Life Choices

by Serpent_Tailed_Angel

Summary

A freak accident leaves Gray pregnant, and he couldn't imagine anything worse. He has no desire to be a father, much less a pregnant mother, and would gladly end things before they begin. But when Natsu finds out, he becomes desperate to stop Gray from doing anything he finds too rash, and is willing to resort to underhanded tactics to save the pregnancy.
A couple *super important things* before you read this story.

1) The views expressed by the characters (including thoughts of theirs that leak into the narrative voice) do not necessarily represent those of the author.

2) This story does not intend to portray either stance as inherently wrong, although some extreme versions of the stances and certain methods used are frowned upon. If you cannot stand the idea that some who you disagree with isn't inherently evil, you might not like this story.

3) If you wish to discuss the subject in the comments, please keep it civil. Regardless of your ideas, I will delete them if you’re a dick about how you present them.

Gray felt off for four days before he really fell ill. At the point that he started throwing up, he holed up in his apartment and waited for his stomach bug to pass. Three days of Juvia breaking in at mealtime and insisting that she spoon feed him chicken noodle soup later, Gray went to Porlyusica for medicine. It wasn't that being sick was unbearable. The nausea was borderline crippling when he woke up, but by evening it had usually subsided to more of a dull queasiness that let him stomach things with only moderate discomfort. What drove him to seek medical help was that he couldn't stand having Juvia playing nurse through one more meal. Annoyance with her overcame fear of the guild's medic.

He expected to hear that he'd eaten something bad or needed some antibiotic. Instead, Porlyusica had him drink a bubbling red concoction that went straight through him, collected a urine sample, and upon inspecting it told him, "You're pregnant."

"I didn't know you had a sense of humor."

"I don't."

Gray stared at her, waiting for her serious expression to crack and give way to uncharacteristic giggles. Instead, she picked up her broom and swatted him in the head.

"What's with that look?" Porlyusica demanded. "You came to me for help, and I'm telling you what's wrong. Do you want a morning sickness remedy or not?"

"Ow! It's not funny if you have to hit me over the head with it!"

She swatted him again. "Who's trying to be funny? You think I would joke about a patient's condition?"

He didn't, actually, but Gray knew better than to think she could make a mistake. Especially one so obvious as to think a male might be pregnant. She wouldn't haphazardly make a guess based on his symptoms, and she wouldn't be party to some prank, be it her own or one a guildmate wanted to stage after hearing Gray was sick. Which could only mean one thing:
"Stop gaping. It's not going to do you any good. We have a pregnancy to manage now, and it sounds like your symptoms are already severe. If you want to eat without your morning sickness troubling you, the potion should suppress the nausea perfectly."

"How?" Gray asked.

"It's a simple enough brew. Doctors never give it because they're beholden to whatever someone synthesizes in a lab, but this is safe for the mother and child, and only takes an hour to make. I'll let you wait outside while I work on it, so you can take your first dose now."

"How could I be pregnant?" Gray clarified.

"Why are you asking me? I don't know what you do with your personal time."

That was an unsatisfying answer if Gray ever heard one.

"Men don't get pregnant."

"Not without a little magic, they don't."

Gray wracked his brain for spells that would leave him pregnant. He found none, but he also came up with a list of enemy attacks from the past few months that he hadn't known the details of. He could have easily fought someone with magic that made Porlyusica's claim possible. Although… Who learned a spell just to make someone pregnant? Gray was by no means active. He couldn't take another partner when Juvia tolerated no love rivals, and he wasn't about to give her that much encouragement.

Him? Pregnant? The idea was absurd, but if he allowed for the possibility, it went from laughable to chilling. He was barely an adult, single with an overly zealous and unwanted admirer, made his living by traveling the country and beating things up, and was entirely unready to be settled down. He hadn't the slightest clue what to do with toddlers, much less infants. Not to mention that everything he'd seen and heard of pregnancy made it sound akin to body horror. Especially for someone who was never meant to be pregnant.

Did he want to spend nine months playing host to a parasite? Nope. No siree. Not in this lifetime or any to follow. As it was, Gray couldn't think of anyone he wanted to father a child with. Becoming a mother was out of the question.

Oblivious to Gray's reeling mind as she searched her cupboards for potion ingredients, Porlyusica said, "Go sit outside. I'll let you know when the potion is ready."

Gray took one step forward, then another, and then another towards the door. Mind wrapped up in the idea of motherhood, his body moved on autopilot.

He sat outside, back against Porlyusica's tree, and tried not to be sick from sheer anxiety.

Older children Gray could manage, but he was awkward around little kids. He had no patience with babies. He was too restless to stay in place and raise a child. He had a fangirl who would no doubt turn the baby into some sign of their love and force herself into the role of the other parent. He wasn't cut out for this. He couldn't do it. He couldn't. He couldn't. He couldn't.

When Porlyusica came out with a clear bottle of medicine for him, Gray was staring off vacantly into the woods, thinking about how horribly screwed he was.
"Do you need more time to let this sink in?" Porlyusica asked, voice softening for the first time. Gray always hated when she spoke like that. You knew you were in a bad place when she went easy on you. "I suppose it is a lot to have dropped on you. Come back inside. I can go over what to expect."

Gray swallowed hard, and asked, "Do I have to do this?"

"What do you mean?"

"Can't someone else take the kid for me?"

"Once it's born, yes. Until then, I've never heard of a spell that transfers a person's pregnancy to someone else."

Gray shut his eyes in despair. All of his dread over parenthood melted away with the idea that someone else would take the child, but then a million new fears popped up. How would he manage if he was pregnant and couldn't work? What new ways would Juvia find to work her way into all facets of his life when she learned about the baby? Who would he find to adopt a kid conceived in a male? How much body horror would he go through during the pregnancy? Would he even be able to handle that? What would Natsu say when he found out? He'd have a field day coming up with ways to tease Gray for being pregnant. Gray could already imagine becoming the laughing stock of the guild once word got out of his situation.

"That's not soon enough."

"There's no other way to give the child up than to wait until you've given birth."

"Do I have to go through a whole pregnancy?"

"You do if you want that child to come out alive at the end."

It took Gray a moment to find the nerve to ask his next question. "What if not putting my body through that matters more than having a child I'm not sure I could find anyone to take from me?"

For a moment, he feared that Porlyusica's silence might mean he was about to be hit with a broom again. Screamed at for such a selfish want, chased from the premise, and reported to the guildmaster for having no soul. But then she said, "In cases where magic is needed to support the pregnancy, such as one where the wrong type of body is pregnant, the child and the parent's magic become more tightly intertwined until birth. By the time it's heartbeat is strong enough to be heard, you magic will have bonded tightly with the child. If you end the pregnancy prematurely after that point, you will lose your magic for good."

Gray didn't respond.

"Given the potency of your test sample, assuming everything is developing normally, you have three weeks at most to make that call, Gray. You might want to make up your mind a few days early, in case the child's heart starts beating ahead of schedule."

Three weeks to make his choice, and it took Gray three seconds to ask, "Can we remove it now?"

Chapter End Notes

A couple other, slightly less important warnings.
This story is set several years after the events of the Alvarez arc in the manga. (Five-ish, maybe? I never picked a specific date.) It involves post-curse Zeref and Mavis and various character have hooked up. This is all explained in coming chapters, but I don’t want anyone thrown off by it.

Also, this story might have slight anti-Nalu and anti-Gruvia tones, as failed Nalu and Gruvia romances post-war but pre-fic and consequences of these failed relationships feature in drama in the fic. This is not meant to come across as character bashing. I have nothing against Nalu.

Also, I started writing this around the time Gajeel turned out to not be dead, so the stuff with Juvia and Invel hadn’t happened yet. I also started this while aspiring to writer 100k words in a month (2000 words to go and one day left) so I wrote a shitton of this fic before those event occurred. (About 25 chapters and 80,000 words by the time the chapter 498 spoilers came out, which is entirely too much to revise according to changing canon.) So as far as this fic is concerned, nothing in that fight ever happened. Gray just had a generic fight with Invel.
Natsu might have spent his whole life blissfully oblivious to anything that had or hadn't happened with Gray, had Zeref not brought it up.

Conversations with Zeref were an interesting affair. They were born only two years apart but had an astronomical age different, and hadn't grown up together. In fact, Zeref placed Natsu in someone else's care when he found Natsu to be too disagreeable of a toddler. There were a few dozen quirks to his mannerism as a result of growing up as an academy prodigy, and as a result of having been immortal as long as he had, and he could leave you in the dust as his train of thought raced to places most minds struggled to grasp just as easily as he could be stumped by the reminder that a broken neck was irreparable.

Most Fioren citizens avoided him, be that steering clear of his home or locking their doors on his infrequent trip to town. Even Happy hadn't been by to visit Zeref in years, ever since confirming that Zeref had the Book of E.N.D. tucked away in a secure place. He left Natsu on his own for trips to the lab.

Perhaps lab was a grandiose term. The old windmill that had once served as Fairy Tail's guild hall and had since been repurposed as Zeref's home was also where he reviews his research and worked on constructing different contraptions to test theories, but that the Black Mage himself worked from the little windmill didn't make it look any less cozy. At least so long as you ignored the half completed tower made entirely of some unsettlingly black material a few dozen yards behind the building. Natsu always felt weird looking at that tower.

But family was family, even when your family was the unflattering kind of special, and Natsu put forth an effort to connect with his brother. Zeref did pull strings to get Natsu's tumor treated, and seemed remorseful (usually) about the whole going to war thing. It sort of balanced out, and even if it wasn't as fun as hanging around the guild with his friends, it was a good idea to keep tabs on what his brother was doing. Sometimes Zeref's research projects were innocent and incredible, but other times Natsu had to talk his brother down from a new idea before disaster struck.

Other times a problem came out of left field, or Zeref had some side project that he forgot to show to others before they could persuade him it was a bad idea. On this particular day, Natsu learned that the former happened.

"You know how I was working on something to purify water?"

"Who did you poison?"

"Technically, no one. Or rather, it depends on your definition of poison." Zeref already wasn't instilling a lot of confidence.

Natsu pulled himself up on the old bar counter, now covered in notes written in the most outdated Fioren script he'd ever seen, and waited for Zeref to elaborate.

This time the lab was mostly devoid of suspicious experiments, but there were papers everywhere. It seemed that poor organization and a distaste for cleaning was a shared trait of theirs.

"Remember how you brought that friend of yours here a few months back? The naked one?"
"Gray."

"Is that his name?"

"Did he not introduce himself?"

"No. I asked him why he showed up naked, and then we never got around to introductions."

Natsu shook his head in exasperation. Zeref missed introductions with half the people he met. He was someone who needed no introduction, left most speechless or stuttering with his presence no matter how unassuming he attempted to make himself, and in four centuries of needing to avoid people had forgotten that asking for someone's name was how most people reacted to a new face. It was a bad combo. The worst part was that Natsu knew Zeref had seen Gray plenty during the war and after.

"Well, he was exposed to the purifying serum I was working on. I recently created a pond to test it, and it's had an odd effect on the various creators I populated it with."

"Is he going to die?"

"No. Honestly, Natsu. I'm done killing people." He said it with such a fiercely determined look that Natsu felt like he might be murdered for suggesting that Zeref was still in the business of murder.

But then that wasn't totally fair. Whatever messing with his head the curse did, his brother hadn't started off as someone who wanted to kill, and desperately tried to hold on to his sense of right and wrong through centuries of getting others killed. There were subjects to tease Zeref on, but this wasn't one of them.

"If it's not fatal, then what's going to happen to him?"

"Well… I suppose it causes a state of… um…" Zeref turned scarlet, avoiding Natsu's gaze.

Something to do with sex then. This was a subject to tease his centuries old virgin brother, who had been unable for most of his life to be physically intimate without hurting his partner.

"Is he sterile? Horny? Can't get it up anymore?"

"W-well… he… um…"

"Do we need to give you some of this purifying stuff?"

"No! I-it… A state of hyperfertility," Zeref managed to get out, racing over the words.

It took Natsu a second to de-slur everything Zeref said, and he still didn't quite understand what that meant. "What?"

"W-well… initially I didn't notice anything amiss with the population, but it started expanding at a rate that didn't make sense for how many of each species I gathered. When I examined them more closely, it became apparent that every last one of them was reproducing."

"So it makes people horny."

"No. There was no change in their mating behavior, but even the males I added to that pond were laying eggs. I haven't managed to isolate the components of the serum that created that effect yet… but I've been studying the effects of it more closely. I grabbed a few other specimens to test with lower doses too, to see if it was something you needed to swim in for weeks, or only a small sample
would be enough to trigger a reaction. The amount of time it takes to clear the system after being separated from exposure varies depending on the gestational cycle, and the lower limit of what's needed to affect an organism is... well... low. The reproductive—"

Natsu held up a hand for Zeref to stop. "Please keep all explanations to three sentences or less."

Zeref, who very much liked to lecture on whatever his latest findings were, scowled at Natsu for the reminder that not everyone appreciated hearing the entire methodology of a study before being told the conclusion.

"You said swimming in your serum for a few weeks? You started that project months ago."

"Well, I noticed the effect after a few weeks, but there was no point in bringing anything up to Gray until I knew what exactly to bring up. I had no reason to believe initially that such a small level of exposure would have the same degree of effect."

"You still should have let him know there was a chance something went wrong."

"Maybe. We're talking about what needs to be done now—not what could have been done. The time it takes for the body to clear the serum is roughly the length of one and a half gestational periods, meaning it varies wildly by species. It takes roughly a quarter of a gestational period for symptoms to manifest after exposure, and again after the initial instance of reproduction, so most specimens produced offspring twice, unless exposed again while working through the effects of the initial exposure, in which case you can reset the clock. The body goes through a phantom pregnancy if exposed in isolation, but when in contact with another member of the same species while the skin is still absorbing the serum, the body produces viable offspring instead."

Natsu cocked his head and scowled at his brother while quietly translating that into layman's terms. "So Gray might be pregnant with the kid of whoever touched him."

"Theoretically, yes. We both helped fish him out after someone shoved him into the water, so one or the other of us... Well, I haven't run enough tests yet to know how it impacts the serum's effects to have multiple exposures to other organisms. And in any case, it may not work the same on humans. It's been half a year, and I'm told no one in the guild looks pregnant."

Natsu took the hint. "I'll ask."

"Thanks."

"So it's safe on humans...?"

"I'll still need to adjust the formula to prevent overpopulation if the serum were to spill on wildlife. Although I suppose that if I isolated the active ingredient, it might help with repopulation of endangered—"

"Have fun with that." Natsu slid off the bar counter and headed for the door before Zeref could go full on lecture mode. Now that he could safely play researcher again, he was too into the role. "I'll see about Gray."

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If Gray was ever going to admit to mysteriously finding himself pregnant, he would have done so by now. By Zeref's account he would be in his second trimester, but showed no clear signs or symptoms. Still, Natsu had noticed a peculiar fluctuation in Gray's scent over the past few months. A gradual change that was abruptly halted and replaced with the scent of blood and drugs, which faded
at a normal rate. Now that scent was returning. A faint, somewhat womanly smell.

There were a variety of explanations Natsu could think of for that, and none of them his business. Except now the possibility had been raised that Gray might be pregnant, and Natsu was either the father or the uncle. If Gray was pregnant, that was very much his business, and the only explanation he could think of for why Gray's scent might have changed back as it had was a miscarriage.

Something that distressing was not a subject Natsu wanted to approach. Not with Gray, anyway. The person who would have treated Gray when he lost the baby was fair game. Since Wendy had commented alongside Natsu on how strange Gray's scent changes were, Natsu skipped asking her about the medical explanation for the changes and went to Porlyusica.

The second Porylusica opened the door, Natsu said, "Zeref accidentally invented a serum that makes people pregnant and we think Gray accidentally took some."

To her credit, it only took her long as she needed to roll her eyes at that before saying, "Well, first off, tell him to stop doing that."

"Taking the serum, making it, or inventing things in general?"

"All three. Especially the last one. No good comes from anything that boy does."

Zeref's research was the only reason Natsu was alive, but he bit his tongue on that one. Zeref did have an extraordinary talent for causing more harm than good, regardless of what his intentions were at any given time.

"Anyway, Gray didn't say anything about it, but I thought maybe he lost the kid."

"Is that any of your business?"

Yes. That was his family that died too.

Seeing Natsu's expression harden, Porlyusica sighed and shook her head. "I suppose your only concerned for your friend. Gray's health is just fine, but you're right that he was pregnant. He didn't feel equipped to handle the situation, and asked that I put a halt to things before they got too far."

Zeref in lecture mode was something Natsu had developed the ability to translate, but this statement was incomprehensible to him. "What does that mean?"

"It means he chose to stop being pregnant before it was too late to safely terminate the pregnancy."

Natsu's mind threw the brakes on before he could finish processing that. Gray chose to kill his baby? That was disgusting. Even at his worst, Zeref never went around murdering babies.

"I had medicine brewed to ease his symptoms, but he waited until I was done making it to ask me to remove the fetus," Porlyusica complained, oblivious to Natsu's distress. "Ungrateful brat."

Gray killed his baby. Without telling anyone else that he was even going to have one. And according to Zeref and judging by the repeated shift in Gray's scent, Gray was starting a second pregnancy. Carrying another kid that he'd kill while pretending to everyone in the guild that nothing was wrong.

Natsu couldn't let that happen. He couldn't let a baby—his baby, Zeref's baby, or any other defenseless child—die just because their mother didn't want them. He had an idea for how to stop it too, and it was a horrible idea, but it wasn't as horrible as killing babies, so for the greater good, he could go through with it.
"What do you mean by 'too late'?"

"It takes magic to maintain a pregnancy in a body that isn't meant to carry children, and the fetus's life becomes intertwined with the mother's magic the more it develops. If you remove it after the heart is strong enough, you remove the mother's magic as well. You'd never notice for someone who was never adept with magic anyway, but for those who do have the potential to control it, it's a steep consequence."

Magic was Gray's life. If Natsu could delay him from ending this second child until doing so would cost him his magic…

"Is that medicine any good?"

"I can't treat every symptom, but it suppresses morning sickness beautifully."

"Could I see the recipe?" Natsu asked. "There are a few other people Zeref is worried might have been exposed, so it would help if he could make them that medicine in case it isn't just Gray who got pregnant."

Sighing heavily, Porlyusica shut the door in Natsu's stunned face. While he was still scrambling to think of whether it was worth enraging Porlyusic or if Zeref might be able to find the recipe on his own, the door opened back up and she handed him a paper slip.

"Here's a copy. Make sure that brother of yours doesn't mess up and poison anyone."

"Can it be poisonous?"

"Normally I would say no, but I'm sure he'll find a way."

She slammed the door shut again, and Natsu grinned down at the paper.

Gray didn't have any periods to notice were late, and a baby's heart started beating well before a person looked pregnant. Morning sickness, if Gray had come to Porlyusica in the first place for such medicine, would be his main tip-off that he had another child on the way. As long as Natsu could suppress that symptom until the baby's heart developed, he could save a life.

Chapter End Notes

There's a long history behind this fic. I came up with the premise many years ago after seeing someone complain about the lack of abortion in mpregs and thinking that it could make for an interesting story, but various issues with the ships I considered for it or plot points making the story come off as too slanted towards a certain stance kept me from writing it. The main issue for a long time was that the only way I could think of to force the character to keep the kid was to make basically everyone else pro-life, and the only way to make it not be creepy was to make the pregnant character quickly accept the pregnancy, so the story basically felt like pro-life propaganda. It took me a super long time to think of that "you could lose your magic" clause, and to become more comfortable with writing good people doing morally questionable things. (Older plot outlines involved the mom—usually Natsu—not learning he was pregnant until somewhere past the midway point, which is pretty absurd for someone who isn't too fat to see their baby bump.)
Nalu was the main ship I tested this premise with, because it took me a long time to figure out I wasn't invested enough in Nalu to write a lengthy fic with it. So usually it was something to do with Celestial Spirits that explained the pregnancy. At one point before certain familial relations were revealed, I toyed with the idea of making this fic ZerNa, so I guess that's where the idea of Zeref as an excuse for pregnancy came from? His inclusion in the story is what made this fic take place years out like it did, but I don't regret that. For one, most of my favorite scenes to write have been ones with Zeref antics. For another, the timing gave me an excuse to bring in the Gajevy twins and put everyone in that age range where a lot of people get married and start families, which works nicer for the Gray!Pregnancy drama than if he's the only one dealing with a kid.
Prank

Chapter Notes

I forgot to make it super clear in the last chapter, so for anyone who was confused, there's a roughly three month gap between chapters one and two. One was in September. Two and three take place in December. The pond incident that Natsu and Zeref discussed, if anyone was curious, happened mid-June.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gray wondered if he was being set up for some prank, but until then he didn't mind when Natsu started to practically wait on him hand and foot. It was funny watching Juvia freak out about a come-from-behind love rival, and he took her attention off of Gray—for as much as Juvia's attention could be off of Gray.

Sporadically, Gray made Natsu test the food and drinks he offered first to prove there was nothing funny in them. He figured that so long as Natsu didn't know when the checks would happen, he would be reluctant to pee in any coffee mugs. Sometimes, when they looked like Natsu made them himself rather than grabbing them from the guild kitchen, they tasted overly spicy, but then the two of them had different tastes, and Gray was willing to believe that Natsu didn't mean anything bad by it.

That being said, there were times when Natsu's sudden dedication to Gray was annoying. For instance…

"That is a disgusting habit." Natsu snatched Gray's cigarette from his lips before he could light it. "You're going to kill yourself."

"I hardly ever have them, Flame Brain."

"He doesn't" Happy added.

Whether Happy was in on Natsu's scheme and played dumb to help make the act more convincing or genuinely didn't know what was going on, Gray had yet to figure out. If there even was a scheme. Whatever the case, Natsu ignored his coming to Gray's aid.

"Then it should be easy for him to switch to never, right?"

Natsu's overly innocent smile was less concerning than the fact that he didn't fire back with an insult.

"What are you playing at?"

"Getting you to live healthier."

Gray narrowed his eyes in suspicion and held his hand out. "Give it back."

Still smiling, Natsu turned and threw the cigarette across the guild hall and into the trash. To Gray's disgust, he was impressed with Natsu's aim. He couldn't even hold it against Happy for applauding that.
"Fine. Pay for my next pack." It was obnoxious enough when Natsu flipped out at Gray for trying to grab a beer, and Gray knew from that incident that Natsu would win in the end if he really pushed the cigarette issue. At least that time Natsu swore off beer in exchange for getting Gray to take a break. Gray would have to find something to deprive Natsu off in exchange for giving up his smoke. He expected Natsu to argue that. Instead, Natsu looked Gray up and down and asked, "How are you feeling, lately?"

"I can breathe just fine, if that's what you're asking."

"Nothing's wrong?"

"No. I actually feel too at ease."

