Fairy Boy Forgotten

by IcyCake

Summary

While out on a mission, Wendy and her teammates discover an ancient temple where they find a mysterious, injured boy. Much to their disappointment, the child suffers from severe amnesia and is devoid of any memories. It's up to Wendy and her friends to help him remember who he really is.
Wendy Marvell crept towards her furry target, one small tip-toe at a time, trying hard not to make too much noise as she crushed the low-growing plants beneath her feet. She held her breath and carefully made her way, not wanting to startle the oblivious orange-striped tabby named Mr. Snugglebottoms curled up on a branch in a deciduous tree deep in the forest. The cat's ears pricked and raised his head. The girl froze. A few seconds passed and the cat had yet to notice her, bringing a small relieved smile to adorn her lips.

After three arduous hours of searching in the thick woods, Wendy, Carla, Natsu, Happy, and Lucy had finally tracked down the 'most precious, adorable, pet' that belonged to Adeline, the Mayor of Saffarion's elder daughter.

The five members of Fairy Tail had accepted one of the very few jobs posted on their guild's Request Board since they had some spare time and building back the guild's lost reputation still needed to be done. Every odd job counted, Wendy tried to assure her teammates, even if the job was ranked a measly D with a tiny reward of two thousand Jewels. The mission: Mayor Burgandy's daughter's favourite pet tabby, Mr. Snugglebottoms, had run away two days ago and the Mayor required help from nearby guilds to search for him. Lucy was on board the instant Wendy kindly asked the spirit mage to join her. Natsu, on the other hand, needed to be nagged and coaxed into coming along by Happy and Lucy. Saffarion was a small village about three hours away from Magnolia Town by train, which wasn't too torturous for Natsu thanks to Wendy providing him temporary relief from his motion sickness.

With Mr. Snugglebottoms in sight, Wendy couldn't wait to finish their mission and head back home in time for a late dinner. She was starting to get hungry. Just when she was right below the tabby, something blue with white feathered wings burst from the nearby bushes and loudly proclaimed, "There he is! Natsu! Mr. Snuggle is in that tree!" Both the cat and Wendy gave a start at Happy's sudden appearance. The green-eyed, lacy pink ribbon-collared tabby bolted out of the tree and dashed deeper into the forest. "No! He's getting away!"

Not before long, Natsu noisily exploded out of the same bushes as Happy, sending leaves and twigs flying about, his expression one of absolute frustration with his brow deeply furrowed and his sharp teeth showing. "Where?! Where's that damn Snugglesbutt?!" he roared, looking around in a fury.

"Natsu! Happy!" Wendy exclaimed with an angry pout. "It's 'Mr. Snugglebottoms' and I almost had him until you two showed up making so much noise!"

Happy apologized while Natsu huffed and crossed his arms in annoyance. Visible on his grumpy face were the many scratches he received when he nearly caught the runaway feline a short while ago using a bait trap. "That cat..." he snarled, raising a flaming fist before him, "I want to roast that Snugglesbutt..."

"Mr. Snugglebottoms," Wendy sullenly corrected, hands on her hips, "And we can't harm him! Our mission is to catch him!"

Natsu loudly groaned in utter misery. "I hate this stupid mission!"

Wendy sighed. "Just try to calm down, Natsu. We'll catch him eventually. You have to be patient!"

Natsu groaned again and extinguished his flames. At that moment, the three of them heard Carla and Lucy calling for them; "This way!", "Guys! He's over here!"
Without hesitating the Dragon Slayers and blue winged Exceed darted towards the sound of their friends’ voices, rounding the trunks of trees, dodging hanging branches and deftly leaping over bushes. Lucy and Carla were a little farther ahead flying and running after what Wendy assumed was Mr. Snugglebottoms.

They entered a wide clearing and were immediately blinded by the light of the evening sun. Stopping, Wendy shielded her eyes and blinked a few times to adjust to the brightness before she could get a good look around. Her breath was taken away at the sight of a large ruinous stone structure overgrown with natural life that might have been a grand two-storey temple at one point in time. The others also marveled at the remnants of the building built within the centre of the clearing, curious as to why such a thing existed all the way out here in the middle of a forest with no roads or paths visibly leading to it.

"Wow, what is this?" Lucy questioned as she slowly made her way through the tall grass, giant weeds, and overgrown shrubs towards the stone staircase hidden under flourishing plants of various kinds. Blossoming flowers both big and small added colour to the green and gray and sweetened the air with their enticing fragrances.

"Looks like it used to be a temple," said Wendy as she craned her head up to see the top of what remained of a bell tower. She sniffed the air, catching the faint scent of the tabby and the smell of the stones amongst the pleasant aroma of nature. "Smells ancient. Mr. Snugglebottoms went inside."

Lucy lightly laughed. "Definitely don't need to smell it to consider it ancient. It's hundreds of years old for sure. This place is huge so let's split up again and try to corner that cat."

They all nodded and searched for different openings to sneak inside. Lucy took the front shattered gate, Natsu and Happy flew up to the collapsed roof of the tower, Carla entered a broken second-storey window, and Wendy rounded to the back.

Wendy kept her senses alert as she made her way through grass that grew as tall as her, stifling her shrieks when she felt spiders and other nasty bugs crawling on her arms and legs. However, she couldn't stop the panicked whimpers from escaping her mouth whenever she walked into every stupid spider web that clung to her face. After the fifth one, she gave up on stealth and madly dashed through.

At last, she found a door made of heavy wood and rusted iron bolts hanging haphazardly from one remaining rusty hinge at the top. Easily, her small lithe frame squeezed through the crack between door and stone wall without touching either. Inside was empty, dark and extremely dusty, with crumbling stone counters and empty hearths filled with piles of sooty ash. It looked like the kitchen.

Tentatively, Wendy walked on the dirty wood floor, cringing every time the boards creaked under her weight. She paused when she spotted something orange and furry crouched behind the remains of a wooden chair against the far wall. It sensed her the moment she took another step closer and ran out of the kitchen, much to the girl's growing frustration. She dashed after it, her steps light and quick, and her shoes stirring up the centuries' worth of dust gathered around.

Darkness was replaced by light in the next room; a beautiful wide open chamber with tall gray-stoned rounded columns and gaping holes that once held stained-glass windows. Ivy and honeysuckle draped down some of the windowsills like long thick curtains that touched the floor, turning into a carpet of leaves that spread over the ancient stones beneath and entwining their vines around the bases of the few columns they have reached. The last few golden rays of the setting sun shone inside, enhancing the rare, breathless beauty between nature and man-made architecture.

Lucy was searching around the far entrance and after seeing Wendy in a rush at the opposite end,
Lucy started to run towards the younger mage, her footfalls echoing in the vast empty chamber.

Wendy caught a glimpse of the tabby's tail before it disappeared into a small gap at the back of a low-rise altar. Two thick, bluish-gray stone slabs, each bearing one-half of a radiant sun carved upon the smooth surfaces, blocked the way to the other side. Wendy peered through the gap that was about half a foot wide, seeing another smaller chamber in the back filled with natural light and mossy piles of rocks. She suddenly reeled away and wrinkled her nose when she noticed a strong metallic smell coming from inside mingled with the smell of damp.

Lucy was panting when she met up with Wendy atop the short flight of stairs. "What is it, Wendy? Did something happen to Mr. Snugglebottoms?" she asked, noticing the smaller girl's frown.

The Dragon Slayer looked at the other with worry. "I smell… blood…"

The spirit mage furrowed her brow and took a look through the opening herself. "I can't see much. Just piles of rubble…"

"I can squeeze through to the other side," Wendy suggested, gently patting Lucy on the shoulder to make her step aside.

However, Lucy refused to move. "It might be dangerous."

"Mr. Snugglebottoms is in there. I have to make sure he's okay."

Lucy hesitated for a moment before reluctantly conceding. "All right. Be careful."

With a nod and an assuring smile, Wendy sucked in her stomach and sidled through the tight gap between the slabs of stone that were both as thick as the length of her arm. The smell of blood was strong once she reached the other side. The tall chamber was empty save for the lumpy piles of mossy rocks strewn about, the pieces having fallen from the domed ceiling and walls ages ago. Crawling down the gaping holes high atop were long vines of ivy that hung halfway down the height of the room. A couple more years and they would likely touch the floor.

Just like the vast chamber behind her, the smaller room held a particular beauty as the many broken holes and the intact arched window high above allowed the last of the day's sunlight to shine through, lighting up the room with a soft orange glow.

Hopping on top of a pile of mossy stones in the centre was Mr. Snugglebottoms. He sat like a sophisticated animal, his sharp green eyes watching her intently and his tail flicking from side to side in a nervous manner, sweeping the dust off the moss. The room was sealed with the exception of the holes in the roof and upper walls and the opening behind Wendy. There was no place left for the cat to run, making it the perfect opportunity to catch it.

Wendy slowly made her way towards the feline. Showing a friendly face, she wanted to let the animal know that she was trustworthy. All the while, she kept her eyes peeled for the source of the coppery smell, noticing it growing stronger as she approached the tabby's position.

She was within an arm's reach when the cat decided to jump behind the pile of rubble. "Oh, come on…" the girl muttered, suppressing a groan. Her patience with the tabby had finally run out so she leapt over the rocks and dove at the cat hiding in the shadows. She missed when the agile animal dodged to the side, resulting in her landing face-first on the cold, stone floor. She coughed and sputtered at the dust flying into her mouth and nose. Grumbling, the young mage pushed off the ground and rubbed her sore, throbbing face, all the while biting back the tears of pain welling in her eyes. On the other side of the stone opening, Wendy could hear Lucy yelling at her summoned
Celestial spirit, Loke, to quickly catch Mr. Snugglebottoms who had escaped through the gap.

Dusting her hands, Wendy moved to stand only to stop midway when she noticed something lying prone in the shadows of the rubble. She sharply gasped when she recognized it was a person lying on his front, partially buried under the pieces of ancient rock and blending well with the green of the moss.

She shifted closer, her eyes wide with horror upon seeing the pale face of a young boy. His blond hair was matted and stiff with dried blood and the strange green hat he wore was stained dark as well. He was the source of the coppery smell…

Fearing the worst, Wendy grasped the boy's limp wrist, relieved to feel his skin not cold as ice, but as hot as fire. "Fever," she concluded, frowning in worry. His wounds were likely a few days old and infected. Acting in haste, the Dragon Slayer mustered all her strength to push off the heavy stones that crushed the poor boy. She managed to topple most of the rocks over onto the other side, sending thick clouds of dust into the air. Wendy puffed it all away with a single, powerful breath, sending it out through the ceiling holes and open gap. The noise drew Lucy's attention.

"Wendy! What is it? What are you doing?"

"There's someone in here and he's badly hurt! Quick! Find everyone!" the younger mage replied. Not waiting for an answer, she kneeled beside the wounded boy to begin her healing. Cool blue light shone from her hands as she gathered her magic, converting the surrounding air into healing energy. Closing her eyes, she lightly pressed on the boy's head, concentrating her efforts on the most serious injury before examining the rest of his body for other wounds. A gentle breeze surrounded her, softly caressing her skin and swaying her long, navy hair. Moments passed and sweat was starting to bead on her brow from exertion.

She didn't notice the others arriving in the room until hearing Natsu exclaim, "A kid? How did he get in here? Who did this to him?"

Keeping her magic steady, Wendy slowly opened her eyes and saw her teammates dropping in from above. Natsu worked quickly in lifting the rest of the rubble off the young boy.

"More importantly," Carla began after lowering Lucy to the ground, "why is he here? Alone? These ruins are far from town… and there are no other towns or villages nearby." She padded to Wendy's side, eyeing the unconscious child intently.

"Maybe he lives in the forest?" Happy suggested.

"It's possible…" said Lucy, although she sounded rather doubtful. "He's certainly well-armed though." It was then Wendy noticed the shield, small bow, quiver full of arrows, and sword strapped to the boy's back, giving her the impression that he was trained with swordplay and archery. "And his ears… they're long and pointy. Is he a demon?"

"Doesn't really look like one," said Natsu, sitting cross-legged nearby. He heavily frowned and folded his arms. "He doesn't smell like one either. I can sense some sort of magic from him though. Could be Take Over magic."

Carla disagreed. "I wouldn't say his appearance is because of magic. If it was, he should have returned back to normal after losing consciousness."

Dispersing her spell, Wendy sadly shook her head as she lowered her gaze on the boy before her. "It doesn't matter what he is," she began, brushing away his dirty hair to touch his forehead. She was
thankful to find his fever gone, however he was still very weak. Barely could she sense the boy's magic energy. "He needs our help."

Her companions silently nodded. Carefully, she shifted the boy onto his back with the help of Lucy. Looking him over, she found many lacerations on his bare arms and legs and a few broken ribs she could feel beneath his one-piece tunic that was the same green as his hat. Breathing deeply, Wendy tended to the rest of his injuries immediately, calling forth the power of the Sky Dragon once more.

She was exhausted and breathless by the time she finished healing every last cut and scrape that covered the boy's body. It was dusk when she opened her eyes and saw Carla's worried expression that she always wore whenever Wendy used too much of her magic. Smiling at her friend, she silently told Carla that she was all right.

As the girl wiped away the sweat trickling down her brow with the back of her hand, her attention fell back on the boy. In the flickering light of the small flame held within Natsu's hand, the boy appeared to be sleeping peacefully while ignoring all the dirt and dried blood on his clothes and skin. Worn brown leather boots caked in dry mud adorned his feet and he wore a simple belt that held a pouch decorated with gems. He also carried a large brown satchel tied around his waist. Looking at him closely, he was younger than Wendy, probably around nine or ten years old.

It was worrisome to wonder how a young boy ended up in the ruins of the temple so far from civilization, alone and injured. Wendy's brown eyes glanced over the broken rubble, pondering if it was the unstable rocks that fell on top of him that caused him harm. Then she remembered Carla's previous question: why was he even here in the first place in a secluded, old room no less? Her eyes suddenly narrowed when she thought back on her own question.

She swept her hand across the floor, disturbing what was left of the dust that she had not previously blown away. The room was covered in centuries of settled dust and the pile of rocks that she had shoved away was overgrown with moss... So how did the boy end up lying underneath the ancient stone that had not supposedly been disturbed for many years? And his injuries were only a few days old...

It was a very bewildering situation. Only the mysterious boy had the answers and they had to wait until he woke up first.

Natsu clenched his hand to snuff out his flame as he approached the boy. Easily, he picked up the child in his arms. "Let's get outta here."

Lucy craned her head up to the ceiling to gaze at the starry night sky visible through the damaged roof. "It's too dark to walk back to town and Wendy's exhausted. We'll have to stay here for the night."

"I'm sorry..." The younger Dragon Slayer bashfully bowed her head.

Natsu snorted. "Why are you apologizing? You just saved this kid's life." It was too dark to clearly see, but Wendy could detect his grateful smile.

Grinning, she felt better, knowing that she had just saved someone in dire need in the nick of time. It was most fortunate that Mayor Burgandy's daughter's runaway tabby led them to the temple hidden deep in the forest. "Oh! Did you guys manage to catch Mr. Snugglebottoms?"

Lucy smirked. "Yeah. Loke's looking after him on the other side of this wall. Who knew he was so good with cats? I should have summoned him first when we were chasing Mr. Snugglebottoms."
"Loke's a lion! Of course he's good to all cats!" piped in Happy.

The spirit mage shortly giggled before falling in a more thoughtful tone. "But then again, we wouldn't have found this place or the kid. So I guess it kind of worked out."

Carla gently nudged her partner. "Are you ready to fly, Wendy?"

The girl soundly nodded and carefully stood up, feeling slightly dizzy. Shaking her weariness away, she dusted off her hands and dress. "Let's get out of this old, dusty temple."

They decided to camp in front of the overgrown stone steps leading to the temple's main entrance. Having thought their mission simple and only a few hours long, no one brought any provisions or gear necessary for camping outside with the exception of their water bottles. Soon after building a fire, Natsu set out to hunt for something to eat since he was complaining about starving to death with Happy, Loke and, oddly enough, Mr. Snugglebottoms tagging along.

The males were gone for almost an hour. Wendy could only wish for them to hurry up and find something because her stomach wouldn't stop growling at her. She constantly took sips of water to keep her hunger temporarily satisfied. She also gave some to the boy as well, to hydrate his weakened body.

Lucy was gingerly dabbing away the dirt and blood on his face with a damp handkerchief. His belongings were neatly piled nearby so he could properly rest on the ground. "I wonder who he is," she pondered out loud. "I hope he wakes up soon so we can take him home."

Carla crossed her arms and knitted her brow. "The Mayor neglected to mention a missing child in town. He's likely from a distant country judging by his clothes and the odd design on his shield. And his magic… it feels different and foreign. Almost ethereal in a sense."

"If he really is from another country, he travelled pretty far by himself," stated Wendy. She soon became worried. "Do you think someone tried to attack him? Maybe that's why he was hiding in that one room…" Although that still did not explain the ancient setting of the chamber.

Neither of her companions had an answer.

"We can only wait to find out the truth," murmured the Exceed with a slight shake of her head. "However, I have a strange feeling that the truth is something we would not like to hear… nor would it be easy to come by." She spoke the last part under her breath but Wendy heard it all. However, the girl did not get a chance to question her friend because the men had soundly returned with a wild boar in tow.

To and fro went Mayor Burgandy's long, thin moustache as he wriggled his nose in thought while peering closely at the unconscious child in Natsu's arms. Twisting one end of his lip hair, the man wearing a velvet red vest and yellow-striped silk tie shook his balding head and said, "No, I've never seen this boy before. Have you tried asking around?" Behind him was his eldest daughter, Adeline, smothering her pet, Mr. Snugglebottoms, against her bosom while weeping tears of joy and shrieking out her affection.

Wendy couldn't help but pity the poor squirming tabby. It was no wonder he ran away in the first place. Happy and Carla were grimacing at the awkward display as they hid from view behind their respective partners. Even Loke was wincing from the scene as he stood beside his master.

Lucy answered the Mayor's question, "We did ask a few townspeople on our way here. They don't know anything about him either. We found him in an old, ruined temple in the forest east of here."

"You kidding?" Natsu grumbled in disbelief. "It's about a one hour walk away if you head straight through."

Mayor Burgandy shook his head, resuming to twisting his moustache between his fingers. "I've gone on hunting excursions through these woods hundreds of times and never have I seen a ruined temple or even heard of it."

Every member of Fairy Tail was confused by that. With no other answer to the group's inquiries, the Mayor handed their reward of two thousand Jewels. "Thank you again, uh… which guild are you again? Raven Tail?"

"Fairy Tail," Natsu corrected, holding back his bitterness for being mistaken for that guild.

"Ah, my dear Adeline gives her thanks as well. As for the boy, I suggest asking around again in hope of finding any clues. No one has reported a missing child so I doubt he came from Saffarion."

Disappointed by the outcome, the group decided to find an inn first to get the child cleaned up and into bed for proper rest. The kind elderly couple running the inn down the main road offered them some help after hearing their story. They provided a free meal and free rooms, allowing them to stay for as long as they needed.

Once they ate, Natsu, Happy, and Lucy left to ask the townsfolk about the temple and the boy while Wendy and Carla watched over him.

The room the boy slept in was small and square with two single beds set against opposite walls, a little bedside table between the beds, and a little round window that was left open to allow cool air into an otherwise hot and stuffy room. The walls were decorated with faded yellowish wallpaper that was starting to peel at the corners and the floor was covered by an old shaggy brown rug that had seen better days. Despite the worn down appearance, the room felt rather cozy and the beds were actually quite soft and comfortable.

Unable to restrain her curiosity, Wendy was sitting on the other bed in the room, taking a peek through the boy's belongings while Carla frowned with disapproval. She was agape when she opened the pouch decorated with gems, finding it full of colourful, beautiful jewels. What looked like emeralds, sapphires, rubies, topazes, and amethysts brightened the inside of the pouch. There were even a few silver and gold pieces that were shaped like the gems. Wendy couldn't imagine the total value of the treasure contained within the little bag in her hand. She quickly put it away in fear of someone peeking into the room and seeing them. After all, they were not the only occupants staying in the inn.

The Dragon Slayer picked up the brown satchel and placed it beside her. She pulled out six glass bottles filled with three different colours of opaque liquids; two red, two green, and two blue. When she took a whiff of the red one, she instantly reeled back, her face scrunched up in disgust at the strong, foul, herbaceous odour. She dared not to investigate the other colours after that. One by one she shoved them back into the satchel while taking quick, wary glances at the owner of the bag.

The boy continued to sleep in peace, his damp blond hair quickly drying from the heat coming from the hot day outside. The elderly woman gave him a quick bath and a change of clothes that once belonged to her son.

Seeing that he wasn't likely going to wake up soon, Wendy went back to snooping. The next thing
she pulled out was made of gilded metal and a little hefty. It had a handle with a trigger and a wound up chain that ended with a sharp, golden point. "I wonder what this is..." she mused aloud, turning the strange object in her hands. She wanted to pull the trigger.

"Do not even try it," warned Carla with a stern glare, reading the girl's thoughts. "It could be dangerous."

Wendy bashfully smiled and wordlessly returned the strange item into the bag. She found another brown bag inside containing a handful of dark blue spheres that looked suspiciously like bombs and beside that was a purple magnifying-glass-like object with a violet tinted lens that bore what appeared to be an eye in the centre. Looking through the lens only turned everything a shade of purple and nothing more. However, Wendy could sense something odd about it. Even Carla was getting a strange vibe. Unable to discern the object's use, Wendy stuffed it away.

The last thing in the bag was the most fascinating to Wendy. Carefully held within her hands was an egg-shaped wind instrument that was sky blue in colour with a silver band around the mouthpiece. Engraved into the silver were three golden triangles in unity, similar in design to the one on the boy's steel shield lying on the floor with the rest of his gear. She rubbed her thumb over the smooth wood before touching the golden mark, wondering what the symbol represented. Without thought, she brought the mouthpiece to her lips, hearing Carla sigh, and blew into it. What came out was a sharp, wobbly note that was quickly cut off from Wendy giggling at the sound. She played a few more notes, shifting her fingers over random holes to see what sort of pitch they made. Needless to say, she was making more noise than music.

She froze and dropped the instrument onto her lap when she noticed the pair of blue eyes watching her from the other bed. She broke into a nervous laugh and scratched the back of her head in embarrassment. "Y-You're awake! I-I'm sorry! I was just uh... I didn't mean to touch your things -- uh, well, I did, but, you see... I, um..." She trailed off with no better explanation and quickly changed the subject. With the instrument back in her hand, Wendy moved to stand over him, a relieved smile on her face. "I'm glad you're okay now. My name is Wendy and this is Carla." She gestured to the Exceed perched atop the table who gave a nod and a friendly smile. "We were worried about you. We found you injured and brought you here. How are you feeling?"

The boy didn't move or say anything. He only stared up at Wendy, his eyes wide and unblinking as he continued to lie in bed.

The Dragon Slayer slightly frowned and softened her voice. "Are you alright? Don't worry, we won't hurt you! We're friends!"

Again, he did not respond. He silently looked at the girl, his gaze never leaving hers for an awkward moment – until Carla spoke up; "Perhaps he does not understand us..."

Upon hearing the feline's voice, the boy's attention fell on the white cat with the same wide-eyed expression, finally noticing her.

Wendy's frown deepened at the dilemma. What her friend had pointed out may seem true. However, she didn't give up trying to communicate with him. Patting a hand over her chest, she slowly pronounced her name, drawing his focus on her once more. "Wendy. I am Wen-dy." When she pointed at Carla, his eyes shifted to the cat. "Car-la." She then held her hand towards him and put on a kind smile. "You are?"

He stared at her hand in a curious manner for a brief moment before freeing his left arm from beneath the covers. His hand was unsteady from fatigue but he still reached out to touch her fingers, much to the girl's surprise. Before his strength gave out, Wendy didn't hesitate to hold his hand within hers, to
show that she was there to help. He started to smile; an innocent and childish smile that made him seem far younger than his actual age.

Carla took on a pondering pose as she studied the boy, the end of her tail twitching in thought. "Wendy, give him the flute you hold."

Unsure of why that was important, Wendy wordlessly held out the boy's blue instrument for him to take. He blinked and eyed the small flute as if it was the first time seeing it before pulling his left hand away from Wendy's to touch it. His fingers slid across the polished, painted wood before grasping it in his weak, trembling grip. He was rather fascinated at the instrument, just like when Wendy first found it, even when he held it upside down and backwards. It didn't seem like he recognized the object at all…

Wendy was worried and confused by his odd reaction, however Carla knew the reason. "He doesn't remember…" she murmured quietly, a look of pity crossing her face. "This child has lost his memories."
"Run run run run run..." chanted Natsu as he barreled through the street full of people with Happy clinging to the end of his scarf. Behind him was Loke, carrying a grumbling Lucy in his arms as he followed right after the Dragon Slayer. And right behind the spirit were the town's guardsmen chasing right after them due to the 'accidental' destruction of Mayor Burgandy's home that still burned in the distant background.

"Damn it, Natsu! Why does every mission have to end up like this?!" Lucy angrily hollered, "This is all your fault!"

"It wasn't entirely my fault! It was Loke's too!" Natsu retorted as he swerved into an alley. After rebounding off the wall, he pounced on top of a pile of stacked crates to jump onto the roof of the closest building.

The Celestial Spirit was highly offended as he followed the other's lead. "Hey! I did my part flawlessly. You're the one who screwed up, idiot. You didn't have to freak out because of a little cat scratch!"

"That stupid Snugglesbutt nearly took out an eye!" Natsu roared, infuriated by the mere mention of the loathsome animal that dared to claw his face yet again. He had tried to be nice, but that damn feline hated him just as much as he hated it.

He continued to sprint across the sloped, shingled roofs, hopping from building to building with the guards trailing them down below. It didn't take long to lose sight of them and once he was sure he couldn't hear them anymore, he slowed to a stop and leaned against the brick chimney of someone's home to catch his breath. He glanced at the pillar of black smoke that was once the grand manor of Saffarion's mayor, feeling only a little guilty.

Since asking nearly every person in town about the strange boy had yielded no answers and inquiring about the ancient temple in Verloren Woods had only brought confusion, Natsu, Lucy, and Happy wanted to convince one of the townsfolk the ruins existed. They dragged one hapless old man through the forest to the area they had thought was the clearing, but instead found nothing but more trees wherever they looked. Even when flying high above the canopy, Natsu couldn't see the open area where the temple was supposed to be. They had searched for hours before the old man demanded to be taken back to town or else he would have them arrested for kidnapping.

Bewildered by the absence of the temple, Lucy surmised that it was probably hidden by some sort of magic and special requirements were needed to see it. After quickly rushing the innocent geezer back to town, the mages tested if the temple would show itself only to magical beings, but the end result was the same as with a non-magic person. Lucy then came up with the conclusion that the Mayor's dumb cat could 'show' them the way to the temple like it had done so before.

They tried asking Mayor Burgandy if they could borrow the stupid animal but the mayor dismissed them for Adeline would not risk parting with her beloved pet 'ever again'. With the direct approach a failure, Natsu came up with the idea of stealing the tabby. Lucy had rolled her eyes and reluctantly agreed.

They had sneaked into the mansion through an open window and without too much trouble, they found the tabby in the merciless clutches of Adeline within her extravagantly plush room. To separate the human and cat, Lucy's brilliant plan was to have Loke charm the young woman and while she was distracted, Natsu was supposed to grab the cat and flee. Everything was going well
until the damn feline decided to retaliate the moment Natsu picked it up. All hell broke loose in the form of an outraged Fire Dragon Slayer and the end result was the near-complete destruction of the manor, a furious mayor and his daughters, and every angry guardsman in town after their heads. The mages even failed at retrieving the stupid Snugglesbutt who was lucky enough to escape the Dragon Slayer's wrath. The only good that came out of the incident was the mayor mistaking them for Raven Tail again so the damage fees were likely going to be charged to that guild and not to Fairy Tail.

Lucy nervously ran a hand through her blonde bangs as she paced around the chimney. "What should we do? We have to get out of here before they decide to lockdown the train station, but we also have no clue where the boy came from."

"It's plain obvious he's not from Saffarion," stated Loke, leaning his back against the same chimney as Natsu. He was staring off towards the burning building with the glare coming from the setting red sun hiding his eyes behind his tinted shades.

"Why don't we ask him?" Happy suggested, sitting atop the chimney. "He might have woken up by now."  

Natsu grinned and pushed off the bricks. "Yeah, let's hurry to Wendy."

Carefully and swiftly, they made their way back to the inn. Upon entering, they were greeted by the worried elderly couple who heard stories of arsonists setting the mayor's home on fire.

Happy pointed at Natsu. "It was actually—"

Natsu clamped a hand over the feline's mouth.

"Damn those arsonists. How could they?" said Natsu in a monotone, doing a terrible job at feigning horror.

"Everyone, you're finally back!" Wendy appeared in the lobby. She was glad at first before looking at them in suspicion, most particularly at Natsu. "Did you guys hear that explosion earlier?"

Lucy quickly made her way over and gently pushed Wendy down the hall with her. She cleared her throat and said, "Yeah... We actually witnessed it. Truly devastating. Right, Natsu?" She spoke his name with an accusing undertone.

Natsu pouted to the side as he followed the girls to the small room with the boy. "It was an accident..." he murmured before he entered.

"It was not an accident!" Lucy quietly hissed, glaring at him over her shoulder.

Inside the lamp lit bedroom, they found the kid still sleeping in bed and Carla giving them a pointed look which was mostly directed at Natsu. "Things went well, I assume?" the white Exceed questioned coolly with a hint of sarcasm.

Sheepishly, Natsu averted his gaze from the feline's sharp eyes. "Things didn't actually go as well as planned, okay?" he muttered his reply. "So he hasn't woken up yet?"

Wendy turned to the blond-haired boy, noticeably crestfallen. "He woke up in the afternoon but—"

"Oh! That's great! Did he say anything like where he's from?"

The girl shook her head. "No... because he doesn't remember anything."
Natsu, Happy, and Lucy were suddenly disheartened by that.

"Not even his name?" Happy asked, hopping onto the other bed to stand beside Carla. He peered at the boy with worry.

"No, he doesn't remember anything," Wendy stressed, giving the two older members and the blue feline a sorrowful frown. "He doesn't remember how to eat, how to speak, how to walk… or even how to use the bathroom…" Her face turned slightly red at the last part and she turned away. She picked up a blue egg-shaped object off the bedside table and showed it to the others. It had holes and a mouthpiece so Natsu assumed it was an instrument of some kind. "We tried showing him his things to see if he would remember anything but he didn't recognize any of them."

"Right now his mind is that of an infant," said Carla, her features softening with pity. "He's suffering with a severe case of amnesia. It took some time and patience, but we were able to teach him a few basic things. However, everything else is still new to him. It's best to take him home. Did you have any luck in finding that information?"

"No luck at all…" Natsu grumbled.

"And what was the purpose of destroying the mayor's manor?"

"That? Uh, well…" He went on to briefly explain the events of their afternoon about the disappearing temple site and the sole reason for going back to Mayor Burgandy's for the stupid cat.

Wendy was appalled at the end of his tale. "Did you hurt Mr. Snugglebottoms? Was anyone hurt?" she demanded, dabbing a finger in the older mage's bare chest.

Natsu snorted and crossed his arms in aggravation. "The lucky bastard got away. And the mayor and his crazy daughters are not too happy about us. So we should hurry and get out of here before the guards find us."

"But what about the boy?" asked Lucy, furrowing her brow in concern. "We can't leave him here."

"Oh! He's waking up," exclaimed Happy.

All heads turned to the child stirring in bed, probably having woken up from everyone talking. Blue eyes fluttered open and were quick to notice all the people standing in the room. Wendy approached him while speaking in a soft, assuring tone and his attention flickered between her and the new faces he didn't recognize. He was visibly weak, needing Wendy's help to slowly sit up. All the while, he stared at Lucy and Natsu standing by the doorway with great interest. He was given a clean set of clothes to wear consisting of a plain sky-blue T-shirt with a faded black logo and a baggy pair of beige pants held up by a brown belt.

"Uh, hello!" said Lucy with a small wave and a kind smile. "I'm Lucy."

The boy didn't say anything nor did he move, making Lucy's smile slowly fade.

"He doesn't quite understand," explained Wendy. She put on a friendly face for the boy and introduced Natsu, Lucy, and Happy, slowly pronouncing each name while gesturing respectively to each of them. There was hardly any reaction from the kid until Happy hopped up beside the boy with a wide, cheery grin when Wendy introduced him.

The boy smiled at Happy's eagerness, his eyes shining with curiosity. When the blue cat raised his paw in his usual gesture, the boy was prompted to reach out and grab it. Happy was a little confused but soon giggled, the sound bringing a broader smile on the boy's face.
Carla was right, the kid was nothing more but a baby…

Natsu couldn't help but feel sorry for the poor kid. To lose all the memories of his friends, his family, his life… It was truly heartbreaking. Natsu couldn't imagine how painful it would be to lose all the fond memories of his father and the wonderful time spent with Fairy Tail.

"Let's take him with us back to the guild," Natsu answered Lucy's previous question, "Maybe Master knows a spell to bring back memories or some sort of cure for his uh… am-neesha."

"It's amnesia," Carla corrected with a little smirk.

"Whatever," Natsu snapped, hating to be mocked. "We can get the others to help out too."

Lucy pursed her lips in thought. "We could certainly try asking. Then let's hurry and head to the station before the guards do."

Wendy and both Exceeds soundly agreed. Natsu kneeled on the floor beside the bed, his back towards the boy. "Hop on, kid."

"He doesn't understand, remember?" reminded Wendy with a small sigh.

Natsu shrugged and shortly laughed. "Oh, right." He tried gesturing but it was Wendy who led the boy off the bed and onto the fire mage's back. "Hang on tight."

Of course, Natsu had instantly forgotten the kid didn't understand a single word he said so when he quickly stood up, the boy latched his hands onto Natsu's face out of instinct.

"Hey! Watch the eyes!" the Dragon Slayer growled. He leaned forward and shook his head to loosen the boy's grip, but that resulted in a finger poking into his delicate left eye that still hurt from the stupid scratches he received from Snugglesbutt. "Ow! Ow!"

Lucy groaned. "Natsu, just hold still, alright?" She gently pried the boy's hands away from Natsu's face and shifted them to hold onto the Dragon Slayer's broad shoulders. But the kid chose instead to wrap his arms around the Natsu's scarfed neck, slightly choking the mage.

Pouting, Natsu restrained the urge to complain. Choking was a little better than losing an eye.

Wendy slung the boy's quiver of arrows over her shoulder, grabbed his bow, and carried his bags while Lucy picked up his small sword and shield.

"This thing's rather heavy," noted Lucy as she hefted the steel shield off the floor with a grunt of effort. "He's pretty strong for a small kid."

"He's probably a strong swordsman class type," said Happy, sounding quite excited. He flew up above Natsu as they left the room, drawing a surprised gasp from the young boy at the magical display. "With a bow as his secondary weapon! And he goes on fun amazing adventures!"

"Sounds cool, eh, kid? Maybe that's what you are." Chuckling, Natsu peered over his shoulder, seeing the boy transfixed on Happy soaring overhead in the hallway and ignoring the mage completely. Not that Natsu really minded.

Saying a quick goodbye and thank you to the elderly couple, the group left the inn in a hurry without hearing a reply. Once outside, they were greeted by the cool night air and the brilliant full moon high in the starry night sky. The change in scenery brought a quiet sound of awe from the kid as he shifted on Natsu's back, twisting and turning his head at every little thing that caught his attention as they ran
down the street populated with open shops and late shoppers. Large, colourful store windows displaying various wares lit up the streets along with the many tall lamp posts powered with Lacrima. There were lots to see for a curious young boy.

Natsu had to adjust and tighten his hold when the kid decided to loosen his grip for a better view of something. "Hey!" the Dragon Slayer barked, shooting a warning glare behind him. The boy only blinked at him once before resuming to looking around with a small smile, seemingly enjoying the ride.

"Natsu! Guards!" Happy suddenly shouted from above, pointing to the end of the road where the train station was located. Up ahead were two patrolling guardsmen that had just approached a group of bystanders to engage in a conversation. By the look of it, it appeared the two men were inquiring about something…

Stifling a curse, Natsu screeched to a halt with the others following suit and dove into the shadows between two buildings. Carefully, he peeked around the corner and whispered, "There's only two. We can take them down and get away, no problem."

Before he could step out, Lucy roughly grabbed his cheek and forced him to look at her disapproving scowl. "Think about it: they're in front of the entrance to the station! If we make a commotion they likely won't let us board the train. Besides, we don't even know what time the train departs. We could get caught waiting for it to leave." She peered around both Natsu and the corner, knitting her brow as she tried to think up a solution.

"How about we walk then?" The mere thought of jumping on the hellish moving contraption stuck on rails was already making him feel queasy. If he had a choice, he'd rather travel on foot than any other vehicle even if the journey took days.

Lucy's scowl deepened. "No, we are unprepared to walk all the way back to Magnolia. It's only a three-hour ride. Wendy's also here, did you forget?" She reached down to her ring of keys by her hip. "All we need is a distraction and I know just what to do." She selected a golden key and twisted it in the air. "Open the Gate of the Twins! Geminii!"

A rift of white light emerged where the key was turned, spreading open to form a large reflective circle that shimmered like a mirror. It only lasted for a few seconds before it vanished in a blink of light. In its place was a floating pair of blue-skinned, short, round-headed, beady-eyed creatures wearing shorts and sashes over their shoulders.

"Gemi," announced the frowning spirit.

"Mini!" announced the smiling one with more enthusiasm.

As one, they both twirled and hovered in the air around Lucy, playfully dancing to unheard music as they awaited their orders, their little antenna swaying with their synchronized movements.

The kid was fidgeting now, greatly entertained by the sudden appearance of the twin spirits. He completely let go, forcing Natsu to lean forward so the boy wouldn't precariously fall backwards. The mage snapped at him and at the sound of Natsu's angry voice, the kid flinched towards him with a look of surprise. Hesitantly, the boy wrapped one arm around Natsu's neck, perhaps finally understanding the Dragon Slayer.

"Gemi, Mini, turn into Natsu and lure those two guards standing at the gate far away."

"Hey! Why me?" Natsu demanded, turning to fully face Lucy.
Lucy ignored him and continued, "Be obnoxious, but don't hurt anyone and don't damage anything! Alright?"

The pair nodded and joined their stubby little arms together after a short twirling dance. Light swallowed them both and within an instant they took on Natsu's form.

Seeing the transformation completely shocked the boy for he was now gaping at the second Natsu, completely fascinated.

"Loud, cocky, annoying, arrogant, stubborn…" In Natsu's monotonous voice, the cloned Dragon Slayer went on to list what it considered to be the original's obnoxious qualities.

The real Natsu was offended and went on to deny most of the qualities listed while Lucy nervously laughed and muttered under her breath, "Well… most of them are kinda true…"

The mages acted normal as they walked down the street while fake Natsu sprinted ahead. The twins immediately got the guards' attention by loudly proclaiming; "I'm Natsu Dragneel and I like to burn things!" He cackled evilly, perfecting the appearance of a fire-breathing maniacal arsonist by showing rows of sharp teeth, puffing out black smoke with each breath, and lighting his flailing hands on fire.

People occupying the streets started to scream and run for their lives.

"A monster!"

"It's the arsonist!"

"Run! We're all going to die!"

"He's going to eat my children!"

The two guards gave chase as the twins dashed erratically around the dispersing crowd before disappearing down another street where more shrill screams could be heard.

Natsu balked at the spirits' performance. "What?! I'm not like--" A hand was slapped over his mouth.

"Shh!" hushed Lucy. "Now's our chance!"

"Everyone knows what I look like now!" And yet the panicking townspeople running past them hardly gave him a second glance.

"Here." Lucy tied a piece of cloth around his head, covering his pink hair and forehead. She then tugged the front of his scarf to loosen it just enough to pull it up to cover the lower half of his face. She stepped back and looked him over with a proud grin. "There. You look like a thug, but it'll do to hide your identity. Let's hurry before Gemini's five minutes are up."

They purchased their tickets and boarded the train with little trouble and anxiously waited for it to leave. With his face still hidden, Natsu sat glumly in his seat, anticipating the dreadful motion sickness that had yet to come. He was silently thankful that he didn't eat anything prior to boarding.

Beside him was Lucy who kept a constant lookout around the car to make sure no one was suspicious of them. It was noisy inside with passengers abuzz from sighting the 'arsonist' so close to the station. A few were panicking, urging the passing conductor checking tickets to hurry it up and go already. It was safe to say that no one really paid much attention to the mages.
Right across from Natsu was the kid. The boy was gazing at the window at his own reflection, touching the glass and sliding his hand across the smooth, flat surface, captivated by the mirrored actions of his own image. Beside him was Wendy, giggling over his shoulder at his childish behaviour before trying to teach him what exactly he was seeing. The two Exceeds were squeezed right beside her at the end of the long, shared seat.

Happy swished his tail in excitement when he asked, "What should we call him? We should give him a name until he gets his memories back. Let's call him 'Tuna'. Tuna are tasty."

Natsu perked up at the idea. "Steak," was his suggestion.

The girls rolled their eyes and gave Happy and Natsu sullen looks. "Don't be ridiculous," said Carla. "Those are such childish names."

"But he is a child," Natsu pointed out.

"That is not what I was implying," Carla retorted with a slight shake of her head. "If he requires a name, it should be more suiting. Wendy?"

The Sky Dragon Slayer pursed her lips in thought, a little habit she had picked up from Lucy. "I don't think he needs a name if he's going to get his memories back once we tell Master," she answered, smiling at the boy who was staring at her in puzzlement. He always turned to her whenever she spoke.

"But we don't know if Master Makarov is capable of getting them back," replied Carla. "In the meantime, we should properly address him with a given name."

"Salmon," said Happy.

"Noodle," said Natsu.

Both received disapproving frowns. The conversation went on and not once did they agree on a name. Meanwhile, the boy was too busy kicking his dangling feet to pay any attention to the mages with the exception of Wendy. He was barefooted since the group had forgotten to grab the boy's boots and his newly washed set of green clothes from the old couple before rushing out the door of the inn. Shortly after the train started moving, Natsu was too occupied with his illness that he could no longer properly contribute to their discussion. But he did like his last suggestion; he wanted to call the kid 'Bacon'.

"Instead of a cat, you five found three million jewels in damages," stated Master Makarov in a stern tone the moment Wendy pushed open the doors to Fairy Tail.

The short old man, with his arms firmly crossed, stood waiting before them, looking none-too-happy. The building was nearly empty since it was very late and most of the guild members have retired for the night.

Wendy and her group tensed and quickly looked away nervously and in shame. In the background behind the bar was Mirajane who gave them all a sympathetic smile and a little welcome back wave. Lisanna was sitting on a stool at the same bar, bearing the same sorry expression as her older sister when she saw the others. Slumped over a table in a corner was Cana, drunk and asleep. Sprawled around her on the floor were a few others who were also too drunk to go home, with one of the bulkier bodies recognizably Elfman.

The soft orange glowing lamps lining the walls set the atmosphere inside for a welcoming,
comfortable night while the strong smell of alcohol lingering in the air was evidence of the heavy, rambunctious drinking that, as usual, had taken place over the evening. It was no surprise at how clean everything looked despite the rowdy parties thrown every day with Mirajane always quick to tidy the place up.

Natsu awkwardly shifted his feet and tried to meet the master's unsatisfied frown. "Err, they didn't charge Raven Tail?" Natsu asked.

Makarov waved a finger at him. "That D mission was registered under Fairy Tail, boy. How many times do I have to tell you--" Makarov stopped short and raised an eyebrow when he noticed the extra person on Natsu's back, staring down at him with curious blue eyes. "And what else did you find, hmm? Who is this?"

Lucy stepped forward before Wendy could. Her face somber, Lucy went on to explain the events that transpired in Saffarion with the others occasionally adding their input. Only when she spoke of the incident involving Mayor Burgandy's home did she grow extremely nervous. "Anyway, we brought him back with us because we thought you could help him somehow."

The master of Fairy Tail stood before the blond-haired boy, easily matching the child in height. Wendy had to hold the boy by the arm so he wouldn't wander off on his own like he had done several times during the team's long explanation. Still not accustomed to walking and lacking footwear, he nearly fell over onto the cobblestone floor every time he tried to leave.

Sadly, the old man shook his head while the boy tilted his head in confusion. "Wendy, if you were not able to heal him with your magic, I'm afraid I do not know of any other spell that could heal the mind," he replied in an apologetic tone.

"What about a potion? Or some kind of medication?" asked Natsu.

Makarov rubbed his chin. "That's not my field of expertise. However, I can inquire more on that." He raised his head to look at Natsu. "So you found him in an old temple that you can no longer find? How mysterious."

Natsu snorted. "Super mysterious. No one knows the temple even exists. It's probably just a coincidence that that stupid cat led us to it."

"And his magic feels different from ours. He must be from somewhere far away," added Carla with a curt nod.

"It's possible," answered the old man as he strolled towards Lucy to inspect the metal shield she had resting in front of her feet.

Mirajane and Lisanna, who had both drawn closer to listen to the group's tale, also glanced at the sturdy piece of equipment.

"Perhaps Erza might know the origin of this design," said Mirajane, with a knowing smile.

Makarov nodded in agreement as he turned to Natsu's group. "You should ask her when she returns."

He then stepped up to the boy with a wide friendly smile and offered his right hand. Blinking, the boy placed his free left hand in Makarov's larger palm and smiled in return. The guild master lightly brushed a thumb over the back of the boy's hand, his eyes narrowing inquisitively. "Quite different, indeed," he quietly mused mostly to himself. "Could it really be only a coincidence?"
"What is it, Master?" Wendy questioned, having heard him.

"Oh, nothing, my dear." Makarov shortly laughed. He patted the boy over the head, making the child slightly frown from the touch. In a gentle voice he said, "You poor child. Worry not. You are safe with us now. Until you regain what you have lost you may stay with us. You will be under the protection of Fairy Tail." The old man grinned, showing his pride and honour. "You will be among us Fairies. We are friends and we are family."
Wendy smiled as she watched Happy and Romeo scurry around the large trunks of giant trees and lush plant growth of East Forest with the young blond-haired boy tailing right after. However, she cringed whenever the two called the boy by his temporary name because it sounded so utterly ridiculous… Even having to say it out loud felt rather awkward for her.

"Bacon! Over here! Over here!" Romeo hollered from atop a large rocky protrusion covered in vines and other plant life. Happy was perched over Romeo's shoulder, waving a beckoning paw at the other boy below.

Bacon… Wendy couldn't help but roll her eyes at the name they had ended up giving the boy. It was mostly Natsu's fault.

During their late breakfast that morning at Fairy Tail, all the members that were present were informed on the situation regarding the boy. Friendly, sympathetic greetings eventually turned into a group discussion on what the child's name should temporarily be thanks to Happy bringing that subject back up again.

"He uses a bow, right? His name should be Bow," Romeo had said as he and others examined the boy's belongings sorted on top of the round table next to where Wendy was seated with her teammates. Everything but the boy's potions and his bag of jewels, which Master Makarov had 'confiscated', sat neatly on the table for everyone to see. Unfortunately, no one recognized any of the items or had a clue to where they originated.

"Grasshopper!" Asuka had shouted her suggestion with a gleeful smile. The little girl was up on her toes and playfully tugging on Wendy's arm to get the Dragon Slayer's utmost attention. "I want to call him Grasshopper! Can we? Please?"

"Asuka, he's not a pet," her mother, Bisca, had lightly scolded with a lighthearted smile. Groaning, the little girl pouted while Natsu chuckled. "She's right, kiddo," said Natsu through a mouthful of food. "I think 'Bacon' sounds better. Right, Bacon? Bacon Bacon Bacon Bacon…"

Gently nudging the boy with his elbow, Natsu repeated the name while vigorously nodding his head, wanting the kid to mimic him.

Bearing a wide, carefree smile, the boy bowed his head several times, imitating Natsu's actions without fully understanding what it meant. In fact, the boy would often try to copy the habits of others from facial expressions to body movements whenever he noticed them. Despite his mimicking of others, Wendy had yet to hear him speak. She had heard him quietly giggle a few times whenever something greatly amused him, proving that he wasn't mute.

Natsu broadly grinned, making the boy grin too. "See? He likes Bacon. We're calling him Bacon."

"That's silly! We can't call him that!" Wendy protested, greatly appalled. She was seated on the other side of the boy and at the sound of her voice, his blue eyes fell upon her. He was always attentive to her whenever she spoke, a behaviour she had accidentally conditioned into him. She gave him a warm smile before looking at Natsu crossly. "It has to be a nice name. Maybe a cute name… Loco?"

"Bacon," said Natsu, refusing to listen. The boy glanced at him expectantly for a brief moment before resuming to eat his honeyed toast that Mirajane had prepared for the group's breakfast. He was a messy eater, preferring to use his hands rather than the knife and fork provided. He was
capable of using the utensils after Wendy had showed him how, but he didn't seem to like them. Crumbs and dripped honey covered the front of his shirt and the lap of his pants from his clumsy fingers, requiring a new change of clothes and possibly a shower once they finished their meal. She knew she had to be stern to teach him proper manners, however she didn't have the heart to be too commanding.

Carla heavily sighed. "His name should be more sophisticated," she had tried to argue. "Like… Artemis."

"Bacon."

"Pan?" Lucy decided to throw in with a tentative smile.

"Bacon."

"It has to be manly! I'd say Joro," someone else suggested from the small crowd gathered around their table. It sounded like Elfman.

"Bacon."

"Fairy," both Jet and Droy said as one. "It would go well because he'll be Fairy boy!" added the heavier man.

"Bacon Bacon Bacon."

The boy had been staring at Natsu throughout the discussion. When Natsu nudged him, the boy nodded at the mage, his face beaming with a sticky smile. The Fire Dragon Slayer pointed and sneered with satisfaction. "Look! Look! He likes the sound of Bacon. There's no denying it."

"But–"

Wendy was cut off by Happy suddenly proclaiming; "I like Bacon now!" The blue feline, standing on top of their table, raised his paw into the air and the boy did the same. Laughter broke out amongst the crowd.

Crossing her arms and shaking her head, Carla shot her fellow Exceed a sullen glare and quietly grumbled, "I suppose it's slightly better than Swordfish."

Mirajane giggled as she started to clean up the empty plates and glasses on the table. "Bacon doesn't actually sound so bad. I rather like it," she commented with a cheery smile. As she passed by the boy, she lightly tousled his blond hair in a playful manner. "Welcome to Fairy Tail, Bacon!"

And so the boy had adopted the name 'Bacon' thanks to Natsu drilling it into his head. It was only temporary, until the boy could remember his own name, so Wendy wasn't too disappointed by the outcome. Hopefully Fairy Tail's Medicinal Advisor, Porlyusica, would be able to help him.

Wendy, Natsu, Lucy, Carla, Happy, and Bacon were now on their way through East Forest to meet up with Master Makarov and the old woman. The guild master had gone ahead before asking Wendy and her teammates to join him when the group arrived at Fairy Tail that morning.

Romeo had tagged along as well, claiming he was bored, but Wendy suspected he was more interested in befriending the other boy. The novice fire mage had given Bacon some of his old clothes to change into and a worn pair of boots to wear. And now he was demonstrating on how to play, teaching the younger boy how to run, jump, crawl, climb, and navigate through the grand forest; he was pretty much showing Bacon how to be a normal kid, getting dirty and scuffed up.
Even though it was nice to see Bacon have fun, Wendy was constantly worried for him. He had yet to fully recover his strength. Whenever he tripped and fell, she was instantly by his side healing up his scrapes and bruises while scolding Romeo for not keeping a close eye on him. Surprisingly, Bacon only frowned whenever he suffered an injury; he never cried nor made a sound.

"He's a tough kid," Romeo had said after Wendy mended the younger boy's scraped elbow the second time. "You don't need to mother him, you know."

She couldn't help it. She just didn't like seeing Bacon hurt because it greatly reminded her of the time she had found him. She was anxious but also afraid to learn what had happened to him back in the ruins, remembering the ominous words Carla had spoken that night; "... the truth is something we would not like to hear..."

By an hour past noon, the group reached the enormous, familiar tree that was the home of Porlyusica. Towering tens of meters above them, Wendy couldn't see the top of the tree through the many thick branches of the forest canopy. Thin beams of sunlight poured through the small gaps, lighting up the staircase carved into the pale stone the tree grew upon.

The scent of Porlyusica – of Grandeeney – was ever present here, bringing a small smile on Wendy's face. It had only been a few weeks since she had last come here and received her mother's gift. There was a sound of wonder from Romeo for it was his first time meeting with Porlyusica. The girl had warned him of the old lady's dislike for humans and asked him not to speak out of turn.

Of course, the same couldn't be applied to Natsu. Banging on the carved wooden door, he loudly announced, "Hey, Gramps! Old hag! We're here!"

The door immediately swung open and standing within the shadows of the doorway with a mighty broom in hand was Porlyusica, her elderly wrinkled face distorted with anger. "Who are you calling an old hag?!" she demanded, jabbing the non-bristled end of her weapon into Natsu's stomach.

Natsu coughed and doubled over while Wendy and the others took a wary step back. Bacon, however, remained where he stood, staring up at the elder woman in his usual curious manner.

Winded, Natsu shrank away from the Medicinal Advisor and wheezed out, "S-Sorry... Ya didn't have to do that..."

Porlyusica's red eyes narrowed at Natsu with disdain for a short moment before she snorted and stepped inside. "Serves you right, human. Now enter and do not make another fuss or else begone with you."

Lucy sighed as she followed the groaning, hunched over Fire Dragon Slayer into the large hollow tree house. Wendy was right behind, pulling Bacon along by his hand while Romeo soundly gulped as he followed them.

Inside, the single room carved out of the trunk appeared much more spacious than from the outside, bringing a small gasp of surprise from Wendy. It was pleasantly cooler and rather cozy within the old woman's home. Natural light entered through the numerous glass-paned windows made into the thick trunk. Two large bookcases carved into the wood held many books both ancient and fairly new as well as several pots of living plants that were most likely medicinal herbs. On the far side was a magnificent indoor garden full of colourful blooming flowers, tall grasses, and climbing vines. There was a work desk on the left side littered with many ceramic and wooden bowls, glassware, utensils, tools, and jars full of dried plant material, translucent liquids, and oils. Scattered around were wooden crates, barrels, and small tree stumps that acted as chairs with a content-looking Master Makarov sitting on top of one of them, sipping what looked like a mug of tea. On the right side was a single
bed and in the center of the room was a red and yellow oval rug that complemented an otherwise bare floor.

Makarov nodded in greeting at the group's arrival and Wendy caught Porlyusica's small welcoming smile directed at her for a fleeting moment before it vanished.

"Close the door," was the old woman's command once everyone was inside.

Romeo, being the last to pass through the doorway, flinched and hastily slammed the wooden door shut, making a few of the pots sitting on the shelves slightly rattle.

"Gently, boy! Gently!" Porlyusica snapped, pointing her fearsome broom at Romeo.

Romeo cowered and profusely apologized while Makarov lightly chuckled. "Now, now…" the old man began, but Wendy didn't catch the rest.

Something caught Bacon's immediate attention. He left Wendy's side before the girl had time to react. He stopped beside one of the bookshelves and craned his head upward. Mounted onto the inner trunk of the tree at the height of an adult's reach was a small Light Lacrima illuminating the corner of the chamber a soft yellow. Slowly hovering around the crystal was a pair of glowbugs, winged beetles with iridescent black shells and white glowing bodies. They were slightly larger than fireflies and they preferred to shine during the day rather than the night. They were also highly attracted to light infused Lacrima, making them a common sight in towns or cities. Always seen in pairs, glowbugs would spend all day flying around a light-giving crystal until nightfall where they disappeared into the darkness.

Bacon pointed at them and, pointing as well, Wendy whispered to him, "Glowbugs." He slightly tilted his head at the sound of their name, his wide blue eyes transfixed on the glowing insects spiraling around the Lacrima in an endless dance.

"It's rare to see them out here," Romeo added in a quiet voice, joining the two.

Wendy nodded, watching the beetles' long transparent wings flicker like sunlit jewels all the while listening to the others converse.

"… potion to cure his amnesia?" Natsu asked.

"As I have told the master, I do not know of any medicinal remedy to bring back memories that have been lost," Porlyusica frankly replied.

Wendy was disappointed to hear that and she could sense her companions feeling the same. She exchanged a saddened look with Romeo before her frown fell on Bacon. The younger boy was still captivated by the moving lights above them. He was smiling in awe, completely oblivious to everything around him.

"Is it possible that someone else may know?" Lucy inquired.

The guild master heavily sighed and shook his head. "I've asked the same question. There hasn't been any records of a cure for treating memory loss in both magical and medicinal research. The only thing left is for the child to remember on his own."

"So he is the one?" Porlyusica questioned, approaching Wendy and the boys. As the girl pried Bacon's attention away from the insects, the advisor's crimson eyes studied Bacon intently, the corner of her mouth perking in thought. "How peculiar…" she quietly murmured, noting his appearance.
Noticing Porlyusica standing before him, Bacon peered up at the tall woman and stuck out his left hand as a form of greeting that he was starting to pick up. Instead of taking his hand, Porlyusica reached into a pocket of her robe and pulled out a familiar corked glass bottle full of thick red liquid. "Memories are triggered through stimulation," she said, placing the bottle in the boy's open palm. "Familiar scents and tastes can trigger the mind into remembering past situations."

"What is that?" Romeo asked, eyeing the bottle curiously in the same manner as Bacon.

"This is one of his potions I was given to examine. It is a rejuvenating potion. If he drinks this, perhaps he could begin to remember something just from the taste of it alone."

Nodding Wendy uncorked the bottle for Bacon and carefully pushed it to his lips, prompting him to drink it. When the first drop touched his tongue, a look of disgust crossed the boy's face followed by the immediate rejection of the medicine all over the floor. The bottle and its contents would have joined the rest if it were not for Wendy quickly grabbing it out of Bacon's hand.

Porlyusica was not too happy at the mess on her floor before her feet. "So sorry, Grandeeney!" Wendy apologized on Bacon's behalf. She understood how difficult it was to swallow something that tasted as bad as it smelled. "I'll clean that up for you!"

Sighing, Porlyusica raised a hand to stop the girl. "Don't worry about it. And do not call me Grandeeney."

Wendy timidly nodded and shuffled her feet. "Err, right. Sorry, Miss Porlyusica."

The advisor turned to Bacon who was busy smacking his lips and cringing at the foul taste left in his mouth. Everyone silently observed, waiting for some sort of reaction, but Bacon seemed no different than before. He was looking rather displeased at the now corked bottle in Wendy's possession.

"Hmph. It doesn't look like it worked," Porlyusica murmured after a moment. She pulled out two more bottles, each filled with a green and blue liquid. "I doubt these two would work either and they both taste equally pungent if not worse."

Natsu wrinkled his nose. "Are they even safe to drink?"

"Why would the boy carry them if they did not aid him in some way? They aren't poison. I've yet to figure out the exact properties of these two potions but I have an inclination that they may heal magic energy." After putting them away, she held out her right hand before Bacon and gestured for him to do the same.

He was reluctant, most likely due to Porlyusica's stern expression and the fact she had given him a nasty tasting potion to drink, but Wendy kindly coaxed him into grabbing the elder's hand. Porlyusica gently enclosed her long, pale fingers around his smaller left hand and lightly touched the back of his palm with her other hand. Her red eyes narrowed slightly after a short moment. "His magic aura... It is quite different," she stated.

"We're guessing he came from a distant country," said Lucy.

"Perhaps. Or he could be from another world."

There were a few gasps. "Like from another parallel universe?" Happy exclaimed with excitement. Carla crossed her arms and looked upon the elders in bewilderment. "Like Edolas?"

Porlyusica met Bacon's curious stare and allowed him to pull away. "No, not Edolas... Most likely
another world that differs from Earthland and Edolas."

"It's a possibility we shouldn't ignore," Makarov informed, raising his brow. "If Edolas exists, so too can other worlds. His coming here may have been accidental as was the case with Porlyusica. However, we cannot overlook the temple and the state you have found him in. There must be more to how and why he ended up in the ruins in the first place. Natsu," he hopped off the stump and strolled towards the fire mage standing in the center of the room, "I'd like you to show me where you found the temple."

"What?" Natsu flinched and nervously rubbed the back of his neck. "You sure I should go back to Saffarion? They'll probably try to arrest me on sight."

The master waved his hand. "Oh, don't worry about that. I've already paid the damage fees."

Natsu was greatly relieved. "You did? How? Where'd you get the money?"

Wendy caught the snide little smile adorning the old man's face before he turned his back to everyone. "Let's just say I had a few extra Jewels in my pocket."

"Wait a minute…" Lucy narrowed her eyes at him in suspicion. "Did you sell Bacon's gems?!"

"Bacon?" The guild master twirled around, confused. Hearing his name, the boy perked up and looked at the old man. "Now who's… Oh!" Makarov burst out in amusing laughter when he saw the child's questioning stare. "Which one of you kids came up with that name for him?"

"I did!" Natsu proudly grinned, slapping a hand to his chest. "Isn't it awesome?"

Wendy rolled her eyes before frowning angrily at Makarov. "Master! You shouldn't have sold his treasure!"

Makarov looked off to the side in guilt and bashfully laughed. "I only sold a few gems… Just enough to compensate for the damages your team was responsible for while recovering the boy. It's his repayment, how about that?"

"But…" She wanted to argue how it wasn't entirely fair but the master soon became serious.

"Rest assured the rest of his treasure will be safe with me. I promise to return it all when he gains back his memories."

"How long do you think it will take for him to remember?" Wendy asked in a hopeful tone. She glanced at Bacon, seeing him gazing up at the glowbugs again after Porlyusica let him go.

Porlyusica grimly shook her head. "I am not certain. It could take days, months, years or, in the worst case scenario, never." Her usual stern face softened when she saw Wendy's dismay. "As long as you can find something overly familiar to him, it may trigger his memories to come back sooner. Favourite foods, sound cues, visual cues, even pain… anything that will stimulate his senses can have an effect. No matter how long it takes, do not give up. He needs our constant help."

Everyone nodded in agreement. Wendy smiled at Porlyusica, silently thanking her for bringing back the girl's determination.

Having done everything they could for the moment, the group left the Medicinal Advisor's home to head back to the guild with a new goal in mind.
Makarov lingered in the doorway, watching his children and the mysterious boy disappear into the forest trees. "Were you able to sense it aside from his magic?" he quietly asked.

Beside him, Porlyusica nodded. "Yes. A strange power… It lies dormant within him. From what I can tell, he is not affiliated with any demons or dark magic."

The guild master furrowed his brow and rubbed the bottom of his chin. "I wouldn't even have considered that. It is far from evil. It is something else entirely… Pure and holy… The nature of it matches the child's heart."

"He may be young and innocent now but what if his true nature is not what it seems?"

He raised his head, meeting Porlyusica's hardened gaze. She was not entirely trusting of others with the exception of Makarov and a select few from the guild. She had every right to be suspicious of the child, especially when he had no past or present and was in possession of a strange, otherworldly power. He gave her an assuring smile. "I believe in what I see. The child and his power is not a danger to us. What I'm worried about, however, is the truth behind his finding. What could have led him to the temple hidden in the forest and what was the main cause for his injuries? It must be fate that Natsu and the others had found him before it was too late."

"Hmph. So you are ruling out his discovery as a mere coincidence?"

His smile broadened. "My dear, there are never any coincidences in Fairy Tail. Every incident involving our guild happens for a reason."

Porlyusica soundly smirked. "If you believe the child poses no threat in the coming future, then I will stand by this belief. I will do whatever I can that is within my power to help him recover."

"Ah, thank you. I'm sure Wendy is happy knowing you are helping out."

Porlyusica turned away to hide a smile twitching upon her lips. She went inside to stop before the Lacrima lamp mounted above her head. Flying around it were two glowbugs entranced by the light of the crystal. "It's obvious she cares for that boy."

"Like a mother would for her child. Are you not the same?" Makarov chortled when he received an annoyed glare from the other.

"I am not a mother," she sharply replied, briskly walking to her desk. "And her mother is the Sky Dragon, not I." She turned back to the insects after grabbing a large empty glass jar. "The boy was rather fascinated by these bugs. Perhaps they remind him of something he has yet to understand." As she spoke, she plucked the crystal from its hold and carefully placed it inside the jar. The pair of glowbugs followed the crystal's trail, slowly descending into the glass to dance within the close quarters.

"From what I hear, he's rather fascinated by everything, especially shiny and moving things."

"Is that so? Well, just give this to him." She handed the jar to the old man who teasingly grinned. "Shall I tell Wendy it was a gift from her mother?"

Crimson eyes flashed with anger. "Enough of that! Begone with you, Makarov!"

"Kidding! Kidding!" The snickering old man was already at the bottom of the steps before she could grab her broom.
Food was the first thing they tried to joggle Bacon's memory. After arriving back at the guild shortly before evenfall, Mirajane and Lisanna offered to prepare a few desserts.

"He's just a kid. I'm sure he has eaten plenty of sweets before," said Lisanna, carrying a tray full of strawberry ice cream sundaes for Wendy, Romeo, Bacon and Asuka who were all seated around the same table closest to the bar. Carla was silently sitting on top of the table near her partner, not really interested in the tasty-looking desserts that were beautifully garnished. "Ice cream is every kid's favourite!"

She was wrong. It looked like it was Bacon's first time eating ice cream; he was extremely delighted by the sweet taste and greatly enjoyed eating the frozen treat, making just as big of a sticky mess as Asuka.

Next, Mirajane came by with vanilla frosted chocolate cupcakes and the result was the same. They factored out sweet foods and tried out the rest in smaller portions; sour orange juice and fruits, raw bitter vegetables, savoury meats, salty chips, and spicy curry... No matter what he ate, it did not seem like his taste buds recognized any of them. However, they did find out what he liked and disliked and spicy food was one of the top things he hated, as to be expected with most children. Bitter things were also repulsive but surprisingly he could tolerate most sour foods.

As Kinana, the violet-haired waitress of their guild, picked up the dirty dishes, she gave the boy an empathetic look. Bacon didn't notice her for he, along with Asuka, was busy searching the jar Makarov had given him for the two glowbugs that have just vanished for the night. All that remained inside the glass was the yellow glowing crystal. "I feel really sorry for him..." the waitress murmured, slightly shaking her head in pity. "Unlike me, he doesn't remember anything at all..."

"He'll eventually remember," said Romeo with a confident grin. However, it soon faded. "We're hoping anyway."

"Gran – Porlyusica said it will take some time. The only thing we can do is to keep on trying," Wendy assured.

"In the meantime, we will also have to teach him the basics of survival," informed Carla.

"Erza will be returning from her mission tomorrow. Perhaps she could shine a little light on where he may have come from," said Mirajane, giving them a hopeful smile.

Carla's expression remained solemn but it soon turned into amusement when the two youngest children upended the jar to dump the Lacrima noisily onto the table.

Asuka was confused as she peered into the large empty glass lying on its side. "Where did they go? They were here and now they're gone!" she cried, looking rather sad. Bacon mirrored her sadness.

Wendy giggled as she lifted the jar and placed the crystal carefully back inside. "Don't worry, you two. They always disappear at night. They'll come back tomorrow if they can find this Lacrima again. We'll have to put it outside or on the window sill."

Seeing Asuka brightly smile at that, Bacon smiled as well.

Before the guild exploded into another crazy party full of hearty laughs and drunken antics, Wendy left the building with Bacon, Carla, Romeo and his father, Macao. The noise had grown too loud for Bacon, he was noticeably wincing and covering his long ears as more people steadily got drunk and rowdy.

With Lucy gone with Natsu, Happy and the master back to Saffarion, her apartment was therefore
inaccessible so Romeo invited Wendy, Carla and Bacon to stay at his home for the night since Bacon couldn't really join Wendy at Fairy Hills. And Wendy didn't want to leave the boy's side since he was most comfortable with her around. After grabbing a few of her things from her dorm, Wendy followed the former guild master and his son to their residence less than an hour's walk away.

"Make yourselves at home!" announced Macao with a welcoming smile as he opened the front door to his one story house. With the snap of his fingers, all the lights inside turned on to reveal the mess that waited inside.

Wendy and Carla reeled back and covered their noses from the rank smell of stale, moldy food coming from the old, dirty dishes scattered around the living room and piled in the kitchen sink. There were stacks of yellowing newspapers in the corner by the fridge and newer papers strewn across the kitchen table, rugs and floorboards. Articles of worn clothing were haphazardly left all over the place, ranging from pants to what Wendy feared were the men's boxers.

The girls stood at the doorway, aghast at the horror that was the former master's home while Bacon followed Romeo inside, clutching to his chest his glass jar of light.

"Sorry about the little mess," Macao quietly chuckled in embarrassment, seeing the girls' appalled reactions. "It's only me and Romeo living here and we both tend to get lazy when it comes to cleaning. This place hasn't seen a woman's touch for over… seven or so years now?" He laughed again.

"A little messy?!!" Carla nearly shrieked. "This place is worst than Natsu's disaster of a home!"

"Oh, come on! It's not that bad!" The man glanced around the visible kitchen and living room for a moment before sighing in defeat. "Alright… I suppose it's a little out of hand…"

"A little' doesn't quite cut it. These conditions are clearly not suitable for us 'guests'," the Carla stated bluntly.

Wendy stepped up and said, "I can help you clean this place up!"

Ignoring the man's protests, Wendy asked Romeo to give Bacon a bath and help brush his teeth before she jumped straight into the kitchen to wash the dirty dishes. Carla helped with the girl's task while Macao tidied the kitchen and living room by throwing out the old newspapers, picking up the discarded clothes, and sweeping the floor. Eventually, the boys joined in on the cleaning chores too, although putting the dishes away was hampered down with Bacon constantly putting things in the wrong place.

It was around midnight when everything was considered clean and everyone could finally get ready for bed.

Yawning, Wendy, dressed in her nightgown, dropped face-first on the spare mattress laid out on the floor in Romeo's bedroom. Carla wasn't too far behind, falling on the bed more elegantly.

There were only two bedrooms in the house, with the other being Macao's. Inside Romeo's room, it was a tad messy with dirty laundry pushed to one corner and a few toys and books lying around. There was a wide drawer against one side of the wall, its top covered in various knickknacks, framed pictures, and other things Romeo had collected over the years. Beside it was a chair and a small writing desk that held a can full of pencils, pens, and markers, a lamp, and a neat pile of paper. On the opposite side was Romeo's bed, its sheets crumpled and messy, and above the headrest was a square window left open with Bacon's glowing jar sitting on the wooden sill. The Lacrima, despite its small size, was bright enough to light up the whole room.
Hearing a familiar shrill sound cut through the quiet room, Wendy abruptly sat up and turned to Romeo and Bacon both sitting atop the older boy's bed. The mage was blowing much too hard into Bacon's flute, holding it awkwardly and randomly moving his fingers over the holes to produce a terrible noise. Bacon was watching him intently, grimacing every so often when Romeo fell on a shrieking note. "You brought his flute with you?" she asked when the mage stopped attempting to play the instrument.

Romeo grinned. "I wanted to try it out and to see if Bacon can remember playing it. And it's not a flute, it's called… an orca? Orca-something… Vijeeter mentioned the name but I can't really remember." He held out the instrument for the other boy to take.

Holding it in his own hands, Bacon gazed at the glossy blue flute for a brief moment before moving to give it to Wendy.

Surprised, the girl slowly took it and he sat on the mattress beside her. "I-I can't play it…” she told him, but of course, he didn't comprehend her and only stared back. She tried to give it back but the boy wouldn't take it.

There was snickering coming from Romeo. "Looks like he only wants you to play."

"It's probably because he heard me try to play it when he first woke up…"

"I'm sure it was a better sound than mine since he wants you to have it."

"No. I don't think it's any better… Just listen."

It was equally as bad. Wobbly notes and shrill screeches instead of a decent tune filled the room and Romeo burst out laughing. A little red in the face, Wendy retorted, "I've never played an instrument before! Stop laughing!"

"Well, Bacon seems to like it," the fire mage pointed out, nodding at Bacon's smiling face. "That orca… thing–"

"Just call it a flute," said Carla.

Romeo pursed his lips and looked off to the side. "Fine," he grumbled. "The flute… I have a feeling it's important to him. I wish I could hear him play it…"

Wendy sadly nodded, rubbing a thumb over the golden triangles on the mouthpiece. The instrument and his belongings were the only clues to who he once was. A young adventurer? A travelling musician? A strong heroic little swordsman? He could be none or all three.

It was a mystery that Wendy was desperate to solve.

Softly, she spoke his false name to draw his full attention, and made a promise to him; "It may take a long time, but someday, we will find out who you truly are…"
The Lost Warrior

Wendy and Carla watched with bated breath as Romeo attempted to juggle three dark blue spheres that were larger than handballs, each with a short white tail of thick string. Sticking his tongue out to the side in concentration, Romeo managed to toss all three of the orbs into the air in succession before fumbling on catching the first, the second, and also the third. The orbs harmlessly bounced on the hardwood floor with heavy thuds and would have all rolled away if it were not for Asuka gleefully chasing after them. Bacon soon joined her in retrieving the last one and followed the little girl in giving the sphere back to Romeo.

Wendy and Carla deeply exhaled, greatly relieved that nothing happened after Bacon's bombs collided with the floor. "Please, Romeo, be careful with those!" said Wendy, waving a warning finger at the dark-haired mage.

Romeo tugged the front of his yellow scarf and broadly smiled bashfully. "No worries. They didn't blow up or anything." His smile turned into a mischievous grin as an idea popped into his head. "Hey, how about we try lighting one up?"

"Those are bombs," Wendy stressed, trying to make it obvious as to why his idea was not a smart one.

After putting two of the bombs back into the small leathery brown bag sitting on the countertop of the guild's bar, Romeo started tossing the last one in the air with one hand and catching it with the other. "And they're Bacon's bombs. When he sees and hears them explode it might spark a memory," he implied, repeatedly passing the dangerous orb between his hands. Bacon was following the dark sphere with his blue eyes, most likely attracted to the metallic sheen of the round object.

Since they arrived to the guild that morning, Romeo, Wendy, and Carla were trying to familiarize Bacon with some of his own belongings in hope of triggering his memories. So far, the sound of his flute – his ocarina, Vijeeter had corrected – and his strange purple eye-lens had yielded no results. No one knew how to properly play the instrument and Bacon would always immediately hand it back to Wendy when she gave it to him to use. And now they had moved onto the boy's small brown bag that held seven bombs in total.

Scratching her forehead beneath the rim of her orange hat, Asuka furrowed her brow and asked, "What are 'bombs'?

"Explosives. Wanna see?" Romeo didn't even wait for anyone's response as he lightly pinched the end of the fuse between his thumb and forefinger on the bomb he carried. A tiny flicker of yellow fire ignited on his fingertips for a half-second and within that instant, the white string started to hiss and smoke, making the youngest children stare in surprise.

"What are you doing?!" both Wendy and Carla exclaimed in horror.

Romeo blinked once before he suddenly realized what was going to happen. "Oops… Should've waited until we were outside, huh?"

"You are taking after Natsu far too much," Carla groaned into her paws as she covered her face and shook her head in disbelief.

"Throw it!" Wendy cried, waving her hands frantically around as the flame quickly ate away the short fuse.
Finally panicking, Romeo broke into a nervous sweat and handled the bomb as if it was too hot to touch despite him being a fire mage. He quickly looked around the guild before heaving the bomb across the room while shouting, "Everyone! Look out!" and then plugged his ears with his fingers.

The smoking dark orb soared towards the far empty corner opposite of the bar. Just as it flew, Bacon suddenly chased after it, rounding the chairs and tables with an excited grin on his young face.

"Bacon! Na!" The boy froze from the sound of Wendy's voice, giving the nimble girl enough time to leap over the obstacles and roughly tackle him to the floor just as the bomb soundly struck the wall and exploded with heat and fire. The explosion was brief but ear-popping loud, especially inside a building, making Bacon recoil beneath her, and sending a hot blast of wind in all directions. Chunks of broken wood were sent flying along with a few chairs and a table that were positioned right by the same wall. Eyes clenched shut, Wendy shielded the smaller boy from the falling, burning debris that noisily clattered nearby, smelling charred wood and acrid smoke. She flinched when something hot brushed the skin of her bare arms, but luckily everything pretty much missed landing on her.

There were shocked and terrified voices amongst the handful of people currently occupying the building. It was fortunate that it was still early in the morning and not too busy in the guild.

"Are you guys okay?!" Romeo was already right by the girl's side with Carla not too far behind. As she pushed off the floor, Wendy nodded in assurance after seeing the worried expressions of her companions. She then quickly checked on Bacon to make sure he wasn't hurt. Unfortunately, the hard fall split his lower lip and bruised his face but Wendy was quick to mend those injuries and wipe the blood away. It didn't seem like the boy even realized he was hurt for he was busy gaping in the direction of the explosion. Wendy glanced at the damage and gasped at the big flaming hole in the corner of Fairy Tail. It looked as if Natsu had thrown one of his devastating fiery punches through the wood and insulation like he had done so many times before back at the old guild.

"Geez, I haven't had my coffee today and already there's a fire started. Natsu's not even here for crying out loud," Wakaba loudly grumbled as he and Macao rushed to the scene along with the rest of the guild members. Wakaba took a long drag of his cigar and slowly exhaled, his eyes further narrowing to slits as he closely looked over the damage. "Looks to be… about two hundred thousand Jewels to repair… Might go into three hundred if the support pillar burns up," he assessed, stroking the end of his pointed beard.

Macao didn't possess the same composure as his friend. "Now's not the time to calculate repair fees!" he shouted, throwing his hands in the air in aggravation. "Someone put out the fires before this whole place burns down!"

"I got it!" a young feminine voice called out. Squeezing between the group was Levy and not far behind was the taller Gajeel shouldering his way through with Pantherlily in tow. The girl with blue hair gestured with her arms and fingers to write out her desired spell; "Solid Script: Water!"

Appearing in a puff of white smoke above her head were bold aqua blue letters spelling out 'WATER'. She pointed to the flames and the letters melded, bubbled and burst into a powerful stream of clear water. The fires noisily hissed and steamed before they were completely drenched and extinguished.

Cheers broke out from the small crowd, with Jet and Droy being the most enthusiastic, thanking Levy and welcoming her, the Iron Dragon Slayer, and black Exceed back from their training excursion.

Wanting to greet the three of them, Wendy moved to stand only to notice that Bacon was no longer with her. She turned abruptly around and saw him on his tiptoes and reaching into his bag of bombs
on the counter to pull one out. Bisca, Alzack, and Asuka gave the smiling boy curious looks as he ignored the three standing by the bar and ran back to Wendy, Romeo, and Carla with an explosive orb in his hands. He gave it to Romeo the instant he reached them.

Romeo raised a quizzical eyebrow as he took the offered object. However, he soon grinned when he realized what the younger boy wanted. "Oh? You liked the explosion, Bacon? Does it remind you of something?" His only answer was Bacon's quiet, eager stare. Tossing it between his hands like before, Romeo slightly frowned in disappointment before his smile returned. "Let's light another one up then."

Macao beat Wendy in scolding the novice mage. "Romeo, it was you who blew up the wall?!" the former master barked from behind Romeo, startling the boy and making him drop the bomb onto the floor. Bacon quickly picked it back up and tried to give it to Romeo again but the older boy was busy looking guilty and apologizing to Macao for causing the damages.

Wakaba casually strolled by and plucked the bomb from Bacon's outstretched hand. He spun the orb on the tip of his index finger, capable of balancing it on top and turning Bacon's frown into a captivated smile. Puffing on his smelly cigar, the man smirked at how easy it was to entertain the boy. "These little things pack quite a wallop. Why does the kid need them?" he wondered out loud, skillfully making the spinning orb lightly hop atop his fingertip.

"Who knows what he used them for? Blowing up buildings? We should store them away," suggested Macao, eyeing the open bag on the counter warily.

"But, Dad! I–" Romeo started to protest but his father held up a hand.

"Just for the time being, Son. I don't want you kids playing around with them and I don't want another hole in my building!"

Nodding wisely, Wakaba started to stroke his beard with his free hand while catching the bomb in the palm of his other. "Adding the flood damage to the floor, repairs are estimated to be–"

"You know I'm not the master anymore. You don't need to tell me the costs," Macao snapped, glowering at his companion.

Biting hard on the butt of his cigar, the other sneered. Wakaba absentmindedly returned the bomb to its young owner who instantly gave it to Romeo. "When Master's out, you're the one in charge, Macao. Isn't that how it is? And didn't you just say that this was your building?"

While the two men went into an argument about who was actually responsible for running Fairy Tail, Romeo quickly hid the bomb within his pocket dimension, making it look as if it disappeared out of thin air. Eyes wide, Bacon uttered a sound of confusion and started to look around the floor for the missing orb. Holding a finger up to the smug smile on his lips, Romeo quietly hushed the bewildered Bacon as well as Wendy and Carla to keep it a secret amongst them. Not understanding the gesture, Bacon kept searching the floor until Wendy gripped his wrist to draw his attention to her. In a whisper, she told him not to worry and the only response she got was the slight tilt of his head and his peering gaze.

Soon after, Wendy was approached by a happy Levy, a disgruntled Gajeel, and an indifferent Pantherlily.

Wendy was glad to see them back home and after introducing Bacon to the three of them, they settled at the closest table to the bar that was lucky enough to avoid being struck by a flying chair. Wendy briefly updated them on Bacon's situation including what Porlyusica had told them to do to
help the boy regain his memories. Meanwhile, a few of the guild members, including Romeo, started
to clean up the mess and temporarily patch up the hole with spare lumber and nails lying around in
the storage room.

"Hasn't even been a month and already she wanted to head back home," Gajeel muttered when
asked how their training went. He was slouched over the table, his right elbow resting on the smooth
surface with his chin propped upon the metal studs on the knuckles of his glove. He was looking
rather bored as he examined Bacon's small sword he had pulled from its blue sheath with a brown
leather sash. In his large hand, the weapon looked more like a big knife than an actual sword. The
child's shield, bow, quiver, and satchel were also on the table for Levy, Gajeel, and Pantherlily to
look over to see if they recognized anything. Unfortunately, the three of them were just as clueless as
everyone else.

Levy meekly laughed to hide her embarrassment and brushed a loose strand of her blue hair behind
her ear. A yellow bandanna adorned with a pretty pink flower held back her usually wild long bangs.
"Well, I kind of got homesick half-way through the third week in the wilderness," she replied.

"She completely missed me!" said Jet, coming around their table joyously with a hammer in hand.

"No! No! She missed *me*!" said Droy, easily knocking the slimmer man aside with his greater girth
and, in the process, accidentally dropping a few silvery nails from the small white paper box he
carried. The sharp points clanged on the floor and the two men were quick to recover them in fear of
someone stepping on them.

Again, Levy laughed. "I missed everyone," she said, making the fawning men of Shadow Gear cry
in happiness. Gajeel snorted and rolled his crimson eyes at them. He then grabbed one of the
dropped nails that had landed on the table and stuck it in his mouth like he would a toothpick. It
wasn't long until Macao commanded Jet and Droy to get back to work. Soon after her teammates
left, Levy's attention fell on the young boy sitting between Wendy and Asuka. The little girl had
joined their table shortly after spotting Pantherlily during Wendy's explanation.

Bacon was currently copying Asuka in petting a grumpy-faced Pantherlily over the head. The
warrior cat didn't fight back or move as he sat crossed-legged with folded arms atop the table. He
only grumbled out, "Why are children attracted to me the most?"

And to irk him further, Carla replied with, "Perhaps you resemble a teddy bear," as she watched,
greatly amused.

The remark evoked a deep, rumbling growl from the black panther and a deeper scowl on his scarred
face. And yet he still did not move to evade the little hands stroking his dark fur. His magic sword
was safely out of the children's reach on the other side of the table.

"I wish there was something I could do to help him," said Levy, her hazel eyes noticeably sad as she
watched Bacon gently pet Pantherlily with utmost care. She suddenly perked up and snapped her
fingers. "Oh! I know! I could teach him how to read and write!"

Gajeel leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms over his chest and peered down at the shorter girl
from the side with a lopsided grin after crunching and swallowing his silver nail. "And where are
you going to find the time for that?" he questioned her. "We still have to train for that Magic Games
thing coming up."

Levy hopelessly sighed and gave Gajeel a shy smile. "There's no way I could compete in that…
There are many others more qualified than me. Like you, Natsu, Erza, Laxus, even you Wendy."
"M-Me?" Wendy stuttered in surprise.

The other girl nodded confidently. "You Dragon Slayers are a force to be reckoned with. There's a likely chance that Master will choose you as one of the participants. The Grand Magic Games are less than five months away. I can watch over Bacon while you continue to train for the upcoming event."

Wendy doubted that she would be chosen for the Grand Magic Games since there were many other obviously stronger mages in the guild who would fare better than her in all aspects of a tournament. Even though the competition was the least of her concerns, she still had the deep desire to grow stronger to make up for the seven years she and others had lost while under the protection of Fairy Sphere. Everyone was out training hard. Wendy did not want to disappoint her guild or herself.

Levy's offer was starting to sound like a good idea since Wendy had yet to master her mother's Secret Arts. She had memorized the written methods and theories behind them over the past few weeks, but pulling them off flawlessly was a completely different story. She needed more time to train and practice, however Wendy wasn't sure how Bacon would react in her long absence. The boy never wandered too far from her and would always patiently wait for her return when she briefly disappeared into another room. For the most part, he relied on her on each passing day.

Sensing the younger girl's dilemma, Levy knowingly smiled and added, "Of course, I need to get more acquainted with little Bacon, don't I?"

"Oh, I get it now," Gajeel mused, his sneer widening to show his set of wicked fangs. "You just want to be around someone smaller than you for once."

"That's not it at all! Pantherlily's shorter than me most of the time!" she argued.

Pantherlily soundly cleared his throat in irritation and flicked his round ears when Asuka playfully tugged on one of them. "You know very well that I cannot maintain my true form for long in Earthland," he evenly replied. He grumbled quietly and further hunched over when Bacon was next to touch his sensitive ears.

"Err, sorry!" Levy quickly apologized while waving her hands before her to indicate she didn't mean to offend. She then huffed at Gajeel, "I just want to help out the only way I can since there's no point in me training relentlessly every day."

Gajeel shrugged his broad shoulders. "If you wanna help the tasty little runt, suit yourself. I'm heading straight back to training."

"I wouldn't mind accompanying you again," Pantherlily piped in, sounding quite eager to get away from the children.

"Tasty?" Carla questioned Gajeel's odd choice of words in addressing the boy and raised her brow.

"Come on. Ba-con," Gajeel drawled out the name. The boy perked up and only blinked once at Gajeel before resuming to petting the miniature panther. "Why'd you let that moronic fire-breather come up with that? It makes the kid sound tasty. Though, I'd rather eat his sword instead. Smells like good iron." He picked up the child's weapon, dangled it above his head by the hilt between his fingers, and eyed the shiny blue-silver blade hungrily.

"No! You can't eat that!" Wendy cried in shock, jumping to her feet and forcefully knocking her chair over.

Gajeel dangerously sneered, his mouth full of sharp teeth that were ready to tear, and lowered the
sword onto the table. "How about a bite of his shield then?" he asked, tapping his iron knuckles against the solid piece of metal, producing an echoing clang. "I think it's steel but I can check to make sure." He lifted the shield easily with one hand and held it like a slice of pizza. Jaws wide open, his vicious fangs glistened as they slowly closed on the thick metal outer rim of the shield.

Horrified, Wendy slammed her palms on the table and angrily shrieked, "Don't you dare! It belongs to Bacon!" Bacon paused to look at her, confusion settling on his features when he saw her anger. He looked between the girl and Gajeel, unable to comprehend what was going on.

Gajeel suddenly burst into laughter and slapped his free hand hard on the table, making everything, including the two startled Exceeds, slightly jump from the impact. "I'm only kidding, pipsqueak," he said with humor, once he finally regained his breath. He raised a teasing studded eyebrow as he dropped the shield back on the table. "A little protective, aren't you?"

"That's right, Gajeel," Levy sided with Wendy, giving the man a firm stare. "All of these things are important so don't damage them!"

"Hey, I said I was kidding," growled the Iron Dragon Slayer, looking off to the side in slight annoyance. He stood up, his naturally tall height allowing him to tower over everyone seated at the table. He walked around and planted his large open palm over the top of Wendy's head and mussed up her navy-blue hair in a rough, playful manner, eliciting a tiny squeak of protest from the girl. "You care for the little runt that much, huh? Fine, I won't touch his stuff."

When Gajeel pulled away, Wendy soon felt a smaller hand pat the top of her head. She turned to see Bacon smiling up at her, his outstretched arm slowly moving to further mess up her tangled locks to repeat what Gajeel had done.

Levy quietly giggled and it wasn't long until Wendy joined her, feeling a little more cheerful. Wearing a kind smile, she gently pried the boy's hand away and attempting to fix her hair. However, it was futile; she needed to seek out a brush.

Gajeel leaned over Bacon's shoulder just as he slowly spoke the boy's name in a low, menacing tone, "Now you better behave, little runt. Don't cause too much trouble for your tiny teacher." He lazily gestured to Levy but Bacon didn't follow.

Bacon was not the least bit intimidated by the larger man with the sharp teeth and glaring red eyes. Bacon was instead staring at the mage's face in childish fascination. He reached up and poked one of Gajeel's small iron studs on the chin.

"He's not scared of you at all," said Levy with a light-hearted laugh.

"He's forgotten all about fear as well, it seems," noted Carla, smirking.

Gajeel snorted and tousled the kid's hair out of amusement before announcing his departure to head back to training. Pantherlily hopped to his feet, grabbed his sword, and followed right after, much to Asuka's groaning disappointment.

"We just got back and already you guys want to leave?" Levy called after.

"Time's wasting, girl," replied Gajeel without looking back. "The Magic Games will be here before we'll even know it. You better get back to training too, pipsqueak. We gotta make Fairy Tail number
one again." With a small petty wave behind him, Gajeel left the building with Pantherlily. Wendy could only silently nod, her mind set on reaching the same goal.

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Erza Scarlet headed straight for the bar the moment she stepped into Fairy Tail. Everyone inside quickly parted from her path after seeing the hardened look on her face. No one dared to question her nor did they even approach her, much to her relief. With a heavy sigh, she dropped onto an empty stool and demanded a cold drink to quench her thirst.

Mirajane, unfazed by the scarlet-haired woman's foul mood, cheerfully smiled and quickly mixed up a cocktail within seconds and set the glass before Erza. The warriress flicked away the unnecessary garnishes decorating her drink before downing the whole glass in one satisfying gulp. The cool, blended liquor was sweet on the tongue and pleasantly burned going down her throat where it warmed her chest. She slammed her glass on the counter and demanded another one.

"How did the mission go?" Mirajane asked as she whipped up another fruity cocktail. She was one of the few brave enough to confront Erza whenever Titania was obviously irritated by something. "It looks like you had plenty of sunshine."

After swallowing her second drink, Erza wiped her mouth with the back of her armoured hand, growled at the other's mockery, and muttered, "It went far longer than I had anticipated."

Her job was the only S-Rank mission that reached their guild. She was the first to pick it up the instant it was posted on the Request Board a month ago. The mission took place in the south eastern country of Desierto that was a week long train ride from Magnolia. The request was to hunt down a giant Devil Scorpion that had attacked a small desert village and made the site its nesting ground after the villagers had all fled.

The mission had sounded simple enough. The blistering, arid heat was nothing to Erza when she wore her special Ambient Earrings that protected her from extreme temperatures. However, when she found the lone scorpion amongst the ruins of the village, twenty more appeared out of the hot white sand.

A swarm of giant full-grown Devil Scorpions, each the size of a two-storey house with ten meter long tails and one meter long stingers, greeted her the instant she stepped foot within their territory. Their thick, black armoured carapaces were covered in hundreds of tiny neon-green-tipped poisonous barbs and their enormous claws had the strength to crush solid steel and rock. It was said that one tiny drop of their deadly venom could kill a person within a blink of an eye.

She had slain eleven of them before the rest scattered and burrowed beneath the sand. Thinking they had run away, Erza reported back to her client only to be sent back out to hunt them all down in fear they might return and cause more havoc. She spent over twelve days searching the vast desert for the last ten Devil Scorpions, enduring two sandstorms, sunburn, a week without a bath, and constant thirst, and because of that, she managed to haggle a much bigger reward out of it.

Suppressing a yawn, Erza leaned back to stretch her arms above her head, still exhausted from the long trip back. It was then that she noticed the shoddy patchwork in the burnt, soggy corner of the building. "Another fight gone wrong?" she asked, nodding towards the damage.

Mirajane lightly chuckled and shook her head. "Surprisingly, no. That was actually from Romeo testing one of Bacon's bombs."

Before Erza could even ask, Mirajane spoke of an amnesiac boy and a mysterious lost temple that Wendy, Carla, Natsu, Happy, and Lucy had discovered on their latest mission. And the reason
behind the boy's ridiculous name, thanks to a mindless Natsu. Mirajane pulled down one of Reedus's paintings decorating the back wall of the bar and fondly showed it to Erza.

The painting was a captured moment within the guild, depicting Wendy, Carla, Romeo, Asuka, and a young, blond-haired, blue-eyed boy with long, pointed ears that Mirajane had pointed out was Bacon. The children and Exceed were seated around a table and visibly enjoying ice cream sundaes, looking no more but a happy, carefree little group.

Erza lightly smiled at the innocence of the children portrayed within the painting before she glanced at the sword and shield Mirajane had pulled out from behind the counter for her to look over. Her brown eyes were drawn to the colourful edge shield first. Picking it up, she held it before her in both hands to closely examine the unfamiliar insignia of a stylish red bird painted in the center. Her gaze then wandered to the three golden triangles situated below the bird and lingered there for a moment longer before she studied the rest of the shield. The blue, red, and white paint covering the surface was noticeably chipped and scratched with the steel beneath visibly marred from having to withstand countless attacks. As well, numerous nicks and small dents adorned the thick outer rim and the decorative metal pieces overlaying the surface of the well-crafted item. Turning it over, she found the handle and leather carrying strap well worn from constant use.

Laying the shield aside, she picked up the small sheathed sword by its blue wooden scabbard and took note of the silver handle's smooth, worn appearance. The pommel was decorated with a sapphire jewel and the guard was simple and made of thick, gilded metal. Quietly, the sword sang when she slowly drew it from its sheath. She sensed no magical properties from the blade, deeming it an ordinary sword made of a silver-blue metal she couldn't quite figure out. Taking her gauntlet off, Erza carefully brushed her thumb along the clean edge, surprised by its razor sharpness. It was definitely not a child's toy.

She mentally smirked at the boy she had yet to meet as she gazed upon her distorted reflection on the short blade. Judging from the condition of his equipment, she could tell the boy had gone through many fierce battles. He was once a young swordsman; a warrior at heart, probably both fearless and talented, but fate was cruel to take it all away…

Returning the sword to its sheath, Erza closed her eyes and slowly shook her head to Mirajane's question. "No, I've never seen the style of these weapons before. I'm not sure where they originated from," Erza quietly replied, bringing a small frown of disappointment from the other.

"That's really unfortunate. Wendy and Romeo will be sad to hear that," Mirajane sighed as she cleaned up Erza's used glasses. "They've grown quite attached to him. Especially Wendy. She's become quite a motherly figure. It's really cute!" Her beaming smile gradually faded. "Everyone has been trying to find out who he is. Lisanna, Max, and Laki have been checking missing child reports from all over Fiore and the surrounding countries but none of them match Bacon's description. He probably doesn't have any family or… he might truly be from another world."

As she pondered over that, Erza stirred her third drink with the straw provided, hearing the ice softly clink against the glass. "Not yet. Likely tomorrow if not tonight. They might have found something, maybe the temple!" Mirajane sounded hopeful.

"Where is Wendy now with the boy?"

Wiping the counter with a rag, Mirajane shrugged while wearing her usual cheerful smile. "Somewhere outside with Gray. He just came back a couple hours ago with Juvia. I believe he's showing Bacon how to use a bow again."
"A bow? Hmm, interesting," Erza mused with a slight nod of her head. She finished her last drink and stored Bacon's sword and shield temporarily within her pocket dimension to give to him later. She would demonstrate the use of the weapons to see if he was capable of remembering how to fight. Before she got up, Mirajane leaned forward on the counter on both of her elbows, her happy expression replaced with seriousness. This prompted Erza to lean over the counter as well so they were face-to-face, looking as if to share a secret.

"Master told us to watch over Bacon," stated Mirajane, her voice nearly a whisper. "He suspects whatever happened to the boy in the temple was not accidental. Whoever harmed him may still be around."

Erza's eyes narrowed. "Any leads on who and why?"

"No. So far we are only going on Master's suspicions. And the reason why? Right now, it's purely conjecture, but you might understand when you meet him. Bacon is under Fairy Tail's protection. For the time being, he's one of us," Mirajane proclaimed with a smile that soon turned devilish, "and whoever harms one us will be properly dealt with."

Erza smirked and soundly agreed before she departed.

Outside, she was greeted by the warm, late afternoon sun blinding her eyes. It didn't take long to find Gray and the children. Following the loud yells, cheers, and laughter, she strolled around the back of the building towards the stretch of tall trees that grew atop the hill. There, she found a small crowd consisting of all three members of Shadow Gear, Bisca, Alzack, Asuka, Romeo, Wendy, Carla, Gray, and the blond-haired boy, Bacon. Not too far from the gathering, Erza spotted Juvia hiding behind a bush, secretly spying on the ice-mage who was moving to stand in front of everyone.

Erza silently observed them from afar, curious at what they were up to.

In Gray's right hand was his conjured bow made of shimmering blue-white ice. Large and wickedly jagged around the edges, the fearsome weapon was visibly steaming under the heat of the sun. He pointed straight ahead at one of the distant trees where someone had mounted a round, wooden target on a vine that swung to and fro like a pendulum on a low hanging branch. Taking a quick look around, Erza found more targets situated in different spots, ranging from close to farther distances to various heights atop the trees. All were pierced with arrows of ice and wood, striking all parts of the targets including the red bull's-eyes, although those were rarer with increasing difficulty of the target.

Gray peered over his shoulder and cockily grinned at the young boy eagerly waiting behind him. "This one's a tricky one. Patience is the key," he advised. He raised his crystalline bow just as he made an arrow in his hand in a brief flash of white light. He nocked the long, deadly-pointed piece of ice, took aim, and soundly drew a deep, steady breath.

Everyone quietly watched the swinging target in the distance, waiting for Gray to release his shot. Seconds passed. Just as the target reached its maximum swinging height, a shiny blue-white streak suddenly flew through the air and struck the wood with a loud thunk when the target dropped to the center. Embedded into the now spinning target was Gray's frozen arrow, having stricken the outer yellow ring close to the red bull's-eye. "Aw, man. Another close one," Gray grumbled, scratching the side of his neck in slight annoyance.

"Still an excellent shot," commented Alzack with the others also soundly praising the ice-user on the incredible feat.

Smirking, Gray stepped back and gestured with his free arm. "Alright, Bacon. You're up. Droy, fix your vine."
Droy, busy chewing his burger, simply waved a finger and the swinging piece of wood resumed its pace.

Grinning wide, the boy bounded to where Gray last stood, carrying in his left hand a small wooden bow fitted with gilded metal binds around the grip and curved ends. Wendy was right behind him, holding onto a quiver of arrows. Smiling, she handed the visibly excited boy one of the wood-shafted arrows and quietly encouraged him to do his best. He pointed at the moving bull's-eye and the girl nodded in assurance. Stepping back, Wendy stayed close as Bacon readied his bow.

Again, everyone fell silent in anticipation, all eyes on the pendulous target pierced by a thin shard of ice. The boy drew a slow, deep breath just like Gray had done and patiently waited for the right moment to release his arrow. There was a sharp twang followed by the hiss of the arrow tearing through the air. With a resounding thunk, the iron tip sank deep into the painted wood, right in the dead center of the bull's-eye. Everyone broke out with cheers and clapping as they surrounded Bacon.

"Impressive," said Erza once she reached the group.

Gray turned abruptly around and jumped in alarm the instant he saw her face, resulting in him accidentally tossing his crystal bow into the air where it shattered to pieces on the ground. "Oh geez – Erza! Wh-What did I do?!" he exclaimed, panicking.

Seeing Gray throw his bow away, Bacon did the same, happily flinging his small bow above his head where Romeo was quick to snatch it before it hit the ground.

Titania crossed her arms and raised a questioning eyebrow at Gray. "I only said I was impressed by the boy's last shot," she stated in truth.

Gray slightly eased up and tentatively scratched the back of his neck. "Well, you look… kinda angry. A little red in the face, you know?" he pointed out hesitantly as he subconsciously took off his shirt. Bacon would have followed suit if Wendy didn't hastily stop the boy from pulling off his T-shirt.

Erza immediately scowled, making Gray noticeably shiver and shrink back along with a few others afraid of her wrath. "It's only a little sunburn," she shortly huffed. "And put your shirt back on."

"My wha – Oh, damn!" Gray quickly picked up his discarded clothing after realizing he was half naked.

Wendy ran up to Erza with Bacon tailing close by. "Erza! Welcome back!" the Dragon Slayer greeted with a broad smile. "I was hoping to ask you if – Oh! Let me first introduce you to um… Bacon…"

"I heard all about him from Mira," informed Erza, knowing what Wendy desired to ask. Shaking her head apologetically, she slightly frowned at the girl. "I'm sorry. I don't have the slightest clue to where he came from."

Just as Mirajane had said, Wendy was deeply disappointed by the news. "I see…" The girl nodded, her sad brown eyes falling on the quiet boy beside her. Her sadness quickly turned into determination. "Then it's up to us to help him in every way we can. I won't give up."

Erza smirked, hearing the others say similar things. She glanced at Bacon, seeing the boy staring at her armoured hands that shone bright in the sunlight. When Wendy gently pulled him closer to Erza for introductions, the boy raised his head to meet the woman's gaze. He stuck out his left hand which
Wendy explained was a sign of greeting.

Having no choice, Erza lightly grasped the boy's hand within hers and received his childish smile in return. His magic aura was like none other. It was not particularly strong; it was comparable to Asuka's, but it felt strange, almost otherworldly. Underlying that was something else as well – a holy presence…

She slightly knitted her brow, remembering what Mirajane had told her. She offered a friendly smile at the one Fairy Tail was assigned to protect by their master. He was only an innocent little boy whose memories had all been lost… She wondered if every last one had all been taken away.

As she pulled her hand back, she placed in his hand the hilt of his sword and pulled the scabbard free for him. Eyes wide in surprise, he gawked at the weapon that suddenly appeared in his grip while Wendy gasped and started to fret over his safety. He raised the sword and made a small sound of awe at the reflective metal, astonished by it. His reaction was proof that his mind had truly forgotten. However, she was not one to simply judge on first impressions. After all, the boy had proven his extraordinary skill in archery despite no recollection of using a bow.

While Wendy prevented the child from touching the sharp edges, Erza stepped back a couple strides and equipped her standard broadsword forged from steel.

Everyone began to worry. "Erza, you're not planning to kill him, are you?" Gray nervously asked, raising a skeptical eyebrow.

She scoffed at the absurdity of his question. "Nonsense. I will test his level of swordplay."

"What level of swordplay? The kid couldn't even remember how to hold his bow let alone a sword," Gray retorted.

She gestured to the targets in the field and trees. "And yet he was able to land a direct hit on that last target while you marginally missed the bull's-eye."

Gray pouted to the side. "Err, well, the kid got surprisingly good after a few practice shots…"

"A good indication that he hasn't completely forgotten his abilities," Erza pointed out.

"Erza! You can't!" Wendy protested, standing protectively between the boy and Erza.

Titania hardened her gaze on the Dragon Slayer. "Do you not wish for his memories to return?"

"I… I do. But… I don't think he's ready for—"

"Wendy, trust me. I will not harm him."

The girl hesitated, giving the boy behind her worried glances. When Erza impatiently tapped her foot, Wendy finally sighed. "Alright… Please don't be too harsh!"

Erza tried to smile but ended up sneering instead for she could not keep such a promise. Ignoring everyone's odd looks, she waved Wendy aside. "Stand back."

Wendy only took one tiny step sideways.

"Farther back."

Pouting, the Dragon Slayer moved to the side until Erza was satisfied. Before Bacon could follow, Erza sharply spoke his name to gain his full attention.
When curious blue eyes met brown, Titania lunged forward. Her sudden movement made the boy flinch and everyone gasp in either surprise or horror. When she was before him, she brought her sword around, going for a horizontal sweep aimed at his neck. She deliberately swung her blade wide and slower than normal, to allow herself enough time to stop her attack if needed.

However, within the moment her sword was swung, the boy's body tensed, every muscle coiled, and wide eyes became narrowed and focused not on her but on her incoming blade. Right before the edge of Erza's weapon would hit, Bacon threw his body back, performing an acrobatic flip in midair where he landed right back on his feet, facing her, his focus turning into instant confusion at his own actions.

The observing mages were stunned silent for a second before sounds of amazement erupted amongst them.

"His reflexes are still intact," stated Titania, amused by the outcome. She advanced once more, crying out her oncoming attack to draw the young warrior's attention. Going for an overhead strike, her movements were restrained yet again.

Bacon instinctively fell into a defensive stance, his gaze flickering to Erza's large sword descending upon him. He leapt to the side to avoid the blade and Erza was quick to follow him with another broad sweep, this time aiming for the child's open right side. Too slow to dodge, the boy cowered and brought his right arm up, his fist clenched tight as if to hold a shield that was not there.

Erza's sword cut nothing but air as it harmlessly passed over the boy's head, the wind from her weapon stirring his blond hair. Thrusting the end of her sword into the ground, Titania brought out the boy's shield and slipped it on his raised arm in one smooth motion. Bacon shifted away from her touch but soon blinked in bewilderment at the new thing attached to his limb.

Erza didn't give him a second to marvel at it. Retrieving her sword, she shouted his name. Just as his head snapped in her direction, she slashed at him, purposely aiming for his shield. His reaction time was commendable; he raised his shield and held it proper. With an echoing clang, her sword struck painted metal, creating a brilliant shower of sparks from the grinding steel. She was stronger, her blow forcing the boy to stumble backwards. However, he was quick to regain his posture, staring intently at her for a brief second before confusion took hold of him once again.

"Do you remember who you are?" she asked him quietly.

The child said nothing, his brow deeply furrowed. Each of her words was probably only gibberish to his long ears.

"Can you remember who you once were?" Erza pressed on, softening her expression, her sword held by her side.

Sensing no danger, his blue eyes lowered to the weapons in his hands, confounded by what they were. Did they feel familiar to him? The weight of his sword, the sound of his shield; could he remember a time where he stood in the same position against an adversary?

Titania could see him internally struggling to understand, but in the end, when he met her eyes, she knew he couldn't find the answer. His mind was truly lost.
Bacon was squirming in his chair, trying in vain to get away from the cotton swab soaked in an alcoholic antiseptic, but the steel fingers encircling his wrist were as strong as a shackle, preventing him from any escape. He uttered sounds of distress when the swab was applied to another one of his many cuts on his left arm.

Wendy was seated in the chair right next to him, one hand gently stroking and picking out bits of grass that clung to his messy blond hair that was still damp with sweat while the other held the boy's hand, her fingers entwined around his to stop him from swatting away the swab. His grip was like iron, crushing her hand every time the antiseptic badly stung and brought tears to his eyes. The girl was cooing in his ear, assuring him that it will be alright and over soon. She desperately wanted to use her magic to heal his wounds quickly but Erza insisted – no, she forbade Wendy from treating the minor cuts, scrapes, and bruises he had received while 'sparring' with Titania.

"Allow him to endure the pain, Wendy," Erza had commanded shortly after the boy was sent sprawling to the ground by her blade, resulting in scraped elbows and knees and an angry frown. "He cannot rely on you all the time when he gets hurt. You were never there to heal him before you found him. How else will he remember his past if he does not remember pain? And there are many forms of it too." She had sneered wickedly, her demeanor almost matching that of a cruel, cruel demon. "Besides, if this experience doesn't bring back memories then at least this will quickly teach him the consequences of being too slow in battle."

"I don't think…" Gray had begun, but a disapproving glare from Erza had stilled his tongue.

Biting her lower lip, the Dragon Slayer had tentatively nodded and anxiously stood back to watch as Erza continued to pressure Bacon into lifting his short sword against her. She was harsh in both her tone and execution, riling Bacon to the point where he had wildly lashed out with his weapon in retaliation. Gradually, the young boy's skill with his blade improved with each swing of his sword, similar to when he practiced with his bow. His strikes grew faster, stronger and more precise, his movements well-balanced and lithe, and his expression bold and unwavering. In return, Erza had matched his speed and strength, pressing the boy with her own swordsmanship to test his limits and capabilities, her impressed smile never fading.

It was a first that Wendy had seen young Bacon's face distort with anger, frustration, and also determination as he was repeatedly beat down by Erza. It was also the first to hear his voice as he cried out with each attack and every jolt of pain. In less than an hour, the lost little boy had turned into a steadfast swordsman who was unwilling to give up in defeat.

Metal rang and shrieked when sword struck against shield and when blade grinded against blade. Their swords were flashes of silver and blue that exploded with orange and red sparks whenever they collided with steel. The air was filled with clangor and yells between the two fighters as well as cheers from the crowd closely watching the spectacle. Wendy was in awe along with everyone else. All fears and doubts for Bacon's safety had diminished after witnessing his vigour and resilience against the stronger Titania.

The pair fought until their swords shone red from the setting sun and when Bacon was too exhausted to get back up. Panting, sweating, bleeding, and covered in grass and dirt stains, the boy couldn't move a limb as he laid on his front on the flattened grass. He had to be carried back inside by Droy.

Now seated at the table closest to the bar, there was hardly a moment for Bacon to rest with Erza voluntarily cleaning and disinfecting his every wound. Around the same table were Carla, Gray, and
Romeo, visibly pitying the boy in Erza's care.

"You just want to torture him some more," Gray murmured sullenly shortly after hearing the Erza's offer to help.

Erza scoffed, her attention never straying from the task at hand. "I inflicted the pain therefore I will treat it. Do you not recall? I've tended to yours and Natsu's injuries many times when you both challenged me to a duel when we were younger and neither of you complained." She paused and raised an eyebrow in the half-naked ice mage's direction.

Gray's mouth twisted into a displeased snarl. "That's because we were knocked out cold by you every time!"

Titania pursed her lips to the side before smiling in amusement. "Ah, that's right. How could I forget? It was the only way to silence your pleas for mercy. Put your shirt back on."

Gray flinched and looked off to the side, irked by her comment. "I… I didn't beg. At least, not that I can remember… And I lost my shirt somewhere."

Much to Bacon's relief, it didn't take too long for Erza to finish. She worked diligently and quickly, dressing some of his larger wounds on his bare arms and legs with ointment and bandages. By the time she was done, the large doors of the guild creaked open to reveal the darkness of night and in stepped Master Makarov, Natsu, Happy, and Lucy.

Wendy beamed a welcoming smile when the group stopped by their table. The guild had gone quiet in anticipation for the returning group's news.

After the exchange of greetings, Natsu was first to notice Bacon's condition and immediately knew whom was responsible. "The hell, Erza?! Why'd you beat up the poor kid?" he suddenly demanded, horrified by the boy's dirty clothes, disheveled blond hair, and numerous injuries adorning his body.

As Erza stuffed away the first-aid supplies back into the kit on the table, she coolly replied, "Ridiculous. I did not beat him up. I was only showing him the way of the sword."

"More like you were showing him the pointy end of your sword," Natsu grumbled, cringing at the mere thought as well as his past experiences.

Erza snorted and crossed her arms as she leaned back in her chair to give the fire-user an even look. "The boy is very talented with the sword, shield, and bow," she praised, the corner of her lips curling into a smirk as her brown eyes flickered to the pouting little boy glowering at her. "His mind may not remember, but his body's superb instincts and reflexes are still intact. He held well against me."

"So he's a warrior type!" said Happy with an astonished smile from atop his perch over Natsu's pink head. "I wish I was here to see him fight!"

"You're actually complimenting him? Is he really that good?"

"He is stronger than he looks," Titania said truthfully, raising her brow. She then shot Natsu a disapproving scowl. "Though his name is very unfitting, Natsu."

He blinked. "What? Bacon's the awesomest name ever. What would you call him?"

"Psshh. Bacon's still better. Right, Bacon?" Natsu grinned and nodded repeatedly at the boy who
quickly smiled when he saw Natsu's face. "See? He still likes it."

Erza continued to scowl while Lucy slightly frowned when she asked, "Does he remember anything at all?"

Wendy sadly shook her head as she gave the boy who still held her hand a gentle squeeze. He glanced questionably at her when she started to speak. "No. Unfortunately, everything we tried so far resulted in nothing. Were you guys able to find the temple and any clues?"

The master, Lucy, Natsu, and Happy heavily sighed, their answer an obvious 'no'.

What they found in Verloren Woods were trees, trees and more trees. They had attempted various approaches in locating the ruins: Natsu and Happy did another thorough search in the sky high above the tall canopy, they tried entering the supposed area in the evening like the first time they had stumbled into the clearing, and they camped out overnight in the forest desperately hoping for the temple to suddenly show itself. In the morning, they had surmised that Mr. Snugglebottoms was probably the key to finding the place. However, the cat had yet to be found since its disappearance after Natsu had accidentally destroyed Mayor Burgandy's manor and Loke had confirmed that the feline was just an ordinary tabby with no magic powers, deeming their entire search hopeless.

Before they left the woods empty-handed and disgruntled, tired, and frustrated, the master wanted to do one last search around the area using markers in the trees to make sure they weren't walking in circles. To their dismay, they had been walking in countless circles due to some mysterious phenomenon. Despite walking in a straight line, a few minutes later they would always find themselves back at the same tree where Happy had scratched a heart with a 'C' in the middle into the smooth brown bark.

"There was some sort of powerful spell preventing us from finding the place," Master informed as he sat on the edge of Wendy's table, his short crossed legs dangling over the side and his back towards the plates of food that had been set during the returning group's long explanation. In his hand was a white mug of freshly brewed tea that he occasionally sipped. He furrowed his brow and rubbed the bottom of his chin with his thumb, his eyes lowering to his drink. "Whoever had cast such a barrier or illusion must have only intended for the boy to be found and saved."

Natsu, now seated at the next table, tried to say something with his mouth full of food but only ended up mumbling and spitting out chunks of his meal.

"Swallow before talking," Erza commanded, shooting the Fire Dragon Slayer a stern glare. Having not moved from Wendy's table, she was casually taking bites of her dinner as she listened to the group's story.

To her right, Bacon was scarfing down his meal consisting of creamy vegetable soup, a meat bun, a small bowl of fried rice, a bowl of fruit salad, and a glass of lemonade, making a mess of spills, crumbs, and dropped grains and fruit that Wendy was quick to clean up. His ravenous appetite was likely due to the amount of energy spent training with Erza.

Natsu noisily gulped and asked again, "Do you think it was intentional for us to find him?"

Makarov hummed in thought as he closed his eyes. "That… might be the case. Perhaps our guild was seen to have the power to protect and help him since the townsfolk of Saffarion are mainly non-mages." He raised his head, his gaze narrowing at something only he could see. "I am beginning to suspect that dark forces may have been responsible for his injuries that have led to his amnesia."

"Dark forces? As in the Dark Guilds or Zeref?" Gray asked, nearly snarling out the name of the evil
mage. Still shirtless, he remained at Wendy's table, his plate of food half-eaten.

The master slowly shook his head before looking over his shoulder at Bacon who was now engaged in a little game of flicking a melting ice cube back and forth across the table with Romeo, oblivious to the attention. "I don't know for sure. I could be wrong. But if it is true, whoever or whatever it may be, we need to keep our guard up. I think it would be best that the Magic Council and the other guilds do not know of Bacon or of the temple. Fate has brought him to us, therefore it is our fate to watch him."

With a promise from everyone present, Fairy Tail vowed to follow their master's word. The crowd dispersed and the usual nightly festivities began to lighten the atmosphere as well as to celebrate the return of all the members who had arrived home that day. The guild turned rowdier as the hour turned late. The delicious aromas of food were soon replaced with the pungency of alcohol as liquor was heavily consumed and spilled. A fight had first broken out between Gray and Natsu, but soon Elfman and Cana and many others got dragged into it. It wasn't long until Erza, having drunk a little too much, joined the fray and things became even more chaotic with chairs and tables being smashed to pieces by flying bodies.

It was then that Romeo invited Wendy, Carla, and Bacon to stay at his home for the night again as they hid under their table to avoid being pelted by stray magic, glasses of beer, and bottles of wine being haphazardly tossed around. Wendy flinched every time she heard the shatter of glass above her while Bacon would jump and bang his head in alarm. The boy was peering out from under the table at the chaos, grimacing at every loud noise but otherwise seemingly enjoying the ongoing destruction of furniture and the tussling of members as different forms of magic were being conjured up and violently exchanged. Plumes of fire, lances of ice, bubbles of water, swirling sand, smoggy smoke, shining swords, gleaming claws, pointy horns, flying cards, fuzzy wool, fists of wood, whipping vines – it was a grand spectacle of colours, shapes, and sounds (that consisted mainly of vulgar curses, death threats, screams of anger and pain, and the occasional burst of song).

Despite it all, Bacon was noticeably tired so it was time to retire for the night. When Wendy apologized for the trouble, Macao, who was also cowering under the same table, replied with, "Don't apologize. You kids are welcomed to stay for as long as you want. I owe you a lot for cleaning up the mess!" He heartily laughed at that over the angry roars of a Fire Dragon Slayer lunging straight for Titania. A deafening crash sounded soon after when Natsu's body was sent flying through the shoddy patchwork in the corner, reopening the gaping hole. Macao gasped at the damage and murmured that it wasn't his job anymore to take care of it.

Too sore and overly exhausted, Bacon had to be carried out on the man's back as Macao dashed towards the exit. Romeo was running right beside them with Bacon's small sword slung over his shoulder. Before Erza had left their table, she advised for Bacon to keep his sword close so he would familiarize with it more and more. Wendy and Carla hastily followed behind Macao, Bacon, and Romeo. In Wendy's hand, she held an old paper gift bag that had Bacon's green clothes and boots Lucy had retrieved back at the inn in Saffarion.

The doors to Fairy Tail closed with a loud thump, muffling the thunderous laughter, taunting jeers, and screams of outrage coming from the boisterous crowd inside. Outside, the night was pleasantly warm and the wind was still. The air smelled of the nearby forest, fresh and piney. The night insects sang, their thrilling tunes seemingly echoing deep into the darkness. Above, the sky was a black blanket dotted with hundreds of sparkling stars of blue, white, and red. High at its peak was the bright moon that was beginning to wane, casting a silver glow over the land below and spreading shadows that stretched far across the ground.

Just as they started down the path that led straight to town, Bacon looked over his shoulder at the top
of the windmill tower of Fairy Tail, his blue eyes shining silver from the moon. He pointed at something and Wendy craned her head to follow, seeing only the building bathed in the pale light of the celestial body in the sky. She smiled and said, "It's Fairy Tail, Bacon."

The boy only tilted his head, his attention never leaving the tower until it was out of sight.

He saw me, she quietly mused as she peeked over the windmill blade the moment the children, the Exceed, and the father disappeared behind the trees as the path curved around the hill. She was certain of it when his eyes met hers for one brief second. She had been quietly humming to herself throughout the evening. He must have heard or sensed her. But how can that be? He does not bear the mark of Fairy Tail.

Bewildered, she started to pace on the small wooden roof of the tower, kicking her bare feet high as she marched back and forth on her toes. The ends of her pink dress flared and swished around her whenever she sharply turned and her long, wavy blonde hair swayed with the same motion.

Having grown bored of Tenrou Island, she had just arrived at Fairy Tail, curious to see what the guild was up to. She had silently observed the events of the day; watching with great interest as the boy with blue eyes and blond hair played with a bow and arrows and fought with a sword and shield, impressing the members of the guild.

Who is he?

She twirled a strand of her hair around her finger as she pondered. She stopped her pacing to sit upon the wooden roof, her feet hanging over the edge. She could feel the building tremble beneath her as the chaos inside continued on. Peals of laughter and rowdy remarks flowing from an open window and large hole in the side of the guild made thinking a little difficult. She was fully aware of his situation when she overheard the conversations between the others out in the field and inside the guild.

Was it truly fate that had brought him here?

She gazed up at the moon, a small smile playing on her lips. She was intrigued by the child who should not be able to see her and decided to keep a closer eye on him.

During the next day, Erza had tried to 'help' Bacon remember his past by putting him through different life-threatening scenarios. This happened three times, resulting in Wendy nearly having three separate heart-attacks.

"Fear is a strong emotion that usually triggers strong memories. Like unwanted memories – ones that have been buried away and forgotten. There is no doubt that Bacon has experienced different levels of fear in his young life," Erza had said when she met up with Wendy, Carla, Bacon, and Romeo as they were heading to the guild that morning. Macao had stayed home to run a few errands and would join them later in the day.

"And how are you going to induce this fear?" Carla asked Erza hesitantly as they started to cross the stone, arched bridge that allowed passage over the canal within Magnolia Town.

Wendy glanced sideways at Titania warily, quietly praying Erza would not do anything extreme to endanger Bacon's life. Natsu had told her many terrifying stories about his childhood involving Erza and many of the details were horrific, although Wendy suspected he exaggerated on some parts.

Bacon was slowly walking beside her, his body still sore from yesterday's spar. He had trouble
getting out of bed and needed a helping hand. Strapped to his back by a leather belted sash was his sword that he was pleased to have but was forbidden to draw when inside Macao's home. Being overly cautious, the man had placed a simple sealing spell on the sword, preventing the blade from ever leaving its scabbard in all the rooms of his house. Bacon was disappointed for the most part. He had tried to unsheathe the sword many times but found it stuck so he gave up before the group left the house after breakfast.

The boy was dressed in his green one-piece tunic since he had run out of clean clothes that would fit. His matching green hat was upon his head that he had previously fought against wearing until Romeo planted it on his noggin the tenth time and on his feet were his own pair of brown boots. Getting him accustomed to his own belongings might make him remember something one of these days. He looked more like an adventurer with his green garb and weapon upon his back. Perhaps that was what he once was aside from being a swordsman.

Bacon's face had morphed into a grumpy one the moment Erza had joined the younger group, clearly remembering the woman's harsh treatment the day before. He disliked her but he did not shy away from her as she strolled on the other side of him.

Titania smiled at Carla's question and it wasn't a friendly one either. "I wonder if he can swim?" she said out loud. Without waiting for an answer, she grabbed Bacon by the back of his tunic's collar and threw him over the stone rail of the bridge, much to everyone's horror.

The boy's startled scream was shortly cut off when he splashed into the deep water below.

Panicking, Wendy peered over the rail and frantically searched the rippling surface of the dark blue water for Bacon. She and Romeo called for his name several times. Relief washed over her for a second when she saw the boy's blond head break the surface to sputter and gasp for air only to sink back under, arms weakly flailing as he was carried by the current. Was he too exhausted to swim or did he truly not know how? Without hesitating, Wendy leapt over the stone rail and dove right after him, ignoring Erza's command to wait.

She held her breath and closed her eyes seconds before she landed in the water. Her muscles tensed from the cold surrounding her, feeling chills running up her spine and goosebumps upon her skin. She opened her eyes to the stinging water and saw dark strands of her long hair shrouding her vision. She swept it aside and saw Bacon a short distance from her, his arms and legs thrashing. Wendy kicked to the surface and immediately swam towards the boy only to have her worry dwindle the moment she got closer.

"Bacon! Are you okay?" she had to ask.

With his head above water, the boy turned his body around, perfectly treading water as if he had done it before hundreds of times and not drowning like he had appeared to be seconds ago. His face brightened when he saw her and Wendy could only sigh in relief. Before the current could carry the both of them far from the bridge, Erza, in her Black Wing Armour, plucked the both of them out of the canal like an osprey hunting fish.

"He enjoyed it more than he should have," noted Titania with an amused smirk when Wendy and Bacon were back on the bridge. People who were crossing the same bridge were gawking at the winged, armoured Titania and questionably staring at the dripping wet children as they passed them by.

"Shivering, Wendy wrung water from her hair, thankful for the bright morning sun warming her back. She noticed Bacon standing by the rail eagerly looking down at the water as if wanting to jump back in. Romeo was holding him by the shoulder, thankfully keeping the boy in place.
Sighing, the Dragon Slayer dared to look crossly at the older woman. "Erza, please don't do anything like that again! What if Bacon couldn't really swim?!"

Erza, back in her usual suit of steel plated armour, tilted her head slightly and answered with an assuring smile, "You really did not need to panic, it turned out he could swim after all. Some instincts take time before they kick in, especially when situations grow dire. You just have to be patient."

As Wendy wiped the water trickling down her face, she quietly groaned at her superior's cruel way of thinking. Wendy was starting to believe that Natsu had not, in fact, exaggerated in his stories…

Later in the early afternoon, the weather had turned overcast and gloomy. The wind was a mere breeze that hardly moved the large blades of the windmill of the tower of Fairy Tail, which was fortunate for Erza because she had decided to dangle Bacon precariously over the edge of the tall roof. Held by the back of his belt, the boy was gazing around in awe at his new height while all the members present had scrambled out of the front doors of the guild and stood below, most of them panicking for the child's life.

"Oh my," Mirajane was first to say, her expression still as cheerful as ever despite the worrisome situation unfolding before her.

"Erza! Are you out of your mind?!" Macao demanded, pointing an accusing finger at the scarlet-haired woman.

"She's always out of her mind…” both Gray and Natsu quietly muttered under their breath as they stared with unease.

Titania's eyes widened as if she had just realized what she was doing. "You're right… This is wrong. What am I thinking?" she murmured, bowing her head in shame. Wendy's relief was short-lived however, because Erza then added, "He should be dropped at the height of a mountain." With that, she once again switched to her Black Wing Armour and took to the air, her dark, demonic wings flapping as she flew straight up at an incredible speed.

Everyone but Mirajane was aghast. Wendy shrieked in worry; "Carla! Hurry! Let's go after them!"

White, feathered wings magically sprouted from Carla's back and she wrapped her tail around the Dragon Slayer's waist. Together, they shot upwards, chasing after the black speck soaring towards the thick cover of pale gray clouds. Flying fast, the wind was rushing by; drying Wendy's eyes and whipping back her tied hair. The higher they flew, the thinner the air and colder the wind.

Exceeds were quicker in flight. Carla propelled them forward, her wings noisily beating. It took only seconds before the pair was behind Erza and Bacon. "Erza! Stop! Please!" Wendy shouted through cupped hands that were stiff and frozen from the icy wind.

Titania whirled around to face them and hovered in place. In her grip, Bacon was flailing his arms and legs more so in excitement than in fright. His eyes were wide and his mouth was agape as he stared at the distant land down below. All of Magnolia Town could be seen, hundreds of buildings of various sizes made of concrete, stone, brick, wood, and marble with plain or colourful roofs that were flat, sloped, or shingled. The canals were wide and shimmering throughout the town, turning into natural rivers once they reach the town's outskirts and every bridge could be counted. Farther down on the rocky coast at the town's edge was the guild's old two-storey building in disrepair and beyond that was the endless expanse of the blue ocean that reached far into the horizon. Surrounding the border of town were vast green forests and pale rocky mountains. In fact, they were higher than the mountains!
"Erza!" It was Natsu's voice. He and Happy had pursued after the warrioress as well. "Do you have some kind of grudge against the poor kid?"

Displeased, Erza snorted and shook her head at the four of them. "What I'm doing is invoking fear into Bacon. I told you that." Moments before she ran off with the boy, she had claimed that falling from incredible heights often if not always brought fear in the bravest of people.

"He doesn't look scared. He seems to be having fun," said Happy, giggling.

Erza's brown eyes dangerously gleamed. "How about I change that?"

Before Wendy could say anything to argue against the woman's risky method, she released her hold on Bacon.

Wendy's heart skipped a beat. To her, it looked as if Erza's lips had twisted into a malignant smile as Bacon's screams started to fade with increasing distance.

Natsu outright swore and Carla muttered what sounded like a curse before she dove after the boy tumbling towards the ground. Right below was Fairy Tail, a tiny red-roofed square that was growing in size with each passing second. "You'll need to catch him, Wendy!" Carla exclaimed as they flew through the air like a speeding bullet. "Our landing might be rough! I'm not sure if I can carry you both!"

Wendy soundly nodded, keeping her eyes on Bacon. He was still screaming, his voice shrill and high in pitch. Was he truly afraid? Is this the fear Erza wanted him to experience and remember? However, when she saw his face, it wasn't fear etched upon his young face. It was pure joy. He was enjoying the thrill of falling to his doom and squealing with happiness as his world spun around him.

From behind, Wendy wrapped her arms around his chest and held him tight as Carla tried to stabilize their flight. Feathered wings frantically beat the air. Their descent was gradually slowing, but not fast enough as gravity and momentum continued to pull them downward. But then a strong hand latched around the back of Wendy's dress that decreased the speed of their fall moments before they hit the grass.

"I gotcha," Natsu assured.

The Dragon Slayers and Bacon safely dropped to the ground at the back of Fairy Tail with the other guild members soon rushing to their side. Exhausted, Carla slumped over on the grass while Wendy fell to her knees, her nerves badly shaking. The girl breathed a very deep sigh to try to calm her wildly beating heart.

Wendy mustered the little courage she had to glower sullenly at Erza the moment the older mage touched the ground. The girl actually felt like crying because she was the one constantly filled with terror from Erza's relentless ideas, not Bacon.

It was the other way around for him. The fall didn't terrify him at all; instead, it made him joyously laugh. The new sound brought a small smile to twitch upon Wendy's lips. Still giggling, he tugged on Wendy's sleeve and pointed to the sky as if begging to fly again.

"Is there anything you're afraid of?" Erza asked the boy, but of course she received no answer. She narrowed her eyes and brought a hand to her chin in thought, probably scheming up more horrible, torturing ideas that would likely end with Wendy breaking out in another panic attack.

Wendy's gut twisted with dread while Natsu called the scarlet-haired woman crazy. "Erza! Please, no
more!" Wendy pleaded, clasping her hands before her chest and looking up at the other, her lower lip quivering. "Please stop endangering him like this!"

Titania looked upon Wendy's sad, pleading face while Bacon gently patted the top of the girl's head, slightly tousling her navy-blue hair. He understood that she was upset. After a moment, Erza finally sighed. "I told you before that you can trust me. I wasn't planning to harm him in any way. Not too seriously, I mean to say," she grumbled, huffing to the side. "But very well, Wendy, I will no longer try to scare him."

"Do you promise me?"

"I promise you."

Erza didn't keep her promise.

When the afternoon was nearing its end, the woman had somehow hauled a giant, square, steel barred cage to the top of the hill with a live reptilian monster trapped inside.

Before Wendy could protect Bacon from the terror that was Erza, Titania had grabbed the boy and flung him into the cage and magically locked it shut.

"What are you doing?! You promised me!" Wendy cried in horror as she ran to the door of the cage and grabbed the thick bars. She uselessly shook it to get it open but only succeeded in making it rattle. Inside, Bacon was sitting up on the metal floor, rubbing his sore, bandaged knee as he looked around in confusion.

"I promised not to scare him," the older woman replied, her sneer looking rather wicked under the gloom of the darkening sky. "This is to test his fighting ability. And I suppose survivability as well against a real enemy."

"A r-raptordile?!" Romeo stuttered, recognizing the hulking beast lounging inside. "That thing is huge! It's going to eat him!"

