eardrums," Cobra growled.

"So, you make others suffer," Makarov mused. "Why?"

"Why not?"

"Because no one should have to suffer if we can help it. Mages have a duty to use the abilities they have to help others. Especially the ones that can't do it themselves."

"Those people deserve to fucking die if they can't keep themselves outta fucking trouble. Why should we help them? Why should I give a rat's ass about some little cunt out there that can't take care of herself? I don't owe those people a goddamn thing."

"What about children?" Makarov asked. "They're innocent and for the most part, helpless. Wouldn't you help a child?"

"... No."

Makarov's eyes widened at that. "Don't you have compassion? Would you really watch a child die, even though you have the power to stop it?"

"No, I don't. And yes, I would. I have." Cobra could feel his anger swelling at the line of questioning. He knew what Makarov wanted to say. He could see the word sitting on the tip of the older man's tongue. It was what Brain had created, after all. What he'd been molded into. He was Cobra the Poison Dragon Slayer, a monster that killed without regard to anyone else. He tortured people, made them suffer, bathed in their blood and poisoned their families in front of them. Brain wanted a wild animal, one with magic. And that was what he got.

"I know that there is more to you than the monster you portray yourself to be, Cobra," Makarov said. "Show me."

Cobra was just about to turn and walk out, then he froze. 'Show you, huh?' The bastard didn't know how wrong he was. Sure, Cobra wasn't insane or psychotic like most people thought, but he was
definitely a monster. "You wanna see?" Cobra growled viciously. "I'm not a fucking monster, right? More than a monster, you said…"

"Yes," Makarov said carefully. "There's more to you than just that."

It was something he'd never willingly done before, but he wanted to just shut the bastard up. Show him just how fucking wrong he was, maybe make him puke himself to death. He wanted to throw Makarov off, maybe enough to get a read on what the fuck was going on in that ancient fucking soul of his. He needed to know the truth. He slowly turned and removed his coat, then tossed it on the couch he and Lucy had been sitting on. Without another thought on the matter, and before he could convince himself otherwise with that pesky thing called his brain, Cobra pulled the two shirts he was wearing up and over his head, then held them tightly in one hand. With a sneer, he turned in place, giving the old man a full 360 view of the scores of scars all over his torso. Running down every inch of his back, his arms, the large bands of scarred flesh around his wrists from the shackles. How there were fewer on his chest and stomach, but enough that there were only certain sections of unmarred flesh. "More than a monster?" he whispered, his voice dripping with hatred. "You still sure about that, Master? Because I sure as shit don't see it."

'That's his story then. A child being beaten and neglected. I understand now… Why he is this way… What the Tower of Heaven did to him… Was this all from that place though? Is there more to this that I just can't see? We all have scars though, even if we can't see them. Do his truly run deeper than just these? Even if they do, I understand… This must be what Lucy saw about him. Somehow, without actually seeing these, she found the scars beneath it all. She accepted them, and him. As do I. He needs us. Someone to truly care for him…'

Cobra's eye widened when he heard it. It was the first thing that he had ever heard from Makarov's soul, just surface thoughts though. Nothing deeper. Their eyes met, and he fought to suppress the whimper of alarm at what he saw. What he continued to hear. There was no pity. No look of horror or disgust. Makarov's eyes were sad, understanding, accepting. He wasn't being judged for it, for what had happened to him, what he'd been the cause of…

"It's fine, Cobra," Makarov silently told the Slayer before him. "There's no reason to hide. You're safe here."

Safe? He was safe? 'Yeah fucking right!' Cobra ground his teeth together and pulled his shirts back on, then his jacket. "You're wrong," he growled as he turned to the door again. He didn't mean to say anything at all, but he couldn't stop himself. He needed to get right the fuck out of there. Now. Because this shit? What the old man had done to him? He couldn't handle it. He didn't know how… As he took long strides to the door, fighting with each step to keep his heart from pounding, or his pace from turning into an all-out run, he whispered, "I'll never be fucking safe, asshole. Ever…"

Lucy jumped when the door to Makarov's office was thrown open and Cobra stormed out. She caught the barest glimpse of their guild master's saddened and slightly teary eyes, and his mouth hanging open in shock, before Cobra shouldered past her and the door closed. She whirled in place and rushed off after the maroon-haired mage. "Cobra, wait!"

"Fuck you, you dumb cunt," Cobra sneered. When her hand closed over his arm and tried to pull him to a stop, he spun in place and pinned her to the wall, his hand around her throat. "Don't fucking touch me."

Lucy scowled and pushed his hand off of her, then crossed her arms under her chest. "What happened?"

"Nothing you need to worry about. Just getting acquainted with my new Master…"
If there was any more venom in that single word, Lucy was sure poison would actually be leaking from his mouth. Why did he make it sound as though being in the guild, and talking with their guild master, had turned him into some pet? He was free now, definitely more so in comparison to being in prison. "Cobra, just-

"No," he said. "No fucking way. Just take me to my place, then fucking leave me the hell alone."

Lucy sighed softly and nodded. She wished he would just talk to her about it. About whatever was bothering him. But that wasn't Cobra. He wouldn't just suddenly open up and share everything with her. It was all a game to him, getting information out of him. She had to pick apart his riddles, wade through all the defense mechanisms he had, all the threats and malevolent glares and snarling. "Did Master Makarov tell you where it was?"

He leaned back against the wall next to Lucy, crossing his arms over his chest. Cobra slowly shook his head while glaring at the ground.

Lucy smiled softly at him. "Okay, I'll go get that then," she whispered. "Are you hungry?"

"I know how to feed myself, y'know," he grumbled. He scowled when she laughed softly, then looked up to see that bright fucking smile on her face. She knew he was fucking starving. She had to. They'd barely eaten breakfast before they jumped on the train, and they had opted to skip lunch altogether.

"Well, how about this?" Lucy asked. "I go get what we need from Master, and then we can get something to eat at the bar before heading to your place?"

"Or you just get my shit and we go. That sounds like a much better plan."

"It would do the guild some good to see you here, Cobra."

"Does it look like I give a fuck what they think?" he hissed. "All you goddamn Fairies can go die in a fucking fire."

"... Except Natsu," Lucy said with a smirk. "Good luck with that one." When all he did was growl at her, Lucy rolled her eyes. "Fine. Starve to death. But I'm stopping to get something to eat from Mira at the bar." With that, she turned and walked back toward Makarov's office, then hesitantly knocked on the door. Once she was called in, Lucy gave him a sweet smile while peeking her head around the door. "Hey, Master. Cobra kinda forgot his stuff?"

Makarov sighed and hopped down from his desk with the large envelope that had everything Cobra would need in it. "He did run out of here pretty quickly."

Lucy nodded. "What was that all about, anyway?" she asked, turning and walking next to the smaller man out to the main hall. She frowned when they reached the spot she'd left Cobra at, finding the Slayer nowhere in sight.

"It is not my place to say, child," Makarov answered. "And I'm not entirely sure what happened to begin with." He only had speculations about it, nothing concrete. The two came to the top of the stairs that led down to the area just next to the bar, then froze when they saw Cobra sitting at the bar with Kinana leaning just in front of him, both of her hands wrapped around one of his. "Well, that's... Unexpected."

Lucy laughed and rolled her eyes, then made her way down the stairs and over to Team Natsu's normal table. Erza was in the middle of eating her cake, as usual. Natsu and Happy were scarifying down way too much fire chicken and fish, respectively. Gray was swatting Juvia away with a
grimace. "Guys, I'll be helping Cobra get settled today, so I'll be back tomorrow. Alright?"

"Mmm… Strawberry…” Erza moaned between bites of her cake.

"Sho ghood!" Natsu groaned around a mouthful of food.

"Aye sir!" Happy chirped.

"Gray-sama!"

"Ack!"

Lucy blinked slowly, then shook her head. "I'll just… Tell Mira," she whispered to herself. "She'll tell you guys." With that, she made her way over to the bar and took a seat just next to Cobra.

"Hey, Lucy!" Kinana laughed while straightening up when she heard Mira in the kitchen. "Your food will be out in just a second. Mira decided to experiment a little bit when she realized that Er... I mean... Cobra eats poison."

"Food?" Lucy asked.

Kinana nodded, smiling at the maroon-haired man she never thought she'd see again. She needed to try and remember that he didn't want anyone in the guild knowing the name he'd told her when they met all those months ago. "He came down and told Mira that you guys needed some food to go. I guess you're gonna help him move into his new place?"

Lucy nodded absently, then furrowed her brow when there was a large explosion from the kitchen. Lisanna and Mira came rushing out with rags over their mouths not a moment later, followed by a large cloud of yellow-green smoke that burnt Lucy's nostrils and made her eyes instantly water. 'Oh great, what now?!'

Cobra raised a brow while watching the short-haired woman, Lisanna, fall to the ground and start retching, and his next breath was filled with something absolutely delicious. 'Dumbasses...' No way in hell was he going to let something like this go to waste, so he leaned over the bar and took a deeper breath, pulling every toxic particle into himself in a matter of seconds. "Fuck, that's good…"

"What the hell happened?" Bickslow asked as he walked up to the bar to get another mug of beer. "Shit, are you guys alright?"

Mira coughed for a moment, then wiped the tears from her eyes. "Fine," she laughed softly. "Just experimenting with some chemicals."

"Y'know, you should really keep the meth lab in another place," Bickslow laughed, his tongue lolling from his mouth.

Lucy smiled and shook her head. "Not meth, Bickslow," she laughed, her eyes glimmering with amusement while looking up at the Seith mage. "We've got a new Dragon Slayer that eats poison."

"And Lisanna here was trying to help me," Mira added.

"By mixing bleach, Pinesol, and fucking drain cleaner, apparently," Cobra said while shaking his head. "Delicious, but I wouldn't suggest repeating that shit." He paused and tilted his head slightly while listening to the murmurs around them about what happened. "Well, you could," he said a little slower. "But I don't think you'll like what chlorine gas does to you. I get to watch you die though, if you're dumb enough to do it again."
Laxus walked up to the second floor banister his grandfather was sitting on as Bickslow started teasing the Strauss sisters about trying to murder the whole town. They watched in silence for several minutes before Lucy and Cobra took the bags of food from Mira and made their way out of the guild. Once the doors were closed, he grunted when he felt Makarov's eyes on him. "What, Gramps?"

"That young man reminds me of you, Laxus," Makarov said thoughtfully, looking back out over the guild.

"Fuck you…"

"Precisely," Makarov chuckled.

"You really think it's a good idea to keep Blondie around him?" Laxus asked. "She's got a habit of getting into shit situations, y'know…"

"There is much more to Cobra than first meets the eye, my boy. And Lucy has already proven to be a valuable asset in getting him to open up."

"... Really?" Laxus asked softly. "Since when are we assets?"

Makarov shook his head, turning to face his grandson again. "She is kind, caring, reliable, and forgiving. But, most importantly, she is understanding and empathetic. He will need someone like her to be successful."

"So… You're turning into Mira, then."

Makarov laughed and shook his head. "Definitely not. I'll leave romantic pairings to you brats and her… But, helping our newest member find a friend that he can open up to? Yes. I'll do that to the best of my ability."

Laxus frowned as he looked back out across the guild. His eyes instantly landed on the last antisocial bastard that had joined the guild. Sitting with his Exceed and munching on his iron off in a dark corner of the guild. It would be a long time before Cobra opened up, if Gajeel's demeanor was anything to go by. Black Steel Gajeel of Phantom Lord hadn't been shit in comparison to the Oracion Seis, and Gajeel still had trouble connecting with the rest of the guild from time to time. Hell, even his own team did. The Raijinshuu had been enemies of Fairy Tail before, just like Gajeel and Juvia. All of them were still outcasts in their own way, even after the Grand Magic Games and the Eclipse Gate. Luckily, he figured everyone was starting to grow closer together.

"You've got that look in your eyes, Laxus."

Mavis giggled, kicking her feet back and forth while she sat on the banister. "I call it Dreyar face. Yury had it too. When he was thinking about the guild's future, and how happy it made him. She paused and watched Makarov as he hopped up onto the bar, having started making his way down the stairs when Laxus got lost in thought. "Your grandfather makes the same face all the time. And now…” She smiled up at the young blond man. "Now, you're doing it. You'll be a great guild master one day. I can feel it."

Laxus chuckled and shook his head. "Nah. Not like Gramps."

"No," Mavis sighed. "Not like Makarov." She leaned forward so she was right his line of sight.
"Like Laxus. We're all different, and we find different ways to lead our crazy guild. Just like each person handles things that happen to them differently."

"Why do I feel like this is a lesson of some sort?"

"Maybe it is," Mavis giggled. "Guess you'll have to decide that for yourself."

Laxus looked out over the guild again, then over to the doors that hadn't opened since Cobra and Lucy had left. "Guess so," he whispered to himself once Mavis disappeared.
One thing that Cobra quickly came to realize after being a part of Fairy Tail for only two days was that they were all officially batshit fucking crazy. A barrel full of monkeys high on crack looked tame in comparison to them, that was for sure. If they weren't partying, it was something else. Overall chaos reigned supreme in the guild hall, with only the smallest pockets of controlled chaos where one could be left the fuck alone. Between the ever-present fighting, the betting, gambling, drinking, and then more partying, it made him feel just a little pissed that the Seis had fallen to the bunch of drunks twice.

Speaking of betting, there was apparently a running bet to see how long it would take for Lucy to realize that literally everyone in the guild knew where she lived, along with different - and, dare he say, inventive - ways to break into her apartment. It still wasn't clear as to the why of it all. Why they all knew, why they all wanted to break in in the first place, or anything else, really. He wasn't going to tell anyone that Lucy already knew, and that she had just given up on trying to stop people from breaking in.

Natsu apparently was the most often offender, going as far as sneaking into the blonde's bed and actually sleeping with her. Gray and Erza were much the same, except they didn't creep on her unconscious ass. Cobra was just surprised that the guy's girlfriend, the fucking demon barmaid herself, had no issue with that particular detail whatsoever. He'd listened in, and it still made no sense.

Cobra himself had been tempted to break in, just to see what all the fuss was about, but he hadn't needed to. She had stopped at her apartment while they were on their way to his own on his first day there, and invited him inside. It really wasn't anything special, aside from garishly pink. Okay, and it smelled like fresh fucking roses, even though there were no flowers. Odd, but it didn't matter.

Now, he was stuck in his own damn apartment, with his blonde 'parole officer' sitting cross-legged on his couch in a pair of too-small shorts and a tank top (even though it was almost fucking November) holding a deck of cards in her hand. "You do realize I'll just hear your hand, right?"

Lucy sighed and dropped the cards to her lap. "Well, you're the one that said you didn't want to go to the guild - which, I still don't understand - and I can't very well just leave you here all alone."

"Why, exactly?"

She gave him a pointed look, one that was nearly screeching that he was a dumbass, then rolled her eyes. "Because, you still haven't even finished your paperwork for Master, first of all. Plus, someone has to keep an eye on you."

"And you're clearly the best one for the job," he scoffed. "And I'm here alone at night when you're fucking sleeping, so…"

Lucy shrugged and placed the cards on an end table. "Well, you can't stand anyone else, so…"

"I can't stand you either," Cobra spat.
"So you say, but if that was really the case, then you wouldn't have even let me in the door."

"You have a key," Cobra retorted. "A bit presumptuous, if you ask me, but-"

Lucy blinked. "Cobra, you gave me the key when we got here. You said-"

"I know what I said," he shot back with a sneer. "But you didn't have to go accepting it."

"What the hell was I supposed to do?" she asked incredulously. "You walked in the door, put the food down, then threw a damn key at me! Was I supposed to let it fall to the ground and stare at you?"

He shrugged, silently snickering when Lucy grabbed the deck of cards and threw them at him. Easily catching the box before it collided with his crotch, he set it back down, watching her scowl at him. "Incorrigible doesn't even begin to scratch the surface, Jugs."

"Well, can you at least get the paperwork finished for Master?" she huffed. "It should have been done by now."

Cobra sighed and dropped his head to the back of the couch. "Fine. It's in the bedroom." If she wanted him to do it so damn badly, then she would have to go and get it. It had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that he wanted to watch her walking away. Nope. Not at all.

Lucy's lips pursed while she glared at Cobra. Never in a million years would she have thought the guy would actually agree so easily, but as she looked at him right then - wearing a long sleeve thermal shirt and a pair of black sleep pants - she realized that maybe he was only agreeing because there really wasn't anything else for him to do. The apartment was furnished when they got there, sure, but it was just bare bones furnishings. A couch and love seat, end tables, a dining table, a single bookshelf, and a rug in the main room; a bed with a nightstand and a dresser in the bedroom; simple cooking utensils and pots and pans in the kitchen. There wasn't anything else. Hell, his closet and pantry were completely bare until the day before when she had gone shopping with him for clothes and food.

She made her way into his bedroom, barely sparing the room a glance as she grabbed the packet of paperwork that was sitting on the dresser with a pen clipped to it. It was in exactly the same spot she'd left it when they came here the first day. Meaning he hadn't even looked at what he needed to fill out.

Cobra's eye stayed closed at Lucy walked back into the living room and plopped herself down on the couch next to him. One thing was for sure, the blonde had grown far too comfortable with him being in her personal bubble, and way too quickly. She was just too damn trusting. He didn't feel like moving though, and Lucy had figured out pretty damn fast that he didn't want her touching him, so there was still at least half a foot between them.

"Ready?" Lucy asked as she uncapped the pen. It was obvious that Cobra wasn't going to do this himself, so maybe he would be willing to just answer the questions. Then she could fill in the forms, and he would just sign it. She had helped Makarov fill out and file forms for the Council, and clean up his office in general, before Laxus had started getting serious about learning the true ropes of being a guild master, so this would be a piece of cake. Assuming Cobra would actually answer her.

"Exactly," he sighed, shifting and quickly pulling his shirt down when it started riding up. With a roll of his closed eye, he shifted again, moving so he was leaning back against the arm of the couch with his feet pulled up onto the cushion. "Hope you're ready to leave that shit blank though."
"You have to answer them, Cobra," she sighed.

His eye slowly opened, and he spread his legs to look at her with a blank face. "I will. You'll see."

"Name?"

He smirked. "Cobra."

"Your real name," Lucy sighed with the pen perched above the page and ready to write.

"It's the only one I'll answer to," he said, just like he'd told her before.

"Cobra, this is a legal document. What's your birth name?" Lucy paused and smirked at him. "I could ask Kinana. She almost called you something else."

He sneered and nudged her leg with his foot, a little more forcefully than was really necessary. "Leave her out of it, Blondie."

Lucy rolled her eyes, nudging his foot with her leg right back. "Calm your tits," she sighed. "Just answer it, and tell Master that you still want to be called Cobra." She watched as he kept his scowl in place and glared at her. Maybe he was mulling it over. Or he was waiting for her to give it up. That wasn't going to happen though. Just when she was ready to prod him to answer again, the Poison Slayer spoke.

"Erik. Don't you dare fucking call me that, but that's my name."

Lucy smiled and started to write, then paused.

"Erik, with a 'K'. And no, I don't have a last name."

Lucy nodded. There were actually a few people that didn't have last names in the guild, so it wasn't all that uncommon. "Alright, date of birth?"

"I don't have one."

Lucy blinked, and slowly looked over to the maroon-haired mage at her side. "Were you somehow manifested from thin air and space particles?" she deadpanned.

"No."

"Stardust and universe juice?"

"No."

"Then, are you a demon, maybe?"

"No."

"So, when were you born?"

Cobra shrugged. "Not a clue. I do know that I'm twenty-five, but that's about it."

She nodded and filled in the age section instead of a birth date. "Location of birth, or do you not know that either?"

Cobra stared at Lucy for a moment. "Why the fuck does anyone need this shit?"
Lucy shrugged. "Well, there's no birth certificate for you, so I'm guessing this has to be filled out instead? I honestly don't know. Master is really the only one that will see this, though. And Laxus, whenever he becomes guild master."

Their eyes met for a moment, then Cobra looked down at where his hands were clasped over his stomach. He shifted slightly and - though he would never admit it - self-consciously pulled down his sleeves, then whispered, "The Tower." It wasn't something he was proud of, or something that he told anyone, but if he had to do this shit to make sure he didn't have to be in prison again, then he'd just have to get the fuck over it. The fact of the matter was, he was one of the few kids actually born in that hellhole, because the guards didn't always keep their dicks to themselves. His mother died during childbirth, and he had only been found because some other prisoner saw him lying under the dead woman. He didn't know the details of how exactly he had survived, and he really didn't want to know.

"You mean…" Lucy's eyes were wide when he looked back up at her, and she saw the smallest flash of sadness in his single indigo eye before it was locked away. "I thought they only abducted kids…"

"They did." Cobra really didn't want anyone knowing this shit, and the thought occurred to him - too little, too late - that he could have just lied. But, honestly, what was the point in lying? He had never needed to do it before, since he was always able to turn the tables on someone and talk his way out of things using his Soul Listening magic.

"Then, your mom was…" When Cobra nodded and looked back down at his hands, Lucy found herself turning in place and scooting forward so she was kneeling between his legs. He didn't stop her, and the blonde knew that he could hear what she was thinking about doing, so she just went with her gut and gently grabbed his hands where they were clasped together.

Cobra tensed, but forced himself to stay still. It was inevitable that she would touch him at some point, the chick was a hugger. At least she had only gone for his hands. That shit, he could handle; which was why he'd let Kinana - a name he had to remind himself to use - touch them any time she was around him. He refused to look at the blonde though. He didn't need to see the pity in her eyes, or sitting plain as fucking day on her face.

'No wonder he wants freedom. Cobra was born in captivity…'

It took everything in him not to wince. She was too fucking perceptive, that was something he was sure of. Her next thought, though… That had his brow furrowing as he looked back up at her. Right when it came out of her mouth.

"I'll just write Caelum, then," Lucy said with a soft smile. It was technically the truth. The island that held the Tower of Heaven was off of the southern shore of the Kingdom of Caelum. Technically, it belonged to that country, so Cobra was - for all intents and purposes - born in that kingdom. "And I'll make sure I never tell anyone where you were born, mmkay?"

"Why?"

Lucy's eyes softened as she let go of his hands and started writing the information down. "Because you're secretive. You keep a lot, if not everything, to yourself. Besides, you should choose who gets to know that about you." She glanced at him for a moment, a light blush on her cheeks. "Thanks for telling me."

"Yeah, yeah," he muttered. "What's next?"
Lucy's lips pursed again. "Blood type? And… Okay, I'm gonna go out on a limb here and say you aren't an organ donor." She jolted when a deep, rumbling, and utterly belly-bursting laugh came from the Slayer. She had heard him chuckle from time to time, but that? Full on laughter? It was just… Inconceivable. Nevertheless, the blonde found herself laughing right along with him.

"Lord have mercy on the poor fuck that gets my organs!" Cobra laughed. Honestly, that shit was just too fucking good. Aside from the fact that, no, he did not want his organs going to anyone else when he kicked the bucket, his body was riddled with poison. It pumped through his veins, and had quite literally changed some of his own fucking DNA once the lacrima had successfully merged with his body. He used to be a brunette, with brown eyes and a lighter complexion - not by much, but still. Now, he had red fucking hair, a dark tan, and a purple eye. "Pretty sure no one wants my blood either, but I'm O-Negative."

She nodded again, then bit her lip in amusement when she decided that his forms needed a little spicing up.

"Really?" Cobra chuckled. "Skull and crossbones?" He shook his head in amusement when she turned the page toward him for his approval on her doodling skills. After checking to see what the next blank section was, his face fell. 'Surviving Family and Beneficiaries, huh?'

Lucy sighed gently when she looked at the next section. "You can actually leave this part blank, if you want. The default is that everything will be donated to charity, so you could choose one of those if… Y'know, if there's no one else." She really didn't want to know what Cobra would want done in the event he died. It just felt a little too personal for how long they had known each other. Sure, the Slayer was able to read souls, and he was privy to everyone's deepest, darkest secrets, but…

"Kinana," Cobra said softly, closing his eye while he listened to Lucy's soul running rampant in Tangent Land. He smirked, letting out a small chuckle. "If I die for whatever reason, everything goes to her."

A tender smile pulled at Lucy's plump lips, and she shifted in place once again to get a little more comfortable. Her feet were starting to fall asleep from how she'd been sitting on them, after all. Without really considering what she was doing, or who exactly it was that she was sitting with, the blonde turned again and grabbed Cobra's pant leg to straighten out his leg on the couch, then draped her own legs over it and leaned back. "Kinana, huh?" she whispered. "Why is it you guys are so familiar, anyway?"

Cobra was broken from his stupor by her voice. All he'd been able to manage in the way of higher functions was… Well, nothing, really. He'd been ready to kick her ass across the apartment when she started reaching for his leg - because that was his motherfucking bubble she was getting in, goddamnit - but then all she had done was grab the fabric on his pants. Obviously, she was making herself more comfortable, and he couldn't really complain about how they had ended up sitting, since he was a whole lot more comfortable now anyway. Still, he'd never sat with someone quite like this before. Well, ever really. A woman between his spread legs, her own mile long legs draped over one of his, the other bent and acting as a backrest for her where it was propped up.

But she had asked him a question, and he needed to quickly mask the utter shock on his face - both from her gall at how they were now positioned, and the fact that he still hadn't pushed her the fuck away. Why was he so familiar with Kinana? Did he really want to answer that one? No. No one needed to know that she used to be Cubellios. He wasn't sure if she wanted anyone to know, so he was keeping that shit to himself. "I've got my reasons," was all he said on the matter, letting his single eye bore into the side of Lucy's head to let her know that the subject was eternally off-limits.

Instead of pushing for more answers, though, Lucy just nodded. She didn't need to know all of
Cobra's secrets. Maybe, when they'd gotten to know each other better - considering he was going to be part of Team Natsu for the next five years - he would be willing to open himself up more. Yes, she was more than curious about his seemingly instant friendship with the purple-haired barmaid, but it was obvious that he didn't want to talk about it.

"Got that right."

She laughed softly, then flipped the page. "Alright, how about hobbies?"

"Hobbies?"

"Yeah, you know… Things you like to do in your free time? Like, cooking, sewing, macrame, sleeping…"

Cobra snorted and closed his eye again. "I'm pretty sure torture isn't something that should be put on that form."

"No, not really."

"Then I don't have any."

She blinked in surprise and openly gaped at him. " Seriously? Nothing at all?"

"Nope."

"What about fishing? Playing cards? Oh! What about riddles?"

He raised a brow at that. "Riddles?"

"Yeah," Lucy giggled. "You seem to like playing word games, so I figured that was probably a hobby of yours."

After a moment's hesitation, Cobra sighed in defeat. He hadn't really had too much time on his hands with the Seis, so anything that he would have done to pass the time consisted of sleeping and reading. The fact that he'd grown so interested in riddles in the first place was because he was locked in prison with no one's soul to listen in on, and no one to talk to. "Alright, riddles," he finally admitted. "Reading, too." The way her soul started humming happily at that had a smirk trying to lift one corner of his mouth. He already knew the blonde was smart - just listening to her soul was enough to figure that one out - but now she was apparently more than curious about what he liked to read, and whether or not they had any similarities in their taste on novels.

"What do you like to read?" Lucy asked curiously.

"Thrillers, history, and anything dealing with biology or psychology." He chuckled again when he looked at her. "Sorry, no skanky romance shit."

"That's mainly Erza," Lucy replied with a wave of her hand. "Anything else you like to do?" When he shook his head, she sighed and continued on with the paperwork. "Okay, this is where it gets a little weird…"

"Great…"

"Favorite color, season, holiday, food, and drink?"

"Purple, Fall, I don't have one, anything with poison in it, and bleach."
"Oh god, I forgot about this…" Lucy sighed and tried to remove the sudden blush from her cheeks. "Favorite sex position?" she mumbled.

"I'm not answering that shit."

'Thank god,' she thought, 'Otherwise I'll be imagining it… Shut up, don't picture it now! Oh god!' She blinked repeatedly, trying to ignore the fact that Cobra had definitely heard her thinking it loud and clear.

"You know what?" Cobra chuckled. "Lemme see that paper…” When the blonde eyed him suspiciously, he reached forward and plucked the forms from her hands, then wrote his answer for the way too intrusive question.

Lucy openly laughed when the papers were set back in her lap. Her eyes locked with his thoroughly amused amethyst orb, and she shook her head. "'Go fuck yourself' is your favorite position?"

Cobra smirked. "Gets my point across."

"Masturbation gets your point across…”

His eye rolled and he grabbed the papers again. "'Go fuck yourself'," he mumbled as he continued filling in the space, "'With a syphilitic gibbon cock, you goddamn pervert.'" He looked up at the blonde when a bright peal of laughter split the air, chuckling when he heard just how much she approved of his response.

'Ooh my god, I love how he thinks…'

"I'll keep that in mind…”

Lucy sputtered and a bright flush crossed her cheeks. She quickly snatched the papers back and hid her face behind her hair, which was really only so he couldn't physically see her blush. 'And look at that! Legible penmanship!' After a moment, she cleared her throat and continued on with the questions. Needless to say, it was nice to get to know a little more about her new teammate. Then again, it was only what he was willing to tell her, and what he wanted to have on record.

"Favorite movie?" Cobra repeated. "I don't have one."

Lucy frowned as she looked at him again. "What do you mean, you don't have a favorite movie?"

He blinked slowly. "Let me rephrase that. I don't have a favorite because I've never seen a movie."

"What?!" The air was quickly pushed out of her lungs when Cobra growled and clamped his legs together, effectively bending her in half. When he decided her lack of oxygen had gone on long enough, and she was able to shoot him a glare while she sat back up and got comfortable again (she might have wiggled just a little more than was necessary), Lucy sighed and wrote in the first horror movie that came to mind that she thought he would like.

"What's Saw?" Cobra asked curiously. "Any good?"

She nodded with a wide smile. "A psychological thriller with a little bit of mystery, and tons of blood and torture." The blank stare she got in return made Lucy just a little self-conscious about her assumption on what he would enjoy watching. She didn't know him all that well, after all. Maybe he would be more interested in comedy movies. Or, he would be like Gajeel and secretly love chick flicks - something she loved about the Iron Slayer, because it meant he really was a big softie on the inside.
"That does sound like something I'd like," Cobra said slowly. His silence had been because of just how quickly Lucy had pulled that movie out. Logos was definitely a wonderful thing for the blonde, since she had essentially run a search on things he knew he liked that also happened in movies. Smart fucking cookie, she was. "And he's more than a 'big softie'. Chick flicks are just the tip of that fucked up iceberg, but..." Cobra shook his head. He already knew just what the Iron Slayer was hiding deep down, and while it was a little surprising, Cobra was going to keep it tucked away for a rainy day. Just in case he ever needed some ammo against the pierced mage. "Anyway, I'll have to check that out."

Lucy smiled when he closed his eye again. "So, come over sometime and we'll watch it. I've got all seven, and I actually haven't had a chance to watch the last three."

Cobra smirked. "Sounds good to me. I'm obviously not getting rid of your ass anytime soon."

"Damn straight," Lucy nodded, laughing when Cobra nudged her with his leg. She definitely hadn't thought it would be so easy to be around the Poison Slayer, but this was more than a pleasant surprise. If anything, now she would have someone to watch horror movies with her, instead of being forced to watch the shit that her team usually fought over. This is gonna be fun.' She really couldn't wait to have a marathon, and it had her nearly wriggling in her seat from her excitement.

"You stay the fuck still, psycho," Cobra grumbled. "I'm comfy, and that wiggleworm bullshit is gonna have me poisoning you real fucking fast."

"So sorry, my liege," Lucy giggled, her eyes dancing with mirth when his eye creaked open to glance at her.

"Goddamn right. Now you're getting it, little peon." He was going to ignore the blush that was lighting up her cheeks when he grinned at her. Not a smirk, but a full grin.

'Oh god, he has dimples! Oh sweet mother of God! Why?! Why does he have to have dimples?! So... Sexy... Shut up, Lucy! I'm so screwed if he keeps making that face...'

Cobra sighed while he walked toward the door to his apartment, already hating that he was quite literally required to attend the party at the guild. So, it was fucking Halloween. He'd already refused to dress up, because hell to the motherfucking no, but he still needed to be there. Four days after joining the guild, and he now fully understood why people listened to what Mira fucking told them to do. He could hear the demons inside of the barmaid. And they were all pretty damn intriguing, for the most part. Except, when all of those demons focused on a single person, and when Mira smiled that creepy fucking smile of hers, it was actually enough to make him feel like his soul was being sucked right out of his ass. Uncomfortable. And it made his head hurt a little.

So, he'd agreed to go to the guild. He was going to be tucked away in a corner somewhere anyway, just to stay away from the utter insanity that was that clusterfuck. The music alone was going to give him a headache, and he was actually curious about how the other Slayers dealt with it. There were four others in the guild, after all, and their senses were just as keen as his were.

It didn't take him long to get there, and he was already groaning when he realized that he could hear the music from a block away. 'Why me?'. Still, he made his way into the bustling guild and nearly froze at the sight of nearly everyone in the guild, dressed up in some of the most ridiculous fucking costumes he'd ever seen. The Connell family, Alzack, Bisca, and Asuka, were probably the only ones he found mildly endearing as a family of bumblebees. He'd never admit it, but that spitfire of a child was fucking precious - especially when she used her innocent charm to get Natsu to do some embarrassing shit. And she fucking knew it, too. 'She's a smart one.'
Most of the women in the guild were dressed in one skimpy costume or another, the men ranging from what he imagined should be scary to awkwardly innocent - like, Droy wearing a diaper and a bonnet, with a rattle in one hand and a turkey leg in the other. Really, Cobra didn't need to see that shit. He still couldn't decide if it was supposed be to awkwardly innocent, or scary though.

As he wound through the guild, he went to the bar and sat at one of the few open spots, smirking when Kinana almost instantly appeared in front of him, dressed as Medusa. A strapless, forest green dress clung to her curves, and atop her head was a crown of golden snakes. "Well, those definitely suit you," he chuckled.

"I thought they might," she laughed. "What can I get you?"

"Glass cleaner."

"Windex and whiskey, right?" When Cobra nodded, she went about making the drink and handed it to him, then gave him a quick smile when she was called away again.

"I'm surprised you showed up."

Cobra glanced to the side to find Gajeel chewing on a piece of iron while he glared at the bartop. "Mandatory. I'm not getting on Mira's bad side."

"Gihi, wise choice."

"Yeah, you don't hear what the fuck goes on in her head. I'd rather not have my fucking nuts made into earrings."

Gajeel snorted and shook his head. "She'd wear that shit, too. Fucking psycho." He tensed when there was a loud screech, and both men turned in their seats as a blonde blur headed right for the Iron Slayer. His arms wrapped around the blonde Celestial mage as she collided with his chest, then he carefully pulled her back to give her a raised brow. "Get in another fight, Bunny?"

Lucy grinned and blew her bangs from her face. "Nope," she giggled. "Natsu and Gray had a bet to see who could throw farther. I think Natsu wins by default, since Juvia went all puddly when Gray touched her."

Cobra took a large gulp of his drink to try and return some moisture to his mouth once he saw just what the blonde was wearing. Yeah, she was almost always in something that bordered on completely inappropriate, but this was just… Sexy as hell. A blue, barely there cheerleader outfit with 'San Romero Knights' across her chest. Her blonde hair pulled up into pigtails. Thigh high white stockings, red leg warmers, and sneakers sitting below her pleated miniskirt. All that was pretty much standard, as far as he was concerned, but it was the severed head hanging on her belt and the chainsaw she was holding that caught his attention. And the fact that she pulled a lollipop out from between her breasts and started sucking on it - after removing the wrapper, of course.

Gajeel raised a studded brow when he took in the flush of alcohol on Lucy's cheeks, but his lips clamped shut when another voice joined them.

"I told you that you were a fucking cheerleader!" Bickslow cackled as he draped an arm over Lucy's shoulders.

"I'm a zombie killing cheerleader tonight," Lucy laughed. "And the Joker, Bickslow? Really?"

His tongue lolled from his mouth while he gave her a huge grin. "Hell yeah!" He pulled back and straightened his bow tie, then flamboyantly slicked back his temporarily dyed green hair away from
his white painted face. "I'm always the Joker!"

"Got that shit right," Cobra mumbled into his glass. Still, he wanted to know just what the fuck had possessed the blonde to wear such a twisted fucking costume. *I'm looking that shit up later. Cheerleader with a chainsaw.*

"Well, I'm gonna get back out there. Have fun, guys!" Lucy turned and looked at the two Slayers, giving them a brilliant smile, then quickly slipped out of Bickslow's hold and bounded back into the crowd.

"Man, she's hot as hell," Bickslow sighed while he leaned on the bar.

"You would know," Gajeel chuckled as he watched the blonde moving through the dancing bodies and over to where Levy was sitting. "You two were fucking for a while."

"Yeah, but we broke off the arrangement," Bickslow sighed. And damn it all, did that fucking suck. From just after Lisanna returned from Edolas until the Grand Magic Games, he'd been the lucky bastard that had gotten Lucy as a friend with benefits. She put an end to it though, when she told him that she wanted a relationship. Not with him, and he didn't really blame her, but the blonde wanted more than just a casual fuck here and there. Bickslow didn't date, ever, so he was fine with calling it quits. Besides, Lucy was probably one of the nicest women he'd met, so he definitely wanted to keep her as his friend without shit getting awkward between them.

"Crying fucking shame."

"Nah," Bickslow laughed. "What's a crying shame is that Natsu couldn't keep his mouth shut, so Mira found out and hounded us nonstop about babies, like the whole damn time."

Cobra shook his head and tuned the conversation between Gajeel and Bickslow out, instead focusing on finishing his drink and then getting a refill. Kinana was busy, so Mira had to make it, but there was no difference in how it tasted. Before he knew it though, an hour had gone by, and the Poison Slayer was drawn once again from his brooding by the pierced mage next to him.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Gajeel groaned. "Who the fuck let Bunny drink that much?"

"Huh?"

Gajeel pointed to the woman that was laughing and dragging Bickslow around by the collar of his purple jacket, specifically, right to where they were sitting. "Bunny," he said to Cobra, "Is fucking scary when she's drunk off her ass. You never know what's gonna happen…"

"Twerk-Off!" Lucy bellowed as she scrambled onto the bar, then pulled Bickslow up with her. She carefully set her chainsaw off to one side, then pointed her newly opened lollipop accusingly at the grinning Seith mage. "You can not twerk better than me, Bixalopolis!"

"Case in fuckin' point right there," Gajeel sighed.

"What the fuck?" Cobra whispered. He looked around curiously when he heard various bets being placed, then over to Gajeel when he heard the silent lamenting the Slayer was doing.

'Always have to deal with this shit. Nope. I'm not watching. No way in fucking hell am I gonna watch this shit. But that ass, moving like that… NO! Walk the fuck away, you dumb shit! It's never gonna fucking happen, so move the hell on. Talk about wrong on so many goddamn levels.'

Cobra raised a brow when he saw the other Slayer standing to leave. He could tell the guy wasn't
going far, but he just couldn't understand why he would have an issue with sitting there in the first place. It wasn't like there was anything wrong with watching-

"Cobra!" Lucy giggled while she crawled across the bar. "You wanna join?"

"Fuck no."

"Aww, c'mon! I'll teach you to shake your snaky booty!" She wiggled her own hips to emphasize her point. "You need to loosen up."

"No. Go shake your ass with the other Soul Boy. My shit is staying nice and tight."

"Suit yourself." She shrugged and stumbled to her feet, then grinned and popped her candy back into her mouth when the music started playing.

"I know what yer thinkin'," Gajeel sighed as he slumped back on the stool. There was no way in hell he was going to get through that fucking crowd, so he was just going to have to keep his eyes trained on his hands. "And no. Bunny has no idea that everyone was just staring at her ass."

Cobra quirked a brow at the Iron Slayer. "She never is, from what I've gathered."

Gajeel smirked and shook his head, studiously ignoring the two mages dancing on the bar. Sure, he could see out of the corner of his eye every time Lucy's skirt would swish one way or the other, and how her bare ass would bounce just right. And he was able to see Bickslow throwing his purple jacket off and putting his hands on his knees, then shaking his ass like his life fucking depended on it. No matter what he saw though, he was ignoring it. No one needed to see him staring, that was for sure. Especially not fucking Mira.

Cobra, on the other hand, was finding it more and more difficult not to watch. The way Lucy's hips swirled around and around, the sultry grin on her alcohol-flushed face when she looked over her shoulder at the cheering crowd, and then when she bent at the waist and shook her ass while touching her toes. He was pretty sure the blonde had forgotten that she had very stupidly worn a thong, because normally she was trying to make sure everyone wasn't seeing her underwear, or her ass, in the first place.

"Damn, Cosplayer!" Bickslow cackled as Lucy strutted across the bar, then kicked up one leg as she spun and continued dancing. Honestly, he knew he couldn't beat the blonde when it came to twerking. Hell, all he really knew about it was that it was sexy as hell watching a woman shaking her ass. But, that didn't mean he was above goading the extremely drunk blonde into doing it. It just meant that he'd make a fool of himself for the length of one song - something that wasn't uncommon, anyway - and then bow out and admit that she was, in fact, better at it than him. All while getting to admire the sexy little Celestial mage while she moved.

Cobra groaned and took the last sip of his drink, signalling for another. "Is everyone in this place trying to sleep with her?" The low chuckle at his side drew his attention from the blonde; although he would never admit just how difficult it was to look away.

"Yeah, Bunny's got that effect on people," Gajeel said. "She's apparently blissfully unaware of that shit though." He paused and shook his head again when the blonde pulled Levy up onto the bar and forced the bluenette dressed as a sexy firefighter - something he already knew was a guildwide coercion on the women's parts - to dance. Judging by the slap-happy grin on Levy's face, she was drunk as a skunk, and would be hiding behind him all the next day, utterly mortified by what she'd done. That is, if she remembered it.
"Most likely, she won't," Cobra said. "Not if she has another drink or two. Her brain's pretty much withered down to sloshing water right now."

"Damn," the Iron Slayer sighed. "Guess me and Lily are taking her ass home then." Every time Levy got shitfaced, which was, thankfully, not that often, he and Pantherlily would escort her back to Fairy Hills. No way in hell was he going to let someone take advantage of the little bookworm. Suddenly, a sneer pulled at his upper lip while he turned fury-filled eyes to the Poison Slayer. "Don't tell me you're lookin' to go after Bunny."

Cobra blinked slowly, then looked back up at Lucy just as she was diving out victoriously into the crowd. The sudden surge of perversion that came from every male there that was able to feel her skin made his head start pounding, but he focused just a little more and forced it down to a dull buzzing sound. As he turned back to the bar, and to take a large gulp of his drink, he said, "No. I'm not. The furthest thing from my mind is getting the shitstorm of the century rained down on my ass just for looking at her the wrong way. I don't need that shit."

'Goddamn right, you fuckin' don't. Go after my Bunny, and I'll rip your ass apart, then fucking eat you.'

"Your Bunny, huh?" Cobra asked with a wicked grin. "Does she know about this?"

"Nothin' to tell," Gajeel growled into his own glass. "You keep that poison dick away from her."

Cobra grunted and finished his sixth - or was it the fifteenth - glass of the night, signalling for another.

"Someone's looking to get wasted," Bickslow laughed as he pulled his jacket back on and took a seat on Cobra's other side.

"Nope. I don't get drunk."

"Seriously?!!"

Cobra nodded. "Alcohol's a poison. I just absorb it like twinkle toes over there does with fire," he said, tilting his head off to the side where Natsu was trying to emulate Vijeeter's… Whatever the fuck he was doing.

"That sucks," Bickslow chuckled. "I know Cosplayer's feeling damn good because of it. She never dances at the guild."

"Bunny never dances anywhere," Gajeel said. "As soon as someone is close enough, she just fucking stops dead in her tracks." He smirked and shook his head again. "Shy as hell…"

"How would you know, Gajeel?" Bickslow laughed while grabbing a beer from Mira.

"Because she sleeps at his house to get away from Salamander," Cobra supplied, grinning when Gajeel's ears turned red from embarrassment. "They watch movies and—"

"And if you say one more fucking word, I'm gonna shove a spiked dildo down your goddamn throat," Gajeel growled menacingly. No one needed to know that he watched chick flicks with Lucy. Pantherlily was sworn to secrecy, not that Gajeel really thought his Exceed would go blabbing to anyone, and his silence was rewarded with kiwis. Constantly. Honestly, the Iron Slayer couldn't understand what the fucking big deal was about them, but he enjoyed the shit out of a romantic comedy. 'Fucking Sandra Bullock and her hilarious goddamn movies...'"
"I was going to say you two eat way too much fucking junk food," Cobra finished. When an iron-covered fist went sailing toward his face, he quickly leaned back. His grin widened when Bickslow went flying as Gajeel's fist connected with the side of his head. "Well, that was fun."

"You're a fuckin' asshole, man," Gajeel spat while he stood and got ready to walk away. He was stopped in his tracks by the sight of the smaller Dragon Slayer standing directly in front of him. Just how the fuck the guy had managed to do it was beyond him, but he really didn't care. There hadn't been a brawl for at least twenty minutes, so he was more than willing to start one right then.

"You can try to hit me," Cobra said slowly, his low voice barely carrying over the loud music that bounced off the walls, "But I've got something to say."

"What."

Cobra decided to err on the side of caution, and took a step closer to Gajeel - just to make sure no one else heard him. "Just because I can hear the shit you're trying to hide from everyone else," he whispered, "Doesn't mean I'm gonna go spilling that shit at random. You've got some juicy fucking secrets, and if I wasn't trying to keep my ass outta prison, I probably would've tried using that shit against you." He sighed when Gajeel tensed, rolling his eye when a low growl vibrated from the other Slayer into him from their proximity alone. "As it is, I'm not gonna do that."

"And why's that?"

"There's no benefit to me," Cobra said simply. "And that big one… The one you won't even fucking touch that's locked way the hell down… I probably wouldn't have heard it otherwise, but… I'm keeping it to myself. Like I never fucking heard it."

Gajeel's fists clenched at his sides while he looked down at the Poison Slayer. He had a general idea of how the Seis worked, of how Cobra worked. Nothing too specific, but he knew the maroon-haired mage before him wasn't really a man of his word. He couldn't trust the fucker. Still, that honor-code all the Slayers held, because of their enhanced senses being able to pick up so much more than others, was one he had to hope Cobra would take to heart.

"I will," Cobra whispered, locking eyes with the Iron Slayer. "Not because of some honor bullshit, but because that big one…" He shook his head and sighed. "I get it. Not entirely, but it's not something I'll fuck with you over."

"I don't know what yer talkin' about, asshole."

'Don't think about it. Don't think about it… Lock it up, dumbass. Don't let him hear it. Never again…'"

"I'm serious, rust bucket," Cobra said as he turned to walk away. "Don't worry about it." He paused in his step, and smirked over his shoulder. "We've all got skeletons, right?" Without another word, he started weaving his way through the crowd and toward a dark, partially quiet corner of the guild, leaving Gajeel standing there slack-jawed. I'm an asshole, but there's some shit even I won't do. That secret's safe with me… As long as he doesn't piss me off too much.'

Lucy was feeling good. Honestly, more than good. The sheer amount of alcohol in her system should have downed her right away, but she'd been spending enough time with Cana, and in Fairy Tail in general, to have built up quite the tolerance. Well, enough so she was still functioning after it was all said and done. The room was spinning and her body was on fire, but she couldn't remember
ever having this much fun at one of the guild's parties. Maybe it was because it was her second
Halloween there, so she knew what to expect - well, the basics, really because there was only so
much you could predict in Fairy Tail.

Whatever the reason, the blonde Celestial mage was ready to keep the party going. When she saw
that Levy was in the process of lifting a barrel to her lips, Lucy laughed and decided that was where
she needed to be. She started moving through the crowd, ignoring the way the room started to
wobble slightly, and gasped when she lost her footing.

What she landed on, however, was much softer than the floor. But just as familiar. A low chuckle
and a pair of strong hands with long fingers wrapping around her ass to pull her closer had Lucy's
eyes slowly opening. A yellow vest and a bow tie, a white painted face with a wide smile and
painted red lips. Sunglasses covering his eyes. "Bickslow…"

"If you wanted to be on me, all you had to do was say so, Cheerleader," he chuckled. It was all in
good fun, but he was probably just as drunk as she was by that point. Laxus wasn't one for
celebrating as hard as the rest of the guild, so he was calmly drinking with Freed up on the second
floor. Which mean that - since the leader of the Raijinshuu wasn't going to pull any crazy drunken
shit - Bickslow was free to do whatever the hell he wanted. Feeling her against him though, for the
first time in months, had him pulling the blonde just a little closer. She always felt way too damn
good. Her skin was so damn soft, and her hair was always shining like the damn sun. "I'm not
opposed to it."

Lucy giggled and let her hands slide up his chest, lightly gripping the lapels of his jacket. "You're
not, huh?" She vaguely recalled some mission she'd given herself at some point in the last
week. 'Operation Dildo Replacement… That's right…' Well, Bickslow knew the score. That it would
only be for the night. Wherever they ended up, they wouldn't wake up together. He wasn't interested
in long-term relationships anyway, and she definitely trusted him.

Bickslow's grip on her ass tightened marginally, and he grinned again when the barest of moans
spilled past her plump lips. "Hell no. I've been watching you…" Slowly, he started to sway from one
side to the other in time with the music, licking his lips when her body willingly moved with him.
Damn, could the little blonde move. He remembered all too well just how well, too. "You've been
sucking on lollipops all night… Reminded me of what else you can do."

Lucy giggled again, then spun so her back was pressed against him, and the hardening length
beneath his purple trousers. Her hips rolled and all she could do was close her eyes and let the music
take over. The low bass beat that kept thumping away, the distorted vocals because the artist used
autotune. She was swept away, not having a care in the world, and her back arched erotically when
Bickslow's warm breath feathered over her ear.

His hands slid over her sweaty, glistening skin, one across her bare, toned stomach and the other
down her thigh. "Come with me, Cheerleader," he rasped sensually. "I'm gonna lose my mind if you
keep this up."

A sultry grin pulled at her lips, and Lucy threaded her fingers through his before pulling away. When
their eyes met, even though she was looking at the sunglasses that were pitch black and reflecting the
flashing multicolored lights in the guild, she was a goner. She didn't care where they were anymore.
Not in the slightest. All she care about was making sure she was able to control her libido long
enough to get what she wanted.

Bickslow cackled when Lucy lunged at him, and lifted the blonde so her deliciously long legs were
wrapped around his hips. Between one second and the next, his lips were on hers, and their tongues
were battling wildly. He never really cared what others thought about him doing anything with the
blonde, but they had never been openly affectionate in public. It was just sex, just a casual fuck here and there. Still, he needed to be in the Celestial mage like never before. Call it the alcohol in his system, or the fact that he hadn't hooked up with anyone since he'd been with her just after the Games. Whatever the reason, he wasn't going to waste any time.

Lucy pulled back for air when she felt them being flown off of the ground and zooming through the guild over the heads of their guild mates. "Just tonight."

Bickslow nodded and dove back in to dominate her kiss-swollen lips that were smeared with the lipstick he'd put on for his costume. That was all he needed to know. This wasn't happening again, and they weren't going back to the arrangement they'd had before. Just a random fuck, and that was fine by him.

Once the cool night air of the outside world hit her skin, Lucy let out a long moan and ground herself against the Seith mage. They flew higher and higher, and her hands dove down between them to start pulling at the fastenings on his pants.

"Damn," Bickslow groaned. "Babies, take us higher." The hum that echoed in his head from the little souls sounded just before they shot up higher into the sky. One hand held her up while the other wrapped around and pushed her barely there panties to the side to tease her sex. "You wanna join the mile high club?"

"God yes," Lucy moaned as her hand closed around him. "Make me fly, Bix."

Never in a million years was the Seith mage as happy that he always carried a condom than right then. The package was pulled from his pocket and ripped open, then quickly pushed down over his rigid cock as Lucy pulled it free from the confines of his pants. Thankfully, his babies had gotten the picture, and were just using his power to keep them flying, because as soon as her tight sheath was gripping him, and her long moan barreled out, he was lost to everything around them. "Fuck… Cosplayer…"

Lucy shivered and gripped his hips tighter with her legs, her fingers sifting through his hair as he moved her over him. 'God, this is what I needed…'

Cobra was officially done. After talking to Gajeel, he'd spent the rest of his required time at the guild away from everyone else. He didn't mind that the only people to come anywhere near him were Mira Jane or Kinana when they were giving him another drink. And he definitely didn't mind that no one trusted him. In fact, he preferred it. All he did was listen to the thoughts that descended into incoherent mumbles that ran rampant in the guild. If anything, if he decided to one day turn against the Fairies, he had more than enough information to bring each and every one of them down. With the exception of Makarov. Still, Laxus could be used as a bargaining chip of some sort, he was sure.

It had been more than interesting to see Bickslow and Lucy go from bumping into each other to sucking face and nearly fucking right there in the guild. Mira's reaction alone was more than enough to make up for the headache he had from Natsu's belligerent ass constantly goading Gray. 'Really, when are those two gonna just cut the bullshit and fuck?' He'd never seen anyone drop to the ground with hearts in their eyes - and way too many fucking genetic combinations of offspring for a pair in their heads - than what the demon barmaid had pulled off.

Regardless of all that, he was done for the night. He was fucking leaving and going back to his apartment to get some much needed sleep. Anyone that had an issue with him leaving on his own, considering Lucy had made a habit of walking with him until they reached her apartment, could just suck it. Then again, as the Poison Slayer made his way to the doors, he didn't hear anyone taking
The cool night air had Cobra pushing his hands into the pockets of his jacket and pulling it just a little more tightly around himself. It was late enough that the little kids who had been dressed up and getting candy from strangers - a rather shady tradition, if you asked him - were already at home, stuffing their fat little faces with more sugar than necessary, then passing out from the insane sugar rush suddenly disappearing. Which mean none of them were privy to the erotic shrieks and groans that he was. Coming from somewhere above him. As in, directly above him.

‘Well, that explains where Lucy went.’ There, dashing across the sky on the little souls that were bound to the Seith mage, were Bickslow and Lucy. Fucking like their drunk ass lives depended on it. Cobra’s eye rolled when he heard, a little too clearly, how the blonde was moaning the blue-haired mage’s name. Damn his enhanced senses for that shit. They were high enough that no normal person would have been able to hear a damn thing, but no. He just had to. He could just barely hear the two mages’ souls, but it was muffled. Just muffled enough that he couldn't make out what either of them were thinking, thank fucking god. That was something he really didn't need.

With a shake of his head, Cobra looked at the path ahead of him and continued on his way. It was way too fucking cold out to be standing around and gawking at the pair, and he really didn't feel like it to begin with.

The blonde had been plaguing him as of late. In more than just her physical presence in his life. He chalked it up to the fact that he hadn't been with a woman in a long damn time, since well before they were arrested for the whole Infinity Clock shit, if he was being honest. He hadn't really cared, but now… Now, he was a free man, in a sense. He could find some random woman, get his rocks off, and be done with it. Just a release of tension, with the woman bent over in front of him so he didn't need to see her face, and so she couldn't try to kiss him. The last thing he needed was some chick getting the bright idea that he wanted more than a place to shove his dick.

No, he'd made that mistake once before, and the result hadn't been pretty. Angel turned into a raging fucking cunt when he told her that he wasn't trying to settle down, and she needed to get those batshit crazy thoughts of doing just that right the hell out of her head before she started spouting that shit to him. Or to anyone else. Yes, she had been in tears, but she knew the fucking score when they had started banging. Just a release of tension. That was it. She might have known about the scars he had, but she didn't ask to see them, or for him to take his shirt off. They had kissed, yeah, but there hadn't been romance.

Still, as he locked the door behind him and walked through the silent and pitch black apartment, Cobra couldn't help but think of the blonde Celestial mage. He didn't want to. Not at all. She was intelligent, sure, but he didn't need the drama of wanting her.

"I really fucking don't." He rolled his eye. "Great, now you're talking to yourself." As if that was anything new...

A heavy sigh passed his lips while he made his way to the bed and threw himself face down on it. At least, when he was with the Seis, there were only six of them. He never had to deal with huge crowds of people piled into a guild hall for hours on end. They moved around when they needed to, making sure the Council never found them. He didn't think anyone realized just what controlling his Soul Listening magic was like, but why would they? They wouldn't know that it took tons of concentration just to make sure he didn’t get a nosebleed from the sheer amount of information trying to cram itself into his skull at once. Bringing everything down to a dull buzz - which sounded like he'd taken a hive of bees and crammed it into his cerebellum - was more taxing than it should have been, and he could only hope that it would get better with time.
Even with how exhausted he was, and maybe because he was so goddamn tired at that point, Cobra couldn’t help but think about just how often he’d been rifling through Lucy’s soul to get away from everything else. Every time he’d get out of Logos, he would duck right back in to avoid something. Okay, so maybe he had jumped over to Pathos, just to see what it was like in that candy cane scented, unicorns and cupcakes and bubblegum, twinkling star bullshit that was the center of her goddamned feelings. But, it was just fucking weird in there. Way too fucking weird for him, and that was saying something.

The one place he stayed away from was Eros, though. Because Cobra already knew that he would be sitting there with a hard-on, trying to forget just what kinds of delicious perversion sat nestled deep within the blonde's psyche. "Fuck, what I wouldn't give to hear that shit now," he groaned softly.

There was one point, just a single moment, where he'd caught a glimpse of it that night. And goddamnit, had that been way too fucking much for him to handle in public. The image of Lucy wearing a red corset with little devil horns and only a pitchfork covering her sex had planted itself in the forefront of his mind, and the Poison Slayer had nearly doubled over right there at the bar.

Now, though, he was all alone. He could do whatever the hell he wanted about that way too alluring image that was slowly morphing the longer he thought about it. Her blood red lips curved up so sinfully, his breath stalled for a moment. His jacket, the two shirts he always wore, everything down to his fucking shoes was still on. Just the friction when he shifted so his dick wasn’t being crushed beneath him was enough to pull a soft hiss from his thinned lips.

He shouldn't be thinking about it, not at all, but there was something about the blonde that called to him. Angel had never done shit like this to him. Her soul was off-limits to him, and he didn't have a problem with ignoring the shit that happened to them in the past. But Lucy… Fuck, just thinking about her soul was getting him hard as a rock.

Without another thought, he pulled himself up onto his knees on the bed, letting out a slow breath as his jacket slipped down the length of his arms. 'Good thing I think drapes are a good idea.' He didn't need anyone seeing just what he was about to do.

Now that he thought about it, the Poison Slayer hadn't even gotten himself off once since getting out of prison. He was free to do it without keeping his senses honed for the slightest noise that was out of the ordinary. There were no guards coming to check on him, bring him food, or anything else. There were no cameras in his apartment, either.

"I'm totally free," he whispered to the empty room. "Free to…" Cobra's eye closed while he unbuttoned his top shirt and tossed it behind him. "Do what I want."

Once his chest was bare, and his pants were sitting open, Cobra's head tipped back as he let his hands thread through his hair and run down his chest. He could see the blonde so clearly in his mind. How the single image continued changing until it was what he wanted her to do. How he wanted to be touched, and the path his own calloused hands took, became her slender fingers and the spiked tips on her pitchfork.

*Her hips swayed sensuously, each shallow dip pushing her chest forward. Closer and closer to him. Flashes of red light, black fog, and a steady beat pounded in his ears - one he knew was his own heart, but refused to acknowledge - and surrounded the fiery vixen as she closed in on him.*

A nail scraped roughly over one nipple, and Cobra let out a breathless whimper while he imagined that it was her. No one would ever know that he'd let himself indulge just this once. Besides, the blonde was sexy as hell.
"Cobra," Lucy mouthed silently, her hands gliding down the scars littering his chest as her pitchfork clanged loudly on the floor beneath them. Her covered breasts brushed ever so lightly over his chest as he was pushed back onto a soft bed. "Cobra..." She crawled up the length of his body, her ruby lips parting to let her tongue slither out and glide from the base of his cock up to his throat. "Fuck," he growled. "Touch me..." His fingers dipped beneath his boxers, and he kicked off his shoes, belatedly realizing that he was already lying on his back on the bed. He wanted to hear her so fucking badly, to know exactly how his name would sound falling from those blood red lips. He hated how it felt when people touched him, and he really wasn't accustomed to it in the slightest by that point, but there... In his mind... He could control Lucy. She could touch him only where he wanted her to, and there would be no issue with it whatsoever. The blonde devil could run her tongue over his scars, and he just wouldn't fucking care. "Touch me, Lucy..."

She smiled down at him with half-lidded eyes, the red flashes of light shining in their lusty mocha depths. Her tongue glided over him, circling each nipple and his navel on her descent to his arousal. She knew just what he wanted. The sudden excitement that flared in her eyes, and the way her tongue darted across her lips upon coming to his arousal, had a shiver wracking his frame. Her mouth wrapped around him slowly, so fucking slowly that he was ready to whimper with need. A moistened finger brushed in careful circles over the tip of his cock, slowly pushing back his foreskin the way Cobra imagined Lucy doing with her lips and tongue. His other hand hastily pushed the last of his clothes off, and he kicked them from the bed just before spitting into his hand and closing it around himself. "Fuck... Just like that..."

Her head bobbed languidly, her tongue dragging up the underside of his shaft. Her lipstick smeared as she met with his pelvis, but it only drove his desire for the blonde higher. She spread his legs to properly kneel between them, with the nails on one hand dragging up his thigh just hard enough to make the Poison Slayer shudder and gasp. He dropped a hand to her head and pushed her faster. Deeper.

"Shit, yes," Cobra growled. He could picture it all so damn clearly. Everything he wanted right then. All that was missing was her soul. How she would sound while she took his length as deeply as she could manage. He wanted all of it. Her moans echoing in the room, the raspy quality he just knew her voice would descend into as she cried out in ecstasy. The sound of Lucy gagging as he slammed into the back of her throat, how she would whimper and scream in pleasure. Everything.

Her lips pulled back and her teeth scraped over him once as she sat up, causing a low growl to fill the air when she dove forward. Wild, uninhibited, and sexy as hell. Her legs spread and the blonde lowered her sex, drenching him with her essence as she teased him. Her lips closed over his, roughly claiming him as her tongue pushed into his mouth. He reached up and ripped the corset from her body, then pulled her decadently soft skin flush against him.

Cobra's eye rolled back when a new sound filled his head. Low growling that wasn't his own, feminine in a way he'd never heard before. Wild thumping bass and warbled tones bounded from one end of his consciousness to the other. The red flashes in his mind quickened until they were nothing more than a steady glow surrounding the blonde. "Wh-What..." he panted, his pace never faltering, and his hips twitching slightly as he continued picturing the blonde. "Fuck..."

'More... More... Fuck me... Fuck me hard... Harder, you bastard! God, just fuck me as hard as you can! Make me sore tomorrow.'

His lip pulled back in a snarl while he listened in on the blonde that was flying overhead. He'd know that inner monologue anywhere. It didn't matter to him if Lucy was with another man right then. The sounds of her soul, what she really wanted deep down, were all his. *Eros* was running wild, filling...
every bit of the blonde in the air with nothing but carnality.

He’d been trying to avoid it earlier, unwilling to get sucked into her deepest desires, but now? That was the only thing he wanted. What he ached for more than his release. A shiver wracked his whole body when he could quite literally feel her moving closer. His ears picked up the heightened pitch of her moans, the pounding of her heart, and he could practically feel her fingers threading through his own hair instead of Bickslow’s while she moved faster over the Seith mage's cock.

Lucy's lips were parted around a black rubber ball, her face wrenched in ecstasy. Her hands were bound by thick ropes, pulled above her head and fixed to a pole. Her legs were spread wide, her ankles tied with the same rope and exposing her hairless sex to him.

"Oh god, yes!" Cobra moaned loudly as Eros filled his head with just what the blonde wanted. His hand tightened around his shaft while the other grasped at the sheet just above his head. If he tore through the material, it went completely unnoticed as he bounded toward his end. He quickly spit into his hand again, crying out as it closed over him tighter than he'd planned. "Y-Yes… D-Don't stop!"

Lucy's body was bare, her large breasts bouncing and her chest heaving while she panted around her gag. Her curves took his breath away, more than he’d imagined possible considering what she wore on a daily basis. The sight of her sex so willingly accepting the thick length that plunged into her had a low growl filling the air. He could hear and feel her soul wrapping around him, blanketing the air in musk and the scent of roses.

Cobra ground his teeth together, planting his feet on the bed and arching his back. "More," he panted. He needed to see the deepest part of her. To know what she ached for more than anything. Just this once, he needed to know what she kept hidden in the most depraved part of her soul. More than just a little bit of kink.

Cobra watched as he was pulled away from the scene, finally able to see just who was wracking the blonde's body with so much pleasure. With everything she wanted, but refused to admit to herself. What he found was himself, with sweat-matted hair sticking to his forehead and a wild fire blazing in his single indigo eye as he plunged recklessly into her quivering core. His tanned skin wasn't marred with scars, and sweat trickled down his chest as he flipped Lucy over and smacked her ass while spearing into her sex wildly. Her muffled screams, his low growls, and the violent slapping of skin echoed and reached into his own soul to start teasing him more insistently.

Cobra's eye opened wide, but it did nothing to stop the images that assaulted him from her soul. It was him she was thinking of. Him. Even while she was with another man, he had taken up the forefront of her mind. His own pace quickened as he stared at the ceiling, his pointed canines piercing his lip where he was biting it. Breathless, ready to spill over any second, he did everything he could to hold off, and to make sure he was ready when she was. He needed to finish with her. He had to know what it would be like, diving into the carnal desire that dwelled within her, and feeling as though he was filling her in more than just his mind and hers.

It seemed luck was on his side as the blonde in the air - flying a couple hundred feet above his apartment - cried out her release. Her scream tore through the night air, but it was one single word that was screeched from her soul as the imagined ball gag dissipated that brought him to his own end.

'Cobra!'

"F-Fuck… Lucy!" Cobra roared as his climax raced up the length of his shaft. Loud moans spilled from him unbidden with each thick stream that shot out of him. "Yes," he panted heavily. "Shit, yes…” His hips twitched and his hand slowed, and the Poison Slayer stared at the ceiling in a daze
while the blonde's soul started to fade away.

"You're welcome!" came the unified voices of the five souls Bickslow and Lucy had been flying on. Followed by a devious round of giggling.

Cobra couldn't even begin to figure out why the fuck those five little perverts would want him to hear that shit. Or how the hell they knew he was listening in the first place. Regardless of that, he continued panting and staring absently at the air long after the sounds of their souls faded into the night. "Well, shit," he whispered to himself, licking his dry lips. Suddenly he grimaced when he tasted a thick droplet of salty fluid on his lower lip. "Ugh… There's cum in my mouth? God that's fucking gross…"

He looked down at himself, at the utterly disheveled mess that was his body and bed. His other hand slowly lowered from its position above his head, and he shakily brushed his sweaty hair from his forehead. No matter how much cum was on his stomach, chest, and hand - with a few droplets having reached as high as his cheeks and down his throat - Cobra couldn't get the image of just what Lucy was picturing out of his head.

'So she wants me to tie her up and fuck her brains out, huh?' A wicked grin pulled at his lips while his single eye slid closed. If that was what the blonde had really been hiding in the one part of her soul that he never delved into, then Cobra was glad he'd had the chance to hear it. Sure, he'd finally found out just what his cum tasted like, and it really wasn't something he'd wanted to know in the first place, but hearing that twisted little knot of pure sex inside of the blonde? "Totally worth it…"

Chapter End Notes

If you're interested in the two songs that make an appearance in this chapter, here are the links on YouTube:
- The Twerk Off:
  B Double OTY by Tone The Chiefrocca & Coly Cole (watch?v=Mm-Zsc3Zm9s)
- Bickslow and Lucy dancing before they leave:
  Love Lockdown by Kanye West (watch?v=kni0tqBTph4)

I'd like everyone to give tons of thanks to LittlePrincessNana for helping me get through the final scene in this chapter. I was utterly stuck on how to get him from kneeling on the bed to everything else that happened. I knew that, with how perfectly she did his little jerk-session in Soulful Fugue, she was the right woman to ask.
Get Over Yourself

Cobra grinned darkly when an unholy shriek echoed far in the distance only a few minutes after eight in the morning. It was nearing a week after Halloween, and he'd been getting more and more amusement out of the insanity that was Fairy Tail just by how much shit Lucy and Bickslow got from Mira for their tonsil hockey display. That Demon was seriously far too obsessed with people's relationships. Even Natsu was fully aware of the fact that nothing serious was going on between Lucy and the Seith mage, and that was saying something.

Still, he'd learned one very valuable lesson in all of it. Well, two lessons. One, never give Mira any indication of an interest in someone, of any sort. And two, if he was ever going to try and take Fairy Tail down, it would be the day after a huge party when they were all more than hungover. It seemed the guild as a whole mustered just enough energy to drag their asses in by noon, and then promptly collapsed until some utterly disgusting concoction was presented to them under the guise of being a remedy for their ailment.

He drank fucking poison, ate nightshade and poison ivy, and green potatoes. As the Poison Dragon Slayer, that was his thing - and also why he was mostly a vegetarian, because pretty much every plant was toxic to ingest - but that 'hangover remedy' was a goddamn abomination. The smell alone had made his fucking toes curl in disgust. The sight of that thick, viscous, hunter green bubbling liquid - that was somehow chilled - had his stomach crawling under a rock and committing suicide. No one seemed to enjoy drinking it, but the fact that it diminished the effects of their hangovers in a matter of an hour? That was just horrifying.

But, regardless of all of that, Cobra was still grinning as he stood up from his couch and went to grab another cup of coffee. Because, the shrill scream that had pierced the morning air in a barely roused Magnolia was none other than the blonde Celestial mage, who had just found Natsu sleeping in her bed again. He knew it wouldn't be long before she was stopping by his apartment to collect him for their first mission as a team, so Cobra really only needed to wait for her morning ritual to be done before he had to really be ready to go.

It hadn't occurred to him before, but Lucy quite literally lived a whole two blocks away. It meant he was able to hone in on her soul even from where he was sitting on his damn couch. He could sneak into Logos, or even Eros when he was so inclined - if she was working on her novel, that is, when it was working overtime to inspire her - just because he could.

A whole ten nights of being out of prison, sleeping in a real bed with fucking sheets and a blanket. He could shower when he wanted. He could sleep in - assuming he didn't hear Lucy coming - and he had the option of staying cooped up in his apartment if he wanted. Which he'd actually done the day before. He'd spent so much time by himself in prison, unable to hear much in the way of souls, but he still loved his privacy. His time alone.

Once he was seated on the couch again, sipping at his bleached coffee and eating a third piece of buttered toast with nutmeg, Cobra closed his eye and honed in on the blonde again. If he focused enough, he'd be able to tell just what was being said in her apartment. They were close enough, physically, that he could easily hear her soul and pick apart what she was thinking about, but getting what she was currently experiencing in real time took just a little more effort from two blocks away.

Still, it gave him something to do. And working on his magic was something he was perfectly fine with doing while he ate a fourth piece of toast and sipped at his poisoned coffee.
"You're fucking kidding me, right?" Cobra groaned as he took a seat next to the blonde on the train with the rest of Team Natsu. Gray and Erza were taking up the opposite bench, and Natsu promptly collapsed as soon as he made it to the compartment. "It's not even fucking moving, you dumbass."

"Do you get motion sickness, too?" Happy asked curiously while settling himself in Lucy's lap, a small purr rumbling in his chest when she instantly started scratching his head.

"No."

"Liar," Lucy snickered, turning a deep scowl to the maroon-haired Slayer when she was elbowed in the side. "Don't be a dick."


Gray scowled and narrowed his eyes. "No way," he muttered.

"You're literally brooding right now," Cobra sighed.

"I'm not the bait," Lucy hissed.

"Name one instance where you weren't used as bait, and maybe I'll change my mind." Cobra found himself smirking as the compartment went silent, with the exception of Natsu's gurgling stomach and attempts at not puking on everyone. "Don't all chime in at once," he chuckled while looking out the window.

Lucy's eyes lowered to the top of Happy's head, and she reached down into her bag for her pack of gum. After she'd popped a piece into her mouth, she naturally held it to the Slayer at her side, even though what he'd said had really fucking stung.

His fingers barely brushed over hers as he pulled a piece from the pack, but she didn't dwell on the calluses she felt - the same ones that she'd found herself fantasizing about trailing over her skin on several occasions. She hated that he could hear what she was thinking, what they all were. He could hear just what would hurt her, what her insecurities were, and how he could upset her - or anyone else, for that matter - with only a few choice words.

"Thanks for the sugar," Cobra whispered while balling up the wrapper and flicking it right between Natsu's eyes. "I needed that."

Lucy's eyes narrowed as she looked at his profile, watching his good eye slide closed while he leaned his head back to rest against the seat. 'Why would he need it? I watched him down a whole bottle of cinnamon and nutmeg before we left his apartment.' Seriously, she needed to bet money on Cobra winning the damn Cinnamon Challenge next time the guild had a party. It was wholly unnatural, but more than intriguing to watch him easily swallow the powder with no reaction whatsoever.

Cobra let out a slow breath, forcing himself to steadily chew the overly sugary strawberry gum. "He's about to puke. Might wanna handle that."

While Gray frowned at the Poison Slayer, Erza's eyes widened and she quickly dropped her book to bring a gauntlet-covered fist to Natsu's head when he belched, knocking him unconscious just in time. "Thank you, Cobra. The last thing we need is-"

"Yep. I don't feel like smelling his sriracha bile for the next two hours. It wasn't for your benefit."
"You're such an asshole," Gray muttered under his breath, his scowl deepening when he saw the Slayer smirk. Instead of playing into his shitty little games, the Ice Make mage turned to Erza, then blanched when he caught Juvia peeking into the compartment across from them through the window. Without any hesitation, he scrambled over the redhead by his side and pulled the little privacy blinds shut.

Needless to say, Erza was already involved in her book again, so the sudden presence of a mostly naked male leaning across her person startled her.

Lucy blinked slowly when Gray dropped to the ground on top of Natsu, completely unconscious with a bump already forming on his head from where Erza had hit him. She looked down to find Happy curled up in her lap, sleeping the morning and train ride away, then over to the Slayer at her side. His eye was still closed, but she knew he was listening in on their surroundings. He was tense, on guard, and much more shut down than how she'd seen him that morning when she'd stopped at his apartment on her way to the train station.

His bag had been packed and by the door, and he'd been sitting on the couch drinking coffee with his eye closed. In total silence. Well, the apartment had been silent, but she knew that it wasn't quiet in the slightest for Cobra. Even though he was a snarky little shit, he'd still been nice enough to tell her good morning, and then promptly teased the hell out of Lucy for how she woke up - with Natsu in her bed and drooling on her hair. It was obvious that Cobra was most comfortable in his apartment, because that was his space, but he really did shut down completely once they were around other people.

"There's Logos again," Cobra chuckled.

"What do you mean?" When he stayed silent, she frowned. And then Lucy watched as a small pinch appeared between his brows when the train lurched to a halt at the first stop on their way to Oshibana. Erza was unaffected by it, and Lucy was used to the way the train stopped and started. Their other companions were sleeping - in one way or another - so she was the only one that saw the same look flash across his features a few minutes later when they started moving again. His jaw clenched, pausing in chewing his gum, and he let out a slow breath. As quickly as Lucy saw it, it was gone. 'He does have motion sickness…'

"Nope."

The way his tongue darted out over his lower lip had Lucy thinking otherwise. "I don't know," she sighed.

"Shut it."

"So… Yes, then?"

"Hell…" The train shook for a moment, and Cobra swallowed his gum on accident when he tried to get rid of the sharp tang of bile rising in his throat. "… Hell no."

Lucy frowned and looked down at Happy where he was asleep in her lap. Normally, she would let Natsu lay down when he was feeling out of it on the train. It freaked her out at first, but she'd grown used to it. Besides, it meant she could play with his hair. Oddly enough, the salmon-haired Slayer's hair - even though he didn't bathe as often as he really should - was always soft. It killed her inside, and she didn't understand just how he could manage it, but that's just the way it was.

But, Lucy couldn't do that for Cobra. One, she wasn't sure it was a good idea to have his head in her
lap. Especially not when she was wearing a mini-skirt. That would only have her mind conjuring up all kinds of horribly delicious things. Things that he would hear, that really needed to stay hidden. Aside from that, he didn't like people touching him. She tried to stay out of his bubble as much as possible, so it wasn't like she could just reach up and pull him closer so he could lay down.

"Pretty much."

"More gum?" Lucy offered, smiling when his eye cracked open so he could look at her out of the corner of it. His eye closed again, and her smile widened when his hand opened with his palm facing up. After placing the pack in his hand, Lucy gently grabbed his fingers and closed them over it. "Keep it."

Cobra let out another slow breath as he popped another piece of gum into his mouth. The quiet laugh from the blonde, and the fact that she was trying to figure out just how bad his motion sickness really was had him wishing he could throw her scrawny ass out the damn window. He couldn't do that though. Hell, the thought of actually caving and lying down with his head in her lap was more than tempting. Mainly because he'd get a noseful of her roses and dew scent. That, and he was sure that if it gave Natsu the ability to fall asleep without upchucking - seriously, he was very glad his motion sickness wasn't that bad - then Cobra himself would feel even better.

Still, he wasn't going to do that. The last thing he needed was for any of the members of Team Natsu to see him in that state. Or that he was willing to even let Lucy touch him. 'Fucking Eros...' Really, it was all her soul's fault. If he hadn't heard it on Halloween night, and that she was thinking about him, that Eros was screaming his name while she came, then he wouldn't be so willing to do it. In his head that night, she'd touched him in all the right ways. Exactly how he'd wanted her to. It made him more relaxed around her in reality, and he needed more than anything to lock that shit up.

"I hope you feel better, Cobra," Lucy silently told him. Her eyes closed and she leaned against the wall, putting a little more distance between them so she could pull her feet up onto the bench.

She missed the way he smirked, and how his leg shifted only an inch so he could feel her boot pressing against his thigh. Just that small bit of contact, that was all he'd allow. Still, it was more than he usually did, and he just wasn't going to question what the hell had possessed him to do it. 'Such a fucking psycho,' he thought, stifling a laugh when he dipped into her soul and listened to her falling asleep.

The mission really wasn't supposed to be all that hard. Lucy knew it, Cobra knew it. Hell, even Happy knew it should have been a damn breeze. And really, things would have gone a whole lot easier if the dynamic of the group wasn't so fucked up. He'd sat through their little planning phase, one that consisted of Erza talking and glaring at Gray and Natsu - who cowered in an instant and pretended they weren't just poking each other in the side harder and harder to assert their 'superiority' - Happy making jokes, and Lucy putting in her two cents only to get shut down or ignored. Cobra had stayed silent. No one asked for his opinion, save for the very end when Erza made sure everyone understood the plan.

