Lion's Pride

by Rhov

Summary

When Lucy gets pregnant with Loke's child, Fairy Tail must protect her from the harsh laws of the Spirit World and enemies who want her half-spirit baby. The Lion fights for his lover, his child, his guild...his PRIDE!
"I am impelled, not to squeak like a grateful and apologetic mouse, but to roar like a lion out of pride in my profession." - John Steinbeck

It was August 10th, and a heatwave had hit Magnolia hard. In Fairy Tail's guild hall, Lucy Heartfilia was enjoying a cold glass of exotic juice. Gray's icy fight with Natsu was nice, too, although she wished the fiery dragon slayer would stop heating things up.

"So," Mirajane began with a sweet simper. "How are you and Loke?"

Lucy sighed and shook her head. "Why...why do people always ask that?"

The bartender tittered innocently. "Because you're so cute together. You're a Celestial Spirit mage, he's a Zodiac Celestial Spirit..." She waved her hands like scales, as if the two balanced in yin-yang fashion.

"Precisely," Lucy grumbled. "Relationships between Celestial Spirits and their owners are forbidden. The relationship between us must remain professional."

"Must?" With a gleam in her eyes, Mirajane leaned over the bar counter. "You sound disappointed."

"Ridiculous! Loke is...crass," grimaced Lucy. "He's a playboy. Plus he's immortal. Can you fathom how many women he's had over the ages?"

"All the more experience in how to truly please a woman."

She ignored that sweet Mirajane would even say something like that. "If he weren't a Celestial Spirit, I'd be worried about diseases. Besides, even if I had the slightest bit of interest, I'd be merely another female conquest."

"But Loke loooves you," Mirajane crooned. "I especially like when he calls you 'Master.' Have you noticed how furious Gray gets when he does that? Put a collar and leash on that kitty and..."

"Enough!" Lucy blushed at her suggestion. She finished her drink and wiped some of the glass sweat on her neck to cool herself off, blaming the flush on the heatwave. "I couldn't care less about what Gray thinks." She stormed away, easily ducking Natsu as he was thrown across the room by Gajeel.

Mirajane watched her, placed a lithe hand on her cheek, and chuckled at the unspoken thing. "She never said she didn't care about what Loke thinks."

When Lucy arrived at her home, she already smelled nikujaga cooking in the kitchen. She smiled and shook her head.

"What if Natsu showed up before me?"

"If I know him, he's still fighting Gajeel," said a man from the kitchen.
She slipped off her shoes at the door. "What if Erza came to visit?"

"She's on a mission and will be gone two more days."

"Gray shows up on his own too, you know...usually naked."

This time, she heard something clunk in the kitchen. Lucy smiled to herself and shook her head. Really, why was she so mean to him? A head popped over from the kitchen, and Loke stared hard at her. Poofy ginger orange hair, predatory dark green eyes hidden by blue shades, sharp features like a noble beast, were all offset by a frilly apron with a Kawaii Kitty grinning on the front.

"If that exhibitionist bastard dared to break into your house," growled Loke, "I'll tell him to keep his hands off my woman, beat him so hard he'll forget I admitted anything, then drop him off butt naked in front of Erza's door and let her deal with him."

"That was almost a normal fight between you two until the end. That's just mean!"

Loke smirked and shrugged nonchalantly. "Gotta come up with more inventive ways of teaching him not to mess with my woman."

Lucy smiled to hear him say that, but her face drifted, her eyes lowered sadly, and she turned to her bedroom.

"Lucy?" Loke quickly turned off the oven and hurried after her, ditching the cute apron as he went. "What is it? Look, if I'm being possessive again, I can't help it. I'm a Lion, you know. Did you know that in the wild, when a male lion takes over a pride, he kills all the other males so there's no competition? I think I'm rather tamed compared to that."

"It's not you," she said in distraction. She tried to turn away, not wanting to ruin a nice night together with her silly worries, but Loke held her by the arms, letting her silently know that he was not going to give up on her so easily. "Mira mentioned you again. It won't take everyone long to figure out about us, and...and I'm scared," she whispered. "I'm scared, if they find out...if you get in trouble...I...I can't lose you."

Loke smirked at her. "Because I'm your strongest Celestial Spirit."

She spitefully slapped his chest. "You know that's not what I mean."

"I know," he smiled, hugging her from behind. "And it's fine. We won't get in trouble."

"The contract between Celestial Spirits and their owners specifically says..."

"I don't recall agreeing to that sub-clause," he smiled, brushing her hair away from her neck and blowing on it to cool her down.

"This...it's illegal."

He sighed and took a step back. "Technically, you're right. So be honest: do you want us to stop? If you truly do, I'll back off."

"No you won't," she smirked, knowing his personality too well.

"Okay, I'll go back to flirting constantly but going home after the fight's over. Nowhere do the rules say we Spirits can't fall in love. Hell, Taurus won't shut up about your boobs, and even Sagittarius is enamored. Even if it becomes more than mere unrequited feelings...I hate to bring this up," he
sighed, "but Karen and I..."

"I know, you told me," she interrupted, not wanting to think about that vile woman who betrayed Loke and Aries...especially Loke who had adored her.

He nuzzled the back of her neck. "So long as we're careful, so long as you don't...you know," he blushed, "get pregnant."

"Oh, hell no! Is that even possible?" she asked, leaning back into his comforting arms. She stretched behind her and began to pet him behind the ears. "I didn't think Celestial Spirits could have kids."

Her petting elicited a satisfied purr from deep in his throat. "It happened only once. The child grew to be insanely powerful. You might have heard of him." He paused as his memory brushed across that horrific time. "Zeref!"

Lucy jolted at the name. "No way! Zeref was the son of a Celestial Spirit?"

"At the time, the parents could hardly be blamed. No Human had ever gotten pregnant from a Celestial Spirit. It wasn't supposed to be possible. After that disaster, the rule was made that Celestial Spirits couldn't have sex with Humans. I broke that rule. I'm breaking it again. I'll keep breaking it because...I love you, Lucy," he sighed, clutching her close to him. "You caught my eye the first time I saw you. When you put your life on the line for me, that clenched it. Karen..." He sighed deeply. "She was powerful, I fell in love with that strength, yet I grew to hate her. But you...you're even more powerful than she was, even if you don't think you are. What's more, you're kind, caring." He rubbed his chin against her head, purring louder. "You care for us Celestial Spirits like real people. Even Plue is more than some little pet to you. Lucy," he whispered, "I love you like I've never loved another person—woman, man, or Spirit—for as long as I have existed."

She had heard those words before, the first day he wooed her, but it always melted her inhibitions. She feared Loke might get in trouble, but she could not deny her own feelings. Despite rejecting everyone's suspicions, treating him coldly in front of others, lying about her purely professional relationship, even lying to Mirajane, Erza, and Levy, her three closest female friends, she could not say no to Loke.

"Master," he purred, rubbing his chin against her.

Hearing him call her that sent a thrill through her body. "You know, Mira said something today."

He licked her neck and began working on the buttons of her blouse. "Did she now?"

"She said I should put a collar on you."

He hummed a laugh at the idea. "Mira is a closet pervert. And collars are for kittens. I'm a wild Lion! Unless," he added with a feral grin, "you'd like to see me in a collar. Meow," he said lustily.

Lucy hummed at the thought and melted into his arms. Loke gently leaned her back onto the bed and began *grooming* every inch of her body.

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Back in the guild hall, Lisanna left a conversation with Alzack and Bisca. She went to the bar to talk with her sister.

"Hey Mira-nee, I have a rather embarrassing question."

Mirajane handed Elfman another drink. "They're in my top drawer under the socks, pink box, ribbed
for her pleasure."

"Wh-what?" Lisanna gasped, stunned by what her sister said. How could she say something like that and keep her innocent smile?

Elfman snorted into his mug. "Natsu should buy his own. A real man makes sure he's prepared for his lady. And what are you doing with things like that, nee-chan?" he realized with a flare of brotherly protection.

"Oh, hell no!" Lisanna blushed brightly. "Natsu and I...we're not..."

Juvia sat primly at a table, intensely watching Cana deal out her love fortune. "If Gray-sama and Juvia did that, Juvia can wash herself out and never get pregnant. Gray-sama would never have to worry about things like that. Juvia is naturally lubricant, too."

"Okay, eww, and that's not what I meant," Lisanna said in a fluster.

Cana hummed at her cards. "The Queen of Wands in reverse: a light-haired woman is getting in the way of your relationship."

Juvia turned her head aside and grumbled, "Love rival."

Cana looked at the next card. "The Lovers..."

"Ah, good fortune!"

"But it's in reverse: frustration in love. The Hanged Man: change shall come, and it's time to let go. Three of Swords: a broken relationship, grief, possibly a three-way relationship, and someone is about to get hurt. The Star in reverse: crushed dreams. The Eight of Cups: disappointment in love and time to walk away from a failed endeavor...wow, Juvia, you have a really unlucky love fortune."

The rain woman stood up, stomped her foot, and yelled, "Juvia does not believe in superstitious nonsense!" She stormed away from Cana's table.

Lisanna was still trying to cool off her cheeks. "No, it's Lucy..."

"Ah, I can help you in that department," Cana grinned lasciviously. "It's called the Double Trouble Missed-Her Fister. Sex with a lady will never be the same!"

"Not that either," Lisanna snapped, almost losing her cool. "I'm not even into...eww, no!"

Cana flipped down a card. "Let's see what awaits you. Eh? Six of Cups? An old lover will reappear. Hmm..." She continued flipping out cards, staring at them intensely.

Lisanna was fiery red now and feeling squirmy just thinking about what these people were saying. "It's about Lucy and Loke. Are those two...I mean...well, are they or aren't they?"

Gray walked up behind them. "Are they or aren't they what?" he glared menacingly.

Lisanna knew that look. She could hardly help but recall how the Gray she had known in Edolas was head over heels for Juvia. Imagining him and Lucy together was too odd. Of course, Edo-Gray also wore five coats in the summer, whereas this Gray...

"Where are your clothes?" Mirajane sighed with a reprimanding smile.

Gray looked down. "Dammit, I did it again!" He rushed off to figure out where he had undressed.
Mirajane took his absence to answer quickly. "About Lucy, she insists there's nothing between them, but Erza went to visit her last week and...overheard some things."

Lisanna blushed at what she meant. "But that could be a problem. Lucy knows contraceptive magic, right?"

Mirajane looked concerned and dismayed. "It's rare for even doctors to know that."

Elfman looked suspicious. "How do you know that, nee-chan?"

She did not answer him. "I'm sure those two are being cautious. Why are you worried for Lucy?"

"Well," Lisanna squirmed, "because...you see, I just read that Celestial Spirits..."

Lucy gasped as Loke thrust into her. Her bedroom, already hot with the late afternoon sun, was thick with the redolence of vanilla candles, strawberry-flavored lubricant, and musky sex. She was on her hands and knees, and Loke grabbed her hips from behind like an animal. She occasionally heard a purr deep in his chest as he strained to hold on longer for her.

"They call me the Lion," he laughed between tensely gritted teeth, "but God, you're the real animal here."

"Loke!" she gasped.

He grabbed her massive breasts as they bobbed against the sheets. Sweat dripped down his strained face and landed on her arching back. He suddenly leaned over her and bit the nap of her neck. Lucy cried out in pain. Then Loke sucked on that spot, and any sense of decency in her was lost. She no longer cared if her neighbors pounded on the walls to keep it down. She let out a shuddering scream and collapsed flat down onto her stomach.

"How do we always end up in that position?" she asked, rolling back around to look at her ceiling.

He mindlessly played with her breasts. "I'm a lion. I like it that way."

"You're biting harder."

"It's an instinct. When they mate, a lion holds his lioness by the back of the neck to make sure she doesn't get away."

"You'll break skin one day."

"Would you hate me if I did?"

She hummed as if she had to think about that. Of course she wouldn't! She might even like it that rough.
"You're definitely no timid little girl," he smiled lazily. "Let me change this thing," he said, pointing to the spent condom. "Then I'll let you have this kitten however you like. Perhaps I'll let you sit on top and give me a belly rub."

"Eager for more already?" she smirked. "I've hardly had time to catch my breath after the last two...no, three times. You might pull a muscle if you keep this up."

"Have we gone at this three times already?" he mused.

She checked the opened condom squares lying on her night stand. "Yep, that's the third. You should buy more."

"Wow, three times. That's all?" He pouted in disappointment. "I'm out of practice."

"All?" she cried out.

"Little Leonita," he smiled, using the pet name he came up for her. "There's one other fact about lions which you must understand." He gave her a long lick from her throat down between her breasts. "A male lion can mate up to forty times a day for four days straight, forgoing even food, all so he can make his lioness happy."

"F-Forty times?" Lucy gawked. "Y-You're joking, right?"

Her awestruck look, a mix of terror and arousal, pleased him. "I'm not joking. But forgoing food doesn't sound fun at all. How about we eat that nice nikujaga dinner I cooked, I'll go to the specialty store for more supplies...then we'll see how long it takes us to work in those other thirty-seven times?"

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**One Month Later**

Lucy walked slowly into Fairy Tail's guild hall. Her feet dragged slightly, and anyone bothering to pay attention could see that her golden hair was a little more limp, her face a bit sallow, and her eyes red from lack of sleep.

"Ice bastard!" she heard, followed by a dragon's roar. She easily batted away a goblet and ducked a flying table half coated in ice and half smoking on fire.

"Idiot! You almost hit Lucy," yelled Gray. He went after Natsu twice as fiercely to teach him a lesson.

Lucy walked to the bar and tapped to get Mirajane's attention.

"Ah, Lucy! You've been missing for a while."

"I went on a...training getaway," she said, blushing slightly and deciding not to mention Loke's sudden desire to visit a beach resort for a few weeks of playtime. "I came home a week ago, but I've been sick ever since."

"Oh, that's terrible! What can I do for you? I have some ginger tea."

"That actually sounds perfect, but first I need to talk to Master."

Mirajane thought it odd, a sick mage wanting to talk to the guild master. Then again, if she had to take some extended time off... "I'll tell him for you. Sick leave isn't a big deal around here. Why,
once Alzack caught some jungle virus and..."

"No, I need to talk to him," she insisted. She suddenly put her hand to her throat and looked like she was about to throw up.

"Of course, of course," Mirajane said, hoping to calm her down. "He just stepped into the infirmary to take his medication. It seems Natsu went on a mission without you last week and destroyed a mountain village." She tittered as if such wanton destruction was merely a trifle unworthy of getting Master Makarov upset.

Lucy muttered thanks and walked to the infirmary, turning down Cana's offer for a drinking contest. It was quieter in this area of the guild, designed to block out even the rowdiness of Fairy Tail so injured mages could rest. Makarov had just gulped down a glass of water and was smacking his lips.

"Ah, Lucy-chan. What can I do for you? Not sick, are you?"

"Something like that," she sighed, sinking onto a nurse bed. He looked worried for one of his brats. "Master, I hate to ask this after all the guild has done for me."

"If you're thinking of leaving us, forget it!" he said, swinging his hand out with an emphatic dismissal. "You're too important to this guild."

"No," she smiled, genuinely glad he felt that way. "I...may need the guild to protect me again." She looked down at him, and Makarov pouted to see the lovely blonde with tears in her eyes. "Master...I'm pregnant!"

End of Chapter 1

Chapter End Notes

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So, this is my first Fairy Tail fanfic! It was just supposed to be a one-shot, but I've gotten numerous requests to expand it. We'll see where this goes. I'm currently writing this in the Tenrou Island Arc, and things are being revealed about Zeref. I have no idea if he's just a human who happens to be insanely powerful and ancient, or if he's some demigod like what I stated. It'd explain some things, like why he's still alive. Also, I'm not trained in Tarot, so those cards might be wrong. If you have training and can tell me the proper cards for Juvia's loveless situation, I'll be very happy.

=^..^= "AYE!"

"Not you, Happy." XD
For once, Fairy Tail's guild hall was quiet. Only movement from chairs and tankards, occasional whispers, and uncomfortable sniffs broke the silence, each like little glasses shattering.

"It's been a while since this has happened," Macao muttered to Wakaba.

The pipe-smoker nodded thoughtfully. "It's why there aren't many older women in this guild. When one gets pregnant, nine out of ten times they retire to raise the kids."

Reedus stopped sketching the scene at the bar that had everyone so quiet. "But if Lucy retires, she has to give up her Celestial Spirit Keys, oui? She'd never give them up!"

"If she gave them up," Macao realized, dropping his voice, "she'd lose...him."

The *him* was the man in Reedus' sketch, a pathetic sight and rare in that guild, so the artist wanted to capture it to show a different side to their normally fun-loving group. Loke sat at the bar between Gildarts and Lisanna, both watching over him with worried expressions, while Mirajane urged him to drink something relaxing. Loke's arms were folded on the counter with his chin resting on top, staring ahead blankly. From time to time, he shook his head as he tried to piece it all together.

"We...we were being careful. Every time. Every goddamn time!" he said in anguish.

Lisanna stroked his back like someone might pet a cat about to see the vet. "The items Humans use to prevent pregnancy don't work for Celestial Spirits because...well, latex doesn't hold back the magic element. I was just asking Mira-nee about magic contraceptives. It's the only sure way."

"I didn't know," Loke whispered hollowly. "I didn't...nobody could have known. This isn't supposed to be possible. Yet...last time as well..."

Before he could say more, the guild's doors splintered apart like a dropped ice cube. A glittering white lance sliced the air, barely missing other guild members and stabbing Cana's beer barrel while she was in the middle of drinking. It pieced Loke's chest with a burst of ice and golden shimmering spirit energy. Lisanna gasped and moved away.

Gildarts leaped around. "Gray, not here, not now," he warned, looking absolutely serious.

Gray's blue eyes were like living flames, half-mad with jealousy, yet they held a gleam of terror as well, fear for a friend. Instead of backing down, he turned his hand ever so slightly. Loke cried out as the icy lance twisted with a squishing sound.

"Gray, don't," Mirajane pleaded.

"You...fucking...bastard," Gray seethed venomously.

Macao lit his purple flame and melted the ice. His face stayed placid, sympathizing with the teen.
"Enough," was all he said. Meanwhile, Wendy rushed over to heal Loke.

Gray marched in. For once, he was fully dressed, proving he was not in his normal state of mind. He strode up to Loke, crushed his shoulder, and yanked him around. Loke was already pale from the hole in his chest, but Wendy's magic was helping quickly.

"You listen to me, you fucking wildcat," Gray threatened softly. "For every pain she suffers, I will inflict it back on you ten-fold. For every tear she sheds as she goes through a hell of agony all because you couldn't keep your pants on, I will take three drops of your blood. And if—Heaven forbid—the worst happens, if she dies in childbirth, if she dies because your demonspawn is too powerful for her fragile body, if she dies because some goddamn rule was broken—a rule you knew about—then so help me," he hissed, leaning so close that his nose almost touched Loke's, "I will hunt you down to whatever realm you slither away into, and I will torture you every day for the rest of my life. Seventy or eighty years might be a drop in the bucket to an immortal Celestial Spirit like you, but I'll make every minute of it a nightmare you'll never forget, no matter how many eons you live."

"You needn't bother," Loke sighed miserably. "If the worst possible thing occurred to Lucy, I'd be responsible for her death. That comes with a death sentence of banishment. I'd last only three years in this world. If you want to torture me during those three years, you're free to do so. I deserve it." He dropped his head, and his shaggy mane fell into his face. "I deserve it," he repeated fatalistically.

Gray backed off, trying to decide if he could truly hate a man like this when Loke already looked tormented by the situation.

"Where is she?" Natsu boomed, stepping over the defrosting shattered door. "You!"

"Not him also," Mirajane sighed.

"These two..." Gildarts pouted, shaking his head.

Natsu kept pointing as he walked up to Loke. "You!" he repeated when he got to the bar.

His fist drew back and caught ablaze, lighting the otherwise gloomy atmosphere of the hall. Wendy backed away with a shout of protest that she had just healed Loke. Lisanna opened her mouth to warn him, but Natsu froze in that position. Loke did not even flinch. His sunglasses had been knocked off when Gray struck him, and the whole guild saw the pink lining his eyelids from tears he had shed in fear for Lucy's safety. He looked ready to accept the fiery blow, as if it could purge his sin.

"Do you love her?" bellowed Natsu.

Loke blinked in confusion. "More than anything in this world or the next world."

Natsu's fierce face did not let up. "Will you stay by her side?"

Loke allowed himself to smile, but his answer was no less serious. "I'm not leaving her just because this happened, Natsu. I will never leave her or our child. Anyone who says I can't stay by her will have to fight me and kill me."

The flame extinguished and Natsu's fist dropped. "That's all I want to hear. Lucy is my nakama. If you can make her happy, that's all I want. So then," he grinned widely, "where is she? I wanna see the baby."

"Idiot!" Gray grumbled, angry that Natsu had actually taken this news more maturely...pink bastard!
"The baby won't be here for nine months."

"Whaaa-? That's too long to be pregnant."

"Seriously, what species are you?" glared Gray.

"It won't be nine months," Porlyusica announced, striding out from the infirmary area. "Stinking humans," the ancient pink-haired woman grumbled. "You! You smell slightly less," she said to Loke. "Are you the father?"

"I...fath-...y-yes." Loke had a goofy grin as he finally got called that. Father!

Porlyusica looked him up and down in inspection. "Celestial Spirit. Leo, right? A lion." Her constant scowl pulled even lower. "Now it makes sense. This is troubling."

"What's wrong? Is Lucy all right?" Loke asked in worry.

Porlyusica glared at him. "Miss Heartfilia requested an abortion."

"What?" Loke gasped, feeling his heart drop.

"No way!" Gray also protested. A minute ago, he would not have minded, but after seeing the happiness in Loke's face at the prospect of starting a family, he almost—just almost—wanted to support him.

"She feared you'd get into trouble with the Spirit World, so it was what she wanted. Upon examining her, I had to inform her that she was too far along."

"Too...far?" Loke asked in confusion. "But that's impossible. Even if it happened on our first time..."

"I estimate she became pregnant one month ago."

Loke just blinked. Natsu puckered his face, not understanding any of this. Gray stayed neutrally hesitant.

"But," Mirajane said softly, "one month isn't too far along for an abortion."

Elfman stared hard at her. "How do you know that, nee-chan?" She did not answer.

"For a human, no. One month and the fetus is barely more than a bundle of cells. Even if she was a normal human carrying a normal human fetus at this stage of development, a doctor could still perform the procedure. However, this isn't a normal pregnancy, or else I wouldn't bother being here. For her...or I should say, for him..." A knobby finger pointing at Loke. "This pregnancy is too challenging. I can't terminate it at this point. Tell me, Leo: do you happen to know any lion facts?"

A blush came to his cheeks. "A few." Of course, he knew all the perverted facts.

"Did you know the gestation period of a lion is only one hundred and ten days?"

The women in the guild dropped their mouths. Most of the men looked clueless.

"Lucy takes one hundred and ten days for digestion?" Natsu asked in confusion. "No wonder she gets constipated."

"Gestation, not digestion, stupid," Gray snapped.
Since you smelly humans are so simpleminded, let me restate this," Porlyusica grumbled. "Human gestation—the period from the parents doing the naughty to popping out a squirmy, crying baby—is two hundred and eighty days, give or take a few. Lucy Heartfilia is carrying the son of the Lion, growing within her at the rate of a lion, one hundred and ten days, over twice as fast as a normal human fetus develops. This is neither natural nor safe. Do you have a mage trained in healing?"

Wendy perked up. "Oh, me! I know a little."

"Don't be modest," Charle scolded. "She is the...

"Sky dragon, perfect," Porlyusica interrupted, much to Charle's annoyance. "I'm assigning you to her. She'll need daily help, especially as the fetus begins its growth spurt. Her hormones will rage at twice the intensity as a normal woman. Her morning sickness appears to be doubly bad, too. You, Leo, will have to deal with this. Now, everyone in this guild has heard about Miss Heartfilia's condition, but it'd be unwise for rumors to spread. There are legends about the children of Celestial Spirits. People will likely be after her. Since she won't be making money from jobs and must remain under guild protection, Makarov has declared that she'll move into the girls' dormitory. Which one of you stinkbags is Gray?"

"Me," the ice mage answered in a deep voice.

"You smell worse with your clothes off, boy." He had not realized when he removed them. "Miss Heartfilia asked that you move her things into the girls' dorm and give her landlord her last rent payment."

"I'll help," Natsu offered.

"Aye!" Happy chimed in.

Porlyusica peered him over. "Fire dragon. Natsu?" He nodded enthusiastically. "She asked that you not move her things. She wants them intact."

"Hey!"

"Ha!" Gray laughed.

"She can take a few visitors, but she's weak. She'll be weak through this whole ordeal. I suggest the Lion and the Sky Dragon go first." With that, Porlyusica turned to go.

"Hey, wait," Loke yelled. He grabbed her shoulder to stop her hasty departure. She glared at him, and he felt something like acid scald him. "When the baby is born, will it grow at an accelerated rate, too? And...well, lions have up to four cubs in a litter." He left it at that, not sure if he should feel happy at the possibility of many babies or even more terrified what something like that might mean to Lucy.

"If she was a lion, you might have a real problem. Luckily for her, she's a healthy human woman of childbearing age, ovulating a single egg per month. She's carrying one child, male, humanoid as far as I can tell. As for how it will develop, I have no idea. I wasn't around when the last hybrid Human-Spirit was born. You were around back then, Leo. Do you remember what happened?"

Loke looked aside with a disturbed face.

"Someone could research this. I don't care. I'm only doing this because I owe Makarov, but don't push your luck, Lion. And don't call me again until she goes into labor." Then the ancient hermit stormed out.
Wendy came up to Loke and tugged his sleeve. "We should go see Lucy."

Loke took a step, stumbled into a table, and collapsed into the nearest chair. His eyes stared out huge and blank. Shaking with emotion, his hand reached up to his chest and clutched right over his heart.

"Loke!" Wendy cried in worry. "Is it your injury? Waaah, I'm sorry, I'm not really trained to heal Celestial Spirits."

"It's...it's okay," he told her, patting her head a little too hard. She pulled back with a cute pout and rubbed out where he bonked her. "It's...gonna be...okay," he said to himself. "It'll be...Lucy...she..."

He felt his world spinning out of control. "Okay...she has to be..."

"Of course she will be!"

Loke looked up with harrowed dread, but Natsu's massive, carefree grin was contagious. Others around the guild also began smiling like that at Loke.

"Lucy has you and me, and even the ice bastard."

"Flame-brain," Gray snapped back.

"Plus she has the whole guild," Natsu went on.

"That's right!" Levy shouted, and others agreed.

Natsu smiled around at all of them. "See! An entire building of nakama. So no worries! Lucy's gonna have a baby at twice the speed, but she's twice as strong as a normal lady so it won't be a problem for a fighter like her. Then she'll spend a little time raising it, and before you know it, she'll be back doing jobs with us. That baby will grow up strong and join the guild one day. I'll teach him how to melt ice."

Gray glared at him. "You're supposed to teach children not to play with fire."

"He'd get sick hanging around a cold-blooded pervert like you."

As they began another fight, Wendy tugged on Loke again. This time he stood, tall and refined, suddenly feeling all the support of those around him, friends who would always be there for Lucy...even if he had to suffer for his crime of loving her.

He went with the little girl and her white cat to the infirmary. Lucy sat on a bed with a sheet pulled over her legs, laughing as Makarov told her some story of the past. Wendy hurried forward to check on her, but Loke stayed in the doorway, watching her with a whole new expression.

I want her with me forever. I want to be by her side until she's old and gray, and then I want to watch over her through each reincarnation, from now until the end of time.

Lucy assured Wendy she was in no discomfort, but she agreed to let her be a midwife, even if the little girl had never seen a baby delivered. Then her eyes caught a familiar shade of orange, and she grinned at Loke. He walked in slowly, placing each foot purposely closer to her, walking away from those fears he felt in the guild hall and closer to where his heart felt most at ease.


With gentle eyes, Loke lightly touched her cheek. "You're saying silly things again, Leonita. A son? How could that not fill me with pride!" He embraced Lucy and hid his face in her shoulder so she
Makarov wisely pulled Wendy aside and told her to follow him to the library where she could research everything she needed to know about pregnancy. He gave one last glance at the couple, pouted, and shook his head. Such an adorable pair! It was a shame this had to happen to them. Makarov was putting his heart and soul on the line for their happiness. He had promised Lucy he would protect her, even if the Celestial Spirits themselves came to punish her and Loke. What use was a guild if they could not protect one of their own when she was weakest?

Still...such a shame.

End of Chapter 2

Chapter End Notes

I bow deeply before all my reviewers! I only planned for this to be a one-shot, but I was so excited by the first chapter's reception that I immediately began plotting a full story. 110 days, and Lucy is already 30 days along, so...80 days! Also, isn't it weird seeing Natsu reacting more maturely than Gray? But one's jealous while the other just wants whatever will make his friend happy.

=^..^= "AYE! But I'm already your friend, Rhov."

"Not you, Happy. And yes, you're my friend."

"Aye, sir!"
"It is much easier to become a father than to be one." - Kent Nerburn

So Mama, that was what happened that fateful year. I was suddenly going to be a mother, something I had never planned for and, quite frankly, I felt totally unprepared.

Did I want this? I ask myself that even now, looking back. At the time, I was mostly scared, even if I tried to laugh it off. I guess the idea of pain worried me some, but I figured I had been in so many battles and survived, so pushing a baby out of me couldn’t be that bad. I was scared about the future. I feared how this baby would change my life, destroy my career, and I feared I'd make a horrible mother, one of those young, inexperienced mothers you hear about who end up with delinquent punks for kids.

Part of me saw this as a heavy curtain lowering on the Stage of Opportunity. My role in the play was over. The audience of available bachelors who I had freely been able to perform to, flirt with, and ogle without guilt was fading away fast. I would soon find myself alone on the dark stage, listening to the muted applause of that audience calling "Good show, Lucy, good show," but never an encore. Encores were not an option in this production. Those opportunities were going away, and I would once again be a normal person, not a glamorous actress, trapped in the humdrum world of backstage domestic life with my amaranthine costar Loke.

That left me shivering. Did I want Loke as my one-and-only? Did I want to overslaugh that cheering mob of bachelors for this dandy Celestial Spirit? Was I prepared for a lifetime with him? I would age, our child would grow, but Loke would never change, never look older. He would always split his time between me and the Spirit World. And that made me depressed. Even more depressed than the fact that I felt totally ill-prepared to raise a child. I mean, hey, this is me we're talking about! I can't even care for two grown boys like Natsu and Gray...

Like...Gray...

Lucy's new place in Fairy Hills—the guild's dormitory for girls—was larger than her townhouse. It was a corner unit far from the lobby, giving her fewer neighbors to annoy. She figured this was good, since if she and Loke wanted some "alone time," it was best if the entire female population of Fairy Tail did not hear them. The landlady Ruchio grudgingly let Loke live there too, only because Erza insisted he should be with Lucy.

Lucy panicked about coming up with 100,000 Jewels a month when she could not do missions, but Erza assured her that this was an exception. Makarov wanted her to be safe, somewhere close to other mages and near Wendy in case she had complications. Lucy felt relieved until Erza told her that her rent would be put on a tab, which she could pay off afterward at her own pace without interest. Lucy had to thank Erza for getting her that sort of deal, but she also felt shattered that she would now be at least 300,000 Jewels in debt, likely more since she might have to live in Fairy Hills after the baby was born.

Through that first week, Loke never left her side, helping her to move in, unpacking boxes, catering to her until Lucy had no idea what to do besides write her novel. She was unsure where he went at
night—surely he could not stay in the Human World that long—but he cuddled her in bed until she fell asleep, and he was already busy making tea and pancakes when she awakened.

Tea and pancakes: the only things she could hold down in the morning. It soon became a ritual: wake up, vomit into the bucket beside her bed, drag herself into the bathroom, vomit again, shower, dress, brush her hair, vomit one last time, wash up, then sit down to breakfast with Loke. At least the ginger tea had enough honey to get rid of the taste of bile.

On this day, just as they were cleaning up their meal, Loke slithered around her and put his hands on her stomach. "Either my cooking is too rich or that baby really is forming quickly," he smiled.

She wanted to hit him for calling her fat. When she swirled around with a vein throbbing on her forehead, she saw a tender look in his shaded eyes. There was barely a bulge, just enough to make her normally tight skirts uncomfortable, yet he stared at her as if she was the glory of womanhood.

"I'll probably get stretch marks like some old hag," she pouted.

"With skin this supple?" he purred, running his hands up her arms. "Impossible! But...is it painful?" he asked, looking genuinely worried. "Is it growing too fast for you? Porlyusica said..."

"I'm fine," she laughed. "Wendy has a magic ointment, and she checks me daily. It's embarrassing, really," she admitted sheepishly. "Everyone is spoiling me."

Loke pulled her close and stroked her cheek. "This is a special time for you. You're allowed to be treated like a princess this once. But for me," he purred, leaning in until his lips brushed against her while his hands ran over the soft hills hidden by her blouse, "you will always be...my master-r-r!" He had a predatory gleam in his eyes. She felt small under such an intense gaze, like a mouse before a lion. "Leonita," he purred with a rumble.

Whenever he called her that, she instantly transformed from that meek mouse to being an equal before this King of Beasts. She grabbed him, tilted her head, and let him come to her for his supplication of kisses.

Loke hummed as he tasted the lingering flavor of maple syrup. His tongue kept venturing into her mouth, savoring that sweetness. His hands wanted to claw at her breasts and possess them, but he had read that pregnant women got more tender in that area. He instead ran his thumbs over the tips, round and around, making her nipples stiffen and press against the thin cotton.

"Loke," she moaned, breathing hard already.

He glanced down at her wantonly flushed face. "Do you want to stay in today?"

She nodded breathlessly, then surrendered herself to his eager mouth.

Lucy hummed as his hands slipped under her blouse and cradled her breasts. Loke left her mouth and trailed kisses down her throat so he could hear her struggling to keep quiet. She was so timid in this dorm, scared of making a noise others would hear. He liked playing with her, trying to force her to make a loud, unexpected cry, something to make her blush with embarrassment.

He moved her shirt higher and gave one pink nipple a long, slow lick. Her lips tightened to muffle her cry. He licked the other, but as it reached the tip of his tongue, he gave the stiffening nipple a small bite, nothing painful, just enough to make her shout, then force her mouth closed, humming tensely to keep quiet. Seeing her struggle made him smile sadistically.

Her out-of-control hormones were raging. Loke's licks felt far more intense than usual. She grabbed
his belt loops and yanked him closer, forcing him to stop his torturous play at her sensitive breasts and return to her lips. She moved her hips against him until she felt him harden and rise. Loke gave a soft groan at her surprising insistence. He pressed her up against the kitchen counter, rubbing himself against her in slow thrusts until she gasped. She reached down and palmed him through his pants, getting an even louder grunt from Loke. He knew he had to be gentle, but dammit, he wanted to ravage her!

Just as things were about to go wild, the door burst open and they heard the unmistakable clanking metallic jangle of Erza's armor. Lucy squeaked, shoved Loke aside, and yanked her blouse down. He turned away, blushing with embarrassment as he adjusted his trousers.

"I come bearing gifts," Erza announced. Only then did she see Lucy's disheveled clothes and Loke's annoyance. "Did I come at a bad time?"

Loke stormed away to finish cleaning the breakfast dishes. "You could try knocking. And take off your shoes when you're inside!"

Erza arched an eyebrow at this domesticated side of the Lion.

"Don't mind him." Lucy took Erza by the arm and led her back into the living room, leaving the cleanup to Loke.

The Titania thrust out a glittery gift bag tied with curling baby-blue ribbons. "A baby rattle. I was taught that a baby who can shake his rattle really loud will grow up to become a warrior and never be afraid. I tested all the rattles in the store. This was the loudest."

"Is...that so?" Lucy wanted to laugh at the image of Erza testing baby rattles. She should probably send some sort of apology to the traumatized store owner.

"I shook them really hard," Erza insisted seriously. "It was expensive, too."

"A rattle?" Lucy asked in confusion. She opened the bag and pulled out the small toy. It looked no different than a normal rattle.

"Yes, because I broke eleven rattles testing them. Although I don't think I should have had to pay. They were obviously of inferior quality."

"Just how hard did you shake them?" Lucy muttered, giving the rattle a light shake.

"I should warn you about something," Erza said as she took a seat. "When I was coming back from my mission, I overheard some talk in a tavern. I didn't catch much, but I heard 'child of the Spirit World' and 'Zeref's Will.' I might have thought nothing of it, except while I was shopping I realized Loke is from the Spirit World. Could that possibly mean your baby? And what does Zeref have to do with it?"

There was a crash in the kitchen. Lucy rushed over to find Loke had dropped some dishes and was seated awkwardly at the table. His head rested in his hand, eyes massive, mouth partly open from panting, face pale and sweaty.

"Loke! Are you okay? You've been out for a while. Maybe you should return to the Spirit World and rest."

"They're after you," he breathed in horror. "Dammit, they're already after you. The guild was supposed to keep it secret."
"It's ripe gossip amongst the guild members," Erza warned them. "It's reasonable that anyone could've overheard. We should warn Master that this is no longer a secret. You also need new clothes. That skirt looks painful."

"It's just snug," Lucy shrugged.

"Shopping!" Erza decided firmly. "Plus I have no idea how to test baby clothes. You'll have to show me."

"You don't test them. You just buy what's cute," Lucy sighed.

"I don't know what's cute for babies. I admit, I...I don't know anything about babies." The warrior woman blushed at admitting such a weakness. "I'm a woman, you'd think I'd know, but it's not exactly some instinct you're born with. It's shameful, isn't it?"

Lucy felt sorry for how awkward Erza looked. "Not at all, not at all! All right, we'll go shopping. I can show you a bit, although," she laughed, "I don't know much either. I could use the walk. My feet swell if I don't keep moving." She checked on Loke again. "Seriously," she whispered to him, "I can't help you if you're stubborn like this. Go back and rest. I'll summon you tonight when Wendy comes for her checkup." She gave Loke a small kiss, then left with Erza.

Loke stayed where he was and listened to Lucy and Erza leave the dormitory. What had he been hoping? Did he really think such a rare child would never be discovered? Did he think he could keep Lucy imprisoned for nine months...no, only about seventy more days. Seventy! In a little over two months, the baby would be there. It seemed impossible.

The best he could do now was stay by her and keep her protected. At least she was safe with Erza. While she was gone, there was so much to clean. He washed the dishes, chopped vegetables for soup, got them on a slow boiling, and began sorting through Lucy's packed boxes.

"This woman has far too many books," he sighed. Books were the worst things to move. So heavy!

In the middle of organizing yet another bookshelf, the door opened. Loke tensed and turned, ready for an enemy, only to see pink hair and a scaly scarf with a little blue cat following.

"Yo!" Natsu beamed, raising his hand in greeting.

"Don't any of you knock?" Loke sighed, relaxing the tension out of his shoulders.

"Is Lucy here?" Happy asked hopefully.

"She's out shopping with Erza," Loke grumbled.

"Hey, is there anything I can do?" Natsu asked excitedly.

"Since you're here, Lucy wants that couch to be in front of the window."

"Yosh!" Natsu cried. He easily lifted the couch on his own, although he knocked over a lamp, which was barely saved by a quick move from Happy. Natsu set the couch down hard, then sat on it and spread his arms out. "But I meant more than this. Can I help with the baby? I know Lucy's finances are always an issue, so I want to buy something you guys need."

Loke thought about it. "Honestly, I'm not sure, but I guess we'll need a cradle, bassinet, clothes..."
"Cradle!" Natsu shouted in excitement. "I'll get her a cradle, the most awesome one I can find. After all," he grinned huge, "I wanna be the godfather."

"Huh? Godfather?"

"Yeah, godfathers get to buy cool things for the baby and go to all the birthday parties, and they wear cool suits and sit around petting a cat. I already have Happy, so I'm halfway there already."

"Aye!" agreed the Exceed.

"I'd make a much better godfather than that ice bastard. Gray doesn't even have a cat, and he never stays in his clothes, let alone a nice suit. So yeah, a cradle, an awesome one."

Loke laughed as Natsu rushed off with Happy hurrying behind him. He was glad Lucy had such loyal friends, even if they were a handful. He held his head, shook out a dizzy spell, and went back to organizing books. An hour later with only a few empty boxes for his effort, there was a knock at the door.

"They all come when she's away," Loke sighed. "At least this one knocks. Come in!"

The knob turned slowly, and Gray walked in. "Sorry, I had to sneak in since it's the girls' dorm. Is Lucy home?"

"She's with Erza."

He stared hard at Loke, then bowed his head in shame. "About last week, sorry for attacking you," he muttered. "I heard, freaked out, and got scared. I was totally out of line."

"It's fine," Loke smiled, waving it off.

"I made this." He pulled his hand out from behind his back. It was a baby's mobile with what looked like colored gems. "It's made of a special ice that isn't cold to the touch and won't melt. None of the edges are sharp, so he won't cut himself." He sounded far less enthusiastic than Natsu and merely set the mobile on a crate. "I just came to give that to Lucy." He began to turn back to the door.

"Gray," Loke called out, stopping him. "You love Lucy a lot, don't you?"

Gray looked back in shock, but he sank slightly. "That obvious, huh? It doesn't matter anymore. She picked who she wants. I'll respect that. So long as it makes her happy, I'll accept you and continue being her friend." He began to turn again but paused with a debate raging on his face. "Hey, I know it's none of my business, but...what are your plans now?"

Loke tilted his head in confusion.

"You know, plans!" Gray blushed at having to say it clearer. "Like, are you gonna...y'know, marry her?"

Loke looked truly stunned. "I don't know, honestly. I've thought about it. I'm a gentleman, I feel I should, but...but I already broke the rules. Marrying her might put even more blame on Lucy herself. I'm not sure if it's safe for her to be tied to me like that."

Gray thought about that and saw the struggle in the Lion's face. "You really have it hard, don't you?"

He turned aside and grabbed the doorknob to leave when something heavy crashed behind him. Gray looked back to see Loke collapsed on the floor. He rushed over and saw the Celestial Spirit had
turned many shades paler.

"Oi, what happened? Hang on, I'll get Wendy."

"No!" Loke grabbed Gray's wrist, and the ice mage looked down in surprise. Loke had his teeth gritted, struggling to overcome immense agony. "This isn't something...something Wendy can heal," he hissed, panting hard. "She already tried. Just...just help me to the couch."

Gray grabbed him under the arms, pulled him over, then lifted him up to the couch cushions. Loke had no strength to move.

"Is this from staying in the Human World too long?" Gray asked as he adjusted a pillow for Loke's sweating head.

"I haven't returned to the Spirit World since learning about Lucy's pregnancy. It's only been a week, but I'm already feeling the effects. It took me three months to build up a tolerance last time."

Gray sat on his heels beside him. "But Loke," he whispered worriedly, "in two months, Lucy's baby will be here."

Loke looked aside. "I know. I'll be a huge bother to her."

"Damn right you will be! She's pregnant! She can't waste her energy pampering you. You need to be strong for her."

"I know," Loke bellowed. "I know that, but...but it can't be helped." He tensed up with more pain, breathed hard through it, until finally he could relax a bit. "I'm scared, okay? The Spirits haven't said anything yet. Maybe they don't know. If I return, they might find out. I'm terrified that if I return for even a moment, I won't be able to come back to her. I can't take the chance. Since I came out on my own magic, she should be able to summon the other Celestial Spirits..."

"That's not the point," Gray yelled. "She needs you." He stopped sharply and jolted at what he just said. Loke also looked up in shock. "She...needs you, Loke," Gray admitted in defeat. "You protect her the most."

"Aquarius is strong."

"Aquarius would recklessly hurt her as well. Taurus is also too rough. Who else could she call on that will also make sure she's not injured? If she's ever in danger, she needs you to be strong."

"What am I supposed to do?" Loke snapped. "Return to the Spirit World, take my chances, maybe leave her forever, possibly get her into more trouble? I'm not just staying out here because I'm scared of punishment." He sighed and looked aside. "I keep asking myself, what might the Spirit King do about Lucy and the baby? If he punishes me, I'll accept it, but what about her? What if he tries to punish her?"

"Natsu and I would protect her," Gray answered proudly.

"Last time?" Gray asked in confusion.
Loke's eyes dimmed. "Zeref. He was a Human-Spirit hybrid. It wasn't against the rules back then, but the Celestial Spirit who fathered the boy..." Loke paused and held his head in another wave of dizziness. "He was punished harshly and separated from his lover. He couldn't go to her, even when she called for him. She probably thought the bastard ran away, left her because he was a coward. She was all alone through the pregnancy and raised the child on her own. He couldn't leave the Spirit World. He never saw the baby, not until Zeref became...well, the Zeref we all know, the evil dark mage. By then, the mother had died, I don't even know how. The contract between her and the Spirit was broken. A new mage owned the Spirit Key, and that Celestial Spirit was called to fight against Zeref, the son he had sired...the son he saw only once, the day he helped to defeat him!"

Gray saw a dark sadness pass across Loke's eyes. It took him a while to continued.

"It took all twelve Zodiac Spirits, numerous minor Spirits, the dragons, plus a mage army of epic proportions to stop Zeref," Loke related. "Afterwards, most of the Celestial Spirits agreed that, if such a thing ever happened again, it's best..." He looked down sadly. "...it's best...for the child to...to not come into existence," he whispered miserably. He stared up at Gray with determination in his shaded eyes. "I can't let them get to her. I can't let that happen again. Lucy...she's so happy about this," he smiled bittersweetly. "I don't want anything to harm her or the child. That's why I'm staying out here, because even if it hurts me, even if it kills me, I won't leave Lucy alone like that. I won't let it happen again, dammit!"

Gray looked at him suspiciously. "Loke...you..."

The front door opened. "We're home! Oh, hi Gray!" Lucy smiled.

Loke sat up quickly, immediately smiling as if nothing was wrong. "Welcome home. How was shopping? Buy anything cute?"

"Mmm-hmm," Lucy nodded, showing off four bags from various stores. "Since I still have a little money from my last job, I decided to buy everything I'll need for later, you know, when I turn into a pumpkin. New pants and skirts, really loose blouses, nighties, and a bra for nursing mothers, since I'll probably need that, too."

Erza stepped in with even more bags. "The nightie is really cute, Gray."

He blushed and looked away. "Like I care!"

Lucy saw the mobile lying on a crate. "Gray, is this for us?"

He shrugged in a slouch. "Yeah, I was bored and made it."

"It's beautiful," Lucy admired, holding it up to see the multicolored ice stones glitter in the sunlight. "It's like the baby will have his own chandelier!"

"It's not much," he mumbled. "Is...is there anything you guys need? A cradle?"

"Natsu's buying the cradle," said Loke.

Erza hummed to herself. "He's already competing for the position of godfather, eh?"

Gray looked over quickly. "What? Competing?" He thought hard. "A pram carriage! A baby needs transportation, right? Natsu would never think about something like that. And a stroller. And...and a high chair."

"He won't need that until he can sit up on his own," Erza told him.
"A pram carriage, then. Then you and Loke can go walking around town and push the baby around, show him off to other mothers, and you can go out to restaurants with the baby, or walk along the river as a family."

Lucy was stunned at how enthusiastic he sounded. "Gray, that's really sweet, to think about us like that."

He felt glad to see her happy. "This is all I really want, to see you smiling." He began to walk out, but paused at the door and turned back. "Loke," he called over. "I think you'll make a really good father. Don't leave her, okay? You better be there by her side, no matter what."

Loke nodded firmly. He walked up to Lucy and kissed her forehead as she began prattling about the things she saw in the baby store.

Gray watched Loke a moment longer. How could Lucy not notice how pale he was? Or did she see it but simply refrained from saying anything that might worry him?

Erza watched Gray. Their eyes met, and she gave him a silent nod of approval. She knew how Gray felt. She had seen the longing in his face when they went on missions. It was why she often tried to get Lucy and Gray to sit by each other on the train. Yet Lucy had chosen. Erza knew that must have crushed Gray—she heard about the attack he made—so to see him acting mature, helping them, even encouraging them, reassured her.

Gray shook his head. What was the big deal? So long as Lucy was happy, he could be happy. Besides, the cryptic things Loke said about Zeref worried him. He left the girls' dormitory and headed to the guild's library.

End of Chapter 3

Chapter End Notes

*Baby carriage versus pram: same thing but called different names in different regions and countries. (English is confusing even to native speakers!) I know it by both names and decided to call it a "pram carriage" here so my European readers know what I mean. For "crib/cot/cradle," maybe it's old-fashion, but my family calls them cradles. Same deal with "stroller/buggy," I've always called those strollers. Just clearing that up for international readers.*
In the guild library, Gray found Wendy and Charle. The girl had borrowed Lucy's Gale-Force Reading Glasses so she could speed-read through piles of books surrounding her, studying child development and midwifery. He was amused by how studious the girl looked wearing those glasses, totally focused on the material, all for Lucy's sake. His movement caught her attention, and the large-eyed child looked up curiously.

"Ah, Gray!" Wendy grinned. She yanked the glasses off and set them aside. Charle picked them up, fit them over her petite feline face, and began flipping through a book. Gray realized it was a seafood cookbook. "It's the first time I've seen you in the library. I figured you didn't like places like this."

"I like to read," he snapped, already tugging on his shirt.

Without even looking up, Charle scolded, "Keep your clothes on! You're in a library," forcing him out of his habit.

"Right," he grumbled. "I just wanted to research something on Zeref. Perhaps learning about him might help Lucy with this Celestial Spirit baby issue."

"Oh, I have a book on that." Wendy dug through her pile of thick books, but knocked over another pile. "Yes, this one." She hauled out a tome with an old binding and a rather long, dull title:

Zeref: A Study on the Life, Achievements, and Horrors of the Black Mage

"I read it because Loke said he was a Human-Spirit hybrid," Wendy explained, handling the book as if it might have a curse written within. "Sadly, there's not much that describes Zeref himself, just stuff on what he made, wars he started, the Great Gathering that finally stopped him, and the chaos that followed after his creations were set loose. The chapter that was supposed to be on his childhood was filled with historical facts, things happening in the world around him, but not much on Zeref himself. I'm rather disappointed," she frowned. "Nothing is really known about his childhood."

"It makes sense," Charle pointed out, flipping page after page. "He lived in ancient times. It's lucky historians know anything at all about him."

"But they don't say where he was born, or if he went to school. They don't even really know his age, or who his parents were."

Gray frowned. "Nothing on his parents?"

"Not much. His mother was named Naomi, and it says she was a famous celestial summoner at the time. Maybe I could look into her more, if she really was famous. The thing is, I don't know when to look. There's nothing at all on when his mother was pregnant with him. The book didn't even say who the father was, or the fact that he was a Celestial Spirit. I'm shocked this wasn't a well-known fact."
"Well, I certainly didn't know until Loke told us," Charle said haughtily, already finished with the
cookbook.

"I also had never heard about that," Gray agreed.

"Oh," Wendy pouted. "Well, I don't know much about Zeref, so I also never heard he was half-
Spirit. Still, that seems like an important fact to be lost through the passage of time."

"Unless people didn't want others to know," Charle deduced. "It very well might have been the
Celestial Spirits themselves who hid that fact from humans. Otherwise, some dark guild wanting to
create a new Zeref would simply coerce a Celestial Spirit into mating with a powerful mage."

"But...that's despicable!" Wendy cried out.

Charle had to nod in agreement. "It's a good reason why the ancients might have wanted to hide the
truth behind his birth."

"So, there's nothing on the father?" Gray mused with disappointment. "Then that's not the book I
need."

"Eh? You want to find out Zeref's father, not the mother? Oh, yeah," Wendy realized, putting a
finger to her mouth. "That makes sense. The mother died centuries ago, but the father is an immortal
Celestial Spirit, so he'd still be around."

"Assuming he wasn't killed for breaking the laws of the Spirit World," Charle added in quietly.

"Well, I could look up which Spirit Keys that woman Naomi had," Wendy decided. "There are
usually records on these things. Then you could have Lucy ask that Spirit about what happened. I bet
he knows all about how things went."

Gray turned out of the library. "No...I don't think he does."

Meanwhile, in a distant land, high in a vast mountain range where the snow never completely
melted, the sky boiled in thick clouds, and it looked like snow would fall yet again. In a cavern high
on a craggy peak, lit only by torches, was an ancient cave painting depicted a battle. Horrific forms
of what could only be demons and a powerful black enemy bringing down lightning battled against
an army that perished under the dark threat.

Another picture further down the stone wall showed the demons falling to dragons and smaller
creatures with wings. The dark enemy fled; the grand army advanced triumphant.

Another section of the wall showed a hole in the heavens. The dragons were strong enough to fight
it, but the smaller winged creatures were swept into the abyss. The army feared the heavenly hole
and fled, pursued by the remaining demons.

Then a hero arrived with a small host behind him, only twelve warriors, yet they looked like animals.
One of those, hard to decipher in the ancient painting, grappled with the dark enemy, while the
others fought off his minions.

At last, victory! The sun shone again, the enemy was buried under a mountain, yet if a person looked
at this last cave painting, the hero was not present with the celebrating army. He stood to the side
with his small group of twelve, facing away from the party. Was he shunned? Was he mourning?
Was he the sort who saved the day and walked off before thanks could be given? It was open for
interpretation, but it gave a melancholy mood to what otherwise was jubilation for the epic battle's
"'Tis time," a sinister voice hissed from the torch-lit cave. "A Celestial Spirit mage of the west doth carry a child of the Spirit World."

"Verily, are there still women like that?" a melodious female voice asked in an archaic speech. "And which is the concupiscent culprit this time?"

"Her mate is Leo the Lion."

"Leo?" The woman sounded stunned, jolted out of her perfect equanimity. Slowly, she hummed, relaxing into the idea. "Leo...mmm, yes, the Spirit any woman would want in her bed. Perfect! At least the slut mage hath taste. He is quite...skilled, from what I remember."

"He is still strong. His son shall be magnificent, mistress-s-s!"

"Is this rumor confirmed?"

"The Lion stayeth by her side night and day."

"But...not confirmed."

There was a slight pause, then the hissing voice spoke with a hint of worry at displeasing her. "T'would be hard to confirm at this time, mistress-s-s."

"That is true," she mused with a sensual hum. "Art thou certain the child is Leo's?"

"That also, we cannot know. He is the one caring for her, but she is master to ten out of twelve Gold Keys, plus numerous Silver Keys-s-s."

"Ten already, eh? So it could be...but no, Leo is the only one who would dare. T'would be too perfect if it is so. Very well, I must see her myself. I wish to see if she truly is the one we desire."

"It shan't be easy, mistress-s-s. She resideth in the kingdom of Fiore, protected by the Lion and the children of the Fire, Iron, and Sky Dragons...with their flying cats-s-s."

"The Exceed? They've returned? Even more intriguing. Just like old times, eh?" She chuckled in wry amusement.

A lithe form in dark purple rose and slipped quietly through the cave. Only her hair, black and tumbling down to her knees, made a whisper as the strands moved against her flowing gown. She walked to the cave wall, to the second battle scene, the winged creatures taking on the demons, and her fingers caressed the dragon breathing fire.

"The dragons...and the Exceed...united once more, this time to protect a child of the Spirit World. This all aligns to the prophecy. Shall they succeed in shielding the child, or shall it be like what happened back then...with him?" She put her finger between her lips, trailing a moist line down her bottom lip. "I wonder if I can seduce Leo to my side. Shouldn't be hard. After all, he said I was his best lover."

"He would make a powerful ally," the hissing voice said ingratiatingly.

"Indeed, but he's a proud one. I still need the Key to his Heart."

She twirled around. The lambent flames showed her face paler than the snow outside, harder than the stone walls of the cave, eyes the color of onyx and piercing like stone, anemic lips, and around her
ivory throat was a short necklace holding a silver pearl that gleamed in the firelight.

"Take me to this woman...this vessel for the Successor of Zeref's Will."

End of Chapter 4

Chapter End Notes

In the previous chapter, Erza overheard "child of the Spirit World" and "Zeref's Will." Here we go!

Zeref's mother "Naomi" is the Japanese name, not the Hebrew name. No particular reason why; I have a thing for names, and I like Naomi. 直美 means "honest, straight" and "beautiful"...a pretty name!

I continue to be flabbergasted by this story's reception. I'm stunned, speechless. I'm trying to type and words fail me (which isn't good in my career!) I feel unworthy to write a FT fanfic since I only began reading the manga this past summer, after my otaku friends chided me for not reading it. Such a deprived person, I'm pathetic! ^_^ My fear of being unable to portray the characters properly—especially since I haven't seen the anime yet; I will for sure!—is slowly being alleviated by your reviews. Thank you so much! Please tell me if I got something wrong. I'm a Fairy Tail neophyte, so as they say in Japan, "Please take care of me!"

=^._.^= "Yoroshiku onegaishimasu!"

"Yes Happy, that's how you say it."

"Aye!"

"Don't you mean 'Hai'?"

=^.^= "Aye, hai!"

"Um...right, Happy..."
"Without a wish, without a will,
I stood upon that silent hill
And stared into the sky until
My eyes were blind with stars and still
I stared into the sky."
—Ralph Hodgson, "The Song of Honour"

On a grassy hill behind the Fairy Tail building, Lucy and Loke stargazed while lying on a picnic blanket. The autumn sky was clear and moonless, letting the stars shine in their full glory. The constellation Leo crouched low in the western sky like a lion ready to pounce.

"Alterf," Loke named, pointing to each star, "Algenubi, Rasalas, Adhafera, Algieba..."

"Algebra?"

"Algieba, silly," he laughed, hugging Lucy closer as she used his arm for a pillow. "Those make up the head. Follow Algieba down and to the right," he pointed, and she looked down his arm to follow. "That's Al Jabbah, the mane. Then keep going down and you'll see Regulus, the Heart of the Lion," he said proudly. "To the right of Regulus is Subra, which makes the front legs. Follow Regulus to the left, you can see a triangle: Chertan the hip, Denebola the tail, and Zosma the rump. Altogether, they make the Lion!"

She hummed happily. Of course, she knew all this. Her mother had taught her astronomy. When Layla Heartfilia listed the constellations, she spoke as if they were alive. Later, Lucy discovered why her mother sounded familiar with Cancer, Aquarius, Capricorn, and others. Her mother was the keeper of Gold Keys.

When Lucy was a child, she used to wish upon the stars every night. She had one in particular that she felt was her wishing star. She looked at it now and remembered her mother's words.

"That one, Lucy, is Leo the Lion. He's the leader of the Zodiacs and very strong. He's a fighter, fierce as a lion, and as noble as you'd expect from the King of Beasts."

"Hey, Mama? What's that bright one? It's like a heart beating in the chest of the lion."

"You're right, Lucy. That's the Heart of the Lion, Regulus."

"Regulus?"

"Yes, a special star. So...very special."

Lucy never learned why her mother thought Regulus was exceptionally special. Lucy had a fascination with the shapes of the constellations, but the individual stars were...just stars.
"Loke, what does Regulus mean?" she asked, cuddling closer to him.

"It means little king. That'd be a good name for this little guy," he said, caressing the growing bulge on her stomach. "We could nickname him Reggie."

"I don't think so. You use Regulus for your attacks. It's just a holder magic."

Loke smiled to himself. "Regulus is much more than that. It's special. So...very special."

Lucy raised her head, stunned that he said the exact same thing her mother once said. "Why is that star so special?"

Loke had one of his mysterious smiles. "Without the Heart, the Lion can't roar."

Lucy eyed him suspiciously. Wasn't Regulus just the magic ring? Sure, its magical Light was immensely powerful, but...it was just a ring, like her keys were just Celestial Spirit Keys, items that gave a mage an external source of magic. Like the stars merely gave shapes to the celestial creatures, holder magic shaped a mage's innate talents. So why did he have a face like that, a smirk of irony, eyes that hid a secret? What secret was there to Regulus? Why had it also fascinated her mother? How could a single star be so important?

"Still, you're not naming our son that."

"I said, you're not naming our son Regulus," she snapped, hating to repeat herself.

"No, just that last part," he urged with a grin.

She raised an eyebrow in confusion, then chuckled as she saw what he meant. "Our...son."

"Yes," he smiled. He leaned over her, radiating warmth over her whole body. "That part." He gave her a long, gentle kiss that made her hum. He smiled down at her blissful face. "Then how about Venant. It's the ancient name for Regulus. We could call him Venny."

"I'll consider it," she smirked.

"Ah, perhaps you have another name you want for the baby. I know some people like to name their children after their parents."

"Not me," she grimaced. "I'd be afraid he'd grow up to be like my father. Honestly, I don't have much of a preference. I don't know any good, strong names. Why are you determined to name him after that star? What's so special about it?" That question was beginning to bug her.

"Regulus," he said, lying back down at her side and gazing up to the heavens, "is no ordinary star."

"It's quite bright," she admitted.

"Indeed! It's one of the brightest stars in the heavens, made up of a four-star system. It's closest to the ecliptic and is only one of three first magnitude stars that are occulted, or covered over, by both the moon and the planets."

"Which means it's sometimes hidden," she realized. A star that did not always shine seemed even less special than one that was constant.

He smiled over at her. "That makes seeing it all the more special." He gave her another small kiss.
"In ancient times, Regulus, or Venant as it was called then, was known as The King Star. It's one of the four Royal Stars, Guardians of the Sky. Specifically, Regulus was the Guardian of the North, Aldebaran in Taurus was Guardian of the East, Antares in Scorpio was Guardian of the West, and Fomalhaut in Piscis Austrinus was Guardian of the South. Those were good times," he sighed. "Me, Scorpio, that pervy bull, and that crazy Fishy, we were truly respected back then, each of us treated like kings. Throughout the ages, different cultures all saw that constellation for just who I am. Other cultures might see them as something else, a Big Dipper or a Great Bear, but most of them recognized the Lion. The name changed, of course: Pi-Mentikeon, Urgula, Urmah, Arfh, Al-Asad, Afyuç, Ser, Burj Asad, Shishiza, Sze Tsze, Glüm Dao Dao Sing-dtoh, St Tr Tür, Asleha, Simhan, Pop, Leontos, Leya, Aslan Takmyıldızı, Aryo, Koşyre, Leômhann, Oroșzlán, Artan, Jalopeura, Lejonet, Leo. I answer to them all, but few call upon me now."

"You went by all those names?" she gawked.

"At different times, different places." He laughed blithely. "Did you know I was once worshiped? It's true! Temples built just for me! Incense, sacrifices, virgins...well, not really any virgins," he chuckled. "Or at least if there were some, nobody told me about it. The ancients believed the world was created when the sun rose within the Leo constellation. People prayed to the Lion who brought in Spring. *In like a lion, out like a lamb:* that was me and Aries, our constellations, mine rising at the beginning of March, hers setting at the end. Poetic, no? The Lion brought in Spring, brought in new hope, and people rejoiced at my coming. They sang songs, danced, wore lion masks..." He trailed off in nostalgic sadness for lost glory. "That was a long time ago. It sure doesn't happen anymore. So few respect the Zodiac Spirits these days."

"You're being moody," Loke laughed. He yanked her back over and set her on top of him to straddle his hips. "The fact that you got ten Gold Keys at such a young age shows that other people in this world are too weak for them. Power like ours is wasted on weaklings. We thrive under a powerful summoner. For centuries, we've grown weaker, indolent. Some have forgotten our past strength. Now, finally...we have you."

Lucy pouted and looked away. Being reminded just what *immortal* meant pained her. What was she in the lifespan of this Celestial Spirit? A mere blink of the eye, and she would be gone, he would be under a new master, a thousand years would pass, and he would likely forget even her name. It saddened her.

Far down the starlit hill, she could barely see the lights of Magnolia and the shadowy silhouette of Fairy Tail. "Do you think you aren't respected here?

"Who in this world recognizes me by sight? Hell, I was in this guild for three years and no one even guessed who I was." He smiled over to her. "You did. You figured it out easily."

"Because I'm a Celestial Spirit mage."

"Exactly. Other celestial summoners would probably recognize me, too, but...but no one else," he frowned. "I'm not sure if I'm glad or sad. It was good back then, but it was lonely. Having one of the Gold Keys really meant something, but we were rarely used. Only the most powerful can wield us properly."

"Oh!" she scoffed. "So because someone weak like me has not just one, but ten Gold Keys, that means it's so much worse now than back then? Well, I'm sorry!" Lucy huffed and rolled away from him to the edge of the blanket.

"You're being moody," Loke laughed. He yanked her back over and set her on top of him to straddle his hips. "The fact that you got ten Gold Keys at such a young age shows that other people in this world are too weak for them. Power like ours is wasted on weaklings. We thrive under a powerful summoner. For centuries, we've grown weaker, indolent. Some have forgotten our past strength. Now, finally...we have you."

He smiled up at her and caressed her cheek. He knew she would never understand just how rare she was, a celestial summoner who not only showed respect to her Spirits, never overworked them,
never broke the bond of their contract, but she even befriended her Spirits. Such a rare, wonderful woman!

"The other Celestial Spirits agree with me. We have someone powerful enough to let us go all out. We have someone strong enough to take us into real battles rather than keeping us for entertainment. We have a master who treats us with respect. You make us stronger, Lucy. You...make _me_ stronger, and I love you so much for it. So very, very much!"

He loved the way her golden hair glowed like a coronet in the starlight. Where she was perched right over his hips, she was angled perfectly so that the Milky Way ringed her head like a celestial tiara. His Princess...no, his Queen!

"There's a saying: 'Women are like stars...only one can make your dreams come true.' I'm lucky I found the right one."

His words made her want to melt. "Loke," she whispered, feeling ready to cry. She began to lean over him to give him a kiss, but her growing stomach got in the way. "I'm starting to get annoyed by this thing," she muttered, poking the swollen belly.

"Don't. Don't ever be annoyed or angry about it." He rubbed the bulge. "That's our son in there. Our son! It's a miracle, a blessing. Even if it's a little troublesome from time to time, it's still a gift to be treasured, something to be proud of. Here, lie on your side." He helped her back down onto the blanket. "Is that easier?"

"Mmm-hmm," she smiled contentedly, snuggling up against him.

He brushed her hair back and gazed down at the silvery starlight on her face. "You're so beautiful," he whispered in bliss.

He enfolded her into his arms and kissed her deeply. Lucy hummed as her breasts pressed into him. One leg instinctively hiked up on top of his thigh. Loke grabbed her hips and pulled her closer, mindful of her stomach. He could hardly keep his hands from venturing under the maternity blouse.

"Loke," she moaned.

"I love you so much," he breathed, and his lips fluttered against her mouth.

"But...in the open...we shouldn't..."

"Hey, you two!"

Lucy sat up quickly with a cherry-colored face. Others from Fairy Tail were also on the hill using this moonless night to stargaze.

"Cana," Loke groaned, sitting up and rubbing out his head. "Can't you mind your own damn business?"

"I'm not drunk enough to watch you two doing sloppy make-outs," snapped Cana.

"I think it's romantic," Levy sighed. "Don't you think so, Gajeel?"

The iron dragon slayer only grunted in response and tossed another nail into his mouth.

"Loke's right," Makarov said, eating a massive lollipop as he watched the stars with his brats. "In generations past, having one Gold Key was a sign of a gifted Celestial Spirit mage. Owning two or
three meant that mage was truly exceptional, since your average summoner barely has enough magical strength to call out one Zodiac Celestial Spirit into battle, let alone more than one."

Wendy sat near the Master and looked over to him. "But Lucy has used up to five Gold Keys in one day!"

Makarov smiled to himself. "Which shows her inner strength. I'm glad we have such a strong mage in our guild."

Lucy waved off the compliment. "Not at all! There are much stronger Celestial Spirit mages out there. I'm weak, really."

"Hardly!" Loke hugged her shoulders to keep her warm against the autumn air.

Mirajane giggled. "Yeah, you make him stronger, Lucy."

"Aye," Happy agreed. "Rrrrrreally cute couple!"

"Don't roll your tongue like that," Lucy grumbled, thankful the darkness hid her blushing cheeks.

She suddenly caught sight of Gray watching her from a little down the hill, with Juvia slowly stalking closer to his blanket. She wished Gray looked less melancholy. She once had a crush on him but never got any hint that he liked her back. So how could he be jealous? Or was Gray the type who got disgusted at public displays of affection? If so, Juvia was in for some disappointment.

"Lucy's strong?" Natsu asked, thinking over this foreign concept.

Lucy gave him a death glare. "Natsuuu!" she growled

"I guess maybe for a Spirit mage she's strong," he decided, pleased with his logic.

"Aye!" Happy chimed in.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she shouted defensively. "Are you saying Celestial Spirit mages are inherently weak? Do you have any idea how much magical energy it takes to make the connection between our world and the Spirit World? I sure don't see you capable of doing that, whereas I once had your flame engulf my entire body and used it to defeat an enemy. Remember that?"

"All right, don't get your panties in a wad," Natsu pouted, not understanding why she was upset. "If you're strong, and if you make Loke stronger," he reasoned, "then I wanna fight him."

"Not tonight," Lisanna giggled, leaning a little closer to Natsu and wrapping her hands around his muscular arm. "Let's just enjoy the stars."

"Stars are boring," Natsu whined. "They're the same every night. People are more interesting. People grow and get stronger."

"Stars are made out of fire, you know," Lisanna egged on. "Maybe the stars are getting stronger, too, but you just don't see it."

Natsu stared up at the sky. He hummed in frustration, squinted hard, then shook his head. "Nope, they're the same as always. But Loke is a Spirit, and Spirits can change. I wanna fight Loke."

Loke knew with how weak he felt, Natsu would win easily, and then he would find it even harder to stay in the Human World. "Another time, Natsu. We both have to stay strong for Lucy. If there really is an enemy out there, we both need to be healthy and at our peak."
"Exactly! That's why I wanna fight. I get stronger that way."

Gray saw that Loke looked more haggard than the last time they talked. He wanted to take attention off the Lion Spirit before everyone saw the pale weariness. "If you're that set on it, it can't be helped. I'll grant you the opportunity to fight me." He sounded like a prince allowing a commoner to kiss the hem of his robes.

"But you suck," Natsu frowned.

Gray's mouth dropped that he had said that so immediately. "What! Why you stupid flame-brain..."

Lucy laughed as the peaceful night was shattered by those two arguing yet again. In the midst of their shouting, she leaned over to Loke. "You know, Regulus isn't such a bad name after all. You also mentioned those other names you go by. I'm not sure if I like naming a kid after the father—it seems old-fashion—but...Lejonet. I sorta liked that one."

"Lejonet?" he smiled, and hugged her tightly. "Loke, Lucy, and Lejonet...I like it. That would make me very proud. But we have time to name him."

He hugged her closer, but his face tensed in pain for a moment. He looked down and was glad she had snuggled into his chest so she did not see his momentary weakness. He did not want her worried needlessly about him. He kissed the top of her head and stared up at the stars with a hint of weariness.

"We...still have time left, and I want to spend every moment of it with you." He leaned into her ear so the rest of the guild did not hear him. "Leonita," he breathed hotly. It made her skin prickle. Loke laughed at her response. So predictable! He held her to him and rubbed out all of the evening chill from her arms. "We still have time."

End of Chapter 5

Chapter End Notes

1337kitsune's "Tales of Lion and Mage" (on FFN) inspired some parts. Greenlies "Under Your Constellation" gave me the idea of having a chapter on stargazing.

This is your astronomy and history lesson for today. Some cultures saw Leo's constellation as a Sickle or Horse, but a vast majority saw a Lion: Egyptians, Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, Romans...lots of them! I'm sort of obsessed with name meanings—"obsessed" is putting it lightly—and I'm intrigued with languages—"intrigued" is also putting it lightly—so I went crazy researching the names "Leo" has gone by. These are the names Loke listed. I spent three days researching all of this! I have no life.

Pi-Mentikeon — Egyptian, "pouring out the divine wrath" and drawn as a lion
Urgula — Babylonian, actually UR-GU-LA, "The Great Lion"
Urmah — Sumerian, "Lion"
Arih — Hebrew, הירא, "Lion"
Al-Asad — Arabic, الأسد, "The Lion"
Ar'yuç — Armenian, Առյուծ, "Lion"
Ser — also spelled Shir or Sher, "Lion"
Burj Asad — Urdu, برج اسد, "Tower of the Lion"
Shishiza — Japanese, 獅子座, "Lion-Throne"
Sze Tsze — Chinese, 獅子, "Lion"
Glüm Daao Sing-dtoh — Thai, สี่สิบดาวจ้าว, "Star-Cluster Lion"
Sr’Tư — Vietnamese, "Lion"
Asleha — Hindu, "Lion"
Simhan — Tamil, "Lion"

Pop — Mayan, name of the sign of the Jaguar (lions aren't found in America, so it's their equivalent)
Leontos — Greek, Λέων, "Lion"
Leya — Roman, "Lion"
Aslan Takmyıldızı — Türkçe, "Lion Constellation(A/N"Aslan" always reminds me of Narnia)
Aryo — Syrian, "the rending lion"
Kosỳre — Chakavian, "Leo"
Leòmhann — Scottish Gaelic, "Lion"
Oroszlán — Hungarian, "Lion"
Artan — Turkish, "Lion"
Jalopeura — Finnish, "Lion"
Lejonet — Swedish, "Lion"
Leo — Latin, "Lion"

SPECIAL NEWS

Lucy gave her first choice for a baby's name, but I'm making this a vote by the readers. That's right, YOU CAN NAME THE BABY! Use the poll on my profile or pick a unique name and tell me in the reviews or PM. I'll tally them, and when it's time for the cub to be born, the most popular name will be used. You can pick any name, such as Regulus, Venant, one of the stars, or a name not related to Leo that you really like. Maybe she'll name the kid "Natsu" or "Gray."

=^..^= "Aye! Gray would be happy with that. Please vote. I wanna name him Kamaboko."

"Umm...no!"

"Sakana?"

"No! No fish names!"

"Awwww...:" ;)

(Note: Voting has concluded)
"Fear follows crime and is its punishment." - Voltaire

The stargazing continued without more fights. It got late, and people began yawning. Natsu fell asleep curled on Lisanna's lap. Makarov laid sprawled out snoring loudly. Lucy kept dozing off leaning against Loke's arm, only to jolt awake, blink a few times, lean back over, and doze off again. The guild finally decided it was time for bed.

As they walked back home, Lucy realized that Loke kept slowing down. Each time, he gritted his teeth, jogged to catch up, silently smiled to tell her everything was fine, yet his face eventually went pale and he would slow down again. Lucy finally came to a stop. The other ladies looked back at her in concern.

"Go on ahead," she grinned, waving them to leave. She snatched up Loke's arm. "We're gonna take a romantic midnight stroll."

"Be safe," Erza warned.

"I've got my Lion with me," Lucy assured. "Go on, go on, or you'll have to deal with us being sickeningly cute."

The girls continued onward. Lucy kept up her fake smile until it was too dark to see them. Finally, she turned peevishly to Loke. "All right, just how long have you been out in the Human World?"

"I'm fine," he laughed through clenched teeth. His face was drenched in sweat, and through her grip on his arm she felt him shivering.

"Like hell you are! How long?" she asked. He turned his gaze out into the town, unable to look her in the eyes. "Loke..." she warned.

"Three weeks," he admitted. "Since the day you found out you were pregnant."

"All this time?" she gasped. "So this is why I never felt a drain on my magic. You're sustaining yourself with your own magic," she realized, shivering to think how painful that must be. "For all this time?"

"Yeah, well, my endurance is pretty damn good," he said sarcastically.

"Go back!" she shouted.

"I can't. Even if I wanted to, I don't think I can anymore."

"I'll open the gate for you." She reached for her Spirit Keys on her belt, but he grabbed her wrist.

"Don't! Even if you forced it open...just...don't," he sighed.

"But Loke..."
"I broke a serious rule. They might not let me leave the Spirit World again. I also can't risk getting you into trouble," he snapped, but then tried to calm himself. "I'm sorry, I really am. I should be pampering you."

"You are," she laughed, but sniffed back tears as she realized how much he had done for her, and all while likely in a world of agony.

"I have a strong feeling, an instinct perhaps, that there's something waiting on the other side of my gate, something bad. They'll imprison me. They'll lock me up, and I won't be able to come back to your side." In the starlight, he saw a teardrop tumble down her cheek. He smiled at Lucy and gently wiped her cheeks dry. "I'll be fine," he whispered. "It's already getting easier."

"Liar," she pouted. "When we get home, I want you to rest. Stay in bed," she insisted. "I'll get Virgo to take care of things. She was a maid once, after all. You...just rest, okay?" She sniffled again. "Just stay alive. If you can't return, if you're already in trouble, then...then we'll keep you out here. We know you can survive three years. Maybe if you rest a lot, you can last even longer. The baby will be born, and that Mustached King will see that it's fine, it's not like how it was back then. The baby won't be evil like Zeref. It...it'll all be fine," she insisted with a cracking voice of desperation. "Then you can go back. You...can go home. It'll go back to how it was before."

His eyes seemed to glow in the starlight, but they were not fierce or predatory anymore. They were gentle and sad, like a waning candle by a window on a windy night. "It'll never be as it was before," he told her, "and it may take many years to prove the baby is a normal, good-hearted person. The Spirit King might not be satisfied until the day the child passes on. Honestly, we don't know how long a Human-Spirit child will live. After all, Zeref is still alive after all these centuries."

"No way," she whispered sadly. "That's not fair."

"I broke the rules. I deserve punishment."

She folded her arms and pouted stubbornly. "You said that once before, by Karen's grave."

"And don't you dare say you'll change the rules," Loke warned, raising his voice slightly. "If the Spirit King comes here, it's all over."

He grabbed her and squeezed her close, desperately holding her to him as if she might be sucked away into another dimension at any moment. Lucy hesitantly wrapped her arms around him. She felt his chest shake with tears he proudly refused to let fall and fear he refused to show.

"I just want you to be safe," he whispered. "You and the baby. That's all. If I can keep you safe, if I can keep you away from them, it'd be worth any sacrifice I make."

"Don't say that," she sobbed. "We'll...we'll find a way. Together! We'll find a way to get you back home safely."

He took her face into his hands and looked down at the stars' reflection in her tears. "I feel I am home, and I don't ever want to leave your side...never again!"

He kissed her, but Lucy sensed an urgent fatalism in that kiss. Her tears refused to stop. When she reached up to him, she felt wetness on his cheeks as well. Loke broke the kiss, but he kept resting his forehead on hers, his eyes shut tight, wishing those tears would stop flowing, just stop...stop! He wanted to be strong for her, but right then he felt like a helpless stray kitten.

"I wish," Loke whispered, "I wish...I could be Human. I'd rather have a few decades with you by my side every day than eternity and lose you forever."
"Don't say that," she laughed and sniffed moistly. She reached up and wiped aside those tears that looked so misplaced on his noble face. "You're Leo the Lion. People used to worship you, remember?"

"All I want is to worship you." He smiled at how she could still look breathtaking even when sad. "They need to make a new constellation: Leonita the Lioness. Then everyone can gaze upon your beauty and envy the Lion."

She laughed at how sentimentally saccharine that sounded, but at least it managed to cheer her up.

"That's it, that's what I want to see: your sweet smile. I could sustain myself as long as necessary on that smile alone. How about this: I promise to rest starting tomorrow, so long as you promise not to do anything foolish."

"It's a deal!" she nodded. "But why starting tomorrow?"

The glow in his eyes turned predatory again. "Because...I plan to ravage you tonight."

His deep, dangerous tone thrilled her, making her lower stomach twist and coil.

"Cana gave me a hint on something we could try that would be safe for you and fun for both of us."

He leaned in to whisper his scheme. Lucy's eyes widened at his words, and her cheeks flamed bright pink. He then reached down and pinched her butt, making her yelp in shock.

"I wanna try it!" he growled.

"You naughty kitty," she smirked, waving her finger at him reprovingly, yet she giggled, now eager to get home quickly.

He wrapped an arm around Lucy's shoulders and led her through the dark streets of Magnolia.

**End of Chapter 6**
"Neko-... But that's a fish!"

"It's a catfish. The baby will be half-Lion, so he's part cat, like a Nekogigi."

"Nekogigi is not half-cat, it's a fish. I SAID NO FISH NAMES! RAWWWRRR!"

*whimper* "Kowai Rhov!"

Ahem...to clarify something, Chapter 1 takes place on August 10th. One month later, September 10th, Lucy learns she's pregnant. It's now three weeks later, so October 1st. I looked it up to be sure, and Leo is indeed in the sky on this day, although it's low in the west...like a lion ready to pounce! So, tenth of August plus 110 days gestation...Lucy is due November 17. Why is this important? I wonder if anyone can guess. If you do, Happy will give you a fish.

=^o.o^= "Ehhhhhh! Why me?"

"Because you're a cat."

=^_-^= *grumbles* "That's not really an answer."

"No...no it's not." :P
A peaceful month passed since that moonless night on the hill. Now Lucy woke up to see Loke beside her in bed. She liked to watch him sleep, frequently snoozing in little catnaps. At least her morning sickness was over. She could wake up and sneak out of bed without him knowing. She slipped on a housecoat, although it could not be tied over her massive stomach. She was thankful for the maternity nightie she bought earlier. Lucy slipped silently out of the bedroom, taking her keys and cringing when they jangled. Still, Loke slept.

"Like a cat who won't wake up for anything but tuna," she muttered, smiling at his peaceful face. She went into the living room where there was more space. "Open the Gate of the Maiden! Virgo!"

The petite maid appeared and immediately bowed. "My apologies for being slow, Princess. Will I be punished?"

"No, you actually came quickly. I need some breakfast and tea. Whatever you fixed for Loke last time worked well."

"It's a tea from the Spirit World that renews our vitality," Virgo explained. "We normally drink it if we know we'll be out for an extended amount of time. Brother won't get the full benefit drinking it here, but it should ease his pain. It's illegal to bring seirei tea into the Human World. I will likely get punished."

"Oh!" she pouted. "Well, plain tea will do."

"Not at all, Princess. I'll make Brother more. If it helps, then punishment is fine. Brother is being punished too harshly for his love for Princess."

"Virgo," she said softly and quickly glanced back to the bedroom. "What's going on in the Spirit World? Are they really going to punish Loke because of...this?" She pointed to her massive belly.

"I don't understand. Brother is already in the midst of his punishment. If he returns, it'll be no different."

"Yes, it will! Would they simply send him back to the Human World, or would they lock him away?"

"This I don't know. I'm sorry, Princess. Will I be punis-...?"

"No," Lucy interrupted irritably. "Tea. And cook another large meal. This baby is sucking up everything in me. It seems like I'm eating all the time, yet I feel constantly starved. Wendy said I'm losing body fat at an alarming rate. Normally I'd be thrilled, except I can feel the energy leaving me every day. She said I need to eat more, but I honestly can't!"

Virgo bowed. "I'll fix something high in calories."
"Thanks. I really am sorry you have to do these things."

"I enjoy the punishment," Virgo said with a faint smile.

Lucy's eyebrow twitched. Weird girl! "Anyway, I'm heading out early. Tell Loke I went to see Wendy. They warned me about when this baby hits its growth spurt, but damn does it hurt! Oh, uh, don't tell Loke I left because I was in pain, just...just that I went for a checkup...yeah."

"As you wish, Princess," she bowed, then got to work arranging the kitchen for breakfast.

Lucy put on a stretchy maternity skirt and cute loose blouse with flaring see-through sleeves. If she had to look like a whale, she might as well be a fashionable whale! She fixed a ribbon into her hair, applied some makeup, spritzed on a nice perfume, and smiled in the mirror. Satisfied with her looks, she went out of the dorm room.

An hour later, Loke awoke with a yawning stretch. He smelled something good, something familiar of home.

Home... Where was home? Could he really think of the Spirit World as home anymore? He did not want to go there. Even if he was not facing punishment, he still wanted to be in this world living by Lucy's side. Yet this world tortured him relentlessly. So...where was home?

He set aside that thought for now. He got up, scratching his bed-head hair until it poofed out again, and walked to where he smelled the wonderful tea. Virgo was busy reorganizing the pantry, but she stopped alphabetizing cans when she heard Loke's steps.

"Ah, Brother is up."

"Good morning. You brought it again," he mumbled.

She set the tea in front of him. "It's still hot. Princess said it helped."

Loke took a generous sip. It felt like pure energy flowing back into him. "It does a lot, but it's illegal to bring this into the Human World."

"True. I might be punished," she said deadpan, yet her voice betrayed thrill at the thought.

"Weird girl," he chuckled. "Where's Lucy?"

"Princess went for a checkup."

"What!" he exclaimed, almost dropping the teacup. "Did I miss one of our checkups? I slept too long. I'm such an idiot." He ran back to the bedroom.

"Brother, the tea! It'll lose its magic if it sits too long."

He ran out wearing unzipped, wrinkled pants and an unbuttoned shirt tossed over him. Virgo blushed and looked away from his half-naked body. Loke snatched up the teacup and guzzled the drink in one go. Then he worked on fixing his shirt and pants. Once he was dressed—albeit sloppily—he hurried down the hallway to Wendy's dorm room and knocked. He heard a muffled shout, then the small girl opened the door and peeked out.

"Ah, Loke!"

"Good morning, Wendy. Sorry I'm late. Where's Lucy?"
Wendy wanted to laugh. His hair was tussled badly, his shirt was rumpled, and he had forgotten to zip his pants. "Lucy already left. She mentioned taking a quick trip to the baby store before breakfast to double-check the gift registry for the baby shower next week. It's going to be a fun party!"

"I see. Who went with her?"

"Um, I'm not sure. It looked like she was going alone."

"What?" Loke shouted, startling the girl. "But she can't. She's supposed to be guarded at all times. Erza!" he bellowed down the hallway.

Another door opened, and Erza stepped out in practice clothes with a sword in her hand. "What is it?" she asked grumpily.

"I want to know who went with Lucy. She's missing."

"She's at the store," Wendy reminded, not understanding why he was upset.

"Zip your pants first," Erza ordered. "Or are you getting into a habit like Gray?"

"Huh?" He looked down to see the flap of his boxers sticking out through the fly of his pants. "Ah, sorry!" He blushed and turned away to adjust himself while Wendy giggled.

Erza went around knocking on doors. It took only a few minutes to determine that everyone was still in the girls' dorm.

"So nobody went with her?" Loke asked, holding onto the corridor wall as his world went dizzy.

"Loke, calm down," Wendy urged. "You're weak. You need to rest."

"She's out there alone," he shouted, but swallowed in painful dizziness. "She's getting farther away from me."

"She'll be fine," Levy assured. "She's still in Magnolia. She just went to the store. It's not like she went on a mission."

Loke did not listen. Something felt wrong. He sensed a presence, something dark and familiar. He could feel Lucy pulling away. He looked around. His world was getting dizzier by the minute. He needed Lucy! Without her, he felt like he was plummeting off a cliff.

He suddenly bolted and ran out of Fairy Hills barefoot, almost tripping over his own feet in a mad dash. Wendy shouted for him to wait and began to follow, but Erza put a hand on the girl's shoulder to stop her.

"Let him go," she said, staring at the door Loke left open in his frantic exit. "If he needs her, let him go to her. Remember what he said a while back. She makes him stronger. Loke is suffering, so maybe if he's with her, he'll feel better. Just let him seek her out."

Lucy normally liked to walk along the wall bordering the river, but not this time. That growing bulge threw off her balance. She carried a small bag, just a baby's shirt she found that she really liked and simply had to buy. She knew her funds were running low and the Fairy Tail ladies had a baby shower planned the following week. Still, that shirt was too perfect. If someone bought a duplicate, the baby could simply wear both, it was that cute.

She hummed a lullaby that had been playing in the baby store. She realized she would have to learn
some songs to sing the baby to sleep. Maybe she could ask Lyra.

In the middle of humming, a woman suddenly stopped in front of her. Lucy came to a halt. The lady was gorgeous! Her amaranth-purple gown looked like something out of a picture of past royalty. Her raven hair tumbled past her knees and splayed out in perfection. Her face was very pale, like a princess who had never seen the sun, locked away in an ivory tower.

"A good day to thee, madame," the woman said. Her words and accent were archaic and lovely.

"Ah! Yes, good day," Lucy said in surprise. She tried to remember her etiquette lessons simply so she would not sound crass to this noblewoman.

"'Tis a beautiful morning, is it not? A glowing morning, as if this day is about to deliver miracles! Didst thou know women have a certain glow when we are pregnant?"

"I've heard that," Lucy answered, laughing and rubbing the back of her head. This woman's use of Old Speak was amusing.

"Verily, madame, thou art simply glowing," the woman smiled happily. "Pray forgive my prying, but how far along art thou?"

Lucy paused. How could she admit she was barely three months pregnant when her belly was so large? "I...uh...well, it's hard to say," she blushed. "How far along do I look?"

"Like the baby shall arrive any week now."

"Yes...something like that," she smiled tensely.

The woman tilted her head and smiled pleasantly at her. Lucy wondered if she sounded as stupid as she felt, but this noblewoman showed no distaste at all.

"Thou remindest me of Naomi."

Lucy was confused. "I remind you of who?"

The woman ignored the question. "The child's father must be...proud," she said with a lilt of irony.

"Oh yes, he is!" Lucy nodded vigorously. "We both are."

"I see. 'Tis good he's still with thee. I noticed no ring on thy finger, madame."

Lucy looked at her hand. "Ah, well...it's complicated."

"'Tis always so." The woman delicately covered her mouth as she tittered softly. "Where is the father? I'm surprised he is not with thee, given thine advanced stage."

"Oh, he's sleeping."

"Sleeping? Ah, didst thou sneak away whilst he catnapped?"

"Exactly," she laughed. Catnapped! This woman hit it right on the head. "I should hurry back before he wakes up."

"Forgive my rude inquiries," she said humbly, "but one of my many interests are clans. With no marriage, dost thou plan on giving the child thy clan's name, or the father's?"
Clan? Definitely as archaic as her speech! But the question still stunned Lucy. What surname could she give the child? "We...actually never discussed that."

"Ah, I see. Well, perhaps the best sounding name should be used. Thou, madame, must be from the Heartfilia Clan. Quite ancient and noble. I would recognize such looks in any era," the woman smiled happily. Lucy raised an eyebrow at how she said it. "So the question is...what is the father's clan?"

Lucy gulped. Loke had no last name as far as she knew. He was Loke, Leo the Lion. "His name...um...is...Le-... Leonita." She wanted to hit herself for picking that name.

"Leo...nita?" the woman said in a purring tone. "That's confession enough."

Too late, Lucy saw the look on her regal face change into something diabolical. "Oh no," she whispered. She dropped the shopping bag and reached for her Spirit Keys.

Loke's dizziness was getting worse. His hunger from not eating breakfast only made things more difficult. He knew where the baby store was—Lucy went there many times over the past couple months—so he took the route Lucy liked along the river.

He suddenly stopped. He stared down the street, and his face went slack. His fist tightened, and his thumb ran over the blue stone in his ring. He calmed his breathing as he marched slowly forward. Loke suddenly knelt down and righted a glittery shopping bag tied with curling blue ribbon, the same used by the baby store. Hesitantly, he reached inside and pulled out a tiny pale blue baby's shirt with the sunny yellow face of a smiling lion printed on it. Next to the bag was a dropped ring of gold and silver keys.

"Lucy," he breathed in disbelief.

Loke gulped hard and closed his eyes as a hundred conflicting emotions pummeled him all at once. He wanted to cry. He wanted to scream. He wanted to drink something strong. He wanted to vomit. He wanted to collapse. He wanted to run. He wanted to give up. He wanted to fight.

Instead, he threw his head back and roared. His voice reverberated through streets and alleys, disturbing mothers in their homes and frightening children playing in parks. It echoed and reached to the very edges of Magnolia. All his fear, pain, and wrath were expressed in the Lion's mighty roar.

End of Chapter 7

Chapter End Notes

You guys are gonna start hating me now, aren't you! ^_^ Last chapter was October 1st. It's now one month later, so November 1st. Lucy is due on the 17th.
"As I imagine your smiling face a petal fell from up above
I know that we'll have something good
It's called beautiful endless love
I know someday we'll be together
Underneath the Cherry Blossom Tree
All I ever want is for you to forever want me...."
- Disha Doshi

Two hours later, Loke sat at Fairy Tail's bar drumming his fingers impatiently. When Mirajane pushed a drink forward, he grabbed it and knocked it back fast.

"Why did she do it?" he growled. "She knew there might be trouble. Why didn't she wait for me?"

"Lucy is a proudly independent woman," said the petite, white-haired bartender. "She does her own thing."

He shot a glare up at her, as if Mirajane might have coerced Lucy into it. No, she was right. Lucy frequently pulled foolish stunts. Perhaps she hung around Natsu and Gray too much. Loke decided the only person to blame was himself for not staying by her. It was his fault! All his! What sort of protector was he? What sort of father would he be if he couldn't wake up to walk his lady to the store? All his fault!

All my fault!

He tapped the shot glass. "Another."

"You've had enough, Loke."

"Another!" he roared.

Mirajane folded her arms and gave him her most stubborn pout. "If we have to fight, you'll need your senses."

With a shout of frustration, Loke threw the shot glass at her. Mirajane easily batted it away as only a person used to brawls could do. He slammed both hands on the counter and leaned in at her.

"Do you have any idea how much pain I'm in?" he hissed in a trembling voice. "If it dulls the pain, I want it."

Elfman was already there to defend his sister. "Loke!"

"Brother?"

Loke turned around and saw Virgo timidly being led into the guild hall by Wendy. She held a silver tea tray. The sight of her calmed his raging mind, and he collapsed back onto his barstool. The maid set up the tray in front of him and got to work pouring a yellow-green tea.

"This will ease the pain better than any human drink." She stirred the tea with fast whisking.
"I'm shocked you're still around," Loke muttered.

"Princess did not send me back. Besides..." She held the teacup up for him. "...if I leave you now, Brother will truly be alone."

Loke gawked for a short moment, then he chortled softly. He realized no one in this guild blamed him or thought it was his fault. They were there to help and support him in any way they could. The guild was family, and the mark on his back proved that he was still a member of Fairy Tail!

He muttered thanks as he took the cup Virgo handed to him and looked at the tea. "How much of this did you bring?"

"Enough for five more brewings."

"And then that's it," he realized. "You can't go back for more."

"Even if I went back, without Princess nearby, I'm not strong enough to force my gate open. I'm sorry. You may punish me."

He waved off the masochistic offer.

"Could you help me to open the gate, Brother?"

Loke took a long drink of the tea, then shook his head. "If I was in the Spirit World, perhaps. I know I can force someone else's gate shut, so maybe I could force them open. But I can't call a Celestial Spirit out while in the Human World."

"Then this is all the seirei tea you have. Please use it wisely."

"Have some too," he suggested. "If you plan on staying out here with me, you'll need it. Otherwise, it'll start to hurt soon."

"It will be my punishment for letting Princess go alone. Besides, I can't be of much use in a fight. When we find Princess, it is Brother who must fight for her."

He sputtered a sigh and glared at the tea. "I'm getting better, but I'm not strong enough to fight. It...still hurts," he muttered. "A lot."

Natsu clasped him on the shoulder. "Then leave it to us. She's our nakama."

Gray came up as well. "We'll get her back."

Erza also stepped forward. "First, we need to figure out who took her. An investigation team already left following their trail. Lucky, Lucy wore perfume this morning. Gajeel is on the search party. With his nose, they'll find her easily."

"I should've been on the team," Natsu pouted. "I'd run in there and grab her immediately."

Gray turned his head aside. "That's precisely why you were ordered to stay home, idiot."

Natsu flared up at him. "What did you say, droopy-eyes?" Before they could fight, Erza smacked both of their heads.

Levy came up to Loke. "It'll take a while, though. The search party reported that the enemy is using the river and traveling at an incredible speed. They probably wanted to avoid leaving tracks. If it weren't for Gajeel's sense of smell, we might never have figured out where they were going. He's
somewhat amazing, isn't he!" she praised with a slight blush.
"Go home, Loke," Erza suggested. "Rest as much as you can. We'll tell you as soon as we learn
anything."
Loke glared at her. "Don't you dare take off and leave me behind."
"I swear, we won't," Erza nodded solemnly. "Virgo, stay with him."
"As you wish, Warrior Queen."
"Warrior Queen?" Erza asked, stunned at the lofty title.
Loke knocked back the last of the tea. He tried to stand, but his weakness hit him hard. Virgo held
him under the arm, balanced the tea tray with her other hand, and slowly helped him out. As soon as
the doors shut on the two Celestial Spirits, there was a collective sigh of relief throughout the guild. It
was too intense being in the same room with a grieving man.
"There's no way he should go on a mission like this," Gray warned Erza.
Her brown eyes slid over to him. "If I tried leaving you behind, what would you do?"
Gray hesitated, but he realized what she meant. "I'd fight through Hell and you to get to her."
"Precisely. Loke has even more reason to fight. He's not only rescuing the woman he loves, but his
child, too. He's weak, but he'll give it everything he's got. It'd dishonor him to leave him behind."
The sun was setting. Loke laid on the bed he shared with Lucy, holding a stuffed lion, a gift from
Happy meant for the baby. Virgo sat primly by his side. She had already cleaned everything twice
before Loke warned her to conserve her strength. So she sat on a stool by the bed, hands folded
neatly, staring at the window as the minutes ticked by.
"We should speak of something happy," Virgo decided suddenly. "Brother, when did you and
Princess get together?"
Loke thought the sudden conversion was strange, but he realized she was right. He needed to
remember happier times and get his mind off of constant worrying. He hummed and thought back.
"It was Spring, a challenging mission. Lucy had already used three Gold Keys, and she finally called
me out. The enemy was a fiend, using his magic to sexually harass Lucy, threatening to rape her. I
grew too furious and killed him with a brutal attack I haven't used in centuries."
"That one?"
"Yes, Regulus Supernova! Afterwards, we saw that Erza took damage on her leg, so I carried her to
a ryokan. Lucy was so weary, she simply forgot to send me back, and I didn't want to leave. I stayed
in the room while Lucy went to an onsen. When she came back, she was shocked I was still there,
but she still didn't send me back. She ordered room service for both of us. We ate, drank...maybe a
bit too much," he laughed. "She got flushed and loosened her robe rather revealingly. It was hard to
talk to her with those massive mounds of feminine beauty partially exposed."
"Shameful!" Virgo frowned.
"I didn't do anything. I won't take advantage of a drunken woman," he assured with a disdainful
pout. "Anyway, she was really drunk, didn't know what she was doing. I figured she'd never


remember anything in the morning, so I confessed to her all that I felt. I had to get it off my chest, I guess. I didn't want to disgrace her, so I carried her to bed. I stayed there all night in case she got sick.

"When she woke up, she avoided me. I still had to carry Erza, but Lucy never said anything. We made it to a town where we could rent some transportation. Gray drove, Erza had some pain killers and slept the whole time, and Natsu was stupid-sick as usual. I had to punch him out of his misery, then try to fit both him and Erza onto the same seat, laying one on top of the other. So only Lucy and I were the only ones awake in the back. I finally demanded to know why she was avoiding me. Turned out she remembered everything I said. It got awkward after that, so as soon as we were back at the guild, I left.

"Later, Lucy called me out again. I was ready to fight, except we were in the middle of Magnolia's rainbow sakura. She wanted to view it with me...just us. She had a picnic spread out and everything. That's when she said she had thought it over all night long, even lost sleep over it, and came to the decision that she was willing to try dating a little. Nothing much, of course: dinners, walks, basically things we had already done together, but just the two of us.

"I could hardly believe that, after all this time of shrugging off my adoration and denying she had any feelings for me, she was finally taking me seriously. And she was so cute and shy when she said it! I felt...that was the best day I had in many centuries. I wanted it to be just a little better, something extra I could add to this magical incantation of love, so I kissed her under the sakura. It was truly the most wonderful kiss!" he sighed with a goofy smile.

"A perfect kiss for Princess," Virgo agreed.

"We hid it from the guild, but I think they all knew. Things progressed fast...probably faster than we wanted," he admitted with an embarrassed laugh. "We couldn't help it. The attraction was inescapable. Her beauty is intoxicating, literally! I feel drunk when I'm with her, I can't think logically, I say things that sound stupid, yet she loves it. Best of all, the pain of being in this world fades whenever she's near me. I would've loved her even if she wasn't my master, but having her, protecting her, being her knight in shining armor...it makes life so much more wonderful. Now this, a baby, a family! It's a dream come true...except," he realized darkly, "with every dream, there's a chance of nightmares. I'm praying this nightmare ends, Lucy returns safely, and we can go back to enjoying our happily-ever-after."

"That sounds sweet," Virgo said without even a smile, although she sounded sincere. "But Brother, why a human? You've done this before: Karen, Hoshi, Parisah, Naomi, Kefira..."

"Because I loved them," he snapped to cut off the lengthy list. "I've dated Celestial Spirits as well. There's no difference in my mind. A person, be they Human or Spirit, can fall in love."

"Do you love Lucy more or less?"

"Way more than Karen," he muttered.

"More than Kefira?"

Loke paused, and a dark shadow passed over his eyes. "Never mention her name again."

"You once said she was the best lover you..."

"What happened with me and Kefira," he shouted over her, "was perhaps the worst mistake of my existence."
"Is Lucy also a mistake?"

"No!" he yelled. "Lucy...Lucy makes me stronger," he said softer, smiling as he thought about her. "Her presence is soothing. You feel it too, don't you?"

"I don't understand. I feel no different with her as my owner than I did under any other powerful owner."

"Is that so?" he smirked to himself. "It must mean we're meant for one another, like two stars that on their own shine well enough, but when converged their brilliance outshines the rest of the heavens."

"Does a human lover make a Celestial Spirit stronger than a Spirit lover? Are other Spirit lovers not as compatible?"

"Dunno," he answered, putting his hands behind his head and looking up at the ceiling. "I guess it's different for everyone. Why are you so curious anyway?"

Virgo looked to the window pensively. "I wonder sometimes: could I fall in love?"

"You?" he asked in shock. Virgo...in love? Even the Lion had a hard time picturing it. "Well, you may be the Maiden, but you don't have to remain one."

"Is that so?" she mused, sounding uncertain. She moved her seat from the stool to the edge of the bed. "There is something I can do to help Brother, but I feel hesitant."

"Help me?" he asked, confused by what she meant and how that tied into her curiosity about love.

"I have extra energy I can lend to you."

His mouth dropped for a moment at the kind offer, yet he firmed up and shook his head. "No, then you'll be too weak."

"I won't be fighting. I can leave once we rescue Princess, but you're stuck here. I can give you some of my magical energy." With a pink face, she inched closer to where Loke laid on the bed, and slowly she crawled on top on him.

Loke's eyes widened in shock. "Whoa, Virgo, what...what the hell are you doing? Hey!"

She took her handcuffs, and with a touch, a second shackle magically appeared on the dangling chain ends. She clasped each one onto Loke's wrists. He was too stunned by such wanton audacity to fight her off, but once he heard the locks click, the Lion felt a moment of panic. He yanked against the chains but merely pulled her arms along with him.

Virgo began an incantation. "Chained together thus, I call upon Spica." She squeezed her eyes shut tightly as brilliant light enveloped her, and her pink hair fluttered with the energy. "Grant me your power! Spica: Virgin Renewed!"

Loke felt a surge of energy flow through the handcuffs, up his arms, and spread all through his body. He stiffened, and his back arched at the intense tingle. Virgo gritted, but she held onto his arms. Pure white light engulfed both of them, searing and purifying at the same time, shaking the windows in the bedroom. As the surge increased, Virgo cried out and grabbed Loke tightly, lying fully on top of him and holding him hard to ride out the thrust of magic.

"V-Virgo," Loke strained out through the intense magical exchange. "Are you okay?" He could barely see through the blinding light, but he heard her whines and felt her body trembling.
"It hurts, and it feels...so good," she whimpered, which ended in a moan. "Leo...I...I..." She cried louder and crushed him into a hug.

Loke was numbed and tingling all over his body. He felt wave after wave of power throb through his essence, healing him and making him whole. As the surge began to wane, Loke felt like he could finally breathe, and he panted hard. Such a rush!

"That...wow," he exclaimed and laughed wearily. "That felt pretty damn good."

Virgo gave a few heavy gasps, utterly spent with the magical surge. She lifted her upper body and looked down at him as he leaned back against the pillows in exhaustion. Her cheeks flushed to see Loke's face sweaty and glowing in ecstasy. "That is the secret regenerative power of Spica: Virgin Renewed. I've not done that in a long, long time."

Virgo suddenly leaned over and kissed Loke. His eyes went huge. He flailed for a moment, but he did not want to simply shove her away, especially since they were chained together. Virgo made a soft humming sound and slid her body down a little, right over a spot Loke did not want her to discover. The sensuality in her quiet moan made him panic.

"Stop!" he yelled right over her mouth.

She leaned up and looked hurt. Then she saw the shock and distress in his face. Her bold actions suddenly dawned on her, and her eyes went massive. Virgo looked away so Loke could not see her blush. "I...I'm so sorry, Brother." She hurried with the shackles, but her eagerness to get far away made her fumble. "I didn't mean it. I just...the rush of power..."

"It's okay," he muttered, looking anywhere but at her. "Can you...um...not wiggle as you unlock those things?" He felt ashamed and a little angry that she kissed him without warning and without asking. However, he could not blame her impulsive response when even for himself, being handcuffed with a lady in a maid outfit straddled across his hips, made him aroused.

She leaned up and looked hurt. Then she saw the shock and distress in his face. Her bold actions suddenly dawned on her, and her eyes went massive. Virgo looked away so Loke could not see her blush. "I...I'm so sorry, Brother." She hurried with the shackles, but her eagerness to get far away made her fumble. "I didn't mean it. I just...the rush of power..."

"I'm sorry. Punish me now."

"I will punish you, but later. Get the damn cuffs off, Virgo!"

With a snap, the shackles finally released just as the knock rapped louder. Loke leaped off the bed, ran to the other room, and opened the door to see Erza, Gray, Natsu, Happy, Wendy, Charle, and Levy dressed for a journey.

"We just got word," Erza told him. "They've discovered Lucy's whereabouts, but because of the situation, the investigation team is standing by until we arrive as backup."

"I'm going, too," Loke insisted.

"As shall I," Virgo insisted, adjusting her maid outfit as she walked forward.

Erza raised an eyebrow at her disheveled appearance but decided it was unimportant. "I figured as much and secured transportation for all of us. They're already near Fiore's border, but they've stopped for the night. If we hurry, we could be there before they leave in the morning. Do you need..."
to pack?"

"All I need is right here." Loke raised his fist and showed them the gleaming ring. Damn that impulsive Virgo, but at least what she did gave him enough energy to not be stumbling around in pain. He felt like he could take on any enemy.

"I should bring the tea," Virgo said, hurrying to the kitchen.

While she was gone, Loke eyed Erza seriously. "Who did this, and why do they want Lucy?"

"Why? We don't know. Gajeel said the kidnapper looked like a noblewoman, and they're in a hurry to leave Fiore, so perhaps this is a rivalry between aristocrats. As for who, we have only a little knowledge. It's a single woman riding a watercraft of some sort pulled by what appears to be a large fish who can talk and walk on dry land. Gajeel heard the fish say a name—Kefira."

Loke's eyes widened in horror. "Kefira?"

Erza raised an eyebrow. "Someone you know?"

His face had gone white. "It couldn't be. That was centuries ago. She'd be dead by now." Still, he looked troubled. "With a walking fish, huh? What did she look like?"

"Not much to go on. Dressed like a noble, long black hair, pale skin. All I got on the fish is that it can walk and is blue. Gajeel isn't the best at communicating, although he did mention that the enemy smelled like snow...however snow is supposed to smell."

"It smells good," Natsu assured. "Like trillium flowers."

Virgo came up behind Loke. "The descriptions match. Do you think it's them?"

"That was four hundred years ago," he muttered. "There's no way Kefira could still be alive."

"There are always ways," Erza warned gravely. "Tell us anything you might know on the way. Let's hurry!"

End of Chapter 8

Chapter End Notes

FYI: Trillium flowers are odorless...except to dragon slayers. ^_^

Hopefully I survive being pummeled by die-hard LoLu fans for daring to write that scene with Virgo. Sumimasen! *bows deeply* Virgo being coy is so hard to imagine. I have a feeling, if Lucy ever says "Yes, you'll be punished," Virgo will break out in a huge smile. That would be creepy.

I received permission from Disha Doshi to use her poem as this chapter's epigraph. It's gorgeous and perfectly fits the mood, "beautiful endless love," the love of an eternal Spirit expressed under the ephemeral sakura. She's at http://disha-doshi.blogspot.com. Thanks, Disha!

I wrote a prelude to Lion's Pride called Ephemeral Sakura, Eternal Love. It's not mandatory to read it, but parts of that story will show up here. It's seven short chapters,
nice and fluffy. Plus Loke kicks ass!
Lucy woke up with a headache and painful hunger gnawing her stomach. With the baby growing so rapidly, she had to eat twice as much these days. Right then, she felt like she had been fasting for a week. From another room, she heard voices.

"I have determined she is definitely the vessel we seek."

"And the child?" came a hissing tone.

"Safe. I still want the Lion if we wish to do this properly. Feed her, protect her. I shall be back."

"Take care, mistress-s-s."

Lucy moaned and reached up to her pounding head. "Oww...huh?"

That was when she felt shackles on her wrists. They were padded with something scaly but smooth so that there was no pain in wearing them, just annoyance. She was so glad Loke wasn't into bondage! She saw that her arms had gotten considerably thinner. How long had she been unconscious?

"Art thou awake, miss-s-s?"

She jolted at what sounded like a snake, although the tone itself was not menacing. She was in a normal enough room, an inn by the bland decor, and on a comfortable bed.

"Thou art half starved, yes-s-s? Wouldst thou like some vittles-s-s?"

"Huh? I'm...I'm sorry but I don't know Old Speak that well."

"Ah, humblest apologies-s-s. I am unversed in thy tongue, but I shall try. Would you...like some...food?"

From an adjoining room, a creature walked out. Lucy gasped and drew away at first. It was some sort of fishman. He stood upright with two normal legs; however, from the waist up his body was blue-gray and scaly. Where his arms would be, he had graceful fins, so that they looked like translucent wings. He covered himself in the front with a silver loincloth bearing the symbol of a fish, but nothing covered the back. Instead, he had a tightly curling tail with fins on the ends. His face was a cross between a fish and a dinosaur with a massive mouth. His wide snout had sharp teeth, and
through his fat lower lip he wore a ring with a blue stone. His eyes were round and never blinked. His head had iridescent fins swooshing backwards like long, glowing hair.