Wendy had read about raptordiles in a book once but had never seen them. They were swamp-dwelling reptiles that lived in the marshlands south of East Forest and could grow as large as a house. The one in the cage nearly took up a quarter of the space and was over ten times the size of Bacon and three times as tall. Standing on a pair of stout legs, the top of the creature's head nearly scraped the ceiling. It had a head like a crocodile; a long flat snout with a wide mouth full of sharp, pointy teeth that could swallow the boy in one bite. Its maw wasn't the only intimidating feature; its webbed fingers and toes ended with hooked claws except for the larger, inner toes for they both bore massive, curved black talons that were meant for tearing deep into flesh.

The lizard's eyes were large, round and crimson, its pupils were black vertical slits. Its thick, leathery skin was the colour of murky brown water and lightly striped with a mossy green while its underbelly was a pale shade of pink. Its neck and arms were short and its tail was long and flat and designed for swimming in water and balance on land. Adorning the top of its head and arced back were rows of spiky, bony ridges that would shred open any hand that dared to touch the fearsome beast.

"Not just an ordinary raptordile," stated Erza. Her smile somehow looked more evil. "This one's been known to have eaten a few people over the past month. There's actually a bounty for it for seventy thousand Jewels, dead or alive."

"Wh-what?!" both Romeo and Wendy uttered in shock.
When the creature spotted Bacon with its hungry eyes, the raptordile fully turned and opened its mighty jaws to produce a long, deep, throaty growl that caught the boy's attention. The child stood frozen in awe as the predator started to lumber towards him. Its claws clicked loudly against the metal floor with each heavy step, the sound sending a twinge of fear within Wendy.

"Master! You should stop this!" the Sky Dragon Slayer exclaimed, feeling utterly helpless as the massive creature closed in on Bacon, its yellowish teeth glistening maliciously. She couldn't use her magic on the cage, there was a barrier that reflected outside spells as Natsu had demonstrated when he tried to melt the bars with his flames a short moment ago.

The old man glanced to the side to meet Titania's stern, disapproving look and turned back to the cage, his wrinkled face scrunching as he contemplated on a decision. "I think Erza knows what she's doing..." he quietly murmured with a short, meek laugh.

"You expect him to fight that thing with his little sword?" Gray demanded of Erza.

"Don't worry. He's got his shield, bow, and quiver in there too," Titania pointed out. The said objects were lying on the floor off to the side of the cage and it didn't seem like Bacon noticed them. "It's only the matter of how he uses them against the lizard. I believe he can defeat it."

"Believe?" Wendy stopped in her fruitless attempts to break down the gate and stared at Erza, feeling a small sense of hope rising. Erza usually had a keen insight on everything. She was one of the strongest and smartest mages that Wendy has ever known and rarely did the girl doubt her superior's judgment ever since joining Fairy Tail. "Do you really think he can?"

Erza crossed her arms and sagely nodded with confidence, her eyes never leaving the cage. "The boy is not a helpless child, Wendy. His memories will never awaken if you keep nurturing him like a baby. I believe he is capable of more than what we have seen. You have to put some trust into him."

It was difficult to overlook Bacon's helplessness, especially when he still stood gawking at the monster stomping his way. Some were yelling at him to move, others screamed for him to fight. But when those gaping jaws bearing rows of sharp teeth went straight for him, it was too late. Wendy gasped, and closed her eyes, fearing the worst when she heard the monster's teeth snap together.

However, the moment of silence was soon broken when the crowd erupted with relieved cries and cheers. "Whoa! That was close!" said Romeo, his voice trembling with astonishment.

Soon after Wendy opened her eyes, she couldn't pry them away because Bacon was still alive and standing behind the raptordile that was searching left and right for its small prey while smacking its hungry mouth. "How'd he get there?" she asked, bewildered.

"He dove and rolled under its legs!" answered Romeo, a wide grin on his face. He started to yell and wave to gain Bacon's attention. "Draw your sword! Like this!" Grasping nothing but air over his right shoulder, Romeo tried to get the other boy to follow the action.

It took a few blinking moments before Bacon reached over his shoulder and felt the hilt of his sword. His blue eyes widened when he realized the weapon was no longer stuck in its scabbard. There was a quiet ring as the sharp metal slid out of the sheath and by the time the silver-blue sword was completely free, the giant reptile had spotted him in the corner of its big, red eye.

It grunted and twisted around, surprisingly quick for a beast of its size. Bacon ducked under the swinging tail and leapt to the side to dodge the snapping teeth.

Wendy held her breath when she saw the boy's hardened expression. His eyes steeled against the
monster wishing to devour him as he stood fearless and determined. It was the same face he wore when he fought against Erza; the face of a warrior ready for battle.

Romeo was yelling again. "Bacon! There! There!" He was pointing at the equipment lying on the floor.

The young swordsman quickly glanced in Romeo's pointed direction and grinned at what he saw. He eagerly ran for his weapons.

Although the raptordile was quick to turn, its gait was slow as it chased after the child in green. It was better suited to hunt in the water than on land. The beast flared its nostrils and snorted, obviously getting frustrated with its elusive meal.

Bacon carelessly dropped his sword as if it were a toy he was no longer interested in to pick up his bow and pull out an arrow from his quiver. He was happy with the bow in hand and he knew just what to do with it. With his arrow notched, he twirled around, drew a deep breath, and took aim at the oncoming monster. Moments before the beast was upon him, he loosed his arrow and the iron tip struck one of the lizard's large red eyes.

The raptordile roared as it reared back in pain, its cry deep and hoarse. It stumbled backwards and whipped its head side to side, its blinded eye weeping tears that were bright and red.

Seeing that he had hit his mark, Bacon celebrated by throwing his bow into the air where it bounced off the ceiling and soundly landed on the floor a short distance away.

"Why'd he do that?" Natsu questioned, raising a perplexed eyebrow.

Standing beside Natsu, Gray ran a hand down his face and groaned in disbelief. "Damn kid. He actually picked up on that?" he murmured.

Wendy was pointing and shouting along with Romeo to get Bacon to retrieve his forgotten sword when the giant lizard turned its good eye on the young boy, clearly angry. It breathed heavily through its nostrils as it pounded towards Bacon in a fury, leaving a small trail of blood in its wake.

The sword was back in Bacon's left hand and his shield in the other. The young warrior faced the giant beast, looking bolder than before. Sharp teeth missed him yet again when he back-flipped out of the way. The moment he landed, he immediately countered with a leaping downward slash. It was the same maneuver he had used once against Erza and it had caught the woman by surprise for only a split-second. His blade only grazed the side of the lizard's maw as it swerved its head away from the gleaming silver. The beast retaliated quickly by lowering its head and throwing its huge body forward for a powerful headbutt. The top of the lizard's skull collided with Bacon's shield with a loud clang and enough force to send the small boy flying far back.

With a yelp, Bacon roughly landed on his right shoulder and rolled to a stop. Wendy watched with great apprehension as the raptordile charged right after him. Quick and resilient, Bacon was back on his feet in a matter of seconds, standing low in a defensive posture. He waited for the great beast to draw nearer with his shield held protectively out front and his sword held back.

"Oh? This is new," Erza quietly mused at his stance.

Gasps and sounds of awe could be heard when everyone felt the surge of magical energy coming from Bacon. "He's using magic!" Romeo needlessly pointed out, looking just as excited as everyone else. Tingly was how Wendy could describe Bacon's magical essence when compared to the natural flow of her own and the others around her. It felt as if the air was charged with harmless electricity as
his power steadily grew.

Bacon's sword started to shine a brilliant blue as his magic gathered around his blade. The energy swirled and shimmered and soon turned a fiery red. Silence fell over the crowd as all eyes were on the young swordsman.

The raptordile snarled as it lunged for a killing bite and at the same time, Bacon vigorously yelled out as he unleashed his attack. He spun in a rapid circle, his magic flaring out from his outstretched weapon like a ring of flames. It looked like fire but it cut like a blade, slashing open the giant lizard's throat and down to its pale belly. The impact surprisingly knocked it back where it landed with a heavy thud on its side. The monster's moan was gurgled as it feebly writhed with blood spilling from its fatal wound and pooling on the metal floor beneath it. It wasn't long until its pitiful cries faded and it became still.

The crowd exploded with claps, cheers, compliments, and yells of shock and disbelief. The celebration was short for Wendy because she heard Bacon whimper over the noise. His sword, no longer enveloped in magic, slipped from his grasp and noisily clattered to the floor. The boy fell to his knees and clutched the sides of his head, his eyes clenched shut and his face distorted with pain. Erza wasted no time in opening the door but Wendy was first to rush in, worry gripping her mind and heart. When the girl reached him, he was already down on his front, unmoving and unconscious.
At the end of this chapter are some extra fun shorts that I and two other authors from FF.net had written. Please take the time to read them below!

Wendy could hear the continuous droplets of rain falling from the leaves of Porlyusica's tree as they pattered against glass windows and bark and the quiet groans of the swaying branches as the wind blew strongly above outside. The sounds were rather ambient and, combined with the dim lighting of the room, it made sleep desirable. The night was already turning very late and the rain that had started at nightfall had yet to let up.

Carla was already curled into a ball and fast asleep by Wendy's side on the only bed. Leaning against the hard wood wall, the girl took comfort stroking the soft white fur of her partner and friend, a gesture she often did when others weren't around or watching since Carla was a little self-conscious about being seen when petted like an ordinary cat. The Exceed was asleep and Porlyusica was the only other person awake in the room aside from Wendy, so the Dragon Slayer was certain her friend wouldn't mind (or notice) too much.

Although sleep was tempting, Wendy couldn't rest, not until she knew Bacon was alright. Frowning, her eyes fell on the unconscious boy lying in bed. He had not moved since he fainted, making Wendy deeply worry. Going against what Erza had told her, Wendy had healed all of his injuries in hope he would recover sooner shortly after Titania had left Porlyusica's home along with Master. It was Erza who carried Bacon all the way out here. As grateful as she was for Erza's help, Wendy was still upset with her.

After hearing the situation, Porlyusica assumed that Bacon may have fainted from a combination of dehydration, magic depletion, and stress, both mental and physical. "He knew how to use his magic on instinct. That had likely triggered a memory or perhaps his mind was trying to grasp how he knew but the strain was too much," the Medicinal Advisor had stated. With great skill, she had given the boy water, a small spoonful of his bitter red potion, and a smaller spoonful of his green one, which she had come to conclude replenished magic energy, without making him choke. There was nothing else that could be done but to allow him to rest.

Not long after that, Erza and Master had departed, leaving Bacon in Porlyusica's care while Wendy stayed behind, inevitably making Carla stay too. To pass the time, and not to be a burden, Wendy had offered to help around the house. While Carla watched over Bacon, Wendy had swept the floor with the same broom the old lady often used as a weapon, organized the lighter crates scattered around by stacking them and pushing them into a corner, watered the indoor garden and potted plants, sorted out the fresh herbs Porlyusica had gathered from the forest earlier in the day, and crushed and grounded the dry ones into a fine powder. Throughout the last three tasks, Wendy enjoyed learning a few things about the different medicinal properties of each unique plant. At first, she was hesitant to strike up a conversation with Porlyusica but, after asking a few curious questions, the tension between them was instantly gone. Talking with Porlyusica felt as natural as speaking with her own mother, Grandeeney.

Once everything was done, the three of them enjoyed a small meal consisting of forest fruits, nuts,
and crisp and soft edible leaves tossed into a salad. As they ate, they had discussed Wendy's training, the upcoming Grand Magic Games, and Bacon's progression. "You should not be angry at Erza," Porlyusica had told her when she mentioned how harsh Erza was treating the poor boy, "she only meant well. She did what others would not dare to do."

"But… He's…" Wendy had tried to argue.

"Would you have been willing to inflict bodily harm to make him feel physical pain? Or attempt to invoke fear into him through intimidation or threats? Would you have given him the chance to use his sword to fight? You wouldn't have known he is capable of handling a weapon in times of hostility and danger if you kept him out of harm's way. No, I am not saying that endangering him is the best method," the old woman had added after Wendy lowered her eyes in guilt, "but certain situations do require extreme measures – though, not as extreme as in Erza's standards – and the right people to do it. Wendy," Porlyusica gave the girl a small smile that vanquished the sternness from her wrinkled face, "you must remember that everyone is trying to help in their own way. Continue to show him your kindness and perhaps one day he will remember something from it."

Wendy had felt better after that. The grudge she held against Erza had diminished. "Do you really think that he could have remembered something?" she had asked, sounding hopeful.

"It is possible. We can only wait and see."

Hours had passed since then and Wendy was still waiting as she sat at the foot of the bed, gently petting her sleeping feline friend atop the head between her soft, pointed ears. Porlyusica was quietly working at her desk under the only Light Lacrima lamp turned on. The chamber was bathed in a pale yellow glow while on the other side of the windows it was pitch black. Water visibly trickled down the glass panes in rivulets.

Sighing wearily, she took a quick glance in Bacon's direction and noticed his peaceful expression had changed. His brow was furrowed as if he was deeply troubled by something. "Bacon? Are you okay?" she asked quietly as she leaned a little closer. However, the boy remained unconscious.

"He dreams," informed Porlyusica as she stood from her chair and strolled towards the bed. Her crimson eyes narrowed inquisitively as she lightly placed the back of her hand over the boy's forehead. "Dreams can be vague and meaningless, formed from fragments of the past and present. If we are fortunate, the dream he is facing might be more than just fragments of his memory turned into a nightmare. Has he dreamt before?"

"I… I don't know." Since Bacon never spoke or tried to verbally communicate, it was hard to tell if he had dreamed in his sleep over the past couple nights. The boy didn't act any different from his usual curious self every morning, so Wendy assumed that if he did, it was probably easily forgotten like most dreams. She wondered if it'll be the same this time once he woke up. The thought was rather disheartening.

The Dragon Slayer sighed, silently hoping for Bacon to remember at least some of the details. However, at the same time she did not want his nightmare to haunt him forever. I wish I could see so I can heal your pain and protect you from your fears. But then again, was there anything he feared?

She pursed her lips and wondered if Bacon would even understand what he saw and felt in his dreams.

Again, they could only wait and see.
He could hear people all around him; their claps, cheers, and shouts all sounded muffled as if they were all behind a door. When he took a quick look around, he saw dark ghostly figures standing by, their thin, wispy arms waving and pointing at something behind him.

He followed the hands and gaped at the giant creature towering before him. Its huge body was black and cloudy and its eyes were large, round and crimson. It made a deep rumbling noise as it slowly approached him on shrouded feet that metallically clanged against the shadowed floor.

In his hand, he held his sword that was bright and shining, turning from silver to blue to red. The tips of his fingers tingled from the warm sensation flowing through him as the energy surrounded his blade, imbuing it with power that felt both familiar and foreign. His body moved on its own, one foot stepped forward and he spun in a circle, screaming in a fury. The fiery energy burst outwards and struck the giant hidden in the black mist, knocking it flying back and spilling shimmering red water.

'Blood...' said a loud, sudden voice that silenced all the noise and gave him quite a start. The voice was one he did not recognize and it came from every direction, making him frantically scan the darkening area in search of the speaker. But he found no one. Not even the ghosts were around anymore.

He only saw the bright red water – the blood – that gushed and pooled on the floor before him as the clouded creature shrank and dissipated away. He blinked in confusion only to jump back in alarm when light emerged from the darkness like an opening door. Golden light stung his eyes and streamed through the widening gap, touching something lying in the growing red pool; something enormous, white, and bleeding.

All he caught was a glimpse of it because two shadows suddenly appeared before him, obstructing his view. Silhouetted against the light, they were both tall and human-like. However, they were unlike the people he knew from Fairy Tail. Their faces were hidden but their eyes were shining and angry, one pair glowing a bluish-white while the other a deep red. The air around them was neither friendly nor pleasant. They were...

'Evil...' warned the strange voice from earlier, more fervent than before.

He tensed, not liking the sound of the word spoken. It had no meaning to him and yet he could sense that it wasn't a nice one. Unnerved, he took a wary step back from the two shadows, his left hand tightening around the hilt of his weapon while his other grasped at empty air. There was something missing, something that should be there within his grip.

"Wretched little whelp," snarled the shadow with eyes that were pale and cold as ice. It was a man whose voice was deep and harsh and unkind and with a mouthful of white teeth that were viciously pointed and gleaming. "How dare you interfere! You will pay for what you've done!"

He was perplexed by the strange words spoken so angrily. Right after he blinked, he saw blood covering the speaker, splotched on the man's face and drenching the man's arms and hands where it dripped off each of his nails that were long, curved, sharp and glistening red. The man suddenly vanished from the boy's sight, only to reappear right in front of him within a second.

The next thing the boy knew, he was down on his hands and knees, sharp pain flaring from his chest and limbs. To his shock, he saw blood on his own skin, seeping from the stinging wounds that adorned his bare arms, and smeared on the ground beneath him. There was a rapid pounding in his ears; the sound of his heart beating against his chest. His breath was ragged, his body worn. He was badly hurting and exhausted and couldn't move to stand, feeling much worse than the time the one named Erza had repeatedly struck him down.
Darkened boots stained with droplets of crimson appeared in his vision. Breathless, he slowly raised his head and met the man's pale, wicked gaze looming over him. The last thing he saw was the man's mouth twitching into a malevolent sneer before everything turned black.

It was completely silent now. He saw nothing and felt nothing. The terrible pain and exhaustion was gone and the man with the mean eyes was nowhere to be seen. It was dark, darker than the night. It was completely black as if his eyes were tightly closed. But he never did close his eyes. He looked from side to side, down, then up... and stopped to stare at the glowing round thing hovering right over his head. It was a glowbug, but it looked a little different with its whole body shrouded in bright white light and flying on four wings instead of two.

The blood, pain and unease from before was soon a fleeting memory. He smiled and reached up an open hand, wanting the glowbug to land and crawl over his fingers with its many long, ticklish feet like the ones that fluttered around the light in the glass jar on the windowsill whenever he stuck his hand inside. To his disappointment, the glowbug flew away instead, speeding out into the darkness and leaving a glittering trail.

He chased after it, his feet stepping on solid ground he could not see. The flying orb of light was shrinking in size as it got farther and farther. Not wanting to lose it, he mustered everything he had to run faster. He suddenly tripped over something and landed face-first on the ground. The fall didn't hurt like the other times he tumbled over, making him blink in surprise. And when he opened his eyes, the world was no longer dark but bright and green.

A gasp escaped his mouth when he saw and felt the soft grass beneath him. He looked around, bewildered by the sudden appearance of trees and leafy things everywhere. Golden beams of sunlight shone through the narrow gaps in the branches, brightening the little blue, white, yellow, and purple flowers that flourished on the lush green floor. The silence was broken by quiet sounds; the soft rustling of the leaves stirred by the wind at the very top and the faint cries of birds and animals in the distance.

This place with the tall trees and greenery growing all around... what was it called again?

'A forest...' he heard someone answer. It was the same voice from before, but softer in tone. Once again he searched around and saw no one.

Confused, he slightly furrowed his brow and started to walk forward only to perk up when he spotted a flickering white ball of light dancing ahead of him. It was the glowbug and it was beckoning him to come after it. With a broad smile, he gave chase yet again.

Rounding thick trunks, leaping over raised roots, clambering over rocky slopes, breaking through shrubbery, splashing through shallow streams, (and occasionally stumbling painlessly to the ground), he gleefully followed the quick moving orb.

He was out of breath by the time he reached a wide and tall set of steps carved from pale gray stone that was cracked and crumbling with age and covered with light green moss in spots untouched by the sun. Bordering each side of the steps were gray-brown walls of smooth rock that reached as high as he could see. Waiting at the top of the steps was the glowbug, spiraling up and down in the air, seemingly impatient for his arrival.

Hopping up the steps two at a time, he climbed the stairs and let out an astonished gasp when he entered an open area surrounded by a thick growth of massive trees that grew so close together that their long arms entangled around one another like vines, forming a living wall that stretched far into the blue sky. At the far end, merged within the twisting brown branches, was a large structure made from the same gray stone as the steps and just as old and broken. Here the sun shone brightest,
casting warm rays over the tall grasses and vibrant flowers that grew under the light.

'A meadow… This place… is sacred…' said that voice again, making him pause and glance warily around. But there was no one nearby, only the trees, plants, rocks, and sky.

He frowned, not quite understanding what was actually spoken. It was soon forgotten when he heard a new sound that disrupted the quietness of the area. He recognized it immediately, and yet it didn't sound quite the same as he had remembered it. Not as painfully loud, shrill, or abrupt, the constant noise fluctuated in pitch and rhythm to meld into…

'A melody… It is a song…' said the voice, almost blending into the music.

It was unlike the funny, shrieking, warbled noises that came out of Wendy's blue ocarina whenever she or Romeo blew into it. But knowing the sound was coming from Wendy, he started to follow it. As he stirred the tall grass that grew up to his stomach, interesting things buzzed, fluttered, and floated into the air: bugs with shiny wings and shells, butterflies that ranged in all sorts of colours and patterns, and little, round, fluffy white things that scattered into many smaller pieces when touched.

Halfway through, his eyes widened when he found two glowbugs instead of one hovering over someone sitting atop a big stump near the broken stone building up ahead. Fascinated, he quickened his pace and slowed to a stop right before the person where the grass was shorter and sparse, seeing not Wendy but another girl.

Her hair was a bright green, the same shade as the leaves basking under the sunlight, as were her clothes, while the band within her hair, her long sleeves, and boots on her feet were a darker shade, matching the underbelly of the forest around them. Eyes closed, she slowly swayed from side to side as if dancing to the sound coming from the wooden object in her hands. It looked just like the ocarina Wendy had, but it was smaller and not blue. Fluttering in circles above the girl, the two glowbugs excitedly bobbed up and down, moving along with the music as well, their paths sparkling behind them.

In awe, he watched the glowbugs dance and the girl play, listening to the pleasant sound coming from her ocarina. He swayed on his feet, entranced by the jaunty tune. The music stopped the instant she pulled the wooden object away from her smiling lips.

Eyes as blue as the deep waters of a river opened and met his curious stare. Her smile widened; it was warm, kind, and friendly – like Wendy's. 'She is not Wendy…' whispered the voice.

Blinking, he tilted his head slightly as he studied the girl more closely. She giggled. Her laugh was as pleasant as her song, resounding around the meadow and bringing a sense of happiness within him. And her voice was just as sweet; "You're finally here. I've been waiting for you. Did you get lost again? The woods are aptly named after all." She chuckled, drawing a smile upon his face. The girl sounded and felt just the same as Wendy.

'But she is not Wendy…'

He held out his left hand, a custom he had learned to do when meeting new people, and the girl responded by placing her ocarina within his palm. He stared at the object as she folded his fingers around it with her own. Her touch was gentle, her skin soft and warm.

She pushed the ocarina to his chest and said, "Do you remember how to play my song?"

He gazed at her questionably, unable to make out most of her words.

The girl sighed, her face turning sad. "You forgot, didn't you? But that's okay. It's been so long, so I
don't blame you." Her smile soon returned and she stood up. She was the same height as him whereas Wendy was a little taller. She grabbed his other hand and lifted it to hold the ocarina before positioning his fingers over the holes. "Go on." The girl pushed the mouthpiece to his lips and nodded in assurance.

He puffed into it and produced a shrieking note that hurt his ears. He pulled the ocarina away in surprise while the girl laughed. Pouting, he held it out for her to take it back.

"Not like that, silly. Like this." She grabbed the ocarina and demonstrated, softly blowing into the musical item to make that pleasant sound again. She shifted her fingers over the holes, changing the tune to a higher pitch, then to another. Three different notes. She repeated them twice before making him try again. He refused but she grabbed his hand and placed the ocarina back in his grip.

His attempts didn't end with the same result as hers the first few times, but under her guidance and patience, his frustration was short-lived and he eventually got the hang of it. Three different notes turned to four, then to five. He lost count after the sixth since he couldn't remember what number came after that. All the various tones were starting to blend into the song the girl had played earlier, making him eager to keep on playing.

Both now sat upon the stump with the glowbugs hovering right above their heads. The two orbs of light would always dance to the tune of the ocarina, often distracting him from playing correctly. Whenever he got it wrong, the girl would laugh in amusement and encouraged him to try again.

He didn't know how long they stayed there. By the time the sky was turning dark and the sun was hidden behind the forest trees, he managed to flawlessly play the entire song in one go. And at the moment the last note ended, he was suddenly overwhelmed with a sense of familiarity. The green-haired girl smiling at him, she had taught her song to him before, in this same place – this sacred meadow. He knew her, but he didn't know how or why. And she had a name, but he couldn't remember that either.

Confused, he could only stare at her while his mind struggled to find the answer that he knew was there but unreachable. The girl who smiled and laughed, whose voice was sweet and kind, whose touch was gentle and warm, she was just like Wendy.

'But she is not Wendy…'

It had suddenly turned darker than night. The trees were no longer visible and neither the meadow nor the sky. Above, the glowbugs flickered once before vanishing away to nothing, not even a glittering trail left behind.

Only the girl sitting on the stump with him stayed in his view but she too was starting to fade into the growing shadows. Her smile was sad again, as were her eyes as she gazed upon him, her clasped hands held to her chest. "It's time for you to go. If you ever feel lost… or lonely… play my song so you can always hear my voice," she said, her voice growing fainter with each word spoken as if she was walking away. But she was still seated right in front of him.

He didn't understand what she said and he didn't want her to leave. He reached out to grab her hand, but his fingers grasped at empty air. She was gone within a blink of an eye. Shocked, he looked around for her and saw only darkness.

Disappointed, he looked down at the wooden ocarina in his hand and thought of the green-haired girl. He could hear her song just from thinking of her, bringing a broad smile on his lips. In his mind, he saw her kind face and her warm smile and he saw the forest that always surrounded her, lush and green and full of life. She was not Wendy, but she felt just as close, just as important. She was…
'A friend,' said the voice, sounding so faint and distant that he had to strain to hear.

Her name was… "Saria…” he whispered. And she was waiting…

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**Asuka and Bacon's Little Adventure**

by Tenrousha

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The sun was shining in the sky above Magnolia Town as the newly dubbed Bacon and Asuka played outside behind the Fairy Tail Guild Hall while Bisca, Wendy, and Carla looked on. "When are you planning to go to Porlyusica's?" Bisca asked as she watched her daughter run around with the young blonde close to the tree line.

"Later this afternoon," Wendy answered as she watched Bacon suddenly stop to crouch down and look at something on the ground, which Asuka identified as a flower. "Hopefully she'll be able to restore…" the Dragon Slayer trailed off for a few moments before she shook her head and sighed, "Bacon's memories."

Bisca smiled down at her. "It has to be better than Grasshopper," Bisca said, referring to the name Asuka had suggested. "Or how about Fairy boy?" she asked with a smirk and that got a giggle from Wendy.

"At least it's only until he gets his memories back," Wendy remarked and Carla folded her arms over her chest, which made the blue-haired girl look down curiously. "Is something wrong, Carla?" The white Exceed blinked at the question then looked up at Wendy.

"Did you say something?" Carla asked and that made Bisca look down at her curiously as well. Though Bisca didn't know her as well as Wendy or even Natsu, she couldn't recall ever seeing Carla distracted enough to not hear something her partner had said. The Exceed suddenly shook her head as if she just processed Wendy's question. "I was just thinking," she said and Wendy's look became questioning. Carla sighed then turned to face her as she uncrossed her arms. "We found this boy in an ancient temple no one had seen before and that we were unable to find again. He was covered in injuries, several of them life-threatening, carried an array of weaponry, including explosives, and a pouch that was full of many different colored and obviously valuable gems. His hands are calloused so he was used to fighting before he lost his memory, his magic has a different feel from anyone else I've met, and he's obviously physically strong." Bisca and Wendy looked at her uncertainly for several seconds when she was done, not sure what she was trying to say. "Wendy, how sure are you that this boy getting his memories back would be a good thing?" she asked and Wendy's eyes widened in shock.

The Dragon Slayer's eyes quickly narrowed with indignant anger as she put her hands on her hips. "Carla! How could you say something like that?" she demanded as she glared at the Exceed, but Carla met Wendy's anger unrepentantly for several seconds before she crossed her arms.

"How do you know he's actually good?" Wendy blinked at the question and Carla pointed her left paw at her. "For all we know he could be evil and returning his memories could-"

"Enough, Carla!" Wendy snapped angrily as she crossed her arms over her chest. "How could you possibly think he's evil?" she asked before she pointed over to where Asuka and Bacon had been looking at a flower. "Just look at him," she said angrily and Carla's eyes glanced over for a moment then returned to Wendy.
"That's only because-" Carla started to say before she froze as her stern expression disappeared. The Exceed quickly turned back to look at the children and her eyes went wide with shock, prompting Wendy and Bisca to look over as well. Both of their eyes widened in shock as well which soon turned into panic when they saw that Bacon and Asuka had disappeared.

Bacon and Asuka both laughed with delight as they chased a purple butterfly through the forest. "Don't weave, Mr. Butterfly!" Asuka called out cheerfully as they followed it into a clearing. Bacon suddenly jumped ahead with a burst of speed as he tried to grab the butterfly before he tripped over his feet and fell to the ground.

Asuka stopped when she reached Bacon and started to crouch next to him in order to see if he was hurt. She stopped, however, when she saw the young boy already getting up to look around for the butterfly that had evaded him. "Bacon, your leg," Asuka said and he immediately turned to look at her. When he didn't react to anything she had said beyond his name, Asuka pointed at his knee and he looked down then frowned momentarily at the scrape there before he started to look for the butterfly again. "Hmmm... maybe it went this way!" she suggested when it seemed Bacon wasn't bothered by the scrape and started to pull him in a random direction with a big smile on her face.

The two of them continued to look for thirty minutes before Asuka abruptly sat down and hugged her knees to her chest. "We're lost," she cried as tears started to well in her eyes. "Mama's gonna be mad at me, too," she added while Bacon looked down at her with his head tilted, not sure what she was saying or what her tears indicated. However, he got the feeling she was upset about something so he sat down next to her and put a hand on top of her hat. When she looked over at him, he gave her a bright smile that made her blink before she smiled back in response. "Right, Mama will be working for us, so no need to cry," she said and then stood up with Bacon following suit.

They both walked for ten minutes. Bacon's ears twitched as if he heard something right before a hissing sound made them both stop and look to the left. A two foot long, brightly colored snake raised the front part of its body with another hiss and the two children looked at it with wide eyes before Asuka smiled brightly. "Pwetty," she said as Bacon walked up to it with astonishment. The snake gave another hiss at his approach before it launched at him, mouth open to pierce his right arm with its fangs.

Bacon's left arm moved in a blur as he snatched the snake out of the air and held it up just behind its head. "Can I touch it?" Asuka asked as she walked up next to him but Bacon was already bringing his other hand up to stroke the thrashing serpent. He made a small grunt of pain when his arm was hit by the thrashing tail and quickly tossed it away. "You okay?" Asuka asked as she looked at the welt but Bacon was already looking around again for something else to do. His eyes went wide and he grabbed Asuka's hand then pointed to her right. "Mr. Butterfly!" she squealed happily as she caught sight of the purple butterfly and the two of them were off again.

They followed the butterfly into another clearing full of purple and orange flowers and surged forward before coming to a stop as all the flowers suddenly fluttered into the air. "More butterflies!" Asuka cheered as she thrust her hands into the air and Bacon mimicked the action with his own smile.

Bacon jumped around and awkwardly tried to catch every butterfly he could see but each one managed to narrowly evade his grasp. In contrast, Asuka seemed content to stand in the middle of it all and giggle happily as she marveled at the display. This continued on for several minutes until all the butterflies disappeared into the forest, leaving the two children alone in the clearing.

The blonde looked as if he was going to chase after them for a few seconds but ended up walking back to Asuka. Right as he got to her, a loud crash made them both turn in surprise to see a large,
ape-like Gorian, also known as a Forest Vulcan. Over ten feet tall and heavily muscled, this monster was covered with green fur except for its purple pectorals, abdominals, hands, ears, and face. On its arms were five pink hearts and its white eyes glowed malevolently as it looked at them for a few seconds. "Hoo, hoo!" it suddenly called out as it walked towards the children with an evil smile on its pointed face. "Lookey here, I found some snacks, hoo, hoo!" it said happily as it started to drool.

Asuka cringed behind Bacon as the Gorian got closer, but Bacon seemed fascinated by the green monster; his blue eyes sparkling as he looked on without a hint of fear. His reaction actually caused the Gorian to pause and regard him with a confused expression. "You no scared?" it asked but got no response in return, just the same curious look as Bacon continued to study it. "ROOOOOAARRRGHHH!" it suddenly roared as it beat its chest with its massive fists and Asuka closed her eyes with fright as she pressed her face against Bacon's back. The boy flinched and covered his sensitive ears against the sudden sound.

The Gorian stopped its display after several seconds and looked back down at Bacon with its evil grin back. The grin quickly disappeared and was replaced with shock when it saw Bacon actually beating his chest in imitation with a broad smile on his face. "You mocking me?" the Gorian demanded as its eyes flared angrily. "You die!" it roared as it launched at them and Asuka screamed in terror.

At the sound of Asuka's fear, something in Bacon's gaze hardened as his ears flicked straight back. A sudden, strong presence made the Gorian hesitate as it saw the change come over its intended meal and it came to a stop a few feet from the boy. Almost immediately Bacon's eyes regained the same curiosity, which left the Gorian in a state of confusion that quickly turned to anger. The monster brought both fists up to smash the two of them when a sudden blast of blue fire hit it from the side, knocking it the ground.

"Bacon and Asuka are over here!" Romeo yelled as he charged in from the forest and Asuka's eyes snapped open as she looked over. "Are you two okay?" the fire mage asked as he got between them and the dazed but quickly recovering Gorian and got a nod from Asuka while Bacon simply smiled. "Cold!" the Gorian shouted unhappily as it glared at the Fire Mage. "Me hate cold!" it snapped as it ground its teeth angrily and Romeo dropped to a ready crouch as he created two purple fireballs.

"Lock on." Asuka's eyes sparkled with joy at the new voice as she turned to see Bisca standing with a dark brown, pump-action rifle decorated with ornate and intricate motifs over its stock chamber. "You have two seconds to get away from my daughter," she said coolly as she looked down the rifle's sights. The Gorian hesitated at this new foe. "Time's up!" Bisca declared then pumped a round into the chamber. "Homing Shot!" she cried and a red streak shot out at the Gorian and hit it in the chest. "Burst Shot!" she called a second later and the round detonated. She pumped another round but refrained from firing as she watched the Gorian slam into the ground after being sent flying from the explosion. "You have two seconds to get away from my daughter," she repeated and this time the Gorian didn't hesitate to take off with a few flames still burning the ends of its fur.

"Mama!" Asuka called out as she ran to Bisca, who immediately Ex-Equipped the rifle and crouched down to pick her up in a hug.

"Don't you ever do that again," Bisca scolded as her body shook and Asuka quickly nodded her head as Wendy, Carla, Natsu, Happy, and Lucy came charging into the clearing.

Wendy gave a large sigh of relief when she saw Asuka unharmed with Bacon walking up with Romeo. "Bacon, are you okay?" Wendy asked as she moved out to meet them halfway then stopped when she saw the scrape on his knee and welt on his arm. The boy just looked at her with his usual smile then pointed back into the clearing and thrust his hands into the air happily. Wendy sighed as
she quickly started to heal his wounds while Natsu chuckled.

"Looks like he had fun," Natsu said then took a step back as Wendy turned enough to glare at him.

"Come on, let's just go and see Porlyusica," Lucy said as she stepped forward to put a hand on Bacon's head, who turned to look up at her inquisitively. "With any luck we can finally find out what happened to him," she said and Wendy hesitated for a few moments before she nodded her head and stood up.

"Don't leave my sight, okay... Bacon?" Wendy hesitated at Natsu's name for him but he immediately looked at her. "There are more dangerous creatures out here, so you have to be careful," she said and Bacon blinked at the concern in her voice. "You still don't understand a word..." She looked down with a helpless sigh before she paused as Bacon put a hand on her shoulder. When she looked up, she saw him smiling bright at her and found herself smiling as well in response. "But I guess I'll take it as a yes," she said and hoped it to be true.

"I think Asuka's had enough excitement for today, so we'll head back to the Guild," Bisca said as she turned around. "Good luck."

Asuka slightly leaned out of her mother's arms. "Bye bye!" the little girl called out and everyone grinned as they waved back, with the exception of Carla.

"Come on, everyone, let's go," Wendy said as she took Bacon's hand and everyone fell in behind her as they headed out to a possible cure for Bacon's amnesia.

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_Tenrousha_ - Well, this was fun to do and I'm glad Icy Cake gave me the chance to do this. Hope everyone enjoyed the short.

Till next time.

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_Dancing with Bacon_

by Quathis

Vijeeter Ecor, dancing mage of Fairy Tail, loved dancing with children. They were so free with their movements and passion that he easily got even more caught up in his favorite activity. Now he was gleefully teaching the new kid Bacon as many dance moves that the little one could take.

What puzzled Vijeeter was the pattern that was emerging in Bacon's movements. With more moves learned, the more often the pattern showed back up. Vijeeter, intrigued by this, tried to guide the dance Bacon was showing, but found that Bacon didn't alter it.

When it was finally compiled by Bacon, the dance held a deeper fascination for Vijeeter. Ghostly music seemed to play as he watched the boy repeat the same moves over and over. A wide stance, hands cupped in front of him swaying with the rest of his body was followed with a slow spin. A curious move finished it all off: right hand cupping the face, left wrist on waist, and a sinuous movement of the hips moving the body to the right and left.

There was a magic in it, but like most things about Bacon, it had an ethereal quality to it. Desire to understand this dance burned in Vijeeter as he watched the dance again.

And so Fairy Tail watched as their resident dancer copied the movements of a lost boy with no memory.
The moment Loke stepped through his gate leading out of the Celestial Spirit World and into Earthland, he was greeted by the usual sounds of his guild: chattering, laughing, bickering, the clink of beer glasses, the splash of spilled drinks, the screech of chairs being pushed back, and the childish insults being exchanged by two childhood rivals. It was loud and rowdy in the building and growing louder and rowdier with each passing moment, and Loke couldn't help but grin and feel right at home.

He really missed the nightly festivities when Lucy and most of the guild vanished on Tenrou Island. For nearly a month, he and Lucy's spirits had waited in the Celestial Spirit World for everyone's return. And now that most of the guild was back from their training and out-of-town missions, he didn't want to miss another crazy party.

Loke slightly adjusted the front of his suit as he casually approached his master. Lucy was seated at the table closest to the bar along with Erza, Romeo, Wendy, Carla, and the amnesiac kid Natsu had unfortunately named Bacon who Loke had yet to properly meet face-to-face. The girls were talking while the boys were playing with a bunch of ice cubes, carefully stacking them on top of one another to construct a tall frozen, melting tower.

"Ah, my sweet, beautiful Master Lucy," Loke purred as he came up behind the spirit mage, leaned over, and draped an arm around her shoulders. "You're as gorgeous as ever." He playfully raised his brow and brushed his cheek against hers.

Lucy shoved a hand into his face, firmly pushed him away, shot him a sullen look and then demanded, "Loke! What are you doing out here?"

Loke straightened, pushed his azure-tinted shades back up the bridge of his nose and grinned, flashing his perfect white teeth at his favourite Celestial Spirit mage. "Why to be with you, of course. And to join in on the fun. We've been out training and doing missions for the past two months that I hardly get to see everyone together."

"Not everyone is back," Wendy spoke up, drawing the lion's attention.

As he turned his head to the young Dragon Slayer, he met a pair of curious blue eyes staring at him right across the table. "Yeah, I've noticed Laxus and his gang aren't back yet and Gildarts is still out and about," he coolly replied before stepping over to Wendy's left side to stand between her and Bacon. He offered a friendly smile and a little wave of his hand. "Hey there, kid. Glad to see you're feeling better… to a point," he mumbled the last part under his breath after noticing the boy's dirty clothes and battered appearance. Aside from the bandages and injuries, the boy looked livelier than the last time the lion had seen him back at the missing temple. Loke took a quick sideways glance in Erza's direction, suspecting she was the main cause for his recent beating. The warrioress was calmly eating her (possibly second or even third) slice of strawberry shortcake that he was certain the kids had already devoured within an instant, having noticed the empty dessert plates sitting on the table. Loke's eyes flickered back to the boy gazing at him and introduced himself; "The name's Loke."

While gesturing, Wendy slowly repeated the spirit's human name for the child. Bacon blinked once, tilted his head slightly and reached out his left hand.
With only a shrug, Loke grabbed the kid's hand that was wet and cold from the ice and shook it like a gentleman. That brought a wide smile on the boy's face. "Sad that you don't remember anything," Loke began, frowning slightly. But then he perked up with a clever thought. "That means you forgot all the basics." He stooped over the boy, propped an arm on his shoulder and winked. "There's no way you can survive in this world if you don't know how to pick up pretty girls. You have to learn to treat the ladies right."

Someone soundly cleared her throat. The spirit looked over and saw Erza's angry, disapproving scowl.

Loke flinched and stood as straight as a pole before nervously stammering, "Wh-What? Wh-Why are you so mad about that?"

The question further angered Titania for some reason. She slammed an armoured fist on the table, making her cake and Carla jump, the forks and empty plates noisily clatter, and the grand ice cube tower to topple over. Carla had to scramble away and hop onto the lap of her partner to avoid the scattering ice. Romeo pouted at the destruction of his well-built ice structure while Bacon stared at the shimmering mess in awe.

"I am not mad. It's only sunburn," Erza grumbled, gesturing at her face.

"Oh… That's why you're so uh, red…" Red as your hair, he wanted to add but quickly thought otherwise lest he risk getting punched through the wall by a solid steel fist and suffer more than a bloody nose.

Another fist pounded on the table, lesser in power but just as effective in making the dishes and ice jitter. Bacon, having copied Erza, was greatly amused by the result and repeatedly pounded his clenched hands against the tabletop until Wendy got him to stop.

Erza snorted in irritation at Loke's previous remark and resumed to eat her cake. "Never mind that. Bacon does not need to learn how to woo girls. There are far more important skills. Survivability for one."

The lion feigned horror. "But charming ladies is a survival skill! For all men! You wouldn't understand!"

"All men?" Erza raised a skeptical eyebrow before shifting her gaze over to the next table behind Loke.

Loke peered over his shoulder and couldn't suppress the groan at the sight waiting behind him. Natsu and Gray - who was now down to wearing only his boxers - were still in the midst of a heated quarrel that involved immature name-calling, death threats and thrown fists powered by frost or fire. When it came to seducing women, Natsu was a lost cause and Gray was hardly any better. However, the Ice Make mage did have a certain admirer who was strangely fond of him and his stripping habit so he wasn't completely out of the dating game just yet. Juvia was standing alongside Cana and Elfman among the crowd, ogling Gray with love clearly reflecting in her dark blue eyes.

"Okay, well, not every guy has the charm," Loke admitted with a hopeless sigh, "but the kid's still young. He can learn all the right moves. Same goes for you, Romeo. Aren't you at the age where you'd rather marvel at girls than toys?"

Romeo flushed and absentmindedly tugged on the frays of his yellow scarf as he nervously looked aside. "Err, Dad says girls are complicated and that I shouldn't, um… think about them until I'm eighteen…" he shyly murmured.
'Sage' advice from the single father. The lion burst out laughing. "You're never too young to find love."

"But sometimes young love is reckless love," said Lucy, propping her chin upon her knuckles as she leaned over the table. She stared off in the distance as if fantasizing a romantic scenario. "You have to find the right love for it to be true."

Loke was immediately by his master's side, grasping her free hand and kneeling by her seat as if proposing marriage. "I love you, Lucy! We can make our love true!" He would have included some flashy sparklers and confetti to add a special effect on his confession but he left them back in the spirit world.

Lucy smirked and rolled her brown eyes before playfully shoving him away again.

"I don't think Bacon needs to learn about love and relationships… yet," said Wendy hesitantly.

Pouting slightly, the lion went back to stand between Bacon and Wendy. "Fine. Fine. You're right. I suppose he's a little too young for that. But he does need to learn how to properly treat a lovely girl like you, Little Miss Wendy. Bacon," the boy raised his head at the sound of his name while clutching onto half a piece of ice he was about to use for his new sloppy tower, "let me show you how to be nice to Wendy." Loke smoothly draped an arm around the small girl's shoulders and lightly kissed her on the cheek, eliciting a startled gasp from Wendy that was soon followed by the noticeable reddening of her face. She hastily bowed her head to hide her embarrassment behind Carla sitting on her lap. The Exceed smiled in amusement.

Loke grinned and lightly nudged Bacon as he leaned against the kid. "See? Like that," he whispered.

Bacon mirrored the lion's smile and unexpectedly wrapped one arm around the spirit's neck and copied the same action Loke had performed on Wendy; he lightly pecked Loke on the cheek.

"Isn't that cute?" Lucy remarked, giggling. Even Erza and Carla chuckled. Not before long, Romeo and Wendy joined in the laughter that was quiet compared to the battle cries coming from Natsu and Gray as they started an all-out fight.

Loke only gave the innocently smiling Bacon a sullen glare before humorously smirking. "Ah ha… Not me, little guy. Wendy. Wen-dy." He pointed at the Sky Dragon Slayer who started to frantically shake her head and wave her hands in protest. "Show Wendy your affection."

The boy looked between the smirking lion and blushing girl and knitted his brow, not quite understanding the gestures.

"You'll get it eventually," said Loke, patting the kid sympathetically on the back.

It was later in the evening, when all hell broke loose in the guild in the form of a drunken Erza, did Loke witness his lesson unfold. Somehow the lion had ended up lying on the floor with an unconscious Elfman and an out cold Gray piled on top of him. As he was trying to drag himself free, he spotted the kids hiding under the table. Just as Wendy was soothing the new bump on Bacon's head, the boy leaned close to her and kissed her lightly on the cheek, bringing a satisfied smirk on the spirit's face.

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**Sweet Affection**

by Icy Cake
The kitchen was fragrant with the sweet smell of baked goods, quickly replacing the aroma of coffee and breakfast. Mirajane was absolutely delighted when her cream-filled pastries turned out perfectly out of the oven. She set the hot tray on the counter alongside the batch of chocolate-chip cookies, custard pudding, and the double-layered red velvet cake that still needed to be frosted.

"Oh! I smell cookies!" announced Elfman the moment he pushed open the kitchen door. He quickly made his way to the counter and plucked two of the warm chocolaty treats off the cooling rack and stuffed them in his mouth. When he reached for another one, Mirajane smacked his greedy, muscular hand away with a wooden spoon.

"Uh-uh. Save some for the kids," she told her younger brother.

Rubbing his hand, Elfman pouted and grumbled to the side. "Aww, it's always for the kids."

Lisanna chuckled by the stove as she stirred around the melting ingredients needed for their next dessert; caramel fudge brownies. "You know how much she loves to spoil them, Brother."

Mirajane's grin was wide, unable to deny the truth. She absolutely adored the youngest members of their guild. So many valuable years had been lost since the incident at Tenrou Island. She didn't get to see Romeo grow up from a cute little boy to a handsome young adolescent and she completely missed Alzack's and Bisca's wedding and the birth of baby Asuka. Looking at pictures and listening to stories just wasn't the same as actually seeing the children grow right before Mirajane's eyes.

So to make up for all that lost time in birthdays, holidays and special occasions, Mirajane wanted to shower the children with all her love and affection in the form of sweets. And with the addition of young Bacon to their family, she more than doubled her effort.

Once all of the day's desserts were finished and set aside, she untied her white apron covered in flour and soiled by icing and left the kitchen with a large platter full of different tasty goods. The moment she stepped out of the door, she was greeted by little Asuka, hopping up and down excitedly around her. "Auntie Mira! Auntie Mira! Uncle Elfie says you have cookies! Can I have one please? Can I?"

the small girl begged, her wide violet eyes desperately pleading.

Mirajane smiled and placed the platter on the counter behind the bar. "Of course, sweetheart!" She gave the girl two.

Seeing she got more than she asked, Asuka's smile was as bright as the sun as she politely thanked Mirajane and eagerly ran back to her mother sitting on one of the stools at the bar.

Bisca sighed and slightly shook her head at Mirajane. "Mira, it's way too early for Asuka to have any sweets," she said, crossing her arms over the counter in a stern, motherly manner.

Mirajane placed a slice of chocolate fudge cake on a plate with a fork and slid it in front of the sharpshooter with a knowing smile. "It's never too early."

Bisca grunted but didn't refuse the dessert laid before her. She took a bite and was unable to hide the pleasure on her face. She quickly regained her composure. "How many cakes did you make this time? Three?"

Mirajane chuckled in amusement. "Nonsense! I made six. And three pies. And a dozen cookies. And pastries. And pudding. And brownies, of course." And they were all made within two hours.

Before the dumbfounded sharpshooter could make a reply to that, the doors of the guild creaked open and everyone present took a gander to see who it was. To their surprise, it was Erza along with Romeo, Carla, a shivering, wet Wendy, and an equally drenched Bacon.
"Oh my, did you two fall into the river on your way here?" Mirajane was first to ask as the group made their way to their usual table closest to the bar, wet boots squelching with each step. Asuka cheerfully welcomed them all, her smile covered in crumbs and chocolate.

"More like thrown into the canal," was Romeo's mumbled reply, taking careful glances in Titania's direction, hoping not to sound so offending.

Erza disregarded the boy's comment and plopped onto a stool next to Bisca. She was smirking while Mirajane raised a curious eyebrow. "It was only a simple test," Erza began, eyeing the cake on Bisca's plate briefly before continuing, "It turns out Bacon can swim."

Mirajane didn't doubt Romeo's words, knowing that when it came to Erza's method of doing things, it was always on the risky side. Nevertheless, Mirajane easily overlooked the fact that the situation could have turned badly and went on to congratulate Bacon. She patted the boy over his damp, green-hatted head and gave him a cookie and a flaky cream pastry as a reward, bringing a wide smile on his face.

"Mira, don't give him too many sweet things!" said Wendy, hands on her hips. "He might get sick if he eats too much of it. Plus, you're going to ruin his appetite! It's almost time for lunch."

"Oh, don't worry, Wendy. It's just a little something," the Take-Over mage replied, setting a few other desserts for the Dragon Slayer and Romeo on the table. "Maybe he'll remember something from eating some of them!" She had used the same excuse before and it was still convincing enough for Wendy to believe her.

As the young girl studied the delicious goods sitting in front of her, she childishly pouted to the side, visibly trying to resist the temptation, and grumbled, "Well, okay… But no more after this!"

By lunchtime, everyone not out training was at the guild enjoying their meals and each other's company. An interesting conversation started up when Erza mentioned her ideas of frightening poor Bacon which, of course, brought a lot of protest from Wendy and a few others.

While everyone was distracted by the discussion, the two youngest children were running about, taking turns scribbling glowing green lines and drawing crude but cute pictures that floated in midair with the Light Pen Levi had given Bacon for his first lesson learning about the alphabet and numbers during the morning. (Suffice it to say, he was more interested in doodling random things rather than learning.) Under the tables, all over the bar, and in between the legs of chairs and standing people, the magic pen had temporarily left its mark seemingly almost everywhere in the main hall.

Seeing that no one was paying too much attention to the two kids brightening the corner by the kitchen door, Mirajane sneaked over and whispered as she passed them by with a beckoning finger, "Psst! Asuka! Bacon! Quietly come with me!"

Intrigued, the little girl covered her mouth to stifle her giggles as she sprinted over to the older woman. Bacon followed right after and since he had forgotten to put the cap back on his magic pen, he left a wavy trail of green light behind him. Mirajane led them into the kitchen where Lisanna and Kinana were busy washing the dirty dishes piled in the sink. Lisanna rolled her eyes, knowing what Mirajane was up to.

Mirajane handed the children a small piece of brownie and quietly said, "Don't tell your mommies, okay?"

"I promise!" said Asuka with a happy smile as she nodded vigorously. Bacon followed her action. Asuka then looked confused. "Who is Bacon's mommy?"
"Wendy, of course," Mirajane answered with a short laugh.

Suddenly, the kitchen door swung open and Erza strolled right in. "There you are, Bacon," was her greeting. The sneer adorning her lips matched the sinister gleam in her eyes. "It's time for test number two."

The boy didn't even get to take one bite of his treat before Erza grabbed him by the back of his belt, making him drop it on the floor. The look of extreme disappointment on his face was the last thing Mirajane saw before Erza was out the door and out of the building.

'Test number two' apparently involved dropping Bacon from the sky, much to (almost) everyone's horror. Fortunately, nothing seriously bad happened.

After the entire ordeal, a frazzled Wendy, an exhausted Carla, and an excited Bacon were back inside and seated at their table. Mirajane came by with slices of lemon cake to calm the Dragon Slayer's nerves and to yet again congratulate Bacon. "Aren't you a brave little boy?" she praised, fixing his wind-swept hair with a comb while he ate. She had taken his green cap off and set it aside. "If you're not afraid of a little fall, you're not afraid of anything. Am I right?"

"That was not a little fall," Carla muttered, lying face-first on the table. Happy was by her side, softly patting her back. She involuntarily shuddered. "I fear what Erza might do next."

"She promised she wouldn't put Bacon in anymore danger," said Wendy, although she sounded doubtful. Brushing a hand through her messy bangs, she sighed and started to eat her cake. Her eyes widened when she suddenly realized something. "Wait, Mirajane! I said no more sweet things today!"

Mirajane teasingly grinned. "Why not treat this as a celebration for Bacon? He deserves it for showing such courage!"

"But--"

"And you deserve it too for bravely jumping to his rescue."

"That's because…"

"Hey, Wendy," Natsu began as he joined her table, "if you don't want your cake, can I have it?"

The girl hesitated as she stared at the partially eaten dessert, struggling with the tough decision. "Um…"

"I'll get you a piece, Natsu," offered Mirajane, saving the Sky Dragon Slayer from the painful choice. Wendy was too kind to say 'no'. After putting away her comb, the Take-Over mage returned Bacon's green hat upon his head and gave him a little pat on top. The boy glanced up at her and she gave him a warm smile as she made her way to the kitchen. She had to remember to bring out the ice cream too.

She overheard Natsu ask, "By the way, have you guys seen Erza?"

"No," Carla replied, "but as long as she stays far away from Bacon, no more harm will come to him."

However, little did she know, she was far from being right.
It was before dawn when Bacon started to stir awake, bringing a relieved smile on Wendy's tired face. She rubbed her eyes and suppressed a yawn, having not slept a wink over the night. Not wanting to disturb Carla who slept beside her at the foot of the bed, Wendy carefully shifted around so she was right at Bacon's side.

He seemed confused at first as his blue eyes wandered the ceiling of Porlyusica's home under the dim light of the room, but when he finally noticed Wendy he immediately smiled and sat right up before the girl could stop him. He kicked the blankets off, accidentally covering Carla and waking her up, and moved to sit beside the Dragon Slayer, his bare feet dangling over the edge. Carla crawled out from under the covers yawning and then stretched out like an ordinary cat before giving her partner a grumpy scowl.

Wendy returned her companion's displeasure with a small apologetic smile before facing the boy. "You're feeling better now? Does your head still hurt?" she whispered, lighting touching the top of his messy blond hair. His green hat was hanging on one of the bedposts and his boots sat neatly on the floor nearby.

Bacon reached up to touch the same spot on his head and gave her a questioning look.

Wendy didn't really expect an answer from him. She smiled nonetheless, feeling more than relieved now that the boy was obviously alright. "I'm glad you're okay. You had me worried all night. Do you remember what happened, Bacon? You fought against a mean raptordile and you defeated it! Magic. Ma-gic." As she slowly pronounced the word, she made her right hand shine with a cool blue light, calling forth her healing power to demonstrate what she was talking about. A very gentle breeze surrounded her as she held her magic steady, lightly stirring their hair.

All around, everything was aglow with an icy blue, even the boy's wide eyes. Bacon had seen her magic many times and yet he was still fascinated by it. He reached out and grasped her hand only to frown in disappointment when the Dragon Slayer dismissed her spell.

She quietly laughed at his expression. "And you dreamed…" Wendy continued, giving his hand a little squeeze. The skin of his palm was rough and calloused most likely from the constant use of his sword and bow. There was no longer any doubt that Bacon was a skilled fighter, both strong and brave. If the small boy could defeat a great beast as ferocious as a raptordile on his own, what other vicious monsters or enemies could he have fought before? Her grip tightened at the thought, making her recall the terrible state she had found him in back at the ancient temple. "Do you remember what you saw in your dreams? Did you see a piece of your past? Do you remember who hurt you and left you to die?"

The boy did not answer. He only blinked at her a few times before turning his attention elsewhere. He stared at the nearest dark window, attracted to the sound of heavy droplets of water pelting the glass. The rain from yesterday evening was still falling and it didn't sound like it would stop anytime soon.

Wendy furrowed her brow, saddened that Bacon didn't fully understand every word she said. Gently slipping her hand free, she rubbed her weary face.

"Wendy, did you sleep at all?" Carla asked her, padding to the girl's side.
"Um, a little," the Dragon Slayer lied, looking bashfully away.

Sighing, the Exceed didn't believe her. Carla hopped onto the floor, landed softly on her padded feet, and stood before the two, arms crossed. Her sharp eyes studied Bacon briefly before meeting Wendy's. "He's fine now. Why don't you get some sleep before morning arrives?"

The thought of closing her eyes for a little nap was very tempting, but Wendy didn't want to just yet. "I'm not that tired," she said with a false smile.

Before Carla could reply to that, Porlyusica spoke from her desk across the room; "He's finally awake now, is he?" With her only bed occupied, she had to resort to sleeping at her work desk and it wasn't the most comfortable place for an elderly woman to rest. The advisor's wrinkled face was noticeably grouchy under the faint glow of the Lacrima lamp hanging above her head and nearly every joint in her body soundly cracked as she stood up and stretched her stiff and sore limbs. Massaging a crick in her neck, she snapped her fingers to turn on all the lights in her home, momentarily stunning everyone from the sudden brightness, and slowly made her way towards the three sitting on her bed. She stopped before the boy and closely looked him over.

Bacon pouted and shrank away from the older woman's touch as Porlyusica tried to feel his forehead. "His fatigue is gone and he's fully alert, it seems," she murmured, nodding in satisfaction. Beneath her red, flowing cloak, she produced a familiar glass bottle full of red liquid from a pocket within her robe. She smirked when the boy instantly recognized it and made a sour face. "His current memories are still intact. That, at least, is a good sign. Have you observed any new behaviour?" she questioned Wendy.

The girl shook her head and shrugged. "He doesn't seem any different. However it's still too early to say... He only just woke up."

Porlyusica tucked away the red potion and glanced out her windows, seeing nothing but darkness and rain-streaked panes. "Morning has yet to arrive. We can keep a close eye on him until you head back to town." She started for the door. "I suppose I'll get breakfast ready," she grumbled before slipping outside.

The sound and smell of rain coming through the open door highly intrigued Bacon. He hopped off the bed and was about to run out but Wendy quickly grabbed his arm and ordered him to stay on the bed. "It's cold and wet out there," she told him, trying to sound stern. She wasn't sure if he understood her completely, nonetheless he didn't try to get up after that.

Not before long, a slightly damp Porlyusica returned with a wooden basin full of fresh water. She filled a kettle and set it atop a lit burner on her desk while Wendy and the others took a drink of water and freshened up. To warm up the room, the advisor activated the Heat Lacrima that hung in the centre of the room like a tiny chandelier. The crystal was shaped into a flame and its inner core burned as red as hot coals.

Breakfast consisted of sliced bread full of nuts and grains and smeared with a sweet, delectable berry jam alongside an assortment of dried and fresh fruits. Porlyusica's herbal tea was fragrant with mint and cloves but bitter to the taste and needed to be sweetened with spoonfuls of honey before Bacon could drink it.

Right after Wendy finished her mug of tea, she suddenly felt extremely tired. She didn't realize she fell asleep until she found herself waking up in Porlyusica's bed to the sound of the old woman's voice; "... slowly, like this. Yes, that's the way – no! Don't dump it all like that, boy!" A large amount of water noisily spilled on the floor followed by splashing and giggling. "Stop stomping in that puddle!"
There was sniggering coming from Carla.

"You be quiet, cat, or else I'll have you mop up this mess," the elder warned in a disgruntled tone.

"Apologies," the feline murmured. "Perhaps you should teach the child how to do that too once he stops making a bigger mess out of it."


The splashing stopped and the boy quietly groaned.

At that point, Wendy slowly sat up and rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. She peered around the room and saw daylight coming through the many windows, indicating that she had slept for a few hours at most. Gathered around Porlyusica's indoor garden were the old woman and Bacon with a pool of water around their boots. Carla was safely standing on a crate right behind them, looking rather amused.

In the boy's hand was a big aluminum watering can that Wendy assumed was where all the water came from. "What's going on? How'd I fall asleep?" Wendy asked, yawning.

Porlyusica snorted as she grabbed a handful of gray towels from a crate. "What does it look like? We're making a mess of my home," she snapped irritably. "And I slipped a little sleeping extract into your tea."

Wendy slightly tensed from Porlyusica's bitter mood and didn't dare complain about being drugged. Probably wanted me to get some rest, she thought as she quickly put on her shoes to help the old woman clean up. Bacon broadly grinned at the girl's approach and lifted the watering can for her to see. "Are you trying to help Porlyusica?" she asked him, unable to hide her amused smile. She hastily grabbed the spout of the can when he tried to pour whatever water was left sloshing inside, preventing another spill.

"'Helpful' does not appear to be one of his traits," Carla quipped. She went on to explain the other little mishaps that occurred around the house as Wendy slept. Since Bacon was restless and there was nothing around to entertain him, the Medicinal Advisor got him to do a few things with her. However, even the simplest of tasks turned into disasters; everything he was supposed to pour ended up on the floor or desk, instead of delicately plucking the wanted part of an herb he ripped out the whole plant from its roots, when he accompanied Porlyusica outside to fetch more water he got distracted by the rain and nearly wandered off into the woods alone.

"It was more like he was searching for something within the trees," the old woman corrected as she finished wiping the floor dry with one of her magic towels; enchanted pieces of woven cloth that could absorb copious amounts of liquids within seconds. "He wanted to venture into the forest and would not follow me back inside. I had to drag him back – thankfully not kicking and screaming." Wendy was quick to give her a hand as the old woman stood up, her knees popping. The advisor sighed from the effort before dropping onto a nearby crate, clearly exhausted.

Wendy furrowed her brow as she pondered over what the elder had said. "You didn't see anything that would have likely attracted his attention?"

"Nothing shiny or glowing if that is what you're referring to. It was still early in the morning and fairly dark to see much of anything." Porlyusica leaned forward, her crimson eyes narrowing in Bacon's direction. The boy was kneeling on top of a large crate nearby, gazing out one of the rain-spotted windows as if yearning to go outside. "Has he ever been intrigued by something in the forest?"
That was a difficult question to answer. Pretty much everything drew the child's attention, especially things he had never seen or heard before. Back when they first came through East Forest to see Porlyusica, Bacon would only go as far as Romeo as they played among the trees. Perhaps the boy was sick of being stuck inside and only wanted to play out in the rain. Or maybe there really was something in the forest that he wanted to find, making Wendy wonder if was because of his dreams.

The Dragon Slayer wanted to investigate, however it was still raining and cold. They did not have any rain cloaks on hand or any extra clothing to keep warm. They had to at least wait until it stopped raining before they could venture out into the woods.

"I want to give him something," said Porlyusica when Wendy spoke of her assumptions. The Medicinal Advisor started to rummage through her small crates that Wendy had neatly piled in a corner last night, all the while grumbling about where she had put 'it', until at last she found what she was looking for. From a small, polished wooden jewellery box, she pulled out a gold-chained necklace with a beautiful clear gem pendant. The jewel was the size and shape of a small marble and set within thin golden spirals that held the gem in place. Under the light of the nearest lamp, the dangling jewel shone with all the colours of the rainbow, astonishing all who laid their eyes upon it.

"Dreamstone. It will grant him dreams whenever he sleeps, both good and bad," the advisor explained. "This may benefit him or it may not. I will let you be the judge of that, Wendy. Be warned: nightmares can persist. Take it off if his sleep is constantly disturbed."

The girl nodded as she accepted the necklace and clasped it around Bacon's neck. He curiously tugged on the chain and rolled the gem between his fingers as he examined it closely in awe, liking the many colours shining inside.

*It's a gift from Porlyusica,* Wendy wanted to cheerfully say but was suddenly interrupted by a heavy knocking on the door. Soon to follow was Master Makarov's urgent voice; "Porlyusica! Quickly! We need Wendy's help!"

The advisor was at the door within a heartbeat.

Wendy covered her mouth and gasped in horror the moment the door swung open. Behind a frantic, out-of-breath, and soaking wet Master were an equally distressed, panting, and drenched Gray and Erza, both dragging a barely conscious Natsu up the pale stone steps. Natsu was badly wounded; visible beneath the orange hooded rain cloak around his shoulders were white bandages bound around his upper torso that were heavily stained red and wet with seeping blood on his right side. His breathing was weak and ragged, each breath a struggle and sounding just like his last. Sweat dampened his pale brow if not the rain and dark, glistening blood dripped down his chin from the corners of his mouth.

"W-What happened?!!" Wendy exclaimed as the group rushed inside with Lucy and Happy not too far behind. They tracked rain and mud into Porlyusica's home but that was the least of everyone's concern.

By Porlyusica's order, Gray and Erza carefully lowered Natsu onto the bed and sat on either side of him to keep him upright. Wendy wasted no time as she stood before Natsu and immediately summoned her healing power. Eyes closed in concentration, she placed her hands over the bandaged, bleeding area, trying to ignore the strong smell of her companion's blood as she listened to the others talk.

"I-I… W-We were…” Gray tried to explain but was stuttering badly, clearly distraught.

Erza took over, calmer than the other but her voice still noticeably trembled; "They were playing around with one of Bacon's things."
"W-We weren't playing! We were only looking at it!" Gray argued angrily.

"And what exactly caused this?" demanded Porlyusica.

Gray's guilty reply nearly made Wendy lose her focus; "This pointy hook and chain thing… I… I pulled the trigger on it and accidentally hit Natsu… point-blank…"

Wendy bit the inside of her lower lip, recalling the moment she wanted to test out the strange heavy object when she first saw it. It was a good thing Carla had stopped her. She took a deep, steady breath and held it, doubling her effort. She could feel sweat trickling down her cheek and her hands shaking from the strain.

"It's a powerful, devastating device," Master added, his tone grim. "It had enough force to throw Natsu across the room and almost pierce him completely through. Four of his ribs are shattered and his right lung is torn open. It all happened within a second." He let out a wavering sigh and soundly scratched the side of his face. "Macao's locked it away with the child's bombs. The same incident won't happen twice, though I worry about that strange purple lens the boy has in his possession. What could it possibly do?"

There was a breathless chuckle coming from Natsu, bringing a sense of relief to wash over the group. "M-Maybe… it shoots… deadly lasers," Natsu rasped.

Wendy smiled and opened her eyes, hearing the joyous cries of Happy and Lucy and the relieved sighs of the others. She kept her healing going, glad to see colour returning to Natsu's face.

"For once you had me worried, lizard-breath," the Ice-Make mage muttered, feigning annoyance. The flame-user huffed, pulled back his arm from Gray's shoulders, and lightly jabbed an elbow into the other's side. "Damn it, pant-less bastard," Natsu growled, his voice gaining strength. "Next time you pull a goddamn trigger on something, don't point the freaking thing at me!"

"I've got pants on, dumbass!" Gray double-checked to make sure before looking away, guilt-trodden. "I'm sorry… Really, I am."

Natsu wiped the sweat and blood off his face with a damp cloth given to him by Porlyusica. "Whatever. Was an accident," he said, his voice muffled. "Didn't think the chain would shoot out like that. Bacon sure has some weird things."

Erza lightly smirked as the Fire Dragon Slayer pulled back his other arm, no longer needing any support to sit up. "Only two of his items are strange: the hooked chain and the purple eye lens. Everything else is self-explanatory," informed Erza.

Natsu rolled his eyes and snorted at her smug tone. "I'll bet you two thousand Jewels the purple thing shoots lasers or some kind of deadly beam."

Erza crossed her arms and narrowed her gaze at the wager. "Four thousand. If it is not a weapon."

"Five thousand it's a treasure finder," Gray joined in, sneering. The word 'treasure' made the master noticeably perk up. "Maybe that is how he found all those gems…" he murmured, a greedy thought passing over his wrinkled features.

The three gamblers shook hands to seal the deal. Everyone's mood was gratefully back to normal.

"Are you feeling better now, Natsu?" Wendy wearily asked, dispelling her magic. She was light-
headed and weak, but strong hands behind her held her up. It was Porlyusica. The old woman guided the girl to sit on the bed by Natsu after Erza promptly jumped to her feet.

"Of course!" was Natsu's happy reply as he ripped away the bloody bandages around his naked torso. "You're healing magic is incredible! Feels like I can go straight to training!" However, when he abruptly stood up, he started to wobble on his legs and would have fallen over if Porlyusica had not shoved him back onto the bed.

"You've lost a lot of blood, boy," the elder told him sternly before handing him a mug full of reddish-brown liquid. She also gave Wendy something to drink, but hers was darker and had a green tint to it. "Drink this to regain your strength and rest for a few hours. Both of you."

Natsu made a face after he sniffed the contents of his concoction and when he took a sip, his face further distorted in disgust. "Yuck! The hell is this stuff?!"

Wendy's didn't smell or taste any better. The greenish-black potion was as thick as syrup and pungent on the tongue with a hint of sourness followed by a nasty, acrid aftertaste. Both Dragon Slayers horribly cringed as they tried to swallow their repulsive drinks.

Porlyusica scoffed at Natsu. "It's a rejuvenating potion, boy. Added a little extra ingredient hence why the bitterness is a little stronger."

Natsu coughed. "Tastes like dirt. Did you add mud to it?"

Crimson eyes flashed dangerously as the corner of the old woman's mouth twitched. She looked ready to slap him, or to be more precise, she wanted to smack him over the head with her broom. "Not mud, you ingrate. I added a few drops of Bacon's red potion for experimental purposes."

Natsu wasn't really any happier to hear that. "Oh, great… By the way, where is the kid?"

"Bacon?" Lucy questioned, glancing over her shoulder. "Why he's right… here?" Her brown eyes went wide. "Uh oh…"

Wendy choked on her potion and immediately leapt to her feet, her eyes sweeping across the small room. To her horror, Bacon was gone and so was Carla and the door leading outside was wide open.

On white feathered wings, Carla swooped under hanging branches and swerved around the thick trunks of trees, following the boy in green running through the rain and mud down below. Not wanting to get her feet dirty, she had taken to the air, staying close to the child who refused to listen to a single command she said. She could have wrapped her tail around him and carried him back to Porlyusica's home, but the Exceed decided not to – too curious to know what exactly Bacon was so eager to look for in the forest.

Shortly after Gray and Erza carried Natsu to bed, the boy had run out the door that was left open without anyone but Carla noticing. Trusting Wendy and the others to take care of the situation, the Exceed had wordlessly chased after Bacon outside.

Overcast and raining, the weather was cold and miserable, but the small boy was hardly fazed by the elements. Winding and zigzagging through trees and bushes, up rocky, vine-covered ridges, down muddy, slippery slopes, and splashing through deep, murky puddles, it didn't seem like the boy knew where he was going. However, he didn't stop moving, even when he tripped over hidden roots and snags and scraped his knees and cut his arms and hands. Drenched and dirty, his blue eyes were constantly searching and his head was always turning, looking more lost than anything. But that was not the case. Not once did he hesitate and think of going back to Wendy. This was the first time he
had ever gone so far on his own without anything visible to entice him.

"Bacon, what is out here that you're so desperate to find?" the Exceed grumbled mostly to herself, growing frustrated by this seemingly pointless chase. Her dress and fur were uncomfortably wet and she was starting to shiver. Perhaps she was wrong to allow him to wander through the woods because now she couldn't remember which direction Porlyusica's tree house was.

"He is looking for someone."

Bacon froze while Carla gave a start at the sudden voice coming from their right. They both turned, one more curious while the other wary. Rounding the nearest moss-covered trunk of a giant tree on bare feet was a young girl with emerald eyes and a fair complexion. Flowing down her back was her long, wavy blonde hair, the curled ends nearly touching the forest floor. It was a shade so pale it looked almost white under the forest's shadows. Soft, feathery accessories decorated her hair, looking as if little wings were sprouting from either side of her head. She appeared as old as Romeo, dressed in a light pink robe with the ends of the sleeves and the bottom frilled like an elegant dress. A shawl of the same colour was draped around her shoulders and tied with a bright red bow of velvety ribbon.

Carla had only seen the girl once before but it was a face she would never forget. "It's you... The First... Master Vermilion," the Exceed whispered, shocked to see the founder and protector of Fairy Tail again.

The girl shortly giggled. "No need for titles. I'm no longer a master or alive."

"Yes, of course. Pardon me," was Carla's response as she gave a polite nod. She fluttered down to Bacon's side, flustered. "May I ask why you are here?"

Mavis playfully smiled as she started to walk towards them, her steps soundless. Leaves did not rustle as she passed and no footprints were left in the soft mud. Her hair gently flowed behind her like a white-gold cloak made of feather-light silk. "I got bored waiting around on Tenrou Island so I decided to see what Fairy Tail was up to. You guys sure have a lot of fun. I'm a little envious," she answered with a childish pout.

Bored? Carla couldn't believe what she was hearing from the ghost of the well-respected First Master of Fairy Tail. She only raised her brow as the girl approached Bacon with a friendly face.

"I have been watching the guild for the past two days and was most intrigued by your new member here," Mavis continued, offering her right hand for the smaller boy to take. "It's nice to finally meet you, little one."

Bacon studied her closely before tentatively placing his dirty, bleeding left hand within hers. He looked confused the moment he touched her, as if knowing there was something different about the girl.

"Don't worry, I won't hurt you," Mavis assured kindly before introducing herself, her smile bright and cheery.

His confusion gradually disappeared and a small smile found its way onto his lips, either from understanding her intention or from the tone of her voice.

"If you have been watching," Carla slowly began, crossing her arms and shaking her head, "then you must be aware that he is not exactly a member of Fairy Tail."

Emerald eyes shifted towards the flying cat. "I am aware of that. And that is what intrigues me most.
Because, you see, only the ones who bear the mark of Fairy Tail are able to see, hear, and touch me."

The Exceed blinked in utter surprise. "Then… How is it that he can see you?"

Tapping a finger against her chin, Mavis stuck out her lower lip and gazed up at the gray sky through the gaps in the trees, pondering like an actual child. It was rather difficult to overlook the fact that she was far older and wiser than what she appeared to be.

Bacon craned his head to follow her stare, trying to see what she saw. Big droplets of water falling from the leaves above pelted his face but he didn't seem to mind.

"I've been wondering about that for a while, but then…” The girl covered the back of his palm with her other hand and closed her eyes. "You felt his magic yesterday, did you not? It is different, yes, but also somewhat familiar… Almost as if…" Trailing off, Carla was forced to inquire what she meant after a moment had passed. The First opened her eyes and met the boy's fascinating stare.

Instead of answering, she asked; "Tell me, Carla, do you believe in fairies?"

The Exceed furrowed her brow at the bizarre question. Fairies were more mythical than dragons since dragons were known to exist at one point in time with the Dragon Slayers as living proof of that. No one has ever seen or heard of fairies in Earthland except in fables and children's stories. Like many other guilds, Fairy Tail was named after a mythical creature and nothing more as far as Carla knew. "I can't say I do," the cat replied in truth. "Why ask such a thing?"

Mavis chuckled lightheartedly and teasingly grinned. "No reason."

Carla suspected the First was purposely hiding something. However, she didn't further question about it for she had a feeling the spirit would avoid answering her. The end of her ribboned tail twitched from side to side when she brought up a previous matter; "You mentioned earlier that he was looking for someone… How do you know this?"

Bacon dropped his arm by his side the instant the First released her hold. His attention was still fixated on her as she spoke, still as curious as ever. "I can see what his heart desires. He wants to find someone important to him."

"Someone important? Then he's starting to remember…” The feline almost showed her excitement. Wendy would surely be ecstatic to hear this.

Mavis reached out to tenderly touch the crystal clear Dreamstone hanging around his neck, prompting him to do the same. "What he remembers could be a distant memory or it could have only been a dream. Whichever one, he is determined to find this person that only he has seen." Her expression became sad as she lightly brushed a hand through Bacon's damp blond hair and caressed his cheek. "But I'm afraid he won't find anyone out here. He has yet to realize this."

Voices shouting in the distance pricked the Exceed's ears. It sounded like Happy and Gray and they were calling for Bacon and her.

"Carla." Mavis gave the white cat a trusting smile. "Please speak to no one of our encounter."

The Exceed didn't bother asking why, assuming the ghost would like to continue observing the guild from afar without anyone knowing. She curtly nodded. "Understood."

The First then stepped closer to Bacon and placed her hands on his shoulders. "Farewell, brave little one. We shall meet again." She embraced him, drawing a gasp of surprise, and whispered something in his ear that only he could hear. When she pulled back, the boy was smiling.
With a small wave and a cheerful grin, Mavis Vermilion took one step back and vanished right before their eyes.

The rain had finally stopped in the middle of the afternoon. By then, Wendy had showered, changed, finished her laundry, and packed a week's worth of clothing into a one-handed suitcase at her dorm in Fairy Hills. The sky was brighter with the sun starting to peek through the layer of white clouds and the damp, cool air was beginning to warm up. Through the wet streets, Wendy lugged her suitcase with Carla not too far behind. Around the feline's shoulders was her small purple backpack filled with her own necessities.

Their trek through town was a quiet one with each occupied with their own thoughts. Bacon's runaway incident kept coming to Wendy's mind.

"I believe he was looking for someone… Someone that might be important…" Carla had told her after Gray and Happy had returned to Porlyusica's home with a dirty and scuffed up Bacon in tow. The boy was visibly upset when Wendy had scolded him for running off and making her worry. He didn't leave her side soon after that. (She had to quickly apologize however, for she felt absolutely terrible for making him sad.)

Who was he looking for? The Dragon Slayer kept wondering. She was desperate to know because she wanted to help him any way she could. But it was so difficult to get any answers from the boy. Communicating with him was always a challenge; he didn't understand every word spoken and he didn't try to speak.

After taking a few wrong turns due to their lack of attention, the pair eventually found their way to Macao's blue and gray stone-brick house one hour later. Macao greeted them at the door after Wendy had knocked. "I told you before, Wendy, you can use the laundry room in the basement. I wouldn't mind at all," the older man generously offered as the girls trotted inside.

"I needed to get some more clothes and a few other things anyway," the Dragon Slayer replied with a timid smile. The main reason was because she didn't want any of the men to accidentally see her underwear. Thinking about it made her shy and embarrassed.

Before she could ask about the boys' whereabouts, she heard a sharp and familiar sound coming from Romeo's room down the hallway. However, it wasn't the usual awful, shrill noise of a badly played ocarina; it sounded like actual notes that melded into some sort of repetitive melody.

"Bacon has been at it for almost an hour now," Macao explained as he closed the door, chuckling.

"Bacon is the one playing?" Wendy asked, a little surprised. She quickly slipped off her shoes and started down the hall.

The man soundly smirked and followed behind her. "He's been trying to play something. He keeps playing three notes over and over again and it's kinda driving me crazy. But when he tries to deviate from there, he stops and stares hard at his flute, like he's trying to remember how to play the rest. You'll see."

Just as Macao had said, after the three notes were repeated several times, the music abruptly stopped. The door to Romeo's room was ajar and Wendy quietly peeked inside. Sitting cross-legged at the head of the older boy's bed was Bacon, properly holding his blue ocarina and frowning deeply at it as he slowly shifted his fingers over the holes, contemplating on which ones to cover. His face was aglow from both the newly mounted Light Lacrima hanging from above the window and the circling pair of glowbugs that always accompanied the crystal during the day. (Romeo went as far as naming
While Wendy was gone, Romeo had given Bacon a bath and helped him change into a fresh set of clothes – clothes that were new and the right fit thanks to Macao purchasing a few things for the boy yesterday. Bacon looked like an ordinary boy dressed in a fiery red, short-sleeved, knee-length, yellow-trimmed jacket cinched at the waist with his own belt and wearing a pair of black shorts sporting a silver-blue, stylish feathered wing embroidered on the left side.

With a book opened on his lap, Romeo sat right across from the younger boy, verbally encouraging Bacon to keep on trying. When Bacon looked at the other, he spotted Wendy at the door. Immediately, his frown turned into a happy smile. He bounded off the bed and ran over, holding out his blue ocarina for the girl to take.

The Dragon Slayer gave him a meek smile and lightly shook her head as she entered the room and dropped her suitcase on the floor at the foot of her mattress. "You know I'm not good, Bacon. You were playing a lot better than me just a moment ago!" Giggling, she gently pushed the instrument back to his chest. "Go on. Play again for me. You can do it."

He glanced between the ocarina and Wendy until the girl nodded in assurance. His blue eyes widened with realization before he nodded confidently. Closing his eyes and taking a deep breath, he brought the mouthpiece to his lips and played those three ascending notes again without flaw. Three times he repeated them and then, to everyone's surprise, his next set of notes differed from the last, melding together into an actual song. He didn't stop and he didn't make a mistake throughout the entire melody. It was a cheerful, energetic tune that brought a joyous smile to Wendy's lips and made her feel like dancing.

When the song ended, Bacon looked fondly at his ocarina, pride beaming on his face. Wendy was first to praise him, followed by Macao. Romeo hopped off his bed and patted Bacon on the back. "Wait till everyone at the guild hears this!" exclaimed Romeo, excited. "He's finally remembered something. I wonder if he learned the song from the person he was looking for…"

Wendy's smile turned sad. "It's possible," was all she said.

"This is proof that he did not just dream it," Carla assured her. "He is starting to remember and this is only the first piece of many. I don't want to admit it, but I believe Erza was not wrong in pushing him to his limit."

Wendy knitted her brow and bowed her head, her eyes falling on the small green pouch belted around her waist. Inside were Bacon's six potions Porlyusica had given her in case the boy passed out again. The blue ones were very potent elixirs that replenished both stamina and magic energy and should be taken in small quantities, the old lady had advised. "I know… but I don't want to keep forcing him to remember – I don't want him to experience any more pain."

Carla frowned and crossed her arms. "But what if–"

"No," Wendy interrupted with an abrupt shake of her head, "His life shouldn't be constantly put at risk. What if… What if he faints in the middle of a battle against another ferocious monster? He could get seriously hurt…"

Like Natsu… It was hard to forget this morning's incident. Natsu was on the verge of death and would have likely died if he and the others reached Wendy a moment too late. What if I was too late to save Bacon if he ever got badly injured? Erza had promised she would never allow that to happen, but the risk was always there, especially with her method of doing things.
She hardened her gaze and furled her hands tight by her sides. "I don't want that to ever happen."

Macao soundly cleared his throat and ran a hand over his gelled hair, wearing an uneasy expression. "Good luck trying to tell Erza that…"

Wendy's stance faltered at the thought. She gulped and nervously wrung her hands together. "I… I can stand up to her… I think." From the horror stories Natsu had told her, rarely did anyone succeed in winning an argument against Erza and rarer still did anyone ever come out unscathed. When the girl met Bacon's stare, she regained her composure and determination. "Yes. I can do it!"

However, as the group neared Fairy Tail atop the hill by evening, all of Wendy's courage had left her. She hung behind Macao and Romeo as they passed through the double doors and into the noisy building. The place was full and a party had already started. Laughter rang amongst the crowd and chatter was abuzz. Dinner and drinks were being served by Lisanna and Kinana, the two lovely girls moving from table to table. They both had an extraordinary talent in balancing numerous plates of food in their arms while handling several glasses in their hands without dropping anything as they maneuvered between constantly moving bodies.

Greetings were exchanged as Wendy's group passed through. Many came over to voice their admiration for Bacon's bravery and his victory over the raptordile, playfully ruffling his hair and patting his back. They were all glad he was feeling fine too. All the attention made the boy laugh and beam with happiness. Wendy wasn't left out either, receiving praise from every direction for saving Natsu's life in the nick of time. The Fire Dragon Slayer himself was most thankful, waving sporadically and calling out her name from his table. The girl swelled with pride and duty, extremely honored to be a part of a wonderful guild.

Throughout it all, Wendy had yet to spot Erza and her evil, evil smile, so Bacon was safe for now. Macao departed to join Wakaba, Elfman, Cana, and Mirajane at the bar while the children and Carla headed to their usual table not too far away. Levy was seated in one of the chairs with Jet and Droy on either side of her, their meals already set before them. Levy waved and gestured to the remaining available seats when she saw the four coming through.

"Saved you guys your spots," said Levy while the two men of Shadow gear nodded in greeting. "So how's Bacon feeling?" she asked, leaning forward on her elbows and giving the boy a warm smile.

"Better now," Wendy answered as she sat down next to Jet. The boy took the chair beside her, accustomed to the routine. He knew exactly which table to go to and where to sit whenever they entered the guild.

"That's good to hear!" Levy chirped, clasping her hands together in joy.

"Everyone's been talking about him all day," Jet chimed in after taking a sip of his beer. He gave the boy, who was currently watching Romeo play around with his bright and sticky purple fire, a lopsided grin. "He's amazingly strong for a small kid. That sword spell of his was incredible."

Droy slapped his big belly and loudly chortled with a mouthful of food. "He could be as good as Erza with a sword in hand!" he boasted.

"And speak of the devil…" Jet murmured under his breath, catching sight of someone Wendy feared was Erza coming up behind her.

"Wendy."

The first instinct that kicked in when the Dragon Slayer heard Titania's voice was to wrap her arms
protectively around Bacon. The boy made a small sound of confusion before embracing her back, lightly giggling in her ear. "Stay away from him, Erza!" she blurted out without thinking. She quickly slapped a hand over her mouth and took a cautious peek over her shoulder. "I-I mean… Don't you dare endanger him again!"

Erza was standing right over them, an amused smirk adorning her lips. "Don't worry, Wendy," she reassured.

However, Erza has already said that more than once and each time resulted in Wendy panicking and overwhelmed with worry instead of the opposite. Not believing the older woman, Wendy tightened her hold on Bacon and tried to look crossly at Erza, but she couldn't stop her lower lip from quivering with apprehension.

"I'm not here to do anything to Bacon. I promise," the warriress continued, sensing Wendy's disbelief.

Wendy managed to glower. Erza had made the very same promise before and that didn't end up well at all either.

Erza's expression softened. "I'm not lying, Wendy. I actually wanted to give you something that I couldn't get to you earlier with Natsu dying and Bacon disappearing." She extended her right hand where a small white envelope was held between two steel fingers.

Wendy looked between the envelope and Erza and slowly pulled away from Bacon. After the boy let go and leaned back in his chair, she took the offered envelope and raised an eyebrow. "What is this?"

"Seventy thousand Jewels. It's the bounty reward for that raptordile."

The Dragon Slayer gaped at the woman in surprise. "Why are you giving the money to me?"

Erza nodded at Bacon who was eyeing the envelope in Wendy's hand with mild interest. "Bacon was the one who slew the lizard. It's really his reward. But since he doesn't know how to use the money, I'm giving it to you. And not only that…” she lowered her voice and gazed upon the floor, "it's a form of apology for what happened. I'm sorry, I didn't intend to cause any harm to Bacon."

Even though she murmured her last few sentences, it seemed like everyone heard her. A dead silence suddenly fell over the previously boisterous crowd as all eyes turned towards Titania, wide with shock. Someone dropped their glass on the floor where it loudly shattered to pieces and spilled its contents among the silent crowd.

And then Natsu started choking at the table next to Wendy's. Lucy slapped his back hard while he pounded his chest until he coughed out a half-chewed piece of meat. "D-Did you aactually apologize for purposely endangering someone's life?" the flame-user wheezed right after regaining his breath, completely flabbergasted. Around the same table was Gray, agape at Erza, his jaw to the floor. Alongside him was Juvia who was looking around at all the stunned faces, just as confused as the other newer members of the guild.

Happy was aghast as he stood upon the tabletop, both paws clutching the sides of his face in horror. He pointed a trembling paw at Erza. "Im-Imposter!" he accused.

Titania's glare was as sharp as a knife, resulting in a quick, panicked retreat for the blue feline. Squealing, Happy leapt onto Natsu's shoulder and cowered behind the teenager's head.

Erza shortly huffed to the side, her sun-burnt face turning a shade brighter. "Why is everyone so
surprised? I've apologized before."

"No, this is actually your first time admitting you have done something wrong," Mirajane spoke up cheerfully.

Erza snorted and hid her face in the shadow of her hair. "I did not want Wendy to stay angry at me."

Wendy was taken aback by that. "I'm not mad at you, Erza," she replied with a slight shake of her head. "Last night I realized you were trying to help Bacon in your own way so I forgive you. However, I... I would like to ask you to stop with your uh... risky ideas... Please? For Bacon's sake!" And, not to mention, for her own sake as well.

Titania met the girl's pleading expression and lightheartedly laughed. "You don't have to worry about that anymore. I'll be leaving town tomorrow. Master wants us to resume our training."

"That's right," Master Makarov announced as he hopped onto the bar counter. With a wide greedy grin, the short old man eagerly rubbed his wrinkled hands together. "Four more months until the Grand Magic Games, everyone. Thirty million Jewels are at stake here! And of course, we have to show Fiore who is number one again!" When he pointed to the ceiling, the crowd roared in agreement, hands pumped into the air, eyes raised to the sky beyond the wooden beams above them. Some pounded the tables and some stomped their feet while others clinked their glasses and gulped down their drinks. The noise went on until the master raised a hand.

Makarov looked around his guild; his keen eyes assessing each face of his children. "I want you kids to be ready when the time comes. Only five will be chosen to represent our guild but do not neglect your training. All of you. There might come a time when your team needs your help. Am I right, Levy?"

Levy soundly nodded. "Correct. I've read the guidelines from front to back. Substitutions are allowed if one team member is incapacitated during an event and cannot participate in the next," she informed knowledgeably.

The master grunted and crossed his arms. "If that were ever the case, I need to make sure the rest of my guild is in tip top shape. That's why during the three months before the Games begin, I want those who are willing to grow stronger to concentrate on nothing but training." His gaze fell on Wendy. "Understood?"

There was a booming chorus of "Aye!" before everyone resumed the party, more excited than before. Gradually, the noise inside the building returned to what it once was and food and drinks were steadily flowing out of the kitchen door again.

Before Wendy could thank Erza and wish her luck on her training, the older woman had already left, joining the others at the bar.

It wasn't long until tonight's dinner was set before Wendy, Bacon, Romeo, and Carla by Kinana all in one go. It was around that time that Master Makarov stopped by their table, taking a seat on the edge of the table between the boys.

"Bacon, how are you doing tonight?" he asked, lightly patting the boy on the arm.

Bacon only blinked at the old man as he nibbled on his dinner roll.

"He's doing better," Wendy answered for the boy.

Makarov raised his brow. "Still not a word from him, huh?"
Wendy slightly frowned as she buttered her bread. "No, not yet. I'm not sure if it's because he can't follow the sound of the words or because he just doesn't want to."

"Maybe he's really shy," said Levy.

Carla smirked and casually gestured at the boy with her paw. "I don't think so. He can get very vocal when he's excited. You heard him the other day."

"The fall was more fun to him than frightening," Levy agreed, smiling.

Wendy groaned, recalling the heart-wrenching dread from that terrifying moment.

Makarov chuckled before giving Wendy a knowing look. "There's something I'd like to ask you to do, Wendy, and I've already asked everyone of this. Bacon's magic is very unique and easily detectable. To keep him safe and protected, it's best that he does not use it."

Wendy nodded. "Is that why you wanted Erza to leave town to train?" she inquired hesitantly.

"Partially. I really do want to win the thirty mil – err, our guild to win the Games. There's no doubt Erza will be one of the chosen five." He winked at the girl. "I am considering you as well, Wendy. Your Sky Dragon Slaying magic might come in handy in one of the events. I understand your hands are full with young Bacon to properly train, but you must remember that we are all here to help out."

"My offer to look after him while you're out training still stands," reminded Levy.

"Dad and I can keep watching over him too," said Romeo, grinning. "He's already used to our house. And maybe the rest of his memories will start coming back to him now that he's remembered something."

Those that overheard were instantly piqued by the news.

"He remembers something?" Jet echoed, surprised.

Romeo nodded. "He remembered how to play a song on his ocarina!"

It was after they had finished eating dinner and their delicious slices of strawberry cream-filled swirl cake (forced upon them by none other than Mirajane) did Romeo pull out the blue wind instrument from his pocket dimension and handed it to Bacon. Romeo had to scream and yell over the rambunctious noises to get everyone's attention.

Bacon’s first response was to give the ocarina back to Wendy again. "No, no," she said as she gently pushed it back. "Play your song for everyone to hear. You know…” She hummed the first six notes of his melody.

Smiling, he nodded and brought the ocarina’s mouthpiece to his lips as he closed his eyes. All remaining voices died down when the boy began to play.

Notes filled the air, blending smoothly into a happy tune that brought looks of wonder and amazement on every guild member's face.

On that night, Vijeeter wasn't the only one dancing.

Three glowing moons loomed above in a pitch black sky, each the shape of an eye and shining a bright silver-gray. One was vertical and positioned higher above the other two and, like eyes, they stared at him; unmoving; unblinking; unyielding.
When he was about to take a step forward, they suddenly disappeared, as if the eyes had forever closed, leaving nothing but complete darkness all around.

"Hello!" A shrill, feminine voice suddenly cut through the silence, making him jump.

On his heel, he twisted around and was elated to find the same glowbug he had seen before – the one that flew on four wings and with its entire body hidden by white light. Did the glowbug actually speak to him?

He started for it but paused after taking the first step because something was very, very different. He felt taller, feeling as if he was standing atop a chair or box and looking below. But he was standing on neither. When he looked down, he noticed his dirty brown boots were a little farther down to the ground which was rather odd.

"Hey!"

He snapped his head up at the shouting glowing orb and saw it suddenly take off in the opposite direction.

"This way!" it called, leaving a sparkling trail.

Smiling, he went after it. His movements were awkward for his legs felt longer, making him stumble a few times. He eventually got the hang of it after nearly tripping over his own two feet.

There was something waiting in the distance that the orb of light was leading him to. As he neared, his eyes grew wide when he recognized the old, broken stone steps spotted with moss. No great walls of rock bordered the stairway, only the empty darkness, but at the top, he could see a pale light where the glowbug was waiting.

He hopped up the steps, skipping three at a time with a longer stride, and reached the top in no time. The instant his foot landed on the last step, the shadows receded to reveal the area he was anxious to see once again.

However, it wasn't the same as the last time.

No warm sun welcomed him for the sky was covered in dreary, dark gray clouds. The vibrant greens of the grass and the bright colours of the flowers that grew in the meadow were replaced with dull yellows and browns of dead and withered things. Stringy weeds and ugly, thorny plants were the only things that thrived in abundance. The long branches of the giant trees that surrounded the area were all bare, the ends sharp and pointed to look like reaching clawed fingers. Twisting and gnarled, the touching arms of the trees tightly entangled one another as if vying to choke whatever life was left in their neighbors before their own demise. The limbs even sank deeper into the pale stone of the distant building, breaking and cracking the thick walls and further crumbling the wide open entrance above a high ledge. Black was the colour of trees' bark, making them appear as tall, standing shadows under the gloom.

He slowly looked around, disturbed by the sudden change in the area. He trudged through the dead grass and thorny weeds, a little surprised that the tallest stalks only reached up to his knees instead of his stomach. Nothing flew out when he passed through, not even an insect.

The glowbug was hovering above the familiar tree stump that sat empty and alone. It looked smaller and shorter than he remembered.

He frowned, saddened that the girl with green hair and blue eyes and the same kindness as Wendy was not here to play her song.
A strange, pleasant sound filled the air – the sound of music. But it was not the sharp notes that came from an ocarina. He turned and craned his head in the direction of the soft noise, seeing a person sitting atop the remains of the only tree that was not merged within the surrounding wall of black. Fingers wrapped in white bandages strummed across a line of strings tightly strung on a golden instrument, producing the gentle notes that highly piqued his interest.

The fingers stopped thrumming and with it, the music ended as well. Behind fringes of blond hair, red eyes, neither cruel nor friendly, peered down at him as he slowly approached the lone dead tree with the glowbug following above his shoulder.

"She is not here..." said the man whose voice was low and slightly muffled by the white shawl that covered the lower half of his face. The white cover draped down his front and back and was badly frayed around the shoulders and bottom ends. A red mark decorated the white fabric, depicting some sort of eye weeping a large crimson tear. He wore a skin-tight suit underneath that was two different shades of blue and his shoes were of the same design. Bandages wrapped the top of his head and the wrists of both arms, the unbound ends hanging loose and swaying with every subtle movement.
"You will never find her... not until you find yourself."

The boy cocked his head, clueless to what was said. He only stared, waiting for the man to pluck the strings of his golden instrument. Instead, the man kept talking, stringing words he didn't quite follow.

"The flow of time is always cruel... A thing that doesn't change with time is the memory of younger days..." The man ran his fingers over his strings, creating an ascending tone. Then he strummed a series of notes together to form a short melody and repeated it twice. "Do you remember? The song to bring you back to this once sacred place..."

The man dropped down to quietly land in front of the other in a crouch. When he stood straight up, he was actually a little shorter than the boy!

The boy blinked in astonishment, not knowing why he was taller than the man. Every man in Fairy Tail, except for the old one, was taller than him. The thought quickly passed him by for the man with blond hair and red eyes soon pointed to the boy's left hand.

Unknowingly clutched in the boy's grip was Wendy's blue ocarina.

Without a word, the man strummed his golden instrument, playing that same song as before. Twice he played again before he stopped and looked at the other and nodded.

Did the man want him to play the ocarina? He looked at the smooth object in his hand and watched its glossy surface shimmer as the glowbug danced above him as if wanting him to play it too.

The man only thrummed the first note of his melody, prompting him to do the same. It took a few tries until he made the right sound to match the man's desired note. Then the man struck the second and the boy followed suit. Seven notes in total in the first set. The second set was different, a little more complex. He made mistakes but the man was patient and never said a word throughout the process. Red eyes constantly watched him while bandaged fingers elegantly strummed the next note repeatedly between short intervals until he got it.

Once the boy managed to complete the song, the man held up a finger to grab his focus. Silently, the man nodded and played the first part of the melody then gestured towards him, inciting him to repeat it. When he went onto the second half, the man joined in, strumming the same notes in the same rhythm. Before the song ended, the boy finally understood what to do. It suddenly came back to him; he has played this song before because... He wasn't sure why exactly. But he just knew how.
Together they played the melody once more, their notes flowing as one, blending into a pleasing harmony that alleviated the weary soul. The glowbug spiraled between them, dancing to the wonderful tune that brightened the dismal forest.

The final note plucked on the man's strings lingered throughout the empty meadow. A small smile reflected in the man's red eyes. Wordlessly, he turned around and, in a single bound, leapt back onto the tree before disappearing over the crumbling walls of the ancient stone building.

When the boy's astounded gaze fell upon the deep black hole atop the high ledge that was the entrance to the building, he froze. He remembered now… the girl with green hair was inside the cold, dark, dank, and haunted depths of the temple. He has wandered inside before... through halls overgrown with creeping vines and through passageways that were oddly twisted. Inside, shadows turned into giant hands or white, bony faces with eight skinny legs and dark, vast chambers echoed with cackling laughter. It was inside that he had searched for the girl who used to sit on the stump and play her wooden ocarina.

'Saria is waiting,' said the mysterious voice that came from all directions. Tensing in caution, he glanced around and found no one. 'But she can never leave… Not here… in this time… Even her song will not bring her voice…'

There was a sense of sadness in the hidden speaker's tone. Before he could wonder or even think about it, the world suddenly faded to black.

The glowbug was last to vanish. It bobbed up and down and hid away in endless shadow, whispering, "She will always be your friend… and so will I…"
The Lost Time

When he closed his eyes at night, the world would change. He would be taken away from the bedroom and cast into another place, seeing many different things and experiencing many different feelings. What he saw, felt, and heard while he slept – they were called 'dreams', Wendy had told him one morning. He never could remember everything he had dreamed, only bits and pieces that were more or less forgotten before the day would even begin.

The dreams took him to various places that were foreign yet somewhat familiar, where he'd meet people that were strangers at first but often turned out to be someone he may have met before. He was never sure how or why he knew them, the answer was always beyond his reach, making him confused and frustrated at the same time.

Sometimes he met the same person, like the man with the red eyes and the golden instrument who would strum a new melody, other times he saw new faces, young and old, big and small, funny and odd, kind and mean, human and not human. They would sing, hum, and whistle; they would laugh, talk, scream, and cry. Sadly, he never found the kind girl with blue eyes and green hair again nor did he ever stumble upon the sacred forest meadow.

The talking glowbug was with him in most dreams, guiding him away from the shadows where the three silver moons were watching in the pitch-black sky to find another place and another new face. In one dream, it was Wendy who guided him instead, leading him by the hand through the double doors of Fairy Tail where laughter and shouting awaited on the other side.

Sometimes he felt different too. He would stand taller than ever before, his arms thick and heavy and strong enough to smash through solid rock with a single punch. He would stand shorter, his short wooden arms and hands grasping to the stems of spinning pink flowers that carried him in the gusting winds. He would be in the water, his body covered in shiny pale blue scales, gliding swiftly through the deep depths of the turbulent seas.

The dreams were fun and exhilarating, joyful and pleasing, annoying and frustrating, confusing and astonishing.

But not every dream ended well. Some dreams were very unpleasant, turning into what Wendy had described as 'nightmares'.

Unfriendly faces haunted the realm of nightmares; twisted creatures of all shapes and sizes with wicked eyes, sharp teeth and claws, rusty blades, pointed spears, giant axes, and hot and cold magic like Natsu's flames and Gray's ice. They were cruel and evil and they would attack him on sight with their fangs bared, their claws gleaming, and their weapons drawn. Groups of them would surround him, hungry eyes leering, while larger ones, monstrous beings that stood thrice his size or more, usually advanced alone.

And every time either happened, the mysterious voice that he could hear would yell at him to fight.

'You do not run. You do not cry. You do not cower. You fight!' it would say, whenever he was cornered and didn't know what to do. 'Be brave and fight!'

With his weapons in his hands, he would listen to the voice and fight, his mind and heart unwavering at the size and sheer number of fiends coming his way. Often he held a familiar sword and shield tight in his grip, sometimes a long wooden stick that easily broke in half, other times he wielded his bow with arrows that had metal tips that didn't just simply gleam in the faint light, but were imbued
with hot orange fire, shrouded in a freezing, deep blue mist, or shone bright and gold like the sun itself. There were all sorts of other things at his disposal, such as an odd, bent, throwing thing that would always fly back to him after striking an enemy, or a strange little creature with a black metallic head and golden body that would scurry away, flash red and explode in a loud, fiery blaze.

He fought until he bled, his body hurting all over and refusing to move; until all monsters were slain, their bodies disintegrating into ash and black smoke or lying in pools of their own blood. Some battles were quick and easy, others were agonizingly long and seemingly impossible.

But every enemy had a weakness, the glowbug once told him when he was up against an unyielding, axe-wielding fiend protected in heavy, clanging armour; weaknesses that could be exploited and used against the enemy.

With that in mind, every tedious battle was eventually won. Except for one.

The shadowed man with eyes that glowed an icy blue, whose voice was deep and harsh, who wore a malicious sneer, and was covered in bright, dripping crimson… Out of nowhere he would appear before the boy and inflict the worst crippling pain the boy had ever felt.

And it was a battle where the boy stood alone in the darkness. No glowbug accompanied him to guide him through and there was no voice to tell him what to do. It was only him against the evil man while another shadowed person stood aside, watching them both with deep scarlet eyes that burned with a wicked light.

More than once he had the same nightmare where he was badly defeated, fallen to the bloodied ground, barely able to rise on his trembling hands and knees, and at the mercy of the cruel man with the sinister smile. Each encounter left him gasping awake in the middle of the night, shaking in panic and drenched in cold sweat.

Wendy was always right by his side when he awoke from the terrible dream, looking down at him with worry. Softly, she would whisper, "It's okay now. It was only a dream. You're safe here," as she lightly brushed her hand through his dampened hair. Her presence combined with her comforting gestures never failed to make him quickly forget the pain and horror he had to endure in his sleep.

However, when he woke up from his latest, horrible defeat, Wendy was not there to take the agony away. She was gone, having left on another journey in which she had promised to return in three months’ time. But three months was a long, long time, he was starting to learn, and knowing that made him very upset.

Rolling onto his side on the mattress on the bedroom floor, he could only stare through the darkness of night at the empty spot beside him where Wendy usually slept, quietly wishing she was here.

Levy McGarden couldn’t help but frown in pity when all her attempts to cheer up her young student had failed. Slumped over on the table covered in notebooks, scrolls of paper, writing utensils, and children's books was little Bacon, gazing at the guild's entrance, forlorn. Already, he was waiting for Wendy to step through the doors, announcing her return with a beaming smile. However, the Sky Dragon Slayer, along with Carla, Natsu, Happy, Lucy, Gray, Juvia, and Erza had all left together for their 'three-months-of-nothing-but-training mission' (as dubbed by Master) early yesterday morning.

It wasn't the first time Bacon was separated from Wendy for so long. It had been a slow, gradual process, but during the past month, Wendy worked on familiarizing him with the other guild members to make the boy less dependent on her. She was hesitant to leave his side at first, but after seeing her team members resume their training one right after the other, (even Romeo went back to
his secret lessons with Totomaru, the Rainbow Fire mage and former member of Phantom Lord), she felt guilty and a little left out.

With Levy and her boys helping out, and occasionally Mirajane lending an extra hand, they had developed a routine where Bacon would stay with Shadow Gear from morning to evening while Wendy would leave town for the day to focus on her training. Bacon was always sad when Wendy left the guild shortly after dropping him off. However, Levy often cheered him up with a story from her collection of books.

She brought her tales to life with her magic, making words dance about and light up with special visual effects; fires burned, rain softly pattered, winds howled and gust, clouds were soft and puffy – Levy wanted to make it fun and easy for the boy to learn how to read and write. Jet and Droy lent their talents as well, humorously acting out various fictional characters in each story so often the reading would turn into a live play that captivated the small audience occupying the hall. Always enthralled by her spells and her stories, Bacon was quick to grasp the basics of their language and began to understand spoken sentences and how to answer simple 'yes' and 'no' questions with either a nod or shake of the head. Levy even taught him simple math and took him on a shopping trip down at Magnolia's market district to demonstrate the use of money. She had tried to not spoil him too much but only partially succeeded, using her own funds to buy him treats and a few little things that greatly appealed to him.

Despite the obvious joy he had being with Shadow Gear, his smile was always brightest whenever Wendy returned to Fairy Tail in the evenings.

As the month went by, Wendy increased the length of her absence to two days, then to three, then to four, then to whole weeks. At first Bacon was confused and extremely disappointed when it was only Romeo and Macao taking him home at night. However, as he started to learn more words, he finally understood the Dragon Slayer's promises that she would come back soon. His sadness turned into anticipation every evening then to absolute happiness whenever Wendy walked through the guild doors.

This time however, Bacon knew that Wendy's promise to return was not going to be any time soon. With his head lying sideways atop his folded arms, he was clearly in no mood to listen to a story or work on Levy's next lesson. Even the delicious slice of chocolate cake topped with a scoop of vanilla ice cream that Mirajane had placed on the table before him was ignored. And Bacon loved cake and ice cream.

"He didn't sleep well last night," Romeo explained when all members of Shadow Gear and Mirajane sighed in defeat. The fire mage was seated on the opposite end of the table, frowning along with everyone else. "He had another really bad dream and usually Wendy is able to make him feel better right after, but since she's gone…"

"Aww, you poor thing," said Mirajane with a little pout as she made her way around the table to gently rub the unhappy child's back. She leaned over so the boy would meet her gaze. "You miss Wendy, don't you?"

Bacon slowly nodded, looking as if he had no energy to even lift his head. It was obvious he was tired as well as in deep despair. Moaning, he turned away from Mirajane and buried his face in his arms.

Everyone's frown deepened. Sitting in the chair beside Bacon, Levy placed a firm hand on his shoulder but her touch went unnoticed. She felt helpless and didn't doubt her friends felt the same.

"If it's the nightmares that are bothering him," Jet began, leaning back in his seat and draping his arm
over the backrest, "then why not take the Dreamstone off? It's what's causing them in the first place, isn't it?"

Romeo shook his head. "Bacon doesn't want to take it off. He actually got angry when Wendy had tried after the first few times he had nightmares."

Mirajane lightly smiled. "The Dreamstone is a pretty jewel. I wouldn't want it taken away either."

"Besides," Romeo continued, giving the other boy a sympathetic look, "taking it off doesn't solve the problem that Wendy isn't here for another three months." He glanced at each face around the table and mischievously smiled as an idea came to mind. "So that means we have no other choice but to take Bacon to Wendy and the others."

Bacon raised his head at the sound of that and stared at the older boy, suddenly interested.

Levy pursed her lips for she didn't quite agree with Romeo's plan. "I don't know… The whole purpose of the past month was to prepare Bacon for Wendy leaving. I'm sure–"

"It's not going to get easier from here," Romeo cut in, his expression somber as his dark eyes met Levy's. "Believe me. I waited seven years for you, Natsu, and everyone else to return. Three months to Bacon can very well feel like seven years to him."

"It's true… it doesn't get easier when you miss someone," Droy added, patting his big belly to prove his point.

Levy was overwhelmed with guilt yet again for leaving her teammates behind for so long. Although the men were back to their usual selves, there were moments Levy felt responsible for Droy's weight gain and overindulging appetite.

She took a quick peek around the guild, seeing it nearly empty this morning. With most of the main members gone, it was very unlikely the hall will liven up in the evenings with loud parties and playful antics. It was so clean and organized too, a stark contrast to how it usually looked late at night when Natsu and his teammates were around. The next three months were going to be very quiet and dull, Levy hated to admit. Now she was starting to miss everyone too…

Levy brushed a loose strand of her blue hair behind her ear as she contemplated on what she should do to help her student. With her hand still gripping Bacon's shoulder, she gave him a little squeeze. "Do you really want to see Wendy, Bacon?" she had to ask despite already knowing the answer.

The boy turned to her and nodded vigorously, his blue eyes pleading.

"Then it's settled," Mirajane announced, giggling. Moving to stand between the teacher and student, she patted the top of Bacon's and Levy's heads. "You guys should hurry and start packing your things and catch the next train. Don't forget your swim suits!"

"Swim suits?" Levy raised an eyebrow at Mirajane. "Where exactly did they go to train?"

The answer was the south-western coast of Fiore that was a four hour journey by train and another two hours on foot through the dense, wild jungle. By mid-afternoon, not only was Levy exhausted from the long train ride, but she was also starting to completely tire out from the arduous trek through the thick, dense growth of tropical plants and trees. Fronds and leaves that grew twice as large as Levy and many hanging vines as thick as her legs barred the way forward. The hot, humid air made matters worse; Levy was sweating like mad, her back soaked with perspiration as she carried her travelling pack over her slim shoulders. She was starting to regret her decision to bring along more books than usual. Her short orange dress and undergarments clung uncomfortably to her body and
she had to tie a dark green bandanna above her forehead to keep most of her hair from sticking to her damp face.

Trudging ahead of her were Jet and Droy, hacking away with their machetes to make a reasonable path through the jungle. They were panting and sweating as they worked, their grunts muted by the many beautiful songs of tropical birds, the annoying buzz of insects, and the occasional shrieks and roars of monkeys and other animals. And noisily scampering and laughing behind her were Romeo and Bacon, running and stopping to look at every fascinating thing they saw among the wildlife. The boys were full of energy having slept through most of the train ride.

Romeo wanted to come along in search of Wendy and her team, insisting it was his idea in the first place. He didn't get approval from his father first since Macao was out of town with Wakaba on a mission for the day so that left Mirajane with the task of relaying the news of his son's sudden disappearance. Levy wondered how Macao would react upon hearing that Romeo and Bacon would be gone for the next three months so far from home.

Probably not too well… Levy concluded, since Macao was an overprotective father and often worried about Romeo. And after having Bacon stay at his home for the past month, the young swordsman was like his second son to him. With both boys gone, Macao would likely stress out more than usual. Levy could only trust Mirajane can explain everything and reassure him that Romeo and Bacon were safe with Shadow Gear and Team Natsu watching over them.

"Wow! Look at this flower! It's huge!" Romeo suddenly exclaimed, drawing Levy's attention behind her. Hanging farther back, he was pointing at an enormous corpse flower growing on the jungle floor. It was bigger than the boys combined, its thick petals a deep red and dotted with yellow. The fire mage wrinkled his nose and gagged soon after leaning closer to peer into the gaping hole in the flower's center that was big enough to swallow him whole. "Eww! It stinks!"

Right beside him was Bacon whose face also morphed into disgust when he caught the foul stench of rotten meat coming from the giant bloom.

"Boys, come on!" Levy called for the trailing pair, waving them over. "Keep up or you'll get lost!" Not to mention the jungle was full of dangerous creatures and poisonous plants. She kept a constant eye on her surroundings, making sure there wasn't anything that could endanger the curious pair when wrongly touched or confronted. There were lots of captivating things in the wilderness around them: enormous trees with twisted trunks and plump, hanging fruits, giant flowers that were vibrant in colour, hundreds of vines that wrapped around branches and trunks of nearly every tree like super long snakes, small and large birds with colourful plumes, and, Levy's least favourite, many different insects and spiders that ranged from ant-sized critters to humongous foot-long abominations.

The children quickly left the smelly plant to catch up with Levy. Both carried their own large backpacks full of their personal belongings and yet neither seemed affected by the heat like Levy and her teammates. "Aren't you guys hot?" she asked, dabbing at the sweat trickling down the side of her face with a damp cloth. Feeling parched, she unhooked her water bottle hanging on the side of her pack and took a big gulp of warm but still refreshing liquid.

Romeo broadly grinned. "Nah. We're keeping cool," he replied, engulfing his left hand with icy blue fire. Instead of heat given off the small flickering flame, it was a pleasing chill that brought some relief to Levy. Bacon immediately smiled at the other boy's magic but dared not to touch it for he had been scolded many times before by Romeo.

"That feels so nice!" Levy murmured with a sigh. "Please keep it burning and stay close to me to ward off this terrible heat."
Romeo slightly pouted at her request but followed Levy nonetheless. However, the cold spell only lasted half a minute before Bacon wandered off to the side to get a closer look at something, taking the fire mage with him. Levy quietly groaned as she was left to suffer in the sweltering humidity once more.

It was another painstaking hour before the group emerged from the jungle and entered the wide open sandy shore of the country's southwestern coast. Levy was greeted by the searing, blinding sun and the cool ocean wind that felt like a blessing against her sticky, moist skin. Sandaled feet sank into hot, white-gold sand as she rounded the few coconut palms that have taken root on the beach. Finding a spot in the shade, she dropped onto her bare knees like a rock onto the soft ground with Jet and Droy collapsing on either side of her, all exhausted. The two young boys however, excitedly ran off to the water's edge, their boots kicking up the sand.

The vast, deep blue ocean sparkled like diamonds under the radiant sun; the sea spreading as far as the eye could see, seemingly merging with the clear blue sky in the horizon. Gulls and other seabirds were soaring above, squawking and landing on the rocky parts of shore not too far away where the rolling tides soundly crashed against the mounds of rocks jutting out of the water's surface. The place looked, smelled, and felt like paradise. It was no wonder her companions had chosen such a beautiful location for their three-month stay.

For a moment, Levy took the time to catch her breath and enjoy the view. Bacon and Romeo stood like brothers side-by-side on the shore, gazing off at the endless sea. Although their backs were turned towards her, Levy knew the both of them wore wide smiles upon their young faces. As the boys began to explore, Levy reached into her bag for the map Mirajane had marked for her. On the chart, a red 'X' was drawn on the shoreline they were currently at. "According to this, they should be around here," she said, looking around the length of the beach that stretched far, around and out of sight behind the bordering jungle. Natsu and his team would have likely set up camp somewhere along the beach, closer to the trees for adequate shelter.

Droy slowly rolled onto his back before heaving his heavy body into a sitting position. "Guess we should hurry and look for them before the sun sets," he suggested, patting away the sand that clung to the bottom of his double chin, the front of his blue and white, tropical shirt, and his big belly.

Nodding, Levy wearily climbed back to her feet with Jet's help. Dusting off her knees and legs, she called for the boys who were now busy picking up shells and rocks in the wet sand and started to make her way down the right side of the beach. She stayed in the cool shadows of the tall palm trees as she followed the shoreline.

When Bacon caught up to her, he gently tugged on her hand as he strolled alongside her. "What is it, Bacon?" Levy asked, giving the boy a kind smile.

Grinning, he handed her half of a clam's shell that was as big as his palm. The girl's smile widened. "For me? Thank you! I love it. It's beautiful," she said, examining the shell closely. It was smooth and pearly-white on the inside and ridged and turquoise on the other. She leaned over and gave him a little hug as thanks before he went to give Jet and Droy pieces of shells as well.

As they rounded the outer jungle, it wasn't long until they heard familiar voices coming from up ahead.

"Fire Dragon's Crushing Fang!" Levy heard Natsu shout out an attack before hearing what sounded like a heavy rock thudding into the ground, tossing sand into the air.
Jet smirked. "Sounds like Natsu's training hard."

Then Levy heard Gray's angry voice, "Hey, flame-brain! Look what you did! You destroyed the ball! That's a penalty!"

There was a sharp sound coming from a blown whistle followed by Erza yelling, "Destruction of equipment nets the other team an additional five points!"

"What?! No freaking way!" Natsu bellowed before growling in annoyance.

Levy exchanged confused looks with Jet and Droy. Bacon and Romeo were already running ahead through the last of the trees before Levy started to jog after them.

She couldn't believe what she saw when she found her friends. "Wait a minute. They're not training, they're playing beach volleyball!" she exclaimed, eyeing the clearly marked sandy court with a net hung high down the center.

A fuming Natsu, a frazzled Lucy, and an unhappy Loke stood on one side while a smirking Gray, a love-struck Juvia, and a relieved Wendy stood on the other. Erza was seated atop a tall, cushioned chair made of thick bluish ice, acting as the referee while Carla and Happy watched from the sidelines, both waving colourful flags that represented their respective team. Everyone was dressed in their swim wear, having fun instead of focusing on their 'mission'.

And it wasn't just ordinary beach volleyball they were playing either… it was Magical (Death) Battle Beach Volleyball, a favourite sport among most members of Fairy Tail, usually the high rankers. It was a game that often turned extremely violent depending on who was playing. Whenever Natsu and Gray were on the court, whether on opposite teams or on the same side, matches always ended up in complete destructive chaos. It got even worse when Erza joined in the action. Everything was bound to be destroyed with those three aggressive and highly competitive members participating; equipment, nearby buildings, the surrounding environment – barely anything was salvageable once the game was over between them.

Their current court was already more than half-devastated with deep craters littering the sand both in and out of the lines. Three recently made craters on Gray's side were smoking, which Levy could quickly assume was due to Natsu spiking the volleyball so hard with his last attack that it split into flaming pieces. Scattered all over the sand were broken chunks of Gray's ice, melting and glistening under the hot sun. The sand was equally drenched and scorched black in various spots by Juvia's water and Natsu's flames. The net bore several burnt holes and hanging, dripping icicles and was held loosely together by only a few remaining strings.

Levy cringed at the state of the beach, not quite sure how long the group had been playing the intense game. Normally, it took at least ten minutes before the playing field reached this level of a mess.

Erza brought out a new volleyball seemingly out of nowhere. But before she could pass it to one of the teams, Wendy spotted Bacon running towards her and cried out the boy's name in surprise. All heads turned towards the approaching group, shocked to see Shadow Gear, Romeo, and Bacon making their way towards them.

Hopping over the sandy craters and avoiding the ice chunks, Wendy was first to meet up with Bacon. She gripped his shoulders, frowning with worry. "Bacon! What are you doing here? Did something happen?" she asked while everyone began to gather around them.

In response, Bacon stepped closer and wrapped his arms around her. Wendy's expression softened
and it was obvious she instantly knew the answer. She returned the embrace without a word.

Meanwhile, Erza raised her brow at Shadow Gear and questioned, "What's going on?"

"Yeah, what're you guys all doing here?" Natsu asked, both eager and confused.

Levy bashfully smiled and began to explain.

"Thank goodness you guys arrived in time," said Lucy, breathing out a big, relieved sigh. Sitting on her beach towel under the shade of the trees, she leaned back on the palms of her hands and gazed out at the ocean shore where Natsu, Happy, Gray, Jet, Droy, Romeo, Bacon, and Wendy were playing in the water. "I was sure I was going to die if we started another round."

Magical Battle Beach Volleyball... it was a sport way out of Lucy's league. Not only could she not keep up with the incredible speed of the volleyball flying all over the place, she couldn't even counter the spells being thrown at her from her opponents, leaving her two teammates, Natsu and Loke, to do all the work.

To Lucy's right, Levy let out a little giggle. She, as well as Jet, Droy, Bacon, and Romeo, had changed into their swim suits not too long ago. The afternoon was late and still very hot so they all decided to finally relax for the rest of the day. "Oh, I know how it is..." Levy replied with a tentative smile. "Can't say I'm a big fan of the game either. By the way, aren't you guys supposed to be training?"

"That was training," Erza implied, lying back on her towel on the other side of Levy, her eyes closed and looking content. "Since Lucy, Juvia, and Wendy have yet to experience the game, it was the perfect exercise to hone their physical and magical reflexes."

More like the perfect exercise to get killed... Lucy bitterly thought. "That game is for you crazy, insane people," she muttered under her breath, running a hand down her tired face. Carla, sitting comfortably on Wendy's rolled-up towel in front of Lucy, soundly smirked at the comment.

"You are only feeling this way because Juvia was on Gray's team and not yours," Juvia boasted from the other side of Lucy, leaning right into the other mage's face with a smug smile. "Juvia won the game."

Lucy nervously flinched away from the water mage and gave her a sullen look, not sure which game Juvia was referring to. Technically, no team had won the dreaded volleyball game since they stopped in the middle of the second round out of a grueling five, but Lucy didn't mention that and only sighed. She hadn't cared about winning; she only cared about staying alive throughout the insanity. "So Bacon had another bad nightmare, huh?" she said, changing the subject. "Wendy was worried about him ever since we left."

Levy nodded. "This morning he was very depressed. We couldn't cheer him up no matter what we did. Coming here was the best option because... well, three months is a long time for him to wait."

Lucy quietly agreed. Smiling, she watched the young boy laugh as he was carried around on Gray's shoulders. Romeo was perched over Natsu's shoulders and Wendy towered above the others as she sat atop of Droy's. The three pairs were trudging through the ocean, chasing after Happy who flew over the tides, carrying his team flag with his tail. Whoever was first to grab the flag won a point. Jet was waiting by the water's edge, keeping score.

"It's been a month..." Lucy quietly remarked. One month since Wendy had found Bacon within the lost temple. Since then, the boy has become a beloved member of Fairy Tail's family.
His past still remained a mystery. Despite all that time and everyone's efforts, it didn't seem like the boy had regained much of his memories. He was still a curious child and still learning the basics of survival. The only things he could recall were a few melodies on his ocarina and parts of songs that he couldn't quite fully remember how to play. Lucy had heard the different wonderful tunes whenever she was back from a short mission or training session, but only when Wendy was around. Bacon rarely played when the young Dragon Slayer was absent.

"It's been slow, but bit by bit, I believe he's remembering pieces of his past," said Levy with a fond smile. "The songs he plays are proof of that."

"Did Bacon bring his weapons?" Erza suddenly asked, bringing quizzical glances from everyone.

Turning to the older woman, Levy cocked her head slightly and raised an eyebrow at first before narrowing her eyes in suspicion. "Romeo usually keeps them stored away in his pocket dimension. Why do you ask?"

Sitting up, Titania was sneering as an idea crossed her mind. "I want to see if he remembers more than just how to play his flute," she answered.

"Not this again," Lucy murmured, afraid of what new sinister plot her superior had planned. "You're not thinking of—"

"I believe it's time to bring out his fighting spirit again. Perhaps it'll hasten the recovery of his memories," Erza informed. Her expression became serious. "He's a warrior as well as a musician. Forbidding him to fight only suppresses his abilities. He needs to experience more battles in order to remember more of his past life."

"Wendy will not approve of it given what happened last time," noted Carla, giving Titania a stern look. She crossed her arms, the end of her ribboned tail twitching. "We are not supposed to draw out the boy's power in fear of what it may attract."

"We are in a safe, isolated location," the other pointed out.

"I don't know, Erza…" Levy began hesitantly, slightly frowning. "I don't think it's wise to go against what we promised Master."

"I'm not suggesting Bacon would need to use his magic. Just a simple test in his fighting capabilities. Specifically with his swordplay."

"Define 'simple' in your terms," Carla dared to retort.

Titania's sneer returned. "Sword against sword in a little spar. As simple as that."

Although it did sound somewhat tame, Lucy had a dreaded feeling the spar would eventually turn into a drawn-out, vicious battle. Especially when Erza was in control of things. Lucy missed the first time Bacon fought against Erza, but she did witness the end result. Lucy didn't want the poor kid to go through all of that again.

Since the raptordile incident, Bacon had not touched his sword, shield, and bow due to Macao suggesting that the weapons should be kept in a safe place until it was absolutely necessary for the young boy to have them. However, Lucy did hear from Levy that Bacon would secretly practice his swordplay with Romeo using wooden sticks, so it was probably safe to say the young boy's skill with the sword had yet to dull over the past month. But even if that was true, Bacon still wouldn't come out unscathed when Erza was done with him.
Levy was quick to go against Erza's plan. "Please, Erza! He didn't come here just to get beat up!"

Erza rolled her eyes as if tired of hearing the same assumptions. "I'm not going to beat him up. I told you, it's only a spar."

"At least let the kid have some fun first," Lucy protested, gesturing to the group having a good time in the water. "Bacon's never been to the beach. Look how happy he is with everyone. I think you should wait for another day." Or another month or two, she wanted to add but held her tongue, knowing Titania wouldn't reconsider waiting that long.

"Juvia would be very happy too if she rode on Gray's shoulders like that," Lucy overheard the water mage murmur to herself. Juvia was cupping her hands to her smiling, blushing face, her sparkling blue eyes glazed over as she fantasized another over-dramatic romantic scenario between her and the Ice-Make mage.

For a moment, Erza said nothing as she watched the boys and Wendy frolic in the ocean. She heaved a sigh and fell back on her towel. "Very well," she finally complied, folding her arms under her head and closing her eyes. "Tomorrow then."

Lucy shared a small, relieved look with Levy now that they've managed to delay a little more time for Bacon. Lucy could only hope she and the others could come up with other excuses to stave off Titania's desire to test her sword against his.

When evening came, everyone was out of the water, starving. As they were getting ready to prepare supper, Loke suddenly returned from the Celestial Spirit World on his own, fully dressed in his black suit again. There was a look of urgency on his face, making Lucy quick to realize something was wrong.

"Guys, I need your help," Loke pleaded, interrupting Natsu from starting a cooking fire, "You all have to come with me to the Celestial Spirit World."

"Wh-what? Why? What's going on?" Lucy questioned in shock, jumping to her feet.

"Did something happen to the spirits?" Gray asked, just as surprised as everyone else.

Loke shook his head and motioned for everyone to come closer. "I have no time to explain. I'll take you to the Spirit World first."

"But how?" Lucy inquired, moving to stand before her friend and spirit. "Humans can't enter the Spirit World… Can they?"

She caught the playful gleam in the lion's eyes behind his tinted shades when he met her stare. A wide grin spread across his face as he raised his right hand shrouded in golden energy. "They can when they wear special clothes enchanted with the power of the Celestial Spirits," he explained. Within the next instant, a large magic circle appeared right below the group's bare and sandaled feet, shining bright and pure with white light.

Lucy could hear the sounds of awe and startled gasps around her as everyone's swim suits were replaced with new clothes in a blink of an eye. Before she could admire her new outfit, the light of the circle grew too bright, forcing her to shut her eyes. The next thing she knew, she was no longer standing on the sunny beach but in an amazing world full of mystery and wonder.

Evening was nearing its end and the sun was beginning to set, painting the sky orange, pink, and red. The last golden rays touched upon the flowing waters of the large fountain built within the center of
the palace's courtyard. Glistening like diamonds, the endless cascade of water added a touch of beauty to the surrounding garden. Flowers of nearly every shape and size and in every colour of the rainbow brightened the lush area alongside the trimmed hedges and trees. Birds could be heard, singing their last songs for the day, as they fluttered between trees and branches.

It was here that Princess Hisui E. Fiore always felt at peace. The vast garden was her late mother's favourite place. "My treasure," the Queen had once called it. And now it was Hisui's treasure, one of the last gifts her mother had left her.

Sitting on the purple marble ledge of the fountain, the princess didn't mind the spray of water against her face, chilling her slightly. She ran her fingers across the rippling surface of the crystal clear water in the basin, smiling at her distorted reflection.

Footsteps were approaching her spot, each step heavy and ringing with the clinks of metal armour. *Always on time,* she mused, her carefree smile gone. In place was the bold face of the princess, the heir and willing protector of the Kingdom of Fiore. She stood and wiped her wet, cold fingers on the fringes of her dark blue satin dress. Eyes transfixed on the shimmering fountain, she addressed the other as he soundly bent a knee behind her; "Sir Geraldo."

"Your Highness," the man greeted, his deep baritone voice echoing within the helm he wore.

The princess turned around, her emerald eyes falling on the kneeling knight. "At ease. No need for formalities here. I've told you many times. Now, please stand."

"Of course, Princess." The knight stood up, his full height towering over the smaller woman by half a meter. Fully clad in polished black armour hemmed with silver from head to toe and wearing the flowing crimson cloak of the Cherry Blossom Holy Knights, the man was an imposing figure when standing among the ranks of the king's army. Within only two years, the man had flourished from a common soldier to a well-respected knight. A stern, strict man most of the time, he dealt discipline with a solid steel fist for he was the second-in-command of the Holy Knights. Loyal and trustworthy, he had sworn to protect the royal family and the Kingdom of Fiore. Not only that, he was the one secretly overseeing the Eclipse Project by the princess's side along with Arcadios.

Never has Hisui gazed upon the man's face for it was always hidden beneath the great helm that covered all but the narrow slit for him to see. Made of layered black steel and lined with silver to match the design of his armour, the front of the large helm was adorned with two magnificent silver horns that curved upwards like the tusks of a wild boar. Deep ruby eyes dwelled within, most of the time shrouded by shadow, but sometimes the princess caught a glimpse of them when the knight stood at the right angle towards the sun. Right now she could see them, glowing red like the embers of a young flame as they met her stare. "Everything is ready for this year's Grand Magic Games."

The princess nodded. "This is the year of the eclipse… the year foretold of our destruction," she coolly replied. And yet her heart was fluttering and her hands were turning cold and clammy with worry. "This is the year we must utilize our plan without flaw."

"The twelve golden Celestial keys are still needed. Are you certain they will appear before the time arrives?"

"Yes." *For that has been foretold as well.* She gave the knight a confident smile. "Fairy Tail's strongest have returned, the ones who once made the guild the strongest seven years past. Among them is a Celestial Spirit mage who is in possession of ten of those keys. Her name is Lucy Heartfilia."
The knight crossed his plated arms that palely gleamed from the fading light and narrowed his eyes through the slit of his helm. "You believe she will attend?"

"I do not doubt that she and her guild will participate in the event. The allure of the Games would surely draw Fairy Tail's attention now that they rank the lowest of all guilds. Do you not remember the stories about them? I understand you have only served seven years under my father but surely you have heard the old tales of their amazing feats?" And of course, the reason why they were also a notorious guild in the eyes of the Magic Council.

