Just What I've Always Wanted

by sassyhazelowl

Summary


Notes

Most of these are a gift for the exchange on tumblr for scribe-senpai for the Fairy Tail FemSlash Exchange. The rest are for prompts matching the holiday event for the ftfemslash blog on tumblr/femslash February.
I always thought it was a figure of speech, that whole dark roiling smoking bit, but sure enough it was black and it did swirl around as the tiny kitchen fan futilely whirled away. Hands clapped over my ears, I suffered through the blaring smoke alarm long enough to smack it several times with the business end of my cheap plastic broom. The bristles were wonky and the plastic green handle cracked, but it did the job I needed it to do -- namely sweep up any stray glass. I didn’t use it too often, partly because I was the kind of slob who preferred to swill wine from boxes and swig beer from cans, but the first time I slashed my barefoot open, I hopped around spraying every inch of the white tiles and white walls and oak cabinets with crimson. Blood was a pain to remove from white tile, I discovered, and only the advice of my neighbor saved me. Did you know hydrogen peroxide from the 99cent Store removes blood stains?

Story of my life -- a cheap fix for a messy problem.

With a defeated screech, the white plastic shrieking electronic harpy clattered to the ground and fell silent. Fingers grasping, I yanked on the tiny window to the outside, knocking off the cheery little pink plastic flower that bobbed and wafted something fruity across the room for those days when I didn't get to the dishes fast enough.

Look, I'm not a slob, okay?

But I am a bartender, so I work really weird hours, and when I'm not working I'm indulging in the fun parts of life... partying, socializing and boozing it up with my two best buds Gray and Loke. No, don't get me wrong here, I'm not seeing either of those two, although I love the two idiots to death. I'm just not really into that scene, if you catch my drift? Not enough up top and too much down low if that helps clarify. They just didn’t have the goods I’m into. And I did clean… once a month.

Anyway, I'm also not a cook either.

But since my shitty pops left me on my own for the holidays - again - I didn't really have a choice, now did I? It's not like cooking is a super special skill. I could boil water after all, and in a pinch I knew how to fry up some greasy hangover goodies first thing in the morning. Weird, I know, but whatever. I'm too cool to be knocked down so easily when fried eggs, sausage and hashbrowns beckoned after a night of hard dancing and flirting.

"Shit," I muttered to myself, coughing up a lung and grateful I'd never stuck with smoking. That crap was rank, and I told Gray he should quit it; of course he just retorted I should lay off the drink. I really should've seen it coming, and what could I say? It's a vice of mine, one of many. "I really fucked up this time."

Finding the window wasn't enough to air things out - in fact I might have just been sucking in city pollution to mix with the smoke into a more potent poison for all I knew - I stumbled to the door, swearing the whole way like a sailor and a trucker in a wrestling match. Clutching the doorknob, I yanked it open only to come face-to-face with my neighbor's big, too-innocent smile.
Within seconds of registering it, I promptly tried to shut the door right back up.

Let me tell you a little bit about my neighbor. One, she's hot. Two, she's super hot. Three, she has a sadistic streak wider than the Amazon River, which I'm pretty sure is in Africa, but no one could think about geography when faced with one of her infamous expressions of pending pain.

"Cana~" her sing-song angel voice drifted through the crack of the door. Did I mention she jammed her foot in there to cut off my escape? Because she did. And she was a lot stronger than she looked. "Why is black smoking filling the hallway?"

"Puh-leeze, Mira, babe, why're you at my door for this? It's obviously Natsu and his pyro streak acting up again..."

"Oh, I'd believe that, if Natsu and Lucy weren't away for the holiday visiting her family out of town. Which I know because I'm watching Happy while they're gone. Besides your apartment reeks!" I probably should’ve been paying attention to her words more than her glossy, pink, perfect lips, but she was just going to yell at me for trying to burn down the building. And then I’d get another responsibility lector, yikes.

On the other hand, when she took that strict tone and struck that pose with her fingers resting just-so on her trim waist and jaw tilted with stern disapproval it was hard to resist a shiver of excitement and the banging of my poor little heart.

Oh, did I forget to mention? I might have a teeny, weenie crush on her… the size of Austria. You know, that place with kangaroos and killer crocs? Yeah, a little glance at her, and I was reduced to that loser in middle school who stared at the too-cool popular girl but never had the balls to do anything about it.

Haha, who was I kidding? I was still that loser. I couldn’t even cook a stupid holiday meal without burning it to cinders.

“It’s just the reek of failure,” I breezed back, wheezing and blinking away the tears burning my eyes. I wasn’t sure if the poison smoke was burning or the tears. “Just a different kind than the usual.”

“Cana… why are you crying?” Before I could answer, not even aware I was crying, she shoved her way into the apartment. I told you she was strong, did I? “Phew, CANA, what did you do? Hang on, you still have the stove on --"

My attempted tackle to save her from the stove going up in flames served to trip her instead, sending both of us crashing to the floor like football stars, complete with deep grunts of pain and a deceptively loud thump.

Goddess, I was full-body touching a goddess, and if Death took me now my life was not a waste…

I was only vaguely aware of the fact a small, slender body vaulted over us super hero style, clicking the stove off with a snap and snatching up the fire extinguisher from the pantry to hose the whole kitchen down.

With a sigh, mostly of relief but tinged with a bit of despair - because what else did I expect from myself? - I let my forehead fall against her chest. The first brush was so light I imagined I dreamed it up in my desperation, but slowly my awareness focused on the fingers carding through my hair.

“He’s on another business trip, isn’t he?”
I forgot she knew. Mira knew everything about me because we’d been friends and neighbors forever. But this was the first time I’d cried to her; I didn’t need her pity nor anyone else’s. Pity was for suckers and losers, and Cana Alberona was a lot of things but not that!

I mumbled in response, listening to Lisanna and Elfman shout at each other across the kitchen island. I guess Elfman didn’t want to accidentally step on us, since we were kind of barricading the entryway. As funny as it’d be to watch him do the leap Lisanna had, the thought was incredibly terrifying too. Mira’s sibling was nothing like her in looks or temperament. The only thing they had in common was their generous, soft heart.

“And you were cooking dinner. Why didn’t you order takeout like normal?”

I pretended she wasn’t making a jab at the pile of empty, stained boxes littering the corner where the trash can was overflowing. Mmm, probably should’ve taken that out earlier, but the apartment complex had strict rules and fines about tossing trash on the wrong day.

“Wanted home cooked,” the admission was muttered into her blouse, because I wasn’t passing up the opportunity to touch her chest. A light scent of lavender and sage tickled my nose, reminding me of the time she held me when I got that life-destroying call.

You know the one; the one everyone never thinks about but secretly dreads.

That call that shatters everything good in life and leaves nothing but numbness in its wake. The sympathetic voice on the other end of the phone, so quiet and impartial. Just another part of their job. Just another stranger sobbing in grief, miles away, out of sight.

Mira was always there for me, and I couldn’t even be honest about my feelings for her.

The petting stopped in response to my words, fingertips brushed up against my scalp, an arm tightening around my shoulders, drawing me in closer. The woman’s breath hitched under me, like I’d punched her in the gut, but softer, sharper somehow. More painful than any bar fight that had graced my eager ears at work.

Voice light and easy, she whispered loudly, “You are so silly. You know there’s always a spot at our table for you, don’t you?”

My eyes slid shut, shielding me from her chiding, playful look because she wouldn’t get it. How to explain the way that empty spot taunted me? A seat at the family table… but as a friend. An outsider.

I’d rather choke down charred flesh, hunched over watching re-runs of the same holiday movies that flashed across the screen every year as a nostalgia trip, than sit there stiff and awkward at a table that wasn’t mine.

We were neighbors. After ten years, we saw each other in the hall while fetching the mail and said hi while bumping into each other in the stairwell. I oogled her silently, offered a cheap beer now and then, while she kept it together with school and family, shooting a stunning smile my way in return. There wasn’t anything more to it.

I could see a charity gesture when it was offered.

More than a few holidays were spent at the table of goodwill and obligation when I was skipping between foster homes and group homes before I emancipated and found my pops. It stunk more than my apartment did at the moment. Being ungrateful for charity wasn’t very nice of me, but I’d had my fill of feel-goods for others at my expense. They could get their jollies and fuzzies
elsewhere.

At least I belonged here in my own apartment, even if I was alone.

When I didn’t answer her right away, she pressed, hovering so close her warm breath brushing against my cheek, “Right? You are always welcome, Cana. Always, no matter what.”