And really, it was an alright plan. Come at the wannabe dark guild from different angles, surrounding the building, to make sure none of them got away. It was really one of the basics in situations like this, when you were outnumbered by the enemy and needed an element of surprise. The Seis had done it countless times. The guilds that they controlled did it, too - because they were forced to learn how with the threat of being poisoned or maimed in some way, should they fail.

The issue was their placement. While it made sense to surround the guild, it was fucking pointless to have Gray and Natsu together on the east side, Cobra in the back, and Lucy taking up the west while
Erza broke down the door. No, Lucy's plan - her Plan A, not Plans B through M - was to have Cobra take the front as a distraction, because of his reputation. Gray on one side and Natsu on the other. Erza coming in through the back. And Lucy herself sneaking in through an open window they could see on the second floor with Happy help to get up there, so she could summon her spirits in hiding and surprise their enemies. It made sense, it was sneaky and conniving, and Cobra fucking loved that. Still, the blonde hadn't gotten a word in edgewise when it came down to it, and that was some serious bullshit in Cobra's opinion.

Brain was a goddamn lunatic, and a sick bastard to boot, but even he understood playing into the strengths of the other members of the guild. He listened when there were suggestions, and listened to the requests of the others - which were always on the twisted side. Most importantly, he listened when Cobra said there was something more to it, because he could hear souls. They'd gotten too big for their britches, and got their asses handed to them before, but it wasn't because they just followed Brain blindly. They'd planned, and it hadn't worked.

This shit though - while Cobra rolled his eye and ducked under a knife that was flying toward the back of his head, then watched as it embedded itself in some guy's head - was fucking stupid. They were a damn mess, and he was sure it had something to do with Natsu deciding to get 'all fired up' and punch Gray into the side of the building. Mayhem ensued. The plan was shot. Erza cut down people left and right - somehow just knocking them out instead of actually killing them - and went right for the guild master. Lucy summoned a couple spirits after a moment. The fact that she was able to read the situation so well and get two gold keys out so quickly was definitely a tick on their side of the fight.

Still, Cobra wasn't going to do a damned thing. Not unless he really had to. He'd told Lucy that no one on the team, save herself, believed he would really be all that helpful, so he was just going to observe. Check out how the team worked, and see how he'd fit. As it turned out, this shit was fucking anarchy. Charred bodies flew one way, frozen ones flew another. Arrows flew down from a rafter to expertly take enemies down, but the huge bull spirit Lucy had summoned was tossing people left and right. And Cobra… Well, he was just standing next to a pillar, watching it all unfold.

"Shit! They're getting away!" Gray shouted.

"I got 'em!" Natsu shot back with a grin.

"Hell no, Ash Breath! They're mine!"

Cobra rolled his eye when ten of the enemies made it out of the partially destroyed building. They shouldn't have gotten out to begin with, but even worse was that it really didn't take two people to subdue them. Still, Natsu and Gray both rushed out and left Lucy and himself inside. He could hear Erza dashing across the roof of the guild, fighting against the guild master whose Requip was as fast as her own - although, he didn't have nearly as many different sets to cycle through. Lucy was whipping at enemies wildly, jumping over tables, diving between piles of debris and scratching her shit up without a single care aside from not getting captured. Again.

"Sagittarius!" Lucy screeched when her spirit was taken out, another sharp gasp leaving her as Taurus bellowed in pain and disappeared only a moment later. "Shit…"

She was surrounded, with nearly thirty men slowly closing in on her. Cobra's brow lifted curiously when her whip started rippling with power, and he blinked in surprise as a fucking river full of glitter replaced the leather cord. It moved of its own accord, or so he thought until he heard Lucy directing it with her thoughts.

Lucy wrapped her whip around one of the men and knocked out another three while throwing him
into a wall, then gave another that rushed forward a solid Lucy Kick. Ducking under an attack, dodging to the side, she was breathless as they converged on her. There was no way she could summon another gold though. Taurus had gone overboard a little, so she was bordering on drained already. "Your guild is named after fucking Spongebob," she ground out. "This is just ridiculous!"

"The Bikini Bottom Guild is superior!" the men shouted as one.

Lucy screamed as she was knocked to the ground, her whip getting kicked from her hand. Cobra found himself rolling his eye again as they descended on her, listening to the blonde screech and cry out as she was kicked and clobbered. Really, he wanted to just let it happen, because she needed to learn a lesson, but this wasn't actually her fault. She'd tried to pick up the slack, and the blonde was just lacking. 'I'll be sure to remind her of that.'

With a heavy sigh, he pushed his way through the crowded men and made his way to the center. Only to find Lucy curled up in a ball with her arms around her head, dirty and bloody and bruised. Oddly enough, she wasn't crying. Really, he'd thought she would be in tears by that point.

"Who the hell are you, man?" one of the men asked.

"Cobra."

"Bullshit. That monster is locked up in prison."

"Good fuckin' riddance too," another mumbled.

Slowly, he lifted his head - after his eye locked onto Lucy's when one of hers peeked open - a dark grin spreading over his face. "Monster?" he chuckled. "Maybe I am…"

"Sh-Shit," came a trembling voice. "Th-That's him, Jaren…"

"One eye, red hair… Oh god. We're so dead."

"Hey man," the first man, Jaren, chuckled nervously. "Take whatever, alright? She's, uh… She's yours. Just some Fairy trash anyway."

"Blondie here?" he mused. "Nah. But you…" Cobra found himself chuckling when Jaren blanched, then snapped his fingers.

Between one moment and the next, everyone surrounding the Poison Dragon Slayer dropped to the ground, groaning and holding their heads to stop the roaring sound that suddenly bore down upon them. Lucy winced as she pulled herself up, then grunted when she was forcefully yanked to her feet.

"Deep breath," Cobra said.

"Don't kill them."

"Wasn't planning on it."

Lucy nodded and did as she was told, then her eyes widened when one of his hands clamped over her mouth and nose. She barely heard him taking a deep breath before she was pulled closer to his side, and Lucy looked up to see poison pouring from between his lips in thick, vile plumes of red-tinted vapor as he exhaled. It wasn't a roar attack, or anything else, and she could only assume this was essentially the same as when Natsu lit his body on fire and she was able to feel the heat from it. The room was covered in poison, and she watched as it crawled along the ground, pulling each mage
it came in contact with down into unconsciousness.

Erza came walking down the stairs just as Cobra was removing his hand from Lucy's face, and raised a single brow when she saw the state of the blonde. "Lucy, what happened?"

"Nothing, Erza," she sighed while going to pick up her whip and placing it on her belt. 'God, I feel useless... Someone had to save me again...' It was really starting to get old, and the fact that she had been telling herself that she could handle this, only to be proven wrong - very painfully - was worse than the several kicks to the gut she'd taken.

"Bullshit," Cobra scoffed. He turned and walked toward the door, sparing the blonde a single glance. "You wouldn't be so fuckin' useless if you'd open your goddamn mouth."

Lucy's jaw dropped as his words hit her full force, and she watched in total silence as the Poison Slayer walked out of the building as though nothing had happened. She hadn't seen anyone that she could ask for help, because she knew that Natsu and Gray had ditched her. Cobra had been somewhere else, she was sure. And honestly, she was just tired of being a burden to everyone. As tears scratched at her eyes, Lucy looked down at her tattered skirt and started making her way out of the guild.

"Don't listen to him, Lucy," Erza said. She dropped a heavy hand on the blonde's shoulder, and gently squeezed. "Cobra is:

Lucy forced a smile as she looked up at her redheaded friend. "No worries, Erza," she laughed. "Nothing he can say can upset me. He's just an asshole."

Cobra looked out over the horizon as the group gathered together. He barely listened to what they were saying, and instead found himself honing in on the blonde's soul. And everything she was fighting to lock down while she was around her friends. *Pathos* was going haywire, and he could hear just how hard *Logos* was fighting to wrap something around that part of her, to protect her. He couldn't understand it, and really... He didn't want to. Lucy had gotten too comfortable around him, and she needed to remember that they weren't friends. They were being forced to work with one another for the next five years. As soon as his parole was done, he was leaving it all behind, and going off to do his own thing. Hell, he might even put whatever plan he had by that point into action to get the Seis out - assuming he hadn't found an opportunity before then.

Still, Lucy needed to get put in her damn place. And she needed to learn a valuable lesson. Don't depend on anyone. She depended on Natsu to come rescue her when she needed it. She depended on Erza's plan, even when Lucy fucking knew her own made more sense. The blonde needed to grow a damn spine when it came to her own strengths, otherwise she'd just get walked all over for the rest of her life.

Also, he really didn't need to hear Lucy thanking him for his help. He did it to keep her alive, because the last thing he needed was for *Logos* to disappear. That shit was what kept him from slaughtering everyone when he was at the guild. It was for his own benefit, and she'd just happened to benefit from it, too. That was all.

Three days had gone by in a flash for Team Natsu once they returned from their mission, with the full reward that was being split five ways instead of four. Even though Natsu and Gray both said they didn't see Cobra doing a single thing to help, the fact that each of the men inside the building had been poisoned was enough proof that he had.

It was on the fourth day, just before dinner, that Cobra heard the other members of the team talking.
about Lucy. Again. She had gone home once they got back from the job, and hadn't made her way
to the guild once. It was always a different excuse, and it was obvious that she was really just making
shit up, but he didn't care. He had been ignoring her soul for the last few days, reminding himself that
he didn't need to hear it. He had self-control, so he could be at the guild without dipping into her soul
to get away from the anarchy in the outside world. He didn't have to depend on her or anyone else.

"Cobra said something to Lucy," Erza sighed.

"What did he say? I'll beat his ass..." Cobra rolled his eye at the scathing tone in Gray's voice.

"That's why she won't let anyone come over?" Natsu whispered. "Her window was locked last night
when I tried to go check on her..."

Cobra took another swig of his beer, then set the mug on the bar and slowly turned it in place.

'I always go in through her window. and Luce always leaves it unlocked for me... What did he say to
her?" Natsu wondered.

"He was insensitive. We will go and see her tomorrow. Maybe she would like to take a job with
Wendy though."

"Wendy? How come?"

"Apparently, Lucy feels useless. Something easy should show her that she has many strengths."

"Makes sense. She needs experience. But, I don't know if Lucy would go for that if we brought it up.
She might think we're calling her weak..."

"This is true. Let's think on how to broach the subject today, and we'll discuss it before going to see
her."

"So what did you say to Bunny?"

Cobra rolled his eye and looked over at the Iron Slayer. "Nothing she didn't need to hear."

"And what might that be?" Gajeel growled.

"That she wouldn't be useless if she'd actually open her goddamn mouth," Cobra said before
finishing his drink.

"What the fuck? You called her weak?" Gajeel's eyes narrowed and his muscles tensed. "She's far
from it. I tortured her myself, I know firsthand she's anything but."

"Never said that," Cobra replied. "She doesn't stick up for herself on the team. Fucking Flamebreath
and Frosty the Snowballs over there screwed the fucking pooch, twice, and left her with almost forty
guys to take on her own. She's still alive, so her being weak isn't really an issue."

"Then what is?"

"She's smart. But no one listens to her. That's the issue."

"So, maybe you should tell her that."

"Not my problem."

Gajeel growled low in his throat. "It is. And I'll make sure it becomes a physical fucking problem for
you if you don't make this shit right." When Cobra simply blinked, he let out a long sigh. "Bunny is gonna blame herself for what happened. And until someone gets her ass to see that she's not a total idiot, or useless, or whatever the fuck else goes on in her head, she's gonna keep doing it."

"And that falls to me… Because?"

Gajeel smirked then. "Because you won't sugar coat shit to spare her feelings. You'll say what she needs to hear, instead of fuckin' babying her."

"So would you."

"Right, but I'm not the one that upset her. And she doesn't listen to my ass. Stubborn little fuckin'…" Gajeel's words trailed off as he lifted his mug and took a large gulp.

Cobra found himself chuckling, then shook his head when Kinana asked if he wanted another round. "It's not my responsibility to hold her hand."

"I'm not sayin' it is," Gajeel sighed. "I'm sayin' yer a part of the team, and they're too close to see she ain't a fuckin' child. Bunny didn't grow up like anyone here. She was sheltered as fuck, and now she's out in the world, trying to be like everyone else."

"So, what?"

"So, act like a fuckin' man and talk to her."

"This, coming from quite literally the most anti-fucking-social prick in the place. Priceless."

"Aside from you."

"Yep."

"Well," Gajeel sighed while standing from his barstool, his plate of metal scraps in hand. "I might not get all buddy-buddy with everyone, but at least I give a shit. From what I can tell, you talk to me, Bunny, and Kinana. But you don't fucking care about anyone, but yourself. You wanna really be a free man, then stop actin' like yer still in prison and everybody is out to get you. Especially Bunny. She's a goddamn sweetheart, and if there's anyone you can trust, it's her."

Cobra scowled as Gajeel walked off, his head dropping to the bar when he heard Kinana walking up to him. "What, Cu?"

"You upset Lucy?"

"What. The fuck..." he grumbled. In a matter of minutes, everyone knew about this shit? It wasn't hard to figure out that he had been the reason for Lucy being cooped up in her apartment. He was aware of the fact that she was going to do it when they got on the train and started heading back to Magnolia. Apparently, Fairy Tail was really good at getting information around. He'd need to keep that in mind for the future.

"How come?"

"Don't worry about it."

"Erik," Kinana whispered with a frown, leaning on her elbows just next to him. "Are you going to apologize?"

"Nothing to apologize for, Cu. She needed to hear it, and that's that."
"Well..." Kinana sighed and carefully patted the top of his head, a small smile trying to pull at her lips when he turned to look up at her. Seeing him with one cheek smooshed against the was pretty adorable, and vaguely familiar.

"Familiar?" Cobra whispered with a small glimmer in his eye.

Kinana let out a tiny laugh. "I don't know. Maybe."

"You're gonna say I should talk to her, aren't you..."

She nodded. "I think the only person she really wants to talk to is you."

"Even though I'm the reason she's being a baby?"

Kinana rolled her eyes then. "She's upset, Erik. Lucy probably needs a friend right now..."

"We're not friends," he scowled.

"You're her friend, even if she isn't yours." After a moment, she sighed and patted his head again. "You know, I do remember a couple things from back then. Not much, but..." She paused when his head lifted and his gaze intensified. "One thing I remember is-"

"Don't say it," Cobra whispered.

"I remember you telling me, when you were a kid... You wished you had another friend like me. Someone that could talk back. Lucy could be that for you, Erik."

"But you talk now, so..."

Kinana shook her head at that and grabbed a glass to start polishing it, keeping her gaze on the bartop so no one would know she was talking to her dear friend. He liked his privacy, after all. "Sure, but it's possible to have more than one friend. You don't have to be friends with everyone, but I know Lucy is trying hard to make everyone else see that you're not a bad guy. So just swallow your pride and go talk to her. Listen, even."

Cobra smirked at the look she gave him.

"I hear you're pretty good at that," Kinana teased.

"Yep. I guess I am..." He glanced around for a moment out of the corners of his eye, then looked at his empty mug. "Gimme another beer. I'm gonna fucking need it..."

It was a few hours later, well after the sun had gone down and Team Dumbass had left the guild for the day, that Cobra finally made his way to Lucy's house. He stood beneath the open window to her bedroom, glaring up at the little sliver of light peeking from between her sheer pink drapes. After several more drinks at the bar, watching six and a quarter brawls - the quarter getting cut short when Gajeel and Natsu went sailing into Erza's cake, which had everyone involved turning tail and hiding beneath tables for cover - and then a few more drinks, he'd finally decided it was time to just get it over with. He couldn't even get drunk, but the drinks were just to waste time anyway.

Lucy was apparently waiting for his ass to show up, according to Kinana, and he could only assume that he might as well be done with it. He wasn't going to admit that he missed hearing the blonde's soul when she unlocked his door and walked into his apartment. Nope. Not at all.

It was while he was just glaring at the window that he realized he needed to have some fun.
Normally, he would have used the door. Knocked like a civilized human being, and waited for her to answer and invite him inside. Not this time. Natsu climbed through her fucking window, Level Five Creeper that he was, and oddly… It looked like it might be fun to do just that. It had been a long time since the Poison Slayer had gotten to climb a damn tree, but there wasn’t one here. Just bricks and mortar. Which meant he was going to have to be inventive. Inventive was good.

His lips curved into a wicked grin as he took a few steps back and prepared himself for a little exercise. How Natsu did this really didn’t matter to him. Then again, he also had that fucking Exceed that could easily just fly his ass up to her window. Nope, Cobra was going to enjoy himself while doing something legal for a change. Well, mostly legal. With that thought in mind, he ran forward and used his momentum to run himself up the white pillar right next to the apartment building’s entrance. His fingers clutched at the rounded overhang, and the Poison Slayer pulled himself up to crouch on top of it.

The next part would be a little on the tricky side, but he’d had to deal with worse. Slowly, he leaned out and grabbed onto the wood panel siding that ran along the front of the building, just under Lucy’s window. Shimmying across, moving one hand and then the other, Cobra sighed as he silently pulled himself up to sit on the blonde’s windowsill.

’It really shouldn’t bother me. I mean, that’s just who he is. How he is. I knew that when I went to talk to him in the Council.’

Cobra rolled his eye then peeked his head inside and looked around. The blonde was nowhere to be seen, but the smell of her soap and the quiet sounds of water sloshing in the tub clued him in. Perfect. Just what he needed. Lucy taking a fucking bath when he was trying to talk to her. Or listen to her bitch and whine and complain. Really, the Poison Slayer was tempted to just leave, and just when he was turning to do it, he nearly screamed like a little bitch when the visor-covered face of the guild’s Seith mage was only inches in front of him. Thank god he bit his tongue to keep quiet. Literally.

"Whatcha doin’?" Bickslow crooned.

"Doin’! Doin’!" the totems giggled.

Cobra’s eye narrowed as he looked down at the totems that Bickslow was perched on. Just how the guy had managed to fuck Lucy while keeping his balance on them was beyond him, but he was definitely going to give the guy some serious fucking props for it. Instead of saying a thing, Cobra carefully slid one leg into the apartment. Then the other. "You saw nothing," he whispered.

Bickslow chuckled and shrugged. "Not a thing, man." His babies turned so they could keep flying him toward his own apartment. "Steer clear of the chimney. Gray says she put booby traps in it." Really, Bickslow wasn’t going to question why Cobra was sneaking into the blonde’s apartment. He’d only caught a glimpse of movement outside of her place and got curious to see which of their guild members it was. Honestly, he had done weirder things than this.

"I’ll keep that in mind." Cobra sighed as Bickslow shot off into the air, then turned back and finished his entry into Lucy’s home. He almost knocked over a flower pot that sat on the sill, but he just barely caught the stupid fucking plant and steadied it. Letting out a heavy breath, Cobra turned toward the bathroom door, then grunted when a very soft, and very fucking wet blonde nearly tackled his ass.

Lucy froze, her hands pausing in their quest to tie her hair up into a sloppy bun as she was greeted with a firm chest pressed against her. A lifetime passed, with her trying to figure out just what the hell was going on, before she finally opened her mouth the scream in terror, and humiliation.
Cobra growled and clamped his hand over her mouth while putting a few inches of space between them. "Scream, and I'll fucking end you," he snarled.

'It's Cobra?! Oh... Well, it could be worse... He's not a crimin - well, okay... He's a criminal, but hey, at least he's not a rapist.' Lucy rolled her eyes as her shoulders slumped and her hands dropped to her sides. She reached up to pull his hand away, then let out a slow sigh when it pulled back as though he'd been burned.

"So observant," he muttered.

"Whatever," Lucy grumbled, shouldering past him. "I don't know what you're doing here, but you can just show yourself out. I'm not in the mood for guests."

"Right," he drawled. He honestly had no idea how he was supposed to start this shit, or how he could get her talking. There was no way in hell he was going to apologize, because there was nothing to apologize for.

"I'm not," Lucy huffed, crossing her arms under her chest. Not only would it show just how serious she was, it would also keep her towel up. "My door is locked, so..." Her eyes narrowed when she looked at her front door, only to see that it was still locked. "You... How did you get in here?"

"Window." Angered brown eyes cut back to him, and Cobra blinked slowly. He knew, based on being in the guild for a couple weeks already, that this was the 'Scary Lucy' look that had Natsu, Gray, and several others actually cowering. It wasn't going to do a lick of good on him though. The shit she was capable of was definitely impressive - like kicking Natsu hard enough to make an indentation of his body in a wall - but it took a lot more than that to scare him.

"You're just as bad as Natsu," she hissed. "Get the hell out!"

"Nope."

Lucy's eyes widened when he simply walked over to her couch and sat down. Her anger rose higher and higher until she was red in the face and stalking after the Poison Slayer. "Get out, Cobra. I don't want you here. I just want to be left alone."

"Why, so you can sulk over something stupid?"

"What do you care what I do with my own time?"

"I don't."

"Then fucking leave!"

"Nope," Cobra grinned. Watching her getting angry was actually becoming something he rather enjoyed. He'd been trying to keep his head low for the most part, so this was really the first time since his first day in Fairy Tail that the Poison Slayer was having some fun. And fuck was she easy to get riled up. "You're being a hypocrite."

"How?"

"Because you're telling yourself that you're not this and that, yet here you are... Acting like a spoiled little brat because I said something you didn't like." He shrugged. "Get the fuck over yourself."

"Get over..." Her lips thinned and her hands trembled as they balled into fists. "You called me useless! I'm a member of the team, too. And I'm not useless!"
"You were the one thinking it," Cobra replied calmly with a smirk. "I was just giving you some advice to remedy that."

"Fuck you, Cobra!" Lucy screeched. "You don't know-"

"Anything about you?" he chuckled. "I do. More than I care to, really. Little Miss Princess left home after being a sheltered, spoiled, rich bitch her whole life. Now you're trying to play with the big dogs, and you got bit. Boo-fucking-hoo."

"That's not true," she whispered, pushing through the tremble in her voice. "I…"

"What, you want me to say what everyone else does?" he scoffed. "'It's okay, Lucy…' or 'No, you're doing just fine' maybe? 'No need to cry. Here let's hug it out.'"

Lucy's lip quivered, the fire in her eyes being doused as it was replaced with welling tears.

"Just face it. Blondie. You can't fucking cut it. You are useless, and that's really all you'll ever be. No one takes you seriously, and there's no reason they should. Hell, why do you think you're always used as bait? Because it's easy to do it. You play a good fucking victim."

"Sh-Shut up," she whimpered.

"You know why you're a victim, right?" Cobra asked, his brow raised when he saw the first tears breaking past her lashes and slashing down her cheeks. "You-"

"I said shut up!" Lucy bellowed. "Get the fuck out of my house! I don't need to hear this shit from you! You can listen to my soul or listen in on my friends all you want, but you don't know me. It's n-not the same thing!"

"It is. I know everything there is to know about you."

Lucy sniffled and opened her mouth to keep yelling at him, then it snapped shut. What was the point? He knew what she was going to say before she said it, before she even decided what to say to begin with. No matter what she did, Cobra would have a rebuttal for it. Some shitty response that would only make her feel worse about herself. Like he was already doing.

Instead of continuing to yell at him, Lucy's arms wrapped around her waist a little more tightly as she lowered her head. "Fuck you, lizardface..." She sniffled again. "I hate you…"

Cobra sat on the couch, his brow pushed together and his eye narrowed to scrutinize the blonde. He'd spent years relishing the way someone's soul sounded when he upset them, when he ripped everything they'd cared about away as slowly as possible. Normally, this was where he'd start hounding on the person he was tormenting for being weak. For snivelling like a fucking baby. Except, he wasn't actually trying to upset the blonde.

'I knew he was a prick, but this… It shouldn't matter. Why does it matter what he thinks? Because it's what everyone else thinks, too... Dumbass... God, just stop crying already. He's probably enjoying seeing me like this. Wake up call of a fucking lifetime. Here I thought maybe he was a nice guy under everything... Weak little Lucy, can't handle anything...'

Slowly Cobra stood up and took a step forward. Then another. And another still until he was directly in front of the blonde who was fighting with everything she was worth to keep her shit together until he was gone. "I never said that."

"J-Just go," she whispered. Lucy went rigid when she saw his hand lifting, and she blinked in
surprise when a single finger pressed gently under her chin to force her to meet his gaze. His face was closed down, not betraying a single thought that rattled around in his head.

"I don't like people putting words in my mouth," Cobra said. "You don't know what I'm thinking, so don't make assumptions." When she stared at him, not making a single sound as tears steadily trickled down her cheeks, he shook his head. "And, for the record… You don't hate me. You don't hate anyone. I'm pretty sure you're incapable of it, you fucking lunatic."

Lucy's eyes crossed when he flicked her in the forehead with a scowl. "What was that for?"

"No, I do not fuck snakes on the side when no one's look - I don't fuck snakes at all!"

Lucy found herself laughing when a very uncharacteristic pout pushed out Cobra's lower lip over what had been a fleeting, albeit bitchy, thought. All that was missing was him stomping his foot. That... She was sure she would lose her shit if he went full-on toddler tantrum in her living room.

"It's not fucking funny," he muttered.

"It is!"

"No, it's really fucking not."

"Why?" She giggled and sniffled again.

Cobra let out a huff as his lips thinned. "Because I never wanted to fuck my best friend. She might've been a snake, but she was the only friend I had."

All the humor left her in an instant as she looked up into his amethyst eye. She thought she saw some sort of vulnerability in him for the briefest of moments. Just a quick flash of sadness. Or loneliness, maybe. Something aside from the blank look he was giving her now. Or maybe she was just imagining things. "O-Oh..." she muttered. It was lame, but really. What was she supposed to say?

Cobra shook his head and carefully swiped his thumb over one of her cheeks, then the other. A smirk made its way over his lips when she blushed. "No more crying over bullshit, Tiggle Bitties."

Lucy ducked her head in shame, then sighed when he forced her to look at him again.

"I'm serious. You didn't cry when you were getting sucked into a fucking clock, so what should it matter what some monster like me says?"

"You're my friend," Lucy whispered.

"And that day was a whole lot more fucked up and what I said to you, so tears are fucking pointless." He wasn't going to comment on what she said. Kinana had said the same thing earlier, but it would take a lot for the blonde to become a friend in his eyes.

Lucy sighed again when he wiped away the fresh wave of tears.

"The shit doesn't suit you, so cut it out."

"Suit me? Does crying really suit anyone?" Lucy asked with a small smile.

"Yes. And no, you don't want me to describe it." Cobra rolled his eye when more tears replaced the ones he'd wiped away. Just why he'd done it in the first place, he wasn't sure, but something about seeing them was starting to piss him off. "Stop crying already."
"So sorry my ocular leakage is offending you," Lucy sniffled.

"It really is," he chuckled. "You keep it up, I'm gonna have to gouge them out."

"Both of them?" Lucy giggled. "But then I won't be able to see!"

"But you will have a badass fucking scar like mine," Cobra grinned. The fact that she instantly picked up on the small hint that he'd been the one to remove his eye really only proved his original point - she was smart as hell. "Two of them, actually. And no more tears."

"I'll still be blind, asshole," she laughed.

"Then you'll be more like everyone else," Cobra whispered as he wiped away the now dwindling tears just beneath her lashes.

Lucy smiled and shook her head at that. 'Everyone else is blind? What does that even mean?'

"Got some shit to talk to you about. So why don't you change out of your washcloth? Unless... this is another offer for me to get my hands on your cookies. You seem to be lacking a jar right now."

Cobra's single eye trailed lower, finally taking in just how goddamn delicious the blonde looked. He'd noticed pretty quickly how small her towel was - then again, it might have looked that way simply because of the size of her chest, but he wasn't complaining - but he hadn't really taken in just how high it was sitting beneath her sex, or how low on her breasts. Really, if it wasn't for Lucy's arms being wrapped around herself, he was sure it would have just fallen off right from the beginning.

That thought was both utterly amazing, and fucking torture. Luckily, the blonde seemed to finally realized she was standing only a few inches away from him in nothing but a towel.

Lucy squeaked and took a step back, tightening her grip around the towel that she'd forgotten was her only means of keeping herself covered. "Shit, um..." She laughed awkwardly. "I-I'll, uh... do that..."

"The changing or letting me have some cookies?" Cobra chuckled as his eye flashed with excitement. If it wasn't for the fact that he would get the shit murdered out of him should he actually do anything with the blonde, he'd have no issues with the latter. Especially not when the cloying scent of her arousal drifted up through the air. Good fucking lord, did he love that smell... 'And now that shit's gonna be haunting my ass...'. He already knew that the memory of her cloying rose scent would pop up the next time he was alone and his dick decided it needed some attention.

"Changing!" she squeaked. "N-No cookies. Ever. Uh..." No, never ever ever. 'But his face between my legs would be... NO! No, Lucy. Shut up. Don't picture him eating - Oh, fuck me... No. Shit... Run before you rip your towel off, you little hussy!"

Cobra chuckled as the blonde all but ran from the living room to get changed, his eye catching on how her towel rode up just enough to bare the bottom of her ass. 'Fuck, she's pure evil... Thanks, Karma. You're a real dickbag.' With Lucy out of the room, and berating Eros for running wild and not fucking stopping, he sat back down on one end of the couch and reached down to adjust himself.

A few minutes later, after getting her face to return to its normal color, Lucy walked out of her bedroom in an oversized grey shirt, hot pink sleep shorts, and knee high gray and pink striped socks. Before going to the living room, she made her way to the kitchen and got herself a glass of water, then paused. Even though she hadn't wanted to have company, she did. And that meant that she had to be a good host. Without another thought on the matter, at least not consciously, she reached under
the sink and pulled out the gallon jug of bleach, then one of the coffee cups she never used - mainly because it always sat in the back of the cupboard and she never got through her other dishes before washing them and putting them back.

Two cups in hand, the blonde walked back out to the living room, then smiled while handing the coffee cup with a cheshire cat on it to the Poison Slayer before she took a seat. Cobra raised a single brow at her, then took a sip. Then another. "You have a bad habit of spoiling people, y'know that?"

"I do," Lucy sighed with a tired smile. "Do you not want me to randomly poison you?"

He shrugged and leaned back, resting the mug on one leg. "I'm not complaining. Just making an observation."

Lucy nodded and pulled her feet up onto the couch. After a moment, she looked over at Cobra to see him watching her. "What did you want to talk about?"

"What I told you."

She looked away again, her eyebrows pinching together. "Oh…"

"You wouldn't be so fuckin' useless if you'd open your goddamn mouth."


"What about it?" she whispered.

"I didn't come to apologize," Cobra said, taking a sip of his bleach while she nodded. "But you misunderstood what I was telling you."

"You were saying what everyone else does," Lucy shrugged. "I'm not good enough. Not strong enough. I get it…"

"If I was calling you weak, I wouldn't have pussyfooted around about it. I'd call you fucking weak and make your ass cry over it. Maybe get you to commit suicide just to prove me right, and laugh while I watched you do it."

Lucy's eyes were wide as she stared at him. And the seriously dark and gleeful look in his eye.

"You've done that, haven't you…"

"Yep, but that's not the point." Cobra finished his drink and set the mug on her coffee table. "Point is, I don't see the point in lying or sugarcoating shit. It just gives people a false sense of security."

"So, I'm just a useless victim, then… Much better…"

"You're useless because you don't stick up for yourself," Cobra said. "That's what I was trying to tell you. That shit job would've been so much simpler if you had told Titania to shut her fucking gob and held your ground on your plan. Any of them, really. It made more sense to do it your way, but you just clammed up."

"Well, I just wanted to get it done…"

"No, you gave up. Don't try to bullshit me."

"Fine," she huffed. "I figured Erza knew better than me. I don't have nearly as much experience as she does, or anyone else in the guild. I always had to practice in secret, and I never knew what any of this was like until I came to Fairy Tail."
"And how exactly does that make you weak?"

"Well-"

"You said it yourself," Cobra interjected. "On the train when it was just us. I'm not going over all the shit you went through before, but you're still alive, right?"

"Duh…"

He smirked. "Just checking. I don't feel like talking to a zombie."

"Dork…"

"Possibly. Regardless of my total *badassery*, not dorkiness, I don't think you're weak."

Lucy smiled softly at that.

"But you do."

"Well…" And just like that, the small glimmer of hope that she'd had concerning Cobra making her feel better was gone.

"That's what makes you a damn victim."

"*Just face it, Blondie. You can't fucking cut it. You are useless, and that's really all you'll ever be. No one takes you seriously, and there's no reason they should. Hell, why do you think you're always used as bait? Because it's easy to do it. You play a good fucking victim.*"

Lucy ducked her head, curling in on herself just a little more. "If you're trying to make me feel better, you suck at it."

"Never said I was."

"Then why are we talking about it?" she asked. "Trying to make me feel worse?"

"No, I'm just telling you what you really need to fucking hear. Everyone else treats you like a damn kid, and it doesn't do you a lick of good. You wanna be a victim your whole damn life, then keep this 'woe is me' shit up. Keep thinking it's never gonna get better, no matter what you do."

"I don't think that."

"You are right now."

"Because you just said-"

"You were before I got here. And you have been since before I even came to the guild. You're only useless if you don't play to your strengths."

"Yeah, well… I have to get saved all the time, so it's kinda hard to see my strengths."

Cobra rolled his eye again. "This is gonna take forever if you don't actually listen to what I'm telling you."

"Might as well make yourself comfortable, then," Lucy sighed. She turned on the couch, leaning her back against the armrest. "Do I need to make popcorn for my lecture?"
"No. Just sit there and pay attention," Cobra chuckled. Sassy little thing that she was, he really couldn't keep a straight face for long. At least the blonde wasn't crying anymore. Still, he figured it would probably be a good idea to get comfortable. And listening to Lucy's rampant thoughts while he pulled off his jacket and boots was what drove him to also remove his top shirt, leaving a black thermal in its place.

"Geez, you wear as much clothing as Bickslow."

"I get cold easily."

"Because you're part snake."

"No, because-" Cobra's mouth snapped shut and he glared at her. "I just do." He wasn't going to tell her that he got cold easily because of his scars. He'd done research on it, and it made zero in the way of actual sense. The marred flesh being overly sensitive? Sure. The shit making him fucking cold all the time? Not so much.

"Comfy?"

He turned on the couch, mirroring the blonde by leaning against the opposite armrest and pulling his feet up onto the cushion. "Relatively." When she silently nodded, looking down at her hands instead of at him, he frowned and nudged her foot with his. Their eyes met, and he didn't try to pull away when the balls of her feet pressed against his own. "Do you know why Celestial mages have gotten killed so often over the years?"

Lucy blinked and furrowed her brow in confusion. "Because people are always trying to take their keys."

"That's part of it, sure," he nodded. "But there's more to it. It's a requirement for summoners to be able to think on their feet. Use tactics, strategize. Celestial mages used to go after one another to get more keys. Problem was, the more keys a mage has, the more information they needed to keep track of. They had more shit in their arsenal, but it would get too confusing trying to figure out which key to whip out for any given scenario. Angel had to learn how to do what comes naturally to you, and that shit took her years."

"Okay, so I can naturally plan things," Lucy sighed. "I'll start my own business, planning parties."

He scowled and pushed her feet until she was wincing while curled up in a ball, and his legs were stretched out completely. "Don't be a cunt. You're naturally a good strategist. That is a serious fucking strength. I've met people that would quite literally kill for what you know how to do by just fucking breathing."

Lucy took in a deep breath once their feet returned to the happy middle ground of the separation between their cushions. "That's terrifying."

"Yeah, well…"

"Okay," Lucy sighed. "So, I'm a 'natural strategist'. What does that have to do with anything?"

"Strategizing is your strength. You'll always fail if you can't identify what you're good at, and then actually fucking use it."

"So…" Lucy nibbled her lip, absently curling her toes and missing the way Cobra tried to keep a straight face while the pudgy little digits tickled his feet. "I should put my foot down when I have a plan, even though someone else-"
"Stop with the doubting shit. Fucking hell, woman…” He scowled and wrapped his toes around hers to make her stop wiggling them. "You have a skill people would kill for, so fucking use it. And make sure people understand why your idea is better. It's really not that fucking hard."

"So, was that Angel's skill too?" Lucy whispered.

"Eventually, yeah. But she still wasn't better at it than me or Brain."

"Well, you have an unfair advantage," she giggled.

He smirked at her. "That, I do. Brain didn't think too much of it though, so I got the lacrima."

"So you could add poison to your arsenal."

He shrugged. "It made sense. Cubellios was poisonous, so I could eat her poison to get a pick me up."

"So, what's your strength in the team, then?" Lucy asked after a silent moment. "If I'm supposed to be the strategist."

"I'm the dick, remember?" A bright, cheery laugh split through the air, and Cobra chuckled when she pushed one of his feet playfully.

"How could I forget?"

"You're a blonde," he shrugged. "It's bound to happen."

Lucy feigned anger and scowled while using all the power she could muster in her legs to push Cobra's knees up to his chest. She fought to hide her laughter when she saw the utter shock on the Poison Slayer's face as the air was pushed from his lungs on a grunt. Really, she didn't think it would have worked.

"Can't… Breathe…” he wheezed.

Lucy squeaked and pulled back a little, only to gasp for air when her knees were crushed against her breasts. "Ass…"

He grinned when he felt her fighting to push back. "Yeah, but you already knew that about - Oof!"

"Ha! Suck it! Ugh…”

When he heard Lucy laughing as their feet battled for dominance - something he'd never thought would be enjoyable in the slightest - Cobra found a small part himself more at ease. Somehow, he'd managed to make her feel better, and to see that she wasn't actually a hopeless case. It shouldn't have mattered to him in the slightest, but it did. He could easily chalk it up to the fact that he needed to work with Lucy for the next five years, which meant that she needed to actually be able to function on jobs without turning into a self-doubting, blubbering pile of fucking tears every time he said something mildly offensive.

She needed to get some thicker skin. He could tell that she was an expert at hiding how upset she was over things, and that pretty much no one could tell if she was upset when she didn't want them to know about it, but the fact that she so easily allowed things to get to her in the first place needed to get nipped in the bud.

Lucy squeaked when her foot slipped and shot between Cobra's legs, her eyes widening when they
closed around her own just before she could kick him in the family jewels. "Sorry," she laughed sheepishly.

Cobra's eye narrowed and he slowly opened his legs. "Keep my nuts outta this," he grumbled while shifting and catching her foot on his own.

Lucy stuck her tongue out. "I don't want anything to do with your nuts."

"Your foot said differently."

"Are you the foot whisperer, now?" she laughed while they returned to their impromptu foot war.

"I could be. Gimme your toes."

"No!"

"Gimme your goddamn toes!" Cobra cackled.

"Leave my little piggies alone! They have things to do!"

"What?" Cobra laughed. "Piggies?"

Lucy paused and gave him a curious smile. "Yeah, you know… This little piggy went to market?"

Cobra shook his head. "Not a fucking clue." He watched as she suddenly sat up and grabbed one of his feet. "What the shit are you doing?"

"I'll show you!"

"Hell no."

"Come on. You don't know about the piggies!" she giggled, tightening her grip when he started to pull his foot away. "It's *essential* knowledge, Cobra. You could *die* without it!"

"I highly fucking doubt tha - How the hell are you still holding my foot? Let go!"

Lucy laughed while he tried to kick her hands away, then shifted forward and sat on his free leg while holding his foot in her lap. "Please? Just this once."

Cobra let out a heavy sigh and closed his eye. "What do you have to do…"

"Take off your sock and touch your toes."

"That… What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Lots of things." Lucy grinned when his eye peeked open. "Enough to fill up Domus Flau. Twice."

"Got that shit right," he grumbled. When he saw her hand poised just above his ankle to pull off his sock, he rolled his eye and opened it fully. "Fine. Just once. And you will never speak of this fucking day to *anyone.*"

"You got it." With that, Lucy reached down and tucked her fingers under the edge of his black sock, then pulled it off and tossed it onto his stomach. "Ready?"

"No, but it doesn't really matter. You're gonna do it anyway."

"Got that right," she shot back. "So, usually parents do this with babies or little kids, but…"
Cobra watched the mischief gleaming in her eyes as she gently grabbed his big toe and lightly wiggled it.

"This little piggy went to market," she crooned.

"Anthropomorphized farm animals. Lovely." He tensed when she moved to the next toe.

"This little piggy stayed home," she sighed, as though she was bored. It really wasn't as much fun if she didn't at least act out the piggies' feelings.

Cobra bit his lip to keep himself from kicking her when she moved on.

"This little piggy had roast beef," she cheered.

He snorted and looked up from where she was grabbing the second to last toe, to find her looking at him.

"And this little piggy had none," Lucy pouted.

Cobra's foot jolted when she grabbed the last toe, and he glared at the blonde when she giggled.

"But this little piggy… This special little piggy," Lucy said with a smile. "What did he do?"

"Not a fucking clue."

"He went…" She grinned and tightened her grip on his foot with one hand, then tickled it with the other. "Wee wee wee-"

"No! Oh god! NO!" Cobra laughed. "S-Stop!"

"All the way home," Lucy finished, finally slowing her wriggling fingers just before Cobra could kick her in the teeth.

"You're… What kind of sick, torturous shit is that?"

She shrugged and smiled when she saw the dimples she'd only seen once before making an appearance. "Like I said, it's for kids." She reached over and grabbed the discarded sock, then slipped it back over his foot, belatedly noticing that the skin was actually a shade lighter than his hands and face. "See? All done."

"I've been violated," Cobra huffed. "I never knew you could be so fucking cruel."

"You let me."

"I was coerced."

"Liar," she laughed while shifting so she was sitting between his legs instead of on top of one.

"Nope. You're more evil than I am."

"It got you laughing though," Lucy countered.

"Because it tickled…" He glared at her again. "And no, I don't want you to do my 'other piggies'. Psycho."
Lucy shrugged. "I once did that for an hour straight."

"What the…"

"Three-year-olds are obsessive when they find something they like. Easiest job I've ever been on."

"Wow."

"And now that I know you're ticklish…"

"Come near my fucking feet again, and I'll rip off those little devil fingers and shove them up your-"

"Alright alright! You don't need to finish."

"- Ass."

Lucy's head dropped to her hands while her brain ran around in little estrogen circles. Really, she was sure it was all Fairy Tail's fault that she'd turned into such a pervert.

"That's all you."

"Shut up."

"Never," he chuckled.

Lucy ignored the flush on her cheeks and peeked through her fingers to look at the grinning Slayer on her couch - and his too-sexy-for-her-wellbeing dimples - then let out a long sigh. "Wanna watch a movie?"

"Saw?"

Lucy nodded.

"Sure. Not like I have anything to do anyway."

"Because you need a hobby."

He shrugged. "I'm good."

"You wait here, I'll get popcorn and all that." She paused after standing up. "More bleach?"

"Yeah. If you put any of the other chemicals you have under your sink in there without washing it, you'll probably drop dead."

"Bleach it is," she mumbled weakly. The last thing she needed was to die by poisoning herself with noxious gases and explosions. Her headstone would read *Took being a dumb blonde to new heights…* Of course, that would be if her body was scattered by the explosion resulting from her own idiocy.

"Little morbid there," Cobra called out to the blonde in the kitchen, grabbing the remote from the end table and fiddling with it until he got the lacrima television turned on and switched over to the right setting. "Great pun, still morbid."

"Probably, but it's valid," Lucy laughed. Once the popcorn was ready, she brought the bowl and Cobra's cup - which would forever be his cup from that point on, because she didn't want everything tasting like random chemicals - out and turned out the lights, then settled herself on the couch again.
"Is that your new spot?" he asked, grabbing a couple pieces of popcorn and tossing them into his mouth. "You always seem to end up there."

"I'm going with yes," Lucy answered flippantly. "It's comfy."

"Sure," he drawled.

"I can move," she said quickly. "I'm kinda in your bubble."

"Kinda is an understatement," he chuckled. When she blushed and started to shift away, his legs tensed just enough to keep her in place. "You're good. You would've gotten kicked otherwise."

Lucy relaxed when his legs loosened their grip on her, a small smile pulling up the corners of her lips. "Ready to pop your movie cherry?"

"I guess so," he sighed dramatically. "You've already assaulted my piggies. Might as well get some gore in to bring me back to my happy place."

"That really shouldn't even be a happy place," Lucy laughed while pressing play.

Natsu frowned as Happy deposited him on Lucy's windowsill well after midnight. He would have been over earlier, but he'd promised Mira that he would spend some time with her after she had closed the guild for the night. And they had. He'd spent two whole hours with his girlfriend, bored out of his mind, then another hour in her bedroom. Far less bored and much happier.

Regardless of all that, he wanted to check on his best friend. The only problem was that Lucy's home reeked of Cobra. That didn't make sense in the slightest, considering Lucy wasn't letting anyone come over. And if she was upset with Cobra, then he definitely wouldn't be at her apartment. Natsu just couldn't see the Poison Slayer coming by to apologize for whatever he'd said to Lucy.

Still, as he climbed in through the window - with Happy sitting on the sill just in case they needed to make a break for it - he could smell the guy everywhere. His scent was so thick in the air that it stood to reason he'd only just left.

Natsu froze when he stopped in front of Lucy's couch. The last thing he'd expected was to find the blonde sleeping on it with Cobra, of all people. Okay, so they weren't all cuddled up like the Fire Slayer usually was with her in bed. In fact, Lucy was lying with her head on an armrest, and Cobra's head was on the other. The only part of them that was actually in contact was their feet.

'That's weird. Luce hates people touching her feet.'

Natsu scowled down at Cobra though. He just couldn't help it. He still didn't trust the other Slayer, and there was no way he trusted the guy sleeping anywhere near his best friend. While they were on that mission, Natsu and Gray had made sure to sleep on either side of Lucy just to make sure Cobra couldn't get near her in the middle of the night.

'He could do anything. I won't let him hurt her...' 

Just as Natsu was leaning down to pick the blonde up and move her back to the bed, Cobra's eye slid open. "If I was gonna do that, I already would have," he whispered. "And you wouldn't have found her body."
Natsu froze and turned to glare at the gleaming amethyst eye that barely caught the moonlight from the open window. "What are you doing here?" he hissed. "If you're awake, then leave."

Cobra grinned wickedly. "Spending the night, Salamander. She asked me to stay." Oh, the look on the Fire Slayer's face was absolutely priceless. And the knowledge that he'd come in the same way that Natsu always did, and hadn't gotten kicked out (literally) of Lucy's apartment, but instead got an invitation to sleep over? Even more worth it.

"What?" Happy nearly shouted, grimacing when Lucy shifted on the couch.

Cobra kept his gaze trained on Natsu, watching as the other Slayer's breathing stopped entirely. He wasn't going to mention that Lucy was out cold, still in dreamland with no chance of being roused unless the world was ending. And even then, it was iffy. They'd gotten through three of the movies in that deliciously gory series before she started yawning, and that had been his cue to leave. But, as soon as he'd started getting ready to get his shit and leave, she'd asked - without thinking - if he wanted to just crash at her place. Needless to say, Cobra really hadn't wanted to get up in the first place, and he'd had to force himself to give her shit for it before finally giving in. "Just let her sleep there," he whispered. "She's had a shitty few days."

Natsu growled softly as he glared at Cobra, then looked back down at Lucy's peacefully sleeping face. Finally, he sighed and shook his head. If he tried to move her, Lucy would definitely wake up. He knew she hadn't been sleeping well, since she never did when she was upset, so he really didn't want to interrupt the blonde's much-needed rest. "Fine," he sighed. "But I'm coming back in the morning to check on her."

Cobra chuckled as Natsu started to walk away. "Might wanna grab her a blanket. She's cold."

Natsu ground his teeth together and pulled the blanket from a trunk in the corner of the room, then draped it over the blonde.

Cobra's eye closed as Natsu made his way to the window, a slow smirk pulling at his lips when he heard the Fire Dragon Slayer's and his little blue Exceed's souls disappearing off toward the woods.

He reached down and moved Lucy's legs into a slightly more comfortable position - with her feet together on one side between his body and the back of the couch. She shifted just a little, and Cobra sighed as he pulled some of the excess blanket over himself. She wasn't cold, but he sure as hell was. 'Cobra, one. Natsu, zero,' he thought as he took a slow breath and let himself listen in on the blonde's dreams of pig masks and dirty tile bathrooms with severed feet in them.
Lucy huffed and kicked open the doors to the guild, ignoring the few quiet murmurs of her guild mates while she stormed over to the bar. She didn't even want a smoothie, or for Mira to bother her in general, but there really was nowhere else she wanted to go.

"Shit, Bunny," Gajeel chuckled as he took a seat next to the blonde. "What's wrong? G-string chafing your asshole?"

"No," she nearly growled. "But I'm gonna use it to choke the shit out of my team."

"Fuck me," he groaned. "Here we go again… What did they do this time?"

"Oh, I'll tell you…" Lucy's eyes narrowed and her back went rigid when the doors to the guild slammed open. Slowly, she turned in her seat when she heard Natsu screaming. Surprisingly, it wasn't him begging her to forgive him. He was just screaming. While hurtling through the air and crashing into a table.

Her eyes slid back to the door to find Cobra standing there with his single eye narrowed. Erza and Gray were just behind him, both staring at the Poison Slayer with gaping mouths. It could only mean that the Poison Slayer was just as pissed about the whole mission thing, and he was the one to throw Natsu into the guild. Really, Lucy didn't blame him. It surprised her, sure, but she'd found out rather quickly just how easy it was for Natsu to aggravate the older Slayer. And when Cobra was aggravated by the Natsu, it meant someone was going to get burnt or poisoned.

"Uh," Gajeel muttered. "What just happened?"

Lucy sniffed and turned back to the bar, crossing her arms under her chest. "Natsu destroyed the whole town. Along with Erza and Gray. The whole reward got eaten up. Again. Because they can't control themselves. And now I have no way of making my rent. Again." Suddenly her head dropped to the bar, and she blinked in surprise when, instead of what she realized would have been an extremely painful thunk, her forehead was resting on a warm, calloused palm.

"Pretty sure you don't want to bash your skull in on the bar," Cobra sighed. "The Demon will kill you for getting it dirtied with your blood."

"Yeah," Lucy muttered. "Thanks, Cobra."

"Whatever." He plopped down onto the only vacant stool next to the blonde, propping his chin on his hand once he pulled it from under her head. "Besides, you still need to tear the rest of the team to pieces. I'd do it, but… Parole."

Lucy frowned and knocked her knuckles against his shoulder, one of the few things she'd been allowed to do over the past two weeks, ever since their first movie marathon together. "Don't be a dick. I've got bigger things to worry about." The fact that he even allowed her to do something like that was a huge deal, but she wasn't allowed to make it into a big thing. If she did, Cobra had sworn to tie her down and torture her piggies for hours until she was covered in piss and tears. The sheer venom in his voice when he'd hissed it right into her ear during a commercial break was enough motivation for Lucy to never try and find out if he was serious.

"Bunny, you could always join me an' Lily," Gajeel offered. "We're gonna head out on a job soon."
"You guys are just as destructive sometimes," she sighed. "And you're saving up to remodel your bathroom, Gaj."

"That's a hobby," he said with a dismissive wave. "Yer rent's a little more important."

"Yeah," she groaned. "But, your bathroom… I've got dibs on christening it with a bubble bath, remember?"

"Sure," Gajeel chuckled. "Still, you're welcome to come."

"Problem with that one, Tetanus Dick," Cobra smirked. "Tiggle Bitties goes, so do I."

"Seriously?"

"Yep," Cobra chuckled, flagging Mira down to get himself something to eat. "Terms of my release, plus Master's orders. I get a parole officer, apparently."

"That fucking sucks, man," Gajeel chuckled, grunting when Lucy scowled and elbowed him in the side. "What the fuck, Bunny?"

"Having me as a half-assed parole officer does not 'fucking suck'. Thank you very much!"

"Sure you do," Cobra chuckled. "You just don't suck for free."

"I do suck for free though," Lucy lamented with a heavy sigh. "I'm not getting paid to suck for yo - Oh my god! What am I saying?!"

Gajeel and Cobra blinked in unison as Lucy slapped a hand over her mouth and shook her head. And Mira let out a wistful sigh while quite literally wilting to the ground. The guild turned as one when two alarmingly boisterous, gravelly laughs filled the air, only to find the two most anti-social Dragon Slayers cracking right the hell up with the guild's blushing Celestial mage between them. No one had heard Cobra laughing quite so much, or at all really, and it was more than alarming that it was actually happening. Especially since no one was quite able to figure out whether or not there was something sinister beneath it. Or whether that was his 'I'm an evil psycho' laugh, or just his regular 'This is funny, and I'm a normal human being' one.

"I-I meant… Master's not…" Lucy let out a defeated sigh and dropped her head to her hands. There was no way she would be convincing the two of anything other than the shit that had come spewing out of her trap. Cobra could hear what she was thinking, and she already knew that he still wasn't going to let it go. 'Perverted little shitbox…'

She'd figured out rather quickly that Cobra was quite the pervert. He just wasn't as obvious about it all as everyone else in the guild. It was subtle, even when he was blatantly making an innuendo, all because he did it with a straight face. Or, he would say something completely normal, but give her that… look… The one where he would smirk just enough to let a little devious glint appear in his eye.

Cobra sighed while picking up a rag from the bar, then wadded it up and chucked it at Mira's face to help rouse her from her utterly terrifying daydreams. He really didn't need to know what she thought her precious 'NaLu' babies would look like. The fact that the woman was daydreaming about her own boyfriend - which, he still didn't understand - and Lucy having babies... He couldn't even begin to figure it out.

Once Mira was standing, and after she'd fixed her hair and dress, she smiled warmly at the trio of mages at the bar as though she hadn't heard a thing, and that she hadn't been sprawled on the floor.
"So, what can I get for you?"


"Nothing for me," Lucy sighed.

Cobra quirked a brow at the blonde, then turned back to the silver-haired barmaid. "Surprise me."

Mira nodded and turned to walk away, giving Lucy a sad smile just before she made her way into the kitchen. Everyone knew that the blonde didn't believe in having a tab. At first, it had come as quite the shock to them, considering it was the guild, and if anyone's account was in the red at the end of the month, then the funds were just deducted from their pay for jobs. It was actually Cobra, of all people, that explained just why Lucy refused to do it.

The blonde didn't want a line of credit. Nothing that would put her in the red. Ever. Mounting debt and creditors breathing down her father's neck were what had ruined his business, and Lucy was adamant about not making the same mistake. Which meant, the times that her team's destructive tendencies took the bulk of their reward money, Lucy was left scrounging every last coin she had to make ends meet. It usually ended in her making her rent money, but not having food - mainly because Natsu and Happy ate it all.

The fact that it was Cobra that told everyone - namely, he'd explained it to Kinana, who told Mira, and their conversation was overheard by Cana, who spread it through the rest of the guild - why Lucy always refused to start a tab, or even let someone else pay for her meals at the guild when she was short on Jewels, was oddly endearing to the Takeover mage. It had only happened because Lucy had downright refused a strawberry shake that Mira had told her was paid for by Gajeel. Lucy had walked out, and Cobra had apparently had enough of everyone wondering why Lucy was upset in the first place.

"I can hear your fucking stomach growling," Cobra muttered. "You should just let Metalmouth feed you."

"Well, if Natsu would stop eating-

"I told you to just-

"And I told you that you don't have-

"Just get over it and tell-

"No," Lucy sighed. "Just drop-

"Not happening," Cobra shot back. "I've gotta listen-

"You really don't-

"Yeah, I-

"No. Just drop-

"Would you two stop talking the fuck over each other?!!" Gajeel roared, his eyes wide as he stared at the two mages beside him. "Fucking shit. How the hell do you even know-"

"We just do," Lucy and Cobra sighed in unison. Cobra knowing what Lucy was about to say wasn't that hard to explain. But Lucy knowing what he was going to say... That actually gave the Poison
Slayer a case of the fucking willies most of the time. It was unnatural, and all he could be thankful for was that she didn't make a habit of doing the weird twin-symbiosis shit she'd just pulled.

"Seriously, I hate it when you fucking do that," Cobra hissed.

Lucy gave him a sweet smile before turning back to Gajeel. "Sorry about that."

Gajeel shook his head as Mira came back out, her arms laden with dishes. "You two spend way too much fuckin' time together," he grumbled.

Lucy hummed in thought, astutely ignoring the kiwis and water that were set in front of Gajeel. Then the heaping plate of lightly steamed vegetables and plants she'd never seen before that was placed in front of Cobra. Then the strawberry smoothie that was also placed in front of him, just a little closer to her. That had her eyes looping while she looked from the Poison Slayer next to her over to the barmaid. "Not really," she finally said. "Just missions, and a little here and there when we're not at the guild."

"Mainly movie marathons," Cobra mumbled around the lightly buttered greens. "Mira, no butter on this. It tastes like I'm licking a literal tub of lard."

"Oh, I'm sorry Cobra," Mira laughed. "Here, let me-"

Lucy swatted Mira's hand away from Cobra's plate just as the barmaid started to reach for it. "Don't try to take his food away," she laughed. "He'll bite you." When Mira raised an intrigued brow, Lucy shrugged with a helpless smile and lifted her left hand to point out a small bandaid. "I learned the hard way."

Cobra chuckled darkly as Mira looked back at him, taking another bite of the food in front of him. "This is better than some of the shit I've had to scarf down. I meant for next time."

Lucy smiled as Mira nodded and walked off to take more orders, then looked over at Cobra while he took a slow sip of the strawberry smoothie in front of him. "What's the worst thing you've ever eaten?" she asked.

"You don't wanna know."

"C'mon," she laughed. "It's not like you're going to spoil my appetite. Tell me."

"Nope." He smirked while taking another bite of his food. "The smoothie's normal, if you want some."

"Nope," she smiled. "I'll be fine. So, stop stalling."

"You really wanna know?" he whispered, quirking his brow at the blonde. When she nodded, he pushed the smoothie toward her. "Drink this, and I'll tell you."

"No, that's yours," Lucy sighed.

"And your stomach is on the verge of compressing itself into a fucking black hole," he whispered with a frown. Cobra paused and glanced just past her to see that Gajeel had taken his load back to the table he and Pantherlily sat at. The fact that Natsu hadn't come to the bar once since they'd arrived was actually a little surprising. But, he could only assume it was because Erza had knocked the Fire Dragon Slayer out cold as soon as she'd gotten a hold of him. Most likely for upsetting the blonde Cobra was sitting next to.
"Yeah, well-"

"When was the last time you even ate?" he asked, looking back down at his plate.

"On the mission," she answered instantly. "Just before we got on the train to come back."

"A slice of bread really doesn't fucking count."

"Yeah, well…"

He sighed and pushed the smoothie a little closer to her. "Seriously, drink up."

"Cobra, that's yours," she insisted. She really wouldn't have any problem drinking out of the same cup as the guy. Mainly because it had happened more than she cared to admit with pretty much everyone she spent time with. She'd even openly offered him some of her own smoothie a number of times, and had no issue drinking it after he'd taken a sip.

He let out a heavy sigh and turned to the blonde, his eye boring into her own equally stubborn gaze. "Why are you so intent on being hungry," he asked, "When you've got plenty of people that are willing to help you out?"

She frowned and propped her chin in her hand. "Because I like being able to depend on myself for things, instead of everyone else. So what if I'm a little hungry? Having a roof over my head is more important."

He rolled his eye at that. "While I can concede that it's a fair point to want to be self-sufficient, the team is a goddamn train wreck that destroys everything."

"I already know that," she mumbled.

"And what are you planning on doing when you pass out in the street from malnutrition?" Did he really care if the blonde went hungry? Not so much. But, he would be damned if little miss princess didn't get a reality check when she really fucking needed one. As long as she didn't fucking cry this time, he'd be fine. The last thing he needed was her crying in the guild over something he said. 'Fucking Fairies would kill the shit outta me…'"

"It's not going to get that bad," Lucy scowled.

"It can," he sighed, looking down at the plate in front of him again. After a moment, his gaze returned to the blonde, and he did a quick survey to make sure no one else was listening to what they were talking about. Once he was sure their conversation was private, he whispered, "I know from personal experience, that shit isn't fun. It hurts more than anything you've ever experienced. If it's bad enough, you'll be willing to rip off someone's arm and eat it raw to just get something in you... When I was a kid, we were lucky to eat a slice of bread once every couple weeks."

Lucy's eyes widened a fraction while she looked at Cobra, at the truth sitting so plainly on his face. Right there, for the briefest of moments, he was actually an open book. She hadn't forgotten what he'd told her about being born in the Tower of Heaven, or that he was a slave for a good portion of his life, but she just couldn't picture him going hungry like that as a child. "What?"

He nodded, pushing the glass the last little distance toward the blonde. "Drink up," he whispered, looking away and taking another bite of his poisoned food. "I'm an evil fucking bastard, but one thing I won't do is sit by and just watch while someone's going hungry. We're a team now, whether we wanna be or not, and that means I've gotta keep your ass alive."
"Har-dee-har-har," Lucy grumbled, glaring at the glass and the delicious looking condensation running down the sides. Just before she caved, she paused when Cobra lightly nudged her leg with his beneath the bar. Her eyes cut over to the Poison Slayer to find him staring at her with a frown. "What?"

"I'm serious," he whispered. "So stop with the martyr shit and just accept help when it's offered. How many times have you let me just crash at your place after we've stayed up watching movies?"

Lucy's lips quirked slightly. "Too many, probably."

"And, any time I'm there, you jump right on getting me some bleach, and making sure I eat before I leave in the morning, even though you've hardly got enough food for yourself most of the time."

"Because-"

"Right, you were raised to be a good hostess," he said, rolling his eye. "But you're also a good fucking person in general. So, when you're going hungry, because the Charbroiled Dildo over there is too busy burning the reward and eating you out of house and fucking home, then let someone else pick up the damn slack."

Lucy's cheeks flushed brilliantly as she ducked her head. "I'm just being a spoiled brat again, 'I'm just being a spoiled brat again,' she thought.

"Nah," he chuckled, nudging her leg once more. "You're just being stubborn." The small smile Lucy gave him both warmed the crusted muscle he called a heart, and made him want to vomit. Everywhere. Cobra didn't want to react at all when Lucy smiled at him, and he was on the verge of punching himself right in the dick when she finally picked up the smoothie and took a small sip, keeping her eyes locked onto his.

"Thank you, Cobra," she whispered.

With another roll of his eye, Cobra returned to his meal. "Yeah yeah," he muttered.

The two sat in silence with one another for nearly an hour before Natsu finally drew up enough courage - and regained consciousness - to talk with Lucy. That had resulted in the Fire Dragon Slayer flying through a wall after getting a thoroughly rejuvenated Lucy Kick to the testicles.

Lucy sighed as she looked over to the request board, wincing when she thought of the type of job the team would need to take just for the five-way split to really be worth it for her to pay her rent.

"Y'know," Cobra mused. "There's nothing that says I can't just take a mission with you. The team doesn't have to go."

"But you can't do solo missions," Lucy frowned, watching him toss her a lazy smirk.

"If it's two people, that's not a solo mission. They destroyed the town, so leave 'em behind this time."

"I-I don't know…"

Cobra shrugged. "Just a suggestion." When he heard her mulling it all over, he rolled his eye and flicked her in the throat. "Go pick something," he chuckled. "Whatever you want."

Her eyes narrowed in suspicion as she gazed at the Poison Slayer. "You're being extra nice today," she mused. "Why is that?"
"Because once a year, on November 27th, I find my inner unicorn," Cobra sighed wistfully. "Once I've made sweet, passionate love to it, the rainbow-shitting equine god rides me off into the sunset."

"Shouldn't you be riding it?" Lucy laughed.

His eye snapped back to her, mock disgust pulling at his lips. "Why the shit would I put a unicorn dick in my ass? You're fucking twisted!"

Lucy's mouth opened and closed for several seconds while a choir of crickets chirped in the guild. After her initial shock, and once the rest of the guild went back to what they were doing, she found a slightly hysterical laugh being muffled into a snicker behind her hand. "Wow, Cobra. I'll keep that in mind. No unicorn peens in your pooper."

"Goddamn right," he huffed with a grin. "That's where my fairy dust comes from."

"Oh my god," she giggled. "Just stop."

"Go pick a job, and I will." After a moment, his grin darkened while he added, "Otherwise, I'm taking the unicorn's horn as a sacrificial dagger."

"Sinner," Lucy teased while she stood from her stool.

"Yep. And proud of that shit."

She rolled her eyes while making her way to the board, a soft smile on her face. Cobra really was an asshole more often than not, but it suited him. The Poison Slayer really made it work. He knew when he needed to tone it down, when to crank up the asshole-meter, and everything in between. The fact that he'd willingly offered to go on a mission with just the two of them was nice, and that definitely wasn't something Lucy was very accustomed to where he was concerned.

She already knew it wasn't a simple case of him 'catching the Fairy Fever' as he'd so disdainfully put it several times before, but there was something that was different that day. She just couldn't put her finger on exactly what it was. Aside from him being nicer. First, he'd made sure she got something in her stomach, and now he had given her free reign over which job the two of them would take. Which meant she could technically choose a job that had fighting in it, one that she wouldn't be able to do on her own, because she would have backup.

Except, Lucy really didn't want to take another mission with fighting. They'd just done that, and she sure as hell needed to rest her weary muscles at least a little bit. As she glanced at the sheer amount of requests tacked on the board, a heavy sigh left her. It would take forever to look through them all. Unless... "Hey, Nab?" Lucy said with a grin, turning to her side to find the man in question still looking at the board.

"Hey, Lucy," he smiled. "Looking for another job already?"

"Yeah," she sighed. "The team got a little carried away again."

He laughed quietly and shook his head. "That's Team Natsu for you, though."

"Sadly," she laughed. "But, I was wondering if you could help me find a job to take. You know these like the back of your hand, so..."

"Sure," he grinned. "I still haven't found the perfect one. What are you looking for?"

"Something preferably without fighting, that pays enough for my rent."
"How much?"

"Well, I still need about thirty thousand Jewels, plus some for groceries," she said with a pout. "And it needs to be enough to split with Cobra, since he's going with me."

Nab paused in reaching for a job to look at the blonde in shock. "Your team isn't going?" he asked warily. "Just... You and Cobra?"

"Yeah," she nodded. "Erza, Natsu, and Gray were the ones that destroyed everything, and Cobra said he'd take a job with me so I could get my rent paid." After a moment, she giggled. "Probably because he'd have to go with me if I went on a solo mission anyway. But, he should get paid for it, even if he doesn't want to go."

Nab's lips pursed disapprovingly, but he still pulled a mission from the board. "Well, there's this one. Some rich family needs a mage to watch their kid for a night. Pays pretty well, too. But..."

"But, what?"

"Well, I don't know if it would be a good fit for Cobra. Watching someone's kid..."

Lucy frowned and looked back to the Poison Dragon Slayer as he sat at a table with Gajeel. Cobra never really sat with the team, if he could help it, and instead had formed a rather odd friendship with the Iron Slayer. Then again, Lucy had already figured out that their sense of humor was relatively similar. That, and Gajeel wasn't one for being overly chatty, and his table was the quietest one in the guild.

But, would Cobra really be good on a mission that involved a child? Lucy had a hard time believing he would. That is, until she saw Asuka darting through the tables to talk with Gajeel just as the Iron Slayer jumped over it to get in on a guild brawl with Natsu.

Cobra's eye slid to the side when Asuka stopped dead in her tracks, raising an intrigued brow at the defeated slump to her shoulders. "What's up, Sniper?"

She sighed and turned to look at him. "I wanted Gajeel to play."

Cobra nodded in understanding, then looked out across the guild. A small grin stretched over his face as his eyes landed on the guild's resident prankster and Seith mage. He leaned forward on the table, then pointed over to Bickslow and said, "Why don't you ask Bickslow if you can do some target practice? The better your shot gets, the sooner you'll get a pellet gun."

"Yeah," she sighed, "But..."

"But he won't let you, because he doesn't want rocks hitting his totems."

"Yeah..."

Cobra frowned and his eye narrowed while he glared at the table. He wasn't really one for trying to help people - regardless of the fact that he'd done as much for Lucy twice in the span of a couple hours - but he fully supported the little girl in getting in some much needed practice. She was good, but he knew she could be even better. "Could you use something that's not rocks?"

"Well, it weighs different, so it messes with my shot..."

He nodded and looked around the guild again. "Alright, I've got it. Go ask Reedes to make you five targets. Something that won't break when a rock hits it. Take 'em to Bickslow, and ask him if those
little souls can be put in that instead. And bam. Target practice."

Asuka beamed at the Poison Dragon Slayer. "Thanks, Cobra."

"Yeah, yeah. Now quit bothering me," he huffed, watching her turn on her heel and dash across the guild. He had no problem helping the little girl out, but he didn't want her getting the impression that it would be a regular occurrence. And he sure as hell wasn't going to get down on his hands and knees and be a goddamn horse like Natsu had.

"Reedus, Cobra told me to stop bothering him. Will you please make me some targets to play with?"

Cobra smirked when several guild members shot him venomous glares. 'Smart girl…'

Lucy rolled her eyes and turned back to Nab. She might not have been able to hear what Cobra was talking to Asuka about, but the fact that he talked to the little girl in the first place was just precious. No one else seemed to have noticed him holding a conversation with the girl, just that Asuka had said he didn't want to be bothered. When she saw Asuka rushing over to the Raijinshuu's table, targets in hand courtesy of Reedus, and talking to Bickslow, Lucy figured out what happened. A quick glance back to the smug smirk on Cobra's face as he watched Bickslow transferring the little souls into the targets so they could zoom around the guild only confirmed it.

Cobra looked over to the blonde, raising a brow at her.

Lucy rolled her eyes again with a smile. "Very sneaky, Cobra," she silently told him. To Nab, she said, "How much does that job pay?"

"150,000 Jewels," Nab chuckled. "More than enough, right?"

"To watch a kid for the day?" Lucy asked incredulously. "I'd say so."

"Not sure why they want mages, but…" He looked down at the request again, then sighed. "Oh. You have to have music experience. That's kinda weird."

Lucy shrugged. "I do. And, if it's something I don't know, then I can ask Lyra."

"And you really think Cobra will be alright with it? Or… He won't go crazy, will he?"

With a raised brow, Lucy held out her hand for the request. "He'll be fine." Once it was in her hand, she looked down to read the information. The pay was great, even for two people to split. Really, it was a dream come true. At least, it was until she saw the name as she walked back over to the table where Cobra sat.

"Found one?"

Lucy shook her head and sighed, getting ready to turn right back around. "I thought so, but… We can't do this one."

"Why?"

With another heavy sigh, she plopped down on the bench next to Cobra and handed him the request. "Because of the family that's requesting it," she mumbled.

Cobra frowned while reading over the page. The pay was pretty good, considering it would only get split between himself and Lucy. It wasn't too far away, so it wouldn't be that long of a train ride. The name of the family was vaguely familiar, but the job itself had him groaning internally. 'I tell her to
pick a job, and this is what she does... Of course...' He was brought from his inner tirade over the prospect of being a goddamn babysitter when he heard the pain and anger swirling within the blonde by his side.

'Junelle. Why does it have to be that asshole? I don't want anything to do with that pug-faced bastard or his stupid fucking family. God, why couldn't he have just been crushed by a boulder during that seven years we were gone?'

"Okay, what's wrong with this guy?" he asked warily.

Lucy scowled and ran both hands over her face in exasperation. "My father tried to force me to marry Duke Sawarr Junelle seven years ago. He's a fat, sweaty, perverted little twat. And he's the one that bought my family's estate after my father went bankrupt." Just saying the guy's name made her stomach churn, and the thought of being anywhere near him, or his hellspawn, had her considering the very real possibility of just upchucking, Exorcist style. Maybe even masturbating with a crucifix just to make herself barren.

"What the fuck?" Cobra laughed. "I don't know where the hell you just went in your head, but… That was fucking sick." And beautiful. Good lord, did he love what her mind did sometimes.

Lucy smirked weakly at him. "I'll add it to our list of movies, then. The Exorcist is a classic."

Cobra shook his head at that. In the span of a couple weeks, they had spent a little over half of it binge-watching horror movies. "Have I mentioned lately that your taste in movies is way too fucking good?"

"Nope. Not today, at least," she chuckled. "I'll go find-"

"Nah," Cobra interjected. "Let's do it."

"Wh-What?"

He shrugged and pointed to the reward. "That's some damn good money. And it's a whole month's worth of your rent right there."

Yes, Cobra had a very valid point, but Lucy couldn't be anywhere near the Junelle family. It would only end in disaster.

"If you're worried about him starting shit," Cobra muttered, "Just remember you're not going in alone. I have been known to... intimidate... people when the need arises."

"You also tend to poison people," she grumbled. "Cannibalism really is frowned upon in most cultures."

"I wouldn't stoop so low as to eat that fucking pork chop," he scoffed, a wicked grin taking residence on his face. "But why don't we keep that between ourselves?"

Lucy rested her head on one hand while looking at the Poison Dragon Slayer, rolling her eyes with a small smile on her lips. "I guess it would be a good way to show Master that you can do a job with no destruction involved. But... Are you okay with-"

"Don't fucking say it," he sighed. "Yeah, I'll be fine. As long as I'm not touching a fucking diaper, we're good."

"Oh god," she shuddered. "Diapers... No thanks."
"Then get that shit marked down and we'll get outta here."

"You tell the team?" she asked hopefully. Really, she was upset with Erza and the guys, but she didn't think her resolve would hold up long enough to tell them that she wasn't going to take a mission with them. Hell, the only mission she'd taken on her own before this one was when Makarov had sent her to pick up Cobra. And technically, this wasn't a solo mission. Cobra was going to be with her.

"Yeah. Fuckin' wimp," he chuckled.

While Lucy went to get the mission signed off with Mira, and with the barmaid double-checking with Master Makarov that it was alright for Lucy and Cobra to take a mission without the rest of Team Natsu, Cobra walked over to their teammates and simply stood next to Gray at the end of the table.

"Yes, Cobra?" Erza asked between bites of her cake.

"Lucy's taking a job. She wanted me to tell you."

"When are we-" Natsu started to ask, frowning when Cobra rolled his eye.

"You aren't," the maroon-haired mage replied. "I'm going with her, as the only other person on the team that didn't actually cause us to lose the whole reward. We'll be back in a couple days."

"You're joking," Gray snorted. "You?"

"Yep," Cobra smirked. "She doesn't want you there. End of story. So, see ya." He couldn't help but chuckle at the utter silence he'd left the three mages in, or the fact that all three of them were hung up on Lucy not wanting them to join her on a mission. Especially Natsu. His mind was nothing but, 'But we're partners. Is she replacing me? I really upset her. Man, this sucks…' And fuck, didn't that just make it all the more worth it.

"All set?" Lucy asked once she was at the doors to the guild, standing next to Cobra once again.

"Yep," Cobra replied as they started making their way down the street.

"Mmkay, so we'll meet at the train station tomorrow-"

"Or we'll just stop at your place to repack your shit, then crash at mine tonight." He paused in his step when Lucy stumbled, blinking at the blonde. "You do know you're never supposed to go full retard, right?"

"Did…" Lucy whispered as she righted herself. How she'd managed to not faceplant was beyond her. "Did you just ask me to…"

"No, I didn't."

"But-"

"I never asked," he smirked. "I just made a suggestion. There was no question involved."

"A-And… Uh…"

"And you can sleep on the fucking couch," he sighed. "Again, I've slept on your damn couch how many times?"
"True, I just never thought you'd want me actually sleeping at your apartment."

"Me neither, but it's a kooky fucking world we live in."

"Did you just say 'kooky'?" Lucy giggled.

"I did. Blame the Addams Family."

"When did you start watching that?" she asked.

"A couple nights ago. After I got the lacrima television set up. That song has been stuck in my head ever since."

"You poor thing."

"Pretty much," he sighed. As they came to the canal, he watched Lucy jump onto the ledge out of the corner of his eye. "Still wanna know what the nastiest thing I've ever eaten was?"

"Yep," she grinned down at him.

"Carrion."

"As in… dead animals."

"One dead animal. In its entirety."

"You know, technically everyone eats carrion. Steak, bacon, all that…"

"No, I mean vulture level carrion," he chuckled. "That shit was a week old. I actually had to chase a few vultures away from the stupid thing."

"Why would you eat something like that?" she asked. "And how are you still alive?"

"I did it to gross out Angel," he shrugged. "She vomited when she saw the maggots."

Lucy shuddered and looked down at him in horror. "What the fuck…"

He shrugged again, giving the blonde a wide grin as she hopped down to the cobblestone next to him. The fact that she was still able to hone in on the dimples in his cheeks he hadn't known existed, even when she was thoroughly grossed the fuck out, was mind-boggling. And he wouldn't admit that it was the reason he'd done it in the first place. "Midnight bet me three hundred Jewels I wouldn't eat it. Because he said I'd fucking die. Which, I already know he would've thrown my ass to the vultures if I had."

"Lovely…"

"What he hates to admit is that he actually forgot I'm immune to pretty much fucking everything. The lacrima sees anything that's toxic in any way as food."

"How did it taste?" she asked after a moment while they made their way into her apartment building.

"Like a deer that had been dead for a fucking week," he deadpanned. "It was disgusting." It was also the reason that he now got all of his meat cooked well-done. Sure, he could eat it raw, but the consistency was completely different. Anything under medium-well reminded him of the deer he'd eaten, which brought up just how vile it had smelled. "There was fucking pus. And maggots. I don't even wanna think of what else was going on in that shit."
"When you say the whole thing," she started warily, "You mean…"

"Just the meat. I steered clear of the organs," Cobra laughed. "I don't eat that shit to begin with, and there was no way I was gonna go after some festering deer intestines."

"You're a sick little bitch, y'know that?" she laughed.

"Yep."

Lucy rolled her eyes and unlocked the door to her apartment. "Lemme just shower and switch out my clothes, then we'll go."

"Whatever," he sighed, plopping down into the spot he'd commandeered as his own on her couch. 

"There's a jar of apple seeds in the fridge, if you want them," Lucy called out as she walked into the bathroom. "I've been saving them. Figured you might want some cyanide every once in awhile without paying out the ass for it."

Cobra blinked in surprise as the door closed, then turned toward the kitchen. It took everything in him to not just outright run to the refrigerator, but once he had the jar of apple seeds in his hand, he let out a quiet laugh while shaking his head. He knew the blonde was smart, that much was obvious from the get-go since he could hear her soul, but the random shit that she knew astounded him more often than not. Like the fact that apple seeds contained cyanide.

He made his way back to the couch, popping a handful of seeds in his mouth as he went, and found himself quietly lounging as time ticked on. When Lucy came back out, maybe fifteen minutes later, wrapped in just a towel, he nearly choked. It had become a rather common sight for the Poison Dragon Slayer to see her in next to no clothing since that first night he'd slept on her couch - considering just how often her clothing got destroyed during her day-to-day life - but this… 'God, I really don't need more spank bank material... But, I'm not complaining.'

