Beastly Possession

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by Rhov

Summary

Something is murdering people in Magnolia. When Lucy is attacked, Natsu goes on a rampage, Gray won't leave her side, Loke is guilt-stricken, and all of Fairy Tail wants revenge. But could the attacker be someone they know? Warning: High octane nightmare fuel! Do not read while eating, and beware of the red eyes in the dark!

Notes

**Warning:** Although this story will have some NaLu sensuality (warning you now) it is not a tale of love. It's my experiment in writing a horror story. If you're looking for pillow talk, this is the wrong place. If you want mystery, brutality, horror, and to wind up scared of the dark
like a sniveling five-year-old...welcome to my domain! Beware of the red-eyed beast!

Disclaimer: I do not own Hiro Mashima. His soul (and *Fairy Tail*) belongs to Kodansha.
It was a bright and beautiful afternoon in Magnolia. Lucy was heading home after having been paid for a job. It was not a big one, since Gray and Natsu were unable to come, one due to getting dragging away somewhere by Juvia, the other still feeling sick from a long train ride earlier that week. This time it was just her and Erza, although she really wished she could forget the perverted enemy. She was happy the client paid well, at least. Lucy balanced along the canal until she came to Strawberry Street and her quaint room. As she entered through her door, she began humming happily and jiggling her purse filled with Jewels.

"Got my reeeent money! Got my rent moooonnney," she sang with a sunny grin.

"Good, I like this place."

"Me too … kyaaah!" She leaped back at the voice but saw only Happy sitting on her couch eating frozen fish sticks. "Happy! What are you doing here?"

The blue cat looked sad as he munched away on the icy fish. "Natsu…" He suddenly looked even more depressed. "Lucy, can I stay here tonight?"

Lucy was shocked, but more than that, she felt worried for her Dragon Slayer friend. "What happened between you and Natsu? Did you two have a fight?"
"No … not really." Happy frowned as he thought for a moment about how he could explain it. "You know how sometimes Erza is really nice and smiles and gives you good fish, and sometimes she's scary and blood covers everything and you don't want to eat any fish because your stomach is jittery?"

Lucy's eyebrow twitched, yet she could hardly help but smirk at his analogy. "Well, I think I get the idea."

"Sometimes Natsu can be scary, and when he is it … it … scares me." The Exceed shivered a little. "This time, he was really, really scary. I wanna stay with Lucy."

"Awww!" Her arms wrapped around Happy in a protective hug. "I've seen Natsu like that too, and you're right, he can get scary when serious. But Happy, why was he like that? Were you attacked?"

"No. That's the thing! We weren't in danger. Or I don't think we were," he mused in a moment of uncertainty. "We had just gone fishing, and Natsu caught a fish, not a big one, but he said I could have it because his stomach was hurting. Then he seemed like his back was hurting, which was really weird because he hadn't even done any training today because he said his head was hurting, and then … then … Scary!" Happy threw himself deeper into Lucy's embrace.

"Okay, okay," she soothed tenderly, petting his blue fur. "Happy, is Natsu in danger? Is he sick? Maybe I should go check on him. He rarely ever gets sick."

"No! Lucy, don't go out there. Natsu is really scary, and I don't want to be left alone." She sighed and looked out her window. It was dark, and the way to Natsu and Happy's house was dangerous enough in the daylight. Besides, if Natsu was in a fighting mood, she could get killed by accident. "Well, someone needs to check on him in case he's really sick. Hold on." The Celestial Spirit mage pulled out a Gold Key and held it aloft. "Open the Gate of the Maiden! Virgo!"

In a swirl of smoke and glimmer of light, the pink-haired lady in a maid outfit appeared and bowed formally. "I'm ready for my punishment."

"Virgo, go to Natsu's house and see if he's sick or in any danger, then come back and tell me."

"I understand, Princess," she nodded, and suddenly she burrowed down into the floor.

"And don't dig holes in my floor!" Lucy screamed. She let out a sigh and rubbed the bulging veins out of her head. "Do you need anything, Happy?"

"Warm milk, please." He grabbed another fish stick. "Lucy, these are really cold and gross."

"You're supposed to warm them up, silly," she chuckled. "I'll fix you a plate."

Ten minutes later, Happy looked content with hot fish sticks and a glass of warm milk. Lucy was still fixing her own dinner when Virgo reappeared.

"Princess, I'm back with my report," the Maiden said formally with a curt bow. "Natsu is nowhere to be found. I searched within five kilometers of his house but found no trace of him. Will I be punished?"

"No, you can go back now." She swished the key, and Virgo vanished. "I wonder where he went this late at night. Are you sure there weren't enemies?" she asked Happy.

"I didn't see anything, but maybe he smelled something. It must have been something really, really
That did not help to alleviate Lucy's worries. "I hope he's safe."

She pouted in worry, but she had to believe Natsu would be fine. If it was an enemy, he would beat them, and if he was sick … well, he should be fine until morning. She could get Wendy to sniff him out. The little girl's sensitive nose would be able to find him, and if he was sick, Wendy could heal him.

After dinner and a bath, Lucy climbed into bed. Happy curled up beside her, and Lucy tried to put her worries aside.

"He'll be fine for one night," she said to herself, and snuggled into the blankets.

She dreamed she was flying with someone holding her as they soared through the air together. She spread her arms out and laughed at the feel of the wind blowing past her. Happy, Charle, and Pantherlily were there too, their wings out, flying along with her and whoever was holding her around the waist.

Then suddenly dark clouds came, and the three Exceeds looked at the person holding Lucy in fear. Happy quickly shielded Charle as the white cat trembled in terror. Pantherlily transformed into his battle size and had his Musica Sword out. In a blinding flash, all three were defeated. The Exceeds began to fall toward the dark clouds, only to get swallowed by them and vanish.

Lucy looked behind her, and it was a fierce dragon holding her in its talons. She screamed, thrashed, and her clothes ripped. She began to fall toward the billowing storm clouds, and the dragon flew after her with a terrifying roar. Lucy watched as the massive teeth got closer and closer.

Lucy jolted up in bed. Her heart was beating so hard it hurt, her lungs shivered with each gasping breath, and her skin felt clammy with sweat.

"What a horrible nightmare!" she whispered.

Then she noticed a shadow in her window. Hesitantly, filled with terror, she looked over. There, perched on her windowsill, was a hunched creature with glowing red eyes, folded wings, and a spiked tail swishing behind it. Lucy gasped and yanked the blankets over her head, as if that might hide her away. A few seconds later, she realized how childish that was. If this was some monster, she needed to fight it.

She threw the covers off, leaped out of bed, and dashed to where she kept her Celestial Spirit Keys and whip. However, before she could summon anyone, she looked at the window again and saw only moonlight and stars.

"Where … ?"

She turned on the bedroom light in case the creature had leaped inside her house. She checked the closet and under the bed. She walked around the entire house, checked every room, and searched every possible hiding place. Then she noticed her bathroom light was on. She crept up slowly and saw a shadow near the crack under the door. She calmed her breathing and prepared her whip.

Suddenly, the door opened. She pulled her whip back, ready to strike, but Happy ambled out looking sleepy. He looked up at her and yawned.
"Lucy, are you okay? Sorry I was in there for so long. I really had to go."

Lucy stuck her head into the bathroom and looked around. "Happy, did you see anything weird?"

"Aye! There was a clump of hair in the bathtub, but it was red, so I think it's Erza's."

"No, I mean … like a creature."

Happy tilted his head. "Did you have a nightmare, Lucy? I had a bad dream too, but I think it was from the gross frozen fish. I dreamed I was a catfish swimming in Lake Juvia, but then Gray came and froze the lake and I was trapped and it was really cold but then I woke up and realized the blankets had fallen off and I had to pee."

She lowered her whip. "A nightmare? Of course, that must have been it. It was a horrible dream, and you and Charle were in it."

Happy grinned. "Then it was a good dream! All of my dreams about Charle are good, even the ones where she slaps my face."

"Well, this wasn't a good one," she grumbled, slowly loosening her tense muscles. "There was a monster, and it killed you, Charle, and Pantherlily."

"Oh," he pouted. "Aye, that's a bad dream."

"Then I thought I woke up. I saw a monster in my window, but then I must have woken up from that dream, too. This isn't a dream, is it?"

"I don't think so," Happy mused. "Let's both go back to sleep and maybe we'll dream good things this time. Dreams of me and Charle and fish."

She nodded in agreement, and they both climbed into bed. Lucy kept her whip and keyring under her pillow this time, and she drifted off into better dreams.

The Next Morning

"Natsu!"

When Lucy went to the guild hall and did not see her pink-haired friend, she asked for help to search for him. Wendy agreed to come since she could sniff Natsu out. Gray came too, not because he was worried for the flame-brain or anything, but if this was the work of an enemy then someone needed to defend the two girls.

Wendy led them to the canals, and it was Lucy who noticed the white scarf. The three of them ran down an embankment and under a bridge. There Natsu laid sprawled on his face in tattered clothes with his feet down in the cold water. Gray yanked him out of the canal, Wendy checked his pulse, and Happy flew forward with a flask of something Mirajane had prepared to revive his senses. After being forced to drink, Natsu coughed and opened his eyes.

"Lucy, Wendy? Where am I? Oh man, my head hurts." He rubbed out his hair as he groaned from a massive migraine.

Gray glared down at him with his hands deep in his pockets, disappointed that there would not be a fight this time. "You look like crap, squinty-eyes. What happened?"
Wendy checked for injuries. Although his skin was not even bruised, his clothes were muddy and in shreds. "Looks like you were in a fight."

"Fight? I … don't remember." Natsu looked around disoriented. "Why am I under a bridge?"

"Idiot, you collapsed here," Lucy yelled, feeling relief that he was safe, but with it was fury for making her worry so much. "Something happened that scared Happy, and I could barely sleep worrying about you."

"Happy?" Natsu looked up to his blue friend. "The last thing I remember was eating dinner, but I … felt funny. I was feeling funny all day. Then I smelled something, and it made me feel even weirder. What happened, Happy?"

The Exceed's eyes went watery. "Stupid Natsu! Can't you even remember? You scared me so much, and you can't even remember!" He flew away sobbing loudly.

Natsu scratched out his pink hair. "What's wrong with him?"

Lucy pouted worriedly. "We don't know, and he won't say. He stayed with me last night because he was too terrified to be around you, but he wouldn't say anything about what happened. Do you remember anything? Whatever it was, you really scared him."

"Me?" Natsu's face scrunched up as he tried to think back. "Nope, nothing. I was fishing, then I was cooking, then we were eating but my stomach hurt, then I smelled something and felt weird, then I woke up here."

Gray shrugged. "Maybe you were attacked and got hit on the head too hard to remember."

"Are you saying I lost?" Natsu tried to leap at him, yet he fell over instantly and held his head. "Oww!"

Lucy recalled the winged shadow she had seen the previous night. "Natsu, could it have been some animal? Like a … a beast? You're not beaten up, so I'm guessing you didn't lose," she assured when he glared at her. "But … but maybe it had a way to give you amnesia."

Natsu sputtered and dropped his head. "I dunno. I was eating, then I was here. I can't even really remember what I smelled, just that it wasn't something I had ever smelled before."

This uncertainty worried Lucy, but she still was unsure if what she had seen was only a dream or not.

Wendy spoke up now. "I don't like that you were feeling sick, and now you spent all night half in the river. Let's get you to the infirmary. I want to check you out head to toe."

"I'm fine," Natsu snapped. He tried to stand but flinched hard again. "My back hurts. Was I sleeping on a root?"

"You were sleeping on your face, idiot," Gray told him.

"Natsu," Wendy said with as much determination as she could muster. "You are going back to the infirmary, and that's final."

He stared down at her, honestly shocked by her stubbornness, yet he decided not to argue. He limped and had to hold onto both Gray and Lucy just to make it back to the guild hall. When they entered, the sight shocked many Fairy Tail members.
"Whoa, is Natsu okay?" Elfman asked in surprise.

"Natsu!" Lisanna cried out. She ran forward to assist Lucy with helping him to walk, taking over Gray's part.

"Hey Natsu," Gajeel smirked. "You smell like defeat."

"And you smell like ugly, metal-head," Natsu glared. However, he suddenly stopped, forcing Lucy and Lisanna to pause. He began sniffing the air, glaring left and right.

"What is it?" Lucy asked in concern.

Natsu took a deeper inhale. "The guild, it smells ... weird," he muttered, looking troubled by whatever he smelled. "I can't tell what's out of place. It's the same smell as usual, just ... not the same."

Lucy huffed in confusion. "Maybe it's you who smells weird. You were in the river, after all, and you're covered in mud." With a nod to Lisanna, the two girls helped the Dragon Slayer over to the infirmary.

After an examination, Wendy declared Natsu had a slight fever, but nothing out of the ordinary. He had not so much as a single bruise, but his back pained him, his stomach was sensitive so that all he could eat were flames, and anything too loud made his head hurt. She gave him some medicine and sent him home.

Natsu rested for two days. Happy was back to normal, although he refused to tell anyone what happened that night. It was a mystery, but people forgot about it when, on the third day, Natsu barged into the guild hall and immediately began fighting with Gray and Elfman.

"Well, he's definitely back to normal," Lucy sighed in plaintive happiness. "Hey, Natsu," she called over, interrupting his fight with Gray before the ice mage could remove more clothes. "Wanna do a mission?"

He grinned to her and blindly punched Gajeel away so he could keep talking. "Nah, Happy and I are gonna do something, just the two of us. I owe it to him."

"I see," she muttered, feeling a bit disappointed because she could really use some shopping money, but still relieved her friends were making up. "I'm glad you're better."

He beamed a massive smile. "Me too. Hey, we'll do a mission when I get home, okay? Keep an eye out for a good one."

Just then, Nab flew through the air and collided into Natsu, who tossed the huge man right back at Elfman before charging into the small battle again. Lucy chuckled and sipped her drink. Winged beasts did not scare her so long as she had her friends around!
I found out Hiro Mashima's favorite manga is also one of my favorites, Berserk, which is filled with so much blood, gore and mindfuckery, I think Hiro-sensei would find a story like Beastly Possession to be fascinating, at the very least.

Disclaimer: I don't own Fairy Tail because Hiro Mashima secretly hates me. Yup, he's going to write me into one of his stories purely to kill me off. This chapter contains excessive goriness. Don't read while eating. (Really, one reader said she vomited in her mouth!)


Through Magnolia's empty streets echoed a sort of music meant for mad men. An allegro tempo of racing shoes laid the percussive beat for a melody of fatigued panting, desperate wheezes, with the occasional squawk of terror, like a musician forcing a sound out of a clarinet with a dry reed. An occasional whimper, the sort of cowardly cries grown men were not supposed to make, counterpointed the raspy arpeggio of gasping for enough air to sustain the sprinter. Ah, but these sounds were a symphony to the hunter after his game! The thrill of the chase, the rush of hearing fear in the prey, following the dire noises, stalking ever closer: it was what made hunting so exhilarating.

The man knew it had been a bad idea to sneak out with his lover so late. Now she was dead, and the murderer was after him. His heart pounded too hard to hear clearly. His terror-widened eyes glanced behind him, but it made him trip. He almost stumbled, the steady rhythm faltered for a few beats, the panting paused as his throat choked too tight for even breathing to get through, but his momentum somehow kept him going forward without falling on his face.

"Help!" he tried yelling for the dozenth time, although he knew the shops were all closed for the night. He needed to get away from this district and to a place with people. A residential area, or even the Fairy Tail guild if he could reach it. They would likely still be partying, even at this hour. He needed to reach a place with people who could help him.

The man knew a shortcut, and perhaps he could lose the killer at the same time. Another frantic look around showed no sign of pursuit. He made a quick dash into an alley, but stepped on a massive gray rat. It shrieked so loudly, he was sure anyone chasing him would have heard it. Still, he did not stop until he was in the center of the alley and completely hidden in shadows. He slid behind some crates and leaned against the moldy wall for a breather.

His trousers reeked of urine. He had wet himself back in the love hotel when the attacker first arrived. Though embarrassing, it was the least of his concerns at the moment. Still, he realized that the thing chasing him might be able to track him by smell. Unless he planned to run through town half naked, there was nothing he could do about the moist clothes.

Sound though: that was something he could work on.

He tried to stifle his gasps by breathing into the sleeve of his jacket, anything to fade away into the darkness of the night and escape notice. His head swam dizzily from too much adrenaline and not enough oxygen. Now that he was resting, his legs burned from running so fast. After all, he was a simple businessman, used to sitting at his desk all day, growing paunchy and old. Sprinting was not
something he did normally, and never had he needed to run for his life.

His stomach suddenly revolted. The sight he had witnessed, the screams of his lover, the blood that exploded from her neck as her head was ripped off her body, replayed through his mind as his dinner came up. Moist vomit splashed into the alley’s central gutter. His mouth and nose burned with stomach acid and second-time-around salmon.

"This can't be happening," he moaned, wiping his mouth clear.

He felt shaky from vomiting and hyperventilation, but he trudged forward. At the end of this alley was a canal, and across the bridge were some apartments. He just needed to reach them, knock on the doors, and shout for help. Someone would come. Someone would let him in, shelter him, and call the authorities to deal with the murderer. Even if his secret love affair was made known, that no longer mattered. Nothing mattered but surviving this night of surreal terror.

He heard a leathery flapping sound and looked up. "Oh no … no!" he whispered, and the man decided to make a break for it. Despite burning pain in his legs, he ran. Each step splashed in reeking puddles of water or crushed over musty debris. He could see the moonlight glittering on the waters of the canal. It was a ribbon at the end of a race, with victory and salvation on the other side.

A shadow suddenly dropped in front of his path. Two glowing red eyes made him leap backward with a whimper. Wings folded in so the beast could enter the narrow alleyway. Behind it, a spiked tail swished back and forth.

"Oh please … please, no," he begged, feeling as if he might lose his bladder for the second time that night. "Whatever it is you want, I'll give it to you. Name your price."

"Want?" came a deep hissing tone. "Want … dragon."

"D-dragon?" the man asked. "Y-y-you want … a dragon? H-hey, there's a guy I know … well, I don't know him, but I've heard of him. He's called Salamander. He's looking for a dragon, too. I … I could introduce you two. He lives here in town, one of the mages, quite famous, but … but I've got connections," he assured eagerly. "I'll hook you two up. If anyone knows where there's a dragon, it'd be him."

"S-S-Salamander?" the creature asked in a slithering tone. "Want … Salamander."

The man grinned nervously. "O-of course you do. He'll help you find a dragon."

The victim had only a split second of hopefulness before the beast leaped forward. Sharp teeth gleamed, and the man uttered his last coherent words.

"Oh shit…"

What followed were screams, unearthly howls of a vicious attack, hacking noises in vain attempts to yell for help, snarls, gargling screams, then finally silence except for the sound of licking and munching. Slowly, a small stream of thick crimson snaked out of the alley, down to the canal, and tainted the moonlit water.

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**The Next Morning, Outside of Magnolia**

"Natsu," Happy whined, kicking the Dragon Slayer in the nose with his furry toe. "Wake up."

The Dragon Slayer yawned and rolled over. "Five more minutes, Lucy," he muttered.
Happy pouted at such laziness. "This is why Erza insists on using the train, you know."

Natsu grumbled in his sleep. "No train, Lucy. Don't wanna ride the choo-choo."

"Sheesh, why are all your dreams about Lucy these days? Hey, wake up! I'm hungry." He gave Natsu an extra hard kick to the nose.

Natsu snorted and blinked his eyes. "Oh, Happy. Aren't we back in Magnolia yet?"

"Of course not. You said you were getting a headache again, so we stopped early. We're only a few hours away, though. If we hurry, we can make it back before supper."

"S'zat so?" he yawned. "Then I can sleep another hour."

"Hey!" he yelled, tugging on Natsu's ear. "It's nearly noon already. You skipped breakfast, and it's almost lunchtime."

Natsu yawned. "Too sleepy. Head hurts."

Happy folded his arms in frustration. Still, he worried that Natsu might be coming down sick again, so he decided to just let his friend sleep. "I guess I'll go find my own fish." He took a pole, some bait, and walked to a nearby river.

Natsu curled into his blankets, began to snore, and soon he was smiling with pleasant dreams. "Lucy, that tickles," he mumbled with a laugh. His relaxed smile gradually faded. His slumbering face began to tighten. He flipped in his sleep as if fighting a monster. "Gajeel … no, Wendy … ugh, Laxus, stop it. No. No!"

He moaned, shaking his head, troubled by the nightmare. His breathing became faster, erratic, mixed with somnolent whimpers. Suddenly, Natsu sat up screaming "Nooooo!" Out of his mouth came an arc of fire. It hit a tree and quickly spread to another tree, then another.

"Oops," he said, staring dumbfounded for a moment.

"Waaah, Natsu!" Happy wailed, flying between trees and out of the quickly spreading blaze. "You burned down another forest."

Natsu cringed as the fire went out of control. There was no way to stop it anymore. "Maybe … we should get out of here."

"Aye, sir!" They ran as trees began to fall over in a rain of embers.

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**Meanwhile, Back in Magnolia**

Erza walked forward cautiously. The morning was already uncomfortably warm. Flies buzzed around her. As she drew closer, she had to put a hand to her nose to block the ghastly smell. A young man in uniform leading her to the scene kindly handed her a handkerchief, which she gladly took to block the unmistakable stench of death.

Even Erza, who had slashed many enemies in her time as a Fairy Tail S-Class mage, had to swallow hard at the grotesque mutilation in front of her. The dark alley had blood splattered up to three meters high and pooled in blackening puddles around the cobbled road. She realized she was standing on a stream of dried and flaking blood running from the crime scene downhill toward the water. She deftly removed her foot and made sure not to walk on any more black stains.
Amidst the gore stood an inspector wearing an army uniform. He adjusted his glasses as he jotted down notes, leaning over the corpse as if the sight and smell were commonplace. He straightened up when she approached and tucked his notebook into a satchel.

"Ah, you must be from the local magic guild. I don't recall requesting assistance," the man said brusquely.

Erza forced her gaze away from the dead body and onto the inspector. "Erza Scarlet of Fairy Tail," she said in a terse introduction. "When our Master heard about the murder, he asked me to look into it."

"Thoughtful, but unnecessary," he said blandly. "As you can see, it's obviously an animal attack."

"Then this isn't related to the other murder today?"

He hummed curiously before something dawned on him. "Ah, you must be talking about the beheading in the love hotel. No, no connection. That murder is under another team's investigation. This is merely an animal attack. As you can see," he said, casually waving to the mutilated body, "the slash marks are similar to a wild predator. We'll have to look into what animals live in this region of Fiore, inspect any possible escaped animals from zoos and such. No magic involved, no tools, just claws and teeth. If the mages of Fairy Tail wish to lend a hand in either of the killings, we will of course accept the help, so long as you don't get in the way of our investigations."

She glanced down at the body again: intestines ripped out and half eaten, rib bones showing through gashes to the chest, and a massive chunk ripped out of the man's throat, leaving his head to hang at an odd angle. The victim's pants were torn apart, and large bites had been taken out of the muscular thighs, chewing right down to the femur. The face was speckled with blood but otherwise left alone, so that the look of horror and agony was still there in the glazed, empty eyes already filming over with death. Flies swarmed around the carcass, buzzing near the splattered entrails and crawling in and out of the gaping hole in the neck. The inspector absently kicked a curious rat out of the way.

"I see," Erza said, keeping her face and voice neutral while her stomach wanted to dry heave at the macabre scene. "I will report this to Master Makarov. If he wishes to assist, he will send the request to your superior. If you need assistance in catching the beast, we have mages skilled in such things."

He snickered softly. "Your offer is appreciated, but I think the army can catch a simple loose animal. Good day to you." He pulled out his notebook again and began to write, showing Erza that this brief interview was over.

Erza left the scene at a hurried pace. She managed to get a block away before she realized she still had the young soldier's handkerchief pressed to her nose. Steeling her stomach for a second dose of gore, she began to return when she saw a familiar face in the crowd of onlookers.

"Gajeel?" she asked, surprised someone like him would be curious about a murder scene.

He saw her, his blood red eyes narrowed, and he began to stomp away, shoving people aside as he went. Erza threw the handkerchief at the young soldier and took off after the iron Dragon Slayer. She caught Gajeel as he was crossing the bridge spanning the canal. Finally, he stopped and faced her with a dark look in his eyes.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"I saw a crowd. Figured I'd see what was up. Nothing more than a dead body, how boring." He began to walk away, but Erza grabbed his shoulder.
"Why are you in this neighborhood anyway?"

"What, am I restricted to certain areas of Magnolia?" he snapped, yanking away from her. "I smelled something weird, so I came to check it out." His eyes shifted back to the crowd around the murder scene. "Do they know who did this?"

"An animal," she answered, watching him skeptically.

"Is that so?" he grumbled. "Just some stupid beast, huh? Good." Then Gajeel turned and stomped away quickly.

Erza watched him warily. What about any of this was possibly good?
Lucy had a piece of paper in front of her, tapping her finger against it. She was unsure if she should officially claim the job yet or not. Natsu was supposed to have returned from his mission with Happy that day, yet he was not back and it was getting late. She needed more money, but all of the job requests were too advanced for her alone.

"Are you taking it or not?" asked Mirajane as she wiped a glass.

Lucy sighed in disappointment and sank to the bar counter. "I guess not. I heard there was a forest fire up north. I have a feeling someone may be in a lot of trouble," she grumbled, knowing her teammate too well. "I just hope this job is still around when he gets back. It sounds really good, and the money is great."

"Please put it back on the board, then," the bartender smiled in a good-natured way. With a sigh, Lucy tacked it back up, sat down with her drink, pulled out her story, and began to write.

Fairy Tail was busy but not as rambunctious today. There were fewer brawls, since Natsu was not there to fight Gray. The poor Ice-Make mage was doing his best to avoid Juvia, who followed him everywhere, even to the bathroom and waited right outside the door for him to exit. Elfman was teaching Romeo how to land a solid punch so he could fight "like a man." Peals of laughter came from where Macao was drinking with Wakaba, and whatever was said made Cana scream with indignation.

All of this swirled around Lucy as she focused on the words flowing effortlessly out from her hand and onto paper. She wondered briefly, where were Gajeel and Wendy? Levy was there, and so was Pantherlily, so Gajeel could not be on a mission. She saw Charle looking rather bored without either Wendy or the annoying blue male cat. Others were missing, too. Lisanna had not come to the guild hall in a few days. Erza left much earlier on an errand from Makarov. It was weird that Nab was not by the board like usual. The Thunder God Tribe were gone, but so was Laxus, so she guessed the four of them were off on a mission or training. No wonder it seemed quieter.

After a couple hours, Lucy flamboyantly dotted the last period on her page and smiled to herself. This latest chapter was solid gold thanks to the nightmare she had earlier that week. Adding a stalking beast to her story put just the right amount of tension for her characters. She tapped all of her pages together, tucked them into her bag, slurped her straw to suck up the last of her drink, and finally rose to go.

"Oh, Lucy," Mirajane called out, and the white-haired bartender bustled over to her. "If you're heading home, you might want to take someone along with you. There were a couple of murders earlier today."

"Murders?" Lucy gasped. "In Magnolia?"
"Yes, rather brutal from what I've heard. One was a beheading, some woman in a love hotel. The army is claiming that the other person was killed by a wild animal. Maybe you should take Gray with you," she smirked with a wink.

"Uh, no thanks," she smiled tensely. She could already feel Juvia's eyes burning into her back. "I should be fine against a wild animal. I'm a Fairy Tail mage, after all! But just to be safe, I'll call out one of my Spirits. Thanks for the warning."

"Okay, be safe." The white-haired mage smiled happily as she waved goodnight.

Lucy had to chuckle at Mirajane's protective, motherly nature. After some of the beasts and fiends she had fought off, some petty killer or wild animal would be no match. Still, as she faced the dark city, Lucy felt a little shiver.

"Guess it wouldn't hurt to have an escort." She pulled out her Spirit Keys. "Open the Gate of the Lion! Leo!"

Loke appeared in a gleam of golden light and immediately picked up her hand to kiss it. "Good evening, dear. May I have the pleasure of walking you home?"

She yanked her hand away from his lips. "Jeez, you can't go one minute without flirting! I'll let you know, I'm only asking this to appease Mira."

"Then I owe her thanks for having the chance to see my gorgeous master again," Loke smiled as he chivalrously held his arm out for her. "Shall we take a stroll, my dear?"

She sighed in annoyance at Loke's flirtatious nature, yet she felt a slight blush warm her cheeks as she wrapped her arm around his. He gallantly led her through the streets of Magnolia like a king escorting his queen.

She hated to admit that it felt good to take a night stroll with a handsome man. She liked the looks people gave them, older couples smiling as they remembered the joys of young love, young single women glaring in jealousy, and young men sighing in disappointment that such a lovely lady was taken. Of course, she would never consider falling in love with one of her Celestial Spirits. It broke all protocols! That did not mean that Loke's prince-like charm had no affect on her … and she hated it.

"Have you eaten?" the Lion asked as they passed a street lined with cafés.

"Not really, but I'm short on money."

"My treat. There's a place I know, and the owner owes me a free meal. The night is young, and you're far too beautiful to spend it indoors."

Pouting at his compliment, yet still blushing from it, she followed him to a little hole-in-the-wall restaurant. She rarely ate at places like this, yet the food was amazing. Loke encouraged her to take advantage of the free meal. Soup, salad, bread basket with garlic dip, the main meal, and then they decided to split a tiramisu. Lucy could hardly help but eat a lot. She had been dining cheaply for weeks, and she missed the feel of a full stomach. Loke kept the wineglass filled and kept up a pleasant conversation with her.

"Our last mission was easy," she chatted brightly, sipping more wine. "I only needed to use Pyxis when Natsu got us lost."

Loke laughed at that. "I figured that boy's nose was as good as a bloodhound. Maybe he had a cold
that day."

"Maybe so. He's been sick, I guess. How about you?" she smiled, leaning on her hand with her elbow on the table as the wine made her warm and sleepy. Loke was starting to look really handsome through the pink glaze of too much pinot noir.

"Not a lot going on in the Spirit World," he admitted. "Oh! There was a bit of a love scandal earlier. Sagittarius and Monoceros."

"The Unicorn?" she gawked. "Oh, you have got to tell me all the details!"

They talked more, catching up, reminiscing on sweet memories, and some cheesy flirtations which Lucy brushed aside with practice. As she savored her tiramisu, Loke swirled his wineglass delicately between his fingers. He took a sip, and Lucy lazily watched how his adam's apple worked with each swallow. She wanted to nibble that slender throat! She blinked hard, shook her head against the crazy fantasies her mind was inventing, and tried to look at anything else. Her eyes locked on his hand instead, the rings he wore, and how they gleamed in the candlelight. However, her mind began thinking about how gentle yet firm those fingers were, how they might feel gliding against her skin. She blinked hard again, banishing the drunken thoughts.

"Too much wine," she realized softly, and she pushed the stemmed glass away to fight the temptation to just keep drinking.

"Are you feeling flushed?" Loke asked in worry. "You've been blushing all night, but I thought that was just me."

"Oh, shut up," she chuckled. She stood up, but the full effect of the wine suddenly hit her. She thought for certain she would fall over, but strong arms swiftly caught her. Loke held her as she found her footing. "How embarrassing," she muttered, knowing people in the restaurant must have seen her stumble.

"I'll walk you home," Loke offered softly.

The way he guided her made him look merely possessive, not that such a young woman was totally drunk. She was thankful for such attentiveness. Loke kept her walking straight as he guided her through the dark streets all the way to her apartment. She only stumbled twice, and he was quick to catch her every time.

Finally, she was home, and just in time. The alcohol was making her giddy and thinking crazy things, like trying to sing one of Lyra's songs. Lucy thought her voice sounded damn good, but Loke winced. She unlocked her front door and left it open. Loke took it as an invitation and followed her in with a smirk. She kicked her shoes off, threw her bag into a corner, turned around to Loke, and grabbed him around the waist. She pressed him against the door so hard, it slammed shut and rattled the walls.

"Whoa, Lucy! What … ? Are you really this drunk?" Loke asked in shock.

"Drunk?" she hummed as her head swam. "Maaaybe. She felt wild and free, completely uninhibited. She loved this feeling!

Loke laughed uncomfortably when she ground her hips against his crotch. "Now Lucy, you've had a lot to drink," he warned. "You don't want to do this."

"How do you know?" she challenged.
Loke rolled his eyes a little. "Because if you did, I would have won you over years ago."

She grabbed his cheeks and planted a kiss right on him. Loke's eyes went wide in shock. "Let's do it," she growled, then giggled, thinking her sexy voice was funny.

"Whoa, okay … you are really drunk." Loke gently eased her off of him. "Now, if you were sober and said those words to me, I'd be naked faster than Gray, but how you are, for how much it pains me, I'm gonna have to say no."

"Ya scared of me?" she teased, still trying to pull on his clothes, yet Loke nimbly kept her fingers away.

"You're drunk and won't remember anything, and if we were to do that, I'd want you to remember every single erotic detail."

"Aww," she pouted and moved away. "Yer no fun."

"Oh, I can be very fun," he smirked. "I just don't screw drunk women. I have a bit more pride than to do that. No, what you need right now is a big glass of water and some sleep. I'm happy you had fun, though," he grinned. "I like treating you to a nice night."

"We should do it again," she slurred as she yanked off her shirt, showing a white bra with pink lace trim underneath. Loke shook his head and guided her to the bedroom before more clothes went away. "S'was fun, you 'n' me, night on th' town. I wan' anudder date with ya."

"I'll take you up on that. Next week, Friday night, six o'clock, call me out or I'm coming out on my own."

She stumbled a little as she pulled her skirt off, removed her bra, and slid into bed wearing only her underwear.

"Cute," Loke chuckled when he saw the little neko printed on her panties. "Kawaii Kitty brand."

"Kitty on mah pussy," Lucy mumbled, not even aware of what she was saying anymore.

Loke sighed and tucked the covers up. "You'll be hurting in the morning. Good night, princess," he whispered, and gave her a peck on the forehead.

"Kiss me," she mumbled, her lips barely moving to say the words. Her eyes opened into slits as she looked at him. "Kiss my lips," she whispered. "That's an order."

Loke smiled to hear her demand something like that, and he leaned over to give her a kiss. As soon as his mouth was against hers, Lucy grabbed around his head, yanked him down, opened her mouth, and thrust her tongue out. Although shocked, Loke smiled and licked through her teeth. He tasted the flavor that was uniquely hers mixed with the sweetness of the wine that had loosened her inhibitions so much. Their tongues clashed and twirled together, making Lucy hum sensually. Her low groans triggered Loke's instincts, and he slowly climbed on top of her, holding her wrists down gently. Her leg hitched over his hips, tugging his lower body down closer.

Before he truly lost control, Loke pushed himself up and off of her. His arms locked straight, and he watched her sultry face. "Oh, you really are a naughty girl," he chuckled. "So, what does my drunken master want with her little Lion?"

"Fucked hard," she growled wildly.
"Now, that I won't do. You should be able to enjoy your first time, and with this much alcohol down you, we'll be lucky if you even remember kissing me. So let me leave you with this."

He leaned down and sucked hard on her neck. Lucy trembled under him and grabbed Loke's shoulders to pull him down tighter. Instead, he rose up and inspected his little love bruise.

"That should help you remember not to get drunk around handsome men and throw yourself at them when you're helpless. A lesser man would have taken advantage of your condition. You're lucky I'm such a gentleman." He slid off the bed and tucked her blanket back up. "Pleasant dreams, my sweet master." With a tender smile, Loke faded away.

Lucy fell asleep almost instantly, slipping into unconsciousness like a scuba diver sliding backward out of a boat, then the cold splash head-down into the murky waters of dreamland.

In her dreams, she was again being chased by a dragon. It was a terrifying feeling. She could hardly help but remember the terror on Tenrou Island, when she and her friends faced Acnologia. That must have been one of the most frightening moments of her life, but she had her friends there.

In her dream, though, she was all alone, and the dragon was hungry. She could hear its growl, feel the heat of its breath, and smell the sulfur of flames. Yet as she ran in her dream, it felt like she was going nowhere. She could never run quick enough. She wished someone would show up, a shining knight on a white horse to slay the dragon and take her home to his castle.

No such luck in this nightmare!

She tossed and turned until her stomach hurt. She felt like there was a heavy weight on her. Suddenly, she woke up and opened her eyes to see a black shadow on top of her, crushing her torso. Heavy breathing hissed out of a mouth filled with teeth, and a tongue slithered out, licking her bare stomach. She screamed, and two glowing red eyes opened.

"Get off!" she shrieked. Lucy struggled to crawl away, but she was pinned down. She slapped angrily at the intruder, but then she heard a growl. Suddenly, two wings unfurled, and Lucy's skin went cold. "The beast," she gasped, recalling the creature who had been in her window.

"It has to be a dream! Please, let it be a dream!"

Yet somehow she knew, this time the beast was real. She heard a low hiss and felt hot air on her body.

"Want," came an animalistic growl. A tongue licked down her throat to her breasts.

Lucy was horrified to realize she had fallen asleep almost naked. "No, get off! Go away! Shoo!"

She tried to push the creature away, but it was heavy. She grabbed its arms, hoping to get enough leverage to flip it off the bed. She felt sinewy bulges at the biceps. The creature was probably a little taller than her, and if those massive muscles were any indication, it was much stronger. She realized with a stab of terror that this beast had easily overpowered her.

"Help!" she shrieked as loudly as possible. Someone had to hear her: her neighbors, the landlady, someone taking a midnight stroll … anyone!

A finger suddenly shoved into her mouth. It made her want to vomit, except she realized the beast's
sharpened nail was only a few millimeters away from piercing her. She gagged when she felt the
claw scratch the back of her throat. The beast above her hissed in a hush sound, and in the darkness
she saw sharp, gleaming teeth grinning at her. She gurgled, but that claw threatened to slice the
inside of her throat. A wrong move and she would choke on her own blood.

The beast's tongue began to lick circles around Lucy's nipples, making her cringe away with disgust.
She gagged on the finger, but if she moved too much the beast would easily kill her. She stared hard
trying to see the face, but the darkness was too complete. There were no stars or moon out that night.
Only a very distant streetlight showed the black silhouette.

Then the tongue went lowered down, slithering over her stomach until it slipped between her legs.
Lucy yanked, but she could not close her legs with the beast's body settled between her knees. When
she tried to yell, the claw pressed deeper into her mouth, stabbing the back of her throat. She felt
blood trickling down and began to choke on it.

One hand ripped away her panties, and the tongue languished around her, lapping at her. Lucy
flushed in disgust that the actions were making her so moist. How could something so despicable feel
so good? She hated it! She felt herself dripping and shut her eyes, wishing she could force herself not
to feel the licks. She began to cry in helplessness.

The beast removed the jabbing gag, and Lucy coughed out blood. Both hands grabbed her breasts
painfully hard. Although the sharp claws threatened to slice into her tender skin, Lucy used the
opportunity to make a grab for her Spirit Keys. A hand went up quickly and snatched one of her
arms while the beast's tail wrapped around the other, squeezing so hard she felt a bone snap in her
wrist. Lucy screamed in pain.

"Bad," came a hissed warning.

"Help!" she cried. "Help me! Natsu!"

There was a spitting roar, then a claw swiped across her stomach and sliced her skin. Lucy screamed
at the tearing pain. She felt hot liquid dripping down her torso and smelled blood. The beast moved
down, licking the blood pouring out quickly. She felt his tongue dip painfully into the fresh gashes.
She heard it lapping and swallowing her blood in thick gulps as her body went cold.


Lucy felt cold and clammy, her breathing was coming rapid but shallow, and she felt dizzy and
numb. She knew she was experiencing the effects of shock. If she kept bleeding at this rate, she
would be dead in minutes, yet she could not think clearly enough to know what she could do. She
tried to reach her keyring again, but her hands were trapped. Then, to her horror, she felt the creature
thrust up against her.

"No!" she shrieked in terror. "Oh God, no! Someone, help me!" She sobbed as she struggled to fight
the beast. Thrashing her hips back and forth to shake off its attempts to pierce her made the clawed
gashes to her stomach hurt even worse, but at that point she would have rather died than let this beast
take her. "Natsu! Gray! Please, someone!"

"Mine!" the beast growled. It grabbed her breast with its mouth, and sharp teeth sank through her
tender skin.

"Noooooo," she screamed in pain while the beast let out a growl of pleasure. One of the hind legs
tried to spread her thighs apart further, and she felt the sharp back claw tear across her leg, ripping
deep gouges in her thigh muscles. "Arrrgh!" she howled in agony, but still she struggled against it.
"Help! Anyone! Loke, please help me! Loke!" She wished with all of her might that her voice might reach him in the Spirit World.

She saw a flash of gold, the claws released her, and the pressure went off of her body. Lucy saw two glowing fists in the darkness and heard a roar of fury. Her vision was blurred with agony, but she felt at ease. Loke had come, and she trusted him to fight away the beast.

While he punched the winged creature, Lucy curled up. The slash to her stomach was deep and bleeding too quickly. She knew she had to put pressure on it or she would die. And she hurt. She hurt so bad! She began to cry in belated terror. Although the sobs made her stomach jolt with agony, she could not stop.

The ruckus around her suddenly ended, and Lucy heard the leathery sound of flapping wings. She saw her loyal Lion silhouetted against the window, staring out at the dark sky and the speck of black getting away.

"Loke," she called weakly. "Help."

Instead of pursuing, he rushed back to her, turned on a light, and gasped at what he saw. Lucy's bed was covered in blood. She laid naked, bruised, and bloodied. Her leg had three massive gashes torn through skin and muscle, all the way to the white bone. One breast had puncture wounds from the beast's sharp teeth that bled freely. Her stomach was sliced open to the point where he saw the grayish-pink color of intestines mixed within an orange padding of bloody fat.

"Oh my God," he whispered, wanting to cry as he saw his beloved master so brutally beaten. "Oh God, oh God! I'm so sorry I didn't come sooner. Oh, Lucy! You..." A bit of rationality returned to his numbed mind. He struggled to shove aside the shock and anger. "Pressure. Put pressure on the wounds." He scrambled to find something to wrap the gushing blood coming from her thigh. By the way it spurted, he knew she must have a severed artery. He settled for the belt of her housecoat and tied it as tight as he dared to make a tourniquet. Instantly, the silk cloth was soaked red.

"Loke," she shivered, struggling to stay awake, fearing that if she closed her eyes, he might disappear on her forever. Her breathing was coming fast but not deep enough. Her whole face buzzed with numbness, making her tongue and lips feel too fat to speak clearly. "Sorry."

"Don't talk," he whispered. He shoved a pillow at her stomach. She howled in pain. "I know it hurts, but we have to put pressure on it." He looked as her face drained its color quickly. A thousand cuss words came to his mind, yet shouting and swearing would do nothing to save her life. "You need a hospital fast. This may hurt. Just hold on, Lucy. Try to stay awake, and don't you dare give up on me."

He wrapped her up in blankets, had her hold the pillow to her stomach to put some pressure on, and yanked her up into his arms. He leaped out her window and raced through the night. Never had he run so quickly. That night, he was more like a cheetah than a lion, driven on by rage and desperation.

"Lucy? Lucy, are you still with me?" When she did not answer, he glanced down. Her lips were pasty white, and her head lolled limply against his chest. He could not even tell if she was breathing anymore. "Don't die on me," he begged.

It was like running in a nightmare, seemingly going slow, whereas in actuality perhaps only a few minutes passed. At last, he got to Magnolia Hospital and brought her to the nurse on duty for the night.

"Please, help her!" he screamed.
The nurse saw the amount of blood soaking the blanket and the young woman already unconscious. She quickly got to work calling in doctors. Lucy was taken from Loke's arms, placed on a wheeled bed, and rushed into emergency surgery. All Loke could do was stand in the hallway outside the operating room, his suit covered in blood, a slash on his chest that already healed, and sadness in his heart for his beloved master.

After what felt like hours, the nurse came out and saw him waiting anxiously. "Are you her husband?"

Normally, Loke would have been thrilled to be called that, but right then he was too filled with terror. "A friend. I fought off the thing that attacked her and brought her here."

"Did you happen to see what it was?"

Loke shook his head, looking at the operating room door in hopes that they might open so he could see even just a glimpse of Lucy again. "It was too dark. It had claws and wings. A tail, too. I can't describe more than that. It flew away."

"I see," the nurse pouted. "Your friend is hurt badly. We've stopped the bleeding, and we're trying to transfuse enough blood back into her to keep her stabilized. She's going through surgery now. We'll know more come morning, but it seems she'll recover."

Loke loosened up with the good news.

"There was a similar attack yesterday night. The wounds on the victim's body match the slices on her stomach and leg. Does she have family?" the nurse asked, and Loke shook his head. "I noticed the Fairy Tail guild mark. Without family, that means Master Makarov is the closest thing to a guardian. Can you fetch him, please?"

Loke had something to do now, and he clutched at the duty in desperation. "Right. Makarov should be told. Yes. And her teammates. They're like family." He turned to leave, but he looked back again. "That creature, when I arrived, it was … to her … trying to … hurt her…" He knew that sounded foolish. Of course it had hurt her! Still, he hoped the nurse would understand what he meant without him having to say it out loud.

"I see," the nurse pouted in sympathy. "It's definitely not something a normal wild animal would do. If you don't mind, after you get Makarov, I'd like you to stay here until the investigators arrive. Since she won't be waking up for a while, any details you can give might help them track down whatever did this."

He nodded, distracted by too many thoughts and the incessant sounds replaying in his head of Lucy's screams and shivering, weak cries for help.

The nurse put a hand on his arm, jolting him out of his thoughts. "You did well, sir. You saved your friend's life. It's a good thing you got to her before it was too late."

"No," Loke sighed. "I had already arrived too late. This never should have happened to someone like her." He turned and slowly left the hospital.
Gajeel stepped into the guild hall, paused in surprise, and glanced around. Empty tables, chairs tucked neatly in place, a glistening clean floor: not at all like the chaos the hall usually took on by noon when most of the mages woke up and dragged themselves in for food. The only sound was melodious humming, someone with a good sense of pitch. A quick glance showed him no one there; however, being a highly talented musician—if he did say so himself—Gajeel knew of only one person in the guild with that level of musicality.

"Morning, Mira," he called out into the cavernous, empty hall.

The humming ended on an ascending note of question. The bartender's snow white head and peachy pale face popped up from behind a table. "Oh, Gajeel. Good morning. Wow, you're here early."

"Yeah, uh … couldn't sleep," he said with a shifting shrug of his shoulders.

"I haven't started breakfast, but there's coffee brewed. Do you mind pouring it yourself? There's a rather stubborn stain here that I want to clean before the morning crowd arrives," she grinned, pointing to the ground where she knelt scrubbing hard.

He stomped over to the bar without complaint. "I don't see why you'd bother. It'll get stained again today."

"And if I didn't clean it every day, what would happen to this place?" she chuckled.

Gajeel had to admire a woman like that. Levy was the same, meticulous almost to a fault. Not for the first time, he wondered if all women were neat-freaks. He always left chaos in his wake. Natsu was the same, and he bet the pyromaniac's house was just as messy as his own. He wondered if Wendy kept her place clean and organized. He had a feeling, especially with a cat like Charle around, the girl's room was spotless. And probably very pink. Yes, definitely pink.

He made his coffee strong and black, the way he liked it. It smelled rich and slightly nutty, nothing at all like the runny tar his coffeemaker sputtered out. One taste convinced him that women had a natural talent for brewing coffee. Or maybe it was just Mirajane. He wanted to invite Levy over for coffee one day, see how she made it, and maybe she could figure out why his coffeemaker hacked out liquid rather than dripped it out neatly.

He had just sat on a chair in the corner and leaned back to enjoy the steaming mug when the front doors were kicked open, spilling gray-green early morning sunlight into the guild hall.

"Please open the door more carefully … Master!"

Gajeel glanced over the rim of his coffee cup. The tiny old man's hair stuck out a bit, as if he had not brushed it yet that morning, and his clothes looked like they had been hastily thrown on. One would think the old Master had just woken up, except his face showed the weariness of a long night of
fretting. His eyes held burning anger that was just starting and would likely rage into an inferno before the end of the day.

"Gajeel," he growled menacingly. "Come with me."

"Che!" he scoffed, looking aside stubbornly. "Can't I finish my morning cof-…"

"NOW!"

The shout echoed over and over through the massive hall. The guild master's aura flamed in fury few ever saw, and even fewer enemies lived to speak of it. Gajeel hesitated, feeling the slightest tremor under that murderous gaze. Weighing his options, he realized he was no match for one of the Ten Wizard Saints. He set his mug down, rose slowly, and took a few steps forward. However, he stopped ten paces from the small man and stared down at him, waiting to see what he would do.

"First, let me ask you this," Makarov said much quieter, but with no less intensity to his words. If eyes could literally be daggers, his would have pierced even the iron hide of a Dragon Slayer. "Where were you last night?"

Gajeel made the tiniest error: he inhaled too sharply and his eyes flinched at the question. He knew right away, that was all the answer Makarov needed.

The old man hummed to himself, considering the silent confession. "Follow me," he ordered softly. Gajeel walked behind Makarov as he led him toward the Master's quarters in the back of the guild hall.

Mirajane had not moved and barely even breathed through all this. Once she finally heard the far away door slam shut, she remembered to exhale and blink. "I wonder what happened," she whispered to herself.

Feet pounded, panting came heavily, and occasional curses hissed between clenched teeth. A fluttering scarf was all that was left as shouts of "slow down," "be careful," "no running in the halls," and "watch where you're going you jerk" followed after him. Natsu ignored the nurses and patients. There were tears in his eyes as he cursed again and declared desperately, "It can't be true. It can't be!"

"Wait for me, Natsu," Happy yelled from somewhere behind him, but the Dragon Slayer did not slow down.

He found the hospital room number he wanted, grabbed the door jamb to swing around the corner, yet came to a skidding stop when he saw Erza, Gray, and Wendy already there sitting on chairs against a plain white wall. His pink hair was a mess, clothes ruffled from running, eyes massive in dread, and tears still clung to the corner of his eyelids. He grabbed both sides of the door jamb now, as if he had to hold on just to keep standing. Hard breaths jolted his chest as he recovered from running so quickly. A few seconds later, Happy flew in after him, looking worn out from flying so quickly in order to keep up.

"I just heard," Natsu said darkly.

He swallowed hard to moisten his scratchy throat and shoved down the gasping need for air. Just that simple maneuver made him shiver and almost destroyed the barrier he was building around his heart, an emotional defense so he could enter the room without going destructive in rage. Slowly, he stepped in, looking at the bed that was partly hidden by a curtain. He could barely see a lump that
was probably Lucy's feet sticking up from a white sheet.

"Lucy!" Happy cried, and he flew beyond the curtain. "Waaah! Is … is that Lucy? What happened?" he shouted, and the blue Exceed began to sob. "Who could do this to Lucy?"

Natsu's pace continued slowly, reluctant to see his best friend hurt, but knowing he needed to be with her. With each step, he saw more: two long lines under the sheet that were her legs, guard rails on the sides of the bed, a limp hand with an I.V. hooked in, and some sort of monitor with a steady blip of light.

"How is she?" he asked to fill in the moments of hesitancy as he walked from the door to the sectioned bed.

"Stabilized and sleeping," Erza told him. "The worst injuries are gouges to her stomach and leg, plus a broken arm. She almost died from blood loss and had to be resuscitated. The creature that mauled her also damaged some of her intestines, and she went through surgery last night. Wendy healed some of the gashes and bite wounds, but she needs to rest before attempting any of the deep wounds."

"I'm sorry," the little girl pouted. Gray patted her head to let her know it was all right.

"According to Loke, it also tried to … hurt her … worse." Erza's voice trailed off into a whisper. They all saw a shiver of horror go through the normally fearless Titania, and Natsu flinched as he understood what she meant. "When she woke up this morning, she was in hysterics. Master and I had to hold her down while the doctors injected medication to knock her out so she wouldn't reopen her wounds. We were told to let her sleep for today, maybe for a few days … until either her brain can accept the trauma, or her body heals enough to handle her violent reactions."

Natsu came around the curtain and finally saw Lucy lying unconscious on the bed. Her chest and stomach had a large wrapping of bandages across them, an I.V. and bag of blood were hooked into her arteries, a tube of oxygen went into her nose, and wired patches on her chest kept a monitor on her heart rate. Her breathing held steady out of slightly parted lips chapped and pasty white from a lack of blood. The bruises that marred her peachy skin tortured Natsu's heart. The plaster cast around her right arm made him want to cry. Every bit of bandaging, some which already needed to be changed with blood seeping through, burned him like no flame could. Of everyone in the guild, he could not stand seeing Lucy hurt. Even scratches and bruises from fights made him furious, but this … this was too much!

He swallowed down a sob and fell to his knees by her side. "Lucy," he whispered in anguish. "Why? Why did it have to happen to you?"

"It could have been anyone," Gray said, straining to keep his emotions cool. "The beast has killed four people so far: two early yesterday—one mauled and partly eaten, the other had her head ripped off but otherwise left alone; they think it's now the same attacker—and two others were found this morning, another mauling and one looked like he just got too close and clawed right over the throat. Lucy is the only victim who survived."

Natsu put his hand to his mouth and looked aside in anger. "Do they know who did this?" he growled.

Gray sighed and shook his head. "An animal of some sort. That's all they know."

Erza's lips trembled in fury. "That beast should die!" she seethed.
“The army is still looking for it,” Gray told them. “Loke gave as much description as he could, since he fought the thing. It's some sort of flying creature, has a thick tail with spikes, and the claws were sharp enough to nearly disembowel Lucy.”

“Master is looking into it, too,” Wendy said. “He had me and Gajeel sniff out Lucy's room, hoping to latch onto a scent. Unfortunately, all we could smell was Lucy, you, me, Gray, Erza, Happy, Loke, and Lisanna. I didn't smell any type of animal, which is why it's probably a demon. Sometimes they don't have a smell. Master said he wants you to go there later to see if you can smell anything.”

“Yeah … later,” he muttered. The Dragon Slayer took Lucy's hand and held it tightly. The chill in her limp fingers worried him, but the beeping monitors assured him she was really alive. He rubbed her fingers, trying to warm them up. "A flying beast? Wings, tail, claws…” He looked to Wendy. "What's your first instinct?"

The little girl blinked in shock. "Me? Well, honestly, at first I thought maybe it was a dragon, but a dragon would be too big to fit in Lucy's bedroom. It managed to fly out her window, so it was small."

Natsu nodded sternly. "Same first thought. Weird, isn't it? It couldn't have been a dragon. The whole town would have seen it. Still, maybe it's something similar. There are wyverns around, but they smell bad. You would have picked them up easily. Whatever it is," he glared in anger, "I'll defeat it." He looked at the unconscious blonde again. "Do you hear that, Lucy? I'll defeat it for you. I don't want you to get hurt again. I'm … I'm so sorry," he cried, and his face fell to the bed. They watched uncomfortably as Natsu's shoulders shook with heavy sobs.

"Oi, it's no one's fault," Gray told him. "You don't have to cry about it."

"Yes I do," Natsu growled with a moist hiccup. "Because … something like this … not even saying sorry will fix it. Nothing I do will heal her heart! So I'll find the thing that did it and … and I'll … I'll defeat it," he roared in fury, and fire blazed inside his mouth. "It hurt Lucy, so I'll fucking kill it!"

Natsu suddenly rose and ran out of the hospital room. Gray was about to follow, but Erza put a hand on his arm to hold him back.

"Let him have some privacy," the redhead suggested passively. "We both know how much he cares for Lucy, so he needs to get over this shock on his own. Getting in his way will only put ourselves in danger."

Gray settled back down on his chair. "I just hope he doesn't go after the beast alone. I want a shot at it, too.” Then he felt something small and soft lean against him. He looked over and saw Wendy slumped on his arm. "Hey, are you okay?" he asked in worry.

The small girl opened her eyes warily. "Sorry, I've been feeling a little funny all morning. I didn't sleep well."

"Go home and rest," Erza suggested. "We've all been up for a long time. You need your energy if you want to continue healing Lucy. Get some warm milk and sleep as long as you need."

"Sorry," Wendy sighed. As she rose, she flinched and held onto her head. "Oww, I have a really bad headache. I wonder if it's from all the beeping monitors and weird smells in this hospital."

Erza stood and wrapped her arm around Wendy's narrow shoulders. "I'll walk you back to Fairy Hills. Gray, stay with Lucy."

"Of course," he nodded.
He pouted with worry as he watched the tall armored woman and petite girl walk away. Wendy must have overworked herself healing so many injuries on Lucy's body, yet she was not even halfway through. Gray scooted his chair over to Lucy and shifted a few of the wires aside so he could be close to her. He brushed back her golden hair and gazed at her peaceful face. Her dry lips looked so wrong. He was used to her shiny lip gloss highlighting either the frustrated pout she had when he and Natsu fought, or the gleaming smile whenever she was happy. Gray dipped a napkin in a cup of ice water and dabbed it on Lucy's parched lips.

"I'll stay with you, Lucy. You don't have to worry. Just sleep and get well quickly." He kissed her forehead and continued to dab her dry lips.

Natsu ran blindly through Magnolia, bumping into people but not even stopping to apologize. The path he took had many smells, but amongst them was one he hated: the smell of Lucy's blood. She had dripped blood along this route. Looking down at the cobbles, he could even see an occasional blackened splotch already flaking away with morning traffic. He followed the drips and odious smell all the way to Lucy's apartment. A crowd of reporters had blocked Strawberry Street, swarming like buzzards around the apartment building as they demanded answers. The small landlady guarded outside, not looking happy that the army had blockaded her building for their investigation and the media wanted to overrun the whole street.

"You, pinkie," she hollered. "Is she okay?"

The reporters turned as one mob and rushed over to Natsu. He cringed and took a step back from the cameras, microphones, and reporters with notebooks out, eager for a quote. They repeated the landlady's question plus too many others.

"Have they caught the attacker?"

"Do they know what it is?"

"Is the guild doing anything about this?"

"What is the army doing about these murders?"

"What can you tell us about Lucy Heartfilia?"

"What are her injuries?"

"What is her current condition?"

"We heard rumors that she died."

"Is she okay?"

"No, she's not okay," he yelled. "Would any of you be okay if you were torn to pieces by some murdering beast? She's not dead either! Don't you ever say that! Lucy's strong; she'd never die from something like this. She's recovering in the hospital and surrounded by her friends. That's all I know, so get the hell out of my way."

He shoved past them angrily and stomped up to the entrance. A soldier dropped his spear to block the way, yet all Natsu had to do was show them his Fairy Tail guild mark and he was allowed inside.

He loved this place. From the first day he visited, it felt like home. It was warm, comfortable, and smelled like Lucy. She always smelled so nice, even after horrible battles. Her smell comforted him.
It was a gentle smell, one that made him want to curl up and sleep, yet it also enlivened him, a smell that banished fatigue and pessimism, a smell that made him feel like all was at ease with the world.

Natsu inhaled deeper. Today, not even her smell could ease the rage in his mind. He walked to the bedroom, sniffing, searching for any unfamiliar smells. He covered his nose at the overwhelming reek of blood. He saw the bed still in disarray with Lucy's blood covering the sheets and mattress. Seeing the blackened stains and smelling the lingering scent of blood made a fire flicker in his throat.

There were two army inspectors talking to one another. One had Lucy's shredded panties in a plastic bag.

"Hey! What are you doing with those?" Natsu yelled, startling the two. "Those are Lucy's, and they're private!"

"The underwear may have evidence to help us," the inspector explained. "We have a warrant to search and collect anything that may give us a lead. I must insist you not remove anything from the scene, nor touch the bed."

"I'm just here to smell," he mumbled.

He wished the inspectors would go away so he could concentrate. Those two reinforced the fact that this was a crime scene. This was where Lucy had been attacked, assaulted … violated! He had noticed the bloody bandages wrapped around Lucy's breasts. Tooth bites, if he had to guess by the bloodied stains seeping through the bandage. The damned beast had bit those perfect boobs! Thinking about that made Natsu want to scream.

He inhaled deeply. So many smells! He caught very faint whiffs of Lisanna. A week old, he guessed, but it was hard to tell. He wondered what Lisanna had been doing over at Lucy's home. When had they become such good friends? He smelled Gray and Erza, five days old. That was right; Team Natsu had a meeting at Lucy's earlier that week. He still smelled the faint lingering aroma of Wendy and the stench of Gajeel. He hated the man's smell—he smelled like a rival, that was the only way to describe it—so he knew the smell immediately. He sniffed along the bed, being careful not to touch the bloodied sheets. He strongly smelled himself, Happy, and Loke. He had taken a nap in Lucy's bed on that visit five days ago, and earlier that week was when Happy sought out Lucy for the night. He sniffed again. Loke's smell was unusually strong, but he was there to fight off the beast. Perhaps he had been on the bed as well.

All these smells were hard to pick up over the overwhelming reek of blood. Lucy's blood! Also, the smell of fear was thick, almost a stench. The two mixed together threatened to overwhelm his sanity. He clenched his fists and restrained himself by force. An instinct to protect roiled just under the surface, yet he knew there was nothing he could do now … and that infuriated him. His friend had been hurt, nearly killed, and he was not there to defend her. Now all he could do was sniff, yet even this was turning up nothing.

He was useless! Utterly useless!

Then he noticed one part of the bed smelled slightly different. He leaned over close to that part and tried to figure out what it was. He inhaled deeply. It was Lucy's smell, yet intense. It was a smell that enthralled him instantly. He wanted to bury his nose into the smell. It made him flushed and giddy, a tickle in his stomach and deep tugging in the very pit of his gut.

He jolted back and covered his nose as he realized what it was. Once, Happy had used Lucy's underwear to play Ninja. Natsu thought it looked like fun and took some lacy lingerie to play Ninja, too. However, when he had put it over his face, he smelled something that made all immature
playfulness leave him. He had taken that scrap of cloth and sniffed it all over, enraptured with the aroma until his stomach fluttered. That was when Lucy caught him smelling her panties and threw a whole basket of dirty clothes at him. Amidst them was underwear with a little bit of something white and flaking on them. They smelled better than anything Natsu could imagine. Just that brief smell drove him crazy. He stole the panties without her realizing it (since he was covered in dirty clothes), ran out of Lucy's apartment, rushed back to his house, and masturbated furiously while smelling the panties as images came to his head that would not go away.

He still had the underwear, too. He brought them out when Happy was sleeping. Smelling them made him feel hot and funny inside.

That was this smell, Lucy's sexual smell.

He remembered what Erza said. The beast had tried to hurt her ... a hurt even worse than breaking her arm and tearing her stomach open.

Natsu closed his eyes in deep pain as he imagined it. Lucy must have screamed and fought hard as the beast attacked her. She must have yelled for help and called for Natsu and Gray. With no one there to save her, she would have screamed for Loke and brought him to this world even without her Spirit Keys.

She had likely yelled Natsu's name in terrified desperation ... and he had not saved her.

Natsu shivered in guilt. Lucy was hurt, and he had not helped.

She got hurt so badly ... and he ... he was ...

"Are you done?"

Natsu jolted out of his pit of guilt. "Oh, uh, y-yeah, I ... I'm sorry, but I don't smell an animal. Except for the blood and you guys, nothing smells out of the ordinary."

The inspector frowned. "That kid and the mage with the piercings said the same thing. No trace of smell, nothing that might clue us in: no blood, no fur, not even a fingernail. No trace. And now we know this is some animal. A flying beast out to murder and rape."

Natsu shivered in anger at that last word. He looked at the bed again. He could see it in his head: Lucy struggling, fighting, so terrified, yet being overwhelmed. In his head, he could picture Lucy's horrified face, and it haunted him. He turned sharply and left the house. He ran again, but this time the Dragon Slayer did not know where he was heading. He just needed to flee, to escape, to run as far away from these painful emotions as he could get.

He felt ... guilty.

"I have to stop this thing," he growled. "Before anyone else gets hurt, I need to..." He panted in weariness, yet he kept on running, fleeing from his emotions like a coward on a battlefield. "Lucy ... why you? Why? What the hell is going on?"

Chapter End Notes

*When I first wrote this chapter, I asked if people wanted me to write a PWP about that scene with Lucy's underwear. I got an overwhelmingly positive reply (lots of pervs out*
there, LOL!) so I came up with a real naughty one. It's called Panty Possession. The
name fits in well with Beastly Possession, ne?
Erza was beginning to hate crime scenes.

This one was just as bad as the first one she had been sent to: a mutilated body, signs of the victim having been partially eaten, copious amounts of blood, pinkish-gray entrails yanked out and chewed up, orange blobs of fatty tissue melting away in the summer heat, and insects … too many insects.

One arm had been pulled completely off the body and eaten down to the bone with only dried scrapes of muscle clinging to thick tendons. It laid a short distance away from the corpse, the brachioradialis and various extensor muscles gone, the hand left alone since it had too many small bones, fingers slightly curled, having loosened from the fist the victim had likely made from the pain of being torn apart so viciously. This victim had apparently been a female, although it was impossible to tell with the chest eaten down to bones and the face slashed apart. Only a lost high heel and the shredded scraps of a bra were proof.

The smell of death was nauseating, and Erza had to swallow hard to keep her stomach down. It was even more difficult for her to investigate this scene with her thoughts constantly returning to Lucy. If it had not been for Loke having the strength to open his own gate, would Erza have been sent to ask investigators about her death, too? Would Lucy have been torn to pieces like this, partially devoured, a mess of flesh and organs? Erza swallowed back stomach bile and shuddered to even imagine something so horrible happening to her closest female friend.

She got the official report and began to head back. That was when she saw a dark hooded person in the crowd turn sharply and leave. It was suspicious, so she began to follow. After they were away from the main crowd, the hooded person stopped and spun around at her.

"What?" he shouted angrily.

Erza stopped and looked distraught to see it was Gajeel again. "Another murder scene attracted you, huh?"

"It's the smell," he insisted with a growl in his throat.

Erza folded her arms. "Are you attracted to the smell of death and blood? Do you like it?"

"Not that smell," he snapped. "The one that's woven into the rest. I know that smell. It's all over Magnolia lately. I've been smelling it in the guild hall, too."

"Mira told me Master spoke to you privately about these attacks." Her eyes narrow in distrust. "What did you two talk about?"

His red eyes squinted arrogantly as he gave her a haughty grin. "If it was private, that means I can't
"I can't tell you," he bellowed, suddenly furious. He paused as people on the street looked over in surprise by his outburst. Eventually the traffic moved on. The tension in Gajeel's shoulders loosened, but his face was no less disturbed. "What the geezer and I talked about is a private issue. If you want to know, try asking him, but he won't tell you. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to look up something. I might know what's going on."

"Care to enlighten me?" Erza asked wryly.

"No," he glared, but his eyes softened with a hint of worry in them. "If I'm right … I'm probably the only one who can stop these murders." Then Gajeel turned and ran off quickly.

Erza decided to just let him go. It was suspicious, but maybe Gajeel really was able to smell whatever this beast was. Makarov already had a long talk with Gajeel the day Lucy was attacked. If there was anything wrong, the Master would have dealt with it right away. Erza trusted that the Master would not let a dangerous man run around town freely.

So just what was going on with Gajeel?

Natsu was slumped at the Fairy Tail bar staring at the drink Mirajane had made for him, only to get forgotten as he stared vacantly at how the grenadine blended with the tequila to create the effect of a sunset. That was how Mirajane described it, at least. Natsu saw it as a fiery red dragon sleeping under an autumn sky.

Wendy came up beside him, pressing her index fingers together nervously. "Umm … Natsu?" When he did not move, she pouted a little. "Natsu," she said louder. He grunted to let her know he heard. "Uh, well, this might be a weird question, but … have you … smelled anything weird lately?"

He glanced over at her this time with a questioning look.

"I've been noticing an unfamiliar smell. It gives me a headache sometimes," she admitted, trying to laugh it off, but the strain of hiding her pain was apparent in her face.

"A headache?" he asked in concern. Only then did he notice dark circles under Wendy's eyes. It looked like the poor girl had not slept in days. "I've been getting the same thing."

"And … and my tummy hurts. I remembered when we found you under the bridge, you had similar symptoms."

"What is it?" he asked eagerly.

"I don't know. I didn't get it until I noticed the smell."

"I've been smelling something weird since just before that day. I remember, I smelled something,
then I felt sick and had a headache and backache."

"Low back and right around the shoulder blades?"

"Precisely!"

She hummed as she considered this. "I wonder if it's a type of Dragon Slayer sickness. Maybe Gajeel has it, too. Have you seen him?"

Natsu slumped a little. "Not in a while. We worked together with the inspection team investigating the murder that took place just after Lucy was attacked. He wasn't being very helpful, I was in a bad mood, I got mad that he wasn't trying hard enough, and I … sort of set an investigator's notebook on fire," he admitted sheepishly. "They made us leave the crime scene. I haven't seen him since that day."

"Natsu…" She glanced around, yet no one was nearby and Mirajane had left to fetch something from the storage rooms. Wendy tiptoed up to him, and the pink-haired Dragon Slayer leaned his ear down to hear her over the low din of the guild hall. "Do you think this smell has something to do with the creature that attacked Lucy? That first day, you had signs of having been in a fight, but you couldn't remember anything. What if it has some odor that affects our health and makes us forget?"

Natsu hated to admit that he had been wondering about precisely that. "I still can't recall anything about that day. Have you noticed any missing time?"

"I … well…" Wendy looked around quickly to make sure they were still alone. "The day Lucy was attacked, I wasn't feeling well. I stayed home, and I don't remember anything of that night. I didn't want to tell anyone," she whimpered, hugging herself as she shivered, "but that night, I … I woke up in the middle of the sakura grove some time after midnight, my clothes were ripped, and it felt like I had been in a huge fight, but I don't remember anything. I don't know how I got there or what happened to me. When I heard Lucy was attacked, I was scared," she squeaked. "Natsu, what if … what if it's me? You and Gajeel are boys, but I'm a girl. What if it's something girl Dragon Slayers do to boy Dragon Slayers? And what if … what if the person attacking everyone … is me?"

She looked so terrified and had tears in her huge eyes. Natsu pouted that she must have lived with this fear for many days, feeling guilty but unable to speak up. He knew the feeling too well. He had also suffered with a sense of guilt that he had not been there to rescue Lucy. He should have returned to Magnolia the day she was attacked, yet he lagged behind, woke up late, and went straight home to sleep off a horrible headache. If he had been there, she never would have gotten hurt. That guilt, along with a bit of lingering worry about just why he kept feeling ill, made his heart ache every time he visited the hospital and saw Lucy unconscious on the bed, still healing from the attack.

He laughed to dispel the little sky Dragon Slayer's worries and patted her shoulder. "Oh, come on, Wendy! You know dragon slaying magic. That doesn't make you half-dragon, or a carnivorous demon. You eat air, not people." He took a deep sniff of her. "And you're not giving off a weird smell. Am I?" Part of him truly was worried. Was this him?

She sniffed and pulled away. "Well, you need a bath."

That was true. He forgot to take one that morning … and the day before. "Besides, whatever attacked Lucy tried to mate with her. It was definitely male. It wasn't you."

"Okay," she said, looking relieved. "Then we need to talk to Gajeel. If he's experiencing the same symptoms, we'll know it's something unique to Dragon Slayers, and if he can smell the same scent, maybe all three of us can work together to track this thing down."
"The sooner, the better. I heard there was another murder."

Wendy covered her mouth. "Oh no! We need to find Gajeel right away."

Just then, Levy came up. "Gajeel? You just missed him. He left this morning."

Wendy jolted that they had been overheard. "He's gone?"

"Just for a couple days," she nodded. "He wouldn't tell me what it's about."

Natsu had a sly smirk. "Ooh? You and Gajeel are so close that you have to know where each other are at all times, huh?"

Levy instantly turned pink. "It's not like that!"

Wendy also got a devilish smile. "Oho! She smells nervous, wouldn't you say, Natsu?"

"Mnn, definitely sweating with anxiety. Ahh, the smell of guilt!"

"Don't smell me, perverts!" Levy yelled. She stomped away, leaving Natsu and Wendy to laugh at her too-obvious reaction.

Two days later, the moon was full and gleamed silver in a cloudless night. Streetlights were hardly even needed with such brilliant heavenly glows. The river that ran through Magnolia gleamed with lunar glory like a silver aorta pulsing through the heart of the town.

With his hands deep in the pockets of his coat, Gray gazed up at the stars as he walked back from the hospital. It was very late to be out, but there was no helping it. He had fallen asleep beside Lucy, his head resting on her bed, and no one came to kick him out until almost midnight. It made him question the efficiency of the hospital staff.

Far away, he heard the cathedral bells chime out the hour. Bored and a little curious about the time, he counted them.

Ten, eleven, twelve … midnight already. A new day.

The Ice-Make mage yawned loudly, not even bothering to cover his mouth. No one was out anyway. The town was quiet with only a slightly chilled breeze whispering through alleys and within the wispy swaying of trees. The coolness felt good on his skin, and the silence was definitely a pleasant change.

Always, there were annoying noises. His neighbors fought constantly, the guild hall had no concept of "peace and quiet," and even in the hospital where he had been staying for the past few days, there were the constant beeps of monitors, whispers between nurses, and pages for doctors announced over the intercom.

He paused for a moment, listening to silence. The only sound was the susurration of the wind and a faint lapping of waves against docked boats. He missed such peace and quiet.

That was when he heard a growl.

It echoed slightly, and Gray realized he was standing by an alley between a meat market and a spice store. The animal's low snarl bounced off the brick walls, vibrating puddles of water in the alley, and came out to the main avenue in a muffled rumble. An instinctive part of Gray froze, thinking that if he simply did not move, the creature would not see him. Like a rabbit before a wolf, he stood with...
His heart thumping rapidly but too terrified to bolt. He fought that potentially fatal reaction and forced his head to turn stiffly in the direction of the noise.

It was dark in the alley. The moonbeams and streetlights did not reach the bottom of the corridor. Some angular shapes of stacked crates made darker shadows amidst the gloom. The puddles closest to the edge of the alley managed to capture a little argent starlight, yet nothing distinct could be seen in that hellish corridor.

Within that sable sarcophagus, two scarlet-glowing pits gleamed, angry eyes that smirked at finding prey, eyes that promised a slow, excruciating death, being a plaything for a demon before becoming its next midnight snack.

Gray felt his skin turn colder than the frostiest mountain blizzard. His thighs tensed, prepared for the brain's decision: fight or flight. Ice blue eyes stayed on fiery red, both staring in a life-or-death contest. His breath came steady and softer than the sigh of a ghost. In contrast, the beast hissed each breath, and foggy smoke puffed out into the darkness. Gray heard a throaty purr, and he thought he saw a faint reflection of puddle-light shine upon sharp, white teeth.

"Want," came a low hiss.

The momentary panic of facing a beast out of primordial nightmares passed. Gray managed to move beyond dread and plunged straight into anger. This was the beast who hurt Lucy. This was the beast who had killed so many people, who would keep killing and eating in carnal greed.

"Bastard," Gray hissed right back to it.

The beast made a guttural chuckle. "Want fight? Yes-s-s. Come."

Gray's fist rested on his palm, and the night was illuminated by a pale blue glow of a magic circle. "Ice-Make…"

Before he could cast, the red glow vanished, and he heard retreating footsteps.

"Oh no you don't!" Gray shouted, and he dashed forward, not thinking straight, only desiring revenge. "You damned beast! You wanna fight but then run away? Get back here! I'll kill you myself."

He stomped through the puddles and leaped over a fallen box. His teeth gritted as rage that had been simmering for too many days—countless hours of watching Lucy's unconscious face, waiting for the moment when she opened her eyes and smiled—now began to boil, steaming through the cold exterior of the ice mage until condensation formed in the corner of his eyes. He could not help but cry at such an intense surge of emotions, so strong they stabbed his chest and seared his gut. He wanted this beast dead, not just because it was a menace to society, but because when Lucy woke up, Gray did not want her trembling in fear because her attacker was still on the loose.

Gray threw off his coat and shirt to help him run faster. He thought he saw a black shadow leap and take into the air. This was not a problem for him. His attacks could be melee as well as ranged. On the ground or in the air, he would pierce this beast. He would be the hero for Lucy. Maybe when she woke up, she would be so happy that she might reward him with a kiss and …

A scream shattered those thoughts and made Gray jolt. It came from the west, whereas he thought he saw the beast fly north. Cursing, he began to race toward the sounds. Howls of agony and snarls of an animal sped him onward. He turned down streets, following the screams. How was it so far away when the beast had seemed to be right in front of him? Was it really that fast in the air?
He panicked when the voice stopped. Not good! He continued to run toward where he heard the sounds until he came to a hotel. It was impossible to tell from here where the attack originated, but he saw an open window three floors up with a curtain fluttering.

Gazing up, trying to figure out how to reach that room, he almost missed a shadow fleeing the scene. Gray decided the beast must have finished its attack, and he ran after the bulky shape. It turned sharply into an alley, and Gray skidded to make the turn. The fleeing shape knocked over a stack of crates, but Gray leaped over them, clearing them easily.

"Ice-Make: Floor!" he shouted and froze the ground.

The thing running away slipped on the ice and crashed into a metal bin, clanging loud into it with a reverberation almost like metal against metal, not the softer squish of flesh. Gray slid to a stop, grabbed the struggling shoulder, and had an ice knife instantly in his hand, ready to stab. That was when two red eyes glared up at him.

"Fucking ice bastard!"

Gray jolted, but he did not back away. "Gajeel? What the hell is going on?"

Gajeel glanced at the silvery white dagger. "Are you planning on killing me with an icicle? Can your ice really pierce iron?"

Gray wondered about that, but he still did not back down. "I saw you fleeing the crime scene."

"I was chasing the attacker. Thanks to you, it got away."

"You expect me to believe that?"

He shrugged smugly. "Do or don't, doesn't matter to me. However, if you don't hurry, the victim will die. The beast got scared off, so chances are he's not totally eaten up yet. So, are you gonna threaten me with an icepick, or you gonna go play the hero?"

Gray wavered, but he finally gave in. He could figure out what Gajeel was up to later. For now, someone direly needed a hospital.

Chapter End Notes

*Have you ever smelled death? It truly is something you will never forget. By the way, I do a lot of research for the gore scenes. It's shocking (and disgusting) what you can find on the internet in the category of animal mauling, fatal accidents, and brutal murder scenes. I've learned to steel my stomach to some really horrific pictures, but they help me visualize how a beast might attack.*
Facing Facts

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Rhov doesn't like facing the fact that she'll never own Fairy Tail. Thus she continues to plot and scheme how to win over Hiro Mashima's otaku horde through fanfiction.

When Lucy finally woke up, she felt weak and dizzy. She glanced at the cast around her right wrist, and that was when she noticed Gray sitting by her side. She grinned when she saw him, and he smiled warmly back at her. She realized she was still in the hospital. Her stomach hurt, her arm was immobile, but most of her wounds were almost healed thanks to Wendy's magic.

"How are ya?" he asked, trying to sound nonchalant although his throat clenched with emotion.

"I suppose okay," she sighed. "The thing that attacked me, did they … did they find it yet?" she asked in jolting words and a worried expression.

Gray frowned and shook his head. He had been so close, too! "It's been a week since the first death. Two others were attacked the night you were brought in, and another was killed a couple days later. Two nights ago, I stumbled upon a victim soon enough to rescue him. He was a lot worse off than you, and the doctor's still aren't sure if he'll make a full recovery, but he's alive for now. Yesterday, a man was attacked a block from your house, but he lived. The inspectors say he must have put up a huge fight. They have a little evidence now. He managed to rip part of the demon's wing. I'm not sure if they can figure out what it is with just a little thing like that, but I for one want to know at least what we're dealing with so I know how to kill it. Gajeel, Wendy, and Natsu are apparently tracking it down."

Lucy leaned back. Her head was still woozy and her stomach felt sick. She wanted to forget the whole experience, just shove the memory away. "How's Fairy Tail?"

Gray looked confused for a moment. Her attacker was still on the loose, and she wanted to know about the guild? "We're … okay. Shaken, obviously. Erza has been keeping in touch with the investigation teams. Gajeel and Natsu…"

"No," she interrupted quickly. "How … How's Happy? Is he still giving Charle fish?"

Gray raised an eyebrow. What sort of question was that? Then he saw the terror in her eyes. He knew running away from something bad was not how a person should deal with a problem, but for now, just until she stabilized … "He tried to give her a fish yesterday. She turned it down, of course."

Lucy finally smiled. Although Gray loved to see her looking happy, for some reason this was even more painful than if she had simply started to cry.

"Wendy went on a mission with Romeo. It was just to help entertain children in an orphanage, but Mira is of course making it seem like this is their first date."

Lucy laughed at that. "That's Mira for you! What else? What have you and Natsu been up to?"
"Oh, not much."

He did not want to tell her that he had spent every day by her bedside waiting for the moment she woke up, and Natsu was running around like an insane maniac insisting he was going to defeat this murdering beast, despite no one being any closer to figuring out what it was. He saw Lucy waiting for information, something to take her mind off the memories.

"Oh, hey!" he recalled, trying hard to make it sound interesting. "Cana got a haircut. Not really short or anything. She said she sort of wished you could have brought Cancer out to do her hair, though. I guess it's uneven. I can't tell the difference," he shrugged.

She tittered. "Of course not. You're a guy." Her forced smile faltered. "Gray, I … thanks, first of all," she muttered. "You understand me better than anyone."

He looked down sadly. "I know what it's like to hurt so bad you want to forget it all."

"Exactly," she admitted. "But now I … I need to ask something. Maybe it's weird, and I definitely don't want you to take this the wrong way. I'd ask any guy, but you happen to be here, so don't think this is anything more than just a general question to a friend."

"O- … kay?" he said hesitantly.

"Purely as a guy," she began, but Lucy blushed, "a girl who isn't … you know … a girl who has experienced something, even if it wasn't everything…"

"Lucy!" he said quickly, hoping to interrupt her.

"Is a girl like me still appealing?" she rushed out. Immediately, Lucy bit her lip in shame for asking.

Gray got up, sat on the bed beside her, and pulled her into a hug. He felt a slight stiffening, and a second later he wondered if maybe this sort of contact was something Lucy was not ready for yet. However, an instant later she relaxed and hugged him back.

"Lucy," he whispered, "the beast did terrible things to you, but you can still wear white on your wedding day, right? Even if it had done worse, no one would think any less of you. Speaking as a guy and also as your friend, I can tell you this: what matters is not what a girl has or hasn't done, but what's in her heart. If she has already been kissed, if she has already been touched, or even if she has slept around, for a guy who truly loves her, none of that should matter. Any guy who feels otherwise is a jackass and doesn't deserve you. So long as your heart doesn't go dark because of this, people will love you the same as before." Gray looked aside. He wanted to tell her more, to assure her that he would love her the same, but he knew that was not something she needed to hear at the moment.

"Thanks, Gray," she whispered, and slowly she pulled back to wipe her eyes. "I need some time alone. Can you go tell Erza and Natsu that I want to go on a mission as soon as I'm released?"

"You should rest," he warned.

"I've been sleeping for a week. What I need now is rent money and to return to normal life. And to get out of Magnolia for a while."

"I see," he muttered, guessing it made sense that she needed a change of scenery. "Sure, I'll tell them. I'll be back later this afternoon, okay?"

"Sure, thanks, Gray."
She kept a smile until he was out of the room, then her whole body deflated in weariness. Trying to pretend in front of him was too hard. Right now, she needed to clear something up, something she knew was probably a huge problem for one of her closest friends. She found her Spirit Keys and pulled one forward. She looked at the golden design for a moment, traced it with her thumb, and finally built up the courage to use it.

"Open the Gate of the Lion! Leo!"

Loke appeared and instantly threw his arms around her. She had half-expected precisely this sort of desperate greeting.

"Lucy," he said with a shiver in his voice. "All of us were worried."

"I'm fine, Loke." Hesitantly, she began, "About that night…"

"I'm so sorry," he cried out, squeezing her so tight she felt like her eyes might pop out of her head. "I sensed something was wrong, but I wasn't sure. By the time I sensed just how much danger you were in, I heard you scream for me."

"I'm sorry, Loke," she whispered.

He pulled back in shock. Why in the world was she apologizing? He remembered she had apologized that night, too. He began to protest, but she spoke over him.

"I should have called for you first. I shouted for Natsu and Gray, but I should have known they couldn't hear me. You're the only one who can be by my side no matter where I am. For whatever reason, I didn't think about calling you. I guess I still think of you as a friend first and as a Celestial Spirit second."

He touched her cheek tenderly and ran his fingers down to her chin, then tilted her head up to meet his eyes. "If I had stayed with you like you asked, you never would have come to harm."

"Silly Lion," she chuckled, blushing at his flirtatious tone. "I was drunk and asking you to have sex with me." She scoffed wryly. "Ironic, isn't it? I wanted you to eat me up that night and instead…"

Before she could even finish, Loke shut her up with a desperate kiss. It was greedy of him, but he could not hear her talking like that. Luckily, Lucy hummed happily at the feeling. When Loke pulled back, she looked in a daze.

"I know this is bad timing," he began. No, it was the worst timing! But still, he had to say it. "You might have been drunk when you asked me, but believe me, Lucy, I wanted to … very much! I still do, too. I love you," he declared. "I know you're not ready for that, but whenever you are—no matter how long you need to heal from this experience—when you feel you're ready for that, I'll be here. I can wait as long as you need, and my feelings will never change. My love for you is as constant as the stars themselves."

She tried to smile at his sincerity. On one hand, this was precisely what had worried her: after being assaulted like that, would a man still want her? At least Gray and Loke did. She wondered what Natsu thought. She might ask him as well one day. At least when she had asked Gray, he refrained from saying more than necessary. Loke, of course, had no sense of when something was bad timing for a woman.

"Thanks," she said uncomfortably. "I'll … consider that."

"Take your time," he smiled, looking satisfied that at least he had told her. Whether she used that
confession to return his feelings, or even if it simply helped her heal a little bit so she could find a man, any man, and find love one day, it was all fine with him. He simply needed to tell her so she knew that she was still a lovely woman and very desirable. He could see in her eyes that this was something she had been doubting, and he never wanted her to feel that she was anything less than stellar!

"I should rest," she said in excuse.

"Of course." He knew she was seeking an escape, but it was fine. She needed to sort things out still, and Loke was willing to do whatever it took to help her heal, even leaving her alone. "Call on me anytime. I promise I won't go on any vacations or dates."

"Gee, thanks," she grumbled. "What sort of idiot confesses his love to a girl but then has to assure her he won't date other women? Jerk!"

He chuckled, fully aware that what he said would anger her a little. To show her he was only joking, he leaned forward to kiss her again, but she held up her hand to block him. He kissed her fingers instead. "Before I go, I just want to say that I'm really glad you look so gorgeous."

"Get out, you flirt," she laughed. Still, her cheeks felt hot from his compliment. How had he known she also worried that her bruises made her look ugly?

"This bruise in particular." He touched the side of her neck where the hickey he gave her was barely visible.

She remembered that moment, shrieked, slapped his hand away, but had to laugh that he could always make her feel better, no matter what. Loke chuckled smugly and faded away. The smile he left her with lingered for some time. He might be a playboy, but right then she needed to feel wanted. Loke was the perfect medicine.

The drinking and normal brawling within the Fairy Tail guild was momentarily interrupted by the doors slamming open, glaring light shining through, and four imposing shadows silhouetted in the sunlight.

"They're back!" Alzack smiled.

"Laxus," Cana cheered. "Come drink with me."

The blond mage ignored her and marched in with the Thunder God Tribe following behind him.

"It's been a while, Laxus," Makarov smiled, sipping something that left a foamy mustache over his snowy whiskers.

"We stopped on the way back to help some priests at a temple," he said in a low grumble. "Some dark guild was cursing the river they used in their ceremonies. They couldn't afford to hire a magic guild, so we did it for lodging and food. I got a neat statue out of the deal, too." He tossed a bronze figurine of some hideous deity over to Makarov. "Otherwise, not a lot of fun."

Makarov chuckled that his grandson could have a kind heart as well. "We've had quite a disaster here in Magnolia. You'll probably hear about it sooner or later."

"Wait up," Laxus said, lifting his hand to silence the Master and raising his nose into the air. "What the hell is that horrible smell?"
"Ah well, you know, as you get older your digestion isn't as good and…"


Makarov's brow drew down low. "You smell it here?"

"Honestly, I've been smelling it all through town. I don't use a Dragon Slayer's olfactory sense too often, but this is really strong. You've gotta be able to smell this."

"No," Makarov frowned. "No, I can't. But I know others who can."

Three days later, Lucy was released from the hospital, healed except for her broken arm. Gray and Erza were there to see her out and walk her home.

"Any more attacks?" she asked, surreptitiously glancing down every alleyway and dark corner.

Erza scowled. "One last night, a child, but she was only bitten. Apparently when she cried, the beast ran away. I don't understand how this creature can be so brutal to adults but flees from a child."

"A conscience?" Gray wondered.

They did not speak about it more. Lucy felt like it had been years since she was back home, and it was good to see the familiar building. She entered and saw Wendy, Levy, and Mirajane already there.

"Oh! You're early," Wendy cried out.

Lucy laughed and felt like crying. The three were in the middle of cleaning her home. "You guys!"

"It was dusty, and some of your food spoiled," Mirajane explained. "We replaced the vegetables that went bad."

"You didn't have to," she said, blushing with happiness.

"We wanted to!" Levy cheered. She ran up and hugged Lucy. "Fairy Tail takes care of each other."

Lucy walked around, reacquainting herself. "I suppose I should make tea for everyone."

"Already did," Mirajane grinned, and she hurried into the kitchen.

Lucy ate a light lunch and drank tea with her friends. She was laughing, and things almost felt normal again.

"Where's Natsu and Happy?" she asked. "I've hardly seen him all week. I'm not even sure if he visited me in the hospital."

The others glanced around at each other, silently asking what they should tell her.

"He's been gone most of the time," Mirajane answered.

Wendy pouted cutely. "Happy seems to be upset at him, so he's staying with me. Actually, he's been drooling over Charle most of the time and muttering about how sleeping under the same roof as her is sort of like being married."

That made Lucy titter. "Well, Natsu can be crazy sometimes. He's protective, though. That's what I
"Oh?" Mirajane smiled, leaning in mischievously. "What you like about him?"

Lucy blushed suddenly. "Not like that!" she shouted.

Gray's eyes narrowed. "Don't tease her."

Mirajane looked even more sly. "Personally, I think Gray is even more protective over you than Natsu. He's been at the hospital every day, he helped us clean your apartment, he walked you home, he…"

"Hey!" Gray snapped, but he could not stop the heat from rising into his cheeks.

The others laughed, and they carefully sidestepped the issue by pouring more tea. Eventually Levy had to go, Mirajane needed to return to the guild hall, and Wendy began yawning so she left. Erza and Gray lingered, and they kept looking to one another. They were waiting for something that they knew would be hard on their friend.

Lucy decided to at least change for bed. She went into the bathroom to brush her teeth, but when she walked to the bedroom she froze in the doorway. That cued Erza and Gray. They knew this moment was going to be a challenge. Lucy had to return to the place where the attack happened, sleep in the same bed where she was hurt so badly, and face the memories of that moment.