“Yeah, well…” I almost told her then, how much I admired and adored her. How just a glimpse of her lit up my entire day no matter how crappy it’d been before. That every single bit of her was perfect and gorgeous and brilliant. And instead I pushed off of her with a huff and folded my arms while looking away, “Thanks. But I’m fine, okay? I never asked for your pity.”

Col-looos-saaaaal mistake, mouthing off like a petty, whiny child.

If hitting the ground before had been painful, this was like being socked by a peeved gorilla.

“Don’t you dare take that tone with me. Look at me, you look me dead in the eye Cana Claire Alberona and say those words again. Tell me I don’t care about you. Tell me I haven’t watched out for you since the moment you moved in. Tell me I wasn’t there when you needed me most. Tell me I have wronged you, Cana. Say it. And don’t lie. If that’s how you really feel about it, I want to know.”

I couldn’t do it.

Each hurried, furious accusation made me shrink down with guilt, lower than low. Images flashed in my mind at her words. Our first meeting. My mother’s death. That drunk, sloppy, accidental kiss. The cookies that appeared at my door. Homemade chicken noodle soup when I was sick.

“Do you truly think that was pity? If so, then you deserve it.” Now tears were pooling in her eyes, Elfman’s panicked face bobbing behind her and Lisanna’s soothing voice trying to make things right.

Great, I ruined their evening, and I was about to be honored with the dubious title of the only one to make MiraJane the “Devil” sob like a baby. All because I was the stupidest, most immature coward on the face of this earth. And maybe Mars too. Definitely the moon as well.

“Hey, babe, don’t cry, please don’t cry… it’s not... I mean, it’s me, not you. Of course you care; you’re the sweetest and kindest kickass chick I know.” Crawling over, I swallowed, hard. There was only one solution I could see to this, and I wasn’t going to self-sabotage this time, dang it. Not today, crippling self-doubt; Mira needed me to be there for her for once. And I was going to be like Xena swooping into save her girlfriend from impending peril on Aragon… I think that was the horse’s name, right? Or was that an elf from Harry Potter? Never mind. “I’m stupid, okay? And reckless and a grade A+ mess, you know that. Don’t listen to a moron like me.”

“Cana,” my name was a hiccup-sob, so ugly and novel from Miss Perfection, and she scrubbed her face with a sleeve before continuing, “Shut up.”

My mouth snapped shut but I still held my arms out, unsure what exactly to do.

“Big sister already set you a plate at the table.” Lisanna’s voice was hushed, pleasant as she stacked the pan of goo and some dirty dishes in the sink, which was filling with suds and warm water. “She does it every holiday. For years and years, since your mom died and your dad’s been gone so much, she kept hoping you’d come over. I said I’d invite you but… you always seemed busy with work or friends...”

Mira hissed at her, flushing red and diving into my arms to hide her face in my cleavage. Atta girl,
best place to do that.

“Plus, she really, really likes to talk about you… especially your backside…”

“Lisanna…” there was pure fratricide in that voice but Mira didn’t move from my cleavage. Either her face was red as a lobster or she was enjoying it in there. Given the butt comment, I’d guess the latter.

“That so?” My butt was one of my best features, if I did say so myself, but I’d never pegged Mira as the type.

Lisanna hummed in agreement. “I think we should all have dinner. Together. Otherwise, we’ll have that empty space again, and it just feels so weird. Like a part of the family is missing.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, spontaneously dropping a kiss on Mira’s hair as she tried to crawl into my lap in embarrassment. Maybe… maybe I was ready to be a part of a family again. A real family. And not in a sisterly way either, judging by the butt comment. “It’d be a shame to let that plate go to waste, right?”
“You are wearing on my patience,” the woman before me snapped into her phone. Wincing a little at how sharp it sounded, I kept my smile bright and cheerful, while anxiously worrying the red and white snowflake-printed cup. Even knowing she wasn’t angry with me, I couldn’t help reacting a little. This was the time of year when the customers were the most ugly, and one bad phone call would leave the customer irate and annoyed. Only one person was around to take it out on - me. “Why can’t you just do this right? Stop argu-- no, stop, just stop. Fine! Be like that!” The sharp snap of acrylic on the phone’s screen cut the conversation short.

I squeezed the cup a little tighter. My sister had insisted I get a job with less… people, worried I couldn’t handle the social interaction without my anxiety overwhelming me. But I loved the smell of coffee and the regulars were dolls.

“I need…” I could tell by the huge intake of breath the woman sucked in, this was going to be a large and complicated order. Tensing, I poked the screen of the register, ready to punch everything in as quickly as possible. Having a great memory sucked when you tended to panic and wipe your mind. As expected, she rattled off the order at lightspeed. If it’d been written out, it’d look something like this:

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iwantacarmelmacchiatocoldmindyounothotwithdoubleshotsofcarmelandtripleexpressionmakesureithassoy
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by the fourth item, my head was spinning and fingers were tapping three times for the order and twice more sheerly out of nerves. But I held it together without so much as a lip tremble until…

“Are you stupid? I said extra chocolate drizzle but no whip!” I’d been watching her getting closer and closer to blowing throughout the entire order, critically waiting for my screw up, yet when it came I nearly ducked back at the hateful vile spewing aimed in my direction. “Really, this is why you work minimum wage with no future. Because you can’t do the simplest thing right. Where is your manager? I demand to speak to them, right this instant!”

Out of the corner of my teary eye, I could see my co-worker taking a step forward to confront the woman or shield me or both. Sorano had given all of my co-workers a very stern lecture behind my back, which she thought I didn’t know about, and if anything, having Rogue step in would only make things worse. It’d prove I couldn’t handle things on my own…

“Excuse you,” a clipped, arrogant voice interjected, forcing all eyes to seek the source. The woman’s finely manicured brow was arched perfectly, the bright shadow beneath it perfectly complimentary to her eyes rather than overwhelmingly gaudy, and her dark burgundy lips were pursed in an unflattering, chilly way. Standing tall, aggressively staring down the complaining customer, she put a hand on her hip. I realized it wasn’t just her face that was perfectly manicured but her entire appearance from head to toe… except for the excessively hideous Christmas sweater hugging tightly across her generous chest with an LED light on each side for reindeer noses. “Do you mind? You are holding up the line with your excessively moronic order, and then you have the sheer nerve to blame the employee for your unreasonable demands. Next time use your undersized brain, write the order down, legibly, and then sit your ass down without hovering or nagging. If you are in such a hurry, next time use your overpriced piece of crap from China to order ahead on the app, like a civilized person who is not stupid as a rock. Save me from your kind and their wah-
wah I want to see the manager ways holding up the line and forcing the world to turn around your petty complaints! Uggh, you even have that hideous haircut to go with the attitude.”

“What’s it to you, Reindeer Ti--”

Rogue smoothly stepped between them then, explaining he was the assistant manager and each would receive free points for their inconvenience. I took the opportunity to dash away the tears and do a few repetitions of my exercises during the distraction, determined not to rush to the back or the dressing rooms this time. It was only the beginning holiday hell, and if I couldn’t tough out one mean person, I might as well just quit right now.

Being nudged out of the way by Rogue, I numbly followed the neat handwriting on the cup as he took the irate customer’s order smooth and flawlessly, nearly scalding myself as I heated the milk in the metal cup. One step at a time, I coached myself trembling, gathering together the order and handing it over without looking the woman in the eye.

“Yukino, are you alright?” Rogue’s hand was warm and heavy on my shoulder but not particularly comforting. Head bobbling too furiously, my own voice spoke for me, hollow sounding, far away, like we were underwater.

“Oh for heaven sakes, this just keeps getting more dramatic. You, shut up and make my drink, will you? I am running low on patience and my blood sugar is sinking to the point where I might take a bite out of you if you don’t hurry it up, Mr. Assistant Manager. As for you, come with me. In fact, make the woman a hot chocolate as well; there is nothing chocolate can’t help.”

A firm, slightly pinching grip on my elbow dragged my body out from behind the counter, hitting the swinging door with my thighs, vaguely aware of the bruise that was going to cause later. I was always tripping over that stupid door, and since I was short it tended to hit me in soft spots. Stumbling on my heels, the chair I collapsed into groaned and screeched across the tiled floor in protest.

My kidnapper slid more daintily into hers, mindful of the pencil skirt enough to cross her legs with one fluid motion.

“Breathe,” she commanded sternly. Thoughtlessly, I obeyed. “Slowly. Count between your breaths. Fill your lungs fully and empty them fully. Do nothing else until this is under control.”

Closing my eyes, I ignored the pounding sensation of my pulse, harsh and ugly, as well as the prickling sensation of lingering fear washing through my system. In. Out. In. Out. The rhythm sounded so soothing to my ears, like the ocean tide almost, and the pounding noise in my ears was receding.