From her slightly flushed cheeks, reddened from the intense heat of her shower, to the too-small towel wrapped around her. How her hand clutched at the small knot in the fabric just between her breasts. The slight elevation of her heart rate when she caught him looking her way. Long, slender legs and little glittery painted toes. He took it all in, in only a single glance before returning his gaze to the screen. Still, that was more than enough. And, even if it wasn't, the thoughts running rampant in the blonde's head sure as hell were.

'Why didn't I bring clothes into the bathroom with me? I don't need Cobra, of all people, seeing me like this. Shit... But he looks so comfy on the couch, all sprawled out like that... I could just straddle him, throw off my towel and... NO! Do not want! Bad touch, Lucy! Oh god, his shirt rode up a little. Fuck, his skin looks like caramel. Delicious... Lickable... Caram - NO! Fuck me... I'm so screwed...'

His lips quirked only slightly, and he grabbed another couple seeds from his open palm to slowly push them between his lips while looking back at the blonde, seeming for all the world that he was bored out of his mind. Cobra sure as hell hadn't meant to let her see his stomach, even the small sliver of it that was showing because his shirt had ridden up when he'd scratched it at some point, but it was more than worth it to hear her thoughts on the matter.

"Just a couple more minutes," Lucy smiled weakly, forcing her perverse desires back down where they belonged, under lock and key, heavily guarded by a cerberus that was frothing at the mouth.

"Uh-huh," Cobra muttered. "Better hurry up. I wanna be sitting down for the marathon in half an
"What marathon?" she called out while walking toward her bedroom.

"Child's Play. Crazy killer ginger doll. Looked pretty fucked up. How many are there?"

Lucy smiled while pulling on her underwear and clasp her bra. "Six in total. Child's Play one through three are horror, then the next two switched to satire and humor with more of a B-rated horror feel. I haven't seen the new one yet, but I hear they went back to strictly horror for it."

"Looks like the first three tonight."

"Y'know, we could just take the movies to your place," Lucy said as she walked out after getting dressed to get her bag, a pile of folded clothes already in hand. "They're up on the shelf. No commercials that way."

"If you want. We'll have to stop and pick up a player though," he shrugged. "I still haven't gotten one yet."

"If you've got the money, and you want to, then sure," she smiled. "I don't mind either way."

Cobra glanced at the clock, then shook his head. "I'll pick one up when we come back. It's getting late."

When Lucy turned to see that the clock only read four in the afternoon, she found herself laughing. "You sound like an old man."

"You do realize I'm about seven years older than you, right?"

"Not the point," she giggled. For all they knew, Cobra was only a few years older than her by that point since she'd lost time on Tenrou. He didn't really know how old he was, and he did look rather young back in X784.

He watched the blonde zip her bag closed, and definitely kept watching as she walked down the hall with her dirty clothes to put them in the hamper. 'Denim should not look edible, goddamnit...' With a sigh, he put the rest of the seeds he hadn't eaten back in the jar then took it to the kitchen. "Bring a jacket," he said when he heard her running through what she'd packed, making sure she wasn't forgetting anything. "It's cold as fuck outside."

"It's only seventy out there," Lucy laughed, grabbing a jacket anyway and draping it over her arm.

"True." He smirked while leaning against the door to her apartment, watching as she gathered her bag and made her way over to him. "But it'll get colder, and you're not using mine."

"Chivalry is truly dead," she sighed dramatically.

"With chivalry comes misogyny," he mused. The pair walked out of the apartment and down the stairs, and he smirked once they were outside and Lucy paused to put her jacket on. "Because opening doors for a woman, or freezing your ass off just so she can be warm, also means saying she's incapable of handling that shit herself."

"You're a true gentleman, then."

"But, of course," Cobra smirked. "Far be it from me to look down on someone because they have an underdeveloped penis and internal testicles."
"Well, of course! Why would someone do that?"

"Idiocy, most likely," Cobra replied. "So, I think you understand why I'm telling you to fuck the fuck off about my damn jacket."

Lucy smirked while glancing at the maroon-haired Slayer out of the corner of her eye. "I guess so. I'm rather fond of opening my own doors. And fur just isn't my thing anyway."

"But offering your cookies up on a platter is," Cobra chuckled, smacking her hand away when she swatted at him. "No denying it. I've lost count on the crotch-shots I've gotten."

"Purely accidental," she groused.

"Uh-huh. You have quite the lace collection, nice array of colors."

"They were!" she insisted with a scowl. "Every time!"

"Right, well you'd just better hope your underwear holds up next time it happens. Because I don't need to be scarred for life from actually seeing that roast beef sandwich."

"You really think a vagina will scar you for life?" she laughed. "Really?" The sight of Cobra grinning that too-perfect grin, dimples and all, had her inner pervert swooning.

"Yours might."

"There's nothing wrong with my vagina!" Lucy shouted, her mouth clamping shut with a pop when an elderly woman gasped in horror as she passed them. "Oh my god, what is wrong with me today..."

"Speaking of..." Cobra laughed. It seemed that day was a good day for him. He was feeling oddly humorous.

"Speaking of what?"

"Roast beef."

"Ew, Cobra!"

"Not that," he chuckled. "I've got some in the fridge. We're having roast beef for dinner."

"We?"

He nodded, fiddling with the keys in his pocket. "Yep, and red potatoes and steamed something or other. Possibly broccoli. Maybe rolls, if I have some."

"I didn't realize you knew how to cook."

"There's a lot you don't know about me, Tinkerbell," he smirked. The fact that she simply smiled back at him was enough for him to know that he was going to have to keep a close eye on the blonde. More like on himself, when he thought about it, and not letting the little one-eyed bastard downstairs run itself face first between her legs. The last thing Cobra needed was that clusterfuck messing with his life. And that smile of hers, just had his dick wriggling itself to life in his pants.

"Apparently being a secret chef is one of these many things?" Lucy asked.

"Well, I don't know about all that," Cobra answered while he opened the door to his apartment
"But I can at least feed myself without burning the kitchen down."

"Then you're leagues ahead of Natsu." After a moment, Lucy laughed and added, "And Erza. Gray too, when I think about it."

"The walking popsicle burnt down a kitchen?"

"Almost, but he froze it to put out the flames…"

"Your poor kitchen…"

Lucy sighed as he opened the door to the apartment, a small smile on her lips when she smelled the cleaning products Cobra used on every surface imaginable. "How often do you clean this place? It's practically sparkling."

"Whenever I'm bored."

"So… Constantly?"

"Yep," he smirked. "Food will be ready in a couple hours. Get the television set up?"

Lucy nodded after setting her bag down by the couch and locking the door. The fact that she was going to be staying at Cobra's apartment was still odd, but she was just going to get over it. And she wasn't even going to fight him on the fact that he was making dinner for the both of them. Whether it was because he was planning on making that for himself to begin with, or because she was also there, she wasn't sure.

Regardless, if Cobra wanted to help her, then she was going to just shut her trap and accept it. It wasn't like he offered to help just anyone, after all.

Cobra smirked as he pulled out a roasting pan and set the temperature on the oven. While it was true that he didn't really offer to help anyone, the fact that Lucy was actually listening to his advice had his ass preening like a damn peacock. At least there was someone out there that trusted his judgment on things, not taking into account his Soul Listening magic. "You can help, if you want," he called out.

"R-Really?"

He looked up as she carefully peeked around the corner. "I've had your cooking. I trust you." The way Lucy blushed and ducked her head had him pausing in chopping the potatoes for only a moment. 'Yeah, I'll definitely need to keep my dick in check…' He watched as she edged further into the small kitchen, then turned the knife so the handle was facing toward her. "Quarter these. I'll get the meat."

"Sure," she smiled. Maybe hanging around Cobra wasn't such a bad thing.

"You do know what a quarter is, right?" he smirked.

Lucy sighed and rolled her eyes. Then again, maybe he was going to put her in an early grave. 'Asshole…'

Deep blue eyes slid open wearily as metal against metal creaked and groaned somewhere in the distance. Maybe it was closer, but she couldn't tell. Once silvery hair, now a dull grey and clinging together in oily chunks, blurred her vision just as much as her malnourishment. She dared not speak,
already knowing that her voice would only come out as a simple rasp. A small gasp sounded out somewhere closer, and the woman slowly moved her head along the floor to get a better look at where the noise had come from.

What she hadn't been expecting was for a woman to be standing just on the other side of the bars to her cell.

"Angel of the Oracion Seis, correct?" the nurse asked, her brow pinched in concern.

Angel blinked in response, then forced herself to nod. She didn't have the strength for much else right then. "W-Water… Please…"

Karina, the same nurse that had cleaned up Cobra before he was released a month prior, looked around the cell in disgust. It was obvious that the cell itself hadn't been cleaned in months, and it looked as though even Angel was sorely in need of bathing. The sight of a dirty, ratty, canvas dress of some sort being the only covering the prisoner was provided made Karina's stomach churn.

The fact that Angel's dress was very obviously torn, with small sections from the bottom hem missing and sitting in a pile in the corner, soaked with blood and simply discarded, made Karina's blood boil. It didn't take a genius to see that the woman was only doing what she could to handle that time of the month with what was available to her.

This was vile. Revolting. Inhumane.

"P-Please," Angel whimpered. "I'm so hungry… S-So thirsty…"

"I don't have keys to your cell," Karina sighed. "But, the guards should be by soon with food and water-"

A dry, humorless laugh left the prisoner as she forced her weary body to lift from the floor. The fact that she could feel a small bit of blood dripping down the inside of her thigh went mostly unnoticed as she directed a dark glare to the woman. There wasn't anything she could do about the fact that she was on her period. Unless she decided to use one of the already bloodied rags torn from her own clothing. Or tore more of her dress. The guards got to see enough of her body in passing, as it was. They didn't also need to see her naked.

"You think they feed me regularly?" Angel spat. "Look at that plate over there."

Karina's eyes lowered to a small metal plate just inside the cell, right by the door. A single slice of moldy bread, green and white and far too fuzzy. What looked like it had once been a piece of meat, now hardened to the point of being a viable bludgeoning weapon. "What is this?"

"They brought that for me last week," Angel whispered. "Left it right there…" She carefully stood and walked to the end of the chain she'd been trapped with, the ankle that held the heavy shackle bruised but thankfully not rubbed raw. Once she'd reached the full length, she raised a brow at the woman, with still a good ten feet between her and the door to the cell. "I can't reach it. They make me just look at it. I get a cup of water every three days. They brought the water yesterday."

Karina watched in horror as Angel lifted a small clay cup that was hardly bigger than her cupped hands, then tipped it over to show it was already empty. "This isn't right," she gasped.

"I'm a prisoner," Angel shot back angrily. "What do you expect?"

"You're not an animal!"
"Me?" she laughed. "No. Cobra is though."

"Cobra," Karina whispered with a frown.

"Yeah," Angel laughed cruelly. "Tan, pointy ears, red hair, one eye. You'd better hope you never have to deal with him. Midnight might have been the leader last time around, but Cobra's the real psycho in the group. He actually ate a week-old deer carcass, just because he could."

Karina's mouth opened and closed for a moment before she shook her head. It wasn't up to her to decide whether or not people were really stable enough to be paroled, as Cobra had been. No, her job was caring for those in need. Tending to the prisoners' wounds, helping them be as comfortable as possible. "I'm going to file a complaint," she finally said.

"Won't do you any good," Angel sighed, sliding down the wall and wincing while rubbing her hand over her stomach to try and ease her cramps. "No one cares about us. Do you have any idea how many people want us dead?"

"That's not my concern," the nurse scowled. "What is my concern are the horrendous conditions you're being kept in. Prisoner or not, you-"

"Don't you get it?" Angel hissed. "Complain all you want, no one cares. And no one will come to check it out."

"Captain Lahar will," Karina said in an instant.

"Yeah? Why's that…"

"Because when I was helping your friend Cobra get cleaned up, he'd been shocked by the guards. They abused him further, right in front of me, and I made a complaint. Captain Lahar knows about it, and if I tell him about this as well, I just know he'll come check for himself."

Angel's eyes narrowed at the mention of the Poison Dragon Slayer. "Why were you cleaning him up?"

"I-I'm not sure I can say," the nurse whispered uncomfortably. Really, she'd said too much already. "Just, I was asked to make him presentable. He had a visitor, and he needed to be bathed."

"You…" Angel's eyes widened as she gaped at the woman. "You touched him… His skin…"

"Well, yes."

"And you're still alive?"

"He wasn't in much of a position to fight back," Karina sighed with a sad smile. "If anything, he seemed almost… thankful… that I was washing him."

Angel was silent for a time, staring down at her hands, then she looked back to the nurse just outside of her cell. "If… If you make a complaint, and if Lahar does come… I want you here."

"M-Me?" Karina gasped.

Angel nodded then. "You seem to care at least a little. If something actually happens…"

Karina smiled and nodded quickly. "I'll be going now, Angel. And I'll be back."

"Yeah," Angel whispered, closing her eyes and resting her head heavily on the wall behind her. She
listened to the woman's footsteps fade into the distance, a small smile pulling up the corners of her mouth. 'A visitor, Cobra?' she wondered. 'Does that mean you got out of here? I hope you'll come for us. And... When you do... We'll kill all these bastards, just like we talked about.'
Cobra's eye opened slowly, his vision blurred by the blood trickling down his forehead. His other eye was already unusable. His wrists and ankles throbbed as the thick magic-cancelling shackles cut into them. Early January air cut through the mostly non-existent insulation of the room he'd been locked in for the last few hours.

The door behind him opened, sending another gust of frozen wind and a small flurry of snowflakes swirling into the small space. The chill in the air was worsened by his lack of clothing, but that was the last thing Cobra was really worried about.

The chains were loosened and his weakened body crumpled to the ground. Once his knees scraped the gravel beneath him, with Cobra biting his lips to keep from crying out, he glared up into black eyes that were gleaming with anger.

"You might want to rethink fighting me."

"Fuck you!" Cobra snarled as his head was roughly yanked to one side, his eye widening as he heard a zipper and his jaw was forced open by thick, calloused fingers.

"You're not good enough, Cobra. But we'll remedy that soon enough."

"Stop it!" Cobra hated that he whimpered in fear. "Don't make me do this!" His mouth was suddenly filled and he gagged. "Sick fuck! That's disgusting!"

"You want the whip again? Maybe I'll tighten those shackles some more." His grip on Cobra's face tightened. "Do it, or she dies!"

Cobra gagged as he was roughly pulled forward, feeling bile rising in his throat. Tears spilled down his cheeks, and there was nothing he could do to stop them. His head was pulled back and he gulped down precious air, listening to his chains rattling. "P-Please… Stop…"

He grunted as a boot connected with his ribs, doubling him over. A second kick had a resounding crack filling the air and pain blossoming through his chest and back.

His chains were loosened and he fell, his head colliding with the gravel floor and making him see spots. "Get away f-from me…"

A dark chuckle sounded as his assailant moved behind the Slayer on the ground. His hips were lifted and his sobbing pleas were cut off by a bloodcurdling scream as searing, ripping pain shot through his body, broad hips planted against his backside.

"I-It hurts! S-Stop!"

He screamed again, his breaths ragged and shuddering.

"I fucking hate you!"

"Good," the black-irised man laughed. "Do you want someone to love you? Because that's not something you'll ever have. You don't deserve it, you piece of shit. You never will. Look at you. Look in the mirror! See that?"

Cobra's head was wrenched to the side, forcing him to look in a cracked mirror on the wall. To see
what little dignity he'd had being ripped away from him as the tattooed body that pinned him to the ground continued to move.

"That's what you're good for… Go ahead and cry. Little slave boy… That's all you'll ever be. My slave. Do you understand?"

Cobra's eye widened as he caught sight of a small flogger with sharp barbs on the ends. "I'm a g-grown man," he sobbed. "You can't do th-" His words were garbled with an agonized roar as the leather cracked over his scarred back, the barbs digging into him and ripping into his flesh. "S-Stop! You're hurting me!"

He lost count of how many times he was hit.

"B-Brain… Stop… N-No more!" He cried out again over Brain's low, sensual groans. "I'm s-sorry! I won't do it again!" he sobbed.

Brain paused, grinning darkly as he snapped Cobra's arm in half.

"I'll do whatever you want!" Cobra cried. He didn't care that there were cuts on his face from the gravel. "A-Anything! Just stop… Please!"

Brain's movements halted. "... Anything?"

Cobra was already too weak to fight back. He knew it was pointless to try, but his body seemed to disagree. He clawed at the ground, trying to pull away, only to scream as the flogger came down on his broken arm.

"Time's running out, Cobra. How long do you think she'll last like this?"

"A-Anything," Cobra said urgently. "Anything you want! Just stop… Please don't h-hurt her…"

"I'm in luck then, little slave…" Brain laughed as he crushed the tan, bloody body to the ground, his hips moving more insistently.

"No!"

"This is what I want from you. Scream for me, you bastard." Brain didn't have to ask twice. Cobra screamed until his throat was raw. "Oh look, you're bleeding… Let's make sure you're nice and sore. You won't walk for days…"

The sounds of slapping skin and Cobra's tormented cries filled the air.

"Fuck, that feels good…"

Cobra's body was limp, even as he was lifted into Brain's lap. 'No…' he thought, 'I don't want this… Please… Someone kill me… Kill me… I wish I was dead…'

His head was lifted, forcing him to look in the mirror as his arms were pulled taut over his head by his shackles. 'Don't make me look… No… I don't want to see this… He's right… I don't deserve love… I'm not good for anything… I'm worthless… Just make the pain stop… It hurts so much…'

'Oh god, I really am bleeding… That's too much blood… I'm gonna die… Thank god… I can't live like this…'

'I wish I was back in the Tower…'
He was left alone in the room once Brain was finished with him, shivering and only able to see his battered reflection. The blood he felt streaming down his back, mixing with the milky fluid running down his thighs. Bruises and cuts all over his body. Tear tracks on his cheeks and one eye swollen shut from his previous beating. A bone protruding from his broken arm.

'Someone save me… Anyone…'

The door opened again, and Cobra's head lifted to find Midnight staring down at him. They locked gazes for several breaths, and he found fresh tears welling in his eyes when his old friend blinked and turned to leave.

"Cubellios is in the freezer," Midnight said flatly. He paused and tossed the keys to Cobra's shackles on the ground just in front of the freezing Slayer. "My father says you can get her out now."

His voice wouldn't work, so all he could do was watch as the door closed, leaving him in the dark once again.

'No one will save me… No one cares…'

He shuffled forward slightly and fought the bring the keys closer so he could pick them up.

'I'm just a slave…'

Once he was able to stand, Cobra ignored the bone protruding from his arm and made his way out of the shed. He barely remembered to grab a thin blanket to cover himself while rushing out to get to his only friend.

'No one will ever care about me…'

By the time he reached the freezer, she was hardly moving. "C-Cubellios," he sobbed, pulling her from it and taking her out into the woods just behind the Oracion Seis' compound. He wrapped her in blankets he'd gathered and built a quick fire.

As he tried to run his hands over the large purple snake to return warmth to her, his tears continued. "I'm so sorry… I'll never let him hurt you again… I'm sorry…"

'I was so stupid… I'll do whatever he wants… Please, don't die…'

"I love you, Cubellios," he sniffed. "Please, don't leave me all alone… Don't leave me…"

Lucy nibbled her lip while sitting on the edge of Cobra's bed, her brow pinched while looking down at his peacefully sleeping face in the pre-dawn light coming from between his drapes. "Cobra," she whispered gently to rouse him.

When he didn't respond, she threw caution to the wind and lightly placed her hand on his upper arm, then nudged him. "Cobra?"

Cobra's eye shot open and he was instantly aware of someone else being in the same room as him. The pressure on his shoulder was too much. With a vicious snarl, he sat up and lunged, not seeing just who it was that he was attacking.

Lucy's eyes were wide and fear-filled as his hand clamped around her throat. The way his pointed teeth were bared, the rage in his eye that burned with the intensity of the sun, had the blonde fruitlessly slapping at his face and arms. Her legs kicked wildly on either side of his body, and she
gagged as his grip tightened.

She'd never once felt fear quite like this before, but Lucy was sure it had something to do with the
general lack of oxygen she was getting. Her vision was spotted and hazy, her hits growing weaker,
and she barely made out the sight of Cobra's free hand lifting into the air while his fingers shifted into
poisoned claws.

"Cobra!" she shouted internally. "Cobra, stop! Please!"

'Don't kill me! Please, don't let me die... Not now. Please... Please!'

Cobra's grip loosened slightly as he woke up a little more. His mind was assaulted by fear, not his
own but someone else's. Splashes of red and violet and yellow clashed violently, nearly deafening
him. Slender fingers brushing over his cheek in a severely weakened slap had his eye coming into
focus.

'Can't breathe... Please... Stop, Cobra. I'm sorry!'

He sneered and lowered his free hand to the bed while he allowed the blonde to breathe - but
keeping his hand in place on her throat - his scales shifting back to his normal, scarred skin. He
recognized her scent, roses and morning dew, and knew it wasn't that bastard Brain. He mostly
ignored Lucy's coughing fit, instead focusing on making his own ragged breaths a little more even.

"C-Cobra?" she wheezed.

"What the fuck are you doing in here?" he growled.

"I-I just..." She shuddered at the sudden, deeper pitch of his voice, feeling his fingers that were still
on her throat tightening in his agitation.

"Don't ever just walk into my room while I'm asleep. Understand, you ditzy fucking blonde?" When
her mouth opened, he roughly clamped his hand over it. Whether she could breathe through her nose
wasn't his concern right then. She thought about pulling away, fighting back, and his fingers dug into
her cheeks.

Lucy whimpered in pain as his head lowered. A thick shaft of dread speared through to her soul
when he spoke again.

"Remember: I'm a fucking criminal. A murderer. I've tortured people for less than invading my
personal space. This shit is a line you're never crossing again, Tinkerbell," he spat.

All she could do was nod, as quickly as possible.

"Good. I don't care that you wanted to know if it was alright to cook breakfast. Next time, you either
wait for me to wake up, or fucking knock and wait for me to answer. Because I won't promise you'll
come out alive if you do this shit again."

Lucy nodded again. When he moved his hand, she took a steadying breath, then flushed brilliantly
when she realized how they're laying on the bed. His thin hips were spreading her legs open, and he
was lying with most of his weight pressing her into the bed. She didn't want to believe that he would
push her any further than the position they were in, but she was terrified that she'd find out how
wrong she was.

"I should kill you for this," he hissed.
'Oh my god, he feels so good like this… Better than I'd imagined…' Lucy's fingers reached up and sifted through the hair hanging over his eyes, pulling him down forcefully to slam his lips over hers.

A dark chuckle left Cobra as he picked up Eros drifting through some fantasy. He could tell that Lucy wasn't even aware of what was going on in that part of her soul, since she was trembling and the scent of her fear was crawling up into his sinuses. And his laughter only made a scared whimper crackle in her bruising throat.

Slowly, Cobra pulled away from the blonde, internally smirking when her breath naturally hitched as his hips pressed against her for a moment. It hadn't been intentional, and he wasn't - by any stretch of the imagination - turned on, but that was still a reaction he appreciated. Still, he was on the verge of breaking right the fuck down, and it was taking everything in him to keep his body under control. "Get the fuck out of my room."

Lucy was silent as she scrambled off the bed, barely able to stand on her wobbling legs. "Sorry," she whispered while rushing out of the room, closing the door behind her.

Cobra sighed and rubbed his hands over his face once he heard the blonde crying in the living room, pulling back and watching as his fingers began to shake. He collapsed back onto the bed, pulling his blanket up over his shoulders and wrapping it tightly around his trembling body.

The images in his nightmare hadn't left him. They never did. He wished it was just that, just a nightmare, but he would be lying if he said that's all it was. He didn't want to remember the shit Brain did to him, how he and the other Seis were tortured and broken to fit into their roles as his slaves. Or the day he'd nearly lost Cubellios because he hadn't attacked Racer with everything he had during training.

Cobra curled up, bringing his knees to his chest as his breath quickened. His arms wrapped around his stomach; hopefully, to hold back from vomiting. All of the fear he'd been holding back in favor of his anger swelled until he couldn't stop it.

"He's locked up," he whispered urgently. "I'm free now…"

He could feel every hit he'd taken that day. Taste everything. Smell the blood and lust in the air. How the gravel had ground into his knees. The throbbing pain of where his arm was broken before.

"I'm free… It's okay…"

He could feel how cold her scales had been. Still see Midnight standing in the doorway. The lacerations all over his back from the flogger. The burning pain from where Brain had breached him.

"He can't hurt me anymore…"

A quiet whimper sounded in his clogged throat, and Cobra's arms pressed into his stomach more insistently. A nearly silent snuffle was muffled by his blanket.

He could hear Brain's laughter as though the bastard was right behind him.

"J-Just breathe… It's over… Breathe…"

Cobra lifted a hand to tightly grip his hair, his eye clamped shut while he buried his face in the pillow and cried for the first time since losing Cubellios.

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Lucy curled up on the couch, wrapping the blanket Cobra had given her to use around herself and
rubbing at her sore throat. Her keys were behind the couch, sitting in her bag where her spirits couldn't help her.

She didn't care that she was crying right then, and was instead stuck on thinking that she was an absolute idiot. She had gotten more comfortable with the Poison Dragon Slayer over the past month. Sure, he upset her a good bit by being a jerk, but the time they'd spent together just watching movies or having the odd meal where he wasn't trying to piss her off… She'd let her guard down and started believing that his bark was worse than his bite most of the time.

Now she knew better. She'd gotten her wakeup call, and couldn't stop herself from getting just a little hysterical in her crying. This was what she got for letting her guard down with him.

'I wish Gajeel was here,' she thought after crying for far too long. She wasn't sure just how long it had been, but the sun was definitely a higher in the sky. 'His hugs always make me feel better… Even when I have a nightmare, he…'

Lucy's shoulders hunched a little further when the couch beside her shifted. Hesitantly, she lifted her head to look at the Poison Slayer next to her, sitting with his arms around his waist and his knees pulled up to his chest. Just like she was.

"It makes you feel better?" Cobra asked with a frown, his gaze distant.

Lucy sniffled and roughly swiped away her tears, then nodded while looking back to the blanket around her. It was pointless. More just replaced them, and she couldn't even begin to stop sobbing right then.

Cobra glanced at the blonde out of the corner of his eye. "You have nightmares a lot?"

"S-Some…" The answer halted as she pulled in a shuddering breath, burying her face in the blanket around her.

"Sometimes?" A heavy sigh rushed past his thinned lips when she nodded again. "Don't wake me up like that again," he muttered. "Ever."

"S-Sorry…"

"You didn't know…" The least he could do was to try to be a little on the understanding side. When he thought about it, her hand was in a place that she was normally allowed to touch him, and she was being gentle while trying to wake him up. She'd technically done everything right, and if he hadn't been dreaming about that day, and hadn't been so spooked and ready to rip Brain's throat out, Cobra knew he wouldn't have attacked Lucy the way he had.

He could hear just how scared she was of him right then, though. And he hated that he didn't really want her to feel like that. He should want her to be scared of him, but hearing her seemingly never-ending sobs and feeling the tremors still wracking her body through the couch while she just broke right the hell down, had him frowning more than he was. "Stay still."

She sniffled again and looked at him curiously, but didn't move. The last thing Lucy wanted to do was piss Cobra off more. When he uncurled himself and started to move closer to her, her eyes widened and she shrunk further into the corner of the couch.

Cobra found himself kneeling next to the blond, nearly glaring down into her widened, mocha eyes. He'd never done this before, and he wasn't sure what was compelling him to do it then, but he slowly lifted his arms and wrapped them around her.
Lucy blinked where her face was pressed against Cobra's chest. Her tears soaked into his shirt. This had to be the most awkward hug she'd ever experienced. He was stiff, rigid, like he had never seen people hugging and had never done it himself. Really, she refused to believe that was the case. Still, it was kind of hard to ignore with one of his arms around her head and the other around her shoulders. Or how he wasn't curling around her, but just sitting there like a stiff board.

Cobra winced as her shoulder dug into his ribs, and lowered his arms to lightly wrap around her shoulders when he heard what she was thinking about. The downside to hugging the blonde, among many, was that he had to hide the fact that he was still freaked right the fuck out over his nightmare. She didn't need to know about that. No one did.

Still, he'd heard her thinking about needing a hug. He'd heard her memories of the times Gajeel had hugged her when she was upset, and how it had made her feel better. Less alone. Less terrified. Cobra needed that as much as he needed air, some way to make him stop sobbing like a little wimp in his bed. Anything.

"Cobra?"

"Shut up."

Lucy's brow furrowed when she felt a barely perceptible shudder run through him. Her head was still on his chest, so she slowly tilted it to look up at him. She wasn't even going to dwell on how good he smelled, or what it felt like to be able to hear his heart beating. Contrary to popular belief, Cobra did have one, but that was when she realized it was racing. "Is s-something wrong?"

Cobra looked deeply into her eyes, his jaw clenching. "Nothing," he lied.

'Bullshit. I can feel it. He's freaked out over something.'

He let out a shaky sigh when her puffy eyes narrowed. It seemed that giving her something else to focus on was helping her stop crying so fucking much. "You…" Cobra paused and pulled her head back to his chest, not willing to even let her see him. "You woke me up from a nightmare," he whispered. "And I scared the shit outta you."

"You… had a nightmare?"

"Yep."

Lucy frowned. "If it scared you, I don't even wanna know…"

"Good…"

The corners of her lips slowly lifted when he trembled again and shifted into what she could only assume was a more comfortable position for him. It was a whole lot more comfortable for her, that was for sure. "You give nice hugs," she sniffled. "But something is missing…"

Cobra tensed when Lucy started to move. "Just stay there," he whispered. "I don't want you touching me."

"Oh… okay…" She'd wanted to be able to hug him back, because it was the 'being held' part that helped her feel better. Lucy hadn't expected Cobra to tell her anything about what was bothering him, but she knew that if a nightmare was able to scare him, of all people, then she was sure it was bad. She just wanted to be able to comfort him, like he was doing for her.

That thought was weird for her though. Cobra was actually comforting her.
"Don't get used to this," Cobra whispered, his eye closing and his cheek resting on top of her head. "I'm not a cuddler..." It seemed that he'd finally found the most comfortable position to hold her, both for himself and Lucy, by nearly pulling the blonde into his lap and pushing one hand into her hair while the other gently wound around her shoulders.

In that moment all he could picture was a fucking octopus. It's what he felt like, being wrapped around the blonde the way he was. And that, in itself, made him realize that her crazy was rubbing off on him.

"Damn," Lucy laughed quietly. "I was hoping."

"Finish that, and I'll fucking poison you," he growled.

Lucy sniffled again, but her tears had stopped and she was suddenly finding herself smiling. "Alright," she whispered. "I won't get used to this. And mum's the word that it happened in the first place. I know..."

Cobra nodded, discreetly taking in her roses and dew scent while they sat in silence. He was left wondering what it would really be like if Lucy had wrapped her arms around him like she'd wanted to, but he knew that wouldn't happen. Shit like that would only lead to her getting attached to him in some way, and he definitely didn't need that.

It was after several long minutes that Lucy had completely relaxed, and Cobra had finally gotten his shit together, that he pulled back.

Lucy gave him a small smile when their eyes met. "Feeling better?"

He didn't necessarily feel better, but he'd had enough time to bury everything so he could look at her without the blonde being any the wiser to just how messed up he really was. Instead of sticking around though, he got up from the couch and started making his way toward the kitchen. "Omelettes for breakfast," he muttered over his shoulder. "You're doing the dishes."

Lucy watched him walk out of the room, crossing his arms over his chest, and sighed in resignation. Maybe it had been wishful thinking, but part of her thought that maybe Cobra had opened up a little bit by hugging her. Instead, he was very obviously closing himself off again.

Still, it was weird that he'd even hugged her in the first place. Weird but... Nice. Well, once Cobra had sorted out the mechanics of hugging, she guessed.

"You can hug me whenever you want, Cobra," she silently told him, getting up from the couch to head to the bathroom and get her shower done before breakfast. "I don't mind."

The Poison Slayer smirked while pulling eggs from the refrigerator. 'Don't get your hopes up,' he thought; although, he couldn't be sure if it was directed at the blonde or himself.

Cobra tossed his pack into the corner of the bench before sitting down, listening as Lucy closed the door behind her. He was more than thankful that they had been able to get a private compartment on the train, but he already knew that it was simply a requirement when you were traveling with a Dragon Slayer as prone to projectile vomiting as Natsu. It seemed the train station was more than happy to just eat the cost of the more expensive tickets to keep the rest of the passengers happy... and vomit-less.

Once they were seated, Lucy started fiddling with her fingers. They still had a couple minutes before the train would leave. "Cobra?"
"Hm."

She winced and peeked up at him through her bangs. "I'm sorry about this morning…"

"You're good." He pulled out a stick of gum and started chewing slowly to combat the pre-ride nausea he was feeling.

"I just didn't think it'd be that bad, y'know?" she mumbled while taking a seat. "I mean, you're okay with me touching your arm and-"

"I said you're good," Cobra growled, glaring at her.

"O-Okay…"

He sighed and rolled his eye as the conductor made the announcement for last call before they left the station. "Look, Jugs. You've gotta remember I was in prison for a long fucking time. Someone touching me when I wake up… What I did this morning is a learned habit."

Lucy blinked and drew back with a frown, then slowly tilted her head to one side while she considered just what he was telling her. "I guess that makes sense," she finally whispered.

"Good, now drop it. We're not gonna hug it out if you start fucking crying again." He wasn't going to tell Lucy that, while it was a learned habit to attack anyone touching him when he woke up, it wasn't from prison. He'd had that beaten into him well before the Seis had ever gotten arrested the first time.

The train began to move and Cobra groaned when he realized that it would be nearly night by the time they got to Shirotsume. Still, he wasn't going to complain. He and Lucy got enough of that whiny baby bullshit when they were with Natsu.

Lucy frowned after watching, out of the corner of her eye while reading a book, Cobra shift uncomfortably in the bench opposite her for a solid hour. After a second hour with him going through three packs of gum, she'd finally had enough.

The train was rocking more than usual, and when she stood up to close the blinds over the little window in the door to their compartment, she nearly fell. Cobra, however, was proud as hell. And he was starting to sweat. Really, he looked like he was going to be sick, but she already knew that he was neither going to admit to it, nor was he going to run to the bathroom to throw up. And, even though it was frustrating, she knew he wouldn't want anyone to see him looking like this.

Cobra peeked his eye open when Lucy flipped the small sign on their door to 'Do Not Disturb' - usually used for slumbering passengers - and he swallowed his gum while she kept her back to him. It was probably a bad habit to just swallow the shit when he was done with it, but he really wasn't one for sticking gum places when he didn't have a trash can.

'Should I… for the best… maybe… but then… rip my face off… Or maybe… Do it… Still…'

He frowned at the speed her thoughts were switching, growing a little more dizzy when he tried to focus and pick just one train of thought out. It was fucking nauseating trying to sort through her head right then.

Lucy turned and smiled at the sight of Cobra's closed eye, a small pinch appearing in his sweat-dotted brow.

When the blonde took a seat next to him, still keeping a fair bit of space between them, Cobra's eye
shot open into a baleful glare. "What do you think…” The train rumbled and his voice cut off as bile rose in his throat.

Lucy's smile widened in understanding and she gently rested her hand on his shoulder. "You really feel like shit, huh?"

His eye rolled. "No shit…"

The train rocked again and the two mages were tossed to one side of the bench. Cobra landed between her legs with his face pressed into her (for once) t-shirt covered stomach. Lucy was pushed against the opposite wall, staring at the sprawled Slayer with wide eyes.

His hands brushed over her thighs as he tried to push himself up, and Lucy found herself giggling when he moved only an inch before collapsing with a quiet groan of discomfort. She was suddenly extremely thankful that she'd only packed clothes that were appropriate for watching a child, because a mini-skirt in that scenario would have killed her.

Still, she couldn't help but find the situation a little humorous. Especially when she tried to look down to see how he was doing, only to get an eyeful of her chest. "Cobra? Where did you go?" she laughed.

"I'm right here, you… Nghh…" He slowly looked up and found the underside of Lucy's more than generous bust obscuring his view of what he already knew was her stupid shit-eating grin. "F-Fuck you…"

"But I can't see you," Lucy mused. "I guess we're playing hide and seek?" She looked one way, then the other. Up to the ceiling, and even shifted slightly to look at the floor. Finally, she pushed her breasts down and grinned at the sight of his single amethyst eye glaring up at her. "Peek-a-boo! I found you!"

"That was… Just kill your - urrk…"

She shook her head with a quiet sigh. "Do you need some help getting up?"

Cobra considered nodding, and he was ready to do just that when he took another slow breath and pulled in more of Lucy's scent. The shit was relaxing, much more than he'd ever thought before, and something about it was making his nausea at least a little more bearable. "Don't make me move," he whispered. "I'll puke if you do."

That, at least, was the truth. He knew that moving right then would turn him into a bile-spewing factory. And that was something he was more than happy to keep to himself.

With a knowing glimmer in her eyes, Lucy asked, "Is this helping, then?"

He took another deep breath, filled with nothing but roses and dew, then nodded. "Yeah…"

'My back is going to start hurting if I sit like this for too long. I'd ask him to move for a second so I could get more comfortable, but if he's feeling better then I don't want to do that. I'll just deal with it.'

Cobra frowned against her stomach. He was a bit of a stickler over tit-for-tat on occasion, and he really didn't want to listen to the pain in her soul for the rest of the train ride over her back. She was letting him use her as a body pillow to help get rid of this Slayer-induced motion sickness, so the least he could do was find some way for her to be a little more comfortable.

Lucy's cheeks flared when Cobra kept his head on her stomach and starting shuffling. All she could
picture was him moving just a little further south and ripping off her pants, and then… She blinked in surprise as his jacket was thrown at her face. It wasn't even a matter of wondering why the Poison Slayer had thrown the thing at her, since Lucy was already used to him just doing things she was thinking about - sadly, never the more perverse things, but she was sure that was for the best.

"Do what you need to, then don't move anymore," Cobra grumbled.

Lucy rolled her eyes and carefully folded the fur-lined jacket the way she remembered Cobra having done it the night he'd been released from prison - before she'd caved and had him sleep in the bed with her so he didn't have to sleep on the floor - then settled it between her back and the wall. "If the pillows weren't in the overhead on my side, I'd just use one of those."

"I know."

"Y'know," she mused. "I thought letting a woman use your jacket was being misogynistic."

"Yeah, if it's to keep her warm," he sighed, his lips quirking. "Fur-lined jackets make great pillows, though. You're fuckin' welcome."

A quiet sigh of relief brushed over his scalp once Lucy had fully relaxed, but the Poison Slayer went rigid when he felt her fingers carding through his hair. "What the fuck are you doing…?"

Lucy stiffened, looking down at him with wide eyes. Slowly, she pulled her hands away from the overly soft maroon locks. "S-Sorry… I, um… It's a habit, I guess."

Cobra scowled and glared up at her. "Don't be a fuckin' creeper," he said, nearly grimacing at the tender touch. His head turned and rested on her stomach again. "Don't touch me…"

"Kinda hard when-"

"That's not what I m-"

"Don't start this shit again!" he whined. Yes, he was fully aware of the fact that he sounded like a fucking brat, but really… It just wasn't fair that the Celestial mage was able to read what he was going to say so well. That was his damn job. With an unconscious pout, he muttered, "It's bullshit…"

She snickered above him. Never in her lifetime would Lucy have thought that Cobra, of all people, would sound like a petulant child. She could just picture his thin lips pushed out into a pout. "Fine," she sighed dramatically, "I won't touch your precious hair."

"Good," he smirked. "Do you have any idea how long it takes to get it to look like this?"

"Yes. I was there while you were getting ready. I'm surprised we made it on time, you diva."

She already knew for a fact that Cobra didn't actually brush his hair. After breakfast that morning, he'd come out of the bathroom, fully dressed, with a towel on his shoulders and his hair sopping wet. Apparently, he'd decided to have another cup of coffee with a shot or two of snake venom before he finished getting ready. And while he was drinking the coffee, she'd watched him just towel dry his hair, then run his fingers through it. That was it.

His hair had still been damp and unbrushed when they left his apartment, and he'd only run his hands through it one more time before they got to the train station.
"Because it takes work to look this sexy," he chuckled, wincing when his stomach lurched.

'You didn't work to look that sexy… Goddamnit…'

"Need some pointer-" Cobra's retort was cut off by a whimper when the train rocked and his stomach started violently protesting the contents of his breakfast not already being digested.

"Cobra?" Lucy frowned.

He shook his head and clamped his lips shut while taking several deep breaths.

"Y'know, Natsu says that lying down only helps a little," she sighed. "Do you want me to try the other thing?"

Cobra shook his head again, putting his fist to his mouth as bile tickled the back of his throat. He was pretty positive that his uvula was in the process of being burnt off with how insistently his body was rebelling. With every rumbling shudder, he felt a little more of his control slipping. "F-Fuck…"

"It's not gonna hurt, Cobra," Lucy whispered. "Just relax."

"If I relax, I'm gonna… blrrgh… upchuck…" It was official. He hated trains. They were the bane of his existence and he was going to find the one who came up with the idea of this hellish transportation… Then murder them. In the event the bastard wasn't alive, it would just be a matter of killing every person in their surviving family. This shit was beyond fucking evil, and Cobra knew if he thought something was bad, then it really was… He'd been ready to destroy the whole goddamn world with a huge fucking fish clock, but trains… They were far more dastardly, just barely ranking above the Little Piggies shit Lucy had done to him.

"I know it's not really in your nature, but just trust me for a minute," she whispered. "If it doesn't work, then I'll stop and never bring it up again, okay?"

Really, Cobra was just going to kill everyone and everything as soon as he was off of that deathtrap. No one was going to survive the hellish torture he was ready to reign down all across Earthland. Then again, when the train rumbled again, he wasn't so sure it would be poison coming out of him. He suddenly felt like his stomach had been thrown out the window and run over by the wheels of all seven cars behind theirs.

Lucy's eyes softened when Cobra groaned and rolled onto his side, watching his arms bar around his stomach and his knees draw up a little on the bench. If he just wanted to power through it, she wasn't going to stop him. At least, lying down the way he was, he wasn't sweating. Maybe it was just that asking him to trust her was too much, and really… she understood that.

Cobra's grip on himself tightened when the train rocked, a strangled whimper sounding in the back of his throat. 'It's only another three hours,' he thought. His body trembled with the realization that he really wasn't going to make it another three hours like this.

His eye opened slowly and he caught sight of the bright pink Fairy Tail guild mark on Lucy's hand where it rested on the bench. He'd heard Natsu thinking about how great it feels to have Lucy helping him out on the train, how he feels better afterward even. But Cobra didn't like the thought of relying on her at all. He hated it.

Besides, it wasn't like anything else would come from her touching him. He wouldn't be able to get her pants off and sink into her heat like he wanted to. And not just because he was pretty much immobilized. Cobra also valued keeping his testicles, and the guild would have his ass strung up so fucking fast if they found out he'd so much as tried anything.
'But, I'll probably feel better,' he thought. And really, if something would help his stomach calm the hell down, he was all for it. Slowly, with his fingers trembling more than they'd been that morning while he'd laid in bed, Cobra reached out for the blonde's hand.

Lucy nearly jumped out of her skin when his fingertips stuttered over the back of her hand. A small smile lifted the corners of her lips when he paused, seeming to reconsider what he was doing. Really, she hadn't expected anything. Her offer stood, but this was Cobra. He wasn't one for physical contact or depending on anyone else. Or trusting people. Hell, after the way their morning had started, she figured it was only him being unwilling to throw up that kept him where he was.

Cobra let out a shaky breath and finally wrapped his fingers around her delicate hand. He had touched Lucy's hands on occasion in the month he'd been at Fairy Tail. Usually, it was while they were both reaching into the popcorn bowl during a movie. But that was always just a passing brush of skin. This was different. He could practically feel the magic of the guild mark on the back of her hand, and just how different her palm was in comparison - one side soft and blemish-free, the other calloused from time spent using her whip. He already knew that her fingertips were calloused as well from training to draw her keys with either hand.

He placed her hand on the top of his head, whispering, "Just my hair." He wasn't going to look up at her, or let her see just how uncomfortable he was. "Don't touch my ears, face, or neck. Nothing but my hair."

And even though he wasn't looking at her, Lucy nodded her understanding. "Just your hair," she whispered back with a gentle smile. She threaded her fingers through his hair, her nails lightly dragging over his scalp. The minutes ticked by, and as he grew more relaxed, she very intentionally thought about using both hands instead of just the one.

When Cobra didn't object, her other hand rose to join the first. Long maroon strands danced between her fingers. His hair was a much thicker than she'd imagined, but she could only assume that was why it wouldn't leave the odd, spiked hairstyle that it naturally fell into. "How's that?"

Cobra took a slow breath as his nausea diminished. His next inhale was sharpened as her thumb brushed over the tip of his ear, but he found himself relaxing just a little more as she used her nails to carefully comb all of his hair back and away from his face. One hand lightly massaged the back of his head just above his neck. "Better," he mumbled. "You were right." His eye slid closed as a contented sigh slipped past his lips. *No wonder Macbeth slept better when I did this for him in our cell…*'

Cobra found himself missing the days in the Tower more often since he'd been released from prison. Especially Macbeth. Before they were taken by Brain and tortured by him, when Cobra was still just Erik… Angel was just Sorano… Midnight was just Macbeth… Things hadn't been easy, but they were close then. Macbeth hadn't been able to sleep at night because of the screams of the other slaves, but Erik had been there whenever he could… He'd helped the boy that was once his friend sleep and relax by doing just what Lucy was doing for him right then.

Lucy smiled when, after nearly ten minutes, Cobra uncurled and rolled into his stomach. His arms draped themselves over her thighs, with his hands curled up on the bench by her hips. She hadn't expected him to take a deep, sleepy-sounding breath and nuzzle her stomach. "Guess it's a good thing I wore pants today," she giggled.

"I'm almost offended that you didn't wear a skirt," he smirked. "Would've been another crotch shot for me." His lips twitched when she snorted, and he could practically hear her rolling her eyes.

"Yeah, because I need you snuggling with my wonder snatch while I'm in a skirt."
And then Cobra's smirk widened into a smile, dimples and all, that he knew Lucy saw. With a soft sigh, he whispered, "You're lucky I'm too comfortable for a comeback."

"You're… comfortable?"

"Yep. Don't get used to this. Once we're off this god forsaken torture device, you're not touching me."

She couldn't help but roll her eyes at that. "Whatever," she laughed.

Cobra chuckled as he quickly pinched her ass. Lucy jumped and squeaked, but it was the way she was mentally slaughtering him - slowly skinning him alive with nothing more than a potato peeler; pouring salt and lye on his wounds; cutting him open and knotting his intestines into a crude humanoid shape, then puncturing it with needles as though it was a voodoo doll; ripping off his nails and shoving them into his newly reopened eye socket, filling the hole the rest of the way with carpenter ants, then sewing it shut; covering his naked, bleeding body in honey and leaving it for a bear or vulcan to find and devour him - that had the one-eyed Slayer laughing.

She wiggled only slightly as his head turned, his lips hovering an inch above her navel, then her eyes widened when his arms wrapped around her hips to hold her in place. "Don't get lippy with me," he teased. "I'll bite off your belly button next."

She refused to acknowledge the way her body rippled with awareness at the sight of his smile. "Fuck you, Cobra," Lucy laughed.

He was the only one that knew both of them were thinking, 'If only…'
Cobra was finding the sight before him both utterly hilarious and completely horrifying. The short, pudgy, red-faced little oompa loompa that was Duke Sawarr Junelle was just creeping him right the fuck out. His little oval glasses were stupid. The crown on top of his head was cheap. Hell, he had nearly gagged just at the amount of cologne the perverted little shit was wearing.

And to top it all off, his wife was barely legal. Before arriving at the opulent mansion, Lucy had given him a quick rundown of how things would work - how he would need to keep snide remarks to himself, because Dickface would whine and have his ass arrested for some trumped up fucking charges, and a little bit about how high society marriages worked. So really, the Poison Slayer shouldn't have been surprised to find the just-turned-eighteen year old girl with a three-year-old daughter with shoulder-length brown hair latched onto her poofy fucking skirt, was actually the Duke's wife.

But he was. And he was also almost positive that he was more sickened by this shit than the goddamn train.

'If he doesn't stop staring at my tits, I'm going to staple his nuts to his asshole, superglue his dick shut, and give him brownies full of laxatives and diuretics… Forcefully… For days!'

It took everything in Cobra's power to not burst out laughing at the constant stream of irate thoughts from his blonde partner. Ever since getting off the train, Lucy had wavered between being just a little sick to her stomach and pissed as hell. And since they'd been standing in front of their current employer's desk for the past ten minutes, and he'd hardly said two words about the actual job, and had instead spent the entire time leering at her, Cobra wasn't all that surprised by how inventive her threats were getting.

He was, however, loving the fact that Lucy didn't show a single damn sign of what she was actually thinking about. She was the picture of politeness. Her arms hung at her sides, because keeping her hands behind her would push out her chest and accentuate her curves, while clasping them in front of her would push her breasts together. Her face was blank, which was almost eerie.

"Lucy… Little Lucy," Duke Junelle sighed.

'What I wouldn't give to have her for a night. Hopefully she hasn't been whoring herself out too much in that trashy guild. Then again, maybe she'll have a few tricks up her skirt that I can take advantage of… Now, to just get rid of this mongrel that accompanied her. Maybe I can-'

"So, this job's about babysitting, right?" Cobra finally sighed. He had to force himself not to sneer at the derisive snort from the pompous shitgoblin in front of him. "Any particular reason you couldn't just hire a nanny or some sh-"

Lucy quickly elbowed Cobra in the side. 'No cursing in front of the kid, goddamnit!'

"Or something," he corrected with a growl, sending the blonde a side-eyed glare.

"That's rather simple," the duke tutted, his eyes closing and his smile curling with condescension.
"My lovely wife and I must attend a ball tonight, and our daughter is not old enough to join us."

"And you needed a mage, because..." Cobra rolled his eye only a moment later. "Wonderful."

Lucy frowned and turned her narrowed eyes to the Poison Slayer. "What is it?"

"Because there is a chance that someone will try and take advantage of our absence," Junelle said, his eyes cutting over to Lucy again. "Now that the competition has died out."

'You slimy little fuck! You mean my dad. You took advantage of him, and I know it! I'm gonna fucking murder you so hard, you don't even know!'

"My family is at a higher risk for being targeted," he continued, utterly unaware of the Celestial mage's hands tightening into fists at her sides.

'I knew she would show up. I hadn't expected her to bring someone with her, though. This would have been so much simpler if she was alone. A simple charm spell, and that delicious little body would be all mine. She hasn't aged one bit in all this time...'

Cobra sighed and closed his eye for a moment, then slowly opened it to look at the man behind the desk. Of course that was the real reason the guy had put out the request. From what he could tell, Fairy Tail was the only one that had received the job, and it had been tailored to fit Lucy's particular skills from what she'd learned while growing up. "Well, you give us a list of duties and a time frame. This request doesn't say much as far as the actual job is concerned."

"Yes," Lucy ground out. "That would be preferable. I'd love to know what our job actually is."

'Getting on your knees and screaming my name is the only job you're good for, you little...'

The mental image that accompanied Junelle's lewd thoughts nearly had Cobra vomiting right there. Instead, he took a deep breath, and counted to twenty in his head to keep himself from poisoning everyone in the goddamn room. This was starting to give him a headache.

Between Lucy's nearly constant internal screeching, Junelle's circle-jerk in PervTown, the silent wife's mental undressing of Cobra, and the terrified little toddler that was currently in the process of pissing in her diaper... He was going to be more crotchety than normal in a matter of minutes.

'I wonder if she's opened her legs for him. Maybe just trying something a little more exotic. Her parents were pathetically poor before the business took off, so maybe it's just that peasant blood in her. She needs to whore herself out for dark-skinned vermin."

It was official. Cobra was going to murder the hell out of someone. It was one thing for the guy to think about Lucy the way he was - Cobra really didn't care all that much. It was something else entirely to look down on him because of the color of his skin. Or his scar. Or the evil as shit look in his eye. Or whatever the hell else the bastard was thinking about.

Hopefully the kid they were supposed to watch wouldn't be a spoiled little brat, and Lucy would take over this whole ordeal of handling the girl. He didn't know the first thing about kids, and he really didn't want to.

'She's never choosing a job again...' he thought sourly. 'Ever!'"
He didn't sleep in new places, and considering the fact that Lucy was just as determined to not fucking sleep in the mansion as him, Cobra was sure that he would be sitting up the whole night with the blonde. Granted, Lucy was planning on staying up simply because she just didn't trust this place. The last thing the blonde wanted was to wake up tied up to a bed with the Duke on top of her.

The fact that she was in the process of running to the bathroom in her own room, just next to his, to throw up after picturing it had the Poison Slayer shuddering. Her imagination was terrifying.

He set his bag down on the bed and barely took in his surroundings. There wasn't a point, and he really didn't give a shit just how expensive anything was. All he had to do was wait for Lucy to finish her sudden puke-fest, then find the little brat they were supposed to watch. Until the following morning.

"Cobra, I'm so fucking sorry…"

He let out a heavy sigh and made his way to her room, opening the door just as he heard her washing her mouth out.

'God, why did I agree to do this?'

As soon as she appeared in the doorway, looking just a little too pale, he rolled his eye and went to sit down on her bed.

"This was a mistake," Lucy whispered sheepishly.

"Whatever," he sighed. "We do it, stay the night, and leave tomorrow after some breakfast. Piece of cake."

'Unless Dickface tries to get me to-

"Stop right there," he sneered.

Lucy froze and stared at the Poison Slayer with widened eyes. "Huh?"

He stood then, closing the distance between them until he was standing only a foot from the blonde. "I'll only say this once, and I want you to fucking listen."

Lucy shivered slightly at the sharper quality to his voice, but nodded all the same.

"The only reason he put out the request was to get you here."

Really, that didn't make her feel any better. She should have known that was the case as soon as she'd seen the name on the request.

"But, you're with me," Cobra continued, his eye glinting with malice. "Remember what I told you at the guild?"

Lucy bit her lip and stared down at her boots, ignoring the plush rug they were standing on. She nodded again. Of course she remembered that Cobra was more than willing to threaten someone, namely their employer, but it would also put him in a boatload of shit after the fact.

"So, no matter what that bastard has in mind, I'll hear it well before he can do anything," he whispered, watching as she slowly looked into his eye again. "You've got bad blood between the two of you. I get that. But I'll tell you right now… The shit you're worrying about is unwarranted."

"Why?" she winced. "He's just trying to-"
“That might be the case, but you’re not interested. I’m a downright asshole, but I’ll gladly go right back to prison for maiming a handsy son of a bitch with a silver spoon in his mouth.”

Lucy knew she shouldn’t be laughing, but she just couldn’t help it. Not when she pictured Cobra taking an actual silver spoon and slowly torturing the Duke with it.

“You…” Cobra chuckled softly as he turned and stood next to her, the pair of mages making their way out of her room. "That's not what I had in mind but… You need to let that shit out more."

“No way,” Lucy giggled. Just a few words from the usually intimidating Slayer had her feeling loads better, like an enormous weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Really, she knew that she didn't have anything to worry about. No matter how creepy the Duke was, he was also a wimp. He wouldn't have the balls to really try making a move on her.

Still, it was nice knowing that Cobra would be keeping an ear out for trouble, and that he'd have her back in the event something was about to happen. The Duke had always given her the creeps, and she knew that she should have seen the request for what it really was. But her need for money had overridden everything else.

"Stop worrying," Cobra said softly. "I'm serious. We're partners, so the last thing that'll happen is me letting you get fucking molested." The shit he and the other members of the Seis had gone through was enough of a reason for Cobra to make sure Lucy didn't have to as well. Hell, he was still a little shaken up from the nightmare just that morning. And the fact that the Duke had even remotely considered taking Lucy against her will had the Poison Slayer so ready to kill the cheeky bastard.

"You really should watch your mouth," she hissed, still smirking.

"Probably," he shrugged. "If it makes you feel any better, he's already gone."

That actually made the blonde visibly relax. Thankfully, the little girl, Priscilla, they were supposed to be watching was taking a nap right then, so Lucy and Cobra had been given a tour of the places they were allowed to take her. Along with the basic rundown from the staff of her daily routine.

Lucy couldn't remember her younger years ever having been so structured. Granted, after her mother had died, everything was laid out in a minute-to-minute schedule at her father's insistence, but really… Priscilla was just three.

"That schedule can suck my asshole," Cobra muttered.

Lucy glanced at him out of the corner of one honey eye. "What do you suggest we do, then?"

"Hell if I know," he shrugged. "But kids are supposed to play and shit."

"Yes," she laughed. "They do tend to shit."

"Asshole," he chuckled. "I just mean, I've heard plenty of parents over the years. Nothing tires a kid out more than playing all fucking day."

"Your magic is going to be really helpful, you realize that?"

He smirked then, lightly knocking her shoulder with his. "You wish. I'm not gonna be your little toddler alarm."

"Think about it this way," Lucy said as they rounded a corner and walked toward the little girl's room. It was apparently time for her to wake up, if she wasn't already, and it now fell to Lucy and
Cobra's smirk faltered as Lucy turned back toward the room, and he simply leaned against the jamb while she walked inside to get Priscilla. He knew all too well just what his Soul Listening magic could do where babies were concerned. Back when he'd been in the Tower, it had helped a good portion of the other slaves there to keep their kids quiet well before they even made a peep.

Granted, no one had known why he knew the little ones were about to cry, and he made sure to keep his involvement in the babies' lives to a minimum otherwise. Still, there had been a handful of times when the little slave boy Erik had been the only one who was able to make a baby stop crying. "Aw," Lucy crooned with a gentle smile. "Your bed got a little messy?"

And suddenly, he was realizing just how horrible this job was going to be.

"It's okay," Lucy said softly, picking up Priscilla and holding her at arm's length while making her way to the changing table. Apparently, no one had been trying to get the girl potty-trained, which meant that she was still in full use of diapers. That just killed her inside. The last thing either of the mages wanted to deal with were diapers, but Lucy wasn't going to make a fuss over it. If she did that, then it could just set the girl back when it was time for her to start learning.

Cobra blinked slowly as the blonde started pulling down Priscilla's wet sleep pants. "There's no way I'm touching a baby's dick," he sneered.

Lucy paused in removing the little girl's diaper to frown at the Poison Slayer. "Priscilla is a girl, Cobra."

"Even worse." He pointed to himself and said, "I'm a criminal. I go anywhere near an itty bitty baby snatch, and the Rune Knights will climb out of the damn woodwork and lock my ass up. Lahar's butt-buddy is the pedo, not me."

"Doranbolt isn't a pedophile," she said with a roll of her eyes. She went back to removing the girl's diaper, then bit her lips in amusement when she heard her companion gag from several feet away. "Aw, we've got some poops here, huh?" she crooned to the little girl.

"Th-That…" Cobra gagged again as the acrid stench crawled up into his sinuses.

Priscilla giggled as Lucy placed a cool baby wipe over her. "This looks like a pretty good poop," Lucy laughed. "Were you saving this just for me?"

"I wanna see the poops on the baby wipe!"

"Why the fuck are you smiling!" Cobra choked out. "That's disgusting."

"Cobra, go into the other room if you can't stand the smell. Don't make her feel bad about this."

Really, he didn't need to be told twice. Instead, he simply shut the door and walked down the hall, then crouched down and placed his head between his knees. He could eat fucking carrion if he really had to (or if Midnight bet him to), but the smell of human shit, and how fucking potent that was, was just vile. How Lucy could smile and look as though it hadn't fazed her in the slightest was beyond
him. He could hear just how gross she thought it was, so why was he the only one that was about to upchuck?

"So, Miss Priscilla, what would you like to play with Miss Lucy and Mister Cobra today?"

"... Play?"  
His head lifted slowly and he turned with a saddened eye at the confusion in the little girl's voice. And when he dipped into her soul, it only got worse.

'What's play? I want Mommy. She sings so pretty. I miss Mommy... Is play like Mommy's song? What's hide-see? Miss Lucy smiles a lot. No one smiles with me...'

Hell, Cobra had very little in the way of knowledge where playing with kids was concerned. The most he knew was what he'd seen little Asuka doing at the guild, but she was so focused on being a sharpshooter that most of her games revolved around cowboys and guns.

But the echoes of loneliness in the little girl's soul were harmonizing with Lucy's memories of her own childhood, and it was actually making him feel sick. For a good portion of his life, he'd envied people like this. Once he'd gotten out of the Tower, and after several more years of being isolated from the rest of the world, he'd seen rich people for the first time. And he'd wanted what they had so badly, he'd considered killing one just to take it for himself.

But now, he was getting a more in-depth look at just how their lives really worked. And he hated it. Children's souls were a secret pleasure of his. They were innocent, and while he loved ripping that away from others and bringing pain and misery to their pathetic lives, he couldn't listen to this.

What he'd told Makarov before hadn't been a lie. There had been times where he'd killed children, or hadn't saved them from dying when he was more than capable of it. But he didn't go out of his way to rip a child's innocence away from them. He loved hearing how their souls would trill so sweetly, the way he would catch splashes of joy no matter how horrible their lives were.

But this little girl - and Lucy, he was realizing - didn't have any of that joy in a giant mansion like this. They had loneliness, fear, pain, and sadness. So fucking much of it that he wasn't sure if he could stomach it. He was supposed to enjoy those darker parts of a soul, but he just couldn't. Not right then.

The door to the bedroom opened, and Lucy was gently holding Priscilla's hand as they walked out, looking for Cobra. Hearing their footsteps well before they could see him, Cobra stood up and buried his emotions beneath a blank mask again.

"Cobra, we're gonna get some lunch," Lucy said as she came to stand by her companion. "Are you coming?"

He nodded and looked down at the little girl, whose bright green eyes were wide as she stared at him.

'He gots a scary face.'

"That's 'He has a scary face'," Cobra whispered. "And yes, I do."

"It's not that scary," Lucy snorted. When he glared at her, she simply raised an amused brow at him. "Nope. Not even that."

'No face he makes will be as scary as this morning... It was like he couldn't see me...'}
Cobra turned his head sharply as her vibrant memory of that morning streaked through her soul. "C'mon. Let's get some grub."

Lucy sighed and smiled down at Priscilla. "So, what do we want for lunch?"

"Pancakes!"

"I don't think pancakes are on the menu, but… We'll see what we can do."

Cobra rolled his eye and lagged behind the two, watching Lucy walking comfortably with the little girl at her side, their hands clasped between them. There had been plenty of times where he'd seen a woman walking with her child, holding hands just like the blonde was with the little girl.

'Miss Lucy so pretty. Her smile my favorite!'

But Lucy wasn't the little girl's mom, and she still looked more than comfortable. She was a natural at this, and he was suddenly left wondering just what it would have been like if he'd had a mother while growing up. If, even though he'd been a slave, things would have been different had his mother actually survived giving birth to him in the rat-infested cell.

What would it have been like if he'd had arms to wrap around him, no matter how thin and frail they would have been? How would her soul have sounded while they tried to keep each other warm? Would she have cried with him and kissed away his tears after he'd been whipped by the guards?

No one had remembered who the woman was that had given birth to him. He didn't even have a face to put to his imagined memories of her. Hell, he didn't know if he even looked a thing like her, or if he looked more like his father. Or even who his own father was. Cobra didn't even know who fucking named him in the first place.

Lucy turned to look at Cobra over her shoulder, her smile fading when she saw the way his brows were pushed together and how his shoulders were just a little more hunched. How he wasn't looking anywhere but at the ground. 'What's up with him?'

The biggest thing that Cobra wondered, though, was whether he really would have had the shit hand he'd been dealt if there had been just one person to really love him. Maybe his mother would have kept him safe from Brain, and then… Maybe they could have escaped.

He wouldn't have cared if they lived under a goddamn bridge, or in a cottage, or an apartment. Anything was better than where he'd been born and where he'd ended up afterwards.

Lucy sent Priscilla on ahead as one of the maids came out of the dining room, nodding for the woman to get her seated like she normally was and letting her know that the girl had asked for pancakes. Cobra was, however, lost in his own little world.

And for the first time since getting the Poison Slayer out of prison, Lucy thought he looked… sad.

She just wasn't sure what to do about it, if anything. Because if he was a downright monster while having a nightmare and getting woken up, then he could just as easily attack her if he wasn't really aware of his surroundings.

Still, the blonde stopped right in front of him and placed her knuckles on his shoulder to stop him from walking into her.

"Cobra… Are you alright?"
He jolted at the sound of his name, lifting his head to look into Lucy's wide brown eyes. "Huh?"

"I asked if you're alright," she said softly, "You look…"

"Fine," he sneered, taking a quick step back.

"Y'know, if you want, you can-" Lucy sighed and rolled her eyes when he roughly brushed past her to stalk into the dining room. He could talk to her, not that she expected him to. Still, she just wanted the guy to know that, if he was so inclined, she was willing to listen to him.

Cobra plopped down into a chair next to the little brown-haired girl, raising a brow at the two pancakes that had been set in front of her. "Pancakes for lunch?" he asked softly.

She glanced at him quickly, then looked back at the pancakes, her lower lip quivering.

Cobra sighed as a plate was set in front of him, piled high with pancakes. It wouldn't be nearly enough to really fill him up, but that wasn't his concern. "What's wrong with the pancakes?" he asked the little girl.

'Too big…'

His head turned slowly, his single eye never leaving her plate even as Lucy walked into the room and sat down on her other side. "Need someone to cut those?"

Priscilla nodded, looking down at her fork as it sat on the table.

Lucy was just about to ask one of the servants for a knife to cut the little girl's pancakes when she paused to stare at Cobra.

He turned in his chair and lifted Priscilla's fork, then handed it to her. "You don't need to depend on anyone else to cut some pancakes. These are easy," he whispered. He lightly grabbed her tiny hand, positioning the plastic fork sideways, then brought it to the plate. "What kind of shapes do we want?"

'Triangles are my favorite.'

"Triangles, then," he chuckled. She turned to look at him with wide eyes, instantly wondering how he'd known what shape she wanted.

Lucy had to stifle a laugh as Cobra's sharpened canines bit down on his lower lip in mock concentration while he made Priscilla's hand cut a section of the pancake.

"That's not triangle," the little girl laughed.

"What?" Cobra frowned at the square piece of pancake. "That looks like a triangle to me…"

"No. That's four sides. Not three!"

"Silly Mister Cobra," Lucy teased. "That's a square!"

"Huh," he sighed. "Well, then you'll just have to eat a square piece. I don't know how to make a triangle."

"Like dis…" Priscilla turned the fork to run diagonally across the pancake. She pushed it down as Cobra's hand drifted back to his own cutlery, grinning when there were two triangles on her plate. "See?"
"Oh, that's a triangle," he mused. "I bet you can't make the rest look like those, though."

Lucy smiled while pouring a little syrup on her own pancakes, stealing a quick glance at the Poison Slayer. His eye locked onto hers, and she rolled her eyes at the playful wink he gave her. And here she'd thought he didn't know a thing about kids. Apparently, if Cobra wasn't going to be threatening people or cursing or killing anyone… He was a damn natural.

Now, if only her poor panties hadn't caught wind of the hormones rushing through her body. The slip of lace would never be the same… And she was sure her spare sets in her bag, back in her room, were already drenched by proxy.

After finishing lunch, Lucy had taken Priscilla and Cobra to where the library was at. They spent a few short minutes attempting to stick to the schedule that had been laid out, by reading to the little girl. Lucy had, however, rolled her eyes at the stacks of books that were set out.

Really, there was no point in trying to get the little girl to understand railways. Not at the age of three. Maybe, if there had been pictures in the book, Lucy would have attempted it. But it was just long, boring blocks of text that made her cringe. Mostly because she remembered her own tutors forcing her to memorize passages from it that she still dreamed about occasionally.

So, the blonde took Priscilla into the stacks and found a couple books that they wouldn't be bored reading. Duke Junelle's library was nowhere near as extensive as her own had been, but Lucy already knew that the man just didn't enjoy reading. It was one more point of disinterest for her concerning the old marriage arrangement.

They only got a few pages into the first book before Priscilla got bored. Cobra had a book in his hands and was sitting on an overstuffed armchair, fully engrossed in the pages of text. He didn't say a word, and Lucy had fought with the little girl for a solid ten minutes, trying to get her to settle down and at least finish the book.

The Poison Slayer, for all he'd looked as though he wasn't paying attention, was listening and watching the blonde in his peripherals. Lucy had a temper, and while he didn't think she would hit the little girl, the fact that Priscilla was actually scared it might escalate to that had him ready to intervene.

But, for all the fuming in the blonde's head about how she was never going to have children, Lucy didn't outwardly lose her cool. She was still gentle with the little girl, even as Priscilla smacked her in the face.

He slowly turned a page, not paying attention to what was actually written in the book, and listened as Priscilla punched Lucy in the throat, then kicked the blonde in the stomach while trying to get away from her.

"Priscilla, honey," Lucy said, her jaw clenching momentarily as she dodged a hand that was sailing toward her face. "If you don't want to read, then what should we do?"

"You made me mad!" Priscilla shrieked.

Cobra let out a slow breath. "You're not mad, Priscilla. You're scared."

Lucy blinked and looked at the maroon-haired mage. "Scared? Of what?"

"That you'll smack her for acting up." He lightly scratched his chin and shifted in his chair, never taking his eye from the book. "She wants attention."
"Priscilla," Lucy sighed. "We're reading together. You don't need to act up to - Ooph!"

Cobra snickered when the toddler ran away from Lucy after kicking her in the crotch. "Enjoy that."

She vaulted from the floor and started chasing after the little girl, but he could see Lucy smiling as they rounded a corner. And he could tell that she was obviously running much slower than she was really capable of. The blonde's legs, even though they were covered in jeans for a change, were pretty damn powerful.

"I'm gonna get you," Lucy laughed. Priscilla turned to look over her shoulder, and Lucy stretched out her hands, feigning a grab for the little girl. "And when I do, I'll gobble you up!"

"No!"

"Yes!" Lucy shouted. "Unless you hide, I'll catch you."

Cobra closed his book and watched Priscilla scramble halfway under the table at his side, still fully visible.

Lucy came to a screeching halt, furrowing her brow and placing her hands on her hips. She took a step toward where the girl's frilly skirt was peeking out from the table. "Where did she go?" she asked. "I just saw her a second ago."

"It's magic," Cobra shrugged, returning to his book. "I have no idea where she went."

"You can't hear her either?" Lucy gasped.

"Nope," he smirked. "Not a peep. She vanished into thin air."

"Priscilla is great at hiding then." Lucy walked one way then another, smiling when she heard the small giggles coming from under the table. "Hmm… Is she… under the couch?"

"No…" Priscilla laughed.

Lucy got onto her hands and knees and crawled across the floor. "Is she…" She carefully grabbed Cobra's shoe and lifted it from the floor. "Under Mister Cobra's foot?!"

"No…" Priscilla giggled.

"On the ceiling!" Lucy shouted while looking above them.

"No…"

"Hmm…" Her movements were exaggerated as she crawled and pretended to search for the little girl. Finally, after looking everywhere else, Lucy sat back on her heels right next to the table that was Priscilla's haven, and let out a dramatic sigh. "Priscilla, where are you hiding?"

"Here I am!" the little girl shouted happily. She crawled out from under the table, a wide smile on her face as Lucy laughed and wrapped her in a gentle hug.

"Miss Lucy should hide now," Cobra said, turning to the next page. "That way you can find her."

The blonde smirked at the bored expression on her partner's face. "Okay, you count to five, Priscilla. Close your eyes."

The girl did as she was told, then instantly started counting.
Cobra paused in his farce of actually reading to watch as Lucy ran across the small space they were in, and hid behind a floor lamp. It was just sad, seeing her crouched down with her hands over her eyes and acting as though it was the best hiding place in existence. Then again, he knew she was doing it for the little girl's benefit.

"Five!" Priscilla opened her eyes and looked around, smiling while she ran over to the couch. "Miss Lucy… under da couch?"

"No…" Lucy crooned.

"Miss Lucy…” Priscilla looked up at Cobra. "In Mister Cobra mouth?"

The Poison Slayer opened his mouth wide, letting her peer inside. "Not here," he chuckled.

She pouted and turned to look at the room, her little brow furrowing in concentration.

Lucy snickered while peeking through her fingers. "You can't find me…” She let out a squeal as Priscilla came rushing over to her, jumping up and running away from the girl. "Bet you can't catch me!"

"I gonna get you!"

Cobra found himself putting the book down entirely as the little girl chased Lucy around the coffee table for a solid five minutes. Again, the blonde was keeping her pace slower than she was capable of for the little brunette's benefit.

Another few minutes went by and he automatically lifted his arms as Lucy jumped onto the couch and sprawled across his lap.

"Can I help you?"

"Sanctuary!" Lucy laughed. "There's a monster after me!"

"I'm a monster!"

'Oh my god, Cobra smells amazing…'

Cobra blinked slowly, then shoved Lucy off the couch with a smirk. "No can do. The monster paid me to let it eat you."

"No!" Lucy shouted as Priscilla descended on her. She quickly upended the girl and started tickling her. "Tickle tickle tickle!"

"That tickles!"

Cobra shook his head and returned to the beginning of the book as Lucy and Priscilla continued playing. Really, he wasn't needed for this part of the job. He was only there because he had to be, what with the blonde being his pseudo-parole officer. If they were in Magnolia, she didn't really need to keep as close an eye on him. But if she was leaving town, he had to accompany her.

So, he would let her handle the kid. While they were playing, he could keep an ear out for anything amiss. The souls of the staff. Anyone who was there and wasn't supposed to be. Even though the Duke had made the request as a ploy to get into Lucy's pants, Cobra wasn't going to let his guard down. Just in case there really was something else going on.
There were plenty of things Cobra had seen in his lifetime, most of them not at all pleasant as far as normal people were concerned. And really, he prided himself on his ability to not be surprised. But just before he and Lucy were about to take Priscilla inside to get cleaned up for dinner, something had caught all of them by surprise.

Nearly a foot long, Cobra found his jaw hanging open at the sight of a pure white snake with gleaming red eyes whose tail was pinched between Lucy's fingers. And instead of being scared in the slightest, even as it curled up and started winding itself around her arm, the blonde was frowning at the thing.

"Now, that's not very nice, little snake," Lucy said sternly. She was sure that spending the day with a toddler had forced her mind to permanently reside in 'mother mode'. Normally, snakes scared the everloving shit out of her. "If you want to play with us, then you don't just started trying to suffocate people's arms. Do you understand me?"

"Uh…” Cobra muttered. He got up from his place under a tree nearly ten feet from the blonde, and made his way over to her. "What are you doing?"

"I swear, you'd better not be poisonous," Lucy hissed under her breath.

"It's not," Cobra said. The snake writhed angrily when Lucy showed no sign of letting its tail go, and his hand shot forward just as it tried to strike the blonde. With his fingers pinched just behind its head, forcing the snake's jaw to remain open, Cobra sighed and glared at the blonde. "Do me a favor."

Lucy blinked down at where the snake's mouth was perched just above her wrist, nodding slowly.

"Don't grab any fucking snake by its tail," Cobra frowned. "It's like me picking you up by your toes."

She nodded again, biting her lips as the snake coiled around her arm and started to tighten its grip on her. "C-Can you get it off of me?"

He crouched down and looked at the snake, reaching out slowly with his other hand to let its tongue flick over the tips of his fingers. His grip on the snake's head loosened, and he gently ran his thumb over the scales surrounding its snout. "Come here, little guy," he whispered.

"Get rid of it, Cobra," Lucy said as she pulled Priscilla into her lap once the snake was no longer on her. She was just going to bury the fact that it was creepy as hell feeling its scales sliding on her arm. And she was definitely going to be scrubbing her hands and arms with a brillo pad just to get the germs off. "That thing could bite her."

He frowned as he peered down at the snake. "It's not poisonous," he said again. "Reticulated pythons are constrictors."

"A snake is a snake," she huffed. "And it tried to bite me. What kind of damage do you think it would do to a little kid?"

"Oh, this thing would tear her to pieces," Cobra sighed. "But, he's just scared. And you grabbing his tail like that didn't make the situation any better."

"I'm serious. Get rid of it."

His brow furrowed while the snake's head lifted, its bright red eyes peering at him with curiosity. He was just as curious about it though, because these snakes weren't from that part of the country. And it
was an albino, insanely rare. "You wanna come with me?" he whispered to the reptile as it started squeezing his fingers. "We'll go find you some yummy rats to eat."

A soft hiss escaped the snake, and Lucy watched as Cobra chuckled and let the snake's tongue flutter over his cheek. "Wow…"

His eye cut over to the blonde while he tucked the snake into his coat - because it was way too damn cold for the little thing to be out and about - and his small smile fell into a scowl. "What?"

"You really like snakes."

"I do," he nodded. "Cobra is my name for a reason, y'know."

She wanted to crack a joke about just how much he liked snakes, but she bit her tongue. For the first time since meeting him, Lucy had seen a much softer side to the Poison Dragon Slayer. And with how quickly it seemed the snake had warmed up to him, Lucy was left wondering if he could understand the snake by hearing its soul.

He bit his lip and looked down as the snake's head popped out of his coat, running a finger over the pale scales on the top of its head. "I can," he said to the blonde. "Not like a human, but… I understand it."

And that was how he just knew that the snake he'd already decided was his, was nothing more than a snake. It had memories of hatching and slithering around with its siblings before leaving the den and going off on its own. Animal souls were all colors and emotions. There were no words to muddy everything up. Well, there were a few animals he'd encountered that were intelligent enough to really communicate with their souls, especially domesticated ones - hell, he was sure there had been several house cats that had actually used words. This little one had so few memories though that Cobra realized just how young it was.

"I'll take good care of you, little guy," Cobra whispered. His thumb brushed over its snout then down the length of its throat.

Lucy bit her lip and looked back toward the manor. "Just keep it hidden while we're here, alright?"

"That's easy," Cobra said distractedly. "I kept Cubellios hidden in my clothes in the Tower all the time. I've got more clothes on me now, so…"

With a furrowed brow, the blonde looked back at Cobra. It was so easy to forget that he'd been born a slave, and she more often than not did forget until he happened to mention something about his own childhood. But the look in his eye was one of adoration as he gazed down at the snake.

Maybe it was pointless to try and get the Poison Dragon Slayer to let go of the snake, when she thought about it. She already knew that he'd cared a great deal about his other snake, even if she still had no idea what happened to it during the seven years that Cobra was locked in prison. He loved the thing like Lucy loved her spirits.

So, maybe this little snake that was nestled in his coat and running its face along the fur-lined edges, whose little tongue kept flicking out to test the air and coming in contact with Cobra's fingers or hand, was what the maroon-haired mage really needed. And the fact that she was thinking Cobra just needed a pet was, in and of itself, weird.