"Thou hast nay...no, forgive me. You have not eaten in over a day. This is mildly inconvenient for normal people, but thou art...you are in the throes of advanced gravidity. The child within shall suck your energy relentlessly. Pleas-s-s-e, eat."

She frowned at the bowl. "How do I know it's not poison?" It smelled so good, her stomach gave a loud groan for her to shut up and just eat.

"What purpose is there in abducting you just to kill you? My mistress and I wish to protect you and your baby. I swear, we wish thee...wish you no harm."

"You swear?" she challenged stubbornly. "Do you swear upon your honor as a Celestial Spirit...Piscis Austrinus, the Southern Fish."

He tipped his head in admiration. "No wonder Leo favors you. To sense me so easily, you must be exceptionally talented."

"The lip ring gave you away. The star Fomalhaut, the Mouth of the Fish. It looks similar to Loke's blue-lacrima ring, Regulus."

"Loke? Is that the name Leo goes by these days-s-s? Intriguing," he mused softly, but quickly pulled himself out of his thoughts. "I too have assumed an alias-s-s. I am now called Haftorang. 'Tis an honor to meet the lady of my friend."

"Your friend? You stole me away from him! Some friend," she scoffed. 

"Perhaps not the wisest friend," he said with a smile to his massive mouth. "About his ring of Regulus and this-s-s, Fomalhaut," he said, and a delicate finlike arm touched his fat lip, "they're not mere blue lacrima, nor are they a subtle power. They are...special."

"Special! Everyone tells me that and never explains," she grumbled in irritation.

"Is this true? Dost thou know naught about these rings-s-s? Well, perhaps I shall entertain thee...you with a story. But first..." He unlocked her handcuffs. "...eat. If your stomach growls much louder, you shan't be able to hear my words-s-s."

Lucy blushed with embarrassment and decided to eat before she passed out in hunger.

The fishman settled onto a stool. "You know about the four Royal Stars, yes-s-s? Or have those too been lost to time?"

"Loke mentioned them. Guardians of the Sky...um, Regulus in Leo, Fomalhaut in Piscis Austrinus, Antares in Scorpio, and Aldebaran in Taurus."

"Ah, good to know they've not been forgotten."

"Well, honestly, I'd never heard of 'Royal Stars' until he told me."

"Is that so? Not surprising, but nevertheless a shame. Those four were Guardians, proud nobles who ruled the heavens back in a time before that damn dictator took over."

"Dicta-...the Spirit King?"

He glared at the name. "He is not my king. Then again, I come from an older time, a more peaceful
era," he sighed with a nostalgic hiss. "The Royal Stars and the constellations lucky enough to have
them were at our peak. The Lion was to the north, I was to the south, two friends watching each
other's backs, equal and opposite, but...always equal in my eyes-s-s," he said warmly, despite the
hissing tone. "Of course, this was back when the Great Southern Fish was amongst the leading
constellations, the consort of Aquarius. You are the master to Aquarius, yes-s-s? How is she?"

"Cantankerous!" Lucy growled petulantly. "It's a miracle she hasn't killed me."

Haftorang opened his massive mouth and laughed loudly. "Yes, that's her! Is she well? Is she happy?
Has she found another mate?"

"Um, well..." Lucy cringed, reluctant to be the one to give him bad news. "I hate to say it but...yeah,
she's dating Scorpio."

"Is she? Good, good," he said with a sad but thankful expression. "They were always close. He's a
good man, one of the ancient nobles, so I trust him. It's good to know he was able to move on after
all that happened to us. And my child and grandchild, Pisces?" he asked eagerly.

"Huh? Pisces is yours? Wow! I...I didn't realize that. Sorry, but I don't have that Gold Key yet."

"Yet? Ambitious-s-s!"

"Oh!" Lucy squeaked, realizing what she said. "No, not really. It's not like I'm out to collect them all
like some bad marketing scheme."

"My daughter and cute grandson. I miss them, even if they think I'm a traitor who died centuries
ago."

"Traitor?" She gulped her soup hard. "Why would they think that?"

He rose fast and adjusted the silver loincloth. "My mistress has questions-s-s. Eat your fill. There's
more." Then he abruptly left.

Once the fishman was gone, Lucy gave up on spooning the soup and tipped the whole bowl back.
She was starving! She licked the bowl clean and still felt like she had an empty stomach. Before she
could check for more food, the door opened and the woman in purple stepped in with the fishman
following at a subservient distance.

"Most humbly I greet thee, Lucy Heartfilia, Princess of Magnolia," the dark-haired lady said loftily.

"Whoa, wait, what?" Lucy gawked. "I know they like to call me that, but really, I'm no princess."

"Ah, much apologies. Perhaps the honorifics are different these days," the woman mused. "Thou
hast already met my companion, Haftorang, the Celestial Spirit of Piscis Austrinus. Haftorang, more
soup for our guest."

"Of course, mistress-s-s." He bowed from his human waist, took the bowl, and went to the other
room.

"And you are?" Lucy asked hesitantly.

"I am Yamataikoku No Kefira, Shaman-Queen of Kohinur."

"Kohinur?" Lucy exclaimed. "That place is beyond the Pergrande Kingdom, on the other side of
Earthland. You came halfway around the world just to abduct me?"

Haftorang brought her another bowl of soup and half a loaf of fresh bread. "Well worth the trouble, if we can save you," he said solemnly.

"Save me?" Lucy glared at them. "For a couple of kidnappers, you sound like you truly think you're doing me a service."

"Are we not?" Queen Kefira asked in a smooth tone. "If thou hadst stayed thither in the arms of thy lover, how long ere the Spirit King came for thee?"

"You're talking weird again," Lucy grumbled with a pout.

"Mistress, she doth not speak the dialect of our days-s-s," Haftorang warned.

"And I speak not hers!" Queen Kefira snapped, dismissing the language barrier. "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the Celestial Spirit King," she warned loftily. "Thou couldst not deny him...nay, thou wouldst not even be able to stand before him without thy knees collapsing in trembles."

"Yeah, ya see," Lucy sassed, "I've met that Mustache-Man, too. Sure, he's big and scary, but he's a nice guy."

Haftorang tilted his head in surprise and awe. "At thy tender age, hast thou truly stood before the King himself?"

"Sure, a couple times," Lucy said with her mouth already full of a hunk of bread dipped in the thick, delicious soup. "When I saved Loke's life and when he invited me and my friends to the Spirit World."

"Thou...in the Spirit World?" Kefira gave a musical laugh. "Now I know thou art lying. 'Tis common knowledge: no Human can go to the Spirit World."

"Well, I did," Lucy said stubbornly, folding her arms and pouting. "And I'm not telling you how I did it."

"Lies. But...who is Loke?" asked the queen.

"Leo's current moniker," the fishman explained.

"That's right!" said Lucy. "And I saved him from the Spirit King's judgment. He was impressed, so a while later he invited me to the Spirit World and called me his friend. He said I was the first they'd ever invited. So see, we're good buddies, the Spirit King and I. If he came again..."

"Perchance once thou couldst have avoided his wrath," Haftorang hissed, "but surely not twice!"

Lucy glared at him hard. "As many times as it takes, Fish-Head."

Queen Kefira chuckled at her audacity. "I believe thee, only because thou art too simple to lie so grandly. Thine experience is indeed great, and barely more than a youth! Thou art not one to be underestimated. 'Tis no wonder Leo fell in love with thee. Tell me," she smiled craftily, "dost thou already possess the Key to his Heart?"

"Key to his heart?" she asked with a full mouth.

"Think not that I'm dumb, child. Surely thou hast not become the mate of the Lion without knowing about his Heart."
"Heart...of the Lion? Do you mean Regulus? Seriously, what's up with everyone and Regulus?" Lucy whined. "It's just a star!"

"Just a star!" Kefira laughed, daintily covering her mouth. "Hear thee that, Haftorang? The youth believeth that Regulus is just a star."

"Mistress, the people of this age do not even know about the Royal Stars-s-s. The fact that she can name them putteth her a step wiser than the rest."

"Verily, was so much forgotten?" she asked in sudden disappointment. "A pity! So then, truly, thou hast no knowledge of the Key to the Heart of the Lion?"

Lucy shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, are we talking about some riddle for romance, or do you mean a physical key, like one of the Spirit Keys? Because I've never heard of key for individual stars. Keys are for the Spirits of the constellations. Can a single star really also have its own Celestial Spirit?"

Queen Kefira's eyes narrowed spiteful. "Ignorant waif! How dare thou givest the great Leo a child when he telleth thee naught about such a vital thing! If Leo truly loved thee, he would tell thee all his secrets, especially this. Thou art not a true beloved one. Thou art...some wench he slept with who happened to latch onto his seed. Harlot!" She raised her hand to slap Lucy.

"Mistress-s-s!" Haftorang shouted. "I said we would take her only if we protected her." His determination fixated on her, and slowly he insisted, "Thou shalt not harm her."

Queen Kefira held back her hand and glared at him. "Just who is the mistress and who is naught but a fallen star?" Her raised hand slapped him instead. Her hand print left a purple mark on his blue-gray scales. Then she swirled away and stormed out of the room.

"What a bitch!" Lucy exclaimed in disgust.

"Forgive her," Haftorang sighed wearily in a long hiss. The fishman rubbed back the iridescent hair-like fins on his head. "Kefira was not always like this-s-s. Time was unkind to her mental state. Her recent obsession only made her worse."

"He'll come for me," Lucy pouted stubbornly. "Loke will hunt you to the end of the world if he has to."

"I hope so," Haftorang smiled sadly. "I dearly miss that old wildcat. Nevertheless, his proximity to thee is a risk. He cannot remain forever by thy side. When his time is nigh, would he rather have thee watch the agony of him dying, or simply return to face judgment? If he was forced to open his gate near thee, thou wouldst suffer greatly. For thine own safety, we removed thee. Yet if the Lion doth come for thee, I wish to help him live longer in this world. Thou...you," Haftorang smiled, realizing he had gone back to his normal way of speaking, although Lucy was having an easier time comprehending him now. "You seem like a good woman. You are a beacon of light in his life, and I hope he is a faithful mate who will seek you out, because...I'm his only hope for surviving this unfair punishment," he said in a sad tone. "For my old friend, I would help."

"Old friend, huh?" Lucy mumbled as she scraped the bottom of the bowl with the last chunk of bread. She could hardly believe she just ate half a loaf and still felt hungry. "That Mustache-Man called Loke 'old friend' too, but then wanted him to die."

"My friendship with the Lion predates the Spirit King, and the last thing I want is the Lion to fall into eternal oblivion. Don't think badly of him for not telling you everything. He merely wished to spare..."
"The Royal Stars?" she asked.

"Aye. If he told you only that Regulus was one of those nobles-s-s, then that's enough."

Lucy looked down at her massive stomach. What sort of secrets was Loke hiding? What happened with the Royal Stars? If they were nobles of heaven, why were they not anymore? She owned Leo, Taurus, and Scorpio, and they had never mentioned anything like this. They did not act like royalty. In fact, her mind refused to wrap itself around the image of that pervy bull being a regal nobleman. She shuddered at the thought!

Now, here was the fourth, the Southern Fish. Why was Piscis Austrinus here? He was not a Gold Key, so...was he a Silver Key? How could a Celestial Spirit who was once the owner of a Royal Star be reduced to serving her soup and following some outdated hag? Why did the Royal Stars lose their titles, and why was Pisces a Zodiac and not their father?

Lucy decided to ask at least one thing that troubled her. "How...how exactly did you have Pisces? I mean, I know I've got this," she said, pointing to her huge belly, "but I heard that Celestial Spirits weren't supposed to be able to have children. Yet you say you're Pisces' father, and Pisces...well...they're mother and son, so...I'm confused now."

"That was the belief, but I guess that all depends on how one became a Spirit."

Lucy leaned in closer with intrigue. "How you...became...a Spirit?"

The door opened, and the woman in purple floated in on soft slippered steps. "We've been detected by enemies. We must make haste!"

"Understood, Mistress Kefira." Haftorang helped Lucy up. "We must go."

"If you refuse to walk, I'll be forced to carry you in my mouth. It's efficient but not pleasant on the nose, I'm told."

"Eww!" She cringed, looking at the massive mouth and sharp teeth. "No thanks."

"Then walk. 'Tis not far."

End of Chapter 9

Chapter End Notes

 Lots of notes, but I wrote some confusing stuff...sorry. ^_^'

Early Modern English (AKA: "Shakespearean English" or "King James English," erroneously called Middle English)

Thou/Thee = you (thou is nominative, thee is objective: "Thou shalt see how I see thee.")
Thy/Thine = your (If the next word begins with a vowel, use thine: "thy face," "thine
eyes." Same rule applies to my/mine: "my face," "mine eyes")

**Conjugation in a nutshell:**
If the pronoun is "thou," the verb ends in -est (or -st if it ends in a vowel). If you'd double the last consonant for "-ing" then double it for "-est."
(You do=Thou dost; you know=thou knowest; you put=thou puttest)

Third person singular (he/she/it): end with -eth/-th.
(He does=He doth; she knows=She knoweth; it puts=it putteth)

Verb "to have": You have=Thou hast; She has=She hath; "I/we/they have" stays the same.

Thou art = You are
'Tis = It's. Cut the "I" off of IT instead of IS.
Naught = Nothing
Nigh = Near
Ere = Before
Verily = Really/Truly
Perchance = Perhaps
Hither and thither = Here and There

*If any dialog confuses you, please ask for clarification. I tried real hard to keep this to a simplified version of the more widely known Shakespearean dialect, but half my readers come from countries where English is not the official language, and even in English-speaking countries, many schools don't teach Shakespeare until high school. I'm sure there are some who are utterly lost in reading Queen Kefira and Haftorang's archaic speech. I took the time to make a dialog-only transcript in Modern English just in case. I can PM it to anyone, no problem!*

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*I once warned you that I'm fanatical with names and their meanings. Now you get to see that I wasn't joking!*

**Piscis Austrinus, AKA "Haftorang" with the ring of Fomalhaut**

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**Piscis Austrinus**: The Southern Fish. Today, Pisces is better known, yet in ancient times the Great Fish was important, and Pisces were his children. As the link above shows, the constellation appears with its large mouth open to guzzle the water Aquarius pours out. Because of this association, I'm hinting that the two had a relationship. If this was an anime, Aquarius would be a mermaid and Piscis Austrinus would be opposite, man
legs but a fish's body.

**Fomalhaut**: The Mouth of the Fish (Arabic فم الحوت; pronounced "FOH-mahl-hout")... I jokingly call it "foam-a-lot") first-magnitude star located on the tip of the mouth of Piscis Austrinus; NASA pictures have given it the nickname "Eye of Sauron" (google "Fomalhaut" for pics, they're awesome!)

**Haftorang**: HAHF-tohr-ahng, not "haft orange" ^_^ also spelled "Hastorang," Persian name of Fomalhaut. In Persian mythology, Haftorang was a Royal Star known as "The Solitary One" and "Watcher of the South" because it's the only first-magnitude star in an otherwise empty area of sky. It's linked with immortality and associated with the Syrian god Dagon. Lovecraft fans, be in awe!

**Yamataikoku No Kefira, Shaman-Queen of Kohinur**

**Yamataikoku** – Sino-Japanese name of an ancient country in Wa (Japan) during the late Yayoi period, home of the **shaman-queen** Himiko.

**No** – Japanese possessive, の. Before the rise of feudalism, "no" was used in clan naming, similar to the German aristocratic "von." Japanese naming went surname/"no"/given name. I like to think of "no" as an apostrophe-S. She's therefore "Clan Yamataikoku's Kefira."

**Kefira** – feminine form of the Hebrew name meaning "young lion." No, she isn't Loke's sister, daughter, aunt, or mother. It's just her name.

**Kohinur** – from Persian کوه نور Koh-i Nūr, "Mountain of Light," also spelled Koh-i-Noor, name of one of the British Crown Jewels and supposedly cursed. The legend goes, the man who wears the Koh-i-Noor diamond may rule the world but will know all the sorrows of the world, so it can only be worn by a god or a woman. To date, the only ruling monarchs to have worn it without tragedy are Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth II.

Yes, I take naming characters seriously. Names hold power. A person's name is their soul, builds their personality, reflects their traits, tells the world what type of person they are! (So says the lady with a weird name like Rhov!)
Chapter Notes

_Disclaimer: I do not own the lyrics to Damion Suomi and the Minor Prophets. I actually emailed the band's general manager and received permission to use their lyrics in my story. (I'm a good girl!) Damion Suomi (sue-me) is a talented American folk singer. This song really touched my heart, so I hope you check it out on YouTube. Here's their website: http://www.damionsuomi.com_

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Let the lion, and the ram, and the fish fight it out.
Oh lord, let me be a peaceful man
Because I don't understand the minds of violent men.
Sometimes nature can be such a bitch."
- Damion Suomi and the Minor Prophets, "The Lion, the Ram, and the Fish"

A/N: Okay, it's the Maiden, not the Ram, but I'm 2/3 right!

Erza, Gray, Natsu, Happy, Wendy, Levy, Virgo, and Loke arrived in a rural, idyllic village in the southeastern edge of Fiore Kingdom. The same river that flowed through Magnolia was here nothing more than a tranquil stream trickling down from the nearby mountains. Their motley party stood out amidst the farmers in their overalls and shopkeepers in calico-print dresses and quaint suits. Families stopped and stared at the armored woman pulling a massive cart of luggage, the raven-haired man with icy eyes wearing a long white coat, the pink-haired yankee with his scaly scarf, a blue cat, a small girl with a white cat, a cute blunette scholar, a rosy-haired maid, and when they got to Loke, the women in the village swooned.

"So handsome!" they whispered to one another. "Like a prince. Are the rest his servants?"

Gray overheard that. "Che! I'm nobody's servant," he scoffed.

They rendezvoused with Gajeel's six-man team in front of an old inn. The iron dragon slayer had his arms folded and a bitter expression.

"Sure took your sweet time," he huffed. "The enemy moved out three hours ago. We've tracked them to an abandoned fort on the edge of the frontier. We've confirmed that Lucy is with them."

"Is she hurt?" Loke asked quickly.

"She was walking under her own strength but...well, I'm not sure how," Gajeel admitted, scratching his spiky head, "but she looked a lot thinner."

"It's the baby," Wendy explained. "I warned her about this. If she skips even a single meal, it's like fasting for a whole day. If she hasn't eaten since breakfast yesterday..."

"Princess did not have breakfast," Virgo related.
"Then that's even worse!" Wendy exclaimed fretfully. "The kidnappers might not realize anything is
wrong, but the toll on Lucy's body is the same as going a week without food."

Loke clenched his fists. Even without being hurt, Lucy was in danger.

After dropping off their luggage, they followed Gajeel along a rough dirt road to a rundown fort
made of stone with wooden spikes for a defensive wall. It was rural and small but still protective.

"Okay," Erza began, "here's the plan..." Before she could say more, Natsu and Loke rushed forward
with roaring battle cries. Erza began to shout at them, but it was too late. She rubbed out yet another
tension headache. "Idiots," she mumbled.

"Fire Dragon's Roar!" Natsu yelled. The fireball smashed apart the wooden outer wall and caught
the rotting wood on fire. "Lucy!" he bellowed.

In a caged prison inside the fort, Lucy raised her head off a tattered army cot and heard the voice.
"Natsu," she smiled in relief.

Queen Kefira also looked up. "They arrived after all. Such a shame."

"I sense the Lion with them," Haftorang said, looking torn by emotions of eagerness and concern.

"Is he? That shall make things easier. Come Haftorang, let us begin."

The fishman bowed from his human waist. "Aye, mistress-s-s. Princess Lucy, you must remain here
for your own safety. Leo shall join you soon."

"Natsu's with him, and I bet Gray and Erza are, too," she said haughtily. "Fairy Tail's strongest team!
There's no way you'll win this fight."

"Is that so?" he asked in amusement. "I'm eager to see how strong this era's warriors have become. If
they're as powerful as you, perhaps I shall have a little fun."

"Are you kidding? I'm the weakest one on the team!" She realized that was not something to brag
about, but right then she was praying furiously that Natsu or Loke came soon. She was starving!

"I shall test their merit. In ancient times, the star Fomalhaut engendered the test of remaining true to
one's ideals. Have you ever wondered, what are Leo's ideals-s-s?" He left her to ponder over that and
followed Kefira outside.

Loke followed Natsu as the energetic teen rushed across a weed-filled open space between the
wooden defense wall and the stone fortress. "Lucy!" he shouted desperately. "We're coming!"

"Hang on, Lucy," Natsu yelled. "Come out here, you bastards. We're taking Lucy back home to
Fairy Tail."

Loke suddenly slowed down. Something was wrong. Something felt horribly off.
Something...familiar. An intense power.

"Natsu, be careful," he warned.

The pink-haired mage stopped and looked back. "What's wrong?"

Just then, the massive doors to the fort creaked open and a woman stepped out. The sun caught her
sable hair and alabaster skin. Her deep purple gown, laced up the bodice with black ribbon, billowed out with each step. Natsu jolted at how noble, beautiful, and melancholy she looked.

"I welcome ye, brave warriors," she said with an elegant, ancient accent.

Loke froze and stared hard at her with an open mouth. "Kefira," he breathed.

Her glance caught his, and she smiled sweetly with a faint gleam in her onyx eyes. "And I greet thee warmly, my dearest Leo. It hath been an age since thy noble visage graced mine eyes. Time hath done thee well."

"Then it is you...Yamataikoku No Kefira, Shaman-Queen of Kohinur."

"Eh? Queen?" Natsu asked, looking her over.

Her pale lips pulled into a tight smile. "'Tis good to see thee again. That costume is most amusing. Is this the newest fashion? 'Tis a compliment to thy figure."

Natsu pouted. "She's talkin' weird."

"Thou art alive?" Loke asked, still in shock. "But how didst thou...?" He slammed his astonished eyes shut and shook out his head. The shock slowly wore off, and his eyes narrowed in anger. "That was a long time ago. You should be dead. They sealed you..."

"Not very well. I escaped, although it took a few centuries."

"But...how?" he shouted. "How are you still alive?"

"Simple. Zeref."

Both Loke and Natsu jolted at the name.

"I was one of Zeref's teachers in arcane thaumaturgy, what this age hath renamed Lost Magic. After he surpassed me, I volunteered to be one of his experiments on immortality." Her eyes gleamed with inner madness. "It worked! I was infused with Celestial Spirit energy, and I have not aged since that day."

"Infused?" he sneered. "Which Spirit would dare...?" He stopped and drew back a step as something dawned on him. "Oh no. Not him!"

"Aye," she chuckled melodically. "Thou shouldst have been able to sense him for some time now, Leo. After all, ye share a connected fate."

The others made it through the burning wreck of the entrance and spread out to surround her, taking up their fighting stances. Kefira casually glanced at them, looking intrigued rather than worried by the numbers.

"Thou hast brought friends. Very well. I brought mine, the only one still left to me since thine heartless abandonment that fateful day." She turned her head to the dark doorway. "Come out."

"Yes-s-s, mistress-s-s," came a hissing voice, and the huge half-man-half-fish exited the dark fort.

Happy drooled thickly. "Big fish. Big...big...fiiiiiish!"

"Happy?" Natsu asked in worry as the cat began walking zombie-like toward Haftorang. He picked him up by the scuff of the neck, but Happy kept trying to walk forward with his legs moving in the
air. "Oi, snap out of it! Are you hypnotized?"

"No," Charle huffed. "He's just stupid."

"Fiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiish," the blue cat moaned, dripping drool down his face.

"Leo, old friend," Haftorang greeted quietly with a razor-sharp toothy grin.

"You damn Fish!" Loke glared. "They said you were a traitor, but I never wanted to believe them. It was true after all. You joined her."

"As thou once did," he shrugged.

Natsu leaned over to Erza. "Who's the fish-head? Loke's friend?"

"Piscis Austrinus," Loke told them darkly. "The Southern Fish. Once, he was one of the strongest Celestial Spirits in existence."

"That was a long time ago. I go by the name Haftorang these days-s-s," he corrected. That made Loke glare harder. "As thou hast named thyself after 'Loki,' that mischievous trickster of the old stories-s-s. Appropriate for one who tricked us all and hid who he really was even from his closest friends...and, apparently, even from thy lover." He turned to the petite maid at Loke's side. "And how fare thee, Virgo? Thou art more lovely than ever, a reflection of thy mistress-s-s."

"You should be dead," she said unemotionally. "Traitor to all Spirits! What you did, I can never forgive. In the name of the Zodiacs, I will punish you!" She posed ready to fight.

Loke put an arm in front of her and stepped forward protectively. "Revenge is not yours to take, Virgo. Besides, you're not strong enough for someone like him."

Virgo straightened with awe that he was protecting her, but concern at the dire tone in his voice. "But Brother, he's not even a Gold Key."

"Because...he's beyond that," Loke realized darkly. "All of you," he shouted to the group. "You handle her. Don't engage the Fish. He's mine!"

"Sounds personal," Erza said.

"Oh, it is," Loke said with a glare, sizing up the other Celestial Spirit. "As leader of the Zodiacs, I cannot let him go unpunished."

Erza saw the fierce look in Loke's face. She could imagine him as a lion about to hunt a prey who had harmed his pride. Any weakness he had earlier was gone from his face, although she wondered just how strong Loke was now. It did not matter. With a look that determined, denying the Lion of its prey would be suicidal.

"We'll leave it to you then. Natsu..."

The dragon slayer had already run at Queen Kefira. "Give back Lucy, you queenie bitch!"

"Never mind," sighed Erza.

Natsu held his hands out. "With a flaming right hand, and flaming left hand..." He smashed together both of his hands in front of him. "When you combine the flames together..." Natsu held his palms above him and a massive ball of dazzling flames formed. "Fire Dragon's Brilliant Flame!" With an enraged shout, Natsu threw the massive sphere of fire at Kefira.
The queen smirked and laughed softly. "Thou art indeed the child of a dragon. Very well, dragonling." She raised her hands up. "Hark to my call, oh ancient dragon of the deep." Her slender arm with its draping sleeve stretched forward, a single finger pointed, and she smiled at the approaching fireball. "Quench the child dragon...Flaming Waters of Leviathan!"

"It's rude to point!" yelled Natsu.

From her finger shot what looked at first like a stream of water, but the blue turned into a flaming liquid. It smashed into Natsu's flame and easily overwhelmed it. Then the flame headed toward him.

"Hehe...snack time!" Natsu opened his mouth, ready for the blue flame, but just before it reached him, something instinctively dawned on him. He quickly leaped out of the way, just barely missing the blast.

"Natsu...dodged flame?" Wendy asked in shock.

"That wasn't flame," Gray realized, studying the residual flickers. "That's water, but not really water."

"Thine instincts are honed to the level of a master dragon slayer, little dragonling," Kefira congratulated regally.

"My nose told me they weren't edible," Natsu said, hanging from an outcropping on the fort wall.

"Indeed, those were not mere flames, but the burning waters of Leviathan, the most ancient of all dragons. If thou hadst eaten them, thy flames would have been quenched for eternity."

Wendy cringed a little. "You mean Natsu would lose his magic?"

"Not at all, child," she smiled. "Only his fire."

"But Natsu's magic is fire!"

"Wait, a dragon?" Natsu asked in astonishment. "You know dragon slayer magic, too? Were you also taught by a dragon?"

"Taught by a dragon?" she asked in puzzlement, then she smiled and chuckled softly. "Little dragonling, in my time the dragons would never dare teach this, for we indeed would have gone out to slay them. No, my shock is that a dragon took a Human as a pupil. That is practically unheard of, yet there are three of ye," she said, glancing to Gajeel and Wendy. "The times have certainly changed."

Erza sneered that this was no mere aristocrat kidnapping an heiress, but someone who knew Lost Magic. "Virgo, Wendy, Levy, Gray, go find Lucy. Gajeel and the rest of you, we'll handle the woman first, the Fish second."

They broke into two groups, one watching the blows between Kefira and Natsu to determine precisely what sort of magic she used, the others racing toward the old building.

"Not so fast!" Queen Kefira glared. "From Chapter 4, Scripture 12 of the Book of Zeref: Reverse Magic. Divine Punishment: Nemesis!"

The crumbled stones around the fort turned black and oily. The others froze to see what horrible thing was about to happen. The rocks wobbled as if alive, grew heads, legs, clawed arms, and turned into dozens of demons.
Wendy screamed and backed away. "Not them again!"

"What the heck are they?" Levy gasped in horror.

Gray got his Ice-Make magic ready. "Demons!"

Erza saw the trouble. "Shit! New plan: everyone get rid of those demons. Leave the shaman-queen to Natsu."

Gajeel grinned fiercely, firing up his magic circle. "Gehehe! Now these look like enemies I can really go all out on, rather than some weird-speaking woman."

"Let's do it!" Gray shouted. "Ice-Make: Lance!" Frozen spears shot out and slammed into a dozen demons.

Levy twirled and wrote into the air. "Solid Script: Fire!" The word FIRE shined for a moment, then blazed and shot out at a group of the creatures.

Gajeel grinned viciously as he ran at three demons. "Iron Dragon's Club!" His arm turned into a single metal club, then branched into three spikes, delivering blows straight through the heads of the three black creatures.

Erza's body shined brightly, and for some she appeared naked for the briefest moment. "Heaven's Wheel Armor!" When the light faded, she wore a glittering white and silver armor with angelic wings. A wheel of swords orbited around her in a glowing metallic circle. "Dance, my blades!" The swords gracefully plunged at the demons, slicing through dozens in a single blow and wiping out almost the entire evil force. "Go, Wendy! Get Lucy."

"Got it," she nodded, and the little girl rushed to the fort doors.

Back over by the two Celestial Spirits, they were still only talking over the clashing all around them. Loke tried to keep his strength burning, but he knew a fight would end badly. Even at full strength, fighting this particular Celestial Spirit would have ended in a draw at best.

"How is my lovely daughter and cute little grandson?" Haftorang asked conversationally.

"You mean Pisces? Last I saw them, they were doing fairly well, considering they think you've been dead for centuries. They'll be furious when I tell them who you teamed up with."

"Jealous, old friend?" he chuckled. "Tis not like thee."

"Shut up," shouted Loke. "I am not your old friend. Maybe in the past we were nakama—I even
thought of you as a brother—but if you teemed up with her..."

He pointed over at Queen Kefira and saw her easily deflecting Natsu's fire. Even his most enraged attacks did not cause her to take a step back. Her liquid flame made the dragon slayer jump around, dodging the water in frustration, since it seemed to set everything it touched on fire, yet not a fire he could eat. Loke also saw the demons the others were fighting, getting smashed only to be restored over and over again.

"Of all the wretched women in this world, why her?"

"Ask thyself that, Leo. Thou belonged to her long before me."

"I had no choice," he yelled in fury. "When she changed, when she became...this," he sneered, "I left. Yet that was when you moved in, wasn't it? I wonder how long she waited. Was her bed even cold by the time you showed up?" He glared menacingly. "While the rest of us were fighting Zeref, you aligned yourself with his side. You assisted the most dangerous mage ever to have existed."

Haftorang put a fin on his hip and looked searchingly with those unblinking eyes. "I had my reasons—s-s, as I'm sure thou hadst thine."

"Speak the tongue of this age, you smelly Fish!" Loke yelled angrily. He stubbornly shook his head. "Reasons? I don't care about your so-called reasons. There is no forgiveness for that sort of sin."

"Like there is no forgiveness for bringing to life that baby your woman is carrying?" Haftorang chuckled in a hiss at Loke's furious sneer. "We are the same, Leo. Outcasts! How many times has the Spirit King imprisoned you or locked you out? How many times have you rebelled, again and again? Only I now have no reason to face that old dictator, because I discovered the key to remaining in the Human World indefinitely."

"Haftorang," Loke muttered, musing over the name. "The Solitary One." The half-fish chuckled, but Loke looked disgusted. "Your sin is far worse than mine."

"You think so? How much longer do you have, Leo? A year? Three years? Ten? Do you wish to leave Lucy a widow, a single mother, struggling to raise your fatherless child all on her own? Could you willingly do that to the woman you love?"

Loke quivered slightly and found it hard to breathe. How did the Fish always know how to sting him where it hurt worst?

"I know your ideals, Leo. You can never harm a woman you love, no matter what that may mean to the rest of the world. You could have stopped Kefira before she started on her path, yet you loved her. You once sacrificed everything—not just yourself, but the entire Spirit World—all for a woman you loved. You're doing it again, but would sacrificing yourself really be the best for Lucy? Without you around, who can save her? Kefira wants the child, and you know why."

Loke glared up spitefully. "Yeah, and you're helping the bitch!"

"I am protecting Lucy in the only way I can. If not for me, the same thing would happen to Lucy as what happened back then...when you acted too foolish for your own good."

That made Loke turn away in anger.

"You could protect her better than I, which is why I want you to come with us. Who else knows what happened centuries ago and can stop that same darkness from entering the world? Dying will only assure her own destruction, just like what happened before with..."
"Shut up," Loke whispered in trembles.

Haftorang watched him struggling with conflict. "You need my help, old friend. Harness the true potential of the power you already have, and nothing will stand in your way, not in this world nor the next. You could be with your woman indefinitely! With Kefira's wisdom, Lucy can become immortal as well. It is the only way to remain a family forever, just as I managed to stay with my daughter and grandson. Think about it, Leo," he urged seductively. "You're both already damned, you by the laws of the Spirit World, she by the limitations of the Human World. However, with our help, you both can remain eternal. How many lovers have you had to watch die? How often does your chest ache at all you've lost? Lucy would be like us. Eternity together! If you truly love her, this is the only way to save her."

Loke did not move for a long time. His face struggled, and his breathing went erratic. He tried to swallow, but his throat choked on the hefty offer.

"Too good to be true," Haftorang nodded. "It's written on your face. True, it's not as easy as a mere agreement, yet it isn't difficult either. We are proof."

Loke knew he was right. Kefira looked the same as the last time he saw her four hundred years ago. Haftorang was still alive despite having lived in the Human World since ancient times.

"You know how to do it, Leo. Only us two, since the beginning, only we knew. Taurus was too stupid to figure it out, and Scorpio was hurt so badly, he repressed all memories of that time. But we knew what we lost back then, and we knew how to find it again! As your old friend, as the one who has stood at your back since time began, I want to help you...the true King of the Heavens-s-s!" he declared with a deep bow, flourishing his fins out in respect.

"Don't...don't you dare call me that," Loke growled.

"'Twas your title of old. 'Twas your inheritance, as this," and his fin touched the lip ring, "is mine. You've known how to save yourself and those you love, yet your pride gets in your way. How long has this knowledge burned where your heart...once...was?"

Loke closed his eyes and grabbed his chest.

"Does it hurt even now?" Haftorang asked sadly, truly pitying him. "Yet you know how to ease the pain."

As Loke thought it through...yes, he knew how. He had always known how. Haftorang was not bluffing. Eternity was possible for both of them.

"I offer this as a friend, Lion."

Loke looked away. He could be free from the pain. He could be saved from the limitations of the Spirit World. He and Lucy could be together until the end of time...

"Loke!" Erza shouted while slicing through one of the black, gooey demons. She had overheard only a little, but it was enough to know that any person would be tempted.

Her shout jolted him, and Loke regained his determination. "Piscis...no, Haftorang," he frowned. "You dabbled in something that never should've been disturbed. If it was only Kefira offering to save Lucy from a short life, I might accept, but what you've done...the one thing that has always—always—been forbidden, the last rule set down by the Royal Stars themselves, a rule no Celestial Spirit could ever dare to break! I can never forgive such a deep sin." He tightened his fist, and magic glowed from his ring.
"You don't realize that you're halfway there already," the fishman sighed. "But I must warn you, there is no way you can defeat me."

"I already know that," he nodded solemnly.

"Then why fight?"

"Simple. My pride demands it."

Haftorang opened his massive mouth and laughed loudly. "Yes-s-s! Yes, that is the Leo I remember. Too proud even to save himself, too proud to make the move that would reinstate you as the true king. Pride and friendship above all else. I shan't kill you, old friend. I want you to join us, if only so I can see you returned to your throne. Very well, you fight with that little ring of Regulus, and I shall give you a taste—a mere sip—of the power I have inherited...from Fomalhaut himself."

Loke knew he had to end this in one shot or else he would never be able to last in a fight. He also braced himself. He knew too well, there was no way to win. Still, for Lucy, for Fairy Tail, for his pride, he had to give it everything.

"I'll have to go with that attack." He held his arm up, and light glowed all around him. Immense power swirled his suit coat and made his hair stand on end. His whole body became encompassed in a brilliant yellow glow. "O Regulus, grant me your strength."

"Do you still have to pray to him?" Haftorang asked in amusement.

Loke looked forward, and his eyes flashed golden and green. He raised his hand, which began to burn fiery red and orange. Then he shouted, "Regulus Solar Flare!" He threw his fist forward as if to punch. With a shout, all of his energy went into the blow. A solid golden beam shot out and pierced Haftorang through the torso. The fishman stumbled back and looked down at the beam.

"Oooh, this one?"

"I once swore I'd never use this attack again," Loke growled. "You're making me break a promise." His eyes glowed, and behind him one could almost see the image of a lion outlined in energy. "Regulus...Supernova!"

Light filled Haftorang's entire body, shooting out his nose, searing his eyes, cracking his bluish skin apart. His mouth opened and laughed, and every time it opened, beams of light shot out.

"Yes, Supernova! The most brutal attack!" the Fish urged. "Destroy thine enemies with all thy might, my king!"

Loke gritted and held on as all the energy he had, including everything Virgo had given him, went into that single attack. Light exploded from Haftorang's body, and Loke shouted as he felt the drain hit him hard. Exhausted, he collapsed to his knees, breathing hard. Pain hit his chest again and throbbed all through his body. He grabbed his heart and cried out in agony. His face fell to the ground as he gasped and panted. He felt drained, utterly used up.

"Was that...really Supernova?"

Haftorang pinched off a sizzling burn to his scant clothes. "There was a time when armies trembled at the word Supernova, the most fatal blow of the heavens, an attack that could destroy a planet. But
that...that doesn't even compare to your weakest. Is this really the level of your strength now, Leo? Has the king of old fallen this far? Granted, you're surely weakened from living out here for so long, but...that's not the power of Regulus-s-s-s." He frowned and shook his head, truly disappointed. "It's a fraction, a mere chip which you inherited. It is the equivalent of a seasoned samurai flicking a child with his finger."

Loke's head fell to the dirt with tears of shock streaming down his face. He punched the ground and growled, "Dammit!"

"Poor Lion," Haftorang sighed in pity. "It hurts me to see you like this-s-s. Put aside your pride for once and admit defeat."

Loke gritted his teeth. "Defeat?" He forced himself up, rested on his knees to catch his breath, and finally stood unsteadily on his feet. His eyes narrowed at the fishman. "Lucy is my master, but more than that, she is my friend, my lover, and she will be the mother of my son. There is no way in Heaven or Hell that I can give up on pride like that!"

Haftorang stared at him sadly for a moment, waiting, hoping he would feel his own weakness and change his mind, or at least collapse in exhaustion so it could be over. However, Loke remained firm, his feet set apart to keep steady, although he still panted hard at the effort it took. He felt like he could not even raise his arm to fight, but he was not about to fall to his knees again.

"So be it," Haftorang sighed. "For what it's worth...I'm sorry. I'll go gentle. Mistress-s-s," he shouted over.

"Art thou finally going to fight?"

"Aye."

"Ehhh?" Happy gawked in surprise, only to start drooling again.

"I see. Then I shall give thee room."

"Oh no you don't!" Natsu growled, but the woman vanished in a bolt of lightning. "Huh? Where did she go? Hey, come back and fight me! I'm just getting fired up."

Haftorang began to glow with magical power. "I don't need to pray for Fomalhaut to grant me strength," he explained.

His mouth grinned huge. The ring on his lower lip glowed greenish-blue and made him too bright to see. Loke shielded his eyes as it appeared that the Fish had turned into pure aqua light. A reverberating voice of immense power boomed out.

"I am Fomalhaut!"

Loke paled and took a terrified step back. "Oh no... Everybody, run!"

It was too late. "Fomalhaut...Flick!"

Loke was glad for one thing. He barely felt it. There was a gush of power too intense for his nerves to begin to comprehend, then it all ended in peaceful sleep.

End of Chapter 10
Leviathan - Biblical sea monster, referred to as a dragon.

Yes, Virgo totally ripped off Sailor Moon's "oshiokiyo," or in English "I'll punish you." It was too tempting!

The Solar Flare/Supernova combo is mentioned in the prequel, "Ephemeral Sakura, Eternal Love."

In case I'm not writing clearly, Regulus is called the Lion's Heart. Kefira wants the Key to the Heart of the Lion. Haftorang says "where your heart once was." Loke keeps grabbing his chest. This is all relevant and related.

Extra

Many readers want to know where I'm getting all this about the Royal Stars. If you don't care, skip this. I won't be sad.

In Persian mythology, the Royal Stars marked the four compass points (North, South, East, West) and each came into prominence during the four seasons (Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter). In Persia, they had different names.

Aldebaran (Tascheter) in Taurus - vernal equinox, Watcher of the East
Regulus (Venant) in Leo - summer solstice, Watcher of the North
Antares (Satevis) in Scorpio - autumnal equinox, Watcher of the West
Fomalhaut (Haftorang) in Piscis Austrinus - winter solstice, Watcher of the South

There is confusion on Fomalhaut and Regulus being Watchers of the North or South. Persians associated the stars with their given directions—Fomalhaut to the South, Regulus to the North. Due to their respective seasonal/directional associations, many modern astrologists flip them. I prefer original beliefs to contemporary reinterpretations. Fomalhaut is in the southern sky, so it's the Southern Watcher.

The Royal Stars were known as Guardians of the Heavens, Nobles of the Sky, Watchers of the Directions, the Shining Ones, Lords of the Stars. In early mystical Hebrew sects, they were the Irin, a high order of angels. The Book of Enoch calls them the Four Archangels: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Phanuel. Some ancient cultures identified them as horsemen, the same Four Horsemen which likely inspired Revelations. Wiccans know them as Lords of the Watchtowers who guard the cardinal points and escort souls to the next realm. Neopagans evoke the names of these four stars in the "Watchtower Call." In short, throughout Human history, they've been pretty damn important.

Fomalhaut, "Mouth of the Fish." Being a bright star in an otherwise undistinguished section of the southern sky, it was called the "Solitary One" and used in ancient navigation. It was seen as the archangel Gabriel "who presides over all that is powerful"
It was associated with the Persian god Zal and believed to bestow charisma and engender the test of remaining true to one's ideals (Haftorang said that in this chapter). For Egyptians, he was the infamous Nile fish who swallowed the phallus of Osiris.

**Aldebaran**, Eye of the Bull, also known as Buddha's Star and God's Eye. The Book of Enoch identifies it with the angel Phanuel. Aldebaran was equated with the Persian god of light, endowed integrity, and engender the test of honor. Egyptians saw Taurus as the Apis Bull, the incarnation of Osiris.

**Antares**, Heart of the Scorpion. It was associated with the archangel Raphael. To Persians, it conveyed passion and the test of addiction to intensity, was one of the four gateways into the underworld, and represented the Persian god of the dead. It also represented the Egyptian scorpion goddess Selkit and the symbol of Isis in the pyramid ceremonials.

**Regulus**, Heart of the Lion, Latin for "Little King," Persia's "King Star," King of the Celestial Sphere, Regulator of Heaven, the "Kingly One," known in ancient Babylon as simply Sharru, the King! It's used in astrology to predict the future of nobility and the rise and fall of nations. It's associated with the "princely" archangel Michael. Regulus was equated with the mythical Persian king Feridun and is said to bestow success, power of position, and the test of withholding revenge. Egyptians believed the world began when the Sun rose in Leo.

Not impressed enough? It's theorized that a convergence of Jupiter (The God Planet), Venus (The Heavenly Woman), and Regulus (The King Star) was the bright **Star of Bethlehem** the three Magi followed at the time of Jesus' birth. The years 3-2 BCE had a rare series of convergences which occurred in both Virgo the "Virgin" and Leo the "Lion" (or Judean Lion). Google "The Birth of Christ Recalculated."

In my mythology, the constellations which contained Royal Stars once got their strength from them, but they're now weakened (explained later). Loke's blue ring is a fraction of Regulus' true power. That's why Haftorang is disappointed in Loke's attack.
Lucy sat in her gloomy, barred cell listening hard. She heard shouts she knew well.

"Fire Dragon's..."

"Ice-Make..."

"Solid Script..."

"Sky Dragon's..."

"Requip..."

"Iron Dragon's..."

And then...silence. It was not even a massive explosion like how most Fairy Tail fights end. Shouting and then...nothing. She had a very bad feeling about it, but she refused to believe Natsu, Gray, and Erza combined could ever be defeated.

"Gray?" she asked in waning hope. "Gajeel?"

No one answered, and the steps did not hurry at her call. Finally she saw blue-gray scales. Her heart began to sink, and when he got into the waning light she felt her whole world shatter. Lucy dropped to her knees with tears already forming in her frightened brown eyes.

Haftorang came forward and saw her collapsed, watching him, unable even to scream or gasp. His massive mouth tugged down into a pout. He waved a magical key over the lock of her cell and entered.

Lucy could only watch as the fishman carried Loke in his fin-like arms. The Lion's tailored suit was torn and dirty. He had lost his sunglasses. His fluffy orange mane was tangled with dirt and plant debris. He looked as pale as a corpse, and his mouth hung open as his head wobbled loosely against the Southern Fish's scaly body. Lucy covered her mouth, fearing the worst.

Haftorang knelt by the cot and gently laid Loke down. He even straightened his suit coat and brushed back some locks of hair with his translucent fins.

"He has only minor injuries-s-s," he assured her. "However, his spirit is very weak. The attack he made likely reduced his life by months-s-s."
He pulled forward a satchel he wore around his shoulder. From inside he pulled out a mug, a pouch, and a flask of water. He sprinkled some glittery powder from the pouch into the mug, then poured water into it. He took a spoon and gave it a quick stir.

"Tea from the Spirit World. It'll help him regain strength. Get him to drink it."

Lucy still felt like she could not stand up. The lack of food gnawed at her. She scooted across the dungeon floor, took the mug, carefully lifted Loke's head, and dribbled a little tea into his mouth. He moaned, swallowed, but did not wake up.

"What about the others?" she whispered as she worked on him.

"Stunned only. I truly did try to produce the least amount of energy. They will awaken soon. Mistress Kefira is an honorable woman. I interrupted her battle, so she won't strike them at the disadvantage I alone created. She shall continue to fight them fairly as soon as they regain consciousness-s-s. I merely wanted to get my old friend away from the rest of the fighting so he wouldn't get hurt."

Sure enough, somewhere high above her head, Lucy heard Natsu shout "Fire Dragon's Roar!"

"She let them sleep it off?" Lucy asked in shock. "She didn't kill them while they were down?" That was not at all like most villains she knew who would have at least tied them up, if not outright killed them.

"Is that how warriors do battle these days? 'Tis a barbaric way to fight. Mistress Kefira comes from a time when battle was about honor."

"From a time?" she repeated. "Just how old is she? Shaman-Queen of Kohinur...but they've been a Republic for four hundred years."

"Indeed, but as the royal family was never officially disbanded, Mistress Kefira still holds her title, as she has for centuries-s-s."

Lucy frowned. She eased Loke's head down and set the mug aside. "I can tell she's not a Celestial Spirit, yet I sense something Spirit-like in her. What is she?"

Haftorang sighed a long hiss. "You can ask Leo when he awakens-s-s. I must witness my mistress's fight." He rose, left the cell, relocked it, and walked down the long corridor.

"Don't I get any food?" Lucy shouted at him. "Sheesh! I'm starving here." She pouted, then looked down at her patient. "Silly Lion! I bet you and Natsu rushed in and got blown away first." She kissed his forehead. "Thank you."

"Best diet ever," she laughed and sniffled as she stroked back his orange hair.

"I'm sorry I lost to him."

"It's fine," she hushed. "Just rest." She dreaded Haftorang's warning that Loke's fight had taken months off of his already slipping life.

Loke tensed up and gritted his teeth hard to keep himself from shouting. Suddenly, his body shimmered in a viscous green wave. Lucy covered her mouth as she helplessly watched. She had
seen that odd appearance before...as Loke was fading away in front of Karen's grave.

"Please, no...no," she whispered.

"I won't...leave...you," he gritted. By sheer willpower, Loke fought through his pain.

Just when he thought he could control it, a jolting spike hit his chest. He gasped and grabbed at his left side, eyes wide as the pain hit too hard. His body arched and his legs kicked at the cot to fight through the agony. Lucy could not bear to watch. She cried, wanting to hold him, but unsure if keeping him was the best thing for Loke right then. His groans pierced her heart with guilt.

"Just go," she sobbed. "It's too hard for a Celestial Spirit to heal in the Human World. You'll die for real. I can't stand watching you in this much pain. I don't want you to suffer anymore because of me. Just...go back."

Lucy hesitated a little. "Again?"

Loke looked stunned and terrified for a moment. He turned his head away from her in shame.

Lucy felt a chill prickle her arms. "This...happened before. This situation. With you."

She looked down at her massive belly. She felt tears already forming in her eyes. She shook her head, refusing to believe her fears, yet it made sense. She saw how the pieces fit, creating a picture she did not want to see, yet she could not turn her eyes away.

"Loke, were you...Zeref's father?"

He did not move for a long time. Neither one could speak. High above them, they heard an explosion. Dust rained down on them, and a few rocks crumbled. Lucy put her hand over the teacup to keep the dirt out. Then all was quiet and awkward.

"Her name was Naomi," Loke finally began, still looking at the wall and lost in thoughts of the past. "She lived in the Kingdom of Kohinur four hundred years ago, a Celestial Spirit mage under the Shaman-Queen Kefira."

"That crazy bitch?" Lucy asked.

"So you met her," he muttered. "Kefira and I...were lovers," he admitted hesitantly. "Back then, although Naomi owned my Gold Key, Queen Kefira had more control over me."

"Does this have to do with the Key to the Heart of the Lion?"

He looked over in horror. "She told you?" he cried out, and his face paled even more. "Oh shit, she doesn't have it, does she?"

"No, but she wants it. She thought I had it. What is it?"

He looked away again, but for a brief moment Lucy saw relief in his face. "Something so powerful, it was removed from existence...or it was supposed to be. I only hid it, just in case a time came when I really needed it. The Royal Stars..." His face pained over. "In summary, the Key to the Heart of the Lion is a way to give me immense power, but the owner of the key has total control over me. Queen
Kefira had that sort of control and made me into her lover. I really did love her for a time, back when she was regal and idealistic, ruling a peaceful land with happy citizens. Then, Naomi showed up.

"She was a quiet girl, not terribly strong, but powerful enough to wield me. Just me. My Gold Key had been in her family for generations, a clan of legendary Celestial Spirit mages, so it was expected that she'd inherit it. I didn't think much of her at first. She was so frail, many other mages teased her. After all, how could such a tiny girl wield the most powerful Zodiac Spirit?

"She relied so much on me, but I liked caring for her," he admitted with a nostalgic smile. "I felt sorry for her, facing so much expectation, not only from her clan and Queen Kefira, but from the whole kingdom. Simply owning a Gold Key made her quite a celebrity, but she dreamed of a simple life away from fighting. Even within the queen's court, many people wanted the Lion's Key and tried to kill her. I first learned to break through my gate so I could be by her side whenever I sensed she was in trouble.

"Eventually, I began spending more time with Naomi, simply to make sure she wasn't stabbed in a corridor. I listened to her dreams, strolled and dined with her, laughed as we watched bards put on plays. Love grew gradually, not something spontaneous, but I think that slowness made it stronger. I remember the day I kissed her. It...felt right. Although she worked under Queen Kefira, and although I was deemed her favorite, we...we married in secret," he whispered. "I helped her to escape Kefira's domain, and we headed west together. We were free, except Kefira kept using my other key to call me to her. I couldn't disobey her summons. I had enough control of my own to turn her down and stay faithful to Naomi. I also wouldn't give in to her threats. No matter how Kefira demanded to know where the Gold Key went—she didn't care about Naomi, only the key—I wouldn't tell her. One day, she struck me. Because of that, I declared our contract broken."

"Just because she hit you? But then with you, Aries, and Karen, why couldn't..."

"Because back then I was king," he yelled in anguish. She saw that admitting this hidden past agonized him. "I...Regulus was the leader of the Royal Stars, the King Star, and through his power, I was...I was the King of the Spirit World."

Lucy covered her mouth. Questions began to flood her mind. How could a single star grant a person that much power? Why was Loke not king anymore?

"It's complicated," he sighed, "but I sacrificed my heart." He squeezed over his chest again. "I gave up the power of Regulus so I could free myself from Queen Kefira and be with Naomi. It's a long and painful story, but suffice it to say I was broken, the Lion's teeth were shattered, his roar was silenced. I was left a pathetic shell of the Lion I once was. Without my power, I had no choice but to abdicate, and the current Spirit King took over at that time."

"You once told me," Lucy whispered, "without the Heart, the Lion can't roar."

"I have only a fraction of that Heart now," he said, rubbing over his blue ring. "Compared to back then, my roar is a squeak from a newborn kitten."

"You gave that up...for her?"

"Not just her. There were numerous reasons. In fact, I had stubbornly held out on the Royal Stars' request to leave. I don't think any of us constellations liked it, but my agreement made it final. I not only weakened myself, but all four of us: Piscis Austrinus, Taurus, Scorpio...it hurt Scorpio worse than it hurt me. He doesn't even remember being attuned to the Royal Stars. He repressed it all so he could live on. I'm just a selfish bastard."
"I'm sure you had good reasons."

"Oh, I did. Anyway, four years passed in a blissful dream. I focused everything on being happy with Naomi, spending as much time as possible in the Human World to avoid the upheaval in my own world. I built up a tolerance to minimize the time I had to spend away from her. We fought enemies sometimes. She even gained Aries in one battle, but mostly we just tried to live quietly.

"One day, she came to me saying she was pregnant. It shouldn't have been possible. I thought she must have cheated on me. Then I sensed the life in her, just as I can sense this little guy," he smiled, caressing her belly and giving it a light kiss. "Celestial Spirits can sense one another, and I knew...that tiny life was mine. My son!

"I was...immensely happy," he said, as if that was an understatement. "I returned home in such high spirits, so proud that I couldn't wait to tell all the Zodiacs. Hell, I wanted to tell every Spirit of every sort! They were all happy to see me, their former king, moving on and enjoying life. We were celebrating, singing, laughing...but then, so suddenly that even now it gives me chills, judgment came down. The Spirit King learned about the baby. It wasn't against any rules, but...but rules were changing quickly under him."

Loke's eyes gleamed in hatred for a moment. Lucy tried to imagine it. There he was, the King of the Heavens a mere four year prior, and suddenly being lorded over by a new king. It must have crushed his pride and left him bitter.

"He said he had a premonition, but I thought it was pure spite. He just wanted to keep me where he could see me, fearing I might fight against him. I was forced to stay in the Spirit World as punishment and barely escaped a death sentence. I tried so hard to get any information. Naomi had Aries, but it seemed there was also a rule that no one could tell me anything. One day, Aries told me that the baby was born. She was punished for telling me, but it made me so happy. And sad. I wanted to go to them. I wanted...so badly...to be there for her, to hold my son," he sobbed with a hiccup. "But I couldn't leave. I almost killed myself trying to escape. I would've rather been exiled than forced apart like that."

Loke wiped his eyes and refused to look at her and show Lucy his weakness. She sat on her heels, her eyes misty at the thought of how he had kept this tremendous pain buried for so long.

"I never saw Naomi again," he whispered. "I was in there...I don't know how long. Years. Then it happened so suddenly. I was summoned, and much to my surprise, I could leave. I was back in the Human World, but it was a different master. His name was Cheveyo. You might have heard of him."

"The Cheveyo?" Lucy asked in shock. "The strongest Celestial Spirit mage ever to have existed?"

"That's the guy."

"I guess that makes sense," she realized. "History books say he was the only celestial summoner to collect all twelve Zodiac Spirit Keys."

"Exactly. He had only recently won my key through combat and didn't have time to make a contract. The battle was already in progress, and he needed my help, right then, right away."

"The Battle of Kohinur Keep," Lucy whispered in awe. "I read about that in my studies on Cheveyo. It was when he obtained the twelfth Gold Key. That was you?" she gawked. Suddenly, Loke seemed much older than she had yet realized.

"Yep. I demanded to know what happened to Naomi. He didn't know, he had never met her, so I
told him I would help him that day, without an official contract, so long as our contract could not be agreed upon until he researched what happened. Cheveyo was an honorable mage, and after the fight, he did. That was when I learned...Naomi...

"He didn't know how," Loke forcefully continued despite his throat being tense and hurting. "No one really knows how. She went on a mission, and she never returned."

Three deep breaths shoved that pain back into the empty chamber of his heart where he had hidden it for centuries, and by the third breath his tears stopped. Anger instead took the place of grief.

"Cheveyo only knew who he took the Lion's Key from: Queen Kefira! Apparently she managed to hunt Naomi down and...and since I wasn't there..." He closed his eyes tightly. "Kefira was also unable to open the gate. When she was defeated, Cheveyo got the key. He was immensely powerful, enough to break the spirit barriers that had been placed on my cell. That power amplified my own diminished abilities. In all of history, Cheveyo was the only mage ever to have been able to summon all twelve Zodiac Spirits at the same time and keep us out for a whole day."

"What!" Lucy shouted. "I never read about that." She vividly recalled when she called out all of her Spirit Keys at once, five Gold and four Silver. It lasted only a few seconds and nearly killed her. To summon all twelve for a whole day...

"He was insanely powerful, eventually helped to establish the Ten Wizard Saints, but he wasn't the best owner. Personally, I didn't like him, but I respected him. With me, he finally had all twelve Gold Keys." Loke smiled distantly. "It was the only time I ever got to see my eleven other comrades as they appear in the Human World. All of us, plus countless Silver Keys, and he could summon us all at once as if it was nothing!

"That was when I learned who we were fighting. It wasn't just Cheveyo or his guild. It was a huge force, mages from all around the world. History came to call it the Great Gathering. They united for one mage, one insanely powerful, evil dark wizard. I heard the name of this enemy: Zeref! I only knew that name because of the time Aries told me. My son...Zeref!"

"That must have been hard," Lucy realized.

He nodded sadly. "For the sake of my new master, I was forced to fight him. I was there when Zeref was captured. I helped. I saw him for the first time. My son...this twisted dark thing possessed by Evil itself. And he knew me. He saw me and called out to me. He said his mother told him about me. And then...he smiled. He looked truly happy. He said he was glad to meet me at last. That was when they took him away. We were told he was sealed along with all his followers, including Queen Kefira and Piscis Austrinus, the only Celestial Spirit who sided with him."

Loke closed his eyes as tears dribbled out.

"He was my son! I wonder sometimes, if I could've been there, helped to raise him, would he have turned out better? Would he have fallen so far if he had a father to guide him? I don't know. I just don't know! But...but I really wish...I pray that he wasn't always like that. I pray that while Naomi was alive he was a good child, a faithful and helpful son. I hope...I hope she died proud of him."

Lucy suddenly threw herself on top of him. Loke was stunned. He had been certain she would hate
him for not telling her from the beginning. His face cracked into a smile, and he grabbed her tight to him.

"I'm so sorry, Lucy. I'm sorry I'm not strong enough to defeat Haftorang and get you out of here. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Naomi and Zeref. I'm sorry you have to go through the same horrible stuff she did. That's why I can't leave your side. I can't let you suffer loneliness like that. I can't let it happen again!"

"Naomi," she sobbed, "probably knew. If she loved you, she knew you're the most loyal person ever to have existed. You're Leo the Lion, after all. You don't run from trouble, you fight! Even if you know it's futile, you fight. If she was married to you for four years, she would've known that. I bet she told Zeref how wonderful of a man you were. I bet he was immensely proud of you!" She squeezed him tighter as tears choked her. "You are going to make the best father in the world! Our son is going to be so proud of you. And I'm going to raise him to be a good man. I swear," she shouted as the dungeon rocked again with explosions above. "I swear I'm going to raise him to be someone you can take pride in."

Loke was speechless for a long time. Finally, he smiled gently and stroked her disheveled blonde hair. "And you are going to make the best mother in the world. With two parents like us, our kid will not only be so handsome he'll have to fight off the girls, but he's going to be the luckiest kid ever." The dungeon shook again, and more rocks fell with a clatter. "And we'll be lucky if they don't bring the whole damn fort down on top of us."

High above, they heard Erza shout, "Natsu, stop before you bring the whole thing down!"

Lucy had to laugh and sniff away any worries. "Seems Erza's concerned about it, too."

Loke looked over at her, searching the emotions on her face. "Are you angry with me?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry you had to go through that. You'll have to tell me one day how you stopped being king."

"A story I don't want to tell when I just got my ass handed to me by another member of the Royal Stars."

She gave him the mug of tea. "Then drink up before rocks fly into your cup. And Loke," she smiled, "thanks for coming after me even when you're weak."

He tipped his head to her. "My pride demanded it."

**End of Chapter 11**

Chapter End Notes

*Cheveyo - Native American Hopi for "spirit warrior." Appropriate name, no?*

*SPOILER* - In Chapter 250, we learn the "Zeref Key of Revival" was a pretense... Damn... There went a whole plot line I had planned. Thankfully, I hadn't written more than brief notes on "Zeref's Key." So everyone who asked "where the heck did you get that Zeref was a Spirit," that's what I was aiming after. Up until this chapter, we've heard about "Zeref's Key" and I guess my ability to read Hiro Mashima's mind is about
as good as my ability to use telepathic hypnosis to convince him to make Loke the new main character. The fact that Zeref never "slept" (was he even sealed?) made me rush back to this chapter and rewrite parts. Loke now says "We were told he was sealed" since that was the rumor. I may make minor changes like this as new twists unravel. Hiro-sensei, why do you do this to meeeeee? T_T

Ahem...this chapter is what many of you have been waiting for. Lots of questions answered, only to bring up more. Just what were the Royal Stars? Why did they leave? What were the circumstances that led to Leo stepping down? Why did Piscis Austrinus (Hafororang) side with Zeref? Will Natsu destroy everything around him before Lucy and Loke can escape? I think most of you already guessed about Zeref. I must be terrible at surprising my audience.

=^..^= "You surprise me, Rhov."

"Really, Happy? I do?" ^_^

"Aye! I'm surprised people are still reading this after two boring lectures on stars."

"Grrr...I'm surprised you're getting tuna tonight."

=^O.O^= "I mean, I'm surprised MORE people aren't reading it. They should tell their friends and...and..."

"Uh-huh. Don't worry, after I finish writing this story, I'll organize these footnotes better."

"You mean you think people will read this even after you stop updating? Aren't you being optimistic, Rhov?"

"Urusai, baka neko!"
"A lion sleeps in the heart of every brave man." - Turkish Proverb

Lucy had Loke lying in her lap as she sat on the tiny prison cot and languidly brushed back his bushy bangs. He slept with his hands folded together over his chest, a contented smile on his face, as a low purr of happiness rumbled deep in his chest. She strained to listen above. The fight was still raging. It felt like hours had passed, and she had long ago given up moaning about being hungry.

Suddenly, she heard rapid footsteps approaching. "Lucy?" came a shout.

Loke woke up, and Lucy scrambled off the cot. She felt miserably weak, her legs refused to work, and she collapsed into a pile on the floor.

Loke looked over the edge of the cot in worry. "Lucy? Are you okay?"

She proudly refused to give in to her weariness and pulled herself across the floor to the bars. "Gray?" she called, yet her voice was too weak to shout without quavering. Her lips felt dry and cracked, like days had passed without a sip of water. "We're down here."

More stomping, and finally she saw the raven-haired mage. She laughed and wept as if she had not seen him in months. He skidded to a stop when he saw her and took a step back.

"Shit!" he muttered. Lucy looked like a skeleton. Her arm bones showed through translucent skin, her face was gaunt with dark circles under her eyes, and much to his horror, even her boobs had shrunk. He shook his head to overcome the shock. "No time. Natsu and Gajeel are taking on the queenie chick. We got rid of the demons finally. Erza, Levy, and Wendy managed to distract the fish-head so I could sneak down."

"All of you came?" she asked in shock and happiness.

"More, but most are beaten too badly. Your maid Spirit was hit hard and vanished."

Lucy dropped her head. "Poor Virgo. Did I leave her out?"

There was a massive boom above, and the fortress rumbled hard enough to knock Gray off his feet. Part of the ceiling caved in, and Lucy covered her head as rocks fell.

"Ice-Make: Shield!" An umbrella of ice blocked the small cave-in from crushing Lucy and Loke. "Stupid Natsu! Where are the keys to this place?"

"Haftorang has them. The Fish."

"Damn! Okay, I'm gonna try something." Gray went to the lock and put one hand over it. A stream of ice filled the empty areas of the lock and formed around the mechanisms inside. He twisted it, but it would not move.

"It's a magical lock," Lucy told him.
"That makes things harder. Get back a little." He grabbed two bars. "Freeze!" Ice spread from his hands all over the metal bars until they crackled. Then Gray took a step back and kicked the bars hard. Three kicks and they shattered. "Can you fit through?"

"I'm too big, but Loke can. Come on, try to get up." Lucy pulled on the Lion Spirit, but Loke fell in a cry of pain.

"I'll have to carry both of you out of here, won't I?" Gray realized, calculating if he could sneak in twice.

"Get Lucy," Loke insisted, straining to sit up. "She's far worse off than I am."

"No I'm not. I'm just a bit hungry."

Both Loke and Gray looked sadly at how horrifically starved she appeared to be.

"Right, I'll get you both. Ice-Make: Sled!" A shimmering sled of ice took shape. "Ice-Make: Floor!" The floor of the fort froze over, creating a long blue and white ice ramp all the way down the corridor for the sled to ride upon. "Let me get a couple more bars busted."

While he froze the metal bars, the fort rumbled again. A rock fell and hit Lucy on the head before Loke could grab her and shield her with his body.

"You know," she laughed weakly. "I don't use my Celestial Spirits as shields."

"This is the Shield of Love," he declared, giving her a flirtatious smile.

She blushed and looked aside in embarrassment. "Geez! What are you talking about?"

The frozen bars shattered, and Gray managed to step through. "Lucy, you're first." He lifted her into his arms and was shocked by how little she weighed, even with a heavily-pregnant belly. He cautiously stepping over fallen rocks, through the broken metal bars, and gently placed Lucy onto the seat of the sled. He removed his white jacket and laid it on the icy seat. "Sorry if it's cold." Then he turned to get Loke.

The fort seemed to tilt, and bits of the ceiling collapsed. Lucy screamed, and Gray barely had time to form a shield over them both.

"Natsu, stop it!" Gray hollered at the ceiling.

"Loke!" Lucy shrieked.

Inside the dungeon cell, the ceiling had crumbled, burying Loke from the waist down. The Spirit strained to pull himself out, but he was trapped. Gray cursed under his breath and ran forward. Before he could reach the bars, the building creaked and crumbled a little more. Gray barely managed to jump away before some rocks fell and shattered on the ground in front of him, blocking his path.

"Get her out," Loke yelled. "I'll work on freeing my legs, just get her to safety."

"I'm not leaving you," Gray said stubbornly. As he stomped forward, more ceiling fell.

"Gray," Loke barked with an edge of desperation. His face softened, and his emotions slowly calmed down. With levelheaded determination, he told the ice mage, "I'm leaving the safety of my child into your hands. Please, Gray, get her somewhere safe."
Gray paused in bitter debate, but another rumble made up his mind. "Got it. I'll be right back. Try to get some of those rocks off of you."

"Loke," Lucy protested.

He smiled sadly. "I'll see you soon, Leonita."

"No!"

Gray positioned himself behind the sled and gave it a hard push. He jumped onto the back and steered as it slid down the icy pathway, whirling up stairs and through corridors. Lucy looked behind her and shouted for Loke, but she could no longer see him.

"What a mess," he muttered to himself. "Can't even feel my legs."

Loke watched until they were out of sight. Grimly, he looked down at the rubble that had trapped him. He threw off a few stones, but quickly gave up with a shake of his head.

"Right now, Regulus, I really wish you could..." However, he could not bring himself to say it.

A pain struck through his chest. Loke felt himself wavering again. He held out his hand and saw the spirit energy going in and out of existence.

"Dammit," he sneered angrily. He looked at the icy ramp again. "Lucy..." He wished he could call her back, see her just one more time, and give her a proper kiss goodbye. He sighed in misery. "I am so...so sorry!"

Slowly, Loke did something he had not done in centuries. He removed his ring! He held the silver band up to a stream of sunlight that pierced the dusty dungeon darkness and watched how the blue stone gleamed. It brought a weak smile to his pale, drained face. Then, once more, he looked at where Gray had swept Lucy away.

"Take care of her, Gray," he whispered. Then he squeezed the ring between his fingers and closed his eyes as a tear dripped down. "Lucy...sayonara."

Lucy thought she would get sick on Gray's sled. Why did his ramp have to make such dangerous turns? This was worse than the roller coaster Levy once forced her to ride at the Magnolia Harvest Festival. She was fairly certain one of the rules was *No Pregnant Women!*

"Just hang on a little longer," Gray urged, straining to focus the sled to minimize the ride's effects.

In no time, their sled reached the exit of the fort and slid out into the sunshine. Erza and Wendy were just about to come in.

"That fish took off, and the woman drew Natsu and Gajeel away from the fort," Erza explained.


"Yikes!" Wendy yelped. "Lucy? Is that you?"
"What do you mean?" the skeletal woman asked in confusion.

Erza grabbed Lucy up into her arms. The blonde yelled *ouch* as the plate armor hit her protruding bones hard.

"We'll take her," Erza decided. "You get..."

Suddenly, the stone fort crumbled. Erza leaped away fast with Lucy screaming. Charle swooped in and grabbed up Wendy, but Gray was caught in the rubble.

"Lucy! Keys!" Wendy was up in the air now, but she threw the ring of Spirit Keys down to Lucy. She grabbed one fast.

"Open the Gate of the Maiden! Virgo!" The pink-haired maid reappeared. "Get Gray, hurry!"

"Yes, Princess," Virgo dived into the dirt, dug a fast hole, and suddenly Gray was sucked down into the ground with a yelp. When the Maiden reappeared beside Lucy, Gray was in her arms...and stark naked.

"How did you lose your clothes like that?" screamed Lucy.

"I don't know," he snapped. "Ask your Celestial Spirit."

"Will I be punished?" asked Virgo.

"Later. Can you dig Loke out?"

"Not without knowing precisely where Brother is located. Otherwise, I may damage him worse."

Lucy paused in a small tremble. "Don't you sense him? I thought Celestial Spirits can sense one another."

"I'm sorry, Princess. I don't sense Brother in the ruins."

"No...oh please, no," she whispered and looked at the settling dust. "Nooo!" She tried to get out of Erza's arms and run to the fallen fort, but she only got two steps before collapsing. "I...I can't even walk. I can't...Loke!"

Gray scrambled to the rubble. "Loke," he shouted. "Oi, Loke!" He listened, but the rocks were still settling. "Come on, Loke, give us a shout. Where the hell are you?"

"Loke!" barked Erza. "He couldn't have...no, he wouldn't get defeated that easily. He has to be safe." In determination, she turned to Virgo. "Go find him!"

"I'm sorry, Warrior Queen, but his presence is not there. Will I be punished?"

Wendy began to sniffle. "No...he can't be..."

"You damn feline bastard," Gray yelled furiously. "You can't vanish now. Remember what you told me? You said you can't leave her! Just now, you said you'd see her soon. Are you a liar?"

"Gray," Erza pouted with tears coming to her eyes.

"You left me in charge of your child. *How dare you without asking my permission!*" screamed Gray. "Natsu and I are competing for that role. You get your ass right back here and pick one of us properly. Loke! Pl-...please!" he begged, looking around helplessly. "She doesn't need us, she needs..."
you! She...needs you, dammit!" His head fell as grief settled in, but not before a spike of anger shot through him like a flame through ice. "You can't leave her, you sonuvabitch!"

Wendy sobbed miserably. "Gray, stop."

Tears streamed down his face as his whole body shook in grief. The soft sound of Lucy's sobs behind him made his blood boil in rage.

Suddenly, Gray roared to the sky, a loud and reverberating shout, animalistic, fraught with emotion. It was unlike anything they had ever heard from him, almost as if the Spirit of the Lion had now passed on to him. Lucy looked up in shock at the sound. It rumbled the ground and made the leaves quiver. Then the roar faded, and it was a normal human's cry of frustration. Gray fell to his knees and stared up to the heavens.

"Dammit!" he yelled and punched the ground so hard, the dirt cracked around his fist.

"Loke..." With that, Lucy suddenly passed out.

Charle set Wendy down beside Lucy. The girl immediately got to work, but she frowned at the condition of her patient.

"She's not well at all. I can keep her alive, but she needs emergency attention."

Gray stared as the last bits of his icy path melted away. "I wasn't quick enough," he whispered. "If I had broken the bars faster...if I had gotten them out before the ceiling fell... Dammit, I wasn't fast enough!"

Amidst this, Natsu strolled forward. "Yo! That queenie chick disappeared again. Hey, you got Lucy out. Awesome! Who broke the fort?"

Gray's eyes narrowed menacingly. "You did," he whispered.

Natsu did not quite catch it and hummed questioningly.

"You damn flame-brained bastard, never thinking, always going overboard even at the cost of your friends," he sneered. "It's your fault. It's all..." he screamed, getting his magic circle ready, "...your fault! Ice-Make: Arrows!" A dozen icy arrows shot at Natsu, and one grazed him across the leg.

"Oi! What's wrong?" he shouted in surprise.

Gray punched his fist into his hand, and a glowing circle formed. "Ice-Make: Geyser!" He slapped both hands onto the dirt, and a tower of ice shot up from the weeded ground. Natsu just barely managed to leap out of its way.

"Bastard," Natsu yelled, getting angry now. "Lucy's out, and she's fine, so what's your problem?"

"But Loke..." Gray's magic faltered.

"Loke?" Finally, Natsu saw Erza's grimace and Wendy's tears. He realized what Gray meant, and his face dropped. "No way!" He ran to the pile of shattered stones, grabbed them, and began throwing them aside. "What are you doing standing around crying? We've gotta dig him out."

Gray realized he was right. This was not the time to place blame or fight. He and all the others shouted for Loke and dug through the rubble while Erza carried Lucy in her arms with Wendy following, wiping her tears away and sniffling.
Sayonara - a Japanese farewell used when you do not expect to see the person for a long time...or ever! It's different from the more casual "ja ne" that you would use for friends at the end of a school day, or coworkers you plan to see on Monday morning. Whenever someone says "sayonara," I tear up instantly. This was the hardest chapter to write, and the quickest. I wrote it in less than an hour. I had to get that sad scene out of my head. Then I cried into a pint of mint chocolate ice cream.
Cry in the Rain

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I always like walking in the rain, so no one can see me crying." - Charles Chaplin

Gray made the long walk up a hill to the girl's dormitory. Cold rain had settled over Magnolia, drenching his black hair, and the early November wind whipped his long, white coat. His eyes drooped in weariness, yet they had a gleam of bitter determination. After all, it had been decided that he should be the one to break this news.

As he neared the entrance to Fairy Hills, the building owner, Ruchio, stepped out with a grimace. "Another boy comes to my dorm! Really, you mages are too bold. No wonder half of you don't have girlfriends."

"I need to see Lucy," Gray said quietly, lacking the energy to fight or even banter.

"No boys are allowed..."

"Mother." Chico C. Hammitt stepped up behind Ruchio, looked sedate with her creepy cat hat and even creepier ghosts who hung around her. "He's Lucy's teammate and, apparently, the godfather to her baby."

Hearing those words made Gray look aside in guilt.

"Ah, I see," Ruchio hummed. "Well, I suppose I could grant you the same leniency I gave that Celestial Spirit fellow. You must report to me or Erza before entering the dormitory. Once inside, you are allowed in the lobby, the private library, and Miss Heartfilia's room, but nowhere else! You are only allowed to knock on another girl's door if Lucy specifically requests it or if it is an emergency."

"Yeah, got it," he muttered as he walked past her. "Not like I want to spy on girls like some other perverts I know."

Chico showed him the way to Lucy's door, and he gave a light rap. He listened closely, heard nothing, and knocked again. Really, after walking all this way and mentally preparing himself, just to have her not home...

"C-come in," came a faint voice.

Gray opened the door and saw Wendy pattering forward.

"Lucy is over here," she waved, leading him to the bedroom.

Gray slowly followed. He had always felt at ease in Lucy's old place, crashing there with Natsu or Erza, sometimes sneaking in alone while Lucy was gone. It was like a second home to their team. For some reason, entering this room made him nervous, as if he really was walking into a woman's bedroom. Perhaps it was because part of him realized that, up until a few days ago, this was the bedroom she had shared with Loke.
Lucy laid on the bed, still thin and hooked up to intravenous medicine drips that Wendy monitored. He was glad for one thing: her face looked normal, not the skeleton they had to carry home. Her blonde hair was up in her usual cute style, and she had some pages for her novel on a tablet so she could write in bed.

"Gray," Lucy smiled. Her voice was weak and airy. Even her smile looked like it took real effort to lift.

He saw her Gold and Silver Keys by the bed, and one in particular was separated from the others from recently being used. Gray sadly realized she must have been desperately trying to open the Lion's gate since regaining consciousness.

"You probably already know what I have to say," he muttered.

Her eyes dropped to the Gold Key, and she nodded sadly. "I've tried calling him...I'm not sure how many times. It won't open, no matter how hard I try."

He wondered how often she had used that key since that day. Each failed attempt would have felt like a deeper defeat to her already-pained heart. It made him want to toss those damned keys away so she would stop tormenting herself.

"We thoroughly searched those ruins," he told her. "I led the team directly to that cell you two were in. We left nothing behind, not a single rock."

"He wasn't there," she answered, braced for the news. "If he died, his body would fade away. Same if he merely went to the Spirit World. Either way, he's gone."

Gray hated to see the tears she was trying so hard to hold back. "We found only one thing. Honestly, I don't know how it was left behind, but I'm guessing he left it for a purpose, maybe a message."

Gray reached into his pocket and pulled out a thick silver ring with a blue stone set in it.

"Regulus," Lucy's face pained at seeing it. She took the ring and looked closely at it. It really was a gorgeous shade of blue, deep and mystic. "He was so proud of this ring," she tearfully told Gray. "I never once saw him take it off. I guess this means he's really gone."

Gray looked aside uncomfortably. "If that's all..."

"There's something I need to do," Lucy said over him. "I should have done it right away, but I haven't had the heart to try. I'm a weak coward after all," she laughed tensely. "If you're here with me, I think maybe I can handle it. Please Gray," she smiled tiredly. "Sit for a moment with me...just in case."

He had a feeling he knew what she wanted to try. He walked around the bed and sat at her side.

Lucy picked up her keys and flipped to the one she always kept beside Leo's. "Open the Gate of the Ram! Aries!"

Sitting so close to her with his shoulder brushing against hers, Gray sensed the immense magical power Lucy used in her summons. There was no comparing it to his magic. He had often thought that using a Spirit Key to open a gate seemed weak, and he had to admit that he had thought little of Lucy when they first met, besides the fact that she was a bit cute. He thought calling others to fight your battles was cheating. Besides, what sort of mage got weak after using magic just twice? Sensing how much it took out of her to summon this Gold Zodiac Key impressed him. He thought that if others in the guild could sense Lucy's well of power, they would never call her silly names like
Cosplay Queen and Cheerleader again.

The shy lamb-lady showed up already looking bashful, but she blushed even more when she saw Gray. He wondered why until he looked down. When had he removed his coat and shirt?

"I'm sorry," she began immediately.

"I'm not angry, Aries," Lucy assured. "I need to know: is Loke now in the Spirit World?"

The woolly Celestial Spirit nodded and looked aside with embarrassment. "He's badly injured and will need a long time to heal since he allowed himself to remain in the Human World for so long. I've been tending him all this time. I'm sorry."

"No, I trust you. You two go back a long way."

Aries blushed and nodded. "He has always watched over me, so now I want to repay him. He had one request: to look after you. And I will, I swear. For Leo's sake, I won't let anyone hurt you."

With a hard gulp, Lucy asked the most important question. "Do you know if he'll be able to return?"

Aries quivered at having to answer. "I'm so sorry! I...I don't know. He's being held by the Spirit King on grounds of treason. His judgment is being withheld until he's strong enough to attend trial. However, I've been asking around, and it seems like it won't be good. This isn't the first time he and the Spirit King have had a conflict." Aries bowed deeply. "I'm very sorry. I promise to keep asking, and I'll let all your Celestial Spirits know so any of us can tell you. That's what Leo wants, so that's what I'll do. I want you two to be happy. I love Leo very much, and if being with you makes him happiest, then that's what I'll fight for."

Gray looked aside guiltily. He also loved Lucy, but was he willing to fight for her and Loke to be reunited?

"I appreciate it, Aries, but don't do anything that will get you into trouble. I don't want to lose you as well. When you see him again, tell him I'm feeling much better." Then Lucy closed her gate.

Gray watched her stare ahead emptily. A clock ticked the seconds away. He felt he should say something, but his mind whirled in doubt and guilt.

"At least he's alive," he finally spoke. It was the best he could come up with.

Lucy suddenly fell to the side and into his chest. Gray stiffened as he heard her sobbing. He looked around, but Wendy had left to give Lucy privacy. Uncertainly, Gray put an arm around her. He felt her shivering in emotions she had been suppressing. He realized how brave she had been up until now, smiling when the fear of this happening must have haunted her over the past few months. He pulled her close against him and rested his cheek against her head to let her know she could turn to him.

"I never should've given in to him," she wailed. "I knew romance with a Celestial Spirit is against the rules. I knew! I knew he could get into trouble, and I still...I'm the worst!" she screamed and broke into fresh sobs.

"You were in love," Gray said softly. "People, be they Celestial Spirit or human, do silly things when they're in love. We don't follow logic or rules. We only follow our heart."

Although his warm tone was a comfort, her guilt was still too deep. "What if he dies?" she whispered, dreading to speak such an unlucky thing aloud. "I'd have just as good as killed him."
"No, don't you dare think that," he said sternly, squeezing her closer.

"I'll end up all alone."

"You won't be alone," he promised. "You have me and Natsu and Erza and Levy...the whole guild will be there beside you. No matter what happens, you can turn to any of us. We'll try to get him back. Master can ask other guilds, other celestial summoners, and try to find some way to free him. But Lucy, right now he needs to heal, and so do you." He hugged her tightly and stroked her hair. "Just rest. Let your friends take care of things. We'll get him back for you, I swear. We're not going to abandon him this easily. He's a member of Fairy Tail, and we'll fight for him!"

Would he fight to reunite the two of them?

Yes! To the death!

She felt waves of relief and comfort. "Gray," she sighed, melting into the protectiveness of his arms.

He looked down at her and smiled as he saw the fears drain out. He just wanted the old Lucy back, the Lucy whose only worry was rent money, the Lucy who played the tsukkomi to his and Natsu's boke, the Lucy who was always prying others for juicy information to use in her novel, the Lucy who acted flighty and silly one moment, loyal and daring the next. He wanted that Lucy back because...that was the Lucy he loved!

"Let me take on your fears so you can rest at ease," he whispered into her ear, sending chills down her arms as if he had used his ice magic on her. "Loke left me with the task of caring for you until he comes back." He stroked her face and tilted her chin up so she could see how serious he was. "I will do anything you need of me. Until he returns, I'll do whatever he would have done. I'll clean around the house, cook your meals, be your coach when it's time for the baby. Anything he would've done, I'll do it in his place...and hopefully do it better than he would," he added with a wink.

That made her laugh a little "Thanks, Gray. That's really sweet, but...can you put on some clothes and then hug me?"

"Why?" he smirked, intrigued by her blushing face. "Don't tell me you're tempted just because I have my shirt off."

"Your pants are off, too," she pointed out, "and your...thing...is poking through."

"Huh? Gah! When did that happen?"

As he scrambled to find his clothes, it made her laugh. "Thanks, Gray, really."

He had his shirt only partly on and unbuttoned. He paused in his quest for pants and looked over to her curiously.

"I really do need support. I'm so weak and useless right now."

He came back to her and put his hands on her shoulders to cheer her on. "You aren't useless, Lucy. You're..." He broke off his words and left them hanging awkwardly.

"I'm what?" she asked in a teasing tone.

His blue eyes slowly turned up into hers. "You're beautiful."

Gray suddenly turned and rushed out of her room. Lucy heard a squealing scream from Levy and a
shout of "Why are you naked again?" He hurried back in, grabbed his pants, and ran out again. However, during that brief return, Lucy saw his face, the bright pink cheeks, the shame in his eyes, and the angst of having told her something so complicated at a time like this.

"Oh Gray," she sighed as she heard his feet pound down the dorm hallway. "Please...don't do this to me now. Not now."

End of Chapter 13

Chapter End Notes

*Boke and Tsukkomi: Japanese manzai comedy duo, funny man and straight man. In episode 29, Gray attempts to replace Lucy as the tsukkomi and fails.*
"When it is darkest, men see the stars." - Ralph Waldo Emerson

Here, he was not Loke. Here, he was Leo the Lion. Here, he was not merely a member of the Fairy Tail magic guild. Here, he was leader of the Ecliptic Zodiac Spirits.

What a pathetic situation for someone like him to be in!

He knew he did not want to wake up. Even after regaining consciousness, he remained still on his cot in the spirit prison, fighting to keep in his tiny sphere of peace for a little while longer. He listened around him to the sound of wind out the slit of a window above his cot, dripping water echoing somewhere far down a stone corridor, Columba the Dove chirping happily to the moon, sounds that were peaceful in the right environment, but from where he lay in the musty prison, they were lonesome reminders of how utterly separated he was from the world.

"I know you're awake, old friend," spoke a basso voice. "Old friend, huh?" mumbled Leo. Resisting fate was no longer possible. He opened his eyes and stared up at the prison ceiling. "We were friends once, close ones. You were like an uncle, maybe even a brother. Is this the punishing hand you show to your family?" He rolled over and glared at the massive creature on the other side of his transparent, shimmering barrier. "Spirit King!"

The maroon-eyed Celestial Spirit with a monstrous mustache gazed down at him unemotionally. "Libra tells me you're well enough to hear your sentence."

Leo shot a quick glare at the Scales, standing behind the Spirit King. All the other Zodiacs had all come to witness, although most looked like it must have been a forced appearance. Aries in particular looked like she wanted to be anywhere else but in that corridor.

"For disobeying the laws of the Spirit World and potentially endangering not only your master, Lucy Heartfilia, but both the Human and Spirit Worlds, you are hereby to be held in detention until we determine if your actions warrant further punishment."

"You needed me healed just to hear you say that?" Leo asked in a sassy tone. "Where's the trial? Where's the jury? Don't I get to testify? And here I've been practicing how to shout 'Objection' in a really dramatic fashion," he said sarcastically.

"Your testimony is unneeded. Crux has given us a detailed—too detailed, in fact—account of your actions."

"Damn snoring gramps," grumbled Leo. "Why not toss me out into the Human World and be done with it?"

The Spirit King cocked his head to the side. "That would be cruel."

"Less cruel than this! Less cruel than separating us, just like you did in the past with Naomi."
"I don't wish to see you suffer, old friend."

"Suffer?" Leo shouted and leaped into a sitting position. "I'm \textit{willing} to suffer. I was willing to stay out there another three years if I had to." He pointed to his tiny cell window. "The woman I love is out there, and the enemy after her is formidable. Piscis Austrinus is back, and he has the full power of Fomalhaut at his beck and call."

The Spirit King leaned back a little, and the other Zodiacs muttered amongst themselves.

Taurus in particular looked stunned. "Fishy?"

"Father? Grandfather?" the mother and son Pisces asked simultaneously, looking troubled but equally hopeful.

"Who?" asked Scorpio. He had no knowledge of that time since he repressed his memories.

Aquarius sadly patted Scorpio's shoulder. Piscis Austrinus: a name the Water-Bearer had hoped she would never hear again...her former lover!

"You all know how dangerous he is even weakened," Leo pressed on. Time alone to think had assured him that this was the only way to win his freedom, and he had to hurry. If one day in the Spirit World was three months in the Human World, he had mere minutes. He had already wasted half an hour lying there, which meant two Human days. "Now that he's at full strength, he's nigh unstoppable. I witnessed it, and he truly did regain Fomalhaut's power." Leo gave a cunning grin. "If you're going to hunt him, you'll need the Lion."

"We don't need you," the Spirit King answered immediately.

Leo sneered that he made such a decision so rashly, and he shouted, "Who else can stand up to him? Now that Piscis Austrinus has the power of Fomalhaut, even you can't defeat him, \textit{oh King!}" He added the last part in sarcasm, but regretted it a moment later.

"Leo," Aries warned, but she trembled before the Spirit King. "I'm sorry."

The Spirit King laughed, and the ground trembled at the sound. "Can't defeat him, you say? Then how do you expect to do it?"

Leo stared silently and kept his face perfectly neutral. He knew the only way was to stoop as low as the Southern Fish himself had gone.

The Spirit King leaned in close, and Leo was pushed back by the sheer force of his presence. "Do you think we can allow you to regain the full power of Regulus? The Royal Stars are gone. We don't need that sort of destructive power again."

Taurus looked down to his cowbell, reached up with one finger, tapped it lightly, and listened to the low ring it made.

"If Piscis Austrinus uses Fomalhaut in an act of war, we will consider a reprieve by which you may be released to join us in fighting him, like what happened last time with Zeref. Indeed, old friend, even as you are, you're powerful. I respect your fighting skills. You would be a welcome asset if war ever came. If he makes no use of Fomalhaut, we will leave him be for now."

"How?" Leo roared furiously. He jumped off his cot and pounced right up to the barrier. It sparkled as his fists pounded it furiously. "How can you keep me imprisoned just because I love a human, while a traitor like him, a Celestial Spirit who has broken a far more ancient and potentially
destruction law, goes free?" His eyes turned to the Celestial Spirit standing behind the King. "Tell me, Libra," he addressed with a smidgen of respect, "how is this justice?"

The Spirit King loomed taller and boomed, "Do not address the others! Libra has already consulted the law books and examined the evidence."

"Brown-noser," Leo grumbled. "You will stay until we determine if the baby is a threat," the Spirit King pronounced. "If not, you will be released and allowed to return; however, if it is dangerous, you will be the one to terminate it."

Leo's mouth dropped. A painful shiver rippled through him from his scalp to his toes, only to rebound back up his spine. "You can't mean..." He could hardly breathe, and his stomach jolted. Kill his own child? Just thinking about such an order, he wanted to vomit. "I could never..."

"Then you will die. This is a lesson you should have learned the first time."

"It wasn't against the rules back then," Leo shouted, feeling truly furious now. "You randomly decided you didn't like the idea of us starting families with humans and held me against my will, without even a mock trial like this. If I had been there, if I could've raised Zeref, guided him, helped him to gain control of his powers, things would've been different. His fall into evil wasn't because of me, but because of you," he accused in outrage. "You're the one who abandoned him, just as you're abandoning Lucy. You're the one who had the ability to stop those events, knowing what Zeref was, knowing people would be after him because of his power, yet you did nothing. You prevented me from even knowing what was going on until it was too late. There is no way his fall into evil was my fault, because thanks to you I wasn't even there," he bellowed, punching the spirit barrier in fury. "It was your heartless attitude toward humans, your own insecurities, your fear of me, your self-consciousness that you," he screamed, "are not the rightful king of the Spirit World!"

A glint of that ancient nobility flared through his glaring emerald eyes as a low growl rumbled deep in the Lion's throat. The Zodiacs cringed that he had finally dared to say it after all these centuries. Aries covered her mouth and shook her head quickly, wishing those words could disappear from history. On the other hand, Aquarius could not help but smirk that he finally had the balls to say it.

The Spirit King pointed a single finger. Light shot up from the ground, engulfed Leo, and hurled him up to the prison's ceiling, smashing him against the stones. He howled in agony as the energy threatened to crush his very essence. Aries turned away and hid her face into Cancer's chest. A few of his crab legs held her comfortingly. The Gemini twins hid behind the massive Pisces fish. Virgo shivered at his screams. Taurus patted her shoulder and watched with conflicting anger and fear. Capricorn looked aside sadly. When the attack ended, Leo fell back to the ground so hard, even Aquarius flinched.

The other Zodiacs watched with troubled faces. Some sympathized with Leo, some felt he was wrong for breaking the rules, and some were unsure one way or another, yet one thing was certain: none of them liked seeing their noble leader reduced to this.

"No, wait...please, wait!" Leo tried to say, yet his voice was too scratchy and weak. One day equaled three Human months. If he was kept locked up in here for even a week, two years would pass for Lucy. "I need to get back to her...please," he begged.
"I truly pity Lucy," the Spirit King sighed. "She is a good friend. She does not deserve this. I wish, Leo," he muttered, "that you had never loved her." Then he walked out of the dungeon.

Leo's head fell back in defeat. The other Celestial Spirits wavered, but in the end many followed their king. Only Aries, Virgo, Taurus, Scorpio, and Aquarius lingered.

"Leo," Aries sobbed. "Why... why did you do it, Leo?"

Despite panting heavily through what felt like crushed ribs, his eyes rolled over to her in a peevish glare. "Are you only upset because it wasn't you I fell in love with?"

The Ram gasped and stepped back. She was shocked he would say such a thing and terrified by the angry gleam in his eyes.

"She's concerned for you, idiot," Aquarius scolded. "Be patient, Leo. We'll try to talk some sense into him." Then she also left. Scorpio watched Leo sadly, but he left with his girlfriend, hoping they could reason with the powerful Spirit King.

Virgo knelt at the edge of the barrier. "Do you need anything, Brother?"

He turned his face away. He did not want them to see him like this, sprawled on the floor, beaten and defeated. It pierced his pride. "What I need, Virgo, you can't give me."

"I can give Princess a message."

He laughed wryly. "Yeah? Like what? 'Dear Lucy, I just got my ass handed to me by the Spirit King. How was your day?' Yeah, great way to exchange letters."

"Don't worry," Taurus insisted loyally. "We'll protect Lucy's nice body."

"That's right," Aries nodded, hoping to redeem herself. "We'll work extra hard to keep her safe. I've been keeping her updated, too. She looks much better."

"Thanks," he muttered flatly. "Please, let me sleep for a while. I'm still rather weak."

"Of course, Brother," Virgo said, and she pulled Aries away. The others followed.

Once they were gone, Leo's chest jolted. It hurt the crushed ribs, but he could not suppress it any longer. A shaky breath inhaled between his teeth and shuddered out. Tears betrayed his eyes and dripped to the cold stone floor under his cheek. He pressed his lips firmly together, trying to command those sobs to retreat. His body obviously sensed he was not in the position to command anything anymore, not even his own emotions. Another jolting sob escaped his defenses and echoed through the bare room, followed by another that hiccuped out of his throat with a cry of pain.

He thought it might have been better if he had stayed in the Human World buried under that debris and died. Then Lucy could have gotten over him and moved on, free to live a happy life. As much as the thought disgusted him, he would rather have her marry Gray or Natsu, raise a happy family, and live her life fully. That was better than being burdened by a short lifetime of pining over him and miserable until the end of her days. Being a prisoner like this would torture her as much as him.

He roared in fury. "Fuck you, Spirit King!"

The sobs finally won their battle. He was a prisoner to their dominion over his erratic breathing and leaking eyes. He wanted to crawl away like a wounded animal, hide in a cave, and disappear from the world. He briefly thought it was ironic that, in a way, he really was in a cave, a pit of solitude,
forbidden from interacting with either of the worlds he had come to love.

"Piscis...no, Haftorang...you were right," he sighed in defeat and anger. "He's only been to the Human World a handful of times. He doesn't know how they are. He doesn't comprehend mortality, or how fast time flies in the Human World. A day to us is three months to them. Four days here is an entire year there. In one of our years, a human can be born, grow up, and die of old age. He doesn't understand! He doesn't even try to comprehend. He really is...just a dictator." Leo looked out the tiny window. "It was never like this back when I was king. I never locked up any of them. I kept a human master, despite being King of the Heavens. I never separated myself from the rest, not like he does. Damn you, Haftorang, but you were right!"

As he looked out the window, he saw the orbs of the stars connected by glowing bridges that formed the constellations. He dragged himself off the ground and painfully clambered closer to his little slit view of freedom. So rarely did he bother to look at the stars here. They were huge, and they shined in full glory, although they lacked the twinkling of Earthland. Only one star actually pulsed in this Spirit World sky, a red star in a series of orbs and bridges Leo knew well, his home, the seat of his power, and largest of those orbs was the Heart of the Lion: Regulus. It beat a steady pulse through the stillness.

Leo's hand clutched at his heart, then dropped and brushed against the indent in his finger where, for centuries, he had worn his ring. It felt odd not having that power anymore, but he knew it was in good hands.

"Lucy," he whispered. "Do you still wish upon Regulus? He's powerful. His star still shines after his spirit has transcended. You now own all that's left of him...all that's left of my Heart. You can probably feel his strength, Lucy. If you wish to him, maybe he'll hear you. Maybe if we both wish, he'll grant even an impossible dream." Leo closed his eyes. "O Regulus, grant me your strength. Give me the patience not to act foolishly, and give me the chance to see my beloved Lucy again. Please, Regulus," he begged, and another sob betrayed his inner pain. "Let me be able to see our son!"

Back on Earthland, Lucy sat at her window and looked at the stars. "Please, Regulus, let him be able to see our son."

She hoped Loke could see the stars wherever he was. She looked down at the ring she now kept on a silver necklace. The chain rested between her breasts and dangled just above the massive bulge of her stomach. In the argent moonlight, the blue stone glowed as if it sensed the life within her and responded to it. She vaguely felt the power in that ring, a wavering energy she knew as distinctly belonging to Loke. It felt like a part of him was there with her, watching over her and the baby.

She smiled as she felt the ring calm her mind and lighten her heart. It gave her hope of seeing Loke again.

End of Chapter 14
Yep, I think the Spirit King is a turd. It took Lucy practically threatening him with all of her Keys for him to overturn Loke's death sentence for Karen's own suicidal stupidity. Plus he punished Loke in a horrible way, making him suffer for three years. In my opinion, that's called "Douchebag!"

"Be grateful to the Stars' guidance" were the parting words the Spirit King left Loke and Lucy after granting Loke a second chance. I thought it was an interesting and formal farewell, like how my Irish grandmother used to say, "May the Lord keep you in His hand and never close His fist too tight." Of course, she also said, "When we drink, we get drunk. When we get drunk, we fall asleep. When we fall asleep, we commit no sin. When we commit no sin, we go to heaven. So let's all get drunk and go to heaven!"

Granny used to start pub brawls purely so she could grab free drinks from everyone's glasses between punches and run away without paying before the cops arrived. I'll shut up now before she decides to haunt me.

=^..^= "Vote on baby names! I voted..."

"NO FISH NAMES!"

"For Makarov."

"Eh? That's a new one."

=^._.^= "He gives me fish...and it sort of sounds like 'mackerel.'"

"Grrrr!"
Shades of Gray

Chapter Notes

A/N: Originally, this chapter's epigraph was lyrics from Waking Ashland's "Shades of Grey" which I listened to while writing this chapter, if you're interested. However, since quoting song lyrics violates copyrights, and I already went through the hassle of getting permission from one band, I changed the quote. Plus this new epigraph really fits the scene too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I believe very strongly that when it comes to desire, when it comes to attraction, that things are never black and white, things are very much shades of grey." - Brian Molko

Dear Mama,

It's been a week since Loke vanished. I won't say I'm getting used to it, but my friends are helping me to get by one day at a time. Wendy finally took me off my treatment yesterday. I still feel weak, but I'm so much better than before. I can walk on my own, but I still get weak after only a few minutes. I lost not only fat, but a lot of muscle. Of course, the bane of all women is that it's harder to gain muscle than fat. Natsu said I should lift weights with him, but he's a total monster. I couldn't lift his weights before getting pregnant, let alone attempt it now!

Natsu is still upset about Gray being the godfather. He insists he'll wait until Loke returns to pick one of them officially. Listening to him talk makes me hopeful that Loke really will come back soon. If it was up to Natsu, he'd probably punch the Spirit King and drag Loke back by his hair...and I'd probably kiss him for being that reckless!

I feel like the other guild members are giving me room and treating me cautiously. Only Erza and Levy come by every day. Erza usually escorts Gray to my room—something about Ruchio not trusting him after he left my room without pants—and Levy drops by after dinner. Wendy visits twice a day for checkups. Gray, though...

Gray always seems to be here. He has been coming every day, usually arriving before breakfast and not leaving until after dinner. It was awkward the first couple days after he said I was beautiful, but he's trying hard to move past that minor confession. He hasn't brought it up, and thankfully he acts the same as before, not self-conscious when he has to hold me to help me walk around, nor weird or perverted.

Some days, Gray acts bright and sunny, almost forcefully so, completely out of character. Then there are days when he sits quietly reading a book, and hours pass without either of us speaking. Sometimes, I catch him watching me a little too intensely, but when I look back at him, he just smiles passively, which makes me the self-conscious one. Lately, it's been raining a lot, and still he shows up every morning and stays until after dinner so he can clean the dishes. Once he got caught in a sudden downpour and had to shower off here. It was awkward, but he kept a bright disposition around me...a little too bright. I could tell that was one of the times he was forcing himself.
Mama, I really don't know what to do about him. I guess what makes me feel worse is a question I asked myself last night. If Loke and I never got together, would I want to date Gray? Now that question haunts me because my heart answered a little too quickly...yes!

However, Loke made the first move. I fell for him. We're about to have a child, and I'm proud about that. I love Loke so much! He's out there somewhere, Mama. My heart shivers in pain when I think about what Aries said, that he'll be detained indefinitely. "Until they know if the baby is dangerous."

That's a frightening thought. Could this baby really be the next Zeref? How long until they know? Loke once said something similar, and he warned that the Spirit King might not be satisfied until the day the child dies. If he dies! If he doesn't live for centuries like Zeref. Either way, I'm worried that Loke and I might be separated for a very long time, if not forever.

No, I can't think that! He has to come back to me someday!

But really, Mama, this is just too cruel of the Spirit King to do this to us. Even criminals have the chance to meet their families, but there are no conjugal visits for a human and a Celestial Spirit. It makes me cry.

Gray does his best when I start crying, but I feel sorry for him. I don't know what he's thinking, and I'm afraid to ask. Gray isn't the sort of person who would cruelly rejoice in the fact that Loke and I are split apart. He said he'd fight to get him back. Yet I know now that Gray likes me, and I guess...maybe I like him a little, too.

I'll probably burn this letter after I write it. If Loke returns and sees it, he'd be sad and jealous. If Gray accidentally came across it...well, I don't want him to get the wrong ideas. I'm still going to wait for Loke. I have to believe that he'll find a way to return to me. I have to believe!

I keep wishing on Regulus to give me strength. Maybe you can give me some too, Mama. You and Papa! The baby is due in about a week, so I need all the strength I can get.

Hey Mama, Papa! You'll soon be grandparents!

Sending you my best, your loving daughter,

Lucy

"Lucy?"

She folded the letter neatly and shoved it into an envelope. Unlike her other letters which she signed "To Mama," she left this one blank. Gray stepped out of the kitchen wearing her frilly Kawaii Kitten apron. Seeing him in it made her giggle softly.

"Erza knocked just now. Natsu is outside waiting for us. Are we still going to the baby store today?"

"Yes," she said, slowly standing, being careful of the massive belly as she moved around the desk. "Something I ordered came in, but the store doesn't deliver."

He sighed and shook his head. "Lucy, you just have to ask me and I'll fetch it. It's no big deal."

"I also want an outing. I haven't gone walking around town in a long time. I miss hanging out with you and Natsu."

He blushed a little, and it was almost too adorable along with that frilly apron. "I miss those days,
"But we had fun, which is what counts," she grinned. "We'll still have fun. You two just better not fight around me or I'll call Taurus to pound you into crushed ice."

Gray laughed and took her arm chivalrously as they headed out the door. "Don't worry, if that flame-brain acts up, I'll cool him off. And Lucy," he said softly, "it's good to see you smiling again."

She gave him an extra wide grin and held her heavy belly as they left the dormitory. Natsu was chatting with Happy while the landlady Ruchio guarded the door with a stern glare. Natsu joyfully leaped forward when he saw Lucy come out.

"Wow, you're even bigger than the last time I saw you." He leaned down to her stomach and poked it. "How can women stretch that big?"

"That's why we have such soft, supple skin. And stop poking me, idiot!" she yelled, slapping his hand away.

Gray took Natsu's fingers. "Try this instead." He laid Natsu's hand flat over the bulge.

The dragon slayer's eyes lit up. "Is that...kicking? That's the baby, right?" he exclaimed in wonder. "He's kicking hard."

"Yeah, and it hurts," Lucy grimaced.

Gray began to rub out her shoulders, which made her hum in enjoyment. "It means he's a healthy boy. He'll be strong like his father and beautiful like his mother."

She caught her breath. He did it again, complimenting her in a subtle way. His hands on her shoulders were chilly and sent shivers down her spine, yet she liked the feel of his cool skin.

Suddenly, the baby kicked extra hard. Lucy cried out and rubbed the spot.

"Holy crap!" Natsu shouted. "There really is something living inside you."

"It's not creepy!" Lucy flared in motherly fury.

Gray shook his head at Natsu's immaturity. "Let's go."

"Oh! First, Natsu..." She pulled out the envelope. "Burn this. Consider it a snack."

"What is it?" Gray asked, looking concerned. He recognized Lucy's stationary, and he had seen her writing one of her letters.

"Something I need to burn."

"Snack time!" Natsu grinned. He happily set the letter on fire and ate the flames.

"Oh hey, Lucy," Happy said in excitement as he flew above them. "Master Makarov got me the coolest fish. I already ate it, but it was so yummy!"

Lucy listened to them chatter about silly things, tangents that led into weird anecdotes, and banal arguments that made her laugh. She was happy to be with her friends again. For a brief moment, she could forget her heartache and pretend like nothing had changed between them.
Gray seems to be treading through the hazy boundary between "friend" and "sweetheart." He better be careful so he doesn't lose himself in the emotional murkiness. I celebrated my wedding anniversary this weekend, so I didn't get to write much. Lots of happiness at home, so I promise the next few chapters will be happy.

=*/^..^= "Yay, I finally star in a chapter!"

O_o "Huh? Umm...I said it'll be happy, not it'll star Happy."

=*/^_^= *dancing with Plue and totally not listening*
The Fairy Tail ladies had planned a baby shower since they first heard the news about Lucy and Loke expecting a child. Presents were wrapped, catering arranged, but now nobody was sure if they should have the party. After all, Lucy rarely left her room these days.

Then, the day before the party, just as Mirajane was ready to cancel the caterer, Lucy decided to join the girls in Fairy Hill's open bath area. Laki cooed over the size of her stomach and felt for kicks. Levy blushed as she admitted she had always wanted children. Evergreen tried to ignore them until someone asked what a baby from her and Elfman might look like. Erza had to demand that she turn Cana, who simply got in the way, back from being a stone statue.

"So, about the party tomorrow," Mirajane began in a gentle yet questioning tone, then her huge blue eyes watched Lucy for the slightest emotional response.

Lucy laughed and rubbed the back of her neck. "You're all so eager for it, I'd hate to disappoint you."

"Lucy!" Erza thudded, and the others froze, fearing she was angry. "It's your party. If you don't feel like celebrating, we can have it later."

"Lu-chan," Levy pouted. She touched her friend's arm to assure her that she had their support.

"Besides, this baby will need clothes to wear and a bed to sleep in. I have a few things already, but everyone was waiting for this party to give me the baby's presents. Maybe it'll cheer me up. I could use that," she admitted with a stressed-out grin.

Mirajane clapped her hands in joy. "Leave it to us! We'll make sure it's the best baby shower Fairy Tail has ever seen."

November 10th: One Week Until the Baby's Due-date

"But I wanna come!" Natsu complained in a stubborn whine. "What is this all of a sudden, saying it's only for girls?"

Wearing her most stubborn scowl, Erza stood guard in front of the entrance to the guild hall while...
the women rushed in and out, bringing in huge gift boxes and delicious smelling dishes. The men of
the guild stood outside, most of them drooling over the savory aromas.

"Natsu, I'm sorry," Erza apologized. "Yes, we said at first that it'd be open to all guild members, but
that was back when we thought Loke would be around. Baby showers are usually only for women,
but we didn't want Loke to feel left out, so we thought having mixed genders would be better. Lucy
knew this was our arrangement. With Loke gone, it'd be too hard on her."

"But I got her a really cool gift. I wanna see her face when she opens it," he whined.

Cana paused by them as she hauled a gift box almost as big as she was tied with a massive bow.
"Hey, you insensitive idiot! Can you imagine how sad she'd be if a bunch of men were around but
Loke wasn't? If just anyone is invited, Lucy will be reminded too painfully that Loke isn't here,
whereas if it's all girls, she might be able to enjoy herself." She walked past them shaking her head.
"Jerk!"

Gray came up and yanked Natsu backwards almost off his feet. "Erza, if it can cheer Lucy up, then
we'll leave it to you. Besides, Natsu doesn't have to see how Lucy likes our gifts since I'm already
the godfather."

Natsu pulled away. "Says you! How do I know that's what Loke really said?" He folded his arms
and stubbornly looked away. "As far as I'm concerned, that competition isn't over until Loke comes
back and says so himself. I'll make him come back, if I have to," he proudly and boldly declared. "I
went into the Spirit World on my own before. I'll just hitch a ride on Virgo again, grab Loke, and
force him back out here."

"Tell Lucy we hope she has fun," Gray waved, yanking Natsu by his scarf. Once they were far
enough away, Gray released the icy gag.

"Bastard!" was the first word out of Natsu's mouth, and with it came a flash of flames.

"Are you really that much of an idiot?" Gray shouted back. "Lucy could've overheard you."

"So? I wanna go to the party."

"I mean about getting Loke back."

Gray sighed and rubbed out a throbbing vein in his forehead. "We all do, but do you even know
what's going on with him?"