Unsure but calmer, I cracked open my eyes to study the woman across from me from beneath my lashes shyly. Rogue had brought her the coffee, and she was taking the biggest chug out of a grande I’d ever seen before.

“Better?”

Startled, my eyes flew open and I nodded jerkily. Great, now I looked completely incompetent and like a social idiot. While she was over there in full dominant glory, ready to take on anything without setting down her coffee.

“Good. Drink your hot chocolate. Your body needs to replenish those calories you just burned on that attack. Sip it slowly and don’t choke. Your throat and tongue may still be tight.”
Bringing the cup up to my lips, I did as she said. Rogue made the best hot chocolate, and I could tell he slipped some extra syrup and mint in there.

“Um, uh, thanks… for standing up for me. To that lady…” I stuttered out, remembering my manners after a few slow sips. Confidence returning when she didn’t correct me, I added, “I mean, you didn’t have to…”

“People like that… are bullies. I know because I used to be like that too. It was miserable for me and everyone around me. My friend…” a wry smile curled her lips at the admission and name, “Erza finally set me straight, and she wasn’t gentle about it either. But sometimes it takes some bullying to realize how it feels to be on the receiving end.”

“I… see.” It made sense.

“I also have a terrible temper, especially when my blood sugar drops.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. I just have one question…”

A dramatic sigh huffed from her lips as her eyes rolled, “About the sweater.”

The tone of complete and utter defeat mixed with a disgust and loathing so deep there wasn’t even a definition in the dictionary to describe it made me giggle a bit. As intimidating as she was, the cute cartoon reindeer frolicking across her front were undermining the image if not the attitude.

“I did not win a bet. Consequently, I now have to wear an ugly sweater every day until Christmas. That is why I am here. To purchase… satan’s fabric… I am going to murder Sting, I swear. He will pay for this.”

“The sweaters?” I asked innocently giggle more at the scowl and growling noise. I only knew of one Sting, Rogue’s boyfriend, and if we were talking about the same guy, there was no way he was paying for anything. That guy was the worst mooch, and I couldn’t even remember how many times I’d fallen victim to him when we went out for dinner.

“Well, I think you look gorgeous, despite the sweater.” It slipped out before I could stop it. Panicked, I shoved my nose in the cup to take a big gulp of the lukewarm chocolate flavored milk. Taking a peek, I gave an internal sigh of relief that she looked pleased rather than creeped out by the compliment. Of course, I was a stranger and she didn’t… know. So she probably thought it was just a nice comment. I hoped she did. Oh dear, my mouth, why. Covering it up hastily, I added the first thing that came to mind, “Can I see the rest?”

Lips curling in a smirk, she leaned across the table until we were nose to nose, “You’ll just have to wait and see when I come get my daily coffee, now won’t you? I promise, they get progressively more hideous the closer it gets.”

“I’m looking forward to you… it… it! I’m looking forward to it! I… I should go back to work now.”

Instead of answering me, she picked up her purse and bag of satan’s fabric artfully and strolled out of the dining area. Mindlessly, I plucked up the discarded cup only to notice there was a bit of liquid left. Curious, I pressed my lips lightly over her lipstick marks. Everyone who worked at a cafe could tell a lot from the kind of coffee someone ordered, so I wasn’t surprised by the burning sensation. A chile mocha suited her fiery temperament.

Rogue shouted through my thoughts, “If you are finished with your new girlfriend, it’s time for my break, Yukino!”
“Yes, sorry!” Scrambling up, I gathered up both cup, and just before tossing them away my eye caught on her name. Minerva. I’d definitely be visiting Sting tonight for some research in preparation for tomorrow’s visit.
This one came out a bit similar to one of the others but I didn't realize that until proofreading later. It's what happens when all your characters are orphans -_-.

**A Home for the Holidays**

It was a job, she reminded herself firmly as she frowned and scooped up the blizzard of discarded bras and thongs littering the dressing room floor. A well-paying job, for retail, and even better, it was a job she hadn’t gotten fired from. Yet.

And she intended to keep it that way, even if it meant she had to clean up after rude slobs who didn’t know the meaning of hangers. Scooping it all up, she carted the armful back to the countertop in the dressing room next to her co-worker. The woman was filing her nails with a completely unimpressed look on her porcelain doll face, pouty lips jutting out just enough to look sexy and not childish, dark eyes partially hidden beneath platinum blonde lashes.

The self-styled guardian of the changing room didn’t even bat an eye nor slow her file as the clothing spilled down in front of her. Dressed in the store’s uniform, she’s modified it enough to show off the goods -- that was to say, the front was cut low enough for the frill of cerulean blue to peek out temptingly, and the skirt flashed the matching set when she flipped her crossed legs.

No wonder that particular set of lingerie was the store’s best sell - and Sorano could afford to be an indulgent, useless and frankly lazy, employee who yelled at women to close the changing doors fully and occasionally doled out advice for those brave enough to approach her about it. She did know her stuff, that much was true.

“Working hard for your paycheck, chicky?”

Gritting her teeth, she carefully threaded the articles back on their respective hangers and purposefully ignored her. Sorano only used the manager’s name and her sister’s; everyone else was ‘chicky’ or ‘dude.’ Sorano had admitted to wanting to use another word that started with d and sounded like chicky, but apparently that had opened up a sexual harassment complaint, so she addressed all the male co-workers now as dude.

Tongue bitten, merchandise secured, Juvia marched out without an answer for the woman, cheeks puffed but nervous. She really couldn’t afford to screw this up. Not after her old job went down so badly, and she barely avoided spending a year in jail for petty robbery and attempted assault.

After the officer had put his neck out for her, she was fully intent on repaying him the best she could for making things more clear to her now. It was hard, but she was going to show Officer Fullbuster his instincts were dead-on the money and that Juvia Lockser had become a better person.
It was so hard though!

She just had no idea it’d be this hard to scrape by on so little money - it was never a problem when she worked for Jose. If she needed money, it was there. Along with food and shelter. Jose took care of those he favored, although Juvia had tried not to think of where the money came from that took care of her needs, and really at that point in her life, she didn’t care too much either.

*Juvia can do this!*

Threading deftly past browsing holiday shopper, she flicked the merchandise back on the hangers, having memorized the maze of skimpy, lace, silky, rainbow spectrum fabric within days of employment. The only section she hated was the holiday themed apparel.

Stupid, useless, gaudy and trashed - it was the section where the bad employees were sent to clean up at closing. The department store dungeon. Full of bright colors, a breathable cloud of glitter and hocky icons unfit for the rest of the year, only the bravest and most foolhardy spent any time there.

The lone, innocent item in her hand beckoned her, challenged her, dared her.

*Go*, it said with a coo, *take me where I belong*.

“Juvia doesn’t want to,” she sulked back, longing for the sanctuary of the dressing room, even if she’d have to share it with the resident bad-tempered underwear angel.

*Return me; only you can do it.*

“Juvia is losing it. Bras don’t talk.”

Those back-to-back double shifts were starting to get to her, but she couldn’t turn down the chance for earning overtime and holiday pay. It was the only time of the year where the store would be desperate enough to offer extra money and hours, and Juvia’s sacrifice of sleep and a social life were a heavy and necessary price to pay for shelter and food. Oh, and presents too. Thankfully she only had a few people on her list, and it was totally doable to penny pinch enough to get Gajeel that man-toy he’d been eyeing.

*Hooooooooooome~*

This was insistently sung in a painfully off-key pitch that pierced Juvia’s brain, making her squint with tears in her eyes.

*For the holidays~*

Snapping back to attention, she realized it was not the jiggle-bra in her hands singing but the intercom system playing that atrocious re-make of the 1950’s song. It was one of seven that had been on loop for the past week, and Juvia was certain she heard the haunting soundtrack in her dreams.

That’d explain the nightmares about snowmen and bobsleds come to think of it…

While she’d been pondering her mid-holiday season crisis, her feet had dutifully taken her in the right direction to do her job. Now she was lost in the middle of the maze, surrounded by bows and bells and fake fur trim.

Shoving past the best-selling ugly sweaters section, she froze in shock at the sight before her. Sure she was hallucinating, she rubbed her eyes, hard, then pinched herself for good measures.
“Ouch!”

The goddess of bad holiday fashion whirled with a challenging glint in her eyes. The two locked gazes, Juvia wondering who in the world would waltz into a department store and try on lingerie on the very public sales floor. Granted, she was cuddled up in a very rosy, warm-looking knit turtleneck and tight, tight jeans with chic low-heeled boots, but that didn’t change the fact that three different bras were clasped around her nor that she was whirling panties on a finger, singing Jingle Bell Rock to a teddy bear.