But he just looked so content, so happy. Relaxed, even. And Lucy was sure that it was all from the little reptile that shifted and started running its snout over his jaw. Cobra's soft laughter was only more proof of that fact.
Lucy wondered, though. What were the odds that the Poison Dragon Slayer would want to keep a snake that wasn't poisonous in the slightest?

Lucy flopped down on the lounge that was in her room, a heavy sigh spilling past her lips as Cobra took a seat next to her. Priscilla was an absolute terror when it came time for dinner. Food had been flying everywhere, and it had fallen to Lucy to try and contain her.

It was obvious that the staff hadn't been prepared to find the little girl sobbing in a corner while Lucy and Cobra continued eating, but the blonde was damn well going to show her that someone was boss, and that it most definitely was not the three-year-old. Her nose had to touch the corner, her back had to be straight, with her hands at her sides and her feet pushed together.

"I still can't believe you put her ass in the corner," Cobra chuckled wearily. His head fell back on the cushion, and he turned slowly to look at the exhausted blonde.

"She deserved it," Lucy sighed. "That'll teach her to throw spaghetti sauce at my tits."

"Well, you got a bath afterwards," he smirked. That had been hilarious to listen to from another room. Apparently, Priscilla was just extremely tired by the time she'd finished her dinner and she wanted her mother to tuck her in. Cobra already knew that the girl's mother never tucked her in, but he was sure it was just that she missed the woman.

But the shrieks from Lucy about the amount of water that had been thrown at her during Priscilla's bath were hilarious. By the time the blonde had emerged, she was soaked from head to toe and looked ready to punch something right in the dick. He'd wisely stayed away from her and found a maid to get the little girl dressed while Lucy dried herself off and changed.

"You weren't much help," Lucy huffed.

"Sure I was," he answered as she looked at him with a lifted brow. "I told you what she wanted you to sing to her."

And Cobra was pleasantly surprised to find that Lucy had a beautiful singing voice. It was much lower than he'd thought, considering just how high-pitched the woman could get while yelling at someone. Her voice was throaty and soft, and he'd been able to hear the slight tremors in it that came from her being embarrassed that he was watching her.

"You made me do everything though," she pouted. Lucy wasn't even thinking about just what she was doing as she shifted to rest her head on his shoulder.

Cobra tensed and frowned down at the top of her head. This was much more than he wanted in the way of the blonde touching him, and she knew that he liked having his own personal bubble not invaded. "Don't fall asleep on me."

"I'm not," she whispered. "We're staying up together, right?"

"Well, I'm sure as hell not fucking sleeping in this place," he sighed, resting his head on the back of the couch again. "I told you. Someone might try something."

"I think you're just being paranoid," she said.

"Maybe. Better safe than sorry though."

Lucy smiled and shifted her gaze to the lapel of his coat. She couldn't see the snake that he'd taken in
earlier that afternoon, but it seemed that the little reptile was keen on staying in one part of Cobra's clothing.

"There's a pocket that he's in right now," Cobra said. "It's right next to my heart, and it keeps him calm."

"Mama Cobra is just precious," Lucy teased.

"Fuck you, asshole," he growled, shifting to push the blonde off of his shoulder.

"Okay, okay," she laughed. Lucy tilted her head slightly to look up at the line of his jaw. "Mama Cobra isn't precious."

"Goddamn right," he scowled. "I'm nobody's 'Mama'."

"Papa Cobra, then?"

"Just Cobra, you fucking twat," he chuckled. He wasn't going to tell Lucy that the snake felt safe because it was warm and listening to the steady beating of his heart. She had figured it out, but that didn't mean he needed to confirm it. Or that she was right in a sense over calling him the thing's 'mother'. It was only a few months old from what he could tell, so it still remembered the safety of being with its siblings, of hearing and feeling their collective heartbeats and warmth.

"Are you gonna name him?" Lucy frowned for a moment. "Wait, are you sure it's a boy?"

"I checked while you were getting the kid bathed," he said. "He doesn't have any spurs, but his tail is thinner and longer than a female's."

"What the hell are spurs?"

"Testicles. They literally look like little sandspurs."

"How do you even know what a female's tail would look like in comparison?"

"Well, I wasn't entirely sure," he smirked. "So I asked if he had a dick."

"You…" Lucy found herself giggling quietly at the image in her head of the big, bad Poison Dragon Slayer asking a snake about it's little snaky bits. "What did he tell you?"

"He got a tiny snake boner," Cobra deadpanned.

"Oh my god…"

"I'm joking, you ass," he laughed. "I just felt his belly, and popped him for a second."

"P-Popped?"

"You push on where the dick is, and it pops out from between its scales," he answered. "It's not the safest way to check, and you can really hurt a snake if you do it wrong, but he's wild. No point in taking him to a vet right now."

"You need to take him to one, Cobra," she frowned. "What if he's sick or something?"

"I'd hear it," he countered.

"Of course," Lucy sighed. "And you're sure it's not poisonous?" Not that it would make much of a
difference to Cobra if the thing bit him, since he couldn't be hurt by it.

"I'm sure. Reticulated pythons only bite to hold their prey in place, then they squeeze the life out of
them."

Lucy was finding herself a little more intrigued by just how much Cobra knew about the snake he'd
collected. He'd mentioned before, while she was filling out his paperwork for the guild, that he liked
reading about biology. Apparently that also included snakes. And really, it made sense, considering
he'd had a giant snake years ago. He would have needed to learn how to care for it properly.

"So," Lucy yawned, "It was trying to bite me earlier to try and eat me?"

"Not really," he laughed. "He was scared. He's just a baby, so he's constantly defensive."

"Doesn't seem that way with you."

"Because I know how to handle him," Cobra said, giving a small shrug that jostled the blonde just
enough to keep her awake. The way her soul was winding down let him know that she really was on
the verge of passing out, and the last thing he wanted was to be used as a fucking pillow.

"Are you gonna name him?" Lucy asked again.

"Yep."

"What's his name?"

With a sly smirk, the Poison Slayer whispered, "Monty."

"Monty the Python," Lucy nodded. It took her much longer than normal to open her eyes and look
up at Cobra, a wry smile pulling at her lips. "Really? Monty Python…"

"There was a marathon last week," he chuckled. "Seems appropriate."

"Should we get a shrubbery?"

"Ni."

"Oh my god," Lucy laughed.

"That shit is addicting," he said softly. "Kept me up all night, and I nearly pissed myself with the
parrot sketch."

"Parrot sketch?"

"Yeah. You know… 'It's not pining, it's passed on! This parrot is no more! It has ceased to be! It's
expired and gone to meet its maker! This is a late parrot! It's a stiff! Bereft of life, it rests in peace! If
you hadn't nailed it to the perch, it would be pushing up the daisies! It's rung down the curtain and
joined the choir invisible. This is an ex-parrot!'"

Lucy's smile was wide as Cobra reenacted the scene from one of her favorite Monty Python
sketches. Finally, someone that understood the dry, utterly silly humor that she loved. Levy, someone
she'd thought would really get into it, actually thought it was just ridiculous. Not even the tongue
twisters and wordy, winding monologues intrigued the bookworm.

"You're ridiculous," Lucy sighed.
"I've been known to be a tad ridiculous on occasion," Cobra nodded sagely. "But there aren't many people that live to tell the tale."

"Why did I just picture some maniacal cackling?"

"Because I was doing it in my head," he chuckled. That wasn't true in the slightest. He didn't cackle.

"So, is Monty going to be paper-trained, or are you planning on letting him shit all over your apartment?"

"I'll send him to your place," Cobra smirked. "Especially when he sheds. Right in your bed, I think."

"I now understand why people say you're evil," she shuddered, her eyes closing in a long blink.

"That's what clued you in? Not the whole, 'let's take over the world' shit? Or maybe the hundreds of people I've murdered?"

Lucy shrugged and smiled gently. "You've got your very own minion now," she yawned. "Perfect for world domination. One bed at a time."

"You're fucking crazy, you realize that?"

"Probably," Lucy whispered.

He glared down at her hair when he realized that the blonde had fallen asleep completely. It was more than tempting to toss her ass on the ground and wake her up, but he knew just how fucking tired she was. He'd been able to hear it all day, that she was really getting worn down by playing with their charge, but that hadn't stopped him from sticking to the sidelines. This was the blonde's job, and he really was only there because he had to be.

And as soon as they'd found Monty, he'd been more than preoccupied with getting the wild little python accustomed to being handled by him. It was easy, as far as he was concerned, but that was mainly because he wasn't afraid of being bitten.

While the little albino snake wasn't poisonous, there were still germs in its mouth that could cause an infection if not properly handled. Cobra, however, already knew that it wouldn't affect him. And if he did get bitten, then it was on him for not listening closely enough and anticipating what the snake's soul was trying to tell him.

His thoughts were interrupted when Lucy let out a soft snore and slid down his chest, with her head landing right in his lap. Face to the dick.

"Well, I'm definitely not sleeping now," he grumbled. He could feel her breaths soaking into the fabric of his pants, warming his loins and causing a part of his anatomy to wake up when it really needed to stay the fuck asleep.

And all the while, Lucy was blissfully unaware of just what she was doing to the Poison Slayer.

Or the fact that he couldn't stop himself from picturing what it would be like to just unzip his pants and rub his arousal over her lips.

'Want Mommy! Scared… Scary shadow!'

Cobra rolled his eye at the frantic thoughts coming from Priscilla's room. The little girl was still asleep, but he was sure that she would be waking up any second with a scream breaking past her tiny
rose petal lips.

"Damnit," Cobra groaned. He nudged the blonde in his lap, roughly shaking her shoulder. "Wake up, Tiggle Bitties. She's having a nightmare."

A sleepy whine vibrated into the fabric of his pants, making the Poison Slayer harshly bite his lower lip to suppress a groan.

"Cobra, c'mon," Lucy mumbled. "I'll do anything you want… Lemme sleep…"

She was still mostly asleep. And she had no fucking clue just what she was doing to him. "Gimme a fucking blowjob, and we'll call it even."

He hadn't been expecting the blonde to turn her head and nuzzle his crotch while descending further into dreamland. The soft, rumbling snore thrummed across his arousal, making it twitch against her lips.

"Fuck…" The last thing he needed was this shit. It was bad enough that he wanted the blonde and couldn't have her. Even worse was when he realized that fucking Eros was taking over her dreams.

Lucy propped herself up on her knees, her hands bound with a soft red silk scarf. Cobra's hand tightened around her wrists and lifted her higher, his other hand sinking into her hair and slowly pulling her closer. Her mouth watered as she felt the tip of his manhood circling her lips. His hips snapped forward and she moaned until her voice was cut off by him hitting her throat.

"Take it," Cobra growled. "Fuck… Take it all."

Lucy's head bobbed quickly until he pulled her back for air. His eye gleamed brightly with desire in the darkened room. "Cobra… I-" His hips snapped again, burying himself to the hilt in her mouth.

The Poison Slayer's eye opened wide, and he stared down at the blonde to find his hand on top of her head, lightly gripping the blonde strands. The blonde shifted slightly, her thighs rubbing together, and he inhaled sharply at the scent of darkened roses that marked her arousal.

"Cobra…" Lucy moaned as the Poison Slayer threw her, face-down, onto a crimson Persian rug with gold detailing. Lying on her stomach, her bound arms outstretched, the blonde lifted her hips in the air and shivered as his sweat-slicked flesh glided over hers. She felt his hips pressing insistently against her, and arched her back to sink onto his straining arousal.

"Fucking shit," Cobra hissed. He shifted slightly to try and get Lucy's lips away from him, biting back a groan at the small bit of friction. The blonde's imagination was too fucking vivid. Sure, he'd heard her dreams from his apartment before when he listened in, and he already knew for a fact that she'd spent several too-long baths pleasuring herself with thoughts of him.

But it had never been this intense. And he was never fucking there to smell her increasing arousal. He only caught small whiffs of it from time to time when he was at her apartment, most often while they were watching horror movies. And really, the fact that Lucy would get even remotely turned on during a horrific murder scene was only making his current predicament that much fucking worse.

His sharpened canines came down onto Lucy's throat, digging into the tender flesh and drawing blood. Instead of shying away from the pain, she leaned into it, basking in the fire that burned in her veins. His hips piston at a relentless pace. Her moans were cut off by two fingers plunging into her mouth. Her tongue swirled around the digits, roughly sucking them further in before he wrenched her jaw open.
"Scream for me," he growled.

Cobra took a shaky breath, his resolve to push the blonde away dwindling the longer he listened to her. He was more than ready to finally just fulfill one of his fantasies where she was concerned. To just unzip his pants and let the Celestial mage do as she pleased in her sleep.

His hand tightened in her hair, and his hips rocked slightly without him realizing it. Cobra couldn't suppress the small shiver that ran through him as one of Lucy's hands slid across his thigh. "Shit," he hissed. "Lucy, wake the hell-"

"Cobra! Oh, Cobra!" She cried out as the Poison Slayer flipped her onto her back and drove into her sex without a moment's hesitation. His teeth scraped over her skin, and the blonde's eyes widened when his head lifted, revealing his bloodstained lips.

He was thrumming with energy, his single eye burning brighter than before as his tongue swiped across his lips. Her hands lifted from the ground to force his head down to her. A loud moan accompanied her teeth sinking into the flesh of his lower lip. Cobra became frantic and wild, then. His hands bruising her hips and thighs as his tongue lashed out to curl around hers.

Thankfully, a sharp cry from down the hall broke the Poison Slayer out of his spiralling thoughts, dragging him away from Lucy's soul. Priscilla sobbed while sitting up in her bed, and he let out a shuddering sigh as he stood up.

Lucy's head was left hanging off the edge of the lounge, but he didn't really care. Hell, she was lucky that the little girl had woken up from her nightmare when she did. Because, even though he knew it was beyond fucking wrong to take advantage of Lucy's unconscious state, regardless of what was going on in her soul, there was only so much he could stand. Another few seconds, and those fantasies of hers would have become a reality, he was sure.

While walking toward the door, he winced and adjusted his member within his pants. The last thing he needed was to have a damn erection while walking into a little girl's room. Just the thought had him softening, thank fucking god. Really, it was only a matter of time before a fucking Rune Knight popped out and cuffed him for something.

Cobra silently opened the door and made his way over to the too-large bed that Priscilla was sitting up in. Her room was too damn big. Everything was oversized, surely as a sign of her family's wealth. But it was just a waste.

"What?" he growled. When she simply cried louder, he groaned and rubbed a hand down his face.

Lucy had been the one to get Priscilla to sleep earlier that night, not him, and while he knew what the blonde had done, Cobra really wasn't all that keen on singing to the little girl. He would be the first person to admit that he couldn't carry a tune in a bucket, even if the thing was superglued shut and his hands were amputated so the bloody fucking stumps of his forearms could be grafted to the metal. He would still find a way to drop the damn thing, that's how bad he was at singing.

Granted, no one had ever heard him doing it, except for Cubellios. He just knew that he wasn't good at it. Hell, he'd probably scare Priscilla even more than she already was if he attempted it.

So, with that being a non-option, he had to think of something else. With a grimace, he sniffed the air. 'I remember doing shit like this when I was a kid, changing diapers is... It's easy... Just... Oh thank you, it's dry. There is a god!' He was more than happy that his enhanced senses allowed him to smell whether or not her diaper had gotten soiled. No way in hell were his hands going anywhere near that fucking thing.
With a heavy sigh, Cobra grabbed the girl under her arms and carefully laid her back down. "Time to shut up," he whispered.

Priscilla sniffled loudly. "S-Sing song?"

"What stupid fu-" The Poison Slayer groaned and closed his eye for a moment. "What song?"

"Spider song."

The problem with that was that he had no clue what song the little girl wanted. Dipping into her soul didn't give him a hint in the slightest. Really, how hard was it to start humming a song in your head when it was the one you were fucking asking for?!

"No," he sighed while taking a seat on the edge of the bed. "No way, kiddo. How about a story?"

Cobra was sure he could think of a story that would be appropriate for the little girl to hear. Something with unicorns and fucking rainbows, where everyone's happy and there's fucking world peace at the end. Yeah, that would work.

She frowned, and his teeth ground together when he heard the beginnings of a tantrum building in her pea-sized brain.

"I will fucking kill you so goddamn fast if you scream," he growled under his breath. Maybe no one would notice if he let Monty just strangle her until she passed out from a lack of oxygen. "Can you sing it to me?" Cobra finally asked. "I don't know that song."

"D'issy bissy spider," the child sang tunelessly. "Uppa water spout…"

'Really?' Of course that wasn't helpful. He dug deeper though and finally caught a memory in her bubblegum pink soul of one of her nannies singing it to her, along with a little dance that had made the girl smile and fall asleep in minutes.

He couldn't believe he was about to do this, but Cobra cleared his throat and just bit the bullet.

_The itsy bitsy spider went up the water spout._

All Cobra could hope while he started singing softly, twisting his hands one way then another to make his pinkies meet with his thumbs, was that the kid would go back to sleep.

_Down came the rain and washed the spider out._

Priscilla smiled as Cobra's fingers wiggled to mimic rain, her eyes gliding closed before snapping open again to watch the next part.

_Out came the sun and dried up all the rain._

_and the itsy bitsy spider went up the spout again._

Lucy rubbed her eyes while leaning against the doorjamb, a gentle smile on her lips as she watched Cobra finish the song. Really, she'd never considered switching the key for it to a minor one, but it made the normally cheery tune so much more like a lullaby that she was going to put that in her own babysitting arsenal.

Within moments, Priscilla was well on her way to sleep and the Poison Dragon Slayer stood silently. Monty's head peeked out of the lapel of his coat - and he was secretly enjoying just how uncomfortable it had made the staff that he refused to take it off inside - and Cobra looked down to
whisper, "Women are fucking insane."

As he reached the doorway, Cobra looked at the sleepy blonde and gave her a small smirk. *Fuck, her lips were all over my dick... If only...* From what he could tell, she'd woken up by falling off of the couch, right on her head, just when her dream was getting to the best part.

He loved and hated that he could still smell how aroused she'd been.

Lucy bit her lip as Cobra closed the door to Priscilla's room and they started walking back toward her own room. "Sorry for passing out, by the way."

He shrugged. Really, he didn't blame her. The blonde wasn't accustomed to sleep deprivation. Besides, he'd actually almost fallen asleep on her while they were on the train, so they were even. "Don't make it a common occurrence, and I won't poison you."

Really, he wanted to bring up the blowjob thing. The problem was that Lucy didn't remember the dream she'd been having in the slightest, or that he'd been the one to goad Eros into going insane. Thankfully, that also meant the blonde wasn't aware of the near-fucking-assault. That shit actually made him cringe inside.

When he thought about it, Cobra had been on the verge of making a very huge mistake all because he'd let himself get lost in the Celestial mage's soul and his own testosterone. He wasn't going to make that mistake again.

No, instead, Cobra was putting his dick on lockdown. He was the king one-eyed motherfucker, and his cock and balls could just deal with it. There was no point in fantasizing about Lucy, because that shit was never going to happen. And clearly, he couldn't handle being around her if he could hear her deeper desire.

Cobra already knew what it was that she wanted though. The only reason he was the object of her fantasies was because she liked bad boys. He was as bad as they came, and it was his shady past that had the blonde tied up in knots. She wasn't acting on anything, so he wouldn't either.

Lucy sighed as she took a seat next to Cobra on the lounge, looking over to the Poison Slayer only to find him glaring at the ground. "So..."

He blinked slowly and shifted his gaze to the blonde. "So..."

Lucy laughed and tucked her hair behind her ear, pulling her feet up onto the lounge. "Any ideas on movies you want to watch when we get back?"

"We can look around when I go to get a player," he shrugged. After a moment, he leaned back on the couch. "You're tired."

It was Lucy's turn to shrug. There was no way she would let herself fall asleep again that night. The blonde was determined to stay up, and that was that. Except, then she was finding Cobra's hand lifting from where it was on his lap and settling on the side of her neck. "Uh..."

Cobra gave the blonde a small smirk and pulled her head onto his shoulder. Her lips were nowhere near his neck, thank the gods. "Get some sleep," he whispered. "You've had a pretty long day."

Lucy bit her lip and looked up at the line of his jaw without moving her head. "I-I can just, um... Lay on the arm, or something."

His smirk widened into a grin while he pulled Monty from his coat. Cobra watched the snake coiling
around his hand as he said, "You are laying on an arm. And I'd wager that my arm is more comfortable than a damn prissy ass couch."

"It is," Lucy said softly.

"Smells better, too," he chuckled.

"Not the point. You don't like people in your bubble."

"Well, you encroached on my bubble earlier and you're still alive. Take what you can get, Jiggles."

Lucy sighed and shifted until she was a little more comfortable. It wasn't by much though, but she wasn't going to be picky.

"Here," Cobra whispered. He carefully pushed the blonde away while kicking off his shoes and removing his coat, then turned so his back was against the arm of the lounge. One leg moved behind her, and he finally stilled once they were in the same position that the two usually found themselves in while watching movies together. With Lucy sitting between his legs and Cobra perfectly comfortable.

Lucy frowned and looked over to the Poison Dragon Slayer. "What am I doing?"

"Lean back and get comfortable," Cobra sighed. It was purely a precaution, as far as he was concerned. With the shit that pudgy little Duke had been trying to scheme earlier, Cobra wasn't going to take any chances. On the off chance that he actually fell asleep, it would been ten times harder for someone to sneak up on them with Lucy so close, not without the Slayer hearing them coming.

Lucy's frown deepened as Cobra moved the hand that Monty had commandeered away from himself, then she slowly turned and laid back against him. If she was facing him, it would be way too close to cuddling, and that was the last thing she needed to be doing with the maroon-haired mage. His coat was easily tossed down onto their legs. Her head almost instantly found the most perfect little hollow next to his shoulder, just under his collarbone. 'Should this ever happen again, this will forever be my fucking nook... God, this is comfy!'

Cobra reached up with his free hand and carefully moved Lucy's hair off to one side just when she lifted her head to do it herself. Once the blonde was settled, he found himself in just a bit of a pickle. Specifically, where the hell he was supposed to put his hands. One was easy, since Monty had taken control of the appendage and was slithering up his arm. The other... Well, Cobra resigned himself to lifting and tucking it behind his own head.

Lucy frowned and absently reached up to grab Cobra's hand, then pulled his arm down and rested it on her stomach. "Don't take away my nook," she yawned.

"It's my fucking body, asshole," he grumbled.

"Except this part," Lucy whispered, smiling while shaking her head slightly. "I dub this 'Lucy's Nook'. No trespassing signs will be posted within a fortnight."

"Just go to sleep already, so I can send Monty on a scouting mission down your pants."

Lucy's eyes shot open and she shot up, trying to scramble away from the suddenly laughing Poison Slayer. His arm around her, however, tightened and pulled her right back down while the hand that held the albino snake moved into her line of sight. "C-Cobra, that's not funny! Let me go!"

"Shh," he whispered. "You'll wake the kid."
"Good! You-" She gasped in horror when one of his fingers hooked into the belt loop on her pants and lifted the denim from her hips. The snake's head turned toward her jeans. "C-Cobra, come on. This isn't f-funny."

"It'll be fine," he smirked. "Go on, Monty. Check it out and tell me what you find."

"Cobra, I-I'm serious," she whimpered. The blonde couldn't find the wherewithal to move, though. She was frozen in place, her heart hammering beneath her breast as she stared at Cobra's tanned fingers. How the room was dark enough that she couldn't see the dark green silk thong she had on. She shuddered when Monty's tongue flicked out across the sliver of her stomach that was bared from her shirt riding up.

"I'm just fucking with you," he chuckled, pulling Monty away from the Celestial mage. He let go of her pants and fixed her shirt, then settled his free hand on her stomach again. "So calm the hell down and get back in your nook."

She eyed the snake warily as its tongue flicked out to test the air, cringing when its red eyes seemed to lock onto her in interest. "You're such a dick, Cobra."

Cobra pulled Monty further away from the blonde when he started leaning toward her. "He just thinks you smell good."

"Because he wants to eat me," she scowled.

"No, because you do smell good. He's not thinking about food right now. And even if he was, you're way too big for him to eat."

Lucy frowned up at Cobra. "Did you just... He thought she smelled good? That was... odd."

"Nothing of the sort," he smirked. "You sleep, and I'll keep watch. But I expect full reign of your lap on the train ride back."

"Not between my legs this time," the blonde sighed.

"No promises on that one." He leaned down slightly and whispered into her ear, "You're always getting between my legs..."

She rolled her eyes, but found herself smiling slightly while she got just a little more comfortable. And really, Lucy found it rather surprising that Cobra's shoulder, and consequently his whole damn torso, was so comfy. She'd never considered it before, but the Poison Dragon Slayer had a great body for snuggling. Not that they were doing that. Oh, no. Definitely not.

"Pull up my coat," Cobra sighed. "It makes a good blanket."

"Ah," Lucy giggled while reaching down to adjust the fur-lined coat over both of them, "Your multipurpose coat of wonder." And once she was fully surrounded and just a little cozier than before, Lucy took a deep breath to find her sinuses filled with nothing but Cobra. She didn't care that he'd moved his hand to rest on her stomach over the coat. And as she slowly drifted off to sleep, the blonde had no clue that both of Cobra's hands were resting on her stomach, with his arms winding around her, or that the little albino python was moving from one of his hands to the other.

Cobra, however, was more than aware of the shit that was going on. And he had to keep reminding himself that it was just a necessary precaution. While he was sure he wouldn't fall asleep, because he'd gone longer without it, he was much warmer than normal. And Lucy smelled amazing. He could easily fall asleep like this, he figured. Listening to her soft breaths, feeling her hair brushing
against his cheek. Oddly enough, even the weight of Lucy using him as a pillow was a comfort he hadn't expected. It was confining in a way he'd only ever really felt with Cubellios, when she used to coil around him so they could share his body heat.

Morning dew and roses filled his every breath. It was going to be torture, being this close to the blonde all night when just a little while before he'd been on the verge of making a huge fucking mistake. But Cobra would just have to deal with it. The last thing he wanted was for some shit to go wrong while they were on a job together - especially his first job without Team Natsu watching his every move. But he could do this.

He'd spent enough time staying awake for days on end, forcing himself past the point of exhaustion because there was just no other option. And he would have Monty to keep him company, at least. Those long nights were always easier when he was able to talk to Cubellios, and now he had a new snake to get better acquainted with.

"Monty, if I fall asleep, I want you to bite anyone that comes in here," Cobra chuckled.

He sat in silence for several long minutes, then looked down at Monty once Lucy was completely asleep, listening to her (and thanking whatever god was out there) perfectly normal dreams of riding on top of a train car to the moon.

"You're a rare one," he whispered to the snake, smiling when it turned to look at him. "But I'll take good care of you, alright?"

Monty's soul quieted slightly, causing Cobra to let out another soft chuckle.

"I can hear you, Monty. I don't know if you can understand me, but I can hear your soul. I..." He paused and sighed while the snake tightened around his forearm. "I had a friend once. She wasn't really a snake though. But, I think you'll like Kinana. And things will be easier now. I couldn't hear her soul back then, but we were best friends... She kept me safe and..."

Cobra lifted one hand to look into the snake's red eyes. "And she's the reason I'm even alive today. But I can hear you, and I know... If you decide to stay with me... I just know you'll be happy. And you'll make me happy, too."

A soft hiss sounded from the snake.

"So... Please," Cobra pleaded sadly. "Please stick with me, okay?"

And, much to the Poison Dragon Slayer's surprise, the python slowly nodded while he heard the barest whisper in its soul. Something that made a childlike grin stretch over his lips as he pulled Monty closer to his cheek.

"... Monty... Happy..."

Chapter End Notes

I will say that Priscilla is based quite a bit on my own son, who was also three when I
wrote this chapter. Those games of hide-and-seek are too cute sometimes. Okay, that's enough gushing about the precious little hellspawn.

Also, as a very important note: You should never "pop" a snake to determine its sex unless you really know what you're doing, and there is a much safer method for finding a snake's gender than this. Only a professional - i.e. a veterinarian or a reptile specialist - should check for a snake's gender. As we all know, this is fiction, and Cobra has been shown to really love his snakes. So, for the purposes of storytelling, he's a well-informed guy on the subject.

For anyone who's interested, I made a recording of The Itsy Bitsy Spider in a minor key, so you can hear the difference between that and what we all know the original to be. My son actually prefers hearing my version (in minor) to the original, so… I just had to use it lol.

chirb.it/JG6vdf
Cobra groaned with a small frown, slowly tightener his grip around what he assumed to be a pillow in his arms. His nose nestled the softness surrounding it and when he shifted slightly to get more comfortable and continue sleeping - because he wasn't sure just how much longer he would have before he wouldn't be able to. The Poison Slayer was blissfully unaware of the denim fabric that sat under his palm.

'I shouldn't be enjoying this. He has no idea he's doing it. But, if I try to move, I'll either get strangled or murdered... Or molested. That would be a nice change of pace...'

He let out a soft, huffing breath and shifted again.

'I'd go back to sleep if it wasn't for him groping me... He's so comfy...'

"Woman... watching... sleep..."

There was a small, startled gasp that acted as the catalyst for Cobra actually waking up. His eye shot open, and he was instantly on alert, soaking in the hundreds of souls that were milling around the estate until he was finally only hearing Lucy. The same woman whose head was resting so easily on his shoulder with her face turned toward him and her chest pressing against his.

Tired brown eyes blinked slowly as they looked at one another, but the two mages were completely silent. While Lucy had been awake for only a handful of minutes, Cobra was still trying to sort out just how he'd gone from talking with Monty in the middle of the night, just thirty minutes before dawn, to waking up with the blonde Celestial mage in his arms.

She'd still been lying with her back to his chest, the last he knew. And she hadn't been pinned between his body and the back of the lounge. Not like she was right then. And when he took a moment to really take stock of their position was when Cobra realized that he was fully, completely, one-hundred percent, feeling Lucy up in his sleep.

And instead of making a peep, Cobra let his hand glide up from her perfectly sculpted ass to the small of her back.

"Do you always wake up like that?" Lucy said around a quiet yawn.

"Like what?"

"Like something's about to murder you..."

Cobra shrugged, letting his eye slide closed while he started focusing on the other souls near them once again. The majority of the staff was present, but there were several foreign souls that had shown up at some point while he'd been unconscious.

After digging for just a little while, he realized they were just more aristocratic assholes that the Duke had invited back to the estate when the party ran later than normal. Not a single one of them was thinking about anything remotely close to dastardly. In any form.
"Can you tell that… thing… to stop watching me?"

"Monty's not a thing," he whispered. "He's a snake."

Lucy cringed but nodded. "You're right. So-"

"And he's allowed to watch whatever he wants," Cobra interjected. His head turned slightly toward where he could hear the baby python's soul, just above his shoulder. "Monty, you're creeping Lucy out."

"Thank y-"

"Keep up the good work, little guy," he smirked. 

"... Ass."

'I wonder why his breath smells like syrup. No, not syrup… But really sweet. Pfft, a Dragon Slayer that doesn't have stinky dragon breath."

"I'll show you 'stinky dragon breath' if you don't watch it…" Cobra opened his eye again with a small smirk sitting on his lips when he heard Lucy giggle. "That's supposed to be a threat, y'know."

"Sure," she nodded. "But you have to admit, it's a little funny." How could it not be? The Poison Dragon Slayer had a roar that was quite literally a knockout from just the smell, but he wakes up in the morning and that's nowhere to be found? Hilarious.

Cobra rolled his eye. "Monty, can you strangle her for a minute?"

Lucy squeaked when the snake's head popped up from behind Cobra's head and it peered down at her. The little forked tongue flickered out while he came closer. "C-Cobra…"

What was even scarier was the dark glee shining in the Poison Slayer's single eye as Monty leaned down over his tanned cheek.

"How is he just d-doing your freakin' bidding?" she whimpered. "It's been l-less than a d-day!"

"Because he's happy, and he likes me?"

"You?!"

"I'm very approachable," he sniffed. "As long as you're a snake."

"And Kinana?" Lucy asked teasingly.

"Cubellios." Cobra blinked as Lucy went oddly still, all the way down to her soul. Well, shit. Didn't mean to let that one slip…' He'd planned on just never telling anyone who Kinana used to be, since the last thing Cobra wanted was for anyone's opinions of the purple-haired woman to change just because she'd once been a snake. Or his best friend.

'Purple hair. Purple scales. They get along so well. It makes sense…'

"Don't tell any-"

Lucy smiled warmly and shook her head. "Not a soul, Cobra."

He let out a huffing breath and looked aside. "So… there's that."
The fact that Cobra was capable of being awkward in the slightest had Lucy fighting not to laugh. Because, in the short time they'd known each other, he'd never been like that. It was when she started losing her fight to keep her laughter hidden, and ended up burying her face against his neck without thinking about it, that Lucy realized they were cuddling on a lounge.

And the last thing she needed to be doing was cuddling with the maroon-haired mage. That he was even in this position in the first place was a surprise, just as much as the fact that his hand was still resting on her lower back.

It took every fiber of her being just to lie in place as Cobra's hand drifted a little higher, then glided so effortlessly over her waist. "I'm guessing we should probably get up and get our money."

"Most likely," he nodded. Neither mage tried to move. Instead, he simply kept looking at Lucy, listening to the gentle hum of her soul. For once, Eros wasn't trying to tease the blonde with fantasies. She was simply looking at him. For some reason, she was memorizing the way his face looked right then.

'... The gentle glow of the rising sun shining from behind him, highlighting dangerously tempting cheekbones. A thin nose. His eye shines with warmth, with longing, desire. Streaks of soft pink and deepest midnight skitter through his spiked hair, giving it depth that begs for sinful fingers to sink into it and right to hell…'

That was definitely different. In the blonde's soul, a trap door had opened in the space between Pathos and Logos. One that was simply called Mousai. After the shit that had happened the night before, Cobra knew it was probably a horrible idea to even try dipping into this new section, but he really wasn't given a choice. Something drew him in further, and he was left in a darkened room with only pale grey swirls of mist hovering around him.

'... His lips part, almost as though they long to whisper his secrets into a willing, flushed ear. He looks distant, preoccupied. A sudden shift in the air, something intangible, presses down around him, tightening his fingers…'

The mist in her soul seemed to solidify into a thin wall that surrounded him on all sides.

'... A flash of pink darts across his lip just before sharpened teeth pull it inward. They glint in the light and instantly draw the eye down. The air is stifling as his pupil thins into a reptilian slit, and the only proof that he's affected by anything is the short, stuttering breath he pulls in. He's wicked, a true devil, but his appeal lies in the promise of that wickedness raining down on his foes. The temptation of an adventure worth remembering leaks from his smooth, caramel skin. There's no turning back once his voice sounds out in the silence. A whisper, ragged and desperate, is pulled from thin lips…'

A sharp knock on the door ripped Cobra from the blonde's soul just when the wall of mist started trailing in thin wisps over his consciousness. He blinked repeatedly and found Lucy still watching him with a curious glint in her eyes.

"What the hell were you just doing?" he whispered. There was no point in worrying about the maid at the door. She could fuck the hell off for a minute or two, because he was much more interested in Lucy at the moment.

"Looking at you," she answered. "We should probably-"

"No," he frowned. "I mean your soul. What the hell was that?"

She blinked in confusion, a thoughtful frown turning down her lips. "I don't know. I was looking at
"You were…" His eye narrowed while he carefully delved right back into her soul, and he watched as the little trap door closed and winked out of existence. 'Mousai… what does that mean again?'

"I guess I got inspired for a character," she admitted sheepishly.

"... Muse," he said.

"Huh?"

"Inspiration is derived from the Muses. That's what it was."

That explained all of it. Lucy had been thinking of her novel, ways to narrate what she was seeing Cobra doing, how he looked. It was heavily romanticised, but in all honesty, that was some damn good thinking. "Nothing. Just…" The knock sounded a third time, and he groaned in aggravation. "What?!

Lucy's lips pursed angrily and she flicked the Poison Slayer in the arm as the door opened to reveal a young maid. "She's just doing her job…"

"M-Master Junelle h-h… h-h-h… has invited… y-you b-b-both..." the maid stuttered.

"We're invited to breakfast before we get paid and leave. It'll be ready in twenty minutes," Cobra nodded after picking the vital information from the girl's soul. "Got it. You can go." The fact that she squeaked in alarm and dashed out of the room in fear when their eyes met wasn't lost on him. He just really didn't care.

"Wow, Cobra. Way to be a dick."

"She's got a speech impediment," he said while turning his attention back to the blonde. "The fact that she got that much of the message out is apparently surprising, and I was scaring the shit out of her just by being in the same room."

Lucy's jaw snapped shut and she watched as Monty slithered across Cobra's scarred eye and up toward his hair. She still couldn't understand how he could handle those creepy little scales on his body. It was weird as hell, especially since he just didn't seem fazed by it in the slightest.

"Now," Cobra sighed. "What I was going to say was that I figured out what I was listening to."

"So, you were listening?" God, that was mortifying. Mainly because Lucy was considering the new character as a potential love interest for the heroine, a man whose past was suspect and who would challenge her and try to lead her to destruction time and again.

"I was."

Lucy's eyes closed and her cheeks blushed brilliantly. "I-I was, uh… Oh my god…"

"Put more shit like that in your book," he chuckled.

"I-I'm not writing about you in my book…"

"Never said you had to, but if I wore panties... They'd be drenched right now."
"Shut up, Cobra," she whined. Yet again, Lucy buried her face in the closest thing possible, the juncture of his neck and shoulder.

"You keep this up, and I will be between your legs-"

"Ack!" Lucy drew back with wide eyes.

"- on the train later," he finished with a short laugh.

"Shut up… And stop feeling me up, pervert."

Cobra simply shrugged and forced himself to let go of the blonde and carefully roll away. "I wasn't. You were the one all over me." She was far too comfortable being around him, and he was getting too complacent. Just letting her do as she pleased with him like that. He still couldn't figure out how he'd even fallen asleep in the first place.

"Lies."

"Me?" he gasped. "A liar? Never!"

The two slowly got up from the lounge, and Lucy stretched and popped her back with a contented sigh. She looked at Cobra and found him slowly pulling his jacket back on with Monty sitting in a coiled, snaky pile on the cushion.

"Woman… smell… good…"

Cobra's brow drew together at the halting thoughts from the snake. "You think so?" he asked while stretching out his hand. Monty slithered forward and his hand lifted once the snake was wrapped around it.

"Sleep… smell… woman… good…"

Cobra chuckled and rubbed his thumb over the top of Monty's head. "I guess that makes sense," he whispered. "Just don't tell anyone, alright?" And it did. He'd been thinking all night about the way Lucy smelled. Morning dew and roses. Two things he hadn't ever been around until he was nearly a teenager. And it was comforting, just like feeling the blonde lying on top of him in 'her nook'. That, in itself, was weird though. He didn't want it to be comforting.

Lucy was silent, but her eyes were wide and slightly horrified as Cobra left the room without a word directed toward her. She could only assume he was going to be getting changed, something she also needed to be doing, and hadn't just completely lost his mind. Just as she was turning toward the bathroom, Cobra's head popped back through the doorway.

"Bring your bag," he said.

"Down to breakfast?"

"Yep. The job's technically done, so we'll leave as soon as we've gotten paid."

Lucy nodded, watching as he closed the door, then continued to the bathroom. She took a fast shower and got dressed - and was supremely glad that she'd only brought pants and full t-shirts to wear, because the last thing she wanted was the Duke ogling her bare flesh - then packed her bag and made her way out of the room.

And just as the door was closing behind her, Lucy found herself smiling at the sight of Cobra leaning
against the wall next to her door. He was apparently not leaving her alone for long while the Duke was around, and she really didn't have a problem with that in the slightest.

"Pretty much," Cobra said, pushing off from the wall. He started walking, listening to everything around them as the two made their way down the hall to the dining room. Or banquet hall. Or whatever the hell the enormous room was called.

They walked into the room, and he let Lucy take the lead in deciding where they were going to sit. Which ended up being next to the only other occupant at the table, Priscilla. Instead of how they'd sat the day before, Lucy was in the center with Priscilla on her right and Cobra on her left. Over his dead body was he going to let something happen when they were so close to being the hell away from that place.

After a few minutes, with the Poison Slayer whispering to the snake in his jacket to stay out of sight and Lucy listening to Priscilla rambling about clouds, Duke Junelle made his entrance with his wife and four other high society couples.

"Oh, it is so difficult to find good help for children these days."

"Yes, well there is only so much one can do on short notice."

"But… mages…"

Lucy sighed and kept her attention on Priscilla until the little girl went silent and gazed at her parents with a wide, loving smile.

"Mommy!"

Okay, so maybe just her mother. Still, there was no way Lucy could stop herself from watching as the three-year-old pushed away from the table and ran toward the woman. And she was definitely sighing in relief to find that the Duke's wife was kneeling on the floor with her arms winding lovingly around Priscilla's small frame.

'Is that… But she looks the same!'

'Lucy Heartfilia?!!'

'Oh dear, but who's that with her? Lucky hussy…'

Cobra cleared his throat slightly, his eye narrowing in suspicion while the Duke came to stand at the head of the table. The sweaty little shit just looked so damn smug. Maybe that was just his default look, though. He was perpetually in 'resting douche face'. But there was something about it, some small kernel of added confidence that had the Poison Slayer listening in just a little harder.

'Extra people to add confusion and keep Bridgette occupied. Damn, why is that mongrel still here? The staff was supposed to get rid of him. Now we'll have to scrub everything he's touched, assuming he didn't steal it…'

Oh, Cobra was more than ready to fucking kill the guy after that. Even while everyone took their seats, with Priscilla returning to her place at Lucy's side, the two mages were more than aware of all the attention they were getting.

'I can't believe that's really Lucy Heartfilia. Am I even supposed to talk to her now?'

Finally, one brave soul among the group turned her gaze on the Celestial mage with her chin held
higher than was really necessary, Cobra was sure.

"So, Lucy Heartfilia has crawled out of the mud," she said. "Are you attempting to wheedle your way back-"

"No."

Cobra had expected any number of things from the blonde, but the sudden inferno that burned in her eyes paired with a severely disarming smile had him more than curious to see what she was going to do.

"I have no intention of forcing myself to adhere to the rules of high society, Lady Marietta. I love my life in my guild."

"But, as a guild mage," Marietta scoffed. "Surely, you haven't become so undesirable as to be unfit for a man to marry."

"That really isn't any of your concern," Lucy answered. "Because I have much more self-respect than thinking my only worth lies on my chest and between my legs."

"That is highly uncalled for," the brunette man at Marietta's side said with a scowl. "Who do you think you are to speak to my wife in such a manner?"

"No one," Duke Junelle chuckled. "Don't mind the help."

Before anyone could say another word on the matter, several servants walked into the room from a side door that was nearly hidden in the paneling, each bearing trays laden with food. Everything was set running down the center of the table, then more came out and placed a plate in front of each person, already dished up with their breakfast portions.

Cobra found himself just a little sick to his stomach at the knowledge that most of it would be wasted. The staff was required to prepare all of this food, but the women at the table weren't going to each very much so they could maintain their weight and fit into their dresses. And the men would happily gorge themselves. Still, there were only five normal men in the room, and the table was set to feed all of the Dragon Slayers in Fairy Tail until they were full.

The Duke didn't care that there were so many people in the world who were starving, forced to beg for a scrap of bread just to feed their children for the week. Cobra had been in much the same position when he was just a child, and this just made him hate the pudgy fuck even more.

"Let us eat," the Duke announced with a wide smile.

Lucy silently picked up her fork and speared through one of her eggs.

"... Bad smell..."

Cobra blinked in surprise at the small hissing soul in his pocket, then tilted his head toward Lucy only slightly to get a better whiff of her food. Their plates were almost identical in preparation and presentation, except when he really focused on it, Cobra felt like an ass for not catching the scent of a very potent, nearly deadly, mixture of poppies and belladonna.

Lucy blinked in surprise when Cobra's fingers brushed across her wrist and his lips closed around her fork. "Cobra?"

The Poison Slayer hummed as the poison on her food danced along his taste buds. He pulled the bit
of egg from the fork, swallowing it in an instant, then leaned over to whisper in her ear. "Switch plates with me. You really don't want what's on yours."

'Oh god… He's kidding, right? Oh fuck… That bastard was trying to poison me?!

Cobra turned his head slightly and ignored the curious stares from everyone around the table as he swapped his plate for Lucy's - only after, of course, taking a precautionary passing sniff of his own meal to make sure it wasn't laced with anything.

As soon their food was settled, he turned toward the blonde with a smirk and let his lips brush across her slightly pale cheek. The last thing he needed to do was act like he was suspicious of anything, and since everyone there was under the assumption that he and Lucy were fucking, it was just easier to pretend that was the case. "You don't need nearly that much food," he said, loud enough for the others present to hear. "You're watching your weight, so…"

Lucy took a stuttering breath and nodded, turning toward the Poison Slayer and giving him a shaky smile. "Thanks, Cobra." And that was when she realized that their lips were nearly touching. He hadn't moved in the slightest, but she'd been the one to put them in that position. Sort of.

Cobra chuckled at the sudden heat in Lucy's cheeks as he leaned back and she turned toward her plate again. He dug into his food then, taking no small amount of pleasure in the red-faced glare he was getting from the Duke.

'Moron. I hope that really IS enough to kill someone now. With him out of the way… Oh, the things I'll do with her… Now I'll just have to figure something else out before they leave here.'

And now that Cobra knew the Duke really was trying to pull some shady bullshit over on them, he was going to be on the ball. Nothing was getting past him, that was for sure.

'... The little slut had him in her room last night… Sleeping on that couch like the trash they are. Maybe if I find a way to get at that snake of his that's in his pocket, that will be enough of a distraction…'

Cobra's eye flashed in warning, and just as his muscles tensed to lunge for the bastard - because no one threatened Monty and got away with it, as far as he was concerned - a small, slender hand with lightly calloused fingertips brushed over the back of his hand beneath the table.

Her fingers slid between his, and the Poison Slayer paused in wrenching his hand away when he heard Lucy's thoughts, directed right at him.

"Wait until we've got him alone in the office, Cobra. Then, by all fucking means, rip his throat out, skull fuck him… I don't care what you do, but I sure as hell want to watch."

He knew she wasn't entirely serious about the murder part, but that didn't mean he couldn't sit himself back and just enjoy the pretty, bloody picture it would make. And even though he wasn't one for people being in his personal space, Lucy's hand gently grasping his was probably the only thing that was keeping Cobra in his seat.

It was even more helpful when Lucy's imagination started running wild of all the ways she wanted to slowly murder the pug-faced shitsack. When a particularly violent image appeared in her head - of the blonde taking a cheese grater to his rolie polie stomach and shredding his flesh, then organs, while listening to his bloodcurdling screams - Cobra lightly squeezed Lucy's fingers, and gave her an amused smile.

"Yeah, I thought you'd like that… Sicko."
"Right back at you," Cobra chuckled quietly, taking another bite of his poisoned food.

The two mages from Fairy Tail stood side by side with the backs of their hands touching as they waited for the Duke to look up from his desk.

'Maybe I can refuse to pay them for… insulting my guests! Yes, that will work.'

"Maybe you aren't aware," Cobra said just as the Duke's lips were parting. "But there are very strict laws that govern the treatment of guild mages by employers. I wouldn't suggest forcing Fairy Tail's hand in contacting the Magic Council if you try to skimp out on our pay."

"What exactly do you mean?" he frowned.

"I mean just that," Cobra replied. "Statute number 537, subsection B, numbers one through four clearly describe what does and does not constitute a redaction of payment for guild mages hired for particular tasks."

Cobra had no clue whether or not there actually was a law about it, but he'd been watching a few Law & Order episodes, and really… he hadn't been able to help himself.

"Our job was clearly laid out, and we verbally agreed to the terms that were added upon our arrival. There was no indication that we would be dealing with other members of high society, or that our behavior in front of them would be a determining factor in whether or not our money comes through."

"We were only hired to watch your daughter until your return," Lucy nodded. "Our job was done as soon as you and your wife came back."

The Duke's eyes narrowed, and he turned his attention to the maroon-haired mage at Lucy's side. "Well, I'm personally just not comfortable paying a criminal."

"You probably should have thought about that before you let me anywhere near your daughter," Cobra answered. "And for the record, I don't kill kids."

He just… let them die on their own. Okay, so he'd killed a few kids. Twenty… Maybe a hundred. But he wasn't killing kids now. That was the point here.

"There was no destruction of property," Lucy continued. "No damages were done that would need to be taken out of our pay."

"I never said that I wouldn't actually pay you, though," the Duke smirked, leaning back in his chair. "You two are jumping to some pretty heavy conclusions here. Maybe to try and get more out of me?"

"That's not it at all, and you know it," Lucy scowled.

"Well, I'm sure we can come to some sort of arrangement. I do feel a rather offended." Duke Junelle paused and let his eyes rake over the blonde. "If you'll excuse us, young man. I have some things to discuss with your partner."

"You're not getting my ass out of this fucking room without her," Cobra growled.

"Oh?" The Duke snapped his fingers and the double doors at the far end of the room burst open with several house guards filing inside. A smug grin twisted his thin lips as they surrounded the two
mages. "Take him out of here."

"Yes, sir!"

"Cobra, don't break anything!"

Cobra's hand instantly lifted and covered Lucy's nose and mouth while he pulled her into his chest. With a deep inhale, he let out a thick cloud of poisonous gas right at the guards that were closing in on them. The sounds of a dozen bodies thudding on the ground, obscured by the vile, red gas coming from his lips, was music to his pointed ears.

Sadly, they still needed to get paid, so he couldn't kill the fucking Duke. He let the poison dissipate, then removed his hand from Lucy's face and took slow steps forward with the blonde still tucked into his side.

"You should learn about the ones you hire," Cobra hissed. "You knew I was a criminal. That's really not hard to figure out."

"Wh-Who are y-you…"

"Cobra, the Poison Dragon Slayer," he said, leaning forward and placing one hand on the Duke's desk. "That pathetic little stunt you pulled during breakfast was just another meal to me. Poppies and belladonna are poisonous, which means all you did was give me a little boost."

The Duke shuddered when he saw Cobra's tongue running slowly over his sharper than normal teeth.

"Now get our fucking money, and Lucy and I will leave."

"I-I should have you arrested…"

"You could try," Cobra nodded. "But the Rune Knights all know who the hell I am. And if I say that you've been trying to think up ways to get rid of me, so you can rape Lucy… Well, what reason do I have to lie?"

"To avoid being locked up!" The Duke stood on trembling legs with a deep scowl. "Those allegations are atrocious!"


"I refuse to be spoken to this way!" The Duke screeched in terror when Cobra lunged forward and snapped his jaws wildly from across the table. "Get away from me, you mongrel!"

"I'll show you a motherfucking mongrel!"

"Cobra, stop!" Lucy shouted. With widened eyes, she wrapped her arms around his waist and struggled to hold him back from their employer. Either he was a really great actor, or the Poison Slayer had finally snapped. If that was the case, then she was just as good as dead.

Really, she was hoping it was just that he was acting. And even if that was the case, she was still struggling to keep him back on their side of the desk.

"I'll roast you like a fucking pig," Cobra growled. His single eye flashed with excitement and he licked his lips again while leaning just a little closer to the Duke. "I'll impale you, and make sure you live through it. It'll be so much fun to watch you squirm when I put you over a fire. Around and
around and around… You'll try to scream… Struggle for each breath…"

The Duke went pale as Cobra's nostrils flared.

"I hear how scared you are," Cobra whispered. "I can smell your fear. Tell me. What scares you more? The fact that someone like me - a piece of trash that's worth nothing - can get a woman you never will, and it makes all your money and power pointless?"

Duke Junelle gulped and whimpered when he felt his large chair stopping him from getting any further away, even as Cobra leaned further over his desk until he was nearly crawling on top of it.

"Or is it the fact that, when I do kill you, I'll make sure your wife and daughter are watching it happen? Bound and violated, spinning over a fire just like the pig you are…"

"Cobra, that's enough," Lucy said softly.

"I'll force them to eat you," Cobra hissed. "Every last bite. Waste not, want not, little piggy. Isn't that right?"

"Cobra…"

"There's enough of you to go around, but I'll make sure they stomach it. Then they're next…"

"Cobra, stop!" Lucy insisted. "That's enough!"

"It isn't enough," he snarled. "Not until he's crying like the little bitch he is, begging for his life… God, little piggy." Cobra groaned with wicked delight when the Duke's heart rate spiked. "I'll play with you for hours. We'll see how long until you break…"

Lucy sighed as he slowly reached back and grabbed one of her hands, giving it a gentle squeeze. When Lucy came to stand next to him, instead of trying to pull him off the desk, she was startled by the crazed look on the Poison Slayer's face. He definitely looked the part of a psychopath right then, that was for sure.

"Now, you're going to unlock your desk and pull out our money," Cobra continued. "You have ten seconds."

"I-I won't be… I-I…"

Cobra snarled and snapped his jaws again, letting the smallest bit of poison drip from his teeth.

"Eight seconds."

"No! Wait!"

"I'm gonna have so much fun ripping your shitty little body to shreds," Cobra whispered. When the Duke didn't budge, he really did crawl on top of the man's desk just so he could get that much closer. "I'm getting hard just thinking about it, piggy… Five seconds."

"I-I…" Duke Junelle shook his head. "I-I'll have you arrested!"

"Three… Two… One…" Cobra's face split into a manic grin, and he licked his lips once again. "Time's up…"

"Wait!" The Duke collapsed to the floor, violently wrenching open his desk drawer and pulling out a bag of Jewels that had been set aside for the mages before him. With trembling hands, he shielded himself from the Poison Slayer while blindly trying to hand him the bag. "P-Please! Don't k-kill me!"
Lucy reached over the desk and grabbed the bag, then set it down and opened it. "I'm counting it."

"Good," Cobra nodded. "Because if it's short, I'll just take it out of his flesh… No, that's too cliché. His organs…" His eye closed for a moment and he hummed in contentment. "God, I miss selling organs. Taking them out… Hearing the screams…" He looked back down to the Duke, and his smile widened. "Bloody bathtubs and rooms filled with bodies. Is that what you want me to do, little piggy?"

"It's all here," Lucy finally said after counting through it a second time to be sure. "Cobra, we can go now."

"Can't I just poison him a little bit?" he asked. "It'll get my point across…"

"... No."

The Duke whimpered and peeked under his arm when he heard the Poison Slayer getting off of his desk. When he dared to look over the wooden obstruction, he froze in place at the sight of Cobra grinning and waiting for him, still leaning mostly over his desk.

"A word of advice," Cobra said slowly, wrapping an arm around Lucy's shoulders and pulling her closer. "Don't ever try to mess with my partner again. If I find out that she's even so much as looked at wrong, because of you… I'll be back here, right on your doorstep. I'll come in while you're asleep and you'll never know what hit you. You chose the wrong woman to fuck with, do you understand me?"

"I-I understand…"

"I won't hesitate to torture you, if you try to pull some shit like this again."


"I almost hope you do, though," Cobra chuckled darkly as he turned to lead Lucy out of the room. He glanced over his shoulder, giving the Duke a dark, twisted grin. "I'll be dreaming up ways to kill you, piggy. It'll be so much fucking fun."

Once they reached the door, Cobra bit his lips to bite back a laugh at the sudden scent of urine filling the Duke's office. He didn't try to let Lucy go, and she was apparently fine with letting him lead her around for a little while. So, that's what he did. Right out of the estate and off the property, then down the road until they were at the train station.

Lucy smiled while she bought two tickets for the next train back to Magnolia, then walked with Cobra over to the train that was in the process of boarding. The two made their way through the cars, with Lucy walking in front of him in search of a private compartment.

And once they were inside, she closed and locked the door, then drew the blinds and sat down sideways on one of the benches.

"What's this?" Cobra chuckled.

"Grab me a pillow for my back?" Lucy grinned. "As a reward for scaring that asshole, and getting our money, you get to use my lap."

"Uh-huh," Cobra snorted. "I was already gonna use your lap." Still, he grabbed a pillow for the blonde and waited as she set it behind herself. As she got situated, he pulled off his jacket and coaxed Monty from his pocket.
"Ah," Lucy nodded. "But you said it yourself. I have a habit of getting between your legs."

"So, because he literally pissed himself while we were leaving, I'm allowed between your legs," Cobra mused. "Are you sure you're not crazy?"

"Only to rest," Lucy laughed. "Come on. Get comfy now before the train starts moving."

Cobra cringed when he heard the conductor's announcement and scrambled to get onto the bench. He didn't even care that Lucy was laughing at him. Or that Monty was highly amused by him being 'weird'. Not when his head was resting on her covered stomach and her fingers sifted through his hair.

"Don't forget to use your coat-blanket," Lucy whispered.

"I'm not gonna sleep..." Still, he moved to draped his jacket over himself and Lucy's lower legs.

"You hardly slept last night," Lucy sighed while running her nails over his scalp. "Get some sleep, Cobra. You and Monty."

He rolled his eye, then groaned when the train shuddered as it started to move. "I shouldn't have slept at all. I said I wouldn't."

"Well, I was safe as could be, thanks to you just being there. So get some rest now, okay? I'll wake you up before we get there, and you can stretch and all that."

"Mm-hmm..." He let out a slow, contented sigh as he rolled onto his stomach and scooted a little higher.

"I said my lap, ass," Lucy giggled. "This is clearly not my lap."

"Nope, but it's a damn good fucking nook..."

Lucy blushed slightly when he nuzzled her stomach, watching as Monty slithered over Cobra's back and under the jacket to stay warm. "Are you claiming it?" she asked.

"It's a possibility." He would have to test out other places on the blonde to see which was the most comfortable. But, really... Cobra knew that was never going to happen. He was just in such a good mood right then, because he'd been able to scare that Duke, to threaten him and let his imagination run wild for a change.

Lucy shook her head and let out a slow breath while looking out the window across the compartment, her fingers still tracing mindless patterns on Cobra's head and toying with his hair. The Poison Dragon Slayer really had a way of surprising her, that was for sure, but the way he'd looked while threatening Duke Junelle... No matter how scared Lucy knew she would have been if it was directed at her, there was just something far too alluring about how he could go from blank-face to crazy face in no time flat.

'My poor panties...'

Lucy knew that Cobra was an unpredictable bastard when he really wanted to be. It was pretty much to be expected since he could hear everyone else's souls, but they couldn't hear his. He was ready for anything more often than not, and now the blonde knew that, even when it seemed like he was sleeping peacefully, the asshole was more than likely thinking.
Really, if she hadn't seen him sleeping twice already, the Celestial mage would have thought that he just never did it.

And really, she didn't have that much of a problem with him quite literally dragging her through Magnolia on a direct path to the guild. Natsu had done it enough times that she was sure her shoulder was just giving up on ever functioning properly. And at least Cobra's hand wasn't nearly as hot, so there wouldn't be a red handprint on her arm. That was a plus.

He was on a mission of some sort, but Lucy really couldn't figure out just what it was. Maybe he was just extremely happy to be back in Magnolia. No, that didn't sound right at all.

Maybe he wanted to get to the guild to show everyone that she'd survived being away with him for the night. Well, that sounded a whole lot dirtier than Lucy had intended it.

Or maybe he just wanted to turn in the mission, so they could split the reward and he could go shopping. No, that was more of a Lucy thing, she was sure.

It wasn't long before the blonde was finding out just what Cobra had in mind, though. He hardly paused to open the doors to the guild before she was being pulled inside and right through a guild brawl. It was, however, the first time that she hadn't actually been punched in the head or tossed across the building within the first two seconds of being in the thick of it.

Lucy was positive it had everything to do with Cobra ducking one way and another before anyone could hit him, and she was just following his lead. Maybe.

She'd barely caught her breath while they went the last few feet to the bar, and then promptly crashed into his back as Cobra stopped dead in his tracks.

"Ah, Cobra," Makarov chuckled while lifting a mug of beer to his lips. "Welcome back."

"Yeah, yeah," Cobra scowled. "Look, I'm gonna tell you this right now. If that bastard ever sends a fucking request to this guild again, I'm gonna rip out his goddamn spleen and make him eat it."

Lucy's eyes went wide while she righted herself, until she was pulled around to stand next to the Poison Slayer and nearly crashed into the bar. "Cobra, I'm not a ragdoll," she hissed. "You're as bad as Natsu."

Makarov frowned and set his mug down, then slowly stood up. "I believe we should discuss this in my office."

"Talk it over with her," Cobra said, tilting his head toward the blonde. "She's the one he was trying to-" He took a step back when Lucy tried to shove him. "Fine. Talk to him. We'll split the money later."

Lucy huffed angrily while Cobra walked off to take a seat at the far end of the bar, then turned toward the guild's master and nodded to the stairs. "I-I guess I should tell you the whole story, Master."

"A wise choice," he said with a tender smile. "But before we get to that. How was the job?"

"A cake walk," Lucy laughed. "And there was no destruction! Just… uh… a few poisoned guards, but… Well…"

"I see," Makarov nodded, leading the blonde further from the bar and up the stairs.
Cobra shook his head while he waited for Kinana to make her rounds at the bar again, then opened the lapel of his coat to let Monty slither out onto his hand. "So, here's the guild," he said softly.

The snake's head turned one way, then another, and Cobra shifted in his seat to allow it to see further into the building. "Guild…"

"Cobra… is that a snake?"

The Poison Slayer turned to look at Mira with a small smirk. "Monty, that's Mira. She's a demon." The baby python's head turned and Cobra moved so he could slither across the bar toward the silver-haired Takeover mage. "And the keeper of food in the guild."

"Food demon…"

"And this…" Cobra chuckled as Kinana came to stop in front of him. He just couldn't get enough of the wide-eyed, curious look that she was giving the little albino snake as its head turned toward her. "This is Kinana."

Kinana carefully set her tray down and lowered her head until her nose was nearly brushing over the python's snout.

"Um, Kinana, maybe you shouldn't get too close?" Mira asked uneasily. "Monty could bite you, and…"

And suddenly the purple-haired barmaid was smiling while looking into the gleaming ruby eyes of the snake. "You wouldn't bite me, would you?" she whispered. She couldn't help but laugh when Monty's forked tongue flicked out over her nose. "I didn't think so."

"Mira," Cobra said, barely taking his gaze from Kinana and Monty. "Reticulated pythons aren't poisonous. He's a constrictor."

"So, he'll suffocate someone?"

"Oh, he's just a little baby," Kinana crooned. "Mira, don't be mean…"

Cobra chuckled when Mira simply shook her head in bewilderment and walked off to take more orders. "Now that she's gone… Monty, I want you to meet Cubellios," he whispered. "You remember, I told you about her?"

"Cubellios… snake friend?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "She was my snake friend."

"He talks to you?" Kinana asked, lifting a finger and gently brushing it along Monty's belly. She really couldn't help the small hint of jealousy that laced her voice. From what she remembered, Kinana had never been able to talk with Cobra. She'd tried, but he could just never hear her. And even though she knew that all he'd wanted was to hear her, it wasn't something they'd been able to accomplish while she was still his snake.

"Hey," Cobra said softly. He held out a hand and sighed as Monty slithered back over to him and coiled around his arm. "This doesn't mean I love you any less, Cu."

"Wh-What?" Kinana laughed.

"The family is just bigger now," Cobra nodded with a playful smirk. "And y'know… I think it's a
"Good thing, you having a little brother."

"Oh my god, Cobra," she giggled. "I'm not jealous of Monty."

"Good, because he needs a role model, Cu. And I'm gonna be depending on you to show him right from wrong, teach him all the ways of a snake…"

"Shut up," Kinana laughed. She reached across the bar and lightly smacked Cobra's arm, then looked down at Monty. "You keep a close eye on Cobra, okay? When he gets in trouble, it's usually extra bad."

If she hadn't known what it felt like, having that sudden protective urge that caused a reptile's body to tense and rise in warning, Kinana would have thought that the little albino python was about to strike her. As it stood, though, the way his head lifted and how he hissed only had her smile widening.

"Cobra," she whispered, taking her old friend's hand with both of hers. "I'm glad you found him."

"Me too, Cu," he whispered back. "It's not like I was trying to replace you or anything, though."

She shook her head in an instant, her smile widening when she saw him look down at the bar top. It was barely there, but she could almost see the little boy that he'd once been when they first met. "Erik, I never said you were trying to replace me."

"Yeah, but…"

"But nothing. He loves you, Erik. Just as much as I did when we found each other."

"You can't know that," he chuckled.

"I don't need to be able to hear souls to know it," she said gently. "Now, how about I go and get you some poison?"

"That sounds great."

"Monty?" she asked. "Do you want anything?"

Cobra smirked when the snake gazed at her for several long moments. "She'll bring you food," he said softly. "Or we can go hunting together."

"Hunting!"

Cobra found himself laughing at the sudden excitement that rippled through Monty's scales. "On second thought, I think we're gonna go hunting now. I'll get something when we come back."

Kinana nodded and watched as the Poison Slayer stood and made his way to the back of the guild. It was more than adorable to see how he held the little snake, letting it wrap around his arm and hand. She couldn't remember much of their time together, just small snippets that were coming more often now that she was around Cobra. But she did remember a little bit about how comforting it was when she was able to wrap around Erik's hand and cover his shackles.

And even though she wished that he'd been able to hear her while she was still a snake, it didn't matter then. Because Cobra had another friend in his life. He was opening up just a little more. And in all of Kinana's life, even as a snake, all she'd ever wanted was for her first and best friend to be happy.
The same day Lucy and Cobra had returned from their mission found the Fairy Tail guild seemingly winding down early for once. Cobra had endured the insanity in the building for Monty's benefit, simply because the little snake was amazed by what he was seeing and didn't want to leave. As long as Monty was wrapped around Cobra's hand, he wasn't scared and wanted to watch everything while smelling the air.

Even the Poison Slayer thought it was pretty fucking precious.

He actually found a contented sigh slipping out when there were only a handful of people left in the guild. Team Natsu, the Raijinshuu, the three Strauss siblings, Gajeel, and Team Shadowgear.

"Let's play a game!"

Cobra rolled his eye at the slurring voice from the other end of the bar. 'And Cana... 'With the shit she thought up on a regular basis, there was no way he was going to stick around. That was for damn sure.

Then again, several other members of the guild were under much the same impression, and as soon as they started to stand and try to slink out of the guild, Mira popped up and blocked the path with a sweet smile and a tray full of alcohol.

"Drinks are on the house for anyone who stays."

Well, that was a surefire way to get Bickslow and Laxus on board. If they were staying, so was Freed. And then Evergreen decided she 'might as well keep an eye on them' even though fucking everyone knew she hadn't been planning on leaving until Elfman did.

"And metal."

And there was Gajeel.

"Did I mention free drinks?"

That got Natsu and Gray's attention from one another and on the barmaid.

"And cake."

Erza caved in an instant, dragging a highly unwilling Lucy along with her. Oddly enough, Levy and her team had no problem staying to play a game the card mage suggested. Mainly because Gajeel was going to stay, and the little blunette wanted to be there as well.

"How 'bout it, Cobra?" Cana smirked. "You gonna stay?"

"No," he said while standing from his seat. "Hell fucking n-"

"Of course he is," Mira laughed from behind the Poison Slayer. "Cobra, you'll stay or I'm letting Sitri out to MAKE you stay."

He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

"Oh, did I forget to mention I'm testing out new poisons?" Mira asked sweetly.

"I'm in," Cobra sighed. "But I'll tell you right now, I have no idea how to play this-

"Everyone get in a circle!" Cana shouted. "Suck and Blow!"
"... game." With a heavier sigh than before he turned and made his way over to the gathering circle of Fairy Tail mages. He was sure that he would regret this. Absolutely positive, actually.

Once everyone was sitting on the floor, Cana grinned at her guildmates and pulled a new deck of playing cards from her bag. "Anyone else who hasn't played?"

Lucy sheepishly raised her hand, her cheeks flushing when Natsu started laughing just next to her.

"Oh man, Gajeel! Seriously?!"

The Iron Slayer shrugged, a bored expression on his face. "So what?"

"Alright," Cana said, clearing her throat. "The rules are simple. Take the card and put it to your lips and suck. Turn to your left and pass it to the next person using only your mouth. When they suck, you blow to help pass it. Around the circle until someone drops the card."

"And, um… What happens if you drop the card?" Lucy asked.

"You have to remove one article of clothing," Cana replied with a lecherous grin.

"Well, Cobra's gonna win," Lucy grumbled, glaring at the Poison Slayer to her right. "Cheating ass wears a million layers of clothes."

"Bickslow, too," Levy laughed on Gajeel's left.

Mira walked out with two trays of drinks and started passing everything out, then handed Gajeel and Erza their plates of metal and cake, respectively. Once she was seated and everyone had taken the time to have a good drink, the game started.

Cana placed the card to her lips then turned to Laxus. Laxus passed the card to Freed. To Elfman to Evergreen. Lisanna to Bickslow. Gajeel. Levy, Jet, Droy. Mira to Erza to Cobra. Lucy to Natsu to Gray and back to Cana.

The first to let it fall was on the second round. Bickslow lost the card while passing it to Gajeel and ended up biting the Iron Slayer's cheek while trying to catch it. And laughing hysterically the whole time.

Gajeel grabbed a card from the deck and continued. After punching Bickslow in the stomach, of course.

Erza dropped it while passing the card to Cobra and requipped out of her armor.

Slowly, everyone in the circle lost articles of clothing, with the exception of Cobra.

"This isn't even fair!" Natsu bellowed as the card kept moving around the circle. "Cobra's not getting drunk so he's perfectly fine!"

Once the card was passed from Mira to Erza, Cobra watched as the Requip mage turned and passed it to him. Honestly, this game was a bit on the ridiculous side, but he was finding that he actually enjoyed it. Most likely because everyone was too busy making a complete fool of themselves while they got more drunk.

But as his head turned toward the guild's Celestial mage, sitting topless with her deep purple bra barely covering her breasts, Cobra found himself getting just a little distracted but just how fucking delicious she looked.
He should drop the card and lemme taste him…

And maybe it was just that his curiosity had finally gotten the better of him. Or maybe it was because every time he'd turned toward Lucy to pass the blonde the card, she would think something along the same lines. As the night had worn on, her cheeks had gotten just a little more flushed with the alcohol she'd been sipping from, and her thoughts drifted closer to Eros each round.

He leaned forward and just as her lips were puckering, right before she could get a grip on the card, he let it slip between them. And since the blonde had a habit of closing her eyes while pulling the card away, she didn't have a clue that it had disappeared until her lips were meeting with his a split second later.

Oh, damn… He tastes so good…

Thankfully, the gathered mages could only see Cobra's closed-over eyelid, and not how his only eye went wide as he finally allowed himself the barest taste of the Celestial mage. Sadly, there was no way he could let it continue for too long without drawing suspicion, and instantly drew back.

Wait! No! Oh, man… Why'd he stop? Wait, what? Lucy, shut up!

What was more than surprising was that he hadn't wanted to pull away. He hadn't been planning on liking it nearly as much as he did. Because that was just supposed to get it all out of the way, and then he could move the hell on from whatever weird obsession he had with Lucy. But now that he'd had a taste, he just wanted more and that was something he really couldn't have.

"Take it off, Cobra!" Cana cackled. "Finally, we get to see what's under it all!"

The Poison Slayer rolled his eye and shrugged off his coat, then carefully pulled Monty from his pocket. When he saw how the little snake was balled up and hardly moving, he let out a quiet sigh and stood.

"Aw, come on!" Laxus laughed. "Kissing Blondie couldn't have been that bad."

Lucy dropped the card and bashed her nose into Natsu's while everyone in the group laughed. Tears sprung to her eyes from the pain, and she turned to see Cobra walking toward the bar.

"Well, she apparently can't suck or blow to save her life," Cobra smirked, looking down at the blonde. "I pity the guy getting your mouth on his dick."

Mira leaned over slightly and watched the Poison Slayer set his jacket on the bar, frowning when he looked at the little snake in his hand. "Is Monty okay?" she asked while the game continued.

Cobra nodded. "He's asleep. Just gotta make sure he stays warm." Even though he wanted to just fucking leave, Cobra knew he couldn't. It didn't take a genius to see that Mira would rip out his damn entrails if he even tried. So, all he could do was try to forget all about Lucy's lips, and how he wanted to just lick every inch of her body, while he sat back down just as Erza was getting the card passed to her.

But as the game continued, Cobra was realizing that he really fucking hated other people being able to see her like this. More so when the blonde's bra came off. He didn't want anyone else seeing what he was constantly fantasizing about, but the Poison Slayer also didn't fucking want to be suddenly jealous and possessive over that shit.

Thankfully, the game ended when Lucy refused to get completely naked. Bickslow had somehow lost everything but his boxers and visor, and that was just a weird fucking image in general, but he
didn't mind one bit. Apparently Lucy's tits were one thing, but Cobra found that she really didn't want anyone seeing her crotch. Or for anyone to realize that she was, in fact, on her period right then. He didn't need to know that, even if he'd been aware of it since the day before when he'd been using her as a pillow.

"What should we play next?" Cana asked while everyone put their clothes back on. Poor Lucy really wasn't good at that game, and she almost felt bad for the girl.

"Something where this one can keep her clothes on," Cobra snorted. "No one needs to see her bloated ass right now."

Lucy scowled over at the maroon-haired mage. "Shut up, Cobra."

"You're just hormonal right now," he shrugged. "Don't get your panties in a twist."

"I'm not hormonal."

"Says the one with a string in her crotch."

"Luce, why do you have a string?" Natsu laughed. "Are you like a wind-up toy?"

"Oh my god," Gray groaned. "Natsu… How do you even function?"

"What?"

"Lucy's on her period," Gray said with a roll of his eyes.

"Oh… I already knew that."

"How?"

Natsu grinned and pointed to his nose. "I can smell it." He turned toward a very red-faced Lucy and leaned a little closer. "Yep, blood and a change in her scent."

"O-Oh my god," Lucy whimpered. "Natsu, tell me you're joking…"

"He's not," Cobra chuckled. "Ask the outlet fucker over there, or the metal buttplug. They'll tell you the same damn thing." He couldn't get enough of the way both Laxus and Gajeel went rigid as all the women present turned their attention to them. Hey, he hadn't been the one to bring up a Slayer's ability to smell that well. That was all Natsu.

Even though the women started giving Natsu, Gajeel, and Laxus the third degree concerning their enhanced senses, Cobra was more preoccupied with just how upset Lucy had become. Just like before, the blonde had gotten too comfortable around him. He didn't fucking want her friendship, or to be plagued with thoughts of her when he was sitting at home alone.

Cobra liked his space, and Lucy had made it her sole mission in life - or so it seemed - to invade that every fucking chance she got. Was it nice that she'd showed him a whole slew of damn good horror movies? Sure, but the last thing he wanted, or fucking needed, was the blonde thinking they were going to be all buddy-buddy over that.

"Well, I'm callin' it a night," Gajeel said. "Bunny."

Lucy turned to look at the Iron Slayer, blinking when she saw his hand was outstretched toward her.

"C'mon. You got first dibs on my fuckin' bathtub."
"You finished it?"

He nodded, but he wasn't going to tell her in front of everyone else that only the tub itself had been installed. Mainly, he just wanted to get her the hell out of there and away from Cobra. Okay, and he really wanted to get away from the guild now that the women knew just how enhanced Slayer senses were.

The blonde reached up and took his hand, letting Gajeel pull her to stand next to him. She gave their friends a short wave and completely ignored the Poison Slayer who was in the process of picking up the still-sleeping python balled up on his jacket.

And here she'd thought they were making progress with one another. Lucy knew that Cobra wouldn't be her friend overnight, but he'd been out of prison for an entire month already. Did he really have to go and embarrass her like that?

"Gajeel," Lucy whispered once they were outside. "I can just go home. It's okay."

"Hell no," he chuckled. "Yer comin' over and havin' a nice, way too fuckin' long bath. Girly soap shit and all."

"You never have that stuff," she said, a small smile ticking the corners of her mouth.

"I might've bought some while you were gone," he shrugged. "I'll tell ya right now though… The rest of the bathroom's a fuckin' mess."

Lucy sighed while they continued walking, refusing to look back toward the guild to see if Cobra was already leaving.

"So, how was the job?"

"Fun," Lucy answered. "We were babysitting a three-year-old."

"Cobra and a kid?" Gajeel snorted. "How the fuck did that work?"

"He's actually pretty good with kids, oddly enough. And he made sure nothing happened to me, so…"

"Whaddya mean?" he frowned.

Lucy's shoulders slumped at the narrowed, crimson eyes that were gazing down at her. She'd already had to explain to Master Makarov earlier that day just what had happened while she and Cobra were on the job, and she'd hoped that it wouldn't need to be repeated again. The way the small guild master had nearly crushed his own desk in anger had been rather terrifying, truth be told.

But Gajeel was great at listening. He always had been. And while Lucy had given Master Makarov the basic run-down of everything, she knew that she could talk to Gajeel about everything else, and he wouldn't say a word until she was done. She could vent to him.

Lucy knew that Erza, Natsu, and Gray were always there for her to talk to, but the things about Cobra… What she felt and saw while it was just the two of them… They wouldn't understand.

Maybe Gajeel wouldn't either, but he'd at least be a willing ear and wouldn't instantly go on a rampage when she so much as mentioned that she'd woken up with Cobra's arms around her, or that he had a cute smile. And Gajeel definitely wouldn't be ready to cut the Poison Slayer to little bits just because he'd let out his crazy and had threatened the Duke with far too detailed torture.
So, with a heavy sigh, Lucy wrapped her arm around Gajeel's and rested her head on his shoulder while she started from the beginning. Back to when she and Cobra had eaten dinner together at his apartment, through staying the night there. How she'd woken him up and nearly got herself killed.

The awkward hug, the train ride there… Everything.

And even though Lucy knew it was a long story, she was definitely happy that Gajeel simply followed her into the bathroom and changed into a pair of swim trunks to take a bath with her - while she, of course, put on a bathing suit that she kept at his house for this very reason. It wasn't the first time they'd done it, with him sitting on one end of the tub and Lucy on the other, but it was a whole lot more comfortable with his new, larger bathtub.

She could see his surprise when she told him about the sweet things Cobra had done, and even what he'd said to the Duke while threatening his life.

What Lucy needed, she realized, was someone to talk to about it all. And once she was done, she at least felt a little better about it.

"Well, he's still a fuckin' asshole, no matter how you slice it, Bunny."

A little better, but not a whole lot. Because Gajeel was right. Cobra was the king asshole, and he just kept giving her reasons to ignore him for the rest of his damn parole. So, Lucy decided that what she really needed was to get some serious space from the Poison Slayer. No going over to hang out and watch movies, or anything else. Besides, he had Monty for company. She couldn't completely ignore him, since he was part of the team, but distancing herself from Cobra would be a good thing.
For the first time since joining Fairy Tail, Lucy couldn't blame the destruction of her apartment on her team. Just that morning over breakfast, she'd joked with Gajeel about hoping her apartment had made it through the past few days intact, since she'd been away with Cobra.