"Some," Sir Geraldo replied in honesty. "They were part of the alliance that defeated the Dark Guild Oracion Seis and were the ones who abolished Grimoire Heart."

"Since the disappearance of their main members on Tenrou Island, Fairy Tail's reputation has gone to the gutter. They are a prideful group. The Grand Magic Games will be their key to bringing them back to the top. They cannot refuse to participate." The outcome of this year's Games will be the deciding factor for my decision. If that cloaked man has told true of our future, then I must do everything I can to protect my city and my people.

"And of the other two keys?"

"They will show up on another Celestial Spirit mage." It was what she was told and she was hoping out of desperation for it to be true. Every night since the day she had learned of the calamity destined to befall Fiore, Hisui had prayed to whatever gods would hear her for the chance to change her kingdom's fate. Years had been spent planning and preparing to prevent the upcoming disaster that was soon dawning upon them. "And when we find those last two keys, it is up to Arcadios to retrieve them all. Is he… Is he prepared for that task?"

The black knight nodded his great helmed head as he slightly bowed forward, his right hand placed over his heart. "The captain and I are at your every command, Your Highness. He will do what is needed and so will I for the sake of Fiore. As of now, Captain Arcadios continues to misinform Minister Datong of the cannon's completion. There will be no interjections from that old man so long as he remains oblivious to our plans."

The princess was overwhelmed with shame and guilt for having to deceive the Minister of Defense. She couldn't hide her heavy frown.

"You must do what must be done, Princess," the man stated bluntly. "Everything we are doing is for one purpose only and--"

"That is to protect our future," Hisui finished for him, feeling more assured. She faced the fountain and stared at the darkening sky. Night was falling, signaling another day gone and forgotten. Time was growing shorter with each beat of her anxious heart. Yes, we all must do everything we can… even if we must lie, betray, and deceive…

"It grows dark, Your Highness. I suggest you retire for the night."

The princess lightly shook her head. "The night is still young. I would like to stay out here for a little while longer. You are dismissed, Sir Geraldo. Give my regards to the captain."

"Of course, Princess."

She heard him leave. Now alone, Hisui turned her head towards the dark heavens, her mind troubled with the upcoming Grand Magic Games. Sleep would not come to her tonight. Just like the night before, the night before that, and the night before that. For the past seven years, she could not fall
asleep on her own and needed a magic spell or a potion to ever get any rest. But even then, her dreams were plagued by nightmares. She often dreamt of failure; her plan to save the future would always somehow go wrong, resulting in death and destruction and her beloved city of Crocus in ruins. The dreams would not go away no matter how much faith she had for the Eclipse Project to succeed.

Hands clasped tight to her chest, she gazed upon the peeking stars and silently prayed for luck and hope to be on their side. The song of ten thousand dragons will soon rent the sky... and she was the only one who could stop it.

*Only one more week until the Games begin... The winner will decide the fate of Fiore's future.*
Above was the starry night sky, full of twinkling lights and colourful orbs that glowed bright. There were many other, larger spheres too – called planetoids – guarded by rings of rainbow or wispy clouds, covered in flowing waters with giant sailing ships, or occupied by large buildings, strange houses, and crystal hills. It wasn't just the sky that was full of fascinating things to see; the area they stood upon was made of luminous stone that flickered with different colours with every step and, beyond the borders of the large platform, was a vast ocean-like world that reflected the universe in the sky above as if a giant, rippling mirror. There were massive trees that sprouted from the dark depths, each as high as the trees in East Forest, their branches bare and as clear as glass. Everywhere they turned, there were pointy mounds of crystals that sparkled under the many tall, skinny lamps that shone like pale blue stars.

This was the Celestial Spirit World and it was a beautiful, wondrous place brimming with magical energy.

Bacon wanted to explore this new amazing land dressed in the new clothes given to him by the strange white light from before. His wet, sandy swimming trunks were replaced with dark blue pants embroidered with red to form an ornate pattern down the outer sides. His bare feet were now covered in knee-high black boots that were belted at the top with oval sapphire ornamental clasps that had open wings of silver on either sides of them. Around his wrists were thick, wide bands of white cloth trimmed with blue depicting shiny purple stars linked within a chain and upon his head was a hat he had yet to see, but he knew it was light and made of something soft and feathery. The final piece was his green shirt that was short-sleeved and long, where the bottoms tapered to points just above his knees, and with fancy yellow jewel-studded buttons and an elegant, celestial design running from top to bottom in light blue. He wasn't the only one wearing different clothes; everyone else around him had changed into new attires as well.

Bacon took one step forward only to freeze in alarm when something huge suddenly materialized above them. It was a giant of a man, just as big as the time the kind old master of Fairy Tail had transformed to enormous proportions to punish those who misbehaved. Hovering in the air, this man was fully dressed in shiny emerald, gold, and silver armour and wearing a long, flowing white mantle that gently flapped behind him. Upon his head was a dark helm topped with long feathers, a golden star on the forehead, and with two, thick pale horns adorning both of its sides. His white moustache was peculiar, the hairs long and stiff and puffy at the ends. He had skin that was blue and red eyes that glinted like gems. And when he spoke, his voice was like thunder, loud and booming, that it reverberated within Bacon's chest and nearly deafened his ears, making him and some others gasp.

"Welcome, my old friends. Thank you all for coming here."

"Whoa! He's so huge!" Natsu exclaimed while Happy shrieked about the man's funny moustache.

"It's the King of the Celestial Spirit World," said Lucy as she moved to bravely stand alone before...
"Loke spoke of some sort of urgent matter. Is something wrong with your world?"

"Indeed. There is a matter most serious that I need all of your help with," the giant replied.

"What is it?" Erza inquired, stepping up to Lucy's side.

The Spirit King grinned, showing his pearly white teeth. "I need you all to help me celebrate your return!" he shouted, his voice booming across the land. At that exact same moment, the world around them exploded with life. Popping out of nowhere was a bunch of people, some of them strange in appearance and not human-like. They ranged in size and shape and all wore friendly, happy, joyful faces. "It's time to party!" they all yelled out as one, matching the king's voice in volume.

Bacon smiled in excitement. 'Party' meant food, fun, games, magic battles, complete destruction of furniture, and more food. He looked at Wendy in anticipation but found her and everyone else, with the exception of Loke, gaping at the odd group in stunned disbelief.

Loke broke out in laughter. "Surprise! It was all just a ruse. My acting was top-notch, wasn't it, Master Lucy?" he asked as he draped an arm around the girl's shoulder.

"Unbelievable…" Lucy sighed before giving Loke a playful shove in the face. She lightly chuckled soon after. "You really had me worried."

Loke smirked and waved for everyone to follow him. "C'mon! Let's go have some fun! You guys are the very first people to be invited to the Celestial Spirit World by our King so let's make this party memorable!"

"For real?" asked Romeo in awe as he clenched his hands before him, both covered in fingerless red gloves decorated with blue crescent moons on the back of the palms. "That's so cool!"

"A party! Alright! Can't wait to eat!" Natsu shouted with glee as he dashed ahead with a smiling Happy flying right behind. Each of Natsu's footsteps left a colourful rippling mark on the lighted stone that disappeared after a few seconds.

"You better not eat everything, Natsu!" Romeo warned jokingly, chasing after the older fire mage. The short orange cape he was given to wear flared behind him, its ends frayed like feathers on a wing. His white boots decorated with golden chains noisily clinked with every footfall.

Bacon grabbed Wendy's hand and pulled her along, wanting to follow the running pair.

She giggled behind him and said, "You must be really hungry. You don't have to rush. I'm sure there's plenty to eat. Isn't there?"

"We've prepared quite a feast for you all," came the thunderous voice of the hovering giant. "There's no need to run, my old friends. I shall take you all to the banquet!"

There was a sharp resounding snap of metal fingers that drew Bacon's attention. Then the world around them began to change. The night sky full of twinkling lights and planetoids flickered and melded with the vast ocean-like land covered in illuminated crystal. Colours and shapes blurred together and before Bacon could even blink, a new area appeared before him. No longer did he and his friends stand upon the glowing stone walkway but on a floor made entirely of pale blue crystal.

Bacon gawked in amazement, not quite sure how everything became so different so fast. It was noisier and more populated here with many more strange-looking beings gathered around, welcoming the group who had just instantly arrived. Most had the faces of animals, others were moving, talking objects, and some resembled ordinary humans. There was a pair of giant, grinning
eel-like fish swimming in circles in the air above them all, their shiny scales flashing with silvery lights.

The floor wasn’t the only thing composed of dazzling crystal, everything on the wide balcony that opened to the night sky was made of it too: the ornate columns, the domed ceiling, the tables, chairs, plates and utensils, and even the potted plants set around as decorations. There was also a giant star-shaped piano and a huge, similar-shaped trumpet that both glimmered like diamonds, and a live band full of animal people, each playing a different instrument. Along with the music and happy cheers, the air was also overflowing with the delicious, savoury smells coming from the many dishes of food sitting on the tables. Some platters were huge, while others were much, much bigger, carrying a humongous portion of herb-roasted brown meat basted in juices, a mountain-sized pile of bread baked golden brown, and a brightly-coloured multilayered cake that was twice as tall as Bacon and ten times as wide.

The King appeared before the largest table on the balcony that was draped with a white cloth and covered in a vast array of delectable dishes. He spread out his silvery-plated arms and motioned for Fairy Tail to step closer. "My friends, please seat around my table. Eat and drink to your heart's content!"

Natsu was first to dive right in, his arms a blur as he filled his plate with everything he could get his hands on. There were dishes of casseroles and pasta drenched in rich sauces, bowls of steaming vegetables, tossed salads, and soups, plates of seafood, grilled meats, and sausages, platters of cheese, crackers, and many types of fruit. There were so many choices and yet Natsu managed to pile everything onto his plate before he started to devour it all.

Everyone else followed in a more sophisticated manner, taking their respective crystal seat and spooning up what they wanted to try out first in moderation.

The food was delicious, every bite bursting with flavor and every taste savoured. There was nothing Bacon didn't like. His favourite was the cake, slathered in sweet, creamy icing, and the chocolaty insides soft and moist. The drinks were cold, refreshing, tasty, and fizzy like sugary soda.

The place was loud with chattering and laughter that was accompanied by the music and singing from the live band. It was a fun and lively atmosphere, having almost the same feel as the wild parties thrown back at Fairy Tail when everyone was gathered.

After the meal, it was time for exploration and discovery for Bacon while everyone else wandered the floor to meet up with others. Some spirits and a few of the mages of Fairy Tail got together and joined arms to prance around and sing.

With Wendy and Carla joining him, Bacon was introduced to many of the spirits who resided in the world by Loke. From the black and white axe-wielding bull warrior named Taurus to the kind, pink-haired girl with short brown horns named Aries, the boy met all of Lucy's Celestial Spirits and many other nice and friendly beings. However, he was most interested in meeting with the giant man in the armour.

He pointed at the Spirit King still sitting cross-legged by the enormous table, conversing with Gray and Lucy who were both currently being swarmed by the small canine spirits called Nikoras.

"You want to meet the great King of the Celestial Spirit World, little guy?" asked Loke, raising his brow. He smirked when the boy nodded. "No problem. He may look big and mean, but he's a good man at heart. What am I worried about? You're not afraid of anything." He shortly laughed as he led the way, rounding the large table.
"He really is kind to throw Lucy and all of us this party," said Wendy. "It's such an honour!"

"This is indeed a rare occasion, a first in our history. Lucy is truly special to us," said Loke with a fond smile. His smile grew wider as they approached Lucy and Gray because the group of Nikoras suddenly began to stampede towards the children and Carla.

Squealing and yapping, the little colourful spirits surrounded Bacon and Wendy and started to climb up their legs and onto their backs. Giggling, the boy happily petted their rounded heads, liking their soft fur and squishy bodies. He picked up a white one like he would an Exceed, glad to find it calm in his arms. The small spirit with the gold, pointy nose and slightly frowning face was very light too, weighing only a pound or less. One had climbed to the top of his head and another perched over his right shoulder. Wendy wasn't spared from the little creatures either, having a few latch onto her arms, back, and legs.

"Oh, there's Plue! Good job in finding him, Bacon," praised Lucy, chuckling.

"These guys can be quite a handful," said Gray, smirking in amusement.

"They're really cute," said Wendy, giggling.

Loke started to pry the Nikoras off the young pair. "Come on, guys. Let them through." Once the path was somewhat clear, Bacon, still carrying the Nikora named Plue, and Wendy stepped towards the King alongside Loke. Two pairs of ruby red eyes watched them approach.

Loke gave a slight bow and said politely, "Your Highness, I have a little friend who wants to say hello."

The King gazed upon the boy staring up in bewilderment, his red eyes glinting. "Ah, at last we meet. I've been waiting for this moment to arrive, Young One," he said, his thunderous words easily overheard over the many noises around them.

The King's reverberating voice always left a strange feeling in Bacon's chest. Nevertheless, he was very curious about the man. Holding Plue with his right arm, he stuck out his left hand which brought a mighty, roaring laugh from the ruler of the spirit realm. Bacon cringed away because it felt like the whole world was shaking from such a loud sound. When the laughter died down, the King held out his enormous hand, prompting the boy to raise his left arm again. A giant finger armoured in silver lightly tapped Bacon's open palm soon after, making his hand tingle from the touch.

Bacon gasped from the odd sensation that ran down his arm. He could sense the king's magic power from that brief contact and it was incredible – far beyond anything he had ever felt before. No mage in Fairy Tail could match the level of magic this giant blue-skinned man possessed. The boy was in awe.

"How do you know Bacon?" Wendy suddenly asked the King.

"I think I briefly mentioned him," Loke chose to answer with a shrug. "Though it hasn't really been that long, Your Highness. Been like a day."

"It feels much longer than that," the great King replied, drawing odd looks from those around him.

Carla flew closer to Bacon, each beat of her wings softly stirring his blond hair. "Is there something you know about him?" she questioned.

"Not at all. This is the first time I've seen him."
"You make it sound like you were expecting him," Bacon heard Lucy quietly mused behind him.

The King leaned over to peer more closely at Bacon, the bushy ends of his long moustache nearly within the boy's reach. He bared his pearly teeth in a small grin. In a surprisingly quieter tone, equal in volume to a normal person, he stated, "Fate has brought you here, Young One, and it shall be fate that will decide how your future unfolds. It will be your friends who will guide you to your lost path so do not lose hope when things look dark."

Bacon tilted his head and blinked, not quite comprehending all that was said. He felt a hand on his shoulder that belonged to Wendy. She gave him an assuring smile while Plue softly murmured in his arms.

The great King straightened and gestured at the table still full of food. "Now, why don't you all have some more to eat? There's still plenty to go around!" he bellowed.

"Um, no thank you. We're very full," Wendy kindly refused with a timid bow of her head and a wave of her hand.

"Then some more song and dance! Lyra, if you could be so kind. Sing us a lovely tune."

A young woman wearing a pink bonnet and a blue dress appeared before the King atop the table where no dishes sat. She had long blonde hair that curled at the ends, small white wings sprouting from her back, and a large blue string instrument set beside her. Her rosy face was alight with a giddy smile as she wriggled in excitement. "As you wish, Your Highness!" she squealed in happiness. She pulled a crystal stool seemingly out of nowhere and sat upon it.

When she ran her fingers over the strings, Bacon was immediately enthralled by the thrilling sound they made. He had heard the same sound before, strummed by a man with blond hair, red eyes, and bandaged fingers, but on an instrument that was made of gold and smaller. Who was that man? And where had Bacon seen him before? There was nothing he could remember; only the melodies strum on the golden instrument that he could play on his blue ocarina.

He was confused, but the thought soon left him as the girl continued to pluck her strings. Her melody was different to the ones he somehow knew. It was a soothing, flowing serenade that calmed the rowdy atmosphere of the banquet hall. And then she parted her smiling lips and sang, her strong, lovely voice captivating everyone's attention;

"Old friend, I can see you. You're right there."

Bacon slowly approached the table with Plue still placid within his arms. He was mesmerized by Lyra's singing, drawn to the harmony in both her voice and music.

"It's beautiful, isn't it? How she plays the harp?" Wendy quietly asked him as she stood by his side.

The boy nodded while Carla responded with; "The sound really takes your mind off of things."

"Old friend, I swear the bond between us will never be broken.

"I'm the star that's meant for you, so I shine bright.

"This song is meant for you so show me your smile."

Her words ended there but her strumming didn't stop, her fingers elegantly weaving a fine melody. The song filled him with happiness because it reminded him of all the heart-warming kindness and support he had received from everyone in Fairy Tail whenever he felt troubled or lost. Most of all, it
reminded him of Wendy, his dear friend. She had cared for him many times and healed him whenever he was hurt. He reached out and lightly grasped Wendy's hand and closed his eyes to listen to the rest, the smile on his face never fading even when Lyra hummed the last note.

It was another hour or two, before it was time for the party to end. Bacon was disappointed that they had to leave, however Aries was kind enough to pack a few slices of cake for him to take.

The group was taken back to the luminous stone platform when everyone was ready to go, again at the sound of the great Spirit King's snapping fingers. Lucy's spirits had gathered around once more, bidding her and her friends good-bye as well as words of encouragement and gratitude. Loke was the only spirit to stand amongst Fairy Tail for he was the one to send them all back.

"Farewell, my old friends. May the stars watch over you," said the King of the Celestial Spirits, his gaze shifting across the happy group. Just as the circle beneath everyone's feet began to glow bright, his eyes found Bacon's. "We are destined to meet again. I will be waiting until that time comes," he quietly added, his grin disappearing in the blinding white light.

The burning hot sun, the cool sea breeze, and the sound of crashing waves welcomed them all back. Compared to the darkness of the Celestial Spirit World, Earthland, on a bright sunny day was very blinding. Wendy had to blink several times to get her eyes adjusted to the new light.

She took a deep breath of the fresh salty air, feeling a little sad about leaving the beautiful spirit realm. However, the time for fun and relaxation was over and back to training. She looked around the beach only to realize it was noon. They had left in the evening, so did that mean they had partied throughout the night and half-way through the day? For sure it felt like they had spent a full day in the spirit realm. She didn't feel tired; all the food she ate kept her energized and awake.

"We're back," she heard Natsu say before he started to stretch. "Man, that was a blast. I'd love to do that again sometime."

"Maybe when we win the Grand Magic Games we could ask for another celebration," suggested Lucy, smiling.

There was shouting coming from the side accompanied by running footsteps in the sand. Two familiar men wearing only their swimming trunks were dashing towards them with tears streaking down their eyes and wide, relieved smiles on their darkly tanned faces.

"Oh! There's Jet and Droy! I was wondering what happened to them!" exclaimed Levy as she squeezed between Erza and Juvia with a large, leather-bound book in her arms the spirits had allowed her to have.

"Oops. Must've missed them," said Loke with an apologetic smile.

The two men of Shadow Gear reunited with their third member, each one wrapping their arms around the small girl, nearly crushing her to death. "Levy! You're back! Thank goodness!" Droy sobbed.

"We thought something terrible happened! I'm so happy to see you back and still in one piece! We've missed you for three months!" Jet added.

There was a sudden pause in everyone who had gone to the Celestial Spirit World.

"W-Wait a minute, Jet. What did you say?" Levy managed to wheeze out as she tried to pry away
from their strong hold.

Wendy and everyone else had fallen into a stunned and confused silence, all eyes on the two men. Bacon, however, only tilted his head slightly as he quietly observed everyone's reactions while Loke started to look rather nervous.

Jet stepped back and raised a perplexed eyebrow at his fellow teammate. "I'm happy to see you alive and still in one piece?" he repeated.

"No, after that."

"We've missed you for three months?"

"Th-Three... Three... months?" Levy echoed, barely able to pronounce the words. Her eyes grew wide and her mouth agape in utter disbelief. "Y-You're kidding, right?"

It was Jet's and Droy's turn to look confused. "It's really been three months, Levy," Jet stressed out.

"Whadya mean 'three months'?!" Natsu suddenly demanded, snapping out of his shock. "How the hell did we lose that much time?! We were only gone for a day!"

"What? Really?!!" Jet and Droy exclaimed as one.

Droy looked at each member and frowned. "So you guys didn't train or anything at all? We waited and waited, thinking you guys were saving the Celestial Spirit World or something. And yeah... It's been three months since you all left. The Grand Magic Games start in five days!"

Wendy just stared, too shocked to even blink. Three months. Gone. Just. Like. That.

Everyone affected by the horrifying news began to slowly turn their attention towards the only Celestial Spirit within the vicinity.

"Loke..." Erza snarled through clenched teeth, her tone low and threatening.

The lion flinched and took a few wary steps back, raising one hand protectively before him while he nervously scratched the back of his head with the other. He let out a tentative laugh, breaking out in a cold sweat. "Uh... D-Did I... forget to mention that there's a... little time difference between our worlds?" he uttered meekly.

"A 'little'? Three months is not a 'little' to us," Gray growled, soundly cracking his knuckles of one hand in the palm of the other.

He, Natsu, and Erza began to slowly advance on the spirit, knuckles cracking, fists tightly clenched, eyes gleaming with malicious intentions, and emitting a violent aura that rivaled the fiercest demons Wendy had ever seen.

"You shoulda mentioned the time difference earlier, dumbass!" the Fire Dragon Slayer roared. Before Loke could get away, the three of them pounced on Loke and began to inflict the poor lion's punishment.

"Gah! Lucy! Please save me!" Loke cried, curled into a defensive ball. But little did he know his master had joined the trio in beating him up.

Once they had vented their anger, everyone slumped to the sandy ground, feeling nothing but utter dismay. By that time, their new outfits disappeared and were replaced with what they had worn
before they left. Even though Wendy was just as downtrodden as her guild members, she couldn't stand seeing Loke lying hurt in a pool of his own blood and had to promptly heal him up. His swollen, bloody face and bruises were gone in seconds under the power of her Sky Dragon Slayer magic.

Loke grasped her hands and wept in appreciation when she was done. "Oh, Little Miss Wendy… Bless your kind heart," the lion exclaimed before turning to Bacon who was kneeling by the girl. "You're lucky to have her, little guy."

The boy smiled brightly while Wendy began to stutter, "W-W-What do you mean by that?"

The Celestial Spirit gave her a little wink. "I'm saying you're a caring young lady. Something every guy needs. Now, if you'll excuse me."

He pocketed his broken shades, got to his feet, dusted the sand off his rumpled, blood-stained suit, and dropped to his hands and knees before Lucy. "Forgive me, Master! I'm so sorry for not telling you about the time difference!" He bowed his head, burying his face in the hot, white sand.

Lucy sighed and waved him away. "Just go home, Loke. We'll… figure something out… maybe…"

However, there was hardly any energy or willpower left in her to make any effort to resolve their new problem. None of the mages did. Everyone was in deep despair.

With one last "Sorry!" the lion disappeared into his gate.

Dragging her feet in the sand, Wendy sullenly joined the rest of her teammates in the shade of the palm trees where a sense of hopelessness hung thick in the air around them. Like a heavy sack of potatoes, the Sky Dragon Slayer dropped against the trunk of a palm beside Romeo, Carla, and Happy with Bacon joining right after. He looked around at each member's face and frowned in concern.

"So… what do you guys plan to do?" Droy dared to ask. He took a bite of his slice of cake that Bacon had shared with him and Jet. "Whoa, this cake! It's… It's like a piece of heaven in my mouth! A God among all cakes! It's so good!" he murmured through joyous tears.

"I'm so jealous you guys got to eat all that food," Jet added between bites of his own dessert.

"I was really hoping to get a chance to train with Natsu while I was here," said Romeo sadly. He folded his arms over his raised knees and rested his chin on top, his eyes downcast. "With only five days left, there's no way you guys can get strong enough for the Games."

Erza suddenly sprang to her feet, giving a few people quite a start. Her eyes were burning with determination as she held a trembling, white-knuckled fist before her. "Yes, we can," she began, meeting everyone's gazes, "We can still train within that short amount of time! We'll have to play the Hell version of Magical Battle Beach Volleyball for five days straight!"

"There's a Hell version?!" Lucy exclaimed in horror.

"There is now!" the warrioress answered, a wicked sneer on her face. "There will be no sleep. There will no breaks. And there will be no escape! Everyone! Get up! You're wasting the precious little time we have!"

Lucy clung to the tree she was leaning against for dear life and tearfully wailed, "No! Anything but that! I don't want to die!"

Wendy wanted to cry just like Lucy. Dread twisted her insides at the thought of having to endure such horrible torture in the form of an extremely violent volleyball game. And for five days non-stop...
no less. There was no way she was going to survive until the end!

Bacon was first to jump to his feet at Erza's command, eager to play the sport he knew absolutely nothing about. Wendy quickly grabbed his wrist and held him back. "No, Bacon! You don't want to play that!" she warned.

The boy blinked at her in confusion. He perked up and turned his attention towards the sky to point at a twittering bird swooping towards them. It was a white pigeon and it descended not on a branch of a palm leaf but on top of Erza's head.

There was an awkward silence as everyone stared for a brief moment, making Erza blink in confusion while still poised in her determined stance.

Natsu was first to point and exclaim, "Erza! Don't move! There's a bird on your head!"

"Eh?" The warrioress froze, mouth agape in surprise. Her wide brown eyes looked upwards to try and spot the feathered creature perched atop her head.

"There's something tied to its leg," noted Gray as he carefully reached out to retrieve the piece of paper wrapped around its skinny orange leg. The instant he unraveled the string, the bird took flight with a chirp and disappeared over the jungle.

"To Fairy Tail," Gray began to read the note, "Come to the suspension bridge deep in the western jungle."

"The hell is this?" Natsu muttered as he snatched the paper to read it himself.

"Someone knows we're here," Erza informed warily as she smoothed out her hair the bird had partially messed up. She hardened her gaze at the wilderness. "Could this be some sort of trap?"

"Who could it be?" Gray wondered, crossing his arms over his bare chest.

Lucy looked unsettled. "I don't think we should go…"

"I'm catching a familiar scent on this paper. Not sure what it is exactly. Can't put my finger on it…" said Natsu as he sniffed the note. He followed Erza's gaze, a sneer on his face. "We should check this out."

"What? Are you sure?" Lucy questioned.

Natsu sidled next to her and asked, "Would you rather stay and play volleyball?"

Lucy raised a hand in the air and said joyfully, "Let's check out this bridge!"

The group changed out of their swimwear and into clothes fit for the hot, humid weather. They left their gear behind on the beach and ventured into the dense wildlife. Up front with machetes and an ice blade were Jet, Droy, and Gray, hacking at the overgrowth barring their way.

It was sweltering the first time they travelled through and it was just as bad the second time. Wendy was grateful to have Romeo's cold blue fire burning close by to keep the temperature down. She constantly kept an eye on Bacon, making sure he didn't wander off on his own. She had told him earlier not to leave her side because there was no knowing who had written that letter.

Whoever had sent them the note could be lurking around the wilderness, watching them undetected for some unknown reason, waiting for an opportunity to strike or something worse. The unnerving
thought frightened Wendy. She kept her keen senses fully alert in hope of not getting ambushed by a surprise attack and noticed Natsu doing the same.

It took over an hour before they found what they were looking for atop a high cliff that overlooked a deep canyon with no visible bottom from where Wendy stood. Opposite to the cliff they stood on was another rocky cliff where the jungle continued on, however the area was unreachable on foot because the suspension bridge they were told to find was broken in half. Only the wooden posts and the ends of the bridge that hung down the cliff sides remained intact and they were visibly old, evident by the rotten, weathered wood and badly frayed rope.

Erza was quick to look around, her narrowed eyes scanning for any sign of danger.

"There's no one here," Natsu grumbled, sounding rather disappointed.

"Were you expecting a fight?" Lucy muttered under her breath.

Gray snorted in annoyance. "Is this some kind of prank? It ain't funny."

Bacon was intrigued by the sight before them and dashed to the very edge of the cliff for a better look before Wendy could stop him. Fortunately, he didn't trip over the side as Wendy had mentally feared. He made a sound of awe as he peered down the steep canyon, seeing a dark flowing river at far bottom. A warm wind was blowing up here, making the leaves gently rustle and the canyon quietly howl.

"Careful! You don't want to fall," Wendy warned as she tugged him away from the edge. "Carla, you should stay with him. Just in case."

Carla quietly sighed. "Very well," she complied before hopping to perch over the young boy's shoulder.

Bacon smiled at the cat accompanying him and reached up to give her a little scratch behind her ears. Carla didn't mind too much, now used to having the boy treat her the same way as Wendy had taught him.

"Hey, look!" shouted Gray. All heads turned towards the bridge, shocked to see it move. The broken ends lifted as if an invisible hand had pulled on the ropes and held them in midair. Shattered planks of wood began to float together to reform into whole boards while the frayed ropes started to grow in length, their individual strands twisting around one another to become stronger, thicker ropes that entwined around the ends of each plank and around the top supporting ropes to suspend the bottom. Within seconds the old, broken bridge was restored, looking as new as the day it was made as if time had just been reversed.

Wendy gulped, feeling very uneasy at the power the mysterious people possessed. Bacon was the complete opposite of how she felt for he was gaping at the magically fixed bridge like it was neat trick.

"Looks like they want to meet on the other side," Erza muttered, eyeing the bridge warily.

Levy nervously wrung her hands together. "This might really be a trap…" she said. "They could make the bridge collapse while we're crossing it…"

Wendy bit her lower lip at the thought.

Erza crossed her arms, her lips curving into a smug smile. "These people know who we are. They wouldn't resort to something as simple as that to get rid of us," she informed.
Natsu strolled ahead and started to cross the bridge, unafraid of the possible bad scenarios that could happen. "If they want to mess with Fairy Tail, then we'll give them a big surprise. Come on. Let's find them!"

In a single file, everyone followed the Fire Dragon Slayer across the bridge that trembled and swayed with each of their steps. Wendy couldn't help but be protective over Bacon by having him walk in front of her. Heights didn't faze him one bit and that was no surprise. Crossing an unsteady bridge suspended over twenty meters high was more exciting than terrifying for him, evident by the little smile he wore. Whenever he stopped to stare at the river below, Wendy would give him a gentle nudge to keep moving.

Much to Wendy's relief, the bridge stayed intact and everyone was safe on the other side. The group continued on through the thicket. No one spoke. All eyes and ears were tuned to their surroundings in hope of finding the ones luring them deeper into the jungle. The only thing Wendy could hear were the beautiful calls of the tropical birds and the annoying buzz of flying insects.

But then she detected movement coming from ahead of them and paused behind Natsu with everyone following their lead. She tensed and stood protectively before Bacon when three people stepped into view.

They wore dark blue hooded cloaks that were trimmed with silver and their faces were hidden in the shadows of their hoods. "Thank you for coming, Fairy Tail," spoke the tallest one in front, obviously a man.

Wendy furrowed her brow when she recognized the scent of the one who spoke and when the person threw back his hood, her suspicions were confirmed.

"Jellal!" Erza was first to say the man's name out of shock. Her eyes were wide and quivering and she trembled where she stood, her hands furling into white-knuckled fists by her sides.

The man with short blue hair, brown eyes, and a distinct crimson tattoo down his right eye had the same face as the kind boy who had once helped Wendy in the past. But it wasn't this Jellal who had helped her, but the Jellal from Edolas who was now the king of the parallel world's kingdom. The man who stood before Wendy was completely different from the one she trusted having been more involved with the Dark Guilds and dark magic. He had been an enemy to Fairy Tail before… but also an ally.

Jellal wasn't the only one to evoke surprise; the other two beside him removed their hoods as well, revealing the faces of two women Wendy had never seen before.

One had bright pink hair, pinker than Natsu's, that was long and wavy and tied behind her head. She wore a cloth headband with black earmuffs and a short red dress beneath her cloak that was decorated with a large yellow ribbon tied right under her well-developed breasts. A wide smile brightened her face when her green eyes fell on someone she recognized, "Juvia! It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Meredy…" the water mage whispered before returning the woman's joyous smile with one of her own.

The other woman was older with a stern face and long dark purple hair adorned with white ribbons. Her outfit consisted of a black and white one-piece suit, brown leggings and thigh-high black leather boots. In her gloved hand was an aqua-coloured crystal orb that was likely a tool she used to convey her magic.
"They're from Grimoire Heart!" Natsu exclaimed.

"Then they're our enemies…" Gray muttered, stepping up front. "Am I right, Ultear?"

The older woman met Gray's fervent stare and offered a sad, regretful smile. "If you wish to treat us as enemies, do what you must. But know that Grimoire Heart is no more but a distant memory."

"We've abandoned that name long ago. The three of us, we have formed a guild of our own," stated Meredy with a righteous smile.

Jellal stepped forward, his expression bold and sincere. "We are Crime Sorcière. And we are aiming for a better world."

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**An Afternoon of Music**

By Quathis

When Wakaba entered Fairy Tail one morning, he came across the unusual sight of a band in the riotous guild. Music wasn't uncommon in Fairy Tail these days, what with Mira Jane and Gajeel showcasing their talents from time to time, but it was always individuals before, no group effort. Wakaba didn't know his guildmates could stop fighting long enough to put together something like a music group.

Then he saw little Bacon scurrying back and forth between the players, making adjustments and acting like an elderly teacher instead of the child he was. Wakaba made his way over to his friend Macao to find out how this odd sight came to be.

"Well, it started when Wendy and Romeo took Bacon through the old storeroom to find if anything in there could spark a memory. Well, it worked. Old musical instruments left behind for one reason or another and now we have everyone trying to see what and how he knows to play. So far, including his ocarina, he apparently knows guitar, drums, and that big old horn thing that someone left. And some catchy songs."

Wakaba smiled, "Oh, like that peppy number he played after getting lost in the woods?"

Macao shook his head, "No, not quite. That one has a trace of magic in it. These are just nice songs to listen to. Though getting everyone to play the way he wanted was tough on Bacon."

Macao related how Bacon had easily gotten Mira to help on guitar, even dragging Gajeel into a duet guitar session that has gotten more than one guild member dancing. Gajeel would go low and flowing, with Mira joining in a flighty climb up the notes in harmony. Elfman was next after Bacon had critically appraised the large man's hands. Once Elfman realized that he was being selected to play the drums due to his size, he cried manly tears and played them "Like a Man!"

The horn thing was a little more difficult, since Natsu had wanted to be the one to try it, once Gajeel taunted the Fire Dragon Slayer. Of course, the others stopped him once it became apparent that Natsu got worked up and started using more fire than air on the instrument. Bacon got Wendy to take over, once they made sure Natsu hadn't completely destroyed it. She had the lungs for it, and it made Bacon smile, so she just went along with it.
Once everyone was properly instructed on the current song, Master Makarov raised his arms and led them into a spirited and flowing song that reminded Wakaba of the ocean winds. The smoke mage studied their newest Fairy. The boy had his eyes shut and swayed to the music he played.

"Macao old buddy, you get the feeling that we're still missing a lot about that kid?"

Macao just chuckled, "What, you mean besides being almost entirely fearless, fighting skill near Erza's level, and music talent like this? Why no I'm pretty sure we've seen everything already." The light sarcasm made Wakaba chuckle with his old drinking partner. A waitress brought the pair their usual drinks and skipped back to the bar in time with the music.

Others started to move to the music again and were soon dancing and showing off their best moves. Of course, in many cases this lead the dancing to become light brawling, with the music playing right along with it.

Wakaba grinned. It was a good day for Fairy Tail.

Quathis: Thank you for reading, and can you guess which songs they were playing?

**Song of the Plains**

By Tenrousha

It was quiet in the Conbolt house as Bacon got into bed to sleep. The young blonde took one last look at the rainbow-colored Dreamstone before he put his head on the pillow and closed his eyes to drift off to sleep. Almost immediately he felt the world shift around him, and he knew that he had been placed somewhere else again.

He opened his eyes and immediately closed them against the bright glare of the sun. After a few seconds he was able to blink against the light and looked around to find himself in a large field with no trees anywhere in sight but instead a couple of buildings, one twice the size of the other, and a large fenced-in area.

Bacon blinked in amazement as he took in this new area. He had never seen something like it before. It took him several minutes before he looked down to see if he was normal-sized or taller. After seeing he was normal-sized this time, a bright smile came to his face as he looked around curiously at this new area.

The sound of a young girl singing filled the air before he could move forward, and the beautiful, calming sound made his smile even brighter. He stood still to enjoy the song for a while before he started running forward to find the source of the song. This didn't seem like it would be what Wendy called a "bad dream".

Bacon lurched to a stop when he suddenly found himself surrounded by large, four-legged creatures of varying colors that either trotted around or grazed on the grass. They all shared the same sleek, powerful-looking legs, a neck that was long, erect and muscular, and a compact body with strong shoulders and smooth, muscular quarters. While normally Bacon would have been watching them with curious eyes, his eyes were riveted on a young girl only ten feet away from him.

The girl had long red hair that reached to her lower back, and at first Bacon was wary because she reminded him of the madwoman who had beaten him within an inch of his life. However, her singing overcame his wariness and before he knew it he was walking closer to her and a smaller version of the strange animals before her. This one was almost completely bright orange, except for
some white hair along its neck, tail, and near the bottom of its legs; with a big black nose that nuzzled against the singing girl.

Something about the creature puzzled Bacon, for like the others it was unfamiliar... yet at the same time familiar. As he approached, the world suddenly shifted around him and he felt that he was now taller. Though he wasn't running, he felt himself moving forward at speeds even faster than he could run, and he looked down to see a bigger version of the orange creature under him.

His eyes squinted as he tried to make sense of it and then he realized he was riding the creature. The instant that realization hit him, he found himself back to normal and quickly approaching the redhead and the orange creature, which had also returned to normal.

The creature's pointed ears, (they reminded Bacon of Happy's or Carla's), suddenly twitched at his approach and its blue, wide-set eyes shifted from the redhead to the young blonde. The redhead glanced back curiously, and her blue eyes immediately lit up with delight as she turned the rest of the way to face him. "Well, if it isn't the fairy boy!" she exclaimed with a giggle. Bacon blinked in surprise at her words before the talking glowbug came from behind him to land gently on his shoulder.

The girl opened her mouth to talk again when the orange creature pushed its nose against her shoulder. She quickly looked back in surprise before her bright smile quickly returned. "That's right, how rude of me," she said before she stepped to the side and indicated the creature. "Fairy boy, this is my friend, Epona," the girl said and Bacon looked between her and the creature for a few seconds before he stepped forward with a bright smile.

The creature, Epona, immediately shied away as its ears flicked a couple of times. Though the girl looked at Epona in surprise, Bacon merely blinked in confusion at its actions. He walked towards it again and brought his hand up but this time it shook its head and took off at a run.

"Oh no..." the girl said sadly as she watched Epona come to a stop a good distance away. "It looks like she doesn't like you," she said while Bacon looked at the creature in complete surprise. It was... unsettling to see something that reacted to him with fear. Bacon's ears drooped as he looked at the creature in dismay, at a loss as to why it would run away from him. The girl started humming the same melody again, and Epona's ears immediately twitched at the sound. One leg nervously ran against the ground as the creature issued a weird snorting sound, but she stayed far away from the girl and Bacon.

The young blonde looked between Epona and the girl for a few seconds as he tried to figure out what to do. "Try playing her song on your ocarina," the glowbug abruptly recommended and Bacon looked over at it in surprise before the world around him shifted again. When he could see clearly, he had the not-blue ocarina in his hands, ready to play.

The redheaded girl looked over at him and stopped her singing as she gave a wide smile. "Oh, are you going to play the song?" she asked excitedly. Bacon looked down at the instrument then at her before he nodded his head with his own smile. "Okay, I'll start from the beginning!" she exclaimed cheerfully then paused to compose herself before she closed her eyes and started to sing.

Bacon brought the ocarina to his mouth and closed his eyes as he listened to her song. After a few seconds, his fingers started to move across the different holes as he tried to figure out the proper pattern. Not much longer after that he started to play, although his first few attempts fell short of the calm, soothing melody the redhead was singing. After his fifth attempt, Bacon brought the ocarina down and looked at it in frustration. The pout only lasted a couple of seconds before he brought the ocarina back up, determined to get the song right. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath then started to play.
He was dimly aware that the redheaded girl had stopped singing and the glowbug's wings had stopped flicking. Everything beyond that was lost to him as he played the girl's song. After what seemed like a long time and at the same time a few seconds, something that left Bacon feeling vaguely confused, he felt something wet that was both soft yet firm push against his arm.

Bacon's eyes shot open at the touch and he looked to see Epona now right in front of him, pushing her nose against his arm. A smile came to his face as he brought the ocarina down in his left hand. He slowly brought his right hand up and placed it higher up on the creature's face to stroke it. "It looks like she likes you now, fairy boy," the redheaded girl said with a bright smile as she came up to stroke Epona along her back. Bacon nodded his head with his own smile still in place as the creature pushed past him to nuzzle his face, which got a laugh from both him and the redhead.
The full moon was visible between the small gaps in the jungle canopy, shining silver and bright alongside the many twinkling stars in the night sky. The night wasn’t still or quiet. Many animals hunted in the dark, thousands of insects sang and chirped, and a group of mages were writhing, groaning, crying, and whimpering in terrible pain.

"Seriously… how are you not in terrible agony like everyone else?" Ultear asked Erza in disbelief.

Erza wore a smug smile as she stood in the dim light of an oil lamp that hung from the hook mounted beside the closed door of a wooden hut the group had stumbled upon and was now ‘borrowing’. Behind the door were her guild mates, each one enduring intense, excruciating pain caused by the magical runes that adorned their skin. The runes burned like molten lava and felt like it too; searing hot and unbearable. It was Ultear's powerful spell to bring out each mage's true potential, allowing them to further maximize their magical abilities to a substantial level to give Fairy Tail the edge they needed to compete in the Grand Magic Games.

Not everyone was behind the door, rolling, clawing, and twitching on the floor. Jet and Droy had turned pale and craven when they first witnessed the effect of Ultear's *Arc of Time* spell on Natsu. The men had hung back to watch over Bacon when everyone else, including young Romeo, mustered what little courage they had to proceed with the torturous process.

"Do if for the sake of Fairy Tail, to bring back our pride and reputation. For seven years we lost at the games, feeling nothing but shame and utter defeat. This is our chance to show Fiore that we haven't given up!" Romeo had encouraged everyone when some felt hesitant to step forward. The boy was second to volunteer, determined to grow stronger and hoping to achieve new strength like his role model. After his brave display, the others had followed right after.

The spell's effect differed on Erza compared to the others. To her it felt like nothing more but hot pinpricks that lasted less than half an hour, bringing a perplexed look from Ultear.

"I toughed it out," Erza chose to answer.

Ultear still couldn't believe the other. Beside her were Jellal and Meredy, both pulling up their hoods and ready to go.

"We can't stay in one place for too long," the man informed. Erza nodded in understanding, catching his small smile in the darkness as he glanced over his shoulder. "I hope to see you again, Erza."

"Don't forget to send us any information about that mysterious force in the Games," reminded Meredy as she happily waved good-bye.

"Everyone should be feeling fine before the Games begin. Hopefully," said Ultear as she too pulled up her hood. "I wish you all the best of luck. And please take care of Gray."

Erza nodded once more and gave them a final wave and a determined smile. She watched as their dark cloaks merged into the shadows, hearing only their fading voices as they chatted freely amongst themselves like a group of good friends.

Erza was happy to see how much the three of them had changed for the better. They were Crime Sorcière, an unofficial, independent guild whose goal was to bring a definite end to all the evil in the world brought on by the Dark Guilds and the infamous Black Wizard, Zeref. Many Dark Guilds had been eliminated by the three members in the past seven years. It was a truly astounding feat.
They had chosen this way of life – this life-long mission – to atone for the sins they had committed in the past.

"As long as we are alive, we will seek out evil and destroy it before it could corrupt the hearts of others," Jellal had told Fairy Tail when they met earlier that day.

Erza wasn't just happy. She was proud, relieved, and most of all, grateful to see the return of her old friend. He had regained his memories during his imprisonment; he remembered who he was and the terrible deeds he had done. However, when he had confided with her during their stroll by the beach in the light of the setting sun, he was full of regret and ready to give up on living. Erza made sure to set him back on track with a quick, hard slap to his damn guilt-ridden face… and an unforeseen tumble down a sandy slope.

Erza huffed at the memory, glad that no one was around to see her blushing face. Fiancé? That's a good one… she mentally thought in a sarcastic tone as she rolled her eyes and smirked at Jellal's poor attempt at lying. He wasn't an expert in showing his feelings… and neither was she.

She stiffened when she heard something approaching the hut from the side. She twisted around just in time to find Bacon emerge from the giant fronds of ferns that were just as large as him. Happy and Carla were hovering above him, with the blue Exceed holding onto a small, portable Lacrima lamp shaped like a lantern. The soft yellow light emitted by the crystal chased away the darkness and made the shadows dance with every subtle movement Happy made.

"Bacon," Erza addressed the boy as she approached the trio. She offered a kind smile when he paused to look at her questionably. "What are you doing here? Where's Jet and Droy?"

The young boy turned towards the door of the hut and frowned, hearing everyone's awful moans. He was supposed to be looked after by the men of Shadow Gear at the group's campsite by the beach. Wendy didn't want him to worry about her and had asked Jet and Droy to keep the boy entertained. Levy had brought some books for him to read and a little homework to do as well, but it didn't seem like he was interested in doing either at the moment.

"He's worried about Wendy," Carla answered for Bacon with a slight shake of her head. She sighed in defeat and crossed her arms, however she too started to frown at the sounds coming from her teammates.

"And we lost Jet and Droy in the jungle somewhere," Happy added. "Not sure how that happened…"

Bacon started for the hut, but Erza held out her hand to stop him. "No, no. You don't want to go in there. It's not a pretty sight."

The boy's frown deepened.

"Don't worry. Wendy will be fine. She and everyone else are going to be okay," Erza tried to reassure.

However, Bacon continued to stare at the closed door.

Feeling sympathetic, Erza started to ponder over what she could do to get his mind off of everyone's pain. A brilliant idea came to her when she remembered what she had wanted to do yesterday, which in actuality was three months ago. With the others currently occupied, there was no one to protest against her idea. The corners of her lips curled into a smile that unfortunately didn't go unnoticed.

"I certainly hope you're not thinking about that," Carla spoke up the instant she saw the woman's
expression, her sharp, inquisitive eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"About what?" Happy asked, glancing between the two.

Erza rested a hand on her hip and gestured at Bacon with the other, ignoring Happy's question. "I see no other option that will distract him from his worries," she started to argue. "No harm will come to him. I promise you and Wendy."

"Promises are only empty words if you cannot keep true to what you have said," Carla dared to retort.

Erza smirked at how bold the cat has become lately, especially when Bacon's safety was a concern. Very few would ever argue against or defy Titania's decisions with the level of confidence Carla portrayed. Erza couldn't help but respect the young but mature feline. Carla was never one to openly show her caring side and would likely never admit she cared for others who were not Wendy. She was just as protective of the boy as the Sky Dragon Slayer.

Placing a hand over her heart and giving a genuine smile, Erza said again, "I promise you, Carla. There will be no harm done."

Carla didn't believe her, but that was to be expected. Erza didn't give Carla the time to properly respond. She touched Bacon's shoulder to draw his attention. "Come with me, Bacon."

Happy sharply gasped when he finally realized what they were talking about. "You're going to beat up Bacon?! You're so mean!" he exclaimed.

"Be quiet. I am not going to beat him up," Titania snapped, tired of hearing that accusation. Happy flinched away and reeled back his excitement. Erza shifted her gaze between the two flying Exceeds. "Both of you stay here and watch everyone. Bacon, come with me. We're going play a little game."

Bacon was hesitant to follow and kept looking back at the noisy hut.

Erza reached down to grasp his left hand and gave him a little tug and a friendly smile. "They will be fine," she reassured once more, softening her voice and expression. Kindness often got him to listen and understand from what Erza had observed back at the guild. The boy was still unhappy but he nodded nonetheless, moving to follow.

Right after Erza turned around, Carla swooped in front of the mage's face with a disapproving scowl. "Erza, you can't--"

"Trust me," the warrioress began, "it's better that he doesn't stay here all night listening to everyone groan in agony."

"It's like they're being tortured," Happy had to needlessly point out.

Carla visibly clenched her jaw as she met Erza's stare. After a moment of tense silence, she finally sighed in defeat and conceded, "Very well... If you lay a scratch on him, it will be Wendy whom you'll have to deal with."

Titania smirked. "Duly noted."

The white Exceed fluttered aside to allow Erza and Bacon to pass.

"Can I come too?" Happy begged as he circled above her head, making the shadows dance and flicker all around them.
"No. Stay here and watch over everyone," commanded Erza, making the blue cat stop and pout in disappointment.

Gently pulling Bacon along with her, Erza left the light of Happy's Lacrima lamp and entered the darkness. She pulled out a small Light Lacrima of her own, a long, pale yellow crystal fragment as big as her index finger, and levitated it over her shoulder so they could see the narrow, trodden path ahead of them. Bacon curiously eyed the hovering light for a brief moment before glancing behind them in the direction of the hut that was now hidden by the dark jungle. His frown noticeably returned.

Erza gave his hand a little squeeze. "Wendy is a strong girl. Don't you think so too?" she asked, pushing aside a giant frond blocking the way.

He nodded. But then he did something that surprised her; he opened his mouth and spoke.
"Wendy…" he said, his voice quiet and full of concern.

The warrioress slowed in her pace, her eyes wide. No one had ever heard Bacon say a word before. To only say Wendy's name was a sign he truly cared for her. Erza gave his hand another squeeze.

"Wendy is growing stronger. To protect Fairy Tail and to protect you. Do you want to grow stronger too? So you can protect her just like how she protects you?" she questioned, hoping to hear another answer.

The boy looked up at her and only nodded.

Erza smiled, not too disappointed that she didn't get to hear him speak again. "Then let me show you how."

It wasn't too long before they left the jungle and found the beach that was bathed under the pale glow of the glorious full moon. The ocean shimmered with silvery streaks, reflecting the bright orb in the starry cobalt sky. It was a warm, windless night, perfect for a calming stroll in the cool, soft sand.

Erza led her sparring partner around the border of the jungle until they found a rocky ledge that was relatively flat and wide enough for the both of them to stand and adequately move around. It was close to the water's edge and high enough to overlook the ocean and its small, silver waves.

Erza pulled out another Light Lacrima, this one twice as large as the previous crystal and brighter too. She placed both of them on the ground a good distance apart to illuminate the area with soft yellow light. The dull black rock they stood upon now appeared to glow with energy. It was bright enough for them to see every bump and crack that littered the stones.

As Titania moved to stand before Bacon waiting at the end opposite of the water, she switched out of her blouse and skirt and into her more comfortable armour set. Next, she equipped an old sword she had only used once in her lifetime; a short, ordinary iron blade with a sharp edge, a golden crescent-shaped guard embedded with sapphire orbs, a black leather-bound hilt, and a pommel that ended with a blue crystal point. It was one of the first weapons she had ever used… and it was once heavily stained with the blood of her enslavers so long ago, back at the Tower of Heaven.

There were a lot of bad memories that came with the stolen sword, but she had kept it in her arsenal so she could look upon it and remember why she was here, alive. The simple blade was both a treasure and a precious reminder of what she had gained and lost in her past.

She held it up before her, her eyes wandering the flat, polished surface, seeing her distorted reflection in the metal that palely gleamed in the light. The weapon was slightly longer than Bacon's small sword and with a little more heft, but Erza was certain he could wield it with ease after a little
practice. It was the smallest sword she had befitting for his age. Unfortunately she didn't have a shield to go along with it.

The boy was studying the weapon in her hand with great interest, immediately recognizing what it was. When she presented the hilt to him, he was eager to hold it and with proper care unlike the first time where things were still new to him. He quickly noted the heavier weight and size of the sword and adjusted his grip to accommodate it. Blue eyes carefully inspected the blade while one hand gingerly touched the cool iron.

"This is Freedom," she told him, "I will lend it to you. Please take good care of it."

Bacon's smile was wide when he nodded.

Erza returned the smile with one of her own before moving to stand a short distance away. In her hand was now her standard broadsword forged from steel. She soundly cut the air to practice a few swings, prompting the boy to do the same.

Bacon tested out his new weapon, slashing nothing but air, his skill and control observably better than what Erza last remembered. His secret daily practice sessions with Romeo had likely honed his swordsmanship or made him recall his fighting abilities. At first glance, the boy looked nothing like a swordsman wearing a plain yellow T-shirt, a pair of red shorts, and blue sandals for the feet. Hanging down his neck was his Dreamstone, the pretty round jewel glittering with all the colours of the rainbow.

Once used to the feel of the blade, he grinned in satisfaction, which Erza took as a sign that he was ready. "Do you remember when we fought?" she asked.

He scowled and nodded, the memory obviously not his favourite.

Erza shortly laughed at his expression. "How about we do it again? I know you've improved since then. I want you to show me."

Slightly pouting, the boy hesitated and stared at her warily. Caution was a good thing. It meant he had learned his lesson and understood the consequences of being unprepared.

Erza dabbed a thumb to her chest. "Pretend I'm Romeo. It will be like practice but with real swords instead of sticks, okay? I won't hurt you."

Bacon perked up at the mention of the other boy's name. He thought for one moment longer before finally nodding. He held Freedom by his side in his left hand and took a small bow; a respective gesture that Romeo must have taught him. When he straightened, his whole demeanor changed. Poised in his familiar stance, his sharp blue eyes were focused on Erza, anticipating her first move.

Titania played along and bowed in respect as well before shifting into her own stance, anxious to find out how much he had improved – if he had improved at all. She evenly met his gaze and for a brief while neither moved nor blinked. Then without warning, Erza lunged at him.

In less than two heartbeats, she was before him, her sword nothing but a silvery-yellow streak that aimed for his dominant side. He didn't fail to impress her; his eyes flickered to her incoming blade and within one split second, he used his short height to his advantage and quickly ducked under the sharp edge. Immediately, he rushed forward to counter with a stabbing thrust, taking Erza by surprise.

Freedom's deadly point stopped short from piercing into her armour and through her stomach. The
warrioress smirked, astonished at how good his reflexes had become and the level of control he had over his weapon. "Excellent maneuver," she praised when he pulled back, wearing a boastful grin. *I might not have to hold back after all,* she mused as she returned to her initial position.

They both fell back in their stances and both wore different smiles. Erza motioned for him to come at her. Bacon broke into a dash, his sandaled feet soundly smacking against rock. He was upon her before she could count to two, holding the black hilt of his borrowed sword in both of his hands and swinging it downwards for a fast vertical strike. Erza twisted her body out of Freedom's path, feeling the wind rush by her, and followed with a broad horizontal sweep that targeted his neck.

Again, Bacon simply ducked to avoid the steel edge and, with his sword still low, he slashed upwards. Erza felt the cold tip of his blade brush past the bare skin of her leg when she took an evasive step back.

The boy didn't stop there; he instantly closed the distance between them with a lunging step and brought his weapon around for a fast side swipe. Steel met iron in a deafening clang when Erza blocked the young swordsman's attack. A brilliant shower of orange sparks erupted between the grinding blades before they both parted only to clash again and again and again.

Erza allowed Bacon to stay on the offensive to scrutinize his improved skills and admire his quick-thinking. She parried and blocked each of his attacks and managed to dodge only a few. Whenever one move failed to break through her defenses, the child would attempt another approach, constantly keeping the mage on her toes.

The dance they did was unlike the first time they tangled with swords. Their weapons where gleaming streaks of reflected light that collided with echoing clangs, each impact bringing sparks to life. They circled, side-stepped, twirled, rolled, and leapt around one another; their footwork and movements seemingly moving in time to the music of clashing steel and iron.

Titania was more than impressed with her little sparring partner. The quiet, innocent little boy was a true warrior at heart even when he couldn't remember who he was. She could even dare to say that he was almost as good as her. The only thing he lacked was the physical strength behind each of his blows.

Erza shifted onto the offensive and pressed the young swordsman back, keeping in mind not to be too rough to avoid another scolding from Carla and Wendy. Having no shield, Bacon dodged, rolled, flipped, and ducked to evade and staggered backwards whenever he tried to block her blade with his own.

The boy flipped backwards to escape the woman's latest sweep of her blade. When he landed, he paused to catch his breath. Glistening sweat was trickling down the sides of his face and he was panting. He was exhausted, his sword wavering in his grip, but he was far from giving up. The light of the Lacrima crystals made his eyes glow brighter than usual with anger and fierce determination.

Titania moved back and took a moment to catch her own breath. Sweat dampened her brow and body and the humid, tropical air certainly didn't help. She brushed away a few strands of her scarlet hair that clung to her damp face and shot a challenging sneer at her little opponent.

When Erza took one slow step to warn Bacon of her approach, the boy fell into a defensive stance, raising his right arm forward and holding Freedom behind him with his left. The mage lunged on the second step only to falter in her running stride the instant she sensed the boy's magic aura flare up. Bright blue, swirling energy gathered around his borrowed sword, the light outshining the small Lacrima crystal nearest to them.
Erza recognized the spell immediately; it was the same power Bacon had used to slay the giant raptordile she had forced him to fight. So his special ability wasn't just limited to his own sword. That was very interesting.

Erza knew she should stop the boy from using his magic, but curiosity and excitement got the better of her. She closed the distance between them and within that time, the magical energy enveloping Freedom increased in power and turned into a fiery red.

With a mighty yell, he spun in a rapid circle, his shining sword unleashing a powerful wave of energy that burned like fire but slashed like a blade. For one split-second, Erza saw nothing but his incoming magic and within that same split-second, she used her own weapon as a shield and braced against the impact. However, no matter how strong her grip was, her broadsword was painfully knocked right out of her hand.

Her blade of steel was sent flying to the side where it landed somewhere in the dark ocean waters with a loud *kerplunk.* Erza's wide eyes turned from her lost sword to the young warrior before her, amazed at the sheer force behind his incredible attack. She clenched her right, trembling hand that throbbed with pain. Having to experience it first-hand was entirely different when compared to watching it unfold behind the bars of a cage.

Bacon was just as stunned, it seemed, as he gaped in the direction of Erza's now sunken sword. He slowly faced her, bowed his head in guilt, and held out the hilt of his borrowed weapon for the older woman to take back.

Erza looked him over. He appeared fine; no headache or any distress from using his magic. He was only feeling guilty for losing her sword to the ocean. Has he practiced the spell before when sparring with Romeo? That seemed unlikely considering how dangerous it was to perform against others. Or has he finally remembered the times he had used it in his past in battles and whatnot? There was just so much Erza wanted to ask, but she knew she wouldn't get an answer.

She started to laugh, making him peer up at her in slight confusion. Grinning, she gently pushed away the offered blade and said, "Don't feel so bad. I have many more." To prove it, Titania equipped another broadsword, this one a little larger than the last and much more valuable due to the magical ore it was forged from. She held it before her, both hands clasped around the long crimson metal hilt with its pointed tip resting on the black stone ground. She was full of pride and admiration for the young boy. "That was most excellent, Bacon. You are stronger than what many others tend to believe. There is no doubt that you can protect Wendy if she is ever in need of it."

The mage sent her new sword back to her storage dimension and brought out an empty sheath that was carved from wood and bound with stiffened black leather. Running along the sides were metal binds in the shape of crescent moons to match the design of the sword it served to protect. She held it out by the white leather strap. "You have earned my greatest respect, little warrior. Freedom is now yours to keep."

Understanding he was receiving a gift, Bacon's wide, grateful smile was one that could not be described with words. Eyes wide, they were shining as bright as the glowing Lacrima when he took his new sword's scabbard and examined it closely, liking the shimmering moons. He then carefully sheathed Freedom, his excitement never fading. To thank her, the boy reached into one of his pockets and pulled something out and gave it to her.

Erza looked over her little present. It was a broken piece of a coiled shell that glinted like gold in the magic light. She tucked it away and said, "Thank you, Bacon. I will treasure your gift as long as you treasure mine."
Still smiling, he nodded.

The mage looked up at the moon, seeing that the night was still young. The others were probably going to be suffering for a while longer so there was no point in heading back yet. She brought out her own sword again and gave the boy a challenging sneer. "Do you want to fight me again?"

Bacon mimicked her expression. Iron hissed against wood as Freedom was drawn from its sheath.

Titania's sneer turned wicked. "Good. This time, I won't hold back."

The clangor of clashing swords reached his ears when the pair visible on the lighted rock at the ocean shore far below resumed their duel. Having seen enough, Jellal Fernandes turned away from the steep cliff to continue on with his two companions closely following.

"Poor kid really doesn't remember a thing. He knows how to fight – its familiar to him, but he doesn't know why he knows. It's rather sad," said Meredy, speaking of the young boy who was brave enough to spar against Erza of all people. Crime Sorcière had met him earlier in the day right after the tension between the two guilds had dissolved away.

Jellal nodded. He could relate to the child, having suffered with amnesia himself. Suffice it to say, amnesia was not fun to have. Days were often confusing, frustrating, and horrifying when bits and pieces of his memories slowly came back during his imprisonment. Remembering his past horrific deeds was like watching a never-ending nightmare unfold before his eyes. He couldn't believe what he had done… It was a past that will haunt him forever. The only thing he could do to atone for his mistakes was to stay alive and fight to protect the world from evil; a conviction that was reinforced upon him by one painful blow to the face. (Erza had claimed it was only a slap, but to Jellal it felt like a full-powered punch that nearly broke his neck. It has been hours and his cheek still throbbed with pain.)

The boy's amnesia was more severe than Jellal's. It was not only his past and identity he had forgotten, but everything else as well. Simple daily tasks, language, objects, colours, understanding what was right or wrong, discerning left from right; the child had to relearn it all.

"He was no one. Just a lost, innocent boy," Erza had explained to Jellal when he had further inquired about the boy during the time they were alone by the beach, "But now he is one of us. An enigma. Always full of mystery and surprises. He is a Fairy even if he does not bear the mark of our guild."

"Did you guys sense his magic back there? It's… really different," Meredy continued.

"There's a holy essence to it," stated Jellal as he made his way through the dense wildlife, guided by the silver rays of the full moon that filtered through. The boy possessed a strange power that Jellal was able to detect when he had briefly shook hands with the curious one. It was faint, but it was unlike anything Jellal had ever felt before much like the boy's magic aura. Foreign; ethereal; otherworldly – the man wasn't sure how to describe it.

The boy given a ridiculous name was truly a mystery. Especially when considering how he was discovered in a ruinous, ancient temple that can no longer be found.

"Who do you think would try to kill him?" Meredy questioned.

Jellal shook his head, having no answer. "We'll find out if we can locate the temple."

Meredy made an interested sound as she trotted in step beside him. "So we're really going to Verloren Woods?"
"I promised Erza that I would look into this matter," he replied.

She soundly smirked and playfully nudged his side with an elbow. "Oh? Doing this for Erza now? If you're so fond of her, why did you tell her you have a fiancé?"

He nearly missed a step. Annoyed by Meredy's tendency to be nosy using her Sensory Link magic in the most inappropriate times, he pulled back his hood and shot her a sideways glare. "Can you not spy on me when I'm having a private moment with an old friend?" he demanded.

It was too dark to see his companion's face, but he was certain she was wearing a snide smile under the shadows. "Just an old friend? She's more like--"

"Meredy," he warned in a stern tone.

Meredy snickered, purely enjoying teasing him. "Hey, Ultear. Why are you so quiet? Don't you find any of this amusing?" she asked the older woman following behind the pair.

Ultear looked up at them, having been staring at the ground before her feet. "I was just thinking," she began, raising a hand to her chin, "What reason was there for anyone to cause harm to a young boy? Was it because of the power he has? Did they wish to obtain it? Or were they aiming to eliminate it? I have an underlying suspicion that something dark may have been involved."

"Fairy Tail has their suspicions as well," Jellal informed as he started to recall what Erza had told him. "They believe it was not coincidental for Natsu's team to find the temple and the boy inside it. Someone wanted Fairy Tail and no one else to find him."

Ultear hummed in thought, glancing back at the ground. "That someone must have been protecting Bacon from whoever had harmed him in the first place," she theorized. "But why would they go to such lengths for him? Just who is he?"

"It's an answer that only he could tell us, but it doesn't seem like it will be anytime soon," said Meredy in a sympathetic tone. "I guess we could help the kid out since Jellal's so keen on pleasing his girl--"

"Meredy," the man snapped, giving Meredy a sharp glare.

Again, she laughed. Once she calmed down, she wondered out loud, "So how long until we reach the forest?"

Jellal suddenly stopped, forcing the women to halt in their tracks with Ultear nearly running into him. He crossed his arms and looked off to the side, realizing that he had forgotten one important thing.

"You don't know where it is, do you?" Meredy questioned, either reading his mind or his feelings. Most likely the latter.

He grumbled under his breath, stepped aside and gestured for Ultear to take the lead, knowing she would be able to find their destination without a problem. "If you don't mind," he said, ignoring Meredy's amused smile.

Smirking, the older woman sighed as she strolled past the pair. "What are you two ever going to do without me?" she teased.

Cana Alberona gulped the last of her beer before slamming the empty glass down on the table with a satisfied sigh. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand before returning to the task at hand.
"Now, where was I?" she asked her young companion seated in the chair right next to her.

Asuka pouted and pointed at the deck of cards that were once neatly piled but were now askew from Cana slamming the table. "You were supposed to read my fortune!" said the little girl, kicking her dangling legs.

"Oh, right! Let me get a refill first." Cana snapped her fingers to get Kinana's attention and shouted for another ten beers and a chocolate shake for little friend.

The violet-haired waitress smiled and nodded and went behind the bar to retrieve the drinks.

Cana glanced at the counter, seeing Master Makarov frantically pace back and forth on top while Macao and Wakaba tried to calm him down. The master was worried – and he had good reason to. Tomorrow was the start of the Grand Magic Games, but none of the members who had left to train three months ago had yet to return with the exception of Elfman.

The Beast Soul expert was an impressive sight, having dramatically bulked up in physical strength and magical power in his three-month absence. When he had stepped through the double doors of Fairy Tail, no one had recognized him, not even his sisters. With muscular arms as thick as tree trunks and a wild mane of silver hair and prominent sideburns, Elfman was entirely a new man. Although his personality was still the same. As of now, the big brute was having a loud conversation with Mirajane by the end of the bar, sharing another one of his stories where he trained "like a man!" up in the rocky mountains.

If all of the missing guild members did not return tonight, Fairy Tail may have to rely mainly on the sibling pair to carry their guild to victory at the Games.

However, Cana wasn't worried about that. She had predicted the future with her cards and her predictions were never wrong; Natsu and the others will be coming home today. She tried to assure Master not to fret, but as each hour passed by, the old man grew more anxious.

Cana picked up her deck and shuffled them. "So what kind of fortune would you like me to do, princess? Do you want to know if you'll fall in love?" she asked Asuka with a little grin. She pulled out a blank card and tapped the empty space with a finger to put a touch of magic into it. When she flipped it between her fingers, a picture of a cute, smiling Asuka wearing her adorable yellow hat was now occupying the space.

The young girl brightened when she saw her own image magically appear and giggled. "I wanna know if I will grow up to be as strong as momma and everyone else!"

"Oh, you don't need a fortune to know that. You'll definitely grow into a strong, beautiful lady like your mother. Well, I'm hoping anyway. Don't want to end up looking like your dad."

"Hey… thanks," Alzack mumbled sarcastically in the seat behind Cana's, having overheard the card-user.

Cana burst out laughing and glanced over her shoulder at Alzack who was sharing a mid-afternoon snack of nachos with his wife. She winked. "I'm kidding! You're actually not too hard on the eyes, Al."

Alzack grinned. "I'm flattered, but I'm a married man now, Cana," he replied jokingly, raising a hand and twiddling his fingers to show off his silver wedding band that was engraved with vows.

By then, Kinana came by and exchanged all of Cana's empty beer glasses with ten frosted, foamy mugs of delicious alcohol and Asuka's chocolate milkshake. Cana tipped generously and quickly
drank one whole glass before starting her reading.

Just as she placed Asuka's card on the table, the great doors to the guild creaked open and all heads turned in anticipation. Stumbling into the building was Natsu's group, most of them looking as if they hadn't slept a wink in the past week. Feet dragging and hunched over, Natsu, Lucy, Gray, Juvia, Levy, Wendy, and Romeo were all limping forward, their pale faces drawn with exhaustion. Erza, on the other hand, appeared fine, which made Cana quick to suspect the warrioress was the likely cause for their condition. She had probably forced them to undergo some sort of hellish training that Cana feared to imagine. Trotting alongside the worn out group were Happy, Carla, Jet, Droy, and Bacon, the five of them in better shape and visibly eager to be back home.

Everyone in the guild welcomed them all back with loud, grateful cheers except for Macao who immediately went right up to Romeo and scolded him for suddenly deciding to leave with Bacon. The father's anger was gone just as fast as it came, replaced with relief for the boys' safe return as he patted their heads. Asuka forgot all about her milkshake and fortune reading and dashed over to say hello. The master was most relieved as he leapt off the counter and made his way over.

Cana stayed in her seat and downed another drink. See? Told you they'll be back, she thought, her smile smug.

Even though Natsu and the others have been gone for a couple months, there was no drastic change that Cana could see or sense. In fact, they looked the same as the day they had left, making Cana wonder if they effectively trained at all or were just beaten senseless by Erza day after day. The only ones who slightly changed in appearance were Jet and Droy, both sporting darker tans from being in the sun for so long.

When asked how their 'mission' went, Erza was first to explain what really happened. Everyone had settled around the nearest tables as she spoke of the invitation to the fascinating Celestial Spirit World, the horrifying realization that the passage of time was vastly different in the magical realm, Loke's inevitable punishment, and most surprising of all, Crime Sorcière and their request for Fairy Tail's aid and the 'gift' Ultear had given them in the form of a magic power boost that had rendered everyone but Erza immobile for two days straight.

"Hmm, a dark presence in the Games…" Master Makarov mused, as he paced back and forth on top of the table across from Cana's. Hands linked behind him, he eyed the polished wooden surface with a heavy frown as he mulled over the sudden change of events. "This certainly doesn't bode well. But we have no choice but to investigate now that Jellal has asked this of us." He stopped and looked between Erza and the rest of Natsu's group, his eyes gleaming with pride as they fell on each individual. "So I've decided then. The five who will represent all of Fairy Tail…"

Everyone fell silent as they held their breath and leaned forward, anxious to know.

Makarov faced Erza and spoke her name, bringing a proud smile to adorn her face. Next were Natsu and Gray. The two young men jumped from their chairs and pumped their fists in the air in glee, forgetting the fatigue in their bodies.

The last two chosen members were not as enthused. "What?! Me?!!" Lucy shrieked in surprise when the master called her name. She had risen so quickly out of her chair that she had knocked it over. Tentatively, she pressed her fingers together and looked off the side. "B-But… What about Gajeel? Or Laxus? They're way stronger than me!"

Wendy was just as shocked from hearing her name as she gaped at the old man in disbelief from where she stood. Standing beside her was Bacon, who gently tugged on the short sleeve of her frilly yellow dress, wondering what was wrong.
Master Makarov sadly shook his head. "I'm afraid those two haven't come back yet. And time is at its end, my dear. We can't wait for them any longer. But you shouldn't worry." He gave Lucy and Wendy an assuring smile, one that creased the corners of his eyes. "I'm confident in the both of your abilities. I do not doubt that you will carry our name forward in the Grand Magic Games and win our prize!"

Others joined in and lent their voices of encouragement, speaking highly of Lucy's and Wendy's talents. It wasn't long before the whole guild convinced them that they were a vital part of Fairy Tail's team. Granted, it was a big responsibility and everyone greatly depended on them, but the two managed to shake away the dread and doubts they had for participating in the competitive event.

Lucy was brimming with confidence and Wendy was beaming with pride by the end of it all from the support of the guild and their friends.

Master clapped his hands to gain everyone's attention. "We leave tomorrow bright and early! So let's have one last party! And don't be late for our departure in the morning!" he exclaimed, waving a warning finger.

Fairy Tail erupted with loud, joyful cheers and laughter and Cana happily drank to that, downing three beers in a row.

It was late in the evening when the guild was full of the usual riots and drunken antics, (something Cana had sorely missed over the past three months), that Asuka came to visit Cana who had migrated to the bar to chat with Mirajane. The little girl wasn't alone, pulling a friend with her.

Bacon was being led by the younger one by the hand, curious as to where Asuka was taking him. Not far behind were Wendy, carrying Carla in her arms, and Romeo. The two young mages were starting to look a bit better compared to the moment they had stepped through the guild doors.

"Cana! Can you read Bacon's future?" Asuka asked, needing to shout over the battle roars between Natsu and Elfman. The Fire Dragon Slayer had challenged the newly improved Take-Over mage to a fight and, since Natsu had yet to fully recover from the effects of Ultear's Arc of Time, he was badly losing to the man who had turned into a hulking, quick-footed feline beast.

Cana set her current glass of wine down and grinned at the children. Bacon smiled at her in greeting. Now that Cana had a closer look, she noticed the new sword strapped to his back and the minor bandaged wounds covering his bare arms and knees. There was only one obvious cause for his injuries and it came in the form of Erza. There was no escaping that woman. The warrioress must have forced the poor kid to battle her again, but it didn't seem like she had harmed him as much as before.

Cana admired the young boy and his fearlessness. Heck, no one in the guild could match his bravery. Talented in music, swordplay, and archery, the kid was a marvel and a favourite among the members of Fairy Tail.

"I suppose I could. Do you want to know if he'll fall in love with you, princess?" Cana questioned teasingly.

Mirajane giggled at that. "They would make a cute couple," she agreed, clasping her hands joyfully.

Wendy made a face while Asuka vigorously shook her head and pouted. "No! Not that!" Asuka shrieked, appalled at the comment.

"We want to know if he'll ever get his memories back," said Romeo, nodding at Bacon whose
attention was now drawn to the loud smashing of a table that Natsu was thrown into. The wooden object splintered in half, tossing glasses and plates all over where they soundly broke into many pieces.

Cana propped an elbow on the counter and rested the side of her head against her knuckles. "That sort of thing is impossible for me to predict, kids," she replied with an apologetic look. "I can, however, tell you if he'll find true love."

Wendy, Carla, Romeo, and Asuka were unimpressed while Bacon was busy watching Natsu, now engulfed in flames, charge straight at Elfman who had taken on another beast's form. Armoured in thick emerald scales and sharp black spines, the man was giant reptilian monster.

Ignoring the children's looks, Cana took out her special deck of cards and began to demonstrate just for fun. "Hey, Bacon bits," she called to gain his attention. She patted the empty stool beside her and offered a friendly smile. "Come have a seat beside your favourite aunt Cana."

The boy climbed onto the stool and stared at her quizzically as she shuffled the cards in her hands. Mirajane, Carla, and the children quietly watched her, some showing more interest than others. Cana first drew a blank card, and just like she had done for Asuka, the mage placed an image of the boy in the empty space.

Bacon always enjoyed the sight of magic no matter how miniscule it was. He grinned at his own picture and wanted to take the card the moment Cana placed it on the bar.

Cana blocked his hand and shook her head disapprovingly. "Nuh-uh, Bacon bits, don't touch."

Disappointed, he quietly obeyed, keeping his hands folded on the counter and his blue eyes on the card with his face on it.

Cana passed her hand over the top of her deck for dramatic effect before flipping the first card onto the counter, placing it above Bacon's card. She felt the blood drain from her face the instant she saw what was on the card.

What? No way… this can't be right. I must've made a mistake.

But she never made mistakes. Even when she was downright drunk she had never messed up in her readings.

Frowning, Mirajane sensed her trouble and asked what was wrong.

"Oops. I screwed up. That's all," said Cana, forcing out an embarrassed laugh to hide her worry. She picked up the card and shuffled it into the deck, making sure to cut the cards twice and shuffle them once more. "Let's try this again, shall we?"

Again, she dramatized her card-reading ability before placing her fingers on the edge of her first card. She held her breath, hoping that she was only wrong that one time, and slowly slid the top card off the deck before flipping it onto the countertop, right above Bacon's.

She froze, her blood turning as cold as ice. Again the card was black with an image of a blindfolded reaper carrying a broken glass orb in its bony hand. Against all odds, she had drawn the card twice in a row, telling her a message she was afraid to believe.

It was not love that was waiting in the young boy's future… It was death.

And Cana's predictions were never wrong.
The glowbug quietly hushed by his ear before fluttering slightly ahead to take a peek around the corner. "All clear," it whispered, happily bobbing up and down. It zoomed out into the open and he chased after its glittering trail, clamping a hand over his mouth to refrain from laughing. He dashed across the stone path bordered by an enormous wall of white brick on one side and a tall leafy hedge on the other.

The glowbug rounded the bush only to suddenly fly back in a panic, nearly smacking into his face. "Hide! Hide!" it squeaked as it shot past his head, dove down, and vanished beneath the hedge, rustling a few leaves.

He immediately dropped to his hands and knees and crawled in the small gap between the bushes to follow the glowing orb's lead. Woody branches scratched his bare skin, snagged at his clothes, and stole his hat as he squeezed through. He emerged on the other side, finding an empty rectangular space filled with grass and weeds.

The shining ball of light with wings was hovering near the ground, prompting him to stay low. He stiffened when he caught the sound of clinking metal drawing closer. Carefully, he peered through the gaps in the hedges and saw the legs of a man dressed in armour and wielding a spear stroll past. There were many of these men patrolling the area, but none had found the boy and the glowbug playfully sneaking around just yet.

It was a fun, thrilling game; somewhat similar to the hide-and-seek game he had played with Asuka, Wendy, Happy, and Romeo around the guild from time to time.

He patiently waited as the heavy footsteps of the armoured guard got farther and farther away.

"Now! Let's go! Don't forget your hat!" whispered the flying orb before it dove back into the bushes.

He pried his green cap free and crawled back onto the stone path. From there, he followed the glowbug's speedy flight, running past the hedges and swerving into a tunnel. Once he stepped onto the other side, he was greeted by warm sunlight. He paused to stare at his new surroundings, finding the area enclosed by more towering walls of pale stone. It was a large garden full of lush green flowering plants growing in a pattern. Streams of crystal clear water ran along the outer perimeter of the garden, sparkling like jewels under the golden light.

This was a new place in his dreams and yet it felt like he had wandered this very same garden before.

He shrugged away the odd feeling. Putting on his hat, he started to walk forward, confident in knowing the guards will not find him here. He wanted to look more closely at the water but his body seemed to move on its own accord, heading instead across the center towards the one window on the far side.

There was someone there, he quickly noticed, standing on the raised stone platform and looking into the window where it was completely black and empty on the other side. His walking stroll turned into a run, his boots stomping on the flowers in his way. His running steps slowed to a stop when the person heard his approach and sharply turned around with a startled gasp.

It was a girl with eyes that were blue and ears as long as his. She wore a dress that was long, white, and flowing on the bottom while the top was pink and cinched around her waist with an elegant belt made of gold. Her blonde hair was hidden beneath a white cap banded with pink and, clasped in the
He recognized those triangles having noticed them engraved into his ocarina and painted on the shield he sometimes got to use. He had even seen them at various places within his dreams; carved on old stone temples, decorating rugs and tapestries, painted on armour and equipment, and now, as he looked over the girl before him, the same three triangles were sewn on clothing and made into jewellery too. There was something important about those golden points… It was a strong feeling that suddenly arose when he met the girl's blue eyes.

She was shocked at first, holding one hand timidly over her open mouth. Her surprise was soon replaced with a hopeful smile, one that seemed to brighten the area, as she clasped her hands before her chest. She took a small step forward, the heel of her shoe clicking against stone, the sound echoing around in the quiet place. When she spoke, no longer could he hear the flowing waters or the gentle winds; only her kind voice; "Who are you?"

He blinked in surprise. No one has ever asked him that before. It was a simple and easy question, but when he opened his mouth to answer, he hesitated, his mind suddenly blank.

"Who are you?" she repeated in the same tone and kindness, her smile never fading.

"Bacon..." he remembered. It was his name that Wendy, Romeo, and all of Fairy Tail called him. But it didn't feel right to tell her that. He didn't understand why. He frowned and looked over his shoulder at the glowbug, wanting it to help him like the many times he needed its guidance. The shining orb hovered close to his ear and whispered; "Tell her your name."

He nodded and turned back to the girl. "Bacon," he said. However, when the word left his mouth, he couldn't shake away the regrettable feeling that he had told her the wrong answer.

It didn't seem like she heard him. She lowered her clasped hands and asked once more, "Who are you?"

His frown returned. "Bacon," he said again, louder.

'\textit{That is... not your name.}'

He tensed at the voice that only he could hear, echoing loudly within the walls of the garden. His frown deepened. He was more confused. Wendy always called him Bacon. Romeo called him Bacon. Everyone else called him Bacon. Bacon was his name... wasn't it?

When the girl in the dress asked the same question, he only stared, not knowing what to tell her.

He felt lost here. He didn't like this place and he didn't like this girl. He wanted to go back to having fun sneaking around behind hedges and walls to avoid being seen by the armoured people. On his heel, he twisted around only to gasp in shock at the sudden change in environment.

The colourful garden had vanished as did the great stone walls and the warm sun, all replaced by a vast open field shadowed by roiling black clouds above. The sky was rumbling. Streaks of lightning split the darkness, making the heavens roar. A cold wind blew, giving him goosebumps and sending ripples through the long grass.

Just when he thought he had avoided the girl, he saw her again, rushing past him while riding atop a tall, white, four-legged animal with an older person dressed in dark clothes seated behind her. They were galloping away at a great speed; the animal's hoofed feet kicking up clods of dirt and grass.
The boy met the girl's wide blue eyes one last time, seeing fear instead of hope, before she and her rider disappeared from sight.

"You…" Another voice, one that was deep, angry, and accusing and coming from right behind him. Bright lightning flashed and thunder boomed soon after, loud enough to deafen the boy's ears and make his breath quiver. Slowly, he turned around only to freeze at the sight of a towering beast standing before him. It looked similar to the tall, four-legged creature the girl had ridden but this one was larger and was as black as the darkest night. Its eyes were fierce and burning red like hot coals and its crimson mane flowed like living flames. Plates of silvery-black steel adorned its head, body and legs and they noisily rattled when the big creature stomped its front right foot into the earth where it scraped its foot back, soundly tearing up the grass. It loudly snorted through its nostrils, its hot breath steaming into mist.

And riding upon its broad back was a tall, muscular man with a face hidden in black shadow. Darkness shrouded his entire figure. Only his eyes were visible, seemingly glowing a sinister red that was the same colour as freshly drawn blood, and they were boring right into the boy with great intensity. "Where did they go, boy?" he demanded, his words a low, threatening snarl. The wind picked up, snapping back the frayed, shadowy cloak he wore.

The boy didn't answer, not liking the man's tone. The glowbug hovering over his shoulder flickered to a yellow colour – the sign of an enemy. The boy clenched his jaw apprehensively and instinctively reached for the weapons strapped to his back. Sword and shield were drawn into his hands, fortifying his will to stand boldly against the dark beings before him. He steeled against the man's glower, knowing there was nothing to fear.

The girl was in danger and fleeing from this man. She had to be protected, but the boy didn't know why; he didn't even like her. But some unforeseen force was prodding him; silently telling him that this was the right thing to do because the man in front of him was evil and had to be stopped.

"Who do you think you are, you little fool?" mocked the shadowed rider. Again, the boy said nothing, his unwavering gaze never leaving the other. He shifted into a defensive stance in anticipation.

The man sneered at the small one's brave display, his dark lips parting to show his pearly teeth. He raised his hand to his chin, forming hooks with his thick shadowy fingers, and suddenly sank his nails into his own black flesh. He tore deep into his own face, ripping upwards to peel away the skin and tissue. Blood gushed from the self-inflicted wounds, pouring down like scarlet rivers that drenched the back of the four-legged animal that continued to glare down at the child. The man gouged out his own eyes with his fingers, leaving bloody sockets that endlessly wept red. Then he raised his head towards the sky and laughed; a reverberating, mocking laughter that rumbled like the thunder above. He didn't care if blood filled his mouth and stained the shadows red and he didn't care if his face was falling apart, piece by bloody piece.

It was a chilling sound combined with a gruesome sight, disturbing the young swordsman greatly. Lightning flashed once more, much brighter than before, lighting up the clouds and blinding the boy for one brief second. He rapidly blinked to readjust his eyes only to stiffen in alarm to find both the man and his black creature gone along with the wide open field and thunderous clouds.

He now stood within a small, dark chamber with several walls decorated with giant, framed paintings, each one depicting the same empty dirt road bathed in moonlight. Icy blue flames burned on the few standing iron torches, casting the room in a dim, cool light, making the air feel just as cold as ice.
Frantic, he looked around, unable to see where the man shrouded in shadows had disappeared to. He was quick to realize that he was tall again, no longer the size of a boy but at the height of an adult, and the sword and shield he had drawn were gone from his gloved hands. The glowbug still accompanied him, back to its normal white glow.

Laughter suddenly shattered the silence in the room; the very same awful sound that sent shivers up his spine and made the hairs at the back of his neck stand on end. He twisted around and gasped in horror when he found the shadowed man standing within an arm’s length away right behind him.

The fiend’s face was mostly torn off, revealing the glistening white bone beneath. Pieces of bloody flesh still clung to his skull, wet and dripping. Within his sockets were two fiery red eyes that shone with a malevolent light. Two long pointed horns of white sprouted from the top of his head while his many teeth were now all sharply pointed like a monster’s. Gone was his lower jaw where it must have fallen off somewhere and within his gaping mouth was a burning flame that was the same icy blue as the torches.

The glowbug screamed a warning and flashed yellow, but the boy was too late to react. Something cold and sharp was suddenly plunged into his stomach, piercing him through to his other side. Excruciating pain flared from the injury, making him cry out in agony. Through his grimace, he saw and felt his own blood begin to spill, running down the long central blade and black metal shaft of the dreaded spear belonging to the man. He grasped the weapon by the base of its three blades in hope of pulling it free only to have it thrust deeper by its wielder, eliciting more pain and making him choke. His knees buckled and he would have fallen if it were not for the spear holding him up.

Mocking laughter turned into mocking words. "Who do you think you are?" the man asked again, his harsh voice overshadowed by a demonic entity.

The wounded boy couldn't answer, his body wracked with pain, and his mind filled with torment and confusion. He had no strength to resist or to fight back, not when his life was slowly seeping away and staining the floor crimson. With trembling hands, he weakly gripped the shaft of the weapon, using it as a crutch to stay upright.

"This isn't supposed to happen!" his mind was screaming at him. He had been here before in this cold, dark room; he had fought the bone-faced phantom that could meld within the many paintings with its four-legged mount and defeated it once before.

It was here that the kind girl with green hair and blue eyes had slept and it was him who had awakened her.

He didn't know how he knew; he could never understand how and why and it often left him feeling lost, frustrated, and vulnerable.

The vile creature leaned forward so his repulsive, peeling face was right before the swordsman's. The boy couldn’t pry away from the pair of wicked eyes dwelling within the hollowed sockets that cried scarlet tears.

"Who are you to stand in my way?" the fiend whispered, his voice a grating rasp, his eyes glowing with anger and his inner blue fire flaring with each spoken word.

The swordsman flinched from the question. His quivering lips moved but there was no sound for he had no breath left to speak with. It hurt to breathe, it hurt to move, and it hurt so much more to stand.

"This isn't suppose to happen," his mind was telling him again. He was supposed to be the triumphant victor wielding a holy sword of light in his left hand and a sturdy shield in the other. But now that
moment had changed…

The man pulled back, yanking the point of his weapon free from the other's body.

The boy staggered and fell backwards, landing hard on the stone floor on his back. His body was growing cold and numb, the pain gradually disappearing. His head was spinning. Everything was blurry. Darkness was starting to crawl into his vision.

Hands that were like iron grabbed his shoulders, the icy fingers digging deep. The fiend loomed above him, peering down with spite, its burning eyes penetrating the growing shadows.

"You are no hero," the phantom hissed in contempt, his dreadful voice echoing all around, "You are no one!"

No one? I am…

"Bacon."

No… that's not my name…

"Bacon. Wake up."

That's… not who I am…

"Bacon!"

Gasping, the boy snapped his eyes open only to find someone shrouded in shadow gripping him by the shoulders. Panicking, he immediately backhanded the person and broke free from the person's grasp.

"Ow! It's only me!"

There was a sharp snap of fingers followed by the sudden blindness of light. The boy flinched from the brightness and shielded his eyes. He jerked away when he felt a hand grab his arm, not wanting the man with the bloody face to hurt him more. He rolled to the side, but ended up falling over the edge and landing face-first onto a carpeted floor with his legs all tangled up in something. In haste, he pushed off the floor and soon blinked in surprise when he finally realized he was no longer in the cold, dark chamber surround by desolate paintings and stone walls.

He was back in the bedroom he shared with Romeo and he had fallen off his mattress with his legs tangled in the sheets.

"Bacon."

Bacon sharply turned his head at the sound of Romeo's voice, seeing the older boy kneeling on Bacon's mattress with worry clear on his sleepy face.

Romeo was rubbing a sore spot on his cheek that was turning red. "It's okay now. You were only having a bad dream," he assured, his tone gentle.

The younger one blinked and stared for a moment, his breathing rapid and his heart pounding loud in his ears. Only a dream? He untangled himself and lifted his buttoned pajama shirt, relieved to see no bleeding hole where a spear had impaled him through.

Romeo shifted closer and frowned. "What's wrong? Do you have a stomach ache?"
Bacon dropped his shirt and shook his head. He wished for Wendy's comforting presence and to hear her calming voice, but the girl had gone back to Fairy Hills to stay for the night to do her laundry and pack her things for their long trip to the capital city of Fiore tomorrow. He glanced at the closed window above Romeo's bed. It was still dark out and he could hear the familiar pattering of rain against the roof.

Romeo gave him a light pat on the head. "Are you feeling okay?"

Bacon slowly nodded and let out a deep sigh, feeling more at ease.

"What did you dream about?" Romeo quietly asked as he motioned for the other boy to climb back onto the mattress.

Bacon frowned and lowered his gaze as he tossed his covers back onto his own bed. It was a question Romeo asked every morning and every morning Bacon didn't know how to respond. It was difficult to put his dreams into words before they were forgotten.

Thunder suddenly cracked the sky, making him freeze before he could get off the floor. The sound brought back the vivid image of the evil man ripping apart his shadowed face beneath the stormy sky.

Then Bacon remembered the sunlit garden surrounded by towering walls of pale stone and the strange girl in the pink and white dress peering through a blackened window. Her haunting question rang through his mind: "Who are you? Who are you? Who are you?"

Bacon had the answer, but at the same time, he did not. It didn't make any sense to him. When he tried to think about it his head started to hurt. He pressed a hand to the side of his head, feeling a sharp pain arise. He felt a hand on his shoulder, giving him a little squeeze.

"Are you okay? Does your head hurt?" Romeo asked in concern. "Lie down. You'll feel better if you get some more sleep."

Bacon slowly shook his head in disagreement. If he closed his eyes again, he may have another bad dream full of confusion and pain. And he might see that man again, ripping away his own face, laughing and ridiculing and glowering down at the boy in contempt…

Above, the storm was angry, now pounding the roof with heavy rain and unleashing a booming roar that seemed to shake the whole house.

Romeo's frown deepened at the younger boy's reaction. "I'll be right back," he said and quietly left the room.

Bacon glanced over at the window, seeing a bright flash coming from outside. Anxious, he made his way over; climbing onto Romeo's bed and kneeling on top to rest his arms on the sill to look through the glass. Instead of seeing the raging storm outside, he saw his own reflection in the window. He was a boy with wide blue eyes, messy blond hair, and long pointed ears and yet… he knew nothing about himself. "Who are you?" he whispered. His reflection didn't have an answer.

Romeo returned shortly with a damp towel for Bacon to wipe his face and a small mug full of warm, sweetened tea for him to drink. Seeing that Bacon wasn't going back to sleep any time soon, the older boy joined the other in looking through the window. "Well, it's only two more hours until we have to get up anyway," the fire mage commented with a yawn. He snapped his fingers to turn off the crystal lights.
Shadows swallowed them both and the view of the drenched street outside became clear. The boys quietly watched the storm together, one a little more apprehensive than the other. Lightning occasionally lit up the dark road and thunder would follow right after, drumming along the black clouds. Rain lashed against the window, whipped about by the howling winds. Gradually, the thunderstorm passed over the sleeping town of Magnolia over an hour later. A light rain continued to fall as the dark sky began to lighten at the first sign of dawn.

Bacon looked over at Romeo, seeing the older boy resting his head over his folded arms, looking as if he had fallen asleep. "Romeo," Bacon began hesitantly. At the sound of his voice, Romeo was instantly awake, his eyes wide and staring at Bacon. "Who am I?"

Romeo blinked a few times and mumbled, "Huh? W-What did you say?"

"Who am I?" Bacon repeated, desperate.

Romeo's surprise morphed into a sympathetic frown. He opened his mouth only to close it again. After taking a moment to ponder, he cleared his throat and said, "I… I don't know…" He patted Bacon on the back when he saw the younger boy's disappointment. Romeo held up a fist, his weary face now determined as he gazed upon the other. "Don't worry. The answer will come to you someday. Everyone in Fairy Tail has been trying to help you remember your past and we will always keep trying. We won't give up." He perked up and grinned. "Actually, I lied. I know who you are. You're a strong, amazing, fearless kid who can fight one-on-one against Titania! You're better than me with a sword and bow and you're fifty times better than me in playing the ocarina. Your songs can make people happy and dance and your magic is incredible. You like cake and ice cream and you hate spicy curry and brussel sprouts. You love to play games and listen to Levy's stories. "You are Bacon of Fairy Tail and you are a friend and valuable member in our guild. That's who you are."

The youngest smiled, feeling more assured. There was one thing that still bothered him, however. "Is Bacon my name?"

Romeo laughed. "No… You probably don't remember at the time, but it was Natsu who came up with that name and it kinda stuck since you seemed to like it." He suddenly became curious. "Why do you ask? Do you remember your true name? Or something about your past, perhaps?"

The other boy shook his head.

Romeo gently nudged Bacon's arm with an elbow. "It'll come to you someday. I know it will. Do you still like to be called Bacon?"

The younger boy thought for a second and nodded. He was Bacon of Fairy Tail. No longer did he doubt that name for it was the only thing he truly knew.

Romeo lightly patted him over the head. "Are you feeling better now?"

Again, Bacon nodded.

The fire mage grinned again. "You should try talking more often. Dad and Wendy would be really happy to hear you speak. It'll be funny to see their surprised faces!"

Bacon matched the other's smile. "Okay."

Wendy let out a big yawn as she tried to stretch out her stiff and sore body. The effect of Ultear's Arc
of Time still hadn't faded away. Every joint was aching and every body part was tender. Not only that, she had just spent three hours in a cramped carriage seated between two sleeping boys who were both using her shoulders as pillows. She was stuck in the middle for nearly three hours and unable to move since she didn't want to disturb her sleeping companions. Last night's storm had woken almost everyone up in the middle of the night, so it wasn't a surprise that her friends were tired. Plus, they had to get up early in the wee hours of the morning too.

Romeo explained to her what had happened during the night. Bacon had another nightmare; one that resulted in him refusing to go back to sleep. But most shocking of all was that he had spoken to Romeo, questioning about his identity and name. It was a moment Wendy had wished to be there for Bacon.

"Wendy."

The girl turned around at the sound of the young boy's quiet voice and smiled. It wasn't the first time she had heard him say her name that day. When they had gathered at the stables that morning, he had surprised her and everyone else by calling Wendy's name. Since then, everyone had been trying to get him to talk more before Master hurried everyone onto the carriages so they could leave at six o'clock sharp.

Bacon was now wide awake and eagerly pointing at the pair of dark brown horses that had pulled their carriage.

"You want to see the horses?" Wendy asked and got a happy nod from the boy. She looked around the street of the small town they had decided to stop at for brunch, seeing only a few carriages and some of her guild members loitering around and taking a break. Not everyone was here yet so there was plenty of time to relax for a bit.

The boy was grinning broadly as he ran up to one of the tall animals, pulling Wendy along. He was excited when he first saw them, but during the morning rush, he didn't get a chance to get a closer look.

Bacon stood before the hoofed beast and stretched out a hand, wanting to touch its face. Snorting, the large animal only looked down at him.

"Do you like horses, Bacon?" Bisca asked as she strolled over with Asuka not far behind. She reached up and gently stroked the animal's snout, managing to make it lower its head so Bacon and Asuka could pet it too.

The boy's smile was bright when the animal nuzzled its nose against his hands. "Epona?" he murmured curiously.

"It's not a pony, silly. It's a horsey!" Asuka corrected him, giggling. "We have one at home!"

"Horsey?" The boy slightly tilted his head at the odd name and continued to stroke the animal.

"Wendy, you and Bacon should stop by our house sometime after the Games are over. We have many different animals I'm sure you would love to see," said Bisca with a kind smile. "I can even show you how to ride a horse."

The Dragon Slayer liked the sound of that idea since Bacon often showed a great interest in every moving critter, no matter how big or small. "That sounds fun, don't you think so, Bacon?" she asked.

The boy grinned and nodded.
However, Wendy's smile faltered when she recalled Cana's ominous prediction with her magic cards: "It's not love he'll find first... It's... death."

Will something bad happen to Bacon before the Games were over? Wendy had demanded to know more about the boy's misfortune, but the only detail Cana could obtain from her readings was that the event will take place 'sometime in the near future'.

Upon hearing the bad news, Master had taken a few precautions by providing a special gold bracelet engraved with sealing runes for Bacon to wear. The shiny accessory concealed the boy's magic aura so it felt as if he was just an ordinary child with no magic capabilities. The bracelet wasn't cheap either; Master had to use more of Bacon's treasure which had made Wendy very unhappy to begin with. After realizing that Master's intention was to protect Bacon, the girl was quick to forgive him. Along with the bracelet, Bacon was given a hooded cloak to wear to hide his appearance. Deep green, trimmed with white, and embroidered with the sigil of Fairy Tail on the back in yellow thread, the article of clothing did well in shrouding the boy's face in shadow whenever he wore the hood.

The city of Crocus was going to be filled with all sorts of people from all over Fiore and possibly from the neighboring countries as well so it was best to keep Bacon's identity well hidden. Especially when dark forces will be present at the Games...

Wendy, Bacon, Asuka, and Bisca spent a little more time with the horses. The children got a chance to feed them as well when the carriage driver offered them the opportunity. When the animals were done eating, everyone in Fairy Tail had arrived into town by then.

The guild ate a hearty meal before boarding their carriages to journey another three hours on the road leading to Crocus. For the duration of the trip, Bacon entertained Wendy and her group, consisting of Carla, Happy, Romeo, Natsu, Gray, Lucy, and Erza, with a number of songs played on his ocarina. The upbeat tunes brought joyous smiles on everyone's faces while the soothing melodies made them calm and relaxed. Even Natsu, unsurprisingly stricken with motion sickness, was feeling slightly better from listening to the boy's music.

Outside, the terrain gradually transformed from lush green forests to vast open plains to enormous rocky, mountains. The capital of Fiore was situated between the grand mountains near the center of the country, built upon the solid earth of the wide valley. The city was massive; the largest Wendy had ever seen. Giant stone walls, nearly twenty meters high, surrounded the perimeter while a huge arced gate allowed passage into and out of the fortified city.

Beyond the gate, Wendy was instantly drawn to the many different sights and sounds. The streets were packed full with people and carriages from other parts of Fiore, and alongside the road were numerous vendors selling food and wares. Crowds of curious civilians stood by to watch the traffic of carriages, many of them waving at the different mages that had just arrived. Various shops, hotels, restaurants, cafes, and bars lined the main road, courting to tourists and visitors. Colourful banners depicting the kingdom's symbol, the crocus flower, and all sorts of flowery decorations adorned the walls of buildings and streetlamps in celebration for the annual Grand Magic Games. There were street performers at every corner doing various kinds of captivating magic tricks, playing live music, and sometimes there was the occasional loud pop from someone launching fireworks high in the sky. In the distance, Wendy caught sight of the golden peaks of the kingdom's castle located in the center of the capital.

Wendy wasn't the only one in awe; beside her, Bacon was pressing his hands and face against the glass window, trying to see every fascinating thing outside with wide blue eyes. She heard sounds of amazement from her teammates as they too gazed out the windows, astonished by the festivities and the sheer size of the city. If Wendy had to guess, the population of Crocus was likely over one
million people. Romeo was the only one not so enthused having experienced the lively celebrations for seven years straight. He was more amused by everyone's reactions.

It took at least an hour for their carriage to maneuver through the busy streets before reaching Team Fairy Tail's designated lodging, the Honeybone Lodge. Located in the north-eastern district, the building was humble in size with the front porch decorated with little smiling skull heads made of white wax on each rounded post. Above the wooden, stain-glass door was a wooden sign depicting a bee with a skeletal head and surrounded by red and pink hibiscus flowers.

The group unloaded their luggage from the carriage. Wendy and Carla stayed with Romeo and Bacon while the rest of her team checked in and dropped off their stuff in their room. Since Team Fairy Tail was strictly assigned the one room in the lodge, the two boys had to stay elsewhere with Macao and the others.

Wendy stretched her body, unable to shake away the pain and fatigue. "I still don't feel right," she groaned in misery as she plopped on the bottom step of the porch, right beside Romeo. Erza was the only one on the team who was feeling perfectly fine which made Wendy a little envious of the woman's extraordinary endurance and willpower. At this rate, Erza may have to carry most of the team's weight until each member fully recovered.

Bacon was standing close by, keeping his attention towards the sky in search of random fireworks. Every minute or so there would be a colourful explosion in the shape of flowers, hearts, stars, animals, or happy faces.

Romeo frowned at Wendy in worry. "Yeah, I'm still aching all over. I hope you guys can make it through the preliminary though. That's one of the toughest parts."

"Preliminary? What's it like? Does it start tomorrow?" she asked, getting nervous.

"The preliminary is different every year and starts at different times. It's basically an elimination round where over a hundred guilds enter, but only eight to ten will actually succeed in participating in the main events. One year, it started right at midnight," Romeo explained. "Fairy Tail has never lost the preliminaries, however... we always end up dead last in the actual Games against the top guilds..."

"This year will be different!" Natsu hollered from behind them as he and the rest of the team stepped out. "Fairy Tail is going to be number one again!"

Wendy heard snickering from across the street. "D'you hear that?" a man asked another as they both glanced over at the mages, sneering. "It's Fairy Tail, the losers!"

"Gonna drag your asses along at the bottom again, Fairy Tail?" jeered the other, jiggling his butt in the guild's direction.

"Sabertooth will dominate the Games just like every year!" the first man added.

"Why you--" Natsu snarled vehemently only to choke midway through his threat when Erza yanked back his scarf.

She gave Natsu a stern glower. "Don't you start anything, Natsu. That won't prove anything." Her glare shifted to the two men and both noticeably shivered when they met her eyes. "We will show all of Fiore Fairy Tail's true strength in due time. Just not now. You'll spoil the surprise," she added with a devilish sneer that suddenly sent the men backpedaling the other way.

"The hell is she?! She's freaking scary!" one of them yelled as they sprinted away.
"Whoa… Geez, you're pretty worked up too, aren't you?" Lucy mumbled under her breath, inching away from the silently fuming Titania.

Even though Erza was her teammate, Wendy felt just as intimidated by the murderous look in the older woman's eyes. Wendy was overwhelmingly relieved to have the fearsome Titania on her side.

Around that time, Bisca, Alzack, Master, with Asuka riding atop his shoulders, and Shadow Gear stopped by, each one wearing a proud or happy smile. Levy was first to discuss the ever-changing rules of the Games and brought up three very important ones that she had read about in the two-hundred paged rule book she skimmed through over the trip: the Master of each guild could not participate, only members who bore the mark of their guild were allowed, and each event was held secret until the moment before they began where then the rules of the event would be explained.

The last rule made Wendy extremely nervous. Not knowing what she was getting into was going to be stressful since she was not particularly good at anything. She was a healer, not a fighter nor an athlete. She could only hope to do her best and make her guild proud.

"There's also a little warning at the end here," Levy noted as she flipped to the last page of the text, "You guys have to return to your lodgings by midnight."

"Hmm? So we have a curfew?" Gray grumbled in disappointment.

Romeo looked thoughtful. "That rule was applied another year before. It could mean the preliminary might start at midnight tonight!" he said.

"What? Tonight?!" Lucy groaned.

"It's possible," warned Jet. "Caught us off-guard that year and we barely made it past the elimination round."

Erza smirked and looked between her teammates. "Very well. Everyone, be here before the clock strikes twelve. Understood?"

Natsu glanced up at the nearest clock tower and found the time to be nearing one in the afternoon. He grinned. "There's lots of time. C'mon, Lucy, let's go check out this city! I'm starving!" he said as he started to sprint down the road with Happy gleefully flapping over his head.

Lucy quietly sighed and jogged after Natsu and Happy nonetheless, yelling at the pair to slow down.

To Wendy, Carla, and Bacon, Romeo suggested, "There's some cool things I'd like to show you guys. Wanna go see?"

The Sky Dragon Slayer smiled and nodded as she hopped onto her feet. "Sure! Bacon, come on, let's have some fun!"

Bacon was elated. But before he could turn to follow, Master Makarov called him over.

"Not too hasty now, my boy. You're forgetting something," said the elder as he pulled the boy's hood over his blond head. "Always keep that on while we're here, okay?"

Bacon nodded.

"Why does he have to?" little Asuka asked, peering down at the other boy from her perch.

"To keep him safe." Makarov lightly patted the boy on the arm. "Now go have some fun and do be
careful."

"Oh, and Romeo," Alzack began before the children could leave, "Your father wants you and Bacon to be back at the inn by ten o'clock."

The older boy pouted. "Aw, ten? That's so early!"

Alzack shrugged. "It's what your dad wants."

Romeo crossed his arms and sighed. "Which inn? The same one?"

"Yeah, Humming Way by the west plaza. Don't be late or else you'll make him worry," Bisca added with a short laugh.

"Yeah, yeah." Romeo motioned for Wendy and Bacon to follow as he started down the road. "You guys hungry? They sell some really good food at the central plaza."

"Sounds good – Oh, wait!" Wendy stopped in her tracks, making her companions stop as well. "I forgot my money! Let me go grab–"

"Don't worry about it!" Romeo grinned and flashed a thick wad of bills he had tucked in the inner pocket of his vest. "I saved up a lot from all the jobs I did. I can pay for everything. My treat."

"But–"

He didn't even wait for the girl to respond. As excited as Natsu, he sprinted down the road with Bacon right at his heels, prompting Wendy and Carla to chase after them without an argument.

The city of Crocus was a loud and busy place with bustling streets full of people and many wonderful things to see, hear, and smell. As they neared the central plaza, crowds were so thick that Bacon, Romeo, and Wendy had to link hands so not to lose one another as they squeezed and nudged their way through the maze of people in order to reach their destination.

As Bacon was pulled along by Wendy, he couldn't help but stare at the many different people walking around him. There were people that resembled animals, people that wore rich, fancy clothes, people that dressed in shiny plates of armour, people that barely wore anything at all, people who painted their bodies and faces in bright colours, people with stylish headdresses and vibrant robes, and many, many other types of individuals that caught his attention.

Once they turned around a corner and emerged onto the busy plaza, the young boy was stunned by all the decorations that adorned the planted trees, street lamps, and stone statues of maidens and knights mounted on horses built around a large stone man wearing a crown and wielding a great sword carved from rock. There were ribbons that burned as if they were on fire, balloons that changed colours and patterns, signs with moving images and flashing lights, glowing lamps in the shape of flowers suspended in midair, a rain of pink flower petals that fluttered to the ground that disappeared before touching the ground, and most amusing of all were the twirling pinwheels that hovered around, carried by the light breeze.

There were dozens of carts and stalls that sold tasty treats that Romeo bought for his friends to try. Bacon snacked on grilled meat on a stick, a scrumptious meat pie, a sweet strawberry tart, delectable dumplings, and honey-dipped doughnuts and drank ice-cold juice to quench his thirst.

As they ate, the four wandered around the plaza and watched the different shows put on by various street performers. Since the children were short, it was difficult to see anything over the countless
heads of adults so they often had to force their way to the front. Bacon kept a hand on his hood, being mindful not to let it fall off as he was pulled along by Wendy.

Together they watched as people in extravagant clothes danced and sang to the rapid beat of drums and strummed guitars. They smiled at the sight of jugglers balancing atop giant rolling balls, tossing a number of objects ranging from balls to flaming swords at each other. They laughed, clapped, and cheered with the crowd at the costumed actors on a stage that surprised and dazzled the audience with all sorts of cool, showy magic, most of which Bacon had never witnessed before back at the guild.

When they saw everything they could see, Romeo led them out of the plaza and into an alley. From there, he took them to a huge, wide bridge constructed over a large body of shimmering water. On the other side in the distance was a tall, massive building with many pointed towers that shone bright and gold under the sun. A wall of stone surrounded the building so the only form of entry was the arced gate built into the wall. People were flooding to and fro across the bridge.

"That's Castle Mercurius," said Romeo, pointing at the magnificent structure. "That's where the King and Princess of Fiore live."

"I'd like to see it up close," said Wendy, shielding her eyes against the sun to peer at the castle from afar.

Romeo shook his head. "It's best to go around evening. Less people that way. It gets very crowded with tourists at this time so it'll take forever to get in and out."

For the rest of the afternoon, they travelled up and down the roads, browsing shops and stopping every now and then for a little bite to eat. Romeo purchased a set of specialty Light Pens for Bacon along with some picture books, puzzles, toys, and a souvenir pin that had a picture of the castle they had just seen. It magically lit up with a touch of a button located at the back of the blue, metal clasp. He also bought Wendy a plush doll of a round pink character with little black eyes and a smiling face after she commented on how cute it was. And, after seeing Bacon staring curiously at the same doll, Romeo bought another for the younger boy to have. They ventured into a local bakery, picking up various sweet breads and rolls, fruit tarts and pies, assorted cookies, and a dozen cupcakes, each one skillfully decorated with different blooming flowers made of coloured frosting. The goodies were packed in boxes where they would be eaten later.

When the sun began to set, the four began their trek over the now sparsely populated bridge, each one carrying a bag of goods. Bacon gazed over the side, seeing the surface of the lake below glimmer like orange jewels under the evening light. Visible beyond the city's outer wall were the enormous, pale gray mountains that were at least one hundred times larger than the mountains near Magnolia. The thin trickle of people leaving the gate ended when the four members of Fairy Tail were half-way across and it seemed like they were the last ones heading to the castle.

It was quiet and peaceful when they passed through the enormous stone walls of the gate, a stark contrast compared to the rest of the city. Instead of the music, explosions in the sky, and the buzz of constant chatter, the only sounds Bacon could hear were their footsteps and the quiet rustling of their paper bags as they strolled along the empty pathway.

Bacon took a deep breath, liking the cool, fresh air. Tailing Wendy and Romeo, he looked around, seeing well-trimmed hedges and dozens upon dozens of flowers planted in a specific order to form an eye-catching pattern of colours and shapes. In the middle the huge garden was a large fountain that sprayed crystal-clear water up at the sky. Bacon leaned over the marble ledge and smiled at his distorted reflection in the basin, feeling the cold spray of mist against his face.
"It's getting late, so let's hurry and get a closer look at the castle," said Wendy as she gently pulled him by the hand.

The boy glanced up at the tallest tower of the enormous building they were approaching, astonished by its size and height. It was the biggest structure he had ever seen. Made of dark gray stone at the bottom and gold-coloured rock mid-way to the top, the castle had so many windows Bacon wasn't sure how many rooms were inside of it. Most of the rooms were lit up because the last of the sun's light was about to disappear behind the distant mountaintops. He had seen other castles before somewhere within his dreams; one that was dark and floating in an ominous sky, and another that was built within a lively town, similar to the one he gazed upon.

"Wow, look at that," the Dragon Slayer whispered in awe, eyeing the top of the building. "Have you ever been inside it, Romeo?"

The older boy shook his head. "No. I don't think visitors are allowed in without permission."

"It's a beautiful place," said Carla.

"It would be interesting to see…"

Bacon didn't hear the rest of the conversation. He turned sharply to the side when he heard a strange chittering sound coming from behind them. He spotted a tiny black creature wearing a strange crown made of leaves and a little red cape slowly crawling towards them. It had round yellow eyes, a wicked grin, and a long tail that ended in a triangular point.

It froze the instant it noticed Bacon looking at it. Before it could even flinch, Bacon dropped his bag of toys and swiftly dove at it, snatching the little creature in his hand to get a better look at it. Unfortunately, the creature didn't like being roughly handled and ended up sinking its sharp little teeth into the boy's thumb in retaliation.

Crying out in pain, Bacon instinctively tossed the mean animal where it landed on the ground with an audible squeak and immediately scampered away on all fours.

"Bacon, what happened?!" Wendy asked, grabbing the boy's injured hand.

Before she could start healing, Bacon dashed after the escaping creature, mad that it bit him.

"Wait! We're not supposed to go over there!" Romeo shouted, but the younger boy didn't listen.

The black animal rounded to the side of the castle, ran under a roped fence, and disappeared beneath a tall hedge that stretched as far as the stone wall encircling the castle.

The boy rolled under the rope then dropped onto his hands and knees and crawled through a small gap in the bushes, ignoring the pain from his bleeding thumb. Branches scratched at his arms and face and tore back his hood but he didn't care. He broke through to the other side and spotted the end of the creature's tail vanishing around the corner of the castle. Pulling his hood back on, he pursued after it. When he sharply rounded the corner, he ran right into what felt like a wall made of metal.

He soundly rebounded off and fell flat on his back with his face throbbing with pain. Moaning on the grassy ground, he gingerly touched his sore nose, feeling something hot, wet, and sticky on his fingers.

"You… How did you get in here? Who do you think you are?" demanded a man whose voice was deep and angry.
Bacon stiffened. He remembered hearing the same words from somewhere, spoken in the same tone of voice; "Who do you think you are, you little fool?"

Wary, the boy slowly lowered his gaze and stared at the large man towering at his feet. It was a soldier covered from head to toe in heavy armour that was as dark as night. He could feel the man's eyes hidden in shadow boring down at him through the narrow slit of a horned helm.

One black plated hand lifted to rest upon the steel hilt of a sword belted by the soldier's waist. "Answer me, boy," he snarled impatiently. "What are you doing here?"

"Bacon!" Wendy and Carla dropped from the sky and rushed to the fallen boy's side. The girl was appalled by the blood on Bacon's face. Cautiously, she turned to the man in armour and bowed her head in apology. "I-I'm so sorry, sir! We didn't mean to come in here! We'll leave right away!" she said as she carefully pulled Bacon onto his feet, making sure his hood stayed on.

The man angrily scoffed and stepped forward, his armour clinking with the movement. "You little--"

"Sir Geraldo, what is all this commotion over here?" a woman's voice suddenly intruded, making the man pause.

The soldier stepped aside for a young woman wearing a sparkling dark blue dress that reached down to her ankles. She had shoulder-length hair that was light green and adorned with a ruby-studded circlet atop her head. She had matching ruby earrings and a ruby necklace as well to add to the glamour.

"We have some trespassers, Princess," the man informed in a brusque manner.

Wendy gasped and covered her mouth with her hands. "Y-You're the Princess?"

"Oh my, this is a good first impression," Carla whispered under her breath.

The woman's attention shifted between Bacon, Wendy, and Carla. "Trespassers? They are mere children and an Exceed." She approached the young boy and frowned, her kind green eyes full of concern. "Looks like you're hurt. What happened to you? Did you do this, Sir?"

The man crossed his arms. "I've done nothing. This ignorant boy ran right into me after infiltrating your courtyard, Your Highness."

Wendy was flustered by the comment, however she deeply bowed, the ends of her pigtails touching the ground. Bacon mimicked her soon after, keeping his head low so he could only see the Princess's blue-painted toenails and diamond encrusted heels. He wiped away the blood dripping off his lips, but his nose kept bleeding.

"We… We're so sorry, Your Majesty! Please forgive us. We didn't intend to infiltrate your castle at all!" Wendy said in haste. She gestured to Bacon. "My friend was chasing a black rat and… he accidentally ended up here."

"Clearly a lie. I did not see a rat come by," the man muttered.

The woman sighed. "Say no more, Sir Geraldo," she commanded.

The soldier grunted irritably and fell silent after that.

The woman placed a hand on Bacon's shoulder, prompting him to stand up straight and look upon her worried face. "Please, be at ease. We should stop the bleeding first."
"I can take care of it. Don't worry," Wendy assured as she held her hand over the boy's face and summoned her magic.

Cool blue light filled the boy's vision and he instantly felt the girl's power soothe away the pain.

"Healing magic. So you are a mage," he heard the woman with many names murmur in amazement. "Are you a member of one of the guilds participating in the Grand Magic Games?"

The Dragon Slayer nodded the moment she finished her spell. She wore a small, shy smile and answered, "Y-Yes. I am Wendy Marvell and we are from Fairy Tail."

The woman piqued at the name. Her red lips curled into an amused smile. "Fairy Tail… I've heard much about your guild. Come, I shall escort you back to the front gate."

The armoured man stepped up and said, "Your Highness, you shouldn't waste your time. Allow me to take them out."

"Uh, we could probably go back the way we came…" Wendy suggested, pointing towards the hedge Bacon had previously crawled through.

The Princess held up her hand to stop the soldier from advancing any further. "I insist to escort young Wendy and her companions. Alone. Sir Geraldo, please remain here. We shall discuss the other matter once I return, understood?"

Reluctantly, the man obliged and stepped back. "Understood, Princess."

She motioned for the children and Carla to follow her. "Now, come with me."

Bacon carefully took a peek at the man as he passed by. Even though he couldn't see the man's eyes within the heavy helm, the boy could feel them watching his every move like a preying animal.

Bacon didn't like him; he didn't like his voice, and he definitely didn't like his rudeness towards him and Wendy. Bacon could sense danger around that man.

Blue eyes hardened when he gave the soldier one last look over his shoulder.

As the trio quietly strolled behind the woman with green hair, Wendy had taken a napkin out to wipe the blood off of Bacon's face. She then remembered his injured hand and quickly healed that up without a word.

The sky was turning a deep shade of blue by the time the group had crossed the length of the courtyard to the opposite end of castle, walking on a straight cobblestone path. The courtyard was a wide open garden that was thrice as large as the one at the front of the building. It was too dark to see much colour and details, but Bacon could make out the silhouettes of tall, full grown trees and thick, well-trimmed hedges growing all over.

"I must apologize for Sir Geraldo's behavior," the Princess suddenly spoke up, breaking the awkward tension that had settled over the group. "He is only being wary considering the situation we are currently facing."

"Um, what kind of situation?" Wendy inquired in a polite tone.

The woman paused before a barred, black metal gate. There was a crystal lamp mounted on the castle wall that brightened the area in a pale yellow glow. "The Games…" she quietly answered. She flicked a series of latches attached alongside the gate in an odd order to open it. The metal hinges quietly creaked as the door swung outward. She turned to Wendy. "Thousands of people come and
go to see this castle at this time of year. We can never be too careful. The Grand Magic Games keeps all of our guards busy and stressed. However, when things go as well as planned, it makes the annual event well worth the effort." She clasped her hands together close to her chest. "I pray that things will go well this year…"

"It's been done for seven years now, I'm sure it will be successful again," noted Carla.

The Princess slightly frowned, but it was soon replaced with a smile. "Yes. Wendy, I wish you and your guild the best of luck."

"Th-Thank you, ma'am – I mean, Your Highness!" The girl bowed and Bacon soon followed. "Again, I'm really sorry about trespassing on your property!"

"Consider the incident an act of fate. I look forward in seeing how Fairy Tail will fare against the other guilds this year."

"We'll certainly do our best!" said Wendy, holding both of her fists before her in confidence.

The woman smiled at the three and gave them one final wave of farewell before closing the gate behind them. Bacon waved goodbye alongside his companions, and together they turned away.

"Wow, she was really nice. And beautiful too," commented Wendy with a hint of admiration. Her joyous expression quickly morphed into a stern one when she looked at Bacon. "Don't ever run off like that again! You had me so worried. You could have gotten in serious trouble, mister!"

The boy deeply frowned and looked away in guilt, feeling nothing but shame.

She wrapped an arm around his shoulders to comfort him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound too harsh. Just promise me you won't do that again, okay?"

He nodded.

"Let's find Romeo."

The older boy was frantically waiting near the main doors of the castle, pacing back in forth around the small pile of their belongings. He was so relieved when he saw the trio safe and sound. Wendy explained what had transpired on the other side of the castle as they started to head back to the bridge.

"Unbelievable… you actually met the Princess?" Romeo asked in disbelief, eyes wide and jaw hanging.

Wendy nodded. "Yup. She's such a kind person. Much nicer than that knight guy."

Romeo patted the younger boy on the head and smirked. "Glad you didn't get into too much trouble, Bacon. You're lucky to have met the Princess!"

Bacon grinned, but it was soon replaced with surprise when he noticed something small and black drop down from the stone gate above and land right in front of them. It was the black rat creature and its rounded eyes shone menacingly as it faced the group. It chittered; "Kihihihi!"

Startled, Wendy flinched back. "Wait, isn't that…" She trailed off, unable to finish because she started to sway on her feet. "H-Hey… Wh… What's…" Suddenly, she fell forward and hit the ground with a dull thud where she laid prone and unmoving.
Carla was next to fall over, landing on her back, her eyes closed towards the starry sky.

"Wen… dy?" Romeo weakly moaned before joining them both, collapsing right beside the fallen pair.

Bacon was the only one left standing. "Wendy? Romeo? Carla?" he managed to utter, horrified. None of them moved nor made a sound. Before he could check to see what was wrong, a pair of strong hands suddenly grabbed him from behind, covering his mouth and wrapping around his body, limiting the movement of his arms. His startled cries were muffled and when he tried to wrestle free, the arms that held him tightened, crushing his chest and hurting his face.

"My, oh my," someone cooed by his right ear, making the boy freeze in alarm. It was a man whose voice was as smooth as poisoned honey. "You're quite the troubling little fairy. Why do you not sleep like the rest of the vermin at our feet?"

Bacon drew a sharp breath and furrowed his brow in anger, realizing the man had done something to his friends. He struggled once more, managing to bend his arms enough to grasp onto the white fabric of the man's lower arm. In a futile attempt, he tried to pry the arm away, however the man was larger and stronger than him.

Snide laughter rang softly in the boy's ear. "Oh ho, I see. You are not a mage at all. Such a sad little fairy." The man 'tsked' and soundly smirked. "Looks like I'll have to clip your wings myself."

Bacon struggled harder. The man was going to hurt him. He had to break free. He had to fight and protect Wendy and the others from the person wanting to harm them. But he had no weapon to fight with; the sword Erza had given him as a gift was stored within Romeo's special dimension along with his smaller blade and the older boy was in no condition to retrieve either.

"Hold still, now. You don't want it to hurt too much, do you, little fairy?"

No! Let go! He wanted to scream; to yell; to defy the man keeping him restrained. The sight of his companions lying unconscious on the ground and the wicked black creature snickering close by infuriated him to no end.

Fight!

Bacon's hands suddenly grew hot; as hot as Natsu's fiery breath. There was intense heat and a bright flash of light as orange flames burst to life from his palms, incinerating the sleeve and searing the skin of the arm he touched.

A horrible, deafening shriek of pain erupted in his ear before he was roughly shoved to the ground. Now free, Bacon scrambled to his feet only to gape in shock at the small fires dancing on his fingertips. The flames vanished a second later, casting him back in shadows. He furled his hands and flexed his tingling fingers, finding them free of burns.

The fire wasn't harmful like Natsu's and Romeo's spells… the fire was his own magic, he quickly realized. The tingling sensation that ran down his arms to the ends of his fingers felt the same as the times he infused his swords with energy.

"How… dare you!" the man snarled venomously. No longer was his voice calm and smooth, but shrill with rage.

Bacon twisted around and boldly faced his attacker.

Dressed in a long, crimson vest coat with tapered ends and wearing a scarlet mask to hide the top
half of his face was the man responsible for making the boy's companions fall unconscious. He wore a brimmed hat the same shade as his coat that was adorned with thick, feathery plumage that hung down his back, reaching as far down as his long blond hair. The man stood a few strides away, hunched over in agony as he clutched his wounded arm close to his body. There was nothing left of his white sleeve up to the elbow except for charred strands of fabric, revealing ugly, blistered, peeling skin that cracked and oozed with blood.

The man was breathing heavily through his clenched teeth, his visible face distorted in utmost anger. "Look at what you did, you damn, filthy brat! You marred me! What accursed magic do you possess?! How can it elude my memory?! You will pay for this, do you hear me?!

"You're making a scene, Rufus. Shut it," a woman scoffed in disgust from behind Bacon.

Before the boy could whip around to see who it was, he felt a sudden chill at the back of his head that spread down his neck and through his entire body, seizing every muscle. Limbs suddenly turned weak and heavy and a terrible exhaustion plagued him. He felt himself fall, however he didn't remember landing because the world around him had quickly grown dark, cold, and empty.
You Cannot Break a Broken Dream

It was half an hour to midnight and the streets of Crocus were still as crowded and noisy as the time Fairy Tail had arrived to the city. No, Macao Conbolt was mistaken; it was much busier and louder than he could ever remember. People flooded the main roads and the plazas, out for a stroll to gander at the many different attractions offered only at night in celebration of the start of the Grand Magic Games, partying at the various open pubs that blared loud, obnoxious music, or simply walking around to wait until midnight was upon them in anticipation of what may be the start of the Preliminary Event. Above, the starry night sky was alight with fireworks that have been going non-stop throughout the day.

Normally the former Fourth Master of Fairy Tail would be drinking a few beers and sharing a cigar with Wakaba at this hour on the night before the Games. However, this year was different; he had two boys to look after who were both supposed to be back at Humming Way an hour and a half ago. Ten o'clock. Macao had specifically told Alzack and Bisca to let Romeo know that his father was expecting him and Bacon to be back by that time. And not a minute. Late.

When the clock had struck ten, Macao wanted to leave the inn, find the boys, and drag them back, but Wakaba had convinced him to give the kids a little more time.

"It's the first time your son's having fun here. Let them be," Wakaba had said with a grin while handing his friend a fresh bottle of ice-cold beer. After that, Macao drank three more bottles to calm his anxiety.

But booze could only suppress so much when a father was constantly worried for his boys. "That Romeo… I'm going punish that boy. This time I'm not going back on my word!" Macao growled as he shoved his way between a drunken group loitering in the middle of the sidewalk.

He had promised to ground his son for life for taking Bacon and disappearing with Levy's team during their three-month absence; he had ranted and raged and cried and worried for the safety of his two boys, losing some more hair in the process. It had been a stressful three months and when he saw Romeo and Bacon step through the double doors of Fairy Tail along with Natsu's and Levy's group, all of Macao's anger had instantly dissolved and Romeo's harsh punishment was soon forgotten.

This time however, Macao was going to be strict. Crocus was a large city full of people from all over Fiore. There were an endless number of possible dangers lurking around. Including a dark entity that Fairy Tail had been forewarned about.

With Cana's ominous reading about Bacon's future and the extra precautions Master had taken to protect the young swordsman, Macao had every right to be concerned at the moment. Not only was he responsible for looking after his own son, the father had to make sure Bacon was safe as well. Bacon was more than just a foster child in Macao's care, he had become a second son to the man and a brother to Romeo. And having to watch over two sons more than doubled the stress for a single parent.

Macao heard Wakaba chuckle behind him as the smoker kept in pace with his fervent strides.

"I'm telling ya, you're turning your hair gray for nothing. Those kids will be fine," said Wakaba. "They're with Wendy and she's likely with her team at the Honeybone with the curfew in place."

"They better be." It was a logical assumption. A father could only hope it was true. But ever since
the clock rang ten and neither of his boys passed through the door of Humming Way, Macao had a very bad feeling gnawing in the pit of his gut telling him that something was wrong. He quickened his pace to the point that he was barreling through every living soul in his path.

It was about five to twelve by the time Macao and Wakaba found the Honeybone Lodge located in a thankfully less busy area. The father took a short moment to catch his breath as he gazed upon the humble, two-storey building decorated with cutesy skeletal heads that housed Natsu's team. Every paned window was lit and Macao could hear the familiar voices of his guild coming from inside through one of the open windows on the second floor.

Macao charged through the front, stained-glass door and was greeted by an empty reception desk with a grinning statue of a skull-faced bee sitting on top. Plush red carpet softened his steps as he made his way to the wooden staircase at the left of the desk. Lacrima lamps mounted to the walls lit the way up the creaky steps. At the top was a short hallway covered in the same red carpet. There were two doors on either side with one wide open where a conversation could be heard.

Macao went straight towards the open room just in time to hear Erza say, "Wendy hasn't come back yet. Maybe she's with--"

"What?!" Macao exclaimed as he barged right in, giving almost everyone a start.

Happy screamed and took to the air in surprise, nearly bashing his head on the ceiling. "Macao?! You scared us!" the Exceed cried out. He flew in a circle before dropping back on the carpeted floor, right beside a large case of bottled cola.

"What's the matter?" Gray asked, quick to notice the panic on the older man's face.

Macao briefly scanned the room, seeing only Natsu, Happy, Erza, Lucy, Gray, Elfman, and Lisanna, and all were giving him questioning or concerned looks. "Wendy's not here?! Where is she?! And the boys?!!" he demanded more than asked.

Erza, dressed in her red pajamas, stood abruptly onto her bare feet from her bed. Her expression turned serious when she met the man's gaze. "She's not with you? They didn't show up at your inn?" she questioned.

Macao shook his head. "No! We waited for them but neither of them returned!"

"We thought the boys would be here… with Wendy," Wakaba added as he moved to stand beside his frantic partner. His bearded face was grim as he bit hard on the butt of his cigar.

Lucy furrowed her brow. "We haven't seen them at all. It's almost midnight too! We can't leave to search for them…" she said, glancing worriedly at the clock hanging on the wall above someone's empty bed.

Natsu cocked his head slightly and shortly hummed. "D'you think they got lost? This place is pretty huge," he asked.

"No, Romeo knows his way around," Macao replied.

"And Carla's with them too!" Happy added.

"Could something have happened to them?" Lisanna suggested with a deep frown, looking between each group member.

Hearing that made the bad feeling in Macao's gut worsen by tenfold. It was like he had swallowed a
giant block of lead. He felt a strong hand grip his shoulder, stopping him from breaking out in a fullfledged panic attack.

"I'm sure they're fine. Maybe having too much fun that they forgot the time," Wakaba tried to assure, his words directed more towards his old friend.

No. Something definitely happened… Macao wanted to say but was interrupted by the clock when both of its hands pointed at twelve. All heads turned towards the sound.

Dong dong dong… Twelve times the clock rang upon the wall, the noise silencing all within the room.

"It's now midnight…" Lucy murmured after the last ring of the bell. She and her team stared at the clock in anticipation, holding their breaths.

Natsu quietly huffed, "So what's gonna happen now?"

As if on cue, a loud, male, sing-song voice erupted from somewhere outside, the sound amplified as if spoken into a microphone so all the people in Crocus could hear; "To all the guilds wanting to take part in the Grand Magic Games! Good morning!"

Macao horribly cringed, recognizing the annoying voice that belonged to Mato, the pumpkin-headed announcer of the Grand Magic Games. He had grown to loathe the freak's enthusiastic tone over the past seven years. Especially when Mato announced another loss or disappointing defeat for Fairy Tail.

Macao's younger companions however, were more enthused by the sudden brightness coming from outside. They ran out onto the wide balcony to see what was going on and spotted the giant, transparent projection of the pumpkin man atop a high, visible tower, lit up by spotlights. Some gasped in awe while others were amazed by the spectacle.

At this point, the fireworks had stopped brightening the city sky for the main attraction has finally begun.

"In order to reduce the number of participating teams from one-hundred and thirteen down to eight, we will now begin the Preliminary Event!" the announcer continued, pointing a finger into the air.