“Juvia… is going to go now…”

“Wait! Uh…” The woman stalled, eyebrows knit and panties still swinging from her index finger. Staring at the teddy bear, she finished in a mumble, “Do you work here?”

The dreaded four words every retail employee cringed at hearing. The doomed feeling of being trapped with this questionably sane woman crashed down as Juvia heard her voice answering with an affirmative noise. It wasn’t quite a yes but close enough to mimic one.

Putting the bear down, she raised her eyes, still not embarrassed enough to justify this awkward encounter, but looking contrite at least.

“Wonderful! I was looking for an employee to aid me when… I was distracted. I apologize that you had to witness… that.” Awkwardness reigned supreme for a long moment forcing the woman to fake cough and continue, “In any case, I have a list to complete, and this store is much too hard to navigate.”

Unwillingly, she glanced at the list thrust under her nose.

“This is… quite long,” Juvia quailed, realizing just how long she was going to be stuck helping this woman. The redhead gave a proud smile, “I finally have enough money to give everyone what they want now. I want this to be the best one yet.”

A flash of jealousy hit Juvia but she swallowed it down. No need to be a green-eyed monster with some random stranger… who just happened to have a killer body, big family and money.

Resigned, the woman started at the top.

But a half hour later, Juvia’d been forced to reassess the customer. Erza was actually quite nice, if slightly bossy and a little strict. Like Juvia, she’d lost her parents young, but unlike Juvia she’d had much better luck, being adopted young into a huge family cobbled together from orphans. It sounds like a rowdy, colorful bunch of harmless miscreants.

“Last item…” Now Juvia was a little blue partly because it seemed like Erza had everything she’d dreamed of (sans a prince - Juvia was very much a romantic at heart and a prince of some sort was a must for any fantasy) but also because she was enjoying the company of the rambunctious and confident woman. Dancing around singing Jingle Bell Rock to a teddy bear was merely the tip of the iceberg when it came to her funny quirks, and Juvia was charmed despite her initial misgivings. “Juvia guesses Erza is tired by now…”

“Hmm? Let me see… oh, Jellal. He is difficult to get a gift for; I never know what he wants. Sho loves games, Milli loves cats, Wally is into gadgets, Simon likes socks… but Jellal… he is special… Jellal deserves the best gift I can give him.”

Juvia’s mind digested this information, a strong, dark and handsome mystery man popping into her imagination, with a beaming smile that sparkled and luxurious hair. Surely, anyone Erza was
interested in was the perfect specimen of a man. He’d be smooth and romantic and so perfect every gift offered felt lackluster.

“Jellal is Erza’s…?”

Blinking like Juvia was dense, Erza reiterated patiently, “Jellal is my best friend, and he has been since our childhood. He is the most special person in my life right now.”

“Oh. Jellal is not…” Juvia gestured helplessly before biting the bullet and saying it out loud, “A boyfriend?”

Erza’s cinnamon colored eyes went wide and while being caught with three bras strapped around her in public didn’t embarrass her in the slightest she now blushed to match her gorgeous red hair. Twirling her hair a bit and fidgeting, she didn’t answer right way.

“No, he is not. Because…” Erza paused to purse her lips before taking a deep breath, the kind one took right before a big admission of honesty or a secret, and finished cryptically, “I think you’re beautiful, Juvia, and kind and patient. But a little clueless… or maybe I am the clueless one? I am often told to do a better job of reading the atmosphere before barging in. Anyway, I thought of a perfect present for Jellal! He does so love star gazing, so where are the telescopes?”

Confused by the tangent, Juvia dutifully lead the way to where she suspected the telescopes might be. No one had ever asked for that before, so she wasn’t quite sure. Erza mulled and muttered over the selection before announcing she’d try a specialty shop, since she wanted a good one, not some cheap junk from China.

Juvia didn’t point out everything in her cart so far was probably from China already.

“One more present to go!” the boisterous redhead announced, stretching leisurely and rolling her shoulders, looking no more tired than she had before. Juvia hid a yawn; her break was fifteen minutes ago and she’d been hoping to catch a few winks in the breakroom. Mumbling, she questioned while pointing to the list, which was now all neatly scratched out, “One more?”

“For you of course, Juvia.”

“Wh-what! Juvia… Juvia cannot… store policy…” she sputtered in a panic, wide awake and heart galloping so hard her chest hurt. “Erza…ma’am… Juvia…”

“Oh I know, you think this is a tip; it is not. It is a gift, for you. Not a tip, not a thank you curtesy. It is a gift,” the woman steamrolled, unwilling to budge. “One you can receive after dinner with my family, just like everyone else.”

A gift? With a big, rowdy, fun family? With the amazing woman who just called her beautiful. For a romantic, Juvia felt like she should return her membership card for being so slow on the uptake. Rosy cheeks, hands over her chest and lips quivering, she thought about all the tiny touches and looks she’d written off as Erza just being that sort of intense person. The way Erza had reiterated, hard, that Jellal was just a friend.

“Is Erza… asking Juvia… out?”

This seemed too good to be true; no one good asked Juvia out. Ever. Her last boyfriend had admitted to pity-dating to score, and while she had a hardcore crush on Officer Fullbuster, Juvia was wary of having a restraining order slapped on her after he almost caught her spying on him. For the fifth time. Plus, his brother was very, very persistent in catching her attention, which would normally be flattering, but he was such a creep about it, Juvia’s skin crawled whenever she saw
him.

The look Erza sent her was so full of trepidation and unsureness, Juvia almost felt compelled to scoop her up and hug her tight. Seeing someone so confident about life being worried about Juvia’s reaction was… weird. And flattering… and… and… nice. But super weird. Erza, after knowing Juvia for a mere half an hour, cared more than most of the people in Juvia’s life ever had.

Juvia did what anyone would do in such a situation.

Soaking the front of Erza’s lovely sweater, which was just as soft as she’d imagine in addition to very padded below, her fingers dug in and she was vaguely aware of hands rubbing and supporting her awkwardly. The sniffles and gulps of air were the most disgusting things Juvia’d ever heard - she’d always found her crying hideous - but Erza’s surprisingly soft laugh greeted her sobbing.

“I suppose I am, although perhaps that is too forward. Dinner and a present first, and we shall see from there. Then… is that a yes?”

Juvia nodded roughly, eyes squeezed tight and nose rubbing. Things had never looked so bright before, and she was almost afraid to look, in case the light was for someone else. Gathering her courage, she cracked a sapphire blue eye, blinking through the blur of tears.

A reassuring, joyful smile met her gaze.

It was still there - just for her.

“Y-yes… Juvia says yes.”
Kagukino - Coincidences

Coincidences

Flowing, cordial script filled the small strip of off-white paper with a name.

It was a name I both secretly hoped and dreaded to get, although I swiftly crumpled the evidence in my palm and shoved it into my jacket pocket. As tiny as the pocket was -- it was merely for decoration after all -- the paper fit perfectly. And as innocent as the little bit of paper was, I knew I wouldn’t be forgetting about it any time soon. Weightless as a feather yet the heaviest secret I’d carried in a long while.

A familiar giggle caught my ear as I stepped back and my eyes cut across the podium to where my best friend and guildmate was lounging with that man from Sabertooth. Narrowing my eyes at him, not quite over our bickering at the banquet, my giddy mood disappeared as Millianna leaned over him to whisper something, looking mischievous to a fault. How both could stand to be so skimpily-clad was beyond me, but this was not the reputation I wanted the guild to have.

Striding forward, I was stopped by a familiar and friendly hand to the shoulder. Even though the room was overcrowded with a plethora of mage guild members celebrating some early holiday cheer, any excuse for a party after all, and it could have been any of my acquaintances, I knew immediately who it was. Composing my face, I turned to face the redhead with a smile only to find a small present shoved under my nose.

“Erza, it is supposed to be a secret,” I chided, carefully taking the gift, marvelling at the delicate wrapping job on such a tiny box. She weaved a bit, blinking, before smirking and leaning heavily against me to breathe in my ear, just a bit more than a little intoxicated, “I am just a delivery girl. So… open it already!”

Instead of asking useless questions about how my Santa knew what gift to prepare or looking around to find the guilty looking party, I rolled my eyes a bit at Erza’s soppy grin.

Huffing at her expression, I reminded her, “It’s not romantic, you know.”

“I know.”

“But you know who it is.” It was obvious she was in on it. Wracking my brain for who in the world could make her so obnoxious about my santa, I came up blank. While I’d gotten along well with members of several other guilds, as well as my own, there really were only a few I’d say I had a good connection with. I wasn’t an overly social sort of person, and being reserved tended to make people shy away.