Sadly, the blonde opened the door to find gallons of water rushing out past her feet and soaking into her boots. A peek inside, just a wary glance that she really hadn't wanted to give, showed her that the wooden floor she'd had enchanted to protect it from being damaged by fire was warped and bowing up from the nails that had been holding it down.

"I was wondering if you were coming back soon."

With a quivering lower lip, Lucy turned and looked down to find her landlady glaring up at her from behind her wing-tipped glasses. "I-I didn't... I..."

The older woman's lips pursed while looking into the tidy apartment. "The empty apartment next to yours had a leaky pipe," she said. "It burst last night and flooded my entire building."

It really wasn't Lucy's fault, then. Sadly, she already knew what the woman was going to say.

"I'm not paying to have your floor replaced. The pipes will be handled later today. Find someone to deal with your apartment."

The blonde could only nod before the older woman turned and walked away, the familiar sandals on her feet that Lucy knew had once been hers squishing with each step as she carefully descended the stairs.

With a heavy sigh, Lucy made her way inside. She winced while struggling to pull the door closed. It seemed the wooden frame had finally taken a deep breath and swelled to the point of being nearly nonfunctional. With each slow step through her apartment, Lucy found more and more damage.

Her desk was ruined, the manuscript she'd been working on not having been saved from the water that had ripped one of her walls to shreds. She could see into the next apartment. The tiles in her kitchen were royally fucked.

And the worst part about it all was that, even though she had enough money to pay her rent a couple days early for a change - which reminded her, she needed to go and give the money to the landlady - Lucy had absolutely no way to pay for a new floor, wall, and furniture.

She was totally screwed on this one. So, all she could do was grab the sheet that had been hanging off of her bed, that already had the beginnings of that gross mildew smell wafting from it, and hang it on the wall to cover the huge hole, then go to the bathroom and take a nice hot shower.

Well, that had been the plan. Except there was no water in the building, apparently. Standing naked in the shower, Lucy dropped her head to the tiled wall and just let herself cry at the unfairness of it all.
After spending the whole day scouring every repairman's shop, looking for the best deal she could, Lucy was running out of options. No one wanted to start the job with only a portion of their payment. Not with a mage from Fairy Tail, at least. And when she told them just how much damage there really was, and everything that needed to get handled, the amount of money that she would need to fork out was about an entire month's worth of her rent. Right there. Down the drain.

She couldn't even think of what the hell she was going to do now, though. And there was no way she could stay in her apartment.

Gajeel was the first option, because he'd let her crash at his place while getting repairs done at her own several times before, and then other times when she just really needed to hide from her team and get some peace and quiet.

The only problem was that Gajeel and Pantherlily had left on a mission just that morning; the same one she had been invited to join before she'd taken a job with Cobra.

Then there was her team.

Natsu and Happy… Their house was a pig sty, and there was no way in hell she was cleaning that monstrosity. Never again.

Gray was instantly off-limits. Juvia would creep on her so fast, maybe drown her, if she even entertained the thought of sleeping in his studio apartment.

Erza and Wendy were both a no-go. Because of a certain someone setting the bushes on fire and blaming it on Lucy, she was no longer allowed on the premises of Fairy Hills. Sometimes she really wanted to punch her partner in the nuts. Still, it had been a day worth remembering when Natsu gotten so excited about a new buffet that he just had to tell Erza about, and he'd accidentally set the bushes on fire while waiting for her to come downstairs.

Which left a whole lot of no options for the Celestial mage as she walked into the guild just before dinner. Nothing aside from figuring out how much money it would cost for her to stay in a hotel until her apartment was fixed up. Well, after she had the money needed to get the place fixed and then get the work done.

Her gaze trailed over the guild's inhabitants. Mira and the Strauss siblings had a full house as it was. No way was she asking Bickslow to sleep on his couch; fucking was one thing, and they were friends, but not that close.

Cana. Just no.

One person after another was checked off her list as someone she really just couldn't ask a favor of. The Connell family, while they were total sweethearts, had enough on their plates. No one in the guild was really made of money, not that she was looking to ask anyone for a loan.

Then there was Cobra.

Lucy's lips turned down and her eyes narrowed while watching him sit at a table off in the corner, the same table Gajeel always sat at. 'No. No way.' She couldn't ask a favor of the Poison Slayer. He'd made it painfully clear that there was just nothing she could do to make him even remotely nice.

Still, Lucy was completely out of options, and she was just desperate enough to make a fool of herself.

The worst that could happen was Cobra making fun of her. Again.
Lucy finally realized that she was just standing at the doors of the guild, and made her way through the hall, around the tables and skirting the brawl that Natsu and Gray had started, to sit down in front of Cobra.

He didn't look up from playing with Monty though, and then she had yet one more reason to just not ask him for a favor. If she tried to stay the night at Cobra's even just a single night, Monty would be there. Slithering all over the place. She just couldn't picture the Poison Slayer putting his new serpentine friend in a cage of any sort.

And maybe it would be longer than a night that she'd need to stay. At least until Gajeel came back, and then she could sleep at the Iron Slayer's house. And he could help her with the repairs for her apartment. Gajeel had built his own house, and he'd been working on remodeling his bathroom - because he'd discovered the gloriousness that was taking a bath after a long, hard mission. Which meant he really wouldn't have the time to help her out in the first place. Not without putting his own home improvements on hold.

Monty's head turned toward the blonde for a moment before his attention was drawn back to Cobra from the Slayer's fingers fluttering under its jaw.

Maybe it wouldn't be too horrible sleeping on Cobra's couch. He was relatively quiet and Lucy would try to make sure she didn't get in his personal bubble, or bother him, as much as humanly possible. She'd only be over long enough to get some sleep, maybe make a meal or two for them if he didn't feel like cooking. They would need to take a job soon anyway, even though they'd just gotten back, so she could start saving up to get the repairs done. Which meant that would be even fewer days of her taking up the space on his couch. Just a few nights. Maybe only two. One at the very least.

Or she could just swallow her tongue and sleep on a damn park bench and hope she made it through the night un-raped.

Cobra looked up from the snake in his hands to the blonde as she tried to glare a hole through the table. Her head lifted and their eyes met, and just when her lips parted, he nodded. "Sure, as long as you need."

He went right back to playing with Monty, and all the pep-talking Lucy had been giving herself to just get up the nerve and ask him to stay the night, went right out the window. Her shoulders visibly slumped in relief. That had been a whole lot easier than she'd anticipated.

Cobra's single eye never left the little albino snake. "I didn't think you'd even consider asking," he whispered.

"I wasn't planning on it, but… desperate times, right?" She cringed a moment later. Sure, Cobra wasn't exactly the nicest guy in the world, but he did have his moments. There was a nice guy somewhere under all the crusty, grumpy bullshit. And even though he'd upset her the night before at the guild, he wasn't totally heartless.

Most likely.

"You can use my washer and dryer, by the way," he said.

"Thanks, Cobra," she smiled.

Still, the Poison Slayer didn't look up from the snake he was holding. His face was completely blank. "You'd let me sleep at your apartment if I didn't have anywhere to go, so…"
He did have a point. If the tables were turned, Lucy wouldn't just let him stay out on the street. She just really hadn't pictured Cobra being the same way.

It wasn't until hours later when she was lying down on the couch with a blanket around her and listening to the steady hum of his washing machine, that Lucy remembered her decision to keep some distance from him.

Well, that was most definitely in the shitter.

Lucy was pulled from her dreams of Jewels going up in flames and enchanted floorboards cackling at her misfortune, by the soft hum of a fan and an odd metallic scratching sound. She tucked the blanket around herself just a little tighter and burrowed further into the couch. Still, she knew it was pointless to try and sleep any longer. Even though she was exhausted, there was just no way she could actually get a good night's rest while trying to figure out just what she could do about her apartment.

Lucy rolled over and opened her bleary eyes to find the apartment still bathed in darkness, save for a single bright red cherry of light that hovered over what she knew was Cobra's dining table. A gust of wind fluttered inside. The little orange-red light lifted higher, brightened, then lowered to its original position.

She didn't even question just what was going on, and instead slowly sat up. The light lifted again, and when it brightened she caught a glimpse of Cobra's face, mostly shadowed, highlighted with orange. His single eye was distant, unseeing as though he was looking into an entirely different dimension.

Lucy wrapped the blanket around herself a little tighter as she stood and silently walked over to the table. Once she was seated across from the silent Poison Slayer, she could see the little fan propped up in the open window, pointing out toward the sleeping city. The little ceramic bowl on the table next to his hand, holding small specks of grey ash. Long fingers gingerly holding a black cigarette between them. A small black cardboard box holding the rest of the cigarettes, and a little purple lighter perched on top.

Cobra took another drag of his cigarette, breathing the toxic air in deeply before blowing the smoke into the fan. He silently slid the pack across the table to the blonde, then flicked the ashes from the tip into the little ceramic dish.

Lucy let out a slow breath while pulling one from the pack and lighting it. She hadn't smoked in a while, and the only reason she'd picked it up in the first place was to piss her dad off and try to get his attention. As a mage, and with the sheer amount of running she had to do on a regular basis, it really wasn't the best idea to start up again.

Still, as she took a long pull and inhaled, feeling the thickness of the smoke she wasn't used to, Lucy felt just a little more at ease for a change. 'Black cherry cloves…'

"No wonder you smell so goo… Uh…"

Cobra snorted and stared down at his hands. "Sure," he whispered. "We'll go with that."

Lucy took another drag, still looking at the Poison Slayer. While it was a horrible habit for her or any other normal person, this was a buffet for him. All the toxins in a cigarette were just another meal for the Poison Slayer.

"At least it's not cigars," she finally whispered.
"Don't like the shitty smell?"

"No, I don't have any blue dresses."

Cobra well and truly choked on the puff of smoke that he'd just pulled in. It wasn't often that he choked while smoking, but he was too busy hacking up a damn lung from the surprise bullshit she'd just pulled on him.

"Buy me a blue dress, and you can call me Monica," Lucy laughed while tapping her cigarette on the ash tray.

"Y-You're… fucking evil," he rasped. Since when had the blonde decided to let out the damn sass? Not that he was complaining a whole lot about it, since it was hilarious to listen to when it was just in her soul. But that was beyond what he'd ever expected to get past her filters.

Lucy, for her part, figured it was time she stopped trying to be a good little girl all the damn time. If there was anyone who would understand that her head wasn't always a little ball of sunshine, it was the guy who could hear her soul.

"We'd have to substitute Makarov's office for the oval one," Cobra chuckled.

"It's a deal."

The pair sat in silence for a short while, with Cobra lighting his fresh cigarette with the last, then crushing the filter in the ash tray.

"You're welcome to more," he said.

Lucy shook her head while resting it on one hand. "These take longer," she whispered. "I'm not really a smoker anyway."

"So, your apartment, huh?"

Lucy winced. "Yeah… It looks like the team's gonna be getting together for a mission soon. I can't pay anyone to fix it up yet, and the lowest quote for the repairs nearly had me in tears."

"Did you ask anyone in the guild?"

"Like who?" she muttered. Lucy scowled when he blew a puff of smoke in her face to get her to look at him.

"You've got wood floors," Cobra pointed out. "What's-her-face… Glasses, closet sadist… Talks like her tongue got caught in a poet's snatch..."

"Laki?"

"Right, she's a Wood-Make mage. Why don't you ask her to make you some floorboards, and you can pay her for the wood?"

"I'd still have to install it," Lucy said. "And one of my walls is fucked. Then there's my furniture..."

"You don't know how to fix a wall?"

Lucy frowned and shook her head. Without thinking, she lit another cigarette, completely missing the small smile ticking up the corners of Cobra's lips. "Gajeel knows, but he's on a job right now. And he's got his own stuff to do. Even with Laki making the wood, I'd still have to pay a repairman to do..."
the labor. And that alone is almost forty-thousand Jewels."

The blonde blinked in surprise when Cobra's free hand gently settled on top of hers.

"That rustbucket isn't the only one who knows how to lay a few boards down," he chuckled. "I was born and raised doing hard labor, so…"

"S-So, you…"

"I'd be willing to help you get it done," he said softly. "It'll get you off my couch and out of my fucking house a whole lot faster."

Lucy blushed brilliantly, but she completely ignored the snarky comment in favor of what he'd said before. "I-I can pay you," she said. "You don't need to do this for free…"

"Never said it was happening for free."

"How much do you want me to pay?" she asked.

Cobra smirked and leaned forward slightly. "Oh, I don't want your money."

"Then what…"

"I want a trade," Cobra said. "I show you how to do this, and help you get it all done. And you do something for me in return."

Lucy really didn't like the sound of that, but she still took his hand and shook it. When his smile widened, she got the distinct feeling that this was a huge fucking mistake.

"Finish that smoke and we'll get started," he said while lighting his third cigarette of the night.

"This isn't what I'd pictured," Lucy said slowly.

"You said I needed a hobby."

"This… is not the hobby I had in mind!"

Cobra frowned over at the blonde where she sat on the counter in his kitchen, just next to the sink already filled with dishes. "Would you rather I get a more evil hobby?" he asked. "I could take up taxidermy, but I'd need corpses to practice on. Lots of corpses."

Lucy rolled her eyes and swiped a finger over rim of the large bowl sitting in her lap, then popped it into her mouth. "Okay, fine," she mumbled. "This is better than going on killing sprees, but still…"

"Shut up," he said. "Now, what's next?"

"Why don't you read it for yourself?"

"Because I'm focusing on this. I don't read these things normally."

"They're your notes," she shot back. "From watching the lacrimavision."

"So?"

"Cobra," Lucy laughed. "This is insane."
"Do you want me to help fix your fucking apartment, or not?!

"... Fine… One and a half teaspoons of vanilla. Good, now one tablespoon of milk."

"I thought it said two of milk," he frowned.

"You add the rest later," Lucy said. "Mix it all up, and then add the rest of the milk, a little at a time, until it's smooth." She leaned over slightly while swiping her finger in the mostly empty batter bowl in her lap again. "Little more milk."

"What's it supposed to look like?" He paused when Lucy's hand closed over his on the spoon. This was the same thing she'd done when he started putting the dry ingredients together for the cake batter. She'd had to show him how to properly stir so he didn't tire his damn arm out, since he hadn't gone out to buy an electric mixer just yet.

The spoon scraped along the edge of the glass bowl, catching some of the powdered sugar he'd missed, then Lucy directed his hand up and away from the frosting to create little peaks that melted back into the frosting a moment later.

"It'll probably be fine, but let's taste it," Lucy said softly.

He didn't think twice about dipping his finger into the mixture and holding it up to her lips. It didn't even occur to him, or to the blonde, that it was a little on the odd side for her lips to wrap around the offered digit.

It wasn't until Cobra felt the gentle suction, her teeth lightly scraping over the tip of his finger to get the extra frosting off, her tongue drawing small, tight circles, that he realized just what the hell was going on. Lucy, for her part, still hadn't caught on. She was just tasting the frosting, licking his finger just like she did with her own when she was trying to get something off of them.

If this was what she did naturally, how thoroughly she was suckling that lucky digit, then Cobra could only imagine just what the blonde was capable of when it was a dick in her mouth. He took a shaky breath as Lucy pulled away, meeting her gaze steadily.

"It needs more confectioner's sugar," Lucy whispered. "It's buttercream, but all I'm tasting is the butter."

Cobra frowned down at the bowl, then looked toward Lucy again when she swiped a finger through the frosting. With a playful smirk, the Poison Slayer leaned forward and wrapped his lips around her frosting-coated digit. The only problem with licking her was that he wanted a whole lot more than just her damn finger. Roses burst across his tastebuds, but Cobra had to force himself to focus on the flavor of the icing.

If he was going to learn how to bake, to make things like this from scratch, he needed to know whether it was too sweet. Too much sugar was something he was perfectly fine with, but she was right. The butter was overpowering. He might as well have just put a stick of it in his damn mouth.

"More sugar," Lucy whispered. She watched as her finger slipped from between Cobra's lips before he turned back toward the frosting and started slowly adding more sugar.

"Those baking shows are fucking evil," Cobra said.

"Why's that? Paula Deen giving you nightmares?" she laughed.

"No," he chuckled. "Every time I see one, it makes me hungry. Then I wanna make the shit, and
since I don't know how, I'm just... Pissed at the screen."

"You're gonna get a fat ass if you make everything you see," Lucy giggled. Her eyes widened when he stuck his tongue out at her and shoved his frosting coated finger into her mouth. But then, she just couldn't care about a whole lot of anything. The blonde was lost in the decadent taste of perfectly blended buttercream dancing over her tongue.

"How's that?"

'Omg, I can't tell if it's his finger or the icing that tastes better...'

Cobra went to pull his hand away, then scowled as Lucy gently bit down on his finger. "Let go."

"Tathes good," she said with a teasing smile.

He rolled his eye and tried to pull away again, then just gave the hell up when she bit him again. Instead, he took one of her fingers and dipped it in the icing then brought it to his lips. "I guess I should taste this then. Right?"

Lucy nodded, her gaze honing in on his parted lips. His tongue slipped out to run over the pad of her finger, and her own jaw dropped in shock and whole buckets of arousal. She had to have been losing her mind though, because it was almost as though the Poison Slayer was in the process of showing her just what his toxic tongue was capable of. More than just ripping into someone and bringing them to tears.

No, this was a skill that would bring the happiest of tears to a woman's eyes. All she could picture was his face nestled between her legs, his tongue circling her sensitive bundle in quick, tight circles. Those thin lips puckering on her slick flesh.

Cobra carefully withdrew his finger from between her lips just when the timer on the oven went off. Lucy drew back in surprise a moment later, pulling her hands to her lap.

"Cakes cool in the pans for ten minutes, right?"

"Y-Yeah," she whispered.

Cobra turned and set the circular cake pans on the stove then turned off the oven, glancing at the dazed blonde over his shoulder. "You sure about that?"

"Uh-huh..."

"Or do you just wanna suck on my fingers a little more?" he smirked.

"Definitely," Lucy breathed.

Cobra slowed in closing the oven door, then silently turned to look at the Celestial mage. "You wanna repeat that?" he whispered.

"Definitely..."

'Omg... the things he could do. I shouldn't have let him do that, but man... if I could just feel him doing that a little more...'

He could practically feel her eyes as they trailed over his body, from the thermal shirt he was wearing to the grey plaid sleep pants, down to his dark grey socks. Slower on the trek back up to focus on his lips, his scar, his ears. Back to his lips.
Cobra reached forward and steadied the empty batter bowl just before it could slip from Lucy's grasp, then set it off to the side as he came to stand in front of her.

"I think baking a cake at four in the morning has made you unreliable and delirious," he whispered.

"Probably," Lucy said, a small smile on her lips. He was a whole lot closer than was healthy. She was mentally incapable of handling the Poison Slayer like this, that was for sure. "But you looked like you wanted more than just me sucking on your fingers."

"A blowjob would be preferable," he chuckled.

Lucy leaned closer until she could feel Cobra's breath feathering across her lips. God, what she wouldn't give to just taste him, really taste him. That small brush of an accidental kiss two nights before hadn't been nearly enough, but she usually had issues with the things her drunken brain did.

"I bet it would, you little hussy," Lucy laughed.

"Says the one itching to blow me."

"Across the country with a bazooka, maybe," Lucy said.

"God, you're just a ball of fucking sweetness, aren't you?" Cobra laughed as Lucy sat back and gave him a cheeky grin. Moment, totally fucking ruined. Damn her soul and its logical bullshit. Still, he couldn't really complain all that much about the blonde being a little more open with him. It was funny, even if all it did was give him more of a reason to tease her right back.

"Precious cupcakes ain't got shit on all of this," Lucy said. The fact that Cobra burst out laughing had her tipping over the deep end into hysterics right along with him. Maybe it had been a bad idea to bake a cake when neither of them had slept all that much, and she was most likely going to pass out again in a little while to catch up on what she lost.

Of course, that wouldn't happen until after Cobra had iced the cake - once it had cooled completely - and they each got to try a bite.

"I'll take the dishes," Lucy said softly once they'd calmed down. "Unless you wanna do them."

"In a little bit," he shrugged. "C'mon, we've got some time to kill, and Cupcake Wars is about to come on."

"Do you just have the tv guide memorized?" Lucy asked while hopping down from the counter and following the Poison Slayer into the living room. The two sat on the couch and she didn't even question it when he draped the blanket she'd been using over their legs.

"Kinda," he said while flipping through the channels. "Hand me a smoke?"

The blonde chuckled and reached over to the coffee table where he'd set a fresh pack of cigarettes just before they started baking. It really was a horrible habit, and she couldn't believe that she hadn't noticed before just how much he did it.

"Just on shitty nights," Cobra said. He glanced at the blonde while she hit the pack against her palm and pulled the plastic wrapping off as though she'd been chain-smoking for years. Lucy put a cigarette between her lips and flicked the lighter. The flame danced over the blackened tip for only a moment before she set everything down and took a long, full drag from the little deathstick.

"And tonight's a shitty night?" she asked while handing him the cigarette and gently blowing out the
"Sort of." He wasn't going to admit that he'd had another nightmare, worse than the last time she was in his apartment, about the things Brain had done to him. Barbed wire as a whip was just the beginning of that horrible memory, and he really hadn't wanted to remember anything else.

"You know, you really shouldn't smoke inside. I'm pretty sure your landlord is gonna flip shit if he smells it."

Cobra shrugged as Lucy set the ashtray on his leg. "It's cold as fuck outside. I'm not gonna freeze my ass off just to get a damn snack." He rolled his eye and held the cloven cigarette up to her lips, watching as they wrapped around the filter so delicately. It just wasn't fucking fair to see her like this. "Just take one."

"... the battle for cupcake supremacy..."

"I've had enough tonight," Lucy laughed. "I shouldn't even be doing it in the first place. We can't all just absorb nicotine for a pick-me-up."

"And yet you keep coming back for more."

"Because you're a bad influence on my better judgment," Lucy giggled.

"... and Florian Bellanger, owner of Mad-Mac Chefs..."

"Your show's starting," she said softly.

"Tell me something first," he whispered while setting the ashtray on the end table. "How much of a bad influence am I on that better judgment of yours?"

"I'd say a relatively bad influence," she answered. She pulled Cobra's fingers to her lips again and took a full drag of the clove cigarette, then lightly touched his chin and brought her lips closer. So close she could almost feel his lips on hers, only a hair away.

Cobra's eye closed as Lucy breathed into his mouth, instantly sucking in the smoke she let out. Secondhand. Not nearly as bad as getting it right from the source, but the cherry flavoring mixing with the cloves, and all of that blending so perfectly with Lucy herself...

The blonde sucked in a sharp breath when she felt Cobra's tongue flick across her lips. "A very bad influence," she rasped.

"You taste like fucking roses," Cobra growled. He reached back and crushed the half-finished smoke in the ashtray, just as Lucy moved in a little closer. Close enough for him to feel her lips tremble against his, how they parted to let her tongue slip out and brush over his lower lip.

"Is that so?" she whispered.

"Yeah..."

She whimpered as he nipped at her lips. His hand wound around the back of her neck to draw her into his web, and Lucy just couldn't find the will to pull away. Not when he was so different than how she would have assumed Cobra would be while kissing someone. It wasn't rough and demanding, but gentle. Exploring. Not quite timid, but still searching for something that she was more than happy to give.
Her hands shakily ghosted up the column of his throat, just behind his ears, and sifted through the soft spikes of his hair. A rumbling purr shot straight from his lips down to her core. *Good god… I'm dead. Or this is a perfect dream…*

And if he could have said a thing, Cobra would have completely agreed with her assessment. Soft lips that he'd barely had the time to enjoy before were his for the taking right there on his couch. The position was a little awkward, since they'd been sitting side by side and only their heads were turned. But then Lucy shifted. One hand left his hair and trailed down to brush her fingers over his collarbone just as she turned to fully face him.

Just as his tongue slipped between her parted lips to tease the blonde into a mindless stupor.

"... topping it with a Kumquat Swiss Meringue Buttercream…"

Lucy's breath stalled in her lungs when Cobra's hand moved lower, but instead of getting to feel his strong fingers skittering across her chest or even between her legs, all he did was gently circle around to her lower back. Beneath her baggy shirt, but nothing more.

And damnit, she was desperate for more. She wanted him pouncing on her, treating her body like a rag doll and sating his every wicked desire. Something. Anything. Even a little brush of his thumb over her pebbled, and oh-so-ready to be touched, nipples.

Cobra intentionally slowed the kiss even more. He wanted the same thing as Lucy, but there was a very real difference between him and the other idiots she'd been with in any capacity. He enjoyed taking his time.

Was it manipulative? Sure. But he wanted Lucy to have just a taste, just enough to keep her thinking about what he'd done, wondering what he still could do. That way, she was the one coming to him and not the other way around. Because if he approached the blonde, it would be his head on a platter and his dick on a string around Erza's neck. Of course, Lucy couldn't just make it easy to pull back. Especially not when her slender fingers danced over the tip of his ear. Just that small brush of attention had him fighting to keep his control intact. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, his ears were more sensitive than almost any other part of him.

Desire coiled deep in his gut and had Cobra bringing her just a little closer. Just enough so he could free his other arm from being pinned between his body and the back of the couch.

Lucy whimpered with need as he gently sucked on her lower lip, following the Poison Slayer as his head gently drifted back. Her eyes slid open to find him watching her, his single eye a hazy lavender.

"Delirious and unreliable," he chuckled.

"Why did you stop?" Lucy felt her cheeks flaring to life as he brushed her hair away from her eyes. She hadn't thought about what she must look like when she'd woken up in the middle of the night to find Cobra at the table. Her hair had been pulled up into a bun when she went to sleep, but it was almost always falling apart with stray strands everywhere by the time morning rolled around. *Oh man, I must look like a train wreck…*

"... filled with a chocolate chipotle truffle and topped with chocolate buttercream, and…"

Cobra let out a short, huffing laugh. "I thought you knew there were birds nesting in your hair."

"... Ass."

He didn't say anything in response, because really… What was there to say? That he didn't mind the
sleepy look on the blonde? No, he was keeping that to himself. Or perhaps that he was enjoying how comfortable she felt, and that she hadn't even considered trying to make herself "presentable" because he was going to be around? Hell no.

"We should get those cakes on the cooling racks," Cobra whispered.

"Has it been ten minutes already?"

"... winner of Cupcake Wars is…"

"I'd say more than ten minutes. The show's over."

"Then, um… W-Well…" She knew for a fact that this show in particular was an hour long. So, how in the hell had that much time passed? Unless she'd completely lost track of time while Cobra's lips had been on hers. Good god, if that was the case, then Lucy just didn't know how she was supposed to handle it. What would it be like if they'd done anything more than simply kissing?

Besides, she really didn't need to be kissing the Poison Slayer in the first place. Her plan to stay away from him had backfired in a major way, much more than simply sleeping on his couch. And he wasn't making it any easier to do what she'd originally set out to do with his fingers dancing along her scalp. Or his chest beneath her fingers.

And still, he wasn't moving away from her. Just sitting in the same spot, watching as her mind reeled with the realization of just how long they'd been like that.

"Unless they can sit in the pan for a little bit longer."

"They won't be ruined if they do," she whispered.

"Then what are you waiting for?"

"Huh?" She took a quivering breath as a small smile turned up his lips.

"... tonight on Cupcake Wars…"

"Better hurry, because I really want another smoke now. So - mmph!" Cobra's grip on the blonde tightened and he turned so his back was resting against the arm of the couch, with Lucy kneeling between his spread legs as her lips moved over his.

Later on, he would have to deal with her trying to sort herself out. Lucy wasn't going to let something like this go so easily, he was sure. But that could be dealt with when the time came. For the time being, Cobra was just going to let himself enjoy how it felt to have a woman in his arms, soft lips moving over his, a wicked tongue curling around his own.

"... topped with marshmallow fondant…"

Chapter End Notes

The episodes of Cupcake Wars referenced in this chapter are "Weird Al" and "Cupcake Love Story". For anyone interested, there are recipes available on the Food Network website from Cupcake Wars; only the winners, but still...
Wood You Help Me?

Lucy turned to look at the the door of her apartment over her shoulder when a harsh, heavy thud sounded on the warped wooden frame. "Who is it?" she called out while bending over to examine the damaged moulding and peeling wallpaper. Thankfully, the damage in her apartment, and the fact that she had to fix this herself, meant her landlady was going to let her decorate however she wanted.

"It's a fucking sex criminal!" came Cobra's muted voice. "Come open the door. It's stuck and Monty's cold."

Lucy rolled her eyes and made her way across the apartment, then opened the door to reveal the Poison Slayer with his arms full of bags and the little albino snake slithering out of the collar of his shirt. Staring right at her. "Well, come on in," she sighed, taking a step back.

His eye raked over her for only half a second, just long enough for him to take in what she was wearing and to send goosebumps trailing over Lucy's flesh. A pair of cut-off shorts and an oversized shirt tied into a knot in the back, with the boots that she wore on missions. At least she was trying to dress appropriately for the work at hand.

Cobra stopped in the far corner of the living room, eyeing the boards that Laki had made for Lucy just that morning to his specifications. Apparently, the blonde was clueless about home repairs to the point that she hadn't known how to measure her own living room. Or any of the other rooms. "Open the windows, because this shit's gonna stink," he said while placing the bags on the floor.

"Did you buy the entire hardware store?" she laughed.

Cobra chuckled softly, listening to her swollen windows creak while she pried them open. The blustery winter wind that rushed into the room had him instantly drawing up the collar of his jacket to keep Monty warm. "Not the whole store, but you needed some specific shit, and I figured it was better to get two of everything so we can both tackle this."

"And so you can add to your growing collection."

"Pretty much." He pulled off his coat and made a nest of sorts after situating it on her bare mattress, then coaxed Monty from inside of his shirt and let the snake slither down to keep warm. "There you go, Monty," he whispered. "I'll get you a blanket in a minute."

Lucy simply stared at the maroon-haired mage while he tickled the underside of Monty's throat. She'd never seen him wearing jeans before, but he was that day. Granted, Lucy didn't know half of what his chosen wardrobe really consisted of, since he was a grown man who did his own shopping. But dark denim stretched just right over his legs, with the bottoms half covering a pair of black work boots, was not what she'd expected. She also hadn't been expecting a black long sleeve shirt with another black thermal shirt beneath it. "You, uh... You really brought the snake."

"Of course I did," he scowled. It wasn't his fault that Monty wanted to stay with him, and not at home where the heater was running. Lucy's heater was, apparently, not functioning. Just one more reason that he was positive she was happy to be crashing at his apartment. From what she'd told him that morning when they'd parted ways, she'd already made the call to the power company to have her service put on hold until she was done with the repairs. And from what he could tell when he'd come up the stairs, all the other apartments were fixed and the tenants were perfectly happy with their heat.
Still, it was going to be hot enough once they got to work. Physical labor was like that though, and while it made him just a little sick to his stomach thinking about why he knew how to do it, he’d promised to help her. The cake they'd eaten for breakfast was a testament to Lucy culinary skills. Or, at least her ability to read recipes and walk him through them. That shit was marvelous.

"Is he..." Lucy tried not to cringe while looking down at Cobra's jacket where it housed the serpent. Still, no matter how much she really got a case of the willies from snakes, she didn't want the little guy to be too cold. "Are you sure he'll be warm enough?"

"He'll need another layer," Cobra said softly while gazing down at the bed. He kept his face blank when Lucy pulled her downy jacket from the corner of the bed and carefully laid it over his. "...Thanks."

"Well, we should get to work," Lucy sighed. "I don't know where to start, so..." She gave a helpless shrug while pacing around the open living room. "I moved the furniture though."

"You mean you threw it all in a pile," he smirked. Her little pink tongue shot past her lips, and even though all he could picture was how it had felt, how it had tasted, only hours earlier when they'd been on his couch, he didn't let on that it affected him in the slightest.

Because, surprisingly, Lucy hadn't been all that confused about them kissing. There had been no need for the damage control he'd been preparing since then. She took what she could get, then pushed it down into Eros to deal with later on. But he could already tell, her version of "dealing" with that involved her being naked with her fingers between her legs.

But she wasn't thinking about anything remotely romantic happening between them. There was no daydreaming about her bearing his children, them getting married, or even dating. And thank the fucking gods for that.

"We can probably salvage some of it," he said, turning away from his thoughts and focusing on the bags he'd brought. "Floor first though."

"You..." Lucy blinked in surprise when she saw several gallons of paint lining the bottoms of the bags. "You bought paint?"

"Sure," he shrugged. "You were thinking about doing lime green and a pale green for the walls, then you could get that new set of pink bedding shit you've been looking at."

Lucy's jaw dropped open slightly when he withdrew a line of stencils from one bag and handed them to her. "Wh-What's this?"

"If you do the lighter green as a base, then stencil the lime green over it, you can have some pretty badass designs on the walls that won't be too overbearing to look at." He watched, just a little nervous - though he would never admit that to anyone - as Lucy lifted one stencil into the air. She tried picturing it, just as he'd done at the store, and then frowned and tried a different one. Then a third.

"Maybe we'll have to test these to see if I like them," she muttered. She'd never considered painting a design on the walls. And if she had the money, Lucy would just hire Reedus to do the work for her. As it stood, she'd gotten one hell of a discount from Laki but still needed to budget properly so she could make it to the end of the month.

Cobra shrugged again when she turned for his opinion. "Your apartment. They were giving those things away." He wasn't going to mention the fact that he'd had a rather long conversation with the
clerk about the designs, and had asked to see samples of the stencils on walls. He'd brought all of the ones that store had, but Cobra had a few personal favorites that he thought would look better with the designs Lucy had in mind.

Besides, the last thing he needed was to stop by her apartment and not be able to handle the shitty color palette. Pink and green was a bit outlandish for his tastes, but he'd learn to cope. For the next five years, at least.

"I'll… I'll pay you back for the supplies, Cobra," Lucy winced while putting the stencils back in the bag. "Really, you didn't need to-"

"I know I didn't, but if it can stop me from hearing you worry about having to take another job while trying to get this place livable again, then I'm all for it." At her heavy sigh, his eye narrowed. "And yes, I expect you to pay me back."

The fact that she brightened up just a little over the prospect of this not just being an extremely expensive favor was a little unnerving.

"We'll work out the payments later," he said while grabbing a pry bar and moving toward the center of the room.

"Payments?"

"Unless you feel like saving up and throwing me a lump sum," he chuckled. "But I'm willing to wave the interest with payments, and I already know how much money you make on jobs since I make the same amount. So, if you're short at any point, or you need the money for something, then we can readjust it."

"Y-You…" She watched as he knelt on the floor and tapped at the warped floorboards, then placed the pry bar in a small space between two planks. "You'd really do that?"

Cobra grunted while pushing up one board, then looked at the bags littering the floor. "Two pairs of gloves in there. Gimme a pair and put some on yourself, then grab the other bar. We've gotta get these up before moving further." Once he had the gloves on and had pointed Lucy to another weak spot in the flooring that would make it easier for her to start getting them up, he added, "And yeah, I'd really do that. I'm not heartless."

Lucy's cheeks flushed and she put more focus on the work at hand. "I never said you were," she muttered under her breath.

"And you weren't thinking it either," he nodded. Sharp creaks of nails grinding against wood had him wincing only slightly. He hated this sound, but it was necessary.

"Then why-"

"There's a lot people don't know about me," Cobra sighed. He put a boot on the partially removed plank and snapped it in half, tossing the damaged wood to the corner. He could feel her stopping to stare at him. "You know just what people think about me. You don't need to hear souls to know it."

"Cobra…"

"I don't want pity," he growled, digging the bar back into the floor and listening as Lucy did the same. "I just… If you wanna work together, you should keep that in mind about me, alright? I'm not heartless, and I do know how to help people..."
They were silent after that, simply working together to get her damaged floor pulled apart and stacked in the far corner. It wasn't like Lucy had all that much to say in response to it. She just needed to take what he said and remember it for the future. She could do that. And Cobra had proven several times that he was willing to help out when someone was in need. He'd helped her and even Asuka before.

Maybe Cobra really wasn't all that horrible after all.

'The way he kisses definitely... Oh my fucking GOD, SHUT UP!'

Lucy didn't see the slow smirk spreading over the Poison Slayer's lips while he ripped off chunks of moulding and added it to the pile.

"I heard that," Cobra said.

"Good," Lucy huffed. She used a little more force while prying up the next board. "You shut up, too."

"You want a glass of water?" Cobra called out from the kitchen while filling his own.

"In a few."

He listened to the sounds of her sanding away the glue that had been put down on the baseboards while filling his glass a second time. It had been two hours since they'd started, and they were nearly to a stopping point in their work so they could get a quick lunch.

He had to admit, he was actually enjoying himself.

He'd watched the Celestial mage stare at a hammer for two solid minutes before realizing why he'd put it in her hands - so that she could pry up the nails that were still left after they'd removed all the damaged wood was gone - before he'd carried the wood downstairs and out to the dumpster behind the building.

Lucy had been trading barbs with him all day, finding new ways to tease him about how their morning had started. Apparently, even though she fully supported his new hobby of baking, there was going to be no shortage of jokes concerning his eventual fat ass.

So, Cobra had told her that she wasn't allowed to taste test any of his concoctions. No matter how delicious they were.

Lucy had relented shortly after that about the Cobra Crocker jokes.

And just as she'd joked about his culinary prowess, he'd joked about sending her soul into a frenzy with just a kiss - so much so that she hadn't realized an entire episode of Cupcake Wars had passed. Or that a second episode came and went once their lips had met again.

Cobra finished a second glass of water, then refilled again and walked to the doorway leading from the kitchen. With the glass sitting at his lips, he rounded the corner and came to an abrupt halt. Cobra had known Lucy was working on the floor, just sanding away and making sure everything was smooth for them to get started on the next step.

He just hadn't expected her to be facing away from him. Or for those god forsaken shorts to ride so damn high, looking for all the world as though she was only wearing one of the thongs still sitting in his dryer. Or for her ass to sway from one side to the other in time with her arm as she continued
sanding the floor.

And to think, that creamy expanse of perfectly rounded flesh had been his for the taking just that morning, if only he hadn't wanted to simply tease her with the thought of having more. If he'd just moved his hands lower, he could have held it, squeezed it. And god, the sounds she would have made if he'd done just that. Her soul had been begging him to do it, but he'd held back.

Cobra tried to break away from staring and took a sip of his water, only for it to dribble down his chin when Lucy bent lower to blow away the sawdust her work had kicked up. Her back arched, pushing her ass further into the air, and only when he realized that his drink was soaking into his shirt did he finally rip his gaze from the mesmerizing sight of the blonde.

"Damn," Cobra muttered under his breath. He stalked back into the kitchen and filled his glass one last time, then set it on the counter for Lucy to drink when she was ready. They'd been sharing the same glass all day, so it wasn't that big of a deal.

"Everything alright in there?"

"Yeah," he called back. He pulled off his shirt and scowled down at the wet spot on the thermal that had been beneath it. Stupid bullshit water. There was no way he was going to keep working with a soaked shirt on, and the last thing he needed was Lucy seeing the evidence of his bumbling.

That meant he needed to take the thermal off. At least he was still wearing a tank top beneath it.

Cobra made his way over to the bed where Monty was still coiled in his and Lucy's coats, then took off the thermal. He laid both shirts on the bed, then knelt down and wriggled his finger in the little hole Monty's head poked out of on occasion. "How are you doing little guy?" he whispered.

A single ruby eye focused on him and Cobra smiled. "Monty... thirsty..."

"Tiggle bitties," Cobra called out over his shoulder.

"Yes, Dick Tits?" she laughed.

"Could you grab a little bowl and put some water in it? Something with a low lip."

"Huh?" Lucy frowned and stood from where she'd been working, pulling her gloves off in the process and dropping them on the floor. "Are you turning into a puppy or something?"

"No," he chuckled. "Monty's thirsty. He doesn't need a lot of water, but I don't want him getting dehydrated." He coaxed the python out of his makeshift nest while listening to the blonde rummaging through her cupboards for something to use as a water dish. "I bet you'll be getting hungry soon, huh?"

Monty's soul flared with excitement, a vibrant yellow thrum that rippled across Cobra's mind.

"No hunting today," Cobra smirked. "But I can get you a yummy mouse. How does that sound?"

"Store... mouse?"

"Yeah," the Poison Slayer whispered. "A store mouse."

Lucy stood, frozen, several feet away from Cobra with a little bowl of water in her hand and her mouth hanging open only slightly. The last thing she'd expected was to find his rich caramel skin barely covered with a stark white tank top. She should have known that his arms would make her
insides quiver with desire. Just muscular enough to send fresh waves of saliva washing through her mouth as it tried to slip down her chin.

His thin waist, much thinner than she would have anticipated since she only ever saw him with at least two shirts on - even more often with his coat over it all. How much easier it was to see his jeans stretched over what Lucy suddenly realized was quite the bubble butt. Muscular. Was there any place he didn't have muscles?

She was sure a coin would bounce right off of his ass.

He reached forward only slightly, revealing even more of his skin - something that Lucy had been sure she was never going to see in her lifetime - and a pair of dimples in his lower back. She was officially a goner right then. One way to get Lucy to sink into the depths of her perversion was for a man to have those sexy dimples. She couldn't help it. Something about seeing them had her fingers itching to touch and her nipples instantly hardening with arousal.

"You want two mice?" Cobra chuckled, tickling under Monty's chin then letting his forked tongue flick over the tip of his finger. "How about just one for now, and then we can go to the store tomorrow and you can pick another one?"

"Erik… take me… too?"

"Hell yeah, I'll take you. And if they say you can't come in, then you just stay in my coat and I'll sneak you in." He frowned at the slightly milky quality of Monty's eyes, brushing his thumb just under one. "You'll be shedding soon, Monty."

"Soon…"

"We'll make sure you have lots of water tonight so you can soak, okay?"

Lucy bit her lip while memorizing every inch of exposed skin she could of the Poison Slayer. Closer inspection revealed something she would never have anticipated though. Several thick scars peeked out from beneath his tank top and onto his shoulders, a couple more lashed down his arms. A thick band of light coffee-colored skin wrapped around his wrists. Even where his shirt rode up, she could see at least four scars reaching down beneath the waistband of his pants.

She wondered how many scars he really had, but that wasn't something she dared ask him. Everyone in the guild had scars. Gajeel was covered in them from fights over the years, especially on his arms. One that really caught her attention though was a knotted bit of flesh on his shoulder, where she knew Brain had shot him in the back the first time Fairy Tail had faced off against the Oracion Seis.

Still, her gaze was drawn away from his scars when his hand lifted and his fingers brushed through the damp roots of his hair. She didn't blame him for sweating, but did he have to look so damn delicious while just existing?

That thin sheen of sweat on his arms and up the side of his throat glistened as though he'd just fallen out of a porno.

'Oh my stars. And I kissed him. Oh my fucking god, we kissed and I didn't know all of THIS was under his clothes… I should have done more… Shit, my panties… Maybe if I pour water on my crotch, he won't be able to tell how soaked I am… Cootch juice might as well be pouring down my thighs… Fuck, he's turning around… Don't let him hear - Oh my god, his collar bones!'

Lucy very nearly dropped the water dish when he was fully facing her with Monty's head running one way and another beneath his fingers.
"Are you bringing the water, or…"

'Hurricane Hoo-ha! Cat five! I'm so sorry, boots… there won't be any survivors…'

Lucy was broken out of her daze by great, heaving laughter from the Poison Slayer. She wanted to glare at him, but watching as his shoulders hunched and seeing his stomach tighten so deliciously beneath his shirt was making it all but impossible.

"S-Stop," Cobra hollered between laughs. "Stop thinking about… Oh fuck… Just stop!"

"Oh, shut up," she muttered. Still, even with her cheeks flaming, Lucy took the little bowl over to her bed and knelt beside Cobra and Monty, then carefully held it out to the python.

It took several minutes for Cobra to calm himself down, but he finally moved Monty toward the bowl and turned his attention to the blonde. "For the record, you'd be better off dousing your whole damn body in water."

Lucy forced herself not to shudder when Monty's tongue almost flicked across her finger as he started drinking, and instead turned the bowl slightly so her hand was further away from his creepy little mouth. "I'm surprised we don't have to baste door jambs in Crisco for your ego to get through."

"Hey, I wasn't the one getting ready to pound my snatch with a fire hose."

"Neither was I, asshole," she pouted.

Cobra sent the blonde a devious grin then raised the pitch of his voice and fluttered his only working eye while he mimicked her. "Maybe if I pour water on my crotch, he won't be able to tell how soaked I am," he sighed.

"I…" She blinked several times in horror. "I don't sound like that!"

"Close enough."

"So, you're telling me that you jerk off to me talking dirty to you… sounding like Master in drag."

He wasn't thinking about a whole lot of anything when he spoke again. "Well, no. You sound sexy."

"So you do jerk off to the thought of me."

"I never - Oh, fuck you!" he spat. "Why the hell would I jerk off thinking about you?" Okay, he knew why he would. And he'd done it several times already. But was it really his fault that he was mainly doing it when Lucy, herself, was fantasizing about him already? He was just… joining in the free show.

"Probably because you haven't found a way to install a lacrima camera in my bathroom yet," she grinned.

"Don't tempt me."

She laughed, not noticing Monty's head moving again and his tongue tickling her knuckle. "You wanna watch me poo? Cobra, I never knew you were that kind of freaky."

"Maybe I'd rather see you fingering yourself in the bathtub instead of just hearing it," he shot back.

"Right… Because you can hear that from your apartment." The sudden deadpan stare and slow blink she received had Lucy's eyes going wide. He couldn't really hear that from his own apartment, could
he?

'Oh, just think... if he can, then he knows you're masturbating to him fucking you.'

"Pretty much," Cobra grinned. "If it's any consolation, I can also hear Makarov beating off in his office from my bedroom, so..."

"Oh my god, that's fucking vile!"

"Which leads us back to the very intent listening to your kink fantasies," he chuckled, sending Lucy a side-eyed glance. "Dirty bitch."

"B-But... You..."

'That's not fair! I should get to know what he fantasizes about then!'

"Not telling."

"Tits or ass, at least?" She didn't miss the way his eye raked over her then before returning to meet her gaze with an intensity that Lucy just wasn't ready to handle.

"Normally, neither. But I think it might be ass tonight."

"Tonight?"

Cobra shrugged and looked down to find Monty inching closer to Lucy's hand until his snout was hovering above her thumb. "Maybe, maybe not. You'll never know."

She tore her gaze from his profile to look back at Monty, then shrieked and accidentally tossed the water bowl into the air. "Oh my god! Ew!"

Cobra rolled his eye at the blonde, scratching under Monty's chin. "No, she doesn't hate you. Lucy's just a pussy."

"Fuck you, Cobra! He's creep-" She froze when he instantly glared at her and his next words came out with so much venom that she was surprised it wasn't actually dripping from his lips.

"He isn't. Don't you dare fucking say that about him."

"Co-"

"Monty was trying to let you know that he likes you. Or he did until you scared him!" Slowly, he reached down to loosen Monty's hold on his wrist that was tightening with each second. "He's just a fucking baby, you uptight bitch."

"Monty... sorry..."

"There's no need to be sorry," Cobra whispered. His finger gently brushed from Monty's snout to the back of his head. "You didn't do anything wrong."

Lucy watched as Monty's head curled into Cobra's hand, and when he sent her yet another glare, she honestly felt bad. Snakes were just creepy in her opinion, and the thought of all those slick little scales wriggling over her was enough to make her want to vomit.

"His scales aren't wet," Cobra growled. "Why the fuck does everyone instantly assume snakes are slimy?"
"Because he looks slimy." Still, Lucy hadn't meant to scare Monty. And she remembered what Cobra had told her before about scaring snakes. Specifically that Monty might bite her if she scared him.

"Y'know what? Fuck you, asshole." Cobra quickly stood and grabbed his shirts with Monty coiling tighter around his arm to keep from falling. Next was his coat, with the Poison Slayer instantly wrapping it around his arm to keep the snake warm instead of trying to pull it on himself. "Do this shit yourself."

"Cobra!" Lucy's eyes went wide as he stormed out of the room, and instead of being able to move at all, she simply sat there, dumbfounded by the sudden turn of events. She jumped when the door to her apartment slammed hard enough for her to hear the jamb creak under the sudden force.

Maybe he just needed to calm down a little bit, and then he would be back. She was sure as hell hoping that was the case.

Because if not, if she'd really pissed him off this much, Lucy was almost positive that she was going to have to find somewhere else to stay until her apartment was done. Which really wouldn't be until Gajeel came back. As much as she loved Natsu, the blonde was absolutely certain that asking him for help with construction involving wood was going to quite literally end up in flames.

There wasn't a whole lot that she could do about Cobra's mood though, aside from try to figure out just what had set him off so suddenly. Obviously it was about Monty, but what exactly had made him angry concerning that whole thing?

"It's not my fault I don't like snakes," she muttered.

She was sure there was something in existence that just gave the Poison Slayer a case of the shudders, and it wasn't like she would go out of her way to rub that in his face if she ever found out about it.

Still, Lucy couldn't just sit on the floor all day. She needed to at least finish the part of this project that she knew how to do. Sanding the floor down and then sweeping up the dust to make sure it was nice and clean for… whenever the next step was supposed to happen.

"Damnit… I hope he comes back…"

So, the blonde stood and dusted her shorts off before picking up the bowl she'd dropped and taking it to the kitchen. She took her time to drink the glass of water that Cobra had filled for her, staring at the wreckage that was her living room. There was only a small section that had been sanded. Most of the room still needed to get finished.

And she still had to eat at some point. She made her way back to where she'd been working and put the gloves back on that Cobra had bought for her. Lucy wanted to make some solid progress. Eating could wait until later.

Cobra scowled at the second story window with his hands in his pockets and Monty securely tucked in the pocket of his coat. The bite in the air was even worse now that the sun was far beneath the horizon. He hadn't really calmed down where Lucy was concerned, but the serpent he'd befriended had convinced him to return to her apartment.

Except Cobra still wasn't sure just how he'd done it. Aside from listening to Monty's desire to be around Lucy - even though he also understood that she didn't really like him - Cobra was at a loss for how this had happened.
He didn't want to be at Lucy's. He didn't fucking want to help her.

"... See... Momma...?"

Ah, yes. That was what had swayed him. The little snake somehow saw Lucy as its fucking mother, of all things. Cobra sure as hell didn't understand it.

"Yeah, Monty," he sighed, still not moving from where he stood outside the building. "We'll go see Lucy."

It was completely dark beyond the open window, though. He would have assumed that she would at least have gotten a lantern or something so she could see. And he knew for a fact that she was still inside, that she hadn't just left and gone to the guild. It wasn't even a matter of hearing her soul, since he was just blocking everything out right then, but that he could smell the fresh sawdust in the air, wafting through the open window.

Cobra shook his head and made his way inside, taking the stairs two at a time until he stood in front of apartment 2B. The door wasn't locked when he turned the knob, sending the Poison Slayer's eye rolling at her utter obliviousness.

Then again, when he tried to push the door open Cobra found that it just wouldn't fucking budge. At all. He'd taken some time earlier that day to handle the door jamb so they could actually get in and out more easily, so this shouldn't be happening.

That could either mean Lucy had done something to keep it shut, more than locking it, or…

No, the blonde had some of the worst luck out there. His own previous guild was proof enough of how easy it was to abduct her. And while Cobra really didn't feel like getting worked up over Lucy getting herself caught up in some evil scheme (again), he also couldn't afford to lose the pseudo-parole officer that laid in the blonde's continued existence. If someone decided to fuck with his chance at being free without having to break the law, then he was going to fucking destroy them.

With an agitated snarl, he stepped back and kicked the damn thing open, listening as the wood cracked while the door flew back into the wall.

Cobra stalked into the room, instantly honing in on the scents in the area to make sure nothing was out of the ordinary. Sawdust, morning dew and roses, sweat. Blood.

His eye went wide and he gazed one way and another, then rushed across the room when he saw the vague human-sized lump on the ground just beneath the window with pale blonde hair. He knelt beside her, pressing his fingers to the side of her throat and letting out a sigh when he felt the steady thrum of her pulse beneath her cold flesh.

But where the hell had the blood come from?

"Lucy," Cobra whispered, gently patting her cheek.

"Mm," she mumbled sleepily. "Gimme back the blanket…"

The blonde rolled over, unconsciously curling around Cobra's legs, and he frowned down at the sight of her still only wearing the too-short denim shorts, boots, and her tied up t-shirt. Her teeth chattered. Goosebumps rose across her flesh when she curled in on herself a little more. "You're a fucking moron," he sighed.

Cobra's hand brushed across her hip, then her thigh. Just enough to feel how cold her skin really
was. With a shake of his head, the Poison Slayer pulled his coat off and carefully wrapped it around the blonde. He paused while pulling her hands through the sleeves, frowning down at the bandages on three of her fingers. Bringing the digits up to his nose, the Poison Slayer inhaled, then sighed once again when he realized that the blood he'd smelled earlier was from her fingers.

Most likely splinters that Lucy had made worse by trying to get out. Or she'd broken a nail. It didn't really matter right then. Not nearly as much as the sudden concerned warble in Monty's soul as he slithered out by Lucy's throat and his forked tongue flickered across her lips.

"Monty?"

"Too cold… Momma…"

"God-fucking-damnit," Cobra groaned. He wrapped his arms beneath the blonde and lifted her, storming back over to the door and kicking the stupid thing closed. Once he was sure it was secure, he made his way back toward the window, then carefully crept out of it with Lucy still curled up in his arms.

"Stupid fucking bimbo," he muttered while jumping down to the ground. Still, Cobra paused to make sure Lucy was alright before he started walking down the street toward his own apartment. "Can't even keep yourself warm. Can't close a goddamn window. Sleeping on the cold, dusty fucking floor like a stupid goddamn martyr…"

The Poison Slayer was so busy grumbling to the unconscious woman in his arms that he didn't notice Fairy Tail's Seith mage walking the opposite direction across the street. Just as he was unaware of drawing Bickslow's attention as he continued talking.

"... I still would have let you stay on my couch, dumbass," Cobra growled, shifting Lucy slightly when she tried snuggling closer to his chest. "Just because you pissed me off… I'm not a total asshole."

Bickslow smiled and watched the odd sight of Fairy Tail's newest member taking care of Lucy, in his own weird way. And just as he was about to ask if Cobra needed any help, with his lips parting and his totems ready to echo his words, Bickslow froze and gaped at the sight of Cobra's new snake rubbing its snout across Lucy's cheek.

"She's gonna be fine, Monty," Cobra sighed. "We'll get her warmed up in bed, then you and me are sleeping on the couch tonight… Yeah, I'll help her finish up her apartment."

Bickslow chuckled quietly and turned to continue on his way. It seemed Fairy Tail's newest Dragon Slayer really did have a heart under it all. It wasn't like Bickslow was going to mention what he'd seen to anyone. It was just nice to know that the guy wasn't all bad.

Then again, he'd been the only one in the guild who had the ability to see Cobra's broken soul the day Lucy brought him to the guild for the first time. The cracks and fissures that kept trying to heal only to be damaged once again. And under it all, a gentle swirling purple light. An innocent spark that somehow hadn't been smothered.

Bickslow cast one last glance behind him and focused on Cobra's soul, his lips curling in a gentle grin at the sight of a warm golden glow brightening in the center of the man's soul. Then just barely there, a soft patch molded itself over the topmost portion of one crack.

"You go, Cosplayer," he chuckled. "Freezing your tits off, and still helping a guy out."

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Cobra gently laid Lucy down on his bed, smiling when Monty slithered out of his coat while he worked to remove it from the blonde. She was still cold and shivering, but he already knew that she just needed to get some halfway decent covering and she'd be fine.

It wasn't even a conscious thought to remove her boots and socks and set them on the floor. Afterward, he made his way out to the small laundry closet to grab a pair of her sweatpants and a large shirt, then a pair of fuzzy socks that he knew Lucy wore when she was cold. Bright fucking pink socks.

Cobra went back to his bedroom, setting her clothes just beside her. He was silent while looking at her soft, sleeping face, then down to the dust still clinging to her arms and hands. The small scrapes on her knees from kneeling on the unfinished floor. He left the room again and returned with a warm washcloth, then set about wiping away the worst of the grime.

He hadn't taken care of someone like this in years. Not since he and the others had been mere children in the Tower of Heaven. The closest he'd ever come after leaving that place was when dealing with Cubellios. He had to force himself to not take such detailed notice of how her legs felt beneath his hand. What it was like to hold her slender wrist while cleaning her hand.

Once Lucy was clean from the neck down - only her arms and hands and legs - Cobra sent his attention to her face. To her round cheeks, the gentle slope of her nose, around the curve of her chin. Then to the already dried sweat on her forehead.

Next was her clothing. Part of it was that he didn't want her sleeping in his bed in dirty clothes. Also, though he was loathe to admit it, Cobra knew she would be more comfortable in her sweats. He made quick work of the button and zipper on her shorts, being careful as his fingers ducked beneath the waistband so he only grabbed the denim and not the lace of her underwear.

He shuffled them one way and another, closing his eye once her shorts were past the generous swell of her hips. No matter how badly he really wanted to see Lucy completely naked, he wasn't a fucking creep. She was the one who chose to let someone see this part of her, and even though her soul was more than willing to have him all over her, Lucy hadn't given him an actual go-ahead.

The shorts fell to the floor, and Cobra set his focus on her sweatpants. Finding the tag in the back so he didn't put them on the wrong way, then bunching up the fabric at her feet and gently pulling one through; then the other.

It was a hassle to pull her pants up, but he managed to only catch the smallest glimpse of her pale pink satin panties before they were covered.

"You sleep like the dead when you want to," Cobra whispered as he slowly put her shirt on beneath the one she'd been wearing that day. Once it was situated, he removed the dirty one, then slid a hand beneath her to pop the clasp on her bra, pulling the straps carefully down her arms like he'd seen Angel do several times in the past. "Honestly, it's no wonder you get kidnapped… I just carried and fucking changed you…"

Still, the Poison Slayer took her clothes and tossed them in a small pile on the floor for the time being while he shuffled the blonde one way and another to get her under the blanket.

"Mm..." Lucy sighed and snuggled closer to the pillow, unaware of Cobra's hands going dangerously still where they grasped the blanket up by her shoulders. "Co... fmmmmh..."

With a roll of his eye, Cobra got ready to turn away from the bed. Then he saw that her hair was in a low, tight ponytail that she'd tied it into while they were working.
He watched the slow rise and fall of her breath. In and out. Up. Down. The gentle lull of dreams in her soul accompanied her soft, smiling lips. With yet another sigh, he reached forward and slowly worked the little black band out of Lucy's hair, setting it on his nightstand for her to find in the morning.

That was all he was doing for her. Much more, and he might as well just crawl in the damn bed with her and start fucking snuggling with the blonde. And that sure as hell wasn't happening. Ever.

He didn't trust Lucy. Well, he didn't really trust anyone. And Cobra made a point of never sharing a bed with someone. If it wasn't bad enough that a woman could get attached to him, he was positive that he flailed in his sleep during nightmares. Probably for the best if he didn't endanger Lucy's life by creeping beneath the covers with her.

So, Cobra turned and finally walked out of the room after picking up her dirty clothes and depositing them in the hamper. He'd showered earlier after taking Monty to the pet store for a mouse to eat, so all he needed to do was get himself changed into something more comfortable and then camp out on his couch. That wasn't a big deal, really, since there had been quite a few nights where he'd simply stayed on the couch watching the lacrimavision until he fell asleep.

Monty slithered out of Cobra's coat just before the Poison Slayer hung it on the hook beside the front door, making his way toward the paper towels and low-lipped bin filled with water in the one corner.

"You gonna loosen up a little bit of skin?"

Cobra's only response was a serpentine flick of Monty's tongue as he took a seat on the couch and flicked on the lacrimavision.

"Tonight on Cupcake War-"

His eye narrowed and he switched to another channel as quickly as possible. Thoughts of cupcakes only brought back the memory of having Lucy's lips on his just that morning. Less than twenty-four hours had passed, and he could already feel himself growing addicted to the decadence of her lips and tongue.

"Tonight on Kitchen Nightmares-"

Now that was better. Cobra couldn't help but enjoy the revolting conditions some of these kitchens were kept in. It was definitely going to help him get to sleep, that was for sure.

Lucy groaned quietly while trying to push the blanket away from her for the third time. There was just no budging it though, and she was sure it had everything to do with the Poison Slayer who'd turned her into a blanket burrito that morning. Just as soon as he'd realized that she'd gotten sick from sleeping in her apartment two nights before.

Or maybe it was because she'd insisted that she was fine while walking to the kitchen for a glass of water, and ended up stumbling into the wall. Twice. She swore it jumped out at her, and that her bumbling had nothing to do with being sick. She couldn't be sick. There was still so much to do in her apartment, and Lucy wasn't going to shirk her responsibilities and try to get Cobra to do it all himself.

"You're staying there," the maroon-haired Slayer said over his shoulder. He paused in sanding the floor in her bedroom to look at where Lucy was resting in her bed in the newly floored living room, just down the short hall. "You can see what I'm doing, so you know how to do this shit in the future."
"But, Cobra," Lucy whined. "I should be helping…"

"You're helping by not getting those fucking germs near me." She didn't need to know that he hadn't been sick since getting the lacrima put in. "Just lay there and watch. When you're feeling better, you can do this shit as much as you fucking want."

"But this is boring…"

"Well, then you can reconsider sleeping in inappropriate clothing next to an open fucking window… in the middle of fucking winter. I mean, really…"

"Well, if you hadn't."

"We're not starting this shit again," Cobra huffed, wiping the sweat from his brow. He stood and crawled across the bed, over the blanketed blonde, and went to the kitchen for a refill on his water and a second plastic cup for Lucy.

The blonde sniffled, grumbling in silence over her treatment while listening to the Poison Slayer slowly making his way back toward her. The bed shifted and she glared when he rolled her onto her back while straddling her stomach. "Are you kidding?"

"You're lucky I'm doing a damn thing for you," he scowled. "You don't need to-"

"I'd be careful what I said right about now," Cobra smirked. He took a large gulp of his water, gazing down at the blonde who was trying very hard not to stare at how his shirt - a simple black tank top - clung to his glistening caramel skin. "I still haven't forgiven you for what you said about Monty."

"Cobra, I said I was sorry," Lucy whined. "I didn't mean to upset you or Monty or… I just can't help what I feel, alright?"

Oh, he understood that entirely. That really wasn't the issue. It was more that she'd been so vocal about it and upset Monty. He just couldn't abide that sort of behavior. "Now, I'll loosen this up and you can sit up and sip your water," he finally said. "And if you try to fight drinking the damn water, I will baby bird the shit out of you."

"Baby… what?"

"How to birds feed their young?" A soft chuckle broke past his lips at the horrified frown curving across her face. Cobra set his glass on the floor after moving off the blonde, grinning to himself when she not so secretly honed in on the grey cargo pants stretching over his ass and how she wished his shirt would ride up just a little.

"Thinking about that will not change my mood toward you," he smirked, loosening the blanket's hold on her and allowing the blonde to sit up properly.

Lucy nodded and took the offered glass, carefully sipping at it while he went back to working on her bedroom. Maybe if she started feeling a little better in some time, he would let her help again. Really, she didn't like just watching him.

'You lie… You love watching him all bent over like that, shaking that ass. And his skin… Good god it's so delicious like this. He shouldn't cover up! EVER! He's your very own coffee lollipop. Come on, you know you wanna lick all that sweat off of him.'
Lucy shook her head and sat the water on the floor, then curled up beneath the blanket and simply watched as Cobra sanded the floor. Her eyes closed in a long blink, and when they opened again, he was already laying floorboards down and setting them in position, with a small section of the room finished.

He'd been distant the past couple days, more so than usual. Aside from explaining that he'd come back to her apartment and had decided to take her to his own so she wouldn't die of hypothermia, Cobra hadn't really said a whole lot.

And she understood it, to a point. She'd upset him over her reaction to Monty being near her hand. She'd overreacted, and spoke without thinking about the fact that, even though Monty was an animal, he still had feelings and he could still understand a negative reaction being sent his way.

And, as Cobra had pointed out, the little albino snake was just a baby. He was curious about her. It stood to reason that having spent so much time with Cobra in the last few days, the majority of the time Monty had been with him and even being there when Cobra decided to adopt him, would out Lucy in a category of people that little snake could trust.

And she'd freaked out over him just trying to get to know her.

Lucy's gaze shifted toward the foot of the bed where Cobra's coat was bunched up in a makeshift nest. Where she knew Monty was resting. Lucy glanced toward her room, to the Poison Slayer who was fitting two planks together and carefully laying them down, then back to the fur-lined coat.

She wasn't even really sure where her fear or uneasiness came from where snakes were concerned. It wasn't like she thought they were products of the devil, or that they were evil or anything. Hell, her newest teammate had been evil for some time - and might still be, she wasn't sure, though she really hoped that Cobra had put the super-villain business behind him.

So what, really, was the problem with Monty? He was kind of sweet, she'd noticed. And for the most part, he stayed out of sight. The only time she ever saw him was when Cobra was holding him in the guild or at his apartment. He never slithered across her feet or in her line of sight, even there.

Was the little guy just scared of everything? So much noise around all the time, Lucy was sure she would probably be a little scared if she was just a baby snake.

Slowly, the blonde sat up again and scooted closer to Cobra's coat, not noticing how the Poison Slayer was watching her with a narrowed, curious eye.

She bit her lip and reached toward the fur edge. "Monty," she whispered. Maybe it was silly though. Her fingers brushed across the soft lining to make sure the little snake knew she was trying to get his attention, and to make sure she didn't get bitten for going near him too quickly.

Her hand drew back and she waited, hoping he would come out of his little nest enough for her to really see him. Nothing happened though.

"Monty," she whispered again. "I'm sorry for, um… for being mean. I… God, can you even understand me?"

Cobra's lips thinned, but he held himself back from saying a word in favor of watching the blonde interacting with Monty. She couldn't tell that the little snake was worried, or that he wanted to trust her. She had to do this on instinct, trying to sort out what the snake wanted, whether it was about to strike or not, based on Monty's body language.

"Well, I'm gonna assume you can," she laughed softly. "Cobra talks to you like you can understand
him, so… We'll just go with it, huh?"

She waited for a moment, then reached toward the fur again and gently brushed her fingers over it. Maybe just being *this* close to touching him would help her get over being closer to the snake. He was going to be part of the team right along with Cobra, as far as she was concerned. It was really for the best if she got the hell over her uneasiness.

When her hand drifted away again, Lucy smiled down at the sight of the translucent peeling scales on his little pale snout peeking out of the small gap in the fabric. Then a single red eye. His forked, flickering tongue testing the air.

Lucy tried not to cringe. She really did. And maybe she succeeded. She wasn't entirely sure.

Still, the Celestial mage was not going to be bested by a little snake who, she hoped, only wanted to be friends. So she reached forward once more and paused just before her fingers came in contact with his snout. She gulped when she felt his tongue brush across her fingertips.

And then they both waited. Lucy waited for Monty to make a move, and Monty waited for Lucy to accept the contact from him and allow him to do it again.

Cobra silently put down the tools and listened in on the blonde.

'He's just a baby, Lucy. It's not like he's a vulcan trying to eat your asshole. And he's not really all that scary. So, why aren't you moving your hand?'

Maybe it was because Monty's little nostrils had new scales showing, still just as pale as the rest, but he almost looked uncomfortable with his older scales peeling off. And itchy. She knew he wasn't slimy, but would those tickle or scratch her?

Finally, she just swallowed her fear and pressed one finger to the top of Monty's head. It was... room temperature. Not cold and creepy. Not overly hot with the fires of hell lurking where his brain should be. And a little on the soft side, she realized while hesitantly stroking from between his eyes to where she could only assume his neck started. Well, more like smooth, but that wasn't important.

"Mommy... petting me!"

Cobra wanted to fight it, but he couldn't stop the smile from lifting his lips as Monty looked at him. Lucy was a little uncomfortable, but she was intrigued. Nearly smiling as she stroked Monty's head again and again. And the little serpent was over the damn moon about the attention. It was all he'd really wanted where Lucy was concerned, just for her to give him the smallest bit of attention.

"Mommy... petting me too!"

Slowly, Cobra stood and removed his gloves. He wasn't even going to scratch the surface of emotion roiling in his gut at seeing the blonde and Monty like this. Still, he needed to let the little blonde know that what she'd just done meant something. So, he made his way toward the bed, pausing to watch as Lucy's head tilted while she lightly touched the peeling scales on Monty's snout.

"Does this mean you'll be shedding soon?" Lucy whispered. "I've never seen a snake shed before."

"He might do it tonight," Cobra said softly, still smiling as she turned to look at him in surprise.

"Oh, well that would be..." Lucy froze as Cobra's warm hand curved around her cheek and drew her closer until their breath mingled and his nose gently brushed across hers. "C-Cob-"
He closed the distance slowly, savoring the sweetness of plump lips molding to his own with no hesitation. It wasn't for long, and he didn't let the intensity build like it had days earlier on his couch. Just enough to leave Lucy breathless and silently begging him to push her back onto the bed and rip her clothes from her slightly warmer than usual body.

But he wanted more, so much more than just a simple kiss. He wanted her tongue slithering between his lips, running along his slightly sharpened canines and dancing over every surface she could reach. He wanted her clutching herself to him, trying to pull him so close there was no space between them. And the smallest part of Cobra, he found, wanted her hands to lift and run across his bare shoulders, push under his shirt, caress the scarred flesh that he kept hidden from sight.

He drew back, nipping gently at her lips, then waited for her eyes to slide open again. And for her soul to catch up on what the hell he'd just done to her. The fact that she so thoroughly lost track of everything around them once his lips were on hers was something he found rather humorous. And the Poison Slayer just knew he would enjoy fucking with her over it should this ever happen again.

Then again, with the way she looked at him in that moment, her eyes barely opened and the slight swelling of her lips nearly screeching for more, Cobra was sure this could happen a whole lot more often.

But not yet. She wasn't desperate enough for him yet.

"Thank you," Cobra smirked, letting his lips just barely ghost over hers before moving to press a gentle kiss on her flushed cheek. Finally he paused at her ear, only after tucking her hair behind it, and whispered, "Apology accepted."

Lucy blinked slowly as he pulled away and knelt down to look at Monty. 'What the hell is he doing to me?' Cobra seemed wholly unaffected by kissing her. Almost as though it was no different than pulling out a plate for dinner or tying his shoes. She gasped when warmth snaked across her ear and down her throat from his lips, then back up with a long, slow lick. When had he stopped looking at the snake?

"Don't think like that," Cobra grinned. "I wouldn't touch you at all if it didn't benefit me somehow."

"And… how does touching me, uh…"

"Benefit me?" He felt Lucy nod and suppressed an aroused groan as morning dew and roses filled his sinuses. "Oh, it's nothing sinister."

Lucy took a shaky breath as he finally looked into her eyes, with his single indigo orb glittering with amusement, but somehow just a shade darker than normal.

"Just remember, Bright Eyes," Cobra chuckled. "Just because you can't see something, doesn't mean it's not there."

Lucy was silent as the Poison Slayer stood and made his way back into her bedroom to continue working. And as she lay down and got more comfortable - after pulling Monty's coat-nest to sit beside her pillow so she could continue petting the snake while she relaxed - Lucy found herself smiling while he laid the flooring. She understood, loud and clear, what he'd meant. Just because she couldn't see a reaction, or see how he really felt about something, didn't mean it wasn't there.

Cobra was, in her experience, pretty secretive. He kept a lot to himself. Maybe there were just signs of his reactions that she hadn't caught on.

So as Lucy's eyes slid closed and Monty slipped from the coat to burrow in the blanket by her chest,
she thought back to her interactions with the Poison Slayer to see if maybe there was something she'd missed. A look in his eye. Anything.

She missed how Cobra glanced over his shoulder once again to give her and the resting python and tender smile, already drifting in between dreams and wakefulness and falling deeper into unconsciousness.

"Dippy fucking blonde," Cobra chuckled to himself.

Lucy fiddled with the radio she'd bought just that morning, a small lacrima-powered device that could fill her apartment with music while only taking up a small corner of her desk. She picked up the last drop cloth they needed from the counter in her kitchen, then made her way toward the main room.

"Just put it down over there," Cobra said.

She didn't even look up to see where he was indicating. There was only one corner of the room that needed to be covered, so it wasn't all that hard to figure out where she needed to put it. She set up the cloth, then went back to the center of the empty room just when the first pop of metal separating from itself could be heard.

"How does it look?" Lucy asked. She turned on the radio and instantly set the volume lower than she probably would have otherwise, just to make sure her painting companion wasn't uncomfortable.

"Looks like key lime pie."

"That sounds yummy," she laughed. Her gaze finally lifted to look at him, to take in the expanses of caramel skin that he just wasn't all that adamant about hiding while they worked any longer. For nearly a week, all she'd been able to do was stare (as discreetly as possible) and try not to imagine Cobra ripping his shirt in half like some barbarian to ravish her all-too-willing body.

Once again, Lucy paused at his thin hips, the site of a grey tank top meeting the belt of his pants where it was tucked in. She'd never realized just how many tank tops Cobra actually owned. But he'd yet to do any laundry, and she knew he hadn't gone shopping for clothes recently.

She let her eyes trail up the length of his spine, and her breath caught when she realized his arms were raised as he stood. Watching all those muscles bunching between his shoulders had the blonde barely able to remember how to lick her lips. Even better was the barest sight of a darker than normal scar just barely peeking out from beneath his shirt, curving toward the right from his spine. She hadn't seen that one before.

Cobra turned toward Lucy. Her eyes lifted. And in an instant, she noticed that something was different about him. His ears were more pronounced for some reason. His face suddenly brighter. She could see the stark contrast between the scar closing his right eye and the rest of his face. How soft a purple his only eye really was, and how he simply looked at things and waited with all the patience of a saint.

It was only when his hands lowered from his head that Lucy realized what was different.

His hair.

And there was no stopping herself from toppling over onto the floor, curled up in a ball, and laughing once she saw the maroon strands pulled into two high ponytails. She hadn't realized Cobra's
hair was even long enough to tie back in any sense of the word, or that it actually could be tamed into something other than the spiked style it dried in naturally.

But he just looked so…

"Say adorable and I will rape your soul with a rusty fucking pipe."

Honestly, he didn't care what he looked like. His hair was sweaty already and it had been bothering him for the past few days, constantly getting in his only eye. Really, he only had the one. He kind of needed it to stay unobstructed if he was going to be able to see what he was doing.

Even that didn't stop her from laughing. Lucy just couldn't help it. Because Cobra, formerly of the Oracion Seis, one of the most feared men in the X700s, had pig tails. Precious little pig tails that made his pointed ears stick out more. Just like-

"I'm not a fucking elf." He ignored how she rolled on the floor and clutched at her stomach, instead grabbing the blue tape and tearing off a long strip. And Lucy was so caught up in imagining him wearing red and white striped stockings and a Peter Pan tunic, that she hadn't a clue what the Poison Slayer was up to until he shoved the wadded up tape into her mouth. Adhesive side facing outward so she could taste it.

She gagged and scrambled to rip it out, and Cobra simply gave her a triumphant grin. "Now," he said, dodging the saliva-covered tape ball she threw at his head, "Are you ready to paint?"

It was several hours later that Lucy realized the Poison Slayer was a total fucking weirdo. And not in a way that was all that bad, as far as she was concerned. They hadn't even started painting, realizing that they'd both overlooked the need for primer on the walls and her watching Cobra put his shirts back on and take down his hair so they could go to the hardware store together for the materials.

She'd gotten quite the lesson from her maroon-haired partner on what to look for and what to avoid. And Lucy hadn't known that he was so knowledgeable when it came to home improvements. It wasn't like the Tower of Heaven had a killer color scheme going on, what with it being an enormous metallic monstrosity and all that.

But the weirdness came in once the walls had been primed and they waited for it to dry so they could start with the first coat of green. Thankfully, Cobra had remembered to close the can he'd opened earlier.

They sat in the middle of the floor, eating the lunch they'd stopped at the guild to pick up, and that was when Cobra got weird.

Maybe it wasn't weird for him, but she had certainly never seen someone pick up an empty can of primer and start scraping the excess from the edges like it was cake icing. And when Lucy had done nothing but stare at him, mid-chew in her sandwich, he'd gone and flicked some primer at her.

"That looks about right." Cobra smirked, popping his finger in his mouth and sucking the rest off.

It took all of two seconds for Lucy to realize what he was hinting at. The pale color of the paint, how it had spattered across her cheek and nearly got in her mouth. "You're such a pervert." There was no point in denying the sudden flash in her mind of the Poison Slayer kneeling over her with his hand pumping furiously at his cock while he milked himself dry.

"That looks about right." Cobra smirked, popping his finger in his mouth and sucking the rest off.

And that was how the blonde found herself in her current predicament, hours after lunch, covered from her cheek down to her hip in pale green paint from the roller in Cobra's hand. She was,
apparently, too distracted and it was aggravating him.

Except, he was smiling. Laughing, even, as she gaped at him.

So, Lucy did the adult thing. She lunged across the short distance between them with the paintbrush she'd been using to go around the windows, attempting to get him back and then some. The only problem was that Cobra dodged her every move, already hearing it before she could even tense her muscles. She did the next best thing when she felt him roll more paint across her stomach. Wild paint flinging. He hadn't been expecting that. And the sudden stillness in the room while several large droplets of green paint slid down the right side of his face had Lucy questioning whether it was a good idea to start this.

"Did you just…"

She chuckled nervously, dropping the brush to the drop cloth on the floor as soft music drifted through the room from her radio.

"You're in for it now," Cobra grinned. Lucy screamed and dove across the room when he lunged for her, sliding on her stomach and finally scrambling to her feet once again while he pivoted in place to catch her.

She didn't even care that he got at least three more strikes on her with the roller as she darted from one corner of the room to another.

"You can't get away from me, Jugs."

"I can try!"

"Resistance is futile!" His arm wound around her from behind, the roller travelling from her throat down between her breasts, to her left thigh. She wriggled in his grasp, giggling and shifting her weight to try and break free, and so completely unaware of how much she was actually rubbing her body against him until she turned in his arms and their lips were only inches apart.

Heaving breaths mingling, Lucy smiled up at the Poison Slayer. "You're an asshole," she whispered. "I'm covered in paint now."

"I made sure to get extra," he chuckled. "Just in case."

"In case you wanted a snack, maybe." Her hands slid up from where they were pinned by her sides, brushing over his stomach until she felt his collarbones beneath her fingertips.

"I eat poison," he shrugged. He was not going to react to having her touching him like this. He was not going to enjoy it. Hell, Lucy shouldn't have been this close to him to begin with, and he sure as hell didn't need her getting comfortable fucking touching him to begin with.