Natsu hummed and thought back. Someone had explained it to him, but he had not really paid close
attention. "Something about the Mustache-King locking him up because getting Lucy pregnant was
against the law."

"Exactly. Loke is a prisoner."

"Then we'll bust him out!" Natsu shouted energetically.
"Humans can't survive in the Spirit World without celestial clothes, and we don't have any. Besides, you know how insanely strong Aquarius is, and Taurus, Scorpio, and Capricorn are immensely powerful, too. Sagittarius is the best archer in existence. Even Cancer, Gemini, Aries, and Virgo are pretty good in a fight. If all the Zodiacs together can't break Loke out, then how are humans—who can't survive in their world—supposed to do anything? If you run your mouth off like that, you'll only hurt Lucy's feelings even more. She'll be scared that we'd try something stupid and end up dead."

Gray sighed and looked back at the guild building just as Erza put her sword up to Nab's throat, threatening him to stay out, although the mage insisted he just wanted to check the request board.

"I want to rescue Loke, too," Gray said softly. "All of us do. He's still part of Fairy Tail, but right now, this is a matter only for the Celestial Spirits. He has friends there also. He's even leader of the twelve Zodiacs. I've spoken to Aries and Virgo when they come to visit Lucy. The Zodiacs aren't letting this slide. Aquarius is apparently wrecking havoc in the Spirit World in protest for Loke's release. Scorpio and Capricorn are arguing with the Spirit King to have Loke punished another way. Virgo and Aries keep him updated, and they're pressuring the Spirit King, too. We have to let them handle this. Here, we have to care for Lucy. If that means giving her a day where she's not crying, then that's the best thing to do. If giving her that reprieve means not going to a party, it's a small thing to ask, right?"

Natsu still did not like being left out, but he gave in to Gray's arguments. "I guess I could go see what the old geezer is up to."

A vein popped on Gray's forehead. "He's over there," and he thumbed behind him.

Makarov was bawling out a geyser of tears while Mirajane desperately tried to ease his emotions.

"But I wanna see Lucy's face when she opens my present!" the guild master whined. "Lucy-chaaan? I can attend too, riiiiight? Lucy-chaaaaan!"

End of Chapter 16

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took so long. I'm having some health problems and can't write much through the painkiller-induced haze. I wanted to give you something this week, so I split Chapter 16 in half. This was originally the lead-in to the baby shower. However, I want to wait and find out what changes we'll see with the latest timeskip, since it'll affect many of the characters, especially in this baby shower scene where we'll see everyone from Fairy Tail. With new relationships (like Bisca and Alzack, squeeee) I'm already rewriting minor things to adjust to the timeskip, since "Lion's Pride" definitely happens after the Tenrou Island Arc. If I had any hint that a timeskip was eminent, I would've waited to write this story. Thus, Hiro Mashima succeeds in tormenting me once more.
"The sky may fall, the stars may too,
But our love's enduring, eternal."
- Rhov Anion, "Ephemeral, Eternal"

Cana slammed her hands against the bar counter. "What! No beer? Mira, are you serious?"

The white-haired bartender held her hands up in peace. "It's for Lucy's sake. She's pregnant, so she can't drink alcohol. Wouldn't it be rude if everyone else was drinking but she couldn't?"

"Not everyone else. Just me!" shouted Cana.

Mirajane sighed but never lost her smile. "Please don't spike the punch."

Evergreen looked over to Laki. "This barbecued chicken is great," she exclaimed with her mouth full and her fingers greasy with a chicken wing.

"It's Bisca's sauce recipe, but the secret is in the wood you use," she said, primly pushing her glasses up her nose. "The two of us had to cook for the guild when Mira and the rest of you were gone. After seven years, we learned some tricks."

"But isn't it great?" Laki sighed, batting her eyes dreamily behind her glasses. "Bearing fruit like this."

"Bearing fruit?" Lisanna asked with a nervous laugh. Laki's phrases were always a little off.

"It is pretty miraculous," Lucy admitted, putting her hand over where the baby was kicking. "When you stop and think about it, a life growing inside you, it's something truly amazing."

"Juvia had Gray-sama inside my body," the rain woman bragged. "My body, not yours."

Lucy's eyebrow twitched. "Um, that's not really the same."

"Juvia is thrilled Lucy is pregnant," she smiled smugly. "It makes Lucy no longer a love rival."

"Yeah, that was never a problem," Lucy muttered.

Juvia suddenly leaned right into her face with a furious glare. "But now Gray-sama is the godfather. Gray-sama stays all day with Lucy and never speaks to Juvia. Lucy better not use that baby to take
Gray-sama away from Juvia."

Lucy backed away from her jealous rage. She was about to reassure her that this was not ever going to happen, but suddenly she remembered the day Gray said she was beautiful. She had seen the tender wistfulness in his eyes before he fled in shame, and she knew he restrained himself around her. Every day, he came to help with the chores: cooking, dishes, laundry, dusting, and sweeping floors. He was practically living there, except he always left after dinner. Maybe she was being too sensitive now, but she caught many compliments that he had never given to her before confessing.

Why hadn't he told her things like that before? Why now?

"Hey, Juvia?" Wendy asked, looking up from Lucy's propped up feet. The water mage leaned back and suddenly looked normal, not like some obsessed demon. "Since your whole body is water, would you even be able to have children?"

Her eyes widened massively. "Juvia...does not know. It should be possible but...but..." She bit on her fingers in terror. "What if Juvia can't? What if Gray-sama wants thirty babies?"

"Normal women can't do that," Lisanna giggled.

"Hey, Lucy!" Levy said in a bubbly voice. "Why not call out Lyra for a song?"

Lucy chewed her mini sandwich and swallowed hard. She had barely stopped her eating binge even to talk. "Ah, yes, I can summon her today." She reached to her belt and pulled out the Silver Key with a harp. "Open the Gate of the Lyre! Lyra!"

The angelically cute Celestial Spirit poofed into the guild hall already squealing with excitement. "Lucyyyyy, you finally called meeeeee! Another baby lullaby? I learned some new ones just for you," the musical Spirit said brightly.

"Another time, Lyra. We're having a baby shower. Do you have anything appropriate?"

"Of course!" she beamed and whipped out her lyre. "Leave it to me."

As Lyra began to strum, the women pulled in closer. Thoughts of beer or love rivals were forgotten in the sweet tune. Outside, the men who had been trying to listen through the locked entrance smiled warmly as they heard the faint arpeggios through the doors. Makarov began to sway to the music. Even Natsu forgot about his schemes on how to break in without pissing off Erza, and he smiled at the enchanting voice.

How sweet, that kiss so long ago  
Beneath ephemeral sakura.  
This love still grows, and this you know,  
I'll stay by your side, eternal.  

For this is not a lover's dream,  
The life in me is real.  
Our love, it grows in this child of ours,  
A lasting sign, eternal.  

So if you go out on your own  
I know you'll return to this home.  
The sky may fall, the stars may too,  
But our love's enduring, eternal.
This love still grows inside of me.
Each night and day I'll remember
That tender kiss beneath the trees.
We'll stay by your side,
This child and I,
We'll stay by your side, eternal.

By the end, Lucy was in tears. Levy hugged her shoulders, but Lucy could not stop bawling.

"Loke!" she wailed.

"Oh dear," Lyra cried out. "I'm...I'm so sorry." She looked shocked that the song had the exact opposite effect from what she had planned. "Something else perhaps? Something...ah, yes!" She began to sing a lilting, happier song that made the ladies want to dance.

Into the woods a child ran,
"Catch me, catch me, if you can!"
He ran so fast without a care.
He ran around in his underwear.

Inside the woods he found a tree.
Around it flew a bright fairy.
The fairy played a dancing tune.
They danced all night and on 'til noon.

Dance, oh fairy, dance and sing
While we forget about everything.
Dance my fears away, dance for joy.
Dance, sweet fairy! Dance, dear boy!

He danced too close to the fire bright,
And then his underwear caught alight.
He threw it off and there he stood,
No longer a boy with such a great manhood.

The fairy gawked, the fairy blushed.
The fairy flew to him, oh so rushed!
Into a maiden she did transform,
And she loved him all night and on 'til morn.

Dance, oh fairy, dance and sing
While we forget about everything.
Dance my fears away, dance for joy.
Dance, sweet fairy! Dance, dear boy!

Lucy wiped away her tears and laughed with them. That ballad had hit a little too close to home, but she wanted to keep happy for the sake of everyone else. The dance tune definitely cheered her up.

There were more songs and cake. Wendy danced cutely with little Asuka, while Mirajane and Lisanna showed what coordination the two Take-Over sisters had together. Laki created a wooden mannequin to be her dance partner. Erza requipped into a slinky dress and took to the floor for a solo number that awed them all. Cana convinced Lucy to get up and did a gentle but fun dance with her.

"Presents!" shouted Mirajane. She and Evergreen brought out a wheeled cart piled with gift boxes.
"I don't have enough room for all of this in my little dorm!" Lucy exclaimed, now eating a plate of cheesecake.

"The boxes are always bigger than the gifts," Mirajane assured her.

"First gift!" Evergreen announced, and she adjusted her glasses to read the tag. "Laki!"

The purple-haired wood mage clapped her hands in excitement. The box was massive, but when Lucy pulled on the huge ribbon, the four sides fell apart easily. Inside was a wooden rocking chair.

"I don't have many memories of childhood," Laki admitted, "but I remember that whenever I was sad, my mother rocked me in her chair. I made it myself. I hope it grows on you."

"Grows on her?" questioned Juvia.

Lucy sat it in and gave it a gentle rock. "It's comfortable," she praised.

"Next gift!" Evergreen called out. "Mira!"

This box was small, but it was done in a cute gift-wrapping. Lucy ripped it open and saw a black satin box. When she opened it, there was a tiny bracelet, small enough to fit a newborn's wrist.

"It's a protection charm," Mirajane explained. "It also magically adjusts its size to the wearer's wrist, so a growing child doesn't have to replace it. So long as your baby wears it, the bracelet creates a shield if anyone tries to touch the baby meaning harm, and you'll be telepathically alerted immediately if that happens."

"That's amazing and really thoughtful," Lucy smiled. She could not help but think that, with Queen Kefira and Haftorang still on the loose, she just might need this sort of protection for her baby.

"Next gift..." Evergreen double-checked the gift tag. "Levy and...Gajeel?" she exclaimed in disbelief.

Cana coughed on the fruit punch she was drinking. "You two are buying gifts together?"

"Sounds intimate," giggled Mirajane.

"It isn't like that at all!" Levy assured, waving her hands but still blushing. "Open it, you'll see."

It was a double box. The smaller one was a crate of books: children stories, nursery rhymes, *Idiot's Guide to Raising a Baby*, and a dozen more.

Lucy gawked. "I don't have shelf room for all these!"

"That's what I figured," Levy winked playfully. "That's why I asked for Gajeel's help, since he wasn't going to get you a gift at all." When Lucy opened the second half, she saw it was a tall, metal-reinforced bookshelf. "Isn't it wonderful?" Levy cried out.

"There's a note." Lucy pulled a sheet of paper taped to the side of the bookshelf. She squinted at the messy scrawling. "Yo cheerleader chick! I made this. It's guaranteed not to break under the weight of all of Levy's books, because I know she's gonna overdo it as always. From, Gajeel. P.S.—Hurry up and finish that damn book of yours so Levy stops blabbing about it. 'Oh, uh...maybe I shouldn't have read that out loud," Lucy realized, but Levy did not look upset at the letter's gruff tone. On the contrary, she smiled widely and blushed.

"It'll be a problem moving around," Erza said thoughtfully.
Levy sprang up in excitement. "I put a lacrima on the bottom, and the activation button is on the side. One press and..." She tapped a decorative button on the side of the metal shelf, and the whole thing levitated. "Voilà! You can move it around without removing all the books."

"That's incredible!" Lucy squealed. "I wish all my furniture was like that." She gave Levy a huge hug.

"The next gift is from Freed."

Lucy looked around. "Oh yeah, none of the guys are here." She took a gift bag and pulled out a book.

"Another book?" Levy asked with interest.

"A mother's journal," Lucy realized, flipping through it. "I've seen these. You can write in the days of all your baby's firsts. How thoughtful!"

"Of course," Evergreen said haughtily. "I helped him to pick it out. Now my gift." Lucy took the box, but was shocked by the weight. Inside was a small stone training toilet. "For potty training. Stone is more sanitary than plastic," she explained as she shoved her glasses up her nose with a smug smile, proud of her little creation.

"It's...great," Lucy grinned tightly. She wondered how she would be able to dump such a heavy thing.

"This is from Nab."

"A baby sling! And this is a really good brand."

"And this...from Jet and Droy," Evergreen looked over to Levy. "Why did they have to go in together?"

"Because I refused to wrap two separate gifts," Levy said peevishly. "Those two are hopeless."

"A toy drum and baby xylophone?" Lucy questioned. "Oi, that's going to be too loud!"

"But maybe your baby will be musical," Lyra grinned. The Celestial Spirit tapped the xylophone to play a tune and continued to play lullabies on the toy as Lucy opened the gifts.

"Here's Wakaba's gift."

"Teething rings?" Lucy wondered, finding such a practical gift to be strange.

"At least they're not in the shape of a pipe," Cana mumbled.

"Now, Macao's present."

Again, it was a normal gift that surprised her. "A baby bib, burping cloth, and matching diaper bag. Well, he's a father, he raised Romeo, so I guess he knows how to buy something practical."

"And talking about Romeo, next is his gift."

"Aww," Lucy smiled as she accepted the small box. "He's growing up so fast." She opened the box and slowly pulled out the ugliest rag-doll she had ever seen, sewn together poorly with a lopsided face. "I guess it's the thought that counts."
"Next one: Reedus."

Lucy opened it. "Crayons? I'm not sure the baby will be able to use these for a while, but that's so like him!"

"This one is Lisanna's."

It was a cute silvery bag tied with too many ribbons. "Plushie!" Lucy squealed. "It's so...so...cute! A dragon plushie."

Mirajane leaned over to Cana. "Doesn't it look a bit like Natsu?"

"Now for Wendy and Charle's gift."

Lucy grinned as she pulled the present out. "Another plushie, and a cat this time." She hugged the little girl. "I think these are more adorable for me, yeah?"

"I'm glad you like it," Wendy chuckled.

Cana leaned over to Mirajane. "Doesn't that cat doll look a lot like Charle?"

"Next up is a gift from our new married couple: Alzack and Bisca Connell."

The gunslinger turned bright red. "Married..." She privately liked it whenever someone called her the wife of Alzack or addressed her as Missus Connell.

Lucy glanced at the blushing bride and could hardly help but feel a bit envious. How nice it must be to marry the man you love! Shaking the idea out of her head, she opened the box. "What the...?"

"It's not real," Bisca assured quickly. "It's just a water pistol. Oh, I told him it wasn't appropriate!"

Lucy held up the realistic miniature revolver, along with a leather holster with slots for "bullets," which were really water lacrima. Then she also pulled out a cowboy hat and leather baby booties.

"Well these are adorable! My baby can be a cute little cowboy."

"Ah, and here's the godfather's gift. A big box from Gray."

"I already know," Lucy chuckled. She opened the box anyway, and inside a bunch of packaging peanuts was a pram carriage.

"Aww, that's really thoughtful," Mirajane smiled. "To think Gray would come up with something like that."

Lucy pushed it lightly. The wheels did not squeak at all and glided smoothly. It was built so it could be laid back as a carriage for infants or set upright as a stroller for toddlers. Her throat hitched a little, and the conversation from back then came into her mind.

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Gray: "Is...is there anything you guys need? A cradle?"

Loke: "Natsu's buying the cradle."

Erza: "He's already competing for the position of godfather, eh?"

Gray: "What? Competing? A pram carriage! A baby needs transportation, right? Natsu would
never think about something like that. And a stroller. And...and a high chair."

Erza: "He won't need that until he can sit up on his own."

Gray: "A pram carriage, then. Then you and Loke can go walking around town and push the baby around, show him off to other mothers, and you can go out to restaurants with the baby, or walk along the river as a family."

Lucy: "Gray, that's really sweet, to think about us like that."

Gray: "This is all I really want, to see you smiling. Loke, I think you'll make a really good father. Don't leave her, okay? You better be there by her side, no matter what."

Even back then, Gray was thinking about what was best for her and Loke. But why had he said that last part? Had Gray already realized that Loke's time was limited?

"This one is...oh, from Erza!"

The redhead warrior looked aside and bit her clenched fist in anticipation. "I hope it's okay. I tried really hard."

Lucy wiped away a stray tear and focused back onto the party. She had friends like Gray, Natsu, and Erza to help her through any bumps along the road of life. She opened the flat box and pulled out baby pajamas. It was orange-and-cream colored with Kawaii Kitty printed on the chest.

"Erza, it's adorable! I was looking for an outfit like this but it was always out of stock. Wherever did you find it?"

"In the Kingdom of Bosco."

Lucy's mouth dropped. "You traveled out of Fiore just to buy this?"

"It was while I was on a mission, and I was close by anyway. It was a challenge to get it, too. I fought off three other women."

Lucy cringed and checked the outfit once more to see if there were any blood stains.

"This one is from Elfman."

Lisanna squealed loudly, startling those around her. "He told me about it. I can't wait to see it."

Lucy opened the gift and pulled out a black teddy bear with gray ears and snout wearing a pale purple bow tie. "Well, it's rather cute for a guy who goes on about being manly."

"No-no-no, read the card," Lisanna urged, looking like she was barely holding back giggles of excitement.

Lucy sat the teddy bear on her lap and pulled out a card, which turned out to be an instruction manual. "Protecto-Bear: a child's first bodyguard. Upon purchasing Protecto-Bear, have your child hug the bear, or hold it up to your stomach if pregnant. The bear will activate to the life of the child and, for the duration of the toy's life, protect that child from any harm. Warning: if pregnant with multiple children, do not hug the bear. Have each child hug their own Protecto-Bears individually. For identical twins, please see inner warning label."

"Hug it, hug it," Lisanna urged.
Lucy shrugged and hugged the bear to her stomach. Suddenly, the stuffed animal moved. It pulled back and looked up at Lucy with its button eyes. Shockingly, it spoke:

"Congratulations, pregnant mother, on your upcoming child. Protecto-Bear has now identified child’s aura and is in sync. Child is in good health. Child is not in any danger. Does child have a name?"

"Name?" Lucy asked, blinking in surprise. "Uh...no, not yet."

"You may set the name option at any time. Please see the manual. Shall I remain active?"

"Well, I doubt we're in danger here..."

"Nooo," Lisanna pouted cutely. "I wanna play with it."

Lucy chuckled at her lighthearted manners. She made such a perfect match for Natsu, and Lucy was glad her friend had someone waiting for him...even if Natsu was not completely aware of Lisanna's feelings yet.

"This one..." Evergreen checked the gift tag closer. "The writing is a fancy script but...Juvia, I think."

The rain woman sniffed disdainfully. "Juvia learned proper penmanship."

Lucy opened a box containing numerous soft packages. "Diapers?"

"Babies need many, many diapers, and good ones are pricey," Juvia nodded primly. "These are top quality with extra-high absorbency. Juvia tested them personally!"

Everyone went silent, and an aura of uncertainly hung in the air as all the ladies stared at her. Slowly, Juvia's face went crimson.

"With water magic, with water!" she cried out frantically. "Juvia's body is water. Juvia tested with water. Only water!"

"Of...of course," Lucy laughed tightly.

Evergreen coughed out a hitch in her throat. "Well then! This is from Bickslow."

"Uh-oh," Cana pouted.

"It better not be a doll," Bisca mumbled under her breath.

Lucy stared at the box with sloppy wrapping. Then she looked to the Protecto-Bear. "This bear really will protect me from anything, right?"

The black and gray teddy bear nodded. "Protecto-Bear guards child. If child is still in mother's womb, Protecto-Bear guards mother. That is my programming."

"Er...right." Lucy slowly opened the box and peeked in. "Oh God, it really is a doll!"

Erza grabbed the box off her lap, pulled it away to a table, and the other women gathered around it.

"Is it speaking?"

"No, it's not moving yet."
"Poke it. See if it does anything."

"I'm not poking it! You poke it!"

"Should I shoot it?"

Erza cautiously lifted the doll out of the box. It was a little black-haired boy wearing a straw hat with a huge—albeit slightly creepy—grin. Holding it cautiously away, Erza gave it a shake. Nothing happened. She tipped it upside down, then right-side up. Still nothing. She poked at the stomach, bobbed its head, tugged the sewed-on red vest, and checked inside the crotch of the cut-off jean shorts.

"Why are you checking in there?" Cana shouted.

"You never know," Erza said coolly. "I'm honestly shocked, but it appears to be a perfectly normal doll." She brought it over to Lucy. "Proto," she said to the Protecto-Bear.

"Proto?" Lucy questioned.

"Do you sense any hostility from the toy toward Lucy or the child?"

The bear shook its soft head. "Negative. Child is in good health. Child is not in any danger."

Erza nodded and handed the grinning doll to Lucy. "I saw these bears in the baby store. They are exceptional at sensing danger even through magical disguises. If it says the doll is safe, it's certainly safe."

"Well, that's a relief," Lucy sighed. "It's a cute doll, a little goofy. It reminds me of Natsu somehow, but with black hair. And a straw hat."

"Next gift! This one is from Cana."

"Hah!" the drinker barked. "Finally my turn."

Lucy ripped off the paper and opened a small crate filled with straw packaging. Slowly, she pulled out a green glass baby bottle. "This...feels like magic."

Cana grinned that she guessed right. "Yup! It makes anything put in it taste like beer."

"What!" Lucy gawked at her in outrage. "I can't give my baby something like that."

"It doesn't become beer, silly. It just tastes like it. Good beer, too. Not the piss-water they sell in stores. Dig a little lower. There's a gift for you." Lucy did and pulled out a tinted glass bottle. "Mother's little helper," Cana chuckled. "12-year-old scotch whiskey. Give yourself three weeks of midnight feedings, you'll be wanting that."

"Er...thanks," Lucy said with a drop of sweat.

"Next up is Natsu's present. It's rather large, isn't it?"

"I sure hope he didn't overdo it again," Lucy sighed as the huge box was lugged forward.

It opened easily, and inside was a gorgeously carved cradle. The wooden headboard had a relief carving of a baby dragon curled up and sleeping. It rocked gently, and the protective bars could be lowered or raised.
"He...actually got something normal," Lucy said in awe. "It's perfect!"

Lisanna smiled brightly. "Natsu's gonna make a good father one day."

Lucy wiped a tear away and nodded happily, glad she had such amazing friends.

"Now...Gildarts!"

"Oh no."

"Another crazy gift."

Lucy again handled this present with caution. The flat cardboard gift box opened, and under a layer of tissue paper was a knitted baby blanket. She pulled it out and held it in front of her. Worked into the knitting was the Fairy Tail insignia.

"That...it's too awesome," Lucy said, tearing up.

Bisca chuckled. "Who knew Gildarts was that type of person!"

"Well," Cana said softly, "he is a father. He probably knows enough to keep it practical."

"But knitting?" asked Laki. "That's like picking a lemon and biting into an apple."

Levy tilted her head at that analogy. "How is he like that, exactly?"

"Wait, there's something under the blanket," Lucy realized. She looked at the small box, then opened a congratulatory card. "Dear Lucy: I figured you'll need this from now on. Trust me on this one! Sincerely, Gildarts." She hummed at what he could mean, then opened the box. Her eyes bulged and she quickly slammed it shut.

"What is it?" Cana asked in worry.

"Is it bad?" asked Juvia.

"Should I shoot it?" Bisca offered a little too eagerly.

Lucy had gone bright red. "No, it's...handy, for sure. Thoughtful. Just...what the hell was he thinking?" she muttered in embarrassment.

Cana grabbed it away and opened it. She also went bright red and tossed the box at Lucy as if it held something disgusting. Juvia picked it up instead, but she looked inside the box with confusion.

"Juvia does not understand."

Mirajane peeked over her shoulder. "Oh! He got you magical contraceptives. That must have been a real challenge to find."

Cana looked aside bitterly. "He sleeps around enough to know about those sorts of thing. God, I need a drink!"

"I saved Master's gift for last," Evergreen said. "He didn't give just one. Let's see, we'll start with this one."

Lucy opened the first present box. It was a self-cleaning padded playmat. The second was a seat that magically changed from infant carrier to baby booster to toddler chair, eliminating the need to buy
new furniture as the child grew. A third gift was a toy replica of the train that ran through Magnolia, which made *chugga-chugga* noises and even billowed steam. The last one was a multicolored magical bird toy that sang lullabies and flew in circles to entertain the baby. It made all the girls coo and laugh.

"Well, that's all," Evergreen declared.

"Not quite!" Mirajane handed Lucy an envelope. "One last special gift from Master. He told me to give it to you as your very last gift."

Lucy swatted away the rainbow bird that had begun to fly circles around her head. She accepted the envelope, wondering what else Makarov could have given her. She broke a wax seal stamped with the cross sign of the Ten Wizard Saints, Makarov's very own seal that only broke for the intended receiver. Inside was nothing but a plain folded letter.

"Read it, read it!" Wendy urged in excitement. All the ladies wondered what could be so important that Master Makarov would make such a special request.

"Dear Lucy,

By now you've seen with your own eyes just how much this guild supports you. We will continue to support you, your child, and all you do in the future. I raised a family, so I know how difficult the coming years will be. I understand that going on missions will be impossible for some time to come. This letter is a reassurance that you're not alone. No matter what troubles befall you, no matter how tiring, or frustrating, or frightening...

She sniffled emotionally and wiped her eyes.

"...you have friends. You have a guild that will accept you and your child, no matter what may happen in the unknowable future. Lucy-chan, you will be a mother soon, but...

Lucy stopped reading and hiccuped a sob. Levy patted her knee, and the other girls smiled in support.

"...but...you will always be my shitty brat. Never forget that. Even as you raise your baby, you are part of Fairy Tail. When you've regained your strength and your child is old enough to be left with a caretaker, if you want to return to your duties, our arms will be open. Starting your own family will not void the bonds of this family. Until the day you're ready, as my gift to you, please remain in the Fairy Hills dormitory surrounded by friends—no, by family! Your 300,000 Jewels of rent up to this month shall be covered at my expense, and however many months or even years it may take, you won't need to worry about rent at all.

"I hope, Lucy-chan, that this will ease your mind so you can focus one-hundred percent on your baby. Give him all the love you have, and we shall also give him and you our love and support. We are Fairy Tail, and we are strongest when supported by our friends. May your child grow with that strength and, one day, become a proud and noble mage...like his father and mother!

"Blessing you with fatherly love,

"Makarov Dreyar."

Lucy dropped the letter and bawled loudly. Erza smiled at such overwhelming joy. The letter had Wendy crying softly. Even Evergreen moved her glasses aside a little and wiped her eyes.

Levy laughed and hugged Lucy. "You get to stay as my neighbor. I'm so happy!"
"Aye!" came a shout.

They all looked at the familiar voice and saw Happy flying high above. Then they noticed a crowd of shadows on the second floor.

"You see that!" Natsu shouted triumphantly. "She said my gift was perfect. I win!"

Gray scoffed softly with his arms folded across his bare chest. "If anything, Master won. He got the best response."

Elfman stood up proudly. "Mine was the most manly!"

"Guys," Lucy sniffled in happiness.

Makarov came down the stairs and walked up to her. The ladies stepped aside and made room for him. He pulled out a handkerchief, stretched his arm up to her face, and wiped her tears. "Lucy-chan..." he said gently with a fatherly smile. Then he suddenly grinned playfully. "I win!"

"No fair, gramps!" Natsu yelled. He jumped off the balcony and landed hard on a table. He pointed an accusatory finger at the old man. "You got her more than one gift. That's cheating!"

"Nya-nya!" Makarov mocked, sticking his tongue out at him.

As the men of Fairy Tail came down, Lucy gasped and smiled. Her heart felt like it would swell and burst in pride. Some of them came up and gave her hugs of congratulations. Others were not quite so close to her but still smiled in happiness.

"Bastard!" Natsu suddenly yelled, already prepared to fight Gray. "You and your stupid stroller-carriage-thingy. Mine was better. It was perfect."

"I bet Happy picked it out of a catalog for you," Gray smirked. "A flame-brain like you could never buy something like that."

"Why you..." He was ready to punch Gray, but the ice mage shoved a frosty ramming rod at Natsu. He went flying toward Lucy.

"Oh no!" Gray realized too late. "Ice-Make..."

Before he could shield Lucy, the Protecto-Bear sprang up and landed a hard kick into Natsu's back. The poor dragon slayer was thrown in the opposite direction with unbelievable force. He almost smacked into Gray, who had to dive to keep from getting hit. Natsu flew completely across the guild hall and slammed into the opposite wall, leaving a massive crack before slowly sliding downward into a crumpled blob. Everyone stared in shock, first at Natsu mumbling nonsense, then at the bear that was still posed for a fight.

"See," Elfman beamed. "My gift is the manliest!"

The whole guild laughed. Lisanna ran up and hugged Proto—as the other guild members were now calling it—and swung the bear around happily. Lyra began another tune, and now men and women mingled. Alzack and Bisca immediately paired off and began dancing. Gildarts brought Cana a
barrel of alcohol, and she hugged her father in joy. Happy sized up Proto as if contemplating if it was a new rival. Romeo shyly came up to Wendy, tapped her shoulder, and asked her to dance. Charle bristled at seeing them together, but Pantherlily grabbed her tail to stop her from stomping over, and she was soon distracted enough as she realized she had to stop Happy before the teddy bear deemed him a threat.

Lucy smiled around. This was more like it! This was the crazy, wild, loyal guild she loved.

Mirajane finished putting the gifts aside and came up to Lucy. "So," she began with a congenial smile, "that bear made me realize something. Have you decided on a name for the baby?"

Lucy looked down and realized this was another subject that pained her. "Loke really wanted Regulus or Venant, but I was against it." She caressed the ring on her necklace. "I guess maybe if we nickname him Reggie or Venny, that would be fine."

"I can understand why Loke would want a name that's special to him."

"Yeah, but I wanted a name that starts with an L. You know, Loke, Lucy, L-name."

"Aww, that's so cute," Mira grinned brightly. "What type of names?"

"I don't know. He listed some. Leontos, Lejonet, Leon..."

"They sound like powerful names."

"And Levy suggested Aslan...something about a book she read about a lion. Or one thing I was considering is this: The first two letters of my name, the last two from his. L-U-K-E. Luke."

"I think that's sweet, too. It's a common name, but it shows the union of both of you. Regulus, Venant, Leontos, Lejonet, Leon, Aslan, Luke...that's still a long list."

Lucy sighed and leaned back. "I can't decide on one. I had hoped...he would decide. But the baby is coming in a week. I guess I have to hurry up and pick one."

End of Chapter 17

Chapter End Notes

That's right, the baby will be here soon, and those seven are the current audience-chosen names. You can PM me, leave your vote in the reviews, or vote on the poll on my profile. Second-place will be the middle name. Or choose a new name and I'll add it.

=^..^= "But no fish names."

"Right Happy, no..." O_O "Happy! You remembered!"

"Aye! Only after you hit me. Meanie Rhov!"

"Eh-heh-heh...um...have a fish." *mumbles* "Urusai, baka neko."
To those who've asked "In which arc does this story take place," my answer is "the near future," post-timeskip, with the assumption that FT returns to its previous glory. By the way, I totally call Romeo and Wendy will hook up! RoWen!

I laugh when FT mentions "30 babies." It's not impossible. My great-aunt had 22 children, but that included three sets of triplets and a LOT of twins. This fertility superpower runs in the family and makes me hesitant about having babies.

Protecto-Bear (AKA "Proto") is based on a black and gray teddy bear I got for my 15th birthday. Too bad mine doesn't kick butt. Kudos to everyone who knows what Bickslow's doll is! If you can't figure it out, you need more manga in your diet. A big thanks to 1337kitsune for suggesting that Lucy should have a baby shower and recommending some gifts. You're a genius! And thanks for all the well-wishes. I had surgery on Thursday and am still recovering, but I have two more chapters in my buffer so I'll be able to update. Yay!

Just before my health turned bad, I made a video of me explaining and singing Lyra's song, "Ephemeral, Eternal." This song has a pretty tune, and I've been singing it for weeks since I wrote it. Hey, I majored in Music in university, it's my "thing." I'm not a good singer, I tend to ramble, my cat decided to act up, but you can learn a little behind-the-scenes of this song and "Lion's Pride" in general. And hear me sing. Yikes! -

http://youtu.be/xJC7Od1RDWw
Another for the whimsical dance song Lyra sings, "Dance, Sweet Fairy."
http://youtu.be/2Vaz0Du_M20

Watch me make an ass out of myself on YouTube, tell me how you liked this party scene, and I'll see you next chapter.
Leo closed his eyes. Sometimes, if he focused hard, he could sense things about Lucy. He always knew when she was in trouble, but sometimes he sensed other emotions. He smiled to himself. Today, Lucy was feeling happy. Like a distant echo, he heard her laugh.

"I'm glad you're doing well, my love," he whispered, staring out his window. Amongst the stars, he saw Regulus glowing firmly and proudly. "O Regulus! Fairy Tail is her family. Have them take care of her until the day I'm able to be by her side again." He dropped his head sadly. "And may that day come soon."

He heard hooves clicking behind him. "Do you think he hears you, Leo-sama?"

The Lion firmed up his face. He knew Capricorn's hoofed footsteps without needing to look around. "If I keep praying, Regulus will hear me."

The clicking steps stopped nearby but still out of reach. "Regulus-sama is gone. So are the others. Praying to him will do nothing."

Leo snarled his teeth in anger. "What do you know, you old Goat? I call to Regulus when I fight. I feel his power. You've felt it, too. He's not completely gone from us."

Capricorn sighed and folded his arms. "True, you granted me the use of Regulus-sama's power once, and so I tell you...all you feel is the fragment he left behind. You told me about your fight with Piscis Austrinus-sama, and he was right. That's not the true power of Regulus-sama. Regulus-sama is gone. Everyone has come to accept it, everyone but you."

"And the Southern Fish," glared Leo. "I saw him, Capricorn. I saw when that damn Fish merged the powers. It was Fomalhaut. Of everyone here, I know him best. It was definitely him. The Royal Stars are not completely gone."

"Fomalhaut, modern name of ancient Haftorang. The Royal Stars of ancient times: Aldebaran, Antares, Fomalhaut, Regulus." Capricorn shook his head. "Our world was turned upside down when they left. You sure didn't help!"

"I know," Leo acknowledged regretfully. "I abandoned everyone here. It's my sin to bear."

"To think they might be back! You never should have told this to the Spirit King."

Leo had been considering that action. "It was my one trump card."

"And it failed. Miserably! If Fomalhaut-sama is really back, and if he's that eager to bring Regulus-sama back and reinstate you...do you honestly think the Spirit King wants that? It'd be the same
upheaval of four hundred years ago, and at a time when we need to be cautious."

"Cautious?" Leo asked bitterly. "You mean because of my son?"

"Precisely!"

"Yet everything is happening exactly how it happened before!" Leo roared and leaped at the gleaming barrier that separated him from the Goat. His eyes narrowed, and his wild orange hair looked even more ragged since his imprisonment. "He took me away from Naomi despite the schemes of Kefira. He locked me away on grounds of treason while ignoring direct threats from Piscis Austrinus. And because of those two, because of their meddling, because the Spirit King did nothing to stop them before it was too late," he shouted, shivering with emotion, "Zeref was turned into the darkest mage in history." He punched the barrier, and it sizzled around his fist. In rage, he shouted, "What's going on now is exactly how it happened before!"

"Except this time," Capricorn said firmly, "we're all going to protect Lucy-sama."

Leo backed down. The rage melted at the sincerity in the Goat's face.

"She's truly precious to you," Capricorn realized. "I felt the same way toward Layla-sama when I swore to watch over all future generations of her family. No, you feel even stronger about Lucy-sama."

"She...makes me stronger," Leo said softly, sinking back onto his prison cot.

"I remember you telling me about a lovely human who made you stronger. I thought you, Cancer, and Aquarius were foolish. No human since Cheveyo ever made me feel stronger. Layla...and now Lucy, huh?"

"I was never able to properly research it, but I believe they are distant descendants of Cheveyo-sama's daughter."

"Ah, she was quite strong too from what I remember."

"So," Capricorn said, resting his back against the wall and folding his arms as he kept a lookout down the prison corridor, "when did you first notice Lucy-sama's strength?"

Leo hummed as he thought back. "I guess I noticed it the first day she walked into the guild. After three years in the Human World, I was trying anything to take my mind off the pain: wine, women, work. I just wanted to feel hazy, lost. I wore shades because the sun was too bright and a coat in summer because I was always freezing. All the senses of the Human World felt ten times stronger, especially pain.

"On that day, I felt terrible, so I had two of my prettiest ladies with me to distract me from the growing agony. It wasn't working, when suddenly something within me changed, like a desperately needed medicine finally kicked in. It felt like a magnet, my eyes focused to the doorway, but I couldn't see anything past Natsu's brawl. Finally I caught a glimpse of her between the fighting. She looked timid and shocked, like how all the newcomers react...and so cute! I felt instinctively drawn to her. I wanted her! Not in the way I had merely enticed other women, but...more. Deeper! A need, an instinctive desire! I wanted her to notice me, yet all she saw was a playboy with a woman on each arm. When she left to find lodging, that feeling of completion left with her."
"There she was, my cure at last! I was determined to make her my partner, keep her by my side. Then I saw why there was that resonance of souls. She was a Celestial Spirit mage. Those other keys sang to me, calling me home...a home I knew I couldn't return to. It made the longing worse.

"I knew as soon as I came close to her...Lucy is strong, stronger than she imagines! I knew that if I got too close, she would sense me. If she called out any of her Celestial Spirits, they would know who I was instantly. Still, I watched her and fought for her. Simply being near her helped me to keep going a few weeks longer than I had calculated, yet I was terrified of her. No, not of her," he realized. "Of you guys, of the Celestial Spirits. I was too ashamed, too proud to let them see me," he admitted bitterly. "Leo the Lion: leader of the Zodiacs, reduced to that weak and dying shell! So I stayed far away from her, dreading she'd call a Celestial Spirit out and I'd be discovered.

"But when Phantom Lord attacked, I felt her...deeply. She resonated right here," he said, a fist to his chest, "right in my heart. I hadn't felt a sensation like that in four hundred years, since my time with Regulus. I thought maybe it was the Spirit Keys, but I realized she had lost them. It wasn't the keys singing to me again, but her soul. And it felt so strong," he sighed with a smile, which slowly dropped as he remembered what happened next. "However, I was too weak. I had been taking easy missions to conserve my strength. Using Regulus to fight Gajeel...even with Lucy nearby, I felt the pain, and that made me lose. I realized just how utterly pathetic I was!

"After it was over, I followed the voices and found her lost Spirit Keys on the street. Such precious artifacts, dropped as she was captured. I was truly terrified to touch them, but I couldn't leave the keys of my old friends there to be lost, or worse, to be picked up by someone cruel. I knew too well what a bad master is like, and I could see that Lucy was a good master, so I forced myself to pick them up. It was such a warm feeling, but it made the longing worse. By then, I was almost gone. The fight with Gajeel had taken off any added energy Lucy had restored. I planned to give the keys to her friends and quietly slip away.

"Then...she was there that day. I knew it'd be my last mission. I had been a jerk to so many women in my quest to distract the pain and make myself forget Karen, so I felt I could redeem myself by hunting down a couple perverts. I'd do my one last good deed in this world, then slink away like a cat ready to die. Yet there Lucy was, a victim of those men! In a twist of fate, she was the one I had to rescue.

"I felt that connection again. I felt power in my heart, strength flowing out from her. I wanted to embrace her and never let go. I had come to terms with death, yet suddenly I wanted to live. I wanted to hold her and exist with her...forever! I didn't want to leave her, but I didn't want to burden her. I ended up confessing my terminal state, but I didn't want her to be sad. Instead, I said something stupid and upset her.

"But I got careless. The Nikora she cutely calls Plue saw me. As soon as Lucy knocked my shades off..." Leo paused and chuckled to himself. "It was like a stupid superhero disguise, put on some glasses and hope no one recognized me. But Nikora saw me without them, and he knew immediately who I was. I saw his face only briefly: surprise, happiness, worry, all mixed in that silly face. Luckily, he couldn't tell Lucy. He probably realized anyway...at that point, I only had a little time left.

"Despite my act to push her away, she chased after me and saved my life. She almost sacrificed herself for some miserable beast like me. I absolutely fell in love with her right then. It was like I knew everything before was mere infatuation, but right then, as I watched her determination and felt that hidden reservoir of power, that same resonance I sensed from our first meeting...it was love, true and honest love!
"Then the Spirit King made her my master. You know," Leo laughed blithely as he leaned back on his tiny cot, "that old geezer can be one domineering jackass, but right then I knew he had felt the love in my heart. Maybe it was his way of saying sorry for three years of torture." He looked out his window. The stars had faded, and only the Day Star shined. "I almost wish Lucy could come here and yell at him again, show him how strong our love is. You should have seen her that day! I hadn't seen power like that since Cheveyo."

"Able to call all twelve of us out," Capricorn nodded. "Perhaps she truly is his scion."

"Lucy isn't even fully trained, and she's too young to be in her full power," Leo mentioned, feeling truly proud of her. "Another five or ten years, I think she'll match Cheveyo, maybe surpass him."

"She is talented. When I helped her train, I saw a glimpse of the power in her, and she's stronger now. However, I think you give her too much credit."

Leo smiled to himself. "You haven't been with her long enough. She's immensely powerful, but it's hidden. She can call up multiple Celestial Spirits at a time. She now even knows how to cast Urano Metria. She has the strength to do high level caster magic. She could do so much more; she just lacks the knowledge. As far as the amount of potential magic power within her body, I would say she's on par with Natsu. His magic comes from his training with the dragon Igneel. If Lucy could be trained...if I could train her..."

He left that thought hanging with regret. Why had he not begun training her? Even Capricorn gave her some basic training exercises to work on. He kept wanting to, but there was never a good time. If she could have been as strong as the famed celestial summoner of the past, Cheveyo, who helped to defeat Zeref, then maybe this whole thing never would have happened. Maybe she could have been strong enough to even bypass the spirit barrier on this jail, like Cheveyo could.

"The baby is due soon," Leo realized, shifting the conversation away from that particular regret. "And once again, I'm missing such an important occasion." Leo looked over firmly to the Goat. "I trust you, old friend. Keep protecting her...I beg of you!"

Capricorn nodded solemnly. "As I swore to Layla-sama, I will guard her family now and generations to come."

They heard footsteps approaching. Leo sensed the heavy presence and sat up quickly. He tried to straighten his tie and suit coat, mentally preparing himself for what he thought would be another hard-handed punishment. If he had to be beaten again, he would take it without losing his dignity.

The first ones he saw were the Gemini twins skipping forward eagerly hand-in-hand. Then came Aquarius, floating along with her tail flipped back haughtily. Hiding slightly beside the Water Bearer was Aries, who gave a timid but happy smile to Leo. Finally came the Spirit King, his eyes glowing red. He did not look happy, and that worried the Lion a little.

"You have loyal allies, old friend," the Spirit King began. "Capricorn and Scorpio have argued vehemently on your behalf. Aries faced her own terror to speak with me and even dared to shout that I was, as she put it, a stubborn old git."

"I'm sorry," the shy Ram trembled.

"Virgo offered a little too willingly to take on your punishment ten-fold. Cancer threatened to cut off my mustache. Taurus went on a rampage within my private chamber and is temporarily locked up for breaking and entering. The damage Aquarius has wrought will take some time to repair."
"It's not my fault those water pipes were rusty," she argued stubbornly, yet a gleam in the mermaid's eyes showed her mischievous side.

"Almost every single Zodiac Spirit, and numerous minor Celestial Spirits, have argued and pleaded on your behalf, Leo. Gemi and Mini were the most convincing. They argued, not for you, but on behalf of your owner, Lucy Heartfilia. She is a good woman, a noble mage, beloved by all of her Spirits...even Aquarius."

"Says who?" the Water Bearer roared, but she backed down fast. "I mean, I guess the bitch at least honors my requests for vacations."

"Our friends," the Spirit King went on, "can sometimes be more persuasive than our own words. Aries says that perhaps last time, Zeref went bad because he had no father figure. If her female intuition is correct, then the son you unwittingly sired needs a father. Therefore, I shall grant you a brief parole."

Leo grinned immediately and wanted to laugh in relief.

"You may pass through your gate freely during this time, but upon reentering you will return to this cell. You are not allowed anywhere else within the Spirit World. Oversee the birth of your child. Tend to your woman as she heals. Show your support. However, you are not free yet. Upon the Human World new year, when the last rainbow sakura petal falls in Magnolia Town, all twelve Zodiac Spirits will gather once more. At that time, your fate shall be decided: either to allow you to stay as a Celestial Spirit but restrict your interaction with your owner; or to allow you to live with your family at the cost of your status as the Spirit of the Lion."

"I'll let you know right now," Leo butted in. "I would rather live a few decades and die of old age than be parted from Lucy again."

"Not just your immortality," the Spirit King warned. "Your power would also be stripped from you. You would have no magic."

Leo hesitated, distraught by the threat. Without magic, he would not be able to protect Lucy easily. He could not work with her on missions. He would not be able to appear beside her at the first sign of trouble. Of course, she would still have the other Celestial Spirits, but he would be a huge hindrance to her, a powerless anchor slowing her down.

"You have two days, or six Earthland months, to weigh your options," the Spirit King intoned. "Also, I need not say this, but if you seek out Piscis Austrinus during this time, or if you go after the Key to the Heart of the Lion, you shall forfeit your life."

"And if he comes to me?" Loke asked skeptically. "He and Queen Kefira are still after Lucy and the baby."

"We are already searching for that traitorous fiend. If he gets near you, or you near him, we will know before you two can meet. If there is an error on our behalf...I hope you can be prudent in such a situation and not face him alone again. Even if only one other is with you—anyone but Taurus and Scorpio—then that would be fine."

Leo knew why he added that stipulation. Taurus and Scorpio had also been aligned with the Royal Stars. That was what the Spirit King feared, just like Capricorn said. If the four constellations aligned with the Royal Stars revolted, it would be another massive upheaval in the Spirit World, only instead of the power vacuum left behind when the Royal Stars left, it would be a coup d'état against the Spirit King.
"You have my oath as the Lion and upon my pride and honor as leader of the Zodiacs, I will not seek out that ancient power," Leo nodded in agreement.

"Very well. Six months, old friend. Upon the falling of the last rainbow sakura petal, your fate shall be decided. Get your affairs in order. Care for your family as best as you can in that time. Be grateful to the stars' guidance."

Lucy stepped out of the guild hall with a yawn. The sun was just rising, but the lavender wisps of river fog hid its burning disk. The guild had partied all night long. She had eaten more in that one day than she normally did in a week. She even managed a meat-eating contest with Natsu and won!

Somehow, she fell asleep. She woke up on a bed in the infirmary, sleepily wondering who carried her there until she saw the white coat draped over her. Gray really was watching out for her, and she was glad for his support.

She smiled at the silvery hidden shadows of Magnolia and the stillness that seemed to be bottled up within the fog, like the steam of a rice cooker. Behind her, she heard others beginning to wake up, some to hangovers, others with tired feet from dancing all night long. It made her feel more connected to them. Fairy Tail fought as a family and partied as a family. The thought warmed her through the dreary morning.

The fog left moisture on her cheeks so that she looked like she was sprinkled with fairy dust. She tugged Gray's coat around her a little tighter and decided to head out. First she pulled out her Spirit Keys.

"Open the Gate of the Canis Minor! Nikora!" The cute white...thing...appeared. "You'll walk me home, won't you, Plue?" She chuckled and began to go.

"Puu-puun!" he answered and began to follow. Then Plue paused and made a questioning sound. "Puu?" He put his paw-like hand up to his black eyes and squinted through the fog. Then he gasped. "Puu! Puu-puun, puu-puun! Puuuuun!"

Lucy stopped and looked down at his excitement. "What is it?"

"Pardon me, lady," a seductive voice called out, "but I believe you need more than a tiny dog to guard you when walking home. How about a Lion?"

She gasped and covered her mouth. The sun burned off the fog, the wisps of purple haze melted away, and the world burst into golden brilliance. Amidst the yellow glare, a dark form stepped forward, a tall and lean figure with a smooth gait, wild hair, and shoes that clicked with solid soles. Like a veil pulling away before royalty, the fog swept to the sides, and the lordly Lion strode forward. Loke had a grin that could make ladies faint, but his eyes were only on his lioness.

"Lucy...sorry I'm late for the party."

She ran forward with a cry. Gray's coat fell from her shoulders and fluttered to the sidewalk as she leaped into Loke's arms. He almost yanked her up to spin her around like in a movie, but he realized that would be bad for the baby. Instead, Loke pulled Lucy close to him and crashed his lips onto hers. He desperately needed to taste her. He needed to know she was really there.

In the doorway, Erza, Wendy, Charle, Happy, Natsu, and Gray watched with smiles.

"I'm glad he's back," Gray sighed in relief.
Natsu still was not satisfied. "Oi, Loke!"

"This is more important," he frowned as he marched forward.

Loke faced him, but he could not let go of Lucy just yet. Natsu came to a stop in front of them.

"Once and for all," he shouted. "Me or him?" His finger swung over to Gray. "Who's the godfather?"

Loke chuckled softly at the question. "Well Natsu, I've actually thought about that long and hard. This will be a special baby. He needs twice the love and twice the protection. Therefore, I think he should have two godfathers...and two godmothers. You and Gray, Erza and Wendy." He looked down to Lucy. "How does that sound to you?"

She was still too emotional to speak, so she just nodded and leaned into him.

"I get to be a godmother?" Wendy asked in awe. She covered her mouth and giggled. "I'm a Fairy godmother!"

"Two, huh?" Natsu pouted. "Well...I guess that's okay. But I get to wear the cool suit and pet the cat."

"Aye!" Happy chimed in. "What about me? Don't I get to do anything special?"

Natsu grinned huge. "You get to be my cat!"

Happy pouted at him. "More than that."

"Of course," Loke smiled. "You get to be the god-cat."

"God...cat?" Happy's eyes shined with stars. "I like that title. God-cat! Hey Charle, did you hear that? I'm the god-cat."

"Hmph! God-awful cat, maybe," she huffed quietly.

He flew up to her and smiled bashfully. "I'll share. You can be the goddess-cat, if you want."

The title piqued her interest, and her face twitched as she tried to suppress a smile. "That title...does sound rather appealing."

"Hey, Loke," Natsu urged, "you gotta see the gifts Lucy got. She said mine was perfect."

Loke held a hand up to calm the hyper teen. "In a bit, Natsu. I'd like to watch the sunrise with Lucy first." He took her around the waist and led her in the direction of the Fairy Hills dormitory.

"But the sun's already up," Natsu argued, and he began to follow.

Gray grabbed his shoulder and forced him to stop. "Give them some time alone," he said knowingly.

"But I wanna..."

"Natsu," Gray said firmly. "You really are a clueless idiot."

"What was that, you ice bastard?" he yelled, ready to fight.
Gray just sighed in exasperation. "Go ask Mira to cook a nice breakfast for Loke."

He yanked away. "I ain't doing whatever you order me to do."

Erza stomped up to him. "Natsu! Breakfast! Now!"

He pulled away with a tremble. "A-a-aye, sir!" Then he hurried back inside to announce to everyone that Loke was back.

Erza patted Gray on the shoulder, and he stumbled at the heavy hit. "You're really growing up, Gray. I'm impressed."

"It has nothing to do with growing up," he pouted. "I sat by her and held her through so many nights as she cried. I was prepared to fight to get him back, and I'll fight to make sure he stays with her from now on. I want her to be happy, that's all there is to it. Besides..." He chuckled as he leaned over to pick up his discarded white coat. "They do make a cute couple."

"Aye!" Happy agreed.

End of Chapter 18

Chapter End Notes

Here's another chapter I had to adjust to match the canon story, since Lucy now knows Urano Metria and can call out more than one Celestial Spirit at a time. Wow, look how far she's come along!

Next up...FINALLY some fluff! Maybe a little smut...keehhehe!

_=^-.-_= "It's about time, Rhov."

^_^ "I know, I know, Happy. It's been really angsty these last few chapters. That's just how I write, either too perverted or too much drama. I'm sorry if it depressed people."

_=^..^= "Well, it made me upset! Especially since I haven't been in this story much."

"Umm...but I made you the god-cat."

"Yeah, but look at how many lines I have in this script!"

"This story isn't really about you, Happy."

"What do you mean? It's Lion's Pride, a cat story. Charle and I should have a scene together, maybe a romantic candlelight dinner on a fishing dock with fresh salmon and cream and..."

"That...well, it'd be darn adorable, but this is Lion's Pride. You're not a lion, you're a cat."

"Lions are cats! What about a cat's pride, eh? We're proud animals!"

"Umm...it's a grownup story, you know, for...for grownup cats."
*spends a long time thinking about it* "...Oh! Okay! So that's why it's Rated M. It's for grownup cats."

"Um...right..." ^_^'
"Heav'n's gifts, which do, like falling stars, appear
Scatter'd in others; all, as in their sphere,
Were fix'd and conglobate in 's soul; and thence
Shone thro' his body, with sweet influence;
Letting their glories so on each limb fall,
The whole frame render'd was celestial."
- John Dryden

They were not even in the dorm room before the attack began. Lucy spent just a moment too long fumbling for her door key, and Loke could no longer contain himself. He spun her around, and instantly his lips were on hers, devouring her like a starved beast. These were not the gentle kisses from before, but ravenous, demanding, insane with passion.

Lucy loved it!

"Let me...mhmm..." she tried to say, but his mouth refused to surrender her lips.

His hands already began their slow stalking up through her blouse. Unable to voice a protest, she hurriedly felt the keys. She kept keys as a career, after all. She knew even her house key by touch. She felt the familiar ridges of the metal teeth and crammed it into the door, missed twice, left a gouge in the door knob on one try, but finally shoved it in, turned the lock, and both of them stumbled through the doorway. Loke kicked the door shut behind him, not caring that her key ring was still in the lock. Lucy tried to protest, yet he grabbed her off her toes, carried her in a maddened rush to the bedroom, and did not stop until both of them slammed down onto the bed.

"I missed you," he growled as his mouth finally released her long enough to catch her breath. His lips sucked her throat hard, leaving a pink trail to rise on her skin. Right at the curve to the shoulder, he grabbed her with his teeth.

Lucy cried out and shivered. It had been a while since he got this rough, and she missed his wild side. She yanked on his tie and worked the shirt buttons. He tugged off her blouse and fumbled with her bra snaps. Finally it was off, her pregnancy was full view, but his eyes were solely on the enlarged breasts. He latched onto one of her nipples, sending her shivering with a moan. He licked, nipped, teased with his fingers, but when he sucked he suddenly tasted something.

"Huh?" He pulled back in shock and licked his lips, wondering at the unusual flavor. "Was that...milk?" he asked. His tongue rubbed across his mouth a bit more. "Tastes weird." Then he saw a slight leakage. "Oh God, it's yellow! Is it puss? Are you okay?" he cried in terror.

Lucy laughed and looked down at the engorged breasts. "It's called colostrum. It's a sort of pre-milk for the baby. It leaks out once in a while. Rather annoying, honestly."

"Oh," he sighed, calming down, then he laughed at how quickly he had freaked out. "I guess I shouldn't do that. I don't want to eat up my son's first breakfast."
That was when he saw more changes. She had grown even larger during their time apart. Her breasts had filled out to an enormous size. Her stomach looked ready to pop. The insane hunger tamed itself as his hands caressed the bulging belly. Suddenly he leaned over and put his ear against her. Lucy sat up to watch him, touched by the wonder in his eyes.

"I missed him, too," he whispered gently. His cheek rubbed against her belly button, snuggling the child inside.

Lucy got tears in her eyes at seeing this gentler side to her loyal Lion. "I look like an elephant," she complained.

"No! You are the glory of the mother, the fertile female, prolific prophetess, life-giver, blossoming femininity, a goddess who creates life within her womb." He ran his hands over her exaggerated curves with a proud smile. "This is heaven's gift. It's not a sin...and I don't care who says it is," he declared with a glare.

He briefly saw the flash of some pain flit past his eyes. She knew he must have suffered during his incarceration, and she stroked his cheek. "Loke," she whispered worriedly.

He was on his knees in front of her, while she sat on the edge of the bed. He removed his glasses, set them on the nightstand, and looked up at her with full earnestness. "I don't care what anyone else says or what they do to me, we're going to be a family," he swore with a slight shaking of intense determination in his voice. "I'm going to watch over both of you. I will fight to stay by your side, and I will protect this child, no matter the cost."

"I love you too much to lose you again...but I love you too much not to fight for you."

Again, he was haunted by the choice: stay with her or protect her. That sort of question had to wait. He saw in her face, she had recognized his inner conflict. He was worrying her again, and he hated doing that. Even if he had to lie to her, he did not ever want to burden her. All he wanted was to see her smile.

He reached up, caressed her cheek, and flashed her a grin. "I'm so glad I made it back in time."

"Me too," she sighed, feeling relief now instead of concern.

"At least we have a little time to spare for fun."

He kissed her knee, turned a sly look up at her, cocked his eyebrow, and suddenly he gave a long lick up her thigh. Lucy cringed and shivered, then she laughed that he could still give her goosebumps like that.

Yes, that was the smile he loved! "Leonita," he purred.

He rose off his knees and climbed onto the bed, pressing her backwards as he kissed her. They resumed the lust from earlier, only mildly tamed now. There was a quick scramble where they raced to remove the bottom half of their clothes. She won, getting her skirt off before he could drop his pants. Then they slithered up onto the pillows.

"Can I?" he asked between nibbles on her earlobe.
She hummed at his touches venturing lower and lower. "Just be gentle," she whispered.

She laid on her back. She pouted that she felt like a beached whale, but Loke caressed her legs as he spread them apart. He leaned over between her thighs and kissed the entrance to that hallowed feminine cave.

"Our son will soon come out through here," he realized in awe, giving her a lick that made Lucy tremble. "Perhaps I should kiss it for good luck."

Lucy felt his tongue scrape over her. Her head pressed back into the pillows as she gasped at the feeling. When he purred against her, she cried out in a gasp.

"Yes, purr like that!" she screamed.

His purrs vibrated through her, driving Lucy wild. His tongue twirled, lapped, and stabbed. He had missed the sound of her gasps, the smell of her skin, and the taste that was uniquely "Lucy." He could tell she was enjoying this, and it made Loke smirk and purr louder, which drove Lucy more wild. Not even five minutes into it, she was bucking her hips and screaming his name.

He slowed as she panted tiredly and finally rose up to dramatically wipe the moisture off his face. "Really? Are you that sensitive?" he chuckled. "This is going to be fun!" He rose up to his knees and positioned himself. She felt him press just a little bit, lining himself up with her entrance. "Warn me if it's too much," he said softly, then gently slid himself inside.

Lucy moaned loudly as he filled her.

"Are you okay?" he asked in worry.

She nodded vigorously. "Yes! You have no idea how badly I've been needing this. God, this pregnancy has made me horny!"

Loke smirked at seeing her flushed face. "It won't be easy containing myself, but I'll try."

His thrusts were maddeningly slow. Loke really had to fight against getting rough. They also could not use his favorite position, but he was happy for any bit of pleasure he could give her. Plus now he did not have to worry about ineffective condoms. They could make love freely, no barrier between his body and hers.

Perhaps it was the hormones or the added pressure from the baby in her uterus, but Lucy felt this was far more intense than their usual sex. She began to scream and shudder after only a few minutes. The muscles in her lower stomach contracted. She worried for a moment, but the feeling was too overwhelmingly euphoric for her doubts to last for long.

"You came already?" he teased. "Will you even give me time to work myself up?"

"Shut up," she huffed with one last shiver.

"I think someone is still hungry," he growled. "Good! Because this Lion is starving!"

He kept on, and she panted wearily. He began to speed up. Despite mentally reminding himself to be gentle, he could not stop himself. Lucy's cries never turned to pain. She encouraged him on with her shouts, pleading for more, more, more.

He suddenly changed positions and moved her to lay on her side. Lucy sighed that the pressure was off her belly. Loke spooned into her, wrapped his arms around her chest, and nibbled her shoulders.
"You're so sexy, looking like this," he sighed warmly as he fondled her breasts.

"I'm fat!"

"This," he said, reaching around her stomach, "is not fat. This is love! This is the ultimate proof of love, a child in the womb. To me, it makes you incredibly sexy!" He took hold of her hips and slowly, again reminding himself to be gentle, he slid inside. She moaned as she felt him enter. "Hey Lucy," he said in a slightly teasing tone. "You realize, with me like this," and he gave her a gentle thrust, "it means two men are inside you at the same time. This is the only time I'll ever allow that."

"Shut up," she blushed, shocked he could say such a perverted thing.

He chuckled, but he glided gently again, humming to himself as he felt her buck back into him and quiver with delight. "Two men in you," he hummed. "Busy, busy girl!"

"I...I said...sh-shut up," she shuddered, beginning to pant.

With her back side up against him, he could not see her face. "Are you still okay?"

She nodded fast. For Lucy, this position felt even better. "More, Loke!" she keened.

"More?" he smirked. "I'm trying to hold back, and you want more? Naughty girl!"

"I need...faster...I...I'm gonna..."

"In that case..."

With a growl, his mouth suddenly latched onto her neck. It was his lion instinct to bite her nap and hold her. Lucy quivered at the roughness. Loke finally sped up, and Lucy screamed with a tremble. Loke felt her spasmodic gripping and cried out.

"Lucy...L-love you..." he managed to say just before tensing up and releasing with a roar.

This time, Lucy felt his fluid fill her. It was so different than with a condom. She liked the gush, the sloppy sounds, and the gentle pressure spurting into her. She wanted him to stay in her, complete her, make her whole, and never leave her feeling empty again.

Loke kept holding her. He did not want to move. He wanted to remain in this euphoria forever. He wanted to feel Lucy surrounding him, shielding him, feel himself being swallowed by her, consuming his lust. He wanted to forever remember the feel of her sweaty skin and the musky smell of sex.

"I love you so much, Lucy," he shuddered, holding onto her shoulders and never wanting to surrender her. "I love you...so very, very much!"

She was the one who finally pulled away, disconnecting their bodies. She turned around and looked deeply at his weary smile. She ran her hand through his fluffy hair and back to his ears. He purred loudly as she pet him in that spot.

"I love you, too...silly Lion," she grinned. "Should we return to the guild? Everyone is probably waiting to show you the baby's presents."

He pulled her up to lie on his chest and stroked through Lucy's disheveled blonde hair. "Not yet. I'm not done enjoying my present."

End of Chapter 19
Hot topic of the day: Is "preggers sex" safe? It depends on how you "do it." In a problem pregnancy (previous miscarriages, twins, STDs) a doctor might ban sex, but in a healthy pregnancy it's fine so long as you're not—ahem—vigorous! Positions might need to change, shallow penetration is recommended, but other than emotional issues (worries of harm to the baby, fears of looking fat) physically you can keep it up. Some doctors say don't during certain times of the pregnancy, others say IF (big if) there has been no complications, it's fine up until your water breaks. The contractions a woman feels during orgasm are totally unrelated to the ones that push out the baby. Plus, according to my friends who have kids, pregnancy can make a woman insanely horny.

Personally, I'd categorize this as a problem pregnancy. Lucy has had no complications, but that baby is growing fast. One week to go, which means Lucy is in her last month; remember, the baby is developing at thrice the speed. I did my research (seriously, I research crazy random crap) and the "spooning" position is best for third trimester sex. Also, due to swelling in a lady's nether regions, she can get multiple orgasms easier. That means more fun for less work! As for Loke, that position is definitely one he likes. Seriously, that boy has got to stop biting her neck or people will mistake this for "Twilight." XD
Shooting Star of Tears

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nagareboshi nagarete kimi no namida wo nugutte onegai
Tada koko de odayaka ni hohoendeite hoshii
- Arashi, "Namida No Nagareboshi," 涙の流れ星 — "Shooting Star of Tears"

English translation:
"Shooting star, fall away, and wipe away your tears please. At least, in this place so calm, I want for you to smile gently."

A/N: Under Japanese copyright law, the usage of quotes "as long as the quotation does not exceed what is justified for its purpose" is allowed. Therefore, I can quote Arashi. Besides, that song is awesome!

Over the next few days, Lucy and Loke could not be parted. Whenever she left her room, he was proudly beside her. A few times she came to the guild to be with friends. Whenever she did, both Loke and Proto were with her, two strange guardians. However, once Natsu began a fight with Elfman, and the only thing that prevented Lucy from getting crushed in the brawl was a glowing punch from Loke that knocked out Elfman and the Protecto-Bear somehow putting Natsu into an arm lock. No one was sure just how the stuffed animal managed that, but it looked painful. After that, Loke decided Lucy really did need to take the last week of her pregnancy easy.

The Fairy Tail ladies helped with decorating the baby’s room. Natsu’s cradle sat by one wall, toys sat on an empty part of the bookshelf, clothes were folded neatly in a small dresser, the pram carriage sat in the corner, the rainbow ice baby mobile dangled over the cradle glittering with the sunlight, and Gildarts’ Fairy Tail insignia knitted blanket laid ready to receive the precious child. Evergreen assured her it was all feng shui.

Often, Lucy stood in the doorway of the room, staring around the tiny nursery as the reality began to sink in. She was about to become a mother! Somehow, seeing that room made this whole ordeal more real. Still, she did not feel ready. No wonder women needed nine months to prepare! She had only three.

Yet it always seemed that, just as the gravity of this responsibility began to settle onto her and crush her shoulders, Loke would slip up behind her, wrap his arms around her, and kiss the side of her neck. She knew she could rely on him. He had gone from guild member, to guardian Spirit, to trusted companion, to a secret boyfriend, to a lover, and now...

Now they were about to have a child!

A part of her still shivered, worried if she could really do this, if she was up to the challenge. Alone, she was unsure, but with Loke...she felt confident she could trust him to support her, just as he always had!

Loke wished he never had to leave her. In bed, in the shower, eating meals, or just sitting lazily on the couch together, he wanted to be next to Lucy for all time. Yet there were moments when he felt
the pain return. He tried to time his disappearances for when she was busy. When she left to the bathroom, he would open his gate and step through for a brief respite.

Always, he stepped into that small, dark cell. It harshly reminded him that he was not free to be with Lucy. He was on parole, nothing more. He would need to tell her the truth one day, but he wanted to wait, at least until the baby arrived. His trips to the Spirit World were always brief, like catching his breath after a long dive, only to plunge back into the suffocating Human World. It was a necessity, but it tormented him to remember that he was not Human like Lucy. They were from different worlds.

They would always have that separation.

Unless he opted to stay Human. Then he would lose all of his magic. He would be weak, grow feeble, and one day he would die. Once, he had been willing to die to atone for Karen's death. Now, he was willing to grow old and die for Lucy's love. It was the threat of losing his magic that made him hesitate.

The ring was back on his finger. She had given it to him the first day he returned. Whenever he was forced to retreat back to his prison cell, he would look at that ring, then gaze through the narrow window at the Spirit World sky and see twinkling Regulus. During those moments, Haftorang's words rang through his ears again. There was one way to stay with Lucy and not lose his power. One horrible way! The ultimate sin for a Celestial Spirit, one for which a thousand rebirths would not atone.

Then he would return just in time for Lucy to step back into the room. He would watch her slow, shuffling gait as she walked with the weight of the baby pulling on her. He would see her gentle smile and shimmering brown eyes. For a brief moment, Loke felt a calm resolve.

He would do it! He would seek out Haftorang, and damn any Spirit who tried to stop him! To stay with Lucy forever, he would do anything!

Then she would curl into his arms, he would rub the belly, feel the small kicks inside, and his conviction wavered. Doing that would condemn both of them to an eternity in hiding. Lucy would of course not be able to use any of her Spirit Keys anymore, severely limiting her magic abilities. She might also have to leave Fairy Tail. Could he really force her to pick between him and her "family"? To remain eternal with Lucy at the cost of losing her keys and leaving her family in Fairy Tail...

Or to grow old with Lucy at the cost of losing his magic and never returning to his family in the Spirit World.

The two paths teetered before him, and neither one seemed appealing. Loke knew only one thing for certain. He would not give up on Lucy!

November 17

"Lu-chan, you're coming with us, right?" Levy asked with huge, puppy-dog eyes. "The Leonid meteor shower is tonight. You can't miss it!"

Lucy sat in a slump. The baby had been moving on her all day. Positioning for delivery, Wendy said. Everyone had noticed how her bulging belly dropped over the past few days. The child within was getting ready to come out.

"I don't know," Lucy muttered. "If Porlyusica's estimates were right, I should be having the baby at
any moment."

"Women are early and late all the time," Levy waved off. "You can't just sit in bed until the time comes. I've read that walking helps a lot and can ease labor pains. And maybe she was off a little. Unless you two know precisely when you made this little guy," she chuckled naughtily.

Lucy blushed in a fluster. "Well, I am rather bored. Stargazing...I haven't done that in a long time."

"Perfect! It's a clear night, the moon is new, so it's ideal for meteor showers."

Loke suddenly reappeared looking refreshed. Lucy realized he had changed clothes in the Spirit World, too. "What's up, pretty ladies?" he grinned. He came up to Lucy and gave her a kiss on the head. "You know what tonight is?"

"Yes, the Leonid meteor shower."

Loke paused and blinked. "Is it really?" A slight frown came to his face, and his eyes drifted away in some long-forgotten memory.

"Aww, it's your meteor shower, Leo the Lion," Levy joshed, elbowing him in the ribs and jolting him out of his thoughts.

Loke rubbed the back of his head, scratching out his orange hair. "So it is!" he said with a hesitant laugh. Still, his face winced as he walked away to the kitchen.

"What's up with him?" Levy whispered to Lucy.

"He was probably more thinking that tonight is when the baby is due. He's been eager all week."

"I bet! It's so wonderful that he's back in time. Although, to be honest," Levy whispered, "I can't picture Loke as a father. Maybe because of those three years he was in the guild, always bringing new girlfriends and...oh, you don't need to hear about that," she laughed nervously, realizing what she was saying just a little too late.

"He had his reasons," Lucy sighed. "Besides, I think he'll make a pretty good father. He's loyal and protective."

"No doubting that!" Levy nodded firmly. "Come on, come on! Everyone's heading out already."

An hour later, the members of Fairy Tail were sitting on a hill just outside the city, lying back on blankets, wrapped thickly against the autumn chill, pointing whenever someone saw a streaking meteor slash the sky in fiery brilliance.

As Loke watched with the rest of them, he felt the unique differences between himself and these Humans. When he saw a shooting star, he thought of how brief yet brilliant life could be. When a star fell, sure, it could shine with glory to awe the world, but it burned out so fast. It was not a quiet, noble death either, but shocking, painful, exposed to the world. Compared to the eternally fixed stars, those meteorites were doomed things.

Celestial Spirits saw shooting stars as a memorial to fallen friends. Loke knew that the symbolism went both ways. A fallen star can never return, but those brief streaks of glory were also likened to Human lives. They burned with amazement that awed the world, yet they were over so quickly.

All these Fairies...sure, they shined brightly now. Lucy, Natsu, Gray, Erza: he looked at each of
them, all in the prime of youth, coming into their full strength. Perhaps they were not at their strongest yet, but this was when they could fight tirelessly. In another ten years, they would need to rest and catch their breath after a hard battle. In twenty years, a single fight might wear them out for weeks. In fifty years...

Bright and glorious, yet so brief. How soon would it all be over?

Loke heard a cough, and he looked over to Makarov sipping hot cocoa against the chill. Erza and Mirajane sat on either side of him, and the white-haired lady helped to adjust the blanket wrapped around his shoulders. Really, a man his age should not be out on a night like this. He was almost ninety!

Ninety! Loke could easily remember ninety years ago. He could remember nine hundred years ago. Nine thousand!

And Lucy, she had another seven or eight decades of life perhaps. The thought of losing her so soon, to stand there and gaze upon her as she burned with glory only to fade like the streak of a shooting star...

"Hey, Loke?"

Her voice pulled him out of the melancholy thoughts. He tried to smile at her, but she could always tell when something was wrong with one of her friends.

"I know you don't particularly like seeing shooting stars, but you seem even more sad tonight than usual. What is it?"

He stroked down her golden hair. Did it matter if he only got to be with her for seven or eight decades? Even a shooting star can grant a wish and be remembered for all time.

"I'm fine," he said with a tenderly quiet voice.

"Liar."

"Oi, Loke," Natsu called from down the hill. "Why is this called the Leonid meteor shower? That's, like, after you, right?"

"Aye! 'Cause you're a grownup cat," Happy grinned.

"Hey, that's right," Mirajane realized. "All these shooting stars seem to be coming from the Leo Constellation."

The guild looked back to him. Loke smiled at them, such brightly burning Fairies. Then he looked up at the eternal stars. "Once upon a time, long, long ago..."

Wendy clapped. "Ooh, a story!"

"There were four stars, four very...special stars. Royal Stars."

Lucy jolted when he said that term.

"Royal?" Juvia asked in surprise.

"Indeed," Loke nodded. "Those four ruled as kings of the heavenly realm for many ages, but one day they decided it was time to move on, to pass leadership over to the next generation. On this day, long ago, the four left the heavens never to be seen again. Their stars remained, but not their spirits,"
he sighed.

His eyes looked sadly at Regulus beating like a heart in the sky. A shooting star zipped by, slashing that heart in fiery glitter that burned off and faded like a scar.

"All the other stars and constellations wept...all but one," Loke said with a distant gleam in his eyes. "The Zodiac Lion refused to mourn, for it had been their choice to burn out in glory rather than remain and regret it. He gathered all the mourners into his hall to comfort them. As their tears fell to the Human World, they streaked through the sky, emanating from the Leo Constellation, as if the heart of the Lion itself was bleeding. One of those Royal Stars that fell that day was indeed the Heart of the Lion, Regulus, the King Star. Because the Lion lost his Heart that day, the others thought he didn't weep because he felt nothing. But they were wrong," he whispered with a sad gaze. "Every year on that day, the Lion cries out silently. The tears he couldn't show to his friends now streak the sky, and all the world can see just how he mourns."

"Loke," Lucy whispered, taking his hand in comfort.

He smiled over to her and squeezed her fingers. "Or at least, that's how the story goes."

"These are star tears?" Wendy asked, looking up at the sky with a sad face.

Mirajane also frowned. "That makes it a bit depressing to watch."

"Hey," Loke tried to laugh. "That's just a story, right? The shooting stars...they can be a glorious thing, too. And the stars that fall, I wonder sometimes...do they want to be mourned, or would they rather be admired?" He looked over to Lucy and smiled at her. "Isn't it better if others enjoy that brief life? Celebrate the glory of the moment rather than worry about the end."

She felt a bit sad for him, wondering how an eternal Celestial Spirit like him must see her, a Human, an mortal being. He squeezed her hand to encourage her. He could see the worries in her face just as if she had spoken those words that darkened her heart.

"Life is ephemeral, but love is eternal," he whispered to her, then gave her a kiss.

Lucy suddenly cried out and grabbed her belly. Loke's eyes widened.

"And talking about life...! Wendy!" he shouted urgently, already beginning to freak out.

"What happened?" Lisanna fretted.

Happy giggled and hid his mouth. "Lucy peed herself."

"I did not!" she screamed.

"Did her water break?" Wendy shouted as she hurried over.

Gray leaped away from Juvia and rushed over. Natsu also scrambled up the hill as soon as he heard Lucy scream. Loke, Gray, and Natsu all worked together to help Lucy up to her feet. Her skirt and the blanket they had been sitting on were soaked.

"Oi, that smells funny," Natsu frowned.

"It's pee," giggled Happy.

"Is not!" Lucy shrieked.
Charle huffed disdainfully. "Idiot male-cat! Her water broke. The baby is coming."

"Bisca, Alzack," Erza barked. "You know where Porlyusica's house is. Hurry there and tell her Lucy is in labor. Natsu, Juvia, Mirajane, hurry ahead to the guild and get some water boiling."

"Can do!" Natsu saluted, and he rushed ahead of the rest.

As Erza continued to shout orders like a general preparing for battle, Gray and Loke helped Lucy along with Wendy following behind giving words of encouragement. The two men looked over to one another. Loke looked nervous and fearful. He knew Lucy was about to go through something painful, a trauma he had inadvertently caused. A little too well, he remembered how Gray had threatened him the day they first found out that Lucy was pregnant. His chest pained him as he remembered when Gray had stabbed him with an icy pike.

"For every pain she suffers, I will inflict it back on you ten-fold. For every tear she sheds as she goes through a hell of agony all because you couldn't keep your pants on, I will take three drops of your blood. And if—Heaven forbid—the worst happens, if she dies in childbirth, if she dies because your demonspawn is too powerful for her fragile body, if she dies because some goddamn rule was broken—a rule you knew about—then so help me, I will hunt you down to whatever realm you slither away into, and I will torture you every day for the rest of my life. Seventy or eighty years might be a drop in the bucket to an immortal Spirit like you, but I will make every minute of it a nightmare you'll never forget, no matter how many eons you live."

Even with the memory of that threat ringing in Loke's ears, Gray gave him a lighthearted smile.

"You'll both be fine," he assured the nervous father-to-be. "You were my partner in the S-Class trial, so I'll be your partner for this. We'll both help Lucy get through this."

Loke smiled thankfully and nodded. He felt relieved that Gray was being supportive.

"Good," Lucy huffed in pain. "I get to crush both of your hands."

End of Chapter 20

Chapter End Notes

=^._.^= "Happy here. Can you believe Rhov has written twenty chapters already? She told me she's giving it her all to write this to the end. Let's give her some fish to celebrate."

"All right! I'm all fired up!"

=^o.o^= "Natsu! You're here! Waaah, what did you do to Rhov?"

"Whaddaya mean? I didn't do anything to her. She said something about...um...Naa-no-rye-moh? She's writing a novel like Lucy. Isn't that cool?"

=^.-.-^= "So much for 'giving it her all' if she's off writing another novel. I think that's what's called being promiscuous."

"Hey, Happy, do you think Lucy will lay an egg?"
"Ehhhh?"
"Well, you came from an egg."
"That's true. I...dunno, Natsu."
*grrrr...*
"Do you hear something?"

*Rhov appears and smacks Natsu on the back of the head* "Shut up, both of you. You, pyro boy, go boil water!"

"A-aye sir!"

"And you, baka neko!" *dark aura* "Just who were you calling promiscuous?"

^ToT^= "Tasukete kudasai! Kowai Rhov!"

Seriously, how did that flame-brain sneak in? Well, since I'm here...yep, I'm doing Nanowrimo. Also, Emil C suggested a long distance party for Chapter 20. I've brought hard cider for those old enough to read this story, and apple juice for the kiddies reading this when their parents aren't looking. I also brought the music.

*stadium echo effect* Now introducing...-ucing...-ing.. the hit boy band from Japan...-apan...-pan...ARASHI! *fangirl squeals*

If you've never heard Arashi, you're missing out on one amazing band. You can google for a video of my epigraph song, "Namida No Nagareboshi" from Arashi's Tokyo Dome concert. Hear it! Fall in love! I translated it myself. Um...I hope I got it right, my Japanese isn't that good. ^_^'

Loke's tale of the origin of the Leonid meteor shower is my own creation. I love inventing legends for things, and this one fits my fanfiction nicely. Is it real? Is it a mere story? Who knows! Baby's coming! Heheee, I'm excited! Now back to writing my Nanowrimo novel.
"Don't push yet, Lucy!"

"Get it out!"

Loke cringed under the crushing grip that threatened to break every bone in his hand. "Ow, ow, ow, ow."

Gray's face drew up in agony as Lucy squeezed his other hand. "You could've...trimmed...your nails...Lucy."

Wendy and Charle were at the foot of the birthing bed. "The contraction is almost over," the little blue-haired girl encouraged. "Hang in there."

"It's not time to push," Charle told her brusquely. "If you don't listen to what Wendy tells you, you'll hurt yourself."

"Get it oooooooout!" Lucy shrieked.

Gray covered the closer ear with his free hand. "No one warned me to bring earplugs."

Suddenly, Lucy grabbed Loke's necktie and yanked him down into her face. He gagged and began to turn purple. "You listen to me, you horny sperm-infested tomcat. I am never going through this again, understood? I'd rather go without sex for the rest of my life than have another baby."

She threw him aside with a surprisingly strong shove that sent Loke sprawling backward across the floor, then she howled and put a doubly hard crunch onto Gray's hand. The ice wizard cried out and grabbed his wrist as if he could freeze the pain before the nerve signals reached his brain. Slowly, Loke rose back onto his feet, yanked the choking tension out of his tie, and tried to straighten his shirt.

"Please tell me you're exaggerating on the no sex part," he mumbled, keeping back for a moment.

"Never again!" she screamed. "No more babies. When this is over, I'm getting my damn tubes tied! Gaaaaaah! It hurts, it hurts, it hurts!"

Outside of the birthing room, Natsu stood in the hall leaning against a doorway separating the guild kitchens from the infirmary. Even with the infirmary door shut, he heard Lucy's shrieks. His brow tensed darkly, and his arms folded across his chest as if he had to hold himself back from rushing in there and rescuing her.

Mirajane peeked her head out. "Natsu, we need more fire to boil water."
"Uh...yeah," he pouted. Through the hall, they heard another shriek. Natsu sneered and began to lean forward as if to run in there, yet he barely restrained himself.

Mirajane came up beside him. "What's wrong, Natsu?"

He had a serious face as Lucy's moan trailed off. "I don't like hearing Lucy in pain," he muttered. "Makes me wanna fight and protect her, take away all her pain, save her from all her tears. Except..." He sneered and swallowed back his misgivings. "...this isn't a battle I can fight. I can't do anything. All I can do is sit here helplessly, while she's in there suffering." His frown deepened. "It's not fair."

Mirajane had a sympathetic smile. "Women have been having babies since the beginning of humankind."

"I know," he grumbled petulantly. "Doesn't mean I like that Lucy's gotta suffer just to have a baby."

"Lucy's a strong woman. She can take care of herself. Worrying for her shows that you're a good friend. Now come on, we need to boil water to sterilize things. You might not be able to take away her pain with your fists, but you can make sure she and the baby stay healthy by providing a sterile environment."

"Romeo can tend the fire," he muttered. There were no more noises down the hall, but he still wanted to stay nearby, guarding Lucy like he had always done.

Mirajane's smile tightened slightly. "Romeo set off one of his smelly yellow fires again." She sighed, and only those who knew this smiling demon could tell she was annoyed. "Boys will be boys."

Lucy finally managed to lie back and rest a little. Wendy applied another warm compress to help ease the pain between her thighs. Gray wiped off some blood from where Lucy's nails had dug into his skin and began to wrap his hand with a bandage. Loke held onto her, wishing he could flow energy into her like she could do to him.

Suddenly, Virgo popped up. "Princess, I'm here to help however I may."

Lucy looked up in confusion. "Virgo? Are you here under your own power?"

"Since Princess is here, I have the strength to do so; however, I can't be here for long. Will I be punished?"

Wendy looked up to the pink-haired maid. "We need more sterile towels, and Lucy could have some ginger tea to keep her strength up."

"Understood." Virgo drilled down to leave.

Charle sighed in frustration. "And now we have a hole in the floor. Sheesh! Gray, fill that hole before someone falls in, run to the kitchen to catch that pink maid, and tell her to use the door."

Gray rose to his feet, still shaking out his injured hand. Damn, Lucy's grip was hard! He filled Virgo's hole with ice and shifted a rug over it. "Do you need anything, Loke?"

"Ask Virgo if she has any seirei tea."

"Got it," and he left.

Lucy looked over to Loke in concern. "Are you feeling weak already?"
"Not really," he smiled to keep her calm, "but I don't want to miss a moment of this. Now, don't worry about me and get some rest."

"Back hurts. Need to walk," she huffed. Loke helped her to roll off the bed and rubbed out her aching lower back.

There was another poof of pink smoke, and Aries nervously looked around. "I...I felt Lucy in pain so I managed to come. I'm sorry," she cringed, rubbing her knees together in a tremble.

Lucy looked up happily. "All my Spirits are worried about me."

"Of course we are," Loke smiled, and he kissed her forehead.

Aries nodded happily. "We all want to help. Cancer already requested if he can cut the umbilical cord. Can I do anything?" she bleated.

Lucy hummed and considered the Ram's abilities. "While I take a walk, could you make the bed softer? And I could really use a better pillow."

Aries grinned happily. "Of course. Leave it to me!"

Gray walked into the main guild hall and asked Mirajane for some ginger tea. He leaned against the bar counter and unconsciously rubbed out his bandaged hand. Before he knew it, Juvia was at his side.

"Did Lucy hurt Gray-sama?" she asked in wide-eyed worry.

"Nah, it's nothing," he muttered. "She's got a grip, that's all."

The rain woman glowered. "Just this once, Juvia will allow Lucy to hold Gray-sama's hand."

Levy bounced up to him. "How's Lu-chan? Is the baby here yet? We can hear her shouting even out here. Is she okay?"

Gray sighed in annoyance at all the questions, but then he saw everyone in the guild was looking at him anxiously. Not a single one had gone home for the night. They were all worried for their nakama.

"The labor is going fast," he admitted. "Wendy's worried that it might be too fast for her body. She's not dilating quickly enough."

Levy covered her mouth in fear. "Is she in danger?"

Gray looked aside, but he saw Natsu standing in the doorway staring at him. He understood that hard look in the dragon slayer's eyes. He felt the same in his heart. The two of them had always protected Lucy, but now she was in a fight they could not take on themselves.

Instead of answering honestly, Gray asked, "Where's Porlyusica?"

Warren tapped the side of his head to communicate with Bisca and Alzack. "They're almost here."

"Good," he said wearily. Mirajane handed him the ginger tea, and Gray began to head back. He paused as he walked by Natsu. Gray knew he needed to talk and understood what bothered the dragon slayer.
"Is there anything I can do? Anything at all?" Natsu asked, his voice hovering toward desperation.

Gray glanced over to him and wondered if his eyes looked just as tormented. "The warm compresses are really bringing relief. That hot jacuzzi soak also relieved some pain. Wendy is trying to conserve her magic to heal after the birth, so the heat and the teas are helping." He patted Natsu's slumped shoulder. "This is a battle she has to fight, but let's back her up, okay?"

They heard another scream down the hall. Natsu growled in instinctual protectiveness, but Gray grabbed his arm to hold him back. Instead, the dragon slayer turned sharply and ran back toward the kitchens. Gray sighed and headed in the direction of Lucy's shouts.

"Lucy, don't push yet! You're not ready," Wendy shouted fretfully.

"I want it out!"

"Breathe! Fast pants. Don't strain. You aren't fully dilated."

"It huuuuuurt!"

Someone tapped Gray's shoulder, and he jolted. Virgo stared at him with a blank expression. She had a silver tray with a kettle of steaming water, a teacup, and a tiny whisk, while her other arm held a bundle of freshly cleaned towels.

"If you freeze Princess's tea, I'll have to punish you," the Maiden warned.

"Huh?" Gray looked down to the cup. Unconsciously, he had begun his Ice-Make magic as if to fight. "Ah, sorry."

Virgo walked in, set the towels on a table, and began preparing tea for Loke. Gray also walked in, set the ginger tea to the side, and took up Lucy's hand to help her through the agonizing contraction. This time, he did not mind that she jabbed her nails into him. He held onto her firmly, glad he could at least be a little helpful.

Barely five minutes passed before Porlyusica arrived. Lucy was between contractions, feeling calmer and drinking the ginger tea while Loke sipped the *seirei* tea. Gray gave Lucy a soothingly cool shoulder massage. Aries added more pink fluff to her pillow, and Virgo stood stiff in the corner awaiting orders. Wendy leaned back trying to conserve her energy and calm her worries while Charle patted her leg in what little comfort she could give.

"Hmph!" Charle huffed indignantly. "I happen to have very good hygiene."

"Same goes for the Spirits. Only the father stays."

"Lucy?" Aries asked with a tremble.
"You've been a huge help," Lucy smiled to both her and Virgo. "Let's follow the doctor's orders."

"Okay. I'm sorry."

"Will I be punished?"

"Out!" Porlyusica snapped, then both Aries and Virgo poofed away.

"What about me?" Gray challenged.

"Wear a shirt and you can stay. You, drink this." She shoved a flask into Lucy's face. "It'll speed up your dilation. Drink it all." She settled onto a stool Wendy offered and peered between Lucy's knees. "This little cub is eager, isn't he? Like the lordly lion rushing on his prey," she mumbled, quoting an ancient saying. "I see you've been using hot baths; a good technique. Warm compresses, good, good. I smell ginger and black cohosh." The ancient healer looked down to Wendy. "You've studied well, little Sky Dragon." The young girl grinned proudly. "Now comes the hard part."

"Hard?" Lucy cried out in terror. "No way! It can't get harder."

Bisca walked in and calmly sat beside her. "It'll be okay, Lucy. I had a baby, and it was fine. There's nothing to be scared about. Like they say: Giving birth to a baby is easier than worrying about it."

"No offense to past sages," Lucy huffed, "but the idiot who said that never pushed a boulder out of his vagin... ahhhhh!" She suddenly tensed up in agony. Immediately, Gray and Loke grabbed her hands.

"Good, the medicine is kicking in already," Porlyusica observed calmly. "Eight centimeters dilation. We're ready for some pushes."

"Thank God!" growled Lucy.

"Okay, one-two-three, push. Ready? One... two... three..."

"Ow!" she tensed up worse than before, crushing Loke's and Gray's hands. "Fucking hell, that hurts like a bitch!"

Gray was shocked that Lucy used language like that.

"Ow, dammit, stings! What the fu-owwwwwww!" she howled. "No, that's even worse. Hurts, hurts, hurts! Ow!"

"Wendy, wipe the blood and heal that," Porlyusica ordered hurriedly.

"What happened?" Loke shouted in terror.

"Almost over," Porlyusica hummed as she concentrated on what was happening below. As if on cue, Lucy let up and collapsed back onto the super fluffy pillow. "It was a perineal tear, that's all. It's common, happens if the skin can't stretch."

Lucy curled into Loke with sobs of weariness. He hugged her protectively and stroked her sweat-drenched hair, wishing he could take on all her pain. "I don't wanna go through that again," Lucy whimpered weakly.

Bisca massaged her shoulders. "It'll be over soon. Try to stay focused."

"Are you okay, Lucy?" Gray asked while Wendy's magic glowed between the bent knees.
"Just tell me when it's over," she laughed tiredly. "I really wanna sleep. What time is it?"

"Past eleven."

"Bed time for mommy," she sang out in a weak quaver. Before she could rest, she spasmed again. "Ow! Not again. Don't I get to rest?"

"Are the contractions coming too fast?" Loke asked in confusion.

"A bit fast," Porlyusica mused as she focused on the birth canal, "but we're getting near the end. All right, the baby's head is in position. It's all pushing from here out."

"Really? You can see the head?" In excitement, Gray jumped up and hopped over to look.

Loke flared up. "Don't you dare look at Lucy's..."

However, the moment Gray saw, his face went pale, he looked as sick as Natsu on a train, and he fainted.

Porlyusica sighed in exasperation. "This is why I hate when Humans procreate. Someone drag him out."

"Erza!" shouted Bisca. The door pounded open, and Erza already had her hand on the pummel of her sword, ready for battle. "Gray fainted. Please take him away."

"That," Porlyusica snapped, "is a baby's head about to come out of a woman's body."

"Oh my God!" Erza cringed, looking almost as sick as Gray had been. "Women can do that? That's not physically possible."

Bisca chuckled when she saw that the fearless Titania had turned many shades paler. "Our bodies are built to do that."

"My body wasn't!" Erza shouted, gawking in shock. "Don't you, like, cut it out or something?"

"You can," tittered Bisca.

"Owwww!" Lucy howled. "Dammit that hurts!"

"Contractions are coming faster. Wendy, wipe up this blood."

"Lucy!" Erza shouted, seeing the blood and hearing Lucy's screams. "Oh God, is she gonna die?"

"What?" Lucy shrieked.

"Get her out of here," Porlyusica snapped. "Everyone out but the midwife and the father. You, green-haired girl, you said you have a kid. You can play the roll of a doula. The rest of you noisy, smelly Humans, out."

"Alzack!" Bisca called out, and the man in a poncho stepped in from where he had been at the doorway watching with slight amusement. "Get Gray. I'll take care of Erza." She put her arm around
Erza's armor. "It's okay, Lucy is strong."

"I'm never having kids," Erza exclaimed, shuddering.

"I'll be right back to help you, Lucy," promised Bisca. "Don't worry, it really isn't that bad."

"Says who?" growled Lucy.

Alzack grabbed Gray around the arms and dragged him across the floor. "Brings back memories," he chuckled softly. "I almost fainted too when Bisca had little Asuka." He shut the infirmary door behind him with an encouraging smile for Loke.

Porlyusica sighed as Lucy panted quietly in exhaustion. "Finally! Damn smelly Humans!"

End of Chapter 21

Chapter End Notes

Next week I'll reveal the baby's name based on your votes.

Midwife versus Doula: Due to certain medical issues, if I have kids I'd have to go all-natural, so I've researched about midwifery, doulas, alternative birthing techniques, herbs, teas, etc. What's a midwife and doula? Midwives are trained to deliver babies in natural settings rather than cold hospitals. A doula is basically a coach whose job is to reassure the mother before, during, and after birth: calm down a nervous mother, give massages, use aromatherapy, teach the mother how to nurse, etc. Midwives deal with the medical aspect, doulas deal with the emotional aspect.
In a luxurious country ryokan in northern Fiore, Haftorang carefully carried a cup of hot tea in his translucent fins and brought it to Kefira. The raven-haired former queen sat by a hearth staring at the fire, yet her gaze fixed beyond the flickering flames, back through memories dating to ancient times. Snow was common this far north, especially around this time of year, but a chill blew off the nearby mountains, making the storm outside even more fierce. To her, it almost felt like that dreadful mountain cave in Kohinur where she had been forced to live for far too long as she bided her time.

"'Tis almost time, mistress-s-s," Haftorang told her.

She nodded solemnly. "Aye, and an appropriate day for the child of the Lion to come forth into this world."

"The Leonid meteor shower," he muttered with a sad, distant gleam in his round eyes.

Haftorang remembered that day over four hundred years ago. Legends said that the Lion was the only Celestial Spirit who did not cry when the Royal Stars left, but there was one other who refrained from tears. On that day, Piscis Austrinus, the Southern Fish, left the Spirit World in anger, rarely returning, and never spoke to the Lion again until one fateful battle when they stood on opposite sides.

Kefira chuckled to herself. "The day the Lion lost his Heart, and now he gaineth a new heart, a family, a reason to continue existing. I wonder how he will react when he all that is taken from him too. Fate is indeed a cruel mistress."

"Will thy plans fail if the child is born without us there to begin?" he asked.

"Not in the least. We'll let the little wench have her bundle of joy for now. Although we shouldn't wait too long, not like we did with Zeref. That was a mistake."

"We had no way of knowing such a being existed in this world," he reminded her. "We simply discovered him too late."

"That's true. And if not for thine ability to sense other Celestial Spirits, I might have killed him along with his mother. Now we know what we're looking for and exactly where to find it. There's no rush. We shall give her half a year. The child should be grown enough by then. In the meantime...how is thy strength, Haftorang?" Kefira asked in genuine concern.

"Returning fast, mistress-s-s. I apologize that I was weakened after my fight. I've not needed to merge with Fomalhaut like that in centuries-s-s. I nearly forgot how exhilarating it can be."

The pale queen smiled. "'Twas glorious to behold, just like the old days! I'm still hoping Leo will agree to join us. I miss how he used to look when he merged with Regulus. Truly marvelous!"
"Perhaps next time we can be more...persuasive."

She hummed and sensually licked her lips. "I certainly hope so!"

Meanwhile, south in Magnolia, the sky was crisp and clear, perfect for watching shooting stars that flashed like tiny fireworks in the sky. However, in Fairy Tail's guild hall, all the members were inside waiting for a much different miracle to shine that night.

"Hahaha! You fainted?" Natsu teased, slapping the dining table until his drink splashed out. "What an idiot!"

Gray was still holding his head as he sipped a tea Mirajane offered to him. "You didn't see it. I will never again think any woman is weak."

"You're such a wimp, droopy eyes!"

Mirajane smiled sweetly. "You shouldn't say that, Natsu. Erza almost fainted too."

Natsu looked over to where Levy and Lisanna were trying to help Erza overcome her shivering trauma. He pouted that even someone as fearless as the Titania had reacted badly. Just how horrible was childbirth anyway? He figured women just popped out a baby, yet Lucy's shrieks, Gray's fainting, and Erza's terror told him that it was a lot harder. He also did not like that he kept smelling Lucy's blood.

"Umm," Juvia muttered, pressing her index fingers together nervously. "Does this mean Gray-sama doesn't want children?"

"I dunno," the ice mage mused. "It's not something I've really thought about. I guess it depends on if my future wife wants to be a mother. After all, she's the one who has to go through all that, so I'd leave it up to her. Girls probably think about those things more than guys anyway, right Juvia?"

She jolted in shock. "W-what?"

"Well, you're a girl," he figured with a lazy shrug. "Do you ever think about crazy stuff like having kids?"

Her cheeks slowly turned pink. "Y-yes, Juvia has thought about it. Juvia wants a big family one day." She covered her cheeks and rushed away before she embarrassed herself. "Juvia and Gray-sama are already talking about starting a family. Oh my! I...I'm not ready for something that big. We should be married first. Oh, Gray-sama!" she sighed dreamily, imagining a dozen blue and black haired babies all around as she and Gray held one another romantically and spoke in low tones.

"How about we try for one more baby, Ju-Ju-chan?"

"Oh Gray-sama, you said only one more last time."

"Does that mean you don't want more babies?"

"No! Many, many more, as many as Gray-sama wants!"

"What I really want is just you, Ju-Ju-chan. After all, it's trying for babies that's most fun!"

"Oooh, Gray-sama!" Juvia sighed aloud, hugging herself in happiness.
Cana set her beer barrel down and pouted at the rain woman. "What's up with her?"

"How about you, Cana?" asked Macao. "Have you ever thought about having kids?"

Gildarts coughed hard and sprayed his ale out all over the table. "You lecherous old goat, asking my daughter that! You're a hundred years too early to be thinking that way."

Macao held his hands up with a nervous sweat. "It was just an innocent question. And what do you mean, a hundred years too early? I have a kid too, you know! I mean, don't you want to be a grandfather, Gildarts?"

"I'm too young for that," he said stubbornly.

"I ain't havin' kids," Cana insisted. "Now that I know pregnant women can't drink alcohol, I don't want any."

Gildarts' mouth dropped, and his eyes went huge with sadness. "But...but how am I going to have grandchildren to play with in my old age?"

Macao chuckled into his beer mug. "Oh, so now you want some?"

"I'll adopt," Cana snapped.

Lisanna smiled dreamily. "I want a boy and a girl. I already know what I want to name them."

"Oh?" Levy asked with interest. "You have it all planned out, eh?"

"Uh-huh! Jane for the girl, after my sister Mirajane."

"How sweet! And for the boy?"

Lisanna blushed and shook her head. "Can't say." She covered her mouth as she tittered cutely. "It's a secret."

Max leaned over to Warren. "I bet she wants to name the boy Igneel."

Laki hummed with a blissful smile. "Propagating offshoots is the greatest joy for women."

"Offshoots?" Droy questioned perplexedly. "Like bamboo shoots?"

"I mean germination," Laki snapped. "You know, stamens and pistils."

"Pistols?" Jet asked in confusion.

"Huh, pistols?" Alzack looked over fast at hearing his second favorite subject...just after Bisca and Asuka, of course! "What about pistols?"

Laki sighed in frustration. "You men are truly helpless. It's a miracle I haven't run off to Blue Pegasus already."

Mirajane brought a calming tea over to Erza's table and set it down in front of her. "How about you, Erza? Have you ever thought about if you want children some day?"

"N-never idea," Erza shivered, and her armor clinked together. "Now that I've seen that! How? How can women do that? The horror..."
"What about you, Levy?" Lisanna asked with interest.

"Eh, me? Sure, I want a family someday, but I'm in no hurry," the blunette bookworm grinned. A few people noticed that Gajeel humphed with a very faint smirk.

Elfman thumped his table and declared, "It's manly to have children."

Evergreen snapped at him, "If it's so manly, it should be men going through the pain."

Freed cast a furtive glance over to the bartender. "How about you, Mira?"

Her blue eyes sparkled as she smiled brightly to everyone in the guild hall and declared, "I always wanted a really, really big family!"

Just as she said that, Lucy let out a shriek they all heard clearly, followed by a sobbing cry. "I wanna diiiie!"

Cana set down her barrel and swallowed hard. "Are you sure about that, Mira?"

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Cana set down her barrel and swallowed hard. "Are you sure about that, Mira?"

The white-haired lady hesitated with worry.

Erza muttered to herself. "Horror... blood... what I saw... impossible for a woman..."

Lisanna hummed to herself. "Do you think Lucy might retire?"

Natsu jolted at that. "What? Retire? Why would she do that?"

"Well," she reasoned, "now she'll have a baby to raise."

"That doesn't mean she has to give up being in Fairy Tail," he shouted.

"But Natsu," Lisanna pouted, "Lucy has to take it easy for a while, and your team always takes really challenging missions."

"We can take easy ones," he insisted.

Gray nodded in agreement. "We'll only do things Lucy can do."

"She can still do easy missions and leave the baby with a babysitter," Alzack told the group. "Bisca does that now after she took a year off to raise Asuka."

"A whole year?" Natsu whined. "I don't want Lucy to miss out for a whole year. Team Natsu wouldn't be the same without her around."

"It might be easier if she joins another team for a while," Freed reasoned.

Bickslow laughed loudly with his tongue lolling out. "Lucy could join us. The Thunder God Team could use a cute cheerleader."

"If Loke can stay around more," Mirajane reasoned, "it's natural that she'll want to go on missions with him instead."

Natsu's eyes burned with stubbornness. "We can take Loke with us. He's good in a fight. I still wanna fight him now that he's at his full strength. Hey Gray, who do you think would win a fight:
the Lion or the Dragon?"

"There's a saying about that," he warned. "I'm pretty sure it went...they'd both die. Of course, all I'd
have to do is tell Loke you said you thought Lucy looked fat and you'd be toast."

Flames leaped into his hands. "Say that again, ice bastard!"

Mirajane tapped his pink head, and he looked up in surprise that she was standing right there. "I
think you're proving Lisanna's point. You have to take it easy around Lucy and the baby, and that's
not in your nature, Natsu."

With a depressed slump, the dragon slayer let his flames sputter out.

Alzack thought over the dilemma. "Mira made a good point about Loke. It was easy for me and
Bisca to adjust to parenthood. We were already teammates, so I just went solo until she could join me
again. We both decided when Asuka was old enough to be left with a babysitter. Since I live with
her, I know when she's too worn out, and I adjust. It might be easier if Lucy weened her way back
into missions by going with just Loke...uh, at least for a while," he amended when Natsu gave him a
fiery glare. "Sorry Natsu, but you, Erza, and Gray shouldn't have to lower your skills just to
accommodate one person. It would hurt Fairy Tail as a whole to lose three powerful mages."

"I'm not tossing Lucy aside," Natsu yelled loyally. "I like her, she's funny, and she makes traveling
not as bad. I don't care what happens, I don't want to break up our team."

"Oi," Levy warned. "Aren't you being a little greedy? Lu-chan's gonna need time to recover from all
this, and then she has to focus on raising the baby."

"But I..."

"Natsu," Gray butted in sharply. "We just have to work hard for her. We can do solo missions or
team missions without her. We'll work on getting stronger so she doesn't have to do too much when
she first comes back. In the meantime, we can help her out with money until she's ready to return."

He puckered out his bottom lip. "Babies sure are inconvenient. Maybe I don't want any."

"Oh, don't say that," Lisanna laughed. "You already have Happy, and he helps you on missions
now, right?"

"Aye!" Happy grinned with a fish in his mouth.

"But remember when he was an egg?" Lisanna continued, blushing slightly at fond memories of
childhood. "We had to sit around the egg for a long time and keep it warm. Then when he hatched
we had to feed him and groom him and potty train him and..."

"Lisanna," Happy interrupted fast with a mortified grimace. "Don't bring up that part! It's
embarrassing." He took a quick look to see if Charle had heard. Luckily, the white cat was standing
in the doorway leading to the hall, listening intently in case Wendy called for her.

"But it was a lot of fun," Lisanna continued with a sweet smile. "Babies are the same way, a bit of a
hassle but totally worth it."

Romeo perked up. "And we kids can help out our fathers when we're big enough."

"That's right!" Macao nodded proudly at his son.
"We can even be more reliable than them," the boy added.

Macao kept on nodding. "That's..." He stopped as what his son said finally dawned on him. "You shitty brat!"

Romeo grinned at one-upping him.

"I just want Lucy back," Natsu yelled, hitting the table with his fists so hard all the drinks spilled.

"Yo, flame head," Gajeel barked. "Lucy isn't the sort to sit on her butt doing nothing. She'll be back as soon as she can manage, so stop your whiny-ass bitching. It's annoying."

Natsu was not about to complain more after Gajeel snapped at him, but he still pouted. He realized their team would never be the same again.

They heard a bang down the hall, then running feet. Everyone looked over in anticipation. The urgent steps drew closer, and suddenly Loke turned the corner. In his arms was a tiny bundle wrapped in a blue blanket.

"My son!" he beamed proudly.

The whole guild burst into cheers. The women rushed forward while the men began to laugh, dance, and celebrate.

Levy squealed, "Oh my gosh, he's got Lucy's brown eyes."

"But Loke's shape of face," Lisanna nodded excitedly. "So cute!"

"He's bald," Natsu pouted.

"Most babies are bald, idiot," Gray snapped, then he looked to Loke. "How's Lucy?"

"She's perfectly fine, just getting some rest."

"What's his name?" Mirajane asked excitedly.

The whole guild fell silent to listen eagerly. Cana was by a board where people had been taking bets on the time of birth, but she stopped giving out money to those who won. Makarov looked down from the second floor where he stood talking to Laxus. Reedus stopped working on a sketch he had begun of the moment Loke entered proudly holding the baby. Everyone listened eagerly to hear the name.

As Loke looked down at the tiny pink newborn, tears swelled thickly behind his blue shades. He smiled at all these friends, his and Lucy's second family. He knew, with a guild like this around, his son would grow up with lots of love and close friends. With a heart surging in pride, he announced:

"His name is...Luke Regulus Heartfilia!"

**End of Chapter 22**
Thanks Evee9109 for suggesting "Luke," ingeniously combining Lu-cy and Lo-ke. It quickly became a favorite! Thanks to everyone who voted. It was a good race, but these two names pulled out in front. These are the final results:

1) Luke - 42
2) Regulus - 36
3) Lejonet - 17
4) Leon - 14
5) Aslan - 13
6) Venant - 12
7) Leontos - 5
8) Len - 2
9) Leander - 1

I originally uploaded this on November 17th. Since September, I’ve been planning the timing of these chapters specifically to give you this scene on this day. Yeah, I’m weird. Happy birthday to baby Luke!
December 15th

Lucy woke up to humming. She peeked open a bleary eye and saw a silhouette by the window swaying gently. A man's voice sang a gentle lullaby.

"Na no hana batake ni irihi usure
Miwatasu yama no ha kasumi fukashi,
Harukaze soyofuku sora wo mireba,
Yuuduki kakarite nioi awashi.

Satowa no hokage mo, mori no iro mo,
Tanaka no komichi wo tadoru hito mo,
Kawazu no naku ne mo, kane no oto mo,
Sanagara kasumeru oborozukiyo."

She smiled, remembering a time when her mother sang that song to her. Loke had a calming tenor voice, and Lucy wanted to drift back to sleep hearing it. Then he crept over to the cradle, set the baby inside, and leaned over to kiss the tiny forehead.

"Sleep well, my son," he whispered proudly. When he turned back around, he saw Lucy watching him with an odd smile. "What?"

She shrugged happily. "I don't know how long it'll take me to get used to the idea of you being such a great father."

He walked over with a cocky stride. "Did you think I'd eat my young?"

"A fully loaded diaper means our son is eating well." He sat on the edge of the bed and brushed back her frazzled blonde hair. "How are you feeling?"

"A lot better. Porlyusica said I should give myself another month to recover, but Wendy's magic helped a lot. I feel perfectly fine."

"Are you up to a party? Today's the day Makarov announces the candidates for the S-Class trial. There's always a party afterward. Some of our friends haven't seen the baby since the day he was born."

"I'm up to it, but would Luke be okay?"
"I'll make sure he stays warm, and we'll bring Proto along in case Natsu turns the party into a brawl. Did you know he's terrified of that stuffed bear?"

Lucy covered her mouth and chuckled. "I don't blame him!"

Loke kissed her forehead. "I'll get some breakfast started." Then he left to the kitchen.

Lucy sighed in bliss. Really, they were fitting into the role of a mother and father so easily, she was not at all shocked or horrified when some of the other ladies in the guild asked her when she would marry Loke. It wasn't that she didn't want to! Still, she was traditional in thinking it should be the guy to propose. Bisca assured her it was fine for a woman to do the asking, but Lucy also was unsure if marrying Loke might get him into even deeper trouble. She left that detail to him and simply enjoyed living together.

She rose and wrapped a robe around her. At least her figure was returning. She exercised every day to lose the weight she gained in pregnancy. She leaned over the cradle and smiled down at baby Luke. Already, after just four weeks, his hair was coming in, although it was hard to tell if it would be blond or orange. Closed, his eyes were definitely Loke's in shape, but when he opened them they were Lucy's rich brown color.

"Hey Mama, Father, do you see him?" she prayed softly. "I really couldn't ask for a better child. He sleeps all night, and he rarely cries." She leaned over to give him a kiss. The baby suddenly twitched in his sleep and thrust a fist out. It lit up in a weak glow, and the impact was enough to make her nose twitch hard to the side. "And...he's got his father's punch!"

That afternoon, Loke and Lucy wrapped the baby up warmly and headed out into a dusting of snow, making the trip to the guild hall while pushing Luke in the carriage Gray bought for them. Levy was the first to rush forward. Although she visited them in Fairy Hills almost every day, she still wanted to see the baby all dressed up and be the first to pinch his cheeks.