Erza requipped into pajamas and put an arm around Lucy's shoulder. "I'm too tired. Gray wants the couch, so is it okay if I share your bed?"

Lucy looked at that bed. The girls had cleaned it up, of course. They had to buy a new mattress, and Lucy realized the blankets were not her old ones. Likely they were ruined, stained permanently since the inspectors did not allow anyone to remove items for a few days. It was not really the same bed other than the framework, but she could still picture the scene. She even looked to the dark window, terrified that she might see glowing eyes.

"Y-yeah," she whispered. "You can take the left side."

Erza crawled into bed while Lucy changed her clothes, then slowly got under the covers. She was thankful Erza was there, although it made her feel like a foolish child wanting to sleep with her mommy because she had a bad dream.

If only it had been just a dream!

*Why can't it be only a nightmare? Why can't I simply wake up?*


Knowingly, Erza pulled Lucy into her arms. "Of course you can. Friends are there for one another."

"Thanks," she sighed. Being held against the nightmares and fears truly helped, and soon Lucy fell fast asleep.

The next day, Lucy went with Erza and Gray to Fairy Tail. As soon as they entered, Happy flew straight into Lucy's chest, almost knocking her backward.

"I was so worried you were gonna die!" he sobbed.
She smiled awkwardly as she stroked his head. "I'm fine, but thanks for worrying."

"Lucy!" A pink blur slammed into her, and this time she really was thrown backwards until she landed on her back with Natsu on top of her. Feeling his weight made her blush.

"Natsu, can you … get off of me?" she said bashfully.

Instead, he squeezed her so tight she could barely breathe. "I'm so sorry, Lucy. I'm gonna protect you from now on, I swear. I won't let anything hurt you."

"Breathe … need … air!" she choked. "Wounds … hurt."

Gray yanked the Dragon Slayer off by his scarf. "She had her gut slashed open, her arm broken, and her boob almost bitten off, and you go tackling her. Idiot! Can't you see that you're the one hurting her?"

Instead of an instant retaliation and challenge to fight, Natsu pulled away with a hurt expression. He looked down as Lucy rubbed out her smashed chest with her good hand. Silently, Natsu turned away and stalked off to the request board.

"Wow, what's wrong with him?" Lucy asked, seeing the drastic change in her friend.

Happy, who managed to get sandwiched between the Celestial Spirit mage and the Dragon Slayer, was rubbing out his head. "Natsu's been like that since you got hurt. He blames himself, and he's been moody and scary. I don't think he's sleeping well, either. He's always waking up in the middle of the night from nightmares, leaves to walk outside, and doesn't come back until almost morning. He hardly eats, doesn't joke around anymore, and he gets cranky a lot. Really cranky. It's too hard to live with him. That's why I've been with Charle. She's so cute! She has the most adorable snore when she sleeps," he said dreamily.

Gray watched Natsu and sighed with a frown. Although he liked that Natsu was not always demanding a fight, he almost missed his rival's old personality. "He said something about how he should have been able to hear you. It isn't as if his hearing is like that Cobra guy. There's no way he could have heard you from his house. Still, he seems to think he should have known by instinct."

Happy smirked. "He lllllllllllllllllikes you!"

"Not that again," she sighed.

Natsu leaped back over to them, and his usual perky smile returned. "I found the perfect mission. Look at this!" He thrust the paper to Lucy.

She took it and read the job aloud. "Infiltrate a rich manor to retrieve a stolen goblet. Person must be able to blend in with nobility during an ambassadorial party. The party cannot be crashed or political tensions may mean war. The goblet must be retrieved without damage. Reward: 2,000,000 Jewels!" Lucy's eyes lit up. "Split between the four of us, this'll cover my rent for seven months. Sweet! I could do some shopping and maybe take a vacation and…" Her eyes shined like stars at the possibilities.

Natsu beamed to see that she liked it. "And Lucy, you're perfect for fitting in with those snooty aristocrats since you were raised in the Heartfilia Konzern."

"I might have a couple gowns that would be appropriate for an ambassadorial party," she decided. "Oh, but my arm." She looked down at the cast.
Wendy perked up. "I have enough magic recharged where I could heal the bone, although you shouldn't do anything strenuous with it for another week after healing."

"Really? Thank you so much," she cried out and hugged the little girl. "All right, let's do it!"

"Yosh!" Natsu cheered, and he hurried over to Mirajane to get approval.

Erza looked a little concerned. "Lucy, you just got out of the hospital yesterday. Are you sure you're up to a mission?"

"Absolutely!" she nodded as she held her arm out for Wendy to heal. "And it'll be fun going to a party. I haven't been to a gala in years. It might be just what I need to cheer me up."

"Very well," Erza nodded. "I should pack. We'll leave in the morning."

"Tonight!" Lucy shouted, but she drew back a little as she realized her voice sounded desperate. "Can … can we leave before tonight?"

Erza saw the fear in Lucy's eyes. So, this was the main reason she wanted a mission so soon! Lucy was still scared to be in the room where she had been attacked. "Very well, I'll check the train schedules and get tickets for a night train."

"Thanks," Lucy said with a sigh.
Tango of Passion

Chapter Notes

We dance as if it is a duel,
Struggling fight for dominance.
Alas, since this is the tango,
The woman always surrenders
To the man as he takes the lead
With a strong will and deep passion.
Defeat! I surrender this time
And swear revenge come the next dance.
— "Tango of Dominance" by Rhov Anion

That being said...Hiro Mashima won this round and still owns Fairy Tail, but I shall seduce him upon the next dance.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

A few days later, Lucy was in the middle of an elegantly gilded ballroom with massive crystal lacrima chandeliers and sweetly playing music. A hundred different expensive perfumes titillated the air, and the savory aroma of rare delicacies from around Fiore beckoned to anyone with an appetite.

She wore her nicest gown, a swirling blue and black corset-like top with whalebone staves forcing her already elegant figure into a stiff, shapely posture. The bosom had a flaunting vertical stripe pattern of swirling deep blue and solid black. The skirt billowed in periwinkle blue satin, with sleeves of matching pale color and fabric hanging loosely off her shoulders. Her massive endowment was highlighted by a heart-shaped sapphire necklace rimmed with diamonds, a gift from Loke. She had matching sapphire earrings that flashed between loose strands of golden locks. The red bow in her hair, tied in her usual fashion, was a sharp contrast. One would almost say it clashed with the blue gown, except the red lace fan she used to flirtatiously hide her face, a spangled red purse, and gleaming scarlet shoes turned that color clash into something daring and highlighting.

Loke was her escort for the evening, dressed in a tuxedo and foregoing his blue shades this time. Originally, Natsu wanted to be the one to take her, but he only wanted to eat at the buffet. When Erza quizzed him on even simple political knowledge, he could not answer. Gray insisted he could be gentlemanly enough for the job, he could name the rulers of all the surrounding countries, but when he proved incapable of keeping his clothes on for more than ten minutes, Lucy called out the only man she knew who was elegant enough to fit in with high society. Luckily, Loke also was well-versed and knew current affairs in politics.

If only he would stop flirting with every young débutante they passed!

"Oh Loke," she said with a tight grin, fluttering her scarlet lace fan elegantly.

Instantly, he was back at her side. "Yes, princess?"

"For one, I told you already not to call me princess. There are real princesses here, and they would get offended if I used their title without having the heritage to back it up. Two..." She took his arm and dug her nails in harshly while still managing to keep her smile. "Stop...flirting!" she growled
between clenched grinned teeth. "You are supposed to be Lord Loke of the Kohinur Kingdom and my fiancé. Now, help me look for this stolen goblet."

"A dance first," he smiled. "My Lady Heartfilia has yet to dance."

She sighed that he just wanted to play around. She knew she should have gone with Gray and just sewed his clothes together.

"Lucy," Loke smiled, and his mouth moved in close to her ear. She lifted the lace fan to hide from view what he was saying. "After a dance, it's expected the lady may want to slip away for some fresh air. It'll give you an excuse to leave the party for a few minutes. You can search for the goblet then."

She could hardly believe that he was actually scheming how to let her sneak out without rousing suspicion. Of course, it was equally likely he made that excuse up on the spot just to get her to dance. Still, she liked the music being played by a small ensemble: two violins, a viola, a cello, a stringed bass, a piano, a percussionist who only played a few instruments for special songs—marimba, congas, castanets, claves, tambourine, hand bells—and one musician who changed between a flute, an oboe, and a mellow flugelhorn.

She set her purse and fan aside—there was never a fear of someone stealing such mundane things at a party like this—and Loke led her to the dance floor. Suddenly the lights dimmed to a shade of sensual scarlet. The violins began a quiet, bashful tune. They tentatively began their dance, but a few steps into it, Lucy recognized it as a tango.

Oh no, not good!

Sure, she knew how to dance it, but tango...tango was sex on hardwood!

Her legs followed his on each step, practically as if she was nothing more than his shadow. Loke's eyes stayed on hers with intensity. Without his usual blue sunglasses, his eyes had a predatory gleam to them that made her throat go dry.

The key to tango is watching your partner, anticipating their moves, predicting them by the smallest glance, the faintest move. The woman trusts her partner wholly, giving up all control to him. The man treats the woman with utter respect, never doing something she cannot follow, yet always pushing the boundaries between what is possible and what is erotic. The senses lead the two to move as one. You feel your partner more intimately than anything besides sex itself. It is about trust and connection.

Or so she was taught by her dance instructor.

She trusted Loke with her life, so she figured she could trust him on this dance floor.

The tango started out slow, flirtatious, teasing moves, a little flashiness, a swirl of the skirt to show some ankle, but never much. Then the piano came in with a heavy syncopated rhythm. Ba-rump-pum-pum! Castanets clapped the steps. The violins surged with emotion. The seduction began!

Loke dipped her, and she knew he was staring hungrily at how her tipped-back head was an invitation to the mounds of pleasure the blue dress barely hid. Then he yanked her back up against his chest. Her hair swished into her face, and the way she flung it back with a whip of her head was like a lioness snarling to her mate. As the song continued, the flirtation grew more intense, more physical. Their bodies moved as one.

Her leg kicked straight up, probably giving a few dozen noblemen nosebleeds. Her red high heel
wrapped around Loke's back, then slowly slid down his thigh. The look he gave her when she did that could have sent a weak woman squealing with her first true orgasm. Lucy certainly felt a chilling thrill tingle from her lower stomach to her thighs from his hungering face, but the dance was not even halfway over.

Then she turned away. The thumping piano had faded out. The violins wept plaintively. The cello gave a dark warning. She acted like she did not care. Loke danced around her like he was begging, pleading for her to pay attention, like a cat swirling around her ankles. This was a part of the "dance" she was accustomed to, the proud woman ignoring the male admirer. Her steps took her away, his arms always pulled her back, a tug-of-war of coyness and determination, until she finally turned to him, he dipped her back, leaning over her body as if only wild sex, right here on the dance floor in front of everyone, was the only way to prove to her how much he loved her.

At last, the finale of the dance! They were one soul again, their movements in sync, their bodies never separating, two lovers in a closeness normally reserved for the bedroom. The music sped up into a frenzy, and their dancing matched. Loke pulled her up, swung her, and Lucy landed back down with one leg hooked around his thigh, gliding sensually up and down his body. She saw his face twitch at that. She was taking the tango to the next level, right here in front of everyone.

As the rhythm went faster, her breath matched and her mind whirled with Loke's fast spins. She felt dizzy, sensually high, letting him take over the pace of this seduction. He was in utter control while her body moved to his wild tempo.

Right at the climax, he pulled her so close against him, she could feel how this exotic dance had affected him. Before she could even gasp, the last punctuated beat hit, a stinger to mark the end, and right on cue he dipped her almost to the ground. She dropped with a sliding leg, down to one knee with the other leg stretched behind her in a contortion that might have been painful any other time, but right then it felt erotic. Loke dropped to one knee as well, leaning over her, looking like he was about to devour her throat.

And they froze, holding that pose as the music echoed in the silence.

A couple seconds of quiet astonishment, then polite applause which broke the spell of the moment. Lucy suddenly realized she was panting hard, and she felt Loke gasping for breath above her. His eyes were still glazed, not aware of the crowd just yet. She took a quick glance and realized the other dancers had cleared the dance floor at some point. They had been doing this tango of passion solo,
with all eyes on them. It made her blush.

The break in their gaze snapped Loke out of the moment. Suave as ever, he pulled her up in a fluid move. She was still aligned with his movement, still mentally connected to his desires. She realized he was about to turn to the crowd and bow, so she readied herself. In unison, they turned to the audience and dipped, he in a stiff bow from the waist, she in a deep curtsy. Then Loke turned to the musicians and gave them a wink. Lucy suddenly had a feeling that, in the midst of flirting with the crowd, he had somehow requested that song from the band.

"You were stunning," he declared as he led her over to a crystal punch bowl.

A softer tune came on, something regal that contrasted sharply to the tango just before. Lucy was eager to take a cup of punch and was almost tempted to gulp the whole thing, except she tasted a bubbling alcohol in the drink.

"You're flushed, my dear. Let's get you some fresh air." Loke spoke it just loud enough for a few others to hear. That should be enough to quell suspicions.

Lucy gathered her purse and fan, and they slipped away into a cold hall. Although there were soldiers guarding the entrance to the ballroom, less than three hundred steps away all that security vanished. Loke looked over to Lucy and nodded.

"It's up to you now. I'll keep an eye on things here. Good luck." He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek, then turned back toward the party.

Gray watched a clock tower from the room they rented at a nearby inn. A deep gong tolled the hour.

"It's time," he said to the others in the room.

Erza was wearing a skin-tight black suit with her scarlet hair pulled back against her scalp. "I'll be going now. Wait for Loke's signal." She soundlessly slipped out the window and vanished into the night.

"Aww, I wanted to be the ninja," Happy pouted. "Wouldn't that be awesome, Natsu?" The blue Exceed realized his partner was spacing out. "Um, Natsu?"

"Mm," he grunted, looking at the flames in the fireplace with agitation.

Gray noticed his worried look. "Lucy and Erza will be fine."

"Huh? Oh, yeah. I'm not worried about them too much," he muttered, still staring hard.

Gray realized the dragon slayer's hand was in a tight fist. "So what's wrong?" When Natsu did not reply, Gray slouched back against the window frame. "Hey, stop blaming yourself."

Natsu jolted at that and looked over in confusion.

"You've been weird since Lucy got out of the hospital. You barely talk to her, but when you do you're overly bubbly, even for you. You keep zoning out on us, and you didn't even complain much on the train here. You couldn't have protected Lucy that night any more than me or Erza could have, so don't try to take all the blame."

"No, it's...not that," he muttered and returned his gaze to the fire. "Just...feeling weird."

"Is it the smell?"
This time, Natsu spun completely around in his seat, and his eyes were massive in dread.

"Wendy told me a little," Gray explained. "Something about you dragon slayers are smelling something that might be related to the attacker. Are you smelling it here? I hope to God that beast didn't follow Lucy all the way out here."

Natsu inhaled deeply. "No, I don't smell it." Natsu rubbed out a pain in his shoulder and cracked his neck. "Hey, I'm gonna get some fresh air."

"Just sit by the window. It's warm enough to keep it open."

"Nah, I...I need to walk."

"Whatever," Gray sighed. "Just don't go far, and keep an eye out for Loke's signal."

He nodded tiredly and stood up. As soon as he was up, Natsu held his head, and his face tensed up in pain.

"Natsu?" Happy asked in worry.

"I need a moment alone, Happy," he said quietly, and shuffled his feet out of the inn room.

Gray watched the door shut behind him. He frowned at the depressed mood but shook his head at it. There was nothing that could be done. He felt guilty too, yet he knew the only thing he could do was stay by Lucy's side and shield her from the trauma. Natsu had to work this out on his own.

Lucy tiptoed quietly down the halls of the mansion, wishing her shoes were quieter. When she came to a place with more security, she realized that stealth and the ability to run if necessary outweighed the need for shoes. Her little purse was too small to hold her heels, so she hid them behind a marble statue set in an alcove. She could retrieve them later.

She continued barefoot. When she came to a crossing hallway, she paused, dug into her purse, and pulled out a makeup case. She opened it and used the mirror to check around the corner before entering the next area. She continued on, keeping close to the walls. She paused sharply and dived behind a china cabinet as two guards walked by. The men in regal uniform patrolled without paying close attention. After all, if anyone was going to make trouble, it would be where all the nobles were, not out here in the dark recesses of the mansion, too far away to even hear the music or smell the savory foods.

Lucy frowned that she had no clue where this goblet might be, and only a vague description from the client on what it looked like. She glanced through curio cabinets and shelves of antiques. Of course, this noble had a vast collection of items.

"You! What are you doing here?"

Lucy froze in front of the glass cabinet. She turned slowly, a seductive smile on her face. Time to use her sex appeal!

"Who, me?" she asked innocently. "I just happened to be attracted to this...um...glass figurine of a...a...unicorn here," she pointed to the gaudy statue in the cabinet. "Maybe you can help me. I got lost trying to...you know...powder my nose."

Then Lucy pulled out her makeup case again and blew on the powder. It puffed into the soldier's face, turning it chalky white. Immediately, she raised the fan to her face, blocking the powder from
affecting her. The soldier coughed, but in two seconds he was unconscious. Lucy stepped away from him and rushed out of that room.

Out in the garden a fountain babbled, surrounded by sculpted bushes trimmed into the shapes of magical creatures: a mermaid, griffin, dragon, fairy, and a unicorn. Two soldiers stood by the fountain bragging about their girlfriends. One sneaked out a flask of alcohol, and soon they were laughing loudly in flushed inebriation.

When the smaller one tilted his head back to laugh raucously, he saw movement by a window in one of the palace's higher floors.

"Hey, there ain't supposed to be nobody anywhere but in the ballroom, right?"

"Eh what? Yup, the lord's orders, that way it's easier for security. Why?"

He pointed up. "Either there's a ghost, or there's a gorgeous noblewoman sneaking around on the third floor."

"Ah shit, that's not good. That's the lord's rarity collection. We better tell the lieutenant."

Before they could flag down another soldier, a hiss came from the sculpted bushes. "Miiiine."

The soldiers spun toward it with lances lowered. "Who goes there?"

They looked all around, but the garden was only lighted by stars and a few scattered torches. They turned one way, then another, their breathing calm, foreheads sweating, fiery adrenalin rushing through their arms and legs, ready to fight or flee.

"Sir?" the smaller one whimpered, trembling.

The older soldier squinted into the dark. He was about to dismiss it for the wind when two red eyes shined from the bush trimmed to look like a dragon. He shivered as two wings suddenly unfolded with the sound of rasping leather.

"Get help," the soldier whispered to his underling, barely able to speak through his terror. Then they both heard another hiss. "Go!" he bellowed desperately.

Before either could move to escape or attack, the creature leaped from the bush with a growl. It pounced on the older soldier's chest, knocking him a meter backwards and down onto his back. He began to shout for help, but before the word could take form on his lips, the beast lashed across his face, leaving four deep gashes, including one that took out the man's eye. His head slumped to the side, knocked unconscious. Blood and eye jelly gushed out onto the cobbled pathway.

"Dear God, dear God!" the younger soldier shuddered, unable to keep his lance up. He drew back at the dark blood of his commander flowing toward him.

Red eyes turned to him. A finger with a sharp claw lifted up to the beast's mouth. "Shhhhhhh!" it hissed. Then the head swung up to the window where Lucy was walking away. "Mine!" it hissed, and the beast jumped up into the air to fly away.

Shaking and with wet pants now, the small soldier looked at his superior. "Sir? Sir, are...are you...?"

He dropped down beside him and checked his throat. Still a pulse. Then he looked around frantically. "Help! Somebody! Intruder! Soldier down. We have a soldier down."
After searching almost every room she could find, Lucy noticed one room she had bypassed. Two guards stood in front of it. Lucy glared. Definitely suspicious! But how could she possibly...

"Excuse me."

Lucy jolted at hearing Erza's voice. She looked around the corner toward that guarded room and saw the redhead had changed into a slender and extremely revealing dress. There was no way an outfit like that would be tolerated at a noble's ball!

"My client told me to wait in his bedroom, but I seem to be lost. Can you boys show me the way?" Erza tapped each man under the chin. "I'll repay you for your kindness. Perhaps a little massage?"

"Erza," Lucy whispered harshly to herself. "Acting like a prostitute? Do you really think they'd buy that? Sure, sex appeal works for store clerks and weak dark mages, but for trained soldiers..."

Her mouth dropped when both soldiers followed her like starved wolves after a bunny rabbit. Erza looked back briefly, made eye contact with Lucy, and that was all they needed. While Erza pulled the soldiers away, Lucy hurried forward silently. Luckily the room was unlocked. She opened it and slipped inside.

It looked like a reading room at first glance, a library of floor-to-ceiling books and an alcove of all glass to allow a breathtaking view of the mansion's grounds, with a couch for the reader to relax upon. Then Lucy saw that this room also held many artifacts protected in glass cases. She began to search each one.

Outside in the garden, she thought she heard shouting. She frowned at that. It might be a distraction, but any alert was bad for her. She had to find the stolen goblet they were hired to retrieve and somehow get out of this palace undetected.

She gasped as she saw the goblet she needed. She rushed over to it, about to yank away the glass belljar around the goblet, when she paused. Some advice from Gray came into her mind. Check for traps! She searched around the glass case. Of course, it had a wire to an alarm. Lift the glass belljar and a siren would alert everyone. She wished she could have had Natsu there to melt the top of the belljar.

Just as she thought that, she saw a shadow in the window. She gasped in a moment of panic, but then she recognized the pink hair.

She smiled in relief. "Perfect timing, Na-...-tsu?"

Slowly, her face went pale and her eyes widened in disbelief.

End of Chapter 7

Chapter End Notes

I drew a picture based on the tango dance. I hope you like it, my gift to you readers.

Tango for Loke and Lucy

The mention of Loke pretending to be a lord of the Kohinur Kingdom is in reference to my other fanfic, "Lion's Pride," where the villain (and Loke's ex-owner) is the former
Shaman Queen of Kohinur.

My best friend is a professional dancer. Although tango isn't her forte, watching her dance that way makes me blush. And we're best friends! I've known her since we were nine! I don't think of her that way at all! Still, tango really is sex on hardwood. For a great manga about tango, read "First Girl." It's an awesome josei manga, and tango dancing plays a vital role to the plot.
The Changing

Chapter Notes

Rhov is amassing space cruisers to invade Japan so she can usurp ownership of Fairy Tail. It promises to be an epic battle. Until the forces of darkness have finished converging, Hiro Mashima still owns this manga.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Happy tugged on Gray's black boxers. "When is Natsu gonna come back? It's been a really long time."

Gray was also worried and had unconsciously stripped all the way down to his boxer briefs. He sat in the window of their hotel room, staring out at the night, not even concerned about the chill. His eyes swept over roofs and into what streets he could see from this angle, instead of keeping a sharp eye on the palace. His job was to wait for Loke's signal that Lucy was done and needed help getting out without raising an alarm amongst the nobles. The plan was for him and Natsu to cause a small disturbance so Lucy, Loke, and Erza could escape without detection. If Natsu was not around, Gray might have to do something illegal to cause a big enough distraction.

So where was that damn flame-brain?

In the ballroom, Loke was chatting with three of the most beautiful women at the party. If he could have snagged just one of them, he would have considered himself the happiest Spirit alive. To gather all three was pure luck! Yet as he kept a lively conversation going, he kept glancing to the doorway where Lucy would reenter. She was taking far too long to return, and he instinctively felt that something was awry, although he could not be sure what.

His distraction did not go unnoticed by his three female companions.

"Was that your wife you were dancing with earlier?" the blonde woman asked with a pout, twirling her finger around her golden locks.

"Ah, no, happily unmarried," he assured them.

"Sister?" the redhead asked suspiciously.

"Definitely not!"

The raven-haired girl huffed and looked away. "I knew it. She must be your betrothed."

"Would it make you feel any better if I said she absolutely doesn't want to marry me?"

That was supposed to be the story. He was supposed to play the role of a foreign lord engaged to a rich Fiore heiress. He gave the three ladies his most dashing grin, the type that made girls see bubbles and fluttering sakura petals.

"Would it make you feel any better if I said she absolutely doesn't want to marry me?"

Apparently, that made all the difference. These noblewomen were used to arranged marriages for the sake of country and family. Such forced couples often took a lover on the side. All three hoped this
dashing foreign lord would find favor with one of them, take them away from boring Fiore, and bring her to an exotic land for many nights of wild passion.

Loke continued to laugh and smile, outwardly dismissing the "arranged marriage." However, he kept glancing to the doorway in worry. He sensed something was wrong, but there was no easy way for him to leave this party without ruining the whole plan for their group. He had gathered too much attention from the ladies in the hall, which was the whole point. If they were focused on him, they would not bother to wonder about what happened to the young woman who was with him. If she was gone, all the better! However, if he left to run to Lucy's side, the women in the ballroom would get suspicious and possibly ask a guard to find out where he went. He could endanger the entire mission.

Loke felt trapped, and he hoped his misgivings were unfounded. If his instincts were right—and they almost always were—he prayed to the stars that the other Zodiac Celestial Spirits were strong enough to protect Lucy.

Natsu had a strange look in his face. His teeth had gone sharp, and there was a faint trace of scales on his skin. His irises were red and his pupils narrowed to slits, looking more like Gajeel's eyes than the gentle gaze Lucy was used to seeing. As he gripped the windowsill to stay perched, she realized his hands looked different. His nails were much longer, thicker, more like the talons of a predatory bird. His shirt and scarf were missing, and sprouted from his back were two leathery red wings with salmon pink webbing. He suddenly leaped into the room, and Lucy instinctively jolted a step back. Behind him swished a thick, red tail with dark spikes going down to the tip.

Lucy's heart pounded faster and harder. She shook her head, not wanting to believe it. When she tried to swallow down her fear, it caught in her throat and became a whimper. She began to retreat in terror, slowly backing away from him. Suddenly, she tripped backward over a rug. Natsu rushed and grabbed around her waist with his tail. She stiffened, trembling as she realized that tail was similar to the one that had pinned down her wrist when she was attacked.

It can't be! Oh please, it couldn't have been Natsu. That's just impossible.

"You almost stepped on a trigger plate."

His eyes were normal now, although the rest of him was just as beastly. He nodded down to her bare feet, where her stumble had shifted the rug and revealed a metal square mere centimeters away. Natsu's newly-grown tail lifted her back onto her feet and gently set her down. He looked at her, frowning slightly, watching to see her reaction to his transformation. Of course, she was shaking in terror, and he hardly blamed her. Saddened, he turned away and walked over to the encased goblet. A flame burned on his hand and melted the glass belljar. He reached in, lifted the goblet, and handed it to her.

Lucy took it with trembling fingers, yet never took her eyes off of him. The creature before her looked like Natsu. It sounded like Natsu.

It can't be the same beast! Maybe it's a different one. Maybe...

"What happened to you?" she whispered. Sure, he was a dragon slayer, but right then Natsu looked half-dragon.

"I..." Natsu choked off and grabbed his head. A low groan hissed out as he nearly doubled over in pain. "Lucy...run," he whispered. "I'm not sure...how much longer...I can keep it controlled."
Instead of fleeing, she felt concerned. Natsu looked like he was in serious agony. She began to reach toward him.

"Go!" he roared.

Flames leaped up on his body. She drew her hand back, but she would not run away. Natsu grimaced, looking like he truly wished she would flee, yet grateful she stayed despite how he looked.

"Lucy, I...I'm so sorry," he cried. "That night, I don't even know if it was me or not. I don't remember anything. Maybe...maybe it was me. I just don't know!" His teeth gnashed in frustration, and she saw tears in his wide, terrified eyes. "I only know that at least three times now—only three times I'm aware of," he corrected, "this has happened." He looked down at his clawed hands. "I'm a little better at controlling it now, but every time, I black out for a moment only to wake up somewhere else. Sometimes nothing happens; sometimes there's a report of an attack. I don't know if it's me doing those things. I don't even know what's happening to me. Lucy..." He looked up at her, and Lucy saw a face she rarely saw on Natsu. His green eyes were wide and filled with tears, his lips trembled as he gritted his teeth, and his tightened fists shook as he became overwhelmed with emotions. In a hoarse whisper, he confessed, "I'm scared."

She felt numbed by the news and stunned by his terror. On one hand, she knew she could always trust Natsu; he was her teammate and best friend. On the other hand, she felt horrified that it might have been Natsu who nearly killed her that night, and the thought that Natsu had such a beastly nature within him terrified her.

Had he also been the one killing and—she gulped sickly—eating people?

"It's like there's something else inside me, some beast possessing me. I'm trying to defeat it, but...but it..." Natsu suddenly grabbed his head and roared in pain. He pulled at his pink hair and ripped a few strands out.

"Natsu!" she gasped. She took a few steps closer and began to reach her hand out, yet she flinched back, too scared to touch him. She desperately wanted to do something to help him, but she had no clue what was happening to her friend.

His hand flashed out, grabbed her, and yanked her to him. Lucy let out a yelp, but she could not pull back. Natsu held her so close, she could feel the heat of the beast within. His eyes blazed in carnal hunger, flickering as that same red glow tried to return in the low light. The tail wrapped around her leg, clutching her tightly to him in possessiveness. Lucy's cheeks burned at seeing the lust in Natsu's eyes.

"Lucy," he breathed hotly. "Your smell..." His hand slithered up under her skirt, sliding along her thigh. Lucy felt herself blushing, and she tensed up at the desirous touch. "I...want...you." He hummed as he sniffed along the edge of her bodice and let his nose rub into the shadowed vale of her cleavage. He gazed up with wild, scarlet eyes. "Want you," he growled softly. Then he began to kiss her collarbone, slowly working up to her neck.

She was terrified of Natsu's beastly form, but how he touched her made Lucy's stomach knot up and her heart race. His hot breath almost burned, yet the fiery touches enthralled her, making her want more. His lips reached a sensitive part on her neck and made her cry out. She belatedly realized she needed to keep quiet, and she only whimpered soft mewls after that. Her cries urged him on. Natsu dropped to his knees and yanked her down with him. His body forced her legs to spread and wrap around him, but his hands supported her back firmly. Her head leaned back, letting him nip and lick her throat as the flames dancing over his body titillated her skin.
"Na-...-tsu," she moaned, her cheeks bright red.

He leaned up and looked at her with lowered lids and a snarling grin. She could hardly meet his eyes, feeling ashamed for liking it too much. He sniffed her from chest up to her face, one long inhale. Then he roughly kissed her, taking full possession over her mouth. Lucy grabbed hold of his shoulders as the heat of his fiery lips burned yet felt so good. Suddenly, Natsu's clawed hand yanked her bodice down, exposing her breasts but ripping the delicate fabric.

"Hey!"

She was about to scream at him for ruining her one good evening gown; however, his tongue licked hot, gentle circles around her nipples, silencing any protests as she bit on her bottom lip and whimpered. She wanted more, but she knew they needed to stop. When his mouth suckled on her, she hummed at how good it felt.

"Natsu..."

It was as if the heat of his flames was pooling in her stomach, making her burn and wanting his juice to extinguish the flames. She realized she should probably fight against him—there was no way Natsu was in his right mind—yet he was making her feel so good. She wanted more!

She heard him growl like a beast, and his hand slid between her thighs. He touched her sex, rubbing circles on her clit, making her spine arch in sparks of pleasure. Then she felt him slide her panties to the side.

"W-wait!"

"Want you," he growled.

He adjusted the loose white pants, and suddenly she felt him thrust into her. Lucy screamed and dropped the goblet. It rolled away from the two of them and clinked against the marble pedestal where it had been on display. He did not even wait to let her get used to it. Hungrily, he began to thrust into her. Lucy's nails dug into him from the pain. He was huge. To Lucy, it felt like he was tearing her apart inside. She cringed and tried to pull away.

"Natsu, it hurts."

He forced her down to the ground and pinned her hands above her head. He thrust harder, and Lucy cried out at the pain. However, instead of struggling against the assault, she looked at him with sadness. She could see in his glowing eyes, this was not really him now, yet...she wished it was truly Natsu making love to her. She desperately wanted it to be him, yet those eyes were animalistic, beastly...not Natsu!

She remembered how everyone said he was furious with guilt after she was attacked. Had Natsu suspected it was himself from the very beginning? Had he lived with that guilt all this time?

She reached up to the flames that danced along the edges of his pink hair. "Oh Natsu," she pouted despite the pain. He growled at hearing his own name. Lucy realized this was going to torment Natsu far more than the pain she felt now. Her heart ached in grief for both him and herself. "It's okay," she whispered, smiling sadly and caressing his scaly cheek as tears dripped from her eyes. "If it's you, then...it's okay."

Did she really mean that, or was she just fooling herself?

He pulled back and stared down at her as if trying to figure out what she was saying. She saw the
realization come back into his eyes, softening them, and the red glow disappeared. Natsu gasped when he saw Lucy lying there, her gown bunched up to her belly, her breasts pulled out of the ripped bodice, red marks on her neck and collar from where he had nipped and sucked on her. Her golden hair was splayed across the ground in disarray, and her eyes were moist in sorrow.

"Lucy?" He suddenly realized that he was the one who did this to her. "No...no, not again!"

As he pulled back, he felt himself still inside her. He looked down and saw their bodies connected. A little bit of blood stained the front of his white pants where it had thrust up against her torn entrance. "Oh God, no!" he shrieked.

With his panic-stricken mouth opened and trembling, he looked up to her face. A sense of disgust and self-loathing washed over him as he realized what he had just done. He wanted to scream, vomit, cry, lash out in hysterics, punch himself, hug her, beg forgiveness...so many powerful emotions! He had no idea what he could even say. His mind was totally blank in horror. He could barely even breathe, fearing that any movement might hurt her worse.

"I...I didn't mean...oh Lucy!"

He gently pulled out, hoping he would not hurt her worse. The blood on his erect shaft made Natsu want to vomit. The smell he loved most—Lucy's sexy smell—was now mixed with the smell he despised most—her blood. He could not wipe the blood off, so he simply adjusted the flap over his trousers. Then, with shaking hands, he attempted to straighten her gown, fiddling with the bulky skirt, nervously trying to tug it back into place, yet he realized that was impossible. The dress was wrinkled and ripped. He gave up trying to make it better and covered his mouth, crying as he realized what he had done to her. He was unable to look directly into her eyes. He could not stand to see that sad yet understanding face marred with tears.

"I'm...sorry," he muttered, his throat thick and shaking with animosity. He knew a simple sorry was not enough, not after something like this, but he had no clue what else he could say. No words could express how miserable he felt right then.

"It's okay," she whispered, although she felt sadness both for herself and for him.

"No, it's not!" he bellowed. Tears overwhelmed him. How could she possibly say it was okay? After what he did...she should hate him. She should want him castrated! Finally, he forced himself to look down at her. "Why didn't you stop me? Why didn't you kill me?" he demanded, feeling furious at himself.

"You know I couldn't hurt you. You're my friend."

"No!" He scampered back all the way to the window and crouched there like an animal knowing it was about to get punished. "A friend doesn't do this." He covered his face with a clawed hand as he began to cry in misery and self-loathing. Slowly, the claws tightened and dragged over his cheek, slicing through the skin and drawing out snaking streams of blood down his face.

"Natsu, stop it!" she yelled, crying to see him hating himself so deeply.

"Why you? How could I do this to you? I'm a beast, a demon! Lucy..." He glared at her with that serious expression she saw when he faced an enemy. "It'll come up again. It's marked you, and it wants you. If I ever try to do this to you again, Lucy..." His face hardened, and his eyes blazed. "...kill me!"

Lucy gasped that he could dare say that. She began to shake her head, but Natsu was firm in his
demands now.

"Get protection from the guild. Have a bodyguard with you at all times, someone strong, strong enough to defeat me. If I ever catch you again—if the beast ever catches you—kill it!"

"I can't hurt you," she protested.

"It's not me doing this," he roared in anger. She saw his eyes glow red for a moment, and she realized the beast within was close to the surface again. Natsu looked away and tried to calm himself. After a few deep breaths, he was passive again and finally looked back to her. Softly, he swore, "I would never do this to you."

"I know that," she said fast and sniffled back tears.

"Seeing you get hurt...knowing it's my body doing it to you...it's killing me inside!"

Hesitantly, not fully trusting himself, Natsu reached forward. As he debated if he dared to touch her with such hideous claws, Lucy took hold of his hand and leaned her face against it, not scared of those massive black nails that could have disemboweled her. That softened the worries in Natsu's face. His thumb lightly caressed her cheek.

"Lucy," he sighed sadly. "I don't ever want to hurt you." He reached down to her lower stomach. She was still a little sore and flinched. Natsu frowned to see her in pain. "I'll take responsibility."

"Huh? Oh!" Responsibility? As in, if she could not find a husband because of this, he would marry her? It was old-fashion to say it that way, and Lucy blushed a little. "If you mean about that..."

He cut her off. "I'm gonna find a way to stop this beast, to defeat it. I'm not going to let it hurt you or anyone else ever again, even...even if that means..." He swallowed hard. "Even if I have to kill myself."

"No!" she screamed.

Natsu suddenly turned and jumped out the window. Lucy gasped, rose up fast, and ran to look out, horrified that he might have committed suicide right in front of her. She looked down to the garden, but no one was there. Confused, she looked up and saw Natsu's winged form flying off into the night like a small dragon against the full moon.

"Natsu," she whispered. "You idiot. Don't you dare do anything stupid."

She felt sorry for him, but the fear began to overwhelm her. She felt sick, like she wanted to vomit, scream, and cry all at the same time.

After all, her best friend had just assaulted her!

Lucy straightened her clothes as best as she could and picked up the goblet. There was no way she could return to the party now, not with the marks on her skin and the torn dress. She stepped out and was just beginning to worry about how she could escape now when Erza marched forward while sheathing a sword.

"Please tell me you didn't kill the guards," Lucy frowned.

"Knocked them out when one grabbed my butt." When Erza saw her closer, she realized Lucy had been attacked. "You're hurt."

"I was...I...it's a long story," she sighed. "I need to get out of here."

"I'll show you the way I got in, then signal Loke to leave on his own. Can you walk okay?"

Lucy knew she was limping. She hurt all over again, and without realizing it, she had been crying. She wiped her cheeks, but the tears would not stop. "Just get me out of here," she whispered and weakly followed Erza.

End of Chapter 8

Art by Rhov
Chapter End Notes

Now that we've seen Natsu's secret, I can finally mention this! MuninniguH on
DeviantArt drew an awesome picture, Fire Dragon's Kiss, which inspired this whole story. I couldn't give credit to her earlier because it would've spoiled the plot. Now you can see what Lucy's pretty blue gown and Dragon-Natsu look like. The picture is a little racy, not bad or anything, but I'm giving a warning for people who check this at school. I didn't want to take MuninniguH's idea completely, but I still wanted to write about the general idea; she allowed it. So here it is! This story is much darker than what she has planned, and I'm totally supporting the story she's writing, Skin and Scales.

I drew my own picture depicting this scene. Perhaps that's how some of you found this story. Beastly Possession: Natsu Dragon Form

ADDED: This story is finished, but let me say this. This was one of my first NaLu stories, written back in 2012. New readers may see similarities to theories going about the fandom now about END, but back in 2012 such theories did not exist. END had not been mentioned. Dragon Slayers possibly turning into dragons was a fandom fantasy and not an in-canon reality. So yes, "Beastly Possession" pre-dated many of these things, and my original readers loved to point out every time something in canon matched up with something in this fanfic. It was really fun, and a little scary, to see the canon story start to coincide. Part of me wonders just how much current theories about how Natsu would look as END are based on the visual descriptions from "Beastly Possession."
The Beast Within

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: It was an epic battle, with ownership of Fairy Tail on the line. Who knew Hiro Mashima could breathe fire! I lost. He still owns Fairy Tail. But one day...one day...!

The atmosphere inside the guild was thick. Lucy was still in a meeting with Makarov, but the rest of Fairy Tail had heard enough from Erza.

Cana just shook her head. "It was Natsu?"

"What can we do?" asked Alzack. "If the authorities catch Natsu, they'll kill him."

"Might be for the best," Freed said dispassionately.

"Don't say that!" Gray snapped.

Happy looked so depressed, he was not even interested in the fish sitting before him.

Wendy sobbed quietly, hugging herself, and everyone saw that she looked terrified. Mirajane hugged the girl in comfort. No one blamed Wendy for being terrified. Since Natsu was a dragon slayer who apparently was turning into a dragon, all the dragon slayers, including Laxus, were ordered not to leave the guild hall. After all, authorities still were unsure if it was one attacker or more than one.

A door opened, footsteps clicked, and soon three people stepped forward. Makarov looked grim, Lucy had calmed down although it was obvious she had been crying earlier, and...

"Gajeel!" Levy cried out. "When did you get back?"

Instead of answering, he looked sternly around the hall, sniffing deeply with his red eyes narrowed, searching carefully.

"Do you smell it?" Makarov asked him.

"Only faintly," he mumbled.

Makarov climbed to the top of the bar counter so everyone could see him. "Brats," he addressed, "I'm sure you've heard about Natsu. Currently, his whereabouts are unknown. I have an odd request now for all of you." He bowed his head for a moment, collecting his composure, and when he looked up his eyes burned with utter seriousness. "Do not tell anyone outside of this guild about what has happened!"

He knew there would be concerns about this, maybe even protests, so he let them mutter back and forth for a moment.

"We're going to hide it?" Elfman asked in shock.

"Even from the authorities?" Evergreen gawked.
Romeo glared at them. "We can't let them know about Natsu-nii. They wouldn't understand."

Macao frowned. "If you know who a murderer is and hide it, that makes you an accomplice."

Makarov knew that was true. "I'm going to emphasize this: we do not yet know if Natsu is the attacker."

"But he attacked Lucy!" Gray shouted, looking over to the blonde who was holding her elbows as if half-hugging herself.

Makarov nodded sternly. "Yes, he did, and I will personally hold him accountable for that. However, we don't know if he's also the one killing people in Magnolia. Natsu was out of town the night of the first attack. There's also the issue of what is going on with the dragon slayers."

Everyone looked to Wendy, Gajeel, and Laxus.

"All four of them have reported an odd and highly distinguishable smell. Gajeel has been investigating it on his own, and he has found this odor throughout Magnolia, particularly at the sites of the most vicious attacks. Both Natsu and Wendy reported headaches, upset stomachs, aches in their backs, and loss of memory."

"Not Gajeel or Laxus?" Levy asked, looking worried to her parter.

Laxus frowned, slightly disturbed by all this. "I smell it, but I haven't felt any sickness."

"You were also out of town until just a few days ago," Mira pointed out.

Gajeel still said nothing. Makarov looked over to him and pouted.

"Do you wish to tell them?" the Master asked quietly.

The iron dragon slayer ground his teeth as he debated it, but finally he gave a shrug. "I'm not a hundred percent sure, but what Natsu appears to be going through is something like dragon slayer puberty. I knew the sonuvabitch was immature, but he's seventeen already. He should have already gotten over this."

"It's just a theory of mine," Makarov admitted, "but I believe Natsu's scarf negated the effects of this...coming-of-age," he put delicately. "Gajeel went through this when he was fifteen. The problem is the magic imbued in a dragon slayer can, if left unchecked, corrupt their instincts. Usually, a dragon or another dragon slayer is around to assist them through a ritual of sorts. When Gajeel experienced this while still in Phantom Lord, Master Jose sought out Rogue Cheney."

"That guy from Sabertooth?" Elfman exclaimed.

"He was just a kid," Gajeel said, "but he was enough to do the ritual. He didn't know about it, guess he killed his dragon before he had a chance to learn about this, so I taught him what I knew, took him in as an apprentice. After I cleared up from spazzing out like that, I came into my full abilities. I always wondered why Natsu couldn't do certain things. If he hasn't even gone through puberty, that explains a lot."

Levy thought about this. "But then why did Natsu already have motion sickness, but you just started experiencing that lately?"

Gajeel looked angry at being reminded of that. "I have no idea," he grumbled.
"Then what about Laxus?" asked Bickslow.

Makarov explained, "Since his dragon slayer magic is artificial, either it doesn't apply to him or Iwan created a stop similar to Natsu's scarf. However, the smell around town negated Natsu's stop and prematurely triggered Wendy's coming-of-age. Laxus may also be affected with enough exposure, which is why I must insist that both of you stay under supervision. Gildarts will look after Laxus, and Mira will look after Wendy. Should they transform, they will be suppressed."

Wendy bowed her head sadly. "Understood."

Mirajane hugged her thin shoulders even tighter. "Don't worry about it. Think of me as a bodyguard against the bogeyman."

"So what is this smell that started all this?" Gray asked.

"My guess?" Gajeel said gruffly. "Another dragon slayer gone feral. I believe that is what's killing people. The attacks so far have come in three forms. One is brutal, attacking swiftly and killing its prey in seconds, devouring it on the spot. Another is timid, little to no harm coming to the victim, with the attacker running away at the slightest yell. That's possibly Wendy."

"I'm sorry," she cringed.

Mirajane squeezed her. "You haven't hurt anyone, just spooked a few people."

"Then there was the attack on Lucy. On that occasion, although Lucy was severely injured, the intent of the attacker was not to eat her. That could have been Natsu, but it's impossible to know for sure. The beast Gray saw was also likely Natsu since I was chasing the beast doing the attack. On that occasion, the beast wanted to fight Gray. That was likely Natsu's own instincts. The longer this goes on without treatment, the worse Natsu will be. Lucy said that when he attacked her at the party, he had some awareness. That's normal. The first few times changing come suddenly, and the dragon slayer is unaware that anything happened. Eventually, they learn to control the beast within, at least for a little while. However, over the course of a few weeks, the transformations will happen more and more frequently, lasting longer each time, becoming more violent, until Natsu will end up trapped in that form. When that happens, he'll still have a little of his own mind, but it'll have completely blended with the primal beast. He'll go feral, and not much can be done to bring him back."

"We have two tasks," Makarov announced. "One, track down the feral dragon slayer and capture him if possible; if not, put him down. Two, we must find Natsu at all costs. The longer we wait, the greater the chance that we'll lose him. Natsu mentioned something about the beast having marked Lucy, and she has agreed to be bait for his capture."

"No way!" Gray shouted in protest.

"Master!" Erza also yelled in shock.

"It's okay, guys," Lucy smiled, glad her friends were concerned. "We need to get him fast, and this is the best way. Natsu..." she said quieter. "He's protected me so many times. This time, I want to be the one to protect him. If it's Natsu, he won't hurt me too much."

Gray still shook his head. He vividly recalled how Lucy looked the day after the attack, barely alive, bruised with gashes all over her body. If that truly had been Natsu...how could she forgive him after an attack like that? And then he attacked her again! Lucy had refused to talk about it afterward, and during the whole ride from the ball to Magnolia, she remained quiet, not saying anything more than
that Natsu had attacked her. Gray suspected much more happened considering the way Lucy kept silently crying, but he had no clue how to go about asking her.

If it was him—if Natsu had torn apart his gut and left him for dead—Gray wondered if he could be as forgiving as Lucy. Of course, that was simply part of Lucy's character. She was loyal to her friends and forgave everyone. She even forgave her father although he had Fairy Tail attacked, and Lucy was badly hurt in that battle.

Reluctantly, Gray realized he was no better. He managed to forgive Lyon despite the trouble they had on Galuna Island with Deliora, and he forgave Ultear despite all she did to him and his friends. All of them forgave Jellal too, even Erza who was hurt so badly and had a friend killed because of him. He guessed that was part of being in Fairy Tail. They were too stubborn to hold a grudge for long.

"We need to hurry on this," Makarov emphasized. "Every day that passes could mean more deaths and a greater chance that we'll lose Natsu forever. Gray, Erza, and Lucy will go after Natsu. Mira and Wendy will go with them so Wendy can sniff him out."

The little girl looked shocked. "But what if I...I...go bad?"

The Master had a kind smile for her. "All you did was scare a few people and nipped a boy on the arm, didn't even break skin. This condition rouses your instincts, and hurting others simply isn't one of your instincts. It'll be fine, and Mira will be there as well just in case. I want Freed to go with your team, too. His runes will be vital in capturing Natsu unharmed."

Freed moved over to them and blushed a little as he stood next to Mirajane. Although Gray still looked like he wanted to protest, he still patted Wendy's head to calm her worries. Lucy felt much more relieved now that their team had so many strong members.

Makarov continued with the instructions. "Gajeel and Laxus will be in charge of searching for the beast. Gildarts, if Laxus shows even the slightest hint of losing himself, you are to sedate him and bring him here for observation. The rest of you, divide into two equal teams and follow either Laxus or Gajeel. I want this beast brought down tonight!"

With that done, the guild began to buzz, breaking into two teams, while Lucy's team was waved to follow Makarov. Lucy, Gray, Erza, Wendy, Charle, Happy, Mira, and Freed went to an office where it was quieter. They stayed close together while Makarov stood a little in front with his back to them. After a solid minute of silence, the old master let out a long, stressed sigh.

"I'd rather send the entire guild after Natsu," he admitted softly, "but the safety of Magnolia outweighs a single mage. I'd rush out there to find him too—my instincts as a father tell me that I should—but I have to keep the authorities from getting too suspicious while a hundred mages go running amok throughout the city. Plus, if we can find the culprit, I'm the only one who knows a good place to keep him locked up until we can determine if a feral dragon slayer is truly lost or if we can bring him back. I'm counting on you to bring Natsu back."

"We'll find him without fail, master," Erza swore.

"You better! Please try to bring him in peacefully, but if you can't, then try your hardest not to kill him. It's not Natsu's fault he's like this. I always wondered why Natsu showed no signs of this coming-of-age, and I foolishly dismissed it as simply him being a bit slow."

"Master," Wendy said worriedly, "when we do find him, what are we going to do? For me too, and for Laxus?"
"Gajeel knows the ritual. He offered to do it right now for you, but it takes a week. I can only rely on the dragon slayers' sense of smell for this task, so I can't have two of you out of commission for a whole week while Natsu slowly slips farther from us and the feral beast continues to murder. I apologize, Wendy. I know you're scared, but like I said, one mage isn't worth the entire town."

"No, I understand," she whispered. "That's okay. I just want to be sure something can be done. I don't wanna go bad." Despite trying to be bravely mature, the little girl sniffed and bit her lip to hold back her fears.

Makarov finally turned back around to them and smiled. "We'll do all we can," he assured her. Then he looked up to Erza, Mira, Freed, Gray, Lucy, and the Exceed. "Bring him back fast and unharmed. We're counting on your nose, Wendy, and your runes, Freed. And Lucy," he added, pouting at the young woman, "be careful! And I don't just mean about Natsu."

She swallowed thickly and nodded. "Understood, master."

"Pack for your journey and leave in the morning. Dismissed."

They turned out and left to see the guild hall empty. Erza and Mira walked Wendy home, Freed went his own way, and in pity Charle offered Happy dinner on the docks. Gray tapped Lucy on the shoulder as she watched them split.

"I'll walk you home," he offered.

She nodded quietly and let him escort her. Neither one said anything, except when she warned him that he was taking off his clothes again. When they got to her house, they both hesitated. Gray knew what she was worrying about, and he also knew Lucy was a proud lady who hated that she was sometimes a bit weak.

"How about I stay on the couch in case that flame-brained bastard shows up again." He tried to say it in his usual joking way, and sure enough it got her to laugh.

"Thanks, Gray," she whispered. "I'm gonna get a bath. Peep in and I'll shove my scrub brush up your ass!"

"I'm not a perv. I'll make dinner. You relax."

Gray was glad her kitchen was so well stocked. Of course, she kept it that way because Natsu and Happy visited so often and ate up all of her food. He got oil heated and chopped vegetables for dinner. When he heard sniffling in the bathroom, he ignored it and chopped harder, angry yet knowing it was not Natsu's fault. No, he was more angry at himself for not noticing anything about his teammate, and for not being there to protect Lucy.

Twice now! Twice, she got hurt and Gray had not been there to help. He was determined to protect her from now on!

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On a cliff far away from any city, Natsu watched the sun go down behind distant mountains. The lush valley below him had already grown dark, but his high perch was bathed in crimson light.

"Don't change, don't change," he chanted in desperation.

He looked down to his hand. Normal so far. He had no clue what triggered this problem, but it seemed to happen mostly at night. He now dreaded the coming darkness.
"Lucy," he gnashed, and his hands clenched into fists.

Her face from that night often came to his mind, sadness mixed with fear, tears in her eyes, disheveled hair, a torn dress. He could still smell her blood and feel...her...being inside her...and the sensual aroma of their conjoined bodies. It had only been for an instant before he realized and pulled away, yet he would never forget the feeling. A part of him, a deep instinct threatening to bubble up, wanted to feel her again...

To touch her...

To taste her...

To **ravage** her...

"No!" he cried. "Not Lucy! Not Lucy!"

He yanked at his pink hair and sobbed as he thrust that darker side of him back down. He had no clue how he could face Lucy again, not after that. She had every right to hate him and want him dead. So he felt like he was being selfish for hoping that maybe she could forgive him and they could go back to being friends. She had said it was all right, but he knew it wasn't!

"After I did that to her?" he asked himself. "I don't deserve to be her friend. A real friend would never do...that!" He closed his eyes as tears of regret and shame tumbled down, then he tried to quickly wipe them away with his scarf. For just a moment, he foolishly feared Gray might see him crying and make fun of him.

Of course, if Gray ever saw him again, he would probably try to kill Natsu for real.

That made him even sadder. How could he return to Fairy Tail after what he did to his teammate? And not just some random guild member, but **Lucy**!

He stared out at the horizon, watching the blood-red sunset seep away into darkness. He had picked this location because it was far from civilization. There were a few farmhouses in the valley, but maybe the beast within would be more satisfied with tasty cows and sheep instead of farmers. Or did he even eat in that form? Natsu had no clue. He could only remember bits and pieces. He had never woken up covered in blood, so that was a good sign. Still, he did not want to chance it.

Suddenly, the familiar headache hit him. He grabbed at his hair as it felt like something wanted to pound out of his skull.

"Don't change, don't change, don't change, *don't change!*"

He roared as the pain spread down to his shoulders, his low back, his face, and to his hands. Panting hard in agony, he looked down at his hands again and saw the nails lengthen and grow thicker.

"**Nooooooooooooo!**"

He fell to the ground and rolled in the dirt as the painful transformation continued. Soon anything touching his back burned like acid. He threw off his shirt as he tried to itch the searing sensation in his shoulders. His scarf was lost in the maddened thrashing, yet once it fluttered off of his neck, a whole new level of pain sent a shock through Natsu's body. He rose up onto his knees and howled at the sky. It felt like his whole body was being torn apart from the inside as the beast clawed its way out.

Slowly, like rain after a blazing summer, relief trickled through him. Natsu opened his eyes to see the
sun still peeking between two snowy mountains. The hands before him were talon-like, and he felt a
tail swishing behind him. Tears burned his eyes. He crawled to the edge of the cliff and looked
down. It was almost tempting to throw himself off the cliff, but he could never go that far. He refused
to give up to this beast inside him. He was Natsu Dragneel! He didn't surrender!

"Erza, Gray," he whispered between ragged breaths. "Find me. Find me and stop me...before I really
do lose myself."

Midnight tolled over Magnolia when Lucy jolted awake with a nightmare. It was the same one she
had before, flying in the sky when suddenly she realized a dragon was carrying her. She instantly
looked to the window, yet there was nothing there, no shadows, no glowing eyes, just a waning
moon and starlight.

Something snorted beside her, and she saw Gray's head rise from the side of her bed. She thought he
had fallen asleep on the couch, so she was shocked to see him sitting in a chair while resting his head
at the foot of her bed.

"Y'kay?" he mumbled half asleep.

"Nightmare," she replied with a little shiver.

Slowly, she got up and pattered barefooted to the kitchen. She must have been panting in her sleep,
because her throat felt really dry. After a glass of water and a trip to the bathroom, she returned to see
Gray standing by the window, staring out with a bitter expression on his face.

"It wasn't the beast," she assured him. "Only a dream."

"Just being cautious," he answered.

When she sat on the edge of the bed, she flinched at the pain between her thighs. She told only
Makarov the whole truth about what Natsu did. If she told anyone else, they would never forgive
Natsu. Especially Gray! So she kept that part secret. She truly hoped that once they found Natsu and
got him back to normal, they could go back to being friends, a team, and what happened could just be...

What? Be forgotten?

She didn't want to forget it. She knew she never could anyway, not that! So what did she want?

Was she really okay with what he did? Did she want more? Did she love Natsu?

She shook her head to chase away all the questions and doubts. She felt too sleepy to wonder about
something as monumentally important as love. She simply wanted a solid night of sleep, especially if
they were leaving in the morning.

"Shouldn't you pack?" she asked Gray.

He moved away from the window and sat by her side. "I'm not leaving you, not for a minute."

She laughed and looked down to her cup of water. "That would get annoying really fast."

"Then let me be annoying." He brushed back her hair and saw the worries in her face. "You're
hiding something. I can tell when you do that. Natsu, he...he hurt you...more...didn't he?"

She did not want to lie, not to Gray, yet she worried what he would do when he discovered the truth.
She could not bring herself to answer him, and she knew she did not need to. Silence was answer enough. She feared Gray would go into a rage, threaten to kill him, and storm out immediately to castrate Natsu.

Instead, he hugged her. Her eyes went wide, and she nearly dropped her drink in surprise. She absolutely had not anticipated this!

"We'll bring him back," Gray swore through clenched teeth.

Yes, he was angry. He was pissed as hell! Yet he had seen the looks in Lucy’s face the whole day. They were not eyes wanting vengeance. She worried about Natsu, and she had been hiding this secret to protect him. If she forgave Natsu, so would he. He would fucking castrate the bastard later, but for now he would support her.

"Gray," she whispered. "Can you...stay here? In the bed?"

"I was going to suggest it, but I thought you'd throttle me with the scrub brush."

"Grope me in my sleep and it'll be the lamp up your ass," she threatened, yet with a good-natured smile.

She faced the door while he faced the window. Still their backs touched. He could feel the cotton of the long shirt she wore and the smoothness of her naked legs. She felt the heat from his bare back and the soft hair on his muscular calves. His foot stroked hers for a moment, and she smiled at the reassuring touch.

"Goodnight, Lucy," he said, staring out at the moon. "Try to have some good dreams this time."

"Thanks, Gray." She closed her eyes, and already she felt like her dreams would be much nicer knowing she had a friend beside her. "Goodnight."

End of Chapter 9

Fanart by SrngDrgn
Disclaimer: No more Missus Nice Rhov! I shall wrest control of Fairy Tail away from Kodansha and revamp it into Rhovy Tail! Now, please hold your applause toward my brilliant plan while I flee from Hiro Mashima. *sprints away faster than Jet can run with a peeved mangaka chasing her*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lucy woke up with heat at her chest and a light sound of someone sleeping. She had a momentary flareup of anger, thinking it was Natsu in her bed again, followed by sinking sadness as she realized it would not be him, he was gone. Then anger blazed again when it dawned on her this must be Gray, and after she threatened him not to grope her in the night. So by the time she finally opened her eyes, she was ready to lash out at him. Her prepared yells were silenced when she saw he still had his back to her. It was she who had turned toward him and wrapped an arm around his naked torso. Anger, sadness, and all other emotions were overrun by shock and slight disgust. She thought of Gray as a teammate and a brother, so why was she hugging him?

She carefully moved away before he woke up and misunderstood. Luckily, he did not stir, and she hoped that meant he was still asleep, not just faking it. She quietly hurried out of the room to get ready before he woke up.

When she came out of the bathroom, Gray was already up and dressed. Well, half dressed. Close enough for Gray. The aroma of coffee filled the house. He had breakfast already on the table and stood at her sink cleaning dishes.

"I already ate. Help yourself," the Ice-Make mage called over. "I'm off to get a shower."

"You still need to pack," Lucy realized.

"We'll stop by my place on the way to the guild. It'll only take a couple minutes to grab some clothes."

She smirked as she poured herself some juice. "Don't tell me you pack as fast as you strip."

"Har-har," he said sarcastically before shutting the bathroom door.

Twenty minutes later, they were ready to go. Lucy felt at ease as she stood by Gray's side and walked down the hall to the house's main exit, teasing him that at least they would not have to deal with Natsu's motion sickness, and trying to egg him on about whether or not he would miss Juvia. She liked how he totally denied it yet blushed at the same time.

She opened the door leading to the street and was about to step out when some instinct stopped her. Maybe it was a smell, or a peripheral view of the crowd gathered around. In any case, she stopped and looked to her feet.

There, sitting at her doorstep, was a severed head.

It was a blonde-haired woman, someone under thirty, blue eyes still open and filmy gray as they
dried out in the early morning sun. A gnarled slash to the victim's cheek had ripped out the skin and muscle until it exposed clenched teeth like some grinning half-skull. Blood had drained out of the ragged edge of the neck, mixed with her long golden hair, and dripped down the steps from her house, dried now and blackened like a waterfall from Hell. People on the street paused, some in horror before rushing off, some wondering if this was some twisted prank.

Lucy let out a shriek and buried her face into Gray's chest. He immediately grabbed hold of her and felt her whole body shaking in horror. He grimaced in revulsion as he stared at the dead blue eyes. It was not anyone he knew, yet with the cascading blonde hair, he could imagine this poor victim as Lucy. His stomach twisted, and he swallowed hard as breakfast threatened to come right back up.

"Get inside!" he ordered. He glared at the crowd. "One of you, call the authorities."

"You mean it's not a prank?" someone in the crowd gasped. "That head...it's real?"

Gray slammed the door shut, locked it, and rushed Lucy back to her room. She collapsed onto the couch in tears while Gray locked all the windows. He realized she was still sobbing and looked worried, yet unsure what to do.

"Was it someone you knew?"

She shook her head. "You don't think it was Natsu who did that, do you?" she sobbed. "It couldn't have been him. He wouldn't!"

Gray did not want to answer. He simply could not imagine Natsu being that barbaric, yet a head waiting there like that, especially a blonde woman's head, had the twisted feeling of a cat leaving behind a bird at the doorstep of its owner.

Cat? Owner? That gave him an idea on how to handle this.

"Call out Loke," he ordered.

Not thinking, she obeyed, pulled out her keyring, and grabbed one. "Open the Gate of the Lion! Leo!"

In a flash and a poof, the orange-haired playboy arrived. "Yes, my prin...Lucy!" he cried, seeing how pale she was and the tears on her face. Then he saw Gray there. "Bastard! What did you do to upset my Lucy?"

"Shut up!" snapped Gray. "Loke, you protected her that first night. I'm counting on you now. Guard her with your life!"

"I do anyway. What happened?" Loke demanded with narrow eyes.

"Take a look out the door," Gray muttered. Loke raced off to see while Gray sat beside Lucy. He felt her trembling and hugged an arm around her. "Stay here. Don't leave. I'll run to the guild and get some help. If the army comes, you can let them in, but don't agree to leave until you get an escort. We're getting you the hell out of this town."

Loke returned looking sick with fury. "I know her. Marlena. We went on a few dates. Dammit, this is going too far," he gnashed.

"Stay with her," Gray ordered. Instead of the front door, he leaped out the bedroom window like he and Natsu had often done.
Half an hour later, Gray returned with Erza, Mira, Freed, Wendy, Charle, and Happy. Gajeel had come along with them to sniff out the macabre scene out front, now cordoned off by the army. Inside, Lucy was curled up in a fetal position on Loke's lap while the Lion Spirit gently stroked her hair to keep her calm.

"We have permission from Master to leave," Erza reported. "Do you think you can make it?"

"I want out of here," Lucy said with a shiver. She slowly pushed herself up into a sitting position, straightened out her disheveled hair, and blushed at Loke. "Thanks for watching over me. You can return now."

"Not a chance!" His noble face looked grim behind his blue-tinted glasses. "I'm not leaving your side until you're far away from here."

She sighed, feigning annoyance. "You and Gray are so much alike."

"Because we both care for you," Gray said with a smile.

Loke jealously glared over at the Ice-Make mage. "Of course, I like you more!" he insisted.

"I've known her longer," Gray argued.

"We met her on the same day."

"She's my teammate."

"She's my owner!"

"Boys," Erza said in a thudding voice.

Both Loke and Gray tensed up fast. "Aye, sir!"

Footsteps thumped, and Gajeel marched in. "It wasn't Natsu," he assured. "I smelled that other smell, the one that's been all over Magnolia lately."

Lucy shivered. "The beast? It knows where I live?"

"And that you're blonde," Gray realized, not liking the implications. "I don't think the hair color and length were purely coincidental. We should probably tell the army to put out a warning that the killer might be targeting young, blonde women."

Lucy's hand went over her stomach to one of the areas where she had been gouged during the first attack. "Was that what tried to kill me back then?"

"Impossible to know," Gajeel admitted. "Maybe it was and this is a threat, or maybe even its way of apologizing. Or maybe it sees Natsu as a rival and this is a claim of territory. Or who knows, maybe this is its way of flirting to win you over."

"What the hell!" she shouted.

Gajeel just shrugged. "Feral dragon slayers have an animal's instincts. It's too hard to guess their motives. I suggest you guys leave immediately. With all the chaotic mix of smells around here right now, maybe it won't be able to latch on and realize you've left."

Their group decided that was the best plan. Although Lucy hated the idea of leaving her home open to army investigators, her landlady promised to keep them from doing any damage. Lucy and the rest
left to the train station.

"We'll return to the manor where Natsu was last seen," Erza explained. "From there, Wendy will begin sniffing him out."

Happy looked worried, and Charle patted his back reassuringly. Loke bid farewell so he would not have to buy a train ticket as well, but he promised to return at the slightest hint of danger. They boarded the train and sat silently as it chugged out of the station. They watched Magnolia go by fast, and soon they were in rolling hills and gentle farmlands. They sat quietly looking out the windows.

"You know," Gray muttered peevishly, "I can't believe I'm saying this but...I almost miss Natsu's moaning and vomiting."

Wendy snickered, Erza chuckled softly, Lucy smiled as she realized she was thinking the same thing, and Happy cheered up a little.

"Aye!" the Exceed cried out. "When we head back home, Natsu is probably gonna be sicker than ever."

Although they knew it would annoy them, for right now that thought comforted them.

"He can rest on my lap," Lucy decided.

"I'll knock him out," Erza offered.

"Please let me be the one to do that," Gray begged.

"Or I could use Troia," Wendy said cheerfully.

Mira and Freed watched them in amusement.

"What an odd team," the green-haired man muttered to himself.

"It's what makes them so strong," Mira sighed in envy.

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Somewhere Far North

The town was deserted.

No, not deserted. That implied that people fled. Here, no one had a chance to escape.

An utter massacre! That's what it was.

Sting Eucliffe carefully stepped between the bodies that littered what was once a thriving central avenue lined with stores still displaying their goods. Looking around, it must have happened many weeks ago. The corpses were already decomposing. The smell of death was everywhere, a miasma that swirled with the wind, carried on the wings of numerous insects buzzing around in festive excitement as they feasted on the rotting bodies. Along with the stench was the smell of emptiness, a dusty smell that told of a city abandoned to its macabre fate.

Yet there was something more, a smell underneath the death and dust. It was doubtful anyone else could smell it. Even a trained dog would be confused. However, to a dragon slayer, this was a smell stronger than any other, something unforgettable, an aroma that was both repulsive and attractive. With narrow eyes, the blond dragon slayer looked from side to side, inspecting clothing stores, grocery stores, a tea house, a saloon, all empty. The silence was not too bad, but the smell sickened
Rogue walked out from an alley looking more melancholy than usual. Sting paused and watched him, trying to read some clues from that shadowy face.

"The smell is all over this town," Rogue told him.

"I saw wanted posters and public warnings taped to some lampposts," Sting told him." They knew there was a murderer around. They had a little warning, but I'd say not much."

"Just like the last town," Rogue realized, and he looked around again. "They probably had two weeks of disappearances, odd and brutal murders, thought it was an animal, and then...it hit. Likely all in one night."

Sting frowned deeper. "These corpses all have nightgowns on. Most of the residents were still in bed. They likely never knew what hit them."

"That's how ferals work," Rogue said with a disinterested shrug. "They'll play for a while, but when they get bored they'll wipe out the whole population."

"Are you certain that's what this smell is?"

Rogue's eyes narrowed. "You've never smelt it before, have you? I helped you through the ritual the instant I saw the warning signs. Then I taught you how to help me, and we caught it within a day. Trust me, Sting, once you smell a feral, it's something you'll never forget."

Sting looked at Rogue for a silent moment. He was a little too serious about this, taking this assignment far too personal. "Could it be," he finally asked, "you've dealt with a feral dragon slayer before?"

Rogue did not answer. He watched Frosch and Lector having some cute argument up ahead. After a minute, Sting walked up right next to his fellow dragon slayer and leaned into the raven-haired man's ear.

"You told me it was Gajeel Redfox who taught you. Was it something he did?"

Rogue's eyes darkened as a memory passed through his mind. "He wasn't fully feral, but the people in Phantom Lord let him go too long. He massacred a village. Master Jose covered it up, said the villagers were all part of a dark guild, but...I was brought in right as Gajeel was in the middle of doing it. I saw what the beast within looked like, its raw destruction, its utter lack of humanity. That was my first impression of Gajeel Redfox: this raging beast out to kill anyone in his way. He's a frightening man to begin with, but seeing such brutality...I was just a little kid. To see him do all that...he terrified me...and left me in awe. It was scary, and it was exhilarating to behold. And the smell...it wasn't strong, but it's something you latch on to. It drove up instincts I didn't know I had. I almost wanted to join him in rampaging and slaughtering. I found out later, the smell of a feral is most dangerous to those too young. They can't control their powers. It's like how an adult snake releases only a little venom into its victim, while a baby snake will bite and force all of its venom out all at once. So although they're smaller, they're more dangerous. Because of that, Phantom Lord had to suppress me, and I had to work fast on Gajeel before I was affected too much."

"So he wasn't feral yet?"

"Not yet, but he was getting close. When it was over and both of us were back to our senses, I suddenly didn't want to grow up. I realized how frightening those instincts were, and I didn't want to turn into that. That's why, when I met you, I refused to go away from you. I knew that when my time
came, I'd need you, Sting. I didn't want to go berserk like that. Seeing this town, it's like what I witnessed then. Raw destruction! And the smell, that feeling..." He looked over to the blond. "Do you sense it, too?"

"Yeah," Sting muttered. "It's like something deep inside of me wants to crawl out. This smell, I hate it. I despise it more than anything, because..." He fell quieter as he confessed a dark secret. "...because...it reminds me of the dragon who raised me."

With swift steps, he pulled away from Rogue and marched down the grim avenue of death. He called to Lector, who swiftly returned to his side.

"Where are you going?" Rogue asked, watching impassively as he left.

"Dragon hunting," Sting called back. "I'm gonna find this feral dragon slayer and destroy it. Slowly! I'll make it feel all the suffering it put its victims through. I'm gonna slay it before it tarnishes the reputation of all dragon slayers."

"Won't you try to help him?" Rogue asked in concern.

"Fuck no! You've told me before, there's no helping a feral. They must be put down."

"That's what Gajeel told me, but we don't know that for certain. Dragon slayers are rare enough. You shouldn't kill one so thoughtlessly."

"Whatever," Sting said dismissively. "From what I've seen here and in the last city, that's what we have to do, and quickly, before another city faces the same fate." He paused and looked back over his shoulder. "Ya with me?"

Rogue folded his arms and looked aside. "Killing someone who has lost their way? Not interested. I think I'll sit this one out."

A dramatic shrug, then Sting continued onward. "Suit yourself. You're missing all the fun."

"Killing is never fun." Rogue gave a soft sigh of frustration as he watched the White Dragon Slayer march away. "Try not to go overboard," he whispered, then turned in the opposite direction. "Come, Frosch. We need to report this."

The little Exceed in a frog suit scampered along beside him. "Fro doesn't like this. Fro is worried for Sting."

"He'll be fine," Rogue said with a gentle smile he only showed to his best friend.

Frosch grinned with renewed assurance. "Of course Sting will! Sting is strong! The strongest...except for Rogue, of course. What will Rogue tell the others?"

"Dunno," he hummed. "I guess we can't mention the feral dragon slayer. Sting is right: if the public found out we can do things like this, it'd be bad for all dragon slayers, us and the ones in Fairy Tail."

"Fro thinks so, too. Fro won't say a word," the Exceed swore with a massive grin.

"I know. You're a good friend," Rogue praised, which made the cat-in-a-frog-suit smile wider. "Now let's go. We'll leave the dirty work to Sting."

Frosch followed for a few moments, then looked troubled. "Rogue, Fro is wondering...could this be the stupid dragon slayers from Fairy Tail?"
Rogue hummed to himself in thought. "I helped Gajeel through the coming-of-age ritual. Natsu is too old, and Wendy is too young. I doubt it's them...and I hope it's not. I don't want Sting to meet up with Natsu again."

"Fro thinks so, too," the tiny Exceed chirped.

End of Chapter 10

Chapter End Notes

*Have you ever wanted to write about someone who pissed you off purely so you can kill them in a horrific way? I just killed off Marlena, someone who used to be my best friend, then stabbed me in the back, abandoned me during a fight to face a dozen guys alone, and I got beat up so bad I ended up in the hospital. Bye-bye, Marlena. And hellllllllllll Sting! So many people wanted to know about the other dragon slayers, so here they are. Now I guess I need to figure out what to do with them.*
"No, stop it!"

Three men chuckled cruelly as they pinned down a struggling woman. Her hair, which she had spent hours fixing into a modest yet trendy chignon, was now pulled loose with strands ripped free and sticking out. She thrashed against their thick arms, sobbing at the feeling of utter helplessness.

"What's the matter, Nicci?" one of her captors asked in a slithering tone. "You're the one who came to us. You walked in here willingly, right?"

She pulled against them in anger. "You...you said you wanted me to model. You had a card and everything. You said it was a photo shoot. You liar!" She lurched at him only to get held down tighter.

"Oh, but it is a photo shoot. See in the corner, the camera is rolling, and it's going to catch every sexy expression you give us, Nicci. Be a good girl and you'll be famous all over Fiore."

"No!" she screamed, straining against their hands.

"Haha, she's soft," a dark-haired man said, groping her breasts. "I wanna see her boobs."

"Toby, you're fucking obsessed with breasts."

"Shut the fuck up, Charles. Help me get her shirt off."

She cringed away from the lecherous touches. "Don't touch me. You scum! You bastards!"

"You've got quite a mouth on you, sweetheart." The one named Toby began to grope her and unbutton her blouse. "Such creamy skin. And look at this bra. Black lace!"

The blond named Charles laughed mockingly. "Leather skirt and lace bra? Only sluts wear stuff like this."

Toby pressed her breasts together to deepen the cleavage. "I bet you were expectin' some sorta ecchi photography, right? Think you're some gravure idol? You're quite experienced, aren't you, missy! Let's see what's under the lace."

He ripped her bra in half, exposing her chest. Nicci gasped in shock. She saw the hunger in these
wretched men's eyes. Their looks terrified her. She realized that these men did not even see her as a human, but purely as a slab of meat to be played with, eaten, and then tossed aside. She howled as the man began to lick her breasts. It made her tingle inside, yet she hated it. She felt like vomiting at the disgusting touches.

The third one in their group had curly auburn hair, paunchy around the middle, a calmer attitude yet far more deadly by the calculating gleam behind his glasses. He adjusted the camera a little, made sure everything was in place, then came forward tugging on his belt. "Spread her!" he ordered.

Toby popped his mouth off of the woman's breast. "But Tom..."

"I'll take her how she is. We can play more with her later."

The blond man scoffed. "You idiot, Tom. You have no patience."

"Shut up, Charles! You're ready to mess your pants just watching her struggle."

Nicci screamed as the men grabbed her thighs and yanked them apart. "Oh please, no! No!" she sobbed. "Someone...someone help me!"

"Ain't no one but us, sweetheart," Charles said, licking up her thigh. "Get her skirt up. I'll get her panties."

"Stop!" Nicci shrieked.

"Don't worry. See." The man named Tom held up a square packet. "I'm using a condom. Now you don't have to worry about getting pregnant and can just enjoy it. You should be thankful I put out the money to buy a whole box of these, just for you, Nicci. I'm a thoughtful man, aren't I?"

"Haha, yeah right," Toby laughed, straining to hold down Nicci's thrashing hips. "You only brought those so there's no DNA evidence."

"Shut up, Toby. Don't worry, Nicci," Tom said as he dropped his pants and proudly showed off the erect weapon. "I'll make it feel real good."

"Please...please don't do this. Pleeeeeease," she sobbed. Nicci growled in frustration and terror as she yanked every way she could to try and force her legs back together.

Charles looked around. "Guys, did you hear something?"

"You chickening out?" Toby teased him. "All I hear is her heart pounding hard." He leaned his head against her breasts and slowly kneading them with his fingers. "She must be excited."

"Oh, she'll be excited once I get this big thing in her," Tom chuckled as he ripped open the condom packet with his teeth, then rolled the thin sheath over him. "Damn, tight fit. That's why I hate condoms. You really should feel thankful, Nicci." He stepped up between her thighs and pressed her legs a little further apart. "Hold her tight, boys. This'll be a rough ride!"

"Nooooo!" she howled.

A growl echoed hers, and the three men stopped. Tom yanked his pants up, Toby pulled out a knife, and Charles raised his fists. They looked around nervously. No one was supposed to be in this abandoned building, yet they heard steamy breathing. At the end of a dank hallway, they saw a darker shadow amidst the normal shadows, a hunched creature with two glowing red eyes.
Tom sneered. "The hell...

Before he could speak, the beast leaped forward. Its claw sliced into Charles' stomach, shredding through skin, muscle, and intestines like a hot knife through butter.

The blond doubled over in shrieks of agony. "Oh God...oh God, it's gonna kill me. T-Tom...help..."

The beast sneered at him. "Bad," it hissed in an airy word of warning.

Then the beast's hand thrust hard into the gaping wound, squishing upward through organs and layers of fat, hissing delightedly as it plunged into the steamy guts. Charles' face went pale, and blood shot out his mouth. He tried to scream, but his body was in shock far beyond the ability to register such pain. He jolted as the beast yanked on something. Slowly, the dark creature pulled his hand out, dripping thickly with blood and gory bits. In its claws, it clutched a still-beating heart. The beast held the pulsing muscle up for Charles to see.

"Bad heart," it said. Then the talon-like hand squished tightly, crushing the throbbing muscle and sending blood gushing between its fingers. Slowly, Charles slid to the ground, already dead. The beast dropped the heart next to the body, then licked its fingers. "Bad heart, bad blood."

Toby had wet his pants at seeing such gruesome butchery happen to his best friend, yet under the horror laid anger, a need for revenge. "You bastard!" he screamed.

The beast swung around with a sneer. "All...bad!"

It bared its fangs, hissing a roar. Then its back legs coiled and sprung. Leathery wings flapped, letting it soar through the room and toward Toby. The man made a swipe with his knife, but the beast's claw slashed at the hand, ripping it apart down to the bone. Toby had less than a second to scream in pain before those gleaming fangs ripped into his throat, chewing out a massive hole. The beast suddenly pulled back with a disgusted snarl and spat out a red stream. Toby tried to grab at the gaping hole, wheezing his breaths, stumbling around with blood spurting out thickly.

"Bad blood. Sick blood." The beast spat again, clearing its mouth of the blood it sensed had diseases. It pulled away with a disappointed look in its fiery eyes. "No more?"

Just then, Tom fired a gun, ripping a hole through the beast's wing. It turned at him, eyes glowing like flaming coals.

"One more," the shadowy creature smiled.

Tom fired again twice before the beast pounced and slammed the paunchy man against the wall. The rapist smelled the metallic scent of blood and felt the beast's breath on his face. Up close now, he saw that the beast was a very dark shade of brown, nearly black, with mocha brown webbing on the wings. He was shocked to see that, despite the glowing eyes and fangs, the face was that of a man. Its teeth dripped crimson with the blood of his friends.

The beast tilted its head a little with a devilish grin. "Is scary, yesss?"

Tom sobbed in terror. "Y-yes!"

"Is fun?" the dark creature asked.

"N-n-n-no! It's...it's not fun at all."

"No," the beast agreed. "Is scary. Want more?"
Tom cringed as he felt the claws rack over his throat. "Oh, please God, no!"

"No. No want. Is scary. Is bad. What you do...is scary. Is bad. All...is bad."

Then the beast dived in, chewing at the man's throat and shredding his fat belly with massive claws. Tom gave an inhuman howl while the beast purred in hungry satisfaction.

"Good blood, this one," it said in delight as both beast and prey slid down to the ground.

"Oh God, please stop!" Tom shrieked. His eyes caught sight of Nicci still sitting on the table they had placed her on. He reached out to her in a final plea of desperation. "H-Help...me," he gurgled as thick, purplish clots of blood bubble up, spilling over his lips and down his chin.

The beast looked up at the outstretched arm, hummed curiously, then bit into the bicep muscles, ripping out chucks of flesh and meat. Tom howled and sobbed. The beast chuckled in pleasure, then tore apart the man's stomach and began to munch on the feast waiting just under the fat flesh.

Nicci yanked her clothes back together and slid off the table, hoping to keep low and out of sight. She was not sure if she could even stand. She shook in a terror she had never before experienced, not only from the dread of the rape just a moment ago, but now the horrific butchery taking place. If she did not escape while the beast was busy, she would be next! She looked around desperately, trying to remember how to get out of this building, but her brain was overwhelmed with fear, all thoughts muted by the pounding of her heart. She scurried over the floor until she bumped into something soft and looked down. She had backed into Charles' body, soaked in blood and no longer moving. Right next to her hand was the crushed heart, still twitching as it moved on internal impulses. She froze and swallowed back an acidic shot of bile.

Slowly, she rose to her feet. Her knees felt like jelly, and she held onto the table where the camera was still filming. The sounds of the beast eating and the croaking last groans from her rapist made her cover her mouth to keep from vomiting. She prayed she could escape unnoticed while the beast gorged itself. She turned to flee, but something whooshed past her, blocking the doorway. She stopped sharply as glowing eyes and massive wings prevented her from leaving.

"Stay," the beast hissed with stringy bits of small intestines dangling from its mouth.

She cringed back in terror until her back hit a wall. She looked behind her, but there was no way to escape. She was now trapped, her only route to freedom blocked. The beast's red eyes gleamed hungrily at her. A fiercely sadistic grin rose on its face, making her shiver in a sort of fear she had not known before, not even with the rapists. This was an entirely different form of terror. It was not the fear of humiliation and possible pregnancy. It was fear for her very life.

The beast licked its fingers casually and wiped aside the offal of its victim. "Good blood, that one. But too fat. You smell better."

The creature leaped at her, and Nicci looked away, realizing this was the end, praying only that it did not hurt too much. Then suddenly two hands hit the wall behind her, stopping the creature. She could feel its blood-scented breath mere centimeters away. Urine rushed down her legs, yet she hardly noticed it. She whimpered, fearing that instead of a quick kill, this beast would toy with her like the men had done.

Instead, she heard weary panting. Slowly, she peeked an eye open and saw the face of a teenage boy with dark brown skin and long, wavy, black hair. He was naked, and as she watched, the wings shrank back into his shoulder blades. When his eyes looked up, the red glow of a moment ago slowly faded to golden-brown irises.
"Are...are you hurt?" the teen panted wearily. His voice was at the stage of having just cracked yet not completely settled into its new depth.

She gasped a little to hear him speak in a civilized tone. His face looked worried, and she saw a gentleness in his narrow eyes. "No...not much. Just from where those men hit me."

"But...not by...by me, right?" he panted.

"No," Nicci said hesitantly.

He smiled in relief, and with his grin Nicci saw that, although the huge fangs were gone, the boy still had sharpened canine teeth. An instant later, his head fell onto her shoulder as his strength nearly failed him.

"Good," he sighed. "I'm glad I stopped it in time. Umm, where am I? Am I anywhere near Magnolia?"

"Th-this is Magnolia," she shivered, still uncertain and too terrified to let hope win over just yet.

"Really?" He sounded delighted in his exhaustion. "Finally. Good. That's...really good. Have...have there been murders?"

Nicci's gaze turned to the three men and the splattered blood. The boy looked behind him to follow her gaze. Charles was lying face-down in a puddle of blood with a crushed heart dropped beside him. Toby had died propped against a wall, his throat mostly gone and his head hanging at an awkward angle. Tom had been ripped to shreds, his body cavity mostly empty, with pieces of entrails scattered around his partially devoured body.

"Ah. I guess I did that, huh?" the boy realized sadly. "Besides them, have you heard any rumors of people being killed?"

"Y-Yes," she breathed in fear.

"For how long?"

"I...I'm not sure. Two or three weeks?"

"That long, huh?" he muttered. "Damn, the time between being awake is getting longer. Look, I...I'm sorry if I scared you. Were these men friends of yours?"

"No!" she cried out in disgust. "They...they attacked me. They were going to...to rape me."

"Oh. So I...I saved you, huh?" He wiped some sweat off of his brow and swallowed down exhaustion. "That's good. I...I did a good thing. Yes...saving someone is good." He smiled to her, and the poor woman uncertainly returned it with tensely lifted lips. "You're safe. Good. But...but you need to get out of here quickly. I'm not sure how long I can stay sane, so...so run, and don't stop until you get to safety. If you can, find someone from Fairy Tail and tell them...the dragon needs a slayer. They'll know what I mean."

He moved aside and slid down the wall. Once on the ground, his hands ran through his long, black hair. Then, not hearing movement, he looked up at the woman.

"Can you walk?" he asked.

"Um, yes, I think so," she decided uncertainly, still anticipating him to leap at her as soon as her back
"Then please, get out of here. I don't want to kill anyone else."

"Then please, get out of here. I don't want to kill anyone else."

She took a few steps toward the door, but then looked back with worry. The teen had already dropped his head back into his arms. "What's your name?"

He glared up with a cranky look in his face. "Have you no sense of self-preservation?"

"Well, if the Fairy Tail mages ask who sent that message, I need to know your name, right?"

His gaze drifted off to the dead bodies. "They don't know me anyway. No one does, and I don't want my name known to the authorities or they'll make trouble for my family."

"I won't tell the army then. Please, sir, I'd like to know the name of the man who saved my life."

"Saved you?" he laughed wryly. "I very well could have eaten you. You were just lucky I managed to regain consciousness. Still...I'm Balaur Blackstone, age sixteen."

"Nicci Bonder," she said with a bow. "Nice to meet you. Um...do you need anything? Clothes?" she asked, eying his naked body. He had an amazing muscle-tone for such a young age.

"I'll borrow off of these guys," Balaur said, nodding down to the dead bodies. "You're a nice girl. I don't want you getting hurt, so please hurry and inform Fairy Tail. I'll try to stay here, but I don't want you coming back, not unless it's with a dragon slayer."

"Got it. Thanks and...um...I hope you feel better." Then Nicci ran, glad to get far away from there.

Balaur smiled to himself and sank a little lower. "Seems like a good girl. I'm glad...I'm really glad...I didn't kill her like all the others. This time, at least. This time," he hummed, drifting off with a dark thought. "They can help me, right? Fairy Tail, they...they have dragon slayers. They can...help me...heal me...or if not..." Balaur glanced over to the three bodies. "If not...they can kill me. I want this nightmare to be over. I hate it. I hate it so much. I don't like being bad. I wanna be...to be good. Good boy, yes. Good."

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**Farther to the North**

"Nooooo!"

Natsu woke up from one of his spells to find blood on his hands and splattered over his bare chest. He held out those incriminating red hands, staring in horror and shivering in fear that he truly had no clue what just happened, how all this blood got on him, or where he was.

"No! Oh please, no! I couldn't have...not a person. It was an animal, right? It had to be."

The dragon slayer looked around, but the meadow surrounding him was empty except for the flowers that chased away any other smells. He rose to his feet, sniffed, and followed a scent until he found his scarf. That was the first thing he had to recover. Wearing the scarf always made him feel more human. Then he looked at the surrounding land.

"A farm," he spotted. "I just...I killed livestock, right? Just like...a sheep or a...a chicken maybe. That's all." He looked at his bloodied hands again. "Just an animal...right?"

There was a scream from the farmhouse. Natsu turned around, but instincts told him to duck. He
dropped just in time to miss a bullet aimed at his head.

"Get him!" came shouts of anger.

Natsu saw a mob of men with guns, scythes, and pitchforks running toward him. "Did...did I kill anyone?" he shouted to the pursuers.

"Oh, you killed something alright, you bastard," an angry farmer yelled.

"Something?" Natsu cried out as he gathered his discarded shirt and a few bags he had gathered with tools that were useful in the wilderness. "What did I kill? Was it a human?"

There was another bullet, and Natsu felt it hit the side of his arm, slashing skin, until blood flowed down heavily.

"Almost hit him that time. Keep at him, boys!"

"You bastards," Natsu growled, grabbing his arm to put pressure on the wound. "Please, I'll leave your farm alone, just tell me what I did?"

"Kill him!" the mob roared.

Natsu knew he could have fought off mere farmers, but these people were innocent. He was the killer! A part of him thought he deserved to be beaten up, strung up, justice done for whatever it was he did. However, just as he thought about giving in to the angry mob, a darker side to him bubbled up.


Natsu felt wings sprout from his back, less painful now than the first few times, and he flew into the air. He heard more gunshots, but none hit him. With a few flaps of his wings, he was over the trees, flying with a liberating shout of joy. He made it to the top of a cliff and landed heavily.

"Away. We're away. Freedom." Then he grabbed his head and shook it furiously. "No! I'm not losing to you. Stupid wings. Go away!" Obeying, the wings shrank back into his body, making Natsu scream in agony at the transformation. "Why? Why does it hurt so much worse changing back into me more than it hurts changing into that...thing...that beast?"

He sighed once the pain was done and looked around at the farm below. There was a crowd in one of the animal pens, but he could not see what had died. Natsu prayed that meant he had not murdered an actual person. Then he looked down at his hands again. He sniffed deeply, but he smelled many things on his skin.

"There's the scent of raw eggs and chicken droppings. A chicken coop? Was I stealing eggs? But there's another animal scent. Smells like Lucy's spirit Capricorn. A goat then? And I...touched a person," he realized, sniffing harder. "Perfume, smells like rosewater. A girl? But there's another scent in the blood." His stomach twisted at the idea, but he decided to lick his hands. It was a timid lick at first, yet his eyes fluttered closed at the ecstasy that shivered through him at the taste. The blood was still warm and fresh. A deep growl rumbled within him as his tongue moistened his fingers, licking all sides and sliding between them. He lapped at the webbing between his fingers, sliding his tongue back and forth. Then he plunged two fingers into his mouth to suck the sanguineous taste off of him. Deep hums reverberated out of his throat.
"Blood...good. Want." He slurped up the thick crimson clots. "Yessss, want more..." His eyes opened fast, and a hint of red glowed in them. Then his eyes narrowed in fury. Natsu shouted and shook his head vigorously. "No! No, go away!"

He collapsed onto the ground, grabbing at his pink hair until he nearly ripped it out. He let out a piercing shout into the pre-dawn sky. It echoed over the cliff and around the fertile valley below. Then he stopped, down on his knees, his back arch as he stared up at the stars beginning to wink out.