He was not going to let this keep happening.

"But you're not nearly covered enough," Lucy whispered.

"... Huh - ACK!"

The blonde laughed while gripping Cobra's pigtails and wrenching his head down to smear his face across her chest. It had apparently been his mission to get her tits covered in green paint, so she was just spreading the love by making sure he was just as well-coated.
Except she hadn't anticipated Cobra's grip on her tightening, or how he would slam her body to the floor and collapse on top of her.

Or for him to growl so damn much with his face nestled between her breasts.

'Ooh my god, I put his face in my tits! Lucy, what the hell were you thinking?!

Just as she was about to let go, the blonde gasped at the feel of sharp teeth and a lithe tongue sucking on the flesh between her breasts, pulling the paint off with ease. "C-Cobra…" Shit, she hadn't meant to moan like that. Why the hell was she not pulling him away from her?

He shivered as her hands fell away from his head, her fingers barely brushing over his ears before settling on his shoulders. Finally, his eye opened and he looked up to see Lucy's head tipped back and her lips parted on yet another soft whimper. His head lifted, his nose brushing across the hollow beneath her throat. "You'd better watch how much you push me," he rasped.

Lucy found her vision filled with nothing but Cobra as he hovered over her. She could feel the heat from him everywhere, though. His arms where they held her. His chest just far enough that they weren't actually touching, but close enough that she could imagine it. His hips parting her thighs. Slowly, she nodded. Surely, she understood what he was getting at.

"Now… Am I green enough for you? Or do need to make my ass into a complete mint chocolate fucking chip ice cream cone?"

"I-I think I'm done," she breathed.

"Good," he chuckled. "Back to work." Without another word, Cobra detangled himself from the blonde and stood, not bothering to help her get up. It was while he listened to Lucy calming her breathing and silently scolding herself for nearly suffocating him and being far too inappropriate, that Cobra's grin turned devious while he dipped the roller back in the paint.

"You might want to fix your shirt," he said without looking away from the wall.

"What's wrong with it?" Lucy frowned.

"Take a look." At the blonde's muffled choking sound, his smirk widened.

"Cobra, what the fuck?!!"

He shrugged, still not looking away from the wall. "If my face is in your tits, you're getting a hickey."

"You can't just… G-Goddamnit, Cobra!"

He paused in working, looking at the red-faced blonde who was smearing some of the paint from her stomach between her breasts to cover the dark mark he'd left behind. "Should I have just licked all the paint off then?"

Her hands went still. Her eyes widened, staring off into space.

'Ooh damn it all. I should have said yes... Well, I could still say yes. Maybe he'd... NO! Shut the hell up, brain! Stop letting him suck on you. I fucking hate you, brain."

"Didn't think so," Cobra chuckled.

It was another five minutes before Lucy found her mental functions really returning. And for the rest
of the day, she was all too aware of the memory of Cobra's lips on her body, how he sucked on her almost hard enough to hurt. Fire in his eye and his voice rumbling with passion, with desire. And she couldn't help but wonder what would have happened if she'd pushed just a little more. He was obviously aware of her attraction to him, and the fact of how often she fantasized about getting him into bed. It kind of killed her inside that he hadn't just ripped her clothes off right then, though.

In the heat of the moment. All wild and untamed, desperate for her. Just the small taste of it was enough to have Lucy wishing she'd kept him against her.

Thankfully, there was still some part of her that could put the slut living in her brain folds on a damn leash so she could focus on painting her apartment. That same part that knew the walk back to Cobra's apartment was going to be an interesting one, since they weren't going to be washing the paint off any time soon.
Cobra really wanted nothing more than to stay in Magnolia and be lazy. It was getting colder and, as far as he was concerned, he didn't really need to take a job. It meant he'd had to leave Monty back at the apartment with promises that he'd be back soon. And, sadly, it also meant that he'd had to talk with Kinana to make sure that, if they didn't come back in the next week, she could stop by and check on Monty. If she didn't live in Fairy Hills, and if there wasn't a ban on pets there, he knew she would have just taken him over there for the time being.

Still, they were out of Magnolia and already on their way through the forest, working on the first step of Erza's plan to catch these bandits. Send the two Dragon Slayers ahead to scout everything out. Natsu using his nose and Cobra using his Soul Listening magic.

They were silent while making their way down the worn path, their gazes searching the looming trees above for any foreign scents. And even though Cobra really hated to admit it, he was keeping a close eye on just how Natsu went about scouting using his Slayer senses. Sure, he technically had the advantage by being able to hear the bandits' souls - if they were there - but Natsu had been doing shit like this longer than him. He'd been raised doing this.

Cobra would be a moron to not take advantage of this opportunity to learn. Not that he'd let Natsu know about it.

Natsu paused in his step, with the Poison Slayer at his side doing the same, his eyes narrowing while he looked at the winter-bare trees around them. "Forest's kinda quiet," he whispered.

Cobra hummed, his eye closing while he sent his magic out. He could hear Lucy, Gray, Erza, and Happy behind them by at least a hundred meters. Animals nesting for the night, while nocturnal fauna crept around. No other human souls, though. "Just animals," he said.

"Not near us. I don't hear them."

Cobra frowned and stretched his magic further. He could hear the souls of the animals around them, but not the sounds they made while wriggling through the forest. Definitely weird. "Probably nothing," he said, taking a step forward and opening his eye again. His arm shifted before Natsu could make a grab for him and he turned to glare at the salmon-haired mage. "What?"

"Can you hear everyone else?"

"Yeah." Cobra turned to look back the way they'd come, taking a deep sniff of the air at the same time as Natsu. "I don't smell them though."

"I smell Happy," Natsu frowned. "And everyone else." Which meant that Cobra's senses just weren't as strong as Natsu's. Not that he really needed the damn reminder.

Cobra wanted to chalk up the silence around them to the fact that maybe the animals saw himself and Natsu as predators. He really did. Except, he hadn't lived this long by being willing to believe in the best case scenario. "C'mon. Let's keep going."

'You thinking it might be a spell?' Natsu thought, casting Cobra a sidelong glance.

"Could be. Best to keep moving." Finally, they started walking again. If there was someone
watching, somehow, then making it appear that they were none the wiser to either of them being aware of something being off would definitely benefit them.

It was only after several minutes that the soft sounds of crickets chirping returned to the forest, nearly deafening from the sudden silence before. Whatever it had been, passed. Cobra was definitely thankful for that.

After another few minutes, the sudden thoughts swirling around in Natsu's soul had Cobra's eye rolling. This was definitely the last fucking thing he wanted to talk about.

"How come Luce doesn't spend time with anyone now?"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Oh, Cobra knew exactly what he was talking about, though. Apparently, the blonde had been so wrapped up in working with him to fix up her apartment that she'd completely ignored the rest of the team. That wasn't really his fucking problem though. Her apartment was done, completely repainted and sort of furnished - she was waiting to get a new desk and living room set to replace the furniture that had been damaged, but at least her bed survived - and she was no longer staying with him.

When Natsu thought more about it though, apparently Lucy had started ignoring everyone else in favor of spending time with Cobra since he'd come to the guild.

That was not fucking good. Not at all.

The last thing he needed was her getting attached to him and thinking they were anything more than two mages who were forced to work together. Yes, he wanted to get between her legs, and he was thoroughly enjoying the tangents her soul went on when she started thinking about what it was like to kiss him, or how long she'd had to wear concealer between her tits to hide the hickey he'd given her, but that really didn't mean that he wanted her thinking they were going to get married and live happily ever fucking after. There was a very real difference between wanting to fuck her and wanting to be with her.

It wasn't helping that Natsu was starting to think that maybe they had some sort of secret relationship.

"It's not what you're thinking," Cobra said with a sneer.

"Then what is it? All she ever does is spend time with you now."

"Her apartment flooded," Cobra said. "I helped her fix it."

Natsu's scowl deepened while they both stepped over a lifted, gnarled root in the path. "She could have asked everyone on the team to help her though."

"You would have set the place on fire," Cobra shrugged. "Frosty McSnowballs has more control, but if the two of you work together, it's a fucking disaster because he has to do better than you." He shook his head and let out an exasperated sigh. "Honestly, you guys are fucking ridiculous."

"We're not that bad."

"You're thinking about the town you and Gray destroyed… a whole fucking town… Over you trying to give Gray a damn purple nurple…"

"... Shut up."

"And Erza…" He paused at that. Honestly, he hadn't a clue why Lucy hadn't asked the redhead to
help her get her apartment fixed. She'd only thought about asking Gajeel, but he'd been away on a mission already. As far as Cobra knew, asking anyone else on the team hadn't even crossed her mind. "I… don't know about that one," he finally said. "She didn't think about it."

"Well, Erza's good at fixing things, too," Natsu frowned. "She even helped me build my house before I knew how to do a whole lot of anything. And we've all done construction jobs before. Luce might not realize it, but she kinda just threw the team to the side to hang out with you. Which I still don't understand why she'd want to…"

Cobra shrugged. "You'd have to talk to her about it. If you want to spend time with her, I really don't care. She's living in her apartment again. Do whatever you want." Honestly, if he could get the blonde out of his hair, then that would be for the best. Because the more time he spent with her, the more he wanted her. A whole three days had gone by since they'd finished working on her apartment, and he'd been aching to have her soul so fucking close to him again. He wanted to wake up and hear her on his couch, in his living room. And that fact was what had made him more than happy to take a damn mission and not have Lucy able to be even remotely close to him. Not with the rest of their guildmates around.

"Did you kiss her first, or did she kiss you?"

Cobra's head whipped to the side to glare at Natsu, only to find narrowed olive eyes glaring right back at him. He knew for a fact that Lucy hadn't told anyone about them kissing. She wasn't ashamed of it, and she hadn't changed how she acted around him in public. So how the hell did Natsu, of all fucking people, know about that?!

"I'm not as stupid as I act, Cobra," Natsu said over the Poison Slayer's low growl. "Sure, there's lots I don't get, but one thing I do know about is caring about someone. And I care about Luce."

"How do you know about that?" he spat.

Natsu shrugged, then a slow smirk lifted his lips. "You just told me."

"Bastard ass motherfucker," Cobra sneered. God, he wanted to rip the asshole's spine out and beat him to death with it. Still, he'd pretty much just walked right into that one. It looked like Natsu had actually managed to grow the hell up, mentally. Took him fucking long enough. "Does it really matter who did it first? She knows the fucking score. And I haven't done anything she hasn't wanted."

Granted, Lucy hadn't exactly said she wanted him to pin her to the floor and suck paint off of her. He'd been going on instinct at that point, but she hadn't complained either. Well, she'd complained about the hickey a little bit, but the blonde just kept thinking about how much she loved what his mouth had reduced her to.

"Sure, but Luce…” Natsu paused in his step, his gaze locking onto Cobra's when he turned to look over his shoulder. "She does a lot to make up for how she was raised. Sometimes it's kinda stupid, but…” Like how she slept around with random guys on occasion, or the ridiculous situations she got herself into from time to time. Or how she tried so hard to be part of the drinking crowd in the guild even though she really was a lightweight. "Well, it's not like anyone can tell her not to do it."

"Can't live her life for her," Cobra shrugged. "What does that-"

"Sometimes I want to," Natsu whispered, letting his gaze break away from the single indigo orb boring into him to look up at the spindling branches arching over their path. The moon barely broke past the trees, dappling both of them in silvery light just bright enough for him to make out his puffs
of breath in the chilled air.

"What?" Cobra frowned. He turned fully toward Natsu, waiting for the Fire Slayer's eyes to lower to him once again.

"Sometimes, I wish it was reversed. That Luce was me, and I was her. Then I could take all the bad stuff for her, and she could just... Smile all the time."

'Life's hard, but I've always got a reason to smile with the guild. I love Fairy Tail... Having a family after Igneel left... I just wish I could protect her.'

Cobra's lips pursed slightly at the errant thought from the mage before him. Oh, he knew all too well just how devoted Natsu was to his friends and the guild. That was pretty much the guy's default function.

But while that was damn near the status quo for Natsu, Cobra suddenly realized that was never something he'd done. He'd never really had a selfless thought like that. There had never been a point in his life where he'd wanted to switch places with someone else just to spare them pain, to protect them, to keep them safe. All the shit Brain had put him and the other Seis members through when they were kids had taught Cobra that he couldn't look out for anyone else, because he had to keep an eye on his own back.

When he'd heard Sorano's screams and cries for help, he'd wanted to protect her, sure... but not once had he thought that he would take her place so she wouldn't have to suffer. And he'd never really done anything to try and protect her.

Life had always been about him. About searching for the best benefit to himself, and how he could sway things to work in his favor. And maybe it was pathetic to others, but Cobra's biggest concern since the day he was born, was watching out for his own fucking hide. The only exception was Cubellios, and now Monty. He'd taken them in and cared for them as best he could, but that was different. It wasn't like he'd done it to make them smile or brighten their lives.

Cubellios had been his first friend. And Monty... Cobra suddenly realized, while staring at Natsu, that he'd taken the little albino python in because he needed to fill that empty space. He needed to have something to take away his loneliness in a guild he didn't want to be in, forced into this shit situation that held him back at every turn.

But Cubellios and Monty weren't human. No human had ever mattered to him before.

"We all just kind of act like the big things aren't that big," Natsu sighed. "Phantom wasn't that bad, since the town was saved and we got Luce back. Dealing with you guys wasn't that bad, because we stopped the disaster and we took Wendy in. We survived Tenrou Island and Acolobia. And the dragons during the Games..." He took a step forward, keeping his eyes locked with Cobra's. "Luce is always in the thick of it, just like the rest of us. Always fighting by our side. Even when I met her, she didn't just back down. But it takes a lot to deal with that. And even though Luce and the rest of us say we lean on Fairy Tail, on our nakama, there are some things you just can't do that with."

Cobra's eye narrowed slightly and apprehension prickled the base of his neck. "Why are you suddenly giving me a crash course in dealing with her, when I'm only on this fucking team because I have no other choice?"

"Because you kissed her. And even if Luce says it doesn't mean a thing, or acts like it doesn't, I know it does."
"Then that's her fucking problem," he growled. The last fucking thing he needed was Lucy starting to care about him. God, just the thought made him want to vomit. "And if that's the case, then I'll make sure she understands, loud and fucking clear, that I want none of the shit she might dream up in that rat's nest brain of hers." After a moment, he added, "Did Gray or Bickslow get this same lecture?"

Natsu's lips curled into a small grin. He hadn't known that Cobra knew she'd slept with Bickslow or Gray. Well, everyone knew about her and Bickslow, since they'd hooked up on Halloween, but she never talked about the few times she and Gray slept together. And he was sure that Lucy didn't know that he knew because he'd smelled it all over her. "Nope. But Luce never ignored us for a guy before. With Bickslow, she tried to keep it a secret, and they only saw each other here and there. That was actually my fault that anyone found out they were sleeping together."

"So I heard."

"And Gray cares about Luce. Bickslow does, too. I'm telling you this, because I know you don't care about her at all. And even though I don't want you anywhere near her or my guild, you're stuck with us. Just like we're stuck with you."

Cobra fought not to show any outward reaction. It wasn't his damn job to care about Lucy. So he wanted to fuck her. So the hell what if he'd kissed her? She sure as hell hadn't been complaining when he'd kissed her to the point where she'd lost track of time. She hadn't uttered a single word to make him stop when she'd been all sniffly and petting Monty, when he'd kissed her again. She definitely hadn't wanted him to stop when they'd been flinging paint at each other.

"It's because I care about Luce that I don't wanna see her get hurt by thinking something good can come from being near you. So if you need to break her heart, do it now before it's too late."

"She doesn't love me, Sulphur Dick. We kissed. That's it." Just saying that word had Cobra wanting to retch. All they'd done was kiss, and he'd been listening really fucking closely to Lucy's soul to make sure she wasn't jumping down the rabbit hole and getting lost in some fucked up candy cane lala-land. The fact that Natsu's tense shoulders eased and his bright grin gleamed had his eye narrowing with suspicion.

"Good," Natsu laughed. "Then I won't have to set you on fire for making her cry."

"She's cried enough. She's had enough pain. I just want her to be happy for once."

"You wouldn't get close enough," Cobra snorted, turning away from Natsu and continuing on their path through the woods. Once he heard Natsu's steps falling in next to him, he stayed silent and dipped into his companion's soul. The last thing he'd wanted to hear was what the bastard was thinking about though.

Lucy knelt on the rich marble floor, tears streaming down her cheeks as she gazed into her future-self's dying eyes. She'd come from the future, taken the hit that Rogue had sent toward Lucy of this time. Natsu turned away from the sight of his best friend crying over her own corpse, her sudden wails ringing between his ears as he snarled and gazed at Future Rogue.

The pair continued on in silence after that, with Cobra not having to look at Natsu's profile to know he was smiling. Even while thinking about one of the most painful days of his fucking life, Natsu smiled. It just wasn't natural.

Still, even though Cobra had been released from prison to help get the dragon situation under control, he didn't really know a whole lot about what had really been going on. It hadn't mattered to him at
the time. He'd been out of his damn cell and able to fight, what more could he really fucking ask for? But he never heard anything about the Grand Magic Games or the dragons or anything else from Lucy's soul.

When he thought about it, Cobra hardly ever heard anything from her about what really upset her, unless it was happening in the moment. She locked it all down, and he found a rather large part of him wondered…

What would happen if her forced her to dredge up the past and think about the pain in her life? What would her soul sound like if she was in so much pain that she went insane? Most importantly, though… How much would he enjoy hearing her soul screech and wail in agony?

The only way to find out would be to do it. Sadly, that was just a little counterproductive to his goals with Lucy. If he actively sought to hurt her like that, the blonde wouldn't exactly be jumping at the prospect of stripping down and getting fucked. *Oh well... I can just imagine her soul crying instead... Mm, that's nice...'*

Cobra stopped dead in his tracks and pulled Natsu to a halt, his eye narrowing in suspicion. He couldn't hear the rest of the team anymore. Their souls had vanished, most likely because they'd just gotten to the section where he and Natsu hadn't been able to hear any animals. "We need to regroup."

"What?" Natsu frowned and turned back toward where they'd come. "What's wrong."

"I can't hear them anymore," Cobra spat, turning on his heel.

"They probably just-
"I know that, but if I can't hear their souls, then there's something fucking wrong."

Natsu blinked in surprise and gazed down the trail, watching for a moment as Cobra stalked toward where Erza and the rest of the team was at. "Damnit," he muttered, taking off at a run to catch up.

Makarov looked up from the files at his desk when there was a sharp knock on the door that opened a moment later. A gentle smile lifted his lips while closing the folders and watching as Cobra walked in and closed the door behind him. Once the Poison Slayer stood before him, he asked, "Cobra, how was your last mission?"

"No one died."

Makarov chuckled quietly at the growled words. "And that's a good thing, isn't it?"

"That's debatable," Cobra huffed.

"Anything else?"

"The bandits were using some sort of relocation spell that put a section of the forest in a pocket dimension," he shrugged. "Natsu and I scouted ahead and we found it. It sucked out all the sound from around us, but I could still hear the rest of the team's souls, and Natsu could still smell them. Once we were out of it, the sound came back."

"And the rest of the team?"

"When they were in it, I couldn't hear their souls anymore. We turned back and caught up to them
and didn't hear any of the fighting they were doing until we'd passed whatever barrier had been put up. It was done before Salamander could say he was *all fired up*.

"And the forest wasn't destroyed?"

"Miraculously, no. Probably because it was a weird pocket dimension overlaid on the forest. Any of the damage to it didn't transfer to the forest after the fact." He paused, blinking slowly at the patient smile Makarov gave him. "You wanted to see me?"

Makarov nodded and hopped down from his seat. He grabbed one folder from his desk then made his way over to the nearby couch, motioning for Cobra to join him. Once they were both seated, he handed the folder to the Poison Slayer. "As part of your probation, it's my job as your guild master to submit reviews to the Magic Council," he said.

Cobra frowned down at the pages once he opened the folder, then sent a sidelong glance toward the guild master. "And?"

"I wanted you to look over this and make sure nothing's missing," Makarov grinned. "Technically, you're not supposed to know about it, and *technically* I was supposed to submit this last week-"

"They're not gonna try and lock me up because you're an incompetent prick, are they?" Cobra sneered.

"No," Makarov chuckled. "If you're not supposed to know about this review, they can't hold my not sending it to them against you. Besides, I needed to wait until I received the information from your last mission anyway. Regardless, because this does affect you, I want to know... Is there anything I need to know about that might affect what I write in this review?"

"... As in...?"

"Well, have you gone on any killing sprees?"

"No," Cobra deadpanned.

"Has there been any raping, pillaging, plundering of booty, or anything like it?"

"I'm not now, and I never fucking *have been*, a damn rapist," Cobra spat. "I don't pillage, and I'm not a damn pirate so there's no booty to plunder." Well, aside from a certain blonde, but he was sure that wasn't what Makarov was talking about. Then again, the guy was a fucking pervert, so it was entirely possible that was *exactly* what he was talking about.

"Any maniacal cackling?" Makarov asked. "That's usually a bad sign."

Monty slithered out of the lapel of Cobra's jacket and turned toward Makarov, his tongue flicking out to test the air. "*What's cackling?*"

Without thinking, Cobra pulled the snake from his jacket and let him coil around his hands, then said, "Cackling is a certain type of laugh that's really loud. Kind of like birds."

"What?"

Cobra blinked and slid his gaze over to Makarov. "Monty asked what cackling was."

"You can speak to him?"

He nodded, looking back down at the snake. With a soft sigh, noticing Monty's attention was on the
old man, Cobra held his hand out toward Makarov. "Monty, this is Master Makarov. He's a fucking pervert."

Monty hissed and flicked his tongue out again.

"Ah, I'm more than just a pervert," Makarov chuckled. "But hello, Monty. It's nice to meet you."

When the python's tongue flickered out once more, he carefully lifted his hand and placed his knuckles before Monty's snout. "Cobra, all I need is for you to look over those papers and let me know if there's anything that needs fixing. You seem to be doing well here, and I don't have a problem with making sure you stay out of prison as long as you're still deserving of this probation."

"Shouldn't you be asking Lucy to look over this instead?" Cobra asked. Still he looked down at the pages in the folder and started reading. "She's my 'probation officer' so…"

"Not really," Makarov chuckled. "Whether you stay out of prison really isn't Lucy's concern. This is just something I have to do as your guild master. Like I said, technically, you're not supposed to know about it."

Cobra nodded, then rolled his eye when he realized that the text was too small for him to read comfortably. Luckily, he knew that Makarov really wasn't all that much of a gossip, so it was a little less embarrassing for him to reach into his jacket and pull out the little piece of glass and put it to his eye.

"I was unaware Dragon Slayers would need glasses," Makarov said, frowning slightly.

"The others might not, but I do," Cobra said. "Just for reading. And especially when someone writes so goddamn small."

The older man chuckled. It was definitely an odd sight before him, seeing Cobra wearing a monocle while holding a pure white snake and reading forms. All he needed was a smoking jacket and a pair of slippers, and he would look like quite the dapper young gentleman. "I see."

"Good for you," Cobra muttered. After several minutes, he put the monocle back in his pocket and turned toward Makarov. "Everything looks good, I guess. I'm adjusting fine to being a civilian. No complaints from my neighbors; although, just an fyi… The landlord might not like the fact that I smoke inside, if he ever finds out."

Makarov shrugged. "Not my problem. It only becomes my problem if you kill him. Or try to kill him."

"I won't."

"Then that's all finished." Makarov took the folder from Cobra and set it on an end table, then turned back, ready to call out to the Poison Slayer before he could leave. Luckily for him, he supposed, Cobra was still sitting in the same place, seemingly waiting for something while Monty slithered over his arms and around his hands.

"You look like there's something else," Cobra said.

"There is." Cobra stayed silent, and Makarov was suddenly struck by just how different he was from the others in his guild. While everyone was seemingly ready to get on with whatever they had planned for the day, Cobra simply waited. He was patient - though Makarov knew that some, like Freed and Laki, were similar in that respect. Although Laxus and Gajeel were the more mature Dragon Slayers he'd encountered, Cobra looked as though he wasn't forcing himself to do what needed to be done; namely, just sitting there instead of trying to run out of the room. "Two things,
actually."

"Alright."

"The first is that our S Class trials are coming up," Makarov said, watching and trying to gauge Cobra's reaction. The maroon-haired mage simply blinked. "I'm assuming you know what S Class is."

"I do."

"And while there have been times where S Class mages from other guilds transfer to a new guild and keep their status, that's not something we've really had to do here." Cobra blinked again, his face completely blank. "For example, Gajeel could have probably kept his rank as an S Class mage, because he was one in Phantom Lord, but because of the circumstances of his joining Fairy Tail-"

"You made him work his way up," Cobra nodded. "Same with Juvia. I know."

"Technically, you were an S Class mage while with the Oracion Seis," Makarov said carefully. "Considering apprehending you was an S Class mission in and of itself, I can only assume as much."

Cobra shrugged. "We didn't really bother with shit like that, but sure." When Makarov sighed heavily, he finally took pity on the older man and smirked. "You're trying to tell me that I can't become S Class right now, even though people are being put up for promotion. I get it."

"Also because of your background," Makarov said. "It's not something I wish to keep holding over your head, child, but while going through your paperwork, I realized that I can't even try to promote you until your probation is up."

"So, I have to wait five years to be considered for a promotion," Cobra said, watching as Makarov nodded. "Sure."

"... What?"

"You're doing what you have to do," Cobra said. "If you can't promote me to S Class until my probation's done, then fine. Not really a whole lot anyone can do about it. And besides, that fucking monster on my team is S Class already, and I know she's taken the team on those missions with her in the past. So, technically, I don't need to worry about being promoted, because I'm on a team that already takes those missions as it is. And I already know that I won't be kicked off of that team, because there really isn't anyone else here that you trust to try and take me out if I go to the dark side or some other bullshit."

A wry smile pulled at Makarov's wrinkled lips. "Pretty much. However, I will say that I trust Laxus and his team to be able to subdue you, should they be needed."

"Wonderful," Cobra deadpanned. "There was something else?"

"Yes." Makarov looked down at the white snake that had slithered down from Cobra's hands and onto the couch. "I would like to offer you a place in my guild, child."

"I'm already part of-"

"Not you," Makarov laughed, glancing up at the confused Slayer. "Monty."

"You... what?"
"I can see that this snake is more than just a pet to you, Cobra," he said, reaching a hand out and waiting for Monty to grant him permission to pet him. Of course, the snake surprised him by slowly slithering up his arm and winding around it, then gently squeezing. "If he was only a pet, you wouldn't take him with you everywhere."

"I left him at home on that last mission."

"And why did you do that?"

"Because it's cold as fuck and he's just a baby," Cobra frowned.

"Precisely. I can only assume you would have taken Monty along, had he been older and more used to the weather patterns?"

"... Yeah?"

"Well, in case you haven't noticed, anyone in this guild who contributes in some way, is welcome to be a member, and to bear a guild mark. Happy, Pantherlily, and Carla all have guild marks. They aren't pets, but companions. Partners."

"Monty's not a damn exceed though."

"No, but I highly doubt you will be like the other Dragon Slayers and go find an Exceed to take in," Makarov grinned. "Especially when you very clearly have an affinity for reptiles."

Cobra's eye narrowed slightly as he said, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, child," Makarov said, his grin widening, "Kinana told me about it already. After you joined the guild, she came to my office and told me the truth."

"About what?"

"About how the two of you met. Sort of. Mostly just that she's known you since you were a child, and she wanted to vouch for you." After a moment, he added, "Oh, and that she was cursed to be a snake. I had my suspicions, but she simply confirmed them for me, officially, and told me that she used to be not just a snake, but Cubellios. Your snake."

Cobra's glare was heavy, domineering, and for a moment, Makarov wondered if he'd stepped over some line in the Poison Slayer's eyes. Still, that wasn't going to stop him from being honest.

"I don't hold her past against her," Makarov said, watching the tension in Cobra's shoulders melt away. "Just as I would like to not hold your past against you. Kinana's proven herself to be an ally to our guild, and she's nakama. You're well on your way to doing the same."

"And Monty?" Cobra whispered. "Why are you offering to give him a guild mark?"

"Because he's just as much a part of this guild as you are," Makarov said, smiling gently down at the serpent who was still tightening around his arm.

"Monty, relax," Cobra said. "It's okay. He doesn't want to hurt you."

Makarov frowned slightly when the pressure on his arm lessened. "So, should I ask you or Monty about this mark?"

"I don't care if he has one," Cobra said slowly. "Monty?"
Monty slowly turned toward Cobra. *What's a guild mark?*

"That weird purple mark on my hip," Cobra said.

*Mommy's hand!*

Cobra sighed and closed his eye for a moment. "Yeah," he said. "Lucy has a pink one on her hand."

*I want! You and Mommy! I want, too…"

If it wasn't so fucking precious, Cobra would slam his own goddamn head into a wall over Monty's insistence on calling Lucy his fucking Mommy. Still, there was no way he was going to correct the snake on it. It wasn't like anyone else would hear what Monty was thinking about in the first place.

"Where do you want it, Monty?" Cobra whispered. Completely forgetting that Makarov was there, Cobra let out a small smile when Monty slithered back over to him and rippled with confusion. "You can get it anywhere you want. On your head, your belly, your back, your tail…"

*Under mouth?*

Cobra's finger brushed along the underside of Monty's jaw. *Here?*

Makarov was definitely surprised to see the snake nod. He hadn't been aware snakes could do that, but it definitely proved that Cobra could actually communicate with Monty. *And what color would you like, Monty?*

*... um…*

"You can pick any color," Cobra said softly.

*I don't know..."

"Well," Cobra whispered, lifting the python to look him in the eye, "There's purple."

*Like your eye."

"Yeah," Cobra chuckled, *Like my eye. And pink."

*Like Mommy."

"Like Lucy's, yeah. And red."

*Like… what?"

"Like my hair," Cobra said, *Or like Salamander's guild mark. And blue, like the sky or dark blue like deep water."

*And green… like grass?"

"Yep," Cobra smirked. *There's green like grass."

*You pick?"

"Okay, Monty," Cobra chuckled. *How about… fuschia?"

*What's fuschia?"*
"Pink and purple together."

"Yes!"

Makarov bit his lips while hopping down from the couch and going back to his desk to retrieve the guild stamp and set down the folder with Cobra's review in it. Once he was back at the couch, he'd managed to school his expression once more - because he just knew that it wouldn't go over very well if Cobra saw him getting all teary-eyed over the bonding he'd witnessed - and held up the stamp. "Monty, this-

"It won't hurt," Cobra whispered. His finger trailed over the top of Monty's head, and he watched as it lifted so Makarov could see beneath it. "Don't be scared."

"Won't hurt?"

"It won't hurt," Cobra said again. He watched and waited as Makarov brought the stamp to the underside of Monty's jaw, smiling when his long body tightened around his arm with anticipation. Once it was done, he shifted and gazed at the pinkish-purple Fairy Tail mark. "Looks good, Monty," he whispered. "You're a Fairy now."

"Welcome to Fairy Tail, child," Makarov smiled.

"Special now?"

"Yeah," Cobra chuckled. "You're special now."

"You're the first snake to ever get a guild mark," Makarov added. "Extremely special, I'd say." He turned his attention to Cobra then. "That's all for now, child. I'll call you up here in a few months for the next review. They'll want something more detailed about the missions you're taking and how they turn out, so we'll need to keep track of those, alright?"

"Sure." Cobra stood and made his way to the door. As soon as it was open, he froze when Monty quite literally vaulted off of his arm and slithered as quickly as possible down the hall. "What the fuck?"

"Show Mommy!"

"That fucking asshole," Cobra groaned.

"... What just happened?"

Without thinking, Cobra said, "Monty says he wants to show Mommy…"

"Mommy?"

His eye closed and he shook his head, rubbing a hand down his face. "He's a baby," he said. "Lucy was there when I took him in, and he's… attached… to her."

"Monty sees Lucy as his mother," Makarov chuckled.

"Fuck off."

"Ah-ah-ah… Is that any way to talk to your guild master?"

Cobra rolled his eye and walked out of the office, smirking as he said, "Fuck off, Master."
"Much better!" Makarov called out, shutting the office door behind him.

The Poison Slayer made his way down the hall and back to the bar. While he really should have expected it, he found himself surprised by the sight of people jumping one way and another on a direct path to Lucy where she sat at the bar, talking to Mira. The blonde was unaware of what was going on, but Cobra simply stood back and watched her smile falter and fade entirely once Monty coiled around her leg and slithered up to the bar.

The fact that she didn't scream was actually more than surprising. She'd been ready to do just that until she saw the little white snake.

"Monty?" Lucy frowned in confusion as she looked into its little red eyes. "What are you doing out here?"

"Mommy see! Mommy see!"

Cobra let out a quiet sigh and made his way over to the bar, taking a seat beside the blonde. He didn't say anything as Monty's head lifted in that familiar periscoping position, even though Lucy tensed and started wondering what was going on.

"Cobra," Mira said softly. "What's he doing?"

"Showing Lucy something," he shrugged. "Can I get a glass of orange juice?"

Mira nodded but didn't move from her spot, keeping her attention on Monty just as intently as Lucy. Monty's head tipped back and Cobra heard his little soul trill happily when Lucy giggled and touched his new guild mark.

"Aw, Monty!" Lucy crooned. "You're part of the guild now!"

"What?" Mira asked.

"Monty has a cute little guild mark!" Lucy said. It took much less effort than ever before for her to reach out and gently stroke the fuschia scales on the underside of Monty's jaw. "Oh, it's so precious!"

"Never would have thought I'd think something about a damn snake is precious... Oh, but he's just so cute! Is that why he came over here? Did Cobra send him?"

"I'll have you know," Cobra muttered while Mira walked off and got his drink, "That little shit jumped clean off of me to get down here and show you. It's all him."

"You really do like me, huh?" Lucy giggled.

"Like like!"

"He says yes."

Lucy smiled softly, then caught a flash of purple hair and waved Kinana down. "Kinana," she called, "You have to come see this! Monty has a guild mark!"

"He does?" Kinana laughed good-naturedly while she set plates down on the table for Elfman and Lisanna. "That's so cute."

"Wait until you see it!" Lucy called back. She turned back to Monty, then bit her lip and glanced at Cobra. "Can-"
"Go ahead," he groaned. "I'll never hear the end of it from him, but sure. Why fucking not…"

Her lips pursed for a moment, unsure of what Cobra meant, then she looked down at Monty again.
"Monty, can I take you over to Kinana?"

"Mommy pick me up? Yay!"

It was almost physically painful for Cobra to stop himself from smiling at the sheer excitement in the serpent's little soul. And while a part of him wanted to cunt-punt Lucy for making his little friend so damn happy just by offering to carry him somewhere - because he never acted like that over Cobra wanting to carry him - he knew it was ridiculous. Sure, Monty liked Lucy, but he more than trusted Cobra.

Hell, the little guy had figured out what love was just the night before while they were in the shower and told Cobra that he loved him while coiling around the baskets that were suction-cupped in the corner - his own little jungle gym to play on while Cobra got a nice hot shower.

"Mommy loves me! Mommy pick me up! Yay!"

Cobra rolled his eye as Lucy walked off with Monty wrapped around her arm and slithering up to her shoulder. She was still kind of weirded out by his scales, but she was getting used to it. That was a plus.

"Oh my god, look at that cute little guild mark!" Lisanna cooed.

"That's a manly guild mark for a snake!"

"Aww, Monty, that's the perfect color for you," Kinana giggled. "I love it."

"What's this? Monty has a guild mark?" Erza asked, pausing in eating her cake. Cobra glanced back to watch her eyes soften. "Welcome to Fairy Tail, then, Monty."

"Luce, are you carrying Monty?" Natsu laughed. "I thought you hated snakes!"

"I do," Lucy frowned, bringing her free hand up to brush over Monty's head. "But Monty's different."

"Different how?" Happy asked.

"He's officially a guild mate!" Lucy grinned, pointing to the fuschia mark under his chin.

"Oh, that's so cool!" Natsu bellowed. "Cobra, now Monty and Happy can fight!"

"What?!" Happy screeched. "I'm not fighting a snake!"

"Fuck off, Salamander," Cobra said, shaking his head. "Monty's not fighting anyone."

"Aw, how come?"

"He's just a baby, Natsu," Lucy laughed. She shook her head and took Monty through the guild, showing his new guild mark to everyone present. Levy shied away from him slightly, but still smiled. Gajeel grinned and threw several nails into his mouth, nodding his acknowledgement. The Raijinshuu gave Lucy patient smiles, with the exception of Bickslow who cackled like a fucking lunatic and gave Monty a thumbs up.

By the time Monty and Lucy were back at the bar, Cobra had finished his drink and easily pulled the
little python from Lucy to tuck him back into his jacket. "Getting cold?" he whispered. Monty's soul trilled quietly, content and happy.

"Thanks for that," Cobra said, looking at the blonde.

"For what?" she asked.

"For taking him around like that. Getting people used to him."

"Oh, it's no trouble," she said. "If I'd known he was cold, I would've-"

"I know."

"Why did you get him a guild mark?" she asked.

"I didn't. Makarov offered it to him, and Monty accepted."

She smiled and shook her head, and Cobra had to force himself not to watch her while she went back to what she'd been doing before. He ignored her soul and fought to ignore the swelling souls around him. Natsu was a moron, he decided. Lucy wasn't getting attached to him, and she wasn't ignoring everyone else in favor of spending time with him. The fact that they'd kissed really didn't mean a whole lot to the blonde. She wasn't obsessing over it, or anything else he'd done to show her that he was interested.

All that worrying bullshit had been for nothing, he figured. And thank fucking god for that.
Cobra squeezed through the crowded guild hall with a scowl, making his way over to where Lucy and the rest of the team was sitting. He really didn't make a habit out of sitting with them, or with anyone if he could help it, but it seemed every member of Fairy Tail had decided to be there at the same time. He'd never seen the place so fucking packed before. He hadn't realized the guild had over two hundred members until that day, but it meant that there really wasn't anywhere to sit. And if he had to stand while being at the guild, he was going to kill something.

He let out a heavy sigh while straddling the bench and taking a seat beside Gray. Monty wriggled in the inner pocket of his jacket, and he reached inside to pull the little white snake out.

"I didn't expect to see you here," Gray said. He smirked at the single-eyed glare sent his way. "I'm not complaining though. You took the spot that Juvia was going to slip into."

Cobra couldn't help but chuckle at that. It hadn't been a conscious decision to take her creeper seat, but he could hear her quietly steaming just on the other side of a pillar less than five feet away. Still, Cobra had just wanted to sit down somewhere. "Well, I would say you're welcome but… Nope, nevermind, you're welcome."

"Dick," Gray snorted.

"Yours is out, yes," he said. While Gray yelped and tried to find his pants that were currently in Juvia's clutches - not even his Soul Listening magic could determine how she got them so quickly when Gray had only just removed them a few seconds prior, and had tossed them in the opposite direction - Cobra looked across the guild again. Lucy and Lisanna were having a conversation about something he couldn't care less about on the other side of the table. Natsu was yelling about Makarov taking too long from Lucy's other side. All Cobra wanted was for someone to calm the fuck down long enough for him to pick out the reason for all this excitement.

"I was the same way last time we did this," Lucy shouted across the table. He turned toward her and Monty slithered off of his hand, across the table, and onto Lucy's outstretched fingers.

"And what would this be, exactly?" he asked.

"Alright, brats!" Makarov bellowed. Everyone's gazes lifted to the second floor to see him standing on the banister with Mira, Erza, Laxus, and Gildarts lined up behind him. "It's time to announce the competitors for the S Class trials!"

Cobra rolled his eye when the building shook from everyone's cheering. "Pss-pssp, Monty," he hissed. "Come on back before they get too crazy."

Thankfully, Monty got the picture when Lucy whooped from where she'd been pulled into a tight hug by Lisanna. He left her arm and made his way back into the safety of Cobra's jacket, then popped his snout out to test the palpable excitement in the air.

"Alright, that's enough!" Makarov shouted. The guild didn't go silent, but they did at least quiet down a bit. "Now, since things were a little on the hectic side last time."

"Hectic?!" Gajeel roared. "We almost got eaten by a fuckin' dragon!"

"And Grimoire Heart tried to murder us!" Bickslow cackled with his arm wrapped around Freed's neck in a half-chokehold. The Rune mage really didn't look pleased by either the contact or
Bickslow's levity over their near-deaths.

"Plus the whole losing seven years in First's time bubble thing," Lucy added.

"Very unmanly!" Elfman shouted.

"Anyway!" Makarov rolled his eyes at the guild's continued murmurs. "We won't be taking the trials to Tenrou this year, just-"

"Just in case karma wants to shit on us again?" Laxus chuckled. There was a round of approving nods at his statement.

"So," Makarov said while pinching his brow, "I've contacted the Magic Council, and-" The entirety of the guild groaned in unison. "And they've agreed to cordon off a section of the mountain range near Crocus for us to hold our exam."

"How are they going to do it?" Levy asked. "To be able to keep everyone's magic in, and not damage everything…"

"Captain Lahar has agreed to use his Jutsu Shiki, and will be coordinating with Freed over the next few days to make this a possibility."

"Why doesn't Freed just do it himself?" Evergreen asked, turning to the Rune mage next to her. She smacked Bickslow with her fan to get him to let Freed go. "Freed, you're strong enough to do it, and it would mean that Lahar isn't trapping the S Class candidates anywhere."

"While I appreciate your faith in my abilities," he replied, "The area we'll need to use must be coordinated with what the Council has agreed to. It will be too vast for me to accomplish with the complex runes that will be required in such a short amount of time, so Captain Lahar and I will work together to complete it. I am already planning on double-checking the rules that are set in place before the trials begin."

"Why is it that I always forget Lahar can do that?" Gray muttered. One would think their team's track record with Lahar would make it so they didn't forget that he could use runes to rival Freed's, but when he looked at Lisanna and Lucy, he realized they were both thinking the same thing as him.

"He can do more than that," Cobra said. Gray's attention snapped over to him, and he smirked. "He's actually a pretty strong mage. He just never has use for most of the shit he can do."

"How do you know that?" Lisanna asked, and Cobra's gaze slid over to her.

"You have no idea how much a person's soul gives away," he chuckled.

'It will be most beneficial to work with Lahar on this. If anything, I can learn what he knows and find ways to counteract it, just in case. And I may be able to learn how he's made it so his Jutsu Shiki can't be rewritten, like mine still can be. That is definitely an irksome quality…'

Cobra sighed at the rambling thoughts coming from Freed. Sometimes he really hated his magic. Even if it was beneficial to hear what someone was thinking in a high-pressure situation, shit like this was just pointless.

Makarov quieted everyone down, then turned to the side and beckoned Mavis forward. That had Cobra's attention real fucking quick. Because the little girl with long pale blonde hair was a blank canvas in a way that Makarov wasn't. He couldn't hear the guy's soul, but he could tell that it was there. Her, on the other hand… It was empty, like she was a doll. Or some wisp of an image. She
had no fucking soul.

"Our first Master, Mavis, will give you the details," Makarov said.

Lucy let out a quiet laugh at the intense, wide-eyed stare Cobra was giving Mavis. "You hadn't seen her before now, had you?" she asked. He shook his head, never looking away from Mavis and her pale bare feet standing on the banister of the second story. "She's the reason we survived Acnologia."

"What is she?"

"I think she's a ghost," Gray said. "Only members of Fairy Tail can see her."

That... explained nothing. Cobra had heard ghosts before. They were all soul with no corporeal form. And they were creepy as hell when they made the hair on the back of his neck stand up from the chill in the air. Mavis wasn't a fucking ghost.

"Sixth and I have decided to keep the same candidates from the last trials," Mavis said, smiling at Makarov. "Natsu Dragneel, Gray Fullbuster, Cana Alberona, Levy McGarden, Elfman Strauss, Juvia Lockser, and Freed Justine."

Cobra really didn't want to hear the way Wendy's soul trembled with sadness over her her former partner having been outed as not being a member of Fairy Tail. Mest Gryder. He also wasn't going to bring up the fact that he knew just where this Mest person was, and who he worked with. Or that he knew the guy's true allegiance. No, Doranbolt was one fucked up mess he wanted nothing to do with if he could help it. Even if he was also the reason that Cobra had gotten his parole in the first place.

"There will be no partners this time around," Mavis continued.

"Well that's some bullshit," Gajeel grumbled.

She sent the ornery Slayer a gentle smile. "But it makes the most sense, all things considered. The last time this happened, our S Class candidates paired with equally strong mages, and everyone was trapped on Tenrou Island. This way, our S Class mages and the candidates will be separated from the guild, but there will still be strong mages here in case something happens."

That actually did make a lot of sense, Cobra realized. With Dragon Slayers like himself and Gajeel still at the guild, plus half of the Raijinshuu, and a few others still around, if some crazy bullshit happened, the guild wouldn't be as devastated by the loss.

"Macao will be the interim guild master," Makarov said. "We shouldn't be gone longer than a week."

"That's what you say," Macao muttered. Then he smiled. "I'd be honored to hold your place for you, Master."

"Fourth Master is coming back!" Wakaba shouted, slapping his friend on the back.

"Just for a week!"

"All the S Class candidates, come up to my office," Laxus said. "I'll be giving you the rules for the first round."

"Good luck to everyone," Makarov yelled. "And let's not rearrange the landscape!"

The guild cheered and laughed, and everyone went back to what they'd been doing before. Most of
the members made their way to the mission board and signed themselves out at the bar with Kinana. Happy flew over everyone's heads, on a direct path to Lucy and away from Natsu, who was on his way up the stairs to Laxus' office.

Gray stood and left the table just as Happy arrived. His little blue ears fell flat against his head while he sat down in front of Lucy's drink. "Lushy," he muttered, "Natsu said I can't go with him."

"Aw, it's alright, Happy," she said gently.

"But I'm his partner," he said. "He needs me."

"Well that's just not allowed this time around," she said. Lucy really didn't know what else to tell him though. That was just how it worked out, she supposed. Sure, she would have loved being Cana's partner again that year. They'd been so close to succeeding the last time. But if they'd changed the rules and decided that having the S Class candidates paired up with someone took too many people away from the guild, then there was no fighting it.

"What am I gonna do while he's gone though?" he whimpered. "I'm never away from Natsu that long."

"Well, you could, uh…" Lucy frowned in thought for only a moment. "Would you want to stay with me?"

His wide eyes filled with tears while he looked up at her. "You'd let me?"

Lucy rolled her eyes and laughed while pulling him to her chest. "Of course, Happy. I know you and Natsu are close, and you're probably gonna miss him while he's off becoming Mr. Super S Class."

"Yeah, I will."

"So come home with me, and I'll keep you company until he comes back."

Monty's head turned toward Lucy, and Cobra's brow lifted when he heard the agitated hiss in his little soul. That wasn't good. It was even worse when Monty slithered down Cobra's arm, through the sleeve of his jacket, and across the table just to wind himself around her wrist.

Happy froze when his eyes opened and Monty was right there in front of his face. Staring at him with those little blood red eyes, with his tongue flicking out here and there. Again and again.

"Mommy's choosing the cat…"

Cobra slowly turned to sit properly on the bench and propped his chin on one hand. "Monty, no," he sighed.

"Can I eat him?"

"No, you can't," Cobra said.

"Wanna eat him. Mommy won't choose him if he's dead."

"You can't eat Happy."

"E-Eat me?" Happy whimpered, pulling back just a bit from where Monty had inched closer.

"He's not too big for me to eat, right?"
"Well," Cobra said, "He actually is too big for you to eat. Don't try to eat him. It'll make you sick."

"Cobra, what the hell is even happening right now?" Lucy asked as she stared down at the two animals in her arms. Monty's head lifted and drew closer to Happy, his tongue flicking out faster than before. In the week or so since Monty had gotten his guild mark, she'd gotten a little more used to him. Like how his favorite place to curl up was around her wrist, almost like her very own snake bracelet; only Cobra was aware of the fact that she silently laughed over her dubbing Monty a *snakelet*. But he'd never done this before. She could feel his body tightening around her arm, and with what Cobra had been saying, Lucy just hadn't a clue what to do.

Monty struck out at Happy with his mouth wide open and an angry hiss spilling from him. Happy narrowly missed being bitten, jumping from Lucy's hold and scratching her neck in the process of flying out of reach. Instead of trying to chase after Happy, Monty stopped and turned when he heard her let out a quiet whimper, and his gaze honed in on the three angry, bleeding scratches just above her collarbone.

Cobra rolled his eye and turned to see Lisanna still sitting there with her jaw slack.

"He hurt Mommy! Stupid cat hurt Mommy! She's bleeding. Is she dying? Mommy, don't die!"

"Monty, she's-" Cobra's jaw snapped shut when he saw Monty untangle himself from Lucy's arm and slither off the table, then across the guild and over to where Kinana was wiping down the bar with a cloth.

"Monty?" Kinana gasped as he coiled around her ankle and quickly moved up her leg, then onto the bar. He snatched the cloth from her hand and practically jumped off the bar, disappearing back into the crowd of mages. "What in the world?"

"Oh, Lucy, are you alright?" Lisanna asked. She pushed Lucy's shoulders to turn her and winced when she saw the scratches on her neck. "Oh, that looks bad…"

"I'll be fine," Lucy sighed. She jumped when she felt cool scales on her leg, slithering higher, winding around and around as Monty moved up into her lap. She picked him up and gasped in surprise when his little snout lunged for her throat. Before she could even react - or even consider that he may have lost his little mind - she felt the cloth he pressed against the scratches Happy had left on her.

"That snake is crazy!" Happy shouted from several feet above them. "Cobra, make him stop!"

Cobra just rolled his eye and kept his reaction to what his little snake buddy was doing for Lucy to himself. "He's fine," he said to the blue Exceed.

"He tried to eat me!"

"Happy, come here," Lisanna said, smiling up at him and opening her arms for him to fly into them. She scooted away from Lucy just a little once Happy was settled, keeping her eyes on Monty. Except the little snake wasn't moving away from Lucy's neck. "Is he…"

"He's trying to stop her from dying," Cobra muttered.

"I'm not dying," Lucy laughed.

"Mommy's not dying?"

"No," Cobra said, "She's not dying, Monty. It's just a little scratch."
"She's bleeding. That cat made her hurt!"

"Yeah, Happy scratched her," Cobra said. "But I'm sure it was an accident."

Happy frowned over at Lucy when Monty finally pulled the cloth away, and then he saw what they were talking about. "Oh, Lushy! I'm sorry!"

"It's alright, Happy," she said with a gentle smile toward him. "I know you didn't mean to."

"I just don't understand why Monty would do that," Lisanna said. She looked to Cobra then, hoping that he would be willing to explain it. Considering she'd just seen him talking to Monty as though they understood one another, Lisanna definitely hoped that was the case.

"I'd like to know what happened just now, too," Lucy said. She lifted Monty higher to look into his eyes, and smiled when she saw how his jaw was still locked around the cloth he'd been holding to her neck. "Thank you for helping me, Monty."

"Mommy isn't choosing the stupid cat?" Monty asked Cobra.

"No, she's not choosing Happy over you," he groaned, dropping his head to the table. It was even worse when Lisanna giggled at his reaction.

"Why would he think that?" Lucy asked.

"Because you offered to let Happy stay with you," he mumbled against the table.

"I want to stay with Mommy."

"Monty, come on, man…"

"I love you too! I just love Mommy too. I want you and Mommy. Like before."

Cobra lifted his head and glared at Lucy. "I blame you for this."

"For what?" she asked. "What did I do?"

Monty curled closer to her chest without Lucy being any the wiser, his scales rubbing against her well-moisturized hands. "Mommy's so soft…"

"Your hands are so soft," he said with a sneer, mimicking the way Monty had spoken about her before.

"Oh my god, is he pouting?" Happy snickered.

Cobra's glare intensified. "Monty might not be able to eat you, but I sure fucking can," he growled before looking at Lucy again. "And you… You. Suck."

"Well, Happy you could always stay with me instead," Lisanna suggested, looking down at the Exceed in her arms. "It could be like old times, remember?"

Happy suddenly grinned up at her and gave an enthusiastic nod. "Okay! I like your house better than her apartment anyway!" He paused a moment later to look at Lucy. "Sorry, Lushy."

The Celestial mage simply shrugged. "No skin off my back," she said. "You can stay wherever you want, Happy. Just know that I don't have an issue with it if you want to come stay with me."
Honestly, Lucy didn't mind either way where Happy stayed, as long as he was being taken care of. She knew that he'd been with Natsu every single day of his life, and that the two had never really been separated like this before, but when she thought about it, it did make sense for him to go home with Lisanna. She'd been there when he was born, after all, so she was kind of like Happy's mother. Lucy was just Natsu's official partner. It would probably be for the best for Happy to go with Lisanna, since they could spend that time catching up more than they had since her return from Edolas.

Lucy grinned down at Monty and whispered in a teasing voice. "You can too. If you ever get tired of dealing with Cobra's grouchy ass, you come on over. I'll take care of you, Monty."

"Oh, fuck you," Cobra snarled. "Monty's-"

"I wanna stay with Mommy!" Monty cheered.

Cobra froze, the muscles in his back tightened between his shoulder blades. The fact that she simply gave him a cocky, triumphant grin only made him angrier. It was one thing for her to joke about it - even though he really didn't appreciate it in the slightest - but it was something else entirely for his little friend to stab him in the fucking back like this. Monty was supposed to be his snake. He was supposed to depend on Cobra, not Lucy. He was supposed to love Cobra, trust Cobra. And here she was, pulling him away with no effort whatsoever. Did they both forget that Monty would have bitten the hell out of her when they'd first met if it hadn't been for Cobra stopping him?

Clearly, they didn't care that Cobra was the one who had acclimated Monty to human contact.

"What's he saying, Cobra?" Lucy crooned.

"Mommy loves me!" Monty cheered. "I get to stay with Mommy!"

Cobra growled and stood from his seat, his hands clenching into fists at his sides. "He wants to stay with you," he hissed.

"Because I rock," Lucy laughed. She looked down at the albino snake snuggled against her breasts. "Isn't that right, Monty?"

"I love you, Mommy!"

"Fuck you, you stupid cunt," Cobra snarled. If they wanted to be with each other, then fine. Lucy could take care of Monty from that point on. He didn't care that her smile fell when he spun on his heel and started walking away. Just like he didn't care that her soul was calling out to him. Or that Monty was suddenly confused about why he was walking away. Because Cobra never left Monty anywhere that wasn't home.

He shouldered past several guild members who got in his way, then decided that everyone could go and fuck themselves. With a single burst of his Sound magic, Cobra sent everyone standing between him and the doors flying every which way. Anyone that was still in his path, most of whom were lying haphazardly on the ground and silently cursing at him, he simply stepped over.

Lucy could go fuck herself. He just didn't care anymore.

He hated that he was worried more about Monty staying warm when he felt the flurries flying down into his hair once he was outside.

"Doranbolt, I need you to come with me."
Doranbolt looked up from the pile of paperwork he'd been reading through to find Lahar standing near the door of their shared office, adjusting his sleeves and pulling imaginary lint from his white gloves. "What for?"

"I'd like to start conducting random inspections in the cells," Lahar replied, pushing his glasses back up the bridge of his nose.

"Any particular reason?" Doranbolt set down his pen and stood from his seat. While he had questions about what Lahar was asking of him, he also knew his partner. And he knew that Lahar really didn't like to be kept waiting. He stretched and groaned in contentment as he realigned his poor spine. "Have we been getting complaints from the guards or something?"

"Not exactly."

Doranbolt frowned as they started walking down the corridors toward the prison beneath the Council. "Do you want to enlighten me, then?"

"I have reason to believe the guards have become more slack in their responsibilities."

"And where does that reason come from?"

"A formal complaint from a nurse." Lahar pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket, one that he'd made a copy of so that the original would remain in the appropriate file. On Gran Doma's desk. Considering what he'd witnessed when Cobra had been released nearly two months prior, Lahar knew that the nurse who'd filed the complaint was telling the truth. She had to be.

Doranbolt's brows drew together as he looked at the page, and his gut twisted while he kept reading. Mentions of Angel being forced to tear her own clothing up just to use it for her period, made him want to vomit. The description of the moldy bread and hard meat that had been left out of her reach for an entire week, had his blood boiling. And as the list kept going, Doranbolt found himself really wishing they were already downstairs to make sure she was alright. Cobra hadn't looked too bad when Doranbolt had last seen him, but maybe that had been a fluke. Maybe it wasn't until after that day that the guards had started abusing the prisoners. Or maybe they hadn't had the opportunity to do it with Cobra in the first place until he'd been taken out of his cell.

Because Lahar had told him just what those guards had done, electrocuting Cobra right in front of him. Doranbolt hadn't considered the very real possibility that things were just as vile for any of the other former Oracion Seis members. Maybe even for any of the prisoners in general.

"Lahar, we should have handled this sooner," he finally said, handing his partner the paper.

"Yes, well, I had to make sure we were cleared to do it first."

"You're too by-the-book sometimes."

"And you're too impulsive, Doranbolt." Lahar didn't smile the way Doranbolt did at the snide comment. Not when they were finally arriving at the entrance to the prison. Angel was kept on a different level than Cobra had been, much closer to other prisoners, so there was no reason for her to be neglected the way that Nurse Karina had reported.

They were silent for the rest of the walk to Angel's cell. There wasn't much that could be said, and it was a sobering thought when Doranbolt considered just how much she may have been tormented in the months since she and the others had been arrested.

When they rounded the corner, Doranbolt and Lahar knew what to expect, in a sense. They'd heard
two men laughing, and that had been enough of a clue about just what they would be walking up on. Except they hadn't expected to see Angel's cell door wide open with two guards lounging around outside of it.

Was she kept in a way that would stop her from trying to escape? Had something happened to her, and she couldn't even make the attempt?

They were silent while moving closer. The guards hadn't even noticed Lahar and Doranbolt as one lifted a small clay cup to his lips and drank every drop of the liquid inside it.

"Ugh, that water tastes like shit," he said.

"Why'd you drink it then?" the other laughed.

"Well, it'd be a waste to give it to her."

"True. She fucking stinks, man…"

Doranbolt's jaw went slack when he saw the state Angel had been left in. The standard issue prison uniform had been replaced with a rough, canvas dress. She should have been in a pair of pants and a buttoned shirt. Instead, what little she'd had was torn up to her waist, with bits of the cloth lying in bloody piles in a nearby corner of her cell. Her breathing was ragged, shallow. It was so shallow, he had a hard time telling if she was even still alive. But then her fingers twitched and her eyes shifted behind her closed lids, and he knew that she was still kicking, even if only just barely.

Even though she was far skinnier than when she'd been arrested, and her lips were chapped and split, she was still fighting to stay alive.

Her fingers twitched again, and that was when he noticed what she held in her hand as it slid across the ground, closer to her parted lips. Doranbolt pushed past the two guards and darted into the cell, pulling the soft chunk of spoiled, grey meat from her hand and throwing it to the far corner.

"D-Doranbolt!" one guard sputtered.

"Sir, we were just-"

"I would say nothing, if I were you," Lahar said coolly, causing the guards to whirl in place and pale once they saw him.

Doranbolt placed a hand on her flushed cheek, and pulled it back a moment later when he felt her feverish skin. He was doing his level best to ignore the stench in her cell though. Old sweat, blood, and something else. Maybe vomit, maybe it was just that spoiled meat she'd been trying to put in her mouth.

"Angel, can you hear me?" he whispered. Her eyes barely opened to reveal a dull purple gaze that couldn't pinpoint his location. He breathed in to speak again, and nearly gagged from the smell. He didn't even want to know what it was. She definitely reeked, but it couldn't all be coming from her. God, he hoped that wasn't the case.

"- Don't know what you two think you are doing, treating a prisoner like this!"

"But, Captain-"

"No. This is unacceptable, and the two of you will be made an example of just as soon as Gran Doma-"
"Angel, can you hear me?" Doranbolt whispered again. He brushed her oily, grimy hair away from her face. "It's okay now."

"H-Help me," she rasped. "Ple…"

He unclasped his white cloak and draped it over her body, then carefully pulled her into his arms. When he tried to stand, her barely there whimper made him pause just before he felt the small bit of resistance that kept him from moving her too far. His turquoise gaze shot over to the obstruction to find a heavy chain wrapped around her thin, bruised ankle.

"Lahar, get this stupid chain off of her. She needs a doctor."

"Do it," Lahar spat, glaring at one of the guards.

Doranbolt waited while the man rushed into the cell and unlocked the chain. "When was the last time she was allowed to bathe?"

"I-I don't know, sir."

"Th-The cup," Angel whispered. She couldn't find the strength to pull the cloak more tightly over herself, let alone lift her head away from Doranbolt's chest. "It w-was… my bath."

"You're kidding me," Lahar snarled.

"She's lying!" the other guard shouted. "That was for her to drink!"

"And yet I watched you drink it," Lahar spat.

"N-Needed… clean..." she said. "Please… P-Please help…"

Doranbolt drew her closer and carried her from the cell. "Lahar, I'll meet you in the infirmary," he said. "Handle this." He didn't wait for a response, and instead channeled his magic to Direct Line both Angel and himself away from the cellblock. They appeared in the infirmary, right next to a bed that was already occupied with some portly man who was probably complaining of a cold.

Karina walked into the room and dropped the bandages she'd been holding at the sight of Angel's deteriorated state. "Is she-"

"No time," Doranbolt said, taking her to the nearest empty bed. "She needs help… God, and a bath… She had spoiled meat in her hand when I found her, but I don't know if she ate any of it before I got there."

Still, as Karina got to work in calling three other nurses into the room, he found it easy to ignore everything else around him. All he could focus on was Angel as he laid her in an empty bed. He didn't care that his cloak was dirty where it kept her body hidden. Just like he didn't care that her trembling hand grasped his before he could pull away. Instead, Doranbolt held onto it and gave her the best smile he could manage when her eyes opened again.

The dark circles under her eyes hadn't been as apparent when he'd taken her from the cell. He hadn't realized just how much dirt had encrusted itself on her skin and under her nails. She squeezed his hand with hardly any pressure, but it was just enough for him to know what she wanted to tell him. He could see it in her gaze, in how she smiled up at him just enough for her chapped lips to crack and bleed. He could feel the gratitude pouring from her, and while Doranbolt was glad that she could even feel something like that in the first place, it soured in his gut when he considered just why she would look at him like this.
"You'll be alright now," he whispered. Karina and the other nurses didn't ask him to leave, and instead just worked around him. He did make an effort to move toward a corner of the bed so he wasn't in their way, though. Angel just nodded, and refused to let go of his hand.

"Doranbolt," Lahar called from the doorway. He hummed a response, never looking away from Angel, even when her eyes fluttered closed. "Please allow the nurses to do their work."

"I'm not in the way," he said.

"No, but we must report to the chairman," Lahar sighed. He walked forward and pressed a handkerchief to his nose when the foul stench wafting from Angel drifted into his sinuses. "Nurse Karina, I will need you to take pictures for evidence."

"Captain, I don't-"

"It's…" Angel rasped. "E-Evi... is…"

Doranbolt leaned closer when her lips kept moving but no sound reached his ears. "What was that?"

"Evidence is… okay. P-Pictures for… evidence… okay…"

He let out a quiet sigh and stood to his full height. "She gave consent for pictures to be taken," he said before turning to Lahar. "Shouldn't we wait until we have those to show the chairman as well?"

"No," Lahar said, his upper lip twitching into an almost visible sneer. "The guards are being detained as we speak, and Gran Doma will be interviewing them shortly. We have to be there to give an account of what happened."

Karina frowned at the cloth she was using to wipe down Angel's legs when she saw that it had hardly cut through the dried blood on her inner thigh. "It would be better for him to see her in person," she said softly. "Maria, get the camera before we do anymore cleaning. Clarice, get her set up with a saline drip until the head nurse arrives. She's dehydrated."

"I'll suggest he come to see her when she's woken up," Doranbolt said. He bent down to Angel's ear and added, "I'll be back to check on you, Angel."

"You… will?"

He drew back and smiled down at her, and he could swear he saw her hazy eyes misting with tears as they finally locked onto his face. He wasn't sure why his hand lifted and rested on her matted hair, but her gaze gained just a little more clarity. "Of course I will. We'll talk again when you've had some rest."

With that, he stepped away from her and walked toward the door with Lahar. By the time they reached the hallway, his smile had fallen and he was ready to have the heads of those guards on a platter. He wasn't sure what would have made them think this was an acceptable way to treat any prisoner, let alone a woman, but it wouldn't go unpunished. Even if he had to use his magic to teleport them right into a volcano, he would see that they paid for what they'd done.

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Kinana hung up her apron in the kitchen and rolled out the soreness in her shoulders from a long day working at the guild. One of the biggest downsides to having so many people in the guild at once was the sheer amount of orders she'd had to handle. The brawls had been much more intense, and she'd been so happy that Laki had stuck around a little later than normal to replace all of the broken tables, benches, stools, and a large section of the bar that had been the victim of Elfman's body
crashing through it.

But her day was done, and she knew that Mira could handle the closing duties on her own in a few hours.

She walked out to the main hall after putting on her coat and scarf, and her attention was instantly drawn to Lucy, who was in the process of bundling up in her own jacket and scarf to head home as well. Every once in a blue moon, they would end up leaving at the same time, so Kinana had no issues with making her way to Lucy and falling in step beside her as they both called out their farewells to their guildmates.

"Monty, I hope you'll be warm enough," Lucy whispered into her jacket.

"Oh, he's still with you?" Kinana asked, her eyes widening when she glanced over to see Monty's snout barely peeking out of Lucy's jacket.

"Yeah," she sighed. "Cobra just... left him."

That wasn't like him at all, Kinana knew. Ever since he'd joined the guild, she'd been getting more flashes of her life from before. She didn't remember everything about being Cobra's friend Cubellios, but she did remember how warm he'd been. How caring and kind he'd been with her. And Kinana could tell just from one look at how Cobra was with Monty, he cared about the little albino snake just as much. It may not have been all that much time in comparison to what she'd spent with him, but maybe he'd really just needed a friend.

So why would he have left Monty behind like that?

"That's really not like him at all," she finally said. Kinana shivered and pulled her scarf up around her mouth while she watched the snow gently drifting down around them.

"He was probably just being an asshole because of the S Class announcement," Lucy shrugged. "I can take care of Monty for tonight, at least."

Kinana looked back over to the little snake. "Make sure he has a little bowl of water, something that won't tip over when he tries to drink out of it," she said. "And somewhere warm for him to curl up."

"Well, it'll probably be in my bed," Lucy laughed.

"I thought you didn't like snakes all that much."

Lucy shrugged then. "Monty's different," she said. "He's not so bad. I mean, I still get a little weirded out by him from time to time, but I'm getting used to him." She smiled down into her jacket and brushed her gloved finger over Monty's snout. "You're growing on me, Monty."

Kinana laughed along with her, then nodded toward Lucy's apartment building. "Well, get him inside," she said. "Monty will know if he's too cold or too hot, but make sure he can keep his heat in. It's always worse in the winter."

"I'll lock my window too, so Natsu doesn't break in and leave it wide open in the middle of the night." Lucy waved goodbye and made her way into her apartment building, leaving Kinana standing on the sidewalk with a thoughtful frown on her face.

She just knew that there was something wrong with this whole situation. Especially considering it was Cobra, of all people. He was loyal. He didn't abandon the ones he cared about. Sure, it took him some time to really open up, to let himself care, but he could do it. Kinana knew, in that moment, that
her feet had carried her all the way to Lucy's apartment for one specific reason. Normally, they only walked together for a few blocks before parting ways for Kinana to go to Fairy Hills.

But not that night.

Kinana turned and continued down the road another few blocks, and then made her way up the stairs of the mostly unfamiliar apartment building. She didn't bother with ringing the bell, choosing to knock on the door in front of her instead.

It opened almost instantly, and she was met with a harsh glare that barely softened once Cobra saw that it was her standing in front of him.

Oh, he was definitely angry about something.

A quick flash of a memory pierced through her skull, of him with both eyes narrowed as he snarled at Brain while she laid on the ground just next to him.

Cobra caught her when she swayed in the doorway, then slowly led her inside and locked the door behind him. He remembered that day from her memories very well. It was a few weeks before Brain had locked Cubellios in a freezer and nearly killed her, because Cobra hadn't listened to him. She didn't remember anything more than that small wisp of a thought, and he really didn't want to give her more than that. Kinana was happy now, and he wanted to make sure she stayed that way. "What are you doing here?"

Kinana sighed while taking a seat on the couch. She unraveled her scarf and unbuttoned her coat while Cobra sat on the far end of the couch, keeping his distance from her. That actually stung just a bit. "I was curious about what happened earlier."

He nodded and leaned back, pulling his feet up onto the cushion. "What about it?"

"Well, that's not really like you," she said. "Leaving him behind like that."

"Not like he fucking cares anyway," he muttered. Monty had made it very clear that he really only cared about Lucy, so Cobra figured the best thing to do was just take himself out of the fucking equation entirely.

"Erik, don't say that," she said, frowning over at him. She couldn't tell if he was pouting or sneering, or what was actually going on with him. The man she remembered didn't sulk. He took what he wanted, when he wanted it.

"Things change," he said. "Like this…"

"I don't understand," she replied. "What's changed?"

"Everything, Cu…" He finally looked over at her, only to see those familiar bright green eyes glimmering with concern; her eyes were smaller and the pupils weren't slitted, but the color was the same as it had been before. She'd looked at him like that even when she was a snake. On his bad days, she gave him this same look while coiling her body around him, squeezing him just a little bit so he could feel how much she cared. But even that had changed. Things were different with Monty though. He wasn't big enough to do anything like covering Cobra's whole damn body like Cubellios had as she'd gotten older. And Cubellios had only ever trusted Cobra, no one else. But there Monty was, wanting to be with Lucy instead. He cared about Lucy, and Cobra was honestly starting to think the little snake would be better off with her instead.

"Everything, like what?" Kinana shifted to the middle cushion on the couch and turned toward him
fully. "You know you can talk to me."

"Do I?" he muttered, turning his head away to stare at the far wall. It was so bare, just like mostly everything in his apartment. Sure, he hadn't grown up with much in the way of possessions, but he wasn't a criminal anymore. He wasn't on the run. He could settle down if he wanted to, instead of hatching some stupid fucking plan to get the rest of the Seis out of prison.

"I know more about you than most people," she said with a soft smile.

"You don't remember."

"Not everything," she nodded. "But I do remember that every winter, you get sad." Her smile stayed in place when his attention snapped back over to her. "You got sad in the Tower, because you couldn't keep me warm very well. And after we left, you were sad because..."

Dear god, he hoped she didn't remember what happened. Based on the pinch in her brow and the far-off look in her eyes, she was trying to do just that. "Don't worry about it," he whispered.

"Brain did something to you," she finally said. She couldn't recall what it was, but she did remember being colder than normal at some point, and then Cobra dragging her out into the snow where he set up a fire. He'd wrapped blankets around her. He'd cried on her. She remembered so clearly how he'd cried. And when she thought on it just a little more, Kinana remembered the blood covering his naked body from fresh cuts and lashes. And the bone in his right arm sticking out.

"He hurt you?" she asked. She was sure that had to be it. He'd been crying so much, and Cobra had looked like he'd taken one hell of a beating with his eye swollen shut and scrapes all over his face and chest. What could Brain possibly have done to him though?

"D-Don't look at me like that. I'm okay... I'm okay, Cu... H-He won't do it again... I'll be good..."

Cobra sniffled and wrapped a thick blanket more tightly around her freezing scales. "Please don't die. I n-need you... Please, Cu..."

Cobra nodded, and this time he couldn't look away. "I told him I'd do whatever he wanted," he said, "As long as he didn't hurt you."

"Erik..."

"You were all I had, Cu... Why wouldn't I do whatever I could to keep you safe?"

"That still doesn't explain why you left Monty,"

"He really calls her that?"

"Did you know he calls her Mommy?" he grumbled. Cobra let out a heavy sigh and ran a hand up his face and into his hair. "He's always talking about how he loves his Mommy and that he's happy when she gives him any bit of fucking attention. She hates snakes, and he still wants to be around her."

"All the fucking time," he said. "If he loves her so damn much, then Lucy can just fucking keep
him." He wasn't going to say out loud that he'd lost Cubellios, so it stood to reason that Monty wouldn't give a fuck about him either. Even though she was right here with him, and he could hear in her soul that she cared about him in some way, it was different. She wasn't entirely Cubellios now. Now even Kinana had other friends. She didn't need Cobra the way she'd needed him before, the way he still knew that he needed her deep down.

She reached out for his hand and he shifted away from her. Cobra didn't want pity, and he didn't want her to touch him right then. When she did it again, striking faster than he could move so her fingers gently wound around his scarred wrist, his single eye narrowed into a fierce glare.

"Don't forget he's just a baby, Erik," she said.

"I fucking know that," he sneered. "It doesn't change-"

"The fact that you think he doesn't care about you?"

"He doesn't." Cobra knew it. Because if Monty cared, then he wouldn't have chosen Lucy. He would have seen that Cobra was the one who fucking cared about him, and Monty would have noticed how upset he was over what had been happening. They spent every waking moment together, with the exception of that mission he'd taken with the team when he'd had to leave Monty at home by himself. It should have been enough for the little snake, but apparently it wasn't.

"Is this because he cares about more than just you?" she asked. He stayed silent on that one, and Kinana couldn't help but roll her eyes at him. He was definitely pouting. "Erik, just because he likes Lucy too, doesn't mean he doesn't care about you."

"He fucking picked her over me, okay?" He tried to shake her grip from his wrist again, and failed. It must have been some residual snake strength, because she shouldn't have been able to hold onto him like that.

"What even happened?"

"It doesn't matte - How the fuck are you still holding on?!"

Kinana laughed when he started wildly flailing his arm and her grip never faltered. She reached over and grabbed his other wrist, laughing harder when he growled low in his throat and doubled his efforts to get her hands loose.

"This is bullshit!" Cobra put his feet between them, and pushed on her stomach. Still, she didn't let go. If he didn't know any better, he would have said that she'd had glue on her hands and they were never going to be separated again. Oddly enough, that thought alone had him smiling while he tried even harder to get her off of him.

Kinana shrieked with laughter as Cobra pressed his feet into her stomach and lifted her into the air. She wasn't sure when he'd ended up on his back. Still, she didn't let go of his wrists. Especially not when he started laughing along with her. It was the first time she'd seen his smile since they'd been reunited. His real smile, and not that little half-smirk he did while at the guild. "Well, would you look at that? I can fly again!"

Cobra chuckled and bent his legs to let her back down, then shifted so Kinana was lying completely on top of him with his legs on either side of hers. "Thanks, Cu," he said. "I've missed this."

"I wanna say I've missed this too," she said. She could feel it though, that a part of her really did miss Cobra. Somewhere in her soul, she missed his warmth, his smile, the way his hands felt while gently trailing over her scales. She missed nuzzling his cheek with her snout and flying with him through
"But you can't really remember?"

She nodded and laid her head on his chest to listen to his steady heartbeat. "Sometimes I do. I wish I remembered more."

"I don't."

She frowned but didn't move. "How come?"

He was finally able to pull away from her grip, and slowly wrapped his arms around her. It was so easy to hold her like he'd done years ago. He didn't care about Kinana touching him. She'd been there with him when he'd gotten his scars. They'd held one another in their own ways while his body healed from the abuse he'd gone through time and again.

He kind of wished she still smelled like Cubellios though, and not the shampoo and body wash she used as a human.

"Erik?"

"Life wasn't easy," he said while closing his eye. "The Tower was horrible."

"I remember some of the Tower. When you were a little kid, right?"

"Yeah," he sighed. "And Brain was... so much worse. He tried to kill you, just to get to me, Cu."

"I should've eaten him then," she giggled.

"I told you not to." He didn't wait for the question in her soul to pass her lips. "I couldn't let him hurt you again. You almost froze to death because of me... So I swore that I'd be good, that I'd listen to him, no matter what he wanted me to do."

She nodded slowly, closing her eyes as the memory from before resurfaced. That must have been the time he was talking about. Brain had done something to him - what it was, she wasn't sure. Brain had hurt Cobra, broken some part of his fighting spirit that made him bend to the older mage's twisted will. "Is that why you did-"

"Everything I did before I lost you, was because of Brain."

"And after?"

"That's because I lost you." He figured it was high time he admitted that out loud. Especially to her. He didn't want Kinana to feel bad about them being separated, but he wasn't going to lie to her either. He'd never lied to Cubellios.

"Erik-"

"I don't want you to remember a lot of what happened back then, because then you'll know how bad it was for me," he said, tightening his hold around her. "And I'm doing everything I can to forget the shit that happened before, so... I'd really rather you don't remember it."

"If it comes back to me, can I... can I ask you about it?"

"Of course." He'd tell her anything she wanted to know, if she asked. If Kinana remembered something and wanted context for it, then he wouldn't lie to her, and he wouldn't keep shit from her.
Cobra just didn't want to go through the painful process of thinking about it for no good reason.

But her remembering the life they'd shared was worth the pain. That was a damn good reason, in his book.

Eventually, she sat up on her knees and looked down at him with a thoughtful frown. He still looked so sad. Maybe she was the only one who could see it though. She kind of knew what to look for, with how closed off he was most of the time. "Can you keep a secret for me?" she asked, nibbling her lower lip.

"You know I can," he chuckled.

'I can show him... won't judge me... might make him happy though... see him smile again…'

Cobra's head tilted slightly when he listened to the way her soul warbled, how it faded in and out of his hearing. He'd never experienced something like that before. He watched as she stood from the couch and turned to face him. He wasn't sure just what she was doing while her eyes closed and her hands clenched at her sides for a moment. The air surrounding her began to shimmer in shades of dark red and black, almost like he'd let out a poisonous breath that clung to her skin. Her head tipped back and her lips parted, and his eye widened when a thick plume of dark, noxious gas spilled out into the air.

"What are you doing?" he whispered. His next breath was filled with the poison she'd breathed out, and he pulled it in, filling his lungs to capacity on instinct. Just like he used to all those years ago.

When her head tipped forward and her eyes opened, he found reptilian pupils staring back at him. Her short purple hair grew longer, down to her hips. It melded with her skin, tinting it a dark indigo. Kinana let out another poisoned breath that was more of a hiss than anything else. The gas obscured his view of her, and he sucked it in as quickly as he could.

Poison spread through him on a wild, searing path that reached down to the tips of his fingers and toes. He very nearly shuddered at the intensity of it feeding his magic.

The sound of something soft hitting the floor came just before he saw her again.

Kinana was no more. In her place, coiled in on herself was Cubellios. His giant winged serpent stared down at him, flicking her tongue out and testing the air. She hissed, and the sound skittered along his flesh, leaving goosebumps in its wake. Had he fallen asleep and started dreaming of having Cubellios again? God, he really fucking hoped that wasn't the case.