"So it's another midnight preliminary," Wakaba remarked, remaining in the room with Macao. He kept a firm hand on the other man's shoulder. "What sort of crazy event will it be this year?"

"A hundred and thirteen teams?! There's that many guilds in Fiore?!!" Natsu shouted, leaning over the ledge of the balcony as if wanting the pumpkin man to answer him.

This year they revised the rules, Macao thought glumly. Not only that, the number of guilds kept increasing every year and that increased the challenge in participating in the Games. Macao had high hopes for Natsu's team to succeed, however with Wendy missing, he wasn't sure how far they will make it through the Preliminary Event with only four members present.

He waited anxiously to hear the details of the challenge;

"The rules are simple!" the pumpkin man sang, dancing upon the tower, "You will now compete with each other! The goal is the tournament grounds, Domus Flaut!"

Suddenly, there was a loud clunk coming from the bottom of the main floor of the Honeybone Lodge and then the building began to move, throwing everyone off-balance. Macao fell against the
doorframe alongside Wakaba while everyone else braced against the floor or grabbed onto something stable. The grinding of mechanical gears and metal parts shifting could be heard over the screaming, yelping, and outcries coming from Macao's guild mates. It felt like the entire lodge was being thrown into the air as it was lifted on some sort of mechanism.

"The first eight teams to reach Domus Flau will participate in the Games!" Mato shouted over the noise. "You will all start at your designated lodgings!"

The Honeybone Lodge violently jerked to a stop, knocking almost all of Fairy Tail off their feet. Macao grimaced from the pain in his newly bruised knees and grumbled a curse under his breath. Wakaba was groaning on the floor beside him, rubbing his sore chin.

"Look!" someone shouted, catching the older men's attentions.

Appearing before the balcony were large planks of wood that flew up from somewhere below and lined up to form a straight path leading away. Each board was suspended stiffly in midair by a strong, magical force, inviting Team Fairy Tail to step forward and begin what they have come here to do.

"There are no restrictions to the magic you can use!" the annoying pumpkin resumed his explanation. "As long as your team is one of the top eight, you will qualify to participate in the Grand Magic Games. However, if all five of your team members do not reach the goal, your team will still lose!"

Natsu, Erza, Gray, and Lucy exchanged worried glances. "Damn! What should we do?!" Natsu exclaimed.

"Further more! We take no responsibilities for any lives lost in the Grand Magic Games Preliminary Event! The Sky Labyrinth!"

In a dazzling flash of colourful lights, a gigantic, spherical object appeared high above the capital on the western edge. Floating in the air and tied down by numerous cords attached to the many clock towers built within Crocus and the rocky cliffs of the tall mountains that held Domus Flau, the object was about a fifth the size of the city. Macao gaped when he noticed that the internally lit-up sphere was composed of platforms, walls, towers, gates, moving parts, and many other structures situated in a twisting, complex maze-like pattern to give the miniature planet its name. This year's Preliminary Event blew the previous years' competitions out of the water in terms of difficulty and eye-catching flare.

Jaw hanging open, Natsu pointed at the Sky Labyrinth in bewilderment. "Whoa! The goal's in there?! We better hurry!"

Erza grabbed the end of the Dragon Slayer's scarf to force him back. "Wait! We can't leave yet. We need all five members of our team to reach the goal in order to qualify!"

Natsu frantically looked around the city from the side of the balcony. "Wendy! Where are you?!" he roared at the top of his lungs.

Elfman stepped forward and soundly smirked. "If Wendy's not here, then you got a man!" he said with pride. He grabbed Team Fairy Tail, holding a pair in each of his huge, muscular arms, and dashed straight for the magic bridge that would lead them to the Sky Labyrinth. "We'll switch members!"

"Brother?!" Lisanna cried out, sounding just as shocked as the four squirming individuals in the big man's grip.
"Guess we have no choice," said Gray. "We can't wait for Wendy any longer."

"Thanks, Elfman!" said Natsu with an eager grin.

"You can count on me!" Elfman replied as he started stomping on the wooden planks that did not shudder under the group's combined weight.

Erza managed to twist her head around to peer at Lisanna, Happy, Macao, and Wakaba. "You guys! Look for Wendy and the boys!" she yelled.

Macao nodded and gave his team a confident smile and a thumbs-up. "We'll find them! Leave it to us! Good luck!" he shouted, waving alongside an ecstatic Exceed. With Natsu's team now in the midst of the event, Macao turned his attention to the others around him. "Let's find those kids."

"Carla's not a kid," Happy corrected.

The man sighed as he started to leave the room in haste. "Right, she's an Exceed. Let's just hurry!"

"Calm down, Macao," said Wakaba, jogging right at the other man's heels. "Wendy might be on her way back here now that the preliminary has started."

"What if she's not?" Macao demanded, storming down the stairs two at a time. "What if something happened to her and the boys? It's not like her to miss out on something as important as this!"

During the times the young Dragon Slayer had stayed at his house to watch over Bacon, Macao had gotten to know her better. She was a shy, caring girl who only wanted nothing more but to bring happiness to her guild and friends. She hated to disappoint them. Being chosen to represent her guild in the Grand Magic Games was an honor – she had said so herself.

Happy gasped as he chased after the two men with Lisanna not far right behind. "Do you think someone wants Fairy Tail to lose? They might have done something to Wendy so we wouldn't qualify!" said the cat.

Macao gritted his teeth at the unnerving thought. Something like this had never happened before, where one member would suddenly go missing. Could it be true that one of the opposing guilds would go so far just to sabotage Fairy Tail? What damn reason would they have in doing so? Fairy Tail was the bottom rung of the ladder. There was nothing to gain in keeping Fairy Tail out of the Games. Unless they sought to further embarrass the guild that was already pitied and mocked by everyone. Unfortunate for whoever was responsible, Fairy Tail had an ace up their sleeve – one that Macao wasn't so fond of in the first place, but Master Makarov was persistent.

"Or maybe…" Lisanna's tone made Macao pause from opening the front door. "Could they be after Bacon? Whoever had harmed him may have returned and…"

"No. That's not likely," Macao replied sternly. The boy was hidden and protected by the gifts Master had given him. However, as much as Macao wanted to believe the young boy was safe from harm, it was still one of the awful possibilities that may have happened. His grip on the doorknob tightened. "We have to find them soon."

Everyone soundly agreed. Macao opened the door and instinctively cursed when his foot stepped on nothing but air. He had completely forgotten that they were thirty meters off the ground. Someone yanked him back inside before he could fall.

"How do we get down from here?!" he exclaimed, looking down at the distant road.
"I can fly," reminded Happy, jumping onto Wakaba's back.

"But you can only carry one person."

Lisanna smiled. "I can fly too. Jump off and I'll carry you down," she said.

Macao raised his brow and stared at Lisanna with great uncertainty. "What? Jump off? Are you sure you can car-" He didn't get to finish his sentence because the girl shoved him out the door. He screamed and uselessly flailed his arms and legs, terrified by the sight of the ground rushing to meet him.

Something grabbed the back of his white coat and abruptly stopped his descent. Feathered wings noisily beat in the air as Macao was carried by Lisanna who had transformed into a giant, green bird with a long neck and an orange beak. Dark blue feathers sprouted atop her head, flaring up and back like little wings on either side. "You're a lot heavier than I thought…" Lisanna remarked with a little strain in her voice as she tried to keep her passenger aloft.

"D-Don't scare me like that!" Macao stuttered out in relief. He was so close to having a heart-attack.

"Sorry!" Lisanna apologized with a giggle. "I didn't want to argue with you."

While hanging like helpless prey in Lisanna's talons, Macao let out a nervous sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose to ease an oncoming headache. It was a long and stressful night. He took the time to scan the city from his new height, stunned by the view. Never had he flown through the air before. It was a frightening and thrilling experience at the same time.

Scattered around the Sky Labyrinth were many other lodgings raised high off the ground by metal legs. Below, the lighted streets were filled to the brim by crowds of people. They were yelling and whistling and cheering for their favourite guilds to win. It sounded like the entire city was awake and screaming, excited for the Games to finally begin.

Happy, carrying Wakaba with his tail, flew right beside the other pair. It didn't seem like the smoker was afraid of heights, but he was certainly disgruntled that his cigar had gone out from the wind blowing by at the speed they were flying at.

"How do we find them? It's so busy down there!" Happy pointed out.

"We have to first consider where those kids could've gone," Wakaba replied, giving Macao a sideways glance. "The central plaza, maybe? I think there are still some shows going on."

"If something did happen to them, it wouldn't be out in the open," Macao stated morbidly. His thoughts wandered to dark back alleys, the bare streets at the outskirts of the city, abandoned, vandalized buildings, the sewers… There were so many possible places to commit a crime and not be seen in such a large place. It would take days to thoroughly search each area. "Just where can they be?" he whispered, becoming desperate.

His answer came in the form of a young girl with long, wavy blonde hair and dressed in a flowing light pink robe with a red bow tied in front. Illuminated by the light of the waning moon, she was hovering in the air in the distance and she was pointing off to the side, her emerald eyes meeting the group's. When Macao blinked, she was gone.

"Did you see that?" he asked, pointing ahead where the girl used to be, hoping he wasn't just imagining things due to his high stress level.

"Yeah… I saw her…” said Wakaba, knitting his brow in confusion.
Lisanna surprised them both when she said, "That… That was Mavis Vermilion!"

"Yeah! I think it was her!" agreed Happy.

"What? The First Master?!” the older men cried in unison.

Macao could hardly believe it. He was aware of the ghost's presence on Tenrou Island, having heard the tale of her miraculous feat to protect Fairy Tail from a dragon's devastating roar attack seven years ago.

"Why is she here? Is she helping us?" Happy questioned, voicing the same thoughts as the others.

"She was telling us something…" Macao began, turning his head in the direction the young girl was pointing at. The first thing that caught his eye were the lighted windows in the tallest tower belonging to Castle Mercurius in the heart of the city. "There! Head for the castle! They must be there!"

"Alright!" said Lisanna as she veered to the left. She flapped hard to gain altitude. "Hold on tight, Macao! I'm going to dive for more speed!"

The man looked up at her in horror. "What?! I have nothing to hold onto!"

The bird let out a bashful chuckle. "Oh right! Then be prepared for this!"

"W-Wai–" Macao cut himself off with a terrified scream when his carrier folded her broad wings and they started to plummet straight down. He was flailing and praying for his life yet again as the sensation of falling overwhelmed him.

When it seemed like they were going to crash into the nearest roof, Lisanna opened her wings and brought them out of their doom. Back up they went, soaring like an arrow towards the grand castle in the distance with the wind rushing by so fast it dried out the man's eyes.

Laughing, Happy sped up to match their speed, towing a sniggering Wakaba who was clearly enjoying Macao's reactions. They reached the palace built in the center of a lake in a matter of minutes.

Once Macao managed to steady his shaken nerves, he got the chance to marvel Castle Mercurius from the sky. The castle was grand, but its courtyards were grander. It was too dark to see much, but Macao could imagine the vast yards full of lush green plants, trees, and fragrant, colourful flowers. He had visited the castle with Romeo numerous times in past years and was always taken away by the beauty and size of their gardens (as well as the gorgeous maidens).

Right now, the courtyards looked empty. It was more peaceful here compared to the frenzy in the western districts. While Lisanna and Happy circled the outer wall that protected the castle grounds, all eyes were keen on finding the missing children and Carla.

Lisanna gasped and started to swoop down. "I see something! On the bridge!"

Macao held his breath as they descended on the stone bridge before the arced entrance of the castle walls. Four bodies he saw, all lying motionless on the shadowed ground beside a number of bags. One of the bodies was small enough to be an Exceed.

When they were close enough, Macao felt a sharp pang in his chest the instant he recognized Romeo's yellow scarf. He didn't wait for Lisanna to let him go; he broke free from her clutches a couple feet off the ground. Once he landed, he sprinted towards his fallen son, his mind numb and
"Romeo! Romeo!" Macao dropped by the boy's side, his badly trembling hands reaching out to give his son a little shake. "Are you alright? Are you alright?" Hearing no response, Macao feared the worst. He turned Romeo over and felt for a pulse on the boy's neck. After a tense moment, he was relieved to find one. His son was still alive.

Lisanna was kneeling beside Wendy, Happy with Carla, and Wakaba with Bacon.

Macao quickly looked around the area. It didn't seem like there was much of a struggle. The bags on the ground didn't fall far from where the children lay and only one had its contents spilled out due to gravity. He checked Romeo over and found no external injuries so he wasn't sure what was wrong. Not knowing troubled him deeply.

"How are they?" Macao asked the others.

"Wendy's unconscious," answered Lisanna with a deep frown as she lifted the young girl off the ground.

"Carla too…" Happy replied, carefully picking her up.

"Kid's cold but he's still breathing. And he's not waking up…" was Wakaba's response. He wrapped Bacon in the boy's own cloak before taking him into his arms. He ground the end of his unlit cigar with his teeth and furrowed his brow when his eyes fell on the child. "What happened to them? Who could've done this?"

Macao angrily punched the ground. He ignored the jarring pain running up his arm and didn't care if his knuckles bled. He growled out, "Whoever did this will pay! I swear it!"

"Could it have been the other guilds?" Lisanna quietly asked.

Wakaba grunted and looked around in the darkness. "If only we have a clue."

"I smell something burnt and I think I smell blood too," said Happy, turning his head to a particular spot on the ground behind them. He gently laid Carla back down and trotted over, sniffing his nose. "It's someone else's blood… not theirs. And look." He picked something up but it was hard for Macao to see.

The father held up a hand and formed a bright purple flame in his open palm to bring some light to the shadows. The object in Happy's paws was a small, piece of white cloth that was mostly charred black.

"Somebody attacked them, but got hurt in the process," the cat deduced, examining the evidence closely. "Looks like Romeo got him with his fire!"

"But it wasn't enough," Macao murmured, lowering his gaze on his son. "The bastard still got him and everyone else." He extinguished his flame and deeply sighed. The headache he was trying to avoid was now upon him, pounding painfully against his temples like a hammer to a stake.

Happy gave the man a hopeful look. "Natsu has a better nose than mine. He'll be able to find out who did this."

Macao sneered at the vengeful thought. Natsu would no doubt tear the whole city apart to seek out the one responsible. The father grabbed all of the children's bought goods and sent them to his storage dimension before cradling his son. "We'll head over to Domus Flau and let Master know..."
Porlyusica could sense every pair of eyes staring at her as she carefully examined her last patient. Since the moment she had demanded silence in the room, no one spoke nor moved. They didn't even dare to breathe. The dull ticking of the clock hanging over the door of the infirmary in Domus Flau was the only sound that disturbed the tense atmosphere.

"It's Magic Deficiency," she finally concluded from the symptoms she observed. Her callused hand lingered on Wendy's forehead. "Wendy, Romeo, and Carla lost a huge amount of their magical power at once, resulting in their physical bodies to suffer with extreme fatigue. All they need is time to rest and recover."

"And Bacon?" Master Makarov questioned. He sat at the foot of the young boy's bed that was right beside Wendy's that she shared Carla. The old man's brow was wrinkled from frowning as he gazed upon the unconscious child. The white curtains that separated each bed in the relatively small room were pulled off to the side so the three occupied beds were visible and easy to attend to.

Fairy Tail's Medicinal Advisor left Wendy's side to stand over Bacon. Her crimson eyes narrowed in concern. Bacon's symptoms differed from the others. He was paler, his skin cold and clammy, and his breathing short and weak. His brow was furrowed, his mind lost in dreams. "It was not magic that was taken from him," she began in a morbid tone, "It was his life energy."

"What?!" the old man exclaimed, his weary eyes now wide with shock.

"Will he be alright?" Macao shouted, springing onto his feet from the chair by his son's side. Lisanna and Wakaba both wore worried expressions as they stood at the foot of the beds. Happy looked tearful from his spot by Carla. "Is Cana's prediction coming true?" the Exceed asked, his voice cracking.

Porlyusica shook her head and snapped; "Don't be a fool. She spoke of his death. The boy is still alive."

"Does that mean he will live through this?" Makarov inquired, giving the woman a look that silently begged for her to say yes.

"Rest assured, I will do all that I can to help him. He will not die under my care, you have my word," the advisor promised them all. She didn't care to see everyone's response as she pointed at the closed door. "Now get out. I can't work with all of you in here."

"But I want to--" Macao started to protest, but Porlyusica didn't want to hear it.

She shot the man an angry glare, stilling his tongue in mid-sentence. "Get out. Now," she commanded sternly. If she had her trusty broom, she could've smacked the father over the head to make her command more efficient. She spotted something that was just like a broom lying in the far corner of the infirmary and moved to grab it.

Once the handle of the dried, old mop was in her hand, no one risked saying another word to argue with her. They took that as a sign to leave as fast as possible. Lisanna, Happy, and Wakaba – dragging Macao with him - rushed out the door in that order. Makarov, on the other hand, didn't budge an inch from his spot. His attention was focused on the youngest boy in bed.
Porlyusica closed the door and tossed the old mop in the corner where it propped against the wall. "Who do you think is responsible?" she inquired, knowing the old man remained to discuss the matter more in depth with her.

Makarov hardened his gaze at their unseen foe. "I don't know… To steal another's life force is a dark power. Why target Bacon and not the others?"

Porlyusica didn't reply right away. She settled on the edge of Bacon's bed and pulled out a black ceramic bottle containing a potion she had recently concocted before leaving for Crocus. It was her own version of Bacon's potent blue potion. It took a lot of patience and a number of experiments for her to figure out the powerful medicine's composition before she could recreate it with her own local ingredients, utilizing a few that were rare. Once she had that down, it wasn't difficult to make potions that had the same healing properties as the red and green one. The main difference between her mixtures and the boy's were the colours. Instead of a vibrant blue, red, or green, her potions were respectively dark purple, pale yellow, and an off-putting dark brown. They may not look the same, but they sure tasted and smelled the same and worked just as good, which was twice as effective as her original healing tonics. She had to thank him for giving her the opportunity to develop something new and better to aid the guild.

Using a small spoon, she gave Bacon some of her purple concoction, being careful not to make him choke. As she poured a second spoonful, she answered, "Look around. They were all targeted, Makarov. The enemy must've thought he had no magic power and chose to drain his life instead. Macao said there was no sign of struggling and yet there was blood spilled at the scene. Luckily the children show no physical injury. Whatever happened, happened quickly." Once she was done with the boy, she moved on to the next bed where Romeo lay.

The master let out a frustrated sigh as he crossed his arms and legs and bowed his head at the thought. Deep wrinkles formed on his forehead while he contemplated on what was said.

Again, the Medicinal Advisor spoon-fed her purple medicine, giving two doses to Romeo.

"Was it all to jeopardize our chances of winning?" the old man pondered, watching Porlyusica work. "All of Fiore knows that we have returned. Would our rivals go so far just to mess with us? It's a good thing I had a Plan B."

Porlyusica scoffed. She wasn't particularly a fan of his idea of having another team enter with a well-known fugitive – who was considered the most wanted, dangerous criminal by the Magic Council – as one of the members. If Jellal's identity was exposed during the Games, there would be severe consequences not only for Jellal, but for Fairy Tail as well.

There was very little she could have said that would've made him reconsider. Once he had his mind set on reaching a goal, the old fool would use any means he had to achieve it. And that meant taking advantage of the new rules that not everyone knew about and using deceit to conceal a criminal.

The advisor made her way to her last two patients. "I can only assume these people wanted your guild to lose. If it was Bacon's life they truly wanted, they would have killed him, not leave him alive," she stated bluntly as she tended Wendy first.

Makarov closed his eyes and slowly nodded, his expression somber. "I suppose you're right…" he conceded, his voice a mere rasp. "They could have killed him, but they chose not to. That means their aim was to stop Fairy Tail as a whole – to discourage us and crush our dreams. This must be a cruel message they're sending. There must be a dark guild hiding among the competitors." He was suddenly riled, evident by the fury in his eyes, the anger on his face, and the vigour in his voice. "If they think we will falter from this, they are sadly mistaken! Fairy Tail is the definition of strength and
hope! This world seems to have forgotten that during our absence."

He hopped off Bacon's bed and marched towards the door, his shoes soundly clacking on the white tiled floor. He stopped with his hand on the knob. There was pride in his tone when he said, "Both teams made it through tonight. We will prove to the people here that Fairy Tail is still as strong as it once was. Even if we fall, we will always get back up."

Porlyusica soundly smirked. "I do not doubt a mere incident such as this will break your children's spirits. In fact, it will make them stronger and more determined to reach their goal. They take after you, after all."

The master laughed at that comment. He glanced up at the clock right above him. It was a quarter to three in the morning. "It's been a long night. The Opening Ceremony is at ten tomorrow." He looked over his shoulder, his tired eyes falling on each of the children and the only Exceed in the room.

"Hmph. If it's at ten in the morning, then get out of here and get some rest. I'll watch over them."

"I'm sorry to burden you with--"

"There is no burden here, Makarov," Porlyusica interrupted, her features stern. "This is my duty as the Medicinal Advisor. Focus on bringing Fairy Tail's name back to the top while I'll focus on getting your team back on their feet."

The old man smiled, making the corners of his eyes wrinkle. "Thank you, my dear. Don't forget to rest as well." With that, he left the infirmary and closed the door behind him.

Porlyusica's stern expression dissolved into weariness. She finished giving Carla the bottle's remaining potion before putting everything away. She pulled up a chair between Bacon's and Wendy's beds and checked the boy's condition. Colour was returning to his face and his breathing was starting to steady due to her medicine's quick effects. He was still dreaming under the power of the Dreamstone.

The advisor turned to Wendy next and lightly felt the girl's forehead with the back of her hand. "It's been a long night indeed," she sighed, silently thankful the children were alive. "Those fools better punish the ones responsible for this or else I'll be the one to strike them down."

There was water everywhere; soundly trickling down the dark walls embedded with colourful crystals, filling the pools on either side of the stone path, and gushing out of the large fountain before him. The waters shimmered and sparkled with the colours of the rainbow under the flickering flames of the two torches built on either side of the basin and the glow of the many glowbugs fluttering around. There were so many of the winged orbs, bobbing and weaving in the air as if caught in a joyful dance.

But it wasn't the glowbugs that captured his interest most; it was the strange woman hovering above the fountain he stood in front of. She was near naked, wearing only the thin, leafy vines of plants that grew around her limbs and body and entwined within her long, swaying, bright red hair, showing her fair, smooth skin. Her ears were long and her face was kind. Her red lips formed a welcoming smile as she leaned forward, looking as if she was lying on her front in midair just an arm's reach away from him. Her lavender eyes met his fascinated stare and she quietly chuckled in amusement.

She held out her right hand, her palm open for him to take. With his left, the boy placed his smaller hand in hers where slender fingers curled around it. Then with her right, she covered the back of his hand.
His hand suddenly grew very hot and before he knew it, fire burst from the woman's fingertips. The flames spread from her fingers to his hand, swallowing his limb in a bright orange blaze. With a sharp gasp, he pulled back in horror, fearing that the fire would hurt him – but it didn't.

Blue eyes widened at the harmless flame burning bright on his own skin. His hand and fingers were tingling from the power he soon recognized was magic. It was hot but not uncomfortable; the warmth spread down his arm and throughout his body, making it feel as if he stood directly beneath the sun on a nice day.

"Din's Fire," spoke the woman in a voice as smooth as silk. The fire from her hands had vanished and left her skin unmarred. "This gift from the Goddess will light your way when your path is dark and dangerous. Use this power wisely because everything the flame touches will burn!"

The boy stiffened. He remembered the stench of something burning. Clothes were charred black. Flesh was red, blistered, cracked and bleeding.

"Look at what you did, you damn, filthy brat!" someone snarled behind him.

He twisted around and found a man wearing a scarlet mask, a scarlet hat, and a scarlet vest coat standing behind him in a place that was no longer surrounded by water and full of glowbugs. The world was dark now, overcome by endless shadow. The flames that engulfed the man's right arm was the only source of light while the boy's own magic had disappeared, leaving his hands cold and clammy.

Blood dripped from the arm that burned, forming a glistening pool of red right at the man's feet. Madness shone in the man's eyes as he lunged at the boy screaming; "You will pay for this, do you hear me?!"

The boy flinched and only had the time to clench his eyes shut and use his arms to shield himself. He expected to be run down by the man on fire, but nothing happened after a short while.

Slowly, he lowered his arms and opened his eyes only to be greeted by a forest shrouded in thick, white fog.

He blinked, surprised and confused. The man was gone and his surroundings had changed again. Trees grew tall here, where the tops disappeared beyond the cover of white mist. He couldn't see very far within the woods. Trees and plant-life meters ahead of him appeared only as ghostly silhouettes in the dim light that penetrated the canopy and fog. It was oddly still and quiet within the forest until something quietly snorted and nudged the back of his neck.

He twirled on his heel, his shock instantly turning into elation at the four-legged animal standing behind him. "Epona!" was the first word that came out of his mouth. The young, roan-coloured creature called a 'horsey' was a friend he recognized from somewhere before. Likely from another strange dream he had.

He stroked the horsey's long face, somehow knowing she enjoyed the touch. She was smaller than the big ones that pulled the carriages, and much smaller than the black one armoured in steel that carried an evil man hidden in darkness… The animal whickered, raised her nose, and licked his cheek to bring him out of his thoughts. Hot and wet was her pink tongue, making him laugh and forget his troubles.

Epona bobbed her head and happily neighed before trotting past him. She paused once to glance back, telling him to follow, before continuing on, turning into a ghostly figure when she went deeper into the mist. The clop of her steel hooves echoed throughout the silent woods.
The boy ran after his friend. The ghosts of trees became whole when he drew closer and obstacles seemed to jump out of the white curtain, forcing him to caution his steps. He lost sight of the horsey soon after, but he could still hear her getting farther and farther away.

His foot suddenly got caught on a raised root, making him stumble forward and fall through a bush. He tumbled head-over-heels onto the other side and landed face-first in the dirt. Groaning, he rose onto his hands and knees only to freeze in alarm when he heard leaves rustling in the tall grass in front of him.

Something was moving in his direction, its path visible due to the bending of the tall green blades. The boy jumped to his feet right when a pointy black nose curiously poked through the grass. The nose sniffed twice. "Hmm?" the owner of the black nose softly hummed before fully emerging from its cover.

It was an animal that looked like a large dog with yellow fur, long pointed ears that were tipped black, and a white underbelly. Unlike other dogs, this one had three bushy tails; each tip ending in black to mimic its ears. It had narrow slits for eyes that made it appear as if it was smiling. Calmly, it sat on its haunches before him, its head the same height as the boy.

"Oh? Never have I seen a Child of the Forest so deep in these old woods. Are you lost?" the creature asked with a quiet chuckle, its voice sounding as young as Romeo's. Each of its three bushy tails gently swayed to and fro behind it like tall grass in the breeze.

The boy shook his head. Lost? No, he was looking for something, he realized. But he wasn't sure what he was looking for until he glanced above his shoulder, finding empty air instead of the glowbug that often accompanied him.

"I'm looking for my friend…" It felt like a long time since he had last seen her…

The talking creature tilted its head, flicked an ear, and studied him for a moment while he did the same. "Oh ho ho! Interesting," it said. It rose on all fours and started to circle around him, its narrowed eyes never leaving the boy. "Could you be…? No. You can't possibly be the one I'm supposed to find… You're much too small. My friend asked me to search for a hero. I don't suppose you've seen one wandering around, have you?"

The boy raised an eyebrow and slowly shook his head. He has heard the legends of some heroes in a few of Levy's stories; people who were strong, heroic, and brave who protected the weak and saved the lives of others. Romeo has called Natsu a hero once, maybe that was who the dog was looking for. However, Natsu wasn't around…

"Oh, how unfortunate." The animal bowed its head and sighed in disappointment. But then it stopped before it completed its circle, its gaze falling upon the boy's left hand. It took one step closer, its pointy black nose nearly touching his fingers, sniffing. "Or perhaps… You really are the one…" it whispered, straightening its ears and standing tall as it met his stare with a noticeable smile upon its lips to match its eyes. "Child of the Forest, you must come with me. My friend will like to meet you!"

The yellow dog dashed into the grass and quickly disappeared from sight. "Don't be slow or you'll truly end up lost! Keaton will show you the way! Come! Come!" it shouted, rustling through the blades and making a trail.

"Keaton…" The boy knew this name. He had met this creature before and he remembered having the exact same conversation while standing within this misty forest – but how did he know this?
Determined to find out the answer, he chased after the three-tailed animal. The wall of grass was so thick and tall – much taller than the boy – that he could barely see where he was going. Blades of green whipped at his face as he tried to push his way through. Eventually the grass opened up and he was back in the forest of mist where the yellow dog could not be seen.

"Come! Come! This way!" he heard the creature calling from somewhere from the left. The boy headed in that direction, swerving around the trunks of trees and leaping over stumps and fallen logs.

"Over here!" This time it was from the right. The boy moved towards the sound, ducking under low-hanging branches and breaking through brush.

The fog in the distance was turning dark as if night was beginning to fall. He was starting to grow very tired as the light continued to fade all around him. His arms felt heavy, and his legs were like jelly with each step he made. It was like his energy was being sapped away.

"Almost there!" From ahead of him now.

He pushed forward with the last of his strength. The trees parted to reveal a blackened sky and a shadowed ground in which he fell onto his hands and knees, exhausted and out of breath. Barely could he lift his head to find the three moons that were shaped like eyes looking down from high above.

"Atarl adune tarei kun ei, Herial Yaarez." The strange words were spoken so softly as if the speaker was standing very far away.

Then he saw they yellow dog sitting beneath the moons, its smiling eyes growing faint as the boy's vision began to blur while his body grew weaker.

"Meet my friend, Child of the Forest," said Keaton, its voice only a whisper. "He's been waiting for you…"

A/N: Leviathan Tamer from FF.net was amazing enough to volunteer writing a short for me. Please take the time to read it below!

A Gale for the Fairy Boy

By LeviathanTamer

Bacon was bored and depressed. Lately, Wendy has been leaving for longer times. He knew that she would be back, but some days not even Levy could keep his attention. Romeo had to give it his all to lift Bacon's spirits, but sometimes that didn't work either. Today was one of those days. It was on days like this that all Bacon could do was wander around the guild.

The places he liked to visit were either the tables where he could rest his head on or some random rock somewhere outside the building. Today he didn't even have the energy to walk over to one of the rocks. He just wandered out into the clearing in front of the building and sat down in the grass. He just looked at the ground; barely did he have enough enthusiasm to raise his head.

Then he heard a sound. It sounded like his blue instrument, but more… buzzy, wheezy even. But it was very faint.

This got him to look around. But no matter where he looked, he could not find the source of the noise which was now starting to sound like music. He got up to search but then he suddenly felt calm
and sat back down. This didn't stop him from looking around more though.

Bacon was about to give up on finding the source when he noticed that the sails on the windmill tower of the guild were moving faster than their normally slow and lazy pace. The music got gradually louder as he stared at the sails. The louder the music got, the faster the sails would spin. At some point (Bacon didn't know when), the music stopped getting louder and now it sounded like the player was right behind him.

Try as he might, Bacon just couldn't break his gaze away from the sails which kept spinning faster and faster even though the music stopped getting louder. Eventually one thing that did break his gaze was the wind. Wind was swirling around him but he felt none of it, he could only tell it was there because there was dirt and leaves blowing in a perfect circle around him. The faster the sails went, the stronger the wind until it had kicked up so much dirt and leaves that he could no longer see outside of the circle.

Despite the music and chaos happening around him, Bacon felt calm. Almost like he'd been at the center of this wind before. This led Bacon to just close his eyes and listen to the music and gusting wind that showed no sign of stopping anytime soon. However after he listened to the looping song for a time he noticed the strange absence of a sound. He could no longer hear the wind!

Wanting to see what the wind had done to the clearing, Bacon opened his eyes only to find a strange sight. He was in a circular room made of stone. Right in front of him was a large, spinning, wooden wheel with a pole sticking right out and a strange assortment of more wooden things attached to the pole. Then he noticed that the song was still playing along with the creaks and thuds of the contraption in front of him.

Now finally able to move his body freely, Bacon whipped around, expecting to see a person playing the instrument. What met his eyes instead was possibly the oddest thing he's seen in his life. There were two… things… floating right in front of him, both with no legs. Both were wearing incredibly weird greenish clothes with only some color changes between the two. One was short and had red changes and the other one was tall and had light blue changes. They both held lanterns in one hand and were waving some small pointy sticks in the other. Then Bacon noticed that they were actually moving the sticks in time with the song.

Bacon assumed the sticks were some form of weapon because the floating pair was waving them just like how Bacon would swing his sword. Neither of them was paying any attention to him and was instead arguing back and forth in a language that he didn't know but… still knew.

"Well, what do you suppose we do then? He's bound to be here any minute! We can't afford to risk telling him!" the taller one nearly shouted at the short one.

The shorter one shook his head and replied, "Well, we've already made the plans to tell him SOMETHING!"

The taller one struck the shorter one with his lantern. "You didn't think of what you were going to tell him BEFORE you summoned him?! This is just like Ikana all over again, you do things without thinking!"

The shorter one suddenly raised his voice. "Oh, you just HAD to bring that back up. I thought you had forgiven me for that." The shorter one crossed his arms and turned away only to see Bacon standing there with curious eyes.

"HE'S HERE!" the short one shrieked so loudly that both the tall one and Bacon had to cover their ears.
The taller one hit him with the lantern again. "Stop shouting." Then the tall one finally just realized what the short one said and started panicking. They both flew around frantically before smacking into each other.

"OW!" they both cried in unison. They took one more look at Bacon and backed away with their backs turned towards him, whispering to one another. Finally the short one turned towards Bacon.

"Welcome, young one," the short one said with elegance, complete with a bow. "My name is Sharp, this one here is my brother, Flat." He nearly hit Flat with his pointy stick in mid-bow.

Flat pushed the stick away and said in the same elegance, "We are honored to meet you again."

This made Bacon think, 'I met these weird people before?' His thoughts were interrupted by Sharp continuing.

"For helping us before, it would be our honor to re-teach you a very special song."

Bacon's eyes widened at this. 'Are they like that girl?' The thought was almost immediately dismissed. They were nothing like her.

"Are you ready, young one?" Bacon was shaken out of his thoughts by the sudden authority in Sharp's voice. Bacon looked back at them and nodded like he'd been taught. "Very well, take out your ocarina and listen closely."

Bacon was confused but reached into his bag and automatically brought out the instrument without thinking. He put it against his lips like he normally did and listened. Everything went quiet and then he heard the same noise that brought him here. Flat and Sharp's pointy sticks were moving at the same time and in the same direction as the song played again.

Three notes, just like the other song taught to him by the girl with green hair. Bacon tried playing but instead played the other song. Bacon worried for a moment.

"We can keep the rhythm until you can play it," Flat said for Bacon.

Focusing, Bacon tried again but made a couple notes too high and too low by mistake.

"As much as we appreciate the tribute to our names we would like this over soon," Sharp said with snark in his tone. Trying one more time Bacon played the song and it came out as well as the unseen instrument played it. Without even thinking he played the rest of the song.

"Well done, boy!" Flat said with genuine happiness. "May my song serve you well."

Sharp smacked him with his lantern. "You idiot, that was too much!" he said.

Flat looked back at him and scoffed. "Well, it is true and it's not like it reveals a lot."

Flat smacked Sharp with his pointy stick and Sharp yelled back; "We weren't supposed to mention anything about ourselves other than our names. That was TOO much! Now we'll be lucky if he remembers this dream at all!" But Bacon could barely hear them as he joyfully played the song again.

What Bacon didn't notice was that as he played the wind started picking up again and before he even realized it, the strong gusts were back. Then everything went black.

Bacon opened his eyes to find hazel ones looking right down on him. He almost bolted up; he
would've if he didn't know whose eyes they were.

Wendy backed up. "Hey, Bacon's awake." She turned back to him as some of his friends came into the room.

Bacon looked around curiously, seeing that he was now back inside the guild, lying atop a folded blanket. He saw everyone's faces and wondered why they were all looking so relieved.

Wendy saw this and said, "Macao was keeping an eye on you while you were outside. He saw you watching the windmill then you just collapsed. Do you know what happened?"

Even if Bacon spoke he honestly didn't know what happened as he remembered nothing so he shook his head. Then he felt a slight breeze against his face and absentmindedly brought his ocarina to his chest. Wendy noticed this but didn't say anything as Bacon put the instrument to his mouth and started to play as he closed his eyes. It was a rather haunting melody, but at the same time everyone could feel sadness behind the notes. Wendy felt herself shed a tear for reasons unknown to her.

What no one was expecting was a strong gust to blow through the open windows that nearly knocked everyone down, Bacon included. Everyone stared out the window with wide eyes, but saw nothing that would bring a storm-worthy gust. It was a clear evening sky. They looked at Bacon and Wendy motioned for him to play again. As he played the song once more, everyone braced themselves but nothing happened aside from the same breeze that had been around all day.
Day One: Losers Don't Cry

Wendy jolted awake at the sound of someone slamming a door open and yelling out her name. Thinking she was in danger, she gasped and shot into a sitting position only to plop back down onto her bed at the sudden dizziness that overcame her. All she could do was lie still and groan because her head was spinning and it felt like her body had gone through one of Erza's infamous Hell Training exercises. It certainly didn't help that people were talking so loud, making her sensitive ears ring. She recognized everyone's scents immediately and had to blink several times to get her vision to focus on them. Natsu and the rest of Team Fairy Tail were standing over her bed with Elfman, Lisanna, Happy, Macao, and Wakaba crowding around as well.

She was shocked but also confused to see everyone huddled so close, looking down at her with great relief in an unfamiliar room.

The Sky Dragon Slayer was even more surprised when Porlyusica stepped into view on the other side of the bed, scowling in annoyance at the group across from her. The Medicinal Advisor wanted to say something – Wendy could tell by the twitching in the corner of the old woman's lips – but Natsu was already asking the girl if she was alright out of concern and questioning to know what happened.

What happened? For some reason the question stumped her. She blinked and furrowed her brow before quickly shifting her attention between each person. She noticed her teammates wearing clothes of the same colour and design to represent their guild. And alongside them was Elfman; he, too, proudly wore the same shade of royal purple with the white mark of Fairy Tail embroidered above his heart.

Wendy's eyes widened and her heart sank the instant she realized what was going on. She had missed the midnight curfew and the start of the Games.

No… How could this have happened?

Someone quietly moaned and stirred beside her. When Wendy saw Carla, she suddenly started to remember some of the events that might have led to her current state. She and Carla weren't the only ones bedridden, she could smell Bacon and Romeo nearby. Sharply, she turned her head to find the two boys lying in separate beds behind Porlyusica. Piece by piece, her memory began to slowly unravel to bring her the answer she and the others sought.

She found the strength to sit up, being careful to avoid another dizzy spell. She took a deep breath to steady her bearings. Her body was hurting, but the pain was nothing compared to the pain in her heart for failing her team. "I… We were… at the castle…" she began to recall, meeting Natsu's worried gaze. Her voice was weak at first, but gained strength the more she spoke; "There was a small black… creature… with eyes that shone yellow and a pointy tail. Bacon chased after it the first time it appeared but he lost sight of it. But then it appeared before us again just as we were leaving… I'm not sure what happened after… I can only remember getting very tired and then…"

"You collapsed due to a great loss in magic energy," Porlyusica explained, crossing her arms beneath her crimson cloak. Her expression was stern to others but to a lesser degree to Wendy, the girl was quick to notice. There was a hint of compassion in those hard, crimson eyes as they examined the Sky Dragon Slayer. Wendy couldn't help but be reminded of Grandeeney and her love, yet again, in the old woman's presence.

"Was it because of that black creature?" Erza asked.
"Was there a person with it? Wearing white?" Happy was next to say, looking up from his spot right by Carla's side, "This person could be the culprit!"

Wendy shook her head. "I don't know… and I don't remember seeing anyone else…"

"Maybe Romeo knows. He's the one that burned them," Natsu suggested. He was visibly anxious; eager to hunt down the people responsible for bringing harm to his friends. He wasn't the only one wishing to seek vengeance, Wendy could see the burning desire in each of her teammate's eyes as well as the rest of her guild standing in the room.

"Huh? I don't remember doing that…" Wendy heard Romeo moan.

All heads turned towards the novice fire mage who had just woken up. Romeo was up on his elbows, looking just as worn as Wendy was feeling. His spiky black hair was disheveled and his eyes were barely open. Macao rushed to his side, crying out in joyous relief, and gently helped his son sit up.

"What's the last thing you remember?" Macao asked quietly, rubbing the boy's back.

Romeo rubbed his weary face with a hand before frowning in Wendy's direction. "Wendy and Carla falling over… and nothing else…"

"You didn't use your magic?"

Romeo thought hard. "No… I don't think I did…"

"Did you see anyone?"

"No, just this weird black rat thing. It jumped in front of us… and it was laughing…" The boy groaned and winced at the pain in his head as he tried to recall every detail. His father quickly ordered him to lie back down, but Romeo refused. He stared at the other boy lying in the middle who had yet to regain consciousness. "I didn't see what happened to Bacon. Is he alright?"

"He is recovering. All he needs is more rest and that goes the same for you two," answered Porlyusica as she glanced between Romeo and Wendy, speaking in a manner that warranted no chance of arguing. She pointed at the door and intensified her scowl. "The Opening Ceremony starts in five minutes. There is no point in you lot to be here any longer. Get out. They need to rest."

Natsu flinched back and started to protest, "But, old hag--"

There was a dangerous glint in the old woman's eyes the instant Natsu muttered 'hag'. Her scowl somehow turned fiercer than before and her stare became petrifying, stopping Natsu (and anyone else) from saying more. "You heard me, boy. Get out! Now!" she snapped.

Everyone but Macao bolted for the door. Before they could leave, Wendy called out to her team, stopping them in their tracks.

Her hands tightly clenched the blanket covering her lap and tears stung her eyes when she started to apologize, "I'm sorry, everyone… I couldn't be there with you guys… After all that training… I'm sorry to disappoint you all…" She wanted to hop out of bed and join them – to be part of Team Fairy Tail like she was supposed to be from the beginning – but she knew she couldn't compete as she was now. Knowing that they couldn't rely on her brought only shame.

Natsu stepped up and lightly shook his head. "Wendy, it's not your fault. Don't worry. Focus on getting better," he said, furling his hands by his side.
She could only nod and turned to the largest man in the group. "Elfman, please… take my place and make Fairy Tail proud."

Elfman grunted and pounded a fist heavily against his chest. "You got it! Once you're well enough, it'll be you who will make us all proud again, Wendy. Until then, you can rely on a man to take your place!"

Gray, Lucy, and Erza gave the girl meaningful nods and confident smirks.

Wendy smiled at the support of her friends.

"Natsu," Romeo began, giving Team Fairy Tail a hopeful smile, "I knew you guys would make it past the preliminary. Please win the Games for all of us."

Grinning, the Fire Dragon Slayer punched a flaming fist into the palm of his other hand. "We will. Just watch! We'll dominate this thing!"

"We better hurry. It's almost time!" Gray informed, glancing up at the clock.

Team Fairy Tail bid Wendy and Romeo to get well as soon as possible with the others following suit. Macao needed to be pulled away by Wakaba. Just before the pair left the door, the father pleaded; "Please take good care of them!"

Porlyusica grunted in response and slammed the door shut. While she proceeded to pour something from a flask into cups at a small table set against the wall, Wendy looked down at her feline friend.

Lightly, the girl stroked Carla's forehead, unable to hold back the tears that resumed to fall. She couldn't believe how careless she was. She was a mage of Fairy Tail and a Dragon Slayer to boot; how could she have dropped her guard in a city full of hidden dangers? Because of that folly, she had endangered her friends and disappointed her guild.

Crestfallen, the girl briefly met Romeo's sympathetic stare across room and gave him an apologetic look before lowering her gaze on Bacon. The cloak that had once concealed his identity was removed, allowing his messy blond hair to show. The young boy appeared to be only sleeping, but Wendy knew he was suffering just as much as her. Just seeing him alive was a great relief to the Dragon Slayer.

She mustered the energy to climb out of her bed, managing to take two wobbly steps before falling against Bacon's, propping her arms on top of the edge of the boy's bed to stay upright. The white tiled floor was hard on her bare knees, but she didn't care.

"Wendy!" Romeo cried out in concern.

"What are you doing? Get back to your bed," Porlyusica demanded, moving to the girl's side with a yellow cup in each hand.

Wendy ignored her orders because when she had disturbed the bed, it woke Bacon up. His blue eyes fluttered open and she was the first thing he saw. His smile was weak but it was an assuring sign that he was alright.

Surprisingly, he spoke first before Wendy could ask how he was feeling; "Wendy… You're okay…” He sounded exhausted and breathless, as if he had just run a lap around the outer walls of Crocus.

"Yes, I'm fine," she quietly replied, giving him a warm smile, "I'm glad you're okay too." She reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder.
"Hmm? He's awake already?" Porlyusica murmured, raising her brow in mild astonishment. She had handed Romeo one of the cups and commanded him to drink all of it before rounding to Wendy's side. Her crimson eyes studied the boy closely as she held out the other cup for Wendy to take.

The girl grabbed the offered medicine but waited to drink it. She could smell it and it certainly didn't smell all that pleasant.

With noticeable effort, Bacon freed his left arm from beneath the blanket so he could grasp the Dragon Slayer's hand that was resting on his shoulder. The gold bracelet that concealed his power glinted. "I was afraid… the man hurt you…" he continued, bringing shock to all who listened.

Wendy's grip on his shoulder tightened. "A man? Who did you see? What did he look like?" she inquired, being careful not to raise her voice.

He knitted his brow in thought and had to close his eyes to concentrate on remembering. "I don't know… He had a mask… a red one. Yellow hair… Red hat."

The description was rather vague. Because of the festivities and the Games, there were many people in Crocus wearing masks of all sorts and colours and wearing various styles of hats. It seemed impossible to recognize who the culprit was. Wendy looked between Porlyusica and Romeo, hoping they had a clue, but the both of them were also pondering over who this man could be.

"Did you see a guild crest on him?" Romeo asked, quickly leaving his bed to kneel on the other side of Bacon's, much to the Medicinal Advisor's annoyance.

The youngest turned to the new voice, elated to see Romeo was okay as well. Bacon shook his head at the question.

"Did he wear white?" Wendy was next to ask, remembering Happy's question.

Again, the boy had to pause to dig into his memories. He met the Dragon Slayer's gaze, his blue eyes full of worry. "Yes… white sleeves. I tried to protect everyone… but I didn't have my sword… So I burned him…"

Once more, every listener was shocked.

"Burned him?" Romeo repeated, not sure if he heard right. He leaned forward on folded arms, looking quite perplexed. "How did you do that?"

Bacon managed to grin as if proud. He freed his right arm and raised it unsteadily above him, his palm facing towards the ceiling. "Din's Fire…" he whispered.

Wendy's eyes widened when she felt his magic surge forth, surpassing the limit his gold bracelet could hide, and enveloped his raised hand; the sensation similar to when he performed his magical sword attack. The air tingled as if charged with electricity, making it feel as if Wendy's hair was standing on end. In a flash, a small orb of bright orange fire burst from his palm before the flames quickly spread and swallowed his whole hand, dancing harmlessly on his fingers.

There were sharp gasps of surprise and awe from each conscious member in the room.

Wendy gawked at the boy's new magic, having not expected him to wield the power of fire. She could feel the intense heat on her skin and it was just as hot as Natsu's powerful flames. The fire burned bright and soundlessly with the core of the orb giving off a light that was as pure as the sun.

Bacon's spell didn't last very long. His fire burned out and the orb extinguished into a small puff of
black smoke before his arm dropped like a rock onto the covers due to exhaustion. He was breathing heavier from the exertion, however his smile remained.

"Incredible!" Romeo praised, giving the boy a pat on the shoulder. "You remembered a new spell! And it's fire too! Awesome! Wait till I tell Dad about this! Everyone will be excited to know!"

Wendy was more grateful than happy. She put her cup on the bedside table and pushed off the floor to lean close enough hug the boy with one arm followed by a light kiss on the forehead. "You were so brave," she said, giving him an admirable smile, "You tried to protect us… Thank you, Bacon. Thank you. I'm so glad you didn't get seriously hurt."

It could have been worse if the man had a cruel heart. Bacon could have been beaten or killed in retaliation, but thank the stars, neither didn't happen.

"So what happened afterwards?" Romeo asked, eager to know more.

Bacon's smile faded and was replaced with a hurt expression. "The man was screaming… and then I… I… can't remember…"

Wendy frowned, understanding that he had fallen unconscious at that point. Was it because of the man using some sort of power that instantly drained his magic energy? Or was it the black creature that had done the deed? Twice they had encountered the dark beast, and twice, Bacon had tried to protect them from it.

She gently brushed a hand through his soft blond hair to comfort him. "It's okay. Don't worry about it," she said.

"That's enough discussion for now," Porlyusica cut in firmly. She stood up and pulled out a few vials containing different coloured liquids from a pouch hidden under her cloak. At the far table, she began to mix them together in another cup. "Let him rest. And both of you, get back to bed."

"Y-Yes, ma'am," Romeo conceded, flinching from the advisor's sharp tone. He shot Bacon an assuring grin and lightly nudged the boy's arm before returning to his bed.

"Get some more sleep, okay?" said Wendy to Bacon. Seeing him nod, she retreated to her own spot with the yellow ceramic cup back in her hands. She made a face at the sight and smell of the purplish mixture inside. She was reluctant to drink it, but had no choice knowing it would speed up her recovery.

As she took the bitter medicine one small mouthful at a time, she overheard Bacon murmur to Romeo; "I had a dream…"

"Oh? What did you dream about?" Romeo replied, sounding rather interested as he sat cross-legged on his bed, facing Bacon and Wendy.

Bacon managed to roll onto his side to face the other. "A yellow dog," he answered. "It had three tails."

The older boy chuckled in amusement. "Neat. What did it do? Did you play with it?"

Bacon slightly shook his head. "Told me to follow him… in a cloudy forest. He had a friend… but I couldn't see his friend… It said to me, 'Atarl adune… tarei kun ei… Herial Yaarez.'"

Wendy noticed Porlyusica stiffen from those strange words while Romeo raised a confused eyebrow. The old woman turned away from the table, her mixture now complete in the brown cup in her hand.
The contents were visibly steaming with a pale yellow mist. Her stern face was still the same, but her eyes were intrigued as she made her way to Bacon's side.

"What does that mean?" Romeo questioned, but the other boy didn't have an answer.

"No more talking. It's time for you all to rest," the advisor demanded. "How else will you return to the Games? The events go on for six more days. Wendy, you will still be able to participate if you recover within that time."

The Dragon Slayer was elated to hear that. She nodded and finished her nasty-tasting medicine without hesitation before lying back down to join her slumbering partner. The potion worked quickly in soothing the pain in her body and made her drowsy. She watched as Porlyusica rolled Bacon onto his back, lifted his head and carefully gave him her steaming concoction, which was not well-received by the patient. The boy sputtered and coughed at the foul taste and refused to drink any more until Wendy spoke softly to him, assuring him that Porlyusica and her medicine would make him feel better. It took less than a minute for him to drink it all. Right after Porlyusica gently lain the boy's head back down, he was out like a light.

"Grandeeney," the girl began, accidentally blurting out her mother's name. "I mean… Porlyusica…" she quickly corrected herself when the old woman shot her a disapproving scowl, "Do you know anything about those strange words Bacon had said? From his dream?" She and Romeo stared at the old woman expectantly.

The advisor shook her head as she remained seated on Bacon's bed. Her crimson eyes narrowed inquisitively on the child as if trying to see through the mystery surrounding him. "The meaning? No. However… If I am correct, the words he spoke were of the Lost Language that was once spoken hundreds of centuries ago… It was known as Dracotongue, the old language of ancient dragons…"

The Grand Magic Games. It was an amazing, magical event that was beyond Lucy Heartfilia's expectations.

It wasn't the enormous size of Domus Flau that took her breath away; it was the number of people gathered in the stadium. Tens of thousands of spectators were seated in the stadiums around the battle ground, screaming and yelling and cheering and whistling in celebration of the triumphant victor of the first main event called Hidden; Sabertooth's Rufus Lore won the most points, bringing him to first place. The audience's voices were like thunder, deafening Lucy's ears and reverberating within her chest.

The fans had gone wild for the flamboyant man in red that Lucy couldn't hear herself think. The noise didn't bother her as much as the jeers and taunts that were thrown in Fairy Tail's faces because of the incredible loss of both of their teams. Natsu got so angry that he roared back at the jerks, fangs bared and ready to explode into a raging inferno. Erza had to hold him back to keep him under control, lest he would jump into the crowd and start bashing heads for belittling Fairy Tail. Natsu wasn't alone however, the mocking laughter aimed at their loss infuriated each member in Team A. Elfman stood stiffly, every muscle tense and his face drawn into an angry scowl. Erza was just as tense in her posture, but she knew not to let the audience get the better of her.

Lucy could only watch in silence as Gray walked away, head downcast and his shoulders sagging. He was mortified by his loss. No words of encouragement seemed to reach his ears. Lucy heavily frowned in morose, understanding that such a defeat was hard to take. Especially when they had come here to prove in front of the people here that Fairy Tail was still the strongest guild in Fiore.

The first contest was a total loss for Fairy Tail. Both members ended up in the last two positions
having gained the least amount of points in the event in which participants from each of the eight guilds had to mingle with hundreds of clones of themselves to seek out the real individual on opposing teams.

It had been a brutal defeat for Gray especially with Raven Tail's Nullpudding skillfully landing blow after blow on the ice-user. The purple-skinned freak with the hideous pointy chin had purposely targeted Gray during the whole round.

Lucy seethed at Raven Tail as a whole. The guild founded by the estranged son of Master Makarov and the father of Laxus strayed far from the family's beliefs. Once a Dark Guild, Raven Tail was now considered an official guild by the Magic Council. She couldn't believe it… it was completely outrageous! Not only that; they were the despicable fiends who attacked Wendy, Carla, Romeo and Bacon last night. The small black creature Wendy had mentioned accompanied them and they even made it clear that they were the ones responsible for committing the deed.

"Those little brats were our way of saying hello," the armoured man in the golden mask had said soon after their guild made their appearance, obviously sneering beneath his disguise.

Those spoken words had sealed Raven Tail's fate. Team Fairy Tail A had vowed to bring the bastards their justice and avenge Wendy and the others. There was no escaping the wrath of the Fairies once provoked.

However, Natsu had a suspicion that it wasn't just Raven Tail who was involved in the attack. His nose was telling him something else. "One of them reeks of the blood Happy found at the scene," he had snarled venomously moments after the five members of Sabertooth had strolled in with much fanfare. Lucy knew that Natsu wasn't simply accusing Fiore's currently favourite guild because of a grudge he held against the pair of Dragon Slayers on their team. She trusted his judgment when it came down to his enhanced sense of smell.

Which of the five members of Sabertooth was involved, Natsu couldn't tell. There were too many people around and too many different scents interfering to pinpoint where the smell was coming from.

So it came to a great disappointment when neither Gray nor Juvia prevailed in the first event of the Games. Both Sabertooth and Raven Tail were at the top, adding insult to injury to Fairy Tail's pride. Was it possible the two guilds were plotting against Fairy Tail? It was a questionable assumption. After all, Rufus had unleashed a magical attack that struck all participants and Nullpudding had tried to retaliate. They seemed more like enemies than allies.

But could that have only been a ruse?

Lucy wasn't sure. There was no definite proof that the two guilds were working together.

*We only lost the first event. We can still win this!* The girl thought positively. One loss wasn't the end of the world. There were still many more events to go to earn enough points to reach first place. And the next upcoming event was the battle portion where one member from one team would fight against one member of another in a tournament.

The matchups were chosen by the organizers based on the votes of fans, so when Lucy's name was called first by the announcer Chapati, she was dumbstruck. "W-Wha? M-Me?" she stammered, gaping at the roaring crowd.

She was even more shocked when her opponent was Flare Corona of Raven Tail.
Lucy's eyes found the young woman standing across the arena with her notorious, odd-looking group. Flare was the only female of her team, wearing a revealing scarlet dress that showed off her cleavage and exposing her dark red guild mark on the top of her right breast. Long gloves that matched the colour of her dress covered her arms nearly up to her shoulders.

Lucy couldn't hold back a shudder when she saw the sadistic smile twisting on the redhead's face as they locked stares from a distance. She was unnerved by the unstable look Flare was giving her; sensing ill-intentions coming her way.

"Lucy! Show them the results of our training!" Natsu bellowed as his form of encouragement.

"It'll be a tie if you win this," said Erza, shooting Lucy an assuring smirk.

Elfman pumped his meaty fists in the air and roared, "Bring them down, Lucy!"

The Celestial Spirit mage smiled over her shoulder at her teammates, her confidence renewed. She clenched her right hand before her to display the pink mark of her guild for all competitors to see. Especially her opponent, Flare Corona. "Don't worry, guys," she said, standing more boldly than before, "I got this. I'll bring us back up."

As all members not participating in the first round began to leave for their designated waiting areas, Lucy from Fairy Tail A and Flare from Raven Tail headed towards the centre of the battlefield.

Lucy strode in a calm, determined pace while her opponent moved in a strange, creepy way as if a doll on strings; Flare swayed her wide hips with each step she took, swinging her head side to side like a metronome, her smile still twisted and her red eyes wide and staring. Her gaze was very disturbing, looking as if she could strangle the life out of someone without a thought.

Lucy steeled against the redhead's stare. There was no reason to be intimidated by her opponent and enemy.

*Raven Tail. I will defeat you for the sake of Wendy, Carla, Romeo, and Bacon. And Gray as well.*

The two opponents stopped several meters apart in the centre. The stadium was alive with tens of thousands of spectators cheering and roaring in excitement. High above the arena was a halo of giant, transparent rectangular screen projections showing Flare and Lucy at the same camera angle thanks to the power of Lacrimavision. These projections allowed the audience to watch all of the action that would’ve otherwise been too difficult to see for the people seated in the top back rows.

"Blondie, Blondie," Flare addressed her opponent, speaking the name giddily like a childish insult. Her head was tilted far to the right side with her wide eyes probing through the long bangs of her fiery-red hair to stare unnervingly at Lucy. She had skin that was so pale it looked almost white under the bright light of the shining sun above.

Even though Flare gave off an eerie, hostile vibe, the spirit mage couldn’t deny the beauty of the other's thick red hair. Caught in the sunlight, Flare's long and braided locks shimmered like fire as the two braids draped down her front with the ends tied together behind her back, right above her waist.

Was she teasing Lucy because Lucy's blonde hair wasn't as nice? Or was it because it was her nature to mock others to match the morals of her loathsome guild?

Whatever the reason, Lucy didn't care to be insulted. She was angry for other reasons.

While the announcer was going over the rules, Lucy glared vehemently at the redhead and snarled, "What Raven Tail has done is unforgivable. You'll be the first to pay."
Flare swung her head to the other side, her full lips parting to reveal her pearly teeth in a sneer. "Unforgivable?" she huffed, "What we did was part of our strategy to win, Blondie. Take out the small and weak first before preying on the rest. Tee hee!"

Lucy bared her teeth in anger. "They were just children!"

Flare's sneer widened, turning into a maliciously gleeful grin. "Don't know what you're talking about, Blondie," she said calmly, feigning ignorance. She started to slowly sway side to side, swinging her head with the motion. She taunted in a quiet sing-song voice, "Blondie, Blondie, Blondie… Are you mad? Whatcha gonna do?"

Annoyed and downright pissed, Lucy was determined to run this damn redhead into the dirt ground and make her regret joining the awful ranks of Raven Tail.

"… with that, the first match of the Grand Magic Games… BEGINS!"

The crowd exploded with deafening cheers that seemed to rumble all throughout Fiore. The loudest group was Fairy Tail as all members seated in the front stadium shouted out words of encouragement or commands for winning. Hanging down the wall of the arena in front of them was the guild's large, red banner with the words "Fairy Tail Victory" in gold letters overtop their white sigil.

Lucy sprang into action, her hand flying into the belted pouch by her right hip that held all her keys. Her fingers deftly picked out the key she desired. She had no need of looking which Gold Key was which, she could discern one spirit key from another by feeling their magical signatures and each one had a distinct one.

She twisted the Gold Key in her hand in midair as if opening an invisible door and cried, "Open the Gate of the Golden Bull! Taurus!"

A large magic circle that shone gold appeared where the key was turned. In a puff of thick, white smoke, the Celestial Spirit Taurus materialized out of his Celestial Gate while letting out a mighty roar of "Moooooo!" For once, the bull didn't waste any time to comment on Lucy's breasts having sensed his master's strong will to win for her friends. The cow-patterned minotaur wielding an enormous double-bladed, black axe immediately charged at Flare. He was upon the redhead in less than two strides and swung his great weapon with much vigour, creating a gale that picked up dust in the axe's wake.

Flare was more agile than she looked; she leapt above and away from Taurus's deadly blade with ease like she had done it a million times before. Lucy caught the little, bemused smile flashing on her opponent's face as the bull's axe missed its target and left a veil of brown dust.

Not wanting to give Flare the chance to counter, Lucy grabbed another Gold Key and opened its Gate. Joining Taurus was a man wearing a crimson coat and having short hair that was red on one half of his head and white on the other. He wore a thick leather belt in which a mechanical tail was attached to the back that curved above his two-toned head like a scorpion's.

"Scorpio!" Lucy called, pleased to have two of her spirits fighting alongside her at the same time. All her training had surmounted to this incredible feat that would have normally taken a huge toll on her magic reserve. The scorpion didn't need to be told what to do; he already knew what his master was thinking.

The spirit instantly dropped onto his gloved hands and pointed the large barrel at the end of his tail straight at Flare who had just landed on her feet. "Sand Buster!" he shouted just as a powerful whirlwind of golden brown sand was launched out of his tail cannon.
The twister expanded as it spiraled towards the redhead, wide enough to tear up the ground and prevent her from evading.

Seconds before the twisting sand reached Flare, Lucy saw the woman's hair suddenly unravel itself. Flame-red tresses wriggled like snakes and lengthened under Flare's magic. The redhead whipped her head forward to fling her thick hair in front where it flared out in all directions, forming a makeshift shield that amazingly blocked Scorpio's sand.

Lucy had to give her opponent some credit to be able to simultaneously avoid getting hit by her spirits' attacks. Lucy wasn't done yet; she wondered if Flare would be able to dodge what she had planned next. She held out her right hand, clutching both of her golden keys between her fingers and commanded her spirits; "Taurus! Scorpio's sand!"

"Moo-kay!" the bull roared, highly enthused. He brought his great axe over his shoulder, imbued with the power to draw all of Scorpio's sand around the blade like a powerful vacuum. Large streaks of gritty gold swirled around the end of the axe, bringing a look of shock on the redhead's face.

Got you now! Lucy thought triumphantly.

Scorpio pumped an arm at his fellow partner, keeping his two middle fingers folded and his index and pinky extended to mimic the pincers of a real scorpion. "Let's go, Taurus! Oi!" he shouted.

With a single bound, the minotaur closed the distance between him and Flare and swung his sand-shrouded blade down on her.

"Sandstorm Axe Aldebaran!" both Celestial Spirits cried out in unison.

Flare avoided the brunt of the attack, but that didn't matter; when Taurus's axe noisily slammed into the ground where she stood a split-second ago, the gathered sand exploded from the blade, forming several tall twisters of gold and brown that were impossible to dodge.

The redhead was blown upwards by one of the whirlwinds. She screamed more in surprise than in pain as she spun in the air. She flew out of the range of the twisters, her body upside down, and her expression noticeably angry. Her hair whipped forward, growing longer than before and twisting together to form the front half of an actual wild *beast* with eyes, ears, teeth and claws!

"Hair Shower: Wolf Fang!"

The magical beast made of hair snarled viciously like a living creature as it headed straight at Lucy, its eyes shining a wicked red.

Lucy acted quickly. She returned her two keys, thus sending her spirits back to the Celestial Spirit World, and grabbed another. There was only one person she knew who was an expert in dealing with hair this troublesome. "Open the gate of the Giant Crab! Cancer!"

Shooting out of a puff of white smoke was the man wearing a pair of green-tinted shades and wielding two pairs of long, sharp scissors. *Snip snip snip snip* went his weapons of choice as he swiftly made short work out of Flare's wolf by completely severing its backend from the woman's head. The beast let out a pained whine before the magic controlling it dispersed, transforming it back into lifeless locks of fiery-red hair. Clumps of Flare's precious hair fluttered to the ground, much to the woman's horror.

"No! My *hair!*" the mage of Raven Tail shrieked, falling to her knees. Her horror turned into pure hatred in blink of an eye. "You bitch!" she hissed, plunging the ends of her still intact hair into the dirt ground like stakes.
Lucy took a wary step back, anticipating the direction of her opponent's attack. *Behind? From the sides?*

Neither. It was right below her.

The ends of Flare's hair pierced from the ground and wrapped tightly around Lucy's ankles within a heartbeat. Strong like rope, the surprised spirit mage was yanked off her feet and thrown upwards.

"My hair can move however I wish," Flare pointed out with pride. "Take this!"

Lucy was flung hard into the ground where she lost hold of Cancer's key, resulting in him being forced back to the Celestial realm. She grunted in pain in her chest from the impact and coughed at the dirt that flew into her mouth. She could feel Flare's hair still bound taut around her ankles. Her hand flew to the handle of her magical whip attached to left side of her hip.

"Oh yeah? My Fleuve d'étoiles can move however I want!" she retaliated as she snapped her whip at Flare. *Fleuve d'étoiles*, once drawn, was a beautiful weapon that looked like a thin river of flowing water but moved and felt like a whip. The weapon shimmered and sparkled under the sun, making it appear as if little stars were shining within the stream.

The end of the magical whip ensnared the redhead's left wrist, drawing out a surprised "What?!"

Lucy yanked back hard at the same time Flare swung her head to fling Lucy aside. Due to their combined forces and connections, they ended up throwing each other into the air where they spun in a rapid circle before crashing painfully back onto the ground.

The insane maneuver set the whole stadium in a wild frenzy; the people's voices rang much louder than ever that Lucy was afraid of going deaf. She could barely hear the announcer over the excitement.

The spirit mage shook away the pain and dizziness before clambering back to her feet, not yet down for the count. She stumbled forward on what she had first believed was uneven ground, but when she felt her heel touch dirt, she got a better look at her boots and found them torn to shreds. Appalled, she quickly surmised it was from the friction caused by Flare's rope-like hair when they twirled in the air. Lucy ripped off the remains of her once favourite pair of boots, knowing they would slow down her movements if she continued to wear them. The ground was warm under her bare feet thanks to heat of the blazing yellow orb in the sky.

Lucy's attention snapped back to her opponent when Flare yelled out in rage. The woman was back on her feet as well, her wide eyes flashing with madness. Flare bent over and buried the ends of her red hair into the ground once more.

Lucy was ready this time. With her muscles tensed and ready to leap out of the way, she frantically scanned the ground around her in anticipation. However, when seconds passed and nothing emerged to ensnare her ankles, she shot a quick glance at her opponent and saw the wicked smile distorting the woman's face and the devious glint in her wide, quivering eyes.

Discreetly, Flare pointed a finger off to the side.

Lucy, assuming it was some sort of ploy to distract her, only took a hasty, wary look in the same direction. She spotted Fairy Tail's banner in the distance where her guild was busy cheering her on. Then she saw it; the small fiery-red wisp of hair that wriggled like a worm beside little Asuka who was leaning against the stone barrier, too enthralled with the fight to notice the danger. In fact, none of the others noticed the thin tendril for their eyes were locked on the heated duel between the mages.
"No! Asuka!" Lucy shouted in horror only to have her mouth gagged shut by Flare's thick hair that was filthy with dirt. She was suddenly thrown to the ground where she landed roughly on her back.

Wincing at the pain running through her body, Lucy rolled onto her knees and froze the instant she saw Flare staring down at her; her red eyes full of malicious intentions. The madness in the woman's stare was gone and was replaced with something dark and cruel.

"Don't make a sound," Flare murmured, sounding disturbingly calm, "Don't move. Don't use magic. That's an order. Because I don't know what will happen if you disobey… no matter how much of a dimwitted blonde you are. I might do something unforgivable as you've so kindly put it."

Lucy gritted her teeth and growled as her only form of defiance against her opponent's threat. There was no lick of honor in the guild of Raven Tail – only heartless beings who fought dirty to win.

*Coward!* Lucy wanted to scream out loud but couldn't in fear of Asuka's safety. She gripped the handle of Fleuve d'étoiles so tightly that the leather binding was starting to painfully dig into her skin. She glared daggers at the woman who didn't deserve to be here in the Games. If only the people of Fiore could see Raven Tail's true colours, they wouldn't have allowed such scum on the premises and they wouldn't even consider them a legal guild!

Feeling helpless, Lucy shot her guild a pleading look, hoping they could read her thoughts. She desperately wished for Cancer to give the woman a much-needed haircut but alas, the Giant Crab's key was dropped somewhere on the ground and Lucy had no time to search for it.

"Blondie."

Lucy was suddenly struck in the side of the face by what felt like a fist, but it was only Flare's magic hair. She flew into the ground once more, her face throbbing with a nasty pain and her whip gone from her hand.

Flare's attack didn't stop there: relentlessly, she lashed at the fallen mage with several extensions of her hair, whipping the girl in multiple areas of her body all the while laughing with sickening joy.

All Lucy could do was yelp and cower under the stinging blows that seemed to go on forever. The red hair she had once considered beautiful was now a vile tangle of dirty knots in her eyes. Her breath was knocked right out of her when Flare got tired of bruising just her skin and decided to go for a heavy swipe at Lucy's stomach which was equivalent to a kick.

Lucy coughed and gasped for air as she writhed on the ground, curled up in a defensive position, her heart sinking with dread. She clenched her hands, sinking her fingers into the dirt to restrain the urge to fight back. There was nothing she could do to win when little Asuka's life was at stake. She had to surrender.

The volume of the audience had dropped since the turnaround. Many were probably wondering the same thing as the announcer; "What is going on here? The fierce battle from a moment ago is now turning into a one-sided match…"

*I'm sorry, everyone...* Tears welled up in Lucy's eyes. She was heartbroken; she couldn't fulfill the vow of avenging her guild and teammates.

Rising only to her knees, her clothes were ragged and torn. She hung her head in defeat before her opponent. "I surrender--" Lucy was suddenly cut off by Flare gagging her once again.

"Who said you can speak, Blondie?!!" the woman demanded, violently yanking the Celestial Spirit mage onto her feet.
The next thing Lucy knew, she found her wrists and ankles bound by Flare's hair, restricting her movements. She was lifted off the ground by the amazing strength of the woman's ugly red tresses, making her feel like a helpless prisoner. She tried to struggle, making her wrists and ankles bleed, but it was futile; the rope-like hair was as strong as iron.

"I'm not letting you surrender," Flare continued, smiling evilly, "Not until I have a little fun with you first. Understand? Not a single peep."

The hair that covered Lucy's mouth loosened and curled around her neck instead, almost choking her.

"You can scream all you want however," the woman offered, sounding as if she was being really generous, "Everyone would love to hear your cries of agony. So what do you want me to do first?" Flare's eyes somehow widened further as an idea came to her. "I know! I'll strip you naked in front of all these people. Won't that be interesting?"

Lucy trembled at the humiliating thought. She wanted to shake her head but the bind around her neck constricted her movements. Even if she did, she knew Flare would inflict some form of punishment for showing defiance.

"Oh! I thought of something better," said Flare, extending another tendril of her hair towards Lucy. The end morphed into the crest of Raven Tail and it literally burned hot like fire, not because of the glare of the sun.

Lucy could see shimmering waves of heat emanating from the glowing sigil as Flare held it in front of the trapped mage's face.

"I'll place Raven Tail's brand on your body – I'll sear it so deep into your flesh that it will last forever."

No!

Terror flooded Lucy like water from a dam. She whimpered and grimaced in fear when Flare teasingly moved the brand closer. She broke into a nervous sweat when she felt the intense heat kissing her cheek.

Her mind was racing a mile a minute; questions on why everyone was standing around and doing nothing to stop this torture plagued her.

Flare leaned forward and brought a gloved finger to her chin, pretending to think. "Hmm. Now where shall I put it? It wouldn't look bad on your pretty blonde face." Her red eyes flickered to Lucy's clenched right hand. "Ah. You want it over your Fairy Tail crest? The one you're so proud to have?"

The burning brand pulled away from Lucy's cheek and hovered at the back of her right hand, ready to mar her skin and desecrate her crest. She badly shook at the thought of having to bear such an ugly scar for the rest of her life; especially one that would prohibit her to boldly show the mark of her guild. "No! Don't do it! Please!"

Flare started to strangle her in order to keep her silent.

"You're not supposed to speak!" the woman snapped.

It wasn't long until Lucy was deemed worthy to breathe again. The girl drew in a sharp, quivering breath, desperately praying for an end to this insanity.
Her prayers were heard when Natsu's voice suddenly rang over the entire crowd; "Lucy!"

All heads turned towards the Fire Dragon Slayer who was now up on the stadium with Fairy Tail, standing beside Asuka. Gripped in his hand was Flare's squirming strand of hair that had threatened the little girl. His fist alighted with flame, incinerating the hair into smoldering ash in an instant.

"Now's your chance, Lucy!" he roared, "Get her back!"

"What?! You burnt my hair!" Flare screeched in horror.

Aghast, her hold on Lucy loosened, allowing the spirit mage to reach down into her pouch of keys.

*Thank you, Natsu!* No words could describe how thankful she was for his rescue.

The Gold Key in her hand had already opened the Gate before Flare got a chance to realize what was happening.

"Gemi! Mini!" Lucy called.

The twins appeared out of a cloud of thick, white smoke and went straight into action without an uttered command. Gemi, shrouded in white energy, flew around his master to sever the binds that held her while Mini launched a headbutt right into Flare's shocked face.

The redhead was thrown flat on her back with her remaining tangled mess of hair falling with her.

As Lucy ripped off the severed strands still tied around her limbs, she turned to the reunited twins dancing beside her. "We're going to do 'that'!" she told them.

"We didn't practice enough," the smiling Mini replied, spinning in a circle.

"We don't know if we can do it," the frowning Gemi added, mirroring his twin's movements.

"Doesn't matter! Transform into me!" Lucy commanded at once.

"Understood!" The twins brought their stubby hands together and began to glow a blinding white. In a flash of light and smoke, the pair reappeared as Lucy… wearing nothing but a white bath towel…

"Why are you dressed like that?!" the Celestial Spirit mage demanded of her near-naked doppelganger, feeling extremely embarrassed.

The twins sheepishly rubbed the back of their blonde head and said in Lucy's pouty voice, "It's not our fault. You were dressed like this when we copied you."

*Oh… right…* It was right before Lucy went for a bath yesterday night. She had summoned the twins to discuss their new technique she was thinking of using at the Games.

Even though that was the case… why didn't the twins just transform into the Lucy standing right before them? Did they purposely want to put on a show?!

There were tiger growls, dog-like barks of affection, love-stricken hoots, and loud wolf-whistles of approval coming from the male species of the audience as they admired bath-towel Lucy in a lustful manner.

The only one not so happy was Flare as she seethed on the ground at the pair of blondes, rubbing her newly bruised cheek.
Ignoring the attention, both Lucys stood an arm's length apart from each other. Lucy pressed her right palm against Gemini's left. Eyes closed, the identical pair raised their magic power together, their energies manifesting and becoming one and the same. The spirit mage could feel their combined magic grow with each passing heartbeat, enveloping their forms in a warm, heavenly light. A gentle breeze lifted their hair and caressed their skin, steadying their minds and bodies for the magnificent spell that will soon smite their foe.

"Survey the Heavens, Open the Heavens..." the pair began to chant together, their voices loud for all to hear, "All the stars, far and wide... Show me thy appearance... With such shine..."

The identical girls raised their arms to shoulder-height as the magic of the stars gathered within them, flowing into their bodies like a river. They could no longer hear the stadium, the announcer, or the commenters; only the resonating beats of their hearts and the cowardly whimpers coming from their terrified target.

Lucy didn't need to see Flare's reaction to feel justified; the Celestial Spirit mage knew she had won. *I'll show you, Flare. The true might of Fairy Tail!*

"Oh Tetrabiblos... I am the ruler of the stars... Aspect become complete... Open thy malevolent gate..." The pair raised their arms above them, their fingers entwined as their power intensified, nearing their peaks. Heads raised to the heavens, the spell was nearly complete. They shifted to stand back to back with both hands linked, now brimming with power that seemed almost endless and divine.

"Oh eighty-eight stars of the heavens... Shine!" Both Lucys opened their eyes. It was not the arena and the stadium that they saw, but the infinite cosmos surrounding them and their poor enemy. Lucy could see the vast expanse of the universe; the endless realm of stars full of fascination, mystery, and wonder. Tens of colourful orbs that looked like planets orbited the pair as if they were the godly sun, each one glowing with their own colour of light.

The time has come.

*This blow strikes with the pride of Fairy Tail!*

"Urano Metria!"

Radiant energy surged from Lucy and Gemini as they unleashed their spell. The universe trembled under the might of their voices. The planets shot forward, leaving their beloved galaxy, all shining gold and heading straight for Flare.

Suddenly, the world they created and the zooming planets completely vanished in a blink of an eye...

Lucy lost sight of her stars and brilliant orbs, seeing the torn arena and the packed stadium once more. "What…?" she managed to utter in confusion, feeling her limbs suddenly grow weak. Her spell and magic energy… they were gone in an instant… as if someone had simply pushed a switch to turn her magic off.

Gemini… they had returned to the Celestial Spirit World now that Lucy could no longer sustain them.

With no strength to stand, the spirit mage started to fall forward and caught a glimpse of Flare looking in the direction of Raven Tail as if they were her saviors.
This sudden loss of magic energy… it was just like with Wendy, Carla, and the boys. 

Dirty cheaters… Was the last thing Lucy thought before she crashed face-first onto the ground, her body feeling numb. There was a horrible pang in her chest when she heard the announcer say, "The match is over! The victor is Raven Tail's Flare Corona!"

Cheers to the winner followed which was immediately ensued by mockery and laughter aimed at her and her beloved guild. But it wasn't the jeers that tore Lucy's heart apart.

It was the sudden realization that she had failed her guild – in spite of all her efforts – that made her uncontrollably weep.

"Shameful! What a pathetic loser!" Flare insulted as she started to saunter away, head held high, laughing along with most of the audience. "It's my win! Serves you right, Blondie!"

The cackling laughter seemed to go on forever as Lucy lay on the ground in despair, sobbing like a fool. She didn't hear Natsu approach until she heard his voice, calm and reassuring.

"Don't cry, Lucy."

She could barely find her own voice when she sputtered between her pitiful sobs, "But… it's so painful…"

He kneeled beside her and carefully helped her sit up, wearing a grin upon his face. She hugged him as tight as she could and cried into his shoulder, unable to hold back her river of tears. He embraced her, being mindful not to squeeze too hard because of her injuries, and said in her ear, "Save those tears for when we win." He was confident in his tone, as if he was certain victory will go to Fairy Tail in the end no matter what happens.

"You were amazing!" he continued, drawing back so he could show her his admiration and wider grin, "You showed us that we can fight in this world with our current level of power. We don't care if you got zero points today. There's always next time. It'll be a huge surprise to everyone when we start turning things around. You'll see."

Lucy swallowed her sobs, sniffed her nose, and wiped her tears with the back of her hand, her confidence slowly returning.

There was no reason to cry. There were still four more days to make the world see Fairy Tail's true strength.

Lucy put on a weak smile and nodded. "Thank you… Natsu."

The Dragon Slayer pulled her up and grabbed her dropped whip and key. Lucy stumbled at first, but with his help, she could walk again. Together they left the arena, their hearts set on winning tomorrow.

The results of the first day of the Grand Magic Games for both Fairy Tail teams ended in complete losses. But even if they lost miserably, their spirits were not broken, especially when they were together under one roof, drinking and partying to their hearts' content like the Games didn't even happen. There was no such thing as giving up in this guild; when a Fairy falls, that Fairy will rise again much stronger with the support of his or her friends.

It felt like an earthquake was hitting the city of Crocus as Erza Scarlet stood on the flat roof of the small pub, Bar Sun, that currently housed her rowdy guild. Their loud voices and their crazy
(drunken) antics constantly made the small building rattle and shake.

The sun was beginning to set behind the mountains beyond the city walls as evening was well upon them, making the sky the colour of gold.

"You guys are amazingly strong-willed," Jellal commented behind her, sounding quite impressed.

Titania turned around to see him still disguised as Mystogan as he approached her. Pleased that he finally got her message to join her, she smirked and handed him one of the mugs of cold beer in which he was hesitant to take. Thrusting the glass into his chest prompted him to grab it.

Although, Erza couldn't see his tattooed face clearly, she could still see the emotions in his eyes, and right now he was looking a little flustered.

They sat down in the centre of the roof to minimize the chances of anyone spotting them. She held up her own mug and he did the same, clinking them together to toast their undeniable defeat on their first day of the Games – as Master had put it.

Erza chugged down all her beer in one go while Jellal carefully lifted his dark green bandanna to take one small gulp. It was obvious he didn't like the taste of the honey-coloured beverage.

"Losing means nothing to us," Erza began, setting her empty mug beside her and wiping her mouth with the back of her plated hand, "Didn't you know that already? We're a tenacious bunch."

It was safe to talk privately up here with the noise below capable of masking their conversation to any passersby who may accidentally eavesdrop on them.

Jellal snorted in amusement. "Been too long to remember," he replied, giving her a sideways look.

"It's a lesson you should learn after your performance today," she said. She smiled humorously when he sheepishly looked away.

"That was… Well, I… I got carried away…" Jellal stammered, absentmindedly running his gloved index finger around the lip of his mug. "I wanted to win for Fairy Tail since your master gave me the chance to get closer to the Games. And after what happened with your teammates, I was more determined to bring your rank back up."

Erza leaned back, resting the palms of her armoured hands behind her and stretching out her legs in front. She shot him a stern look from the side. "That's a nice gesture, but you shouldn't risk exposing your identity to the public."

"Yeah… I know. Ultear made sure of that," he grumbled with a little huff.

Erza raised her brow, now understanding why Jellal – who was in the midst of unleashing a powerful non-Mystogan spell that had transformed the skies into a brewing nightmare of a storm – suddenly collapsed during his battle with Lamia Scale's Jura Neekis.

She couldn't help but laugh.

"You tried a little too hard," she teased. She was thankful for him, however, to consider the feelings of her guild. He had the same heart as everyone in Fairy Tail, Mavis Vermilion had said so herself, according to Master Makarov. "Tomorrow will be different now that we have a general idea what to expect from these Games. And from Raven Tail." The last bit was spoken with scorn.

He faced her, his eyes narrowing. "Raven Tail had laid low over the past seven years. They were
never on our radar. It's suspicious that they've suddenly shown up and are now regarded as an official guild this year."

"Master isn't taking that fact too well. He knows Ivan is scheming something." Erza's gaze darkened as she looked at the distant mountain that held Domus Flau. The four giant statues of powerful mages known in legends were vaguely recognizable from where they sat. "They've targeted us since we have arrived, aiming to hinder us. They will soon regret all of their actions towards us," she said, her tone carrying a dangerous edge.

It was possible that it wasn't only Raven Tail using sordid methods to get the upper hand against Fairy Tail. Natsu had claimed that Sabertooth could be involved as well, going by the evidence left at the scene where Wendy, Carla, Romeo, and Bacon were found. Erza didn't doubt him; she trusted his instincts as much as she trusted her own.

Two guilds against one; Erza wasn't daunted by that possible truth. Fairy Tail had two teams participating after all, although that didn't necessarily imply that both teams would work together. Rivalries between members will never die and Natsu made that very clear the instant his team had learned of the existence of Team B consisting of none other than Mirajane, Laxus, Juvia, Gajeel, and 'Mystogan', during the Opening Ceremony. (What aggravated Natsu the most was that Team B came in second in the Preliminary Event whereas Team A was last.)

Nevertheless, anyone foolish enough to cross the Fairies will regret it in due time.

"How are they? Wendy and those boys?" Jellal asked after taking a cautious sip of his beer. Unable to tolerate any more of the taste, he set the mug aside.

"Lisanna says they're getting better but require some more rest," Erza answered, brushing her scarlet hair behind her ear. "Speaking of which, did you and your companions find the temple where Bacon was found?"

Jellal sighed and looked up at the evening sky. "Can't say we found the temple," he began, keeping his voice low. He noticeably furrowed his brow in thought. "But we did discover something odd about the forest in one particular area. The same thing happened to us as it did with Natsu and your master – we ended up going in circles when we tried to pass through. Magic guards the temple and the surrounding woods and Ultear believes it is time magic – one she cannot dispel, counter, or alter."

"Time magic, you say?" Erza was intrigued and only showed it through a slightly raised eyebrow.

"We tested the phenomenon many times using markers to pinpoint our location. When we walked straight forward, we would always loop back to where we started. It's a reversal shift of space after a random amount of time and the change is so instantaneous and subtle that we could never detect it until we found ourselves back at the beginning."

Jellal crossed his legs, rested his elbows on his knees and propped his chin over interlaced fingers. He stared at the orange brick wall of the clock tower right across the street, musing on what he had just shared.

"Whoever cast this spell is protecting the temple and whatever secrets it may contain," he continued after a short moment. "They've been doing so for quite a long time."

"What do you mean?"

Jellal met her inquiring gaze intently. "The magic is old. Ancient. Just like the forest. Ultear has
never come across any records of this sort of time spell before and you've mentioned that none of the nearby villagers has ever heard about or stumbled upon the temple either. The forest was likely enchanted long before Saffarion was even a settlement considering there is no written history of the temple's existence.

"Tell me again, how exactly did Natsu and his team find the boy?"

Erza paused, needing a moment to recall the details of the story Mirajane had told her the day she returned to Fairy Tail after her mission in Desierto. It felt like ages ago. "There was a cat, if I remember correctly. Snugglybuttocks... was its name. Natsu's team was chasing it around the forest," she answered, although she had a nagging feeling she got the name wrong.

Jellal noticeably raised his brow. "Snuggly... buttocks?" he repeated slowly, perturbed, "That's... a rather disturbing name..."

Titania shrugged. "I'm probably wrong but I'm sure it's something similar to that."

Jellal said nothing in response to that. He returned to the subject at hand. "The cat led them straight to the temple?"

Erza shook her head. "No... They spent hours searching the forest to retrieve that cat for their mission," she explained. She brought a hand to her chin in a pondering gesture. "I think it was coincidental that the cat led them down the right path through the forest. No, the cat does not possess magic," she added, seeing the question in his eyes. "It was an ordinary cat."

"What exactly did it look like?"

"Lucy or Natsu will have the answer to that. Why does it matter?"

Jellal glanced over to the mountains beyond the wall that seemed to burn like fire under the setting sun's fiery light. "A cat ran by us while we were in the woods. Orange and white. Pink lacy collar. I thought nothing of it at the time. It hid and watched us from afar... like it was observing us."

Erza could remember what Lucy had told her, "Loke became good friends with the cat. It's too bad it hated Natsu though."

There was nothing strange about the feline if Loke could not sense anything out of the ordinary. The cat was only a cat, she wanted to say, but didn't want to intrude on Jellal's thoughts.

Erza studied his expression which was mostly hidden from view, but she could tell by the distant look in his eyes that he was contemplating deeply about the incident, trying to make connections with their currently known facts. A minute passed and no answer or theory had yet to come to his mind.

The mystery around Bacon was still as thick as the day Erza had first met him. She wanted to help the boy recover his memories; most if not all of Fairy Tail did. But the important answers to his identity were hidden away behind a frustrating barrier consisting of ancient time magic.

"Erza," Jellal turned back to her, "have you guys tried taking the boy back to the temple?"

Erza blinked at the suggestion and quickly understood what he was getting at. "No, the thought never occurred to us. We were more focused on helping him remember as well as teaching him. Are you implying that the path will open up if he was around?"

"It's possible. I'm assuming Bacon was protected in the temple so it may make sense that whoever
protected him will allow him passage to return."

It was an incredibly interesting conjecture, one in which Erza wanted to test out right away. But that would have to wait; Fairy Tail's top priority at the moment was to win the Grand Magic Games.

Erza would have to relay this idea with everyone once everything was over.

She sighed and stood up, her armour softly clinking together. She dusted off her skirt and offered Jellal her hand which he was nervous to take for some curious reason. Right after yanking him back to his feet, she smirked and said, "The party has barely started. Come inside and join us."

Jellal abruptly stepped away, nearly tripping over the replicas of Mystogan's old staves that he had set aside before sitting down, and held up his hands in protest. "No, I shouldn't. I… don't belong. I also need to further investigate—"

Titania didn't have the patience to hear his excuses. She grabbed his wrist and dragged him along no matter what he tried to say or do. The heels of his boots screeched in protest across the stone of the pub's roof behind her as he fought to break free from her grip. "Don't say such nonsense, Mystogan. You are a Fairy and no Fairies are ever left out of the fun." The kind smile she gave him turned wicked just as she stopped at the edge of the building. "We're friends today, but we'll be rivals again tomorrow. So let's enjoy this night together."
Day Two: Stirring Shadows

There stood a massive gate at the end of a dark hall, watched over by giant sentinels carved from stone. Upon the arced door, above the centre, was the radiant sun against a teal sky, its rays beaming between twelve metal bars that acted as locks, and beneath the glorious orb was a golden ring that symbolized the moon, its core as dark as the surrounding navy, night sky.

The twelve locks groaned and the enormous gate creaked open, allowing the faintest of light to seep through…

The Blooming Capital is now under attack; black smoke billowed from the towering flames that ravaged the city, shrouding the skies with thick smog and ash. There was screaming coming from the streets, hundreds – thousands – of voices rang, all full of terror as they fled from the giant shadows flying overhead, their true forms obscured by the heavy smoke.

A monstrous roar rent the sky, silencing the screams of the panicked people. And then a giant creature hidden in darkness descended into the smog, with eyes that burned evil and red. It had massive, webbed wings that overshadowed the city that created wind storms with each mighty flap. Riding atop the horned monster's head was a man fully armoured in black, staring down at a lone figure below.

Cloaked in feathery white, the person on the ground stood amidst the burning ruins of what was once a part of Crocus. It was another man whose identity was hidden under a mask painted a bright yellow and carved into the smiling face of a fox. He stood fearlessly amongst the chaos wielding a long, broad sword that gleamed blue and silver, the narrow, slanted holes of his smiling mask aimed at the monstrosity flying above.

Then he lowered his head to meet someone's gaze through messy fringes of blond hair that fluttered in the hot, smoky wind. There was a flash of brilliant blue within those smiling eyes, and he spoke, his steady, determined voice slightly muffled beneath his disguise; "Carla… Come fly with me. We'll protect Wendy… We'll protect everyone…"

Carla woke up with a start, a nervous shiver running down her spine. She sat up, her mind filled with images of her dream.

Was it only a dream? Or was it a premonition?

She prayed the latter wasn't true.

"Morning!"

The cat jumped at the cheerful greeting coming from Wendy sitting on the edge of the same bed. The girl was in the middle of brushing out her long, navy hair. Wendy paused and frowned with worry at Carla's reaction.

"Carla, are you alright?" Wendy asked, putting her brush down to crawl over to her friend. "Are you still feeling tired?"

The Exceed quickly shook her head. "Tired? N-No, I just had a dream," she answered tentatively.

"What sort of dream?" Wendy lightly petted the cat between her ears.

Where Crocus is attacked by flying monsters from the sky and there is a man wearing a fox mask
who knew our names…

"It was… a silly dream. I really don't remember," Carla lied, not wishing to stir up trouble over what may only be a fabrication of her sub-consciousness. Wanting to change the subject, she took note of their surroundings, realizing she was in an unfamiliar room and they were not alone.

Porlyusica was seated in a chair between two of the three beds in the room, Wendy's and Bacon's, facing the young boy who appeared to be sleeping. The scratching of an ink pen on paper stopped when the old woman turned from the notebook she was writing in to glance over her shoulder at Carla with scrutinizing eyes. On the other side of Bacon's bed was another bed with Romeo sitting on top of the sheets, neatly folding his old clothes.

Carla turned back to Wendy, confused. "Where are we?" she asked.

Wendy's frown returned. In a quiet voice, she explained what had happened on the night they visited Castle Mercurius, about the black creature, the man in the red mask, why they fainted, and Bacon's bravery, before expressing her sadness at missing the preliminary as well as the first day of the Grand Magic Games.

Surprised and angry, Carla stood up without any effort, her strength fully restored thanks to Porlyusica's care. Pacing on the bed, she hissed at the infuriating thought of someone wanting to interfere with Fairy Tail by using such dirty, shameful means. She paused to glance over at young Bacon, silently thankful for his heroism.

Wendy picked Carla up and hugged her. "I know… it's frustrating," said the girl, hoping to calm down her partner, "But don't worry, we're okay now. Thanks to Grandeen – err, Porlyusica, we're all better now."

Once Wendy set Carla back down, the feline gave Porlyusica, who was still watching, a slight bow and said politely, "Thank you for your help."

The Medicinal Advisor snorted and turned back to the open book in her lap, resuming her scribbling. "Now that you are all well enough to move, you can all leave," she said in a firm tone, waving them away as if she had grown tired of them.

"What about Bacon? Will he wake up soon?" Wendy asked in concern, shifting back to her spot to brush the rest of her hair.

Without diverting away from the page, the elder calmly replied, "He will be fine. He just needs a little more rest, that is all. I will keep watch over him until we wakes."

Romeo strolled over, his hands busy tying the ends of his yellow scarf together. He glanced at the clock hanging above the door of the infirmary, which read ten minutes past ten, and grinned in excitement. "Today's competition part just started. We should hurry and go watch!" he said to Wendy and Carla.

Agreeing, Wendy, having already changed into new clothes before Carla had woken up, needed to finish tying her hair up in pigtails. Meanwhile, Carla went into the small adjoining bathroom to change and freshen up.

As Carla stood on the edge of the glossy stone sink filled with warm water in a clean, blue dress, she gazed into the plain, square mirror at her reflection, her mind returning to the images she had seen in her dream. She closed her eyes to see them more clearly.

Eyes that were bright blue met her stare through the narrow slits of a smiling yellow fox.
"Carla… Come fly with me. We’ll protect Wendy… We’ll protect everyone…"

The cat shuddered, perturbed by the possible meaning behind those words. What was he implying? Were Wendy and the others in danger?

Who was the man and how did he know Carla and Wendy? He felt familiar – those sharp blue eyes – Carla was certain she had seen them before. He was someone whom she had trusted in the dream… and yet no memory of ever meeting him came to her.

And who was the other man covered in black armour, riding atop a monstrous beast as if commanding it?

And the gate baring the sun and moon… what was so significant about it?

Thinking hard about it only brought confusion. The unreachable truth nagged at her like an itch she couldn't scratch.

Carla shook her head vigorously and tried to convince herself that what she saw were only fragments of a dream and nothing more.

Sighing, she splashed her face, patted it dry with a nearby towel, smoothed out her fur and adjusted the pink bow at the tip of her tail, and left the room.

The loud click of a door closing shut brought him out of his dream in which he was playing a shooting game with his bow. The shattering of the jewel-like targets whenever one of his arrows had pierced through them seemed to echo faintly in the distance before everything had gone quiet.

No, he was wrong – it wasn't entirely quiet. Someone was moaning nearby over the rhythmic ticking of a clock. There was a click of a tongue followed by grumbling as another person moved about, shuffling soft leather shoes against a tiled floor.

Bacon decided to get up at that moment. Yawning, he sat up and stretched his arms above his head, feeling as if he had just slept all day. It felt rather great. He rubbed his eyes and blinked away the bleariness. It took a few seconds before his eyesight focused on the person in red standing above him.

"Awake now, are you?"

The boy stiffened, immediately recognizing the old woman as Porlyusica, the same person who had forced him to drink something really disgusting before he fell asleep. Was she here to make him drink another yucky potion? He cringed and made a face at the dreadful thought.

The woman lightly smirked, making the corners of her eyes wrinkle. She looked him over. "Do you feel tired?" she asked.

Bacon shook his head.

"Any weakness in your arms or legs? Any pain?"

The boy looked down at his hands and wiggled his fingers before stretching out his legs and wiggling his toes under the white blanket. He shook his head at the woman's questions before turning towards the source of the moans. He found Natsu unconscious on the bed next to his, his sickly pale face glistening with sweat.
Bacon cocked his head slightly, wondering where Romeo had gone because Natsu was now sleeping in the older boy's bed. Wendy and Carla were gone too, he realized as he searched the small room.

"If you're looking for Wendy," Porlyusica began, reading his mind, "she was just here a short moment ago to check on you. She has gone back to the stadium to watch the battle portion of the Games with everyone else. I will take you to her in a moment. First," her eyes narrowed, studying him once again and making him feel uncomfortable under her intense scrutiny. "Bacon," she addressed, stern yet kindly, "have you ever seen a dragon?"

The boy blinked questionably at her. "Dragon?" he murmured. He looked off to the side at Natsu and pointed at the groaning Dragon Slayer. "Like Natsu?"

The old woman lightly shook her head. "Not a Dragon Slayer. Dragons are not humans but are large, magical, intelligent creatures," she tried to explain.

However, Bacon continued to misunderstand her. He couldn't think of anything else that had the name 'dragon' besides Dragon Slayers so he said Wendy's name next.

Sighing wearily, Porlyusica carefully eased into the creaking chair situated between the two occupied beds and adjusted it to face the boy.

Bacon shifted to face her, dangling his bare legs and feet over the edge of the bed.

The old woman leaned against the backrest and folded her arms beneath her cloak, pressing her lips into a thin line. "Do you remember your dream with the yellow dog?" she inquired, speaking slowly.

Lowering his gaze to his hands on his lap, the boy thought for a moment. Vaguely, he could recall a large yellow dog with three bushy tails running through tall blades of grass. And it was smiling…

"Keaton will show you the way... Come..."

"You mentioned it had a friend," the elder continued when he didn't answer right away, "and it said these words to you; 'Atarl adune... Herial Yaarez.' Do you remember any of it?"

"Meet my friend, Child of the Forest... He's been waiting for you..."

Shadows. That was all he could remember. Three moons that were shaped like eyes and endless darkness as far as he could see. He had dreamt those same moons various times before where they would silently watch him in a pitch-black sky void of stars. Briefly they would stare at him before the dark world would change to something different.

They spoke to him once, in a voice that sounded so lonely and far away, only when the yellow dog was present…

Bacon couldn't recall the exact words, but what Porlyusica had said sounded familiar. He tried to concentrate, to remember the exact details of the dream he had spoken of to Romeo, only to end up with a dull pain in his head the longer he dwelled on it. This discomfort didn't go unnoticed.

Porlyusica briefly touched his forehead with the back of her wrinkly, liver-spotted hand. "Headache?" she questioned firmly and the boy hesitated to answer, fearing she would feed him more foul-tasting medicine if he said 'yes'.

"It goes away," Bacon finally admitted when he risked meeting the Medicinal Advisor's gaze. He was a little surprised to see the woman's stern demeanor gone and replaced with mild concern.
She asked him a few more questions, "How often does the pain occur?", "When does it usually happen?", "How often do you dream about this yellow dog and its friend?", and a few others related to Bacon's health, his magic capabilities, and going back to the mysterious words of dragons, creatures he still wasn't sure what they truly were.

The boy tried to answer each question truthfully, most of them with either a 'yes' or 'no', while others he could only shrug because he didn't have the answer, growing impatient with each passing minute. He didn't want to stay in the room for too long, not when his friends were having fun without him. But when he was given warm, sweet tea and a delicious cup of golden brown broth to drink midway through, he felt calmer.

Natsu's moans had transformed into snores shortly before they were done.

The old woman had assessed Bacon carefully throughout the interrogation, it seemed, judging by the intensity of her stare. Even though she wore an intimidating face whenever Bacon saw her, Porlyusica was a person he knew he could trust because Wendy trusted her.

"Porlyusica will make you feel all better soon. You can trust her," Wendy had said when he wouldn't drink the smoky, yellowish potion that smelled and tasted like curdled milk.

The exhaustion he was burdened with before was completely gone and he had Porlyusica to thank.

"No, child," the elder responded to his quiet murmur of thanks, a warm smile gracing her lips, turning her into a completely different person, "I have you to thank for showing me something new to strive for in my field of work. You have helped me help Fairy Tail, to say the least. We have discussed enough. I will take you to Wendy."

Bacon smiled in return and slid off his bed, happy to stretch out his body.

Porlyusica pointed at the small pile of neatly folded clothes at the foot of his bed where Freedom was also waiting. "Macao has brought you some clean clothes to change into and Romeo left you your sword. Change first in the bathroom."

The boy obeyed, grabbing his clothes and hurrying to the small bathroom, his bare feet smacking on the tiled floor. He quickly switched out of his old clothes for his new ones and used the facilities of the bathroom as well. It only took five minutes before he was back by his bed, wearing fresh underwear, a pair of black, knee-length shorts adorned with blue tiger stripes on the outer sides of the legs, and a simple red T-shirt that had a grinning cartoonish gray cat curled into a ball in the front that reminded him of Happy.

After slipping on his blue sandals, he buckled Erza's gift over his back, extremely happy to have his blade. He couldn't explain why it felt so natural to have a sword upon his back.

Porlyusica handed him one last thing to wear that was previously folded on the small bedside table.

Bacon threw on his green and white, hooded cloak which partially hid his sword from view. The hilt was noticeable for it stuck above his left shoulder, not that he cared.

The old woman quickly looked him over as she calmly strolled past him towards the door. "Hood on. Good. Let's go."

He paused when he heard a series of footsteps fast approaching behind the closed door. His first thought was Wendy and Romeo were coming to get him.

"What is it?" Porlyusica asked the instant she noticed him hesitating.
Her question was answered when the door swung wide open and four people, who were neither Wendy, Romeo, nor anyone familiar, barged into the room, blocking the exit.

Bacon's smile vanished and he immediately tensed in caution. Feeling uneasy, his blue eyes flickered between the strangers crowding the infirmary.

All four wore identical dark red outfits with high thick collars and were striped with white on the shoulders down to their beige-coloured gloves. Belts of light brown leather encircled their waists that held a pair of holsters containing black weapons Bacon recognized as handguns, similar to the weapons Alzack used.

Their identities were hidden under dark hoods and gray metal masks that covered the top half of their faces, however their muscular builds identified them as men. One was short, standing as high as Porlyusica's shoulders, another tall, the top of his head nearly brushing against the top of the door frame, the third was stooped forward with slouched shoulders, while the fourth had a slightly different mask that showed his flat, pug nose.

Bacon didn't like these people. There was a strong sense of hostility emanating from them, the feeling similar to the time he had confronted the masked, blond-haired man in red. He was starting to realize that men in masks were people who couldn't be trusted…

"Who are you people?" Porlyusica demanded, moving to stand between Bacon and the four men. The kind old lady from before was gone and the woman with the terrifying scowl had returned.
"What do you humans want?"

The men ignored her and started to whisper hastily amongst themselves;

"D'you see a girl in 'ere?" the man with the pug-nose asked.

"Is that kid a girl?" said the short one, pointing a thumb in Bacon's direction.

"Or did he mean the old lady?" muttered the tall one, taking a quick peek at the fuming Porlyusica.

"Can't be the old lady…" the short one replied.

"Must be the brat then," grumbled the man with the slouch in a deep voice.

"Oi, let's just take 'em both!" suggested pug-nose, exasperated.

"Fine!" the other three hissed.

The slouching man and the one with the pug-nose made a mad grab for Porlyusica who could only take a step back before they apprehended her, holding both of her arms.

"Unhand me!" she bellowed angrily, trying to twist free. She resorted to stomping her heels onto their toes, but her efforts were in vain when the men could feel nothing under the protection of their sturdy black boots.

While Porlyusica struggled against the pair of men, the other two goons rounded the trio and lunged straight for Bacon, arms out and ready to snatch him up.

The boy acted quickly on instinct; his hand flew up to the hilt of Freedom just as he leapt to the side and out of reach of the men's greedy hands. With a metallic ring, his sword was freed from its hold, gliding smoothly against his cloak without damaging the fabric. Once his toes touched the ground, he spun to face the pair and slashed down across the face of the closest man, his sword only appearing
as a flash of silver.

There was a metal clang when the edge of the blade struck the mask, and the shortest man jerked back from the surprise swipe, stumbling into the taller one following right behind him.

The short man's mask split nearly perfectly in half right down the middle and slipped off his face, the two pieces clattering to the floor, revealing his short black hair and brown eyes that were wide with shock. A thin trickle of blood started to leak from the shallow, crooked wound running from his forehead to the bridge of his rounded nose due to *Freedom's* sharp point grazing his skin.

"W-What the hell?!" the short man cursed, slightly shaken.

His taller partner pushed him aside and growled, "Come on! It's only a little brat!" He made a move to grab his handgun.

In two quick strides, Bacon was right before the tall man before he could draw his weapon, the boy's blade a shiny blur as *Freedom* swiped at the man's waist.

The man's hand grasped only air because his belt and holsters had fallen to the floor with an audible *thunk*. Confused, the tall man glanced down and was horrified to see his pistols at his feet, his belt cleanly cut, and his pants starting to fall. "What?!" he exclaimed. "How did you–?"

Just as he raised his head to gape at Bacon in stunned terror, the boy jumped and slashed upwards, cleaving his metal mask in half in almost the same manner as the other man's.

Those two metal pieces rang when they clattered on the white tiled floor. The tall man shambled backwards, nearly losing his pants in the process to show off his black and white striped boxers. His quivering green eyes stared down at Bacon with disbelief under curly locks of aqua-blue hair while his face bled from the new cut down his forehead.

"Oi! What're ya idjits doin'?!!" the pug-nosed man shouted at the other men as he and his slouching partner continued to wrestle with Porlyusica. "Jus' grab the damn kid!"

"This kid's too good with that thing!" the tall man replied, pointing erratically at Bacon. He hesitated to follow the simple order.

Bacon turned sharply and glared angrily at Pug-nose. He wanted to save and protect Porlyusica who was now forced onto her knees. He was about to charge at the man with the ugly, flat nose first when he caught movement in the corner of his eye.

The short man with the black hair was back on his feet and reaching for his gun tucked in his right holster.

Bacon twisted around and launched at the shortest enemy, easily closing the distance with a single bound. In one swift motion, he smacked the flat side of his blade hard against the man's wrist before the man could take aim, drawing a pained yelp and knocking the gun to the side, then slashed downwards to cut loose the man's belt, remaining gun, and his pants as well so he could join his tall friend. The soaring pistol rebounded off the stone wall and when it landed on the floor, it went off with an ear-shattering *bang*.

It was like a bomb had exploded in the room.

Startled by the incredibly loud noise, Bacon jumped and instinctively retreated from the short man and fell into a defensive stance. Ears ringing, he gasped when he spotted the small, cracked hole in the gray stone ceiling right above the tall man where the bullet had punctured through.
"Stop foolin' around!" Pug-nose growled in frustration. Tired of his fellow goons not being able to capture the boy, he decided to do it himself. He roughly pushed Porlyusica fully to the ground, where the man with the slouch pried her arms behind her back and held her down.

Pug-nose stomped towards the boy in an aggravated fury, his gun already in his hand. But before he could even consider lifting his weapon to aim at Bacon as a threat, there was a flash of pink and royal purple and he was suddenly sent flying into Slouchy-shoulders, knocking the other man right off his feet and taking him along for the ride. Both of them continued to fly until they smashed into the wall with a resounding crash. The impact was so hard that they shook the room and made a crater in the stone in the shape of their overlapping bodies with their arms and legs sprawled all over. Stuck in the deep hole, the two men hung on the wall, either twitching or groaning in agony.

The remaining tall and short men were aghast at the sight of their defeated allies before warily turning their attention to the one responsible.

Natsu was wide awake and downright angry, evident by the throbbing vein at the base of his clenched jaw, his bared fangs, the plumes of black smoke coming from his flared nostrils, and the deadly glare directed at the two men who were now sweating and trembling in their spot, their pants forgotten around their ankles. Rising along with the mage's temper was the temperature in the room from the heat emanating from his body.

Bacon was astonished; never had he ever seen Natsu so mad. The boy had witnessed the Dragon Slayer's wrath several times whenever fights broke out back at the guild, but that level of anger didn't compare to what Bacon was seeing now. It was frightening and exhilarating at the same time.

"Who the hell are you bastards?!

"Raven Tail? Sabertooth? Which of you goddamn cheaters are behind this?! Huh?!!"

When the Dragon Slayer took one step towards them, both men tried to back away in a wild panic only to trip over their own pants and fall flat on their backs. The short, dark-haired one squeaked like a frightened mouse as he crab-walked backwards as far as possible from the approaching fire mage. Once his back was pressed against the wall and escape seemed impossible, he began to stutter, "W-We w-were only following R-Raven T-Tail's orders!"

"Raven Tail?!!" Natsu snarled vehemently. He continued to advance in a slow pace, bringing terror on the men's faces. His hands furled into fists by his sides, each knuckle soundly cracking, and his eyes blazed with rage. "The hell do they want with us?" he growled, his voice threateningly low.

"S-S-Supposed to bring them the girl who's supposed t-to be i-in here!" the short man stammered his answer.

Natsu scanned the room and finally noticed the empty bed that was once Wendy's. "Who? Wendy? Why?"

Bacon stiffened at the sound of the girl's name. His hold on Freedom's hilt tightened at the thought of these men wanting to harm her. A burning anger suddenly rose within him. His blue eyes narrowed at the shorter man in hate and noticed the goon cautiously reaching behind his back for something.

"We don't know!" Just as the short man madly screamed his answer, he swung his arm forward, his previously dropped pistol back in his hand and pointing at Natsu.

Bacon was closest and the first to reach him before Natsu could spring into action. Freedom hissed through the air and cleaved into the man's weapon, cutting the pistol in half and leaving only the backend stump of the handle and trigger in the man's grip. Before the man could realize the fate of
his gun, Bacon brought the edge of his blade right at the coward's neck.

The instant the sharp, cold steel touched his skin, the short man froze like a terrified statue. His wide, fearful brown eyes slowly rose to meet Bacon's fierce glower that penetrated the shadows shrouding his young face. A pitiful whimper escaped his quivering lips as he started to badly shake in fear, his brow beaded with sweat.

A strong, warm hand gripped Bacon's left shoulder and gently pulled him and his sword away from the defeated man. "You did great, Bacon," said Natsu, sounding quite impressed. He lightly tousled the boy's hair through his hood, making the swordsman broadly smile. "Now let me handle this."

Nodding, Bacon lowered his weapon and stepped aside.

Natsu grabbed the front of the short man's red shirt and easily yanked him off the floor and off his feet so they were eye-level. Natsu pulled the man close so they were face-to-face, black eyes piercing into brown. "You better tell me everything you know. Got it?" he hissed, his hot breath likely scorching the man's cheeks, judging by the man's grimace the instant the mage started to speak.

"Y-Yes! Understood! Whatever you want! I promise!" the man squealed as rivulets of sweat streamed down his bleeding face.

Natsu sharply turned to the taller goon still sitting on the floor who instantly froze in the midst of tugging his pants back on. The man shrank back, making him seem shorter than his normal height, and quickly raised his arms in surrender and shouted, "I-I'm not doing anything! I swear! Please don't hurt me! I'll tell you everything you want too!"

A groan coming from Porlyusica caught Bacon's attention. She was painstakingly climbing onto her hands and knees, her joints audibly popping and her face distorted in pain.

Wanting to help, the boy left Natsu to deal with the conscious men in red and sheathed his sword. Joining the old woman's side, he offered a hand and a look of concern. "Are you okay?" he quietly asked.

The woman grunted in aggravation as she grasped the boy's hand and carefully pulled herself up with his support. Her tied hair and cloak were disheveled and she quickly readjusted them. "Ugh. I'm getting too old," she grumbled, needing to place a hand on the young swordsman's shoulder to stay upright. Hunched over, the advisor rubbed her sore lower back and glanced between the pair of men stuck in the wall and the other pair under Natsu's mercy, wearing a scornful expression. "I'm still alive, boy," she answered Bacon's question. "This is why I hate humans. No respect for the elderly."

With a sharp crack, she straightened up and was capable of standing on her own. She gave Bacon a small, grateful smile that soon morphed into a look of disdain when she turned to Natsu and the two goons.

The short man had been tossed onto the floor right by his taller partner, his pants still tangled around his ankles and his white boxers showing. The Fire Dragon Slayer stood above the pair, wearing a menacing scowl. Arms crossed, he impatiently tapped a finger against his arm as the short man fumbled his replies.

"It was… It was the leader… The master – yes! It was the guild master of Raven Tail who… uh, who hired us!"

"Y-Yeah! It was him!" the tall man chimed in, nodding vigorously.

"And why does he want Wendy?" the mage snarled.
"I told you! W-We don't know!" shouted the short one.

Natsu snorted, blowing more black smoke out of his nostrils. "Tell me the goddamn truth!" he roared.

Both men shrank from the volume of Natsu's voice. "We don't know! We don't know!" the little man wailed, "We weren't told anything! I swear it! I swear it!"

Natsu growled in frustration and suddenly punched the nearby wall with a flaming fist, shattering the thick stone and charring it black. The men squeaked and covered their heads from the flying pieces of wall while Bacon flinched back in surprise.

"Natsu!" Porlyusica barked, taking a wary step towards the enraged Dragon Slayer. "Calm down! You're going to destroy this room if you don't control your anger!"

Natsu retracted his burning fist from the wall, leaving a gaping hole of melted stone. "Sorry…" he mumbled before shooting the cowering men a distasteful glare, his flames dispersing. "Raven Tail keeps trying to mess with us. It's pissing the hell outta me. If their master wasn't the old man's son, I would…"

"But now you know for sure that Raven Tail are the ones behind everything," interrupted the old woman as she crossed her arms beneath her cloak.

"No… It's not just Raven Tail," Natsu snarled bitterly.

"Sabertooth as well?" the advisor questioned and yet her tone reflected that she already knew the answer.

Natsu peered over his shoulder at her and raised his brow. "Yeah. Did someone already tell you?"

The Medicinal Advisor dropped her gaze on Bacon, her eyes glinting with a little pride. "Lucy has informed me of your suspicions and Bacon had seen the man who attacked Wendy and the others before he fainted that night," she began, "He was also the one who injured the man. Going from what we know so far, it is likely the masked man named Rufus Lore of Sabertooth."

Natsu seemed repulsed by that name. "Ugh! That damn pretty boy?! I'm going to break his face the next time I see him!" he spat, punching a fist into his open palm which both soon ignited with fire, engulfing his arms up to the elbows. His magic lasted only seconds before he realized something.

"Hey wait," he turned to face Bacon, looking bewildered, "You burned the blond freak? It wasn't Romeo? How'd you do it?"

The young boy bounded up to the Dragon Slayer, beaming. "Natsu, look!" he said as he raised his hands before him, palms facing together. He couldn't wait to see the older mage's reaction because Natsu always got super excited whenever Romeo secretly showed off his new colourful fire spells.

"Bacon, no," Porlyusica said sharply, stopping the boy from summoning his magic, "not here."

Extremely disappointed, the young swordsman couldn't help but pout as he dropped his arms and stared glumly at the floor.

A pat on the head from Natsu brought him out of his gloom.

"Show me later, okay?" said Natsu with a wink.

The boy nodded, his smile returning.
Right at that moment, the two men stuck in the wall had finally crumpled to the floor due to gravity, both lying in unconscious heaps of tangled limbs.

Natsu looked between the two pairs of men and sneered maliciously. "Now, let's tie these idiots up."

It didn't take long for Natsu and Porlyusica to find some rope lying around the infirmary in which they used to bind the four goons together, sitting back-to-back, in one tight bundle. With two of them unconscious and the other two drowning in defeat and nearly pant-less, they were a comical sight.

Holding the long end of the rope, Natsu easily dragged the men behind him as he, Porlyusica, and Bacon left the room to search for some guards to arrest the men. He didn't have to go very far because there were two soldiers wielding spears and wearing silver helms, black and white striped tunics, and heavy chainmail jogging towards them.

"Err… We heard a lot of noise over here and were wondering what's going on?" said one of the guards as he approached Natsu.

"Just ask these guys," said the Dragon Slayer as he gestured to the tied up bunch he was lugging behind him, "They were trying to kidnap one of our friends!"

"Kidnapping?" the soldier frowned at the men while the second soldier came over for a closer look.

Porlyusica and Natsu briefly explained what happened.

"Good work in capturing them," the second soldier commented with a nod after listening to their story. "We'll take care of these guys and lock them up for good." He accepted Natsu's end of the rope.

With curt nods, the two guards pulled the defeated lot with them down the hall which wasn't entirely empty.

There stood a lone figure at the visible end of the curved hallway.

Bacon held his breath and tensed up the instant he recognized the gleaming black and silver armour and the horned helm that belonged to Sir Geraldo. Even though his face was hidden in darkness, Bacon could sense the man's fierce gaze upon him.

Did the man remember him? The boy wondered apprehensively.

"Who's that?" he heard Natsu say out of curiosity when he spotted the fully armoured soldier.

"He could be the Captain of the knights," Porlyusica suggested. She didn't dawdle too long to stare. She started to saunter the other way. "If you wish to see the rest of the battles for today, we better head down now."

Natsu was pumped. "Oh, yeah! I wonder who's fighting on our side? Hey, Bacon," he noticed the boy's hesitation, "Something wrong?"

Bacon saw Natsu's slightly concerned expression before shifting his gaze back on the black knight. The man was now walking away, each heavy step making his armour audibly clink and echo down the hall. His crimson cloak embroidered with a gold symbol flowed gallantly behind him as the two soldiers and their prisoners followed suit.

Bacon shook his head and joined up with Natsu and Porlyusica who were both waiting for him. He glanced one last time at the dark knight, only to find him gone behind the curve.
"Bacon." Once again Natsu grabbed the boy's attention. The fire mage scanned the area for any sign of people as they continued to walk. Sensing no one around the hall except for the three of them, he grinned. "Show me your surprise."

Bacon mimicked the older mage's smile and momentarily forgot about the black knight.

The second day of the Grand Magic Games ended on a much better note than the first for Fairy Tail. Although they gained very little points in the competition Chariot, (Dragon Slayers and moving vehicles were a very bad combination), both teams had redeemed their pride and dignity when their chosen fighters won their matches in the battle rounds, giving them a bigger chance to reach the top. Fairy Tail had even won some new fans and admirers in the audience after Natsu's heartwarming outcry and ability to keep moving forward in spite of his predicament and Elfman's (manly) will and steadfast determination against Quatro Puppy's (formerly named Quatro Cerberus) Bacchus Groh.

But the majority of the new admirers gained, who were mostly male, were undeniably because of Mirajane when her battle against her opponent, Jenny Realight of Blue Pegasus, began as a swimsuit competition.

During that portion, Wendy, having joined up with her team in their designated viewing area, was hoping Macao would cover Bacon's innocent eyes so his mind wouldn't be tainted with sexy, seductive images of the two beautiful ladies, however, the man was too distracted by the 'battle' to even care.

"One day Bacon will be a man and he'll understand what it's all about," Macao had nervously told Wendy when she scolded him afterwards.

Nevertheless, Bacon had a great time cheering along with the guild after the great ordeal he, Porlyusica and Natsu had encountered shortly after Wendy had left the infirmary to check on the boy with Lucy.

While they had dinner and drinks at the pub, Bar Sun, where all available members of Fairy Tail had gathered to celebrate their teams' accomplishments, Natsu spoke of the incident involving the goons. He mentioned Raven Tail's involvement, evoking a powerful resentment against the nefarious guild from all members, before praising Bacon's bravery and swordsmanship.

The young swordsman had practically defeated two of the men before Natsu had woken from his nap.

After hearing the tale, Erza was first to compliment Bacon before everyone else joined in, making the boy gush with happiness.

It was Bacon's new fire spell, which Natsu had commented was extraordinarily enlightening and extremely tasty, that astonished the guild. After making sure it was only Fairy Tail and the pub employees present in the building, Master kindly asked the boy to demonstrate his new magic.

Tables and chairs were pushed aside to give the boy plenty of room. Everyone gathered around in a large circle, anxious to see. Even Laxus, who had yet to personally meet the boy but knew about him from Master, was looking on from his high stool by the counter. However, the owner of the pub and his workers were nervous about the idea.

"If you damage anything again, you're paying for it!" croaked the old man of Bar Sun as he stood behind the bar counter, cleaning up empty glasses with the end of his white, stained apron.
"I'm sure it won't be like last night," Master assured from his perch atop a table.

Wendy had heard from Lucy about the steep fine the guild had racked up during last night's party. The whole place had turned into a warzone when numerous fights broke out between drunken members (mainly involving Erza and Natsu) with furniture smashed apart, holes in the walls, and messes all over the floor. They even nearly ran the pub dry, which was mostly because of Cana.

Because of that, Master was stern on keeping things more in order for tonight's festivities in spite of the need to celebrate the guild's first victories.

"Go all out, Bacon," Natsu encouraged, ignoring the owner's warning and Makarov's shaking head of disapproval. The fire mage stood in front of Bacon with his hands on his hips, ready to snack on some magical flames in case Bacon's spell got out of hand.

Like almost everyone, Wendy was curious to know just how strong Bacon's magic truly was. She watched from the side, heart pounding with excitement while Carla was silent in her arms.

Bacon cocked his head at what Natsu had just told him. His hood was down at the moment, revealing his messy blond hair that was further mussed up from the numerous playful pats he had received on the head a short while ago. "All… out?" the boy echoed, not quite understanding the meaning.

Natsu nodded and held up a fist as a sign of strength. "Yeah. Put everything you have in your Dins Fire. Make it strong!"

"Strong…" Bacon murmured, looking at his palms as if trying to find the instructions on how to do it written on them. When he couldn't figure it out, he looked over at Wendy for an answer.

Wendy quickly sprinted to his side and gave him a warm, encouraging smile. In an assuring tone, she said, "Just do your best, Bacon. Take a deep breath and concentrate all of your magic into your hands like you did before. Make a big pretty fire."

Smiling back, the boy nodded in understanding. "Okay."

"I have a bad feeling about this…" Wendy heard Carla grumble to herself as they returned to their spot between Romeo and Gajeel.

All eyes in the pub were on the boy as he held out his arms before him, his palms facing together. No one spoke nor made a sound. Some didn't even breathe due to the suspense.

Taking Wendy's advice, Bacon drew a slow, deep breath and stared intently at the space between his hands as he deeply furrowed his brow in concentration.

Wendy held her breath when she felt his magic come to life the instant it exceeded the sealing power of his bracelet. She felt the tingling sensation that was unique to his form of magic running across her bare skin. Then, in a blink of an eye, a bright orb of fire appeared between his hands. Perfectly spherical, the yellow and orange flames swirled and burned around a blinding white core, making it look like a miniature sun the size of a golf ball.

There were sounds of awe and whispers of amazement while others leaned forward to get a closer view of the boy's magic that brightened the pub.

Wendy was just as fascinated as the first time she had witnessed Bacon's Dins Fire. Captivated by the beautiful flames, she couldn't control the wide smile spreading across her face.
Bacon's blue eyes flashed with the colours of his flames, his attention never straying from his growing power. With each passing second, his blazing orb steadily grew larger and brighter until it was bigger than his hands. The ball-sized sun emitted little streams of flaming energy, its flares harmlessly licking the boy's fingers that were now burning with fire.

The magic was so bright that Wendy had to pry her eyes away and focused on Bacon instead. An incredibly hot wind was stirring within the pub caused by the swirling flames concentrated in the boy's hands. His blond hair and cloak fluttered in the same heat that had Wendy soaked in sweat. Just like a fire mage, Bacon was unaffected by the heat of his own magic.

When he knew his spell had reached its maximum power, Bacon raised his head to give Natsu a boastful grin.

The Fire Dragon Slayer had been broadly grinning since the beginning. There was a devilish glint in his wide eyes when he said with a nod, "Awesome. Now, unleash it."

"Oh, that's not very wise…" Carla uttered nervously as she began to fidget in Wendy's arms.

"W-Wait!" someone started to protest, but it was too late to stop Bacon.

The boy had blinked once and nodded at Natsu's command. He bent low, shifting his left leg back while bringing his fiery orb by his hip.

What happened next shocked everyone, including Natsu.

With a mighty cry, Bacon slammed his blazing sun right into the floor. The gathered magic instantly exploded like a fire bomb; swirling, searing flames burst outwards from the blinding core, shrouding the boy in protective fire that instantly incinerated the floorboards and every wooden object they touched.

"Holy shit!" Gajeel cursed out loud while others started to panic for their lives.

Romeo hastily retreated, pulling Wendy with him while Carla was screaming at them to run fast.

They leapt over tables and chairs in the way that were quickly eaten up by the hungry wave of fire licking at their heels. The rapidly growing inferno was too much for Natsu to swallow in one gulp, overwhelming the Dragon Slayer and engulfing him from head to toe in Bacon's magic.

Taking countermeasures, Gray and Juvia quickly summoned walls of ice and water respectively to shield everyone from the powerful spell that annihilated everything in its path; chairs and tables instantly burned to cinders, glasses and bottles cracked and melted, drinks bubbled and evaporated, metal utensils turned into molten lumps, and the floor was becoming a gaping hole.

Ice steamed and melted and the water noisily hissed against the violent wall of flames.

Stunned by the destructive power of Bacon's magic, Wendy was left speechless as she watched the light of Dins Fire burn a few seconds more before it flickered away beyond the glistening barrier of ice. Once it was certain that Bacon's magic was no more, Gray dispelled his crystal wall to reveal the terrible damage the pub had sustained.

Wendy gawked in horror along with a few others while some, like Erza, gaped in amazement.

The air was filled with fluttering ash and smoke. All the floorboards touched by fire had been burnt away, leaving only a charred stone foundation below in the form of a huge, unsightly circle. There was a new massive, smoldering hole in the roof that allowed a spectacular view of the clear evening
sky. No objects survived the inferno, only piles of soot and melted, blackened lumps remained. Juvia's water started to flood into the hole and soak into the dusty ash.

And standing in the middle of the smoky devastation, were Natsu and Bacon, both unscathed and laughing in joy.

"That was so awesome!" Natsu exclaimed, pumping his fists gleefully in the air which Bacon soon mimicked. The Dragon Slayer patted his stomach and loudly belched out a stream of brilliant fire before sighing in content, breathing out black smoke. "Man, that was so delicious. Tasted like heaven. Thanks for the feast, Bacon!"

The boy was elated by Natsu's comment and didn't seem to notice the damages he had done.

"M-M-My bar!" the owner shrieked, completely mortified. He angrily tossed his apron onto the non-charred half of his counter and turned to Master Makarov who was just as appalled. "The damages are worse than yesterday! You owe me, Fairy Tail! One million Jewels!"

"One… m-million?" the guild master stuttered. Tears streamed down his blanched, wrinkled face as he wailed, "Noooooo!"

Romeo, looking a little frazzled, chuckled and glanced sideways at Wendy. "Looks like Bacon's really a Fairy," he whispered.

"Unbelievable…" the girl groaned. But deep down, she was happy to know the boy was starting to fit perfectly right in with their rambunctious guild.

She was surprised, to say the least, that Bacon's magic fire was just as devastating as Natsu's and could potentially reach the same level of power as the Fire Dragon Slayer. Knowing what he was capable of, Wendy was curious to know what other sorts of powerful magic the boy might possess if fire and sword spells were not his only techniques. It all depended on whether or not he could remember them all.

Charged with Bacon's power, Natsu arrogantly challenged Laxus to a fight, ignoring the owner's demands to get out of his ruined pub.

It took Master Makarov to turn into a full-sized giant to stop the hotheaded fire mage from doing any more damage to the hollowed building that reeked of smoke.

With their celebration abruptly ended, the members decided to retire for the night to prepare for tomorrow's competitions.

Before Wendy's team parted ways with Bacon, Romeo, Macao, and Wakaba, the girl quietly said to him, "Don't wander too far from Romeo and Macao, okay? Always stay close to them."

The boy sadly nodded his hooded head.

Wanting to cheer him up, Wendy gave him a little hug. "We'll see each other tomorrow morning for breakfast," she reassured, meeting his tired blue eyes.

"Then… be careful," he replied. "Raven Tail might hurt you again. Or that man, Rufus."

"You have nothing to worry about, Bacon," Erza intruded, eavesdropping on their conversation. She smirked and placed a hand on her pink blouse right over her heart. "I promise to watch over Wendy for you."
"You're not the only one," Gray piped in, his calm demeanor turning into a hateful scowl, "If I see that bastard Rufus come near us, I'll make sure to give him a new one."

"A new what?" Natsu asked, perking an eyebrow in confusion. "Why the hell would you give him something new? You're supposed to hate him!"

Gray rolled his eyes. "Don't you know the saying, flame-brain? Means I'm gonna rip a new hole in his ass," he explained with a sigh.

"Shut up, ice-freak. I knew that!" Natsu angrily snapped.

Lucy and Happy looked at him in disbelief.

Natsu raised a fist before him and ignited it with fire that burned as bright as Bacon's. "I'll beat ya to it. I'll finish what Bacon started. You'd like that, wouldn't you, kiddo? See that pretty bastard all nice and toasty?"

Grinning, Bacon nodded at Natsu's sinister idea.

Rufus Lore of Sabertooth – he was the man Bacon had tried to protect Wendy, Carla, and Romeo from on the night they went to Castle Mercurius. The boy had immediately recognized the masked man in the red, plumed hat when he had joined the guild in the stadium to watch the battle portion of the Games. Since learning of this, both teams of Fairy Tail had grown even more ambitious to come out on top in the Grand Magic Games to prove that nothing would break their spirits. Vengeance would be best served on the battlefield before tens of thousands of witnesses.

After exchanging goodnights and waving goodbye, Wendy's team and Bacon's group went their separate ways.

Before Wendy got very far, she noticed Carla trailing behind. The white feline was looking over her shoulder, eyeing the white symbol of Fairy Tail on the back of Bacon's green cloak.

"What's wrong, Carla?" the girl asked.

The Exceed sharply turned at the sound of Wendy's voice. "Oh… It is nothing. I apologize," she murmured. She took one quick glance at the young boy before hurrying to catch up.

Wendy frowned, knowing something was troubling her friend. But she would have to wait to ask about it later.

The empty hall in the lower, underground chambers of Castle Mercurius was eerily dark, lit only by a single torchlight mounted on the wall. Shadows danced in the mercy of the flickering flame, making the passageway seem haunted by ghosts.

Heavy footsteps echoed loud and far and was accompanied by the rhythmic sound of clinking armour.

Arcadios pushed off the pillar he was leaning against the moment the owner of the footsteps entered the dim light.

"Two blunders in one day. Quite the record," said Sir Geraldo, his deep voice reverberating within his helm. He moved to stand a few feet away from the other. His black armour gleamed in the light, giving the curved horns of his great helm a fearsome appearance.
Arcadios grunted in annoyance at his vice-captain’s mockery. "The King wasn't exactly clear on whom he wanted to see battling and the plan would have gone well if those damn fools went for the right girl in the first place," he retorted. He ran an armoured hand through his spiky black hair, exasperated. "Idiots. All of them. How could they not understand the descriptions I gave them?"

The Captain of the Cherry Blossom Holy Knights was outraged when he had heard that the four chosen guardsmen posing as hired goons had failed their duty. And it was none other than Sir Geraldo who had delivered the news personally.

"It was a flawed plan to begin with," the black knight stated bluntly.

The Captain snorted angrily and glowered at the narrow slit where Geraldo's eyes should be. Only once did Arcadios ever gaze upon the other man's true face and that was the day Geraldo was first recruited as a knight seven years ago by Arcadios himself.