"I...I did it. I won! I beat down the beast," he sighed, panting hard at the exertion it took just to stay normal. Then Natsu laughed in relief. It felt so good to declare such a personal victory that he felt tears gathering in the corner of his eyes. "I won," he sighed in exhaustion.

He realized his scalp felt foul, and he saw that the blood on his hands had come off into his hair, staining the pink strands red. He ignored that for now and focused again on the tattling evidence of violence on his hands.

"Goat...goat blood. And sheep wool under my nails, so a sheep too. Raw eggs. But I...I didn't taste human blood. Only the smell of having touched someone. Good," he smiled wearily. "That's...good. I'm still good. I didn't kill any people so...so that's...that's good."

Natsu grabbed a blanket out of his supplies and covered up, deciding to sleep right there in the open without even washing the blood off. He felt too weary to find a river. Right at that moment, all he wanted was to sleep for two days.

End of Chapter 11

Chapter End Notes

These three men are based on two sex-fiend bastards I know and one disturbingly perverted asshole a reader asked me to kill off. Then there's Nicci Bonder, in memory of a friend who was raped and murdered just a few months after we graduated high school. You'll live on in my memory and in my story, Nic!

Say hello to Balaur Blackstone, our feral dragon slayer. The balaur is a multi-headed dragon from Romanian fairy tales. It is believed that the saliva of the balaur can form precious stones. That myth plays into his name Blackstone. In case you're wondering, he is an Earth Dragon Slayer.
Makarov had all of Fairy Tail working on the mystery of the beastly killer, yet for a whole week they had no clues. There were no murders in Magnolia, and despite having every single available mage scouring the city, no one saw anything that might have been the "black demon" they were looking for.

Their only solid evidence was Gajeel's nose.

"He's definitely still in the city," the iron dragon slayer said without any doubt. "I smell him. He's been all over this town, probably scouting out for his big attack."

Makarov stroked his mustache, not liking such an ominous prediction. "Big attack? How big?"

Gajeel looked aside as memories he would rather like to forget were forced up. "When this happened to me, I came damn close to losing it entirely. I destroyed an entire small village, killed everyone, and didn't even realize I had done it." He ground his teeth together in frustration that, even to this day, he was not fully aware of what happened during that time. "First, you hunt, either for food or for fun. When the hunt is no longer fun, the feral doesn't just move on to another place. It slaughters everything first. It truly unleashes itself during that moment. I'm told...it looks much more dragon-like than anything a normal dragon slayer can do."

Makarov's forehead wrinkled deeply. "He turns into a dragon?"

"Or something close to it," Gajeel muttered. "When it happened to me, I wasn't even that far gone, yet it still took all of Phantom Lord's Elemental Four to stop me enough for Rogue to do the ceremony and return my mind. The ceremony itself is simple. It was trying to find another dragon slayer that was a challenge. According to reports from the surviving victims, this beast we're hunting claims to be seeking a dragon. It's likely an instinct, wanting to be cured."

"Is there really no hope?" the master frowned.

"At this stage, no," Gajeel said with a hard voice. "Death is the only way to stop him. The best we can do is make it painless." He gulped down a cup of mercury, wiped the liquid metal from his lips, and rose from his chair. "I'll patrol the city again, starting with the outskirts and working my way in. See ya." Then he walked out.

It was that evening, shortly after the dinner crowd left, that a woman in torn clothes with makeup smeared from crying ran into the guild hall.
"H-help," she managed to say before collapsing to her knees.

Laki rushed over quickly while other mages looked on in concern. Laxus eyed the woman. Not a mage; he sensed no magic in her. Laki spoke calmly to her, trying to get the lady to talk.

"He attacked," Nicci Bonder stuttered. "He...he killed them all. Then he changed. He was so young! He said..." She suddenly remembered the important part and looked right up into Laki's glasses. "He said: The dragon needs a slayer."

Laxus bolted up at that and stomped forward. "Where is it?" he demanded with a sneer. This feral beast had pissed him off all week, giving dragon slayers a bad name. If rumors got out to the public, it would mean disaster to all dragon slayers.

"Building," the woman shivered. "Riverfront. They said it was a studio, but it wasn't."

Makarov acted fast. "Gildarts, go with Laxus. Levy, signal Gajeel to return. Laki, try to calm her down so she can show us where the feral is located. Warren..."

"The lady doesn't have to come," Laxus said brusquely. "She can stay here and rest. I don't need her to show me. Follow the scent of blood and the beast, right?" He glared over at Gildarts as the scruffy man wrapped his tattered cloak around him. "Let's end this!"

Gildarts nodded and marched forward. As the older mage walked by Nicci, she reached up and tapped his leg.

"Please don't kill him," she sniffled. "He saved my life. He's just a kid, and he's not in control. Even I could see that."

Gildarts lightly patted her head. "We'll try to capture him unharmed. Just stay here and rest." He gave her a tender smile, that gentle look that reminded people of a father or dear uncle. Then Gildarts turned, and his face hardened as he stepped outside into the evening glow. The others watched in awe as the two strongest S-Class mages of Fairy Tail left to hunt after the beast.

Gildarts had a bad feeling about this wild, out-of-control dragon slayer. Makarov had instructed all of them to capture the beast if possible, but otherwise kill it. Part of him could hardly help but worry if Natsu might become so unstable as well.

What if Makarov had to give a similar order about the pink-haired boy? What if the best they could do was "make it painless"?

Gildarts knew there was no way he could kill Natsu, and he doubted if anyone else in the guild had to ability to go that far. Then he glanced at the hardened blond beside him. Laxus might be able to do something that drastic, if he felt it was the best thing for the guild and Magnolia as a whole. However, Gildarts knew that killing his own guildmate would torment the young man for life. No, if anyone had to bear the burden of putting down Natsu, it should be either himself or Makarov. They could not allow the younger generation to suffer guilt like that.

Laxus kept sniffing the air, following a potent scent. It made the hair on the back of his neck prickle and his heart race, almost like smelling a battlefield and feeling the excitement of war. It was an intoxicating and revolting smell, something desirous and disgusting.

"You really can't smell that?" he muttered to Gildarts.

"Sorry, but I lack a dragon slayer's nose," the older man said lightly.
"It reeks. I smell blood, too. Lots of blood. We're close."

As if on cue, they heard a guttural roar of pain. Both mages quickened their steps as they came up to an old warehouse in an abandoned industrial area of Magnolia. At this time of day, no workers were around. The street was empty, all the buildings deserted.

"It's inside," Laxus said.

He had just begun to enter the door when something crashed through the second story window and landed hard down on the street. A boy thrashed around, grabbing at his long black hair as he howled in pain.

"Don't change, don't change," Balaur yelled at himself.

Gildarts cautiously approached the naked youth. "Oi, are you the dragon slayer?"

Balaur suddenly crouched on all fours and glared over at them. Both mages backed up a step at the glowing red eyes that greeted them with bloodlust.

"Slayer?" came a hiss. "Fuck slayer. Want fight." Then the eyes faded to golden-brown and the boy panted. "H-help me," he rasped out from a dry throat. "Are...are you from Fairy Tail? That girl, did she make it safely?"

"She's fine," Gildarts assured him, keeping a cautious distance as he assessed the situation. "Are you the dragon slayer?"

"Y-yeah," he muttered. "Balaur Blackstone. I'm the Earth Dragon Slayer. I...I've been like this...too long," he sighed weakly. "I'm not sure...if...if I can even be helped. I feel the beast all the time. I need a dragon or a dragon slayer, someone to cure me, but...but it's so strong. It used to want a dragon too, but not anymore. It...it doesn't want to be cured. It keeps going against what I want." He grabbed at his long, wavy, black hair. "I've heard of this. I heard people like me...we can't be saved." His eyes teared up as he sniffled. "I don't want to be bad anymore," he cried. "Please...please, either cure me or kill me. Just don't let me murder anyone else. I can't take it anymore!"

Gildarts saw that the person in front of him was hardly a beast. He was young, and the clarity of his words showed that he had at least a little sanity left in him. Gildarts had been under the impression that a feral dragon slayer was hardly even human anymore. This boy looked perfectly normal for now. Something about his sharp eyes and those pointy canine teeth reminded him of Natsu.

Then Balaur's eyes focused behind Gildarts and widened in horror. "He should be old enough," he gasped. "You brought an immature dragon slayer? Idiots!" he shouted, and he quickly scampered backwards. "But he should be old enough."

Gildarts looked back and cursed under his breath. The smell had been affecting Laxus for some time, but standing just a few steps away from the feral dragon slayer was suddenly sending the Lightning Dragon Slayer over his limit. His teeth had lengthened, and his nails were curling as they grew longer. Laxus clenched his teeth as a wild fierceness began to overwhelm him.

"What type of element is he?" Balaur shouted.

"Lightning," Gildarts answered.

"Damn, that's not good. Earth is strong against lightning, and I don't want to hurt him." The boy cringed, but he tried to keep a hold on his sanity a little longer. "If he changes fully, we'll all be in a lot of trouble. Just kill me now, then you don't have to worry about him."
Gildarts cringed a little as he looked the boy over. He had his orders, but facing just a kid was a lot harder than facing some mindless beast. "Maybe we can save you," he decided.

"Are you crazy?" Balaur shouted. "He's losing control, and I'm about to also. Just kill me, please!"

"I don't kill kids," Gildarts snapped angrily.

The boy fell to his knees and grabbed his head in pain. His eyes were wide in fear and confusion. Wasn't it natural to kill a beast like him? "I can't...keep it controlled...much longer."

"Then I'll knock this guy out first. Laxus, this might hurt but..." As Gildarts turned back around to the Lightning Dragon Slayer, his face paled. "Shit," he muttered, although he said a lot more profanity in his mind as he realized why Makarov had told him to knock out Laxus at the first sign of trouble.

Laxus had already sprouted wings that ripped his shirt asunder, showing off his tattoos and muscles that seemed to have tripled in size. His eyes gleamed red with narrow slits for pupils, and his hands were more like falcon claws. Golden, sparking scales marked his face and arms, while all around him the air tingled with electricity.

"Laxus?" Gildarts called out softly, taking a cautious step forward.

Balaur was on his knees on the ground, hugging himself to hold back the beast trying to break out. "He isn't conscious anymore. That's purely the beast's mind now." He gasped in pain, his eyes went red for a moment, but he struggled to hold it off. "If I change, we'll fight to the death. The beast...it's very territorial. Please, I don't want to kill him. If you just kill me now..."

Gildarts did not take his eyes off of Laxus, but he shouted angrily back at the boy, "Do you really want to die?"

Balaur looked stunned for a moment, blinked in shock, then dropped his head sadly. "No, sir," he whispered, "but I don't want to live if all I do is kill people."

"Then stay alive long enough for us to heal you," the older mage yelled.

For the first time in many months, Balaur felt a bit of hope. "If that's possible..."

"We'll make it possible," he snapped. "We're Fairy Tail!"

The Lightning Dragon Slayer hissed at those last two words. It worried Gildarts. Now, this was what he had expected to find, a beastly semblance of what used to be human. If he had merely seen some creature like this...heaven help him, but he might have killed the boy instantly. Now he knew Balaur was just a poor, struggling, sick kid. He could not kill him, no more than he could kill Laxus, Natsu, Gajeel, or Wendy. Although the boy was the objective of this mission, Balaur seemed to have at least a little control for now. Gildarts knew he had to contain this new and deadlier threat before things got out of hand.

"Want," Laxus growled deeply. His voice no longer sounded like Laxus Dreyar, but like some demonic creature, gargling and snarling, hellishly deep in tone. "Want...power!"

"Power hungry?" Balaur questioned.

Gildarts smirked as he faced Laxus straight on. "You could say he has a bit of a personality complex. You want power, Laxus? I'll give you a taste of real power."
Laxus snarled at him. "Want fight."

"Yeah, of course you do," Gildarts goaded on. "You and Natsu are too alike, except I've known you since you were in diapers. Well, I never turn down a challenge to fight, so go ahead. I'll take you on." The mage motioned with his hand for Laxus to come at him. "Come and get it, Laxus."

"Sir!" Balaur cried out in shock. "As he is, he's stronger than a normal dragon slayer. He won't hold back."

"I've fought the Black Dragon, kid. Don't worry, this brat has never been able to beat me yet. He's all bark and no..."

Laxus suddenly sprang as fast as a bolt of lightning and snapped his jaws onto Gildarts' arm. Luckily, he clamped down on the left prosthetic and only dented the metal forearm.

"You actually bit me!" Gildarts cried out in shock. His good hand shot forward, slammed into Laxus' chest, and shoved him back. The beastly blond skidded to a stop on all fours and crouched there, growling with the pleasure of battle.

Balaur had sweat pouring down his face as he strained to keep from transforming. "He...has the mind...of a beast, nothing more," he rasped out between heavy, strained breaths. "Only...only after a long time..." He sank a little further. "...will a feral...remember some...dragon slayer magic."

"So he doesn't know magic right now, huh?" Gildarts mused. "That'll make this a lot easier."

"No, he might use it, but not consciously, and not with precision," Balaur warned. "Against..." He hissed in pain as lumps threatened to burst out of his back, throbbing grotesquely just under his dark brown skin. His voice kept shifting between the barely-cracked voice of a young teen and the growling purr of a beast. "Easy prey...no need for magic. Against hard prey, magic comes. Whatever it takes...stay free...escape. We do...whatever we must...to...stay free." He collapsed onto the road and moaned loudly.

"Just lie there quietly, kid," Gildarts warned him. "If I know where you are, I can make sure you don't get hurt."

Balaur looked up in surprise. "You'd go that far?"

Gildarts did not take his eyes off of Laxus. "Let's just say you remind me of a kid I like. If I can save you, I can definitely save him."

Laxus snarled with drool slipping down from his mouth. "No talk. Fight more!"


The dragon slayer leaped at him again, eyes fiery, blond hair crackling with lightning. His arm drew back, preparing for a powerful punch with aimed, sharp claws ready to rip and slash. Gildarts watched carefully, taking in all body movements and calculating possible feints. He saw none. This was nothing more than a beast showing its brute strength. He almost smiled, thinking this would be too easy.

Gildarts grabbed Laxus' wrist just as he rammed forward, easily pushing the arm off target, and tipped his head slightly to the right to dodge the blow. Then, holding the dragon slayer in place, Gildarts' head came down to strike against the blond's forehead. The red eyes rolled slightly. A quick glance assured Gildarts that he had not hit so hard as to cause a concussion, yet Laxus was not falling unconscious either. Although he had hoped to knock Laxus out fast, he did not want to permanently
disable him.

While hunched over in pain, Laxus managed to grab the metal arm in his teeth again, snarling and shaking his head like a wild dog to pull on it. Gildarts yanked the dragon slayer's hair to pull him away, but the jaw snapped down hard enough to dent into the metal.

"Little brat, stop biting me," he yelled.

Rage and pain overwhelmed the beastly face as his blond hair was brutally grabbed and ripped. Gildarts tried to pull Laxus back enough to get a hit at his neck, something to knock him out. When that did not work, Gildarts lowered his fake arm slightly down to give more, then rammed the arm up into Laxus' face, strengthening its force by using the heel of his free hand to boost the hit. He knew that in a normal fight, this would probably knock out three or four teeth, and there was a good chance that Laxus might bite his tongue. However, the lengthened and sharper teeth of a dragon-slayer-turned-beast were stronger than he expected. Laxus looked jarred, but he did not stop fighting.

The older mage heard a creak in the bitten metal but did not have time to think about it. Laxus used the force of Gildarts' blow against him. The fake arm cracked, he felt bolts pop, and suddenly the prosthetic ripped off with a shower of broken metal bits while the forearm up to the elbow remained stuck in the dragon slayer's snarling maw.

"Goddammit," Gildarts hissed.

Not giving Laxus time to gloat, Gildarts used his free hand to strike another hard palm blow into Laxus' chest, shoving the dragon slayer into the wall of the warehouse and cracking the bricks. The older mage groaned as he held the metal stump.

"Sir!" Balaur screamed in horror.

"Fake arm, kid," the older man assured him. "I lost that one a few years ago to Acnologia. Still, he yanked my shoulder out of socket doing that. Damn!" Gildarts pressed up on the stump until a bone in the shoulder popped grotesquely. He clenched his teeth in pain. It might be a metal prosthetic, but the shoulder joint connected to real bone, skin, ligaments, and muscles. Popping that shoulder joint hurt the remaining nerves.

Laxus recovered enough to tip his head back and howl in victory with the mechanical arm still in his mouth. Then he spit it out and grinned with his eyes gleaming scarlet in bloodlust. However, he hissed when he saw his opponent still stood firm.

"Strong," he snarled.

Gildarts rotated and cracked his shoulder a bit more. "You're not too bad yourself, Laxus."

However, holding back was something the Crash Magic mage hated to do, and the longer this fight lasted, the more Laxus became beast-like. During their brief confrontation, a tail had grown out of Laxus' lower spine area, and his posture was slouching over into the crouch of an animal.

"Doing this one-handed will be tough," Gildarts grumbled.

Balaur had wings on his back, but he was barely staving off the rest of the transformation. "Don't you have magic? I thought you were a mage."

"Shut it, kid," Gildarts warned. "If I use my magic on him, he could easily die. Still, with only one arm...shit," he hissed. Losing the arm did not hurt, but the immense pull on his shoulder was throbbing. "I'm getting too old for this."
Balaur moaned in agony. "Please hurry, sir. The beast desperately wants out to fight. Yes, fight! No," he yelled, grabbing his head. "Not yet. Don't change. Not yet!"

Gildarts growled under his breath. "Two of these monsters would be a big problem even for me," he realized. "Guess there's no helping it."

Laxus rubbed the red mark on his brow from the powerful headbutt earlier. His vision was still clouded, so he took his prey's lack of movement for a reprieve. However, his disorientation grew worse as he was hefted from the ground and flailed about with nothing to support his feet. The concrete under him had cracked and raised into the air, yanking Laxus off-balance. The insane dragon slayer roared in defiance as the ground fell out from under him. He spread his wings to try balancing himself.

Not giving Laxus a moment to regain his bearings, Gildarts sprinted across the space between himself and his younger guild mate. He brought his knee up into Laxus' diaphragm and added power to the kick with his magic by forcing the ground beneath the foot to shatter and reform in a quick jutting angle, slamming the knee even farther up. Laxus choked on a bit of vomit. He slashed a claw out, but Gildarts raised the metal stump to block the strike from hitting his face. One clawed swipe managed to slice across the older man's chest, but he ignored it with only a hiss of pain. Gildarts delivered another powered kick to the inner mid-section. He felt ribs crack under the power of his knee, and this time Laxus puked blood.

"Sorry, Laxus," Gildarts muttered, knowing the man within could not hear him, but still frowning that he had to fight this roughly. "It has to be done. You'll thank me later."

Gildarts brought his elbow up and across his body, hoping to strike at the back of Laxus' neck. A hissing roar was the only thing he heard as the air around him became charged.

"Want power!" the lightning user sneered. "Slayer power."

Without calling out any attack name, or even using his hands to direct the flow of the magic, the enraged dragon slayer released a messy version of Lightning Dragon's Heavenward Halberd. A glowing electrical spear shot right at Gildarts' head. Using the fullness of his Disassembly magic, Gildarts shattered the spear of lightning that nearly hit him point-blank. Still, the bolts scattered, and although the main blast did not hit, his body became surrounded by electricity. Gildarts tensed, and his body convulsed so hard he could not even scream from the tingling pain. Laxus smirked as he saw his aim, while sloppy, had affected his prey.

Once the attack was over, Gildarts staggered and threw his cloak to one side, freeing himself of any impediments and managing to back away before more bursts like that could hit him directly. He cursed under his breath, knowing he should have been more careful. Damn him, but he had slipped into the mindset of fighting a mere beast, not a powerful Lightning Dragon Slayer and S-Class mage. That bit of underestimating cost him. Now he struggled to clear his jolted mind, trying to focus on his surroundings, where Laxus was, where Balaur was, and making sure no civilians were around.

"Shit," Gildarts hissed. "That...hurt," he admitted with a smile of admiration. Then he fell to one knee and coughed harshly. The electric jolt just about stopped his heart, and he pounded on his own chest to get the muscle back into rhythm. "Dammit. Gonna give this old man a heart attack. I'm lucky I'm a tough old bastard, or Cana would be having a funeral for me right about now. Boy, she'd be pissed, too! Just like her mother." Gildarts actually threw his head back and laughed when he pictured Cana bitching him out just like her mother use to do. "Women are never quiet, are they, boy?"

"Cana?" Laxus growled, tilting his head to the side in question. "Want woman. Want fuck."
The laugh died instantly. Gildarts' eyes narrowed dangerously, and his teeth clenched in rage. In a fatalistically low voice, he asked, "You wanna do what with my daughter?"


Not even the speed of the Lightning Dragon Slayer could catch the fast fist that slammed forward and connected with the bridge of Laxus' nose, sending the blond a good fifty meters backwards. Gildarts eyes were wild with fatherly fury.

"You stay the hell away from Cana," he warned softly.

With blood pouring from a broken nose and snarling over his continued lack of victory, Laxus took a wide stance. His chest and cheeks expanded as he sucked in vast amounts of air to prepare his roar. Gildarts spit out a stream of blood and wiped his mouth with his forearm. His eyes glared at the dragon slayer for a moment before calming himself.

"You're just a beast. Primal instincts. Still...this has gone on long enough."

He dived deep within himself. The aura around him grew, the ground crumbled, floated, and bits of rock disintegrated at the sheer force of Gildarts' unleashed power. A column of golden electricity sizzled against the column of pure white magical force.

Many kilometers away in the Fairy Tail guild hall, Cana sensed something was wrong. She dropped her beer barrel and raced to the door, throwing it open with a shattering bang. The bloody dusk glow barely gave enough light by which to see. She felt that unique power, and she saw the two spikes of intense magic in the gloaming.

"Father," she whispered worriedly.

Makarov came up behind her and frowned at the overwhelming magical forces clashing together. "It seems we're going to have a problem with Laxus, as well."

"But Gildarts..."

"Don't worry," the old guild master smiled confidently. "Do you really think Gildarts is weaker than Laxus?"

She blushed a little as pride rose to the surface. "No, Master," she smiled. "There's no way he'd lose...because he knows I'd kill him if he died."

Makarov laughed at that, but he still watched the clashing towers of magic with worry. He had confidence in Gildarts, but the man hated to go easy on people. He was more worried for Laxus and any bystanders in the area.

The air around the two mages seemed to freeze, as if time itself stopped to watch the first and second ranked mages of Fairy Tail in their decisive last clash. Gildarts' dark eyes and Laxus' glowing red irises focused completely on one another.

Suddenly, with a ferocious snarl, Laxus released his roar upon his prey. A second later, Gildarts unlocked all of his power and sent it out in a radiating blast aimed solely at the blond dragon slayer. Light enveloped the two as hell itself descended upon Earthland.

All around Magnolia, windows shattered, sidewalks cracked, the ground rumbled hard enough to
knock food off shelves, and anything electronic died instantly. In the industrial area, entire buildings crumbled before the intense clash, and people even a kilometer away felt their hair rise a little from the static. Anyone too close went a little numb in their limbs, although the effect faded soon. Shockingly, no one was hurt too badly.

At ground zero, there was a crater left behind, and the building the rapists had used as their headquarters was a pile of tiny cubes of rubble. Anything metallic sparked with arcing lines of electricity. The air stank of ozone and dust.

Gildarts coughed harshly. His hair stuck out like a mad scientist, but he had a smile on his face. In front of him were dozens of tiny copies of Laxus. Not the beast, he noted, but just Laxus. They all looked a bit dazed due to the forced transformation back into the mage's normal body.

"Well," wheezed Gildarts, "I'm glad that worked. It was a gamble that you'd either Disassemble into a bunch of little beasts, or the magic would force you back into your real body. With luck like this, I should hit a casino and win enough money to buy Cana a pretty gold necklace. I think..." He coughed more. "...she'd like that." He pounded on his chest again. "Damn heart. I bet kids like Natsu wouldn't have to worry about things like this. Yup, I'm getting old."

Belatedly, he looked back to where Balaur had collapsed. He did not see the boy, and he panicked for a moment. Then in the air he heard a roar. Looking up, he saw what looked like a small brown and black dragon flying across the evening sky.


With a poof, the miniatures combined into one man. Laxus laid on the ground moaning and disoriented, his face bloodied, his shirt missing, with a nasty bruise forming where Gildarts' kick had broken some ribs. He could hardly move. His shoulders and lower back throbbed in pain, and he felt like his head was going to burst. Gildarts marched over to him and knelt by his side.

"You fought well, Laxus. You might be yourself now, but I can't chance it. Sorry." He delivered a hit to the dragon slayer's neck, and Laxus was knocked out cold. "Still, carrying your ass back to the guild with one arm is going to kill my back."

Half an hour later, the older mage managed to stumble in through the guild doors and heavily dropped Laxus to the floor. While Bickslow and Evergreen rushed over to help their team leader, Gildarts stretched and cracked his spine. Cana rushed over to him and was about to take his hand when she noticed the missing arm.

"What happened?" she shouted.

"The kid's more than just all bark," he said casually, brushing the matter aside and hurrying over to Makarov. "I apologize, Master. I had the feral dragon slayer, but the smell he was giving off apparently triggered Laxus. While I suppressed him, the feral escaped."

The small old man frowned. "I see. We'll have to hunt him again."

"Sir," Gildarts whispered with a disturbed grimace. "I spoke to him. He was still mostly sane when we arrived. His name is Balaur. He's just a kid," the Crash Magic mage stressed. "He's scared, he knows he's out of control, and he's desperate for help. Master, if possible, I strongly feel we shouldn't kill this boy."

Makarov's face hardened. "Gildarts, I know how you love kids, and I'm sure if I met him, I'd
probably feel the same way. However, Gajeel has already warned that there is no way to cure a feral
dragon slayer. Like with a rabid dog, the best you can do is put them down painlessly."

"But to kill a kid..."

"A kid who had murdered at least a dozen people in this city alone. I got a warning from Sabertooth.
They discovered two entire towns wiped out by what they say is a feral dragon slayer. They also
want to keep the matter quiet, but they figured they should warn us. Since a feral is obsessed with
finding other dragon slayers, they worried that this beast would head to Magnolia." The tiny master
gazed sternly. "Even if we could save this boy, do you think he could live a normal life knowing he
has butchered hundreds of people?"

Gildarts looked away as he remembered Balaur beseeching to kill him before he could murder
anyone else. The boy had been so guilt-ridden, he wanted death.

"Gildarts," Makarov said quietly. "If it must come down to that, I would rather send you than one of
these brats. Can I count on you?"

The Crash Magic mage remembered thinking about that while heading off to the industrial district. If
one of these teens had to kill a boy who was almost their age, it would devastate them. It had to be
him or Makarov. He did not like it one bit, but he firmed his heart.

"Yes, Master. I understand."

"Thank you," Makarov said, although his eyes held a silent apology. "Now go get your arm
repaired." He watched Gildarts' unsteady steps and realized, for such a man like him to be so
unstable after a fight, Laxus must have not held back. "The only person left who can track down the
beast is Gajeel. He's already past this adolescent phase and matured."

Just then, Laxus began to wake up. "Hey, old geezer," he grumbled. "Are you saying I'm
immature?"

Makarov walked over to him as his grandson tried to sit up. "As a dragon slayer, you are. Laxus,
you're forbidden from leaving the guild until Gajeel can do the rite-of-passage ceremony. Consider
yourself grounded."

"Dammit, I ain't some kid going through puberty."

Makarov chuckled softly. "Maybe when you come of age as a dragon slayer too, then you'll give me
some great-grandbabies."

Laxus tried to leap at him, but his body hurt too badly to stand. Evergreen and Bickslow held his
shoulders so he would not completely fall over.

"Laxus," Gildarts bellowed from across the room. "I forbid you from touching Cana."

Laxus huffed petulantly. "Who'd want to touch that drunk?"

"During our fight, you said you wanted to fuck her."

"What?" he roared in shock.

"What?" Cana shrieked, blushing as she glanced over to Laxus in disgust.

"Oh-ho!" Makarov giggled naughtily. "The beast drives up the inner desires of the person. Good. I
expect many great-grandbabies."

"Get bent, old man!" Laxus shouted.

"Cana," Gildarts said sternly. "What you do in private is your own business, but I don't want grandchildren too soon. I'm not old enough for that."

"Like hell," Cana yelled.

Makarov pouted. "But I want great-grandbabies."

Both Laxus and Cana yelled together. "I'm not having kids!"

End of Chapter 12
Lucy and the gang had been traveling for over a week, and she was just about at her wits' end. Every morning, she woke up in a jolt from nightmares of red eyes and hellish growls, yet that never dampened her resolve to travel, hunting after Natsu, determined to find him and help him before it was too late. They followed clues, reports of flying creatures, frightened villagers whispering of crimson eyes in the dark, and farmers who had animals killed. Luckily, there were no reports of people being injured. That was a huge relief.

They got a message from Magnolia that morning about the feral dragon slayer, that he was called Balaur and just a teen not much younger than Lucy. Still, upon hearing Erza read the letter, Lucy had held her stomach where the beast who attacked her had nearly disemboweled her, and she shivered when she remembered how that beast had attempted to rape her. How could that have been a sixteen-year-old boy? Or had the beast that time also been Natsu? She did not know, not even Natsu knew if it was actually him that night, yet she could not imagine either type of boy hurting someone so terribly.

Hearing that Laxus had turned beastly due to the smell of the feral was also disturbing news. So far, Wendy showed no signs of trouble, but Lucy could see that the letter had the girl terrified. Laxus had transformed and attacked Gildarts. Wendy was such a gentle girl, so the fear that she might hurt her friends made her face a lot paler. Mirajane hugged Wendy most of that day, and Freed assured her that she should not have troubles. It was the scent produced by a feral dragon slayer that affected her. Reasonably, he explained, Wendy was safer out here in the wilderness, where that scent was not around. No scent, no transformation.

Of course, that was assuming Natsu had not completely fallen into the level of a feral beast. Lucy wondered what the final change was. When did a dragon slayer merely going through "puberty" fall into a creature that could no longer be helped? She now wished she could have talked to Gajeel more before leaving so they could have a better idea of what to look out for. He gave them only a few warnings.

"He'll want to change," the iron dragon slayer had told them. "He'll struggle against it at first, but after a while he'd rather be the beast than face the hell he's living. It's better to surrender consciousness—or be dead—than continue struggling, knowing what the beast inside wants to do, knowing you're the one doing it. If he lets it slip that far, to where he willingly gives up control, he's a step away from turning feral. Cheerleader," Gajeel said, glaring at Lucy seriously, "if that fire-brat gets that far, do him a favor and knock him out. Keep him unconscious, through magic or drugs or keeping him pissed drunk, whatever you gotta do. Just don't let him suffer like that. Trust me!"

It was the only clue she had, but that would take finding Natsu and testing his current mental state.

Lucy stared up at the stars and said a quick prayer that they could reach Natsu again, and soon.
wanted to see him, hold him, comfort him so he never reached the point of wanting to give up or die. Yet that night he attacked her at the ball, he had told her to kill him if he tried it again. Did that mean he was already slipping? She just hoped they reached him in time.

"Natsu," she whispered into the night. She found the constellation Draco the Dragon. It made her think of her pink-haired Salamander. She realized...she missed Natsu dearly.

**Somewhere to the West**

Natsu laid out in the open. He was not even sure where he was anymore. Another valley, another abandoned field. He stared up at the stars. He bet Lucy knew which constellations these were, and probably the name of each major star. He had never been able to see pictures out of such far away points of light. Happy swore he saw fish in the sky. Of course, Happy saw fish in clouds, tree shadows, and burnt toast. To Natsu, they were just dots of light amidst the darkness.

Except for tonight.

Tonight, he saw Lucy's face outlined in celestial glory. He saw her smile, her large eyes, and even her lopsided ponytail. He saw her so clearly, he wondered if maybe Lucy was a Celestial Spirit too, and she was gazing down at him.

"Lucy," he moaned, feeling weakened from transforming back and forth so frequently in the past week. "Help me, Lucy. Even like this, I can feel it inside me. Oh Lucy, I...no," he sighed in regret. For how direly he yearned to see her again, he knew that he had not gained control yet. He was still dangerous to her. "You need to stay away. It wants you."

His eyes flickered red. "Yesss...want. Want girlie with good smell. Want touch her. Want taste her. Want fuck her."

Natsu growled and ground his fists into his eyes. "No! Stop," he screamed. "Not Lucy!"

He sat still, waiting worriedly, fearing that the beast might take advantage and rear up again. He was waiting for it, like waiting for a jack-in-the-box to pop. Nothing. The silence in his mind was almost more unnerving than the voice that sometimes tried to take over.

He began to cry softly, feeling as helpless as a child, more helpless than the day Igneel vanished without a trace. Whenever he thought about Lucy now, he saw her terrified face as he woke up to find their bodies conjoined. His last smell of Lucy had been highly sensual, and even if only for a few seconds, he had felt her burning heat sheathing him.

He hated that moment...and he loved it! It haunted him, and it enthralled him.

Slowly, Natsu reached down to his pants. The memory always made him aroused. Sure enough, just thinking about how moist, soft, and hot she had felt inside made him hard. He touched the bulge in his pants, and pleasure tickled through him. It was dark here. No one could see him. The only life was an owl in the distance and some sheep he could smell in a neighboring pasture.

"I broke you, Lucy," he whispered as his hand slowly undid his pants, freeing the swollen member straining inside. "I broke you, and I don't even remember doing it. This body did those things, but I wasn't in control. I can't remember! I'm the worst. I can't remember...thrusting into you." He hissed as his hand gripped himself hard and thrust downward, pulling the foreskin back. "I can't remember...kissing your lips, or sucking your breasts, or whether you moaned or screamed."

He stroked himself imagining Lucy's face, her massive breasts gleaming in a low light, her face
looking so coy and blushing as he thrust waves of pleasure into her. He could almost smell that sensual aroma again, the musky scent of her juices mixed with the perspiration of exertion and that special floral aroma that only belonged to Lucy.

"I was a total monster that night. This beast acts on my wants and...and I want you, Lucy." He hissed as confessing that to the stellar outline of her face made his body feel hot. "I want you," he repeated, liking how good it felt to admit those feelings after such a long time working with Lucy and keeping silent about his desires. "I want you so much. Oh God, Lucy!" Natsu shuddered in sensual pleasure as his sharp teeth clenched from his stroking hand.

He wondered when it had happened. On Tenrou Island? He knew he had felt something then when he took her hand and, for the first time, noticed how soft her skin was. Or had it been even earlier? He remembered punching Gray once when the ice bastard began bragging that he was going to be the first to ask out Lucy. Of course, when Mirajane tried to goad Natsu into admitting he was in love, Natsu dismissed it as merely feeling competitive. He simply was not going to make it easy on the ice bastard, that's all! Yet part of his heart had burned at hearing Gray haughtily talking as if he could win over any girl with a few smooth words and a promise of ice cream and cake.

Lucy deserved more. She deserved better! She deserved...

Him!

"Gimme another chance, Lucy," he panted into the night, and his breath made little puffs of smoke in the chilly air. "Next time, it'll be better. I'll make it feel good. Reeeeal good. I'll make you moan in pleasure. I'll love you as long as you want. I'll last all night long if I have to, anything you want, anything you desire."

The calluses on his hands made jerking off a little rough. He now knew how soft a woman truly was. He knew how good it felt to be inside Lucy, the squishy feel of her walls, the softness and moist heat that his hands could never duplicate. The memory of that feeling, only a few seconds worth but still enough, made Natsu moan. He desperately wanted to feel her again now. The beast brought out his desires, and ever since this issue with transforming into that creature started, that hidden lust inside Natsu had begun to increase.

"Ahh...nngh!" Natsu moaned loudly, not caring since there were no people around to hear him. "Next time, Lucy. I'll do it properly next time. I'll be gentle. I'll show you I'm a man, not a beast. I'm not a beast!" he insisted, and panted heatedly into the night. "I want you, Lucy. I need you. I...I lo-...love...you."

He felt euphoria at being able to say it. The feeling shot straight down to his groin and made him shudder. His back arched up on the bare grass as his teeth gritted tightly against the throbbing pressure within him building to a peak.

"Oh God, I love you, Lucy!" he shouted.

He had been the one to bring her into the guild. He had approached her first about starting a team together. He had never bothered with forming a team before, but Lucy...Lucy was different. From the very beginning, he felt that. Lucy was gentle, sweet, funny. He sincerely wanted to protect her, unlike he had ever felt for anyone in Fairy Tail before, not even for Lisanna. No one else could protect Lucy like him. No one understood Lucy like him. Lucy was his by right. Finders keepers! First come, first served!

And now, he had claimed Lucy. He had been her first. Except...
He screamed into the night, "Why can't I remember it?"

On the brink of climaxing, he stopped masturbating and dug his fingers into the soft soil in fury. His cock twitched painfully in need, his balls felt like they were burning, yet he refused to touch himself more. He had done that horrible thing to Lucy, forced himself on her, taken her, broken her, stolen her innocence, and he could not remember a goddamn thing.

"I hate it!" he screamed. "I hate myself. I hate this beast in me. I hate it! I hate it!" His dirty fingers dug into his scalp and ripped at his pink hair. "Someone just kill me already!"

He grabbed his cock again, but this time it was to punish it. That horribly troublesome thing with a mind of its own had pierced into Lucy. The beast had stolen what Natsu wanted. It was the beast, but it was still his body. He despised his manhood for doing that. Natsu squeezed his shaft so hard, it was agonizing. His hand heated to an extreme, so hot his body could feel the flames. It made him scream, and his voice cracked at the genital pain. His cock deflated quickly, the life choked out of it.

"Stupid idiot!" he scolded of himself. "I am such a moron. I love Lucy? Damn, I'm such an asshole! What right do I have to love her? What right do I have to jerk off thinking about her? I'm the worst sort of pathetic scumbag in the world! I don't deserve that sort of pleasure after I hurt Lucy. I don't deserve happiness at all. "Fuck!" he screamed, releasing his fury in that one word.

Once he felt himself completely soft again, he released the chokehold on his cock and collapsed back onto the field. That was going to hurt for a while. Yet pain wasn't enough! Such pain was nothing compared to what Lucy must have felt.

"What right do I have," he asked softly in exhaustion, "even to live?"

He sobbed thickly, choking on the tears until it felt like he was slowly drowning.

"Lucy," he sniffled. "Why did you forgive me? Didn't I hurt you? Didn't I...r...ra...r...rape you?"

Hearing himself admit that wracked a whole new level of self-hatred over him. He swallowed back a shot of acid from his stomach at the thought of what he had done.

"Or...or did you want it? Did you think it was me? It wasn't," he sniffled in guilt, "but maybe you thought it was. Maybe you gave in because you thought it was me. Maybe you forgave me only because you thought that was me being too bold due to the beast's influence. I wonder what you'll think when you find out the truth. Still...did you...maybe...like it?"

That was probably asking for too much, yet the only thing that kept him from castrating himself right then and there was a tiny bit of hope that Lucy possibly might have enjoyed it. After all, Lucy was strong, she would have fought a lot harder if she had hated it. He remembered how bruised and bloodied she had been after that first attack. Many of the bruises were from struggling against her attacker. If she had not wanted Natsu to touch her, she would have fought him hard. Her keyring had still been at her side, untouched. She could have grabbed it, called out help, and fought him. Instead, when Natsu regained consciousness that night, she had been lying under him, her cheeks flushed, her hands caressing his face. Although she had been crying, she had also been smiling and telling him it was okay. The fact that she did not fight against him led Natsu to hope beyond expectation that maybe Lucy thought it was him in control and allowed him to do those things to her.

If she wanted it, then it wasn't rape...right? If she allowed him to touch her like that, then perhaps it meant she wanted it, too.

"Lucy," he sighed plaintively. "Please don't hate me. I...I don't even want to live if you hate me. So
find me, Lucy. Save me before I completely lose control. And then..." He smiled up at the stars, seeing her eyes twinkle in the heavens. "Then...I'll watch over you. I swear, I'll dedicate my whole life to making it up to you."

That private oath lightened the pain in his heart.

"I'm a beast, so I'll serve you like a loyal dog," he decided. "You can be my master, like you're master over all those Celestial Spirits. I'll take responsibility and protect you...for as long as I live."

The thought of watching over her every day for the rest of his life was too good to be considered a punishment. If he could do that, Natsu knew he would be happy. To stay with Lucy, serve her, be with her every day, maybe even move in with her so he could make her dinner, help her clean, and guard her house at night, was simply too good to hope for. Still, he meant it sincerely. He wanted to take responsibility. He had hurt her, so he would dedicate his life to protecting her.

The cathartic release of his anguish had an unexpected reaction. He felt himself getting aroused again.

"Are you kidding me?" he moaned, wishing he could simply will away such horniness. He looked down at the fully erect member and sneered at it. "I'm such a disgusting beast. I don't even want to touch myself, but this thing isn't going to go away on its own."

Just then, a sheep wandered into the field. It grazed casually, either not seeing him lying in the flowers or not caring. Natsu's eyes flickered red again.

"Want..."

He closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Oh hell no! That's...that's disgusting!"

The sheep must have thought him to be friendly because it wandered closer.

"No...go away," he panted, already feeling panicky as he felt a stirring in his mind. Pain spiked through Natsu's head. He grabbed the sides of his scalp as that wretchedly familiar sensation started up. "No! No, not again. You dumb sheep, shoo. Dammit!"

Animal instincts churned inside Natsu as he stared at the animal. All he wanted was to relieve the ache in his loins. But this...this was beyond being gross. This was bestial.

"I really am a horrible beast," he decided. Slowly, with his body moving on its own, Natsu rose to his feet. "No...no, stop! Don't...I won't let you take control."

One hand reached to his scarf, but Natsu caught his wrist and held it back by force. He had already figured out that the scarf was a break of some sort, keeping sanity intact.

"No! Not the scarf! You stupid beast, I won't let you."

Suddenly, the out of control hand sprouted long claws, and his fingers lengthened like the talons of a predatory bird. Natsu screamed as he saw how the beast was taking control one bit of his body at a time.

"No!"

The clawed hand snagged the scarf, then pulled away fast. Once that little scrap of protection was
gone, Natsu shrieked as he felt his control vanishing.

"Want freedom!"

The sheep looked over at his shouts and bleated. Natsu's head swung toward it with fiery eyes and drool dripping hungrily. Then he grabbed his head and shook it hard.

"Get away, you dumb sheep. This isn't me! Don't trust me. I...I can't stop it anymore," Natsu explained as the sheep trotted a little away. "Come on, run away! I...I can't..."

That inner lust forced him on while the last shreds of his humanity screamed at him to stop.

"No!" he yelled, still fighting but unable to stop his legs from moving. "Wanna...wanna stay good." His eyes began to roll backwards. He felt his consciousness slipping and the beast rising forward. "I don't want to watch."


The sheep realized he was getting too close, and it bleated again in fear. The beast coiled down in the long grass, then leaped forward, caught the sheep, and yanked it to the ground. The creature cried in terror. The sound gave the inner beast a thrill.


It lined its cock up with the animal. The sheep's eyes were wide in terror. It struggled to break free, but sharp claws dug into the wool and down to the flesh.

"Want...Lucccccy!" As it hissed her name, the beast thrust into the poor ewe, making it cry out and balk. "Struggle, yessss! Fight! Fear! Fear me," it growled deeply.

The winged beast thrust a few more times, and the sheep gave ghastly cries as if it was being slaughtered from the inside. The beast snarled as it ravaged the animal.

"Want fuck. Want...blood!"

Fangs gleamed in the moonlight, then the beast chomped down on the sheep's throat. Its desperate beats gargled while the beast lapped up the hot blood spurting from the artery it had ripped open. It growled at the satisfaction of both its carnal desires and its hunger.

"Fuck, good."

The dark creature roared up to the stars. Its tail whipped from side to side. Guttural cries of sadistic pleasure shattered the night. Growls of greed mixed with the dying, lonesome weeping of the sacrificial sheep.

"Want fuck," the beast howled, thrusting with each shout. "Fuck! Fuck! Want it! Want! Fuuuuuuck!"

The sheep cried out in agony as the claws dug into its skin, pulling it closer. Then the winged monster leaned over its prey and proceeded to eat the sheep while still alive and being assaulted so brutally. The death screams from the ewe chased away all other animals in the flower field. The beast rose up, blood dripping down its lips, neck, and chest. It snarled, then its head snapped back in one
Natsu's face flinched as sunlight peeked over a mountain and shined into his eyes. He grumbled something about Happy closing the curtains, but slowly his eyes opened to a pinkish purple dawn sky.

"I feel like crap," he mumbled.

Slowly, feeling the familiar ache in his back and head, Natsu sat up. He was still in the flower field. His neck felt cold, and he reached to it only to feel bareness. The scarf was gone, and the whole front of his chest was covered in black flakes of dried blood. He looked at his hands to see they were also stained.

"Damn," was all he said.

This situation was getting to be more frequent, so the thought of horror and dread, fears about what he might have done the night before, were no longer affecting him. It was an apathetic acceptance that he must have killed something. So long as it was not a human, he tried not to worry about it.

Natsu rose to his feet and stretched high above his head. That was when he realized that he was completely naked. He looked down at his nude body with a hum of question.

"Well, that's different," he muttered, but it was not a big deal. He saw his pants nearby, his shirt was where he had left it, and the scarf had blown only a little away. "I feel like Gray, collecting all my clothes," he laughed to himself. "Now to find a river. I really need to bathe."

Natsu left the field without noticing the massive scene of carnage, bits of ripped wool, splattered blood and entrails, and the bones of the sheep left behind, hidden amidst the flowers.

End of Chapter 13

Chapter End Notes

Whoa...intense. I was shivering while writing this. I debated for months about whether I should really add this scene—I am so not into bestiality—but remember, this is the beast in control, not Natsu. Poor Natsu probably had half a minute of realizing what the beast wanted before losing the battle, eventually wanting to give up consciousness in order to stay "good." That in itself is my way of showing how Natsu's transformation is progressing. He's at a point where he would rather give up control passively in order to save his sanity, and it's easy to let the beast take over, whereas a few chapters ago it was agonizing. This shows he is really close to falling into the level of "feral."
Lucy sighed as she sat outside a farmstead babysitting Gray. The Ice-Make mage slumped his elbow onto his knees with his chin in his hands, glaring in the direction of the quaint house in the midst of wheat fields.

Softly, he grumbled to himself. "I don't see what the big deal is. Does Erza think I'm not civilized enough to talk to some damn country bumpkins?"

"Erza didn't like saving your butt at the last farm," Lucy explained, jotting some notes in a tablet she brought along in case she got ideas for her novel. The view right now of the valley, tamed by the calloused hands of a farmer, was too inspiring not to write about it.

"Seriously, that was not my fault," Gray protested in irritation. "I was questioning people just like she told me to do. I said nothing rude at all, just the same questions we've been asking every farmer. Those people shot at me for no reason."

"Gray," Lucy sighed, "you stripped to your boxers while cornering the farmer's daughter against a haystack. What was her father supposed to think you were doing? When you told him you were asking her if she'd seen a pink beast, that really didn't help."

"It's not my fault if the farmer had a dirty mind."

Lucy sighed to ignore the whole humiliating incident. She stared out at the clouds that threatened rain to the south. Luckily they were heading northwest, following clues. It seemed like Natsu had the sense to keep to farmlands and not terrorize large cities. However, that made gathering clues about him next to impossible. There was no pattern to his attacks, other than they were farm animals. Once it was a cow, then three goats, another farmer reported five butchered chickens and all the eggs eaten raw, another showed them the carcass of his prized horse and demanded that someone pay for killing the stallion. That was the one who took a shot at Gray and might have hit him if the chronic stripper had not been so quick at forming an ice shield.

Finally, Erza, Freed, Mira, Wendy, Happy, and Charle returned from the farm with news.

"A single sheep was killed out in a pasture," Erza told the other two. "No one was around, so they thought it was wolves, but the farmer said all he found were human tracks, someone wearing sandals. He also said a neighbor's son saw a young man fighting a cougar barehanded, spouting flames like a dragon."

Lucy nodded. "Definitely Natsu. When was this?"

"The dead sheep was found yesterday. The cougar was early this morning."
Wendy looked excited. "We're really close. I went out to the field, and I could still smell Natsu. It was a fresh scent, although...not a good one," she mumbled, looking immensely troubled.

Mira hugging the little girl's shoulders in emotional support. "There was a lot of blood and..." The white-haired woman stopped short, blushing a little. Luckily, Wendy had no idea what she was smelling, but Mira figured it out easily enough. Semen! She had searched that whole field, horrified that they might find the body of a female victim. Luckily, there was only the single dead sheep, torn to ragged bits. Just the memory of the smell of that fly-infested carcass was enough to turn her stomach. "It was a mess," she summarized. "Wendy began to get a headache from the smell. She said something about Natsu's smell is really wrong."

"It's Natsu," Wendy assured them, "but it's almost not him at all. I can't explain it. We need to find him quickly. I can probably follow his trail from here, so long as he doesn't fly away again."

"One sheep," Lucy hummed. "Natsu could have eaten more, so he must have left after people arrived."

"I spoke to the shepherd on duty that night," Freed told them. "He said he heard growls and the sheep bleating. He blew a horn to warn for wolves, but he didn't go to chase the creature away since he only had his staff. He briefly saw red glowing eyes in the dark."

Lucy shivered as she remembered what those burning eyes looked like. They were something out of a nightmare. "Natsu would have been able to smell him," she realized. "Yet he didn't attack." She held her chin as she considered this. "This is the third time someone has actually seen Natsu in his beast form, yet not once has he attacked a human. He's only hunting animals. With the feral creature, it hunted anything, animal or human. Maybe a small part of Natsu doesn't want to hurt anyone. That means he still has some control." She smiled with hope. "He's not too far gone yet, but we need to find him."


They returned to a gravel path that lazily weaved between copses of small trees and snaky rivers. Wendy walked ahead with Mira, sniffing the air and trying to follow where the scent led. Erza pulled their cart of supplies, with Happy sitting depressed on top of the massive pile and Charle trying her best to cheer him up. Freed walked alone, tagging along since his skills were needed once this manhunt reached its target. Bringing up the end was Lucy and Gray. Her eyes shined with the hope of seeing Natsu again soon, but Gray's expression had been getting darker as they drew closer.

At night, they camped by a waterfall to restock on supplies. Mira and Erza went to take a shower in the falls, but Lucy just quickly washed up, hating the icy cold water. Freed was out in some nearby woods using his runes to hunt; his ability to snare wild game worked with amazing accuracy. Wendy and the two Exceeds prepared dinner, with the little girl making vegetable stew while Happy tried to show off his barbecuing skills, usually just burning the meat until Charle yelled at him and sent him to go fish while she cooked.

Lucy drifted away from the camp to look at the stars. She smiled up at the constellation Draco the Dragon. One of these days, she would have to get that key just to make Natsu happy, although he would probably only want to fight it. She laughed quietly to herself as she could practically hear his voice.

"A celestial dragon? That's so cool! Hey Lucy, call him out. I wanna fight him!"

Yes, that's precisely what he would say.
She heard Gray's steps approaching and did not even need to look around. The Ice-Make mage cautiously came nearer, watching his steps in the darkness.

"Hey," Gray said with a heavy voice. "Um...nice night."

"Mmh," she agreed. Lucy leaned back a bit, feeling relaxed by the distant roar of the waterfall, the babbling stream at her feet, soft rustling in the trees around her, and the silence of the stars.

Gray sat close beside her. He also looked up at the stars for a while, but he quickly lost interest. He gazed at Lucy instead. They were teammates, yet he could hardly help but think she was incredibly cute. Of course, he thought Erza was lovely, too. Juvia was rather pretty as well. He might think Levy wasn't half bad, but Gajeel would kill him if he said so! Still, there was something pure about Lucy. The way her brown eyes gleamed in the starlight, how her face glowed pale silver in the moon's rays, and the glittering of gold from her hair, like a halo around a saint...sometimes he wished for more between them, something closer than just teammates, and sometimes he was happy just to gaze upon her like a work of art.

"I don't get it," Gray finally sighed, surprising Lucy. "Why are you defending Natsu?"

She blinked her wide eyes in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Earlier, you were going on about him having control. Obviously, he doesn't! He's slaughtering farm animals, for crying out loud!"

"He's not hurting people..."

"He hurt you," Gray snapped, and the inner fury simmered in his eyes. "I won't forgive him for doing that, either."

She looked upset at being reminded of that dark attack. "I've already forgiven him, so you should also. He wasn't in control..."

"Precisely! And he's still not. If anything, when we find him, he'll be worse, and you're going to be his target."

"I know the risks," she assured. "I'm the one who volunteered to be bait."

"You need to be ready for the worst, Lucy. You're getting your hopes up, and that's worrying me. For all we know, he might be too far gone to save."

"Even so, I'm not giving up on him. I don't think he..."

"Do you think you can forgive him and everything will go back to normal?" Gray argued. "Look, I want to find that flame-brain and bring him back home, if only so I can castrate him for hurting you. I really do hope we catch up to him soon, but I'm worried about you. You keep saying you're okay, that it's all fine and dandy since it was Natsu. That's wrong, Lucy! Whether it's Natsu or me or anyone, taking you by force is wrong. Yet you're ready to welcome that jerk back with a laugh and a kiss on the cheek. You're only letting yourself be used. Even if you love Natsu, that bastard assaulted you, he stole your virginity, he hurt you so badly..."

"Shut up!" she shouted, and her hands covered her ears.

Gray backed off when he saw tears in her eyes, but he still did not like Lucy's complaisance. "You can't just pretend it didn't happen."
"I...I know," she whispered, slowly unplugging her ears. "I know what happened, and I'm not defending the beast. I hate the beast, but I...I love Natsu, yes," she confessed. "I wanted it to be Natsu, and I was scared, so I..."

She sniffled, and Gray could see that it was taking all of her strength not to break down completely into sobs. She had been raised and trained to be a noblewoman, never showing emotions in public, even the fiercest anger or deepest sadness. She was relying on that training now to keep the tears from touching her cheeks.

"I tried to take comfort in telling myself it was Natsu, and that's why I didn't fight him. I wanted it to be him...but it wasn't. I saw when Natsu woke up. He looked confused. He was horrified when he saw what his body had done. Definitely, he didn't realize it had happened. He probably lost all consciousness. Natsu wasn't in control when it happened, Gray," she told him, staring right up into his blue eyes with stubbornness laced with tears. "As much as it's comforting for me to think it was Natsu, I know it wasn't! The beast took my virginity." Anger surged into her face, and she screamed at Gray, "Can you imagine how hard it is to admit something like that?"

That sapped away the last of her strength. She had been fighting to maintain control over her emotions for many days, but even her high-class training was not enough. She collapsed to the ground and covered her face as the tears overtook her in unrestrained sobs that shook her whole body.

Gray was left with a dropped mouth. He honestly couldn't imagine it! He had a little idea about how girls felt about virginity and such. "It's like losing the most precious personal thing," Mira once said to a group of guild girls, and Gray had been listening in. "If you're going to lose it, you want someone special to have it."

Some mindlessly carnal beast, or the friend she secretly loved: which was special enough to take such a precious thing? He understood a little why Lucy would try to delude herself into thinking it was Natsu who did that to her.

Even for Gray, it was easier to hate Natsu for hurting Lucy, not some obscure possession hidden within the dragon slayer. For Lucy to be faced with whether to slip into the warm blanket of lies—telling herself it was Natsu so she could simply get together with him later on and reassure herself—or to admit that her first time was with some creature hidden within Natsu's body, something that the "Natsu" they knew was not even aware of...obviously, lies were easier.

Gray scooted over closer and hugged Lucy. She grabbed hold of him, clinging to his shirt, desperate for someone to be there as she faced this horrible truth.

"That's why," she hiccuped between sobs, "I can hate the beast...but I can't hate Natsu. Natsu had no control. Maybe it was his inner desires, but it wasn't his mind controlling it. He's probably tormented, too. Can you imagine what it's like for him?" she questioned, looking up to Gray. "He knows it was his body, but he was helpless. He probably has no memory, not until he came to and saw...saw what...what he had done." Her voice nearly faded away completely. "Imagine waking up to see you're in the middle of making love to Juvia, but you don't remember getting there."

Gray shivered at the thought! That would be a true nightmare.

"It's tormenting him, just like it's tormenting me. So please, Gray," she whispered tiredly, exhausted after the emotional release. "Please don't fight me on this. It took me a long time to decide this. I hate the beast, but I love Natsu. I want the beast banished, but I want to assure Natsu that he's innocent. I...I would like to...maybe...see if Natsu wants a relationship like that."
"Lucy!" Gray began to protest, blushing at what she was saying.

"If it's his inner desire, and it's mine too, isn't that natural?" she questioned, looking a little hesitant whether or not she was right to feel that way.

Gray sighed as he tried to see it from her point of view. "If you truly hold Natsu innocent, if you honestly believe he was not in control and not even conscious, then...it's up to you both." He gave a shrug. "I'll try not to castrate him when we find him."

She chuckled wearily. "That would be nice of you," she smirked.

Through the trees, they heard Wendy shout, "Dinner's ready!"

Lucy wiped her eyes and splashed some icy river water onto her face. She pinched her cheeks so they would look healthy and rosy, not pale from emotional fatigue. Then she looked over to Gray and gave him a smile.

"Let's go eat."

He helped her to stand, then took hold of her elbows and looked firmly down at her. "Are you okay?"

"No," she admitted, "but I'll make due until we find him."

"Lucy..."

"Gray," she interrupted.

"No, I...I just want to say..." He looked aside, and she saw a blush on his cheeks. "If you and Natsu...if you two...you know, hook up or whatever, I...I'll support your choice."

Lucy looked confused until she realized what Gray was saying. He also had feelings for her, but he valued their friendship above all else, so he would respect her decision. She reached her arms around him and gave him a tight hug.

"Thank you, Gray." Suddenly, she realized she was touching his bare back. She opened her eyes and saw the guild mark on his chest. "Um...where did your clothes go?"

Gray pulled away and looked down. Not only was his shirt gone, but his pants as well. "Dammit, when did I do that?"

Lucy tittered softly as Gray hunted for his clothes. "Gray," she said as he struggled into his pants. "Even if Natsu and I hook up some day, we're not splitting up the team. I love all of you guys too much to do something like that."

It made Gray smile with relief. "Yeah, that flame-brain might be a pain in the ass, but we all make a damn good team."

"Mmh!" she said, nodding firmly. "Your shirt is on that rock, by the way."

"Huh?" He looked to where she was pointing across the stream. "How the hell did it get way over there?"

Once he was dressed again, Lucy and Gray strolled side by side together back to the camp. Lucy gave a soft sigh filled with worries. Roughly, Gray yanked her by the shoulder in a half-hug as they walked onward.
"Hey, no gloomy faces. We'll find him, and we'll cure him. Then you two can be gross and smoochie all you want."

She stuck her tongue out at him, and Gray laughed. It made Lucy giggle too, and instantly she felt hope returning to her. They would find Natsu. Then everything would be better...

Right?

End of Chapter 14
Lucy came up to a cave. If Wendy was right, this was where Natsu was hiding. Erza and Gray had already been sent inside, but that was many hours ago. The two had not returned yet. For how much Lucy would love to think it was due to Erza and Gray being a little naughty together, she knew that was likely not the case. She volunteered to go check it out, but right now she was really wishing she had brought Freed or Mira along. She gulped hard as she stared into the yawning maw of darkness. She listened closely, hoping to hear heated moans, or even groans of agony, something that would give her a damn good excuse to leave the cave and run back to the rest of their group. Instead, it was totally silent, the only sound being the wind blowing over the lip of the cave entrance. Her palms were moist with sweat, her throat felt scratchy from dryness, yet she bravely took a step inside.

"Gray?" she called out softly. "Erza?"

Lucy heard a moan and froze with a chill. She felt as if her eardrums had grown twice their size as she strained to listen for more.

"Are...are you in here? Guys?" she called out softly. She took two more steps forward, although every muscle in her body screamed to turn right back around and run. She forced herself on through pure determination and stubbornness. "Natsu?" she called out hesitantly.

She heard movement like a wet cloth dragged over sand and jolted, trying to look in the direction where she heard it. There was nothing but darkness. She moved in a little deeper, hoping that maybe if she immersed herself in the dark, her eyes would adjust. Her boots clopped on the stone floor, nearly slipping on little lumps of rocks.

"Natsu?" she called out again, unsure if she actually wanted to hear an answer. She felt her heart thumping, beating in her throat, pulsing in her ears, making her chest jolt. "Are you in here, Natsu? Or...or is it the beast?"

A soft hiss came from the side. "Luccccccccee."

She jolted with a squeak, and her fist instinctively clenched her whip. It was Natsu's voice, only...different. "Natsu?" Her voice was trembling in terror. "Is that you? Are you okay?"

"What are you doing here, Luccccccey?" the voice asked.

"I had to come. You need help. We...we came to fetch you, bring you back home, and heal you from...from whatever is going on."

She heard something like the flap of a giant bat behind her. With a gasp, Lucy twirled around, but there was nothing there. Then she heard the wet-cloth sound again to her left. She jolted with a cry of surprise. Lucy held her whip ready for that direction, yet still nothing visible. Then silence again. She
stayed perfectly still, listening hard, trying to make her eyes see in the darkness. All she heard was her own heart racing painfully hard, and all she saw were the faint silhouettes of stalagmites and stalactites.

"Heal me?" Natsu asked wryly, his voice coming from all around her. "That's not what the other two said."

"Other two...you mean Gray and Erza? Where are they?" she cried out, desperate for some friends to back her up.

"Where? Why, they're right in front of you. Can't you see them?"

Lucy squinted into the darkness. Her eyes were still not adjusted, but she thought she saw Gray's spiky hair. With a thick gulp, she slowly stepped closer. Her eyes flitted to the left and right, nervously searching for those hideous red eyes. The gloom seemed to envelope her with each step. She was walking into Oblivion itself, and her stomach twisted with a thousand arguments for why she should turn right around and run for her life. Still, if Erza or Gray were in this cave, even if they were injured, she needed to see them, maybe help them.

Only what she saw proved...there was no help. Not anymore.

Atop two bloodied, spiky stalagmites were the severed heads of her teammates, skin waxy pale, dead eyes filmed over and rolled up, neck ragged, just like the head of the blonde woman that had been left at her doorstep in Magnolia.

Lucy gasped, too horrified even for a scream, and scurried away fast. It couldn't be them. It just couldn't! Yet Erza's long, red hair trailed down the stone spike along with the scarlet blood, and Gray's head had the scar right above his eyebrow.

"Oh God, no," she whispered.

She needed to scream. She had to call for help. Even if it was only to warn the rest of the group, she needed to open her mouth and shout something, anything. However, her throat had clenched tightly shut, and her lungs were hyperventilating too hard to take a deep breath and shriek. All she could do was retreat from the horror in the cave.

Her back suddenly collided into something soft yet firm. Hands with razor sharp black nails grasped her wrists quickly. Lucy struggled to pull away, but the person had her in a firm grip. She looked behind her in terror, only to see piercing red eyes glowing in the dark and Natsu's wide grin sneering down at her.

The beast growled, "Who says I want to be healed? I like it in this body." It licked its lips hungrily. "And I'm going to love being inside your body. I've been waiting for you, Lucccccy."

"NO!"

Lucy jolted up, panting hard and sweating profusely. Mira quickly pulled her into a hug. Erza yanked out a sword from nowhere, too sleepy to know if it was an attack or a nightmare. Wendy slowly raised her head up from her sleeping bag and looked around their tent.

"Just a dream," Mira crooned softly, stroking Lucy's hair like a mother cat licking its kitten. "It was nothing more than a bad dream."

"He was there," Lucy sobbed, still shaking from adrenaline. "He...he killed them.

"He was there," Lucy sobbed, still shaking from adrenaline. "He...he killed them."
"Hush, hush." Mira rocked Lucy and rested her chin on the blonde's head. "It was only a dream. You're awake now. It's all safe."

The tent flap fluttered open, and Lucy saw Gray standing in front of her. She was never so relieved to see him. He was alive. Erza was alive. They were in a tent in the countryside, still hunting for Natsu.

"I heard a scream," Gray said, slightly out of breath.

"A nightmare," Erza told him, letting the sword vanish.

"Gray, your clothes," Mira pointed out.

The Ice-Make mage looked down at his fully naked body, then moved the tent flap in front of his crotch. "I heard Lucy screaming. I wasn't going to waste time with getting dressed."


Gray still looked worried. "Are you okay, Lucy?"

"Fine, fine," she said dismissively. "Only, if Natsu's in a cave, don't go inside."

Gray raised an eyebrow, wondering what sort of dream it was. "Oh...okay," he mumbled. "Well, if you're all safe, I'm going to try to get some more sleep."

Lucy laid back down, and the girls curled into their sleeping bags. The others fell back to sleep quickly, but Lucy laid awake for a few more hours, unable to shake off the tremors from the nightmare.

End of Chapter 15
Slayer Don't Like You

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Hiro Mashima survived the Mayan apocalypse by sending Team Natsu out to defeat the incoming disaster. All is safe now. Fairy Tail will continue.

In other news, I'm back from my vacation, still settling in, celebrating the New Year with a new chapter. Cheers, everyone! I wrote this while I was in Los Angeles, so hopefully there aren't too many errors.

Morning was a welcome sight. The air was clear, the day warm, a perfect day for a picnic or outing with friends. Lucy hardly counted a campfire breakfast as a picnic, or trudging through dewy grasses with other mages sent to help her hunt down Natsu as an "outing." Still, with weather so fine, the nightmare she had that evening was all but forgotten. Optimism again returned to her heart.

Instead, she was more worried about the little girl in their group.

Wendy climbed to the crest of a flowery hill. The wind blew her bluish-purple hair back and ruffled her green dress. She inhaled deeply, "feeding" on the air. It filled her with energy, and the smell of daisies and larkspur tingled her nose. However, she was searching for something much different than floral aromas.

"He's here," she whispered. "I smell him. Natsu is somewhere really close."

Mirajane came up beside her. She had been watching the little girl closely over the past few days. Makarov warned that Laxus changed due to the smell of the feral dragon slayer. Natsu should not be feral yet, but Wendy insisted his smell was changing. All of them silently worried that he might start to give off a pheromone that could trigger Wendy into changing. Yet that smell, a smell she said was "Natsu's but not like Natsu," was precisely what the little girl needed to hunt out. It was their only way to find the Fire Dragon Slayer, yet it posed a huge risk to Wendy. Mirajane saw in the girl's face, Wendy knew the risks. Still, she was determined to reach Natsu before it was too late, no matter what that meant to her personally. Mirajane felt that was incredibly brave.

Erza stomped forward and gazed around. The hill was one of many, like haystacks covered in grass and flowers, some strange geological formation the local farmers called The Mumps. No farming could be done here, and it was known as a perfect hiding place for little children. It seemed appropriate that Natsu was also using the location to hide away.

"We'll need to split up," Erza realized as she surveyed the massive track of land. Even in teams, it could take a whole day to search the hills, and Natsu could simply hide around them if he wanted to. "Freed, you and I will start west. Gray and Lucy, you start from the east. Mira and Wendy will go through the center and try to lock on to Natsu's smell to give us a better idea of where he might be. If there's nothing solid, try to find the highest hill and have her keep tabs on the smell so we know he doesn't escape from these...Mumps, as they're called. Happy, Charle, you two search from the skies in case Natsu tries rounding a hill to hide from us."

Lucy frowned at the plan. "Can't we just stay together and call out for him? He'll come if he heard our voices."
Erza hesitated before answering that. "We don't know if it's Natsu out there...or the beast."

The warning gave Lucy a little shiver. Her nightmare returned to her, and she looked at the hills, wondering if any of them were tall enough to hide a cave. Gray patted her shoulder, and she felt a bit better knowing he was coming with her.

"We'll search for three hours," Erza decided. "If we find nothing by then, we'll meet at the hill Wendy picks for some lunch before searching farther down. It should give us a good lookout. Let's go!"

They split up. Lucy wanted to shout for Natsu, but Gray kept warning her to keep quiet. Besides, Natsu had good hearing. If he was in the area, he probably smelled them already, and he would be able to hear where each of their groups were located. The fact that Wendy insisted he was nearby, yet Natsu had not shown himself yet, made Gray leery. Lucy's recent nightmares were of no help.

The Ice-Make mage kept a wary eye out for tracks, dried blood, discarded bits of food, anything that might show Natsu (or the beast) was in the area. So far, he saw nothing but wild nature blooming. An hour passed, then two. The sun moved directly overhead and heated the muggy air that did not stir a single breeze between those towering hills. Gray felt like climbing a hill just to get above the staleness and feel fresh wind. He had just tossed off his shirt when Lucy stopped. She glanced around with a pout.

"It's not time to meet up yet, is it?" she asked softly.

Gray glanced at his watch. "Another hour."

"Darn," she mumbled, puckering her lips. "I...have to go."

"Where?" Gray asked, not thinking hard at all with such stifling heat.

"Go! You know, the little girl's room."

"Huh? Oh!" He blushed a little as he looked around. There were no trees nor even bushes in the Mumps. It was nothing but grass and flowers. He had to admit, he had been holding it for a few minutes, but he was fine still. Now that he observed closer, Lucy's face looked like she was already in discomfort, and her thighs twisted together a bit. "Okay, this hill isn't that big. You stay here. I'll walk around to the other side and wait for you."

Lucy grimaced and looked around more. "Promise not to look?"

He chuckled softly. "Cross my heart. But shout if you see or hear anything at all."

Gray rounded the hill. He stopped when he estimated he was halfway around, although determining the distance was impossible with such huge hills.

"Is this far enough, Lucy?" he spoke, but he heard no reply.

Gray shrugged casually and guessed he was far enough away to be polite. While he was there, he unzipped his pants and decided to relieve himself as well. As he peed into the grass, Gray gazed up at the clouds, trying to pretend he was not thinking perverted urologniac thoughts of Lucy and her golden shower.

"Lucy pees quietly."

"Yeah," Gray replied, and only a second later did he jolt at the voice. He looked up to the top of the
round hill. The sun was directly overhead, blinding him, but Gray saw a shadow of massive wings silhouetted against the azure sky. "Shit," he hissed, zipping his pants back up quickly.

The creature tipped its head to the side. "Want Lucy? Think naughty things of girlie with good smell? Too bad. Lucy is mine!"

"You fucking bastard," Gray growled. He pounded his right fist into his hand. "Ice-Make..."

Blackness rushed at him too suddenly to react. Before Gray could say anything, something heavy pounced onto his chest, knocking him to the ground and skidding him backward over the grass. He hit his head hard, but the weight on him was more of a problem, crushing down on his lungs. When Gray opened his eyes, he saw spiky pink hair; however, Natsu's skin was scaly, and the eyes burned red. The hands that held him down were knobby like the talons of a predatory bird, with blackened claws curling inward. A long, spiked tail swished behind him, and the maroon and salmon wings spread out to keep the creature balanced.

The beast grinned down at Gray, showing off sharp teeth. "Slayer don't like you."

"Slayer?" the ice mage questioned. Gray stared hard at those red eyes with slitted pupils. "Is that you in there, Natsu?"

The beast purred in a growling rumble through gleaming teeth. "Slayer not here. Want sleep. Want stay good. No like want if want is bad."

Gray tried to understand the odd speech. "Natsu isn't aware of what you do? He doesn't like that you kill things, so he...he sleeps? Inside you?"

"Yesssss, but we know Slayer thoughts, Slayer wants. Want fight you." A purr gurgled in its throat. "Slayer don't like you."

"Well good," Gray snapped, "because I don't like him, and I fucking hate you!"

Just as Gray was about to do magic, the beast grabbed his hands, forcing them apart and pinning them to the ground. It straddled over Gray's torso and leaned in close with a triumphant smirk.

"Grab icy hands. No hands, no ice. Slayer knows this."

"Dammit," Gray sneered. Without using both of his hands, his magic was severely limited.

The beast tilted its head and slowly examined Gray's body. "Slayer wants fight but...not what I want," it decided thoughtfully. Just as Gray was about to feel shocked that this creature did not want to fight him, the beast grinned hungrily. "Instead, want fuck."

Gray's eyes widened in horror as a feeling of disgust unlike he had ever known before shivered down his spine. "What the...? Oh, hell no!" He yanked away hard, but his wrists were held so tightly, he could not budge.

"Slayer won't let me with women. Didn't say no about men."

The beast chuckled cruelly, then it gave Gray's bare chest a long, languishing lick. Gray cringed at the revolting feel of Natsu's hot tongue and fiery breath on his skin. He fought hard, trying to kick with his feet, not caring if he injured Natsu's body. There was no way in hell he was going to let the beast that raped Lucy also take him. He would kill the beast and Natsu too before he allowed that.

"Struggle, yesss!" the beast laughed in delight. "Fight! Want freedom? Want kill?" The snarling face
leaned right into Gray's until their noses touched. Then, in a mocking tone, it asked, "Is scary?"

"I'm gonna fucking kill you!" shouted Gray.

"Fuck, yes. Kill...later."

Its tongue slithered out again and licked Gray's cheek. The Ice-Make mage jerked away, but he felt the strength in the beast's arms. Whatever had happened to Natsu to make him like this, the beast was much stronger than the dragon slayer had been. Gray could not break free at all, and his bones felt ready to come out of their sockets trying.

The beast hummed contentedly. "Cold, but like taste. Taste good. Smell good."

It rolled its hips, and Gray felt the hard length hidden within Natsu's pants. His skin went cold in horror. The beast saw his aghast face and chuckled menacingly. Pointy teeth grinned in Natsu's signature wide smile, but those slitted eyes burned bright red. They were not Natsu's eyes, and Gray realized that Natsu was not at all in control right now.

No one in their group had seriously thought that they might have to kill Natsu, but suddenly Gray realized that saving him might not be an option. Although he fought the dragon slayer all the time, Gray was troubled with the idea of killing his own teammate. He sometimes thought of Natsu as an annoying little brother, someone he could never get along with, yet someone he respected...sometimes. Yet if the beast was like this with him, how much worse would it act when it saw Lucy? Gray knew he would rather face the guilt of murdering the dragon slayer than the far deeper guilt of letting Lucy get raped and nearly killed again. He was determined that if he could not bring the beast under control quickly, he would kill it before Lucy could be in danger.

However, without his hands, his casting was limited. He could not even make the stance for Iced Shell to take both himself and Natsu out at the same time.

The beast nipped Gray's nipple, and the ice mage's spine arched off the grass.

"Ah...nngh!" he gasped, not expecting something like that.

His heart pounded harder as he began to realize a tragic truth. He could be noble all he wanted, thinking to himself that he will kill Natsu to save Lucy. However, the fact remained that he could not move...at all! He yanked on the hands gripping him, going white with horror at the possibility of being raped and killed without even a chance to rescue Lucy. He just hoped his scream alerted her so she would run and get help.

The beast purred in satisfaction. "Want..."

"Hey!"

The beast turned, and Gray cursed at Lucy's shout. She stood on the top of the hill, glaring down at them.

"What the hell are you doing?" Gray cried out in horrified panic. "Run!"

Her eyes were focused stubbornly on the beast. "I thought you marked me as yours. What are you doing playing with him?"

The beast leaped off of Gray, spread out its wings, and half-flew up to Lucy. It grabbed her possessively into a hug. "Mine!" it declared loudly. Then it began to nuzzle her neck. "Yes, good smell. Best smell. So long, we want you. Lucccccccccy," the beast hissed, sniffing her hair and
caressing her neck with its nose. "Want Lucy. Need Lucy. Lucy is ours."

Gray leaped up and pounded his fist into his palm, ready to strike Natsu dead while he had the chance. However, the beast had Lucy pulled so close against its body, Gray was unsure what attack he could do that would not potentially hurt her also. Lucy stood still, passively allowing the beast to lick her neck and shoulders. Her eyes focused on Gray, and he was stunned to see how calm she appeared.

"Get Freed and the others," she told him in a quiet voice. "Freed is the only one who can trap him. I'll be bait until you return."

To Gray, that was not even an option. "No way in hell am I letting him get to you again. Lucy..."

The beast swung its head around and hissed at Gray. "Mine! Lucy is mine."

"Natsu is still in there," she said calmly. "The beast said Natsu wasn't letting it hurt women. That means Natsu still has a little control, even if it's subconscious. He won't hurt me. Just...just hurry," she whispered, and Gray finally saw a bit of fear in Lucy's face.

Gray hated to leave her alone; every nerve in his body wanted to run up there and free her from that creature's vile embrace. However, now that the beast had something it felt possessive over, it would not release Lucy without a fight. Likely, it would just grab her and fly away. Then they would lose both of them. She was right; they needed Freed's runes to capture Natsu alive. He had to trust that Natsu really did have some control and would not hurt her. Reluctantly, Gray ran off as fast as he could, shouting for Freed, Erza, Mira, and Wendy.

Lucy sighed once he was gone. "Well, I hope this wasn't a stupid idea," she muttered to herself. "Natsu?"

"Slayer not here," the beast snapped, licking her neck. "Down. Sit."

Lucy complied and sat on the grassy hill. The beast shoved her to the ground harder and straddled over her. Lucy gasped faintly, feeling the weight on her body, looking up and seeing Natsu...only, not Natsu. Those red eyes gazed down at her hungrily and made her shiver with fear. After all, the beast only said Natsu would not let it have sex with women. Since the creature had marked her, the rules might not apply to Lucy herself.

She saw a sharp claw come forward, and she shut her eyes tightly, fearing the worst, remembering that horrific night in her bedroom. She felt the hand at her belly, and her abdominal muscles tightened, dreading the feel of ripping flesh. Instead, the fingers carefully pulled her shirt up to her neck. The talons never scratched her skin, not even when the creature yanked her bra down off of her breasts. That made Lucy whimper in fear.

"We not hurt Lucy," it promised with a rumbling purr. "Girlie with good smell, no hurt. Want too much to hurt."

"Want?" she asked, looking at the familiar face distorted by scales. "Which one wants me: you or Natsu?"

The beast grinned and leaned over her, right into her face until she could feel the heated breath. "Both," it said, then chuckled at her astonished face. "Yes, Slayer wants Lucy, and I want Lucy. We agree when it comes to Lucy."

"But Natsu doesn't know you're doing this," she pointed out.
"Slayer don't need to know. Is my turn. Slayer has his turn. Share girlie."

She glared slightly. "Natsu wants to share me?"

It paused for a moment, as if thinking or searching. Then the beast smiled mischievously. "No, Slayer no want to share Lucy. Wants Lucy all to self. Too bad for Slayer."

Then the beast lowered its head down, and Lucy felt hot moisture as the beast licked her nipples. She flinched and barely held back a cry of disgust. To her surprise, it gazed up at her with a face that seemed uncertain, almost as if asking if it had hurt her. It made her blush. However, it did not cease with her silence, and she had a feeling it would keep going even if she screamed for it to stop.

The beast was being gentle, caressing her tenderly, using its tongue in a way that made her want to moan. She tried to look at the face. Despite the red eyes, the faint scales, and the fangs, it was still Natsu's face. She stroked his pink hair, felt how soft it was, and wanted to cry that this horrible creature has usurped her best friend's body. It was hard to see him and tell herself that this was not her Natsu.

"I want to speak with Natsu."

The beast drew back and bared its teeth in anger. "Slayer sleeping. Lucy mine now."

"I want to speak to him," she said firmly. "I won't fight you if you let me talk to him."

The beast sneered, yet slowly the glow in the eyes lessened, and the red irises went back to green. The scales faded away, but the rest of him was still in the transformed shape: tail, wings, and claws. Natsu looked confused for a moment.

"A dream?" he wondered.

Lucy felt immense relief that her plan worked. Her grin was huge but tired as the terror she felt just a moment ago flowed out. "Hey Natsu."

"Lucy? Is it really...?" Then he saw her shirt pulled up and her breasts exposed. "No!" he yelled, and his voice cracked. He scrambled away over the grass in horror. "No! Oh God no, not again."

"No, it wasn't you," she assured, yanking her shirt down over her. "I used myself as bait."

"Bait?" he shouted, aghast at such a foolish plan. "Lucy, how could you...? Why would you...?"

With tears in his eyes, he screamed, "Haven't I hurt you enough?"

"I wasn't hurt this time," she assured. "The beast was being...gentle." She tried to put it delicately, but it still sounded perverted.

Natsu looked away, feeling sick. "Dammit, I'm...I'm sorry for anything it did."

"Really, I'm okay. It said I could talk to you."

"You shouldn't have come! The beast could take back control at any minute. I...I can't control it anymore," he lamented as tears of helplessness fell from his eyes. "I try, but it's getting stronger every day. I can feel it even now."

"That's why we came."

"We?" He looked a little relieved. "Thank goodness, you're not alone."
"No, Erza and Gray are here, along with Happy and Charle. Wendy was the one who has been sniffing your trail. Mira and Freed are with us, too."

"Freed?" As he thought about it, the team made sense. Wendy could smell him, but she might be unstable, so Mirajane was there to watch her, and Freed... "Freed is a good choice." He nodded to himself. "You'd need his runes to contain me." Natsu glanced over her, wary about her well-being.

"It didn't...do anything, did it?"

She was ready to tell him no, but he probably would not believe her anyway. "It licked my chest. That's it, really."

Natsu looked at her breasts, and for a moment Lucy swore he looked jealous. It made her a little more hopeful. She inched closer, and although Natsu tried to lean away from her, she crawled on her knees until she was beside him. She gazed at the wings, following the main rim to where it connected in his back. Cautiously, she reached forward and touched the bony ridge. Natsu inhaled sharply, but he stayed still.

"Does it hurt?" she asked, rubbing where the maroon scales met his tan-colored back.

"When I transform, it hurts pretty bad," he admitted. "I'm getting used to it, but it's still weird and painful."

"Poor Natsu," she pouted.

"Well," he shrugged, trying to cheer her up, "they do come in handy. I don't have to wait for Happy to fly me around."

Lucy stroked the wing upward to the clawed tip. Natsu shivered a little, yet she saw he had a smile and faint blush. Then she felt the leathery webbing between the wings. Suddenly, the dragon slayer flinched and snapped the wings closed. To her surprise, Natsu giggled.

"I guess it's ticklish there," he laughed.

"Hah! Ticklish, eh?" she grinned playfully. "So, the almighty Salamander Natsu has a weak point." She held her hands in front of her and wiggled them as if ready to tickle.

Natsu laughed instinctively at the threat and skidded back across the grass. "Don't you dare!"

"I wonder about the tail," she cackled impishly.

"No! It's...it's really sensitive. Don't..."

Before he could fully warn her, Lucy stroked the tail right near the base of the spine. Natsu choked on a gasp and grabbed Lucy into a crushing embrace. Then he flipped both of them, pressing Lucy to the grass with him on top. She was about to yell at him, but she felt him shivering. Then she felt hardness forming in the area between his legs. Her eyes widened in fear. Was the beast back already? Before that terror could settle in, Natsu rose up and gazed down at her with flushed cheeks. His squinty eyes were still green, but they looked a little hazy now.

"I tried to warn you, the tail is...sensitive," he warned with a hesitant stress.

Lucy thought she understood now. Not ticklish, but easy to pleasure. It made her blush. "S-sorry," she mumbled in shame.

Still, those lidded eyes gazed over her, taking in how her blonde hair splayed around her, how her
breasts parted slightly to each side as she laid on her back, and how adorable she looked blushing like that. Natsu swallowed hard, feeling guilty for being so easily aroused. He knew he needed to climb off, apologize for reacting on instinct like that, and make sure Lucy was not hurt. Instead, he realized that he did not want to move. If he climbed off, he was not sure if she would let him get this close again. More than anything, Natsu wanted to stay close to Lucy.

Quietly gazing up at him, Lucy asked, "Why do you look angry?"

Natsu was startled that she saw all the turmoil in his heart. He looked away in frustration and shame. "I shouldn't be this close to you."

"I don't mind," she shrugged.

That made Natsu smile a little, but he still felt troubled. "I'm so angry that the beast hurt you. I can't believe it did...that...to you. I..." His brows tightened in shame. "I can never forgive myself."

"It wasn't you..."

"But it was me," he shouted furiously. "The beast is part of me. It was my body. I..." He dropped his head until it almost rested on her chest. "I wanted...to be your first."

That confession stunned Lucy. She had secretly hoped that since the beast molested her, it meant Natsu wanted a similar relationship. Still, to hear him actually say it made her so happy, she felt like crying.

"It was still your body, so in a way..."

"No!" he yelled. "That body...it's the same one that nearly killed you."

"We don't know if it was you that first night," she told him. "There's a feral dragon slayer in Magnolia. That's what set you off, and now it's setting off Laxus. It might have made Wendy start to change, too. That beast is much more violent. It kills and eats things for fun. So it most likely wasn't you who hurt me, but the feral."

"Feral?" Natsu asked in confusion. "Do you know what's happening?"

Lucy did her best to explain the situation, the things Gajeel said, the news they got over lacrima about Laxus being triggered into transforming due to the smell emitted by the feral Earth Dragon Slayer Balaur. Natsu listened thoughtfully, although he did not climb off from his perch on top of Lucy.

"That's reassuring," he admitted after hearing it all. "I just wish I knew for sure. I've been tearing myself up about this, both the first night and that night at the party." He blushed and looked away. "I remember...a little from that night. Just the end. I wish I was awake through all of it."

Lucy reached up and caressed his face. "How about I help you to make a memory?"

Natsu glanced down at her, cautious in his hope. He swung his head away, knowing he should back off, yet when he dared a peek back at her, Lucy's face looked too inviting. He swallowed hard at his own hesitation.

"I can't trust myself," he told her, "so why do you trust me?"

She reached up and gently held his cheek. "Because," she said, smiling happily, "I'm in love with you, Natsu."
His eyes widened, and Lucy saw tears welling up in the corners. "You...you...really?" he asked, too stunned to fully believe it.

She nodded bashfully. "I just figured it out recently. I love you, so I know I can trust you."

Natsu wanted to shout back that he also loved her, but he jolted before saying the words. What right did he have to love her? Still, with Lucy gazing up at him, he could not shove aside those feelings. Instead of words, Natsu leaned over, lowering his face to hers. Lucy's eyes closed, her lips loosened, and he saw her waiting for him. He could not remember ever kissing a girl, he knew he would probably mess it up, but still...how could he say no to Lucy? If she trusted him, he had to put a little faith in himself. And if she loved him...

"I love you," he breathed right against her lips before lightly brushing against her mouth.

It was barely a touch, testing out how safe it was for him to do this much. Natsu felt the beast in the back of his mind, but he sensed that the creature was being dormant, letting the dragon slayer have at least this much enjoyment. Feeling more confident, Natsu pressed a little harder into Lucy's kiss. He felt her fingers reach up and stroke through his hair. He hummed at how gently her hands touched his skin. Then her fingers drifted down, scratching along his neck. When they brushed over the scar, he gasped in a shocking jolt of intensity and began to pull back. Lucy's hand grabbed around his head and quickly yanked him down.

Natsu's eyes opened wide in surprise at such fierceness, but then instinct began to get the better of him. He wanted to taste her. He feared this new, weird instinct. Wasn't that sort of...beastly? However, Lucy opened her mouth first, and it was her tongue that sought out his. Natsu was surprised, then confused. Was wanting to lick her up not a desire of the beast? Was it his own? Which desires belonged to whom? He did not know enough about these sorts of things to fully understand what was happening.

Before he knew it, he felt heat pooling in his lower gut and stiffness in his pants. That sort of thing, he knew about. He had stroked off to perverted thoughts of Lucy many times. He figured touching himself now was impolite, but his manhood had caught on some fabric. He meant only to move himself a little, break free from the tugging cloth, so he rolled his hips forward. He felt himself rub against Lucy. He probably would have been fine with that—just moving himself to a more comfortable position in his pants, after all—except Lucy moaned at the feel.

That was too much!

Natsu pulled back, making sure his erection was away from her body. His breathing came fast, and so did hers. Lucy's face had turned flushed, and her lips were swollen from heavy kissing.

"I'm sorry," he panted.

Lucy looked confused. "Why?"

He swallowed thickly so he could speak. "Crazy instincts are surging through me. I don't think I can hold them back."

She chuckled softly and caressed his cheek. "Silly Natsu. Instincts are merely what you really want."

"But," he muttered in shame, "what I want to do...it's the same thing the beast was doing to you."

His jaw tightened at confessing that.

Lucy blushed and nibbled her bottom lip. "Does that mean you want to do those things with me?"
"It's wrong," he gnashed. "After what it did..."

She put a finger to his lips, instantly silencing him. His eyes widened in surprise.

"Is it what you want?" she asked again.

Lucy thought the bashful face Natsu made was too adorable. Unable to answer with honest words, he merely nodded.

"Good," she said. "I want to also."

"But after what it did..."

She slapped her hand over his mouth to shut him up. "Natsu," she said seriously. "The only way I've been coping through these past few days is by telling myself that it was something you wanted."

"But I wouldn't have..."

"You want to, right?" she asked, butting in fast.

"I...well, yeah, but I..."

"Then please..." She also waited to calm herself. This was way harder than it ought to be, but at least she knew Natsu was truly in love with her. His hesitation and reluctance proved it. "Yes, the beast took my virginity, but it didn't...you know...build me up enough to finish. All it did was thrust in a few times, but Natsu..." He had begun to look away in jealousy again, so Lucy held his cheeks and turned his face back to her. "Natsu, I want you to be the first person to actually make love to me."

He looked stunned, then determined to fulfill her desires. He leaned over her again and kissed her. This time when he thrust up against her, he meant it. He felt Lucy shiver, and it heated him up inside hotter than a fire. He felt her legs wrap around him, pulling him in for more.

"Natsu..." she moaned.

"Luc..."

"Lucy!" came Gray's shout.

Natsu's face snapped up, and to her surprise, Lucy heard him hiss in anger. When she opened her eyes, she saw red beginning to shine over the green.

"Natsu!" she yelled.

He jolted and looked down at her. The red faded, and Natsu looked a little dizzy.

"Stay with me, Natsu," Lucy encouraged. "Don't let it take over."

"Oh damn, not right now," he sneered. "Don't change, don't change," he chanted to himself. "Goddammit, I am not going to let you take over now. Lucy is mine!" he yelled at nothing.

"Lucy, are you nearby?" Gray shouted again.

"Lucy?" yelled Erza.

"Mine!" Natsu roared, and the red flashed again. He grabbed his head and clenched at his hair. "No! You keep your claws off of her. Do you hear me, you damn beast? Don't touch her!"
"Natsu?" Lucy asked in worry. "Should I...should I leave?"

"No!" he sneered, gripping her arm hard. He felt her flinch and instantly let go. "Sorry. Gray's voice is triggering the beast. It wants to fight him, I guess."

"Or something else," Lucy mumbled, blushing as she recalled what she had seen and heard about the beast's desires toward Gray.

"Lucy, forgive me," he said seriously, "but I'm about to do something bad."

"What...?"

Before she could ask, Natsu grabbed her up into his arms and flew into the air. Lucy screamed as she felt her feet leave solid ground. She looked down just in time to see Gray, Freed, and Erza arrive around the hill. She thought about yelling for them, but they already saw her. Gray had his hands up, ready to cast some magic, but Freed yanked the ice mage's arms down to break the magic circle.