"Cu?" he whispered. "Is that…"

She leaned forward and his hand lifted of its own accord. Between one moment and the next, he was standing, pressing his shaking fingers to her snout, along the ridge of her purple brow. His other hand came up to cup the pale scales under her chin. She felt so real. Her scales were just like he remembered. The way she pushed her face against his cheek was exactly the same as before. And even though he wanted to fight it, he couldn't stop the tears from welling in his eye and trailing down to his chin. He was a fucking goner when her tongue fluttered over his scarred cheek, but it was something he hadn't expected in the slightest that had a broken sob spilling past his lips while he crumpled to the floor.

"Can you hear me, Erik?"

It was her voice. That song in Kinana's soul was a little muted, but he could hear her. Just like he'd always wanted to. That one wish he'd held onto for so long had finally come true. And sure, he'd
heard Kinana's soul and found that she was Cubellios, but this was different. It wasn't some unfamiliar woman that he knew was his best friend. This was her, and she was talking to him. Her body wrapped around him and squeezed just enough to pull another loud cry from his lips.

He didn't care what he looked like, or what he sounded like. He didn't give one single shit about his tears coating her scales or how she hissed against his hair as his arms wrapped around her where he knelt on the pile of clothes that had fallen off her body.

"Y-You're back!"

"I'm back," she said. "I'm sorry I didn't show you sooner."

"I-I don't fucking c-care… Cubellios, y-you're…"

"It's okay, Erik… I'm here now." Cubellios stayed curled around him, listening to the man she'd grown up with cry and mumble against her scaly body. "You'll never lose me, Erik."

"You're back… Cu, tell m-me I'm not dreaming…"

"It's not a dream." The way she hissed in short bursts, her own little serpentine laugh, was just the same as he remembered. This really was her. She was really there, holding him again, comforting him. The first friend he'd ever had was right there in his apartment, and damnit he wished he could stop crying long enough to listen to the beautiful sound of her soul.

"When I'm like this with you," Cubellios sighed, "I remember more. That's never happened before."

"D-Don't remember…"

"Too late, Erik." Her body tightened around him and she brushed her scaly snout against his hair. "I'm sorry I couldn't stop him from doing that to you." Cobra shook his head, but she had something to say and there was no way that she was going to stop now that her memories were swimming to the surface. Not when she could finally tell him the things she'd wanted to tell him all those years ago. "Erik, I'm sorry Brain lied to you. I'm sorry he never stopped hurting you after that day. So many times, I wished I could make him stop, that I could kill him. But he told me that he'd kill you right in front of me if I tried to stop him."

A quick flash of her memory burned itself into Cobra's mind, and he instinctively flinched away from the image of Brain's naked, tattooed body standing in that dim, drafty shed. The same place he'd dragged Cobra to time and again to beat and torture and violate him. But this memory was different. It wasn't from his own perspective, but from hers. And in it, he could see his younger self, chained to the floor and already unconscious and bleeding with a barbed and bloody flogger tossed to the floor beside him.

"It'll be so much worse for him if you try to help him run again, Cubellios," Brain said, his voice low and controlled. He turned toward Cobra and smiled down at the nude, shivering teen's body. "This is nothing compared to what I'll do if you take away my slave."

"I wanted to kill him so many times," Cubellios continued, pulling Cobra away from her memory. "Erik, I wanted to save you... Please forgive me for not taking you away from him."

"It's not y-your fault," he sniffled. "And I-I got away... I'm safe now."

"Yes, now you're safe," she said. If she could have managed it, she would have smiled. But she already knew that Cobra could hear in her soul just how happy she was that he was away from Brain again, that he was on the right path in his life for a change. "And I swear, no matter what form I'm
in, I'll always love you, Erik."

"I l-love you too, Cu."

A short while later, she would lead him to his bedroom and curl up beneath the blanket while he crawled in beside her. They would sleep in a real bed together for the first time in years, enjoying each other's warmth and the heat that permeated his apartment. And in the morning, when Kinana woke up completely nude and pressed against Cobra's bare chest, blushing and stammering when his single eye locked onto her beet red face, he would smile at her and put the smallest bit of space between them, while pushing the blanket higher to cover her body. They would talk about anything that came to mind, fully rekindling the friendship they'd once had.

But for the time being, Cobra simply let himself be held by the first friend he'd ever had while he cried on his living room floor.
While the S Class Are Away

I'll apologize now if the first scene gives you Faulkner flashbacks. I realized while writing it that it kind of had that sort of feel to it, but I liked it too much to take it out. I did, however, go back in and make sure it's understandable and not overly convoluted… or, I at least tried.

This wasn't the same, and he didn't like it. Not one bit. What had been exciting the day before just made him sad. He didn't know a lot of things, but Monty knew what sad was. And he knew that he was sad because Mommy couldn't talk to him. Not like Daddy could.

He tried talking to her, but she didn't listen. Or maybe she couldn't. Daddy did say that it was his magic that let them talk. Mommy just didn't have that kind of magic, he guessed. But he wished she could talk to him. He wanted to know things. Like why Daddy hadn't come with them. Why she stopped sleeping on that big cushion with the blankets by the square light that talked about food all the time. Why she never went home with Daddy anymore.

He wanted to know why Daddy left him at that loud place he called the guild, with all it's woody smells and food smells.

Monty didn't move much once they got to where Mommy and Daddy painted the walls, and where Mommy slept when her body got really warm and watched Daddy put wood on the floor. Once she put him in the blanket, he was even warmer. He liked that she knew to help him stay warm.

They slept in her bed. She even let him curl up in his blanket by her face. Before they went to sleep, he watched her sit on a chair and write things. He didn't know what things she wrote, but it made her smile when she did it. Monty liked it when she smiled. And he watched her put down a bowl with water for him. And she put a paper down for him near the hot wires that he liked to curl up by sometimes, just like Daddy did.

But now the sun was up and she was moving around and picking up clothes and putting them in a big basket. And Monty didn't move. He wasn't having fun like he thought. He was sad. So sad. Daddy wasn't there to make things fun, and tell Mommy what Monty was saying.

"Mommy, will you carry me?"

She didn't answer him. He just wanted her to pick him up like Daddy did as soon as they woke up. He wanted her to let him on her arm so he could be warm with her. The blanket was warm, but it wasn't Mommy-warm.

She stopped by the bed and frowned down at him. "Are you always like this in the morning?" she asked.

"No. Daddy picks me up."
She sighed and touched the top of his head, then walked away again. "I need a bath before I do anything else."

His head lifted a little. Maybe she would take him with her. Daddy always let him play in the bath when he cleaned his body. Daddy didn't shed like Monty, so he had to get himself wet and rub bubbles all over. But he put toys in the bathtub for Monty, and Monty could play with them and squeeze them, and they made squeaking dying noises when he did it. Daddy said not to eat them though, so Monty didn't try. But while he played, Daddy stood and cleaned himself and watched Monty play. And he laughed and talked about how big Monty was getting, or that they would need bigger toys soon.

Sometimes, he surprised Monty with a new toy to kill over and over. Monty liked those. He liked finding out what sounds they made when they died.

"Monty, don't forget there's water here for you," she said. And then she walked into another room and closed the door. And he was all alone.

He hadn't forgotten about the water. He just wasn't thirsty. But if Mommy wanted to leave and go to the guild, then it would be good to drink water. Daddy might not be there, and no one would know when Monty got thirsty because they couldn't talk to him like Daddy could. Maybe Cubellios. She was nice. And she was a snake too. She would know if he got thirsty.

But now he was thirsty. Monty slithered out of the blanket and down to the floor. He dipped his snout in the water dish and drank.

Mommy still wasn't back. He went over to the paper on the floor and used it like Daddy taught him to do, then went back to the bed. He laid next to her pillow, out of the blanket, and waited.

Mommy came out of the other room with new clothes on. She looked at him and touched his head again with her finger. "Are you sick?"

"What's sick?"

She sighed again. "I guess snakes don't move much when it's cold, but you're usually so active at Cobra's house. Is it not warm enough?"

He didn't want her to wrap him in the blanket again. He wanted Mommy-warm. But she wasn't letting him do it. Monty poked his head out of the blanket and watched her put on more clothes, and those things that covered her toes and her feet. She picked him up, and he was so happy to feel her so close again. But then she walked away from the bed and the big cushions by her glowing box that made sounds. She walked to the door that led them to the hallway that went outside. He didn't want to go outside.

It was cold outside.

Once they were outside in the cold, she said, "Maybe you really are sick. I don't know anything about snakes. Ugh, Cobra's gonna kill me if you got sick."

She took him down the street, but when Monty tested the air it didn't smell the same. It didn't have Daddy's smell with it like it always did when they were together.

"Maybe I could take you to the veterinarian?"

She looked down at him then, and he smelled the scared on her. Why was she scared? "Mommy, what's a vetter-airy-un?" Was that what scared her? If it scared Mommy, he didn't want to go there.
He just wanted Daddy to come back and take him home. He loved Mommy, but he loved Daddy too. Monty just wanted both of them. Because Mommy was warm and soft, and Daddy talked to him. He helped Mommy understand Monty.

"Can we find Daddy?"

She didn't say anything to him, but she smelled scared-sad. He knew Mommy wouldn't hurt him, and that she'd keep him safe. He got to sleep by her pillow. Monty just really wanted Daddy back so he didn't feel sad anymore. Unless Daddy left because he didn't care about Monty anymore. But that couldn't be right. Daddy loved him. He knew that.

"Mommy, I want Daddy. I want to go home to Daddy…"

The thing that Doranbolt hated the most about working with Lahar was that he actually had to work. There was no slacking off on the odd day one came in with a hangover. But it was also what he liked the most about working with his stuffy partner, because it meant things got done. There was efficiency, timeliness, and an added aura of authority that came from having Lahar by his side. Technically, Doranbolt ranked just a little lower and to the left of Lahar, position-wise. He wasn't actually sure how all that worked anyway.

Lahar knew, so that was good enough.

To Doranbolt, they were friends first. Partners second.

The sharp slap to the back of his head drew Doranbolt from his thoughts faster than a politician pulling out of his mistress when his wife walked in.

"I'll take this side," Lahar said, pushing up his glasses. "And I'll check on Racer. You head over there and see Hoteye."

"The file says he goes by Richard now," Doranbolt said. Lahar shrugged. That, in itself, was peculiar. Lahar didn't shrug. His entire being was so tense on a constant basis, that Doranbolt had always assumed he was incapable of performing such a lazy maneuver. Apparently, he wasn't.

Still, Lahar walked away and down the corridor of prison cells to the right that would lead toward Racer of the Oracion Seis. Doranbolt turned left. He paused at each cell, read from the questionnaires in his hands and checked off the prisoners' responses one by one.

How are the guards treating you? Do you have enough food to exist comfortably, without hunger pains? Is the food fresh or spoiled? How often is the food spoiled? Do you have your necessary needs met - food, water, hygiene? Do the guards deny you access to feminine hygiene products? Are you provided with fresh clothes at least once a week? Are you allowed to bathe at least once a week? Do the guards ever threaten you? If so, in what way? Are you ever physically or mentally abused by the guards? Are you able to request visitation with a doctor for your medical needs? If so, are those requests handled professionally, and promptly? Do you have any comments on the living conditions of your cell? Do you have any other comments?

It was tedious, and he definitely got a few answers that were chock full of bullshit. No, they couldn't provide the inmates with prostitutes to sate their sexual desires. No, they wouldn't provide lotion solely for masturbation. He would look into tissues though.

But for the most part, very few prisoners complained. One or two had to be escorted from their cells and taken to the infirmary when they reported sexual abuse. Another was taken to the infirmary to receive treatment for a nasty case of gout that swelled up his whole left foot to the size of a grapefruit
on steroids.

Doranbolt made a note to request the nurses be set on a rotation to check the prisoners on a biweekly basis - at minimum - to make sure they were healthy.

Finally, he reached the last cell in the block. He looked down at the form in his hand, then peered between the bars at Hoteye. It was easy to find the sharp, geometric angles of his face and his bright orange hair. "Richard 'Hoteye of the Heavenly Eyes' Buchanan," Doranbolt said.

Hoteye turned and smiled at him in a kind sort of way that reminded him of an elderly man sitting in the park and feeding pigeons. "Please, call me Richard." He stood and walked toward the bars separating them, then stopped when he was nearly a foot away.

"Richard, then," Doranbolt said. "We've gotten several reports from prisoners, complaining about the conditions they're being kept in." There was no need to explain that it started with Cobra's release - even though he'd never made a formal complaint - and then Karina's complaint concerning Angel's treatment. "So, we're going through the whole prison and getting feedback from everyone."

"I see," Richard said. He looked down at the papers in Doranbolt's hands. "I'm willing to answer your questions."

He nodded and began the questionnaire. Of all the prisoners he'd interviewed so far, Richard was the only one with no complaints. There were a great many declarations about the love and compassion the guards showed him, but not a single negative word about anything in the prison.

When the official questionnaire was done, Doranbolt looked into Richard's eyes and frowned. "There's really nothing wrong in how you've been treated?"

"Nothing," he said. "After the things I have experienced in my life, this is comfortable. Racer and the others would probably agree."

He wasn't allowed to bring up Angel's situation with anyone outside of the investigation. And Doranbolt knew he couldn't bring up Cobra being released. The reason for it was all tied up in classified red tape. Instead, he asked, "Why is that?"

Richard took a moment to return to his cot which, Doranbolt noticed, had a freshly laundered blanket on it and a mildly fluffed pillow. Once settled, he leaned back and finally stopped smiling. Through their entire conversation, he'd been smiling. It had been just a little unsettling for Doranbolt. "I assume you've heard of the Tower of Heaven."

"The eighth R System tower on the border of Caelum," he said. "The Council shut all of them down, but that one was built outside our jurisdiction. And without us knowing about it until X784."

"Five members of the Oracion Seis were there as slaves. Macbeth, Sorano, myself, Sawyer, and Erik. We barely knew of one another back then. I was too busy trying to keep my brother safe. Sorano wished for a way to escape and find her sister, Yukino."

Doranbolt's brows drew together minutely. He hadn't known Angel had a sister. No one knew a thing about the members of the Oracion Seis aside from the crimes they'd committed.

"Sawyer lost his family to the cult who kidnapped all of us when we were children. Macbeth cried every night because of the screams of the other slaves that kept him awake. And Erik befriended a snake that he named Cubellios."

"For someone who says you didn't know each other back then, you seem to know a lot about who
Richard's lips shifted into a small semblance of a smile. "We were taken from the Tower - sold is more appropriate - by a man who ran the Bureau of Magical Development."

"Brain," Doranbolt said.

"He wanted us for our magical potential," Richard said. "We were under the impression that we were being saved from slavery and forced labor. And we all assumed that there would be no more beatings or lashings for not performing the way our slavers expected."

He wanted so badly to write this down. Would it be insensitive to take notes and confirm their validity with Angel when he went to visit her later that day?

"Things were fine with Brain for a time, but then they changed." Richard paused, staring into the space in front of him and clearly caught up in memories that Doranbolt suspected were better left forgotten. Buried. Never spoken of again. "Brain beat us worse than the guards in the Tower. He tortured us individually for years to make us into the people who tried to activate Nirvana."

Doranbolt wondered just how bad things had been for them. "How old were you when you were taken?"

"We were all around ten years old. That was about X776, I suppose."

That meant that they'd been nothing more than children while forced to work in the Tower of Heaven, and if Richard was to be believed about their treatment by Brain… the five young adults who had been arrested never stood a chance.

"Some nights, Sorano begged us to kill her. She begged Brain to send her back to the Tower." Richard shook his head. "He found ways to bring each of us to heel. He convinced me that money was the answer to all problems. He made Macbeth truly believe that they were father and son. Erik…"

Doranbolt frowned when he saw Richard shudder. "What about him?"

"Brain had the hardest time with him, because he was so stubborn. But once he was done, there was no Erik anymore. He became Cobra, and only Cobra." It was with sadness gleaming in his bright blue eyes that Richard looked back at Doranbolt. "We were such happy, optimistic kids. There are days when I wonder what would have happened, if we'd stayed in the Tower. If we had stayed there until Fairy Tail destroyed it…"

"What do you think would have happened?"

"I wouldn't have lost track of my brother," Richard chuckled. "I think Sorano would have searched for her sister. Erik and Macbeth would have stayed together, though. They would never admit it aloud, but those two were close friends once. I believe it was Brain who tore them apart." A wistful smile lifted his lips. "We could have learned to use our magic, surrounded by love instead of being beaten until we mastered it."

Doranbolt didn't know what to say to that.

"That's why I can say that nothing here is worse than what I've experienced before," Richard said. "Nothing can compare to what Brain did to us. Even if I was beaten every day, it wouldn't come close to what he did to…" He shook his head again and stared at where his hands were clasped over his stomach. "Regardless, I have no complaints. Not just because of that, but because the guards do
treat me well."

"And why do you think they do that?"

Richard chuckled quietly. "When I was brought in, I gave them respect. They're just doing their jobs, and I understand that. I'm a criminal, and they are here to keep me imprisoned. I'm sure it helped that I didn't attempt to escape with the others before."

"It probably did," Doranbolt nodded. "While we're on the subject-

"We had a plan in place, just between the five of us, if we were ever arrested. We would wait two years, and Erik would use his magic to get out of his cell. Once he was out, he went for Macbeth, who used his illusions to get everyone else," Richard said. "They came to me, and I refused to leave. They couldn't change my mind, and I told them to run, that I wouldn't betray them."

"And is there any plan like that in place now?"

"I wouldn't know," he said with a laugh. "We would have changed our plan after the first escape. I assume they would have done the same without me there, so only the four of them knew the new plan."

Their conversation came to a close shortly after that. As Doranbolt headed back down the corridor to meet up with Lahar and compile the information they'd gathered into a comprehensive list, then probably create spreadsheets to present to Gran Doma directly on the statistical something-or-other that was entirely Lahar's specialty… He couldn't stop thinking about the story he'd been told.

If the members of the Oracion Seis who had been taken in as children were given a place that nurtured them, instead of beating them into submission, would they thrive? Was that the reason they'd all been arrested in the first place? Because Brain's guidance was all they knew? Had they broken out of prison to do things differently, only to fall into the same vicious cycle of destruction, because that was how they were trained to think?

The only example he could work off of was Cobra's parole in Fairy Tail. Both he and Lahar had read the reports that came from Makarov, but everything was official and boring. They both knew it wasn't an entirely accurate account of Cobra's experience living in society, but it was the best he could do at the moment.

"I sincerely hope the responses on your end were not as disturbing as mine," Lahar said. Doranbolt's head shot up to find his partner glaring at the corridor he'd just come from. "We may need to do a mass firing, if this is becoming a trend."

"That bad, huh?" Doranbolt muttered. They turned away from the cells and walked back toward the elevator that would lead up to their shared office.

"Of the forty prisoners I interviewed, seven were beaten, three women claimed they were raped, two men also claimed they were sexually assaulted in some way they didn't wish to speak about with me. One was severely dehydrated." Lahar paused to look at his notebook. "Seventeen made claims of being threatened or intimidated by the guards. And none of the women have been given proper care for their feminine hygiene."

"It's disgusting." Doranbolt scowled at the ground while Lahar hit the button for the fifteenth floor. "Something natural like this… What would their mothers think if they knew how these men were treating the women here?"

Lahar hummed and stayed silent for a moment. "Should we consider requesting an all-female ward
"in the prison?" he mused. "Hire female guards."

"We could probably shift some things around, and have it close to the infirmary," Doranbolt nodded.

"Not too close," Lahar said. "The psychiatric ward still needs to be kept as a medical priority."

"Speaking of which, I had an interesting conversation with Richard."

"Did you?" They left the elevator and went down the hall to their office. Doranbolt waited until the door was closed to speak.

"Did you know Brain recruited them from the Tower of Heaven in X776?"

"I did not," Lahar said while carrying his paperwork to his desk. "Should I have known?"

"No," he sighed. Doranbolt followed his lead and went to his own desk. He stared down at the page on top, Richard's questionnaire that didn't have a single complaint on it. "I think I'll be the one to talk with him."

"Who will you be talking to?" Lahar asked. It was obvious he was distracted. He was probably already tallying numbers in his head and figuring out who he would need to speak with about creating a women's ward in the prison.

"Midnight," Doranbolt said. His brows drew together when Lahar's pen slipped from his grasp and clattered to the desk.

"You can't possibly mean-"

"I do. That's exactly what I'm planning on doing. I found some things out, and I need to see if they're true."

"And you expect him to answer you?" Lahar scoffed and picked his pen back up. "I wish you the best of luck, Doranbolt. You know what he was like when they were brought back to the prison."

Oh, Doranbolt knew all too well the state Midnight had been in. But it had been nearly eight months since that Infinity Clock business. Surely something had changed for Midnight in that time.

"At least start on the interviews you've already finished," Lahar said just before he could stand and leave the room.

He looked down at the stack of papers, then smirked while picking up two blank forms from his drawer. "I'll just add a couple more to my stack, then I'll get started on them."

Lahar simply shook his head while watching Doranbolt walk out of the room. "He's going to visit her again," he sighed, while returning to his work. He couldn't stop himself from smiling just a little bit. "What a lovesick moron."

Cobra smiled at Kinana while she adjusted the blanket over her bare breasts for the tenth time in only a few minutes. He didn't care that he was shirtless around her. Kinana remembered it all anyway. He hadn't a clue how long they'd laid together like this since waking up. All he knew was that he didn't want to get out of this bed, and he didn't want her to get up either.

He wanted to keep her with him, just like this.

"I don't know when the last time was that I saw you smile this much."
He chuckled and snuggled down into the bed a little more, pulling the blanket higher on his shoulders. "I can't help it," he said. "This is beyond fucking words, Cu."

"Well, I don't want to burst any happy bubbles, but we really need to talk."

"Because we haven't been doing that already," he snorted. She pouted and reached across the minimal space between them to pinch his belly button, pulling a high-pitched laugh from him.

"It's about Monty," she said, watching as his smile faded.

"Cu…" He didn't want to talk about this shit. Not with her and not with anyone. But he already knew that she wouldn't let it go. Even when they'd been younger, she hadn't let him get away with not talking to her.

"Erik, you treated him horribly yesterday." He frowned as her fingers trailed across his stomach and up to his chest. "He's just a baby."

"What he did fucking hurt, Cu."

"But you can't treat Monty like he knows these things already," she said. "I know that he picked spending the night with Lucy over coming home with you, but he's little. He doesn't know better."

"She doesn't even know how to take care of him, but he wants to be with her."

"And you think Monty realized that yesterday?" she laughed.

His eye narrowed at her. Of course Monty wouldn't realize something like that. Cobra knew he was just a baby snake. He didn't know a lot of things. God, most of Cobra's day was spent teaching his little friend all about the things they came across. Explaining why he couldn't bite one thing or another, talking about what Cobra was doing so Monty could understand it. Helping him figure out the sounds and smells and tastes of the world around him, so he wouldn't be aggressive like a snake in the wild unless it was necessary.

He got that. But Monty just didn't understand how much Cobra cared about him. How much it meant to have the little albino python around to talk to. Because when the day was done, when Cobra was all alone and ignoring the souls of everyone in Magnolia, it was just him and Monty.

"Did you ever consider the fact that he's latched onto Lucy, because she bonded with him?"

Like hell had she bonded with Monty. Cobra was the one who took care of him day in and day out. Cobra was the one who took him hunting and made sure he caught something large enough to keep him full. He made sure Monty had water whenever he needed it, blankets to coil up in, and a warm body right by his side.

"You told me that she spent a lot of time with you guys," she said softly. Her fingers brushed across the scar on the front of his shoulder from Brain's betrayal during Nirvana. "She was there when you found him, and he's seen you two together a lot."

"So?"

"So," she laughed, "Monty probably sees her as a part of being with you, Erik. She stayed here for a few days, right?"

"While we were fixing up her apartment."
"And he stayed near her when you finished it up?"

"She's the dumbass who slept in her empty ass apartment with the window open," he grumbled. His eye closed after a moment when he felt the random patterns she drew up the side of his neck so softly that it was like her serpentine tongue was doing it. God, that was fucking relaxing.

"But Monty still sees you and her together more than anyone else," Kinana said. "So maybe that's why he's so attached to her."

His eye slowly opened to meet her bright jade gaze. "Is that how you would've been?"

She shrugged and rested her hand on his unscarred cheek. "We'll never know. You were my friend, Erik. You kept me safe, and I did the same for you when I could." She smiled even though he heard the flash of sadness in her soul over the things she hadn't been able to protect him from. "But for us, it was just the two of us."

"Well, you've got friends now," he muttered.

She giggled and shook her head at him. "Just because I have friends now doesn't mean I don't still love you, silly. And all you have to do is help Monty understand that you left because you were upset."

"I doubt he even cares."

"I bet he does," she said. "You'd be surprised by how much that little guy cares about you. He probably misses you, Erik."

His lips parted to give her a snarky response, but then he heard something from just behind her. He looked away, toward his bedroom door, and his eye widened when he saw Lucy standing there. Staring at him and Kinana, and what little exposed flesh was visible. Lucy couldn't see that he was still wearing pajama pants and socks - he'd forgone a shirt the night before only so he could feel Cubellios' scales on his skin again. She could definitely see a whole lot of Kinana's bare fucking back though.

And he knew, before the thought even settled in her mind, just what conclusion she was going to jump to. That's exactly what it looked like anyway.

Kinana peeked over her shoulder, then squeaked in alarm when she saw Lucy's wide eyes and shock-parted lips. "Lucy, it's-"

Lucy blinked repeatedly, looking from Cobra to Kinana and back, then a mischievous smile curled her lips. "None of my business," she laughed, already in the process of turning around to walk back toward his living room.

"Well, fuck," Cobra sighed. He sat up and ran a hand through his hair, then got up to find a shirt. "Lemme get your clothes for you."

"How did you not hear her?" she whimpered. He turned toward her after pulling his head through a thermal shirt, only to find her face buried beneath the blanket and only her bright red ears visible.

"Not a damn clue," he chuckled. "I'll be right back."

"Monty, you're home now. Why don't you come out of the blanket? Maybe Cobra can figure out what's wrong."
His brows furrowed and he rushed out of the bedroom on a direct path to the dining table where Lucy had set a fluffy pink blanket. "What the fuck do you mean?" he snarled, pushing her out of the way. He peeled back the top layer of the blanket and looked Monty over quickly. "What happened?"

"Nothing happened," she said, coming to stand next to him. When their eyes met, she winced. "He just hasn't moved a whole lot, and I don't know if there's something wrong, or if it's a snake thing."

'And I don't want to accidentally kill him and then get murdered for it.'

He shook his head and turned his full attention to Monty. "Kinana's dress is on the floor. Can you take it to her?" Once Lucy was out of the room, he sat down and brought his hand closer to Monty's snout. "What's going on, buddy? What's the matter?"

"We're not having sex," Kinana said once Lucy was in the room. "This… it's hard to explain."

"Kinana, what you and Cobra do in your spare time is really none of my business," Lucy giggled. "And I promise not to tell Mira that I found you here. Naked…"

"Talk to me," Cobra whispered. "Are you alright?"

Monty's head lifted and his tongue flicked out to test the air. "I missed you. Don't leave me behind again..."

Cobra frowned when he heard the sad warbling in the little snake's soul. "Did you not like it over at Lucy's?"

"Mommy's okay. She was sad though. She smelled sad, and… what's scared-sad?"

"Worried," he said gently. "She's worried about you."

He listened closer to Monty's soul, delving deeper to get to the memories he had of the night before and that morning. And all he kept hearing was the same thing. Monty had wanted him, and he'd been so sad and upset from the moment Cobra had stormed out of the guild that he hadn't known what to do. He'd wanted to know why Cobra left him behind with Lucy. He'd thought they would all spend time together, and that was why he wanted to go home with Lucy. The poor little guy had thought it meant Lucy would come to Cobra's apartment, and that they would all sit together and keep warm. But that hadn't happened, and Monty hadn't known what was really going on.

It was just like Kinana had said, and Cobra suddenly felt like the biggest piece of shit in all of Earthland. There he'd been, blaming his little friend for choosing Lucy over him when Monty hadn't known any better.

God, he was just an innocent little fucking baby. And he'd worried that Cobra didn't fucking love him anymore because he was an asshole.

"Monty, I didn't stop caring about you," Cobra said. He reached forward and gently stroked Monty's guild mark under his chin. He heard Lucy and Kinana walk out into the living room, but he didn't pay them any mind. Monty was more important. "I was upset."

"Why?" Monty slithered a little closer to his warm hand. "Was I bad?"

Cobra let out a soft sigh and rested his chin on the table so he could look directly into Monty's little red eyes. "No, you weren't bad. I just got upset."

"What's upset?"
"Sad," he said. "I was sad."

"Why?"

"Because it made me sad to hear you didn't want to come home." How could he not feel sad over something like that? Monty was supposed to be his friend.

"Why?"

Cobra knew the only way he could help Monty understand this was by being blunt about it, regardless of the audience he had. "Because I thought you didn't want to be with me anymore."

"Why?"

He closed his eye and felt Monty's tongue tickle across his scarred cheek. "Because I thought that you picked her over me. Just like you thought she picked that cat over you."

"But... I love Mommy."

"I know you do." It killed him inside, but he knew that Monty loved Lucy.

"And I love you."

Cobra let out a small smile at hearing that. "I love you too, Monty." He'd been so fucking angry the day before when he thought that the time he'd spent with Monty was all for nothing. It had fucking hurt to think he'd lose another friend in his life. He had so few of them, after all.

"I miss Mommy. Why can't Mommy come home, too? Like before?"

"Because she has her own place," he said. This shit needed to get handled. He had to understand that Cobra and Lucy weren't an item. They didn't live together, and they didn't have any feelings for one another aside from a mutual lusting after the other. God, what Cobra wouldn't give to get Lucy in his bed. Any bed. Shit, his kitchen counter would be fine, too. But he was waiting for her to make the first move, now that he'd given her the very obvious hints that he was, in fact, attracted to her. "Monty, we aren't together."

"Why?"

"Because we just aren't." It was that simple. He and Lucy were nothing more than teammates. And even that was a term he used loosely.

"Are you together with Cubellios? Is she my new Mommy?"

Cobra couldn't help but chuckle. "No, and no. Cubellios is different. She's like a big sister, remember?"

That was the closest he could come to describing what Kinana was for Monty. Or maybe an aunt, but the little snake had no idea what that sort of relationship even was. Siblings, he understood. Cobra had found out the night after bringing him back to Magnolia, that Monty had apparently eaten two of his brothers who didn't get out of their eggs fast enough.

Monty's snout pushed gently against his cheek. "If you and Mommy aren't together, why does she smell weird around you?"

"That... is not something you should worry about." Good fucking god, he was not getting into that conversation with this snake. Especially not when he could hear Lucy's neverending amusement
over the direction of this conversation that she was only hearing his side of.

"You smell the same around her... If I'm with Mommy, I want you too. She's happy with you there with me."

"That's fine. We can do that." Did he like it? No, not really. But Cobra just had to accept that Lucy was someone who was important to Monty. Well, he was going to be around her for the next five years anyway - what with his bullshit parole - so she was going to become a sort of permanent fixture in Monty's life for a time.

"... Daddy?"

Cobra's eye shot open to stare at the little snake who was only centimeters from his face. That was a definite first. Monty had never called him that before. He'd never really called Cobra anything, as far as he was aware. But that was usually because they were talking to each other. It was kind of a given that Monty was talking to him.

But to be called that...

Cobra slowly sat up and brushed his fingers along Monty's scales to coax him out of the blanket a little more.

"Why doesn't Mommy let me in the bath with her? You do."

He couldn't stop himself from laughing over that one. So she'd taken a bath, and hadn't let Monty in? That was just... kind of precious. A little. Then again, the only one who would understand that quirk of his would be the purple-haired woman standing a few feet away, waving to him and leaving his apartment so she could get changed before heading down to the guild. With Cubellios, it had just made sense to bathe with her around. They did everything together.

When he'd been out scouting and stopped for a quick dip in a lake to wash the sweat off of himself, she'd been there for him. She kept an eye out for trouble, even though he could hear anyone who might try to come for him.

But with Monty, it was just a habit. He had a snake, so he bathed with it. And Cobra had no problem admitting that he loved watching the little guy attack and try to kill squeaky toys over and over.

Cobra picked Monty up, then let him slither up and coil around his throat.

There was no getting past this fucking Mommy thing, it seemed. So Cobra was just going with the flow. There was no way to change Monty's mind about it. Not at all. It would save him a world of headaches if he just stopped trying to get Monty to call her Lucy. Besides, it could be funny to see her reaction.

"Mommy didn't let you in the bath like I do because she didn't know you like taking baths."

"And she doesn't tell stories."

"Mommy's still learning, Monty," he chuckled. "We can teach her, okay?"

"Daddy... Do you love Mommy?"

Cobra snorted. "Hell no, I don't love Mommy."

"But it's okay for me to love her?"
“Yeah,” he said, shaking his head. He turned in his chair to look at Lucy, with a grin stretching across his lips when he saw her wide-eyed, slack-jawed expression. He couldn't tell if she was horrified or confused - she kept switching between the two so rapidly, it was hard to keep track - but that fucking face was just too good for words. "It's perfectly fine for you to love Mommy. Just because you love Mommy doesn't mean you love me any less."

Lucy's cheeks flamed while she looked from Cobra down to Monty. She was sure the little snake was staring at her. "M-Mommy?" she finally sputtered.

Cobra shrugged while standing from his seat. "I gave up on trying to stop this shit," he said. "Now…"

Lucy took a small step back when he walked closer.

"Monty would like me to tell you that he wanted you to hold him more," Cobra said. "And that he likes being in the tub when you shower. And he likes it when I tell him stories."

"He what?!"

"If you plan on Monty-sitting again, I'd suggest some squeaky toys in a plastic bin that sticks to the corner." He pulled Monty from around his shoulders and held him out to Lucy. "Monty, since I haven't had my damn coffee yet, I need you to keep Lucy company while I get my morning shit situated."

"I'll stay with Mommy," Monty replied. His soul was positively preening when Lucy sighed and carefully took him from Cobra. "But I mean here. I'll stay here with her, Daddy."

Lucy's eyes narrowed slightly. "It's already eleven in the morning," she said. "Don't you usually get up around eight?"

"I was busy," he said, turning toward the kitchen. Her thoughts took a decidedly lewd turn, and he rolled his eye. "We were just fucking talking, you crazy bitch."

"Naked cuddling and pillow talk," she laughed, following behind him. Lucy hopped up onto the counter while he went about preparing a full pot of coffee. "I never pegged you for that kinda guy, Cobra."

"Naked, sort of," he chuckled. "Cuddling, no. And pillow talk… Unless you consider us catching up from the past seven fucking years pillow talk, then that's a hard no."

He was just a little surprised that Lucy didn't push the issue after that. She went oddly quiet. Her soul didn't really give him much of a clue at first. Not until he caught a quick glimpse of her and Monty sitting on the counter together. Her hands lifted, and he saw Monty coiled around her wrists and lifting his head to kiss her nose. And then Cobra heard it.

'I'm happy they found each other. Maybe it's just some weird residual snuggling thing from how they were when she was a snake. I wonder if Cobra snuggled with Cubellios. I can't picture it being comfortable."

He cleared his throat and went to the refrigerator. "Pancakes or waffles?"

"I'm oka-"

He glared at her, shutting her up in an instant. "You didn't eat breakfast because you were worried about Monty's behavior," he said. "And you thought that one night with you had made him fucking
suicidal. For doing a surprisingly adequate job of not killing him, I'm making a breakfast of your fucking choosing. From the options I just gave you." If he was cooking it, he was going to have a say in the menu. "Also, I really don't feel like making a damn omelette."

Instead of arguing with him over it, Lucy just laughed. She didn't look at him, but kept her gaze trained on Monty in a mini staring contest. "You just can't decide if you want pancakes or waffles more, can you…"

He was silent so long that she eventually looked at him. His expression was dead serious as he said, "Not. At. All."

"Waffles, then," she said and looked back at Monty. After a moment, she frowned. "When did you get a waffle-maker? Just a couple days ago, you were complaining about the lack of waffles in your life."

"Yesterday when I was pissed off." Cobra went about grabbing the ingredients he needed, then pulled out the waffle-maker he'd bought. It wasn't anything fancy, but it got the job done and didn't burn his food.

Lucy rolled her eyes and smiled down at Monty. "Your Daddy is weird," she giggled quietly.

"I fucking heard that," Cobra spat over his shoulder. "No strawberries for you, wench!"

Lucy's eyes widened and she spent the entire time he was cooking, begging his forgiveness. All so she could have strawberries on her waffles. Cobra hadn't been serious in the first place, but he did enjoy making her work to get what she wanted. And the fact that she'd actually kissed Monty - at Cobra's instruction, as a way to get her fucking strawberries - was priceless.

Doranbolt accompanied Lahar from Era to the mountain range a few miles away from Crocus. They met up with Makarov and Freed, gave Fairy Tail's S Class candidates a formal greeting and explained the rules that would confine them to the area until the trials were complete. The guild had been granted a grand total of 53 miles worth of mountains to hold their promotion trials. It was agreed that any damages that occurred would be waived, but only because Lamia Scale was using the same mountain range the following week for their own S Class trials. Jura Neekis had stepped up and agreed to use his magic to fix it all when they were finished.

"Ah, to be a Wizard Saint."

While Lahar worked with Freed to write Jutsu Shiki runes, Doranbolt decided that it would be good to get a better idea of just how Cobra was doing in Fairy Tail. And the best person to ask about the Poison Dragon Slayer was Makarov, who was already in the process of overseeing his current S Class mages while they set up the base camp.

Doranbolt made his way over to them, then leaned against the large boulder the older mage had settled himself on.

"Ah, Doranbolt," Makarov said. "How is everything?"

"Just fine," he said. "Though I do have some questions I was hoping you could answer for me." He didn't see the point in beating around the bush with small talk. They both knew it would be a load of horse shit that was just leading up to what he really wanted to talk about anyway.

"I believe I know what this is about," Makarov said gravely, causing Doranbolt to glance at him. "The girls should be wearing bikinis for this."
He snorted at the cheeky grin he received from the older man. "I never said that."

"No," Makarov chuckled. "What are your questions?"

"It's about Cobra."

"I see..." Makarov's easy smile tightened into a suspicious frown. "Well, I've put everything in those reports that are required."

"And we both know that there's things you'll leave out of them, to protect him," Doranbolt said. Makarov got ready to speak, but he waved the older man's objections away. "This is off the record, Master Dreyar. There have been some changes happening down at the Council, and I'm curious about how his parole is really going."

"What sorts of changes?"

"Those are classified," he chuckled. They weren't classified, but he wasn't going to broadcast the failings of the Council to anyone who wasn't already in the know. Not even Lahar knew what he was considering, but that might change. He wasn't sure yet. "So, aside from the very dry reports you've given us, what can you tell me about him?"

"Well, Cobra is very reserved," Makarov said slowly. He lifted a pipe that Doranbolt hadn't seen before and puffed on a bit of tobacco. "He hasn't really opened up to anyone in the guild."

"And his interactions with his team?"

"They've all had to adjust, I'm sure," Makarov smirked. "The damages alone are a testament to that."

"I didn't really peg him for the Fairy Tail Property Damage type."

"Oh, no," he laughed. "According to Lucy, the damages were from Natsu and Gray. They've been getting used to working together with him as part of their unit."

"Speaking of Lucy," Doranbolt said carefully. "Is she really alright with him being around? After everything that happened before..."

"She seems to have done what she does best," Makarov said. He puffed on his pipe again, letting the statement hang in the air between them. "Quite the forgiving young woman."

Doranbolt really wasn't getting anywhere with this. Maybe that was what the wily little guild master was going for. He wasn't going to sell out one of his children. He wouldn't outright lie, but he was also smart enough - and conniving enough - to twist the truth just enough to keep even Cobra from getting into trouble.

What Doranbolt needed was something solid to work from. "Is there anything you can tell me? Anything at all?" After a moment, he added, "I'm not trying to revoke his parole. I just want to make sure things are working out well for him."

"You want to know how he's adjusting to being a law-abiding citizen?"

Doranbolt nodded. Finally, they were getting somewhere.

"From my understanding, there are no complaints from his neighbors or his landlord," Makarov said. "From what I've seen in the guild, he's a bright young man who has to find his own path. We're giving him this chance at life, and it seems to me that he's latched onto it. He's given me no reason to
suspect any foul play from him."

"So, he's really doing alright?" Doranbolt pressed. "There's nothing that concerns you about his behavior?"

"Well, Lucy would be a better judge of that," Makarov chuckled. "She's been appointed as his parole officer, in a sense. They arrive at the guild together nearly every morning - or within a few minutes of each other. I do believe he even allowed her to stay at his apartment when her own was being renovated."

"More damages from your guild?" Doranbolt teased. Luckily, Makarov laughed with him.

"No, just the normal hazards of shoddy plumbing."

"So Lucy spends time with Cobra," Doranbolt mused. "And she doesn't feel threatened or unsafe around him?"

"If she did, then I never would have agreed to forcing them to work on a team together," Makarov said. Slowly, he turned to fully face Doranbolt. "And I wouldn't have trusted Lucy to keep an eye on him while we hold the trials, if I didn't believe in her abilities as a mage."

All the humor faded from his face. And probably all the blood too. Because when he thought about it - and when he looked around to find the S Class candidates milling about - Doranbolt realized that the only ones from Team Natsu who weren't present were Lucy, Happy, and Cobra. That wasn't good. The only other mage in Fairy Tail who stood a chance against the Poison Slayer was Gajeel Redfox, being a Dragon Slayer and previous S Class mage and all.

Lucy was alone in Magnolia with Cobra. She was keeping an eye on the man who'd been a criminal his entire life. A violent criminal. And there was no guarantee that she would really be safe now that her guild's strongest members were away. Cobra could have been playing nice and biding his time, waiting for this exact moment to enact some dastardly scheme.

Deep down, Doranbolt wanted to believe that Cobra wasn't planning anything. But that conversation with Richard from the day before had been rattling around in his head nonstop. How the Seis had been brought together, how they were trained to use their magic and survive in general. How they'd made a plan to break out of prison together, and had succeeded in pulling it off. How they thrived in their own strengths and worked as a solid team to try taking over the world.

It hadn't helped that Midnight had been less than forthcoming with any answers to his questions. And when he'd seen Angel in the infirmary, she hadn't really seemed all that interested in conversation. It could have been because of the feeding tube that had been shoved up her nose, though. She'd told him that it was hard to keep food down when she chewed it, so they were giving her a liquid diet until she was a little stronger. After that, he'd ended up just sitting with her, holding her thin hand and letting her rest her throat. Apparently, the tube was uncomfortable. He still wasn't sure how she hadn't been gagging the whole time.

At least he'd been able to sweet talk the nurses into letting Angel have a television to keep the boredom at bay while she was awake.

"Master, we're ready for you," Mira called out from the tents that had been set up.

"That's my cue," Makarov chuckled. He paused in jumping down from the boulder to look at Doranbolt. "You could always pop into town and check on my children. Make sure they're not causing too much trouble while I'm away."
Doranbolt smirked and nodded. He waited for Makarov to make his way over to the tents, then glanced around. Lahar was still busy with Freed. That Jutsu Shiki of his was serious business, and he knew from experience that it would take a good portion of the day to finish it. And Doranbolt was of absolutely no help when it came to runes. He was actually pretty hopeless with them, much to Lahar's chagrin.

So, he figured it wouldn't be that bad of an idea to do just what Makarov suggested. He could pop into Magnolia and check things out. There was a former member of the Oracion Seis on parole there, after all. He could chalk it up to a random visit or something. Not that Cobra would believe it if he listened close enough - which, Doranbolt knew he would - but still. It made him feel better to have an excuse to be there.

So, he channeled his magic and closed his eyes, then Direct Lined straight into Cobra's living room. It wasn't the most polite way to do things, he knew, but that was the point of it being a surprise. If Cobra had a chance to hide anything while Doranbolt waited at the door, then he'd never know about it. The man was probably a master of deceit.

His eyes opened, then rounded in horror at the sight before him.

"I'm gonna fucking kill you," Cobra snarled from his place on the floor. Lying on top of Lucy with his arm wrapped tightly around her throat from behind.

That was all Doranbolt needed to see for his feet to propel him forward, and his hands to rip Cobra away from the blonde who wasn't moving. In his haste, he didn't take notice of their state of dress. Not Lucy's sweatpants and fuzzy socks, or Cobra's black and grey pajamas. He also didn't see the way she rolled onto her back to stare up at him in surprise as he rounded on the sneering Poison Dragon Slayer. "I should've known you'd try something as soon as your team was away!" Doranbolt shouted.

Cobra's face relaxed and his head tilted to one side. And then he smirked. "Oh?" he asked, crossing his arms over his chest. "And what was I trying to do?"

"You were trying to kill Lucy!" Doranbolt yelled, motioning to the blonde who was still just lying on the floor. Gaping at him. "This is a clear violation of your parole, Cobra. I'm going to have to take you back to prison for this!"

And here he'd been so optimistic when the day had started. Doranbolt had assumed that things were looking up for Cobra, that he would be able to get through his parole and be a regular mage who didn't break the law. Who didn't try to murder his own teammates.

"I don't see why I should go back to prison," Cobra chuckled. How could he not see it, though? Was he really so far gone that he couldn't understand that murder had repercussions? Doranbolt just couldn't understand how they'd missed this. Something so crucial, and it was right under their noses the whole time!

Maybe he should have been given a psychological evaluation before being released to Fairy Tail…

"She's fine," Cobra said.

"Because I came in here and stopped you," Doranbolt shot back. He reached down and grabbed the handcuffs that he knew wouldn't do a damn thing to hold Cobra. Assuming he could even get them on Cobra's wrists. "Who knows what would have happened if I hadn't decided to drop by?"

"She would've been fine."
Doranbolt took a chance and turned toward Lucy to make his point. She hadn't made a sound since he'd arrived. He'd assumed she was unconscious, but instead of her limp body sprawled across the floor, he found her wide eyes staring up at him. And instead of gratitude for being saved from certain doom in her eyes, she was just surprised while she stared at him. He would have settled for upset at being attacked, in all honesty. Anything but surprise, because surprise just didn't make sense. Well, maybe it did a little bit. It wasn't as though anyone had been expecting him to show up and rescue her.

But she still wasn't saying anything. Or doing anything.

Finally, Cobra rolled his eye and interrupted the staring contest in his living room. "She said that she could get out of a rear naked choke. I called bullshit."

Doranbolt rounded on Cobra once more with a frown. "Then why were you pinning her to the floor, Cobra?"

"Have you fucking met her?!!" Cobra gestured wildly to Lucy - which was more of his hand making a single wave in her general direction. "This bitch is a walking fucking calamity with two left feet. She slipped because she's wearing those godforsaken socks on my wood floors, and dragged my ass down with her."

Doranbolt knew from experience that even regular socks on a polished wood floor could make the most graceful individual into a dundering mess, courtesy of being Lahar's caretaker during his triennial cold. The poor sap was helpless, since he somehow managed to only get sick once every three years, but he'd been even more helpless while stumbling around his home in socks with a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. It was the only time Doranbolt had ever seen his best friend fall flat on his ass. And he'd been sworn to never speak of it to anyone.

Based on the way Cobra was suddenly smirking at him, Doranbolt knew he'd heard it. And that he would find some way to use it in some sort of evil scheme in the future.

"So, why didn't you just let go when she fell?" Doranbolt finally asked, receiving a glare in return from the Poison Dragon Slayer.

"I wasn't letting her get out of it that fucking easy, you dumb shit." He paused, then added, "Why are you even here?"

Doranbolt knew it was a trap. Cobra had already heard the truth, that he was literally coming to check on everything now that Makarov and most of Team Natsu was away from Magnolia. There really wasn't any point in lying about it, or trying to make up some excuse.

"Of course," Cobra muttered. He rolled his eye again and went to the kitchen, leaving Doranbolt and Lucy in his living room.

Doranbolt sighed and turned back to Lucy and extended his hand to help her stand up. That was when he really took note of her state of dress. And how comfortable it was. He couldn't understand why she was wearing a tank top with sweatpants and fuzzy pink socks at two in the afternoon. Cobra's apartment was definitely toasty compared to the chill in the air out in the mountains where he'd just come from, but it almost looked as though she'd been there for some time.

She took his hand and stood, then bent down and picked up a freaking snake from the floor. Doranbolt cringed when he saw her pull the pale serpent up to her chest. His discomfort was made even worse when it turned toward him and its creepy little forked devil tongue flickered out in his direction.
"Monty, this is Doranbolt," Lucy said while he coiled around her wrist. She turned to Doranbolt. "This Monty, our newest member."

Doranbolt's eyes widened when the snake lifted its head to show off a fuschia Fairy Tail guild mark. Did this thing actually understand them? That was... disturbing. Then again, Cobra had owned a snake seven years ago, so it stood to reason he would've gotten a new one. Maybe the nickname was more than just a name after all. "Why are you over here, anyway?" he asked her.

She noticed the way he was staring at how she'd rolled the waistband of her sweatpants. "Monty wanted me to sleep over last night. It's a lazy day today."

He literally had no response for this. "And where's Happy?"

"He's with Lisanna."

"And you're fine with staying over here?"

Lucy laughed and rubbed under Monty's chin. "Our team is off doing S Class trials," she said. "I was bored, and Master told me to keep an eye on Cobra."

"As if she could do a fucking thing about my plot to destroy the world!" Cobra shouted from the kitchen.

Doranbolt jolted and rushed off toward the kitchen. "What plot?!"

What he found wasn't what he'd expected in the slightest. Cobra stood in front of one counter, pulling a piping bag full of royal purple icing from a cup and tying the top closed. Nearly six dozen cupcakes were set on stacked cooling racks to his left, and a bowl of bright red sprinkles sat just in front of him.

Cobra lifted a cupcake and slowly iced it, then dipped and rolled the iced top in the sprinkles. He looked into Doranbolt's eyes. "This plot," he said with a smirk. "I'm going to destroy Fiore. One fat ass at a time."

Doranbolt jumped when Lucy brushed past him and hopped up onto the only open space on Cobra's counter. She still had the snake on her arm, but once she was settled it slithered up her arm and under her hair. Just watching it gave him the creeps. She leaned over to the large bowl of icing that hadn't been put into the piping bag, and swiped her finger through it.

Before her hand was clear, Cobra grabbed a freshly washed whisk and threw it at her forehead. "You're gonna get a fat ass first if you don't stop eating all my shit!"

"It's yummy," she mumbled around her finger. Lucy frowned and looked down at Monty, already reaching into the bowl to get more icing on her finger. Cobra didn't even try to stop her that time.

"At least use the other fucking bowl," Cobra muttered. "You know, the one that's just extra fucking icing for your rolie polie ass to eat? So you'll leave my good icing the fuck alone?"

Doranbolt's jaw dropped when Lucy just laughed again and took the bowl Cobra handed to her. One that had two whole cups of light pink icing in it and a spoon. The spoon was probably there so she wouldn't use her finger.

She licked the icing off the spoon, then giggled when Monty's snout brushed against her cheek. "Can Monty have some, Cobra?"
"No, it'll make him sick." Cobra paused in icing a cupcake and looked at the snake. "I don't know why. I just know this much sugar isn't good for you."

Doranbolt wasn't sure what bizarro world he'd Direct Lined into, but he was positive that's what had happened. It had to be some strange world with a domestic Cobra who baked cupcakes and didn't try to murder people. With a weird Lucy who was comfortable having a snake slithering all over her. Maybe this was just a nightmare.

Cobra sighed and handed Doranbolt a cupcake. He smirked when the Council mage slowly took it and just fucking stared at the treat. "They're not poisoned. Adding most poisons to cupcakes actually fucks with the consistency."

Lucy hummed and put her icing bowl down when Cobra gave her a cupcake with a little extra icing on it. "You should try getting some nightshade berries and making them into a filling," she said. "Like that one guy last night on Cupcake Wars, remember?"

Cobra nodded and leaned against the oven. "The shepherd's pie cupcake with beef filling and mashed potato frosting."

"Ugh, you should make that too," Lucy groaned. She took a bite of her cupcake, and Doranbolt just watched in horror as her entire body relaxed the longer she chewed. "Why if dish sho good?!"

"Because I'm a culinary fucking genius," Cobra said. He shoved the whole cupcake into his mouth, puffing out his cheeks while he chewed, and went back to icing the rest of the cupcakes.

"Doranbolt, are you alright?" Lucy asked. "You're not eating your cupcake."

"I…" He honestly had no words. What the hell was he supposed to say about this whole situation?

"You'll say a whole lot of fucking nothing," Cobra said with a glare over his shoulder. Somehow, even while piping dark purple icing onto a chocolate cupcake, he was still pretty intimidating. Doranbolt had no idea how this didn't diminish the intensity of his glare. "The last thing I need is more people finding out I have this fucking hobby."

"And why, uh…"

Cobra nodded toward Lucy. "She said I needed a hobby, and murder isn't a viable option."

"So, baking was the next obvious choice," Lucy laughed. "I'm not complaining. I get to be the taste tester."

"With some goddamn love handles if you're not careful."

Lucy shrugged. "You'd totally fuck me even if I had love handles."

"Nope."

"Lies," she snorted. Doranbolt nearly dropped his cupcake when she wiggled her butt on the counter. "You'd totally tap my juicy booty."

"You see what I have to fucking deal with?" Cobra muttered to Doranbolt. "This is why I'm taking over the world with fucking cupcakes."

At this point, Doranbolt didn't even want to know why Cobra really was making six dozen cupcakes at two in the afternoon, wearing his pajamas. He'd come to check on the Poison Dragon Slayer, to
make sure he was behaving himself, and clearly he was. Unless Cobra had somehow turned Lucy into an accomplice, there wasn't anything to worry about.

"Well, alright," Doranbolt finally said. "Uh… sorry for popping in unexpected like this."

"Whatever," Cobra mumbled, already focused on icing the rest of the cupcakes. "Just get the fuck out already. Your pencil-prick lovesicle should be done with his runes soon."

"What?! How?!"

"He's falling madly in love with Freed's efficiency," Cobra shrugged. "They make a good team."

Doranbolt shoved the cupcake in his mouth and used his magic to teleport out of the kitchen, back to the mountain range where he was supposed to be. Lucy shook her head and got another mouthful of pink icing, then hopped down from the counter. "Do you think he figured out what's up?" she asked.

Cobra took a step to the side, then handed an iced cupcake to Lucy so she could dip it into the bowl of sprinkles. "Nope, he doesn't have a fucking clue." He paused and looked at the cupcakes on the cooling racks, then back toward the oven. "Is this enough?"

Lucy followed suit, counting quickly in her head. "It should be," she said. There were another four pans in the oven, giving them a total of 120 cupcakes that would need to get iced and sprinkled and boxed up. Luckily, Virgo was going to be doing the boxing and had offered to store them in the Spirit Realm for safekeeping. "I mean, I know Fairy Tail's crazy and all, but…"

"But it's Asuka's birthday, and she wants cupcakes," Cobra said. "And since Mira's busy with the S Class bullshit, I'm making them."

"Did she even tell anyone that she wanted cupcakes?"

"Nope," he said. Asuka knew that Mira wouldn't be there to make a cake for her birthday, and her parents couldn't really afford to get one from a bakery. Or maybe they could, but she never showed interest in a bakery cake.

"So you're making enough cupcakes for everyone who's still at the guild, plus some for Asuka to take home and have later?"

"Yep." She was the only damn kid in the guild, and while Cobra really never put any stock in birthdays - he'd never celebrated one since he didn't know when he was actually born anyway - he'd heard the saddest little ping in Asuka's soul the day before over not really getting to celebrate with everyone. So, he took it upon himself to at least give the little girl way too much fucking sugar. Her parents could deal with the aftermath.

"You do realize, this means everyone in the guild will know you can bake, right?"

Cobra shrugged and turned to take the cupcakes out of the oven when the timer went off. "I was coerced," he lied. "You strong-armed me into it with tears and whining. This all happened under extreme duress, and the only reason I agreed is because it was either bake the fucking cupcakes or murder you and end up on the run from those asshole Rune Knights."

He didn't need to see her to know that she was smiling. The happy trill in her soul was enough of a giveaway. And when she spoke, he could hear it in her voice. "You're right. That's exactly what happened."
So, I just realized it's almost the new year, and I only updated this story one time in 2018! Please forgive me! I started writing this on December 30th, and I hoped I could get it finished before 2019 came. But... Well, this is a monster of a chapter, and Cobra decided to keep changing shit on me as I was writing out the scenes I'd planned.

Lucy had just taken her first bite of sugary cereal when her front door opened with no preamble. Cobra walked inside with Monty's head peeking out of the collar of his coat, then closed the door behind him. She blinked and slowly chewed while watching him kick off his boots in a rush. "Morning to you, too," she mumbled around her breakfast.

She wasn't even going to question why he'd barged in like he owned the place. At least Cobra had used the damn door. And he hadn't even broken it down. He'd turned the knob, like a civilized human being!

"We need to talk."

"About?" She swallowed and took another bite, slurping the milk from her spoon before it could dribble down her chin.

"Christmas."

That was even more surprising. Sure, the holiday was only a few days away, and they were still waiting for the S Class candidates to return with news on whether or not anyone had made the cut, but she wasn't sure why he was bringing it up all of a sudden.

"I don't do fucking Christmas," Cobra said. He sat in an empty seat at the table before she could even gesture for him to do so. "Or any holidays."

"Why?" she asked with her mouth full of another bite. Just because he was trying to have a conversation with her didn't mean she was going to stop eating. She didn't want soggy cereal for a change.

He stared at her while she chewed. It wasn't a glare, per se, but it felt heavier than him just looking at her. Lucy hated it when he did that. "What reason would I have to celebrate?" he asked. She didn't try to answer though. "New Year - big whoop, I survived another year."

Her brows lifted as he counted off the holidays on his fingers.

"Valentine's? No fucking thank you. White Day? No one would give me chocolate, so there's no reason to reciprocate."

Lucy had the errant thought that she would give him chocolate for Valentine's Day. But just the normal, obligatory kind. Not the pretty ones that came in heart-shaped boxes to express her undying love for him.

"St. Patrick's Day? It's just a reason for people to drink. I can't get drunk, so it's fucking pointless."
Lucy hadn't realized he couldn't get drunk. Had he ever mentioned that? She took another bite of cereal and smiled when Monty slithered across the table and around her wrist.

"Greenery Day? Yay, we have nature," he said, rolling his eye. "Children's Day? I'm not a child. I don't have a child. I don't need to wish kids good luck on their future lives."

Honestly, she hadn't a clue what had gotten into him. This was bordering on psychotic rambling.

"Marine Day? I don't go to the beach, and I don't swim unless under extreme duress."

"Huh," she mumbled around her spoon. She hadn't known that either. At least she knew that Cobra knew how to swim.

"Respect for the Aged Day… What old person would want me to come by and give them fucking presents? None. And I don't have any family anyway. Then there's Thanksgiving. What should I be giving thanks for? Not a whole lot of fucking anything."

She put down her spoon and lifted her bowl to drink the milk once her cereal was gone.

"And then Christmas. Fuck Christmas," he sneered. "Giving presents to people I don't give a shit about, pretending the ones I got are just what I wanted? Yeah, no fucking thanks."

Lucy put her bowl down and took a deep breath. "Are you done?"

His eye narrowed at her. He grabbed her bowl and spoon, then got up from the table and poured himself a bowl of cereal as well. Lucy waited until he was sitting down again, viciously digging into his breakfast - she had a feeling he hadn't wanted to cook anything, and was using this as an excuse to raid her pantry - before she spoke.

"No one's forcing you to celebrate anything," she said. She winced when he glared at her. "Okay, so I was gonna ask everyone on the team if they wanted to come over here for a little present exchange on Christmas morning, but it's not set in stone!"

She'd wanted to do it before, her first year in the guild, but they'd missed Christmas entirely when they'd been frozen on Tenrou. Lucy didn't know whether or not her friends had their own Christmas traditions that they preferred. She just wanted to start something with the team, their own little tradition. It had been so long since she'd actually enjoyed Christmas...

"They'll say yes," Cobra muttered. "And if I don't come, then I'm an asshole who can't be a 'team player."

"Then come," she said with a shrug.

"I'm not buying presents for people I don't even fucking like."

"Then don't buy presents," she said. It wasn't all that difficult. Cobra was part of the team, so of course she would invite him. It didn't mean he had to give people presents.

"Then I'm a cheapskate," he said before drinking the leftover milk from the bowl. How had he eaten his cereal so quickly?

Her brow quirked at that. "Since when do you care about what other people think of you?"

"I don't," he snarled. It was decidedly less intimidating with him also having a milk moustache. Lucy smirked when he quickly wiped the back of his hand over his mouth.
"You know, Christmas isn't just about buying presents for people. You could make something instead."

"That would mean giving up my precious time to make shit for people I don't fucking like."

She threw her hands in the air and rolled her eyes. "Cobra, I don't know what to tell you then. Come or don't come. It's honestly up to you. If you give people presents, then fine. If you don't, then fine. I just wanted to celebrate with the team. It's not a big deal."

"Bullshit is it not a big deal," he said. Cobra leaned his elbows on the table and his eye bored into hers, holding her in place as her brows furrowed with confusion. "You've been planning this shit for three months. You wanna get the team together to get a fucking tree and decorate it all together. There's a whole notebook in your desk about how you want the tree to look, where you'll hang stockings. You're fucking obsessed with this shit."

Lucy's jaw dropped for only a moment before she scowled right back at him. "Stop being so nosy!"

"Kinda hard to not hear all your godforsaken fucking daydreaming," he snipped.

"Is that why you came over here?" she asked. "To squash all my stupid little dreams first thing in the morning? Couldn't wait until lunch, huh?"

Was it really so bad to love Christmas? Honestly, Lucy had thought she'd been doing a pretty good job of keeping it to herself. She hadn't really talked to anyone about the holiday, and she hadn't told anyone just why she liked it so much. But surely Cobra already knew.

"I do," he said. "Your mom made a huge deal out of it, got everyone who worked for your parents into the giving spirit, and all of your memories of spending Christmas with her are full of snow and nostalgic glittery bullshit. It's disgusting."

"Well, excuse me for preferring to remember the good times instead of focusing on how lonely I've been at Christmas ever since she died," she said.

"Well, I don't want any fucking part of this decorating and fa-la-la-ing shit you're planning," he snapped.

"Fine!" she shouted, rising to her feet to take the bowl to the kitchen. "Then don't be a part of it!"

"I won't!" Cobra shouted right back, standing as well. He reached out to Monty and waited for his little friend to slither back across the table and onto his arm. "And I'm only gonna come to the Christmas morning shit because I feel like it! And I'm gonna bake some shit to bring over, and there's nothing you can do about it!"

"Fine!" Lucy screeched as he whirled in place and stormed out of her apartment. It was while she was standing there, still heaving great, angry breaths and glaring at the door, that she realized what he'd said.

She blinked repeatedly, then dropped the empty bowl when she realized that he'd actually agreed to come over on Christmas morning. And that he was apparently planning on bringing something over to share with everyone.

As Cobra reached the bottom of the stairs and walked out of her apartment building, he snickered quietly to himself. That was too much fucking fun. Still, he supposed he would need to think of something to bring over to her apartment on Christmas morning.
The following morning, Lucy woke up to a piece of paper taped to her forehead. She frowned and carefully pulled the note off, then turned it over and read it.

*They're coming back today... Strike that. Tomorrow. Natsu and Freed are S Class. Gray is sulking no more than usual. Figured you'd wanna know.*

She smiled down at the slanted script on the paper. "Way to go, Natsu," she whispered.

Just as Lucy was about to toss the note on her nightstand, her thumb moved and she saw that there was a quickly scrawled post-script at the bottom.

*P.S. It's snowing like a motherfucker out there. I'm on your couch.*

She definitely appreciated the heads up from Cobra that she had company. Even though he'd crept into her room while she'd been sleeping and taped a freaking note to her face, at least she would be prepared to have someone sitting on her couch when she walked out. It was oddly thoughtful of him.

With a quiet groan, she stretched and got out of the bed. Once her bare feet touched the floor, Lucy wanted to crawl right back under the covers. The apartment was freezing, and her nice new wooden floor was colder than Gray's ice. If Cobra was there, then her apartment should have been nice and toasty. She shivered while tip-toeing across her room and grabbing her thick, fluffy robe and fuzzy socks.

Lucy wasn't sure why she'd thought it would be a good idea to wear just a t-shirt to bed, but she was definitely regretting it now that her knees were shaking. Still, she wasn't too concerned with putting pants on right then. Not with a robe around her. And more than likely, she'd be sitting on her couch soon and have a blanket on her legs again.

As soon as she opened the door, the smell of strong, rich coffee assaulted her senses. Her eyes slid closed and a soft smile curled her lips.

"On the table," Cobra called out. "Hurry the hell up and use the bathroom."

Lucy rolled her eyes and laughed quietly to herself - even though she knew he heard it - but she still sent him silent thanks for getting her a cup of coffee while making a beeline to the bathroom. Once finished, she came out to find him curled up with every spare blanket she owned wrapped around him on the couch. The sight was truly something to behold. And if she hadn't just emptied her bladder, then Lucy was sure the laughing fit that nearly dropped her to her knees would have had her pissing everywhere.

"Very funny," Cobra mumbled from the small gap in the blanket that she could just barely see his face through. "The boiler in my building froze last night, so I came over here to warm up."

"I thought you said it was snowing," she giggled. Lucy grabbed the mug that was still full and steaming and took a sip. Her nose wrinkled a moment later when she realized Cobra hadn't put any sugar in her coffee.

"You're out of sugar," he said. "And I didn't realize it was snowing until I was already outside."

"Why not just turn around?" she asked, setting the mug back down.

"I was already committed to it," he deadpanned. "And you have more blankets."

Lucy just rolled her eyes at the mound of fuzzy blankets on her couch housing the Poison Dragon Slayer. The lacrima television was off. He was quite literally sitting in a silent room, wrapped in
blankets, staring at nothing in particular. Maybe he was just listening to souls? Or trying to ignore them? Hell, for all she knew, Cobra was actually just trying to sleep on her couch for some reason.

Still, it didn't explain why her apartment was so cold.

"Same reason as mine," Cobra said. "Boiler froze. Your landlady's already aware and screaming at a plumber to wade through the fucking snow to get here and fix it."

"And your landlord-"

"Isn't in town until tomorrow and doesn't really give a shit, I guess."

Her lips turned down into a small frown. "Cobra…"

"You can turn on a show or something," he said. "It's too quiet in here."

"Is it safe to assume Monty's in there with you?" she asked, picking up the remote. At the sound of his name, the little albino snake poked its head out of one of the many folds in the blankets by Cobra's face. Lucy couldn't help but smile at how he looked, surrounded by green and pink. "Well, good morning, Monty."

Cobra was silent for a moment, simply watching Lucy turn on the lacrimavision and flip through the channels. "He says, 'Good morning, Mommy.'"

She snorted and finally turned back toward the couch. "I hope you're gonna let me in your fort," she said. "It's cold out here." Cobra didn't respond. He shifted beneath the blankets for a moment, and then part of the blankets lifted. Lucy smirked and sat down beside him, much closer than they normally did while sitting on the couch.

What she hadn't realized right away was that he'd moved all of the blankets. When she was settled, Lucy found herself pressed against his side, with no fabric between them except for his long sleeve shirt. But god, was he warm. Cobra's arm wrapped around her shoulders for only a moment to fix the blankets again, expertly draping them down over her legs and feet. She squeaked in alarm when she felt his fingers brush across her calf. Not because he'd touched her, but because his fingers were freezing.

How the hell was the rest of him warm, but his hands were still so cold?

"I get cold really easily," he said, pulling his arm back into his own personal bubble. It forced Lucy to move slightly, until she was leaned against his arm. But that was when she realized that his knees were pulled up to his chest. He'd quite literally curled himself into a ball on her couch.

It took some adjusting on her part to get comfortable, but eventually Lucy had created her own little face hole in the blankets so she could see the screen (and breathe). And oddly enough, Cobra didn't seem to mind her being this close to him for a change. Sure, she tended to sit between his legs while he was sprawled on the couch when they watched a movie together, but this was different. This time, she was nestled against his arm. Her legs were flush against his as though they were a pair of conjoined twins, attached at the hip.

But maybe he just wasn't saying anything about their current position for some other reason. She didn't want to make him uncomfortable, so maybe-

"You're fine," he mumbled. Her brows furrowed when he shivered and started rubbing his hands together.
"Is Monty alright?" she asked.

"Yeah, he's good," Cobra sighed. "The blankets are keeping him warm."

Lucy bit her lip for a moment, then tucked the remote into her robe and reached through the minimal space between them to wrap her fingers around his shaking hands. "Seriously, how long have you been in here?"

"Couple hours."

She frowned up at him and rubbed her hands a little more vigorously over his. Something really didn't sound right. He didn't seem angry, but his answers were short and to the point. And did he honestly mean that he'd been sitting here, on her couch, in complete silence for two hours? "Cobra, are… are you okay?"

Lucy had expected him to smirk down at her and make some snide comment. She'd expected him to roll his eye at her and sneer while teasing her about something and changing the subject. He didn't do any of it. Instead, Cobra sighed and let his head fall onto the back cushion of the couch.

"Don't worry about it."

"If you wanna talk-"

"I don't."

"Well, if you want me to leave you alone." Lucy paused when his slack grip on her hands tightened marginally. She looked up at his profile and found his eye closed and his brows furrowed.

"No," he said softly. "I just…"

Cobra was lost on how he could explain this. He didn't even want to explain it in the first place. He just didn't want to do a whole lot of anything. It was something he'd grown accustomed to, and usually he could just push through it and get shit handled. But he didn't have any job to do right then. There was no Brain looming over his shoulder to keep him working like some fucking dog, uncaring of whether or not he could physically or mentally deal with the concept of getting out of bed. There was no goal for him to accomplish now.

He questioned whether being free from prison and his old criminal lifestyle was really for the best. At least, when he'd been with the Oracion Seis, Cobra had something to work toward.

But he couldn't tell Lucy any of that. And he didn't want to tell her that he'd spent nearly an hour fighting to find the will to just sit up in his bed that morning. If it hadn't been for Monty saying that he was cold, Cobra would have probably still been in his bed.

Just the day before, he'd heard her thoughts concerning getting the team together for Christmas, and he'd lost his shit. Of course, he'd rationalized after the fact that her reaction was hilarious. But he'd literally stormed over to her apartment and acted like a lunatic.

Cobra hated it. It made him want to scream at himself, but he couldn't. He just couldn't be bothered with it.

Fuck, he hated this so much.

"You just…?" Lucy whispered.
Damn, he'd forgotten that he'd been talking to her. Slowly, his eye slid open and he peered down at her, wrapped up in the blankets and tucked against his side. Her hair was a messy mop of gold barely held in a bun on top of her head. Lucy looked as cozy as most of his body felt with her fluffy pink robe pushed up beneath her chin.

Still, the color of her hair had him thinking back to a happier time. One of few in his life. He could so clearly remember the first time he'd felt the sun shining down on his face after he and the others broke out of prison. He hadn't felt the sun's warmth for years, and even though there had been a huge part of his soul that ached that day over Cubellios not being with him, Cobra had still taken just a minute to stop in his trek away from Era and feel the sunlight and air and freedom that surrounded him.

"Mommy smells scared-sad... worried! She smells worried," Monty silently said while slithering through the blankets and curling up on Cobra's opposite shoulder. "Daddy, is she worried about you and how sad you are?"

It was barely there, but Cobra's lips lifted in a small, grateful smile when he felt his little friend's scales brushing against his cheek. It didn't last, but he relished in that little kernel of happiness that rolled around in his chest. It tried to swell as Lucy's warm hands stayed wrapped around his cold fingers. Something so small - so seemingly insignificant - and for some reason, right then, he latched onto it.

With one hand, he grasped her fingers, then pulled his other hand away. She went still, but he didn't blame her. Lucy was strangely good at doing nothing when he needed her to, and this was one of those times. His arm wrapped around her shoulders again, like it had when he'd been fixing the blankets to keep both of them warm. Except this time... he didn't reach for the blankets. His hand rested lightly on the fluffy fabric of her robe that covered her arm, and he pulled her just a little closer to his side.

Lucy seemed to get the idea though. With her legs pulled up and leaning against his, she tucked herself tightly against his side so her head rested in the little hollow just next to his shoulder.

"Back in your nook, huh?" he said with a small smirk.

"You remembered," she giggled, looking up at him again. His hand lifted from her arm and his fingers sifted through her hair, then he gently guided her back to lying on his shoulder.

Of course he remembered the night they'd been lying on a lounge together in Duke Junelle's manor. She'd been worried that the Duke might try something, and Cobra had stayed with her to make sure that didn't happen. He could still remember how it had felt to have her back pressed to his chest, her head lying on his shoulder, and his arms wrapped around her.

"Don't take away my nook," she yawned.

"It's my fucking body, asshole," he grumbled.

"Except this part," Lucy whispered, smiling while shaking her head slightly. "I dub this 'Lucy's Nook'. No trespassing signs will be posted within a fortnight."

Cobra wasn't sure what it was that had his nose nestling in her hair for a moment, but he didn't care. And Lucy didn't seem to mind as he quietly breathed in the morning dew and roses scent that was so unique to her. But this was a small comfort for him, and he could only reason that it was because he'd chosen to do it.
He chose to allow her under the blankets with him to keep warm. He chose how close she sat to him. Cobra was the one who had decided to wrap his arm around her and pull her closer, and he knew that he hadn't done it for them to share their body heat.

"I'm avoiding smoking in your apartment," he sighed against her hair. "You're welcome."

"That shitty, huh?"

Cobra let out a heavy sigh that he was sure held part of his fucking soul in it. He should have known that she would remember what he'd told her about when he smoked. *Just on shitty nights.* That was what he'd told her. And while this was a different kind of situation - he hadn't been having nightmares about Brain lately - it still left him feeling as though he was watching everything around him turn to shit and there wasn't a damn thing he could do to change it.

"Say no more," she said, pulling his hand that she still hadn't let go of closer to her chest and tucking it under her chin. And while they continued sitting on the couch for several hours after that - covered in blankets and completely silent, save for the quiet hum of voices on the lacrimavision - Cobra found himself reveling in the warmth of her skin against his knuckles and the softness of her hair as his fingers absently trailed over her scalp.

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The return of the S Class mages and the recent candidates had been slowed by the snow, even with Natsu's literally flaming excitement at getting back to the guild to tell everyone the good news. What they hadn't expected when they walked into the guild, however, was for a full party to be under way. Before Makarov could make the announcement, people cheered for Freed and Natsu equally. The two newest S Class members were dragged into rounds of drinking and congratulatory hugs. And when Makarov finally asked how they'd known, Lucy had been the one to quietly gesture to a dark corner of the guild. To Cobra, who was sitting with his feet kicked up onto a table and his eye closed. Just as Makarov smiled, the Poison Slayer lifted his hand in their direction and gave them both the middle finger, causing Makarov to laugh and shake his head.

The celebration for the guild's newest S Class members lasted until Christmas Eve. Lucy was sure it would have lasted even longer than that, but Mira was adamant about making the guild presentable for Christmas.

As she'd come to find out, Fairy Tail had its own form of a tradition for Christmas. For the people who really had nowhere else to go, and no one to spend the holiday with, it was a warm building full of family.

Erza had been the one to tell her that, when there had been a lot of children in the guild - like herself, Natsu and Gray, and even the Strauss siblings - Makarov had made a show of dressing up as Santa and handing out presents from beneath the 20-foot Christmas tree in the center of the guild hall. It had changed over the years as they grew older, but he still made sure to give a present to every person in the guild. Luckily, she supposed, that wasn't supposed to happen until around noon on Christmas. It gave the adults with families a chance to spend the morning at home, watching their kids open presents, or even nursing a hangover as needed.

It also meant that, when she'd pulled her team to the side to ask if they would spend Christmas morning with her to exchange gifts, they'd all agreed.

Natsu's childlike smile was so bright it had Lucy laughing and pulling him into a hug. Gray had gone quiet, but he still smiled when she'd said that they were her family, and she wanted to make lasting memories with them. Even Erza's bone-crushing hug while wearing her armor was worth it. They'd all agreed to be at her apartment around nine. It would give everyone time to wake up and get their
own morning routines finished. She already knew that Natsu was more likely to sleep in because of
the cold, while Gray would probably be up around dawn. Erza woke up every morning at seven,
unless they were on a job. So, really, nine o'clock was the time they would be getting started. More
than likely, her teammates would be at her apartment well before then.

That just left one last person for Lucy to talk to. Sure, he probably already knew the plan - he'd
known before she'd even opened her mouth, and he'd already said that he was going to come over -
but she still wanted to formally extend the invitation to Cobra. Except she hadn't seen him at all on
Christmas Eve. He hadn't come down to the guild, and it was nearing sunset.

Then again, Cobra had been… off for the past few days. Ever since they'd sat on her couch, all
snuggled up under the blankets, she'd noticed there was something different about him. He was
quieter than normal. He didn't take the obvious goading Natsu was doing over becoming S Class,
and it didn't descend into a brawl. Cobra had simply nodded, said he knew before Natsu did, and
went right back to looking at Monty who kept slithering over his hands.

When Lucy stopped by his apartment, he didn't answer the door. She used her key and went inside,
only to find that he wasn't home. The lights were off. She checked his bedroom as well, just to see if
he'd turned himself into another blanket cocoon, but he wasn't there. There was no way he could be
out shopping though. The stores had all closed early so shopkeepers could be home with their
families. But maybe he was just on his way home from shopping? That was a possibility.

As Lucy sighed and left the apartment, she didn't notice Monty peeking his head out from behind
one of the sofa cushions. Instead, she left the building and tucked her chin down into her scarf while
walking toward the shopping district in town. If Cobra was on his way home, then they would run
into each other, and she could invite him over for the team's Christmas get-together. And if she
couldn't find him, then Lucy was going to have to think of something else.

For the most part, it wasn't really all that difficult keeping track of Cobra's whereabouts. He was
either home, at her apartment or the guild, or he was shopping for one knick-knack or appliance that
he needed. If it wasn't any of those, then they were on a job. He'd been part of the guild for nearly
two months by that point, and not once had she needed to search for him. The Poison Dragon Slayer
had been behaving himself while on parole.

By the time she reached the shopping district with its darkened windows and emptying streets, Lucy
hadn't seen him. There were still a few stragglers on the street, heading home with their arms full of
bags of last-minute Christmas presents. Here and there, as she walked down the snowy road, she saw
couples huddled together for warmth as they strolled by. Lucy smiled when she saw two old men
with greying hair walking arm in arm and laughing quietly together.