I’d be simply satisfied with a few small tokens and a card of well wishes from anyone.

“Open it! You are so lucky getting a present immediately! I wonder what my Secret Santa will get me?” My first guess to her question was cake, along with my second and third one. We had a monetary limit after all, so no one was going to buy anything extravagant or extraordinary. Food was the most sensible gift, and sweets fell in line with holiday expectations.
Taking a step away from her hovering, I daintily tugged on the tiny golden bow with a furrowed brow of concentration and neatly unfolded each bit of the wrapping paper while Erza practically danced in frustration at the task. I sniffed a little, pegging her for a paper shredder and noted to give my gift to her in a bag instead.

Three chocolate truffles lay in the box, bundled up together like dark brown eggs in a nest, and a note lay on top. Opening it, I stared at the cursive, sure I’d seen it before somewhere. But it was hard to concentrate while being lightly shaken by an overexcited swordswomen.

‘Seasons greetings ~ I don’t know who you are at the time of writing this but I hope you like chocolate!’

How… thoughtful. To have this prepared in advance. Idly popping one in my mouth -- raspberry filled and high quality enough to deliciously melt in my mouth -- I surveyed the room, instantly crossing out half the suspect lists by this one gesture alone. Erza included, I mentally added, not that I thought she’d be trying to pull one over on me but it was very suspect she of all people delivered a gift.

Offering one to Erza, I resolved to get to the bottom of this before the reveal at the end. It couldn’t possibly be that hard, there were only about fifty people in the pool and half of them had difficulty putting on clothing properly let alone wrapping a gift so tidily.

It’d be a cinch to figure out...

“Why is this so difficult,” I groaned, staring at my next gift and feeling a bit of guilt stir at the thought that I hadn’t put nearly as much thought into what I was giving as what I was receiving.

Shoving both the present and my frustration aside, I straightened as Millianna waltzed in with a huge grin. Draping herself across me, a habit she’d gotten into more recently and while it wasn’t one I disliked I couldn't say I was entirely comfortable with it either, she strung her arm around my neck loosely.She was a lot heavier than she looked.

"Kagura!" she announced my name happily and I fought the smile that was summoned to my lips at her efforts. No matter what, I could always count on her to be there to cheer me up. Even when I wasn't really sad just frustrated. Our relationship had gone through a lot since meeting Jellal, twice, and I couldn't imagine having anyone else as my best friend, despite how different we truly were. I knew Millianna always wanted what was best for me, and I trusted her with my deepest secrets. "Let's go shopping!"

I scowled. Best friend or not, her common sense was lacking on occasion.

"I know, I know, it's the middle of the weekend and right before the holidays and there'll be crowds, but it'll still be fun! Besides, I have to get everyone gifts!" She rolled her maroon eyes at my expression and crooked a clawed finger into the air as if she were about to impart flawless wisdom, "Better late than never, right?"

"Millianna..." I placed the letter down gently at the summons because it was futile to argue with her when she was pumped up and ready to go. I did have a few last minute gifts to acquire myself, although all the big and important ones were neatly wrapped and ready to go, and they had been for ages. I liked to be prepared, and the only way to ensure the gift is perfect is to do it in advance, not five days before.

"Ooh, what's that?" Curious as the animals she loved, she reached over and deftly plucked the letter up in sharp claws, narrating it to the air playfully, "To my Mermaid Warrior, I hope this finds
you in good health and cheer, although I know the holidays are a chaotic time. My guild adores the holidays, so it has been a test of patience and good-will to keep up with the demands of baking and decorating and even carolling! I am a good baker, so I love to make cookies for the season. I had a lot left over, so I've enclosed a cookie tin of all my favorites. Hopefully one strikes your fancy, and if you remember it, after the reveal I'd be happy to bake you more! I am sorry if you are not a fan of sweets, although you did list them on your sheet. Your Secret Santa. Awww, Kagura-chan, that's soooo... sweet. My secret santa sent me a catnip toy and a feather wand."

"I..." Well I had marked that I liked sweets on the sheet but only because it was a pretty standard answer. But the looming cookie tin, which was monstrous, was daunting. I'd peeked in only to see at least half a dozen types of cookies neatly arranged on wax paper. "I suppose I might be difficult to shop for."

"No, no, no! Homemade gifts are really great!" my friend yelped, "Way better than storebought. It means your Santa put a lot of their time and effort into making you something special. You got so lucky this time. They must really... like you! A lot!"

I sighed a bit, glumly, wishing I had a talent such as baking or crafting. Perhaps it wasn't too late to learn to knit? Scarves and gloves were never a bad thing in winter weather after all. I wanted my gift to be special too. I suppose buying a gift was the bare minimum requirement, but I had the feeling there wasn't anything as impressive as a gift from one's own hands.

"Millianna, what did you give your giftee?"

"Ohhhhhhhhhh, wellllll, you seeeeeee, I gave them a bunch of free samples and little kits and things! Y'know, a bunch of random stuff. I'm sure at least some of it is useful, teehee!" Her giggle wasn't guilty in the slightest and she waved a hand, "And I got them some wine because nothing says happy holidays like booze to get you through it, am I right? Yeah! And it wasn't even in a box; I splurged on the good stuff in the bottle!"

Aghast, I hid my reaction. So cheap! I guess there was a bar to clear, and you'd simply have to be dead to clear it. I'd already sent a nice card, although it'd taken a good hour to write the little note on the inside, and I almost didn't send it because it seemed too fake and hollow. By the fifth card I was running out of endurance and my hand was cramping up from all the writing, so the note was short and too the point, rather than the long letters I got.

"MILLIANNA!"

"What? He's a guy; he won't care anyway. You know how that is. I stuck a candy cane in there too, one of those mini ones that're fruit flavored. You're putting too much thought into this, Kagura-chan! It's just a silly little exchange in the holiday spirit not an exchange of rings... unlessssssssssss..."

Resolute, I stiffened my posture and face, refusing to rise to the bait. It was bad enough to be teased by Erza but if Millianna got even the slightest whiff of romance, she'd be all over it relentlessly.

"I just wish to do a good job."

Inspecting my face carefully, she grumped at not getting a reaction, "Yeah, that sounds like you. Look, just get them something nice and call it a day, okay? Ohh, how about you make them a card? That's not too hard and it'll be homemade, right? You can even slip in some hints if you liiiiiiiike them."

I almost shot the idea down immediately, purely out of self preservation, but after considering it for a moment, I realized that might actually be a good idea. There were plenty of craft stalls that...
sold pre-made cut outs and supplies; all I’d have to do is put them together and sign it. How hard could that be?

We were going out shopping anyway...

I knew it was terrible but did Risley have to belly laugh so hard at my efforts? Glitter glue stuck my hair together in clumps, a cute penguin sticker was plastered to my nose and I had a million tiny paper cuts from arranging and rearranging everything. I’d been two seconds away from either tossing my efforts in the trash or crying or both. As much as I hated to be laughed at, Risley’s timely intervention saved the card’s life.

“Ah, Kagura, you take everything so seriously! I’ll give you a hand, since I know a thing or two about scrapbooking! Don’t worry!” A sigh of relief wheezed out with a puff of glitter as she cleared a space and plopped down beside me. Millianna must have sent help after watching me struggle and snarl for a good half hour. My guildmates were the best. “First off, you need to set the base first… Kagura, what are these hearts for?”

Blushing, I muttered something about love and good cheer for all, which earned a skeptical look but the woman didn’t pry. In an entire guild full of women, there had to be some boundaries and common courtesy after all.

Many, many hearts were added, and not all by my hand. I didn’t even have the energy to protest the bright red, shiny pair of lips Risley added to the plain white envelope flap when my head was bowed, laboriously writing the note in cursive the way she showed me. My reading and writing were passable for my duties in the guild but I’d never have flawless handwriting due to my childhood and lack of schooling. My sword and my magic were my prides, and a good fight was my joy, but moments like these left me with a pang of regret for a mother I barely remembered and a school house I only played outside of, never attended. My last glimpse of the building had been the charred timbers collapsing into the brick structure, everything black and red, ruined forever.

Pausing to glance at the card, I closed it with a sigh of satisfaction. It was a bit crude, amateurish, but it was my creation. Snug in the envelope, I gently closed and sealed it with the sticker. So gaudy! Yet I couldn’t bring myself to peel it off despite the warmth rising in my cheeks at how much it looked like an immature love letter to a crush.

Another thing I hadn’t gotten the chance to do growing up.