"Whoa! He grew a lot," Natsu exclaimed, pressing forward to the front of the crowd that gathered around Lucy. "I still can't believe that thing was in your stomach."

Lucy's eyes burned with frustration. "Stop calling my baby a thing."

"That's right," Elfman declared. "He's a man!"

Proto stepped up, and his black bead eyes glared at Natsu. "Child's name is Luke. But you are correct. Luke has grown five centimeters since you last saw him."

Natsu leaped back. "Proto! I...uh...that is...I...I haven't done anything!" he shouted, cringing away.


Before Lucy could tease Natsu about his fear of the stuffed bear, she felt a tug on her long skirt. She looked down and saw Happy holding up a bottle.

"It's milk. Mira taught me how to make it how babies like it."

"Happy, that's so sweet." Of course, she did not trust the cat, so she tested the temperature on her arm, then tasted a little. Surprisingly, it was fine.

"Ooh, can I feed him?" Loke cried out. "Normally you're breastfeeding him, so I don't get to do it."
Elfman laughed raucously. "But I bet you have fun with her br-..." Suddenly, an ice frying pan hit
Elfman in the back of the head. "Ow! Gray, you bastard!"

The Ice-Make mage glared at him. "Don't talk that way about Lucy," he warned.

While Loke sat and held the bottle for the baby to drink, Lucy wearily went to the bar and ordered
some herbal tea.

"Hey, Lucy," Cana laughed, already flushed and working on a whole barrel. "A drinking contest! A
contest!"

"Sorry," she smiled, waving off the lush's offer. "Since I'm breastfeeding, I can't drink alcohol. I
have to watch out for caffeine and what I eat, too."

"Whaaaaa!" Cana exclaimed, then slouched. "I am definitely never having kids!"

Gray sat beside her and smiled. "You're looking well."

"Thanks," she grinned, glad that there was none of the awkwardness from earlier. "I feel a lot better.
Sometimes, I almost feel like I could start doing missions again."

He put a hand on her arm and looked at her seriously. "Take care of yourself. There's no rush. Natsu
and I will be waiting whenever you're ready to rejoin the team."

"Thanks," she smiled thoughtfully. Out of a little worry, she looked back to where Loke was sitting. It
seemed, since it was a man holding the baby, the men in Fairy Tail decided this was an acceptable
time to be just as inquisitive as the women normally were. Loke answered questions about how the
baby was growing and any signs of magic.

"Oh yes, he has a strange magic, somewhat similar to mine, although it's not Regulus. We probably
won't know for certain until he's older."

Gray looked concerned after overhearing Loke say that. "Showing signs of magic already?"

"Yeah, especially punches," Lucy pouted, rubbing where the baby had hit her nose. "Um...why do
you look so upset?"

"No, not upset, just...I remember what happened with my teacher and her daughter, Ultear."

"Oh! The one with the weird ball and timewarp-thingy-magic?"

"Ultear was born with too much magic inside her. It caused her to be sick. Ur took her to doctors, but
they basically kidnapped her and told Ur the child had died. I guess I'm just worried that Luke might
have a similar problem."

"Well, if he starts to run a fever, Wendy can take care of him, and if it gets real bad, nobody can beat
Porlyusica. Besides," she pouted, "taking him to a regular doctor might not be a good idea. I mean,
what if they find out he's half-Spirit? What if he's different from Humans physically? Wendy says he
seems perfectly normal, but what if a doctor can tell?" She sighed and sipped her herbal tea. "Even
after he's born, there are problems. I guess I'll just have to get used to it."

Across the room, she heard Natsu cry out. He grabbed his nose and ran to the other side of the hall,
looking green with his cheeks puffed out ready to puke. Loke laughed, hefted the baby up, and
began patting to get a burp.
"Yep, babies make little messes too. Lucy," he called over. "I'm going to change the diaper."

"Okay, thanks!" she smiled, and she gave him a little wave.

Mirajane rested her chin on her hands and sighed. "How sweet! To think he even helps with changing diapers. I'm honestly impressed. Loke seems to be quite useful and accepting even the down sides to fatherhood."

Lucy hummed happily in agreement. "He's so determined to do everything possible, it sometimes feels like he's hogging the baby all to himself. But it's cute. And I truly don't mind that he changes the diapers all the time. I've tried it and nearly vomited."

After a few minutes, Makarov called the guild to attention. Everyone was there that day, eager to hear the announcement for the S-Class trial. Lucy tapped Gray's shoulder, wished him luck, then took her teacup and retreated to the back of the hall. She knew she was not in the running, and she could not be anyone's partner this year, not with the baby. Instead she watched the palpable tension and eagerness.

Loke finally returned, and the baby was almost asleep again, babbling to himself in drowsy happiness. Lucy saw Proto following, looking like a gray and black fuzzy bouncer, prepared to protect baby Luke from these ruffians. Loke carefully placed the baby in the carriage, sat beside Lucy, and hugged around her shoulder as they listened to the candidate names being read off.

That evening, after a noisy party with the new candidates, Lucy went with a group of girls heading back to the dormitory. Wendy was excited that she was picked, but she was equally worried that it meant she would not be around to help Lucy with the baby.

"What if Luke gets sick? What if the cold weather gives him pneumonia? What if he gets diarrhea again?"

Erza put a heavy hand on the tiny girl's shoulder. "Wendy, it's only for a few days."

"Yeah, we'll be fine," Lucy assured her. "Focus on your training."

They got back to their rooms, and Lucy changed the baby for bed. Loke settled into the sheets wearing only boxers. Lucy knew he stayed in bed only until she fell asleep, then returned to the Spirit World while she dreamed. Unless she woke up too early, he was normally back and ready to greet her with a morning kiss.

She dressed in a slinky nightgown and cuddled into bed with him. Of course he kissed her bare skin and teased her just a little, then they turned off a lamp and settled into each other's arms happily.

"Hey, Lucy," he muttered into the darkness as he stared out at the winter moon.

She hummed sleepily in question.

Loke saw the Leo constellation twinkling in the sky. He looked at the scythe-like formation of the head and mane, and the brilliant red Heart of the Lion, Regulus. It made him think of his home. He had not been back to his mansion in a long time. Now when he returned to the Spirit World, he went straight into the cell where he was being held. He missed the crystalline glow of the magnificent bridges spanning the heavens. He missed the comforts of his house and attending banquets. He missed simply laughing with Aries.

He needed to break the news to Lucy that he had only a few months. Two days in the Spirit World:
that was his "conjugal visit." It equaled six months in the Human World. He could hardly believe
that a whole month had already passed so quickly, and still he had not told her the truth.

He needed to. Putting it off was only delaying the inevitable.

"Lucy, I...I only have..."

A snore interrupted him. He looked over in surprise and saw Lucy had completely dropped off to
sleep. He smiled sadly, glad that she was able to sleep so easily, but still feeling guilty. Maybe it was
best to keep her ignorant a while longer. After all, it wasn't like they could change anything! He
would have six months, then his fate would be decided.

"I love you, Lucy," he whispered and kissed her forehead. "Sleep well." Then he faded away, and
the blankets dropped around Lucy. She hummed in her sleep but did not wake up.

End of Chapter 23

Chapter End Notes

Loke is singing a traditional Japanese lullaby, "Oborozukiyo." It means "Misty Moonlit Night." It's in the public domain.

I'm back! I had fun in California. Now I have to adjust from balmy mid-80s (or 30°C) to
near freezing rain/snow. I'm happy many of you wrote asking if I was having fun,
concerned if I was okay, and a few demanding that I had to write more or bad things
would happen to my computer. LOL! It's okay, that eagerness spurs me on! (Although threats never work.)

Did anyone else squeal in Chapter 262? I read it three times before I could calm down
and think logically. I've been waiting to see the Spirit World since Loke's Arc. The time
variance issue messes up my plans for this story. If one day equals 3 months, then one
hour equals 3.75 days. So earlier, if Loke was in the spirit prison for one week Human
time, it means he was a prisoner for maybe two hours Spirit time. I ended up rewriting
Chapters 14 and 18 to fix that issue. And now the Spirit King seems like a nice guy,
except he didn't warn them ahead of time and made them lose their time for training.
Nope, he's still a mustache-bastard. XD

=^.^= "Aye! But his food was good. And did you see those two giant fish?"

"Yes I did...and I have a feeling I know who those two fish are!" ^_^

=^.^._= "Yup! They're called Lunch and Supper."

"Umm...no." ^^

"Aye! But his food was good. And did you see those two giant fish?"
Stubborn as a Lion

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"He who is fixed to a star does not change his mind." - Leonardo da Vinci

In late December, Makarov and the S-Class mages took the participants and their partners away for the testing. Lucy and the others stood on the docks to watch them sail off. They were heading north this time, to a mountain retreat where Erza, Mirajane, Laxus, and Gildarts had set up some sort of obstacle course. Of course, Gray was the favorite to win in such a snowy environment, but others noted that Natsu's fire and ability to fly thanks to Happy might also be advantageous in the snow. Poor Wendy looked like a lost lamb, bleating that she did not feel adequate enough to participate in the test, with Charle scolding her to be more assertive. She picked Romeo as her partner, and there were plenty of smirks amongst the guild members when the boy blushingly agreed to help her.

Once they had sailed out of sight, Lucy sighed and turned to head back to the guild. Loke carried the baby in a sling, holding Luke close to his chest and humming so he would stay asleep. They opted for a slow walk along the river. Lucy hopped up to the low wall to balance along, as was her habit, but Loke held her hand. He thought she looked graceful doing that, but of course, like the passing boatmen, he worried that she might fall in.

When they finally got to the guild hall, it was surprisingly quiet. Lucy had to fix herself a drink. Nab came up and ordered a gin and tonic, which Lucy gladly fixed. Seeing someone behind the bar, others came up. Wakaba wanted a stout beer. Macao ordered whiskey on the rocks. Alzack wanted a tequila sunrise.

Lucy laughed and joked with the guild members. She fixed drinks, and everyone cheered for her. For a moment, she understood why Mirajane never complained about her job. It kept her busy, but she got to hear so much from people she barely knew.

Loke sat back, giving the baby a bottle of milk and smiling at the happiness in Lucy's flushed cheeks. Everyone liked her. She was simply an easy person to love. Sure, she freaked out when Jet and Droy threatened to start a fight. The way she hit them both over the head with a dark aura terrified everyone in the hall. Then she smiled, helped them up, and fixed them a couple beers. She was the type of person who, no matter what happened, she would come through smiling.

Loke wondered, if he told her the truth about his probation, would that smile fade? If she discovered that he would only be around for five more months, would she be able to simply be happy with him, or would the truth bring her pain?

He did not want that to ever happen, yet he knew this was an unavoidable sadness.

He looked down at Luke. People had been commenting that he was growing so fast, and Loke was definitely aware of it. His hair was coming in as blond except at the roots, which were orange. He gained weight every day and ate much more than they expected. It was Bisca who realized that, although the newborn was only a month old, Luke was the size of a three-month-old infant. That meant that not only had the pregnancy been accelerated, but his growing was too.

That made Loke a little sad. His son's childhood would be over far too quickly. In no time, he would
be walking, talking, and...

Luke's fist lit up and pounded into Loke's chest. The hit was just hard enough to knock the air out of his lungs.

"That's my boy!" Loke grinned proudly.

The party did not last too long, and everyone went back home before midnight. Laki and Bisca offered to clean up, and Lucy left it to them so she could go back home and rest her aching feet. She was exhausted but happy.

"I want to always be in Fairy Tail!" she exclaimed as they climbed up the incline to Fairy Hills.

Loke laughed and kissed her head. "Me too."

They went to bed, and as was becoming a routine, Loke waited until Lucy fell asleep, then he vanished back to the Spirit World. He went from familiar family comforts to a cold cell. It made him sigh, but at least he felt his energy quickly returning.

"How is Lucy-sama?"

Leo the Lion looked over in surprise and saw Capricorn standing on the other side of the spirit barrier. He walked over to him, put his hand on the barrier, and felt the shimmering energy that imprisoned him. "She's doing well. Her energy is back, and she smiles a lot. I do what I can to keep the baby from being a hassle to her, but I think she's fully recovered."

"I'm happy to hear that," Capricorn smiled faintly. "Layla-sama was frail even before conceiving Lucy-sama, but Lucy-sama is a strong, vibrant woman. You're the sort of man she needs. Jude-sama..." There was a momentary sneer of anger and perhaps even jealousy in Capricorn's face. "He was a kind man at first, but greed made him cold. I was not around when Lucy-sama was born, but I imagine he had little to do with her upbringing."

"True," Leo pouted. "Her relationship with her father was never good. He didn't appreciate her until the very end, after she vanished for seven years."

"Then she must be even more happy to have you there to show love to her newborn."

"Thank you, Capricorn..." Leo glanced around the prison's corridor to make sure they were alone. "Have you heard any news, any rumors?"

"Only that the Spirit King is gathering a court for your trial. We did our best just to convince him to give you this small leave, six months to spend time with your child. It's impossible to demand more from him. Believe me, we've tried! Leo-sama," the Goat frowned in concern, "are you truly willing to give up your position? You know what that means: no magic, aging, eventual death."

"So long as I age at the same speed as Lucy and can live and grow old by her side, death is something I'll accept," he answered, solemnly staring down at the ground. "Of course, it's not something I particularly want, but if that's my only option to stay with her, I'll have no regrets."

"Options?" Capricorn mused. "Crux-sama is looking into possible other options. He stole some of Libra-sama's law books and is searching for a possible compromise."

"I'll be thankful for anything you can do," Leo sighed. "Time is short."

"True. We have two days."
"I'm glad it'll feel like six months to me."

"That's a blessing in itself, Leo-sama."

Suddenly, a golden arch formed in the cell and Lucy's voice was heard with a touch of desperation. "Open the Gate of the Lion! Leo! Hurry!"

"Shit!" Leo sneered, and he ran through the portal.

What he saw on the other side made him stop. It was morning already. He had not realized just how long his talk with Capricorn had lasted. They were in a main avenue in Magnolia. Magic circles lit up, and the cacophony of fighting rang through the streets.

"Where's Luke?" he asked first.

Lucy had her whip out and a cut already on her arm bleeding freely. "Left him at home with Ruchio, the landlady. Magnolia is under attack! They waited until all the S-Class mages were gone. Bastards!"

"Okay, Lucy, I'm going to return and come back under my own magic. Capricorn is ready to go. We'll both fight for you."

"Understood," she nodded, and Loke's gate closed.

He was back in his cell in the Spirit World. The Goat had just turned to leave. "Capricorn! Fairy Tail is under attack. Get ready to fight."

"And you?"

"I'm going to..." A throbbing pain suddenly hit his chest and reverberated through his whole body. Loke's eyes widened in shock as he clutched right over his heart. He dropped to his knees and gasped to breathe.

Capricorn came as close as he could get to the spirit barrier. "You're not fully recovered. You've been spending too long in the Human World. If you keep this up, you'll die."

"Lucy's in trouble," he snapped. "I'll open my own gate."

"You're too weak. I'll get Virgo-sama to come assist you."

"No!" He cringed at the throbbing pain in his chest. "By the time Virgo shows up, the fight will be over. Lucy needs you right now."

Another golden archway appeared. "Open the Gate of the Goat! Capricorn!"

"Go!" Loke shouted.

"But Leo-sama..."

His green eyes flashed up in momentary anger and desperation. "As leader of the Zodiac Spirits, I am ordering you to stay by her side until I can get there. Now hurry!"

Capricorn paused for only a moment, then nodded in understanding and stepped through his gate. It faded away in golden sparkles.

Leo growled and clutched his chest. "Damn, stupid, annoying pain! Can't be worried about it now."
She needs me. Nothing else matters." He closed his eyes, spread his hands out, gathered all the
magic he could, and gritted at the immense energy it took. "Gate of the Lion, I open thee!" The arch
shimmered in front of him. He took a deep breath, like a swimmer about to dive into deep water, and
plunged his way through the magical gateway.

He appeared at Capricorn's side. Caustic smoke choked the air. Loke saw Lucy laying in the street
with a rag to her mouth, coughing in pain while the Goat shielded her from explosions that made
stones and bits of trees scatter dangerously.

"Capricorn, what happened to her?" Loke demanded angrily.

"A dark mage sprayed something into the air. Lucy-sama and numerous civilians were incapacitated
by it. I'll protect her. You're the better fighter, Leo-sama."

"Got it," the Lion nodded, and he rushed into the fray of Fairy Tail mages battling dark mages.

"Loke," Lucy tried to call, but she fell back onto the ground coughing hard.

"Your lungs are badly injured," Capricorn told her gently, blocking her body from the fallout of the
fight. "Conserve your strength so you can call us as needed."

"Capricorn," she sighed and looked away with shame. "After all this, I'm still weak."

"No, Lucy-sama. You were hit by surprise, that's all. To insist on staying on the battlefield despite
being injured is truly brave. Though your body is fragile, your will and your reserve of magic is
strong. So is your love for your nakama. You are a powerful Celestial Spirit Mage and a good-
hearted woman. Truly, you are just like your mothe-..."

A blast of magic suddenly hit Capricorn. He tensed up in pain as the blast shot a hole through his
chest. Glowing particles began to float as his body faded.

"Capricorn!" she screamed.

"Call...Sagittarius...-sama," he gritted. "We shall...protect...you..." Then he faded.

Lucy shook emotionally at having to see her friend hurt so badly. "Sagittarius? I can't..." She
dropped her head. She did not want anyone else to get hurt, but maybe Capricorn knew something.
She pulled out her keys, and despite the burning pain in her throat she rasped out, "Open the Gate of
the Archer! Sagittarius!" It was not spoken in a bold tone this time. She realized her summons
sounded pathetic.

The horse-man poofed into existence. "You can count on me, moshi-moshi!" He knelt in front of
Lucy with his bow ready. Arrows shot out, pegging off enemies before they could get close enough
to harm Lucy. Not a single shot missed.

Lucy coughed and blood came to her mouth. She gagged, leaned over to her side, and spat it out.
She stared at the red glob and cringed. "That's not good."

"Someone get that horse!" an enemy ordered.

Sagittarius was hard put, shooting faster, but the enemy began to focus on him.

"Sagittarius!" Lucy coughed in worry.

He continued to shoot his arrows without fail. "Fear not. I have the advantage, as it were."
Lucy smiled and laughed weakly. "I'm lucky to have friends like you." He grinned back at her.

The enemy was getting desperate. "Forget the horse. Aim for the Spirit Mage. Kill her!"

"Lucy-dono!" Sagittarius cried out as a dozen shots all aimed at her. He threw his body in the way, taking all the hits. Lucy felt only a small bit of heat from one fireball.

"No!" she screamed, seeing the agony in Sagittarius' face.

His eyes opened, his face just centimeters above her, and he grinned as his body faded. "We swore...to Leo-dono...we'd...protect you...moshi-..." Then he also vanished.

Tears streamed down Lucy's face. She wanted to get up, grab her whip, and fight these bastards alongside her Spirits, but another cough tasted like blood. She could barely move.

"Lucy!" She heard Loke's voice from far away, almost lost amidst the noise of battle. "Use Aries. Her Wool Wall can shield you. Try to get out of here. You're injured too badly. Just go!"

She shook her head. "I don't use my Spirits as shields. I don't..."

Virgo appeared out of the ground. "I was requested to come by Capricorn. Will I be punished?"

"Virgo?" Lucy sniffled as she realized Loke was right. Her injury was too severe. Staying there would only put her friends in jeopardy. "Just help me get to somewhere with fresh air. My lungs...I don't know what they used, but it burned my lungs."

"Understood." She grabbed Lucy into her arms and burrowed down. A minute later, Virgo popped out of the ground in one of Magnolia's parks. "Will this suffice?"

Lucy dusted the dirt off her clothes. The park was quiet, empty due to the cold weather and nearby raging battle. "It's fine, although now I can't help anyone." She leaned against a tree and tried to breathe slowly. Every breath felt like fire. "Hurts so bad," she cringed, holding her chest.

"I may have something." Virgo vanished.

Lucy waited, leaned back, and listened to the fighting going on about a kilometer away. She felt the dire need to be there, to help her friends, but she could do nothing injured like this. Loke was out there fighting, yet here she was, resting in a park.

"I'm terrible," she muttered, yet even talking felt agonizing. She coughed and blood sprayed out, staining her shirt. "Oh God, it hurts!"

Virgo reappeared holding a canister with a plastic mask. "I will accept punishment for taking so long. This is a rare medicine meant to be used in case a Human is accidentally sucked into the Spirit World. It will heal their body from the effects. We have only used it a few times, so it may not work. I would like to be punished if it fails."

Lucy groaned and took the canister. Virgo pushed a button on it, and smoky air came out through the plastic mask. Lucy put that over her mouth and inhaled slowly. Instantly, she felt the searing pain leave. It felt like pure energy flowing back into her. Her aches vanished, her lungs healed, even the fiery tingle in her nose and throat went away.

After a couple minutes, Lucy turned off the canister, handed it back to Virgo, and stood up. She felt revitalized, ready to fight.
"Yosh! Let's get back in there," she declared. "I fight with my friends, not stand behind them cowering. No more hiding for Lucy Heartfilia. I'm going to show those bastards that Spirit Mages can be strong fighters too." She thrust a fist up into the air. "Let's fight for Fairy Tail!"

Virgo primly stood behind her and watched her master's determination. Then, deadpan, she asked, "Will I be punished?"

Lucy's fist sank and her shoulders slumped. What a way to kill the mood! "Just...just get me back to the fight."

Ten minutes later, Lucy was back in battle with Scorpio by her side. Between his sand blasts and her whip, they pushed the enemy out of Magnolia little by little. Other members of the guild, weary and nearly out of magic, cheered her on. For once, Lucy felt like maybe—just maybe—she was a strong mage after all.

She glanced around occasionally, trying to find Loke. She saw a glow of yellow and sensed the magic of Regulus, that familiar warmth that emanated from Loke whenever he fought. She sighed in relief that he was still out there. She knew that if he was hit bad, he could simply return to the Spirit World, but she had already seen two of her Spirit friends hurt. She did not want to same for the man she loved.

Then she saw him leap back, just barely managing to miss the downswing of a giant hammer that cracked a huge chasm into the street and demolished a nearby store. A giant stomped forward, hefting the hammer up for another strike.

"Damn, this guy's a tough one," he flinched, shoving his shades back up his nose.

"Loke!" Lucy screamed.

He glanced back briefly in dread, but looked relieved to see her safe. He worried terribly for her. After all, this was her first fight in months. She was out of practice, and she did not have her usual teammates to back her up. Lucy was accustomed to fighting alongside Natsu and Gray. Now she was battling enemies mostly on her own, with only her Spirits to fight beside her. She had already been hurt bad; he could still see the blood on her shirt. Loke was terrified for her safety. He was immortal, after all, whereas if Lucy was hit bad...

Death!

He had been in many fights, participated in many wars, seen many deaths. The lives of Humans were so short, especially for Spirits who spent most of their time in the Spirit World. In a single year in the Spirit World, a Human could be born, grow old, and die. Such ephemeral existences! He had seen many masters come and go in a single one of his "years." The only way to truly have enough time to make friends was to stay in the Human World longer, and few Spirits bothered with the pain involved.

With most of his past masters, Loke had generally ignored them and came only when summoned, merely fulfilling his contract, no other interaction. Some masters were kind, he tried to spend time with them when he was called, and he became friends with them. Although rare Human friendships were something to be cherished, their brief lifespan pained him. Less than a year for him, and they were gone! Over the centuries, he learned to simply accept their sad fate.

This was different. He could not imagine his world without Lucy. Despite knowing how brief she would be alive, he refused to accept death as an inevitable part of the cycle of life. A part of him
wanted her out of there, protect her, preserve that fragile body for as long as possible. He refused to lose her. He was ready to give every last drop of magic power he had to protect her.

He didn't want her to die! Ever!

The enemy spotted Lucy. "It's that damn Spirit Mage with the Zodiac Keys. Molot, crush her!"

The hammer-wielder raised his huge weapon. "Molot smash!" He stomped over to Lucy. Both Loke and Scorpio blocked his way.

Loke had a grin on his face like a lion playing with his food. "Ready to show this guy some Spirit power, Scorpio?"

"We are!" he shouted. "Unison Raid, baby, yeah!"

Loke's ring lit up. "Regulus..."

Scorpio dropped to his hands as his tail took aim. "Sand..."

"Guys," Lucy gasped, seeing the blending of their magic.

Together, they shouted, "Golden Haboob!"

Molot tilted his head to the side. "Who's boob? Her boob? She has nice boobs."

Lucy covered her chest and shrieked, "Don't look at my boobs!"

A mighty sand blast from Scorpio's tail and a golden burst from Loke's ring combined. The sand reflected the light, making it brighter, and swirled with it as it aimed right at the giant. The light blinded him so he could not see what was coming, and the sand smashed into his face.

"My eyes!" Molot bellowed. He dropped his hammer as he held his bleeding face. Wakaba sent a plume of smoke their way, and it wrapped around the enemy's hands, binding him like shackles.

"You did it!" Lucy cheered.

"We are! Yeah!" Scorpio shouted and held his fist out to Loke, who bumped it with a laugh.

"I just love that word: haboob," Loke chuckled.

"Got him!"

The enemy's shout was followed by a blue flash of magic. Ice began to form, starting at Scorpio's feet and quickly rising up over his legs.

"Not the Spirits, you idiot! Aim for the Spirit Mage."

"Scorpio!" Lucy yelled.

Loke punched and kicked the ice, but it refused to shatter. Scorpio stiffened in pain, but he aimed his tail as best as he could.

"One...last...shot." A small jet of sand burst out and hit a water barrel in front of a nearby store. The water flooded out and got Lucy wet. "Use that," he winked, then Scorpio vanished just before the ice completely covered his face.
Lucy looked at the water in confusion, but it quickly dawned on her. "I might have enough magic for one more." She whipped out a key and stuck it in the muddy water in the street. "Open the Gate of the Water Bearer! Aquarius!"

The water rose, swirled, and the mermaid emerged with a graceful arching back. Then she flipped around with her water jar raised threateningly.

"How dare you summon me out of some muddy puddle, you little bitch!"

Lucy ducked and said as fast as possible, "Scorpio shot a water barrel because he wanted me to summon you."

Aquarius' personality changed instantly. She grabbed her cheeks and squealed. "Scorpio did that just for me?"

Lucy muttered under her breath, "Actually, he did it for me." Aquarius was too busy daydreaming to hear. "We've almost got the enemy out of the town. Can you sweep the last of them away?"

"Che!" sneered Aquarius. "I'm not doing it for you. I'll only do it because it's what my boyfriend wanted." She raised her jar and water flooded out across the streets. The few remaining members of the dark guild were washed away in the massive wave that carried them out toward the harbor.

"All right, Lucy!" Laki cheered.

"I knew you could do it, Lucy," Macao smiled, beaten and worn out.

Nab limped forward. "We're lucky you stayed home this year."

Lucy began to blush at all the cheers. "Ah jeez, guys!"

"Hmph!" Aquarius huffed disdainfully. "Lucy, Lucy, Lucy! What did she do besides wave a key around. Who do you pesky Humans think did most of the work around here? It was we Celestial Spirits!" Her aura turned dark. "Plus, my Scorpio was hurt because of you idiots, so I'm not in a good mood."

"Uh oh," Droy shivered.

"This is bad!" Max realized, backing up out of the way. "Lucy, you better force-close her gate."

Aquarius laughed haughtily. "Force close? On me? I'll show you just how weak your precious Lucy is!"

She raised her jar and swished out a tidal wave. Lucy was too weak to try to escape. She closed her eyes, held her breath, and readied herself for the painful slaming of water that would inevitably almost (but not completely) drown her.

Suddenly, the water rushing toward her lit up. A burst of golden light forced the massive wave up into the air where it scattered and came down like rain. Lucy opened her eyes and saw Loke standing in front of her, his suit and orange hair soaked. His whole body glowed vibrant gold, and his eyes were as hard as emeralds as he glared at Aquarius. The mermaid flinched away from him.

"You might have harassed Lucy in the past," he said in a dire tone, "but I will not allow it anymore. If you ever attack her again, you will have to answer to me. Understood, Aquarius?"

She stiffened imperiously, and blue flames leaped into her eyes. Then the ire faded and she smirked.
haughtily. "Oh, I understand. But I wonder if Lucy understands about you yet. I wonder if you’ve told her about that yet."

Loke glared silently at her.

"Hiding secrets from your lover! Scorpio and I never hide anything from each other. We have what’s called a relationship of trust. A shame you don’t have that sort of relationship with Lucy. Then again, you’re a Lion, and all lions know how to do is roar, fight, and fuck. You might be our leader, Leo, but you are far less a man than my Scorpio."

Lucy felt weary from blood-loss and dizzy from a lack of magic, yet she barely managed to hear what Aquarius said. "What? Secrets?"

With a mocking laugh, Aquarius faded back into the Spirit World. Loke stayed where he was standing for a moment, allowing the dropping water to rain down on him. Those who could see his face saw a dark shadow pass over him, his head slightly down, his eyes shaded, his drenched hair hanging down into his stern face. All Lucy could see from where she laid was the stiffness in his shoulders and his hands clenched into fists.

"Loke?" she whispered.

He slowly began to turn, but when he faced her he had a beaming smile. "I really hope she never bothers you again. Let me know if she does, okay?" he said brightly.

Lucy pouted at his overly-jolly words. She knew that was the type of smile he gave when something really disturbed him. Before she could question, her strength gave out. She fell flat backwards and stared up at the sky.

"No...magic...left."

Drifting toward unconsciousness, she felt her body rise up. Loke held her close to his chest and carried her back toward Fairy Hills. She looked up and saw he had that serious expression again. However, darkness crept into her vision. She leaned her head against his chest and drifted off to sleep.

It was night when she woke up. She felt the comfort of her bed and heard small baby breaths from Luke nearby. When she moved her head with a light moan, a hand rested on her cheek, then moved to the other cheek, then felt her forehead. It was too dark to see, but the warmth of the hand felt familiar.

"Loke?" she whispered.

"You've been feverish all day. We had a healer in here. He said you just need to rest and recover your magic."

She leaned against him, feeling comfortable by his side. "The fight?"

"Aquarius successfully swept the enemies out to the harbor. The army managed to fish them out of the bay. Magnolia is safe. A message was sent to Makarov, but since the fighting is over, they're going to continue with the test."

"Hey Loke," she frowned. "What did Aquarius mean about keeping secrets? Are you hiding something from me?"
His mouth opened a little in surprise. He had dearly hoped she would forget that part. "I...well...you see..." Just then, Luke woke up fussy and began to cry. Loke moved to the cradle quickly and lifted him up. "Aw, does widdle Wuke gotta wet diappy?"

In reply, the baby blew a moist raspberry at him. Loke shut his eyes as spit sprayed all over his face and sunglasses.

"Thanks a lot, kid," he muttered. "I'll clean him up. Sleep some more."

"But Loke..."

He walked up to her side, leaned over, and kissed her forehead. "I would never lie to you, Lucy. Don't worry." Then he turned and walked away.

He felt a stab of guilt to his chest. Maybe he would never lie, but he also was not telling her the whole truth. For a moment, he glanced back. He should tell her! It was inevitable. Capricorn even said that the Spirit King would not be moved. He would for certain have to leave to attend that stupid trial and hear the decision. He knew what his only choice could be: to give up his magic and become a mortal so he could stay with Lucy. Yet especially after the fight today, he realized that if he had not been Leo the Lion with the magic power of Regulus at his call, Lucy could have died.

How could he protect her if he was powerless? Was staying by her side every day truly the right thing to do? Maybe simply being the Spirit she called once in a while...

No! He didn't want to see her only when there was a battle. He wanted to stay by her every day, every night, no restrictions. He wanted to raise their son together. He wanted to hold her as the years lazily drifted past. Perhaps, since they already had a son, he would buy a ring and ask her to...

Maybe that was too much to ask, but it was what he wanted deep down inside. He wanted to belong to Lucy, heart and soul...even if it meant sacrificing everything he was.

He prayed that his friends in the Spirit World could find some sort of loophole, because if not then on the day of the trial, he could not allow his will to be shaken. He had to hold strong to his decision and not change his mind.

When the time came, he needed to be as stubborn as only the Lion could be.

End of Chapter 24

Chapter End Notes

_Haboob – a powerful wall of dust and hot wind. Yes, it's a funny word, but a scary thing to see rolling in over the desert!_  
_Molot – Russian for hammer. I love tossing in names like this._

_Sorry this is rather late. I was distracted by haboobs. ^_^ Kidding! My Muse is being stubborn again._

_T_T "Come back, Kerry! I didn't mean to ignore you."

_=^.^_= "Umm...who's Kerry?"

="My Muse. She's a fickle one. She's mad I went on vacation."

_=^o.o^= "Rhov hears voices in her head!"
"Yeah? So?"
*Happy backs away slowly.*
"She's my Muse. My Muse!"
I used to have the first stanza to The Calling's "Wherever You Will Go" (I prefer Charlene Soraia's cover version). Thanks to SakuraXxXIchigo who noted that Loke's plight is reminiscent of this song. When I listened to it with that in mind, this chapter popped into my head almost in its entirety. It's now Loke's "theme song" throughout the next few chapters. I truly can't listen to it without a dire urge to write more "Lion's Pride." See, your reviews inspire this story to be even better! However, since quoting song lyrics is not allowed, and I don't want this story to get deleted for four lines from a song, I'll let you go google that song, read the lyrics, and you will understand why it fits Loke's plight. See, I'm a good girl! If I can't get permission like I did in Chapter 10's lyrics, I'll remove them.

Two months passed in a blur of snow and joy. January came and went. February brought a fierce chill and record snowfall in Magnolia, so Lucy and Loke spent most of their time indoors playing with Luke. The baby could now sit up on his own and loved to crawl around, looking just like an awkward little lion cub with his blond hair sticking out wildly. He grew out of all his clothes, and Lucy had to buy new outfits for him every week. Because of his accelerated growth, she often just let him crawl around in nothing but a diaper.

"If he ends up with Gray's habit of going around naked, we know why," Loke teased.

"Nana...naka...nakee..." Luke babbled.

Lucy stepped up next to Loke and snuggled into his embrace. "Maybe he's trying to say 'naked.' That had better not be his first word."

"He isn't talking yet, is he?" Loke pouted, looking concerned for the baby.

"Dear, he shouldn't even be crawling yet. I'm a little worried," she pouted. "What if his body can't keep up with his growth? Remember when I was captured and went just one day without food?"

"Gah-bah!" Luke cried out, and reached his pudgy hands up to her. It was his signal that he was hungry again.

Lucy hefted him up and lifted her shirt for him to nurse. "He eats constantly. I can't keep breastfeeding him like this."

"Well, at least your breasts are big enough to hold plenty of milk," Loke teased, staring at her exposed bosom.

Lucy glared at him for joking about something that truly concerned her. "What if something happens and he can't eat?"

Loke stopped ogling her. He knew she worried, and honestly so did he. He feared for both of them, his special and brand new family, the Lion's own "pride." He held her close and kissed her head as he gazed down at the loving scene of a mother feeding her child. Such tenderness always made his stomach flutter and his eyes burn, although he could not understand how something so natural made him want to weep with happiness.

Luke's huge brown eyes opened to look at him as he enjoyed his meal. Lucy's eyes, yet shaped like Loke's! The child's eyes and that gold and ginger hair...everything about him was a perfect blend of mother and father. Loke blinked hard to clear away the tears that threatened to spill his dark secret.
"I'll make sure nothing like that happens," he swore softly. "I won't let anything bad happen to either of you. Besides," he said lightly, trying to shrug off his misgivings, "I'm sure the growth spurt will taper off."

"But no one knows for sure," she reminded him. "Zeref is the only other Human-Spirit hybrid, and no one knows anything about his childhood." Luke did not eat much. It was never a lot, but it was constant. Lucy tried to put him on her shoulder to burp him, but he began to fuss.

"Dah! Dah!" It was his way of saying he wanted down.

Lucy placed him on a play mat, and he crawled off fast to where Proto sat with his stuffed arms folded sternly. Luke laughed at the bear and slapped both arms with his palms. The bear put his arms forward, and Luke began a clapping game with the Protecto-Bear as he happily babbled to himself.

Lucy sighed and lamented, "I feel like I won't get to enjoy any of his childhood."

"Don't say that," Loke said soothingly. Privately, he thought 'If anyone is going to miss his childhood, it'll be me.'

Loke sighed at the worst-case scenarios that always played through his mind, everything from his trial taking weeks or months—which in the Human World meant years or decades—to the Spirit King deciding to simply keep Loke locked up indefinitely. Whenever those fears came to mind, he would look to Luke, to his adorable son, his own flesh and blood, and think 'How can I possibly let myself give him up?'

"I'm gonna head out and get more diapers," he said and kissed Lucy goodbye.

Loke stepped out into the snowy afternoon and watched his breath fog in front of him. From atop Fairy Hills, he could see the white vastness, more beautiful than the Spirit World, but very cold. Magnolia sprawled out just down the hill, and only steep roofs pierced through the shroud of snow. He stuck his hands into his suit coat pockets and headed down the hill.

Instead of the baby store, he walked in another direction, crunching over the snow that muffled the world around him. He saw who he was looking for long before he came to his house. Gray stood on his roof doing postures that Loke guessed corresponded to various Ice-Make moves. All he wore were boxers, but it seemed his neighbors were used to the half-naked mage by now.

"Gray!"

The raven-haired man stopped in the middle of going from one posture to another and looked down to the street. "Ah, Loke! What are you doing out in the cold? Shouldn't you at least wear a jacket?"

"You're one to talk! I wanted to speak with you."

"Be right down." He left to another part of the roof and vanished. By the time Loke got to his front door, Gray was opening it. "Come on in. I have some mulled apple cider cooked up."

Loke sat on a couch and watched Gray ladle out two mugs of cider from a crock. He brought over Loke's cup, sat down across from him, and blew on the steam rising from his mug.

"How's Lucy and the kid? Haven't seen you guys around the guild since the weather went bad."

Loke looked in a daze. "Staying home, keeping warm."

"That's good, I guess. Don't want the little cub to get sick. So, what's up?"
Loke stared into his cup for a solid, silent minute. Gray saw the concern in his face and decided to simply wait until Loke was ready to talk. Somewhere in the room, a clock ticked away the seconds. Gray lifted his mug and took a sip that sounded far too noisy in such a heavy atmosphere.

"Hey Gray," Loke finally said, trying to sound casual despite the awkwardness that had already set in between them. "When I was gone, you comforted Lucy, right?"

Gray's throat clenched, and he cringed away slightly in worry. "I...th-that is...really, nothing happened, I swear!"

"No, I mean...she could turn to you," Loke said with a faint smile. "People said you looked after her, were there every day, cooked for her, catered to her. She felt comfortable with you around, right?"

"I...guess so." Gray warily took a sip of cider. He recalled just how awkward it had been at first, especially after he told Lucy he thought she was beautiful. It was not really a confession, but it might as well have been one.

"Good, I'm glad. You see," he said, still only staring at his mug, "I may have to leave again."

Gray sputtered out his drink and set the cup down so hard some cider spilled out. "What?" he bellowed.

"Not long. At least, I hope not long. Spirits perceive time much differently. It very well may be many months to conclude the trial."

"Trial?" shouted Gray. His brow tightened, and he asked in caution, "Loke, are you in trouble with the Spirit World again?"

The Lion Spirit's lips tugged upward with a dim sadness in his shaded eyes. Loke finally lifted the mug to his mouth and took a generous gulp. "Good cider, nicely spiced and perfectly sweetened. I should bring Lucy over for a drink. She'd love this."

"Loke!" Gray yelled, irritated that he was sidestepping the issue.

He sighed and set his cup down. "The truth is, I was never out of trouble. I was given a small leave, a conjugal visit of sorts, nothing more. The trial to determine my fate will be in the Spring, and I don't know how long it might last."

"I see," Gray muttered, not liking the idea, but he supposed something like a trial was unavoidable if Loke broke a law of the Spirit World. "Does Lucy know?"

He shook his head. "I haven't had to heart to tell her."

"You need to," he warned.

"I know, I will, and soon. I...I'm just trying to get things in order before then," he explained, but he sounded desperate. "I want all possible issues covered, that way there's nothing for her to worry about when I tell her. Just in case the worst happens—if I'm detained for a long time, if the trial lasts a few years..." His throat cracked and Loke unexpectedly sniffed. "God, I hope it doesn't!" he wailed out. He covered his mouth, slammed his eyes shut, and turned his head aside to hide his shame for crying.

Gray politely looked away and tried to focus on listening to the ticking clock rather than the suppressed sobs in front of him. He could not even begin to imagine Loke's fears. He tried. He thought how it might be if he had to leave Fairy Tail and knew he might be gone for a long time. If
the guild found out about him leaving, they would all be sad, likely try to convince him to stay. Would it be better to tell them and face them day after day as they stared at him like a lost soul, or worst yet, like a traitor? Or was it better to wait until the last moment, then simply walk away?

"Lucy needs someone."

The whispered words brought over Gray's attention, but Loke still could not face him. The flickering light from the fireplace made the lines of tears steaming down his cheeks shimmer golden.

"When I'm gone, she'll need someone to be there for her, to care for her. Luke, he...he's going to need a...a man around." Loke tried to laugh, but it shook out unsteadily. "You know, someone to teach him and...and someone to...to play ball with him and tuck him into bed at night." To Gray, it sounded like each word shattered a little bit of Loke's heart. "I know Natsu will fight through Hell itself to protect Lucy, but he's absentminded, destructive, and a bit childish. I trust you to care for her emotionally. She...she needs someone like you, Gray. They both do." His throat clenched to say it, and a wave of guilt made Loke want to cry again.

Gray looked aside in regret. "I don't think I'm the best person, Loke."

A laugh airily burst out. He sniffed it back, wiped his eyes, and looked over with a smile. His blue shades barely hid the pink tint around his eyelids and the lashes that stuck together with tears. "Hey, we were partners! I trust you, Gray. More than anyone else! I know you'll take care of whatever Lucy and Luke need. Now, I need to talk to a few others. Next week is Lover's Day. We have reservations to a nice resort. I'll tell Lucy then. Please, don't hint anything to her until I'm ready to tell her in my own way." Loke finished off the cider and set the mug down. "That really is good stuff. You'll have to tell me the recipe." Then he excused himself and left.

Gray sat still and stared at his steamy mug, lost in a tempest of emotions. How could Loke trust him? He knew Gray liked Lucy. Loke had even called him out on it when the whole pregnancy thing started up. So how could he put Lucy's emotional well-being into his hands?

Or was that precisely why he could? Because he knew Gray liked Lucy too much to do anything that would hurt her.

Gray just wished he felt the same confidence. He wished he could trust himself.
Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter is Rated MA for lemon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Have the courage to face the truth. Do the right thing because it is right. These are the magic keys to living your life with integrity." - W. Clement Stone

Lucy gave a firm knock on the door to the Connell home, and a moment later Bisca answered with Asuka straddled on her hip. The girl cried out happily to see Luke.

"Mama, issa baby!" she pointed.

Bisca and Lucy chuckled. "Yes, dear, he's just a little baby, so you need to play nice. Asuka, this is Luke. He'll be staying with us for a few days. Come on in, guys," she greeted.

Lucy and Loke stepped into a house done in navajo white with colorful rugs woven in geometric patterns and pictures on the walls of Alzack and Bisca's homeland. Alzack sat at a table cleaning one of his magical guns, but he nodded to Loke in greeting. Lucy saw a playpen in the main room and set Luke down inside.

"Now remember, he eats a lot," she told Bisca. "He averages eight small meals a day. We dressed him in something too big, so hopefully he doesn't outgrow it before we return. If so, he's okay in just diapers. He's fine playing on his own, but we're not sure how he'll play with others. You need to watch out for hitting. He's got quite a punch. He's learning not to hit anyone, but if you see his fist light up, just tell him 'no' firmly. He knows to control his magic if you remind him."

"Already displaying magic, eh?" Bisca asked in surprise. "Most children don't show magical abilities for a few years. Asuka hasn't done anything yet, and Macao said Romeo didn't learn magic until he was six."

"He's adorable!" Bisca giggled as she watched Luke crawling around the playpen, testing out his boundaries. "I hope they play well. Now Asuka, he's just a baby, so be nice." She set Asuka down inside the pen with the infant. She toddled over to him, and Luke smiled up to her with a gleaming grin.

"He's pwetty," Asuka declared. She leaned over and patted his yellow and orange hair. "Pwetty baby!"

Luke suddenly grabbed her hand. Lucy began to gasp, worried he might hurt her. Instead, Luke brought Asuka's hand to his mouth and gave it a sloppy baby kiss. Bisca quickly covered her mouth to keep from squealing at just how adorable it was.
"Ewww!" Asuka cringed. "He kissed me and got slobber all over me. I'm gonna have cooties. Mommyyyy! I have baby cooties."

Bisca could not help but laugh. "Oh my goodness, he is just like Loke!"

"Riiiiight," Lucy muttered. "Well, thanks for offering to watch him, Bisca. We owe you the favor back someday."

"It's perfectly all right," the green-haired mother assured amiably. "I know how much new parents need a little time to be together without a baby getting in the way. You two have fun at the resort."

"We will. Alzack, make sure you keep those guns out of Luke's reach. Since he can use magic, he might be able to bypass the safety on them."

"We have an enchanted safe where we store them away from Asuka," he assured her.

"Mommy!" Asuka whined. "He kissed me again!"

Lucy sighed as she looked down at the innocent face of her son. "You better behave yourself, young man. Ooh, I don't want to leave him," she sighed, looking torn.

Loke teased her, "You were the one who wanted a getaway."

"I know, but he's growing so fast. What if we come back and he's all big and walking around and talking?"

"Lucy, it's only three days. He's not growing that fast," chuckled Loke. "Come on, we still need to pack."

Lucy lifted Luke one more time and hugged him close. "Be good, my little cub. Mama's gonna miss you." Instead of chiding her, Loke also came up and gave the baby a kiss on his chubby cheek. He leaned his head against Lucy's as they both gazed upon their son.

"Don't they just make the most adorable family portrait," Bisca sighed.

Luke began to squirm and shouted "Dah, dah" to be put down. Once down in the playpen, he began crawling after Asuka, who tried to run away from him shouting about cooties. Then Lucy took Loke's arm, and he led her out of the Connell house.

"It's hard walking away," she pouted.

"I know," he said softly, and Loke squeezed around her shoulders. "Sometimes a parent has to let their child be with someone else, be it a babysitter or a boarding school." He looked aside with a little guilt. "We have to learn to let go so we can do what we have to do."

"Well, we don't have to go on vacation," Lucy pouted. "I know I'm the one who suggested it but...but it's hard leaving him behind."

"We could take him."

"No, I need to relax. My boobs are killing me! Besides," she smirked up at him, "it's Lover's Day
weekend. We can't have as much fun for Lover's Day with a baby around."

"What look?"

"The lioness look. The look that dares the Lion to make nonstop love for four days straight."

"Our vacation is only three days."

Loke smirked lasciviously. "Perhaps we'll extend it by one day!"

The next morning, they traveled to a spacious resort on the shores of a tropical beach with swaying palms and golden sand. Lucy immediately changed into a bikini and ran to the ocean, grinning happily at the sun sparkling on the crystalline waves. They spent their first few hours playing on the beach.

After a while, Loke took her over to a rock cropping, claiming to have seen a rare fish. Once they were on the other side of the rocks and away from the beach, he grabbed Lucy and kissed her hard. A wave came and shoved him against her with her back leaning against the smooth, eroded rocks. They felt the grains of sand swirling around their ankles and sliding over their feet, pulling them down, rooting them to the seabed, as if the whole beach was being pulled into the depths of Poseidon's reign. Then another wave came, pressed her against the rocks, and Loke's body thrust up against her. Again the sea pulled out, and Loke had to hold her tight to keep her from slipping away. With each ebb and flow of water, he grew harder and thrust more persistently.

She broke off their kiss with heavy panting. "We shouldn't, not out in the open."

"Just be sure to stay quiet," Loke whispered.

His fingers traced the hem of her bikini top, edging it down lower, while under the water her legs wrapped around his waist to feel him more. Despite the cold ocean water, he was hot and hard, thrusting up against her until she moaned. He reached down under the waves, adjusted his swimming trunks, then his fingers carefully pulled her bikini bottom to the side. Upon the next smashing wave, Loke used the momentum to quickly slide into her.

"Oh...nnngh!" She covered her mouth to keep from moaning too loudly and alerting anyone.

"You look so sexy in the sunlight," Loke groaned. "I'd take you right on the beach, except I'm not about to let others see that face you're making."

Seeing the desire burning in her eyes, he reached around her thighs and hoisted her up. The waves buoyed her, and Loke moved her to the tempo he wanted. She grabbed around him, afraid he might drop her. However, it was Loke's strength and endurance that made him the leader of the Twelve Zodiac Spirits. He probably could have done this maneuver on the shore, but with the icy water rushing at her, thrusting at her again and again in an ancient aquatic rhythm, it was so much more erotic and enlivening!

Lucy felt her body melting and her nerves sizzling with a fever not even the icy ocean could cool. The salty sweat of their exertion mixed with the frothing spume that covered the ocean like the lace of a mermaid's wedding dress. Hot and cold intermingled in her loins. Loke's lips dived in like a peregrine falcon and devoured the exposed, glistening arch of her neck, lapping up the salty water dripping from her hair, mixing cold ocean water and the heat of his tongue, sending her writhing with the contrastive climes waging war across her body. She swung her head from side to side,
panting heavily with each of his thrusts.

"Loke...too much!" she keened.

He chuckled softly at her. "Worked up so fast? I've hardly started. Or is the thought that we're having sex out in the open really that erotic to you? Does it turn you on, thinking someone could be watching? Maybe Gray's exhibitionist ways are rubbing off on you." He gave her neck a small nip. She cried out and covered her mouth fast with both hands. "You are...so sexy!" he growled.

"Loke!" she squeaked as she tried to hush herself. "I...I can't hold back!"

He kissed her hard, and his pace went erratic. As he felt her clench on him, Loke completely lost control. Just then, a wave smashed into them, and Loke thrust as deep as he could go as the sea gushed over their bodies. She felt him fill her and screamed, yet his mouth muted most of the cry. Right at that moment, a flock of seagulls began to fight over some food, and their raucous calls overpowered Lucy's faint screams.

The ocean waves crashed over them again and again, and with each splash the sweat running down Lucy's body washed away. All movement between them stopped except long, deep, measured breaths. Lucy leaned back against the rocks, not minding how rough they felt against her spine, and panted hard. Loke's mouth hung open, basking in the titillation of love that tingled every nerve and muscle. She smiled at him with wonderful satisfaction. He opened his eyes and laughed tiredly when he saw her pert expression and how flushed her whole body looked. He had to admit, he felt a little smug tormenting her like this. She might protest and get upset, but he could tell she really liked it.

Slowly, Lucy lowered her feet to the wet sand below the waves. Loke flinched as his body realized just how cold the ocean was. Still, he held onto her buttocks, smiling lazily at her. She returned the tired grin and hugged him tightly. He used one hand to smooth back her wet, tangled hair.

Exhausted but happy, he exclaimed, "No man nor Spirit has ever been so lucky as me, to have a woman as amazing as you." He felt so happy, he almost wanted to cry, but he blamed it on the salty sea water in his eyes. "I love you so much, Lucy," he whispered ardently, rubbing his nose against hers, then giving her another kiss.

They held one another close in the water, resting their heads on each other's shoulders, holding themselves up after the wearying exertion. Around them, the ocean washed away the stringy white evidence of their passion.

"How about we go to the hotel and just cuddle together?" she panted in fatigue.

They walked back to the shore, leaving the sea and its rhythms behind. No one looked too shocked to see a flushed woman or overly-happy man. They merely thought she had a slight sunburn, and of course with a woman as buxomly at this blonde, any man would be proud to have her by his side! They got to their hotel room and collapsed together on the sheets.

They took a nap and woke up to more passion. Finally, they cleaned up, washed the saltwater out of their hair, and dressed nicely for a fancy dinner. Afterwards, they went to the theater to watch a romantic play, then took a late night walk over the sands, gazing at the stars. It was almost midnight before they returned to their room. Lucy was too tired to do anything more than collapse into bed. Loke watched over her, smiling at her cute sleeping face, happy she was enjoying herself, but he still looked worried.

"Tomorrow, I'll tell you," he decided, then vanished back to the Spirit World for a quick rest.
On their second day, they ate an amazing breakfast in the resort's restaurant, explored nearby temple ruins, then returned to the beach and swam some more in the ocean. Afterward, they took a stroll through town, ate gelato in an outdoor café, and Loke took her shopping. He bought her anything she wanted, not caring about prices. He carried her boxes and bags, purely happy to see her beaming smile as she ran to another store. They returned to the resort late at night and decided to have room service brought in. They ate on a balcony overlooking the enchanting sea. The moon made the ocean look like a pool of quicksilver, and the numerous stars sprinkled the waves with fairy dust.

"Loke," she said softly. "Yesterday, out in the ocean, we didn't...you know, use protection."

He almost spit out his wine, his chest thumped painfully, and his eyes went huge. "Are you saying you're...?"

"No...I don't think so. But I was thinking all day, since Luke is growing up so fast, maybe—not right now, but someday—maybe we could try again, you know, for a girl." She looked up worriedly to him. "I mean, if you don't want to, I understand. Luke was an accident, but...but I'm really happy having him and...and I wouldn't mind, you know, having a bigger family...if...if you want." Her eyes dropped back to her dinner plate. "Or am I being too clingy?"

He blinked a few times in shock. So, she wanted more children! The thought made him want to laugh and weep at the same time. His brain went frantic for a moment with visions of children running around. He reached over the table, took her hand, and Lucy looked up in shock. Behind his blue shades, Loke was smiling tenderly.

"If we're blessed with more children, that would make me so happy," he declared ardently. "Still...maybe we should wait a little. Luke really took a lot out of you. You're still breastfeeding him, and I read that all your milk dries up as soon as you get pregnant again."

"Oh. I...I didn't think about that," she muttered.

"We have time," he assured her.

"I guess," she pouted. She pulled back and ate a little more.

Loke sighed inwardly and plaintively watched her. It wasn't bad enough that the Spirit King was furious because of Luke, but now...more children? Yet the thought of a little sister for Luke...how he would love it! But not yet. Loke needed to wait for the trial. He would accept becoming mortal. Then their daughter would be normal. Lucy would not suffer as much with a normal pregnancy. The girl would grow at a normal rate. She would age, grow up, marry, have kids of her own...like a normal Human.

He realized making love in the ocean had been foolish and impetuous. He needed to be careful. He was not about to leave Lucy during another pregnancy.

Lucy saw a shooting star streak through the sky, bright and burning, yet fading so fast. She suddenly got a contemplative face. "Hey Loke, what will happen when I grow old and die? I don't really like the idea of leaving you alone."

He looked up in shock that she was bringing up a subject they had pretty much silently agreed to avoid. Still, he was sure it must bother her. He had to admit, he did not like the idea of losing her one day. It was partly why mortality seemed not so bad.

"Don't worry," Loke assured her. "If that happens, if you die and I stay the same, then you'll be reborn, and I'll seek you out. I'll wait until you're of legal age, and then..." He leaned over the table
and right up into her face with a predatory grin. "Then I get the joy of seducing you all over again." He kissed her roughly, and Lucy began to giggle.

"Come on, your tie is in the soup."

He tugged the ruined tie off, then decided to remove his shirt too. They left the dinner on the balcony and snuggled into bed together. Loke sank to her side and curled into her.

"I wonder," she mused as she stared at a lambent candle. "Maybe you've seduced me in one of my past lives."

Loke hummed and thought back through the centuries. "Not that I know of. Still, I have to admit—and don't take this wrong—you remind me an awful lot of Naomi."

"Your wife from four hundred years ago?" Lucy felt a little twinge of sadness as she wondered how frequently he must think of her.

"Capricorn has some suspicions that you might be Cheveyo's descendant."

"The great Spirit Mage Cheveyo?" she gasped.

"It'd likely be on your mother's side. As I recall, he was from a branch of Naomi's clan. All of them were powerful Celestial Spirit mages back then. If you are somehow related to her, that might explain the similarities."

"Do I look like her?"

"Not really. She was also blonde, but that's about it. Just little things you say, little looks you give, but I guess any woman could give those looks."

She hummed and sought out the warmth in his chest. "Did you ever try to find her reincarnated self?"

Loke hesitated on answering, but he had to tell her the truth. "I tried for a while, but then I figured I'd probably feel too guilty if I knew it really was her."

"So do you think I'm Naomi's reincarnation?"

"Who knows! We could go to a past-life regression therapist tomorrow if you're that curious."

"Not really, but it'd be nice if maybe we're ancient lovers destined to meet up rebirth after rebirth."

"That really would be nice."

Her fingers traced lazy lines over his bare torso. "I wonder," she mumbled sleepily. "What if, in my next life, I'm reborn as a man?"

Loke jolted up. "God would not be that cruel," he shouted. She blinked at his sudden reaction. Slowly, Loke sank back down and settled onto the pillows. "But if you were, then I guess I'd only have one choice: invest in lube."

That made her laugh and love him all the more!

He hugged her and smiled at their moment of happiness. Still, the weight of his duty felt too heavy on him. He had to tell her, and it was best to do it now that the mood was a little solemn.
"Lucy, I...I have to confess something."

"You really did seduce me in another life?"

"No," he chuckled tensely.

"Don't tell me you tried to seduce my mother."

"Hell no! I..." He felt frustrated now. He hated the idea of ruining this perfect vacation, but he knew he had to tell her before anything else happened. "I have to leave back to the Spirit World in a couple months."

For a few seconds, she stared at him blankly and wondered what he meant. When it dawned on her, she gasped in a panic. "What? No!"

He held a hand up in a vain attempt to calm her. "I'm sorry, I should have told you immediately. This whole time, I've only been on parole. I was granted six months, then I have to go back."

"Loke, no, don't! Please..." she begged, trembling in terror, trying so hard to stop tears from coming to her eyes. "Please don't do this to me again."

That stabbed the guilt even deeper into his heart. He rubbed her arms and felt how they shivered. "There will be a trial."

She slapped his hands away. "Don't go!" she screamed.

"I have no choice," he snapped, but he reined in his emotions fast. He felt himself trembling and knew he had to keep his emotions from overwhelming him. He needed to tell her the whole thing calmly. "The Spirit King will be holding a trial. I've been told already that I'll have a choice: either extremely limited interaction with the Human World, or losing my place as the Spirit of the Lion, including being stripped of my immortality and magic. I already told them my decision." He squeezed her hands and smiled sadly. His eyebrows drooped, and his eyes squinted in angst. "Mortality isn't such a bad thing, right? There's beauty in an ephemeral existence. Eternity...it's not all it's cracked up to be," he pouted, then he gazed at her in determination. "I would rather grow old with you than live eternally without you."

"Loke," she sniffled, shaking her head and trying to stop her tears by sheer willpower. "Please don't put this sort of burden on me."

He hesitated for a moment. He had heard those exact same words before. He had seen that same face the day he told Naomi he was going to give up his position as King of the Heavens. The two really were too much alike!

He looked aside in regret as he realized he was doing the same things to Lucy now. He sat beside her on the bed, hugged around her shoulders, and planted a kiss on her head, letting his lips rest there as he inhaled the scent of her hair. Then he rested his cheek on her shoulder and swayed gently with her as if there was a melancholy tune playing in the background.

"It's my decision, my burden," he told her. "We have two more months. Maybe the Spirit King will change his mind, but if he doesn't..." He pulled back and looked at her with worry and anguish. "If I wasn't Leo the Lion, if I was just plain Loke—a Human with no power, no magic, no way to protect you—would you still want me?"

He looked truly worried that she might reject him. It made Lucy laugh. "How could you even question that?" She leaned forward to give him a warm kiss. Their noses rested on one another,
rubbing the ridge of each other's nostrils in soft caresses. "I didn't fall in love with a Lion. I fell in love with a tender man. Whether you're the Spirit of the Lion or a mere Human, you're still my beloved Loke."

He had heard similar words before, too. He could even see a ghostly figure of Naomi, her golden hair swept in that bun style she always wore, the humble dress she handmade since they lived far from any town in order to avoid detection, her face a haunting image of understanding and love despite the tears she cried when he told her he planned to abdicate. "Whether thou art King of the Heavens or a mere Lion, thou art still my beloved husband." The apparition vanished, leaving only Lucy, her large brown eyes, her cute hairstyle, and the small smile she struggled to keep on her sun-kissed face.

Instead of being relieved at Lucy's acceptance, Loke felt even more guilty. It was all repeating itself. Still, he had no idea how to change this fate. All he knew was, unlike with Naomi, he would not burden Lucy with raising the child alone, no matter what that meant to himself!

End of Chapter 26

Chapter End Notes

*I'm posting this on New Year's Eve so you can read it while staying up to midnight, or in my tradition, staying up to watch the sunrise.

=^-..^-= "My tradition is to eat lots of fish. Happy 2012."

Thank you, everybody!
Dear Mama,

Well, it happened again. We had another argument. I know it's my fault, but I can't help it. Ever since that vacation, I've tried to live normally, but it isn't easy. Loke spends all of his time with Luke and seems to avoid me. Now that I'm calmer, I understand he's probably trying to make as much of an impact on our son's life while he can, but can't I be part of that bonding? I'm sure he doesn't mean to push me away, I'm probably just being too sensitive, but I can't help it. After all, he'll be leaving me too!

So what did I do? Pushed him away even more! I'm an idiot.

We've forewarned a few others in the guild, just so they know Loke will be leaving again. Master knows, and Erza. I told Levy, who ended up telling all the girls in Fairy Hills. I told Natsu too, partly in hopes that maybe he'd help me fight to keep Loke here. I'm sure, if there was a way we could fight to save Loke, Natsu would do it.

I realized right away that Gray knew something about this. He watches over me more, comes to the dormitory more frequently, and immediately joins me and Loke whenever we go to the guild hall. He frequently asks to hold Luke and sometimes even changes his diaper. I have a suspicion that maybe Loke already asked him to watch over us when he's away, so perhaps Gray is doing all this as a way to ease himself into our lives.

Erza just came by. Apparently Gray is on his way here again. I wonder if Loke asked him to calm me down after I kicked him out. Stupid fight! I'll just admit it was my fault and go make up.

I know I've been acting a little colder toward Loke. I'm trying my best to forgive him—really I am—but...why? Why did he have to hide this, Mama? If I had known from the beginning that this was only a temporary parole, I could've spent the past few months preparing my mind. I could've helped him figure out what to do, which path to choose, instead of having him suffer all on his own.

And why the hell does he have to pick between just those two choices? Limited visits to the Human World, or stripped of his status, not just as the Spirit of the Lion, but as a Celestial Spirit completely, including his magic and immortality. Basically, a death sentence!

And he's willing to accept that...for me! I almost want to tell him not to, but I guess we're both a bit selfish.

A few days ago, I summoned Aries and asked her to confirm it. She did and told me the court had already been gathered. They're ready and waiting. With the time difference between dimensions, for Aries the trial is this very day. For me, I still have a few weeks. I'm glad for that, but it feels like such a short amount of time.

I knew Aries was too timid, so I called out Capricorn and asked him to argue against this, fight for an extension, or just let Loke continue precisely as we are. After all, we're both happy with this arrangement. He gets to be with me and Luke all day long. I know now that he returns to a jail cell,
but at least he spends very little time there, not enough for it to matter where he returns to, or so he
claims. I'm sure it hurts him not to have freedom—he's the Lion, after all—but it encourages him to
spend more time with me. And we're not troubling anyone. He's not raising riots in the Spirit World.
He says he's only talked to Capricorn and Aries a few times. So why can't we just stay like this?

Capricorn told me: "We've done everything possible purely to give you and Leo-sama this
opportunity to raise your child. I truly wish we could do more, for Leo-sama's sake, but we have run
out of time."

Time! The Spirit World is ready for this trial, but to me, it seems like there's plenty of time left. We
have until sakura season. "When the last rainbow sakura petal falls in Magnolia" is the deadline.

Mama...I've never hated Spring until now.

There was a knock on her door. Lucy sighed, hid her letter, and opened the door to see Gray
standing in the hall looking awkward. She knew he was uncomfortable with mediating like this, and
she honestly did wish she could hold back her emotions so these fights would not happen. Perhaps
Erza's sudden bursts of anger were rubbing off on her.

"You probably know why I'm here," he muttered.

Lucy nodded solemnly. "You can let him know I forgive him and he can come back. I just...I needed
to sort out my mind, I guess," she sighed, looking away and hoping Gray would not think she was
being a spoiled princess again. "Sorry you got dragged into it."

"I just want you to be happy," he assured. Gray entered her place and waited until she closed the
door before saying more. "Be honest, Lucy. Do you still love him? Because if you don't, Natsu and I
will make sure he leaves you alone."

"Of course I do!" she shouted. "We're just...I'm having..." She groaned and flopped heavily onto the
couch. "He didn't tell me, and that made me angry. I understand why he hid it—there was the baby
to worry about, I was weak, he didn't want to upset me and have me depressed the entire time—but
still, I feel like I've been lied to. And now he's spending all his time with Luke and not me."

"Lucy," Gray sighed, "if Loke is gone for a few months, Luke's going to be a lot bigger by the time
he returns. Especially with his rate of growth! Whereas you'll look about the same. He's going to
miss both of you equally as much, but he wants to be sure Luke at least remembers who he even is."

She pouted and looked away stubbornly. "I know. That's why I'm not angry anymore."

"Yes you are," he said knowingly. "Your eyebrow twitches when you're frustrated."

She glared at him, but then laughed softly. Of course Gray knew more about her than most people.
They had been a team for so long. He patted her leg, and Lucy looked down to where his hand
rested. Although his skin felt cool to the touch and his fingers were roughened from fighting, that
touch still conveyed such friendliness.

"He loves you more than ever. The way you're acting though...this is precisely why Loke hid the
truth from you. He told me that he's starting to think perhaps he shouldn't have told you at all and just
waited until the day he had to leave. Lucy, he wants to see his son, and you! Has he ever demanded
to take Luke somewhere and exclude you?"

"No," she grumbled.
"You know what I think? I think you're upset, too proud to admit it, and looking for any excuse to blame him. Whatever argument you had today, it's the same underlying reason as last time, and the time before that. You've kicked him out three times, forgave him three times, but the root of the problem is still there and won't go away until either you both talk this through, or he leaves. I want you both to be happy," he said, giving her knee an encouraging squeeze. "How about you tell him what's really the problem? Tell him you're angry, get it out of your system, so you can return to being a family." He looked aside as a dark memory passed through his mind. "Family is an important thing to have. I lost my family when I was only eight. You've lost yours now, too. Don't lose this one, okay? If it's at all possible, make sure your son has a mother and a father."

"I'll try," she sighed.

"Good. I heard there's a birthday today, didn't hear whose, but you know Fairy Tail; we're using it as an excuse to party. Loke is there now. Go wash your face, I'll pack some diapers and bottles, and we'll head over. A party might do you some good. And talk to Loke while you're there."

She nodded in agreement and left to the bathroom, not realizing that she had been quietly weeping. Gray grabbed a few toys, a bag full of diapers, a change of clothes, and filled some bottles with milk Lucy kept in the refrigerator. Then he hefted Luke out of his playpen and up into his arms.

"You're getting heavy, little guy," he chuckled. "No wonder he wants to be with you all the time. You're growing so fast, he's probably scared that if he even blinks, you'll be all grown up."

He placed Luke in the pram carriage, and when Lucy was ready they walked together down the hill, making the trek to Fairy Tail. The fresh air cleared Lucy's mind, and she began to show her usual smile. Gray saw it, smiled back at her, and felt relieved that she was cheering up.

Just then, two old ladies happened to walk by. They eyed Gray and Lucy with wrinkly smiles, and after they had passed, the two spoke together none too softly. "Look at them! Such an adorable couple. I bet their baby is an absolute doll."

Gray tensed up at hearing them and looked over fast to Lucy. Her face went instantly pink, and she looked over to him, horrified what he might think about their casually dropped observation.

"Maybe you should push him," Gray choked out.

She nodded fast in agreement. He let Lucy push the pram carriage the rest of the way, staying by her but at a slight distance with his hands shoved deep into his pockets, hoping that looked just aloof enough to stop anyone from thinking they were a couple.

Inside the guild, Loke was hunched over a table drinking and brooding. When he saw Lucy enter, he leaped to his feet fast but barely held himself back from running into her arms. He saw that she was watching him, and he waited for her to make the first move. Thankfully, she went to him immediately.

"Gray, watch over Luke for a bit," she whispered and let him take the baby.

He lifted the infant up and smelled a problem. "Okay, someone needs a changing. Seriously, kid, you have some of the smelliest crap."

He was not too shocked that Juvia was by his side, but this time it was not all that annoying. "Juvia can help Gray-sama change the baby. Juvia probably needs practice."

"Thanks," he nodded, and they went back to the infirmary.
Juvia felt aflutter at "playing mommy" with Gray. She told herself over and over again: *Calm down, Juvia. You must show Gray-sama that you will make a good mother for his children. Show him your maternal instincts. Gray-sama won't be able to resist such feminine charm.*

However, she sensed someone following and looked back. She did not see anyone until she looked down. Proto was following right behind them. "Um, Gray-sama?" She pointed down to the stuffed bear.

Gray just hummed and shrugged. "He follows everywhere Luke goes. He's harmless, so long as you don't threaten the baby."

Proto gazed up at them. "Luke is in danger of getting diaper rash."

"Yeah, yeah, we're hurrying," Gray sighed, not at all perturbed.

On a bed in the infirmary, they laid out a changing pad and all the supplies. When Gray undid the diaper, Juvia gasped, then instantly regretted it because that made the smell worse. Forgetting about maternal instincts, she covered her nose as tears came to her eyes. Gray worked fast to wipe up the crap, bunched up the messy diaper, and handed it to Juvia to throw away. She turned a little green as she held the diaper out far with just her fingertips and rushed it over to a trashcan. Then she opened a window to clear the air. She returned to watch Gray work with fascination.

"Gray-sama is so fast," she praised.

He was already applying baby powder to Luke's bottom. "I've helped change him a few times. Plus it's best if you work fast so he doesn't..."

Just then, a little fountain of yellow piss shot up. Gray cursed and made an ice shield in front of himself so he would not get hit by it. Juvia used her water to clean the mess while Luke laughed happily at the two struggling to wipe him clean all over again. When at last the baby was clean, diapered, and redressed, Gray and Juvia brought him back out to the main hall. Lucy was curled up happily in Loke's arms, so it appeared they had worked things out. Gray called Mirajane over to spread out a rug so Luke did not have to crawl on the beer-stained floor.

Her experience in tending babies over, Juvia rushed off with flushed cheeks. "Gray-sama will make such a good father to Juvia's thirty babies," she declared to herself. Gray heard her anyway and raised an eyebrow to that.

People in the guild were intrigued with Luke's growth progress. Wendy especially was fascinated by the baby she had helped to deliver. She sat on the rug as well, keeping Luke's attention so he did not wander off into the occasional brawls.


Lucy chuckled at the cute pout Wendy made. "His body is growing fast, but it still might take a while for his brain to catch up."


"That word is too hard," Wendy stated.

Luke laughed at the Master's wrinkly face and yanked on his whiskers. "Mah-gah-wah!"
Makarov sat up fast. "Did you hear that? He said Makarov! He said my name!"

Mirajane tittered at his excitement as she brought drinks over for Lucy and Loke. "Not quite, but it's close. I've heard him almost say nakama too. He's quite smart, isn't he!"

"Of course!" beamed Levy. "Because Lucy's his mother, and she's a writer, so she has a way with words."

Natsu tilted his head and kept clear from the bear Proto. "Lucy's smart?"

The blonde swung a scowling glare at him. "Proto: sic him!"

Natsu leaped away fast and jumped up onto a table like a person terrified of a rat. The other guild members laughed at his panicked face.

Proto just stared up to Lucy with no expression in his beady eyes. "Mother, I protect Luke. I do not attack non-threatening entities."

Natsu sighed and relaxed. He heard Gray laughing loudest of all, got annoyed, and punched him.

Gray was shocked out of his humor, then looked over to Proto. "He just hit me, and you're not kicking his butt?"

Proto shook his head. "Recommended safety proximity has not been breached. Luke is in good health. Luke is not in any danger."

"Hah!" Natsu laughed boisterous. "Is widdle Grayee-wayee hoping the tiny stuffed bear protects him? Pooooor Grayee-wayee!"

Gray threw off his shirt. "Juvia!"

"Ah!" she cried, suddenly pulled out of her fantasies about a huge family of blue and black haired babies. "Yes, Gray-sama!"

"Make sure there's a barrier around Luke so we don't accidentally throw something his way."

"Understood! Juvia will protect him with her life!" She looked quite determined to do so, too.

With that precaution, Gray punched Natsu, making sure he did it at an angle so the dragon slayer flew away from Luke. They at least took the fight to the other side of the guild, and Juvia diligently used a shield of water to keep flying plates and goblets from entering their corner of the building.

Ignoring the brawl, Macao watched the baby from his table and hummed. "Going just by his size, I'd swear he was a year old."

Lucy nodded and hefted Luke back onto her lap. "The growth rate seems to be steady at three times normal speed."

Wakaba laughed loudly. "You're lucky! He'll be potty trained and out of diapers in no time."

She said nothing and just looked into her son's huge brown eyes. Lucky? How can missing so much of her baby's childhood be lucky? At this rate, she had only six years before he was a full grown adult. She hugged Luke close to her, wishing she could squeeze him and keep him small forever.

The party dragged on with laughs and the usual rowdiness. Lucy cheered up and sang a tune with
Levy and Mirajane. Loke unconsciously began flirting with one of the new members but was put back in line with a smack to the back of his head from Erza before Lucy could see what he was doing. He apologized profusely to Erza and realized he had a ways to go to break his playboy habits. At least it was not as bad as Gray's habit. Lucy shrieked when she realized he had stripped completely naked again. When he asked to borrow some of her clothes, she threw a diaper at him. That made Natsu laugh and call him "Diaper Boy," which started another brawl.

Loke and Lucy ended up falling asleep where it was safe thanks to Juvia's continuing vigilance. As sleep became more appealing than drinking, or drinking made sleep that much more appealing, others drifted off too. Mirajane and Lisanna were curled protectively in Elfman's arms. Makarov snored loudly from his sprawling bed on the top of the bar counter. Levy used Gajeel's arm for a pillow and Droy's stomach as a footrest, while Jet fell asleep holding Gajeel's hand thinking it was Levy's. Alzack had his poncho wrapped around both him and Bisca with his rifle leaned against the wall. Wendy and Charle had curled up together, and Romeo smiled down at her sleeping face and put his scarf around her to keep her warm. A few were still awake but keeping quiet. These included Gray and Natsu.


"I don't think he sleeps," Gray answered, amused through a drunken stupor that the mighty Salamander was scared of a stuffed animal.

"I wanna play with Luke, but that bear is always there."

"Then just play nicely. Proto doesn't do anything unless you threaten Luke."

Natsu's eyes narrowed. "He glares at me."

"You glare at him."

Natsu rose and walked over to the sleeping family. Luke was awake and watched him with large, curious eyes. Natsu smiled, hoping to look friendly and not scare him. He glanced fast to the bear, but it sat limp. It looked like nothing more than a plushie.


"Dah!" Luke said.

Natsu grinned at what he took as a yes. However, Loke was holding Luke tightly. The dragon slayer hummed at this slight obstacle. He lightly tugged on Loke's arm, but he would not budge.

"Luuuuke," the Lion moaned in his sleep. "Not losing you. Cave...fish-head...narfmrph..."

Gray crouched down beside Natsu, tapped his shoulder to tell him to get ready, then leaned over into Loke's ear. "It's okay, Loke," he whispered. "I'll protect him. Nothing bad will happen."

Loke hummed in his dream. "Gray...trust you...safe."


"Luuucy," he groaned. "Bad girl...lion tamer outfit...sexy."

Natsu gagged down a laugh at Gray's disgusted face at hearing that little bit of naughty fantasy.
"Na-nah!" Luke said happily, slapping Natsu on the nose.

"Come on, say Natsu," he urged.

"Not you too," Gray sighed. "He'll talk when he's ready. Now why did you want him?"

"No real reason," Natsu shrugged, "but she looked like she wanted to play."

He nodded over and down to where Asuka stood watching them. The toddler gasped at being noticed and pulled her cowgirl hat down over her eyes as if she could hide away so long as she could not see them.

"Aww, Asuka, you can play with him if you want," Natsu encouraged. He plopped down in front of her with Luke in his lap. "He's a cute baby, right? You two are gonna grow up in the same generation. You'll be good friends. It'll be fun!"

"He's just a baby," she pouted, "but...but he is kinda cute. Cute baby. But," she insisted stubbornly, "still a baby."

"Sure, sure, still a baby," Natsu laughed. "You wanna feed the baby? I bet Lucy has some bottles around. Hey Romeo, you're still awake. Get that bag Lucy had."

"Sure thing, Natsu!" the boy said eagerly, and Romeo brought the baby bag over.

Natsu searched through the supplies, saw some bottles, but then saw a nice green bottle near the bottom. "Ooh, that one looks cooler," he grinned. He tasted the milk and his eyes widened. "Yup, Luke will like this one. Here, Asuka, you hold the bottle while Luke drinks it."

"Can I?" she asked uncertainly as she drew closer.


While they chatted and Asuka looked in wonder as she found herself feeding a baby like a grownup, Lisanna peeked an eye open. She saw Natsu with both children around him, Romeo sitting close beside him, and Happy perched on Natsu's head. It made her smile.

"I wonder if he realizes he's just like how Gildarts used to be, taking time to play with us when we were children," she mused, then snuggled back into her brother's arm. "He makes a good daddy. Maybe...someday..." She drifted off with the thought still on her mind and ready to turn into a pleasant dreams.

Slowly, Lucy began to fidget and wake up. "Potty," she muttered. "Eh? Why am I in the guild? Oh, right, we were having a party and..." She suddenly realized Luke was not with them. She had a moment of heart-stopping panic, then heard a laugh and saw Natsu holding the baby with Romeo beside him and Asuka laughing. Lucy smiled happily to herself. "Even Natsu can be like that, huh? Well, I guess he raised Happy, so he wouldn't be too bad of a...wait...that bottle..." Just then, Natsu turned to Romeo more, smiling at something he said, and Lucy saw the green bottle. "Natsuuuuuu!" she bellowed.

"Hey, Lucy's up!" he grinned. "Hope you don't mind. He was hungry."

"That bottle! That's the bottle Cana gave me that turns everything into alcohol."

"It only tastes like alcohol," Natsu corrected. "Like honey beer, too! Tastes pretty good."
"You *drank it!*" Lucy raged, shaking in bottled fury. "Natsu, that...that's *my* milk."


"Aye," Happy said with a frown. "You're really greedy, Lucy."

Her teeth clenched at how dense he was. "No, I mean...that's...my...*breast milk.*"

Natsu suddenly looked as sick as if he had just ridden a train for a full day. In his shock, he accidentally dropped both the bottle and Luke. Gray made a dive and caught the baby's head before he hit, but it still startled Luke, who began to cry.

"You *idiot,*" Lucy screamed.

Hearing his son crying, Loke woke up immediately. "What's going on?"

Proto leaped into action. "Luke is in danger."

"What!" Loke roared.

Proto sprang to Luke's side but determined he was unharmed. Still, he kicked Natsu in the shin. "Do not endanger Luke with your recklessness. Be safe around children."

"Ow! Stupid bear, why the hell did you kick me?"

"It was a warning. You should run away from Luke, though."

"Why? I'm not doing anything."

"No, but Mother is about to shoot you."

"Huh?" Natsu looked up to see Lucy had grabbed Alzack's rifle and had it aimed at him. "Holy shit! Lucy, wait..."

"Ice Bullet!" she shouted.

The bullet that shot out hit Natsu in the chest, instantly covering him in ice. He froze with his hands up and his mouth open as if to tell her not to shoot.

"Bastard, drop my baby, will ya?" She handed the gun back to Alzack, who looked pissed that someone had dared to touch his weapon, then stomped over to Gray. He was trying to calm Luke down, but he handed the baby over when Lucy silently demanded him. "You packed the baby's bag," she accused. "Why did you use that bottle?"

"I didn't know it was Cana's," he defended. "Why did you have it in the cabinet?"

"I can't drink alcohol since I'm breastfeeding, but it makes plain apple juice taste like hard cider."

"Well, it's just a taste, right?" he reasoned. "No harm done."

"I wouldn't have punished him just for that. He didn't know. I just sort of flipped out when I saw him drop Luke. Sorry, Natsu." Then she saw he was still frozen. "Oh. Uh, can you melt that?" she asked Gray.

"Dunno. It's not my ice."
Romeo came up to them. "I'll melt it, Miss Lucy."


The rest of Fairy Tail watched in cowering fear as the frightful mother bear turned into a cutesy mom once more. Over in his corner, Loke tried hard not to laugh at just how fast Lucy's personality could flip. Natsu tried to shout "Hurry, it's cold" through his icy prison. His eyes looked around left and right, seeking a little help to escape.

Chapter End Notes

*I'll be up front. This wasn't my idea. I had another chapter ready (including the first half of this chapter), but earlier this week 1337kitsune told me about a dream she had based on "Lion's Pride." To think, I'm influencing people's dreams! Her dream about a party, Natsu feeding Luke the "beer bottle," and Lucy shooting ice at him with Alzack's gun, sounded so awesome. I asked permission to capture such oneiric inspiration with written words. I hope it's as funny to you as it was for me when she told me about it.*
Days drifted by. Lucy tried to live them normally, but she felt like she was dangling from a cliff, holding onto a root, and slowly slipping. Her son was growing up too fast, and Loke’s judgment day was approaching too swiftly. She wished Time would stop!

Spring inevitably came. Lucy, Loke, and Luke went to the Hanami Party with the rest of Fairy Tail, played bingo, participated in competitions, and laughed when Luke began crawl-chasing after Asuka with her squealing about "baby cooties." When night came, they all watched in wonder as the rainbow sakura shone in variegated brilliance.

"Do you remember the first day I kissed you?" Loke asked as they enjoyed the peaceful evening and shifting colors. "A few days before, while on a mission, I had confessed my feelings, but you had too much to drink that night. You woke up regretting it and hardly speaking to me."

"I regretted getting drunk and flashing my boobs at you," Lucy muttered, not liking to recall that particular day. "At least you were a gentleman and put me to bed."

"After that, I thought you'd want nothing to do with me. Then you called me out, right here in this grove, and had a picnic set up under the cherry trees. You shocked me by saying that maybe we could try dating. I figured it was the perfect moment to kiss you. That was one year ago today." He sighed and looked up at the trees. "Time passes too quickly sometimes."

She heard the grief in his voice. Each petal that fell ticked down the moments. Instead of being able to simply enjoy the beauty like everyone around them, Lucy felt an ice shiver through her arms. "How long will you be gone?"

"Hard to say," he admitted, unable to look at her. "How long do trials last in the Human World?"

"I don't know. Days, weeks, sometimes they can last months and drag out until..." She realized something, and it stung her heart. "Even if the trial lasts only a day..."

"It'll be three months to you," Loke finished, dropping an anvil on that painful truth. "And if it lasts a month, thirty days for Spirits equals ninety months for Humans."

"Seven and a half years!" she whispered. Lucy looked down at Luke. At his rate of growth, in six years her son would be an adult. So if Loke's trial lasted one month in Spirit World time...she wanted to cry just thinking about it. "So, when you were locked up for a week, it was only two hours for you. Yet it felt like so long for me. That's not really fair." Her head dropped over onto his shoulder. "I wish I could go with you," she pouted. "I could wear the Celestial clothes, and Virgo can dress Luke up in them. Or maybe, since he's half Spirit, he doesn't even need the special clothes. At least then we could be with you. Even if it takes a few days or weeks..."

"Lucy, if that was the case, you'd miss out on months or even years of life here. You'd come back
and all your friends would be older."

"But I'd be with you!" she shouted. "I wouldn't be left alone. Luke would grow up slower."

"We don't know that. For all we know, the Spirit World might cause him to grow even faster."

"Dammit, I don't want you to miss out on seeing him grow up!" she shouted, and the other guild members looked over to her. Lucy shut her eyes as tears came unwanted. "I'd rather be with you, even if I miss out on a few years here."

He sighed heavily. "I'll ask the Spirit King if that's possible," Loke whispered, although he already knew it would not be allowed. Even if it was, Lucy would only be able to last a day or two in the Spirit World. She would have to go back and recover. And Luke...Loke and no clue how being in the Spirit World might affect his son, but he had a bad feeling.

Each day of the sakura season, they went out to watch, although it felt like they were only tormenting themselves. The fluttering sakura taunted them. Soon the trees were almost bare. Loke knew, when the last petal dropped, his time would be up. He almost felt like doing something silly like gluing the cherry blossoms onto the branches, just to give himself more time. That was something Natsu would do. He realized Fairy Tail was having quite an influence on him if he even bothered to think of something as childish as that.

Finally, most of the trees were naked. The rain of petals stopped, and now they only fluttered down like occasional teardrops. On that day, Loke found himself glaring at the cherry trees and hating the sakura. He wished he could flee from this damning fate. Even if he tried, the Spirit King himself would come to arrest Loke. Attempting to evade justice would only make his judgment harsher.

He saw there were only a handful of petals left on the trees, each trembling as if scared to fall and fade from their ephemeral existence. Time ticked steadily onward like a ponderous march, plodding ever closer toward doom. With each passing moment of this transient freedom, Loke felt the icy fingers of encroaching captivity slowly tightening around his throat. He glanced over to Lucy and saw she had grown thin lately. She slept poorly and barely ate. Sakura season was torturous to them both.

How much worse would it be for her once he was gone? How could he possibly protect her? Wasn't there something he could do? Anything?

Loke's fingers trembled with hesitation as he reached to his hand and slowly pulled off his ring. He held it between his fingers, rubbed his thumb over the blue stone, and seemed to siphon a little confidence from it.

"Lucy," he said softly, his voice quavering. "I want you to have this." He placed his ring in her hands and smiled sadly, trying to be strong for her sake. "This is my Heart, or what's left of it."

She looked down in shock. "Your Regulus ring?" A vision flashed through her mind, Gray delivering the ring to her, telling her that the ring was the only thing they could find after they searched the rubble of the fort where she and Loke had been held prisoner. For him to removed it again... "No," she gasped.

He spoke over her in a rush, needing desperately to tell her this before it was too late. "I don't want the Spirit King or anyone else to get their hands on it. If I have to give up my magic, the Spirit King might want to destroy my ring as well. I can't allow that!" he insisted vehemently. "Even if I can't use it, I can't let it be destroyed. Please, Lucy. I trust you with it. Protect it. Never lose it." He stroked her
face and smiled at her sad eyes. "Treat it as preciously as you would treat our love."

Tears gathered on the rim of her eyelids, and her throat tightened as she strained not to cry. Suddenly, she sensed a magical presence. She blinked her eyes fast to clear them and tucked the ring away into a pocket. In two golden flashes, Capricorn appeared with Taurus by his side, both looking reluctant but determined to carry out their grim duty.

"You two don't have to worry," Loke assured them in resignation. "I'll leave willingly."

"We're really sorry, Leo-sama," Capricorn said quietly.

"Lucy! I'll protect your nice body," swore Taurus.

"As shall I," Capricorn solemnly promised. "My oath to your mother Layla-sama shall apply to both you and Luke-sama."

"I know you will," she smiled gratefully. "You guys are more than just my Spirits. You're my friends!"

Taurus got hearts in his eyes that she actually called him her friend. "Moooooving statement!" he bellowed.

Capricorn merely gave a nod, still stunned by how similar this girl was to her mother.

Loke gave a long sigh and rose to his feet. "Whelp, guess it's time to go."

"Loke!" Lucy scrambled to get up. She reached out for him, yet withdrew her hand fast and covered her mouth with it. She wanted to scream protests, but she knew this must be just as hard on him. She had to be strong for him. She could not protest, not this time.

He looked back at her. For a moment, his mouth opened as if to say something. The words choked, his teeth gritted to hold back what he dearly wanted to say, yet he realized it was futile. Instead, he grabbed the back of her head, yanked her forward, and kissed her hard. Lucy grabbed him back, clutching onto his suit coat as if she could keep him with her by the sheer power of her fingers. Their kiss was rough, fiery, unrestrained, yet bittersweet, a wild burst of passion and emotions.

Taurus whimpered and the hearts in his eyes crumbled. Capricorn looked even more distasteful that he had to be the one to separate them. He politely looked away to give the two star-crossed lovers a little privacy. At least for now, he would wait and let the two have a proper goodbye.

Breathlessly, Loke rested his forehead against hers and pawed at her face as if hoping to remember every soft contour. Lucy felt the icy shivering in his touches. This was tearing him apart, and it pained her to see him being crushed.

"Try to make it quick, okay?" she said lightly, forcing a small smile.

"I'll try." He swallowed hard to clear his tensed throat. "I love you, Lucy. Wait for me." Then Loke turned sharply and began to march toward the two waiting Spirits like a doomed man heading to the guillotine.

Lucy wiped her tears fast as she watched his back. She bit her bottom lip hard to hold back from sobbing or screaming for him. *Come on, Lucy. Be strong. You can't make this any worse for him. You can't cry, not yet. You can cry all you want later. Be strong!*

"Dada!"
Loke suddenly froze. Lucy gasped and looked down to Luke. The baby began to crawl across the petal-strewn ground toward the three Celestial Spirits. He stumbled on some slippery sakura, fell face down, pushed himself up into a sitting position, looked up to Loke, and stretched his arms forward.

"Dada," he said again. In his face, he seemed to be asking why his father was leaving him, and his out-stretched arms beckoned him to come back.

Loke slowly turned around. His lips twitched, wanting to smile and cry at the same time. Suddenly, his resolve cracked. He hurried back and grabbed Luke up into his arms, hugging him tightly. "My son!" He looked to Lucy with excitement shining in his eyes. "This counts, right? This counts as a first word?"

She sniffed happily. "He was looking at you when he said it, no prompting."

"His first word," Loke said in amazement. "Say it again. Say dada."


Lucy came up beside Loke and leaned into his shoulder, smiling proudly. "He knows who you are. He knows you're his daddy."

Tears streamed down from behind his glasses until Loke had to remove his shades. For a while, he was speechless, in awe with this milestone. Then he slowly realized he had almost missed it. A minute later and he would have been spirited away without having heard his baby's first word. How many more firsts would he miss? How much of his son's life would pass by before he could return to them?

"I don't want to go," Loke whispered in anguish, squeezing Luke and Lucy close to him, as if he could hold them for eternity. "I really, really don't want to go. Dammit, how can I miss even a single day of his childhood?"

Lucy wrapped her arms around his waist. She knew his emotions must be at their very limit for him to admit that bit of weakness.

"Dada," Luke said again, as if to tell him it would be all right.

Loke looked to Lucy, and his emerald eyes pierced into her. "I'll come back, one way or another. I might be leaving without a struggle, but it doesn't mean I won't fight to get back to you!" He looked at Luke next. "And I swear to you, my son: I will not abandon you. I will teach you all you need to know so you can grow up to be a proud, noble mage. Everyone who sees you will know you are the son of the Lion. I will be there for you, Luke. I'll be the father you deserve." He hugged the baby close to him again. "I swear!"

Suddenly, Virgo appeared in a poof of smoke. "He says to hurry," she told them, then vanished again.

Capricorn sighed in regret. "I'm sorry, Leo-sama."

"No, it's...I understand," he choked out.

Reluctantly, Loke handed the baby back to Lucy. Luke tried to reach back to him, calling out "Dada" again. This time, Loke sadly brushed the tiny fingers aside, then leaned over to kiss them as if he could apologize for such painful negligence. He then looked up into Lucy's teary eyes and kissed her on the lips.
"I love you. I'll try to hurry back. But...there's one more thing to tell you." He looked down and spent almost half a minute debating if he could say what he wanted to tell her. She saw a glimmer of desperation growing in his eyes. "I'm not sure how long this will take, or what might happen once I'm not here to shield you. If you ever fall into dark times and need me desperately..." He paused again, but his mind seemed to be made up. The next words were spoken with a slight sneer of bitter defiance. "There is a way to free me."

"Leo-sama!" Capricorn warned, striding forward fast.

"Don't send her after that," Taurus yelled angrily.

"The Heart of the Lion!" Loke shouted just as Capricorn grabbed his arms and pulled him away from Lucy. Loke suddenly looked desperate and struggled to stay by her side. "With the Key to the Heart of the Lion, you could call upon me no matter where I am," he hurriedly told her, fighting to say just this last thing while the Goat and massive Bull pulled him back by force. "Of all Humans, you're the only one who could find it. If you obtain that key, you'd have utter control over me, control beyond what even the Spirit King..."

Suddenly, all three disappeared in a flash of gold light. Lucy was left staring at where Loke vanished, the image of his anguished face remaining like a ghostly shadow. Little Luke began to cry loudly, tears streaming down his chubby face as he reached out to where his daddy had been.

"Dadaaaaa!" he wailed.

The last sakura petal suddenly trembled, disconnected, and fluttered to the ground.

"Key? Heart of the Lion?" she whispered. She remembered hearing that term before. Queen Kefira had been searching for the Key to the Heart of the Lion and thought Lucy might have it. "Regulus." She reached into her pocket and pulled out the ring, then looked over to the crying baby. "What exactly is Regulus?"

End of Chapter 28

Chapter End Notes

Loke’s recollection of their first kiss is straight from the prequel, "Ephemeral Sakura, Eternal Love." It's short, and the kiss scene is in the last chapter. Yes, she drunkenly flashed her boobs at Loke in that story.
"So what's so special about Regulus? He is certainly of our time. He is the X factor and the superstar. The Elvis of the fixed stars. He ranks as ultra-fortunate, the most benefic star in the Universe. Medieval astrologers said it would bring glory, riches and fame to all those born under it, and that it was the 'Royall Starre'." - Marina E. Partridge, "Darkstar Astrology"

Lucy sat on her bed with Crux out. The wizened Celestial Spirit was snoring, but she recognized it as the sound of him searching. Gray and Natsu sat in the room with her, but they had both grown bored of waiting. Natsu and Happy began to raid her cupboards while Gray sat in the window and stared out vacuously.

"Lucy," Happy pouted as he gnawed on frozen fish sticks. "Are you sure he's not asleep?"

"Positive," she affirmed. Not a single bit of eager concentration wavered from her face as she continued watching the snoring Southern Cross.

Finally, Crux woke up. "Ooh! Regulus!"

Lucy leaned forward, eager to catch every single word. Natsu dropped his leg of chicken, Happy swallowed his fish down hard, and Gray moved from the window to the couch to sit beside Lucy. He could feel the magic pulsing through her to keep the Spirit manifested. It was nowhere near as much as that time she called out Aries, but it was a steady drain. He hoped it was worth it and they got some answers.

Crux began to lecture in a monotone voice. "Regulus, also known as Alpha Leonis, is the brightest star in the Leo Constellation. Of the twenty-one first magnitude stars, it is the closest to the ecliptic and regularly occulted by..."

"I know all that," Lucy snapped impatiently. "Skip the astronomy lecture."

"Very well. Regulus is also called the Heart of the Lion and is the source of power for the Celestial Spirit Leo. Access to Regulus' power is by means of the Regulus Ring, owned by Leo. However," he added, holding up a lecturing finger, "Regulus was once a Royal Star, Guardian of the Northern Sky, and a Celestial Spirit itself."

"A Spirit?" she asked. "Like you?"

"No. Most stars are weak themselves, just as most constellations have little power. Yet we constellations receive our power from the stars. Without the stars, we would be nothing. Most stars are merely that: sources of power. However, amongst the heavens, there were four Royal Stars, beings of great intellect, not mere hubs of magic, but wise and benevolent. In ancient times, they were called Venant, Tascheter, Satevis, and Haftorang."

"Haftorang," she whispered, remembering the fish-man who accompanied Queen Kefira.

"We know them today as Regulus, Aldebaran, Antares, and Fomalhaut. Long ago, those four were
Guardians, royalty, lords over the Spirit World. Above them all was Regulus, the King Star, the most powerful of all. These four stars were creatures of a much higher power than we mere constellations. They technically ruled over the Spirit World, but being incorporeal in nature, they only manifested in the bodies of their constellation Spirits."

Lucy pouted in confusion. "Manifested?"

"They merged with the Celestial Spirits. Leo, Taurus, Scorpio, and Piscis Austrinus were autonomous Spirits; however, in terms you can understand, the Royal Stars could possess the Celestial Spirits in order to dole out law and justice. Yet when possessed, it was not the star alone who decided things, but a perfect union between Star and Constellation. Regulus was Leo, Leo was Regulus, yet both were their own individual selves. Leo could be summoned into the Human World with his Gold Key, opening the Gate of the Lion. Regulus had his own key as well, the Regulus Key, which opened the Gate of the Heart of the Lion. When summoned, the Regulus Key overpowered the Gold Key, and Regulus manifested by merging with Leo, using his body to work powerful magic in the Human World. When Leo merged with Regulus, it made him the strongest Celestial Spirit in existence, which was why the Lion was once considered the King of the Heavens. The Royal Star Keys were made of lapis lazuli and opened the gates to power that, so it is said, could destroy a planet."

"Cool!" Natsu shouted. He leaned forward with wide eyes and a massive smile like a child who was just told that his friend got a new game for his birthday and was eager to play. "Did Loke really have power like that?"

"Indeed!" Crux asserted. "The Lapis Lazuli Keys were some of the most coveted in the world and owned only by Human royalty. Four of the ancient kingdoms held these Royal Star Keys: Kohinur to the north had Regulus, Nyota in the south had Fomalhaut, Fiore in the west had Aldebaran, and Setareh in the east had Antares. With one of those keys, a person could easily win a war. The constellations aligned with those Royal Stars realized this was a double-edged sword. They had access to their full power, making them great and feared. However, in rare cases of conflict, the sheer power of the Royal Star could override the will of the Spirit of the Constellation."

"Loke would lose his freewill?" Gray questioned, not liking the thought of that at all.

"It rarely happened, but there are confirmed cases. They are personal matters, so I cannot divulge them."

"That's fine," Lucy assured. "So what happened to these four stars?"

"The Royal Stars saw that Leo, Scorpio, Taurus, and Piscis Austrinus had too much power, and through their usage, it gave Humans a power they could not handle. The Royal Stars were displeased with being used for petty warfare. They wished to move on, transcend these realms, and leave behind both Humans and Spirits. However, they pitied the constellations affected by their power. Knowing how great a blow it would be to them, the Royal Stars in their wisdom left the decision to the king, Leo. Leo hesitated for a long time, but quite suddenly he agreed to let the Royal Stars leave this existence."

"Because of Kefira," Lucy realized.

Natsu sneered. "That queenie bitch?"

Crux nodded solemnly. "Yamataikoku No Kefira, Shaman-Queen of Kohinur, was the last Human to possess the Regulus Key. I cannot get into the circumstances, since that is private information."
"I already know," Lucy whispered, recalling all Loke had told her when they were prisoners of Kefira and Haftorang. He and Kefira had been lovers until Loke left her for Naomi, the woman he eventually married.

"The Royal Stars moved on; their Lapis Lazuli Keys were lost or destroyed in fear of reviving such frighteningly strong creatures. The disbanding severely affected the four Celestial Spirits involved. Leo lost all but a fraction of his power and had to step down from his station as king. Taurus went from a noble gentleman to a raging pervert. Piscis Austrinus had vehemently fought against the plan. He sulked away, rarely seen, and eventually betrayed all of the Spirit World in his quest to regain his old power. Scorpio was hurt the worst. Antares completely destroyed his Lapis Lazuli Key. Having his heart removed so utterly traumatized Scorpio, and he repressed the memory of ever having been aligned with a Royal Star. What few particles were left of the Antares Key were blended with Scorpio’s sand in hopes that it might stabilize him. However, it did little to ease the Scorpion’s trauma. Instead, he has apparently formed something like a split personality, since he constantly refers to his attacks as our sand."

"Poor Scorpio," Lucy pouted.

Crux hummed, not commenting on what he thought of the Scorpion's predicament. "After seeing the torment Scorpio went through at the total destruction of the Antares Key, the other Royal Stars gave each of the other constellations fragments of their keys. Piscis Austrinus was given the lip ring of Fomalhaut. Taurus has his Aldebaran stone hidden within the cowbell he wears. Leo was given a small chip from the Regulus Key."

"So with Loke's ring," Lucy realized, "that blue stone is a fragment off of the Regulus Key. Just that tiny bit is that powerful?"

"Indeed! A whole Lapis Lazuli Key would be over a hundred times stronger, making Leo the strongest Celestial Spirit in existence, certainly more powerful than the current Spirit King."

"No way!" shouted Gray.

"Stronger than that mustache-geezer?" Natsu grinned wildly, looking even more eager.

Lucy's mouth dropped numbly. She began to see what Loke had planned, and she did not like it one bit. "What happened to the Lapis Lazuli Keys?" she asked hesitantly.

Crux hummed, which turned into a loud snore.

Happy pouted. "He's asleep again."

"No, he's thinking," Lucy said, waiting intensely.

Natsu laughed in excitement. "Man, to think Loke was that strong! I wanna find that lappy-whatever key so I can fight him."

"You're an idiot," grumbled Gray.

Then there was a pop and Crux opened his eyes. "Ah yes, the whereabouts of the Lapis Lazuli Keys! No one knows."

Lucy sank in disappointment. "Just great!"

"The Antares Key was destroyed, this much is confirmed. The other three Lapis Lazuli Keys were hidden so that the Celestial Spirits could call upon that old power in times of crisis. However, the last
law handed down by the Royal Stars was that they should not be called back except in dire emergency. To use their keys for greed of power is considered to be the greatest sin a Celestial Spirit can make. As for where the three remaining Lapis Lazuli Keys were hidden, it is not recorded. Only the Celestial Spirit attuned to the key can find them. Yet they are useless broken. They must become whole."

"Which means," she realized, "even if a person found the Regulus Key, they'd need the missing chip on the Regulus Ring." She looked down at her necklace and the ring threaded through a silver chain. So that was the reason Loke left the ring with her!

Lucy was stunned to realize what Loke must have been thinking when he shouted at her to find the Key to the Heart of the Lion, the Regulus Key. The only way to completely gain his freedom was to reacquire his ancient strength, stage a coup d'etat, defeat the Spirit King, reclaim his place as the King of the Heavens, and thus Loke would be able to make new rules and arrange things to his favor.

Lucy shuddered at the plan. She did not want to be the reason for a shift in the Spirit World, likely as Naomi probably did not want to be the reason Leo lost his Heart and throne. That poor woman must have felt deep guilt, but also pride that someone would go that far just for her.

She remembered what Kefira said about wanting the Heart of the Lion. That vile woman was after it. If she found it and got the ring, Loke would have no choice but to fight for her side. To have Zeref's minions controlling Loke...

She refused to let that happen!

"You've been helpful, Crux. I'm closing your gate."

However, the old Spirit was already asleep and snoring loudly. She sliced her Silver Key through the air, and he vanished with a pop. Now that he was gone, a plotting look came to Lucy's face, and her brown eyes hardened with determination.

"So what's the plan?" asked Gray.

Natsu leaped up and thrust his fist into the air. "Find the lappy-zuly key and make Loke super strong!"

Gray was about to shout at him to be more serious, but Lucy nodded.

"We need to find it. Kefira is after the Regulus Key, too. If we find it before her, we win. If Loke can be summoned using the Regulus Key, and it'd overpower even the Spirit King's jurisdiction, then that's one way to free him. Perhaps the Spirit King will let us live in peace if Loke is stronger."

"Threaten him!" whooped Natsu.

Happy leaped into the air and cheered. "Aye, sir!"

Gray was a bit more practical. "Lucy, if you do that, it very well might mean war within the Spirit World."

"I'm aware of that," she nodded solemnly. "I don't want trouble for my friends there, but I don't want to lose Loke either. If nothing else works, if I can't get him back by any other means..." Her eyes burned with determination. "...we'll take down the entire Spirit World together!"
Never get between a woman and her man! Here's some obscure foreshadowing: in Chapter 14 (many months ago) the Spirit King warned Leo that the Royal Stars were gone and they did not need their power. After he said that, Taurus reached up to his cowbell and sadly tapped it. A minor action, but here we see why he did that. His fragment is inside that bell. He was obviously thinking about his own star, Aldebaran.

For the four ancient kingdoms, they're not important, but I have fun inventing names. Each kingdom is designated by a direction which matches the Guardian direction of the star. North is Kohinur, and Queen Kefira had the Regulus Key, Guardian of the North. Fiore is far to the west on maps of Earthland, so I state they had the Guardian of the West, Aldebaran. South is Nyota, meaning "star" in Swahili, and they had the Guardian of the South, Fomalhaut. To the east is Setareh, meaning "star" in Persian, and they had the Guardian of the East, Antares.

I brought together some mythology with ancient culture. The FT wiki said Loke's ring is quartz, but that sure doesn't look like quartz to me! Recently they changed it to lacrima, but it's from the Spirit World. When I first saw a closeup of Loke's ring in color, I thought it was made of lapis lazuli.

Lapis ring:

Compared to Loke's ring:
Lapis lazuli is a semi-precious stone, lauded in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Caucasus. *Lapis* is Latin for "stone," and *lazuli* comes from the Persian لازوری، lāzhward, the name of a place where lapis lazuli was mined, which ultimately comes from a Sanskrit phrase meaning "ring of the king."

So lapis lazuli = "stone" + "ring of the king." An appropriate stone for the Keys of the Royal Stars, as well as the stone of Loke's ring, the King Star, Regulus!

I explained in earlier footnotes that the Royal Stars were part of Persian mythology. So when I state that these **Persian** Royal Stars have **Persian** lapis lazuli keys, whose name translates to "**stone of the ring of the king**"...aha! There is method to my madness! ^_^

=^..^= "I think Rhov is just mad."

"Quiet, Happy! This is the result of ingenious research and years of studying mythology and ancient cultures." *snooty nod*

=^-.-^= "I think you just got lucky in your random research of weird crap."

"Grrr... I think you're not getting any fish tonight. Ha!"

=^o.o^= "Rhov! You're a genius!"

"Good kitty! Have some tuna."
“The way to read a fairy tale is to throw yourself in.” - W. H. Auden

Levy, Erza, and Wendy all wore Gale-Force Reading Glasses, flipping quickly through books while Natsu, Gray, and Happy ran back and forth through Fairy Tail's massive library, bringing arm-loads of books and taking back any that were finished.

"I never realized there were so many fairy tales," Wendy exclaimed as she flipped through her storybook.

"Didn't you read any as a kid?" Levy asked in surprise.

"Do you realize how many of these involve slaying dragons? Grandeeney never would have allowed those sorts of stories!"

Levy looked over. "But you're a dragon slayer. You'd think stories like that would be...I don't know, research."

"To do what? Kill my mother? No way! Besides, the magic Grandeeney taught me is different from other dragon slayers. It's more about healing than destroying."

"I suppose that's true," Levy realized. "When you were in Cait Shelter, didn't they have fairy tales?"

The little girl thought back. "Master Roubaul told me legends, but I guess they must have been unique to the Nirvit people, because I don't recognize any of them in these books."

Gray groaned wearily as he brought five more thick tomes and dropped them heavily onto the table. "Levy, are you sure there's a clue in these? I mean, they're kids' stories."

"I don't know for certain," Levy admitted. "When you guys were talking about lion hearts, I was reminded of a story I read as a child. I don't remember who wrote it, what book it was in, or the title, only a vague memory about a lion who gave up his heart to be with a girl. Fairy tales have elements of truth. Maybe it can give us a hint on where to start looking for this Royal Key."

"We should ask Lucy to help us," Wendy suggested. She set aside a book, picked up another, and began to rapidly flip through it.

Natsu came with more books and a pout on his face. "Lucy has enough worries. Every time I visit her, she smells like salt water, so I know she's been crying. Let's leave her alone for a few more days."

"Natsu's right," nodded Gray. "I think it's best if we let her focus on her baby while we do the research."

Erza paused in her reading, flipped back a few pages, and read the story slower. "I think I found it." The others rushed over to her as Erza removed the glasses so she could read normally.
Once upon a time, there lived a princess who was under the spell of an evil witch. The witch was a cruel woman who beat the princess and made her live worse than a slave. She even tried to kill the princess many times.

One day, while walking in the fields surrounding the witch's fortress, the princess met a lion. She was scared, but the lion spoke gently to her.

"Fear not, princess. If you hug my mane, I will protect you."

"No!" cried the girl. "If I get too close, you will eat me."

"Upon my pride, I promise not to harm you."

The princess was scared, but she wanted to be protected from the witch, so she hugged his mane. He was warm and purred gently. After that, the lion followed beside her every day. When the witch came to beat the princess, the lion stood in the way. When the witch sent demons to attack in the night, the lion fought them and kept the princess safe. She came to trust the lion, although she feared his beastly nature.

One day, the princess became sad. She had been a prisoner of the witch for so long, and she missed her family.

The lion said, "Please do not cry. If you give me a kiss, I can free you."

"Oh dear, no!" the princess protested. "If I get too close to your mouth, you will eat me."

"Princess, we have been friends for so long, but I have not been honest. I am under a spell from the evil witch. A kiss will break the curse. Then we can work together and get free. Please princess, upon my pride, you can trust me."

Believing the lion, she gave him a kiss. Instantly, the beast turned into a handsome prince. Seeing him made the princess very happy, and they immediately fell in love.

Suddenly, the witch arrived in anger. "Who changed the prince back from a lion?" she demanded. She saw the princess shivering. "You did! For undoing my spell, I will have your head."

However, the lion-prince knew magic. He grabbed the princess, and they disappeared from the witch's fortress. He took her to a peaceful land filled with flowers. They married and were very happy. However, the prince was doomed to fall under the witch's spell once more. To prevent this, he traveled to a wise sage to seek a solution.

"The witch's spell lingers in your heart," the sage told the lion-prince. "Unless you remove your heart, you will never be free."

The lion-prince refused. He feared that if he lost his heart, he would stop caring for the princess. Still, he dreaded the witch's influence.