She sighed and continued walking. Wandering was probably more accurate. She didn't know where
Cobra could be at, and she was tempted to just go home and call it a night. Maybe she could drink
some hot cocoa, watch The Grinch, and finish wrapping up the few presents she'd yet to deal with.
Cobra knew what time to come over. Maybe he was just avoiding her.

For the briefest of moments, Lucy wondered if he already had plans with someone. What if he'd
actually gotten a date? Her lips pursed as she let the thought roll around in her head. She couldn't
picture Cobra going on a date, to be perfectly honest. He just didn't really seem like the dating type,
what with his aversion to people being in his personal bubble. But if that really was the case, what
kind of person would he take out? And what did he even consider an appropriate date?

"I don't date."

Lucy screamed and spun to find the Poison Slayer smirking down at her with his arms crossed over
his chest. She drew several people's attention, and Lucy's cheeks burned brightly when the elderly
couple paused to chuckle at her.

"You really should be more aware of your surroundings," he said. "I've been following you for ten
minutes already."

"You - wha - how?!"

Cobra blinked slowly. "Anyway, I need you to come with me."

"Why?"

"Because you're my parole officer," he chuckled. "I'm not gonna be in Magnolia, exactly, so you're
supposed to escort me."

"But it's Christmas Eve," she said. Lucy groaned when he simply shrugged and started walking
away. She didn't want to follow Cobra anywhere. All she'd wanted was to invite him over and head
home. Still, she rushed after him. "And where have you been anyway? I've been looking all over for
you."

"You didn't look in the woods."

"The woods are outside of town," she said, narrowing her eyes at him. "You can't leave town-"

"I never said I did," he said. "But if you'd gone in that direction, you would've found me." He
smirked down at her again, and even though Lucy was glaring up at him, she still noticed the way
his breath puffed out in little silvery clouds from the chill in the air. "Now, what do you want?"

"I wanted to make sure you're still coming over tomorrow morning."

"Nine o'clock is when the festivities begin," he said, rolling his eye. They turned the corner and
walked down a thin sidewalk, through a residential area that was a little more upscale than Lucy's
apartment. "I really don't want to be there."

"Oh," she said, staring down at her boots.

"But I'll come," he finished. "Monty's excited about it."

"Did you explain to him-"

"No," he said. "I didn't explain why people give each other presents on Christmas." His smirk turned
a little more playful then. "That's your job, as his mother."

Lucy laughed and tried to smack his arm, but he shuffled just barely out of reach. One of these days,
she was going to hit his arm. "Well, I hope he likes what I got for him."

"I'm sure he will," Cobra said.

They rounded another corner, and Lucy smiled when she saw Laxus walking toward them. "Hey,
Laxus!"

He pulled off his headphones and stopped when they were close enough. "Hey, Blondie," he said,
than looked at Cobra. The two Slayers shared a quiet look that left Lucy frowning. Finally, Laxus
looked back at her. "What're you up to?"

"Cobra's taking me out to the woods," she said, then failed at stifling a laugh. "Now that I think
about it, you may be the last person to see me alive."

"It does sound like the beginning of one of those shitty horror movies," Cobra chuckled. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"Class," Lucy said, nodding sagely.

"Right," Laxus drawled. He looked at the pair of mages in front of him, then shook his head. "Well, try not to get murdered all alone in the woods. I'm heading home."

Lucy blinked in surprise while looking around them again. She hadn't really ever thought about where Laxus might live. Part of her had assumed that he still lived with his grandfather, but she wasn't actually sure where Makarov lived. With the exception of the people on her team, Gajeel, and the women who lived in Fairy Hills, Lucy didn't really know where anyone in the guild lived. But for some reason, they all knew exactly where she lived.

Sometimes she wondered if there was something written on a bathroom stall concerning her address.

"Alright," she said, coming back to herself with a shake of her head. She smiled up at Laxus. "Merry Christmas, Laxus. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah, Merry Christmas," he muttered. Laxus put his headphones back on then walked past them with his hands in his pockets.

"With the amount of pussy he gets, you'd think he would've figured out how to be less socially fucking awkward," Cobra said as they started walking again.

Lucy just laughed and shook her head. She really hadn't wanted to know just how sexually active Laxus was. "I think it's kinda sweet," she said.

"Literally every conversation with him is like that."

"How would you know?" she laughed. "You don't talk to anyone."

"That's what you assume." Cobra slowed his steps as they finally reached the edge of the city. There was a small clearing of a couple hundred meters covered in a thick coating of snow, and just beyond that were the woods. The towering oak trees' bare branches cast spiderwebbed shadows across the ground. "Come on, it's just a little further."

Lucy squeaked when his fingers wrapped around her hand and he pulled her over to a shoveled path in the snow that led into the woods. She wasn't entirely sure just what he had planned, or why he had to do this the night before Christmas.

"Because if it doesn't happen tonight, then it won't happen at all," Cobra said. He took the lead as the path in front of them thinned slightly. There was still enough light that Lucy didn't need to worry about not being able to see, but if they were going to be out really late then she couldn't guarantee she'd make it through the night unscathed. Hopefully she wouldn't also be running for her life.

"And why's that?" Lucy nearly stumbled over a root, but quickly righted herself and continued following along behind him.

"You'll see."

"Are you sure we're not in a horror movie?"
Cobra didn't answer her right away. He pushed through a dead bush and moved to the side, and she stepped out into an empty clearing. Well, at first glance, it was empty. The longer she looked around, the more she noticed. And the more she recognized it. This was the lake Natsu and Happy sometimes went to when they were off fishing, except the water had frozen over in a way that sparkled with the waning sun. She could see where a log had been dragged from the forest, through the snow and over to the nearby bank, and several torches that had been set up and lit around the lake to help keep the area illuminated as the sun sank below the horizon.

"Cobra-"

He took her hand again, gently this time with his fingers lightly wrapped around her gloved palm, and led her over to the log. "If we waited until tomorrow, the sun might've melted the ice too much."

"Wh-What is all this?" Lucy jolted when they stopped by the log and he gestured for her to sit. She wasn't sure what to say, so she settled herself on the wood - being careful not to put too much weight on it at first in case it couldn't hold her. When Cobra knelt in front of her, Lucy blushed, and it only deepened when he picked up her foot and started untying her boot laces.

"I bake a lot now," he said softly, not looking at her and instead pouring all his focus on removing her boot. "And I'm gonna be making shit for the rest of the team to give to them tomorrow."

"They'll like that," she said.

"Titania's easy. Give her anything sweet and with strawberries, and she's a fucking goner. Salamander's the same, except he's more of a garbage disposal that prefers spicy bullshit. The Popsicle likes minty shit, and Happy likes fish." He finally pulled off her boot and adjusted her pale green sock so it stretched over her ankle. "But you're different."

"How?" she asked. Her toes curled against the cold air around them, but then his hands covered her foot.

"You eat everything I make," he said. "I couldn't just bake something and be done with it."

"You could," she said. "I don't mind. I really do like-"

"I know," he chuckled. "But then you had to go and be… yourself, I guess…” She found it rather odd that he wouldn't look at her. "When I was wrapped up in your blankets."

Lucy blinked in surprise and watched as he lifted her other foot and took her boot off. Cobra set them both to the side and pulled a box she hadn't noticed before closer while he kept her feet propped up on his knees.

"So, this is your Christmas present," he said. Her brows shot up when he pulled out a pair of light blue ice skates that looked to be her size. The blade beneath was just barely curved, and only a hair longer than the boot. Her brows pinched when she noticed the little jagged edge to the front of the blade. What the hell was that for?

"Cobra, that's really sweet, but I-I…"

He chuckled and loosened the laces on the skate, then slipped her foot into it and started to tighten them. "I know you never learned how to skate," he said. "Your mom was supposed to teach you."

"So I can't really, um…” Lucy bit her lips with unease. Her mother had promised, when Lucy turned ten she would teach the little girl how to ice skate. Layla had died only days after her tenth birthday, so the following winter had been spent largely indoors.
"I learned how when I got out of the Tower," Cobra said softly. He slid her other foot into its skate and tied up the laces.

Granted, the only reason he'd learned how to do it was another form of training. Brain had wanted his child soldiers to be able to move on any terrain they came across. And Cobra, who hadn't been nearly as graceful or able to stay upright as Racer and Angel, had been forced to walk barefoot across the ice while Brain whipped him. It had taken him twice as long to learn, but even after Brain moved on to other training tactics, Cobra had kept at it. He hated the cold, but he loved being able to glide across the ice.

"So, my gift is that I'll teach you," he said.

Lucy was speechless as he sat down beside her on the log and removed his shoes. He took another pair of ice skates from the box - these ones a dark, weathered red, and without the little jagged bit of metal on the front of the blades - and expertly tied them up. She was silent as he stood and rocked from one foot to the other. Then he looked back at her as though he expected her to stand up as well.

She stayed right where she was, and looked over at the lake. "Are you sure it's safe?" she asked.

"Yeah," he chuckled, "I tested it earlier." When she still didn't move, Cobra sighed. "I'll do a lap around it, and you can see for yourself."

Lucy sat there on the log and watched as he carefully walked the few steps to the frozen lake. Cobra glanced back at her over his shoulder and smirked while taking the first step onto the ice. His white coat billowed behind him as he turned right and started to glide across the ice. He tucked his hands into his pockets and she found herself mesmerized by the way his legs moved so gracefully, each step flowing flawlessly into the next as though he was just going on a nice little stroll. Even with the sun sinking lower in the sky, the torches around the lake gave off just enough light that she was still able to see him (and the ice) clearly.

Cobra didn't do any tricks. There were no beautiful twirls, flashy jumps, or dazzling displays of ice flying from his skates when he came back around to stop in front of her. Cobra simply slid to a stop at the edge of the lake with one foot turned sideways behind him, grinned down at her flabbergasted expression, then stepped onto the bank again.

"Your turn," he said. "Don't be a chickenshit."

Lucy huffed when he was directly in front of her. She slowly stood and wobbled almost instantly. Cobra made this look so easy! But all she could focus on was the fact that the only thing keeping her from eating snow was a thin bit of metal, standing on its side, under her feet. Lucy's hands shot out in front of her, and Cobra laughed while easily catching her.

"No laughing!" Lucy whined. "Cobra…"

"Fine," he said. "I'll try not to laugh."

"Bet you won't try very hard," she muttered.

"Probably not," he chuckled. She sent him a withering glare, but he didn't seem all that fazed by it. Instead, Cobra took her hands and placed them by the lapels of his coat, then held onto her shoulders. "Walk slowly," he said. "Just baby steps right now."

"Baby steps," she whispered to herself. "I can do that."

"My eye is up here," he said as he took his first step backwards. Lucy's head shot up and she looked
into his eye while mirroring him. They took two more steps before his skates touched the ice. "Next step, you'll be on the ice."

"Wait," she said quickly. "I don't think-

"And step," Cobra said, pulling her away from the solid ground. Lucy yelped and latched onto his coat with her gloved hands. One foot stepped out onto the ice while the other stayed anchored on land. "Come on, now. Don't you trust me?"

"That's not a wise question, considering I'm still not sure if you're planning on making me star in a Slasher flick!" she screeched.

Cobra smirked down at her and pulled her closer to him. Lucy's face collided with his chest, but he braced himself for the added weight when her feet slipped out from under her.

"Fuck! Hold me up!"

He couldn't help himself. Cobra laughed as her arms wrapped around the back of his neck and her skates slid one way and another across the ice. "Relax," he chuckled. "I won't drop you. Now, get your bearings and put the tip of one of your skates on the ice." He waited for her to follow his instructions, then added, "And get your other foot flat. There you go."

It took several tries, but eventually both of Lucy's feet were under her and she was standing on the ice. She gasped when Cobra's skate slid between her feet, lightly knocking on one of hers.

"Spread them a little more," he said. "Don't keep your ankles together."

She adjusted her feet a little bit, then grinned up at him. She was really doing this! She was on the ice and standing, and she hadn't fallen over!

"And now we move," he chuckled. His hands shifted from their place on her lower back - Lucy hadn't realized just where he'd been holding her until that point, and she was suddenly very thankful that her cheeks were already tinted pink from the cold - to detach her arms from around his neck. He took her hands in his and backed away, taking the warmth of his body pressed against hers as well.

"How?" she asked.

"We'll start simple," he said. "I'll move and you just keep your feet like this."

"I don't have to do anything?" Lucy frowned down at the ice. She wanted to actually skate, not just have Cobra do all the work for her.

"It'll get you used to how the ice feels." His feet slid apart, then arced back in, pulling her forward slowly as he moved backward. "You need to think of the skates like they're another part of your foot."

"I-Is this how you learned?"

"No," he snorted. He heard her curiosity coiling around in her soul, and just before the follow-up question could form, Cobra decided that maybe he could tell her just enough to get her to drop it. "Brain used this as training."

"How is ice skating training?" Lucy bit her lips and held onto his hands a little tighter when she realized that her feet were starting to glide further apart.
"Turn your toes in," he said softly. "Brain didn't really explain it to us all the time. He liked making things difficult."

"How can you make skating harder than it already is?" She found herself smiling when he laughed. "Okay, so this part's not hard, but still."

"Well, he made me do this barefoot," Cobra said. "Bleeding feet, be damned."

Her smile faded at that. "He what?"

Cobra nodded and carefully guided her around a curve. "That bastard was a slavedriver, in every sense of the word." He hadn't meant to say it. He hadn't meant to tell her a whole lot of anything about himself, but she'd gotten in his head. It almost made Cobra wish he'd thought a little more about this idea of his. He'd gone digging around in Lucy's soul and found something that she'd always wanted, and he knew how to do it so he'd figured it wouldn't be that bad. He could teach her, no problem.

What he hadn't taken into account was just how curious she could be.

Finally, Cobra forced himself to smirk down at her wide-eyed expression. "Not all bad, I guess," he said. "If it wasn't for him making me learn, I wouldn't be doing this."

Lucy looked down at their joined hands as they finished turning at the edge of the lake. That was when she noticed that Cobra wasn't wearing any gloves. Her brows furrowed slightly and her thumbs wrapped a little more tightly around his fingers.

"Don't get all gloomy on me now," he said, and when she looked back up at him, Lucy could swear there was something hidden behind that teasing expression. She couldn't be sure just what it was, but it was there. Lurking in the depths of Cobra's soft indigo eye.

But he was right. This wasn't a time to think about the bad shit that had happened in the past. They were supposed to be enjoying themselves. And Lucy was determined to brighten the mood. He'd already given her an opening, really. "Well, I'm really glad you're teaching me," she said with a small smile.

He huffed out a short, wisping laugh. Lucy was positive that there was a hint of a blush on his cheeks, but she couldn't confirm it.

"Alright, time to put your ass to work," he said. She nodded, waiting for his instructions. Cobra smirked and let go of her hands, leaving Lucy in one spot. "Watch my feet. I'll go slow."

He skated backwards a little further from her, then stopped. She watched intently as he placed his right foot slightly behind his left, then pushed off to glide forward on just his left foot. He brought his other skate down onto the ice, then his left foot slid back and turned out. He pushed off again.

Lucy bit her lips and stared down at her skates. She could do that. Slowly, she put her right foot back, trying to copy what Cobra had done. Her left foot moved forward, and she squealed in alarm when both feet slid out from under her and she fell back onto her butt. The ice was hard and unforgiving as she collided with it. Lucy wasn't sure why she'd thought that falling on the ice wouldn't hurt that much, but it felt as though she'd jumped off a roof and right onto the sidewalk with only her butt as a cushion.

"I didn't tell you to move yet." He came to a stop in front of her, then reached his hand out and helped her stand. "You push off with the right foot and just glide on the left. If you try to do the work with your left foot, you'll fall."
"I can see that," she muttered. She rubbed a hand over her bruised rear-end, wincing at the throbbing pain left behind from her fall. Once Cobra's hands were in hers again, Lucy looked down at her feet. She could do this. Her legs wobbled with unease as her right foot shifted back.

"Just like that," Cobra whispered. "Now push with that foot and keep your ankle straight." She pushed and felt him pulling on her hands to increase her speed a little bit. "Don't lock your knee. Good, now bring your foot down - there you go."

Lucy's lips split into a wide, excited smile. She looked up from her feet and into his eye. "I'm doing it!" she shouted. "Cobra, I'm skating!"

A small smile ticked up the corners of his lips. "Yeah, you are. Now set up the other foot, and do it again."

It was a slow process of her shuffling from one foot to the other across the ice. She stumbled a few times over rough patches and ridges in the ice before they reached the next turn, but Cobra was always there to catch her. They joked quietly with one another as he carefully guided her around the turn, with him commenting on how she moved with all the grace of a bloated baby elephant, and her shooting back that he had a stupid face. It wasn't her best comeback, but she was a little preoccupied with trying not to faceplant and break all her teeth.

"And now you do it by yourself," Cobra said. He laughed when she held his hands tighter. "Come on. You can't hold onto me forever."

"I can try!" she shouted. She grasped for his hands desperately as he pulled them away. Lucy leaned further forward, her eyes widening when she felt her skates starting to go out of control. She struggled to keep her footing, even snagging the toe pick on the front of one skate on a groove in the ice. "Cobra!"

He rolled his eye and moved closer, wrapping his arms around her flailing, ungraceful body as Lucy clutched at his coat. Luck, however, wasn't on his side. Lucy's skate knocked into his while she tried to regain her footing, pushing it out from under him. "Fuck!" he shouted as he lost his balance, dragging her down with him. They toppled over, and while he could hear the sudden flash of pain from her concerning her knee hitting the ice, Cobra was a little more concerned with the fact that his back slammed down onto it, and that he had her landing right on top of him, knocking the wind out of him.

"I'm so sorry!"

"You... suck," he wheezed. He didn't try pushing her off of him. Cobra let his head fall to the ice as well and closed his eye.

"God, are you okay?"

"Let me die here," he rasped. "I'm a goner."

Lucy snickered. "What about Monty?"

"He can live with Mommy."

"And Kinana?"

"She can live with you, too," he chuckled, wincing a moment later. "Get your elbow away from my balls."
Lucy squeaked and moved her arms on either side of his stomach instead. She took her time getting up onto her knees, then slowly crept forward so she could look down at him. "We can stop," she said.

She didn't want to stop. They hadn't been at it for very long. At least, it didn't feel like they had. She wanted to be able to skate all on her own without holding onto anyone. Who knew, maybe she could find an actual skating rink somewhere. They probably had one at Akane Resort. That place had everything.

"Nope, we're just getting started."

"You're not even wearing gloves," she said. "You've gotta be freezing."

Cobra sighed and lifted his hand to her cheek, smirking when she screamed and scrambled away from his freezing touch. Lucy toppled over his leg and landed on the ice beside him. "I'll be fine. I'll just warm up when I head back home."

"With hot cocoa, I hope," she giggled, peeking out at him from the safety of her scarf.

"Nope. Hot shower."

"No cocoa?!!" Lucy was utterly appalled. How could he not drink hot cocoa? It was a staple of the holiday, and cold weather in general.

"I've never had it."

"You… what?!"

Cobra turned his head toward her, ignoring the chill creeping down from the pointed tip of his ear as it touched the ice. "We didn't get things like cookies and bedtime stories," he said with a hint of bitterness in his voice. "Considering I'd never seen a movie before—"

"We have to remedy this," Lucy said, waving away the rest of his sentence. She didn't need to hear the specifics. She sat up quickly and rolled onto her hands and knees, then grabbed Cobra's jacket by the lapels and dragged him to sit up. "Teach me to skate, then we're getting hot cocoa in you. With marshmallows. Cobra!"

He groaned and let his head loll back when she shook him, but still he smiled. After the past few horrible days that he'd had, he was latching onto this feeling. "Fine," he chuckled. "Now cut that shit out before you give me Shaking Baby Syndrome."

"You're too old for that!" she laughed. When he merely stared at her, she stopped shaking him and sat back. "Now, how do I stand up without losing a finger?"

Cobra huffed out a heavy sigh and rolled onto his knees. He showed her how to pull on leg up to kneel and push all of her weight onto that leg while standing. Lucy didn't quite get it, so he grabbed her hands again and let her use him as leverage to pull herself up. "Stay still," he said.

Lucy nodded, watching as he skated around her. She gulped when Cobra was directly behind her, suddenly flush against her back.

"I'll guide you, but you can't lean on me now," he said. His hands skimmed down the thick sleeves of her coat, gently grasping her hands once again. "When I move my legs, you do the same."

"L-Like this?"
He chuckled and bent down to whisper in her ear. "Just like this. I won't let you fall, but I'm not pulling you along anymore."

Her eyes closed as she felt his lips brushing over the shell of her ear, sending tingling heat soaring through her belly. His breath was warm and inviting, tempting her to turn toward him. But she wouldn't. Lucy wanted to learn to skate, and this was her chance to do just that.

"And when you're ready…" Lucy shivered when he paused. His right foot slid back and hers followed suit, keeping their legs flush and their skates together. One hand left hers and wrapped delicately around her waist, guiding her to lean a little more to the left just as his chest pushed into her back. "When you're ready, let go of me and skate. Understood?"

Lucy nodded, tightening her grip on his hand. She felt the way his right leg tensed and tried to mimic it, how his breathing changed just slightly. His left leg bent just slightly, forcing hers to bend as well.

"Perfect," he said. "Now push."

Lucy pushed off with her right foot and started gliding forward. She wanted to bring it right back down to the ice, but Cobra's free hand shot down to grab her thigh. She wobbled, her eyes slammed shut. She was going to fall again, and the last thing she wanted was to land on her ass.

"The blade's part of you," he said in her ear. His fingers tightened on her thigh and around her waist. "You can stand on one foot, can't you?"

"Yeah…"

"Then you can do this." She still wobbled, and his lips pressed closer to her ear. "Find your balance."

"I can't," she said. "It's shaky." Lucy brought her foot down and Cobra's followed, but her eyes stayed closed while she listened to the sound of his skates scraping over the ice, slowing them down.

"You can," he sneered. "You can stand on one foot. And so fucking what if you shake a little bit? You've got one hell of a kick, and your legs are strong. Trust yourself."

Lucy took a deep breath and nodded again. She wouldn't allow her own insecurities and fears to get in her way. Besides, he'd said that he wouldn't let her fall. This time, she was the one who moved her left leg back, pushing his along with it as their toes turned out to the side.

"That's better," he chuckled. She was about to push off when his arm around her waist guided her to lean over her right foot a little more. Lucy pushed off with her left foot and glided with Cobra right behind her, his leg held up just like hers, and his right hand still sitting high on her stocking-covered thigh only inches below the hem of her dark grey skirt. "Much better."

Lucy brought her left foot down, and before she could question how to transition back to her right foot Cobra guided her weight to the left and pulled her thigh to remind her to let her foot slide back and outward.

"Perfect," he said. "You're doing it, Lucy."

She could hear the way he smiled. She felt his lips lift where they still touched her ear. When she opened her eyes, she reveled in the way they zipped past the log where her boots sat next to his. But then she noticed the turn up ahead. Her steps didn't falter, but she had no idea how to turn yet. All she could do was go straight!
"Follow my lead," Cobra whispered. She didn't hear him right away - far too concerned with the logistics of navigating something as simple as a turn - so he rolled his eye and lightly nipped at her earlobe. It had the desired effect, and then some. It definitely got Lucy's attention, but the quiet whimper she let out had him itching to pull her closer. "Let's coast for a second, then take this leg." His fingers skimmed an inch higher on her thigh. "Keep it straight. Lean just like usual, but just a little more to help you turn."

"Cobra-"

He nipped at her ear again, this time pulling a louder whimper from her. Fuck, it was turning her on. He could smell it even through the thick layers she was wearing. "Just do what I tell you," he said. "Feel the way I move, and copy me."

"O-Okay…"

He leaned a little to the left as they neared the edge of the lake. "Bend the inside leg. Good. Lean a little further…” He smirked against her hair, pulling her just a little closer to his chest as their weight shifted. "Feel how this leg's not doing much?"

"Yeah," she breathed. It was the outer leg that she needed to control. She could do this! As soon as they completed the turn and evened out, Lucy felt her confidence swelling. She figured it was probably time to push Cobra away and skate on her own, but there was something relaxing about having him wrapped around her like this.

He was never this physical. In fact, normally, there was almost this invisible barrier around him that warned people not to get too close. But right then, she was overly aware of his hand still on her thigh and his other arm wrapped around her waist, the heat of his chest against her back and his hot breath puffing out in wisping clouds by her cheek.

Cobra didn't try to let her go either, even though she was sure he heard that she was ready to try skating without his help. They kept moving in unison, swaying in perfect time with one another down the length of the lake, rounding the bend together, then continuing on in a straight line. After the second curve, she was definitely thankful she hadn't tried on her own. The ice wasn't nearly as smooth on that side of the lake, and the picks on her skates easily caught on the ridges.

Eventually, his hands moved to rest on her hips. With a secret smirk of her own, Lucy swayed just a little more than was probably necessary. She knew he was teasing her before with the way he'd been whispering in her ear. And if he wanted to play that game, then she could do it too.

"Shit," he hissed, his grip tightening on her hips for only a moment. Lucy hadn't realized just how much them skating like this had been affecting him, but the proof was there, and starting to dig into her back.

Just as soon as she noticed, Cobra's teeth scraped over her throat. When had he burrowed beneath her scarf?

"Don't tease me."

Lucy bit her lower lip. She knew for a fact that he was interested in something with her. He'd been the one to kiss her first, after all. And they'd been playing this odd little flirtatious game for a while now, but there hadn't been anything more from him since she'd been sick when he was helping to fix up her apartment. They joked around about it when they were alone. She'd even mentioned that he wanted to fuck her when Doranbolt had popped into his apartment for a random visit.
There was definitely something there between them. Knowing Cobra, it was just physical attraction. Well, that's what she assumed it was. And on her end... it was the same. He was sexy, far too sexy for her mental well-being sometimes. It was purely physical. She didn't need romance and candlelit dinners. She didn't need the affirmation that whoever she was fucking was only interested in being with her.

But if this was mutual - and she had no illusions that it wasn't at this point - then what was stopping her?

Nothing. Not a damn thing.

She didn't even try to keep up the façade of skating while rolling her hips back and grinding shamelessly against the rigid tent in his pants. What Lucy hadn't anticipated was how Cobra would react with a deep growl as his lips parted and latched onto her throat. He sucked, hard, instantly weakening her knees. But then his hands were moving from her hips. One slid higher to cup her breast through her jacket, and the other massaged down her leg, then between her thighs.

Lucy's breath caught when his chilly fingers slid over the seam of her stockings. Her legs clamped around his hand, but it was too late. He'd honed in on her clit and pressed against it, slowly massaging while he left a dark hickey on her neck.

Thank god it was winter. She could get away with scarves and turtlenecks.

His thumb skimmed across her full breast, pebbling her nipple beneath her bra. He couldn't feel it with the thick layers she had on, but he knew. Fuck, she tasted so sweet. Cobra groaned when he felt the moisture soaking through her panties and into her stockings. She smelled even sweeter. The darkened scent of her arousal clung to her skin as his lips finally let go of her throat with a small pop. His tongue laved over the dark mark he'd left.

God, he wanted her. Right here, standing in the middle of this frozen lake, he wanted to rip these fucking stockings to shreds and fuck her. His finger on her clit drew tighter circles than before, leaving Lucy a panting, whimpering mess in his arms. Even her voice was music to his ears.

Normally he hated hearing women moan. They were always too loud, but not her. She was quiet, holding back the pleasure that streaked through her from head to toe. He was almost tempted to push Lucy to her breaking point, forcing the lewd and wanton moans out that he knew she was keeping from him. But not right then.

Her head tipped back onto his shoulder as Cobra placed wanting, open-mouthed kisses up to her jaw. And just when Lucy started to turn her head, to let him capture her lips in a kiss that she knew from experience would make everything around them melt away, Cobra stopped.

He froze, looking for all the world as though he was staring deeply into her eyes. But he wasn't, and she knew this look. She'd seen it several times before - equal parts unfocused and closed off.

His hands withdrew and pulled her skirt back down to its modest length by her thighs. “Fix your scarf,” he hissed while skating backwards, putting too much distance between them. A moment later, before she'd regained all of her senses, Cobra was in front of her, his hands moving her scarf higher to hide the hickey he'd left.

He took her hands in his once again and started skating backwards, pulling her along with him as though nothing was wrong. Her knees trembled, but before she could say a word, someone broke through the treeline just within her line of sight.
Lucy's head turned, and she found the reason he'd stopped working the wonderful magic between her legs pausing at the sight of them.

Gray stood there in a pair of boxers, blinking in surprise as he took in the scene. "Lucy?"

"H-Hey, Gray!" she said. Oh god, were her cheeks too flushed for it to be believable that they weren't doing anything but skating? Was she too breathless? Did she look scared of being caught?

Why did just the thought of nearly being caught have her insides tightening? She wasn't an exhibitionist, and it wasn't like she was doing anything wrong with Cobra. She was a grown woman. But still... Her eyes widened when her skate caught on another ridge in the ice. She stumbled slightly, but Cobra helped to keep her from falling.

"Might wanna focus," Cobra said. He glanced at Gray then. "She's still learning."

Gray shook his head and chuckled, pausing beside the log with their shoes. He used his magic to create a pair of skates for himself, then knelt down and pressed his hand to the frozen lake. A thin sheen of crystalline ice swept over the ground, evening out the ridges and uneven patches from the naturally frozen lake. He stood and skated out toward them, then circled around and came to an abrupt stop just beside them. "Lucy, you should've asked me to teach you," he said.

"I-I didn't-"

"She didn't want to impose," Cobra said. "But you can take over from here." He let go of her hands and skated back toward the bank. Lucy stared at his retreating back, dumbfounded and more than frustrated.

Gray took Cobra's place, and she politely smiled up at him when he gave her gentle, encouraging instructions on how to move her feet.

She didn't look back toward the log to watch Cobra taking off his skates and putting his shoes back on. She didn't check to make sure he was gone. After a few minutes, Lucy knew that it was just her and Gray, quietly skating around the frozen lake with only the soft crackle of burning torches around them and a clear, starry night sky up above.

An hour after returning to his apartment, Cobra had finally warmed up. Once he'd gotten home, he needed to make sure Monty was handled, and then he'd gone right to the shower. There was no more hot water in his apartment at that point. He'd used every drop possible. He turned the water off and reached up to the rack to take down his towel. He draped it over his head and roughly dried his hair.

With how cold it was, he took extra care to make sure his hair wasn't dripping everywhere before wrapping the towel around his hips.

That damn frosty bastard just had to come and interrupt his time with Lucy. It was probably for the best, he supposed. The last thing he needed was to lose his cool and fuck the woman who was supposed to be his pseudo-parole officer. Especially not out in the woods, in the middle of winter like some heathen. If he was going to fuck her in the woods, he would need a blanket. Like hell was he going to have rocks digging into his knees while she was laid out under him.

He pushed back the shower curtain and stepped out of the shower, glowering at the empty countertop. Had he really been so preoccupied when he'd come home that he forgot to grab a change of clothes? Damn it all to hell.

With a heavy sigh, he braced himself and opened the bathroom door. Steam billowed out before him,
and he closed his eye then left the warm stuffiness of his current favorite room. All he really needed were some boxers, since he wasn't planning on going anywhere that night. Except he still needed to bake that bullshit for the rest of the team.

It would take a little while to sort through all the recipes he had, but Cobra was sure he had a little something for everyone. Even Happy and his bullshit fish obsession.

Though, he was tempted to put some cyanide in Gray's food, just for being a goddamn cockblock.

Cobra ran a hand through his hair as he came to his bedroom. He flipped the switch on the wall, turning on the lamp on his nightstand, and padded across the room over to his dresser. If he was going to be baking, then he needed pants and a shirt as well. Maybe he could just throw on a tank top and some pajama pants.

That would work. And if he did need to smoke later on, he could put on another shirt and crack the window like usual.

Cobra opened the top drawer and pushed his socks off to the side. He picked up the first pair of boxers he found and turned around while pushing the drawer closed. And then he stopped.

Lucy stood in the open doorway, her honey-colored eyes wider than normal and her soul a scattered mish-mash of thoughts and sounds and bright splashes of color that he couldn't even begin to wade through. She met his surprised gaze, and it seemed she lost a fight she was having with herself. Her eyes drifted lower, pausing at his collar bones, then down over his chest and stomach. Nearly piercing through the towel as though she wished she had x-ray vision. All the way down to his feet. One the way back up, her brow lifted only slightly when she saw the black boxers in his hand with little hot pink snakes printed all over. Monty had thought they were funny, so Cobra had bought them. He hadn't realized which ones he'd grabbed until that moment.

Fuck, had she seen his scars? Had she really been standing there and he hadn't noticed at all? How much had she seen? Why hadn't she run away screaming at the misshapen horror that was his back? Why the fuck was she still drinking in the sight of him even after finding out about that?

Her breath shuddered from between her lips when their eyes met again. And Cobra couldn't find the will to move an inch. He wanted to. Fuck, he wanted to jump out the goddamn window, except then she spoke, and he was rooted to the spot for an entirely different reason.

Her soul was suddenly washed in a deep, misty red.

"I've died and gone to hell," she rasped. Her feet carried her forward into the room, and just when she was within arms reach, Lucy shoved him against the dresser and tightly gripped his hair, then slammed his lips down over hers.
CoLu Week 2019, Day 4: Sweater

Chapter Notes

It's finally come. This is the moment we've all been waiting for. Do you have any idea how excited I've been to write this chapter?! Four years, guys… For 4 years, I've been waiting to write this, and now it's finally happening. More notes at the end for anyone who's interested in some behind the scenes details.

This is why I love CoLu Week… Prepare yourselves!

(As a quick note, please remember that I don't write smut for characters under the age of 18. Do the math, guys... Lucy's just recently had her 18th birthday in X791 - and her 18th birthday is even mentioned during the GMG arc - and Cobra does explicitly state in chapter 6 of this story that he's 25... because... y'know, Mashima never actually gave him an age, so I gave him one.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He could still feel the winter chill on her freezing lips as they moved desperately over his. Cobra didn't even care that she was pulling his hair as he bent lower and his hands gripped her waist, bringing her flush against him. Lucy didn't seem to mind the way he pawed at her, either. Her soul was too preoccupied with how she'd had to fight to spend just enough time with Gray before she could reasonably leave. And how she'd reasoned with herself the entire time she'd been walking home that she needed to just get to her apartment and handle the aroused state Cobra had left her in on her own.

But then she'd thought better of it, and her feet turned at a fork in the road. And here she was, barely having taken the time to kick off her boots and unzip her jacket before coming to find him in his room.

Cobra groaned when his hands curved around her hips and down to cup her ass. Had this skirt really been this short when they were skating? No. No, he remembered pulling her skirt back down just before Gray had come into the clearing. It had gone down to her thighs then, but now it had ridden up. It took no effort to slip his finger past it and right between her trembling legs once again.

The soft mewl she let loose only spurred him on. He couldn't feel the moisture that had collected on her stockings earlier, but he knew that he could remedy that relatively quickly.

Or he could…

Cobra growled as she bit his lip, and her body rubbed lewdly against him. He was going to fucking destroy her if she kept that shit up. There was only so much he could do to calm things down, and if she wanted to turn back at some point, he couldn't guarantee that he'd be willing to listen.

Her slender fingers massaged down his throat and chest, pausing to marvel at the feel of his collar bones. Fuck, she really did like those, huh? Based on the way she moaned and arched back into his hand, then slipped her tongue between his lips, she definitely did.
But he wanted a whole lot more than just kissing her. Sure, it was nice. And he definitely got a kick out of how she lost track of everything around them the few times he'd kissed her before, but now wasn't the time for that. Some other time, he'd spend hours teasing her into a sex-crazed stupor with his lips and tongue alone. But she'd done enough teasing for the night, and if he didn't get some sort of relief soon, Cobra was going to murder something.

The only question he needed to answer was where. There were only so many options in his room. The dresser he was leaning against, a wall, the door, or his bed. There were plenty of other choices in the rest of his apartment, but he'd be damned if he tried to get her anywhere that wasn't nearby.

And he didn't really want her lying in his bed. That was too intimate. Like hell was he going to lay her down on his pillows, turn the lights down low, throw on some Barry White, and make sweet passionate love to her.

Hell no. Cobra was going to fuck her brains out… as long as she gave him the go ahead.

'Just tonight… Get it out of my system, then move on… Just once…'

He hummed and finally broke away from her lips. Before she could start kissing her way down his throat, on a mission to get on her knees in front of him, he used the hand that wasn't currently toying with the seam of her stockings to grab her chin. "I heard that," he rasped.

"Good," she panted. Her fingers shook as they traversed the plains of his stomach. Her hips shifted to push his fingers closer to her clit, but he smirked and moved them toward her dripping entrance instead.

"You sound like you want me," he said, his eye narrowing as her eyelids fluttered at the briefest bit of pressure against her stockings and panties. "But what is it you want?"

"Don't make me say it," she whimpered. The healthy flush to her cheeks brightened as his finger pressed more firmly against her, just barely forcing her panties to dip into her center. "C-Careful…"

"Wouldn't want me to rip these, huh?" he chuckled. She didn't get a chance to respond before his finger hooked around the seam of her stockings, and he pulled. Her eyes widened as the soft sound of sheer material ripping between her legs gave way to his fingers deftly sliding her panties to the side and spearing into her.

For the first time in a long while, Cobra watched the pleasure ripple through a woman as he ramped up her arousal. Lucy's head tipped back and a strangled moan warbled in her throat as he wriggled his fingers in her wet, cloying heat. He needed this. He needed to see her come apart. The fantasies he'd been having for the past month or so weren't doing the job anymore, and he could only listen to her masturbate in her bathtub so many times before he needed a slice of the pie for himself.

The fact that she'd been the one to come to him, that she'd had the audacity to pin him to his fucking dresser and force him to kiss her like she had, was just an added bonus. It meant his manipulation had worked like a fucking charm. He'd teased her until she couldn't take it any longer, and now… He wasn't the one pursuing her. Lucy came to him on her own.

"Just once?" he rasped, nipping at her chin. His fingers planted as deeply as he could reach, and he scissored them slowly at first.

"Yes."

"Nothing more," he said.
"No," she moaned.

"Trying to get your rocks off?" he chuckled.

When her eyes slid open, the fire burning in them washed over him in a wave of lust so intense that he nearly froze. Her soul practically vibrated with need as she reached down to his towel and pulled as hard as she could. The fabric slipped down his legs, but didn't hit the floor. With his ass still pressed against the dresser, the towel was stuck.

Cobra grinned. Oh, she was definitely being forward. Based on her memories, this was all new territory for her. That was fine, though, because he didn't plan on letting her take the lead for too much longer. If this was a one time thing, then he was damn well going to get his time's worth.

"Just say the word, and I'll fuck that psychotic little brain of yours right out of you." Cobra leaned down to bite harshly at her kiss swollen lips, eliciting another small moan from her. His fingers withdrew and slammed back in, and he reveled in the way her breath stuttered. How she grabbed his hips to help keep her standing. "I'll be nice… I won't make you beg."

Lucy sat on her knees, her legs spread wide, wearing nothing but a black leather collar around her throat. Her hand dipped between her legs to tease herself. "Please, Cobra," she moaned. "Please fuck me…"

"Keep thinking like that, and I really will put a fucking collar on you," he snarled just before dragging her into another, more heated kiss. His tongue ravaged her mouth, giving her no opportunity to do more than take what he could give her. He didn't want her in control now. Not if she was going to think like that.

With no warning, he ripped his hand from between her legs and pulled on her skirt. It wouldn't budge past her hips. Fuck. The stupid thing probably had buttons or a zipper, or a damn combination lock. That last option seemed more and more likely as he felt in vain for something to loosen it. Lucy's hands joined the search though, and within moments she was shimmying it off. He smacked her hands away before she could pull off her stockings though.

"Those stay on," he sneered against her trembling lips.

He grabbed her waist and spun so she was the one pinned to his dresser. His towel finally fell to the floor, leaving him completely naked, but he didn't fucking care. For once, he didn't mind having no clothes on.

And he knew for a fact that there was no way Lucy would be getting anywhere close to his level of undress.

He didn't even have to guide her to jump up onto the dresser. Like second nature, she perched herself right on the edge, her legs spread to accommodate his hips. And then her hands were on him again, gliding over his drying stomach, down to his hips, and up to his chest again and again. It nearly killed the fucking mood for him, because she was moving too fast. He wanted her to touch him slower, more carefully.

Except when his lips left hers, and his hands nearly tore her shirt in an effort to get it up past her heaving chest, he didn't mind all that much anymore. Not when the sight of her black lacy bra barely containing those perky fucking tits of hers was right in front of him.

Lucy smiled down at him and grabbed his head, just behind his ears, guiding him closer to her breasts. And suddenly he was the one rushing to touch her. He pulled on the cups of her bra and
wrapped his lips around one pale pink nipple with a soft groan. She tasted like fucking candy. Her quiet mewl of pleasure became a full, wanton moan as he filled her sex with two fingers again, pumping quickly in time with his swirling tongue around her nipple.

"Cobra," Lucy moaned. "Fuck, Cobra!"

Shit, if she was going to sound like that, he wasn't going to get the chance to fuck her. That was the moment it hit him. He'd yet to have sex since getting out of prison. He honestly hadn't seen the point in it, and had been a little preoccupied with dealing with Fairy Tail's insanity, and his sexy parole officer.

Cobra scraped his teeth against her breast, groaning quietly as she arched back and pushed herself more fully against his lips. Still he drew back just enough to look down at her. She was an absolute mess, splayed out on his dresser with her tits out, her stockings torn at the crotch and her matching black lace thong pushed off to one side. He didn't even mind that she was missing the little tuft of hair above her pussy that he would have loved to have rubbing against his face. No, she was bare, waxed and primped as though she'd been planning this. Except he knew that she hadn't planned any of it.

He'd been the one to surprise her with ice skating.

He picked up the pace with his fingers, listening to the way her soul and her voice hummed in perfect harmony.

He couldn't take this anymore. Her moans were growing louder, and if she got too loud and hurt his ears, he was going to have blue balls. But there was an easy fix for that, and with a devilish grin he withdrew his fingers from her sex just before she could crest that peak into bliss. Where was the fun in it if he didn't torture her just a little bit? He could bring her right to the edge, then ease off until she was literally crying in frustration.

'No! Don't stop! Come on, I was so close! Just let me cum, damnit!'

"Not yet," he chuckled, his eye flashing with excitement when her jaw dropped in shock for a moment. Ah, she'd really forgotten he could hear her. If he let her forget about it again, if she got so worked up that she just wasn't thinking about it, that could definitely work in his favor.

"Cobra-"

He silenced her with a rough, needy kiss, then breathed against her lips, "Do you need it?"

Lucy nodded, moaning when he kissed her more fervently.

"I'm naked here," he growled. "Don't think I'm just gonna finger you and call it a day."

"Wouldn't dream of it," she rasped. She squeaked when he palmed her ass and pulled her off the dresser, her legs instantly wrapping around his hips. Lucy grasped desperately at the top of the dresser to keep herself balanced, but then he rocked his hips and let her feel the full length of his arousal against her core.

"Shirt off," he said. He might have enjoyed it just a little too much when she struggled to get her shirt over her head. His hips curled again, and he took no small amount of pleasure in the way her own hips moved to try and ease him into her. But now she was taking too long. "Hurry or I'm ripping this fucking thing off of you and making you walk home topless."

Lucy's eyes narrowed at him, and a sneer suddenly pulled at her upper lip. "You wouldn't."
"Tell me I wouldn't again," he grinned. Her lips pursed, and he chuckled while setting her back on the dresser. He could be nice and help her out a little, he supposed. It was definitely a surprise when her ankles locked at the small of his back and ground his hips against her as he reached up to her shirt. He pulled it over her head, then paused to let out a shaky breath when he felt his cock prodding her entrance.

Damn. Double damn. He wanted to be in her right fucking then. To hell with her stupid turtleneck coming off! Her arms were still stuck in the sleeves, so she couldn't touch him. It kind of sucked, because he did like her hands on his skin, but at the same time… now she wouldn't be touching him too much.

"Cobra, my arms-"

"I know," he crooned, smirking down at her. One hand gripped her shirt and pushed it back against the wall, and the other reached down to palm his straining arousal. "I've got you all tied up now."

The way Lucy whimpered and spread her legs just a little wider for him had Cobra more than ready to plunge into her soaking depths. The only problem was that he couldn't just fuck her. He held her heavy gaze and pulled back his foreskin, then carefully dipped into her waiting heat. Slowly. He had to take this shit slowly, or it would pull, and that would kill the mood faster than waking up with Midnight tonguing his asshole.

(Thank fucking god that had never happened.)

His strokes were short, careful, and he marveled at the way she squirmed with the need to feel more of him. By the time Cobra was half-buried in her, Lucy's legs had wrapped around his hips again, and her feet were digging into his ass, begging him to move faster. He kind of liked how it felt to have the sheer material brushing against the backs of his thighs.

"So impatient," he rasped. Fuck, she felt amazing! He needed more of her, right then and there. Cobra withdrew and slammed himself back in, buried to the hilt and groaning as she clamped down on him with a sharp cry. Just that one stroke was enough to send him into a frenzy though.

Normally, he would have worked her up to the punishing pace he set with his hips slamming into her, but he couldn't stop himself. Now that he had her at his mercy, Cobra wanted everything. He wanted her crying out in ecstasy, screaming his fucking name loud enough for the neighbors to question whether he was murdering her or giving her the best fuck of her life.

Lucy struggled to wriggle out of her shirt the rest of the way, and he twisted the fabric around his hand, pushing her hands higher on the wall. Hell no, he wasn't letting her get free. He wanted her tied up, helpless, forced to accept whatever he did to her willing body. "C-Co… Cobr- agh fuck! Yes! Fuck me! Fuck me hard!"

Her desperate plea slithered down his spine and pushed him to new heights. Not once had the tips of his ears burned with the need to please a woman, but the sudden flash of heat traveling down into his skull was new. Tantalizing. Intoxicating.

He dove down with a vicious snarl and wrapped his lips around her bouncing breast, sucking with enough force for her head to fly back and hit the wall. He kind of hoped his bitch of a neighbor was forced to listen to Lucy scream. It would definitely make up for the late night Enya jam sessions that happened on a weekly basis that he was forced to endure.

Damnit, he needed more fucking hands! He wanted to touch her soft skin everywhere. All at once. He needed to feel everything he could right then. The best he could manage was tightly gripping one
stocking-covered thigh and using it as leverage to pull her onto him more forcefully.

Shit, that was amazing!

He could feel her winding up for her release already. And just knowing that had him stretching out each thrust, pulling back until just the tip was buried in her, then pushing forward hard enough for the dresser to bang against the wall. And through it all, she moaned. At one point, she howled from the pleasure that tightened her muscles and turned her nipples into taut peaks, begging for him to lick and tease and nibble to his heart's content.

When his tongue dragged up the center of her chest, she surprised him by rolling her hips in an attempt at keeping up with him. All it did was change the angle to something utterly fucking heavenly.

Lucy gasped a moment later. "Cobra, wait…"

"No," he growled, his hips snapping faster. The dresser banged harder against the wall. She couldn't make him stop now. He was too fucking close. He'd waited for this, and the last thing she was going to do was make him fucking stop! Even if he'd wanted to, his body had other ideas as he pulled her leg over his arm.

Lucy howled with delight as he buried himself deeply in her. "Cobra… N-No condom, and…"

She paused, whimpering at the short, deep thrusts he gave her. Her short, hot breaths fanned over his face as their noses brushed together. "Don't cum in me."

"I'm not a fucking moron," he snarled. Hell no, he wasn't going to chance knocking her up just because he was barebacking. "I plan on covering your tits with my jizz."

The sudden splash of color in her soul washed over him. Oh, did she like that idea? When he listened in, he realized that no one had ever done that to her. Just the thought of trying it was turning her on. And if that wasn't enough of a reason for him to let go of her shirt, then the thought of feeling her clamping down on his cock as she finally came definitely was.

His thumb pressed down on her clit, drawing quick circles over her swollen bundle of nerves.

"Yes!" she cried out. "Cobra, yes!"

'Ooh, thank god! I knew he'd make me cum! Shit… Shit, here it comes. Fuck, fuck, fuck…'

It took every ounce of willpower he possessed to slam into her and not let his own release take over as she flew over the edge. His hand left her clit and covered her mouth before she could scream loud enough to break the fucking windows. Her sex tightened around him in wave after delicious wave, pushing his release closer and closer to the tip of his cock.

Fuck, he was going to cum… Not yet. Not… His eye closed so he couldn't see her, but then she rolled her hips and his eye shot open again, taking in every inch of her from her tousled blonde hair to the blush on her cheeks, her half-lidded eyes and the dark hickeys on her throat, her quivering breasts. Her torn stockings.

Shit! Those stockings were his undoing. Cobra pulled out and took his hand from her mouth, wrapping it quickly around his cock just fast enough so he could aim. He didn't even have to stroke to get himself over the edge. Just the sensation of her slick sex sliding away from his cock was enough. The first shot of his release left him groaning quietly, but he couldn't stop himself from watching where it landed, right on her stomach. Another reached up to her breasts. He stroked himself just a little, and his eye finally closed as he allowed himself to bask in the buzzing sensation
across his skin that accompanied this high.

Her soul thrummed with something dark and erotic as she reveled in the little droplets of liquid fire spattering over her chest and stomach. The heat of it was what turned her on. That was… really good to know.

When he looked at her again, Lucy hardly resembled the woman who'd come to Era and gotten him released from prison. Mussed and thoroughly fucked, with his cum splattered across her stomach and soaking into her bra. God, that was sexy as hell. He'd dragged her down to the depths of hell and she looked at him as though it was nothing short of paradise.

This was something he never got to see in her soul when she fantasized about him. It was always focused on him, not this dazed expression on her face or the slap-happy grin trying to curl her swollen lips. This was definitely going to be starring in his fantasies when he was alone and feeling the need to work off some stress. At least, until he found some other woman to fill his time.

Finally, he took a step back and bent down to grab his discarded towel. And his boxers that he'd dropped when he'd seen her there in his doorway, staring at him as though she was going to eat his fucking soul. Cobra shivered as he rubbed the towel over his crotch, just enough to wipe away most of the moisture clinging to his pubes from her sex. Then he tossed her the towel.

He was so fucking tempted to give her a swat on the ass and tell her *Good game, champ*, but the last thing he wanted was for her to give him any attitude. He was too relaxed right then to chance ruining it was her sass.

He listened to her slow movements as she used his damp towel to clean herself up, but Cobra set his attention on getting his boxers on. Then his pajama pants. He'd yet to grab a tank top, but now he was definitely considering it. Especially if she was going to be there for any period of time. Just because she'd seen his back didn't mean he was going to let that happen again.

It was with that thought in mind that he turned back to his dresser, nudged her leg to the side, and opened the drawer that had all of his tank tops in it.

They didn't speak to one another as she finally hopped down and fixed her shirt and bra, then her panties. Cobra was tempted to have her take the stockings off since they were mostly useless at that point anyway. But what the hell would he do with them? Keep them as a memento of the time he'd fucked Lucy Heartfilia? He didn't need it.

Cobra let out a secretive smirk as she tried to pull on her skirt without wobbling. Once she was fully dressed, she looked up at him expectantly. He simply raised a brow in return. "I've gotta get some shit done," he said.

Her cheeks burned brightly as she nodded. "Yeah, I should probably get home and get a good shower…"

'Last thing I need is Natsu smelling Cobra's cum on me... He acts like he's oblivious, but I know he's smarter than he lets on when it comes to that.'

Cobra was going to keep it to himself that just a shower wouldn't get his smell off of her entirely. And Natsu's nose was probably the strongest in the guild. Lucy would have to scrub off layers of skin for days on end to fully get rid of Cobra's pheromones. "You should probably wash your clothes, too," he said. That was all he'd offer on the matter.

He wanted to laugh when, as they walked to his front door for her to get her jacket and boots back
on, she briefly wondered if he was going to shower again. He didn't say anything. She could continue wondering all she wanted. And besides, she should know by then that he hated having people in his business. Who he happened to stick his dick in was definitely his fucking business.

Lucy looked up at him once she'd zipped her jacket back up, her lips pursed. "You know, I had a reason for coming over here…"

"One that didn't involve you screaming my name?" he chuckled. Oh, how he loved the way her blush deepened at the mention of what they'd done. This could be a lot of fun in the days to come.

"Remember, we were supposed to warm up with cocoa," she said.

"I don't have any cocoa."

"O-Oh…" Lucy winced, and he realized that while it was a thin excuse at best for her to come over, she actually had been looking forward to doing that.

Cobra crossed his arms over his chest, then forced himself to stare at her face. He was so tempted to look anywhere but at her as he spoke. "Make me some cocoa in the morning," he said.

"Huh?"

"When I come over," he elaborated, rolling his eye. "I'm gonna be cold, so…"

Lucy grinned up at him. "Cocoa will be ready when you get there," she said. "Should I poison it?"

He simply shrugged. He'd never had cocoa before, so how would he know whether or not it would taste any good with a dash of poison? It would probably be for the best if he just tried it normally first, and then adjusted it accordingly on his own. "Nah," he finally said. "I've never had it. Lemme try it out first."

Her soul hummed with excitement at getting to experience a first of his. Which was weird as hell. She'd already been the one to show him the gory glory that was horror movies, what more did she want?

"Okay, well, I'm gonna get going. I'll see you at nine?"

He nodded and watched as she turned to open the door. Something felt wrong, but he couldn't place it. It was weird though, having her just walk out like this after he'd fucked her. This was a bit out of his comfort zone, because he'd never really planned on fucking Lucy in his apartment. This was supposed to be his own personal space. If anything, he would have preferred to bang her against her front door just before he'd left one night. Then he could be the one walking out, and not her. Then she could sit there in a daze while he walked home.

It wasn't like he was worried about her making it home safely, but he still reached out and wrapped an arm around her waist, dragging her back into him. Lucy squeaked as he buried his nose against her throat, burrowing under the high collar of her shirt. He smirked, wrapping his lips around the hickey he'd left on her while they'd been skating, then sucked so he could darken the little mark.

'Damn, why'd I have to go and say this was a one-time thing?... Hoo boy, he's gonna kill me…'

With a soft groan, Cobra pulled his lips away to marvel the purple-red bruising on her throat. He grinned down at the mark, knowing that Lucy would cover it if for no other reason than to avoid talking about who left it there.
"Cobra-"

He gently kissed her throat, then let her go. He reached around her and opened the door. "Merry Christmas, psycho," he rasped against her ear. "Nine sharp."

She scrambled to fix her collar and smiled at him as she walked out. "Merry Christmas," she said. He closed the door in her face, then locked it.

Fuck. He'd really gone and stepped in it this time.

"Daddy, are you and Mommy together now?"

Son of a bitch! He'd completely forgotten that Monty was in the living room. Cobra turned, his eye wide as he took in the little python sitting so innocuously on his sofa, his pale head lifted above the arm and his forked tongue flicking out over and over to scent the air.

"Is she gonna lay her eggs soon?"

"M-Monty that's not, uh… not how it works for humans." He wasn't prepared to have a fucking sex ed talk with his snake!

"But you… fucked?"

Cobra's jaw dropped. His little baby snake had really cursed. He really understood the use of that particular word? "Yeah, we did," he said absentely.

God, Monty was growing up so fast!

"Daddy?"

"Yeah…"

"Did you stick your dude piston in her squish mitten?"

"What the fuck?!" he laughed suddenly. "Monty, where the hell did you hear that?"

"That guy with the helmet," Monty replied. He slithered over to the arm of the couch and waited to be picked up. Cobra, for his part, just laughed and obliged his little scaly friend, carrying him to the kitchen. "He said something about it. I didn't understand it."

Well, that explained it. Fucking Bickslow *would* say some weird shit like that. "Yeah, Monty," he said. "Now, enough talking about that. I have to bake some shit for Christmas at Lucy's tomorrow morning."

"Yay, Christmas!" Monty cheered.

Lucy paced back and forth in her apartment, staring at the clock every time she passed her writing desk. It was nearing 9:30 in the morning, and no one had showed up. Maybe she should have told her team to be at her apartment at 8:00 just so they would be there at the time she actually wanted them to show up. But she'd assumed that they wouldn't be too happy if she'd said the time to meet up was so early. This was their day to relax, too.

It didn't matter that she'd been up since five that morning, cleaning the place to the point where Natsu could (hygienically) eat food off the floor, if he so chose. Not that she'd let him actually go through with it, but still… it could happen.
There was nothing else for her to do anyway. She had water already heated up, ready to be made
into hot cocoa, complete with marshmallows for added sweetness.

Her apartment was already decorated, too. The tree was much smaller than what she'd grown up
with, but it wasn't like she had vaulted ceilings to work with. She'd even put up stockings, one for
each member of their team, including Happy. She was sure Cobra would be surprised to have one
himself. And Monty, who had a tiny stocking that really couldn't fit a whole lot of anything in it. But
it was the thought that counted, she supposed.

She didn't really have as much as she needed to accommodate everyone where seating was
concerned, but she'd put a few pillows on the floor as well, so everyone could at least be
comfortable.

But all that work wouldn't be worth a whole lot of anything if no one actually came to her apartment!

Erza, she could see her trying to figure out how to haul things over to Lucy's apartment. Gray was
probably already awake, and she knew for a fact that he hadn't forgotten because she'd been sure to
remind him while changing from her ice skates back into her boots. Natsu… She'd literally told him
to come and have fun and be ready for food. It just didn't make sense. Why hadn't anyone showed
up?

And then there was Cobra. Had she messed things up by going to his place the night before? Was it
going to be weird for him now that they'd had sex? It wasn't like they'd really had an in-depth
discussion about how to handle things after the fact. If anything, he'd basically kicked her out after
he'd gotten his rocks off. Okay, sure, she did need to get a shower, but maybe she could've done that
at his apartment.

Was he reconsidering even coming over? God, she hoped not. She really wanted to have him try hot
cocoa. And Monty! From what she'd been told, the little snake was excited to celebrate Christmas.

Which reminded her, she needed to figure out how to explain to a snake why people give each other
presents on Christmas...

Then again, what was the point? She glanced at the clock again, plopping down on her couch with a
heavy sigh. 9:40 in the morning. No one was coming.

The sudden knock on her door had Lucy jumping up and running across her living room to answer
it. She was all smiles and warm welcomes even before opening the door. It was made so much better
when she found Erza, Gray, Natsu, and Happy all standing there in their winter attire (even Happy
had on a cute little fuzzy jacket), grinning right back at her, with their arms full of presents.
"Come on in, guys," she said, stepping back. "Presents over by the tree, and have a seat."

"Lucy, is there anything you need help with?" Gray asked as he came inside.

"Maybe dishing up food," she laughed. "We all know Natsu can't be trusted."

"I resemble that statement!" Natsu bellowed. Lucy bit her lips to try not to laugh, but then his grin
widened even further as he walked past. Wait, did he actually mean to say that?

Lucy closed the door once Erza had made her way inside. "The decorations are lovely," Erza said,
smiling fondly at the stockings. Her brows drew together when she came to Cobra's and Monty's.
"Will Cobra be joining us?"

Happy cringed. "And Monty?"
"Well, I invited them," Lucy said. "Everyone on the team is here, and they are part of the team."

"Maybe I can get Cobra to arm wrestle," Natsu said, lifting a flaming fist in front of him as though he was trying to practice.

"Maybe if you don't try to burn him while you're at it," Lucy muttered. She smiled when Natsu gave her a thumbs up, then turned to the kitchen. Gray set his things down and met her at the counter. "Water's already hot," she said. "Just put a packet of cocoa into each cup, and-"

"I've made hot cocoa before, y'know," he chuckled.

Lucy blushed and shook her head, then reached into the oven to grab one of the casserole dishes she was keeping warm. She hadn't really known what to make for breakfast for everyone, or whether or not everyone would be hungry. But she figured, with two Dragon Slayers around, having two full breakfast casseroles should be enough to tie them over until everyone went to the guild around lunchtime.

"I've got some coffee in the fridge for you," she said, smirking over at him. "Don't think I forgot that you don't like hot cocoa."

"It's always too hot."

She snorted and grabbed the plates. "That's kinda the point, Gray."

"Lushy, when are we opening presents?" Happy asked as he flew into the kitchen. "Ooh food! Did you make me fish?"

"In the fridge, Happy," she said, nodding her head in that general direction. It was pointless, she knew. Happy was well-acquainted with where her refrigerator was. He zoomed through the air and opened the refrigerator, diving right into the pile of fish she'd left on a plate for him.

"Fanks, Rushy," Happy called, fish in paws as he went back to the living room.

"Are we waiting for Cobra to get here?" Gray asked.

Her lips pursed and she busied herself with scooping out helpings of her breakfast tots and ham casserole onto the plates. She made sure to scoop an extra helping onto one plate for Natsu. "We can eat first, I guess. Just in case he slept in or something."

"He doesn't really seem like the type to sleep in," Gray said.

Lucy just shrugged and grabbed two plates while Gray picked up two mugs. "On the off chance it happened, I'll give him the benefit of the doubt. But when we're done eating, if he's not here, then we'll get started. And if he shows up, then he shows up."

"You're too nice, sometimes," he chuckled.

Honestly, Lucy questioned just how right he was.

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The festivities had already begun when Cobra finally made an appearance. His hands had been so full of bakery boxes that he'd gotten for a pretty decent discount on the wholesale price (he would deny any and all allegations that he'd threatened the woman who ran the bakery on the other side of town), that he'd had to kick Lucy's door just to knock.

Okay, so maybe he'd gone a little overboard on the whole baking shit as a present thing. But he
knew his own stomach was occasionally a bottomless pit, and Natsu could put an industrial Hoover to shame with his eating habits. And Erza wasn't much better when it came to sweets.

It was actually Monty who'd been the kick in the ass he'd needed to get out of bed and get a quick shower. The shower was only because when he'd pulled his dick out to take a piss, he could still smell Lucy's fucking sex juices. He didn't even want to chance Natsu smelling it through his clothes. It wasn't like a shower did much, though. The scent of his shampoo and body wash covered some of her pheromones that were left, and then he'd have to just use other stronger smells around them to keep Natsu's nose preoccupied.

Based on the strong scent of sugar and meat and potatoes wafting from under Lucy's door, maybe she'd had the same idea.

He'd kind of been doing everything in his power to ignore her soul that morning. Granted, it had been relatively easy when he was still passed out, but then Monty realized it was 9:30 and remembered how Cobra had showed him what 8:00 looked like on his alarm clock, so they could get to Lucy's on time. Needless to say, the not-so-little python had literally started slithering into his fucking mouth just to wake him up, because Cobra had been awake until nearly six that morning.

Cobra had never before in his life nearly choked to death on a fucking snake.

Lucy finally opened the door, and the scents inside hit him full force in the face. She'd made a breakfast casserole of some sort, and still had more in her oven. He could smell the fish Happy had been eating, and lots of chocolate. That must be the hot cocoa.

"Cobra!" Lucy shouted with a far-too-happy laugh at seeing him. "Come in!"

"What took you so long?" Natsu shouted. He paused a moment later, staring at the stack of boxes Lucy took from Cobra to lighten his load a little. "Whoa, did you rob a bakery?!"

Erza's head perked up, and she turned with daggers forming in her heavy glare. Cobra just rolled his eye. "Calm your tits, Titania. I haven't hurt your precious bakeries."

Lucy passed off the boxes in her hands to Gray, then took the rest from Cobra so he could get his shoes and jacket off. Well, he at least took his shoes off. Monty was still curled up in his jacket, and he knew his little friend needed the body heat right now. "Why don't we pass these out now?" she asked, smiling over at him. "Then you can just relax."

"Whatever," he sighed. He walked over to the couch and took the seat Lucy had vacated. "They're all labeled."

He watched as Lucy and Gray read the labels on each of the boxes, then passed them out to everyone.

"How come Lushy doesn't get a box?" Happy asked.

"I already gave her present to her yesterday," he said with a smirk. He nearly laughed when Lucy choked. God, she was horrible at keeping secrets, wasn't she... Still, Happy was oblivious. And he supposed he could keep questions about what the hell was wrong with their hostess if he just offered the information himself. "I taught her to ice skate."

"So that's why you guys were out there," Gray said, frowning. "Hey, man, I'm sorry I bothered you guys then. I didn't know."

Cobra shrugged. "Not really a huge deal."
Erza gasped, drawing everyone's attention just as Lucy left the room. "Cobra, where did you get these? No one in town makes them…"

Lucy returned with a steaming mug in one hand and a plate piled high with food in the other. She handed both to Cobra, then sat down on the floor just in front of him. "He didn't buy them, Erza," she laughed.

"Did you steal them?" Erza breathed. He nearly laughed when she waffled on whether or not she wanted to know who was stupid enough to hide these treats from her, or punishing him for breaking the law.

"No," he said. Cobra brought the mug to his lips and took a small sip. It burned like hell, but fuck was it worth it. The sweetness of the marshmallows covering the surface of the cocoa coated the inside of his mouth. The chocolate itself wasn't the greatest, but the heat spiraling down his throat and into his stomach definitely helped to combat the frozen state of his body from walking over to Lucy's apartment for this bullshit team thing.

When he finished the mug and set it down, Cobra realized that he'd chugged it all. Maybe cocoa really wasn't that bad, after all.

"I baked all this shit," he said.

Natsu and Happy paused in bringing their own sweet treats to their lips, staring at him in horror. "Is it poisoned?" Happy whimpered.

"No, idiot," he snorted.

"Cobra made the cupcakes for Asuka's birthday, remember?" Lucy asked. When the rest of their team just stared at her, she sighed. That's right. She'd forgotten why he'd even volunteered to do it in the first place. Mira hadn't been around. "Right, you were all at the S Class trials…"

Cobra simply lifted a brow at them. "I was informed I needed a hobby that was legal," he drawled. "I chose baking."

"Isn't that kinda… girlie?" Natsu snickered.

Erza cut off Cobra's snarling reply with a delighted moan. Suddenly, he smirked over to the Fire Dragon Slayer. "Not really. Pretty sure I could get laid in a serious way if I baked for a woman."

Natsu frowned and looked at Lucy. "Is that true, Luce?"

"Wh-What?!" she shrieked. An uneasy, trembling laugh escaped her lips as he kept staring at her. "Why would you ask me that?"

Real fucking smooth, Lucy.

"You're a girl," Natsu said, grinning at her again. "Do girls really like it when guys bake?"

"Moron," Gray muttered. "Why would it matter to you, anyway? You're probably going to die a virgin."

"No way!" Natsu roared.

"Guys, please don't fight today," Lucy pleaded. "At least, not in my apartment!"

Cobra picked up his fork, completely unperturbed by the looming childish battle between Natsu and
Gray. He took a bite of the casserole, then glanced at Happy. "You should try yours," he said to the little blue Exceed. "It's got fish in it."

"What is it?" Happy asked. He reached a paw into his little white box and poked at the fish-shaped cookies.

"Catnip and tuna chip cookies," Cobra said. Happy's eyes went wide, and fat tears quickly filled them when he looked from the treats over to the Poison Dragon Slayer who was in the process of shoving an overly large bite of Lucy's casserole in his mouth.

"Oh, are those the ones you were saving that tuna for?" Lucy asked. Cobra simply nodded. She grinned and turned to Erza, blinking in surprise when she saw the Requip mage had three large bakery boxes in front of her. Yeah, he'd gone overboard for both Erza and Natsu. Only because it wouldn't go to waste. "Erza, how about you?"

"Strawberry," she moaned around a mouthful of food.

Cobra swallowed his own bite. "Don't expect me to make this shit for you at the drop of a hat," he warned her. She didn't hear him. Motherfucker. "She's got a strawberry-chocolate meringue torte, some strawberry shortcakes, and this really weird fucking thing I saw once out in Desierto with curry and strawberries. It was a cake, but I turned it into cupcakes to make it easier to eat."

"That's pretty cool, man," Gray said. Honestly, Gray was probably the most normal person on this fucked up team, in Cobra's opinion. He turned toward the Ice-Make mage, then sighed when he realized Gray was naked.

"Get that frosty gummy worm out of my sight," he sneered. Cobra counted down from three, shaking his head when Gray shrieked and went on a search for his clothes. This was sad. The most normal member of the team was a fucking exhibitionist who stripped without even realizing it.

What kind of bullshit life was Cobra stuck living?

It was nearing 11 in the morning, and Erza had finally decided it was time to hand out presents. She'd been sitting by the tree, and had apparently deemed herself as the present master for this little event. Not that Cobra really gave a shit either way. He wasn't expecting a whole lot of anything.

He didn't want anything.

He was also going to have to talk with Natsu at some point to let him know that he really didn't have to try and think of something to give Cobra to repay him for the three-tiered ghost pepper cake, or the hot sauce infused muffins. Or the three pounds of cookies that Cobra had baked on a whim, and decided Natsu would be the perfect place to pawn them off. Even Happy felt bad about not getting him anything.

Really, he didn't give a flying fuck. Because he knew that they hadn't known what he would even like as a present. And he knew that Gray and Erza had both assumed he would just downright refuse to show up to Lucy's at all.

Still, as he sat there, surrounded by the rest of the people on this team he hadn't wanted any part in who were all laughing and smiling as they opened small gifts from each other, Cobra was struck with the feeling of just not belonging there. He didn't fit in with them at all. He wasn't being a fucking goober like Natsu was while holding up a bathing suit that Erza had given to Lucy - although, he did take an extra few seconds to appreciate the hot pink straps that made up ninety percent of the thing. That would barely cover her at all…
Nope, he was removing that train of thought from his head entirely.

Cobra glanced down when Monty finally wriggled out of his jacket.

"Present?"

Lucy looked over at just the right time and smiled wide when she saw Monty. "There you are," she laughed. She nodded to Erza, who picked up a small grey box with a bright red bow on top and passed it to Lucy. "I hope you like your present, Monty. Me and Erza had to search everywhere to find the perfect thing for you."

"Mommy and the Titan-lady got me a present?" Monty slithered down onto Cobra's legs, watching with anticipation as Lucy held it up for him to inspect it. "Open it?" Cobra reached forward and lifted the lid just enough for Monty to nudge his snout into the opening. He pushed the box open and stared down at the folded fabric in confusion. "What's my present?"

"He wants to know what it is," Cobra said to Lucy.

She laughed, brushing her fingers along the bright red fabric, then lifted it into the air. It looked like one long knitted fucking sock. "It's a snake sweater," she said. "So Monty won't get cold every time you go out with the weather like this."

"Sweater?"

"Like my jacket," Cobra said. His finger brushed across the scales on Monty's head. "Made just for you."

"Won't I get too big for it?"

"We weren't sure how fast he would grow," Erza said, almost as though she could also hear the worry coiling in Monty's soul, "So I had the woman who knitted this one make him a longer one as well. And she assured me that it will stretch, so he can wear it after he's eaten, too."

"Can I wear it now?"

"Sure," Cobra said, with a small chuckle. "Try it on."

Everyone laughed when Monty slithered into the gift box still in Lucy's hands. His head lifted and he waited for her to stretch the knitted material down the length of his body.

Cobra nearly lost his shit when it was all said and done, and Monty slithered around the box, then looked back at himself, and his little jaw dropped.

"Oh my God, is he smiling?" Lucy cooed. "Monty, you're so adorable!"

"He is kinda cute in that thing," Happy said. "Oh! Lushy, can Monty have his stocking?"

Her lips pursed in confusion, but Gray leaned over and grabbed Monty's stocking off the wall where Lucy had hung it on a little plastic hook. "Happy told us on the way over," he said to Cobra as a vague explanation. "Hope it's alright."

Cobra frowned at the stocking, then listened in on Gray's soul, to what he wasn't saying out loud so Monty would be none the wiser. Finally, he smirked. "Yeah, it's fine."

'I didn't put anything in the stockings…’
"Monty, you've got another present," Cobra said softly.

"This one is from me," Happy interjected.

Monty turned toward the stocking, and Cobra set his hand on Gray's arm to make sure he wouldn't move. They all watched as Monty's head disappeared inside the stocking. Cobra shifted Gray's arm a little to shake the stocking, and Monty's head shook one way and another, then finally withdrew with a dead mouse clutched in his jaws.

"Tell the stupid cat I love it! It was still moving. We killed it together!"

Cobra couldn't stop himself from chuckling. "He says he helped you kill it, Happy," he said, shaking his head. "And he loves it."

"Can I eat now?"

Cobra nodded and picked Monty up. He knew that no one else would be able to do it. Not while his little snake had prey in his mouth. This was one of the few times instinct took over for Monty. If someone touched him, he'd more than likely strike to protect his food.

"Where are you going?" Natsu asked.

"Bedroom," he said. It took a little maneuvering to step over Lucy and not slip on all the wrapping paper on the floor. "He likes eating in the dark."

"Oh!" Lucy scrambled to her feet. "Lemme clear out a space under my bed for him." Not smooth in the slightest. It wasn't like he couldn't clear out a space under her bed on his own. Still, Cobra didn't react to her accompanying him.

He set Monty on her bed and grinned when his little friend shook the mouse again. Just to make sure it was extra dead, he already knew. Lucy crouched down on the floor and rummaged under her bed for a moment, then pulled out a black gift box. She set it on the bed, and he transferred Monty to the dark space under the bed.

They stayed there with Monty for a silent moment, listening to his sweater slide across her floor. Lucy's lips curled in a devious smile while pushing the black box closer to Cobra. "That's weird," she said. "Santa put your present in my room instead of under the tree."

He blinked repeatedly, staring at the box as though a demon was resting inside, ready to eat him alive. Why the fuck had she given him a present? Sure, he'd given one to her, but she wasn't supposed to give one back. And she was giving him this after they'd fucked? Was this her way of telling him that she was lying when she said it was just a one time thing?

Goddamnit, was she trying to get something more out of him?

She patted his shoulder and walked back out into the living room, leaving him staring at the box. Was she trying to win him over with this?

'... Glad I used some of the money from that mission to get him something. Especially since the rest of the team dropped the ball... Gonna have to talk to them about that... Cobra's part of the team. Part of the guild. We should treat him just like anyone else...’

Thank fucking god. This had nothing to do with her screaming his name the night before. She'd been planning on giving this shit to him already.
Honestly, he blamed Angel for his reservations. She'd been a clinger after they'd fucked years ago. And he understood why she'd been like that - she'd wanted to hold onto the idea of someone not hurting her and calling it intimacy - but that wasn't what he'd wanted from her. It wasn't something he could've given her either.

Not with the way her soul was.

Cobra finally let out a long, slow breath, and grabbed the box. He sat down on the floor and set it in his lap, then slowly opened it. Shocked was the only word to describe how he felt when he saw the contents nestled in dark purple tissue paper. A pair of black leather gloves sat on top of everything. His fingers lightly brushed the leather, marveling at the softness before he picked them up and tucked them inside his jacket.

He moved a layer of tissue paper and found a couple horror movies that Lucy had mentioned to him before, and a card for Brewster Merriweather's Nursery located in a small town just outside of Magnolia. On the back of the card, Lucy had written down a number of toxic plants with a note saying those seeds were in stock, and they were expecting him to stop by sometime. There was another layer of tissue paper that he shifted to the side, his eye widening and his mouth watering when he saw a Chocolate Lover's Cookbook that advertised over 450 pages of recipes with illustrations. His fingers brushed across the gold leafing on the pages, and he flipped through a couple to find full color images of dozens of chocolatey treats.

There were no words Cobra could think of to express how he felt. He was truly speechless. Because he'd never expected to get any gifts from anyone, let alone things that he could use or would enjoy. He'd been meaning to buy a pair of gloves to keep his hands warm, but he'd never gotten around to it. Lucy knew that, and she'd gotten them for him.

He wasn't sure how difficult it would be to start growing his own poisonous plants, but that would make getting poison easier for him.

He already knew that she would want to be there when he watched the movies, but these ones… They were his. It wasn't a movie he was borrowing from her, or watching on the movie channels. He owned these now…

And the recipe book… Well, that was a given. He didn't own any recipe books just yet. He got almost all of his recipes from watching a program and copying it down, or trial and error.

"Monty, come out to the living room when you're ready," he said. Cobra put everything but the gloves back into the box and set it on Lucy's bed. He'd grab it later on before going home. There was no reason to take it out where the others were. He was sure she'd hidden his gift because she'd assumed he either wouldn't show up or that the others wouldn't get him anything. She was probably trying to save everyone's feelings.

'This is the way we eat the mouse… Kill the mouse… Maim the mouse…'

Good fucking lord, Monty was adorable. With a shake of his head, Cobra stood and left her bedroom, then took his seat on the couch again. Natsu and Happy had been tasked with cleaning up the wrapping paper - most likely because Happy's claws had shredded it and turned the shit into confetti - and Erza was putting her presents into her Requip dimension one by one. Gray had lost his shirt again in the time Cobra had been gone, and was on the hunt for it. And Lucy was taking dishes to the kitchen.

Cobra noticed his empty cocoa mug was still out, so he picked it up and took it to the kitchen. He stopped next to Lucy, handing her the mug. She didn't look at him, simply smiling while taking the
dish and setting it into her sink full of bubbles.

"You don't have to say thank you to Santa," she silently told him. "Being a good little boy is all Santa really wants."

When she glanced at him, then winked, he couldn't stop himself from laughing. Hysterically. It drew the rest of the team's attention, and he was sure he heard something from Happy about how Cobra had lost his mind, but he didn't care.

She was such a fucking pervert.

"I think you owe me more cocoa for that one," he whispered to her when he'd finally calmed down again.

"I can make you some right now," she said, but Cobra shook his head.

"Later," he said. "Movie night?"

Her cheeks flushed slightly, and she dropped the cup in her hands back into the sink when her mind began to race from the depth of his voice. Interesting. Just whispering was enough to remind her of the way he'd sounded the night before, which brought back other memories of how it had felt to have her arms pinned to his wall, hearing the dresser banging the drywall.

He was going to have to earmark that little tidbit of information, and use it to his advantage some other time.

Chapter End Notes

And that's that! I seriously hope you guys enjoyed this chapter. I've been using every spare moment the past couple days to get this thing finished.

I also want to give MadSoullessQueen a huge shout-out for helping me decide what I should do with the smut. That whole first scene was plotted out very differently (and I actually gave a little nod to it when Cobra was thinking about how he'd imagined him and Lucy hooking up - against her door, etc.). So, because the sex scene no longer meshed with my original plotting, I was flying by the seat of my pants. And then I ended up outlining a much longer sex scene. When talking with Mad about it, she helped me realize I was overthinking it, and I needed to refocus on the tension that's been building up to this point. So, I snagged about half of the outline and set it to the side to use later.

I'm much happier with the smut now that I've done that.

I know you've been waiting for this chapter for forever, so I seriously hope it was worth the wait!

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