Setting the letter aside, wondering how much Risley knew, I pondered who my Santa was, since I’d sworn to figure it out. Baking and neatly wrapped presents said they were good with their hands, a maker, a creator. A few people sprung to mind. Both those Ice Mages were creators, since Maker Magic was, by nature, a craft. The Fairy Tail man didn’t seem the type to be so precise and certainly not to bake. Lyon Vastia was precise, I’d admit, having fought with and against him, but far too much of an extravagant show off. There was the man in Sabertooth who also possessed Maker Magic as well, and he did seem the type to have hobbies, as well as organized and precise.

Hmmm, Sabertooth. I hadn’t considered that guild much, since Mermaid Heel was much closer to Blue Pegasus and Lamia Scale more so than the other guilds in the alliance. Obviously, their guildmaster was out -- that man, aside from flirting atrociously with Milli, couldn’t even sign paperwork let alone pen a letter. Rogue did not seem the type to bake and Orga probably did not know how to hold a pen correctly.

Minerva?

Our relationship had certainly improved immensely, yet I couldn’t imagine her writing such sweet
and cheerful letters. Especially not to her former enemy. Not matter how hard she was the trying to change herself, that simply seemed like too much.

Yukino’s name came to mind, freezing me to the spot as it summoned up a beautiful smile and gentle gaze. As often as I thought of her, it was usually the steel determination in her eyes and her battle stance, not the softer side.

Before Jellal and Erza I didn’t believe in coincidences. But now… now I wasn’t so sure. Tentatively, I added her to the suspect list before rising to do my ablutions before bed. Perhaps my next gift would give me the final clue...

“What is it, Kagura?” Arana was the only one around as we hurried to get ready to go. One of my biggest peeves of this guild was the sheer inability to be on time for anything. The woman was reading a book, patiently waiting to go, but set it down to peer at the gift in my hand. A fine eyebrow arched at the sight and she hummed, “Quite the gift. A suitor?”

“My Secret Santa,” I responded with dignity and a little bit of a fidget to check my ears. The metal was smooth and foreign beneath my fingers as I traced the gold part that made up the hair and face. The amethysts and white sapphires that formed the scales were probably what Arana was inspecting but I couldn’t help trying to tip some hair forward to cover them. The smile that crossed her face was a bit wistful, “Honey, either your Santa is an extremely generous person or they like you very much.”

“M-me?”

A nod as she leaned forward to brush my hair back and inspect the nearest one closely. Stupefied by the implication that this jewelry was more than a cheap bauble, although I’d guessed it myself by the sheer air of quality, I allowed her to touch it. Carefully, she gathered up the hair that had escaped and neatly secured it back with a few bobby pins I’d haphazardly stuck in there trying to keep the silken strands back.

“Show them off, Kagura. And promise me one thing…” Taken aback by the unusually amiable expression and earnest tone from the other serious person in the guild, I nodded, “Be gentle with them; it’s Christmas.”

“I cannot promise that.”

She sighed then, perhaps thinking of a past pain or lover, making me wince before patting my cheek with a quick, painful whack, “Of course you cannot. Kagura, you are as straight as your sword, but try not to be so sharp.”

Obviously, I did not wish to hurt anyone, especially someone as generous as my Santa, but there was only one person I had my heart set on this year. I couldn’t promise my heart to another, no matter what the cost to me.

Gathering my last gift, which looked rather sad in comparison, I gave Arana a long look before speaking swiftly and softly, “There is someone else.”

“Erza?”

I wish… I wish for once my intentions were not so transparent. Arana didn’t intend to, but she chose a very sore subject.

“No, no, she has made it very clear we are merely friends, and I will respect that. It is…”
“KAGURA-CHAN!”

Before I could answer, our conversation was invaded by the rest of the guild and we were swept out the door by pushy hands and urgent shouts of how tardy we’d be to the party.

As usual, the party was a whirlwind of sound and color, all the guilds taking a break to enjoy some socialization and relaxation. Despite the handful of banquets I’d attended and some important meetings for business, there were that many opportunities to interact with other wizards, so these events were an attempt to bolster camaraderie. It worked… a little too well, I thought, as I passed a dancing can-can line of half-naked men from various guilds.

Settling against the wall, not touching liquid courage tonight, my keen gaze flickered over all the antics and shenanigans. Apparently, someone had spiked the eggnog a lot stronger than it should’ve been and there was an uproar both from the more responsible members worried for the young ones and from the accidentally inebriated ones alike. Some of the braver members were dancing, even after we saw what happened last time, and the results were mostly passable with a sprinkling of chaos. And, of course, there were those in their own private world, tucked away in nooks and crannies together, being either cutely or obscenely overly affectionate. That, I couldn’t look at, in case I saw a flash of red in one of those private worlds. Or Milli with that obnoxious blond guy.

Millianna joined me for awhile, chattering about the people and the rumors, before bounding back into the fray when she realized I was content to watch not lonely or mopey. Arana and Risley both checked in as well, although I could see Arana was more than likely going to call it a night early, considering how exhausted she looked from all the social interaction. Lyon Vastia stumbled by as well as a few others I knew cordially to exchange greetings and make small talk.

I wasn’t surprised when Erza settled in beside me. Unlike last time, she was as sober as I, murmuring something about prior bad experiences landing her outside naked in the snow on Christmas.

“Has your Secret Santa revealed themselves yet?”

It was left to the discretion of the participants when and how to reveal themselves, and at this point in the party, most people knew and had exchanged their last gift with laughs and conversations and hugs.

“Not yet. But I have not revealed myself yet either.” Truthfully, I was considering having someone else deliver the package with my name on it. “You?”

“Oh, yes, I had Sherry, and her tastes are quite… peculiar. But fun! And it was easy to buy little gifts for the baby!” We both stopped to consider that. Sherry was only a few years older, yet she had a husband, house and baby. While the two of us were single and in dorms. Erza marched right over that insecurity with her usual attitude and pressed on, “And my secret santa was very nice! You would not believe it, but Rocker has excellent tastes in cake and pastries. As well as accessories.” Having seen the puppy ear hat and paw mitts she’d arrived in, I wasn’t sure if I agreed. “Oh! Kagura, I did not know your ears were pierced?”

Fingers flying up, I fiddled with the mermaid earrings. I’d grown used to the weight and nearly forgot them until someone complimented them. Of course, Erza would noticed my ears weren’t pierced before and question it.

“It is a simple modification… I just… it never felt right… before… but I always wanted to.” I had always wanted to but the fact of the matter was that earrings were a liability in battle and piercings
were one extra thing to worry about when my sole focus should have been on training and revenge. Now… well, I still hesitated because it seemed so… feminine. What would people say? But no one knew that… except Milli… it was a secret, as all my insecurities were. I had to be strong, bold, decisive -- there was no room in my image for trinkets and play-pretend. Even when I’d chosen to start wearing traditional kimonos over my strict uniform, I hear the whispers and rumors. “It would be rude not to use the gift I was given, so I pierced them to wear these.”

A soft smile crept across her face, the one that made her eyes glisten at the slight squint where her cheeks bunched and brow relax. Knot in my chest loosening at the sight, I let my guard down.

“I see. Your Secret Santa means that much to you?” Hum, fiddle, pounce. Suffocating in the hug and trying to claw my way free, she gushed, “My little sister makes me so proud! You are so beautiful and strong and amazing, Kagura. I could not have asked for a better one.”

“Erza, stop picking on her and c’mon!” the Ice Make wizard shouted across the hall while his companions bickered behind him. “You’re the one who challenged us, and now you’re ditching?”

“Oh! I forgot.” After one more spine-crushing hug, her grip relaxed. Sucking in a breath, taking in both her scent and much need oxygen, I enjoyed the sensation. Pecking me on the forehead, she bolted, bellowing at how they were going to regret interrupting her and how she’d win the challenge hands down. Whirling, she shouted back, “Gorgeous and fantastic and brave!”

I wished to sink into the earth as all eyes pinned me with a hard stare.

Slinking off, I took out the piece of paper with the fancy script. It was crumpled from being carried around in my pocket.

**Yukino Aguria**

Swallowing, I decided the night wasn’t getting any younger, although I knew the party had several more hours in it. Threading my way through the crowded floor, I craned around trying to spot her. Surprisingly, she wasn’t with her guildmate, instead with some Fairy Tail women.

Her gaze flicked up and caught mine, expression morphing from happiness to an emotion I wasn’t sure I could decode. It wasn’t… not happy… she wasn’t *unhappy* to see me. But it certainly wasn’t the pure, innocent enjoyment from before either. There was something more there.

The Fairy Tail ladies looked between us before the older one giggled and ushered them both away, making excuses. However, I could feel their eyes on us as they gave space, curious and expectant.

“Yukino…” Thrusting my package out before me in offering, eyes squeezed shut and head bowed, I announced formally, “Please accept this gift from your Secret Santa! I made it with all my heart, and I hope you enjoy it!”