Geraldo had stood out amongst the rest of the recruits. Not only was he a tall, strongly built man, he had skin that was dark as ash, hair that was vibrant and red, and crimson eyes that were fierce and commanding. However, the man chose to hide his features due to the numerous hideous scars that marred his face.

Arcadios can still remember the gruesome marks that disfigured the man as if it he had just seen it yesterday. It was like a beast had tried to rip Geraldo's face right off with its claws. Deep, painful scars ran down his cheeks, across his nose, down his eyes, over his lips – it was a ghastly sight. The only explanation Geraldo was willing to share about them was that the deed was done by a 'wretched green demon'.

For seven years, Geraldo had never shown his real face to the public knowing his face made others uncomfortable. But even if he was a man whose face many had never seen in the kingdom, including the King and Princess, he was a trustworthy and loyal knight capable of exuding raw strength in his outer appearance alone. More suited to lead than to follow, Arcadios had promoted the man to Vice-Captain only a year after joining the Captain's squadron and had left him in charge numerous times in Arcadios's absence.

The two of them were more like acquaintances rather than friends in spite of the years they spent working together. They were alike in some aspects and completely different in others but they got along decently well most of the time.

"Capturing a Celestial Spirit mage will not bend her will in our favour," the black knight continued, "If Minister Datong hears of this incident of yours, I doubt he will not suspect us."

"Damn that old man," Arcadios grounded out. The Minister of Defense was a nosy old geezer who constantly inquired on the progress of the Eclipse Project, often to advise against its use. "Last I've spoken to him, he believes we will complete the cannon by the last day of the Games."

The Eclipse Gate was already complete; it had absorbed enough magic energy from the Games to power its doors. All it needed were the twelve Gold Celestial keys and a Celestial Spirit mage to unlock and control it.

Sir Geraldo crossed his plated arms and scoffed, "He will not believe your lies any longer if you screw up again, Captain. He is becoming more suspicious with us as well as with the Princess."

Arcadios cursed the old man's name once again for putting Princess Hisui under more stress. The poor woman already had enough to worry about and Arcadios wanted to alleviate her troubles as quickly as possible. However, things were just not as simple as they should be.
"The twelve golden Celestial keys," Sir Geraldo began, his deep voice low and stern, "think you can get them before the time comes?"

"You don't think I'm capable, Vice-Captain?" Arcadios demanded, irritated by the other's unspoken accusation that he would fail again.

"The feat will not be easy with those little Fairies guarding them."

"Hmph. They will be distracted now that we have added fuel to the war between them and Raven Tail. The only thing to do is to wait for the perfect opportunity to show itself."

Sir Geraldo was unimpressed by the idea and it was evident by his lack of response. After a pause, he turned his cloaked back to the Captain and started to walk away towards the shadows. "Five days left, Captain," he began, his footsteps echoing in the empty hall, "If you do not act quickly, we will lose our chance."

"Don't question my ways, Vice-Captain," Arcadios snarled the title in a derisive manner to remind the other of where he stood in rank.

The black knight stopped at the boundary of light and shadow and peered over his shoulder. "I am not. I am merely stating the truth. I recommend getting rid of some of the pests who guard the keys if you ever wish to obtain them. Perhaps that will persuade the Celestial Spirit mages to work with us."

"I will not resort to such despicable methods."

"You may have no choice when the fate of our future depends on those twelve keys. If you do not have the heart to do it, I can be of your service."

"No. It is not necessary."

Sir Geraldo faced forward again. "Have you forgotten? We must do what must be done in order to save our kingdom."

Arcadios grunted at the truth in those words. It was the Princess who had said those words to them first. Having no reply, he kept silent.

The black knight resumed his pace, melding into the darkness beyond the reach of the fire's light where the empty halls rang with the sounds of his footsteps.

The Captain stayed in the light until a deathly silence fell upon the hall. "Do what must be done," he repeated the saying to himself in a gruff whisper as he gazed at the shadows where the black knight had disappeared.

Time was running short. If things did not go his way, then Arcadios would have to resort to following Sir Geraldo's suggestion and dirty his hands.
Day Three: Keaton

He saw the three moons again, hovering above in a pitch black sky. And waiting under the lunar bodies was the yellow, three-tailed dog, Keaton, beckoning him with a paw, its narrowed eyes glinting with excitement and the ends of its mouth curled into a smile.

As the boy approached the animal, the shadows slowly receded, as if he was holding a lamp to chase them away. With each step he took, night gradually turned to dawn, revealing the world that was once shrouded in darkness.

Growing silhouettes of giant trees surrounded the area, a sign he was wandering in a forest once again. Dawn turned into morning after a few more steps, bringing life and colour to the natural land. He could even smell the sweet forest air and hear its tranquil music consisting of various songs of birds and the rustling of leaves in the gentle breeze.

But it wasn't the sudden appearance of the ancient forest that fascinated him most; it was the transformation of the three watching moons into three watching eyes that belonged to an enormous, silver-scaled reptile.

The boy stopped a few paces away from Keaton to stare at the giant creature in awe; needing to crane his neck to meet the three eyes of milky white that shone with kindness. Multiple horns of beautiful gold grew upon its head, curving and twisting to appear like the massive crown of antlers of a handsome stag. Vines and flowering, twining plants have tangled within those horns, but most amusing were the few colourful birds perched atop the golden points, chirping and flitting between green and gold.

The boy's eyes traced the lizard's long neck down to its main body that seemed to merge with the earth and forest. There was moss growing on its silvery scales like pale green fur, forming a thick mane around the base of its neck and draping down it shoulders. Folded on its mossy back were three pairs of leathery wings that looked frayed and worn. Massive roots of nearby trees entwined its clawed limbs like woody fingers, holding it in place, however the creature did not seem to mind. These trees grew the largest compared to the rest of the forest; their trunks twice the size of the lizard and their tops reaching high into the sky beyond what the boy could see standing on the ground.

The giant being politely bowed its great, horned head, which did little to disturb its little feathered friends, and opened its jaws to talk, showing its mouth full of sharp, yellowish teeth. Each fang was as long as the boy’s arm, but the boy had nothing to fear for he somehow knew the big lizard was not an enemy.

"Atarl adune tarei kun ei, Herial Yaarez," the creature spoke in a loud, gravelly voice that reminded the boy of a powerful, yet kind elderly man – much like Master Makarov.

The words were odd and meaningless, but the sound of them was familiar. It took only a moment before the boy remembered where he had heard them before.

This was Keaton's friend.

And the words spoken were the words of a dragon.

'This is where it began... The beginning of your new destiny...’ whispered the mysterious voice that had no face.
The next thing the boy knew, he was sitting on a raised root alongside Keaton, facing the great
dragon and listening to it speak in a language he could now understand.

"Blind I am, but the future I can still see… Our world will become a bleak and dismal place ruled by
a powerful evil," said the elderly lizard, its tone quiet and somber. Two of its eyes were closed while
the middle one in the centre of its forehead remained open, staring blankly at the canopy above.

"But all is not lost," the dragon continued, sounding more hopeful, "For the future is not absolute. It
can be altered and you are the key to that change. However, you must first walk two separate paths.
One full of despair and loss, and the other, full of life and hope. This journey will be your longest
and most difficult trial you will ever face. You must endure to overcome pain, grief, and sorrow in
order to find yourself again. Only then will you gain the power to change the fate of our world."

The dragon opened its other eyes and lowered its great head so the end of its scaly snout was right in
front of the boy and dog. Its expression looked rather sad and regretful as its unfocused gaze fell on
the boy. "Forgive me for placing this burden on your young shoulders. I am but an old, feeble King
whose time is at its end. I beseech you, Herial Yaarez, please save this land from the forces of evil.
Protect the future in my stead…"

Keaton abruptly stood up, looking quite shocked with its three tails standing straight up and its
usually narrowed eyes wide. "'At its end'? My friend… Y-You don't mean…" it began, only to
suddenly trail off, a tremor in its child-like voice.

The dragon shifted its nose to the dog and slowly nodded once, its saddened expression even sadder
than before. "I am afraid that day is upon us, tierruden. I cannot escape this fate… nor can you. You
know what you must do. Do not forget: Arrieyu en tiyir."

Keaton let out a sad whine as it bowed its head, its ears and tails drooping. "Understood… I will not
fail you, my dear friend."

The scene suddenly changed before the boy's eyes. The forest was gone; replaced by a large
chamber with a stone floor and walls of perfectly laid bricks. Rows of rounded columns stood on
either side of a central walkway that was covered in a layer of dust and dirt. There were stained glass
windows below the ceiling that brought light and colour to an otherwise drab and gray interior.

The boy was walking now, kicking up dust with his boots as he followed right behind the three
swaying tails of the yellow dog. Up ahead was a short set of steps that led to a flat altar where a
carving of a radiant sun on a section of bluish-gray stone awaited on the wall.

"Doors of Time?" Keaton questioned in response to something the boy couldn't remember asking.
The dog glanced back at the other and snorted in amusement, its eyes and mouth smiling once again.
"I have no idea what that is. Those doors," it gestured with its black nose, "are known as The
Eternal–"

The animal was suddenly cut off by an earth-shaking roar of a mighty beast coming from somewhere
outside. The boy felt the floor tremble and heard the windows rattle from the incredible volume.

He twisted around to face the closed entrance of the building, feeling the sudden need to find out
what was happening. That roar was not the roar of a monster, but the cry of the dragon he had just
met and it was in danger.

Before he could leave, he felt something yank him back by the sleeve of his green tunic.

"You mustn't!" Keaton growled with a mouthful of the boy's sleeve. It looked at the young warrior
pleadingly, its narrowed eyes glistening with tears. "It is too late to save him…"

There was an explosion that rocked the chamber, throwing the pair off balance. All the windows noisily shattered and stone soundly crumbled from other parts of the building. The hall remained intact with shards of coloured glass sparkling on the floor. Now freed from Keaton, the boy clambered to his feet and rushed to the exit, ignoring the dog’s demand to return.

He was back in the forest, his body knowing where to go while his mind was telling him to hurry. Before he knew it, he was standing with a sword and shield in his hands, aghast at the gruesome sight waiting before him.

The silver dragon, still embraced by the roots of giant trees, was lying still on the ground that was glistening red from the blood gushing from its torn neck. Its once impressive crown of gold and green had been broken to pieces; its feathered companions long gone from the scene.

Two men stood before the slain creature, their features distorted by shadows. One was dressed in flowing robes of black, wielding a long staff in one hand and holding a heavy tome in the other. The top of the staff bore a round onyx crystal that pulsed with a sinister red light.

The other man was more intimidating in appearance for he was completely drenched from head to toe in the fresh blood of his kill.

Both had their backs towards the swordsman, neither appearing to notice his presence just yet.

The boy froze the instant he recognized the scene before him. The man covered in blood was the man the boy could never defeat…

"Now I am King, you old fool," the man proclaimed. He reared his head to the sky and laughed gleefully at the slaughter done by his hands.

The man with the staff suddenly turned his head to peer over his shoulder. Crimson eyes found the boy, fierce and unkind.

The other man twisted around, showing his shadowed face splotched with red. Cruel, pale eyes glaring at the boy while a wicked sneer twisted on the man's blood-stained lips, showing his inhuman fangs. "Well, well… What do we have here?" he remarked in a deep, hostile tone as he took a step forward. His bloodied hands flexed into a killing form by his sides, each finger ending in a deadly claw that dripped with crimson.

A Dragon Slayer! The boy realized, recognizing the man's ability to transform his nails into claws, his teeth into fangs, and his pupils into that of a lizard's. And the man's skin… they seemed to gleam like onyx scales…

The boy drew back in caution, his hands clammy and his heart hammering against his chest with apprehension for he knew what was next to come.

"This boy…" spoke the robed man, his voice unlike the other's. It sounded young and it was neither harsh nor friendly. However, his red eyes gave his true nature away because they shone with a malevolent light as they studied the young warrior intently. "He will prove to be an obstacle if you do not kill him now."

The other man snorted in disdain. "Look at this whelp. What can this little creature do?"

The boy charged without warning, his body moving on its own accord in spite of him already knowing he would lose the fight. His blade slashed across the man's shoulder down to his belly, but
it was not flesh that his weapon had struck beneath the man's leather clothes, but something that felt and sounded like metal plating. His rash attack brought a look of surprise upon the man's face that lasted only a mere second.

A terrible rage flashed in the man's icy eyes. That was the last thing the boy remembered before he found himself limping across the dusty walkway once again, leaning heavily against Keaton's furry back for support. He was hurting all over, his body beaten and bloody. Barely could he keep his eyes focused on the radiant sun carved into the stone wall on the altar before them.

"Quickly! Quickly!" Keaton urged, wishing to move faster, but the injured boy could not ignore the pain. "Time will return to normal shortly! They will come after you once the spell ends!"

Climbing the stone steps was an arduous feat, but the boy somehow managed with the dog's aid. Once at the top of the altar, the animal pointed at the wall with its nose. "Now, your left hand. Touch the stone doors," it commanded.

The boy did as he was told without a second thought. Once his palm touched the cold, gray-blue stone, the animal uttered, "Arriei yu en tiyir."

There was a flash of golden light on the back of the boy's hand and for an instant he saw the three familiar triangles he had seen many times before shining on his skin, but only one shone brighter than the rest. The mark disappeared right after he blinked. Then, like magic, the wall suddenly split into two halves and noisily slid sideways like a set of stone doors.

There was no time to be baffled because wood and stone were suddenly blasted apart by a deafening explosion that nearly knocked the boy to the floor. Soon to follow was the infuriated snarl of an angry Dragon Slayer coming from the new gaping hole in the entrance.

"They're here! Quickly! Inside!"

The boy was shoved into the next chamber that was much, much smaller than the previous room with each wall engraved with magic runes that seemed to glow faintly with power. In the centre was a magic circle etched into the stones that made up the floor. He stumbled and collapsed onto his side within the circle, aggravating his many wounds and drawing a pained hiss from his lips. He heard the stone doors grinding as they began to close behind him. Panicking, he struggled to push off the ground, managing to rise only onto his hands and knees, just in time to see a blaze of white energy heading his way from the other side of the closing stone doors.

His blood ran cold when he saw Keaton's silhouette as it jumped in the light's path, acting as a shield. Its pained howl seemed to echo throughout the small chamber, even when its entire body was incinerated by the blast. The boy dropped flat on the floor to avoid the attack that managed to pass through the narrow gap between the moving stone. It felt like a stream of fire had narrowly missed the top of his head. The energy struck the wall with the force of a bomb, leaving a charred, vertical mark on the engraved stones and knocking some out of place. Something cracked and crumbled from above.

When the boy raised his head towards the sound, all he saw were broken pieces of rock raining down on him before everything went black.

Bacon jerked awake and immediately sat straight up in bed, accidentally throwing off his covers. He took a sharp breath, finding his body shaking and his heart hammering against his chest.

He gingerly felt the top of his head, feeling only hair dampened with cold sweat and no painful injury. The falling rocks he saw were only in his dream. A firm hand on his shoulder startled him out
of his thoughts.

"Hey. Don't worry, it's just me," Romeo assured in a whisper as he magically turned on the nearest bedside Lacrima lamp without a sound.

Bacon had to blink a few times to adjust to the bright light before focusing his attention on Romeo.

Romeo was wide awake and sitting up on the same bed they shared in their small, two-bed hotel room. Snoring away in the second bed to the right of Bacon was Macao. The man's deep, raspy snores were thankfully not too loud to disturb the boys too much.

Bacon frowned in guilt knowing he had likely woken Romeo up. He glanced at the hanging clock across the room and saw the hands pointing at four-twenty in the morning.

"Did you have another bad dream?" Romeo asked.

Bacon nodded and mumbled, "Sorry…"

Romeo raised a questioning eyebrow. "For what?"

"Did I wake you?"

Romeo put on a carefree smile. "Oh, that. You did, but that's okay. I'm getting used to it. Besides, I wasn't really tired anyway," he lied as he stifled a yawn behind a hand. "So… what did you dream about?" he inquired, looking concerned.

Bacon furrowed his brow as he tried to recall every detail, both good and bad. "I saw the yellow dog again," he began slowly, thinking hard.

"Oh?" Romeo leaned forward, his interest piqued. "The one with three tails?"

The youngest nodded. "I met his friend who was really big," the boy stretched out his arms to elaborate, "and covered in shiny scales."

Romeo's eyes widened. "Was his friend… a dragon?" he asked in bewilderment.

"A dragon?" The word sounded right. Bacon nodded, now understanding what it was.

"Did it talk to you? Did it say something along the lines of uh, 'An… Antaru ad…' um… You know, something like that?" Romeo muttered as he looked off to the side and scratched the back of his head, embarrassed by his awful pronunciation.

"It said… 'Atarl adune… tarei… kun ei… Herial Yaarez.‘" Bacon recalled. He could almost hear the strange words in his head spoken in the kind, elderly lizard's voice.

"Yes! That!" Romeo exclaimed a little too loudly in his excitement. He quickly clamped a hand over his mouth and glanced nervously at Macao. Seeing his father still soundly asleep, Romeo sighed with relief. He suddenly threw off the rest of their covers and hopped off their bed. He rummaged through his knapsack and when Bacon asked what he was doing, he replied with; "I'm going to write this all down. I'm thinking we should keep a dream journal for you."

"What's that?"

"It's a journal that keeps tracks of your dreams. It might be helpful."

Bacon wasn't entirely sure what Romeo was talking about. "Why…?"
Romeo grinned as he pulled out a medium-sized pad of paper and a pencil. He hopped back onto their bed, making the mattress springs squeak, and leaned against the headrest. "Because your dreams could also be pieces of your memories," he explained as he began to scribble on the first blank lined page. "What you had just said was in Dracotongue, the ancient language of dragons. Porlyusica was talking about it the other day when she heard you say those words. There's no way you could've made them all up in your dream unless you've actually heard it before. That means you must've really met this dragon that you saw in your dream some time ago."

Bacon frowned. Could his dreams truly be some of his memories? He didn't like the thought of that possibility, especially when his latest dream was not the most pleasant one. And there were many other bad dreams too, ones that often woke him up in the middle of the night and filled him with terror and dread. "Do you really think so?" he had to ask, sounding worried.

Romeo shrugged. When he noticed the unease on the younger one's face, he softened his expression. "It could be true… or not. Dreams can only be just dreams. A bunch of made up stuff. But sometimes there's more to it than that. I want to believe that what you saw actually happened… Is it okay if you tell me more about it?"

Bacon shifted over to take a closer look at what Romeo had written down. Across the top margin in big letters was 'BACON'S DREAM JOURNAL' with 'Entry #1' right underneath it. In the top right-hand corner were today's date and the current time. Then in point form was a list of some of the things Bacon had already mentioned. Although, there were a few words the boy couldn't read because they looked too complicated. "What does this say?" he asked, pointing.

"That says 'Drac-o-tongue'," Romeo replied, slowly pronouncing the word as he underlined each syllable. "And this is 'her-ell yar-es'. I'm not really sure if that's how you spell them but that's how it sounds… isn't it? Anyway, they're the only two Dracotongue words I can remember you saying."

"Her-ell yar-es? Herial Yaarez," Bacon repeated, sounding the words out for himself. Saying them made him remember something else about his dream. "The dragon called me that… Do you think that is my real name?"

Romeo perked a curious brow and started to tap the pink eraser end of his pencil against his chin. "Does the name sound familiar to you? It's a… really weird name. Oh, but if it really is your name, then it's pretty… unique," he quickly added the last part with a sheepish laugh when he saw the other boy's look of disappointment.

"Herial… Yaarez," Bacon said once more. The name didn't sound right rolling off his tongue and he didn't feel comfortable to be called by it. He crossed his arms, pouted, and shook his head. "I don't like it. I don't think it's my name."

The older boy quietly chuckled. "Okay. If you say so." On the same line with 'Herell yares', he drew a dash followed by 'Name?'. "Did the dragon say anything else?"

Bacon could remember the tone of the creature's voice that was full of sorrow and regret, but not its words. "No… I can't remember."

"What else happened with the dragon and the dog?"

Bacon suddenly felt a pang in his chest. "They died." He wasn't sure why he was so upset about the loss of the dragon and Keaton. For some odd reason, it felt like they were his friends and yet he knew very little about them.

Romeo was shocked, his intrigued smile instantly wiped from his face.
"They were killed," Bacon continued, seeing their deaths flash in his mind, "by an evil man."

Romeo lowered his pad and pencil and furrowed his brow, pitying the other. "Oh… That's why it was a bad dream… Do… do you know who it was?"

Bacon shook his head that was starting to ache. He dropped his gaze to his hands that were unknowingly clenched tight over his lap. "I couldn't see his real face. He was a Dragon Slayer, I think. He killed the dragon and Keaton. And he tried to kill me."

The scratching of pencil on paper resumed as Romeo quickly jotted down the new information. "Is 'Keaton' the name of the yellow dog?" he inquired in which he received a nod as an answer. He added the name after 'yellow dog with three tails'. "Where did this all happen? Was it inside a temple?"

"A temple? No… it was a forest? There were trees… but I was inside somewhere too. I don't know where though…"

Romeo wrote a few more lines. He knitted his brow in deep thought as he began to lightly tap the point of his pencil against the paper. "A Dragon Slayer, huh," he uttered in disbelief with a slight shake of his head. "And he attacked you… Did you… escape in your dream?"

"I…” Bacon clenched his eyes shut, seeing images of moving stone walls and falling rocks but no clear memory on how he had survived. "I don't know…"

Romeo gave Bacon a grim look. "Natsu mentioned the Twin Dragons of Sabertooth were capable of killing their dragon parents… Could it have been one of them?"

Not waiting for a reply, Romeo rolled off the bed and started to dig through his small pile of Crocus's daily newspapers Macao had collected for him. The fire mage was planning on cutting out specific articles about Fairy Tail in the Grand Magic Games and paste them in his scrapbook once they were back home. He pulled one out, joined Bacon back on the bed, and flipped to the second page. Inside was the complete roster of the eight participating teams that qualified for the main Games. Under each coloured portrait were the person's name and a few details about them such as their likes and dislikes.

Romeo pointed to a pair of young men under the 'Team Sabertooth' heading and logo and said their names. The one named Rogue Cheney had messy black hair that covered one of his red eyes. He had a stoic face and a confident posture in the picture. The other man was Sting Eucliffe who had spiky blond hair, sharp blue eyes, and a cocky smile.

They were both Dragon Slayers, but neither had the same wickedness Bacon had seen in the cold, pale eyes of the shadowed man in his nightmare.

"No. It wasn't them…” was his answer to Romeo's question.

The fire mage folded the paper and tossed it back onto his pile on the floor with a weary sigh. He started to chew on the eraser of his pencil as he stared hard at their list, as if trying to find an answer between the lines. "So there's a possibility that there's another Dragon Slayer out there… An evil one…” he concluded after pondering for a short while.

"But it was just a dream…” said Bacon, running a hand over his arm which, in his dream, had been bruised and bleeding. There was no pain and no physical scars to remind him of the battle he could not win so it couldn't have happened… Unless he had been healed by magic that was just like Wendy's; her magnificent power erased all evidence of an injury.
Bacon shook his head and looked down at the gleaming Dreamstone hanging around his neck. He knew Wendy would tell him the same thing if he had asked; that the horrible things he saw and felt in his sleep were mere dreams conjured by his magic jewel and nothing more.

"But... I think... Err, Yeah... I suppose you're right," Romeo finally conceded when he saw Bacon's troubled expression. "I'm probably thinking too much into this and jumping to conclusions... Real dragons haven't been seen for a while now, except for Acno... Actually... never mind, let's just go back to sleep and not worry about it anymore. Okay?"

Bacon nodded, having grown weary from their discussion. But he also felt a little better too. Confiding with Romeo had somewhat unraveled some of the mystery behind his dream. Albeit he still had many unanswered questions and some things were just too confusing to comprehend. However, as he glanced over what Romeo had written down, it felt like he would eventually find answers to everything he wanted to know.

Before Romeo could put his pad and pencil aside on the table, Bacon asked, "Will you write the next entry too?"

The fire mage smiled. "Do you want me to?"

Bacon nodded.

Romeo's smile broadened into a grin. He flipped to the next page and titled it with 'Entry #2' with the date in the corner but no time. "Wake me up if I'm not awake before you, okay?"

"Okay."

The lights were silently turned off and both boys shifted back into bed.

Bacon felt a supportive hand on his shoulder. "If you have another nightmare, just remember I'll be right here. Dreams can't hurt you," Romeo assured in a quiet whisper.

Bacon smiled and didn't hesitate to close his eyes, anxious to dream again.

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Domus Flau was nearly filled to the brim with people more so than usual. Jellal surmised it was likely due to Fairy Tail continuing to win the hearts of fans with their hard-fought triumphs and boundless determination. Even Jellal was mightily impressed at Erza's victory in Pandemonium, battling one hundred different monsters at the same time and taking all the glory. Fairy Tail, once the laughing stock of Fiore, was starting to regain the fame it once had seven years ago.

The mage of Crime Sorcière felt rather proud for Fairy Tail. And it wasn't because he was considered a 'member' of their guild at the moment.

However, as much as Jellal wanted the Games to continue on to showcase Fairy Tail's might and fortitude, there was still the problem of the dark entity underlying the grand event. Or the lack thereof.

"Three days... and no sign of the dark energy," Jellal relayed his thoughts to the others of Crime Sorcière.

Staying disguised as Mystogan, he was acting casual by leaning his back against a pillar situated on the highest viewing platform that was standing-room only. Latecomers all ended up here to view the Games when no seats were available. The view was terrible compared to the lower levels; battling participants were mere ants on the battleground and the Lacrima screens were barely large enough to
see any details. Many of the spectators resorted to using binoculars or wore magic Far-Sight glasses in order to enjoy the competitions.

Only when the announcer spoke the names of the participants did the people lacking the proper equipment know who was fighting who. In spite of the limitations, the platform was still crowded nearly to the point of overflowing and as loud as ever that Jellal could hardly hear his own thoughts or his companions'.

"This is rather strange," Ultear replied telepathically, sounding just as suspicious as Jellal felt, "Things are going too smoothly for my liking…"

"Yeah, usually we'd pick something up by now," Meredy piped in.

Jellal sighed. He didn't like how smooth things were going either. It was worrisome; he wondered if the dark entity was aware of his group's activities or it had finally moved on to another area to continue scheming up some nefarious plan.

Arms crossed, Jellal kept to himself as he pondered over what should be done while the people around him cheered, clapped and whistled for Wendy Marvell and Chelia Blendy who were both chosen for the next battle round. His eyes shifted towards the arena, but all he could see were the backs of the people standing in front of him. So far, no one in the crowd really paid much attention to his presence, or even recognized him as Mystogan, so it was a perfect place for him to stay hidden and out of sight of the few members of the Magic Council who were guests for today's events.

He didn't want to give up on his search just yet. Perhaps he was too far away from the main event to sense anything. He had to move closer, but that would be risky. Members of the Magic Council could be sitting among the audience. He had to lay low.

The people around him burst into deafening cheers all at once for the battle between Wendy and Chelia had just begun.

That was when he sensed it; the dark entity of Zeref he had been searching for these past few days. There was no mistaking the evil no matter how faint it was. He stiffened but made no abrupt move, trying to pinpoint its location without being noticed. It felt as if it came from far away. It did not come from the arena, but from somewhere to his left and above, higher than the highest accessible platform.

Jellal narrowed his gaze in the direction of the dark aura, seeing the giant stone statue of the female mage that guarded the east wing of Domus Flau. He spotted a ledge at the base of the sculpture carved from mountain stone and quickly assumed the entity of Zeref was there at this very moment. It was odd and highly suspicious because over the past seven years, the evil had originated near or in the battlegrounds.

Jellal had no choice but to proceed with great caution.

"It's here," he informed Meredy and Ultear, "I'm heading towards it."

"Be careful," Ultear advised as he started to squeeze between the countless bodies of screaming, moving fans.

"If you need backup, say – or rather, think: The sun rises in the south," said Meredy in a chipper voice.

Jellal rolled his eyes after managing to reach the back of the platform that was thankfully not as
occupied with spectators. "What?" he grumbled in thought.

"It's code. We should have a code. Don't you think?"

"Why would we need a code for backup?" Ultear questioned firmly. Jellal could imagine her giving Meredy a disapproving scowl. "We can communicate telepathically!"

"What if someone hacks our telepathic connection?" Meredy argued. She was pouting judging by her offended tone. "We're dealing with Zeref's power here. Whoever this is could read your thoughts and know we're coming, that is, if you need it."

Jellal snorted. He had to give Meredy some credit for considering that possibility. "I suppose you're right, Meredy. We'll stick with the code," he conceded as he quickly made his way around the long corridor that connected the many viewing platforms together. He could sense Meredy's pleased smile through her Sensory Link spell she had placed on him 'for protection' – according to Ultear. (Jellal was certain Ultear insisted on the magic link to make sure he didn't pull anything foolish again.)

"Remember! The sun rises in the south."

"Understood."

It was a battle trying to get from the north wing of the stadium to the east. Too many people were moving or standing about, making his journey as slow as a crawl. But that wasn't the only problem. He wasn't sure if there were any stairways or ladders that could take him up to the upper wall on foot.

After ten more frustrating minutes of getting nowhere, Jellal decided on an alternative route. He discreetly moved towards one of the rectangular openings that served as windows to allow natural light and cool, mountain air into the corridors. The opening was too high to reach for regular folk, but fortunately for Jellal, a single hop was all he needed.

Making sure no one was watching, he bounded onto the window ledge and leapt out. He was greeted by the sun in his eyes and gravity. But before he could plummet to the earth waiting fifty meters below, he activated Meteor to take him skyward.

Bathed in golden light, Jellal soared like a fired bullet towards his destination, making sure to keep his flight path out of the line of sight. He circled the outer perimeter of Domus Flau until he reached the giant statue of the female mage known only in legends.

He spotted someone standing near the edge, overlooking the stadium and arena.

Softly, Jellal landed a safe distance away behind the stranger who possessed the weak aura of Zeref. He studied the person carefully, seeing a mantle made of large, pure white feathers draping down the person's back, the frayed, tapered ends lightly brushing against the floor, and a long, floppy green hat upon the individual's head. Both visible articles of clothing moved with the gentle wind that was blowing by. The person was armed; the long, cobalt hilt of a large sword strapped to the individual's back was visible.

"Master Jellal Fernades," the cloaked figure suddenly greeted. The stranger had the voice of a young man and it sounded slightly muffled as if speaking behind a mask.

Jellal tensed in alarm from hearing his name. He fell into a defensive posture, thinking the man an enemy, but the stranger made no move.
Jellal narrowed his gaze warily. "You were expecting me?" he inquired, keeping his tone firm to hide his surprise.

"I just had a feeling you would find me," the young man replied. Slowly, he turned to face Jellal.

The mage of Crime Sorcière slightly raised his brow. The stranger really was wearing a mask; bright yellow and carved into the smiling face of a fox that had narrow, diagonal slits for eyes. However, it wasn't the mask that caught Jellal's attention most; it was the man's ears which were long and pointed.

Who was this person? Could he truly be the Black Wizard Zeref? The dark aura Jellal could sense on the masked man did not compare in level to the entity the mage had detected in the past years. It was so faint; only a trace and nothing more. Only skilled sensory-type mages like Jellal could ever pick it out amongst the rest of the magical powers dominating the stadium.

"Worry not. I am not your enemy," the man assured when he noticed Jellal's stiff and cautious stance.

"How am I to believe you?"

"Why don't you ask Meredy whether or not to trust me?"

The question stunned the mage. How could this man know of Meredy let alone her affiliation with Jellal? The three members of Crime Sorcière had never shown their identities to anyone with the exception of Fairy Tail.

"Meredy! This man… do you two see him?" he asked the girl telepathically for confirmation.

"Yeah, we got a visual on him on Ultear's crystal," Meredy replied.

"He tells me he is not an enemy. Is he telling the truth?"

It took a few seconds before she replied hesitantly, "He's not lying… I don't sense any hostility coming from him… more like…"

"What? What is it?"

"Happiness… He's really happy to see you… Feels like he's never seen you in a long time? What is going on here? You know this guy?"

Jellal blinked in confusion before hardening his gaze. "Who are you?" he demanded, keeping his guard up. If the stranger knew of Meredy and her powers, then it was likely he knew how to trick her as well.

"I am a friend. You can call me Keaton," the man replied, unfazed by the mage's angry tone.

"Keaton?" Jellal snorted. He did not believe it was the man's real name. "Why hide your identity?"

"The same reason you hide yours."

Jellal grunted. His suspicions continued to grow. "How do you know about us? Have we met before?"

The other nodded, the action shaking loose a few blond hairs that had previously been tucked behind his long ears. "You have already met me once, Master Jellal. It wasn't too long ago, if I remember
correctly."

Jellal deeply furrowed his brow. He couldn't recall ever meeting this man before. He thought back at what Meredy had mentioned, still not able to comprehend the meaning behind the man's emotions. It was hard to fool Meredy – Jellal had tried on many occasions and was never successful. He couldn't quite figure out why the man would entitle him 'Master' either. That title had been abandoned ever since his defeat in the Tower of Heaven – he had no minions, servants, or followers anymore; only enemies and a select few allies.

"Why call me 'master'? I am a master of no one," Jellal stated fervently.

Keaton slightly bowed his head. "I call you 'master'… out of respect. One day you will understand… but that is only if history is allowed to repeat itself." He turned sideways to glance down at the battle that was still ongoing.

Jellal doubted the masked man could see very much from this height, however the voices of the excited announcers over the roar of the stadium narrated what was happening between Wendy and Chelia. It sounded like the two girls were an even match.

Jellal was even more confounded than before by Keaton's last statement. He was about to demand a clearer answer only to pause when the young man continued.

"A terrible calamity will befall this city in four days," said Keaton, his tone quiet and barely audible over the noise down below.

Jellal's expression darkened. He clenched his hands by his sides, infusing them with magic to prepare an attack that he might need depending on the stranger's answer to his following question; "And will it be your doing?"

The masked man shook his head and turned to face the other once more. "No, I am here to prevent it, to save everyone," he stated firmly, his voice bold and sincere.

Shocked, Jellal dispelled his magic and straightened. "Prevent it? How do you know what will happen? Are you a fortune teller? A seer?"

"Neither. I know, because I am a survivor of that day…" He began to walk forward, his movements deliberately slow to prove he meant no harm in his approach. "Before the day of the final ceremony, there will be a lunar eclipse. That is when Crocus will fall under attack by ten thousand dragons. That day will be known as The Festival of Dragons and will mark the beginning of the end of humanity." He stopped an arm's length away from Jellal who stood stunned by this sudden new information.

"Have you finally figured it out yet, Master Jellal? I am from the future. Seven years to be exact."

The mage stared in disbelief. "The future?" Jellal exclaimed before slowly shaking his head. "How do I know… you're not lying?"

"The sun rises in the south."

Jellet's eyes widened. It was just recently that Meredy had made up the code… His first thought was that Keaton could read minds, but if that was the case, Jellal would have known instantly if the other pried into his thoughts.

He then saw the colour of Keaton's eyes through the narrow slits of his mask. They were blue, just like the sky above. Jellal began to piece everything together.
Blue eyes. Blond hair. Long pointy ears. And a swordsman. There was only one person Jellal knew who had the same characteristics.

"Bacon…" Jellal finally realized. He was speechless. He could only gawk, silently thankful that he wore a mask to hide most of his expression.

"Bacon." Keaton quietly chuckled. "How nostalgic…” He parted his cloak, revealing a long, green tunic underneath and straps of leather that held his large sword, quiver, and numerous knives. Belted by his right hip was a shorter blade and on his left, a worn out pouch still in use and an iron ring with a set of keys that resembled Celestial Spirit keys in both shape and size; two gold and one silver. Gauntlets covered his arms, plated silvery-white and trimmed with snowy feathers down the outer edges. His pants were beige and his boots were black leather and armoured with the same silver-white plating as his gauntlets.

He reached up and removed his mask, pushing it up to rest it on top of his head, to show a face aged and marred by battle. An old wound ran diagonally from his right brow down to his right cheek, the flesh scabbed and would eventually turn into an ugly scar like the one that marked the left side of his chin.

The curious little boy Jellal remembered was now seven years older and an adult. Keaton was still young, only a teenager, but his eyes alone told of an age beyond his years. He was battle-weary, evident by the exhaustion on his face.

There were hundreds of questions Jellal was eager to ask. The first one that escaped his lips was, "Do you remember your past?"

Keaton nodded, his head downcast. "Yes. But I remembered seven years too late… Everyone I had loved, everyone I had considered family… They all died before I remembered what I was destined to do. I was too late to protect anyone… However…” He met Jellel's gaze, his grief turning into ambition. "It was my fate to endure. I have walked the path of loss and despair. Now I am here to walk the path of life and hope.

"Master Jellal, I have come here to change Earthland's future. But I know I cannot do it alone. Hidden in the underground chambers of Castle Mercurius is a magical door known as the Eclipse Gate. It is a gateway through time."

"So you have used it to come here," Jellal concluded.

"That is correct."

Jellal turned away to look in the direction of the castle, seeing only its golden points in the distant city below the mountain of Domus Flau. "Why does the King of Fiore have a need for it?" he inquired, feeling nothing but dread. To travel through time… it was a very dangerous ability that could alter the course of history forever if misused…

"I do not know. And it should not exist," Keaton growled. He left Jellal to walk back to the ledge. It sounded like the battle between Wendy and Chelia was reaching a climax.

The mage moved to stand beside him, however he couldn't make heads or tails who the little dots moving on the battleground were. Jellal said nothing, needing a moment for the truth to sink in as well as giving Keaton some time.

Jellal glanced sideways at the swordsman who watched the distant battle with a fond smile. The boy had grown up without Wendy, there was no mistaking it. It made Jellal wonder who else survived in
the young man's timeline. Did all of Fairy Tail perish? Or were there other survivors just like him?

Against an army of ten thousand dragons… the chances of survival was close to zero.

"These dragons you have mentioned," Jellal began.

"They came from the Eclipse Gate as well," Keaton murmured, keeping his eyes on the battleground. "They were summoned from the past to the present and brought under complete control by an evil man. Who could this man be? I have yet to search for an answer because… I wanted to see everyone again the instant I arrived to this time."

"A single man can control ten thousand dragons?" Jellal exclaimed, aghast.

"It's what I have been told…"

"By whom?"

Keaton didn't answer right away. They listened as the announcer, Chapati, screamed out the outcome of the battle with great enthusiasm. Wendy's and Chelia's fight had ended in a draw and it didn't sound like a big disappointment for the fans, but the complete opposite. The whole stadium was roaring and Jellal was certain he could feel the stone under his feet tremble from the volume of the spectators' collective voices.

Once the stadium had somewhat calmed down to hear the contestants for the next round, Keaton turned to Jellal. "It was the black dragon, Acnologia."

"Him?!" Jellal didn't bother to lower his voice because no one but Keaton could hear him anyway. "He… spoke to you?"

"He mocked us and called us fools… He… It was only a month ago that we hunted him down and fought him – a small handful of us."

"Was I… there as well?"

Keaton sadly shook his head and avoided the other's gaze. "No, you and Meredy were killed within the third year… and the deaths never stopped there. In the end, by the seventh year, there were only six of us left. We were the last remaining mages in all of Fiore; we had nothing left to lose.

"We had believed Acnologia, as their King, was the one controlling all the other dragons. By defeating him, we thought we could break the spell and somehow find peace with the rest of the dragons. But we were wrong… He too was being controlled by another. Before he drew his last breath, he spoke of a powerful man who was more demon than human and whose name he did not know.

"My assumption is whoever had built the Eclipse Gate is the one behind it all."

"The King of Fiore?" was Jellal's wild guess. His mind was still grappling with the fact that the boy before him had slain the fearsome black dragon, Acnologia – the same dragon who nearly annihilated most of Fairy Tail on Tenrou Island. It was an astonishing feat, beyond Jellal's expectations, and yet the swordsman did not speak proudly of it. 'A small handful' fought the powerful beast, but only Keaton was here to tell the tale…

The swordsman shifted his gaze to the Royal Platform where the King and Princess were situated in the stadium, constantly guarded by the Holy Knights.
"No," he replied. He clenched an armoured hand before him and furrowed his brow. "A dark power controls the door. You can sense the energy lingering on me. It is Zeref's power, but it was not Zeref himself who controlled the dragons. Acnologia was adamant of that.

"Master Lucy and I had tried to uncover who it could be, but we lost faith in saving what remained of Fiore. There was no reason to fight anymore, all our loved ones were dead and the army of dragons was never-ending, we were ready to give up. But then we remembered the Eclipse Gate Acnologia had mentioned and decided to find it and use it to bring back hope for our future."

Keaton paused and drew a slow deep breath as he gazed towards the horizon where the mountain range met the sky. His hand fell on the small ring of keys by his side. "Master Lucy… she would have been here too, but the Gate only had enough magic power to send one person. I didn't know… and I had gone first… and now she's…"

He abruptly shook his head and focused on Jellal once more, his eyes red and teary but also steadfast. "This is where I must ask for your help. The destruction of the Gate should be our prime objective; without it, the dragons can never be summoned. However, the Gate is as sturdy as a mountain and made of a special material that absorbs all forms of magic. I am powerless against it."

"If magic is useless against it, there is little I can do," Jellal pointed out. "I suggest we find the one behind all of this." He had a strong feeling the source of the dark entity he had been tracking over the past few years was because of this mysterious man.

"We risk never being able to find this man before it's too late. We need a backup plan."

Jellal crossed his arms, but nodded in agreement. "Then I'll have to investigate the doors to find out what I can do about it. Where are they?"

"I can show you," Keaton offered an armoured hand. "With most of the knights protecting their King and Princess, the castle is not heavily guarded at the moment."

Jellal raised a questioning eyebrow because he wasn't sure why he needed to hold the other's hand.

"It'll be faster if we warp there," Keaton told him, answering Jellal's unspoken question.

"Wait, you can teleport?" Jellal stared in surprise.

The young man grinned. "I remember everything, remember?" He quietly laughed, which seemed to erase the exhaustion and sadness that had plagued him previously, reminding Jellal of the happy boy Keaton used to be.

Jellal smirked and grasped the teenager's hand firmly in his. He sensed the swordsman's unique power, stronger than when he was a boy by more than tenfold, which was not a surprise. The young warrior had to grow up in a dangerous world overrun by mind-controlled dragons after all. Only the strong and brave would ever survive such a cruel place.

It made Jellal wonder what sort of skills and magic the swordsman knew and learned. Dragon Slaying perhaps? How else could he have defeated the likes of Acnologia? But the boy lacked the fangs that usually defined a mage as a Dragon Slayer. And in a world ruled by enslaved dragons, it was very unlikely that one would teach him the magic.

Was his unique form of magic effective against dragons? Or did he learn something new that gave him an advantage over the powerful beasts?

Jellal thought better not to ask but to observe instead. "If you remember everything, then what is your
true name?" the mage asked out of curiosity.

"Link," the other replied as he slipped his fox mask back on. "But Keaton is more… meaningful to me."

Jellal tensed the instant he felt the teen's magic flare up, charging the surrounding air with an electrifying sensation. The wind suddenly picked up, turning from a breeze to a gust in a blink of an eye, making their cloaks snap in all directions. As the swordsman's magic grew, his body began to glow with a soft green aura.

"Hold on tight," said Keaton, giving Jellal's hand a tight squeeze.

The last thing the mage of Crime Sorcière saw was the swordsman's smiling mask before he was swallowed in bright, green light.
Wendy tried her best not to giggle at Bacon's crude drawing of a pointy-eared dog. With his new bright yellow Light Pen, the boy put a crooked smile and diagonal slits for eyes on the image floating above his half-eaten breakfast. Seated around the same table was Carla, Romeo, and Wendy's team and all were watching in amusement as Bacon attempted to draw what he saw in his dreams.

They were currently in Sunny Crack-us, a popular restaurant best known for their breakfast omelets (according to their outdoor sign), along with the rest of the guild. Even though it was a quarter after nine in the morning, the large restaurant was packed with people and super busy. It wasn't just Fairy Tail occupying the many tables, there were a number of normal customers and a few other guilds as well. Wendy had waved at Chelia and her teammates in the far corner when Fairy Tail had just arrived. Blue Pegasus had also been spotted in another corner, with the men flirting with and charming the waitresses.

In spite of last night's disastrous incident at Ryuzetsu Land, (involving ice mages freezing the entire pool and an outraged Fire Dragon Slayer demolishing the place in a failed attempt to melt the ice – which resulted in another massive bill for Fairy Tail), there was no tension between any of the guilds here, only friendly rivalries, respect for fellow mages and even some admiration between each member present. They were among friends, both old and new, and acquaintances. The real competition didn't start until the Games began at two in the afternoon.

"So this is Keaton?" Wendy asked the moment Bacon capped his pen.

The boy frowned at his own creation and pouted, obviously not satisfied at how his picture turned out. "No..." he murmured and quickly erased the glowing image by swiping his hand through the magic light. His smiling dog dissipated into glittering yellow dust that disappeared in midair. He tried drawing it again but the end result was still not how he imagined it. He grunted in frustration at the distorted dog head hovering in front of his face.

Taking notice of Bacon's struggle, Reedus, seated at the table right next to Wendy's, called the boy over. "Perhaps I can assist you, Bacon!" he said with a hearty chuckle as he brought out his magic paint and brush. "Tell me what your friend looks like and I'll paint a picture for you!"

Elated, Bacon left the table and sprinted over to Reedus to describe the dog he had dreamt about.

Wendy smiled, but that smile soon faded when her eyes fell on the pad of paper that was Bacon's dream journal that Romeo had been keeping for the other boy. She reread the latest entry that detailed the same dream involving the talking three-tailed dog named Keaton, a Dracotongue-speaking dragon, and an evil Dragon Slayer.

When Romeo had spoken about it to Wendy yesterday over breakfast, the mere utter of 'dragon' had caught the interest of almost every Dragon Slayer in Fairy Tail. But the dragon Bacon had seen was
only a figment of his dreams. Nothing more could be concluded from that. The same could be said about the evil Dragon Slayer.

Romeo suspected that Bacon's reoccurring nightmare was no mere dream but a memory and he wasn't alone in his suspicion. However, others, including Wendy and Carla, believed that Bacon's dreams were only because of the Dreamstone he wore. Dreams were not true; one could have a dream about anything, even about people that have never been met or about incidents that had never happened.

Wendy had experienced a number of bizarre dreams in her lifetime. But none had ever made her wake up shaken and drenched in sweat as has been the case for Bacon more than once.

*Dreams... That's all they are...* she mentally grumbled to assure herself that she was right. After all, Bacon didn't only just have the same dream. His second entry mentioned talking glowbugs and big, rock-eating rock-monster people who called him 'brother'. A silly dream.

But a part of her did want to believe that Bacon's dreams were fragments of his memory. How else could he have heard the ancient words spoken in the forgotten language of dragons? And if it was all true, then who could this evil Dragon Slayer be? And could he be the one responsible for injuring Bacon in the mysterious lost temple?

Having no answer, she sighed and flipped back to the first entry and returned the journal to Romeo.

"I'm thinking of buying a real journal for Bacon before we head to Domus Flau," said Romeo as he sent the pad away in his storage dimension.

Wendy nodded at Romeo's suggestion and continued to finish her meal. "That would be nice," she said, her smile returning as she glanced at Bacon's crude drawing still floating in the air.

Carla, sitting atop the table nearby, followed the girl's gaze as she nibbled on her sausage. Unlike Happy who was devouring his plate of bacon and sausage as if it was his last meal, the white cat ate at a more sophisticated manner. "Keeping a proper written record of Bacon's dreams may help him cope with his nightmares," the Exceed remarked.

Romeo yawned and rubbed his tired eyes. He had another sleepless night thanks to Bacon, but he had yet to complain. "He says he feels better after talking to me about his dreams so I think it really helps," he said before taking a bite of his buttered toast.

"Hey, Erza, something wrong?" Wendy heard Lucy suddenly ask beside her.

Everyone at the table turned to the scarlet-haired warrioress who had barely touched her food. Erza quietly snorted at the sudden attention of her teammates and everyone else at the table.

"I was wondering where..." she paused and carefully looked around. She lowered her voice; "Where 'Mystogan' has gone. I haven't heard from him yesterday and it doesn't look like he's around this morning either. Usually he would keep me informed on the 'situation'."

"He's probably being careful," suggested Gray who was now suddenly lacking a shirt (and it wouldn't be a surprise if he wasn't wearing any pants either). He was seated across from Wendy and yet the girl hadn't noticed when he had taken his clothes off. But then again, the change always seemed instantaneous with the Ice Make mage. Not realizing he was half-naked, Gray casually poked his fork into his omelet and continued, "The Magic Council's still around. Best for him to lay low."

"Yeah. Don't want him to get in trouble," Natsu muttered between bites of his food. Happy nodded
vigorously in agreement, his cheeks stuffed with meat.

"I suppose that's likely the case," Erza conceded with a shrug. Before she could start eating, there were sounds of awe and clapping coming from some of the tables around them.

All eyes were on the creature that Reedus had brought to life with his magic. There was a large dog now occupying the walkway, covered in yellow, white, and black fur. Keaton was not how Wendy had imagined because it resembled a fox more than a dog with its three tails thick and bushy and its black-tipped ears long and pointy. Its eyes were narrow slits to match the cunning smile it wore. It moved like a living animal, its ears twitching and its nose sniffing as it briefly padded around before sitting on its haunches before Bacon, standing as tall as the boy.

Even though Wendy couldn't see Bacon's expression hidden under his hood, she could tell the boy was very impressed by Reedus's version of Keaton. Every curious person in the restaurant had paused in what they were doing to take a quick look at the large fox blocking the walkway, its three tails gently swaying to and fro. Asuka squealed with joy and ran up to the animal to pet its fur, prompting Bacon to tentatively reach out to touch it as well.

"Isn't that cute, Carla?" asked Wendy. She didn't hear a reply from her feline friend. She looked over at Carla and found the cat frozen, her brown eyes wide and staring at Keaton in shock.

Out of concern, Wendy leaned over and whispered discreetly in her partner's ear, "What's wrong?"

Carla slightly jumped and quickly shook her head. "Nothing," was her abrupt answer, making the Dragon Slayer not believe her.

Wendy's gaze shifted from the yellow fox and Bacon and back to Carla. "Something's been bothering you lately," Wendy noted, reaching over to scratch her friend between the ears. "What is it? You can tell me."

Carla stubbornly shook her head again. "It's nothing to be worried about, Wendy," she stated firmly which was another way of saying that she was not willing to tell Wendy anything.

Wendy had tried to find out what was on Carla's mind over the past few days, but the feline kept refusing to share. Knowing it was useless to pry, Wendy went back to finishing her breakfast that was starting to get cold.

"Bacon, come back here and eat your food," she called the instant Reedus's spell began to wear off. The three-tailed fox turned transparent and wispy before disappearing completely, much to the children's disappointment.

Natsu snickered and teased over his shoulder, "Bacon! Bacon! If you don't hurry, I'll eat your bacon!"

But the boy didn't listen to either of them for he was busy asking Reedus to draw something else.

Wendy heard the word 'dragon' and that pricked almost every Dragon Slayer's ears. Natsu's teasing grin vanished, his attention now fully on the boy and Reedus. In the corner of Wendy's eye, she noticed Gajeel turning around in his chair to observe as well.

"You guys alright?" Lucy questioned her teammates.

"Reedus is going to draw the dragon Bacon saw," replied Natsu in anticipation.

"He didn't see it, he dreamt it," Wendy clarified.
Natsu met her stare. "He saw it. I know he did."

The girl pursed her lips. "How can you be so sure?"

"Because I agree with Romeo. Bacon couldn't have made up all that Dracotongue stuff. You've never heard it before and neither have I. And I doubt Gajeel knows anything about it either. So how can Bacon suddenly dream about an ancient dragon language that none of us know about?"

Wendy frowned at that. It was the same argument she had with Romeo yesterday. "Then what about the evil Dragon Slayer who killed the dragon and tried to kill Bacon too? Do you think he's real as well?" she argued.

Natsu furrowed his brow and narrowed his eyes in anger; directing his hatred not at her but at the person who may or may not exist. "That I don't know… But if he is the one who left the kid for dead, I'll find him and make sure to make him pay a hundred fold."

It was at that time that Reedus applied the last stroke to his painting on the back of his hand. With a wave of his brush and the simple chant, he brought his art to life in a dazzling flash of colours.

Wendy held her breath when a miniature dragon covered in shiny silver scales took flight on a pair of magnificent webbed wings. It had a long neck and large golden horns shaped like antlers that appeared to be tangled with vines. Most unusual were its eyes; it had three of them and each shone as bright as moons. It circled once above Fairy Tail's heads, drawing awes and excited screams from every child in the building, before landing on the floor in front of Bacon with an audible thud. It reared its head high to stand only a head taller than the boy. However, Bacon was clearly disappointed in its size by commenting on how small it was.

"I can't make him too big," was Reedus's reply. "He wouldn't fit in here and he might scare everyone!"

The boy nodded in understanding. Asuka was just as happy to pet the winged lizard, however Bacon didn't follow her lead. Instead, he met the dragon's lunar eyes and quietly stared.

Wendy exchanged a look with Natsu and Gajeel; each Dragon Slayer silently telling the others that this silver dragon was not their parent. It was one they did not recognize and there was a small sense of relief in knowing that.

If it had been Grandeeney, Igneel, or Metalicana, then that would imply that Bacon's dream truly happened and the fate of one of their dragons would be answered…

Just like Keaton, the dragon's form began to fade as Reedus's spell was coming to an end. That was when Bacon reached up towards the dragon's face only to touch nothing but air.

Again, Asuka was sad when Reedus's creation disappeared. "Aw, it's gone," she murmured with an adorable pout. When she looked over at Bacon, her expression became worried. "Are you okay?" she asked the older boy.

The question made Wendy leave her seat and rush over to Bacon's side. His head was downcast, most of his features hidden in shadow. All Wendy saw the moment she reached him was his unhappy frown. "What's wrong, Bacon?" she quietly asked as she gripped his shoulder.

He raised his head towards her and Wendy was surprised to see his blue eyes glistening with tears. "They're gone…" he whispered.

"That's because the magic--"
"They died... I couldn't save them..."

"What? No..." Wendy embraced him and hushed in his ear to console him, not caring that everyone was watching. "It's okay..."

It was all a dream, she wanted to add to assure him, but she wasn't sure if it was only a dream anymore.

"So what did you dream about this time, brother?"

"It was a good dream this time. The Grand Magic Games. Do you remember – when was it? On the fourth day? The tag team battle... I had a dream about that."

"Oh yeah! I can still remember that day. Natsu and Gajeel versus Sting and Rouge – man, they totally wrecked the arena! Haha! That was such an awesome fight! The stadium kept shaking and people were screaming and panicking but also cheering at the same time. Hell, I remember my throat being so sore from all the yelling I did when Natsu won."

"It was pretty... uh, what was that one word you used to describe it again?"

"Epic?"

"Yeah... epic. I want to go back and relive that moment again. To be with everyone... We were with them in my dream: Dad, Uncle Wakaba, Aunt Cana, Aunt Mirajane, little Asuka, the old master, Levy, Jet and Droy too..."

"I miss Dad... I miss everyone..."

"Wendy wasn't there though... Haven't dreamt of her for a while. I'm afraid I'm forgetting what she looked like..."

"Yeah... Hard to remember faces... How many years has it been?"

"Six? Seven? It's been too long."

"Funny how we're still alive. Thought we'd be dead by now."

"You're putting Fairy Tail's pride to shame. 'Gotta keep living to fight another day.' Isn't that something Natsu once said to you?"

"Yeah. I've lived by it to this day. And passed it onto you. But... we can't keep fighting this losing battle forever..."

"On that day, when Natsu had won against Sting and Rouge on his own, I saw what power and determination truly meant. Even though the odds are against us--"

"We mustn't give up. I know, I know. But sometimes... Sometimes... it's just too hard to not give up especially when there's little hope left for us."

"We'll find hope someday..."

"Someday... That sounds like a long time from now... It could even be never... It'll be morning in a couple more hours, brother. It's your turn to watch. Don't forget to update your journal."
The tag team battle between the Dragon Slayers of Sabertooth and Fairy Tail; it was the most 'epic' clash the Grand Magic Games had ever witnessed, according to Romeo. Intense; chaotic; insane; awesome – those were some of the many words that described the amazing event amongst the chatter that had taken place in the infirmary.

Bacon didn't experience the battle in the crowded stadium but had watched the entire earth-shaking duel on the Lacrima vision in the infirmary alongside Wendy, Carla, Porlyusica, Lucy, Elfman, and three of the four members of the Thunder God Tribe: Freed, Evergreen, and Bickslow.

Lucy was seriously injured in the Naval Battle event because of Sabertooth's Minerva Orlando and after she was rushed to the infirmary, Bacon had tagged along with Master Makarov to join up with Wendy. Not only did he wish to see Lucy out of concern, but to also tell Wendy about Minerva – the woman was the other person on the bridge on the night they visited the castle. The boy was certain of it after hearing the woman's familiar voice when she had humiliated Lucy within the watery sphere suspended in midair.

When Fairy Tail had learned of this, the newly reformed team became even more determined to defeat Sabertooth in the Grand Magic Games. And the end result was the triumphant victory for Team Fairy Tail in the most anticipated portion of today's Games.

Shadow Gear and Romeo were the first to enter the infirmary to share the glory. It was less than an hour later before Natsu, Happy, Gray, Erza, and Pantherlily had arrived to join in the celebration and surprisingly, Porlyusica did not object to the growing crowd and noise. Bacon had caught the old woman's proud smile as she quietly observed from her seat between Lucy's and Elfman's beds.

Bacon couldn't feel any happier than the rest of the guild for Natsu and Gajeel (who was still currently missing). The joyous moment made him forget about the sadness he had felt that morning.

The young swordsman stood beside Romeo who loved to praise the Fire Dragon Slayer. "You're so strong, Natsu!"

Natsu grinned and puffed out his bare chest with great pride. "Of course I am! I hafta be to protect my friends," he said, glancing in Lucy's direction. She and the other females were conversing around the Celestial Spirit mage's bed. Seeing her pretty much back on her feet thanks to Porlyusica's care, Natsu was clearly relieved.

Natsu pounded a fist over his heart and looked between Bacon and Romeo who both stared with admiration. "One day, you guys will become just as strong too. As long as you strive to protect what's most important to you, there's no stopping what you can do. Got that?"

The boys nodded.

It was another hour later when someone barged right into the room screaming Natsu's guild name, giving everyone quite a start. It was Gajeel, covered in dirt and scratches, and he was extremely angry at Natsu, evident by his fearsome scowl on his iron-studded face, his glaring red eyes, and his bared teeth; every tooth sharp and deadly. He noisily stomped towards the Fire Dragon Slayer, forcing everyone to get out of the way without question.

Romeo had to drag Bacon aside to avoid getting trampled by the livid mage.

Natsu simply snorted and mocked with a sneer, "Finally found your way back? Did ya get lost?"

The bigger Dragon Slayer snatched the front of Natsu's scarf then slammed his forehead hard against Natsu's which did little to make the fire mage flinch.
Natsu met Gajeel's fierce glower evenly, his sneer even wider on his lips.

"You goddamn son of a bitch!" Gajeel snarled vehemently in the other's face. "What the hell?! What made you think that I didn't want to beat the living shit out of those cocky bastards?! Huh?!! How 'bout I throw your bony ass on a freaking mine cart?! See how you like it!"

Curious, Bacon turned to Romeo and asked, "What is a 'living shit'?"

Romeo scratched the back of his head and mumbled over Natsu's snide retort, "Uh… It's… It's a different way of saying… Actually, you shouldn't worry about it. It's not important to know."

Bacon turned back to the argument. Natsu had boasted about his victory which aggravated the other Dragon Slayer even further. In retaliation, Gajeel growled out a bunch of words Bacon had heard a few times being exchanged around the guild during heated fights between members but never really understood them. Again to Romeo, he asked, "What does 'fu–'" Romeo slapped a hand over his mouth before he could finish.

"That is a bad word you shouldn't say out loud," said Romeo with a sheepish smile as he pulled back his hand. "Dad wouldn't be too happy to hear you saying it. I don't think Wendy would like it either."

Bacon pointed at the two male Dragon Slayers who were now tussling on the floor and trading iron and flaming fists, flying into furniture and smashing a few things to pieces, much to Porlyusica's annoyance. "How come they are saying it?" Bacon asked, confused.

"Uh… because… they're adults? Yeah, they're adults. Only grown-ups can say it," was Romeo's explanation.

Bacon blinked in surprise. "Only grown-ups? Oh, okay."

It wasn't long until Porlyusica got fed up with the fighting Dragon Slayers making a big mess of her temporary room. With a mop in hand, she single-handedly broke the pair apart and kicked them right out the door of the infirmary. Everyone was ordered to leave right after, including Lucy and Elfman. Elfman had just fully recovered and Lucy, still patched up with bandages, was well enough to walk.

"Unless you're dying, you two are not allowed in here ever again!" the Medicinal Advisor commanded Natsu and Gajeel who were both lying on the floor groaning in pain. She slammed the door shut right after and Bacon could hear her grumbling to herself on the other side.

"Old hag…" Natsu muttered under his breath as he rubbed the new bump on his head.

"Damn, she hits hard for an old crone," Gajeel grumbled, massaging the side of his face where he was struck with the handle of Porlyusica's mop.

Lucy and Levy stood over the two men, hands on their hips and smug smiles on their faces. "You guys deserved it," said Lucy and Levy nodded in agreement.

"By the way, Gajeel," Levy began, "Where did you end up on the mine cart? I was afraid you got lost in the old ruins under the arena."

Gajeel snorted as he sat up, his disgruntled expression replaced with seriousness. "I discovered something that you guys should see," he answered, looking between Natsu and Wendy before his crimson eyes found Bacon. "Hey, runt, you need to see it too."

The boy tilted his head questionably while Wendy raised her brow. "Why? What did you find?" the
girl inquired curiously.

Gajeel stood up and dusted off is clothes. "Better if I show it to you. Follow me." He started to walk down the corridor only to pause when he heard Natsu's stomach growl.

Everyone's attention fell on Natsu who chuckled sheepishly. "How about a bite to eat first? All that fighting made me hungry!" he said.

For some reason the comment riled Gajeel but he didn't say no to the suggestion because his stomach began to make loud hungry noises too. Slightly embarrassed, he twisted around on his heel and started to head the other way. "Fine. Let's just grab something at the concession," he snarled, throwing his hands in the air in exasperation.

"I don't think they're still open," said Pantherlily, shaking his head.

Gajeel sighed and snarled the bad word.

The group travelled back into the lower city and stopped at the closest restaurant. After a quick meal of burgers and fries, the three Dragon Slayers, the three Exceeds, and Bacon began their trek towards the foot of the mountain that held Domus Flau at its peak. Romeo, Lucy, and Gray had tagged along as well mostly out of curiosity while the others stayed in the city to inform the rest of the guild where everyone else had gone.

With Gajeel in the lead, he guided his guild mates off the main mountain path and took the skinnier road that rounded the mountain.

As they passed through the quiet residential area, Romeo whispered to Wendy, "What do you think it could be? Something related to dragons maybe? Is that why he wanted Bacon to come too?"

The youngest perked at the sound of his name and glanced between Wendy and Romeo who were walking on either side of him. The three of them were at the back of the group, strolling behind the felines. Ahead of the Exceeds were Lucy, Natsu, and Gray, and alone in the front was Gajeel.

Wendy's slight frown was visible under the street lamps that had just turned on a moment ago. "I'm not really sure," she answered quietly, giving Bacon a little smile when she met his gaze. To Romeo, she continued, "Gajeel isn't saying anything, but... I have a feeling it might be related to our dragons..."


The remark didn't go unnoticed by the Iron Dragon Slayer. He glared at Natsu over his shoulder and snapped, "You shut the hell up. I'm telling ya, it'd be better if I show it to you. Now, hurry up!" He increased his pace, making everyone jog right after his long, hasty strides.

"Hey! Not so fast!" Lucy demanded, struggling to keep up due to her injuries.

Gajeel grunted in annoyance and grudgingly slowed back down.

It was nightfall by the time Gajeel had found the small opening in the side of the mountain that was hidden well under shadow and behind some large bushes. The group had to leave the man-made road and enter the thin cover of trees and vegetation before climbing a few craggy slopes to reach it.

The hole was tall enough for Bacon and the Exceeds to simply walk through; everyone else needed
to duck or crouch in order to get in. It was pitch black within the cave until Natsu and Romeo ignited
their hands with bright orange flames. Their magic chased away the darkness and revealed all that
was hidden within the vast cavern of the mountain.

Bacon’s attention was attracted to the many pointy rocks hanging from the ceiling that resembled the
sharp teeth of giant stone monsters. There were pointy rock formations all over on the ground too,
casting long shadows that danced with the flickering fires. Yellow mushrooms sprouted in the soft
dirt closest to the entrance, both small and large and dotted with red. The smell of dank earth was
strong here and the air cooler, chilling the boy’s skin.

Bacon stayed close to Romeo for warmth as they followed Gajeel across the uneven terrain.
Numerous times Wendy had warned Bacon not to trip so he made sure to proceed carefully while
she guided him by the hand. Their journey within the cavern was quiet, the silence disturbed only by
their scuffling feet.

It felt almost like an hour until Gajeel found what he was looking for. Bacon stopped a second before
walking right into Wendy who had suddenly froze in place at the scene before them. There were
massive bones lying on the ground throughout the large cavern; dusty, moss-covered, cobwebbed
skeletons of enormous creatures that were once larger than average buildings alongside the old,
decayed trunks of giant trees. Their giant skulls bared rows of pointed, rotten teeth and their hollow
black eyes stared silently at nothing. Some had horns upon their heads, curved, straight, twisted, or
broken, and claws that were as large as Bacon. Shifting shadows made the skeletons appear almost
alive, bringing a sense of unease upon the group.

There were many colourful, fascinating mushrooms growing here, ranging from tiny to monstrous in
size, growing on the ancient, mossy wood and sprouting between the bones of the dead creatures.
They were luminescent, glowing in the dark in a variety of colours and shedding glittering spores.
Blue, purple, yellow, green, and pink; the cavern would have felt like a magical place if it were not
for the creepy bones lying around.

With enough natural light to illuminate the area, Romeo and Natsu dispersed their fires.

"Dragons…” Wendy whispered as she covered her mouth, aghast at the remains that haunted the
cavern. "This is a graveyard for dragons…”

"Dragons?” Bacon questioned, looking at each bony creature. There were too many to count. He
didn't recognize them as dragons however, because the dragon Reedus had drawn was covered in
shiny scales and had three eyes that shone like moons. All he saw were a bunch of old bones
decorated with mushrooms.

"What is this place? Are these really all dragons?” Gray asked, turning to Gajeel.

The Iron Dragon Slayer crossed his arms and hardened his gaze at the lifeless skeletons. "This place?
No idea," he replied in a somber tone. "These were once all dragons and now they're all dead."

"This is proof that dragons truly existed…” stated Pantherlily, just as surprised as his fellow Exceeds.

"What could've happened here?” Lucy wondered.

Happy padded up to Natsu and looked up at his friend with grief. "Do you think Igneel—"

"No," Natsu sharply cut Happy off with an abrupt shake of his head. Eyes fixated on the dead
creatures, his expression darkened. "He's not here. None of our dragons are.”

"Our dragons disappeared fourteen years ago," Gajeel started to explain. "These ones are from
ancient times."

"Ancient…” Bacon heard Wendy whisper. He turned to her and saw her furrow her brow in deep thought.

Her face brightened when she finally realized something. "I see now… Milky Way," she said, gathering everyone's attention.

Lucy raised an eyebrow at her. "What was that, Wendy?" she asked.

Wendy picked up a nearby dusty old stick and moved to stand on a relatively flat part of the ground. "Milky Way," she began as she started to draw a large circle into the soft dirt, "it's one of Grandeeney's Secret Arts that I've been trying to learn. I couldn't figure out how to use it before however, because I thought it was an attack spell." She drew a slightly smaller circle within the larger one followed by two even smaller circles within the center. Then she began to scratch in runes between the lines. "'Listen to the voices of the dragons connected to the river in the sky' was the description of the spell Mother had left for me. I think I understand what it means now."

"Eh? What are you doing?" Natsu inquired, getting confused at her explanation.

"It's a magic circle," Romeo pointed out.

Natsu snorted. "I can see that. But why?"

Wendy continued to write in the dirt as she continued, "I think Milky Way is a spell that can be used to listen to the voices of dragons that have turned into souls."

Gajeel and Natsu gaped in shock. "What?", "For real?" both said respectively in unison.

The youngest Dragon Slayer paused in her work and nodded at the pair. "If we can hear the voices of the dragons here, then we can learn what happened. And maybe… maybe they can tell us what happened to our dragons too."

She returned to her drawing, focusing on making magical symbols while everyone silently watched. "I kept using the wrong rune here and here, but I think I got it now. And it's done!" She tossed her stick aside and gestured for everyone to move away from her circle.

She took a deep breath and stood in the middle. "Here goes," she said as she closed her eyes and raised her arms high above her head as if wanting to touch the ceiling above. She chanted in a strong, loud voice; "Wandering souls of dragons, I am ready to receive your voices. Milky Way!" The magic circle suddenly lit up with pale green light, creating a beacon that stretched high above their heads. The light expanded once at its peak, rippling outwards like a stone dropped in water. Silver, sparkling stars appeared within the ripples, creating a magical sky for all to gawk and admire.

"Wow! So beautiful!" commented Lucy, her breath taken away by the magic.

Bacon smiled, his wide eyes captivated by the glittering green ribbons of energy that swirled and flowed like water. He suddenly tensed when he heard a clattering noise before seeing the giant skeletons begin to vibrate in place as if they had been stirred from their slumber. He instinctively reached for the hilt of his sword beneath his cloak and freed it from its sheath. Beside him, Romeo let out a terrified whimper and inched closer to Bacon, lighting his hands with fire in defense. Meanwhile, Lucy shrieked at an ear-piercing volume and hid behind Gray for protection.

"The b-bones are moving!" Lucy cried, trembling in terror.
Gray rubbed his deafened ear. Although he wasn't as frightened as Lucy, he was visibly nervous about the strange phenomenon. "Is this supposed to happen, Wendy?" he asked the caster.

"Don't worry," the girl assured, bringing some level of calm to her friends, "I'm looking for the souls of these dragons. Their residual auras are extremely old and small, it's hard to pinpoint where they are… Oh! Wait! I found one!" She snapped her eyes open and turned her body to face the soul that only she could see. She clasped her hands together as if in prayer and dropped to her knees, her head bowed forward and her eyes closed once more in concentration.

The light of her circle intensified before the rippling, starry energy began to gather before the young Dragon Slayer. Swirls of shimmering energy collected into a bright orb that burned like green fire. The globe grew larger and brighter as more energy gathered with each passing second.

"Is that a soul?" Pantherlily wondered out loud as everyone watched, anticipating what would happen next.

Bacon shifted back when something suddenly emerged from the energy; it was a huge, transparent, clawed hand, followed by its arm, then the rest of its ghostly body. An enormous winged reptile had taken the orb's place, hovering before the startled group like a magical hologram made of eerie green light that brightened the cavern. It was the spirit of a dragon manifested by Wendy's spell.

This dragon differed from the one Bacon had dreamt of. This one was covered in rough, spiny scales and had dark webbed ears on either side of its stout head. It had a large chin with two long, thick hairs and a gaping mouth full of razor-sharp teeth. When its pair of reptilian eyes saw the group standing on the ground, the dragon unleashed a fearsome roar that shook the whole cavern and made Bacon's heart leap to his throat.

The boy quickly dropped Freedom to cover his ears from the painful noise, but that did little to block it out. The horrible cry rattled his bones and threatened to burst his eardrums. Through his grimace, he saw the others, with the exception of Wendy, jump back in alarm and scream in fear.

The dragon lowered its head, its eyes gleaming with amusement before its echoing roar transformed into booming laughter that drummed within Bacon's chest. "Stupid humans!" it guffawed in a gruff voice. It was grinning wide, erasing its intimidating image. "I love seeing your dumb, shocked faces! Gahahaha!"

Bacon blinked and slowly uncovered his ears, staring at the spirit in confusion much like everyone else.

"Um… what?" Romeo quietly uttered, still a little shaken.

"I am Zirconis, the Dragon of Jade," the dragon introduced himself, raising his head high on his slightly long neck. "This power to summon my soul, it must be Grandeeney. Where is she?" he inquired, looking around the cavern for the dragon Bacon had learned was Wendy's mother.

There was no Sky Dragon to be found but the Sky Dragon Slayer instead.

"Oh! How cute! Did this little Dragon Slayer summon me?" Zirconis exclaimed as he dropped right in front of Wendy and pressed his face against the ground to peer at her closely with his leering eyes. His sneering jaws full of sharp teeth were mere inches away from her and yet the girl did not seem to notice, still deep in concentration.

Fearing for Wendy's safety, Bacon quickly picked up his sword and charged straight at the dragon. "Stay away!" he cried and swung his blade at the lizard's face. He was certain his blade struck the
side of the dragon's big chin, but it felt like he hit nothing but air.

Zirconis turned his head and eyed the swordsman maliciously. "Aren't you a brave lad," he mused, showing his wicked teeth in a hungry smile. "Just for that, I'm going to eat this girl first."

"No!" the boy shouted and stayed his ground to stand protectively between the dragon and Wendy, his sword held before him.

Natsu was quick to join his side, the mage's hands alight with fire. "Bastard! Don't you touch her!" he roared.

The dragon suddenly reared back and burst into delightful laughter once again, bringing more confused looks to cross everyone's faces. "It was just a joke! You humans are so stupid!" the lizard mocked, purely enjoying himself. "Look! Look! What can a ghost do?" He swiped his claws at Bacon and Natsu.

Bacon tensed and held his breath, feeling a cold, unnerving sensation as the dragon's claws harmlessly passed through his body a few times. Realizing the dragon couldn't physically hurt Wendy, he lowered his sword but did not sheathe it just in case. He didn't like Zirconis; the dragon was rude and mean-looking.

"What is up with this guy?" Natsu growled, extremely annoyed with the dragon's antics.

"Who is this crazy person?" Lucy murmured in disbelief.

"He's a dragon, not a person," Gray corrected.

"He's a soul… an obnoxious one," Gajeel grumbled under his breath.

"I am Zirconis, the Dragon of Jade," the dragon introduced himself again to answer Lucy's question.

"We know that already!" Gray snapped.

"What we want to know is what happened here," said Carla, exasperated. She was clearly tired of Zirconis fooling around.

Happy nodded beside her. "There are so many dragon skeletons here," he stated, gesturing with a paw.

"We summoned you here to find out the truth," Pantherlily added.

Zirconis grunted and turned his head away from the Exceeds with a grunt of disdain, waving them away. "I have nothing to say to humans. Go away."

"We're cats," Happy pointed out.

The dragon faced them again. "Oh, so you are. So it happened over four hundred years ago…" he began, quick to change his mind, irking the mages to no end. "Dragons used to be the rulers of the world…"

Bacon listened quietly, trying his best to understand most of the dragon's tale. Zirconis spoke fondly of ancient times where dragons once lived freely in the land, in the sky, and across the seas. Back then, humans were insignificant compared to the greater beasts; treated as livestock or game. It was a tragic time to be a human, but that had all changed when some dragons wanted to coexist with the humans.
War had broken out between the rulers of the land, sky, and sea. Dragons fought dragons in a long and bloody battle that altered the land forever. The war seemed endless, but that had all changed with the rise of Dragon Slayers, human mages who had acquired the power to slay dragons from the great beasts themselves. With the Dragon Slayers fighting alongside the dragons who wished to live peacefully with humans, the war seemed almost won.

"But there was a critical miscalculation…" Zirconis continued, grimly shaking his head. "The Dragon Slayers who had grown too powerful began to kill the dragons on their side as well. Allies, mentors… they killed every single one of them and among those humans, there was one who bathed in too much of our blood."

Zirconis swallowed and shuddered in fear. "His name… I dare not say it…" he choked, his voice low. "He murdered countless dragons, friends and foes alike, and continued to bathe in their blood. Eventually his skin became scales and his teeth into fangs. He resembled more like a dragon with every life he took."

Bacon felt a sudden shiver down his spine. His grip on his sword tightened and his heart began to beat faster when he remembered the man in his nightmares, the one who had slain the kind old dragon, his shadowed body drenched in fresh blood. Could this man in the past – this Dragon Slayer – be the same man who haunted the boy's sleep?

"A man became a dragon?!

"Now I am King, you old fool…" Bacon drew a sharp breath, his body trembling from those words spoken by the man in his dreams…

There was shock and horror on everyone's faces after learning the fate of the dragons who once ruled the world. Only Wendy was unfazed, but that was no surprise.

Bacon stepped forward and spoke up, desperate to know more. "This man…" he began, his quiet tone quivering. "Did he have cold blue eyes and black scales?"

The dragon's eyes widened. He leaned forward so his snout was nearly touching Bacon, looking the boy over. "You saw him…" Zirconis whispered, his voice a harsh rasp. It was a statement rather than a question.

Bacon took a cautious step back. "Only in my dreams…"

"That is no mere dream. There's no mistaking the terror I see in your eyes. You saw him – you've met him, didn't you? But how can that be… How old are you, lad?"

Bacon hesitated. He was never asked that before. "Um, I… I think…"

"He is only ten," Carla answered for Bacon.

"That's it?" Zirconis cocked his head and stroked the two whiskers on his chin. "You sure you're not over four hundred years old?" he joked, laughing.

The boy briefly pondered over that question and shrugged. "I don't know?"
"He's obviously not that old," said Lucy with a sigh.

"Hmph. Maybe his race can live that long," Gajeel suggested, perking a studded eyebrow.

"His race?" Zirconis raised his brow. "What? Aren't you a stupid human, lad?"

Bacon shook his head and pulled back his hood to show his long ears. "No… I am…" He knew he was different from his friends; no one else had ears like his. Levi had taught him about the different races in Earthland, but unfortunately, her books didn't have all the information they wanted to know. Just like his real name, he couldn't remember where he came from. No one in Fairy Tail really knew what he was but it did not matter. Race had no meaning in the kind guild who treated every member as a part of their family.

Zirconis was a little taken back. "Oh! I have to apologize for making fun of you before. You don't look like a dumb, stupid human like the rest of these idiots! So sorry about that!" he said humbly with a small bow of his head.

"Didn't know he could be nice…" Lucy grumbled, glowering at the big lizard ghost.

"Hey! Stop calling us stupid!" Natsu roared angrily.

"Would you prefer to be called 'inferior' then? I actually like the sound of that. You humans are an inferior species!"

While the dragon guffawed at Natsu's outrage, Romeo ran up to Bacon's side and whispered, "Ask him about Dracotongue."

The swordsman turned back to the glowing green spirit. "Zirconis," he began, needing to raise his voice to catch the dragon's attention. "What is: Atarl adune… tarei kun ei… Herial Yaarez?"

Zirconis was shocked at first before he narrowed his gaze at the young warrior, studying him more intently than before. "You… That is the Lost Language of Ishgar. Where did you learn it? Or did you 'dream' about that too?" he demanded.

Bacon flinched from the dragon's tone and nodded tentatively. "I did… A dragon with three eyes said them to me…"

The ghost snorted and waved the boy off. "Impossible. Only the dragons known as the Ancient Ones could speak it fluently and they had all perished long before the war began… Just who are you?"

That question again… it stumped the boy. He frowned and cast his gaze to the ground before his feet, not knowing the true answer.

Romeo mustered the courage to ask, "Can you tell us what those words mean? Um, that is… if you can translate them?"

A tense silence fell upon them as Zirconis did nothing but stroke his chin hairs and stare at Bacon, making the boy fidget uncomfortably. It felt like a long minute before the dragon smirked and finally answered; "Atarl… adune… tarei kun ei, Herial Yaarez… Is that it?"

"Sounds about right…" said Romeo while Bacon nodded.

"You are destined to save our realm, Hero of Time…" were Zirconis's last words before his ghostly body brightened and dispersed into thousands of light particles. Each one rose towards the ceiling
and blinked out in the darkness, the soul gone forever.

With him gone, the cavern grew dim, lit only by the mushrooms.

"What? He's gone!" exclaimed Natsu. "Wait! Come back! There's still lots we want to ask you!"
There was no response, only the echo of the Dragon Slayer's voice throughout the cavern.

There was a tired sigh behind Bacon. He twisted around, relieved to find Wendy moving once again. He put his sword away and went to her side to help her up.

"Wendy, can you summon him back?" Natsu asked urgently.

The girl dusted her knees and shook her head. "No… His aura has vanished completely. He's passed onto the afterlife."

Gray glanced over at Bacon. "Well, we got some answers but got more questions at the same time," he said.

"'You are destined to save our realm, Hero of Time'," Romeo slowly repeated as he wrote the translation down in Bacon's new leather-bound journal that they had bought earlier in the day. "Hero of Time… does that ring any bells, Bacon?"

The youngest blinked in confusion. "Ring bells?"

"Sorry, it means if 'Hero of Time' sounds familiar to you. The dragon in your dream called you that, right?" Romeo started to tap the end of his pencil against his chin as he gave Bacon a mischievous smile. "It has to mean something. Maybe… you are supposed to be this Hero of Time?"

Bacon pondered over the strange name. It sounded somewhat familiar, but where did he hear it before?

Gajeel burst into laughter and pointed at Bacon. "This little runt a hero? I'd like to see that! Bacon, the Hero of Time! Destined to save our world!" He laughed again, needing to hold his stomach from laughing too hard.

"Man, that actually sounds really awesome," said Natsu, giving the young swordsman a jealous look.

"Are you really a hero?!" Happy exclaimed, looking up at the boy in astonishment.

"That's… nonsense," Carla murmured, crossing her arms in disbelief and yet her expression was troubled when she met Bacon's gaze.

Lucy rolled her eyes before returning to the more serious issue at hand. "Guys… Calm down. We're dealing with a lot here. Destinies, heroes, and Acnologia…"

Natsu looked nervously at his fellow Dragon Slayers. "He was a human… Unbelievable. Does that mean we could turn into dragons too if we keep using Dragon Slaying magic?"

"Hell, I don't wanna be a dragon!" Gajeel exclaimed while Wendy looked terrified at the thought.

"And Bacon," Natsu approached the boy and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. Natsu's expression was a mixture of sympathy and hatred. "Can it be true? Was it Acnologia who hurt you?"

_It was a dream…_ Bacon frowned and before he could say anything, Gajeel sharply interrupted.

"Someone's here."
Everyone stiffened.

Footsteps were approaching them, heavy and metallic alongside a pair of lighter steps. As one, the group turned towards the owners and found a bearded man with spiky black hair and dressed in silver armour that was adorned with a flowing red cape. Beside him was the young woman, Yukino, who Bacon recognized was the Celestial Spirit mage of Sabertooth.

"Fairy Tail," the armoured man addressed in a formal manner as he marched towards the group. He had a bold, stern face and a straight, squarish nose. The corners of his lips curled into a firm smile as his dark eyes scanned the many faces looking his way. "I have listened to the whole story in regards to Acnologia. I have an important request for you all, one you cannot refuse, because if you want to defeat Acnologia, you must first defeat Zeref. And I can tell you how."

"Couldn't sleep, Master Lucy?"

"Being in this old house... it brings back a lot of memories. I was just remembering. The good and the bad. But mostly the good."

"What about, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Natsu. I know you haven't known him as long as us, this used to be his and Happy's house. Do you remember him?"

"Of course. I haven't forgotten him... I haven't forgotten anyone. I can remember that he was the one who came up with 'Bacon' as my name. Heh, thinking back on it now... It was a really stupid name..."

"You can't deny that you liked it."

"No, I don't regret it. 'Bacon' was who I was when Fairy Tail was still whole... If anything, I want to thank Natsu for it..."

"He was a very good friend – the best you could ever ask for; strong, brave, caring, and loyal to a fault. But he was also the world's most stubborn, loud, and arrogant fool who often got carried away with his magic, destroying everything in sight, costing us more in fines than our rewards could pay off."

"In spite of all his flaws... I still loved him. If it were not for him, I would never have joined Fairy Tail. He brought meaning to my life, made not only my existence, but everyone else's lives important."

"He was always there for me... no matter what trouble I got into, he would come and save me regardless of the consequences. The last time he saved me... It was during the final day of the Grand Magic Games, the day before... before everything changed... He, Wendy, Mirajane... Happy, Carla, and Pantherlily... they all came and rescued me from the castle dungeon."

"The dungeon? I don't recall that... How did you end up in the there?"

"You don't remember? It was supposedly for treason. But it was mostly because I was a Celestial Spirit mage. I can't remember his name, but the captain of the knights, the man with the funny square nose – remember him? It was right after we met the spirit of Zirconis. He brought us to the castle and showed us their secret 'weapon', the Eclipse Gate."

"Oh! Yes, I think I remember that now. He insisted that you help his cause, to protect the world. If only he knew the truth... The guards apprehended us..."
"He and Yukino were tried for treason for sharing their kingdom's secret with us. He was sent to Abyss Palace as punishment and Yukino… poor, poor Yukino… I never saw her again when they took her away from the cell we shared."

"And we were kicked out of the castle after you were imprisoned… On the following day, Master Makarov and everyone else planned your escape as well as their strategy to win the final event. I wasn't there to listen to the whole thing, but I do recall seeing Natsu tied up because he wanted to charge back to the castle to save you the instant he recovered."

"Oh, that dumb idiot… However… when I saw him on the other side of those bars, smiling his cocky smile, I knew I would be safe. Little did we know, it was all a trap."

"A trap?"

"The Princess knew of their plan to rescue me. We fell through the dungeon floor and ended up in Abyss Palace. We escaped, of course. Spent the whole night in the dreadful place… only to enter another Hell…"

"Some days… I wonder as I lie awake… If it were not for me, would Natsu still be alive, breathing the same air we breathe? If he didn't come for me… then he wouldn't have stayed back and… He wouldn't have… I shouldn't have listened to him then; I should have stayed with him and fought by his side. I was a coward to leave him behind…"

"No, if you had stayed you would not be here today to guide and protect us. He saved you yet again, like he always did, like he always wanted to do because you were important to him."

"He saved me twice that day, didn't he? That damn fool… That stupid, stupid, stupid fool… That was the last time he was my hero… My last words to him were, 'I'll meet you outside.' He never showed up. I never found him in the castle ruins…"

"I bet he wouldn't regret giving up his life knowing you are still alive."

"I wish… I wish I could go back… and tell him how much I loved him… To thank him for everything he had given me. If only… If only he didn't come for me in that dungeon that day, he might still be here, fighting with us… Fate… can be so cruel…"

Lucy paced her small cell for the umpteenth time, growing furious and impatient with every passing hour. How long had it been since she was thrown in the dark dungeon by the mean, short old man, Minister Datong, and his guards?

Charged with treason!

She couldn't believe it! She cursed fate for the sudden turn of events.

There was no window in the dank dungeon so she couldn't tell how much time had passed. It felt like a day had gone by, judging by the number of meals the guards were generous to bring her.

She slumped on her cot and groaned in her hands. She wondered what happened with her friends. Were they safe? Did the guards kick them out of the castle unharmed?

She wondered what happened to Yukino. The other Celestial Spirit mage was here in the same cell from the beginning only to be taken away by a knight fully dressed in black armour without an explanation.
Lucy was grumpy and tired. She hadn't slept a wink since her imprisonment; the cot was hard and the sheets stank of something nasty. She was bored to death, left with only her thoughts to pass the time. She wanted a bath and a new change of clothes because her skin was sticky and gross with sweat and grime. Her bandages were starting to itch too, further souring her mood. And she wanted her keys back. The guards had taken them away, leaving her to stress about them.

The twelve Gold Celestial Spirit Keys were needed to open the Eclipse Gate. Was Datong going to keep them forever to prevent the Gate from ever being used?

Lucy needed them back; they were her friends as well as her power. When she demanded about them with the guards who brought her meals, they simply ignored her questions, driving her mad. She had kicked the door several times in retaliation which resulted in nothing but irritatingly smug smiles from the armed men.

Lucy sighed and ran a hand through her messy bangs, being mindful of her bandages. Was she going to be stuck here until the eclipse was over?

Her question was soon answered.

There was a click coming from the heavy dungeon door followed by the squeal of rusty hinges as someone pushed it open. Lucy glared at the person, expecting either the big knight in black or another guard bringing her next meal. It was neither, much to her surprise.

She stood up when she saw an unfamiliar person quickly strolling towards her, wearing an animal mask and a cloak made of white feathers. He was armed with a sword upon his back and wore armoured boots that softly clinked with each step. When the person passed under the dim Lacrima Lamp hanging from the ceiling, she got a better view. She gasped when she saw the mask, seeing the same smiling face of the yellow fox Reedus had brought to life the other day.

"W-Who are you?" she asked, tensing in caution.

"A friend," the masked individual answered, keeping his voice hush and quiet. "I'm here to break you out, Mas – Miss Lucy." In his plated hands, he had a jingling ring of prison keys and he was trying to find the one that matched the girl's cell.

Lucy wasn't surprised the man knew who she was. Having lost in the Games twice already, she was probably infamous by now. But who could this person be and why would he help her? Was he hired by her guild to rescue her because they couldn't risk getting caught by the kingdom a second time? Or could he be from another guild who wanted to help Fairy Tail? So many questions were running through her mind.

She dropped her voice to a whisper; "Did Fairy Tail ask you to help me? And where'd you get those?"

"In a way, you could say that I've come on their behalf. And I got these from the guard lying unconscious outside. I think this is the one." When he turned the key in the lock of Lucy's cell door it made a satisfying click. He swung the creaking door wide open and motioned for her to come out.

"Come with me. I'll take you back to Fairy Tail."

He seemed friendly enough. Lucy didn't hesitate to leave her dingy cell. "Wait, I have to retrieve my spirit keys first! The guards took them away. Please, they're very important to me."

The man nodded without a second thought. "Very well. Let's find them quickly."

"Thank you… uh, what can I call you?"
"Keaton."

Lucy paused and raised her brow. She was sure she had heard that name before. Didn't Bacon give the yellow fox the same name? She didn't have time to question the man because he was already making his way to the dungeon door.

She only took two steps when she felt the floor suddenly disappear right under her feet. Screaming for her life, she fell into the black abyss below with her new friend not far behind.

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**Bacon's Fierce Companion**

By LeviathanTamer

It had not even been a month since Bacon had passed out in the courtyard and remembered that sad tune. The guild got over it rather quickly as it was clear that whatever Bacon did he couldn't recreate whenever he wished. However, while the guild had been overjoyed that Bacon was slowly regaining his memories, Makarov was having different thoughts, just things that he could easily dismiss until they had grown over the time of a month. Now Master Makarov was contemplating even in front of all the guild members, something that wasn't unnoticed by Macao.

Macao pulled up a chair next to his predecessor and simultaneous successor as Master of Fairy Tail. Makarov was deep in contemplation and didn't even notice Macao's arrival. "You've been thinking about something, Makarov. What is it?" Macao questioned.

Makarov flinched then realized who the speaker was and relaxed. "It's nothing Macao-" is what Makarov tried to say but was cut off by Macao.

"Don't kid me with that. I know that look. It's the same one you wear every time you're worried about something serious," Macao finished with a glare in his tone. At this Makarov just sighed.

"Bacon's power is incredible. Remember when that gale knocked over everyone in the room? I could've sworn I felt a powerful storm coming, but once he lost his train of thought it dissipated. What else could he have?" The genuine unease in Makarov's tone unnerved Macao. The man had only heard that tone a few times, and normally that meant the worst was going to happen.

Macao scratched his head nervously while thinking of a way to avert this. "We kept all of Bacon's dangerous items in my storage dimension, remember? Do you want me to check them all to see how dangerous they are?"

Makarov rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Just do a basic check. Look for any active magic being emitted or used."

Macao nodded and walked off to his house where he could check in privacy.

Once Macao got into his house, he started pulling Bacon's items one by one, examining each and every one for any kind of magic signature.

The weird purple Lens? No, he couldn't sense any magic. The sharp hook-and-chain thing that nearly killed Natsu? Dangerous, but definitely not magical in anyway. There was a mechanical mechanism that locked and propelled the hook. The odd nuts the size of his head? These strange things nearly blinded some people but they were certainly not magically infused items. The bombs and the utterly confusing mouse-like bombs were definitely not magic. All that was left were the strange vessels they found.
Makarov knew of many vessels that could hold a soul or a being. Most of them involved dark magic. So it was a large surprise when they found out that Bacon carried not one, not two, not even three, but four of the objects. What was even stranger was that all of them were masks. Thankfully all of them were empty. Or so Macao thought, these were the last of Bacon’s items in Macao's storage dimension. One of them had to have something in it.

The wooden one with the sad eyes and cylindrical mouth had absolutely nothing in it from what Macao could tell. All he felt was a strange pang of sadness and an early fate. The round one with some more sad eyes had nothing in it either, but the face seemed to hold a look of regret and unfulfilled tasks. The fishy one with sharp features and a sad pair of eyes held nothing in it but the feeling of despair for something that wasn't itself.

It was at this point that Macao began to wonder, *Why the heck are all these masks so sad?!*

Sighing, Macao moved on with his task and held up the last mask, remembering a feeling of disappointment emanating from it and its closed eyes. He pulled himself out of memory lane and actually looked at the mask and nearly jumped out of his skin.

The once empty mask of a painted warrior, whose eyes were closed, was now a mask that silently emanated power. The look on its face could be described as nothing more than *fierce*. The frown was still present but it was no longer a drifting, disappointing frown but a mighty scowl. The marks shifted slightly with the new expression and were no longer faded but vibrant. Most disturbing of all were the eyes; they were now open and glowing with a faint white light. There was no background behind the eye holes, only the empty white of a warrior who had faced too many battles that his eyes had become jaded.

The sheer power that this mask now silently emanated was vast. Macao felt as though he was attempting to stare down a beast of a man. Then the surge happened. It was so quick and powerful that he didn't have a chance to resist. Macao could feel the mask searching his memories. It was tearing apart Macao's mind and yet at the same time he felt no pain.

Then as quickly as it came, the entity left, retreating back into the mask, making it feel nearly empty again. Macao would've thought the power was gone if it weren't for the glaring white eyes that remained open. This thing was far beyond his power, which meant there was only one way he could deal with this. Unfortunately, that meant bringing an extremely powerful object within arms reach of a guild member. Macao put the mask in a pouch he grabbed on his way out and tied the end, hopefully no rambunctious member would find out about it and, heavens forbid, put it on.

Macao calmly made his way through the main guild entrance and sat down next to Makarov. Makarov raised an eyebrow at Macao. "Was there anything dangerous?"

Macao put the bag in Makarov's hand. "One of the vessels still has something inside of it. It overwhelmed my mind and took a look at something. Nothing deadly so far though," he answered nonchalantly with a shrug.

It took all of Makarov's will power to keep himself from falling over or checking Macao to see if he was still sane.

Makarov stroked his beard a couple times to calm himself down. Once he stroked it thoroughly he said, "Show it to me."

Macao didn't question why Makarov didn't open it himself when the bag was in his hand, the young man just untied the sack which promptly fell around the mask revealing it. Makarov couldn't hold it back and visibly flinched from the sight of the glaring eyes.
Makarov was about to comment when a very drunk Elfman swiped the mask from the Masters who were distracted. "A mask? This looks like a mask FOR A MAN!" and with that he put it on.

"NOOOOO!" Macao and Makarov yelled as they dove for it. They both missed and crashed on the floor.

The second Elfman's skin made full contact with the mask, a blast of magic knocked him through two tables and into a wall. This did not go unnoticed by everyone else who just stared at the mask which fell to the floor. Then all hell seemed to have broken loose because various guild members scrambled to try the mask on, some wrestling others to obtain it. All of them were met with the same result as Elfman. Makarov and Macao weren't too worried about their guild members, they were more worried about damage the guild was sustaining.

Erza had walked through the door sometime after the fifth person had tried to put the mask on. She raised an eyebrow and decided to ignore the chaos, thinking it was another ordinary scuffle between her friends. She sat down at an empty table and ordered some cake from the Mirajane. It wasn't until the eighth member had tried to put it on did she intervene because that person ended up destroying her delicious cake with their thrown body.

"What are you fools doing?!" she demanded in a very authoritative and rage-filled voice that rang over the rumbling.

Natsu who had joined the fight and had finally gotten his hands on the mask stood straight up from her tone. "Everyone's been trying on this mask. It's been launching people so we've been trying to control it, ma'am!" he said quickly. He nearly fainted when he saw Erza's hand moving fast towards him only to sigh in relief when she only took the mask.

"So, you've been causing trouble? Time to see what this was all about." She put on the mask and everyone waited for her to be launched like the others. It never happened.

Instead, after about three seconds she took off the mask and handed it to Macao. "It gave me a message. It wants to be returned to the boy in green." With that she walked back to her table but then remembered why she got up in the first place. She hunted down the poor person who ruined her dessert and proceeded to inflict some punishment.

Macao looked at the mask in his hand. Should he bring it to Bacon? A jolt went up and down his body and his foot very much unwillingly took a step away from him. Realizing that he didn't have a choice, he got up of his own accord and walked to where he thought Bacon would be. Seeing as it was almost evening, he assumed Bacon was with Wendy who recently returned again.

If he had to guess, they would be in one of the back rooms playing or visiting. His hunch was right when he knocked on the door and Wendy opened it.

Macao sighed as he walked over to Bacon, knelt to meet his eyes, and handed him the mask. "This thing apparently wants to meet you."

Curious, Bacon stared at it and slowly realized what it was for. Bacon put the mask on and instantly went limp. His body slouched over and his face was completely covered by the mask. The back of the mask began to shine and it almost appeared to have seamlessly fused to Bacon's face…

All that Bacon remembered after putting on the mask was a small flash and then darkness. Lo and behold that is what he woke up to, more darkness. Bacon looked around, trying to find out where he was. It wasn't until he had made a complete circle that he noticed someone suddenly standing not too
far away from him. The person was TALL, taller than Erza or about as tall no… taller than Elfman. It was a man who wore a light blue tunic underneath a breast plate that was decorated with various symbols. On his back was a sword that was taller than the man! It was designed with blue and green overlapping metal ribbons that ended in a sharp point.

The man turned around and revealed a face that was as relaxed as a permanently fierce face could get. The white eyes and face paint didn't scare Bacon, nor did his stature. What made Bacon the slightest bit wary of this man was the incredible power he emitted. Then he spoke in a language that Bacon couldn't recognize at all. "Ah, so we meet again, Young Hero."

Bacon could only look quizzically at the man and how he spoke. "The others have left; their pains are finally gone forever. Only I remain." It was clear that whoever he was knew that Bacon couldn't understand him but he continued anyways. "I remain because I am not bound to this world by pain; I am bound to your soul by your resolve" he said the last bit with a touch of disappointment. Then he drew his sword and held it at Bacon's throat.

"You tried to call on my strength before this happened. But you lacked the same resolve that you had when I first met you." He continued in the strange language. "Perhaps I should take your life here and free myself." He withdrew his sword with those words. "No, I must first see if you are able to wield me still. If you can show the same resolve that you had then I shall return to you. If not, you shall die." The finality in the last of those words gave Bacon chills in his spine despite not knowing what the man was saying.

The man snapped his fingers and Wendy, Natsu, and Erza appeared, lined up side-by-side. At the same time, not too far in the distance, Magnolia Town appeared. The man raised his two-toned sword, its sharp edge held an inch away from Natsu's and Erza's necks and with his other hand, he fired a slow moving ball of light at Magnolia town. "Can you make the same decision that you did last time? Can you forgo all of your ties with your friends in order to save the town?" he threatened.

Bacon was about to run toward his friends but then he saw Magnolia town and some citizens cowering in fear before the massive attack heading their way. Bacon hesitated, he stepped from foot to foot trying to decide. Then he closed his eyes and calmed down. This level of thought was previously impossible for Bacon to make as he was. His mind was clear and so were his actions. A sword, shield, and bow materialized on his person.

Bacon dashed towards Magnolia town and intercepted the attack with his sword which reflected the attack and sent it flying in a different direction. Without even a moment's notice he pulled out his bow and charged it with magic familiar to him and fired at the man. His heart sank when the arrow was blocked by the man's gauntlets and all the magic he put in was dispersed. Bacon's thoughts clouded up again and the weapons disappeared. He sank to his knees and watched the man who was about to kill his friends.

Only to be met with laughter. It wasn't a normal outright laugh, it was a light chuckle. The man lowered his sword. "That was the resolve that first bound me, the one that could let go of ties such as trust or friendship so he could save everyone. But at the same time, he would never truly forget his friends." He walked over and stuck the blade into the ground in front of Bacon, then spoke in a language the boy could now understand. "By the Oath to Order, I, The Fierce Deity swear that this boy shall serve as my vessel just as I shall serve as his wrath."

Bacon didn't know what any of that meant. The man who had recently introduced himself as the Fierce Deity pulled his sword out of the ground and put it back on his back. "You are not strong enough yet to wield my power." He said as he turned around and went back to the position Bacon first saw him in. "But when the time comes, Young Hero, when it comes to the point where you
shall need me. I shall be there." With that final note, everything went white.

Bacon found himself still on the same seat as when he left, and a mask in his hands. Bacon couldn't remember the specifics, but one thing that he did remember was that he now had a new friend...

It was only when he looked up from the mask that he noticed the worried looks on both Macao's and Wendy's faces. Bacon raised the mask and smiled at it, indicating that the mask was no danger, but a friend. With that he gave the mask back to a bewildered Macao.

Macao just looked at the mask. It now felt much more docile. Bacon wasn't harmed and even smiled at it. Macao just let out a big, relieved sigh that nothing bad had happened. But now he had the dilemma of what he should do with the mask. He couldn't put it back in his storage dimension as he didn't want anything that strong connected to his magic in any way.

He mulled it over until he got home at near midnight. He checked on the two boys who were fast asleep. Macao looked at the mask one more time and then walked into the room to place the mask on the nightstand next to Bacon. The scene looked so peaceful that Macao decided to leave it at that and went to bed. Bacon didn't have any nightmares that night.
Yukino wasn't sure how she ended up standing before Princess Hisui out by the large fountain in the grand courtyard of Castle Mercurius. She couldn't remember following the black knight either. All she could recall was leaving her cell when the man commanded her to.

Her mind was blank and hazy as she stared ahead at the princess, transfixed by Her Higness's emerald eyes that glinted with sorrow under the faint glow of the moon that shone behind a cover of clouds. Princess Hisui was beautiful, that much Yukino could understand as she stood obediently beside the taller man concealed under heavy armour.

"Princess," rumbled the man's deep voice from within his dark helm as he took a bow.

The sound of his voice sent a shiver down Yukino's spine for some unknown reason. She said nothing as she followed the knight's gesture without a thought and bowed as well. Her gaze once again fell on the beautiful face of Princess Hisui, but Her Highness paid little attention to the Celestial Spirit mage. Those sad, emerald eyes were locked on the black knight, her pale hands clasped tightly before her breasts as if in prayer.

"Sir Geraldo," the princess addressed formally, but quickly shook her head. "No. I apologize. You are Captain now."

The black knight straightened and grunted in annoyance at his newly promoted title. "'Captain' is un-befitting of me. It belongs to Arcadios and always will be."

*Arcadios...* The name triggered something in Yukino's foggy memory. There was a man with curly black hair, a square nose, and dressed in silver armour instead of black. The image of the person flashed in the girl's mind for a second before her focus was interrupted by the black knight's voice.

"There is nothing we can do for him now, Your Highness. He has taken the blame and now it is up to us to finish what he started. I promised him we would see this plan to the end. The fate of our kingdom depends on this!"

The princess's frown deepened. "The plan... Yes, of course," she whispered, closing her eyes. She wrung her hands and bit her lower lip, both anxious and upset. "The eclipse is soon upon us. Gods... Without Arcadios, do you think we will be prepared?"

The black knight took a step forward and spoke softly, "I do, Princess." He turned and gestured at Yukino. "We have everything we need to activate the Gate when the time comes. All twelve Gold Celestial Spirit Keys and a Celestial Spirit mage. Sergeant Yukino has agreed to lend us her power."

Yukino blinked in confusion and slowly shifted her attention to the shadowed slit of the man's horned helm where his eyes should be. When did she agree to help this man? She had never spoken to him, not that she could remember.

And the twelve Gold Keys... Yukino's hand tightened around a small pouch she didn't know she was holding. Somehow she knew what was inside the pouch and it worried her. How did she come in possession of *Lucy's* keys?

Yukino furrowed her brow and tried to make sense of what was happening. She tried to ask the black knight, but her tongue suddenly felt glued to the top of her mouth when she saw his eyes flash bright red and sinister for only an instant. Her blood went cold and the shivers down her back returned as she stood frozen; terrified of the demon standing so close to her.
Next thing she knew, her mind and body had gone numb, feeling as if she had fallen in some sort of
dream. Her vision was clouded, like a veil had been pulled over her head; the black knight was a
shadow and the princess a pale ghost.

Yukino heard her own voice, but it sounded like she was underwater; "I am honoured to be at your
service, Your Royal Highness. I will not fail you."

Princess Hisui opened her eyes that seemed to blaze like fire within her ghostly face and met the
other woman's gaze. She offered a weak, but grateful smile. "I thank you," she said, her voice quiet
and distant to Yukino's ears, "The whole kingdom will be in your debt once they know you helped
prevent the terror that will soon be upon us." She furrowed her brow in concern as she took a step
closer to Yukino. "Are you alright? Are you not feeling well?"

"I have just released the Sergeant from prison," the black knight answered for the mage, shifting to
stand right beside the Celestial Spirit mage, "She has gone through quite an ordeal, she is weary and
in need of rest before the time comes." His voice was like thunder, every word like a command.
Yukino had no choice but to listen.

The princess looked apologetic as she reached out and grasped Yukino's free hand. She was shocked
the instant she touched Yukino's skin. "You're so cold and pale! I'm... I'm very sorry for what
Minister Datong has put you through. It has been a long day. Sir – Captain, will you please escort the
Sergeant to her room?"

The black knight bowed. "Of course, Princess. She must stay hidden, however. The minister will not
look kindly on this if he finds out what I have done. Rest assured, the guards I have posted down at
the prison will not disclose our secret."

Princess Hisui slid her hand away from Yukino's and yet her expression remained concerned. "What
of the other Celestial Spirit mage?" she questioned.

"Datong promised to release her after the eclipse so there is no need to worry about her, Your
Highness."

The princess breathed a small sigh of relief. "Then... everything is set. All we have to do is wait and
see tomorrow's outcome... Thank you, Captain. Thank you, Sergeant. Please, retire for the night. I
would like to spend a moment longer out here."

"As you wish, Princess." The black knight bowed once more and Yukino's body followed. "Come,
he commanded the mage as he turned away from Her Royal Highness and headed towards the
castle.

In a trance, Yukino followed behind the billowing crimson cape before her. She couldn't remember
how many hallways they passed through or how many corners they turned. It seemed to happen so
fast that her memory was a blurry mess. But then the pair stopped when a new voice started to shout
for the new captain.

It was a ghostly soldier and he was running towards them, his steps seemingly echoing all around
Yukino. "Captain!" he formally address the black knight with a salute. He was panting heavily and
needed a short moment to catch his breath. "W-We have a problem! There's an intruder and he tried
to escape with the spirit mage down in the dungeon. Both intruder and escapee have just fallen into
Abyss Palace."

The black knight crossed his arms and grunted. "If that is the case, why is it a problem?" he
demanded more than asked.
The soldier grimaced and lost his stiff composure from the larger man's tone. "Err, w-well..." he gulped.

"We are no longer obligated to keep an eye on the prisoner until her release," stated the captain. "By deciding to follow this rat out of her cell, she is now as guilty as a criminal for breaking the conditions we had set specifically for her."

"I... I guess..." the soldier mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck nervously. "Um, but what about our dungeon keys? The intruder knocked Benny out and took them!"

The captain huffed. "I will inform the Garou Knights to retrieve them from the dead rat's body. In the meantime, escort Sergeant Yukino to her quarters and ensure no one enters without permission from me. Is that clear?" He turned to the girl, his hidden eyes flashing red for an instant. "She needs to rest and she is not to be disturbed."

The soldier saluted. "Yes! Understood!"

The black knighted nodded and turned away, his crimson cape flapping behind him as he continued down the hall. "You are both dismissed."

"Bad news," Meredy's worried voice interrupted Jellal's train of thought. The man stopped short and quickly took cover in the nearest alley to avoid looking suspicious to the people still wandering the streets of Crocus in the middle of the night.

"What is it?" Jellal inquired, moving into the darkest shadows behind a smelly dumpster. He wrinkled his nose and decided to venture into the next alley.

"I've lost my connection with Keaton," she continued as Jellal carefully slipped into the shadows between two closed shops.

Jellal exhaled sharply and swore under his breath the moment he knew no one was around to hear him. "What happened? Ultear?"

"Can't tell you," Ultear replied, sounding quite frustrated, "The enchantments protecting the castle are preventing me from seeing inside. Only Meredy could keep tabs on him."

"I think he managed to get to Lucy," said Meredy, "He was really happy for a moment before he was surprised by something. It felt like he was falling. There wasn't any pain so I don't think he was attacked and he's not unconscious either. It's like he just disappeared!"

Jellal folded his arms and closed his eyes, putting all his concentration into creating a telepathic link with the swordsman from the future. Normally it would have been easy to hone in on the boy's unique magic signature, however Jellal could not find it within or around the city. It truly was as if he had disappeared out of thin air. "I can't detect him either. Wherever he's gone, our magic cannot follow."

It was just like the time when Keaton had tried to teleport with Jellal back to the underground chambers of Mercurius castle. But instead of teleporting to the warp point Keaton had set, the pair ended up crash-landing in the main fountain in the courtyard. Luckily, no one was around to witness their humiliating entrance.

Ultear grumbled a curse. "More damn enchantments." Jellal could picture the scowl on her face.
"Should we go help him?" asked Meredy. Her worry was making Jellal feel worried too thanks to the sensory link they shared. She had quickly grown fond of Keaton after meeting the young man the night before. She had found it so very amusing that, in the future, Jellal somehow had the patience to become the boy's master. (Even Jellal couldn't believe he could be a teacher.)

Jellal shook his head out of habit as he answered, "No. We don't know what happened in there. For all we know, he may have set off a trap. We can't risk going in there, they might be expecting us if we do. We need to continue with our plan. We only have two days, we can't waste any time."

He formed an assuring smile that Meredy could sense. "If he really did learn from me, then I know he can get himself out of trouble. After all, he survived seven years while we only survived three in his timeline."

"You guys survived three years," Ultear pointed out, "I was killed during the Festival! We better change that future at once! I don't want to be killed fighting some damn dragons!"

"I agree!" Meredy practically shouted in Jellal's mind, making him grimace. "A future without Ultear is a sad future…"

Jellal smirked and glanced up at the faint glow where the moon was hidden behind the clouds. "The future has already been changed with Keaton coming here. We just have to continue diverting its path towards a better outcome."

"Then are you almost done with the final preparations?" Meredy asked.

Again, Jellal shook his head even though his companions weren't around to see. "Not quite. I was on my way to make sure we got what we need."

"Then hurry up! Chop chop! Time's wasting here!"

Jellal sighed and wearily pinched the bridge of his nose. "You two better not be slacking off either!" he snapped. The corner of his lips twitched into a smile when he sensed Meredy's laughter.

He was riding on Meredy's chipper mood to carry him through the rest of the night. He hadn't slept since the night before Keaton's arrival. For the past two days, Crime Sorcière and Keaton had been making plans and running around Crocus to gather everything they needed for the destruction of the Eclipse Gate.

Their plan sounded simple but was much more complex in reality. There could be dire consequences if something were to go wrong. It was Keaton who had suggested it to Jellal, back when they were examining the Eclipse Gate:

"Even when he was cold and uncomfortably wet, Jellal couldn't help but be astonished by the incredible structure standing before him. The Gate was enormous! Larger than the main gate to the city of Crocus, as if made for giants! Jellal gazed upon the gilded stone, following the golden rays of the sun to the twelve metal mechanisms that appeared to be locks. He slowly climbed the steps, his eyes drinking all the little details that went into the design and function of the Gate.

He reached out to touch the gold metal bracing only to be stopped by Keaton grabbing his arm."

"Careful," the boy warned through the telepathic link Jellal had created. Jellal wanted to communicate only through telepathy to ensure any patrolling guards would not accidentally catch their voices when they spoke. "The Gate will absorb all your magic even through contact. Master
Lucy made that mistake the first time and she passed right out."

Jellal nodded. He quietly hummed as he leaned in for a closer look. "So this is it? The doorway through time." It was dimly lit in the underground chamber so it was hard to make out what the Gate was made of.

Keaton nodded and slid his mask up to rest it on his forehead. He reached into the folds of his tunic and pulled something out. With a flick of his wrist, the object he held started to shine with a pale blue light. Dangling in his left hand was a silver-chained necklace with a star-shaped pendant made of a rare, blue Light Lacrima. The shining crystal was only bright enough to light up what was in front of them, which was all they needed.

Keaton's blue eyes seemed to burn with anger under the glow of his Lacrima as he glared at the giant gate. "Yes," he said aloud before falling back on mind-speech. "This is where it all began. Where everything changed." He faced Jellal, his expression almost pleading. "Master Jellal, there must be something we can do to keep these doors from ever opening!"

The mage of Crime Sorcière crossed his arms and glanced around, hoping to find an easy solution. But like his complicated past, nothing was ever simple, straightforward, or what he hoped to expect. "It's hard to say what this thing is made of. If it is as sturdy as a mountain, then we'll need a high amount of force to destroy it. How does it even open? What controls it?"

"There should be a switch panel, but it's not down here."

Jellal raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean? Is it not yet built?"

Keaton shrugged. "I'm pretty sure it's already built. It's just not here. Sometime between now and the day of the eclipse, the Gate will somehow be moved to the main plaza on the left side of the castle. That is where Master Lucy and I found it in our time. The switch panel is probably up there somewhere, stored away, hidden, or under guard."

"I was thinking of sabotaging it."

Keaton smirked at the idea, but his enthusiasm didn't last long. "That would only delay the Gate's use."

"It would bide us some more time."

The swordsman frowned. "But then they would know that someone is out to stop them. They may move the Gate, hide it, increase security… They will likely do whatever they can to stop us from stopping them. It's too risky. We need a one-step plan. I was thinking… maybe perhaps…" He hesitated and looked off to the side as his hands began to fidget with the chain of his necklace.

"Well? Go on. I'm all ears – well, open-minded – you get the idea. I can't think of any other options so yours might as well be the best one."

Blue eyes met brown, steadfast and determined. "We blow it up."

The first thing that came to Jellal's mind was how insane that sounded, (but then again, Keaton was raised as a Fairy and Jellal knew first-hand how insane and catastrophic everyone in Fairy Tail was), followed by how many ways that plan could go devastatingly wrong. He wasn't aware he was staring with his jaw hanging open until Keaton tilted his head and made a face.
"You think I'm crazy," the boy accused sullenly.

Jellal sighed and brought a hand to rub his weary face. "Am I wrong to think so?"

Keaton raised a challenging brow. "Can you come up with a better idea? Enough explosives can level a mountain so we can assume the same will happen to this door."

"Then we'll need a lot of explosives."

"A lot of powerful, non-magical explosives."

Oh yes, enough bombs to turn Crocus into a smoldering crater. It wasn’t easy to find someone who could supply them the right materials at such short notice. There were plenty of firework shops situated throughout the city due to the festivities surrounding the Grand Magic Games. It took day and night; after asking the right questions and bribing the right people, they tracked down the right person who would provide what they needed – for a very steep fee.

Located on the far corner of the south-western district, the seedy, little 'fireworks' shop was tucked between a run-down, out-of-business hotel and the city's outer wall. Jellal was just on his way there before being interrupted by Meredy.

Before he slipped back into the street, he adjusted his black hooded cloak that was part of his new disguise. He wasn’t Jellal or Mystogan tonight; he was 'Crow'. The new identity was necessary to prevent anybody, especially the Magic Council, from tracking down his activities back to Fairy Tail or Crime Sorcière. He had taken a page from Keaton the night prior and borrowed a crow mask to hide his whole face, hence his new alias.

A cherished treasure, the bird mask once belonged to Keaton's late brother who also went by the name of 'Crow'. It was made from black dragon bone and decorated with large, golden-tipped, black scales carved into the shape of feathers. Wearing it didn't make Jellal stand out too much since many people still wore costumes and festival masks out on the streets with the Games still going on.

Acting casual, Jellal headed straight for the tiny shop that was still open past midnight. Above the rusty screen door was an old, poorly-lit, lopsided sign that said 'Crocus's Best Fireworks Sold Here!' in faded red and blue letters. The place looked sketchy on the outside and it looked no better on the inside.

The screen door screamed at Jellal as he pried it open. The rusty hinges alone were louder than a doorbell, alerting the only visible person occupying the cramped and cluttered little store. There were ten others that Jellal could sense, and those ten individuals were well hidden from sight; no doubt waiting to show themselves if Jellal would choose to deceive the person before him.

Golden, reptilian eyes glinted in the dim light when the store owner turned from his desk to meet his customer. Sharp teeth were visible when the blue-scaled lizardman formed a grin the instant he recognized Jellal. "Ah, Crow," greeted the lizard in his raspy voice as he approached the mage, wiping his dirty, clawed hands on the filthy, ragged, brown apron he wore. His long, spiny tail swayed behind him with each heavy step. Having operated in his dingy store for years, he was careful not to accidentally knock over any of the cheap fireworks piled on his tables.

The lizardman stopped before Jellal, standing a full two heads taller than the human. The two pairs of horns sprouting on the back of his head just barely grazed the ceiling. Gold eyes narrowed and looked behind Jellal suspiciously. "Jusssst you tonight? Where issss your partner?" the reptile asked.

"He is on a job at the moment," was Jellal's quickly thought up answer.
The store owner's forked, black tongued flicked out as if to taste the truth in Jellal's words.

"Do you have what I came here for, Rajar?" the mage questioned brusquely.

Rajar's expression immediately changed into sneering delight. He clasped his greedy hands together and nodded vigorously. "Why yessss! Of coursssse! It all came in time thissss evening! Exssssspress delivery from my besssstest men! Becausssse of that, I'll have to charge you exssssstra." He lowered his voice and kept a sharp eye on the front door. "Dangeroussss cargo and all."

Jellal withheld the urge to grumble. He wasn't surprised at the additional fees suddenly tacked onto his shipment. He had dealt with plenty of shady characters like Rajar in the past so he knew that it was best to work in their favour to get what he wanted without too much trouble. Jellal hid his annoyance when he replied, "I understand. I put your men in danger so I suppose they should be generously compensated."

Rajar's sneer widened with glee. He held up a scaly finger and an open hand. "Now, before I show you your goodssss, I musssst firsssst see the other half of my payment. Twenty million Jewelssss plussss two hundred thoussssand for the exssssspress."

Just as Jellal moved to raise his arm, he summoned a brown leather briefcase in his hand. Inside was the exact amount of cash plus some valuable jewels from Keaton.

"They're Rupees where I came from. But here, call them 'rare Hylian gems.' Makes them sound more valuable," the boy had told Jellal with a snide, little grin when they were preparing Rajar's payment. The handful of colourful Rupees the swordsman had tossed in was more than enough to cover the added costs.

As Jellal handed over the case, he said, "You'll find everything is here, plus the extra you spoke of. Even more."

Rajar's gold eyes were wide and gleaming as he took the cash. He turned around, careful not to smack Jellal or his merchandise with his swinging tail, and headed straight to his counter to get a better look inside.

The masked man waited patiently as the lizardman counted the bills. The reptile made a sound of awe when he found Keaton's Rupees stashed in a fancy-looking pouch tucked in one of the case's pockets.

Rajar held one of the ruby-coloured gems up to the light hanging right above him. "Ohhh! Thesssse are real?!" He sniffed it, tasted it, and brought it closer to his eye, admiring its sparkling shine.

"What you are holding is a rare Hylian gem."

"Hylian?" The lizard turned his head to give Jellal a suspicious look. "Never heard that name before."

"That is why that gem is extremely rare. And highly valuable. Selling one of those will cover that extra charge and leave a little extra for yourself as well. Consider these gems as a… thank-you gift from us, my friend."

Rajar's eyes were wide as saucers as he stared in disbelief. "Wh-Where did you--"

Jellal 'tsked' and wagged a finger. "Ask not where I got them, and I will not ask where you obtain your special wares. Now, is Rajar satisfied with his payment?"
The store owner nodded vigorously with great enthusiasm. He was visibly shaking, most likely all giddy inside at Jellal's generosity. "Yessss! Yessss! Rajar is mosssst pleassssed!" He snapped the briefcase shut and made it disappear, likely sending it to his storage dimension for safe-keeping.

He faced the mage, showing his sharp teeth in a wide, happy grin, and clapped twice; it was a signal to his ten hidden friends that they were no longer needed. Jellal could sense them leave, leaving him alone with Rajar.

"You will not be disappointed, my friend Crow. Come, thissss way." Rajar rounded his counter into the backroom and Jellal followed right after his spiny tail.

The room was small and dim with crates and boxes piled haphazardly on top of one another. There was barely any room to move around and it seemed impossible to find anything to an outsider like Jellal. The mage stayed by the doorway as the reptile shifted a stack of cardboard boxes aside, climbed over a giant crate and pushed it far enough to create a wide enough gap for Jellal to squeeze through.

"Through here, Crow," Rajar rasped from behind the crate as he soundly moved a few more things. There was a loud click followed by a dull grinding of gears as something mechanic was moving out of Jellal's line of sight.

By the time the mage managed to wiggle his way between the crate and another pile of boxes, he found a hole in the wall waiting for him. There was light flickering from the darkness inside, revealing a set of stairs that led down.

"Thissss way!" Rajar called from within.

Jellal stepped into the shadows, keeping his senses fully alert. He didn't fully trust Rajar and half-expected the lizard to have more men waiting below, ready to jump him. The stairway curved and it wasn't long until Jellal found Rajar at the bottom where awaited a wall marked with a magic seal.

The shopkeeper had his spiny back turned to the man, one hand holding onto a Lacrima lamp, and the other hand sweeping over the runes in the circle. In beast-tongue, the lizard hissed and snarled the magic chant to open the seal. The circle flashed blue and the wall started to rumble as it slid down to reveal a dark opening.

Rajar glanced at the mage over his shoulder. "It'ssss all in here," he said, gold eyes gleaming with pride. The moment Jellal stepped inside, Rajar snapped his fingers and the room suddenly lit up.

Jellal was stunned by the brightness, but did not fear any sudden attack. They were the only people in the room. When his eyes fully adjusted, he saw a fairly large room filled with gray metal barrels neatly stacked and tied together on wooden pallets.

Rajar turned to the mage and gestured to the metal barrels. "Two hundred and fifty kegssss full of volcanonyte! As you have requessssted!"

Jellal examined the closest, unmarked barrel. "And this material produces the strongest, non-magical explosion known in Earthland?"

"That issss correct! Ah! Careful! Careful!" Rajar warned when Jellal lightly touched the cold metal casing of one of the barrels. "Volcanonyte issss very unsssstable. Sssslighest bump can ssset one off! Thissss special inert ore," he pointed to the outer casing, "preventsssst the volcanonyte from reacting with air and water. Air and water are bad! Remember that, Crow! Ssssstore it carefully or elsssse Crocuussss will be no more!"
Jellal nodded. "I will keep that in mind."

"Now, if you need assistance carrying—"

The mage held up a hand to interrupt the lizard. "No need." It didn't take too long for Jellal to send every pallet into his storage dimension. One at a time, he made them all vanish.

Back upstairs in the main shop, Rajar handed Jellal a huge box full of cheap fireworks as a gift. It, too, was stored in the other dimension.

Before heading out, Jellal said, "Thank you for your service, Rajar."

Rajar bowed his head humbly. "A pleasure doing business with you, my friend Crow!" said the shopkeeper, baring all his sharp teeth in a grin. "If you are in need of Rajar's wares again, please stop by!"

Out the screaming door and into the cool night air, Jellal exhaled a deep, weary breath. The deal went better than he had anticipated. Part one of their plan was done and now it was onto the next. And it was going to be another sleepless night.

Lucy was going to die! She just knew it; her life was flashing before her eyes. She was falling and falling in pitch black darkness, screaming her lungs out, arms and legs flailing uselessly around her. Oh, what did she do to die like this?! Just when she thought the end had come, there was a blinding flash of green light right beside her and a powerful gust of wind that made her twist around. It felt like she was nearly struck with lightning for her skin got all tingly and every hair on her body stood on end. Then a pair of strong arms embraced her followed by someone saying, "I got you! Please stop kicking!"

Then her fall abruptly ended. She landed hard on top of the person holding her, drawing out a breathless "Oof!", and together they bounced, landed once again, and rolled a couple times before coming to a sudden halt.

Head spinning, Lucy drew several much needed breaths only to end up hacking at the dust flying into her mouth. She stiffened when the ground started to move right under her, moaning as if in pain. It took a long moment before Lucy realized she was lying on top of – and possibly crushing – the masked man named Keaton who had just protected her and cushioned her fall.

Lucy rolled off him and apologized profusely as she kneeled beside him. She groped for him in the darkness, hoping he wasn't badly injured. Her hands found mostly the feathers of the cloak he wore.

"I… I think I'll live," the young man croaked, his voice muffled under his mask. He coughed at the dust and hissed at the action.

"Are you hurt?" Lucy asked, wishing she could see.

"Ugh… I may have broken a rib – Ow! Or two…" Keaton groaned. From the sound of it, he was trying to sit up.

The spirit mage frowned with worry as she blindly tried to help. "I'm so sorry!" she apologized again, finding his arm. She lent him her support.

She felt his hand cover hers, cold and plated with steel. "Not your fault, Master Lucy," he assured her quietly, "I should've remembered about the trap…"
She was about to question the odd title before her name but then she exclaimed, "Wait, you knew there was a trap?!

"Was vaguely aware of it..." he grumbled. There was a rustling of clothing before something blue lit up in his hand, chasing away some of the shadows. Star-shaped and beautiful, it was a blue Lacrima crystal necklace – appearing as if a real star shining through the settling dust in the darkness that surrounded them. Keaton turned to Lucy, peering at her through the narrow slits of his fox mask. "Are you alright?"

Lucy nodded. She was a little sore and her right knee was throbbing having banged it pretty good, but other than that and a few other bruises, she was better off than Keaton. "Yes. Thanks to you," she said humbly, bowing her head guiltily. "But you should worry more about yourself. You came to rescue me and--"

He waved a hand to stop her in mid-sentence. "Getting hurt isn't new to me, Mas – err, Miss Lucy." She raised a questioning brow. He continued before she could say anything; "I'm pretty sure I've broken every rib at least once. It's not a big deal." To prove it, he got to his feet, with much grunting and staggering. He leaned against the craggy rock wall they had rolled into.

Lucy rolled her eyes and sighed. How typical of men and their manly pride. She wanted to find out what sort of other crazy things, besides breaking people out of prison, this man did for a living to result in broken bones on a daily basis. However, there were more pressing matters at the moment. She looked around where they had fallen, unable to see far in the small blue light of Keaton's pendant. Wherever they were, it seemed like an underground cavern judging by the rocky ground and wall. It was cold and dusty and the air stale and musky.

"Where are we?" she asked.

The answer to her question appeared right above them in the form of a giant hologram screen bright enough to illuminate the small, ceiling-less cavern. And on the screen was the enlarged image of the black knight's armoured face; the same man who had taken Yukino from the cell she shared with Lucy.

Although Lucy couldn't see the man's eyes hidden within the dark depths of his horned helm, she could definitely feel them glowering right at her.

"Still alive, I see," the man's voice boomed within the cavern, making Lucy's ears ring. "If the fall did not kill you, then your punishment will soon be upon you. You have fallen in Abyss Palace. There is no escape for criminals like you."

"Criminals?! Hey! I didn't do anything! And give me back my keys!" Lucy screamed at the image. It didn't seem like the knight could hear her.

"For harming a soldier, breaking into prison, and for attempting to escape, you will both be executed for these crimes. Farewell."

The hologram blipped out, casting the pair in darkness once more.

Lucy shuddered, mouth agape. *Executed?! You have got to be kidding me!*

"That man..." Keaton began, still staring where the hologram used to be, "Do you know who that was?"

The Celestial Spirit mage shook her head and slowly gathered her nerves. "I sort of met him back in prison, but he never did introduce himself. I never liked him the first time I saw him, and now I hate
him even more,” she growled.

The masked man brought a hand up to his chin. "I think I met him once before…” he murmured, mostly to himself.

"Does it matter?” Lucy asked. She was panicking. Hands running through her dirty, tangled locks, she couldn't stop shaking at the fact that they were going to be executed by the Kingdom of Fiore!


No, she couldn't let them do this to her. She had only been trying to help, didn't they understand? She will not die down here.

"Look, we… we should start finding a way out of here," she said, regaining her calm.

Keaton nodded. "You're right. It was a long time ago anyway. Let's get out of here." He held out his glowing pendant as he walked along the cavern wall, gliding his other hand over the rocky surface, perhaps searching for a way out. Lucy strode alongside him to stay in the light because she was secretly afraid that something could be hiding in the dark, waiting for the right opportunity to attack.

As she silently kept in pace with Keaton, she could tell his injuries were hindering him and he was trying his best to hide it. She glanced discreetly at his mask from time to time, trying to find a connection between this Keaton and the magic fox Reedus had drawn for Bacon. Similar name, similar faces… And his ears; she hadn't noticed it until now, but they were long and pointy, just like Bacon's. Just who was this person?

Curious, Lucy broke the tense silence, "Can I ask you something?"

"Hm?” was his response, his attention never straying from his task.

"Where did you get that mask?"

"I made it."

How intriguing. Lucy wanted to find out more. "Why do you wear it? It must be hard to see with it." Take it off. I want to see your face.

He hesitated for a moment. "I can see well enough. I wear it because it is my identity."

Damn. "Where are you from?"

He stiffened from the question. He seemed more reluctant to answer her.

Lucy softened her voice and expression, hoping to make him understand why she was prying into his life. "You see… there is a boy with us – with Fairy Tail," she began.

"And he has amnesia," he finished for her, bringing a look of shock on her face.

"Y-Yes, how did you know?” Lucy could've smacked herself for such a stupid question. Of course, he would know, he had to have met with Fairy Tail first before agreeing to come and try to rescue Lucy.

He paused and didn't answer right away because they found a change in the cavern wall. Someone had built a perfectly aligned stone wall over part of the natural, craggy rock of the cavern. Once, the covered section may have been an exit from this awful cave, but now it was barricaded by old, gray stones deeply etched with magic runes.
"Great, an enchantment," Keaton muttered in contempt as he traced one of the runes with a metal finger. "No wonder… I won't be able to use magic to get us out."

"There has to be another way out," said Lucy. She had to be optimistic in a situation like this or else it felt like it would just get worse, (which was pretty much every time she got into some sort of trouble).

Keaton turned to her and leaned his back against the wall. "There is… and it won't be easy, Master Lucy."

She abruptly pointed at his mask's pointy nose, causing him to flinch back. "There it is again! Why do you keep calling me that?" she demanded.

"Call you what?" he asked, sounding genuinely confused.

"Master Lucy." It wasn't like she didn't appreciate being called a 'master'; she always felt empowered when her spirits called her that; but that was just it, only her spirits had a reason to call her their master.

He looked away and scratched the back of his head. "Oh! Um, no I didn't."

She placed her hands on her hips. "Yes, you did! You said it a few times!"

"Did I?" He laughed nervously, which was sharply cut off by pain. He clutched his broken ribs and held up a hand as if to surrender. "Ow ow ow! Okay… Well… I suppose you'll find out eventually…" he mumbled under his breath.