He hadn't been hung over in weeks. He didn't even have a bruise on him. Natsu kept insisting their team take quirky jobs that involved little to no fighting, and Erza loved the idea, so there was no contesting his suggestions. Gray could feel the edge on his fighting skills dulling.

Did Natsu think he was sick? Was that why he kept taking away vices and pushing for light work? Gray tried to think of anything he might have done to give that impression, but nothing came to mind.

In any case, he didn't appreciate the effort, if that's what Natsu was doing. Especially since the behavior had gone on over a month now. When Porlyusica forced Gray to take it easy after his abortion, it had only been for a few days.

Remembering the incident, a wave of nausea crashed over Gray. He still had no idea how that happened to him, and not knowing why it happened or if he might find himself in that predicament again was terrifying. He wanted to never wake up in a daze in Porlyusica's bed again. Never be helped to his feet by someone trying to block his view the tray covered with a cloth napkin with blood peeking out from beneath the fabric, which he knew was where she set the fetus she removed. Never wanted to find himself responsible for some small creature he never asked for, which people would expect him to tend to just because it somehow found its way into his body.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Happy asked. "You look out of it."

Snapping out of his memories, Gray realized he'd been holding his breath. How was that for convincing Natsu the cigarettes were harmless?

"Y-yeah… Just… Remembered something unpleasant."

Natsu gestured to the infirmary door. "You can lie down if you want."

"Nothing's wrong with me. I just…" Gray trailed off, unsure how to give any more detail without lying or telling too much.

Would it be telling too much to share what happened with anyone? It wasn't anybody's business but his own, but it felt dirty to keep it a secret. Like he'd done something wrong and was trying to hide it, when in truth, he'd made the most sensible choice for the situation. He wasn't suited to have a child, and it would have been so much more wrong to go through all the mutilation of a pregnancy just to bring something into the world that no one wanted. But he had no idea of where to begin articulating that. How to explain if anyone in the guild lashed out at him that it wasn't like he wanted an abortion any more than he wanted to be pregnant, or how he had lain awake at nights wondering what the child might have grown up to be, if it had been conceived by someone who could keep it.
Natsu would understand. He was about Gray's age, and a man, and twice as free-spirited. He would understand how terrified Gray was when he made the decision. And Natsu spent so much time tending to him lately that if he saw that Gray needed someone to agree with him that he'd done the right thing…

Natsu would also get a kick out of the fact Gray had been pregnant. Maybe the reason he was so suspiciously nice lately was to try and lure Gray into telling him his deepest, darkest secrets just to get blackmail material. Probably not. He'd been too nice for too long to do something like that, but Gray was still antsy about who he might be able to confide in.

Next time he saw Jellal, Gray decided, then he would confide in someone. Jellal was the safest bet for who to talk to first. He was too mature to laugh over Gray's story. He understood better than any of the guildmates Gray grew up with what it was like to wonder if you were doing the right thing while knowing you did what you had to.

"Just what?" Natsu asked.

"Nothing."

He would tell Jellal, and he would ask Jellal what he thought about telling everyone else. Natsu especially. Now that the idea was there, Gray did want Natsu to know.

"Really?"

"It's really nothing, Natsu," Gray insisted. "Do you know when Jellal is coming by again?"

"Whenever he feels like it, I guess." Natsu grumbled. Jellal had beaten him up the last time he was in town (because Natsu challenged him to a fight and then jumped to attack him the second he finished his declaration of challenge) and he was still sore about the loss.

Gray had the perfect teasing remark about Natsu's loss in mind when a shriek caused both of them to turn and look to the front door, where one of the Redfox twins had gotten away from their dad, and he was trying to hold on tight to the other toddler while attempting to chase the more successful of the two trouble makers. Asuka, who had been overjoyed ever since Levy announced her pregnancy to know that she would be someone's big sister in the guild, hopped up to help.

"I'm going home," Gray announced.

"Mind if I come along?"

"Yes."

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He threw his dinner up, which he blamed on the twins.

Gajeel managed. Gajeel, who was awkward with everyone, managed to be a dad. He even liked his hellions. He wasn't the one who had to carry them, Gray told himself, but before Levy's pregnancy and hers and Gajeel's rushed marriage and before Gray found himself looking at the prospect of parenthood, he would have said he was twice the father material Gajeel was.

Gajeel managed, and so did Levy and Bisca and Alzack. Even Ur, whose husband left her before Ultear was born. She managed just fine, and took in more children after she lost the first.

Gray sat back on the tiled bathroom floor in front of his toilet and stared up at the ceiling, running
through that day again. The cold dread of what Porlyusica said started not in the pit of his stomach but in his throat, muscles contracting and making it hard to breath as he thought once more about what it would be like. He wasn't Gajeel or Levy or Bisca. There was no one with him to share in the responsibility, or to know he could fall back on for support. Even if there had been, his body wasn't built to carry a baby, and just because Gajeel rose to the occasion and turned into a decent father didn't mean Gray would have. Even if he could have…

He leaned forward and wretched into the toilet again.

No sense in thinking about it. No sense in thinking about what the baby might have grown into. If it had been a boy or a girl and how much she would have looked like him or whether he would have been a great mage. That child was gone. Didn't exist. Never should have existed. He had no right to come into Gray's life, and Gray had no obligation to throw all his life plans away for her.

But he would have felt so much better hearing that from someone else. Telling it to himself over and over was hollow when he wasn't sure who he could safely tell without being called a murderer.

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Gray didn't remember any dreams, but guessed that he must have had a nightmare from all his agonizing the night before, because when a knock on his door woke him he still felt sick.

Foregoing a trip to the bathroom until he really felt like he was going to hurl, Gray went to the door and found Natsu standing outside his apartment.

No Happy in sight. It used to be rare to see the two apart, but lately Natsu kept coming over on his own, which was weird in a way that raised all sorts of alarms for Gray. He had yet to figure out what was going on.

"Hey. Thought I'd make you breakfast."

"I'm not hungry."

Natsu stuck his foot in the door to block Gray's attempt to close it. "I'll make you tea, then."

Reluctantly, Gray stepped aside to let Natsu in. Anything Natsu liked for breakfast—mostly heavy, greasy meats—was at the bottom of the list for things Gray was willing to eat just then, but tea sounded bearable. He took a seat at the table and waited.

"Did you sleep well?" Natsu asked while he filled Gray's kettle. The metal glowed red around his hands.

"I guess." He had no memories of bad dreams or waking up in the middle of the night.

"You look out of it all."

Saying he didn't feel good would only encourage that notion Natsu had that something was physically wrong with him, so Gray skipped over the physical symptoms and went straight to the issue causing them.

"What do you think of kids?"

Natsu fumbled with the kettle, almost dropping Gray's favorite mug before he collected himself.

"They're cute," he said. "I like 'em. Asuka's big enough now that Alzack and Bisca make meals for
her to heat up and leave her on her own when they take shorter jobs, but it's okay 'cuzz Gajeel likes to take jobs with Levy and I get to babysit them."

Natsu had never struck Gray as the type to adore little kids, much less be trusted with them, but thinking back that wasn't so strange. There was a reason Romeo grew up looking up to Natsu, and it was Natsu who drew Wendy to the guild. He had seen Natsu entertaining Asuka often, although he hadn't realized he was the official babysitter. He'd seen Natsu with the twins too, but usually when Lucy was present, and he'd assumed that Lucy was looking after them at Levy's request.

"Gajeel picked you too look after his kids?"

"No. Bisca recommended me to Levy, and she snuck them to me behind Gajeel's back, and then he had no choice because they liked me." Natsu looked entirely too pleased with himself. Imagining the look on Gajeel's face when his kids rebelled over wanting to spend time with Salamander, Gray grinned too.

Pity Natsu hadn't been the one to be afflicted with a random pregnancy instead. He seemed better suited for it.

Natsu passed Gray his tea before that thought could lead to any negative physical reactions. It smelled honey sweet, with a vague fruit taste to it that Gray knew didn't belong to anything on his shelves. Natsu's tea always smelled like that. He must have been an avid tea drinker, since he always had the bags on hand to make the drink for Gray. Whenever Natsu got tired of coming over, Gray would have to ask him what it was called so he could buy some for himself.

Whatever it was, it calmed Gray's nerves. Within minutes, he felt his worries and their physical manifestations melt away. He still wasn't about to accept a greasy breakfast, but a piece of toast with jam before headed to the guild was up for consideration.

Natsu would have been better suited to find out he was randomly pregnant and didn't have long to do anything about that before he was locked into having a child he never asked for. Hell, Natsu might not even care that he didn't ask for the child he would just take it in stride. But it wasn't Natsu who became pregnant, and it didn't matter because Gray wasn't pregnant anymore, and life would move on. Being pregnant and feeling something move inside him sounded like something out of a horror story anyway.

"Are you up for any work?" Gray asked.

"Half the guild is taking the week off," Natsu said. "I don't think we could get Lucy in on anything, and Wendy is out of town. Are you low on money? I can spot you."

He would never have offered that before. It was almost like he didn't want Gray working at all.

With a sigh, Gray asked, "I'm bored, not broke. What's Lucy on break for anyway? It's not like she has a boyfriend to spend the holidays with."

Natsu only flinched a little. He and Lucy had been together the Christmas before, but split over the summer. Gray never asked what they split over. Something that Lucy decided was grounds to call the relationship off, but Happy knew no more than that, and was the guild's only source of information on the split. Natsu and Lucy didn't discuss it.

"I think she likes the idea of not working on a holiday," Natsu said.

"Yeah. And is willing to do anything to keep Cana from teasing her about being alone over Christmas."
Natsu sank quietly into the chair opposite Gray's at the kitchen table. The two of them had succeeded in the 'we can still be friends' department, but it was no secret that Natsu had wanted more success than that.

"We could do something," Gray said, mostly out of pity.

"Not that many people request jobs at this time of year. Too much of a hassle to have to deal with mages when your family is celebrating, and hardly anyone takes work anyway. There's nothing fun on the board right now."

"Not something for work. To celebrate," Gray said. "You're going to break in on New Year's Day and offer me tea again anyway, and if I don't have plans with someone, then Juvia's going to insist she spend the night."

"Well... if it's to save you from Juvia."

Gray clicked his tongue at the sly smirk Natsu gave him. Gray had accepted Juvia's proposal in the emotional high of the end of the Alvarez war, but he ended their engagement four hours later when he saw the number of creep shots she had hung on her walls—to say nothing of all the dolls she'd sewn of him and every scrap of fabric she embroidered his face onto. There was a fine line between dedication and obsession, and it just hadn't been comforting to think that he might marry someone who treated him more like an idol than a partner.

"So am I staying here for New Year's, or are you coming to my place? Or do you want to party with the rest of the guild?"

"Here," Gray said without a moment's hesitation. Guild parties were fun if there was no couple aspect to whatever holiday they were celebrating, but when there was any romantic aspect to the event, Juvia was on him like white on rice. "I'm going to tell Juvia that it has to just be you and me because we're doing this to keep you from feeling bad about being alone for the holidays, by the way."

"But I'm not alone if I have you to keep me company."

Natsu's smirk turned into a dazzling smile that made Gray curse internally. All those little favors the past month took on a new meaning when Natsu said something like that. He only wanted the excuse to stay away from Juvia. He didn't need to find any legitimate love rivals for her.

But... maybe it wouldn't be so bad. Natsu had been suspiciously nice for a month now, and he hadn't put all that good will and lowered guard to use for any sorts of pranks on Christmas Day, which would have been a golden opportunity. Natsu's motives just might be earnest. And why couldn't they be? They were both adults, after all.

"Alright," Gray said. "It's a date."

Chapter End Notes

Anyone who read Burn Out knows that I have a problem with ending chapters on that line.

Other chapter notes... I have a bunch, actually. First off, I just wanted to say I read
through so many abortion stories to try and get a sense for how Gray should feel in the aftermath. There were basically no neutral ones, btw. Everyone who wanted to share either treated it like nothing or was majorly emotionally conflicted. Or had a lot to say about how many hoops they had to jump through because of pro-life people, or about how physically uncomfortable certain methods were.

Second... I should probably stop there, actually. I have so much I want to say about the story, but I feel like I ought to let it speak for itself.
Natsu found Juvia outside Gray's apartment on New Year's Eve.

He'd already been there that morning, offering Gray tea with a few drops of morning sickness medicine, but had to leave for groceries.

Natsu wouldn't say he felt good about what he was doing, especially since Gray appreciated the acts of 'kindness', but he wasn't sure how else to go about saving Gray's child. He would offer whatever financial support Gray needed and help with any physical problems that came up and take the baby if Gray didn't realize how precious it was. Hell, if he weren't already a horrible person for how he was going about handling things, he would try and argue that he ought to be the one to take the kid home on account of being the one who liked kids more. He'd even cleaned up his house so that it was infant friendly, even though Gray was eight months out still.

As for Happy, Natsu didn't have the nerve to explain what he was doing. Happy thought Natsu was only trying to impress Lucy by cleaning the house, even though he knew slovenliness on Natsu's part wasn't what caused them to split. On the offhand chance that Happy would see him slip something into Gray's drink, he didn't even let him come along whenever he went to Gray's. He felt almost as bad keeping Happy in the dark as he did doing the same to Gray.

More than anything, Natsu wanted to sit down and talk to Gray about the kid. Tell him he was pregnant again, and assure Gray that whatever made him do something so extreme the last time, it wasn't something that needed to happen.

But there was always the possibility that Gray did it because he just didn't want to be pregnant, or because he was in denial about his kid's right to life. Or worse, that it meant nothing to him that there was a living person inside of him who depended on his good will to survive. Natsu wanted more than anything to let Gray know what happened to him and what was happening that very moment inside of him, but what if the baby died because he told Gray the truth?

He couldn't risk telling Gray. Not yet. What he could do was make sure that in his ignorance of his own situation, Gray didn't do anything to harm himself or the child. So Natsu had convinced Gray to forgo alcohol and toast the new year with sparkling juice instead, which meant running out to the store to buy bottles.

Juvia looked only miffed when Natsu first saw her, but when she saw him, her expression changed to one of despair.

"Gray really does have someone else to welcome the new year with?"

"Bachelor's night," Natsu told her.

"Gray and Juvia are engaged."

Their engagement had ended years ago, and no amount of reminders would convince Juvia that it really had lasted only a few hours. Natsu only gave her a sympathetic smile and said, "Maybe Gray will be up for doing something with you next year."

"But Juvia can't wait that long!"
"It's a day away."

"A day without Gray is too much for Juvia!"

"...ah. Well, I'm sure the withdrawal can't be that bad." Natsu slipped between her and the door. "There's a party at the guild. Maybe we'll drop by later."

Juvia was already off running before Natsu placed the period at the end of his sentence. Hopefully, by the time she realized they weren't going to show up at the guild, she would be too drunk to make the trip to Gray's on her own. No one, not even Erza (who was almost as deep in denial as Juvia over the ended engagement), would take Juvia to Gray's drunk.

No longer worried that unwanted guests might spring through the door when he opened it, Natsu knocked, and Gray cracked the door open. He'd secured the chain across the top so that Natsu couldn't fit more than an arm in, which was a silly precaution to take against someone who could turn into water and slip through that space, but upon seeing only Natsu he shut the door and undid the chain, then let his guest in.

"How are you feeling?" Natsu asked first thing when he stepped in.

"Fine as always," Gray said, which was a lie. Natsu didn't always get the evening dose on the medicine right, or missed a meal, and the next time he had the chance, Gray would look green around the gills.

But Gray already had his morning dose, and he didn't look distracted or discomforted. No chance for his morning sickness to rear its head and potentially tip him off to what was going on. For as many times as Natsu slipped up, he thought Gray must have noticed something amiss by now, but then Gray was only somewhere in the range of five weeks pregnant, judging from when Natsu noticed the first traces of his scent shifting. It was possible he hadn't developed many symptoms yet.

"You really never feel off?"

There was a slight hesitation before Gray said, "Never."

"Really?"

Another hesitation, then Gray admitted, "I've had some things weighing on my mind lately."

"Such as?"

This time it took Gray so long to respond that Natsu began to think he wasn't going to. "Have you ever thought about being a parent?"

"Yes." It was hard not to, for as often as he babysat. For that matter, it had been on his mind the entire time he nurtured Happy egg. "I'd like to be one eventually." Or already. "Why?"

"What if you couldn't be one?"

The question threw Natsu off, if only because it struck closer to home than Gray knew. But he didn't dare get into that one. Natsu wasn't about to pull of Porlyusica and give away someone else's medical history because Gray might have known one detail.

"Low sperm count?" Natsu asked.

"No. I mean... if you weren't cut out for it."
Good call on Natsu's part. That was a completely different scenario from having no choice but to adopt. Natsu was almost miffed to hear lack of confidence in parenting from someone who could have still produce a child spoken about when he knew child lovers who would never have their own.

"I'm **good** with kids."

"But what if you weren't? How would you even know?"

"You don't until you try. But most people get the hang of it."

"Yeah. **Most.**"

Natsu wondered if Gray thought of Laxus's dad just then, because he sure did. Some people really were terrible parents, with no rhyme or reason or clear explanation of genetics or even upbringing. Makarov was a brilliant parent to all of them, and his true son was a mess. And Mavis had confided in Natsu that if she ever became pregnant, she would have him over daily to help until she had the hang of things, which he thought was the right call. Neither he nor she trusted the fatherly prowess of a man who gave his baby brother to a dragon because he got fed up with trying to raise a toddler who refused to sit still through lessons on how to speak. It was like Zeref got every bit of brains their parents had to pass on, but what spotty social sense there was all went to Natsu.

"I think if you're worried about being a good parent, you probably will be one," Natsu decided. "People who care about being good parents learn and adjust to what works with each kid. People who are too convinced they're perfect to see any flaws or don't care at all are the ones who end up doing more harm than good."

"That can't be true every time."

"Probably not. But I like to think it's true most of the time."

"What if you take too long to learn?"

"Hopefully there's someone there to help you. Why? Is Juvia begging you to get her pregnant again?"

"No… Um… I won't name names, but someone confided in me that they had an abortion."

"Oh." The sound came out of Natsu's mouth, flat and harsh, before he could stop himself. This was Gray trying to approach the subject without admitting that he was talking about himself, and Natsu needed the chance to tell Gray why it was a stupid thing to do.

Gray's face fell at Natsu's response, and he looked away. "Nevermind."

"No. I can listen. It's not like I know whoever it is that did… um… **that.**"

"But you think they made the wrong choice."

"They killed someone."

"You didn't even hear their reasoning."

"There's no good reason to kill someone."

"What if their life would have been miserable if… if that woman kept them? What if she was absolutely terrible for them, or if she gave them up and they spent their life in some dingy orphanage? Kids die waiting for an adoption that's never going to come. You don't think it would be
irresponsible to bring them into a world like that?"

"Go up to the next homeless man you see and tell him he's better off dead than in dire straits," Natsu said. "If you think it's fine to kill people just because their life might not be stellar, go and kill everyone who isn't well off."

"That's not the same thing!"

"Why not?"

"They haven't been born yet."

"And that makes them less human?"

"Well…" Gray hesitated. "My friend… You couldn't hear a heartbeat."

"And baby brains aren't all developed the same way an adult's is," Natsu said, grateful to have been caught previously in an argument between Mavis and Zeref over how much sense it made to give him to Igneel for being a bad student as a toddler. "Being less grown doesn't make you less human."

"This is semantics."

"This is the heart of the issue."

Gray threw his hands up and dropped into one of the kitchen chairs. "It doesn't matter. It's wrong to have someone just to make their life hell."

Seeing Gray fuming, Natsu turned and grabbed Gray's tea kettle, setting it on the stove once it was full rather than heating the water with his magic. He turned on the burner, listening to the click of the electricity sending out sparks until the gas caught fire, then looked back at Gray.

"My parents died when I was only a few years old, but I don't remember any of that, or much of Zeref trying to raise me after he brought me back, and Igneel never mentioned any of it so I thought he must not have known where I came from. I always assumed I'd been unwanted, and I was left for dead in the woods and that it was the greatest stroke of luck I ever had that Igneel found me and took me in. That wasn't really the case. My parents loved me, and Zeref gave me to someone he knew would take better care of me than he could, but still, I spent most of my life thinking that I was unwanted and abandoned and left for dead.

"I never asked Zeref whether or not they did abortions back then, but if my parents really hadn't wanted me, and if they figured it would be easier to do me in before I left the womb rather than dump me in the wilderness after, I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't have known Igneel and found my way to Fairy Tail after. Just because you think someone might not have a good life doesn't mean they shouldn't have a chance."

Gray's expression had gone from fuming to seething hate, and Natsu let it drop there. The tea kettle whistled, so he turned his attention to making Gray his tea.

"I suppose you think you're unequivocally right about this," Gray said.

Not really. The same moral code that told Natsu that the abortion had to be prevented also told him he had picked a terrible way to stop it. It was hard to call yourself 'right' while you were actively in the middle of slipping medicine into someone's drink to keep them from finding out about their own health status.
"I think what your friend did was wrong."

"Well, I'll make sure to tell them not to bother with going to you for help then," Gray snapped. "I'll send them to Jellal instead. Or freaking Gajeel."

He should have left it drop. He knew Gray was mad and he would have rather convinced him to let the kid live then pushed the issue. Natsu kicked himself mentally. Letting his emotions get the better of him was not the right way to go about handling this issue, which probably meant he was the wrong person to handle it.

Setting tea down for Gray, Natsu said, "If your friend ever gets into that situation again, tell them I'd be happy to help look after the kid."

Gray's voice oozed sarcasm. "Yeah. A babysitter makes everything okay."

"I'd take the kid then, if they hate having it so much."

Gray turned and looked away, no longer meeting Natsu's gaze at all.

"Well, the kid's dead, and that friend of yours isn't here, so it's not like fighting does anything. What do you want for lunch?"

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No telling Natsu. Not now or ever. That was abundantly clear. Confiding in someone would have to wait until Jellal returned after all.

Gray was grateful for Natsu's willingness to let the subject abruptly drop. He didn't need anyone calling him a killer, even if they didn't know they were talking about him specifically.

Natsu changed to subject to Zeref. He'd been out to the edge of town to pay his volatile brother another visit, and he was building some sort of looking glass now that, despite being confined to a special chamber in that tower of his, would be able to let one see anywhere in the world.

Gray wasn't sure if it was a good idea or a bad one to let Zeref keep coming up with things. With Archive magic at his disposal, an entire empire across the sea that still bowed to him despite his stepping down to the throne, and a dozen other kingdoms on the continent that were still scared enough of him to offer up whatever resources he requested whether he made threats or not, the access he had to research material was terrifying. At least for the time being, with Mavis making a point of checking in on him ten times as often as Natsu, all that creative energy was focused on things that were either beneficial or merely intended for curiosity.