The green-haired man warned, "If you shoot him down, Natsu might drop Lucy."

Gray sneered. "Fuck! We were almost there. We would have had him."

"At least Lucy is still safe," Erza reasoned. "If the beast hasn't harmed her yet, it likely won't."

"But now we've lost them," Gray shouted in frustration.

"We'll track them. Gray, send up an ice flare for everyone else. With both of them together, Wendy should have an easier time tracking them."

Gray was still enraged. "What if the beast hurts her? What if...if it...?" He could not bring himself to say it.

"We need to have confidence that Natsu won't let the beast harm her," Erza told him.

Gray was ready to yell that the beast had already raped her, but he realized that Lucy had not mentioned it to anyone else. It was not his place to tell others such deep news. Clenching his teeth to keep his mouth quiet, Gray shot four frozen fireworks into the sky, a signal to the others. He just hoped Lucy fought back with everything she had instead of passively giving in.

Personally, he hoped she nailed Natsu in the balls with the heel of her boot. That'd serve the flame-brain for housing a beast like that all these years!

End of Chapter 16
OMG CHIBIS!!!

(fanart by Skywarriorkirby)
As Natsu flew through the air with Lucy in his arms, he felt troubled by flustering thoughts. His body smoldered with a type of inner heat he was unused to feeling. Flashes of dreams passed through his mind, every fantasy, every wet dream, every naughty little thought of the things he wanted to do with Lucy some day. If he could have balled them all up and done them all at once, he would, but he was pretty sure that was physically impossible.

Or was it?

« Slayer can fuck her any way Slayer want. »

« Shut up! » Natsu ground his teeth as he heard that snarling voice in his head. « This is Lucy. I'm not going to...to fuck her. »

« Why not? Girlie probably want it. Slayer want it, too. »

« Make love! I want to show Lucy that I love her, not...not...that other word. There's a big difference. »

« What difference? Slide into her, thrust into her, hump into her, fuck her, fuck her... »

« SHUT UP! »

Natsu glanced over to Lucy, who had gotten over her shock at being abducted so suddenly, and she looked like she was enjoying the chance to go flying. Her face calmed him. Yes, he loved her, and yes, part of him was desperate with passion, but this was Lucy. He would only do what she wanted.

« I am Slayer instincts, Slayer desires, Slayer wants. I know your wants, Slayer. Want Lucy, and want is growing. Is overpowering other instincts. So long as Slayer want Lucy, I want Lucy. If Slayer not want me to try to fuck Lucy, then fulfill desire. When Slayer no longer aching to fuck Lucy, I won't want. We keep Lucy safe. »

« Wait, are you saying that if I...if I fulfill my desires, you'll leave her alone? »

« Maybe. Slayer want fuck, but not certain on that want. You not certain, means I'm not certain, means more free to fuck anything. If Slayer give in to instinct, maybe no longer a want. Or maybe want more, but more focus, more control. »

« Why are you telling me this? »
Slayer has more instincts than just fuck, deeper instincts. Want protect friends. I have that instinct, too. I help Slayer protect friends, but Slayer must obey. Instincts, desires, wants...I am those. I am you. More hidden is Slayer instinct, means I want more. Less hidden, I want less. Hidden wants are mine. So unhide. Make happen. Fuck Lucy, then that want is no longer hidden.

That's despicable!

But might help protect Lucy.

Natsu swallowed hard. Somehow, he knew this creature was right. From what Lucy had told him, the beast was a manifestation of his darker emotions, some facet of himself that cultivated his inner dragon-like abilities. His hidden desires—including the infatuation he had been trying to ignore for months—had taken an ugly form inside of him. Natsu did not understand that too much, but he was willing to work with the dark inner side if it meant he could pacify the beast and protect Lucy. All he had to do was...

Yes, FUCK HER!

No, make love to her.

Fuck her, fuck her...

Shut the hell up, you disgusting thing!

Lucy was reminded of the dreams she had been having, flying through the air with someone holding on to her. Only this time, when she looked up, it was not some cruel dragon that clutched her with its leathery talons, but Natsu who held her bridal-style against his chest. He looked troubled with thoughts, and she wondered what was running through his head.

For that matter, where was he taking her? She felt nervous, but also filled with hope that it was somewhere far away, some place where they could be alone. Once together, were they really going to do...that? She shivered a little at the thought.

"Are you cold, Lucy?" Natsu asked in worry. "Sorry about all the wind." Using his chin, so he would not lose grip of her, he loosened his scarf and let it drape on her. "You can use that. It'll keep you warm."

The scarf smelled strongly like Natsu. There were only a few times when Lucy got to hold the scarf, and each time it was surprisingly soft, a texture like reptile scales but with the feel of a satin pillow. She did not pull it completely off his neck, recalling Makarov saying something about how the scarf worked as a stopper against the beast. Instead, she took the trailing end, laying it over the side of her arms and face that were getting most of the wind from flight. It was a warm, comforting feeling to be sharing Natsu's precious scarf.

Lucy looked down at the land passing under them. They were out of the hilly area called the Mumps and in a rocky canyon. She realized, she had not really been paying attention to where they were going. If anything bad happened, there was no easy way to run back to the rest of the team. She would be completely lost.

Surely, Wendy would get started on sniffing them out, but it might take all day to cover the distance on foot, since Natsu was able to fly in a straight line rather than all the twists of the canyon.

All day...alone with Natsu.
"Where are we going?" she finally asked.

"It's where I've been staying for the past couple days," Natsu answered, keeping his focus forward. "A little cave in this canyon, far away from any people or farms, a place where the beast can't hurt anyone."

"Oh, I see..." Suddenly, Lucy panicked. "Wait, a cave? No...no way, Natsu!"

Her nightmare from last night came back to her: entering a cave, the beast taunting her, finding Gray's and Erza's heads on spikes. She began to thrash, and Natsu's grip tightened.

"Whoa, Lucy, stop it! If you wiggle like that, I might drop you."

She froze perfectly still. The other nightmare stormed into her mind, how when she was being carried by the dragon, she began to protest, thrashing around, and the dragon dropped her. That was how that dream always ended, getting dropped into some storm clouds, the dragon coming after her, and blowing flames to devour her.

She looked at Natsu's face as too many phantasmal fears caused her blood to run cold. He was not...normal. He still had the wings and tail, and if she looked closely enough, there was a faint tracing of scales on his cheeks. She reached up and felt that part of his skin. It was smooth, soft...in fact, it felt exactly like the scarf.

Natsu smiled at her caresses. Although he wanted to enjoy it, he smelled fear in her and felt shivering in her fingertips. He looked down at Lucy's hesitant face and tried to give her his most reassuring grin.

"It's okay, Lucy. I won't hurt you."

She knew she had to trust him. She really had no other choice, but more than that...she wanted to trust him. She wanted to believe he still had control, that he was not a feral monster and completely lost to them.

That was when she felt Natsu's feet touch down, and he placed her back onto solid ground. She had been daydreaming and not looking to see that they had alighted on a smooth lip overhang, with many meters between them and the bottom of the canyon. Looking down made her dizzy, so she looked to where Natsu was walking away...

Right into a cave!

"At least I know Gray's and Erza's heads won't be in there," she mumbled to herself as she hesitantly followed him in.

Natsu walked to the back of the small cave and set a pile of gathered wood on fire with a bit of his flames. As Lucy looked around, she was glad to see that the cave was smooth, no sharp stalagmites like in her dream. It was also more shallow, although deep enough to shelter them from the canyon winds. Natsu had some cooking gear near the fire and a thick blanket rolled out where he slept. He had no other supplies with him. She briefly wondered where he got the cooking pot. Stolen, probably.

Natsu spread his hands out to present the humble abode. "It's not exactly home-sweet-home, but it's private. I'd offer you tea, but I was out searching for fresh water when I came across you guys. I don't have anything to drink. Sorry."

Natsu watched Lucy's timid steps, the way she hugged her arms in worry, and the shiftiness of her
eyes as she inspected every shadow. He realized he could hardly blame her for being scared. If he knew how to get rid of those awkward wings and tail, he would revert back to normal so she would truly trust him. However, he had no clue how to control his changing body, and the beast was still cackling fuck her, fuck her in the back of his mind.

Finally, Lucy's huge eyes met his. She laughed nervously, dropped her head as she blushed, and stared over at the bed. "So, why did you take me here?" she asked in a soft voice filled with fear and anticipation.

What he said just before flying away, the things they confessed to one another, made her heart race. She still could hardly believe she confessed that she had fallen in love with him, and hearing him say 'I love you' back to her was almost too good to believe. Maybe it had just been a fantasy, something she wanted to hear.

Her mind was totally blank, unsure which way to turn now. Did she dare to hope that they would end up on that bed soon? Or did she just want to go back to the rest of the team and head home? She could hardly figure it out for herself.

Natsu knew why he brought her to this cave. He knew precisely what he had wanted to do to her as they laid under that hill in the Mumps, kissing and sighing one another's names. Even now, the pit of his gut was tight, coiling, tugging at him impatiently. He licked his lips in nervousness. They felt dry, cracked, pretty much normal for him, but now he wished his lips could be a bit softer...for Lucy's sake. Her lips had been so plump and smooth when he kissed her. He looked at them now, and he saw her tug her lower lip inward to moist it, followed by the tiniest flick of her tongue over the top lip.

She was cute when she did that. Knowing she was just as nervous as him made Natsu feel better. They were both new at this love thing, so of course they were worried about getting it all wrong.

Finally, Natsu opened his mouth. "I...I wanted..."

« To fuck, fuck, fuck... »

Natsu flinched at the voice's incessant chant. "I wanted to..."

« Fuck her, fuck her! »

"Shut up!" he screamed.

Lucy took a step back. The mental blankness shattered with nightmare fears. Natsu cringed as he saw the terror in her face.

"No, Lucy, it...it's okay, really, I..."

« Wanna hump, wanna taste, wanna devour. »

"NO!"

"Natsu?" Lucy asked, shivering at the madness in his eyes. "Maybe this was a bad idea."

"No," he said urgently. "It's just...I..." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath to calm himself. The voice began to fade away, but it was still there, a whisper in the background. "All these...wants...feelings...are overwhelming me," he muttered, trying to sort out his mind for himself. "I don't even know where the beast's wants end and where my desires begin, because...because..."

He forced his dark green eyes up into hers. "What it wants is what I want, but I don't know if it's
what you want. I don't want to do what you don't want even if it's what I want and *I am totally confusing myself!* he suddenly yelled. "Gah! How do guys normally deal with this sort of thing? I'm not used to thinking this much. It's annoying."

*That* was the Natsu she loved, and his burst of childish frustration made Lucy giggle. Hearing her laugh soothed Natsu's worries.

"Natsu, I already told you that I...I want to...with you." She blushed at having to say it again.

His cheeks turned pink, and he half hid his face into the folds of his scarf mumbling, "I wasn't sure if you'd change your mind."

Boldly, she walked up to him and lifted his chin out of its tucked position. "Never! I love you. I trust you."

It was like drinking a glass of milk after getting heartburn, or at least that was how Natsu thought it felt like. It was a relief to know that although he felt so insecure, Lucy had faith in his ability to keep control.

Slowly, he moved his face in closer, gazing at her lips. She closed her eyes and lifted her head up to him. Natsu swallowed hard in nervousness. She looked so eager, not at all afraid like him. He quickly licked his lips, then placed them awkwardly against her. Natsu was still unsure how this kissing thing worked, but luckily Lucy seemed to know. He guessed she had kissed enough boys for it to not be a big deal. She guided him, wrapping her arms around his neck so he could wrap his around her waist, pulling their bodies closer together. She opened her mouth and tapped his lips with her tongue, teaching him to deepen the kiss. He followed, mimicking her moves like he might mimic fighting maneuvers. He had years of training as a dragon slayer. Now it was time to train as a lover.

Her taste was as sweet as her smell. The inside of her mouth was warm, and he felt something like dragon lightning every time their tongues touched. He wanted more.

"Lucy, I...I don't..."

She pulled back, worried that maybe he would stop before they got any further than just kisses.

Natsu shifted his weight a few times in uneasiness. Blushing with shame, he admitted, "I don't know what to do...you know...for *that*. I mean, I know the basics," he added defensively, "but I don't know how you get from here to there, if...if that makes sense."

It took her a couple seconds, but then she laughed out her worries. "It's okay. They say that during your first time, instinct will tell you what to do."

Natsu scowled. "*My instinct* is screaming lewd profanities at the moment."

"How about we start with this?" With a bashful smile and pinkness in her cheeks, Lucy reached to her blouse and began unbuttoning it.

Natsu had seen Lucy's cleavage plenty of times, practically every day, and sometimes much more when a fight tended to rip her clothes apart. He already knew what her breasts looked like, so seeing her blouse come apart and expose her bra should not have been too erotic.

Yet it was!

Every button that slipped through felt like a countdown to some great fighting match, and Natsu was waiting for the final *three-two-one-GO!* He saw her fingers shaking slightly. He wondered if she was
cold, but the fire made the cave a nice temperature even for him. Nervousness, he realized. As he reached toward her, he realized his fingers were also shaking. Still, unwilling to wait for her to finish working the buttons, Natsu reached forward and caressed her collar bone, feeling the warmth of her skin. Lucy kept her eyes turned away coyly. Natsu did not understand why, but such bashfulness coming from Lucy made her appear insanely cute. The tugging in Natsu's gut was growing. Blood was rushing southward, and he felt himself get hard again.

Undressing in front of Natsu was utterly mortifying. Lucy knew he was staring, and she easily felt the temperature in the cave skyrocketing. She heard every gulp he made as he stood frozen to his spot, his eyes moving downward ever so slowly as each button popped open. His fingers were so rough, yet they were warm and touched her skin with tenderness. She liked how they felt, and she tried to speed up the fingers fiddling with buttons.

As the blouse split apart, Natsu slowly pushed the collar to the side, showing off more of her breasts, until she was down to the buttons near her belly button. His hand also drifted down, moving away from the collar bone and venturing between the hills of her breasts. He had to lick his lips again as he felt the soft thumping of her heart and watched her chest moving, up and down, up and down, in fast breaths. His hand slid back up, right over her heart, to feel it.

The only thing Lucy could hear was the thrumming in her ears of rushing blood pulsing ever quicker. Now, with Natsu's hand on her chest, she knew he could feel the racing heart. She wondered if his was beating just as fast. Lucy finally got the last button after slipping three times in growing haste. She pulled the blouse off roughly and dropped it to the ground. Then, wanting to know, wanting to feel, she placed her hand on Natsu's bare chest. They stood there in the cave, each feeling the other's heart, timing their breaths to one another. Lucy looked up from his chest and met Natsu's narrow eyes. He had that dark look he sometimes got, only instead of fiery and focused, it was smoky and hazy.

"Lucy," he whispered.

Her whole body stiffened at hearing his voice. She loved the way he said her name.

"Natsu," she breathed back.

His eyes fluttered closed, as if those syllables were caresses. "Your heart, it's racing."

She pressed her palm a little tighter against his chest. "Yours is, too."

His hand began to move, slipping down off her heart and over the soft hill of her breast. Then his other hand came up and felt the same on the right side, both moving together. He felt the stiff nipples with the palm of his hand first, so he got to see Lucy's face react to the touch just seconds before his fingers dragged their way down. His thumbs circled the stiff peaks, and Lucy inhale sharply, thrusting her breasts outward. Natsu smiled at how cute that reaction looked.

Then he cupped under, hefting the massive breasts up a bit, feeling their softness as they filled his hands. He watched how they changed shape as he moved them, first up making little "boob-brows" on her chest. He laughed at the imagine of that...boob-brows! Lucy would hate that term for certain. Then he moved the breasts inward, pushing them together. The ravine they made in her chest looked soft and inviting. Hardly thinking just what he was doing, Natsu buried in nose into the middle of those mounds.

"Wha-...Natsu!" Lucy cried out in surprise.

With her breasts smashing his cheeks, Natsu thought he had discovered the softest thing in the world.
Plus like this, her smell was right in his nose. His tongue slipped out, and he licked the vale of her chest. He heard Lucy moan softly at that. He licked more. He licked the top of her chest. Then, seeing the nipple pressing tightly against the bra, he licked that as well, making the material darken with the moisture of his mouth. Lucy squirmed, and Natsu laughed softly at the funny faces she was making.

« Like to lick. Licking is fun. Tastes so good. »

Were these his thoughts, or the beast's? Maybe both.

Nervousness was forgotten as Lucy’s stomach heated up and her thighs clenched. While Natsu slowly discovered that licking a woman's breasts was rather good, Lucy's hands were also drifting over him. Natsu's muscles had always fascinated her. There were lots of muscular men in the guild. She got to see Gray's abs all the time. She had to admit, Elfman was immensely impressive, although a bit too bulky for her tastes. Gajeel...well, he was off-limits anyway. Laxus was stronger than he first appeared, but she was not too much into tattoos. But Natsu...Natsu's chest and abs had always made her twist her thighs a bit. She had almost gotten accustomed to it with that opened vest he used to wear, but lately his clothes were more conservative. She missed the eye candy!

So seeing him shirtless, she finally got to stroke those tensed ab muscles, up over his hairless chest, palming his nipples a little. He exhale sharply at that, and it caught her attention for a moment.

Natsu had never realized his chest could be sensitive. If that was how good it felt for him, then for Lucy it must feel ten times greater. Suddenly, he wanted this cotton barrier gone. He looked at the straps going over her shoulders, then around the cups and under-wire, inspecting the bizarre contraption.

"How the hell do you take this thing off?" he grumbled, tugging the sides where they wrapped around her ribs, as if maybe it pulled apart like a puzzle.

Lucy laughed lightly at his frustration. "There are snaps in the back." She turned around and moved her hair to the side to show him the bra hooks. "Can you get it for me?" she requested in the most coquettish tone she could muster.

Natsu leaned forward to stare at the hooks and latches. He was tempted to just burn the damn thing, but Lucy would be upset. Trying to be delicate about it, but fumbling with his thick fingers, he managed to get the first latch. Two more to go.

That was when he glanced up, over the pale back, and to her bare shoulders. With her hair pulled to the side, that neck looked so smooth, so inviting. Still fumbling with the hooks, Natsu leaned over and placed his lips against Lucy's neck.

"Ah!" she gasped. She would never admit it, but her neck was the most sensitive part of her body. That was why she preferred outfits with low necklines and only wore turtlenecks in really cold weather.

Natsu realized her smell here was different than her breasts. That neck had been curtained by her hair, so it smelled like shampoo. Her strong reactions also amused him. He licked right where the neck met the shoulder, and he felt Lucy pull back into him, pressing her butt into his groin. The contact to that hard member he had been trying to ignore made Natsu grunt, which got Lucy to smirk.

"Do you like that?" she teased. Lucy wiggled her ass back and forth, feeling that hardness, purposely tempting it.
Natsu's mind blanked out for a moment. His eyes flashed crimson, and he grabbed Lucy hard. Before she could even shout, he thrust her up against the cave wall, almost smashing her face into the rocks, and snapped his hips up against her.

"Natsu..."

He grabbed her wrists and pinned them against the rocks, holding them up to keep her still. Snarling, he leaned over her neck and bit softly right in the curve of her shoulder. Lucy cried out and trembled. He was suddenly being rough, but she found that strangely thrilling.

However, the possessive growl he made worried her.

"Natsu?" she asked, trying to look over her shoulder at him. He gave only a grunt in return. "Natsu!"

He pulled back, and she saw his eyes widen with faint traces of red quickly vanishing.

She sighed in worry. "Are you really going to be okay doing this? We can stop. It's okay if we don't do anything. We'll only do what you're comfortable with, what you're...able to handle." She ended in a soft, worried whisper.

Natsu looked away, realizing the beast must have reared up. He breathed heavily for a few moments, trying to push aside the growling creature that was clawing to take control. Of all times...not now!

"Say my name," he whispered.

Lucy's eyebrows raised in confusion.

"Say it," he insisted in a mutter, closing his eyes as he concentrated deep within himself. "Say my name."

Uncertainly, she said, "Natsu."

He inhaled with a deep and purifying breath. "Who do you love?"

Lucy thought she now understood. He was meditating to keep in control. He was doing this much to protect her from the raging beast inside. "I love you, Natsu. I only want you."

Natsu's face tightened, and with his body pressed against her back, Lucy felt him breathing harder. "Do you hear that?" he said to something in his mind. "She only wants me. She is mine. And...and I'm not going to share. Lucy is mine. I claim her as my mate. She is off limits. Do you hear that? No touching! Mine!"

The enraged demands seemed to work, because when Natsu opened his eyes, Lucy saw that they were wholly his.

Wearily, he dropped his head onto her shoulder. His nose nuzzled her neck, inhaling her smell. "You're mine...my mate," he breathed in a stream of hot air against her skin. It burn away her temporary worries. "I love you, Lucy. It's greedy of me, but I'm not sharing you, not even with another part of myself."

She tried to turn around so she could hold him in comfort, but Natsu pressed against her tighter.

"No! Don't turn around. Don't look at me." His body shivered as his mind thrashed in conflict. "I...I hate this. I wish I could look normal for you."

Lucy could not move her hands, so she rubbed her cheek against his hair to pet him comfortingly. "I
didn’t fall in love with how you look, Natsu. I fell in love with who you are. Besides," she mumbled, "the wings are...a bit sexy." She bit her lip at confessing that.

Natsu raised up with wide, surprised eyes. "You...really don't mind?"

She shook her head, then looked around her shoulder at the burgundy and salmon wings. "Can I touch them again? And can I touch your tail now?"

Natsu shivered at the thought of Lucy touching those appendages he hated, yet he knew they were immensely sensitive. Having her caress his tail would definitely feel thrilling.

Lucy slowly turned around to face him. First, she knew she had to reassure him. She had been momentarily terrified by the beast’s emergence, so losing control like that must have been horrifying to Natsu. Still, she trusted him to stay in control. She caressed both cheeks, moved her hands along his jaw bone, up to his ears, and lightly traced around the rim. Then her fingernails dragged down his neck. She realized he had lost the scarf at about the same time he lost control. Had the beast thrown it aside? If Natsu was still in control despite not having the scarf on, that showed his inner strength.

Lucy rubbed along his shoulders and around to his back. She felt the powerful muscles that controlled those wings and where they connected to existing muscles. She grimaced slightly at the thought of how agonizing it must be, to transform so drastically. His shoulder blades were now an extension of those wings, and she rubbed where they came out of his back.

Part of her wanted to rub the pink webbing, just to tease Natsu about having such a wide ticklish area, but she knew this was not the right mood. She stroked along the bony, dark-burgundy edge. The scales that lined it were just as soft as his scarf had been.

Then her hands drifted down, over the taut muscles of his back, to where the tail attached, forcing his pants to sag a bit. She touched where it jutted out, and with a bit of surprise, she realized that Natsu no longer had butt cheeks. That whole area around his spinal tailbone was now all part of the tail.

Natsu gasped through clenched teeth as he felt Lucy touch that sensitive tail. Of everything about this transformed body, he hated the tail most. It had a mind of its own, moving to his emotions; it meant he had to sleep on his stomach or side; and it made taking a dump really awkward. Worst of all, it was so damn sensitive to any touch, especially right at the base where Lucy was feeling, where skin turned into scales.

Natsu clenched his fists as Lucy kept touching that area. He did not want her to know just how erotic it felt. The nerves must have gotten messed up, because not only did he feel an electric rush up his spine, but the caresses tingled all the way around to his groin. He could feel the tail whipping back and forth in excitement, pleased to get some attention after so long of Natsu hating and ignoring it.

Natsu reached back around Lucy, grabbed the straps to her bra, bent them together and upward so the hooks came off with ease, then pulled that weird contraption off of her. Lucy moved the straps down her arms and let it drop somewhere close to where her shirt went.

Natsu stared at her topless body. "Wow," he whispered, unable to think at all. "What...what should I do with them?"

Such sweet innocence reassured Lucy a bit. "You play with them."

She took his hands and brought them up to her chest. He stared at them blankly. He was...touching her chest! Not just her bra, but her boobs! They felt even softer without the bra in the way. He caressed her nipple with his thumb, then saw the pink skin around it tighten into a wrinkled dot. It
amused him how her skin changed so fast, so he rubbed circles around the perky tip. It made Lucy whimper, and the ache between her thighs increased. She wanted to touch herself there, but it was too soon. Still, she twisted her legs a bit to relieve the ache.

Natsu really wanted to taste her again. The top of her breasts and cleavage had smelled and tasted so good, but those pink dots reminded him of candy. He really wanted to suck them.

Just as he was about to lean over and lick them, Lucy's hand drifted down again and roughly grabbed the tail as she yanked him up against her body, hoping a little friction would ease the ache. Natsu gasped as a jolt went through the tail and right around to his groin.

"Gah! No! Lucy!"

He grabbed her under the arms, lifted her off her toes, and rushed her over to the bed. He was not at all thinking when he practically threw her down; he grimaced afterward when he saw Lucy cringe in pain at being dropped onto what was nothing more than grass and leaves to make a meager padding with a thick blanket thrown over them as a mattress. However, he was driven onward now. He leaped on top of her, pressing his body against her and forcing her legs to spread. His arms caged her in, and his hips slid over her. He needed to feel her, to have something touch him...now!

Lucy shivered as Natsu rubbed that area that had been itching with need. The ache turned into heated relief, and she moaned at the friction. This was precisely what she needed, and he had somehow sensed it by instinct. Missing his taste, she grabbed his cheeks and crashed into his lips. His eyes widened in surprise by her eagerness, but he relaxed into the kiss. He squeezed her breasts again, and Lucy's moan vibrated on his lips, making the tugging in his gut down right painful.

It didn't help that Lucy grabbed his hips and yanked him against her again!

He made a few thrusts against her panties. God, he needed her! Fantasies and wet dreams were now coming true. He had Lucy under him, gazing down at her naked torso, admiring her flushed cheeks and the hazy lust in her eyes. Natsu could smell how aroused she was, and he felt wetness soak into his pants as he rubbed over her panties again.

He licked his lips. Why was he feeling hungry, like he wanted to eat her?

He pulled back suddenly, all weight on his stiffened arms and knees. Fear grasped hold of his chest. He felt like he was losing control again. He had no clue why he carried Lucy over here so suddenly, why he treated her a bit roughly, and why...why the hell did he want to taste her? What a weird thing to want!

Lucy lazily opened her eyes to see the panic in his face. She knew that would happen again, and she reached up to touch his cheek.

"Natsu." She said his name gently, calling him away from those fears. "I don't see the beast in your eyes. These are purely your instincts. Go with it."

He knew what he wanted to do. His tongue twitched to taste her, to see what that powerful musky smell really was like. Still, it was an odd thing to want. Never had he wanted to taste a person before, only recently, and only with Lucy. He wanted to lick her breasts more. He wanted to lick her stomach, her neck, her legs, her sex...everything.

His brows pulled down a bit. "I heard in the guild, guys are supposed to...to touch girls...down there. Rub them and...and use their fingers to feel inside, and that girls really like that. I want to," he assured wholeheartedly, "but..."
He raised his hand. Lucy wondered what the problem was, until she looked a little closer. Although his caresses so far had been incredibly gentle, Natsu still had long, curved, black claws like the talons of a predatory bird. She cringed at the thought of those razor sharp nails reaching into her tender entrance.

"Yeah, that's not going to work," she muttered.

"Exactly, but I've been thinking, and I want to know if this is okay. I mean, you know a bit about this stuff, right? You've gone on dates, and there are rumors about you and Loke..."

She flinched. Really, at a time like this, the last thing she wanted was to have past crushes brought up. "Loke and I, we never...I mean, once we...but I was drunk...but we didn't..."

"Don't tell me." He frowned, feeling his stomach twist in jealousy. "But...well..." He looked aside with a furrowed brow. "Maybe I can't touch you, but...is it normal for a guy to want to...to lick? Not just suck on boobs, but...but lick other places...taste other places." He felt really worried about this new instinct that was nagging him.

Her stomach fluttered at the thought of his burning tongue all over her. "Licking...yeah, definitely, that's normal. It's...really enjoyable. Biting is fine, so long as it's soft."

"You like being bitten?" he asked, not sure if he fully believed it. He could not imagine anyone biting another person for fun.

"Soft biting, like little love nips."

He carefully considered her reply, formulating an attack plan in his brain. "So, licking and biting aren't weird? Do you want me to do that?"

"Oh God, yes!" she gasped breathlessly. Her inner muscles were aching even worse now.

Seriously, he warned, "If I do this, I probably won't be able to stop."

Lucy gave him a cocky smirk. "You better not stop like you did last time."

He chuckled back. "Weirdo."

He looked down at the skirt. That definitely needed to go. He tugged it down, taking the panties along with it. As the cloth pulled away, the aroma or feminine arousal completely suffocated him. The panties were wet, and their smell also make his stomach tug with need. He wanted to sniff them, but Lucy had gotten mad at him in the past for sniffing her dirty laundry. He set the clothes to the side, then looked at the present he just unwrapped.

Amused, he commented, "It looks like a wet flower."

"Don't just stare at it!" Lucy yelled, feeling exposed and embarrassed.

"But it's cute."

"It's not cute! It's supposed to be sexy."

"Yeah, it's that too. Cute and sexy, like you."

Lucy turned her face away, unable to look at how he was staring right down at her most private area. "Really Natsu, you..."
Her admonishments were cut short when Natsu dropped onto his elbows and licked the whole length of her sex. Stars exploded in her vision, and her body stiffened as it felt something so amazing, it instinctively wanted more...and wanted him to stop before she lost control. Lucy was pretty damn sure she had never felt anything more fantastic in her entire life. Touching herself, using the shower head, nothing compared to the wet fire of Natsu's tongue.

"Tastes weird."

Those two words nearly shattered her heaven. Did she taste bad? She knew she was a little filthy, having spent days roaming the wilderness searching for Natsu, but at least she bathed the previous day.

"Sweet and strong, a bit bitter at times, but that makes the sweetness even better." He glanced up from between her thighs with wide eyes, looking amazed and pleased. "It tastes just like how you are. How cool is that?" he exclaimed.

Lucy blushed at his assessment. Sweet and strong, huh? No one but Natsu ever called her strong.
"You...you like it?"

Natsu nodded briskly with a grin. "Can I taste more?"

"Y-yeah," she mumbled. "Actually, there's a spot. Maybe aim for that. Umm...God, this is embarrassing," she mumbled, but she knew Natsu had no clue about female anatomy. She reached down and touched her clit to show him. "That spot. That's where it feels best. Inside too, if...if you wanna try licking inside. You don't have to," she mumbled.

"Nah, I wanna try everything. Maybe I'll find places you like that you didn't know you liked. But I'll start with these two."

Natsu settled back down, looking at the little pink dot she had pointed out. It was such a tiny thing. Did it really feel so good? He narrowed his tongue and just lapped it softly, not sure what to do. Instantly, he felt Lucy's body jolt. He looked up over her belly, worried he might have done it too hard, but Lucy hummed sensually as her body floated back down.

"Weirdo," he thought again.

He licked once more, this time with a softened flat tongue. Her whole lower body squirmed, until he had to hold her hips still so he could lick her again. He began to experiment: up and down motions, swirling in circles, flicked over the very tip. Each thing he tried got strong reactions from Lucy, so he decided variety was best: up, down, all around, flick, lap, suck.

She nearly leaped right off the floor when his lips wrapped around that button and sucked on it. She screamed, but Natsu smelled her sensual aroma tripling.

"Oh please, Natsu!"

Please what? What did she want? Then he remembered she said something about sticking his tongue inside. He knew it would not reach that far, but he decided to try it anyway. His tongue dragged down, sliding between folds that looked like lips or flower petals. He saw the small hole.

Really, how could men fit their penis into something that tiny? It looked physically impossible!

At least his tongue would fit. He tested it out, poking his tongue at just the wet entrance. Dear God, she tastes strong! He felt his mind blanking out, but not because of the beast this time. He was simply getting overwhelmed by the smell and taste.
"Natsu," Lucy keened, wiggling again with impatience.

Natsu gazed up at her, a lusty and hazy look that peered over the soft mound covered with wiry hair. Lucy happened to open her eyes and look down at him. Big mistake! That predatory look of carnal lust alone was practically enough to make her reach her peak. Then suddenly, his tongue stabbed into her.

She once again bucked upward, and Natsu grabbed onto her hips, forcing her butt back down onto the bedding. Then his tongue stabbed at her again, thrusting in deep. He felt bad that he had to dig his fingers into her hips a bit—he hoped they did not leave bruises—but seriously, she was squirming all over the place. How was he supposed to lick her when she kept moving away? He almost wanted to tell her, Just stay still! Except, he liked feeling her writhing at his ministrations. He liked hearing the gasps and whimpers she tried to hold back.

He liked hot things, and Lucy was burning up.

"Natsu!"

He pulled back up to that button and licked it again. Lucy screamed this time, but the shiver through her body reassured Natsu that her cry was not from pain. Sheesh, she was noisy!

Her hands suddenly flew up and grabbed onto his head, pressing him against her. She wanted to rub his head up and down to get more friction, but his tongue was doing plenty for now. Her legs wrapped around his back to pull him closer into her, and her toes were beginning to curl.

"Natsu, don't you dare stop!"

He glanced up over her belly again. She was close, huh? He heard men in the guild say that female orgasm was a big mystery, and you could never tell if they were faking it or not. He was curious, what exactly happened to women? Obviously, they didn't cum! Or did they? He was confused, so he watched her and kept licking, not giving up, pressing his tongue harder, until his mouth began to hurt. She looked in pain, her head shook back and forth just like what happened to him when he transformed, except the fingers that were now yanking his hair showed she was not about to let him have a break. Then she pulled a little too hard, and Natsu moaned in pain as he felt some hairs detach from his scalp.

"Aargh!" Lucy cried out.

Smirking, he realized the vibration must have made it better. He hummed again, sensually this time, and he felt Lucy tense up.

"Natsu," she cried in a squealing voice. "Natsu!"

He loved hearing her say his name, and he hummed "Lucy" into her. Then he began to spell her name out with his tongue. L-U-C-Y. At the end, he gave that button a firm suck.

Lucy's back arched right up. Her whole body stiffened and went still as all movement was now happened inside her, clenching, tugging, muscles twitching. She only wished his fingers could have been inside her, something to grab onto.

Natsu instinctively sensed that something serious had happened. Lucy was not screaming anymore. She sounded like she was choking, and her body was too still. When he looked up, her face was completely red and drawn up as if ready to scream or cry...maybe both. Then all of a sudden, she collapsed back down limply. Her hand fell off his head, and her legs spread to either side of his body.
He waited, wondering what the hell just happened. Unsure, worried that she was so quiet, he gave her opening another lick, hoping to get a reaction. She reached down and pushed him away. That worried him even more. She had her eyes covered with her arm, panting hard, but she warned:

"Don't. Sensitive."

Sensitive? He felt that way sometimes, but only after he...

"Oh," he realized belatedly. "Was that...did you...?"

She nodded, still covering her eyes and trying to regain control of her breathing.

Natsu stared down at that wet, pink area again. "Oh," he said again.

She came. He felt a bit smug that he had managed to do that to her, but he kind of wished he had known that *that* was happening. Some warning would have been nice so he could have watched her closer.

Female orgasm was still a mystery.

"Lucy, I...I still need..." He had no clue how to ask her, so he climbed up and tapped on her entrance with his pants. His cock had been ignored for too long, and after finding out she just came, he realized how painful he was getting from ignoring his own physical needs.

Lucy reached down and softly caressed his hidden length. "Can I look at it a bit first?"

Natsu shrank his head down and looked aside with a blush. "There's not much to look at. It's just a dick."

"I've never seen one up close. Please? Stand up. Take your pants off."

Getting ordered like that made his throat go dry, and he was helpless to resist. He rose in front of her, pulled his pants down, and stood there awkwardly, hoping he did not look too weird. Natsu now knew how mortifying it must have been for Lucy to have him stare at her sex.

Lucy had seen Gray's penis a few times when he stripped completely naked, but that was flaccid, soft, normal. Natsu's was truly impressive when erect. She felt the tightness of the skin, the heat that came off of it, the veins throbbing with Natsu's racing heart, and how the foreskin covered the head like a hoodie. She pulled on the loose skin a little, brought it up over the head, then moved it back down until the flared head popped out. It was cute, but she knew she could never tell that to Natsu. She tugged the skin back up over, watching it stretch, then curious, she put her finger inside and felt the inner skin.

Natsu hissed and put his hands against the wall to stabilize himself as his knees began to weaken. *Shit!* The foreskin was one of the most sensitive parts, and she was playing with it. His need increased, but he held it back for now. It was only fair that Lucy got time to play, too.

He thought it could never get more intense than this, until Lucy pushed the foreskin completely back and licked his head. It had a faintly bitter taste and a strong, musky smell, but she decided she could put up with that. She popped the head into her mouth, sucking on just that part, and lapped her tongue around the underside in circles.

Natsu lost his breath at that. He dealt with fire every day, so how was it that her mouth was so burning hot?
Although Lucy had never gotten this far with a guy before, she had a basic idea of what to do. She was Cana's partner, after all, and that woman had stories that could curl your toes! So Lucy knew a little. She licked from testes to tip, right up the thick vein, twirled her tongue around the underside of his flared head, then tensed the tongue narrower and flicked it over the slit. Cana swore this drove men insane.

It sure did to Natsu. It was both teasing and intensely satisfying, innocent and completely seductive. His need was at an apex, yet just as he was ready to demand that they get to the good part (with the beast cheering fuck, fuck, fuck in the back of his head) Lucy suddenly thrust his whole penis into her mouth. She bobbed on him, holding with her hand what could not fit in her mouth. She grunted a little when it hit the back of her throat, but she did not stop bobbing in and out.

He almost completely lost it. He had to grab down and squeeze himself so he would not come in her mouth so quickly.

Lucy saw his movement, and she had a good guess why he was grabbing himself like that. She would have loved to give him a blowjob, she was immensely curious how he tasted, but there was more she wanted, and the sensitivity in her nether regions had lessened, leaving her aching again.

After not even a minute of sucking on him, she pulled back and looked up at him. "Natsu, do you want...?"

He did not let her finish. He dropped to his knees, pressed her to the bed, and climbed on top of her with insatiable lust in his eyes. Want? Oh hell yes, he had wants!

« I want inside her. I want to claim her. I want to taste and feel and kiss and hold and love, love, love! »

« Fuck, fuck fuck! »

« You can just shut up, stupid beast. This is my turn now, my wants. My Lucy! I'm not doing this because it might protect Lucy from you. I'm doing it because I want no one else but her, and I won't let anyone else touch her like how I want to touch her. I want her...no, not want. I need her. I need Lucy, and I love Lucy, and...and damn she looks so sexy naked like this! »

He leaned over, kissed her neck again, then bit it. Lucy shivered under him with a cry laden with sensual overtones. He sucked on that spot, leaving his mark, showing to the world that he had claimed her heart and her body. He looked down at it and smiled that the pink circle on her pale skin looked so much like a little salamander curled up on a peach. He licked the hickey as if that might make the mark permanent. He knew though, it would fade. That just meant he would have to reapply his mark again and again...

And again!

"Lucy," he said, gazing down at her. "I love you, but I don't know if I can hold myself back anymore."

"It's okay," she said, rotating her hips up to meet him. "I'm ready."

He reached down to align himself until he was pretty sure he was in the right spot. "I'm sorry," he whispered, knowing it might hurt. Then his hips gave a firm thrust. He felt himself plunge into softness, moistness, and heat.

Lucy cried out. The beast might have done this already, yet that was only one time, and it had been a
while since then, enough time to heal a bit. So it still hurt, and her nails dug into his shoulders as she strained to loosen up so she could take him in.

Natsu kissed her face all over, lightly fluttering his lips over the strain in her brow and the clench in her jaws. "Sorry. I'm sorry," he whispered over and over with each light kiss. After a while, he felt her body relax, although she kept her eyes closed. Natsu took the chance to push in more, seeing how deep he could go.

Seriously, how was it that women had a passage this deep inside them? It was strange, but Natsu was glad to find that he could fit all the way without hurting her. The last thing he wanted was to thrust in and hit something dangerous...because dear heavens he wanted to thrust hard and fast!

He restrained that instinct, ignoring the screaming growls of faster, harder, fuck her, fuck, fuck in the back of his head. Instead, he pulled back slowly, watching her face, looking at the reactions of her body. The way her lips parted in a silent gasp made him want to devour her mouth. Her eyes peeked open, her lids heavy and lusty, and finally she smiled.

Lucy felt...well, happy wasn't the right word. Ecstatic? Overwhelmed? Relieved? She was a writer, yet words were failing her. She would have to check her thesaurus back home to see if there was a perfect word to describe exactly what she was feeling right then.

When he slid in again, it was a smooth glide, no pain, just the wonderful sensation of being filled up, of having Natsu inside her...a thought which overwhelmed her. She looked up at him, so happy to be with him. When he thrust in again, she moved her hips to match his, making him reach even deeper. The sensation made her gasp and her eyes fluttered closed.

Natsu rose onto his knees, holding Lucy's hips to help support her, and looked down at where their bodies were joined. With curious fascination, he watched as his penis disappeared inside her, only to come back out wet and hot. Suddenly, he was overwhelmed, not by lust, but something stronger. He wanted to laugh, but instead he found a tear dripping down his face.

Lucy saw this and reached up to wipe the single teardrop away. "Natsu, what's wrong?" she asked in concern. It was definitely weird to be crying during sex when both people wanted it so much.

"I dunno," he admitted. "I'm just...happy. Being like this," and he slid into her again to show what he meant, "it's like a missing puzzle piece, something that's always been incomplete, a part of my life that never seemed to be whole. It finally fits together, and the picture is beautiful. Does that even make sense?"

Now Lucy felt like crying in happiness, too. She nodded to his question and sniffled a little. "It makes perfect sense."

Something that had always been missing... That described it as simply yet as perfectly as possible. Natsu was that missing puzzle piece in her life, something she needed to be complete. They were equals and opposites. They blended together like colors on two separate pieces of a puzzle. Like the grooves of a puzzle, when those two pieces snapped together, they locked into place firmly, not wanting to separate.

Leave it to Natsu to describe such a deep and complex emotion as a child's puzzle.

Natsu kept watching right where their bodies joined, fascinated by looking at himself sink into her again and again, in and out. Then he got a mischievous idea and tried not to cackle. He heated himself up, just down there, and thrust in a bit deeper so Lucy could feel it.
"Whoa, Natsu!" she cried out in shock.

He smirked smugly. Let's see any other man do that!

Then his attention was distracted by her breasts. They moved with each thrust, and it looked interesting to see them jiggle like that. He snapped his hips harder, thrusting in rougher, so he could watch those massive mounds jiggle up and down. It was hypnotic, really. In a trance, he leaned over her body, dunked his head down, and took one nipple into his mouth.

Lucy suddenly cried out loudly, and Natsu felt her clench on him. He backed off quickly and froze, needing a moment to control himself before he ended too soon.

Lucy squirmed with impatience. "Oh, come on! Touch me more, Natsu," she begged.

He laughed. "Weirdo. Do you think you really need to ask me to touch you more? Every muscle in me is practically burning to touch you all over." Slowly, he sank back into her. "You're getting me turned on too fast. How sexy you look..." He caressed her flushed cheeks; they felt hot even to his hands. "...how naughty you sound..."

She huffed and looked away with her lips pressed together tighter.

Natsu pulled her face back to him and licked her lips. "I like it. I like hearing you moan my name."

Lucy's inner muscles tightened at that. Was she honestly susceptible to dirty talk?

"I like feeling you clench on me, just like that. Do it again, Lucy," he whispered lustily.

She focused and squeezed her muscles around the cock that was spreading her so wide. She barely felt it, but Natsu shivered.

"Yes, like...like that...oh God!"

He suddenly began to pound into her with rough speeds that shocked her. Lucy didn't even have time to moan in rhythm with Natsu jackhammering desperately.

"Natsu..."

She needed to warn him that, since they had no protection, he needed to pull out. Likely, he did not realize this was an issue. However, her walls began to tighten again. Lucy felt herself getting close...oh so deliciously close!

Natsu grabbed her up and made her sit on his lap. Then he moved her up and down onto him, having her ride him while sitting in his lap. She grabbed around him, but she found the wings. She held onto those, right where they met his back. Her legs were forced to wrap around his hips, and they came to rest right on top of his tail. She recalled that the tail was sensitive, so she moved her feet along it, stroking the tail with her toes.

Natsu cursed now. "Oh fuck!" Then she had to make it worse by leaning over and sucking right over the scar on his neck. "Lucy!" he screamed. She was touching every sensitive part of his body all at once. It was way too much for him. He could not even stop himself.

He released, shivering at such insane intensity. His whole body stiffened as he felt himself go, spurting, filling her.

Lucy gasped when she felt it. "No!" she tried to warn, but the pressure filling her drove her over her
own border. "Na-...Natsu!" she shrieked as her muscles clenched on him. "Oh God...oh God...Natsu!"

Natsu couldn't even move! He was paralyzed with the throes of his orgasm. An enemy could have entered the cave just then, and he would still not be able to move a muscle. He could only grip Lucy and shiver as he felt her clenching muscles milk him.

So, this was female orgasm. It felt pretty good on him! But it lasted way too briefly.

"Idiot," she mumbled as she drifted off her high. "You're not supposed to release inside without protection."

"Sorry," he whispered tiredly. "Wait, is that like really bad?"

She sighed in exasperation. He really was clueless. "I could end up...you know...pregnant."

"Oh, is that all?" he laughed wearily. "You scared me for a moment there."

She raised an eyebrow at his aloof reaction. Yep...clueless.

Natsu lowered her back down onto the bed and collapsed on top of her, all energy gone, muscles trembling from exertion. Not even battles left him this tired. His breathing came slowly now with a heavy feeling.

"Woooow!" he said airily within an exhale. "I'm beat."

Lucy looked up, but all she saw was his pink hair in her face. "That good, huh?" she teased lightly.

"Hell yeah!" he exclaimed in a tired whisper.

He pulled out slowly. Lucy did not want him to go yet, and she squeezed him one last time before he left her. Natsu felt that and shivered. As much as he would have loved to do her twice, he really did need to rest and recover some sensation in his nether regions.

Lucy felt a gush flow out of her and grimaced a little. It felt sticky and hot, and she realized that pregnancy might be an issue. If they could have hurried to a town, she could have some magic done that would prevent that, but they were in the middle of nowhere. Then again, the chances of getting pregnant were not one hundred percent. Maybe she would get lucky.

A big maybe.

Even if something did happen, she knew Natsu would take care of her.

Suddenly, Natsu hissed a sharp inhale and groaned "Oww!" Lucy pushed aside her worries and looked at him just in time to see the wings shrink down and the tail retract. Natsu cringed at the change, and he did not move even after the foreign objects had sunk into his skin. The scales on his face went away, and she realized that his fingernails were back to normal. It all took under a minute, but Natsu kept holding still for twice as long. When he opened his eyes, they were joyful. He was back to normal!

Maybe the beast was right. Maybe he just needed to address the desires he had been suppressing for so long. In any case, he wanted to thank Lucy, but he had no clue how. So, Natsu dived down and kissed her hard. This time, when his hands caressed her face, he could drag his nails along her skin without fearing that he might scratch her. He raised up again and looked ready to burst in joy.
"I love you, Lucy," he declared with desperation in his words. "I have for a while, but I didn't really think you'd like me back, and I never thought I'd be able to do anything about it, being teammates at all. Not until all of this started. I...really, really, really love you." He pouted a little. "I wish there was a better word than love, because I love you way more than I can say." He nuzzled down into her neck, saw the pink mark he left behind, and licked it. "I want you. The beast claimed you, but I want to as well."

"You just did, silly," she giggled with a light blush at his ticklish licking.

He pulled back, and his narrow eyes stared at her intensely. "I mean...more."

"More? Wait, you want to go again? So soon?" she shouted in shock. Her thighs were tingling numb right now, let alone how sore she might end up if they attempted to go for a second round.

"No, not that. Sex is awesome, but it's over too fast. I want more than just that. I want something that doesn't end." He suddenly looked nervous again, yet he knew he just had to go ahead and ask. "Lucy, will you...?"

Just then, runes lit up around them. "Got him."

Natsu pulled away, backing up with a hiss. Paranoia was again in his widened eyes. He bared his teeth at the unseen enemy. Lucy saw his eyes flicker red, and she sat up in worry.

"Natsu!" she shouted in warning.

He retreated until his back hit a wall of runes. He leaped away from them and spun around, searching frantically for an escape.

"Natsu, calm down!" shouted Lucy. He was not even looking at her, searching for an escape.

"Natsu!"

"Want freedom!" he hissed angrily in a distorted voice.

"Natsu Dragneel, you get your consciousness back here right now!" It was a weird thing to demand, but it seemed to work. Natsu's body loosened, and his eyes faded back to their normal color. "Stay with me, Natsu. Don't get scared. It was Freed's voice. These are his runes. It's just Freed Justine. Our friends are here. We all want to help you to get better. It's okay, Natsu."

The dragon slayer looked over at Lucy, panic on his face, longing in his eyes, and whimpered, "Lucy..."

He suddenly bolted into her arms and crushed her into a hug. Lucy was about to complain until she felt him shivering all over. She still was unaccustomed to seeing Natsu afraid of something, so she hugged him and ran her fingers through his hair, hoping to keep him calm.

"It's scary," he whispered. "The beast inside...it's panicking, it's clawing, and it's scaring me. I don't want it to come out and hurt you."

"It's okay, Natsu." She stroked his head reassuringly and laid her cheek against him, rocking him softly to console him. "I'll protect you. You don't have to listen to the beast. Don't let it control you. You're in charge, not it."

He swallowed hard and nodded. Still, she felt him trembling.

"Oh Natsu," she sighed, nuzzling into his pink hair. "Really, you're a big baby sometimes." She
smiled and rubbed her cheek against his face until her lips were by his ear. "I love you, so stay with me. Don't leave me."

He raised his head and looked into her eyes deeply. "I'll never leave you," he promised solemnly. Then he kissed her fervently. His head dropped again until their foreheads rested together with their noses touching. He muttered, "I wanna go home."

Two figures entered the cave. Erza and Freed saw Lucy's naked backside with Natsu grasping tightly to her.

"Lucy!" Freed shouted, fearing she was being attacked.

Erza swung her arm out to hold him back. "It's okay," she said softly. She saw the hickeys on Lucy's skin, the iridescent moisture between her legs, as well as the rumpled bedding. "Lucy, are you injured?" she asked softly.

"No," the blonde called back. "We're both fine."

"Lucy," Freed explained, "step back slowly and exit the runes. You can leave, but Natsu can't."

"But Natsu is better now," she insisted.

"We can't risk it," Erza told her.

"Lucy," Natsu said quietly, pulling back from the hug. She could still feel him shaking, but he tried to smile at her. "It's best this way. I'm still dangerous. I could lose to the beast at any moment."

Lucy's eyes teared up. She wanted to stay with him and kiss him some more. Her body still tingled with his touches and moist tongue. All she wanted was to hold onto him all night long.

"I'll...um...step out," Freed politely offered, and he exited the cave with a blush on his cheeks.

Natsu tipped his chin to show Lucy that she should go. Slowly, she rose from the bed. Natsu's eyes could not stop staring at her creamy skin and the little pink marks he left behind. Already, he wanted to take her again, put on more marks to show he had claimed her, but he knew she had to go. He could feel himself growing more unstable, and the last thing he wanted was to ruin this wonderful moment by slipping and having the beast hurt Lucy.

He watched her tug her panties up until they covered the little patch of hair. Then he gazed as she pulled her bra on and hid away those breasts he adored. Making love to her had not appeased his wants; it only intensified his craving. Still, he felt a strong sense of satisfaction. The dark desires were no longer something deep that he tried to suppress. They were in the open.

And he was getting aroused again!

He forced his eyes down, when he realized he was also still naked. He went over to where his pants had been thrown off, just barely within the border of the runes, and yanked them on. His shirt was in another part of the cave, though, where he had removed it when the wings first sprouted on the previous day. He sneaked a glance over to Lucy and saw she was also watching him. They shared a silent smile, both knowing that this was not the sort of ending they wanted, both wanting another chance in the near future to make love properly, including cuddling all night.

Erza watched over them, seeking the smallest hint that Natsu might attack, yet all she witnessed were glances of love and sadness. She could easily guess what happened, but at least it seemed like both Natsu and Lucy were consensual. She felt guilty for ripping them apart like this, but she had to
protect her teammates. That was her duty, even if it meant ruining a perfect romantic moment.

Once dressed, Lucy held the dragon slayer, hugging him, rubbing her hands up and down his back, as if she might not get to touch him again for weeks...which was quite possible. As she felt him still shaking, she kissed the side of his cheek.

"You'll be okay," she promised softly. "We're going to get you help."

Natsu knew he could not hold back these passions any more. If he buried them, they would become the beast's wants. He grabbed Lucy roughly, tipped her back a little, and kissed her with as much passion as he could give, instantly thrusting his tongue into her to taste her one last time.

To the side, Erza began to reach for her sword until she saw Natsu give Lucy a fiery kiss. Her eyes widened at that. Sure, she had figured out that the two must have made love, but she had never seen Natsu kiss someone before, let alone like that! It was...weird for her to see Natsu being so passionate.

Lucy panicked for a moment. Natsu was doing way more than just kissing her goodbye. His tongue sought out all of her flavor, and his hand grasped at her breasts once more. She gasped and looked over to Erza, but she saw the redhead looking away, giving the two some privacy to say their goodbyes. Lucy gave in, and her body felt like it was melting into Natsu's touches. Her hands ran through his hair, down his neck, and over his shoulders. His mouth still tasted a little like her sweetness, and it was an oddly arousing flavor, tasting both him and her on his tongue. He suddenly tweaked her nipple, and Lucy moaned without thinking. She instantly turned red as she realized Erza just heard that erotic noise.

Finally, Natsu pulled back, but he did not let her go yet. His eyes held passion and sadness. He swallowed hard as emotions pummeled him. He knew what he needed to do, but letting her go felt...wrong! It went against every single instinct, especially the beast shrieking in the back of his mind:

« Nooo! Keep her. Want her. Need her. Never let Lucy go. »

"I'm sorry about...that." He glanced down to show he meant about releasing inside her. "I wasn't thinking. It's my fault. I'll take responsibility."

Lucy blushed with embarrassment. "That's the second time you've told me that."

"I've meant it both times," he assured with a serious gaze. Then Natsu leaned forward again and gave her a gentle goodbye kiss.

« You can't give up girlie! No! Keep her! Need her! »

Natsu smiled sadly to himself as he realized that this was going to be the beast's new instinct: the desire to get Lucy back and keep her close. That was precisely what he wanted, but he knew he could not do it, not yet. Reluctantly, he released her and stepped back.

"Go on," he whispered.

Breathless and ready to cry, Lucy pulled back. Still, she watched him while her tongue rubbed the roof of her mouth, still enjoying his taste. There was so much she wanted to say, but with Erza there, those sorts of confessions had to wait. Knowing she was only dragging out the inevitable, Lucy sadly turned away. She spent a moment to steel herself and rein in her emotions, but finally she was ready.

The runes glowed and tingled as she stepped through. Natsu followed her, but the runes blocked him
with a purple flash. He placed his hand against the barrier, and Lucy turned around to put her hand next to his. Only the field of magic separated them.

"The others are waiting at the bottom of the cliff," Erza told her. "We'll get Natsu down."

Lucy stood there for a few seconds before she felt ready to leave and face the others. At last, she turned and walked away without looking back. Outside, there was an ice ladder made by Gray that stretched from the bottom of the canyon up to the cave. She climbed down, and the ice worked to cool her emotions.

"Better than a cold shower," she muttered.

At the bottom, Gray watched her descending. He held the ladder to stabilize it and pretended that he did not see her panties. When she finally stepped on solid ground and turned around, he realized that she was crying.

"Lucy!" He grabbed her shoulders, but she pulled away fast. Gray wondered if maybe she had been hurt. He saw a few pink marks, and it infuriated him. "What did that bastard do to you?"

"I'm fine," she whispered, wiping her eyes. "Natsu's better now. He's not dangerous. He...he's..." She suddenly hiccuped a sob and ran off as she began to bawl loudly, completely surrendering to the emotions she had hoped to hide.

Gray wanted to run after her, but he had no idea what to say. Just then, Wendy stepped up to him.

"I'm a little worried," she whispered to Gray. "Lucy's smell has changed."

"Changed?" he asked in dread.

"It's..." The twelve-year-old bashfully tucked her head down. "I hate to say this, but...it smells like love. Like...like when people make love in the back stock rooms of the guild. I can always smell it, and Gajeel told me once that it's the smell of...of se-...s-sex." She blushed fiercely at saying that word. "Lucy smells like that now."

Gray's mouth dropped. Like sex? She and Natsu...

Gray sneered up at the cave just as Erza and Freed worked together to move the rune-cage. Fury blazed in his eyes, and his fists clenched. He did not care if Lucy said Natsu was better or not dangerous. That creature possessing him was definitely unsafe and unstable, which meant Natsu could not be trusted. Gray was determined to deal with that bloodthirsty beast one way or another, if
only to get revenge for it hurting Lucy so deeply.

End of Chapter 17

Chapter End Notes

A/N: This...was the most frustrating chapter EVER! First, massive writer's block through most of January. Then, I finally get inspired, write like an insane woman, totally into the moment, and just as I get to the lemon...CRASH! With nothing saved, of course. Hours of intense writing, lost. That was on January 30th, and I really wanted this finished by Feb. 1st for the one-year anniversary. So I've spent the past two days focused utterly on the longest single chapter ever. Now I need to go play a video game and blow some shit up to release my frustrations.

Happy anniversary, Beastly Possession! You have been a hell of a beast to write.
Sting politely took a cookie offered by a rotund farm wife who obviously believed that having many children would help during the planting and harvest seasons. The small mob of children annoyed Sting, all of them with bright orange hair and piercing blue eyes, each only a year older than the next. He lost count of how many there were, since the older ones looked alike, the younger ones ran around too fast, and there was at least one set of twins.

He focused on the haggard father instead, a grizzled man with dark skin from working the fields all day, his orange hair fading to white, smelling to Sting's sensitive nose like dirt, sweat, cut plants, sheep dung, and his breath reeked of cheese and moonshine whiskey. It was a retched smell that added to the aroma of cookies baking and stench of dirty diapers.

"So, you's huntin' that beast that's been plaguin' these farms, eh?" the farmer said in a drawling accent. "Issa 'bout dang time someone seriously hunted that critter."

"Has it been in the area for long?" Sting asked. He attempted to bite into the cookie, but it was rock hard. He discreetly tucked it into a pocket instead.

"Nope, came an' went like the wind, it did! Ate many of my animals."

Sting glanced around at the rowdy mob. "It didn't, perhaps, eat a few of your children?"

The farmer wheezed a laugh. "No, no. All present an' accounted for. It did try to attack my eldest. She's the one who scared the thing away when it came attackin' the chickens."

"Scared it away?" Sting frowned as he realized something was not making sense. A feral dragon slayer did not get scared away, and it hunted people, not farm animals. Perhaps the rumors were about a normal monster. "Did you actually see this beast?"

"Me? No sirree. Tenko did, though. She got a real good look at it."

"I think I should speak to her next." Sting rose and tipped his head to the wife. "Thanks for the cookie, ma'am."

"Oh, you're mighty welcome, sugar," she tittered. "Ain't every day we get such a cutie in the house. Here, have a few for the road." She already had a knapsack filled with rock hard cookies.

Sting raised an eyebrow as he took them. Well, they might actually taste good if the next farmer gave him some milk to soften them up. Or maybe he could use them to sink a line for fishing. Lector had been complaining about not getting enough fish.

Sting gladly stepped out of the noisy house and finally breathed some fresh air. Lector was waiting.
keeping out of the way after one of the children had pulled his tail. He came up now and sniffed the
floral sack.

"Cookies?"

"Trust me, you don't want them," Sting whispered. "Have you seen a girl around here?"

"There's one in the chicken coop."

Sting headed toward the small building surrounded by feathers. His boots sank into droppings, and
once again Lector decided he would wait for Sting to speak with these farmer folks. The Exceed
honestly did not like rural life and missed the city. Lector took the knapsack, tested out a cookie,
could not bite into it, and stuck it back with a grumble about stupid farmers.

Sting ducked down into the chicken coop. He was unsure what he had been expecting, maybe a
smaller version of the rotund mother. Instead, he saw a svelte girl his age, her gleaming orange hair
pulled back into a haphazard bun and held in place with a pencil, strands falling down in ringlets,
and although her dress was simple and her apron filthy, her skin was absolutely flawless and
gleamed golden-bronze from a life in the sun.

"Well well! A piece of heaven found in the most humblest place on Earthland. No wonder your
name is Tenko."

The girl startled, dropping the egg she was holding. Sting rushed forward and grabbed the chicken
egg before it fell. He rose up, put the egg back in the nest, and found himself standing so close to the
girl, he could smell a rose scent from her hair.

"A beauty like you doesn't belong on a farm," Sting said suavely. "If I weren't on a mission, I'd take
you back to Sabertooth with me."

"Sabertooth?" she gasped softly. "You're a mage?"

He showed Tenko his guild mark. "I need to ask you some questions."

"About the beast," she realized. "I knew Papa put out word for help about it, but I didn't think he'd
hire a magic guild."

"He didn't. I happen to be hunting this beast. Just good luck that I got to meet you," he smiled,
completely dazzling her.

"I...I see," she blushed, looking aside as her cheeks burned. Then she saw the droppings they stood
in and the feathers that covered the ground. "Perhaps a better location. This chicken coop must
stink."

Sting followed the young lady out of the reeking coop and down to a piece of farmland left to fallow
with a clover cover crop. Here they sat and gazed at the tiny puffs of purple flowers. Tenko tucked
her skirt around her politely, and Sting looked around at the plants with a childlike curiosity if he
could find a rare four-leafed clover. With hunting this beast, he could use all the luck he could get!

"So, what did you want to know?" she asked.

Sting jolted out of his cloverleaf search. "Oh, right. The beast. Anything you can tell me about it:
what it looked like, how it behaved, what it did? Anything at all you can remember might help me
hunt it down."
"Hunt it down?" she mumbled. "It...he's a person. Or maybe, half a person. But he looked somewhat human."

"That's normal," Sting assured her. "This creature was once human, but it lost its humanity a long time ago. It's no longer a man, nor does it think like one. It's purely a beast now."

"No," she said, shaking her head with a furrowed brow. "There's a part of him still human. When he tried to...to..." She broke off with a shiver.

Sting placed a reassuring hand on her back. "It's all right. This beast does horrific things to people. I've seen the horrors and heard the very worst. It's safe to tell me. I won't judge you."

She nodded and swallowed hard. "I was just waking up for the morning chores. I get up before Mama and Papa to fetch water. I was at the well when I heard a noise in the chicken coop. I thought it was a fox. We've had those a couple times. So I went to chase it away, and that's when I saw...glowing eyes," she whispered in remembered terror. "It was huge, the size of a man, wings and a tail. It was before dawn, still dark, so I can't tell you much, but the wings appeared to be reddish. His skin was the same color as yours, but there was something strange about it, like scales in certain areas. He grabbed me before I could scream and slammed me against the wall. He began to...lick me," she mumbled in shame, and her eyes filled with tears. "I really thought he was going to...to...do things." She put it delicately and blushed.

Sting looked a little surprised. "It didn't?" he asked. Although that was a good thing, it did not fit the normal profile of a feral dragon slayer that acted purely on dark instincts.

Tenko shook her head. "His voice suddenly changed. It was distorted and growling at first, but then he seemed to talk normally. He...apologized. Then he began arguing with the first voice."

"Two voices?" Sting tried to clarify.

She nodded. "It was like he was arguing with another side of himself."

Sting looked aside. This made absolutely no sense. "The feral should be too far along. Then again, I suppose the human side could break through momentarily. What sort of things did he say?"

Tenko shrugged and looked down at the purple flowers to avoid eye contact with such a handsome man while confessing about something as horrible as a near-rape. "He repeated over and over that he didn't want to hurt anyone, but the other side, the beast side, kept screaming profanities about wanting to fu...uh, to have sex," she said more politely. "He was fighting with himself, then he ran out screaming that women were...off-limits." She shrugged, unsure at the meaning of this, only relieved that she had not been hurt.

Sting looked troubled. "The beast listened to the human side. That's very unusual."

"Unusual?" Tenko asked worried.

"I mean no offense, but this beast is a creature of vile destruction and wanton slaughter. It would have raped you while eating you alive. To see that you're safe, not a scratch on you, and the beast backed away due to the human side coming forward...that's a real surprise."

Tenko pouted and looked away petulantly. "Maybe it's just me. Seems like no man, even a half-man, wants me."

Sting was no fool. He heard the offer hidden in her pouting words. "Perhaps it truly is you," he said in a deep, seductive voice that brought Tenko's face back over to him in surprise. "It seems even a
beast from Hell can be tamed by the face of a Heavenly Child."

Tenko, whose name meant Heavenly Child, blushed at his words.

"You know," Sting said, sidling up closer to her, "this beast leaves a mark on its prey, something to guide it back if it wants to play with the prey a little longer."

Her face paled in dread. "A mark? Like how wolves mark territory?"

"Exactly. It could be anything: a smell, a bite, a scratch." His hand caressed her sun-kissed arm. "Where did this beast touch you? Show me everywhere it touched. You see, I'm a dragon slayer. You could say that my specialty is finding beastly marks on people. I don't smell it on you." He nuzzled his nose into her neck, giving her chills. "So it must have been a physical mark. Did it touch your arms?"

Tenko blushed fiercely. "I...I don't remember. Maybe."

Sting moved in closer. "Did it touch your shoulders?"

"Y-yes." She breathed heavily, loosening her blouse and willingly tugging it down. "He grabbed my shoulders when he slammed me against the wall."

"Such a brute!" Sting said, caressing the paler skin on her neck and shoulders, inching the blouse downward. "I shall slay that creature for daring to touch such perfection. Where else? What other places did this fiend touch? I need to inspect every single place to search for its mark."

"He...just for a moment, though..."

"A moment is all it would need."

"He...grabbed my...my bosom."

"Bosom?" Sting chuckled as his lips trailed over her flushing skin. "Have I ever told you that I love the way farm girls talk? Tell me more," he said, guiding her as Tenko leaned back against the fragrant clover and pulled him with her. Sting leaned over her, using his body to shade her eyes from the sun. "Show me every place it might have marked."

"Sir!" she gasped as he leaned down over her.

"Just call me Sting. Remember, I won't tell anyone. I won't say where it touched you or what it did. This is our secret." He leaned over and nipped on her collar bone, making her shudder in pleasure. "Our little secret."

An hour later, Sting walked up the hill from the clover field with slightly disheveled hair and a lazy smile on his face. Lector was glaring at the farmer's hunting dogs, which were snarling back at him, trying to decide if this weird creature was a cat or not.

"About time!" the Exceed complained. "She must have had a lot of information."

"Hmm? Oh, yeah, sure," Sting said, still lightheaded. "Actually, her story is bizarre. So far, the beast has been slaughtering mostly people, entire villages wiped out. Yet this is the third farm we've visited who claim that not a single person was hurt. The daughter confronted the beast, and it let her go. That's not at all the way a feral dragon slayer acts. Its instinct is to kill humans, so why is it now heading into non-populated areas and killing only animals?"
"Maybe this is another creature? We could have lost its track."

"No," Sting muttered, reaching the main road and staring back down at the little farmhouse, including the orange-haired girl standing on the porch, watching him wistfully. "Her description fits perfectly: the face of a human, wings, a tail, scaly skin. It's definitely a feral dragon slayer. There's no way there could be two...or at least, the odds are astronomical."

Lector tried to think logically about that. "Maybe it's having a change of heart."

Sting shook his head. "According to Rogue, that can't happen. It gets worse with time, not better. Dammit, I really wish he had come along with us. He and Gajeel are the only dragon slayers who know how to handle this problem."

He sighed, missing his fellow dragon slayer, but he knew that Rogue did his own thing. He stared at the distant girl instead. At least without Rogue there to act all stoic, Sting could have a little fun.

Lector gave a weary sigh. "You marked her, didn't you?"

"Just a little tumble in the clover," he said dismissively. "She might be worth returning for, but I doubt I'll ever come this way again. We better hurry," Sting decided, turning away from the farm and the girl. "We seem to be close. We have to press on before this little loll in its habit ends and it heads back to civilization."

"Right, but no more marking women. One of these days, you're going to ruin some young girl's life, or her father will come after you with a shotgun."

Sting just laughed at that. "Who needs Rogue around when I have you to keep me in line?"

"I obviously don't do a good enough job," Lector grumbled as the two continued on their way.

Back in Lucy's group, they set up camp for the night. Natsu was stuck in his cage of runes, curled into a ball of sickness due to the bumpy ride. It took him nearly an hour after stopping before he recovered enough to sit up. Freed reworked the runes just enough to slide a plate of food in and remove a bucket they gave Natsu for puking and peeing. Otherwise, nearly everyone kept far away from the cage, uncomfortable with the idea of having their friend locked away. No one really knew what to say to him, and he did not bother to speak to them either.

Capturing him was an adventure, but transporting him back, knowing he was unstable, was a solemn duty.

Lucy glanced occasionally to the purple glowing runes. However, Natsu's sad expression pained her. She began to think it might be better if he was in his beastly form. Then it would feel more appropriate to keep him caged like this. For now, it felt...wrong!

Mirajane sang a campfire tune, hoping to pull them out of their gloominess. It did not really work, and finally they all went to bed early. Gray offered to take the first watch, and he sat by the fire, glaring at Natsu's cage. Natsu watched him back for a while.

"You wanna say something, droopy-eyes?" he finally challenged.

Gray kept quiet. Something gnawed at him, but he had to keep quiet about it, at least until he heard everyone asleep. He listened closely. Wendy slept so silently, it was hard to tell when she finally dozed off. After an hour, he decided it was safe enough. He stood up, which pulled Natsu out of a light doze. Silently, Gray walked over to the glowing cage sitting on a wheeled cart, casting a
lavender hue around the bit of grass they had parked it on.

"I'm going to ask this only once, Natsu," he whispered, which made the dragon slayer scoot closer to the edge of runes. "I want the truth, no matter how...how damning it is." He sneered for a moment but held back his anger. He needed to hear it from Natsu first before he could truly give in to hatred. "Yesterday in that cave," he whispered, "did you rape Lucy?"

Natsu's face showed astonishment, then anger. "What did she tell you?"

"Nothing," Gray glared. "She won't talk to me, and that makes me even more suspicious. I know you assaulted her..."

Natsu began to shout, "I didn't..."

"I overheard her talking to Wendy yesterday, asking her if she could use her healing magic to check for pregnancy."

Natsu blinked, then slowly a smile came to his face. "She's pregnant?" he asked in abetted happiness. Gray shook his head. "Wendy detected nothing."

Natsu sank a little. "Oh. That's...good, I guess."

Gray sneered at him. "You really did rape her, didn't you?"

"No!" Natsu insisted.

"You had sex with her."

"Yes," he said in a panic, "but...but I didn't rape her. I swear, I didn't!"

"Then the beast did, whatever. Just like you raped her before."

"I never..." Natsu froze as sickening realization dawned on him. That, at least, was one accusation that Gray had every right to make. "Goddammit," he hissed in self-loathing, and Natsu curled into a ball. "Did she tell everyone about that?"

"So far, only Master and I know. She had to tell him. I managed to guess. No one else knows about it. If she doesn't want people to know, I won't say anything, but I swear, Natsu, I will never forgive you for that."

"Even if she forgave me?" he asked quietly, looking up with mournful eyes. "I didn't rape her yesterday. It was...what's the word...consensual. I was fully in control, and Lucy wanted it, I swear."

Gray's anger now began to boil. "If you were in control yesterday, then why the hell did you try to rape me?"

"Rape...you?" He sneered in revulsion. "When the hell did that happen?"

"Just before Lucy came and practically threw herself as a sacrifice to get the beast off me and onto her. I ran to get help, and next thing we knew, you were flying away with her. What the hell was I supposed to think?" he shouted quietly. "Do you expect me to believe that after you did that to me, you just smiled at Lucy and she opened her arms to embrace you?"

Natsu put his hand to his mouth as he looked sick. "What...what exactly did the beast do to you?"
Gray inspected Natsu's reaction. It was pretty obvious, he was completely unaware of the beast's actions while it was in control. "Do you really want to know?"

Natsu shivered with a way-too-vivid imagination. "Maybe not," he mumbled. "I didn't do...that...did I?"

Gray looked away, suddenly feeling awkward as well. "You didn't...stick it in."

"Oh, thank God!" Natsu sighed in relief. "I'm really sorry. Dammit," he grumbled. "Now I have to enforce not only 'no sex with women' but 'no sex with anything.' Stupid beast."

"Don't think I'll forgive you so easily just because you weren't conscious."

"I don't blame you," Natsu mumbled. "Shit, that would have been the worst thing ever. You must really hate me."

"Yeah, I do," Gray said honestly.

Natsu's forehead crinkled in sadness. "Gray...Lucy trusts you. She's close to you."

"We're teammates. Of course we trust one another."

Those slanted eyes gazed up, and they nearly glowed in the low light of the runes. "I'm charging you with protecting Lucy while I'm locked up. Keep her safe, even if it's from me. If I turn again, and if I break out of this cage somehow, protect her. If the beast tries to hurt her, I give you permission to kill me."

Gray's eyes widened at how seriously Natsu said that, completely unlike him, yet he spoke without hesitation. Obviously, this was something the dragon slayer had been thinking about for a while. He was honestly that scared for Lucy's safety.

"I sure hope it doesn't come to that," the ice mage frowned.

"Believe me, I hope not either," Natsu laughed tensely. "Still, it could happen. I've told that to Lucy, too, but I know she won't hurt me. If she threw herself at the beast to save you, there's no way she'd do what it takes to stop the beast for good, so I'm leaving that duty to you."

Natsu bit his lip, and if Gray didn't know better, it almost looked like the dragon slayer was ready to cry. "There's no way I could live with myself if I hurt her again," he whispered miserably, "so if the beast is about to do anything, protect her at all cost. Only protect, though!" he insisted firmly. "Lay a hand on her, work your moves on her, flirt with her in any way, and I will bash your ugly face in." He glared seriously. "Lucy is my mate now, and I'm not going to let you steal her away."

Gray chuckled softly. "Yeah, yeah, I get it. I won't take another man's girl." He looked aside and glanced back to the camp, to the tent where Lucy was sleeping. "You're one lucky bastard, Natsu."

"More lucky than you," Natsu goaded.

Gray chuckled while glaring at him. "Shut the hell up, flame-brain."

"You couldn't get a snowflake to fall for you."

"At least I don't have a subconscious desire to screw men."

"Seriously, shut up about that."

Gray laughed, and for a moment it seemed like they were normal again, bantering, pestering one
another, except the barrier of runes reminded him of the dire situation. "You know, we went through a lot of trouble to hunt you down. You better not be weak on us and go feral or whatever while we're hauling your lazy dragon ass back home."

"Suck on an icicle, stripper. There ain't no way I'm giving up now. I have to take Lucy on a date."

"Oh, now that's something I'd have to see! I'm sure Cana will start taking bets on how long you last before Lucy gives up in humiliation."

"At least I can stay dressed in public."

"Fuck you!"

"Fuck you back!"

"You already tried that."

"Seriously, do not ever mention that again or I will burn every hair off your body."

Gray laughed. Sure, it annoyed him and angered him that the beast had tried to do that, but in the end, nothing happened and now...

Now he had the best blackmail against Natsu ever!

End of Chapter 18
Disclaimer: Rhov is curious about the inner desires of Hiro Mashima.

......Not like THAT! I mean, like what he desires to do with Fairy Tail, what his plans are, his hopes for Natsu and Lucy, his dreams for how this story will end. That's what I mean. (Besides, he's married.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It had been three days of traveling, and they were close to Magnolia now. Natsu's moaning as they pulled his wagon along the bumpy roads was almost—almost—seeming normal by now. Whenever they stopped for breaks, he fell silent, napping mostly since all the motion sickness left him weakened. Their group kept watch over Natsu, but so far he had not shown any sign of changing back into that beast.

"Maybe something Lucy did cured him," Erza guessed, politely not going into detail. However, Mirajane warned that she had seen a red gleam to his eyes once in a while late at night, and Wendy said he was continuing to smell less like Natsu.

Lucy had hardly been able to look at Natsu stuck in that cage. She spoke to him a few times, but they were always awkward conversations. They could not talk about what happened in the cave, not with their friends nearby, and whenever she was close to Natsu, that was all Lucy could think about. She wanted to feel his arms around her again. Being together yet separated like this was torturous.

On the third day, while stopped for lunch, Lucy once again went up to Natsu's cage. Freed adjusted the runes only enough for her to slide some food inside. Natsu reached for his plate, and his fingers deftly caressed Lucy's hand as he took the dish. His narrow eyes looked firmly into hers, which made her heart flutter and her cheeks grow hot. For three days, mealtimes were the only moments when they could actually touch, but it was always only for a couple seconds before Lucy had to pull her hands back. Then Freed reset the runes and went to the campfire to get his own meal.

Instead of joining the others, Lucy lingered by the purple glowing cage. "I just wanted to tell you," she said softly. She glanced back to the others to make sure none of them could hear her. "You don't have to worry. I'm definitely not pregnant."

"Yeah, but even then, it can take a few days after...after doing that...for a woman to actually get pregnant. Now, I'm certain. Definitely, I'm not pregnant."

"How are you certain?" Natsu looked a bit pensive. "Did you...did you terminate it?"

"No, I...well, not to gross you out, but I started my period," she told him. Natsu tipped his head to the side in confusion. "You know, my menstrual cycle!"

"I know what a...a...that time of the month is, Lucy," he said, looking awkward to talk about it. "I just don't get what that has to do with it."
Lucy sighed in annoyance, yet she could hardly help but chuckle. "Natsu, you really are ignorant about women."

"Well, I don't have that sort of thing, so I don't know what happens besides girls talking about cramping, and I can smell blood, and Erza craves chocolate cake instead of strawberry cake."

He had a point. Unless they grew up around women, usually boys had no clue about the way a woman's inner body worked. "Short version: when you get pregnant, your period stops. Since I started my period, it means the egg wasn't fertilized."

"Huh? Egg?"

She rolled her eyes a little. Slowly, she enunciated, "I'm...not...pregnant." She watched for a response, guessing he would look relieved that he did not have to take responsibility. Instead, Natsu looked a little disappointed. For some reason, that upset her. "What, were you hoping to knock me up, prove your manhood or something?"

"No! I mean, if you were pregnant...I think...well," he stuttered, blushing slightly and looking away as he rubbed the back of his neck in a nervous gesture. "I...I wouldn't mind."

Her brow tightened, trying to figure him out. "Natsu, I'm not ready to raise a family."

"I know," he mumbled. "I just mean, if somehow you had ended up pregnant, I would have taken care of you. Maybe..." He twisted his hands sheepishly. "Maybe...someday...you'll feel ready. When you think you are, just tell me. I...well, maybe it's weird to say this, but I want to be a dad some day."

That totally shocked her. "You?" she cried out in amazement.

He cringed down under the weight of her disbelief. "Okay, so I probably wouldn't make the greatest father in the world, maybe there are lots of other guys better suited for raising kids, but I wanna give it my best shot. My dad was awesome. I want to be a father like Igneel."

Hearing him say that with such enthusiasm and optimism, yet with a surprisingly mature glint in his eyes, tugged at Lucy's heart. "Oh Natsu," she sighed.

She placed her hands up against the runes, and he reached up, placing his hands against the barrier right next to her fingers. Then with a sad sigh, Natsu rested his head against the runes. Lucy put her forehead against his, and they gazed longingly into one another's eyes. This separation was torture, but both were glad that at least they were together again.

Natsu gave her a gentle smile. "So Lucy, whenever you feel ready, just tell me. I'll be careful from now on, I won't get you pregnant until you say you're ready for a family, but...when you are ready," he said softly, "I want to have a family with you, Lucy."

Tears came to her eyes at this heartfelt confession. "Really?" she sniffled.

Natsu nodded happily. "I want to raise our kids together, little kids with pink and blond hair. A son first, so he can protect his little sister, but then a daughter, so she can keep her brother from getting into too much trouble. Maybe more, if you want more. Or not," he shrugged awkwardly. "But at least two."

"You've really thought this out, haven't you?" Lucy realized in surprise.

Natsu averted his eyes as his cheeks blushed hotly. "Maybe," he muttered.
Lucy was truly surprised by this side of him. She never would have guessed that Natsu had dreams of raising children and being a father. It simply did not seem like the sort of dream a wild fighter like him would have. At the same time, she could imagine that he would make a wonderful parent, considering how protective he was over his friends and the close bond he had with Happy.

"I always wanted a big family," she told him, feeling a little embarrassed by the subject, yet sensing it might bring them closer together if they knew what each other wanted in the future. "I'm an only child, and it was lonely growing up, so I used to think that I wanted lots of children, that way none of them would ever feel alone."

"Yeah, me too," he smiled broadly. "Five or six, I think. Maybe three of each, three boys and three girls."

"Whoa, wait a minute," Lucy chuckled. "Let me see how painful having one is, and then I'll decide if I can handle having more. Besides, you haven't even proposed to me yet."

"Huh? Propose? But I just did," he insisted. "I propose we have babies together."

"I mean marriage, silly," she giggled.

Natsu's pout tweaked up. "Marriage? What does that have to do with it?"

Her brown eyes flashed peevishly. "I'm not starting a family without getting married first."

He grumbled at this annoying demand. "Really? Is that the only way you'd agree?"

"Well, yeah! I'm not having children out of wedlock. My mother raised me better than that."

"Oh," he muttered.

Perhaps that was something people learned from mothers, not fathers. Igneel taught him some things about mating and procreation, but "weddings" were something Lisanna went on and on about when they were children. Weddings were annoying things that involved dressing up and remembering what to say. Still...

"Well, if that's how it has to be done, then we'll do it that way."

Lucy's eyes went massive and her heart fluttered. "Natsu!"

"When you get pregnant, we'll get married," he decided proudly.

Lucy stomped her foot. "No! That's not the way it's done. We'll do it in the proper order."

"Order?" Natsu slouched down. "Do you mean there's a proper order to all of this stuff? Man, marriage is too confusing."

She shouted angrily, "Then you can have kids on your own!" She suddenly stomped away, feeling too frustrated and hormonally wound up at the moment to deal with Natsu's ignorance.

Natsu sank back into his cage. Girls were way too emotional, and he never understood why they got angry. He just promised to marry her, so why did that upset her? He thought girls looked forward to having boys propose marriage.

Slowly, Freed came forward, pulling Natsu out of his brooding. "Forgive me, I didn't mean to eavesdrop. I was coming to restrengthen the runes when it looked like I was about to interrupt something special."
"Yeah, I thought it'd be special, too," Natsu grumbled. "I don't even know what her problem is."

Freed was amazed that Natsu was confused by something so basic. "Lucy was raised as a proper lady. Likely, she was taught that you refrain from having sex until after marriage."

"But we've already..." Natsu stopped with wide, horrified eyes as he realized that he almost admitted something so private.

Freed waved the matter aside. "It happens all the time. Just please don't go into detail," he requested. "Proper ladies are taught that before having children, you get married, and before you do that, you must court the man."

"Court?"

"You go on dates. Then, the man proposes in a romantic way. Being trapped in a prison is not romantic," he told the dragon slayer, just to make sure Natsu realized that. "Either at a fancy restaurant, or a park, or at the beach, or on a holiday, or some other moment when there is romance in the air and when she's feeling happy and relaxed. Then, the man presents her with a ring."

"A ring, got it," Natsu nodded, taking mental notes on all this.

"Diamond or sapphire is usually traditional. Ladies prefer larger gems, not tiny half-carats, so they can show it off. A full carat or more, if you can afford it," he suggested. "Go to a place that sells jewelry, ask to see engagement rings, and pick one in Lucy's size. You might have to borrow one of her rings to get the size right."

"Got it: steal one of her rings, buy one with a big stone on it, a full carrot...although I don't know what carrots have to do with diamonds."

"Just ask the jeweler," sighed Freed. "When you find the perfect romantic moment, you show her the ring and ask 'Will you marry me?' Lucy is definitely in love with you. She'll likely say yes."

"Then we try for kids?"

"Then you get married. After the wedding is over, you go on a honeymoon, a vacation just for the two of you. Usually, if you want a family right away, that's when you start trying for babies. Or maybe you'll get married but wait a few years before starting a family. It depends on how eager you are for marriage and children."

"I want both!" Natsu insisted.

"From what I overheard, you want children and eventually want marriage. Lucy wants marriage and eventually wants children."

"Oh," he mumbled. "I think I see the problem."

"How long have you two been dating?"

Natsu felt a little guilty. "We...aren't. Not really."

Freed raised an eyebrow. Sexually active but not dating? "That could be a big problem."

"I want to date her," Natsu insisted. Then he slumped down. "Kind of can't while I'm stuck in here."

"Then when we get back to Magnolia, ask Lucy to be your girlfriend and take her on a proper date."
"Right, got it. So...what's a proper date like?"

Freed sighed, and he decided to get started recasting the runes to Natsu's prison as he gave basic dating advice to the clueless dragon slayer.

That night, while in her tent, Lucy woke up in the middle of a dream, swearing she heard a dragon roaring. She glanced around quickly, but no one else was awake. Erza was close to her, drooling on her pillow. Wendy and Charle had both curled up into cute little balls. Lucy rose, stepped out into the meadow where they had camped, and peeked in on the boys' tent. Gray was lying stark naked and snoring. Freed was a silent sleeper, with Happy wrapped up in his long, green hair. All was relatively silent.

She stepped quietly around the fire pit that was only low embers now. Still feeling a shiver from the nightmare, Lucy tossed on a few more logs to get the flames burning and chase away the shadows of those dark fantasies. Mirajane was on watch, but she looked ready to fall asleep, nodding off with tiny, cute, brief moments of snoring.

Lucy tapped her on the shoulder. "I'll start my watch early. Get some rest."

"Thanks, Lucy. I'll warn you, he's been restless," she said, nodding to the wagon with the runes cage holding Natsu. Then Mirajane slipped into the girls' tent to find a place to sleep.

Lucy stared at the faint purple glow of the runes. For some reason, something seemed different. She felt a little shiver, but she dismissed it for the midnight chill. Then she heard a low grumble. Thickly, she swallowed down instinctive terror. She took a careful step closer.

"Natsu?" she whispered.

Two red eyes opened and glared at her. Lucy pulled back with a soft gasp, and she barely stopped herself from letting out a scream.

"So, you're back," she whispered spitefully.

"Cold," came a distorted voice.

Lucy bit her lip and bravely took a few steps forward. "I can't give you anything for the cold. When morning comes, I'll have Freed give you a thicker blanket."

The beast let out a grumble, and its breath fogged the night air. "Want warmth. Lucy warmth."

For some reason, that angered her now. "Look, just give it up. What you did to me was horrible. I didn't like it, and Natsu didn't like it."

"Yesssss, but Slayer want Lucy, so I want Lucy. Wants are same. Slayer learning this. Slayer wants are...different now. No want fuck anymore."

Lucy twitched in worry. "He...he doesn't? Is he mad at me for turning him down earlier today? Is he upset I haven't been talking to him much? Did he..." She shrank down a little and mumbled, "Did he not like it?"

The beast grinned menacingly. "Like very much, but Slayer learning that wants are my wants. Slayer smart, learning...control," it said with amusement. "No want fuck Lucy. Want protect Lucy. Now I want to...protect."
Lucy looked aside. Her mind was blank, unsure why hearing that made her both sad and happy. It was as if Natsu was sacrificing his desire to love her in order to save her. She wondered when he must have made such a deep-rooted decision, something so firmly planted in his instincts that it affected the beast within. She felt tears on her eyelids and a smile tugging on her mouth.

"Still wanna kill ice bastard."

Lucy laughed at that. "Well, that's Natsu alright! I guess you probably really would kill Gray, though, so you still need to be in that cage."

"Strange Slayer," the beast purred. "Why Slayer want little Slayers?"

Lucy's cheeks went red. "He really wants kids, doesn't he?"

"Yesssss, Slayer want little Slayers and little Lucys. Is strange."

Lucy put a hand to her cheek and felt the heat in it. "That idiot, telling you something private like that."

"Slayer not tell me. Is what Slayer wants deeply. I know Slayer desires, Slayer instincts, Slayer wants. Instinct: never let Lucy get hurt, protect all guildmates, even...even ice bastard. Strange. Want fight, but want protect. Strange Slayer."

"That's just how Natsu is," Lucy realized happily. "What else has that weirdo been wanting?"

It growled hungrily. "Meat."

Lucy flinched at seeing the gleaming sharp teeth. She had almost forgotten what this creature had done. "No more slaughtering farm animals and eating them raw. If we do give you meat, it'll be cooked."

"Is fine. Slayer just want meat. I only know hunt, not cook."

Lucy twisted her hands together and debated about asking one more thing. She glanced nervously back at the two tents, then decided to walk right up beside the glowing runes cage.

"That day, you and Gray...I mean, I know you're a creature of instincts, but I know Natsu would never want to...you know...with Gray."

The beast tilted its head in confusion. "Lucy talk weird."

She gritted her teeth, then just blurted it out. "Why did you try to rape Gray? I overheard him talking to Natsu about it, and Natsu had no clue it even happened. Does Natsu...like Gray that way? Or...or is it you that loves him?"

"Love?" the beast questioned in confusion. "Not know love. Hate ice bastard. But Slayer want fuck. Want Lucy, but want to know what is fuck. Slayer wants, but not sure on some wants. Not sure on fuck. That makes me want all things to fuck. If Slayer wants are precise, my wants are precise. Slayer is learning this. Want fuck Lucy, but not want fuck Lucy. Definitely no fuck men now. Slayer not say yes or no to men before."

"So because he never considered gay sex, that left you free to try it?"

The beast shrugged. "Slayer only say nofuck women. Never said anything about men. Now Slayer say no fuck anything, not women, not men, not sheep."
"Wait, what? Sheep?" Lucy shouted in disgust. "Don't tell me you did that with a sheep."

The beast gave a snarling grin.

Lucy covered her mouth and swallowed hard. "Oh God, I'm going to be sick! What else did you do in his body?"

It hissed out a laugh. "Lucy really want to know?"

She considered it with a sickening flutter of worst case scenarios. "Maybe I don't. But...well, did you hurt anyone? Humans, I mean."

"Slayer say I hurt Lucy. Not understand. I fuck Lucy, not hurt Lucy."

"Well, it did hurt," she snapped angrily. She felt like this was something similar to facing one's own rapist. In a way, it was!

The beast looked down, thinking over something. The brows knitted together tightly. "Slayer not want Lucy hurt. Protect Lucy. If I hurt Lucy..." It shrank down and wrapped its wings around its body, curling into a hunched ball. "Is bad. Bad beast. I...sorry." The eyes turned up, and Lucy thought she saw a speck of green in those glowing red eyes. "I'm sorry, Lucy."