She raised an eyebrow and stepped closer. "Find what out exactly? What is going on here? I'd like an explanation right now, if you don't mind?" She sounded angrier than she felt. She was tired, grumpy, frustrated, and scared and she was stuck with this stranger wearing a mask who was obviously hiding some sort of secret. She deserved some answers because she was not in the mood to play stupid mind games.

Seeing her stern 'don't-you-dare-argue-with-me' expression, (which Lucy liked to call the 'Erza-mean-face impression'), Keaton sighed and turned back to following the wall in search of an exit.

"We should keep moving," he said quietly as if in defeat, "I'll tell you everything as we go on."

Lips a thin line, Lucy marched beside the young man as he continued to drag his hand over the stone wall, producing an irritating screech every now and then. "Earlier, you asked me where I'm from. Will you believe me if I told you I'm from the future?"

Lucy missed a step and stumbled over a rock, but was quick to regain her composure. She stared dubiously at the masked man, thinking perhaps he had hit his head pretty hard when they landed. "Are you… sure about that?"

He made a strange choking noise as if trying not to laugh. "I'm positively sure. You wondered how I know about the boy with amnesia in your guild? That's because…" He paused and looked at her then, through those narrow slits for eyes. He reached for his mask and slowly slid it upwards until it rested on top of his head.

Lucy had held her breath during the whole process. And when she met those bright blue eyes set within an awfully familiar, but older face, she couldn't help but to cover her mouth and gasp upon recognition. She was speechless, shocked, and confused all at once as she did nothing but gape in absolute disbelief at the person standing before her.
"I am that boy," he finished softly, his voice almost a whisper.

The Celestial Spirit mage removed her hand and sputtered the first thing that came to her mind, "Wh-What? I don't … I don't believe this… Y-You… You're… Bacon?"

He smirked at that silly name. "Yeah, it's me, seven years from the future."

She truly could not believe it! The same fearless little boy who loved to smile and laugh was now a strong and handsome young man!

"But… how?" And then she remembered the main reason why she was in this awful mess in the first place. "The Eclipse Gate!"

He nodded, his eyes bold and determined. "Yes. I used it to come back to this time. Something terrible will happen on the final day of the Grand Magic Games, something that will turn the world to death and ruin in the upcoming future. I am here to stop it."

"Stop it? Stop what? What's going to happen?" she asked, body going numb with trepidation.

As he went back to searching for a way out of the cave, he told her the shocking truth: Dragons – ten thousand of them, all under the control of one. Single. Man. And all would come through the Eclipse Gate from the distant past when dragons once ruled the land, skies, and sea. That day would be known as The Festival of Dragons and would forever be remembered as the beginning of humanity's downfall.

Lucy had fallen into a solemn mood as she listened to Keaton's tale. She wanted to know what happened to Fairy Tail, but was too afraid to find out how many of her friends didn't survive. Keaton didn't share any details and Lucy did not press him to tell, deeply understanding how painful it would be to relive the tragedy.

Lucy asked instead, "How do you plan on stopping that future?"

"We will destroy the Gate."

"We? There are others who came back with you as well?"

Keaton shook his head and glanced at her with sadness and guilt. He turned away, head downcast as his gauntlet quietly screeched beside him. "No… I am the only one who made it," he answered, voice cracking. "Master Lucy… I call you 'Master' because you – the future you – were my last mentor and the final master of the only guild left in Fiore."

He grabbed a set of keys attached to his belt that Lucy had first thought were the prison keys he had stolen, but when he held them up for her to take, she recognized them as Celestial Spirit keys. Two gold and one silver.

Lucy carefully reached for them, her mind still reeling from this sudden revelation. The instant she touched them, she knew they were her keys but not the exact same ones she owned. Her whole set, along with her whip, had been confiscated by the guards. These ones were rough in shape; covered in scratches and worn in some places. She didn't need to read the symbols to know which keys she held.

"Loke, Gemini, and Plue…" She rubbed her thumb over each key bow as she spoke the spirits' names.

"You taught me how to summon them, how to fight with them. You taught me how to be a Celestial
Spirit mage and gave me those keys to keep as my own."

In spite of everything she had just learned, hearing that was the most shocking news to Lucy. She did a double-take and nearly tripped over another stupid rock at such a convenient time. "What?! You're a Celestial Spirit mage?!!"

She was flabbergasted and most of all, incredibly happy. Celestial Spirit mages were rare nowadays; the special magic could only be inherited, not taught. She would have never thought that Bacon was capable of summoning spirits given that he enjoyed playing with swords rather than magic. And his magical aura certainly didn't have that light, celestial feel that Lucy could sense when she was around another Celestial Spirit mage like Yukino.

"I'm not a very good Celestial mage," he said modestly, looking rather sheepish. "I didn't find out I could summon spirits until I was almost fifteen so I didn't get to train very long."

"But you remember being a Celestial Spirit mage now, don't you? Or… do you still not remember your past?"

He smiled at her, but it was more sullen than expected, "I remember everything. My real name, my past life, how I ended up at the temple… All it took was seven years and a near-death battle against Ac – whoa!" It was his turn to stumble, but it wasn't due to a rock on the ground; the cavern wall he had been leaning against as he walked had turned into a narrow fissure.

After regaining his balance, he held up his light in the opening and side-stepped into the gap that was wide enough for them to squeeze through. "I think this may be a way out," he surmised. He turned his head and motioned with his free hand for Lucy to follow.

The gap was tight, Lucy couldn't turn her head the other way if she wanted to, and the rocks on either side of her were cold and rough. She was feeling claustrophobic with the walls pressed against her, seemingly crushing the air out of her lungs. It was so dark too! She could barely see Keaton – was that his real name? – ahead of her. She was afraid of getting stuck.

Keaton must have sensed her fear because he paused and extended his hand. Lucy didn't hesitate to grab it. His grip was cold but strong and assuring. Feeling better, she allowed him to guide her. "I wasn't born a Celestial Spirit mage if you're wondering," he continued, keeping his voice low, "The power was given to me by the Celestial Spirit King back when I first met him."

Lucy squeezed his hand, once again flabbergasted. She had no idea the King could do such a thing. "During the party…" she mused, thinking back on the wonderful time they had in the Celestial Spirit World. She remembered the moment when a curious little boy had walked up to the giant of a man and offered a friendly hand in greeting. Why did the King give the boy the power of a Celestial Spirit mage and not mention it? She would have to get Loke to ask the King for answers later once they got out of their current dilemma.

"You taught me as much as you could for two years," he said, sounding wistful. "You were supposed to come with me back to this time… but the Gate only had enough magic to send one person. I didn't know… You told me to go first and I did without a second thought." His fingers tightened around hers, as if afraid to lose her. "The instant I stepped through, the door shut behind me, and you were left behind… I'm sorry… I'm so sorry… If I had known…"

"She knew you would be the one to save the future," Lucy interrupted him, speaking softly. He was crying, she could hear it in his voice. Knowing he felt absolutely guilty of abandoning her future counterpart made her heart wrench. Her future self knew the best course of action when given such a difficult decision.
"How would she know?" he muttered.

"Because you are destined to do it, just as Zirconis had said."

"Zirconis?" he snarled. His mood suddenly turned dark from hearing the dragon's name.

"You don't remember? He translated that Dracotongue thing for you. Something along the lines of you being destined to save our world, Hero of Time."

He was quiet for a moment, probably thinking. "He did?"

Lucy suppressed the urge to roll her eyes and sigh. She had to cut him some slack, it was seven years ago for him. "It was before I got thrown into prison. Wendy used her magic to summon the ghost of Zirconis."

"Oh! His ghost. Right, forgot about that. Damn prophesies…" His tone was bitter. He tensed and dropped his voice to a whisper. "There's light up ahead. We need to be on our guard. Whoever's in charge down here might be waiting for us. Use those keys – the spirits are still under your contract."

"Okay," Lucy whispered back. There was so much more she wanted to ask of him, but that would have to wait. Getting out of this Abyss Palace alive came first. Her hand clenched tight around the spirit keys Keaton had given her. Holding them gave her the strength and courage to face whatever danger lurked beneath the castle.

Just as Keaton had said, there was light when they finally reached the other end of the fissure. The young man sidled to the very edge and slowly poked his head out to scan the area. "No one out there," he whispered, "but I can sense five magical entities coming this way. We need to hurry."

As he pulled Lucy out into the open, he tucked away his necklace and slipped his mask back on. The other side of the fissure was completely different from the pitch black cavern. Underground ruins lay before them, similar to the ruins beneath Domus Flau. Seeing it made Lucy wonder if there was an entire forgotten city right under Crocus. If so, then it was possible there would be connecting tunnels that they could escape through before being found.

Sconces on the walls of the old, mossy buildings burned with eerie green flames, casting strange shadows over the crumbling stones. It was as if the ghosts of the dead were dancing among the ruins, eager for more living souls to come join them. Someone was definitely down here keeping those fires going.

Lucy gritted her teeth and swallowed her fear as Keaton pulled her into the haunted ruins. They ran through the barren streets overgrown with glowing bell flowers and thorny vines. There were large flowers blooming on the vines; red, vibrant, and nauseatingly sweet. The flowery vines seemed to grow everywhere they turned, choking old statues of giant stone knights, wrapped around support pillars that reached into the darkness above, and forming curtains that draped down the sides of walls and buildings.

Out of the emerald light and into the shadows they went, trampling through an empty plaza carpeted in dark moss. In the centre was a bare, twisted tree with gnarled roots jutting out of the cobblestone ground. Beautiful florescent mushrooms sprouted on the old, rotten trunk, providing some natural light around the area.

By then, Lucy was out of breath and struggling to keep up with Keaton's quick strides. Her body was screaming at her; lungs and muscles were burning like fire and her wounds that have yet to heal were aching like mad. She hadn't have a proper rest since leaving the infirmary however long ago so
it didn't take too long to get exhausted. She nearly tripped over a number of times, but thanks to Keaton's strong grip, she was saved from breaking her face on the ground.

Keaton suddenly stopped and Lucy had no choice but to run into him. Considering he was just as tall as her, they both fell over. Again, she was on top of him and crushing his poor broken bones. He hissed at the pain, but was quick to climb back to his feet, pulling the spirit mage with him. Sharply, he turned to the side and practically dove behind the remains of a wall that used to be a part of a building a long time ago judging by the square hole that served as a window.

Lucy pretty much collapsed against the wall while Keaton crouched under the window. He brought a finger to the smiling lips of his mask, silently telling her to be quiet. Lucy nodded and slapped a hand over her mouth to muffle her panting breaths.

She dared not to move a muscle, her back parallel to the wall they hid behind. She tried to tune her ears to listen for whatever may be following them, but all she could hear was the rapid beat of her racing heart. She watched Keaton instead, waiting for him to signal when the coast was clear.

After a few rapid heartbeats, there was an audible pounding of footsteps accompanied by heavy breathing coming towards them from the other side of the wall. It sounded like a person. Possibly male.

Lucy tensed when the person got very close to their hiding spot, soundly dragging his hand across the ancient stone as he quickly walked along. He passed the pair without noticing them and crossed the plaza, much to Lucy's relief.

Keaton carefully peeked out of the corner of the window only to suddenly pull back when the person cursed loudly in a familiar voice and began to run back the way he came. However, he didn't get very far. Lucy heard him fall hard on the ground as if he had just tripped over his own two feet.

Someone else had appeared in the plaza, giggling in amusement at the fallen man. Suddenly, there was light on the other side of the wall, illuminating the area in a soft yellowish glow. A young woman with a bubbly voice began to speak; "There you are, Captain! We've been looking all over for you!"

"C-Cosmos," the captain stammered, terror evident in his voice.

Lucy stiffened. The man was Captain Arcadios, the silver knight with the square nose who spoke of defeating Zeref using the Eclipse Gate. Was he sent down here by the short, old man?

"At your service," the woman giggled at the man's reaction. "Why such an ugly face, Captain? Oh! I suppose I shouldn't call you that anymore. Down here, you're just an awful criminal."

"I am no criminal!" Arcadios shouted defiantly. "What I did was to protect our kingdom! It was wrong for them to send me here! It was unjust!"

Cosmos laughed, her voice ringing around the abandoned ruins. "What you say doesn't matter anymore. You of all people should know that all who fall into Abyss Palace are guilty for their sinful crimes and must be executed! Since you chose to flee like a coward instead of choosing your method of execution, it looks like I get to have the honour. Oh! But before I send you to Hell, have you seen a yellow-faced rat and a blonde girl come this way?"

Arcadios growled. "I have seen no one. Who are they? Who is the blonde girl? Don't tell me…"

"They are terrible sinners, just like you. This is the most we've had within a day in such a long time. It's beautiful."
There was no doubt the woman was talking about Lucy and Keaton. Lucy slowly and carefully shifted her body so she could see what was going on, but before she could even get close enough, Keaton held up a hand and shook his head. _Bad idea_, he seemed to say.

"Are you sure you haven't seen them?" Cosmos asked. Her steps were so light, Lucy could only tell the woman was moving by the increasing volume of her voice. She was slowly approaching the pair's hiding spot, likely circling the captain as if she was the predator and he was prey. "My beauties tell me they were heading in this direction."

Lucy furrowed her brow in worry while Keaton clenched a fist. What 'beauties' did the woman speak of that had been watching them?

"I told you," Arcadios spat, "I've seen no one."

The woman hummed in disappointment. "Very well. Any last words?"

"Not once have I ever betrayed our kingdom. I have sworn to serve only my king and princess; I am their sword and shield, their light in darkness! My entire life has been devoted to protecting Fiore. You will be killing an innocent man, Cosmos."

"How beautiful," the woman gushed, standing just opposite from Lucy's and Keaton's wall.

Keaton decided to peek out the window and Lucy followed, her brown eyes falling on the back of a woman with long, pretty pink hair standing several metres ahead.

Cosmos looked as tall as Lucy and wore a white rounded hat atop her head, a long, white robe with petal-like ends, and knee-length green boots that matched the colour of plants. Floating around the plaza were fluffy balls of yellow spores that shone bright with magic, forming a perfect ring.

In the centre was the rotting tree and Arcadios, stripped of armour and looking worn and frazzled.

"Very touching," Cosmos sighed, one hand on her cheek. "But as I have mentioned earlier, no one is innocent when they are cast down here. You have been judged, ex-Captain, and you are a guilty man." She brought both of her hands outward and raised her head slightly. She spoke in a strong, authoritative voice; "I am Cosmos of the Garou Knights. As your executioner, I hereby send you to Hell for your sins!"

Lucy almost yelped when the ground began to shake and split apart as giant flowers rapidly grew from the earth, surrounding and trapping a terrified Arcadios. Buds the size of the man's head unraveled into beautiful violet blooms with open crimson centres.

"Sleep for all eternity," commanded the woman and the large flowers began to hiss, spewing some kind of purplish-gray gas from their middle holes.

Lucy needed to act quickly to save the captain. The man didn't deserve to die like this; he had been wrongly accused of treason just like Lucy! Not only that, he could help them escape!

She was about to select Loke's key from Keaton's iron ring when the young man placed a hand over hers, stopping her. She glared, her eyes silently screaming at him that she couldn't let Arcadios die. However, Keaton wasn't looking at her; the slits of his mask were focused on the scene before them.

Before Lucy could even open her mouth to argue, she felt his magic surge and in an instant Keaton's entire body was suddenly enveloped in bright green light. His body seemed to burst into thousands of light particles, releasing a powerful gust that nearly knocked Lucy right over. Then the wind shifted, carrying the emerald dust right out the window. In a blink of an eye, Keaton reappeared right
behind Cosmos in another powerful blast of wind, blowing off her hat and giving her a start. But before she could turn around, Keaton struck her from behind; swiftly chopping his hand to the back of her head, knocking her out cold.

Cosmos would have landed face-first on the hard ground if the young man hadn't grabbed her and gently laid her down. With the caster incapacitated, her spells dissipated; the flowers wilted and shriveled to dust and the glowing spores dispersed like dandelion puffs before their light faded away.

The only source of light remaining was the colourful mushrooms on the tree; faint but enough to see. Arcadios was lying prone on the ground and Keaton quickly made his way over, whipping his feathered cloak in front of him a few times to fan away the sleeping gas.

Lucy left her hiding spot, amazed at what Keaton had just pulled. She took a quick glance at the unconscious Cosmos as she passed, seeing a harmless young woman. Appearances were deceiving, however. The woman was an executioner; Lucy was afraid to know how many lives Cosmos had taken in her life.

Carefully, the Celestial Spirit mage approached Keaton as he kneeled over the captain. "That's Captain Arcadios," said the spirit mage, keeping her voice low in fear of waking up the executioner. "Is he okay?"

"He's in a deep sleep," Keaton answered, bringing some relief to Lucy. For some reason, he started to gently brush the feathery ends of his cloak over the sleeping man repeatedly.

"What are you doing?"

"This cloak has the ability to protect and ward off any magically afflicted ailments," he explained. After a few more times and nothing happened, he stopped and decided to take his cloak off instead, revealing the many pointy weapons he had hidden on his person. Knives strapped to his chest, a small sword by his waist, and upon his back, a quiver half full of arrows, a bow, a large sword, and an edge shield that appeared to be made of a monster's ruby scales. He was well armed and had gauntlets and plated boots for protection as well. All necessary to fight and defend against dragons most likely.

"Hm, it's a strong sleep spell," he mused, not noticing Lucy's staring. "It'll take a while before he'll wake and we can't stay here for too long. The rest of the Garou Knights are coming this way fast."

"If you're thinking what I'm thinking, we'll need Arcadios to show us the way out of here."

Keaton nodded. He clasped the cloak around the captain's shoulders and with Lucy's help, lifted the sleeping man onto his feet. Even without his armour, Arcadios was still a big and heavy man who weighed like a ton to Lucy. They each draped one of the captain's beefy arms over their shoulders to keep him upright.

"We need a distraction," Keaton grunted as he adjusted his hold on Arcadios. He looked over at Lucy. "Summon Gemini."

Lucy didn't hesitate or ask why; she knew exactly what he was planning. In the air before her, she twisted the scarred gold key from the future as she chanted: "Open the Gate of the Twins! Gemi! Mini!"

Something felt off when the twins took longer to appear than normal. "It didn't work?" she questioned, giving Keaton a worried look.

Before he could respond, the air before them flashed silvery white as a mirror-like rift appeared.
Gemi and Mini flew right out, both crying, "Master Lucy!" The twins circled the three once before hovering in front of Lucy, twirling and swinging their stubby arms and legs as they danced in sync.

"Sorry if we're late!" Mini exclaimed, his smile always present.

"Something weird happened," said Gemi, his tone matching his constant frown, "We heard your call, but our normal gate didn't open."

"But there was another gate," Mini added, "It opened in another location and we had to find it!"

"So weird, we don't know why that happened."

Lucy exchanged a quick look with Keaton. "You might know the reason if you transform into me," the masked man told them. "Please, hurry and do so."

"Who's this, Master Lucy?" Mini asked curiously, twirling closer to the masked man with Gemi mirroring his movements.

"Yeah, he's rather rude. He can't order us what to do!" said Gemi angrily, pointing a stubby arm at Keaton's masked face.

"There's no time to explain," Lucy began as she nodded at her future apprentice, "Do as he says."

The twins flinched back as if struck, both wearing identical shocked faces. "What?!" they cried as one.

"You'll understand when you do it, now hurry up! We're running out of time!" the girl demanded.

"Yes, Master Lucy!"

"Don't forget my feather cloak!" said Keaton right at the moment the twins joined their stubby arms together.

The spirits' bodies turned blindingly white in the darkness, forcing Lucy to shut her eyes. With a poof, the twins had taken on their new form. They didn't forget the young man's white-feathered cloak or his smiling fox mask as they stood before them, a perfect clone of Keaton

Gemi gasped, their eyes falling on their raised hands, examining them in disbelief. "You are…" they spoke in Keaton's voice, muffled by their own mask. They were in shock at Keaton's true identity.

"We need you to distract the other executioners for as long as you can," ordered Keaton, "Go now. And stay safe."

Gemini shook out of their surprise and nodded, armoured hands furling by their sides. "We will do our best… Master Link." With that, the twins took off in the opposite direction the trio was heading.

*Link, so that is your real name,* Lucy mused to herself, glancing sideways at the masked man.

As they began to trudge through the plaza, Lucy couldn't help but quietly laugh.

"What's so amusing at a time like this?" Keaton questioned, looking her way. If he wasn't wearing that mask, Lucy would probably be seeing him raise an eyebrow at her.

Lucy smiled. "Haven't you noticed? Using Gemini as a distraction was the same strategy I used back when we were trying to leave Saffarion without getting arrested."
"Really? When was that? I don't remember… As for the strategy," he soundly smirked, "I did learn from the best after all."

For some reason, hearing that made Lucy's eyes water and her heart swell with newfound pride. She started to tell the story of that disastrous day to bring back the fond memory they shared together in hope of lightening the mood.
Lucy took several satisfying gulps of delicious, refreshing water from one of Keaton's glass bottles. She poured a little in her hand and wiped her tired eyes with the cool liquid to get rid of the dirt and to keep her mind awake. After lugging Arcadios around for what felt like hours in the underground ruins that was built like a maze, the girl was exhausted. She was filthy too; her sweat soaked clothes, (which she had worn for two days straight), clung uncomfortably to her body and she was undoubtedly covered in a layer of dirt. She was desperate for a bath and a clean set of clothes to change into.

She splashed water on her hot, sweaty face. Focus, Lucy! she mentally growled at herself. Bath later. Survival more important.

"Try not to waste too much water, Master Lucy," said Keaton in a tired, hushed tone as he rested beside her. They both sat against a moss-covered wall that was once a part of a small building, hiding out of sight in the darkest shadows where the emerald flames barely touched. Arcadios was still asleep lying by their feet. "I only have one other bottle full of water with me and we might need to ration it for as long as we can until we're out of here."

Lucy wiped her face with the back of her hand, feeling guilty. "Sorry!" she quickly apologized, keeping her voice low. She corked the bottle and nudged it against the masked man's arm for him to take.

He grasped for the bottle in the dark, his metal fingers softly clinking against glass. Once he stowed it away, he brought out his star-pendant necklace, cupping the glowing crystal in his hands to limit the range of its light. He shifted to kneel by the sleeping knight's side and shook the man. When nothing happened, he resorted to lightly slapping Arcadios across the face a few times and saying the man's name.

"Doesn't look like he'll be waking up soon," Keaton sighed. He slid his mask up to his forehead and ran a hand down his face, obviously weary.

"How are you holding up?" Lucy asked out of concern as he carefully moved back to sit beside her, one hand bracing his broken ribs.

He made a vague gesture with his other hand as he answered in a casual manner, "I'm alright. Sore, tired, the usual."

Lucy frowned. It sounded like he got injured often and constantly lived with pain.

You survived seven years under the reign of mind-controlled dragons, Lucy mused with admiration. She was curious yet fearful to know what her future had become. What was Fiore like in his time? Was the land nothing but empty wastelands covered in death? Every city and town reduced to ash and ruins? What happened to Magnolia and the people she loved?

Seeing him hurt made Lucy think about Wendy and how the young Dragon Slayer would have quickly healed him if she was around. Was Wendy still alive during his time to heal his wounds? To protect him as she always did? It was heartbreaking to imagine the two children forced apart, their lives forever changed.

Lucy opened her mouth to ask but thought better of it. Instead, as she watched him stare at the glowing star in his palm, she quietly asked, "Where did you get that? It's beautiful."
A small smile graced his lips as blue eyes met brown. "This? You gave it to me," he said, holding it out for Lucy to take, "on my sixteenth birthday – well, not actually my birthday – the day I became Bacon."

Lucy held the star like a precious treasure, cupping it like Keaton had to hide as much of the light as possible to reduce the chances of being spotted in the dark. Blue Light Lacrima. It was delicately carved into the shape of a star and smooth to the touch. The coloured crystal was a rarity in Earthland. Jewelery and accessories made with blue Light Lacrima were usually over three hundred thousand Jewels on the market. How did her future counterpart get a hold of something so valuable?

"It used to be a lot brighter," Keaton continued, his smile gone, "But the Eclipse Gate drained most of its magic. It's a dying star… It won't be long until its light fades away." He stared ahead into the shadows, his expression turning into one of sorrow. "You called it the Star of Hope. 'It will guide you in the darkest night,' you said to me. And it always did."

Lucy smiled at the thought. To give such a special gift, it was definitely her that would come up with something like that. She made a mental note to remind herself to seek the same star pendent to give to Bacon later.

"You met the others before coming to rescue me, right?" Lucy questioned out of curiosity. "How did everyone react when they saw you? I bet everyone was just as surprised as I was."

Keaton slowly shook his head and kept his attention forward. "I… didn't meet up with them," he murmured, surprising Lucy. He lowered his head, eyes hidden in shadow. "When I first came here, I wanted so badly to see you all again… I was there during Wendy's battle and I saw you all in the stadium. I wanted to join you… but I knew I had more important matters to attend to. The only ones who know I'm here are Crime Sorcière and now you. I spoke to Jellal; told him the same thing I told you and asked him to help me."

"And you guys came up with the plan to blow up the Gate," Lucy concluded.

The swordsman nodded and drew a deep breath. "It could be a long shot, but it's the best idea we could come up with on such short notice."

Lucy furrowed her brow in slight anger. "Why didn't you guys tell us? We would have believed you and helped you!"

Keaton shook his head and glanced at her from the side, the corner of his lips curling into a smile. "I didn't want to take everyone's happiness away."

"Still, that—" Lucy mumbled, running a thumb over the star she held.

"I had to," he sharply cut into Lucy's remark, turning his head to meet her stare, "The more people who know about me and my plan to destroy the Gate, the higher the chances the one scheming all of this would find out. Jellal warned me of this and told me not to let anyone else know." He smirked. "Fairy Tail isn't well-known for keeping quiet after all."

The girl sighed, hating to agree with him. Thinking about it now, she knew Natsu and Erza – heck, every violent member of her guild who acted first and asked questions later – would have likely barged right into the castle, subdued every guard on duty, and hunted down the man responsible for the terrible future.

"I guess you're right…" Lucy mumbled, running a thumb over the star she held.

"Why don't you keep hold of it for now?" Keaton suggested when Lucy tried to give it back. "We
should start moving again." He moved to kneel beside Arcadios. Just when he started to lift the sleeping man's arm, Arcadios began to stir. "Oh! Guess I was wrong."

Lucy joined Keaton as he slid his mask back on. They both hovered over the waking man with Lucy holding the glowing star high enough to illuminate Arcadios's face. The captain murmured something unintelligible before going back to sleep with a loud snore, much to Lucy's annoyance.

She did not want to haul the beast of a man around again, especially when she was tired and grumpy and currently being hunted by executioners. Growling, Lucy grabbed the collar of the man's torn shirt and shook him as hard as she could. "Captain Arcadios!" Lucy snarled under her breath, "Please wake up!"

"Uh, Master Lucy? Maybe you shouldn't bang his head that hard on the ground…" advised Keaton tentatively.

"If he doesn't wake up right now, I swear I'll--"

Arcadios groaned and brought a hand up to touch the back of his head. That was when Lucy dropped the man with an audible thud. The captain blinked sluggishly, slowly coming out of Cosmos's sleep spell. It was like waking up from a strong anesthetic; it took Arcadios at least a minute before his eyes began to focus on the blue light in Lucy's hand. Then he saw Keaton's mask and his whole face twisted into horror.

Keaton clamped a hand over the captain's mouth before he could make a sound. Lucy quickly leaned close and held the man's shoulders so the captain wouldn't struggle before he could recognize her face. "It's okay! It's me! Lucy Heartfilia!" she exclaimed in a harsh whisper.

Arcadios blinked at her, his eyes wide, but no longer terrified as if waking into a nightmare.

"You need to remain calm and quiet, okay?" Lucy continued. She received a nod from the captain. She exchanged a look with Keaton and the young man withdrew his hand from Arcadios's mouth.

"L-Lucy Heartfilia…” croaked the captain, his throat hoarse. He shifted his attention to Keaton, staring at the swordsman's mask for a moment before turning back to Lucy. "You two… are the ones the Garou Knights are looking for…” he grunted as he slowly sat up with their help. "Wait… what happened? I'm still alive?" He started to feel his body, surprised he wasn't a ghost. "But Cosmos… I thought for sure that I was done for…”

"I knocked her out right when she put you to sleep," Keaton explained. He handed the man his half-full bottle of water in which Arcadios didn't hesitate to drink from.

In one breath, the captain downed the entire contents of the bottle and sighed in relief right after. He looked more awake and energized, no longer slouching in his posture. "You saved me?" he exclaimed, staring at the masked swordsman in astonishment as he handed the empty bottle back, "From a Garou Knight no less…”

"Captain," Lucy addressed, making sure she sounded urgent, "No time for praise and all that. We need to get out of here. Can you lead us to the exit?"

The man clenched his jaw stiffly as he looked between the pair in trepidation. "No one has ever escaped Abyss Palace, Miss Heartfilia," he murmured, shaking his head grimly. "It's impossible. The Garou Knights are powerful mages and they are extremely thorough with their job as executioners."

"There are five of them, correct?" Keaton asked, unperturbed by what Arcadios had just told them.
"Yes. Five highly skilled mages trained to kill," the captain stressed, giving the masked man a hard stare.

"They are not together at the moment," the other went on, "They've split into two groups. We should be able to sneak past them. But first, we need to know which way we should be going."

Arcadios blinked in shock. "Sneak past them? How would you even know where they are?"

"I can detect their positions by their magic power," answered Keaton. To be able to sense and discern the magic energies of other living beings or objects at great distances was an extremely useful skill. Lucy was flabbergasted, yet again, when Keaton had told her that it was none other than Jellal Fernandes who had taught him the ability. "There are two travelling together and it won't be long until they find our location. Please, tell us which way to go. We can escape together."

The captain grunted and shook his head. "Even if you know their locations, escape is still impossible, don't you understand? The only way out is through the Abyss Gate and only the Garou Knights can open it. Each Knight holds a special key and you need all five of them together to unlock the Gate."

Lucy was about to swear – a bad habit she had picked up from hanging around Natsu for so long – but Keaton surprisingly beat her to it, murmuring under his breath the most vulgar curse word in Lucy's dictionary. With a heavy sigh – cut short by a pained hiss – the young man sat back and crossed his arms. "Well, there goes my plan," he grumbled. "Looks like we can't avoid having to fight them."

"What if we can convince them to let us go?" Lucy suggested. "Tell them the truth?"

Arcadios scoffed. "That won't work, Miss Heartfilia. None of them will listen to a word we say. We are criminals to them no matter how innocent we are. No one, in the history of Fiore, has ever escaped or been released from Abyss Palace." He faced the masked man, dark eyes scrutinizing. "If you choose to fight them, you are forfeiting your life."

"I'd rather fight to stay alive than be hunted like a cowardly animal," Keaton countered harshly. "Do you want your final moments to be down here, Captain?"

Lucy joined in. "You can't give up already, Captain Arcadios! You said so yourself that you're an innocent man. You and I have been wrongly accused of treason! We do not belong here!"

The man clenched his hands and gritted his teeth. "It… It doesn't matter for me now. I've done all I can to protect our kingdom. It's up to my subordinate to keep Fiore safe."

"Does he know what will happen on the day of the eclipse?" Keaton demanded, straining to keep his voice low. Even though Lucy couldn't see his face, she could tell he was starting to get very frustrated.

Arcadios narrowed his gaze in suspicion. "What do you know about the eclipse? Just who are you?"

"I know what will happen when that accursed Gate is opened," snarled the young man as he rocked on his heels to lean right into the captain's face as if challenging the other. "The kingdom you wish to protect will be destroyed."

"Wh–" An armoured hand was slapped over Arcadios's mouth before he could even form a word.

Finger to his mask's smiling lips, Keaton quickly hushed the older man. In a whisper, he continued, "I am from the future, Captain, and the future is not a pleasant world. Thousands of dragons terrorize the land, hunting and killing every living person they can find. No town or city is left standing in
Fiore and most of the land is barren and dead. Do you know where those damn dragons came from in the first place, Captain? They came from the Eclipse Gate!"

Arcadios pulled away from the other's hand, gaping in shock at the masked man. It took a little while for him to process everything that was said. His mouth was flapping like a fish out of water before he could form coherent words. "You're... from the future? W-Wait... What? The dragons came from the Gate? But... the Gate was supposed to be a weapon to stop the dragon invasion!" He suddenly narrowed his gaze at Keaton. "What is going on here? You're lying, aren't you? Who the hell are you?!"

Keaton hushed him yet again, angering the captain. "I'm telling the truth," said the swordsman, removing his mask to show his face. Blue eyes pierced green in a fervent gaze. "Do you recognize me? I think you've already met my younger self in this timeline."

"You did meet," said Lucy, hoping to clarify. "The youngest boy that was with us before we were apprehended by the guards, wearing the green cloak," she pointed at Keaton, "that is him in this time."

Recognition flashed across the captain's face when he looked the boy over, his eyes lingering on the swordsman's long ears. "It... It really is you. Then what you said--"

"Is true," finished Keaton.

Arcadios still didn't want to believe it, Lucy could see it in his eyes. The man rubbed at his temples and slowly shook his head. "I don't understand... We were forewarned of the dragon invasion. Ten thousand of them. From the sky not the Eclipse Gate!"

"Who warned you of the invasion?" Keaton inquired, frowning.

The captain breathed a deep sigh as he ran a hand down his tired face. "He gave us no real name, but called himself The Prophet," he began, dropping his gaze to his clenched fists on his lap. "Seven years ago, he somehow appeared out of thin air right before the throne of His Majesty. He spoke of the eclipse and the Festival of the Dragon King on July 7, X791 and gave King Toma... he gave him the blueprints for the Eclipse Gate. He told His Highness about the Gate's power, how it could store an unlimited amount of magic that could then be used as a powerful cannon to annihilate the dragons."

"The king believed him just like that?" Lucy asked in disbelief.

"No," murmured the captain with a rough shake of his head, "Not right then. I thought he was threatening King Toma and tried to arrest him, but he vanished just when I was about to make my move. It was a few months later when he appeared again and warned us of an assassination attempt on Princess Hisui's life. After we foiled the assassins' plans, we started to believe in The Prophet's words."

"It could have been staged."

"Don't you think I would have thought of that? I interrogated the assassins; gave them all Truth Potions so there would be no lies. None of them were affiliated with The Prophet."

Keaton brought a hand to his chin and furrowed his brow in thought. "This prophet, he must be the one behind all of this..." he said, his expression turning dark, "Where is he now? Do you know? What does he look like?"

Arcadios shrugged his bulky shoulders. "He was a tall man, but I never got a good look at his face.
He wore a beggar's cloak with a hood that concealed his face in shadow. After the king agreed to build the Eclipse Gate in secret from the public, The Prophet disappeared and never returned. I can't tell you more than that, I'm afraid."

"He must be here, hiding somewhere within Crocus, waiting for the Eclipse Gate to open. He's the one controlling the fate of Fiore and we need to stop him!"

"And how do you plan to stop someone who has never been seen for seven years, boy?"

As Keaton carefully got to his feet, he huffed, "I don't know. I'll have to figure that out later. Right now, we need to focus on getting out of here. Now, are you with us or not, Captain?" He extended a hand for the other man to take.

Arcadios's face was unreadable as he stared at the offered hand. "Escaping… will not be easy," he said, shifting his gaze between the mages.

"We won't know until we try," said Keaton, glancing over at Lucy who gave him an assuring nod and confident smile. "I can tell the Garou Knights are strong, but I've fought much stronger beings in my lifetime. I will not be stopped by them, not when this world is in grave danger. I have traveled back to this time to change the future, Captain, and that is what I intend to do."

Lucy was impressed by his words and she wasn't the only one.

Arcadios gazed upon the swordsman with newfound admiration when he grabbed the boy's hand. As he was pulled to his feet, he said, "You've grown into a strong, brave warrior. You would make an excellent knight, boy. One I would be proud to have by my side." Standing at least one head taller, the captain reached out and placed a large hand on the young man's shoulder. "Thank you for showing me what true courage looks like. Let me help you as much as I can."

He quickly briefed them on the Garou Knights; spoke of their appearances and each of their abilities. There were three men and two women. Their weaknesses were unknown, but they had plenty of strengths. Individually, each could take out groups of soldiers. All together, they were an unbeatable force against a whole army.

Kama was the leader. A wielder of two scythes, he relied more on his weapons than his own magic for his executions.

Neppa was a large man capable of conjuring copious amounts of acid. His acid was so corrosive it could eat through the strongest steel in seconds.

Uosuke was the strange one with a fish-like face and abnormally large forearms. Arcadios feared him the most; "Not even the bones are left when he's done…” They were warned not to judge Uosuke by his odd, almost innocent appearance because he was the most dangerous Knight. He could alter the terrain on a whim by summoning whirlpools, icebergs, lava pools, and worst of all, he could control gravity.

Kamika was a woman with dark hair who used paper magic. Each colour of her paper had different magical properties, but unfortunately, Arcadios couldn't remember which colour did what.

Last, but not least, was Cosmos, the woman with pink hair. As Lucy had witnessed, Cosmos specialized in plant magic. She could summon different types of plants to aid her, including strangling vines and flowers that spewed toxic spores. She even had special spying flowers, which she had likely placed around the ruins to easily locate her targets. None of the plants growing in Abyss Palace could be trusted.
"Lucy and I will try to ambush the two coming this way," said Keaton as he clasped his feather cloak back around his shoulders. "Captain, you should hang back and stay out of sight."

The older man grunted in annoyance. "I wish I could be of more use to you both."

"You already gave us some vital information," said Lucy, giving Arcadios a cocky grin – one Natsu would probably be proud of. "Now we know what to expect from these guys. We won't be caught off guard."

Keaton's smirk was the last thing she saw before he put his mask back on. "Let's go. Lucy, turn the light off."

"Uh, how do I turn it off?" the girl questioned when nothing happened after she shook the Lacrima pendant a few times.

"Flick it hard," the young man replied.

And when she did, the world went pitch black for several seconds before Lucy's eyes could adjust to the faint emerald light provided by the distant fires. As she stuffed the necklace into one of her pockets, she held her breath and listened as Keaton began to whisper, "They're about ten minutes away from us. We will make our way around them to attack from behind and take them out by surprise if possible."

"If that doesn't work?" Lucy asked, starting to feel anxious. There were many things that could go wrong.

"One thing you've always told me was to always be ready for the worst case scenario."

She quietly giggled. It was definitely something she would say. "Best advice I've ever heard."

He laughed along with her.

Keaton led the way, moving as swiftly and stealthily as his injury would let him, maneuvering between the ruins in the direction of the flickering light up ahead. It took a moment before Lucy realized that some of the light was moving, which meant someone was carrying one of the green torches around. About half-way upon reaching the mobile source of the light, Keaton motioned for Lucy and Arcadios to be very quiet. They slowed their pace to avoid making too much noise with their steps.

Around a corner and through the broken shell of a building they went. When they passed through the small doorway, they sidled up against the outer wall of a neighboring structure.

Lucy's heart nearly skipped a beat when she heard voices echoing from somewhere far on the other side of the wall. She couldn't pick out any words but she could tell the speakers were both men.

With his hands, he silently told Arcadios to stay put and Lucy to follow. Both nodded.

Heart fluttering with nervousness, the spirit mage followed her future apprentice. She was no longer feeling exhausted due to the adrenaline pumping through her veins. She had to be ready; any mishap could mean the end if the Garou Knights truly did not hesitate to kill their opponents. From the back pocket of her shorts, she quietly pulled out Keaton's ring of keys and held them tight, drawing strength from her spirit friends.

They were moving at a crawl by the time they got close enough to spot their two male targets. Backs pressed against the crooked stone of what remained of a house, they hid among the shadows cast by
the emerald flame carried by the largest of the men.

Spiky blond hair, gorilla-like arms with a flaming torch in one hand and a green bottle of soda in the other; the big guy was Neppa the acid-user. The shorter one in the lead was armed, carrying twin scythes on his back and wearing a dark hood and a metal mask that covered the lower half of his face. He was Kama, the leader of the Garou Knights.

They were a good distance away from Lucy's and Keaton's hiding spot, walking through a wide open area littered with rubble. Keaton slowly and quietly took out his bow and pulled an arrow from his quiver. The bow he held greatly differed from the one he used as a child; it was larger, the grip was guarded on top and bottom by curved spines, and the limbs were covered in a creature's pearly white scales with the ends forming the shape of feathered wings. Even his arrow looked different from a normal arrow with the sharp point made of some type of oily-black metal.

He shifted a little closer before he nocked his arrow and took aim. Lucy could hear her heart thundering in her chest as she watched the scene slowly unfold. She was tense, but unlike her, Keaton seemed so calm and focused. Looking at him now, it was almost hard to believe that he used to be the young, curious boy named Bacon.

The childish wonder that defined him had been replaced by a warrior's mindset. He knew what he was doing; he had to wait for the two Knights to walk by and show their backs to make their ambush somewhat of a success.

The two men were busy talking, oblivious to the fact that they were being watched.

"Getting so late. Is it early morning now?" Neppa asked in his deep, loud voice, never removing the lip of his bottle away from his mouth. He took a swig of his drink and continued. "Cosmos should've waited for us, I told that woman."

"It's fortunate she only got a bump on her head and nothing more, " replied the other, his voice muffled by his mask.

Neppa soundly smirked as he marched behind his leader on shorter legs. "Oh, she's got more than a bump, she's got a bruised ego. She's pretty pissed to be taken out by a lousy criminal. Must've been that yellow-faced rat we were chasing earlier. I'll betcha one thousand Jewels she'll tear him into pieces instead of sending him off to sleep when she finds him."

Kama snorted, "She mustn't lose her cool under these circumstances. If they are able to sneak behind her--"

Keaton fired his arrow, but it was no ordinary arrow soaring through the air. A second before he released it, he had powered it up with his magic, shrouding the tip in a deep blue mist. And within a heartbeat, he shot a second magic arrow. Both were aimed at the backs of the men, appearing as nothing but blue streaks.

Just when Lucy thought it was as easy as that, both executioners twirled around the instant the second arrow was fired. Kama's reflexes were as quick as lightning as he deflected Keaton's blue arrow with the blade of one his scythes. As Neppa spun on his heel, he swung his torch-carrying arm outward and conjured a bright purple liquid that acted as a shield. When the magic arrow struck the purple wall, it flashed with a blue light and steam. Pale blue ice soundly formed, freezing every drop of the purple liquid in a matter of seconds. Neppa's now frozen shield shattered on the ground like glass. Both Knights weren't taken by surprise, judging by the sneer on Neppa's face and the ferocity in Kama's sharp eyes; they had been expecting something like a sneak attack.
With both scythes in his hands, Kama was already charging straight for Keaton and Lucy's hiding spot before Lucy could even blink. He was like the grim reaper in appearance with his huge, deadly blades glinting by his sides and his dark cloak flapping behind him.

Keaton growled and fired a third ice-powered arrow at the oncoming Knight, but Kama easily deflected it yet again, sending the arrow into the darkness where it burst and froze something out of sight.

"Fools!" shouted the executioner, "There is no mercy for sinful cowards like you!"

The masked swordsman quickly put away his bow and stepped out of his hiding spot while shouting, "Lucy!"

She nodded, understanding from his urgent tone that it was time to fight. Gold key in hand, she called forth her chosen Celestial Spirit; "Open the Gate of the Lion!" However, just like with Gemini, Loke didn't appear right away. She cursed and hung back as Keaton and Kama clashed weapons.

The masked swordsman was now equipped with his red shield in his right and his smaller sword in his left. He was blocking and evading Kama's relentless onslaught; the man's large scythes moving at a blurring speed, constantly aiming for the young man's neck. The cavern rang loud every time black steel struck crimson.

Keaton was forced to say on the defensive, but no matter how strong Kama swung his twin weapons, Keaton's guard never weakened. He was unyielding, as sturdy as his shield and as swift as his arrows. When Kama pulled back his scythes to perform a guillotine maneuver, Keaton quickly switched to the offensive and rushed forward, thrusting his sword at the Knight's exposed belly.

Lucy, so mesmerized by the incredible battle, didn't get to see what happened next because she heard Loke yell, "Lucy! Look out!" before she was roughly tackled to the ground.

She heard something splash and violently hiss before she caught a whiff of some noxious fumes that stung her eyes and burned her nostrils. Strong arms carried her away from the bubbling, smoking pool of purple acid that none other than Neppa could produce.

"Huh? Where'd you come from?" she heard Neppa exclaim out of surprise.

"Loke! Thank you!" said the Celestial Spirit mage the moment she laid her eyes on her savior. "That was a close one."

"Sorry, I'm late," replied the great lion as he flashed his master a handsome, but also apologetic smile. He lowered Lucy on her feet, straightened his tie, and stepped protectively in front of her to face the large Knight glowering at them behind his bottle. "I sensed you were in trouble a little while ago, but something was preventing me from opening my gate. And then the strangest thing happened when you called for me, another gate opened, but it was--"

"In another location?" Lucy finished for him with a raised her brow. When he nodded, she asked, "The same thing happened to Gemini. Didn't they tell you guys anything?"

"Well, when they came back to the Celestial Spirit World, they were about to tell us this 'awesome surprise', but then you summoned me. So… no. Is this the surprise? Seeing Master Lucy covered in dirt with every hair out of place? You're still beautiful, by the way," he quickly added when he sensed her glare at the back of his head, "Way prettier than," he pointed at Neppa, "that ugly fellow. So why are you down in this cave and what's going on over there?" He nodded in the direction of
Keaton and Kama who were both busy dancing and talking with their weapons to notice Loke's presence.

"Ugly?" Neppa growled at the insult, his small eyes narrowing to angry slits. "You're going to regret that once I melt your stupid little face off, spirit!" He plunged the pointed end of his torch into the ground and left it erect as he stomped towards Loke. He raised his beefy arm and punched hard into the ground with enough force make a crater.

"Explain later! Fight now!" Lucy shrieked as she felt the ground rumble beneath her.

Loke twisted around, grabbed his master's arm and leapt to the side just in time to avoid a geyser of hissing acid that appeared right where they were standing only seconds ago. Lucy cringed at the horrible sound as the corrosive liquid quickly ate away every stone it touched. One drop on her skin would leave a permanent scar or even worse.

Neppa growled and swept his free arm, conjuring more of the purple liquid and sending it towards the pair in a deadly spray.

Muttering a string of colourful expletives, Loke picked Lucy up yet again and dove behind a pile of rubble for cover. Their broken stone barrier noisily hissed the instant it came in contact with the acid, making Lucy panic. Loke decided to smother her from above to shield her from any stray splashes.

"Ah shit! This stuff burns like hell!" Loke snarled as he hastily wiped at the back of his neck with the sleeve of his suit.

Lucy coughed at the strong fumes and covered her mouth and nose. "Let's find some more cover! Over there!" She pointed and grabbed Loke's arm to lead him towards an old building made of rotted wood and chipped stone. They ran behind it, using it as a temporary shield against Neppa's dangerous magic.

Loke shed his suit that now had little holes from where the acid had eaten through. He swore under his breath. "I won't be able to attack him and keep you safe at the same time. His magic is hard to avoid," he growled, hissing in pain when he felt his burned neck.

Lucy held up Gemini's key and took a deep breath. Exhausted as she was, she still had the magic energy to call forth another spirit. "Then we need a little more help."

The twins appeared immediately right after she called for them unlike the first time. They hovered before her.

"Master Lucy! Are you fighting those executioners?" Gemi asked, dancing alongside his brother.

"Shall we take on the form of Master Link?" asked Mini.

Loke raised an eyebrow at the twin spirits. "Master who?"

"Remember the awesome surprise we wanted to tell everyone back in the spirit world?" Gemi began.

While the brothers started to explain, Lucy quickly pondered over Mini’s suggestion. Keaton had the power to freeze Neppa's acid with his arrows. That would be useful in stopping his magic and giving Loke an opening to get close to attack.

"Do it," commanded Lucy, interrupting the twins' before they could reveal Keaton's true identity. "Transform into Keaton."
"Keaton? Now who's this guy?" Loke asked, confused.

"He's Master Link!" chanted the twins right before they connected their stubby arms. In a bright flash of white, the little spirits merged together and in their place was the swordsman from the future donning the smiling fox mask and feathery cloak.

"Oh, that guy fighting the other dude," murmured Loke with a nod. "Now who is he, exactly?"

Neither Lucy nor Gemini got a chance to answer because they heard the awful splashing and hissing of Neppa's acid when it struck the other side of the building they were hiding behind. "Don't think you can run and hide from my magic!" the Knight bellowed.

"I have a plan!" whispered Lucy. She quickly told her spirits what to do as their barrier began to noisily dissolve and crumble from the purple acid.

Gemini nervously scratched the side of their masked face after hearing her strategy. "We haven't tried using Master Link's magic yet. We don't know if we can use it since it's so different from ours."

Loke raised his brow but didn't say anything.

"What?!" Lucy exclaimed, clutching the sides of her head in panicking horror. It was such a perfect plan! There was no changing it now with their last wall of defense starting to disintegrate. "At least try! You have to be able to! Come on, let's do it!"

"Aye, Master Lucy!" said Loke and Gemini in unison.

Gemini split away from the group, dashing to the right to merge with the shadows while Lucy and Loke went left, rounding the corner and out in the open where Neppa could spot them.

The executioner was sneering in delight having flushed his targets out of hiding. Bottle still clenched between his teeth, he chortled and said, "You should stop putting up a fight. This is the end of the line. No criminal can escape my acid."

Loke once again stood protectively in front of Lucy. "You're a sick bastard, you know that?" he growled angrily. He cracked each of his knuckles as he eyed his opponent, eager to wipe the smile off the Knight's ugly face. "You're the real criminal here, pal. Wanting to harm a pretty girl is a serious offence!"

The executioner guffawed, never taking his bottle away from his mouth. "She won't be pretty for long once I'm done with her."

"You..." Loke seethed, his mane of hair bristling, "I'm going to make sure you never get that chance."

"You think you can stop me? Many have tried and none have ever succeeded against me." Neppa held up his free hand and formed a glob of purple acid that hovered above his palm. "Even the strongest armour is no match against my magic. What good is your own skin and flesh? The instant my acid touches you, you're dead."

"Then let's see if you can get me first!" Loke roared, lunging straight for the big Knight.

"Big mistake!" laughed Neppa as he summoned a large amount of corrosive liquid before him and sent it splashing towards the great lion in a big, purple wave that swallowed everything in its path. "Try to avoid this one!"
Lucy prayed to every merciful god for her plan to work as she watched the deadly liquid rush towards Loke and her. Loke kept running fearlessly towards it, confident that they were not going to fail.

Just when the acid wave was seconds away from slamming into the lion, Lucy saw three deep blue streaks that flew over Loke's head and collided with the purple liquid at various parts, each erupting with brilliant flashes of blue. Pale, crackling ice magically formed within a blink of an eye, encasing and freezing all of Neppa's magic.

Loke was already leaping over the ice before the executioner could even realize what had just happened. Right fist engulfed with golden light in the shape of a lion's head, Loke pulled back and punched the stunned Knight squarely in the face with a shout; "Regulus Impact!" The magic lion exploded with blinding energy and a mighty roar that shook the cavern. The blow was so strong Neppa was sent crashing through a number of ancient structures, completely destroying some and badly damaging others, before finally coming to a halt somewhere in the distance, leaving a trail of dust clouds and debris.

Lucy cheered and went to join Loke, who was massaging his sore hand and wearing a satisfied grin. Gemini stepped out from their hiding spot with their copy of Keaton's bow still in hand. "Great job, guys!" Lucy praised her friends. "I had faith in you both."

"The plan actually worked," said Gemini, sounding quite happy.

Loke breathed a big sigh of relief. "Thank the Spirit King it damn well worked," he said, grabbing Lucy's hands and giving her an affectionate smile. "It was Master Lucy's smart plan after all!"

The girl gently shoved the love-sick spirit away. "Both of you, go and make sure Neppa will stay down for a while and search him for some sort of key. We'll need it to get out of here."

The Celestial Spirits nodded and followed the trail of destruction. Lucy overheard them continue their conversation from before just as they disappeared from view. The girl was curious to see Loke's reaction when he found out the identity of Gemini's current form, but she needed to check on Keaton first.

It wasn't difficult to find the swordsman and Kama. All she had to do was follow the clangor coming from the battling warriors. By the sound of it, they were still going strong, making the cavern ring with clashing metal and battle cries.

Lucy spotted the dueling pair near the very edge of the open area where the light from Neppa's emerald torch could not reach. She saw one of Kama's scythes dropped on the torn ground, its sharp edge spotted with blood. One of Keaton's knives was lying not too far away and it too glistened with something dark and wet. She went to pick it up and nearly dropped it the instant she touched the cold blood staining the black leather hilt.

Slowly and cautiously, she approached their fight, flinching every time their weapons met. Sparks flew whenever their blades struck shield or scythe, briefly lighting up their masked faces. And each time, Lucy took note on how they were faring against each other.

Keaton was favouring his right leg and Kama's left arm was stiff and bloody by his side.

With his shield, Keaton deflected Kama's horizontal swipe and tried to move close to counter with a downward strike, however, due to his wounded leg, his movements were hindered. The leader of the Garou Knights easily dodged the short blade wanting to cut him by jumping back, putting some distance with a single bound.
They stood apart to catch their breaths, eyes locked on each other, both unaware of Lucy's presence. They panted heavily from exertion, but neither was ready to fall in defeat.

"Give up," snarled Kama between breaths, his sharp eyes boring into the other, "With an injury like that, you no longer stand even against me."

"And yet, here I stand," Keaton shot back, a sneer evident in his tone. He kept his shield up and his sword lowered by his side, prepared to defend against the executioner's next move.

Kama growled and shifted into an attacking stance; gripping the shaft of his scythe with both hands and holding the blade over his shoulder. "Your skill is admirable, I will admit," he said, his voice low. "No vile criminal has ever earned my praise. It's disappointing that you are a man of sin. Allow me to cleanse your soul and give you an honored death!"

He leapt towards the other, willing to put all his strength behind his next attack.

Keaton flinched into what Lucy thought was a defensive stance. But then she felt his magic surge and saw his sword start to shine with bright blue energy that lit up the area and both fighters. Skin tingling, she recognized the spell immediately and could only watch in stunned silence as their battle had finally reached a climax.

Blue turned into fiery red a split-second before Kama was within range. Yelling with all their might, both fighters swung their weapons at the same time; Kama going for a lightning-quick sweep from the side and Keaton rapidly spinning on his heel to perform his powerful spin attack. Their blades collided in mid-strike with an ear-deafening clang, but only one would come out the victor.

Keaton's magic flared out like deadly fire, knocking the Knight's weapon out of his hands. Then in one quick motion, Keaton spun around once more on the same heel, moving along with his carried momentum to slash his fiery sword across Kama's exposed torso.

The leader of the Garou Knights let out a pained cry as he was thrown back from the blow. He flew a good distance away from the other and crashed hard against the ground before skidding to a stop. He didn't move right after.

Keaton snarled in pain when he had to put weight on his injured leg when he tried to regain his balance. Unable to tolerate the agony, he fell on his side and groaned.

Lucy quickly ran to him while shouting his name out of worry.

"The other guy?" he asked after she helped him sit up.

"He's been taken care of, I think," Lucy answered. She took out the swordsman's star pendant to provide some light to see more clearly. "I sent Loke and Gemini to make sure he's out for the count and to grab his key."

He nodded as he dug into his pouch for something. "You're not hurt. That's good. I see it went a lot better for you," he said with a little laugh. He ripped open the hole in his bloody pant leg to reveal the terrible gash that heavily bled. Lucy covered her mouth and gasped in horror at the sight of it.

Keaton, on the other hand, only sighed, acting rather annoyed instead of horrified at such a wound. He quickly pulled out one of his bottles, inspected it to make sure he had the right one, and then uncorked it. Inside wasn't a liquid but some sort of clear, thick, translucent goop that he scooped up with his hand and smeared over the bleeding gash on his thigh. It had a strong herbal scent to it that oddly reminded her of Porlyusica's home.
She frowned and searched around for something that could be used to bind his wound. He beat her to it by proceeding to cut away the ends of his long tunic with a knife, making a few long strips, in which he used to bandage his leg.

"Will you be okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, don't worry," he pulled up his mask, wiped the sweat off his face, and gave her an assuring smile. His gaze fell on the fallen Knight as he started to put away his equipment. "I didn't expect his scythe to fly back to him right after he tried throwing the damn thing at me."

"I'm glad you're safe," she said, handing him his dropped knife. She was greatly relieved that they had won their first battles against the Garou Knights. There were three left; how were they going to defeat them when Keaton had sustained another injury?

He thanked her for returning his knife and used the torn end of his tunic to clean the silvery blade before sheathing it.

Lucy jumped to her feet in alarm when she heard Gemi and Mini call her name upon their return. Back in their original forms, the twins were zooming towards her, leaving trails of glittering light with Loke not too far behind.

The twins were both carrying a large, black iron key. "I think we found the key you wanted," said Gemi as the spirits dropped the item into Lucy's waiting hand.

Lucy pursed her lips as she examined the key. It was slightly larger than a Celestial Spirit key and heavier than it appeared to be. Engraved on the bow was the gold Royal Emblem of Fiore. "Looks important so it must be it," she surmised.

"It's the only key we could find on that guy," said Loke with a shrug as he strode past them. Wordlessly, he crouched beside Keaton, pushed his blue-tinted shades up to his forehead, and leaned right into the young man's face for a better look.

Keaton didn't flinch away from the other invading his personal space. Instead, his blue eyes brightened and his lips curled into a familiar smile. "Hello, Loke."

The lion blinked in bewilderment before he grinned. "Well, well. Little man, it really is you!" he exclaimed, moving back to look the boy over from head to toe. "I don't freaking believe it… You're all grown up! So you came from the future, huh?"

The twins flew in opposite circles around the men. "Told you it was an awesome surprise!" they shouted in excitement. They stopped to hover above the lion's head and started their synchronized dance.

Loke chuckled. "Yeah, quite a shocking tale. Seriously, I really can't imagine you being my next master."

Keaton's expression became serious; his youthfulness instantly replaced by a mature, battle-hardened man. "That may never happen. If we can destroy the Eclipse Gate before the day of the eclipse, the future will turn out differently, hopefully for the better. That is, if we can escape this place."

The lion gripped the swordsman's shoulder. "We'll get out of here. Link, right? Much better name than 'Bacon'."

The other chuckled at the comment. "Agreed. But Link is my past name. I prefer to be called 'Keaton' instead."
"Why Keaton?"

The boy lightly tapped his fox mask and formed a wistful smile. "Because I grew up and survived in this world as Keaton, not Link. Uh, do you mind lending me a hand? My leg has gone numb and we should be getting out of here. The other three Knights heard the commotion and are now heading our way. We need to think up a plan before we can go up against them."

"Oh. Here, I got you." Loke draped one of Keaton's arms over his shoulder and helped the wounded swordsman stand. With his wounded leg gone completely limp, Keaton needed Loke to support him.

"Gemi, Mini," Loke addressed his fellow Celestial Spirits, "Head back to the spirit world. I'm going to stay here and keep an eye on these two."

The twins nodded and disappeared.

"There are actually three of us," said Lucy. As if on cue, she heard heavy footsteps running towards them. Heart-skipping a beat, she twirled around and was glad to see it was only Arcadios.

As the captain made his way over, he was carefully looking around the area, noticing all the damage to the ground and buildings. He paused for a moment to eye the frozen acid wave and glanced warily at Kama's weapon lying on the ground. "I-I heard all that noise and... Did you do it?" He found his answer when he spotted Kama lying motionless off to the side. His jaw dropped to the ground. "You defeated Kama?!" he shrieked, surprised, amazed, and stunned all at once. "I... I-I would never have thought... Wait, what happened to the other Knight? There was a second person with Kama, wasn't there?"

"That big, ugly, acid-spewing guy?" Loke questioned with a raised brow and cocky sneer. "I'm pretty sure I knocked him into next week. He won't be getting up for a while."

Arcadios didn't notice the great lion until now. "Who are you?"

"Loke, good sir. I'm one of Master Lucy's Celestial Spirits."

Arcadios nodded and introduced himself before inquiring about the Knights' keys.

Lucy held up the black key the twins had given her. "Is this one?"

The captain was extremely ecstatic that Lucy was afraid he was going to have a heart-attack. "Yes! That's it! There should be five of them and they are all identical. Each Garou Knight has one. Did you get the second one as well?"

"Not yet," replied Keaton, turning his attention to Kama. "Had to tend to my injury first before I could search for it."

"I can get it," said Lucy. But before she could take a step, Keaton stopped her.

The injured warrior dug into his pouch and handed her the bottle that had the thick, clear goop. "Put some on his wounds. It's a salve that'll stop the bleeding and numb the pain for a few hours."

Arcadios asked the same question that sprang to Lucy's mind; "Are you sure about this? The man tried to kill you."

Keaton nodded and turned his weary gaze on the fallen Knight, looking rather guilty. "I didn't come to the past to kill anyone. I just want to save everyone's future."
Lucy nodded in understanding. "Leave him to me," she said as she strode over to the unconscious man. Out of caution, she prodded Kama's foot with her shoe to make sure he wasn't going to wake up anytime soon. She gasped when she shined some light over him, seeing the awful wound Keaton had inflicted with his spinning attack. Kama was wearing plated armour throughout the entire battle and it did little to protect from Keaton's magic blade. The metal had been slashed wide open from side to side and the flesh beneath bled profusely. In spite of his injury, he was still alive, but his breaths were quick and shallow.

After wrapping Keaton's necklace around her wrist to free her hands, Lucy did as Keaton had asked and carefully smeared the strong-smelling gel-like medicine over the executioner's bleeding wounds. Once finished, she wiped her hands on her shorts and began rummaging through Kama's belt pouches for his black key. Meanwhile, she listened to the men converse.

"We could ambush the other three if we wait for them to arrive here," suggested Arcadios.

"I don't think that's a good idea," said Loke, "The kid's in no condition to fight another battle right now. He can't even stand!"

Keaton grunted. "The salve's numbing effect will last at least four hours. I might be able to walk right after."

"We can't wait that long. What if Kama and Neppa recover by then? You won't be just dealing with three Knights," argued the captain.

"I'm pretty sure it'll be a couple days before either of them will be getting up," Loke pointed out.

"We need to be careful from now on," advised Keaton, sounding tired, "Our ambush didn't work against Kama and Neppa. They were expecting a surprise attack and I can only assume the other three are well prepared for one too. With their leader down, how do you think they will respond?"

Arcadios groaned. "I really don't know… This would be the first time Kama has been defeated. If they are arrogant enough, the remaining Knights will likely continue their hunt for us to avenge their fallen comrades."

"Knowing these types of people, they're going to be pretty mad when they find out what happened to their pals," murmured Loke.

"Definitely gonna hunt us down," sighed Keaton.

Lucy's fingers finally grasped onto something that felt like a key in one of Kama's back pouches. Smiling, she returned to her companions. "I got it. Let's find a safe place to hide. We can think of something then," she suggested, giving Keaton his bottle back.

The three of them looked at Arcadios until he finally agreed. The group of four left the area, moving in the opposite direction of the approaching Knights at a speed that Keaton could manage with Loke's support. Lucy was in the lead, using Keaton's pendant, still wrapped around her wrist, to light their way ahead. Striding silently beside her was Arcadios who appeared to be deep in thought, judging by the furrow of his brow. Behind her were Loke and Keaton; the swordsman was leaning heavily against the lion, dragging his wounded leg and hopping with the other.

Although the pain in Keaton's leg was numbed, he still had his broken ribs to deal with. He was hurting; Lucy could hear it whenever he took a sharp breath, but he didn't complain or slow them down too much.

The Celestial Spirit mage led them through the maze of ruins, making sure to keep some distance
from the flickering emerald lights where Cosmos's plants tend to grow. It was roughly an hour later when they finally stopped due to Keaton starting to pass out.

They hid within a barren shell of a small home that had a carpet of moss and a missing roof. The group huddled around a corner with Keaton resting against the wall. He was exhausted, but refused to sleep.

"The three remaining Knights are searching for us," he told them, trying to rub away the weariness from his eyes with the heel of his hand, "I can't rest now."

"I know, but we can't have you fainting on us," stated Loke, sitting beside him to keep a close eye. "When's the last time you actually got some sleep? You look awful."

The swordsman scoffed and looked off to the side. "I dunno… It would be some time before I came here. Maybe four days ago? It doesn't matter…"

"Four days?!" Lucy nearly shrieked. "How are you still alive?!" Or the better question would be, how was he still a tolerable person to be around? Whenever she missed a few hours of beauty sleep, she was like a grouchy bear who couldn't stand being around another person.

Keaton lightly shrugged, ignoring Lucy's over-the-top reaction. "I've gotten used to having little to no sleep for long periods of time," he answered. His expression became distant when he quietly added, "Less nightmares that way…"

Keaton frowned at the sound of that. "So what is our plan?" he questioned, looking at each of them in turn. "One idea I have is to devise some sort of trap we can lure them into."

"Hmm, a trap…" Loke rubbed his chin and pondered over it.

"Could work," began Lucy, "But what kind of trap can we set up?"

"Oh!" Keaton quickly sat up straight only to regret it after. After grimacing from the ache of his broken bones, he said, "I have bombs we could use. That narrow road with the tall buildings we passed through earlier, we could set up a trap there."

"Cause the buildings to topple over them. Might work," commented the captain with a nod.

Keaton frowned at the sound of that. "I want to trap them… not kill them."

Arcadios smirked humorlessly. "Mere rocks won't kill them, boy. The Garou Knights are the toughest executioners in this kingdom. Don't give them the chance to counter or else you won't be walking away from this next battle."

"He's right," agreed Loke. "Strong mages don't die that easily. I thought you knew that already."

Anger flashed in Keaton's blue eyes. He opened his mouth to argue, but then closed it, his anger gone in an instant. He was back to his tired self. "If… If that's true, then I suppose we could blast the buildings and trap them underneath," he said.

Lucy smiled with confidence when she said, "I know how we can lure them in there."

Over the next hour, the group worked on setting their trap in the aforementioned area. While Keaton was still immobile, the other three went around and hid the boy's bombs, which were heavy, hand-ball sized, dark blue spheres with a fuse, at structurally weak spots outside of the ancient buildings. They had a good limit of thirty bombs and they had to be placed close enough to each other for a
chain explosion.

Once that was set up, with ten bombs to spare, they all moved into position. Keaton hid out of sight at the end of the path with his bow in hand while Lucy, Loke, and Arcadios remained on the other end. Loke was wearing Keaton's fox mask, green floppy hat, and feathered cloak as a disguise. The Garou Knights, other than Neppa, as far as Lucy was aware of, did not know about Loke and were only hunting after Lucy, Keaton, and Arcadios.

The three purposely chatted out loud and threw stones around to make noise.

"Footsteps," Loke warned some time later, pointing in the direction they were expecting their targets to come. "Does everyone remember their lines?" he teased and threw one last rock really hard against a far wall. The clatter of stone echoed far and loud.

Lucy heard a woman's voice, "Did you hear that? They went this way!"

It wasn't long until Lucy saw Cosmos with the other woman named Kamika and the odd-looking man named Uosuke come into view.

It was time to put on their show.

Lucy screamed at her companions, "Run! They found us!" and bolted in the other direction.

Loke cursed out loud and followed her while Arcadios pretended to stumble and urged them both to hurry.

"There they are!" Cosmos shouted behind them as she gave chase, her voice shrill with anger. "There's nowhere to run, you rotten scum!"

Lucy's group rounded a sharp corner and dashed towards the narrow path rigged with explosives. Leg muscles burning and sides starting to cramp, she mustered everything she had to run as fast as she could from the pursuing Knights. Right when she left the blast zone, she saw a flash of fire coming from up ahead. It flew in her direction; an arrow engulfed entirely in flame. For a brief moment, she felt the fire's heat lick her skin just as it soared past her, missing her by an arm's length. She didn't stop running and she didn't look back when she heard the first deafening explosion which was quickly followed by a second one, followed by a third, the forth, and so on.

The earth rumbled and her ears rang with every exploding bomb. It felt like there was an earthquake when the buildings started to collapse on the three remaining executioners.

However, just when she thought things were working out as planned, there was always something waiting to ruin it.

"Terrain Effect: Gravity Zone!"

The thunder of falling rubble suddenly stopped. Lucy twisted around and gasped in shock when she saw all the dust and broken stone now levitating in midair instead of crushing the Knights. In the center was Uosuke, smiling his strange smile and sitting crossed leg in midair with his abnormally large forearms held out before him, controlling the gravity in the surrounding area. Cosmos and Kamika were floating beside him, both struggling to orient themselves in zero gravity.

Cosmos, while hanging upside down, pointed a finger indignantly at Lucy's group, her beautiful face twisted into an ugly scowl. "You filthy criminals are going to pay for everything you've done!" she snarled. "No one hurts a Garou Knight and gets away with it! So unforgivable! I'm going to punish you lowly criminals myself!"
Floating on her back, Kamika looked disappointed. "Well, alright," she grumbled and crossed her arms nonchalantly. "Go ahead and have all the fun."

Ignoring her, Cosmos twisted around to right herself, looked towards the darkness above them, raised her arms above her head, and yelled, "Grow Flow!"

"Oh no!" Arcadios gasped in horror.

Lucy flinched into a defensive position, ready to defend against whatever spell Cosmos was going to throw at them. It turned out she wasn't prepared because she did not expect an enormous flower bud sprouting from the ceiling right above them. Five, massive, bright blue petals unfurled, revealing a vivid purple center with a gaping black hole in the very middle. The entire flower was at least the width of several houses and its black core around two houses wide.

The next thing Lucy knew, her feet were no longer touching the ground. She yelped in surprise and uselessly flailed her limbs in the air as the giant flower started to suck her up like a powerful vacuum. Dust, rubble, loose stone – whatever wasn't stuck to the earth – were all pulled into the black void in the flower's centre.

In her screaming terror, she looked frantically around for her companions and found Loke and Arcadios helpless in the air along with her. She saw something burst into flame in the corner of her eye.

She spotted Keaton stuck in the same situation not too far away from them and he was busy lighting and hurling the rest of his bombs that were eagerly swallowed by the flower's gaping hole. A heart-wrenching second later, there was a deafening boom as Lucy's world exploded in burning fire and she was thrown into the dark abyss.

Sitting outside of an ice cream parlor, Mirajane smiled in content after finishing the last bite of her strawberry and banana sundae. It was a really warm day, the perfect weather for ice cream. After setting down her plastic spoon, she was surprised to find Bacon had hardly touched the chocolate fudge sundae she had bought for him. He was playing with it more than eating it, stabbing the quickly melting, goopy treat with his spoon and making a mess of the table they sat around. Seated across from him was Asuka and she had already devoured her yummy dessert and was now curiously watching the other people waiting in line for ice cream.

A little concerned, Mirajane rested her elbows on the table and leaned forward to get a better look at Bacon's face hidden under his hood. "What's wrong, Bacon?" she asked the boy, "Don't you like the ice cream here?"

He glanced at her and shook his head. "It's not as good as yours," he answered quietly and resumed to poking his dessert.

"You're right. It's missing something," said Mirajane, looking thoughtful.

"There was no cherry!" Asuka pointed out, pouting her lips. "I like the cherries you put on top! They're the best part!"

Mirajane smiled and wiped the chocolate syrup staining the cute girl's face. "You're right! There's no cherry! And no cake to go with it!"

She turned to Bacon, expecting him to agree, but the boy didn't react to her comment at all. Her smile fell. She knew the quality of his treat wasn't the only reason he didn't want to eat it. He was very upset about last night's incident.
Natsu, Gajeel, Wendy, Gray, Lucy, the three Exceeds, Romeo and Bacon had all gone exploring some ruins Gajeel had stumbled upon during his match against the Twin Dragons of Sabertooth. It was quite an adventure they had, discovering a dragon graveyard, meeting a dragon ghost, and finding out about the kingdom's secret plan to use a time-travelling door to travel to the past to defeat the Black Wizard Zeref and Acnologia. However, in the end, Lucy was detained and thrown into prison for treason while the rest of Fairy Tail was kicked out of the castle.

Since morning, Fairy Tail had been occupying the newly renovated Bar Sun specifically reserved just for them. They had been discussing and strategizing to prepare for tomorrow's final event for the Games as well as trying to figure out how to rescue Lucy without getting caught. With Mavis Vermilion lending her knowledge and ideas, Fairy Tail's plans seemed to be coming together.

It was around mid-afternoon when Mirajane had noticed Bacon alone at a table, clearly upset about something. With everyone too focused on the Games and Lucy, no one paid too much attention to him and he didn't seem to care what was going on around him. Hating to see him so sad, Mirajane took the boy and a very bored Asuka, with her parents' permission, out for ice cream at the parlor down by the corner of the street. She had already volunteered to be on the rescue team, so it wasn't vital that she needed to stay and hear out the rest of the guild's plans.

Sweets usually cheered Bacon up, but this was another one of those rare cases where sugar did absolutely nothing to bring back his smile. Mirajane reached out and placed a supportive hand on his shoulder. "You don't have to worry about Lucy," she told him with an assuring smile, "We'll make sure she comes back to us."

He only nodded as he stared at his sundae, which was now mostly a chocolaty-vanilla soup overflowing in his plastic cup.

Mirajane frowned. Something else was definitely on his mind and Mirajane had a feeling it was related to what the group had discovered in the graveyard that they may have forgotten to mention.

Mirajane wanted to ask Bacon about it, but she couldn't do it out in the open. Too many eyes and ears. It was best to talk to him in private, but she wasn't sure if he would open up to her like he would with Wendy. It wouldn't hurt to try.

Seeing that he wasn't interested in eating his ice cream soup, she stood up and said, "Let's head back."

"Okay!" said Asuka, hopping off her tall chair and running around to Bacon's side. "Want to race back?"

The boy slowly slid off his seat and shook his head.

Asuka crossed her arms and pouted. "Aw, you're no fun!"

"Be nice, Asuka," Mirajane lightly scolded, "Bacon's feeling a little down. How about you try cheering him up?" She started to clean up the children's mess and threw away their trash. She tried her best to wipe up all the spilled ice cream on the sticky table with the unused napkins she still had left.

The little girl looked apologetically at Bacon. "Oh..." was all she uttered before she hugged him.

Bacon blinked in surprise as he asked, "Asuka, what are you doing?"

"Auntie Mira asked me to cheer you up so that's what I'm doing!" she answered with a giggle. "Hugs always cheer me up when I'm sad."
"Thank you, but I'm not sad..." he replied. He returned her hug anyway and cracked a smile Mirajane was hoping to see.

"You feel better though, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"Yay!" cheered the little girl. She let him go and then ran behind him to hide under his cloak. "Let's go back to everyone like this. They'll wonder where I am. Momma and Daddy will think I disappeared!"

Bacon's smile widened and he decided to play along. "They are going to be very worried when they can't find you!"

"When they do, I'll jump out and yell 'Surprise!'"

"Oh, they'll be very surprised for sure," said Mirajane. She chuckled at how silly they looked.

Asuka, appearing as a big lump under Bacon's green cloak, started to hop up and down in excitement. "I can't wait to see their faces! Let's go! Let's go!" She urged the older boy to start walking.

Laughing, Bacon moved forward with Asuka trying to keep in pace behind him.

"Don't go so fast!" the girl exclaimed, tugging on his cloak.

"Alright. Hey, don't pull!"

Mirajane smiled and followed right behind them. She was suddenly joined by someone she had least expected to meet out in the open. Her smile became sly. "Mystogan," she coolly addressed the man now striding beside her, "So good to see you! A certain someone has been worried about you for the past few days. Where have you been?"

Her former teammate grunted. "Busy with preparations," was his mumbled response.

She glanced sideways at him and noticed the dark circles under his eyes. She raised a curious eyebrow and lowered her voice. "Preparations, you say? Related to you-know-what?"

He nodded discreetly.

"So you've found out what it is?"

He nodded again. "And much more."

The way he said that piqued Mirajane's interest. She leaned close to him and whispered, "And you're here to report about it?"

He shook his head, his eyes falling on the children strolling ahead of them. Bacon must have sensed his gaze because the boy glanced over his shoulder and blinked at the man in confusion for he had never seen or met 'Mystogan' in person, but he had met Jellal once. Without a word, the boy turned back forward because Asuka was bumping into him.

"Not exactly," was Jellal's answer to Mirajane's question. "I've encountered... a problem and I may need Fairy Tail's help in the matter."

Mirajane slightly frowned. "We've encountered a problem of our own," she said, "Lucy's been—"
"I know what happened," he interrupted.

"You do? How'd you find out?"

"I've been working with someone," he replied, now whispering. "An informant. He told me about it as well as the necessary information concerning you-know-what. But he's... I believe he's been captured and thrown into the dungeons at the castle."

"Oh." Mirajane's lips curled into a devilish smirk. "Lucky for you, we've been a little busy devising a special mission that involves a little rescuing."

He raised his brow. "Is that so? Tell me about it."

She nodded at Bar Sun that was coming up ahead. "I'm sure everyone will be eager to share the details," she said with a wink and a smile.
Day Five: The Burning Abyss

It was a few hours before dawn and the streets of Crocus were eerily quiet to Wendy's ears. She was not the least bit tired. Even though she only had a few hours of sleep, she was wide awake, fueled by nervous anxiety.

Soaring over the sleeping city on the wings of her feline partner, the Sky Dragon Slayer followed behind Natsu and Happy towards their rendezvous point. All four were dressed to blend in the night for better stealth. While Wendy and Carla wore simple, tight-fitting black clothes, Natsu and Happy had decided to go all out in full ninja-garb, concealing everything but their eyes in black.

The sky above was covered in thick clouds that hid the moon and stars, while down below, the city was bright and dazzling, lit up from all the street lamps, flashy neon store signs, and interior lights coming from the windows of every building that had yet to close. Everything on the ground blurred together as the Dragon Slayers and their Exceeds flew at top speed to avoid being spotted.

They touched down at the edge of the park near the main bridge that connected the city to Mercurius Castle's main gate. It didn't take too long to find Mirajane and Pantherlily waiting for them under the flowering cherry trees, both dressed appropriately for their stealth mission. But there were also two others with them who were not supposed to be a part of their rescue team; both the size of children and wearing hooded cloaks.

Wendy instantly recognized the cloaked pair by their scents before she even saw their faces as she approached them. "Bacon? Romeo? What are you two doing here?" she demanded in a hushed, stern tone.

"Someone is worried about you," answered Mirajane as she placed a hand on Bacon's back. Before Wendy could ask, Bacon rushed to her and blurted out, "Don't go."

The girl frowned at the concern in his voice. "What's the matter?" It was obvious what was troubling him, but she felt the need to ask.

Bacon grabbed her hand and squeezed it tight. "Don't go to the castle. If you do, you won't come back."

Wendy blinked in confusion, her anger suddenly gone.

"What do you mean?" Carla asked, beating Wendy to the question. The Exceed gazed upon the boy with a worried brow, arms crossed and pretending to be unfazed by what Bacon had said, but the slight twitching at the tip of her tail gave her anxiety away.

"He just had a bad dream," Romeo explained, stifling a yawn. "It bothered him so much that we had to sneak out to tell you."

Pantherlily harrumphed to gain everyone's attention. "As I've mentioned to them before your arrival," he began, looking directly at Wendy, "we can't alter our plan due to some mere dream."

"That is correct," spoke a young girl hiding behind one of the cherry trees, giving everyone a start. Mavis Vermillion silently stepped into view, her normally carefree, childish face replaced with a stern, hardened expression that made almost everyone flinch back. "I chose the six of you specifically for this mission in order to have the highest probability in successfully rescuing Lucy and Jellal's informant from the palace. We cannot afford to deviate from the plan." Her emerald eyes fell
on Bacon and her expression slightly softened. "Especially because of a dream."

"The First is right," Wendy agreed as she gave Bacon's hand an assuring squeeze. "You just had a bad dream."

The boy shook his head however. "No! If you go to the castle, you won't come back! I saw it…"

"You dreamt it," Wendy corrected. Dreams of dragons and talking yellow foxes may signify something in relation to Bacon's past, but dreaming about Wendy's terrible fate? Such a bad dream could only be caused by stress and worry combined with a magical Dreamstone.

She pried her hand free to pull him close for a comforting hug, a gesture that always calmed him down after he woke up from a nightmare. It worked effectively; she felt him relax and lean against her. "You're still worried about me, aren't you?" she asked quietly.

Right before leaving Bar Sun to retire for the night, Wendy had tried her best to make Bacon believe she would be fine on this mission. After all – as Mavis had previously mentioned – Wendy was chosen to be a part of the rescue team because of her healing abilities, she couldn't back down from something so important no matter what.

Bacon nodded and wrapped his arms tight around her as if afraid to lose her. "Yes…" he murmured into her shoulder, "But…"

"I'll come back," she interrupted, gently stroking his back. "I promise you. I left you many times before and I always came back. This time won't be any different." Except instead of going away to train, she was going to infiltrate one of the most secure places in all of Fiore.

She pulled back only to meet his saddened gaze. He wasn't convinced on just her words. "Here," she said as she undid both of her pigtails. She grabbed his hand, placed one of her pink, pointy-ear-shaped hair ties in his open palm and closed his fingers around it. "Hold onto this, okay? It's the other half of my favourite set so I'll definitely be coming for it once we're done."

Natsu strolled over and planted a hand on the boy's cloaked head. "You shouldn't worry about anything, Bacon," he assured, his voice slightly muffled by the cover over his mouth, "You're forgetting that I'll be with Wendy. I'll make sure nothing bad will happen to her."

"Me too!" Happy chimed in. He hopped forward, punched the air, and performed a swift roundhouse kick to act tough and fearless. "Hiyah! If any bad guys get in our way, we'll beat them up ninja-style!"

Mirajane giggled and clasped her hands together in amusement. "Our mission is to go in and out without getting caught," she reminded her teammates in a light-hearted manner, "So hopefully we won't have to lay the beat down on the kingdom's guards."

Natsu soundly cracked his knuckles as he eyed the distant castle with a murderous glare. "If we do get cornered, I'll make sure to defeat every single guard in our way as payback for what they did to Lucy."

"Hear that?" Romeo asked Bacon, nudging the other with his elbow, "If anything does go wrong, Natsu will take care of it. He'll protect Wendy and keep everyone else safe."

Wendy gave Bacon a confident smile. "See? There's nothing to worry about," she said, "Now hurry back to your hotel with Romeo and get some more sleep."

"Yeah, we should head back before Dad wakes up," said Romeo as he nervously scratched the side
of his neck, "He might ground us if he finds out we're gone."

Bacon looked at Romeo in confusion. "Dad can 'ground' us?" he asked tentatively. He pointed at the ground by his feet. "But... aren't we already standing on the ground?"

Everyone erupted into quiet giggles or snickering, making poor Bacon pout at being laughed at.

Romeo had to slap a hand over his mouth to stifle his burst of laughter. "I'm... I'll explain later," he said the moment he calmed down.

Wendy grabbed Bacon by the shoulders to gain his attention. "Keep my hair tie safe with you. I'll come find you right after we save Lucy and Jellal's friend, okay?"

Bacon's sad frown returned. He looked down at her hair tie clutched within his hand and, after a moment of hesitation, he finally nodded. "Okay..." he mumbled and met her gaze once more. "Please be careful, Wendy."

"I will," she assured with a nod.

"And Carla," the boy knelt down to pet the white Exceed between the ears, "Take care of Wendy."

The cat looked slightly annoyed by the boy's touch, but Wendy knew she was only feigning it. "I will make sure she stays out of trouble," was Carla's response, giving her partner a look that spoke of a silent promise.

"I know you guys can save them," said Romeo, giving the team a wide grin and a 'thumbs-up' in encouragement.

"They will save them," Mavis stated with a confident smile of her own, "I'm putting all my faith into this team. Make this mission a success not only for me, but for Fairy Tail. Best of luck to you all."

Wendy and the others nodded, their spirits invigorated in knowing their guild trusted them in saving Lucy. Wearing proud, determined faces, the team began their trek across the bridge with the boys and Mavis waving at their backs.

Wendy overheard the First telling the boys, "Better head back now. We don't want to bring any attention to them or the guild, understand?"

"Right," said Romeo. "Come on, Bacon. We need to go."

Wendy glanced over her shoulder one last time, seeing Bacon still watching her until Romeo pulled him along. Her stomach twisted with guilt for making Bacon worry about her. But she had promised him – just like every other time she had left his side – that she would return no matter what.

"Come on, let's hurry," said Natsu before breaking into a run.

The others followed suit and together, they quickly sprinted over the lake towards the enormous palace gate. Castle Mercurius loomed ahead, appearing like a foreboding fortress in the night than a beautiful castle out of a fantasy book during the day. Most of the lights were out in the castle but its enormous silhouette was still visible.

Seeing it made Wendy remember her first night in Crocus followed by the awful guilt she had felt for missing out on the Preliminary Event with her team. Huffing, she shook her head to momentarily forget about the memory because she needed to focus on the mission at hand.
There was one more person missing from their team, an additional member who wasn't truly a part of Fairy Tail and had joined the group at the very last minute of planning. Once they crossed the unguarded bridge, it didn't take too long to find their last teammate beneath the great arc of the open gate.

Hidden well in the darkest shadows, the only way Wendy knew the man was even there was by his scent alone.

When he heard the team's approach, the man silently moved to stand at the edge of the light cast by the nearest Lacrima lamp mounted on the outer side of the gate. He appeared like a demonic ghost before them, wearing a hooded black cloak and a spooky bird mask.

In spite of knowing his true identity, Wendy jumped back in fright and covered her mouth to suppress her scream. Carla froze in her tracks while Happy let out a frightened squeak and dove behind Natsu for protection.

Natsu, on the other hand, cocked his head to the side and pointed right at the man. "What's with the new getup?" he asked, raising an eyebrow, "Aren't you supposed to be Mystogan?"

"It's a precaution," Jellal answered, his hushed voice muffled by his mask, "In case something goes wrong and I end up captured or my face seen."

"I see," said Mirajane with a knowing smile, "You don't want the Magic Council to find out that Fiore's most wanted criminal has been hiding among Fairy Tail and participating in the Games in our stead."

The man nodded. "Exactly. It will not bode well for your master and your guild if they make that connection. From now on, address me as 'Crow'. Are you all prepared for this?"

Natsu snorted and gestured at his outfit. "Of course. Look at me and Happy, we're way prepared for sneaking in and stealth stuff."

"Yeah! We bought these costumes last night!" said Happy, punching the air again.

Pantherlily shushed the blue cat. "The first step in being a ninja is to be quiet," he pointed out sternly. "The guards will hear you at this rate."

"It's fine for now," said Jellal with a dismissive wave of his hand. He turned around to face the lit cobblestone path that led straight to the main plaza garden before the castle's main doors. It was empty and oddly quiet with the exception of the splashing fountain in the middle of the garden. "I haven't seen any guards patrolling the grounds since I arrived over an hour ago and it's rather disconcerting."

"Eh? No guards?" asked Natsu, visibly raising his brow in surprise.

"How odd," said Mirajane with a slight frown, "With this being the home of the Royal Family, I would expect security to be tight. Especially with the Games going on."

"My exact thoughts," said Jellal. "We should hurry. I know a way inside, follow me."

Without waiting for the others to respond, Jellal ran ahead, quickly merging with the shadows in the garden. Wordlessly, the group tailed the mage of Crime Sorcière between the manicured trees and hedges and around the sprawling beds of fragrant flowers.

Wendy kept her eyes on the flapping black cloak in front of her, trusting the man in the lead. She
was secretly glad Jellal was with them and it wasn't because he was a powerful mage. Being around him brought back fond memories of the time she had spent with Edolas's Jellal when she was a young girl. Although his personality greatly differed from King Jellal's, this Jellal possessed the same willingness to help others.

Originally, Mavis had planned to have Natsu's team infiltrate the castle and rescue Lucy while using the Final Event of the Grand Magic Games as a diversion. But that had to be changed after Jellal joined the guild's discussion. He went straight to the point and told Fairy Tail about his mysterious informant that had been captured and thrown into the castle dungeons. He spoke of Meredy losing her magical connection with the informant and feared that something had gone wrong. He suspected that Lucy may have been involved as well.

"It might be too late to save them if we wait for the Games to start," Jellal had warned them.

Thus, they had agreed to go before dawn, using the night as cover and the assumption that fewer guards would be on patrol. And right at the end of that decision, Jellal, without argument, had stated that he would be joining the team. In spite of the risks, he never explained his reason for wanting to come along. None of the members of Fairy Tail, not even Erza, could get any clear answers from him before he left the bar in a hurry yesterday evening.

Perhaps Jellal wanted to ensure his informant was still alive to obtain every detail about the dark entity lurking around the Games. Whatever he had already been told, he wasn't willing to share with Fairy Tail just yet, it seemed.

Jellal led the team to the east side of the palace, past the rope fence and towards the tall hedge wall – the very same one that Bacon had crawled through when he chased after Raven Tail's little black creature. He slowed to a walk and placed a black gloved hand against the castle wall above his head, gliding his fingers along the stone as if feeling for something in the darkness.

He stopped a few feet from the hedge, his hand still pressed against the castle. Then, very lightly, he tapped three different spots on the stone wall in quick succession. There was an audible click followed by the grinding of stone as a narrow section of the wall slid away, revealing a small hidden entryway.

"Whoa!" Natsu exclaimed in a whisper, "How'd you know this was here?"

"My informant," Jellal quietly replied as he stepped into the pitch black entrance. He melded with the darkness, disappearing right before their eyes, but his voice indicated he was still there. "This will lead us straight to the underground chambers and deep within is the dungeon. From here on out, speak only with--"

"Your minds," he finished, his voice suddenly ringing through Wendy's head. She jumped a second time that night. Although she was familiar with telepathy, it was always startling to hear another's voice in her mind right out of the blue.

"I've opened a telepathic link between each of us. This will reduce our chances of being heard. Watch your step." A tiny flickering flame of gold appeared in Jellal's hand to light the way. There was a steep staircase made of ancient, dusty stone bricks.

"Oh! That's cool!" Natsu's enthusiastic voice sounded through Wendy's head while he followed right after Jellal like an excited child.

"I feel like a spy!" Happy chimed in, mentally screaming his words in everyone's heads.
Pantherlily hissed and clutched the sides of his head. "Please, Happy, not so loud!"

"Sorry!"

The group descended the narrow stairs in a single file with Jellal lighting the way and Mirajane taking up the rear. The hidden door suddenly closed itself shortly after Mirajane passed through.

Their journey into the deep, dark depths of the castle was accompanied with a rather tense silence with the exception of scuffling feet. Everyone was keeping their own thoughts to themselves as they prepared for their task ahead.

It felt like they had gone three to four stories down before they finally stepped onto flat ground. Dim, golden light softly illuminated the low, narrow path. Wendy could see dust on the floor and old spider webs hanging above. The air was cold and stale, indicating this passageway was rarely opened and used. It was a known secret only to a select few and that now included everyone here. It was a rather thrilling thought.

They stopped at what Wendy first assumed was a dead end until Jellal began to turn a loose stone brick tucked in the corner. There was a quiet click followed by the slow sinking of the wall before them. Dust briefly trickled from above the hidden doorway. Coming from the other side was slightly fresher air and complete darkness. Jellal stepped out and shone his light into a large chamber filled with crates, boxes, tarp-covered furniture, old statues, and dusty antiques. Hanging on the walls were giant framed paintings of landscapes, castles, citadels, and cities. They have apparently entered one of the Royal Family's storage rooms.

The secret passageway was guarded by two white statues of armoured knights, both facing each other, mirroring the other's pose with their stone swords held up and forward to form a point. Once Mirajane entered the room, the hidden door slid back up, becoming a part of the solid wall once more. The only hint to the door's whereabouts was the tiny crest of Fiore on one of the stone bricks.

Swiftly, yet carefully, Jellal made his way around everything towards the chamber doors and expected the others to do the same. "Touch nothing," he warned seconds before Natsu and Happy were about to open a small, ornate chest sitting on a table.

The ninja-garbed pair bowed their heads in disappointment and quickly joined Jellal who was already pushing one of the doors open. The creaking hinges sounded as loud as a siren to Wendy's sensitive ears, making her worry about getting caught.

"There are no guards on this floor," assured Jellal, confidently strolling into the torch lit hall. "It seems they have all gathered in one place beneath us. But why, I wonder?"

"Are they guarding the dungeons?" was Wendy's guess.

"No. The dungeons are located on this floor, however... I am not sure what's going on. It's best we hurry."

Understanding Jellal's concern and trusting his senses, the team threw away their precautions and broke into a run, following the older mage down the long, dreary corridor of the castle's basement. Burning torches mounted to the walls were few and far between, resulting in short sections of the hall to fall under the darkest shadows.

Around a few corners, and down several more corridors; they passed by every closed door until reaching the very end of the longest, darkest hall. Waiting there was a large, heavy iron door that reeked of rust that someone had left wide open.
Natsu pushed past Jellal and rushed inside.

The castle dungeon was smaller than Wendy had imagined, but just as dank and grimy. There were only eight cells and one had its barred door open.

Natsu was already searching the open cell, frantically looking around. "Lucy was here!" he exclaimed in a growl, forgetting to mind-speak. "But where is she? Did they take her somewhere else?" He pulled down his mask and took a deep breath through his nose, drawing in the foul odours lingering in the dungeon.

Meanwhile, the others examined the rest of the dungeon, finding the other cells empty and their doors locked. It stank so much that Wendy had to breathe through her mouth.

"Your informant isn't here either," noted Pantherlily after checking the last cell. He raised an eyebrow at Jellal.

"This is where Meredy lost track of him," replied the man. He approached what used to be Lucy's cell and touched one of the iron bars. "I cannot sense him or Lucy anywhere within this castle. I thought in coming here, we could find a clue to what may have happened to them."

Frowning, Wendy turned back to Natsu who was now trying to trace Lucy's scent. He was crouched near the open cell door, sniffing around. "Someone opened her cell," he mumbled, brow furrowed in deep concentration. "Someone with a familiar smell… Lucy followed this person out and then…" he walked towards the dungeon exit and stopped half-way, "The trail suddenly ends around here. It's like they disappeared."

"Meredy said the same thing," Jellal mused with a heavy sigh. He joined Natsu's side and scanned the ceiling and floor; a crow hungry for answers. "It's been over a day since my informant disappeared from here… Whatever happened to him likely happened to Lucy as well."

Natsu swore under his breath before resorting back to telepathy; "So what the hell happened to them?"

The answer to his question appeared as if on cue; the floor they stood upon suddenly dropped wide open.

Wendy's cry of surprise instantly morphed into one of terror as she and everyone else plummeted into a black abyss. They were quickly swallowed by darkness, leaving Wendy blind and scared.

She was tumbling fast, her arms and legs flailing and her hair whipping about. She screamed Carla's name and Carla screamed hers in return. There was a flash of gold coming from someone, casting enough light for everyone to find each other.

The Exceeds flew to Wendy's, Natsu's, and Mirajane's rescue while Jellal, bathed in golden magic, used his own power to save himself.

"I guess now we know what happened to them," grumbled Pantherlily as they descended the deep, dark hole.

That statement alone made Wendy's chest ache with worry. It was such a long fall – was Lucy and Jellal's informant okay?

They touched down on solid ground moments after, their feet kicking up dust upon landing. All the light that surrounded Jellal was now back in flaming form within the palm of his hand. Gold
shimmered off the rocky walls and dusty floor of a natural cavern. Just like the dungeon, it was unfortunately empty.

"Lucy! Lucy!" Natsu called, his voice ringing loud in the silent cave.

"I don't see her…" said Happy with a sad frown.

Natsu scoffed and sniffed the cold, stale air. "Her scent is here and so is… the other guy… He kinda smells like Bacon."

Happy's stomach started to growl. "Mmm, bacon? You're making me hungry!"

"No, not delicious bacon bacon. I mean Bacon Bacon."

Mirajane smiled and quietly giggled. "Oh, you mean like our little Bacon?"

"Yeah."

Curious, Wendy moved to where Natsu was standing and took several deep breaths through her nose, catching the faint traces of Lucy's favourite perfume. It was mixed with one very familiar scent Wendy had already imprinted to memory: the smell of ancient stone surrounded by an old, thriving forest – it was Bacon's natural scent, no doubt about it.

Wendy looked at Natsu and found him watching her, waiting for her reaction. He raised an eyebrow as if to silently ask her, Doesn't it?

Together, they both turned to Jellal and found him already making his way towards the farthest cavern wall. She wanted to know who exactly his informant was and where he came from, but she was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a bright, holographic screen hovering right above them.

"It's the princess!" Carla exclaimed in shock.

Indeed it was and she was staring down at them, dressed in an elegant white robe with the laced hood pulled over her head. Princess Hisui stood within a dark room, holding onto a burning candle that embraced her beautiful face in warm, orange light. Her emerald eyes, no longer were they kind and full of compassion as Wendy remembered, but as sharp as knives as she glared at each mage caught in the trap.

Wendy gulped and hastily turned her face away when the princess's gaze turned her way. She was afraid of being recognized – but then again, it probably wasn't difficult for the princess to recognize Carla even if the cat was disguised in black. There weren't that many white Exceeds who hung around a girl with navy blue hair after all.

"Fools," Her Royal Highness called them. She glanced left and right in a suspicious manner before she leaned closer to the screen and spoke in a quieter tone. Her hushed voice was unbefitting of her currently sour expression and authoritative position. "Welcome to Abyss Palace. The worst criminals, escaped prisoners, and intruders, such as you foolish lot, are sent here to receive their final judgment. Do not think you can escape here so easily; powerful executioners roam this underground palace and they guard the only way out. Even if you somehow succeed in defeating them all, know that every soldier in this castle will be waiting for you on the other side of the door."

She looked at Wendy for what felt like one long moment before she said her last words, "Only the brave and just will prevail. Farewell."
The screen blinked out, casting the mages back in the dimmer light of Jellal's gold fire.

Natsu grunted in annoyance. "She sent us here? How'd she know we were in the castle?"

"Don't know, but did it seem like she was trying to hide from someone?" noted Mirajane.

"As if she didn't want to get caught sending us to our doom…" Pantherlily growled.

Carla crossed her arms and knitted her brow in worry. "She spoke of powerful executioners down here… Is Lucy…"

"She's still alive," Jellal assured, resuming his trek towards the far cavern wall, "And so is my informant. I can sense them beyond this wall. However, we need to hurry – they're battling the executioners as we speak."

There was a heavy smack of a fist striking an open palm coming from Natsu. "Why are we still standing here then?! Let's go help them!"

The team nodded and together, they followed the bearer of the golden flame. The way out of the cavern revealed itself as a fissure in the wall when the flickering light shone upon it. Sharing the same thought and wearing the same determined expressions, the group fearlessly ventured into the claustrophobic passageway with Natsu leading the way.

He shot through the sky in hot pursuit of his prey, never letting it out of his sight. The coward was fleeing in desperation, diving and ascending through the sea of clouds in hope of losing him.

There is no escape from me!

He unleashed a mighty roar that parted the heavens, eliminating all traces of cover in the sky. His target panicked and dove for the mountains below. He folded his wings and chased right after it like a fired canon, his claws itching for the kill. He was death – a true slayer of dragons!

He caught up to his prey in mere seconds, right before it could reach the first valley. Black claws slashed through thick purple scales like a blade shredding through parchment. He ripped off his prey's webbed wings and grinned in gleeful satisfaction as he watched it plummet helplessly to earth, screaming and flailing in agony.

His moment of joy was suddenly cut short when the sky turned dark, darker than night itself. Shadows covered the land and enveloped him in darkness. The next thing he knew, he was lying on his front on a cold stone floor, his right eye blind and stinging. He couldn't move any part of his body; his head, arms, legs, wings, and tail were tied tightly to the floor with thick, heavy, black chains. The chains were barbed and tore through scales and deep into flesh when he tried to snap them apart with only brute strength. They noisily rattled and clanked, but failed to even crack.

A puny man shrouded in black appeared before him – no, it was not an ordinary man, this insect did not stink of human flesh but of something else, something unearthly and vile. This man was a demon, with eyes that shone crimson and an aura that was dark and sinister.

He snarled in anger; the very same chains that bound his body also sealed his jaws shut, preventing him from roaring and cursing at the wretch who dared to show itself. It was the demon who somehow captured him and knowing this infuriated him to no end. His mouth filled with searing energy that wished to be unleashed upon the man in a powerful, incinerating blast. But his wrath was contained behind the cursed chains and only sparks and smoke could escape between his clenched
teeth and nostrils.

"It is useless," said the man, his deep voice seemingly coming from all directions. "Struggle all you want, you will never break free. I will release you only if you submit to me."

'Submit' to you?! Do not think me weak, fool! These chains will shatter from my power! He jerked forward, attempting to lunge at the fiend and tear him apart. But the chains held strong and his efforts were in vain. He hissed in both pain and frustration, spewing his scorching breath at the demon.

The skin and clothes of a normal human would be melting and burning under such intense heat, but this man stood unfazed, treating it like a harmless gust that made his cape flap wildly behind him.

"Obey me." Eyes of red burned brighter as unholy black flames swallowed the man's raised hand. "Resistance is futile. Even the strongest, fiercest beasts have fallen under my control. The King of Dragons is no exception."

Still your tongue, wretch! You will never control me! Once I am free, I will kill you and your pathetic army of pets!

He silently screamed in rage when the black fire that was once in the demon's hand was now engulfing his entire body. The fire was freezing, colder than the coldest ice, quickly chilling his blood and turning his anger into actual fear. He tried to thrash about, thinking he could throw off the flames, roll around the ground, bury beneath the earth – do something to escape the terrible cold – but again, the accursed chains would not yield. He started to choke as his body turned numb, making it feel like he was drowning beneath the icy ocean. His strength was waning by the second and it wasn't long until he could no longer fight. The black fire consumed his vision and the last thing he saw were those wicked red eyes shining through.

"Puu! Puu-puuun!"

Keaton woke up gasping, his brow covered in cold sweat and his left arm hot and burning like fire. He shuddered. He could still feel the cold, suffocating black flames all over his body even though it was a figment of his dream. Someone lightly smacked his face, fully bringing him out of his nightmare. He moaned and slowly brought his right hand to his struck cheek, flinching from the icy touch of his own metal-covered fingers.

"Puu! Puu-puuun!" something squealed right in his ear, making him grimace from the sheer volume of it. It took some effort and a few more light slaps by a tiny, furry paw to force his heavy eyelids open. He saw nothing but shadows and decided to shut his eyes for more sleep. He was so tired. He hadn't slept in a while.

Wait… when did he fall asleep?

It was at that moment he remembered the reason why he was lying uncomfortably on his back atop what felt like a pile of rubble. He pried open his eyes again, much to the delight of the little creature that kept pawing his face. It was too dark to properly see, but he knew who it was by its distinctive cries.

"Plue…?" Keaton managed to croak. His mouth and throat were dry and hoarse from lack of hydration. He licked his chapped lips with a tongue that felt like sandpaper.

"Puu-puu-puuuun!" Plue answered excitedly, soundly hopping up and down.

Keaton hushed the spirit and carefully rolled onto his side. It hurt to move; there were sharp, stabbing pains in his chest and his wounded leg stung and throbbed. He was stiff, sore and aching from head
to toe; new injuries kept adding to the old. He was certain he was covered in fresh bruises, especially after getting thrown somewhere and knocked unconscious when he blew up the giant flower. This wasn't the worst he had ever felt, so he had that going for him.

He was up and sitting one minute later, propped against a crumbled wall that could have likely belonged to one of the buildings he and the others had blown up with his bombs. His head spun and pounded and his left arm continued to burn with a feverish heat. With his good arm, he dug into his pouch by his side and brought out a bottle. The last of his water tasted like the gift of gods as he downed it all in two gulps. Thirst quenched and mind now fully awake and aware, he looked around, seeing very little in the dim, flickering green light that shone from somewhere far away on the other side of his wall. It was uncomfortably quiet, as if there was no other living soul nearby other than Plue.

He placed a gentle hand atop the canine's rounded head, feeling the Celestial Spirit's nervous shivering through his metal gauntlet. The swordsman smiled; Plue's constant shaking was a quirk he found amusing. Not only that, ever since Plue became his to summon, having the little spirit around always lifted Keaton's mood when times were tough and very depressing.

But that had been his Plue who became a very close friend. This Plue belonged to Lucy. He wondered if the spirit could even recognize who he was. Nevertheless, the spirit's presence still had the same uplifting effect on the swordsman.

"Did Lucy summon you to find me?" asked Keaton.

"Puun." Plue shook his head.

The young man furrowed his brow in confusion. "No? Then… why are you here?"


Keaton understood absolutely none of that. "Is Lucy nearby?"

"Puun." Again, Plue shook his head.

"No? Did something happen to her? How long was I out?" Long enough to dream, he realized with newfound fear. A couple hours at most, which was too long – anything could have happened within that time frame. All the worst-case scenarios instantly came to mind.

Keaton didn't wait for an answer and tried to sense Lucy's aura. Having to deal with pain, fatigue, and an anxious heart hindered his ability to detect any living magic source beyond the ruins of the building. He had to shut his eyes in order to concentrate. Searching for magical signatures was a lot like how a dog would sniff for odours. Every person had a different scent and every mage had their own unique aura. He had Lucy's and Loke's auras memorized so distinguishing them from the remaining Garou Knights wasn't too difficult.

He reached out with invisible hands, probing and sweeping through ancient walls and rubble, gradually expanding his range in search of his missing companions. Seconds quickly turned into two dread-filled minutes before he eventually found something. His heart skipped a beat; it was one of the executioners, which one exactly, he wasn't too sure. It didn't matter, however, because the other two Knights weren't that far apart from the first. They were roughly two blocks north of his position and all three were heading in the same general direction, moving at a prowling pace. They zigzagged and stopped frequently; seeking; hunting; in search for their lost prey like a pack of hungry wolves.

Have they already found Lucy, Loke, or Captain Arcadios?
Growing more worried, Keaton pressed on, knitting his brow in deeper concentration. He scanned within the vicinity of the Knights, desperate to find his master before they could.

Another long, agonizing minute passed and at last, he could sense two familiar presences half a block away from the executioners. Lucy and Loke, they were together, alive and moving, seemingly circling the Knights to avoid confrontation.

The swordsman breathed a small sigh of relief. They're safe... for now. But where is Arcadios?

It was impossible for Keaton to sense the Captain since the man was not a mage and lacked any magical items on his person. Although Arcadios was only an ordinary human, he, like all living things in Earthland, possessed at least a little or trace amounts of Ethernano. Only a master sensory mage like Jellal could detect the faintest of magic in others and, unfortunately, Keaton was far from being a master. The swordsman could only pray the Captain was still alive and staying out of the executioners' sights.

Keaton gave Plue an assuring pat on the head and said, "She's okay. How did you find me, Plue?"


The young man smiled. He could only assume the canine tracked him down either through magic or scent. He was still curious as to how and why Plue was here if Lucy hadn't summoned him. Nevertheless, he was glad to have the spirit around to keep him company. "Thanks for waking me up, little friend. I would still be dreaming if it weren't for you..." Dreaming he was a powerful dragon who took joy in slaughtering others of its kind no less. Such twisted nightmares haunted his sleep ever since he was cursed by Acnologia.

He massaged his left shoulder where the curse marked his skin, feeling the burning sensation gradually subside. It used to bleed and burn for days when the mark was still fresh like a new tattoo. Nowadays, it only flared up whenever he had dragon dreams.

Three more keys were needed to open the only way out of Abyss Palace and they were unfortunately still in the hands of the three remaining executioners. Trying to defeat them all in one fell swoop obviously didn't work and attempting a similar strategy would no doubt end in failure yet again.

Keaton kept his focus on the Knights, Lucy, and Loke as he wracked his brain for a good plan.

Uosuke was the main problem. Capable of manipulating gravity and altering the terrain on a whim made the ugly man the most troublesome out of the three Knights. He had to be taken out first. A surprise attack wasn't going to work with the three executioners staying near one another, watching each others' backs.

They won't fall for another trap, that's for sure, the swordsman thought glumly. He sighed and brought a hand to his forehead, carefully scratching the skin beside the scab above his right eye to relieve an annoying itch.

"I need them distracted..." he murmured to himself. Only then would a surprise attack be effective in quickly incapacitating Uosuke. "But how?"

Plue hummed and lightly tugged at the end of Keaton's tunic.

The young man glanced down at his spirit companion, catching only a glint of the canine's beady eyes. The answer to Keaton's question didn't come from Plue, but from a new, familiar presence that had suddenly appeared alongside Lucy and Loke.
"Gemini." Keaton smirked.

They must be planning some kind of sneak attack, judging from their positions. It was three against three; Lucy and the Celestial Spirits each crept towards one of the Knights, moving as one. But what was Lucy thinking trying to fight an executioner unarmed and with her only two combat spirits focusing on their own opponents?

Keaton needed to get ready to help her. "Plue, head back to the spirit world," he grumbled as he started to move to stand.

"Puun!"

The swordsman, having gotten not very far, dropped back to the ground with a grunt and raised an eyebrow at his defiant little companion. "No? What's the matter, Plue?"

Of course, the response he got was incomprehensible. Whatever may be keeping Plue from returning to the spirit world, Keaton would have to figure that out later. He couldn't force Plue to go back since the spirit was not under his contract. Having no other choice, he picked up the feather-light spirit and placed him over his right shoulder. Soft little paws clung to the fabric of his tunic.

"Hold on tight, okay?"

"Puu-puuun!"

Keaton used the surrounding rubble as support as he painstakingly climbed onto his feet. His wounded leg was hurting badly, but numbing it again with the salve would greatly limit his mobility. Limping was better than not being able to move. He stretched his stiff arms and flexed his fingers to ease some of the tension in his sore, aching muscles. He needed to be quick to the draw in order to survive this next ordeal.

He waited for the right opportunity to strike. There was a tingle down his spine the instant he felt a rise in magic energy. Loke and Gemini attacked first, unleashing some sort of ranged attack at the backs of their foes. Keaton's ears pricked at the distant explosion that rocked the underground cavern.

More magic flared to life, emanating from the three executioners. Each Garou Knight held respectable power, but one stood out among the others. This Knight had cast a powerful spell that instantly covered a wide area, infusing magic into the terrain, physically changing it to suit the caster's desire and affecting everyone in it. Keaton could sense and hear the land transform as old ruins soundly shifted and collapsed. This type of magic belonged to no one but Uosuke.

Keaton's target was now clear. He drew a slow, steadying breath, as deep as his broken ribcage would allow, and called forth his magic. A powerful gust surrounded him as his body flashed a bright green, blasting away the dust and gloom. Plue cried out in awe.

Keaton grinned at his spirit friend, pleased to be able to see the canine's bewilderment in the light of his spell. "Don't make a sound, okay? We want to catch our foes by surprise. Now, let's go help our master."

Plue nodded. "Puu-puuun!"

He cast Farore's Wind and saw nothing but green soon after. He was soaring blindly through the air, heading towards the destination set within his mind. He did not plan to teleport right behind Uosuke in fear of getting caught in the executioner's magic; he needed a good vantage point to assess the situation first and there was no better view than directly above the male Garou Knight.
Keaton warped to the highest spot he could achieve and that ended up being the very roof of the cavern, right beneath the pointy stalactites. Just as gravity took hold of him, his eyes went wide in horror and shock when he saw what had become of the battle zone. It was as if he was staring right into the mouth of Death Mountain; lava flowed freely within a lake, red hot and bubbling, eating away at rock and ruins and giving off thick plumes of black smoke. He already broke into a sweat, able to feel the intense heat from such a height. Through the haze and wavering heat, he spotted Lucy, her Celestial Spirits, and the two female executioners all stranded on different platforms that either floated on top of the molten lake or protruded from below. And in the center of it all was Uosuke, safely hovering above a towering pillar of natural rock in which the lava did not touch.

Gemini was closest to Uosuke. Perched on top of a tall sinking column, the twins had taken on Keaton’s disguised form and were busy aiming a shining blue arrow at the man. They fired, not just one Ice Arrow but three more right after the first.

The arrows were nothing more but deep blue streaks that soared across the wide gap. However, with a simple wave of his ape-like arm, Uosuke cast another spell that made the magical arrows suddenly drop like dead weights before they reached their target. The Knight had manipulated the gravity all around him, increasing it to an unbearable level.

Gemini collapsed onto their hands and knees, barely able to withstand the incredible force pulling them down. Their sinking column started to crumble apart. Soon, they would plunge into the molten lake unless Keaton could save them in time.

The swordsman continued to plummet feet-first towards Uosuke, determined to take the man out in one blow. He had the advantage of surprise and a clear, direct shot, it was too hard to miss. Thanks to the Knight’s magic, he fell at a faster rate and his body felt as heavy as a boulder. He gripped onto Plue with one hand to brace the spirit for what was next to come.

Uosuke failed to notice him up to the last second. The bottoms of Keaton’s boots connected with the top of Uosuke's shiny bald head with a loud, satisfying thunk! The impact was so hard and jarring it felt as if every bone in Keaton's legs and feet had shattered. Down the executioner went, his fishy face slamming into the rock pillar with so much force the entire structure smashed to pieces. Farther down he fell with Keaton not far behind. Dust flew and rocks rained beside the falling pair. By then gravity had returned to normal and the fiery lake below had instantly cooled to black volcanic rock, bringing back the darkness of the cavern.

Keaton no longer had to worry about the lava, only his next landing. Fortunately, he had Uosuke’s limp, unconscious body to cushion his fall. The executioner was first to crash down, creating a small human-shaped crater upon impact, and Keaton landed on top of him, back-first. Keaton bounced off and ended up tumbling over huge chunks of rock before finally coming to halt. Dazed, winded, and wracked with pain, it took a long moment to regain his bearings. It felt like forever until he realized he was lying on his side on the ground that was still hot and steaming.

He groaned and carefully rolled onto his front, accidentally crushing Plue with his shoulder. His mumbled apology was cut short when he heard Cosmos's shrill, angry voice.

"How many of you are there?! Just die already!"

Next to follow was her magic coming his way. With both legs now badly hurting, he managed to rise only onto his hands and knees by the time her spell was upon him.

Giant, thorny flowers grew from the black earth, surrounding Keaton and Plue in a perfect circle. They bloomed like roses, their petals emitting a soft blue glow and their dark centres spewing clouds of purple pollen that were probably not healthy to breathe in.
Keaton quickly covered his mouth and nose with one hand and scooped up a disoriented Plue with the other.

"Master Link!" Gemini dropped down beside them, still disguised as the swordsman from the future. The twins spun on their heel and whipped their feathered cloak around to fan away some of the pollen. Then they kneeled and covered themselves, Keaton, and Plue under their cloak to protect against the poison. The pointy nose of their replicated mask was pressed uncomfortably against Keaton's cheek within the close quarters they had to share. "We're so happy you're still alive! Lucy feared you dead! Are you all right? Can you stand?"

"Worry about me later. Let's burn these flowers away with Din's Wrath!"

"Understood!"

Keaton and his doppelganger both raised their left hands, their palms facing each other's but not touching. Heat rushed from their chest and down to the tips of their fingers as they called forth their magic. Small orbs of fire appeared in their hands, bright, hot, and swirling. They slowly pressed the two orbs together, carefully fusing their magic to create a more powerful spell. Larger and brighter, their new, combined orb burned intensely with contained fury. They had to shut their eyes to avoid going blind. Keaton and Gemini did not need to see if the other was ready; they were one and the same, having the same mind and sharing a magical bond; they could feel when the moment was right.

As one, they yelled and slammed their miniature sun into the earth right by their feet where it melted deep below and exploded underground, causing a massive quake. Twisting pillars of fire violently erupted around the casters soon after. They were so tall they licked the stalactites hanging on the roof and illuminated the entire cavern in a hellish, fiery glow. Many more pillars followed the first set, spreading outward in a spiraling pattern, instantly incinerating everything caught in the deadly flames.

Mere plants stood no chance against the blazing inferno. Rendered helpless, Cosmos had no choice but to retreat. However, she didn't get very far. She was thrown high and far from an erupting blast. Keaton was certain he could hear her screaming over the eruptions. Even though Loke had taught him to never hurt a woman, it was still rather satisfying to get a little revenge. But then he remembered he was fighting people, not dragons. He felt a small twinge of guilt. Did he overdo it? Would Cosmos survive? And what about Uosuke who was also caught in the attack?

"The Garou Knights are the toughest executioners in this kingdom," Arcadios had told him. If the Captain believed that falling buildings would not crush them to death, then it could be possible a little fire wouldn't kill them either.

Keaton could only hope as he watched the last tower of fire flicker away in the distance, leaving behind a razed, smouldering ground covered in fissures and holes that glowed bright red. There were no standing buildings in sight, only molten piles of rubble and scorched stone. Embers and ash filled the air, falling and rising in the heat coming from the burning earth.

"That was excellent, Master Link!" praised Gemini as they helped the swordsman onto his aching legs and feet.

Plue, unharmed and clutched upside-down in the crook of Keaton's elbow, clapped and cheered to agree.

"Plue? Why is he here?"
"I was wondering if you could tell me," said Keaton, wanting to divert Gemini's attention away from his injuries. Without his mask, it was difficult to hide the pain from showing on his face as he stood slightly hunched over, favouring his right leg. His wound had unfortunately reopened from his rough landing and blood was trickling into his boot.

Plue started to babble something to Gemini as Keaton adjusted the little spirit to ride on his shoulder again.

The twins nodded. "Plue says, 'I sensed Master needing some help so I came to help.'"

Keaton smiled at the canine. "I see now. You knew Lucy needed my help so you somehow opened your gate to come find me."

"Puu-puuu-puun!"

"'Something like that,' he says." Gemini cocked their head to the side in confusion. "But Plue, how did you open your gate on your own?"

"Puuu-puun."

"You don't know?"

Strange as it was, there was no time to discuss the issue. Keaton waved his hand aside. "That's not important right now. We need to deal with the executioners first."

"Right. Well, you have certainly taken care of the worst of the bunch and that flower girl landed somewhere over there," the twins pointed to their right, towards the darkness beyond the burning ground. "She hasn't moved since so I think she's completely out. Loke is supposed to be handling that other woman, but…"

"She's a woman," Keaton stated with a defeated sigh. He had a good feeling the battle was one-sided, unless Lucy was capable of convincing the great lion to not pull his punches against his female opponent. No, even with Lucy chewing out his ear, Loke would never try to physically hit a woman who was too pretty for his eyes. "Go back to Lucy and Loke and lend them a hand. I'll retrieve the keys from the fallen Knights and join you all after."

Gemini nodded. "Understood." With a flash of green accompanied by a powerful gust, the twins disappeared from sight, teleporting to Lucy and Loke's location.

No longer needing to keep up the façade, Keaton dropped to one knee, needing a moment to catch his breath. Plue sounded concerned as he tapped the swordsman's shoulder.

"I'll be all right," Keaton tried to assure the canine. "Head back to the spirit world. You've helped more than enough. Take a rest."

"Puun."

"Still no? You're a stubborn little fellow."

Keaton sighed and quietly watched as the lingering magic of Din's Wrath was finally beginning to fade. The red-hot glow coming from deep beneath the ground was gradually dying, slowly bringing back the shadows. The ground was cooling, turning solid and black.

"This nightmare's almost over," he grumbled as he forced himself to stand. But it wasn't the end once they escaped Abyss Palace – no, far from it.
“…ended up in Abyss Palace. We escaped, of course. Spent the whole night in the dreadful place… only to enter another Hell…” he suddenly remembered Master Lucy saying.

He had to hurry and escape in order to change the fate of the world lest history would repeat itself.

One hand pressed against his bleeding wound, he hobbled forward, wincing at the needle-like pain shooting from the soles of his feet and up his legs. He wasn't sure if any bones were broken from the fall, but as long as he could keep moving, he didn't care. The broken terrain was rough and bumpy. He stumbled many times but did not completely falter in his stride. Just as the last of the red embers burned away, he found Cosmos's motionless body lying prone at the very edge of the charred ground.

He grabbed an arrow from his quiver. With a shaft made from the strongest wood and a tip sharpened from a spiny dragon's scale, the arrow was designed to pierce the strongest of hides and armours. But right now, he needed it for another purpose. With a quick flick of his wrist, the tip of the arrow ignited aflame and he held it like a torch. Slowly, he approached Cosmos and shone his new light upon her. She didn't flinch and her aura remained weak, she was completely out for the count. He frowned when he caught the smell of burnt hair and clothes.

Her long pink hair was noticeably singed and the bottom ends and the back of her dress were full of burnt holes. She suffered the worst damage on both her legs; all that was left of her white boots were scraps of blackened cloth which did very little in hiding the large, angry blisters that covered her skin from the bottoms of her heels up to the back of her thighs.

Feeling guilty, Keaton murmured a quiet apology as he tried to kneel beside her. He succeeded in cracking one knee on the ground, resulting in a pained grunt, and proceeded to search for her key. Strapped to her hip was a leather pouch and he dug inside. He found four small glass bottles. Two contained a vibrant pink liquid and were labeled 'HEAL' and the other two held a deep green concoction and were labeled 'ANTIDOTE'. Just his luck, she had some healing potions!

He uncapped one of the HEAL bottles and sniffed its contents, surprised by its sweet, fruity scent. Never had he encountered such a pleasant-smelling potion before; all of Granny's potions were always unappetizing in both appearance and smell and that was because they were truly god-awful in taste. Having experienced the foulest of medicines growing up, he was rather skeptical about the pink potion's effectiveness.

"The more bitter the medicine, the better it is," Granny had beaten into his head.

There was nothing else to do but try it out. With a shrug, Keaton didn't hesitate to pour the whole thing down his throat. It was like drinking strawberry-flavoured oil loaded with sugar. It was far too sweet and it left a greasy feeling in his mouth; it was no doubt tailored for Cosmos's taste buds. He wished he had some water to wash it down.

He didn't feel anything right away, which proved his assumption true. Disappointed in the quality, he put the empty bottle and the antidotes aside and placed the remaining HEAL potion in Cosmos's hand before continuing his rummaging through her pouch. Right at the bottom of it, he found the black key. He tucked it away and, with much groaning and effort, stood back up.

Flaming arrow still in hand, he turned and limped towards Uosuke whose aura was just as feeble as Cosmos's. The man's unconscious body had been thrown not too far from where Cosmos had landed, saving Keaton from a long, arduous trek in his exhausted state.

Halfway across, Keaton finally began to notice the potion's gradual effects. His headache was becoming tolerable, the stabbing sensations in his chest eventually turned into mere pin-pricks, the
throbbing in his wounded leg was less noticeable, and the bleeding may have stopped. Sore muscles and bruises were no more but a mild, dull ache. He wasn't fully healed, but he felt substantially better.

He could breathe and walk without wincing and the fatigue that had plagued him earlier was nearly gone. Perhaps he had been too hasty in judging the sweet potion because it was actually quite decent. With renewed energy, he strode towards the motionless body visible in the border of his firelight. He only got close enough to catch a glimpse of Uosuke's shiny bald head when he suddenly detected something magical coming from behind. It sounded like a whirling blade and it was closing in fast. He quickly equipped his crimson shield and twisted around just in time to see an all-too-familiar scythe flying straight for him.

With a deafening clang, the spinning weapon collided with Keaton's shield, knocking him back a few steps, and bounced off high into the air. Bound by magic, the scythe flew back to its owner lurking in the shadows.

Kama wasn't alone, Neppa was also with him. Both executioners were making their way towards the swordsman, as if lured by the beacon he carried.

Keaton mentally cursed at his bad luck. Just when he thought it was almost over, there was always something else in the way. He glanced at his companion and whispered, "Find the last key, Plue. Once you do, stay hidden, okay?"

The spirit soundly nodded, hopped off the swordsman's shoulder and scurried to the fallen Knight.

Keaton turned his attention forward, glaring into the shadows where the two executioners were approaching. Since there was no other light source nearby, he had to keep the Fire Arrow around. With his teeth, he bit onto the shaft of the arrow and unsheathed the smaller sword by his hip. Freedom palely gleamed under the flickering flame. Although the weapon was old and marred from years of use, it was still sharp and reliable against human opponents. Fearless, he stood his ground, prepared for any other surprise attacks.

But none came. Instead, his opponents have chosen to confront him head-on.

A pair of footsteps drew closer, accompanied by a rhythmic clank clank with every other step, growing louder with each passing second.

Kama stepped into view first, his pale, masked face a menacing glower in the dim light. He held one of his scythes in his right hand, using it as a supporting staff, while the other remained strapped to his back. As he walked, his injured arm was pressed against his stomach wound that was now bandaged and still bleeding, evident by the wet, crimson stain.

"You should have killed us when you had the chance, boy," the executioner spat angrily. "As long as we live, you will not escape. We will make sure of it!"

Behind the leader of the Garou Knights was Neppa whose badly bruised face was trying to scowl. With his right eye swollen shut and his fat lips split and purple, he looked more comical than intimidating. Arms crossed, Neppa hung back while Kama continued to close in on their lone enemy.

Clank clank clank. The pounding of Kama's scythe against the ground was like a countdown to their rematch.

The executioner stopped before the swordsman, his narrowed eyes blazing with fury. Despite the serious wound hindering him, the man still possessed the burning passion to perform his duty. It must
be stubbornness and pride that kept him going.

The tension Keaton had felt when he first faced Kama was still as intense as ever. Unable to speak, the young warrior in green could only stare and listen as he maintained his defensive stance, his body tense and ready for battle. Fortunate for him, it was only going to be Kama fighting him and not both Knights at the same time as he had previously dreaded.

"I'm actually impressed you have survived this long," said Kama, shifting into his own stance as he looked his opponent over, taking in Keaton's battered appearance. "You even defeated Uosuke. But it ends here--"

"Keaton." The swordsman flinched at the familiar voice that suddenly intruded his mind. He blinked in surprise before resuming his steely glare at Kama, pretending to listen to the executioner's prattle.

"It's me, Jellal."

"Master Jellal?! But how are you able to… There are enchantments--"

"I'm here in Abyss Palace and I didn't come alone."

"What? Why would you… Who--"

"… die!"

Keaton snapped his focus back on Kama the instant the man decided to lunge for him. Gasping, the swordsman's first reaction was to leap back to avoid getting cleaved diagonally in half.

"Explain later! Busy!"

Jellal replied with something, but Keaton was too occupied in trying to stay alive to pay any attention. He back-flipped to avoid losing his head to Kama's scythe and stumbled slightly on his landing.

The executioner leapt back as well to put some distance between them and threw his scythe right when his feet touched the ground.

Keaton easily dodged to the side, making the spinning blade miss him completely.

Kama was already equipped with his second scythe when he charged at the swordsman once more. He swiped at the other's neck only to be stopped by a crimson shield. Growling, he quickly twisted his blade around and slashed again, but to no avail could he break through Keaton's strong defense.

Keaton parried the third blow and shifted onto the offensive. He rushed in and slashed upwards, his blade cutting through leather and into the flesh of Kama's right shoulder.

The Knight snarled at the new injury and quickly countered by lashing out his foot, purposely kicking the wound on Keaton's left leg.

The swordsman's cry of pain was muffled by the arrow clenched between his teeth. He managed to stagger back without falling over, hissing and wincing with every step.

Kama didn't give him a breather. Possessed by rage, the Knight was already moving in for another onslaught, screaming with all his might.

Keaton deflected the executioner's scythe three more times and was quick to notice how much
weaker the Knight's attacks were becoming. With both of his arms injured, Kama couldn't properly wield his weapon. Knowing this, the swordsman used his shield to divert Kama's scythe downwards so it would slice deep into the ground, making it difficult for the Knight to recover quickly.

Keaton was about to perform a leaping slash when he sensed something coming in from behind at the very last second. It was the first scythe Kama had thrown! He threw his body to the ground and avoided the brunt of it, feeling its cold sharp edge graze the side of his neck. Only a shallow flesh wound and not decapitation, he had the gods to thank. He landed hard on his left side just as Kama caught his thrown weapon.

"This is the end!" the executioner bellowed as he jumped at the fallen warrior, his weapon raised high above his head for a finishing blow. His eyes briefly met Keaton's one last time before the swordsman extinguished the flame from his arrow, throwing them in complete darkness.

There was a startled "What?!" coming from Kama just as Keaton frantically rolled aside. He felt the wind from the executioner's blade as it passed over his head by the width of a hair. Using the darkness to his advantage, he pushed onto his feet and drove the pommel of his sword into the Knight's wounded gut.

Kama choked, winded by the hit and in no doubt a lot of pain. He soundly coughed up blood and collapsed on the ground with his weapon clattering beside him. Moaning and writhing, he was unable to respond to Neppa's worried cries.

"What happened?! Kama! Kama!"

Arrow still clamped between his teeth, Keaton reigned it, shining light on his victory.

Neppa's one eye was wide, horrified to see the swordsman seemingly appear out of the darkness, standing over his defeated comrade. He visibly shuddered when he met Keaton's furious glower, reacting as if he was gazing upon a demon disguised as a man.

Keaton hardly felt like such a fearsome being. His jaw was aching from biting onto the arrow so hard that he was surprised he hadn't cracked a tooth yet. Sweat trickled down his brow as he panted heavily, barely able to stand straight. He was exhausted and hurting all over again, feeling just like the moment before he had taken the healing potion.

Despite feeling like shit, he wasn't ready to keel over just yet. Eyes locked on the burly man, he shifted into his stance.

"N-No way…" Neppa murmured in shock. He bared his teeth and clenched his fists that started to glow purple. "You bastard! I'll make sure you won't – oof!"

Someone dressed in black clothing and shrouded in golden light suddenly dropped down from above, one fist colliding with the top of the executioner's head, knocking the big man down and making a crater with his face. Besides a few twitches, Neppa didn't move after that.

The figure dispelled his golden magic and faced Keaton, wearing a familiar bird mask. For a fleeting moment, Keaton was certain he was imagining his brother standing before him, alive and well. But then he soon remembered he had lent that mask to Jellal.

Jellal's sudden appearance wasn't what caught him by surprise the most however, it was the young girl who flew down on the wings of a white Exceed. She landed right in front of him, her cautious expression quickly dissolving into disbelief when she finally met his gaze.

His blue eyes absorbed everything that she was. Long, flowing navy blue hair, large brown eyes that
were filled with love and compassion, and a face so pure, innocent and beautiful. He couldn't believe he had forgotten what she looked like.

Memories of her were flooding back; memories he had thought were lost forever. From the first day he woke up to her smiling face to the day she went to Mercurius Castle and never came back. He was so overwhelmed that he couldn't breathe. All of his strength disappeared and he fell to his knees, his sword and shield dropping at his sides.

The girl ran towards him, worry etched on her features, a look he had dearly missed.

Keaton slipped his Fire arrow back in his hand and wrapped his arms around Wendy for the first time in seven long years.
The hands of the clock kept ticking by, seemingly slower and slower the longer Bacon laid awake in bed.

Ever since they had snuck back into their room unnoticed, he couldn't fall back asleep. Romeo, on the other hand, was out like a light the instant his head hit his pillow.

Bacon sighed for the umpteenth time and rolled onto his side, feeling frustrated but anxious as well. He opened his eyes and spotted his dream journal lying open on the bedside table under the gloom of early dawn. It was too dark to read, but he knew the details of his latest dream were written upon those pages.

'Wendy goes to the dark castle and never comes back.'

His heart grew heavier with worry.

He carefully slid off his covers and sat up, one hand moving to close the leather book only to accidentally knock something off the table. With a soft thud, Wendy's hair tie landed on the carpet.

He bent over to pick it up, his fingers cold and shaking. This bad feeling he had – it was unlike the time Wendy had left for days to train – it was much worse, as if something was eating away at the pit of his stomach.

Romeo had assured him over and over that things would be alright. Bacon wanted to believe his brother, but he just couldn't shake away the bad feeling.