The subject was a good one. Between easy access to research material and a much smaller scope for his projects than defying the laws of nature and reviving the dead or rewriting history, Zeref could propose a half a dozen theories in a year, and then bring half of them out of the realm of the theoretical. Most of Magnolia politely ignored the four-hundred year old black mage conducting erratic but mostly harmless experiment just a few miles away, so whenever someone broke that unspoken rule, there was a lot of new activity on Zeref's part to talk through.

His looking glass project was going well. At Mavis's insistence he had delayed it to include an automatic censor, lest any of the young men in town realize that Zeref's latest contraption was perfect for spying on girls in the bathhouse, or the privacy of their rooms. Zeref, who was a bigger picture person and never even considered such details, had apparently been surprised to realize that his latest idea did indeed possess the capabilities for that.
The chamber where he was working on the looking glass was inside a much larger scale construction, which Alvarez citizens regularly visited to help with. It wasn't yet complete but still loomed over the town, and the people ignored it even harder than they ignored Zeref himself. If forced to acknowledge it, they would insist it was actually a good thing, because it brought in a sort of tourism from Alvarez men who came each summer to help with the construction.

It was a revised version of the R-System, slightly smaller scale and aesthetically redesigned so as not to look too familiar to those residents who had previously been tangled up in the fully functional thing. (Zeref had learned it was a touchy subject after asking Jellal how well the tower worked—since he'd assumed it was impossible to power and always looked at it as a theoretical that could be used as a stepping stone towards his 'revive the dead' project.) That it's function, to divide a serious ailment between multiple people to make it easier to treat, was adapted from the previous tower was also something that not too many people were privy too. Gray suspected that Jellal worked all of that out, but then half the reason Jellal was always off on some lengthy job or another was because he avoided Zeref like the plague, so there was no talking to him about that one.

The research projects and all of Zeref and Mavis's antics regarding it took up hours of discussion, but once that topic was done, the subject matter as a whole went downhill. Compared to the two towers, there wasn't much else Zeref was working on of interest. His water purifying project was delayed indefinitely while he tried to figure out how to make it serve it's intended purpose without also having a strange effect on the wildlife. His resign of communication lacrima so that it could work with Archive Magic had gone swimmingly, but he was uninterested in creating a third device, so until Warren finished reviewing the blueprints and making a more user-friendly version to present to the Council for review, it was effectively two large contraptions that could be used for him and Mavis to communicate and while she was at the guild and he was in the lab.

"I think he's mostly interested in everything that went wrong than with providing clean water, at this point. Holdover from all the etherious experiments, I guess. He likes stuff that messes with biographies."

"You mean biology, right?"

"It's one of those words."

It never ceased to amaze Gray how different biological brothers were. Zeref redesigned his device from bringing the dead back to life in order to create an entirely new divide and conquer strategy for the world of medicine, and Natsu didn't even know the word biology. Who knew how different the Redfox twins would be when they grew up?

Since the subject of Zeref was running dry, they switched to talking about Gajeel and Levy and their kids, then how Evergreen was totally not dying for a child or anything but wouldn't object to having one, and Elfman, who thought that being a father was manly.

It was dangerous territory, but Natsu never asked about the possibility of Gray and Juvia and children, or about Gray's fake friend. With all that consideration on Natsu's part, Gray kicked himself the moment he went and said, "I'm surprised you and Lucy never tried for a kid, since you both like them so much."

The way Natsu froze, you would think Gray had confessed to murdering a baby, which Natsu did think he'd done—even if he didn't know if was Gray they'd talked about earlier. Then, grinning far too widely for someone who'd just made such a pained expression, Natsu said, "Well, we split before getting married. I know the guild is building a tradition of shotgun weddings right now, but she was a rich girl, remember? She was too proper to let me get her pregnant before I even proposed. Did you know Mavis is afraid of having a kid? Even though she started growing again. She says I'm proof
Zeref shouldn't be trusted with kids, so she's not sure what to do about having one with him. But the thing is, I'm not sure it'll cross his mind to get in bed with her until she suggests it. Last time I asked him what he thought of her looks, he commented on how it was odd how much she grew since the curse was broken even though 'most women are done with the bulk of their growth by the time they hit puberty.' He probably doesn't even notice she has boobs just 'cause it's not an 'anomaly'."

No one ever successful learned why Natsu and Lucy split up, and for a moment Gray wondered if he'd accidentally stumbled on the reason. Lucy was good to kids, but she was also vain, and by all accounts her mother's health had always been worse after she was born. It was possible she'd been afraid to have children. It was also possible they broke up over any other disagreement, and Natsu just didn't like to be reminded. The whole guild had lobbed theories at the two before, and that was the first time he'd seen Natsu or Lucy react that way.

Since Lucy was the one to call things off, Gray filed away the idea that he should ask her about it later. For the time being, he could roll with the subject change.

"I can't believe you've put me in a position where I have to defend him, but in Zeref's defense, her chest didn't grow that much. Besides, he did find someone decent to take care of you for him."

Natsu nodded his approval at the accepted change in subject. "I think Mavis wants a good father, not a good adoption coordinator. Besides, the way she sees it, he had no way of knowing that Igneel wasn't a man-eater who just knew better than to try and chow down on an immortal, and agreeing to send me to the future was 'highly irresponsible' because he only assumed that whoever handled the other end of the gate would know what they were doing. And then he lost track of the dates and wasn't there when I came out the other end."

"I thought it was weird that he didn't meet back up with you for seven whole years."

"Yeah. I mean, to be fair, I'd lose track of time if I had to wait four centuries and all when it wasn't safe for me to hang around society too long."

"You really don't mind?" Gray asked. Zeref's tinkerings were a subject that people rarely ever touched on, and Zeref himself was something that only Mavis and Natsu discussed without hesitation, and mostly with each other. He'd never asked before. "After everything he did to you… And he did take a lot of thoughtless risks…"

"Well, I guess I kinda owe it to him that I'm alive. And he takes good care of that book I'm tied to. Besides… he's not… I mean, he's a lot better now, but that curse really messed with his head, y'know? Sometimes he still gets himself mixed up with thinking two opposite things."

Gray's alarm must have shown on his face, because Natsu started talking faster. "Little things. He doesn't have any major contradictions anymore. Just little things. And anyway… well… there are still some things that he did to you guys that I'm mad about… Like Deliora and attacking Gramps, but Tartaros acted on its own, and he wasn't ordering around those creeps who enslaved Erza and Jellal either. And with the curse…"

Natsu fell silent.

"What?"

"The little contradictions… how much do you think they're a result of the curse? It's normal for people to not be perfectly consistent, right? When Zeref contradicts himself bad, he doesn't remember saying one thing or the other opposite, but the little things he laughs at me for pointing out."
"Yeah. Most people have a few things they do or say that don't line up."

"So… what about if you didn't want to hurt anyone, but there was someone who was gonna die, and the only way you knew how to save them was to do something really underhanded to someone else? Someone you didn't want to hurt."

They weren't talking about Zeref anymore. Since Natsu hadn't pressed Gray for the name of his fake friend, Gray refrained from asking Natsu what he'd gotten himself into. "Are you killing them?"

"No. No one should die. But… it's a really serious betrayal. And the person you would have to do it to doesn't even think you're saving anything worthwhile."

Maybe they were talking about Zeref after all. He wasn't as bad as he used to be, but Gray didn't know anyone else Natsu could betray who might be so flippant about the sanctity of life. Jellal, maybe, when he was brainwashed, but otherwise it was mostly Zeref.

"What would you hurt? Just their feelings?"

"And your relationship with that person. And maybe take away a lot of their control over their own lives."

What did Zeref do? Did Natsu actually plan to lock his brother up? No one dared try, but if Natsu knew a way to hold him and went to the Council with his method…

"For how long?"

"Um… No more than a year. But there would be some… results from what happened. A reminder."

"Well if it's just a reminder, then fuck him. Save whoever he's screwing over, and let him deal with the consequences of whatever he did."

"What if the whole incident was someone else's fault, though?" Natsu asked. "Zeref… um… there was an accident with one of his experiments and… Nevermind."

"No. Not nevermind. Did Zeref kill someone?"

"No. Mostly he just made some weird stuff happen to frogs. No one's dying because of him. It doesn't matter. Forget I said anything."

"Natsu."

"Erza," Natsu said. "You think she plans on tying Jellal down soon? I know he's still making up a different reason not to get married every time he comes home, but you see that look she gets whenever she sees the twins, right? Sooner or later, she's gonna bully him into settling down over their own kids."

Gray shook his head in exasperation. He'd been so mad at Natsu earlier for not looking at his situation from the lens Gray needed in a sympathizer, and now he'd done the exact same thing. Natsu's relationship with his brother was a mess of concern, pity, discomfort, gratitude, smothered resentment, and a desire to find whatever sibling bond they lost when a dragon temporarily took his life, and so long as Natsu insisted he had the situation under control, Gray needed to not cut his way into the tangled web those two wove for themselves.

They both had things that they didn't want to fully confess to, and he would respect that.
"Yeah. Well, everyone knows Jellal's not going to get past whatever block he's struggling with now if she doesn't give him a push."

Natsu grinned. "You think? I bet you she's not gonna wait much longer?"

"You know something I don't."

"Mm... Maybe."

That shit eating grin he gave should have annoyed Gray, but instead he found himself grinning back. It had been a month now, and Natsu did for him had turned into some grand prank. So maybe his motives were innocent after all, and maybe Gray liked seeing him smile, even if it was because he had a one up on someone in a conversation.

"Well? Out with it."

"Nuh-uh. She doesn't know I know, and she'll kill me if she finds out I found out. She said yesterday that she's counting on Jellal coming home sometime this week. You'll have to hear it after she does it to him."

"Does what?"

Natsu's grin stretched wider.

"Okay. That does it!"

Gray leapt across the table to try and grab at Natsu, only to flip the furniture over and cause both of them to tumble to the floor. Gray had the good fortune to land on Natsu, but Natsu landed on his back and winded himself.

"Are you alright?" Gray asked, scrambling to get off and shove the overturned table aside. His neighbor in the apartment bellow was hitting the ceiling with something, but Gray ignored the noise complaint, focus entirely on Natsu gasping for air.

Natsu coughed, gasped, gasped again, and then his next cough turned into a laugh.

A laugh? Gray's whole body sagged in relief. Not that he thought Natsu was frail, but he didn't want to hurt him. Especially not after inviting him over for the holidays.

Natsu lay on the floor, alternating between short spurts of laughter and deep gasps of air, and Gray smiled down at him. Really, whatever the reason, he didn't think he minded Natsu getting more involved in his life.

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Natsu had Gray's blessings to save the kid. Kind of. Sort of. In a really twisted way that he knew Gray wouldn't think counted once he knew what Natsu was really asking about. But for the time being, it was a load of Natsu's chest.

Talk of couples having kids mercifully petered out. Natsu hadn't dared be the one to stray away from the subject when Gray led into it, hoping that it was a sign he regretted calling off his own first shot at parenthood. He'd known that sooner or later Lucy would come up, but that hurdle had easily been passed. The hurdle of winning Gray's forgiveness when he learned what Natsu did, hopefully, wouldn't be too much greater.
Until that time came, Natsu would appreciate Gray's friendship while he still had it.

In the interest of that, they had a confetti throwing contest to try and get one another coated in the stuff, and popped open the sparkling juice as midnight neared.

There was no need to count the seconds until the clock struck twelve. Gray's apartment wasn't particularly close to the guild hall, but Natsu could hear the party from blocks away. When the guild roared at midnight, Natsu and Gray clinked their glasses together and drank.

It was a far less eventful hailing of the new year than they would have had at the guild, but it kept Gray away from alcohol and bar brawls. And Natsu didn't mind spending so much time alone with Gray. If he was ever forgiven for what he was doing, he would need to find more reasons to spend time with Gray down the road.

That was looking to be a big if, because only second later Natsu realized that his betrayal was going to run much deeper than he'd been prepared to risk. What he was doing to a friend was already bad, but it became a thousand times worse when, after throwing back his drink, Gray gave Natsu a coy smile and leaned in to kiss him.

Chapter End Notes

I've always imagined that if you put Zeref and Jellal together under non-combative circumstances, Zeref would want the chance to talk about the tower. In his flashback, it seemed apparent that he didn't have a firm idea for how one would go about powering something of that magnitude. I like to picture him getting all excited by the idea that someone got his idea up and running, and wanting to know who well it worked with reviving whoever it was Jellal wanted to revive. Jellal would just stand there awkwardly, not knowing how to admit that Zeref was the person he tried to revive, and finally excuse himself by bringing up the magic explosion issue, which Zeref hadn't accounted for in his construction plans because he'd never considered that you could actually gather that much magic.
Kissing was a mistake.

Not the kind of mistake Gray usually made on New Year's, where he got so drunk that he made out with whoever was closest. (Juvia, most often.) Thanks to someone and their overbearing ways, Gray didn't have alcohol to blame for what happened. He was sober. Dead sober when he kissed Natsu, and in doing so he went and made things between them awkward. Natsu spent the rest of his time in the apartment not meeting Gray's eyes, and declined to stay until dawn.

Gray woke shortly after noon on the first of the year furious with himself. Natsu was gone, and left only a cup of now flat juice for Gray to drink.

He downed the cup and tossed it into the sink, flinching when he heard glass shatter. What a cruddy way to start the new year. He couldn't even go to the guild to get wasted and forget about his screw up, because the bar would be unattended. Everyone else would still be too hung over from a party where anything they did wrong, they could blame on the booze if called out for.

It was just that he thought there might have been something to it. Natsu made so many nice gestures over the past month and passed up so many chances to prank Gray while his guard was down. Gray started to wonder he'd caught Natsu's fancy, and then decided he didn't mind if he had.

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Gray knew that the guild would be closed and everyone out of commission, but since no other bars opened early, he looped back and checked anyway, and the guild was indeed closed. By this point he had used up whatever energy he could summon with his current mood, and he probably could have picked up a six-pack at a store on the way home, but detours were too much effort.

To his surprise, the door was cracked open when he returned to the apartment. His heart skipped a beat, wondering if Natsu had returned to hear him out.

He found Jellal inside instead, sitting at his kitchen table and staring vacantly at a fresh mug of coffee, and it took Gray a moment to remember that was still a good thing.

"Hey." Jellal smiled for Gray. "Natsu thought you might want to talk to me."

"Oh."

"Did something happen?"

"No. Natsu's avoiding me. That's all."

"Is that so?" Jellal wasn't so easily flustered that getting dragged into someone else's drama threw him off. The extreme look of discomfort on his face that looked out of place to Gray.

"Don't tell me. You jumped on the chance to come over when Natsu mentioned me because you're avoiding someone."

"Well… no one in particular. Just most of the guild."
Gray shook his head in exasperation. Jellal being reluctant to socialize was nothing new. He hadn't been able to turn down the offer to join Erza's guild after being granted pardon after the war, but he hadn't entirely overcome the notion that he had any right to enjoy himself either. He jumped on any criminal suppression job that came, sometimes inviting Erza along, sometimes dragging Erik, sometimes going on his own. Most of the guild he didn't seem comfortable around, like getting to interact with them was something he had yet to earn. It was pure chance that Gray had managed to befriend Jellal.

"You skipped the party then?" Gray asked. "When did you get back?"

"Yesterday. Erza talked me into going to the party by saying I would get to see you, actually."

There was no accusation in Jellal's voice. A hint of worry instead. Gray hadn't been there, and now Natsu was asking people to check in on Gray for him.

"I just felt like something quiet. Without Juvia."

"I buy half of that."

"Natsu's been weirdly nice to me, and the idea of spending the evening with just him came up, and I got too into it," Gray said. "Way too into it. Whatever he's playing at, I read it wrong."

"Well, whatever you're fighting over, I'm sure he'll have forgotten about it by this time tomorrow."

"I kissed him."

Jellal did his best not to grin. "He'll probably have forgotten that too."

"How sure about that are you? Because he spent the past month following me around constantly, and today he asked you to check up on me instead."

This did seem to surprise Jellal, but not alarm him. "I was told there was something you mentioned wanting to talk to me about."

Gray paused, thinking over everything he and Natsu discussed. "Oh. Yeah..." He only mentioned wanting to send 'a friend' to Jellal, but Natsu must have misremembered. Or assumed that Gray wanted to direct Jellal to that friend, perhaps. "It's a little weird, but... I did have something I needed to talk to you about."

In all his stressing over Natsu and the kiss, he'd forgotten how poorly the other attempt at opening up to Natsu went. Speaking to Jellal about... about that would be good.

"You turned pale fast," Jellal commented. "Sit. I made coffee. Do you want a cup?"

It was almost evening, but Gray nodded and said nothing about the fact that it was his coffee beans and machine that Jellal used. Jellal grabbed a mug from Gray's cupboard, filled it, and set it on the table.

Taking a seat and a sip, Gray noted how odd it was now to have a drink that lacked that added flavor Natsu mixed in.

What was that anyway? Some sort of herbal tea? It did seem that Natsu thought something was medically wrong. Gray needed to ask what. While it was great that Natsu cared, an actual explanation on what he was worried about...
While it was great that Natsu cared…

He’d thought Natsu was someone he might be able to talk to about what happened…

"Actually, my story's and old one by this point. Before we get caught up in it, did anything happen at the guild? I'm already regretting spending the night with Natsu, after how it turned out. I didn't miss anything big last night, did I?" Gray asked.

There was no surprise on Jellal's face at the abrupt subject avoidance. Gray and Natsu both were terrible with talking about things that troubled them. He rolled with it.

"How are things with you and Juvia?"

"My question first."

"My answer depends on yours."

"Same as ever. She comes by most days, and I do whatever is the easiest with her mood. Humor her when she doesn't want too much, and back off once she gets pushy. Why?"

"I keep wondering if I'll come back from one job or another and you'll have decided it's less effort to give in completely," Jellal confessed. "So this thing you need to talk about has nothing to do with her?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

Jellal nodded, making up his mind. "Erza is pregnant."

"Since when?"

"Since the last time I was here, I hope." He gave a lopsided grin that said he had no concerns that the father might be anyone else. "She wanted me there when she told anyone else, and I think she'd murder me if I took any longer with that last job than I did, because any day now she's going to show through her clothes."

Well, that explained why Erza was as big an advocate as Natsu for taking low risk jobs as of late. There was no way she told Jellal first, though. He had been gone three full months. Left right after Gray saw Porlyusica, and before he could process the whole thing enough to realize he needed someone to talk to. Even if it took Erza half that time to realize she was pregnant, she would have been too panicked not to go to someone for help. Bisca, probably.

Come to think of it, that was probably what Natsu had been hinting at the other night. There must have been some way his sharper sense let him catch on. He was good with kids, but Gray couldn't picture him being the one Erza might confide in.

"Your fiancée is gonna be pissed."

"Well, I think I'm in more danger of being killed by Erza if I don't make her my fiancée. So we can let that joke die now. Please."

"No one's ever gonna let the fiancée thing go."

Jellal sighed. "Fine. But maybe you could mention it less?"

"Maybe. Does this mean you're going to stick around?"
"I suppose I should." Jellal leaned forward, propping his cheek up with his hand and resting his elbow on the table. "Depending on how much this all costs, I'll need to take some work. But it wouldn't be fair to leave Erza."

Jellal regularly took SS missions, and for as well as those paid, he could probably retire and be set for life. But that was Gray's estimate for if Jellal stayed a bachelor forever. Since Jellal had not only given in to his desire for Erza, but was about to become a family man, he would have more costs. How much did a kid cost, anyway? Gray never thought far enough into the parenting process to wonder about that.

"So that's what you missed at the party," Jellal said. "That and Laxus getting drunk and confessing his love to a photo of one of the Councilors in the day's newspaper. I'm sure Mira is giving him hell for it right now. What did you really want to talk about?"

"Did Erik do anything drunk?"

"Erik doesn't get drunk. He's immune to poison."

"But alcohol—"

"He's immune to poison," Jellal repeated with a finality that reminded Gray that he never drank. "I told you Erza's pregnant. Now what did you want to talk to me about?"

Gray bit his lip, looking past Jellal to his bedroom door. Too far away. And even if Jellal weren't already between it and him, the bastard was too fast. No escaping, then. He could either make something up, or come clean and pray that this friend handled it more kindly than the last one did.

"Gray?"

"I was pregnant."

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Jellal sat through the story with an impassive expression, and was silent as Gray gushed about everything that came with the incident. His confusion over how it came to pass at all. The sick, twisting feeling in his gut when he saw how Gajeel managed just fine when Gray had panicked. The way it stuck with him, and he sometimes found himself wondering what the child could have grown into if he'd been better suited for it. The fear over how Natsu reacted, and how others might.

And when it was well past twilight and Gray was all out of words and tears, Jellal finally said, "I'm sorry."

"It was the right call, right?"

"I'm not all knowing."

"I didn't have long to make up my mind. It would have been forever. And I can always have another kid. When I'm older and married and know what the hell I'm doing. But it wouldn't be that kid, you know?"

"There's no guarantee they would have lived," Jellal said. "Without knowing how it happened, and considering you lack a few key design elements meant to help with child bearing, it could have easily ended badly. There's no reason to think that your choice was the only thing in their way."

"Natsu said—"
"Forget what Natsu said," Jellal instructed. "Natsu punched me into a coma the last time he had something to correct me on. He gets entirely too passionate about the things that matter to him."

That glossed over the little detail of Natsu having been mad at Jellal for attempting to murder Erza in cold blood, but in a way, it was a comforting reminder. Even before they knew about Jellal having been brainwashed, Natsu was willing to forgive Jellal on the grounds that he’d been nothing but good intentions since then. If ever Natsu found out that Gray was talking about himself the other day, then he’d forgive Gray eventually. Maybe Gray could offer to help Jellal here and there with his kid to show that he didn't hate children in general.

Then again, managing little kids didn’t come as naturally to Gray as it did Natsu, and messing a baby up for life was an easy thing to accidentally do. Maybe he would do Jellal and Erza a favor by not touching their kid until it was older instead.

"Natsu should have been the one to get pregnant."

"Everyone keeps mentioning him," Jellal said. "Gajeel pulled me aside last night to say that 'even if it sucked' I should go to Natsu if I needed parenting advice. Which was… Well…"

"You'd think Gajeel would be the one you'd go to and awkwardly ask for help with, right? Since he's the one with two little nightmares to manage."

"I've seen him try to manage them. He wasn't on my list of people to keep in mind if I needed help." Jellal paused, reassessing that assertion. "Depending on how bad Erza's mood swings get, I may ask for help with that."

"I hate to break it to you, but no one's going to help with Erza when she gets violent."

Jellal sighed, looking down at the table. "I was afraid of that."

"Hey, man. No one made you bed a monster."

Jellal laughed at that, but when the humor died down, he regarded Gray with concern.

"Are you going to be okay?"

"I've held out alright the last few months. And I feel a lot better just getting that off my chest."

Jellal nodded, reaching out to take Gray's hand in his. "I'm going to be in town at least for a little while after Erza gives birth. If you need an ear again, I'll be here."