One day, the evil witch made him return with her magic and imprisoned him. She changed him back into a lion and kept him in a cage.

"You are a beast, and you will always be a beast," she cackled as she tormented him through his prison bars.
"I am not a beast," he roared. "I am a proud prince, and I love no one but my princess."

"Then I will find your precious princess and kill her so that you will belong to me again." With that threat, the witch left him alone in his cage.

The lion-prince roared and paced, but he could not escape. He feared for his beloved princess and was prepared to do anything to save her from the witch.

Remembering the sage's words, the lion used his mighty claw and cut out his heart, leaving only a single piece, the part that loved the princess. Instantly, the curse lifted, and he was a prince once more. He left the witch's fortress and never returned. He put his heart in a magic box and hid the box in a cave on a far southern island, so no one under the stars would find it.

The witch saw the empty cage and searched for the lion, but since her magic over him was undone, she never found him or the princess ever again. The lion-prince returned home feeling worried. He was now heartless, and he feared he might feel no love for his beloved princess. However, when she rushed out to greet him, he felt a leap in the place where his heart once was. That tiny piece he left intact held all of his feelings for her, and he swore she would be his only love for all eternity.

The princess and the heartless lion-prince lived happily ever after.

The End

"That's it!" Levy cried out. "That's the story of Loke."

"Aye!" Happy agreed.

Wendy had a tiny pout. "But knowing it's Loke makes it sad, since we know it wasn't happily ever after between them."

Gray hummed as he looked over Erza's shoulder at the book, accompanied by drawings of each scene to help children to understand. "But Loke isn't a prince, and Naomi was never a princess."

"Well, you guys said Loke used to be a king, right?" Levy reasoned. "In fairy tales, kings are old and princes are young. A good writer follows the archetypes of the genre," she explained as if this was elementary. "Little children aren't as interested if bad things happen to normal people, but it's more tragic if it's a prince and princess. In this story, the role of royalty was transferred from Queen Kefira, who is only called an evil witch, to the Celestial Spirit Mage, who in this story is a princess. That's not important," she said, swishing the minor detail away before pointing hard into the book. "The thing is, it's about a man who was also a lion, a wicked witch, a damsel in distress...hmm..." She tapped her glasses up her nose and skimmed through the story again. "He put his heart in a magic box and hid the box in a cave on a far southern island, so no one under the stars would find it. That's our Spirit Key."

"But south from where?" pouted Gray. "Queen Kefira lived in Kohinur. That's halfway around the world. Are we expected to search every island from Fiore to Kohinur?"

"Obviously, this is pertaining to south from the country of origin." Levy took the book out of Erza's hands and flipped back to the first few pages. "Oh! Children Tales from the Land of Kohinur. So yep, it looks like the island where Loke hid the Key to the Heart of the Lion is on an island south of Kohinur."

"Kohinur," Natsu whined in complaint. "That's so far away! Wendy, you better come with us so you can use Troia to keep me from getting sick. Looks like this is going to be a very long quest."
Erza hummed and walked over to a globe in the library. "If we're traveling to Kohinur, we might have to wait a little. There are trade winds out that way that would make traveling by boat difficult."

"Boat?" Natsu moaned, feeling sick just imagining it.

"What about a train?" asked Gray.

"Tra-a-ain?" Natsu groaned louder.

"That might be possible," Erza mused, inspecting the globe. "It might take longer by train on average, but it's much better than waiting for the winds and spring storms to subside."

Natsu was wavering and turning green. "Stormy seas...boat..." He hiccuped and covered his mouth in illness.

Gray glared at him. "Don't get sick just thinking about it."

Just then, Lucy walked into the library and was startled to see them all standing around. "Oh? I see Levy and Erza in here a lot, but I didn't think Natsu even liked reading."

"How mean!" he snapped, forgetting his sickness as he crossed his arms over his chest. "I know how to read. Igneel taught me."

"Mean Lucy!" Happy joined in for Natsu's defense.

She rolled her eyes in annoyance. "I never said I thought you couldn't read; I said I didn't think you liked reading enough to spend a nice spring day here in the library."

"Lu-chan!" Levy cried out happily. "We found a clue to the location of that Spirit Key Loke wants."

Lucy's eyes widened, and for a moment she looked terrified. A split second later, she had a casual smile and gave a flippant wave at the idea as she walked past them. "He doesn't want it," she said dismissively. "He only said if I'm in trouble, I could use it. But I have you guys, so I don't have to go on some silly wild goose chase."

"But..." Levy looked down at the book. "I thought you wanted to search for the Regulus Key."

"Yeah!" shouted Natsu. "I wanna make Loke stronger, so I can fight him."

"Aye," agreed Happy. "Then he'll be a super-duper awesome grownup cat."

"Don't be idiots," Lucy sighed, grabbing a book from a shelf. "Loke just panicked when he told me that. He probably wasn't supposed to say anything at all. You should forget about it."

"But Lucy," Wendy began sadly.

"No!" she snapped. That shocked all of them, and they stared at her. Lucy rubbed out her head and tried to calm herself. "Look, I have a baby to think about now. I can't run off on adventures like you guys. I don't think any of you could find that key anyway. Loke said only I could, and I don't want to, so just...give it up already," she yelled and stormed out.

"Lucy," Happy pouted as they watched her flee.

Erza's eyes narrowed, and after Lucy was gone, she muttered, "Something's up with her."

"PMS?" asked Natsu.
Gray realized it, too. "She's hiding something. She was scared."

"Precisely," Erza nodded. "You guys mentioned something about the Celestial Spirits weren't supposed to use those Royal Keys unless it was a dire emergency."

"Yeah," Natsu frowned, thinking back. "That snoring gramps said it was an ultimate sin."

Erza's face went even more stern. "I see. If that's the case, then it might be that if she tries to look for the Regulus Key, Loke could be killed to keep him from gaining more power."

"That's horrible," Levy gasped. Her eyes dropped to the fairy tale book. "Then I guess we shouldn't bother. I don't want Loke to get into trouble because of us."

Gray stared a little harder. Something felt off with Lucy. He decided to follow her and hurried out of the guild building. He kept his distance, tracking her through the streets of Magnolia, all the way to Bisca's house. Lucy paused in front of it but did not knock. Even keeping his distance, Gray heard the voices of Luke and Asuka inside the house. With a sigh, Lucy went past and continued on to her old apartment. Gray thought she had given up on it, but Lucy pulled out a key and unlocked the door. He knew how to break in, so Gray went to her bedroom window, stealthily opened it, and climbed inside. The place was surprisingly clean for a house that had been abandoned since last summer.

"Thanks for cleaning it again," he heard Lucy say. "This is the rent for this month. I might miss the next few months, but I'll pay you in full when I can."

"You're a good girl, Lucy Heartfilia," Gray heard an old woman say. "If I waited seven years to have you pay all that was due on your rent, I can wait a few months while you take care of your baby. Are you planning on moving back soon?"

"Not yet. With my baby's father gone, I'm under guild protection again."

"I see. Well, return when you can. That husband of yours isn't bad looking, and I'm sure he could help you with rent."

"Oh! He, uh...he's not my...never mind," sighed Lucy. "When he returns from his, um, mission, I'll ask him about moving back here. I miss this place."

"I'll hold it in wait a bit longer, only because you've somehow managed to keep paying rent. I don't like empty houses, though," she said in a grouchy voice.

"I know. I'm sorry. Thank you, landlady."

Then Gray heard a door open and shut. He slipped out from the bedroom and saw Lucy standing in the middle of an empty house. All of her furniture had been moved to the dormitory, and only a few things were left behind. She jolted at the sound of footsteps, but relaxed when she saw it was only Gray.

"Sneaking into my house," she chided. "Boy, does that bring back memories!"

"How are you paying for this?" he asked in concern.

"Natsu slips me some of his money. I told him he didn't have to, but he said he doesn't want to lose Team Natsu's training room." She laughed with a snuffle and shook her head at the craziness of her beloved friend.
Hesitantly, Gray began, "Lucy, about the Regulus Key—"

"I told you, I don't want to search for it," she said harshly. "Loke will come back. I trust him, and I trust the Spirit King to make this trial as quick as possible. I'll wait." She held her head up bravely.

Gray found a slip of paper on a crate and a pencil. He scratched something down on it. "Are you sure you don't want him to be stronger? You know what Crux said. He'd be the strongest Celestial Spirit. That'd be a huge power-up to you as a mage." He slipped the paper over. On it, he had written: Are we being watched?

"I don't care about something like power," Lucy snapped. She took the pencil and wrote back: Yes!
"I want Loke to be safe, that's all. Even if he's stripped of his magic completely, so long as he can return to us, then that's fine."

Gray crunched up the paper. "If that's your decision, of course we'll abide by it. None of us want Loke to get into worse trouble. We want both you and him to be happy together. Sorry we butted into your business without asking. We just wanted to help."

"I know, and I'm glad everyone is concerned for us," Lucy smiled sadly, feeling truly lucky to have such loyal friends.

"Feel free to let us know when you need assistance, either with the baby or with paying rent on this place. I'll tell the others to stop researching this."

"Thanks," she muttered with a wary pout.

He nodded in a silent goodbye and began to turn out of the house. Gray only got three steps before Lucy grabbed his arm.

"Wait!" She looked around her room, glaring at the corners. "It's gone. I don't know what it was, but I felt it following me for a few days now, watching me. Some sort of Celestial Spirit, from how it felt. A spy is my guess. Loke probably got in trouble for telling me about the Regulus Key, so they were spying on me to see if I'd go after it. That's why I had to tell all those lies."

"Lies?" asked Gray. "Then you do want to go after the key?"

"Of course I do! That evil woman Kefira is also after it. I'm not going to let her get Loke. It's bad enough that I've lost him to the Spirit King, but I refuse to lose him to some bitch like her. Even if Loke comes back home this very day, I'd still go after that key, if only to make sure no one else ever gets it. But we need to lie low for a while. I picked this up at the guild." She showed him a sheet of paper.

Gray read through it. "A job?"

"I want to go on a mission tomorrow, purely so I have an excuse to call out my Spirits. If they think I'm going back into my usual routine, they'll tell the Spirit King and he'll forget about the matter of the Lapis Lazuli Key."

Gray nodded with a smile to see that she was not giving up. "I see. I'll show this job to Natsu and Erza. It sounds easy, but you'll still have to call out a Celestial Spirit."

"Right! And if all the Spirits are gathered for this trial, then the Spirit King will know right away. He'll be off his guard, and that's when we can leave!" she declared with a gleam of defiance in her eyes.
Meanwhile, in the Spirit World

The Celestial Spirit Telescopium, the Telescope, appeared before the Spirit King in a puff of smoke and light. "My liege," he said, and the awkwardly shaped Spirit bowed his horizontally tubular head. "I bring news. Despite being tempted by her compatriots, the Spirit Mage Lucy Heartfilia has publicly declared she shall not seek the Regulus Key. She is resting her hope in your benevolence, my esteemed king."

The mustached Spirit nodded solemnly. "I had sincerely hoped she was wise enough to leave this issue alone. It seems I was right about her. Lucy is not the sort to foolishly do dangerous things."

Seated with dozens of other Celestial Spirits all waiting in a courtroom, Aquarius gave a soft scoff. "He obviously doesn't know Lucy very well."

Sagittarius looked over with concern. "Moshi-moshi! Do you think Lucy-dono will seek it out?"

Aquarius kept silent and just smirked. She knew it was best not to speak her mind. She had been Lucy's Celestial Spirit since the girl was a child and barely able to summon her for a couple of minutes. Aquarius had always felt annoyed by the frail girl, but at least she gave lengthy vacations and did not pry into her love life. Aquarius did not want Lucy to lose her keys, only to end up with an owner who saw her as a mere tool. She despised those sorts of Humans.

Aries bit her nails fretfully. "Where's Leo? Why isn't he here yet?" She looked over to Capricorn. "You guys already fetched him, right?"

"Yes," the Goat frowned, still feeling guilty about the scene of familial love he had witnessed and, essentially, destroyed. "It's been many hours. I don't understand the delay."

"Simple, ebi," said Cancer. "Each hour here is almost four days in Earthland, and Leo knows this, ebi. This is the Spirit King's way of mentally torturing Leo. As he sits, he realizes how much time is passing with Lucy all alone. The guilt will weaken his sense of pride and tame him a little, ebi."

Aries pouted and folded her arms. "I don't like this at all."

"Nor do I," Capricorn whispered. He felt that justice needed to be served, but this...this wasn't justice! This was revenge. The Goat had not been aligned with the Royal Stars, so he did not understand what sort of power was involved. He only knew that he had observed fear in the Spirit King. With Leo desperate enough to send Lucy off to seek that ancient power, the worries the Spirit King had were now justified. Leo was being punished with this delay in the trial. However, if Leo was going to be punished by stripping away his magic anyway, what purpose did the delay serve besides tormenting both Leo and Lucy?

"We don't like this, either," Gemi and Mini said together.

"Pu-puun!" Plue agreed, looking as upset as the Canis Minor could with his silly face.

Scorpio also frowned with his arms folded angrily. "Yeah, but what can we do? We are too weak to stand up against the Spirit King."

Lyra urgently hushed him. "Don't even talk about that! You'll also get in trouble."

Still, the Celestial Spirits who loved Lucy were anxious and angry. It was bad enough that they knew what this trial was for—to strip away Leo's immortality and magic—but the delay was purely cruel.
Taurus began to tap his cowbell. Inside it was his fragment of the Aldebaran Key. He had not thought about the Royal Stars in a long, long time. Now this whole problem with Leo and the Regulus Key made the Bull disturbed. He kept tapping the bell, letting it ring mutely, until Capricorn grabbed his hand.

"Do you wish to get in trouble, too?" the Goat warned in a stern whisper.

Taurus put his hand down and refrained from the nervous tapping. There was nothing they could do but wait...and wait...and wait.

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**Back in Earthland**

The next day, Lucy and the team went to a nearby town where Blue Pegasus had partied and left magical booby traps scattered through a hotel. No one from their guild felt well enough to clean up, since all of them, even Master Bob, had hangovers, so Fairy Tail went to aid them.

They arrived to see mages being carried out on stretchers. Some had injuries from brawls, but most appeared to be in pain from hangovers. They saw Master Bob about to be taken away in a wagon with his bald head cradled down in his hands.

"Master Bob!" Lucy shouted and waved.

"Shhhh!" came dozens of pained hushes.

The cross-dressing master silently pointed to the hotel. Curious, they began to walk to the entrance when they heard a joyous cry.

"Oh, my lovely Erza!" They turned to see Ichiya leaping forward, rather nimble for a man of his age. Erza cringed back in disgust. "Your perfume is..." He suddenly collapsed and vomited.

"Wow, do you smell that bad?" Happy asked, and Erza shook her fist at him in a threat.

"Ichiya-sensei," little Eve cried out. Although he looked like he was also suffering with a hangover, he and Ren rushed to assist their team leader over to a waiting wagon. "We're very sorry about that, ladies," he grinned specifically to Erza and Lucy, completely ignoring Gray and Natsu.

"We'll make it up to you for such humiliation," Ren assured them. "But...it's not because we like you or anything," he added in a grumble.

"Let's go," Erza growled, and she escaped as quickly as she could.

They went inside the posh hotel, where the staff took them upstairs to a dark room. They knocked and after a long delay a man answered. He wore a rumpled suit, the jacket off, his tie loose and askew, and two buttons had been ripped off his wrinkled shirt. Despite shading his bloodshot eyes against the morning's glare, they recognized Hibiki Laytis.

"Shh!" he hushed immediately. "Come in and close the door. Too bright." Hibiki retreated back into a partially demolished hotel room with the shades pulled shut and the lights low. "Sorry for asking this favor," he whispered, his eyes hooded as he sipped some medicine. He gave a low, wry chuckle and scratched his messy blond hair. "Guess we went as overboard as Fairy Tail usually does."

"I'm rather shocked by all this," Erza had to admit in disappointment.

"I know, we all are. It was supposed to be a private gala for Master Bob's birthday, but the whole
Ichiya-sama made his special Parfum Piña-colada Punch. That stuff should be illegal," he muttered, looking sick just remembering what must have been an insane night of drunken debauchery. "We were told that if we don't get this place clean before tomorrow, they'll charge us an insane fee. Some local lord is having a party here tomorrow, so they need the hotel to be spotless or they'll lose his patronage. To make it worse, one of our young guild members set traps everywhere. It'll take a mage to disarm them. Master Bob realized it was cheaper to hire another guild than take the fee."

"We'll get right to work," Erza nodded. "Happy, fly around and find all the magic enchantments placed on the ceilings. I'll search for ones in the floors and walls. Natsu, your job is it take any magic devices we find, take them outside," she emphasized, "and burn them. If you make this place even a little more messy, so help me..."

"Whoa, got it, got it!" he assured. "I'll be good."

"Gray and Lucy, start cleaning. When we clear a room from traps, you move in and clean."

"Oh joy," Lucy mumbled, although she knew this was a simple mission, not at all the caliber worthy of their team.

"I'll find the cleaning supplies," Gray offered.

The others all left, leaving Lucy alone with Hibiki. She looked over at him. He was much older than her now, but still surprisingly handsome. Perhaps even more handsome! More than once she had wondered, if she had picked Blue Pegasus instead of Fairy Tail, would she have fallen for someone like him? He had dated Karen Lilica, after all, so he was into Spirit Mages. Plus he reminded her a lot of Loke, so much so that it made her a little sad now.

"You and Karen's old Spirit, Leo," he said, pulling her out of her thoughts. "I heard you two got married."

"Oh!" Lucy squeaked, and she blushed. "No, we didn't, but we have a baby."

"A baby?" he cried out, yet his voice hurt his head. He had to hold it and spoke softer. "I didn't think it was possible for Humans and Spirits to have children."

"I guess it's not supposed to be," she muttered. "Luke's a bit...special. Hey, Hibiki, you have access to a lot of information, right?"

"My Archive Magic lets me store and access quite a large database," he nodded.

"Do you..." She looked around, trying to feel that spying presence she had sensed earlier, but she felt nothing. "Do you have information on the Key to the Heart of the Lion?"

He looked up in a jolt. She guessed from his stunned face that he knew something. After a moment of staring at her hesitantly, he finally said, "Get me medicine to cure this hangover and I'll look it up. With my head pounding this hard, I won't be able to do anything. Sorry," he shrugged apologetically.

Lucy nodded in understanding and pulled out a Gold Key. "Open the Gate of the Maiden! Virgo!"

Hibiki flinched at her loud voice, and then at the noise as Virgo drilled up from the floor.

"I await my punishment, Princess," she greeted.
"Virgo...well, first, how is the trial going?"

"Ah, you mean Brother's sentencing. It hasn't started."

"What!" Lucy yelled.

Hibiki grabbed his head. "Easy, easy," he moaned.

"It's been a week," Lucy reasoned. "Are they still waiting for something?"

Virgo stared at her blankly. Lucy waited, but it seemed like she simply would not speak.

"Is...Is he in trouble?" whispered Lucy. "Are they not even going to let him have a trial?"

"Brother will be punished," she assured. "The Spirit King delayed the trial to observe you."

"Observe...?" She paused as she realized what Virgo meant. The spy! "Because of what Loke said?"

"Brother should not have told you about his other key," she frowned. "He is being punished for it."

Lucy covered her mouth as she felt like screaming. Punished? How? Was he being tortured? Loke had told her a little about what happened the last time he was imprisoned, including being hurt by the Spirit King. She felt like sobbing to think how much more he might suffer on her account.

"Did you call me to interrogate me?" Virgo questioned, her face still a blank expression.

"Wha-? No, no, I...I need your help. We have to...to clean this place." She tried to stabilize her mind. "I need to find medicine for Hibiki, so I want you to help Gray to clean up. Oh, and please don't make holes in the floor," she added quickly.

"I understand, Princess." She walked away normally.

Once she was gone, the tears hit Lucy too suddenly to stop them. She fell to her knees and sobbed. Hibiki hurried to her side and, without even knowing what was really wrong, he hugged her.

"I don't want him to hurt anymore," she cried, grabbing hold of Hibiki's shirt as she wept. "It's all my fault. Everything that's happened...all my fault. They want to make him mortal. They want him to die! I...I don't want that. I used to think I wanted him to be Human, but I can't let them sentence him to a slow death because of me. He's my Spirit, my friend, the man I love. I can't let him die because of me. I'll do anything, anything, to save him."

Hibiki's face tightened as he heard the desperation in her voice. "I think I understand now." He stood, and a bright projection of a console formed in front of him. Immediately, he began to type in information.

Lucy looked up in surprise and wiped her tears. "I thought you can't work your magic with your head hurting so badly."

He smiled down to her flirtatiously. "The tears of a beautiful woman are the best medicine for a man."

Her cheeks went pink. "Sheesh, you really are as bad as Loke."

"I know what you're looking for," he admitted, "and I think I now understand why you want it. The Regulus Key."
That gave Lucy a jolt. "You know about it?"

"Karen was interested in it too and had me look it up. I should still have the information in my archives. She wanted it as a way to get stronger and force Loke to stop his self-exile. She died before I found its whereabouts. Your goal isn't for greed, but to make Leo strong enough to fight for his freedom."

"Yes, exactly," she nodded eagerly.

"Unfortunately, not even the Spirits know where the Royal Stars hid their Lapis Lazuli Keys."

"You even know about the Royal Stars?" she gasped in amazement.

"Of course. Mythology often hides clues to facts. Where even the Spirit King can't figure something out, often just a little research can make it all clear." He tapped one more button, and a story came up on his screen.

"The Heartless Lion," Lucy read. "That's the same fairy tale Levy was talking about."

"And the line that gives us the map." He highlighted it, and Lucy read it aloud.

"Remembering the sage's words, the lion used his mighty claw and cut out his heart, leaving only a single piece, the part that loved the princess. Instantly, the curse lifted, and he was a prince once more. He left the witch's fortress and never returned. He put his heart in a magic box and hid the box in a cave on a far southern island, so no one under the stars would find it." She hummed as she considered those written words. "A magic box. A cave on a far southern island. That's not really a map, Hibiki. It's hardly even a clue."

He chuckled as he tapped in more information. "Do you know anything about children's stories from ancient Kohinur?"

"Of course not," she pouted. Was he trying to make her look stupid?

"They were, for the most part, written by two sources. Who these two myth-builders were is a mystery, but there are theories for one of them. In the halls of the Shaman-Queen Kefira..."

Lucy's eyes immediately widened at her name.

"...there lived a woman who was both a mage and a writer. She left behind a large amount of literature before vanishing one day. Her style of writing and the style of sixty percent of the fairy tales from ancient Kohinur fall under the same pattern of dialect and morpheme combinations with an idiosyncratic lexicon. Of course, you have to study the documents in the vernacular as opposed to transliterated versions common today to observe the syntax similarities."

"Huh?" Lucy asked, totally lost now.

"Basically, the style is exactly the same, which gives good evidence that this mage is the same woman who wrote those fairy tales, and her name is..."

Before the information could appear, Lucy spoke the name aloud. "Naomi!"

Hibiki looked back at her, shocked she got it before his grand reveal. "Oh! So you know about her?"

"I know she and Loke...they..." She could not bring herself to say they were lovers.

"Right," he nodded, sensing her emotions. "Onoyasumaro No Naomi, Celestial Spirit Mage under..."
the patronage of Yamataikoku No Kefira, the last monarch of the Kingdom of Kohinur. One day in the year X375, Naomi vanished, and with her the Key to the Lion. That makes her the obvious writer of this fairy tale. Of course, very few people knew anything about the Royal Stars and the Heart of the Lion, so the story made no sense beyond a cute fairy tale. However, being Leo's lover, Naomi likely knew exactly where he hid the Key to the Heart of the Lion. If she gave any hint at all, it would be in this story, the tale of the lion losing his heart."

"If she knew, then why did she never use it to free him?" Lucy shouted in outrage.

Hibiki looked over in confusion. "Free him?"

"He was taken from her four years later, imprisoned in the Spirit World, just when she learned she was pregnant. She had to raise..." She shut her mouth quickly. Letting him know about Zeref was probably unwise.

"Oh? Did they have a child?" he asked.

"Research it for yourself," she grumbled.

He shrugged off the matter. "In any case, she probably couldn't search for it. The last part here shows that: 'no one under the stars would find it.' Now, for a woman who was a Celestial Spirit Mage, isn't that an odd phrase to use? No one under the stars."

"Which means Humans can't find it," she realized. "But Loke said, of all Humans, I could find it. Why would he tell me that?"

"Because, Lucy, you have an advantage no other Human has." He smiled down to her. "You have a baby who is above the stars, a half-Spirit child. Your son has the Lion's inheritance within him. He could find the key, but obviously he's too small. He'd need his mother. That means you're the one who could find it, but only by using your son's instincts."

"So why didn't Naomi use her son to find the key?" she demanded. She was beginning to hate this woman for not trying harder to free Loke.

"Maybe she never realized he had that ability. Or maybe she tried going after it and failed. Even more likely, she probably died before the baby grew up enough to be able to travel with her. See, Naomi vanished in X375. You said Leo was imprisoned four years later after learning she was pregnant. That means her baby must have been born around X379 or X380. Yet in X391, at the Battle of Kohinur Keep, the Great Spirit Mage Cheveyo obtained the Leo Key. It was in Queen Kerfira's possession at that point, not Naomi's. One can only guess how she got it."

Lucy felt a shudder down her spine. "She killed Naomi for it."

"That means the child couldn't have been more than eleven years old at the time of his mother's death. That's pretty young to be traveling on a quest, especially since the world was embroiled in Zeref's war."

"No, that's more than old enough," Lucy realized softly.

If Zeref had matured at the same rate Luke was, then he would have been fully grown in six year. Plus, he was the one who started the whole war; however, she could not tell Hibiki that it was Zeref they were talking about. She knew from history books that the monsters and demons began appearing in X384. That meant Zeref was taken from his mother around the age of four, twisted into evil, and reigned in terror for the next seven years through what was the darkest period in Earthland's history.
She paused as a terrible thought came to her. Kefira must have kidnapped Lucy because she wanted her baby in order to find the Key to the Heart of the Lion. It explained why Kefira claimed she wanted to 'keep her safe,' but she had not cared if Loke was hurt bad enough to force him back to the Spirit World. Even if he was imprisoned there, if Kefira waited until Lucy delivered the baby, she could use him to find the Regulus Key and bring Loke out that way.

"She'll be after him again," she realized with a tremor.

Kefira wanted Luke for some reason, and now Lucy figured it out. She wanted the Key to the Heart of the Lion, and she needed a child of the Lion to find it. This time, when Kefira came for Luke, she would have no qualms about killing Lucy. She might even kill her purely out of jealousy. Before Hibiki could ask what she meant, Lucy thought of something else, something that gave her a small spark of hope.

"Just before the Battle of Kohinur Keep, were there any major battles on islands south of Kohinur?"

Hibiki inputted that query and waited for the information to come up. "No, but...but the final battle...oh wow!" He brought the information up onto the main screen so Lucy could see. "The final battle between Zeref and the Great Gathering was on—"

"Hoshinoue Island," Lucy gasped, reading the screen. "Hoshinoue Island, Above the Stars."

Hibiki nodded with a smile. He always felt giddy when his research produced results like this. "The Great Gathering—when numerous armies of men, dragons, Exceed, plus the twelve Zodiac Spirits, all fought Zeref and his demons—took place on Hoshinoue Island. No one under the stars would find it. Which means you need someone above the stars...and you need to go to a land above the stars. She left the clue right there in her story."

Lucy glanced at a side screen that still showed the fairy tale's text. "Thank you, Naomi," she prayed softly. Then she looked to Hibiki. "Don't let people know about this. If anyone learns that I'm searching for this, Loke could be killed."

"I understand." He shut down the Archive Magic and stumbled to a chair. "Now, no offense, but I really do need something for this hangover."

"I'll make sure you get the best herbs in town." She gave him a kiss on the cheek in thanks before racing out.

Hibiki chuckled at her enthusiasm. "Why do I always fall for girls who are taken?"

Outside, Gray shouted down to Natsu. "Yo, flame-brain! I found a rune-infested chair for you to burn." Then something was tossed out of an upper window and smashed onto the courtyard below.

"You ice bastard! That almost hit me."

"Oh darn, did I miss?"

Hibiki blocked his ears from the ensuing argument. "Why...why did we hire Fairy Tail of all people to clean a mess?"

Chapter End Notes
I love writing children's stories. I tried to illustrate a picture book of "The Heartless Lion," but my drawings were so bad I gave up.

"Onoyasumaro No Naomi" - Finally Naomi has a surname. Like Kefira, it is written using the feudal Japanese "no" to signify the clan. I took her name from Ō No Yasumaro, who wrote the "Kojiki," a book about the myths and legendary history of Japan.

Hoshinoue Island — hoshi no ue — 星の上 — above the stars

In the Oración Seis Arc, we learned that Roubaul (Master of Cait Shelter) created Nirvana in X384 to stop the wars ravaging Earthland. The events involving Roubaul of the Nirvit Tribe and the terrors of Zeref both happened 400 years ago, so I'm assuming they were the same wars. That means, in my story, Zeref was 4-5 when Nirvana was created, but times that by 3 (since he aged faster) he was physically 12-15. That's about the same age as Wendy, so Zeref was old enough to use powerful levels of magic. I'm assuming the manga's 7-year timeskip was for an important reason. If those years, X784 to X791, represent Zeref's 2nd reign (his awakening on Tenrou Island to his eventual downfall) and mirror his original reign 400 years ago (big assumption here), then the Battle of Kohinur Keep and Cheveyo getting all 12 Gold Keys to defeat Zeref on Hoshinoeu Island would have happened in X391. Zeref was 11 years old, but aging at three times the speed, it'd give him plenty of "adult" years to create many monsters and demons, tossing the world into chaos and war.

Am I right on this timeline? Doubt it. But this is my fanfic, so until Hiro-sensei pays me to write for him or gives me the secret manuscript hidden in the bottom of his sock drawer that contains all of his devious plans for "Fairy Tail," I'll make up my own damn history! ^_^
The Key to His Heart

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"To hide the key to your heart is to risk forgetting where you placed it." - Timothy Childers

Far to the snowy north, Haftorang carried a tea tray over to his master Kefira. Although they had spent over six months at the inn, it was not too long to wait for these two. Still, Haftorang privately missed the warmth of the southern lands where he had lived for centuries before seeking out this non-aging monarch. She liked the cold, but it did not serve the Southern Fish well. There were days when he felt ready to leave her and her schemes, except she was his best chance at fulfilling his own ambitions.

He set the tea in front of her, yet instead of fixing it for her like usual, he rose up tall and faced Kefira. "I heard from my source in the S-S-Spirit World this morning. The Lion is undergoing a trial. He was forced out of the Human World a few weeks ago and is locked up."

"Just like before," Kefira mused softly. "I wonder if that damned Mustachio King hath realized he is acting the same as back then."

"Likely, he doth not care," Haftorang guessed. "There is a twist though, my mistress-s-s. According to my source—"

"Thy spy," she smirked.

"Aye," he pouted. The constellation Hydra had been one of his closest friends back when he still lived in the Spirit World. Even after the Southern Fish betrayed them all, the Water Serpent was the only one whom he trusted enough to ask for help. Yes, he was a spy for a traitor, but he was also only helping an old friend who had been banished because he picked the wrong side in a war. "According to Hydra, this is no ordinary trial. The Spirit King is now aware of our existence, he is in fear of a rebellion, so he hath decided to stamp out the one Celestial Spirit standing in the way of his utter dominion."

Kefira jolted in fear and gripped the armrests of her chair so hard her knuckles turned white. "Is he planning to kill Leo? No! He...he can't!" she shouted, and her face paled a little more than usual. Tears came to her eyes, and her mouth trembled as she fought to calm her breathing. In dread, she whispered, "He wouldn't dare."

Haftorang's massive mouth drew down into a pout. Sometimes he forgot that Kefira was, after all, merely a Human and prone to fragile emotions. She had perfected her queenly mask long before their banishment. For that equanimity to crack so thoroughly, he knew her emotions were indeed strong for the Lion.

"The choice will be Leo's to make," Haftorang told her. "However, according to Hydra, the Lion already clearly affirmed his intentions-s-s. He shall accept mortality as well as the loss of his magic in exchange for being allowed to live in peace with his woman and child."

The terror in her face turned to disgust. "With his woman?" she whispered spitefully. Slowly, her lips drew back in furious jealousy. Her breathing came faster and deeper, building with emotion, until she
roared, "The fool!" Her hand slapped the tea tray aside in rage. "Hath he forgotten who he is? Is the past being erased from memory even by he who caused the two of us so much pain? And for what? A wench with no social status of which to speak, no political influence, and very little magic power. Is he mad? Why?" she shrieked. "First he sacrificed his place as king for that pipsqueak Naomi; now shall he sacrifice even his immortality for some slut? What do they have that I don't?" she demanded furiously.

"The key to his heart, mistress-s-s," Haftorang answered bluntly.

"I owned the Key to his Heart!" she screamed. Slowly, she regained her composure, pushed her raven hair back in order, and raised her chin nobly. "And I shall own it again. He shall be mine. Naomi could have found the Regulus Key. She refused, even at her death. This new blonde is probably too dumb. She would let him sit and rot like Naomi did. Naomi..." She sneered in a distasteful memory. "When we found her, she already had another husband and a two-year-old daughter. That means not even a year passed since Leo was taken from her before she remarried. How much time is that in the Spirit World?"

Haftorang sighed sadly, also disliking this little detail from the past. "Four days, mistress-s-s."

"Precisely. Not even a week since Leo was taken from her, and she already had a child with another man. She probably barely waited for Zeref to be weened before spreading her legs for the first oaf who would take her with such baggage. This new girl, I bet she shall open her arms to some young stud before the year is over. A slut like her is probably glad Leo is gone."

"Mistress-s-s," Haftorang warned quietly.

"Concupiscent fools, all of them!" she roared. "I was ready to go through Hell for Leo. I searched for him for four years! And when we found that whore Naomi, she had already given up on him so easily and even replaced him. Neither of them truly love him...not like...like I do!"

She closed her eyes as tears threatened to mar her regal visage. Haftorang bit on his lip ring in sympathy.

"Why...why would he go to women like that when I've always been right here? Was I not good enough?" she demanded to know in desperation. "Never did he give me a clue that he was dissatisfied, so why did he leave me? He said he loved me! He...he said I was the best lover he ever had." That little memory made her smile sadly. "So why was I not good enough? Why did he sneak behind my back with Naomi? She was a tiny girl no one wanted, not even her own clan, a girl I took in out of pity, treated her like a sister, and convinced her father to give her the Leo Key so at least he could protect her. I trained her!"

"Thou wert also prone to beat her," Haftorang reminded.

"I never laid a hand on her. I warned her that the royal trainers were brutal. Awakening a person's Second Origin is agonizing. Teaching battle tactics shall get one's hands dirty. My father put me through far worse before I was granted the Regulus Key. She asked to be trained. 'Twas not my fault if she wasn't physically ready for the challenge. I gave her training like no other Spirit Mage in the kingdom received, training that would have made her worthy of owning that Gold Key. And how did she repay me? By sleeping with the man who swore he would love me to the end of time! By committing treason against the Kingdom of Kohinur and shaming Clan Onoyasumaro, stealing their coveted Gold Key, betraying her own family!"

She paused to calm herself. Haftorang took the small break to pick up the tea tray. He poured in more water from a kettle, and this time he brewed the tea. He could see that she was stressed and
needed the drink. Kefira accepted the cup and sipped it as memories boiled in her mind, moments of
passion followed by moments of bitter betrayal. Even four centuries had not dulled the pain.

"She didn't even bother to convince Leo to remain as King of the Heavens," she muttered, staring
down into her teacup at the leaves that managed to escape and sink to the bottom. "She wanted him
to give up on the Royal Stars purely to strip me of my last fragile thread connecting me to him. She
betrayed my trust, hurt thee and Scorpio and Taurus badly, threw the Spirit World into chaos, all for
her carnal lust. Then, when Leo paid the price for her greed, she got herself another lover within a
year!" Her voice dropped into a sneering whisper. "How could she betray him after he sacrificed his
pride and position for her? Now, to sacrifice his power and immortality for a girl just like that little
traitor! I must find the Regulus Key and remind him of who he is. If Leo were to feel that power
even for a brief moment, he would remember the promise he made to me."

She shook her head and blinked her eyes to stop the tears.

"He said, 'Celestial Spirits always keep their promises!' Hah!" she scoffed. "I shall make him
remember the promise he gave to my grandfather, and my father, and then to me: that he would
always protect Kohinur and keep my family secure upon the throne! Even if he doth not want me in
the end, I shall make him remember purely so he shall suffer knowing how his lie destroyed my life,
my clan, my whole kingdom! How many suffered and died because he took off with that whore and
left us powerless? He swore I would never lose a battle, yet when the forces of Cheveyo burst
through the gate and began slaughtering the women and children, Leo never came to rescue us."

She looked aside in anger that had been simmering for centuries. Hatred and determination wavered
and turned into regret and numerous past pains.

"I swore upon my father's desecrated grave that I would retake my kingdom! I shall use the Regulus
Key to make that Lion fight for me like he promised. Even if I destroy the Spirit World in the
process, I shall reclaim my family's honor and restore Clan Yamataikoku as the true rulers of
Kohinur! I swear...for the souls of those who died because Leo abandoned us, I swear I shall make
him keep his promise."

Haftorang frowned at her spiteful words but said nothing. Kefira had her ambitions. So did he.
Perhaps both were a little greedy, yet both only wanted what Leo had taken from them: for her, a
kingdom he swore to protect yet abandoned; for him, the four Royal Stars ruling the Spirit World
under their noble and benevolent Lion.

To escape from the emotions and threat of tears, Kefira downed her teacup, threw the cup into the
fireplace, and stormed aside. "Pack our things. We leave at dawn."

"Our destination?"

"Where else? Magnolia! I must convince that slut mage that she cannot allow him to fade from
existence. At this moment, his life is more important than our desires, both the restoration of Kohinur
and the return of the Royal Stars. Without Leo, all our ambitions shall come to naught. To be made
mortal!" She sneered in disgust at such a repulsive concept. "How desperate is that mustached
substitute-king? There is no greater insult to the Royal Stars than that!" She glared at the heavens
and shook her fist in protest. "Spirit King, thou hast gone too far this time! If the Lion shan't stop thee,
then upon my pride as the Queen of Kohinur, I shall."

**Meanwhile, in Magnolia**

"Come on, guys! We have a key to find!" Levy paused in the middle of Magnolia Station, twirled
around, and gave an eager wave to her tarrying friends. She hauled with her a massive pack filled with books. The only way the petite blue-haired Solid Script mage managed to carry it was thanks to a lacrima on the pack that helped it to float.

"Tra-a-ain?" Natsu groaned, dragging his feet and looking sick just gazing at the rails.

Lucy had Luke in a stroller. She paused to look back at Natsu and put a hand on her hip. "If you don't want to come, you don't have to. This isn't a mission, after all."

"Aye!" Happy cheered as he flew overhead. "It's a quest!"

Gray scoffed and looked away. "I hope he doesn't come."

Natsu leaped into his face. "What was that, you stupid stripper?"

"Hey Natsu, what's that?" Gray pointed down the station and Natsu looked just in time to see another train coming in from the opposite tracks. The dragon slayer held his mouth in sickness from seeing it. "Yep, that proves it. You're an idiot."

Wendy came up and raised her hand to Natsu. He calmed down and watched with fascination as a magic circle glowed in front of him. Suddenly, Natsu looked perfectly fine.

"Woohoo!" he shouted, giving a leap into the air. "I'm all fired up! Let's ride this train to the end of the world."

"Stupid flame-brain," Gray grumbled. "Wendy warned you, through the duration of this trip she can cast Troia on you only six times before the spell completely loses its potency."

"Then I'll talk to the engineer, stoke up the flames on this sucker, and we'll blast through all the way to Kohinur!" Natsu looked excited at the prospect of such adventure.

Erza came forward with her massive pile of luggage. "Stop chitchatting and get on the train, now!"

Gray and Natsu stiffened up and saluted. "Aye, sir!"

They hurried aboard and took their seats. Out on the platform, everyone from Fairy Tail had come to see them off. They knew this was going to be a long quest, so they wanted to show their support.

Makarov stood on top of Droy's meaty shoulders as he waved goodbye. "Erza, keep those brats out of trouble."

"I will, Master," she promised.

Elfman nodded firmly. "To travel the world while you're young is manly!"

Mirajane cupped her hands around her mouth. "I hope you and the baby stay healthy, Lucy," she shouted. "You have Proto and that protection bracelet on him, right?"

Lucy held up the disgruntled black and gray bear, then showed them the charm bracelet on Luke's wrist. "I'm prepared for any dangers. We'll be safe."

"Bon voyage!" Reedus cheered.

"Try not to die too fast," Laxus snapped at them.

Lisanna and Juvia stood side by side. "Take care, Natsu," the petite white-haired girl shouted with a
worried and sad look to her huge blue eyes.

"Juvia does not want Gray-sama to be gone for too long," Juvia shouted as she glared at Lucy.


Jet looked depressed. "Levy, why do you have to go, too?"

She laughed and waved at her teammates. "We'll go on a cool mission when I get back. See ya, Jet and Droy."

Gajeel bellowed at them and shook a threatening fist. "You better take care of Levy, ya bastards!"

Natsu barked back. "And you better keep the guild safe." The two dragon slayers glared at each other for a moment, then both grinned and laughed in friendly rivalry.

"I'll do a better job protecting them than you will, dragonfly," Gajeel grinned.

"Like hell you will, metal head." Natsu chuckled and gave him a finger-up sign, which Gajeel returned.

Pantherlily was with his iron dragon slayer partner. "Happy, Charle, be safe and take care of them."

Happy waved excitedly at him. "We will, Lily. You better watch over the guild while we're away."

The little black Exceed grinned broadly. "Leave it to me!"

Cana lifted a flask. "Godspeed on your quest, Lucy." Then she took a drink to toast them.

Macao came up beside the lush. "Hey, what are you drinking, Cana?"

She was in the middle of gulping it. "Vile shit. Wanna taste?"

She handed it over, nudging it to him with a wink. Smelling the potency, Macao took only a sip. He coughed, sputtered, his face turned red, he giggled like a girl for a few seconds, and then suddenly fainted. Cana laughed loudly while Wakaba tried to revive him.

"Idiot, can't hold his liquor." She tipped the flask back again, took three large gulps, and smacked her lips as the drink colored her cheeks pink. "Vile shit ain't meant for old men."

Romeo pretended he was not crying as his lips quivered. "Natsu, Wendy...be safe you guys."

Wendy leaned out of the train window. "I'll bring back a souvenir from Kohinur, Romeo." That made him blush.

Alzack and Bisca had brought Asuka to say goodbye to her new little playmate. "Bye-bye, Luke," she called, waving excitedly.

Sitting in his mother's lap, the little boy waved back. "Bah-bah, Uka!"

"Oh, how cute!" Levy squealed.

Lucy felt warmth in her heart at the support her friends were giving to her. She looked down to her
son and gave a soft prayer that he would be safe on this long journey. Then she gave another prayer
that Loke would be safe while she was gone looking for the Key to his Heart. As the train began to
chug out of the station, she, Natsu, Gray, Wendy, Levy, Erza, Happy, and Charle waved one final
goodbye to Fairy Tail.

"I smell adventure!" shouted Natsu.

Happy's cheeks turned pink. "Sorry, that was me. I ate a funny fish."

Lucy chuckled along with the others. It would be a long journey, but at least she had her friends with
her!

Chapter End Notes

Do you pity Kefira just a little now? Do you dislike Naomi just a tiny bit? No story is fun
without a little sympathy for the devil. Also, whoever put "Lion's Pride" as a Fanfiction
Recommendation on TV Tropes, you are awesome! Thank you.
Finally, Leo the Lion was brought into the courtroom by Canes Venatici, the Hunting Dogs, two lean, black canines marching under the orders of Boötes the Herdsman. Leo's orange hair was more disorderly than normal, his tie hung loosely around his neck, and he had small rips in his dark suit coat. His hands were cuffed in glowing crystal, a special form of restraint that prevented him from using his magic so he could not open his own gate and try to escape. His eyes were narrow as he was brought in, and they glared straight at the Celestial Spirit King. He was shoved over to a stand before a large desk where the mustached monarch sat. To the Spirit King's side was Libra, who always provided balanced judgment in legal matters.

"Leo-sama!" one of the female Spirits in the audience shouted. He gave a wink in that direction but could not make out which adoring fangirl it was. Still, it gave him a little encouragement. At least some of the Spirits were rooting for him.

Leo took his stand in a defendant box and faced Libra and the Spirit King silently.


"I think we get it," Leo snapped, sounding anything but regal. "You don't need to list every name in every language I've ever been called. Can we hurry up?"

Libra waited a moment, then continued undauntedly. "You are hereby charged with the following crimes: ninety-three counts of disorderly conduct with your owner—"

"Did we really do it ninety-three times? Hey, wait, who the hell was watching us and keeping count?" he yelled.

"Taurus and Capricorn accepted my apology!"

"—one count of attempted murder of a Celestial Spirit—"

"What?" Leo bellowed. "Who?"

"Piscis Austrinus."

"But he's a criminal," he exclaimed. "He was banished from the Spirit World centuries ago."

"He is still a Spirit," Libra said sternly.

"It was self-defense," Leo tried stubbornly.
"That is to be examined and decided upon at this trial. Now please stop interrupting this court. Continuing. One count of treason against the Spirit World, twelve counts of—"

"Are you seriously going to list them all?" yelled Leo. "All these counts aren't why I'm really here. I fell in love with Lucy, we had sex—ninety-three times, apparently—and now we have a child. I admit I'm guilty and accept mortality and being stripped of my magic as punishment. If you want to stack all those other so-called crimes along with that main one, I think a fucking death sentence should balance out every sin I've ever committed. Let's hurry it along."

"You are out of order," Libra said stolidly.

"Out of order? I was kept waiting for half a day." Those in the courtroom saw the panicking desperation in the Lion's eyes. If the Spirit King had waited in hopes of taming him, he did precisely the opposite. "I know you just wanted to torment me, and you did, okay? Half a day of pulling at my hair, scared to death for Lucy, counting the minutes while calculating whole days, thinking about how an entire month has passed in the Human World. It's torture! So please, I beg of you, get this punishment over with and send me back to Lucy."

The Spirit King looked unconcerned and unaffected by his pleading. "Leo, old friend, do you really despise being the Lion so much? Do you hate the Spirit World so intensely?"

His eyes narrowed behind his blue shades. "I have never hated my home nor my position. I am proud to be the Lion and Leader of the Zodiacs, just as I was and will forever be proud of the station I used to hold...old friend. But I need to get back to Lucy. That is the most important thing to me right now."

"You shouldn't worry," the Spirit King told him. "Lucy Heartfilia has already gone back to her duties, doing missions for the Humans."

Leo's mouth dropped in astonishment. "She...she is? So soon? But the two of us agreed that after the baby was born we'd wait a year."

"And with your son growing at thrice the speed, she only needed to wait four months," the Spirit King pointed out. "Perhaps Lucy put her life on halt because of you. Obviously, she was eager to get back to her usual routine and did so as soon as you weren't there to suffocate her. It might be she's more happy living the normal life of a mage with her friends instead of having you tell her what's best. Consider that as a possibility before rashly giving up your power."

That angered Leo. Was he really saying that Lucy would be better without him? How dare he! Still, he bit back the arguments he wanted to shout and lowered his head humbly. "May I make a request, my king?"

"You are not in a position to request anything."

"It was Lucy's desire to be brought into the Spirit World to witness the trial. After all, she stands to lose a Gold Key. That's a huge blow to a Spirit Mage. Her request was that she and our son may be granted the right to witness the trial."

"Request denied," the Spirit King answered. "Now, stop interrupting or you will only delay your sentencing further. Libra, continue listing his sins."

The Lion tensed his fists and toned out the words. He needed to stay calm. It was all formality. He might not like it, but he understood the purpose. After all, he had overseen trials like this in his day. Even if some parts were tedious, they were necessary for the sake of being thorough.
As Libra continued, Leo glanced over to a section in the crowd where he saw all of Lucy’s Celestial Spirits gathered to watch. So, she was on missions, huh? The Spirit King likely knew this because Lucy had summoned one of her Spirits. Had she been in a fight? What if she was hurt? How did Luke look now? Was he talking more? Had he taken his first step? Was Lucy still living in the dorm, or had she returned home? Why did she need to go on missions? How much could have changed in the month he was away?

All these questions and worries made him want to scream!

To his right, too fast to pinpoint, there was a silver flash. Some Celestial Spirit had just been called through their gate. Of course, not even a trial like this would put a hold on everyone's lives. They had owners who needed their help.

Another flash, this time gold, and Leo sensed a more powerful gate. He looked over quickly and saw the arched Gate of the Goat shimmering in front of Capricorn.

"My apologies, Leo-sama," the Goat said in excuse as he walked through the gate.

"Wait!" Leo yelled, leaning forward as far as he could in his defendant box. "Is Lucy okay? Tell her I love her!" Without a reply, the gate shut.

"Leo," the Spirit King warned.

Libra had paused at the interruption, but although Leo was facing the vanished gate, the Spirit of the Scales continued to read off mandatory introductory parts. Leo vaguely heard that this section of the trial depicted the punishment in detail.

_In summary, I'll be a Human without magic. It boils down to a death sentence, but also liberty. Hurry up, already!_

Boötes tapped his shoulder, and only then did Leo realize he had been growling lowly.

Capricorn returned soon. Again, Leo ignored the trial. "How is she?" he shouted.

"I didn't see much," Capricorn answered. "Her train was attacked by a group of weird bandits with jiggling butts. Lucy-sama and Luke-sama are safe."


"Leo!" the Spirit King shouted.

"Virgo, go to Lucy and tell her to leave Luke with Bisca," Leo requested. "Tell her I do _not_ want him going on trips to—"

"Enough!" The King's voice boomed so loudly, Leo was forced to his knees, as were many others in the room. "I know you think lightly of the gravity of your situation, but to interrupt the wheels of justice like this and frivolously dismiss your own trial is intolerable. If you are so set in ignoring us for the Humans—"

"Make me one already!" Leo yelled with wild desperation. "You've planned to do that from the beginning anyway, right? So do it! Let me go back to Lucy."

"Not until you acknowledge the importance of the Spirit World," the King said deeply. "I at least have pride in what I am, and I honor the laws of this land. Even if you're not destined by the stars to be the Lion for much longer, I will at least make you acknowledge us."
"Acknowledge what? That I'm a Celestial Spirit?" Leo snapped. "Why should I when you want to take that away from me just because I fell in love? Or do you mean I should acknowledge the laws? You do realize, Regulus and I were the ones who wrote those laws...all but the few you added after I stepped down. According to the laws set down by the Royal Stars, I did no sin at all. Or shall I quote the original law book for this court?" he smirked haughtily. "I know every paragraph and subclause by heart, since I'm the one who wrote the damn thing!"

"Enough!" the Spirit King boomed. "Canes Venatici, Boötes, return the Lion to his cell. This trial will resume tomorrow."

"Wha-? No!" Leo screamed, and his voice cracked under the terror. Immediately, his fingers clutched the railing around the defendant box to prevent himself from being dragged away. "Please, you can't do this."

The Spirit King stared hard at him while Boötes and his Hunting Dogs came forward. "Perhaps a night of reflection will help you to understand that, although you may not want to be a Spirit anymore, as the mate of a Celestial Spirit Mage you must still show respect to us. After all, I consider Lucy Heartfilia to be a friend. I would not want Lucy's mate to influence her into becoming a mage the Spirits in this domain fear."

"I beg of you, don't delay this any longer," Leo protested while Boötes tried to loosen his gripping fingers. "Spirit King, please. If we wait even one day, three months will pass for Lucy. If you think of her as a friend, you must know that this is torturing her far worse than it is me."

The Spirit King folded his arms and would not be budged. Boötes finally yanked Leo's cuffed hands away and dragged him toward the exit doors.

"Lucy will find out what you're doing," he yelled, his voice edging toward a threat. "This is the sort of cruelty that very well could make her hate you. Please reconsider, for Lucy's sake."

Orion came forward to help Boötes pull the prisoner away. The two large men worked together to force Leo forward, despite his heels digging into the floor to slow down their progress.

"Please, Spirit King!" he pleaded, writhing in desperation as he was dragged past row after row of Celestial Spirits. "I just want to be with my family. I swear, I won't bother the Spirit World again. I'll live with Lucy and raise my family. I was fine with the arrangement I had, returning to my cell. I'll continue like that, if you want. Or if I have to be Human to be allowed that sort of life, then I'll accept it. I'll accept any damn punishment you want! So why are you keeping us apart? Just let me go to her. Let me be with Lucy and my son. All I want..." He struggled more as they opened the courtroom doors with a loud creak. To Leo, it sounded like a banshee cry threatening disaster. "All I want is to be with my child and the woman I love. How is that a sin? Answer me that! How is it a sin to love a woman?" Realizing his pleas were not making an impact, he thrashed wildly. "Spirit King! I swear, I will not let you stop me from seeing them again. Just let me go back. For the stars' sake, please!" The courtroom doors shut, but the Celestial Spirits inside could still hear his protests.

The Southern Cross woke up with a pop from his snoring bubble. "Hooo? Yes, my king?"

"Come with me. There is one possible route that we might use to save Leo's life, but we need time to research it. Hurry, for our time is short, and I won't torment my old friend longer than necessary."
The large Spirit King and floating Cross left the courtroom. Libra dismissed the rest, and everyone began to head home.

"See," Aries smiled timidly. "The Spirit King is trying to save Leo's life. He wants to protect all of us. That's his job as king, after all."

Taurus looked angry. He tapped his bell, glaring at the spot where the Spirit King and Libra had been sitting. Due to the king's massive size, it was hard to tell that the judicial bench was not built for only a judge and bailiff; it was meant for four judges. Where Libra sat was where Taurus had once sat in ages past.

He could picture the four of them now: the great Lion in his full power, a glorious creature to behold, not the playboy he now was; the Southern Fish always at Leo's side, his partner and closest companion; a different Golden Bull sitting beside the High King, one who was respected for his few but wise words; and to the opposite end, the Scorpion, Guardian of the Eastern Skies. They four had reigned over justice in the Spirit World. Only when a tie-breaker was needed would they call in Libra. She always saw both sides of an argument rationally and weighed laws justly. Those had been good days. No one left this hall feeling like they had been treated unfairly.

Taurus tried to think back to those times. How would he have handled a case like this? What would he, Scorpio, Piscis Austrinus, and Leo have done differently to ensure justice?

What would Aldebaran do?

Cancer grabbed Taurus' wrist. The Bull had not realized that, instead of tapping his cowbell, he was now gripping it tightly. His thoughts had focused on his Royal Star, and it was showing. Taurus muttered an apology and moved his hand away.

"Why not let Leo be with Lucy and still be the Lion?" Lyra asked, strumming in a sad C-minor chord.

"He's merely following the law," Capricorn sighed.

Lyra pouted. "But he was the one who made up that law."

Libra walked up to them. "He had his reasons," she told them. "Back then, the Spirit King felt angry at Leo for letting the Royal Stars go. He blamed the Human wife he had taken."

"Naomi?" asked Aries. She had briefly belonged to Naomi as well after the Spirit Mage and Leo escaped Queen Kefira.

Libra nodded solemnly and adjusted her veil. "Because Leo's reasoning involved his trouble with women, the Spirit King made that law so such conflicts would never happen again. He tried to delay punishing Leo for his marriage to Naomi, but there were other Celestial Spirits who were forced to break up with their Human companions, and they protested against such favoritism. The Spirit King had no choice but to force Leo away from his wife in order to keep justice balanced. Even after that, Leo broke that law numerous times. It's truly unfair and unjust that the Spirit King has let the issue slide for four hundred Earthland years. This case pushed his benevolence beyond hope. With another half-Spirit child in existence, the Spirit King has no choice but to deliver the full punishment that Leo should have received long ago. Still, despite all that, he's searching for a way to save him."

"We still don't like it," said Gemi.

"Don't like it!" pouted Mini.
"It's not right," Lyra added in.

"Puun!" Plue agreed.

Libra shrugged her shoulders at their protests. "Perhaps it seems unfair to those with eyes clouded by loyalty and friendship, but as they say, 'injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.' Just because he's the Lion and Leader of we Twelve Zodiacs, it doesn't mean Leo is above the law. Even he must follow our justice system, or it shall breed anarchy."

She turned aside and strode out of the massive doors. Not liking to stay in the courtroom after such depressing drama, the others eventually also left.

The courtroom was nearly empty. Taurus began to walk out, yet he paused. He stood alone in the room, and he looked around at how massive the place was when not filled with Celestial Spirits. This building was older than Human civilization, and in all that time, this was the first day the Bull had ever witnessed an injustice being committed.

"If I thought they were dead, I would say, 'The Royal Stars must be rolling in their graves,'" he joked to himself. He looked down at the cowbell once more. "I wonder what they'd think of all this. Foolish to ask that, isn't it? Still."

He forced the thought away and hurried out of the doors before darker thoughts took hold. Someone needed to calm down Leo, and of everyone in the Spirit World, the Golden Bull was the last one left who knew what was running through the Lion's mind.

Chapter End Notes

_In astronomy, Canes Venatici are the Hunting Dogs of Boötes, the Herdsman. That's why I have Boötes and his dogs "herding" Leo into the courtroom._

_Have I said before that I think the Spirit King is a douchebag? He got redeemed in Chapter 262. He was cool through the whole party. But he didn't warn the mages that a day with them was three months back home, and that led to another mini timeskip. Dooooouche! George Takei-like voice: "Spirit King, you are...a douchebag! That's right, a douchebag."_
Gray leaned back with a loud sigh. "Sheesh, those bandits were idiots. Seriously, what did they call themselves?"

"The Jiggle Butt Gang," Natsu smirked. The obtuse bandits had been immensely proud of their massive spandex-covered hind sides and the matching ridiculous name, insisting throughout their failed heist that everyone should remember it...like anyone could forget that! "You didn't need to call Capricorn for those losers, Lucy. I thought you weren't going to call your Spirits at all, just in case one of them realizes we're not in Fiore anymore."

She huffed with a puckered pout and cute glare. "I had Luke in my arms, I couldn't fight, and when I called for help none of you guys heard me."

Wendy shrank down feeling guilty. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," Charle scolded. "You were in the bathroom when they broke in. There was no way you could have helped Lucy."

"I doubt they would've attacked a woman with a baby," Levy assured her. "The one I fought was rather a gentleman. An idiot, but chivalrous."

"They're good guys deep down," Wendy said defensively.

"Well, I didn't know that," Lucy huffed. "They're robbers, and this isn't their first attempted train robbery. They're quite notorious, you know."

Natsu snorted a laugh. "Notoriously bad!"

Lucy ignored him. "For all I knew, they would've kidnapped Luke to ransom him."

Natsu shrugged casually. "We left that queenie and fish-head back in Fiore. No one out here knows us. Now, since I'm not sick anymore, I'm starving." He ran off fast toward the dining car.

"Poor Natsu," Wendy pouted. "I need to limit the use of Troia, but I figured he should be able to defend himself against the robbers."

"It's fine," Erza assured her. "He hasn't been able to eat well in weeks. After that fight, I could use some cake. How about we all go eat?"

They happily agreed and went to the train's dining car. For fighting off the bandits, the train conductor offered them free meals for the rest of their trip. Obviously, he was unaware of just how long they were riding this train, and just how much a group of hungry mages could eat. Natsu was in
the midst of scarfing down all the meat and rice he could grab, getting bits of food all over his face and muffler. Gray heartily joined him. Happy was no better with gnawing through fish after fish, tossing the bones aside. The girls opted to eat at another table far away from the flying bits of food.

Levy watched them and giggled. "Those guys are even worse than Jet and Droy, although Droy has gotten pretty bad lately."

"It's fine, they're growing boys," Erza waved off, digging into her cake and savoring each bite.

Wendy gazed longingly at the creamy strawberry frosting on Erza's dessert. "C-can I have a little taste?" she asked uncertainly.

Erza chuckled at her timidity. "The food is free, so have your own piece."

"Really?" she gasped, her huge eyes shining.

Charle held her paw up to protest. "A young girl should be careful about eating too many sweets. You'll ruin your complexion and gain weight."

"But Erza eats cake all the time, and she never gets fat," Wendy protested, really wanting some cake.

Lucy chuckled softly. "I think it all goes to her boobs."

"I heard that," Erza said, but she did not give an emotional response.

That clenched it for Wendy. She stood up fast and hailed a waiter. "I want an entire cake!"

"Wendy!" Charle protested.

"Good girl," Erza nodded in approval, while Levy and Lucy merely laughed.

After the boys had their fill, they left the disastrous table to eat dessert with the girls. Wendy got through only two slices of cake before she felt sick and had to give the rest to Erza. Natsu ordered a banana foster flambé, more interested in the blue flame the dessert produced. Gray sucked a popsicle, Levy had frozen yogurt, and Lucy slurped a chocolate shake.

After eating, Natsu laughed as he sat Luke on his lap. "He's grown huge!" he exclaimed.

"Well, you've been half-conscious and sick for so long," Lucy pouted, although even she was aware of how fast her son was growing.


"Wooorh!" Luke cried out loudly.

Lucy giggled and swallowed down her food. "I think he's trying to say roar."

"Ooh, so you wanna roar, huh?" Natsu lifted Luke up and swung him around, getting the baby to squeal. "You can grow up as my little mini dragon buddy."

Lucy smiled as Natsu played with Luke. It was not the first time she thought that her immature and destructive friend would make a great father one day. She had to admit, she used to daydream about little pink-haired children running around setting things on fire. Now she had a little orange and blond lion cub.
Wendy pulled his attention over. "Hey, Luke. Do you know who he is?" She pointed to the Ice-Make mage.

Luke laughed happily and exclaimed, "Gay!"

Natsu smiled, then snorted, then covered his mouth as more chuckles escaped. Unable to hold it back, he began to laugh so hard he fell backwards in his chair and rolled over the floor. Happy chuckled a little, and Levy giggled softly. Gray folded his arms, not at all amused.

"But that's real good," Lucy admitted. "We know he meant Gray, and he recognizes your name."

Natsu pounded the floor in laughter. "Awesome! Ya see that, Stripper? Even a baby knows you're into other guys."

Gray's eyes narrowed into an icy glare. "Even if I was, why is that so funny?"

Natsu ignored the question. "Keep sucking your popsicle, Gay. It's cream-filled, right?" He burst into louder peals of laughter.

Erza bonked Natsu on the head. "No more homosexual jokes. It's crude."

"Oww! Sorry, Erza. Sorry, Gay...I mean Gray." He shielded his head from Erza's fist. "Really, I meant Gray!"

The Ice-Make mage merely rolled his eyes at his rival. Then, with a cunning smile, he leaned over to the baby. "Say 'Uncle Gray.'"

"Unkie Gay."

Gray straightened up with a smug smile, silently challenging Natsu to beat that.

The dragon slayer leaped up and leaned forward. "Say 'Uncle Natsu.'"

"Unkie Nana."

"Wow, so I'm gay and you're a nana," Gray teased right back at him.


Luke leaned forward, crouched just like Erza was, and his almond-shaped eyes squinted in a cute mock-glare. "Rrrrr," he growled back like a tiny lion. "Rrrrr-zah!"

She nodded in satisfaction. "He's growing up to be a wise young man."

"Is that so?" Lucy laughed nervously. It was a miracle Erza's scary faces never intimidated the baby and made him cry.

Charle pouted at all of them. "Sheesh, he's still a baby, you know."

"Mama," Luke called out, and he stretched his arms out to her. "Hungie."

"Aww, are you hungry already? All right, Luke," she chuckled, and pulled him up onto her lap. She
began to lift her shirt but noticed Natsu leaning forward, staring at her chest eagerly. "Excuse me!" she cried out.

Gray punched him in the shoulder. "Don't stare at her."

"I'm just curious," he protested. "We've been traveling together for weeks now, but I never really get to see you feeding him up close. How does the milk come out?"

Lucy sighed and lifted her shirt anyway. "It's not like all of you haven't seen my boobs plenty of times during this trip. Go ahead and look, if you want."

To her surprise, all seven of them pulled in a little closer.

"Does it hurt?" Happy asked in a soft voice.

"Sometimes a little," Lucy admitted. "Only when he bites. Otherwise...well, it feels rather good," she admitted with a blush.

"What does it taste like?" asked Levy.

"Tastes good," Natsu grinned.

"You tried it?" Wendy asked, looking shocked and borderline traumatized.

"From a bottle," Lucy insisted loudly. "And that was Cana's beer bottle. Mother's milk does not taste like honey beer."

"It doesn't?" asked Natsu. "Then I wanna taste."

Gray was about to hit him, but Erza's armored fist bonked Natsu on the head again.

"Oww!" he whined, rubbing out a second lump on his head. "I mean from a regular bottle, or a cup, whatever, not...not that," he said defensively.

"It'd be weird to drink," Wendy said hesitantly.

Erza nodded. "True, but I have to admit, I've always been curious."

"You too?" Lucy sighed, knowing that if Erza also wanted to know, then they probably all did. "Okay, fine. Wendy, give me a cup. Gray, take Luke for a moment." She lowered her blouse and rose from her seat. "Gah, this is weird." She turned to go.

"I wanna see how you milk yourself," Natsu said eagerly. "Is it like a cow?"

"No!" she yelled, and Lucy began to turn dark red. "I'll...I'll be back." She rushed off to the bathroom.

Gray put Luke over his shoulder and began patting his back. "You sure are a nosy group."

"Sorry," Wendy pouted.

"It's natural for a woman to be curious about what her body can do," Erza said proudly. "What's unnatural is Natsu's fascination."

"I'm curious, too," he pouted. "I don't remember my mother. For all I know, I might have never tasted Human milk. What does your milk taste like, Erza?"
"Idiot!" She blushed as bright as her hair. "Only mothers have breast milk."

"Not true," Wendy said with a perky smile. "I read in one of the books on how to be a midwife, women can stimulate themselves into lactation even if they've never had a baby before. That's how wet nurses do it." She muttered to herself, "I wonder, if I try that, would I get bigger?"

"Cool," Natsu grinned. "Hey Erza..."

She raised a fist right in front of his eyes, and the whole room seemed to darken in her fury. In a deep, dangerous tone, she warned, "If you ask what I think you're about to ask, so help me, I will make you wet yourself at the mere thought of a woman's chest."

"Aye sir. I'll be good," Natsu squeaked out.

"Aren't you curious too, Gray?" asked Levy.

He blushed and looked away. "Why should I be?"

Happy covered his mouth and laughed. "He's already tasted it."

"Shut up!" the ice mage yelled.

Wendy turned red. "You mean..."

"In a bottle," he yelled over her. "She had some stored in the fridge back home, and I tasted a little, okay?" He crossed his arms and slouched. "Like you guys were saying, it's only natural to be curious."

Lucy returned still looking embarrassed as she silently handed the cup over. Natsu eagerly took it and looked inside.

"Looks like milk."

Lucy sat down in a huff. "Of course it does! What did you think it would be: pink?"

He sipped a little before passing the cup on to Erza. "It's warm."

"Well, I'm not a human refrigerator like Gray," she said wryly.

Erza took a dainty sip and swished it around her mouth as if it was a fine wine. "Not bad. You must eat well for it to taste so good."

Lucy looked bashful. "I do try to eat balanced meals."

Wendy tried it next. "Sweeter than I expected."

Charle was the next to take a sip. "It's decent," she decided snootily.

Happy took the cup and slurped some, then passed it to Levy. "Hehe, I got an indirect kiss from Charle."

Lucy's eyes narrowed. "Is that all you care about?"

Levy tried it next. "You're right, it's sweet. It's a little weird to think that this came out of you."

"Yeah, well, it's weird thinking you're all drinking my breast milk," she grumbled.
Gray looked at the cup with uncertainty. Granted, he had tasted this before, but it was something he got from a bottle in the refrigerator. Knowing this was fresh out of Lucy's breasts made him feel awkwardly aroused.

"You don't have to," Lucy assured him. "I bet Natsu would love to finish it off."

"Yeah, it's good," Natsu said eagerly.

"No, I...I'll try it." Summoning up some courage, Gray took a sip.

It was warm, and it had a sweet, slightly nutty taste, like the milk left over after eating cereal. To Gray, it was the most wonderful taste in the world. He wanted to drink it every day. Especially knowing this was fresh from her breasts! His mind drifted to weird thoughts, how badly he wanted to suckle those breasts, drink up her milk, while Lucy cradled him, stroked his hair, and gave him a motherly smile.

Gray thrust the cup back to Natsu. "It's...okay."

"You're blushing," Erza pointed out with a smirk.

Natsu greedily drank more. "I really like the smell. It smells like Lucy, and it's sweet like Lucy."

The Spirit Mage chuckled. "Aww, Natsu! Thanks."

He gave her a huge grin, then drank down the rest. "I wonder if you can make ice cream out of it."

"What!" Lucy roared.

Natsu laughed devilishly. "If Gray was a girl, he'd make ice cream in his tits."

Gray drew back his fist and formed a magic circle around it. "I'll make you shit ice cubes for a week, you flame-brain."

"Bring it on, ice bastard!"

"Boys," Erza interrupted.

Both Gray and Natsu instantly sat up and looked proper. "Yes, Erza-san?" the said in unison.

"Play nice," she said calmly.

"Just joking between good friends," Gray assured nervously. "It's a friendly rivalry, right, Natsu?"

"Aye, sir!" the dragon slayer squeaked.

Later that night, Gray got up to get some midnight water and saw a light in the observation car a little further down from their sleeper car. He shuffled forward and squinted sleepily into the brightness. Lucy leaned back in a chair, staring out the wide train window at the darkness, her eyes turned up to the stars, while Luke suckled at her breast.

She noticed Gray in the doorway and smiled. "Can't sleep?"

"Wendy's spell wore off. Natsu's groaning too loudly to sleep. I just hope he doesn't puke up that
huge meal we ate."

"Well, you can keep me company. Luke woke up from a nightmare."

"With all the excitement today, I'm not all that surprised."

He got a glass of water and sat across from her. His eyes fell to the baby sucking away, his tiny hands pressing on Lucy's huge bosom, his eyes closed in satisfaction. Gray watched his tiny mouth work and listened to the baby making cute grunting noises as he slurped and gulped. He also saw how doing this gave Lucy a sleepy, happy look, almost like it put her into a trance. He wondered if it felt as good as when a man sucked a woman's breasts. Gray had a few girlfriends in the past. He recalled how women moaned and blushed when he played with their breasts. Yet Lucy looked more pacified, as if nothing could be wrong in this world while her child feasted.

"Still curious?"

Gray jumped at her words. Lucy's face was still pointed to the window, but her brown eyes had shifted over to him. She had a faint smile on her lips.

"It's...n-not like that," he said, although he felt his face turn red. "I was thinking, watching you and Luke like this...it suits you. The motherly look, I mean," he said, feeling awkward. "You look like you're really happy."

"Mmh," she hummed with a nod, and her eyes drifted down to her son. "I didn't want to say anything to the others, but it really does feel good when he nurses."

Gray gulped hard at that.

"More than just in a perverted way," she laughed, finding his blushing face a bit cute. "I guess I like feeling that he depends upon me. It won't last much longer."

"Huh? Wh-what do you mean, won't last?"

"He's eating soft food already. He's growing so fast, he'll be on solid food in no time. He wants to eat normal food, but Wendy said the nutrients in the breast milk could be helping him to cope with his accelerated growth. She recommended that I shouldn't wean him until he's at least physically two years old."

"Which at his rate of growth means eight months," Gray calculated. "It's May already, he was born in November...you're right, that's not too far away. And he'll be physically two..." He realized that some of the worry in Lucy's face lately was due to this. Her son was growing up before she had a chance to enjoy his infancy.

They fell silent. Gray tried looking out the window, but his eyes returned to Luke again. He recalled the day he heard about Lucy getting pregnant, how jealous and furious he felt, mad enough to attack Loke and threaten him. Then he remembered when Loke disappeared, how Lucy sobbed while Gray held her and swore on that rainy day that he would fight to the death to get Loke back. He remembered the day Luke was born, how tiny he was, how proudly Loke beamed showing him off to the guild, and how happily Lucy smiled through her exhaustion. That tiny baby was now the size of a toddler. He once thought he could never bring himself to accept a child of Loke. Now...he almost wished...

"What is it this time?"

Again, Lucy's voice startled him. "Uh...nothing."
"You're staring at my chest rather obsessively." She smirked at him and teased, "Don't tell me you're getting perverted thoughts."

"No!" Well, yes, but that was not the main thing. "Is it weird to watch a woman breastfeeding and think...maybe you'd...I dunno," he grumbled, "sorta wanna see your own child being fed like that?"

"I think it's part of human instinct, an ingrained desire to have children, propagation of the species and all."

"I guess that makes sense," he muttered, but he knew it was more than that. He wanted to be the one wrapping his arm around Lucy, watching her nurse their son, a little black-haired boy with chocolate brown eyes. He wanted to feel that sort of pride, and he was jealous that such an honor belonged only to Loke. Lucky bastard!

"Hey." Lucy's smile told him that she saw through his mask. She knew exactly what he was feeling. "You'll have your own kids one day, Gray. You're still young. One day you'll find a woman, marry her, have kids...hopefully in that order! You'll feel immensely happy as you watch her nurse your child, and you'll love her deeply."

He wanted, so desperately, to tell her 'I already love a woman deeply.' But he couldn't! He didn't have the right to say those words! Gray rose from his seat, and Lucy watched his stiff movements with worried eyes.

"I hope we reach Kohinur soon," he said, pitching his voice to sound casual, but Lucy saw Gray's fists squeeze tightly. "I want Loke to return. He deserves to feel that happiness watching you." Then he rushed back to his bedroom. Although Natsu was still moaning in sickness, it mattered little because Gray already knew he would not be able to sleep that night.

Chapter End Notes

Kudos to everyone who guessed the group that attacked Lucy was the Jiggle Butt Gang. I went back to this after they appeared in the anime. They're originally from Hiro Mashima's "Rave Master." If you haven't read it, you should, if only to gawk at how kickass Plue can be, drool over Musica and theorize he's the long-lost cousin of Gray and Gajeel, fall in love with Sieg Hart...and cry for him!

Because someone got confused, "nana" is American slang for "grandmother." I guess I should watch out for language-specific jokes.

="^o.o^=" "Rhov, you're weird."

"Well Happy, I think drinking cow's milk is weird. I mean... it's from a cow! Human milk is meant for humans."

="^-.-^=" "I would never drink Charle's milk. That's too gross."

"You liked Lucy's milk."
Yeah, but I'm a cat.

"...Point taken."
"Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, 
Nor hell a fury like a woman scorned."
- William Congreve

Meanwhile, a battle was raging in Magnolia. Cana sent five glowing cards flying toward a mob of black demons, with an immediate follow-up from Macao and his purple flame. "Where's Gildarts when I need him?" she grumbled in a cranky tone.

"Away on another long mission from Master," Macao told her. "Whoa, watch out!"

Cana ducked as a fiery blast nearly singed her brown hair. Suddenly, a wall of vines sprouted beside her, blocking the enemy's attacks. She looked over and saw Droy with his plant seeds.

"Thanks," she panted. "Damn demons! Where the hell did they come from?"

"Mira found the caster," Wakaba told her as he lassoed a black demon with his smoke and slammed the creature into a stone wall, where it dissipated into wisps of shadow. "Where's Master?"

"At a council meeting," Macao growled, already fighting another demon. "And Laxus is away on a mission. Mira already called him on the communications lacrima. He promised to hurry back, but he'll be a while."

"Dammit," Romeo yelled, working with Warren and Max against another wave of black demons.

"Watch your mouth!" Macao warned his son in a flare of fatherly disapproval.

Romeo ignored him. "Why are all the good fighters gone at a time like this?"

"Hey!" Cana shouted in offense. "I'm here, and Mira, and I saw Gajeel taking on a dozen demons by himself. Juvia's somewhere; I saw a large wet area a few streets down."

"Don't forget the Thunder God Tribe," Evergreen said haughtily from where she hovered a few meters above them, pelting demons from the sky.

Suddenly, they heard a woman's scream and saw a blur of white and red fly past them. Mira slammed into the wall of a store, and blood coughed out of her mouth from the impact. Her dress was torn low enough to expose her bra, and a slash to her forehead dripped streams of blood down her pained face.

"Mira!" Cana screamed in shock and horror. What in the world could be strong enough to defeat Mira like that?

The S-Class mage struggled to open her eyes and saw their group. "Everyone, run," she rasped out weakly.

"Mira-nee!" From down the street, Lisanna came flying in her half-bird form, nimbly zooming back
and forth between demons until she came to her older sister's side. Then she ended her Take Over form and returned to a human one so she could fretfully dabbed Mira's bloody face.

"Lisanna?" the bartender-mage asked in a daze. "I told you...to help evacuate...the townspeople."

"Reedus constructed a train and got everyone out of the affected areas," she reported.

Elfman stood in front of the two, already in his Take Over Beast form. He grimly looked at the approaching enemy. "I will not allow you to hurt my sister!" he bellowed.

Queen Kefira sauntered forward, easily avoiding the chaos of demons and mages around her. She had not planned on fighting, but she still needed to ask questions. Unfortunately, these new-age mages were excessively stubborn.

"I asked thee a simple question," she said with hard eyes. "I will call off my demons once I get an answer. Where is the Celestial Spirit mage Lucy Heartfilia?"

Cana heard and looked over in shock. "Why does she want Lucy?"

Jet stopped his fast dodging to look at the regal woman. "That's the lady who was with the walking fish when Lucy got kidnapped. She fought against Natsu and Gajeel together and managed to escape."

"Is she still in this town?" Kefira asked. "We did not sense her bairn."

"Her what?" asked Elfman.

"An ancient word," Freed told them, slicing into demons with his rapier. "It means child. Apparently, she can sense Luke."

Jet glanced around. "If she's here, where's that fishman?"

Suddenly they heard a horrific shriek of agony. Everyone jumped at the bloodcurdling scream.

"That's Juvia!" gasped Lisanna.

Mira managed to stand. "All of you, go rescue Juvia. I'll deal with this woman."

"I'm staying with you," Lisanna insisted.

"A man does not leave his sister to fight alone," Elfman said proudly.

"No!" Mira shouted stubbornly. "She's too strong for you."

Her little sister smiled up at her. "But maybe she's not as strong as all three of us together."

Kefira chuckled, not paying attention to the other mages who scrambled toward Juvia's shrieks. "A three-against-one melee? Unfair odds, I say. Alas, 'tis of little matter. I shall vanquish all three of ye if I must. Or perhaps only two and leave the littlest alive to torture until she telleth me whither went Lady Heartfilia."

Mira sneered with a face she rarely showed to anyone. "Take Over: Satan Soul!"
The ground under her went gold, then darkened to a sinister black light. Lisanna backed away as a glowing black magic circle formed overhead and rocks lifted in a surge of magical energy. A grid pattern glowed over Mira's skin for a moment, then wings sprouted from her back, a tail grew and swished, her arms turned into claws, her ears lengthened to something like an elf, her white hair stood on end, and a crack ran down the adorable face that enchanted photographers all over Fiore. The gentle bartender was gone. All that was left was a demonic form.

"Oh?" Kefira smirked. "This is interesting. And somehow familiar."

Mira lifted a hand. "Darkness Stream!" A nebulous form of black with a dark glow shot from her hand and sped toward Kefira.

"Aurora's Shield," Kefira cast, and a blinding gold barrier rose in front of her. Lisanna shouted as she had to shield her eyes from the glare, Elfman grunted as spots floated in his vision, and Mira hissed in frustration. "Satan Soul, didst thou say? I believe I am familiar with that demon. Certainly strong, but I created much worse creatures in my youth. Still, 'tis a fascinating form. A Take Over mage. That magic is genetic. Ye three must be of the Strauss Clan."

Lisanna gasped. "How did you know our family name?"

"Simple. White hair, blue eyes, Take Over magic in all three of ye. Your clan was famous even in Kohinur. I thought it died out in the Great Gathering, but I guess one or two survived. Perhaps ye three are the last of your lineage. A pity I must kill ye off. Perhaps I shall be generous, do away with the mousy brat, and let the male live to perpetuate another generation." She smirked sadistically. "I can have a lot of fun with him."

A flash of fury glowed in Mira's eyes. Protective rage boiled in her heart until it made the magic around her burst outward and flicker in dangerous black flames. She extended her beastly hands toward Kefira and bellowed, "Evil Explosion!"

In another area of Magnolia, Haftorang had met up face-to-face with Juvia and opted for the quickest way to end the fight. As soon as she turned into a water state, he opened his mouth. With a suctioning inhalation, all water in the surrounding area—street puddles, gardening cans, an abandoned soda bottle, and Juvia herself—instantly sucked into the massive mouth of the Southern Fish.

Juvia was halfway inside his mouth, the suction still pulling at her, but somehow she managed to solidify just her hands. Gajeel held onto them, tugging hard, straining against the pull of the fishman's mouth. The rest of Juvia was water and starting to stretch out from the vacuum.

"Bastard!" the iron dragon slayer growled. "Hang on, Juvia."

"Behind you!" Juvia shouted.

Gajeel could not turn around. All of his focus was on trying to pull Juvia out of the massive mouth. He smelled the demon approaching. "Iron Dragon's Scales," he growled, and he prepared his metal skin for the inevitable blow.

"Gajeel-kun," Juvia screamed as the demon's black arm made a stabbing motion.

Despite the metal that covered his skin, the shadow pierced him. Blood shot out of Gajeel's stomach. He gagged at the pain, but he refused to let go.

"Gajeel-kun," the water mage sobbed, although her face was already water. "Let go. Juvia can't
watch a friend get hurt like this."

"Shut the hell up," he growled, although his face showed pain and growing weakness. "I ain't letting you get eaten and that's all there is to it. If it weren't for you and that old geezer, I'd be a total mess, so just work with me and get out of his mouth."

"Juvia is trying," she cried. "Even just making Juvia's hands like this is taking all of Juvia's magic. Something is trying to force Juvia to turn all into water. Juvia can't feel anything. It's like all of Juvia's body is...vanishing!" That worried her. Was she already being digested? Even if Gajeel managed to pull her out, would she have a body left to her? She probably would have bawled heavy tears if she was not already all water. "Juvia just wants to see Gray-sama one last time!"

Suddenly, Gajeel felt his grip slipping. "Oi, oi!" He saw her hands turning blue with drops of liquid being sucked out. Her watery face tensed, and she whimpered in agony. "Juvia!" he shouted. "Hang in there."

"Gajeel-kun!" she screamed.

Suddenly, she lost all solid stability. Gajeel's hands went right through the water. He lost his hold so suddenly, he fell backward and landed on the ground.

"Juviaaaa!"

Gajeel watched in horror as the last of the water slurped into Haftorang's mouth. Juvia tried to shout something, but the wide lips closed over her. Haftorang licked a wet drop off of his blue lip ring, then let out a loud belch.

"You bastard!" Gajeel howled. He began to jump up, but instantly he fell back onto the street. The stab to his stomach was pouring out blood fast. "Dammit! If that fucking fireball was here, I'd have him cauterize this."

Just then, Cana arrived running with a large group of mages following her. "Gajeel!" she shouted, seeing him laying on the ground bleeding heavily.

He forced his eyes open and saw the group, including one that gave him some hope. "You, mini fireball," he said to Romeo. "Burn this wound closed before I bleed to death."

The boy looked horrified. "But...I...I've never done something like that."

"Fuck if I care. It doesn't have to be the work of a doctor, just something to stop the bleeding until I can get to a healer."

Romeo stepped forward hesitantly. "O-okay, but it's gonna hurt."

"Don't you think I know that?" he shouted. "Hurry up before I pass out. Cana," he yelled as he pulled off his shirt so Romeo could get to the wound. "That damn fish swallowed Juvia. I want you to turn him into sushi."

"Swallowed her?" everyone gasped.

"Incoming!" Bickslow yelled, pointing to a mob of demons coming up the street.

"Just great," Macao sighed. "I'm too old for this."

Haftorang waved a fin and the demon halted. Everyone watched in shock at the frozen horde, then
looked to him.

"I don't like using such vile things-s-s," he explained in a light hiss, and suddenly the demons exploded into bubbles of darkness. "I came to save Lucy Heartfilia and her child. Please tell me where they are located."

"Lucy?" Cana gasped. "That other woman wanted her, too."

"Yes-s-s, and if she finds them before I do, there is a chance she will kill Lucy before I can stop her. So please, tell me their location before my mistress learns of it."

Cana readied her cards. "Mistress? Then you're in league with her. In that case, not a chance!" She heard Gajeel cry out and Romeo apologize as he cauterized the gapping wound. "You've hurt too many of our friends. I won't let you hurt Lucy too."

She flung out three cards at a time. Haftorang puckered his lips like a kiss and shot out small bullets of liquid from his mouth. They pierced the cards and made them disintegrate.

"I wish to save her life," Haftorang insisted patiently. "She is the consort of my king, so I shall protect both from harm."

"King?" Freed asked suspiciously. "Do you mean Loke?"

Haftorang nodded. "He who now goes by that name, yes-s-s. I was then called Piscis Austrinus-s-s. I was Leo's closest friend and ally. He may no longer officially hold his title, but in my eyes he will always be my king."

"Don't listen to him," Gajeel sneered between clenched teeth. "He's the one who fought and defeated Loke when Lucy was kidnapped. He's aligned with that queenie bitch and wants Loke dead."

"Fool, I minimized my attack to stun Leo without killing him. He was never in danger of dying. However, now he may be. I must find Lucy and her son so I can save his life before it's too late."

Droy looked confused. "Wait, you're trying to save Loke and Lucy?"

"I am sworn to the Lion," the fishman said. "As his consort, that oath of protection includes Lucy Heartfilia, so long as she does not endanger his existence. It also extends to his son and heir. Upon my very existence, I shan't allow harm to come to the family of my king." His huge mouth lifted in a keen smile. "If you are truly their friends, you will help me. The Spirit World is ready to pass a death sentence onto Leo; meanwhile, Kefira will kill Lucy if she finds her and I'm not around. I can shield Lucy twenty-four hours a day, since I don't sleep and have no need to leave her side. I can also save Leo's life while making him strong enough to protect Lucy and the baby on his own. To live together in peace...this is what Lucy wants more than anything, right? I can provide that! If your guild truly believes in protecting one another—in camaraderie and the bonds of friendship—then please help me save them."

"In case of a tie," Freed said. "I offer my services in protecting your friends, noble Fairy Tail mages-s-s."

Gajeel managed to stand. A nasty scar was left on his stomach and back, but the bleeding had stopped. "I don't fucking believe you. Even if it's the truth, we're not handing Lucy over to either you nor that queenie bitch. This guild is a bit insane when it comes to protecting one another, but I wouldn't trade in that loyalty for anything. I'll fight just as hard as any of them. Iron Dragon's Club!"

His arm turned to metal and shot out. Haftorang easily moved to the side and avoided getting skewered.
"Fascinating." The fishman smiled as he dodged another stabbing motion from Gajeel. "Does the flesh truly turn to metal, or is it a mere transformation of sorts-s-s?" He ducked nimbly as the club turned into an ax and tried to make a chop at his head. "Where does the metal come from? Is it all within you, or a summoning of elements-s-s?"

Gajeel glared. "I dunno what the hell you're talking about, you hissing tuna. I fight how Metalicana taught me, that's all."

"Is your understanding of your own Lost Magic so limited? A shame. Shall we test it scientifically? Fish's Corrosion!" Haftorang's lips puckered together, and a jet of water shot out from his mouth.

Gajeel leaped to the side and shot his metal club at the fishman again. "I'll hook you like a fresh-caught sea bass!"

He laughed wildly, his red eyes gleaming at the thrill of the fight. Gajeel leaped up to a wooden barrel, and the water Haftorang spit splashed against it, not even damaging the wood. Then Gajeel ran over the top of a fence, balancing with grace as shots hit right at his heels. With a pounce, he leaped up to a roof to get the high ground. Suddenly, one of the jets of spit hit Gajeel in the stomach and splashed all over him.

"Was it his wound?" Romeo asked worriedly.

Gajeel suddenly howled, a beastly noise unlike anything they had ever heard. He gasped hard and raspy, holding his stomach as he tried to regain control. Then the pain overwhelmed him, making him scream again even louder.

"My God," Cana gasped. She ran over and knelt beside him as the dragon slayer stomped his foot and punched a wall to distract himself from the agony. Cana covered her mouth as she felt ready to vomit. Gajeel's skin was slowly turning reddish-orange and crusty.

"It seems the metal exists within his very blood," Haftorang said, watching the wreathing dragon slayer with fascination. "I wonder if he's even Human still."

Cana swung her head around to the enemy with tears in her eyes. "What did you do to him?"

"A corrosive liquid that reacts only to metal. If he was a normal Human, it wouldn't have done anything besides rust away his belt buckle. However, with a creature like this-s-s...I'm afraid it might be lethal. My sincerest apologies-s-s. I hadn't expected such a strong reaction."

Gajeel howled again. Blood was pouring out from the corroding skin, but even that turned to orange dust before it could drip. The rust-like corrosion was spreading fast. Cana bit her lip as she realized that he really could die. "Someone take him to Porlyusica, fast," she screamed.

Jet was the quickest, so he put Gajeel over his shoulders. "I won't be as quick as normal carrying someone this heavy," he warned, but he sped off almost too fast for anyone to see more than the dust of his trail.

Cana wiped tears out of her eyes. "First Mira, then Juvia, now Gajeel," she muttered, half to herself. Then she screamed in fury, "What the hell do you people want?"
The Celestial Spirit mage Lucy Heartfilia. Or more precisely, her child, the son of Leo the Lion.

"You can't have them!" someone yelled.

Everyone was stunned that the scream of defiance came from Romeo, and they all looked over to him in wide-eyed shock. His dark eyes were narrow and hard as he glared at the enemy. The boy who had trained for seven years to protect his guild was now furious, and flames danced along the edge of his skin while his orange scarf flapped in the breeze.

"He looks just like Natsu," Bisca realized softly.

"I won't let you hurt anyone else in this guild," the thirteen-year-old warned darkly. "We are Fairy Tail! We will fight to the very end to save one of our own. Blue Fire!" Romeo shouted, and an icy blaze shot from his hand toward the fishman.

Haftorang nimbly dodged, but a small bit of the cold flame hit his translucent fin. He hissed in pain and smacked the fire out.

"That's it!" Wakaba shouted. "He's a fish, so he must be weak against fire. Romeo, Macao..."

He did not even need to give an order. Glyphs circled around Romeo's wrist. "Red Fire!" he cast, and a small flame shot out. It was nothing compared to the attacks Natsu could do, but Haftorang showed annoyance as he desperately tried to avoid it. Macao followed up on his son with his Purple Fire, manipulating the sticky flame like a whip to spur the fishman toward Romeo's fireballs.

"Enough!" the Southern Fish hissed. "Fish's Phlegm!" He spit again, but this time it was yellowish green. The huge glob hit Romeo and encased him from the neck down, making him stick to the cobbled road.

"Romeo!" Macao shouted in horror. He gave up trying to fight and racing over to his son.

"Eww, that's gross," Romeo grimaced, struggling yet unable to move anything but his head. "It feels like snot!"

"Touch it and you will stick with him," Haftorang warned just before Macao could grab at the greenish goop.

"Che! I'll get him," Evergreen sighed, and she lowered her glasses. "Stone Eyes!"

Haftorang waved his fins, and magic glowed from their rainbow translucence. "Fish's Mirror."

Water formed in front of him, a perfectly glassy pool that reflected the faces of everyone in front of him, including Evergreen's magical gaze.

"Crap!" she cringed, but it was already too late.

Luckily, Max saw the problem just in time. "Sand Wall!" he shouted. A thick barricade of sand raised up, blocking the effects of the mirror, but it only protected those near him. Evergreen, Freed, Jet, Droy, Macao, Wakaba, and Bisca were instantly lithified.

"Bisca!" Alzack cried out in horror.

She had been standing right beside him, but Max's Sand Wall had protected him while being just barely out of reach of shielding his green-haired wife. With gritted teeth, Alzack aimed his rifle and fired round after round with a maddened shout. He was barely even aiming, just shooting with a
burst of emotions. Haftorang spit again, and the same corrosive water hit the gun, instantly dissolving it into useless rust.

"Bastard," Bickslow growled, seeing that the other two members of the Thunder God Tribe had been turned to stone. He was only protected because of his helmet. "I'll turn you into a puppet." He lifted his visor, and his wild eyes shined. "Figure Eyes!"

Haftorang looked back at him. It was silent for a moment, then the fishman tilted his head. "And that does what?"

Bickslow pulled back in shock. "How...?" The tattoo on his face crunched up. "I've felt something like this before. With Loke! You...you're a Celestial Spirit!"

"I believe I did introduce myself as Piscis Austrinus-s-s," the fishman said.

"But," Bickslow said softer, "something is wrong. You're...taken. Your soul is hidden under another soul. Somehow, you're already possessed, although I don't understand how. It's unlike any spirit I've ever felt."

Haftorang tilted his head back and laughed. "Possessed? You might call it that. Joining with Fomalhaut must protect me from whatever sort of magic you use. Possessed! I prefer to call it merged." Then a guileful smirk rose onto his wide mouth. "Do you wish to see?"

He brightened into a massive blue-green glow, and slowly the glow shifted to gold. His body changed. Instead of fins, he had massive feathered wings. Instead of a mere loincloth, he wore a white robe. His face shifted, but no one could say what exactly he looked like. Not fish, but not exactly Human.

"It's angelic," Laki whispered in amazement, unable to move as her brain was over-awed at the form before them.

The radiant creature before them spoke with a deep, echoing voice. "You brave mages are fortunate. Few Humans in history have seen the face of the unbounded Fomalhaut, Guardian of the Southern Sky. However," he sighed, sounding truly contrite, "I'm afraid I must be going. I have no time to play anymore. My king needs me." The glow intensified. "Fomalhaut: Fusion."

Up in the air, Lisanna nimbly dodged while attacking a flying demon, using her Animal Soul: Half Bird form to fly while her sharp talons clawed at the dark creature. Down on the street, Elfman's Beast form smashed into demon after demon, keeping the way clear for Mira.

Mira had blood running down her legs and head, dripping from her chin and down onto her scantily-clad bosom. She hated to admit that she was losing. This woman was far too powerful. She used too many different forms of magic to keep up with her. Light magic, darkness magic, fire, water, wind, and earth magic...it was too much! She had never heard of this sort of mage. However, with Lisanna and Elfman fighting so hard, she was not about to give up. Mira wiped blood out of her eyes and focused through the dizziness.

"Tell me whither I may find Lucy Heartfilia, and I shall leave this town," Kefira promised, not winded in the least by her fight. Instead, she looked bored and peevish. "I have no desire to demolish it, but I shall until I find the place where ye have hidden her."

"Go to hell," Mira growled. She pulled her hands back and formed a sphere of darkness. "Soul Extinction!" A massive blast of darkness shot forward, destroying buildings all down the length of the street. However, when it ended Kefira stood with a rainbow sphere shielding her.
"I grow weary of this," Kefira sighed in boredom. She raised her hands. "Hark to my call, oh ancient dragon of the deep." Her arm stretched forward, and a slender finger pointed. "Flaming Waters of Leviathan!"

Blue liquid shot out. Mira flew back and forth, dodging the stream that set everything it touching on fire. She cursed under her breath. She had heard Natsu talk about this water-flame, and she knew that she could not let it touch her.

"Mira-nee!" Lisanna shouted in worry as she saw her sister growing tired, slowing down, and barely able to dodge.

Suddenly, something caught Lisanna's eyes. Far to the west side of Magnolia, in the direction where Cana and the rest had gone running, there was a massive explosion. A ball of golden light bubbled out, blasting everything in its path, then expanded upward like a mushroom. A few moments later, the roar and wind from the blast hit them. Lisanna was blown back, unable to steady herself with her wings. The demons around her were scattered, but she was flung right into a tall building. She felt her wing crunch and fold backwards on her. She screamed, then fell limply into some bushes below.

"Lisanna!" Mira yelled. The distraction cost her. The blue liquid flame hit her leathery wings. Mira screamed as her wings were seared off, and she plummeted to the ground in a spin. She landed hard, and blood poured out from her back.

"No!" Elfman bellowed. "Lisanna! Nee-chan!"

"Go to her," Mira ordered sharply, trying to stand again.

As he raced over, Elfman phased out of his Beast form and back into his muscular body. He knelt beside Lisanna and cried to see her arm broken, bent in the wrong direction, and a small, sharp edge of white bone stabbing through her skin. Blood poured out from the open fracture and turned the skin around it purplish-red from internal bleeding.

Weakly, the petite girl opened her eyes and strained out a smile. "Elf...nii-chan."

Mira heard the desperation in his voice. She could not see Lisanna well, but she had heard the loud crack. Definitely a broken bone, probably an open fracture by how Elfman was reacting. She glared at Kefira, but despite all of her boiling rage, Mira felt like she could barely lift her arms. She was dizzy from blood loss and nearly out of magic. The drain was starting to make her nauseous, and she could no longer see straight. Still, for Lisanna...for Elfman...for Lucy...for all of Fairy Tail...


Mira gritted and lowered her head, ready to take the hit to protect her younger siblings. Blackness enveloped her.

And then light.

She saw a flash and heard the booming crack a second later.

Nothing hit. She loosened up, and as she did, the full drain hit her. She lost her form, faded back into simple Mirajane, and her knees collapsed under her like a rag doll. Panting hard, she looked up to see
"You look like shit, Mira."

A smile spread over her face. "Laxus!"

He glanced down and had a smile for her. "Really, what would this guild do without me?"

Kefira grinned and eyed him up and down. "A fascinating specimen of lacrima fusion. Lightning Dragon, if I'm not mistaken. Nearly flawless, although the initial strength is less than ideal. Still, the fusion process must have advanced by leaps since my time. Most of our experiments never lived past the initial integration. Half of those died within the first five years, and the survivors were only of weak lacrima origins. None of our attempts at fusing dragon lacrima into Humans succeeded even marginally. Yet I sense the lacrima hath been in thy body for years, and with no visible adverse side effects. How I'd love to take thee to my old lab and see what such a powerful lacrima fusion can do!"

Laxus faced Kefira, and his eyes narrowed at what she was saying. "What the hell do you want with us? Why are you attacking my guild?"

"Thy guild?" she asked curiously. "Art thou the one they call Master Makarov Dreyar?"

"His grandson," he sneered. "Laxus Dreyar."

"I see. Greetings, heir of the master of Fairy Tail." She bowed regally. It made Laxus arch an eyebrow and wish people greeted him like that more often. "I am Yamataikoku No Kefira, Shaman-Queen of Kohinur, Magistrate of the Pearl Islands, Protector of Ruby Silphium, Owner of the Lion's Heart, Mother of all citizens of..."

"I don't fucking care who you are!" he shouted. "Why are you destroying my town? What is your goal?"

"I seek only an answer. Where is the Celestial Spirit mage Lucy Heartfilia?"

"She left on some quest," he snapped. "Try knocking again in a month or two, and leave your hoard of demons at home."

"A quest?" Kefira frowned. "A curse upon that wench! She must be after it. Whither did she go?" she demanded.

Laxus folded his arms in a cocky stance. "As luck would have it, to that place you claim you're queen of, Kohinur."

"Laxus!" Mira gasped.

"Kohinur?" Kefira seethed. "She would dare to set foot upon my land?" Then her face loosened, and she chuckled to herself. "She shall be on my turf. All the better. Haftorang!"

He walked forward, back in his fishman form. "Sorry it took me so long, mistress-s-s. I fear I failed seeking Lucy's whereabouts-s-s."

"And where thou hast failed, I succeeded. We're leaving to Kohinur!" She suddenly vanished. Once she was gone, all the demons around them faded away like smoke.

Haftorang bowed to them. "My apologies-s-s. If my mistress manages to regain her throne, I will personally request that she pay recompense for the damages incurred today. Rest assured, I did not
“Why did you tell her?” she yelled, looking like she was about to cry. “We were fighting so hard to protect Lucy, and you handed her over without even trying to fight. What sort of Fairy Tail mage are you?”

“Not just her!” he shouted right back. “The fishman might have spared the lives of those he fought, but not so the demons. There are casualties all over Magnolia. I did what I had to do to save the whole town.”

You don't need to worry about Lucy,” he finally said. “Natsu's with them, and Erza and Gray. If it's those three, they'll definitely win. And if Lucy is fighting for the man she loves, she'll definitely beat that bitch.” He lifted Lisanna carefully, making sure her arm did not move much. Still, she cried out in agony and finally passed out. Laxus moved her to lean against his chest, then he began walking away. “Tend to the wounded and bury the dead,” he called back to Mira. “It's the least we can do for now. The rest is up to Team Natsu. That flame-brain better not disappoint my expectations in him or I'll kick his ass out through his nose!”
The spell "Black Sins of Orlov" is taken from the cursed diamond called Black Orlov. I picked it since the name of Kefira's homeland, Kohinur, was taken from the Koh-i-Noor Diamond, another cursed gem.

"Ruby Silphium" - The now-extinct silphium plant, a contraceptive herb used in Ancient Egypt up until Roman times, lent the shape of its fruit to what we now call a "heart" shape, a symbol of love, since the ancients took that herb before they...well...you know! What the Ruby Silphium is will come up later.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"The whisper of a pretty girl can be heard further than the roar of a lion." - Arabian proverb

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**Spirit World**

As Taurus walked down to the cell where Leo was being held, he already heard roars of frustration mixed with curses and occasionally the sound of something crashing into a wall. Canis Major, the guard dog of Orion, was left to watch over the irate prisoner. The poor dog looked ready for a nap.

"Leo?" the Bull called out.

The Lion practically threw himself against the spirit barrier, and it glowed where his face and hands pressed against it. "Taurus! Get me out of here. I need to talk to Lucy. At the very least, I need to give her a message."

"Virgo can do that for you," he said as he came nearer.

"Dammit, no!" His fists beat on the barrier. "I'll never again send Virgo in my place."

Taurus knew that the worst thing in the world for the Lion was to be caged like this. He was a wild Spirit, used to roaming freely, coming and going wherever he pleased. Being trapped in a tiny cell was probably wearing on his sanity.

"Hey, just calm down," Taurus said. "You know none of us will allow Lucy's nice body to get hurt. We all love Lucy. She hasn't called any of us, so she's safe. Maybe she stopped going on missions. She's probably resting at home, soaking in a hot bath, wet and naked and..."

"Hey!" Leo yelled, not liking the hearts forming in Taurus' eyes.

"...and thinking of you," he concluded with a smirk.

"And I should be there with her," he roared.

"I'd love to be in a bathtub with her, too, but—"

"Dammit, you know what I mean!"

Taurus folded his arms across his massive chest. He wished he could talk privately. Mostly, he did not want other Spirits to see the Leader of the Zodiacs reduced to this. "Hey Canis, looks like he broke his jug of water. Go get him some more to drink."

"But..." the Great Dog began.

"I'll report you for denying a prisoner water," he threatened. The guard dog flattened his ears at the glare in the Bull's eyes and sulked away. Once he was gone, Taurus gave a sigh. He hated to bully other Spirits; it was not in his nature at all. Still, he needed some privacy. "The Spirit King is looking into a way to resolve this legally and not strip you of your immortality," he told his fellow Zodiac.
"He wants you to stay as the Lion, Leo. We all do. None of us want to lose you. Just give him time."

"Time is the problem. If the trial lasts even two days, Lucy will be alone for half a year."

"That's true," Taurus nodded. "And Spirit trials in particular are known to take a great deal of time, since the matter is always a dire one."

"Which is why I'm willing to surrender my position rather than drag out a long trial that very well could take all of Lucy's lifetime." Leo looked stubborn. "I've lived a good life. I've suffered many sins which I thought could only be atoned for through death. I know what I want. All I need is that mustached-bastard's permission."

"Do you really want to lose your powers?" Taurus asked with a worried face.

"Of course not," he sighed. Leo collapsed onto his tiny cot and leaned his head back against the cold wall. He looked like he was almost out of energy and ready to faint. "I spent six months in the Human World debating what the best choice would be. The Spirit King doesn't realize I've had that much time to think about this."

"And you decided death was best?"

"Hell no! But if these are the choices he's giving me, then I have to pick one, right? If he offered 'Choice Number Three,' I'd probably take it. But he didn't, and that's the problem. You said he wants me to remain as the Lion. Well then, he needs to change the conditions. I'd rather keep my magic and position, but not if the cost is losing Lucy." His face tightened into a sneer. "Almost makes me wish I had agreed."

"With what?"

Leo laughed bitterly. "You'd hate me if I admitted it."

Taurus took a quick look down the hall. There was no sign of Canis Major. "I already assume you mean Fishy."

"Yup," he smirked. "Piscis Austrinus suggested an alternative, one of those offers you can't refuse. He'd teach me how to stay in the Human World indefinitely, and Kefira would make Lucy immortal. Well, there's no way in hell Kefira would ever agree to help Lucy, not with how psychotically jealous that woman can get. And of course, I know precisely how he's staying alive. He sought out the Fomalhaut Key. How he looks now is how he looked when he was merged."

"Which means he probably plans to stay this way indefinitely."

Leo hummed and nodded. "It's what he preferred. He never did like how he looked normally."

"That's true. I must admit, I also prefer how I looked when merged with Aldebaran. I was quite sexy," he said as he flexed his muscles.

Leo had to laugh at his playful antics. "You were a true Golden Bull."

"So, what did you prefer?" asked Taurus.
He chuckled softly at his friend's attempt at interrogating. "What I preferred then, what I prefer now, and what I'd rather have at this moment are three different things. Of course I liked the energy rush when Regulus merged with me. I looked damn sexy, too, if I do say so," he said, grinning suavely. "I'm also the independent type. I didn't like having someone else partially controlling me. I could never be sure if it was something I wanted or he wanted. I like the freedom I have now. I like not having to always worry with political details. The Spirit King can deal with the legal crap that's involved with ruling. But if I had to regain Regulus, if there was no other choice, would I? Of course I would! I won't lie; I miss that level of power, but it's not something I'd seek out of greed, not like Piscis Austrinus. I at least still have the prestige of being Leader of the Zodiacs, and you're physically the strongest. Fishy...he didn't even have that. He was a Silver Key, the only Silver Key who was also aligned with the Royal Stars. Without Fomalhaut, he wasn't much of anything, just some loner."

"Be honest, Leo," Taurus said, sounding uncharacteristically serious. "If you could go back and do it over again, knowing what happened, knowing how the Spirit King changed the rules against you, knowing you wouldn't get a lifetime with Naomi like you wished, would you still let the Royal Stars go? I won't tell the Spirit King—you know that—and don't answer in a way you think will make me happy. I knew full well that Aldebaran wanted to leave, and the four of them left the decision to you. I just want to know, for you personally..."

"You're being way too polite, Taurus," Leo teased. "If I didn't know any better, I'd almost think you were back to your old self, the erudite gentleman, rather than the pervy Bull you changed into." His playful smile faded, and he stared forward for a long time, thinking through his life, how things went, how they could have gone, considering scenarios. "To be honest," he whispered sadly, and his eyes slowly turned over to meet the dark eyes of the Bull. "No. Maybe I'll get in trouble for admitting this—"

"I said I won't tell," Taurus swore.

"Naomi remarried one Earthland year after I left her. I remember the day Aries told me, so suddenly after I was locked up. It was only four days for me!" he cried out in anguish that had been pent up for too many centuries. "I know a lot can happen in a year, especially how Earthland was during those days. Still, why did she give up waiting for me so quickly? What happened? I swore I'd stay with her through all eternity, find her through each incarnation, wait as long as it took for her to be reborn, yet she couldn't wait one fucking year," he screamed and threw an unlucky metal dish across the room. It embedded into the wall from the force of the toss. "I gave up everything for her. I let the Royal Stars go because she didn't like when Kefira summoned me. I stepped down as king so I could devote all of my time to her. I sought out and conquered Aries' Key because she said she wanted a woman around to keep her company. We were married for four years, and when I was gone just one year, just four Spirit days, she called the whole thing off and married some Human."

His fingers gripped his orange hair and pulled at it. His face was so distraught, it almost looked like he was about to cry, but Taurus knew the Lion had too much pride to do that.

"Despite my grief," Leo said quietly, "I still hoped that when I was released, perhaps we could get together again. Maybe she was forced into it. Maybe she needed a man to protect her. Even if I try to tell myself that she must have had her reasons, it's still painful, even to this day. I don't know why she did it. I'll probably never know. I don't even know for sure how she died. I have suspicions, of course." His eyes narrowed as he remembered hearing Kefira swear revenge against both of them the day he and Regulus came to take away the Lapis Lazuli Key. "If I could go back in time, I think...maybe I never would've bothered Naomi. She could have lived a good life. And just think," he laughed wryly, "if I hadn't screwed around, think how much better the Human World would be. No Zeref! No demons! No years of war! The Royal Stars would still be keeping both worlds in a balance of tentative peace, countries too afraid to attack one another. It wasn't perfect, but I wonder if..."
maybe my selfish choice back then made everything a hell of a lot worse."

Leo looked up fast, ready to protest, but his shoulders dropped as he realized what the Bull was saying. "I dunno. Maybe. I guess I'm being selfish again."

"The Spirit King is looking for a way to save you. My suggestion, Leo, is to take it. If it lets you and Lucy be together without you losing your magic and making the same mistake all over again, then no matter what it is, take it."

"That's the problem," Leo muttered. "Me being with Lucy goes against the rules. Whatever he has planned, it must be a way to make Lucy not want me ever again. That's all I can figure."

"Aww, come on! Don't be so pessimistic," he said. "It's not like you."

"A lion in the desert grows doubtful it'll ever rain again," he said darkly. "I just hope that when I get out of here, Lucy hasn't already replaced me."

"Hey! Don't talk that way about Lucy. Sure, she has a nice body and awesome boobs, but her heart belongs to you."

Leo pouted slightly at that. "I almost wish my Heart belonged to her."

Taurus looked down to his cowbell again. The Heart of the Lion. The Eye of the Bull. Regulus and Aldebaran: two powerful entities who shaped their destinies and still let their influence be felt to this day.