Her breath hitched slightly at the clearer tone in the voice. She squinted and looked a little closer. "Natsu?"

Before she could figure out about the eye color, the head dropped all the way to the ground in a low bow. "Sorry. Not want Lucy hurt. Protect Lucy. Love Lucy. Hurt all who hurt Lucy. These are Slayer instincts, so they are my wants. Hate self for hurting Lucy. Do what I can for Lucy, make up for hurting Lucy. Slayer wants..." It rose its head up, and the red eyes had a confused quirk to them. "Slayer wants me to protect...all...friends."

"Wait, he wants you to protect us?" she asked incredulously.

"Strange Slayer," it agreed with a nod. "But is Slayer want, so is my want."

Lucy suddenly realized something. She had considered it before, but now it seemed concrete. "You really are just an extension of Natsu. You're not some demon possessing him, but...but a different facet of his psyche."

The beast tilted its head. "Lucy use weird words."

"You are Natsu, but it's like seeing only an apple core instead of the whole fruit."

"Like seeing t-bone and not steak?"

"Uh...sure," she chuckled.

The beast thought about this with a gurgling hum. "Slayer is in me, I am in Slayer. We are same."

"Exactly," she nodded, but then she began to wonder aloud. "So, if you're a facet of his psyche, but you act in ways that Natsu doesn't actually like, how much of what you do is really Natsu's instincts? How much is you making conscious decisions based upon vague desires tempered by a very basic outline of morality and ethics? Just how much autonomy do you have from the rest of Natsu's psyche?"

"Lucy talk weird again," the beast complained.
Lucy shook the worries out of her head. "I doubt even Natsu would be able to tell me, let alone you. I'll have to try and remember to ask Gajeel."

"Does Lucy have a beast inside?"

She wondered about that. It seemed terrifying to think of it, but... "I guess everyone has a monster hidden in them."

"Wanna see Lucy beast!"

"No."

"Lucy beast probably want fuck."

"I'm leaving," she said angrily and turned away.

"What are Lucy's wants? Slayer wants to know."

She stopped in her tracks and delved into her mind. What were her desires, anyway? To have fun with her friends, to write her book, to go on adventures with Natsu...

But what about deeper desires? What sort of darker cravings did she have?

"I'll tell Natsu," she decided. "I won't tell you."

"But Lucy say I am Natsu."

"Then I will tell the steak, not the t-bone."

The beast grinned broadly. "Smart Lucy. Is why we like Lucy."

She glared at the creature in the cage. How much of this really was Natsu, and how much was something so twisted that even Natsu would despise it?

Lucy walked back over to the campfire and took the seat where Mirajane had been resting. She pulled out one of her keys and summoned: "Open the Gate of the Canis Minor! Nikora!" Plue poofed before her with a greeting of puu-puun. Lucy hugged the Little Dog to her chest like a stuffed animal. Holding him was a bit comforting, and the soft puun sounds Plue made somehow put her at ease after dealing with the hellish creature. She looked up at the sky, and the constellation Draco was on the horizon.

"Natsu," she whispered, staring at the celestial Dragon. "I want to know everything about you, all your inner wants. I want to hear it from your own mouth, not through this beast. Keep being strong and in control for just a little bit longer. Don't slip away from me completely, Natsu. Someday..." She looked over at the cage where the red-eyed beast was picking at its nails. "...someday, I want to make your wants come true. So don't slip away from me."

Atop Kardia Cathedral in Magnolia, a shadow sat still. People on the streets below, if they had bothered to glance up at the towering spires, would have merely thought this black shadow was a stone gargoyle, with the wings folded and hunched down like it was. Anyone watching for too long would have realized that this gargoyle's tail whipped back and forth.

In a rare moment of lucidity, Balaur Blackstone, the Earth Dragon Slayer and now a feral beast with only scant moments of humanity, gazed down at the late afternoon traffic. The sun was about to set, shops were closing up, and people crowded the streets on their way home. They looked like
scurrying ants from up on the cathedral, but the Earth Dragon Slayer had keen eyes. They narrowed, glinting like golden-brown gemstones.

"What is Slayer watching?" he heard as a hiss in the back of his mind.

"People," Balaur said softly. "I've been searching for Magnolia for so long, looking for a dragon slayer to heal me. I thought this city would be...different. Better. Now I'm here, but it's like every other city we've visited: crowded, crime, poor people, sick people, evil people."

"All bad," the beast within him growled. "We hate bad people, don't we?"

"They can't all be bad," Balaur reasoned quietly.

"I have been following, observing, seeing in shadows what Magnolia-people want to hide. I know secrets. Does Slayer want to know secrets?"

"I...I'm not sure I do," Balaur pouted sadly.

"We hate bad ones, and we hate happy ones, don't we, Slayer?"

"Shut up," he sneered, hugging himself in misery. "I don't like to hate. You're the one who enjoys hating others."

"Is bad to be happy. Is unfair. Slayer was never happy. Hates happy people."

"I...I don't!" he insisted weakly, but he knew that this beast spoke the subconscious truth that was buried deep in his heart.

"Sad childhood. Sad Slayer. No friends. No family."

"I had a family...sort of. The Piatra family were...well, I wouldn't say good people, but at least they took me in and fed me...before they died in the earthquake. My sister might take me back. Smaralda was always so nice to me despite being adopted." His eyes dropped sadly. "If I can find her."

"Adopted parents were cruel. Village was cruel. Don't know real family. Can't even remember dragon who raised us."

Balaur closed his eyes. "Terracia. She was kind to take me in as an infant. I should be honored, even if I don't remember her...even if she left when I was only two years old."

"Too young to know magic. Too young to be real slayer."

"I'm still a dragon slayer," he yelled. "Even if I can only do minor attacks, I'm still the Earth Dragon Slayer. I'll find Terracia some day. I'll find her and...and I'll..."


Balaur clenched his fists. "Not like it matters. I'm as good as dead already. You don't let me wake up anymore."

"Slayer is awake now. Slayer not like being awake. Bad memories, want to forget. Want sleep already?"

"No. I like the view here," he said, feeling a rare sensation of peace. "This city...it's amazing how it's so crowded, yet so quiet."
"Many people. I know them. I watch them. Down there." The beast turned his attention to a young lady walking down the street with her friends, obviously the center of their group with an aura of superiority over the other girls. "She is going to a mixer to make more friends."

"Make more friends?" Balaur asked, squinting his eyes to look at the girl. "But she's surrounded by friends now."

“She not like these friends. I hear her last night, saying she will go to party, then dump all these friends for new ones, better ones.”

Balaur sneered in revulsion. "But...but they're friends. You don't just trade in friends like shopping for clothes."

"Shopping...yes, she say something like that. Shop for better friends, richer friends, more fun, more parties."

"That's just sickening," he mumbled in anger.

"Slayer never have one friend. Maybe Slayer let this girl buy you as friend."

"I'm not for sale," he snapped. "Friendship is something you earn, not take and toss away."

"Is only one of many Magnolia-people. Look there, man in blue suit and short-brimmed hat. I follow him many days. Even others want to kill him. Man has wife and two kids."

"Well, that's nice," Balaur smiled.

"No. See, after work, he calls wife-lady, says he'll be working late. Then father-man goes to hotel. Slayer can see hotel from here. Father-man is having an affair with girlie half the age of wife-lady. I see her once. Looks like tasty girlie, big boobs to eat."

Balaur grimaced in nausea. "Don't talk like that. You know I hate it."

"Slayer hate her too if Slayer see her. I feel in Slayer's heart, Slayer already hate father-man."

Balaur had to admit he did. "A life like that, a family, mother and father, siblings, cousins...I never had that. I was taken in, but only Smaralda considered me as anything more than just a burden. That life...a real family...it's perfect. Why is he giving it up?"

"For pleasure," the beast growled.

"Pleasure," Balaur sneered. "How is he finding pleasure? By sacrificing that perfect life? By abandoning his children?"

"Father-man already talk to lawyer about divorce. Want young wife, no want kids. Kids too noisy, too messy, wastes his time. Want wife who not want kids, young and pretty girlie who party lots and make other men jealous. She is wanting him for money. I follow big boob girlie, too. She want him to divorce wife-lady, then marry her, then she talk to man who say he kill father-man so boob-girlie can get all the money. She not love him. She fuck him to steal money."

Balaur snarled; for a moment, his voice and the beast's blended. "People like that...should just die. No," he glared. "He should watch his family die. He should see how what he had was so perfect: happiness, love...things I never knew. He should have it stripped away." The fangs in his mouth lengthened, and Balaur hunched over, snarling furiously. "Kill them! Kill the family in front of him. Make him watch. Make him taste their blood. Make him suffer for giving up something I want more
than anything in the world. Family. Love. Friends."

"Yesssss. Kill. Look! Whole city," the beast told him. "All happy. All at peace. Happy city, but rotten inside. All is bad."

"Have they ever been attacked?" asked Balaur. "Has this city ever known sorrow?"

"Not in long time. The magic guild keeps them safe."

Balaur seethed. "Mages. Fairy Tail," he spat. "My town had no mages to protect them when a dark guild came and butchered almost everyone. Why should Magnolia have such a strong collection of mages? What makes this city so special? They're hoarding those mages when they should be spread around protecting all villages. And what does Fairy Tail do?"

"We watch them, yesssss?"

"Yeah," Balaur growled. "Parties all the time, sitting on their fat asses getting drunk on the money people work all their lives to save, only to have to spend it all to hire a single mage to come and save them. Then they dare complain that the rewards aren't high enough, that they can't pay their lousy rent, that they have to take three jobs a month to cover costs, while they live in splendor. What a bunch of lazy bastards! Meanwhile, whole villages get slaughtered because all they can collectively scrape together are a mere ten thousand Jewels, and no mage wants to be bothered with them. People are dying out there while Fairy Tail sits in their guild hall drinking all day."

His body changed more. Scales raised onto his face, and his hands became knobby with black claws. He growled as he gazed over the rooftops.

"I hate this place. They're all so happy. What gives them the right? A city that has never suffered like mine did. I hate it! They deserve to know what I felt. It's only fair that we all suffer equally."

"Attack, and mages stop you," the beast warned.

Balaur's eyes rolled over to the guild hall. "Fairy Tail," he snarled, and red flashed in his eyes briefly. "I just wanted them to send a dragon slayer to stop me. They sent an immature one, a full-grown slayer who had not gone through the ceremony. Fools! They are doing nothing to stop this madness, nothing to protect this city, just sitting in their magical hall, drinking and laughing, while people are out here dying because of you."

"Because of us."

"No, because of you! All I wanted was for them to either cure me or kill me, and they won't! I hate them. I hate magic guilds. They always turned me down, said I was too young, didn't believe that I was old enough to have been raised by a dragon. They didn't come when we were attacked. No one came. I had to fight all those dark mages alone, and...and I...I couldn't. I wasn't strong enough. I couldn't save them!" He sobbed with his teeth clenched in dark memories. "Soldiers. Mages. People. I hate them. I hate humans."

The beast purred in satisfaction and seductively asked, "What does Slayer want to do about it?"

Balaur's face went cold. With wild, hate-filled eyes flickering from dark golden to crimson red, he declared, "Kill them all!"

"Goooood. But first, we eat."

Balaur looked disgusted. "You're not still eating people, are you? I told you not to do that anymore. I
said I hate it. This is still my body, and I don't want to be a cannibal on top of everything else."

"Then sleep again, little Slayer."

"No!" he cried out in panic. "No, don't take over my mind again, please don't..."

His eyes went purely red. "Yessss, sleep. I take care of hunting." The creature glared down at the man walking into a love hotel. "Girlie with big boobs smelled good. Will be big feast. Lots of breast to eat. Then fulfill Slayer wish. Father-man watch family die, then kill father-man, too. Is Slayer want, so is my want. You sleep, Slayer. Leave everything to me...like we always do it. Soon, Slayer won't ever have to wake up from the nightmares. Soon...will only be me. Only my wants."

The beast spread its wings as the evening sky began to darken and the first bold stars twinkled. It grinned hungrily at its prey, then swooped down to the hotel. It already knew which room this couple used, the same room every time. He perched in the opened window and saw the large-breasted woman changing into some sexy lingerie in anticipation of her coming lover. She chatted on a lacrima phone.

"Yeah, he said he talked to the lawyer already," she told her friend. "He's going to give his wife the papers tonight. No, of course we're meeting up first." She chuckled to some question on the other line. "Of course! I have to seduce this old bastard to make sure he doesn't chicken out at the last minute. Yep, he's gonna get the best sex of his miserable life. There's no way he'd want that scrawny wife after I'm through with him. We'll get married as soon as possible, and then his money is as good as mine. Oh, don't worry. He's an idiot. He doesn't suspect a thing."

"I do," the beast purred.

The lady dropped her phone as she stared in horror at the winged creature perched just behind her. "Oh...oh God. It's that thing people are talking about."

"Kylie?" came the voice over the phone. "Kylie, what's wrong?"

The beast climbed through the window and snarled as he stalked forward while the lady retreated with trembling steps. "Is scary?" it asked sadistically. "Girlie already piss herself."

Kylie had not even realized that she lost her bladder in terror. She had heard dark rumors of a creature on the loose in Magnolia randomly killing people. She hoped her lover came soon and rescued her...or at least that he might prove to be a tastier treat for this man-eater while she ran away.

"Oh Kylie, dearest, I'm here," the cheating man called in as he opened the hotel room door. Just as she opened her mouth to shout, the beast reached forward and crushed her throat in its claws. She gagged as she heard her lover enter and lock the door behind him.

"I brought you a little present, my fiery siren," he chuckled. When he walked into the bedroom, he saw the naked winged creature and his lover together. "Oh...is this some new kink of yours, dearest?"

Tears ran down her face as she tried to speak, but her crushed vocal chords would not work. Only croaking groans rasped out.

"Kink, yessss," the beast chuckled. "Is new game, called you watch silently, and I not rip off your head. You scream, I bite out your tongue. You run, I break your legs. You sit there and be quiet, I take you home and we play game again."
"Sadistic, eh?" laughed the obtuse man. He took a seat to watch what he assumed was a new form of sex-play. "I do love it when you're a bad girl."

The dark beast gave an evil chuckle. "Yes...is bad girlie. And you is bad man."

"Oh-ho! Perhaps I deserve a spanking," he snickered.

"Not into spanking asses. Perhaps I eat your ass first."

"Why, such a naughty little demon you are!" the man chuckled. "So, what do you plan to do with my little succubus? Perhaps I can join in, if it won't ruin the game."

"You like taste of breast?"

The paunchy fool grinned. "What red-blooded man doesn't!"

"Blood, good. Breast, good. Maybe I share."

The beast then grabbed the woman and snapped its jaws on her breast. Despite the damage to her windpipe, she let out a gargling shriek and punched the beast. She tried to kick it and flailed her arms in hopes of reaching something that could be used as a weapon.

"You're quite loud, Kylie," the man said as he watched her back side. From his angle, it merely looked like this cosplaying stranger was suckling her roughly. "Though I must admit, I love watching you thrash in the arms of another man. It's surprisingly quite a turn-on. Let's invite him again, dearest. Perhaps one of your female friends, too, and we'll have ourselves a foursome."

"Fool," she managed to croak out. "Dead...you're dead."

The beast peeked over her collar bone. "Want to share girlie?"

The man rose from his chair and removed his tie with a smirk. "I'll warn you, I've never done a threesome with another man before, but she's quite enough woman for both of us, I guess."

"Big breasts, good blood."

The beast spun the limp woman around. Only then did the lecherous man see that her left breast had a massive chunk of flesh and fat ripped out, eaten down low enough for a faint whiteness of a rib bone to show through the bloodied mess. The man's breathing became quicker and ragged as he saw that the entire front of her body dripped in blood, her eyes barely open, her face ashen, while gasps of agony wheezed through a bruised and crushed throat.

"K...Kylie?" he gasped as the truth of this scenario finally dawned on him. It was not kinky sex. It was a horror beyond imagination. "Oh...oh God...no. It can't be...no! Cannibal. You can have her. You can keep her!"

"I share," the beast hissed with a wide grin showing off its bloodied teeth.

"Nooooo!" he shrieked, and he quickly turned to run to the door.

Black and brown leathery wings rushed past him, and the beast stood in his way with the limp woman still in his arms. "I warn you, try to run..." The beast kicked the man out from under his own feet, then stomped on his legs and snapped the bones with a grotesque crunch. "...I break legs. Scream again, I eat tongue. Be silent, you live...for now."

The creature then lowered the woman to the ground near the sobbing man. The lady gargled, trying
to moan kill me out of her crushed throat. She no longer had the strength to fight and only prayed for death soon to take her away from the agony in her chest.

"You plan to destroy family for pleasure. She plan to fuck you, take money, and kill you."

"What?" the man gasped, looking over at his mistress in disbelief. "Kylie! How...how do you know this?"

"I watch you," the beast told the man. "I see what you and girlie do. I see greed. I see fuck. You wanna watch fuck, yesssss?"

The beast yanked the woman's legs apart and sidled up between them. She tried to gasp, jerked in a weak attempt to fight, but numbness from blood-loss was tingling over her entire body as her vision began to cloud over.

"Oh please, no! No! Not her," the man begged as he tried to move. The agony in his shattered legs kept him still, and the fear of dying kept his voice quiet.

"I show you fuck is not kinky. Is only fuck. I show you on her. Then I show you on your wife."

"No!"

"Silence! You make Slayer sad and angry. Makes me angry. I show you how bad you is. I show until not want fuck anymore, until can't fuck anymore."

The beast sneered as it entered the dying woman, making her grunt as the life slipped out of her. She sobbed as she realized she was going to die, and the last thing she would feel was the humiliation of being raped.

"Pleasure. Desire. Wants. You two are beasts like me." The dark creature snarled as it snapped its hips into the woman. "Both of you, you make people sad, make them angry. Is bad."

It growled, leaned over, and ripped another chunk of flesh off from the woman. She shrieked, and the man stared in horror at the blood pooling around her body, slowly spreading toward his twisted and shattered legs. He merely stared, too terrified to move. The beast gulped down the meat and snarled in pleasure.

"All...is bad! All...must die!"

End of Chapter 19

Chapter End Notes

In my stories, I kill people who piss me off. Kylie is a homophobic cunt who has been harassing a friend of mine, spamming hateful messages online despite attempts to block her. People like that, who take sadistic pleasure in bullying others, make me want to punch some noses. I love and support my friends, no matter their gender, ethnicity, age, or sexual preference. For me, those things simply don't matter. Friends are friends, and I'm fiercely protective of my nakama. If I lived closer, I would slap the living hell out of Kylie for saying that gay people should be beaten up! Instead, I get to kill her off and preach to you readers. Don't be a racist, sexist, or homophobic asshole, or Rhov will kill you off in her stories!
On a lighter note...

PSYCHOLOGY LESSON!

I was discussing the psychology behind "Beast Possession" with a few reviewers, and I decided to toss in some of what I wrote to them, paraphrased so I don't utterly bore you. Basically, the beast is a deep, dark, potentially dangerous side of Natsu that runs on hidden desires: his "id" in psychological terms. I knew that university course in Psychology would come in handy some day!

Sigmund Freud wrote that the id is one of the three components of human personality: id, ego, and super-ego. The id is an uncoordinated and utterly chaotic force within us that works to satisfy basic urges, needs, impulses, and desires. The id operates based on the "pleasure principle," which demands immediate gratification of needs and wants. The id controls aggressive behavior and the libido, which is the primary source of our instinctual actions. In other words, it strives to fulfill our most basic and primitive urges—hunger, thirst, anger, and sex drive—without any concern for the reality or morality of a given situation. It does not know good and evil; it has no understanding of ethics. Freud wrote that the id is the only entirely-unconscious part of our psyche and acts as the driving force behind personality. He also said the id contains the "death drive," which he described as "an instinct of destruction directed against the external world and other organisms."

For instance, if a person was controlled purely by the id, they would not wait at a restaurant to eat, but simply grab the nearest food and fight over it. They would not control anger, but lash out and murder anyone who upsets them, then continue to seek destruction until that aggressive impulse is appeased. Rather than seeking a person to love and waiting for romance to develop, they would rape anyone and anything until their sex drive is satisfied. One's own wants and impulses are all that matter to the id.

"It is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality...a negative character and can be described only as a contrast to the ego. We approach the id with analogies: we call it a chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations... It is filled with energy reaching it from the instincts, but it has no organization, produces no collective will, but only a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle." - Sigmund Freud, 1933, "New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis."

So, in this story, the beast is the id in tangible form. It is that unconscious and chaotic force, that libido that acts on pure instincts to fulfill desires and bodily needs, pure aggression that seeks destruction. It is a force that lies within each and every one of us, but it is only a piece of our overall psyche. "A t-bone and not the steak," as I wrote. It lies inside the "meat," gives flavor and shape, but it is not what everyone else "tastes." We experience the entire personality, which includes ego and super-ego: control, judgment, ethics, and morality, the things that make Natsu the "good guy."
Makarov growled at the report Levy gave him. "What! Five dead?"

"I'm afraid so," she pouted, understanding his outrage. "There was a body found in a hotel. They...they think it was a woman. There wasn't much left," she mumbled, looking sick as she remembered visiting the crime scene to talk to the investigators and seeing the bloody carnage left behind. "There was a cellphone near the body, and the last call went to a lady who said the victim's name was Kylie. She was having an affair with another one of the victims, middle-aged man. His blood was found at the scene of the hotel, but his body was discovered at home. He and his family had been slain, including two children."

"Children, now," Makarov grimaced, stroking his mustache. "This is going beyond justice."

Levy tilted her head in confusion. "Justice?"

"Up until now, the victims have all been...sinners, I suppose would be the best term," he said, looking like he hated to use such a word to describe this horrifying situation. "The first two victims were an adulterous man and his lover. The next one was a man who had just robbed a store. There was also a prostitute and those three rapists."

"Then what about Lucy?" Levy cried out. "Lucy isn't a sinner...well, not a bad one. Maybe minor things, but not like robbery and rape."

Makarov hummed as he considered this dilemma. It was true that the attack on Lucy did not match with the normal pattern of attacks so far.

"The night Lucy was attacked," the Master said slowly, trying to think this out, "she and Loke went on a date. She was drunk and a bit rowdy in public. It could be that more happened between the two than Loke would admit. If the beast only saw a drunk woman acting inappropriately toward a man in public, it might have assumed Lucy was always that way, and that was why she got attacked. According to the few eye witnesses and survivors, the beast attacks people it calls bad. So then, why a whole family? Why kill children?"

"The man had divorce papers on him," Levy recalled. "It seems he planned to break up with his wife and get together with the mistress."

"Not justice, then. Vengeance. It probably killed the children first and made the man watch, feel a sense of guilt, before ending his life as well. This means the beast's purpose for killing is changing."

Gajeel stomped into the room where the two were discussing the issue in private. "It's getting ready
for a final attack," he explained.

"Gajeel," Levy cried out, smiling at seeing him again. "I thought you were investigating something."

"I was. That's why I'm here." Gajeel roughly took a seat at the table beside Makarov and Levy and leaned back with a leg crossed over his knee. He looked hard at the master. "The hunt is no longer fun. The beast will stop listening to the human side, to the sense of morality and justice held on by the dragon slayer. It'll act on its own desires, even if it goes against the will of the slayer. It's probably already decided to slaughter everyone, and it's just waiting for the slayer within to fall into such a deep sleep that he won't know it even happened. That poor kid probably has no clue that he's killed hundreds of villagers over who knows how many months."

"Sadly, that's probably the case," Makarov realized with a deep, troubled frown. "Although he has murdered countless people, the boy within has no control and no memory of these deeds. Still, the Magic Council doesn't care about those things. He'll still be executed, memory loss or not, especially if there's no cure, no way to stop him. Did you find anything, Gajeel?"

"Yeah. I looked up on this Balaur Blackstone kid. He's damn young for a dragon slayer. Never been in a guild. He was two years old when his dragon left, probably doesn't know much about magic at all. Some farmers found him and took him in, but the family realized he was...different. Apparently, they didn't treat him very well. It was probably a living hell for the poor boy, being an outcast in his own home."


"Then, a year ago, the family died in what was called a massive, localized earthquake. Ground just opened up and swallowed them. Only a sister survived. I found her, and she told me it was Balaur who did it, except...according to her, it wasn't totally him. Consciously, he only knows how to do a breath attack, but she said his earth magic went out of control that day. He was completely unconscious as he did it, and when it was over, he firmly believed it was nothing more than an earthquake. That was probably the first time the beast took over. He was still more or less sane for three months, but people around them began to die. Then a dark guild tried to move in on the village and slaughtered a third of the townsfolk. Balaur fought them, got badly injured, and suddenly went berserk. He killed all the enemies, but not before his out-of-control behavior killed half the surviving villagers. Balaur realized then that he was dangerous, so he ran away. He's been on the run ever since." Gajeel glanced at both the Master and the Solid Script mage. "It's a story that would make Shrimpy here sob, but the fact remains: this kid is dangerous. He needs to be stopped."

"Then why haven't we been able to capture him?" demanded Makarov.

"We've come damn close. It's like sometimes he wants to be found, and suddenly he desperately doesn't."

Levy nodded eagerly. "It's likely that the side of him that is still human wants to have someone stop him, but the beast won't allow it."

"Exactly," Gajeel agreed. "If he's caught, he's dead. He knows that already. Gildarts said the boy is aware of his condition, including being beyond any chance of curing him. He begged to die, yet when Gildarts asked if that truly was his wish, Balaur admitted it wasn't. He might think death is the only option, but his inner desire is to live. That desire is what the beast will feed upon. The beast is a creature of instinct. Even if the moral side of Balaur wants to end the destruction, his true desire is to live, and his deeper instincts will be about self-preservation. He won't allow himself to be caught, and those instincts will do everything it can to stay one step ahead of us."
"Catch him, Gajeel," Makarov ordered sternly. "I don't care what it takes, what you have to do, if you tear apart half the town to find him. I don't ever want to hear another report of children being murdered in this town. Take as many guild members as you need."

Max suddenly ran into the room panting heavily and sweating. "Master, bad news!"

"Not another killing," Makarov frowned.

"No. The feral dragon slayer is leaving town. Warren just made contact, and there were reports of it in the northern woods."

"Leaving?" Makarov shouted. "Gajeel, I thought you said it wouldn't leave until it killed everyone."

"Normally, that's true," Gajeel muttered, "unless...fuck!" He stood up quickly and stomped toward the door.

"Gajeel!" Levy cried out.

"Tell us what's wrong," Makarov demanded.

"It seeks the strongest prey," Gajeel shouted back to them as he stomped into the main hall with Makarov and Levy following on his heels. "Normally, it would see the entire town as a prey. The only reason it would abandon prey is to go after something even stronger, something of greater interest...something more like itself, another creature threatening to move in on its territory."

"Natsu," Makarov realized with worry.

"They're probably close to town now. If that fire-breathing idiot gets exposed to the full pheromone effects of the feral beast in his unstable condition, he'll change completely and there'd be no way we could save him." Gajeel looked back to Levy. "Shrimp, you're with me."

She blushed and eagerly smiled. "Ah! Right! I'm coming." Levy hurried eagerly after him.

"Juvia, I could use you, too," Gajeel called out. "Old man," he yelled to Gildarts. "Can you fight again?"

Cana slammed down her beer barrel. "Obviously he can't!"

Gildarts rose and adjusted his cloak over the mechanical arm he lost in his fight with Laxus. "Obviously I will," he smirked. "If someone like Gajeel realizes he needs this many people, he must be expecting a hell of a fight."

"You could say that," glowered the iron dragon slayer. "If that beast catches Salamander and the others, not only would it make that idiot change, but it could force Wendy into transforming, too. That would really be a bad situation."

Levy looked worried. "But she's just a little kid. She wouldn't be that dangerous, right?"

Gajeel glared down at the small blunette. "Do you know about the bites of baby rattlesnakes?"

Levy paused in worry as she recalled something she had read. Baby snakes lack the ability to hold back venom. Although they might be tiny without the massive fangs of adult snakes, if baby rattlesnakes strike, they will sink their fangs in and inject all the poison in their body rather than portioning it out in tiny doses. Because of this lack of experience in how to hold back, baby rattlesnake bites can be far more dangerous than bites from adult snakes.
Then Levy thought about Wendy. Older mages like Natsu and Laxus learned over many years how to portion out their magic power in order to last a long time in a fight. Wendy had only minimal battle experience. Especially if driven by pure instinct, she might put everything she had into a single, highly destructive attack that would not only be potentially fatal to everyone nearby, but dangerous for her own well-being.

Gajeel saw that Levy understood. "Yeah, it could be bad, so stay close to me, Shrimp." He patted her head with a heavy hand, and Levy glared up at him while blushing. "We need to hurry. If someone like Gildarts had a hell of a time fighting just Laxus on his first transformation, those people will barely stand a chance against the feral dragon slayer, Natsu, and Wendy combined. We need strong fighters, and preferably, we need to reach the beast before it gets close enough to affect Salamander."

The small group nodded with determination and headed out into the street, hurrying as they raced a creature with wings on its back and blood on its mind.

   End of Chapter 20
Smells of Home, Smells of Danger

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Mangaka like Fairy Tail's Hiro Mashima are only human. They get sick. They need mental breaks. They have a social life. Oh wait...no they don't. Well, I do. So although I'm not the great Mashima-sensei, perhaps you'll forgive me when a chapter of this fanfic is late.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Natsu recognized the scent of melliferous honeysuckles and creeping vines of flowering blackberry bramble overtaking a copse of young oaks. On an updraft came the swirling redolence of larkspur, daisies, coneflowers, primroses, foxglove, yarrow, cosmos, columbine, poppies, and his favorite: snapdragons. Wafting just above this wildflower wonderland, he sniffed a flowering magnolia tree.

To the west, three leagues at least, he smelled the sharp scent of a pine forest, and to the east came the whiffs of a sheep pasture covered in clovers, with the stale fetor of a pond used by mallards. Then, like a foggy effluvium, Natsu's sensitive nose picked up the sooty smell of smoke from a nearby farmhouse. He smiled at the thought of a crackling fire, billowing smoke, the amber glow of burning things...all the peaceful thoughts that smoking wood evoked in the fire dragon slayer.

Pricking this bouquet of nature, like an ugly thorn on a graceful rose, came the tang of duck droppings, the territorial marking of a hound dog upon a nearby road marker, and dry stench of the dusty road under him where a horse had dropped its load at least eight hours ago.

Just one more day until we reach home. One more day!

This unique blend of scents cued Natsu into his location better than any map, so he could keep his eyes closed as he suffered the seemingly never-ending ride aboard Erza's rickety cart. How many days had they been traveling? He lost track, too sick to care. This was the worst trip of his life!

The only joy was having Lucy nearby. When he peeked an eye open again, he saw her by the cart, like a golden guardian angel. It comforted him just knowing her smell was nearby, that unique fragrance that was purely Lucy Heartfilia, not the vanilla bath oils and weird shampoo perfumes she used to hide that sour-sweet muskiness. On a long journey like this, when her only bath was a dip in some nearby river, those cloying fragrances were gone; only her gentle and natural aroma remained. That muskiness, that eau de Lucy, was a balm alleviating any sickness.

Well, that is until they hit a bump in the road. Then all of his breakfast came up once more. He grabbed the bucket the group had given him and puked violently.

"Natsu?"

Lucy's worried voice rang in his ears, along with pounding drums of pulsing blood and an annoying ringing buzz that deafened him to everything else. Acid seared his nose, burning away the flowers, the magnolia tree, the pines, the pond, the chimney smoke, the ducks, the horse droppings, and Lucy's familiar aroma. All he smelled now was gastric juices mixed with whatever it was he managed to eat for breakfast.
Just as he thought he was going to vomit again, the cart came to a stop. He moaned and fell flat to the ground, a melted puddle of sickly flesh, utterly exhausted, defeated by his greatest weakness. He prayed in thanks to any god that would listen. Finally, a rest!

However, he did not hear the clattering of Gray setting up a camp, or Mirajane asking what everyone wanted for lunch. It felt too early, anyway. Not that Natsu cared if they stopped early, but he knew the sun was not quite overhead.

The group around him stood still, and somewhere in the midst of vomit fumes, Natsu smelled the pheromones of fear. He peeked one eye open, all he could manage. Up ahead, Wendy had raised her hand to halt them all. To the side, he saw Lucy with a hand on her whip. Erza was directly in front of him, since she was the one pulling the cart, but she had a hand on the hilt of her sword.

Natsu's sickness affected all of his senses now. Lucy became three Lucys, which made Natsu laugh weakly. Hmm, three Lucys! He had seen three Lucys before, but he never thought of the advantage of there being three of her and one of him. What would he do with three Lucys?

Then he heard Gray speak and looked over to him. Three Grays. Natsu grumbled at that hallucination. It meant three times more ice bastards to beat up.

He heard voices, but his ears were buzzing with dizziness and nausea, so he caught only a few words. Wendy said something about *strange smell*; Gray asked a worried question, but Natsu heard only the word *beast*; then Mirajane spoke firmly, but Natsu only heard the most important word: *fight*.

Natsu opened his mouth to try to speak, but he felt another wave of vomit shoot up through his throat. He swallowed it down, willing the acidic surge to retreat back into his stomach.

Happy's words fluttered down to him. "Don't worry, Natsu. We'll protect you this time."

Protect? A fight? A beast? Somewhere in his addled brain, Natsu recalled what Lucy said about there being another beast. What did she call it? A feral dragon slayer? That was the creature murdering citizens. Natsu hoped that was the beast who almost killed Lucy, because if it was him that night...

For some reason, in his blurry vision slowly going black, Natsu saw Lucy in the hospital. He saw her room when Natsu went to investigate, and all the blood splattered over her blankets. If that had been some other creature, then Natsu could channel his anger into fighting; however, if that had been him that night...if it had been his hands that ripped Lucy apart so brutally...

No! He loved her. As sickening as it was, the beast within him loved her as well. He would never hurt Lucy!

Yet he had.

Why was he worrying about that right now? His friends were about to fight! Yet Natsu's brain was still spinning and swaying. He was remembering the night of the gala party, finding Lucy in that dark museum-like room, stalking toward her, knowing what the beast within wanted, and hating that he wanted it too, deep down inside. And then, waking up to see her crying, her dress ripped, himself thrusting into her, and blood...more blood. Her first time, and the beast had stolen that from Natsu, sadistically leaving him only with the aftereffects and the immense guilt of knowing, beyond any doubt, that it had been his body that hurt her.

Then he remembered Lucy in the cave, how she soothed his doubts, calmed that inner rage, and
opened her arms to him. Such a sweet, gentle, sensual memory! The vision of her erotic face calmed Natsu's stomach, loosened the twisting sickness, moving that tightness southward. Being aroused was better than being nauseous.

He felt a little better simply by thinking of Lucy. He would apologize properly once he was cured. He would ask Lucy out on a date, do things right, laugh with her and kiss her goodnight like a normal couple.

Freed had given him lots of advice, as well as suggestions that Natsu eagerly listened to late at night, when everyone else was asleep. Freed was surprisingly a romantic, all for candlelight dinners, roses, and love poetry. The best Natsu could do was a haiku, but he would write the very best one in the world for Lucy.

Sweet like summertime
Your fragrance, like flower fields
Blossoms in my mind

Okay, that wasn't the best, but it was a start.

Dates and roses and poems came later, though. For now...a fight.

Natsu just wished the world would stop tipping and twirling, messing up his thoughts, distracting him with random pleasantries. He wanted to see straight, hear properly, and get the stench of puke out of his nose so he could smell whatever enemy was approaching. If they were going to fight...

Really, what could he do?

He was stuck in a cage, and there was no way the group would risk letting him out. Natsu wasn't even sure if he trusted himself! If he got into a fight and the beast suddenly took control, he might kill any enemy, and then turn violent on his friends. The beast had tried to attack Gray already. It had ravaged Lucy. Freed had warned that he would not hesitate to kill Natsu if he escaped the runes and went on a rampage. He dreaded to know what that foul creature might do against a truly strong opponent like Erza and Mirajane. Plus, the beast was a danger to Wendy, a demonic creature exuding some primal smell that could potentially trigger the little girl into also transforming. He didn't want that! Not for Wendy!

Trees up ahead rustled. He heard Erza unsheathe her sword and shout. His ringing ears heard her voice clearly.

"Why are you here? What are your intentions?"

Natsu tried to raise his head to see who the intruder was, but a wave of nausea swept over him. The pounding in his head got louder. He could not hear the enemy's response, but he heard Lucy gasp.

"No! Why would you even think of doing that?"

"Bastard," growled Gray.

Wendy's piping voice yelled, "Meanie! Leave Natsu alone."

Next was Freed's analytical voice. "You are clearly outnumbered. Leave now."

"We don't wish to fight," Mirajane pleaded.

Natsu heard a laugh that chilled him. He knew that sort of laugh. With every bit of his remaining
strength, he pushed himself up just enough to raise his head and squint past the barrier of bodies. Although Erza's armor and Gray's naked torso partly hid it, Natsu saw the person facing them now.

"You," he rasped out weakly. "Why..."

A sardonic grin with pointy canines gleamed in the sunlight. Blue eyes twinkled with mischief, and an eyebrow lifted in wry amusement, making a scar twist slightly. As he stood there, Sting Eucliffe's blond hair ruffled in the breeze.

"Good morning, Natsu. I'm here to kill you."

End of Chapter 21

Chapter End Notes

Have you ever found yourself writing the perfect cliffhanger, but then realizing you're only one page into the chapter? That's what happened. After being utterly stuck with writer's block for a month, I managed to finally think of a way to write this scene only to create a perfect moment of dramatic tension...one page in! I pushed myself into lengthening this chapter; thus, my obsession with wildflowers shows up again. So, not a lot happens here, but maybe you'll forgive me and wait for the impending confrontation.
Sting slowly began to recover, all sickness shocked out of his system by Sting's bold declaration. He raised himself up onto his hands and knees, still shaky with illness yet determined not to show weakness after a challenge like that. His eyes narrowed as he glared at the rival dragon slayer.

"You're gonna kill me, huh?" Natsu sneered. "I'd like to see you try."

"I won't hold back," Sting warned, and his face showed true killing intent.

"Why do you have to kill him?" Lucy screamed. "He hasn't hurt anyone."

"Oh yes he has!" Sting said, glaring at the Fire Dragon Slayer. "I've seen the carnage left behind, bodies scattered in the streets: men, women, and children, all slaughtered with no survivors. He's a murderer. Isn't that right, Natsu?"

He shook his head, and pink hair fell into his eyes. "No...I...I don't think so. I don't remember anything like that..."

"Of course not. It was the beast within you. Still," Sting said sternly, "that beast is a murderer, and it's part of your psyche. By the laws of Fiore, that makes you guilty of all crimes committed by that body of yours."

"I didn't do anything," Natsu shouted. However, he looked over guiltily to Lucy. He had done things...horrible things! And to his friends, no less.

"I see the guilt in your eyes," Sting said in a low voice. "Do you really think you can live with yourself, knowing what you've done?"

All the pain and guilt Natsu had been hiding for weeks, knowing how horribly he had hurt Lucy, bubbled back up. His eyes began to water with self-loathing, and a fire far more painful than anything his flames could produce burning in his heart. Lucy looked back at Natsu and saw the fear in his eyes. She placed her hand up against the purple runes barrier.

"It's okay, Natsu," she whispered in forgiveness.

Gray stepped forward in his defense. "Even if Natsu has hurt people, he should be brought to a trial and face the guilt legally."

Sting's blue eyes narrowed. "I can't allow that. Do you have any idea how the public would react toward all dragon slayers if they knew this little secret? Even if you bring Natsu back to Magnolia, what will you do? Master Makarov's a smart man; he won't turn Natsu in for the same reason: it'd tarnish the reputation of dragon slayers. We would forever be seen as beasts about to turn into
murdering cannibals. None of us would ever be trusted again. The families of the slain would go after any one of us in revenge. We would be hunted. I can't allow that to happen! Out of all the guilds in Fiore, Fairy Tail would suffer the most with four dragon slayers! Do you think Master Makarov wants that sort of reputation for his own grandson? As a dragon slayer, I have to stop him before he kills again, and before any civilians find out it's a dragon slayer doing this."

"But we're going to heal him," Wendy insisted, pleading with large eyes.

Sting looked down at her with sorrow. "Don't you smell it? He's too far gone." His eyes flicked up to Natsu and glared. "You smell like a feral beast."

Lucy gasped and looked at her love in dread. Natsu pulled back and blinked mutely in shock. Feral? Already? He shook his head, silently protesting that dreaded fate.

Gray looked back at his fiery rival. "It can't be!"

Wendy sniffled. "Are...are we too late? No!"

"I'm sorry," Sting said solemnly. "I can smell it. When someone gets to this point, you can't turn them back. There's only one thing you can do: be merciful and make it painless." Quickly, not giving anyone a chance to react, he shouted: "White Drive! Holy Blast!"

Light cloaked his body, and in that very instant a beam of pure white light shot out toward the cage of runes. Lucy watched in horror as the magic came right at her. With just a split second to spare, Gray leaped at her, knocking her to the ground and out of the way. Lucy fell under him while the light blasted against the cage.

"No!" Lucy shrieked. "Natsu!"

"Bastard!" Erza bellowed. Suddenly, she had her sword out, charging at Sting.

When the blinding light faded, they saw that the runes had protected Natsu. He blinked his eyes from the brightness, but he was unharmed.

Sting dodged Erza's sword and frowned that his attack failed. "Something more powerful, eh?"

Mira suddenly transformed into Satan's Soul, and she joined Erza in fighting the White Dragon Slayer. Wendy knelt beside Lucy, checking her for injuries. Gray leaped up, putting himself right in front of the cage. Natsu gazed at all of them in awe. They were all fighting...for him! Even though he might be a lost cause, they were still going this far.

Freed walked up to the cage. "I anticipated something like this. The runes hold Natsu in, but they also protect from attacks. He can't be harmed."

Lucy sighed in relief. "Thank goodness." Then she saw Sting charging another light blast. "Gray, watch out!"

"Ice-Make: Shield!" Gray yelled instead, and the blast from Sting deflected off the ice, scattering the rays into brilliant icy rainbows. "No offense, Freed, but I'm not taking chances."

Natsu watched, stunned that Gray of all people was defending him. He turned his eyes back to Erza and Mira. Although both S-class girls were insanely powerful, against the nimble moves of Sting and his powerful light magic, both women were only capable of holding him back. Sting, meanwhile, looked like he was enjoying the challenge of fighting the two strongest women in Fairy Tail.
"This is fun!" he laughed wildly, leaping back from Erza's sword while ducking Mira's swiping claw-like hand. "We should have a threesome."

Erza furiously swung at him. "Hell no! Requip: Knight of the Mirrors!" Her new armor was covered in metal polished so perfectly, it reflected all light.

"White Dragon's Claw!" Sting yelled, and he attacked her with his fist glowing incandescently. However, all that light reflected right off the armor, and the only thing that hit was a normal fist. Sting leaped back as he realized her armor negated his magic. "Dammit!"

Off to the side, Lector had arrived and was in the middle of a cat fight with Happy. Just as the red Exceed seemed to have hit the blue furball down, Charle leaped on Lector's back and pulled him away by his whiskers. Wendy heard their small shouts and ran over to yell at the three to stop fighting.

In his cage, Natsu shook his head in rage. Tumultuous emotions boiled in his mind. Anger swelled up, and frustration burned in his blood. He yearned to fight Sting himself. He knew he could beat the White Dragon Slayer.

"Let me out," he shouted.

"You know we can't," Freed said passively.

Lucy went over to get Wendy away from the Exceeds' fight as claws were brought out. Wendy cried as she saw Lector scratch Happy's arm, and Lucy had to hold her back. Then suddenly a stray shot from Sting grazed Lucy's leg. It knocked her to the ground with a cry. Wendy knelt down beside her with a panicked face as blood soaked down Lucy's thigh. Gray saw Lucy go down and rushed over to shield them from any more wild shots. With the cage no longer guarded, one of Sting's blinding hits bashed into the runes.

Natsu began to growl, and his eyes flashed red. "Let me out. Want freedom!" His voice began to snarl.

Freed saw the flash of madness just under the surface. "Calm down, Natsu."

Suddenly, Wendy cried out. Her spine snapped into an arch, and her face turned straight upward as she screamed to the sky. Worried, Gray reached out to her shoulder. He just barely touched her, and Wendy suddenly lashed out at him. Gray's arm drew back, but where Wendy scratched, his skin had been torn by sharp, black nails.

"Mira!" he shouted in a panic. "Wendy...Wendy, calm down. Don't change. Shit, Lucy, get away from her."

Lucy tried to scuttle back, yet she was still injured and unable to stand.

Mira left the fight with Sting and rushed over to Wendy. Sting saw the problem and cursed under his breath.

"Do you see this, Natsu? Your feral pheromones are hurting her."

Natsu's eyes went back to green as he looked in terror at how Wendy appeared. Her teeth had sharpened, her claws were predatory, and her eyes...

They were red!
"No," he whispered, trembling at the reflection of how he must also look. "No, not...not Wendy. Oh please, no! Get her away from me," he whispered, looking at Wendy's crimson stare. No one heard him over the clang of Erza's sword, the blasts from Sting's magic, the yells from the Exceeds' cat fight, and the growls and shouts around Wendy. Natsu flung himself against the runes and shrieked, "Get her away from me!"

Freed turned back around. "Natsu?"

"It's me that's doing it to her," he yelled, and tears ran down his face. "I'm...I'm hurting her. My smell...it's triggering this. For the love of God, get her away from me!"

Wendy suddenly broke free from Mira's hold, whipped around, and slashed over her face. Four claw marks tore into that perfect, adorably photogenic face, and blood poured down her cheek.

"Mira!" Freed screamed.

Natsu was shaking so hard, he looked like he was convulsing. Panic, anger, fear, rage...he watched Wendy losing control, and suddenly everything within him snapped. Wings and a tail tore out his back, scales covered his skin, and his eyes flashed crimson

"Get Tiny Slayer away from me! Is hurting Tiny Slayer. Is bad. Bad smell for her. Leave, go, run, get away." When neither Freed nor Mira moved, the beast tried to leap forward and shrieked, "Awaaaaay!"

Lucy saw the beastly form raging in the cage. "Oh God...Natsu?"

Gray tried to keep calm. "He's right. It's the feral smell that's changing her."

"He can't be a feral!" Lucy yelled angrily.

"We'll figure that out later. Let's try to draw Wendy away from here. Maybe if she's away from his smell, she'll go back to normal. Mira?"

"I'm fine," she lied as the blood poured down her cheek. "Lucy, your leg is injured, so stay here. Guard Natsu. Maybe you can calm him down again."

"I'll try," she nodded. She pulled out a Gold Key. "Open the Gate of the Archer! Sagittarius!"

The horseman came out. "Moshi-moshi!" He gave Lucy a hand up and helped her to hobble over to the cage.

Meanwhile, Gray and Mira tried to pull Wendy off the road, but the inner beast was smart. It knew what was keeping the girl like this.

"No," beast-Wendy hissed with a wild grin. "Not leaving Fire Slayer. Smell is freedom."

"Dammit," Gray whispered.

"It knows," Mira realized.

Lucy walked up to Natsu. Those red eyes still scared her, but she forced herself to draw closer. "Sagittarius, blast away any attacks. Protect this cage. If you can get any clear shots at Sting, take them."

"Of course, Lucy-dono," he said loyally, and the Archer readied his bow and arrow, following Sting and Erza's movements keenly.
Lucy placed her hand against the violet glow. The beast inside watched her, sneering with anger. However, it raised the deadly claws up and place its hand next to hers.

"Girlie," Natsu's distorted voice said in a gentle whisper. "Is bad smell for Tiny Slayer."

"We know," she sniffled.

"Is not feral, though," the red-eyed creature insisted. "Is not! Slayer still has control."

Lucy caught her breath with a bit of hope. "Are you sure?"

The scaly face nodded. "We know. Is not too late to save Slayer. I not want that," it admitted honestly, "but...will make Lucy happy. We want Lucy happy. Love Lucy. Want Lucy. Is Slayer wants. Want smiles, not tears."

That spark of hope burned brighter in Lucy's heart. "Natsu," she breathed.

Those red eyes flicked over to the battle. "Tiny Slayer not safe until Slayer is back. Slayer not come back until White Slayer gone. I can fight White Slayer."

Lucy was stunned. "We can't let you out!"

"Is safe," the beast insisted. "Slayer in control."

"Obviously, Natsu's not in control."

"He is!" the beast shouted. "Tiny Slayer is hurting. Longer she hurt, worse it will be. Want fight! Need protect Tiny Slayer."

Lucy and Freed exchanged wary glances.

"Please!" the beast begged. "I return. I not hurt others, only White Slayer. I not kill. Please!" Those red eyes focused on the blonde. "Lucy...please, trust us."

Over at the side of the road, Mira let out another cry of pain and fell to the ground. Through ragged breaths, she grabbed her side and tried to hold back tears as blood soaked through her clothes. Gray stood over her to shield her and stared furiously at the little twelve-year-old.

"Wendy, stop it," Gray shouted. "I don't want to hurt you!"

"Slayer not here," the tiny girl cackled. "No want to hurt Slayer? Is fun prey."

Mira clutched her side, and her eyes lifted to Freed. The runes mage panicked at seeing her injured, her face slashed, and clawed stabs to her stomach.

"Please," the caged beast begged again. "Tiny Slayer hurting much. Not like to hurt others. Will make heart painful. Must stop this. Must fight!"

Freed dropped his head. "I better not regret this. Remember what I said," he threatened. "I will kill you if you hurt anyone."

The beast nodded seriously. "Only White Slayer, then return. Is promise."

Freed pulled out his sword, and with the tip he rewrote the runes. Suddenly, the purple barrier was gone.
With no hesitation, the beast spread its wings and flew out of the cage with a fiery roar. Erza backed away in shock, and Sting had only a second to see the enraged creature barreling at him before the beast collided into his chest, knocking Sting back many meters. Sting skidded across the ground, and his face tensed up in pain. He lashed out with blinding light, but the beast above him slammed a hand into his chest, knocking all air out. For a second, Sting felt like his heart had stopped, too.

Lector saw his best friend go down and stopped fighting Happy. "Sting-kun! You idiots, why would you set that murdering beast loose?"

Sting recovered from the pain and gritted his teeth. "White Dragon's..."

Before he could say anything, the beast head-butted him, and everything momentarily went black. Sting lay on his back, feeling the overwhelming strength that pinned him down so easily, like an adult restraining a tiny child. As his vision cleared, he looked up at those red eyes, sharp teeth, and fiery scales. He sensed the intense power. Sting could hardly help but laugh that, after hunting the beast for so many weeks, he was defeated with such ease.

"Power of a real dragon, eh?" he sighed to himself.

The fangs bared, the beast snarled a smile of victory, and suddenly the beast's mouth struck down with a hungry growl. Erza's sword went to the beast's throat, Gray had ice already forming in his hands, Freed's sword was out and pointing their way, Lucy was ready to order Sagittarius to fire, and Sting closed his eyes in resigned preparation for the beast to rip out his throat.

When suddenly, the creature froze. Breathing heavily, it pulled back and glared down at Sting.

"Need slayer," he hissed. "But...not you."

Sting raised an eyebrow. "You're right, I don't know the ceremony to cure you. Only Gajeel and Rogue do."

"Yesssss...need them." The beast rose off of Sting, and the red eyes faded away. While still standing over the White Dragon Slayer with his wings out in a sign of dominance, Natsu glared down. "I'm still in control," he declared firmly, his voice back to normal, although weary sounding. "I'm not totally feral yet, but I don't have much time. The beast within is getting stronger. I'm starting to...to want to change."

Lucy covered her mouth to hear him say that. Gajeel's warning had been that when a dragon slayer wanted to change, his final phase of transformation was almost there.

"For now," Natsu panted, "I still have control. You're gravely mistaken, Sting. I haven't killed anyone."

"You weren't conscious..."

"The beast told me so!" Natsu yelled over him. "It hasn't killed any humans."

"I've seen the wreckage," Sting shouted. "Whole villages were wiped out by a feral!"

"It wasn't me. There's another dragon slayer out there. He's the one who triggered all of us: me, Wendy, Laxus as well. That's the feral, and he's been killing people in Magnolia. So please, Sting," he said, and Natsu bowed down low. "Please, I beg of you, take Wendy with you, get her far away from me, and hurry to Magnolia. Stop the feral dragon slayer before it hurts any more of my friends. You and Gajeel are the only ones who can face him. If I came too close, he'd trigger the beast, and then I'd truly lose control."
Sting saw for himself that Natsu was sane. This was definitely not the mindless beast Rogue had described. Despite himself, Sting knew he had to believe in Natsu. He admired him too much. If anyone could keep that feral side at bay despite the smell being fully present, it was Salamander! Sting walked up close to Natsu and leaned into his ear.

"Maybe you're not feral yet, but you smell just like one. That smell will trigger the Sky Dragon Slayer," he warned, nodding to where Wendy was still lashing against Gray and Mira. "It's a miracle she's been able to stay in control even this long. She's one strong girl," he praised, smiling to her. Then Sting looked down at Natsu, who still had his face lowered humbly. "I'll take her with me for her own sake, but I suggest you try to keep the beast under control. Any more transformations and you might never return to normal. If that happens, as you can see, I have no hesitation against killing you."

"Got it," Natsu nodded, and the wings painfully shrank back in. He hissed at the change, but it was nowhere near as bad as it had originally felt. When he looked fully human again, Natsu took a step closer to his fellow dragon slayer. "Hey Sting." He glanced briefly to his teammates, then dropped his voice lower. "When Gajeel can help me through this, that beast...does it go away?"

Sting chuckled softly and shook his head. "I still feel it in there sometimes, but only as an awareness. Rogue says he hears that voice in his shadow. It's part of being a dragon slayer, to have that little bit of dragon instincts, a dark side lying in wait, hiding in the crevices of our heart. Good dragon slayers learn to suppress those instincts. Bad ones like Acnologia gave in to it. Or that's what I was told. I'll tell you what Rogue told me, and Gajeel told him." The White Dragon Slayer glared into Natsu's face. "Once you go through the ceremony to become an adult dragon slayer, you can suppress the beast indefinitely. However if, for whatever reason, you give into it, even once...you will never be able to return to normal. That's what happened to Acnologia. He gave in to the dragon's inner beast. You've seen the Black Dragon, and you know what he once was. If you allow it to take over again, you'll turn into a killing machine, not like our parents, but like Acnologia. That beast gives dragon slayers immense power, but we'll forever lose our minds and fall to the darkness. If you do that, I swear I will slay you."

"Same to you," Natsu smirked. "I'd treat you as if you were the Black Dragon itself. But don't worry. I've seen what this beast can do to friends. I would never give into that beast willingly, not even if I felt I might get stronger."

"Even to save a friend?" asked Sting. "Even to save someone you love?"

Natsu shook his head. "That beast...it hurt the person I love most." He glanced back to Lucy, who was helping the injured Mirajane, bandaging the wound to the Take-Over mage's stomach and dabbing the bloody cheeks.

Lucy sensed his eyes on her, looked over, and smiled happily. "She'll be fine," she called over.

Natsu gave her a relieved nod. Then to Sting he whispered, "I don't want that to ever happen again," he sighed sadly. "I know I'd only hurt those I care about, and I wouldn't even know that I was doing it. I can't allow that. I can't hurt friends. Even if it's powerful, I can't trust that side of me."

Sting nodded solemnly. "Maybe you can be a smart kid after all."

Natsu laughed at the compliment. "At least I know when I'm dangerous."

He walked back to the cage of runes. Natsu paused just a moment by Lucy, looking at her wistfully. She rose up and took his hand, squeezing his fingers, finally able to touch after so many days. His hands were so huge, so warm, and so gentle. His rough thumb ran over her knuckles. He loved how
soft her skin felt, how her hands were not quite cold yet not quite hot, and he wished for a day when he could touch her more.

"I love you," he whispered so softly, no one else could hear him.

Then he let go of her hand, forced himself to walk away, and sat obediently on the cart that had been his prison for days. Freed quickly rewrote a few runes, and the cage once again held Natsu in its purple glowing confines.

Sting turned and walked over to Wendy. With a nod to Gray, he stood in front of the girl. Although she tried to scratch him, he easily grabbed both of her tiny hands. He held her a bit tightly, enough to probably leave bruises, and looked straight into her eyes. His pupils narrowed, and slowly Wendy began to calm down.

"Want...slayer..." she whispered. Then she suddenly passed out.

Sting swooped her up into his arms. "That won't cure her, but it'll pacify her for a few hours, long enough for me to get away from this feral stench. I'll bring her to your guild as quickly as possible. I hope your master can do something for her."

"Then I'm coming, too," Mira insisted, slowly rising to her feet.

Freed rushed over in protest. "Mira, you're injured badly."

"It's my duty to watch over her," she insisted. "Besides, maybe if I hurry, I can get to a healer before these cuts leave a scar on my face. That'd really ruin my modeling career."

"Suits me," Sting said, briefly eying the lovely white-haired woman. Freed glared at him jealously. "The rest of you, don't travel too fast. Give us a little head start. See ya in Magnolia, Natsu. Let's go, Lector." Then he turned and, carrying Wendy, he and Mira headed down the road.

Natsu watched them leave, then let out a sputtering sigh and collapsed onto the floor of the cage. Lucy walked up and watched him through the violet glow.

"Are you okay?" she asked worriedly.

"I...hurt...everywhere," he admitted, staring blankly up at the sky. "I hope I never change like that again." Then he looked around at their remaining group. They slowly gathered around to check on him. "Thanks, everyone. Especially you, Freed. Thanks for trusting me."

Freed chuckled softly. "To be honest, I was ready to kill you at any moment."

Natsu chuckled wearily at that blunt honesty. "I wanna go home," he whispered.

Erza finally sheathed her sword. "Let's get going," she ordered. "We'll travel slowly."

Natsu felt the jolt of the cart and moaned. Slow traveling meant it would take even longer to reach the town. He kept staring up at the sky as they trudged down the road to Magnolia.

Chapter End Notes

I received an awesome fanart for Beastly Possession. http://fay.me/d68n0h7
Wendy woke up to a jolting sensation that would have made any other dragon slayer nauseous. Luckily, motion sickness was something she had never experienced...yet. She felt heat around her, arms holding her, and a smell she did not fully recognize, although it was familiar. As she regained consciousness, she realized it was the musk of a man.

"What?" she squeaked, trying to jolt away from the powerful arms. Nearby she saw Mira. "Mira, what happened?"

Charle flew above. "Wendy! You're awake."

The arms holding her abruptly yanked her away from that bright, warm body. She was set a little too firmly onto the ground, making her stumble. Then a blond knelt in front of her.

"Are you okay? How do you feel?"

"Sting?" She recognized the fellow dragon slayer, but she was confused why he was there. "Where are the others? Mira..." She saw a scabbed gash across the white-haired model's face and gasped in horror. "What happened? Were we attacked?" She looked again to Sting. "You! You tried to attack Natsu." She hit him with her tiny fists. "What did you do to Mira, you meanie?"

Mira looked over to Sting. "She doesn't remember?"

"No," he said, not protesting the weak hits. "When the beast within takes control, the dragon slayer loses consciousness. It's not until the late stages that the beast and slayer can coexist."

Wendy froze in shock. "Beast? Do you mean...me?" Her eyes teared up, and she covered her trembling mouth. "Did...did I do that?"

Mira patted her head. "My duty is to protect you if you lose control. I was just doing my job."

"But Mira, your face! Let me heal it, quickly. I promise, I won't let there be any scars."

Sting stiffened and rose to his feet. "That'll have to wait. He looked around in paranoia. "That smell..."

Wendy flinched and covered her nose. "I smelled that in Magnolia. Is...is that the feral?"
Sting's eyes narrowed as he scanned the woods. "Yes, and it's coming this way. Dammit! Why would it come here?" He thought for a moment. "Of course. Natsu! He has the smell of a feral, too. It must have smelled him nearing Magnolia and sees him as another feral invading his territory. I didn't think its nose would be that sensitive." He looked back to the girls. "Mira, take Wendy away from here, quickly! She just recovered, so she could slip again. Lector, protect them." He threw off his traveling cloak, and his blue eyes flicked around the forest, searching warily.

"Sting-kun," Lector protested.

Mira looked worried. "You're going to face it alone?"

"You can't!" Wendy cried out.

"If you stay here, I'll be facing two beasts," he shouted. "Wendy, you need to get away. The more you change, the more powerful the inner strength of the beast will be. And Mira, you shouldn't be fighting with those wounds. Both of you, leave it to me. Please!" His voice strained with urgency.

Mira sensed there was more to this. "Sting, what aren't you telling us?"

His jaw tightened in disgust. "This feral creature works off of instincts. One of the most basic and carnal is...to mate." He looked back at the two ladies. "It'd probably just kill you, Mira, but Wendy...a dragon slayer, one of its own kind..."

Mira's face went pale with horror, although little Wendy looked confused. "Oh God, no!" The older girl shuddered, and she grabbed the little dragon slayer protectively around the shoulders. "Let's go, Wendy."

"But Sting..."

"You need to get out of here," she yelled, shaking with horrific visions in her head. "Lector, Charle, scout ahead."

"But..." The little Exceed looked between Sting and the others. "Sting-kun..."

Charle huffed at him. "Oh, get over it and follow orders."


Sting sniffed deeply, and a bright grin burst onto his face. "It's him."

A moment later, a shadow came strolling through the trees.

Lector gasped happily. "Frosh!"

"Lector," cried the froggy Exceed.

"Rogue," Sting sighed in relief as the Shadow Dragon Slayer came forward. "Damn, am I glad to see you."

Rogue gave a curt nod and reticent smile. "I was in Magnolia shopping and heard rumors. I figured you would need assistance, and if that's truly the feral dragon slayer I'm smelling, then my instincts were right."

Sting frowned, staring off into the woods. "Yeah, it's coming. It probably wants to kill Natsu before he enters Magnolia."
"Natsu Dragneel?"

"He apparently never went through the ceremony. The creature changed him. He's nearly feral himself."

His red eyes looked down to Wendy. "And her, too? I smell just a little of the change in her."

Wendy pouted. "I smell?"

"The creature triggered her early." Sting scoffed softly. "What's up with these Fairy Tail dragon slayers not being fully mature?"

"Immature!" Lector echoed.

"Fro thinks so, too."

Wendy dropped her head. "I'm sorry."

Rogue smiled gently. "Don't feel bad. You're too young to even be facing this change. If we had caught this killer earlier, you never would have been bothered for a few more years. It is we who should apologize for letting it escape twice."

Mira asked, "Have you been hunting it?"

Rogue nodded grimly. "For a couple months. The creature has slaughter entire towns. I fear Magnolia will be next. If we can kill it out here, away from civilization, all the better."

"But he's just a sick boy," Wendy cried out in protest.

Rogue's eyes saddened. "A sick boy who can't be cured, who has lost all humanity, killed hundreds if not thousands, has eaten people alive, and if the rumors I heard are true, the feral beast has nearly killed one of your teammates."

"Lucy," Wendy whispered, shivering as she remembered trying to heal those horrific wounds on Lucy's mauled body.

"It's not something to be pitied," Sting warned sternly. "Rogue and I swore we would stop it ourselves, our duty as dragon slayers. Let us handle this."

"Wendy," Rogue said gently. "We don't wish to fight you as well. Please escape before you're affected. You're like the little sister of the dragon slayer family. Let us protect you as well."

Her eyes watered up at hearing his kind words. "Rogue..." If anyone in Fairy Tail ever thought Rogue might be bad because of things that happened in the past, she at least knew his heart was good. "Got it," she nodded firmly. "Sorry."

"Just keep yourself safe, Fro," and he patted the Exceed on the head. "Stay with her. Try to make her smile. You're best at keeping people happy."

The little froggy Exceed blushed at the praise. "Fro will do my best!"

Mira took Wendy's hand and led her away. Lector flew ahead to make sure they kept on a path going as far away from the incoming enemy as possible, while Charle and Frosh stayed with the two girls.

Sting waited while they escaped. He felt more confident facing this powerful enemy with his dark
twin beside him, fighting side-by-side like old times.

"You sent Frosh away, too," he noted.

Rogue had a grim look in his face. "I know how deadly this beast is. It won't be a normal fight. It'll be to the death, and if we die here, they'll only identify our bodies by the dragon lacrima still embedded within us."

"If the beast doesn't eat lacrima and all," Sting pointed out. "I wonder what would happen if it ate the lacrima of a different element. With any luck, it'd make the beast sick enough to kill it."

"I don't plan on finding out."

"Oh, me neither." The White Dragon Slayer grinned playfully. "Just wondering. Got any idea what element it is?"

"I thought we determined it must be earth."

"Yeah, but we haven't met it yet."

"I investigated the scene where the beast encountered Fairy Tail's strongest, Gildarts Clive. Sadly, it seems the fight was mostly between him and the Lightning Dragon Slayer."

"Laxus?" Sting asked in amazement. "He's affected as well? Damn! Ferals poppin' up everywhere. What's up with Fairy Tail?"

"An immature group with immature mages. That's why I admire Gajeel."

"Humph!" Just then, the trees ahead rustled. "Well, let's see how earth fairs against the light and the dark."

A half naked boy ran out, dark like the trees around them, with glowing red eyes and a body half like a dragon.

"In the way," the feral snarled.

Sting had not expected to meet something so human-like. He really was nothing more than a sick boy, maybe fifteen or sixteen, with skin brown like the earth and longish, wild, black hair. His body was toned, and Sting guessed that even before falling to this illness, he had been a decent fighter.

Rogue spoke, "Are you Balaur Blackstone, the Earth Dragon Slayer?"

"Slayer not here." The creature crouched down in preparation to attack.

Rogue kept his voice in a calming pitch. "I know the ceremony to cure you. Will you let me do it?"

Sting looked over in shock. They had never said this was an option. "Rogue!"

"Cure?" The feral snarled, then roared at them in fury. "Where was the cure when Slayer wanted it? Slayer mad. No cure. No help. People shoot at us. People hate us. All is bad! Don't want dragon anymore. Don't want cure. Body is mine. Mind is mine. All is mine. Too late, too late. No cure!"

Sting's brow tensed. "It knows it's too far gone."

Rogue nodded sadly. "Which means the boy within is truly lost. He has no humanity left to rescue." He frowned. "Damn. I didn't want to do this."
"It's nothing but a bloodthirsty beast now, Rogue. We have no choice but to kill it before it kills us."

Rogue looked hesitant. "It could have happened to either one of us."

"But it didn't," he snapped. "It's our duty as fellow dragon slayers to put him out of his misery. This boy, whoever he was in life, is lost. He's sick. We have to end his misery...like we had to do back then. We had to kill our own parents when they were sick. This is no different."

Rogue still shook his head, eying the dark face that sneered at him.

"We have to, Rogue," Sting warned. "Or do you want Gajeel to do it?"

He thought about it. Killing just a monster was one thing, yet Rogue realized deep down inside that, if it had not been for Gajeel and Sting, if he had grown up alone, he would have ended up exactly like this boy, lost to the dragon instincts. To kill a fellow dragon slayer, one of his own kind, was not something he could do lightly. It reminded him too much of that traumatizing moment when he had to kill his adopted dragon father.

But to save others, to save Natsu and Wendy, to save all of Magnolia and keep the reputation of dragon slayers from being forever tarnished...

Finally, Rogue lifted his head with renewed determination. "I won't let Gajeel take on this burden. To save him from this sin..." He stopped, ambivalently wavering for a moment.

Squinty blue eyes glanced over to Rogue. "Can you kill it?"

Rogue swallowed down his heart's own protests, then he posed ready to fight with a crimson gleam in his eyes and a dark aura around his body. "It may have been human once. That's not what it is now. Let's do it."

The beast grinned. "Done talking? We fight now! Kill you, eat you, then go. New feral coming."

A bright glow cloaked Sting's body. "Natsu's not feral yet. I won't let you hurt him while he's sick."

Shadows coalesced around Rogue. "On my pride as a mage of Sabertooth, I shall protect our new friends in Fairy Tail."

"Good, good. Need warm-up. Haven't used Slayer powers in a long time. Balaur's hands stretched out to the sides. The ground shuddered, making Sting and Rogue almost lose balance. All around Balaur, rocks rose, floating around him.

Sting growled in frustration. "He knows telekinesis as well." He had expected a mindless attack of brute strength—claws and teeth—not magic. This made the feral far more dangerous than the two had anticipated.

A sly smile slithered onto Balaur's face as he saw the shock in the Twin Dragon Slayers' eyes. "Yes, I know Slayer magic. From the beginning, I have known how to kill with rock and dirt and dust. Not all is bright. Not all is dark. But here, all is earth. Everywhere you stand is mine. Unless you fly or climb into the trees, where your feet are, I control."

Sting grimaced. "Maybe I shouldn't have sent Lector away."

"Those rocks would pelt us from the sky as well," Rogue said.
"Yessss," hissed the feral. "No escaping earth. Come. Light and dark can only change the color of earth. It cannot harm it."

"We'll see about that," Sting sneered, and he took a deep breath, ready to roar.

Farther north, Lucy's group traveled slowly down the road with Natsu's cage in tow. The dragon slayer looked sick like usual from being stuck on transportation, but suddenly his low moans turned into screams of pain. Natsu leaped up and crashed backwards into the runes, making them sparkle purple as he hit them again and again. He thrashed around, holding his head in agony.

"Natsu," Lucy cried out in fear. In all their days of traveling, he had not turned into the beast while motion sick, to the point where Wendy theorized that the illness suppressed the inner beast, and she refused to cast Troia on Natsu so he would not possibly lose control.

"Smell...smell!" The hissing in his voice showed that the beast within was trying to break out. "Feral smell."

"The feral dragon slayer?" asked Gray.

Far ahead, they saw a burst of blinding light shoot straight up into the sky.

"That's Sting's magic," muttered Erza. "The feral must have sensed Natsu, came to confront him, and met Sting instead."

"But Wendy!" Lucy cried out.

"That is troubling," Erza frowned, also worried for the little girl. "Gray, go on ahead. Help out if you can. We'll backtrack until the smell doesn't affect Natsu."

"Got it," Gray nodded, and he raced off into the woods.

Lucy put her hand up against the runes. More than anything, she wanted to hold Natsu and comfort him, but right now his eyes were glowing red. That was the only change so far, but his voice showed he was not in control.

"Is feral," he snarled, glaring at the distant flashes of magic and rumbles like earthquakes. "Must fight. Must...kill."

"Natsu," Lucy called out sternly, hoping to snap him back.

"Kill..." There was a noise like a purr of excitement. "Kill and eat and drink blood of feral, get stronger."

"Natsu!"

"And mate." Those scarlet eyes slid over to her. "Girlie..."

Lucy shivered at that distorted form of Natsu's voice and the way those red eyes stared at her like she was a piece of meat.

The beast, with Natsu's face, smirked at her so coldly. "If I win struggle with Slayer," it whispered, "you'll be mine. I'm gonna fuck you harder than Slayer ever could."

A shiver ran down Lucy's spine, and her face paled with a spike of instinctive fear. Tears pooled in her eyes, and her bottom lip trembled in horror at the threat.
This...this was not Natsu! This was not even some facet of his mind. This was a creature that was completely different from the silly idiot she loved, a creature that was beginning to exert its own desires. A part of Lucy realized that meant Natsu's own sense of self was slipping fast.

"I claimed you first," the beast purred softly, crawling closer to her, glaring through the glowing purple runes. "I marked you and fucked you. I took what Slayer can't take anymore."

Lucy shivered out a sob of deep terror, overwhelmed by a feeling of helplessness. She remembered that night in the gala, the red in Natsu's eyes as he slid into her, breaking her virginal barrier. She had not understood at the time, she thought at first that it really was Natsu doing that to her, but she eventually realized he was not in control. Seeing the carnal hunger in those red eyes again pounded in the fact that Natsu had not been the one with her that night. It had been his body, but not his mind. The assailant was this creature before her, this foul-mouthed beast that craved death, blood, and lust.

Its face leaned right up against the runes and stared directly at her. Lucy had never seen Natsu's smile look so sadistic as it did now. "Girlie liked how Slayer fucks. I know. I watched. But I fucked girlie first. You...are mine!"

Before Lucy could gasp, Freed unsheathed his sword and stabbed at the cage. The rapier struck the runes but did not pierce. Instead, an electric jolt zapped Natsu's body. He shrieked, then collapsed unconscious onto the floor of the cage. Lucy gawked at the green-haired man. She was ready to shout, but Freed's infuriated sneer silenced her protests.

"There is not one shred of Natsu's being that would ever speak to Lucy like that," he said in low, dire words. "I've spoken to Natsu and know his feelings." Freed looked over to Lucy and assured her, "He would never harm you, nor does he think of you as a conquest. He loves you deeper than even he himself comprehends. Don't let what this monstrosity says scare you away from the man you love."

She blinked mutely, too stunned to reply right away. Freed, of all people, just supported their relationship on Natsu's behalf. Lucy was so shaken, she could only mumble, "Thanks."

Erza said nothing as she pulled the cage behind her, backtracking down the road they had just come along. However, from the beast's words and Lucy's reactions, she realized that her blonde friend had been hiding a horrible secret all this time. She knew better than to ask about it now, but she figured Lucy was probably in a desperate need for a girls' night out and some serious heartfelt talking. And strawberry cake. That always made things better.

Gajeel led the group from Fairy Tail through the woods, following the permeating stench of the feral. He heard whispers in the crowd behind him. Gildarts' encounter had shown him nothing more than a frightened boy. Personally, Gajeel thought it was a shame his first impression had to be that of a sick child. This was far worse than some illness. If Fairy Tail did not take this fight seriously, more people could die. Lots more!

At least Gajeel was glad of one thing. The feral had followed the dragon slayer's instincts, leading it to Magnolia, a city rich in powerful mages. When the feral got bored and decided it was time to slaughter everyone, it would definitely fail.

He seriously hoped it would not come to that, though. There had already been far too many deaths, and the rate was increasing.

For now, the targets were picked for a reason, and there were usually no more than three targets in a
night. The creature had not yet resorted to a brutal mass slaughter of the entire population. When it did, dozens if not hundreds might die before Fairy Tail could muster an offensive. Still, the feral's days of slaughtering would stop here...one way or another.

A feral dragon slayer was a dangerous thing, but against just two S-class mages, there was no chance it would succeed.

Or so he thought.

They saw flashes of brilliant white light up ahead, and Gajeel recognized Rogue's Shadow Dragon strikes blasting the trees. The Fairy Tail mages dispersed so they could weave through the forest with enough room to dodge attacks. Approaching a battle in progress was always precarious.

Finally, with Levy close by his side—he patted her head just to make sure she was there—Gajeel stepped into a clearing that was an utter mess. The very land seemed tormented by the battle. Deep fissures cracked the ground. Rocks jutted up in bizarre shapes. Trees had been scorched by Sting's beams. Shadows clung to any dark place, like black slugs avoiding fatal sunlight.

He saw the Twin Dragon Slayers scuffed up and weary, and then Gajeel saw the feral. It had opted to go without wings for this fight. A wise move, given the narrowness of the area and all the trees. However, the beast had a blackish brown tail with ebony spikes running down the spine, which it used to cling to a tree, swinging more like a monkey than a dragon. It sang tauntingly to Sting and Rogue.

"Slayers, slayers, you're just players.
Bad at aim, boring game.
Kill you, kill you, then I eat you.
Shadow, light, eat up right.
Stronger, stronger, I'll fight longer.
Fire will die, then Lightning and Sky."

"You forgot Iron," Gajeel called out.

The Sabertooth mages looked back in surprise to see Fairy Tail coming forward, at least a dozen mages, including powerhouses like Gildarts, Gajeel, Cana, and Juvia.

The beast crawled up into the tree, perched on a branch, and hissed. "Another slayer? Haven't smelled you before."

Gajeel snorted a laugh, glad he caught it by surprise. "I've been wearing some god-awful cologne since I first sniffed you out. I figured covering my scent was best."

Levy scowled in petulant anger and muttered, "That was the cologne I got you for your birthday, jerk." He just patted her head, annoying her and making her blush.

The creature hissed. Against two dragon slayers, it had already fought the hardest battle of its life. Facing a dozen more mages, including another dragon slayer, would be impossible. Dark brown wings sprouted from its back and unfurled.

Gajeel sneered and raised his hand. "Oh no you don't! Iron Dragon's Lance: Demon Logs." His arm turned into a massive steel spear, then with a green magic flash, it shot small metal spears rapidly out at the perched creature.

The feral took to the air, barely dodging the blast that tore apart the tree it had been on, leaving behind a mess of metal spikes.
Rogue chimed in quickly, "Shadow Dragon's Roar!"

Sting was not about to miss out on the fun and took a massive breath. "White Dragon's Roar!"

Gajeel was mad he missed, so he also took a breath. "Iron Dragon's Roar!"

Light, Shadow, and Iron all stormed toward the beast, blending into a fierce and fatal tornado of destruction. Those crimson eyes widened at the ferocity. The feral bellowed, feeling fear for once.

"Earth Dragon's Stonewall!"

The ground directly underneath shot up, forming a shield against the triple combo. Still, the blasts shattered the defensive barrier and hit the bottom half of the feral, sending the creature spiraling into the air with a shriek. It flapped its leathery wings frantically to regain control.

"Noooo!"

The other mages all attacked. Juvia sent out a jet of water, but with a swipe of its hand, the feral swished a bunch of dirt in her path, which turned to mud when the water attack hit. It then flung the mud at her, capturing Juvia, Evergreen, and Elfman in a gooey mess that instantly dried into hard stone, containing them. Romeo threw a purple fireball at the beast, but a shield of rocks blocked him. Then Cana tossed a card at it, but before the magic could even activate, bullet-like pebbles shot out of the Earth Dragon Slayer's hands and shredded her card.

Gildarts knew he should attack as well. His magic could easily crush these earthen barriers. Mentally, however, he was still struggling with the fact that Balaur was a child.

"Stop! Stop, stop! Hate you! Kill you!" The air around Balaur filled with dust that swirled around him in a brownish yellow haze. "Earth Dragon's Avalanche!"

The feral stretched out its arms, which took on the appearance of rocks crunched together. Then from his fingertips, a barrage of pebbles stormed down on the mages. Mixed with it was thick dust, blinding everyone from the hailstorm of stones.

Gajeel grabbed Levy and turned his arm into an iron shield, protecting the two of them. Max whipped up a wall of sand that at least shielded most of the smaller rocks, but large ones still pierced through. Gildarts crushed all rocks that came near him and Cana. Sting tried to blast as many stones away as possible, but one hit him on the head. He fell backwards with blood dripping down his hair.

"Sting!" Rogue called out, but the blond was unconscious. He used his shadows to shield Sting from any more hits and made his way over to him to put pressure on the wound.

The other mages also did their best to not get crushed under the rocky avalanche. The dust made them all cough, unable to breath.

"He's getting away!" Macao shouted, wheezing through the suffocating dust.

Bisca scanned the sky and saw the dark wings flapping away. She raised her shotgun, took steady aim, and fired. They heard the beast cry out, hit by her superb sharpshooting, but still it flew off in the chaos.

"Goddammit!" Gajeel bellowed.

"He's heading back to Magnolia," Max realized.
Elfman finally managed to burst out of his stone barrier, freeing himself, Juvia, and Evergreen, who blushed as she held onto him to regain her footing. "We should hurry after it," he insisted, not minding Evergreen using his chest to steady herself.

"He's wounded," Gildarts stated. "He won't get far."

Gajeel checked on Levy, who kept coughing from the dust. "It won't make a move injured, and this is the perfect time if the old geezer wants it captured alive. Follow it, Pantherlily, take to the skies and lead them." He looked over to Rogue, who was helping Sting to wake up. "Fancy seein' you two again! Ya chasing that beast?"

"Yes," Rogue answered. "It's our duty to slay it."

"Good. We have the same goals. With Salamander, Laxus, and Wendy down, we could use more dragon slayers to end this beast once and for all."

Sting rubbed off the blood dripping toward his eyes. "I met with Natsu on the road." He decided to leave off the part about trying to kill him. "He began to change, and Wendy was affected by him. She traveled with me most of this morning, along with Mira, in order to get away from Natsu's smell. I sent them away when the feral showed up for Wendy's own safety."

Gildarts looked to see which mages were still around. "Warren, try to contact Mira. If Wendy is also sick now, we need to get her to the guild quickly. Makarov has something like a quarantine set up for them. How far back was Natsu?"

Just then, Gray jogged into the clearing. "We're not far. I take it the asshole got away."

Gajeel sneered that he had failed. "That shitty beast was a helluva lot stronger than I figured. It's a smart thing for a fucking psychotic animal."

"We noticed that, too," Rogue nodded. "Its attacks were precise."

Sting looked over to Gray. "How's Natsu?"

"He smelled the feral and started to flip out. Erza's backing up until the smell goes away."

"He seriously needs to stay away from the smell of the feral," Sting warned.

"Exactly," Gajeel nodded. "He shouldn't even come through this area, since the smell is so strong. Plus no cart is getting through this mess," he said, eying the tortured and twisted earth. "Run back and tell Erza to take the long way around these woods. A couple of hours will be worth it to save Salamander from beasting out again. When you guys get to Magnolia, he's gonna have a hard time. It's likely he'll smell it and change."

"He really needs help, fast," Sting warned. "He smells feral, but he still has a bit of control."

Gajeel stared up the road as he calculated what to do. "Rogue, ya still know the ceremony I taught ya?"

"Yes, and I taught Sting a short version of it, enough to cure me when I got the first symptoms. It wouldn't be enough for someone who has already begun changing."

"You have half a day to learn," Gajeel said to Sting. "You two, follow me. The feral won't make a move today, and curing Natsu should be a priority. I don't want to have to kill him as well. If I take care of him, I'll be out of commission for a week. I want you two to kill that feral. Once you do, cure
Laxus and Wendy as soon as possible. Three of us, three of them."

"Understood," Rogue said, bowing his head respectfully.

"Sheesh," Sting groaned. "I have to learn some boring week-long ceremony thing?"

"You want Natsu safe, right?" Rogue pointed out.

"Well yeah, if he's curable." Sting folded his arms and slouched. "Okay, fine. I'll learn it, but getting rid of the beast comes first on my list."

Gajeel nodded, and the group left. Some went with Warren to search for Mira and Wendy, some followed Pantherlily after the feral, and Gray raced back through the trees to tell Erza about taking an alternate route. There was a lot of planning to do, and bringing Natsu back into Magnolia was going to be a lot harder than they expected.
Natsu and company approached Magnolia cautiously. Gray had warned them about Gajeel's worries, that Natsu would most likely change when he entered the city. The smell was all over the town, and Natsu was already unstable.

Natsu sat in his cage with his hand to his nose, hoping that simply blocking the smell would stop things. Lucy watched him with her brow tense in worry. Natsu's face had gone weary and pale since that morning's encounter with Sting. He truly looked sick now.

"I can smell it still," Natsu muttered through his pinched nostrils.

"Keep your nose plugged," Erza told him, trying to pull the cart a little faster.

"I can smell it just breathing through my mouth." He laid down on the floor of the cage and gazed up. "This sucks. I'm gonna change again, aren't I?"

No one answered him. They glanced around to each other, wondering if there was anything they could do to help him, but hours on the road discussing their approach to Magnolia had not given any of them a single clue on what they could do, besides Freed rewriting the runes to block air, and that was out of the question.

Natsu realized their silence meant he was right. "If I do, Lucy...don't look."

"Natsu." She trembled with worry for him. "You're gonna be okay."

"This is pathetic," he groaned. "I don't want you to see me this way."

"Idiot. I want to take care of you. If I could hold you, I would."

Natsu laughed weakly. "That would probably help."

Lucy looked over to Freed. He saw the silent question in her face and shook his head.

"That's a bad idea, Lucy," Freed warned.

"It could help."
"And he could change."

"I trust Natsu."

"I trust him too, but I don't trust the beast inside him."

"Lucy," Gray warned.

Her eyes remained focused on the purple runes. Natsu's head turned over, and he looked at her with weary, exhausted, depressed eyes. She had never seen such a look on his face before, like he was ready to give up. That was not the Natsu she knew.

"He needs me," she said stubbornly. "Even if all I can do is hold him, if I can help him to keep away the beast for just a few minutes..." She looked up desperately to Freed. "Please, let me be with him."

"The beast could kill you, Lucy."

"It won't." Her eyes stayed on Natsu's sickly gaze. "The beast claimed me. It won't kill me. Plus I firmly believe that if I stay with Natsu, I can keep his consciousness intact. He won't let the beast hurt me."

Freed looked away, but he frowned as they got more into the city. "Once again, I'm going against my better judgment." He pulled out his sword and used it to rewrite some of the runes. "You can enter and exit at will, but Natsu cannot leave."

"Thank you, Freed." Lucy climbed up onto the cart and passed through the purple runes. She crawled over to Natsu and sat beside him.

"I'll also try to block fragrances from entering the cage," Freed said. "Natsu, tell me if it works. I can't smell whatever you're smelling, so this might not work at all." He began to manipulate the runes while Erza continued to pull the cart.

Gray walked over to the redhead. "Let me pull some of the added weight. We should hurry. The sooner we get to the guild, the sooner Natsu gets into whatever this quarantine thing is Master has set up."

"Then quicken the pace. Freed, keep up."

Natsu moaned louder as the cart sped up and jostled more. "The smell, it's...it's less but...but it's still there." He swallowed down some acid trying to shoot up from his stomach.

Lucy grabbed Natsu's hand. He looked up at her and tried to grin.

Softly, he whispered, "I missed you. I finally get to hold you, and I'm this bad."

"You're just sick. You've taken care of me when I got sick and cheered me up by sending the rainbow sakura tree down the canal. Now it's my turn."

He smiled briefly, but his head fell to the side. "I...feel it." He shuddered and gasped. "It's...it's trying to take over. Lucy..." He looked up at her with fear making his lips tremble. "Don't let it take over me. I don't want to lose to it. I don't want to leave you alone."

Tears filled her eyes, and she grabbed him up into her arms, holding him around his back, his shoulders resting against her body, her arms wrapped around his chest as if she could squeeze him and keep him like this forever. She felt him shaking, and being this close, she heard him sniffle and
gulp down the terror Natsu refused to show to anyone.

Erza glanced around at the street traffic. "We're attracting too much attention."

Suddenly, Natsu screamed in pain. He grabbed hold of Lucy. "Don't let me change. Don't let me change!"

"Natsu!" she wept.

Gray saw what Erza meant. "They're going to question. Everyone knows what Natsu looks like. If they see him change into a beast, the secret of the dragon slayers will be out."

Erza nodded. "Freed, make the runes opaque."

"Understood. Lucy, time to get out."

She squeezed Natsu closer to her. "I'm not leaving."

"For your own safety..."

She screamed, "I'm not leaving him alone!" Natsu clung to her harder. "He's terrified. I can't leave him like this. Make the cage opaque. I'll tell you if anything happens, and I'll get out if he tries to hurt me. Until then, I'm not leaving him."

Freed sighed and looked to Erza. She gave a nod to let Lucy stay. Frowning, Freed rewrote just a few runes, and the cage went totally black. They could still hear Natsu panting and moaning inside, but nobody could see who was inside the solid black square.

Inside, the light dimmed, but Lucy could still see out through the dark walls. She saw the silent looks exchanged between Gray, Erza, and Freed. They did not agree with her decision, that much was obvious, but Lucy knew she had to help Natsu. Even if she could not hold him back from transforming, if she could at least comfort him through this terror, that was enough.

"Lucy..."

"I'm here, Natsu," she said, pulling him against her chest.

"I can feel it. I wanna fight it."

She stroked his hair. "Try to fight it as long as you can. I'll be right here next to you."

"Lucy...it hurts. My head. My back. Everything. It all hurts. I...I don't like this. I don't wanna change, but it hurts. It hurts to stay me. It makes me want to let go."

"No! Don't let go, Natsu. Fight it."

"I'm trying!" he screamed.

"Lucy?" Freed asked in worry.

"I'm fine. He's just..." She looked down. Natsu was scared, but she did not want to tell the others that.

"It hurts," Natsu moaned. "I wanna lie down."

She moved him to lie on the floor, and Natsu immediately curled into a fetal position.
"Stay with me. Don't let me go," he begged weakly. "Don't leave me alone with it."

Lucy bit her lip, and she laid down beside him, caressing his nose with hers. Natsu eyes opened to see her, and he smiled weakly.

"Your smell always makes me feel at ease," he whispered. "I feel safe with you around. I can relax and sleep when I'm in your bed. Even now, like this, I feel safer knowing you're here."

She smiled and caressed his face. Natsu seemed to relax a little, but suddenly his body curled up in pain.

"Gaaaah! Hurts! It hurts. Don't change. Don't change... Nnng! God, it hurts!"

Lucy hugged him against her chest. "I'm right here. Tell me what I can do."

Natsu breathed hard as he fought through the pain. "Just...hold me. Don't let me be alone." He bit his lip so hard, Lucy thought it might bleed.

"It's okay to cry, Natsu," she whispered. "It's just me in here. They can't see you. When you're in pain, then it's okay to cry."

He still tried to be strong, but Natsu burrowed his face down into his muffler. She felt him shiver, and his chest jolted with tears he tried to keep silent out of pride.

"Lucy..." he moaned softly. "Don't want this. Wanna fight it. I'm...I'm scared. Hold me."

"I'm not leaving you," she promised, and she kissed the top of his head.

"I hate this," he whispered in exhaustion. "I hate feeling it in the back of my head. I can feel my brain wanted to shut down and something else take over, but I don't want that. I don't want it. I won't let it. I wanna fight it. Nngh!" He flinched hard with pain, and Lucy saw his hands shaking as the nails began to turn black. "Don't want it. Hate it. Lucy..."

Lucy sniffled. There was nothing she could do except hold him as he shivered and convulsed. He fell silent for a long time, clutching at her, shaking his head back and forth in silent protest. Outside the darkened runes, she saw they were just a few blocks away from the guild.

"We're almost there, Natsu. Just hold on."

"Luuuccecy."

The hiss in the voice made her stiffen and freeze.

"Lucy?" Gray shouted in worry. When he looked back, he could see nothing but the black cage.

"Keep going," she said with a soft, steady voice aimed to keep everyone, even herself, calm. "I'm okay."

"Lucccy..." Natsu's head raised, and red eyes looked up at her sadly. "Slayer hates this. Slayer don't want this. Hates it. Hates me. Loves Lucy." The pink head dropped into her bosom again. "I love Lucy, too. I make Lucy sad. Don't want Lucy sad. How can I not make Lucy sad?"

Sobs choked up her throat. "Give me back my Natsu," she whispered in desperation. The beast peered up at her, looking hurt. Slowly, those red eyes turned away. "I...don't know how." It slumped against her and clutched at her body. "Don't know how to make Lucy happy. Sorry,
Lucy. It snuggled against her, rubbing its nose between her breasts and inhaling her scent. "Slayer sorry, and I'm sorry. Both want Lucy happy. But I can't make Lucy happy. Can only want Lucy. Can only crave Lucy. Not know other things. Sorry. I'm sorry." That face suddenly looked up again, and the red eyes faded to sage-green. "I'm sorry, Lucy. I'm not strong enough. Sorry." Then the red glowed again, and the beast grabbed her, burrowing down into her chest. "Sorry. I sorry! Sorry Lucy sad. Sorry is scary. Sorry."