"Thanks."

"I still need to speak with Natsu about parenting advice. Want me to ask him about you while I'm at it?"

"Just mention the whole being glued to me for a month thing. Leave out the kiss."

Chapter End Notes

Seriously. There will be a while where it goes unmentioned, but that kiss is going to cause a lot of shit down the line.
In other news, I really like the idea of Jellal just letting himself into someone's home and offering them their own coffee. Musica (Rave Master) doing it is a mental image that also pleases me. Same for Sieg Hart, except I really can't see him legit doing it.

BTW, I don't remember the exact chapter, but starting soon-ish the chapters are gonna basically double in length. My usual norm is about 2-3k per chapter (closer to 2k) but somewhere along the line this story shot way up in average chapter size. More stuff transpiring on any given day than I'd normally write, mostly. I could probably break some of them into two (or three) chapters, but I don't like multiple chapters covering the same day in an mpreg if I can help it. You gotta keep the days moving so the pregnancy can actually develop, and this is already my slowest mpreg ever.

Just a heads up for people who like content more broken up.
Whatever Jellal said to Natsu, he was back again the next day and acting as though the kiss never happened. Natsu himself offered no explanation for his behavior, and Jellal could only say "he seemed to feel bad about something."

Something. Not 'leading you on and then bailing once you kissed him,' or 'playing with your head,' or 'starting some elaborate prank that you mistook for affection,' Just something.

Gray put up no further resistance, too busy analyzing every little action of Natsu's to pick a fight over them. What was behind each chuckle Natsu gave? What did it mean when Natsu wouldn't make eye contact? Were those times that he caught Natsu out of the corner of his eye watching him sadly because Natsu thought something was wrong? Because Natsu wanted him but panicked when he had his chance? Because he was still trying to mess with Gray's mind and found a new way to tear him up inside?

Weeks passed with no answer. Any attempt Gray made to become closer were bluntly shut down, and it grew more and more apparent that whatever Natsu's reason was for concerning himself so much with Gray's wellbeing, he didn't want it to turn into anything romantic.

Jellal was the least likely to know what was up, having been gone when Natsu's behavior changed, and by his account Erza didn't know and didn't care. Everything Natsu imposed on the group in Gray's interest was something she wanted to do with her baby, so whatever was going on, she wanted him to keep it up. Lucy was firmly of the mindset that it was a prank, but had no ideas as to what Natsu was angling for.

It took more than half the month of January, but Gray eventually got his answer, albeit from the last source he expected.

He was at the guild at the time. Jellal still preferred pretending he was Mysotgan, but it was hard to avoid everyone when your pregnant fiancée insisted that you be with her as much as possible and threw a fit about wanting to hang out with her friends as well. The compromise was that Jellal could hide in a back corner of the guild where Erza could easily call for him—for all the good that did. Unless he was occupied with another guild member, those who rarely got to speak to the former Wizard Saint, former Councilor, former fugitive, and former vigilante justice leader jumped at the opportunity. It was hard to be all those things and not attract attention wherever you went, be it from tabloids or estranged guildmates. So as much as possible, Jellal tried to find someone he was closer to who would hide in the corner with him

That day it was Gray, who wanted an excuse not to stay in a center table with Erza and took pity on Jellal after seeing him frantically shutting the guild doors on a Sorcerer Weekly photographer. So Gray was the first to see Jellal go pale and stiffly look in the direction of the guild entrance.

Half the reason Jellal was usually away was to appease his guilt complex, but the other half was to avoid the other infamous former criminal who lived in the area. And having spent so many years dedicating his efforts to tearing down all criminal activity related to Zeref, Jellal had a keener sense for the magic aura of that former criminal than most of the guild. His reaction gave Gray advanced warning that Zeref had left his lab to come and visit the town.
"Want me to distract him while you make your getaway?" Gray asked.

"He… just wants to see Mavis. Or Natsu, perhaps," was what came out of Jellal's mouth, but his eyes screamed yes.

"Mavis is out of town right now." As the ninth guild master following Makarov's (final) retirement, she had to leave from time to time to attend meetings. "He's probably here to see why she wouldn't answer his messages on that Archive Lacrima he made. I bet you five-thousand jewels he was too busy working on his latest theory when she stopped by to say goodbye and didn't hear when she said she'd be gone."

"How do you plan to determine that?"

"By asking him," Gray said. "Natsu's busy with the Redfox twins, so I'll stall Zeref until he can break away, alright?"

In reality, Zeref knew better than to talk to Jellal. Even if he wasn't the one who brainwashed Jellal or led the cult that enslaved him before that, appeasing him had been the driving motivation behind both acts, and thus Zeref as the source of all suffering was too deeply rooted in Jellal's subconscious. Conflict with Zeref, Jellal was as good for as anyone else, but asking him to deal amiably with Zeref? That hadn't gone well. That Jellal's brainwashing had implanted zealotry for Zeref as a justification for any wrongdoing he committed during that time didn't help.

Zeref was aware that most people were at least discomforted by his presence, and did his best not to impose too much. That meant giving Jellal a wide berth since learning just how severe Jellal's issues regarding him were. But Jellal's issues were too severe to realize that Zeref wasn't going to attempt to engage him without good cause, and giving him some other reason to believe that he would be left alone helped to prevent him from hyperventilating when Zeref entered the same room as him.

Jellal still looked nervous when Gray rose and walked out of the building. In all likelihood, he was worried that if he ever saw Gray again, he would be a changed man. Although this was placing too much mistrust on Zeref, he wasn't entirely wrong.

A block from the guild, Gray met his target. Zeref looked only mildly surprised to see Gray, but smiled upon recognizing him.

"Did you want to talk to me?"

"Kind of. Although if you're here for Mavis, I should tell you upfront that she's out of town."

"Oh." Zeref's smile faltered, and he glanced to his side. The houses nearest them had the shutters drawn. When Gray arrived at the guild half an hour earlier, there had been a couple laughing on the balcony, but they'd retreated inside since. "Well… That's alright. Is Natsu here?"

"Yeah. He should be out soon."

Zeref nodded. "How are you feeling, speaking of?"

Gray almost said he was as good as ever, until it struck him that most of Zeref's news came from either Natsu or Mavis. Sometimes Mavis brought him the paper—since the paperboy didn't dare go near the lab. Otherwise, it was only what they had to share with him that he heard. He rarely came into town and generally avoided people. Gray used to think that was a force of habit, until he caught onto how aware Zeref was that the town avoided him.

Zeref had only Natsu and Mavis's word to go on for how things were at the guild, and was known to
rarely converse with anyone else in Magnolia. If Natsu suspected something was wrong with Gray, even if he didn't want his theory to become widespread, there was a good chance that he shared it with Zeref, and that Zeref accepted it unquestioningly as the truth.

"A little off," Gray said. "Natsu's been taking good care of me, but he gets awkward and quiet whenever I ask if he knows what's going on. He must, because he always knows exactly what will help me feel better, but he won't explain it to me at all."

Zeref's eyes widened in alarm, then shut in a grimace.

"M-maybe…" Zeref opened his eyes again to look past Gray to the guild. "Maybe we can get him out here to explain it?"

For one last, blissfully ignorant second, Gray thought that he might have accidentally been right to guess that Natsu was too embarrassed to explain the situation, when in reality it was only the older Dragneel brother who found the situation an awkward one.

"I don't think he's going to. Maybe you could?"

"O-oh. Alright… then." Zeref looked around and, spotting a bench, dragged Gray over to it and brushed the snow off before gesturing for him to sit down. "Okay. Um… Remember that time you came to complain to me about how an exposed part of the S-System tower was casting a glare on your house, and you and Natsu got into a fight?"

"Not really."

Zeref dropped onto the bench beside Gray. "You punched Natsu in the stomach, and then he grabbed your arm on his way down, and flipped you over into an artificial pond in the yard."

"What did you poison it with?"

"Nothing. Why can I not handle fluids without people assuming they're poison? I am the only person I have ever deliberately poisoned."

Gray held silent to wait and see if Zeref might feel the need to clarify on who he'd accidentally poisoned in the past. Instead, Zeref went ahead talking about his pond.

"The pond was a test environment for a water purification serum. I wanted to make sure it didn't harm wildlife before offering the serum to anyone who might spill it into, say, the ocean." Mavis must have pushed for Zeref to do that, because he didn't normally show so much caution for the safety of his experiments. "As it turns out, it does have an impact on the wildlife exposed to it. Even animals that only spent a short time in the water and didn't drink from it were affected."

"So you did poison me."

"I looked it up, and the official definition state that a poison is a substance that causes illness or death. It doesn't count as a poison if the side effect of exposure is impregnation, because that's not an illness. So no, I did not."

"That kind of technicality doesn't…" Gray froze, Zeref's words sinking in.

Impregnation as a side effect. Of freaking course. He fell into some shifty test pond set up by the resident mad scientist who had a long history of defying the laws of nature with his experiments on living things. Zeref could bring the freaking dead back to life. If anyone would accidentally come up with a way to impregnate men, it would be him.
Mystery solved. Gray was 'blessed' with a kid instead of Natsu because he didn't sock Natsu hard enough to send him flying into that pond.

Mind reeling over this discovery alone, Gray couldn't even begin to connect the information with any unusual behavior in the past few months. He sat in silence while Zeref hastily carried on with his explanation.

"I'm not entirely sure who the father is. I've been running tests for some time now trying to figure out the details of how it works, but I don't have enough data yet on when someone exposed to enough of the serum comes in contact with multiple people while still susceptible to the full effects. So it could be Natsu or... um... me. Natsu told me—my condolences—that you lost the first child. Given the timing, there shouldn't be a third... Well assuming you don't lose this—I'm really sorry. I'm not used to dealing with losses where there's anyone left around me to grieve. I don't have a lot of practice talking to people about it."

Gray, unlike Jellal, had no Zeref specific traumas that made it hard to be near him. He just found discussions with Zeref irritating. For the first time since moving to Magnolia, Zeref had something Gray desperately needed to hear, and he kept beating around the bush and awkwardly losing his spot on the subject.

"Is this going to keep happening?" Gray asked, doing his best to keep his voice from increasing in pitch.

"No. The effects wear off after a while. Maybe... around a year and a half for humans? You're the only human exposed to the serum in high enough quantities so far, but given the trend in every other species I observed, it shouldn't take any longer than that, so after the current child is born, it won't happen again."

"But if I lose it...?"

"In another few months, you would become pregnant again. Oh, but you don't need to worry about what happens if the serum wears off while you're still pregnant. It does most of its work upfront, so you should be able carry to term just fine. All creatures possess some magic, even if they can't consciously harness it, and it's almost always enough to support something like this."

A few months. If Gray assumed that meant only two, and given that he'd fallen into that pond in June, and if he was pregnant now, that could be as many as six more times that he would need to nip a pregnancy in the bud to come out of Zeref's mess intact. Just thinking of how shaken the first time left him...

Gray looked to the guild, wondering if Jellal would forgive him if he ran straight to their table with Zeref in tow, still trying to explain the situation. He needed to talk to Jellal. He needed someone to tell him everything would be alright now.

It would be alright, right? He hadn't even begun to feel sick yet, so he couldn't be too far along in the pregnancy. And if Natsu was sticking to him because Zeref wanted him to watch for symptoms...

Looking back to Zeref, Gray asked, "Are you sure I'm pregnant?"

"Natsu was confident of it. I can scan for signs of fetal activity, if you want."

Without knowing how pregnant he was, Gray didn't need to hear about whether or not Zeref's magic determined the fetus to be active. "No. I'm just... curious how Natsu noticed before I did."

He'd noticed no symptoms, so how did Natsu come to that conclusion?
"Scent, probably. I don't suppose there's any reason to suspect it if one didn't know that you could be pregnant, but a lot of people in the guild are having children right now, so he would know how it changes a person's scent. Or he might have heard a heartbeat. If he spent a lot of time alone with you, there would be few enough suspects for him to pin down where the sound is coming from. I'm really shocked he didn't tell you. I thought you were the one to ask for that medicine."

"What… What medicine?"

Zeref looked down at this hands and sighed. "I was afraid of you would ask that."

"What medicine, Black Mage?"

"Something for nausea. Natsu brought the recipe from your guild's physician and told me she said it was safe to take when pregnant."

The morning sickness potion Gray had been offered after that first diagnosis! At the time, Gray had been too shocked to pay it any heed. If he'd sampled it back then…

If he'd sampled it back then, he would have recognized the scent and taste as Natsu added it to all those drinks. The tea and milk and warm cider that he insisted he prepare for Gray in lieu of any drinks that you were supposed to avoid while pregnant.

Natsu hadn't been so kind to him the past two months because of any affection for Gray. He'd done it to ensure that he could suppress Gray's symptoms and keep him from damaging the fetus.

How long had that been going on? Gray tried to count the weeks, and then switched to days when he didn't like that first number. How pregnant had he been when Natsu started sneaking him that medicine?

Forget about running to Jellal for moral support. He needed to see Porlyusica immediately

"Sorry." Gray stood. "I have to go. Can we continue this discussion later?"

"Sure. I'm not hard to find."

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Gray had worked himself to tears by the time he reached Porlyusica's door. What if it was too late? Why would Natsu do that to him?

He'd trusted Natsu. Even if he had long suspected that all that niceness was setup for a prank, he'd never suspected Natsu of something so underhanded. There was a world of difference between messing with someone's drink as a joke and slipping them medicine over the course of weeks to keep them from finding out they were pregnant. Had he planned to keep Gray in the dark until a baby fell out from between his legs? Did he think Gray wouldn't suspect anything even as his body blew up and his emotions spiraled out of control?

It already felt like Gray had lost all control of his emotions. He practically threw himself on Porlyusica and sobbed when she opened her door.

She didn't even snap at him, and that's how Gray knew he looked like a wreck. "My goodness child. What trouble have you gotten yourself into this time?"

"Happened again," Gray gasped out between sobs. "I can't… If it's too late…"
Grabbing him by the arm, Porlyusica pulled him into her hut, sat him down on the bed, and handed him a glass of water.

"Drink this."

The last two months of drinking things other people handed him hadn't gone so well, but Gray gave no protest and did as ordered. He was counting on her to save him, and if she said he needed to drink something, he would do it.

It took him a minute, and he nearly choked once when a sob hit him just as he tried to swallow.

"What was that?"

"Water. Now tell me what happened."

"I… Z-Zeref… Experiment went wrong… And that pregnancy… h-happened again."

"Hold on." Porlyusica dug through a cabinet and handed Gray a flask or red liquid, which bubbled when she mixed a powder in. "This is the same potion as last time. Drink it, and we can go through everything while you explain with details."

This one Gray downed so fast he felt it almost come right back up, and it took several minutes of gasping and willing his stomach to cooperate before he could speak again.

Porlyusica sat patiently as Gray stumbled over words and thoughts trying to explain Zeref's screw up and Natsu's betrayal and the terrifyingly real possibility that he was not only pregnant, but that it was too late to do anything about it.

Although having to sit still to keep from throwing up had given Gray some semblance of calm minutes before, he fell apart again towards the end of the story. For as often as he had to stop to futilely try and rub his eyes clear, he almost missed the grimace Porlyusica gave.

With a sickening jolt, Gray recalled that it was her potion that Natsu had secretly given him. Even if Zeref was the one making if for Natsu, he would have spoken to her.

"Were y-you in o-o-on it?" Gray asked. "You… you were m-mad at me… for…"

"No. That fool boy came to me already aware of your condition, and I had no reason to think he found out any way but hearing it from you. He asked for the potion because he thought his brother might have dragged more than just you into the mess, or that's what he told me, anyway."

Relief that Porlyusica wasn't secretly working against him gave way to a vague sense of comradery for not having been the only one Natsu tricked, but that only reminded Gray that Natsu betrayed him, and another sob bubbled up and cut off anything he might have said.

"Enough time has passed," Porlyusica decided, passing Gray an empty jar. "Collect a sample and bring it back. You haven't been nauseous lately, right?"

"N-not really."

"Not really, or not at all?"

He'd been sick once or twice. Usually after something prevented Natsu from messing with his food, Gray realized. If he woke up feeling nauseas, it was because he'd barred Natsu from the apartment the night before and made his own dinner.
"I… d-don't know…"

"Well then, we only have Zeref's word that you're pregnant."

Zeref had been many, many things at his worst, but a liar was never among them. Vague as all hell, sure, but never an outright liar. It was some odd bit of moral code that his curse hadn't required Zeref squelch, so even when he shrugged at the idea of genocide, he still wouldn't lower himself as to be dishonest. Too bad his shitty ass little cunt of a fucking brother couldn't say the same.

Gray rubbed his eyes once more on the way to the bathroom and vowed to strike all fond memories of Natsu from record. To think that earlier in the month, he thought he'd fallen for the bastard! Ha!

The last time Gray did this, his piss had been almost neon in tint. Not it's normal yellow, but not something he would be too worried to see come out of him if he hadn't drunken a funky diagnostic potion. This time, he didn't doubt that there was an alien green color. He tried to convince himself that was there the last time as he brought the jar out for Porlyusica.

Every second she spent analyzing the sample could be one second less that they had to resolve things. If it wasn't already too late. Gray sat anxiously on the bed, picking at the edges of his nails while he waited for her verdict. His cheeks were finally drying up, and given the headache coming on, he felt he must have cried himself into dehydration. His sobs had tampered down to pathetic hiccups, but each jolt they gave him made him aware of his body all over again, and afraid of what might be inside it.

He couldn't do this.

Gray looked to the door, wondering about the wisdom of running away. He could take the most dangerous job he could find solo, get himself beaten to a bloody pulp, and if no one ever told him that he was pregnant and his magic—the thing that comprised his life—depended on keeping the thing that would destroy his life alive, then he might get lucky that wake up in the hospital to the news that he'd miscarried in the fight, but would otherwise make a full recovery.

Before he could make up his mind to bolt, Porlyusica dumped the sample, washed her hands, and dug through her drawers until she found a stethoscope. Last time, she had been confident enough that Gray was too early in his pregnancy for any risks.

"Lie down," she instructed. "I'm going to listen for a heartbeat."

Gray did as he was told, and was surprised when Porlyusica had to pull a shirt up to reach his stomach. Usually, when his mind started racing, he forgot he was supposed to leave clothes on. This time, he'd forgotten to take them off.

It wasn't necessarily the coldness of the metal end of the stethoscope that made a shiver run down Gray's spine, nor was it the winter air seeping through the crack under Porlyusica's door and onto his exposed skin. It was fear, plain and simple.

"Stop that," Porlyusica ordered when Gray hiccuped. "How do you expect me to hear clearly with that noise?"

Was she kidding him?

Gray hiccuped once more—it wasn't like he chose when that happened—before a glare from Porlyusica told him she was serious. Unsure what else to do when he really did need her to listen and verify that there was nothing to be concerned with, Gray held his breath.
The rush of blood thudded in Gray's ears, drowning out any possible silence, and it took him a moment to realize it was his own racing heart causing the sensation. He wondered how Porlyusica could tell his heart from a potential fetus's, and his silent question was answered a split second later when Porlyusica snatched his wrist and felt his pulse as she continued to listen.

Gray counted his own heartbeat as held his breath. One. Two. Three. They went by fast, and he was over sixty and not yet stressed with how long it had been since his last inhale when Porlyusica pulled the stethoscope back.

She tugged Gray's shirt down and turned to put the stethoscope away, and didn't look at him as she said "I'm sorry. It's been too long."

Chapter End Notes

Maybe it’s just the sadist in me, but I had a fun time describing Gray in total breakdown mode. The part where he’s out of tears and just hiccups instead of sobbing was nice >:)

Kinda mentioned this in notes before, but pretty much all previous iterations of this fic had Natsu as the one who was pregnant and unaware. Since I usually spotted flaws in the plot before I even started writing, I never really had to think much about how exactly to write him learning there was nothing he could do about being pregnant.. Something akin to the first chapter of this fic but with Natsu instead of Gray does exist in pencil scribbles in some notebook or another of mine, but that’s it.

As for why I made Gray the pregnant one after so many years of Natsu… Iunno. Pro-life/choice both come from a place of moral concern, and which side a person takes just comes down to how their life experiences and understanding of the world affect when they see life as beginning, and whether they care more about the mother or child, so it’s pretty easy to argue that any character could take either side on the issue and just emphasize that they want to protect something to keep them from seeming totally evil for their beliefs. (Meaning that without canon on their abortion stances, it’s easy to excuse both of them as taking either stance.) I guess I thought Natsu was more likely to panic and make a dumb move in how to stop Gray from aborting, while Gray was more likely to think things through rationally and try something less extreme. (Either of them not confronting something head on is a bit of a stretch, tbh, but I’m justifying it by saying that Natsu tried to deal with the “Gray will kill Frosch” thing without ever telling Rogue.)
Jellal had only met Porlyusica once, back when Erza first tempted him into bed, and he realized at the last second that someone like him claiming the virginity of a woman like her was unacceptable. His excuse hadn't been as bad as the time he feigned an engagement, but Erza had been unimpressed all the same, and impressed that opinion very painfully on Jellal. He hadn't been able to walk for a week after.

So at first it seemed odd when Erza pulled him aside and said Porlyusica was asking for him. But then Gray's name came up, and Jellal had a sinking feeling. Gray had indeed successfully delayed Zeref's arrival at the guild until Natsu was ready for him, but he hadn't returned to the guild afterward. This left Jellal in the awkward position of being in the room with Zeref and being open for conversation with guildmates he wasn't overly familiar with, most of whom wanted to talk about Zeref.

Any excuse to leave was a good one, but more important than that, one of the few guildmates of Erza's who Jellal had formed a friendship with needed him. And given that the friend just spoke to Zeref, who knew what damage he'd suffered?

Since he had Erza's blessings to go, Jellal left as fast as he could, and reached the little hut in the woods in under a half a minutes. Maybe it was a little disruptive to everyone he sped past to abuse Meteor in that way, but he could always brush it off by saying he was worried for Gray.

Three seconds later, when he knocked on the door and it immediately opened for him, that mild concern that made for a good excuse to get away from Zeref turned to deep worry.

The violent yelling that Jellal remembered from Porlyusica the last time he met her was nowhere to be found, replaced by a sullen silence. She nodded to Jellal and stepped back to let him see Gray.

The boy lay rigid on her bed. His eyes were puffed up red, and his face was splotchy. Whatever had transpired in the hours since he left the guild, he'd cried hard through it. From his chin down, he was as white as the snow outside. He stared vacantly at the ceiling, not so much as glancing away when Jellal called his name. The only time he moved was when he involuntarily hiccuped.

"I was told you knew about the last pregnancy," Porlyusica said.

"Did he need to… um… was he pregnant again?"

"Is he pregnant again. We didn't abort this one. There's no way to remove it without taking his magic away."

Jellal allowed himself one brief, selfish moment of satisfaction before being a proper, concerned friend.