He heard steps far off. Canis Major was returning. "Hey, Leo," the Bull whispered. "If you ever take...drastic measures," he said cautiously, "I just want you to know...I'll support you."

Leo looked up in horror. "Taurus!" His voice dropped as he too heard distant steps. "Talk like that and you'll be banished as well."

"If that happens, I know where to find Aldebaran," he said, grinning mischievously. "Speaking as the Golden Bull, I don't advise it, but if you're ever left with no other choice..." He shrugged, unable to say more since the Great Dog turned a corner and entered the hallway. Taurus pulled back from the barrier. "So don't you worry," he said boisterously. "Lucy's boobs will be safe in my hands."

"That sounded totally perverted, and stop talking about her boobs all the time," Leo shouted back, but he had a smile, thankful for his friend's support. "But hey, Taurus...send Virgo. Tell her to tell Lucy that it'll be a bit longer."

"Sure thing. And don't trash your cell anymore. It's rather undignified." He gave a nod to Canis Major and left the dank dungeon.

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**Meanwhile, in Earthland**

Three months had passed since leaving Magnolia. It was the first of July and Lucy's birthday. The team stopped at a fishing village in southern Kohinur, a tiny collection of huts and a few wooden buildings that smelled of salt and old fish. They took lodging in the nicest inn in the village, which was nothing glamorous and shockingly cheap. Still, it had soft beds and warm showers, which was better than the beds on the train, or sleeping on the ground as they traveled by foot from the train station to this distant village. Now they had to wait for a ship that would take them to Hoshinoue...
In the meantime, they celebrated Lucy's birthday with a cake and laughs. The baby had grown considerably during their long journey. Luke now looked like a two-year-old toddler, walking around, talking more, and sticking anything he could into his mouth. Since he had grown so big, Lucy got him an outfit when they arrived in Kohinur, something native to this distant land.

To blend in, all of them bought Kohinur-style outfits, bulky clothes made of a thick but soft wool, cut prudishly long, with bright colors accented in gold. Lucy's dress was brilliant blue and lengthy, going all the way to her ankles, since the Kohinurians were horrified at her short skirts. With it she wore a blue top with tight sleeves of red and gold stripes. Wendy's dress was deep purple with gold swirls and also came down to her wrists and ankles, which made it a bit hard to walk in since she was used to short dresses. Levy wore a dark orange dress with gold around a high collar and flaring gold sleeves, and although it was the shortest dress she could find, it was still far below the knees. Despite that, it made the townspeople stare in horror and mothers covered the eyes of their children at such a "loose woman" who dared to show off her ankles. Since Erza refused to remove her armor and women were expected to dress a certain way, they decided that disguising her as a man was best. She pulled back her scarlet hair in a style common to the men in Kohinur, bought some trousers, and wore a cloak to hide the fact that her breastplate had...well, breasts!

Natsu reclined in a loose red shirt tied up with black lacing, puffy blue pants, and a gold sash tied around his waist. Gray's long white coat and black turtleneck shirt surprisingly fit the fashion very well, but he had to be extra careful about stripping with such prudish laws. They were detained for a week in their first Kohinurian town after the Ice-Make mage was arrested for indecent exposure for having simply taken off his shirt, and Lucy was escorted out of town with a warning due to her miniskirt. After that, they all watched how they dressed, and they took shifts at reminding Gray not to strip.

Charle felt indignant as she finally pulled on her pink dress. Just after they passed beyond the mountains that made the boundary between the western lands and the far eastern lands, they all noticed that people on the train stared in horror at the two Exceeds. Levy was the one who deduced that Exceed eggs must have not landed this far east. They had even more trouble in the highly superstitious land of Kohinur, where talking cats were a sort of demon. Happy and Charle had to go around without wearing clothing, meowing to get attention, and they either had to be held or walk on all fours, which neither was used to doing. Charle usually rode with Luke and hid in the baby blankets to save her modesty, while Happy simply sat on Natsu's shoulders.

They ate birthday cake and joked that they were not sure how old Lucy was. They teased all the members of Team Tenrou about this on every birthday. Was someone twenty or twenty-seven?

"What do you wish for your birthday?" Levy asked excitedly.

Lucy smiled and looked out the window. It was night, and the stars shined brightly in this small port town. "I want to find the Regulus Key. I'm not sure what to do with it yet, but I feel like everything will fall into place if I can just get it. Maybe...I can use it to see Loke again." Her chocolate brown
eyes lowered with a sad smile. "It feels like years since I've seen him."

Luke toddled up to her. He had learned how to walk while they were still on the long train ride that took them halfway around the world. "Mama, loookie!" He showed her a drawing he made.

Lucy smiled and lifted the boy onto her lap. "That's good. What is it?"

"Issa kitty. A gwonup kitty."

"A grownup kitty?" She looked at the scribbles again. She could make out the eyes, a smile, and a lion's orange mane. Her lips began to tremble as her eyes filled with tears. "It...it's really good." She quickly bit her lip to keep it from shaking and letting loose a sob.

Wendy swooped in to the rescue. "Hey Luke, let's draw a picture of that weird bird we saw today."

"Okee." He slipped off Lucy's lap, tumbled forward a little, but walked unsteadily forward after Wendy. She took his hand to help him to balance as she led him out of the room, realizing Lucy needed to cry.

Lucy still stared at the messy picture in her hands. "Does he even remember Loke?" she asked softly. "Three months for a child his age might as well be half a lifetime."

Natsu grinned at her. "It'll be fine. Even if Luke can't remember, he will as soon as he sees Loke again. I mean, Loke's the kind of guy no one forgets. And it's his dad. A kid never forgets his dad, no matter how long they're separated." He looked totally serious on that part.

Lucy nodded firmly. "Yes! I know what my birthday wish is. I want my whole family to be together again in Fairy Tail: Loke, my son, the two godfathers," she said to Natsu and Gray, "the two godmothers," she smiled at Erza and to where Wendy stood in the doorway, "and of course Auntie Levy," she giggled to her best friend.

Happy flew up into her face. "What about the god-cats?"

Lucy hugged him tightly against her. "Yes, yes, the god-cat and goddess-cat, too."

That night, Gray woke up to use the bathroom. As he walked into the room that connected the girls' and boys' chambers, he saw Lucy sitting in a chair with Luke sniffling in her arms. She hummed a lullaby to him and spent the time reading a book by a low lamp.

"Is he okay?" Gray whispered.

Lucy hummed affirmative. "A nightmare. He's been getting more and more as we get closer. I don't like putting him through this. I hope we can find that key and get out of this country." She tried to shift. "He's getting so heavy. My arm's asleep."

"Here, let me hold him." Gray easily lifted the boy into his arms and took a seat in a chair beside Lucy.

Luke moaned at being disturbed. "Unkie Gay?"
He hushed Luke and hummed as well. The lower timbre relaxed the boy's face, and Luke began to drift back to sleep.

"What are you reading?" Gray asked, nodding down to an opened book laying beside her.

"The Heartless Lion. It's that story Naomi wrote about Loke losing his heart. It's meant for kids, but somehow, when I read it, I can picture exactly how everything went. I can visualize it, as if I was there. But this last part," she frowned, hefting the book up and staring at the words. "This is what gets me. The lion-prince returned home feeling worried. He was now heartless, and he feared he might feel no love for his beloved princess. However, when she rushed out to greet him, he felt a leap in the place where his heart once was. That tiny piece he left intact held all of his feelings for her, and he swore she would be his only love for all eternity. The princess and the heartless lion-prince lived happily ever after."

"They didn't live happily ever after," Gray realized.

"They lived in peace for four years. He gave up being King of the Heavens, and all he got were four years of happiness. And a lifetime of regret." She dropped the book and covered her face with her hands. "Loke's ready to do it again, only this time he'll become mortal. And for what? How long until I die? Or he might die! And that line, 'he swore she would be his only love for all eternity.'" Lucy sniffled at that. "He loved her...so much! He once swore to me he'd find me the next time I'm reborn, even..." and she had to chuckle, "...even if I'm born a male. I bet he promised that to Naomi too. He said he looked for her a little, but...but he didn't search the whole globe for her. He gave up! And Naomi, she knew how to free Loke, but she didn't! Why?" she screamed, which woke Luke up again and made him cry.

Luke finally calmed down, and Gray put him in his cradle. Then he came over to Lucy and hugged her. She desperately threw her arms around him and continued to sob.

"It makes me wonder," she whispered, "did she do the right thing?"

"Huh?" Gray asked in confusion. "I thought you didn't like that she gave up."

"Yeah but...but Loke, he...he could have any girl," she grumbled. "I know he still flirts. It's in his nature. He...he's always talking about...about lions mating," she sobbed, hiccuping between words. "He leaves out...one thing. Lions...they...they have harems. All the female lions gather around the big, strong male. He'll mate with all of them."

"Lucy," Gray scolded softly.

"I don't want someone like that," she whispered, hating herself for admitting this. "I want someone who'll only want me."

He rocked her gently. "I'm sure he does. He's only the Spirit of the Zodiac Lion. It's not like he has all the traits of a real lion."

"Then why does he go off and flirt?" She pouted bitterly. "Sometimes I think that I want him to be a normal Human, to lose all traits of the Lion, that way he'll stop being promiscuous. If I get this key...who knows, but it might make him even worse. I don't want Kefira to get it, but...but I'm really not sure I want to use it."
"Even if you can free him?" Gray asked, worried about her depressed feelings.

"Even if," she nodded. "If I can get him to come back, but he turns around and cheats on me...I'd hate him! And I don't want to hate him. I'd rather not see him again and be sad, than see him with another woman and despise him. I wonder, maybe that's the reason why Naomi didn't try to save him. Somehow, I think that was how she felt. I think she felt guilty, like she had to stick with him after he gave up so much for her, but...but if Loke flirted around when he was with Naomi, and if she was heartbroken by it, maybe...maybe she abandoned him because...maybe...she hated him," she whispered, as if admitting that was confessing a feeling deep within herself. "Maybe she actually wanted a reason to be free of him. And that makes me wonder: what do I want? So many women in the guild have asked why I don't insist on Loke marrying me, and it makes me ask myself: do I even want that sort of lifelong commitment? Do I want him as my one-and-only? And I...I just don't know! Why don't I know, Gray?" she demanded, looking up at him desperately.

He hushed her and pulled her in closer. She laid her head against his bare chest and cried freely. Gray stayed quiet and kept stroking down her long, blonde hair. He let her sob, and he tried not to feel too awkward. He wished he could remove all of her doubts, but he knew that something like that could only be done by Loke himself.

Slowly, uncertainly, Lucy's fingers began to trace the guild symbol on his chest. The ache in her heart grew tighter, and dark feelings threatened to rise up. Knowing she would regret it, Lucy still whispered what she honestly felt.

"Why didn't you make the first move, Gray?"

His chest throbbed at her whisper, and his stomach felt like it plummeted. Although spoken softly, that hesitant question rang through the room as loudly as a roar. Gray had no clue how to respond or even what to do. He completely froze, too scared that a slight touch or breath would trigger something they would both regret.

Still leaning against his chest, Lucy heard his heart racing and smiled sadly. At least he was not taking advantage of her momentary weakness. For that, she was glad, although a guilty part of her wanted to be kissed. Slowly and with a faint blush, she pulled away.

"Sorry," she laughed with a snuffle, and she wiped her large brown eyes. "I'm not getting enough sleep. I'm saying crazy things. Just forget it."

"Lucy," he sighed, but Gray had no clue what to say. He wanted to reach out to her, but he felt like he would be betraying the trust Loke had in him if he did anything. His sense of honor prevented him from embracing her.

"You should go back to Natsu. I'll try to get a little sleep." She went to the bed she had made up on the couch to be near Luke's cradle and laid down.

Gray pulled a chair over to her couch and sat down on it. "You need a solid night of sleep. I'll stay here in case the baby wakes up."

She smiled in thanks and closed her eyes, ready to dismiss the whole night as nothing more than a bad dream. Gray watched her in the moonlight. Hesitantly, he stretched over to her head and stroked her forehead gently. Lucy hummed in happiness, and the tension in her face melted away. Gray could not help but smile at how she looked in the dark, how the moon lit up her hair, and how the shadows played on her smooth face. After a few minutes, Lucy's breathing went deeper, and her mouth opened slightly in peaceful sleep.
"I'm sorry I hesitated," Gray finally confessed in a whisper so soft, it would not wake her up. "I knew you liked Loke, so I waited to see what you would do. You made your choice, Lucy. I'll always respect that." He leaned over and gave her a gentle kiss on the lips.

Lucy smiled in her sleep. "Loke..."

Gray felt a stab to his heart at her muttered word, but it proved to him that what Lucy truly needed was not him, but to have Loke again. "I'll fight to get him back, Lucy, I swear! If you can look him in the eyes and tell him you don't want him anymore...but I don't think you can do that," he admitted to himself. "However it goes when he's back, whichever path you choose, I'll support you."

Gray leaned over in his chair until his head was on the couch's armrest. He watched Lucy's face and smiled.

"Pleasant dreams."

**End of Chapter 35**

Chapter End Notes

_AmaiTsukii-chan drew a cute fanart for me on DeviantArt. Check it out: [http://fav.me/d4rpl7h](http://fav.me/d4rpl7h)_

This story is available in **French** and **Portuguese**. If you feel brave and want to translate "Lion's Pride," I would absolutely love it! Just please let me know so I can approve it and link to you. If any talented artists want to draw a picture for me, I'll link to it in the story and on my profile. You guys are awesome!
Finally, one day had passed in the Spirit World. The courtroom was once again packed with creatures of all shapes and sizes, some humanoid in features, some more like animals, while others looked like utensils with eyes and a mouth. They talked to one another in low voices, greeting friends they rarely got to see, laughing with teammates who had the same owner, while all around numerous cone-nosed Nikora creatures of every style played pranks or danced in funny little troupes. Then a loud gong rang from Horologium. It was time for the trial to begin. Everyone rushed to their seats as the Spirit King entered and sat behind the massive desk where Libra was already sitting.

A side door creaked open. Leo was brought in cuffed and under guard. His face was slack, his hair drooped, his clothes wrinkled and a little dirty, but the most shocking thing were his eyes. They always twinkled with flirtatious joy here in the Spirit World, but now those shaded eyes were dull, lacking their proud sheen, as if all the life had been siphoned out. Everyone present saw immediately that the noble Lion was suffering from being imprisoned in the Spirit World far worse than a Celestial Spirit normally suffered when trapped in the Human World.

"Maybe it's better for him to go," a few whispered amongst themselves.

"It's all that Human's fault," a female muttered in hatred. "She should die for doing this to Leo-sama!"

"No, it shows how much Leo-sama loves her," another female admirer whispered.

Libra frowned at seeing him. "Leo, you look like you've lost weight."

He shot a glaring scowl at her but said nothing. His feet dragged as he took his stand before the Spirit King and Libra. This time, Leo said nothing as Libra began the proceedings with a long list of mandatory references. His face stayed slack, his green eyes hollow, his breathing slow and steady like a person half asleep.

"Have you anything to say, Leo?" the Spirit King asked, his red eyes glowing at him.

"Please." Slowly, as if every joint in his body ached, Leo knelt down, set his hands flat in front of him, and lowered his face to the ground. Female Spirits cried. Male Spirits protested that the mighty Lion should never do such a humbling gesture. "Please!" he said firmer, silencing them all. "I'll do anything. It may only have been a day to us, but I just missed three months of watching my son grow up. He's talking for sure, probably walking and running all over the place. He's probably forgotten me. So please, I beg of you … whatever I must do to be sent back, I will. Just don't keep me trapped here another day. I … don't think I could live," he shivered. "This is killing me inside, so please … just let me go back to her, if only for one day."

The Spirit King hummed deeply, almost a sigh. "I pity Lucy and you both. I didn't want to torment you this much, old friend. To escape punishment of this magnitude, there is only one way to maintain
judicial balance. The prisoner must perform a task of equal magnitude."

"I'll do it, if it means I can be with Lucy," he whispered, face still to the ground.

"The task itself will be simple, but the magnitude is equal to your own sin. There is a threat residing in the Human World, a creature that is neither Human nor Spirit, and yet belongs in both worlds."

Leo looked up sharply at that, and his face was pale in horror. His mouth opened, wanting to protest already, except his brain refused to believe this was true. He had to hear more. He needed to know … this wasn't happening!

The next sentence dashed all hopes away. "You must go into the Human World, retrieve the half-breed child known as Luke Regulus Heartfilia, and bring him back to the Spirit World."

"B-bring him back?" he asked in surprise.

"He is half Spirit. In flesh and blood he is Human, yet his magic originates with the Spirit World. Although it'll take longer, his magic and vitality will drain out in that world, and there is nothing we can do to stop it. His life in the Human World is dangerous. However, here in the Spirit World, we can keep him safe if he wears the Spirit Garments. We can contain and heal his rapidly growing body better than Humans can. If he remains in the Human World, his mind and his magic may be corrupted … like what happened to Zeref."

"He is not lying," Libra told Leo. "We spent an entire day researching the very depths of the archives. If Luke remains with the Humans, he will not only suffer, but his chance for corruption is almost guaranteed, if he even survives into adulthood. Zeref fell under a dark curse. That curse kept him alive in the Human World, but produced unstoppable death around him. A life for a life. Your son may be faced with no other choice but that sort of curse if he wishes to stay alive in the Human World."

The Lion knew Libra was incapable of lying. If she said this was so, then it had to be the truth. "I … see." No, he didn't see! His whole soul protested against it. Still, it explained Zeref's condition, and what little magic Luke had displayed was definitely more like Loke's own magic. "Can Lucy come, too?"

"No. I'm sorry, old friend, but I cannot allow her another visit, not for a while. Even wearing the Spirit Garments, that much exposure to the Spirit World would be unsafe for a Human."

"So, how long does Luke have to be here? Because like I've said before, even a single day…"

"Until he is grown. When he is of age, we can give him the choice to become Human entirely, or officially make him a Celestial Spirit; however, that is something we can only do when he is a legal adult. Possibly, like you, he will be able to pass through a gate on his own, and since he is half Human, he could survive in the Human World for many months without a need to return. However, he will have to return here once in a while. He is eternally linked to the Spirit World, just as you are."

Loke felt his heart drop. "But … but then Lucy would miss out on seeing him grow up. That's unfair to her."

"That is the condition for your release," the Spirit King pronounced. "Whether you accept it or not, the child must be brought to the Spirit World for his own safety. And for ours! We can't afford another dark mage like Zeref to threaten both Humans and Spirits."

"So you mean I don't even have a choice anymore?" he shouted.
"Your son is unstable," Libra explained. "It will start with nightmares, then pain. With the agony will come dark thoughts and hatred. Here, he'll find stability, the nightmares can be controlled, the pain eased, and he will grow normally without the influence of dark forces. This is your own child, Leo," Libra implored, "so his health and safety are your concern, too."

"Old friend," the Spirit King sighed contritely. "I wished only to find a way to save you. I never expected to find something as dark or as dangerous as this. Had I known a half-Spirit would face such difficulties, I would have warned you and Lucy from the start." The Spirit King had a severe scowl. "This is likely why the Royal Stars ordered me to forbid another half-breed child."

Leo gawked. "They ordered you?"

The Spirit King nodded dourly. "At least we now know and can take measures to heal him. You are the best person to do this," he said solemnly. "You know Lucy best. You can explain it in a way she will understand. She trusts you."

"True," Leo muttered, "but this will crush Lucy and likely destroy our relationship forever."

"Then you have a choice: your love for Lucy, or your son's life. We will not kill the child, even if he is already beyond help. However, the Humans are not so forgiving. If he grows up to be twisted, there is no knowing what the Humans may do to him. You know very well what they did to Zeref when they caught him."

Leo gritted his teeth and looked away at the odious memory.

"At least in the Spirit World, we can heal his soul. We can even take away all of his magic if it is too late to save him. However, we must hurry. I give you two days, half a Human year. If you fail, I will personally bring both you and the child back here, and you will not be allowed to leave again until you fall under a new contract."

"Don't have much of a choice then, do I?" Leo grumbled. "Fine! But on one condition. The moment it's safe for Lucy to return to the Spirit World, I want her to be allowed to visit. She deserves at least that. And if it's at all safe for Luke to return, if only for a day, that will be allowed, too."

Libra hummed while she considered these stipulations. "We'll have to monitor the health of both mother and child, but there shouldn't be a problem with occasional visits."

"Very well," the Spirit King boomed. "Bring the child back, and tell Lucy … I'm sorry. I truly did not wish to do this to her. May the stars guild you."

Leo turned away. "The stars abandoned me long ago."

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**A Port Town a Few Leagues from Hoshinoue Island**

"Hurry, Natsu," Levy called out cheerfully.

Erza glanced back over her shoulder at the lager. "He needs time to convince himself he won't die."

"I'm gonna diiiie!" Natsu moaned, turning green as he looked at the ship they needed to take to get to the island. "Can't I just swim there?"

"You're such a loser," Gray teased. "You managed to travel on a train for three months, but you can't ride on a boat for three hours?" He took Lucy's hand and helped her aboard. "Are you okay?" he asked her softly.
She smiled and nodded, but Luke was noticeably more cranky that morning. "He slept badly and woke up with a headache, but maybe the fresh air will do both of us some good." She began to walk but paused and looked back at him. "Gray, thanks for staying around last night. I haven't gotten more than five hours of solid sleep since we left Magnolia."

"Then maybe I should sleep with you more often."

Erza loomed up behind him and spoke in a threatening rumble. "What was that?"

Both Gray and Lucy cringed at her dark aura. "Sl-Sleep ... beside you ... I mean," Gray tried again when Erza looked even more furious. "Sleep ... in the same room ... or maybe sleep with Luke in my room so you get a night off." He managed to fight his instinctual fear of the Titania and snapped back as loudly as he dared, "I didn't mean I slept with her. Sheesh, Erza!"

"I'm merely making sure Lucy's reputation is not tarnished," the redhead said stoically. "You should watch how you say things. People could get the wrong impression."

"Wendyyyy," Natsu moaned. "Cast Troia on me."

"But Natsu," the girl pouted, "the ride is only three hours. It'd be a waste of the spell. We still have to get back to Fiore."

"Happyyy," he groaned. "Carry me the whole way."

The blue cat was about to tell him Aye, but a burly sailor walked by. Erza had warned Happy not to give away that he could walk and talk, especially since sailors tended to be highly superstitious. The poor Exceed looked frustrated, gazed up at Natsu, and replied in a wry tone: "Nyaaa!" His totally fake meow made Lucy giggle.

"Weigh anchor!" a sailor yelled.

Wendy hurried up the gangplank with Charle in her arms, wrapped up in a blanket to shield her modesty. Erza threw Natsu over her shoulder and carried him aboard. The sails billowed out, the tide took them away, and the group from Fairy Tail began the last leg of their quest.

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**Back in Magnolia**

The Fairy Tail Guild fell silent as the doors opened and a familiar person stepped in.

"Loke!" Cana cried out in shock.

He looked around. He saw that there were injuries: Lisanna was in a cast, Mira had a nearly-healed black eye, Nab had bandages around his head. To him, it had been only a day since he last saw these friends, yet the drawn out time here in the Human World showed. Laki's hair was a little longer. Romeo was a little taller, ready to hit a growth spurt. One of the newer members whose name he could not recall had grown a full beard during those three months. If there were this many changes to adults, he wondered how drastically his tiny son had changed.

"Where's Lucy?"

They all heard the weariness in his voice, as if he had been tortured and newly released. In Loke's mind, that was fairly close to the truth.

Makarov stepped forward, and Loke saw that the old man had also changed, his mustache longer, his
wrinkles deeper. "She left three months ago to find a way to free you."

Loke realized he should have known. That meant when Capricorn was called in the middle of the trial, the reason Luke was with Lucy was because they were in the midst of traveling to Kohinur.

"There's a woman and fishman after her," Cana told him.

Loke paled at that. Suddenly, the injuries to the guild made sense. "Dammit!" he growled, and he vanished with a flash.

The guild members looked back and forth to each other with worried expressions.

Laxus scoffed loudly from his seat in the corner as he smoked a cigar. "Well, that's the fastest 'hello/goodbye' ever!"

Mira's azure eyes glared at him. "It's your fault those evil people are chasing after Lucy now."

"What was that?" he shouted with a gangster's glare. "You're never gonna leave that alone, will you?"

"No," she said snappishly, and she swirled away from the bar to escape in the back rooms.

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Just Outside the Kohinurian Port Town

There was a purple blip, and suddenly a regal woman with long, raven hair stood atop a hill. Below her, the ocean shimmered sapphire with glittery diamond crests. Fishing boats sat in a harbor, while some larger ships were sailing in or heading out into the open seas. A tiny fishing village had sprung up around the idyllic half-moon bay, just a collection of wooden buildings and docks for the ships that brought in fish, island spices, and did trade with distant countries. Kefira put her lengthy sleeve up to her nose to block out the reek of fish.

"Is this it?" she said with disdain.

"It hath been an age since I bothered to come this far south in Kohinur. I never knew my kingdom had such balmy climates. Let's hurry. I do not like the heat." She trotted down the hill toward a main cart road.

The Spirit fishman hesitated. He watched a ship already on the horizon, white sails billowed as it caught the trade wind. With his ability to sense other Celestial Spirits, he knew the son of Leo the Lion was on that ship.

"Find the key quickly, Lucy," he whispered. "Free him before it's too late."

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On Hoshinoue Island

Loke stood on a sandy bluff looking out from Hoshinoue Island toward the faint purple and gray haze that marked mainland Kohinur. Raucous white gulls soared overhead. Long-nosed sandpipers raced along the shore, darting out when waves ebbed to peck in the sand, only to scurry back as the waves surged in. Palms swayed in the salty breeze that stirred Loke's suit coat and fluttered his orange hair.
"I thought I'd never see this place again," he muttered, gazing around nostalgically. "Hoshinoue: the Isle Above the Stars. If I know you, Lucy, you'll find your way here eventually. I'll wait for you."

End of Chapter 36

Chapter End Notes

This can only end badly. By the way, Libra is incapable of lying. This isn't a scheme. Luke was having nightmares last chapter, and now he woke up with his head hurting. It means the process has already begun.
"Woman, hold me close to your heart. However distant, don't keep us apart. After all, it is written in the stars." - John Lennon

Due to superstitious feelings, the ship Lucy's group boarded did not take them all the way to the island. The crew moored in a bay and told them they had three days before they would be back from the neighboring islands, gathering spices for the seaside markets, then they would return to get them. After a too-formal farewell from the captain that sounded more like what one might say to a man heading to the gallows, they were lowered on a rowboat and abandoned to what the sailors were certain was a doomed fate on the cursed Hoshinoue Island.

Gray and Erza rowed; Levy stood on the prow watching for the treacherous rocks that made approaching the island a hazard; Wendy used a pole to push the boat if any rocks sneak up on them too suddenly to steer with just the paddles; Natsu hung off the edge vomiting; while Lucy and the two Exceeds sat at the stern with their supplies, enough food for three days, and equipment for exploring.

The tiny boat gently crunched into the wet sand on the shore. Gray heaved the rowboat up out of the way of the high tide while Erza and Lucy dragged Natsu onto the beach. One girl grabbed each arm, tugging him along until he got his bearings and could walk on his own. With the boat on shore and supplies on their backs, they trekked farther inland, following a freshwater stream that flowed out to the sea. Not far in, they came to an area with soft ground, shady palm trees, and berry bushes to supplement their food. They set up camp and stored their supplies in tents. They then broke into two groups to explore. Levy, Erza, and Wendy went east. Lucy, Gray, and Natsu went west. Charle and Happy flew around the interior of the island, searching for anything suspicious from the sky.

Gray led their party. "The map showed a rock cropping with a cave this way," he said, shading his eyes against the bright glare off the ocean. "If I were to hide something, a cave would make the best place."

"That aligns with the story," Lucy realized. "He put his heart in a magic box and hid the box in a cave on a far southern island, so no one under the stars would find it." She squeezed Loke's ring, which hung from a silver necklace. Luke was seated in a baby backpack and played with her blue ribbon. At her heels, Proto stood ready to protect the baby from anything this exotic island had to offer.

Natsu cracked his knuckles. "Let's go," he said firmly, and Lucy nodded with determination.

They set out over the sand and followed the coast. Two hours later, they found the rock cropping. Instead of a natural cave with rough edges, the dark hole was obviously carved, with symbols etched into blocks of stone that supported the entrance. There were signs of a road leading to the cave, now cracked and worn nearly to nothing. Flowers and grass hid the stones, spreading them further apart with their stubborn roots.

"Definitely suspicious," Gray muttered.
Luke squirmed in his seat in the baby backpack. "Mama, head owwie."

Natsu came up behind her to rub the little boy's blond and orange hair in sympathy.

"Should we signal the others?" asked Lucy.

"Don't bother," thudded a voice.

They jolted, and Lucy gasped with a huge smile. From within the dark entrance, sharp heels clicked over stone and a familiar silhouette stepped out. The figure exited the cave, and the sun shone on orange hair.

"Loke!" she cried out ecstatically and ran to him.

"Thank God you're okay," Gray said in relief.

Natsu grinned. "Awesome! I knew you'd be back."

Loke grabbed Lucy and gave her a long kiss. "I was so worried about you," he sighed, pawing her face. "No troubles getting here?"

"Not many," she said with a shrugged, too happy to be bothered with that. "Are you okay?"

His eyes shined as he gazed down at her with a joyous smile. "I am now."


Loke's face dropped for a moment. "Dear heavens … Luke?" He grabbed him up out of the pack and swung him into the air, getting the boy to squeal. "Look at you, my little man! You got so big. Oh, thank the stars you remember me!" He squeezed him tightly and nuzzled into short, spiky hair. "It's not fair. He grew up so fast."

"He can walk a little bit."

"He can?" Loke smiled in astonishment, then looked sad. "I missed it, his first step."

"I wrote about it in the mother's journal Freed gave me. I've been keeping accounts of everything for you. And he has a talent for art. You've gotta see the 'grown-up kitty' he drew."

Loke's eyes closed with overwhelming emotions. "I didn't want to stay away this long," he apologized.

"Virgo told me. It's cruel of the Spirit King to detain you for no good reason," she said with a pout. "At least you're here now."

Gray smiled, happy to see how overwhelmed he was. "It's good to have you back." Loke still looked torn, and the expression worried the ice mage. "You … are back, aren't you?"

Lucy's eyes went huge. A slight feeling of panic struck her chest, making it hard to breathe. "Is the trial over?"

Loke did not move for a while, holding Luke tightly against him while stress wrinkled his forehead. After a long pause, he shook his head. "Lucy…" He reluctantly pulled Luke away and returned him
into his backpack. "Give me my ring back."

"Huh? Oh … r-right," she muttered. His cold tone disturbed her. Still, she unclasp the necklace and took the ring off.

"Lucy, wait," Gray warned, sensing something was wrong.

She handed it over. "Even if the trial isn't over, you can find the Regulus Key on your own now. Then we don't have to worry about anything. You know where it is, right?"

"I do." Loke placed the ring back on and tightened his fist. "But I'm not going to get it yet."

Lucy's mouth dropped. Gray sneered; he saw the look in Loke's eyes, and he did not like it. Natsu also sensed something was wrong and moved in closer to Lucy.

"W-Why aren't you going to get the key?" she asked in a shaky voice. "We're right here. We're so close! The Key to the Heart of the Lion is here."

"If you want to seek it, you can. It might help us later, but…" He hesitated in worry. "There's something I have to do first, and you're not going to like it. After I tell you…" His face went sad with regret. "…you might not want to use that key, or even see me again."

Now even Lucy saw something was definitely wrong. "Did the trial go badly?"

Loke's eyes were on Luke. The baby grinned happily to see his father again, but that carefree face felt like acid to the Lion's chest. "The Spirit King gave me an ultimatum, something I simply can't afford to refuse. I can be forgiven of all my sins, keep my magic, and continue living however I please, on one condition: bring Luke back to the Spirit World."

"What?" Lucy immediately pulled away as if Loke might grab Luke from her and vanish with him. "For how long?"

Loke sighed miserably. Her horrified face made his chest ache. "I don't know. Probably a while."

She pouted stubbornly. "Tell him no. If he banishes you and makes you Human, then we can live a nice, simple life. We'll grow old together."

Loke shook his head. "That's not possible anymore."

Gray tried to think levelly, but it was not easy. Every fiber of his being wanted to grab Lucy and get her out of there before Loke said something to truly crumble her happiness. "Does the Spirit King just need to inspect him and see for himself that he's a normal boy?"

"That's the problem: he's not a normal boy. He's half Celestial Spirit, and the Spirit King warned that, because of this, he needs to live half of his life in the Spirit World."

"Then he can live the later half," she yelled angrily.

"It doesn't work that way," Loke said regretfully. "Has he been getting nightmares? Has he been in pain?"

Lucy frowned at that.


Loke reached forward and stroked the boy's hair. "I'm sorry, Luke. Daddy just wants to make it
better."

Lucy glared bitterly. "Get your hands off of him," she hissed with shaking fury.

Loke's mouth dropped in shock. Lucy could be really scary when she was angry. He knew she would be furious but … well, he should have expected this. "I'm sorry, Lucy. We didn't know. No one knew about it until just now. The Spirit King was looking for a way to protect me, and instead he discovered a danger for half-Spirit people. Luckily, they learned about it before it was too late. Just like I can only live in this world for so long before I feel pain, and after a while I'll die, same with Luke. It'd take a longer time before the pain hits, but it's inevitable. As a baby, his endurance will be low and the effects more drastic. If his head hurts, then we don't have much time. First nightmares, then pain, then dark, evil thoughts. At his age, any darkness will severely affect the path of his magic. It's a critical time for a mage, and he must spend it somewhere where he's not in agony."

Lucy sniffled moistly. "Then … you came here … just to take him from me?"

Natsu felt furious to see Lucy ready to cry. "Can't you distract the Spirit King for just a year?"

"Natsu, you don't understand," Loke yelled. "His vitality is draining out in this world. He's slowly dying. Luke doesn't have a year left. Besides, the Spirit King wants him brought in within six Human months."

Lucy sneered at him, feeling bitter at such betrayal. "Isn't this the same Mustache-Man who kept you away from Naomi all because he said he had a vision? What if he takes Luke and doesn't free you? What if he never gives Luke back to us? How can you trust him?"

Loke dropped his head and let out a long, weary sigh. His face looked pained for a moment. "I have to. He is still my king and his rules, no matter how much I disagree with them, are the laws of the Spirit World. I … have to honor that," he admitted. "If I don't return with Luke before the trial restarts, the Spirit King will come himself to retrieve him, and I'll be punished harshly. Since you now know where the Regulus Key is hidden, I'll definitely face a death sentence."

Lucy turned away to hide her face and the tears that fell thickly. She had dreamed of the day when she could see Loke again, wanting so much to be in his arms and feel his hot kisses. Now he was here, and she felt ice cold despite the tropical summer sun. She shook her head as tears tumbled down her cheeks. "I just spent three months waiting for you. Now you want me to spend who-knows-how-long waiting for him? Why do I feel like the losing parent in a nasty divorce custody battle?" she grumbled. "You and I weren't even married, so why should you get full custody?"

"This isn't custody, Lucy," he argued sternly. "This is for his own well-being, to save his life."

"I don't believe that one bit!"

"Then at least it's for my own life. You know the Spirit King really will kill me." Loke took a moment to rein in his desperate anxiety. "I knew this wasn't going to be easy, but please believe me, it's for his own good." He stepped up to her, but his hand landed on the baby instead, silently apologizing to Luke that he had to witness a fight between his parents. "Think of it as sending your child to boarding school. He'll be gone for a while, but he can come back. It won't be forever."

"How long?" Natsu demanded.

"I … I don't know," Loke admitted worriedly. "Might be a couple weeks, for all I know."

"You know it won't be a couple weeks," Gray accused. "How many years?"
Loke let his shoulders drop. "He'll be allowed back for visits, and when it's safe, you can come to the Spirit World to visit him."

"But when can he come back on his own?" Gray yelled. "When can he stay here?"

Loke's eyes narrowed at him for making this even harder. If he could just explain it all calmly to Lucy, he was sure she would understand that it was for their child's safety. "In all likeliness, he'll never be able to stay in either world permanently. His vitality drains here, but his life is threatened there. The Celestial Clothes will help for a little while, but he'll have to balance his time in both worlds. When he's an adult by Spirit World law, he will be given a choice to either be a Human and remove his magic so it can no longer endanger him, or be inducted as a Celestial Spirit."

She looked back at him from over her shoulder. Her huge eyes were bloodshot and watery with sadness. "How old is that?"

"Incredibly young, actually. Only ten years old, according to the ancient laws. We rarely had to actually invoke an age law, but it's still written in the books."

"Ten years?" she asked. "A single day in the Spirit World is three months here. If he has to grow up … if even ten years must pass…"

"Ten years to us is nine hundred years to Humans," Loke muttered sadly.

"No way!" shouted Natsu.

Gray thought it over. "Nine hundred and twelve, actually."

Natsu glared at the ice mage. "That's not what I mean. You can't do this, Loke. Ten years to you is nine hundred to us? So what is ten years for us like for you?"

"Forty days," Gray answered.

"So distract him for forty days!" the dragon slayer bellowed.

"Luke might die in the Human World before the year is over!" Loke shouted angrily. "Do you want that, Natsu? Do you want to keep him here and watch him suffer? Even if he survived the agony, he could be twisted for life. I sure as hell don't want that to happen again!"

"Just because it happened to Zeref doesn't mean it'll happen to Luke," Natsu yelled back.

Luke began to cry from all the yelling and covered his ears. "Mommy, head owwie. Noisy."

Proto glared up at all four of them. "Luke is in danger of a migraine. Please lower the volume of your voices."

"He's already in pain," Loke pointed out. "We can't wait much longer. A normal Spirit can die after just a week in the Human World. He's lucky he's managed to last nine months."

"But ten years…"

"It won't even be that long," Loke protested. "He's growing at three times the speed, he's already the size of a two year old … so eight more years, at three times the growth rate…"

"He'll be physically ten years old in two years and eight months," Gray answered.

"But even then," Natsu argued, "two years and eight months for a Spirit would be…"
"Two hundred and forty years for Humans."

"Do you have a calculator in your head, droopy eyes?" Natsu exclaimed at Gray's quick answers. "I'm simply good in math, flame-brain."

"Spirits grow up very fast," Loke said, feeling desperate now. Knowing the math was making this even harder. "It's why I was worried about him going to the Spirit World. Instead of two years, maybe it'll take half a year."

"For you, yes," Lucy shouted. "For me, that's still half my life!" She rubbed out her forehead, mostly because she did not want him to see her crying. "Loke," she said direly. "Look around you. We're here now, on that island where you hid your other key. I figured out where it is. All I need to do is find where you hid it, then we'll be free from the Spirit King's unfair laws and absurd ultimatums."

"The clue was in Naomi's story, The Heartless Lion." Loke took a sweeping glance. "Yes, Hoshinoue Island," he said, frowning slightly. "Damn, the war really destroyed it! That's why the locals avoid it. We fought and captured Zeref here. We had to act fast because I feared he would find the Regulus Key. He either didn't know it was here, or he was protecting it. I never got to ask him, why this island? I'm honestly shocked you discovered it so quickly when no one in four hundred years has come close."

"The clue was in Naomi's story, The Heartless Lion."

She folded her arms stubbornly. "You were the one who told me to find it."

"I know I did!" he shouted. "And ... and part of me wants you to get it. But if you do, the whole Spirit World will go into war."

"You're only a key owner! It's not your home that will be turned upside down," he shouted. "But if we had it—"

"Luke would still need to go to the Spirit World. There's no way to help that," Loke tried to explain, but he saw that all three of them looked unconvinced.

"Please, Loke, I beg of you ... don't make me choose between you and my son."

In anger, Loke yelled, "Would you rather we both die?"

"Hey!" Natsu warned. Both he and Gray stepped in front of Lucy as she turned away in tears.

Loke tried to look at her past their formidable shoulders. "Lucy, I honestly believe this is the right thing to do. Maybe this was Zeref's problem. Maybe he should have been raised in the Spirit World. We don't know. I ... I just don't know," he sighed and dropped his head until his orange mane fell into his face. "I wish I did, believe me. All I do know is that Zeref can live in the Human World only
because he was given a curse. Obviously, we're not going to curse our son."

"We'll find another way then," she protested.

Loke looked at her seriously. "We don't have time."

"How fast will he grow in the Spirit World?"

"Honestly," he said softly, "we don't know. There are occasions where Humans are made into Spirits, but they're usually full-grown. For a half-Spirit … we … we don't know."

"So you're turning against me like this, all on a wild guess?" she exclaimed.

"I'm not turning against you!" Loke shouted, looking pained. "I'm trying to protect our son. And it's not a wild guess. It was a warning found in an ancient tome … and it's the orders of my king," he said a little more firmly.

"Che!" Gray scoffed. "Your king can go to hell. Come on, Loke! Find another way, another solution, anything!"

"There is none. If there was, I would use it. This—having Luke grow up in the Spirit World—is the only and final solution to everything. My friends in the Spirit World were bending over backward trying to give me a legal excuse for a second chance, and this is it."

"Sorry," Gray sneered, "but I won't let you make Lucy cry anymore."

"This is not your concern, Gray," Loke shouted in frustration. "This is between me and Lucy, so butt out of it."

"Nope," Natsu said, folding his arms over his chest. "You made the two of us the godfathers. That means we're responsible for looking out for Luke's safety. That means this is very much our concern."

"It's a family issue!"

"And Lucy is our family."

"I'm trying to save Luke's life." Gray's voice raised just as loudly. "You're going off of a wild guess told to you by a guy you really can't trust."

"Just stop," Lucy muttered.

Gray looked back to her, worried by the quavering in her voice and the moistness of her sniffles. Her eyes turned to him, begging him to tell her what she should do. Loke might be right, it made sense that Luke might gain his vitality from the Spirit World, but … to give up her son…

Loke caught their shared glance. He saw Gray's eyes soften as he looked at her, and he saw Lucy look with what he mistook to be yearning. Slowly, a morbid thought took seed and grew in Loke's mind. His eyes narrowed at the two of them.

"It'd probably be easier on you both if I just went away, wouldn't it?"

Lucy jolted at the words that sounded heavy with bitterness and jealousy. She wanted to protest, but the grief had thickened her throat too much to speak.
"Shit," Loke whispered in a bitter hiss, rubbing his mouth as he felt like laughing and screaming at the same time. "Sometimes I can't believe how similar you and Naomi really are, barely waiting for the gate to shut on my ass before you hook up with someone else."

"What?" she asked in confusion, angry at his insinuations. Had something happened with his first wife? He never mentioned it to her before, and she never wanted to pry into that painful history.

"And you!" he sneered to Gray. Loke's gaze narrowed until it seemed like only his blue sunglasses held back the burning fury. "You probably hope the Spirit King does kill me so you can move in on her freely."

"No!" Gray protested, shocked he could even think that.

"After all I've put up with," Loke continued in growing jealousy. "Suffering for so long so I could stay by your side, being tortured in the Spirit World because I dared to fall in love with a Human! And all I ask…" He stopped and tried desperately to regain control over his emotions. "All I ask is that you let our son grow up in the Spirit World to keep him safe."

Gray's anger had reached its limit. "You shut up about sacrifices and suffering! 'Oh woe is me, I went through a little pain.' How much do you think Lucy has suffered?" he shouted. "You spent, what, barely one day in the Spirit World? She spent months alone and crying. I won't let you make her cry again."

"I thought we were partners, Gray," Loke accused acridly.

Gray glared hard. "Partners? All I see right now is someone threatening my friend. I won't allow you to take Luke away from her."

"Stop it, you two," Lucy sobbed.

"Then you do want me to die," Loke yelled at Gray. "You've wanted me to die since the day you heard Lucy was pregnant. You stabbed me in the back with your ice that day, remember? So see," Loke laughed in wry anger. "You truly are a backstabbing sonuvabitch."

Gray stared coldly as Loke's fury turned into glowing light, magic lit up with the energy of emotion. "Natsu," he said softly, not even blinking as he kept an eye on Loke. "Take Lucy into the cave. Protect her. I'll deal with this traitor."

Natsu saw the determination in his friend-and-rival's face. "Got it," he said with a stern nod. He turned around to Lucy, and she buried her crying face into his white scarf. With hard eyes as he tried to work out how he felt about his two friends fighting, Natsu led her away.

Loke waited until Lucy was out of earshot. Then he let his anger boil over. "How long did you wait, Gray? I knew you had feelings for her, but I thought you were trustworthy. That's why I put her into your care. You bastard!"

Gray gritted his teeth tightly. "Loke, I am pissed and, honestly, immensely disappointed that you dare think that way. Do you trust Lucy so little? She has traveled halfway around the world all on a hope that she could rescue you, and right as we're on the cusp of doing that, you show up wanting to take her baby away. So who's the bastard?"

"Then swear to me you haven't touched her. Swear you haven't kissed her."

Gray was about to, but he hesitated just a moment. Suddenly, he remembered the previous night when he leaned over and gave Lucy a kiss in her sleep.
That hesitation and look of guilt was too much for Loke. "O Regulus, grant me your strength!" he gnashed.

"Loke, wait, you're mistaken!"

"Zenith of Regulus." The gold glow intensified around him. "Lion Brilliance!"

Gray quickly raised his hands. "Ice-Make: Shield!" A large barrier spread from his hands, but the intense light of the attack blinded his eyes. Gray shouted at the burning sensation, and his shield shattered.

"Ever heard of snow blindness?" Loke mocked.

Through the spots in his eyes, Gray saw swift movement. He barely managed to duck a golden punch, but then he felt his legs kicked out from under him. He fell hard on his back and scraped against the ancient stone pathway. Another punch smashed down on his stomach, knocking all air out. Gray felt as if his kidney might have ruptured with the blow.

"Ice-Make: Lance," he coughed out while aiming blindly. The golden glow leaped away and lessened. Gray blinked out the dancing spots in his eyes. "Bastard, using an attack like that to blind me."

"I knew you would use your shield, and Lion Brilliance can nearly blind a man on its own. Magnifying it with ice is just asking for trouble."

Gray rose back up to his feet. "I don't want to fight you, but you can't do this to Lucy. Asking her to give up her son … I can't believe you agreed to it. I thought you had decided to become Human."

"That's still an option, but it's not one I want anymore. Luke will die if I don't bring him back. If he really does need to live in the Spirit World, I should at least live with him. Now that Lucy has discovered the whereabouts of the Regulus Key, it solidifies my sin for telling her about it, tempting her, committing treason against the Spirit World by asking her to find it. Even as it is, I might not be forgiven for this."


"Dammit, don't you get it? It's because he'll die!"

"You don't know that. Some bastard monarch tells you and you just believed it?"

"Libra confirmed it. She can't lie or make mere guesses. Trust me, I didn't want to believe it either. I sure as hell wouldn't have if it was just the Spirit King saying so, yet Libra confirmed that Luke would waste away and die, just like any other Celestial Spirit trapped in the Human World."

"Then we'll find a way. You said you have six months, right? Give us six months! Maybe by then, you guys in the Spirit World can come up with a way for Luke to stay in this world."

"Do you think we'd have time for that?" Loke shouted. "It's only two days for the Spirits. You Humans think you have all the time in the world. Well, you don't! Your days fly by so quickly. I could take a nap, and you'll all be many weeks older. In one of my years, you'll all be dead. Your world rushes, rushes, rushes, so you Humans can't understand how it's like for us."

Gray's mouth dropped, stunned for a moment. Softly and with a sneer, he said, "That's the first time I've ever heard you talk about Humans that way, as if we're insects. Is that what you think?"
"Of course not," Loke sighed. "But you don't understand. In six months, Luke very well might be dead. He's in the second stage of vitality deprivation. This world is slowly killing him. I could take him to the Spirit World while you research it, and even if it takes you a year, it'd be as if only four days passed for Luke. Isn't that what's best for the child? Instead of months apart from his parents, he'd only be away from Lucy for mere days."

"Which means it's Lucy who has to suffer," Gray shouted. "You don't care, do you?"

"Of course I do," he growled, "but I'm doing what I have to for my son."

"While abandoning the woman who loves you."

"She picked you."

"No, she hasn't!" yelled Gray.

"You said you've kissed."

"Goddammit, I kissed her in her sleep, okay? It was wrong, I shouldn't have, she doesn't even know I did it." Gray fisted his hand and looked away. "Lucy hasn't given up on you, Loke. She's a loyal woman, but you're pushing her to the very limits of what a woman can endure. If you try this, you very well might lose her forever."

Loke looked down at the blue stone ring. "I'm aware of that." His fist tightened and began to glow. "It's a gamble I have to take to keep my son alive."

Gray posed ready for another round of fighting. "And I won't let you make her cry. You're right, I have feelings for her, but above all else, Lucy is my friend. You come here as if it's nothing. To you, you left Lucy a day ago. You don't care how desperately she's wanted to see you. You don't care how much she's missed you. You don't give one fucking scrap of care about how many nights she's cried, how hard it's been for her to raise Luke on her own, how happy she was to see you back after so long. You don't give a shit about her!"

"Of course I do!" Loke screamed furiously.

"If you did, you wouldn't have tried to steal her child away before you even properly told her hello. I can't see how she could ever love a heartless bastard like you." An ice sword formed in Gray's hands, and he stood squarely in front of the cave entrance. "I won't let you get close to her."

Loke stared hard at him for a long time. "Heartless?" he whispered, smirking at the irony. "You're right, I lost my Heart. It's here on this island, so close I can feel it. My first wife left me after I was imprisoned for a year. To me, it felt like merely four days. If I did have a remnant of a heart, it froze on that day. I thought Lucy had melted that iciness. Now here we are again, mere months since I left, and she's practically yours. After this, I bet she'll be in your bed before you can get back to Fiore."

Gray glowered. "Then you severely underestimate her love for you, and you sure as hell don't deserve it."

Loke's head dropped in surrender. "Maybe I don't. Maybe I've lost Lucy already," he said in a defeated, tired tone. Then his eyes flashed up with a stubborn gleam. "But I can still be the father Luke deserves. I will not lose my son. Before it's too late to save him, I will—one way or another—bring him back to the Spirit World to be healed. He is my son, my pride and joy! I will do everything in my power to save his life."

"Just give us a few months," Gray pleaded.
Loke bellowed back, "I can't sit back and watch him suffer! I know exactly how it feels to have your vitality leeched away. It's a feeling a Human like you can't comprehend, and I don't want my son to go through agony like that. He doesn't have much longer, and I have no more time to argue with you, Gray! If you won't listen to reason…" His arms stretched out to attack. "…then maybe you'll listen to this. *Regulus Impact!*"

A flaming lion of light shot out from his ring and roared toward Gray. The ice mage was hit hard, no chance to block or evade. He was shoved into the cave, all the way into a chamber of gold with runes carved into slabs of silver. Lucy and Natsu were nowhere in sight. He was glad they had gone on ahead. It meant they had not heard what he and Loke talked about.

"Ice-Make: Bazooka!" A huge launcher formed on his shoulder, and Gray blasted out an icy burst, aimed to pass through the cave opening. It hit Loke and shoved him up into a tree. Gray ran out of the golden anteroom, worried about caving it in and trapping his teammates. He shot another bazooka round, but Loke evaded it.

"Regulus Blast!"

Gray thought he had dodged, but the rush of glowing energy was more widely spread. It clipped him, but it was still enough to fling him backward into a bolder on the edge of the ocean. Getting hit by it felt almost exactly like the brute force of Natsu's Fire Dragon's Roar. He cringed at the pain stabbing through his body.

When Loke came in for a punch, Gray rolled fast to the side and evaded. The glowing fist hit the bolder Gray had been leaning against and left behind crumbling bits of stone. Gray countered with an ice-enforced punch. Loke evaded and fell back a step. Then he went for a leap and a swinging kick.

"I won't let you keep me from my son," he shouted. "I will *not* let what happened to Zeref happen to Luke, too. Upon my pride and my very existence, I will not lose another son!"

The kick hit Gray in the side. He cringed as he felt at least two ribs crack.

"Am I interrupting a reunion between ye two?"

Loke was about to go in for a punch to Gray's head that certainly would have rendered him unconscious for half a day. However, at that simpering voice, he leaped back and took on a defensive pose.

"Dear stars, not you!" he hissed.

Kefira stepped forward, her deep purple gown swaying like the palms that lined the sandy beach. Behind her, Haftorang smiled to see his old friend again.

"I know not why ye are fighting, but forgive me. I can't help but laugh and wonder how friends became foes." Her eyes glimmered with excitement. "Do continue. I miss the days when the Lion fought in the arena. I would love to see how thou hast improved over the centuries, my dear lover."

"Lover?" Gray shouted, swinging a glare at Loke.

Loke glared hard. "Kefira, you and I haven't been lovers in centuries, so shut the hell up!"

"My, my," she said while laughing softly. "I always loved how thy face looked when I surprised thee, Leo. Perhaps it would surprise thee even more if I told thee … I know how to keep thy son alive in this world."
Crap is going on in my life which will slow down my writing. If you're curious, I left a message here: YouTube Vid

Winry7405 is a psychic for guessing back in Chapter 35 that John Lennon's "Woman" fits Loke. And go ahead, call me a bastard for ending on a cliffhanger.

=^*o*^= "You're a bastard, Rhov!"

O_O "Happy!"

=^._.^= "Whaat? You said I could."

=-_- "Hmph!"
"A lion...is strongest among beasts, and turneth not away for any." - Proverbs 30:30

"You...you can help Luke stay alive in the Human World?" Loke felt a leap of hopefulness in his chest, but instant fear too. Such a promise surely came at a high price. "If you mean the curse placed upon Zeref, forget it!"

"Nay, not that," Kefira assured. "That was merely a prototype, a desperate attempt to save a boy with more than one foot already through Death's gate. It was Zeref himself who discovered a better means, something he could use should his children face similar problems. He had no progeny, but the research is still in his notes, which I can obtain...if thou wouldst help me in a small, insignificant matter."

"What?" Loke glared bitterly. He knew Kefira would never do anything without a steep price. She smiled, seeing that she at least had his attention. "The notes lie within a secret vault far under the palace of Kohinur Keep. To get inside, one must be of the ruling family. If you want me to get those notes, fulfill thine oath from ancient times. Help my clan reclaim that which is ours. Then I may enter Kohinur Keep freely, retrieve his books of research, and save thy son's life."

"My oath...?" Loke's brow tightened as his memory skimmed over promises from long, long ago. "You want me to fight a war for you. You want to overthrow the current government of Kohinur!"

"A small coup d'etat which would have minimal repercussions in thy new homeland of Fiore."

"Kohinur has been at peace for four hundred years," Loke argued. "Why should I destroy that?"

"It would continue to be at peace, I swear it. Kohinur and Fiore were allies in ages past. It was thy duty to help us maintain that balance of power. I would be willing to forgive thee of thy sin, free thee of thy former duty, and as a show of my goodwill, save thy child. All I request is thy strength. Thy full strength," she corrected with a smirk.

Loke shook his head. "I won't call back Regulus. The ancient promise was that we were not to call them back unless the need was dire."

"And was it not thine own decision to determine what constituted a dire need? The Spirit World is rotting from within, the new king hath threatened the existence of the former king, and his demands shall destroy the first happy coupling between Human and Spirit in centuries. I witnessed thine argument with Lady Lucy. As a woman, I warn thee: push this point and take away her child, and she shall never in her lifetime forgive thee! Is this not indeed dire?"

"Leo," Haftorang said ingratiatingly. "Please consider more than just your own problems. If you are dissatisfied with the slow decay of the Spirit World, don't you think many others are as well?"

Loke shouted, "Then it's up to the Celestial Spirits to change that world! It's not reason enough to call back the Royal Stars. A single life—even my own or that of my son—is not enough to break..."
such a solemn promise to a friend."

Haftorang looked angry now. "If the Spirit World loses the Lion, it truly would be a disaster beyond any in recent memory. Someone like me can be banished and no one would care, but someone like you, my king..."

"Don't call me that!" Loke bellowed, looking pained by that old title.

Haftorang managed to keep his face neutral. "I'm not the only one who sees you as the true King of the Heavens. I was merely the only one loyal enough to do something about it...old friend."

Loke stubbornly shook his head. "As a Celestial Spirit, my promises are my pride. I promised Regulus that I wouldn't call the Royal Stars back unless the Spirit World was threatened and I had no other choice. To break that promise just because some outdated monarch wants her palace and prestige back...even if it's for my son..." He looked over to Gray. "Am I wrong in feeling this way?"

Gray rubbed out the pain from one of his cracked ribs. "I can't say I understand all of this since I'm not a Celestial Spirit, and I'm not completely sure what the Royal Stars are besides what Lucy and Levy have said. Still, if you made a promise to a friend, then the right thing to do is to keep that promise."

"Even if it means I have to take Luke away from Lucy?"

"It was still a promise. These people are still the enemies. I'm just trying to protect Lucy, but right now..." He glared at the two foes. "...we have a bigger problem, don't we?"

Loke eyed Kefira and Haftorang with a worried expression. "I can't beat them on my own, Gray," he said softly so the other two would not hear. "Haftorang's magic is water-based. Your ice should work well against that. But Kefira's magic is what modern people call Lost Magic, and she knows dragon slayer techniques, amongst many other highly destructive forms of magic."

"I remember the fight at the run-down fort," Gray muttered. "She has that Leviathan ability, she knows Arc of Time, and she can summon demons."

"She wasn't even fighting seriously," Loke muttered. "I'll delay her, but I'm not sure I can defeat her."

"Then I'll take on the fish."

"Stop him quickly, Gray...before he changes."

"Into what?"

Loke glared at the Southern Fish. "Into Fomalhaut, the Royal Star of the Southern Sky."

Gray's mouth dropped. "Wait, are you saying that fishman is a Royal Star?"

"He's merged with one. That makes him more powerful than me. If he changes, there's not a mage in this world that can stand up against him. You have to defeat him, freeze him, knock him out, something, before that happens."

Gray glanced over to him as Loke held his wrist in preparation for combat. "Can I trust you?" he asked in full seriousness.

Loke smiled over at him. "We're still friends. I'm just trying to protect Lucy."
"Do you still love her?"

A light blush spread over Loke's cheeks. "I will for all eternity."

Gray smiled to see that happiness. He knew any feelings he had for Lucy paled in comparison to the depth of love Loke felt for the woman who saved his life. Then he gave Loke a little smirk. "You have shitty timing, you know that? You should've waited before hitting Lucy with crap like taking away her son. At least enjoy the reunion for a couple days."

"You're right, I wasn't thinking straight," Loke admitted. "Hearing that my son might die...any father would panic."

"And any mother would fight viciously to protect her kid."

"True. It shows Lucy makes a great mother, and part of me is glad. Another part of me feels the urgency to save Luke before it's too late. Perhaps I wanted it over with too fast. No one's perfect."

"I still won't let you take Luke away for a few hundred years. That's absurd! But we'll settle it after we're done here. Partners again?"

Loke smiled gratefully and bumped fists with Gray. "Partners!"

"Are ye done planning?" Kefira asked in a droll voice. "I hope ye don't think ye can fight us. Just two opponents? It shan't last long enough for me to enjoy myself."

"We'll see about that." Gray glared as a blue magic circle formed in his hands. "Let's protect Lucy."

Lucy realized this definitely was not a cave; it was some sort of underground palace. The first few rooms she and Natsu passed through were built of gold, silver, copper, and precious gems embedded into the walls. Balls of lacrima floated on the ceiling and lit up as soon as someone entered a room. Ancient writing had been carved into walls and giant pillars that held up the ceiling. Lucy did not recognize the symbols, but she was sure Levy would love to study them. She wondered if this had been a temple or tomb.

Every new room was a few steps lower than the previous. Then they came to a room with multiple exits. Lucy paused in the golden room and looked at the three possible paths.

"I have no clue where we're even heading," she admitted.

"Mama!" From his seat in the baby backpack, Luke pointed past her face and straight ahead. "Dat one."

"That one?"

"Yah! Dere. We go dere."

She recalled what Hibiki said, that it would be her son who could find the Regulus Key. She went with his instinct and picked that route.

As they continued on and downward, the rooms became different. First they changed to a plaster surface rather than gold, and artwork was painted on them, scenes of armies and fights. One room was different. There was an obvious bed, although the mattress had rotted away centuries ago. The plaster walls were painted dark blue with white, yellow, blue, and red dots showings an accurate depiction of the night sky, all the constellations in their places. As she stood in the center and looked
up, she realized something.

"This constellation," she pointed to the apex. "It's Leo. We must be on the right path."

"But there's no exit," Natsu said, glancing around. "Ooh, maybe it's a secret passage and we have to hit the right book or vase."

"There's nothing in this room but that bed," Lucy muttered. No books, no vases or jugs, no furniture at all. "Maybe it's a magic incantation."

"Open sesame!" Natsu tried, but nothing happened. "Abracadabra! Hocus pocus? Bibbidi-bobbidy-boo?"

"Mama!" Luke cried out excitedly, and he stretched his hands to the ceiling. "Up, up!"

Lucy looked at the painted sky again and realized one star was not painted. The Heart of the Lion, Regulus, was in fact a ruby. "Natsu, can you press that?"

He had to leap a little, but he managed to tap it. He tried three times, hitting it harder and harder. "It won't budge."

"Mama!" Luke cried out in frustration. "Up! Me go up!"

"You?" She looked over at him and saw his brown eyes looking serious. "I guess we can try. Natsu, you'll need to lift me."

She pulled Luke out of the backpack and held him in her arms. Natsu grabbed Lucy around the waist and lifted her up.

"Uff! You gained weight, Lucy."

"Shut up!" she snapped. "I'm carrying a baby, that's why."

Proto watched and stood below, ready to catch. "This is a very dangerous situation for Luke to be in," he protested.

Once Natsu held her steady, she lifted Luke up to the ceiling. He reached his pudgy hand up and placed it over the ruby heart. His hand glowed golden, and Lucy sensed a similar magic to Loke's flowing through her son. Suddenly, the wall where the constellation of Aries was painted shifted and moved to the side with the sound of grinding stones.

"No way! Cool!" Natsu cheered. "It really is a secret passageway."

"Naomi's fairy tale was right. It truly does have to be a Celestial Spirit to find it," Lucy realized in awe. "And not only that, but someone with Loke's magic."

Natsu set Lucy down, and they continued on through the passage. The corridor was made of rough stone with pointy stalactites hanging down from a low ceiling like hundreds of daggers waiting to skewer them. The atmosphere felt damp, and Natsu kept sniffing with a look on his face that showed he did not like something in the air. After a long passage, the corridor opened to a massive cave. Natsu lit a flame in his hand and held it aloft to light the room.

"It's beautiful," Lucy said in awe.

Natsu's blaze lit up the limestone cavern into a rainbow of gentle colors, all blending one into another: violets, scarlets, azures, verdant hues of smooth rock that had formed over millions of years.
The stones reflected their kaleidoscopic beauty in a vast, glassy lake. In the center of the lake was a small island. A single stalactite and stalagmite stretched from island to ceiling with only a tiny opening between the two. It was hard to see from this distance, but there was definitely something between those two spikes glowing gently with magic.

"That must be it," Lucy whispered. "The Key to the Heart of the Lion." She began to walk toward it as if in a trance.

"Oi!" Natsu grabbed her arm and yanked her back. "Don't touch the water. It smells really horrible."

"He is right," said Proto. "Luke is in danger."

Natsu picked up a stone and tossed it into the lake. It hissed and steam rose as the rock melted.

"Acid!" Lucy gasped. "How do we reach the island?"

They searched around for a craft or another booby trap, but there was nothing around. Natsu tried some flame on the lake, but it let off a noxious fume.

"If there's no way to cross, how did Loke get the key to the island?" Lucy huffed after several minutes and no success.

"He's a Celestial Spirit," Natsu shrugged. "He just had to appear there, and he wouldn't have needed to worry about getting back to the shore because he could just poof back into the Spirit World."

Her eyes lit up. "Yes, of course! I could use my Spirits to help us."

Natsu frowned as she reached for her key chain. "Is that smart? I mean, you've spent the whole three months it took to get here not using your Spirit Keys because you were afraid they'd realize that we were heading to Kohinur."

"Yes, but we're underground, and since none of the Celestial Spirits know where the Regulus Key is hidden, none would recognize this place." She pulled out three Silver Keys and gripped them together. "I call upon the triple constellation: Carina the Keel, Puppis the Stern, and Vela the Sails. Unite and form thy true self. Open the Gate of the Argo Navis! Argo!"

Three puffs of smoke exploded above her. Three Celestial Spirits appeared and twirled together. With a bright flash, they combined into a huge ship with a mighty sail. On the prow was a figurehead of a maiden with long golden hair wearing a draping blue toga. She stretched with a yawn, then brushed some barnacles off her arms in annoyance. Across the hull was written the name Argo.

"Whoa! A transformer!" Natsu cried out.

Mercurial blue eyes flashed at him. "I am not a transformer. I," she said haughtily, "am Argo, the great ship of the heavens."

Lucy panted a little as she lowered the three Spirit Keys. "Argo is a bit of a challenge to normal Celestial Spirit mages because she involves calling out three Spirits simultaneously. They can't combine unless all three are summoned at the same time. They're only Silver Keys, but still...it can be tiring, and I'm out of practice," she said sheepishly.

Her exhaustion worried Natsu. "We're still stuck. That lake is acid. Even if it's a Celestial Spirit, that'll hurt it too badly."

Argo huffed disdainfully and turned her prow toward him. "I will tell you this only once, little man.
There is no substance I can't sail upon, even sand and solid rock. If I have to, I can even sail in the air."

"Cool!" Natsu laughed. "Bit of an attitude problem, though."

A gangplank lowered from the side of the ship and dropped down to the cave floor. "All aboard."

Lucy began to climb up the ramp with Luke and Proto, but Natsu hesitated. She looked back in confusion. "Not coming? I might need you over there."

"Uh...there's no way I can ride, too. I get sick with transportation."

"I am not mere transportation," the figurehead huffed proudly. "I am Argo."

"Argo is a friend," Lucy tried to reason. "It's like riding with Happy."

"Ah, I see," Natsu said thoughtfully. "That's altogether different."

Lucy sighed wearily as she sat against the railing encircling the ship. "I still don't see why you get sick when I have to carry you."

Natsu climbed onto Argo's deck, and the ship yelled at him for stomping. He immediately began climbing into the rigging, and Argo screamed at him to get down, then threatened to drop him overboard into the acid if he did not behave. After a minute of playing around, Natsu sat obediently perched right on top of the prow, which still annoyed the blond figurehead. Finally they set sail over the acidic lake.

During the gentle ride, Lucy felt the strain of calling upon three Celestial Spirits. She kept quiet, not wanting to worry Natsu, but she realized she really was out of shape. Those three months of only calling upon Capricorn once had really done her harm, plus even before then, she had not needed to call upon her Spirits too often. Other than cleaning that hotel for Blue Pegasus, she had not been on a mission since August, before she learned she was pregnant. Now it was July, almost a full year.

Thinking about that made her think of Loke's words, his cold attitude, wanting to take Luke away. She bitterly admitted that she had feared something like this. After all, her son was half-Spirit, so it made sense that he would need the Spirit World as much as the Human World. However, she had always thought they could work out some balance. Loke did not need a long time in the Spirit World to recharge his vitality. Even if he stayed out for an entire day, just a few minutes or hours in the Spirit World was all it took to recover.

"Shouldn't it only take minutes?" she asked to herself.

Natsu looked over at her mumbling and hummed a question.

"Am I traveling too slowly?" asked Argo. She tugged at her toga, glaring at Natsu as if he might be using his position to stare down her clothes.

"Ah, no, not that," Lucy assured. "I was just thinking, with my son going back to the Spirit World, Loke said he would need to stay there until he's ten years old. Shouldn't it take only a few minutes to regain his vitality?"

"Oh, you mean the trial," Argo realized with a sad note. "I admit, I don't know many of the details. It was quite rare for a trial to be called, and even more rare for all of the Celestial Spirits to be gathered to witness it. That hasn't happened since...since...well, I'm not sure. Probably since the thirteen Ecliptic Zodiac Spirits were officially reduced to twelve and Ophiuchus' Gold Key was taken away."
"That huge metal-mouth snake?" Natsu gawked. "What did it do to deserve that?"

"Ophiuchus attacked and nearly killed Scorpio," Argo explained. "That was back when Scorpio was a Royal Star. You simply did not attack a Royal Star, even if you're the all-powerful Snake-Bearer! After that, his new blackened Spirit Key was hidden, Ophiuchus was imprisoned due to his enormous destructive strength, and he slipped away into legend. However, about your son, Lucy, I can tell you this," Argo went on. "Every Celestial Spirit is different. The Zodiacs are powerful and can regain their strength quickly, especially those meant for battle. Some of us are usually only used for a few minutes and can return and rest at our leisure. However, if a Spirit has been out for a very long time, it takes longer to heal. I am the Ship, so when I am called out as Argo, it's usually for a lengthy voyage. Because of that, I am built to last up to three months in this world. That would be fatal to most Celestial Spirits, and especially for a Silver Key Spirit. Yet that is my design. Because of that, I recharge slowly. I demand one month between voyages to recover, and I can only be used three times a year. Each of us are different."

"Even still, it shouldn't take ten years," Lucy protested.

"In the trial, the Lion asked that you be allowed to visit as soon as it's safe and demanded that Luke be allowed back to the Human World as often as his health allows. These stipulations were granted by the Spirit King."

Lucy looked away. "I still don't like it."

Argo shrugged her arms dramatically. "Not my concern. I'm not like those ninnies who fawn over the Lion all the time. By the way, land ho," she said just moments before crunching into the island, jolting Natsu almost off the prow. When he cried out in shock, Argo glared up at him. "Stop looking down my toga, you pink-headed perv."

Lucy and Natsu leaped off the ship and onto the rocky shore of the tiny island. Nothing was on it but that spiky stalagmite. A box hovering between it and the low stalactite gave off a faint golden glow. Lucy walked toward it with hypnotic fascination. She did not stop until she stood right in front of the small treasure chest with a lock in the shape of a lion's head.

Natsu tugged on her sleeve and whispered worriedly. "Hey, should you really just take it? Shouldn't you send Argo back? She might figure it out."

"Didn't you hear her?" Lucy whispered back, still staring transfixed at the box. "Argo demands a month between voyages, no matter how brief they are. If I send her back, we'll be stuck on this island, and it sure doesn't look like we can fish for our food in this lake." She began to reach out to the box. "I just have to chance it."

Her hands entered the glowing light, and suddenly the pulsing radiance got brighter. She had to look away, and Natsu shielded his eyes. Luke cried out, causing Proto to leap up onto Lucy's shoulders to cover his eyes protectively. Slowly, nearly blind, Lucy reached onward until her fingertips touched the box. She grasped hold of it firmly and pulled it out of its hovering location. It felt like pulling something heavy through water, and she prepared herself for something weighty. Sure enough, as she felt it break free from the barrier, the box fell heavily into her hands. As soon as it left the two spikes, the glow vanished. Lucy blinked out the spots in her eyes, then looked at her hands holding the tiny treasure chest.

"I have it," she breathed.

Natsu watched her with a gentle smile, waiting for a reaction. For a moment, Lucy had no clue what to do. Now that she finally had what they traveled for three months to get, she felt...disappointed.
She had the Key to the Heart of the Lion, but she wondered if she still had her beloved Lion's heart.

"Lucy?" Natsu asked tenderly, seeing the struggle in her face and pouting with sympathy.

"Yeah, I...I'm okay." She wiped a tear aside. Natsu hugged her around the shoulder, and she leaned into him, glad to have such a loyal friend. "Let's head back."

They turned and reboarded Argo. The figurehead stared at the tiny, hefty box suspiciously. In the end, she decided not to ask what it was. Her job was to get them from shore to island and back again. That was all the Ship would worry about. What suspicious actions her owner was up to was no concern of hers.

Meanwhile, the fight outside raged on. Haftorang and Gray were in a battle of water versus ice on a scale that far surpassed what Juvia had been able to do when he fought with her. Already, he had a gash across his arm from one of Haftorang's spitting attacks that shot the water out faster than a bullet. Gray had been lucky his ice shield deflected it a few centimeters, otherwise that shot would have blasted straight through his chest. Still, he figured he was being toyed with by this fishman. Loke said he had some more powerful transformation. Gray had hoped to end things quickly like Loke suggested so he could help fight the former queen, yet many minutes had passed and he had not even scratched the Celestial Spirit.

Kefira and Loke were also having a lopsided battle. His suit was torn apart, his face filthy from getting thrown to the ground too many times, and one particularly bad attack had amputated his arm. The ragged ends of his suit coat swayed as he staggered, and green spirit particles dripped from the wound only to dissipate before hitting the ground. Despite the grievous injury, he refused to return to the Spirit World. If he left Gray alone with these two, he would definitely get killed.

"Swallow thy pride and surrender, Leo," Kefira said with a worried pout. "I can't bear to see thee in such pain."

He dropped his head as dizziness threatened to swoop him back to the Spirit World. He looked at the severed arm and clenched his jaws stubbornly. "Not yet!" He still had his Regulus Ring on his remaining arm, and he raised it in preparation. "O Regulus, grant me your strength." He flinched as the power surged through him, but he refused to give up. If he did not stop her, there was no chance for Gray to win. "Regulus Blast!"

The golden light shot out at her, and Kefira nimbly leaped away, smirking as if she was playing a game of Tag with a child.

"Regulus Impact!" he yelled again, and he made a swinging punch at her that shot out a radiant head of a lion.

She ran over into the lapping ocean waves, hoisting her purple skirt up out of the water, splashing the waves, and laughing as if she was having mere summer fun. However, the golden glowing lion's head twisted back around and came at her again.

"Oh ho!" she giggled, barely dodging as it impacted a nearby boulder and crushed the stone into shards. "More, Leo! Play with me more!"

"Damn you," he hissed. "You're making me use that attack again. So be it. Regulus Solar Flare!" A solid golden beam shot out, and with it went almost all of Loke's remaining magic.

Kefira looked stunned for a moment, then quickly lifted her hands. "Aurora's Shield!" A barrier even brighter than Loke's beam formed in front of her and just barely blocked the strike. Still, it shoved her
back over the sand for over a meter.

While Kefira was on the defense, Loke spared a glance over to Gray's side of the beach. As he feared, although ice magic had a higher chance of hurting Haftorang, Gray was simply not powerful enough. If the Southern Fish had been fighting seriously, Gray probably would have been dead within the first minute. Still, even the fishman's half-hearted attacks were powerful.

Loke grimaced as he realized that Kefira's playful antics and Haftorang still using only his usual water attacks proved that they were merely toying with the two of them. Which meant they had another goal on this island.

Lucy!

But does she know the Key to the Heart of the Lion is here, or is she only searching for Lucy? If she knew, she would finish us off fast and go after it before Lucy has a chance to use it. I almost hope Lucy finds it and summonses Regulus back to this world. Last time we went up against Kefira and Zeref, it took all twelve Zodiac Spirits and an army of mages to defeat them, and that was before Haftorang reclaimed the Fomalhaut Key. Kefira is definitely stronger than she was back then, and if Haftorang calls upon Fomalhaut, his full destructive power is equal to Acnologia. Just the two of us...even if Natsu and Erza fought too...even if all of Fairy Tail combined fought them... Could we win?

Kefira smirked as she lowered her shield. "Is that all? Or art thou lost in pondering? A Jewel for thy thoughts."

Loke tensely gritted a smile through the pain. "I'm thinking of the old days."

"Good memories, I hope," she said with a genuinely amiable smile.

Seeing that gentle expression on her face, Loke could picture the two of them as they were four hundred years ago, close friends, fighting partners, passionate lovers. He had known her since she was born and knew that when her father passed on, this raven-haired beauty would inherit his Regulus Key. Yet she qualified for it long before her parents' untimely death. He had comforted her in her grief, holding her as she wailed for her dead parents, and she turned to him in desperation. That was when they became far more than just owner and Spirit. They became lovers. For ten years, he was hers; he admired her and truly loved her for a time. She was one of the mightiest queens in Earthland, he the King of the Heavens and most powerful Celestial Spirit in the Spirit World. Even when her advisers warned her that she should marry and sire an heir, she refused to leave him. Yet in time, being queen made her colder, more serious, not as fun for the playful Lion...and that was when Naomi entered the palace. He wondered for a moment...

"If I had never betrayed your love, would you have taken this path in life? Would you have supported Zeref or fought against him? If he hadn't received your help...no," he realized softly. "If I had stayed with you instead of running away with Naomi, Zeref never would've been born."

"True," said Kefira. "One could say this all started with thy betrayal and disloyalty toward me. Tell me: were three years of marriage worth the wars, the madness, the indiscriminate slaughtering of millions that thy son unleashed? And in the end, thou wert betrayed as well. Perhaps thou wert the strongest at one time, Leo, but even the Lion and King of the Heavens must face karma eventually."

"Mistress-s-s," Haftorang hissed. "She's coming."

Loke's eyes widened. He sensed it too. Lucy was almost at the opening of the cave, and he felt the Regulus Key with her. She hadn't used it!
Of course not, he admonished to himself. He had taken the Regulus Ring back just in case Gray and Natsu tried to fight him about taking Luke away. Even if she had the Key to the Heart of the Lion, she could not use it without the lapis lazuli shard in his ring.

Kefira sighed in disappointment. "Time to end this. I have not been leaping around like a gazelle purely out of fun, although sparring with thee again brings back fond memories." Kefira raised her hands in an arcing sweep. Clouds gathered overhead, and the sky darkened into a threatening color. "Fear not, Leo my lover. Return to the Spirit World and rest. I shall summon thee back under thy full power. Then we shall be united once more, Kohinur and the Lion, as it always was and as it should always be."

A bright light glowed in the sky. Seven orbs burned brilliantly with lightning-like energy drawing lines from one to the other until the shape of the Big Dipper took form. Beams attacked the ground, punching holes into the sandy shoreline. Gray leaped away from two of the hits and bumped into Loke. The strikes pounded into the ground, sending sand flying everywhere in a blinding series of explosions and forcing them to the center of the attack.

Kefira closed her eyes. "Judgment of the Seven Stars..."

"This is bad!" Loke warned, and he tried to shove Gray out of the attack zone.

Gray's face looked stricken as he stared up at a humongous magic circle forming in the sky, eclipsing a huge portion of the island and sea. "Seven Stars...? Wait, isn't that Jellal's form of magic?"

"Get out of here!" Loke screamed.

Kefira waved her fingers in a pattern, and the magic circle glowed blindingly bright. "Heavenly Body Magic: Grand Chariot!"

A powerful burst of light descended from the magic circle and crushed Loke and Gray. The ground below them sunk down, and they slipped down into a sudden sand trap. Gray sank and tried to swim through the sand, yet the magic coming from above was crushing every bone in his body.

"How...the hell...does she know...even this?" Gray struggled to say as he began to sink into the sandpit.

Loke yelled loudly at the tremendous force crushing him. As Gray watched, the Celestial Spirit lost cohesion of his body and melted away into wisps of energy.

"Loke!" he bellowed in horror.

Meanwhile, just at that moment, Lucy and Natsu were watching from the cave entrance. They saw Gray sinking, struggling to keep his head above the sand, and stretching his hand upward desperately as if he could grab hold of something to stop himself from going under. Lucy covered her mouth when she heard Loke howling just before vanishing in agony.

"No!" she whispered. "L-Loke?"

Natsu's mouth dropped as he saw the attack. He remembered getting hit by Jellal's Grand Chariot. It was a miracle he survived the attack. Yet the magic circle in the sky now was far larger than back then. "She knows dragon slayer magic, Lost Magic, and Heavenly Body Magic? She beat Loke and Gray together? Just who is this lady?"

The spell ended, and the dusty clouds of sand began to settle. On the beach was a massive crater, and water from the ocean began to dribble down into it with each wave. Loke was gone, and all they
could see of Gray was a limp hand stretched up through the sand at the bottom of the crater. Natsu's mouth was still hanging open, and Lucy had begun to weep. Out on the shoreline, Kefira nonchalantly dusted some grains of sand off her purple gown.

Haftorang looked troubled by the wanton destruction. He glared at Kefira with disapproval and a little terror at the sheer strength of her magic. Then he sighed, reluctantly resigning himself to continue following her for now despite her flaws. He dropped his head in sadness for his old friend, Leo the Lion.

"She didn't have to go that far."

End of Chapter 38

Chapter End Notes

Missed me? I'm alive, this isn't Rhov's ghost. Although if I die, I'll haunt one of you to finish this story for me.

I love caves. As a child, my family took a trip to Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico. It left me in awe. The Ju Long Tan Cave and Reed Flute Cave in China are two places on my bucket list of locations to see and were the inspirations for this cave.

If you've read Chapter 280, you've seen Ophiuchus, the Snake-Bearer, known as the "Thirteenth Zodiac" since part of that constellation lies on the ecliptic. The idea of a thirteenth Zodiac was propagated by the 1995 book The 13 Signs of the Zodiac by Walter Berg and Mark Yazaki, a bestseller in Japan. Since then, Ophiuchus often appears in Japanese pop culture, like Final Fantasy. I came up with the idea of adding Ophiuchus weeks ago. Guess I'm reading Hiro-sensei's mind again! ^_^ I had to postpone publishing this chapter so I could figure out how to rewrite Argo's little explanation, since the original anecdote no longer fit into what we've seen of this 13th Zodiac in Chapter 280. I decided to explain it as he was "removed" from the official Zodiacs for doing something bad, since he's pretty bad-ass. Then I was stuck on WHY was he removed. Off to research mythology! Aratus' poem Phaenomena describes Ophiuchus thus: "...he, steadfast with both his feet well set, tramples a huge monster, even the Scorpion, standing upright on his eye and breast." So I thought it'd be fitting if Ophiuchus lost his official position and slipped away into legend after a brawl with Scorpio.
The Heart of the Lion

"Death was afraid of him because he had the heart of a lion." - Arabian proverb

The dust settled over a perturbed silence that hovered over the battle-torn beach. Lucy wept softly, feeling guilty now for dragging her friends into this long quest...and for what? She could not pull her eyes off Gray's limp hand sticking up out of the sand and the water slowly filling in the massive crater. Beside her, she heard Natsu's teeth grinding in anger.

"You...bitch!" he roared in fury. Natsu began to run toward Kefira, tripping over his sandals as he raced in blind rage over the ancient pathway.

Kefira sneered at such a barbaric attack and lifted one long, slender finger. "Teach him manners, Leviathan."

A blue watery tendril shot out, and a snakelike head opened wide at the end, hissing with dripping fangs. In his rage, Natsu could not dodge it. The water dragon smashed into his chest, and Natsu skidded over the sand, rolling to a stop. He immediately tried to leap back up, yet he stumbled weakly and held his head in dizziness.

"I feel weird," he muttered. He stuck out his hand and stared at it. "My...my magic. It's gone. That water snake..." He collapsed again and moaned.

"Natsu?" Lucy cried. "Don't just lie there with your face in the dirt. Get up!"

Natsu placed his hands on the road and pushed slowly upward. However, he collapsed again and did not move. Lucy shivered as a thousand worries inundated her. She looked with huge, terrified eyes to Kefira and Haftorang. Suddenly, she felt very alone.

"That was but a small trickle of Leviathan," Kefira explained as the water dragon slithered menacingly between her and Natsu. "His magic is sealed, but it will return in about a week." Her eyes flashed up to Lucy. "Hand over the child and we shall leave in peace. Don't and I will kill thy pink-headed friend." The watery creature hovered over Natsu like a hungry snake. "Leviathan can do more than seal fire magic. Its fangs inject a fatal venom. The boy is slowly dying. Haftorang is the only one with the remedy. I will let him cure the boy, but only if thou wilt obey."

Natsu strained to look back to the cave. "Don't do it, Lucy."

Hyperventilating, Lucy reached to her keyring, but her hands shook too hard to grab one.

Kefira chuckled softly. "Planning to fight? Commendable. Brave, even. Nobility like us do not give up so easily. Otherwise, we do not deserve our station. Think a weakling like thee can win where even thy two friends and the Lion failed? Even if thou shouldst try, would the fight end fast enough? The ice mage is alive, but not for much longer. The dragon slayer is strong and might withstand the poison a full day, but his movements are paralyzed. Thy choice is thus: save thy two friends or attempt to protect thy son. Attempt! I doubt thou hast the power. Thou art naught but a Celestial Spirit Mage with no other magical knowledge."

Lucy stiffened and grabbed one of her Gold Keys firmly. "Don't underestimate the bonds I have with my Spirits. Open the Gate of the Maiden! Virgo!"
The pink-haired maid appeared and bowed. "I'm ready for my punishment."

"Dig Gray out," she ordered. Virgo immediately burrowed down. Lucy grabbed forth two more keys. "Open the Gate of the Ram! Aries! Open the Gate of the Clock! Horologium!"

Aries showed up along with the tall Clock. The Ram immediately said, "I'm here. I'm sorry!"

Lucy leaned over, panting at the strain and her lack of practice. "Aries, shield Horologium while he gets Natsu. Horologium, protect him inside you and then both of you retreat to the cave."

"Understood," Aries said with a firm nod. "Wool Wall!" She shoved a fluffy wall at Leviathan and pushed it aside. It hissed in annoyance, then lost the will to fight amidst the soft defense that made the water dragon want to sleep. Aries whimpered as she ran alongside Horologium, and together they got Natsu placed inside the Clock. However, just as Horologium was retreating, Aries paused and stared at the enemy, properly seeing them for the first time.

"Piscis Austrinus?" she whispered, and in shattering terror she fell to her knees. "Nooo! I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Please, don't hurt me!"

Haftorang pouted down at her, but he did not move in to attack. "Go, gentle Ram," he said sadly. "Thank you for staying by the Lion's side all these years—s-s. I knew you would." He gave her an amiable smile and nodded for her to escape.

Slowly, still quivering, Aries got up. "I...I knew you were good. I knew what they said about you couldn't be true."

"Likely, every word of it was true," he admitted. "I'm not the Spirit I once was—s-s."

She began to turn, but Aries looked back around. "Come back to us, Piscis Austrinus!"

His head dropped with regret. "I'm afraid it's too late for that. Go, before she orders me to attack."

Aries sniffled as she fled with Wool Wall still shielding her.

Virgo popped out of the ground next to Lucy. "Princess, your ice prince is safely inside the cave."

"Good. And he is not my ice prince!"

"Forgive me. Will I be punished?"

"Go back, Virgo." The Spirit disappeared in a poof, and Lucy slowly pulled out another Gold Key. "Open..." However, the drain was almost too much, and she leaned against the cave wall. "Open...the Gate...of the Goat! C-Capricorn!"

He appeared and immediately took her shoulders, gently helping her to stand upright. "Such slouching is undignified for the heiress of the Heartfilia Konzern, Lucy-sama."

"Capricorn, you're sworn to protect my mother's family, right?" She shrugged off the baby backpack and handed Luke over to the Goat. "Protect him at all costs."

"Understood, Lucy-sama." He bowed and left to take shelter with Aries inside the cave.

At last, with her friends and son safe, Lucy turned to face the two enemies. "Now we're just two women on equal grounds. I'll fight you...for my family and for my pride as a Fairy Tail mage."

"You needn't fight alone." Suddenly, Loke reappeared standing beside her. He still looked beaten,
although he wore fresh clothes. The arm he had lost was back but in a sling. Still, the burning
determination in his eyes shined brighter than the stars. Suddenly, beside him appeared Taurus,
Scorpio, Aquarius, Cancer, Virgo, Sagittarius, and Gemini.

"Moshi-moshi!" Sagittarius saluted. "We're here to support you, Lucy-dono."

Virgo stared unemotionally at Kefira. "For hurting Brother and Princess, you will be punished."

"We are going to teach you a lesson," Scorpio said, grinning menacingly.

"Moo!" Taurus roared. "You dare to threaten Lucy's boobs!"

"You messed up Leo's hair, ebi," said Cancer.

Aquarius sneered haughtily. "I don't like that you're so old yet look so young."

Gemini combined and formed a double of Lucy. "Lucy loves all of us. Love makes a Celestial Spirit
stronger."

Loke jolted and yelled, "Hey, that's my line!" Gemini stuck its tongue out at him.

Kefira simpered softly, then chuckled, and slowly it grew into a laugh. Then her head threw back,
her mouth opened wide, and she cackled loudly while holding her stomach. "Kahahaha! Oh my!
Seeing all of you again. And on this island of all places. How deliciously ironic! Kehehe!" She
wiped a tear aside as she still laughed in jolts. "How long hath it been? And ye all wish to fight me?
Not even all twelve, and no army to back you up this time. Your defeat is assured."

Lucy pointed emphatically. "Taurus, Scorpio!"

Scorpio used his sand to blind them while Taurus went in for an attack. Haftorang stepped in their
way and spit out two streams of water. Taurus was hit instantly and yelled for only a second before
vanishing back to the Spirit World. Scorpio was a little luckier, managing to shield the attack with his
sand.

Kefira chuckled. "Lucy, dost thou know the strength and weakness of a Celestial Spirit mage?"

Lucy ignored her. "Sagittarius!"

"Moshi-moshi!" The Archer pulled back his bow and let loose an arrow. Kefira raised her hand, and
a shield of light blocked the shot. At the same time, Cancer moved in from the side and took a swipe
at her with his scissors. She expanded her magic shield outward fast, and it slammed into Cancer,
searing him until he was forced to return.

Kefira continued as if giving a child a lesson. "Spirit mages are like generals in battle, especially
those powerful enough to call forth multiple Spirits. We make decisions on which ones to summons,
their strengths, their weaknesses, balancing their talents against the abilities of the enemy."

Their side ignored Kefira's lesson. Gemini grabbed Lucy's hand. "Let's do it!"

Lucy nodded to the Twin and began an incantation.

Survey the Heaven, Open the Heaven.
All the stars, far and wide,
Show me thy appearance
With such shine.
Lucy's eyes shined and her hair fluttered with the powerful surge. The land around them darkened and grew brighter with orbs of star power and swirling magic. Haftorang glanced around as the landscape no longer looked like a tropical island, but like the heavens themselves.

"Stars above, she even knows this?" he exclaimed in awe.

Lucy did not stop her incantation with Gemini.

_I am the ruler of the stars._
_Aspect became complete._
_Open thy malevolent gate._
_{O 88 Stars of the heaven,_
_Shine! Urano Metria!_}

The numerous globes began to converge upon Kefira. She gazed around with frustration. "Annoying child, listen when thine elders speak. Gravity Magic: Supermassive Black Hole." A huge blackness opened up in front of her just as the eighty-eight colorful spheres threatened to crush her. All the balls of star magic sucked within the threatening darkness and vanished. "Gravity is a star killer. Remember that well, young one. As I was saying, Celestial Spirit mages are generals. We order our soldiers—our Spirits—and send them into battle knowing they might...get...hurt!" Kefira raised her hands together, and a purple-black ball formed between them. "Cursed Magic: Black Sins of Orlov!"

Kefira shot a massive blast out of her hands. Aquarius used her jar to pour out water that shielded Lucy and Loke, but Scorpio, Virgo, and Sagittarius were easily wiped out by the attack. Gemini used itself to block Lucy and was affected severely by the blast, crying out for a moment before poofing back into two small creatures, then vanishing altogether.

Lucy trembled. The encouragement she felt a moment ago standing with her Spirits had faded. She realized just how powerful these two people were and had to admit, there was no way she could win at her current strength.

Kefira continued as if nothing had happened. "Celestial Spirit mages make the hardest choices. An average melee fighter may think little of the well-being of his opponent, caught up in the rush of battle. However, since we stand afar and witness the battle from a vantage point, we are more affected by the pain of others. We see how our attacks agonize enemies. We know our decisions may hurt our friends. We have time to consider it. We _plan_ for it to happen. We are the most sadistic sort of mage out there, Lucy Heartfilia of the Fairy Tail Guild. Thou art no different than I. Haftorang," she said with a sly smirk. "Kill Aquarius."

Lucy gasped, the Water-bearer stared in shock at the Southern Fish, but Haftorang did not move.

"Ah, but see, little Spirit mage," said Kefira. "We can order them only to a point. In general, Celestial Spirits have no choice but to obey our wishes. Even if they don't want to attack, they do if the will of the owner is greater than their own will. However, a Spirit is autonomous. They have feelings and can act upon them if those emotions override the will of the owner. It is a matter of willpower. The weaker the will of the mage, the more unruly the Spirit. The stronger the will of the mage, the more obedient the Spirit. Back when Haftorang was called Piscis Austrinus, he and Aquarius were lovers. His will to protect her is strong, and I truly have no desire to see her destroyed. Thus he can disobey. Their bond can never fully be broken. Similarly, Leo and I were lovers, and a part of him will always belong to me."

"No," Loke shouted. "You always thought that, Kefira, and you're wrong. You don't own me!"
"I do by birthright," she replied sharply. "And keep quiet, Lion. I am speaking to the child in hopes that she may learn a lesson. In the end, Lucy Heartfilia, we Spirit mages are useful only to send others to their destruction. A general in wartime cannot be bothered by the guilt of knowing that if he were to send a thousand soldiers, five hundred may die. A general must think only of the goal. I have a single goal today and am fully prepared to sacrifice all I have to achieve it. My will is strong." She pulled out a key that shined blue in the tropical sunlight. "Stronger than anything Haftorang may feel, and stronger than those ambivalent emotions thou thinketh are love."

Haftorang's bulbous eyes grew wider at the sight of the blue key. "Mistress-s-s, no, please!" He then looked over to Aquarius, Loke, and Lucy with dread. "My king, get out of here!"

Kefira closed her eyes and began an incantation.

 Thou Solitary One, oh Royal Star,
Watcher of the South, Star of Alchemy,
Navigator of the heavens, judge of ideals,
Ancient Guardian, make thyself known to me.
Smite with thy chilling Winter's Breath.
Examine my worthiness and grant my wish.
Gate to the Guardian of the South, I open thee.
O Fomalhaut: Mouth of the Fish!

"I'm sorry," the fishman said faintly as he began to glow.

Aquarius backed up as the shining light grew brighter. "Leo," she said in a soft, worried tone. "He's transforming."

Loke leaned down to Lucy's ear. "You have the Regulus Key. You need to use it now!"

She looked up in confusion. "What?"

"There is no way we can defeat Fomalhaut unleashed." Loke glanced back to the enemies and breathed hard as the glow intensified. Kefira was too far away to hear his whispers, and the rumble from the fishman blocked most sounds. "The only person who could stop him is Regulus. You've gotta use that key."

She pulled back a little. "If I use it, you'll be super powerful. You...you'll take Luke from me."

"Lucy, this is not the time for that," he whispered harshly. "Fomalhaut is more powerful than the black dragon. If he unleashes his full power, he could wipe out the island, including you, me, Luke, Natsu, Gray, everyone! You've gotta use the Heart of the Lion so I can stop him."

She looked at the box she was carrying, then to the cave where Capricorn and Aries were keeping Luke safe. "I...guess..."

Her hesitation cost them. A new being stood before them. He glowed pale blue-white with smooth, nearly transparent skin, a tall creature with no neck and a fish-like face, yet unlike any sort of sea creature Lucy knew. His head was wide, broader than his shoulders, with a humongous mouth stretching from one side to the other. Fins of glowing rainbow colors flowed down from his head and along the spine, moving gracefully as if he was in water, and glittering with each gentle movement. As Lucy watched in fearful awe, she felt the power emanating from this creature. It was a strength of magic beyond anything she had ever encountered.

"Fomalhaut," Loke breathed as a tremble shook through him.
The creature looked to him. "I know you," he spoke in a reverberating voice, like five voices speaking at once. "You're the one Regulus chose."

Loke's face drew tight in anguish. "Fomalhaut, please. Please don't hurt her."

The glowing pale creature gazed coldly at him. "It's not my will, but that of my mistress. Yet the Southern Fish within me also pleads for your sake. You and he were close friends for a time."

Loke looked aside with guilt. "Best friends."

"Fomalhaut," Kefira said smugly. "Send Aquarius and Leo back to the Spirit World and kill the girl. Yet be careful. There is a child within the cave who I need."

"I understand and shall be mindful of my power, mistress."

"No! Stop!" screamed Loke. "Fomalhaut, I command thee to cease," he roared with an undeniably majestic overtone to his words.

The Royal Star halted for only a moment, then that multi-toned voice chuckled. "No...sorry, but you are not my king. Scion of Regulus you may be, but your authority is not even a speck of my true king."

Loke grimaced, and for the first time in four hundred years he wished he was King of the Heavens once more. He grabbed Lucy and shielded her. "Aquarius!"

She moved in front of them. "I'll do what I can." The mermaid glared back at Lucy. "You owe me big time, bitch."

The glowing creature prepared to attack. "Fomalhaut Fountainhead!"

From Fomalhaut's massively wide mouth, a blast of energy shot out. Aquarius used a massive wave to try to block it, but when the blast hit it easily crushed her wall of water. Aquarius was blown back and slammed into Loke with a cry of surprise. Lucy screamed as she felt the gush of magic flow through her, shaking her down to the marrow of her bones. She heard Aquarius scream, and then she was blown off her feet. Loke wrapped his arms around her tightly as they were sent flying. With her ear against his chest, she heard the growls of pain, yet he struggled not to yell. She knew it was because he did not want to worry her. He loved her enough to take on any amount of pain, wanting to shield her and keep her alive.

"Loke," she muttered into his suit coat as they were airborne and carried along on the gush of magic. "I...love you."

She felt a glow around him. Love made Celestial Spirits stronger, so she poured out all the love she felt for him, all the dreams she had of a lifetime together with him, all the happiness of being his friend, then his lover, and now the mother of his son; all the love she felt in wanting more in their relationship, wanting to be together forever...wanting to get married! Yes, she even dreamed of that. She dreamed of having more children, a family they could love and raise together. She balled together all those feelings and tried to thrust them into Loke, hoping it would be enough.

Then her body slammed into a wall and her head cracked against hard metal. As she sank into darkness, she muttered Loke's name, two syllables that she hoped would convey all the hope she was now entrusting into him.

Loke had just barely managed to hold onto Lucy with his one good arm, yet as they were blasted away, just as he felt himself slipping back into the Spirit World, pure strength had flowed into him.
He knew it was from Lucy, and it was enough for him to stay, hold her as they were hit by Fomalhaut's attack, and shield her from its fatal destruction. However, in keeping her body away from the blast, it meant she was closest to the wall when they were blown into the cave and to the antechamber. He tried at the very last second to protect her head and take the crash on his shoulder to protect her, but part of her body still hit. He heard the crunch of bones and shivered in horror at what might have happened. That blast was truly precise, enough to blow away Aquarius and nearly send back him, aimed purely to kill a Human like Lucy without destroying the land around them.

When the surge of magic ended, they were on the ground. Lucy was limp in his arms and bleeding heavily from the head. He shook her and called out her name, but she made no response. He felt her pulse. Weak but there. At least she was alive. Then he looked around and saw a pink, fluffy wall with Aries and Capricorn hidden within but peeking out in worry.

"I'm sorry," Aries cried out. "I didn't see you two soon enough. I'm sorry."

Loke did not answer. He stayed knelt beside Lucy, feeling her arms and legs for broken bones.

"Is she...okay?" Aries asked with a shudder of dread.

Loke looked at the pooling blood on the ground seeping from Lucy's head. She was definitely not okay, and he feared the crash might have cracked her skull. "Capricorn, take her and the baby. Get them out of here."

"We can't take Lucy-sama to the Spirit World. More exposure will make her sick."

"Just get them out!" He looked at the box Lucy still clutched to her chest. "Kefira apparently doesn't know we already have the Regulus Key. She wants Luke to find it. If she were to get this, she'll want to kill Luke as well as Lucy. So please, keep them safe and hidden. Go down two rooms. That should be enough." Then Loke reached to Lucy's keyring, flipped through them, and carefully pulled off the Key to the Lion's Gate.

"Leo-sama!" Capricorn cried out.

"What are you doing?" Aries shouted in astonishment.

His face hardened as he glared at the cave opening. "Anything I must to protect my family." He looked back and forced himself to smile at them. "Hey, it's me! I'll be safe. Now get going."

Aries picked up Luke and hurried off with Horologium still keeping the paralyzed Natsu in his case. Capricorn threw Gray over his shoulder and lifted Lucy into his arms. Once they were gone, Loke gave a deep sigh and looked down at the Gold Key in his hand.

"Forgive me for doing this, Lucy. It's the only way to save you."

He walked out of the cave and faced the ageless former monarch and blue-white glowing Royal Star. "Shaman-Queen Kefira," he addressed formally. "You want my son solely to seek the Key to the Heart of the Lion, true?"

"I have no other use for a brat like that," she admitted.

"Then I propose a trade. Leave Luke and Lucy alone, don't bother them again, and in exchange..."

He hesitated a moment, burying the protests in his heart. He felt sick inside, but the powerful being standing before him reminded Loke that there was no other choice in this matter. He had to get Haftorang and Kefira away from Lucy or everyone would get killed, and if she discovered the Regulus Key, even Luke would be nothing but a piece of shameful evidence that Loke loved someone else. She would kill the child for sure. "In exchange," he said again, burning the last remnants of doubt and guilt in his heart, "I will go with you." He handed forward the Gold Key. "By
right of combat, defeating the Celestial Spirit mage Lucy Heartfilia, I am free to pick my new master. I choose you."

It took Kefira a moment to respond, as if she was wondering if this was a dream or a trap. "Thou shalt give thyself freely to me?"

Loke's face tensed up as a surge of protests wanted to roar out of his throat, yet the glowing form of unleashed Fomalhaut was enough for him to realize this truly was the only choice, as despicable as it was. Loke was a combat Spirit, fighting was second nature to him, but his love for Lucy outweighed his desire for revenge. There was no way for him to win against a Royal Star. Surrender was the only option that could save Lucy's life.

Frigid with determination, he declared: "I shall once again be yours, Yamataikoku No Kefira." Slowly, feeling as if he was crushing his heart, Loke bowed his head. "Please accept me into thy service once more, my queen."

Kefira stepped up to him, took the Gold Key, and put it on a ring along with Fomalhaut's Lapis Lazuli Key and Piscis Austrinus' Silver Key. She placed a hand on his chin, tilted his head up, and gazed into his eyes. She pulled off his shades and tossed them to the side. They clattered against the ancient roadway, and the blue lens cracked into a spiderweb design. Then Kefira leaned in and gave Loke a kiss. He held still through it, not closing his eyes, but not pushing her away. Instead, he glanced to the blue-white creature that stood to the side watching all this with disinterest.

Kefira pulled back with a gentle smile on her lips. "Welcome back, Leo. Let's go home."

His eyes were cold and empty as she wrapped her arm around him and vanished with Fomalhaut. From the cave entrance, Aries had been peeking out and saw the whole scene. Tears streamed down her cheeks as her delicate hands tightened into fists.

"Leo, you idiot," she muttered with a sniffle. "How...How could you do this to Lucy? Idiot Lion! Stupid, stupid, stupid Leo! You...you...big dummy!" She turned around quickly and sobbed as she fled back into the cave.

Later that day, as the setting sun turned the ocean into a sea of blood, Wendy came out of the cave and quietly stepped up to Erza as the ocean breeze whipped the mage's scarlet hair.

"The poison is out of Natsu's system," she reported. "Gray's throat and lungs were damaged from inhaling sand, he broke a few bones, but he'll heal. Also, Virgo popped up and gave me a box of seirei tea from the Spirit World. That's what Loke was drinking to maintain his vitality. I put it in Luke's baby bottle, and it seems to have cured his headaches."

"Then they really are caused by him being in this world," Erza realized softly, frowning at this discovery.

"It seems so. Levy is still exploring this temple hoping for some more clues, anything at all. I asked Charle to try to get a vision of where Loke and the two enemies might have gone, but nothing so far." Wendy looked up worriedly to the warrior, then out to the shoreline. "How is she?"

Erza pouted sadly. "You healed her concussion, but the injuries to her heart won't heal by even the magic of a dragon slayer."

"Aries said he did it to save her."

"Yes but...but he still betrayed her. He still left willingly with the enemies and joined their side, even
if it was in exchange for her life. Lucy knows Loke did it purely for her sake. That's why she's torn between hating him and feeling immensely guilty. Lucy has always felt she was the weakest on our team. Now she feels like she was so weak, Loke had to sacrifice himself for her."

Wendy frowned and looked to where the surf made soft crashes against the powdery golden sand. Lucy sat on a rock by the shore, one partly demolished when Loke and Gray fought. In her hands she held Loke's broken sunglasses, twirling them by the bent ear piece. She stared out at the setting sun as if she could burn all her troubles away in the flames and bury her emotions down along with the dying star.

"Tell Levy, if she wants to study the ruins, she has three days. We'll leave as soon as the ship returns for us. Then we're heading directly back to Magnolia on the fastest ship possible. The trade winds should be in our favor. Traveling by ship will be faster, especially if you use a little wind magic to speed us along."

"Tell Levy, if she wants to study the ruins, she has three days. We'll leave as soon as the ship returns for us. Then we're heading directly back to Magnolia on the fastest ship possible. The trade winds should be in our favor. Traveling by ship will be faster, especially if you use a little wind magic to speed us along."

"I'll do what I can," Wendy said with determination. "But...should we really just leave? What if Loke...?"

"If Loke wants her, he'll find a way to get to her."

"If?" Wendy whispered in worry. "Erza, you don't think Loke really just gave up on her, do you?"

"No," she muttered. "However, I know from experience that men do some foolish things if they think they're protecting someone they love." She smiled softly as she thought of the stupid things Jellal did. She missed him! Erza turned away from watching Lucy. "When Natsu wakes up, tell him to get a fire started so we can eat dinner."

"He still can't use magic."

"Oh yeah. No magic for one week, right? Well, let's see if he can start a fire the old fashion way."

"What about Lucy?"

Erza paused and glanced back at the lonely blonde staring out at the endless sea. "Let's leave her alone for a while. She needs to sort out her feelings on her own."

Wendy looked out at Lucy and bit her bottom lip. Part of her wanted to give Lucy a big hug and tell her it would all be okay, but part of her knew that empty words would not help. There was nothing any of them could do besides be there to support her in every way possible.

"Cheer up, Lucy," Wendy whispered to herself, then she turned to let Lucy watch the sunset alone.

End of Chapter 39
The Consequences of Loving

"Screw the rules, damn the consequences, and just love. Love until it kills you, because there's nothing better worth dying for." - Karen Amanda Hooper

Mama, I learned something important on my adventure to Kohinur and back.

Love has some damning consequences.

Love also doesn't go away easily. I almost wish it did. I wish I could close my heart to it. Like in that fairy tale of the Heartless Lion, the lion-prince cut out his heart except for the piece that loved the princess. I wish I could just cut out the piece that loves Loke. I wish I could forget, because remembering hurts so bad I want to die.

Loving Loke...I wonder if it was a mistake. How deeply did he really love me back? He's immortal, after all. He has known many women. Maybe having me as a lover was just another conquest in a long line of women he has wooed. I can't honestly make myself believe that, but...it hurts, Mama. It hurts bad.

Why did he leave us?

Aries insisted he did it to save us, and when she talks about Piscis Austrinus, that fishman who calls himself Haftorang, she shakes more than usual. I can tell he's immensely powerful by how scared she looks whenever she thinks about him. He was strong enough to defeat Loke and Gray. Plus that woman Kefira defeated Natsu so easily, and when I was kidnapped both Natsu and Gajeel together fought her yet couldn't win. Aries told me that during the wars with Zeref, it took an entire army of elite mages to defeat Kefira alone. A handful of mages like what we had on Hoshinoue Island would have done nothing but annoy her.

She's just too powerful!

So how do I get Loke back from her? Would he want to come back? What if he still loves her?

It feels lonely not having Loke's key. He didn't even leave behind his ring, or else I could use the Regulus Key. It has a missing piece in the key bitting, and I guess that's where Loke's ring stone would fit in. Broken as it is, there's nothing I can do with it. It's useless!

If he had just left his ring, I could have used this stupid Regulus Key, brought Loke into his full power, and we could have defeated Kefira and Haftorang by now. So why didn't he leave it behind? Did he not want me to use it? If he truly wanted to be with Kefira, why didn't he take the Regulus Key too?

I don't understand! What the hell was that idiot Lion thinking when he did that?

And I...I feel guilty, Mama. He left us to protect us because I wasn't strong enough to fight Kefira. Even with all my Spirits there to support me, I was too weak. Loke used himself as a consolation prize, a sacrifice. Kefira wanted Luke to help her find the Key to the Lion's Heart. Instead, Loke left behind that Regulus Key and gave over himself instead of our son.

WHY? If he obviously has no plan to help Kefira find the Regulus Key, why did he leave with her?
Why take the Lion's Key as well?

I think about what they might be doing now, and it makes me sick! I don't want to imagine it, yet my head keeps picturing Kefira and Loke kissing happily. He must have known she still had feelings for him, and if she forced him to remain as her lover before, maybe she could do it again. I hate it! I hate the idea of Loke being with any other woman. Especially her! Especially someone he loved so much in his past! Whenever I think about it, I want to hate him, because...

Because, after all, he's the proud Lion and...and lions have harems.

Mama, I wish I could stop being in love with him. I wish I could carve out those feelings, purge the memory, just forget about what we shared, those dreams of the future, our foolish fantasies...but whenever I see Luke, I see Loke. There's so much of Loke in him, I can't escape.

And Luke...he's been so sick. I guess Loke was telling the truth. I don't want to give up my son, but if I keep holding on to him I just might lose him. I know I could summon any of my Spirits to take Luke to the Spirit World, but I can't bring myself to do it. Loke took everything but left behind the Regulus Key and our son, so I don't want to give him up! If I do, it's like I'm giving up on the last frayed strand of the red string binding me and Loke together.

There has to be a way to save Luke and keep him here. There has to be! It's immensely selfish of me, but I just can't bear the thought of losing him too. I don't know what to do, Mama. I feel like as a mother—and as a lover—I am a complete failure!

Lucy watched worriedly as Porlyusica inspected Luke. Wendy stood nearby, observing like a good apprentice. At a nearby table, Gray and Natsu sat quietly, both frowning at how helpless they felt, unable to do anything for their friend. After a long time, the old pink-haired healer straightened up and shook her head. Her wrinkled face looked even more sour at having to give a young mother bad news.