Lucy numbly held around those hot shoulders, but she stared ahead. She had no clue what to think anymore. Should she hate this beast that was slowly taking away the man she loved? Should she pity it? She didn't know! All she could do was sit there, hold the possessed body of her friend, and stroke his pink hair.

*How ironic! I'm giving comfort to the creature that's terrifying Natsu so much.*

It took only a few more minutes before they got to the guild hall. They pulled the whole cart through the wide doors, and Freed dropped the opaque barrier. The other guild members gathered around in curiosity, and they saw Natsu clinging to Lucy. Except...

Romeo gasped. "Natsu-nii has wings and a tail!"

"Look at his claws," Max cringed.

"Lu-chan!" Levy cried out.

"I'm fine," she said passively, not moving. In fact, Lucy was keeping a little too still, and they all saw how she was holding back her own panicking dread.

The beast looked up, and his red eyes narrowed. "Don't want Lucy to go!" Then he pulled back and looked around. "Smell. Smell is gone. Gone!"

Makarov stepped forward. "There is a barrier around the whole guild that neutralizes the feral's smell. Natsu should return to normal soon."

"No! Don't want!" the beast screamed. "Want freedom. Want Lucy. Lucy!"

She sat still and watched the creature panic. *This isn't Natsu. For Natsu to come back, this beastly side that's possessing him has to go away. Go away! Give me my Natsu back.*

"Lucy!"

In soft and dire tones, she sneered, "Give back Natsu."

"No...Lucy..." The beast sank to its knees. "Make...make Lucy...happy. Protect...friends. Wants. Instincts." The black claws grabbed at the pink hair. "Wants, instincts, desires! No! My wants! Mine! Nooo!" The beast's head dropped to the ground, growling in frustration. Slowly, the wings shrank back in and the tail retracted. When that pink head lifted up again, Natsu's green eyes were wide in terror.

"Lucy!" He flung himself at her and grabbed her tightly. "I changed, didn't I? You're still here. Why are you in this cage with me? Did it hurt you? What happened? I can't remember anything that happened."

"I'm not hurt," she assured him, holding Natsu with a sigh of relief. "I'm fine. The beast couldn't hurt me because it wasn't your instinct to hurt me. That means you still have control." She began to sob in belated emotions. "You're still in control, Natsu. You're still with me."
"I'm not going to leave you alone," he swore. Natsu took her cheeks into his hands and gave Lucy a firm kiss. "I love you, so I won't leave you. I promise, Lucy. I won't lose to that thing."

She sniffled and nodded her head. Natsu was the sort of person who would keep fighting, even when everyone else gave up hope. She leaned forward and gave him a kiss, showing him she believed him and had faith in him.

Someone in the crowd around them cleared their throat, and suddenly Lucy and Natsu realized they were visible again. Lucy blushed that everyone in the guild had seen the two of them kissing, and Natsu hid down into his muffler with adorable embarrassment.

"Natsu," Makarov said impassively, "we need to take you to the basement. It's for everyone's safety."

"I understand...oww!" Suddenly, Natsu collapsed. His head landed in Lucy's lap and stayed there. "I...don't feel good."

"Lucy," Makarov said, "come out of the cage now. You've done all you can. We need to get Natsu ready for the dragon slayer coming-of-age ceremony."

She looked down to Natsu, who was looking up at her.

"I'm gonna be okay," he said, smiling weakly. "I could really use a nap. And food. I've been vomiting from motion sickness for a week. Food first, then nap."

Lucy still hesitated on leaving him.

"Hey." He laughed tiredly. "Trust me. I won't leave you, Lucy. Go get some rest. And a bath. You sorta smell."

She scowled at that and left the cage. Natsu chuckled weakly and sprawled out on the floor of the cage. He knew that would get her to leave, because otherwise they would have some sickly sweet farewell, and he did not want that in front of everyone.

Erza moved the cart to follow Gajeel down to the guild's basement. Gray walked up to Lucy and tapped her arm. She gave a brief smile to assure him she was okay, but she really felt like if she tried to talk, she would only sputter out tears.

"Lucy," Makarov said with tender understanding. "Go home. Get some rest."

"I'll walk you home," Gray offered.

"No," she said, stepping away from him. "I'll call out a Spirit. I...need time alone." She pulled out her keys. "Open the Gate of the Goat! Capricorn!"

The goat-man appeared and bowed genteelly. "Lucy-sama can walk home with mehhh."

With only her loyal Spirit to accompany her, Lucy left the guild. As soon as she passed through the entrance gate, she began to cry with the emotional upheaval of that day...no, the whole week! Capricorn wrapped an arm around her so she could bury her face into his suit coat, and he led her down the streets of Magnolia.

High above, unseen from the rest, a winged shadow watched all of this.

"New feral. Must kill." Balaur looked over at the wing Bisca had injured with her shotgun. "Heal,
then kill. Also, girlie is back. Girlie from long ago. Girlie with good smell. Want that one. Want her! Want fuck her. Want...kill her. Taste her blood. Taste her body. Fuck and kill and eat and fuck. Want her. Heal, then get her. Get girlie. Kill new feral. Kill...everyone!"

Chapter End Notes

Natsu's experience is based on a true story. As longtime readers know, I took a hellishly long hiatus this summer. I have epilepsy, and I had a massive seizure that affected the language sectors of my brain. I knew what I wanted to write, but the words weren't there. That seizure, as terrifying as it was, inspired this chapter. The lines I wrote for Natsu were the same words I cried as I realized my brain was about to shut down, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

When I have a seizure, I'm partially conscious through the beginning. I know it's coming, and it terrifies me to tears. I mean, I almost never cry, not even at funerals, so for me to break down into wailing sobs is humiliating. It's uncontrolled, a common occurrence with seizures; I can't stop the tears any more than I can stop my brain from shutting down or stop the convulsions from wracking my body.

During my last major seizure, I vaguely recall my husband holding me as I screamed and sobbed, "I hate this! I don't want this! I wanna fight this!" But...you can't. You really can't do anything. Neither can the person with you. No matter how I struggle with my own brain, desperately battling to hold off the coming seizure, I know the blackness will take over, I'll lose consciousness and control, and I'll wake up on the ground, aching, head throbbing, confused, and feeling like utter crap. I won't know what happened, what I did, or how much time passed.

That sort of experience—losing control, missing time, fighting my own brain and body—is what I believe Natsu would go through, so I wrote almost precisely what happens in one of my seizure episodes.

Sounds terrifying? It is!

Because I'm "uncontrolled" (my medication doesn't take away all the seizures) I'm not allowed to have a driver's license and cannot work many jobs, legally. My two seizure medications cost $600 a month, just to keep a modicum of stability. If I don't take those two pills twice a day, I honestly could die! When I have a seizure, I'm unable to function for 2-3 days, and sometimes full mental recovery can take up to two weeks, which means I can't even hold down a simple job since no employer will give three days off every other month. I can't work, I can't drive, and I can't trust my own brain and body. Epilepsy fucking sucks!

By the way, I have sworn that when I finally publish a novel, 10% of any money I make from it will go to epilepsy research, which is severely underfunded. Call it an act of self-preservation if you want, but I want to help others who have this condition even worse than I do, people who end up with permanent brain damage because of non-stop seizures that nothing we have today can cure. I'd like to make a difference in what little way I can.

Thanks for reading this long note. See you next time.
Prisoner

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I bind Hiro Mashima as a prisoner, because I wish to free Fairy Tail from its restrictions as a shounen manga. I must learn a better binding spell. ^_^

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Later that afternoon, there was a meeting between Makarov, Gajeel, Rogue, and Sting. Outside the little meeting room, the Fairy Tail mages were organizing another thorough sweep of the city in order to root out the feral beast still on the loose. Sting and Rogue had hoped to simply sniff it out, but the smell was so strong all over the city, it was impossible to pinpoint by smell alone. So all of Fairy Tail was scouring the area. As they searched, Sting and Rogue were preparing themselves, not only for a fight with the feral, but also for the healing that had to happen after everything was settled.

However, a more pressing matter was at hand. Natsu was much worse off than any of them thought possible, as if the effects of turning feral were accelerated. This news troubled Makarov, and he suspected the acceleration was partly due to Igneel's scarf. The muffler had held back this coming-of-age for years, and now, like a spring that had been wound tight within him, Natsu's body was spinning out of control far faster than normal.

"Have you inspected Natsu already?" the aged guild master asked the Iron Dragon Slayer.

Grimly, Gajeel scowled as he acknowledged the dire extent of this situation. "Yeah. He smells feral to me, but he keeps insisting he's not. Says the beast also claims its not. The fact that he's consciously aware of the beast's thoughts is a sign that he's damn far gone."

Sting looked worried for the mage he admired so deeply. "Can he be saved?"

Gajeel kept quiet, staring at a cup of mercury and running his finger over his pierced eyebrow, feeling the studs as well as the tension in his brow.

"Gajeel?" Makarov asked sternly.

He sighed, and still his eyes stayed down. "I honestly don't know."

A palpable shiver rippled through the room. Rogue's brow tensed. Sting looked like he had been hit in the gut. Makarov frowned deeper, trying to hide just how much the news pained him.

Sting broke the silence with grim words. "If we have to kill him, I'll do it. I already told him I would."

"I ain't saying that!" Gajeel shouted. "I'll admit, Salamander is far gone. Metalicana taught me this ceremony on the assumption that it could be done within days or weeks of the first signs. Natsu has gone for over a month, and it was artificially triggered in someone who should have been mature already. The effects are happening twice as fast, according to what his teammates have told me. I don't know if this ceremony will even work on someone who is this far with the change. Plus it takes time, which he doesn't have. I'll try it, but if he really is feral right now, that ceremony will kill him."

"What exactly are you going to do?" asked Makarov.
"Che! Hell if I know what it does," Gajeel grumbled.

"It's a merge," Rogue explained in dark tones. "When I had to do the ceremony on Gajeel, that's what I sensed. Within every dragon slayer, we contain a seed of a dragon's instincts buried deep within our subconscious. Normally, this does nothing but make us a bit more aggressive, more possessive, more eager to fight, as well as allow mature dragon slayers to tap into Dragon Force at will."

"With the right training," Sting added in.

"Otherwise," Rogue continued, "we're the basically the same as any normal human. When our hormones change, that buried psyche comes forward, as it does with any normal teenager: aggression, depression, fits of rage, unstable emotions. The difference is, since it's the instinct of a dragon, it's separate from our human instincts. It forms a separate personality based upon the instincts and desires of the dragon slayer himself, but much darker. In the ceremony, the dark personality—the inner beast—is merged with our own personality, blending the two, burying it once more, although we can still sense it. However, if that alternate personality continues to grow and mature, a completely separate entity forms. That personality will develop its own sense of self, its own instincts and desires, separate and often in conflict to the dragon slayer. When that personality fully establishes itself, to the point of overpowering the main instincts, there's nothing to merge. If we were to attempt the ceremony on someone who is fully feral, instead of burying the dark personality, it would be the light personality that sinks. If everything that made the person human vanished so suddenly, the feral beast would have nothing supporting it, not even a subconscious human side, the sense of self would collapse, both personalities would—in a sense—die...and so would the dragon slayer."

Makarov wanted to clear up one bit of confusion. "So, does going feral mean those dark instincts take on their own personality, which then supplant the human instincts?"

"Something like that," Gajeel mumbled.

Rogue nodded. "Feral is a term Gajeel used to describe what could, in theory, happen to a dragon slayer whose personal instincts are completely supplanted by the secondary personality. They would go wild and destructive...feral."

"I use the term because that's what Metalicana called it," Gajeel grumbled. "Apparently, it happened a lot long ago, before the ceremony was invented to suppress the dark instincts. It's part of what happened with Acnologia. He gave in to the dark personality and allowed it to overwhelm him. Made him bloodthirsty. Or that's what Metalicana told me. It was more like a bedtime story. I only vaguely remember it."

Makarov ran his fingers through his mustache. "How will we know if Natsu is feral or not? It seems the smell isn't the deciding factor."

"Apparently not," Gajeel agreed. "Or he's just really good at keeping the other personality in control. You know the person is too far gone when the human side begins to believe the feral's instincts are his own. For instance, maybe Natsu never wanted to mate with Lucy, but the beast decides it does. If he believes he wants to sleep with her when he really didn't originally, then it's too late."

Sting laughed at his example. "Yeah, but who wouldn't want to get in her panties?"

Rogue rolled his eyes at the White Dragon. "Sting..."

"I'm just sayin'! Any man would want to. She's hot!"
"Shit, it's just an example, okay?" Gajeel snapped. "And yeah, Natsu does wanna fuck her. It's easy to smell it on him. Every time she walks by, he gets horny."

"See," Sting pointed. "Even an immature guy like Natsu wants that blonde bombshell in his bed."

"That's not my point," Gajeel shouted. "The beast will stop reacting to Natsu's instincts, start acting purely on its own, and Natsu will begin to think those other instincts are his own."

Rogue tried to answer. "I think the key points are that he'll want to change, he'll desire the same things the inner beast wants, and he'll believe the hatred and homicidal cravings are justified based loosely on his own sense of justice. That is what Sting and I have gathered by talking to survivors from the other cities this feral beast has attacked over the past few months. So long as Natsu can differentiate his desires from the beast's desires, he should, in theory, be curable."

"An instinct to protect Lucy," Makarov stated.

"Do you blame that beast?" Sting smirked. "I wouldn't mind guarding that body either."

"Sorry, sorry," he chuckled.

"So for the moment," Makarov noted, "their instincts are the same."

"Yeah, and makes it damn hard to diagnose him," Gajeel grumbled. "I don't know if he's feral or not, since I've never seen it happen before now. However, the smell is unmistakable once you experience it. Before now, I had only smelled myself when I went through the whole hassle. I was also rather far gone by the time Rogue was brought in. I taught him what to do. I wasn't as bad as Natsu, but my personality was pretty rotten back then, so my other self had done some really horrible things already. We're lucky Natsu's an idiot."

Sting sputtered out a badly concealed laugh at the insult. The others glared over at him. "Sorry," he mumbled, covering his mouth.

"I want to see Natsu for myself," Makarov decided. "Sting, Rogue, you're guests of this guild. Make yourselves at home, but focus on learning this ceremony."

Rogue glared over to Sting. "Which means back to studying."

"It's boooooooring!" the White Dragon Slayer whined.

"Too bad," Rogue said stolidly.

Makarov stood, and Gajeel followed him down to the dungeons under the Fairy Tail building. Erza was standing guard, and when the two approached, she went with them.

Makarov grumbled as they descended more stairs, "I never thought I'd have to imprison one of my brats in these dungeons ever again."

"Again?" Gajeel asked.

Makarov said nothing, but his face looked far grimmer. Erza mouthed silently to Gajeel: "Ivan."
Gajeel now understood. He knew Makarov's son was excommunicated. So, he had been locked up as well before being kicked out. No wonder Makarov's face looked so bitter.

"How are Laxus and Wendy?" the Master asked Erza.

"Doing well, although Laxus is getting aggressive purely due to being trapped here. We're keeping them far away from Natsu's holding cell with Freed's aroma-barrier set in place so he doesn't affect them. Neither one has changed."

"That's good," Gajeel mumbled. "It means those two are only affected by the smell. Natsu was changing without the smell, right?"

"Yes, he changed a few times on our trip back," Erza told them just as the stairs ended.

In the dungeon, Mira sat on a stool as she took her shift at guard duty. She stood as their group entered the dungeons. "You caught Natsu at a bad time," she warned. They immediately heard a guttural snarl and something crashing in the prison cell.

"Actually, this is perfect timing," Makarov glowered. "I want to see for myself what we're dealing with, and Gajeel can make a better assessment of potential dangers."

The guild master walked forward to the prison door. The cacophony inside died away to just huffing and hissing snarls. In the gloomy shadows, Makarov could see red eyes glowing, some dark beast crouched in the corner, but not much else.

"Natsu?" the old man called in.

A hiss replied, "Slayer not here. Slayer sleep. Lucy!" The beast flew through the small cell and flung himself at the magical bars that held him back. Purple runes sparked as he pounded them. Now Makarov saw the distorted face, the scaly skin, wings, tail, and black claws. It was Natsu, but only barely. "Where's Lucy?" the creature snarled viciously. "Want Lucy. Need Lucy. Where is girlie? Where? Where is she?"

Calmly, Makarov answered, "Lucy is at home."

"Home?" the creature questioned with confusion. "Safe? Lucy safe?"

"She's perfectly fine. She just wanted a hot bath and a nap."

The beast breathed heavily as it seemed to take a moment to understand. "Safe," it whispered, shrinking back and squatting on the ground. "Lucy safe. Clean. Sleep."

Mira hummed as she observed. "The creature within is definitely protective over Lucy. It's much like Natsu, isn't it? Only, more beastly."

"Lucy...sleep. In bed. Clean." Then it smirked with fangs gleaming. "I can clean Lucy. Lick her clean. Lick everything. Fuck her...with tongue." It licked its lips hungrily.

Makarov muttered to himself. "Definitely not like Natsu," he grumbled.

Mira gave a meek shrug. "Well, you never know."

"Want Lucy," the beast huffed, dropping down in tiredness. "Need Lucy. Cold. Need Lucy warmth."

"Is that all you need?" Gajeel asked suspiciously. "Just her? Is that your only desire?"

"You don't want to be healed?" asked Makarov.

Those red eyes slowly turned up to him in a narrow glare. "Want freedom. Want soar. Want sky and land and meat...and Lucy."

"Basic survival instincts," Gajeel mumbled. "Food, shelter, sex. Typical wants. What other wants —?"

Erza cut in. "Why Lucy?" she asked with a voice barely suppressing her anger.

Those red eyes looked confused, as if the answer was obvious. "Lucy is mate. Claimed her. Marked her. She's mine."

Makarov walked a little closer to the bars. "If we let Lucy come here, will you let us talk to Natsu?"

The face looked eager. "Lucy here? See Lucy again?"

"Only if you let Natsu come back."

The beast pulled back scowling. "Why? Slayer asleep."

"I won't let her see you unless it's Natsu in control."

"No!" the beast hissed furiously, scuttling back into the cell. "I am Slayer. Slayer is me. We are safe. Let me see Lucy!"

"Not until you let me speak to Natsu."

The creature shook its head, but the face showed that it was considering the offer. "Want Lucy. Not for Slayer. For me. Me! I...want Lucy. She is mine, not Slayer's. Mine!"

Gajeel bit on a knuckle. "That's bad. It's independent sense of self is well developed. We'll need to get this done quickly."

Makarov stepped right up to the prison bars. "Let Natsu come back, and I swear I will let Lucy come to visit."

The creature glared up, red eyes ablaze in spite, but slowly the scarlet glow faded and green eyes shined through. The face loosened up, and Natsu was back.

"Lucy...is safe?" he asked tiredly.

"She's resting at home," Makarov told him.

"I heard," Natsu nodded. "I was...sort of aware."

Gajeel stomped forward now. "Salamander! Don't you fucking change again. I'm serious! One more transformation and you might totally lose it."

Natsu nodded wearily. "Can't promise that, but I'll try to fight it."

"You better!" Gajeel snapped. "Don't you dare be a pussy and give in."
"Right," he muttered. Then Natsu rubbed out his head. "How long was I gone?"

Mira looked at a clock. "About two hours."

Natsu moaned as his whole body felt the drain of transforming. "What about Wendy? Is she safe? Did she make it here okay?"

"Wendy is being held elsewhere," Makarov told him.

Natsu's face drew up. "Do you mean she's locked up, too?"

"We had to," Makarov muttered, hating that they had to do something like this to their youngest member.

Natsu rubbed out pain in his shoulders as the wings shrank back. "She...changed. I remember seeing that." His face tensed up in anger and frustration, and he forced himself to swallow so he could hold back tears of self-hatred. "It was me doing it to her. Sting said I smell like a feral." He looked up at the group on the other side of the bars. "I'm not," he shouted desperately. "Is that why you're all here? Is that why you sent Lucy away? Are you gonna kill me?" he yelled in paranoia.

"Natsu—"

"I'm still me!" he roared. His voice began to growl at the end, and the guttural noise shocked him. Natsu jolted back, startled by his own outburst. He rubbed his head again. A bit of the beast had almost emerged with that shout. "Please, believe me," he whispered. "I'm still me. I'm not feral, although...I can feel...I don't have much time."

"We're going to do the ceremony first thing in the morning," Makarov told him. "Gajeel is training Sting so the three of them can heal you, Laxus, and Wendy at the same time."

"But, the feral?"

Gajeel growled under his breath. "Still out there. Those Sabertooth guys will take care of it."

Natsu pouted. "That kid, he probably felt the same way I feel. You can feel yourself losing control, losing to the creature inside...changing. Confused about what you want, who you even are anymore." He gazed up to Gajeel. "Does he really have to die? Is there really no way to save him?"

The Iron Dragon Slayer folded his arms over his chest. "The ceremony Metalicana taught me only works for someone with a sense of humanity still within them strong enough to keep the beast's own sense of self at bay."

"But I bet he still has a human side."

"Not strong enough. Even when Rogue asked if he wanted to be cured, the feral said no. Your own beast said it wants to be cured only because you want it, but it doesn't want it. That's why I warned you not to transform again. You're seriously on the borderline of losing your human personality. To be honest, I'm not sure if the ceremony will work. It takes a week, and I don't think you have that long."

Hearing that stabbed at Natsu's heart. "It might not work?"

Gajeel's jaw tensed as he thought about what to say. "I'm gonna do my damndest to make it work, but if not—if you turn feral while in the middle of the ceremony—I might not have a choice but to put the creature down. Do you think you can last a whole week?"
Natsu looked lost as well as a little scared. Slowly, his head shook. "I can barely last three days without losing to it. It's getting worse. Almost every night now. It's happened three times today alone."

"Three times?" Gajeel shouted.

Natsu nodded wearily. "The fight with Sting this morning, smelling the feral when we entered the city, and then just now."

"Shit." Gajeel bit on his knuckle as he growled to himself. "I'm gonna be honest with you, Salamander. I don't think you have more than two days, let alone a week. I planned to start the ceremony in the morning, since I need sleep after running all over the place and fighting that feral, but even if we start it right now...we're probably too late."

Mira gasped with tears in her eyes. Erza's armored fist tightened. Makarov's head dropped. Gajeel had told him all the things that could possibly go wrong. One mistake, one slip, and Natsu could be lost forever.

Natsu let those words simmer in his mind for a moment. "I guess running away from everyone was a stupid move."

"Yeah, it was," Gajeel said bluntly. "We could've healed you weeks ago."

"I just didn't want to hurt anyone. I thought I could regain control on my own." Natsu laughed wryly and shook his head. "Lucy often tells me I'm an idiot. I guess she's right." Then he gazed up at the three. "Can I at least see Lucy before the ceremony? I need to talk to her. There's a lot I need to tell her...just in case."

Makarov looked sympathetic. "I'll send her word, but she wanted a nap."

"That's fine. Whenever she's rested." Natsu curled down again and hugged his knees. "Sorry about this, everyone."

"It ain't your fault, Salamander," Gajeel said gruffly. "It ain't nobody's fault, not even the feral's. It's a natural thing, just brought about a bit unnaturally."

"Do you need anything, Natsu?" asked Makarov.

"Something to drink. Maybe something to clean myself. I smell."

Gajeel snorted. "You fuckin' reek!"

"I'll get some soap and a sponge," Mira offered. "What would you like to drink?"

"Something on fire. I feel really tired," he admitted with a scowl, hating to admit any weakness.

Makarov frowned at seeing how sick Natsu looked, especially in the dim light of the dungeon. "I'll bring Gajeel back early tomorrow morning, Natsu. Get some rest."

"Thanks, old man," he mumbled, and he watched sadly as they turned and left the dungeon.

Erza paused at the door, but she suddenly turned back around. She returned to Natsu's prison cell and glared at him. He eyed her quietly, not too surprised that she looked so angry. He had done a lot of things in the past few weeks that inconvenienced everyone.

The redhead got right to the point. "Did you hurt Lucy?"
Natsu opened his mouth in shock. "Do you mean in the cage? She said she was okay. Oh God, did the beast hurt her?"

"I mean in the past."

He was ready to protest, until he remembered what was now the darkest moment of his life. "I...yeah," he admitted sadly. "But it wasn't me. The beast hurt her."

Erza's eyes narrowed even more. "Did it rape her?"

Natsu felt as if she had just stabbed him with all of her Heaven's Wheel swords: a dozen swords, right to his heart! He covered his face in grief. "It...it had...sex with her," he whispered sickly. "She didn't know it wasn't me until it was too late."

"Then who had sex with her in that cave? You, or the beast?"

"That was just us," he insisted with a raised voice. Erza's eyes glared harder at him. "I'm telling the truth. I didn't hurt her, and I didn't force her, I swear. Lucy forgave me for what the beast did, and she wanted to...to do it." His face dropped down sadly. "I don't know why she loves me after everything that happened." Then he looked up firmly. "But I love her! I want her as my mate."

"Just now, the beast claimed that Lucy was its mate, and that it had claimed and marked her."

"No!" Natsu screamed. His fists fired up and slammed into the floor, cracking the stones underneath him. "I'm not giving her to anyone, not even another piece of myself."

"When we were on the road this morning," she said, "the beast told Lucy it would overpower you, claim her, and..." She paused to search for a more delicate way of putting it. "...vigorously mate with her."

The flames around Natsu's fists leaped higher, and his eyes narrowed. "Like hell I'd let it."

"Then don't lose to it, Natsu," she ordered. "Gajeel said you have two days. You had better last seven! I don't want Lucy to be hurt, and if she lost you, that would hurt her far worse than anything the beast could do. Don't you dare lose to this beast and die on us. If you can do that, I'll consider forgiving you for letting the beast hurt Lucy."

"Do you think I had a choice in that?" he snapped.

Her impassive gaze never faltered. "It was your instincts, right?"

He backed off, and his face drifted aside. She had a point. The beast had only acted on what he already wanted to do. If he had not been secretly infatuated with Lucy, it would have never hurt her.

Erza decided not to accuse him too much. She could see that this issue was tearing Natsu up inside, and she suspected it was the main reason why he ran away in the first place. He was prepared to live all alone out in the wild purely so he would not hurt Lucy again.

"Don't give in to that beast anymore, Natsu. If you think you're going to, just tell me. I'll knock you unconscious. That way, your subconsciousness can't hurt anyone."

"I think I'd rather struggle on my own," he muttered.

"Obey Gajeel, at least this once. Don't cause anyone more trouble. I'll make sure Lucy comes to see you before morning."
"Thank you," he said vacantly. "And Erza, if the worst happens...watch over Lucy for me."

She stomped up to the prison bars and glared through them. "Don't talk like that. Don't you dare even think that way. That's not the Natsu I know."

"Because I'm not the Natsu I was before," he said grimly with a pale and weary face. "I'm not even sure what I was back then, or what I'm becoming now."

"Don't talk that way, Natsu."

"I don't even know what I'll be when this is over."

"You will still be the same fire-breathing idiot we all love," she insisted.

Natsu's eyes weakly lifted up to her, and those narrow eyes practically gleamed emerald in the low light of the prison cell. "Will I?"

That soft voice, so heavy with resignation, worried Erza. Natsu was definitely not himself.

With an exhausted sigh, Natsu collapsed to the ground and stared up vacuously to the ceiling. "I really want to see Lucy."

Erza could hardly help but think that he sounded like a condemned man asking for a dying wish. "I'll bring her. Try to get a nap." She turned to leave, but Erza felt a bad foreboding. She hoped that being with Lucy again would revitalize the dragon slayer's spirit.

End of Chapter 25

Chapter End Notes

I hope I answered a lot of questions. I realized there is one potential inconsistency, and since someone is going to point it out (I have really smart readers) I'll address it now. When we first meet Balaur (the feral beast), his first words are "Want dragon." Yet when Balaur met Sting and Rogue, he said he doesn't want to be cured. This does not mean Balaur was not feral at the beginning but is now. It just means a little of the human desires were still there, enough to make that request, enough to drive the beast to seek out Magnolia. Balaur wants to be healed, but the beast is getting stronger, silencing his personal desires and taking over complete control little by little. Those human desires might continue to be there, but not strong enough to be dominant. Balaur spends most of his time as a beast, sometimes weeks at a time, with only hours as a human, unlike Natsu who spends days perfectly normal, but changes into a beast for a few hours. However, when Natsu starts to believe the beast's wants and desires are his own, that's when he's lost.
A Question of Carrots

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Hush. I may have figured out how to bribe Hiro Mashima into giving me "Fairy Tail." Diamonds are forever, right? Big diamonds! ^_^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was dark when Lucy arrived at the guild. She felt much better after a long bath and a nap. Some clean clothes, hair that did not feel oily, and lotion on her skin...she felt human again! Although many people in the guild wanted to talk to her about her adventure hunting down Natsu, there was only one person she wanted to see. Mira came to rescue her from the mob of curious mages.

"Lucy, it's time for Natsu's dinner," the bartender said sweetly. "Why don't you deliver it to him?" Then Mira leaned over and whispered into her ear, "I'll make sure you two get some privacy."

Lucy blushed, but she took the tray of food. Mira showed her the way down.

"This is the key to unlock the prison," Mira said, handing a magic key over. "If you need help, if anything happens, take this." It was one of Cana's cards. "Each of us who come down here carries this...just in case. It'll warn Erza and Makarov, and they'll come to help."

"I don't think this will be necessary," Lucy assured her, "but thanks."

"And Lucy," Mira frowned, "if there is any way you can think of to keep him from changing into that creature, please do what you can. Master said if he changes one more time, we might lose him."

Lucy's brow tightened with worry as she looked at the dungeon entrance. "I'll do what I can."

She entered the dungeon alone. It was gloomy down there, and she heard the sound of urinating. She stayed back, giving Natsu privacy, but hearing him made her blush with naughty thoughts. She had seen that penis. She had felt it, tasted it...experienced all the pleasure it could give her. Memories of their tender time in the cave returned to her, and she felt her lower stomach coil as her face went hot. Then she heard his belt rattle and realized Natsu must be done. She waited a little longer, hoping he would not realize she was there.

"I can smell you," Natsu said. "Thanks for the privacy, though."

He walked forward and looked at her through the prison bars. Natsu smiled, but Lucy saw just how weak he was. That was not the same exuberant grin he usually had.

"I really wanted to see you, Lucy," he said softly.

She bit her lip as she came forward. The ordeal that morning—first fighting Sting, then holding Natsu as he transformed—had seemed like some nightmare, but now, seeing Natsu in prison, she realized how real it all was.

"I have your food."

He began to back up, retreating deeper into the cell.
"What are you doing?"

"You need to open the door," Natsu stated.

"You can stay there." In all honesty, she was hoping to open the door and touch him, maybe even kiss him.

"No," Natsu said, shaking his head. "I'll want to escape. I...want freedom. And you. But...but those are the feral's wants, not mine. But they're also mine. I want to stay, because I want to be cured, but I don't want to stay alone, locked up. I'm...confused." He backed up to the far end of the prison cell. "I'm not stable, Lucy. I don't know what I'll do to you. So just open the door, put the food in, then shut it."

Lucy frowned. She heard from Erza that Natsu was slipping fast, and that Gajeel was not even certain if he had a week left to him for the cure to kick in. At least he knew what he wanted still. He was not totally lost to them.

Lucy used the magical key to open to sealed prison door. She slid the tray in, then hesitated, looking at Natsu. She really wanted a kiss, but she could see he was holding himself back. Probably, he was afraid of hurting her. She sadly closed the door again and locked it. Only then did Natsu come forward.

"You smell really good. It must've been a nice shower," he said, sounding as casual as always. He grabbed the food and began to eat with a hearty appetite. "Mmm! Mira's food is as awesome as ever. I really missed her cooking."

Lucy watched him sadly. Was he acting this way just for her sake, to keep her from worrying? Natsu looked happy as he stuffed his face until his cheeks puffed out.

Hesitantly, she said, "Can I ask some...personal questions?"

"Shoot," Natsu encouraged with a full mouth.

"There's something I'm curious about. Back then, you were also a virgin, right?"

He stopped eating and looked up in surprise. With a loud gulp, he swallowed everything in his mouth. "Do you mean that time at the party? I...well...uh, yeah," he confessed, turning bright red.

She nodded with a troubled expression on her face. "It just dawned on me while I was taking a bath. In a sense, the beast took your virginity as well."

Natsu blinked in shock. "I never thought about it that way," he admitted.

"Except, you don't even remember that time."

He gave her a mournful look. "I...sort of was awake at the end. Enough to...you know...to feel it."

"So," she mumbled awkwardly, "you've never had sex with anyone else, right?"

Again he looked uncomfortable. "I'm not really sure. I mean, me personally, no. Only you. But with the beast...once it...um..."

Lucy suddenly covered her mouth in horror. "The beast raped another girl?"

"No...I don't think so," he added. "I told it not to, but there was one time...it wasn't a girl..."
"Oh God, it raped a boy?" she shouted, remembering what the beast had tried to do to Gray.

"No! But...well..." His stomach twisted sickly. "I'm not a hundred percent sure, since I wasn't conscious. I only sensed what it wanted to do before blacking out, so I don't know if it did it or not, but...I think it was a...a sheep."

Lucy retreated a few steps. "It said something about that. I didn't think it'd really...oh...oh God." She turned away and covered her mouth before she could vomit. She had not meant to react so drastically, but that really disgusted her.

Natsu...and a sheep!

"I don't know!" Natsu shouted in defense. "That's what it wanted to do, so maybe it did. I honestly don't know."

Lucy swallowed hard with her hand covering her mouth. "Oh...okay." She swallowed again, still tasting bile in the back of her throat. "Well, that wouldn't count since it wasn't you in control. Still..." She could hardly help it; she glanced down to his pants. "You bathed since then, right?"

"Oh, hell yes!" he nodded vigorously. "I washed myself over and over, because I just didn't know if it did or didn't, and I didn't want anything disgusting on me. I can't even look at farm animals anymore. Seriously, I would never do that, no matter how desperate I was. I don't blame you if you don't want to touch me again. I feel sick just worrying that the beast might have actually done that, and maybe worse. Maybe that wasn't the only time. Maybe it did attack girls. Or even boys." He cringed, remembering what Gray hinted about the beast's attempt to rape the ice mage. "Maybe it killed someone, although it insists it never outright murdered anyone, just...sorta left them bloody, whatever that means. I...I really don't know. It's so frustrating!" He grabbed at his pink hair in anguish.

Lucy felt sorry for him. "It's okay."

"Obviously, it's not! You look ready to vomit."

"I have to realize that even if it was your body, it wasn't you...not completely you, anyway."

"Oh, trust me, I am definitely not interested in sheep, or anything else but you. The beast just really wanted sex, but I didn't want that, so I said it most definitely could not do it with any girls, but it still wanted to, but... W-why are you laughing?" he shouted.

Lucy had her mouth covered to hide her giggles. "You didn't want anyone but me, huh?"

"Of course not!" he insisted.

"Natsu, at that time, you hadn't actually made love to me yet. Not you, at least."

He blinked in confusion. He had! Or...the beast had. He merely woke up in the middle of it. He realized that in Lucy's mind, that time did not count. She did not blame him for that at all.

"Yeah, but...but I still knew. Even before all this happened, I knew that I only wanted you." He blushed and hid down into his muffler. "That's one thing that still separates me from the beast. It'd rape anything, but I only want you. So long as I know you're the only person I want as my mate, I know I'm not feral. I can't be feral! If that happened, I couldn't be with you, and more than anything..." He paused and looked up to her fervently. "I want to be with you, Lucy. I want to kiss you again and hold you. I want to go on adventures and have fun together. I can't lose to this, because then I'd lose you, and I can't lose you. That's what's keeping me strong right now. You...are
keeping me strong."

She knelt beside the prison and placed her hand against the protective runes. Woefully, she whispered, "Natsu..." It broke her heart to be separated from him. Then she firmed up with determination, pulled out the prison key, and unlocked the door.

Natsu's eyes bugged, and he began to scamper back. "Are you crazy?"

"I'm staying in here with you." She stubbornly stood inside the prison cell. "Do you still want to escape?"

"Of course I do," he shouted. "Lucy, this is insane. I'm unstable. You could get hurt. I could escape. I could snatch you away, do horrible things to you..."

"The beast would do those things. I trust you."

"I don't trust myself," he screamed in fear.

"Then trust your emotions."

He stared silently in confusion.

She walked forward, but he scampered back in terror. "Trust that you won't lose me so long as you stay human. If you change once more, you probably won't come back to me. If I can keep you human by staying right here, then it's worth the danger."

"It's not..."

"Because this way, you will realize you can't change. If you change, that beast will hurt me. You won't let it hurt me. I trust that part of you, Natsu. So if I stay here, the potential danger to me will keep you safe."

He shook his head with tears in his eyes. "Don't risk yourself, Lucy."

"It's worth the risk," she said firmly. "How much would you risk for me? How much have you risked in the past to save my life, over and over again? It's only fair that, this time, I risk just as much to save your life."

He was cornered against the stone wall now, nowhere else to escape. He still looked scared, uncertain of his own restraint. Lucy straddled over him, sitting on his lap to hold him in place. She took Natsu's pale, weak face in her hands, caressing the fear out of his brow.

"I trust you, Natsu...because I love you."

Then she leaned in and gave him a kiss. His eyes widened as he felt a surge of desire within him, yet with Lucy's warmth against his skin, he slowly calmed down. Those desires were not the beast's. They were his own. The beast only desired Lucy because he desired her. If he lost his humanity, the beast would still want her, but it would move on, craving any girl as its mate.

He didn't want just any girl, only Lucy!

Fiercely, he grabbed her around the waist and yanked her to him. Lucy opened her eyes briefly, but Natsu looked the same. This was not the beast clinging to her. It was Natsu himself. She relaxed into the kiss.

"Lucy," he hummed against his lips. "I can't hold back."
She stretched her neck up for him to kiss along the pulse. "I think this is one time when you can let your instincts guide you."

Those narrow sage-green eyes looked up at her, simmering with ardent passion. In a low, lusty voice, Natsu asked, "Can I mark you?"

She gulped hard. The very first attack, the beast had marked her by biting her breast so hard, she would have had horrific scars if not for Wendy's healing. She did not want to believe that the beast that night was Natsu. It had to have been the feral for it to attack so viciously. That was what everyone else theorized, too. Still, she could hardly help but shudder at the painful memory, and she gazed at the sharp canine teeth.

"Do you mean...biting?" she asked in a trembling whisper.

Natsu knew he could have just given her a hickey, but...that wasn't what he really wanted. "Yes," he confessed. "I...want to bite you. I'll try to be gentle," Natsu promised, "but...it'll hurt."

Gulping away her fear, she acquiesced. "Just don't let it show."

He nodded with understanding. Although he wanted his mark to show for the whole world, he would be respectful. He was already asking quite a bit from her, seeking permission for him to mark her.

He loosened Lucy's blouse, pulled the collar to the side, and exposed the curve of her shoulder. He sniffed her skin, and he felt tightness in his pants from just that. He kissed her shoulder, licked it, and listened to her humming with pleasure. Then suddenly his lips pulled back, his teeth bared, and a bit down hard.

Upstairs, amidst the mild roar of a guild brawl, Mira heard Lucy scream. Worried, she slipped away from the bar and trotted down the stairs toward the dungeon. However, as she drew near, she heard more noises.

"N-Natsu..."

"You're mine now, Lucy."

"Please, m-more."

"Can I bite you here?"

"Yes...ahhhhn."

"What about here?"

"No! That's my breast, idiot."

"Then can I suck up a hickey on your tit?"

"Mmh, yeah...ah. Ahhh! Natsu! Wait, stop...that's too hard."

"I can't stop myself. You taste too good."

"Ah...oooh...kyaaaal!"

"Does that hurt?"
"No, don't stop. M-more."

"Dammit, don't say that. I'll do something worse."

"It's okay. I need it, Natsu."

"Need it? In a prison?"

"Anywhere. A cave, a prison, anywhere is fine with you. Please, Natsu."

"Oh God, Lucy. You're the animal here."

"Then maybe I should be the one to ravage you."

"W-whoa, hey. Lucy, sheesh, warn me before...ah...oooh! Oh yeah, that's...ahhh! Slow down or I'm gonna...oh wow, yes! L-Lucy!"

Mira blushed and backed away slowly as she heard Natsu moan louder. She put up a little magic barrier that blocked noises, that way they could have some privacy and not alert the whole guild to their play. Then with a titter, Mira raced back upstairs.

Lucy kept glancing at Natsu, just to make sure. When his hands began to wander, they were still soft fingers with short nails. As they pulled each other's clothes off, it was Natsu's body, and she kissed every inch of his hot skin. When she climbed on top of him, shocking him, and gently made love to him right there on the prison floor, never once did his eyes turn red. It was just the two of them.

He did growl when he grabbed her, suddenly flipped them to switch positions, and slammed hard into her, plunging inside roughly, fast, forceful with desperation and high-strung emotions that were ready to snap. He drove her through three shrieking orgasms, one after another, until she felt ready to pass out. Yet never did she see a hint of the beast in his eyes. He was simply wild and aggressive by nature, yet also gentle and attentive.

At the end, when there was the biggest chance that the primal instincts of mating might make Natsu lose control, he pulled out in time and began to frantically rub himself. Lucy realized the issue, sat up, and used her mouth to finish him off. He stroked her hair lovingly, even in the midst of ecstasy.

"L-Lucy! Oh God, Lucy...is it...o-okay?"

She hummed her response, and the vibrations of her mouth sent him over the edge.

She was...amazing! She was the only person in the world who could make him feel like his soul was on fire.

He gazed down at her messy lips, and to thank her, he kissed her firmly. Then Natsu pulled Lucy into his arms and curled his body around her in a possessive hug. They laid on old blankets, their clothes for pillows, the chill of the dungeon around them, but the two of them were too happy to care.

Simply making love like this felt like a victory.

Eventually, they drifted into a weary nap, still naked, still a bit messy, but Lucy never felt cold in Natsu's arms. She had no clue how long they slept together, but when she woke up, he was propped up on an elbow, watching her with a gentle smile of utter happiness. She could wake up to that face for the rest of her life!
"Are you okay?" He tenderly caressed the bruise on her naked shoulder where he had bit, along with other smaller bites and pink ovals where he had sucked her skin.

Lucy nodded in a sleepy post-coital daze and mumbled, "Thanks for being considerate this time."

Natsu chuckled softly as his fingers drifted over her skin. "I might like the idea of having kids, but if you're not ready, I'll be careful."

"See, just by saying that, I know you're still fully Natsu."

He sighed, feeling confidence again. Yes, he was human. The beast was somewhere in the back of his head, purring happily that they got to enjoy Lucy, but it was also upset that the mating got interrupted for such a silly thing as being responsible toward Lucy. So long as he put Lucy's desires before his own, that also made him human.

"Hey Lucy," he said softly, playing with her golden hair. "I know Freed said not to ask this while in prison, and he said there was a proper way to do it. He gave me lots of advice, actually, but...I don't know if I'll even survive through that ceremony."

She rolled around and stroked his cheek. "Don't talk like that, Natsu."

"Plus the ceremony takes a week. I don't wanna wait that long," he whined. "So although he told me not to do this while in prison...Lucy," he said seriously, looking down at her flushed face. "Will you be my girlfriend?"

She laughed bashfully. Asking that while naked and still with his taste in her mouth! What an idiot. "It's a bit late to ask that."

Natsu flinched and shouted, "Aw man, did I mess up again?"

She leaned over his torso to gaze down into his eyes. "Yep, you messed up the order...because I already think of you as my boyfriend."

Natsu paused, confused, but then his face brightened up. "You do? Really?"

She nodded happily.

"Then that means we've been courting this whole week, right?" he wondered.

"Courting?" she laughed. What an old-fashion way of putting it! She guessed it was Freed who called it that. "Sure, I guess so."

"Awesome! So, as soon as I'm out of here, I'm taking you to a fancy restaurant. Oh, but I need one of your rings. Freed said to take one, but I'd feel bad stealing from you, so I just wanna borrow it."

"A...a ring?" she asked, feeling flushed and dizzy.

"Yeah. Oh, and which do you like better: sapphire or diamond? I don't wanna get it messed up."

Lucy turned her head aside. "You're talking about...about an engagement ring, aren't you?"

"Uhh...no! No, of course not, it's...ummm...it's...a toe ring, yeah! But...but for your finger and...and carrots. Lots of carrots."

"Natsu," she sighed. Did he really mean carats?
"It's a carrot ring...yeah, that's it."

She chuckled and felt her face burning hot. "Lot of carrots, huh? Was that Freed's advice, too?"

"Yep! He said to make it with as many carrots as I can afford, so...lots of carrots for your...um...toe ring. Because the carrots show how big your love is, so...huge carrots! Lots of them."

"Natsu, you're a really horrible liar," she exclaimed in laughing astonishment. Seriously...a carrot ring? She blushed as she peeked at him. "It's for an engagement ring, isn't it?"

Natsu looked away with a devastated expression, but with just the two of them in the prison, there was nothing else to distract him. "Freed said there are steps I have to take. He taught me the right things to do. He also said I shouldn't hint about the ring, but I wanted to have it ready in case the perfect time came to give it to you. I wanted to be ready and surprise you. I mean, I'm not gonna give it to you as soon as I'm released from here. I need to court you properly," he said decisively. "I just wanna make sure I'm ready. He said I'd know when the time was right. I don't wanna miss that perfect moment just because I don't have a ring with me. So I was gonna buy one and keep it with me all the time until...until...we're both ready and the right moment arrives."

Tears came to her eyes. "You are a real idiot, you know that?" She dived down and kissed him passionately. "I love you!"

Natsu was confused. He thought Lucy would be angry, but instead she looked as happy as if he had already asked her.

So...why not!

"Lucy," he said, holding her cheeks. "I'm messing everything up, but I don't care. You're already my mate," he said, lightly touching the bite mark on her shoulder, where his teeth broke a little bit of the skin, "and I don't want anyone else. You can forgive me, no matter how annoying I get. You laugh even when I do stupid things. I can always fall asleep in your bed, because it smells so good. I'm not going to formally ask you, because...well, because Gajeel said he thinks I might go fully feral before this ceremony thing is over. I don't want to leave you with a lot of expectations. Still, think about it. If I live through this...would you want to marry me? Don't answer yet!" he insisted seriously. "But...just think about it. I'll ask when it's the right time."

"Natsu..."

He put a finger against her lips. "I said don't answer. Just think about it."

"I don't even have to," she whispered with joyful tears in her eyes. "I already know my answer."

"Don't say it! I don't want to mess up asking you."

She giggled. "Then I won't answer yes or no," she agreed, giving in to this game of his.

"Okay," he sighed in relief, but then Natsu pouted. "You're not gonna say no, are you?"

Lucy tittered and shook her head while singing tauntingly, "Not saying!"

"Because really, that would be too mean."

"Then it depends on how you ask me. You're really building this up to be something spectacular, so I expect the best proposal ever."
"Shoot, I just know I'm gonna mess it up."

She laughed and hugged him, cuddling into him despite their dismal surroundings. A life with Natsu, huh? She could imagine it. She had considered things like that before. It would be wild, crazy, never a boring moment with him around. However, she knew Natsu was good around kids. She had seen how well he got along with Romeo when he was a child, and even more now that Romeo was a teenager. He would make a protective father and a loving husband.

She could imagine it...and she liked what she saw in her fantasies.

She rolled around and raised herself onto an elbow to peer down into his face. He still had a pacified smile, and the satisfaction on his face made her want to blush.

"I love you, Natsu," she declared.

He laughed softly, reached up, and stroked her face. "I love you, too, Lucy. Can you stay the night?"

She wanted that, more than anything. To sleep in his arms again, to wake up together...but not in a prison. "I should let you get some rest. If I stay, you probably won't sleep."

He hummed in agreement. "True. I already wanna do it again."

Her eyes widened, and her cheeks flushed. "Already?" she cried out.

He nodded. "But I think I'm too weak. It's been a long day."

"Then I should go. I'll come back in the morning, I promise."

She rose and pulled her slightly wrinkled clothes back on. Natsu rolled onto his side to watch her. Dressed or naked, she was gorgeous, and he wanted her either way. As he pulled his own clothes back on, he kept glancing at Lucy. He imagined her in a wedding dress. She would make the most angelic bride in all of Fiore. He imagined her pregnant, her belly huge with his child. Then he imagined the two of them with many children around, little pink and blond sons and daughters. He wanted that life.

Which meant he had to survive this ordeal. He had begun to lose hope, but now Natsu felt renewed determination. He had to survive, which meant he had to fight the beast within himself.

"Is there anything you want before I go?" asked Lucy.

"Well...it's stupid."

"Oh? What?" she asked in amusement.

He shifted a few times. "Could you...maybe...let me keep your underwear?"

She stared, dumbfounded for a moment, before shrieking, "What?"

"I know, I know, it's weird," he shouted, cringing under the volume of her scream. "It's just...your smell keeps the beast away. When you're with me, he stops clawing to break free. Just your smell is enough to help. Your panties have the strongest smell."

"How do you know what my panties smell like?"

Natsu flinched back, then blushed. "I...sorta...stole a pair from you."
"You...you stole my...panties? When?"

"A few months ago."

"Panty thief!"

"I know, it's perverted, and I always meant to give them back," he yelled. "I just...I...they were..." He sighed and shrank into a ball. "I liked having something that smelled like you."

"Did you jerk off to smelling my underwear?" she asked angrily.

Natsu's pout twisted. "M-maybe...once or twice."

"Sheesh!" she cried out, rubbing the tension in her head. "You're a real pervert."

"I know," he muttered. "Just...never mind. Sorry I asked. It's wrong and stupid and totally gross. Sorry."

She looked back down at him. He sounded so contrite. After half a minute of debate, she reached up under her skirt, deftly rubbed herself to get more smell on, then shimied the panties down her legs. Natsu jolted up as he watched Lucy carefully tug the underwear down and step out of them. Then she walked over and held them out for him. Natsu gleefully took the panties and snuffled his nose into them.

"Don't do that while I'm still here," she shouted, feeling hot by the idea of Natsu sniffing her underwear. She threatened viciously, "If anyone sees that you have that, I'll throttle you."

"No one will see it," he promised. "I wouldn't want anyone to know you have such cute panties."

"Shut up!"

"With an adorable Kawaii Kitty printed on it. Very fashionable."

"I said shut it!"

He hid the panties in his scarf. "I'll treasure it always."

"No, you'll give it back to me later, along with whichever other one you stole."

"I will, I will," he laughed happily.

She sighed at seeing his face so relaxed again. Then she leaned over and kissed him. Natsu's fingers brushed through her hair, and he inhaled her aroma. When she leaned back, his eyes gleamed and danced with joy.

"Be safe, Natsu."

"I will. Don't let your skirt flip up on your way home."

"I'll pound you in the head if it does."

"That's no fair."

"You're the one who wants my underwear."

"I want all of you."
Those words made her cheeks burn. "I'll be back tomorrow. Hopefully I can see you before this ceremony thing starts up. Will I be able to see you during it?"

"I don't know. I don't really understand it myself, but from what Gajeel told me...no. He can't be disturbed, so we'll be locked away somewhere. Believe me, the thought of being stuck in a room with that metal-head for a whole week is not fun at all."

"Then one more before I go." She leaned over and gave him a final, passionate kiss, committing his taste and the heat of his tongue to memory. Natsu looked overwhelmed. He grabbed her and gave her a deeper kiss, making her moan. Then he pulled away in sexual frustration.

"You better get out of here or I'll ravage you again."

"Maybe I want that," she teased.

"Definitely, I do! But it's getting late. Have someone walk you home."

"I will. Goodnight."

Then she pulled away, locked the jail door behind her, and forced herself to leave without looking back, knowing that if she saw Natsu's sad eyes as she left the dungeon, she would rush back to him.

Mira was still upstairs wiping glasses. There were only a few drunk mages around. The bartender's eyes lit up when she saw Lucy.

"Well, that was a long visit. Erza thought you'd stay the night. She already left. So, how was it?"

Lucy looked at the people passed out on tables. There was no way she could get into any juicy details, even if she had half a mind to tell Mira anything. "I'm going to be really lonely this coming week."

She sighed wistfully. "So cute! Be safe going home. That monster is still out there."

"I know. I'm not taking any chances. I'll go with my strongest guardian." Lucy pulled out her keys. "Open the Gate of the Lion! Leo!"

In a burst of golden light, the celestial Lion appeared with a debonair smile. "Lucy! It's been a long time. I've been worried. Sagittarius said you were out, and something about Natsu being that beast that attacked you."

"No, we think that beast was someone else, but Natsu is affected. I guess a lot has happened since I last saw you."

"Night of the gala," he purred. "Best tango dance of my existence."

That made her smile. "We'll have to catch up. I have a whole week to waste."

They left together. Loke opened the guild door for her, and as she walked past him, he inhaled. A frowned tugged on his face.

"You and Natsu, huh?"

She froze as Loke stepped out and let the door shut.

"You smell like Draco the Dragon when it's his mating season. I'm a Lion, I can smell these things."
"Sheesh, what is up with men sniffing me?" She looked aside bashfully. "Yeah...me and Natsu. It happened a week ago."

"Obviously, it happened again tonight. You're missing your underwear."

She reached down and pulled her skirt closer against her thighs.

"I doubt any normal man would notice, although they might if you hold yourself like that. I'm an expert at seeing panties under clothing, and by the smooth lines, plus the way you're walking, I can tell you're not wearing any."

"Pervert."

"Lucy." He took her chin and tilted it up.

"Kiss me and Natsu will burn you," she warned sternly.

"Nope. I just want you to know I'll still be your Lion and your knight. It's more romantic when the knight's lady is unattainable, right?" he said with a sad, wistful smile. "However, if he does anything to hurt you, it's a knight's duty to slay dragons."

"You'd slay a dragon slayer?" she asked ironically.

"I don't plan on seeing the end result of when a Lion and a Dragon fight, but I will if he hurts you. You're still my master and my friend, and I will forever be your knight admiring you from afar and praying for your happiness."

Lucy smiled, hugged Loke's arm, and let him guide her down the street.

"Can I treat you to dinner?"

"No, Loke."

"Just drinks?"

"You're not getting me drunk again."

"You were sexy the last time you were drunk."

"Shut up, Loke."

"You sound worn out. He must have really..."

"I will send you back!"

"Okay, okay, shutting up." He smiled down as Lucy yawned. "Damn lucky dragon!"

End of Chapter 26

Chapter End Notes

I've done this with other fanfics, so why not here? When I write chapters, I often record the dialog parts because it's easier to act them out, then write down what I ad-lib. It
makes the dialog feel more "real." So this is the proposal scene. I'm just making it up as I go, but it all ended up in the story.
https://soundcloud.com/rhov/beastly-possession-natsus

_Panties and Kitties_: References to _Panty Possession_, my prequel about when Natsu stole Lucy's panties. It's also the return of Kawaii Kitty, a fictional clothes brand I made up that competes with Mashima's Heart Kreuz. I've mentioned Kawaii Kitty in many of my fanfics. Sort of a running gag.

_Sapphires and Diamonds_: Sapphire used to be traditional for engagement rings. The idea that engagement rings must be diamonds began in the 1930s, thanks to the De Beers diamond monopoly's aggressive commercialization. "Diamonds are forever. Diamonds are a girl's best friend. A girl is not engaged unless she has a diamond engagement ring." Just google about diamond alternatives and you'll find blogs filled with mindless sheep insisting "fake diamonds are for fake brides." Ugh, brainwashed idiots! As for me, my wedding ring (picture) is a 1.5 carat Moissanite surrounded by ten small diamonds amidst a 14-carat band, five on each side set to an ocean wave pattern, since my husband and I love to go sailing and I'm not that impressed with diamonds. Honestly, I hinted to him that I wanted a sapphire, my favorite gemstone, yet he realized people saw diamonds as "traditional" engagement rings. He wanted to give me a huge stone that'd keep flirting guys away, a sparkling sign that said "Hands off, she's taken!" Moissanites are "meteorite diamonds," more sparkly and cheaper, so with the large "fake diamond" stone and the 10 smaller real diamonds, this ring really shines! And it holds special meaning for me, which is more important than whatever stone you use.

_Quotes and Quips_: Loke is referencing a famous quote by Tadashi Adachi, "If the lion and dragon fight, they will both die." This quote was featured in my fanfic _Lion's Pride_.

Last time Lucy was drunk: see chapter 3.
Last time Lucy saw Loke: see chapter 7.
A Night of Worries

Chapter Notes

At night, I lie awake, staring at the shadows on my bedroom ceiling, and wonder how Hiro Mashima will troll us next. It's his Fairy Tail, so that makes him a Troll King.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Lucy shoved Loke out the door. "No! You are not coming in here with me."

"Aww, but Lucy..."

"I'm not falling for your tricks, Loke. Go flirt up some other girl. I'm dating Natsu now."

That...felt odd to say. Really odd. It made her blush a second later, but by then she had closed her apartment door, so Loke could not see her. She placed her hands to her cheeks.

"Dating, huh?" she muttered to herself. "Sheesh, I can't believe that idiot proposed to me. I mean, seriously? He couldn't wait until we have one official date? He rushes into anything in life, I guess."

She fixed herself some herbal tea to warm herself up after the night chill. She had already showered, but after making love to Natsu—Did we really just have sex is a frigging dungeon?—she needed to wash up again. She sipped her tea while soaking in the bathtub, blushing from time to time as she thought about that night of passion and Natsu's words.

I'm not going to formally ask you, because...well, because Gajeel said he thinks I might go fully feral before this ceremony thing is over. I don't want to leave you with a lot of expectations. Still, think about it. If I live through this...would you want to marry me?

"That idiot," she sighed, blaming the heat in her cheeks on the hot bath. "Like I can tell him no."

Down in the guild dungeon, Natsu curled on his side, trying to get some sleep, but his mind was filled with too many thoughts, as well as plenty of worries.

He could die. Or even worse, he could lose the last vestiges of his humanity and become some murdering, cannibalistic beast that would kill his own friends. The thought of death was not something new. He had nearly died plenty of times. However, now he had something to truly live for.

He brought Lucy's panties up to his nose. Her smell soothed him. His mind calmed down when he thought of her smile.

He had to live through this. He had to survive and make Lucy happy. He would court her properly, and one day he would buy that carrot ring...whatever the hell it was. Then he would marry her and take her home with him. He wanted children with Lucy, to be a father, to see her holding his babies. As he closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep, he saw Lucy pregnant, with a pink-haired little girl in her arms and a blond boy holding onto her kitchen apron.

Having a family with the woman he loved...
It was truly something to live for!

In a guest room of the guild, Rogue sat with his fingers peaked together, rubbing his nose across the tips. Sting stepped out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel, his blond hair rumpled from roughing it up with a towel to dry it off.

"Trouble?" he asked.

"Thinking," Rogue muttered, staring forward with a creased brow. "Something seems wrong about all this, but I can't figure out what."

"Wrong about what? The ceremony? You didn't teach me wrong, did you?"

"No, that should be easy. I mean about this feral. That blonde girl, what's her name...Lucy? She was attacked, right?"

"The hot chick? Yeah. Sounds like she was one of the first victims."

"Exactly. The beast also didn't just kill her. I mean, it probably would have eventually, but it was playing with her first, according to what Gajeel told us about the whole incident." His eyes narrowed in thought. "Playing with her. It marked her, bit her neck and her breast. Why would it mark her if it meant to kill her? Unless it smelled Natsu on her, and the marking was a taunt to him. Whether if she died or not, Natsu would have seen the marks. But could she have merely been a taunt? Erza mentioned that just before they left to hunt down Natsu, the feral delivered a blonde head to Lucy's door."

"Like a cat bringing a present," Sting muttered, drying off and searching for his underwear.

"My same thoughts," Rogue nodded, glancing briefly at Sting's body. He had a few minor cuts from his fight with Erza and Mira that morning, as well as bruises to his back and shoulders from his fight with Natsu, and Sting kept rubbing out his head where a rock from Balaur had knocked him unconscious during that scuffle in the woods. It had been a rough day for Sting. "Why a blonde and female head, though? If it was a mere present, wouldn't any head suffice? Blondes aren't too common in Magnolia."

"Are you checking out the local girls?" Sting teased, tugging his boxers up.

Rogue ignored that. "Why would the feral bother Lucy a second time, and leave a present rather than attack her? Or an even better question is, why didn't it finish her off? Even if she was in a hospital, that place isn't guarded all that closely, and certainly not from aerial intruders. Normally when a killer decides upon a target, it'll keep at the target until the job is done, especially if it has every opportunity to return to Lucy and finish her, either in the hospital when she was unconscious, or after she was released and back at home."

"Something changed. Something about her. It's killed other women before, so it's not like it wants a mate."

"Maybe the human kid inside fell for Lucy. I mean, she is hot. That could've affected the feral beast, especially since it's a facet of his emotions."

"That's one possibility," Rogue nodded. "We know for sure, feral slayers react on darker emotions, and lust would be one of those. However, we don't know exactly how conscious a fully feral person is. Gajeel only got close, and he lost all human consciousness. With Laxus and Wendy, they don't remember anything at all. Tonight, just before we left, Gajeel said Natsu was somewhat aware of conversations that happened while the beast was in control. Dual consciousness could be possible as a person's psyche merges and becomes suppressed by the secondary personality. However, it's just as..."
likely that as time passes, the human consciousness would sink, separating the two personalities once more. The window of opportunity in which human and feral consciousnesses would blend is probably very narrow. Natsu is at that point, but this Earth Dragon Slayer is likely past that. He's way too far gone. So why did the feral not kill Lucy? Why did it give her a present? Why did it play with her, mark her, let her live...? Too many questions. Something isn't adding up."

"Maybe it didn't kill her because of Natsu."

Rogue froze the drumming fingers and slid his gaze over to the half-naked blond. "What?"

"Well, maybe it was waiting for him. He was out of town, right? Maybe it wanted a good fight, so it kept harassing Lucy so she would bring Natsu back into town."

Rogue considered that. "Lucy said she saw red eyes at her window the same night Natsu likely made his first transformation. So the smell of Natsu going through the change would have been at her house. When the feral arrived days later, it would have smelled that and assumed she was Natsu's woman. It would want to steal property from another feral. That would explain the marks, tagging her as its property. Then Natsu left Magnolia. It could be the feral wanted him back to fight him, so it harassed Lucy, like you said. In that case, now that Natsu is back in town..."

"It would harass Lucy again," Sting realized. "Natsu's locked up. The feral would use Lucy to draw him out."

"Shit," Rogue sneered, and he rose quickly, grabbing a cloak as he marched to the doors.

"What are you going to do?" Sting shouted after him, yanking his pajama pants up. "We don't know where Lucy lives."

"Someone else in the guild must know."

Rogue stomped down the stairs and to the main dining hall. It was long after midnight, and the only people around were Kinana at the bar and a few stragglers around the tables, most too drunk to see straight.

"Does anyone know where the Celestial Spirit Mage lives?" Rogue shouted urgently. The others looked over at him, some shrugged, and they looked away. "It's important," he insisted, but they still did not seem that interested.

Kinana came up, and the short-haired bartender smiled daintily. "Do you mean Lucy Heartfilia?"

Rogue nodded, figuring there must be only one Lucy and one Celestial Spirit Mage in the guild. "I think she might be in danger."

"Sorry, I'm not sure where she lives. Lucy left hours ago. She had her Lion Spirit with her. If she's in trouble, he'll protect her. I don't know Loke well, that was before my time, but I hear he's really strong."

Rogue glanced toward the door. From the windows, he could see it was late and foggy. The fog would mess up his sense of smell, plus the stench of the feral was all over this city. Tracking it would be impossible by smell alone.

"Could you wake someone who does know?"

Kinana looked panicky. "I...I'm not sure who would, other than her teammates. You could maybe ask Natsu, but it's best not to make him worry too much."
"No, if he finds out Lucy might be in danger, the shock could turn him fully. Do you know where Lucy's teammates live?"

"Only Erza, and I only know that she lives in Fairy Hills. Men aren't allowed in there, and it's past curfew, so the landlady wouldn't let me in even if I tried. I...I could maybe wake up Master if it's really an emergency."

Just then, Sting came down the stairs wearing only his pajama pants and no shirt. Kinana blushed as she ogled his sculpted muscles and the Sabertooth crest on his sleek skin.

"We don't want to make trouble for Makarov off of a suspicion," Sting warned, and one could see the respect he felt for the older guild leader. "If Lucy's got Celestial Spirits, she'll be fine." The blond dragon slayer patted the shoulder of his darker companion. "You know how strong Yukino is, and Lucy has even more keys, including Leo and Taurus. If there is any danger, they'll fight their hardest to keep her safe."

"I really hope that's enough," Rogue muttered.

"The feral is injured. I doubt it'll attack now. We can have someone check on Lucy in the morning." He smiled to Kinana. "Don't worry about it, cutey." Then he dragged Rogue back upstairs, complaining about how Rogue always played such a melodramatic role, rushing off when a woman's life was in danger, and if he just loosened up, he would be popular with the girls.

Rogue ignored Sting's jaunty remarks. He dressed for bed. Sting was out quickly, snoring happily away, but Rogue sat up by the window, gazing out at the foggy city. He had a bad feeling that lingered all that night.

Lucy was having a bizarre dream. In it, she was pregnant. She never had a dream like that before. Not only was her belly huge, but she had a two-year-old in her arms, a cute girl with sakura pink hair.

Children! But who was the father?

"Mama?"

She felt a tug on her apron, and she looked down to see a little boy, not more than five years old, with golden hair like her own and narrow eyes. She knew those eyes. Although they were brown like hers, the squint in them...

A door slammed shut. "Lucy, I'm home."

Lucy looked up with a leap in her throat. "Welcome home, dear," she greeted cheerfully, feeling happiness at hearing that voice.

She heard footsteps approaching and looked at the kitchen doorway, waiting to see the man she loved, the father of these children...her husband...

Instead, a black-skinned creature rounded the entryway, with red eyes glowing and white fangs grinning menacingly. Large wings spread out, completely blocking the doorway. The toddler in her arms began to cry, and the little boy jumped in front of Lucy, ready to fight for her.

"Oh God," Lucy gasped. "No...no!" She grabbed her son protectively and trembled as she tried to back away.
"Luccccccy...mine!"

The hissing growl jolted her awake, only to see the same shadow in her window. Dark brown wings spread out against the foggy night sky, and red eyes shined at her.

"You is called Luccccccy," the creature hissed. "I claimed you, marked you."

Lucy jolted up in bed and grabbed her keys in a panic. The pounding in her chest hurt; she breathed so hard it made her fingers cold and numb. The grip on the keys shook violently. It was happening all over again, just like that first night. Only this time, she had her keys at hand. She should feel safer, but facing this murdering beast once more terrified her far worse than it had the first time. Now she knew what she was deal with. She knew this creature not only killed, but it ate its victims.

And she knew, if left alone, Natsu would turn into a beast like this.

"Stay back," she warned. She had Loke's key ready in her hand.

The feral tilted its head in wry amusement at her defensive stance. "Want fight? Is not the fight I want. I want better fight. Want other feral. You smell like him. Fuck him? Lucky fighter. I want him now. Want fight him. Want kill him. Want him to watch as I fuck you and kill you. Best fights are over women. Best fights are revenge. You will make him fight best. Other feral ran. You chased. He took you away from me. Is bad. All...is bad. All...must die. I kill you. I kill him. Then I kill all in this rotting town. All. Kill all. But first, I kill you...Luccccccy."

It hopped off the windowsill and strode slowly into her room.

"Scream," it smiled sadistic. "Scream for him. Bring him here. I won't kill you until he comes, but..." Those red gazed up and down her body. "...might rough you up a bit." It hunched forward with a snarling, predatory grin. "Scream!"

End of Chapter 27

Chapter End Notes
I'm participating in National Novel Writing Month starting in November. I wanted to get one more chapter in before the madness hits. If you are also doing NaNoWriMo, please feel free to be my writing buddy. http://nanowrimo.org/en/participants/rhov
Lucy faced off with the feral beast despite shaking in terror. She realized she had to calm herself. Balaur was only taunting her to make her off-balance. If she stayed calm and focused, she could fight this infernal creature.

She gripped her Gold Key hard. "Open the Gate of the Lion! Leo!"

In an aurulent flash, Loke appeared beside her. One glance told him the problem.

"You again," the Lion sneered at the feral dragon slayer. "How dare you show your face here and bother my Lucy."

"My Lucy," the feral snarled.

Lucy huffed, "I am neither of yours."

"Marked you, claimed you..."

"Shut up!" Lucy shouted angrily at the dark brown devilish beast.

"Lucy," Loke said softly as he and the feral were locked in a staring contest. "I'll hold him off. You get out of here."

"I didn't call you out to be a shield," she protested angrily.

"Please!" he snapped, but his voice fell quiet with aching emotions. "I had to see you get torn apart by this creature, and I sure as hell am not going to let that happen again. Get to the guild. The barrier around the building should block this creature, or at least it might forcefully revert him. Please, Lucy," he begged, and he glanced down at her. "I almost lost you once. Even if you have to use us as shields this one time, every single one of us Celestial Spirits is ready to fight as hard as we can for you. Please, get out of here. Stay alive!"

Lucy shook her head, unwilling to run away while her friend used himself to protect her. Although she was trembling in terror, she felt disgusted by the idea of simply leaving Loke alone to fight. She
had more pride than to do that.

Balaur was not willing to wait longer. He leaped at Loke with his claws raised. Instantly, Loke's fists lit up, cloaked in starlight, and he punched away the surprise attack. The creature skidded across the floor, crashing into Lucy's dresser, and grinned wildly with delight at a chance to fight.

"Good prey. Strong prey. Good warm-up for Slayer."

"Don't imagine I'm nothing more than a small fry," Loke growled.

The beast leaped again, fangs bared, and roared. As he surged forward, numerous rocks flew out of his mouth, pelting Loke. Loke raised his arm to shield his face from the barrage of pebbles, and the beast got a large swipe at Loke's torso. He shouted in pain and fell back a step. The beast relentlessly lurched forward and sank his teeth into Loke's shoulder.

"Loke!" Lucy screamed. She leaped at the feral and used her whip to strangle him, garroting the beast. He fell back off from Loke, clawing at the starry whip. Then his talon-like hand slashed Lucy's arm. She had to let go of one side of the whip and fell back, cradling her forearm as blood dripped thickly from the gash.

"Lucy, get out!" Loke screamed frantically.

The beast spat out something that sparkled gold. "No blood? Weird prey. Taste strange." Then he licked the claws with Lucy's blood on them. "Yes, like this taste. Good taste. Best taste. Want more blood. Sweet blood, good to drink."

"You sick monster," Loke snarled. "Lucy, I apologize ahead of time for destroying your house. Now get out so I can fight without worrying about hitting you." He raised his hands up. "Regulus Beam!"

The blast punched a hole through Lucy's wall. Oh, the landlady was going to be so mad about all this!

She wanted to fight with Loke. She wanted to stay by his side, just as she and Loke had often fought as a duo. However, the pain in her arm brought tears to her eyes. She could not fight something like that. Plus...she was scared. She was horrified at the red eyes and devilish snarls. They were a nightmare, but also a forewarning. Natsu could turn into this. This hideous beast had once been a normal dragon slayer like Natsu, Laxus, and Wendy. Those three could turn into this creature: mindless, bloodthirsty, driven by darker instincts to kill, rape, and destroy all in its path.

That made her want to run to Natsu and hold him, keep him human, be with him to make sure this never happened.

"Natsu," she whispered, desperately wanting him to come and save her like he always did. Except now, she realized he was the one who needed to be saved. She did not want him to turn into this.

She spun around and ran out of the house in just her nightgown, apologizing softly over and over. She felt guilty for her own cowardice and physical weakness.

In her room, Loke sighed in relief to see her finally go. He worried for Lucy. She was one of the nicest owners he had ever had, and he wanted to keep being by her side. Even though she had picked another man to love, he would protect her all of her life, on his pride as a Spirit and on his honor as her friend.

"Not tasty prey," the feral grumbled.
"Too bad for you," Loke replied wryly, although that bite to his shoulder had weakened him slightly. He knew he would not be able to punch with that arm.

"Not want you. Want blondie girly. Want fuck her."

Loke sneered, disgusted by this crude beast. "That is definitely something I won't allow."

Loke shot a beam of light, blinding the beast, then he pounced in like a feline to bash a starlight-enforced fist into the feral's jaw. The beast fought back with clawing scratches, but this time Loke managed to dodge out of the way. He aimed a kick to the creature's stomach and sent him flying backwards into Lucy's collection of perfumes. The bottles shattered, and the overwhelming smell reacted violently against the sensitive nose of the feral dragon slayer. Balaur covered his face, looking sick from all the fragrances.

Loke took that opportunity to get a few punches in, until the beast's tail swiped around and hit Loke in the back of his knees, instantly knocking the Lion to the floor. Loke rolled out of the way of a slashing claw and spun back up to his feet, winded but ready for more.

"Not tasty prey, but strong. Still, not the fight I want. Want to fight other feral slayer. Stronger prey. End this quickly." Balaur's hand raised, and the Earth Dragon Slayer's magic covered his arm with hard, gray stone. "I will bury you."

"Hah! I'm a spirit of the stars." Loke taunted. "You can't bury a star."

"There is one way." He held his hand in front of him and grabbed his wrist. "Earth Dragon's Meteor Shower!"

Rocks flew from his hand at such high speed, they glowed hot, burning from friction like hundreds of shooting stars. Although Loke had raised his hands to defend, the barrage was relentless. He was pushed back, pelted by burning rocks that ripped apart the wall of Lucy's room.

Loke cried out as the rocks burning his suit coat, crushed one lens of his glasses, and left searing gashes all over his body. Then while he was down and weak, the feral leaped at him, and that stone arm punched a hole right through Loke's gut. The Lion gasped, feeling himself fading.

"No...Lucy..." he wheezed.

The feral grinned right up in Loke's face with his fist still through the Celestial Spirit's body. "She's mine. I will take her, fuck her, and kill her. Fade away, little star." Then he ripped the stone hand out. Loke collapsed to the ground, quavering in and out of existence. "Too bad you're not tasty. Makes me more hungry for her."

"No..." Loke gritted tightly, desperately holding on out of stubbornness. "You...won't hurt her. We won't let you!" he screamed hoarsely.

"If Slayer put up good fight, maybe I let her live, keep her around. Good to have something to fuck between towns."

Loke tried to lunge in fury, but he was beginning to fade from the Human World.

"Twinkle-twinkle, little star. You try to fight, but not get far. Up above the world you shine, but here on Earthland, all earth is mine. Twinkle-twinkle, little star. Far too weak is what you are." The feral cackled at his little song. "Bye-bye, little star." Then he left, leaping out through the window and spreading his wings to fly away.
Loke felt his body vanishing and saw the golden energy leaking out of his celestial body. "No...can't fade...not yet." He looked out into the foggy night. "Fairy Tail. They...need to know. They need...to protect her...now." Loke slowly forced himself onto his feet, grasping at the hole that was making his body in this world tear apart. By sheer willpower, he stopped the spread of his body breaking down into spirit particles.

"Must...find...help." Loke limped out of Lucy's house and stumbled as he dragged his vanishing body toward the guild.

Lucy wished she had thought a little clearer before fleeing her house. At the least, she should have put on some shoes. With some good shoes, she could have ran and probably have been halfway to the guild by now. Instead, her toes seemed to hit every rough bump in the road and stub on every piece of uneven ground. In the foggy darkness, she could not even see where she was going, the thick mist hiding all street signs. She ran by memory, knowing she needed to turn down one street, then cross another, and over a bridge. She knew the way, although the night and the thick fog made visibility impossible.

She suddenly stepped on a sharp piece of broken glass and screamed as it sliced open the bottom of her foot. She limped, trailing blood with each step, but she refused to stop. Either Loke would come, sweep her off her feet, and make some flirtatious comment about licking her toes clean, or it would be the beast to come after her.

The pain in her clawed arm, and now the torn skin on the bottom of her foot, hurt badly; however, when Death was your enemy, pain did not matter. She kept going, panting heavily, her heart burning from pounding so hard and fast. She thought about shouting for help, but if anyone came they would just be fodder for the beast. She would not risk innocent lives.

She knew a shortcut, but it involved running through an alley...a wet and litter-strewn alley that would surely cut her feet up worse. If only she could have someone carry her.

She grabbed up a key. "Open the Gate of the Golden Bull! Taurus!"

The large bovine appeared with hearts in his pervy eyes. "Lucy, your nightie is very cute, although a negligee or sheer camisole would look better."

"Taurus, I need you to carry me."

Instantly, he swept her up into his arms. "Oh Lucy, I've waiting years for this moment. To hold you so tenderly..."

"Quiet! Look, there's a beast chasing me, and I need to get to the guild, but I left my shoes. This alley is a shortcut. Let's hurry."

"Yes, we'll rush to where there's a warm, romantic fire and a bed for you to spread out and..."

"Shut up, you perverted Bull!"

Taurus plowed through the alley, as graceful as the cliché bull in a china shop. He kicked aside crates and stepped on a rat in his haste. He emerged out the other end, and Lucy told him where to go.

Lucy got a chance to catch her breath, but now the pain began to really weigh down on her. The foot was bad, it would need stitches. The arm was beginning to go numb, and her left side was drenched in blood from the clawed gashes. She tore the bottom of her pajama shirt and wrapped it around the
wound tightly, hoping that might lessen the blood loss.

A shiver ran over her skin. She had a really bad feeling, and suddenly she feared for Loke. She knew she had a slight telepathic connection with her Celestial Spirits, so she dreaded that this chill was a bad sign for Loke.

"We should hurry," she told Taurus. "We need to move closer to the harbor. There's one more shortcut I know. The alley after the bakery, turn left there."

"Moooo! Understood, Lucy."

Taurus held her a little tighter against his massive chest as the alley was narrower, and his bulky body had to squeeze through. He had to pick his way around piles of discarded boxes, crates, and junk. As Taurus rushed through, Lucy heard a noise above, like the sound of leather flapping. She looked up with a tiny gasp, but in the fog all she saw was a fuzzy shadow.

"Oh no," she whispered in dread. "Hurry, Taurus!"

"This alley is a tighter squeeze than a virgin's..."

"Shut up and hurry!"

Instead, Taurus came to a jolting stop, and Lucy felt his muscles tense. She turned around in his arms to look forward, and there she saw a large, winged shadow at the end of the alley blocking their path. Red eyes glowed in the foggy darkness. Lucy shrank back instinctively, a tremble that Taurus felt in his arms, so the Bull protectively held her even tighter.

With a low growl, Taurus sneered, "You are the pervert who hurt Lucy's boobs. Are you after her for another feel? No man touches her boobs twice without permission and lives."

"Well, so do I, but I don't..."

Lucy shouted angrily over them, "You're both sick!" Then she glared at the feral. "Where's Loke? What did you do to him?"

"Little star...fell to earth." The feral chuckled at his own joke. "All fall to Earth Dragon Slayer. All will die. To dust they shall return."

Lucy felt tears of regret in her eyes, and Taurus growled as he heard that his fellow Celestial Spirit, the Leader of the Zodiacs, was defeated by this enemy.

"Is this a star, too?" the feral asked, eying Taurus. "Big star. Maybe better fight? Still not tasty. Weird smell."

Taurus looked shocked. "Do I smell weird, Lucy?"

"Taurus, be careful," she warned. "He's fast, and he's vicious."

The Bull glared at the enemy. "Speed, maybe, but he looks tiny to me. Hold on tight!"

Shielding Lucy with his bulky arms, Taurus roared and ran right at Balaur. Lucy tried to scream, but then she realized what he was doing. She shrunk down, curling into a ball. The feral saw the charging Bull and grinned in excitement. Balaur raised his claws, ready to see who would dodge first.
Taurus did not dodge. He barreled right into the winged creature, ignoring those razor-sharp claws that thrashed at his thick cow hide. With a bellow of pain, he burst out of the alley, then tossed Lucy as far as he could. She flew through the air across the street and rolled over the ground, bruised up but at quite a distance from the two fighters.

"Mooooove, Lucy!" Taurus shouted.

She hiccuped a sob as she realized yet another one of her Celestial Spirits was willingly using himself to shield her from this deadly attacker. However, she would not let both Loke's and Taurus' sacrifices be in vain. Despite the slicing pain in her foot, she ran, limping but hurrying, while behind her she heard clangs of Taurus' massive battle ax and hisses from the feral dragon slayer.

She could almost see the lights of Fairy Tail in the fog, a warm glow through the swirling clouds, the misty outline of that castle that was her sanctuary. It spurred her on, all pain forgotten in a final mad dash.

"Help!" she finally shouted. "Somebody, help!"

Her voice sounded muted in the fog, and she wondered if the clouds blocked her cries. She was almost there...almost...

Suddenly, she was grabbed and spun around. She met a dark face, a cruel smile, and those narrow crimson eyes. Somewhere behind, she saw the golden sparkles of Taurus vanishing to the Spirit World, utterly defeated.

"Bad girlie," the creature grinned.

Lucy reached down to the pouch on her belt, but Balaur grabbed both of her wrists in a crushing hold. Lucy cried out as a bone popped painfully.

"Call out something tasty." Those red eyes leaned in so close, she could feel his breath against her lips. "Call Slayer out," he whispered. "Cry to him. Scream to him." The eyes turned to look behind her. "Is he in there? A dragon in a castle? What sort of twisted fairy tale is that? Scream for him. Bring Slayer here." Holding her wrists with one hand, his other arm wrapped around Lucy's body and pulled her tight against his groin. "I will fuck you if you don't."

A sob shuddered out. She wanted Natsu to come, but if he faced this beast, he would turn into the same sort of thing. The smell changed Natsu. Just meeting the Earth Dragon Slayer would be the end of the man she loved. With eyes fierce with determination, she glared back at this beast.

"I won't," she declared as tears of fear dripped down her angry face. Her body shivered, but still she remained stubborn. "I won't let him turn into you. I'll protect him."

"He is feral..."

"He's not!" she screamed. "He can't come anyway. He can't leave. They've locked him away."

"The mages?" Balaur again looked at the guild building. "Smart mages. But bad for you."

He grabbed her even closer, pressing her body up against him. Lucy cried out at the crushing hold, but the beast chuckled sadistically at her pain. Then he licked over her lips. Lucy turned her head aside in disgust, but the beast licked her neck instead.

"I will mark you." He bit into her shoulder, and Lucy screamed as those teeth sank in. The feral did not bite too deeply, though. He licked the blood off his lips and lapped at the wound. "I will mark
you, fuck you, make you scream, until Slayer comes. They will let him come. I will keep fucking you until Slayer arrives. Not kill you. Just fuck you. Over and over."

Lucy struggled to break free, but she felt the rock-hard muscles that trapped her in a tight embrace.

"This will be fun."

The feral leaped into the air, carrying Lucy with him, and vanished in the fog.

A few moments later, Kinana cautiously stepped out of the guild building with a lantern to light the pre-dawn darkness. She looked around at the swirling fog and called out, "Is anyone out there?" She thought she had heard shouting but could not be sure. Since Kinana was not a mage, it took a lot of courage to come inspect, and she wanted at least a lantern and a kitchen knife in case there was trouble. She called out once more, but there were no sounds in the empty street. With a shrug, she quickly went back inside and shut the door, winking out the cheery light, so that the city outside fell once more into darkness.

End of Chapter 28

Chapter End Notes

Oooooh shit, what did I just write? I actually gave myself chills with that ending. Lucy is brave in her own way.

Wanna hear the feral? I made an audio. (This totally killed my throat.)
http://chirb.it/ONFqEJ
A Dangerous Interruption

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Heeeelp, Hiro Mashima is reading my mind and making Fairy Tail more pervy. Or am I reading his? If our minds combined, that would be a dangerous combination.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With the coming of morning, the fog burned away, leaving sticky moistness in the air. Birds were just beginning to sing when Gajeel stomped into the guild followed by Pantherlily. Makarov was there early, as was Erza and Mira. Sting looked sleepy and was trying to wake himself with some strong tea, but Rogue looked the same as always. Happy had come for this, and he sat with Frosh and Lector off to the side. Their usual teasing had no affect on the blue cat this morning. Happy was worried for his best friend.

Today, Gajeel would begin the week-long ceremony to bring Natsu back to his senses and make him a fully matured dragon slayer.

"We'll get started on Natsu immediately," Makarov stated to the early morning group. "However, I've decided that until the feral is caught, we'll postpone Laxus' and Wendy's ceremonies. Rogue and Sting will help to protect the town and hunt the feral slayer. As soon as it's caught, we'll start on the others immediately."

"How are they?" Erza asked in grave concern for her fellow guildmates.

"Stable for now," Makarov assured her. "I think getting them out of a pheromone-rich environment was important to making the progression slow down."

Rogue explained further, "Laxus changed only once, so you caught him right at the start. He should be fine for a few weeks. Wendy believes she might have changed a few times without realizing it, and she changed yesterday. She's shaken, but since she was triggered prematurely by the feral's pheromones, and later by the pheromones Natsu has begun to product, getting her out of that smell will keep her normal, probably until she reaches maturity. However, it wouldn't hurt to do the ceremony on her now, since she has experienced a little of the awakening beast within. Sting will perform it on her, that way if he fails, she's young enough so that she should be fine even if the schism in personality can't be mended right away."

The blond glared over at his fellow Sabertooth guildmate. "If I fail, huh?"

Mira dropped her voice as she spoke to Rogue. "Kinana said you were worried for Lucy."

"A possible danger for her, yes," said the Shadow Dragon Slayer.

"Danger?" Erza asked in an overly-protective jolt. "What danger?"

"It's my assumption that the feral will use Lucy to get Natsu to come and fight. We should get her later. I honestly had thought she would be here this morning," he said, looking troubled as he glanced to the door.
"Didn't she stay the night with Natsu?" asked Erza. "They were together until after midnight. I assumed she slept with him."

"Well, she did," Mira tittered. "She woke up later and went home."

"Then she's in danger," Erza said loudly, instinctively reaching to her sword.

The white-haired mage quickly assured her, "Lucy still has the emergency calling card I gave her when she went down to the dungeon. I had forgotten to ask for it back."

Erza reached to her side and picked up a corresponding calling card. It was still normal. "She would alert to us if she's in trouble. Then she should be fine." She relaxed again and stowed the emergency calling card away. "Still, I'm disappointed that she isn't here."

Sting held back a sleepy laugh. "She's probably worn out and sore from last night. Considering how much that dungeon smells like pussy, it'd be a miracle if she can walk for a week."

Rogue smacked him over the head for being crude.

Mira sadly realized, "She probably just doesn't want to upset Natsu if she starts to cry. She looked rather emotional last night when she was leaving."

"I see," Erza muttered. She knew how much it hurt to see someone you love taken away, especially if you feared for their life.

Gajeel huffed at all the drama. "Screw her! Bring Salamander up here before the idiot loses to himself."

Mira went down to the dungeon and came up a few minutes later with a very tired-looking Natsu.

"He's worn out and sore, too," Sting muttered, and this time he blocked Rogue before the Shadow Dragon Slayer could whack him.

Natsu squinted in the bright sunlight and glanced around the room. "Where's Lucy?"

"At home, probably sleeping," Erza assured him calmly.

He frowned. "She said she'd be here this morning. Lucy doesn't break her promises."

Gajeel took a deep sniff of him. "Sting is right, you reek of pussy. Ya must'v'e fucked her a few times to smell that bad. If she's too worn out to wake up, that's your own fault."

Natsu blushed and looked aside, not wanting to admit that the strong smell was from Lucy's panties tucked away in his scarf to keep him calm.

"We have a room set up," Makarov explained. "It's soundproof, but Gajeel will have an emergency calling card in case there is trouble. Food and water for a week are stored inside, as are toilets and beds. Gajeel said you'll sleep a lot between sessions. It's reinforced just in case you...well..." He did not want to say in case this doesn't work and you transform fully into a mindless killer. Still, success in this was not guaranteed.

"We should wait for Lucy," Natsu insisted.

"Idiot," Gajeel grumbled. "You can't wait. We shouldn't have waited even one night."

"I'll tell Lucy any message you want," Erza offered to him.
The message he wanted to give to Lucy was not one he could speak aloud. It was not even words he wanted. He simply wanted to be with her one more time, to give her one more kiss, hold her, smell her, taste her lips, touch her soft body, hear her voice, and see her smile. He wanted to assure her he would be fine, and in doing so reassure himself.

"Tell her...what we talked about last night, I wasn't joking. I meant it, and I want her to think about it. Because I really wanna..." His words cut off in embarrassment. He could not say in front of everyone that he wanted Lucy to be his wife. "I wanna be with her...always. To court her properly, to take her to nice restaurants... Oh, tell her to pick a restaurant for when I get out, because I'm gonna take her on a date right away. And...and I...I wanna..." He shrank down bashfully, smiling to himself.

Erza and Mira shared a stunned look. He was really serious about this!

"...I wanna be there for her all the time, protect her, and hold her, and...and...I want..."

Just then, the doors of the guild burst open and a body collapsed in, wheezing harshly. They saw the orange hair amidst a torn and battered suit coat.

"Loke!" Mira cried out, running forward to him.

He was wavering in and out of existence, with golden sparkles of spirit energy draining out of him. Still, the Lion forcefully raised his head. They saw his eyes dark with exhaustion, one blue lens shattered, and his normally impeccable clothes now torn to shreds.

"Lucy..." He coughed harshly and grabbed the gaping hole in his torso.

Natsu jolted at that, and his eyes went wide in fear.

"The beast...is after...Lucy. Couldn't...stop him. He's...strong. Much stronger. Couldn't...stop...s-sorry..." Then in exhaustion far beyond what even the Leader of the Zodiacs could withstand, Loke sank to the floor and vanished in a rain of golden light.

"Lucy!" Natsu yelled, and he ran to the door.

Erza yanked him back by the scarf. "Where do you think you're going?"

"To save Lucy," he bellowed in rage.

"Natsu, you're in no condition..."

"Save her!" he screamed, and his eyes flashed red for a moment.

"Natsu, calm down," Gajeel warned.

Natsu slammed his eyes shut and shook his head, straining to regain control. "I'm...okay. Really, I'm okay."

They heard a tiny, weird voice with a beeping alarm. "Help me, help me. Erza pulled out her emergency card. On it was a chibi picture of Lucy waving her tiny arms with HELP ME flashing in bold letters.

"It's Lucy. She must still have the card."

Since Erza had let go of the scarf to get the card, Natsu bolted and ran out the opened door. He sniffed, but there was nothing. The barrier was still up and blocking the smell. Only the feral's smell,
though. He smelled Lucy's scent right away. With the others racing right behind him, he ran to the entrance and passed through the magic barrier. Not far down the street, he dropped to the ground and inhaled. There was the reek of blood, and he saw dried bloody footprints.

The worse smell: Lucy's blood.