In truth, Jellal had to search deep for reassuring comments to offer Gray when he heard about the abortion. It wasn't something he condoned, or would ever consider doing regardless of his circumstances. A life was a life was a life, and Jellal had deliberately trashed enough of those already. If another life was entrusted to him, he would do his best to ensure it was properly cared for, and not toss it out just because he wasn't sure he could give it the best life possible.
But Gray wasn't him, and Jellal wasn't so narrow-minded as to think that there was no validity whatsoever to Gray's concerns. He certainly wasn't about to tell a distraught friend in need of support that they were a terrible person. Especially since he knew Gray well enough to know that, however they might not have seen eye to eye on such a sticky subject, he wasn't a terrible person.

First and foremost, Gray was someone in need of support, so Jellal swallowed down all his own thoughts and feelings that Gray didn't need to hear and went to sit next to him, taking one of his pale hands.

"We'll figure something out," he said.

Gray blinked, and didn't look away from the ceiling.

"The upside, depending on how you want to look at it, is that his magic should help prevent any malformations, and so long as he doesn't suffer any serious physical trauma, there shouldn't be a miscarriage. It takes a lot for a wizard to have a bad pregnancy. They have more magic in them than most Earthlanders, so there's more to support the child."

Gray was too busy pretending to be a lifeless corpse to ask any questions regarding his health, so Jellal asked, "Would he still lose his magic if he miscarried?"

"Of course he would! You think his magic would only leave with the child if we removed it deliberately?"

"I don't know. It's magic. That seems like something it could differentiate between."

"The problem isn't that his magic doesn't want him to deliberately terminate the pregnancy. It's that his magic has accepted the fetus and temporarily bound itself to the child in order to ensure it lives until birth. Anything that ends the pregnancy before his magic is ready to unwind itself will strip him permanently. Even a premature labor could do it."

Speaking of striping Gray, Jellal noticed that his nudist friend was oddly clothed. He reached up and stroked Gray's hair, offering a sympathetic smile that went unseen.

"If you're willing to ask questions, then I can fill you in on everything he'll need to know. Catch him up once he's talking again. I'm not sure if he's listening now."

Jellal nodded. "Will he be alright?"

"There's nothing physically wrong with him. We even have an answer for how this happened now. Oh, do send Zeref to me later. I'd like to have a word with him."

Jellal's heart skipped a beat. Destroying Zeref was something he dedicated the better half of a decade to. If she'd asked him to beat Zeref unconscious as retribution for harming Gray, he'd have said yes. Interacting amiably with Zeref, Zeref, and being unable to do anything to properly fight off such a tremendous threat until that threat landed the first potentially fatal blow…

She might as well have asked him to cut off an arm and hope he didn't bleed out.

Jellal wasn't Natsu or Mavis. He couldn't count on some strange brotherly affection or past romance for safety. He was someone who's entire childhood and adolescence was spent being screwed over by all things Zeref, and his adulthood spent rescuing others Zeref's influence harmed. He was not safe around Zeref.

And just thinking of that sent such an all-encompassing chill through his body that he missed what
Porlyusica said next, and had to ask that she repeat it.

"If you go silent on me too, then so help me I'll beat you with a broom. The boy isn't responding to me at all, so I'm making it your job to get him to eat. Take him back to his apartment and make him something. Anything. Here. You'll want this."

She set a potion in Jellal's hands. It was clear as water, but smelled floral.

"What—"

"For morning sickness. He had it bad the last time, so I assume he'll need it this time."

By Gray's account, he'd likely had a few weeks before it was too late to back out of his first pregnancy. Odd that his symptoms would be notably delayed this time. If it was the same cause as before… was it the same cause as before…?

"How did this happen?" Jellal asked.

"Our resident mad scientist had an experiment go wrong, I'm told. As for how it took Gray so long to realize he was pregnant again, I would advise asking Natsu."

Natsu? Vague memories of Gray recounting that Natsu had stuck close to him for the past several weeks and of Natsu looking extraordinarily guilty while talking about Gray surfaced, but Jellal shoved them back down before he could make anything of it. Porlyusica wasn't going to elaborate, and Gray wasn't speaking at all, so he would ask Natsu. Later. Until then, he wasn't going to rush to any conclusions.

Looking after Gray had to come first.

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Gray spoke once at Porlyusica's to inform Jellal that he didn't want to go home. Home was a place where Juvia and Natsu constantly dropped in, and he didn't have the energy to deal with Juvia and didn't want to be arrested for murder if he saw Natsu. Jellal took Gray to his own apartment instead.

His and Erik's. He would be moving in with Erza soon, and even though every part of living with Erza made him anxious, he couldn't wait to not live with Erik.

"There is no such thing as privacy in this apartment. Or anywhere on this side of town," Jellal cautioned. "If you don't want any secrets to be overheard by persons of dubious trustworthiness… don't think about anything that happened today."

Erik's voice drifted from the apartment bathroom. "I'm not gonna blackmail a kid who just found out his crush tricked him into a pregnancy, asshole!"

"This is why we don't think about secrets in my apartment," Jellal said, hoping that Gray might appreciate the pitiful attempt at a joke and, for one moment not think about how he was pregnant and…

Because his crush tricked him?

"Drop it, Jellal. He's not in the mood."

Erik would hear Jellal just fine if he only thought about how he had the most frustrating roommate in the world, but for Gray's benefit he said aloud, "I imagine he's not in the mood to have you
interjecting your opinions either. For tonight, please pretend you aren't here."

Sweet silence answered Jellal, and he gave Gray a sympathetic smile and gestured for him to sit on the couch.

"Erik not reminding you that he's privy to your every thought is as good as it gets. It's not too late to go to your apartment, if you want."

"He already heard everything that matters." Gray sounded tired as he staged to the couch and flopped over on it. "No one would look for me here."

True enough. It was no secret that with most of Crime Sorciere gone their separate ways, Gray was one of the guild members Jellal was closer to. But while Jellal was short on friends, Gray had a glut of them. The home of Erza's elusive on-again-off-again boyfriend who rarely lingered in town couldn't be anywhere in the top ten spots that most people would think to look for Gray.

"Is there anyone else you want to tell?" Jellal asked, dropping the potions and instructions from Porlyusica on the table and turning the light over the kitchen counter on. "Lucy? Erza? What was that white haired rat's name?"

"Lyon." Gray paused. "How do you never remember Lyon?"

"I make an effort to repress the memories," Jellal answered honestly. Lyon was entirely too old for Meredy, and he was still sore about her running off with him. "Should I send for him in the morning?"

"Yes, please. No. I don't know. I don't know how I'm going to explain any of this."

"You have the misfortune of living near the Black Mage Zeref, and one of his crazy projects left you pregnant."

"I shouldn't be pregnant. I'm only pregnant because he kept it hidden from me until it was too late. How am I going to explain the them that I'm pregnant when I shouldn't be?"

"Exactly how I just said. No one—" he stressed the words as he looked in the direction of Erik's room "—needs to know that you would have an abortion if you could. Just tell them that Zeref messed with your body and leave it at that."

When Gray didn't have a response for that, Jellal let the conversation drop. It was getting to be evening, and Erik never cooked, which left the task of making dinner to Jellal. After so many years of being pardoned, he was finally getting the hang of using a stove rather than a campfire to cook with, but decided to stick to something simple. Even with Porlyusica's medicine, there was no sense in testing the capabilities of Gray's stomach.

He'd only just finished patting beef into a good burger shape when the door to Erik's room flung open and the poison slayer stepped out.

"I know I'm supposed to pretend I'm not here, but I can kick Natsu's ass for you, since you're not supposed to fight right now."

"Hang on—"

"He found out Gray got an abortion that had to happen before the baby was too big, then slipped him some sort of nausea drug to keep him from figuring out he was pregnant again. You don't think that's worth an ass kicking?"
As far as methods of discouraging abortions went, it was tragically not the most extreme Jellal heard of, but he had to admit it was up there. Had he been given the chance before either of Gray's trips to Porlyusica, he would have held his friend there for however many hours it took to talk him out of having an abortion, but sneaking around like that?

And Gray mistook Natsu's intentions for romantic interest. Jellal focused his gaze on the raw meat in his hands to avoid having Gray suffer through a look of pity.

"See. Even you think it was a shitty thing to do. And you don't even—"

"Cobra."

Erik flinched. Jellal only used the Oracion Seis code names when he thought they were way out of line, building a negative connotation with the terms.

There were some things Gray didn't need to know. Maybe years down to road Jellal would be completely open with his thoughts, but Gray already suffered a betrayal from a dear friend, never mind that simply being pregnant was stress enough. He didn't need to think that the person he turned to for help and support might be just as dangerous to place his faith in.

"You agree," Erik said. "And if Gray takes a punch to the gut and loses the kid, he loses his magic too, so he can't fight. So I can beat Natsu up."

Jellal looked to Gray, who watched both of them with dulled interest, then back to Erik. "Gray doesn't want anyone knowing where he is right now, and you getting revenge on his behalf would be an obvious tipoff. Does Natsu know that anyone knows what he did?"

"Zeref might have told him," Gray said. "He was the one who told Natsu I'm pregnant, and he thought Natsu would tell me. He was surprised I didn't know."

So Gray went running to Porlyusica because Zeref told him about his condition. That… made Jellal feel a little sick, actually. Even if it was too little too late, that was still Zeref doing something helpful, and he refused to accept that Zeref could do such a thing.

Erik, who found Jellal's problems with the Black Mage hilarious so long as he didn't have to keep Jellal calm while in Zeref's presence, smirked and gave Jellal a sideways glance as he said, "Well, it was good of him to try and give you a heads up, even if Natsu decided to abuse his job as messenger."

Jellal slammed the burger patty still dripping in his hand onto the skillet. "Go back to pretending you aren't here, Erik."

"Fine. Fine." Erik held his hands up in surrender. "But Gray, my offer's always open."

Erik disappeared into his room.

Gray didn't even wait for the door to shut all the way before asking Jellal, "How would I get even without telling everyone about… I mean… unless you know about the first kid, there's no reason to believe Natsu would have…"

Jellal wanted to tell Gray that it would be fine to explain that one. That even people who didn't condone Gray's decision would agree that Natsu was way out of line. But then Jellal would have thought that Natsu would be the type to come to the defense of a friend who just experienced what Gray did, so how good a judge of character could he really consider himself on that one?
Maybe… it was somewhat invasive, but Jellal lived with the ultimate privacy invader, so the idea that your own thoughts were a sacred and private thing was a concept he’d abandoned some time ago. If Erik wanted to give Gray a hand, he could help Jellal determine who all in the guild it was safe to share the full story with. They could start as soon as Jellal felt Gray could be left alone safely.

In the meantime, Gray needed tending to.

"We'll get to that when we get to that. For now, how are you feeling?"

"Like the atmosphere tripled and the weight of the sky is crushing me."

"I was looking for something more along the lines of whether or not you could keep dinner down," Jellal confessed. "Porlyusica gave me something to help with morning sickness if—"

"No."

"You don't feel sick?"

"Maybe. I don't know. Everything feels awful. I don't think I'm going to throw up?"

"So you don't want the medicine now?"

"I don't want it ever."

Erik broke his silence once more to call out from the other room, "That's what Natsu was dosing him with."

Jellal cast the potion a wistful look, then let the matter drop. "I have ginger in the cupboard. If you start to feel sick, we'll try and make do with that."

He flipped the patties and tested how much juice seeped out when he pressed them. Now that he thought of it, half the reason hamburgers sounded like a good idea was because he knew they had pickles and cheese in the fridge, but would it be insensitive to offer Gray pickles when he was still coming to terms with the idea that he was pregnant?

Hearing Gray let out a languid sigh, Jellal grabbed only cheese and ketchup and left the pickles be. His hand hovered over a door shelf as he went to close the fridge, spotting a bottle of root beer. Technically, that was Erik's, but technically Erik never cared about what foodstuffs were Jellal's, and the boundaries between who owned what in their apartment were thin and fragmented.

"How do root beer floats sound?" Jellal asked. "I know it's more of a summer treat, but I don't have the ingredients for anything wintery."

Gray grunted, which Jellal decided to interpret as a yes.

Cheese was dropped on the hamburgers to melt while Jellal hastily scooped ice cream into two cups and poured soda over it. When dinner was ready, Gray didn't stand and come over to the table, so Jellal set their meals on the coffee table and then opened Erik's door just enough to slide a plate with a cheeseless burger before shutting the door tight. With that taken care of, he grabbed Gray by the wrist and pulled him into a sitting position.

"Look. You feel terrible. I get it. Believe me. I get it. I've been there. Now believe me when I tell you that even if you have no appetite whatsoever, you're going to feel ten times worse if you don't eat something. So eat before I blend this all into an unappetizing paste and have Erik force it down your throat with a funnel."
The threat was so uncharacteristic of Jellal that Gray reacted to it with a look of befuddled concern, asking, "Have you two done that before?"

"No. Just Ultear."

Ultear left Jellal and Meredy her farewell letter and vanished before Erik and his crew joined up with Jellal, and between himself and Meredy, Meredy was the less likely of the two to hit a point of depression in which she required force-feeding. Jellal had never mentioned as much to anyone before. He recovered from both the most severe stages of depression and the trauma of Ultear’s caretaking well before his social circle expanded, so there’d been no need to confide in anyone about it. He was still relieved that Gray was too absorbed in his own misery to decipher the hints of Jellal’s past suffering.

Rather than question Jellal further on funnels, Gray picked up a spoon and took a bite of ice cream, then another, then took the glass and sipped at the sturdy foam of the float. Jellal worried he might ignore the burger entirely, but after emptying the glass Gray took his fork and began to pick at the meat.

It took Gray four times as long as Jellal to finish eating, and once he was done, he flopped back over on the couch. But it was something. Jellal took the dishes and set them in the sink, then found a blanket to toss over Gray. He doubted that the ice maker needed it, but Gray had kept his coat on the entire day, so Jellal figured it was worth the effort. Maybe Gray was too distressed to be immune to the cold, if that was how the whole thing even worked.

"Let's hope you feel better in the morning, okay?"

-o-

Gray was violently ill the next morning, throwing up whatever was offered to him. Applesauce, hardboiled egg, and ginger tea all came back up, and he curled up on the couch and refused to try anything more while the apartment still smelled like the oatmeal Erik heated up for himself. After Erik’s tactless reminder that Gray was free to leave went ignored, Jellal opened the windows up to let the room air out, threw the blanket Gray tossed off during the middle of the night over Erik’s pet snake, and left to find Natsu.

It took him the better part of an hour. Jellal's apartment was on the expanding side of town with all the new constructions, while Natsu's decrepit little home was on the outskirts of the old side. Not eager to talk with him when he wasn't sure what Gray would think about it, Jellal opted for walking over flying. The trek across town was spent reminding himself that Zeref would have likely told Natsu he'd been discovered, so it wasn't like Jellal was blowing Gray's chances of being the first to approach his assailant.

Natsu's house was empty, and Jellal resigned himself to checking the guild next. It was near the heart of town, only a few blocks from the market, and he had taken a long detour around it earlier to avoid attracting attention, but it was hard to reach the guild without at least one person calling out to him. Jellal counted three strangers who merely called his name and waved, and one teenager who shoved a camera into his friend’s hands and made the friend snap a fast photo when he struck an impromptu pose beside Jellal—who had a strict policy of only indulging photo requests for interviews, and only accepting interviews that the guildmaster or Erza pushed him into. There were also seven mothers who pulled their children closer as he walked past, which was what happened when you had the term "child enslavement" come up in an unauthorized biography someone wrote about you. Details like being an enslaved child didn't spread quite as far or wide as the fact that The Jellal Fernandez had somehow been tangled up in child enslavement.
Starting the morning with an already emotionally shattered and now physically unwell friend didn't lend to Jellal being in a good mood. Nor did an hour of walking around town running through all the things he might say to Natsu in his head. Putting up with the usual reactions to his presence left him feeling downright rotten by the time he reached the guild, and not seeing Natsu there was the last straw.

Jellal stood in the front door glowering at the early risers in the guild. He might as well have stayed home and tried to get Gray to drink something.

Spotting him, Mira beamed and said, "Good Morning."

"No."

Jellal shut the door before realizing that he needed to at least pretend he felt a little more sociable than that. Now that he was going to actually stay in town for more than forty-eight hours at a time, he needed to connect with the guild more. And Erza would be embarrassed by him when she heard about that exchange. It was bad enough to see her defending him to civilians who read more on his initial scandal than on the grounds for his pardon. He didn't want her apologizing to her friends for him as well.

The right thing to do would be go back in and apologize, but Jellal's mood was still foul enough that he didn't trust he wouldn't cause more trouble. Instead, he resumed his search for Natsu.

He checked Gray's apartment next, and while he did find Juvia asleep outside Gray's door, there was no Natsu in sight. Jellal wasn't sure if he'd wanted to see Natsu there or not, but it was probably a good thing he didn't.

Out of ideas for where else to look, Jellal set off back towards his own apartment. Erik wasn't the best with people, and Gray was undoubtedly still in need of emotional support.

He'd only gone three blocks when he saw Natsu come out of a store with three grocery bags in each hand and one more held in the crook of his elbow. Jellal had walked up until this point, but he closed the twenty feet between them with Meteor and grabbed Natsu by his less occupied arm.

"Hi."

Once the rush of wind from Jellal's burst of speed was done gusting past Natsu, he blinked and gave Jellal a nervous smile. "Is something wrong?"

"Yes. Do you have a minute?"

"I was on my way to—"

"I'll walk with you."

"You don't want to—"

"I insist."

Natsu looked like he wanted to keep arguing, but let it drop. With Jellal still holding his arm, he turned right and headed down the street, leading Jellal along.

"So what is this about?"

"Gray."
"Have you seen him?" Natsu asked. "He vanished yesterday, and no one knows where he is. I was worried he might have run off on a job."

Liar. "I saw him at Porlyusica's yesterday," Jellal said. It was true, and it explained how he knew everything he was about to say, and it omitted the detail of Gray's current location, which Gray specifically didn't want Natsu to know.

"Oh." Natsu looked away. "What was wrong?"

Jellal paused here, wondering how direct he should be, and decided that if Gray had another seven or so months of discomfort to deal with, Natsu could squirm for a few more minutes. "What did you and Zeref talk about yesterday?"

"Responsibility, mostly," Natsu said. "Which is stupid. He was annoyed with me for not doing something he wouldn't do himself."

"Which would be…?"

Natsu's tug to extract his arm from Jellal's hand was light. Too light to succeed, but Jellal noticed it and tightened his grip all the same.

"Health stuff. Zeref had a serum he was working on that would make water safe to drink when you added it in, but it had some weird side effects that he didn't find out about until Gray got it all over him." Natsu paused there, having finished his explanation, but then felt the need to add, "He wasn't being irresponsible about that. I know you don't like him that much since… well… Anyway, he was in the middle of testing it to make sure there weren't weird side effects when Gray fell into the test area."

"I see. And by health stuff, you mean Gray's pregnant?" Jellal asked.

Natsu froze, so when Jellal stepped ahead of him with a hand still clenched around the fire slayers arm, he pulled him along.

"I mean… I should have told him," Natsu admitted. "But how do you tell a guy he's pregnant? I was just… waiting for the right time. And I made sure he didn't do anything to hurt the baby before he found out."

"And by waiting for the right time, you mean you were waiting until he couldn't have an abortion."

"No."

"That wasn't a question, Natsu."

"Oh… We were supposed to go left back there."

Jellal turned around and dragged Natsu to the street they were meant to turn on.

"So?"

"Maybe I didn't want to tell him too early."

"And drugged him to keep him from finding out."

"I didn't drug him. I kept him from getting sick."

"So he wouldn't suspect he was pregnant again."
"...yeah."
"Louder."

Natsu dug his heels into the ground and ripped his arm from Jellal's grip. "Yes."

Jellal turned around to look at his, eyes ablaze with anger. "And you saw nothing wrong with that?"

"Don't be stupid. Of course I did. But I had to save the baby. He already killed one, and he would have killed the second too. And a third, and a forth, until the effects from the serum wore off. Don't try to tell me you never hurt someone to save someone else."

Jellal didn't even flinch. "You're right. I tried to murder you and Erza to bring a criminal back from the dead thinking it was for the greater good." He grabbed Natsu and pulled him forward again. "And I think we all agree that was a terrible idea, so you might want to think twice before making that comparison again."

"But—"
"No."

"So what? You think I should have stood by and let the kid die?"

"Of course not! I don't like the thought of that any more than you do! But what you did to Gray was wrong."

"Well how would you have stopped him?"

"Talked him down!"

"And if he couldn't be?"

"You still should have tried!"

"If I failed, he would have known what was happening and killed it!"

They reached the edge of town and Jellal stopped, unsure where to go from there. The dirt path beyond where the pavement ended split in two immediately, with more forks in the distance. Grudgingly, he released Natsu and let him take the lead.

"It wasn't right, but it was less wrong than letting Gray kill an innocent."

"He doesn't see it that way."

"But you do."

"I don't see it as more right," Jellal argued. "Besides, even if he wasn't... if he couldn't be convinced..."

Half the problem, Jellal knew, was fears about parenting. He kind of got that. He wasn't too thrilled himself that he was going to be a dad, given how badly he'd messed up every other major milestone in life. Not so upset that he would walk out on Erza, and definitely not so much so that he would demand she lose their child, but he could understand how Gray might be anxious about the future with an unplanned pregnancy. Offering him assurance, promising to be there to help, or arranging for someone else to take the child once it was born might be able to resolve that.
But the other half of the problem was that pregnancy in general unnerved Gray, and a pregnancy occurring with his body was twice as disgusting and terrifying. Even if Jellal addressed every possible concern regarding the baby that came at the end, he doubted he could convince Gray that the seven months he had to go were only seven months that he could be less comfortable during in order to spare a life.

"Well… If he couldn't… I…"

"You couldn't save the kid without going against what Gray wants."

Jellal had no idea what to say for that. He'd already admitted to Natsu that he would rather there not be an abortion, and he couldn't honestly say he saw a way to have stopped the abortion without forcing his will on Gray. All he could say was that Natsu's methods were far too extreme for his tastes.

So then…

"I would never have done something so underhanded to a friend."

Natsu very politely ignored all the underhanded things Jellal did to his friends during his tower days and said, "Then you wouldn't have saved a life."

"I wouldn't have ruined one either," Jellal said under his breath.

"Gray isn't…" Natsu stopped at a fork in the road, and Jellal waited for him to indicate which direction they were going. "That… I mean, he might not be happy about it, but it's only a few months, and I already let him know I'll take the kid if he doesn't want it."

"It took years for Erza to stop tensing whenever I raised my voice, and she was the one who always made the excuse for me that I was brainwashed," Jellal said. "What makes you think that the only thing that's going to change because of what you did is that there's going to be a child now? Gray thought you were being nice because you liked him."