Stressing about it made his head hurt. The room was getting too hot and uncomfortable. He needed some fresh air.

Treading lightly on his toes, he made his way to the balcony door. He slipped behind the drapes and unlatched the glass-sliding door. Now the hard part: Slowly, he slid the door open. The wheels were old and ungreased, making the door sound as loud as a train as it ground along its track. He paused at every inch to make sure his family wasn't disturbed by the awful sound. Both continued to snore soundly throughout it all.

Once the door was wide enough, Bacon sucked in his stomach and squeezed through to the other side. Cool morning air greeted him as he stepped onto the small balcony.

High up on the fifth floor, there was much to see on the streets below. However, something else got his attention first; a slight tingle ran down his neck, warm and ticklish. He sensed her presence the instant his bare feet touched the cold wood of the balcony floor.

He turned and found Mavis Vermilion sitting precariously on the railing with her back towards him, kicking her feet over the edge. It was as if she had been waiting for him for a while while he was in the room.

She smiled over her shoulder and tilted her head, beckoning him to come over.

The boy didn't hesitate to stand beside her, arms propped atop the icy metal rail. He shivered but didn't pull away, curious to know why she was suddenly here. He was used to her appearing and disappearing whenever she pleased.
She was unlike anyone else; invisible to all but the eyes of Fairy Tail. As Romeo had put it, she was like their guardian spirit, here to protect and guide them in their time of need.

Bacon heard the story of how she had saved Wendy and most of the guild from a terrifying black dragon. And had it not been for her, Macao might not have found Bacon and the others unconscious near the castle.

Mavis looked as old as Wendy, but she had a mind like an adult – most of the time. Whenever the situation revolved around the Games, Mavis was as sharp and wise as Master Makarov. However, when it came to having fun, such as the water park, she was as cheerful and energetic as any other kid.

Right now, she was a kid who seemed real eager to play rather than sleep the night away. (Did guardian spirits even sleep?)

"Morning!" she greeted in an excited whisper, being careful not to wake up the others inside. "Did you want to watch the sunrise too?" She gestured over to the mountainous horizon where the sky was beginning to lighten.

Bacon shook his head.

She looked disappointed. "No? That's not why you're up so early?" she questioned before he could say anything. She hummed in thought for a brief second. "You had that bad dream again?"

He frowned and shook his head again, slower than before.

Her eyes found the hair tie clutched in his hand. "I see. Then I know what it is..." She twisted around and slipped off the railing, floating down instead of instantly dropping onto the balcony. Her bare feet made no sound when it touched the wood nor did her robe when she twirled back around. She copied Bacon's pose and stared forward, eyeing the cityscape that still thrived with activity despite the hour.

"I'd be lying if I told you everything will be alright," she said, glancing at the boy from the side. She grabbed a lock of her blonde hair and started to twirl it around her finger. "I know you're worried about Wendy and them – I'm just as worried too. I wish I had the power to see the future, but all I can really do is predict the outcomes."

"See the future..." Bacon murmured, wondering where he had heard that before.

A sense of fascination fell upon Mavis's face as she continued to play with her hair. "Did you know it's an extremely rare form of magic? Throughout history, there have only been eight known mages who held such power. In the year X104, King Abrador Kelfish of Pergrande was the first to be recorded. He could predict the weather months ahead of time, leading to bountiful harvests every season. His people had lived in prosperity under his rule. Unfortunately, a few years after his death, the Pergrande Kingdom was hit hard with blight and famine.

"The second was a woman named Mistress Selina Yerling of Enca. She could..."

Bacon couldn't quite follow everything the girl was saying. She spoke so fast and used words he didn't know the meaning of. But it was interesting to listen to her talk. The passion and energy in her voice and the sparkle in her eyes made her stories sound exciting.

There were a bunch of funny-sounding names that made him snicker and she would repeat them, just to make him laugh. Lord Oogenstein the Third. Camletto No-no Sagriffy. Duke Ikenshire Haffletuff Hornsworth. And so on.
The sun was already peaking over the mountains by the time she finished. "It's been three hundred years since the last living seer. No mage living today has the power to see the future – none that we are aware of, at least."

"Auntie Cana says she can see the future," Bacon spoke up. "Could she be one of them?" Ever since the card-reading, Cana had constantly warned him to be careful and never go anywhere alone or else something really bad would happen. And bad things had happened since then, but not the very, very bad thing she was warning about. What exactly that was, she wouldn't say.

The First smiled. "True she has the power of divination through her cards. But it is, to say the least, a weak form of future telling. She can predict the good and bad but can not see all the details that matter most that could be used to alter the future."

"Alter the future..." Bacon shuddered as the sense of familiarity washed over him yet again.

"Blind I am, but the future I can still see... the future is not absolute. It can be altered and you are the key..."

"Are you okay? You're shaking," said Mavis, snapping his attention back on her.

The boy blinked, his heart racing and his head pounding. "He can see..." he blurted out without thought.

Mavis fully turned to face him, intrigued. "Who?"

Bacon's tongue was tied for he didn't have the answer right away. A few seconds felt more like minutes when he finally realized where it was all coming from. The Dragon Dream, as Romeo had titled it. There was more to the dream than what was written in his journal. Lost fragments were drifting back; carrying small details that somehow felt important.

He took a deep breath, needing a moment to put the missing pieces together. It would have been more comfortable if he was talking to Romeo instead of Mavis.

"A dragon," he finally replied, watching the girl's eyes grow wide, "In a dream I had. He was my friend."

Mavis leaned close, her eyes flashing with excitement. "Give me your left hand."

"Huh?" Bacon flinched back in surprise. He glanced at her open palm and back to her eager face before moving to grab her hand.

Smiling, Mavis cupped his hand in both of hers. Bacon was fascinated, her touch sent a warm, ticklish sensation through his skin. He was tempted to pull away, but curiosity got the better of him.

"Now close your eyes," she said and he listened without question.

"Tell me," she continued, her voice soft and gentle, "what does this dragon look like? Imagine it in your mind as if it was standing right here in front of you."

At first, he imagined the small dragon Reedus had brought to life the other morning. The magic lizard was similar but not exactly the same to the one in Bacon's dream. It wasn't just the size that had been wrong, certain features were also incorrect.

Eyes shut tight, he focused on Reedus's dragon, watching it slowly shift and transform into its true form.
"He's big," he began.

"How big?"

"As big as... No, bigger than this hotel. Twice as big! He has a long neck and a big mouth full of sharp teeth. Silver scales covered in green fur. Moss, I think? Thick around his neck and shoulders. He has golden horns, like antlers, covered with vines and birds."

"Birds?" Mavis giggled. "And do they sing?"

He nodded. "Yes. There are many. Of every colour. And the dragon has six wings, but... he can't fly anymore."

"Why can't he fly?"

Bacon furrowed his brow. "Because... he is old and his wings are full of holes. And there are trees. Giant, super tall trees where you can't see the tops. Their roots have grown around him, keeping him to the ground. But he doesn't care."

"He lives in a forest?"

"Yes. His eyes..." They stood out most in the black sea of his mind, calm, radiant and full of wisdom. "He has three eyes that shine like the moon. He's blind."

"Three eyes? Where is the third?"

"Middle of his forehead. I don't think it blinks."

"Hmm. If he's blind, how can he 'see' the future?"

Bacon shook his head. "I don't know... He only told me..."

Mavis lightly squeezed his hand when he hesitated. "What did he tell you?"

"He said he could still see even when blind."

She tightened her hold, sending warm tickles up his arm. His body was itching to pull away, but he felt the need to stay in touch with her. Somehow, she was helping him remember.

"And what did he see?" she asked.

"Our world will become a bleak and dismal place..."

The boy swallowed, his mouth had gone dry as something heavy suddenly settled in his gut. "He said our world would become... bleak and dis... dis-mal. And then he said the future is not... absolute? What does that mean?"

Mavis made a small sound of interest. "He's saying that the future doesn't have to be bleak and dismal – not terrible. It can be changed for the better."

"Change for the better... I am the key to that change..."

She squeezed his hand again. He could hear her take a slow deep breath. "Did he say how?"

"How?"
"How are you the key to change the future?"

That piece was somewhere. Bacon dug deep into the recesses of his mind, ignoring the headache that threatened to stop him. Where was it? *Keep searching. It should be here.*

But he couldn't find it.

The pain was too much. He used his free hand to rub his temple. "I don't know..." he uttered in disappointment.

"Don't worry about it. It's okay. You can open your eyes."

First thing he saw was Mavis's smiling face, framed by her wavy blonde hair that glistened from the few rays of sunlight that shone through the trees.

Trees? He blinked a few times and glanced around in confusion, finding the hotel and the entire city gone, only to be somehow replaced with a lush green forest with trees so thick and tall they appeared to touch the sky. He gaped at the new scenery, wondering how he hadn't noticed the changes. The hard wood under his feet was now a soft carpet of green moss. The air was no longer cold but warm and humid, fragrant with the earthly smells of a forest. It had gone awfully quiet too, save for the few birds calling from somewhere in the distance.

He was about to ask Mavis where they were when a rustling of leaves made him abruptly turn around.

He gasped at the familiar sight towering before him: a wizened, silver-scaled, three-eyed, blind dragon trapped in the roots of humongous trees. His head was held high and proud while colourful songbirds rested on his golden horns tangled with leafy vines.

The dragon lowered his head, his three sightless eyes seemingly staring at Bacon, each glowing as bright as the moon in the shadows cast by the trees. The birds in his horns noisily chirped and flitted around from the movement.

The boy moved towards the dragon, feeling a rush of emotion and familiarity. He had walked this path before. He hadn't just dreamt the moment. He knew in his heart that he had met the blind dragon sometime in his past.

After a few steps, Mavis suddenly pulled back on his hand that he had forgotten she was still holding. Her voice broke the spell that had fallen over Bacon; "Wait, this is as far as you can go."

"He's not dangerous. He's my friend," Bacon assured. He tried to keep going, but the girl was a lot stronger than she looked.

She had laced her fingers between his own for a firm grip. "Your friend isn't really here, little one," she said with a sad shake of her head. "All of this is just an illusion that only we can see. This forest isn't real and neither is your friend... we're still on the balcony. Go any farther and you'll be walking into the railing."

The truth pierced Bacon like an arrow to the chest. His eyes stung and his breath grew short. The dragon was *dead*, of course the one before him couldn't be real.

Mavis spoke in a quiet, soothing tone, "He was a good friend, wasn't he? What was his name?"

*His name...*
He let his tears fall as he met the dragon's blind stare. For a minute or two, everything had gone quiet and still as if time itself had stopped around them.

"Come, come closer, Herial Yaarez... There is no need to be afraid of this weary, old dragon. Long have I waited to finally meet you, my young friend... Yes, I know who you are, ah, but you do not know me. Ages ago, I ruled the land and sky of Ishgar as..."

"The Ancient Dragon King, Yorenthall."

He was delirious. There was no doubt about it. Sleep deprivation, fatigue, blood-loss; it was a deadly combination that often led to wild hallucinations.

The Wendy he could see couldn't be real; he had been fooled far too many times before to believe it true. And yet... he could feel the illusion pressed against his body as he held her close; so close that his bruised and broken ribs were screaming in protest. Unlike every hallucination, this Wendy was warm. He could hear her breathing. Strands of her navy hair actually tickled his cheek.

And she smelled so pleasant, like fragrant wild flowers blooming in an open meadow.

*Flowers...?*

He took in a sharp, deep breath, drawing more of the familiar scent.

It pulled him back into reality faster than the stabbing in his chest. He remembered now... The very night he had last seen her walk away to her doom, she had smelled just the same.

This wasn't a hallucination. This was real.

"W-Wendy..." was all he managed to croak before choking on a sob. There was so much more he wanted to say; how he had missed her, how he had loved her, how he was so overwhelmed to see her alive again. His body started to shake uncontrollably. It hurt to cry and it hurt to hold her, but he couldn't stop or let her go. Her death had left the deepest void in his life, leaving him to struggle silently for years with guilt and sorrow. Now that he could hold her, that void had quickly filled, overflowing with all sorts of emotions.

He hadn't noticed the soft hushing in his ear or the gentle caress on the back of his head until his eyes ran dry. For a minute longer, he didn't move, lost in the moment, his mind drifting to the fond memories he cherished so much.

Once he collected himself, he slowly pulled back, leaving one hand to rest on Wendy's shoulder while the other he used to hastily wipe his eyes. "I'm sorry," he mumbled, hanging his head out of embarrassment. "I-I..." He was silenced by a small hand cupping his jaw.

Wendy gently turned and lifted his chin so he would have to meet her gaze. It was no surprise to see nothing but compassion upon her young, delicate face that shone under a flickering golden light. She studied him closely, her warm brown eyes wandering over every inch of his face.

"Bacon," she said. Keaton's heart leapt at the sound of her kind voice; "It's really you, isn't it?"

"Yes," he answered, his throat hoarse and begging for moisture.

Her eyes widened slightly. "H-How is this possible?" She gingerly rubbed her thumb over the scar on his chin then brushed away his matted bangs to get a good look at the scabby wound running down his right brow. She frowned. "What happened to you? You look terrible!"
Keaton couldn't muster the strength to laugh at how many times he has heard that already. He lightly pushed her hand away and bowed his head. "The future is what happened."

"The future?" exclaimed a familiar voice.

Carla appeared from behind Wendy as quick and smooth as a shadow. She stopped a foot away from the pair, wearing an expression of disbelief with her arms crossed and her ribbon-tail twitching. Her sharp eyes narrowed on Keaton, more so out of fascination than suspicion.

Oh, brave little Carla... Keaton would have broken down into a sobbing mess if he still had any tears left. Having gone a month without her icy glares and nagging guidance made Keaton realize just how much he truly missed her. This Carla was whole and composed, unmarred by the disaster that had yet to haunt them all, completely different from the feline he considered his partner and close friend in his timeline. He held back the urge to pet her between the ears knowing full-well she wouldn't appreciate the gesture.

"Carla," she flinched at the sound of her name spoken from his lips, "I'm happy to see you again."

The feline studied Keaton briefly. She uncrossed her arms and took one small step closer, her caution melting away. "So you are Bacon from the future? But how—" Her eyes widened; "Of course! The Eclipse Gate... You used it to travel to the past."

The swordsman nodded and turned to the masked man wielding a golden flame in the palm of his hand. "Master Jellal, why didn't you tell them on your way here?"

Jellal grunted and lightly shrugged his shoulders. "Better to show the truth than have to explain. The less questions, the faster we could come to your rescue."

"I know you didn't want Natsu and his team to come here, but it was unavoidable," he added, grumbling only in Keaton's mind. "You were gone far too long trying to rescue Lucy and Fairy Tail was already in the midst of their plan to save her. Thought it'd be best to bring some extra help in saving your hide."

Keaton tried to hide his grateful smile as he replied, "Sorry, things didn't go as well as expected. Completely forgot about the trap. So you were worried?"

Jellal mentally groaned. "It was Meredy who is worried. Better be thankful we weren't a minute too late."

"Yes, Master. I am in your debt."

Jellal discreetly shook his head. "It will be us who will be in your debt if our plan succeeds. Everything is almost in place. Once Meredy and Ultear do their part, it's only a matter of waiting for the right opportunity."

Keaton nodded. "We need to get out of here first. But even then..."

"You and I are both here with them this time," Jellal assured, sensing the other's unease. "Every one of us will escape before the day of the ceremony."

Carla, oblivious to their private telepathic conversation, frowned at Jellal. "So you knew who he was all this time?"

"I found him four days ago, so yes, I have known since then," Jellal answered in a nonchalant
Keaton gave Wendy's shoulder a small squeeze. "I arrived on the third day of the Games, just in time to watch your battle against Chelia. I was happy to see that moment again."

Wendy gripped his hand resting on her shoulder and gave him a troubled look. "Why are you here from the future? What happened? To you and everyone?"

Keaton swallowed, unable to rid the desert in his throat. He dreaded having to tell her the truth, but there was no way around it. Perhaps the sooner she knew, the easier it would be to keep her and everyone else out of danger. He sighed only to be quickly reminded of his injuries and exhaustion. With the adrenaline gone, fatigue and pain hit him like a boulder.

"Fiore is destined for ruin," he muttered wearily as he carefully pulled away from Wendy. Kneeling on rough stone was taking a toll on his bruised knees and wounded leg. He was far from graceful trying to shift into a sitting position.

Wendy was down by his side faster than he could say "I'm fine", one glowing hand pressed over the bloody rag on his leg. Her magic instantly chased away the dull ache, replacing the pain with a blissfully cool sensation. The Sky Dragon Slayer said nothing as she worked, eyes closed in deep concentration.

He missed that face and he missed her healing – oh, how he missed it so much. Her power was a blessing when compared to Granny's nauseating medicines.

"What ruin do you speak of?" Carla demanded, drawing his attention. The Exceed was tense and glaring. She knew exactly what Keaton was talking about.

The swordsman's face was drawn and sombre. "You've seen it already, haven't you, Carla?"

"I saw the castle fall, the city burn, monsters in the sky... If I had known it would all come true... I could have saved her! I could have saved them all!"

Carla hugged her body, shivering as if caught in a cold wind. "The premonition..." she whispered, sounding quite distraught.

Wendy snapped her attention towards her partner all the while keeping her magic steady. She furrowed her brow. "Carla?"

"Tell us," said Keaton, his voice but a rasp, "what did you see in your vision?" He needed to hear it again; to make sure this world was on the same path of destruction so all his and Crime Sorcière's efforts hadn't been for naught.

Carla gave Wendy an apologetic look before hardening her gaze at Keaton. She was putting on a brave act, but there was no hiding the fear in her quivering eyes. "Smoke and flames," she began, "Crocus was burning and Mercurius Castle had fallen. There were screams... people crying in terror – fleeing from a horrendous monster in the sky! And riding upon that shadowed beast was a man in black armour..."

Keaton stiffened, feeling his gut twist in nervous dread.

"What is it?" Jellal was first to notice his distress.

Keaton clenched his jaw until it ached. "Her premonition is not the same. The man in black armour... Carla of my time has never mentioned him – no one was even aware. Only Acnologia
"revealed the truth..."

"Foolish little whelp... the one you ought to kill... is a demon wearing the vile skin of man... Armour blacker than night... eyes like the pits of Hell..."

"Was there anything else?" Keaton probed, keeping his tone calm.

Carla flicked her ear as if annoyed by his question. She looked off to the side towards the darkness, her eyes growing distant. "There was... another man," she murmured after a moment of hesitation. "Cloaked in white and wielding a sword. He stood fearless against the monster in the sky, his face hidden behind a mask of a smiling yellow fox..."

Wendy perked up, her magic gone from her hands and her healing complete. "Wait, a yellow fox?" she asked.

"The mask of Keaton," said the swordsman in disbelief. His headache became noticeably worse as he tried to make sense of Carla's altered vision. He rubbed his forehead and shut his eyes. "The man in the mask is me and the monster in the sky... a dragon controlled by the man in black. If that is what you saw, then that means..." There was a high chance the plan to destroy the Eclipse Gate was going to fail.

He furled his hands and mentally swore. There was no more time to waste.

"We need to hur – ugh!" His attempt to stand was rudely interrupted by the sharp pain in his chest.

Wendy grabbed his arm to support him. "Wait! You're still hurt!"

"Don't... Don't worry about it." He brushed her away and tried again, only to suffer just as much.

"Keaton, calm down." Hearing Jellal's commanding voice made him pause.

Jellal stepped forward, his golden flame flickering wildly with the movement. "You will accomplish nothing in your condition. Rest and let Wendy heal you. They need to know what we're up against."

Carla huffed and crossed her arms. "Yes, what exactly is going on?" she demanded. She glanced between the men; confused, suspicious, and terrified all rolled into one.

Keaton grunted. "I'll explain on the way."

"Keaton." Jellal's tone was just as firm as the hand that planted on the swordsman's shoulder. Stern eyes gleamed within the hollows of his bird mask as he looked down at the other. "It's only the morning of the Fifth Day. There's still time. Now rest, or should I have Wendy put you to sleep?"

"Wait, what?" the girl exclaimed. "I don't have – I-I mean, I would never do that without permission... However..." She tightened her grip on Keaton and gave him a hard, oddly determined look – one that resembled so much like Granny's take-your-medicine-now-or-you-will-dearly-regret-it scowl. "If I must, I'll do it if you refuse to stay put."

This was a battle he knew he couldn't win. Stubbornness had often gotten him so far on the battlefield, but not so much when under the care of a healer – Granny's former 'apprentice' no less. He sighed in defeat and waved a hand in the air. "Fine. Alright. I suppose a little break won't jeopardize the future," he grumbled, not bothering to hide his sarcasm. "I need a goddamn drink anyway. Any water?"

Jellal wordlessly handed over his canteen, in which Keaton was eager to snatch away.
Swallowing each refreshing gulp was agony, but Keaton's thirst was stronger than the pain.

"We should wait for Natsu and the others to come before we begin explaining. Save our breaths from repeating ourselves," Jellal advised as he stepped back to scan the area. He eyed the fallen Knights closely. "Once they arrive we should get away from any listening ears. They should be on their way soon."

"Have they already won?" Carla asked. "Lucy is safe?"

"Five against one Knight. I'll be very disappointed if they lose with those odds."

Keaton wiped his mouth with the back of his hand once his throat was quenched. He did not need to ask to know who else had tagged along with their rescue mission. Natsu, Happy, Pantherlily and Mirajane... The only four missing from the original rescue team. With them on Lucy's side, Keaton felt rather sorry for Kamika.

With the executioners soon to be defeated, there would be no more obstacles barring their way out of Abyss Palace.

There was a soft pattering of feet fast approaching them, accompanied by a happy, "Puu-puu-puun!"

Wendy gave a startled squeak. "Plue?! You're here?" She took a quick look around. "I don't see Lucy. Where is she?"

Keaton smiled at the bounding spirit. His voice now clear, he said, "He actually showed up on his own to help our Master. Isn't that right, Plue?"

"Puu-puun! Puu-puun!" the canine squealed cheerfully. He stopped before the swordsman and proudly held up the black iron key that was once in Uosuke's possession.

The Dragon Slayer raised her brow. "'Our Master'?"

"Master Lucy. I'll explain later."

She seemed rather disappointed but didn't press on. "What's that key for?"

"We'll need it to get out of here," said Keaton. He patted Plue atop the head as thanks before stuffing the key into his pouch. He nodded towards the unconscious forms of Kama and Neppa, who were being carefully watched by the mage of Crime Sorcière. "Each of the five executioners carried one. Once we reunite with Lucy, we'll have all five keys to open the doors to escape."

Jellal made a disgruntled noise. "It won't be freedom waiting on the other side. Even with the executioners defeated, we're not out of the fire just yet. The princess gave us a warning."

"Every soldier will be waiting on the other side of the door..." Carla murmured with a troubled frown.

"Into another Hell..." Keaton muttered under his breath.

Jellal turned his head slightly to catch them all in his view. "We'll worry about that later. In the meantime, focus on healing."

Wendy nodded and went straight to work. The hard, determined mask she had worn earlier was replaced with a much gentler face. She placed a hand on the swordsman's neck to quickly heal the cut left by Kama's scythe before pausing. "You're chest is bothering you," she spoke softly. "Is it
 bruising? A broken rib?"

Keaton hated seeing her so worried, but there was no more hiding his pain. He needed her help – her healing power was the main reason she was chosen for rescuing Lucy. There was no way she would ignore a wounded friend. "Both," he said and gestured to the right side of his upper torso. "Two broken ribs here."

He winced at both the horror on her face and the tone of her voice when she shrieked, "Broken ribs?! Was it from fighting with the executioners?"

He shook his head and gave her a sheepish smile. "No... From stupidly falling into a trap." The humour quickly faded from his expression. "No, it wasn't just the fall. I broke them a month ago and they hadn't fully healed."

"What were you doing?" she demanded.

*Fighting to save what was left of our world...*

"I'm sorry. Nevermind," she murmured, glancing away out of regret when he didn't answer right away. She lightly prodded the fabric of Keaton's tunic. "Um, you'll have to take this off... I can't heal broken bones through clothing."

Keaton nodded and was about to start unbuckling his gear when he noticed Wendy was keeping her eyes to the ground, her cheeks a bright pink. "You okay?" he asked.

She shot up and nodded vigorously. Her face turned redder for some reason and she cupped her cheeks to hide it. "Me? Y-Yes! I'm fine! There's nothing you should worry about. Hurry up and... and take your shirt off."

"Oh dear..." Carla sighed with an amused shake of her head.

Keaton decided it would be wise not to inquire about it any further. He went back to removing each piece of his equipment. Wendy had to lend him a hand because a bruised and broken ribcage made the simplest of motions absolute torture. One by one, they unbuckled every belt and took off every item Keaton carried, piling them atop his dropped shield. Quiver, bow, knives, item pouch, *Freedom's* scabbard, and last, but certainly not least, his second, larger, heavier sword that was strapped to his back.

*Dragonslayer* was the name of the sword and Keaton prayed to never have to wield it in this timeline. It was made from the sharp wing-blade of a metal-plated dragon and forged into shape by Celestial Spirit magic. It had lived up to its name, having slain a number of dragons since the day Keaton first obtained it at the age of thirteen.

Without the burden of his equipment, the swordsman could breathe a little easier. Taking off his tunic was the challenging part. It was a painful, desperate struggle that nearly brought him to tears and required Jellal to step in to pull it over his head.

Wendy and Carla gasped while Plue let out a tiny whimper the moment they saw the ugliness hiding under Keaton's tunic.

The young man cursed under his breath when he saw how bad he truly was hurting. The two broken ribs was actually three and almost every inch of his skin was a different shade of bruise. Some month-old scabs by his left hip were cracked and bleeding, leaving lovely trails of red.

Wendy bit her lower lip and frowned deeply as her eyes roamed his torso, taking in every wound
and scar. "You've been through a lot in those seven years..." she said, her gaze lingering on the hideous scar that ran across his stomach.

Behind every mark on his body was a different story; a different battle; a different outcome. Failure. Arrogance. Weakness. Stupidity. Despite suffering with injuries, it was the old scars that hurt most because they were constant reminders of sadness, loss, misery, regret... Never did they evoke a moment of triumph or victory.

"I... I didn't make it... did I?" Wendy continued, her eyes beginning to water. Her hand wavered over the swordsman's broken ribs, but she couldn't seem to concentrate her magic. "I never came back to you like I promised... did I?"

The sudden lump in Keaton's throat prevented him from answering. He could only match her saddened look as the truth finally dawned on her.

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry I broke my promise! I-I'm sorry I wasn't there for you! I'm sorry... I-I..."

Seeing Wendy cry was like a knife to the heart. Keaton gently pulled her close and lowered his head to touch his forehead to hers. She leaned against him, wrapped her arms around his head, and broke down into trembling sobs. Their roles have now switched; it was his turn to give her support while she cried.

The clock was ticking but he didn't care anymore. They stayed like that for a while, neither moved and no one interrupted.

Keaton waited until Wendy was calm when he murmured softly, "Hey, you don't have to apologize for anything. It wasn't your fault. It could never be your fault." He pulled back and started to slip off his left gauntlet. "A part of you has always been with me. I've kept it all this time. As a good-luck charm."

It was filthy, worn, and frayed and the elastic band had long been replaced with cheap string, but it was still recognizable; the second half of Wendy's favourite hair-tie. He had worn the keepsake as a bracelet ever since the fateful day, always holding onto the fragile hope that Wendy would somehow, someday, keep her promise.

"It took seven years, but you've finally kept your promise," he managed to joke. "Sorry it's gross and smelly and broken. You don't have to take it back if you don't want to."

Wendy wiped her eyes and half-sniffled, half-laughed.

"Hey, didn't I ever teach you not to make girls cry?" Loke spoke up from somewhere off to the side.

"Shut up, Loke. You're ruining the moment," was Keaton's reply as he turned his head in the lion's direction.

The grinning spirit, still wearing Keaton's borrowed items, was not alone. He, Lucy, Natsu, Happy, Pantherlily, Mirajane, and Arcadios were making their way towards Keaton and the others. With both his fists engulfed in flames, Natsu lit the path ahead as well as everyone around him. Each wore a different expression upon their face, (with the exception of Natsu and Happy, whose faces were hidden under their ninja masks), ranging from curious to astonishment to relief.

First to rush over were Natsu and Happy with Lucy and Loke not too far behind. Although Natsu and Happy were dressed from head to toe in black, their excitement was evident by the gleam in their eyes and their body language.
"Bacon, is it really you?" Happy exclaimed, bounding up beside Wendy.

"Course it's him! No mistaking his scent," said Natsu. He knelt on Keaton's other side and pulled down his mask to reveal his toothy grin. "Seven years from the future, huh? You've really grown up, kid. But hell, you look awful! Looks like you've been through one of Erza's intense training sessions."

Keaton cracked a smile. Hearing Erza's name brought back memories of the brutal 'sparring' sessions he had endured when he was young. "Does feel like that. And more."

"We've been up against the executioners since we fell down here," Lucy explained as she dropped like a rock beside Natsu. She was looking a little worse for wear. Despite the few scrapes and bruises covering her bare arms and legs, she had emerged mostly unscathed from her battle against the Knights. "You had me worried," she told Keaton with a proud, tired sigh. "Thought the worst had happened until I saw you take down Uosuke."

"That fire show was pretty impressive," Loke commented. He raised a brow at the two prone bodies lying nearby. "Hey, is that the acid-spewing bastard and that other guy?"

"Kama and Neppa?" Lucy glanced in their direction before giving Keaton a frown. "You had to fight them again?"

The swordsman shook his head and nodded at Jellal. "Just Kama. Master Jellal knocked Neppa out before I had to deal with him."

"Hope you hit him hard," Loke growled, glaring at the unconscious Neppa while rubbing his knuckles. "I punched him square in his ugly face with Regulus Impact and that wasn't enough to keep him down for long, it seems."

Jellal scoffed under his mask. "He likely won't be moving again for a good day or two. I made certain of it. But even still, there are sensitive matters we mustn't discuss around our enemies. We need to get moving. Wendy."

"Right," said Wendy, returning to the mission at hand. She was back to her confident self. Her hands were steady as stone as she lightly touched Keaton's broken ribs. She gave him a firm look. "It's going to hurt when the bones snap back into place. Are you ready?"

Keaton clenched his jaw and nodded.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes in concentration.

Wendy didn't exactly lie; it was far worse than Keaton was anticipating. The instant Wendy used her magic, it felt as if she had plunged a knife into his chest and twisted it repeatedly. Black spots exploded in his vision and the world started to spin around him.

Down he fell, seemingly forever through a cold, black abyss, until there was a sudden, painless stop. Darkness receded to reveal a world filled with green.

A forest. Lush and vibrant and reeking of life. But it was dead silent and oddly still. Not a single leaf stirred as if time itself had stopped.

No – time did stop. He couldn't move; frozen in place by magic that should have died along with its caster.

Something moved in the corner of his eye and soundlessly drifted into view. White. Ghostly.
Enormous. A lingering soul in the form of the slain Dragon King.

Three eyes of fiery gold gazed down at him; eyes that were no longer pale and blind. There should have been anger or spite, but there was neither, only a deep remorse behind the dragon's wizened, tired stare.

"I knew this day would come," the dragon spoke, its saddened voice seemingly echoing all around. "Since the beginning of my time, I have seen my fate. And yours.

"I do not hate you. You were destined to come here... to slay me... and take my power to wield as your heart desires. By your hand alone, the war will end. And by your hand alone, old kingdoms will fall. Lives will be lost. Countless. My brethren... my children... your people... You will become a great terror among this land. A bringer of destruction. The Black Wings of Despair. Feared. Loathed. Unloved.

"Ishgar is on the path to ruin. However, it will not be you who would bring upon the end. No... A greater threat looms ahead. An evil entity this world has never seen... A shadow so dark that even I could never see its true form. When that time comes, you will understand... You will understand... what must be done. The fate of Earthland will fall on the final choice you will have to make..."

The enormous gates of Abyss Palace were about as tall and wide as the main gates of Mercurius Castle and far more intimidating. The doors were made of slabs of heavy black iron and steel and secured by five locks evenly spaced in a circle around the middle at a reachable height.

When Jellal shone his golden flame off to the side, his eyes caught the faint outline of runes engraved into the metal. He studied the runes closely and quietly grumbled at the level of security the Kingdom of Fiore had placed down here.

A powerful reflection enchantment protected the gate. Any magic used against the doors would reflect right back to the caster.

Luckily, there was no need to even try brute force.

Jellal pulled out one of the black iron keys Lucy and Keaton had painstakingly obtained from the Garou Knights. All five executioners were defeated and detained to ensure they would not get in Fairy Tail's way during their escape. Natsu and Pantherlily had bound each unconscious Knight tightly with indestructible rope and left them behind in the dark. Since then, Jellal had kept his magic sense on each executioner and noticed none had moved an inch from any of their positions.

Black key held tight in his hand, Jellal turned around to meet everyone's gazes. All of Fairy Tail stood waiting with anxious, determined faces. The only one to be afraid was the ex-Captain of the Holy Knights, Arcadios. The burly man stood behind the mages with an unconscious Keaton upon his back.

Keaton had passed out from earlier when Wendy started to mend his broken ribs.

It had been as painful as Wendy had warned. The audible snap of bones shifting back into place had made Jellal cringe out of sympathy. Wendy had felt extremely guilty about hurting Keaton and making him faint, but there was nothing else she could have done better. The young man had worn himself to the ground; his body desperately needed to rest. All the sleepless nights, sustained injuries and exertion had greatly taken their toll on him.

Shortly after Wendy had finished healing him, the group had travelled far away from the unconscious Knights and had stopped for a short break to give Lucy and Arcadios some time to
recover. Although none had asked, it was evident upon Wendy and the others' faces the many questions in regards to Keaton.

Jellal and Lucy spoke of what they knew – as much as Keaton had told them. Both had played the role of Master to Keaton sometime in the ruined future; Jellal, a year before his death, taught Keaton how to survive with Sensory Magic while, during the last two years, Lucy trained and honed his Celestial Spirit capabilities. They spoke of the terror that would soon be upon them and shared the plan that was already in motion.

Jellal, however, held back on the details of their plan to destroy the Eclipse Gate. Arcadios was a man of the castle and Jellal could not fully trust him. Nor could he trust in Natsu from accidentally leaking any vital information to potential enemies. The Fire Dragon Slayer was sometimes as unpredictable as his element, forcing Jellal to act accordingly.

The stories Jellal and Lucy had told evoked many instances of surprise and amazement from the others, but the most shocking thing everyone, including Lucy, had learned was the defeat of Acnologia.

"He fought and killed Acnologia?!!" Lucy exclaimed, speaking telepathically to avoid waking Keaton.

"Whoa! He's really that strong?" Happy asked.

Jellal nodded without hesitation. Keaton was a Fairy through and through; he needed to be strong to survive in the world he came from.

"It is what I've been told," Jellal replied, "He did not fight the dragon alone, however. He mentioned others, a small number. Who they all were, I did not ask, but Lucy, you were likely there. He and you were the only ones to survive in the end. It was a battle won... with a heavy price. Before Acnologia died, he cursed Keaton with the mark on his arm, in which I can only assume it was out of spite." To add insult to injury no doubt.

Wendy frowned at Keaton, her eyes falling on the young man's left arm hidden under the white feathered cloak someone had placed over him like a blanket. She had noticed the tattoo-like mark when tending his wounds, a black serpentine dragon with six feathery wings and a long tail that curled around his bicep. "So that's what that is?" she asked.

Jellal glanced between Wendy and Natsu. "Do you Dragon Slayers know anything about it?"

Wendy shook her head. "Grandeeney never mentioned anything about dragon curses..."

"Same with Igneel," said Natsu. He had been oddly quiet since the beginning, seething in silence as more of Keaton's past unfolded. He cursed Acnologia's name out loud and glared at the hidden mark. "The hell did the bastard do to him?"

Jellal sighed whilst shaking his head. "Keaton doesn't know exactly. From what he has told me, the mark causes him pain and discomfort at certain times."

"If Acnologia wanted him dead, the dragon wouldn't have hesitated," Pantherlily growled within their heads. "Acnologia would have wiped us all out at Tenrou Island if it were not for Mavis. That dragon is not merciful."

"No, he is certainly not..." Carla spoke up, her expression sombre. "Perhaps... Acnologia wanted
to make Keaton suffer beyond the grave..."

Natsu let out a furious snarl, looking as if he wanted to punch a hole through the stone wall behind him.

"Nevertheless," Jellal said firmly to calm the Fire Dragon Slayer, "it was from Acnologia Keaton learned the truth, that a single man was the one responsible for the Festival of Dragons and the Eclipse Gate was the beginning of it all."

Who that man was was still a mystery – a matter that needed to be discussed later, once they were out of Abyss Palace.

With Arcadios, they planned their escape. The ex-Captain knew the castle layout beyond the heavy doors and the strategy and positions the guards would most likely take to ambush them. There were even traps designed to render even the strongest mages powerless situated at various key locations, making escape for a criminal mage impossible.

But it wasn't impossible for Jellal and Fairy Tail; there was a secret path that would bypass all the traps and where the guards were likely waiting. Only Arcadios knew about it – he swore upon the late Queen's name. They could only hope that luck was on their side that no guards were stationed before the hidden passageway.

Jellal held up the key in his hand and nodded at Arcadios. "Does it matter which key goes in which lock?" he asked.

Arcadios shook his head. "No. They're all the same. As long as you have all five, the door should open."

One by one, Jellal inserted and twisted each key in their respective locks. Four heavy metal clicks echoed from the door. Jellal paused on turning the fifth and final lock. Without needing to look back, he mind-spoke, "Get ready."

The last click was quickly followed by the loud grinding of gears and echoing boom as the giant bolt inside the gate was finally released. The doors slowly swung inward, screeching at their hinges. If the guards weren't aware of their escape yet, they would surely now due to the sheer volume of the horrid sound.

Jellal stepped away from the opening gate, never turning his back. The instant he saw light come through from the other side, he extinguished his golden flame. Warmer, fresher air welcomed him next. Through the tiny gap, he reached out with his magical senses, probing the area right outside the gate. There was no one waiting. "It's safe."

There were a few sighs of relief. They didn't have to fight their way out just yet.

Jellal pushed the doors open just wide enough for them to pass through unhindered. Waiting on the other side was an empty hall dimly lit by burning torches mounted on the walls. On the opposite end was the beginning of a spiral stairway.

There were guards lying in ambush at the very top of the stairs, Jellal could sense each and every one of them, outnumbering Jellal and Fairy Tail twenty-to-one. Jellal motioned for everyone to move as planned; Natsu in the lead, followed by Jellal, Arcadios with Keaton, Lucy, the three Exceeds, Loke, and Mirajane at the back.

The stairway was narrow, forcing them to walk single-file. It was purposely structured to make it
easy to dispose of any escaping criminals.

They marched in silence; listening, smelling, sensing for any sign of danger. For now, it was only the guards coming up ahead that Jellal could detect.

"W-Wait," Arcadios's voice suddenly interrupted Jellal's concentration. Everyone stopped to look at him. The ex-Captain leaned towards the wall, pressing his squarish nose against it as he tried to get a good look at something under the poor light. "This might be it."

Jellal wordlessly held up a small flame in his hand for the man to better see. Golden light lit up the tiny crest of Fiore engraved into the corner of one of the bricks.

Arcadios grinned. "Yes! This is the passageway! Crow, there should be four movable stones that you need to push in the correct order."

Jellal scanned the wall and found no stones that were distinguishable from the others, much like the other secret entrance way. "You need to be more specific than that, I'm afraid."

With his arms full, Arcadios could only gesture with his chin and give out vague instructions, but the attempt was just as fruitless. Groaning in frustration, he turned sideways and nodded at Keaton. "Please, take him. I'll open it."

After an awkward shuffle, Keaton was successfully transferred to Jellal's back. Without all his gear weighing him down, the young man was actually lighter than he appeared to be. His weapons and most of his items were safely stored away in Jellal's storage dimension, saving anyone from having to carry them. Aside from the clothes on his back, he at least still had his feathered cloak around his shoulders and his fox mask atop his head.

Arcadios proceeded to carefully feel the wall, consecutively pushing in four different stones in a particular order. There was a grinding of stone and a quiet rumbling as the section of the wall slid sideways to reveal a pitch black tunnel that was narrower than the stairway.

Natsu lighted the way inside with Arcadios right behind. Since there would be another special door that only the ex-Captain could open, Jellal continued to carry Keaton. Mirajane once again guarded the back, holding onto a torch she had acquired from one of the sconces.

The passageway was awfully claustrophobic; the tallest had to hunch forward to avoid hitting their heads on the ceiling while arms and shoulders noisily scraped against the walls. The path eventually turned into steep winding steps that climbed at least two stories. At the end of that tiring trek was another stone door that required Arcadios's attention.

"What lies on the other side is a secret room," explained the man as he worked. He had to reach over a crouching Natsu in order to push the concealed switches. "Long ago, it was a... torture chamber... It was sealed away and forgotten for many generations. Try not to be alarmed by what you see..."

"Torture?" Wendy whispered under her breath.

The door opened the same way as the first.

Natsu immediately gagged and quickly covered his nose. "It reeks!" he hissed, reeling.

Even Wendy and the Exceeds made disgusted noises.
The smell struck Jellal just as hard under his mask. Sour, rancid, putrid, metallic; the powerful stench was far from pleasant.

"Ugh! What is that?!" Wendy exclaimed, her words muffled under her hands.

The answer appeared before them when Natsu made his flame bigger to light up the whole room. There were gasps of horror and frightened squeals at the ghastly sight lying around them.

Small as it was, the secret chamber held many old torture devices and tables piled with filthy, menacing tools from wicked hooks to jagged saws. Everything wood and leather were heavily stained and worn, and anything metal was dirty and rusting. Crusted on the stone floor were layers upon layers of dried blood that had long since turned black. Just with a glance, it was apparent that nothing in the room had ever been cleaned since its existence.

There were bad vibes coming from every corner of the room. The spirits of the dead haunted this place; Jellal could feel them, hundreds, if not thousands, of tortured souls. It threw his senses into overdrive. Chills ran down his spine and he broke into a nervous sweat. It suddenly became hard to breathe and the stench was not helping. He needed to leave and he wasn't the only one desperate to get away.

"Can't stand this..." Natsu mumbled, looking pale and sick. His flame had dwindled to the size of a candle, bringing back the shadows. "We need to get out of here. Now!"

Arcadios flinched from the mage's demand. "Y-Yes, it's... it's this way, I believe. Or this way? I need light to see."

Mirajane wordlessly offered her torch in which Arcadios took with a firm nod of thanks.

The secret door slid closed behind them. Arcadios led them through, being careful not to brush against anything in fear of disturbing the ghosts of the dead. Silence hung thick in the foul air.

"I'm sorry you all had to see this," Arcadios murmured after they were half-way across. "This room may be the castle's darkest secret... Before our time – before Abyss Palace and executioners even existed – prisoners were physically tortured here no matter how small the crime. It was cruelty–"

"But a punishment all criminals deserved." A deep voice came from the shadows right before them.

Some jumped and screamed in fright while others fell into their battle stances. Natsu pushed in front of Arcadios, his hands wreathed in fire. Something gleamed in the light of his flames.

"Whoever you are, you better get out of our way!" Natsu warned, his tone low and threatening. He was visibly restless, highly on edge from everything wrong with the room.

Blocking their way was a tall, large man. He was one with the darkness, suited entirely in black armour. He ignored the Fire Dragon Slayer entirely; "I would have preferred the use of torture than rely on those idiots to get the job done."

"G-Geraldo," Arcadios stammered upon recognition. He quickly shot a nervous glance back at Jellal, silently asking the same question that ran through the mage's head.

*How did he go unnoticed?*

Unnerved, Jellal silently cursed. No matter how much he focused, he couldn't detect the black knight's aura. It was somehow concealed.
"A shame to see you still alive, Arcadios."

Arcadios moved to stand beside Natsu and steeled against the black knight. "How do you know about this place?" he demanded. "How did you know we would come this way?"

"As the new Captain of the Holy Blossom Knights, should it not be my sworn duty to protect the Royal Family? One must know the secrets of the castle in order to properly serve the king," was Geraldo's reply as he stepped into the firelight. The light of the fires softly reflected off the smooth surfaces of his armour, making him appear as if he was blessed by flame.

Arcadios snorted. "So they made you Captain."

Geraldo soundly smirked. "Does that anger you? That honour will never be yours again now that you are branded a traitor."

Arcadios bared his teeth in anger. "You have it all wrong! You know I was wrongly accused of treason, Geraldo. Minister Datong—"

"I do not need to hear your excuses. You have broken your oath and fallen so far that you would dare side with these criminals. You are a disgrace. Once Her Highness learns of your betrayal, it will break her little heart."

Arcadios's eyes widened. "The princess! Wait! Geraldo! There is something Her Highness needs to know. The Eclipse Gate must not be opened. Our Kingdom – all of Fiore – will be in grave danger if those doors are opened during the eclipse!"

"What are you talking about?" the black knight snarled.

"We were lied to from the very beginning. The Eclipse Gate will not save Fiore from the dragons... It will summon them!"

There was a short pause as Geraldo needed a moment to understand what Arcadios was saying. "'Summon' them?" he exclaimed in disbelief. "Who told you this?"

"It was—"

"Say nothing," Jellal warned Arcadios through a private telepathic link.

Arcadios flinched and hesitated, but it was too late to keep the truth secret. Arcadios had subconsciously glanced back at Jellal and Keaton in the midst of his answer, giving Geraldo a subtle hint.

Jellal stiffened. He could feel the black knight's gaze fall upon him from the shadows of the man's helm; cold, intense, malicious. This man was dangerous.

"I... I cannot say..."

"You cannot say?" the black knight spat. He took another step forward, his appearance more imposing in full light of the fires. "We have spent years preparing the Gate and now you are telling me we should not even use it? Did this other person claim to be a prophet as well? That he had seen the future?!"

Arcadios shook his head and slowly approached the other man, arms spread to show he did not want to fight. He stood before Geraldo, matching the black knight in height and posture, his expression stern. "A prophet, no. But he had seen the future and he had lived through it. I saw the truth in his
eyes when he told me what will happen on the day of the eclipse. Fiore will fall and it will be our own doing. Believe me, Geraldo. I know we've had our differences, but please, you need to trust me. For the sake of our Kingdom; if the Gate is opened, Fiore is doomed."

There was tense moment of silence as the two men stood face to face, still like statues, not even daring to breathe.

Geraldo finally sighed and turned his caped back towards the other, head slightly shaking. "I understand now," he began, his voice a low murmur, "If what you say is true..."

Arcadios slapped a hand over his heart. "I have sworn an oath to the Royal Family. I would never lie to endanger them. You have my word."

"Very well then."

Arcadios was elated. "So you believe me?"

"Yes. I have no choice, it seems, but to kill you all."

It happened before Jellal could even blink; Geraldo had whipped around and rushed at Arcadios, thrusting his large sword right through the unarmed man.

Arcadios didn't even realize he was stabbed in the chest until he started to cough up blood. "W-Why...?" he managed to choke out.

"Because you are a traitor and a criminal and all criminals must face their due punishment. No one has ever escaped Abyss Palace and I intend to keep it that way. You will not stop the Gate from opening. No one will as long as I stand." With that, Geraldo kicked Arcadios off his bloodied blade, sending the wounded man to fall before Natsu's feet.

"You bastard!" the Fire Dragon Slayer roared.

Fire engulfed all of Natsu as he lunged at the black knight with a great fury. He swung a blazing fist only to suddenly have his flames completely extinguished and his punch caught in Geraldo's armoured hand. "What the – my magic – augh!"

Natsu screamed and fell to his knees in agony as the bones in his hand were crushed under the black knight's unforeseen strength.

"Natsu!" Lucy and Happy shouted out of concern.

Mirajane was about to move in to attack but stopped in her tracks, staring wide-eyed at her hands. "What's going on?! I can't use my magic!" she exclaimed.

"Me too!" cried Wendy, panicking. She was down by Arcadios's side, trying to heal him before he bled out, but she couldn't form any spells. All she could do was press her hands against his wound.

Lucy turned around and called for Loke but the spirit was nowhere to be seen.

Jellal swore under his breath. He wasn't spared either. There was an annoying buzzing in his ears and a weird tingling at the back of his head that ran down his entire spine. Something had been activated and it was likely one of the traps used against mages Arcadios had warned about: an Ethernano Nullification Zone.

Without his magic sense, Jellal felt disoriented and enclosed from not being able to detect the
proximity of everyone around him. But worst of all, he felt weak and helpless, reminding him of the awful time he had spent imprisoned at the Magic Council.

"Do not think I would come unprepared," said Geraldo, his grip on Natsu never faltering. "Resistance is futile. Submit and I shall give you all a swift and painless execution."

"Never!" Natsu hissed, shooting the black knight a defiant glare through the pain. He tried to break free only to have his hand further crushed under the larger man's hold.

"Slow and painful it shall be then," Geraldo snarled over Natsu's screams.

"It's him," a voice quietly rasped in Jellal's ear.

"Keaton? Are you awake?" Jellal asked, keeping his attention on the chaos unfolding before him.

Keaton was stirring, head shaking and hands noticeably clenched into fists.

"Yes, Master... It's him. It's him. It's him! He's the one! You have to stop him!"

Jellal took a sharp breath when he realized what the boy was talking about. "Are you certain of this? How do you know?"

"His voice. I recognize it. I...I don't know how... But I know it's him!"

Keaton was squirming now. Jellal moved behind a table to hide from Geraldo's view and lowered Keaton to the ground.

Keaton more or less fell off the other's back. He dropped and curled up on the dirty floor, clawing at the mark on his left arm with metal fingers. He swore and groaned and writhed as the curse burned and bled. "Stop him... you have to stop him," he hissed through clenched teeth, his face distorted in pain.

"I wouldn't be hesitating if I could," Jellal told him, "Our magic is completely sealed here. None of us can use any spells against him!"

Geraldo may be one man, but he was sharp-minded and physically strong. He had caught them in a deadly trap and cornered them like rats in a cage.

It was not looking good up ahead. Natsu had been thrown flat on his back and was now struggling to breathe from the black metal boot crushing his throat and chest. Geraldo's sword held him in place, pierced deep into his shoulder and into the stone ground beneath him. Happy and Pantherlily had tried to help him, but were easily swatted away like flies. Now Mirajane stood boldly before the black knight, swinging one end of a rusty chain she had picked off a nearby table. However, she was careful not to make a hasty move.

Wendy remained by Arcadios's side, desperate to help him, but the man was nearing his end. Carla stayed near the girl, standing protectively beside her. Meanwhile, Lucy was kneeling on his other side, her face pale and her mouth a grim line as she glanced between the dying man and Natsu.

With a grunt of effort, Keaton rolled onto his front and pushed himself onto his knees and elbows, one hand constantly rubbing the mark on his arm. "Everyone's magic is sealed?" he mumbled, peering up at Jellal from the side.

Jellal nodded. His frustration was hidden behind his crow mask but not his tone. "Yes. Even mine. I'm sorry, I stored away your weapons and now I can't return them."
Keaton shook his head. "Even if I had them right now, I wouldn't put up much of a fight." He dared to look at the state of their dire situation and outright swore. His expression turned dark the instant he saw the black knight. "We need to get out of here."

"The only way out is through him—"

"There's another way," Keaton quickly cut in, his face now determined. "I'll get us out. I won't let anything happen to them again. Wendy and Natsu... Everyone. I won't let them die." He struggled to rise, prompting Jellal to help him sit up.

"What are you planning?" Jellal whispered, lending a shoulder for Keaton to lean on. He caught the boy's tired smirk right before Keaton slid his mask on.

"Not everyone's magic is sealed," was Keaton's reply, making Jellal raise his brow. "Lucy! Master Lucy!"

Over the battle cries coming from two angry Exceeds, the Celestial Spirit mage heard his call. She turned her head and immediately went to Keaton when he beckoned her over. She crouched before him, relieved but worried at the same time. "Keaton, are you—"

Keaton grabbed her hand before she could say more and said, "Master Lucy, here I stand beneath the Celestial Stars, I humbly ask of thee, lend me thy strength, thy gifts, thy love, for as long as thou choose to part. Heed my wish, the gold Key of the Twins, wherein I will entrust my heart as one would a companion spirit of soul, unto the end of our time."

Jellal was confused while Lucy was nodding in full understanding. She quickly grabbed her borrowed set of spirit keys, picked a gold one off the ring, and placed it in the palm of Keaton's hand. While still touching the key, she met his gaze with a steady stare and said, "Under these Celestial Stars, I heed thy wish and grant thee the gold Key of the Twins. From sun to moon, moon to sun, may this companion spirit be thy heart and soul. When the end of our time comes, or if thou breaks thy trust of heart, then this Key and spirit will return to me."

The key between their hands shimmered white for a brief second. Then together they spoke as one, "O Celestial Stars, the promise has been made. Open! The Gate of the Twins!"

There was a bright flash coming from the key that was mostly concealed within their palms. Not long after that, two little, blue, identical beings appeared, both holding onto a scroll of parchment.

"Master Link," said one.

"Master Lucy," said the other.

"The Spirit King gives his blessing!" they said at the same time. Together they unrolled the very long scroll that would have stretched from one wall to the other if laid flat. From one end to the other, it was covered in hundreds upon hundred of neatly written lines detailing what Jellal could only assume were the summoned spirits' rights.

One of the spirits said to Lucy, "Master Lucy, once you read and review this—"

The girl waved her hand to cut the spirit off. "There's no time for that, Mini. Skip to the end!"

Mini picked up the bottom end of the document and pointed, with a golden quill that had magically appeared in its stubby hand, at one of two blank lines marked with an 'X'. "Then, as the owner of our key, you must sign here."
Lucy took the quill and quickly wrote her signature.

The other spirit used the same quill and pointed to the other blank line and said to Keaton, "Master Link, as the loaner of our key, sign here."

Keaton hastily scrawled his true name, his hand-writing much messier than Lucy's. The contract disappeared into magical dust the instant he finished.

"The temporary contract has been made!" the twins announced happily with a twirling, synchronized dance. "Master Link, we are yours to command for twenty-four Earthland hours before we must return to Master Lucy."

The boy nodded. "Understood. Now listen, Gemini, we need to escape at once with everyone. Do you still have memories of when you first transformed into me?"

"Yes!"

"Take on my form from then."

The spirits fused into one, turning into a perfect replica of Keaton, fully equipped and in much better shape than the real Keaton. "Master, you're running on such little magic..." they said, their worried voice slightly muffled under their fox mask. "We have less than three minutes."

"Then everyone, please listen..."

Keaton quickly briefed Jellal, Lucy, and Gemini on his plan, in which Jellal did not entirely agree on. There was no time to argue and Jellal made it clear it needed to be done a slightly different way.

The boy had huffed in annoyance but knew better not to protest against the one he called 'Master'.

With the plan now set, the four split up and proceeded to do their part.

Jellal rounded the table and headed straight for the black knight, wielding Gemini's copy of Keaton's small sword he called Freedom. Jellal was no swordsman, nor did he ever engage an opponent with only a weapon, so he wasn't quite confident he could overtake a skilled brute of a knight. He did, however, likely stood a better chance than Keaton at keeping the Captain distracted long enough for their escape plan to work.

By the time Jellal was close enough, Mirajane had whipped her chain at Geraldo who blocked with his free hand. The chain harmlessly wrapped around the man's gauntlet, allowing him to easily grab it. Just as he yanked the chain out of Mirajane's hands, Jellal rushed in from the side.

His approach did not go unnoticed.

Geraldo had reflexes better than most; he pulled his sword free from the floor and out of Natsu's shoulder and used it to parry Jellal's blade in one fluid motion. The power behind the Captain's swing was more than the mage anticipated; it was, perhaps, even equal to Erza's. Freedom was easily knocked aside from the heavy impact and nearly sent flying out of Jellal's grip.

Hands numb and aching, Jellal held onto his weapon as firmly as his trembling fingers would allow as he regained his balance. The knight followed smoothly with a forward thrust that moved faster than Jellal's eyes could follow.

The mage twisted to the side in hope of avoiding the deadly point only to feel it bite into his right arm. He hissed from the sting and staggered backwards, just out of the knight's incredible reach. He
was definitely outmatched in terms of swordsmanship... and his opponent had yet to move an inch from his spot. Natsu remained pinned to the ground by one solid foot, his struggles weakening and his lips turning blue.

Geraldo, with his attention locked on Jellal, tossed away the chain that was once Mirajane's and soundly smirked. "What was that pathetic attempt? You are no swordsman, that I can see. Without your magic, you foolish lot are nothing but mere insects."

An idea to bait the Captain away from the Dragon Slayer suddenly sprang to Jellal's mind. "Bastard," he growled heatedly, pointing the wavering end of his sword at the other. "It was your doing all along! You opened the Gate and summoned the dragons! You used them to destroy the Kingdom and all of Fiore!"

There was a sudden change in atmosphere; the air felt colder, stiffer, and unwelcoming. Jellal was certain he saw Geraldo's eyes flash red from within the shadows of his helm.

The Captain fully turned to face Jellal, purposely using Natsu as a stepping stone before slowly making his way towards the mage like a predator that had cornered its prey. Each footstep was a thunderous clang that seemed to resonate within the room. With every step the knight took, Jellal took two back, drawing the armoured man as far as possible from Natsu.

"So you are the one," the knight snarled vehemently. "You are from the future. You used the Eclipse Gate to come here. And for what?"

"To end the terror before it begins."

Derisive laughter filled the room. "Fool! Do you think you can alter the past as you see fit? To stop the inevitable? Your coming here will change absolutely nothing! I will make sure of it!" He lunged, closing the distance within a heartbeat.

Jellal barely had enough time to dodge the sword arcing down at his head. It sliced into a table instead, cutting it cleanly in half and noisily spilling its contents to the floor. There was no time to catch his breath or even think as Geraldo quickly followed with a backhanded sweep. Left with no choice, Jellal used his sword to block the attack, but it did next to nothing as Freedom was shattered to pieces by the larger, stronger blade.

He felt the cold edge cut deep across his chest as he was sent flying. He crashed into something hard before landing on his back on the floor.

"Master!" Keaton cried, sounding very close.

Jellal moaned in response, overwhelmed with excruciating pain. Everything seemed to hurt. He forced his eyes open at the sound of the knight's steps stomping his way. There was a bright flash of green light that made the footsteps stop. Next came the strong gust of cool wind as Gemini used Keaton's teleporting spell.

"What?" Geraldo roared. "How? Impossible! The three of you will not escape me!"

"Master! Give me your hand! Hurry!"

Through sheer effort, Jellal rolled towards Keaton's voice and found him crouched beside Natsu, extending a hand for the older man to take. Jellal reached out and grabbed the boy's hand firmly in his and instantly felt his fingertips tingle from Keaton's familiar magic. A strong wind began to blow as the spell took form.
Knowing Geraldo was soon upon them, Jellal risked taking one last glance. What he saw was no longer a man who wished them dead, but a *demon* straight from Hell.

Glowering red eyes loomed above them for one split-second before everything turned green and blinding.
Keaton carried them as far as he could before his strength finally gave out. Out of the magical realm of green and into the real world filled with hard, solid objects. He fell and landed face-first onto a cold, stone floor, the wind knocked right out of him. His other two companions hardly fared any better as they soundly crashed on either side of him.

To his right was Natsu, hacking and wheezing for air, every breath a hoarse rasp.

To his left was Jellal, coughing and moaning in pain.

Keaton lay motionless between them, too tired and breathless to move. All he wanted to do was sleep for a week. He likely would have fallen asleep right there and then if it weren't for the annoying little paws lightly smacking the side of his face followed by the cheerful "Puu-puu-puuun!" right in his ear.

He jolted awake and immediately remembered what had just happened. Through painstaking effort, he pushed off the floor and did a quick scan to their surroundings, finding no black knight or any guards, much to his relief. So where did they end up with Farore's Wind?

The first thing he noticed were the huge barrels; hundreds of them, neatly stacked in orderly rows on their sides and piled on top of each other on metal racks in perfect order. They were kegs, upon closer inspection, likely all full of beer or wine.

If Keaton had to guess, it appeared they had ended up in the castle's rich wine cellar.

It was far from what he had in mind when he cast his spell. His destination was supposed to be the same as what he told Gemini: Warp to Meredy. He had long since memorized her aura, making it easy for Keaton and Gemini to lock on within a city full of mages. But with his magic energy down to almost nothing, Keaton didn't get as far as he had hoped.

Did Gemini and the others manage to reach their destination? Keaton had sensed the spirits somewhere far away for a brief second before they had to return to the Celestial Spirit World. He tried to feel for Lucy's aura, but his reach was limited due to the combination of exhaustion and lack of magic energy. Wherever Gemini had taken Lucy and the others didn't matter as long as they were far from the castle.

Keaton slid his mask up to rest atop his head, ran a cold, metal hand down his weary face, and glanced at the little canine spirit that had decided to accompany him on his shoulder. "Plue, how'd you get here? Did Master Lucy send you to find me this time?" he asked with a curious eyebrow.

"Puun." Plue shook his head.

Keaton gave the canine a questioning stare, but decided not to ask any further, knowing he wouldn't get much of an answer. "Is Master Lucy safe? Wendy too?"

There was a nod and a happy squeal of "Puu-puuun!"

Keaton smiled in relief and gave Plue a gentle pat on the head. "Good. You can head back home now."

"Puun." Plue shook his head as expected.
There was an angry growl coming from Natsu.

It was a struggle, but the Dragon Slayer had managed to sit himself up to lean against the nearest barrel despite his mangled right hand and bloody hole in his left shoulder. He was wincing and scowling at the many barrels lying around them. "Where are we?" he croaked, his voice rough due to his bruised vocal cords. "Where the hell did that bastard go? Where's Lucy... and everyone else?"

"We got out just in time," Keaton answered. "Master Lucy and the others are safe. Gemini warped them out. They should be with Ultear and Meredy. Plue is sure of it."

Plue soundly nodded in agreement, making Natsu realize the spirit was hanging around.

"Unfortunately, we aren't so lucky..." Keaton continued, "because it looks like I warped us to the castle's wine cellar. I ran out of magic... Couldn't get us very far..."

Natsu raised his eyebrow at the swordsman, looking rather impressed for a half-second before furrowing his brow in confusion. "Warped? How'd you pull that off? That bastard sealed our magic."

"Everyone's but mine."

"Huh?"

Before he could explain, Jellal coughed and groaned in agony, catching Keaton's immediate attention. Keaton moved to help his master up, carefully propping the wounded man against the same wall of barrels as Natsu.

Jellal coughed again, an action that pained him greatly. He draped one arm across his chest to press against the large, terrible gash that bled profusely. With his other hand, he removed his mask, revealing a pale face beaded with sweat and lips spotted with red. He spat to the side and wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his gloved hand.

"Master, your wound," Keaton said, frowning with concern. He felt extremely guilty. Keaton was supposed to be the distraction, but Jellal had commanded to take his place, knowing Keaton wouldn't have lasted even a second against the formidable black knight. "Can you use magic here? Give me my pouch. I have something that might stop the bleeding and numb the pain. It'll help you and Natsu in the meantime before we can find Wendy."

Jellal wordlessly nodded. He simply flicked his wrist and instantly brought all of Keaton's items back from his storage dimension, putting everything into one pile. His eyes swept the room soon after. "The wine cellar? I suppose it's better than the dungeon. Or the fountains," Jellal remarked, opening a telepathic link between the three of them for he was likely in too much pain to talk verbally.

Keaton rubbed his neck sheepishly. "Sorry, Master..."

Jellal shook his head and gave Keaton a slightly apologetic look. "Don't be. We got away before it was too late, thanks to you. I understand now. You don't rely on Ethernano as your source of magic. That's why you were not affected like us by the Nullification trap."

"Wait, really?!" Natsu exclaimed, his voice sounding normal within their thoughts. "That's why you could teleport us out?"

Keaton shrugged as he dug through his pouch. When he had trained under Jellal, his master had
made a similar observation. Because Keaton's magical essence differed greatly from the mages of Fiore, learning sensory magic was so goddamn difficult for him.

"Seems that way. I guess it's an advantage in some situations. There is a big downside to it, though. My magic energy takes a long time to recover naturally compared to everyone else's. I need Granny's potions all the time."

And unfortunately, he had used the last of her elixirs she had ever made for him during the final battle against Acnologia. The potent concoction was a complex recipe that only she could make. However, her knowledge and skills had died with her over half a year ago in Keaton's time when a dragon razed her hideout to the ground.

His magic had been limited before he had even passed through the Eclipse Gate. He had tried to conserve it as much as possible, but the battles against the executioners left him with no other choice.

"Who's Granny?" Natsu asked.

Keaton smiled fondly. He found the bottle he was looking for and uncorked it. As he began to smear the goopy salve over Jellal's wound, he answered, "Grandma Porlyusica. We called her 'Granny' for short. She was never a big fan of that name. But we kept calling her that anyway."

Natsu soundly smirked. "That old hag? Bet she smacked you good for that."

Keaton chuckled quietly while Jellal hissed and flinched under his care. "You bet. Don't know where she kept hid ing her broom, but she always had it on hand when she wanted to smack the living shit out of us. It took maybe five or six years before she finally accepted 'Granny'. Master, let me see your arm." He slathered the salve on the deep cut on Jellal's right arm and realized something when he finished.

Granny of this time could make him some much-needed potions. Although, this Granny had yet to master and improve upon the magic restoring recipe. Keaton however, had salvaged one of future Granny's notebooks that detailed some of her work. If he could give it to her...

"The guards are moving below," Jellal interrupted Keaton's thoughts. "They know we're no longer down there. We need to get moving. Get out of here and meet up with Ultear and everyone else. Before that Captain finds us."

"Let him come!" Natsu growled, nearly shouting within their heads. "My magic ain't sealed here. I'll kick his goddamn ass as payback!"

"No," Jellal said firmly, giving the fire mage as stern of a look he could muster. "That man should not be underestimated."

"He's the one behind everything," Keaton snarled bitterly, shifting to Natsu's injured shoulder. "He is the one who will control the dragons."

How Keaton knew, he still wasn't quite sure. Hearing the man's voice in that foul room had triggered something; a strong feeling – a powerful hatred – so overwhelming that he was certain it was not his own. Thinking about it made his stomach roil and his curse start to uncomfortably itch.

Natsu's eyes widened. "What?!"

"If he can control ten thousand dragons, including Acnologia, then it's possible he can do more
than just wield a sword," Jellal stressed. "His eyes, did you see them? They were not human. Red... evil..."

"Like the pits of Hell..." Keaton whispered.

"He can hide his aura from me," Jellal continued. "There's no telling where and when he'll show up. We need to hurry. He wants us dead no matter what now that we revealed what we know."

Natsu scoffed angrily, blowing out a puff of smoke out of his nose. "I can take him down. As long as he doesn't pull that cheap trick again--"

"Our mission," Jellal cut in sharply, "is to rescue Lucy and Keaton. We got Lucy out, now we need to get Keaton to safety."

"You mean all of us need to get to safety," Keaton corrected. "No one is being left behind."

Natsu ignored the swordsman and glowered at Jellal. "I'm not running away," he stated out of frustration. "I can stop him! Stop him before it all goes to--"

"Natsu, no!" Keaton hissed under his breath. He shook his head and placed a firm hand over Natsu's good shoulder. "Please, listen to Master Jellal. I want to kill him as much as you, but right now neither of us stand a chance against him. You will die if you try to fight him. Master Lucy will never forgive you and every day, she'll cry. Believe me, I've counted the days." Years, to be honest.

Lucy had always called Natsu a stubborn, arrogant fool whenever she shared her stories and Keaton could now see why. When Keaton was young, he had looked up to Natsu like an older brother the same way Romeo had. Strong, unyielding, a hero; Natsu was still all that in Keaton's eyes, but there was such a thing as being too stupid and reckless. (There was no denying that Keaton had done the same many times over, which often resulted in heavy consequences.) No one in Fairy Tail was unbeatable, even the bravest and strongest; it was a painful truth Keaton had learned since that fateful day.

Keaton wanted to set things right; to fix the future that should never be and erase all the hurt everyone has yet to feel.

But first, they needed to get out and heal and recover their strength before they could come up with a strategy to take down Geraldo and his plan to open the Eclipse Gate.

Natsu tensed from Keaton's words. The moment he met the swordsman's fervent gaze, his anger vanished instantly. "Shit... Did she really?" He let out a ragged sigh when the other nodded and quietly cursed mostly at himself.

With Natsu somewhat calm, Keaton resumed to helping the other. Front and back, he covered Natsu's ugly shoulder wound and gestured for the Dragon Slayer's broken hand. They both grimaced at the sight of it; each finger and thumb were bent at odd angles and there was swelling around every knuckle and broken joint. Very lightly, Keaton dabbed some salve on the swollen parts to help numb the pain.

"How'd I die?" Natsu asked, making Keaton pause.

"If he didn't come for me... then he wouldn't have stayed back and..."
Keaton frowned heavily as he remembered what Lucy had told him. "While escaping from the castle guards," he began reluctantly, "You stayed behind to give Lucy and the others time to escape. However... Shortly after that... the dragons appeared and... only Lucy and Carla made it out that day..."

"Hey." Natsu tried to lift his other arm but to no avail. He gave Keaton a familiar cocky grin instead. "It's different now, right? With you being here and helping us. You're changing the future already."

Keaton wished that were true. Although Carla's power of foresight had yet to mature, her altered premonition still troubled him; she saw the black knight and she saw Keaton standing amongst the ruins of the city...

"The same thing won't happen again," Natsu assured when he noticed the other's distress. "I'll make sure of it. I promise you, Bacon." He lifted his broken hand. If he could move his fingers, he would have formed a fist.

Natsu's confidence was something Keaton always admired. It was contagious, always rubbing off onto others around him and right now, Keaton was starting to feel it. He matched the Dragon Slayer's grin and nodded.

"We'll do it together. We'll change the future for the better. By the way, just call me 'Keaton'."

Natsu perked a curious eyebrow. "Is that your real name?"

Keaton shook his head. "No, Link is my real name, but I've grown up as Keaton."

Natsu furrowed his brow in slight confusion. "Really? Why not stick with 'Bacon'?"

"Because I'm not 'Bacon' anymore."

"But I gave you that name. You loved it."

Keaton snorted in amusement. "When I was a kid who knew nothing, I don't hate it," he added when he saw Natsu's disappointment, "I've just outgrown that name."

Natsu's grin was teasing. "Heh. Well, if you don't hate it, then I can keep calling you 'Bacon' because I still love it."

Keaton refrained from rolling his eyes as he put away his salve. There was no point in arguing over something so trivial at the moment. "Master, how far away are the guards?"

He didn't get an answer right away, making him glance at Jellal in worry. Head bowed and eyes closed, it looked as if Jellal had fallen unconscious, but Keaton knew otherwise.

Natsu, on the other hand, was blunt in his observation. "Hey, ya dying already, Crow?" he mocked out loud, every word a grating rasp. "Erza cut you up worse before, so this shouldn't kill ya."

Jellal grunted in annoyance as he responded with, "I'm not dead yet. Erza hesitated to kill me. That Captain did not. So shut it, Dragneel. I'm concentrating. The guards have split up like ants below us, likely given new orders from that Captain. I'm trying to keep track of where they're heading. Half are combing the lower levels, the other half are climbing up. Seems like they don't know where we are at the moment, so we have a bit of time before they reach the main level. Thirty
minutes at least."

"Understood," Keaton acknowledged with a nod. "Let me bind your wounds. I'll use your cloak."
He unbuttoned Jellal's hooded cloak and grabbed one of his knives to cut it up into usable strips. He did a rushed job of covering their injuries, hoping it was enough to stop their bleeding otherwise they would leave a bloody trail wherever they went.

Once finished, Keaton took off his own cloak and began to equip all his gear in haste. Metal fingers deftly snapped on clasps and tightened belts with ease, having done the same routine daily. Once finished, he slowly climbed to his aching feet, unable to suppress his groan. He was grateful Wendy had healed the worst of his injuries, however, she only tended to the ones she could see. Both of Keaton's feet were hurting badly, likely suffering with a few fractures caused by stomping onto Uosuke's ugly face at such high gravity and height. He could barely stand and every step was akin to walking on pins and needles.

Nevertheless, as he leaned heavily against the barrels, he lent a hand to pull Jellal up while Natsu easily stood on his own.

"Master, let me help," said Keaton as he quickly draped one of Jellal's arms over his shoulder. The older man was visibly dizzy from blood loss. With Jellal and Keaton greatly hindered by their injuries, thirty minutes to get out of the castle was a very short time when they didn't know the layout.

The three of them put on their masks to keep their identities hidden in case they were spotted. There were other people besides the guards working in the castle; maids, servants, cooks, attendants – all innocent and likely unaware of the events that had occurred right under their very own feet.

Keaton moved Plue from his shoulder onto his capped head. "Be my eyes, Plue. If you see something we don't see, let me know."

"Puu-puuun!" The spirit cheered and clapped with excitement at his new perch.

Natsu, being the most mobile of the three, took the lead while Keaton and Jellal slowly hobbled behind.

The stone steps leading out of the cellar were the worst; too steep and too many to climb. Thankfully, it was the main floor from there. With Natsu's nose and ears and Jellal's magic sense, they carefully manoeuvred through the castle to the best of their limited abilities, purposely avoiding rooms and halls occupied by people. Lucky for them, there weren't too many workers around and the reason became clear when Keaton overheard a pair of maids chatting down a hall.

"The final event is about to start!"

"Let's hurry and finish cleaning the princess's room so we can watch it on the Lacrima-Vision!"

"Oh man! The last Game!" said Natsu excitedly as they huddled around the corner, waiting for the maids to pass. "Wonder what kind of event it is? Hope everyone dominates it!"

"It's a battle royale throughout the entire city," Keaton recalled, smiling at the memory. "You can already guess who the winning team will be."

Natsu whipped around and stared at Keaton with wide eyes. "Wait, really?! We win?! Damn it! I wanna watch!"
"It's clear," Jellal intruded, sounding rather irritated. "Let's get moving. We have more important matters to focus on than the Games right now."

"Yeah, yeah," Natsu grumbled.

"Yes, Master," said Keaton.

The closest exit they could find – without having to break a colourful stained-glass window, which Natsu was tempted to do – were the fancy gilded doors of the back entrance leading to the garden courtyard.

Keaton winced at the sunlight shining down from a clear blue sky. Outside was so bright compared to Abyss Palace and the dark dungeons. Even though there was no one around, they stayed close to the castle to avoid being seen from the windows above. Shortly after they slipped behind the tall hedges, they were suddenly assaulted by what sounded like a hundred voices ringing in their heads.

Jellal buckled to his knees, bringing Keaton down with him. Jellal immediately cut the telepathic connection and rubbed his temple to ease his new headache.

"The hell was that?!" Natsu demanded in a harsh whisper, looking around as if expecting an ambush.

"Everyone trying to talk at once," Jellal managed to utter breathlessly.

"Sorry about that," Ultear's voice echoed through their heads, exasperated. "We're going to try that again. One at a time, everyone. One. At a time. I'll start. Glad to see you three finally made it out. Lucy and the others are here. Do you—"

"Jellal! Keaton!" Meredy cut in, pretty much screaming in their heads. "Do you know how much you had me worried?! Just hang tight! We're coming to get you!"

"Don't," Jellal commanded, noticeably wincing from her voice. "All of you stay where you are. We'll come to you."

Many worried voices jumped in to argue against him. Again, they were all cut off.

"That's it. It's just me on this end," Ultear assured with a notable sigh soon after. "Tell me why we shouldn't come bail you guys out of there. You all look ready to keel over."

Natsu growled. "Not me!"

"Certainly not your best," she shot back.

"He's here. The man who will control the dragons," Jellal informed, motioning for Keaton to get them back up so they could resume their escape. The swordsman staggered to his feet, heaving Jellal with him. "He's a demon disguised as the new Captain of the castle guards and he's very dangerous, Ultear. If it were not for Keaton, we would all be dead by now. We don't know what he's truly capable of and I do not intend to wait around to find out. We need to regroup and rethink our plan."

The three of them continued on, squeezed between the hedges and castle, making their way around to the side gate. In the distance, Keaton could faintly hear the Magic Games announcer shouting away to start off the final event that will soon take place beyond the castle walls.
"A demon? Goddamn it... Well, getting here without our help is going to be a problem, Jellal," stated Ultear. "The whole city is under lockdown and under surveillance for the final Game. Unless you're a participant, you can't wander the streets or fly around."

Jellal muttered a curse under his breath. They reached a barred, black metal gate, which had been left unlocked. They left the courtyard and made their way to the front plaza. "If that's the case, then how were you planning to come to our rescue?"

"The sewers, of course," Ultear replied matter-of-factly as if it was the most obvious answer. "The sewers beneath the city are all connected. They're not sealed off by magic like everything else."

Natsu made a sound of disgust all the while keeping a cautious eye around the plaza that was unsurprisingly empty. "Yuck. The sewers?"

Jellal ignored the Dragon Slayer and nodded, his attention on the main castle gate that was unfortunately closed shut. "Then once we cross the bridge, we'll look for the nearest drainage pipe."

"I'll be waiting for you guys there," said Ultear.

"No, Ultear--"

"I'm not going to risk going to the castle. I'll only be waiting at the sewer entrance. Whether you like it or not, Jellal. And you, Keaton?"

Keaton stiffened from her demanding tone. "No objections here, ma'am."

Jellal quietly grumbled. "Very well," he finally conceded, too tired to argue. "We'll meet you there."

"Wait, Ultear! I need to ask Wendy a favour," said Keaton before Ultear could break the connection.

"Wendy? All right, she's here. Talk away," she said.

"Wendy."

Wendy's voice was shrill with worry, but Keaton smiled nonetheless, knowing she was somewhere safe.

"Bacon! Or is it Keaton? A-Are you okay?! You still look hurt! I'm sorry! I--"

"Wendy, I'm okay," Keaton interrupted. "Please, listen to me. I need to ask a favour of you."

"A favour? What is it?"

"Granny – Porlyusica. Can you find her and bring her there? I need her to make me a potion. Have her bring everything she needs."

"Porlyusica? Yes, I can bring her here at once!"

Before Keaton could say thanks, Plue made a noise and frantically slapped the top of the swordsman's head.
"Behind us!" Jellal warned, speaking only to Natsu and Keaton.

Natsu fully turned around while Keaton and Jellal could only glance behind their shoulders in time to see the front ornate doors of Mercurius Castle swing wide open. Standing in the doorway was not the black knight, but a young woman with short silvery-blue hair decorated with a dark blue rose. She was dressed in the uniform with the colours of the royal military, her rank obviously higher than an ordinary guard.

"Yukino!" Natsu exclaimed out of surprise.

There was no reaction from the woman as she marched forward, her expression blank. She moved with purpose as she headed their way and yet she saw nothing through half-lidded eyes. Jingling in her right hand was a ring of keys, twelve gold and one black – Lucy's keys.

"Keaton?" Wendy asked with worry.

"Go find Granny, Wendy. We'll meet you back at the hideout," Keaton assured, keeping his attention on the approaching danger. Ultear severed the telepathic link before Wendy could reply to that.

Natsu stepped forward and shouted, "Hey, Yukino! It's me, Natsu! What are you doing?"

"On your guard. A dark power is controlling her!" Jellal growled.

Without needing to select her key, Yukino spoke in a monotone, "Open the Gate of the Snake Charmer."

Right above them, the sky turned dark, almost pitch black, with hazy, deep purple clouds twisting in a spiral. Emerging from the darkness was a giant black snake with red eyes that shone with a wicked light. It looked more machine than beast with a body and head composed of metal parts and a jaw hinged by pistons. It slithered in the air, coiling around itself in the same, spiraling pattern as the sky. It hissed, the sound echoing throughout its hollow body, as it hungrily eyed its targets on the ground.

"Ophiuchus..." Keaton whispered more so in awe than dread. Rarely did Lucy ever summon this Celestial Spirit in Keaton's time due to its aggressive, disobedient nature.

Ophiuchus was a powerful Celestial Spirit, but also a great risk and very unreliable. A devourer of energy, the spirit had a gluttonous appetite and would consume all forms of magic from friends and foes alike in order to increase its strength. If it did not feed shortly after being summoned, it would quickly drain the caster's magic instead in order to sustain its form in Earthland. It required a huge amount of magic energy to fill the gauge that ran along its body, but once it had eaten enough, it would become an unstoppable, savage monster that could overtake anything – even dragons.

Jellal pulled away from Keaton and began to form a magic seal with his hands, each fingertip alight with golden energy

"Wait, Master!" Keaton quickly grabbed Jellal's wrist to break the seal before the man could cast. "Don't use any long-range energy spells! It'll eat it!"

Jellal snarled a curse.

That brief spike in magic was enough to gain the snake's attention. Its metallic tongue flicked out, rattling in the air, tasting and smelling the magical source. Uncoiling its body, it shot straight for Jellal and Keaton as fast as a fired arrow, its enormous mouth agape, aiming to swallow them both in one
A flaming kick from Natsu knocked it aside moments before it could reach the pair.

Ophiuchus's head smashed into the centre fountain, demolishing it completely. Water shot out of the broken fountain like a geyser, spraying everyone in the vicinity.

Despite getting wet, Yukino still showed no emotion.

Ophiuchus coiled its head around, its eyes finding its new target. It lunged for Natsu whose legs were enveloped in flames.

"Come on, ya big ugly snake!" the Dragon Slayer taunted.

But before Natsu could make a move, Jellal swung one hand up to make a number of sharp stalagmites burst out of the ground. They failed to impale the serpent's sturdy metal plating, but they were enough to slam its head upwards.

Natsu used that opportunity to leap high into the air above the snake and performed a rapidly spinning burning kick propelled by the flames at his heels. Ophiuchus was sent straight down with so much force, it completely demolished all of Jellal's stone spikes as well as bury its head deep into a crater. Defeated, the serpent was sent back to the spirit world and the sky returned to normal.

Yukino was neither disappointed nor annoyed at the defeat of her spirit. She had already summoned another one right after Ophiuchus disappeared. Libra stood before her master, a golden scale in each hand. Unlike Ophiuchus, this spirit made Keaton's stomach drop.

"Crush them," ordered Yukino.

The moment Libra tipped her arms like a scale, gravity shifted and Keaton was suddenly thrown to the ground by invisible hands. Crashing face-first, he gasped and choked, feeling as if a giant stone golem was stepping right on top of him, painfully crushing the air from his lungs and threatening to break every bone in his body. He couldn't move or breathe. The ground beneath him cracked and sank as gravity tried to drag him through the earth. He wasn't the only one affected. He heard Plue squeal helplessly nearby and beside him, Jellal was flat on his stomach, soundly sputtering up blood, the incredible pressure doing his wound no favour.

"Yukino!" Keaton heard Natsu scream, his voice strained. "Stop it! I don't want to hurt you! Snap out of it, Yukino!"

His cries went unheard. Gravity continued to force them deep into the crumbling ground. Natsu roared out of anger, his magic flaring to match his rage.

Keaton could see and feel the Fire Dragon Slayer's power grow. Fire danced at the periphery of his vision. He could feel the intense heat coming from Natsu's flames and easily broke into a sweat.

With a mighty yell, Natsu unleashed something powerful that exploded, shaking the ground and deafening Keaton's ears. A blast of scorching heat washed over Keaton, stealing whatever air he had left. Gravity instantly returned to normal and he was free to breathe again. Gasping, he lay motionless, desperately trying to catch his breath. He didn't even flinch when charred clumps of dirt and rock pelted him from above.

There was violent coughing and laboured breathing coming from Jellal, which forced Keaton to try to move. But even with gravity back to normal, his body still felt as heavy as lead.
"Get up!" Ultear's voice rang loud through their minds. "You guys need to get out of there! Now!"

It was the urgency in her tone that gave Keaton the little strength he needed to keep going. He shook away the dust and debris and pushed off the ground on trembling hands and knees. He gaped at the huge, smoking crater where Yukino and Libra once stood. The remains of the fountain were completely blown apart, leaving only a massive hole and a broken pipe where water continuously poured. He found Natsu off to the side, kneeling over the Celestial Spirit mage who lay motionless on the ground, her clothes singed and skin burned red.

"Hey, Bacon!" Natsu called, glancing back at Keaton. "Help me lift Yukino onto my back. We're taking her with us!"

Keaton nodded. As he clambered onto his horribly aching feet, he peeled a deflated Plue off the ground. "Plue, you okay?"

Plue sprang back into shape and clapped out of joy to show he was fine. After telling Plue to stay with Jellal, Keaton stumbled towards Natsu. There was no time to be gentle; as Natsu crouched with his back towards him, Keaton tossed Yukino's prone body over Natsu's good shoulder like a heavy sack of flour.

Natsu rushed to the castle gate and Keaton was about to follow when something gold and gleaming caught his eye. Half-buried in the dirt was the ring of Celestial Spirit keys. Keaton snatched them off the ground and hurried to Jellal's side. He half-carried, half-dragged his barely conscious master towards the locked castle gate that Natsu had decided to open himself.

With one angry roar and a fiery kick, the ornate gate was blasted off its gilded hinges. Being quiet and stealthy was no longer an option after they have already destroyed half of the plaza. All the guards were likely alerted of their location after all that noise.

They dared not look back as they made their way across the bridge. It seemed like luck was truly on their side when no guards or even the black knight appeared to give chase. When they reached the other side, Keaton couldn't help but wonder they had gotten away too easily.

Porlyusica was still in disbelief as she carefully flipped through the old, tattered notebook in her hands for the third time. Her own hand-writing and drawings stared back at her, detailing new recipes for various types of medicines that utilized ingredients in ways she had never even considered. She was not the one who had written it herself, and yet there was no mistaking her own work.

Missing the front cover and the first few pages, the book was mostly intact and legible. Every page contained knowledge as well as a story; wrinkles and stains from spilled liquids, worn edges, creased corners, ink lines smudged and redrawn, tears repaired with tape, steps crossed out and rewritten – it was clear this book was used often. And it smelled strongly of home.

"It's because of you, Granny... You are the reason we have survived for as long as we did. You brought us back from the brink many times over. You always yelled and scolded, called us idiots and selfish fools... and yet you still took care of us. I wouldn't be alive today if it weren't for the last of your gifts you had left us."

With a heavy sigh, Porlyusica gently laid the book down on the wooden counter and flipped back to the potion she was in the process of making. Magic Restore Elixir. Just as the name implied, it was a revitalizing concoction that fully restored a mage's magic energy as well as stamina. It was ten times more potent and worked thrice as fast than the current recipe Porlyusica had derived from Bacon's
blue potion. She was determined to make it right the first time, knowing it was her own instructions she was following.

While her hands were busy with a mortar and pestle, she grumbled at the situation Wendy had dragged her into. Right after the final Game had just started, Wendy had suddenly appeared in the infirmary at Domus Flau with Carla and a young woman with pink hair and, without so much as an explanation, had begged Porlyusica to grab her things and quickly follow them into the foul sewers. It sounded urgent so Porlyusica listened without question, thinking something serious had happened during their mission to rescue Lucy.

And it did turn out to be something serious. Hidden behind the glamour and fame of the Grand Magic Games was a diabolical evil planning its course.

Everything was explained to Porlyusica the moment she stepped foot in the small abandoned house Crime Sorcière was currently using as their hideout. Located in the slums of the city, it used to be an old, rundown, hollowed shell. Time had been reversed on the building, thanks to the woman named Ultear, reverting the tiny abode back to when it was still fairly new. There was only one floor with three rooms: a kitchen that was also part of the living room, one bathroom, and one bedroom.

The kitchen counter had been converted into Porlyusica's work space while the bedroom served as the infirmary where the wounded and weary could rest. The house was lacking in most furnishings with only a small round dining table, three chairs, a couch, and a single bed; old abandoned items all restored by rewinding time.

As Porlyusica worked in the crowded room, she listened to the chatter. The joy of hearing Fairy Tail announced as the winners of this years Grand Magic Games had finally died down. For the past hour and a half, they had been listening closely through an open window at the narration of the final event blaring from the many speakers placed throughout the city.

Once the group had finished their brief celebration, Porlyusica's attention didn't stray as she ordered Wendy and Lucy to get some rest. The tone she used brooked no argument; Porlyusica was not in the best mood and it was clear upon her face.

Lucy hadn't slept for over two days, having been imprisoned and sent to Abyss Palace to fight for her life, and Wendy had spent most of her magic energy healing the wounded. The two girls wordlessly shuffled into the bedroom where Jellal and Keaton were sleeping. Unconscious on the couch was Yukino, kept under close watch.

It wasn't the fact that Porlyusica had to work in such cramped quarters with a bunch of humans that made her cranky, it was learning the shocking truth about Keaton. From a curious, amnesiac boy to a fearless, young man who had slain many dragons, Bacon had to grow up fast in a grim and hopeless world.

And he was still fighting, having travelled through time, seeking to protect the ones he loved and foolishly pushing himself far beyond his limits, much to Porlyusica's displeasure.

'You are destined to save our realm, Hero of Time.' A prophecy translated from the ancient language of dragons. It was all starting to make sense. It was no mere coincidence that Wendy had found a lost boy in a temple forgotten by time.

"My dear, there are never any coincidences in Fairy Tail," Makarov had said what seemed like ages ago; "Every incident involving our guild happens for a reason."

Porlyusica shook her head; never had she thought the boy named Bacon would be destined with
such a cruel fate.

The future was safe, for now, Lucy had assured them. The twelve Gold Zodiac Keys were needed to open the Eclipse Gate and right now they were in her possession. But could it really be that easy after the ordeal they had endured beneath the castle? One man was dead, his body left behind in the castle, and Jellal and Natsu were nearly killed – all done by the same man who wished to rule the world using dragons summoned from the past.

It was a concern best left to the humans involved to discuss while Porlyusica focused on preparing the medicine they needed.

It fell quiet in the kitchen room with the only sounds coming from a ticking clock on the wall, the gentle simmering of liquids, the grinding of a pestle, and the steady dripping of extract collecting into an open beaker. The constant noise coming from the busy streets outside carried through the open window; fireworks, cheers, music and song; the entire city was alive and celebrating the victors as well as the end of the Grand Magic Games. It was a festival that would undoubtedly last all throughout the night by the oblivious populace – unaware of the evil that hid in the heart of their city.

Inside the cramped little house, those still awake and waiting eventually got restless. Nastu, in particular, wouldn't stop pacing and there were a few instances where he wanted to charge right back into the castle only to be subdued by Mirajane each time.

"Keaton saved you once already. Don't think he can save you again," Mirajane had warned the third and final time Natsu had tried.

"Look, I know how badly you wanna beat the shit out of that bastard," Loke began, "but you can't just blindly barge right in. Not after what nearly happened to you guys. You'll be waltzing right into another trap."

"There's been no activity around the castle other than the guards cleaning up the mess you made, Natsu," Ultear pointed out as she peered into her crystal levitating in the centre of the dining table. Her eyes narrowed in frustration, wishing she could find all the answers within the orb. "No sign of the Captain anywhere either. He hasn't left the castle at all. He's hiding behind those walls, scheming something big. I just know it."

"Yeah, I have a bad feeling about all this," said Meredy, seated across from Ultear. "They know prisoners have escaped and yet they haven't sent any search parties or even issued warnings throughout the city."

"They want to keep the people in the dark," said Mirajane. She was leaning against the open window, keeping a lookout for any sign of danger. "Less suspicion drawn to the castle that way while the whole city is busy celebrating."

"Looks like they also want to keep the guards stationed near the castle," Pantherlily noted. He sat cross-legged on top of the table alongside Happy and Carla, studying the live image in the crystal ball. "They do not want to thin their numbers, which could mean they want to keep security tight. Make it appear they're protecting the castle, but in reality, they are protecting the Gate."

Happy frowned with worry. "But they can't open the Gate, right? They need a Celestial Spirit mage and the twelve Zodiac Keys! Now they don't have both!"

"If they needed both," Carla began, her brow furrowed deeply in thought, "then why would they allow Yukino and the keys to be taken away? Why are they not searching for her? I must agree with Meredy on this. This doesn't feel right."
Mirajane soundly agreed. "It's as if they handed her and the keys right to us. Maybe to have her attack us when we have our guard down?"

"Jellal will know for sure if she's still mind-controlled once he wakes up," said Ultear.

Natsu growled and clenched a flaming fist, his eyes falling on Yukino. "That damn Captain made Yukino act against her will. I'm going to kill that goddamn bastard! I swear it!"

"He can control people and he can control dragons," Pantherlily stressed, shooting Natsu a stern glare. "For all we know, he could be controlling everyone in the castle. We cannot afford to be careless."

The fire in Natsu's hand flared up in rage. Before he could even think of charging back to the castle again, Porlyusica shouted, "You! Come here. I need your help with something."

Porlyusica wished there was a broom nearby to conk Natsu over the head for calling her the name he had picked up from Keaton. With a huff, she handed him a flask half-full of liquid that contained the ground-up contents of the mortar she had just dumped in.

"All my Heat Lacrimas are in use," she lied. "Gently warm this up until it boils. Keep mixing it while it heats up."

Natsu nodded. Under Porlyusica's watchful eye, he slowly warmed up his hands to the correct temperature she wanted. For the remainder of the process, Porlyusica kept him occupied with other small tasks to keep his mind off of everything else. She even had him perform a few redundant steps so he would stay busy. The others silently thanked her for keeping the Fire Dragon Slayer out of trouble.

When the potion needed time to slowly brew, Porlyusica made Natsu simmer a beaker of water while she quickly checked on her patients.

Yukino was first, tucked beneath a blanket on the couch. The major burns she had suffered on her face, arms, and hands had been healed by Wendy while the minor burns on her legs had been cleaned, dabbed with ointment, and bandaged. She hadn't stirred since her arrival, but there were no concerns for her health other than the state of her mind once she woke up.

Next, Porlyusica opened the door to the small bedroom and stepped inside. It was dark in the room, with the only window covered by thick, heavy drapes. She nearly tripped over an armoured boot that was haphazardly left on the floor. She quietly grumbled at the assortment of weapons and armour piled messily in one corner before turning her attention to the five occupants crammed within.

Passed out on the only bed beneath a feathery cloak was Jellal, his skin pale and body weak from heavy blood loss. He was cold and clammy to the touch and his breathing was shallow, both worrisome symptoms, but once the Magic Restore Elixir was finished, he would make a full recovery in no time.

Out cold on the shaggy rug with his back right against the bed was Keaton with Plue napping in the crook of his neck. Huddled beside him and squished in the middle was Wendy while Lucy was between her and the wall, both fast asleep.

Colour was starting to return to Keaton's face. When Porlyusica had first laid eyes on him, he looked as if he had dragged himself back from the grave. Saying he had only slept for a grand total of five or
six hours over a span of seven days earned him a nasty scolding from Porlyusica, which was soon promptly followed with a threat upon his life if he didn't go straight to sleep after Wendy was done healing his battered feet. It would be best for him to rest for a couple days, but time was not on their side.

Porlyusica suppressed a frustrated sigh. As quietly as she came, she slipped out of the room and went back to work.

It took nearly two more hours before the batch of elixir was finally complete. Viscous, dark and bluish, and smelling strongly of herbs, the concoction closely resembled Bacon's original blue potion. Supposedly ten times more potent, she was eager to test its effects right away.

She was in the middle of pouring the elixir into vials when the bedroom door swung open and Wendy poked her head out with a worried expression.

"Gran – Porlyusica! Come quick! It's Keaton!" the girl cried in a frightful panic.

Porlyusica stopped what she was doing and rushed into the bedroom. Someone had opened the drapes to allow daylight to shine through to better see.

Keaton was curled up on his right side on the floor, moaning and writhing as he clutched at his left arm in anguish, his nails digging deep. Everyone in the room was wide awake. Lucy and Plue were beside him with worry, pleading at him to stop clawing at his own skin, but to no avail.

"What's wrong?" Porlyusica demanded. Lucy moved out of the way for Porlyusica to achingly drop to her knees for a better look.

"His curse is acting up again," Jellal explained, barely sitting half-way up on the bed.

"I tried healing it with my magic, but it had no effect!" Wendy exclaimed, her voice shrill with fear. Through the pain, Keaton tried to assure her, growling out his words; "Don't worry, Wendy... It'll pass! Ugh... It usually does... Don't worry about me... I-I'll be fine!"

By the way he continued to squirm and sweat and noticeably bleed, Porlyusica wasn't convinced. "What sort of pain is it?" she inquired. "Sharp? Stabbing? Burning?"

"Burning..." he hissed. "Like it's on fucking fire!"

Porlyusica pursed her lips and turned to the doorway, finding all the other mages peering inside. Natsu was first to meet Porlyusica's narrowed gaze. She pointed straight at him. "You!" she barked, "Bring me a bowl of water. Make sure it's ice cold. And bring me my bag sitting on the counter. The rest of you humans, get out of here! Not you." She shot Jellal a stern look, making him freeze. "Lie back down and don't you dare move."

Jellal obeyed without so much as a blink while Lucy hastily picked up her spirit companion and gently pushed a reluctant Wendy out.

After Natsu brought Porlyusica her things, she shooed him right out and slammed the door behind him.

With a heavy sigh, Porlyusica returned to Keaton's side and dug through her bag, pulling out a few supplies. She began to soak a few clean white cloths in the bowl of water. "Let me see. Move your hand," she commanded. He didn't listen, forcing her to pry his bloody fingers away, which required
a reasonable amount of effort due to his strength.

She clicked her tongue in disapproval at the many scratches he left on his reddened skin. But it wasn't just the scratches that bled, the entire outline of the black, serpentine dragon was also bleeding as if someone had traced the entire tattoo with the tip of a knife.

His skin was hot, as if inflamed, but the mark itself was truly like fire, making Porlyusica jerk back the instant she touched it.

"Keep your hand away," she growled as she grabbed one of the cloths from her bowl. She wrung some of the water out and wrapped it around his arm in hope of cooling it off. "Does that make it feel better?"

Keaton exhaled a sharp breath at the cold touch and nodded, instantly falling still as the wet cloth quickly soothed the burning. "Yes, a little better," he murmured after a short while. He wiped the sweat off his face and shifted slightly to give her a tired look of gratitude. He was hopeful and trusting of her when he asked, "Granny, do you know anything about it?"

She refrained from smacking him for giving her that accursed name. Scowling, she shook her head. "Never seen anything like this," she answered truthfully, bringing nothing but disappointment on Keaton's face. He looked away, making Porlyusica slightly soften her expression out of pity. "Is it true Acnologia was the one who did this?"

"Yes... right before he died," he muttered bitterly. "It was a month ago. In my time."

A month since he fought against the fearsome black dragon. Barely enough time to make a full recovery, that was clear by the old, scabby wounds he still had. "How did he do it? Was it through magic? By touch?"

Keaton shook his head. "I don't know. I wasn't conscious when it happened... Master Lucy found me lying near his body and even she didn't know how I got it."

Porlyusica frowned at that. She replaced the cloth that was now hot and spotted with red with a fresh one. "It has hurt before? What triggers the pain?"

The young man shrugged. "Many times, although it has never been this bad before. It happens whenever I sleep? No – whenever I have dreams. Dragon dreams."

Always dreaming about dragons, it seemed, but it was very unlikely they could be the same dreams he had as a child. Porlyusica took a quick glance at his neck and found no Dreamstone.

"What are these dreams? Nightmares? When did they start?"

His expression turned dark and grim and his tone quiet and somber; "Nightmares... Most of the time. They started right after defeating Acnologia. In them, I am a dragon. A dragon who finds great joy in killing other dragons..."

Hearing that sent a shiver down Porlyusica's spine for some unknown reason. She was unnerved, unable to comprehend why she suddenly felt afraid. It was similar to when Makarov had spoken of the dragon graveyard hidden beneath the city and the truth revolving Acnologia that Natsu and the others had discovered just recently.

"But it's not always about hunting other dragons," he continued, unaware of Porlyusica's reaction. "Sometimes, there's a lot of anger. A lot of hate. Fear for the fleetest moments. Black shadows, so cold... rattling chains... and... and..." He winced and reached for his curse, the fiery sensation likely
Porlyusica snapped out of it and quickly slapped his hand away before replacing the cloth with a new one. She let out a slow, steady sigh to calm herself as she focused back on treating her patient.

There was not much else she could do for Keaton other than to keep the mark cool. If it was these nightmares that made his curse flare up and bleed, that would explain why he rarely slept. Bracing herself, she continued her round of questioning once the pain became tolerable for Keaton to bear; "What did you dream about just now that triggered this?"

Eyes closed, Keaton slowly shook his head. "I... I can't remember exactly. I was a dragon again... Maybe? Lying somewhere, unable to move. Everything was either hurting or numb. Dying... Maybe I was dying... Gods, the pain felt so real."

"Might not have been just a dream," Jellal spoke up. Lying on his back, he had been staring intently at the ceiling, quietly listening to the pair. "They could be memories. Acnologia's memories."

There were audible gasps and surprised exclamations coming from the other side of the door, which indicated the others were eavesdropping.

Porlyusica took off one of her shoes and threw it at the door while yelling at them to shut up out there. It immediately fell dead silent in the other room.

"What... do you mean?" Keaton asked.

Jellal slowly rolled over to meet the young man's skeptical gaze down below. "The curse was affecting you just as bad when you woke up at the castle. Somehow you knew, right then, that Geraldo was the man we are after. Only Acnologia knew his true identity and yet you recognized his voice in spite of never encountering him in your time. It's only an assumption, but I believe what you've been dreaming are actually pieces of Acnologia's past right up to his death."

Keaton snorted in disbelief, however his tone betrayed his uncertainty; "What? No. No, that can't be what it is. You're delirious, Master. Lost too much blood. You're not thinking straight."

Jellal grunted. "My mind may be as clear as mud right now, but I know what I'm saying. Dreams can sometimes be fragments of memories... I've experienced it the most when I had amnesia. Perhaps you've experienced it too."

"I... have," Keaton admitted hesitantly.

"Then it is a possibility," Porlyusica mused, intrigued by Jellal's observation. "In these dreams, were you always the same dragon?"

Keaton blinked at the question. He shifted to look at his right hand as if it held the answer, curling his fingers like claws. "No... Or maybe, yes? Black scales. Black claws. Never different... But then, sometimes I was blind in one eye... My right eye..." He stiffened, his eyes growing wide with realization. "Acnologia was missing his right eye... He lost it sometime after the Festival..."

"Can't be a mere coincidence," said Jellal, hardening his gaze.

"And Acnologia hunted other dragons," Porlyusica added. "Remember the dragon graveyard hidden beneath this city?"

Jellal raised his brow in surprise.
Keaton, on the other hand, was shocked, confused, and then angry in that order. He swore under his breath. "Why? Why did he do this to me?"

"A side-effect, perhaps?" Porlyusica surmised. "It may not have been intentional that he somehow transferred some of his memories when he inflicted the curse on you."

Keaton groaned in misery and stared glumly ahead.

"As much as you hate it, it has helped us," Jellal tried to assure, giving the other a sympathetic look. "Now we know Geraldo is the one we need to go after."

"Great," Keaton grumbled sarcastically. "Glad it's helpful in some way. Now get rid of it."

"As I have said before," Porlyusica began with a shake of her head, "this curse is beyond my knowledge. I have no means of curing it."

Keaton shot her a serious look. "I know the perfect cure. Granny, please cut off my arm."

Porlyusica smacked him over the head, eliciting a quiet "Ow" from him. "Don't be ridiculous!" she snapped. "That will cause more problems than it'll solve, boy."

He chuckled unexpectedly, erasing the dour mood that had settled over them. "I was kidding, Granny," he said with a grin before sighing wearily in defeat. "Guess I'll just have to get used to this torture every now and then."

Porlyusica hid her frown as she switched cloths one last time. No longer did the mark burn upon touch and the bleeding had nearly stopped. There were no visible cuts around the dragon that Porlyusica could see, making her wonder how it bled. Nevertheless, she bandaged his arm, covering the entire tattoo.

"I have finished the Magic Restore Elixir," she informed while she cleaned up her things. "You will need to tell me if I made it correctly. I'll bring it for you."

"Wait, I can grab them," Keaton offered, helping her stand and retrieving her thrown shoe. The moment he stepped out of the room, he was instantly bombarded with questions from Wendy. Even though he was a grown man who had endured the worst of the worst, she still worried for him. Porlyusica hated to admit that she felt just the same.

She was extremely pleased by the various looks of disgust that crossed Keaton's, Jellal's, Natsu's, Wendy's, and Lucy's faces when they each drank her elixir. It was pure revulsion; a true measurement of the effectiveness of her potions.

"Tastes... just how I remember it..." Keaton sputtered, cringing horribly at the bitterness.

"How is this even medicine?!" Natsu gagged, looking ready to throw it all back up.

After washing it down with water, it was evident upon their glowing complexions that the potion truly worked. Keaton and Jellal especially looked much healthier compared to a minute ago.

Porlyusica had one extra vial of the elixir left, in which she gave to Keaton. "Take it when you need it most," she said. "This is all I could make with the limited ingredients I had on hand."

Keaton's warm smile quickly became apologetic. "Thank you for your help, Granny. Sorry to drag you into this..."
Porlyusica crossed her arms and scoffed. "The only thing you need to apologize for is forcing me to walk through the vile sewers. Here." She tried to return the tattered notebook, but Keaton pushed it back towards her.

"It's yours. Always will be. I have no use for it so keep it."

With a subtle nod of thanks, Porlyusica carefully put the book in her bag, secretly wanting to read through every page in greater detail. Next, she handed Wendy a small care package that contained extra rolls of gauze, ointments and salves, and some herbal teas. "For Yukino as well as yourselves," she informed the girl, a fleeting smile on her lips.

She looked over the group standing before her, seeing their hardened, determined expressions and fearless stances, their minds all set on their next important mission. "Looks like I'm done here. I should head back before Makarov believes I've been kidnapped. There are bound to be some injuries I need to take care of after Fairy Tail won that insanity of a battle royale."

"You have my thanks," said Jellal with a grateful nod. "Please, keep all that has transpired a secret. This must remain our mission alone. There is too great of a risk if more people get involved."

"I'll keep them out of trouble, but I cannot make any promises," she retorted, scowling at his request.

"I can take you back," Keaton offered, grabbing both of her hands.

She raised an eyebrow only to see he had closed his eyes in concentration. She was about to demand what he was doing when he announced, "There's brother. Hang tight, Granny. I'll be back soon, guys."

His body was shrouded in bright green light as his magic came to life, sending a tingling sensation through her fingers. Porlyusica had to shut her eyes when the light became too unbearable and felt a strong wind begin to blow.

Before she knew it, she was swept right off her feet, carried away by a magical gale. Then in the next moment, she came to an abrupt stop on solid ground. She stumbled forward, only to have Keaton keep her steady.

She blinked rapidly to adjust her eyes to the dimmer light of an empty hall in Domus Flau. "First Celestial Spirit magic and now teleportation," she remarked. "You're full of surprises, boy."

She stepped back, expecting Keaton to let go, but his hold remained firm. She met his sorrowful gaze.

"Granny... I-I..." he stammered, hesitant to say more.

She glowered, pretending to be impatient. "If you have something to say, say it already. I don't have all day."

He swallowed, his eyes downcast, head slowly shaking. "Seven years you've watched over me and I... I never got to thank you for everything you've ever done... before it was too late. I never got the chance and I'm so sorry... I failed to protect you..."

What Porlyusica did next was something she had never thought she would ever do in her life; she pulled him close and embraced him, prompting him to wrap his arms tight around her. If her future counterpart was stubborn enough to live through seven years of Hell to keep this boy alive, there was no doubt she had somehow grown to love him as one of her own. It was a strange, foreign feeling, but one she did not despise.
"If I had never told you in the future, then I will tell you now: I am very proud of you," she said. It was the truth that made her genuinely smile.

He cried quietly on her shoulder and she didn't mind at all. He suddenly pulled away. With one last smile, he whispered, "Thank you, Granny."

Before she could tell him to be careful, he was gone in a flash of green and a strong gust of wind, leaving her alone in the hall.

Or so she had thought. A pair of footsteps fast approached her from behind. She spun around to find Romeo and young Bacon sprinting towards her.

"Porlyusica!" Romeo exclaimed. "Who was that? Are you okay? Everyone's been looking for you! What happened?!"

"I'm fine. I was – oof!" She was cut short when Bacon ran into her and hugged her by the waist. "What are you doing? What's the matter?"

Bacon shook his head as he stepped back, tears in his eyes. "I don't know..." he mumbled, looking rather confused. "I really missed you, I guess?"

Porlyusica knew the real reason. She placed a gentle hand upon his hooded head. "Come with me, both of you. I need your help in gathering some supplies. There's a lot of work to be done to get Fairy Tail back on their feet."

She said she would not tell, but she did not say she would not help to prepare for whatever terror may soon be upon them.

Evening had fallen over Crocus, but the city was far from done with all the celebrations. Fireworks have been going non-stop and revellers, both drunk and sober, have filled almost every street and corner, even down here in the slums. It was a city-wide party and everyone was invited.

Compared to the care-free chaos outside, the atmosphere inside the little home Wendy and the others had occupied was the complete opposite.

Right after Keaton had taken Porlyusica back to Domus Flau, Mirajane and Wendy, while wearing their stealth clothes to avoid being recognized on the streets, had stepped out to quickly pick up food, clothing, and other necessities for everyone. Those that needed it most freshened up, showered, and changed into new outfits before they all crowded around the kitchen to eat. While they ate a wide assortment of street vendor foods, including a bunch of desserts Mirajane knew Wendy and Keaton would enjoy, the group tried to plan their next course of action.

Their number one priority was the destruction of the Eclipse Gate, in which Keaton and Crime Sorcière had spent the last three days preparing for. However, now that the black knight was aware of what they knew, simply blowing up the Gate was no longer feasible. It was possible the Gate could be moved and hidden elsewhere or heavily protected by both soldiers and deadly traps.

Defeating the black knight was their next priority. However, they couldn't just run into the castle and hunt him down. He was a dangerous enemy; his true power hidden under his disguise as the Captain of the Holy Blossom Knights. Wherever the Gate will be, there was a good chance he would be there to protect it.

The Captain was well-prepared to stop them from escaping the castle; undoubtedly, he would be ready to prevent them from interfering with his plan. If he could control Yukino, then he could
control others to do his bidding, such as the King or Princess. It wouldn't be wise to charge the castle and have all of Fairy Tail and Crime Sorcière branded as traitors against the kingdom.

The group had a limited time to come up with a strategy. The lunar eclipse – a vital, natural phenomenon needed to fully activate the Eclipse Gate – was going to occur sometime in the middle of the night. Keaton didn't know the exact time nor could he remember if his Master Lucy ever mentioned it. Knowing this, they needed to think of something before midnight.

The same concerns that were discussed earlier were brought back up; the Eclipse Gate required the twelve Gold Zodiac Keys and a Celestial Spirit mage, in which the black knight now had neither. So why was he not in search for Yukino or the keys? As Mirajane and Carla had mentioned, the whole situation was rather suspicious.

They needed answers; answers that only Yukino may be able to provide.

Jellal had confirmed that Yukino was free of the dark power that had been controlling her earlier so there were no concerns when she finally woke up shortly after they finished their meals.

Confused, ashamed, and guilty, Yukino had broken down when questions were thrown at her. She couldn't remember what happened after she was taken out of her prison cell by the black knight, making her fear she had done something wrong to hurt them. Lucy and Mirajane had escorted her to the bedroom to help her calm down as well as give her some privacy so she could change out of her burnt uniform.

The rest of Fairy Tail waited in the kitchen and living room since then, while Crime Sorcière stepped out for a quick patrol around the area, wanting to make sure they were still safe.

Wendy had been anxious and upset ever since Abyss Palace. She was overwhelmed, to say the least. Keaton. The fate of the future. The black knight. Arcadios's death... It was so much to take in in such a short amount of time. (She still wasn't quite over the initial shock that Keaton was Bacon, seven years from the future.) The guilt from being unable to heal Arcadios had troubled her most until Keaton had assured her, through kind words and a much-needed hug, that there was nothing that could have been done for Arcadios in that situation. The wound was fatal; even with magic, Wendy would not have been able to heal Arcadios in time.

What was once a rescue mission had now turned into a mission to save the kingdom and the future.

The lives of many rested on their shoulders, but they couldn't act recklessly as Natsu wanted to do so badly. One wrong move and it could be the end for them; for Fiore; for Earthland.

Even though Wendy was a nervous wreck, she was actually glad to share the burden that had once only been Keaton's. He did not deserve the responsibility, not after what he's been through already.

Wendy sat on one of the chairs at the dining table with Carla on her lap, gently petting her feline friend atop the head in hope of calming her nerves as well as Carla's. Wendy's nervousness was replaced by curiosity when Keaton decided to clean his feathery cloak seemingly out of boredom.

He looked like an ordinary teenager wearing the new clothes Mirajane and Wendy had picked out for him: a plain black T-shirt, a light, green, hooded sweater left unzipped and sleeves rolled-up, and beige cargo pants that was one or two-sizes too big. Hooked to one of his pant loops was his set of Celestial Spirit keys, two gold and one silver.

With Keaton being the future owner of Plue's key, it was clear why Plue was so attached to him since Abyss Palace. Right now, the canine was riding atop Keaton's disheveled blond hair with a
joyous smile upon his adorable face.

Loke was also one of Keaton's future spirits, their strong bond already evident by how natural they talked like close friends. There was no better proof at how kind and caring Keaton was towards his Celestial Spirits, having taken after his master, Lucy.

There were many questions Wendy wanted to ask Keaton – personal questions that she knew would cause him grief. Now seemed like the only time they would be able to talk freely, but she was hesitant to say anything.

Fortunately, he was first to start.

He caught her staring and asked, "You okay, Wendy?"

All heads in the room turned in Wendy's direction. Flustered by the sudden attention, Wendy straightened and blurted out the first thing that came to her mind; "I-I was just wondering about your cloak, that's all!"

"This?" Keaton held up his feathered cloak for her to better see. "Do you recognize it? I don't know if it still smells like her or not. It's been like four years since I've had this so it probably has my stink on it now."

"Like 'her'? What do you mean?" Wendy asked, blinking in confusion.

He spread the cloak open to make it appear like wings. "This cloak... It's made from the wing feathers of the Sky Dragon. I didn't kill her, if that's what you're thinking," he quickly added when he saw her horrified reaction.

"Then how'd you get that?" Natsu asked, almost demanding. He was sitting on the kitchen floor, back against the counter.

"It was two years after the Festival..." Keaton began, his voice quiet. He started to absentmindedly brush his fingers through the feathers of his cloak, straightening them and picking out pieces of dirt. "Granny had felt... a summon? A call? She felt something that lured her deep into East Forest. She led us there and that is where we found your mother, Grandeeney. She was fatally wounded..."

Stunned, Wendy gasped into one of her hands. "A-Are you sure it was her?" she asked, barely able to find her voice. The thought of her kind, gentle mother dying alone in the woods made Wendy's heart wrench. "Not a different Grandeeney? From the past?"

Keaton gave her a pitying look. "It was her. Granny was sure of it."

Wendy felt a sharp pang in her chest as tears stung her eyes. "Grandeeney... Did she say... where she's been all this time?"

He shook his head, lightly making Plue sway with the motion, his eyes and hands back on the cloak. "No... We arrived moments before she died. She only had enough time to tell us this; 'Only the power of a dragon can defeat another dragon. Use my body for a chance fight back.' Then in her final breath, she somehow showed Granny the locations of two other dragons who had fallen battling alongside her; Igneel and Metalicana."

"Igneel..." Natsu murmured, just as shocked as Wendy at hearing the name of his parent. He shot up in anger. "What the hell happened to them? What were they fighting that got them killed?"

Keaton shrugged. "Acnologia and the other the mind-controlled dragons is my guess, judging from
the wounds I remember seeing..." He avoided going into more grisly details for the Dragon Slayers' sake.

Natsu growled heatedly, only to have relief wash over him soon after. "That means Igneel's still alive somewhere..."

Keaton nodded, giving both Wendy and Natsu a grateful smile. "That's right, your parents are still alive right now as we speak. I wish I could thank them. If it were not for their sacrifices, I wouldn't even be here. Even in death, they have protected us and gave us the strength we desperately needed to fight and survive. I'm sorry I can't tell you where they could be."

"We know they're okay. That's all that matters," said Wendy, her tears becoming joyful. She wiped her eyes and gently put Carla on the table before she stood up. She walked over to Keaton to lightly touch the feathers of his cloak.

He held it out for her to take. "It's yours if you want it. Or would it be... odd to wear a part of your mother?"

"There's nothing wrong with that," said Natsu. He grabbed the end of his favourite scarf. "This is made from Igneel's scales and I have no problem wearing it."

Loke raised an eyebrow. "Didn't he give it to you as a gift though? It's not quite the same as... you know... Sorry, Wendy..."

Wendy shook her head. "It's fine, Loke. It was still a gift from Mother." She waved away her hands to refuse Keaton's kind gesture. "It belongs to you. I can't take it. Besides, it's too big for me."

In spite of what Wendy had said, Keaton draped the cloak around her shoulders, stepped back, and raised his brow as he looked her over.

"Guess it has gotten pretty big," he remarked.

Wendy felt her cheeks burn out of embarrassment because Keaton was so much bigger than her now, standing nearly two heads taller. Wendy would be tripping head over heels if she tried to wear his cloak.

"It used to be a lot smaller," said Keaton, "but it's been growing to match my size since its bound to me."

Wendy handed the cloak back to him. Even though it wasn't made for her, she still loved it; it was soft and warm, reminding her of the cold nights she had slept under her mother's protective wings. Her mother's scent was faint, nearly overpowered by Keaton's scent, but it was still present and it made her smile.

Happy hopped over for a better look, his eyes wide with curiosity. "Growing? Because of magic?" he asked.

"Correct. Because of Celestial Spirit magic." Keaton flipped the cloak over to expose the downy feathers lining the inside. He pointed to a small, golden emblem of a howling wolf-head that appeared to be stamped on near the collar. "This is the handiwork of Lupus the Wolf."

"Wait, that obnoxious asshole?" Loke exclaimed in disdain, shooting a pointed look at Keaton over the rim of his shades.

Keaton sighed and rolled his eyes. "Yes, that obnoxious asshole."
"Why would you ever have him make that for you?" Loke demanded with a huff, his mane bristling.

Keaton cocked his head at the lion and raised his brow knowingly. "Because there was no one alive who knew how to craft weapons or armour out of dragon parts. We had to look elsewhere and that's when you, Loke, mentioned Lupus the Celestial Spirit. You even helped Master Lucy locate his key."

Loke crossed his arms and made a disgruntled noise. "No way. I don't believe this..."

Natsu snorted out of amusement. "The hell did this Lupus guy do to ya?"

Loke bared his fangs and growled indignantly, "He's rude, lazy, obnoxious, loud, and a goddamn greedy prick."

"And he's a wolf," Keaton added.

"Yeah! And that too!"

Keaton smirked. "It's true Lupus was all that. 'A big pain in the ass to deal with,' according to Master Lucy. But once she managed to negotiate a working contract with him, he was a big help. There's no denying he's very good at what he does. He could create anything you wanted out of anything you gave him, but and at the cost of something most precious to you. The stronger the sentimental value, the stronger his creations would be.

"What was most precious to me at that time was the Dreamstone you gave me, Wendy. Gods, it was so hard to part with it... I had to think about it for two days before I could do it."

"Why the Dreamstone?" Wendy had to ask. She had thought the hair-tie would have been more important. She had taken the accessory back despite it being old, broken, worn, and dirty; it was a promise kept that made Keaton happy.

He smiled at her fondly. "Because the Dreamstone was the very first present you ever gave me."

Wendy returned the smile. In truth, it was actually Porlyusica who had given Wendy the Dreamstone to give to him. She dared not correct him for it was one of his most cherished memories of her.

Keaton wandered over to his pile of things he had tossed beside the couch shortly before Yukino, Lucy, and Mirajane went into the bedroom. "In return for the Dreamstone, Lupus made me some of the stuff you see here out of the dragon parts we managed to collect."

He held up his cloak again, spreading it out as if it was a display. "This is the Sky Cloak of Warding. It protects from any magically afflicted ailments, but unfortunately not dragon curses."

He folded the cloak and set it aside before picking up his bow covered in pearly-white scales, the limbs shaped like feathered wings. He met Wendy's gaze. "Sky Bow. With it, my arrows are swift and never miss."

His edge-shaped shield plated with crimson scales was next. He looked at Natsu as he spoke. "Shield of the Flame King. It can block any type of fire, no matter how powerful or devastating."

He picked up his larger sword, its black leather sheath decorated with silver bindings that intertwined like a pair of twisting, scaly tails. It had a cobalt hilt long enough to be wielded by two-hands and a silver pommel that ended in a diamond point. The guard of the sword resembled the curved claws of a beast with a round onyx gem gleaming in the centre. Keaton's eyes were drawn to the sword as he
unsheathed it half-way. The blade was broad, lustrous, and sharp on both edges. Glinting upon the reflective surface was the golden emblem of the howling wolf. "Dragonslayer. It can cut through almost anything, the blade never dull."

"A fine sword," Pantherlily remarked with admiration, perched upon the open window sill. "How many dragons were you able to slay with it, may I ask?"

Keaton slid the sword back into its sheath and shrugged. "I never kept count," he answered, not quite enthused at such a great feat. "Could be fifty. Could be two hundred. Whatever it was, it barely made a dent against the vast army that roamed the land."

Losing a few hundred out of ten thousand was, indeed, insignificant. Wendy shuddered at the thought of seeing so many hostile dragons at once.

Keaton slid on his armoured boots and gauntlets. They were a combination of Metalicana's and Grandeeney's parts, providing a strong defense as well as the benefit of being nearly weightless compared to ordinary armour. Hidden in each thumb and fingertip of the gauntlets were hooked steel claws that allowed him to cling onto and climb rough surfaces, such as the scaly backs of dragons. He used to have more pieces of armour to make a complete set, but they were either lost or destroyed over the years.

"What about those knives?" Loke asked when it seemed like Keaton was done explaining. "I can sense that stupid wolf's magic on them."

A deep sadness crossed Keaton's features as he carefully lifted the leather belt that held six knives, each one with a different hilt. "These aren't actually mine. They belonged to my brother, Crow – Romeo."

"Really?" said Natsu, leaning forward in awe. "Was he there fighting in the end? Against Acnologia?"

Keaton grinned, no longer forlorn, but full of pride and admiration. "He was. Wish you could've seen how strong he became, Natsu! He lived by your words, by your beliefs; we both did. He was a master ninja and Rainbow Fire mage as well as Gildarts' disciple."

"Gildarts?!" Happy shrieked more so out of horror than surprise. "H-He can actually teach?! How was Romeo never accidentally killed?!"

Keaton winced at the volume of Happy's voice and chuckled in amusement. "Rarely did brother ever return without breaking something after training with Gildarts. I swear he had broken more bones than I had broken my ribs, and I've broken every single one at least once.

"Romeo... his determination was boundless and he possessed a will as strong as the toughest mountains. He never gave up no matter how painful or hopeless it felt. He was a great inspiration and role model to me growing up. The best big brother I could ever have..." Keaton's eyes fell on the belt in his hands, the sadness returning. "This was all I could find of him after the battle..."

There was a moment of silence, grief heavy in the air.

Wendy was completely heartbroken. Hearing the outcome straight from Keaton was just as devastating as she had feared. He had lost so much... the deaths of the ones he loved still fresh in his heart and mind.

"Gildarts was there too, then?" Natsu asked quietly
"Who else?" Happy questioned only to be scolded by Carla. "Sorry! If it's okay to ask?"

"It's fine," said Keaton, a wistful smile on his face. He looked at each member in the room with great pride. "You should all know who they were, the legends they have become, the last members of Fairy Tail to stand against all odds: Master Lucy, Romeo, Gildarts, Gray, and you, Carla."

Carla stiffened at the sound of her name.

"Me?" Carla uttered in shock. She took a tentative step towards the edge of the dining table just as Keaton walked towards her.

"You were my dearest friend and partner," Keaton told her, his eyes shimmering with tears. "You were my wings; you carried me through the skies, through danger, through hardships and turmoil. Together, we took down dragons left, right and centre. And together, we took down Acnologia out of the air."

Tears freely falling, he reached out a trembling hand to give Carla a little scratch behind the ear where she loved it most. "You sacrificed yourself to protect me..." he continued, his voice cracking. "Gave me the chance to deal the final blow... There's no way I can ever repay you for that..."

Carla leaned into his touch and bowed her head in remorse, her body shaking. "I wasn't aware... Forgive me. I'm sorry if I came across as rude since meeting you," she murmured.

Keaton burst out laughing, giving Carla a start. "You call that rude? I consider that one of your better moods. Normally you're... No, I shouldn't say." He gave her a teasing grin as he wiped his face with the back of his armoured hand.

Glares, Carla huffed and placed her paws on her hips. "Normally I'm what?" she demanded with a pout.

He was about to answer when the door to the bedroom creaked open.

Mirajane was first to step out, perking a curious eyebrow at everyone. "Sounds like you guys are having a lot of fun out here," she said with a smile. Following behind her was Yukino, changed out of her uniform and into a pink blouse, a yellow-miniskirt, and red and white striped stockings that hid her bandaged legs. She was downcast, ashamed to look at anyone in the room. Lucy was beside her, keeping a supportive hand on Yukino's shoulder.

"Yukino, are you feeling okay now?" Wendy asked as she approached the Celestial Spirit mage.

Yukino gave Wendy a quick glance and nodded. "Yes... I'm sorry about before..."

Natsu came up to her, frowning in concern. "Hey, Yukino, sorry if I hurt you bad."

Yukino quickly shook her head. "No, it was... necessary. I... I attacked you and... But, you still saved me. You saved me from him. Thank you, Natsu." She managed a small smile in the Dragon Slayer's direction.

Natsu's expression darkened. "So then--" He was cut off by Mirajane holding up a hand in his face.

"Where's Crime Sorcière?" Mirajane asked, her eyes sweeping the room.

"They'll be back soon," said Keaton.
Mirajane nodded. "Once they're back, we'll tell you everything Yukino has told us. They need to hear it too."

Everyone nodded in understanding and backed away to give Yukino some space. Wendy offered to heal the rest of Yukino's wounds, but the spirit mage kindly refused.

"Thank you, Wendy, but don't worry," said Yukino, slightly shaking her head. "You've already done enough for me. I don't feel any pain."

"If it bothers you at all, please let me know," said Wendy.

Yukino nodded, her normal smile returning. She peered over Wendy's shoulder at someone, suddenly intrigued. She walked past Wendy and approached Keaton with renewed confidence, Lucy not far behind.

"Lucy has told me all about you," Yukino began, her brow furrowed out of sympathy. She held out the palm of her hand, in which there were two gold Celestial Spirit keys. "I want to give these to you. Please, take them."

Keaton raised his brow in surprise. "What? Why are you giving them to me? They're your friends."

"They are my friends, yes, and they have served me well," she replied fondly before hardening her gaze out of determination. "But I know they would be a greater help to you than to me on your mission. They will understand."

Keaton was hesitant to accept. "You could just loan them to me in the meantime."

Yukino shook her head. "No, giving them to you is the right choice. I know it in my heart. It was the Spirit King himself who gave you your power to summon spirits and it was you who travelled through the gate that could change the world. You are destined to have these keys."

Keaton still wasn't convinced. "I don't know about that... Because I'll be honest, I'm not the best Celestial Spirit mage in this room. You should give them to Master Lucy."

"No, Keaton," Lucy began, giving her future student a proud smile, "you're selling yourself short! If it weren't for you and your quick-thinking, we wouldn't have escaped the castle alive."

"Indeed, you have learned from a great teacher," Yukino added, meeting Lucy's gaze. She glanced up at a happy Plue still riding atop Keaton's head and giggled. "I don't need to see what you can do, I already know you're an excellent Celestial Spirit mage. I have no doubts in what you're capable of. I've discussed this with Lucy, you are more than worthy to have Libra and Pisces as your companion spirits."

Keaton looked off to the side in a bashful manner. "Look, I think—" He was interrupted by Loke draping an arm around his shoulders.

"Hey, Keaton, can I have a word?" Loke hissed in the other's ear. He gave Yukino and Lucy a charming smile and a flirtatious wink. "Please excuse us, ladies."

Yukino exchanged a confused look with Lucy whom only shrugged in response.

Loke pulled Keaton over to the kitchen sink. Hunched backs turned towards everyone, they conversed in hushed whispers that Wendy could easily overhear.

"Did future me teach you anything?! When a girl presents you a gift, you're supposed to take it."
"Puu-puu-puuun!"

"See? Plue agrees."

"Those are her friends. I can't just take them!"

"You have to. When you refuse a gift from a girl, it's a big insult to her."

"What? It is?"

"That's right. Take it from me, kiddo. I know exactly what every woman wants."

Wendy wanted to roll her eyes, but it was true that women were highly attracted to Loke wherever he went when he wasn't busy being Lucy's Celestial Spirit.

"You don't want to hurt her feelings, right?" Loke continued.

"I don't, but..."

"Then accept her keys."

"I can't. What if she still needs them?"

"Look. You'll be needing them more. We'll be the ones going up against that bastard in the castle so you're going to need all the help you can get. If he somehow seals everyone's magic again, it's up to you to defeat him and protect everyone at the same time. You can rely on Libra and Pisces to get you out of that jam."

Keaton mulled over that thought for a moment and sighed. "Guess you're right about that. I can always give them back to her when this is over."

"Uh... Well, I suppose you can do that... All right. We're good?"

"Puu-puuun."

"We're good."

They both turned around, Keaton with a reluctant expression while Loke wore a smug grin.

Keaton stopped before Yukino, bowed his head in thanks, and humbly said, "I am honoured to have your Celestial Spirits join me, Yukino. I will take good care of them and hope they will do the same."

Smiling, Yukino held out her golden keys for him to take, eyeing each one with great respect. "They are trustworthy companions. True spirits of heart and soul. Look no further when you need a helping hand for these two will always watch your back when you need it most."

As Keaton studied his new keys, Wendy noticed the excitement in his eyes that eventually reached his curling lips, forming an eager smile. It was the very same childish wonder she had seen many times when he was just a child.

Wendy quietly giggled to herself. She was happy to know that Keaton, having grown in a dark and desolate world, was still, at heart, the same boy she deeply cared for.
The Final Day: The Lunar Eclipse

The, once again, newly repaired Bar Sun was physically trembling from all the banter, laughter, and drunken brawls that erupted every so often. Even though they should all be resting, it was impossible to restrain Fairy Tail's excitement for winning this year's Grand Magic Game. And their joyous celebration had spread like wildfire; it wasn't just Fairy Tail celebrating inside, the other guilds had joined in on the fun after hearing all the ruckus coming from the single guild: Mermaid Heel, Lamia Scale, Quatro Puppy, Blue Pegasus – only Sabertooth was absent, all likely sulking back at their lodgings after experiencing such a dramatic defeat in the final Game.

On this warm night, everyone merrily ate, drank, and sang together, enjoying each others' company.

The bar was loud, crowded, rowdy, and destructive and Cana wouldn't have wanted it any other way. Surrounded by empty kegs, she was in the middle of a drinking rematch against Bacchus Groh of Quatro Puppy. After her embarrassing defeat against the sleazeball, Cana had trained every night, drinking at every bar that she had come across until it ran dry to increase her tolerance. Just so she could get her petty revenge.

All those brutal hangovers were finally paying off. The drinking rivals were down to their thirty-seventh keg and Bacchus was very red in the face, badly slurring his speech, and swaying to and fro in his chair. Cana, on the other hand, was only starting to feel tipsy.

"Come on, bad boy," Cana teased with a sultry smile, purposely adjusting the strap of her bra, "we got thirteen more kegs to go. Don't tell me you're finished already?"