The silence stretched on, nearly crushing me with doubt. Was the wrapping job not good enough? The present wasn’t big enough? Did she not like me and wished her Santa was someone else? Had I ruined her good time and evening with my intrusion?

Unable to take it, I lifted my head just enough to peer through my bangs.

“Kagura-sama! Thank you so much for your gifts!” the Celestial wizard burst out, snatching the present from my hands and clutching it to her chest tightly, “…her voice dropped, aware of the stares I’d been on the receiving end of for the second time that evening, and she added earnestly, “Thank you. Your card was… one of the best things I’ve ever gotten, and I love it so much! Although, I’m quite surprised at your artistic talent!”
“I-- Risley helped me.”

“You must have put a lot of work into it. Plus the little hearts were so cute! I’d almost think you had a crush on me; it was just like a little love letter with that cute little confession inside!”

Mute, I couldn’t deny or confirm it.

“Oh… you… are wearing the earrings…”

Again, I didn’t believe in coincidences, but it was hard to swallow we were each other’s secret santa by accident.

Comprehension dawned on us at the same time, and I wasn’t sure if I was more embarrassed by her embarrassment or my own. Before this turned into a scene, I snatched her wrist and tugged insistently, while stalking past a giggling part of half-naked miscreants. No wonder Yukino knew - - Millianna was feeding Sting information! Those devious little… And Erza must have been in on it too!

Out in the chilly air of the night, we huffed and shifted awkwardly.

“Thank you… for the earrings…”

“Sting-sama suggested them…”

I’m sure he did.

“Ah, I confess,” she blurted out suddenly, flustered and adorable, “I knew it was you all along! Sting-sama and your friend rigged the assigning. I saw those earrings, and I knew they were perfect, but I was afraid to give them as a Christmas gift… so I asked to have you as a Secret Santa. But I didn’t know they gave you me as well! I’m sorry for the deception!”

Transfixed by the moonlight shining behind her and making her glow, I nearly missed her words. She… asked to have me? Just to give me these earrings? All that trouble… for me?

“Were the words in your letter true?”

Swallowing, I nodded stiffly. Even Risely didn’t see the small note I slipped in separately, written hastily before I lost my nerve or was discovered.

The long, warm hug was more than I imagined and the way her head tucked just so on my shoulder completed the perfect moment. This evening would be burned into my memory as one of the best days of my life, and her answer to my letter was all I had ever hoped for.

It turned out I didn’t have to worry about keeping a promise to Arana, thanks to our meddlesome best friends.
There was absolutely no way she was going to mess this up.

“I’m totally gonna f-up,” she muttered to herself morosely. What did she know about romance and shit? Nothing, that’s what. Nada. Zippo. Zilch. ZE-RO. Perhaps instead of rowdily throwing popcorn at the decrepit TV screen while sloshing cheap red wine and putting her bare, sassy-toed feet up in Gray’s face all twisted up with a combo of drunk laughter and disgust, she should’ve actually studied those chick flicks a little more closely. “I don’t wanna.”

The last sentence was mumbled into her questionably clean pillowcase with her hair artfully tossed around in the style of hungover and her legs kicking the edge of the mattress moodily, paddling the air angrily like a determined toddler behind a wakeboard. The only thing that would have made the entire scene anymore painfully cliche, straight out of some crappy sitcom, was if the love interest in question was leaning against the door frame with a sexy, understanding smirk that promised some sharp tongued mocking and then a dollop of ‘you’re my fuck up, babydoll’ to soothe the burn.

Cautiously, knowing damn well that Mira had a key after the Thanksgiving snafu, her blurry gaze peered through thick, gunky lashes. As suspected… there was absolutely nothing there. Because Mira, unlike Cana’s dumb ass, was a sensible and responsible human being who went to work in the mor-- early afternoon.

Grunting, she flopped out of bed, hitting the floor with a loud, boneless plop and scooted across the grubby bark brown carpeting towards the white, porcelain haven. So cool, so inviting. Why she passed out on her warm, sticky bed instead of flopping in the bathroom to sleep with her cheek against the curve was beyond her semi-lucid state of consciousness. God, the sink and the toilet were both already right there; why weren’t bathrooms also bedrooms?

“Whew, shower girl,” she counselled herself after a quick sniff test, nose wrinkling with distaste at the sour stench. That was the worst part, the way it oozed out of her pores. A shower wouldn’t hide the evidence but at least her girl wouldn’t walk off gagging. Also, Altoids, they were somewhere playing hide and seek in this forsaken hellscape of mostly empty containers the littered her drawers and medicine cabinent, and the only way she was going to earn more than a palm over her face.

All of her showers started as quick affairs but soon turned into long engagements with a ring at the end. Actually, she probably should scrub the tub, she considered, wiggling her feet in the hot puddle of water sluggishly. It was getting noticeably grimy, and while Cana hadn’t really given a crap before, now she felt… self-conscious.

There was a reason Mira didn’t come over often, and it wasn’t just because she liked her own kitchen for cooking or because the siblings’ couch was a perfect fit for two adult bodies. It was practically made for a make-out session, all snug and velvety, but the chance of someone walking in and killing the mood was astronomical, even with the schedule chart Mira kept on the fridge.

Try having your hand down someone’s panties and their brother walking in with some Indian food
and a smile that melted into sheer horror. If Cana had a boner, that would’ve killed it. Like, forever. And dang it if she didn’t think of that face whenever they were getting too hot and heavy on the couch every single time, which was a problem all its own.

No one was walking into Cana’s place.

“Prolly a reason for that,” she chuckled into the spray, now lukewarm and sputtering. Third floor plumbing wasn’t the greatest for water pressure, and the heater had never worked properly in the first place. “Surprised the ACDC hasn’t come in here to declare this place a biohazard… pig flu and hyperbola…”

Hit with inspiration, she carefully leaned over and cranked the knob to off at a crawl, desperate not to jar loose and free the thought that just hit her. Genius, pure genius, but tricky, very tricky…

“Cana!”

Nearly jumping out of her skin, the young woman paused to adjust her bright pink elbow length gloves and face mask both. Scrubber in hand, she was about to tackle the unknown stains that’d been there since before she’d moved in, eyes squished shut to avoid speculating about them too much.

“What are you doing?” Rather than looking pleased, the woman looked like a mad hellcat as she stalked forward and snatched the bottle of bleach out of reach with a sloshy sound echoing in the half empty bottle. “Are you trying to kill yourself? The alcohol not slow enough for you?”

“But babe…” at a loss for words, she tried hard to figure out what exactly got her girlfriend all fired up this time. When all she was doing was cleaning. Especially when she was cleaning. That thing Mira had nagged her about with subtle hints and catty remarks then offered to help her with and finally tried to bribe and cajole her into with deceptive cheer. “I’m… cleaning. See?” The scrubber, all covered in cleaner, dripped on the floor, making Mira’s blue eye twitch and Cana wince a bit. “Like… like you wanted… for you. Cuz… cuz I love you?”

The ire melted into a soft, loving look that made Cana tingly from head to toe; that you’ve done good look full of adoring exasperation reserved for extra special occasions. Oh yes, Cana fucked up big time to earn that look.

“Ammonia and bleach will kill you, sweetheart.”

Oh.

Crisis safely averted, she straightened and looked around with disbelief. Twirling, she peered out into the other room before coming back to stare at Cana. This repeated on loop several times before she finally kneel down, quizzically touching and pinching around the cleaning mask and stretching the skin.

“Who are you, and what have you done with my girlfriend, Cana Alberona?”

“Quit it.”

Mira giggled a bit, that tinkling laugh for when she was childishly delighted and unabashed about her pleasure. Bubbly, it was a bubbly sort of laugh, infectious and pure. Damn, Cana would kill for that laugh alone.

“If you’re just gonna hassle me…”
Mira interrupted, “I see you cleaned the bed.”

“Yeah…” Cana failed to see what that had to do with anything.

“Nice, fresh sheets… they look so… inviting.”

“Oh, I guess?” Really, it was the middle of the day. Too late to sleep in and just a bit too early for a good late afternoon nap.

A sly look crossed the angelic face of her girlfriend, “It’d be a shame if they were mussed… hmm?”

Cana wasn’t following.

“I’ll be back!” Mira squealed, leaping up and out the door as her meaning sunk in. Snapping her fingers and cursing softly, the woman picked up the scrub brush. Whatever Mira was up to, she’d just have to let it be a surprise. And hoped it involved messing up the sheets in the best way possible.