There was a split second of panic where Jellal was worried he gave away something he should have, but then Natsu looked away and said, "Yeah. I noticed. I tried to… make it clear that wasn't what was going on."

"You know what would have been a really effective way to make it clear? Sitting down and talking to him about how he shouldn't kill the child. I… I know it would be an issue if…" When. It was a matter of when. "I know you didn't want his baby to be put at risk, but—"

"But nothing. It's a baby. And it's either mine or Zeref's, and either way it's family and you can't tell me I don't get a say in whether or not my own family gets to live. I couldn't risk it's mother killing it."

It took Jellal a second to process this new information and form a proper retort. If Gray knew about his baby's parentage, he hadn't told Jellal. That wasn't something he had a response ready for, and someone else stepped into the conversation as he searched for a comeback

"Who's killing family?"

Jellal swore he felt his heart stop. His eyes stayed glued to Natsu for fear of what they might see if they looked away.

Natsu looked away from Jellal to turn his attention to his older brother. "No one. I stopped it."
"Oh. That's good." A pause. "Wait… Was it me you stopped?"

"Nah. Though someone's probably planning to kill you right now. Not that they'd invite me in on their plans."

"That makes sense. By family, you mean someone in your guild? If the issue comes back up, let me know. I can help, you know."

"Yeah, but the Council always comes running after us when you get involved."

"Which is silly, because I'm not a member of your guild and involving myself of my own accord. But it sounds like everyone is safe this time."

Jellal's gaze dropped to the groceries in Natsu's hands, and he cursed himself for not realizing this was going to happen. The reaction Zeref received from civilians far exceeded anything Jellal dealt with, and he only came into town when circumstances forced him to. Since he went four centuries without needing to eat, 'out of food' wasn't a scenario that he always remembered warranted a trip to town, so Natsu or Mavis brought him groceries periodically.

Jellal was one of the few people never to have visited Zeref's lab. When he and Zeref first settled into Magnolia, Zeref had asked him once about the tower. They hadn't so much as exchanged casual greetings in the years since. He didn't approach Zeref. He vacated spaces Zeref entered. He wasn't allowed to fight Zeref, and he wasn't going to risk thinking anything good of him. Not ever again. That meant no interaction.

But Jellal knew from hearing Mavis complain that Zeref was also apt to forget to eat when he had food on hand, so she and Natsu always made him something to eat during visits. Natsu would take those bags to the lab where Jellal didn't dare follow and be there for hours. And they were not done with their conversation.

"…" Jellal put a hand to his throat to make sure nothing was clamped over it. It felt like something was squeezing him. Or at least, his throat felt pinched off.

"Is your friend… That's Jellal, isn't it? Is he alright?"

"Crap! No. Take three steps back!"

Jellal didn't see Zeref step back, but he did hear the crunch of old snow moving away from him. The idea that Zeref, The Black Mage Zeref who had a hand in every wrongdoing Jellal ever saw or felt, would take three steps back because he was worried about a near stranger about to have a panic attack was absurd enough to free Jellal's tongue.

"We were discussing your… nephew. Or son."

"Gray kept it?" Zeref asked. "The way he raced off, I was sure he wanted to have that one removed right away too. What changed his mind?"

Jellal's gaze had yet to leave Natsu, so all he could do to emphasize where he was looking was narrow his eyes.

"Natsu? You spoke with him after I left?" Zeref's chuckle was entirely too warm and soft for the person it came out of. "You must have really raced to catch up with him."

"Well," Natsu glanced between Jellal and his brother. "That wasn't… exactly what happened."
There's this one massively underrated six book series called Knight and Rogue. For recession reasons there was a delay between books three and four being released and the author's agent retired during that time, and I think she must have added some touch to the books because while they're all good reads, the first three are simply magical while the second three are just okay. But I absolutely adore the first three.

That might not be the best sell, but consider the following: The first chapter opens up to Fisk (the rogue) watching Michael (the knight) rescue a maiden who is going to be married against her will from a tower, with Fisk narrating. However, as the rescue proceeds, Fisk lets slip to the readers that knighthood is several centuries out of date (although the setting is still very feudal), and he suspects that Michael might be insane for deciding to be a knight errant. Shortly after they hand the maiden over to her retainer, they're arrested, and it turns out she was actually a baroness being held in an unconventional prison cell while awaiting trial for the murder of her husband. At this point, Michael takes over as narrator and you learn that on top of all of this, Fisk is actually a recently convicted conman who is paying off his legal debts by serving as Michael's squire, and is only complying with the antics Michael drags him into because he goes to jail if he doesn't. Michael is precociously naïve and intends to declare Fisk's debts repaid only once he's reformed.

I mention this because there's a scene towards the end of the first book where Michael is used in a human experiment, and getting him to "comply" involved shoving a funnel with a long, curved end down his throat so he can't even refuse to swallow. And I might have read this chapter a lot. And it might have come to mind when Jellal hints that Ultear had to force-feed him at the lowest point in his own depression.
Natsu knew from the moment he hatched his plan that Gray would be furious with him. Maybe even never fully forgive him. It was a risk he had to take. But it still felt like a punch in the gut when he stepped into Jellal's apartment only for Gray to look past him through half-lidded eyes as if he wasn't even there.

"Sorry," Jellal said. "I…"

"I asked." Zeref pushed past both Natsu and Jellal, and crouched down before Gray. This brought Gray to a state of full alertness. He straightened, eyes widening enough for Natsu to see his irises clearly, and took the new arrivals in with greater detail. He glanced quickly over Natsu's feet, then gave Zeref a hard look over, then focused his attention on Jellal, who had been pale the whole time they walked to 'where Gray is'. If Jellal had just told Natsu earlier that Gray was safe with him, Natsu would have put up a fight to have Zeref wait until they fetched Gray instead. Bringing Zeref to Jellal's apartment of all places…

Erik darted out of the bathroom with his pants only mostly pulled up, seized Jellal by the arm, and pulled him into one of the bedrooms. That he felt the need to intervene at all was a bad enough sign. Natsu chose not to think about what it meant when Erik stepped out a few seconds later to grab a paper bag before disappearing back into the room.

Gray glanced to Natsu, but his eyes darted away, and instead focused intently on the door.

"He'll live!" Erik shouted.

"You should have left Jellal alone," Gray said to Zeref.

"Normally I would. This is more important."

"And this would be…?"

He was pregnant, and the deadly mage who accidentally sparked that miracle of life had a hand splayed out a half an inch from his stomach. Natsu was amazed it took Gray so long to ask. But then until the scene with Erik, Natsu had been too concerned about Jellal's mental wellbeing to notice all the signs that something was amiss with Gray.

First and foremost, Gray was not only dressed, but dressed in the same clothes he'd worn the day before. The wrinkles that webbed across his shirt and pants proclaimed the clothes had been slept in, while his jacket—neatly hung by the front door, smelled like Jellal handled it last. Natsu hoped that only meant Jellal offered to hang it, and not that Jellal had to pull it off for Gray.

There was a sharp acidic scent to Gray's breath, which Natsu could also smell from the bathroom, and in one spot on the floor that wasn't totally masked with the smell of cleaner. Gray had been sick, despite the all too familiar bottle of morning sickness medicine sitting on the table. Natsu could only assume, then, that it was something else that disturbed Gray's stomach. Nerves, probably. He didn't look feverish. Fatigued, sure, but not feverish.

There were bags under his eyes, which were swollen as though he'd cried on and off since waking
His hair had gone beyond its normal level of dishevelment, but despite its clear lack of maintenance, it had a sheen that Natsu could only suspect were the first signs of grease.

You didn't have to be half as observant to see that Gray took the discovery hard. Natsu hoped it didn't take Gray too long to come around to the idea of the baby.

"I'm kind of sick of Dragneel's doing things to me without explaining themselves."

"Sorry. I got distracted there." Zeref pulled his hand back. "Your magic does seem rather tightly woven in to the fetus. It's almost as firm a connection as Natsu and the Book of E.N.D. have. I know it's common for mages to have some magic tied to their pregnancy, but since most can already support a child on their own, their magic doesn't bond to it quite so tightly. I've heard of that happening before, but I've never had the chance to see it for myself. If I were to have tried to observe it up close... Well, the mother's magic might have protected the fetus, but it would do no good if the mother herself were dead."

Gray made eye contact for the first time to give him a weary look. Most of the guild didn't have heavy practice conversing with Zeref. It wasn't that Zeref was deliberately vague and unhelpful when he explained things. If he put his mind to it, he could give a straightforward answer. But whenever he was thinking things through, he didn't take the time to remember that most people weren't privy to his entire thought process. It was like he put together puzzles in his mind, but was so fixated on putting all the pieces in their place that when you asked to be a part of the process he only thought to show you the image he had just set in place, and not the completed image that you needed for context on where the next piece should fit.

"Why did you want to see how the magic affected the baby, Zeref?"

"I thought I might be able to disconnect it," Zeref said. "This may be within the realm of what Eileen could do, but even now I can see the bonds strengthening. It would likely be beyond her capabilities by the time she crossed the ocean, assuming I could contact her instantly. Which I can't." He looked up at Gray. "I'm sorry."

"You're not the one who drugged me."

Gray looked like he might be sick again, and even socially stunted Zeref saw the signs and pulled a wastebasket at the edge of the couch nearer to them in case it was needed. Natsu felt his own stomach lurch at the accusation, fair though it was.

It wasn't like he did it to hurt Gray. He just didn't know what else to do.

"No. But I did make the potion. And trust the wrong person to pass my message on to you."

Natsu looked away. Zeref took a position in which he derided the morality of others' action once or twice a year, and usually said nothing ill about another person without prefacing that he wasn't someone who could really hold the position of moral authority.

"...I—"

"I apologize for my brother. I would say I should have raised him better, but..." Zeref glanced over to Natsu. "Well, I suppose that if I'd been the one to raise him, I would have raised him not to try something like this."

Natsu bristled. "Sorry for protecting family."

"It's a clump of cells, Natsu."
The matter-of-fact way Zeref said it took Natsu by surprise, and even widened Gray's eyes. And if was just that. Matter-of-fact. Not cold or angry. He said it as simply as one might note that the weather was overcast. If asked what color the couch Gray sat on was, Zeref would be hard pressed to find a more neutral tone with which to say it was green.

"It has a heartbeat," Natsu countered.

"It has no brain activity."

Leave it to Zeref to care more about the head than the heart.

"It doesn't matter." Gray slumped back into the couch. "It's glued itself to me now, so who even cares?"

"I do," Zeref insisted. "This was not what I shared my findings with Natsu for. You didn't want it, right?"

Gray looked down tiredly at Zeref, then turned to stare out the window.

"Right?"

"I stayed up all night wondering if I should give up magic," Gray admitted.

It was like a punch to the gut for Natsu. He knew Gray didn't want to be pregnant, but to hear he hated the child he carried in him that much? The pregnancy would only be nine months, and Gray had already gone through two of them without noticing anything amiss. Giving up his magic would be for life.

"I would advise against that," Zeref said. "That's not a decision you can go back on."

"So's popping out a kid."

"I'm serious."

"So am I. Natsu should have been the one to fall in your stupid pond. He actually likes being tied down by kids. I'm the last person who should be anyone's parent."

Natsu would hazard to guess that Zeref was worse parent material than Gray, and Zeref at least had Ivan Dreyer beat for being able to recognize he should not be responsible for a child and needed to find a good surrogate parent for his brother. If Zeref did nothing else right, it was find someone who could properly raise Natsu. As he'd told Gray before, Zeref was a terrible father, but a good adoption coordinator.

"In that case, you should dump the child on Natsu. He was the one who insisted it be born."

"Hang on. Did you 'dump me' on Igneel, or entrust me to him?"

The cheeky grin Zeref gave Natsu let him know he was deliberately being given a hard time, but it didn't answer his question one way or the other.

"Natsu already offered to take it," Gray said, ignoring the exchange. "I almost want to give the kid to an orphanage on another continent just to make sure he can't have it."

Natsu bit down hard enough on his lip to draw blood so he wouldn't protest. The most important part was that the child lived. Even if, as Natsu had to admit now that he'd insisted the baby was family, Natsu had wanted to raise it. The baby was going to live. And Natsu gave up every ounce or trust,
affection, and tolerance Gray had for him to see to that, so he couldn't complain if doing so meant he didn't get to raise the baby.

Zeref started to protest that, but caught himself and shook his head. He would be fine with letting a family member go, losing contact, and not seeing them again for many years. There was a strong precedent for him agreeing to do just that. That he'd considered talking Gray down at all was impressive.

"It sounds like you don't need to worry about being tied down, then." Zeref tilted his head towards Natsu, inviting Gray to explain what the remaining problem was.

"No. I just have to put up with nine months of hell."

"Seven," Natsu said.

"Fine. Seven months that I didn't sign up for that someone knew I would have backed out of it I could where I get to be nauseas, bloated, can't do anything I like, gain weight, have what is functionally a parasite grow larger and larger inside of me… How the hell will it even get out?"

"Well, depending on the general class of species—"

"I know I asked, but I actually don't want you to answer that one. Now or ever. Just knock me out when it's time to remove the thing and never tell me what it looked like."

"The birth or the baby?" Zeref asked in all seriousness.

Gray thought about it a moment. "Both."

Both? Even if he felt he had to give a child up, Natsu couldn't imagine not so much as asking what it looked like. Even Zeref, with his impressively lengthy absentee record, had asked about photos of Natsu growing up after moving to Magnolia.

But Zeref was the one Gray wasn't too mad at to hold a conversation with, and Zeref didn't find it shocking to think that one might give up a child in their care and then not so much as hear a status update on them.

"Then since Natsu can't take care of the baby for you, how about he makes amends by tending to any of the other problems and discomforts this causes you?" Zeref offered. Natsu almost protested, but he was outnumbered at least three to one on the subject of how badly he wronged Gray, and Erik was likely on whatever side Jellal was, so probably four to one.

"Letting Natsu tend to anything he felt I needed help with last time didn't end so well for me," Gray said.

"I'm sure I can craft something that will keep him from tricking you again."

Had this conversation happened anywhere else, Gray would have said no. Had it not already gone on as long as it had, he would have said no then too. In fact, if the conversation happened right where it did, right when it did, and took twice as long as it already had while only Gray and the Drangeels were nearby, Gray still would have said no. But the conversation took place in Jellal's apartment while Jellal was there and had dragged on for long enough that Jellal must have been near the point of a total nervous breakdown, because Erik stuck his head into the room just then and gestured for them to hurry up and get Zeref out of there. Zeref not being one to easily be backed down, Gray took one look at Erik, winced, and said, "Fine. Bring me some assurance that he won't pull any crap behind my back again."
"That shouldn't be too hard."

"Good. Then if you leave now, I'm sure you can have it ready by tomorrow."

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Natsu and Zeref were halfway back to the lab when it occurred to Zeref. "He just wanted us gone, didn't he?"

"You were in Jellal's apartment."

"Don't frame it like I was the only one he chased out. Only one of us was physically shoved outside."

"It was less of a shove and more of a punch," Natsu said, which wasn't the best thing to say to defend himself. "But I think he would have been fine talking to you more if it wasn't for the Jellal thing, if that makes you feel any better."

"I should have asked someone else about the tower back then."

"I'm pretty sure he'd take issue with you even if you never brought the tower up to anyone," Natsu said.

Zeref paused to look at him, perplexed. Jellal had been a participant in the war, sure, but most everyone involved in the war had at least grudgingly moved past that. Zeref seen so many wars and acts of brutality that they all blended together in his memory, but hadn't paid much attention to the various cult and loyalist groups that sprung up in his honor over the centuries. Those cults were closer to an abstract concept for Zeref. For the sake of his own conscious, it was probably for the best that he didn't have the most concrete grasp of so many misfortunes that were suffered in his name, but it also made it hard for Zeref to fully wrap his mind around why things that happened to Jellal that he had no deliberate involvement in might have left Jellal with such an inability to cope with his presence, while those who he actively targeted had made their peace.

Someday, hopefully, that would get sorted out. Either Mavis would bully Zeref into doubling his efforts to empathize with the people he'd inspired harm upon, or Erza would coax Jellal into more concisely laying out his problem and getting professional help. Until then, it was better to keep them apart. Natsu should have protested harder when Jellal ambushed him that morning. Put off his visit until Jellal was done arguing with him, or made more attempts to warn Jellal that they were going to see Zeref. He assumed it would be obvious at the point they left town and headed in the lab's direction, but since Jellal never went near the lab, it made sense in hindsight that he wouldn't recognize the location.

The groceries Natsu bought were right where he'd left them on the road, protected by a barrier Zeref put up so they could go straight to wherever Gray was without stopping to drop the food off first. Natsu only had to carry two bags per hand. Zeref grabbed half the items.

"I don't need this much food, you know."

"I know you think you don't, but this is how much a person should eat in the amount of time it'll take before Mavis gets back."

"Planning to avoid visiting me again before then?" Zeref asked.

"Well..." He'd been keeping visits to a minimum ever since he started hiding Gray's pregnancy, to cut down on the amount of time that he wasn't there to make sure nothing went wrong.
"That's fine. You'll be busy with Gray, so you shouldn't have to leave him alone constantly. I can do more research when I don't have to make small talk anyway."

"I think he doesn't want me around."

"I think he doesn't want you secretly medicating him to deny him his own agency, and he doesn't trust you not to do that a second time," Zeref said. "Jellal has his own pregnant fiancée to look after. Expecting him to take care of Gray too because of my little brother's poor decisions is too much."

"Gray has other friends."

"Erza has her own pregnancy to deal with. And Lucy… Well…” He cast Natsu an apologetic glance. "It doesn't feel right asking her to help, does it?"

Natsu looked away. Lucy had never come around to the idea of Zeref as a brother-in-law, but marrying into the same family that Mavis planned to was an idea she fancied, and she had kept Mavis up to date on everything with her an Natsu's relationship while Natsu periodically gave Zeref updates for the sake of making sure his brother had some socialization. He never told Zeref the full details of the breakup, nor did he think Lucy explained it to Mavis, but they knew about the drama that led up to the split, so they must have had their guesses.

"What about Wendy? Lyon?"

"Who's Lyon?"

Gray's not quite brother who, come to think of it, was expecting a child with Meredy in only a couple of months. Jellal and Meredy both would have Natsu's neck if he told Lyon that Gray needed someone to come out and take care of him while he was pregnant and made Lyon leave Meredy alone with a newborn. And then Lyon would murder Natsu again when he heard Gray's account of events.

When Natsu didn't answer, Zeref shrugged. "This is a chance for you to make amends. And to get yourself on the path to forgiveness. You did something terrible to him, and now you can start to make up for it by making the fallout of your actions easier on him. Besides, I think you're getting too far ahead of yourself, but you called the fetus family, didn't you?"

"It's either mine or yours, isn't it?"

"Yes. I've narrowed it down to the point of learning that first contact determined parentage, but I don't remember which of us grabbed him first. I had some ideas for a lens of sorts that would allow one to see past events in a given location based on some of the mechanisms behind the Eclipse Gate, but—"

"That's nice, but I don't think you should mess with that gate anymore. It's family either way, and that's enough for me," Natsu said.

"So you'll want to convince Gray to forgive you at least enough to consider letting you keep the child in town," Zeref said. "All things considered, that might take some effort. I don't think he'll want it around as a reminder. Saying he would send it so far away to spite you may just be a cover to avoid admitting that he doesn't want it near him."

Natsu grunted a sullen affirmative.

"So I'll get to work on some assurance for him so you can get to work on mending your relationship with him," Zeref said. "Really, it would have been better if you let him abort, but unless he decides
that he truly would prefer to give up his magic, then what's done is done. How do you think we should go about it? Some sort of accessory that detects your intent would be the easiest. How about a bracelet that changes color when you're lying? Truth detecting artifacts are hard to make, and it might take me a while to obtain all the materials. It's easier to make things that react when the person in their detection field feels guilt. Like a collar that shocks someone when they're about to do something they know is bad."

"Gray would probably love to see me in a shock collar right now," Natsu muttered.

"We'll do the collar then. I think I could have the design done by tonight." Zeref dropped his grocery bags, spun around, and wrapped both hands around Natsu's neck. "Hm... I should have enough material to make something functional too. If you were Elfman, I'd need you to run a few more errands for me."

Realizing his brother was serious, Natsu jolted back and threw his hands up in defense. "I-I'd like the bracelet more, if I'm the one who has to wear this thing."

"Then I'll get make a bracelet once I have the materials, and until then we can use the collar," Zeref decided. He looked so pleased with himself that Natsu almost didn't want to tell him no. Almost.

"How about we—"

"Oh, and Natsu?"

Natsu froze at the sight of the smile his brother gave him. It had the same mild curve of his lips as all of the other smiles Zeref gave, with his gaze flattening, rather than the soft look he often had in his eyes. His eyes glowed read, and there were visible traces of dark magic leaking out from him and causing the air around him to distort.

"...yes?"

"If Gray does decide he would rather give up his magic, I don't want to hear that you forcibly stopped him again."

Chapter End Notes

Zeref: *puts hands around Natsu's neck* I have enough material lying around the house to make you a shock collar.
Natsu: Please don't.
Zeref: I'll have it by tomorrow, kay?
Natsu: No.
Zeref: I love you too.
What Gray wanted more than anything else was to find some secluded place away from everyone else in the world to curl up and sleep until everything was over. Since that wasn't an option, hiding in the home of a supportive friend who would keep his location secret was the next best thing.

Unfortunately, that supportive friend was afraid of Zeref, who had unintentionally bullied said friend into giving up Gray's location, and who would be back to see Gray again as soon as he had some 'assurance' to offer for Natsu's good behavior.

Since Natsu knew where he was hiding, Gray gave up on hiding. Erik had told him that Jellal was planning to move in with Erza soon anyway, and Gray didn't like the idea of staying with only Erik any more than he liked the idea of imposing on Erza. Especially when Erza served as a peek at Gray's own not too distance future. Even before learning he was pregnant, Gray had put off going to congratulate Erza on her own pregnancy. He hadn't wanted to see what her stomach looked like now that she was done hiding it.

So he spent the night at Lucy's, the two of them brainstorming ways to explain to Juvia that he didn't want a family with her without ever telling Lucy about his pregnancy.

He would have to tell everyone eventually. He'd complained too much about Natsu stopping him from drinking to pass off a bump as a beer gut, and eventually he would be too big for that excuse to work even if he could convince people it was booze. But he didn't want to deal with it. Be it laughs about the fact that he was in the position he was despite being male, to congratulations for something that nauseated him in more way than one, pity from people who saw how miserable he was with the situation, or anger from Natsu-sympathizers who would react with indignation to Gray not appreciating the little 'miracle' that had rooted itself in his gut. To say nothing of what people might do if they learned about the first pregnancy.

He could excuse his not sleeping well for a second night in a row on staying up late talking, and forgave Lucy for frying eggs that made Gray's stomach do flips because she didn't know about the morning sickness. He used his throwing up as an excuse to leave, 'so he didn't give her his cold,' and then he finally went home.