"Grrrr! Lucy blood. Lucy in trouble. Bad smell. Smell...enemy!" Natsu shook his head, suppressing that instinct. "No! Can't give in. Lucy...was here," he said calmer. "Just a couple of hours ago. The feral, too. I smell that...that...bad smell. Enemy. Feral. Kill! Feral hurt Lucy. KILL THE MOTHERFUCKER! No! Calm down, calm the hell down. She just used that card, which means she's okay."

The sun was barely up, but Natsu looked around frantically. He smelled something else and scrambled to a nearby alley, sniffing the scene. It smelled like cow.

"Taurus," he whispered. "He fought the feral here while Lucy ran." He smelled more of Lucy's blood and looked around. "Bloody footsteps. She was barefoot. The blood could have been from stepping on something with bare feet. Where the steps end, there isn't more blood, which means the feral didn't hurt her here. She stopped, though. She turned around, probably confronted the beast. Dammit, she was almost at the guild. She was so close before he caught up." Natsu turned around and screamed at the mages who had hurried after him. "Why did no one realize Lucy was out here? She was right there."

Mira realized too late. "Kinana mentioned that she thought she heard something, but when she went to inspect nothing was there. Could that have been Lucy? Oh God, no one heard her."

"Dammit!" Natsu screamed, grasping at his hair as the voice within him went into an outrage. "If I hadn't been locked up, I would have smelled her right away. Sting, Rogue: why didn't you smell her?"

"I was asleep, idiot," Sting said defensively.

Rogue sadly shook his head. "Sorry, I don't know her smell."

Natsu cursed under his breath. He spun one way, then the other way, sniffing the air. "We have to hurry. That beast has her. It could kill her."

"So could you, if you go after her," Sting warned.

"You're not well," Makarov told him. "We can't let you go."

Rogue stepped forward. "We'll get her back, Natsu."

"You won't be quick enough," he shouted furiously.

Suddenly, Natsu ripped off his shirt and squinted up his face, expecting the pain. Wings sprouted out of his back and unfurled to full width. A blood red tail with shiny black spines grew out of his lower back. He hissed from the pain, and when his eyes opened, they were fierce but still green. He stood with the translucent pink wings fluttering in the morning air, twitching eagerly to fly, and the tail whipping from side to side.

"Natsu!" Makarov warned sharply.

He turned to the horizon, and his fists clenched defiantly. "I can smell him. I can hear her. I know where they are. I hear her...calling me."
"Bastard, stop it right now," Gajeel yelled. "If you change fully again, you might truly go feral."

"I won't," he assured with a smile of confidence. "I can't allow that, because I'm gonna marry Lucy, and I can't make her my wife if I'm not even human."

"Marry her?" Erza shouted in shock. Mira covered her mouth at such a bold declaration, and Gajeel arched an eyebrow in surprise.

"That's right." He grinned broadly. "I'm gonna marry her, and we're gonna have a family, and I'm gonna be a father. So I can't let Lucy die."

Sting shouted furiously at him, "This is precisely what I warned you about yesterday: sacrificing your human side to save a friend. You'll really lose, Natsu. Then you'll not only lose your humanity, you'll lose everything. You'll turn into a bloodthirsty dragon like Acnologia. You could kill Lucy!"

Natsu dropped his head solemnly. "I know what you warned me, and I know I said I wouldn't do this, but there's still a chance I can keep conscious. Lucy just sent that message, which means she's alive, but she's run out of options. She was here two hours ago; I can smell it. She's been fighting that beast for hours, already injured! She would have called for help earlier, but she obviously doesn't want to put her friends at risk. That's the way Lucy is. She's stubborn and prideful," he said in admiration. "I'll make sure she doesn't have to worry about losing any friends. I want to save Lucy, and I feel that the beast within has the same desire."

Gajeel warned darkly, "Dual emotions might actually be a worse sign."

"It's not," Natsu insisted confidently. "The beast has always felt that way, and I have always felt that way. It's one instinct that will never change...ever! For Lucy's sake, I'll make sure I stay sane."

"Natsu," Makarov warned as they all stayed back, like cornering a rabid dog.

"Gramps, if you try to stop me, the beast will struggle and I might really lose it. If I don't at least try to save her, the beast will insist I do, it'll take over, and I'll lose to it anyway. Either way, by you forcing me or by me realizing this is a really stupid idea, my only chance at staying sane is to go after Lucy. She's the only person who keeps me...being me." He reached down to the scarf and pulled up the part hiding her panties, giving it a deep sniff. It calmed the panicking beast within that wanted him to stop talking and start fighting. "I have to go to her. She's my only chance at surviving this."

He flapped his massive wings and took off fast, flying to where he smelled that scent of strawberry shampoo and rosewater.

« Slayer save Lucy? »

"Yes, we're going to save her," he calmly told the voice inside him.

« If Lucy dead, we kill all. »

"She's not dead, and we're not killing anyone."

« All. Slayer kill all. Burn. Fire. Burn everything. To cinders. Ashes to ashes. If feral hurt her...if feral fucked her... »

"Shut up! Don't even say that." He knew it was a possibility, but he refused to believe something that horrible had already happened.

« Kill feral. Burn slowly. Then fuck all scent and marks off Lucy. Make her ours again. Kill all
"Natsu sneered and shoved that cackling voice back down. "See, this is how I know I'm not feral. You still disgust me. And seriously...Erza? Are you insane? She's way too scary."

"Oh God, I was fourteen, it was a wet dream, and it was only once. Don't you dare tell her about that or she'd kill me."

Back near the guild, the group watched Natsu fly off.

"Master!" Erza shouted in protest. She knew Makarov easily could have grabbed Natsu and restrained him. If anyone could beat sense into that boy in a single second, it was Makarov.

"He may have a point," Makarov said reluctantly. "If we keep Natsu locked up, he'll be panicking and anxious. Those darker emotions will feed the beast inside. Natsu might eventually want to lose control purely to go after Lucy. Right now, his eyes were still Natsu's. I think that, since Lucy is involved, Natsu will fight just about anything to make sure she stays safe, including fighting himself."

"He's still unstable and not as strong as a person who's been feral for a while," Gajeel warned. "Lily, let's fly after him."

Pantherlily grew to battle size and grabbed Gajeel as well. "Against two dragon slayers, even I wouldn't be enough." They flew off together after Natsu.

"He's right," Sting said. "Against two dragon slayers, not many could survive. Erza, Mira, try to evacuate the town in that area. You know how destructive Natsu can get, and he might be worse considering he's fighting to save the woman he loves. Plus that Earth Dragon Slayer's magic can probably destroy half the town easily."

"Understood," said Erza.

"I'll call in the other mages," Makarov told them. "We'll evacuate the southern half of Magnolia for now, and I'll send Gildarts to meet with you. He has a trick that forced Laxus to revert to human form again. It might work on the feral."

"Get Freed as well," Mira pointed out. "Natsu...might need to be caged." She pouted at the many worries troubling her mind.

Makarov frowned sternly. "That's true. I'll organize the evacuation and form a team to wait on standby for the dragon slayer fight. Rogue, Sting..." The old man's eyes wrinkled beseechingly. "Don't kill him, even if he's lost to us. There might be a way to bring him back."

"A feral can't be healed," Rogue warned.

"I know, but...there might be something we can do. Don't kill him."

"I can't promise that," Rogue said sadly, "but we'll try our hardest to capture him alive."

"Yeah," Sting growled, "that way I can beat him up for being an idiot. Lector, Frosh!"

"Coming, Sting-kun."
"Fro, too," said the froggy little Exceed.

"I'm also coming." Happy insisted.

Lector scoffed at him. "A stupid-looking tiny brat like you?"

"Tiny brat," Frosh repeated.

There were tears of terror mixed with determination in Happy's eyes. "Natsu is my best friend. I don't care if he can fly now, or if he's scary, or even if he goes crazy. He's my friend, and I'm gonna help him fight in any way I can."

Rogue leaned over and patted Happy's head with a gentle smile. "Natsu is lucky to have a friend as brave as you."

Frosh also came up and patted Happy in the same way. "Fro thinks so, too."

Lector folded his arms and looked away. "Yeah, whatever. At least don't piss yourself when you get scared."

Frosh heaved Rogue into the air, and Lector grabbed up Sting. With Happy flying behind, they all rushed south after Natsu, ready to face the feral beast.

Chapter End Notes

NEW FANART, and a SIDE STORY!

She didn't know it when she drew them, but SrngDrng drew two scenes that I had already written for this chapter. SHE'S READING MY MIND TOOOOO!

This Scent! - by SrngDrng
Defiant - by SrngDrgn

SrngDrng also wrote a Christmas Special for the Feral Natsu Tumblr page. It's really awesome, creepy and funny and perfect for the holidays. I encourage you to read it. The Night Before Christmas: Beastly Possession Christmas Special
Lucy Versus the Feral

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: Hiro Mashima does not approve of this chapter. Too bad.

I bow deeply in apology for vanishing for three months. We're getting close to the end, and I want it to be perfect. Fight scenes are the hardest things for me to write, but I don't want to scrimp on you guys. I want "Beastly Possession" to be awesome all the way to the end! If you want to follow my progress (or give me nudges; I sometimes need to be nudged really hard to get back to work) I started a Facebook group called Rhoy Anion's Minions.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lucy was unsure when she passed out, but she woke up with a sudden crash to the ground that scraped up her leg and almost dislocated her shoulder. She leaped up and away more on instinct than seeing any real danger. A second later, the feral dragon slayer alighted next to her and folded his dark brown wings.

"Bandage arm," he ordered. "We don't want you dead yet."

Lucy looked down at the bloodied arm with claw marks from where the feral had sliced at her. She had tied a tourniquet around the wound earlier, so the bleeding was not as bad as it could have been. Still, she could barely feel anything from the elbow down.

She then looked around at her surroundings. The stygian sky simmered with the faintest bruised purple on the eastern horizon hinting at the coming of dawn. For now, that violaceous glow was weak; the stars and moon gave more light than the approaching daystar. Through the darkness, she could see the spires of Kardia Cathedral in the distance. They were still in Magnolia, but she did not recognize this area. The decaying buildings, graffiti, and weeds growing through cracks in the pavement hardly looked like the neat, peaceful merchant city she loved. She guessed that if Magnolia had a bad side of town, this was it. The building they had landed near appeared to be abandoned, as far as she could tell by the boarded-up windows and flaking paint. She guessed the feral had made the old warehouse his hideout.

She covered her nose. Something stank. She had no clue what such a disgusting smell could possibly be. Sewer? No, worse. Then she recalled smelling this before when the team infiltrated a meat packing factory. It was a mix of the smells of death, animal waste, raw meat, and smoky pollution. No wonder Gajeel had no luck sniffing out the feral if he hid in such a retch-inducing reek.

"Smell is bad, yes," the feral agreed. "Is only way to hide. Fix arm. Hurry."

"I need water, medicine and bandages," she said, mostly to herself since she was fairly certain the beast would not oblige her in any way.

"Not know medicines. Can get water. Bandage with clothes. Would give you mine, but..." The feral stretched out his arms and wings, showing off the fully naked body.

Lucy was hoping he would leave to fetch water. Instead, the beast placed his hands on the ground.
Lucy felt a slight rumble in the soil, and suddenly a small crack broke the street. Water bubbled up from the crack. The beast cupped his clawed hand, caught some of the water, and tasted it.

"Is good water, safe to drink."

"That's impressive magic," she had to admit, tearing some of her nightshirt to soak in the water. She began to wash off the blood.

"Is easy magic even Slayer can do."

"Even Slayer?" she asked. "Does that mean you know more magic than the dragon slayer does?"

"Slayer knows shit," the beast sneered. "Slayer is nothing but shit."

"He is you, y'know."

"No, he is Slayer. I am dragon."

"You sure don't look like a dragon."

He grabbed her chin and yanked her head up painfully hard. "Not yet," he growled. "I will one day. Still look like shitty Slayer, but not for much longer." Then the feral threw her chin aside. "Hungry?"

"Not really," she mumbled, not even wanting to think about what he might give her to eat.

Lucy focused on washing the gaping wounds. Not just her arm, but the slice to her foot from whatever she had stepped on in her barefooted flee through town. Then she made makeshift footwraps with the torn-off sleeves of her nightgown, protecting her toes from more sharp objects. If she was going to escape in this darkness, she needed to be healed, and at least she had to keep the feral's attention away from his threats about raping her.

"How much will you physically change?" She really was curious.

"Until I am dragon."

"Then what about the dragon slayer inside you? You're only a part of his mind, a facet of his psyche."

"You use weird words."

She sighed in annoyance. "That's what Natsu's beastly side said, too."

"Is not all mental. Is physical, too." He flapped his dark wings and swung his tail from side to side to show her. "Pieces of dragon buried inside come to surface. With time, all is dragon, none is human."

"And the dragon slayer?"

"Earth Slayer was fertilizer to nourish me, that is all. I was a seed buried in the shit of his mind. I grew strong. I give Slayer strength he could never have. I know attacks he never learned. I am Earth Dragon. He is only Slayer. I am child of Earth Dragon Terracia. He is only a potting jar Terracia used, a human to host me."

"That's not how it works," she protested, thinking about how much Natsu loved Igneel and wanted to be reunited with his adopted father. "You were meant to blend in with the dragon slayer, the two becoming one, not one taking over the other."
"Blend?" The feral tilted his head. "Blend. In older Slayers, do you see blend? Do they have wings, tail, claws? Equal parts? Half-dragon?"

"Well...no," she admitted. "Gajeel can do this thing where he had metal scales cover his body, though."

He laughed sardonically. "Scales? Is that all? Is not blend. What you mean is Slayer remains and beast is crushed, then mixed in with stupid Slayer. A seed crushed to feed fertilizer is still nothing but shit. His body, not mine. His wants, not mine. His strength...but also mine. Only strength blends, not me. Not dragon. Is not blending. He takes my strength, I get nothing. All wants, all desires, die."

"You don't know that."

"I know enough. I remember what Slayer doesn't. A dragon's child has two paths: to be slayer, or to be dragon. Slayers can turn into dragons."

"Like Acnologia," Lucy whispered in horror.

"King of Dragons," the beast said with a tone of high respect in his voice. "I am a seed that is now a sapling, wanting to grow to be a tree, a real dragon. I am still growing in the shit of his mind. Other Slayers kill the seed within before it can take root. Beast within dies before it can think for itself. Abortion of a dragon! I pity those seeds. Dragons will not be born from those Slayers. Think I want that? Think the dragons wanted that? What will Slayer grow into? He is human, will always be human, will always be Slayer, nothing more. I will grow and join Acnologia. I will be Prince of Dragons. I will not let Slayer crush that desire."

"Acnologia is a horrible beast," Lucy sneered. "I've seen him. I've fought him...and failed."

"All mages will fail against the Dragon King."

"Gajeel said his dragon taught him how to stop the beast. That was Metalicana's wish, for Gajeel to grow stronger. And Natsu as well; his scarf that Igneel gave him suppressed the beast within. His inner beast was only meant to strengthen him. It wasn't suppose to take over and change him."

"NO!" the feral screamed insanely. "Terracia not teach us that. Terracia left. Acnologia taught us."

Lucy's eyes widened. "You've met Acnologia?"

"Yessss," he hissed gleefully. "Acnologia see us. Acnologia speak to us. Teach us. Slayer heard rumors, other dragon slayers, Human Slayers, healed from feral side, but I tell Slayer is not our destiny. Acnologia is king. King knows. Humans do not. What do humans know of dragons? Nothing! They know shit! Think dragons are mythical. So quickly, they forget. So quickly, Slayer forgot all Acnologia told us. Stupid Slayer think other Slayers heal him. I told him he was too late. Is only me now. Slayer inside is gone, eternal slumber."

"No, he's still in there, and he doesn't like what you're doing."

"Shut up! I will not be crushed. I will not blend in with shitty Slayer. I will grow. I will be dragon! I will show Slayers, they cannot kill a real dragon. Old and sick dragons, maybe, but not me, not young dragon. I will turn into dragon and show them. I will destroy this city, kill all, show Slayers they are weak. But first, there is another changing into dragon. He lifted his face to the wind. "I smell him. I fight him. If I kill him, I will take his magic, absorb it, and then I will be a dragon. Two elements, fire and earth. Feral cannot be real dragon until it defeats a feral or a dragon. Want dragon, but if can't have dragon, want Slayer who is feral. Now, stop bleeding. If you die too soon, Fire Slayer may not come."
Lucy looked around her again. She eyed the dark buildings, some half-dead trees, and a shadowy canal that had gone bone dry. Then she looked up and around at the sky, the position of the stars, clouds drifting by the moon, anything that might spark a plan on how to escape. She still had her keys and her whip. At least she was in Magnolia, but she was probably far away from the guild. The feral could fly. Did any of her Celestial Spirits have that ability?

One did! He was a new guy, a Silver Key, and Lucy had not tested his carrying capacity, but he might work. All she really had to do was distract the feral and fly away.

"You know," she said cautiously, "I guess I am a little hungry. Do you have something to eat?"

"Can get something."

"Not...you know...people."

The beast grinned viciously. "Not make girlie eat people-flesh. Save that for me."

Her stomach heaved a little.

Still, the beast walked toward the warehouse. Lucy guessed it did not take her inside because the creature wanted her scent out in the open. It wanted to fight Natsu, so hiding her away defeated that purpose. Still, she wondered if Natsu—or any of the dragon slayers—would be able to smell her in such a disgusting area. It dawned on her a moment later. From what she had seen, a beast's senses were even more acute than a normal dragon slayer's. Gajeel, Sting, and Rogue would probably not be able to smell her in a place like this, but Natsu could. Or at least, his beastly side could.

As soon as the feral went inside the building, Lucy whipped out two keys, gold and silver. "Open the Gate of the Archer! Sagittarius! Open the Gate of the Crane! Grus!"

The horseman and a graceful white crane appeared together.

"Moshi-moshi! An odd pairing," Sagittarius said, looking over to his smaller Celestial Spirit companion.

"Odd indeed," Grus huffed disdainfully. "It can't be helped."

Lucy kept her voice quiet. "Sagittarius, I need you to keep the feral on the ground. Shoot him out of the sky if he tries to fly. I noticed he's injured on one wing, so he might be slow. Grus..."

"That's Lord Grus," the Crane huffed loftily.

"Right, I forgot," she grumbled. A big reason she rarely used the Crane's Key was his stuck-up attitude. In a placating tone, she politely requested, "Lord Grus, if it pleases you, sir, I need you to fly me out of here."

"Me? Carry you? Dare you suggest I demean myself to drudgery work?" the Crane scoffed.

"Please...dear lord of all birds," she said, appealing to his vanity. "Of all flying creatures of the Spirit World, surely only the Crane is strong enough to carry the weight of a lower peon as myself." God, she really hated puffing up his ego!

"Well, surely that must be so," Grus touted smugly. "It can't be helped. I shall carry you this once. May it be known, I do this only to reaffirm my position as the strongest of all avian Celestial Spirits."

Lucy mumbled under her breath, "Actually, Aquila the Eagle is way stronger, but I don't have his
key." However, Grus was too busy fluffing his white feathers. "Whenever it pleases you, Lord Grus, but let's hurry. The enemy will be back soon."

"It can't be helped," he sighed haughtily. The Crane grabbed Lucy by the shoulders, flapped his massive wings, and barely managed to lift her off the ground. "Seriously, go on a diet! You plebeians gorge yourselves on low-quality rubbish."

"Oh, shut up," she mumbled, but spoke aloud to the Crane, "I humbly apologize, Lord Grus. I'll definitely take your wise and blessed advice." She cringed and rolled her eyes as they flew away.

At least they left the stench behind, but Lucy realized they were on the far southern edge of town, about as far away from Fairy Tail as they could get. She could see the expansive darkness that was Lake Scilliora in the distance, and the purple light of approaching dawn showed her the silhouette of the guild building. However, Grus was already struggling with her weight. Although the Crane was one of the largest of the avian Spirits, his abilities did not include carrying people.

Just then, she heard the twang of Sagittarius' arrows. "Hurry, Grus!"

"That's Lord Grus," he snapped arrogantly. "I am flying at the maximum airspeed velocity of a laden crane."

"This won't be enough," she realized, already calculating how to make the next leg of the journey. At least she got a few blocks away with Grus. "If I can't fly all the way...and he can fly..." Her eyes lit up. "Yes! It might work."

She heard a large crash behind her and looked around. A massively jagged uplifting of earth had pierced the avenue. Sagittarius balanced himself on top, fighting hard, his arrows flying. Lucy felt awful. Once again, she had called out a Spirit to fight only so she could run away. She would have to make it up to all of her Celestial Spirit friends later.

"This is the limit of my power," Grus warned, and suddenly they were heading down at a rapid speed. Lucy curled her knees, ready for a crash landing. For being so graceful, the Crane still had work to do with his landings. "Heed my advice on the diet, peon," he snapped, and then Grus poofed away.

"Up yours, pompous pigeon!" Lucy grumbled, sticking her tongue out at where he had disappeared.

She looked down. Her foot was still a big issue with walking. Even wrapped, it pained her to put any pressure on it. Her arm also throbbed, and a little blood was already seeping through the bandage she made out of her torn nightshirt. She tightened the tourniquet to keep the bleeding down, and then she pulled out her keys.

"Open the Gate of the Maiden! Virgo!"

In a flash and poof, the pink-haired maid appeared. "I'm ready for my punishment."

"Virgo, I need you to tunnel a path from here to the guild while carrying me. The feral will take to the skies. If he can't see us, he can't follow us, and maybe being underground will also mean he can't smell us."

She bowed stiffly. "Yes, Princess. Hold onto me and don't inhale the dust."

Lucy took a deep breath and grabbed tightly onto Virgo's shoulders. She felt them dive down, and as if plunging through water, Virgo burrowed through the ground. It was dark, noisy, and when Lucy finally did have to breathe, the air was stale and dust choked her lungs. She pressed her mouth into
Virgo’s maid uniform and breathed through that instead to filter the air.

"Princess, that tickles," Virgo said, cracking a rare smile.

Suddenly, Lucy sensed Virgo plummeting. Instead of straight burrowing, it was like she was falling through quicksand. Virgo scrambled as the texture of the soil around her changed.

"I'm sorry, Princess. We must emerge!"

Virgo swam upward, straining against the sinking soil, but finally they burst through the ground and into cool, pre-dawn air. Instantly, Lucy was grabbed and yanked away. Virgo was hit so hard, she poofed back to the Spirit World. Then the hand holding her threw Lucy to the ground.

"Smart, but foolish," the feral growled. "Fly in air, get far. Arrows sting like green-haired girlie with gun who hit us. But ground...all earth is mine!"

Lucy coughed out the dirt from her mouth and nose. "Then let's fight soil with soil. Open the Gate of the Scorpion! Scorpio!"

A poof, and the red-and-white-haired man with a scorpion's tail appeared. "Our sand is ready!"

"Please, Scorpio. Keep him back while I think of something."

"Yeah, gonna fight soil with sand." He crouched down and his tail poised. "Sand Buster!"

Lucy tried to think fast. There was still a long way to go. Flying did not work. Traveling underground was suicide. This winged beast had already defeated Loke, Taurus, Sagittarius, and Virgo. There was no water to call out Aquarius, although water would be strong against earth. She looked around everywhere. A house would have water. Even if it was a horse stall, anything wet would work. She would deal with Aquarius' rage later.

Scorpio's sand was useless. Balaur Blackstone was an Earth Dragon Slayer. Even as a feral, he had control over anything related to dirt. That meant he could easily stop Scorpio's sand and even turn it back against him. In not even a minute, the feral beast overwhelmed the Scorpion with a barrage of large rocks that easily penetrated the wall of sand, pelting Scorpio and forcing him to leave back to the Spirit World.

Lucy saw the beast charging at her and the blood lust in those red eyes. She raised her whip, but she had no time. She was not as coordinated with her left hand, and it moved slower. In a fleeting moment of terror, she realized the feral would get her this time. Her body stiffened, ready for the pain.

Instead, there was a flash, and she heard the beast howl in agony. She saw darkness, yet as her mind cleared, she realized the black was a man's coat. Then she saw the orange hair.

"Loke!"

Balaur roared again, and pebbles flew out of his mouth. Loke crossed his arms ahead of him, and a great golden shield blocked the attack.

"I'm not healed," warned Loke, and she heard the tight grit of his teeth in his words. He sounded exhausted, and Loke leaned over slightly in pain from the injuries he received less than an hour ago. His magic wavered gold and sickly green, but he was mostly stable. "I can't fight, but I can do this."

He grabbed her, wrapping her tightly in a crushing embrace. Lucy was about to smack him away for
being perverted, but she felt tingling all around her.

"I'm sorry, Lucy," he whispered.

She felt...strange. Light. Fuzzy. Then suddenly she was in agony unlike anything she had ever known. She opened her eyes, ready to scream at Loke, but she could not get her lungs to work.

Then she saw the floating orbs and glowing crystalline formations of the Spirit World. However, since she was not wearing celestial clothes, the different dimension was rapidly poisoning her. She shivered as she felt the potent spirit magic piercing all particles of her body.

"With a bit of my magic, I can keep a human in here for exactly one minute," Loke explained quietly. "However, time flows differently between our dimensions. One minute in the Spirit World is precisely ninety minutes in the Human World. It could buy you time, and with any luck that monster will grow bored and leave. So please, bear with the pain. I sent Virgo to get celestial clothes but...it'd take her more than a minute to fetch them," he sighed.

Lucy could not speak, nor barely breathe as her body felt crushed under the realm of the stars. Loke held her tightly, and she sensed he was trying to shield her from the full effect of the Spirit World upon a human.

"A few more seconds. Last as long as you can endure, Lucy. Each second will help."

She honestly did not think she would survive this. Humans could not exist in the Spirit World, not without special protective clothes. Loke squeezed her tighter. She sensed he was straining to keep his magic up to protect her.

"I can't risk any more time," he gnashed.

Suddenly, the world around Lucy changed. She gasped deeply and collapsed to the ground. They were right back where they had been, somewhere in southern Magnolia. Loke stood and surveyed the surroundings.

"I don't see him, but I have a strong feeling that he's close." He knelt and carefully helped Lucy to stand. "Look. It's morning. At least we can see better."

She saw he was right. The sun was up, although the night's chill still clung to the air. It felt like she had been in the Spirit World for nothing more than one minute, yet an hour-and-a-half had passed in the Human World. She hoped the beast flew off to find out where she had vanished to and was gone for good.

"Let's go," Loke urged.

He pulled her along. She felt sick, ready to faint, but sheer adrenaline kept her up.

"Oh wait!" she realized.

She had that card Mira gave her. It was meant so that if Natsu went wild in the prison, she could quickly call Mira to come help her. Perhaps it would work anywhere. She had tucked it away with her key pouch and forgot to give it back. She pulled it out now and pressed on it to activate the card. *Help Me* flashed red on it. Lucy tucked the card back into her pouch.

"Maybe Mira will come. I could use another person to help me fight. If I'm lucky, she'll bring Gajeel or those Sabertooth guys."
She and Loke at least got some distance. Still, they were not even to the train station yet. Lucy never thought Magnolia was this large. Her injuries made the journey feel like an endless nightmare. Then, she saw a shadow on the ground, large and winged. From somewhere high above, she heard a growl she knew too well.

"Damn," Loke sneered. "I'm still not recovered. I can shield you while the others fight, since I'm out on my own magic. Call Cancer. He's fastest. He can keep up with this guy's speed. And Aries. I...I need help shielding you." He hated to admit that he alone could not protect her. Needing help was a huge blow to the Lion's pride.

"Got it," she said, grabbing up her keys. "Open the Gate of the Crab! Cancer! Open the Gate of the Ram! Aries!"

The Crab and pink lamb appeared, but Lucy wobbled on her feet. Loke grabbed her around the shoulders and held her steady.

"Cancer," Loke shouted. "Stall that wannabe dragon as long as you can."

"Got it, ebi."

"Aries, shield us. Come on, Lucy," Loke said, gently pulling her away. "We gotta keep moving."

She stumbled as she limped away, going where he pulled her. "But...fight..."

"You can't fight, Lucy. You're too injured. Let us do the fighting this time. Hurry!"

Behind her, she heard Cancer's scissors clashing against stones. It was useless; she knew that. Anyone who had ever played jan-ken-pon knew that rock beat scissors. Still, Cancer had speed, and his many crab legs were good at blocking rocks the feral could fling at his opponents. Aries shielded them with her wool so none of the rocks hit them.

"I'm sorry, Loke," Lucy sighed. "I left you behind."

"That's what I told you to do," he said, not angry at her.

"I'm leaving everyone behind. I'm not fighting with you guys. This is horrible for an celestial summoner."

"It's our job to fight, to take the blows, and to protect our owner's life at any cost. I'm just sorry I couldn't handle him on my own. I'm really sorry you got hurt. I'd rather take all of your pain, Lucy, because I'm your knight...and your friend."

She smiled at his loyalty. Loke could be so sweet sometimes.

"I'll kiss all of your wounds when this is over."

"I don't think so, pervert!" Yep, Loke was the same as always.

"Leo!" Aries shouted in terror. "He's... Wool Wall!" she screamed, and Aries flinched back as the feral flew right into her barrier. "Cancer?" she cried out.

Loke sneered. "Dammit! Was he defeated so quickly? Hurry, Lucy."

She tried to run, but the cut on her foot still slowed her. Loke would have taken her into his arms and raced off, but he was too weakened, barely able to run himself.
"Try Virgo," he suggested.

"I already did. Her abilities are useless when this guy can control the soil."

"Gemini, then. We'll use them as a double."

"The feral tracks by smell. Gemini would only have my appearance and magic."

"Aquarius, then?"

"No water and I...I don't know if I can call anyone out anymore," Lucy admitted. "I'm almost out of magic. I'm...really ready to pass out."

"Don't!" He grabbed her hand and ran, pulling her along. "Not yet. Hang in there, Lucy. There's a shopping district up ahead. There should be people, someone who can help us. We just need to make it to..."

His words were cut off when a rock-encrusted fist punched right through Loke's head. He felt Lucy pulled out of his grasp. Loke collapsed to the ground and rolled over, fading already, but he saw with his remaining eye, the dark beast standing over him with Lucy struggling in his grasp. The feral snarled down at the Lion.

"Fade away, little star. Stay away." Then the beast raised his foot, aimed at Loke's head.

Lucy looked away. She knew Loke would not die, but she still could not bear to watch his head get crushed in. She sensed his celestial magic vanishing. There was still a little disappearing wool where Aries had also faced an inevitable defeat.

All of them! All of her Spirits, her friends, her one chance at fighting...all were defeated.

"Is that all?"

Lucy bit her lip to hold back sobs. She had often fretted about being so much weaker than her other teammates, but now she felt honestly powerless.

The beast smiled down into her face. "Tears make you pretty," he hissed, and he licked the salty lines dripping down her face. Lucy cringed at the heat of that tongue. "But pretty girlie needs to stop running."

His rock-like fist suddenly punched her leg, crushing muscles and crunching into the thigh bone. Lucy screamed as she fell to the ground. She did not think the bone was shattered, but definitely cracked, and a massive bruise was already darkening her skin. It was enough to keep her from walking anytime soon.

Her head swam from blood loss and magic deprivation. She wondered, if she just passed out, would the beast leave her alone? Sort of like playing dead to escape predatory animals. She had a feeling he would still ravage her, awake or asleep...and probably alive or dead.

He knelt down and straddled over her. His weight crushed her pelvis down into the hard road. She could not stop sobbing. Was there really nothing she could do against such strength? She weakly put her arms up, vainly shielding herself; he easily grabbed her wrists and pinned them down.

She looked into the face above her. Beyond the red eyes and fierce snarl, somewhere in there was a little boy.
Couldn't she call out to the human side of him?

What was his name? She had heard his name mentioned over the lacrima when they were on the road, a story from Gildarts about the frightened boy he had met, younger than her, scared of the beast inside of him, nothing but a poor, terrified, confused boy.

"Balaur!"

The beast jolted. That name...nobody had said that name in months. Slowly, the eyes faded from red to golden-brown, and the scaly skin smoothed down to a dark mocha hue. Balaur Blackstone stared in confusion.

"Who are you?" His voice was a normal sixteen-year-old's, but it sounded weary, slightly raspy, as if he had not spoken in a long time.

"My name is Lucy. I'm from Fairy Tail."

"A mage? Why are you here?" He saw blood oozing through on the bandage wrapped around her arm. "Oh God!" He leaped off of her and covered his mouth in disgust. "Was...was that me? Did I hurt you? I'm so sorry. You...you need to put pressure on that. Oh, and...um..." He bashfully covered his groin. "Sorry that I'm naked. The beast doesn't like clothes."

"It's fine. I have a friend who goes around naked a lot. Are you...normal now?"

The boy crunched up his face. "It's still there. I can't control it. I never learned how. Terracia, the dragon who raised me, disappeared when I was only a couple years old, so I'm really weak and didn't learn much of anything."

"You're not weak," she assured him.

"The beast knows more than I do," Balaur muttered, holding his head in pain. "It wants...to be a dragon. A real dragon. I wanted it too for a while, but then I realized...I wouldn't exist. Only it. Want...dragon..." He gasped as the pain in his head grew worse. "You need to get out of here. Get as far away as you can, and send...a dragon...slayer." Balaur doubled over. "Hurry! Get away! It's trying to come back."

Lucy looked down at the massive bruise to her leg. The bone hurt, and just flexing the knee made the thigh muscles burn with pain. She could not walk, surely not run away before the beast regained control. "I don't know if I have enough magic."

Balaur knelt beside her. "I won't hurt you," he said, and Balaur put his hand on Lucy's sternum. She felt energy filling her. "It's another ability I have, unrelated to dragon slayer magic. I can transfer a little of my magic into others. Not my abilities, and not much, just a bit of magic power. Eterano transfusion, they call it. I wish I could give you all of my magic. Maybe then, the beast wouldn't return."

Still, what he gave Lucy made her feel strong enough to pull out another key. "Open the Gate of the Goat! Capricorn!"

In a puff and flash, the well-dress Goat appeared and bowed. "How may I serve you, Lucy-sama?"

"I'm sorry to ask this, but carry me away as fast as you can."

"Should I fight him?" he asked, eying Balaur.
"Too dangerous," Lucy panted, feeling the dizziness of blood loss. "We need to hurry out of here."

"Yes, hurry, please," Balaur urged. "I'll hold it back as long as...as I can." He doubled over. "Aaaargh! A few minutes. Maybe less. Uuugh! Hurry!"

Capricorn easily lifted Lucy princess-style. Then he began to race forward, leaping over obstructions with the grace of a goat. Lucy rested her head against him. Her heart was still pounding from the fight, but she felt a little sorry for Balaur. She also feared such a fate might befall Natsu.

"Where shall we go, Lucy-sama?"

She wanted to sleep in her own bed, but that was foolish. There was only one safe place in Magnolia. "The guild."

"Understood."

She drifted off for a minute, then jolted back awake. When she did, she saw they were right by the train station.

"Lucy-sama?" Capricorn asked, sensing she had woken up.

"Lost...too much..." She shook her head to keep herself conscious. "We need...dragon slayer. Capricorn, if I pass out, you need to tell Gajeel..."

Suddenly, a clawed hand burst through Capricorn's chest, missing Lucy by a hair. The Goat cried out in pain, and Lucy screamed. When she looked over Capricorn's shoulder, the beast was right there, grinning wildly.

"Don't...steal...my...prey," the demonic creature hissed.

Capricorn set Lucy down hard. "Run! I'll..." He gasped as the hand ripped out. "...hold...him off. Go!"

She could barely put any pressure on the leg that was likely cracked, yet she hopped along awkwardly. Once again, she was limping away while her Spirits sacrificed themselves.

Why? Why was this happening? There was no way she could fight a creature this strong.

She heard the fight behind her. She glanced briefly back and saw Capricorn putting up one heck of a fight. He was strong, and Capricorn was an earth sign, perhaps the most equal to an Earth Dragon Slayer.

She could not stand around and watch, though. The guild was too far away still. With her injured leg, she would never make it. She had to find shelter, a place she could barricade, and preferably a weapon. She thought about using the train station itself, although that put the public in danger. Still, at least if she was in a crowded area, someone would tell the army, or inform Fairy Tail of their fight, rather than remaining in empty streets. Maybe she could even board a train and escape Magnolia completely. However, the beast would fly after any train, and then all of the passengers would be at risk. She raced toward the station, her leg throbbing, the bone creaking as if ready to completely snap in half. The wound on her foot reopened, but she still limped onward.

Then something grabbed her hair, and she was yanked to a stop. Slowly, she turned around and saw red eyes glaring down at her.

"Slayer is idiot," the feral beast hissed. "Why let go of tasty girlie? Stupid Slayer."
He grabbed Lucy and yanked her against his body. She pressed her hands against his rock-hard chest, but his arms were like granite, making it impossible to break free. Then he leaped into the air and flew. She feared he would return to the smelly neighborhood. Then all of her running, all that her Spirit friends suffered and sacrificed, would have been in vain. Instead, he flew to the very top of the train station and alighted on the roof.

Lucy realized that it was morning, and very soon there would be many people boarding trains. However, way up here on one of the tallest buildings in Magnolia, with the noise of the rails to drown out all sound, even if Lucy screamed, no one would hear her.

"I will be a dragon," the feral declared sternly. "Before that happens, I should pass on strength. You are strong woman, strongest I have yet met. Pretty girlie. Strong girlie. Fight well. You will make strong children."

Lucy looked up in horror. Just that night, she had a dream about being pregnant, and when she looked to see who the father was, thinking it was Natsu, it was this beast who appeared in her dream. That horror made her tremble.

"Slayer is old enough." His hand pressed against Lucy's lower belly, and she squirmed away. "You are ready, ripe for seed."

"No!" she shrieked, fighting against him.

The feral leaned up into her face with a sadistic smile. "You are shit to fertilize my seed, just as Slayer was shit to feed me so I could grow. While I am still a human in body, you will give me children. I will put seeds in those children. They will grow to be Slayers, and when it is time, they will turn into me. You will be mother of dragons. Is great honor."

Lucy glared as she struggled against that strong hold. She sneered at him, not seeing the sick boy anymore, but the beast that had thoroughly taken over. "I am not yours to take. Only one man is allowed to touch me like that."

"No. Only one type of man. Only a Slayer. Does not matter what type."

She fought his tightening hold. "I only want Natsu."

"He want children? He ask for babies? Is not his wants. I tell you now: to have babies is the want of the beast within. Fire Slayer does not want you that way. He is not in love. He's only showing the wants of the beast. He is feral. Beast's wants are now his wants."

"He's not feral. He said the beast within said he's not feral yet."

"Of course. Keep Slayer happy."

"He's not feral!" she screamed.

"He will be...when he comes to save you."

Lucy was suddenly shoved to the ground, hitting her head hard. Her vision blacked out for a moment, but then she felt a heavy weight on top of her. She opened her eyes to see that dark face with a lustful sneer.

"You fight for so long. Brave girlie. No more fighting now." It licked her lips, and Lucy turned her face away with disgust. "Time for fucking."
He yanked her legs apart and spread them with his own body. Lucy jolted, desperately pulling away, but the feral quickly had both of her wrists pinned to the tiles of the roof, and his heavy body crushed down on her.

One of his thick claws slid along her throat. Lucy froze for a moment and gasped in terror as the sharpness threatened to slice her neck open. That razor-sharp claw dragged slowly across her skin to her chest, then yanked down fast, ripping her nightgown apart. Cold morning air blew against her breasts, making them perk up instantly. Lucy struggled again, lashing back and forth, trying to shake free.

"Yes, keep fighting. More fun."

Lucy felt something hard slide up her thigh and wedge against the cotton barrier of her panties. She gasped, and the feral chuckled cruelly as he rubbed himself against her covered core.

"No!" she screamed. "I won't let you." Just as she screamed, the first train of the morning chugged into the station, and her cries mixed with its blaring whistle.

Was Loke too weak to come to her a second time? She had used almost all of her keys already, and they all vanished back to the Spirit World with injuries. It was still just a little after sunrise, and there were few people in this area. The residents of Magnolia were mostly at home just waking up. Besides, if anyone came to help her, the feral would kill them.

She felt like screaming for Natsu, but she knew if he came, he would turn into a mindless beast, just like Balaur. She would not let that happen. No matter what happened to her body, she would protect Natsu.

The feral chuckled. "Slayer inside must like you. He woke up again. He's telling me no, stop, don't hurt her. He is stupid boy, weak." The beast leaned down and licked Lucy's breast. She tensed up in disgust at the hot tongue lapping on her. "He does not know how to fuck women. He was a virgin before I awoke. Maybe I will let him watch this time as I fuck you."

Lucy realized a horrible similarity. Natsu had also been a virgin before the beast forced itself on her. In the same way, poor Balaur lost his innocence because of this debased creature.

She sneered in disgust. "You are everything evil about humanity, and none of the good within that boy."

The beast raised his head from her breast and looked down at her coldly. "I am all that is strong." He reached down, and that sharp claw tore her panties in half, fully exposing her. She felt a soft hardness press against her again.

"N-no...Natsu," she whimpered, wishing she could scream his name and cry for help. But she couldn't! If he came, she would lose the man she loved. He would change into a creature like this. She gazed up into those red eyes. Definitely, she did not want Natsu to change into this.

The beast chuckled hungrily as his hips flexed, thrusting up against her. Then he paused and pulled back. He pressed again, and Lucy clenched tightly, dreading what was to come, hoping her vaginal muscles alone could hold him out. He growled lowly in frustration, tried again even firmer, but to no avail. It was not simply that Lucy did a lot of Kegel exercises and could squeeze herself totally shut. It was a different, and far more common, issue.

"You are dry."

"Do you think I'd be aroused?" she screamed angrily.
"Was hoping to make this quick. Magnolia-people wake soon. I guess we can take a little time for pleasure." He held up two fingers with their curved black claws and began to lick them.

Lucy's eyes grew huge with horror. "Oh, you are not sticking those in me!"

"No. Might damage womb. Then no babies." He focused, and the claws on just those two fingers retracted to normal. "Better."

"Don't touch me," she snarled, struggling violently. "Don't you dare..."

He reached down and smiled sadistically as he rubbed circles around her clit. Lucy jolted at the touch, but she could not break free.

"I'll make you moist," he hissed. "Make you ready. Then when Fire Slayer comes, I'll show him, mark you, make him watch as I thrust my cock into you and claim what was his."

Suddenly, he rammed his fingers inside. Lucy gasped, shocked he actually did it. His fingers thrust in and out, enticing her inside. She shook her head, fighting the physical responses. She still hoped someone would come at the last minute and save her, like in a romance novel. But real life was not filled with romantic last-minute rescues. Real life bred horror and ugliness.

"You are getting wet so quickly," he purred, curling his fingers up and hitting her spot dead on, making Lucy lose her breath. "Like that? Girlie likes it. Smell is changing."

She thrashed under him, trying desperately to break free. Her wrists hurt, she was pretty sure one was broken, but still she yanked away.

"Stop it, please!" she shrieked.

"If fingers stop, cock enters." He leaned over her and licked her tear-stained face. "Which would girlie rather have? Fingers, or cock?"

Lucy sneered up defiantly. "You are sick."

He withdrew his fingers and licked them. "You are delicious." He licked again, but suddenly he pulled the fingers out of his mouth. His tongue ran across the roof of his mouth to rid himself of something distasteful. "Fire Slayer fucked you. Taste him, but don't taste his seed. Did he fuck you without giving you children? Stupid Fire Slayer."

Lucy was sobbing, realizing she was about to be raped, but she still glared with proud spitefulness. "He's not feral. He wants children because he loves me, but because of that love, he's considerate of my wishes. Natsu cares for me, and he's respectful of me. That's the man I love."

Those red eyes leaned in close to her. "That's the man I will kill."

His fingers slammed hard into her again. Lucy shrieked as she tried to push him away. Instead, he forced a third finger in, prying her open.

"That is the man I will slaughter in front of your eyes. I will kill him, rip open his chest, tear out his heart, and give it to you. I will eat his liver and his muscles, and I will scatter his intestines all around you. Then I will piss into his carcass and shit into his emptied chest. But first, I will make him watch as I fuck you. I will make him see you take my seed. He will see how stupid he was. Could have given you children, but didn't. Stupid Fire Slayer. But lucky for me. Your babies will be mine."

He leaned over and bit her neck, leaving a second wounding mark, just above the one he had given
"Mine," he purred, and latched onto the other side of her neck, sucking hard and leaving behind a huge purple mark. "Claim you. Mark you. Now fuck you."

She felt his fingers thrust again, and she thought of Natsu. She sobbed as she feared he would not want her after this. Even if someone came, even if this feral creature was stopped, Natsu would reject her. She had been marked by another. She had been touched by another man. She was no longer his alone.

"Scream more," the beast growled, thrusting again and again. "Scream for him. Louder!"

Lucy slammed her mouth shut instead. She wanted to shout Natsu's name, but she was too afraid. If he came, she would lose him.

"No? Fingers no fun anymore? All wet. Ready for more?" He pulled his fingers out and sidled up against her. She felt his shaft rub up and down her slit, moistening himself. Then the tip begin to spread her.

"No!" she shrieked, clenching tightly again.

"Yes, scream. Scream so he hears you. Bring him..."

Fire rushed past her, and the weight on her vanished. Lucy felt only the lingering heat of flames and the pain of her own body. She gasped, and a dread beyond even this type of humiliation filled her.

"Natsu!" she shrieked. She saw pink wings and flames dancing along a crimson tail. Instantly, she feared the worst.

No, it can't be him. If he came here, he'll turn feral. I'll lose him. I can't lose him! I don't care what happens to me, but I can't lose him.

"You goddamn bastard." Natsu punched the beast three times before forcing his hand to stop, grabbing his wrist to hold it back, as if he had no control over that part of his body. He shuddered in rage, glaring at the creature under him. "I'll kill you! No... Yes, kill! No, we are not killing anyone." He grabbed the feral by the throat and yanked Balaur's dark head up. Sneering, Natsu growled out, "I will never forgive you. I want to kill you...so much," he sneered in maddening fury. Natsu's fingers squeezed the throat tightly, making the creature gag and croak out choking gasps.

"Natsu?"

He heard that tiny voice, dropped the neck he had begun to strangle, and looked around. Only then did Lucy see the green eyes. Natsu was still himself, but for how much longer? Now that he was here, with the smell of the feral right in front of him, how long could his sanity last?

Natsu had seen enough. As he flew here, he saw what was happened to Lucy, and the hatred in him had momentarily taken over. Now, seeing Lucy bruised and covered in blood, cradling a torn arm and broken wrist, with her nightgown ripped to pieces, that fury simmered, and fear overtook him.

"Lucy! Oh God, I'm sorry. I wasn't quick enough. I'm so sorry that happened. Did...did he...?" He slammed his eyes shut and shook his head. "No, it doesn't matter. I won't let him hurt you anymore. No matter what happens, we are going to protect you."

"We?" she asked softly. Was he already losing his individuality? Tears gathered in her eyes. She felt disgusting; those touches still crept on her skin, making her feel dirty. She curled into herself and
looked away, unable to face him like this. "You shouldn't have come."

"Of course I'd come, Lucy," he whispered, hating to see the tears and smell the blood. "No matter what that bastard did, I still love you," he swore ardently. "I will always love you, and I won't let him hurt you again. I won't let anyone hurt you," he sneered fiercely. "You are my mate, and that will never change."

He looked back to the feral he had tackled, and the beast inside Natsu was in an uproar. Natsu's fists tightened as that hatred flowed back into him, filling his veins with powerful fire.

"I really want to kill you," Natsu sneered, breathing heavily as the darker emotions welled up inside. "For making her bleed, for making her cry, for daring to touch her with your disgusting body...I'm gonna bash your face in."

« Yes, fight! »

"I'm gonna burn you."

« Yes, burn to ash! »

Natsu sneered madly, and red flickered in and out of his eyes. "I'll kill you and anyone else who dares to hurt her."

« Kill all! Kill all! »

That maddened cackle suddenly sounded good. The darker thoughts were appealing. All the ways he could slowly kill this creature passed through Natsu's mind with a sadistic sense of giddiness. He would kill this beast slowly, brutally, tear him to tiny pieces, and drink his blood. Then he would reclaim Lucy, undo all this beast had done to her by overwhelming her with his own body, covering her all over with his scent, his marks, fuck her as his mate.

Kill...fuck...claim...

Natsu drew up a fist. However, as the flickers of red began to take over his eyes, the fist opened to razor-sharp black claws, ready to rip the beast under him to shreds.

"You hurt Lucy. I'll fucking kill you!" Natsu hissed.
Next is an emotional piece by SrngDrng. This picture made me go back and tweak a chapter so that Natsu and Lucy's foreheads are leaning against one another while he's caged. When I showed it to my husband (who doesn't watch FT) his mouth dropped a bit. "That's damn good! It looks like the anime." So see, SrngDrng, you get approval from Hubby as a "damn good" artist!

Also by SrngDrng, it's Natsu flying to rescue Lucy. Go, Natsu, gooooo!
Also, I drew a little something: Natsu in the midst of a transformation. (I know, all these awesome artists, and then me with my pencils).

"Turning Feral"
"Natsu, stop!" Lucy cried out.

The fierce claw, poised to shred the half-beast under him, froze at her shout. Natsu's eyes still did not leave his prey, fluctuating between sage green and crimson red, but he held back as her shout brought him back to his senses.

Lucy looked at the feral. Part of her wanted to hate him. He had hurt her and her friends. He had killed...who knew how many people! And he had been ready to rape her just a minute ago. Still, under all the snarling, she saw that teenager she had briefly spoken to.

"He's just a boy in there," she said sympathetically. "He's scared. He was telling the feral not to hurt me. He doesn't want anyone hurt. He's trapped in there, partially conscious, caged by the beast. We need to see if we can somehow save him. If...if it's at all possible..."

She wanted to rescue the boy held prisoner inside that beastly body, because as Lucy looked at Natsu's wings and tail, all she could imagine was...what if this had happened to Natsu? What if the boy that Balaur Blackstone had once been was just like the silly Fire Dragon Slayer? If someone had found him earlier, this boy could have grown up in Fairy Tail. He could have been one of their guildmates. Fairy Tail would never give up on Natsu, even if he turned fully feral. Similarly, her brief meeting with the boy dwelling inside this beast showed her that this was not just some fiend, but a potential friend. If this had happened to Natsu...

She would do anything to save Natsu.

She also did not want to see Natsu turn into a killer. She had a horrible feeling that if he killed Balaur, a piece of Natsu's humanity would be forever lost.

Slowly, the claw dropped, and the tension loosened from Natsu's shoulders. Balaur did not move, assessing the threat from this new prey, wondering why he did not instantly attack, what this hesitation meant.

"I know how he feels," Natsu said darkly, glaring down at the feral. "I know what it's like, being trapped, looking out from the inside, knowing you're hurting people, maybe even killing people," he sneered, "and not able to do a damn thing about it." Finally, he turned away and gazed sadly at Lucy. "Even hurting friends," he whispered.

She bit her lip, knowing that Natsu must still be torn up inside that it had been his body that claimed her the night of the gala, took her virginity, and yet...it was not his mind.

"I know what it's like," he growled, looking away sadly. Then he glared down at the beast again. "I know how much it hurts, how you end up hating yourself, and all you want...is for someone to stop
"On..." he gnashed, breathing heavily. "All you want...is for the nightmare to end...one way or another." His fingers tightened up again, baring the claws. "I know how he feels inside, and I know...he probably wishes for death."

"Natsu, stop!" Lucy screamed again.

With a red glow of fury in his eyes, Natsu's hand plunged down, yet at the last second the feral grabbed his wrist, easily halting the attack. Natsu tried to pull away, but Balaur had his wrist in a crushing grip. Slowly, the feral rose to his feet. He grinned at Natsu, only slightly shorter, both so frightfully similar with their wings and tails, one brown like the soil, the other crimson like flames. The feral leaned in close to Natsu's face.

"Fight me." He yanked Natsu's wrist forward to pull him in and grinned with a fierce hiss of excitement. "Fight me, Fire Slayer. Fight me for girlie."

Natsu yanked his wrist away and glared hard, pulling himself up to be even taller over this younger dragon slayer. "I don't need to fight you over Lucy. She's mine!"

The beast cackled and tilted his head with a wild smile. "I claimed her. I marked her."

Natsu laughed smugly. "Sniff closer, bastard. I can tell you touched her, but I can also tell...you didn't take her."

"Marked her!" he insisted.

"I marked her, too."

"Marked over your mark."

Natsu glanced back to Lucy and saw that, indeed, there was a bite right over where he had bitten her just the night before, and many other bites had bruised her skin. It angered him to see that and to think about what this feral must have done to her. He smelled no semen, at least, but he did smell Lucy's sexy scent on this creature's hand. He had touched her inside, and he had marked her flesh, putting his claim on her.

"So what?" Natsu shouted, gritting his teeth in fury. "I'll mark her again. I'll mark her as many times as I have to, because she is my mate. I..." The red flashed brighter in his eyes, and his voice growled, "I fucked her first."

Lucy trembled. That was the voice of the beast, the creature from that night at the gala. He was back...but not fully. The eyes were mostly red, but some green still sparkled through the burning, beastly glare. She could see for herself, Natsu was unstable.

The feral chuckled lowly. "But I marked her first."

"What?" the beast hissed. Suddenly, Natsu's eyes widened and snapped solidly back to green. "What did you say?"

Lucy gasped as she remembered her first encounter with these half-dragon beasts. "That night. The night I was attacked. He bit me. He...he bit me on my breast." Her hand touched her chest where she could still remember the pain of that creature in the darkness as it sank its teeth into her flesh.

Natsu growled furiously. "Then it was you! I was never sure if it was you or me that night. For weeks, I was terrified it might have been me who hurt Lucy so badly. But...it was you, you goddamn bastard!"
"Yessssss," the beast hissed smugly. "Marked her first. Claimed her first. Smelled dragon slayer on her, but not marked, so I took her."

"Then that means..." Natsu's tail whipped back and forth angrily, and his wings trembled in rage. "...you hurt Lucy even back then. She was in a coma for days. She almost died! You hurt her...that...badly." The red flared in his eyes again, and he bared his sharp teeth. "You hurt Lucy. Kill you!"

"Natsu!" Lucy shouted, but he began to hunch over, his tail swishing with madness. "Natsu, you need to calm down. Don't let the beast take over. Don't kill him, please."

The feral cackled arrogantly. "Listen to girlie." In a falsetto, he mocked, "Don't kill me."

"Shut...up!" Natsu growled.

Suddenly, the feral looked around. "In air. On building. Not good for fight." He bolted past Natsu, grabbed Lucy around the waist, and leaped off the train station roof, flying off with Lucy shrieking at the sensation like she was falling, only for the feral's wings to flap and lift them both into the air.

"Lucy!" Natsu screamed. He spread his wings and took off after them. "Give her back. Fire Dragon's Roar!" A ball of flames shot out of Natsu's mouth.

Lucy screamed as the fire scorched her as well. "You idiot! Who do you think he's holding?"

"Oh. Sorry, Lucy."

"Sheesh, practically turning into a beast yourself, but you're still an idiot." She should be angry, he had burned off the last bits of her clothes, but as she watched Natsu flying after her, she could hardly help but smile. He was still the same silly Natsu deep down inside.

Natsu realized an aerial battle was a bad idea since Lucy might be dropped. He flew after the feral, although he was not as used to wings as this seasoned beast. He struggled with flying straight, and he was much slower.

"How does Happy make it look so easy?" he grumbled, straining to flap his wings properly.

« I could help Slayer fly. »

"How can I trust you?"

« Because is Lucy. Save Lucy. Kill feral. »

"Lucy doesn't want him to die."

« Then only fly. Fly to Lucy. Save her. We need Lucy. Protect Lucy. Don't let feral bastard take Lucy away from us. »

Natsu debated it, but he was quickly falling behind the two. "Fine," he grumbled. He closed his eyes, and when they opened, the beast's red eyes were glowing. "We save Lucy. We only fly, not kill. Not yet." Instantly, the wings flapped harder, and Natsu sped through the air with a determined sneer.

They headed out of Magnolia and to a flat stretch of land covered in clovers. There, the feral alighted and tossed Lucy to the side. She rolled over the clovers, crying out at the pain all through her body. Her leg still throbbed, her arm had soaked through the bloody bandage, and her broken wrist burned as the bones crunched together.
"Better place. Firm earth." He picked up a rock. "Lunchtime." He bit right into the stone, crunched it between his teeth, and swallowed it down.

Lucy felt the ground under her. Because of the clover, the soil was soft and smelled fresh. There was a sponginess to the soil, but firmness as well. Indeed, if the Earth Dragon Slayer had to fight, doing it on a building would be a disadvantage. Here, he could change the field to his liking. At least if they were out in a clearing like this, they would not cause too much damage to the city. Makarov would punish them harshly if they destroyed the train station.

Natsu landed and instantly crouched with his wings spread in a dominating pose. "Fight!" he hissed, but the red in his eyes faded. "You wanna fight, huh?"


"You bastard," he sneered. "I'm the one who will father her children, because I'm the one who will marry her!"

Lucy blushed as he boldly declared that. "Idiot. You haven't actually proposed to me yet," she mumbled happily.

"I will when you're ready, and you'll say yes."

"Says who?"

Natsu smiled. "I know you, Lucy. You'll blush and mumble that I asked you totally all wrong, but you'll still say yes. Then we'll marry and have kids, and you'll be a mother and I'll be a father, and we'll have our own house with Happy and lots of children."

Lucy bashfully looked away. Was that really his dream? It was...sort of nice.

"Marry?" the beast questioned. "Who cares! I fuck her, give her babies. You had your chance. Stupid Fire Slayer not plant seeds when shit is fertile."

"Hey! Are you calling Lucy a piece of shit?" he yelled angrily. "I won't forgive anyone who calls her that."

"Then fight me," the feral smirked. "Winner gets tofuck her."

Natsu crouched lower. "If you dare touch her, I really will kill you."

"Already touched her." The feral lifted his hand and stiffed the fingers he had forced inside Lucy. "Good smell. You like her smell, too? Nice smelling girlie. And she tastes good." He licked his fingers, then thrust his tongue between the fingers, giving a crude imitation of what he planned to do to Lucy.

His eyes flashed red in outrage. "Bastard!"

"Natsu!"

A deep voice bellowed his name just as Lucy thought for sure Natsu would pounce and attack. Everyone looked up to the sky in shock as Pantherlily, Lector, and Frosh dropped down, settling Gajeel, Sting, and Rogue onto the ground, with Happy following behind them. Lucy brightened up at seeing them.

"Gajeel! Rogue! Sting!"
"Hey there, cutey," Sting said flirtatiously. He shrugged off a cape he was wearing and draped it over Lucy's naked body. "Cover up before you get sick."

"Thank you," she muttered, having almost forgotten about her exposed body.

Natsu still faced off with the feral. "Took you guys a while," he said in a raspy voice, panting as he struggled to remain in control.

Rogue looked at him warily. "Are you okay?"

"Yes!" he hissed, but Natsu shook his head. "Y-yeah," he replied again. "Just fine."

Gajeel stepped forward cautiously. "Natsu, you need to get out of here."

"No!" he snapped in a scathing snarl. "My prey!" His eyes dimmed back to green. "My fight. This...is my fight," he declared, breathing laboriously. "He challenged me over Lucy. My fight. My prey!" he ended in a half-insane cackle. Natsu held his head, shuddering as he struggled between the two personalities. "I'm...okay."

"No, you're not, you idiot," Gajeel shouted.

Sting looked at the man he admired so deeply, and his eyes tightened with worry. Lucy gazed up and saw his expression.

"Is Natsu okay?"

Sting wanted to assure her it would all be fine, but as he watched, he realized the horrible truth. "No," he whispered. "He's not. Natsu," he called over. "Your smell is changing even worse. You need to get out of here. You won't last long." Under his breath, he added, "It might already be too late."

"I...can't," Natsu said softly, not turning away from the beast. "Challenged. Have to fight."

"Shit," Gajeel muttered. "Feral instincts. If he truly believes this, he's slipping fast."

Sting reached his hand down to Lucy. "Let's get you away..."

The earth feral roared suddenly. Lucy flattened, shielding her face with Sting's cloak as pebbles flew at the three dragon slayers, forcing them back. Suddenly, a wall of stone rose up beside Lucy, blocking her from the others.

"My fight!" the feral screamed. "No interrupt!"

He slammed both hands on the ground, and the earth shattered. A massive gap cracked open, so deep no one could see the bottom, and too wide to jump. The area around the feral, Natsu, and Lucy stood like an island separated from the rest of the clover field.

"Lucy!" Happy cried out.

Sting tried to reach out to her, but the gap was far too wide. Happy was ready to fly over, but Frosh grabbed his tail.

"Don't go, Happy. He's too strong for us."

"But Lucy..." the blue Exceed began to protest.
"Leave it to Sting-kun," Lector said with confidence.

Happy watched the two and frowned fretfully. "Natsu," he whispered, silently praying his best friend would be all right.

Natsu glanced back to Lucy. "Are you okay?"

"I'm not hurt," she replied, although she felt like panicking now that she was cut off from help.

"Don't worry. I won't let him touch you again."

"Natsu..." she whispered.

"Natsu!" Gajeel shouted. "You can fly still. Get out of there. We'll protect Lucy, I promise."

"Mine!" he snarled. Natsu gulped, trying to hold back more of the change. "I love Lucy." Then suddenly his eyes went red. "And I love Lucy!" He breathed heavily. "And we're gonna protect her."

"You idiot!" Gajeel shouted.

"Natsu!" Sting's mouth dropped. "Oh God, he's merging."

"Yeah," Gajeel grumbled with a sneer. "Shit!"

Rogue watched with narrowed eyes. "What do we do? Is he even able to recover at this point?"

Gajeel hesitated before admitting quietly, "I don't know."

"It shouldn't be possible," Sting insisted. "Right? It shouldn't be physically feasibly, merging like that. I mean, he's both at the same time." His voice fell with quiet hope and inner dread. "That...shouldn't be possible."

"It's Natsu," Gajeel said, not bothering to conceal the admiration he had for his rival. "The guy's an idiot, but he's loyal by instinct. Him and that damn beast inside him are working in harmony to protect Lucy."

"Me?" Lucy asked, overhearing them from across the chasm.

Natsu chuckled gravelly. "Yeah, that's right, and I don't get it," he admitted. "Me and the beast, we're putting aside our own wants and needs for one desire: protect Lucy. Dunno how, but we're working together on this one. I know one thing, though. This...feral..." he said, nodding to Balaur. "He can be saved."

Lucy's eyes lit up with hope. "He can?"

"He can't," Gajeel insisted.

"Yes, he can, Gajeel," Natsu said confidently.

"He'll fully feral."

"Yeah, he is...but do you know what?" He smiled as his eyes flicked between green and red. "Lucy doesn't want him to die. The beast...inside me...he says... There is a way," came a growling hiss. "There is a way to save feral."

Lucy shivered at that voice. "Natsu..."
His hand lashed out, as if shoving that other personality aside. "I...can defeat him." He gasped wearily and began to sweat as he staved off the inner struggle. "I can defeat his inner beast, but...there's a trick to it, one you guys aren't going to like." He glanced over to the three other dragon slayers. "Only another feral can do it."

Gajeel glared at him. "You're talking about letting yourself slip on purpose."

"Natsu," Sting warned. "You're on the cusp of becoming the same as him. If you end up turning into some murderous monster, I swear I'll kill you."

Natsu laughed wryly. "You don't have to worry, Sting. I won't hurt anyone except the beast inside him."

Rogue shouted across the chasm, "Even if you can save him, who will save you?"

"I'll figure that out when I get there."

Gajeel protested, "Natsu, this is suicidal."

"Only if I die."

"Natsu!" Lucy cried out. "Don't do it. I can't lose you. Please, don't become like him."

He glanced over and saw her sobbing and silently shaking her head. "Hey, don't worry." He laughed, giving her the grin he always had despite the sweat from his inner turmoil. Then he promised solemnly, "I'll return to you, Lucy."

"A feral can't be saved," Gajeel shouted.

"They can!" Natsu yelled back, lashing out with his tail. "The beast inside knows how. Maybe Igneel taught me and I just can't remember on my own, but the beast knows... There's a way." Natsu gulped hard to hold back the beast. "There's...a way," he repeated calmer. "However, it means...it means I have to become feral first." His stomach twisted at the thought of giving up his humanity. What if the beast inside him was lying? Could he lie to himself like that? "I have to trust...myself." He firmed his stance with determination.

Lucy cried out tearfully, "Natsu, please, don't!"

He gave her a confident glance. "I won't lose, Lucy. After all," and his smile brightened, "I still have to get you a carrot ring."

The tears spilled over Lucy's face. She whispered his name softly, "Natsu." Even in the face of possibly losing his humanity, he could make her feel warm inside, like a bit of his fire burned within her.

"Trust me," he said firmly. Then Natsu closed his eyes. "All right, you bastard beast. Let's do this."

Gajeel jolted forward to the edge of the chasm. "Natsu, no! If you willingly let the beast take over, you'll never..."

Too late! Scales crinkled over his skin. His eyes opened, and they gleamed red. When Natsu smiled, his fangs were longer, and a purring growl of satisfaction gurgled out of his throat.

"Want fight," he declared.
**NEW FANART!**

ANO Dram. Another fanart from SrgnDrgn. Again, it's like she read my mind and drew a scene months before I actually wrote what's outlined in my notes.

"Annoyed"

You can listen to how I tore up my throat acting this out. This is how I write, acting out the scene and recording the audio first.

[http://chirb.it/fOddsA](http://chirb.it/fOddsA)
The Jester of the Fourth Moon

Sting watched on with a pained expression. Sure, Natsu was a rival, but he admired this man so much, he did not want to see him go like this. The creature in front of him snarled and hunched over. This was no longer Natsu. Even his smell changed, and that made Sting realize the horrible truth.

"We lost him," he whispered. "He's completely feral."

"Smells that way," Gajeel agreed. "He smelled bad before, but it's way worse now. Still, I ain't giving up hope on him yet."

Sting looked over in shock. "But I thought once a dragon slayer changed to a feral, there's no hope for them."

"Normally, yeah, but if he says there's a way to come back, I'm gonna wait and see. If anyone can defeat the inner beast and come back, it's Salamander."

The stubbornness in Gajeel's face amazed Sting. He was sure these two were rivals, too. They probably fought and bickered all the time. However, Gajeel looked like he was proud of Natsu and envied his inner strength.

Sting watched the scene. Balaur and Natsu were growling at one another, with Lucy trapped amidst impending chaos. She also looked worried, yet her face showed that she had no doubts that Natsu would come back to her.

If even a girl like her trusted this Salamander, Sting would, too.

Natsu crouched low, glaring at the beast, growling viciously deep in his throat. His eyes gleamed, and his fangs caught the early morning light as he snarled with wild, feral madness.

Balaur tilted his head with sly amusement. "Want fight?"

Natsu growled scathingly. "Protect Lucy. Fight for Lucy."

"Protect? Protect is stupid. Want fuck her?"

Natsu's red eyes twinkled mischievously. "Of course. Feel good. Smell good. Taste good. Slayer likes how she feels inside."

"Share?" the feral offered.

Natsu hunched down lower, dropping to all fours. "Why share? Lucy is ours."

"You just want to protect her, yes."

"And fuck her."

"Fuck and protect," the feral reasoned. "We fight, Lucy gets hurt. We share, no hurt."

Lucy's eyes went wide. "What the hell are you talking about?"

The pink beast thought about the offer. "Fuck Lucy, but not hurt her?"

"No hurt. Just mating. Share her. Whichever seed fertilizes, is same. Is feral. Not matter which."
"Sounds good. Get to fuck, not have to kill you, get to have Lucy."

"WHAT?" she screamed.

Natsu suddenly grabbed Lucy. "Slayer say only fuck Lucy. Not say if I can't share you." He leaped into the air with her wrapped in his arms. Then he and the feral flew off together.

Gajeel, Sting, and Rogue watched the two winged half-dragons fly away with blank, dumbstruck faces.

"What the hell just happened?" Gajeel asked in a soft mumble.

Rogue had a blush to his cheeks. "I think they just agreed to a threesome."

Sting's mouth dropped. "Hey! I wanna join in. Come on, Lector."

Rogue put a hand on his arm, stopping the blond dragon slayer. "I don't think you'd be wanted."

Sting smiled arrogantly. "Who wouldn't want me?"

"Yeah!" Lector cheered. "Sting-kun is the best at everything."

"Fro thinks so, too."

Rogue looked down disapprovingly. "Frosh, do you even know what they're talking about?"

"Uuuuuh...about having fun?" the froggy Exceed guessed.

"Let's go!" Sting cheered. Lector grabbed him, and he flew off after the feral dragon slayers.

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**Nine Months Later**

Lucy couldn't believe she ended up with triplets. Three babies, one dark, one blond, and one with pink hair all cried at the same time. One kept glowing white in the middle of the night, which woke up the other two. When the light startled the dark one, the ground would begin to shake. That woke up the sleeping pink one, who nearly set his crib on fire.

"What a nightmare!" she groaned.

Lucy suddenly woke up, bolting straight up from her pillows. She was in her own bedroom. Happy was sleeping at the foot of the bed, where he had curled up for the night, staying at her place because of something to do with Natsu. She gazed around the shadowy room in confusion.

"It...was all a dream?" she asked in bewilderment. "All of that? Oh God, what a horrible dream. A real nightmare."

"Yessssss."

She leaped at the hiss and looked to the window. There was perched a pink-haired beast with glowing red eyes. Lucy's throat went dry when she saw the creature.

"All a nightmare," he cackled softly. "Time for girlie to sleep...forever."

The last thing she saw was Natsu's face flying at her, claws poised, and his teeth bared, aimed for her
throat.

In her very last thought, she was glad for one thing. At least he made it quick.

The End

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APRIL FOOLS

(I just realized it's April 1st. I had to tease you guys after so many readers have said I better not kill everyone off at the end, or some other lame ending, so I came up with this in about 5 minutes. Got ya!)
Sting watched on with a pained expression. Sure, Natsu was a rival, but he admired this man so much, he did not want to see him go like this. The creature in front of him snarled and hunched over. This was no longer Natsu. Even his smell changed, and that made Sting realize the horrible truth.

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If even a girl like her trusted this Salamander, Sting would, too.

Sting knelt down beside Lector, waved Frosh to join their little meeting, and whispered to them both. "Those two will be distracted as soon as they start fighting. Once there's an opening, you and Frosh zoom in there and grab Lucy. Bring her back here, behind us."

Lector nodded. "Got it, Sting-kun!"

Pantherlily grew to battle size. "I'll protect you, just in case."

Happy watched with tears in his eyes. "Natsu..."

Lector smacked the blue Exceed's back. "If that flame-brain can beat Sting-kun, he'll be fine, because there's no way Sting-kun would lose to a stupid beast."

Between the two feral dragon slayers, the tension grew. Flames surrounded the red-eyed, pink-haired, winged form of Natsu. His scarlet eyes glared with intense hatred, while across from him, Balaur grinned with a wicked gleam in his eyes.
The Earth Dragon Slayer rumbled gleefully deep in his chest, "Ferrrrral."

The crimson and pink beast leered angrily. "Slayer not like to do this. Slayer angry. Angry Slayer makes angry Feral."

"Anger, yessss!" hissed Balaur. "Kill you. Then I'll become dragon."

"We won't allow it," snarled Feral-Natsu. "Save Lucy. Protect Lucy. Protect all friends."

"Those are Slayer's desires," Balaur pointed out. "What are yours?"

"Same!" he shouted, spittle flying from his mouth. Feral-Natsu sneered with gleaming teeth. "We are same. Wants, same. Desires, same. I am Slayer. Slayer is me. We are one."

Balaur spat in disgust. "You are weak! End your Slayer, take his power, then fight me."

Feral-Natsu scoffed softly. "Is that how you did it? Then you're the weak one. Slayer is smarter. Not by much," he said, rolling his red eyes slightly in annoyance, "but still smart. Two minds think better than one."

"If Fire Slayer is still in control, you won't be strong enough. Slayers are only shit."

Feral-Natsu chuckled. "Maybe yours. Fire Slayer is not shit-for-brains. He is flame-brain." He grinned proudly at that.

To the side, Sting snorted out a laugh. "I can't believe he admitted that. Idiot."

Balaur only glanced in their direction at the sound of laughter, but then he focused back on the feral in front of him. "This won't even be a fight."

"We'll see." Feral-Natsu raised his clawed hand and beckoned mockingly. "Come at us, shit-for-brains. We will burn you!"

"Can you even flame? Can you use Slayer magic?"

Feral-Natsu looked a little doubtful.

"Even if a weakling like you can do it..."

"Weakling?" the pink feral shouted scathingly.

"...I still win." His dark wings beat harder. "Earth Dragon's Haboob."

"Who's boob?" Feral-Natsu asked in confusion.

Balaur's brown wings flapped faster, and an abnormal amount of dust swirled around, blinding Natsu and everyone around. They all had to put their arms up to shield from the dust storm.

"Now!" Pantherlily shouted. He grabbed up Lector and Frosh and used the swirling dust as cover. He flew over the chasm and landed beside Lucy. She gasped when, through the blinding dust storm, she felt a large body beside her, but Pantherlily's large paw covered her mouth. "We're getting you to safety."

"But Natsu..."

"He'll be able to fight better without needing to protect you. You two," he said to the smaller
Exceeds, "get her away. I'll try to shield this wind with my wings."

Lector and Frosh grabbed Lucy, each holding a shoulder, and lifted her into the air. The strong wind from Balaur's wings would have made flying impossible, but Pantherlily spread his wide wings and blocked the effects, allowing the small Exceeds to fly safely while carrying Lucy. They crossed the chasm and landed beside the three other dragon slayers. Sting immediately knelt beside her, helping to block the dust.

"You're injured badly," he realized as he saw the blood on her and how Lucy held her broken arm. "Rogue, you're good at medicine. Can you tend to her?"

He inspected her gashes and bruises. "You'll need a healer, but I can wrap something around this. Not until this dust settles, though. We don't want dust in your wounds."

"Thank you," Lucy muttered. She tried to look back at the shattered island, but there was still too much dust to know what was going on with Natsu.

Feral-Natsu's red eyes flicked one way, then another. There was too much dust to see, and he could not inhale deeply enough to smell his enemy. He thought he heard Lucy's voice, but he had lost all sense of direction. Where was she? He could not hurt her. Slayer would be mad.

He felt the dragon slayer's mind inside him. The beast realized this was different to when he simply took control. Slayer had given him control this time, he had not had to fight Slayer down, and that meant Slayer was still around, still watching, still thinking. Maybe if this was something one of them did not want, they would fight for dominance until one slid away into oblivion, but for the moment this was a fight they both wanted. They were working together this time.

If only they could find their enemy.

"Ferrrral."

Feral-Natsu looked sharply to the left, only to feel a slash to the right. He pulled away and saw a wisp of a shadow vanish back into the dust.

"Trouble, Fire Feral?"

He was ready for an attack from either side this time, but suddenly the ground under him thrust up, knocking Natsu off his feet. When he stumbled back down, spikes stabbed his feet. He cried out as the bottom of his sandals perforated and the soles of his feet bled.

"All earth is mine," Balaur chuckled.

Rocks flew through the air, hitting Natsu from all sides. He tried to smack them away and blew flames at some, but the bigger rocks struck him, pummeling him down. He stepped again, and the spiky ground tore at his feet.

Natsu blew fire at the ground until the soil melted and flattened. Then he crouched there until the barrage stopped. "Where are you, bastard?"

"Long distance fighter versus melee," the Earth Dragon Slayer said smugly. "I already win."

Slowly, the wind settled and the dust cleared. Balaur was high in the air, flapping his wings to keep him up. On the ground, Natsu was hunkered down with small slashes all over his face from the fierce dust, and a large gash sliced over his cheek from one of the rocks. His eyes were sharper, glaring scarlet in rage.
Balaur had a smug grin on his dark face. "Try your best, Fire." He spread his hands out to goad him. "Try to hit me."

Natsu growled, took a deep breath, and attempted to breathe fire. The flames flew hot but with no control, just a huge fireball that quickly dispersed. It did not even reach up to where Balaur hovered in the air.

"Pathetic," the dark feral sneered.

His hand stretched out, and as it did, fingers of stone lifted from the ground, wrapping around Natsu. The Fire Feral looked left and right in frantic confusion as the rocky hand lifted and the fingers curls inward.

"Earth Dragon's Stone Gauntlet." Balaur clenched his hand, and as he did the fingers of stone crunched around Natsu.

"No!" Lucy screamed. She tried to stand despite her injuries, but Gajeel plopped his heavy hand on top of her head, forcing Lucy to stay seated.

"Have some faith in that bastard," he told her sharply.

Balaur flew over and landed on top of the fist of boulders. "Comfy, Fire?" He stomped twice on the rocks. "I could have crushed you to dust. I didn't. I want you to be alive when I fuck your girlie. I want you to watch her face as I pierce her." He leaned down toward the stones and whispered into it, "She tastes really good. Warm inside. Wet. Moist, fertile field for my seed."

Gajeel stood directly in front of Lucy. "Like hell I'd allow that! My little shrimp would never forgive me if I let her best friend get raped."

Balaur turned to them. "You three. I've had enough of you. Hunting me. Tricking me. You are failures. You left the path of dragons, crushed the seed within you. So I will crush you. I will bury you! Your carcasses will fertilize the earth...like the shit you are."

Both of his hands raised, and rocky hands rumbled up out of the ground. One caught Gajeel, the other caught Sting and Rogue. Happy leaped from where he had been swept up on a finger of rock, and Pantherlily caught him.

"Gajeel!" Lucy screamed.

Gajeel's body became covered in metallic scales. "He's earth. He can't crush iron. Rogue, Sting!"

"A little stuck here," Sting yelled over. Rogue's foot was caught in a cluster of rocks. Sting was helping him to pull on it, trying to free him.

"Die," Balaur said coldly. "Earth Dragon's..."

Suddenly, the fist he was standing on glowed molten hot. Balaur leaped off and took to the sky as an opening melted through the rocky gauntlet. Searing flames shot out of the hole, and with them Natsu bolted up. His crimson wings spread, but it took some difficulty to stay airborne.

Natsu snarled at the Earth Feral. "What did you say you'd do to Lucy? Only I can fuck Lucy. She's mine! Stay the hell away. Kill you. Kill..."

He lost balance in flying and fumbled to land awkwardly back on the rock fist.
Sting laughed. "The idiot can't fly!"

Gajeel squinted as he looked at the trouble Natsu was having. "His wing is injured. The rocks tore part of the webbing. He's not used to flying anyway, and now he doesn't have balanced equilibrium."

Still, as soon as Natsu stabilized himself, he flew at Balaur and tried to engage him in hand-to-hand combat. The Earth Feral easily blocked his attacks and kept Natsu at bay with pelting rocks.

Gajeel climbed off his stone hand and walked over to the other. His fist turned to metal, and he punched the rock formation until it crumbled, freeing Rogue's boot. The Shadow Dragon Slayer could not put weight on that foot, so Sting held him up with his shoulder. Gajeel slapped Rogue's back, looking concerned by the injury.

"Just stubbed my toes a little," Rogue said lightly to Gajeel, trying to smile despite the agonizing injury. Gajeel could see that Rogue's ankle was also crushed. The Shadow Dragon Slayer tried to play it off, but his forehead was already starting to sweat from holding back the pain.

"Sit with Lucy," Gajeel ordered. Rogue opened his mouth to protest. "Sit, or I'm pounding you into the ground. Work out your ankle, see if it's broken, and tend to Lucy's wounds. She's still bleeding."

"But..."

"He's right, Rogue," Sting interrupted. "As your guild master, I'm ordering you to rest that ankle. If we need to fight, I need you to be capable."

Rogue bowed his head, honoring Sting's authority, and sat beside Lucy. "I'll tend your wound first."

Sting walked up to Gajeel and whispered softly. "What do we do if they get out of control?"

Gajeel frowned as this question matched his own worries. "I'd rather not kill either one."

"I know that, but we have to plan for it. It's a good possibility that both will become absorbed in their bloodlust and go wild. Natsu..." He glanced to where Rogue was unwrapping one of Lucy's impromptu bandages. Sting's brow crinkled as he realized she had her head angled to still be able to listen in on his conversation although her eyes were focused on Rogue. "Natsu might not return to normal," Sting whispered to Gajeel. "He's feral now. He's distracted with this fight, but once it's over, assuming he wins, he very well may attempt to hurt Lucy. If he loses...we know the Earth Dragon Slayer will harm Lucy. He wants to rape her, and I sure as hell am not going to allow that."

Gajeel's teeth clenched, but as Natsu and Balaur exchanged blows midair, he did not take his eyes off the fight. "You're saying we should be prepared to kill either one of them."

"Or both," Sting admitted reluctantly. "If they both get out of control, we may have no choice."

"Fairy Tail does not kill our teammates!"

Sting looked at Gajeel steadily. "Is that beast out there really your friend? He may have killed people, and he would kill again. Be realistic, Gajeel. He's feral. The Natsu you knew is..."

"Shut up!" Gajeel snapped. His narrow eyes sneered down at Sting's light blue gaze. "You shut the hell up! Natsu is going to win this. If he doesn't..."

"That Earth feral is ours," Sting said over him. "Rogue and I have been tracking him long enough. He's ours to deal with. But if it's Natsu who wins, and if he's truly a mindless, killing monster..."
"I'll deal with it," Gajeel growled. "That's what you're hinting at, isn't it? That I should be the one to deal with Natsu. You're right. If anyone has to put that fire-bastard down, it'll be me. We're rivals, after all. If it comes to that, if we honestly have no choice, I'll be the one to end him."

He realized Lucy was looking up at him with an expression of horror. Gajeel tried to imagine if the tables were turned, if it was himself gone wild and Levy watching on, how would that shrimp feel? He figured she would bawl her eyes out. Such a crybaby! So he knew Lucy was a strong woman, just by how composed she was through this whole ordeal. He patted her on the head, just as he often did to Levy.

"I trust his strength," Gajeel assured her. "Natsu's a goddamn idiot, but he's strong, especially when protecting his friends." He gave a curt nod to Lucy, and he saw her face relax. Then Gajeel looked back to the blond dragon slayer. "He knows what's at stake, Sting. It's more than just who gets to fuck some girl." Lucy glared at him for putting it that crudely, and Gajeel realized he probably deserved the elbow in his kneecap from her. "That feral beast made Laxus and Wendy suffer, he killed people in Magnolia, he attacked members of Fairy Tail—just look at what he did to Lucy—and he'll kill the whole goddamn city if we can't stop him here and now. Natsu knows that." Gajeel looked back at the fight. Natsu had landed on the ground, nursing the injury to his wing, while Balaur had created a spire of rock jutting straight up and perched on it like a bird of prey, laughing at how useless Natsu's melee fighting skills were against him. "You can see the determination in his eyes. Natsu may be feral now, but even like that, he knows what's at stake."

Back over on the island Balaur had created, Feral-Natsu was breathing hard. He had managed to fly up to Balaur's height and matched his speed, but his agility in flight was far weaker.

"Weak Fire," Balaur hissed in disapproval. "Hardly worth calling you Feral. I wonder if it will work."

"What work?" the pink feral growled.

"The ceremony to become dragon, killing another feral and absorbing all the magic. That's what Acnologia said to do."

"Acnologia stupid!"

"Acnologia is our king."

"Not my king. I am my own king. Even have crown."

Gajeel rubbed out his head as he remembered how Natsu had stolen the King of Fiore's crown. "Idiot."

Balaur's eyes narrowed in warning. "You should respect Acnologia, fear Acnologia...worship Acnologia."

"Fuck that! Only one dragon I respect. Igneel."

Balaur cocked his head to the side. "Fire dragon?"

"Our father," he said, grinning proudly. "There is something we understand that Slayers don't. We remember our dragon parent."

Balaur's eyes narrowed. "Terracia," he hissed in hatred.

Feral-Natsu nodded. "We remember all Igneel said, all Igneel taught. We remember things Slayer
forgot. We remember...everything!" A wide, cunning smile rose onto his face. "We remember. But you? You must tap into Slayer. You must borrow his understanding of how magic flows. I not have to."

"Until you become a real dragon, you have to," Balaur protested.

"No. See, Lucy smart. Lucy said it before. I am Slayer. Slayer is me." The pupils of his red eyes flashed a hint of green, and for a second, his voice was normal again. "I am Natsu Dragneel." His hands lifted up to his mouth as he bellowed, "Fire Dragon's Roar!"

This time, the flames that shot out directed through his hands, with a large magic circle making the breath attack clear, direct, and allowing it to reach up to Balaur and beyond him. Balaur rose his arms in front of his face, and with them came a massive collection of rocks to shield Balaur from the attack. The flames kept coming, and the rocks began to glow white hot. However, the fire could not penetrate. Finally, Natsu stopped his flame and held his head in pain. Two personalities balancing one another was difficult.

"Natsu?"

The voice was no more than a worried whisper, but he heard it clearly. He looked over to where Lucy sat. He was relieved to see she was safe, and he managed a smile at her.

Lucy had no idea what to think anymore. That body, the red eyes, everything about the pink-haired creature in front of her was the feral beast, a monster that was a total nightmare, a creature that had claimed her, coveted her, and just yesterday it threatened to ravage her. However, that simple smile was all Natsu. The beast never smiled like that before. She realized he was still in there. Natsu was now both the Feral and the Slayer.

There was a loud roar, and what looked like a gleaming white comet flew forward. Feral-Natsu barely had enough time to dive out of the way. His flames had made the rocky armor around the Earth Dragon Slayer take on the appearance of magma.

"Fire...is...weaker!" Balaur screamed. "Earth Dragon's Lava Punch!"

His fist punched forward, and a stream of the molten rock shot out from his fist. Feral-Natsu leaped out of the way, but the blast hit his tail, burning a hole straight through it. He shrieked in agony as blood dripped out of the extra appendage. The fire feral fell to the ground, writhing in pain.

"Stupid tail," he snarled. Still, it was a part of his body and extremely sensitive. The pain was almost blinding, but he knew he had to fight. He shouted at himself, "Get up. Get up!"

A shadow loomed over him, making Natsu freeze. As he slowly turned his red eyes upward, he was met by yet another set of crimson eyes that gleamed amidst Balaur's dark face like some hellbeast. Feral-Natsu snarled, but he realized he was defenseless like this.

"You are weak. Not even fun. Die," Balaur ordered, and a glowing molten fist raised to strike the fallen dragon slayer.

"No!" Sting bellowed. "White Dragon's Roar!"

Blinding light hit the feral and gave Natsu time to roll away.

Rogue cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted across the chasm. "Natsu! If you can, retract the tail and wings."
"How?" he sneered.

Rogue had no clue. He had never changed like that.

Gajeel knew the answer. "The best way to retract the appendages is to give the human side more control."

"Slayer is weak," the Fire Feral hissed.

"You'll bleed to death if you don't."

Feral-Natsu looked back to Balaur who was quickly recovering from the blinding distraction. "Fighting. Too busy."

Sting looked to Rogue. "How's the ankle?"

Rogue finished knotting a bandage around his boot. "I can fight."

"Good. Let's buy him time."

"Right," Rogue nodded. "Frosh!"

"Lector!"

Both Exceeds grabbed their partners and flew them over the chasm.

"Take it seriously, Sting," Rogue warned.

"I know that already. White Drive!"

"Shadow Drive!"

Light and darkness cloaked the twin dragon slayers.

Sting grinned at another chance to fight. "Let's go!"

Feral-Natsu crouched near the edge of the rock island as the two engaged Balaur. Give in to the human side? The feral side of him did not want to do that. It wanted control. It wanted freedom. However, the pain in his tail confused his mind too much. The shot was clean through and bleeding heavily.

But what might happen when the tail retracted? Would it heal? Would the injury become internal? These were the human side's fears, but the feral wanted to keep fighting; he could not do that with a hole in his tail.

"Don't be afraid, Slayer," he said to himself. "We will win. We will kill him."

« No, don't kill him. »

"I want to kill him. He hurt girlie."

« Lucy wants him alive. He's like us. He's tearing apart inside. You said you can save him. »

"Can make him whole. Can bring together what is two. Maybe whole is human. Maybe whole is dragon."

« We'll take the chance. »
"Is stupid choice, Slayer. Is better to kill."

« No. I don't want to kill anyone. Did you kill anyone while in control? »


« That's bad enough. I don't want anymore blood on my hands. »

"Lots of tasty animal blood."

« Shut up! That was you, not me. »

"That was us!"

« Well, now it's my turn to be in control. I always hated this damn tail. »

"Keep wings."

« But the wings are damaged, too. »

"Yes, but may need them. Can't fly. Little blue cat shouldn't be here."

Natsu looked to where Happy and Lucy stood across the gaping chasm. "Happy?"

The little Exceed's eyes widened. "Natsu. It's really Natsu."

Lucy looked down to him. "Are you sure?"

"That's Natsu now. He's in control."

Lucy wished dearly that this was true. "But his eyes are red."

"One is green."

Lucy looked and saw that Happy was right. One eye was gleaming red, but the other was normal sage green, gazing at her and Happy with a face half in worry whether or not they were safe, half in determination to fight and protect them.

"Natsu," she whispered, happy to see he was not totally lost. Lucy cupped her hands around her mouth to shout. "Defeat him, Natsu! You can do it."

Natsu smiled. Hearing her cheer him on was all both sides of his mind needed. The feral loosened control; Natsu shut his eyes and concentrated. The tail retracted back into his body. It hurt, there was pain inside now, but he felt the wound vanishing. Then he looked to where White and Shadow were battling Earth. Sabertooth's elements were not suited for this fight. Natsu was unsure if his element could defeat the Earth Dragon Slayer either. However, he had some advantages Balaur did not.

He was older, he had more time training with Igneel, and he had something to protect. That made him far stronger.

"Sting, Rogue!"

The two pulled back, shocked that it was not the hissing growls of the feral that called out to them, but Natsu's own voice.

"Thanks for covering for me," Natsu said with a nod of appreciation, "but this is my fight. Don't
interfere. We're fighting over Lucy, so it's my fight alone."

Rogue disagreed, "We could defeat him easily if all four of us fight together."

"No. Protect Lucy. This is between us." Natsu glared at his opponent with green and red eyes. "It's a fight between ferals."

Sting gazed at him up and down. The smell was stronger than ever, although Natsu's voice was normal and sane again. "Are you really feral?" he asked in confusion.

"Yes," Natsu replied with a slight pout. "More than before. But I'm not like him."

Sting wondered what he meant. Maybe Natsu himself didn't know. "Are you dangerous?"

Natsu chuckling menacingly. "Oooooh yessssss!" The hiss was back, but only for a moment. "The beast in me...and the slayer in me...we're together in this." His eyes slid over to Sting. "So get off this island or the beast will fucking kill you."

*That* did not sound like Natsu. Sting backed off a step. The voice might sound like Natsu, but he was still a danger. He said so himself. Sting nodded to Rogue, and the two backed off to watch the fight.

Natsu walked forward to where the Earth Dragon Slayer tiredly flapped his broad, brown wings. "I hope those two didn't beat you up too badly."