Slumped over their table, Bacchus hiccuped and leered at her whilst licking his lips. "Ain't dun yet, sweet pea. I'll be takin' home another trophy!" he proclaimed, pounding his fist on the table. He reached for the next keg only to overshoot and lose his balance, which resulted in him toppling face-first onto the floor, ass up in the air. He didn't move or get back up for a while.

Cana nudged him with her foot and heard a loud snore in reply. Whooping, she jumped out of her chair and threw her hands up in victory, receiving a thunderous cheer and happy clapping from the surrounding crowd. "Time to claim my trophy," she said, sneering at the unconscious man. She ripped off Bacchus's pants, revealing his bare ass, and laughed uncontrollably as she swung the man's pants wildly above her head like a lasso.

A couple more drinking games later, Cana found herself sitting alone in the far corner of the bar, Bacchus's pants long forgotten in the rafters, her fortune-telling cards shuffling in her hands. It was midnight. The beginning of a new day. Reading a fortune right when the clock struck twelve had become a ritual for her this past week. No matter how drunk, her hands moved deftly and precise.

The card with Bacon's face lay on the counter, smiling up at her. Cana stopped shuffling, took a deep breath, and closed her eyes. She slowly flipped the first card in her deck over, praying to whatever deities would listen that the card in her hand was not the one she feared.

She opened her eyes and looked at the image in her card. Nothing made her sober faster than having death staring right back at her.

Cana strung together a bunch of colourful words. Maybe she had one too many drinks. She reshuffled her cards and read the fortune again, only to get the same cursed result. She gathered her cards and frantically looked around the bar, but it was impossible to find a little kid with so many people crammed together.
"Hey, Cana, you okay?" Gray asked as he stopped by the bar beside her to grab a new drink. He had stripped down to his boxers unknowingly, showing off his bandaged injuries that were already quickly healing thanks to Porlyusica's new and improved medicines.

"Have you seen Bacon?" she asked him.

Gray raised his brow questionably. "Saw him earlier before the other guilds started showing up," he answered, giving the crowd a quick glance. " Haven't seen him since. Why? What's wrong?"

Cana showed him Bacon's fortune. "It's going to happen today."

Shocked, Gray fully turned to face her. "What? You're sure?"

"My cards don't lie, Gray."

He swore and looked around Bar Sun, eyeing the members of the other guilds suspiciously. His fists curled by his sides. "How? Is it Sabertooth? That bastard Rufus out for revenge? I swear, if he thinks he can mess with us again..."

Cana shook her head. "I have no idea. Could be anything. We need to find Bacon first and keep him safe." There was one easy way to find the boy amongst the many bodies occupying the building. Cana held Bacon's card and lightly tapped the blank space above the boy's image, infusing the card with a spell. The word 'LOCATE' appeared in bold letters in the space and the card flew out of Cana's hand, its edges shimmering with white magic.

The card hovered before her, twirled once and shot left, straight towards the wall, but then immediately stopped. It twirled in place, as if hesitating, before it sharply turned around and flew past Cana in the opposite direction. But then it stopped abruptly before it got too far, once again hesitating for some reason. Back and forth the card flew, unable to decide which way to go.

Cana furrowed her brow out of confusion, having never seen her locating spell act so strangely. Usually, the card would head straight for the target, purposely taking detours to avoid obstacles such as walls. And if the card could not locate the target, due to distance, being in another dimension, or some sort of magical interference, the spell wouldn't activate at all.

"Find. Bacon," Cana ordered her card. It continued to fly back and forth instead. "What the hell's going on?"

"Maybe because of his sealing bracelet?" Gray suggested, looking just as confused.

"No, can't be that. If my spell can't find him, the card wouldn't have left my hand in the first place. It's like... It thinks he's in two places at once or something." Frustrated, Cana snatched her card out of the air and dispelled her magic. She recast the locating spell, this time adding more specific instructions; "Find the ten-year old boy named Bacon who wears a green cloak of Fairy Tail."

The card came to life and unlike before, it shot in one direction without a hitch, flying high above everyone's heads towards the swinging door leading to the kitchen. It stopped above the door and twirled in place, waiting for its caster to catch up.

Cana let out a brief sigh of relief, seeing her magic finally work. She exchanged a nod with Gray and together they elbowed and pushed their way through the crowd to follow the magic card. There were many hazards to avoid, such as thrown chairs and beer bottles, stray magic, and tussling bodies as fights broke out spontaneously between friends and rivals from every guild.

Cana spotted Macao and Wakaba near the opposite end of the bar and was about to head their way,
but thought second of it. It would be wise not to update Macao on Bacon's fortune just yet, knowing
the father would have a full-fledged panic attack upon hearing the news, which had already
happened when Romeo and Bacon ended up missing on the first day of the Games. Cana steered
clear of Macao and made a beeline to the kitchen door with Gray not too far behind.

She took a quick look around for any sign of the owner and employees of Bar Sun before she
slipped through the kitchen door, allowing her card to continue its search. The kitchen was bustling
with the cooks preparing food for the ever-hungry customers in the bar. None paid attention to the
two mages who quietly snuck around, following a magic card to another door that likely led to the
back storage room.

Seeing how far her card was taking her made Cana wonder what Bacon was up to. Again, Cana
made sure no one was looking before she opened the next door and hurried inside. It was a short
empty hallway on the other side with four doors, two on either side. Cana's card hovered above one
of the doors at the end of the hall that had a sign that said 'Manager's Office'. One room was an
employee washroom and another an employee break room, both empty. The third door however,
opposite of the manager's office, was cracked open ajar and two familiar voices could be heard.

Curious, Cana tip-toed to the open door to listen in on the conversation between Master Makarov
and Porlyusica.

"... cannot say. All I can tell you is Natsu's team was able to rescue Lucy," said Porlyusica.

Cana blinked in surprise and met Gray's just-as-shocked expression.

"Heed me, Makarov," Porlyusica continued, a sense of urgency in her tone. "The future will be a
dark and grim place if we are not prepared. I have done all I can for the children. The potions I've
made should bring them back to full strength before the time comes, but I fear their strength alone
will not be enough. It will not just be dragons they may have to face."

Cana held her breath, feeling her gut twist with dread. Dragons? What were they talking about?
Could it be related to Bacon's fortune?

There was a heavy sigh coming from Makarov. "I will have to trust you on this, don't I, my dear?
How soon? Do you know?"

"Sometime tonight. During the lunar eclipse. The Gate will open then if it is not prevented in the first
place."

"Then I assume Natsu and the others are working on that?"

"What?" Gray exclaimed in a whisper.

Cana quickly brought a finger to her lips to hush him.

There was a brief moment of tense silence before they heard Makarov continue; "Judging by that
look you're giving me, you cannot say, yet again, correct? This is quite the dilemma..."

"That will only get worse if we don't act now."

The master hummed deeply in thought. "Gray. Cana."

Both mages froze at the sound of their names.

"No need to stand out there," said Makarov, "You two may come in."
Hanging their heads in guilt, Cana and Gray quietly shuffled inside what looked like the storage room. Makarov was sitting on the edge of a crate, legs crossed and Porlyusica was leaning against a metal shelf full of food stuffs, arms folded beneath her red cloak. Makarov welcomed them with a nod and hardened stare while Porlyusica shot them an irritable scowl that made Cana break into a nervous sweat.

"Sorry, Master," Gray was first to apologize, scratching the back of his neck bashfully. "We didn't mean to eavesdrop..."

"Did something happen?" Makarov asked, glancing between the two.

Cana nodded and motioned for her card to come back to her. She showed them Bacon's image and heavily frowned. "I read his fortune, Master... It's going to happen sometime today," she answered.

Porlyusica suddenly stepped forward, her scowl replaced with worry – an expression Cana had never thought the mean, old woman was capable of doing. "This is proof, Makarov," said Porlyusica, sounding quite distressed, "You mustn't delay any further."

Even Makarov was taken back by Porlyusica's sudden concern. He grunted and crossed his arms. "Well then... I suppose I will have to meet with the other Guild Masters and tell them of this great evil that may soon be upon us."

"What exactly are you guys talking about?" Gray asked, raising an eyebrow at Porlyusica. "You mentioned Natsu and Lucy–"

Makarov waved a hand to interrupt. "It will all be explained later, I'm hoping?" he raised his brow in Porlyusica's direction and received a glare in return. "In the meantime, both of you keep an eye on Bacon. I had asked Dwayne to watch over him while all the other guilds are here. As a precaution. He and Romeo should be in the manager's office across the hall. Go on. Porlyusica, please accompany me when I speak with the other masters."

Porlyusica scoffed in annoyance. "Do I have a choice?"

Makarov hopped off the crate and chuckled. "You can be very convincing when you need others to listen. I will need your help on this. Gray, Cana," he glanced at them both as he passed, "I'm counting on you two."

"Do not lose sight of the boy," Porlyusica added, giving the two mages a stern look that could easily be mistaken as a death threat.

The elders both left and headed straight for the kitchen, leaving Cana and Gray feeling either bewildered or perturbed.

Gray sighed as he ran a hand through his hair out of frustration. "Got a really bad feeling things are going to turn to shit," he grumbled.

Cana shook her head in disbelief. "Dragons and a 'great evil'? Yeah, definitely doesn't sound like we're going to have a good time tonight," she muttered, wrapping her arms around herself. She was trembling out of anxiousness, her mind conjuring up one terrible scenario after another. She took a deep, steadying breath to shake away the bad feelings so she could focus on the new mission Master had just assigned them. In a confident stride, she approached the manager's office and knocked on the door.

"Who's there?!" a loud, gruff voice demanded from the other side.
"Hi, it's Cana," she answered, undeterred by the man's intimidating tone. "Who?!"

"It's Auntie Cana," said a child behind the door.

Cana grinned, glad to hear Bacon's voice. "That's right! Auntie Cana! From Fairy Tail? Gray is here also. We're just checking in!"

"Fairy Tail, eh?" the man grumbled. "Let me check and make sure they're your pals, scamp."

There was a big grunt of effort, followed by heavy footsteps stomping towards the door. A series of locks clicked in succession before the door opened a crack. Peeking through the narrow gap was the owner of Bar Sun, eyeing both mages suspiciously.

He recognized Cana immediately and threw the door wide open with a welcoming grin. "Ah, so it is! Come in! Come in!" he said, waving the pair inside, his demeanour completely changed. With a simple glance, one would never think Dwayne, a tall, burly, graying man with a stern, hairy face and tough exterior, would ever have a kind side to him. Although Fairy Tail may have been the source of his problems a few times, (nearly destroying his bar more than once these past couple nights), he was never one to refuse the guild's patronage. They were his best (and worst) customers, after all.

Cana smiled and nodded in thanks as she strolled inside the office that looked newly refurbished. Sitting on the floor on plush cushions around a small coffee table were Romeo and Bacon. Each had a small pile of coins and a hand of playing cards.

They both smiled at Cana and Gray in greeting.

"Hey kids, whatcha playing here?" Cana asked as she rounded the table to plop on the floor between them.

"Pokey," Bacon answered, showing her his cards. Two aces, two queens, and a four of hearts.

"Poker," Romeo corrected, shuffling his hand around. "Mr. Dwayne is teaching us."

Cana snorted in laughter while Gray raised his brow at the owner. "Really? That doesn't seem appropriate for them," he said, taking a seat on the fancy lounge chair situated behind Romeo.

Dwayne had locked the door and returned to his spot at the table, acting as both teacher and dealer. His knees loudly popped as he slowly lowered himself onto his cushion. "The scamps are good at it. Keeps them out of trouble. 'Specially this one who nearly burned down my whole business the other day!" With a hearty chuckle, he ruffled Bacon's hair playfully, drawing a wide grin from the boy as if he was being praised.

"Can I do it again?" Bacon asked, slapping down his cards and jumping to his feet. He cupped his hands together, eager to play with his fire.

Everyone in the room gasped and started to protest.

Cana saw only a spark of flame before she grabbed Bacon's arm to break his concentration. "No! No! Don't do that here!" she shrieked in panic.

"Yes! Please don't!" Dwayne cried, waving his hands frantically. "Lots of people are going to be very, very upset. Especially me, understand?"
"Oh... Sorry..." Bacon slumped onto his cushion with a guilty pout.

There was a collective sigh of relief.

"Hey, once Natsu comes back, you can use your fire again," said Romeo, hoping to cheer Bacon up. "Somewhere far, far away from Bar Sun. Better yet, far far away from the city so we don't rack up any more damage fees."

Bacon brightened at the thought, but soon frowned right after. "When will he be back? And Wendy too? Do you think they're okay?"

"Knowing Natsu, he'll make sure everyone's okay," said Gray. He looked off to the side, narrowing his eyes at nothing in particular, unable to fully hide how he truly felt. "They'll be back before you'll know it. Hopefully..."

"Why are you two here, exactly?" Romeo questioned, noticing the magic card that Cana had foolishly forgotten to put away. When he met her gaze, his eyes went wide, realizing the truth immediately.

Before Cana could pretend nothing was wrong, there was a sudden pounding on the door.

"Who is it now?!" Dwayne demanded, glaring at the door.

"Hey, boss, it's me, Jim," a man answered, likely one of the cooks. "We got a situation out here. It's the Magic Council. They say we gotta leave right now. They're evacuating the whole city!"

"Evacuating the city?! What? Why?" Dwayne exclaimed, wrinkling his brow in confusion.

Cana exchanged a worried look with Gray. She bit the inside of her lip. The dread she was feeling had gotten ten times worse.

"Don't know," Jim answered. "They wouldn't say. Says it's an emergency though. We better get going. Everyone's already leaving."

"All right! I'm coming! Meet you all outside!" Dwayne bellowed. He let out an exasperated sigh and grumbled mostly to himself as he climbed to his feet. He stomped towards the door, turned every lock, and motioned everyone out. "Well, you heard him, we better get moving. City wide evacuation... what on Earthland is going on?"

Cana was desperate to know the answer to that very same question.

"What's happening?" Bacon asked, visibly confused as to why everyone was in a hurry to leave.

"We're evacuating. Means we gotta get out of here because... something bad is about to happen," was the best answer Cana could give him.

He gasped. "Is it the very, very bad thing you were talking about?"

Cana's gut twisted into knots. She placed a firm hand on Bacon's shoulder and guided him out the door. "It's... possible. So stay close, okay, Bacon bits? Let's go find everyone else."

Bacon pulled his hood on and nodded. Romeo and Gray were not too far behind, both wearing the same fearful expression as Cana.

It was an hour before midnight and the streets were oddly quiet and empty. There wasn't a single
firework going off in the night sky nor was there any cheering, partying or other loud noises compared to a few hours ago.

Lights were still on in every house and building, however, no matter where Lucy looked, she saw no one through the many windows. She wasn't the only one to notice as she and her teammates, Crime Sorcière, and Keaton quickly made their way through the side streets towards Mercurius Castle in the distance.

"Where are all the people?" Happy was first to ask, flying above their heads alongside Carla and Pantherlily.

Ultear shortly snickered and sounded quite impressed when she answered, "The Magic Council actually took Jellal seriously. Over half the city has already been evacuated."

"You guys weren't actually scouting earlier, were you?" Keaton asked, his voice muffled by his fox mask.

Meredy laughed wickedly. "Oh, we were definitely scouting."

"Scouting for Doranbolt and his people," Jellal clarified, leading the group down a dark, narrow alley. His face was hidden behind his bird mask. He had changed to his guild attire, but kept his disguise as Crow. Since the black knight believed Jellal to be the one from the future, Jellal wanted to keep up the charade to better deceive their enemy. He even borrowed Keaton's small sword to make his disguise more convincing. "I told him to take his Rune Knights and initiate a city-wide evacuation. To put our minds at ease, just in case..."

*In case everything goes horribly wrong,* Lucy finished the thought. With an anxious frown, she glanced up at the full moon and saw the beginning of the lunar eclipse.

Natsu snorted and raised a skeptical brow at Jellal. "Really? How'd you convince Doranbolt to listen without him arresting you on sight?"

Jellal's smirk was evident by his tone when he replied, "Easy. Sent him a telepathic message. Threatened to blow up the city. Told him the destruction of the castle gate and front plaza was only just a warning. I'm not bluffing either. I have enough explosives to wipe Crocus off the map."

Mirajane giggled in amusement. "Oh my, branding yourself a terrorist certainly won't win you any favours from the Magic Council any time soon."

The man scoffed and waved his hand dismissively. "I'm already the most wanted criminal. Can't get any worse than that. Doranbolt and his Rune Knights are caught up getting everyone out so we don't have to worry about the Magic Council interfering."

"What about the Royal Family and the people in the castle?" Wendy asked out of concern.

"Doranbolt had gotten them out first," said Ultear. "From what we saw, the Royal Family and those employed were escorted out by the Rune Knights and Royal Guards."

"But not all the guards," Meredy noted with a hint of disdain.

"I estimate it was only eighty percent of the army," said Jellal.

Ultear grumbled, "And of course, our Captain was nowhere to be seen."

Keaton swore under his breath. "He's staying behind to ensure the Gate is opened during the total
"The King and Princess," Lucy began, "were they under his control?"

"No," said Jellal, "I did not sense any dark power from them as I had with Yukino."

Natsu growled indignantly, always riled whenever Yukino or the Captain were mentioned.

Lucy couldn't help but feel the same. The thought of Yukino acting against her will angered Lucy to no end.

Yukino had told Lucy and Mirajane everything she could remember while she had been under Geraldo's control. Her memories were jumbled, hazy, and missing huge gaps, but there were some vital pieces of information scattered throughout, nonetheless. The Eclipse Gate was no longer locked; Yukino was forced to use the twelve Gold Zodiac Keys to unlock it. Not only that, she had a portion of her magic absorbed into a special Lacrima ring, which would temporarily grant the wearer the abilities of a Celestial Spirit mage. Hence why Yukino and the keys were no longer needed to operate the Gate.

Yukino had also overheard the knight talking to the princess about moving the Gate to a safer location when the time to use it came. From what Yukino could stitch together, it sounded like the Gate would remain on the castle grounds, just somewhere not in the main plaza where Keaton had found it in the future. Although it wouldn't be far from where it was predicted to appear, a 'safer location' implied the Gate would be better protected. Wherever it was going to end up, no doubt there would be hidden traps and an evil Captain and his likely mind-controlled men.

Yukino had stayed behind after the group had devised their plan. She was in no condition, both mentally and physically, to join in on the fight. She was terrified of the Captain, evident by how pale and shaken she had gotten when she spoke of him. A demon with red, sinister eyes and human skin, she called him, in which Jellal and Keaton couldn't agree more. Not wanting to leave her alone, Lucy had asked Loke to take Yukino to Fairy Tail, knowing her guild would keep Yukino safe.

While following Jellal's lead, Lucy kept tabs on Loke's progress, sensing him moving towards the south-western district. Bar Sun was located there and it was very likely her guild was busy celebrating their victory if news of the evacuation hadn't reached them yet.

By the time they stepped foot on the main bridge leading to the castle, Lucy felt a sharp pang in her chest just as Loke disappeared from her radar. She stopped in her tracks and turned her head in the direction she last sensed him, one hand clutching her chest and the other reaching for his key by her hip out of instinct. Loke's key was ice-cold to the touch, bringing a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

Natsu was first to notice her lagging behind. "Hey, Lucy, what's the matter?" he asked, stopping to wait for her, prompting everyone to do the same.

"It's Loke. He's... vanished," she answered hesitantly. Normally, it wouldn't trouble her; Loke was free to pass through his own gate however he pleased, appearing and disappearing from Lucy's detection without any cause for concern. But this time, it felt unusual and it made her worry.

Keaton turned his head in the same direction Lucy was looking. "Gone back to the Spirit World?" he questioned her.

"I think so. Can you sense Yukino? Did she make it to the guild?"

It took a moment before Keaton muttered, "Hard to distinguish her out of all the mages that have
gathered together in this one spot. Master Jellal, can you pick her out?"

Jellal shook his head. "Too many powerful magical signatures blending together. Seems like it's not only Fairy Tail that are celebrating at Bar Sun, the other guilds are there too. Yukino's likely there if that's the last place you sensed Loke."

Lucy nodded and let out a small sigh. "Yeah, it was around the bar where he disappeared. Sorry, I guess I'm worrying for nothing." Loke likely wanted to take a rest in the Spirit World to prepare himself for what was coming up ahead.

Without delay, Jellal motioned them all to continue. "Let's keep moving."

As Lucy followed everyone across the bridge, she couldn't shake away the nagging feeling lingering at the back of her mind. Perhaps she was overthinking it; the stress and anxiety were making her thoughts run wild – as per usual when she was up against some of the toughest adversaries.

And the enemy they were about to face was the worst Earthland has ever seen.

Up ahead, Mercurius Castle was only a dark silhouette under the moonlight. There were no lights shining from within, making it seem completely abandoned and eerily haunted. The gate Natsu had blown apart was missing and was replaced with a temporary barricade consisting of an iron barred fence that was a head taller than Lucy. Chained to the middle of the fence was a huge wooden sign that said in big red letters:

'UNDER CONSTRUCTION. DO NOT ENTER. INTRUDERS WILL BE THROWN INTO THE DUNGEONS!'

"No trespassing, huh?" Natsu mocked, pounding a fist into the palm of his other hand. "Think this puny little fence is gonna stop me?"

Jellal held out his arm to stop the Dragon Slayer from doing anything rash. "What did I say about alerting our enemies to our position?" Jellal hissed.

"Natsu! We have to be stealthy like ninjas again!" said Happy. He dove down and picked up a grumpy Natsu to carry over the iron bars.

Carla carried Wendy and Pantherlily carried Lucy. Meanwhile, the others simply bound or pulled themselves over without any effort, making Lucy envious of their acrobatic abilities.

Once on the other side, Jellal signaled them all to wait in the shadow of the great arc as he scanned the area with both his eyes and senses.

Lucy could make out the damage in the plaza, seeing the outline of a huge, deep crater and the pile of collected rubble that used to be a fountain. It was unnervingly quiet without the sound of running water. In fact, there were no other sounds that Lucy could hear that usually accompanied the city night; no breeze, no crickets... nothing. Suddenly, in the distance, the clock tower struck twelve and the bell began to toll, counting the start of a new day.

Lucy peeked out at the full moon and frowned at the creeping shadow that covered half its glowing face. Another hour, more or less, and it would be a total eclipse – the time the Eclipse Gate would open.

"About two hundred guards waiting in the courtyard," informed Jellal through telepathy, "and five strong mages."
"Feels like the Garou Knights," said Keaton, crossing his arms out of frustration. "I shouldn't be surprised that they'd be guarding the Gate."

Lucy shuddered at the thought of having to confront the five executioners all over again. However, it would not be the same struggle as in Abyss Palace with Natsu and the others fighting alongside Lucy and Keaton.

"If they are guarding it," Ultear began, humming in thought, "then it's likely there are no Nullification traps. Otherwise, they wouldn't be able to fight back either."

"It could be a ruse," said Pantherlily, "Fool us into thinking there are no traps. They could all be armed with anti-magic weaponry."


"On it. Cover me," Ultear replied, holding out her crystal ball that she had been carrying since they left the hideout. Turning her back, she crouched and levitated the ball an inch above the ground, waving her hands over it. Jellal and Meredy shifted to stand behind her to hide the magic pink light that illuminated from within Ultear's crystal, in case there were any hidden eyes looking from the castle's dark windows.

Curious, Lucy moved in for a closer look and saw a bird's-eye view of the castle's enormous garden courtyard under a pink hue.

With subtle movements of her fingers, Ultear zoomed in on the image and scrolled around as if controlling the lens of a flying camera. Soldiers and armoured knights stood waiting in ambush throughout the dark garden, wielding swords and pointy spears. Scattered among them were the Garou Knights, their wounds fully healed, and seemingly in charge of their respective group of guards.

Keaton peered over Lucy's shoulder. "Do you see the Gate? Or the Captain?"

After a bit more searching, Ultear shook her head. "Negative. I see neither. It's still a little while before the total eclipse. My guess is he'll show up when it's close to time."

Keaton wasn't happy to hear that. "It can't be that easy to move a gate that large... We need to lure him out. Defeat all the guards and the Knights as soon as possible."

"Now you're talking! Let's do this, Bacon!" said Natsu eagerly. Both boys were about to charge ahead, but Jellal's stern command to wait made Natsu stumble to a stop and Keaton freeze.

"We need to take every step of caution before we can proceed," Jellal told them fervently. "lest it'll be the torture chamber all over again. That Captain can conceal his presence and blend with the shadows. For all we know, he could be hiding where Ultear cannot see."

Natsu scoffed in anger, but didn't argue.

Keaton huffed to the side and grumbled, "Sorry, Master."

They were both on edge and it was understandable. They weren't the only ones; all around, Lucy could see the anxiety, fear, and agitation in each of her teammates and she wasn't spared either. The thought of failure weighed heavily in her heart. They needed to succeed in their mission, but they couldn't just rush in like normal, not against an enemy like Geraldo.
Jellal sighed and glanced over his shoulder at Ultear. "Any traps?"

Ultear scrolled around the courtyard, checking the perimeter and every corner before hovering over the executioners and guards. "None that I can see. No special runes in place. Guards are armed with ordinary weapons, but every one of them are carrying Sealing Cuffs."

"Sealing Cuffs? What're those?" Keaton asked.

"Binds made of Sealing Stone," Jellal answered in a bitter tone. "Can render any mage helpless if caught. They might not affect you at all, Keaton, but I don't recommend testing that theory out."

Keaton chuckled. "Wasn't planning to."

Jellal turned to Meredy. "Anything odd?"

Meredy shook her head. "It's a mix of boredom, nervousness, and confusion. Doesn't seem like they know why they're standing around there instead of evacuating. There is one Knight though, who seems very steadfast despite not know what he's even guarding."

"Kama, I'm assuming," noted Keaton with admiration. "He definitely has a strong sense of duty."

Mirajane made a quiet sound of interest. "I find it rather strange they would blindly follow orders without knowing the reason. There is nothing to protect in the garden."

"Do not underestimate the loyalty of soldiers," commented Pantherlily, speaking from experience. "Command from a Captain is never questioned. To be given a duty is an honour and often disobedience is punishable."

Natsu tapped his foot impatiently and glowered at Jellal. "So there ain't no traps and all we gotta worry about are those stupid cuffs, right? What are we waiting for?! Let's hurry and finish this!"

Jellal exhaled a slow, deep breath, clearly trying to maintain his composure. "Just because we can't see any traps, doesn't guarantee there aren't any. We'll continue on, but--" He didn't even get to finish.

Natsu was already bolting half-way across the plaza with Happy and Keaton right on his tail.

"Hey! You guys!" Lucy exclaimed, horrified at their reckless behaviour. After everything they've been through, how could they just throw caution right out the window?!

"We've already wasted too much time!" Natsu argued.

"Don't worry," Keaton assured, "I'll make sure we won't get caught in any traps!"

Jellal pushed his mask up to run a hand down his face in frustration. "How does Erza deal with this?" he groaned, exasperated.

Mirajane giggled quietly and whispered, "She tends to use intimidation and fear to keep the boys under control. You could learn a thing or two from her." With a teasing wink, she dashed after the boys who were making their way to the side of the castle.

Sighing, Jellal turned to Meredy and Ultear. "Both of you stay here and keep watch. Bail us out if anything happens."
They both nodded.

Jellal glanced between Pantherlily, Carla, Wendy, and Lucy and motioned them to follow him closely. Together, they rounded the huge crater towards the side of the castle. To those ahead, he growled a warning, "If any of you get caught in those binds, don't expect me to save you!"

"Ha! They won't even get close enough to use them on me!" Natsu retorted smugly.

"Wait, Natsu," Happy's voice chimed in, "there's a gate over--"

There was loud explosion and a bright flash of fire as Natsu demolished something in his way. Typical, stupid Natsu.

Lucy wanted to pull out her hair and scream at him.

"So much for being stealthy as ninjas..." Carla muttered.

"That goddamn idiot," Jellal hissed as they entered the shadows of the castle. Ahead, they could see hedges burning and a tall piked fence with a massive hole blown through it, the metal around it melted and still red hot. The hole was just inches away from an unlocked gate door that was wide open and completely bent out of shape. They hopped through the gaping hole and continued on at a slower pace.

Lucy could hear Natsu shouting at the top of his lungs; calling Geraldo a coward and a bastard, attempting to lure the Captain out. Although she couldn't see him, she knew he was charging head-first towards the guards and executioners waiting in the middle of the courtyard.

Instead of heading out into the open as Natsu, Happy, Keaton, and Mirajane had gone, Jellal led Lucy's group to stay by the outer wall. Manicured trees and trimmed hedges provided enough cover to keep them hidden from view. Not only that, with Natsu causing such a commotion, no one would even notice them sneaking by.

Jellal created a private telepathic link between Lucy's group and said, "Let them draw all the guards' attention. We'll provide back-up if they need it. In the meantime, we'll scout for any hidden traps."

"Are you sure we shouldn't join and help?" Wendy asked, sounding worried.

The answer to her question came in the form of an earth-shaking explosion that was immediately followed by a massive, twisting inferno coming from the centre of the courtyard. It was Natsu and he had just unleashed his fury on the helpless guards that dared stand in his way. There were screams of pain and terror alongside the panicked cries of fleeing men as the wild flames quickly spread throughout the garden.

Before the fire got out of hand, a powerful stream of water rapidly extinguished the flames and tore up the flower garden, thanks to the mother and son dual, Pisces. Any guard standing in the path of their water were blasted right off their feet.

Not too far from there, soldiers were being tossed through the air like rag dolls as Mirajane easily ripped through their defenses.

"They're doing fine," Jellal pointed out needlessly, rather calm compared to a moment ago. "As much as I disapprove of their methods, I have faith they won't be easily defeated. If the Garou Knights are giving them trouble, we can surprise them from behind."
So far, it didn't seem like the executioners were too difficult for Natsu's team to handle. Natsu's fires could eliminate Cosmos's and most of Kamika's spells and Mirajane was an unstoppable force against any opponent whenever she transformed into one of her demonic forms.

And with Keaton no longer hindered by injuries and his magic power fully restored, he was free to go all out. He possessed a wide variety of skills and spells and had Gemini, Pisces, and Libra at his command, making him capable of countering any of the Garou Knights. And to add on top of that, Keaton had learned, from Lucy of his time, the Celestial Spirit spell *Star Suit*, the male equivalent of *Star Dress*. It was an advanced spell that granted the caster the summoned spirit's abilities, manifested in the form of altered clothes, and sometimes weapons, stylized to match the caster's preferences as well as represent that spirit's characteristics. Lucy had yet to dabble with that spell herself due to the lack of time, which, she hated to admit, made her a little envious of her own student. (Keaton had thought she had Star Dress mastered by now. Boy, was he totally wrong...)

'Not the best Celestial Spirit mage,' huh? Lucy had wanted to slap him for believing such a thing. He had learned so much within two short years that took Lucy her entire lifetime and then some.

With Natsu, Keaton, Mirajane, and Happy taking care of things on the main battlefield, Jellal was right not to worry.

Swiftly and quietly, Lucy and the others continued on, unseen like shadows. Lucy winced every time people screamed and cringed whenever something exploded. She felt sorry for the poor soldiers and even sorrier for the Royal Family's garden. The beautiful courtyard had been meticulously groomed and maintained for many generations, often deemed the "greatest treasure" of Castle Mercurius; for it to be ruined in a single night, Lucy wouldn't be surprised if the king and princess would never forgive them.

Undetected, they passed by the line of soldiers and started to circle around to get behind when Wendy frantically pointed at something. Her voice was a frightened squeak when she exclaimed, "There's someone there!"

Beyond the fragrant flower beds and ornate benches tangled with ivy was a wide open area paved with smooth stones. And standing in the dead centre of it was a lone figure, nearly invisible in the darkness. A horned helm and black armour softly gleaming under the fading moonlight; it was the Captain of the Holy Blossom Knights and he was watching the chaos before him seemingly without a care, arms stubbornly crossed and as still as a statue.

Lucy quickly followed Jellal in dropping into a crouch behind a low hedge. Meanwhile, Wendy, Pantherlily, and Carla dove behind the trunk of the nearest tree.

Lucy held her breath, trying to calm her rapidly beating heart. The mere sight of the Captain made her body tremble in fear. She slowly peered over her hiding spot, seeing the man had yet to make the slightest twitch, which was a good indication that he hadn't noticed them.

"Has he been waiting there all this time?" Lucy wondered to her companions.

"Ultear would have seen him... Ultear, Meredy," Jellal reconnected with his guild mates, "he's here! The Captain!"

"What? Where?!" Ultear questioned. "I don't see anyone where you guys are."

Jellal gave Ultear a precise description on Geraldo's position. Her cryptic reply sent a nervous shiver down Lucy's spine; "I can't see him, Jellal. I don't know how he's doing it, but he's not showing on my crystal! All I see is a wide open space that looks like the perfect place to put a giant gate."
Jellal sighed in aggravation. "*You gotta be kidding me... I'm taking him down before he gets the chance to activate any traps!*"

"*You better not get yourself killed again!*" Meredy warned out of concern.

Jellal stood abruptly and shifted into a stance, one hand raised skyward and his eyes locked on his target, his body charged with an incredible amount of magic. Winking from the night sky were six brilliant stars that quickly turned into rays of golden light as they fell straight for the oblivious Captain at a blinding speed.

All six rays struck the black knight from above, combining into one giant, deadly beam that swallowed the man in bright, golden energy and tore up the ground he stood upon. The light faded and the dust cleared.

To their horror, the black knight stood unscathed and unflinching with only his crimson cape fluttering from the wind stirred up by the attack. The ground right under his feet remained untouched while the surrounding area was completely annihilated by Jellal's magic, leaving a ring of destruction.

"What?! Pleiades did nothing?" Jellal uttered in shock.

The Captain slowly turned his head in Jellal's direction, looking more bored than annoyed at being disturbed. But that was definitely not the case. The tension in the air had suddenly grown cold and heavy now that they have the black knight's attention.

Jellal visibly stiffened. He didn't waste another moment as he shifted into another stance. Seven stars flashed from the heavens, forming the constellation, Grand Chariot. They fell as one, each falling star a golden ray that slammed into the Captain with the force of a meteor. With a blinding flash and an earth-shattering boom, the seven stars crashed into the earth.

The resulting shockwave sent Lucy tumbling backwards heads over heels a few times. She ended up on her side and quickly curled up into a defensive ball to shield her head from the hail of debris.

Hearing Jellal outright curse made Lucy quickly scramble to her feet. She covered her face with one hand and waved her other hand in front, trying to blow away the thick cover of dust shrouding her view. She didn't need to see to know there was nothing left of the garden where the black knight once stood, only giant, sunken craters.

Despite the power behind Jellal's spell, it clearly didn't eliminate the threat; within the cover of dust, Lucy could hear the dreadful, heavy clang of armour calmly marching their way.

"*What's happening?*!" Ultear demanded.

"*He's unaffected by my spells!*" Jellal growled, taking a few wary steps back. "*A barrier? No... Maybe he can nullify magic before it hits him... His armour must be made of something special – enchanted with protective runes and the like. Hitting him directly is ineffective.*"

"Then perhaps this will stop him!" Jellal snarled out loud. He brought his hands before him as if grabbing onto something then swung them outward to either side. The ground split apart, creating a deep, dark fissure that Lucy was certain had swallowed the black knight. Jellal brought his hands back together to seal the crack with a minor quake, trapping the Captain beneath the earth.

The clanging of armour stopped. They waited in anticipation, watching as the dust finally settled to reveal an empty, completely demolished section of the courtyard.
"You got him!" Lucy cheered. Her celebration was short-lived, however.

A tall, humanoid shadow suddenly appeared from the ground right behind Jellal, wielding a large sword high above its horned head.

Lucy jumped back with a start and screamed, "Look out!"

Jellal only had enough time to whip his head around before the sword came down on him faster than anyone could react. Pantherlily was an exception; he tried to bravely tackle Jellal out of the way, but it was still too late; the sword struck them both and sent them flying. They landed roughly on the grass where they lay motionless and bleeding.

Lucy acted quickly, ignoring Meredy's and Ultear's shrill, telepathic messages. "Wendy! Hurry to them!" she commanded as she grabbed her keys, moving to stand between the injured and their enemy. She called for Sagittarius and Taurus. Both spirits appeared from their respective gates in a flash of white to stand before her, facing their enemy.

"Master!" Sagittarius was first to greet Lucy, giving her a quick salute, his expression as well as his horse head awfully grim. "I bring dire news! Leo! He was killed during his escort mission!"

"Wh-What?" Lucy stammered, feeling her heart skip a beat.

"He was attacked from behind!" Taurus growled with a furious snort. For once, he wasn't ogling Lucy upon his arrival. "Stabbed in the back, he said! By a knife or sword!"

Who could have done it? A soldier under the Captain's control, perhaps? If so, why would they attack Loke? To get to Yukino?

Lucy mustered the courage to glare at the Captain, hands clenched by her sides with utmost fury.

"Is Loke okay?" she asked, her voice quavering.

"He's recovering back in the Spirit World," Sagittarius assured. "He needs time to heal. In the meantime, let us avenge him!"

Geraldo scoffed at the sight of the two spirits who dared to oppose him. "What ignorant fools you are to return here," he scorned. "It would have been wise to stay away like the cowards you are for none of you will get the opportunity to flee again. I shall have to kill the little healer first to keep you meddling pests from coming back from the clutches of death time and time again."

Lucy bared her teeth in anger. She took a quick glance behind her, seeing Wendy busy healing Pantherlily. Lucy had to protect Wendy now that Geraldo had the young Dragon Slayer in his sights.

"Sagittarius, Taurus, don't let him get near Wendy!" Lucy ordered her spirits.

"Aye, Master Lucy!" they both said as one.

In one fluid motion, Sagittarius nocked three arrows to his bow and fired them all at the Captain. At the same time, Taurus launched straight up into the air and brought down his huge battle axe as he landed, cleaving the ground and sending a powerful shockwave that violently tore up the earth as it headed towards the black knight.

Without any sign of effort, the Captain flicked his sword to cut all three of Sagittarius's arrows in half with a single swing. He then slashed downwards at Taurus's shockwave and somehow proceeded to physically split it into two, diverting the attack to either side of him, leaving him to stand in the
middle, unharmed.

Lucy mentally swore, unable to shake away the fear that had gripped her soul. If Jellal's level of spells couldn't touch the Captain, what good was Lucy's magic?

The Captain was formidable indeed, and he had yet to show his true colours. Immune to spells and able to phase through the ground like a phantom... How could Lucy keep Wendy safe?

The black knight marched forward in a confident, leisurely stride, each heavy footfall sounding like a countdown to their doom.

Taurus snorted and furiously scraped up the ground with one of his hooves like an agitated bull. Without Lucy's permission, he charged forward.

"Taurus! No!" she cried.

But Taurus was too enraged and didn't listen. The spirit closed in on the Captain in a matter of seconds. With a mighty moo, Taurus swept his axe fast from the side, aiming to cleave the knight in half by the waist.

There was a deafening clang as the giant axe – that should have easily destroyed the much smaller sword – was parried and knocked upwards, throwing Taurus completely off balance due to his momentum.

The Captain moved in faster than Lucy could even blink, piercing his sword right through Taurus's heart.

The only sound Taurus made was a sharp gasp before his body went limp. The Captain stepped aside, pulling free his blade just as Taurus crumpled forward, landing on his knees with a heavy thud. Before the spirit could fully hit the ground, his body vanished in a flash of white, his soul returning to the Spirit World.

Lucy was stunned with horror. She felt that sharp pang in her chest again, finally understanding it was another death of her spirit friends.

Tears stung her eyes and grief turned her legs to jelly. She slowly sank to her knees and could only watch as Sagittarius uselessly fired volley after volley of arrows at the demon coming their way. Every arrow was cut down with deadly precision, none ever reaching their mark. When Sagittarius finally ran out of arrows, the Captain lunged forward, appearing before the spirit in a matter of seconds.

With a cry, Lucy sent Sagittarius back home before he, too, could die.

The knight's sword cut nothing but air and he grunted in annoyance. He turned his head at Lucy, his hidden gaze piercing right through her body like an invisible blade. His presence seemed to drain every ounce of her strength and instilled the worst fear she had ever felt.

Lucy now understood why Yukino was so terrified of him. "Wh-What... What have you done with Y-Yukino?" she questioned, unable to control the tremor in her voice.

Deep, rumbling laughter echoed within the dark helm. "The Sergeant has one last important role to play before I'm done with her. That time will soon be upon us."

He could have killed Lucy, seeing how she was reduced to a quivering, weeping mess, but instead ignored her and began his advance on Wendy.
No! No! Lucy wanted to scream, but had lost her voice.

Carla boldly jumped in front of Wendy, baring her claws and fangs. "S-Stay away! I-I won't let you touch her!" she hissed at the Captain, putting on a brave act when it was clear in her stance that she was absolutely terrified. She looked at Lucy, her tearful eyes pleading. "Help me, Lucy! Help me protect her!"

Lucy reached for her keys only to stop midway. Her mind was struggling to determine which of her remaining spirits to summon, too afraid to get more of them killed if she didn't choose carefully.

She hesitated for too long; Geraldo made his move the instant he was close enough. He lunged at Carla, his blade ready to run her through.

There was a flash of green and a gust of wind as Keaton materialized in front of Carla, a second before she met her demise. Empowered with Pisces' Star Suit and wielding a trident to match, Keaton knocked the Captain's sword aside with his three-pronged weapon, throwing the knight completely off-guard. Keaton then followed with a quick thrust that not only hit the knight squarely in his armoured chest, but also forced the larger man back as a powerful jet stream burst from the tip of the trident.

A normal person of his size would have been thrown through the air by such a concentrated blast, but the Captain had already proven he was more demon than man. He withstood the attack, digging his heels deep and using one arm to brace against the torrent, which resulted in him getting shoved back several feet instead of flying across the courtyard. It was far enough to make him completely disappear into the darkness where Lucy's eyes could not follow.

Keaton twirled his trident in a circle upon his fingertips a few times as he shifted to stand protectively in front of Carla, glaring at the spot where the Captain had vanished. He stood fearlessly in his Star Suit blessed by Pisces, appearing like a true warrior of the sea. Silver, ornate plating in the shape of fins protected his shoulders and forearms and layered over his tall, dark blue boots. Strapped around his waist by thick, scaly chains was a set of faulds in the same design. Beneath that armour was a skin-tight blue suit covered in black fish scales around the arms, back, and upper legs, giving an extra layer of protection. A thick silver band guarded his forehead, adorned with a white and black diamond-shaped jewel in the centre and black fins flaring right above his ears, similar to what Pisces wore when they were in human form.

"Carla, Master Lucy, are you both okay?" Keaton quietly asked, keeping his attention forward.

"Y-Yes, you made it just in time," said Carla in great relief, hastily wiping her eyes.

"He killed Taurus," Lucy mumbled, holding back a sob. "And Loke... Earlier, he was..."

"I already know," Keaton muttered with an angry shake of his head. "Pisces gave me the news. How are Pantherlily and Master Jellal?"

"Pantherlily is almost stable," Wendy spoke up, her voice strained. Sweat trickled down her furrowed brow from exertion. Her hands were shining bright in the darkness, revealing the ugly gash that ran down the side of Pantherlily's head. She looked sideways at Jellal lying prone nearby and bit her lower lip. "I-I haven’t checked on Jellal yet, but I know he's hurt bad!"

"He's still alive. However, his aura is very weak..." Keaton told her with a deep frown, "Please, you need to hurry, Wendy!"

"I know! I'm trying!" Wendy cried, on the brink of tears.
"Calm down, Wendy," said Carla, her tone hushed. "Focus only on healing. You need to ignore everything around you, understand? Their lives are in your hands. And Keaton," stern, feline eyes narrowed at the young man's back, "you need to protect Wendy! The Captain wants her dead!"

Keaton growled and tightened his grip on the silver hilt of his trident. "Understood. I won't let him touch you, Wendy. I promise!"

"Please, be careful," Wendy begged. She shut her eyes, drew a deep breath, and bowed her head, forcing herself to relax in order to concentrate. Brighter, her magic grew as she summoned more of her power to speed up Pantherlily's healing.

Right at that moment, two giant, flying, grinning eels rushed towards them, one black and one white. The pair twisted and circled high above, swimming in the air in a synchronized dance, staying near their master.

Seeing Keaton with his spirits gave Lucy the strength to stand. She wiped away her tears only to freeze when she heard the heavy clang of armour stomping towards them.

"The rat from the dungeon," said the man cloaked in shadow, his voice a threatening snarl. Louder and louder the sound of metal rang with every heavy step he took. It wasn't long before the black knight appeared into view, his drenched armour glistening under the moon. Though his eyes were set on Keaton, Lucy could feel the intensity coming from the Captain's hidden gaze.

Even Pisces was intimidated; they both tightly coiled their bodies around each other and shrank back, visibly shuddering in place out of fear.

Keaton was unfazed. He steeled against the demon's glower, his weapon poised and ready in his hands.

"Not just a common vermin, I see," the black knight continued, his sword gleaming dangerously at his side, "A Celestial Spirit mage and something else entirely. There has not been a record of a male Celestial Spirit mage born in this world in the last fifty years. So how do you exist to be?"

Records? Lucy loathed to think the Kingdom of Fiore had been keeping track of every Celestial Spirit mage for the sole purpose of utilizing the Eclipse Gate.

Keaton ignored the Captain's question and demanded, "Where is the Eclipse Gate?"

The black knight soundly smirked and gestured to the area with his free hand. "Clearly not here. The fate of this world cannot be changed no matter what you pathetic insects attempt to do. Might as well accept your due punishment and allow me to execute you once and for all."

Keaton stepped forward and hardened his expression, pointing the tip of his trident defiantly at the Captain. "The future can be changed. I am the one destined to change it. You will never gain control of Acnologia or any other dragon! Once I defeat you, I will find that Gate and destroy it!"

The Captain paused several paces before reaching Keaton, his mood turning foul, judging by both his tone and stance. "So that mangy crow was but a ploy," the knight lowly hissed, one hand curling into a tight fist. "You are the one from the future; the one who had managed to survive... You say you can defeat me, little rat? A fine jest. There is no stopping me and there is no stopping the Eclipse Gate. The future you know is inevitable! I will kill you last to make you relive it all again!"

It was all that needed to be said to provoke Keaton; his demeanour instantly transformed into pure hatred. He charged at the Captain faster Lucy had ever seen him move, closing the distance within a heartbeat. With a resounding clash, trident and sword collided when the knight blocked Keaton's
running thrust. Pressurized water burst forth upon impact, but unlike before, the Captain was prepared for it.

By simply twisting his sword, the Captain allowed the stream to split itself apart against the sharp edge of his blade. He got soaked by the spray, but otherwise stood his ground.

Growling in frustration, Keaton quickly followed with a number of jabs, each one as fast as lightning and spurting with water. However, no matter how many he performed, they were all deflected. Except for the last.

With a furious grunt, the Captain struck Keaton's weapon hard with his blade, shattering the trident's prongs to pieces as if it was composed only of glass. The Captain then rushed forward with an upward swing, narrowly missing Keaton who back-flipped out of harm's way in haste.

Keaton leapt back a few more times to put some distance between him and the knight and scowled at his broken weapon.

The white Pisces uncoiled from the other and shot through the air, rushing to her master's aid. She flew in fast from the side, aiming to headbutt the Captain when he noticed her approach. He turned his blade on her in an instant, slicing the spirit nearly in half as easily as cutting through air.

Keaton flinched with a sharp gasp, his wide eyes following the white eel as her body crashed lifelessly to the ground.

The black Pisces made a strangled noise, completely horrified at the fate of his mother. Anger consumed him right after. He launched at the Captain in a blind rage only to be forced back to the Spirit World by Keaton. Both eels vanished in a flicker of white, taking with them the power they had granted their master.

Back to his normal clothes and gear, Keaton snarled a curse and whispered an apology to Pisces, his voice muffled beneath his fox mask.

"Go on," the Captain taunted, a sneer evident in his tone, "summon another spirit for me to slay."

Keaton called for Libra without hesitation.

The beautiful Celestial Spirit appeared beside her new master, quiet and composed.

"Crush him with all your might, Libra!" Keaton commanded at once, absolutely livid.

Libra gave him a curt nod of acknowledgement and tipped her arms like a scale.

The Captain grunted and staggered forward almost to one knee when gravity increased right where he stood. The ground noisily cracked and sank beneath him from the incredible pressure. It appeared he was trapped, but then he straightened in his posture, seemingly shrugging away the intense gravity as if it was nothing. He walked forward in a normal stride, unaffected by Libra's spell unlike the crumbling earth around him.

"Impossible..." Lucy uttered in shock. Just when she felt it was becoming hopeless, a wave of searing fire came in fast from the side, swallowing the black knight in massive flames that chased away the surrounding shadows.

Lucy had to shield her face from the scorching heat and brightness that thankfully lasted only a few seconds. When the fire subsided, she had to blink several times to adjust to the returning darkness.
Natsu and Happy suddenly joined Lucy's side, renewing her hope.

"Did I get him?" Natsu growled, both fists wreathed in angry flames.

"No way he dodged that!" said Happy, hovering above him.

"Don't get cocky," Lucy warned, "He's immune to every spell we've thrown at him!"

"You sure?" Natsu questioned, wearing a smug grin. "Look! He's gone! I incinerated the bastard to nothing!"

"What?" Lucy couldn't believe her eyes when she saw the Captain missing from the sunken, smouldering spot where she had last seen him. As much as she believed in Natsu's impressive power, she knew defeating the black knight wasn't as easy as that. She looked around in a frantic manner and shouted for all to hear; "He can phase through the ground and move like a shadow! Be on the lookout!"

Keaton spun around. "Wendy!" he exclaimed.

He was right to worry about her; the black knight was already towering behind the girl who was lost in her spell, his sword moving to cut her down.

Before it was too late, something silver, red, and black suddenly rammed into him from the side.

It was Mirajane and she was downright fearsome in her Satan Soul form. On black demonic wings, she carried the Captain far away from Wendy and the injured then proceeded to slam the knight hard into the ground.

However, instead of eating dirt, the Captain harmlessly passed through the ground like a ghost. Mirajane snarled in displeasure and twisted around in circles, staying a few feet aloft in the air. Her angry eyes searched for her prey, her sharp, golden claws flexed and ready to tear him apart.

Lucy expected the Captain to go for Wendy one more time, but she was wrong when she heard Mirajane sharply hiss in pain.

A black gauntlet coming from the ground had grabbed Mirajane's ankle in a bone-crushing grip. She was yanked downwards and pulled through the earth, disappearing underground.

Lucy opened the Gate of The Maiden, hoping Virgo could dig Mirajane out. Before Lucy could give her command, the ground where Mirajane was buried suddenly exploded with dark purple energy that reached high into the night sky like a beacon. Everything it touched was instantly vaporized, leaving a gaping black hole in the ground. Mirajane emerged from the endless depth soon after, looking annoyed, but mostly unhurt.

She was not alone, however. Unbeknownst to her, a large shadow was tailing her, leaping faster than she flew.

"Mira! Below you!" Lucy shouted.

Mirajane glanced down in surprise and altered her course at the last second. Not quick enough to escape, she faced the demon and crossed her arms before her for protection. The Captain's sword slashed through her gold plating with ease as he passed her by, wounding both her arms and cutting deep into her left shoulder.

There was a flash of green high above them.
Wielding a large sword that shone with blazing red energy, Keaton plummeted straight towards the black knight like a falling star, his descent sped up to a blinding speed by Libra's power.

The Captain didn't even notice until it was too late; Keaton plunged his blade right through the knight's upper chest and out his lower back. Together they fell, crashing hard and fast into the ground beside the giant hole Mirajane had made, making a huge crater upon impact. Keaton unleashed the magic from his sword right at that instant; tall, fiery red blades of energy erupted from beneath the Captain, throwing thick plumes of dust in the air.

Mirajane dropped down by the crater's edge, favouring one leg and covering her bleeding shoulder. Despite her injuries, she was still determined to keep fighting. Natsu, hands still aflame, bounded to stand next to her with Happy in tow. Lucy tentatively did the same with Virgo obediently following along.

As the dust settled, Lucy could make out Keaton's form as he stood over the fallen Captain in triumph. She was agape when she saw the condition of the once nearly invincible Captain as he lay upon his back in defeat; the energy from Keaton's sword had sheared apart the knight's cape and armour like paper and sundered the surrounding earth, leaving crevasses that stretched far and deep.

"It's over," Keaton snarled at the Captain, holding the tip of his sword over the knight's neck.

The black knight started to laugh only to choke on blood. "It is far from over... little rat," he sputtered, his breathing hoarse and laboured, "You are... too late. You cannot change the future. The total eclipse is here... Gaze upon its magnificent glory... and embrace the true terror that has finally come!"

Lucy craned her neck upwards and felt the colour drain from her face at the sight of the moon completely swallowed by darkness.

"What the hell are you talking about? It shouldn't matter," Keaton retorted, "The Gate cannot be activated if it remains underground."

The Captain snorted in amusement. "The Sergeant had played her part far too well... in deceiving you fools. I had no intention... of keeping the Gate on the castle grounds..."

"What? Are you talking about Yukino?!” Natsu demanded. He jumped into the crater and charged right over, his burning hands flaring to match his anger.

It felt like Lucy had swallowed a block of ice when she finally pieced together the truth. "We were lied to from the beginning," she began, barely able to form her words, "Yukino gave us false information... No – she was tricked... given fake memories to believe... The Gate has been moved to somewhere else in the city and a Celestial Spirit mage is still needed to use it, that's why Loke was killed... A-And Yukino..."

"No, that can't be true..." Keaton uttered, shaking his head in disbelief.

Seething, Natsu bent over the Captain, one blazing fist raised over his shoulder, ready to punch the Captain into oblivion. "Where is she?! What the hell did you do to her?! And where is that goddamn Gate?!"

"Threaten... all you want," the knight rasped, his strength waning, "I will tell you nothing..."

"Don't waste your breath on him, Natsu," Keaton growled bitterly, "We'll find Yukino and the Gate when the first dragon appears. We can close it immediately and destroy it then because he won't be around to control any dragons coming out of those doors."
Mocking laughter suddenly rumbled from the Captain's throat, loud and booming, giving almost everyone a start. He sharply turned his head towards Keaton, his eyes now burning red and sinister within the shadows of his helm. "Little rat," he hissed vehemently, his voice no longer on the verge of death, but full of vigour and spite, "you have won nothing! I still stand. What you have defeated before you was only my weak, inferior phantom!"

His body suddenly erupted with cold, black fire, making Natsu and Keaton jump back in alarm. The dark flames consumed the knight's body in mere seconds and extinguished itself, leaving nothing behind, but the looming sense of dread.
Yukino found herself walking alone through a long, dark tunnel shrouded in dense fog. She was lost, that much she knew. Leo had been guiding her through the streets of Crocus not too long ago, but had suddenly vanished from her sight the moment they turned a corner. Yukino had searched for Lucy's spirit, however, no matter where she looked, she saw nothing but shadows in the thick, growing mist.

She had tried to call his name only to find she had lost her voice. Fear had gripped her for the briefest of moments until she heard someone whisper in her ear: *Don't stop. Keep walking.*

Her body seemed to move on its own since then, every movement sluggish and uncoordinated as if she was in a drunken stupor. Each of her footsteps echoed long and far, the sound muted like she was strolling underwater.

The situation felt so frighteningly familiar. However, when Yukino tried to understand why, her mind drew a blank.

Forward, she kept going, not knowing where her legs were taking her. An eternal march, it felt like, with the silent shadows and fog as her only companions.

Sometimes there would be a glimpse of a crimson star twinkling in the distance and she would turn in its direction, following the unseen path. Left. Right. Left. Right. Always moving. Never stopping.

Next thing she knew, she was out of the tunnel and fog and climbing on steps that spiralled upwards. Up and up she went, climbing forever on a staircase that was as high as a mountain, barely tiring. At the peak, she saw the full moon nearly swallowed by darkness, leaving only a sliver of a crescent. The lunar eclipse.

Her body finally stopped. Her eyes drifted from the darkening moon to the enormous structure waiting before her. Twelve golden rays of a sun, each leading to a mechanism that were no longer locked. Gilded stone. Silver, blue, and green. A giant arced gate. She was standing before the doors that could change the world.

She was mesmerized by it. The sheer magnitude, the intricate design, the power it contained.

She had stood before this gate before, she realized, her heart aflutter. She was the one who had **unlocked** it with Celestial Keys that were not her own. Fascination turned into absolute terror in an instant. A sudden cold washed over her as if she had just taken a plunge into a frozen lake. She shivered uncontrollably, her breath short and stuttering.

A tall, frightening shadow appeared beside her, bearing a pair of horns and no face. It only had eyes that flickered like the crimson star that guided her. It pointed a wispy finger towards the golden lever situated near the gate, giving her a silent command. Yukino's legs jerked forward and carried her towards the switch that should never be touched. It will open the doors... and behind those doors was
Stop!

She paused mid-step, nearly stumbling over her own two feet. She had bitten the inside of her lower lip, drawing blood. Her hands were furled tight, nails digging into her palm in one hand while the other clutched onto something she wasn't aware she was holding. A metal hilt. A knife. Before she could question it, a voice thundered from all around, deafening her ears and rattling her bones.

'Open the Gate.'

A command spoken so harsh and cruel. It broke the meagre willpower Yukino had left. The knife slipped from her fingers and landed dully beside her only to be forgotten.

Her body continued walking onward, the motion no longer awkward but smooth and purposeful.

No! Please, stop!

This time there was no hesitation she could muster. Tears blurred Yukino's vision. She was a prisoner in her own body; trapped within a horrific nightmare that would not end.

'Open the Gate and you will be free.'

An empty promise. Yukino knew it in her heart. There was no freedom waiting for her on the other side.

She cried in silence, tears streaming down her cheeks. When she blinked, she was already standing in front of the lever, her fingers wrapped around the golden handle. She shut her eyes as the lever was pulled, making gears noisily turn and something hum to life.

There was a loud audible metallic ring followed by the heavy creaking of hinges as both doors of the Eclipse Gate slowly swung open.

Yukino was greeted by blinding light that she could see through her eyelids and felt a rush of wind. The light embraced her in warmth, chasing away the bitter cold and shadows. She shielded her face with a hand and dared to open her eyes.

She had thought the light holy and pure; freeing her from the invisible binds that controlled her.

Until she saw the giant monster that emerged from within.

It was almost as tall as the gateway, with twisted black horns that nearly scraped the bottom of the arch. Upon its muscular neck was a large reptilian head with a mouth full of sharp teeth. It walked upright on two legs where every toe ended with a deadly black claw. Spiny black and ruby scales protected its powerful body and a pair of huge, webbed wings were folded at its sides like a bat. Fierce eyes that gleamed like amethysts looked around in confusion for a brief moment before they widened in surprise.

Black chains wrapped around the monster's neck and jaws – thick, heavy, barbed, and choking. They tore into the beast's scales and ignited with a dark, sinister flame. The fire spread quickly, engulfing the monster completely in less than a second only to extinguish a few heartbeats later.

Eyes that were once purple were now shining red and wicked. The chains were gone, but the wounds still bled.
The beast fully stomped out of the Gate, each step making the ground tremble and crack. It turned its attention on Yukino, its red eyes glaring and cruel.

She stood frozen, too frightened to move or even make a sound, when the monster lunged straight for her.

Carla had thought the battle was won, that the demon's terror and the threat behind the Eclipse Gate was over... but changing fate was never as simple as one would believe. Carla had hoped and prayed and **begged** to the unseen gods for her premonition to never come true.

However, her pleas had fallen on deaf ears.

She knew what was going to happen next; she had seen it multiple times, played through her mind over and over again for the past few days when she had tried to make sense of it.

With the darkness of the total eclipse and the truth behind the **phantom's** last words, the nightmare had only just begun.

There was an exhausted sigh coming from Wendy and a groan from Pantherlily as he came to.

Carla turned towards them, finding Pantherlily fully healed and slowly moving to sit up and Wendy leaning forward on her lap, clearly exhausted.

"What... happened?" Pantherlily croaked, gingerly touching his head, finding blood but no wound.

"You tried to save Jellal," Carla answered with a frown, slightly shaking her head.

Right when she heard his name, Wendy wiped the sweat off her brow and summoned her power in her hand to provide some light to see. She quickly crawled over to Jellal and bit her lower lip the instant she saw his injury. Wendy swallowed a few gulps of air, closed her eyes, and started to heal the wounded man without a word.

A pair of footsteps fast approached them from behind. Fur standing on end, Carla twisted around, claws and fangs bared, only to breathe a small sigh of relief at the sight of Ultear and Meredy.

Meredy dropped down on the other side of Jellal, a worried frown on her face. Ultear stood on guard, giving the area a quick scan before she looked at the others gathered around the crater where the black knight had fallen.

"Did they do it?" Ultear asked.

Carla shook her head and glared at the total eclipse mocking them from above. "No, it is far from over," she hissed, hating to repeat the demon's words. "They did not defeat the true demon, but his phantom..."

"A phantom?" Pantherlily growled, shocked. "That was a mere **phantom**? Where is the real Captain? And the Eclipse Gate?"

Carla shook her head, having no answer. They weren't the only ones to ask those questions. She turned towards the crater, seeing Keaton and a seething Natsu step out to join Mirajane, Happy, Lucy and her spirit, Virgo, and Keaton's spirit, Libra. Natsu was ablaze, but his fires soon died down when he rushed to catch Mirajane right when she transformed back to her human self. She was too injured to stand, with her one ankle crushed and her arms and shoulder bleeding. Natsu gently picked her up and followed behind Keaton who was quickly making his way towards Carla's group.
Keaton's frustration was obvious when he pushed his mask to rest atop his head, revealing the scowl on his face. With a subtle nod to Libra, he sent the Celestial Spirit back home. His expression softened to concern when he knelt beside Meredy, his eyes drawn to the bright glow of Wendy's hands as she worked on healing Jellal. The injury was severe, a deep slash diagonally down the back from shoulder blade to hip. If Pantherlily had not jumped in to try and save him, the sword would have cut deeper and ultimately been fatal.

"Wendy is doing everything she can," said Carla, hoping to ease their worries.

Keaton nodded. "I know. Master will pull through," he murmured, placing one hand on Jellal's arm.

Natsu carefully laid Mirajane on the ground nearby, queuing her next in line for Wendy's healing. He was about to say something when Keaton abruptly stood up.

Keaton had fully turned to the side, his eyes wide for a second before his scowl returned.

"What is it?" Ultear was first to ask.

Everyone's attention was on him. He glared at the darkness beyond the castle wall, teeth bared in anger. "I found the Gate," he snarled, "Domus Flau... The doors are open and the first goddamn dragon has appeared!"

"What? All the way there?!" Lucy exclaimed, "H-How?"

"The underground passageways?" Happy suggested. "Domus Flau and the castle are connected that way."

Natsu growled, "But even still... How the hell did that bastard move that huge Gate through there?"

"That's not important," Keaton grumbled as he started to rummage through his pouch, "We need to get over there and shut the Gate before too many dragons overwhelm the city. Meredy, here," he handed her a familiar vial of dark liquid, "Please give this elixir to Wendy and Master. Once Master has recovered, you guys need to destroy the Gate!"

Meredy grabbed the vial and nodded, her expression turning into grim determination. "We will. We didn't spend all that time and money for nothing! We are blowing that stupid Gate into smithereens!"

"We'll contact you when we're ready to move," said Ultear, giving Keaton and the others a firm nod.

Natsu and Happy were about to take off for Domus Flau when Keaton shouted at them to wait. "I'll teleport us there," said Keaton, "it'll be safer and faster. But first..."

Keaton walked towards Carla and knelt before her, his look pleading. "Carla, I know this may sound demanding--"

"Say no more," she interrupted. She already knew what he was going to ask.

"Carla... Come fly with me. We'll protect Wendy... We'll protect everyone..."

"I will be your wings," she continued, giving Keaton what she hoped was a confident smile. She was not as bold as she made herself appear to be, there was no denying it; she did not know the outcome of her premonition, but she knew she was supposed to play a part in it. Helping Keaton was her destiny. If protecting Wendy and the future meant risking her life, Carla would not hesitate to do it.
Keaton's smile was grateful as he reached out and scratched behind her ear before picking her up. He lifted her as he stood and propped her onto his left shoulder.

As Carla shifted to cling down his feathery back, she discreetly brushed her cheek against his, giving him her trust. The strong bond between her future self and Keaton was unmistakable when he shared his story with Carla back at the little hideout.

"You were my dearest friend and partner." She held onto him tight, almost afraid to let go.

Keaton pulled down his mask as he moved to stand between Lucy and Natsu and Happy. Happy hopped onto Keaton's other shoulder, needing to be in physical contact in order to warp with Keaton's spell.

The five of them faced Ultear, Meredy, Pantherlily, and Mirajane.

"I'll join you guys shortly once I'm fully healed," Mirajane assured, keeping one hand over her shoulder wound.

Keaton shook his head and spoke quietly, "No, please stay here and keep Wendy out of danger. Don't let her come to us. I don't want anything to happen to her."

Mirajane raised her brow and wagged a finger at him as if scolding. "You know she won't like that. She'll refuse to stay put knowing you're out there fighting."

"Please, Aunt Mira, I've already lost her once..."

Mirajane's face fell. She dropped her hand and nodded in understanding. "I'll try my best," she said softly. "All of you, please be careful."

They nodded.

Keaton grabbed Lucy's and Natsu's hands and said, "Two – no, three dragons now have left the Gate so far. I know the Captain is there, but I can't tell where. I'll warp us close and out of sight so we're not taken by surprise. Hopefully sneak up from behind."

"Leave the bastard to me," Natsu demanded, spitting out smoke and sparks with every heated word. He glowered at their unseen foe, eyes as fierce as a dragon's. He was smouldering, his body giving off so much heat that Carla was panting and Keaton was noticeably sweating. "I'll make sure he gets what he deserves. Bacon, you take care of the dragons."

"Understood. Just don't get careless against him, Natsu. Might end up being another phantom."

Natsu scoffed. "Don't worry. I'll hunt him down even if I have to go through every damn phantom in my way."

"Wait," Carla blurted out without thought.

Keaton glanced at her sideways and asked, "What's wrong, Carla?"

She held her tongue, the end of her tail twitching anxiously. In her premonition, she was certain Keaton was the one fated to battle the black knight. But also in her vision, the city was already burning by the time Keaton had asked for her help.

It will not be the same, she assured herself. Premonitions were not absolute... If they acted as quickly as planned, then perhaps the city would not end up in smoking ruins.
"I'm sorry, nevermind," she murmured with a curt shake of her head.

Keaton's gaze lingered on her for a brief moment before he turned to Lucy. "Master Lucy, we'll leave the Gate to you. There should be a panel that controls it. Find it and shut the Gate while we have the Captain and the dragons distracted."

"Got it," said Lucy, her voice quivering with trepidation.

"Everyone, hang tight," said Keaton.

Carla's fur stood on end as his magic flared to life, coursing through her body like harmless electricity. He was surrounded by a bright green aura that soon enveloped Carla and the others.

Carla shut her eyes when the light grew too bright and felt a strong wind suddenly pick up. Having experienced Keaton's spell once already, Carla braced herself for what was to come next.

"Don't die..." she heard Meredy quietly pray right before the strong, magical gale swept them away.

Carla dug her claws into Keaton's feather cloak as they soared fast through the air, heading towards the destination he had set in his mind.

Not a moment longer, they came to a sudden stop, back on solid ground. Carla blinked to adjust her eyes to the dimmer, flickering light and immediately recognized where they were. They were up on one of the balconies overlooking the bleachers and the arena of Domus Flau.

Keaton quickly crouched to hide behind the stone barrier of the balcony, pulling Lucy and Natsu with him.

They carefully peeked over the ledge at the arena far, far down below to assess the situation. The gaping hole Sting had created during the tag team battle between Fairy Tail's and Sabertooth's Dragon Slayers had been temporarily patched up with wooden planks. Situated on the opposite end of that was the Eclipse Gate, its heavy, gilded doors wide open and white light shining through.

And roaming near the Gate like guardians were three dragons that had yet to take flight. One was black, crimson, two-legged and tall; the second, stout, heavy, with scales as gray and jagged like rock; and the third...

Happy gasped at the sight of it. "Is that really a dragon?! It's completely on fire!" he whispered in shock.

Indeed, the third monstrous beast was engulfed entirely in red and orange fire appearing like a living, moving torch. Its flames were so bright, it lit up the whole stadium in a warm, flickering, orange glow. The ground burned and smouldered as it left a fiery trail in its wake. It looked more demon than dragon having only its black skeletal body visible through the wild flames and a white, pulsing core that may be its heart. An eerie red glow shone from deep within the sockets of its eyes, sharing the same sinister light as the other two dragons.

Carla could feel the incredible heat coming from the fire dragon's form despite the great distance between it and the balcony. She would even dare say it was hotter than Natsu who was seething right beside her.

Keaton cursed under his breath. "Damn it. Why does it have to be that fire one?" he groaned, keeping his voice low. He hastily wiped the sweat dripping down the side of his face with the back of his gauntlet. "Without Pisces, I won't be able to get near it."
"Ugh, it's so hot..." Lucy whined, dabbing at her forehead with the sleeve of her shirt. She blinked at Keaton in bewilderment. "Wait, you've actually fought that freaky fire one before?"

Keaton shook his head. "Tried to, but no success. It was Gray who managed to kill it. He was the only one who could withstand the heat."

Natsu huffed and crossed his arms. "If that dumb Ice-brain can kill it, then so can I!" he declared out of jealousy.

"But, Natsu, your element is fire," Keaton stated, sounding skeptical.

Lucy perked up and leaned forward to look at Natsu, her sweaty face beaming with an idea. "But he's also a Fire Dragon Slayer. Natsu, you can eat that dragon since it's mostly fire!"

Keaton cocked his head slightly at Natsu. "Oh, right. Forgot Dragon Slayers can do that. Can you eat a whole dragon?"

A devilish, sharp-toothed sneer adorned Natsu's face as he patted his stomach. "Won't know till I try. I am getting pretty hungry!"

Keaton turned back to the situation below before glancing around the stadium, hands clenched upon the stone barrier. "I don't see the Captain anywhere..."

"Don't see Yukino either," added Lucy, knitting her brow with worry. Her eyes fell on the Gate. "She had to be the one to open those doors... Do you think – Oh no! Look!"

A fourth dragon was emerging from the light, one covered in glimmering green scales and looking awfully familiar.

"Hey, isn't that–" Natsu started to say only to be sharply cut off by Keaton's angry snarl. "Zirconis. That's the dragon who killed Wendy in my time..."

Hearing that made Carla's blood run cold. She hadn't liked Zirconis as an annoying ghost and now she despised him even more alive. Glaring daggers at the Jade Dragon, she bared her fangs and furled her paws with newfound anger.

"I'll make sure it won't happen again," Keaton vowed, moving to stand, which prompted Happy to shift over to Natsu. "I'll slay him before–"

Keaton froze when four dark, hazy, purplish rifts suddenly teared open in the air right before Zirconis just as the dragon was only halfway through the Gate. Multiple, thick, black chains suddenly shot out of the magical rifts and ensnared Zirconis's head and neck, sealing his big mouth shut. Black fire quickly spread from the rifts and down the chains before consuming the dragon entirely in shadowy flames. Zirconis only struggled once before falling completely still. Red eyes burned through the darkness, matching the eyes of the other mind-controlled beasts. The black fire extinguished, taking the rifts and chains along with it to leave behind another obedient slave.

Carla felt Keaton shudder as his magic suddenly surged forth. She was unnerved by his sudden..."
change in demeanour and managed to only utter nervously, "Keaton, are you–"

She didn't get to finish because he had decided to teleport right at that instant, taking her along for the ride. Within a blink, they reappeared somewhere bright and unbearably hot. For a fraction of a second, Carla didn't know where they were until she felt her heart leap to her throat as they began to fall from the sky.

Carla's first instinct was to take flight, but the sound of a drawn sword made her pause. Keaton summoned his magic once more, quickly charging his blade with blazing red energy. He twisted in mid-air, his body parallel to the ground, and performed a dizzying, fast-spinning sideways slash as he descended upon what Carla could assume was one of the dragons. She couldn't tell which of the four he was aiming at because the world before her eyes was nothing but a blur of fiery red and white.

In the midst of the maneuver, Keaton had reoriented himself to land perfectly on his feet. It was graceful for him, but not so much for Carla who was unprepared for the abrupt stop. The wind was knocked right out of her and trying to regain her breath was nearly impossible when it felt like they were in the middle of a burning brazier. Panting, she only caught a glimpse of the blood spraying from the side of Zirconis's neck before Keaton rushed forward, leaving the collapsing dragon's body behind.

Three pairs of wicked red eyes snapped in Keaton's direction the instant the remaining dragons heard his footsteps.

Keaton dashed towards the closest dragon, the one composed of solid stone and spiny rock and possessing a body as rigid and sturdy like a mountain. Standing half-way across the arena, the grinning, stout-faced dragon let out a deep, rumbling growl that sounded like grinding stone. It raised one of its front legs and slammed it down with little effort, easily smashing the ground apart and creating a huge wave of jagged, rocky spikes that violently burst from the earth towards Keaton.

Keaton leapt into the air and shouted, "Carla! Up!"

Carla reacted upon command, sprouting her wings and flapping hard to carry him upwards as fast as a fired arrow, just in time to avoid getting impaled by giant, deadly spikes that were tens of metres tall.

"Back down! Where the spikes end!"

There was no time to question why; Carla could only believe Keaton knew what he was doing since he was an expert in slaying dragons.

Carla performed a tight turn and quickly dove towards the last of the earthen spikes that almost touched the edge of the arena. Shortly before landing, Keaton had summoned Libra and magically changed into the Celestial Spirit's Star Suit.

His feathered cloak disappeared from right under Carla, forcing her to lose her grip on him. Fortunately, he was just a few feet above ground when it happened.

Keaton rolled into his landing and was as lithe as a cat at getting back on his feet, imbued with Libra's power. His new attire nearly matched the spirit's in both colour and style, in which he bared more skin than usual, showing off his many battle scars for all to see.

He was half-naked but he wasn't completely vulnerable and defenseless; a pauldron guarded his right shoulder, vambraces protected his forearms, faulds hung around his waist, greaves and armoured shoes shielded his lower legs and feet. Each gilded piece of armour was painted green and gleamed
like gold, held in place or decorated by thin golden chains that resembled the chains of Libra's scales.

Draped down in front of his faulds and red, knee-length shorts was a long, green, silken cloth embroidered in gold thread that formed Libra's Celestial symbol. An armlet of gold adorned his left arm, adding a little glimmer to the dull white bandages that covered his tattoo. A white cloth hid the lower half of his face, similar to how Libra hid hers, making them a perfect pair.

With Libra's Star Suit, Keaton was granted an enormous golden hammer to wield. The shaft was twice his height and the rounded hammer head was as wide as Taurus's axe and ten times as thick. If it were not for Libra's power, the weapon would have been impossible to hold for someone of Keaton's size.

Carla hovered nearby and watched in fascination as Keaton spun in a circle once, twice, thrice on his heels to build up momentum. After the third rapid spin, he swung his hammer at the base of one of the spikes. Hammer and rock collided like a crack of thunder that was so loud it hurt Carla's ears. Although the hammer was light enough for Keaton to use, it packed quite a devastating wallop due to the manipulation of gravity.

With a single blow, all the towering spikes blocking their view were completely demolished by the resulting shock-wave. Thousands of boulders and giant chunks of sharp, jagged rock were sent flying far and fast back towards the caster; turning the dragon's own magic against it.

Carla didn't get to witness the damage Keaton had done because she noticed something flash bright and orange in the corner of her eye. It was a massive, fiery inferno and it was heading straight for them at an alarming rate.

"Carla!" Keaton spun around towards her, one hand reaching out of desperation. He had already changed back to his normal clothes, Libra nowhere to be seen.

Was there even time to escape?! Carla dove at Keaton nonetheless, heart racing, mind numb with panic. However, instead of wanting her to try to get them out of the fire's path, he yanked her out of the air and held her tight against him. He brought out his crimson shield, planted the pointed end deep into the ground, and huddled behind it a mere second before the incinerating blast reached them.

Keaton grunted as he braced against the devastating attack. The howling fire was deafening as the world burned around them.

It was so hot it felt like Carla was being roasted alive! She squirmed in Keaton's hold, curling into a tight ball, burying her face in his clothes, desperate to get away from the sweltering heat. She wanted to scream, but there was no air left to breathe.

It was pure agony. She was suffocating and the inferno seemed to last forever.

Fear gripped Carla's soul; she was afraid to die. Her lungs were burning. Throat and mouth dry like sand. She couldn't hold on any longer, her mind was slipping and her struggles grew weak.

Images flashed before her eyes; Keaton falling through a dark sky. Rows of sharp teeth closing around him. Pale blue light that flickered like a flame; stronger, brighter, uncontrollable by the second until everything was consumed by its unbridled rage.

Carla must have fallen unconscious because the next thing she knew, someone was roughly shaking her awake.

"Breathe... Carla... Breathe!" a faint voice pleaded in a breathless rasp. "Carla... wake up... Shit!"
There was a thunderous rumbling followed by stone noisily cracking.

Carla gasped, drawing a lungful of much needed air when the world trembled beneath her. The shaking grew more violent and she was nearly thrown aside. Then she was falling, surrounded by the roar of cascading rock. The unbearable heat was quickly replaced by rushing cool wind that was unfortunately dusty and stale.

Carla's eyes shot open and she found Keaton holding her close, protecting her, keeping her safe, as they plummeted head-first into a deep, dark abyss. Dirt and rocks of every size fell alongside them and not far behind was something that shone bright. The Eclipse Gate; it noisily clanged as it clashed and tumbled against the walls of the pit, its stubborn doors remaining wide open.

Whatever had caused the earthquake ended up destroying the entire arena of Domus Flau.

Carla's adrenaline kicked back in and she was fully alert once more. "Keaton! I'll get us out!" she hollered over the noise. He loosened his grip and she quickly clambered to his back.

She summoned her wings and caught the wind, swooping down before smoothly changing their course upwards to avoid giving her rider whiplash. Keaton had pulled an arrow from his quiver and infused the tip with a bright, golden light to illuminate the darkness and oncoming dangers.

Carla swerved and weaved around the falling hazards to the best of her ability while Keaton used his shield to protect against the smaller debris she failed to dodge. They avoided the spinning, giant Gate by only a margin and as they flew past, Carla was certain she saw the silhouette of another dragon within the light.

She continued on, escaping the dusty pit seconds later. Exhausted, she slowed their ascent and took a quick glance down at the bottom, catching the last of the Gate's light before it was buried beneath tonnes of rock and dirt.

There was no time for a breather; they were out of one danger and thrown right into the next.

"Carla! Left!"

She shot to the left in the nick of time to evade the snapping teeth of the giant, winged shadow that dove at them from above. They avoided getting eaten, however they couldn't avoid the powerful wind gust left in the black dragon's wake.

Caught in the turbulence, they ended up tumbling downwards.

"Steady! Carla! Steady!"

*I'm trying!* Carla wanted to scream, but she could barely catch her breath let alone utter a single word. She was flapping hard, wing muscles burning like fire, fighting to reorient themselves in the air. Once she did, Keaton immediately commanded her to spin around to face the black dragon, his shield already replaced with his bow and his arrow of light still in his hand.

The beast with wings like a bat had crash-landed on the bleachers of the stadium while trying to quickly turn around. Eyes locked on its prey, the dragon launched off the stadium, aiming its gaping mouth at the flying pair.

Keaton fired his light arrow and struck the dragon between the eyes, the tip soundly piercing through scales. Golden light burst upon impact – a flash so bright it was like catching a glimpse of the sun – blinding the beast and drawing a pained howl. Stunned, the dragon reared back and hovered in place, whipping its head to and fro, eyes clenched tight.
Keaton's sword was back in his hand. "Its neck! Go!"

Carla ignored the ache in her wings and mustered everything she had to swoop in faster than ever before. They were upon their target within a blink of an eye with Keaton slashing his silver blade deep across the dragon's exposed neck as they zipped by.

The dragon's gurgled cry was cut short when it started to choke on its own blood. Down it fell, the red light in its eyes fading to nothing. Its body vanished in the darkness below where it landed with a heavy, echoing thud at the very bottom.

Carla was tense, awaiting for Keaton's next command while they hovered near the centre of the stadium. When he sheathed his sword, she took that as a sign to finally have a moment to breathe. She cautiously looked around, her wide eyes taking in all the damage Domus Flau had sustained.

Besides the complete destruction of the battleground, bringing shame to Sting's little hole, the entire north wing of the stadium had been blown away. Even the giant, guardian statue of the legendary mage was missing, likely reduced to a molten pile of rubble or blasted miles away. Nearby stone structures were either scorched black or visibly melted and still red hot.

The south wing was barely any better; smashed, impaled, and punctured by giant chunks of rocks that Keaton had sent flying back at the stone dragon.

"Carla! Bacon!" Happy cried, zooming towards them. "You're okay! I was worried! Wow, you guys were amazing!"

"Barely okay," Carla sighed wearily. It had been one crazy, dangerous situation after another; her heart was still pounding and she was highly on edge. The fire dragon's heat had been the worst and she dreaded to experience its breath attack once more. She hadn't noticed either the fire or rock dragon around, making her anxiously wonder where they had gone.

Keaton pushed his mask up to rest atop his head and wiped the sweat dripping from his forehead. "Carla, I'm sorry," he mumbled, giving her a sideways glance, "I didn't mean to suddenly jump in like that. I don't know what took over me..."

Carla furrowed her brow and hardened her gaze. "Was it your curse? It looked like you were in pain earlier..."

He looked away, one hand rubbing the concealed mark on his arm. "Was I?" His voice was quiet and full of uncertainty.

It was disconcerting. Carla's frown deepened, but she decided not to press further on it since it wasn't the time or place. "Happy, where is Natsu? And the other remaining dragons?"

Happy pointed beyond the east wing of Domus Flau where in the distance, Carla spotted a dragon-shaped fireball flying erratically in the air. "Natsu took Lucy's advice and is trying to eat that fire dragon!"

Sighing, Keaton pulled his mask back on, seemingly back to his normal self. "That fire one is the worst of the bunch so far. Hopefully Natsu can defeat it."

Happy raised a paw in the air and grinned proudly for his partner. "Of course, he can! The dragon didn't seem too pleased with Natsu munching on its flames! And the rock one, it went into a stomping frenzy when you badly injured it, Bacon. It made that earthquake and broke the ground and fell into the hole. I don't know if it's still alive..."
Keaton lowered his gaze to the darkness, eyeing something hidden within. "It is. I can sense it. Hasn't moved though. Maybe too injured to–"

He was cut short when something suddenly flashed to life all around them, making him tense and Carla flinch in surprise. Happy let out a terrified squeak and dove behind the pair, but it was useless to hide.

Four giant Lacrima-Vision screens, the very same ones used during the Games, had appeared, lighting up what was left of the stadium in a soft blue glow. Upon each screen was the same frightening image of the Captain of the Holy Blossom Knights, gazing down at the trio hovering in the centre.

Carla shuddered and held her breath. Even through a hologram, she could feel the chilling intensity of the demon's hidden glower upon her, the sensation made worse being surrounded by his stare.

Keaton growled heatedly at the black knight, fists trembling with anger by his sides.

"I've underestimated you, _little rat,_" said Geraldo, his spiteful voice blaring loud through the speakers of the stadium, "It seems you are capable of slaying a few dragons, but how long can you truly last? Ten? Twenty? A hundred? How many more can you slay until you grow tired and weak?" Eyes suddenly burned like smouldering red pits in the shadows; evil, angry, _malicious_ like a true demon from the depths of Hell. "Resist all you want, vermin, this world is fated for ruin. There is no straying from this path. You survived the calamity once, can you survive it again when every dragon hungers for your flesh?!"

All the Lacrima screens blinked out, bringing back the darkness.

Carla gasped, remembering to breathe and maintain her magic wings. She had nearly frozen up in terror, her blood ice-cold from the evil emanating from the mere image of their enemy. There was no time to even process what the demon had said before she heard a loud rumbling echoing from the bottom of the pit.

Something was moving through the rubble – no, _smashing_ through, judging by the violent sounds of shattering rock and thrown stone. It wasn't long until the familiar light of the Eclipse Gate began to shine from the dark abyss, uncovered by the obedient rock dragon.

Keaton strung together a series of colourful expletives. "The Gate is still open!"

Carla didn't hold back as she, too, bit out a few choice words that would have made Wendy gasp. The Eclipse Gate was lopsided and crooked, but still mostly upright, its stubborn doors angled slightly upwards towards the lunar eclipse. The light was taunting them. After such a fall and crushed by tonnes of earth, the Gate remained intact and functioning, truly as sturdy as a mountain.

Happy clutched the sides of his head. "O-Oh no! There's no way Lucy can shut it now when it's all the way down there!"

"We need to destroy it as soon as possible, but Master–" Keaton was interrupted yet again by the appearance of the dark rifts opening before the Gate. It was double the number compared to before and each suddenly shot out multiple flaming, black chains _into_ the light of the gateway. They snagged onto something on the other side and began to reel in fast, pulling a hapless dragon through that was already red-eyed and enslaved.

Once the dragon was out, the chains burned away and new ones appeared within the rifts, shooting into the light to quickly find what Carla feared was another dragon.
Happy's eyes were wide with horror. "What?! H-He's dragging them through time?!

Carla's heart sank with dread. "No! At this rate..." They would soon be overwhelmed. Two new dragons had replaced the ones Keaton had just killed and a third was already on its way.

Keaton cursed the black knight, his body trembling with contained fury. Unlike before, he did not lose himself to his curse. "Carla," he turned his head to give her a sideways look. Although his face was hidden, his concern was evident in his tone; "Are you okay? Can you keep going?"

She was exhausted, terrified, and desperate to flee. However, despite her rapidly pounding heart and badly shaken nerves, she was not ready to give up just yet, not when she was needed; not when the fate of the world depended on them.

Her future self had fought by Keaton's side till the end. Carla would be insulting her own name if she backed down now. Gathering every ounce of courage in her heart, she said to him; "I will help you fight for as long as I live, Keaton."

He nodded in thanks and returned his attention to the growing threat lying below. "Happy, go to Master Lucy and get her out of here. That goddamn coward is sending all the dragons after me. I want to keep them around Domus Flau until Crime Sorcière can get here. I don't think everyone has evacuated the city yet."

Happy frowned. "Bac–"

"Go! Hurry! Carla!"

She didn't need to ask. She saw it herself; three pairs of red eyes glinted at them from the darkness below accompanied by the burning energy coming from each dragon's mouths. Blue, purple, white – each glowing brighter by the second.

Happy dove one way, Carla and Keaton the other. Three ear-deafening roar attacks shot skywards towards them at the same time, merging into one to form one deadly, powerful blast. It was a beacon of devastation; blinding, scorching, catastrophic – no doubt capable of annihilating an entire mountain range or more.

Carla didn't escape unscathed; she had dodged the brunt of the blast, but the charged energy surrounding it was hot enough to burn the tip of her tail and singe her wings. She gritted her teeth and ignored the pain, flying as fast as possible away from the open pit.

The light of the beam faded and the silence of night returned to their ringing ears.

"They're giving chase," Keaton informed soon after. "Circle around the outside perimeter of the stadium. We'll take them down one at a time!"

"Aye!" Carla veered to the left once they passed the edge of Domus Flau. She could hear the snarls and mighty flaps of wings coming from the dragons wanting to have them for a snack. She dipped low, using the building for cover while soaring along its outer walls.

One of the dragons noisily crashed through the stadium right behind them. Carla flinched but dared not to look back.

"Fly straight up! Dive when I say so and go for one of its wings!"

Carla did exactly as he instructed and sensed the dragon pass right under them, its manoeuvrability in the air not as sharp as an Exceed's.
"Now!" Keaton drew his sword.

Carla folded her wings and dove straight down just as the dragon with purple scales and thin, curved spines upon its head twisted around in mid-flight to face them. That moment when it stalled in the air was enough for Carla to shoot past its head towards it right wing unhindered. Keaton easily cut through tough scales and bone, severing the webbed limb from its body like a branch from a tree.

The dragon yelped in pain and helplessly fell backwards, plummeting over the side of the mountain.

Carla didn't get to see where it ended up because another dragon was already after them, coming from above. Covered in thick, bluish, spirally scales, the dive-bombing dragon was a huge, muscular brute and noticeably slower in flight.

Carla swerved above its head at the last second, giving Keaton the opportunity to target one of its wings. He slashed, his sword soundly scraping against hard scales, generating a brilliant shower of sparks. Unlike with the purple dragon, he failed to completely cut through.

Keaton grunted in annoyance. "Left!"

Carla turned swiftly just as the third dragon appeared, smashing over the top of the stadium, sending chunks of debris to rain down. Dark blue and with webbed fins instead of spines and horns, the dragon was just as big of a brute as the other.

"I'm warping!" Keaton forewarned, "Drop when we reappear!"

A flash of green, a rush of wind; they were somewhere else in the sky before Carla could blink. She stopped flapping, hoping that 'drop' meant to fall. And she quickly understood why when Keaton opened the Gate of The Heavenly Scales.

"Libra! Imbue my blade!"

It was the same technique he used against the phantom; a downward plunge greatly sped up by Libra's gravitational pull.

Carla clung to Keaton for dear life, the wind whipping by fast, stinging her eyes. Everything passed by in a blur of colours and shadows as the point of Keaton's fiery red sword fell straight for the dark blue dragon.

He avoided the dragon's sharp back fin and landed upon one of its shoulders, his sword sinking deep into the base of its neck. Libra's gravity continued to drag them downward and, altogether, they dropped hard and fast.

The blue dragon collided with the other dragon with spirally scales in mid-air, crushing the brute under its weight when they both crashed into the ground with an earth-shaking boom.

With a furious yell, Keaton unleashed the magic from his sword upon impact, sending a burst of energy that pierced through both dragons and erupted into large, fiery blades that spread outwards once it struck the ground. Scales, flesh, bone, and rock were cleaved apart by the magic as if they were nothing.

Carla cringed in disgust when she was sprayed by hot blood. She shook her body in hope of shaking it off, meanwhile Keaton, drenched from head to toe, was too tired to care about the mess. He had dismissed Libra not too long ago, needing to conserve his magic as much as possible.

The unstable ground began to rumble and sink beneath them. Carla quickly carried Keaton to a safe
distance as the mountain broke away in a landslide, taking the two dead dragons with it.

Keaton planted the tip of his sword into the ground and leaned against it to catch his breath. He pushed his mask up and rubbed his face, heaving an exhausted sigh.

Carla rested her head against the nape of Keaton's neck, ready to collapse. However, she knew it was far from over.

A familiar voice suddenly spoke in their minds, making them both flinch;

"Keaton!"

Keaton bowed his head in relief. "Master! Thank the Gods you're all right. You need to hurry! The Gate, it's--"

"I know," Jellal interrupted, his fury clear in his tone, "It's in a fucking pit."

"And Geraldo is dragging the dragons through the door, bringing them here as fast as he can. Don't know where the hell he's hiding, but he's sending them all after me. We'll lure the dragons away from here so you guys can--" Keaton cut himself short, his head snapping towards the sky. He swore under his breath.

A new dragon had made its appearance, flying over the boundary of the shattered stadium, its hungry crimson eyes falling upon Keaton and Carla.

It was a fearsome white beast, shrouded in cold mist and covered in sharp, icy spines. Crystal horns sprouted from its head and nose and a frosted beard hung down its lower jaw. Broad wings layered with ice folded as the dragon dove straight for the pair.

The moment Keaton freed his blade, Carla took off, going in the opposite direction of Domus Flau now that the plan to destroy the Gate was in motion.

"Master, I'm sending Gemini your way!" said Keaton, sheathing his blade. They were soaring over the city with the ice dragon soundly flapping behind them. The dragon wasn't alone; soon two more pairs of wings had joined it, making a total of three dragons hot on their tail.

"All right. We will destroy that damn Gate. Don't die, understand?!"

Despite their dire situation, Keaton managed to smirk. "Understood! The same goes for you, Master!"

Keaton wasted no time and summoned Gemini while Carla was left to watch out for the dragons chasing after them. Keaton snatched the twins out of the air right when they appeared so they wouldn't be left behind. They huddled against his shoulders while he gave them orders; "Gemini, take on my current form and go to Master Jellal and listen to his commands. Protect him with everything you have for as long as you can, understand? The goal is to destroy the Eclipse Gate!"

"Yes, Master Link!" the spirits cried as one.

"I'm counting on you both. Now, go!" Keaton flung them sideways as hard as he could so they were out of the flight path of the dragons.

Carla saw a flash of white as the twins fused into one before they were out of her line of sight.
Keaton sensed an attack coming their way. "Dive!"

Carla dropped low seconds before several large lances of ice could pierce them through, each ten times as big as Keaton. The ice whizzed by overhead, leaving a sparkling trail as they shot towards the outer city.

Keaton had drawn his bow and grabbed an arrow. "Loop around! Fly under the ice dragon and give me a clear shot at its underside!"

She twisted sharply around, grunting from the strain in her exhausted wings, and did not fail to do what he had told her.

Fire erupted from the tip of Keaton's arrow. He shot it upwards at the ice dragon's belly as they passed under it. The arrow exploded in a quick burst of orange flames, making the dragon flinch. However, the small fire only melted away some of the protective ice and merely licked the beast's scales beneath, doing little to no harm.

Carla turned her attention back forward and felt her stomach drop at the sight before them; three dragons were now five and counting. She swerved to the side, throwing the closest pursuing dragons off-course for only a brief moment.

It was starting to feel like a hopeless struggle until Carla saw something bright flicker in the periphery of her vision. She looked in its direction and gasped at the massive fireball shooting fast towards the ice dragon.

"*Hell Fire Dragon's Sword Horn!*" the fireball roared as it rammed the side of the ice dragon with so much force it knocked the beast out of the air. Searing flames exploded upon impact, shattering and vaporizing the dragon's protective layer of ice and engulfing it completely in burning fire. The dragon screamed in pain as it fell towards the city like a flaming, thrashing meteor.

"It's Natsu!" Keaton exclaimed with a grin. "He must've really eaten that fire dragon whole."

Indeed, Natsu was an impressive sight, having absorbed an incredible amount of power. He was a living inferno, his body nearly obscured by the towering flames that radiated from his form. Behind his back, the fire flared out like the wings of the dragon he had just consumed. And just like the fire dragon, he made the air shimmer with unbearable heat.

The Dragon Slayer launched at the next oncoming dragon, propelled by the flames at his heels, all the while yelling, "I got this! Keep moving!"

"Carla, let's go! Keep leading them away!"

"Right!" Carla circled around just as Natsu unleashed another brilliant explosion that sent a blistering wave of heat in all directions. She quickened her pace, getting away from Natsu's fires as well as the angry roar of the dragon Natsu had just attacked.

Despite Natsu taking one of the dragons down, Carla had noticed two more had already taken its place. More winged shadows with eyes of red were in pursuit of the pair, ignoring the Fire Dragon Slayer. Their numbers were steadily increasing with no end in sight. *Ten thousand* dragons was the demon's goal; a number that no longer seemed impossible at the rate they were coming.

"We can't defeat them all," Carla hissed breathlessly, the feeling of hopelessness returning.

"No, not yet, at least, but we can keep them distracted long enough for Master to blow up the Gate. Once that's done, we can focus on defeating the remaining dragons. We'll find a way!"
Carla involuntarily shuddered, remembering the vision she saw when she had passed out at the stadium. She wanted to tell Keaton about it, but the chance never came.

They were busy dodging everything the dragons were throwing at them, constantly praying no one was still occupying the city below. Carla purposefully stayed away from the lake and Mercurius Castle where Wendy was hopefully still safe. Businesses, homes, streets, and parks were demolished, blown apart, incinerated, flooded, frozen, impaled, flattened; every dragon of every element seemed to be chasing after them now.

Arcs of lightning, frigid ice blades, volcanic boulders, poisonous spines, water bombs, wooden stakes, stone spikes, deadly beams of energy; it was one attack after another. Staying alive required all of their focus and instincts.

It was too risky to counter-attack with so many powerful beasts swarming the sky. They could only flee. However, they couldn't run forever.

Carla was tiring quickly, leaving Keaton to warp them out of danger whenever he detected an attack that was impossible for Carla to evade. He would always take them to a new location in the sky, far enough to give Carla a brief ten second break before the chase would begin anew.

After the fifth time they warped, Keaton snapped his head sideways to look behind his shoulder. "A fast one is approaching. This one feels so familiar. No! Damn it! It can't be..."

"Acnologia?!" Carla followed his gaze and was met with multiple pairs of hungry red eyes. The fear of death gave her a small boost in energy, allowing her to beat her wings harder for a little more speed.

"No, not him, but just as bad. Second to Acnologia even. To the right! Hurry!"

She veered hard, evading the enormous shadow that suddenly descended upon where they were mere moments ago. Instead of a tempest left in the dragon's wake, it was a strong whirlwind that caught the pair. Carla struggled to break free and regain their balance due to fatigue. They spiralled downwards, the rooftops of buildings rushing to meet them.

"Carla!"

"I-I can't!"

Keaton resorted to warping to safety. He took them somewhere noticeably higher up in the night sky where the air was cold and thin, away from the turbulent winds. Carla got them back upright and soaring. Far beneath them was the monstrous dragon that had just attacked them.

"Dreadwing," Keaton snarled in the same hateful manner he had spoken Zirconis's name, "He's the one who killed Master Jellal and Meredy."

As the dragon's name implied, its massive dark, webbed wings were its most intimidating feature. It easily overshadowed the rest of the other dragons due to its broad wingspan and long slender body, making it the largest Carla had ever seen.

The dragon was armoured in spiny purplish-black scales tipped with gold and its three pairs of wings were twice the length of its body, patterned with golden, swirling lines, and the ends torn and frayed. Its tail was several meters long and protected with multiple layers of spines and its neck was half that length, ending with a head plated in purplish-black and gold. A pair of thick, strong horns grew atop its head, curving forward like a bull's, their deadly golden points reaching beyond the dragon's narrow snout.
"Calm yourself," Carla hissed in Keaton's ear, "don't be reckless."

He growled, head shaking. "I know! I know... Dreadwing is extremely dangerous in the air. He commands the power of storms. Hurry, we need to stay as far away from him as possible!"

It was at that moment the dragons below sensed their presence. All heads craned skywards in their direction, every pair of blinking red eyes as hungry and fierce as the next.

Dreadwing was first to change course in an instant, its many wings flapping to gain altitude faster than Carla could count to one. A powerful flyer and swift in the air, the dragon was a living nightmare of the sky.

Carla was already zooming in the opposite direction when the dragon let out a roar so loud and mighty she was certain she had gone deaf the moment the shock wave struck her. It was like the crack of thunder right in her ears amplified by a thousand times. Ears painfully hurting and ringing loud, she fought to stay in flight.

It was the storm that truly brought them down.

Thick, dark clouds had gathered above, twisting from the strong winds that began to blow. Stronger and stronger the gusts became with every passing second, turning into the magnitude of a hurricane.

Carla was at the mercy of the stormy winds, too weak to resist. Icy rain pelted her face and stung her eyes. Lightning flashed, blinding her.

She couldn't see and she couldn't hear. She didn't notice the red-eyed monster that suddenly appeared in front until it was too late. Sharp pain erupted from her side and back.

Numb and badly hurting, she was barely able to comprehend what was happening other than she was falling. As the world began to fade, she thought she saw Keaton tumbling towards the gaping maw of a monster before everything went dark and cold.

From the darkness, she saw the city of Crocus in ruins, giant dead monsters strewn throughout. Smoke, ash, devastation, death. A demon armoured in black, eyes a burning red. A winged being shining an icy blue, a large sword in hand. Facing each other like mortal enemies.

Another premonition... one Carla feared she may never see come true.

Erza couldn't believe her eyes when she and Gajeel were the first to reach the foot of the mountain leading to Domus Flau. A rockslide was blocking the path and half-buried within were two very dead, giant, reptilian creatures that were unmistakably dragons.

Master Makarov wasn't wrong when he had warned them of the great evil and the possibility of dragons appearing to attack the city.

"Holy shit," was the first thing that came out of Gajeel's mouth. He cautiously stepped towards the head of one of the dead beasts, narrowing his gaze at the gaping, bloody wounds. "Actual fucking dragons... Who the hell did this? Don't tell me it was those damn Twins."

"No, wasn't us," came a familiar voice behind them.

Sting and Rogue, both carried by their respective Exceeds, touched down on the ground to join Erza and Gajeel. The Twin Dragons, bandaged, bruised, and weary, still stood tall and proud despite losing this year's Grand Magic Games. They, too, were struck with wide-eyed disbelief the moment
they saw the deceased dragons lying before them.

"Sting! I-Is that a real dragon?!!" Lector asked, peering over his partner's shoulder.

"Yeah, it really is," Sting answered quietly, his brow furrowed with unease. Hands on his hips, he turned and faced Gajeel and Erza, giving both a questioning stare. "So I take it you guys have no clue what's happening either? We were in the middle of evacuating the city when we saw that commotion coming from Domus Flau. Wanted to find out what the hell was going on, but then noticed you guys down here."

"We may have an idea of what's happening..." said Erza, hand upon her chin. She was about to say more when a shadow suddenly appeared above them.

"Hey!" Happy cried, swooping down whilst carrying Lucy. Both were looking very worried and frazzled.

Erza was relieved to see Lucy out of prison and unharmed for the most part. Before Erza could question where Natsu and the others were, Lucy was first to speak;

"You guys haven't evacuated yet?! You need to get away from here! It's too dangerous!"

The moment Lucy landed, Erza firmly gripped the spirit mage's shoulders and spoke in a stern tone; "Lucy, calm down. Tell me what's happening."

"Dragons!" Happy answered in a panic, paws flailing as he stayed in the air. "They're being dragged out of the Eclipse Gate and being controlled by a scary demon! He's sending them all after Bacon! And soon this whole mountain is going to explode!"

"What?!" everyone, other than Happy and Lucy, exclaimed in a mixture of shock, confusion, and terror.

It was too much information to take in all at once, but one thing stood out the most to Erza and it made her furious.

"Did you say dragons are going after Bacon?" she asked, furling her hands.

Gajeel growled deeply and bared his fangs. "Why is this demon after the little runt?"

Lucy shook her head. "No, he's not targeting young Bacon—"

"It's older Bacon!" Happy tried to explain, "Seven-years-from-the-future Bacon! He travelled to this time to stop the demon!"

Erza raised her brow while Gajeel blinked, both needing a moment to fully understand the words spewing from Happy's mouth.

"All this talk about bacon is making Frosch hungry," Erza overheard Frosch say.

Rogue sighed and quietly grumbled, "You just ate before we left." Sighing in aggravation, Gajeel held up a hand and raised a studded eyebrow at Happy. "Back up! Back up! The hell did you just say, cat?"

Happy didn't get the chance to answer because more people suddenly showed up, appearing out of nowhere in a brilliant flash of green and a gust of wind.
Expecting a sudden attack from an enemy, Erza twisted sharply on her heel, a sword already equipped in her hand. To her surprise, she found all three members of Crime Sorcière huddled around someone who had hidden his face behind a mask of a familiar, smiling yellow fox.

Jellal was also hiding his face behind a mask, one that resembled a crow. Despite the disguise, Erza could feel his eyes meet hers.

She quickly shot him a look of relief before knitting her brow in concern. He was injured, evident by the slouch in his posture and the slight lean towards the masked stranger that Erza assumed was Jellal's secret informant.

"Who're you freaks?!" Sting demanded, shining fists raised and ready for battle. Rogue stood by his side, just as prepared to unleash the wrath of his shadows.

"W-Wait!" Lucy waved her hands at the Twins in hopes of stopping them, "They're on our side!"

Completely ignoring Sabertooth, Ultear stepped away from the masked stranger and said to him and Jellal, "Get to the Gate. We'll start setting up the barrier. We'll message you when it's ready."

"Hey! I'm talking to you!" Sting growled, however none of the newcomers paid any attention to him.

The person with the fox mask cocked his head at Ultear. His muffled voice belonged to a young man's as he replied hesitantly with, "But there's still that little problem down here..."

Ultear snorted and gestured at the Twin Dragons and Gajeel, who all flinched at her pointed look. "There are three Dragon Slayers here. Surely they can handle a single dragon!"

"What dragon?!" the three Dragon Slayers exclaimed as one.

Jellal pointed at the landslide. "The one heading this way! Move!"

Erza roughly grabbed Lucy by the back of her collar and pretty much carried her to safety the moment the ground started to rumble. Not a moment longer, something huge and purple burst through the broken rocks, tossing the two dead dragons aside and flinging boulders down the path where everyone once stood.

Erza cleaved apart all the rocks that flew her way, protecting Lucy who shrieked and cowered right behind her. After the shower of debris, Erza shifted into her stance and warily faced the enormous shadow looming in the dust, her blade held steady in front.

The dragon towered above them on four strong legs, its muscular body covered in coarse, purple scales, and its head armed with two curved, blade-like spines that jutted forward from the top of its head and lower jaw. As mighty as it was, it was wounded; one wing was missing, cleanly sliced off by a sharp blade, and there were numerous small cuts around its head and neck. In spite of its injuries, it held itself proud and strong, exuding an immense power in its form alone.

The beast stomped forward, its fierce red eyes locked on the masked stranger who stood protectively in front of Crime Sorcière.

"It must think you're Keaton," Jellal muttered apprehensively, hands glowing gold in preparation of a spell.

"As it should. We are a perfect copy of Master Link right down to his scent!" boasted the young man with pride as he drew his large, broad sword from his back.
"Wait, is that Gemini?" Erza inquired, glancing back at Lucy.

Lucy nodded as she slowly stood up, her body visibly shaking. The moment her gaze fell on her spirits, her fear instantly vanished when seeing their bravery against a monstrous foe. "They've copied future Bacon."

Erza's eyes widened. She gaped at the Celestial Spirit, rendered speechless by the truth behind the identity they had taken. *Seven-years-from-the-future Bacon.* The fearless boy had grown into a fearless young man and had somehow travelled through time. Erza was desperate to know what was happening, but she knew now was not the time to ask.

The dragon let out a ferocious snarl and charged at Gemini.

Darkness, light, and metallic energy blasted the dragon head-on coming from the three Dragon Slayers, their roar attacks clashing together into one massive explosion. Tendrils of shadow, swirls of radiant white, and streaks of silvery gray melded in perfect harmony, decimating the trail and nearby mountainside.

The light of the Dragon Slayers' attacks dissipated and the dragon that was caught in the middle was lying on its side within a deep, sunken hole.

Just when Erza had thought the dragon was defeated, it began to rise.

The dragon climbed back to its feet and shook off the rocks and dust, looking no more wounded than before.

Sting took a wary step back. "No way..."

"It's still alive after all that?!" Lector exclaimed, hiding behind Sting's neck in fright.

Rogue stared in shock. "Did we even hurt it?"

Gajeel snarled. "Shit! Not even a new scratch?!"

The dragon roared in anger, its cry loud and deafening, blasting away the dust and making everyone wince. In a single bound, it left the hole and landed before them with an earth-shaking tremor, crushing the solid rock beneath.

Gemini appeared in front of the dragon in an instant, their movements so fast that Erza would have missed them had she blinked.

Their blade was enveloped in a familiar blazing red energy, their magic possessing that same tingling sensation Erza immediately recognized. They crouched low and leapt high, spinning fast and hard as they rose, slashing open the dragon's chest and neck with each successful hit, the energy of their sword flaring out like flames, further cutting deep.

They truly were Bacon – there was no mistaking that sword attack nor the feel of their magic.

The dragon merely flinched and made no sound before it began to topple over, the light of its eyes fading away. With a heavy thud, it crashed lifelessly on the ground, sending a minor quake under their feet.

Erza stood stunned and she was not the only one gawking.

"Gemini, we need to move," Jellal urged the spirits, his voice breaking the moment of silence that
had fallen over the astonished group.

"Yes, Master Jellal!" said the twins, sheathing their weapon. They returned to Jellal and grabbed his hand.

"Stay off this mountain if you value your lives," Jellal warned, looking between Fairy Tail and Sabertooth just as Gemini's body began to glow green.

To Erza, he spoke to her privately through telepathy, his voice stern and commanding in her head; "Don't follow me, Erza. It's too dangerous. Get everyone out of the city."

Irritated that he would dare give her such an order, Erza was about to retaliate when he and Gemini suddenly disappeared the same way they had came.

"What just happened?" Sting uttered under his breath, blinking in bewilderment, his attention flickering between the slain dragon and the remaining members of Crime Sorcière. "That guy! He just killed – Who the hell was he?! Who the hell are you guys?! What is going on here?!"

Exasperated, Ultear stormed right up to Sting and jabbed a finger right into his bare chest, making him flinch back. She wore a scowl so fierce that Erza couldn't help but admire her. "Listen here, punk, if you want to survive this, you better calm down and stop asking questions right now. What happens today will decide the fate of our future.

"Don't listen to what that masked fool said. Our world is in grave danger so you better do something to help save it. Get your ass in there and lend them a hand. They'll need all the help they can get to destroy the magic time gate that's bringing all these goddamn dragons here. If you really are a Dragon Slayer, then slay some goddamn dragons! Or else this will be the last night you'll ever see! Got it?!"

Sting opened his mouth to argue only to quickly shut it back up, highly intimidated by Ultear's look and tone. Wide-eyed, he slowly nodded in understanding and Rogue was just as timid when she glanced his way.

Gajeel said nothing, his face grim yet determined as he finally understood what they were up against.

Satisfied, Ultear smirked and strolled back to Meredy. "The two of us will set up a barrier around this mountain that will contain the explosion that we hope will be enough to destroy the Eclipse Gate. Once we give the word, bail out of the mountain immediately."

Meredy gave Erza a knowing look and a teasing smile. "Erza, you better go too. You're Jellal's girl, he'll need your help."

Erza was taken aback. She huffed and hid her suddenly burning face behind her hair. "W-What are you talking about?"

"He needs you," Meredy answered, sounding quite pleased by Erza's reaction, "He's still wounded and he's super pissed. And when he's mad, he's bound to do something reckless and stupid. You need to make sure he gets out alive!"

Knowing Meredy spoke the truth, Erza grumbled and crossed her arms irritably. "That idiot... Very well. I'll knock him out and drag him back if I have to."

Meredy smiled in thanks.

"Good. You all better get going," said Ultear, nodding towards the mountain.
"I can make a shortcut," said Lucy before anyone could make a move. With a golden key in hand, she summoned Virgo.

The petite Celestial Spirit dressed in a maid's outfit bowed at Lucy and held out her arms. "I am ready for your punishment, Master."

Lucy sighed. "There's no punishment, Virgo! Please, dig through this mountain down to the bottom where the Eclipse Gate has fallen. Make the tunnel wide enough for all of us to walk through."

Virgo bowed again. "Yes, Master." In blink of white light, Virgo suddenly changed her appearance, transforming from a cute little girl to a huge, terrifying, beefy gorilla-woman, giving almost everyone a start. With a manly grunt, she dove right at the mountainside as if she was diving into water and instantly dug a wide opening leading to their destination.

Sting and Lector, Rogue and Frosch, Gajeel, Lucy, Happy, and Erza headed straight for the tunnel without a moment to waste.

"Be careful," was the last thing Erza heard Meredy say as she stepped into the darkness with Sting lighting the way.

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It's all about that Feeling

Meredy was all sorts of emotions as she was left to wait. She paced between the kitchen and living room of the little house Crime Sorcière had temporarily made into their base of operations in the city of Crocus. It used to be an abandoned, boarded up, and vandalized stink-hole long forgotten at the very edge of the slums, but thanks to Ultear, it had been fully restored to what it used to be in the distant past; a humble little home.

Meredy was growing impatient and anxious, but she had no reason to be, the young man with the fox mask Jellal had suddenly disappeared with was not an enemy. Far from it, in fact. She had placed a Sensory Link on both Jellal and the mysterious person before the pair had vanished out of Ultear's crystal sight.

Wherever they had gone, Ultear could not reach Jellal with telepathy. However, Meredy could keep track of them, capable of only feeling their emotions and nothing more. They were still alive, putting their complete trust with one another; that was all she knew as she and Ultear waited for any news.

The stranger didn't feel like a stranger to Meredy. No, there was something about him... A strong sense of familiarity. The emotions she had felt from him while he conversed with Jellal atop Domus Flau were genuine.


All true feelings that came from the heart.

It was a wild, emotional ride and it made Meredy anxious to know who he was.

"Sit down," Ultear grumbled, tired of Meredy's pacing. She was lying on an ugly floral-pattered couch that used to be tattered rags and broken springs until Ultear rewound time on it. Levitating her crystal ball above her face, she appeared to be bored but was actually scanning the whole city inch by inch in search of Jellal. She had been at it for almost an hour and a half now. "Don't worry about Jellal, he can take care of himself."

"I'm not worried," Meredy uttered with a little pout, "I'm just... I don't know. I'm not sure how to
explain it. That boy Jellal disappeared with... feels like I know him."

Ultear glanced at Meredy knowingly and shrugged. "He did look kind of familiar under that mask," she noted.

Meredy clapped her hands and pointed at Ultear in agreement. "Right?!" She let out an exasperated sigh and stopped before the window, placing her hands on the sill. Outside she could see the filthy backstreet where a pair of mangy mutts were digging through a garbage heap for scraps. "But it's not just that," she continued after a quiet moment, a small smile on her lips, "This feeling I have, it's more than just reacquaintance. It's stronger. Like he's... It's like... Ugh, how do I even describe it??!

She groaned and threw her hands up in frustration. Communicating her emotions through words was always so difficult!

"Deep breath, Meredy," Ultear advised, stern yet patient.

Meredy listened and took more than one calming breath as she leaned forward on the windowsill. Once relaxed, she tried to explain herself again, however she was rudely interrupted by a bright green flash and a strong gust of wind that nearly knocked her over from behind. She twisted around on her heel, forming magic swords that shone bright and blue, ready to shear through whoever dared to pull a surprise attack on them.

At the same time, Ultear had shot to her feet, numerous orbs of white light hovering above her head, her expression instantly morphed into a cold, murderous scowl.

"Wait! Ultear! Meredy!"

Jellal had appeared out of thin air right in the middle of the kitchen and he wasn't alone. Still disguised as Mystogan, Jellal stood protectively before the young man with the fox mask, arms raised and glowing palms held towards both women in preparation of countering any accidentally thrown spells.

"Jellal?!" Meredy shrieked in surprise. She quickly dispelled her magic and Ultear did the same.

"Goddamn it. Don't just suddenly appear out of nowhere!" Ultear growled, crossing her arms irritably, "You know that's never a good idea with us."

The young man behind Jellal bowed his head apologetically, making the mask resting atop his head slightly tilt forward. "Sorry! Should've warped us outside so we could knock," he said meekly.

Jellal shook his head. "Better that no one saw us coming here," he said, pulling down his bandana that hid his face. He stepped aside and it was then that Meredy got a better look at the boy with blond hair.

His blue eyes found her first. Right at that instant, she was suddenly overwhelmed by a rush of warmth. She moved without thought, her body driven by the powerful feelings he held when he saw her face.

"Meredy..." was all he managed to say before she practically barrelled into him for a big hug.

Even though his clothes were cold and damp, Meredy held him tight and began to cry. "I-I don't know why!" she sobbed, slightly shaking her head, "I don't know why! But... this feeling... You're..." 

"Family. That's what it was. He was family. Not an acquaintance. Not just a friend. Family. Much like how Ultear and Jellal were close to her like family for the past seven years. She wasn't sure how it was possible considering she had no memory of him at all, but feelings never lie.
Especially when they came straight from the heart.

This boy knew her and he truly missed her.

He embraced her back without hesitation and cried just the same.

"Damn it, Meredy," Jellal muttered, turning away from the scene. He could hide his face, but not the quiver in his tone. "Break this Sensory Link, right now."

Meredy sniffled and started to giggle. She held out an arm towards Jellal and said teasingly, "Aww, come join us for a hug. I know you want to."

His quick response was a sharp, "No."

The young man chuckled in Meredy's ear. "You know Master Jellal isn't fond of hugs."

Meredy pulled back and raised an eyebrow at the grown man ashamed to show his tears brought out by her magic. "Oh? 'Master' Jellal?" she questioned, her lips curling into a playful smile. "Since when did you ever had time to take on a pupil? And what happened to you two?" she added, finally noticing they were shivering cold and wet, "Did you guys fall in the lake or something?"

"Err, almost..." the boy mumbled, glancing off to the side in embarrassment, "I accidentally warped us into a fountain at the castle."

With his back still turned towards her, Jellal grunted in annoyance and waved her away. "It's a long story."

"Do tell," Ultear demanded, tapping her fingers impatiently over her crossed arms. She narrowed her eyes at the young man, not yet trusting of him as Meredy and Jellal. She looked him over from head to toe, taking note of his sword upon his back. "Just who are you?"

"Keaton," the boy answered promptly, turning to meet her piercing gaze without flinching. "However, you may likely recognize me as the boy named 'Bacon'."

Meredy did a triple-take and stared, mouth agape. "Wait, what?!" She leaned right into his face for a closer look and started to see the resemblance between him and the fearless little kid who remembered nothing. It was made especially clear when he grinned at her reaction.

"How?" Ultear was first to ask, completely taken off-guard.

"He is from the future," Jellal answered for the other, finally facing everyone. His slightly reddened eyes were the only evidence of his tears.

"Yes... seven years from the future," Keaton added, his smile turning wistful. He gave Ultear a respectable nod. "You must be Ultear. Forgive me, I barely remember the first time meeting you when I was still a child. Meredy used to talk a lot about you all the time so it's nice to finally meet the person I've heard all about."

Ultear glared at Meredy as if she had just been insulted. "And what sort of things did she love to talk about?"

Meredy held up her hands in protest. "H-Hey! Why are you looking at me like that?! Whatever you're thinking, it wasn't me!" Well, technically, it was her. Future her. She stiffened when she realized what he had just said. "Wait... 'used to'? What happened to Ultear? To me?"
"And how did you travel through time to get here?" Ultear inquired.

Jellal certainly wasn't lying when he had said it was a long story. They made themselves comfortable around the dining table, drinking the few bottled drinks and munching on some of the snacks Meredy had bought during Crime Sorcière's search for a decent hideout, all the while learning how grim the future would become.

The Eclipse Gate. The Festival of Dragons. Ultear's death. Acnologia. The demon behind it all. And the plan that may possibly change history for the better good.

Meredy was taken through another wild emotional ride yet again as she remained connected with Keaton with her magic.


For seven long years, Keaton had to endure. It was painful. Disheartening. And yet Meredy didn't let go as she listened to every word.

However, every day wasn't terrible and full of hopelessness. There were some happy, cherishable moments sprinkled in between. Fond, tender memories that evoked the strongest feelings. Although brief those instances may have been, they shone through the most throughout the misery and sadness.

"You were like an older sister, Meredy," Keaton had told her with a loving smile, bringing back that warm sensation that nearly brought Meredy to tears again.

Playful. Teasing. Encouraging. Caring. Protective. Future Meredy had watched over him while he had trained under Jellal. Perhaps she had taken the part in order to cope with the loss of Ultear.

And Jellal; though he was referred to as 'Master' by Keaton out of great respect, Jellal's role hadn't only been limited to just that. It was unspoken, but Meredy could easily read the truth in Keaton's eyes without the need of a Sensory Link whenever he glanced at his master.

Jellal was a mentor. A guardian. A close friend. A father.

As of now, it was impossible to imagine Jellal in that kind of position, given he was a relentless man hard-set on the complete annihilation of Zeref and his dark forces. But with the world reduced to nothing but death and ruin, the path to redemption would no longer matter. Perspectives would have had to change in order to survive; to keep living for those who didn't make it in the end.

It was obvious Jellal wasn't aware of how Keaton truly regarded him. Not yet, at least.

Meredy was hoping he would eventually come to realize it. Wanting to make sure it would happen sooner than later, she secretly devised a cunning plan.

While Jellal was distracted with explaining the details on how to proceed with destroying the Eclipse Gate, Meredy subtly created a very weak, invisible Sensory Link between Keaton and Jellal.

Slowly, but surely, their bond would grow and Jellal would understand what family truly stood for.
Extra Bonus: Lean on Me

Chapter Notes

The next chapter(s) need a bit of planning and organization so it'll likely be a while before I will update. In the meantime, here's an extra bonus scene that expands on a particular part that was briefly mentioned in Chapter 21. Hopefully this will tide you guys over until the next chapter!

Please enjoy and thanks for reading!

Wendy stood by the kitchen counter and slowly ate her food as she listened to the ongoing discussion involving the Eclipse Gate, the black knight, and the lunar eclipse. A nibble here, a nibble there, as if she was only sampling each different vendor dish like a culinary critic. The greasy food had gone cold and still tasted fine, but she didn't have the appetite to eat much of it. It was likely because the strong smells, mixed with the ever lingering stench of blood on her hands, made her stomach uncomfortably churn.

Not wanting to waste any of the food, she had discreetly pushed each unfinished item towards Natsu's pile of goods. The Fire Dragon Slayer was fortunate enough to be standing right beside her and was too occupied with the conversations to even notice he was gradually gaining more food. Thankfully, Natsu had a big appetite and devoured everything without questioning why there was a bite missing.

Once it was decided they needed to wait for Yukino to wake up, Wendy quickly slipped into the bathroom.

She filled the sink with hot water and proceeded to scrub her hands raw with soap, desperate to wash away the smell of blood. She had tried many times already since arriving to Crime Sorcière's hideout, and had even taken a shower and changed into new clothes, but she just couldn't get rid of the smell or get her hands clean. Under and around her nails was where the blood was too stubborn to come off.

"Keep at it like that and you'll be washing your skin off."

Wendy jumped and glanced at the door, seeing Keaton peering inside, his brow raised in concern.

"I-I'm just cleaning up after eating," she replied a little too hastily. "Sorry, did you need to use the washroom?"

"No," he said, stepping inside and partially closing the door behind him, "I wanted to make sure you were feeling okay. I noticed you weren't eating so I got worried."

"I... wasn't hungry, that's all. There's nothing to worry about, really." Wendy turned away to hide behind her lie. Unfortunately, there was a mirror in front of her so he could clearly see the truth in her reflection.

Keaton wordlessly stepped up beside her and interrupted her by grabbing her right hand, making her flinch in surprise. He frowned at the redness of her skin and the marks left by her nails. She didn't
pull away or question what he was doing when he proceeded to lather more soap onto the back of her hand to help her wash up, being much more gentle than she was to herself.

Feeling a little ashamed, she said nothing as she watched him work. She had done this with him before, she realized, although it was the other way around, when he was a lost ten-year-old boy needing to relearn the basics. His hands were larger than hers now, stronger and rough with calluses and scars. Every nick, scrape, cut, and burn had left their mark on his bare arms and hands. And it wasn't just limited to what Wendy could see.

Wendy glanced at the mirror to spy on his face, finding he was calm and focused on his self-appointed task. Knowing he wasn't angry or annoyed brought a small smile to grace her lips for only a fleeting moment.

"It's not easy getting all the blood off," he said once he finished with her other hand, inspecting one of her fingers closely. He rinsed the soap off and grabbed a nearby towel. "This is the best we can do for now. It'll eventually go away so you shouldn't worry about it too much."

Wendy sniffed her fingertips before he could offer her the towel and wrinkled her nose in disgust. She could still smell the blood over the strong fruity perfume of the soap and it made her sick to her stomach. She shook her head. "It's the smell... I can't get rid of it!" She bit her lower lip and dropped her gaze to the floor, embarrassed to have raised her voice.

Keaton sighed and, without warning, dropped the towel on her head, eliciting a startled gasp from her. "How about we get some fresh air? Dry your hands and follow me."

Wendy yanked off the towel and pouted at him in slight annoyance, in which he completely ignored her. He was busy standing in the bathtub to open up the window right above it. He poked his head outside and craned his neck upwards.

"Looks like we can climb onto the roof from here," he informed with a grin.

"The roof? Through the window?" Wendy blinked in bewilderment.

"Yeah. It's reachable." He hopped onto the windowsill, needing to carefully crouch very low on the ledge in order to fit. Smiling, he nodded at Wendy. "I'll pull you up from top, okay?"

Wendy hesitated as she looked at the door, hearing the voices of the others. "Should we tell everyone where we're going in case they come looking for us?"

Keaton shook his head and motioned for her to come. "Don't have to. Master Jellal will know."

Wendy nodded. As she stepped into the tub, Keaton moved to stand outside the window and pulled himself onto the roof. She saw his bare feet disappear over the edge by the time she clambered onto the windowsill. The roof was about half a meter above the window and stuck out a foot away from the house.

Keaton reappeared into view, lying on his stomach. He dangled an arm for Wendy to grab. Since she was small and light, he lifted her up with little to no effort.

It was comfortably warm under the late afternoon sun. They sat on the slope of the roof, facing the worn-down street lined with old, crumbling homes, most of them abandoned and forgotten at the very edge of the slums. It wasn't a spectacular view, but considering their location, it was better than staring at the bare, stone wall that surrounded the city. The street below wasn't empty; there was much activity in the form of disgusting rats and stray animals wandering about, however none were a cause for concern.
It wasn't entirely quiet outside either. Wendy could hear, and sometimes see, the many fireworks going off from all parts of the city as well as the constant, distant sounds of music, shouting, and singing.

For a while, they watched the sky in search of fireworks and listened to the sounds of the city. It kept Wendy distracted until she moved to push away a loose strand of hair from her face and caught the scent of blood on her fingers.

"That was the first time you saw someone die, isn't it?" Keaton spoke up the instant she was downcast.

Wendy was a little shocked he figured out what was truly bothering her. Perhaps everyone knew. She wasn't the best at lying or hiding her feelings. She hugged her knees to her chest and slowly nodded. "I failed as a healer," she whispered, tears stinging her eyes. She stared at her hands before clenching them tight until they shook. "That man... Arcadios... He died right under me... I-I couldn't do anything! If I had my magic, I could have saved him! He wouldn't be dead!"

Arcadio's death haunted her. The last look he gave her as he lay dying in a pool of his own blood was forever burned into her mind. His eyes, so wide and full of terror, had pleaded for her help. The stains on her hands and the stench of the dead man's blood; they were constant reminders of her failure.

Head shaking, she buried her face in her arms and wept, unable to hold back her true emotions. She was more than just upset, she was angry at herself, her heart heavy with guilt.

"Wendy..." Keaton draped an arm around her shoulders and gently pulled her close. His touch was warm and comforting, just like back in Abyss Palace when she had broken down into uncontrollable sobs.

She turned and cried into his shoulder, soaking his new green sweater with tears. He didn't seem to care as he continued to hold her, his head resting atop of hers, one hand stroking her back.

"Arcadios was a good man," murmured Keaton, "He didn't deserve to die the way he did. But there wasn't anything you could have done to save him in that situation."

Wendy shook her head. "N-No! If I..."

"Wendy," he held her a little tighter, his voice quiet yet firm, "he would have died regardless, whether or not you could use your magic. No one can survive such a fatal wound. No magic potion or spell could have saved him in time."

How would you know? she wanted to snap at him, but quickly thought second of it. Of course, he would know... Death was obviously not new to him. He had seen it many times over. Friends and family... All of Fairy Tail and every other guild had all perished in his time. In the end, it was only him and Lucy who were still alive.

Knowing that made Wendy's problem so trivial in comparison.

Her heart badly ached when she realized just how much he had truly suffered for the past seven years of his life. The thought of it made her cry harder. Body wracked with sobs, she clung to him for support while he kept his arms around her.

Wendy wasn't sure how long it took before her eyes were finally dry. "I-I'm sorry..." was all she managed to croak out. *I'm sorry you had live with so much pain.*
She felt Keaton shake his head. Unable to read her thoughts, he wasn't aware what she was apologizing for, but what he said next was still impactful. "Don't be. I know it's difficult to accept that people can die, but it's the reality we all have to face. Sometimes, you just can't save everyone no matter how hard you try..."

It was a painful truth that Wendy hated. Miserable, she could only nod.

They stayed within each other's embrace for a moment longer until Wendy eventually had to pull away and adjust her position due to her leg falling asleep. She rubbed her puffy eyes and wiped her nose with the back of her hand in a futile attempt to clean herself up.

"Keaton, is that your real name?" Wendy asked, wanting to change the somber mood. She had been curious about that name for a while now, wondering how it related to the yellow fox he used to dream about. He even had a mask with the same face as the mysterious animal.

He shook his head. "Link is my real name, but my life as Keaton is what I remember most."

Wendy met his gaze, unable to hide her excitement. "You remember everything then? About your past? Before Fairy Tail?"

He smirked and half-nodded. "I want to say I do, but what I remember is so bizarre."

Confused, Wendy raised her brow. "Bizarre? What do you mean?"

He turned to stare out at the empty street, his smile gone. "It was just a month ago my memories came back to me. I haven't been able to sort it all out in my head though, because... Well, after having amnesia for so long, I can't tell which memories are real and which are just dreams... I know some pieces are definitely true, but some... seem too weird to be true. Tell me, does this sound like a dream? I once saw a moon with a mean, angry face falling towards a town, but it was stopped by four red giants."

Wendy tilted her head slightly and quietly giggled. "A moon with a mean face. That does sound like a crazy dream."

Keaton shrugged and frowned soon after. "When I told Master Lucy the same thing, she said I was having fever dreams. Which is probably what it was. I was sick with fever for over a week after the battle with Acnologia because of his goddamn curse. He pressed his palm against his forehead and shut his eyes as if to ease a sudden headache. "I don't know if things truly did happen the way I remember it. There's no one I can ask to tell me that, yeah, a moon with a mean, ugly face did actually try to crash into a town."

"No one? Where are you from? Maybe if..."

"Hyrule, I think? Or was it Termina? No, I'm pretty sure it was Hyrule..." Keaton looked lost as he tried to answer. He groaned and ran a hand through his messy blond hair in frustration, his head shaking. "Damn it, it's all so confusing and now I have Acnologia's shit to deal with too!" He glared into the distance and angrily clutched his left arm where the black dragon had left his mark.

Wendy gripped his other hand, hoping to calm him down. He immediately relaxed upon her touch.

"Sorry..." he mumbled when he saw the concern on her face. Sighing, he laced his fingers between hers and dropped his gaze to the shingles before his feet.

Wendy bit her lower lip, anxious to know more about his past. More so about temple where he was found and how he ended up there, wounded and buried in ancient stone. However, she hesitated to
ask any more questions seeing how much it confused and pained him.

"I should have died, honestly," he said quietly after a moment of silence, making Wendy frown. "I thought for sure I wasn't going to make it after defeating Acnologia. I was hurt bad, I couldn't move. Maybe I pulled through so I wouldn't leave Master Lucy alone. But... in the end... I did it anyway..."

He brought a hand to cover his face, which did little to hide the sadness and tears as he began to cry.

"Keaton." There was more Wendy wanted to say to cheer him up, but couldn't find the proper words. What could she tell him that hasn't already been said by the others? He had sacrificed whatever he had left to come here, desperate to save those he loved most. Perhaps he already knew how Wendy felt because he held her hand tight, as if afraid to lose her.

She leaned against him, resting her head on his shoulder to let him know she was there for him as he had done for her.

"Yukino is waking up," Jellal's voice intruded in their minds, making them both jump.

Wendy's face was flush, feeling as if she was caught in an embarrassing situation, which really wasn't the case.

"We'll be right there," Keaton replied, hastily wiping his eyes.

There was a short pause before Jellal said, "Take a few minutes. I'll update you both on anything you've missed."

Keaton managed a small smile. "Thanks. We won't take too long."

Hands still locked together, Wendy and Keaton silently watched the few fireworks they could see until they were ready to slip back through the bathroom window to join the others inside.

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