"Vitality deprivation," she said in conclusion to her diagnosis. "I had suspicions that a half-Spirit might suffer from it, but I expected to see signs within weeks to a month. When half a year passed and he was fine, I thought perhaps he had inherited a Human's vitality. Apparently not, although his must be very high to have lasted so long without complications. You said he began showing signs on your journey?"

"The nightmares began a couple weeks into the trip," Lucy answered in a weak voice, tired from sleepless nights dealing with a crying child and her own tears of grief.

"And his health turned bad two months ago, you said."

"Yes, he began complaining more about headaches while we were on Hoshinoue Island. We thought it was the proximity to the Regulus Key," Lucy explained.

"No. If anything, items from the Spirit World might help him, like these clothes," Porlyusica observed, tugging on a decorative blue and gold outfit the toddler wore.

"Virgo brought them. She said they might help. She also gave me more seirei tea. I've been giving it to him a few times a day. It helped on our sailing voyage back from Kohinur, but by the end of July he got the headaches back. It's now almost September, and his headaches are getting worse. He's not sleeping, he barely eats, he's lethargic and cranky and..."

The child got annoyed by Porlyusica's poking and prodding. "It hurts!" he screamed.
His fist lit up, and he punched the old woman in the gut. Lucy grabbed him and yanked him back. In a tantrum, he aimed a hit at her as well. Although his hands were so tiny, it felt like her rib almost broke. Natsu sprang forward to grab the toddler into his arms, effectively comforting and immobilizing Luke while the boy continued to thrash in frustration.

"And he's been doing that," Lucy coughed, rubbing out her side while Porlyusica tried to catch her breath through the sharp pain where the child had hit her. "I'm so sorry."

"I've dealt with worse from patients," the old woman assured. "I really am sorry, but this isn't something I can fix. I don't know much about Celestial Spirits, but I do know that the only way for them to regain their vitality is to return to their own realm."

Lucy felt anger well up inside her. "If I do that, they won't return him. They plan on keeping him for hundreds of years."

"It hurts!" Luke wailed, squirming to break free from Natsu. "I hate you! I hate you!"

"I'll warn you this," Porlyusica said firmly. "Intense levels of pain and hatred at such a young age can corrupt the magic within a mage. He would grow up with dark thoughts of using his magic for evil, and those thoughts can easily become deeds. However, in Luke's case, that won't be a problem."

"No, because if he continues to lose vitality at this rate, he'll die before winter." The ancient healer watched callously as that hope in Lucy's huge brown eyes fell to icy dread. Delivering bad news was always hard, but it was part of being a healer. Sometimes you delivered miracles, sometimes you had to tell someone they only had months to live. "There's truly nothing more I can do. Now get out of my house. You all stink!"

Lucy was numbed by the news, so Gray came forward to guide her out before the cranky old healer smacked them with her broom.

"Naked stinkbag," the old woman snapped. "Pick up your clothes before you go."

"Huh?" Gray looked down and realized he was only wearing his boxers. "Ack! I did it again!" He quickly began searching around and putting on his clothes as he found them.

At the door, Lucy stopped and looked around fast. "Find a way!" she shouted. "If anyone can figure out how to save my son, it's you, Porlyusica. So please...please," she begged, "find a way!" Then she walked out with Natsu.

Wendy watched Lucy go with a pout. Once the blonde was far down the path, she asked, "Can't we do anything?"

"He's not wholly Human," Porlyusica said with a sad note to her voice. Gray paused in his search to listen in. "I can look up in my tomes for anything about Celestial Spirits, but if there was a way to keep one in the Human World then it'd be the Spirits who'd know, and if the best they can do is give him some magical tea and garments, then it means there's nothing more. I doubt Lucy would agree to let me experiment on one of her Spirits. Like that weird dog of hers, he's small so he'd be a good test subject, but to test something like vitality deprivation, there's a chance I could kill the Spirit."

"No way!" Wendy gasped. "You can't kill Plue."
"That's the risk of medical experimentation. That girl needs to be a little less stubborn and more mindful of her child's needs, even if it means giving him up."

"But that's too mean," Wendy whispered. "Please, Grandeeney..."

"I told you not to call me that," she snapped fast.

"Please, try looking up for some way to save him."

The old woman gave a weary sigh, then rubbed out the punch to her stomach again. "For your sake, little one, I'll try. I don't have much hope of finding anything, though. Keep an eye on him, and I'll try sending letters to a few other healers I know."

"Thank you very much!" Wendy smiled, then she rushed out the door to chase after the others.

Gray was finally dressed, and he stood in front of the old pink-haired woman. "Please do try. We fought hard so Lucy could keep her son. I don't want her to have to give him up now because of this."

Her red eyes flashed up at him. Porlyusica might not be a mage, but somehow her glares felt like acid. "You're close to her, aren't you?"

Gray swallowed hard at the accusation in her words. "We're friends. Best friends."

"Then be a friend," she said sharply. "That girl's mental state is severely messed up. She might try something stupid."

"You mean..." Gray quickly looked out of the forest home and down the road to where their group was about to head down a hill that would take them out of view. A shiver of dread ran down his spine. "Lucy would never commit suicide."

"That's not exactly what I was talking about, but I guess it's a possibility too. She's definitely depressed. Keep an eye on her for a while. Make sure she doesn't try anything foolish. Protect her...as a friend!"

Gray pouted at the stressed words, but he nodded before leaving to catch up with the others. She was right; Lucy had been out of sorts since that day on Hoshinoue Island. Gray could not remember anything after his fight with Kefira, but he heard that Lucy had tried—and failed—to stand up against Kefira and Haftorang combined. After having fought the fishman and witnessing the trouble Loke had with the ancient noble, he realized that such a stand was hopelessly futile. Lucy never could have won, even with all of her Spirits. Still, just the fact that she tried impressed him. Lucy had guts, and he admired that.

Down the road, Natsu's sensitive ears had overheard Porlyusica's bleak outlook. He looked down at the toddler who had once again gone lethargic and fell asleep in his arms while hugging the trailing end of Natsu's scarf like a security blanket. His orange and blond hair spiked out like Loke's, with his brown eyes closed they appeared just like Loke's, yet his face and smile were Lucy's.

"We'll take care of you, kid," he whispered, adjusting his hold to make it more comfortable on the child. "Don't you worry. You're godfather is here to look after you. I won't let anything bad happen."

They took Lucy back to her room at Fairy Hills, although the landlady grumbled about all the men who kept showing up lately. Wendy left back to her room, Natsu placed Luke in his crib and then took off to meet Happy for a job, but Gray stuck around. Porlyusica's warning bothered him, and now he was almost afraid to take his eyes off of her for more than a few minutes. Lucy mindlessly
began to fix tea.

"Gray," she said quietly from the kitchen. "Is this pointless? Should I just hand him over?"

He walked up behind her and rubbed the tension out of her shoulders with his cool hands. "You're the only one who can decide that, Lucy."

"I...don't know," she sniffed, staring at the kettle sitting on the stove while Gray's hands eased her muscles. "I have no clue what I should do, or what I want. I'm...lost. I just want things to go back to how they used to be."

"With you and Loke raising Luke as a family?" he asked.

She leaned back against his chest and closed her eyes. "No, further back. To the days of just us four: you, me, Natsu, and Erza. I want to go back to crazy jobs and fun times hanging out at my home. I want to go back before Acnologia, before we lost seven years, before everything that happened afterward. I wish there was a way to go back, change one choice, and rewrite all of that grief."

"We'd also be rewriting a lot of good times."

Gray swallowed hard, and it felt like his heart might beat out of his chest. Lucy's soft fingers grazed over the scar above his eyebrow.

"I remember when I treated this. I warned you it'd leave a scar. I still remember what you said. 'I don't care where I get hurt, as long as my injuries are visible.' I thought that was a really cool thing for you to say. I think it was then that I stopped thinking of you as just the weird ice mage with a stripping habit and...maybe...you could be a cool guy as well."

"Lucy," Gray whispered in shock.

She began to lean in closer to him. Her eyes lowered off the scar and onto his lips. "You've stuck by me all this time. I want to thank you."

Gray felt himself break into a cold sweat. He watched in shock as Lucy leaned in closer and closer. He opened his mouth to try saying something, but his throat was too tight even to swallow. He realized now what Porlyusica meant.

Make sure she doesn't try anything foolish. Protect her...as a friend!

Suddenly, Gray's hands shot out, holding her shoulders and pushing her lips just out of reach. Lucy's eyes opened in surprise at being rejected, and even more shock at the torment in Gray's face.

"I can't," he gnashed in anguish. "As Loke's friend, I can't betray him. You shouldn't either. If you did," he whispered, "you'd only regret it. Loke..."

"Loke left me!" she shouted furiously. "He didn't even leave me his key. He left behind nothing!"

"He sacrificed himself for you and Luke," Gray yelled back. "Lucy, he came there to take Luke to the Spirit World, but look what he did: he left him behind! That's what he left you! He could have just taken Luke and fled to the Spirit World, but he didn't. He wanted to protect you at any cost. Natsu and I would have done the same, but in this case the only person who could have appeased that old queen was Loke."
"But...if I had his ring..."

"The fishman used to be his friend, right? He would know immediately if Loke was missing his ring, and Kefira would just have gone after you again to get it. Loke knew what he was doing. Same with the Lion's Key. You were unconscious, Lucy. All three of us were. None of us could have done anything to help him, and he had no clue when any of us would finally wake up. Loke had to act immediately or you, me, Natsu, and Luke would have been killed. He had to sever all ties with you, anything that would have made Kefira want you. He left behind the Regulus Key for you to guard, and he gave you freedom."

"Yes, and he freely left with that bitch who wants him as her sex toy. She wants him wholly as her own. He told me before, she had the ability to force him to remain as her lover. Right now he's probably...he's...with her..."

She broke down into tears, and Gray grabbed her quickly, letting her bury her face into his white coat. He stroked her hair and rested his chin on her head, cradling her as she finally released all her anger.

"Let it out," he said softly.

"I hate him!" she shrieked. "Why would he do that? Even...even for me." She hiccuped a sob and pounded her fists on Gray in anger while he stood there accepting her weak outburst. "If I had just handed Luke over...or if I had been quicker and used the Regulus Key when he told me to...if I had...just...been stronger!"

"Same here," Gray admitted. "Don't you think I feel the same way? I couldn't protect you. I was so weak, Loke had to go off and do that. I was no match for one lousy Celestial Spirit. Don't you think I feel just as guilty?"

Lucy leaned back in surprise at the spite in his words. She honestly had not considered how Gray and Natsu must feel. She knew those two had protected her for years. To fail now must have been a huge blow to them.

"Lucy," Gray said, staring hard down at her. "Loke accused me of seducing you. Maybe I unconsciously tried, I don't know, but since he challenged me on it, I...I can't take his place, not in that way. I can be a friend, but nothing more. It isn't right, and it isn't fair to you."

Her blush went brighter, and her head fell in shame. "Maybe...me, too. Maybe I'm guilty of...well...of at least being a little too close to you. Sorry."

He smiled at the small confession and tapped her chin up to look at him. "I can't steal you away from him, but I promise to stay by your side until you heart stops hurting. When that day comes, if you don't want Loke, if you're still interested, if it's what you truly want...I'll be there for you, damn all the consequences."

Her face twisted a little as she thought about what she truly wanted. She was angry, but not so much at Loke. She realized just then that who really made her angry...was herself!

"Thanks, Gray," she muttered. "Could you just hold me for today? Would that be okay?"

He chuckled, finding her timid side to be unbearably cute. "Sure, I can do that much. It's what a true friend would do, right?"

He pulled her over to the couch, sat down, and she sat next to him. Hesitantly, now aware of her guilt, Lucy rested her head on his shoulder. Instead, Gray wrapped his arm around her and pulled her
in closer. Lucy blushed, but she accepted his chest to rest against. Tears dripped down silently as she listened to his heartbeat and felt gentle peace finally returning to her soul.

"Hey Gray?" she asked, and he hummed back to her. "Juvia was bugging me yesterday about you. You know, the whole love rival thing she likes to obsess about."

"Ignore her," he mumbled. Lucy was surprisingly comfortable to hold.

"Maybe you should spend more time with her. She's a sweet girl once you get to know her, and you can't be dense enough not to realize her feelings."

"You and Erza!" he grumbled. "What's with you two trying to hook me up with that annoying woman?"

"I dunno, it's just a suggestion...for now, at least."

Gray had to chuckle softly at that last part. "Fine, I'll stop pestering you all the time and try talking to Juvia more...for now, at least. Maybe if I agree to take her out on a date, she'll stop stalking me. But later. Today, I'm here to take care of you...as a friend."

"Sounds good," Lucy sighed as she snuggled into Gray's coat.

End of Chapter 40
"As I saw the morning star come up over the mountain, I realized at last, that life is simply a collection of memories...but memories, my friends, are like starlight, because memories go on forever." - C. W. McCall
should forget about her, Leo. She's naught but a greedy and thoughtless woman who betrayed you."

His frown pulled down tighter. "She did as she thought best."

"She's holding your son hostage despite knowing it could mean his death. I saw with my own eyes, she already has that other man." 

"Gray's my friend," he shouted. "I was his partner."

"Yet when I arrived," she spoke fast, "you were fighting him."

Loke turned his head away from her and looked to the corner of the bedroom. Kefira rose up onto her elbow and climbed on top of Loke's body, straddling over his hips. Her thin fingers gently tugged his face back to look up at her.

"Leo," she said sadly, feeling sorry for him. "You probably realize it by now, don't you?" She pouted sympathetically, as if she truly pitied him and his choice in women. "She's Naomi."

"She's not..."

"Is reincarnation really so hard to believe?"

Loke's brow tightened hard, and his eyes closed against a truth he had been telling himself was impossible. Still, since that day a year ago, he had begun to see the similarities between Lucy and Naomi: the phrases they used when talking, the way they laughed, little things like the pull of Lucy's lips when she pouted and how her eyes twinkled in the starlight. Plus that one damning similarity: of all the women he had known over the centuries, those two somehow managed to conceive a child from him.

He said in a low voice, "Even if the soul is the same, Lucy isn't Naomi. Naomi was shy, whispered everything, too weak to lift a sack of flour, scared of a field mouse. Lucy is outgoing, noisy, a little grumpy sometimes..." He had to smile and laugh. "...likes to think she has a lot of sex appeal and use it to her advantage. She's fearless, even if she freaks out a lot, and she's been in many battles. She never hides behind her Spirits. She fights beside us."

"Yet who is she standing beside now?"

Loke swallowed bitterly and looked straight ahead. "I trust Gray."

Kefira had to titter at that. "No you don't. If you did, you wouldn't look so worried when you talk about him. You think you've already lost her to him. It's understandable; he's good-looking." She leaned on top of Loke's body and stroked her fingers over his naked chest. "You know...Naomi remarried."

"I heard about it," he muttered bitterly.

"Accept the harsh truth, my overly-proud Lion," she frowned, stroking her fingers over his face. "The body may change, even the personality, but the spirit within stays the same. Both Naomi and Lucy waited less than a year before replacing you. But Leo, my dear Lion..." She pulled his face back over to her and gave him a kiss. Loke did not even close his eyes as he coldly let her do it. "I have waited four hundred years for you. I can love you through eternity. Once we find the Regulus Key, we can go back to how we were, you as King of the Heavens, me as Queen of Kohinur."

He finally pulled away, shoved her off of him, stood up, and glared down at her. "That's only if I use Regulus to defeat Kohinur's existing government and subdue their armies."
"A mere skirmish for the great Lion," she said in placatory tones.

He lashed out, "I don't fight those sorts of wars anymore, Kefira!" Loke looked aside to calm himself. "Besides," he said in a smoother tone, "first you have to get the Regulus Key."

"And you're lying about where it is."

Despite himself, Loke jolted at her keen observation.

"Don't think I'm a foolish newborn kitten, Leo. I've been around for four hundred years. I've heard men tell many lies. You're taking us to the Kingdom of Setareh in the east, yet they had the Antares Key. Now, why would Regulus hide his Lapis Lazuli Key in the enemy's land?"

"Regulus considered no land of the Humans his enemy nor ally."

"Regulus was also worried about keeping a balance of power amongst us Humans. He would not tip those scales by giving Setareh two Royal Star Keys."

"The Antares Key was destroyed."

"I would bet my nobility the Regulus Key remained in Kohinur, likely on Hoshinoue Island. I always wondered why Zeref set up his base on such a remote island. Which means Lucy has likely found it by now." She rose up, naked and breathtaking in the morning sunlight, and slithered up against his body. Her long finger painted with blood red enamel tapped under his chin, annoying him. "You're a bad boy, Leo."

He gritted his teeth that she had figured it out too soon. He had hoped to delay Kefira for a few more months, long enough for Lucy to sort things out with Luke and hopefully find a way to save him. "I wanted my son to be safe. I had no guarantee that if I gave you the Regulus Key, you wouldn't kill Luke."

"Protecting your pride and family? Very well, I forgive you. However, as punishment, you have to take the Regulus Key away from Lucy. Haftorang and I can distract the others, but we might accidentally harm your former lover or child. If you wish to ensure their safety, Leo, then it must be you alone who handles her. Otherwise, how many Earthland months do you have before the Spirit King demands your son?"

"Four left," he glared. "I can't even return home to beg for an extension since I'm now outcast for joining you."

"Fear not about yourself just yet. The seirei tea and my magic will assure you can stay in Earthland for many years, but I doubt your son has four months. My magic can keep him in Earthland for a few years, but I need Zeref's notes in Kohinur Keep if you wish to keep him here indefinitely. While you're lying to me and wasting our time, your son is dying. Even if Lucy hands him over to the Spirit World, your only hope for being reunited with him is the Key to the Heart of the Lion. It'll mean war. You know that, right?" she asked, looking worried and pawing at his arm to soothe his troubled face.

He nodded sadly. "I knew when I joined you, there was no going back."

"I cannot fight the Spirit King. Haftorang might be able to match him, but the other Zodiacs would be there too. How many could you defeat?"

Loke hummed as he considered it. "If I took on Scorpio, Gemini, and Capricorn, Haftorang can easily defeat Aquarius, Taurus, and Pisces...Virgo, Aries, and Cancer are weak in battle, but..."
"You've considered it." She followed after him, not ready to let him escape yet. "You've probably thought a lot about it, Leo, and long before you returned to me. How many of them could be swayed to our side? Taurus might like the Royal Stars back. Aries was always closest to you. Scorpio? Maybe Pisces?"

"I don't like the thought of fighting my friends," he snapped, trying to escape from her.

"Yet you knew it was inevitable."

"I don't want a civil war," he shouted.

"And I don't want to lose you again," she yelled right back at him. Kefira threw her arms around Loke and held him tightly with her cheek against his bare chest. "After I've waited so long, I can't let them kill you."

He stood stiffly and stared forward. "Kefira."

She eagerly looked up into his face. "Yes, my Lion?"

He frowned, but he had to ask. "Would you make Lucy immortal?"

She pulled away fast with a disgusted look.

Loke stared down at her unemotionally. "I know you can do it. You never did while you were queen, but your bloodline had that ability. Considering all the forms of magic you've mastered, I bet that was one you at least studied. I won't go a step farther with you unless you swear not to hurt Lucy and to make her immortal. You can be the Queen of Kohinur if you want, but I want her to be my Queen of the Heavens."

Kefira's fingers drifted up to her mouth, feigning shock while really hiding a sneer. For a while, she debated it, although her face kept returning to a snarl. She swallowed back disgust and betrayal, but finally firmed up her determination. "If that's the only way, then yes," she decided. "But not until she hands over the Regulus Key and I get my kingdom back. After you do that for me, we'll discuss it. If she wants it, then yes, I know how to do it. If she doesn't want it, I won't bother."

"Blood oath," he demanded.

She chuckled and walked over to her desk. "Feeling nostalgic? Blood oaths were quite the trend in old Kohinur." She picked up a dagger with a bejeweled handle and held it aloft in the dawn glow. "I, Yamataikoku No Kefira, Shaman-Queen of Kohinur, hereby swear unto Leo the Lion, Leader of the Ecliptic Zodiacs, my oath to make Lucy Heartfilia an immortal Celestial Spirit upon the conditions we have thus laid out." Then she grabbed the blade and slid the dagger fast, slicing her hand. Her face winced at the pain, and thick droplets of purplish-red blood dripped to the floor. "Satisfied?"

Loke gave a silent nod, wrapped a robe around him, and stepped out of the bedroom.

She stood naked in the doorway watching him until he turned down a corridor. "Foolish Lion," she smirked. "Hast thou forgotten that I excelled in twisting my way out of blood oaths? I'm no longer the Shaman-Queen...not until thou makest Kohinur bend its knee to me once more. I refuse to surrender thee, Leo. Thou shouldst know that by now. I need not worry about that blonde bitch if she is dead before I ascend the throne once more."

She chuckled, but winced at the pain in her hand.
"A bloody hassle, these blood oaths," she muttered, then left to search for something to bandage her hand.

Loke strode through a hall, passing old paintings. They were still in Kohinur, right near the eastern border, in a house that had once belonged to Clan Yamataikoku's royal family. He paused by one portrait. The slanted eyes, the long raven hair, the alabaster skin and dangerously beautiful smile: it was Kefira, a picture painted of her the year she was crowned queen, a young lady, barely old enough to be called a woman. In her hands were two items, a massive scarlet stone cut into the shape of a heart and a blue key. Loke recognized the Ruby Silphium, considered the greatest gem in the world at one time. Legend said that the gem was a heart from a god or ancient spirit. Clan Yamataikoku believed it was the Lion's Heart in terrestrial form. It was said that the person who owned the Ruby Silphium was destined to rule without knowing the heartache of defeat.

All three of those rumors were wrong. Loke remembered the day he gave the massive stone to a friend, who had it cut and polished into this shape. The idea that the ruby was Leo's heart was foolish. And obviously the Ruby Silphium did not stop Kohinur from falling into enemy hands.

Loke reached up to the painting and touched the blue-colored key. "Regulus," he whispered wistfully. Then his finger went up to Kefira's face and caressed the portrait's rosy cheeks. "Silly girl. When did you turn from such an idealistic noble into...this?"

He turned away from the painting and strode into the mansion's library. The walls were filled with books and ancient tomes. Lacrima lights brightened the reading area. There he found Haftorang reclining on a couch reading a book. He nodded curtly in greeting, then went to a table with a carafe of wine and poured himself a glass.

"You look weary. Has she entice you to her bed finally?" the fishman asked.

Loke glared down at the red wine. "She tries. She's good at it, but I'm holding her back...barely. I've not embraced her, if that's what you mean."

Haftorang looked aside. "Impressive. I thought for sure she'd make you into her lover within days-s-s."

"As I said, she tries. There's only one woman I want, and that's Lucy."

The massive mouth tweaked in a smile. "That girl must be a talented woman to have tamed the Lion."

Loke scoffed at that and took a drink. "More like I had to tame her."

"A wild one, huh? Do you remember that girl...oh, it must have been eight thousand, no, ten thousand years ago. The southern girl who ran around naked."

Loke laughed into his goblet. "Isis?"

"That's the one! Isis-s-s. She was a wild one."

"Her beauty was notorious in five kingdoms! I have no idea how you tamed her. I sure couldn't, and believe me, I tried! Did you know that a few thousand years later, they made an entire religion based upon legends of her?"

Haftorang hummed with a massive smile. "I believe it. She was a goddess-s-s!"

"Perverted old Fishy!" Then something dawned on Loke. "She was the one who..."
"Yes-s-s," Haftorang nodded nostalgically. "Not all Celestial Spirits are born into the Spirit World. Some of us earned our right to become immortal. You did too, Lion."

Loke looked aside thoughtfully. "That was...a really long time ago. Even for Celestial Spirits."

"Isis-s-s," Haftorang sighed nostalgically. "I saved her life. We had one beautiful night together. Then she offered me a choice: I could be king with her as queen, or I could be immortal. I was a poor fisherman, I knew nothing of nobility nor did that sort of thing interest me, so of course I accepted eternal life! I didn't think I'd end up looking like this-s-s," he pouted. "She lived in the southern desert and owned Fomalhaut's Lapis Lazuli Key. She delivered me right to him, then I was taken to the Spirit World to be his host and the Spirit of the Southern Fish. A year later, Isis bore my daughter Pisces, who had a son. Isis changed them both with her magic too, so that I could have something to remember her by. They sure did grow huge!" he chuckled.

Loke thought back to ancient times, a time long before Kohinur and Fiore even existed. "Do you ever regret it?"

Haftorang jolted at the odd question. "Regret what? Making love to her? Hell no! She was amazing."

"Choosing immortality?"

Haftorang let out a sharp laugh. "Hah! That's insane, of course not."

"You could have stayed with Isis. She was the most beautiful woman in the world at the time. You could have married her, raised your children together, lived a happy life..."

"Leo, I was an unwanted man, ugly and undesirable. I didn't have anything worthwhile in that life. I didn't know Isis well enough to love her."

"You could have gotten to know her," he insisted. "She turned me down, yet she took you as a lover and offered to marry you. She must have been interested."

The fishman shook his head. "Leo, you were born with the face of a noble. Women flock to you. You don't understand what it's like to be so undesirable. Isis likely made love to me out of pity. She would not have wanted a lowly creature like me as her king. Besides-s-s, that was thousands of years ago. I can barely remember what she looked like, or her name, or exactly what I did that saved her life. We forget such foolish details-s-s."

Loke stared down contemplatively into his wineglass. "I don't. I remember everything. Every woman I ever truly loved, every detail of the romance. I can remember their favorite colors."

"You're the Lordly Lion; you're supposed to remember things-s-s. I'm just the Southern Fish," he said with a shrug from his translucent fins. "But it's good you remember so well."

"I often wish I could forget," Loke muttered bitterly.

"I bet you still remember how you became a Celestial Spirit."

His green eyes tightened thoughtfully. "Like it was yesterday."

"Those of us who become Celestial Spirits through our deeds-s-s, it's said we can still have children but only with the woman we loved in life. I never had a lover but Isis-s-s. Were you married when you were a Human?"

"No," Loke whispered. "Marriage as a concept didn't exist back then. Like I said, it was a really,
really long time ago. But there was a woman," he said softly, and his face looked sad with ancient memories. "She gave me a stone, I gave her the skin to a lion I had killed barehanded. That was good enough to make us a couple. She died bearing our first child. The baby died that winter. I couldn't handle the grief, so I took both the stone and the lion skin and left our tribe. I wandered the frozen wilderness alone, looking to die.

"Then I met a man dressed in clothes we didn't have in the far northern tribes. He said he was Uyuh'cluh, Chieftain of the North. Apparently he and his army had come to kill us barbarians. I thought of the other families in our tribe, and I didn't want any of them to suffer through death like I had. So I fought him for the pride of my people.

"It was the hardest fight I had ever been in. I was only a hunter, but he was a trained warrior. At one point, Uyuh'cluh brought his spear down on me, and I used the stone to block him. The giant spearhead almost chipped it in half. I was saved by the stone, but I laid on my back at his mercy. Uyuh'cluh was shocked to see the stone, the largest ruby he had ever come across. He gave me an offer. He said my fighting ability so impressed him, he would call off his troops if I gave the stone to him. I figured it was useless chipped like that; still, he took it, carved it, and made the Ruby Silphium from it, utilizing even the massive chip he put in, making what would later be called a 'heart shape.'"

"That must have been Kefira's ancestor," Haftorang realized.

"One of her earliest, a time when most Humans still dwelt in caves and mud huts. Then Uyuh'cluh told his troops not to attack any of us, and he sought out a peaceable solution. He asked for my name, but we didn't have such concepts in our tribe. He said that with my long hair and animal skin clothes, I looked like some wild beast, so he gave me the name Tlu'datsi, meaning Lion. It was the first of many names I went by over my existence. Then Uyuh'cluh asked what I desired most in the world. I told him I just wanted to live happily with my woman, but since it was impossible, I wanted nothing. He said, 'What if I can give you everything, including the chance to find your woman again?' I thought he hadn't understood what I meant, since our dialects were different. Suddenly, Uyuh'cluh pulled out a blue key, there was a huge flash, and Regulus—known by his ancient name Venant back then—stood before me. For my heroism in battle and proving myself a man of pride and dignity, I was made into Leo the Lion." He laughed wryly at that fateful day. "I was actually upset at Uyuh'cluh. I had left the tribe looking to die, and instead I ended up immortal."

Loke's eyes squinted and his brow tensed in bitter memories. He looked either ready to cry or snarl, and Haftorang kept silent to watch how he would react.

"I thought I could forget about my life as a Human," Loke said softly, "but I never did. I remember how I felt when Uyuh'cluh gave me that name, Tlu'datsi. It was like, for the first time, I was more than just a tribal hunter. I was a person, an individual. I remember...the pride I felt. I felt like I owed him a great debt for giving me that name, and I swore to watch over his family throughout the generations. Still, I wanted to forget everything from before the day I met him. I tried to forget my home, my tribe, that woman. She didn't even have a name, but I never needed one for her," he said with a smile that hid tears he might have shed in private, but he refused to give into them now. "Naomi...she must have been the reincarnation of that woman. Lucy too. That's why I could have children with them."

"So it seems-s-s," Haftorang smiled with wary hopefulness. "The same soul of who you loved most in life. Even though you are the Lion now, your soul is connected to her."

"And what a sick joke from Fate that with all three, I lost the woman in only a few years...and my sons."

"You haven't lost Lucy yet," the fishman said with a smile of encouragement. "Third time's a charm,
as they say. I'm glad you found her again. When we see Lucy in the future, I will protect her if I can."

"I'm honestly shocked you bothered to protect her all this time. She told me that you gave her food while a prisoner of Kefira, and you didn't attack her on Hoshinoue Island. You could have easily killed her and all the others while leaving Luke alive. Instead, Kefira had to bypass you and call out Fomalhaut."

"Those people were your friends-s-s, and since I still consider myself your friend, they are in turn my friends-s-s. I might block their attempts to stop me, but I won't kill them."

"I noticed that. You left Gray alive. I thought you were toying with him, but I realized how hard you were concentrating on each attack."

"Yes-s-s, predicting his moves so that I would not deliver a fatal blow. Not an easy way to fight, especially with someone so strong."

Loke refilled his wineglass. "For what it's worth, thanks."

Haftorang chuckled with a relaxed smile. "Talking to you like this-s-s, it's like the old days when you were king. We could speak of anything. I thought of you as my brother."

Instead of drinking his wine, Loke set the glass aside and glared at the fishman. "I never had a chance to ask you, but...why did you betray us back then?" he asked in anguish, feeling those old emotions all over again. "Why did you leave the Spirit World and join Zeref? Do you have any idea how hard it was for me to fight not only my son, but my best friend, the Spirit who was closer than a brother? Why did you do it? And why did you join Kefira again now? I would've thought you'd learn your lesson the first time."

Haftorang sighed in sadness to see the pain in the Lion's eyes. "I suppose saying 'I'm sorry' won't work, nor am I sorry for my actions-s-s. You deserve an explanation."

The fishman rose and walked over to a bookshelf, staring at it so he did not have to see the anger in his friend's face.

"Fomalhaut was the only Royal Star who did not want to leave, but since the other three did, he was out-voted. Because of his reluctance, Regulus decreed that his key would be hidden without telling me where it was-s-s. Before Zeref's birth, Kefira obtained my Silver Key and said she was looking for the Lapis Lazuli Keys-s-s. She wanted my help to search for the Regulus Key. She claimed she would bring you back into power, and that became my goal as well. For that reason, I joined her. Since I would be banished if anyone found out what I was doing, she used her magic to allow me to stay in the Human World longer than normal. No one in the Spirit World noticed my absence since, after all, I am called the Solitary One for a reason.

"We were supposed to track down where you and Naomi ran away to. Instead, Naomi fled with her son, we pursued, and we caught her. Kefira was outraged that Naomi kept saying she couldn't call you out. Since I had not returned to the Spirit World in many years, I didn't know you had been kept prisoner by the Spirit King. I was the one who sensed your magic within Naomi's child. I convinced Kefira that, as your son, Zeref would be able to find the Regulus Key once he grew up a little. She spared him and took him with us.

"After that, I stuck by Zeref, hoping he would know where the Royal Stars hid their keys-s-s, and wanting to protect him from Kefira. I wanted Zeref to succeed so he could one day free you from your prison. However, I suppose Kefira's influence over the boy was too great. I didn't approve of
her way of training him, yet I admit I turned a blind eye when they taught him such horrific magic, like how to kill effortlessly and create demons-s-s.

"When Cheveyo attacked and burned Kohinur Keep, we fled south with the boy. It was Zeref who led us to Hoshinoue Island. I suddenly felt the key's presence, but Zeref never took it. I thought maybe he was holding onto it in secret, keeping it away from Kefira so she would not try to reclaim it. Maybe he was. However, he couldn't use it without you. He told me we had to lure you to the island so he could use your ring, make the Regulus Key whole, and then summon the King of the Heavens once more. I had hoped that when that happened, Regulus would rejoice at returning and would tell me where he hid the Fomalhaut Key. That was all I wanted: my old power back and you reinstated. I'm useless without Fomalhaut, called the Solitary One because no one wants an ugly fish like me. As I was rejected in life, so I am in the heavens-s-s."

"You were never rejected, Piscis Austrinus," Loke insisted passionately. "You had your two sons, the love of Aquarius, our friendship!" he shouted, still bitter with a sense of being betrayed. "You were not alone. You didn't need that power."

"Fomalhaut didn't want to go," the fishman yelled back. "If the other three wanted to transcend, that was fine, but they could have left Fomalhaut to remain."

"It would have been an uneven balance of power and led to wars with the other..."

"I don't care!" Haftorang bellowed. Catching himself in such an undignified outburst, he covered a fin over his wide mouth and reined in his emotions. "I just wanted to be strong like you, Leo. I wanted to remain as your equal. Without Fomalhaut—as nothing more than Piscis Austrinus-s-s—I'm pathetically weak. There was no way I could match you. You're the noble Lion and leader of the Ecliptic Zodiacs-s-s. I'm nothing but the Southern Fish."

"The distance between us was so far apart, I couldn't even look at you. And...I admit I was angry at you. You, Scorpio, and Taurus are good fighters on your own. What was I? I was a Silver Key, good at navigating fishing boats, but people preferred to use Pyxis for that. I was antiquated, unwanted. All I wanted was to feel like I could be your equal again."

"And so you rejoined Kefira after she broke out of her prison?"

"No," he admitted. "I was the one who freed her."

Loke opened his mouth to ask how, but he closed his lips fast with a disapproving scowl.

"You found the Fomalhaut Key," Loke whispered. "But how if he didn't tell you where it was? And how did you escape death?"

"Simple, really. I escaped because the Humans and Spirits both underestimated me. The Spirit King figured that if I stayed trapped in the Human World, I would die within weeks-s-s. Banishment is a death sentence, after all. You know that too well, my king. However, we who were blessed by the Royal Stars can last longer than average Spirits-s-s."

"I lasted three years," Loke nodded.

"Without aid, I wouldn't have fared even that well. A year after Zeref's defeat, everyone thought I was dead...even you. Luckily I have some friends in the Spirit World who don't mind getting their
hands a little dirty, and they helped me to hide from the Spirit King. Hydra gave me seirei tea and provided me with these celestial clothes-s-s." He pointed to the loincloth with the symbol of a fish on it. "It strengthened me enough so I could track down the last king of the South, the son of the final owner of the Fomalhaut Key. He took pity on me in memory of his father and pointed me in a direction. I used my own sense of navigation from there and found the Fomalhaut Key. However, we Spirits cannot use those keys-s-s. I needed a Celestial Spirit mage, and they have always been rare. Naomi was dead, Zeref was gone, Kefira was imprisoned, of course I couldn't turn to Cheveyo, and all the other Spirit mages were under Cheveyo's control, flocking to him in hopes that he would grant them a Gold Key upon his retirement. Finally I found a child with potential, although he was too young. I trained him. It took four years-s-s, but finally he was just barely strong enough to use the Lapis Lazuli Key. Sadly, it used up all the magic in his body and he died. Still, I merged with Fomalhaut and took on my stronger form, as you see now." He stretched out his fins to show off the huge body with firm muscles and massive face.

"You killed a boy to do it?" Loke sneered.

"I honestly didn't want that to happen. I loved that boy. He was a war orphan, so I raised him as my own son. I told him to stop when I saw it was too much, but he knew I was dying. He understood, if he did not call out Fomalhaut, I would fade away. He said, 'What's the point of magic to begin with if I can't use it to protect my friends?'"

"I've heard those words too," Loke realized, remembering the day Lucy saved him.

"I watched helplessly as he drained himself, and I decided not to let his death be in vain. I wanted to continue Zeref's will, to find the Regulus Key and bring my old king back into power. Since I'm now merged with Fomalhaut, I don't need to worry about returning to the Spirit World. Time was of no issue, but I still worried about how that dictator was abusing everyone back home."

"It wasn't that bad," Loke insisted in a soft mutter. "The Spirit King is a good guy...usually."

"How many times has he imprisoned you? He even banished you, Leo, and all because you tried to protect Aries-s-s. I heard about it all thanks to Hydra."

"You used Hydra as a spy," the Lion realized.

"I'll use anyone to meet my goals-s-s. That's why I freed Kefira a hundred years ago. I've been searching with her ever since. We heard Zeref was back and residing in a place called Tenrou Island, but he was deemed too unstable for us-s-s. Then we heard more and more rumors-s-s. Kefira had a book of prophecy written before the War. There was a line that went like this-s-s." With numerous hisses, he recited, "The son of the Sun sign shall secure safety amidst the slayers of serpentines, soaring Exceed, and sorcerers sublime. Several sorties shall succor the son of the stars. So sayeth this soothsayer."

"Awkwardly poetic, particularly when you say it," Loke chuckled.

"Awkward, yes-s-s, but prophetic as well as poetic. Now the Exceed are back, dragon slayers are once again in this world, and the Lion—the Sun sign—has a son. It was the sign Kefira and I were awaiting. We knew you would never disobey the will of the Royal Stars-s-s, so we hoped your son would assist us to fulfill Zeref's will. That's all I really want, after all. When this is over, if Kefira tries to harm your woman or corrupt your son like she did to Zeref, I will simply do away with her."

Loke glanced around nervously, realizing he should not say such things aloud, but he realized they were very much alone in this library. "You'd kill her after you've spent so long working beside her?"
"So long?" the fishman asked in confusion. "It was only a few years long ago, and it's only been for the past hundred years that we've lived together. That's not too long for Spirits-s-s. She means nothing besides a way to make you king again, old friend."

"But..." Loke's face tensed up. "She promised to make Lucy immortal. I know she can do it. She's the last of that bloodline, the descendant of the same man who made me into a Celestial Spirit. She has the ability within herself. That's our agreement for me helping her to get back Kohinur."

"That woman would give up her right arm to regain her ancestral lands-s-s," Haftorang realized, "but...would she be willing to share you with Lucy for all eternity?"

"We took a blood oath."

Haftorang laughed with his massive mouth. "How old-fashion! Well, if you wish to make her keep her oath, I won't kill her yet. However, if she causes trouble, I will be at your side, chamberlain to my king, just like the old days-s-s."

"Thanks," Loke mumbled, troubled by something else. "Look, I...I need to be away for a week or two. There's someone I need to talk to, someone I should have visited a long time ago."

"Not a Celestial Spirit, I hope," the Southern Fish said worriedly. "Unless you're asking to recruit someone to our cause, and even then you should take me along so they can't simply capture you. I can protect you until we get the Regulus Key back. Then you won't have to worry about anyone, not even the Spirit King."

"Don't worry, it's not a Celestial Spirit," he assured. Then Loke walked away and mumbled under his breath, "He's half-Spirit." Loud enough for Haftorang to hear, he shouted back, "I'll return in a few weeks. Tell Kefira not to do anything until I get back. With any luck, I'll have the perfect person to help us." Then after he left the room, Loke's face sank darker. "Although I doubt he'll want to help a deadbeat dad like me."

End of Chapter 41

Chapter End Notes

These backstories were something I had planned since Haftorang told Lucy that a Celestial Spirit's ability to have children depended upon how they became a Spirit, way back in Chapter 9. I never had a good opportunity to explain what I meant until now. I had this idea that the Constellations got their place sort of like how mythology explains, just...different.

Isis - an Egyptian goddess, patroness of nature and magic. According to Egyptian stories, she placed Piscis Austrinus and his children Pisces (changed to mother and son in the manga) into the heavens as thanks for rescuing her. I changed the myth a little. After all, legends are mere embellishments of past events.

For how Leo got into the heavens, instead of the Nemean Lion which Heracles killed, I wanted something older. Sadly, I couldn't find any Egyptian or Babylonia stories for how the Lion Constellation came into being, so I made up something. Still, at its heart it's a story about a warrior battling a "Lion." Since the Lion constellation has been noted since ancient times, I aimed for something very old, with tribes and chieftains,
hinting that this happened at the very dawn of Human civilization. We’re talking cavemen! Loke is ancient!

_Uyuh’cluh_ - a close approximation of pronouncing the word u-yv-tlv, the Cherokee word for “north.”

_Tlu’datsi_ - (tloo-DAH-chee) based on tlu-da-tsi, Cherokee word meaning "mountain lion."

Why did I pick Cherokee names? I dunno...for the same reason Cheveyo's name is also Native American. It sounds cool and has an appropriate meaning behind it. And my mother's family is Cherokee. ^_^

_Ruby Silphium_ - I said in Chapter 34, I'd explain the Ruby Silphium. In 34, Kefira gives her full (and lengthy) title including ”Protector of the Ruby Silphium.” It's common for royalty to hold many titles, and even in modern times, some royal families own a gem that represents their leadership. I had this idea of Loke's fight that led to him becoming immortal through some great feat, and I thought it'd be cool if it was Kefira's ancestor, tying them together. So I wanted something physical, like a legendary stone, to show how Loke has been tied to her family since ancient times.

Maybe all of this is a bunch of useless detail, but I liked inventing these back-stories, so forgive me if it slows down the story. In my head, laying out the past for these characters is important.
The son whines to his father, 'You messed up my childhood!' And the father says, 'How could I, son? I wasn't even there.' - John Cleese

The sky shined a deep blue in the woods. High above the treetops, puffs of clouds scuttled by, white and fluffy on top, gray and ominous on the bottom, while the sun alternated between hiding and blazing. All around, towering pines stabbed the sky like green spears of some ancient army. A solitary man sat in the middle of a clearing amidst soft tufts of clover and noble spires of purple foxglove. In this peaceful place, an ancient cemetery marred the burst of life with mossy headstones reminding the world that death was inevitable.

For most people, at least.

"Will I never die and join you?" the lonely man whispered sadly.

Loke slowly walked forward, cautious of the man in the clearing. He glanced at the headstones, reading names and little epitaphs. He approached the young man sitting in the center, right in front of a tall marker carved into the shape of a five-pointed star. On the front read:

Onoyasumaro No Naomi
May X357 — August X383
She served the Spirits of the Stars.
Now she is a spirit brighter than the stars.

Loke removed his sunglasses to view the grave respectfully. He folded his hands in front of him and said a prayer for Naomi, the woman who used to be his wife. The young man before him had limp black hair and sad eyes. His clothes were of an outdated style, yet they were clean and wrapped around him neatly in perfectly layered folds. Around his neck, the same as Kefira, was a necklace with a silver pearl.

"It's peaceful here," the man in black robes said in a melancholy voice. "I had to go back to gather her remains years afterward. There...wasn't much left. Still, she deserved a resting place. She loved lonely places, places where it was silent, where she could watch the night sky and listen to the wind, as if she was waiting for someone to answer her as she wished on her favorite star."

"Naomi was always like that," Loke agreed. "Palace life didn't suit her well at all. We would ride horses out to the countryside for picnics or just random strolling. She had a place she loved most, a small stream in the woods where the foxglove grew. They were her favorite."

"I know. That's why this place...it felt right. I came across it by chance, and I knew that if I ever got a chance to bury my mother, it would be here," the man said, not turning around. "I wonder how you managed to find me. I thought I was hiding my presence well. Perhaps I'm weaker than I thought."

Loke cautiously came up to his side and knelt before the grave, not so close as to be in the man's personal space, just close enough to show he was not afraid. "I can always sense my own flesh and blood...Zeref."
The dark mage turned around and stared coldly at the ginger-haired Spirit. "Is that so, Father? In all my travels, you've always known where I was? Then why is this the first time I've seen you in so many centuries? You were never there, Father," he accused with a slight glare of anger. "Not when I was growing up, not after I was imprisoned, and not after I freed myself. Not in four hundred years."

Loke sighed; he knew this would not be a happy reunion, so such accusations did not surprise him. Still, they stung. He settled down onto a clump of spongy clover. "You're right. I guess I never felt comfortable with the idea of being the father to...to..."

He could not bring himself to say it, but Zeref provided, "To the darkest, most evil mage to have plagued Earthland?"

"I'm sorry I wasn't there for you," Loke apologized softly.

Zeref waved it off. "I'm not so sure if your presence in my life might have changed things, but it's all in the past. I believe in destiny, despite my downfall. I accept what my life has been, good and bad. You were taken from me and Mother for a reason. Kefira turned me into this for a reason, even if it was only to form a catalyst to ensure four centuries of peace. I met up with Natsu and Fairy Tail for a reason. We shall see what that is. You're here today for a reason, although I wonder what that is. I wonder if you even know why you came. Out of all the times in these four hundred years, why now?"

"To tell you, maybe warn you." Loke looked down at his intertwined fingers. "You have a brother, Zeref."

He looked over sharply at that. "Since when?"

"Recently. Born last November. Unfortunately, things are turning out just as bad, maybe even worse, than what happened to me and your mother."

"Queen Kefira again? Or is it the Spirit King?"

"Both," he admitted.

Zeref looked away with a disturbed face, already feeling pity for a brother he had never met.

"I've already been imprisoned by the Spirit King twice. I'm free only to get Luke and bring him to the Spirit World."

"Yes, he'll die from vitality deprivation otherwise. I almost did, too. And Kefira? Is she after him?"

"Not anymore," Loke sighed.

Zeref watched him curiously for a moment, expecting an explanation, but Loke looked pensively at the gravestone. Suddenly, the dark mage understood. "You joined her!" It was part exclamation, part question.

"I had no choice," Loke admitted wearily. "It was me or my son, and I couldn't let her get him, not like what happened to you. This time," he muttered sadly, "at least I could stop her, even if it meant giving myself over to her."

"You'd go that far?" Zeref asked in shock.

Loke looked over in confusion. "Of course I would. If I could have been there, I would have done the same for you."
Zeref suddenly blushed and looked away in a fluster. "Couldn't you have overpowered her? You and the Zodiacs managed to capture me, so why not her?" He had not meant it to come out bitterly, but it still sounded that way.

"She has the Fomalhaut Key and Piscis Austrinus is working with her."

"I see," Zeref pouted. "That's troubling to hear. I should warn you, she wants more than just Kohinur back. She wants all four Royal Star Keys. It's the only reason she kept me alive."

Loke sighed and nodded. "Piscis Austrinus told me she tried to use you to find the Regulus Key. Then there was the final battle on Hoshinoue Island. I'm guessing you found it but refused to give it to her."

"Yes, I knew where to find it. Mother told me where it was before she died. I made the island my base so Queen Kefira would never guess it was there." Zeref glanced over suspiciously. "I wonder why you're telling me this, though. What do you think I can do? Stop her without causing another war? Help you get your own key?"

"Lucy has the Regulus Key. She refused to use it when we had the chance."

"Lucy," Zeref mused. "The name is familiar."

"Natsu's best friend."

"Natsu!" he cried out in astonishment. "I...I see. Well, Natsu will protect her, you need not worry about that. So why seek my aid? I destroy everything I touch. I doubt you want me near your woman and child."

"I dunno," Loke admitted. "I'm not even sure if I came here looking for aid. I don't want you helping Kefira's side, obviously; I'm not so sure you should try helping Fairy Tail's side, either. I just wanted you to know...you have a brother. I thought maybe that'd make you happy. Now that I'm here though, sitting in front of her grave, I realize you might not like hearing that. It means I moved on from Naomi. I mean, I loved her a lot, I still think of her, but...but I love Lucy now. Very much."

Zeref leaned back on his elbows and looked up into the silvery green shadows of the pine trees. "Mother remarried when I was a year old."

Loke looked up in shock. He already knew this much, but he still felt a pang of jealousy. Sadly, he realized Zeref was telling him so he would not think that telling his firstborn son the truth was painful.

"I...I heard a little about it," Loke admitted awkwardly. "I've always wondered...why? Why didn't she wait for me?"

"She figured you were either in so much trouble that you couldn't leave, or too scared to come out and deal with your child."

"No!" Loke cried out. "I tried so hard to escape. I almost killed myself trying."

Zeref smiled slightly hearing that but did not look to Loke to show that little bit of happiness. "Either way, she knew it would be too hard on you. She told me one day, she remarried hoping that if the Spirit King saw that she had moved on, you would be released. Even if she lost you, she wanted you to be free."

Loke dropped his head. "She did it...for me?"
"Well, there was more to it than just wanting to free you. She saw I was growing up too fast. She knew I'd need a father in my life. I was also very sickly, doctors were expensive, so she needed a husband to help her out financially. She told me before she died, remarrying was the hardest choice of her life because she knew it would hurt you so badly. She sacrificed her heart and her love trying to save you and me. In the end, it didn't work."

That hurt Loke. He had moments when he hated Naomi for giving up on him. To hear she did it hoping to save him, and to give Zeref a chance at life, pained him with guilt.

"My stepfather was a wealthy farmer, a bit rough around the edges, but he had a gentle heart. Mother had a daughter with him. I grew up with a sister."

"I see. That's...that's good," he said awkwardly. "I'm glad Naomi wasn't lonely, or you. So, what was your sister's name?"

"It doesn't matter," Zeref said coldly. "I was the one who killed her."

Loke looked stunned and felt a cold shudder. For a while, he had forgotten just who he was talking to: the Dark Wizard Zeref!

"It wasn't on purpose," he assured. "I was four when Mother took me and left home, although I looked more like twelve. Kohinur was already embroiled in war, yet we fled from the farm, leaving my father and Estella behind. I think Queen Kefira was already after us, but Mother didn't want to scare me. All she told me was that we were going to fetch...you."

He finally looked over to Loke, and the faintest smile was on his lips. Then Zeref rose to his feet and walked away, weaving between headstones, gently touching a few as he passed.

"She knew who was chasing her. She said, if anyone could stop Queen Kefira, it'd be you, but I was the one who could find your key. She told me enough, and I began to lead her there. However, my father—my adopted father—loved Mother too much. He had followed her with my sister in tow, but he was not being discrete. Queen Kefira followed him and found us. Mother managed to get Father and Estella away, but the two of us were caught. The queen demanded Mother to give over your key and find the Regulus Key for her. She tortured Mother in front of me."

Loke looked away, not even able to stomach such brutal truth.

"The queen knew about my stepfather and sister, and it infuriated her. Her torture went too far. As Mother was dying, she told me one last thing: Don't let her go above the stars! I knew what she meant. Hoshinoue Island, the Isle Above The Stars! Then Queen Kerfira was about to kill me, but Piscis Austrinus was with her, before he became Haftorang. He sensed the Celestial Spirit nature in me and decided to take me with them. They were the ones who turned me into this!"

He spread his arms out in a burst of self-loathing. Suddenly the clover, foxglove flowers, and pine trees around him died. The burst of black magic spread, surrounding even Loke. He felt a sickening sensation as it passed over him, like insects crawling over him and leaving fire in their wake. Then it was over, and black death was all that was left of the gentle clearing. In the middle of the destruction, Zeref stood looking sad at the power he could barely control.

"I spent the next few years doing what the queen and her court wanted. I studied dark art magic, created demons and other vile things. I didn't know it was wrong. It...was fun. By the time I knew just what my creations were being used for, I didn't care. Until one day, I heard that one of my creations destroyed a school Estella was attending, and she died. I went out to find her and my stepfather. He was dead too, at the hands of one of my demons."
Zeref walked over to two other headstones, more humble than the large marble star. One read Fabiano, the smaller one read Estella.

"I saw what my things did to the world," Zeref said sadly, caressing the small headstone of his half-sister. "I knew I needed to be stopped. If anyone could stop me, it was my own father. However, Queen Kefira said you were locked away. I had to have someone stronger use your key, so I committed treason against Kohinur. I went to our enemies and made sure the Spirit Mage Cheveyo got close enough to defeat Queen Kefira. It worked. I saw him summons you, but I was forced to escape Kohinur Keep. The others didn't want me to be taken, not yet. I was still *useful* to them. Queen Kefira was more determined than ever that I should find the Regulus Key, and I knew exactly where it was."

"Then you went there," Loke nodded. "I remember when the Great Gathering convened on Hoshinoue Island, I was scared to death that Kefira had the Regulus Key."

"I made my fortress there specifically to watch over that key and make sure she never found it. Who thinks to look right under their nose for a mystic lost artifact?"

"I see," he whispered. "That explains a lot."

"If you were curious," Zeref said with a small smile, "you should have come visited me earlier. Don't fear my reactions. What son wants a cowardly lion as his father?" he teased.

That lighter tone in the man's voice made Loke feel at ease. "Thanks. Also, I know it's too late, but...I'm sorry I defeated you."

Zeref laughed, and his pale face looked boyish in amusement. "Sorry? Why should the leader of the Zodiacs, the *Hero of Hoshinoue*, be sorry for bringing peace to the world? I knew you were the only one who could stop that twisted beast they turned me into. I was relieved and glad," he admitted with a reticent smile. "Like I'll be glad when Natsu stops me. I don't like what I became, but I believe there is a reason for it. There must be! Until I discover that reason, I'll keep away from the living and haunt the homes of the dead. Therefore," Zeref concluded sadly, "I should not get involved in this new brother of mine. I am a creature of death and destruction. I would only twist his pure heart. If you have problems," he said, turning aside and walking away, "you need to solve them on your own. Farewell, Father."

"Zeref!" Loke called out, but the young man did not stop. Wherever he went, the life around him dried up and died. "I'm so sorry...my son," he whispered. "I hope, one day, we can do something for you."

Many days later, Loke returned to Kefira's manor. He saw there was packing involved, as if they were ready to move.

"There you are!" Kefira stomped forward and slapped Loke across the face. "You strong-willed Spirit! How dare you leave for such a long time and ignore my calls for you."

"You didn't need me for anything important," he glared. Kefira opened her mouth to protest. "Being in your bedroom is *not* important! So, what's going on here?"

"What we discussed: we're preparing to invade Magnolia."

Loke felt a momentary spike of horror and tensed up, ready to scream protests. However, he barely managed to keep it bottled up. It was true, they had discussed this. He knew it was coming. He had just hoped to delay her a little longer.
"First I must ask you, Leo, and be honest." Kefira's eyes pierced into his gaze. "Do you truly plan on fighting for me even against your Fiore friends?"

His lips drew down, but he answered honestly. "I don't like it, but you have my key. I fight for my owner, even against a friend. That's the pride of a Celestial Spirit."

"Leo," Haftorang whispered sadly.

He grinned over at the Fish. "Don't look at me that way. You and I fought each other many times when North and South went to war." Loke saw Kefira's hand was still wrapped in a white bandage. He picked it up and held it gently. "Does it still hurt?" he asked in concern.

"The bleeding stopped within seconds, but the pain can linger. Sadly, immortality doesn't mean I heal instantly. If only Zeref had perfected that technique, too."

"I see," he muttered.

Then he kissed her hand. The stern woman could barely help but blush. Kefira rushed past him before her embarrassment became too obvious, shouting back an excuse that she had to speak with the owner of the manor. Haftorang followed after her. Loke silently watched them go. Slowly, a smirk rose onto his lips.

"That's good to know, Kefira. Very good!"

**End of Chapter 42**

Chapter End Notes

=^o_o^= "Waaaah, it's Zeref!"

"Don't worry, Happy. I think Zeref is a good guy."

=^.^= "But all the stuff he did in the past..."

"Jellal did lots of bad things, but he's a good guy."

"Yeah, Erza likes him. A LOT! Dekitieirrrrrrrru!" =^*.*^=

"Okay, don't roll your tongue, it's creepy."

=^.^= "Sure thing, Rrrrrrrrrrhov."

"...Still creepy."
"You must pay the price if you wish to secure the blessing." - Andrew Jackson

It was a cool and peaceful September day in Magnolia. In a city park, Lucy and Bisca had a picnic set out and watched Alzack playing with the two children. Luke was almost the same size as the little girl now.

"Mommy, watch!" the boy shouted, and Alzack helped him down a slide.

"That looks like fun," Lucy shouted back to him from her seat under a shady tree.

"Yeah, fun," he repeated. "Lotsa fun! Su-su, you try."

"Okay!" Next, little Asuka went down with a loud weeeeee!

Lucy smiled at the peaceful scene, yet she still felt a little sad. She wanted Loke to be there and see their son growing up. She wondered where he was, if he was safe, and what he planned to do next. She refused to think he went with Kefira because he was still in love with her. That couldn't be it! He must have had a plan. She hoped that one day he would return and they could be a family again.

By the time she realized Bisca was talking to her, the woman had called her name three times. Lucy jolted out of her thoughts, then tried to laugh it off.

"Sorry, I was just daydreaming," she said in excuse.

"I was merely wondering what you plan to do next. Will you wait for him or move on? The whole guild is wondering about you and Gray. Juvia bugs me for news every day."

"Gray...he's sweet, but I'm waiting for Loke," Lucy said decisively. "When he tried to take Luke away, I guess Loke probably panicked. I would too if I was told Luke might die. Any parent would panic and do whatever they're told is the only cure, no matter what that means."

"That's true," Bisca nodded, knowing all too well from the few childhood diseases Asuka already went through.

"Wendy and Levy are searching every day for any hints about a cure. Some days he's fine, like today, and some days he can't even get out of bed. It's heartbreaking," she admitted, watching her son climb up the slide ladder and squeal as he slid down again. "Still, I can't give him up, not until we look into every alternative. Loke...I can forgive him for panicking. It just means he's a loving father. Leaving with that woman, there's no way I can think he did that without a reason. I'll wait until he comes back and tells me his side of the story. Then I'll make a decision. Until then, he at least deserves my loyalty."

Bisca patted the blonde on the back. "You're growing to be a fine woman, Lucy. You're stronger than I would be."

She laughed sheepishly. "I guess it comes with being in Fairy Tail's strongest team, ne? But really,
There was a loud explosion, and both women jolted up to their feet. Bisca had a gun out, and Lucy's hand was already on her whip.

"It came from the north," Lucy realized. "Could it be Natsu again?"

"Lucy!" They saw pink hair running toward her.

"Nope," Bisca answered. "He's been hiding behind a tree for the past hour watching over you. You really must be out of it if you didn't realize he was there."

"That guy!" Lucy sighed, but she was glad to see him and Happy come forward. Alzack had gathered the two children up and handed them to Bisca and Lucy.

"Mama?" the little girl asked in worry.

"It'll be all right," Bisca assured her.

"Lucy!" Natsu shouted again. He held her arm, just to make sure she was fine.

"No harm done," she assured.

Alzack whipped forward his gun. "Looks like an attack. Natsu, help me guard them until we get to the safe house."

They ran to the east, Bisca holding Asuka and Lucy holding Luke. The citizens of Magnolia were in a panic. Some jumped into boats so they could paddle down the canals quickly to escape while they were still able. Others had wagons and carts with supplies, escaping before the fighting reached this district. Being the home base of a guild like Fairy Tail, they were used to an occasional evacuation, so the adults took the fleeing calmly while still rushing. They heard another bombing explosion, and the two children began to cry.

"Unkie Nana?" Luke whimpered in fear.

The dragon slayer grinned at the toddler hanging onto Lucy's shoulder and ruffled his orange and blond hair. "Hey, I told you to call me Natsu."

"Unkie Nazoo?"

"Close enough," he laughed. "Don't worry. We'll protect you. That's what grownups do," he said with a grin.

"You barely qualify as a grownup," Lucy teased.

A few streets down, they met Wendy.

"You guys!" she shouted. "A battle has started to the north. Demons were spotted. Master has ordered all available mages to the front lines. Alzack, Natsu, they'll need you two. I'll protect Lucy and Bisca until they reach the safe house."

The two women looked to the escorts. Bisca gave Alzack a farewell kiss while Natsu and Lucy looked at one another for a moment. She bit her lip in worry, and he grinned in his confident way.

"Go on, Lucy," he encouraged. "You can fight later. You've gotta get your kid to safety first. That's
what a good parent does."

She knew he was right. Despite her instincts to run out into battle with him, Gray, and Erza, she had a son to look after. Luke came first in her life.

She gave him a nod. "Save some of the bad guys for me, okay?"

"Sure thing," he laughed. "Let's go, Alzack."

They ran together to the north, leaving the safety of the two mothers and children to Wendy. Their group ran along with the crowd of evacuating civilians heading east.

To the north, Queen Kefira stood atop a hill looking down at her army of demons attacking Magnolia. Smoke rose where magic spheres had exploded against the city's defensive wall, cracking an opening for the demonic forces to enter. Already, she saw flashes of magic circles trying to stop the invasion.

"A beautiful site!" she said in amazement. She glanced to her side where Loke stood stiffly. "Wouldn't you say, my Lion? Is there nothing more grand than the battlefield?"

Loke did not answer. Sadly, he realized this was the hill the guild used for stargazing. He remembered many occasions of coming up here with Lucy and the rest of the guild to look at the moon, watch shooting stars, and simply enjoy the glory of the heavens.

"What glorious view now?" he muttered to himself.

As the first skirmishes between mages and demons raged below, Kefira rubbed her hand up Loke's arm. "Will you join in the fray?"

"I don't think it's necessary. If you wish to refrain, my demons can do enough damage. However, I thought fighting was in your soul."

"I refuse to attack the guild. After all, those are my friends. I don't want to hurt them. If you force me to, I will upon my pride, but on my own I prefer not to."

"I don't wish to force you to do anything, my love," she assured. "Per your orders, I created these particular demons to incapacitate, not kill. Your friends will be defeated without any loss of life. It's not an easy spell," she warned, glaring slightly. "You should be thankful."

"I...am," he said hesitantly. He still felt sick that they were attacking Fairy Tail, but at least she promised that no one would die. "I should get going."

"I await your return, dear Leo."

She tried to give him a kiss, but Loke shoved past her. She glared at his back as he strode down the hill and toward the city. The demons made way for him like servants bowing before the path of a king.

"You will return to me," she whispered to herself. "You will be mine, spirit and body. She won't want you after this. When this is over, you won't have a reason to come back to her. Then you'll be mine alone."
Lucy, Bisca and Wendy jogged through Magnolia's streets to get Asuka and Luke to safety. The explosions sounded like they were getting closer. Then they heard shrieking up ahead.

"Get ready," Wendy warned the two mothers.

Lucy held Luke on her shoulder and reached for her keyring. Bisca balanced Asuka on her hip and pulled a snubby revolver out with her free hand. Suddenly, two black demons lumbered out of an alley directly in front of them. Their group came to a stop, and the two children screamed in terror at the hideous creatures. Wendy took a deep breath, ready to fight in defense of the two mothers.

Then they heard the clicking of heeled shoes. "Go away," a deep voice ordered, and the two demons scampered off to another area of the city. Loke stepped out of the alley and stood blocking the mages' path. Lucy hitched a breath at seeing him.

"Daddy!" Luke cried out happily.

Loke smiled sadly at the boy's shout, but his eyes were cold as they fixed on Lucy.

Bisca aimed her gun at him. "Then you really have betrayed us, Loke. You're with the group attacking our city."

Lucy bit her lip. She refused to believe it was true, yet Loke did not even try to refute the accusation.

"Get the children to safety, Bisca," he said flatly. "I won't stop you, and I can even keep the demons from coming in this direction. All I want is to talk to Lucy." When she did not lower her gun, Loke finally turned his eyes over to her. "Protect them, I beg of you," he pleaded.

Bisca's resolve wavered. She looked over to Lucy.

"Luke too?" the Spirit Mage asked.

"Yes," Loke replied. "Get them both to the safe house, and hurry before too many demons arrive." His face cringed in guilt. "I'm sorry, but it's the best I can do to help."

Lucy frowned at the anguish in his voice. "You're probably under orders from your new owner," she realized bitterly. "I see. So that's how it is." She gave Luke to Wendy. "Take care of him. Bisca, hurry. Get Asuka to the safe house, then join the fighting. I'll be along in a moment."

"But Lucy," Wendy protested.

"Let's go," Bisca urged, and she ran forward. She glared at Loke as she passed by him. "If you hurt her, I'll blast your head off," she threatened, then hurried forward with her daughter.

However, Wendy hesitated in leaving. She held Luke as well as the tiny girl could managed and stood a few meters behind Loke, watching with worry.

"So, what is it you want to talk about?" Lucy yelled over to him. She realized the street was suddenly empty. The fleeing citizens had seen the demons and were taking a southern route.

"I came to get the Regulus Key," he told her. "Kefira wants nothing to do with Fiore. She needs the Lapis Lazuli Key to reclaim her ancestral lands."

"Do you plan on helping her?" Lucy asked incredulously. "Have you...gone back to her?" She bit her lip, not sure if she really wanted to hear the truth.

"No!" Loke insisted. However, the memory of those empty kisses sickened him. "She...wanted to.
She tried. I won't let her. I still love you, and I always will...eternally," he smiled bittersweetly, knowing just how honest those words were now that he understood just who Lucy was, the soul he had loved over many lifetimes. "I just need to do this, then I'll be back. I won't leave you again."

"You've said that before," she snapped.

Loke dropped his gaze, knowing she was right. How many times had he sworn never to leave her? How many times had he said they would be a family? He had broken those promises. A Spirit's word was his pride, yet he had lied so many times.

"Hand me your ring, Loke," she urged. "It doesn't have to be Kefira to call up Regulus. I can do it. Levy taught me the incantation, so I can do this. Then you don't have to listen to what Kefira wants."

Loke shook his head. "I want Kefira to have it."

"Then why the hell did you leave it with me? Why didn't you take the Regulus Key at the same time you took the Lion's Key? Why are you attacking us now to get it back?"

"That was before I got her to make a deal. I help Kefira, then she'll help me. I give the Regulus Key to her and help her to retake Kohinur, and she'll make you immortal."

"That's ridiculous!" she scoffed. "She's powerful, but she can't..."

"She can!" he yelled over her. "There are certain bloodlines that exist amongst Humans. Some said they were descendants of ancient gods, but it was a very rare type of magic that showed itself only once every few generations. These people can turn a normal Human into a Celestial Spirit. Most of us Zodiacs came into being this way. Kefira is the last person alive with the pure Kohinurian royal bloodline. Her ancestor was the man who made me into the Lion. She promised to do the same for you. That's the deal. When all this is over, I can simply leave her again. We can live together in peace. You can come with me to the Spirit World, and we can raise Luke together. It's the only way we can both raise our son. It's the only way we can become a true family. You wanted an alternative to me simply taking Luke away from you, and this is it! If he can't stay in the Human World, I can make it so that you can stay in the Spirit World. No one will separate us ever again."

Lucy shook her head with tears in her eyes. "And you'd attack Fairy Tail to do this?"

He explained fast, "Historically, entire nations have been wiped out to capture a Royal Star Key, so what Kefira is doing is mild compared to what was done in the past. You were prepared to fight the Spirit World to free me from imprisonment. I'm willing to fight Fairy Tail to free us so we can be a family."

"Do you really think that makes this right?" she yelled. "These are our friends!"

"And you're the woman I love," he shouted back. "So please...please, Lucy, don't give her any reason to do worse. The fighting is only a distraction. She'll go away once you hand over the Regulus Key."

Lucy put her hand over her ring of Spirit Keys, including the single blue one with a chip carved out of it. She hesitated. On one hand, Loke would be powerful enough to protect himself from the Spirit King, Magnolia would be saved, and Loke promised he would return to her. On the other hand, she did not trust Kefira having the Regulus Key. Loke would be under her complete control, and they were planning to overthrow a peaceful country.

Loke saw her looking more and more reluctant. He shook his head, staring hard, as if he could drill
his reasons into her head and make her see his point of view. Instead, her eyes drifted, looking at the smoke and flashes of magic. Loke's worries piled up. He wanted the fighting to stop…\textit{now!} He knew what Kefira and Haftorang were really capable of doing, and he wanted to spare Magnolia from utter annihilation.

In a desperate move, he charged at Lucy and nearly grabbed the keyring. Lucy leaped away, grabbed her Spirit Keys, and called forth the first one she touched.

"Open the Gate of the Ram! Aries!"

The lamb came out already in a fighting stance and landed a blow to Loke just as he almost caught Lucy again. His yanking grab made Lucy stumble and fall to the ground, but Aries stood in front of her.

"I'm sorry, but I'll protect Lucy from you, Leo," the Ram warned.

Wendy gasped and shouted, "Lucy!"

"Stay back!" the blonde yelled, waving the little girl away. "What are you doing waiting around? Follow Bisca."

"But Lucy…" Wendy looked at where the gunslinger had gone, but she had a feeling she needed to stay there in case things got bad.

"Lucy, please," Loke begged, looking down at her and ignoring Aries for now. "Kefira won't stop. These demons are made not to kill, but if she gets impatient, she very well could send worse. She might even make me do things I don't want to do."

Lucy lashed back, "If I give her both keys, she'll make you do even worse. She'll make you hers. I'll lose you completely."

"I won't let her…"

"Were you able to stop her in the past?" Lucy screamed angrily. "Could you completely stop her when you were with Naomi? Maybe you could keep out of her bed, but I bet she still kissed you."

Loke's stomach twisted as he remembered the past two months, spending nights lying beside Kefira, not moving, not reciprocating, but letting the woman kiss him however she pleased. How could he argue when he had done such wretched things?

"I won't let her take you," Lucy said firmly.

That determination made Loke happy...and worried. He had to smile that she was not giving up on him, but fear nagged at him.

"I love you so much, Lucy," he declared in a choking whisper, "but how much are you willing to pay to keep me here? Will you sacrifice our friends, this town, all you love? Will you sacrifice our one chance to make you into a Celestial Spirit so you can help me raise Luke in the Spirit World? Would you sacrifice your son for me?" he asked with a serious tone.

"Leo," Aries cried out. "Please don't do this to her. It's an unfair choice."

"It seems our lives are all about unfair choices," he sighed. Then the Lion looked over to the Ram in a sudden thought. "Aries, do you really want to fight me?"
"No, of course not," she trembled.

"How many others are on my side? Even when this is over, the Spirit King will not be happy. I can fight him as Regulus, but it'd be useless if most of the Zodiac Spirits are against me, too. I need allies. How many would join my side?"

Aries trembled at the fervent questions. "I...I don't know. First you try to attack Lucy, now you want us to mutiny against the Spirit King? Leo, what's wrong with you?"

"What's wrong?" he laughed, then bellowed angrily, "What isn't wrong? All I want is to raise Luke with Lucy. If he can't live in the Human World, then the problem is how to get Lucy to the Spirit World. Kefira can do that, but then the Spirit King will only lock me up. I won't let him separate me from Lucy anymore, and I'm willing to pay any price to save my family."

"Even if that price is your nakama?" came a voice, and Natsu stepped out from behind a building. "It looks like my nose was right. I thought I smelled a Lion prowling around here. A cowardly lion, it seems...one who would sacrifice his friends."

"I'm sorry, Natsu," Loke sighed, "but compared to my family, there is nothing more important."

"Then that just means you have to get through me and the rest of Fairy Tail." Natsu punched his fists together. "A Lion and a Dragon...who do you think would win? Let's find out!"

End of Chapter 43

Chapter End Notes

=T_T=  "Waaaaah, I heard a horrible rumor that Rhov died!"

"Um, Happy...I'm not dead yet."

=^.o.o^= "She was under a lot of stress, and it was too much. First it was her stomach, then her heart, then her brain, then her whole body fell apart and she...she died."

"Hey, I'm not dead."

=^.^=_^= "Then her ghost possessed another writer who lives like a zombie, not eating or drinking as she continues the stories Rhov couldn't finish before such a tragic end."

"I'M ALIVE, DAMMIT!"

=^o_o^= "I heard a rumor that if you listen closely in the catacombs of Deviant Art, you can hear her voice moaning as her spirit wanders in search of someone new to possess."

"I give up...I'm not dead, and I apologize for taking such a long break. I really needed it! My Muse keeled over just writing this much. I decided to publish it like this and save Natsu and Loke's fight for the next chapter. Otherwise, it very well might take another month to get this chapter up, and then the rumors of my untimely death would seem justified."

=^.^= "Natsu and I are holding a wake in Rhov's memory. There will be fish
appetizers."

"I SAID I'M NOT DEAD!"
Makarov inspected the newcomer closely. "So, you wanna join our guild, huh?"

"Well, it's certainly no problem. What's your magic, kid?"

He thought about it for a moment. "I...I can do this." His fist lit up, and he punched a nearby beer barrel, spilling its contents all over the floor.

"Hey!" a brunette teen yelled. "That was going to be mine!"

"Shut up, Cana," yelled a spunky white-haired girl. "You shouldn't be drinking alcohol at your age."

"You shut up, Mira! I've been drinking since I was thirteen. I can drink so long as I'm responsible."

"When are you ever that?"

"Have you ever seen me drunk?"

"I don't think I've seen you sober in two years!"

"Yeah? Well who'd want to be sober around your ugly mug, Mira?"

Makarov chuckled at their little fight. "That's an impressive punch, boy. Did that light come from your ring?"

"Ring?" The stranger looked down at the blue stone on his finger. "Ah, yes...yeah, it's...ring magic, I guess."

"A holder magic?" Makarov leaned in closer to inspect the piece of jewelry. "I've not seen a ring like that sold in stores."

"You could say it's an heirloom," the man said with a sad expression on his face.

"Well, it's certainly powerful. All right, kid, you're in. What's your name?"

"My...name?"

"Sure, we have to fill out this guild card, see." Makarov held up a stiff piece of paper. "Just the basics: name, age, magic, likes, dislikes."

"My...name, huh? Le-...-o-...Key..."
"Eh? Leo Key?"

"No!" he shouted in a panic. "Loke. Just...just Loke, I guess."

The old master chuckled and twirled his pen between his fingers. "Are you sure about that?"

"Yes...Loke."

"A last name?"

"Ah...no, not really. Just...Loke, that's enough."

"Keeping it low key, eh? Sorry for the bad pun. Okay...Loke," Makarov smirked, glancing up as the ginger-haired man wiped a little sweat off his brow. "Age?"

"Do I really have to say?"

"No, not really. You look legally old enough, at least."

"I don't know my age, to be honest."

"That's fine. It happens. We're still not sure on Natsu's age, to tell you the truth. Magic: that's ring magic, right? And likes?"

Just then, a young lady walked through the guild hall and up to the request board. Loke followed her sashaying hips.

"Women," he answered. "Definitely women."

"I hear you on that," Makarov chuckled, jotting it down. "Any dislikes?"

"Yes, Celestial Spirit mages." Loke's eyes, hidden behind blue shades so no one would recognize him, darkened at the memory of Karen and her abuse.

"Then you're lucky. Our guild doesn't have any."

"I know. That's why I want to join here."


"If you do, I'll just keep away from her. Anything else?"

"Yes, the guild stamp. Mira!"

"What?" snapped the cranky fifteen-year-old girl.

"Please get the guild stamp."

"Why should I?" she demanded haughtily.

Makarov sighed at her attitude problem. "If our newly-made S-class mage can't do such a simple task, I guess I'll have to ask someone who has been S-class longer, like Erza."

That infuriated young Mirajane. "I'm perfectly capable of fetching something like that."

"Good, then stamp this new member."
She eyed Loke up and down. "Well, you're somewhat cute, I guess."

"Uh...thanks, although you're a bit young for me."

"Whatever. Come on, I'll stamp you." She led him back behind the bar to where the stamp was kept locked away so only S-class mages could get it, just so the more immature mages did not stamp the foreheads of sleeping members. "Where do you want it?"

Loke thought about it, then he yanked off his shirt.

"Whooa, dude!" Mirajane grimaced. "I thought you said I was too young."

Loke showed his back to her. "Right there in the back. As I'm walking away from my defeated opponent, I want them to see what guild took them down."

She had to chuckle at such a reason. "Sweet! Any color?"

"Whatever you think will look good on me."

She eyed him again, then set the color of the stamp and pressed it firmly against his back. "There you go. Green to match your eyes, and it'll make those enemies green with envy."

Loke tugged his shirt back on. "I like your thinking, kid."

The guild doors burst open and a small teen leaped in. "What's this I hear about a new member? Where is he?" The pink-haired punk looked around eagerly.

"Ah, that's Natsu," Mirajane explained as she put the guild stamp away. "He's a hot-headed dragon slayer."

"Lost Magic," Loke muttered. "That's rare these days."

Mirajane laughed to herself. "You sound like an old man, the way you say that."

Natsu stomped up in front of the new member and gazed up at Loke. "You're him, huh? I wanna fight you."

"What?" Loke asked in confusion. "Why? Did I do anything wrong?"

"Nah," the teen grinned, "I just wanna see how strong you are."

"It's a hazing of sorts," Mirajane explained. "He challenges every newcomer."

"I see." Loke saw the determination in the boy's squinty eyes and the firm build to his gangling muscles. "Built for battle, huh? So was I. Fine, kid, I'll give you a fight."

"Awesome!" Natsu cheered. "I'll warn you, I'm really strong. Don't you dare go easy on me, or you'll be sent flying."

"Natsu!" Lisanna called out, running up to him and tugging on his sleeve. "Don't fight today. We were going to eat Elf-nii-chan's hotpot tonight. If you get hit in the gut, your stomach will hurt too bad for food."

"Are you saying I'll lose?" Natsu shouted.

Loke decided to challenge the boy. "How about a little wager between men? If you win, the money
from my first mission goes to buying you all the food you can eat. If I win, you have to take this little white-haired cutey out for ice cream."

Lisanna's blue eyes widened. "Lose, Natsu!" she cried out instantly.

"Lisannaaaaaa!" Natsu whined.

Loke chuckled at how the boy blushed. "Just to help this little cutie out, I think I'll fight you seriously. I'd hate to see her disappointed if I make her lose out on ice cream."

"Fine! Let's go outside. By the way, what magic do you use?"

"Light magic, melee-style. And you?"

"Fire magic, also melee. Fire versus light, huh? Should be an interesting fight."

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**Modern Day, Back in Magnolia**

"Fire versus light," Loke muttered, thinking back to that moment. "Dragon versus Lion. Do you remember the outcome of that day? I'm sure Lisanna does. Probably the best ice cream she ever had."

"I was young," Natsu glared. "I'm a lot stronger now."

"So am I."

"I heard you joined Fairy Tail only because we didn't have a Celestial Spirit mage. You didn't care about us as a guild, like you don't care now."

"You're wrong!" Loke yelled. "That might have been my only reason back then, but Fairy Tail became my family."

"Then why did you bring an army against us?" Natsu shouted in anger. "That family is off defending this town from demons you and your new master brought."

Loke could not argue with that, and he swallowed back bitterness. "It's all so I can save Lucy and make her into a Celestial Spirit so we can raise Luke together. That family is now more important to me than my Fairy Tail family."

"Have you even asked her if she wants that? If she becomes a Spirit like you, she won't be able to stay here in Fairy Tail. You'd be taking her away from our family. She'd need an owner to call her out. Even if she comes out every day, she can't stay around for long. And who's to say she won't end up with a bad owner! She could end up with a pervert like that Duke Everlue guy, or a villain like Angel, or someone abusive like that owner you had before. Do you want that eternal life of uncertainty and servitude for Lucy?"

Loke paused as he realized Natsu was right. The life of a Celestial Spirit was not always easy. If Lucy wanted to return to Fairy Tail, she would need a contract with a Celestial Spirit mage.

"If...if she doesn't want that," he said softly, although to him personally, this was the best choice. "Kefira can also get access to Zeref's notes on how to keep a half-Spirit child in the Human World indefinitely. That's only if she first defeats the Kohinurian army, retakes the throne, and gets into the vaults under Kohinur Keep. I don't trust those notes, or anything Zeref created, but it's an alternative. Still, it means helping Kefira, and for that I need the Regulus Key. That woman, for how much I
utterly despise her, is the only person who can help us now, but only if I first fulfill the oath I gave her four hundred years ago. Understand, I'm not fighting for Kefira. I'm fighting for what is most important to me in my life."

"Funny," Natsu chuckled wryly, lighting his hands on fire. "So am I. And it's the same thing, isn't it? We're both fighting for Lucy."

"Wrong," Loke said with a serious glint to his eyes. "It's not just Lucy for me. I'm fighting to save this town and this guild, even if I have to fight all of you to do it. I'm fighting for the woman I love, for my son, my family...my pride! The burden I carry is far more than you can comprehend." Loke touched his ring, and golden light glowed all around him, bathing him in celestial brilliance. "O Regulus, grant me your strength."

Lucy reached out to both of them. "Loke, no!" She suddenly flinched and grabbed her side. "Ow! The Regulus Key felt hot just now."

Natsu laughed and lit the rest of his body into a mass of flames. "I'm all fired up!"

"Zenith of Regulus: Lion's Brilliance!"

The blinding flare forced Lucy to look away, and Wendy quickly covered Luke's eyes to keep them from being hurt. Aries stayed by Lucy's side and bit on her fingers at having to watch two friends battle one another.

Suddenly, the light disappeared, and Loke was sent flying from a punch to the gut. Lucy covered her mouth in shock, then looked back over to Natsu. His eyes were shut.

"That stripper told me about his fight with you, all the new moves you now have that you weren't able to do back when we fought, including how you used that move to blind him and get in the first hit. Lucky for me, I don't have to use my eyes in a fight. I can smell you just fine."

"Is that so?" Loke chuckled, forcing himself to stand back up. "Then how about a little nostalgia. Twister!"

His hand swung outward, and the force made the wind in front of him whirl violently. Natsu was caught in it, flung up into the air, and spun numerous times. The dragon slayer got sick, turned green, and vomited before his body even had a chance to hit the ground. Loke leaped in and delivered a glowing kick to the ill mage, sending Natsu flying into a brick wall. However, right after doing it the Lion looked disgusted at himself. He really did not want to fight. He looked back over to Lucy with sadness in his eyes.

"Please, don't make me do more," Loke begged, and he held his hand out. "Give me the Regulus Key."

Natsu came charging out. "She already told you no, bastard! Fire Dragon's Roar!"

The spouting flames came right at Loke. He barely had time to leap away, yet still caught his coat tail on fire. Suddenly, he looked back in dread. Lucy also laid on the path of those flames.

"Lucy!" he screamed.

"Wool Wall!" Aries shouted. Her wool caught the flames, setting it on fire instead of the Celestial Spirit mage.

"Asshole, you almost hit Lucy," Loke shouted furiously.
Natsu gave a nonchalant shrug. "I had confidence that Aries could protect her."

The Ram blushed at that. "Y-You did?"

Natsu smiled at the bashful lamb. "I trust that every single one of the Celestial Spirits contracted to Lucy will do everything in their power to protect her. But you, Loke...you're not contracted with her anymore. Which means I can't trust you." His body lit up again. "Fire Dragon's Iron Fist!"

"Regulus Punch!" Loke yelled, stopping the fire-enhanced punch with the magic of his light-reinforced fist.

Both of Natsu's hands lit up and smashed together to create a massive fireball. "Fire Dragon's Brilliant Flame!" He flung the sphere of flames at the Lion.

Loke aimed his ring right at the incoming fireball. "Regulus Beam!" The blast of gold light made the fireball shoot off course and set a roof on fire.

On the other side of the street, Wendy had backed up to take shelter behind a pushcart, yet she refused to leave. In her arms, Luke struggled to get loose, whimpering in frustration and a painful headache at every explosion.

"Why is Unkie Nazoo fighting Daddy?" he demanded. "I don't want Daddy and Unkie Nazoo hurt. No! Don't like it! Daddy!"

Loke heard his screaming voice and looked around. "Luke?" he cried out in dread. He thought Wendy had already left and did not realize his son was still there. He belatedly realized that not all of his attacks had been watchful. He feared one might have hurt Wendy and Luke.

While his eyes were averted, Natsu jumped in with a punch that sent Loke soaring into a brick wall. "Keep your eyes on your opponent, Loke. I figured you were old enough to know something that basic."

Lucy whimpered as she watched them fight blow for blow, nearly equal in power, a golden Lion gleaming in the Autumn sunlight, and a fiery Dragon blazing out of myth. Flashes of yellow and red clashed again and again, driving more tears out of her eyes.

"I...I don't know which one I want to lose," she sniffled. "I don't want Loke to win, but I don't want him to get beaten either."

"Leo won't lose that easily," Aries said proudly. "I'm sure he'll do the right thing in the end."

"Aries, I don't want you two to have to fight again. I'll send you back." Lucy picked up the Gold Key.

"No," Aries insisted. "I'm sorry, but what you need now is a defensive Spirit, and that's my specialty. As a proud member of the Sexy Fluffy Guard, I can handle this."

"Please don't call it that," Lucy sighed.

Another clash between the two men sent Natsu flying into a building. Crushed rocks flew toward Lucy, but Aries raised her hands. "Wool Wall!" The barrier made the stones bounce away harmlessly.

"Lucy!" Loke yelled again in fear.
Aries shouted back, "She's safe, Leo."

Natsu sprang out of the debris. "Don't lose focus yet, Loke! Fire Dragon's Roar!"

"Regulus, grant me your strength." Both of Loke's hands lit up, and he moved them in a circular motion. A golden magic circle formed in front of him. "Regulus Blast!"

A powerful burst of light crashed into the roaring fire. The two magic forces pressed against one another. Natsu kept the breath attack going and blew out harder. Loke dug his feet into the street to keep from getting pushed back. The center of the clash burned as fire and light created something like staring directly into the sun. That glowing suddenly exploded and forced both fighters backward. The burst fluttered Lucy's short skirt and nearly blew away the pushcart Wendy was hiding behind.

Luke laughed as his orange and blond hair was ruffled by the blast. "My daddy is strong!" he cheered. "Go, Daddy!"

Lucy watched them and suddenly realized something. "Loke's going easy on him!" she gasped. "He has one super strong attack, Regulus Supernova, but he's not using it."

"It's not that he's going easy," Aries explained. "I'm sorry for explaining, but Regulus Supernova utterly obliterates an enemy. If he used it on Natsu, there would be nothing left but bloodied body pieces, and Leo definitely doesn't want to do that. I'm sorry, but he has always hated that attack. He only uses it against the very worst enemies, ones he truly wants to die. He would never use it against an ally."

"But he's also punching at only half the strength I've seen him use before," Lucy realized, analyzing the fight more, seeing the speed of Loke's fists and the arc of his kicks.

"Because of love," Aries explained with a sigh.

"Eh? Love? For Natsu?" The thought made Lucy grimace.

"No, silly. For you! Love makes a Celestial Spirit stronger. Kefira's love for Leo obviously isn't as strong as Lucy's love for him, so Leo is weaker with her as his master than when he was contracted to you. Also, since Leo himself doesn't want to fight, his strength is much weaker. A Celestial Spirit's strength, after all, comes from three things: the magical power of our owner, the bonds of love and trust we form with that owner, and our own personal resolve. In all three matters, Leo is now weaker."

"Not in magical power," Lucy pouted petulantly. "In that department, Kefira's a frigging demon!"

"No," Aries smiled, "even in that area. I'm sorry, but both Leo and I were owned by Kefira at one time. I remember her power, and I can sense it in Leo now. She might be strong in many other forms of magic—and I'm sorry but her strength as a Celestial Spirit Mage is definitely very high—still, she's weaker than you because she can never form a true bond of love with us Spirits. So it's not that Leo is holding back on Natsu; it's that he only has a fraction of the power he has when he's fighting for you. I'm sorry to say it, but unless he really gets serious, Leo will lose this fight."

Lucy was shocked that even though he had severed his contract with her, the two of them were still connected so closely. It made her smile and want to cry. "Loke," she whispered wistfully.

Natsu and Loke both paused to catch their breaths. Loke had char marks all over his body, while Natsu was bleeding from a gash to his arm and a cut to the head. Both were weary, but neither lost any of their determination.
"You're not bad," Natsu complimented.

"Same to you," Loke nodded in return. "Definitely stronger than the last time we dueled."

"I told you, I was just a kid back then."

"Then how must it feel, an immortal Spirit like you getting your ass kicked by a mere kid?"

"I'm not down yet," Loke warned.

"And I'm still getting warmed up. However, fighting you is making Lucy sad, so I need to end this for her sake. Dragon Slayer's Secret Art. Crimson Lotus: Exploding Flame Blade."

Spiraling wheels of flames swirled around Natsu, then charge outward and hit Loke with a devastating force. The Lion was thrown through the air, shouting in agony as he spun out of control. He smashed through the window of a bakery shop and slammed into a shelf full of flour sacks. The white powder exploded in a massive puff that blinded half the street, sending Lucy, Aries, Wendy, Luke, and Natsu coughing and sneezing. Suddenly, the whole inside of the shop brightened up like sunrise through white fog.

"Regulus Impact!"

A lion of light roared out of the broken window, shoving away the clouds of flour with a glowing snarl. It smashed into Natsu, sending him flying completely across the street, through a building, into the neighboring street, and into yet another building. Loke dragged himself out of the demolished shop. Flour covered him head to toe like a white specter. He yanked a massive sliver of glass out of his shoulder and rotated his arm a few times. Then he dusted himself off, wiped his face clean of the flour, and looked over at Lucy and Aries again.

"Please, Lucy," he pleaded. "I just want to leave this city in peace. I don't want to hurt anyone, and I don't want to make you cry anymore. I already promised Kefira that I would fulfill my ancient oath to her family. Celestial Spirits keep our promises, and I promise I'll return to you. You can trust that I'll keep that promise, too. So please..."

"I ain't done yet, Loke!"

The Lion sighed regretfully at hearing Natsu's voice. "You really don't know when to stay down," he muttered, although Loke could hardly help but admire that tenacity.

He sadly looked over to where the teen had come back through an alley, blooded and bruised, yet looking more determined than ever. Now lightning had mixed with his flames, sparking jagged bolts of gold with the scarlet fire.

Lucy gasped at seeing Natsu standing there glaring in anger. "His lightning flame!" she exclaimed in awe at her friend and fear for Loke.

"Please, Natsu, I don't want to fight you," Loke insisted.

"Oh really? Don't you remember what you said to me the day we learned Lucy was pregnant? I asked you if you'd stay by her side. You said, 'Anyone who says I can't stay by her will have to fight me and kill me.' Where is that resolve now, Loke?"

His green eyes narrowed. "You...want me to fight you?"
"I don't agree with what you're doing," Natsu admitted, "but I don't want to see the man Lucy loves being half-assed about his feelings for her. She deserves better."

Loke looked down, stunned by the gall of this teenager. "You're really impressive, Natsu. This is why I'm glad you and Gray are by her side. Fine! I trust the nobility of the Yamataikoku family. I've been under them since their clan lived in caves. I saw them evolve from bloody chieftains of a barbaric tribe to refined monarchs of a vast and wealthy kingdom. If Kefira says she'll make it so I can stay with Lucy for all eternity, I trust her to keep her oath. I'll fight now to prove my love for Lucy and my determination to stay by her. If you want to stop me, come at me seriously. I will do my damnedest to get that key so I can save Magnolia from Kefira's horde and save Lucy from the sadness of losing her son to the Spirit World."

"That's right, fight me seriously, because how I see it, you're only hurting your friends so you can steal something from Lucy, betray her, and run off with some outdated old hag."

"Then we'll end this in the next blow," Loke nodded. He held his hand up, grabbed his arm, and closed his eyes. "Regulus, I need you to grant me all the power you can give me."

Lucy flinched again as the blue key at her side burned like an iron brand. "Why does the Lapis Lazuli Key get hotter the more he fights?"

Aries explained, "I'm sorry, it's because Leo's ring has the shard of Regulus in it. It taps into the Regulus Key to gather strength for Leo to use."

Lucy looked down at the large blue key. "The ring and the key are connected that strongly?" she whispered.

Loke was fully aglow now. His clothes ruffled around him as the magic circle at his feet grew. His hair looked golden instead of orange and stood up on end at the powerful surge. As he opened his eyes, they glowed like a predatory beast.

"When we fought Zeref's army four hundred years ago, we had dragons, but he had a dragon slayer. I was sent to defeat that dragon slayer. I never thought I'd use this against you, Natsu."

Natsu took in a massive breath. He sucked in all the flames from the nearby roof fire until the flames went out of the smoldering building. The bolts of lightning on his body flashed faster as his lungs filled.

To everyone's shock, Loke also began inhaling deeply. It seemed like the light out of the sky itself dimmed and flowed into him.

"A breath attack?" Lucy questioned. "Does Loke have those, too?"

"Only one," Aries whispered as she quivered in fear, "and he has only used it once...against a dragon slayer. This is really bad." She squinted her eyes tightly. "Wool Fort!" Instead of just a wall, she and Lucy were entirely surrounded by soft pink fluff. "I just hope this holds. I'm sorry you can't see them, but it's really not safe."

Wendy sensed the danger approaching, and she grabbed up the child left in her care. "Come on, Luke. We need to go."

"But Daddy..."

"We need to hide!" she insisted in dread. Wendy pulled the little boy into her arms and ran to a bridge spanning the river. She crawled down underneath it and held onto the child tightly. "I hope
"they'll be okay."

Finally, both opponents were ready.

"Lightning Flame Dragon's..."

"Regulus Solar Wind's..."

"ROAR!"

Blasts of electric flame and celestial light collided, surged outward, and coalesced into a massive ball like a dying sun going supernova.

To the north, Laxus and Mirajane were fighting demons. She took care of the ones in the sky, while he fought the ones on the ground. Both saw the blast and gawked.


"That glow," Mira whispered. "That's Loke's light. Why are those two fighting?"

On another street, Erza saw the demon in front of her shield its eyes from the overpowering glow. She took the opportunity to slash off its head, making it vanish into smoke. Then she looked around and frowned in dismay at the gold and red burst.

Elsewhere, Gray and Juvia were fighting back to back, both weary but leaning on one another for support. They saw the explosion rise over the tops of Magnolia's buildings.

"What is that flame-brain doing now?" Gray grumbled. "Juvia, stay here. I'm gonna check it out."

"Juvia wants to fight with Gray-sama," she insisted.

"Huh? Well, yeah, of course you are. That's why I like fighting with you."

She flushed even brighter. "Then Juvia will fight even harder until Gray-sama returns."

He smiled and patted her head. "I won't be long." He turned and raced to the southeast toward the ball of fiery light.

"Ooh, Gray-sama!" Juvia sighed romantically. Then she turned back to the invading demons. "All right! Until Gray-sama returns to Juvia, Juvia will have to fight twice as hard."

All the way on the northern hill, Kefira saw the massive explosion rising over Magnolia like a summer sunrise. It made a thin smile tug at her blood red lips.

"I see," she simpered. "My Lion has encountered the dragon slayer. I almost wish I could watch up close. Then again, with a blast like that, nobody could watch it and live."

Back by the river, Natsu stood in the midst of utter destruction. As the smoke settled, he panted laboriously, utterly drained after using both fire and lightning.
Down the street, the fluffy pink fort finally disintegrated. Lucy gawked at the demolished buildings around them. Then she heard something collapse and saw Aries fall to the ground, too weary to stand.

"I can't...can't keep...up with this. I'm sorry," she said in exhaustion.

"I don't think you need to do more," Lucy said sadly, looking at where Natsu stood. "It seems to be over."

Natsu took a heavy step forward, then another, slowly dragging his feet to his fallen opponent. Loke laid limply prompted up against a heap of stones. Slowly, he cracked an eye open to look up at the pink-haired teen.

Between breaths of exhaustion, Loke said, "I guess...we now know...what happens when...a lion and a dragon fight."

"Yup," Natsu muttered. Then suddenly he passed out and fell beside Loke.

End of Chapter 44

Chapter End Notes

I was listening to the album "Archangel" by Two Steps From Hell while writing this. Most epic fight music ever!

"Sexy Fluffy Guard" comes from Chapter 291. When I read that scene with Aries and Virgo, I simply had to add that in. Go Sexy Fluffy Guard!

According to Cana's guild card in Chapter 38, she's been drinking since she was 13. Loke's guild card is in Chapter 73. Also, thus far in the manga, Loke does NOT have a breath attack. I'm just making stuff up again.

Wanna know a cool behind-the-scenes fact? If you can't tell, I love epigraphs, those quotes before the chapters. Early on in this story, before I knew what I wanted to do with "Lion's Pride," I searched for star and lion quotes to inspire me. This was waaaay back in Chapter Two. Yeah, that far back! I came across Tadashi Adachi's quote about a lion and dragon fighting, and it sent a shiver through me. I wanted to use it, but I needed a reason why Loke and Natsu might fight. This single quote inspired the entire idea that Loke might be turned by something that haunted his past. Kefira, Haftorang, the mythology of the Royal Stars, it was all brought together purely so I could fulfill my wish of using that quote and seeing the Lion and the Dragon fight.

In the manga, if these two faced off, who do you think would win?
"How art thou fallen from heaven, O day-star, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, that didst lay low the nations!" - Isaiah 14:12

"Loke!" Lucy yelled. "Natsu!"

"Guys!" Wendy shouted.

The Sky Dragon Slayer rushed out of the hiding place under the bridge, pulling Luke along with her, while the Celestial Spirit Mage left Aries and ran through the debris littered all over the street. They met in the middle beside the two fallen fighters. Lucy grabbed up Luke and shielded his eyes from the sight of Natsu dripping with blood.

"Daddy?" the boy asked, looking down at Loke's face and his tangled orange hair now covered with dirt and flour. "Is Daddy taking a nap?"

"Yes," Lucy lied between teary sobs. "Daddy is tired after fighting. He...He's taking a nap. Natsu, too. Wendy?" she asked, fearing the worst.

Wendy immediately began healing Natsu's wounds. "The damage is extensive," she fretted. "It's a miracle he's still alive. How's Loke?"

Lucy held onto his hand and gazed down worriedly. His face twitched in pain, and sometimes she saw a quaver of green energy, but he was forcing himself to remain in the Human World. Sadly, Lucy realized why he was not returning to heal. Since Loke joined Kefira and was seeking the Regulus Key, it meant he was now an enemy of the Spirit World. If he returned, the Spirit King would definitely lock him away and probably never let him return.

Luke looked down sadly at his father, then he toddled over to Wendy and squatted beside Natsu. "Is Unkie Nazoo feeling owwie? Is Auntie Wendy making him feel better?"

"Yep," she smiled, hoping to reassure him. "This is why it's bad to fight. People get hurt."

"Then why was Unkie Nazoo and Daddy fighting?"

"Well...they...um..." Wendy was lost for an explanation.

Lucy came to the rescue. "There's a bad lady, and she's making Daddy fight. He said he doesn't want to, but he has to obey her."

"Because she's his owner?" Luke asked with wide, innocent eyes. "A Celestial Spirit fights for his owner."

Lucy was stunned that the boy understood such a concept and spoke that rule with such clarity. Then it dawned on her: Luke was half-Spirit. A part of him was tied to the Spirit World. Who knows, but he might one day get his own Spirit Key. She realized that he probably instinctively knew the rules of their world.
As she squeezed Loke's fingers, she felt the cold smoothness of his ring. She looked down at it and the blue stone. Then she looked over to her blue Lapis Lazuli Key and the chunk carved out of it. Just eying it, she could see that the ring would fit perfectly into the divot cut out of the Regulus Key. The urge to use it, to summon Loke to his full strength, was overwhelming. She even tried to justify that it might heal Loke's wounds.

It would also concrete both of them as traitors of the Spirit World and start a civil war. That alone kept her from using it. She did not want her Celestial Spirit friends to hate her for using a key that was supposed to be left alone. She also wondered if Regulus would be angry if she summoned him back. After all, the Royal Stars wanted to leave behind both the Spirit and Human Worlds. She definitely did not want to piss off a creature so powerful, he could destroy a planet!

"This damn key," Lucy sneered. "I wish we never got it. It has caused nothing but problems. Maybe I should destroy it."

"You can't," Loke said in a creaky voice. He slowly peeked an eye open. "No one can destroy it, not even me. The only ones who can are the Royal Stars."

Lucy stroked back his messy hair. "Just rest, Loke." She gave him a sad smile, leaned over, and kissed his forehead.

He chuckled weakly. "Why are you kissing me? I'm a traitor, right?"

"I know you have your reasons," she whispered. She glanced over to where Luke squatted next to Wendy, watching her glowing hands with childish fascination. "I can't lose him, and I don't want to give up on you, and I refuse to give that horrible woman complete ownership over you. I want to hold on to both of you tightly and never let you go! I'm sorry, Loke, but I'm going to be a spoiled heiress this one time. I'll throw a tantrum until I get what I want."

Loke weakly laughed, but he felt warm inside at seeing the stubborn determination in her huge, brown eyes. "That's one of the many things I love about you, Lucy."

Just then, Kefira suddenly appeared out of nowhere in the middle of the demolished street. Her porcelain-smooth face was now marred with a fierce sneer. Loke sensed the fury in her and cringed in anguish.

"Get away from here, both of you," he shouted urgently to Lucy and Wendy. Both girls drew back in fear.

"Oh God, not her," Lucy shivered, retreating back toward Aries. She looked down at the pink-haired Spirit, but poor Aries looked utterly exhausted.

Luke frowned and clung onto Wendy as she backed away from Natsu. "I don't like her. Bad lady!"

Kefira stomped right up to where Loke and Natsu had fallen together. "Pathetic Lion!" She gave him a sharp kick in the ribs.

"Stop!" screamed Lucy. "He's already beaten up."

Kefira did not listen and kicked Loke again, sending him curling over in agony. "Is this the extent of your strength? Is this how low you were taken down when you gave up Regulus? Beaten by a mere child, you who could once destroy an entire nation on a whim. You're too weak in this meager form."
In the midst of another kick, her ankle was suddenly grabbed tightly. Kefira nearly lost her balance, then glared down at the burning, sinewy hand holding her. Natsu glared up at her with flaming anger in his eyes.

"Hey...old hag," he panted heavily. "Don't you dare call Loke weak."

She glared silently at him. Then her hands shot out. A blast struck Natsu, knocking him aside and making him crash through a brick wall.

"No!" Loke cried out.

"Natsu," Wendy shouted, and she ran over to him with Luke in tow.

"This is why I preferred dealing with Regulus," Kefira complained. "He was less whiny than you."

"Leo!" Aries cried out. "Watch out!"

"And you, foolish weak lamb," Kefira yelled. "You were such a waste of a Gold Key."

"Stop!" Loke screamed, but too late.

Another blackish-purple blast hurled toward Aries and Lucy. At the last second, the Ram jumped in front of Lucy and used herself as a shield. Lucy screamed at her not to do it, but it was too late. The blast of dark magic hit her and made a gaping hole through her torso.

"No!" Loke cried out. "Please, stop it." He tried to get up, but the injuries from Natsu were too severe. "You promised not to hurt my friends."

"I promised I'd make demons that would maim, not kill. That's all I swore. I have but one goal, Leo: to get the Key to the Heart of the Lion and restore Kohinur. If you can't do the job, I will, even if I have to kill this little whore."

"No!" Loke screamed, yanking himself forward but unable to move his legs. "Kefira, don't. Please! You promised. You said you'd make Lucy immortal. You even took a blood oath."

She laughed cruelly. "When has even a blood oath meant anything to me? I swore that oath as the Shaman-Queen of Kohinur. I swore to your ancestor that I would dedicate my life to his family, but you...you are not worthy of his blood. I never should have trusted you."

"Are you just now discovering that?" she asked in amusement. "My, you're a slow one to learn."

He gritted his teeth and looked with determination to the blonde woman he loved more than anything. "Lucy...don't lose to her," he said through a clenched mouth.

Kefira huffed softly. "I'll be merciful at least. I'll finish her off fast." She raised her hand up out of the draping sleeves and pointed a slender finger. "Hark to my call, oh ancient dragon of the deep."

Tears ran down Lucy's face. "Aries...why?"

She looked back with a sad smile as she faded away. "For...love...sorry!" Then she vanished back to the Spirit World.

Loke's face paled. "Please, stop it." He tried to get up, but the injuries from Natsu were too severe. "You promised not to hurt my friends."

"I promised I'd make demons that would maim, not kill. That's all I swore. I have but one goal, Leo: to get the Key to the Heart of the Lion and restore Kohinur. If you can't do the job, I will, even if I have to kill this little whore."

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Kefira huffed softly. "I'll be merciful at least. I'll finish her off fast." She raised her hand up out of the draping sleeves and pointed a slender finger. "Hark to my call, oh ancient dragon of the deep.
Flaming Waters of Leviathan!

Lucy began to reach for her keyring, but the blue serpent shot out too fast for her to summon anyone. She pulled out her whip Fleuve d'étoiles and swung it fast. The length, like a rope of glowing water, or as the name meant, 'river of stars,' cracked at the ancient water dragon. Leviathan backed away from the whip and hissed in anger.

"What is it, Leviathan?" Kefira asked in confusion.

Lucy chuckled that finally something was going her way. "Looks like your little blue snake is weak against Fleuve d'étoiles. He's a water dragon, and my whip uses water of the Spirit World." Now she had time to grab one of her Gold Keys. "Open the Gate of the Twins! Gemini!"

They appeared already looking like Lucy with their copy of the whip in hand. "It seems you've found a weakness in this bitch after all."

"Just be careful," Lucy warned.

Natsu lifted his head. He saw Wendy leaning over him, focused on healing him all over again. He saw Luke perched on an overturned crate. The boy watched his mother fight with an intense gaze. Natsu could see it in his eyes: this boy was studying fighting techniques. If he watched enough fights, he would pick up nuances on what worked in a fight and what could be easily countered. He was a born fighter. Then Natsu's eyes drifted wearily and saw his best friend take a firm stand. He knew too well; when Lucy got serious, she could look really scary.

"Good luck, Lucy," he muttered before falling back into unconsciousness.

Lucy broke off to the left and cracked her whip, drawing the blue serpent's attention. Gemini went to the right and aimed the whip directly at Kefira. Seeing their strategy, Kefira turned her focus to Gemini, and Leviathan shot out toward the Twin with a hiss.

Just then, Lucy's whip lashed out and wrapped around Kefira's wrist. With a sharp yank, both Kefira and Leviathan were pulled hard to the side. The former queen cried out as the lashing cut into her skin, and she almost fell from lack of balance. Then Gemini's whip cracked again, and it slashed into Leviathan. The snake hissed in pain and recoiled closer to its owner.

"Using Gemini to double your power?" Kefira noted, impressed with the tactic. "But it's still not enough. Cursed Magic: Black..." She was suddenly distracted by the twang of an arrow. "Leviathan!"

The snake whipped in front of her, taking the arrow in her place. It hissed, then faded away. To the right, Gemini had summoned Sagittarius.

"I not only look like Lucy," the Twin smirked. "I have all of her magic, including the ability to summon as many Spirits as she can." Gemini pulled out another Gold Key. "Open the Gate of the Golden Bull! Taurus!"

The Bull arrived with his massive ax ready. "I won't be distracted by you anymore, Kefira. Lucy's boobs are much nicer!"

Lucy also pulled out another Gold Key. "Open the Gate of the Scorpion! Scorpio!"

The red-and-white haired Spirit poofed next to her. "We are!"

"See," Lucy taunted haughtily. "By summoning Gemini, I can bring out up to four Spirits at once."
The five of them circled around the ancient queen, Lucy and Gemini with their whips, Taurus with his ax, Sagittarius with his bow, and Scorpio with his tail already aimed.

"Clever," Kefira admitted. "However, I'm afraid four pawns against one queen is still not enough. See, all I have to do is this..."

Her hand shot out toward Gemini and emitted a black blast of magic. Sagittarius released another arrow, which hit a magic shield around Kefira. Taurus raised his ax, but the blast hit Gemini square in the chest, sending the Twins back to the Spirit World with a brief scream. Once Gemini vanished, Taurus and Sagittarius went with them.

"And see," smirked Kefira. "Now you're down to one."

"Keep back, Lucy," Scorpio warned, guarding in front of her. "Our sand will shield you."

"Scorpio," Kefira purred with a smug smile. "As handsome as always. I was good friends with the Empress of Setareh who held your Antares Key. I suppose you don't remember Antares."

His eyes narrowed. "I was told I have no memory of certain things in the past. Antares gave me our sand. That's all I need to know."

"You were much more back then, Scorpio. You can be again," she said enticingly. "Help me and Leo. We have the Fomalhaut Key, Lucy has the Regulus Key, and Taurus knows where the Aldebaran Key is hidden. If we can summon those three, we can get them to remake your Antares Key. You could regain your memories. Wouldn't you like to know thousands of years worth of deeds you performed? You were royalty, admired and feared throughout both worlds. Don't you think Aquarius would rather you be a king once again?"

"We are who we are," Scorpio answered. "Aquarius loves me as I am. I don't need to remember thousands of years without her by my side."

Lucy was touched by such romantic sentiment. "Scorpio," she whispered with a sad smile. "I think I'll give you and Aquarius an extra long vacation."

He grinned back at her and gave her his typical hand signal of his index and pink fingers raised.

Kefira scoffed at the dismissal. "Lovestruck fool."

She shot another black blast. At the same time, Scorpio shouted "Sand Buster!" and a burst of sand crashed into the dark magic. The two forces canceled each other out, yet while Scorpio was focused on the black magic, a stream of burning blue shot out. Kefira had summoned Leviathan again. Although the flaming-water snake looked much weaker, it still bit Scorpio, setting him on fire.

"Burn to glass, sand boy," Kefira chuckled cruelly.

"Leo," Scorpio shouted as the flames overwhelmed him. "Don't give in. We are rooting for you!"

Then the Scorpion vanished back to the Spirit World.

Lucy's knees trembled and felt weak. She knew this sinking feeling. On Hoshinoue Island, she had felt a similar dread. She was alone, her friends defeated one by one. Even if she called out more, she would only be forced to watch them suffer. Her confidence evaporated like dew in summer. It was hopeless. The difference in power was impossible to surmount.