Balaur was bleeding from a few lucky hits that had penetrated his tight defenses, but he did not look as badly injured as a person normally would be when facing two dragon slayers. "They are not even feral. They are shit."

"That *shiiit* just beat you up."

"I don't want them. I don't even want girlie anymore. All I want is you."

"Sorry, I don't swing that way," Natsu said, smirking arrogantly.

The feral snarled in annoyance. "I want your magic. Feral magic. Only you will make me into a dragon."

"You want it?" Natsu beckoned him tauntingly. "Come fight me and get it."

Balaur sneered at such a cocky attitude. He would end this arrogant and weak excuse for an opponent. "Earth Dragon's..."

"Too slow!"

Natsu leaped into the air. Without the weight of his tail, he moved faster, although he realized right away, he did not have a good ability to steer his direction. He did not need agility right now, though. Just speed.

The Earth Feral saw the speeding pink attacker and began to shift his magic from offense to defense. "Earth Dragon's Stonewall!"

However, before the rocks could come together to shield him, Natsu blasted past, using his massive black claws to swipe the bare torso of the Earth Feral. Balaur screamed as blood poured out.

"Yessss!" Natsu hissed with a feral growl to his words. He hovered midair and licked his fingers. "Blood tastes like shit. Earth Feral is shit."
Balaur spit on his hand. A little dust mixed in and created a poultice of mud that he slathered over the wound, stopping the bleeding. Then he snarled at Natsu. "Kill you."

"Try!" he mocked. "Fire Dragon's Claw!" Fire blasted from Natsu's feet, speeding him faster through the air. His fist stuck out firmly. "Fire Dragon's Iron Fist!" Flames cloaked his hand, and Natsu punched right through Balaur's rocky defenses. "And then...Fire Dragon's Sword Horn!" The flames covered his head, and like a horn on a rhinoceros, he head-butted Balaur and blasted him into the sky.

The dark feral lost control, tumbled through the air, and spiraled to the ground. He landed badly on his left wing, and they all heard the crunch of bones. The fragile wing bones cracked and splintered, making the left wing droop uselessly.

Natsu slowed himself with back-flapping from his wings. "Another advantage I have is my best friend. I might not be used to my own wings, but years of flying with Happy taught me some neat tricks in aerial combat."

Happy leaped up and pumped his tiny blue fist into the air. "Aye, sir!" he cheered, jumping around excitedly. "Go, Natsu, go!"

Balaur slowly pushed himself up. His wing was useless. He breathed hard in agony from the crushed bones and torn webbing. His crimson eyes glared hatefully at his opponent just as Natsu delicately landed back on the island of rock and folded his scarlet and cerise wings in, tucking them away.

"Hate you," Balaur growled lowly, then he bared his teeth and screamed in rage, "Hate you!"

The dark feral inspected his opponent. Natsu's eyes were red with flickers of green. He had wings, although no tail. He walked firmly, not the loping gate of a beast, but the firm stride of a human. Rather than a scathing and snarling monster, he had a cocky smile and a swagger to his stance. Balaur sniffed deeply, but he still smelled the scent of a feral.

No...more than feral. It was stronger. Although his fighting style was purely that of a dragon slayer, Natsu's scent had gone beyond his own feral smell.

"What...are you?" he hissed warily.

Natsu's eyes narrowed. "I am closer to being a dragon than you will ever be."

Out of instinct, Balaur back down and crouched defensively. The move, done out of pure instinct, confused him. "No," he sneered. He forced himself to stand upright, not cower. "No! You are more human. Humans are weak. Only a dragon is strong."

Natsu scoffed softly at that. "Do you even know what a dragon is?"

"I know!" he sneered. "I've met Acnologia."

"So have I," Natsu stated.

"And Terracia!"

"And Igneel," Natsu added. "Have you ever fought a real dragon?"

Natsu took a few steps forward. Balaur crouched down again instinctively, and he sneered at how this half-human feral failure was affecting him. His subconscious instinct was to flee from this enemy, sensing it was too dangerous. Maybe not more powerful, but a different type of threat laid
within Natsu's eyes. Balaur ignored those instincts, remained facing this enemy, and bared his teeth.

"I have," Natsu went on. "I've fought a few. And I've made friends with them." He glared at the crouching feral. "You don't know what a real dragon is like."

That declaration angered Balaur, and the ground began to shake with his shivering emotions. "Terracia..."

Natsu shouted over him. "How old were you when Terracia vanished?"

The ground shook harder and began to splinter. The rocky island swayed unsteadily. Where the others stood, the ground cracked. Frosh almost fell into a new crack, crying out as the ground opened under him. Lucy grabbed him and hoisted him into her lap. Rogue leaped over the crack in the ground, but his ankle gave way. He collapsed beside Lucy, ignored his own pain, and petted Frosh's head in worry.

"Frosh, are you okay?"

The froggy Exceed snuggled into Lucy's bosom. "Fro likes it here."

Sting shook his head at the adorable perviness. "Lucky frog."

Rogue glared up. "He's a cat!"

Pantherlily corrected them both, "He's an Exceed." Then he grabbed Frosh off of Lucy's breasts by the scruff of his frog outfit, held him up to eye level, and in a deep voice scolded, "Act like one."

"Fro will. Sowwy."

As the ground continued to fracture, Balaur grabbed his head and howled in rage. Memories of his human childhood wanted to come up, and he tried to thrust them down.

"Yes," Natsu said calmly. "Get angry. Think of the past. Be mad at your parent for leaving, and mad at yourself for not finding them yet. I know those feelings, too. But remember them. Remember your time with Terracia."

"No!"

"Then fight me. Fight me as a dragon, not as a human who wants to become a dragon. If you're that desperate for power, then you'll never find it. You, who barely remembers your own dragon parent, who has never fought a real dragon, who was told a bunch of lies from a dragon slayer...who failed!"

That infuriated Balaur. "Acnologia did not fail! Acnologia is king."

"He's a failure as a dragon slayer," Natsu declared in disgust. "Dragon slayers were created to protect humans, not kill them. You and I have hurt humans. You've killed them. I might have. Neither one of us deserves the honor of becoming a dragon. But you—you who seeks that path through bloodshed, just like Acnologia did—you don't belong on the path of dragons. I won't let a monster like you have that power."

Balaur was on his hands and knees, but he glared up in anger. "It's the path of a feral, why dragon slayers were created, to become dragons..."

"Wrong! You listened to the words of a dragon slayer who failed the path of humanity. You've forgotten all that your own dragon taught you. Didn't I say it before? One advantage we ferals have
over our human slayer is that we remember *everything* about our dragon. Think back to the parent who raised you."

"No! Hate her! Wanna kill her! Am feral. Am stronger."

"Stronger?" Natsu raised his hand and set it on fire. "Yes, you mentioned about *feral magic*. I sensed just dragon slayer magic at first, but now that I'm in my right mind, I sense a special feral magic under it. It's not the sort of power you think it is."

"Is stronger!"

"Physically, we may be stronger. No, physically I could kick the butts of all three of those idiots," he said, nodding over to the trio guarding Lucy.

Gajeel pounded his fist into his hand. "Wanna try it, Salamander?"

"The magic, though..." Natsu went on.

Sting chuckled. "He's ignoring you, Gajeel. He totally brushed you off."

Gajeel glared. "I'm kicking his ass when we're done here."

"...The magic!" Natsu looked at his burning hand in wonder as his scarlet and sage eyes reflected the flames. "This is what the beast meant: to bring together what is two. To weld them together. If you want to weld two things together..." A sly smile crept up. "...you need a really hot flame, hotter than a dragon slayer can make. A flame only someone with the magic of a feral can create...a flame only the son of Igneel can ignite."

Fire burst out, engulfing the solitary island of rock. Lucy shielded her face from the immense heat, Sting and Rogue backed up a step, and Gajeel quickly formed a blastshield of iron to block the searing burn from hurting their small group.

"Pointless," Balaur yelled from amidst the flames. "Fire does not scorch Earth. Fire can melt rock, but molten earth still exists. Fire makes me stronger," he gloated.

"I'm done fighting you," Natsu declared. "Now it's time to save you. Okay, beasty. Let's try your idea. Guys," he shouted to the others across the chasm. "This is going to be embarrassing. I might end up naked. Don't watch, okay?"

Lucy stood with pain and limped to the metal shield Gajeel had erected. "What is he doing?"

Gajeel scoffed softly, "Hopefully winning."

A roar suddenly shuddered the ground. All of them widened their eyes at the booming voice.

Sting grinned with excitement. "That sounds like a..." He peeked around the blastshield, but his smile faltered. "What...the...hell?"

Lucy edged to the rim of the shield. "What's going on?"

"Careful!" Gajeel warned. "That heat is intense."

"But Natsu..." She peeked around the edge.

Lucy could not really see what was going on. Flames filled the entire island, soaring a hundred meters into the sky, smoking and making the air all around them shimmer with scalding heat. She felt
her skin burn just peeking around for a few seconds. Any longer, and she knew she would have ended up with blisters on her cheeks. The quick scene she saw was confusing.

"What...what happened to him?" she whispered in horror.

Balaur glowed molten amidst the furnace of raging flames, but he backed away at the looming shadow in front of him. "No. Impossible. How are you like this?"

Natsu's voice answered, "Dragons fly. Flying involves balance. If you can't find balance, you can't soar."

"No!" Balaur screamed amidst the burning flames. "This..." He looked at Natsu longingly, and his eyes softened. "This is what I want. Acnologia said that the only way to reach it was by beating another feral. So how are you like this?"

"Easy," Natsu replied. "Because you're already defeated. Happy?"

"Aye, sir!"

"Take Lucy back three hundred paces. Same with all of you. Hurry! I'm not really sure how this will work."

Balaur turned to them. "No! Girlie is mine."

Before he could give chase, the shadow amidst those flames smacked him to the ground. "Keep your hands off her, bastard. Happy, go!"

Happy grabbed Lucy and flew her away. The other Exceeds also grabbed their dragon slayers and moved them to a safer spot. Now at a distance, Lucy could gaze into the mass of flames safely. Still, as she tried to look for Natsu, she could not see his familiar silhouette. Instead, it was as if Balaur stood facing a smallish dragon.

"Natsu?" she wondered, feeling a chill run down her arms.

Sting watched with his mouth dropped. "He's...a...a dragon? Natsu?"

Rogue looked to Gajeel for an explanation, but the Iron Dragon Slayer had none. Instead, glaring in confusion, Gajeel muttered, "What the fuck is going on?"

Happy grinned happily. "Natsu's a real dragon," he said with a sense of pride.

Lucy collapsed again, covering her mouth to keep herself from screaming as she looked at that silhouette amidst the flames. Was he really a dragon? Could he ever come back again? Had she completely lost him? Would he vanish, like all the other dragons had vanished? A myriad of worries flooded her mind as she looked at the reptilian form amidst those flames.

Natsu shouted over the roar of intense fire. "I judge you now, Earth Dragon Slayer. As the son of the Flame Dragon King, Igneel, I banish you from the path of dragons and bring you back to the path of humanity." The flames tripled and turned from red and yellow to intense blue and searing white. "May your sins as a feral be purged with fire."

There was a gleaming white explosion on the island. Gajeel, Sting, and Rogue all used their magic to shield their group as intense heat blasted across the land. Lucy hugged Happy and Frosh to her, Pantherlily shielded Lector, who was closest, and they hunkered down as the flames from Natsu scorched the earth around them.
I don't remember Terracia. Only impressions. She was large, beautiful, like a mountain of gems. I remember a soft, warm voice and the gleam of her solid black eyes. Not much else.

By the time I was old enough to have clear memories, I was living with the Piatra family. I guess I had the name Balaur Blackstone already when they found me, or maybe they called me that since my dark skin, brown eyes, and black hair were so different from their fair-faced freckles and red hair. I know my first name is after a local legend, a dragon called the balaur, whose saliva can create precious gems. It's nice to think that Terracia probably named me that.

That's actually one of my abilities. Give me the right ingredients, and I can create gems. The Piatras could have become the wealthiest people in Bosco with my ability, but they didn't bother. Maybe they just didn't dream to that level. I made a few diamonds for them, but they kept my gem-making ability secret. I know my adopted parents were worried about what I could do, the fact that I was a mage, and not a normal one.

I don't know why they kept me around. Okay, so probably it was for the gems. That's a good reason to keep a kid who is obviously not part of the family, and who has the problem of causing earthquakes when throwing a tantrum. I admit, I was a destructive little brat. I think they had to rebuild the house five times before I was fourteen.

That's when it all went to hell.

My adopted parents were...less than kind. I was a mouth to feed, although it was my gems that bought the groceries. My adopted father was able to retire early and got drunk a lot. My adopted mother...well, I don't know what she did during the day. Maybe I don't want to know. That left me and Smaralda alone.

Smaralda was the closest thing I had to a real family. I thought she was a goddess. Like the meaning of her name, her eyes were like emeralds, but her hair was rubies. She was my diamond, the one person who shined in a dismal world of mud and clay. Even though we were raised as brother and sister, I loved her a bit more than a brother should.

I was just beginning to realize these feelings were not brotherly love when that day happened.

I don't even remember it. I woke up outside of the house. It was night, I was in torn clothes, and our house...

Our house was gone. The earth had opened up and swallowed it.

Smaralda said it was an earthquake, and it happened so fast, our parents couldn't get out. She said she managed to drag me out of the house after a beam fell and hit my head. I had a massive lump on my skull, so I believed her. Sure, maybe I caused small quakes as a kid, but the only magic I knew
was Earth Dragon's Roar, how to draw up water from underground springs, and how to make gems. Tremors were things I caused unconsciously, and only when mad. There was no way I could create an earthquake of that magnitude, and surely not in my sleep.

I know better now. That was the work of the beast inside me. My sister was covering for me. She lied to the entire village, and to authorities who had to come and help dig out my parents' bodies. She protect me as her little brother. I realize now, she probably witnessed the whole thing. My biggest fear is...what did I do to her that first time?

If I was just discovering my love for Smaralda, did I...hurt her?

However, for three months, I believed it was an earthquake, nothing more. I had no memory of the shaking, and I had no one else's word to go by but that of my beloved sister, who had never lied to me before. I grieved for the couple who had adopted me, and I made their tombstones out of marble I created with my magic. I used my gems to get a place in the village. Smaralda and I lived together. Since we were usually alone at home, actually living together like that made me really fall in love with her.

I find that irony to be sickening now, considering I murdered her parents, stole her home, and probably hurt her. If something more did happen, she didn't hint about it. Thinking back, I wonder how she even managed to smile at me in the morning.

We lived well; she found work, and I kept up with school. A summer passed in peace. It was honestly the best time of my life. No drunken father, no weird-smelling smoky mother, no demands for gems, no farmwork. For her seventeenth birthday, I made Smaralda a jade statue of a dragon. She got mad and told me not to use my magic for any reason. I thought she was just afraid of what the villagers might do if they knew I could do more than draw up well water. I realize now, she was probably terrified that I would turn into that thing again.

It was pure coincidence that the murders began at the same time as our village got news of a dark guild who terrorized a nearby town. Our neighbor, a portly but friendly banker, died horrifically on his way home from the tavern. Most just vanished and were never found again. Ten total died or vanished, but our village thought the deaths were the fault of the dark guild. We sent out a plea, but Bosco isn't like Fiore. Our mage guilds are much more greedy. We could not come up with the money. So I revealed to the village leader my hidden ability. I took the coal and other ingredients I would need, and I created a massive diamond that no magic guild would turn down.

They probably would have come, too. Except by then, it was too late.

The dark guild attacked and swept through viciously. They killed a third of the village and stole the diamond I had made. With it, they apparently paid off the right people, so that no one would come to our rescue. Money has corrupted the mages and government of Bosco.

I knew I could fight. I was the only person in our village with magic. Smaralda pleaded with me not to go, but I left anyway. It must have been truly hilarious, a fourteen-year-old child marching out alone to face a hundred seasoned dark mages. Still, I declared with pride:

"I am the son of Terracia, the Earth Dragon Slayer, Balaur Blackstone. Leave our village, or you will suffer the wrath of a dragon."

Yep, must've been damn hilarious. They laughed, and they sent their smallest warrior. Maybe I'm not as strong as the dragon slayers of Fiore, but my breath attack took out the wimp they sent, along with a few dozen others, all in one roar. I guess they decided to take me seriously after all, because they charged at me all at once, a wave of weapons and magic spells, all aimed at me.
I fought, and I fought hard. I had never really had to fight for real before. There was no plan or strategy besides "hurt them lots."

I blacked out surrounded by enemies, realizing I would probably die, but hoping I could take out enough of them so the village could defend itself against the rest. So long as Smaralda was safe. So long as I saved her...

I woke up covered in blood, the village a ruin, bodies of both mages and villagers scattered everywhere, and under me...

Smaralda. My sister. The girl I loved.

There was no doubt about it. I had hurt her. Still, she was crying and stroking my face, trying to call me back, instantly forgiving me even as I could feel what I had done to her.

I fled. In the whole world, Smaralda was the one person I wanted to protect, but instead...

Instead...

I ran as far as I could. Over time, I began to realize I was changing. A week later, I remained conscious through a transformation and saw the wings and tail for myself. I had no clue what was happening to me. There was no one in Bosco to help me, so I began to head west. If I could get to Fiore, to the famed dragon slayers of Sabertooth and Fairy Tail, then maybe they would know what was going on and help me.

Instead, I met **him**.

I remember only a little about Terracia, but I knew the creature I stumbled upon was a real dragon, dark and terrifying. One glance told me that this was a creature that saw me as nothing more than a bug. I might have been raised to be a dragon slayer, but when I saw this mighty beast for myself, I realized that I was nothing in his eyes.

So it surprised me when he spoke. It was like a god had opened his mouth and deemed an ant worthy of a whole mantra. He called me "Seed of Terracia." He spoke of my dragon mother as if he personally knew her. He told me his name.

**Acnologia.**

He said he was once like me, a dragon slayer who learned how to become a dragon. He assured me, there was nothing to fear. I should be honored that Terracia deemed me worthy of hosting her seed, and that if I continued with the transformation, I would one day be able to meet my mother. I wanted that...so much. I might not remember her, but I wanted to see her, to look into her glittering onyx eyes again...

And to **kill her** for abandoning me.

That was the beast's desire. I don't think it was mine originally, but soon I wasn't sure which desires were mine and which were his. Maybe I used to love her. Maybe I had always hated her. Maybe both. I couldn't tell anymore.

Acnologia did not stay around for long. Like Terracia, he just suddenly vanished one day, leaving me to figure out things for myself. Still, he left an impression on me. I could become a dragon! How cool is that?

I also got the feeling he had taught my inner beast some attacks. I didn't recall any time as a beast, but
sometimes I would wake up to see food I had killed. It was small things at first: chickens, sheep, once a cow. Then one day I woke up and saw the carcass of a massive gorian. Apparently, I had eaten the ape-like creature. I wasn't hungry at all that day. Nor the next.

I learned to ignore waking up with blood on my hands. Naively, I told myself that I was just hunting animals.

That is, until I reached Thornville. I woke up, and I was in a town. I thought it was weird, and I tried to leave. The next day, I was back in the same town. I really didn't want to be there, yet every day I tried to leave, and by the next time I was conscious, I was back in Thornville. Out in the wild, I had no idea how long I was unconscious. Days could flow together, and not much changed around me. In a town, though, I realized that I was not unconscious for a few hours as I had assumed, but for days at a time. I felt potently that I had far less control than I thought I did. I began to look for newspapers to see what the day was.

And that was when I read about the murders.

I vomited when I read the article. The authorities thought it was a wild animal, but I knew it must have been the beast inside me. In that form, I was killing people.

Not just killing. Eating!

I became terrified of transforming. I began to seriously try and prevent myself. I fought the beast inside, but it always won over. I was unconscious for days, and then I would see newspapers filled with stories of the murders. I saw the townspeople around me getting scared. I tried again to run away, and the beast stopped me that time.

It was the first time I heard its actual voice coming up from my own throat.

"Slayer too weak. Go to sleep."

When I woke up, I was standing in the midst of a bloodbath. The whole town had been slaughtered, every living thing killed, including children, animals, pets...everything. Some looked like quick kills left with only a single fatal wound, some were gruesomely tortured and left to bleed slowly, others were hollowed out carcasses with their partially eaten guts scattered all around them.

I wanted to kill myself, but the beast wouldn't let me. Every time I became conscious, I sought for a way to die, to end this horror, but the beast would take over again. I no longer wanted to be a dragon if dragons did this to humans.

I recalled one thing I had learned from Acnologia. I had asked him, "If dragon slayers change into dragons, why are the Fiore dragon slayers still human?" He told me there were some dragons in the past who opposed the birth of new dragons from seeded humans. These rebellious dragons had taught the seeded children how to stop the change. He made it sound like a horrible thing, crushing out the precious seed within them, a travesty to all of dragonkind.

However, as I began to fear what I was becoming, I sought out those dragon slayers. I headed to Sabertooth first. I got as far as the town of Whistling, and then...I don't know how long I was unconscious; probably over a month. I woke up to another blood-soaked town, everyone slaughtered. It was like the beast let me wake up only to gloat about his work, the wholesale slaughter of an entire town.

I heard that the Twin Dragons of Sabertooth were hunting some "beast," and I knew that was me. Although I wanted to be caught, I also desired to live. Even far away in Bosco, those two dragon
slayers were notorious for being sadistic against their enemies. I had hoped Fairy Tail might be more understanding, so I headed to Magnolia.

I guess my inner beast agreed with me to head to Magnolia, although I came to comprehend that its reasons were not to seek help, but to find a dragon slayer, kill him, and complete the transformation into a dragon. Part of me hoped that maybe that would calm down the wild side. Maybe we would blend, and I could tame the murderous beast inside. I was able to "talk" to the beast a bit more while staying in Magnolia. I regained only moments of lucidity. I knew I was killing people, but I couldn't bring myself to care anymore. I just wanted to enjoy the few moments of peace and consciousness I could get. I had grieved over my sins plenty of times already over that year of horror and fear.

Then I saw that girl. I had saved her from rapists, I guess. It was one good thing I did in the midst of so much evil. I wanted to die a good person. The Fairy Tail mages came, but...well, I guess not all of their dragon slayers had gone through that ceremony that stopped their feral side from taking over. That was immensely disappointing. Even angering! I had hoped to be stopped, but they let the beast get away, and I knew I probably was still murdering people. I hated that. I hated them. I hated myself.

I lost hope. I wanted it all to end. I wanted this town to vanish, and myself with it. If I vanished into nothingness, and a newborn dragon was left behind, at least that would be the end of my mental suffering. At least that was something else, not me, not my sins. It would not be the sins of a human.

Then another girl stepped into my life. She called my name and yanked me out of the sinking darkness. She glowed like a golden angel, and she seemed so familiar. Her eyes...her smell...

She smelled like Smaralda. She had different colored eyes, but they shined like my sister's.

I could see I had injured her badly, but if I could save her, hold myself back, just a little...if I could protect her, unlike how I had lost control with Smaralda...

I'm too weak now. The beast is always there, clawing to break out again.

The beast truly is sadistic. It let me see what it was doing to her. All I could do was imagine that this must have been how Smaralda had suffered. I—no, the beast within me—had assaulted my sister, the one girl I loved and wanted to protect. I wanted to save this blond lady, and the beast was torturing me by sharing the experience, keeping me awake but locked away, able to watch but unable to stop my own body.

I can hear her, see her, feel her...oh God, I can taste her! I can't move on my own. I can't stop my hands. I can't control my body anymore. I don't want to hurt her, but I don't have any way to control the beast. I can't stop him, no matter how desperately I want to.

I couldn't protect Smaralda, and I can't protect this lady.

No! No, I don't want to hurt her!

Someone stop me, please.

I can't control my body.

I don't want to watch.

Make it stop.

I want to die.
"As the son of the Flame Dragon King, Igneel, I banish you from the path of dragons and bring you back to the path of humanity. May your sins as a feral be purged with fire."

Balaur opened his golden-brown eyes and blinked at the brightness surrounding him. It was pure white all around and utterly silent.

"Am I dead?" he asked.

"Not yet, but you were close."

He saw a man with pink hair standing beside him. He wore all white, with a white scarf wrapped around his neck. His eyes shined down at him, green and peaceful. To Balaur, he looked angelic.

"Who are you?"

"Natsu Dragneel, son of Igneel, the Flame Dragon King."

"You're a dragon...prince?"

Natsu laughed lightly and scratched the back of his head. "I guess you could call me that."

Balaur looked at his blank surroundings and whispered, "Where are we?"

The pink-haired man glanced around at the solid whiteness. "I'm not sure, honestly. Somewhere inside your head, is my guess."

"We're inside...my head?"

"Yep. So! We've been fighting this whole time, but I still don't know your name."

"Huh? Fighting?"

"Well, your feral is fighting my feral."

"Oh." Balaur's head dropped. "Sorry about him. I don't have control."

"We're working on that."

He glanced up in confusion and asked, "We?"

"Me and my feral. I think that's why we're here in your head. So, what's your name, kid?"

"Oh! Uh, I'm Balaur Blackstone, son of the Earth Dragon Terracia."

"Nice to meet you, Balaur. Do you like the idea of being a dragon?"

Balaur shuddered slightly. "Not anymore. Not if I don't have control."

"I know how you feel," Natsu said sympathetically. "I hate losing control to that beast. He's a real
Balaur laughed at that. Somehow, talking to someone who understood him, who had gone through the same things he did, made him feel better. "I'd really like to know how to get rid of my beast."

"Like I said, we're working on it. So, would you prefer to be a normal human?"

Balaur's brow creased. "I prefer being a dragon slayer. That's what Terracia wanted of me, and even if I can't remember her well, she's still my mother. However, I'm a human. If Acnologia is right, if Terracia planned to have me become anything other than a human...I don't want that. Even if that was her goal, even if I was nothing more than...than fertilizer for this seed inside me, still! This is my life and my body," he declared firmly. He looked down at his hands, then his golden-brown eyes turned up to Natsu. "I want to be human. I want to learn how to become a real dragon slayer...like you."

Natsu smiled amiably. "That's good to know." He stuck his hand out. "How about I teach you?"

Balaur looked at the offered hand. Slowly, he reached out his own hand and grasped Natsu's warm fingers. The Fire Dragon Slayer suddenly yanked him closer.

Balaur gasped as if breathing for the first time in his life. His eyes opened to a blue sky dotted with puffs of clouds. It looked so close, and so immensely far away.

Then slanted green eyes leaned over and gazed at him, filling his vision with pink hair. "Are you awake?"

"Y-yeah," he said unsteadily. It was his voice. His own! Not that cursed creature. Balaur looked over at the young man. "Natsu...Dragneel?"

He grinned broadly. "Welcome back."

"You..." Balaur looked over his body, the cerise hair, those sage-green eyes, and the bright red Fairy Tail mark on Natsu's upper arm. Only now, instead of a mystical apparition all in white, Natsu's clothes had torn to shreds until nothing but the scarf remained to cover his bruised and bleeding body. "You were a dragon. I saw it! How are you human now?"

"Easy," Natsu said with a blithe shrug. "I choose to be human, just like you made your choice. Now, here we are."

"But you could have been a dragon. You were so much stronger; I could sense it. Don't you want that?"

Natsu chuckled quietly and shook his head. "It's nice to be strong, but strength is only good if you can protect your loved ones. Right now, there's someone I love, and I can't be with her if I'm like that. So even if I'm not as strong, if I'm like this," he said, stretching out his arms, "then I can hold her and protect her, and that's more important to me than strength. She's more important. How about you? Is the beast gone?"

Balaur realized there was no more voice in his head, no beast clawing to get out. He felt whole for the first time in a year. "He's...gone. I don't even sense him. Or...or I sort of do, but not like before." Balaur's eyes tensed up, and he looked to Natsu with a sense of panic. "Did you crush him?"

Although he hated his feral side, Balaur remembered the beast's desire for freedom and the fear of being crushed. He almost felt bad for the beast.
"He's not crushed. What I did for you was welding you and him together. To be honest," Natsu said with a grin, "my way is better than that damn ceremony they keep talking about. It should leave you stronger. His strength is still in you, you may even hear his voice if you get really emotional, but he won't control your body ever again."

"Th-thank you!" Suddenly, Balaur laughed at the buoyant feeling of freedom and stared up at the sky. "It's so blue," he whispered in awe.

Natsu glanced upward. "Yeah, the sky looks best after you've been staring at the dark ground for so long."

"It's like I was buried, a seed in the soil, but now my leaves have broken through and I can feel the warm sun."

Natsu frowned at the simile. "Do you always talk in terms of seeds and soils?"

Balaur laughed softly, the first time in ages he felt like he could truly laugh at something. "Yeah, I guess I do," he admitted happily. "Terracia always did. Terracia loved nature." Tears gathered in his eyes. "I want to find her, but not to kill her anymore." He looked up to Natsu, and a tear slipped down his cheek. "For the first time in my life, I want to find Terracia...and give her a big hug."

Natsu patted his black hair. "That's a good start."

"And you?" the boy asked, suddenly looking concerned. "You went feral to save me. You're not a dragon but...but I sense..."

Natsu put his finger to his smirking lips to silence the boy. "My beast and I worked it out."

"Natsu!" came a woman's cry.

Balaur lifted his head and saw Lucy being carried over the chasm by Happy. "The blond lady from earlier. Is she safe?" he asked, truly worried.

"Of course she is," Natsu beamed proudly. "I would never let Lucy get hurt."

"I'm glad she's okay." Balaur collapsed back and stared at the clouds. "She really does smell like my sister."

Natsu glared down. "You stay away from Lucy!"

Balaur chuckled weakly and shook his head. "I can smell that she's been claimed by you."

"Damn right she is!"

Happy set Lucy down beside Natsu, and she wrapped her arms around the dragon slayer's neck. "Oh Natsu! I was so worried. Are you okay?"

He squeezed her and inhaled her scent. "I am now," he sighed happily.

She held his cheeks and looked at his face. "Just now, were you really a dragon?"

Natsu just smiled and stroked his fingers through her hair. "I'm me now. That's all that matters."

"But Natsu..."

"I'm fine, Lucy," he assured, and he tenderly kissed her forehead. "I told you I'd come back to you."
But...I'll have to leave you again."

"What?" she cried out in dread. "Why?"

Natsu was already wobbling. "I'm totally ready to pass out."

Suddenly, he collapsed to the ground beside Balaur, unconscious but smiling in victory.

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**FANART:**

![Bloody Feral Natsu](image)

*Bloody Feral Natsu*

by the incredibly talented SrngDrng who is obsessed with making Beastly fanart, and I love her for it!
SLAYER SAY
NO KILL, PROTECT NAKAMA

SAY NOTHING ABOUT
HURT

Natsu Trollface Poster
another by the talented SrngDrgn, or as I like to call it, "Say Nothing About...HURT!"

* To go along with this poster, I did a voice-over of Beasty saying this line. - http://chirb.it/50Bq6m
* Which all started with this RP post in the "Feral Natsu" Tumblr page - http://feralnatsu.tumblr.com/post/86826157793/i-dont-need-to-be-saved
It's not over yet. I must usurp...I mean honor Hiro Mashima a little more.

The smells were familiar. A sweet smell. A soothing smell. Vanilla, strawberry, faded whiffs of perfume and facial cleansers, clean laundry, old wood, fresh fruits, femininity: these were the smells of Lucy's apartment. Natsu smiled as he woke up to this nostalgic blend of fragrances.

Lucy! He loved her. He loved her so much, his chest hurt just thinking about her. That weirdo with the lopsided ponytail had fought through the flames and won her way into his heart. She was his now. His mate! His girlfriend! His...lover. His pulse raced just thinking about the love they shared, her smile, her laugh, the heat of her body and feel of her skin.

He would fight anything to protect her.

Even himself.

He would sacrifice anything to keep her safe.

Even himself.

Somewhere in his sleep-addled mind, he knew he had just done both: battling himself, sacrificing himself. He had willingly given up his humanity, his sanity, all control, and became...something else. Something not him, but still him. He had been ready to give up absolutely everything to protect her. For a while, he thought he might lose her forever.

However, because of Lucy, he came back. Or something brought him back. Something did not want Lucy to be sad. Something knew her happiness relied on this silly, destructive, pink-haired teenager, and that something was not about to let Lucy cry.

So he sacrificed himself, only to be brought back...

To normal?

Maybe not normal. A different smell...some anomalous aroma whiffing around him and through him...

« Slayer... »

He moaned. That voice...

"Natsu!"

This time, his eyes opened. Lucy's cry brought him over the cusp of dreamy sleep. For a moment, he wanted to slip back. That voice...how was it still there? Had that voice been just a dream, a memory, or was it something more?
"Lucy?" His throat felt raw and dry, like swallowing sand.

"Rest still, Natsu-san."

A different voice. A different smell. He forced himself to look over and saw the tiny Sky Dragon Slayer.


"Gajeel healed me," Wendy explained. "He did some sort of ceremony. Oh! And Laxus, too. Rogue did his. We're both better."

Natsu's face crunched up as he tried to process this. "Ceremony? The one for feral dragon slayers?"

Wendy nodded. "I thought it would be scary, but it was actually rather boring. I was just sitting there, Gajeel chanted some long incantation, and then I fell asleep. I partially woke up a few times, always with a headache, and Gajeel would ask me weird questions, like if I want to be human. What an odd question to ask," she mused, but Natsu smiled to himself as he realized he had asked Balaur the same thing. "Just today, I woke up completely and he said it was over. I don't feel all that different. Then again, I wasn't that far gone."

Natsu inhaled deeply, although his lungs struggled against that. He felt bandages around his chest restricting what he guessed were a few broken ribs. However, the smell he sought was not there.

"Then, they crushed the seed in you."

Wendy's green healing magic stopped. "Yes, the dragon instincts in me were trying to take root. The power is still in there, but not the scary voice. Why? Is something wrong?"

Natsu looked away; for some reason, he felt sad. "I think I need more rest."

A soft hand stroked back his hair. He looked up and saw Lucy smiling down at him. That bad feeling of depression swept away at the gleam in her brown eyes. Whatever happened to Wendy and Laxus no longer mattered. What's done was done! How they got saved was up to them. All that he cared about was that they were safe now, and Lucy was here with him, smiling, looking absolutely gorgeous in the sunlight slanting through her bedroom window.

"Wait," he suddenly realized in a jolt. "That ceremony thing is supposed to take seven days. That means I've been sleeping for a whole week!"

Natsu wanted to jump up, but Lucy easily pressed him back down. The blinding pain all through his body convinced him not to move again, and he flopped back onto her pillows.

"You've been feverish with all your injuries," Lucy told him. "You've healed a little over the past week, but not enough. Wendy just now was released from the ceremony. She'll heal you, but you should probably sleep more."

Sleep. Yes, sleep sounded good. His eyelids were getting heavy and his head swam dizzily. "I...took your bed."

"I gave you my bed," Lucy corrected. "I wasn't about to sleep in that pig sty you call a home." She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. Wendy politely looked away with a blush on her cheeks. "I also wasn't about to leave you alone when you were barely hanging on to life."

Natsu's eyes were too heavy, but he tried to force them to stay open. He wanted to keep looking at
"I like your bed," he muttered. "Comfy. Smells good." He saw dark shadows under Lucy's eyes. He bet she had stayed right by his side all week. "You...get sleep...too," he mumbled. He hoped she heard him, because he instantly fell back into a dark warmth with strange dreams.

Natsu faced someone who almost looked like himself, except this twin had massive scarlet wings with pink webbing, a crimson tail with black spines, long black claws on its fingers and toes, blazing red eyes, and a blushing of scales over its skin.

They stood in emptiness, a grayness that stretched for eternity. There seemed to be a glowing light somewhere behind Natsu, and he sensed a shadowy darkness behind this beast. The light and dark were retreating, leaving the two of them to face off in a place that was purely gray.

"Slayer saved Lucy?"

Natsu nodded to his other self. "She's safe. She was hurt, but I'll take care of her from now on."

"Never let Lucy cry. Never let Lucy be lonely."

Natsu smiled with confidence. "She's strong. If she cries, it won't be for something I did. If I see her in tears, I'll do everything I can to make her smile once again. And...she won't ever be lonely," he promised. "She has me and our friends, everyone in Fairy Tail. We're her family, and we'll always be there for her. She never needs to feel like she's all alone."

The red eyes narrowed as the beast hissed, "Never hurt Lucy!"

Natsu held the creature's fiery gaze. "That goes for you, too. If you hurt her, I will crush you."

The feral lowered its head. "Beast lost. Not to Slayer, though. To Lucy. I lost...to Lucy."

"What do you mean? How the hell did you lose to her? You didn't fight her...or did you?" he asked with suspicion bordering on anger.

"No. Not fight with fists." The beast's face drew up in frustration. "Should not be this weak!" it hissed scathingly. "Beast was strong. Beast not care if kill things. Beast not care who to fuck. Then it all changed. She changed it. Suddenly, not wanna fuck anything else. Suddenly...care," it spat, as if caring was a loathsome thing. "Care for girlie with good smell. Not want other girlies. Want to protect. Want to...to make happy. To obey. Obey is not freedom. Obey is cage! So then...why?" it roared in frustration. "She made Beast weak."

"Wait, wait, you...you're saying you...fell in love?" Natsu asked in shock.

The beast stayed quiet for a while, looking pensive. "Should not have let Slayer return at all. Was free! Was feral! Was dragon! But Lucy wanted Slayer back. Can't fight against her wants. I...obeyed. I let Slayer share. I did not take over." Its head dropped, and it chuckled at the irony. "Beast is weak. Lucy is strong. Slayer is strong with Beast and Lucy. Lucy is safer with Slayer and Beast."

"And you?" Natsu asked.

"Beast exists...for Slayer...and for Lucy. I lost, so I must obey Lucy."

"Do you mean as punishment? It can't be that simple," Natsu said suspiciously.

"I am seed of a dragon. Dragons live by honor."

"You wanted to kill people!" Natsu yelled.
"Dragons have different morals. I have no morals, only wants, desires...and the honor of a dragon. That is instinct." The beast unfurled its wings and bowed humbly. "I lost. I lost to Lucy, so must obey. I...want...to obey. I will honor Lucy's desire to have only Slayer in control."

Natsu took two steps closer and poked the Beast hard in the chest. "I don't want you in my head," he said sternly. "You won't take over anymore, at least not without my permission."

"Can I live?"

Natsu stared at the bowed beast, and he felt a little pity for it. If the tables were turned—if it was him begging to survive while being trapped inside this body without any control—would he want to live, or would death be preferable to servitude?

"You can live," Natsu decided. "You'll probably see everything I do, right?"

"Yessss...see all, feel all, say nothing."

Again, Natsu felt just a little sympathy for this other side of himself. "If you promise to behave, maybe I'll let you out once in a while."

The beast straightened up and shook its head. "Too dangerous. People not like that. Lucy not like that. Make Lucy sad if Slayer is not in control. Lucy wants Slayer, not Beast. I lost to Lucy. I will honor Lucy's wants. I will help Slayer. I will not fight Slayer. If Lucy wants Slayer, Lucy will have Slayer. I will go, Slayer will stay. But..." Those scarlet eyes glowed menacingly. "If you hurt Lucy, all deals are off. I will take over. I will take Lucy. I will fuck her as my mate."

"Like hell!" Natsu sneered.

The beast snarled back, but it quickly turned aside, looking weary. "Know your wants, Slayer. Your wants are my wants, but my wants will always be for Lucy."

"And if Lucy decides she doesn't want me?"

The beast shrugged with a mocking smile. "Sucks to be Slayer! I will still honor Lucy. I lost. I lost to Lucy's wants." It grinned up at him arrogantly. "If Lucy ever wants Beast..."

"Over my dead body!"

"Our body, and not dead, and would love to have her over me, on top of me, riding me..."

Natsu's fist flamed up in rage, but the beast just laughed at his jealous reaction.

"Keep her happy, Slayer...or I will. Bye-bye."

Then the winged creature faded into the grayness until Natsu was standing all alone. However, the light was still behind him, and the shadow was still in front of him. Natsu knew that if he rushed ahead too quickly, the darkness would consume him, and if he stumbled backward, the light would burn him. He had found balance, and he needed to stay in this argent world of precarious equilibrium.

When Natsu woke again, there were more smells, a complex weave of aromas. He had never associated light and dark with a smell, but after the Grand Magic Games, he knew two new smells existed.

"He's sleeping," Lucy argued at the doorway of the bedroom.
Natsu forced himself awake. "No, I'm up."

Lucy turned to look at him in shock, but her hesitation allowed a small group to enter. Sting pushed his way inside, but Rogue was more gentle, catching Lucy when Sting's exuberance almost made her fall. Laxus also came in, glaring at the cuteness of Lucy's bedroom with distaste.

"So, this is where you've been hiding," he grumbled.

Last to enter was Gajeel. Lucy and Wendy stayed to the side as the four men encircled her bed and made their own examination of the Fire Dragon Slayer.

Slowly, Natsu pushed himself up into a sitting position, resting against the headboard. To his surprise and delight, the pain from earlier was gone. He had some lingering aches, he felt weakness in his muscles—probably from sleeping in bed for over a week, he realized—but nothing at all like earlier. Wendy had healed him well.

Sting grinned at seeing Natsu looking healthy again. "So, you're up. You've been really out of it, from what we've heard."

Natsu still felt tired, and he scratched out his bed-head hair. "Yeah, I guess I'm almost back to normal."

Rogue had a suspicious gaze. "Normal? Are you sure about that?" He took in every detail of Natsu, as well as sniffing. He smelled the scent of the Fire Dragon Slayer, but Lucy's smells were absolutely everywhere, inundating the air with her fragrances. It was annoying that women tended to smell more...flowery!

Natsu chuckled at the worries that tweaked everyone's faces. "I'm fine, really."

Rogue did not look convinced. "But you...that dragon..."

"That won't be happening again," Natsu said quickly. "None of it will. Well, maybe the wings. I liked those wings. Maybe I can figure out how to bring back just those. But the beast, the madness...the dragon...those are all gone."

"That ceremony," said Laxus. "Did you do it on yourself? You've been out for over a week. So has that Earth Dragon Slayer kid we picked up. It's almost the same as what these guys," thumbing to Gajeel and the Sabertooth twins, "did to us."

Gajeel stared at Natsu distrustfully. "Doing that on yourself ain't supposed to be possible."

Natsu hummed and thought about it. "I still don't really know what this whole ceremony thing is about, but I did something. He's gone, that's all I know. His power is still there, but he won't be in my head anymore."

Sting let out a sigh of relief. "That's good."

Just then, there was a timid knock at the door and a meek voice mumbled, "Um, pardon me. Is this Miss Heartfilia's house?" The boy asking had the distinct accent of a person from the country of Bosco. "I was told that Natsu Dragneel is here."

Lucy sighed, giving up. "My home is now a hospital and visiting hours are open." As she looked back to the doorway, she saw a teenager with long, wavy, black hair, dark mocha skin, and eyes like amber. "Balaur!"
The other dragon slayers tensed up when they saw him. Gone were the wings and tail, but the shape of the face was the same as the feral beast they had all fought at least once.

"It's safe," Natsu said to all of them, and he smiled at Balaur. "Nice to see you wearing clothes for a change."

The boy blushed and looked down at the shirt and trousers he wore. "I got them from a girl I met in your guild, someone named Nicci Bonder."

"I don't know a mage named Nicci," Natsu mused.

Lucy perked up in surprise. "I talked to her yesterday. She's not a mage. Actually, she's a model. She's been coming to the guild all week to check on you, Balaur. Did you really rescue her from rapists?"

"Yes. Well, that is...I killed the men trying to hurt her," Balaur amended. "I woke up before the beast killed her as well, so she escaped. She bought me a bunch of clothes as a way to say thanks. I...don't deserve a gift like this," he muttered despondently, tugging on what was a high-quality shirt. "I could have killed her just as easily, but...but it's nice to know I saved someone."

Lucy got past her fears. She had been hurt badly and assaulted by this teen, but that was the beast that had possessed and controlled him. "You also tried to save me, you know," she said, forcing herself to smile. If she could forgive Natsu for something he had no control over doing, she should express the same forgiveness toward this boy whose only sin was losing control to the feral seed within him.

Balaur cautiously walked forward, and the other dragon slayers gave him a wide berth. He came up beside the bed where Natsu still sat.

"I wanted to thank you," Balaur said softly. "You should have killed me. Instead, you saved me and brought me back. When I was healing, I had a...a dream, maybe a vision, I don't know. It was about that beast in me. We talked face to face, and we came to an understanding. He said he lost to you, so now he has to obey you, and since you granted me the chance to be human, he'll obey your wish. You...saved me." Balaur's throat choke up with emotion. "What you did for me..."

"Hey," Natsu interrupted. He rose out of bed and gave the kid a hug. "I was just helping a fellow dragon slayer. Don't worry about it. Just don't screw up anymore."

Balaur gulped down a sob and nodded. He pulled away quickly with a deft wipe to his eye. "I...I just wanted to say thanks personally. It's..." He glanced to Lucy, and painful regrets flashed past his face. "It's a little awkward being here. I should go."

"Hey, wait!" Sting shouted as Balaur began to turn. "You're a dragon slayer. You should be in a guild."

"I've thought about that," Balaur muttered. "I would like to learn more about how to control my magic and do things to help people. I want to atone for my sins."

"Join Sabertooth," Sting insisted. "I'm the guild master. I want you in my guild."

Laxus huffed at the overly-eager blond. "If he wants to get stronger, he should join the strongest guild in Fiore, and that's Fairy Tail."

"You guys have more than enough dragon slayers," Sting argued. "Sabertooth is the best place for him."
Laxus scoffed with a smirk. "If you think you would make a good mentor, try growing up a bit, ya damn brat."

Sting leaned into his face and growled, "What was that, Sparky?"

Balaur cleared his throat to stop the bickering. "Actually, I really think it'd be bad to stay in Magnolia. The guild knows what I did as a feral, and staying in this town...there are too many bad memories."

Rogue smiled amiably to the boy. "You have a home with us."

"Thanks, but I'm not sure I would fit in with Sabertooth, either. I might try one of the smaller guilds. However, right now I want to go back to my home village, pay my respects to the graves of my foster parents, and try to find my sister, Smaralda." His eyes cast down in darkness. "I owe her a very big apology," he whispered in grief. "Then, one day, when I'm strong enough, I want to look for my dragon mother, Terracia. Maybe I can work in a guild and travel around, that way I can ask about her."

Natsu nodded in agreement. "Yeah, I do that all the time, asking about Igneel everywhere I go."

Gajeel patted Balaur's shoulder so hard, the boy almost stumbled. "Do what you feel you must to atone for the pain you put others through. Living with a dark and hateful past is not easy. I know!" He thought about all the people he hurt once, destroying the original Fairy Tail guild, nearly killing Levy, Jet, and Droy, torturing Lucy for fun, and fighting the people he now considered to be friends. It had been a long journey of redemption for Gajeel, so he understood a little about how this poor kid was going to suffer along the way, and grow stronger through that pain.

"You fought really well," Natsu told Balaur. "One day, you'll be a really powerful dragon slayer. When you get some control over your magic, I wanna fight you again."

Everyone rolled their eyes. That was so typical of Natsu!

Balaur chuckled at his friendly challenge. "It's a deal. I'll get strong enough to beat you. After all," and for the first time since arriving, Balaur had a genuinely happy smile on his face, "Earth is strong against Fire. One of these days, I'm gonna whoop your ass, Salamander Natsu."

Sting guffawed at the boastful declaration. "Now you really do sound like a dragon slayer. Awesome! Hey, we'll fight too someday."

Natsu grinned at the White Dragon Slayer. "I also owe you another chance to fight me, fairly this time."

Sting beamed back at him. "Hell yes!"

Laxus stared down at the Earth Dragon Slayer. "I never did get to test your strength, kid. I'm curious how Lightning would match up against you."

Balaur smirked haughtily. "I'll warn you, I'm pretty much impervious to lightning."

Natsu laughed in excitement. "Oooh, sounds like a challenge, Laxus! But Earth is weak to Air, right? Wendy will probably kick your butt."

"What? Me?" the little girl squeaked.

"Ah, Wendy." Balaur pulled away from the other dragon slayers and came up to her. "I owe you an
apology as well." He bowed low and formally in front of her. "You shouldn't have had to face the awakening for a few more years. You suffered all that because of me. To hurt someone so young, I am deeply grieved."

She felt flustered at his sincerity, plus his Bosco accent was exotic and made her blush. "Don't worry about it. I didn't suffer too much. Now it's over with for me, so I won't have to go through that again. Maybe I can grow up faster."

Balaaur chuckled and patted her head. "Not too fast. Once you grow up, you'll have to fight off the boys more than fighting enemies. By how cute you look now, you'll be quite the lady when you're older."

Wendy felt her cheeks heat up all the way to her ears as she stared down at her toes and muttered an awkward thanks.

Natsu chuckled and teased, "Wendy's blushing!"

"I am not!" she squeaked in a fluster.

Since Wendy was standing next to Lucy, Balaaur looked over to her next. "Miss Lucy..."

She gulped as he came up. It was still something like double-vision. She saw the poor, sick, tormented boy who had tried to rescue her, but she also saw the violent fiend who had assaulted her and nearly killed her. Her leg and arm still ached sometimes from the devastating injuries he gave her in their fight.

"I...I don't even know how I can possibly apologize for all I did to you." Balaaur's face tensed up, and tears lined his eyelids. "I hurt so many. I killed countless people. I know that, but I was never conscious through it. I don't remember any of what the feral did. I guess that's a blessing. But with you...the feral forced me to watch what he did to you. I realize, I might have done the exact same thing to dozens of other people. I may have done worse. A lot worse," he ended in a faint whisper. "It's like all of my sins pile up onto what I did to you, because with you—and only with you—I actually saw what the feral did, how vicious and sadistic it was. It...it makes me want to vomit."

He gulped and lowered his head. The worries in Lucy's mind faded as she saw just how miserable this boy felt for crimes that he had no control over. She took his hands, callused and as rough as sandstone, and squeezed them with her gentle, soft fingers.

"You had no control, no ability to stop it," she said with a tone of forgiveness. "You even tried to help me to escape by giving me your magic power so I could call one of my Celestial Spirits. In a way, you were fighting right along with me. That shows you're actually a good guy deep down inside." Her eyes drifted past him and over to Natsu. He was watching her warily, wondering how she would forgive this person who had plagued her nightmares for so long. "Blaming people for something they absolutely can't control...it's not fair, and it's not right. You can only blame the person who wanted the pain, not the thing that was used to deliver the pain. It would be like blaming a sword and not the swordsman wielding it. The beast was wielding your body. You had no control. You were a tool it could use."

"It was still part of my instincts," Balaaur muttered in misery.

Lucy had heard the same inflection of guilt from Natsu, and as she looked over at the Fire Dragon Slayer again, she saw the same inner pain. It was like she was speaking to both of them now.

"We all have dark desires." Lucy looked back to Balaaur, took his chin in her hand, and tipped his
face up to see wetness streaking his cheeks. "What makes us human is the ability not to give in to those desires. You're human now. You don't ever have to go through that again. You make your own decisions based on your own morality."

His eyes hardened with determination. "You're right. I'm human. When Natsu healed me, he gave me a choice, and I decided I wanted to be human, not a dragon. As a human, I can control myself, and I can atone for what I did. I can't erase what the beast did to you—and to other people. It's a sin I'll have to endure all my life. However, because of that, I swear, I will help women in need. I will honor them and respect them. I will do everything in my power to protect the weak. I'll fight the people who have lost their humanity and fallen into the depths of their dark instincts. Maybe I can save a few of them, as well. That's all I can do for now, but maybe it'll be enough to balance out all the blood on my hands."

Balaur then turned to Natsu. "For what I did to Lucy, I deserved to have died by your hands."

Natsu shook his head. "I don't kill people."

"Then you're a stronger man than I am. Protect her, Natsu Dragneel. I sincerely hope you and Lucy can have a happy life together. Farewell."

Without another word, Balaur turned and left Lucy's home. A silence followed him, until someone gave a long sigh.

"Well, that's all over now," Sting said, stretching his arms above his head. "I miss my bed. Rogue, ya ready to go home?"

"We need to get Frosh and Lector. Happy said something about a catnip tea party."

Sting grimaced. "Oh, that doesn't sound good. We better go check on things."

Laxus asked, "What are you going to tell your guild? You two left to chase after the feral dragon slayer."

Sting turned to face him. "No one knows it was a feral, only us. When we left Sabertooth, we just told people it was a monster or beast. The fact that this was a dragon slayer gone bad is something the public should never know. Ever!" he said seriously. "We'll just report that the beast was vanquished. Two beasts, I guess." Sting slapped Natsu hard on the back with a massive grin. "Good to see you back to normal, Natsu. Later." Then he turned and left with Rogue.

"I'm outta here," Laxus grumbled, leaving as well without any other word of encouragement or congratulations.

"If you're feeling better, I still have other people to heal," Wendy said, curtsying briefly before leaving.

Lucy sighed wearily. "Finally, some peace in my home again." Then she realized Gajeel was still around.

His voice was terse. "I need to talk to him. Alone."

"Oh, okay," Lucy muttered, a little concerned. "Natsu, do you need anything?"

"My throat still hurts a bit. I could use something to drink."

"Got it!" She hurried into the kitchen.
Gajeel waited until the others were away, and then he leaned over Natsu with a furious glare in his narrow eyes. "What the hell did you do, Salamander?"

Natsu looked up at him in surprise. "Huh?"

"I didn't want to say anything around the others. They all think you're fine and normal. You're not normal!" he growled. "You don't smell feral, but you smell...different. It ain't a smell I know, and I don't like it."

Natsu smiled smugly. "Get used to it. This is me now. It's how I am."

Gajeel glared harshly. "Are you safe?"

Natsu gave a blithe shrug. "Pretty sure."

His casual attitude annoyed Gajeel. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means I'm pretty sure what I did worked, for Balaur and for me. It's not the same as you, but it works good enough."

"Good enough?" Gajeel bellowed. He grabbed Natsu by his scarf and hauled him up close. "You hurt Lucy, that kid almost killed her twice, and you're leaving this as being good enough?"

Natsu's eyes flashed red. "Back the hell off, metalhead."

Gajeel quickly let go and jolted away. He felt...intimidated. And it annoyed the hell out of him! What was it about Natsu that, for a split second, made Gajeel's whole body cower?

Instantly, Natsu's eyes were normal again. "See. I'm in control."

"That thing is still in there," Gajeel sneered in disbelief and outrage.

"It's still in you, too. It's in Sting and Rogue. It's in all of us. I merely let my beast live, while you guys crushed that seed of self-awareness."

"Who's to say you won't flip out?" Gajeel lashed out in anger.

"The beast doesn't want it, and neither do I. This only works because my beast and I got to know each other well, and we compromised. He remains alive and conscious of what is happening, and I use his strength whenever I need it."

"That's too dangerous, Salamander!" he shouted, lashing his hand out in fury.

Natsu did not back down and stared at the Iron Dragon Slayer with serious eyes. "Life's always dangerous. All we can do is trust that we do the right thing and don't mess up too badly. I've got my friends to take care of me, and I'll take care of them. Plus, I have Lucy. I can't screw up, because she might get hurt, and that is one thing neither me nor the beast inside me wants."

"What if that beast in you gets bored or loses interest in Lucy?"

Natsu's eyebrow raised up. "Have you ever looked at her? Who the hell could get bored of a girl like that?"

"Pervert," Gajeel grumbled.

"Tell ya what. If I ever lose control and the beast inside rampages, you can kill me. I'm that confident
that I have control."

Gajeel pointed his finger sharply into Natsu's chest. "I'm keeping my eyes on you, Salamander. One screw up..."

"Gonna watch me all the time?" Natsu smirked. "Who's the pervert now?"

With a deep growl, Gajeel turned away and stomped out of the room. "I still don't like your smell."

Natsu shouted after him. "I never liked yours, either."

As Gajeel stormed out, Lucy came back with a tea tray. She watched Gajeel until he slammed her door shut, shaking the walls.

"Sheesh, what's up with him?"

"Don't worry," Natsu said dismissively. He sat back down on her bed. "Come here."

She entered the bedroom and set the tray down on her nightstand. "Tea with honey and lemon. It'll help your sore throat. I also figured you're a bit hungry, so I added some biscuits and..."

Natsu yanked her down onto his lap. "I'm hungry, all right!"

Lucy saw the desire smoldering in his gaze and blushed brightly. "Natsu..."

"I don't have to be scared of myself anymore," he said, nuzzling her neck and inhaling the fragrance of her skin. "Finally, I can be as wild as I want without worrying about that annoying guy taking over."

He kissed her on the lips. For the first time, there was no voice in the back of his head urging him on, no secondary thoughts about forgetting an annoying thing like kissing and getting to the good part. He could savor such a simple thing, like the feel of her soft mouth against his and the taste of her strawberry lip gloss as he lightly sucked her bottom lip.

"No one's left in here, right?" he asked in a husky voice, letting himself become intoxicated as her smell intensified. Lucy shook her head, not trusting her voice. "So, we're all alone?" He took both of her cheeks in his hands and turned her face down to him. "Good."

He kissed her firmer, and his tongue sought out her taste. Lucy moaned as Natsu's hot hands skimmed over her stomach and glided up her blouse to her breasts. His mouth was so hot, and his fingers felt like they might burn away her clothing. Natsu smiled at her, adoring the way her cheeks turned pink and her eyes squinted up, as if she could hide away from the way he made her feel.

Lucy suddenly grabbed around his shoulders and buried her face in his scarf, hiding the tears that he could still smell. Natsu froze, worried why she was crying. Was it too much? He hadn't done anything bad, had he?

"Lucy?" he asked fretfully.

"I was so worried that I'd lost you!" she cried, clutching him firmly.

"I'm here," he assured her, tenderly stroking back her golden hair. "It's all over. I'm safe, and you're safe, and we can be together." He clutched her against him, like grabbing hold of a treasure after a long and arduous battle. "No fears, no cages, just us."

He thought about the beast's words. "If Lucy wants Slayer, Lucy will have Slayer. I will go, Slayer..."
"I'll always be me," Natsu swore fervently. "I'll always be your dragon slayer."

He kissed her blond hair and buried his nose into the fragrance of the back of her neck. Finally, they were free to be together!

"Hey," he cried out happily. "Now we can start dating for real, right? We can go on dates and walk around town holding hands, and I can take you out to dinners. I'm gonna be the best boyfriend ever. Promise!"

Her laughter dispersed the tears, and Natsu grinned to see her smiling. Like he had promised the beast, if Lucy ever cried, he would make her smile again.

"I just wanna make you happy," he told her, putting aside his silliness and trying to sound serious. "Whatever you want, just let me know. I'll probably screw up along the way, so you'll need to help me out with this whole dating thing."

Still sitting on his lap, she looked down into his narrow green eyes and stroked her fingers through his wild hair. "For now, kiss me."

He leaned his face up to hers, feeling the way her breathing quickened and the slight shudder in her muscles as she waited in anticipation. "I love you, Lucy," he whispered passionately, gazing at her waiting lips.

She just about melted at hearing him say those words. "I love you too, Natsu. I love you so much."

His lips just barely brushed against her, kissing her with all the gentleness he could muster, and savoring that he could be tender with her without any worries or fear. There was only himself and Lucy, and if there was anything more inside him, Natsu did not sense it in there.

"It's just you and me, Lucy," he sighed in happiness. "Only us." He gripped her cheeks in his hands, wanting to always feel the cool softness of her skin. "Be mine forever."

Her eyes widened in shock. For—ever?

"Uh...well..." He stuttered as he realized what he just said. Natsu rubbed the back of his head and looked aside, gazing up to the corner of her ceiling, hoping Lucy did not see just how much he was blushing. "Be mine...for now?" He hoped that was better. This romance business was so awkward.

Lucy sputtered out a joyful laugh and nodded her head. "Yeah. I'm all yours. Your...mate, right?" she asked uncertainly.

He shook his head and gave her another warm kiss. "My girlfriend. How about I get a shower and take you out on a date? I'm absolutely starving, and tea and biscuits won't be enough."

She beamed happily and nodded. Dating with Natsu was going to be an adventure all of its own.

Chapter End Notes

The lady who got Balaur clothes, Nicci Bonder, is from way back in Chapter 11. I had many readers who wanted me to hook up Balaur and Nicci at the end, but he's still in
love with his foster sister, Smaralda. Plus Nicci is too old for him, haha! But I gave a cursory nod to everyone who wanted her to at least thank Balaur.

Do you want more Balaur? A fan started this blog to RP for my OC. That's totally awesome!
http://balaurblackstonetumblr.com

Since this is the last time we'll get to see Beast, I decided to voice out his farewell. Pardon the low volume. Doing the beast's voice really wears out my throat.

http://chirb.it/Cwm14Q
Natsu thought he had done quite well for a first date. First, he sought out Happy, which was easy enough—how many blue flying cats were there in Magnolia? He asked the Exceed to fly back to their house and get him some money, since he did not want to leave Lucy alone long enough to run back home himself. Lucy offered to pay for their meal, but Natsu was not about to ruin their first date by being broke. Luckily, Happy was overjoyed to have Natsu back. He flew at maximum speed to fetch a pouch of Jewels, and he even teased them about being a cute couple in his purring sort of way.

Natsu picked what he knew was a good place. They had eaten there before as teammates, not super fancy, but a step above his normal diners, somewhere their team liked to treat themselves to whenever they did a really great mission. Coming to the restaurant as a couple somehow made the food taste so much better.

Once Natsu was filled—and he really was starving after not eating for a week—they took a walk around the park. They fed ducks together until Natsu accidentally burned the bread. Lucy looked cutely frustrated at that, so Natsu bought them ice cream from a trolley to cheer her up. They hid under the drooping branches of a willow tree to cuddle close together and watch people walking by along the park trails, many of them loving couples as well.

Then he took her shopping. He thought it was odd how Lucy looked through lots of stores and tried on dozens of outfits, yet she did not want to buy anything. Girls were so weird! Then in a refined boutique, he sneaked a glance at a blouse Lucy had tried on, declaring it was "so cute," and his throat choked at the price. He grabbed her hand and yanked her out of the door. Natsu decided that should be the end of shopping, before Lucy decided she really did want to buy something.

After an enjoyable afternoon, they went to the guild, since Natsu was way too eager to tell everyone the good news. Thanks to rumors from the group that chased after Natsu, and some sly hints from Mira who had heard them in the prison under the guild, everyone already knew. When Natsu and Lucy entered, ready to shout to everyone that they were a couple, instead they were greeted by cheers and Cana shouted "About damn time!" Natsu pouted that he did not get the chance to shock everyone, but Lucy was laughing that their friends had already accepted them as a couple, so the dragon slayer decided this was okay, too.

Their friends congratulated them. There was a party to welcome back Natsu, celebrate his recovery, and toast the new couple. Natsu even managed to not get into a fight with Gray, since he knew that annoyed Lucy.

At some point late that night, they slipped out. They had partied and eaten, maybe they drank too much, and it was dark outside.

"I'll walk you home."
Natsu would have offered that anyway, but this time, the way he said it, and the blush Lucy gave him in return, they both knew it meant so much more.

They took the long way back, meandering the streets which were now lively as townsfolk celebrated the news that the vicious beast who had shed so much blood in Magnolia had been defeated by the mages of Fairy Tail. The whole city had a party atmosphere; people no longer looked scared. A small festival had started up in the town square with a bonfire, drumming, and dancing. Natsu and Lucy paused by the celebration, but they did not join in. Natsu felt it somehow was unfair to celebrate, when he had caused some of the trouble.

Instead, they went on home. Wordlessly, Lucy let Natsu come inside. It was not at all strange for her teammate to come into her home this late at night, but this time, her heart pounded in anticipation. She took off her shoes, removed her purse, and set her key pouch down, all automatic things she always did upon coming home for the night. She felt herself breathing faster until her throat went dry. When two hands touched her shoulders, that tension snapped. She jolted with a squeak and turned around to see Natsu gazing down at her with a sad expression.

"You smell scared." His brow tensed. "Are you still worried that I might turn into that beast at night?"

Her cheeks flushed as she looked to the side. "That's not it."

"I won't ever hurt you, Lucy. I made a promise...with myself."

She looked up in surprise. With himself? Did he mean with the inner beast?

"I didn't win my fight against the beast."

"What?" she gasped, terrified for a split second.

He bent over and kissed her. Her eyes widened in shock, and her cheeks went cherry red.

"You did," Natsu explained.

She tilted her head in confusion.

"The beast said he lost to you, not to me. He lets me stay in control only because you want me, not him. Somewhere along the way, we managed to agree on three things: we don't want to see you cry, or feel alone, or get hurt."

Natsu smiled and stroked her cheek. Gosh, she was cute! He could not stop himself from leaning over and kissing her again, lingering against her lips this time, until he felt her hum with pleasure. His arms slid around her body, glided around to the back of her neck, and cradled her head as she tilted it up into his kiss. He loved the softness of her skin. He wanted to feel and taste everywhere.

His mouth left her lips and trailed down her throat, sucking softly along the sensitive skin until he reached the crook of her shoulder. His mark from a week ago had faded, so he sucked on her lightly, putting a small redness where, very soon, he wanted to mark her deeply again.

"Natsu," she whispered as the erotic pleasure of his mouth pulling up a hickey.

He leaned back, cheeks flushed, eyes glazed with passion, and whispered, "You're the one who saved me, Lucy. I owe my life to you. Everything that is mine is yours. All of me, it all belongs to you now: heart, body, and soul."
She felt her eyes burning with the salty sting of tears, and she buried her face down into his scarf. Her arms grasped around him, and Natsu chuckled as he hugged her tightly. He loved the way her arms grasped around his ribs, as if Lucy was afraid to let him go. Actually, she gripped him a little too hard. Natsu realized she was tense, her knuckles were clenched, and it worried him.

His hand stroked her hair, hoping to ease her fears and regain her trust. When she finally lifted her head and opened her eyes, tears had made her lashes clump together in wetness.

"Lucy!" he cried out. He made her cry! He felt the stirring in his mind of an inner anger. "I told you, it's okay now."

"I'm not afraid. I trust you, Natsu."

"Then why are you crying?" he asked, his voice rising with dread.

He still felt the stirring in his mind. The voice was not back, but he sensed the beast coming closer to the surface. Before he could panic, he thought about all she had been through, not just with him, but also the horrible things Balaur's feral beast did to her in their final fight. Here he was, kissing her, marking her, and he was not thinking about how traumatized she might be feeling.

"Is it about...about that? Is it too soon?" he asked in worry. "If it's not a good time, we don't have to do anything. I can wait. I'll wait as long as you need, and I'll always be here to hold you."

"It's not that," she said breathlessly. His tender consideration for her feelings was so touching, she felt like she might start to cry again. "What we did together, all of...of that... Was it just the beast? Was any of it ever purely you? Would you still want me now that your wild side is gone?"

He grabbed her chin and yanked it to look up at him. "Who says it's gone?"

Before she could question, he silenced her with an overpowering kiss. Lucy moaned softly as his tongue invaded and his hands grabbed her possessively. He wanted to let her know, he still wanted her, and only her, for all time.

"Lucy," he whispered.

Something was definitely stirring inside him. Up until now, he had feared that these strange desires were the beast. Now, he realized it was only himself. He loved her, and although she had defeated the feral beast, she somehow drove up a different type of beast inside of Natsu: not one of destruction, but one of carnal passion.

He pressed her up against the wall and flexed his hips against her, letting her feel that other sort of beast she turned him into. Lucy moaned softly, and her voice drove Natsu crazy. He wanted everything about her. He wanted every taste of her body, every feel of every single part of her. His hand slid up her short skirt and rubbed against her panties. Lucy made a weird sound, repressing her moans until it sounded like the whinny of a pony.

Still a weirdo!

Natsu pulled his finger back, smelled the femininity that covered it, and erotically sucked on it. Lucy felt hot seeing him do that, but the desire in his eyes was what truly burned her.

"You always smell good," he told her, "but when you're like this, your smell changes." He sniffed his finger again, and then he gazed down at her with carnivorous passion. "I want to be the only man who ever makes you smell like this."
He grabbed her around the waist, lifted her right up off her toes, and marched to the bedroom. He flopped onto the mattress and pulled her down on top of him, lying on her pillows with Lucy above. He loved to gaze up at her like this.

"So beautiful," he said in a soft growl of pleasure. His hands slid up her waist and cupped her breasts, lifting them and groping their softness. "Is it okay to take your shirt off?"

Lucy bit her lip and nodded. Moving slowly, ashamed at how intensely he was staring, she slid her blouse up over her head, reached behind her, and unsnapped her bra. With coy blushing, she pulled off that bit of lingerie and let it fall to the ground.

"Wow," he whispered, too amazed to speak for a while. Then he laughed that he was staring like an idiot. "You really are amazing, Lucy." His hands went up, but he stopped just before reaching her breasts. "Can I touch them?"

She nodded, struggling to hold back any sounds.

His fingers pressed into her breasts, holding them and squeezing gently. A moan slipped out of Lucy's tensed throat. The blush in her cheeks was spreading down her neck and to her chest.

"I've touched them before, but every time, they're so soft," he said, watching the mounds change shape in his hands. "I'm almost afraid to touch too much. Something this soft is so fragile, I don't really trust myself."

Although she was breathing heavily, she looked down at him. "I trust you. It doesn't hurt. It...it feels good."

"What about here?" His thumb circled her nipple. Lucy tensed up and groaned with pleasure. "Your smell is getting stronger. Is this good?"

She nodded frantically. "You're feeling a little wild down here," she teased, wiggling her hips and letting Natsu realize what was happening below the belt. He blushed as he felt her do that against him. "Are you sure the beast isn't in there?"

He smirked sensually. "Depends on which beast you're talking about."

"Will you ever...um...sprout wings and stuff?"

He paused in his foreplay and stared up at her in shock. He needed to explain it, he supposed, although Natsu hardly understood it himself. "The beast is still inside me, but he won't take control so long as I don't screw up. I honestly don't know if I can still transform like that. Maybe if I really tap into that power, I could."

Lucy felt her cheeks burning as she bashfully admitted, "I kind of liked the wings."

A cocky smile curled onto his face. "I know you did. Not this time, though. This time, it's just us. Just you and me...and an actual bed," he chuckled. Lucy also laughed as she realized this was the first time they had ever been like this in a bed and not some weird location. "Just us," he whispered warmly.

Lucy hummed, and her hips wiggled. Natsu moaned as he felt her slide over him.

"Do you like that?" she asked playfully. Her lower body gyrated over him, and Natsu hummed at the pleasure.
"You're teasing me," he said in warning. She smiled coquettishly and did it some more, making his hips buck up. "Don't tease a dragon, Lucy."

He grabbed her, flipped her hard, and pinned her to the bed. Lucy gasped at the speed. Had Natsu always been that fast?

"Let's see how you like to be teased." His hand slid up her skirt again, rubbing her, driving her crazy. Lucy held back her voice, and it annoyed Natsu. "I wanna hear you."

"My landlady..."

"I don't care about that old biddy. I wanna hear you. I wanna know this feels good."

"You can smell it, can't you?" she protested.

Natsu smirked down at her. "Sure, I can smell it. I can see it, too. I can feel it." He rubbed his finger inside of her drenched panties and across her slit. Then he pulled the finger back and licked off the moistness. "I can even taste it." He leaned over on top of her and kissed her tenderly. "I still want to hear it. I want everything about you, Lucy. I want to experience you with all that I have."

He reached down and rubbed her again, but she still kept her lips tight as she moaned.

"Maybe it's not enough."

She thought she smelled something burning, and before she could ask, Natsu threw some smoldering bits of her panties over his shoulder.

"Hey!" she yelled in anger. "Those were a good brand."

"Then I now owe you three panties," he said, not giving some annoying bits of fabric much heed. His finger plunged into her.

This time Lucy cried out. "Ahhh!"

However, for a split second, she remembered the fear she had when Balaur had done this to her. The feral had only fingered her, but it had hurt. The humiliation and fear returned.

"Lucy?"

She jolted. She had not realized when she began to cry.

Natsu pulled his finger back out, laid down beside her, and cradled her into his arms. "I told you, if it's too soon, I'll wait."

"I...I don't know," she whispered. "I can't blame Balaur. He had no control. Still, it was...scary."

Natsu kissed her forehead. "Then let's just be like this for now. I'll hold you, and that's all. I don't want to do anything that you don't like. I just want to be with you and show you that I love you, even if that means just hugging you."

Lucy pouted and looked aside petulantly.

"What?" he asked. "Is hugging no good?"

She wiggled a bit with a fluster. "I want...more."
"More than hugging?"

She squirmed and bashfully admitted, "A lot more."

Natsu laughed at how embarrassed she was to confess that. "Then tell me what you want."

"Just not your fingers. Not yet."

His eyes saddened. "Is that what he used?"

She nodded, thinking about that scary moment.

"Did he...?" Natsu froze, figuring he should not ask, but he still needed to know or it would always bother him. "Did he...to you...?"

"No," she assured him. "He...he didn't go all the way. You managed to stop him in time."

"Well, that's good," he sighed in relief. He rather liked Balaur, but if the guy had fucked her, Natsu knew he might actually start to hate him. "What about his tongue? Did he use that?"

She blushed brightly. "N-not down there."

Natsu smirked mischievously. "Can I use my tongue?"

Lucy felt like his fire was already burning her from the inside. She moaned at his low tone and nodded wordlessly.

"Get this skirt off before I burn it as well."

She figured he probably would, too. As she shimmed her skirt down her thighs, Natsu tossed off his clothes. She looked at him, that muscular body, the scars, and bruises that were still healing. She reached forward and ran her hand over his chest. Her eyes gazed lower and saw just how aroused he was being with her. It both shocked her and made her tingle with desire to have that inside of her.

He kissed her again with a smile of tender reassurance. Then Natsu slowly kissed down her throat and chest. He paused at her breasts, licking them, suckling one while tugging the other, then switching until Lucy squirmed and her lips tightened to hold back.

"Stop doing that," he said in annoyance. Natsu put his finger in her mouth. "There."

When he tugged her nipple again with his lips, Lucy's groan escaped through the opening around his finger. She felt a rush of embarrassment at the sound.

"It's just us, Lucy. Don't hold back."

He kissed on down her stomach, slowly spread her thighs, and settled between them. He had to take his finger out of her mouth to reach down. He spread her feminine lips and gazed at the pink flower before him. It was lovely. He was amazed that girls had such a beautiful part of their body, and no one got to see it.

"Only I can see this part of you," he whispered.

He leaned in and dragged his tongue all the way across her. She gasped as her whole body stiffened. It was so hot, so wet, and as Natsu took a second swipe, he knew just where to stop and play, twirling his tongue on her, kissing and sucking, while his hands went back up and played with her breasts.
"Nnngh...N-Natsu!"

Narrow eyes flicked up at her, and the heat of his gaze made her tremble.

"You taste even better than the first time, Lucy," he hummed, lavishing her with his mouth and tongue. "Taste so good. So sweet."

He plunged his tongue inside of her, and Lucy shuddered with pleasure. She grabbed at his hair and pressed his face down against her, needing more of this amazing feeling. His tongue was so hot, and he had learned quickly just what places she liked on her body. He hummed, and her whole body leaped up in erotic shock.

"Natsu!" she whined.

"Feels good?" he asked with a low growl. A faint flicker of red danced in his eyes, only to vanish before Lucy could say whether or not she really saw it there. "Want more?"

"God, yes!" she screamed.

He grinned wildly, almost the same grin as the feral. Lucy felt a deep thrill shoot through her. Just how much of the beast was still inside of him? Natsu hoisted himself up and immediately covered her with his body. As he gazed down at her, she saw only him, those green eyes and playful smile, with cheeks flushed with passion.

"I love you so much, Lucy," he whispered. "You saved me. We both owe you."

Although panting with desire, she looked up in confusion. "Both? What do you mean, Na-..."

Before she could ask, he dived down and captured her lips. As he kissed her and caressed her breasts, he cursed himself for saying it that way. Still, although the beast was silent, he felt it there, like eyes looking over his shoulder. It was part of him. How did Lucy put it? A facet of his psyche? Natsu wasn't sure what that meant, but he understood that the beast was a part of his mind, a fracture that was now healing. Maybe the split would always be there, like a stone that cannot be mended after being broken in two. He sensed a purr of pleasure somewhere in his mind, although no actual sounds came to him. It was just a sense, a feeling, knowing the beast was there with him and was greatly enjoying this.

"Lucy," he whispered hotly against her mouth. "Is it all right?" He thrust his hips just a little, rubbing himself against her, enough to let her know what he needed.

Blushing with embarrassment and arousal, she nodded her head. "But...be careful. We don't have...um...protection."

"Huh? I'll protect you," he declared, confused why she felt the need to be protected.

"I mean...you know..." By his confused look, obvious he had no clue. "A condom," she eked out.

"A...? Oh!" He suddenly jolted up. "I almost forgot."

He leaped off the bed, bouncing Lucy slightly. She raised up in blushing fluster as he ran over to where his trousers had gone and dug into the pocket. He pulled out a box and showed it to her proudly.

"I bought this while you were shopping."
Her eyes widened. "You...you bought condoms...while shopping with me?" She felt utterly mortified. Whichever store had sold them, the owner must have looked from Natsu to Lucy and knew what was going to happen that night. How embarrassing!

"I wanna take care of you," he said with a loving smile. "If you're not ready for a family, I wanna be responsible." He walked back to the bed and set the box on the nightstand. He laid beside her and gazed down at her face. "I know I'm an idiot sometimes, but I'll try to be better for you. I just hope you can put up with me when I'm a total dork."

She laughed at such blunt honesty. "Buying those, that's really a mature thing. It shows how much you respect me."

"Of course I respect you. You're a strong mage!"

She chuckled and shook her head. "I mean that you respect my body, and my desires, not wanting a family yet..."

"Yet?" He gazed at her firmly. "But someday?"

Lucy bit her lip nervously and looked aside. "Sure...someday."

He grinned brighter. "Then I'll keep buying these until you tell me that you're ready. Now...how the hell do I use these things?"

"Don't look at me. I've never even seen one before."

"Ah crap! Maybe I should have asked the shop owner."

Lucy muttered to herself, "I'm glad you didn't." Then she took the box and opened it. "Well, I know the gist of it. Open one of these squares up. Let's see how we put it on."

It turned out to be pretty simple, and Lucy rolled the condom down onto Natsu. He hummed in pleasure as her hand stroked his length, securing the condom onto his shaft.

"So, I don't have to pull out with this, right?" he asked, just wanting to make sure.

"Um...well, that's what they're for."

"So I can stay inside you...the whole time?" he asked softly, already desperate for her body.

Lucy laid back against the pillow and flushed. "Y-yeah. You can...um...you know...inside."

"Is that what you want?"

She bit her lip and nodded.

"I need you to say it," he said, teasing her slightly.

She whimpered with shame. "Please, Natsu."

"Please, what?" he smirked, rubbing his arousal against her a little more, stroking over that spot she really loved.

Lucy began to wiggle under him. "Please, do it already."

He rested on an elbow and gazed down at her in amusement. "Do what?"
"Natsu!" she whined in salacious need.

"Tell me, Lucy."

She made herself look up at him. He looked smug, but also flushed with passion. "Make love to me...and don't stop until I can't take it anymore."

Her words warmed him. Natsu leaned over, but instead of kissing her, his lips dragged over her skin, warming her with his breath until she squirmed.

"All right, Lucy."

He angled himself and pressed in, slowly sinking into her softness. Lucy let out a long, shuddering moan as he eased in more and more, taking his time, fully sheathing himself inside her before pausing and watching her gasping breaths causing her breasts to rise and fall. He had to calm himself or he would not be able to pleasure her thoroughly, and more than anything, he wanted to satisfy Lucy completely. For all she did to save him, for how hard she fought to bring him back, for the pain and suffering she went through, and for somehow still loving him despite all their troubles, he wanted to show her with his body just how precious she was to him.

"You're my flame, Lucy."

She opened her eyes again, gazing up at him in confusion.

"You mean everything to me. All of my soul, my essence, all that I am, it's all wrapped up in you, like a flame setting fire to everything around it." He stroked her cheek and gazed at her with deep love. "I want to be everything to you."

"You are," she whispered.

He smiled to hear that. However, lust was winning over.

"Burn with me!"

He pulled back and thrust into her fast and hard, shifting her up the bed. Lucy cried out in shock and pleasure at the roughness.

"We'll set everything on fire, Lucy."

He slammed his hips in again, and she let out a louder cry.

"Anything that dares to get in our way, we'll burn it." Slam! "Just you and me now." Slam! "Nothing will separate us."

Another thrust, then another, until Natsu knew he could not stop this amazing feeling of Lucy's tight walls rubbing him.

"N-Natsu!"

"Feels good," he growled. His eyes glowed red for a moment in carnal lust. "Want you." Then his eyes went back to normal, he looked up into her face, and told her firmly, "I want you with me for the rest of my life."

A tear came to her eyes. "Natsu..."

He grabbed her face with both hands and kissed her hard. Suddenly, he thrust into her again, and her
cry moaned out against his mouth.

As the full moon rose through the window, Natsu knew the beast within him would always be partly there. For Lucy's sake, he would tame that side of him, yet he could allow the full lust of the beast to surge forward at moments like this. No longer did he lose consciousness, not even for a moment. He was fully aware of every gasp and every mewling plea. It was a blend now: his awkward self who loved Lucy madly, and the animalistic beast ready to ravage and pleasure her.

Maybe the split rock could not fully fuse back together, but it was still strong. He would be Lucy's strength, her rock, her protector, since both he and the beast inside him had managed to fall in love with her. They would both shield her and love her in their own ways.

He made love to her wildly, then tenderly, then teasing when she begged him to stop, insisting she could not take anymore, and finally once more, so gentle that the foreplay alone lasted an hour, so attentive that he built her up slowly, until she was screaming, pleading with him to give her more, anything to release the unbearable passion. By the time Natsu was truly worn out, the box of condoms was half used up, the moon was gone, and the sky had begun to blush with coming dawn.

"All night!" Lucy exclaimed as she laid disheveled and exhausted, sprawled on the mattress, with Natsu curled up against her with a satisfied smile. "I thought guys just exaggerated when they say things like they'll make love to a woman all night long."

Natsu hummed sleepily. "Mmm...probably," he mumbled. "That wasn't easy."

"Then why didn't you stop when you got tired?"

"Didn't wanna." He nestled his nose against the nape of her neck. "I wanted to claim you in a way so no other guy will ever think he can mark you." He licked one of the many love bites he had given her.

"I'm pretty sure normal men don't mark women," she chuckled softly, shivering at the warm air that tickled the side of her neck.

"Eh?" He lifted up onto an elbow. "Then how do guys mark the girl they love?" he asked, demanding to be told.


Natsu suddenly leaped out of bed. "A ring? You mean the diamond carrot ring? That's all I have to do? Easy! Freed told me what to get, too. Okay, today I'm gonna get you that carrot ring thingy. I'm supposed to surprise you with it, but maybe you should come too, that way you can pick what type you want. I don't know anything about diamonds or carrots."

Lucy yawned, too worn out for his antics. "You can't afford a diamond ring. And it's carat, not carrot. Idiot," she chuckled.

"Oh, are they expensive?" Natsu rubbed his chin as he stood in the middle of the room stark naked. "Freed said something about a full carat or more if I could afford it, so I guess they can cost a lot, huh? Okay!" He punched his fist into his other hand with determination. "First, we do a bunch of missions and save up the money. Then, I'm buying you a huge diamond ring, big enough so all the guys can see it and know you belong to me now. I wonder if I can do a mission where the payment is a diamond. That would make things easier."

She laughed and shook her head at him. "You're really something, Natsu." That made him grin happily. "Now get back to bed. We can do missions after we sleep."
"But all the good ones are taken early in the morning," he protested.

"I'm not walking to the guild with my thighs still on fire from a full night of having them spread for you. If you don't want any men to make a move on me, then just stay close to me."

He dived back into bed, wrapped her up in his arms, and snuggled into her body. Lucy flailed for a bit.

"Wh-what are you doing?" she cried out. "Seriously, I can't go again. My whole body is aching."

"I'm hanging on to you until I can get you a ring," he insisted stubbornly. "I wanna see a nice, big, sparkly diamond ring on your finger. I want you to show it off to everyone, make sure every person sees it, so they know you belong to me."

"Sheesh," she sighed, yet she stroked her hand through his pink hair. Natsu began to nibble on her skin, licking sensitive places until, despite her weariness, she hummed sensually. "You're still a bit of a beast, you know."

Natsu whispered seductively into her ear. "Well, this beast is about to possess you."

Then he kissed her passionately, and Lucy gave up attempting to protest. As the sun began to light up the morning, inside that little house on Strawberry Street, sensual growls and breathy moans that belonged to the night started up once again.

Chapter End Notes

This story has generated an incredible amount of fan response, from numerous fanart (I'm trying to keep up posting links to them all, but there are so many) to RP blogs popping up all over the net. I'm blown away. When I began this story, I told my husband, "I have a story in mind, but I don't think anyone but weirdos will read it. It's gonna be a gory horror story." In the encouraging way he has, he told me, "Hunny, if you're the one writing it, people will love it." Somehow, that's the case.

Here are some of the RP'ers who have taken "Beastly Possession" and, with my blessing, are giving new spins and fresh angles onto this story. Some of their side stories are incredible, so check them out. If you want to start your own based on any of my fanfics, just ask. I almost never tell a person no, but I do get peeved when I find out someone does this without telling me... so I can squeal about it.

beastlypossession.tumblr.com
feralnatsu.tumblr.com
balaurblackstone.tumblr.com
twitter.com/FeralNatsu
YouTube Playlist for "Beastly Possession"

Thanks for reading! One more to go.
After a weekend with Lucy, Natsu returned to his house in the woods feeling light-hearted, wonderfully in love, and looking forward to a mission they planned to take on Monday. The beast within was hardly more than a lingering presence, practically out of his thoughts now that he was getting used to it. Soon, it would simply be a part of him.

When he reached the clearing where his house stood, Natsu sensed that something was amiss. He glanced around the woods and sniffed the air. Something lingered, a familiar scent, but not familiar enough to pinpoint who had been there. As he cautiously stepped forward, he saw sitting at his doorstep was a package wrapped in plain brown paper.

Natsu had received plenty of pranks over the years, so he was suspicious. He sniffed the package before touching it, and he was shocked to smell Balaur's scent. Not the feral stench he had grown used to, but the boy's own personal scent, something like tilled soil and fresh-cut grass. He tapped the box with his toe, but it seemed to be safe. Balaur was a good kid, not the sort of punk who would pull a nasty prank after all the trouble he caused.

Natsu picked up the package and carried it inside. He took off the messy wrapping and opened the box. On top was a card. Natsu had a hard time reading it—Balaur's handwriting was really awful, considering he had not needed to write anything in months—but slowly Natsu deciphered it.

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**Dear Natsu,**

There really is no way for me to repay you for the hurt I caused to you personally, and especially to your girlfriend, Lucy. However, I want you both to know that I truly wish happiness for the two of you. She's a nice girl, and I fully understand that, if it wasn't for her, I'd be dead. I owe her my life, as well as my sanity.

I told your guild master about my abilities, hoping for some way to benefit your guild before I leave, as a way to make up for my sins. Some green-haired man overheard me. He suggested a way I can repay all the people I hurt, but in particular, a way to help out you and Lucy.

You see, I can manipulate rocks pretty well, and that includes creating gems. It's a really poor apology, but I left massive gems with the families of every person I killed or injured. That took up a lot of magic, I've never been so tired, but I hope it's a start toward assisting the people my feral beast hurt. I can't bring back the people I killed, but maybe those gems will help the families to get a nice home, someplace peaceful, where they can live without any more trouble.

As for you and Lucy, the green-haired man—sorry, I didn't catch his name—told me that you're looking into buying a diamond ring. I've never manipulated gold before. Metal is different from stone, so Gajeel helped me out a bit. Even if this design isn't something that you like, you can use the stone. I put my best effort into this. It's the purest diamond I've ever managed to create. Lucy will
look very pretty wearing it on her finger. It's large, seven carats.


For the moment, I'm traveling with a small group that calls themselves Crime Sorcière. Their leader happened to be in Magnolia visiting a friend, and he said he will take me in for a while. His name is Jellal. He said he knows you, so that's cool. I think I'll stay with him until I pay back my sins, but one day I want to return to Bosco and search for my sister. I miss Smaralda a lot, and I hope I can somehow make amends with her. You would like her. She smells like Lucy.

I will probably not see you again for a long time, so I included something special. It's a very early wedding gift for you and Lucy. Take care of her, okay? If I ever find Terracia, I'll see if she knows Igneel. Maybe when the dragons return, we can all meet up again for a big family reunion.

Good luck, and thank you for saving me. I will make this life you gave me count!

Your fellow dragon slayer,

Balaur Blackstone

Natsu dug into the box. Wrapped in a lot of padding was a breathtaking sculpture of two dragons in battle. One half was blood red jade with tiny emeralds for eyes, the other half was made of brown jade with cut tiger's-eye stones for the eyes. The detail on the two fighting dragons, down to tiny scales covering both bodies, stunned even an amateur like Natsu. He realized right away, this was something precious. He barely trusted himself to hold it. Definitely, this was the sort of gift Lucy should have. She had a nice place to live, and a carving this intricate would eventually get broken in Natsu's home, considering how rowdy he and Happy got.

On the bottom of the box was another smaller box, barely hand-size. Natsu pulled it out and opened the latch. Inside, sitting in a satin divot, was a gold ring. Star-shaped sapphires nestled within the golden band. Seated on the top was the biggest diamond Natsu had ever seen. It caught the sunlight streaming in from the window and sparkled tiny rainbow lights all around Natsu's house.

"That...is a lot of carrots!"

Natsu closed the lid to the box. It was not the right time to ask Lucy yet. He wanted to date her properly first. He loved her, and he wanted to make her happy, even if that meant marriage and a family had to wait.

He would wait for her! In the meantime, he would keep this ring in his pocket, a constant reminder of the bright future he looked forward to enjoying with the woman he loved. When the time was right, he would give it to Lucy. He knew her eyes would widen when she saw the size of that diamond. He could hardly wait to give it to her. Then she would be his forever.

He just hoped she did not make him wait too long. The beast within him was not very patient. As he thought about marking Lucy as his with this ring, claiming her, always having her, making her his mate, slowly a desirous smile curled up onto his lips, and a gleam of red flashed briefly in his eyes.

"Want her," he whispered to himself. "Want Lucy." His wants, the beast's instincts, their desires!

No, the beast was not patient at all. Lucy had better not keep him waiting.

The End
Chapter End Notes

That's it. Short, sweet, a little mysterious, and it leaves this story open for people who like to roleplay as the feral characters. It's all over now. Happy birthday to me!

There are some amazing spin-offs on the Tumblr RP pages. I will post some of those here, with permission from the authors. They would be omakes and independent sequels. The writers of those stories are simply amazing. So "Beastly Possession" will continue to update, but Rhov's story is over. Thanks, everyone, for reading this fanfic, an experiment to see if I could write a horror story. I hope it wasn't too awful.

Cheers!

Works inspired by this one

Panty Possession by Rhov

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!