No one waited outside his door for him, and Gray breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't have the energy to deal with Juvia.

The first order of business was to go to his sink and vomit again, because he'd left his dishes on the counter two days ago and the food scraps left on them had gone bad. After that he attempted brushing his teeth but, the taste of his toothpaste made him queasy, so he settled for swishing and spitting. The morning sickness medicine was still in Jellal's kitchen, and Gray felt like he might vomit blood if he drank any more of that evil thing, so he would have to learn to tolerate the nausea.

Once he was done blowing chunks, Gray turned on the shower water and undressed.

His clothes were as old as the food on his counter, and even if Lucy didn't know that, he was sure she noticed the wrinkles. Gray hadn't dared remove them, afraid to look at his stomach after learning what was in there. Now he let them drop to the floor, then stared at his face in the mirror. He had bags under his eyes, and his eyes themselves looked dulled. He had developed a zit on his chin from either stress or poor hygiene. Probably grease. There was a lot of grease. His hair looked slick enough that you could almost think he'd just come out of the shower.

Daring to look down from his face, Gray studied his stomach in the mirror, then looked down further
and studied it from above. His abs were still visible, although there was a softness to them that he didn't like. Even squinting, he didn't see a bump.

Maybe it was all a hoax. Zeref's serum didn't really cause everything that fell in it to become pregnant. He wasn't pregnant. He hadn't been pregnant before. He hadn't really had a fetus pulled out of his body and thrown away because the idea of actually having it sounded too terrifying. It was all a great prank that multiple people were in on. It was the prank Natsu set Gray up for. That potion he spiked all of Gray's drinks with was some sort of strange nausea causing agent that took effect once you stopped taking it, and that was why Gray felt so ill right after being told he was pregnant.

He liked that idea. He liked it a lot. Too bad Jellal would never be party to any scheme that Zeref was involved in, or Gray might have been able to convince himself that it really was all one big joke being played on him.

Whether he looked it yet or not, he was pregnant.

Sighing so heavily that he forced out air from pockets deeper in his lungs than he knew he had, Gray stepped into the shower and let the hot water run over him.

He lathered his hair three times before it no longer felt greasy, and while he scrubbed vigorously at his arms and legs and chest to remove two days of grime, he went delicately over his stomach. How hard was too hard for a fetus anyway? Two days without the potion had Gray questioning his resolution that retaining his magic beat being pregnant, but he hadn't made up his mind on that yet and didn't dare risk hurting the fetus before he knew for sure what he planned to do about it.

What happened if he only damaged it, but didn't kill it? Would his magic be impaired forever as a result, or would it have no effect?

Gray's resistance to the cold came from body training, not magic. The fetus may have latched itself onto his magic, but it lacked that training. Was it safe to get cold while pregnant? How cold was too cold anyway? Gray had lost all sense for that. Maybe he would need to be careful to avoid cold showers.

Come to think of it, he usually took cold showers. It was odd that he stepped into hot water. Doing something like that without even noticing was sounded more like… more like…

Natsu.

Gray hastily spun the tap to cold, then shifted it to what he thought was probably lukewarm incase cold water was bad for the baby.

Hot was Natsu's thing. Even if most of the world liked warm showers, hot was Natsu's thing. Gray didn't want to have anything to do with Natsu. The warmth of his touch and the brightness of his smile and the sweet taste of his lips were all repulsive things now. He would not allow himself to enjoy anything that was anything like Natsu.

A lukewarm shower wasn't cold enough to be refreshing or hot enough to be relaxing, and Gray hurried to rinse himself down and towel off.

The kitchen still smelled nasty when Gray stepped out into it, but not too much so for him to scrape the offending plate and rinse it down. He threw open the window to let the air out, and was in the middle of attempting to make himself tea when someone knocked at the door.

He gave it fifty-fifty odds whether it was Juvia or Natsu, threw the door open to tell them off, and was surprised to see Zeref instead.
Zeref, similarly stunned into silence, raised a hand to shield his eyes before holding a paper bag out. It occurred to Gray that after wearing the same shirt non-stop for over forty-eight hours, he’d forgotten to dress getting out of the shower.

"Here," Zeref said. "You wanted assurance that Natsu wouldn't do anything else, right?"

Gray sighed and took the bag. Inside was a leather collar, the rim of which was dotted with fine blue beads.

"How does it work?"

"It give the wearer a... reminder to behave when they're about to do something wrong."

"Someone should have put this on you years ago."

"Well, you can take it off at any point, so as far as permanent corrective measure go, it's not ideal. It only works on someone who… Can you put pants on?"

Gray shut the door, set the collar on his counter, and went to find clothes, then went back and opened it again once he was decent. There were many holdovers from Zeref's time as an immortal that could best be called inconvenient, but his complete lack of concern for the passing of time was not one of them. While someone else might object to being made to wait, Zeref's patience extended on infinitely.

"It only works on someone who…?"

"Who wants to prove their good intentions," Zeref finished. "So long as Natsu wears it, he can prove he isn't doing anything wrong. If you had put it on me during the war, when I didn't care about the morality of my actions, I would have taken it off."

Gray looked over at the collar, wondering what reminder exactly it gave.

"Natsu wanted a bracelet that would change colors if he lies, but I didn't have the materials on hand. The collar is just for a few weeks until I can make that."

Truth detecting items were rare and near impossible to make. That's why they weren't used in all legal trials, even though anyone who could think of the full potential for such a thing drooled over the thought. Gray was completely unsurprised to hear that Zeref could have one made in a matter of weeks, and intended it only to be for something as mundane as proving that his brother wasn’t causing a friend trouble.

Beyond that, it did strike Gray that not only had Zeref not precisely explained what the collar did—while admitting that he wouldn't wear one, no less—but Natsu had wanted to opt out of it. He probably should have asked for more detail as to how the collar worked to make sure it was nothing too dangerous. But then Natsu should have given Gray more detail on what he was doing when Gray asked.

Besides, Gray had to admit that the image of Natsu doing whatever tasks Gray deemed would supposedly make up for what he'd done with a collar on his neck pleased him. It would serve Natsu right for tricking Gray as horribly as he had.

"Is this arrangement to your satisfaction?" Zeref asked.

"Why do you care?"
"Because I have four hundred years of being a terrible brother to make up for," Zeref said. "Helping my brother mend the relationships he's shattered seems like a good place to work on that."

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Juvia came by around lunch. Gray was in the middle of eating, but his stomach was still on the unsteady side, so he was slowly nursing a mug of tea when she burst in without knocking.

She wanted Gray to go out with her, and he said no. She complained about how they didn't spend nearly enough time together when they were engaged, and he reminded her that they weren't. She told him to stop being stubborn, and he said nothing because the last time he told her to stop being delusional, she cried so hard that the town nearly flooded from the ensuing thunder storm, and then everyone scolded him for being so cruel and unfair to her. Then she complained about how everyone else was getting married and having families. Gajeel and Levy's little twins would be three soon and Meredy would be a mom in a few months and now Erza, whose boyfriend didn't even like to admit he was in a relationship, was going to have a baby and at the rate that things were going Natsu would get back together with Lucy and they'd have their own baby and poor Juvia was going to be an old spinster because her love for Gray apparently wasn't enough for him to give her a baby.

Then the handle of the half-empty tea mug cracked in Gray's hand, and he asked her very calmly to leave.

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It wasn't until the day after Zeref dropped by that Natsu dared come around to the apartment. Gray had flipped back and forth between wanting to never see Natsu again, wishing that he could see Natsu the way he did a week ago, fantasizing about contrived requests he would watch Natsu try to fulfil with that collar on that Gray would give just to harass him, and miffed about how Natsu had claimed he wanted to do something to apologize only to take so long after Zeref to show up.

Mostly, he wanted to put that collar on Natsu and order him to justify what he did, and then see for himself what the collar did to remind people when they were in the wrong.

When Natsu showed up, Gray was sick again. He'd forgotten after each visitor the day before to lock his door, although Natsu knocked before letting himself in. The possibility existed that he also thought he'd been told he was free to enter, since Gray's attempt to say he couldn't answer the door just then had been interrupted by his attempted breakfast making its way back up.

The collar sat all night on the counter, within reach of the apartment door and easy for Natsu to spot when he came in. He wore it when he entered the bathroom to see if Gray was alright.

"Are you sick?"

"I don't know," Gray croaked. "Do I look sick?"

"Well… yeah."

"That's because I'm fucking pregnant. Thanks for that, by the way."

"I didn't… The medicine for your stomach… Do you… need… any?"

For the first time since learning about the second pregnancy, Gray met Natsu's eye, and he met them in order to fix Natsu with the fiercest glare he could "I would rather drink a glass of Erik's poison."

Natsu broke eye contact to look at his feet.
"Look as guilty as you want. It does me no good now."

"No. I… Um… Jellal gave me some ginger. I'll make tea. It's… It's not the potion, but it's supposed to help with the same thing. Is that alright?"

Gray considered it. A drink Natsu prepared that would help with his nausea. But this time he knew what it was he was drinking, and he'd be lying if he said he wanted nothing for morning sickness. Plus, it had to be less potent if Porlyusica had given him a special potion instead of ordering him to make tea, which meant he would likely still have some sense of what the baby was doing to his body. He liked the idea of being less nauseas. Of knowing what was happening rather than suppressing the signs entirely, but without being as miserable as he felt just then.

"I can give it a shot." He would just have to sniff-test it first. For anything that didn't smell like ginger. If it was too floral, or helped too much with his stomach, then he'd know to clock Natsu over the head with the mug.

Natsu nodded, but didn't move.

With a moan, Gray rested his arm on the toilet seat and let his head rest on his bicep. "I'm not going anywhere, and you know my whole kitchen by this point. Go make the damn tea."

That bought him fifteen minutes of peace. He shut his eyes when Natsu left the room and tried to focus more on what he would do to get through the day. A whole day seemed like a good trial period. If he said no more Natsu after that, Zeref wouldn't push the issue. Gray couldn't impose too much on Jellal or Lyon or Erza, and you could better hide from Natsu in his own house than Lucy's, but maybe he would get Jellal to let him hide at Macbeth's. Macbeth found Fairy Tail too loud, but since moving was such a hassle, he was still in town. Even if he was a Twilight Ogre mage, he was still on good terms with all the former Crime Sorciere members, and he'd entertain a request from Jellal to help so long as Gray didn't cause a ruckus.

"I didn't sweeten it with anything."

Gray's eyes flew open, and Natsu was there again with a steaming mug. A black one. The blue mug that Gray liked best with snowflakes painted on it was in his trash now, since the handle was broken.

"What?"

"There's no sugar. Or spice or anything. I didn't even add pepper. I wasn't sure if that might hurt your stomach."

"You put pepper in ginger tea?"

"It adds a bite to it, but I don't think you want that." Natsu set the mug on the floor by Gray. "Do you want anything else?"

"A whole bottle of vodka, a packet of cigarettes, and a job listing to fight a demon the size of a city. Or something fun to do to take my mind off of all this. Only seven more months before I can have anything I want. What do you want?"

"Cheese," Natsu said. "I thought it sounded good, but I forgot to buy some one my way here."

"Cheese?"

"Cheddar."
"I think your brother cares more about me forgiving you than you do."

"I thought you were asking me for things that we attainable," Natsu said. "You'd throw that mug at me if I said I wanted you to forgive me right now anyway, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah. I changed my mind. I want an excuse to throw the mug at you."

Natsu had the decency not to react negatively. "I'll be in the kitchen. Let me know if you want anything else."

"I want to not be pregnant."

"I know." He was already walking away from the door.

Gray lifted his head, straightening as much as he dared. "You knew the whole time that I didn't want to be pregnant!"

Natsu didn't answer. Gray couldn't see him, but he could hear one of the kitchen chairs drag along the linoleum.

"You're only here because your brother told you to come! If you really wanted to help me, you would've cared that I didn't want to be pregnant!"

He'd screamed it as loud as he could, and was met with silence.

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The ginger tea helped, and Gray hated that he wanted to ask for another mug. He went and got his own refill.

Natsu sat at the kitchen table. He looked up when Gray came in, but said nothing. A book on pregnancy sat open in front of him, and although the most logical explanation was that Natsu was reading up on what he would need to help Gray with, Gray preferred to think that Natsu had some weird fetish. That made it easier to be all the madder with him.

Still, Gray did very little research into the subject himself. He would rather it be anyone else, but someone who knew what he was in for who could guide him through things wasn't an unappealing idea. Maybe he would ask Jellal for a heads up on anything.

"Have you ever done this before?" Gray asked.

"For the last two months, yeah."

Gray flinched, and needed a moment to pull himself together enough to pretend he hadn't died a little inside hearing Natsu say that so calmly. "No. Watched someone through a pregnancy."

It took Natsu a second to catch up to Gray's train of thought. "Kind of? Lucy and I were still together when Levy and Gajeel learned they were having twins, and he's crap at the whole father thing, so we were over there a lot to help her with stuff, but I mostly took orders from Lucy. Why?"

"What do you mean, why? Why would you even ask that?"

"Oh. Right. I don't think you're gonna get as big as Levy did. You have more space anyway, and she had twins."

"I refuse to have two." Even if he knew there wasn't anything Gray could do to actually control it,
surely through sheer willpower he would be able to prevent twins from—

"Well, yeah. Zeref only detected one kid in there."

The reminder should have relieved Gray, who didn't know what he would have done if he learned he was really having twins, but instead it made his skin crawl. He still hated to think that there was another person in him. It was easier to just call it a fetus and not think about how eventually a fetus became a baby.

"I wouldn't want twins either," Natsu said, oblivious to Gray's discomfort. "I mean, if I had twins, I'm sure I would hate to think of being without one or the other of them, but Gajeel and Levy can barely keep track of one kid at a time. And imagine having two kids turn rebellious at the same time."

"Well, maybe I should ask Lucy for help," Gray said. But he wouldn't. Asking her for help would mean explaining the situation to her. He still didn't know what he was going to tell everyone to put off telling them he was pregnant while excusing his avoiding all the things you had to while pregnant. Now that he no longer had Natsu forcing him to avoid this and that to justify why there were so many things he stopped doing…

Actually, regardless of his final verdict on having Natsu hang out to help with things, it might be a good idea to have Natsu still go through the motions of denying him drinks or cigarettes or dangerous work in public. If nothing else, it would buy Gray a little time to figure out how to deal with explaining the pregnancy. The only problem was that openly letting Natsu help him would make it harder to convince the guild that Natsu wronged him, although Gray was still unsure if there was a safe way to tell everyone the full story. He couldn't explain what Natsu did wrong if most of the guild felt that Gray was the one who'd been out of line.

Gray was so lost in thought that he didn't realize Natsu said anything until the fire slayer poked him in the arm.

"What?"

"Don't go to Lucy for help with this. Ever."

"But Levy—"

"That was then. If Levy gets pregnant again, she can't go to Lucy either."

That was an absurd thing to insist upon. Levy and Lucy were too close. But Gray did make a mental note to ask Lucy at the next opportunity why it was that Natsu thought the subject was off topic.

Probably because she would tell him that Natsu was a control freak when it came to kids. Gray wouldn't be shocked if it turned out that she dumped him over a dispute about having children. She didn't want to wreck her body, and he probably got caught poking holes in all his condoms.

Given Gray's own experience, he wouldn't put something like that past Natsu anymore. He'd seen Natsu light up whenever the idea of kids of his own was mentioned, and Erik had made a point of telling him after the Dragneel brothers left the other day just how upset Natsu was with the idea that someone else would adopt the kid. Gray wouldn't have put it past Natsu to have made up a moral high ground excuse in denying him the chance for an abortion just to cover up that he was really jumping on an opportunity to have a kid after Lucy realized what a sneak he was.

Was it unfair of Gray to judge Natsu so harshly? No. No it was not. Gray would never put anything past Natsu again.
Natsu waved a hand in Gray's face. "You're spacey today."

"Still sorting out all the shit you've doomed me to."

"Sorry."

"Like hell you are."

Natsu scowled. "Just because I didn't want the baby die doesn't mean I wanted to hurt you. I'm here trying to make this easier, aren't I?"

"You could be here hiding that I'm also slowly turning into a dog."

"I'm not hiding anything."

"Swear it."

"I swear I'm not hiding anything."

Gray's eyes fell on the collar. He still didn't know how it worked.

"Tell me, honestly, that you did the right thing."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I did something wrong."

"Then why did you do it?" Gray demanded.

"Because not doing anything would have also been wrong."

"Letting me control my own life was wrong?"

"Standing by and letting my friend repeat an act of heartless murder was wrong, yes."

It hurt bad enough hearing Natsu say it when they pretended to talk about someone else, but Natsu looking him in the eye and telling him something so brutal was ten times worse.

"I didn't murder anyone."

"You killed our first kid."

It wasn't their kid. It was just... just a bundle of cells. Like Zeref said. Like Jellal... Come to think of it, Jellal never said that. He never said anything about the fetus. He only offered Gray an ear and told him everything was alright.

"I... I didn't have a choice..."

"No. You didn't have a choice this time."

"I had to!" Gray snapped. "I can't do this, Natsu! What have you seen since I found out about any of this that makes you think I'm able to handle it?"

A tear raced down Gray's cheek and fell from his chin, jolting him to the awareness that he was crying.
Natsu froze at the sight of Gray, the next accusation caught on his tongue.

"Say it!" Gray screamed.

"You didn't even try—"

Any emotional jolt that might have had for Gray was pushed aside in shock at the very physical jolt of pain Natsu performed, complete with him falling to the floor and clutching at his neck.

It took Gray a few seconds to decide to kneel down and see if Natsu was seriously hurt. His own mind was a mess, doubts about the first pregnancy that Jellal had helped alleviate resurfacing with Natsu's words. Gray had to split his focus. Half of him reminding himself that he really, really hadn't been in a good place mentally since finding out he was pregnant, and assuring him that his mental health was reason enough for him to think he had made the right choice before. The other half, having smelled the tang of electricity in the air, was now marveling at the fact that Natsu had willfully put on a shock collar as a show that he wanted to make amends.

Not that a shock collar you could take off at will was on par with being forced to carry a spawn for month without rest, but it was more than Gray had expected from the same man who snuck medicine into his drink to trap him in a pregnancy.

Natsu swore. "Fuck. Are you okay?"

"You're the one sprawled on the floor."

"You're still crying. I shouldn't have said that when you were already crying."

"Well... yeah." Gray would rather they talked about Natsu more. Focusing on his reaction meant thinking about the things that caused it.

"Shit. This is how I messed up during New Year's too. Maybe he was on to something and I just sucked too bad to see it. Maybe talking you down sounded impossible was because I suck at it so much. There isn't even anything either of us can change at this point, so what good does getting mad about it do?"

For Gray? A lot. Being mad at Natsu was energy that he wasn't devoting to feeling miserable for himself. As for who 'he' was that told Natsu to try talking to Gray about not getting an abortion... Gray decided he didn't want to know. He didn't need to know if anyone else thought he was in the wrong.

But it felt nice, in a useless sort of way, to see that Natsu wished he'd managed a less underhanded approach. And if that collar reacted based on its wearer's sense of morality and shocked Natsu for saying something he knew would upset Gray, then that meant Natsu really did feel that his behavior was wrong.

On the other hand, he'd still said something he knew would upset Gray.

And on the hypothetical third hand, the shock that collar gave looked nasty. Gray almost felt bad for Natsu, having someone wear it to impress him. He ought to tell Natsu to take it off.

But Natsu told him that he was too hasty in killing a baby knowing it would upset him. When Gray tried to call the collar excessive, what he said instead was: "My stomach feels a little better. Maybe we can do grilled cheese for lunch."
Lucy and Lyon

Chapter Notes

Fun fact, I am terrible at remembering Lyon exists in relation to Gray. I only remembered him for this fic because I threw Lyredy in just to peeve Jellal.

Also, I wasn't kidding when I said the kiss comes up a lot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gray put up with Natsu for six days, and on the seventh, sent Natsu out with the mission of hand delivering a message to Lyon explaining the basics of his situation. There was no reason Gray couldn't call Lyon. They both had their own pocket sized Communication Lacrima, and Lyon would no doubt call anyway wanting more of an explanation than 'There was an accident with Zeref and now I'm pregnant. Tell no one.' The real purpose of the letter, aside from his first step towards coming out with his condition, was to get Natsu out of town.

If he'd simply told Natsu he wanted a day off, Natsu might have taken a job, or he might have gone to hang out with Lucy. Since Gray planned on seeing Lucy in private, that wasn't a risk he could afford.

He waited a good fifteen minutes after sending Natsu off before setting out on his own. The cold didn't bother him, but he'd yet to verify that it wouldn't bother the baby, so he wore a coat. Because Natsu had made hot chocolate before Gray resolved to see Lucy, he'd also filled a travel mug with warm chocolaty goodness. Loathe though he was to admit it, he couldn't turn down anything with chocolate in it as of late. Natsu actually melted chunks of chocolate into milk and added honey to make it even sweeter, rather than mixing instant hot chocolate packets from Gray's cupboard with hot water, and his hot chocolate was creamier than what Gray made for himself.

So Gray turned up at Lucy's doorstep in a winter coat clutching a warm mug. Such an out of place sight made Lucy pale.

"Are you still sick? What's wrong? Why do you have so many layers on?"

"It's winter," Gray said. "Isn't this a normal amount to wear?"

"Well..." Lucy looked at Gray's wet jeans and shoes, and then out her window at the foot and half of mostly fresh snow that the average person wouldn't venture into without snow pants and boots. "It's a good effort."

"Thanks? Can I come in?"

Lucy stepped aside for Gray, shutting the door after him.

"I was worried about you, you know. You didn't look good last time you were here. No one's seen you at the guild, and Juvia said you've been strange all week."

Gray gave a vague affirmative noise as he shed his coat. Juvia had been baby crazy all week, and Natsu couldn't field her. He'd tried. But he supposed he did at least look better than the last time he saw Lucy. His morning sickness had subsided for the day and he made a point to keep himself clean.
so Natsu wouldn't offer to wash him. His clothes hadn't been worn since the last time they were 

"What happened."

"Natsu and I had a fight."

"That made you physically ill?"

"Kind of. There was some weirdness with Zeref and... It doesn't really matter right now."

It did, but he couldn't say it. If that letter to Lyon wasn't penned with ink and in Natsu's hands, Gray would snatch it back and tear it up before anyone could see it. He really didn't want to face telling anyone about his situation.

"Come to think of it, it's been a while since Natsu broke in here."

"He kept that up even after you two split?"

Lucy gave her room a weary look. "Well, he did it before we started dating too."

"On that subject..." No one ever successfully asked the two of them what happened. Both of them were always so quick to shut the subject down. "You and Natsu... What did you fight over?"