Finishing her task, Cana rocked back on her heels and eyed the bathtub, nearly blinded by the sparkle. Turns out the original color was white not cream, and she had to admit it looked a lot more tempting clean. Plus, who knew that washing the towels and then drying them with that fancy tissue paper made them fluffy and soft?

Pooped, she tossed the cleaning stuff under the sink and meandered towards the living room for some quality, mindless, daytime TV. The lack of stickiness on the faux leather couch was amazing, and that comforting lemon-y fresh smell of clean was perfect. If she’d realized what a rush this was, she’d of done this cleaning thing sooner. For herself, not just to get into her girlfriend’s pants.

The slamming of the front door woke her, heart pounding and gasping at her chest. Ignoring the dramatics, large bags were chucked into the foyer with excessive enthusiasm followed by a flurry of skirts and curls.

Then the dragging sound…

“Babe, I just cleaned; no dead bodies,” Cana groaned, not even bothering to identify the sound. Shuffling to the door, she peered at the large potted plant for a second before focusing on what was really important about the view presented: Mira’s butt up, front and center, wiggling with each tug. The palm leaves doing a violent tango had nothing on that feast of the eyes. Casually shifting, smile tugging at her lips and eyebrow quirked, she did nothing to hide her blatant enjoyment of the spectacle nor moved to help.

“I should’ve…” huff, heave, wiggle, “Asked… should’ve…” puff, tug, jiggle, “Elf… heavy!”

Getting it over the threshold, she dramatically expelled a breath, ignoring Cana's blatant stare at her chest, and gently kicked the door shut behind her. Straightening, she looked Cana dead in the eye and pointed an index finger to the tip of her nose threateningly, “Don’t kill it.”

“Hmm, better come over and make sure then,” she purred in answer as she grabbed the offending finger and gave it a sloppy kiss, not having the faintest clue what in the heck she was going to do with a dumb plant. Half the time she’d forget to water herself, if booze weren’t a liquid. Toeing a bag, “Seriously though, what’s this about?”

“Ingredients, for dinner!”

“Okay, that’s the grocery store bags but…”
“And some flowers! Red roses, a dozen, and some extra petals… for the bedroom…”

“Oh…” Cana blinked, wracking her brain. Was it an anniversary? Was it a birthday? Was it a celebration of the fact Cana’s apartment no longer incubated typhoid? “Kinda too much…. For… y’know…?”

“Candles too, for the dinner, and chocolates and some wine too. And before you ask, it’s white, to go with the dinner I have planned, and you’ll love it, so don’t complain that you like red better! There’s the bubble bath and massage oil… I mean, obviously, we’ll save some for later too, but it was all on sale and the deals were too good to pass up!”

Cana reached into a bag, earning a light swat and blush. Nursing her hand, eyes lingering on the VS logo, the woman had a very, very good idea what was in that bag. And oh boy, did she approve of whatever it was!

“Should’ve cleaned sooner.”

Mira paused from where she’d move to in the kitchen, bags and utensils shifting noisily as she hummed.

“You don’t have a clue what this is for, do you, sweetheart?”

Cana grinned, scooping up the rest of the bags before depositing them on the counter and sweeping Mira up, “Don’t have to. As a certified gambler, I know when I got lucky and struck it rich. You’re goin’ all out, and dammit girl, I love ya for it. And I’m gonna love ya a different way tonight, if that gives you a clue!”

Flushing bright red and yelping at the grab, Mira giggled and tugged her in for a long, slow kiss. For someone who’s entire holiday experience had been a void of misery and a bane, Cana felt warmth and pleasure flush her skin and curl her toes, realizing for the first time that having someone to share holidays with was what made them special and noteworthy. She’d forgotten the holiday of love because it hadn’t matter to her before, but Mira made it more than just a buzzword and discount candy.

And making holidays a Big Thing was something Cana could really get into.
Coming to an Understanding

Tentatively, she picked up the item that her brain helpfully supplemented as some kind of medieval torture device knock-off, the sharp and pointy end of it facing away from her body as a precaution. The woman could handle a katana with ease and precision most would envy and never possess, but in this strange environment with all kinds of things that she didn’t know what they did, she was lost.

Reaching up, she fiddled with the small stud earrings, wishing they were a more elaborate set. Since piercing her ears, the warrior had switched to more basic and sensible sets, usually gold to match her pristine uniform, or a small cherry blossom set made of painted silver that Risley had given her to match her traditional clothing better. It felt natural to have something there now, but she was wishing for some reassurance of a different sort.

She was going to need it, judging by the expression of wary curiosity and haughty impatience facing her.

“So why me?”

Blunt and to the point.

Kagura took a long moment to consider her answer. There was the truth, of course; that Minerva was arguably one of the people closest to Yukino and more reliable than Sting and more open than Rogue. But, from what Kagura had gleaned, since returning to Sabertooth, the tiger she’d faced before full of patriotic desire to win was a kitten in comparison to the one now, who protected her guildmates with the ferocity of a mother with cubs.

And… there was one other thing.

Sabertooth had a well-deserved reputation of being full of gossipers, busybodies and nosy neighbors.

Steeling herself for the consequences, she looked the other woman dead in the eye, spatula held aloft and cheeks flaming red, and said just as blunt and to the point, “I wish to give Yukino homemade chocolates, and no one in my guild is good at baking.”

A bit of a stretch. Arana offered to help Kagura, taking pity on her banging around, bumbling and confused as she stared at the pots. And Risley was a wonderful chef, although not much of a baker, preferring cream on her carrots rather than her cake.

Still, Minerva considered it for a long moment, green eyes flashing with cunning intelligence. The two were on much better terms now, and Kagura knew Minerva had a grudging respect for her, but she didn’t know if that extended to allowing her to court Yukino.

“Very well. I do have some leftovers from…” a slight blush covered her cheeks and her eyes lowered in embarrassment, “My chocolates.” Kagura didn’t ask any rude or invasive questions, but having a good hunch who Minerva made the for. It made her chest hurt a bit, mourning the death
of an old crush and sympathizing with the proud woman both. Reading Kagura’s thoughts, she added hastily with a bit of sharpness to her tone, “And the rest of the guild’s chocolates too, of course.”

“Of course…”

“You know,” Minera began conversationally, stooping to gather up the necessary supplies. Pots and pans began to clutter the counter as she continued, “Yukino prefers white chocolate over dark and milk.”

Kagura let a small smile and sigh of relief pass her lips, glad Minerva decided to be helpful instead of difficult.

“And if you hurt her,” this was said in the exact same tone, not missing a single beat, “What I did before is the least of it, do you understand me?”

“I understand,” she replied neutrally, wondering if Yukino got this sort of vetting when she visited Mermaid Heel. Probably not, since the girls were more likely to embarrass than threaten, and they wanted to know all the dirt and juicy details. “And thank you.”

Minerva paused to cock an eyebrow in askance, hands full of chocolate making supplies and lips pursed uncertainly.

“For taking care of Yukino,” Kagura clarified sincerely, putting her hands out to take some of the pots and share the burden. “She could not ask for a better or more loyal friend, Minerva.”

The were was a long, awkward pause as she stood frozen in the middle of the kitchen, eyes wide and lips quivering, before turning around sharply towards the stove.

“Get the chocolate from the cupboard. We are going to have to melt it down. And some sugar too, while you are in there.”

Wordlessly, Kagura did as she was bid, plucking up both items and placing them down quietly on the counter, waiting for further instructions.

“And we need some butter and milk too, from the fridge.”

That seemed logical, although Kagura had no idea chocolates required so many different ingredients. It was good that Minerva decided to help her because if she floundered through with a recipe book, she was bound to burn them or use salt instead of sugar in her ignorance.

“And…” without turning around, the woman’s shoulders stiffened, but she pressed on, “I… Yukino was one of the first people to welcome me back without any reservations… after… I owe her… so…if you can make her happy, I’ll help any way I can.”

“Then it seems we have a common goal,” she conceded, reserved and serious on the outside, but heart hammering and warmth flushing through her internally.

“What’s that?”

Both jumped guilty as Yukino wandered in, taking stock of the two unlikely occupants and eyebrows quirking at the equipment. Walking forward, her shoulder and fingers brushed against Kagura as she leaned in to whisper, “I hope you and Lady Minerva are behaving. She could use another friend.”
Hooking their pinkies together briefly, savoring the electric feeling that jumped between them at the innocent touch, she whispered back loudly, “We are making chocolates. Care to join us?”

A bright, sunshine smile crossed the Celestial Wizard’s face at the mock whisper that earned a huff of pretend annoyance from Minerva and a very innocent look from Kagura.

It was something Yukino had always hoped for, and something she’d never thought would happen. And there was no better day for it than the day of love, whether it was romantic or platonic or familial.

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