"Mama."
That small voice cracked through the gloomy pessimism. She looked over to Luke, still perched on a crate watching her fight. His huge eyes, shaped just like Loke's, watched her with worry. Lucy realized that if she lost, Kefira would likely kill her son out of spite. Wendy was too weak to face her alone, Natsu was unconscious, and Loke still could not even stand up. She saw the Lion also watching her, his eyes almost identical to Luke's, worry and sadness gleaming behind blue sunglasses.

"I can't give up yet," she said to herself. She picked up her whip and faced Kefira squarely. "For the sake of my family, I can't give up yet."

Loke felt immense pride seeing her standing so firmly. He looked down at his blue ring, then over to her again. He tugged on the ring a little without fully removing it. If she was just a little closer...

Lucy saw Loke's movements. She cracked her whip, hitting Leviathan and making it vanish again. Then she made a dash toward Loke. She stretched her hand out, and Loke removed his ring, prepared to toss it to her.

"Not so fast, little whore."

Kefira made a blast shoot up from the street just in front of Lucy. She screamed as rocks hit her face. One left a long gash across her forehead that dripped blood into her eyes. Lucy could not see and wiped her eyes furiously, trying to get the blood out of the way. She saw that she was still too far away from Loke for him to toss the ring to her.

Kefira gave a small sigh. "I respect your courage, Lucy Heartfilia of Fairy Tail. In honor of that, I'll let your son live. Die in peace knowing he'll be safe." She raised her hands. "I hope you meet me and Leo in another life. Next time, we would love to have a mage like you on our side. Until then, sayonara." A red magic circle formed in front of her hands. "Cursed Magic: Nine Diamonds!"

Lucy grabbed one more Gold Key. "Open the Gate of..."

However, she stopped as she saw the nine blasts shoot out. She could call one of her Spirits, but she would only be using them as a shield. That was not the way she was taught! Spirits had feelings. They could hurt. What right did she have to make one suffer for her sake?

"Lucy!" Loke screamed when he saw her hesitate.

She lowered her hand with the key, smiled over to him sadly, and licked "I love you." Then she closed her eyes tightly and prepared for the hit.

Lucy felt a strong wind but no pain. Slowly she opened her eyes and caught a flash of red hair. Erza stood in front of her wearing her Adamantine Armor.

"E-Erza?" she asked in shock.

The Titania glanced back at her with a smile. "It seems we made it here in time."

Behind her came Levy and Gajeel.

"You okay, cheerleader?" the iron dragon slayer smirked.

"Don't worry, Lu-chan," Levy said, her pen ready to fight through her scripts.

"You guys!" Lucy smiled, feeling better just knowing she would not be alone. "You came."
"Aye!" Up in the sky, Lucy saw Happy, Charle, and Pantherlily rushing forward.

The black Exceed landed and immediately took up his battle form and faced Kefira. "I learned that the Exceed were sent to Edolas due to your evil army's magic. For their honor, I'll fight you with all of my might."

Natsu finally rose to his feet and strode forward with fury in his gaze. "You've been harassing my nakama and my godson since the very beginning." Flames engulfed his body while streaks of blazing lightning glinted through his narrowed eyes. "It ain't smart to piss off a godfather."


"And two godmothers," Wendy added in, ready to provide support magic to the rest.

Happy chimed in, "And two god-cats!"

"And two goddess-cats!" Charle glared over at the blue Exceed.

Kefira looked around her with fanatical excitement. "Dragon Slayers, powerful mages, and the Exceed, all coming to the aid of the son of the Sun Sign. The prophecy...the dream Zeref had long ago. It has come true! The Will of Zeref! To find the Regulus Key, regain the Royal Stars, and harness their power under one ultimate ruler!"

"Wrong," Loke said as he slowly pulling himself up to his feet, yet still he needed to lean heavily against a wall, using his shoulder to hold himself up against the pain. "Zeref didn't want the Lapis Lazuli Keys for power. He wanted to destroy them to stop others. However, he discovered that no mere Human—not even a half-Spirit one—can destroy those keys. The best he could do was to keep them from falling into the hands of others. He wasn't doing it for you," Loke chuckled weakly. "He was sitting on the Regulus Key the whole time, purely to stop you. It was right under your nose, buried on Hoshinoue Island, and he knew it."

Kefira sneered at him. "You...idiot Lion and your cursed children! I hope you all suffer for eternity. Now go back to that damned Spirit World of yours and rot in jail. Curse Magic: Black Sins of Orlov!" Dark magic burst out from her hands.

Gray put his hands together. "Ice-Make: Ice Wall!"

A massive barrier shielded Loke from the blast. The Lion looked over in shock that his friends from Fairy Tail had protected him, especially Gray considering the fight they had earlier. Gray gave him a reassuring smile.

"Are you fighting for this bitch, or for us?" he asked.

Loke chuckled and pushed his glasses up his nose. "I still have my guild mark on my back. I'm a member of Fairy Tail."

Wendy took in a deep breath and lifted her hand above her head. A glowing blue circle formed above her. "O strength of arm to cleave the heavens! O swift wind that dashes through the heavens! Arms x Venier!"

Under each of the gathered fighters, glows formed, and the mages felt strength flowing into their muscles.

"All right!" Natsu laughed, feeling his strength returning. "Let's go, Gajeel!"
"Who said I'm gonna follow your lead?" the iron dragon slayer snapped, and he leaped forward faster than Natsu.

Levy grabbed Lucy's arm. "Come on, we still need to get you and Luke to some shelter. There are demon's running around all over the city." She pulled her away from Erza and Gajeel, trying to make it around to where Luke still sat on a crate watching the fighting.

"This is a girl's fight, boys!" Kefira gathered her strength and raised her arms. "From Chapter 4, Scripture 12 of the Book of Zeref: Reverse Magic. Divine Punishment: Nemesis!"

From the surrounding rubble, purple-black creatures took shape. One shoved Lucy and Levy, forcing them apart. Lucy fell onto her back with a cry of pain. Levy was tossed into the air, but Gajeel managed to catch her safely.

"Not these guys again," Gray moaned.

"Dammit, I hate demons," Gajeel sneered.

"Get ready for them," Erza warned.

Then, in the distance upon the wind, they heard a softly spoken incantation.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Howl that trembles the flower of Providence.} \\
\text{Fiery Ophanim of Araboth,} \\
\text{Holy purveyor of Empyrean.} \\
\text{Ye moon of crimson before the battle.} \\
O \text{ you of the dawn who wake and sleep,} \\
\text{Whose eyes are keen and whose claws are sharp.} \\
\text{Lioness who sees and catches by night.} \\
\text{Ancient Lost Magic: Shield of Pakhet.}
\end{align*}
\]

All around Magnolia, a brilliant golden dome formed in the sky. Those underneath it felt soothing warmth, as if the September day had just become the middle of summer. It seeped into their minds and made them all smile like children without worries.

"What...is this?" Kefira asked, struggling between giddy gentleness and her own fury.

Slowly, the demons around them melted away, turning into wisps of lavender smoke. Loke especially felt a power within this sphere of protection flowing into his body, soothing all pain and providing him with strength.

"Shield of Pakhet?" he whispered. "That magic was lost thousands of years ago. Who in this lifetime...?" He stopped as he sensed the power within the spell. "It can't be!"

While everyone else was lost in a dizzy sense of bliss, eyes closed, mouths opened, sighing in peace, Loke looked around desperately, squinting through the golden haze. On the highest steeple of the cathedral, he saw a man in black standing with his hands raised to the sky. Even from this distance, Loke felt the magic flowing out in excess to form a shield large enough to cover the whole city. Then a voice entered his head.

"This is all I dare do to help. It's for my brother's sake. I leave the rest to you...Father."

Tears formed in Loke's eyes. "Zeref," he whispered. "Thank you."

"It won't work now," Loke explained with a light smile smugly on his face. "Shield of Pakhet creates an area through time and space in which demonic beings cannot exist...ever! For all eternity, this entire city will be shielded against demons and other evil Living Magic. Shield of Pakhet was how Zeref protected his own location while his demons devastated the rest of the world."

"Zeref?" she questioned with a grimace.

"Your demonic horde is gone," Loke told her. "If you continue fighting, all of Fairy Tail will be drawn to this location. Do you alone think you can take them all on? The only reason it took an entire army to beat you last time was your demons. Without them to shield you, you're actually rather weak."


The fishman appeared at her side. "You summoned me?"

Loke scoffed lightly. "You still have to call upon others."

She ignored his taunts. "Deal with the Spirit Mage. Take the Regulus Key. I shall give a lesson to this new generation of cocky mages."

"No!" Loke yelled. "Piscis Austrinus, I command you not to hurt Lucy."

He glanced over to his old friend. "You know how it is, Lion. We obey the will of our owner, and seeing you reinstated as King is my goal as well as hers. I only promise that I won't kill her."

"Lucy!" Natsu shouted.

"You damn fishhead!" Gray sneered. "Ice-Make..."

"I'm your opponent," Kefira said. "White Blaze of Orlov." A searing white magic circle formed in front of her, sparkling with intense power.

"Shit! Shield!" Gray shouted.

A flame shot out from the center of Kefira's circle, white as hot metal. It crashed into Gray's shield and easily melted through it. Gray barely had time to leap to the side.

"Dammit, that flame is hotter than yours, Natsu."

The dragon slayer grinned at the challenge. "Super hot flame, huh? I wanna taste it."

"Careful, little dragonlet," Kefira chuckled. "'twould burn thy tongue."

"Bring it on!" Natsu punched his fists together into sparking flames. "I'm all fired up!"

End of Chapter 45

Chapter End Notes
Nine Diamonds - The playing card Nine of Diamonds is sometimes called "The Curse of Scotland." All of Kefira's attacks are based on cursed gems. This one just isn't a real gem.

Fiery Ophanim of Araboth - I know people will question this one. "Ophanim" is Hebrew for "wheels" and refers to the Biblical vision in Ezekiel 1:15-21 and in Daniel 7:9 of the fiery, many-eyed, intersecting wheels guarding God's throne. The four Ophanim are considered to be angels residing in the seventh layer of Heaven, called Araboth (תוברע).

Shield of Pakhet – Pakhet is the Egyptian lioness goddess of war. Part of this incantation is actually part of Spell 470 of the Egyptian Coffin Text which calls upon Pakhet. Repeat it three times and a lion jumps out of your computer screen.

White Blaze of Orlov – Just as Kefira uses "Black Sins of Orlov" which is based on the Black Orlov cursed gem, so there is its counterpart, the Orlov Diamond, said to be "the diamond of failed romance."

"Happy, what are you doing?"

"I was joking. Besides, the full incantation goes: O You of the dawn who wake and sleep, O You who are in limpness, dwelling aforetime in Nedit, I have appeared as Pakhet the Great, whose eyes are keen and whose claws are sharp, the lioness who sees and catches by night."

"Cooool! I wanna play with a lion. O you of the dawn who wake and sleep..."
Lucy faced Haftorang cut off from the others. She knew she had to fight him with her best. Since she no longer had Loke's Key or command over him, she called upon her next strongest. She grabbed a Gold Key and stuck it in a water barrel.

"Open the Gate of the Water-bearer! Aquarius!"

"Fish's Phlegm!" Haftorang spit out a thick fluid.

The mermaid came out just in time to smash the attack away with her water. She sneered disdainfully. "That's truly disgusting. How many times have I had to wash your mouth out, Piscis Austrinus?"

"Perhaps you need to wash it once more, former-lover." His fat lips puckered, and the fishman began to inhale. All water in the area was sucked toward him, including the rain barrel. Aquarius was carried along with the water. She gasped in shocked and began swimming against the current.

"Dammit, I won't let you do this," she shouted. "Go ahead and drown!" She poured water from her jug, enough to deluge the whole street. Lucy moaned that, once again, she was going to end up washed away from one of Aquarius' insanely powerful attacks, and she took a breath in preparation. Instead, every drop that gushed out was swallowed up by the Southern Fish. Soon only a trickle came out of the massive jar.

Aquarius blinked in stupefaction. "Wha-...? My water!"

"Foolish mermaid," Haftorang smiled cunningly. "You can't drown a fish, and the Southern Fish swallows all the waters of the Water-bearer. You should know that by now. Or has it been so many years that you forgot just how weak you are to me?"

He inhaled more, and the water dragged Aquarius along screaming.

"Lucy," the mermaid yelled in desperation. "I beg of you, close my gate. Close it before..."

She and all the water was sucked whole into the Fish's mouth.

"Close the Gate to the Water-bearer," Lucy cried out in horror, swishing the key fast. The massive bulk in Haftorang's mouth vanished, and his face shrank down. "You were really going to swallow her," she grimaced. "That's sick!"

"Siphoning water is my specialty," Haftorang explained. "I once had an owner who would use Aquarius to make it flood and me to suck the land dry again. When used together, we're a dangerous duo. When battling one on one, there is no possible way for her to win against me."

Lucy felt her hopes plummet again. She looked down to her keyring and began calculating. Who else could she call upon? If only she had a Celestial Spirit that used fire. Desperately, she looked over to Natsu, but he was busy with Kefira. She quickly weighed her options, but for each Spirit the
scenario of battle was never good. Scorpio's sand could be washed away with water. Cancer was a crab and strong against water attacks, but could he even get close enough to cut Haftorang with only his scissors? Her remaining fire sign Zodias were Aries, who was too injured now, and Sagittarius. She gripped his Gold Key stubbornly and raised it.

"Open the Gate of the Archer! Sagittarius!"

Poof! "Moshi-moshi!"

The fishman eyed the horse-man and nodded to himself. "A wise choice. You comprehend the weaknesses and strengths of your Celestial Spirits well."

Sagittarius pulled back his arrow. "Lucy-dono is our beloved master. I might have admired you at one time, Piscis Austrinus-dono, but I will fight for her with the pride of a horse, as it were."

"Good," Haftorang smiled placidly. "I want the woman of my king to have loyal control over her Spirits. My king deserves nothing less."

"Your king?" Sagittarius sneered. "The Spirit World needs only one king."

"Precisely, and the Lion is it." Haftorang took up a fighting stance. "Show me the strength of the Archer, old friend. Prove to me you're worthy of being a Celestial Spirit belonging to my king's woman."

Meanwhile, Kefira cast her spell at Natsu. "White Blaze of Orlov!" A molten blaze shot out. Natsu took a bite of it, but he immediately coughed.

Gray hit the ground with his hands. "Ice-Make: Geyser!" Kefira nimbly leaped out of the way. "You okay?" he asked Natsu as the dragon slayer's face turned red and he gasped for air.

"Yeah, just really hot," he admitted, fanning his mouth. "Gah! Tongue's all fiery and numb. Reminds me of the time Happy tricked me into eating habañero nachos."

Gajeel leaped at the former queen with his arm turned into a metal sword. "You better not get the shits from eating that, Salamander."

Suddenly, Kefira was holding a claymore in both hands, a sword big enough to stop Gajeel's attack. His red eyes widened as he stared down at her, and Kefira smirked right back at him. With a thrust, she pushed Gajeel aside.

"My!" the raven-haired woman scoffed. "To make me draw out a weapon! I haven't needed to hold something so crude since I was a child. Then again, all of your attacks are so undisciplined, a crude object may be what you need."

Without warning, Erza had a sword at Kefira's neck, yet at the very last moment the claymore raised to block. The former queen glinted over at the queen of the Fairies.

"Except for you, redhead warrior. Your attacks are calculated. You have the mind of a general. If I gave you another twenty years, you might make a decent fighter."

"You know Requip as well?" Erza sneered.

"Why not? It's elementary. Don't tell me that's all you know!"

Erza scoffed in anger. Elementary? Requip wasn't exactly a commonly known magic!
Gajeel came at Kefira again from her right. The woman thrust out, pushing aside Erza's sword so that it hit Gajeel's metal arm. Then she took a step back and prepared. Both iron dragon slayer and Titania came at Kefira with their swords at the same time, yet she managed to block both with a single parry.

Then suddenly, Kefira cried out in pain. She looked over and saw blood dripping from her side. Gray had sneaked up from behind and used his ice sword, not killing her as he had intended—she shifted her weight ever so slightly at the last moment to avoid a fatal strike—but still the wound was bad.

"Damn you!" she hissed. "Leviathan!"

The snake shot out of her arm with an enraged hiss and sank its fangs into Gray's naked torso. He howled, his ice shattered, and fell back.

Happy flew forward and yanked on the snake's tail. "Bad snake! Let go!" It hissed and turned to attack Happy. The blue Exceed cried out, but suddenly Pantherlily's sword came down on top of the water dragon, crushing it until it evaporated. Wendy rushed forward to Gray. Purple stripes of poison flowing through his veins were already spreading out from the twin puncture wounds. Gray's skin began to turn a sickly shade of blue, and his lips were purple from the spreading venom.

"Pull him over here," the little girl ordered the cats. "I'll get to work on him right away."

Natsu saw Gray and looked confusedly worried. "When that thing bit me, it wasn't that bad. Took away my magic and numbed me, that's all."

Kefira explained, "Because you're a dragon slayer and Leviathan is a dragon, you have antibodies to it. A normal person would die within minutes."

Natsu watched in disbelief as Gray already began foaming at the mouth and convulsing. Wendy shouted for Happy and Charle to hold him still as she kept her glowing hands on Gray. The ice mage yanked against them in delirium while sputtering out thick mouthfuls of poisoned foam.

"Gray!" Lucy screamed as she heard him gagging to breathe and choking on the bubbles spewing from his lungs.

Sagittarius also looked worried for Gray, whom he had come to like during their visit to the Spirit World. While distracted, Haftorang made his attack. Sagittarius tried to shoot the spit that shot at them, but it splattered. Most hit the horseman and disintegrated him until he had to return to the Spirit World. The few drops that landed on Lucy burned holes through her cloths and seared deep pocks of melted flesh into her exposed skin. She cried and tried to wipe it off fast without spreading the acidic juice.

Kefira laughed at them. "Futility is a hard lesson to learn because many don't survive to take the knowledge to heart."

Natsu gritted his teeth. He might see Gray as his rival, yet hearing that he could die, seeing Lucy's tears, and listening to Kefira's heartless laugh filled the dragon slayer with unbounded rage. "Bitch! White Fire Dragon's Roar!" When he breathed out, the flame was laced with the white flame he had eaten earlier, producing a white-hot jet.

Levy gasped when she saw it. "That almost looks like Sting's White Dragon's Roar."

Gajeel shook his head. "No, it's different. Sting's is made of light. That's just fire so hot it has turned white."
Kefira raised her hands fast. "Aurora's Shield!" A bright sphere protected her from the blast.

Natsu collapsed after the flames died out and moaned only half aware of what he was saying. "Ugh! That really made my mouth burn. No more chili peppers, Happy. My tummy feels funny."

Gajeel scoffed at him. "Well, he's out. Let's hit this bitch while she's down. Iron Dragon's Roar!" Shards of metal blasted out of his mouth and hit the shield without causing damage.

"She's gone on the defensive," Loke shouted to them. "Nothing can get through Aurora's Shield, but she can't attack like that either. It also drains her magic quickly. She can hold the shield up for maybe a minute tops."

"Leo!" Kefira screamed, furious that he was telling them about her abilities. "How dare you betray me for this blonde bitch!"

He glared at her hard. "You betrayed me first...by killing Naomi."

"What? How...how did you find that out?" She glared over to the fishman. "Haftorang!"

"It wasn't him. Zeref told me everything."

Lucy gasped slightly. "You met with Zeref?"

Loke frowned in personal doubts and past worries. "I've been hiding from my sins for too long." He looked to Lucy sadly. "I didn't tell you about my past because I wanted to run away from it. I can't do that anymore. It's time for me to stop being a pussy and start being the Lion!" He pulled his ring off of his finger. "Catch!" He tossed it as hard as he could.

Lucy eyed Haftorang, figuring he would stop her. Instead, the fishman smiled. "Bring him back," he urged.

She wondered on whose side this Celestial Spirit stood, but she ignored that for now. She ran forward after the airborne ring.

"No!" Kefira shrieked. The second she lowered her shield to also run after it, Erza, Gajeel, Levy, and Pantherlily came at her one after another. Erza's sword blocked her path. Kefira grabbed it barehanded, and the blade melted and dripped as if turned to fluid. Numerous metal spikes shot out from Gajeel, caging the woman in. It took Kefira a little longer to melt her way through them, and they saw that whatever magic she was using to liquify everything was a huge strain on her.

"Levy!" Gajeel yelled. "A wall!"

"Got it!" she nodded. The solid script mage pulled out her pen and wrote in the air "WALL!" A massive brick wall cut off the entire street.

Just as Kefira began melting that too, Pantherlily attacked, forcing her to stop melting and defend herself with a shield. While she did that, Lucy leaped onto a pushcart, vaulted over the wall, and caught the thrown ring just before landing hard. She pulled out the Regulus Key but looked to Loke first.

He nodded sternly. "Do it."

Lucy placed the blue stone part of the ring into the Lapis Lazuli Key. As soon as the two pieces were united, the entire key glowed pale blue with immense power that tingled Lucy's hand. Determined now, she raised the key up into the air.
The power surge was immense. Haftorang fell with his face to the ground as an intense light blinded them all.

When it vanished, Leo was no longer sprawled out on the ground, but stood by Lucy's side. For a moment, his whole body glowed with pure light. As it slowly dimmed, Lucy gasped at his transformed appearance. The face was the same, but his orange hair was longer and wilder. The top part spiked out in an even more massive mane, draping around his face and shoulders just like a noble lion, while the rest of his hair flowed down to his waist and blew lightly with the surging power. He wore ancient military plated armor, gauntlet gloves, spaulders on the shoulders, with a golden lion emblazoned on the silver breastplate. A regal red cloak flowed down from his shoulders with thick white fur lining the collar.

"Whoa! Loke?" Lucy asked, stunned by his appearance. Then she blushed slightly. "You look really hot!"

He glanced down at her and smirked flirtatiously. "Girls go crazy for a guy in uniform, right?" He inspected the silver gauntlets and leather gloves, held his hand up, and flexed his fingers. "It's been a long time..."

End of Chapter 46
"When heaven joins the battle against you, who could stand?" - Stephen R. Lawhead

Everyone stared silently at the transformed Loke. Gray managed to lift his head up a little, although he was still weak from the poison. Natsu gawked and yelled "Cool!" Erza felt herself blush just a little. Levy whispered, "Lu-chan is so lucky," and Gajeel glared down at her in jealousy.

"Regulus," Kefira whispered with a wildly delighted smile at seeing the long-haired man in antique armor. "At last, my Lion! Mine!"

Loke stared at her disdainfully. "Che! Yours?" he scoffed. "You never understood, Kefira. I am far beyond you. Even when you held my key, I was never yours."

She ignored his words in her ecstatic glee. "Haftorang," she ordered sharply, pointing a slender finger at them. "Seize him! I hereby reclaim the Key of the Heart of the Lion into the protection of Clan Yamataikoku. By right of heritage as Queen of Kohinur and the last survivor of the Yamataikoku bloodline, it belongs to me."

However, Haftorang was still prostrated humbly on his knees. "My king! The true King of the Heavens!"

Kefira gawked at him. "What...what are you doing, idiot? Get up! You are my Spirit and you will follow my orders." Still Haftorang did not move. "Damn fish. The whole purpose of keeping you around all these years was so you could reclaim him for me. Now get up! Fight him! As your owner, I demand it."

"I cannot. He is the king for whom I have waited." The fishman's head rose, and his unblinking eyes shining with adoration. "My old friend, my king! Thank the Stars you've returned."

Kefira could hardly believe it. "Fool! You dare oppose me? I will not have it! No little slut shall steal my Lion from me again. I shall destroy her utterly." She glared hatefully to Lucy. "You've been nothing but a nuisance, little whore. Darkness Magic: Utter Oblivion!"

A purple ball of magical plasma formed in her hands, and she thrust it at the Celestial Spirit mage. Lucy gasped, realizing there was no way she could jump out of the way of such a massive attack. She turned partway, hoping to absorb it with her back, but she saw a blinding gold flash. When she looked, the glowing Lion stood in front of her. Loke had taken the shot, but it did not affect him at all.

Loke glanced down at his breastplate and touched it with his finger. "You put a tiny nick in my armor. That must be one helluva spell."

Kefira paled at seeing him standing there. "Impossible! I learned that spell specifically to overwhelm you. You weren't that strong when I had you."
His eyes flashed at Kefira and glowed in predatory anger. "Are you starting to understand yet? Three things affect the strength of a Celestial Spirit: the strength of the mage, the closeness of the bond we have with our owner, and the will of the Spirit itself. In all three ways, Lucy is far superior to you, so it's no surprise I'm also stronger now with her as my owner."

Kefira sneered in jealousy.

"Hurting my master is one thing I cannot forgive." He looked over to Haftorang who still bowed with his face to the dirt. "You really were waiting for me all these centuries. For your loyalty, I'm glad...old friend."

Haftorang looked up with shining, adoring eyes and a hopeful smile.

"However," Loke said in a dark tone, "your sins piled too high. You stole Lucy from me. You dared to attack me. When you could have saved me, you still sided with the ancient enemy."

Haftorang cringed down and shivered in terror at the fury that burned in the Lion's eyes. "It...it was...for you, my king," he insisted feebly.

"For me? How is hurting my friends for me?" Loke bellowed, and Lucy heard the roar of a lion in his voice. "Bringing Regulus back like this was not for me, nor for the sake of Leo the Lion. It was for your own greed, Piscis Austrinus. That was why you wanted Regulus...wanted...me!"

As he spoke in Regulus' words, Loke's eyes changed from green to goldenrod, and Lucy sensed an even greater power inside of him. She bit her lip and cringed back at the terrifyingly powerful magic she sensed within his body.

"You wanted your power back, and you knew you alone were too weak to retake the Spirit World. That was why you forced me to return to this world that I had hoped to leave behind. Tell me: was this greed your own, Piscis Austrinus, or was it Fomalhaut's?"

"It...it was..." His head dropped in shame. "It was my own, my dear king. Fomalhaut was not against returning, but it was not his plan originally."

"I see," the long-haired Lion muttered, nodding sagely. "Then you alone shall face punishment, and the price must be severe for breaking such a solemn oath as what you swore when we Royal Stars left. You showed me your power with a mere flick, so I shall return the favor. Lucy, stand behind me and shield your eyes," he warned.

She hurried and hid her face in his red cloak. She felt the energy of Leo the Lion in there, but it had been almost completely supplanted by something else, something powerful to the point of being terrifying. She sensed energy on a scale completely incomparable to even the Spirit King. She wanted to trust him, but honestly, this different form of Loke terrified her.

"You both shall be punished," Loke said, now turning his golden eyes to the former queen. "You see, I figured out your weakness, Kefira. That blood oath I made you take was also a test. Your hand," he said, nodding down to her fingers. "It's still not healed, is it?"

She looked at the bandage wrapped around her palm. Then she clasped her fingers tightly as if to hide that bit of weakness.

"That's the main reason I joined you. I needed to get close to you, have you trust me, so that you'd finally show me a weakness. I wasn't returning to you," he said with a smirking chuckle. "I was spying on you. When Gray stabbed you, that was confirmation for me. See, you're still bleeding heavily from the wound in your side."
"So what?" she snapped, yet sweat dripped down Kefira's face from the pain and blood loss.

"Your weakness is your fleshly body. You merged a tiny bit of Haftorang's spirit into your own soul to stop yourself from aging, but it doesn't instantly heal flesh and blood. You have the divine power of being able to turn Humans into Celestial Spirits, yet you yourself can never become a spirit, nor can you be reborn. Your soul will die when you die. It's the price for this form of magic, the blessing and the curse of Clan Yamataikoku. That's why you fear death so much, because for you there truly is nothing after this life."

Kefira trembled at hearing her greatest weakness and darkest fear being spoken so casually. For centuries, she never let anyone get close enough to scratch her, lest they figure out her one terrible flaw. Yet Loke had her take that blood oath purely to see how fast the wound healed. Then Gray sneaked up on her and pieced her, something no one had managed to do in hundreds of years.

"L-Leo," she whispered. "Please, don't. Don't kill me, I beg of you. This is the only lifetime I have."

"And you've far outlived it," he declared. "That fate was the same for your ancestors since before civilization began. In all those millenniums, not one went as evil as you out of the fear of death."

"Please, Leo! I'll obey your every command. I'll serve you. I...I'll even turn your woman into a Celestial Spirit. I will!" she declared with a tense grin.

"I don't trust you anywhere near Lucy, not after you lied to me already. You'd use any excuse to kill her."

"Please! I...I love you," she said, forcing a meek smile.

"You love power, nothing more. Goodbye, Kefira." Suddenly, Loke began to glow even brighter, and Lucy had to cover her eyes. Kefira sneered, giving up all pretense. "Damn Lion! If I have to tame thee all over again, I shall. Aurora's Shield!" she shrieked in desperation, putting up her strongest defense. "Leo, I command thee..."

"You don't own me," he yelled in disgust. "My heart belongs to only one woman. Lion's Heart Magic! Regulus...Flick!"

He held his hand up, middle finger and thumb connected, and then gave nothing more than a flick of his finger. There was a massive blast, a blinding flash, and a roar like a hundred lions. Natsu was blown off his feet, but Erza grabbed him. Only her heavy armor let her stay standing. Levy's small body was lifted completely up, but Gajeel hugged her close to him and shielded her from the force that merely the edge of that attack created. Happy and Charle were tossed into the air; Pantherlily leaped up and flew to them, catching them before they hit any buildings. Gray formed a pole of ice and grabbed onto it to keep from being blown back. He grabbed Wendy to keep her safe, and she grabbed Luke.

"My daddy's super strong!" the boy squealed in excitement.

Slowly, the light faded and the growling howl lessened. Lucy lowered her arm and looked ahead of her. The street was blown apart, all the stones disintegrated all the way down to two meters deep into the dirt underneath. The avenue had a massive scar spanning both sides of the street and even took out some further buildings. There was nothing in front of Loke but a pile of smoldering bones where Kefira had stood and Haftorang slowly fading away. Lucy covered her mouth in horror. This was only twice in her life that she had witnessed Loke actually killing someone. This level of
And this was only a flick, a tiny fragment of his full power!

"I apologize for doing that. I know it's frightening."

"She...is she dead?" Lucy shuddered. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Believe it or not, it wasn't overkill. The attack needed to be that strong to defeat her defenses. Nothing can break Aurora's Shield except for the power of a Royal Star. Her defensive magic was always superb, and Kefira honed it to be even stronger when she realized the fragility of her body." He glanced at the pile of bones. "Someone with the capability of living forever can't simply be locked up in a prison. It's still a shame I had to do it to the last descendant of the man who made me the Lion. It's over now. Don't be afraid." Then he turned back and faced the dwindling enemy. Loke gave a sad sigh as he saw the particles of spirit energy floating away from Haftorang's body. "Piscis Austrinus, the fact that you survived that blast shows your true strength."

"A mere flick?" Haftorang laughed weakly as his body faded in and out of existence. "Yes, that...that is the power I remember. I've lived this long...to see it once more."

"Fishy," Loke whispered, addressing him informally and with a fond tone to his voice. He walked forward, and each step left behind a golden glowing footprint. From those steps, rich grass and flowers bloomed. Loke knelt beside the fading half-fish and took his translucent fin.

Haftorang gripped his fingers tightly. Tears dripped from his bulbous eyes. "My king!"

"Not a king anymore, Fishy. Just a friend," he said tenderly.

"I blamed you once for letting the Royal Stars leave. I even hated you for being selfish," he confessed. "Still, I wanted you back. I'm glad to see my old friend after an age upon an age. My...king," he sighed happily.

"Please don't call me that," Loke sighed sadly. "My sins over the eons are equally as great as yours. I don't deserve that title...just as I don't deserve Regulus."

Light condensed around his heart, and a beam shot out from it. Loke's body instantly changed back to the man in a business suit. In front of him was a creature of gleaming golden light, oddly smooth features, and a massive golden mane...Regulus himself. Loke smiled, but suddenly cried out and grabbed his chest. He fell forward onto his hands and knees before this great spirit.

"Loke!" Lucy shouted, and she ran to his side.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," he assured, still holding his chest. "Just always hurts a bit when that happens. Don't worry, it's nothing."

Haftorang chuckled weakly. "Always that implacable pride. However, in my heart, you will always be my king...and my friend."

The glowing creature spoke with a voice that resonated like a dozen angels speaking at once. "Fomalhaut, thou wert called the Solitary One in ages agone, yet ironically thy desire hath always dwelt upon remaining hither amongst others. Commendable, my brethren, yet our age hath gone and
past. 'Tis thy time to go. Come with me to where the other Guardians of the Sky now dwell. This world is no longer in need of us."

"Yes, Regulus, my king and friend. I think...perhaps I'm now ready to go."

Then Haftorang's body turned into colored sparkles that gathered around his lip ring. Out from his mouth came another white, glowing creature. It flowed out of the Southern Fish and stood beside Regulus for a while, his glowing body vaguely fish-like. The two Royal Stars shared a touch of friendship, then the pure white form of Fomalhaut faded away. Left on the ground was a small, blue, awkward fish with fat lips and bulbous eyes.

Piscis Austrinus looked up at the rest of them. "I look pathetic, yes?" he lamented with a tiny, squeaky voice.

Loke smiled amiably at him. "No more pathetic than that pervy Bull. Go home, old friend, back to the Spirit World. You'll be punished, but you need to face your crimes." He placed a friendly hand on the Fish, and the small Celestial Spirit faded away. Left behind was a Silver Key with the symbol of the Southern Fish. Loke picked it up and handed it to Lucy. "He's yours by right of combat. He's a little guy, but his specialty is navigation, swallowing things, and spitting water. Just plain water, not acidic, but you'd be surprised how handy that can be. You can put out Natsu's fires, at least," he chuckled.

Lucy accepted the Silver Key and looked at it. "He'll really make a contract with me?"

"He swore to me that he would serve you since you're my chosen mate."

Her eyes teared up at hearing him say that. "Loke..."

The Royal Star Spirit boomed out in the multi-toned voice. "Master of Spirits, Lucy Heartfilia."

She leaped up with a jolt of shock. "Yes, Regulus?" she said loudly, standing stiffly at attention.

"Thine ambitions are commendable, and thy soul is strong. To summon me all the way from my place of slumber is a feat few of thy corporeal form could achieve."

"Oh! Uh, sorry for waking you up," she said in awkward shame.

The glowing being chuckled. "'Tis forgiven, child. I thank thee for doing so, if only so I could call back my brethren. Thy quest must have been great, thine enemies dire. For thy struggles and sacrifices, I shall grant thee a wish."

"Any wish?" she gawked.

"Other than changing thy Human body, 'tis within my power to grant anything thou couldst ask," he nodded.

"Ask for fish!" Happy shouted.


"Lots of meat!" Natsu said with a hungry grin.

Lucy had to laugh at such petty wishes. Instead, she proudly took Loke's hand. "I want us to be a family."

The massive star spirit looked confused. "Ye already are. Unbreakable bonds of love connect ye."
Loke stepped forward boldly. "Regulus, I wish you to lend me your strength so I can save my family and never be parted from them again."

The Star sighed and shook its head. "My scion and noble host, this offer was not to thee, but to thy master. After willfully disobeying our order not to let Humans regain the Lapis Lazuli Keys, thou art in no position to request anything."

Loke cringed a little as he realized Regulus was right. He had sent Lucy after the Lapis Lazuli Key, breaking the oath he made with the Royal Stars.

"Besides," Regulus said gently, "killing the Spirit King shall not solve thy problems."

"Then make her into a Celestial Spirit, too," Loke demanded.

"I said I cannot change her Human body. Nor, I'm afraid, can I change your son, not until he is of age to decide his fate for himself."

Lucy huffed in anger. "You can't make me into a Celestial Spirit or make Luke into a Human? What good are you?" she yelled.

"Lucy!" Loke gasped.

Regulus calmly told her, "The solution, Master of Spirits, is the one thing thou hatest the most."

Her hopes plummeted. "No way," she whispered in despair. "You can't mean..."

The air around them shuddered and felt heavy. Loke and Lucy were forced down to their knees by the sheer presence. The sky darkened, time seemed to stop, and the Spirit King came forth, looming over Magnolia with glaring red eyes.

"Leo," he boomed. "You have betrayed me for the last time!"

"Oh," Regulus said disdainfully, turning to confront the Spirit King. "'Tis thee."

"Did I not warn thee before I left the first time? Do not harass my scion! Leo knoweth well the feeling of power thou shalt only dream about, young child."

Lucy leaned over to Loke. "He's calling the Spirit King a young child?"

The Spirit King's voice boomed out deeply. "Leo is a troublemaker!"

"One thou hast created with thine irresponsible demands. Dost thou think that I not know the pain my scion hath suffered at thine own hands?" he roared in anger.

The ground shivered at the voice. Lucy heard a thousand deafening lions within that overpowering shout. It frightening her, but Loke held her close while stroking her hair. Instead of worried, Loke looked proud to have Regulus stand up to the Spirit King, like a child watching his father fight for him.

"Thy will shall be tempered this one last time, young child," Regulus declared. "Leo is not to be punished, nor his Human mate. Thou shalt also forgive Piscis Austrinus and let him serve the Master of Spirits, Lucy Heartfilia. The halfbreed child shall be raised to maturity in the Spirit World, but then he shall have freedom to choose his path. His decision shall not reflect upon his parents, nor shall they face punishment for his deeds heretofore. Thus is my decree as the King Star."
"Hey!" Lucy yelled angrily. "What about my one free wish? I said I want us to be a family, and yet you're saying I should just hand over my baby? I don't think so!"

"Lucy," Loke hissed, trying to hush her.

"Thy wish shall be fulfilled, mistress of mine, but in due time. Or is thy wish truly to have me slay this young child who calleth himself a king?" He raised a glowing hand aimed at the Spirit King, who drew back looking worried with large, red eyes. "Even if I made Leo the new Spirit King, that halfbreed child cannot survive for long in the Human World."

Lucy looked to Loke, then to Wendy holding the child, and to Gray who was still recovering from the poison. "I...I don't...I can't make a choice like that. I don't want anyone to die, but...I mean, is even an ancient Spirit who can destroy the planet now against me?" She laughed bitterly at just how miserably ridiculous it was to even try resisting under such circumstances. Tears dribbled down her cheeks. "I can't win."

"Dost thou take this as defeat?" Regulus asked in confusion.

"Yes!" she screamed irately. "You Spirits don't understand Human emotion."

"Lucy," Loke warned. "Remember what you were taught. Celestial Spirits have feelings the same as Humans. Still, if Regulus says so, then this is the best choice."

"Bullshit!" Natsu bellowed from the sidelines.

Lucy looked back to them and covered her mouth. Her friends looked ready to fight. "Natsu...no," she whispered faintly.

The dragon slayer's nostrils flared in a hot breath of anger at the glowing Royal Star. "You think you can tell Lucy what to do? Do you think you know what's best?"

"Yes," Regulus answered bluntly.

Natsu pounded his fists together, and flames sparked out. Gray slowly rose to his feet, still weak but healed enough. He threw off his remaining clothes down to his boxers and came up next to Natsu. The air around them crackled with the blend of fire and ice.

"You don't know Lucy," Gray sneered. "You don't know how she has suffered, the pain she went through just to give this baby life, the loneliness she endured when Loke was taken away. Don't think you're just going to take her kid away from her without a fight."

"Stop it, you two," Lucy sobbed.

"It's suicide," Loke warned frantically. "Regulus could blow up this whole planet if he wanted to. You saw what he did with just a flick."

"Sure did," said Natsu. "Which means we just have to beat him up before he can make a move."

"Are you with us or against us, Loke?" Gray demanded.

The Lion looked startled by the question. "I..." He breathed hard, looking to Lucy, then to the Spirit King and Regulus, then back to Lucy. "I can't..." He began to hyperventilate at being put in this situation.

"Looks like he's against us," Gray decided. "You, me, Erza, Wendy, Gajeel, Levy, and Lucy. You
think we can take them?"

"Three of them versus seven of us?" Natsu grinned as the flames around him increased. "Piece of cake. I'm all fired up!"

Erza stepped forward. "To protect our friends, Fairy Tail will fight anything."

"We'll protect you and your family, Lu-chan."

Gajeel gave a gravelly chuckle. "Gihihi! I wouldn't mind beating up the King of Heaven."

"Don't you dare!" Loke yelled at them.

Regulus glared at the mages. "Insolent fools..."

"Stoooodp!" screamed Lucy. Everyone froze and looked at her. She panted hard with the barrage of emotions. "Just...stop. If you attack, you'll be killed."

Gray still looked determined. "That doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does," she yelled. "I can't lose everyone I love, even if it means..." She hiccuped a sob. "...even if it means...something so horrible as giving up my child. I just...I can't live with that much guilt. And I can't give up my son." She fell to her knees as she realized how futile it was. "I just can't win."

"Thine ambitions are simply too high, young one," Regulus counseled.

Gray began to form ice in his hands again. "Don't you dare tell Lucy about high ambitions, you damn Star King."

Loke stood in front of Regulus. "How dare you!"

"Stop!" Lucy screamed. With her face covered in tears, she waved Wendy over. The girl looked at the toddler in her arms and reluctantly came forward.

"Mama?" Luke asked.

Lucy wiped her eyes and smiled. "I love you, Luke. Please don't ever forget that. I fought so hard to keep you, but you need to go with your daddy now."

"Mama coming too?" he asked.

"No, sweetie. Mama can't come where you're going, but I'll write letters to you every day. When you grow up a little, maybe you can write me back." She smiled sadly, kissed his forehead, then waved Wendy aside. "Give Luke to his father," she whispered with thick sorrow choking her throat.

Wendy sniffled but obeyed. Slowly, she walked over to the three Celestial Spirits. Loke looked down at the child in shock.

"Lucy," Gray protested.

"Take him." Her voice was weak, her face to the ground, unable to look at the exchange. "If you want him that badly, then go. At least...at least then Luke won't die. I could never forgive myself if he had another bad spell and didn't recover." She sniffled and wiped her nose. "What are you
waiting for, Loke? Take him. Take your son, raise him well...and never come back unless I call for you," she ended bitterly.

"Lucy!" Loke gasped.

"More than likely, that's never going to happen again," she muttered to herself. "Just...go." Her voiced faded out on her.

Loke shook his head. Her soft sniffles tore at his heart. "All I wanted was to love you. I never wanted to hurt you." Tears dripped down his cheeks. "I...I'm so sorry, Lucy." He took Luke and settled him on his hip. Then he walked over to Lucy and reached one hand down to stroke her soft, blonde hair. "I didn't want to do this..."

Lucy slapped his hand away. "Go!" she screamed.

Regulus nodded firmly. "'Tis a hard choice, but it is the best course of action."

"Hard choice?" Lucy sneered bitterly, glaring up with bloodshot eyes filled with tears. "You've never given up a child. You Royal Stars ran away from Loke and the others you call your scion. You know nothing of hard choices." She deflated a little, and her head sank down. "I just wish," she muttered, "that Luke can grow up fast. I'd like to see him at least once more before I die."

"Granted," intoned Regulus. "Now hand me my key."

Lucy pulled it out and blindly threw it at him. The other Celestial Spirits were stunned at such disrespect. Regulus merely held his hand out, and the Lapis Lazuli Key floated to him. Then from the bones of Kefira, her blue Fomalhaut Key floated to him as well.

"Leo." He pulled the ring off from the key. "Keep this, and be glad thou art still powerful enough to be leader of the Zodiacs. 'Tis more than enough ambition for thee." Then the Royal Star Keys crumbled into blue dust. "I shall likewise destroy Aldebaran's Key. We Royal Stars shall never return. When danger cometh, ye all are strong enough to survive. We hand the future over to our children. Guide it well into the next generation, and when it is thy turn, come join us in the Beyond."

Then the glowing angelic spirit faded away.

Gray came up and shielded Lucy from her pains. Loke stood nearby, hugging Luke and looking down at her as she sobbed uncontrollably.

"Mama?" Luke called out, stretching his arms out to her. "No wanna go!"

That made Lucy cry harder.

Natsu stepped forward and shoved his way between Loke and Lucy. "You've caused her enough trouble," he said grimly. "Leave."

Loke still looked down at her. He bit his lips to see her this sad, yet looking at Luke, he knew he had to protect the boy's life. This was the only way, as horrible as it was for all three of them.

"Lucy...I'm very sorry. I swear, I will bring Luke back as soon as it's safe," Loke said fervently. "Until then, whatever it takes, just be happy in life." He looked to Gray, then to Natsu, both of them giving him harsh glares. "Until I can return with him, take care of her, both of you."

Then he and the Spirit King vanished, taking Luke with them. Just before disappearing, the little boy stretched his hand out and called again.
"Mama!"

Then he was gone. All that was left were the members of Fairy Tail slowly gathering around the wailing Celestial Spirit mage.

Chapter End Notes

Oh no! Now what? Please don't hate me yet.

I stated this was only twice that Lucy has seen Loke kill someone. The first time is in the prequel, "Ephemeral Sakura, Eternal Love." That attack looks wimpy compared to THIS!

In other news, today is my birthday. I'm heading to the coast with my husband for a romantic day out: cheeseburgers and ice cream at the Tillamook Cheese Factory, shopping around the coastal communities, hiking, photographing the sunset at Cannon Beach (the 1985 movie "The Goonies" was filmed here), and stargazing tonight. It's the Perseid meteor shower. I get a heavenly gift every year! ^_^
"No pessimist ever discovered the secret of the stars, or sailed to an uncharted land, or opened a new doorway for the human spirit." - Helen Keller

Dear Luke,

I hope you’re doing well and studying hard. Don’t worry, we’re doing fine here, other than your uncle Natsu burned down a seaport on our last mission. Master made us pay for the damages and help in the rebuilding. That used up all of the reward money and took us three weeks. Because of that, I was late on my rent, and the landlady charged me a huge fine. Ah, but you don’t need to hear about money problems. I’ll write about that to my own mama.

I saw a lion cub at the zoo today, and it made me think of you. When you were born, Fairy Tail nicknamed you “the cub.” I doubt you remember that, but I hope you can remember a few of the mages in this guild. They loved you very much, and many fought to protect you when bad people came. I hope one day you’ll be healthy enough to come back to the Human World and see them. We would all like to see you and how much you’ve grown. It hasn’t even been two months, yet it feels like ages since I’ve held you. Still, I can’t be selfish. You were very sick when you lived in this world. Aries said you’re getting better now, so I’m glad you can grow up someplace where you can be healthy and strong. I know my little cub will grow up to be a great Lion like your father.

I apologize that my letter today is so short. Your uncle Gray has just arrived to tell me Erza picked a mission for us. It’s S-class, but we can come along to support her. Natsu is absolutely ecstatic about doing another S-class mission. I’m worried he’ll overdo things again. Don’t worry, your mama is a strong mage, so I’ll be fine. Plus those two uncles of yours would never let me come to harm.

Now Happy is here too saying Natsu wants to hurry, so I need to call Virgo out to give her this letter. Stay healthy, my son. Keep studying. Work hard on writing so I can hear back from you one day.

Your loving mother,

Lucy

Lucy eventually moved back into her old place on Strawberry Street. As rent came every month, she was forced to rejoin Team Natsu and go on missions so she could make the payments. She could usually rely on Taurus, Scorpio, or Capricorn, sometimes on Sagittarius or Cancer, and in special occasions she used Gemini, Virgo, or Aries. She tried to avoid using Aquarius, but there were a couple times.

One Zodiac Celestial Key remained unused. It hung heavily on her keyring, a weight she could never forget, but she usually avoided even touching it.
In her house, there were no longer any reminders. She ended up selling most of the baby furniture, clothes, and toys, although she kept a few as bittersweet reminders locked away in a trunk. She still had Gray's ice-crystal mobile, the cowboy booties from Bisca, and the smiling lion shirt she bought the day Kefira kidnapped her. Proto sat on a shelf with other plushies, not moving, not speaking, just a normal teddy bear now that the boy he was supposed to protect was gone. Lucy often brought out Gildarts' blanket and smelled it to remind her. It always brought tears to her eyes, but she tried to tell herself that Luke was doing well where he was. She wrote letters to him, same as she wrote them to her mother. Other than that, she rarely asked any of her Spirits about news. Respecting her wishes, they carefully avoided mentioning either him or Loke unless she specifically asked, and then they told her only what she wanted to know, nothing extra.

Basically, Lucy tried to force herself back into a normal life as a mage. The whole guild watched her cautiously for many months. When they saw that she could smile and laugh, they decided she had gotten over it. To the average guild member, Lucy looked well-adjusted. She freaked out easily when Natsu picked seemingly-impossible missions, she laughed loudly at the jokes and little brawls, she moaned about trying to finish her book, she fought relentlessly when a dark guild attacked them, and she even entered another Fantasia contest—although she did not win. Only her closest friends saw the little looks of sadness whenever Bisca and Alzack brought Asuka with them to the guild hall, or if a mother and father walked by with their children, or when the stars shined exceptionally bright. She never joined Fairy Tail's moon-gazing parties and was shockingly absent from the rainbow sakura festival.

"We'll both wish him happy birthday," he said quietly to Lucy. "If we wish on Regulus, maybe he'll hear us."

She smiled in her little sunny way and nodded happily.

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Dear Luke,

Happy birthday! I can't believe that one year ago today I got to see your face for the first time. You grew so fast on me, but I'll always remember the tiny baby and how you looked when they first put you in my arms. I'm giving you a present. I hope you remember Proto, your little bear. He has sat alone and unmoving for too long. I'm thankful you're not in any danger in the Spirit World, but maybe this bear will help you to remember us. It was Elfman who gave him to you. He said it was a "manly gift."

Everyone in Fairy Tail says happy birthday. I was really hoping you could come for a small visit, but Virgo said something about you going through a painful growth spurt. You grew up fast here, too. I hope you feel better soon.

Lots of love from your mother,

Lucy
"Open the Gate of the Maiden! Virgo!"

In a puff of smoke, the handcuffed maid appeared. "I await punishment."

"Here," Lucy sighed, handing the letter over.

"Ah, another letter for the little prince."

"Yes, and a present. Take this bear." Lucy reluctantly handed Proto over. "He could use it more than me."

"I'll deliver it at once, Princess," Virgo said with a bow. "This is from the little prince." She delivered a letter. On the front of the envelope was scrawled To Mama.

"Luke can write?" Lucy asked in shock.

"The little prince is a quick learner," Virgo affirmed. "However, he doesn't have Princess's love for writing."

"Oh," she muttered with a tiny sad smile. "I guess he didn't inherit the heart of a writer."

"No, he has the heart of a Lion."

Lucy jolted at hearing that phrase after such a long time. Then the stiffness in her shoulders relaxed, and she laughed it off nervously. "I guess you're right. He takes after Loke."

Virgo tilted her head. "This is the most I've heard you talk about the little prince and Brother in many months."

"Because it's his birthday." Lucy whispered, looking down at the letter. "Wait a moment, Virgo. I want to read it before you leave."

"I will remain as punishment," said the Maiden.

Lucy opened the letter and cried at seeing the shaky letters written in something like a crayon.

Mama, thank you for keeping me in your tummy. I like this place but I miss you. I miss Uncle Gray and Nazoo too. Oh, Daddy says it's spelled Natsu. Tell them hi and to stop blowing up things or I have to come kick their butts when I grow up. I love you, Mama. From Luke.

Lucy moved the letter away as tears fell too fast. Virgo came forward and handed her a handkerchief.

"It's his birthday," the blonde sniffled, "and yet...he's given me...the best gift of all."

"I'll let the little prince know," Virgo said, and she gave a tiny smile before disappearing.

The next question that circulated around the gossiping crowd in the guild was who Lucy would fall for next. All eyes were on Gray, but he kept a healthy distinction between being teammates and anything more. Sure, he watched over her a little closer, and whenever Lucy picked an easy job she could do alone, Gray vanished for a few days. When Juvia asked her in jealousy what she and Gray were up to, Lucy swore he was not going along with her. Not as far as she knew, anyway.
"When are you going to ask her out?" Mira asked Gray bluntly one day some six months later.

"The day she doesn't cry when she looks at the stars," was Gray's answer.

Meanwhile, Gray began going out with Juvia. At first, he insisted it was just to shut up the rain woman and pacify the gossiping curiosity of the guild members. After a few weeks, he seemed to be having a nice time with her. Lucy encouraged them to go on more dates, and Juvia became even closer friends with Lucy in gratitude for encouraging her relationship with her precious Gray-sama.

Summer rolled around. A whole year had passed since the day Kefira was defeated, Regulus vanished from this world, and Loke and Luke went off to the Spirit World. Luke only wrote to her once every three months, but Lucy realized that was once a day by Spirit World reckoning. He wrote on his birthday, on Lucy's birthday in June, and on the anniversary of his leaving Earthland. Each time, the handwriting got a little better.

Virgo wasn't kidding about him being a fast learner.

It was the beginning of autumn, just as the greens of summer turned gold and royal red. Lucy was on an exceptionally tough mission. Of course, it did not start out that way. They rarely did. "Banish the Forest Monsters" became "oust the dark guild using forbidden magic to create those monsters."

Natsu, Gray, and Erza had pulled away from each other so they would not hurt one another in their destructive battles, leaving what they hoped was the weakest one for Lucy.

She wasn't the weakest, of course. That never happened.

Gemini helped to confuse the enemy for a while, but the Twins were eventually defeated. Taurus was so seduced by the woman's scanty clad body, he turned into a mess and was easily blown away. Capricorn at least did quite a bit of damage, but when it seemed eminent that the enemy was going to hit Lucy, he jumped in front of her and took the blow. Then Lucy called upon Scorpio. He fought hard, and Lucy thought for sure the enemy would fall to his blows, but of course the enemy had some last ace up her sleeve. She pulled out some weapon and shot it. Scorpio tried to dodge and missed. He cried out in the pain and apologized before vanishing.

Lucy became frantic. She called Aries for some defensive magic, and although Wool Wall bought her a few minutes, it was not enough. Desperate, she called upon Cancer, but his scissors did nothing more than scratch the enemy and gave her a terrible haircut, which pissed her off more.

Almost too weak to stand, Lucy called upon Virgo hoping to burrow down and run away, as much as she hated the idea of leaving the fight. However, Virgo arrived just in time to block a shot aimed at Lucy. Although she managed to save her Princess, she vanished from the disabling blow while thanking Lucy for the punishment.

Lucy had almost no magic left and was out of options. She dodged attacks, but a few grazed her. Happy swooped down and lifted her a short distance as she fumbled with her keys, trying to decide who else she could use. It was not the right day for Sagittarius, and Lucy was nowhere near water to use Aquarius.

She realized she had no other choice left.

Happy tiredly dropped Lucy in a clearing. She caught the exhausted cat as his wings vanished and tucked him into a hole in a tree where she hoped he would be safe.

"Lucy!" Gray shouted over, seeing just a little bit of the fight and realizing that if Happy had left Natsu to protect Lucy, she must really be in trouble.
"I'm out of options," she yelled back. Already, she could hear the enemy shouting profanities as the woman chased after her prey.

"Just summon him!" yelled Gray.

She held up the Gold Key but frowned stubbornly. "Even if I call him, he probably won't come."

Gray managed to get his enemy to slip on ice and slide down a hill, buying him enough time to run over to Lucy and lean against her back to watch for more enemies. "Stop being pessimistic and just do it. If he comes, he comes, if not, I'll take care of the rest." Still, she hesitated. "Lucy, you can't keep hiding from him."

She firmed up. "I know that." Another enemy arrived, and Gray ran that way to hold back the dark mage while Lucy summoned her last choice. She held up the Gold Zodiac Key. "Open the Gate of the Lion! Leo!"

She was ready for the same intense magical drain as the others. She had actually forgotten how effortlessly Loke's gate opened for her, despite him being the most powerful of the Zodiacs.

Loke arrived with a stern face ready for battle, sunglasses gleaming, rings glittering, holding his wrist as he built up magical power, ready to protect his master. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Which one's the enemy?"

Lucy pointed, too tired to speak. Then she sank to her knees. Effortless or not, Loke was the seventh Gold Key she had summoned in under thirty minutes. She felt so tired, she just wanted to sleep.

"O Regulus, grant me your strength."

Lucy closed her eyes to the brilliant golden light. His voice was still the same warm timbre. And praying to Regulus...she could hardly help but remember how Loke looked during that time when he merged with the Royal Star spirit. She sadly wished she had been just a little more ruthless and asked him to stay that way, being king again. Then perhaps none of this year of sadness would have happened.

No...even if Loke had usurped the Spirit King and got reinstated as King of the Heavens, Luke still would have had to leave for that realm to save his life. The choice she made back then was the best for her son's sake. Luke was happy, healthy, growing up fast, and getting stronger. That was far more important than anything else. She would sacrifice her happiness for his health.

It was the sort of thing a good mother did.

Lucy watched Loke fight. Nothing flashy, no extraneous moves. He was graceful but vicious, like a lion on the hunt. His poofy orange mane enthralled her. The enemy was shocked, not only by his beauty, but his fighting skill, refined over centuries, eons, ages.

It was over too soon. He tied up the enemy, then turned to Lucy with a genuine smile. He looked overjoyed to see her, hesitant to say anything wrong, and a little sad at seeing the sour expression on her face.

"You look well," he said with a forlorn expression.

Lucy grabbed up her Gold Key. "Close the Gate of the Lion!" She slashed the air with it, but Loke resisted. She slashed again, and he twisted his neck to get it to pop. She glared at him, daring to go against her like that. "I warn you, I didn't call you out to chat. I had no choice. I never wanted to see you again."
"Yet you didn't get rid of my key." He saw her face tighten up, as if she just might cry that he suggested that she still wanted him around. "I understand," he assured gently. "It's only been a year, so I figured it was a fifty-fifty chance, either you'd still be mad or maybe—hopefully—you'd be ready to listen and forgive me. Our son is growing fast, far faster than a human could. In the Human World, he was aging at three times the speed, but in the Spirit World that growth went even faster. It seems that wish you asked of Regulus that Luke should grow quickly was truly granted."

"Wish?" That was when she remembered that Regulus had offered her one wish, anything she wanted, and in the end she wept that she wished Luke would grow up fast so she could see him again soon.

"We all thought it would take decades," Loke went on, "but he recently reached what we Spirits deem to be the age of maturity. He's about to become a full-fledged Celestial Spirit."

"He...is?" Lucy asked in shock. A tentative smile twitched on her lips. "He's all grown up? Already?" She felt both pride and sadness at the thought. Her little baby was grown. She had missed his entire childhood. It was painful to think about all she missed seeing.

"He's still a child in appearance, but legally he is of age." Loke pulled out a crystal clear key. "Diamond Key. The rarest of all, because there's only one. It belongs to Luke, and he specifically asked me to give it to you. I have to warn you, he's not much of a fighter yet, but I'm training him. A little real world experience might do him some good."

Lucy held out her hands and accepted the Diamond Key as if being handed back the child she had been forced to give up over a year ago. Her whole body trembled as she looked at the shape, similar to Loke's but with a different symbol and etched out of the clearest dazzling gem.

"Th-thank you," she whispered.

Loke gave her a gentle nod and vanished, leaving Lucy to stare at the Celestial Spirit Key.

Happy moaned and rubbed out his head as he crawled out of the tree hole. "Lucy, you gained weight."

"Shut up, stupid cat!" she yelled irately purely out of habit. Then she looked back contemplatively at the object in her hands.

"Aww, that was too easy!" Natsu complained, marching back out of the forest and to the clearing. "Really, I barely got a warm-up. Maybe he was the weakest one. How was yours, Lucy? Eh, Lucy? Did you find something cool?"

Gray grabbed Natsu's arm to keep him from running forward. He had watched the exchange from a distance. "Give her a moment."

Erza also came forward next. "A key?"

"Diamond Key," Lucy said breathlessly. "The key to open my son's gate." She looked up and saw all of their faces dropped in shock. "What should I do?"

"Well, open it, of course," laughed Natsu.

"Not so hasty," Erza warned. "This is a hard decision for her."

"It's your choice, Lucy," Gray told her. "No matter what, we'll support you."
"Yeah, of course," Natsu agreed. "But...come on, open it, even if just for a little bit. I wanna see what the kid looks like and if he's strong...and I still have to teach him how to melt ice."

Lucy cried and laughed at their continued support. Even if it went bad, even if Luke hated her for abandoning him, her friends would be there to support her. As Gray said, she couldn't keep hiding.

Firm with determination, she held the Diamond Key out and poured her magic into it. "I am linked to the path to the world of Celestial Spirits, now! O spirit, answer my call and pass through the gate! Open the Gate to the Little Lion! Leo Minor!"

She felt the magic course through her body, the tug of dimensions uniting, and in a flash and ring of a bell, there was a child before her. He looked to be about twelve years old, brown eyes in a cat-like slant, and poofy blond hair with orange roots. He wore a boy's school uniform. As if to prove this older boy was truly the same child as the toddler from a year ago, Proto stood at his feet with his stuffed little arms folded and a scowl in his beaded eyes.

"Ack! It's that stuffed bear again," Natsu shouted, leaping back and hiding behind Erza.


Lucy stared at the boy. Only one year! Loke had warned that his rate of growth sped up. Instead of aging three months in one month like he had been doing as a child in Earthland, he had been aging nine months per month while in the Spirit World.

"Mama!" he grinned. "I'm glad you called for me so soon. I missed you."


"You remember us?" Gray asked in shock.

"Well, of course I do," Luke laughed. "It hasn't been that long."

"Of course," Erza realized. "One day in the Spirit World is three months in the Human World. In Luke's mind, he's only apart from us for four days."

"He's big," Happy said softly, stunned along with the rest of them.

Gray considered it logically. "He was growing at three times the rate here, but if the Spirit World increased that to three times more...within twelve months he would have aged nine years. He was already the size of a two or three-year-old, which means physically he's about eleven or twelve."

"I see," Natsu said, holding his chin and nodding studiously, although they could tell he did not get it at all.

"Mama?" Luke asked in worry. "I know I grew up real fast. Daddy tried to explain it to me. It's a little confusing still. It's only been four days, but he said it's been a year to you, and Grandpa Mustache says I'm now around twelve. Isn't that sort of funny?"

Lucy still did not say anything.

"Mama?" he asked in worry.
Loke then appeared behind his son with a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Lucy, my love," he said with a soft smile, "meet Leo Minor, the newest addition to the Celestial Spirits. He chose to be a Spirit rather than a Human. Please don't be angry at that choice."

"I'm not," she said in a jolt, still stunned by the boy. "I...I just..." Tears came to her eyes. "He grew up."

"Luke can live in the Human World or Spirit World equally fine now," Loke told her.

"Which means..." she began, unable to believe it.

Loke walked up to her and wiped a tear off of her cheek. "Which means, now that he's a full-fledged Celestial Spirit with his own key and master, he can live wherever he pleases. He still needs lessons in the Spirit World, and the strain on his growing body would likely be fatal if he stayed out here for too long, so he does have to live in my world a while longer, purely for his own safety. It might take a couple more years before he's at full strength, but...we have no need to worry anymore. Since he's half Human, he doesn't rely upon your magic to stay out here. He can come out any day you want, although only for a couple weeks at a time until he's stronger."

"Yeah," said Luke. "For our contract, you can call me any day, any time. I want you to summon me a lot, Mama. Even if I can't stay with you forever, I wanna see you as much as I can."

"Is it really safe for him?" she asked uncertainly. "He was in so much pain before."

"If he stays too long, that would happen again," Loke admitted. "He can stay only as long as he has vitality. As he grows stronger, that length of time will increase until he can stay almost indefinitely. He'll get stronger quickly. A Celestial Spirit's strength comes from love, and I know you love him dearly."

"That's...that's great," Lucy sniffled, overwhelmed with joy. "That's wonderful. I...I can't even find the words." She wiped tears off her face.

"And now," Loke warned, "I'm going to do something that might get me slapped, but I really don't care."

Suddenly, Loke embraced Lucy and gave her a long kiss. Instead of fighting him off and slapping him, she hummed in delight, feeling the nostalgic sensation and familiar taste. Being in Loke's arms always felt safe. Only for him could she drop all defenses and purely enjoy the sensual touches.

To the side, Luke giggled softly at seeing his parents getting mushy. Natsu grinned in joy, Happy purred, and Erza raised an eyebrow at such boldness. With a knowing smile, Gray looked away to give them privacy. He had not seen Lucy so happy in a long time, and for that, he was glad.

When Loke broke the kiss, he held Lucy's cheeks and looked down at her full of pent-up passion and growing hope. The child joined them in a group hug. Lucy squeezed Luke close to her and rubbed her face into his poofy mini mane.

Loke informed her, "The Spirit King declared he senses no evil in our son. Luke's heart wasn't corrupted by the pain he suffered in the Human World. That old geezer even gave his blessing." The Lion grinned happily. "It's like Regulus said. We can be a family, it just had to take a little time." He pulled back and looked suddenly uncertain. "That is, if you're willing to forgive me."

"I...I suppose I am," she laughed in a fluster. "I should have listened to you back then. You tried to explain it. Luke needed to be in the Spirit World, right? He needed to regain his vitality and get lessons, and I can't go there for very long. Just like you said, it's...it's like sending your child off to a
boarding school. I was being so selfish."

"Not at all! You didn't want to give up on him, and I don't blame you," Loke said, caressing her golden hair. "It was a cruel thing, but vital for his well-being. Thanks to Regulus, we didn't have to wait long at all. Now it's over. Luke only has to go back once in a while for training."

The boy looked up at his father. "And my friends!" he insisted stubbornly.

"Yes, and your friends," Loke laughed, ruffling the boy's hair. "He's quite popular with the ladies."

"Daaaaaad," he groaned in mortification. "Don't tell Mama about them."

Loke laughed and hugged his son's shoulder. Lucy covered her mouth as she laughed at just how similar the two were. It was too cute!

"So," Loke asked her, his playful smile turning serious, "do you want to be a family again?"

"Please?" Luke begged with huge, innocent eyes. "I'm sorry I had to go away, really sorry, Mama. Please take us back."

She looked at the child...her son! Their son! "Of course," she laughed and sniffed. "How could I turn away my two favorite Lions?" She reached forward and scratched both behind the ears. Both Loke and Luke leaned into her petting and gave her the same catlike grin.

"Thanks, Mama," said the boy.

Loke sighed in relief. "That makes me so happy. Which leaves one last question."

Natsu and Gray gawked at what happened next, Erza smiled proudly, and Happy giggled.

As Loke dropped to one knee, Lucy covered her mouth to stop herself from laughing, gasping, squealing, crying, and everything else that hit her all at once. Tears sprang to her eyes as Loke held up a tiny box with a gold ring fitted with a blue stone. She sensed the power of Fomalhaut in it, the stone chip reset in a slender finger ring and surrounded by diamonds. Guardian of the South, while Loke's Regulus Ring was Guardian of the North, a matching set, opposite and yet equal.

"Lucy Heartfilia." Loke's deep green eyes gleamed full of love and hope. "We had a really rough start, worse than most people face through an entire lifetime. I can't say it's all over—we'll probably always face hardships, because that's how life is—but I would rather face the future with you by my side. I don't ever want to be separated from you again. I know," he laughed sheepishly, "I've said that probably a hundred times already, but I've meant it every single time. I want to be with you every day, never parting from your side. I want us to be a family to the end of our days. I wish to be more than your knight, but your husband. So please...will you marry me?"

Lucy was speechless for a moment. She looked to Natsu, who had a massive grin filling his face. Her eyes turned to Erza, who gave her an encouraging nod. Lastly, her eyes landed on Gray.

The ice mage saw the conflict in her face. Personally, he felt Loke should have waited a while before asking her. Lucy needed time to truly get over her anger. On the other hand, this was a perfect moment, reuniting as a family.

Gray missed his family. Lucy deserved to have one. Putting aside his doubts, Gray realized that this was what would make Lucy happiest. In the end, that was what he wanted most, for the day to come when she stopped crying whenever she saw the stars and could look at them with smiles of joy once more. He gave her a nod, encouraging her to take this path.
Lucy turned her gaze to little Luke, whom she could tell was ready to pounce on her if she accepted. Then she looked down to Loke, still on one knee as he waited patiently with the ring raised up, looking hopeful but also realizing that he was being impetuous and selfish again.

Did she want him as her one-and-only? Every bit of her soul knew the answer instantly, as if it had always known through countless lifetimes.

"Yes!"

Chapter End Notes

=^..^= "She said yes!"

"See, I promised it'd have a happy ending."

=^..^= "They're in llllllove!"

"Yes, Happy, and they all lived happily ever after. Now stop rolling your tongue, it's creepy."

"What you say, Rrrrrrrrhov." =^._.^=

"Okay, that's even creepier...but it's also cute." *glomps Happy and gives him lots of fish*
A New Contract

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I wanted a perfect ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next." — Gilda Radner

Loke could not remember when he had ever felt so nervous. Despite relaxing music from Lyra, he licked his lips in anticipation, swallowed hard, and stared down a carpeted aisle with shivering eagerness.

Why am I shaking? I'm Leo the Lion! But...but what if she doesn't come? What if she changes her mind? What if...?

Suddenly, a hand landed on his shoulder. Loke could have leaped right out of his shoes, and only a quick clench of his throat kept him from letting out a squeaking cry. He looked back to see Capricorn smiling at him. Just behind the Goat were Taurus, Scorpio, Cancer, and Sagittarius, all of his old friends dressed in black tuxedos and smiling reassuringly. It made the Lion loosen up a little.

Yes, it'll be fine. She'll come. She wouldn't leave me at the altar.

Loke still tugged on his white tuxedo with long tailcoats, a regal outfit for the Leader of the Zodiacs. He wore a vest as blue as the evening sky, and a golden tie tucked in primly. His boutonnière was a single golden poppy, carrying the symbolic meaning of sacrifice, magic, pleasure, and remembrance of war, for indeed Loke had fought many battles to reach this point in his life. He had seen many friends hurt, many tears, and many deaths. He wanted to remember it all on this most important day.

Around him was a garden hidden away on the old Heartfilia estate. Lucy managed to reserve this place where she and her mother had played when she was a child. There was a raised platform with chairs around them for all of their friends. Lyra's music was blissful, and all around were towering stalks of flowering blue larkspur and yellow gladiolus, the flowers of July and August to represent Lucy's birth month and Leo's dominant month.

The audience was large, although Lucy had asked for just a small group. However, she realized just how many friends she had made since joining Fairy Tail, and she dared not rudely leave out anyone. Not only was the entire Fairy Tail guild there, but there were people from Blue Pegasus, Lamia Scale, Mermaid Heel, Sabertooth, townspeople from Magnolia, the old servants from her days in the mansion, and so many Celestial Spirits that they took up their own section of seating.

Hibiki, Eve, and Ren flew a pure white airship called Beulah, nowhere near as huge as Christine, but the airship shaped like a dove was large enough for a bridal party. They had offered for Lucy to use it, saying they only really used the white ship for weddings anyway. Beulah landed with grace just outside of the circle of guests, and a ramp lowered. The first to walk down was Wendy as a junior bridesmaid, with Romeo blushing and looking away bashfully as he escorted her down the carpeted aisle. She wore a shimmering royal blue kimono with a silver pattern of outlined stars and a golden obi tied around her waist. Romeo wore a blue haori and gray hakama, although he tugged at the
traditional outfit a few times in discomfort.

Not far behind came Erza in a similar shimmering blue kimono, and Jellal was making a rare appearance in public to be her escort (a big reason why this gathering was only for friends despite all the reporters from *Sorcerer Magazine* who wanted to photograph it). After her came Cana, who scowled at being forced to wear a tight kimono with her hair up in a twist bun, and Gildarts proudly escorted her as if it was his own daughter getting married. Then came Mirajane who wore her kimono with elegance, being led forward by her brother Elfman who wore his haori with the kanji 一番 (ichiban, greatest) printed on the back, clobbering down the airship's ramp with his geta sandals.

Then there were whispers of "how adorable" as Asuka and Luke came out of the airship. The little girl wore a flower-print gold dress with a royal blue cowgirl hat, and she carried a star-shaped basket filled with rose petals which she generously scattered, giggling that she got to "make a little mess" with the flowers. Luke was dressed as sharply as his father in a white tuxedo with a gold bow tie and matching vest. He guided his tiny childhood playmate while holding a plump pillow containing two rings.

Finally came the maid-of-honor. Levy wore a golden kimono with blue stars and grayish-silver obi, completely reverse of the other bridesmaids. She was escorted by Gajeel, who surprisingly cleaned up well into a white suit and tie with a dapper fedora hat giving him just a little bit of a roguish look.

In *Beulah*, Lucy took a deep breath and let it out with a little shiver. Gray squeezed her shoulder to calm her. She smiled over at him and gave him a nod to let him know she was fine.

"Natsu, you're not sick anymore are you?" she asked as she watched Levy walk down.

"No, I'm fine. Wendy used Troia." The dragon slayer grinned. "Don't worry, Lucy. It's your day. Enjoy it!"

"That's right." Gray smiled and laughed softly at her nervousness. "Just step down and smile big for everyone."

"Gray," she whispered. "I...well...thanks for doing this. It was probably mean of me to ask but..."

"Lucy," he sighed. "I've told you a hundred times since he proposed, and I don't ever want to have to tell you again after today. All I ever wanted was to see you happy." He nicked her playfully under the chin, which made her smile. "I'm really happy for you two, truly! Besides, me and Juvia...we're doing good together."

Natsu looked aside with a perverted smile and teased softly, "He banged her yesterday."

"I could hear them in the back storage room moaning like cats in heat."

"We...we weren't..."

Natsu covered his mouth as he laugh. "Hoho, it's true! Mira had a hell of a time mopping up the water mess and defrosting the walnut barrels. Good thing you're not marrying him, Lucy, if he's that messy in bed."

"You bastard! I'll—"

Lucy smacked them both over their heads. "If you do anything to ruin my wedding day, you won't have the anatomy to consummate your own marriages."

"Sorry, Lucy," Gray grumbled petulantly.

"Sheesh, you two will never grow up," she sighed, yet it made her smile that her two best friends were the same as always.

Outside, the music changed. Lyra strummed her lyre and began a new song.

Here comes the bride,
All dressed in white,
Sweetly, serenely in the soft glowing light.
Lovely to see,
Marching to thee,
Sweet love united for eternity.

Led here in faith,
Draw near with joy,
Love's guardian angel will watch over you!
Joined in a bond
None can destroy,
Now you are one in your love ever true!

The audience rose as Lucy stepped down from the airship. Up front, Loke's mouth dropped a little, and his heart skipped a beat.

Lucy wore a form-fitting wedding dress, glistening white, that flared from her knees down in shimmering ruffles of cloth. Instead of a necklace, she wore her son's Diamond Key on a gold chain, letting it gleam in the morning light. Her golden hair was pulled into a simple up-do held in place with shimmering star-shaped crystal pins. The veil over her face could not hide the beaming smile and blushing cheeks. In her hands, she held a bouquet of white roses and daisies with a few golden laurel leaves for little flashes of celestial color. Instead of a long train on her gown, the back side of her veil trailed down two meters past her ankles, sewn with beads into the patterns of the constellations, which was kept smoothly in place by Virgo and Aries. Escorting her on both her left and right were Natsu and Gray, both looking happy for their best friend.

Lucy saw all her friends in the garden. Master Makarov was already sobbing moistly and slobbering that "she grew up." Bisca and Alzack gave her smiles, knowing the joy she must be feeling. Juvia looked well-pleased that she no longer had a love rival, and Lisanna looked ready to bounce with eagerness for her dear friend. Happy leaned against Charle with a sigh of romance, and the white cat blushed as she decided that this time—only this time—she would allow it.

All of her Spirit friends were there, even Aquarius and Piscis Austrinus who hung out at a nearby water fountain. Some of the Celestial Spirits were not hers but still wanted to witness Leo the Lion getting married. They all came thanks to the magical power of the Spirit King, who stood at the front to deliver the ceremony speech. She could hardly ask for a better officiant for her wedding.

By the time Lyra finished her song, Lucy stood by the raised platform. Natsu and Gray each gave her a kiss on the cheek, then they handed her over to Loke. Natsu sat beside Lisanna, who hugged his arm and whispered that he looked so mature in his haori. It made him blush as bright as his pink hair. Gray sat beside Juvia, and he squeezed her hand, which made the rain woman blush with joy.

Loke took Lucy's hand, led her up the two steps of the platform, and pulled her veil back to reveal a face that could have put the brightest star in the heavens to shame. The Spirit King stood before
them, speaking in solemn tones about the oath between a Celestial Spirit and a key owner, how such bonds were so close, yet none as close as the bonds of true love and fidelity. The bride and groom were so happy and so nervous, they hardly listened to his little sermon.

Loke remembered the first day he saw Lucy, how he sensed something about her from the very start, yet when he learned she was a Spirit mage, he felt frightened of being found out, dreading that the news of his impending death might reach his friends back in the Spirit World and make Aries feel guilty. He remembered the day she saved him, the times they fought side by side, their first kiss under the sakura trees, their first time making love, and the day she found out she was pregnant. They went through so much joy and so much sorrow, yet that journey made this day all the more sweeter.

Loke was so absorbed in staring at Lucy's face that he barely heard the moment when he was supposed to give his vow.

"Lucy," he said gently, "today, before all our friends, I make a new contract with you. Not one of Spirit and owner, but of husband and wife. I swear upon the constant stars that I shall take you to my hand, my heart, and my spirit. I swear to love you wholly and without restraint, in youth and in old age, in sickness and in health, in plenty and penury, for the rest of my existence. I shall honor you, be wholly faithful to you, and protect you from all harm. I swear this upon the ring of my love, the honor of my word, and my pride as a Celestial Spirit."

Then it was Lucy's turn. She gazed up into Loke's eyes and spoke her oath with ardent feeling.

"You're already bound to me, Loke. I saved your life, and you became my knight. I can't count the times you've saved my life. It's only fitting that I bind myself to you today, but instead of a knight and princess, I shall be your wife. I swear to be more than just a master, but a good and loyal spouse. I swear to love you and honor you, in youth and in old age, in sickness and in health, in plenty and penury, for as long as I live. I shall honor you, be wholly faithful to you, and never abuse our bond. I swear this upon the ring of my love, the honor of my word, and my pride as a Fairy Tail mage."

Then Luke came forward, grinning happily at his parents as he held up the pillow with the wedding rings. Loke took the blue stone ring he had picked for Lucy and slipped it onto her slender finger.

"With this ring, I thee wed."

Then Lucy took a ring. It was a plain gold band, but it was a magic ring that held within it a picture of Lucy which could be projected. That way, when Loke had to return to the Spirit World for business or to rest, he could always see her face. Her hands shaking with intense emotion, Lucy slid that ring onto Loke's finger and said, "With this ring, I thee wed."

Juvia sniffed in happiness. Gray squeezed her hand and gave her a handkerchief. On the other side of the gathering of guests, Natsu had a clear view of Lucy's face. He saw the giddiness in her gleaming eyes, and he felt such immense joy at seeing his best friend finally making her wish come true. He glanced over to Gray. There had been rumors, of course, that Gray might kidnap Lucy at the last minute. However, Gray was acting mature about the whole thing. Natsu pouted a bit.

Damn that exhibitionist, he's not screwing up one bit. Erza even gave me permission to beat him to a pulp if he tried anything stupid. I almost wish he would.

Still, Natsu felt glad that Gray was letting Lucy have her day. He was even a bit shocked when Gray leaned over to Juvia and whispered something to her that made the young woman's pale cheeks flush bright.
Then the Spirit King said in a deep, rumbling voice. "Leo, Lucy, today you have made a new contract with one another. Honor that oath, honor each other, and you will have love and happiness. You may be from different worlds, but your hearts have traveled beyond all barriers. Let nothing hold back that ardent love. Having joined in this sacred union, I now pronounce you husband and wife. Old friend, you may kiss your bride."

Loke smiled as he leaned in and gave Lucy the happiest kiss he had even known...in his entire existence.

Lucy and Loke sat at their own table during the reception, which was probably a good thing. Lucy quickly realized why Mira arranged the seating this way. The rest of the guests...well...it was a normal Fairy Tail party. Any celebration, especially something as elaborate as a wedding, was an excuse to eat excessively, drink heavily, fight "manly," burn things, freeze things, and cause general chaos and destruction.

Natsu suddenly ran past her with one of his hilarious laughing faces, breathing fire as he cackled and waved someone's boxers in his hand. Gray chased after him stark naked, shouting to hand back his underwear. Juvia raced close behind, hoping Natsu could outrun Gray-sama a little longer since she had a gloriously clear view of his butt. Cana and Bacchus were in a corner of their own surrounded by empty tankards, kegs, and barrels. Hibiki was flirting with Aries, who blushed fiercely at his sweet words. Makarow stood on a table dancing a silly jig with Plue and Happy, while Macao, Wakaba, Warren, Max, Jet, and Droy roared in laughter at the crazy old master. Elfman demanded that someone must fight him and was taken up on the challenge by Taurus. Sagittarius was busy discussing aiming techniques with Bisca and Alzack. On the dance floor, Gajeel and Mira sang a duet with Lyra accompanying Mira's guitar. Luke bent over so he could dance with Asuka, laughing that his best friend was having so much fun and glad she did not mind that he grew up so quickly. Romeo and Wendy waltzed bashfully, while Erza awed the crowd with her and Jellal's flashy dance moves.

"Argo!" Lucy realized, recognizing the large ship spirit.

"Get us out quietly," Loke told the proud prow.

"Where to, Captain Leo?" asked Argo.

Loke hugged Lucy as they took seats on the ship. "To where the stars shine brightest."

Argo sailed over the grass as if it was the sea. They drew away from the noisy party and into a quiet twilight. Lucy looked up to the sky and smiled at the twinkling stars. Right overhead was the Leo constellation, and she saw Regulus burning brightly red. She gave a little wish, the same she requested of Regulus himself, that she and Loke could be a family. She also wished that perhaps they could expand their family someday and give Luke a little sister.

Suddenly, the sky lit up. A fiery flower exploded right over the constellation, giving the impression of Regulus growing huge, the Lion's Heart swelling with joy and pride, glowing like the fire sign which Leo represented. Then another explosion, this one ice-blue and shaped like a snowflake. Then another, a cross with a heart. One was a golden light that formed the shape of a little lion cub. One bolted up into the night like yellow lightning, another glowed like quicksilver, and another was a purple flame. Another firework exploded, and words in Levy's handwriting gleamed across the
Lucy looked back and saw her friends gathered, waving them off, and occasionally shooting up magical fireworks. They cheered for her, toasted her happiness, and a few shouted lewd comments regarding their upcoming honeymoon. Tears came to Lucy's eyes, happy that her friends were all there to support her. She leaned into Loke, who wrapped his arm around her shoulder as they sailed off into the night.

"Well, they're off," Gray stated.

Natsu nodded happily. "Yup, away on their honeymoon."

Erza walked up to them. "You know what that means, right?"

The two boys looked over at her, thinking they knew what she meant but shocked that Erza of all people would mention something so perverted. They dared not answer her, so she smiled down at the two of them.

"Now this party can really get started."

They both laughed with a nervous sweat. "Oh, right, right!"

Mira stood up on her chair, and her acoustic six-string transformed into a wild, spiky, electric guitar. "Let's party!" she shouted.

Gajeel threw aside the fedora and white suit. Underneath was his black clothes and spikes. He growled into the microphone while Mira rocked out a riff. The music went loud and wild. A food fight began almost instantly, and the whole party quickly turned into a massive brawl.

"I love this guild!" she exclaimed.

Luke realized he had an arm around the little girl. "Me too," he decided.

"Are you gonna join?" she asked.

Luke thought it over. "I might. My dad joined and still has his guild mark, so I guess Celestial Spirits can be Fairy Tail mages too."

"Yay! You should join. Then we can be on the same team with Auntie Wendy and Romeo."

"I guess I will...when I'm older."

Asuka gave a little pout. "You'll be old enough way before me. You grew up too fast. No fair!"

He laughed that she was finally calling him out on that. "Yeah, I know. Sorry. You'll catch up to me soon."


He smiled and hugged the girl a little closer. "I like being with you too, Asuka."
Just then, a chair flew their way, and Luke blasted it with another beam of light. He and Asuka laughed as they watched Natsu and Gray roll over the floor, blown away by a gust of wind from Wendy, then the two boys got zapped by Laxus for bumping into his chair and making him spill his beer.

"Yup," Luke said decisively. "I'm definitely gonna join Fairy Tail someday."

End of Chapter 49

Chapter End Notes

_The airship "Beulah" comes from the Hebrew name meaning "bride."_

_The lyrics to "Treulich Geführt" (or "Here Comes the Bride" as it's known in English) were taken from two sources. One is the most popular English version: "Here comes the bride all dressed in white..." The other is a close translation of the original German created by John Rutter. The song comes from my favorite opera, "Lohengrin" by Richard Wagner._

_A huge thanks to Abiding Angel, who is training to be a wedding coordinator. [She created a whole Pinterest blog of LoLu wedding ideas](https://www.pinterest.com/): which flowers worked best symbolically, various dress styles, wedding invitations, parting gifts, shoes for the bride, cake toppers, and even cuff links. She really put a lot of work into it, but it was so much, I couldn't really add everything in without losing the interest of half my readers. Then my beta reader 1337kitsune suggested that I add a reception scene. That definitely kept this chapter with a Fairy Tail feel. Plus I have weddings on the brain. Just this week, two of my friends went to Canada to get married since gay marriage is still not allowed here, and Pierre still has his Canadian citizenship. Also, my best friend is engaged and I'm the matron-of-honor, so I'm helping her with that. Lots of wedding stuff going on around here! ^_^

_One more chapter to go! I feel sad at seeing it end._
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I am not going to die, I'm going home like a shooting star." - Sojourner Truth

Three years later, my daughter Stella was born. Sadly, I faced the same issue of a fast pregnancy, an infant who grew at three times the normal speed, and having to give her up after less than a year to be raised in the Spirit World. My wish to Regulus was also bestowed upon Stella, and she only needed one year in the Spirit World until she physically reached the age of maturity. Unlike Luke, Stella chose to be Human because she wants the freedom to travel around the world. She is now a famous historian, teaches at the University of Fiore, and recently she became the leader of her archeology guild. I don't get to see her much anymore, she's always off at ancient dig sites, but she has made me proud. She has the skills to be a great celestial summoner, so I have been giving her some of my keys over the years. Virgo says Stella is a kind owner, although she complains at not getting enough punishment. Now, if only Stella would stop cycling through boyfriends every week!

Loke and I moved into our own place shortly before Stella's birth. Luke lived with us for quite some time. He has apparently stopped aging at around his late teens or early twenties, but he had no desire to leave me too soon. That is, until Asuka came of age. Now they live in the old Heartfilia mansion, which has been converted into a shelter for mage orphans, and they care for those children until they are old enough to join a guild...most go to Fairy Tail, of course! Instead of a wild playboy like his father, Luke turned out to be a loyal husband with a level head and quick wits. He is insanely powerful, a superb fighter when the need arises, fiercely protective, but he's gentle around the children.

As I get older, I'm beginning to wonder what Loke sees in me. I'm always worried and jealous, but he has never shown the smallest bit of disloyalty. I love him more and more every year for continually choosing me over some younger, more lovely woman. He even showed up one day and had changed his hair to silver. He seemed rather proud of himself, bragging about how clever he was to come up with the idea of making himself look older, but I told him never to do that again. I love that orange mane of his, and I want it to be my sunshine throughout the years.

So now we're living alone again. It's just the two of us, but it feels good to have privacy. That is, until Natsu jumps through my window, or Gray shows up naked. Then again, my life just wouldn't be the same without those little quirks, and we wouldn't be Fairy Tail mages if we were a perfectly normal family.

Our children are grown. The cubs have left to form their own pride. I wish them luck, and I know Luke and Stella will make me proud.

Watch over them for me, Mama. Watch over all of us.

Your daughter, Lucy.
Many Decades Later

They all knew this day would come.

Lucy laid in the stiff hospital bed that had been her cage for three years already. Her golden hair had long ago turned silver, but her chocolate eyes were still as brightly smiling as ever. Her two men were with her, orange and golden manes on both of them, their faces so similar that, in her aging senility, she often mixed up one for the other.

But not now, not when they were together.

She felt her life reaching its end. She wondered sometimes what Loke saw in her, this decrepit shell who could not even feed herself. Yet he never left her side. He seemed to be more patient these days. A morbid side of Lucy figured he was waiting for her to die and be reborn so he could love her again in the next life. That was fine. It made the passing easier. She knew she would see them again...one day.

"Leonita?"

His voice speaking that pet name from the past made her smile and took away all pain.

"Mama?"

That voice too. Really, their voices were so alike, only a slight timbre difference distinguished father from son. Luke would always sound a little younger than Loke, although their apparent ages were the same.

She reached her frail hands up, and with shaking fingers she scratched both of them just behind the ears. She swore she could hear them purring.

"My silly Lions," she sighed, and finally Lucy Heartfilia let her soul flow out.

They stood in black suits during the funeral, the only two not bothering with umbrellas to shield them from heavy rain that felt too stereotypical for such a solemn occasion. Their hair stood out like two burning suns amidst the sea of black and gray.

Some of the faces around the cemetery were familiar. Wendy stood with her husband Romeo, her blue hair mixed with silver like a gleaming waterfall, while five tiny blue and white kittens fluttered around her to hide under her umbrella. Master Erza of Fairy Tail, her hair no longer scarlet but pure silver, wore her cloak with the Ten Wizard Saints insignia on the back over solemn black armor. Natsu and Lisanna held onto each other, both of them very old as well; and a little to the side was Gray donning the black trench coat he wore all the time since losing his wife Juvia. It had been a present on their fiftieth wedding anniversary, and only that coat had curbed his exhibitionist tendencies.

Lucy's grave was near others, all etched with the Fairy Tail insignia, a long line of dedicated service: Makarov, Gildarts, Macao, Wakaba, Nab, Laki, Max, Warren, Jet, Droy, Levy, Gajeel, Cana, Mira, Elfman, Evergreen, Laxus, Freed, Bickslow, Juvia...proud mages all of them, some dying to protect the innocent, some passing on peacefully like Lucy, living long and wonderful years surrounded by friends.

The last prayer was given, and people began to move away, ready for the gathering that would be held in the guild hall. Loke saw one person walk up to him. Gray's eyes had not cried. His tears dried
up the day his rain-woman passed away. Wearing his long black coat, the ancient Gray stared hard, almost bitterly, out of wrinkled eyes. Loke had gotten used to such looks. It was common for the older generation to feel a little bitter that they were so frail now, whereas the Celestial Spirit was as youthful as ever, eternally young and never lacking the power to fight. It created a feeling of jealousy and nostalgia in the older mages.

"Will you watch over her next time too?" Gray asked, his voice frail but still with that passion that made him such a respected senior member of Fairy Tail.

Loke and Luke both stood firmly. "We both will," Loke promised. "With any luck, I hope you'll all be reborn together."

"I hope so too," Gray sighed. "And Loke...thanks for staying faithful. I'll be honest, none of us thought you'd see this through to the end. A few decades ago, Cana even began taking bets. I bet in your favor. Too bad she's not with us anymore to pay up."

The Lion smirked. "Of course I stayed loyal. My pride demanded it."

"And a Lion's pride," Luke added in, "can be a very powerful thing."

Loke smiled over to the young man. "Well said, son."

A short distance away, Luke saw two women come forward, one with long orange hair pulled into a lop-sided ponytail and catlike green eyes, and another wearing a cowgirl hat.

"Hey, brother," the ginger girl sighed with a sad smile on her face.

Luke ran up to her and gave her a hug. "Stella! I'm glad you made it. We didn't think you could return from that excavation on Hoshinoue Island in time for Mama's funeral."

"Silly little Lion. I might have chosen to be Human, but I'm still half Spirit. I summoned Virgo and hitched a ride with her through the Spirit World. You know, she's the best Celestial Spirit ever. She makes my archeology digs so much easier."

"Really? So she's better than me and Dad, huh?" he challenged playfully.


"What?" Luke shouted. "Oh come on, what'd I do this time?"

The orange-haired woman just chuckled. "I dunno, but he said, 'That little lion cub is a troublemaker like his father.'" She tried to mimic the Spirit King, grouchy deep voice and all. "You can always hide with me and Piscis Austrinus on Hoshinoue Island."

"No way! That fishman gives me the creeps!" Luke looked aside. "I have too many bad memories from childhood about that guy."

"Aww, he's nice, and he's awesome when it comes to navigation. That works great on my excavations, and he has so many fascinating stories. I'm glad Mama gave me his key."

"Oh, that reminds me!" Luke dug into his pocket and pulled out a keyring. "All of Mama's Spirit Keys, or at least the ones she hasn't already given to you. She wanted you to have them. She said she knows you'll treat them with kindness. Your passion may lie in being a historian, not a mage, but if
you can look up the history of magic then it's a great asset to mages all over the world."

Stella slowly held her hands out and took the keyring in shock. "Seriously? Mama's Spirit Keys? That's...wow, I really don't know what to..." She paused, and her emerald eyes widened in panic. "Hey wait, yours and Dad's aren't on here. Don't tell me you lost them, you idiot cub!"

"Calm down," he said gently. "They're not lost. Aunt Wendy has them for now."

"Aunt Wendy? But she's not a celestial summoner."

Luke gave a light sigh. He knew someone would have to break this news to his sister, and he felt regretful that it had to be him. Still, she needed to know. After all, she was his beloved sister, the girl he had protected for years until the headstrong woman left home to explore the world. "We...we're going to someone else."

"What?" Stella shouted, her voice nearly reaching a screeching level. She ignored the shocked stares from the mourners, blinded by terror at losing her brother. He was her best friend, the only man who understood her. She refused to imagine it, and anger swelled up inside her that he was leaving her now, after the loss of their mother. "Who?" she demanded furiously. "Who'll be your new owner?"

He gave a soft shake of his head. "I don't know yet."

"No way! Luke, you and Dad are my only family now. I can't let some stranger have you."

"Stella." He smiled and patted her shoulder. "It's something we already agreed upon, all three of us: Mama, Dad, and me."

The ginger girl glared in disapproval.

"Oh, don't give me that look," Luke chuckled. "No woman is good enough for your big brother, huh?"

"Asuka is too good for you, in my opinion," she said quietly, glancing over to the woman in a cowgirl hat. "If this new owner is mean to you in any sort of way, you better tell me. I may have joined the archeology guild instead of a mage's guild, but I'm just as good of a Celestial Spirit mage as Mama was."

"If she threatens me, I'll let you use Aquarius to drown her."

"Oh hell no, then I'd drown too," Stella grumbled petulantly. "Anyway, I should go say hello to everyone. It's been at least five years. Oh, I got you this. I was going to wait until after the memorial, but I don't know when I'll have to hurry back to the dig site." She slipped a gift box over to him.

"What is it?" Luke questioned, shaking the box.

Stella covered her mouth with a giggle and leaned into his ear. "Magical contraceptives, straight from the infamous bordellos of eastern Kohinur."

"Stella!" he shouted softly, turning bright red as he quickly hid the box in his coat.

"Well, you and Asuka don't want kids, right? You're just adopting, but...you know," she smirked. "You two are still...active, right?"

"How dare you talk like that in front of Mama's grave!"

"Oh please! Mama was the one who asked me to get them for you. She said she knows how it is, a
Celestial Spirit and a Human trying to avoid having children. Anyway, I hope you make good use out of them, big brother." She gave him a wink.

"I swear, Stella," he growled. "You are as bawdy as Dad."

"Well, I learned it from somewhere. Talking about him... Hey Dad!" she shouted, waving her arms to get his attention. "Quit talking to the old fogies and come give your baby girl a hug."

She turned aside to greet her father. Luke watched his sister go and shook his head. She was wild at heart, flirtatious, could never settle down... just like Loke had been. Luke on the other hand used his sex appeal only on one woman. He saw her coming up now, a gentle woman whose hair was nearly all gray, yet it gave Asuka a noble look, a proud matron, a great mage who succeeded her parents as Fairy Tail's sharpshooter. Her eyes were still keen, and now they were on him. Even after so many decades, seeing her made his heart melt.

"Luke?" the cowgirl asked quietly, hanging back a little.

"Asuka," Luke sighed. "I thought you were staying with the kids." They had opted to adopt all the children who wandered into the guild just like Erza, Gray, and Natsu had done in their childhood.

"They're fine. Proto is watching over them. That bear won't let a single fly into the house. I had to come. I couldn't leave you, not on a day like this."

She attached herself to Luke's arm. He smiled at Asuka and gave his wife a kiss. She looked so sad for him, but Luke had an expression of acceptance. His mother was Human after all, just like his wife, and even his sister, although Stella aged very slowly since she was half Spirit. One day he would have to say goodbye to them too. It was all part of a cycle, and it was something he as the Celestial Spirit of Leo Minor had to accept.

Luke joined his father, and they came up to another elderly woman, just a few years older than Asuka. Loke walked up to her while Luke dabbed his wife's tearful eyes.

"Wendy," the senior Lion addressed. "You have the package, right?"

The blue-haired matron nodded, and her flying kittens replied in unison, Aye, sir! "When I sense her soul again, the keys will be given to the mother, and she will give them to the child when the time comes."

"What?" Stella shouted, leaping over to them and staring with huge, emerald, feline eyes. "Ooh, so you're doing that, huh?"


She smacked his arm. "You could have just said so."

"Thank you, Wendy," Loke said respectfully. "I know I can trust you to find her again. Well," he said, looking to Luke, Asuka, Stella, and all the others. "I'm not bound by an owner anymore. Luke, Stella, tell everyone hello and goodbye for me."

"Dad, aren't you coming to the memorial?" the younger Lion asked in concern.

"Yeah, I just got here," Stella protested.

"I don't think it'd be appropriate for them to see me looking the same after having lost an old friend. It's best this way," he muttered, nodding to himself.
"Dad," Stella whispered.

He smiled to his daughter. Stella ended up with Loke's color of hair and eyes, but her face was a replica of Lucy, just how she looked when Loke first fell in love with her. Even the way she fixed her orange hair was Lucy's style, as well as her choice in clothing...although Loke felt her skirts were way too short! He hugged his daughter closely, feeling joy at the children he and Lucy had, all the years of raising them, teaching them, having troubles with them—lots of troubles!—and then watching them grow up and move away, off to start their own lives.

He was so glad Lucy gave him these two precious gifts.

"It'll be fine, Stella. You still have your sweater," he said, tugging on the blue and gold sweater she wore against the pouring rain. "It's celestial clothes. Wearing that, you can hitch a ride with Virgo and visit me any time."

She pouted. "But I can't stay long. I'm not like you and Luke."

"No, you're a Human, and you should be proud of that." Loke squeezed her tighter. "You'll live much longer than others, but it means you'll be around long enough to see all your dreams fulfilled, plus you get to have the freedom of being Human. So enjoy your life, Stella. Enjoy it to the fullest, just like your Mama did."

"Yes, Daddy," she said, sniffling back tears. "And you, Luke? You're not going away, are you?"

"No," the young man assured her. "I'm not bound by an owner anymore, but I'm strong enough to stay in Earthland for as long as I want. It just means I'll have more free time. Maybe we'll expand the mansion, adopt more orphans," he said, smiling down to Asuka. The cowgirl smiled at that plan and leaned into him. "You can come babysit for us."

"Ugh! Screw that idea," Stella grumbled.

Loke pulled away and looked around him. Gray came up beside Wendy. Natsu had lingered just enough to see what was going on and came over. Master Erza of course could not leave her brats, not even those only a few years younger than her. She saw their gathering and came up to give the Lion a final smile. She knew it would be their last time together.

"Gray, Natsu, Erza...I'll see you in the next life." Then with a final grin, Loke faded back to the Spirit World.

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**A Few Years Later**

Loke hated hospitals. After having stayed in one for three years with Lucy, he really, *really* hated them.

Nurses stopped to watch the two of them walk by. One dropped her chart as she gawked at two of the finest looking men she had ever seen. One old lady in a wheelchair watched them pass her, then declared in ecstasy that she could now die a happy woman. A pregnant woman walking the halls saw them and sighed, "I hope my son grows up to be that dashing."

Loke smirked to himself. Yep, he still had the charm!

Luke pulled him forward eagerly. Loke wondered for a moment, if Luke was his son and half-human, why was it that he seemed to stop aging at seventeen so that he looked like a younger brother? The boy was close to a hundred years old now. Perhaps he was eternal as well. Honestly,
no one was sure.

"In here, Dad!"

That title always earned them a few stares. An apparent-seventeen-year-old and an apparent-twenty-something-year-old, father and son? Loke left people questioning that. He did not feel like explaining it every single time.

They stepped into a quiet recovery room, following a neatly dressed nurse. Loke could hardly help but give just a little stare at the shortness of her white skirt. Well, technically he wasn't married anymore! He could at least look.

"Ma'am," the nurse said in the quiet tone of a hospital worker. "You have visitors."

A curtain was pulled aside, and Loke saw a woman in bed. She had black-blue hair and gray-blue eyes. Her face was still pale from exertion, and she wore a plain hospital gown. Beside her was a young husband with a studious trim to his pure white hair. A small daughter was with them, a child of maybe five with flaming red hair who stared at these strangers with hard eyes.

"You must be the men the letter mentioned," the woman in bed said, smiling congenially. "I'm Grayrain, and this is my husband Drake-sama."

The husband stared at them from behind his thick glasses. "Master Wendy of Fairy Tail is respected even in these distant parts. To get such a request from one of the Ten Wizard Saints is certainly an honor, yet I question her judgment. Who exactly are you two? The letter only said that you would be guardians to our newborn. I'm not sure Master Wendy knew all the details of this pregnancy."

Grayrain smiled down and nodded happily at the infant. "We're going to name him after my great-grandfather who recently passed away, Gray Fullbuster."

"Gray?" Loke shouted. He looked to Luke fast. "Did Wendy get the wrong person?"

"Twins?" he gawked. "Both...boys?" He felt a slicing disappointment. Well, he reasoned, maybe he'll grow up to be gay. I could live with that.

"Yep!" the proud new father grinned. "Not identical, though. You wouldn't think this kid was a boy, either."

"Drake-sama, stop saying that," Grayrain snapped. "You know the poor kid is going to be teased enough when he grows up. And hair like that must be from your side of the family. Mine are all dark-headed."

"My side all have white hair. Although I guess Mother did mention that her grandfather had pink hair, and little Elsa was born with red hair. Weird genetics."
Loke peered over and saw a sleeping newborn with a tiny tuft of bright salmon-pink hair. "Stars above!" he gasped in awe. "These two...twins?"

Luke was slightly more in control of his emotions. "What name have you decided for this one?"

"My great-grandfather, the hero from the old story, you know, *Songs of the Fairy Tail Mage* by the great author Lucy Heartfilia. You've read it, right?"

Luke smirked slightly at the irony. "Oh yes, I've read it. Many times!"

"Wait, your great-grandfather was Natsu?" Loke asked in shock. "But your last name isn't Dragneel."

"Well, no, of course not. We're descended through his daughter Jane," Drake said with a boastful smile. When he did, Loke clearly saw Natsu's signature smile on the man's face. Even his name Drake now made sense. Drake meant dragon.

"Ah...of course," Loke muttered. "Jane Dragneel."

"Growing up," Drake went on, "I always wanted to name my first son after Great-grandpa Natsu. Of course, so many kids in my generation were named after him—it was a popular name thanks to the book, you know—so I think we'll be a little different and call him Dragneel." He laughed and grinned again. "Dragneel Dreyar! It has a good ring to it, no?"

"D-Dreyar?" Loke whispered. "That's right, little Jane married that conceited brat of Laxus and..."

"That's wonderful," Luke cut in, pulling his awestruck father back a little so he would stop gawking and not say anything rude about this man's ancestors. "However, it seems we may have made an error. You see..." He looked to Loke, who was still blank in shock at the concept of Natsu and Gray being reborn as twins. These poor, poor parents! "This is Leo the Lion, and I am his son, Leo Minor. Please, call us Loke and Luke."

Drake gasped. "Celestial Spirits?"

"Those two keys now make sense," Grayrain said thoughtfully. "Great-grandfather Gray-sama had stories about you two."

"We were sworn to watch over Lucy in her next life, but it seems..." Luke laughed at the two infants. "...Master Wendy must have mixed up the auras."

"Well, maybe not," Grayrain mused. "Elsa, get the other one."

The redhead child, who had been glaring hard at them the whole time, rose up and went to a bassinet against the wall. She carefully lifted a small bundle.

"We really weren't expecting triplets," Grayrain explained. "We knew about these two, but we had no clue about her. It was like she was hiding behind the two boys, or they were both shielding her."

"That sounds like Mama," Luke mumbled too softly for them to hear.

Loke pulled himself away from baby Dragneel and rushed over. He tried to take the infant from Elsa, but she pulled the bundle away protectively.

"It's okay, Elsa," her mother urged. "He's sworn to protect her."

The redhead sneered at him. "You better not hurt my sister." Then she let him pick her up.
Luke joined beside Loke to stare at the tiny blonde baby...girl!

Grayrain pouted. "She's much smaller and weaker than the others."

Loke gazed at the infant in awe. "She has an inner strength to her that will shine through as she grows. Do you feel it, Luke?"

"Yeah." The young Lion laughed in amazement. "Like a golden power flowing from her very soul. I feel stronger just being near her. It's definitely her."

Drake still looked skeptical. "So, you two say you're Celestial Spirits dedicated to her? And she's the reincarnation of someone you swore to protect?"

Loke handed the infant back to Elsa. "You're going to make a great older sister to these three," he praised, rubbing her bright scarlet hair. Then he rose up tall and faced the curious parents. "You have a special family, sir and madame. If it's okay with you, I would like to temporarily dedicate ourselves to the protection of all four of them, at least until Lucy is old enough to inherit our keys and become a Celestial Spirit mage in her own right."

"Lucy?" Drake asked, and he looked over to Grayrain.

"We...actually haven't picked a name for her yet," the young mother admitted timidly. "We were only expecting two boys, not a girl. But...Lucy? That's a pretty name, like the author. What do you think, Drake-sama?" She looked to her husband, who shrugged to let her know it was her choice.

"We'll leave your family to rest for now," Loke said with a deep bow. "We are proudly at your service."

Luke mimicked the bow and followed his father out into the hospital corridor.

"Mama...and Uncle Gray...and Uncle Natsu. Triplets?" Luke exclaimed, laughing and shaking his head now that he could freely express his amazement. "I know we hoped they would be reborn around the same time, but really, I never expected this. I feel rather sorry for them," he chuckled. "They're going to need both of us just to keep those three from killing each other in sibling rivalry."

"No, they'll be fine," Loke said as they strode through the hospital corridors. "Did you take a look at the older daughter?"

"Elsa...Erza."

"She and Lucy were the only people who could make those two boys behave." The Lion smiled to himself. "Their family will be just fine."

"Hey Dad, do you think Mama's going to remember anything from her past life?"

"Doubtful," he shrugged, not too concerned about that. "Sometimes Humans have feelings, like a place may look familiar, or they feel they've met someone before. Sometimes they get dreams of their past lives, or they have a knack for a skill they shouldn't know. Rarely, they may remember portions of a previous life through regressions and such. It's fine if she can't remember us. It just means I get to fall in love with her all over again."

Luke grimaced. "Sheesh, Dad! Wait until she's out of diapers before you start talking like that."

Loke laughed and grabbed him around the shoulder as they continued their walk through the sterile halls. "All right, I promise not to flirt until she's thirteen."
"Eww! This is my mother, after all. I won't have you turn into a pedophile with her."

"Fifteen."

"Twenty."

"No way! Seventeen."

"Eighteen, not a day sooner."

"Deal!"

With that, the two Lions sparkled and faded away.

**The End**

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**Chapter End Notes**

Don't you love Grayrain and Drake? Yes, Gray eventually married Juvia, and they had many children, although not 30. Natsu married his childhood sweetheart Lisanna. They had two children, Igneel and Jane (named after Mirajane). Jane later married Laxus' son. I bet Daddy Natsu wasn't happy about that! Wendy married Romeo and became a "crazy cat lady." She has no less than five Exceeds with her at all times.

Lucy and Loke had two children, Luke and Stella. Luke married his only sweetheart, Asuka. Since Lucy's wish of her children growing up faster would not apply to Luke's children, he and Asuka opted to start an orphanage for children with the potential to become mages. Lucy became a famous writer, known primarily for her bestselling novel "Songs of a Fairy Tail Mage." It's estimated that three-quarters of Fiore's population have read that book. It made the main characters into legends. Thirty years after events in the manga, it became trendy to name children "Natsu," "Gray," "Erza," and "Lucy." It's estimated that a tenth of all the domestic cats in Fiore are named Happy, Charle, or Lily.

Major Fairy Tail fans will chuckle at the fact that "Erza" used to be written as "Elsa" in the manga before Hiro Mashima made official English spellings. Yet he still gets it
wrong occasionally (see Chapter 22). That's okay. We still love him!

You're probably sick of footnotes, but I'll point out one more thing, something I tossed in for my own personal entertainment. If you read this story top to bottom, you'll notice that in every chapter, I used either the word pride, proud, or proudly. Every chapter! Leos are known for their pride, and I'm a Leo. I'm proud of this story, and I take pride in writing it to the best of my ability. As some of you caught, there is a triple meaning to this story's title:

1) excessive pride is a feature of those like myself born under Leo's sign,
2) a pride is a lion's family, just as this is about Loke and Lucy starting a family,
3) going off the idea of pride-as-family, Fairy Tail is also Loke and Lucy's family. Both of them are proud to belong to Fairy Tail.

Thus, "Lion's Pride" is a simple title with deep meaning. And to think, I titled it that on a whim! Really, the Muses work in mysterious ways.

=^.^=  "What's mysterious is that Rhov hears voices in her head yet hasn't been committed to a mental hospital."

=^-_-^=  "That voice is telling me you may be getting an omake called "Cat's Pride" that will be about the romance between you and Charle."

=^O.O^=  "Nice voices, keep talking to her!"

I bow deeply to those who stuck by me this past year patiently (or not so patiently) awaiting updates. I also applaud those who recently found this fanfic and decided to read the whole thing despite its immense size. I'm floored by the reception it's received, truly blown away! So many of you supported me, wrote to me, read my other works, and I even made a few close friends, which is awesome! This story is being translated into French and Portuguese. It received the very first "Fanfiction Recommendation" for Fairy Tail on T.V. Tropes. People continue to draw outstanding fan art for me. Because of the support I got here, I scraped up enough courage to publish my own novel, "Daughters of Ashby."

Thanks again for all your support, and I'll see you guys online!

~ Rhov Anion

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