"Oh, everything. What to have for breakfast. Whether or not he could sleep in my bed. Whose clothes were whose. None of it was major, but we got into lots of silly arguments."

If Gray were a woman and found his boyfriend poking holes in condoms, he would blow his top. He knew Lucy would too, and grudgingly relinquished that theory.

"So what did you too break up over?"

Lucy turned to glare at him.

"I kissed Natsu," Gray said, which wasn't a lie. "But we got into a huge fight not long after and... I just want to know what exactly I'm dealing with."

"You and Natsu are a couple?"

Gray regretted implying that on so many levels, the least of which was that he now had to nip a rumor in the bud of him and Natsu as an item. More pressing at the moment was that Lucy looked almost grief stricken.

"Are you okay?" Gray asked. Lucy was the one to call it off, so he'd just assumed she was fine with Natsu dating again.

"Yes! I... Yes. It's just that... I didn't expect him... with a man."

"We're really not dating. It was thrown out there. That's all."

Lucy looked around her room, then gestured for Gray to sit in one of her chairs while she took the other. "It's nothing. Really. I ended things even though... Well... I ended things, so if Natsu's ready to move on... I guess can't complain."

For half a second Gray forgot about the pregnancy and wondered if Natsu didn't kiss him back because he *wasn't* ready to move on. Then he remembered that Natsu didn't kiss him back because
he was only being nice to manipulate Gray, and that he didn't want Natsu to kiss him back anyway.

"So what happened?" Gray dared ask. "I thought it might have been something to do with children. The way he changed the subject when it came up, it just seemed like that was the issue."

"It was." Lucy paused, as if deciding whether or not to leave it at that. "Juvia…?"

"I'm not sleeping with her. I'm sure she has plenty of items to satisfy herself with that have all been custom made in my likeness." Given how many times people had seen him naked, she probably had a perfect replica dildo.

"It's really Natsu you're interested in? So you're not worried about kids then," Lucy mumbled, which was a perfectly fair assumption to make, but the furthest thing from true. Gray took a sip of his hot chocolate and let its warm goodness push back all the bad thoughts.

Because Gray was busy thinking happy thoughts, Lucy started her story to fill the silence.

"The only thing we ever really fought over was whether or not we ought to break up. Everything else was a disagreement at worst, but kids… Kids were something we agreed on. We both wanted them. We wanted to exact same amount, and had similar ideas on how to raise them, and were both so excited with the idea that we started trying before Natsu had even saved up enough to propose. Bisca didn't get married until she was pregnant, and Levy was scrambling to get her wedding put together before she was too big to fit in a dress, so there wasn't a lot of pressure to get married first. We could elope at any time if we felt like it, but a baby would take months, so we were eager to get started on that."

Gray took another sip to push back thoughts of how Natsu was probably using him to get a baby, since he wanted one so bad.

Oblivious to Gray's thoughts, Lucy rested her head back on the top of her chair, almost perpendicular to the floor, and placed her hands over her stomach. "But months and months went by of us trying, and nothing happened. Sometimes I would be late and he would comment on my scent changing and we would get excited, but nothing ever came of it. Finally, we went to see a specialist."

"Technically I'm not barren. But my body… There was some damage when we fought Tartaros, so it doesn't react right when I conceive. I can't support a pregnancy, and every time one started, I would miscarry in only a week or two. I didn't even realize. It felt like a bad period."

"We were both distraught when we heard. I couldn't have children of my own. Not ever. Suddenly, all those conversations we had about whose nose and eyes and hair we hoped our baby had felt like a cruel joke, and we stopped talking about it. Natsu came home one day with a list of places where we could adopt, but when I saw them, I felt like a failure. Even if Natsu said it was fine and we didn't have to have our own, I remember going through pictures of children after he left for the day and thinking about how none of them had his eyes and chin and my hair and nose like he said he hoped our child would. None of them looked like him at all. The only baby was born blind, and I'm sure she's a precious little girl, but Natsu wanted someone he would be able to train to fight and bond with taking jobs, and we couldn't take a blind girl into battle. He wanted a baby that he could see through every stage of life, but the only baby wasn't his dream child. After all that time we spent talking about it and how excited he'd been, I felt like I was forcing him to settle.

"I told him that night that we were through. I just couldn't stand to think about it. How he could still have the baby he wanted, but only if it was with some other girl. We fought all night. He thought I was being rash, and he was right, but I just couldn't stand it. I started crying again, and he gave up, and that only made me cry harder. Maybe if we talked about it, we could have sorted it out, but
we've avoided it ever since. And he has you now."

There was a flash of bitter resentment as Lucy lifted her head to look at Gray again, but it was gone as quickly as it came on. This time, Gray recognized the issue. As far as she knew, he couldn't give Natsu a child either. She'd given him up so he could find someone who could become pregnant, and from her perspective he went and wound up with someone else with whom he would have to settle for adoption.

He could tell her about the pregnancy. Natsu only took such an intense interest in him because of it, and if it wasn't Natsu's son, it was at least his nephew.

But Natsu had been interested in her despite the fact that she couldn't have kids. Interested in her romantically, when he backed away from Gray the moment he realized his interest in stopping the abortion had been mistaken for romantic. Natsu didn't need a biological child. Natsu wanted a child, but he'd cared more about his relationship with Lucy than with having a child of his own.

Which meant that as much as Gray hated to admit it, Natsu had likely seen the pregnancy, his obtaining a child, and his relationship with Gray's with regard to the whole affair as separate matters.

"Did you and Natsu talk about children?" Lucy asked. "It seems a little early for that."

"Sort of. Juvia talks about us and children a lot, no matter how much I tell her not to. So the subject comes up."

"Ah." Lucy gave him a sympathetic look. "She didn't follow you here, did she?"

"No." Probably not. She usually tagged along openly, but every now and then she popped up when Gray thought he was alone. "Sorry to intrude. I'm sure it's something you don't like to be reminded of."

"No. It felt nice to tell someone. Just… Well, I… hope you two are happy together."

—o—

Gray made himself a dinner of plain toast when he ran out of hot chocolate, and was stripping down for bed when someone knocked. It was too late to deal with Juvia, and much too late for the cesspool of emotional turmoil that was dealing with Natsu, and Gray was glad that, for once, he had remembered both the lock and the chain over the door.

The lock clicked and the door opened as wide as the chain would allow.

"Gray?" Lyon asked.

Gray rushed over with his pants still on one leg to undo the chain. He'd expected a call from Lyon once Natsu delivered the letter, not this.

"Hey. You're out late," Gray said. "Come in. Are you staying the night?"

"Yeah." Lyon thudded his boots on the balcony to knock off snow before stepping in. "How are you feeling? Natsu didn't want me to hear too much from him, but he made it sound like you weren't doing well."

"I'm holding up," Gray said. "The first couple days after I found out were rough. Really rough. But I'm holding up."
Lyon pulled him into a hug, and Gray offered no resistance.

"What all did Natsu tell you, besides what's in the letter?"

"The details of the accident. Zeref's created the ultimate fertility drug, from the sounds of it. That, and that you haven't been well since you found out."

"Yeah. Well... A lot happened. I can't back out of this without losing my magic. Did Natsu mention that? I only had so long to abort before removing the fetus would also remove my magic."

"He didn't." Lyon pulled away and took Gray's hand, guiding him to the living room.

'Living room' was a nice way of putting it. Gray's apartment was a kitchen, two bedrooms, and a bathroom. But it was only him living there and he had no need for two bedrooms, so a Lacrima Vision equipped to play recordings and a couch had been placed in the room instead. Zeref had offered to give Gray an Archive Lacrima that he could use to research pregnancy protocol, but Gray wasn't sure he wanted to look into it. On the one hand, it would be good not to depend on Natsu for information on what he was in for, but on the other it just made him feel sick to read about it for himself.

Sitting Gray down on the couch where he would sleep that night, Lyon said, "You'll have to get the hang of it, I guess."

"The hang of what? Being pregnant?"

"Being a parent."

"I'm not going to be a parent. I'm not ready. There's still a lot I want to do and... And I can handle older kids but I never know what to do with little ones."

"Not ready? Gray, I'm about to be a father too, and we're the same age. How much time do you need."

"We're not the same age. You have seven years on me."

Lyon's cheeks turned pink. "R-right. The island incident."

"I don't suppose you have any bright ideas for how to convince me I'm also already the perfect parent."

"No... Maybe... Get help? Natsu's good with kids, right? Meredy said he gives her plenty of good advice when she comes to see Jellal."

"Natsu is not an option!"

Lyon flinched back at Gray's outburst, eyes wide with surprise. "Sorry? I thought he was already helping."

"Natsu's making amends. It's his fault I'm in this mess."

"I thought it was Zeref's experiment."

"Yeah. But at least he didn't know at the time that it would get me pregnant. Natsu knew I was pregnant months before I did, and he knew I wouldn't want the kid, and he made sure I wouldn't find out until it was too late to do anything."
Except give up his magic. He'd sent a letter to Porlyusica asking, and he had ten more weeks to decide whether or not he was willing to make that sacrifice before the procedure was too high risk for her to perform electively. By Zeref's estimate, the serum would last in his system until mid-August, so even if Gray did wait until the last possible day to safely give up his magic to terminate the pregnancy, he would still be looking at one more pregnancy that he would need to catch in time.

Lyon tugged uncomfortably at the collar of his shirt and said, "That's unfortunate."

"That's an understatement."

"How did Natsu do that anyway? It's your body, isn't it? How could you not notice something as major as a baby growing in it?"

"Drugs. Natsu was acting nice and buddy-buddy with me so he could slip stuff to suppress my symptoms into my drinks."

"Oh." Lyon stared at Gray, face growing blanker and blanker as he processed the explanation, then tightening with anger. "Oh. Do you need me to hit him for you?"

"You're not the first to offer, but no thanks. I can hit him myself." It wasn't that hard to exaggerate how hurt he was to scare Natsu into being nicer, since Natsu kept putting that collar on first thing when he arrived at Gray's.

Lyon hardly looked satisfied with that answer. He dropped down on the couch beside Gray, hunched over and arms crossed. "We're not telling anyone you're pregnant yet, are we? Not if you had to tell me with a sealed letter. So I can't tell anyone about Natsu either. How should I tell Meredy that we're not letting him near our kid?"

Gray didn't know what to say to that, so he said nothing.

"And now he's the one making sure you don't have an emotional meltdown over this? Are you sure you're okay?"

"Fine. I already had my meltdown and Jellal was the one to handle it, and Natsu knows that if I have another, I want Jellal for that one too. Besides, I really am doing better. The shock's worn off and… It's more time dependent. I wake up feeling bad physically and it messes with my head, but that usually goes away by noon. Or a few hours after. He makes good comfort food, and I think that he didn't actually do what he did out of malice. He thought he was 'saving the baby' from me, or something."

"People who are willing to go too far in the name of good are twice as dangerous as people who act with malice," Lyon said.

"I don't think he felt good about doing it," Gray said.

It surprised him to realize that he believed the words he said to pacify his friend. Natsu wouldn't submit to the precautions he did if he didn't want to make amends, and he'd sounded sincere when beating himself up over his inability to bring the abortion up without attacking Gray.

Did that mean Natsu was forgiven? Hell no. Not for years after Gray shipped the blasted baby to an overseas orphanage and never saw it again, assuming Gray ever could fully forgive him. What it did mean was that he felt reasonably comfortable that Natsu wasn't about to try anything like his medicine scheme again. At least not while the guilt from his last act was fresh.

Natsu betrayed him, tricked him, denied him the right to control and even basic information about his
own life and body. That wasn't something Gray thought he could ever forgive. But despite that, it was no longer just avoidance of Zeref that made Gray open to the idea of giving Natsu a second chance.

Chapter End Notes

Now you might be asking, Serpent, how can you have a woman who is incapable of birth in a story where a man is pregnant? Can't the serum get Lucy pregnant too?

No. The serum kickstarts stuff, but Gray's magic is what's fueling the ability to not lose the kid, and this ability would be severely impaired if only had a minimal amount of magic. If Lucy's magic couldn't do the same for her, then the serum wouldn't resolve that. (Although if you wanna check chapter two again, Natsu does start to ask about using the serum on other people. He and Lucy have already broken up by that point, but he still tries to ask.)

Some interesting details on adoption, since the number of kids who go unadopted is an oft quoted statistic when abortion is brought up. Most couple looking to adopt take years after starting the process before they get a kid. There's a ton of couples who just give up entirely, and plenty more who would like to adopt, but don't even try.

In short summary, the bureaucracy and financial demands involved are a huge barrier of entry. Couples then tend towards children of their own race, and prefer girls at that. Additionally, many won't consider disabled children, which are a tragically common group to be given up for adoption. Most people also want babies, which is a knock against anyone either not adopted right away, or taken because their birth family wasn't looking after them properly.

So healthy babies (especially white girls) tend to be snatched up by couples looking to adopt—with adoptions often being agreed upon before the child is born. (Generally speaking, healthy babies are given up because the mother knows she doesn't want to be a mother, while disabled babies are given up because the mother didn't want that specific baby when it turned out to be disabled. So healthy babies can be made available for adoption while still in utero.) These most often fall through if the mom changes her mind and decides to keep the kid. But older children and those who are disable or otherwise medically unsound can wait years to find a home, if they ever do. Couples who are willing to take these children can usually get an adoption arranged faster, since the supply and demand are favorable to adopting parents. There are also instances in which disabled children are given to couples who usually would not be allowed to adopt just because the system is glad to find someone who wanted those kids.
Gray had reservations about the whole second chance thing when Natsu came over one day with a jar of pickles. Not just any jar, but the most suspect jar Gray had ever laid eyes on. The original label was mostly peeled off, but what bits of the picture were still there suggested the jar was meant to contain oysters. There was rust on the lid.

"What," Gray asked, "is this?"

"Pickles."

Gray didn’t even try not to glare.

In return for being glared at, Natsu stared at Gray in innocent confusion. "What?"

"You really think you're funny, huh?"

"Yes? But I don't get it. What's the joke."

Gray gestured emphatically to the pickles.

"I still don't get it."

Frustrated, Gray looked through the rest of the groceries Natsu brought over. Since Gray was officially off active duty and helping with record keeping didn’t pay as well, Natsu had offered to foot most all of his expenses until he could work again. Gray still handled his own rent, which was cheap when you picked and old apartment out of the way of everything, but he let Natsu take care of his bills and groceries. Regardless of the circumstances, he wasn't going to complain if someone paid those.

There was chocolate ice cream, which Gray couldn't really complain about when he had mentioned the other day that he wished he had some, but no vanilla. The stereotype, in every instance he’d seen, was vanilla ice cream with pickles.

"Okay. Why pickles?" Gray asked. "What made you think pickles were a good idea?"

"Seriously. What's wrong with the pickles?"

"I'm pregnant! That's what's wrong with the pickles!"

Natsu was teasing him! He was playing dumb and teasing him because he wanted ice cream and he was pregnant, even though it was all Natsu's stupid fault that he was pregnant.

Realizing he was tearing up, Gray growled in frustration and tried to rub his eyes dry. He'd hoped that sheer willpower would overcome any hormones Natsu and the fetus subjected him to, but even after recovering from his initial meltdown, he was too prone to tears over the stupidest things.

That was no shock when the still collared Natsu said, "I don't get it. What's wrong?"

He really didn't get it… So Gray wasn't being teased. No one was making fun of him for being pregnant and there was no reason to completely break down in tears over a jar of pickles, but Gray
did just that anyway.

"Whoa! What's wrong?" Natsu was around the kitchen table in an instant, hand on Gray's shoulder. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. What was it this time?"

"J-just… take the stupid p-pickles away."

Natsu looked around and, seeing no obvious hiding spots, took the pickles off the table and set them beneath it.

"I can get Jellal. Or Lyon. Or… um…"

"N-no." Gray rubbed furiously at his eyes, trying to get them to stop. "It's too s-stupid to ask them f-f-or help."

"Sorry."

Gray shook his head, trying to sob less since stopping the whole tear thing was an effort in futility. "I'm not ev-en crying over anything that r-really m-matters. I h-hate this stupid p-pre… this stupid…"

He had to stop himself there, or his mind would go places it didn't need to be when he was already struggling to pull himself together.

"Here. Let's get something to eat," Natsu said. "It would take me a bit to make hot chocolate, but this can tide you over until then."

The innocently nervous smile Natsu wore when he pulled out the chocolate ice cream, off all the treats he'd bought, and set it in front of Gray was too much. The sobbing over pickles and ice cream turned into a fit of giggles.

Unsure what to make of this, Natsu kept both eyes on Gray as he groped around the cupboards for a bowl to scoop ice cream into.

"I'm still not sure what the issue is," Natsu said when Gray settled down enough to pick up a spoon, "but I made them myself, and they're better for you than those vinegary ones at the store, so Zeref thought I should share them."

"Did you—" Gray smothered a snicker. "Did you run that plan by anyone else?"

"Jellal. He thought it was a bad idea, but he just rolled his eyes when I asked why."

Natsu gave Gray an odd look that said that while he still didn't get what was wrong with his pickles, he realized that Jellal predicted that reaction. Gray, having found an unoffered jar of pickles the morning after sleeping at Jellal's, was aware of the fact that Jellal was aware of how he walked on eggshells avoiding anything that might be deemed offensive while pregnant. He probably had practice from Erza.

Speaking of which…

"How is Erza doing?" Gray asked. He knew he ought to get out more before he ballooned up, but the thought of going to the guild was so draining. He could make the trip to visit someone if he needed, but that was energy enough, and conversation with people he passed on the streets joking about how he still had his clothes on or how they'd been worried after not seeing him in so long wore him down. It was easier to curl up in the living room with hot chocolate and watch the news.
Besides, last he saw Erza, she was using the weather to excuse her wardrobe turning into nothing but baggy sweaters. The time they took a job helping to stage a play, she jumped at the role of 'extra' rather than insisting she be the lead, and went with a puffy rabbit costume that made her look three times wider than she was. Now that he knew she'd been hiding a pregnancy, he was afraid to see what she'd look like while open with her condition.

He was afraid to see what he would look like soon.

"Fine. I guess. She misses you."

"That's all?"

"She's moody. She complains twice as much as you do about being pregnant, even though she says she likes it. She gave Jellal a black eye the other day after he said 'no' when she asked if she looked fat, because she thought he was just lying to make her feel better and didn't want a relationship built on lies, and then ran to Wendy begging her to heal him when he found a picture of a fat lady and explained how fat and pregnant look different. He's really patient with her. But you can't say that in front of her or she gets mad and says he'd better be after leaving her on her own for the first couple months after he knocked her up."

That sounded like Jellal and Erza. Since Jellal finally come around to settling down, Erza no longer had to bite her tongue about how frustrating it was to wait while he worked things out for himself.

"It's kind of weird," Gray said. "Everyone's having kids now. What's next? Happy?"

"Probably," Natsu said, slumping over in his chair. "For as much as I've told him to go play with Carla lately, I wouldn't be shocked if she comes over with an egg in tow soon."

"Why doesn't he ever come with you anymore?"

"At first I… didn't think he'd approve of… you know." Slipping you drugs to deliberately defy your will. "A-anyway, at this point I just thought you would prefer he not be here. He's used to me asking that he give you some privacy, and you don't want anyone else knowing about the pregnancy yet, and sooner or later he'd get comfortable enough with the whole situation to start teasing you. With how you feel about the whole thing, I thought you might like to not deal with that until you absolutely have to."

"Happy's not that insensitive."

"You clearly didn't see or hear about anything he did with the whole Jellal and Erza situation."

Actually, Gray had heard quite a few accounts from Erza, and had his suspicions as to why Jellal avoided Happy and Mira more than anyone else in the guild. Maybe Happy would give him grief when he came out as pregnant after all.

One more thing not to look forward to with the whole mess Natsu got him into. But at least the idiot was trying to mitigate the damage after the fact.

Gray gave a grunt of affirmation and, after a moments consideration, added, "Ice cream with pickles is a stereotype about pregnancy cravings."

Natsu's brow scrunched. "How? All you ever want is chocolate."

"I don't know. Maybe someone wanted it at some point. Or someone just made it up while joking about their wife, and enough people had or knew someone who had ridiculous cravings, so they
repeated the joke ad nauseam."

"Okay," Natsu said. "You shouldn't eat the pickles before you finish your ice cream then, but I do think you should try one."

Gray made a noncommittal noise. He was running low on ice cream, so he was either going to have to get more for himself when Natsu had already given him a large bowl, or face mounting pressure to try a pickle.

"Really. They're healthy. The baby should have more healthy things."

"The baby doesn't want pickles," Gray said, and immediately felt sick after doing so. It had seemed like a good way to make Natsu shut up, but actually calling it 'the baby' brought on a fresh wave of anxiety.

He set his spoon down and his hand in his lap, staring at the last few bites of frozen chocolate. Suddenly, even though his morning sickness had been spotty in the past couple weeks, he felt like he might throw up.

The thing growing inside of him was a baby. A baby that he was going to have to get out somehow and either give up his life for or find a home for. It would grow up as that weird kid with a man for a mom or the adopted kid whose mother gave it up. Or the kid who spent its entire childhood in an orphanage. Likely all three.

"Why don't you go out?" Natsu said out of the blue.

Gray said nothing.

"You look like you could use fresh air," Natsu pressed. "I know you haven't been out much lately. Maybe you could go to the lake. It's still frozen over. You like skating, right?"

He did, and he appreciate how Natsu had avoided saying 'we', even though Gray knew he would follow to make sure there were no accidents while out on the ice.

Skating, in the past, was always fun, but right then it sounded… not fun.

Nothing sounded fun while he was pregnant.

"Maybe some other day."

"But—"

"I can make myself a rink in skate in the summer if I want. There's no rush."

In the summer, he would be bloated from the thing growing in his gut. Gray shoved himself up from the table and hurried to his room, as if he could physically distance himself from that thought.

"Gray?"

"I'm tired."

"It's only three."

"I don't care."

"I'll make dinner, okay?"
"Do what you want. You would whether you get my permission or not, right?"

He slammed the bedroom door and didn't listen for an answer. He needed a beer. Or a smoke. He needed something, and he wasn't sure he cared if it was something bad for the kid.

-o-

Natsu helped himself to a pickle before putting away the food he'd bought. Vegetables, chocolate ice cream, chocolate ice cream with fudge chunks, chocolate ice cream with brownie bits, baker's chocolate for making chocolate milk, milk for making chocolate milk, eggs, crackers, cheese, and the pickles. Gray might not have wanted them yet, but they were good pickles. Natsu would find a meal to make in a few days that you normally included pickles in so Gray couldn't object when he pulled them out.

Most of it was sugary, or snacks that Gray could shovel down in front of his Lacrima Vision. Natsu didn't say anything about it, because he knew Gray cried the other day when he saw his stomach starting to stick out, but he was going to get fat at the rate he was going. It wasn't good for him to hide inside as much as he did. Too bad there was no way to push him out the door. After what he did to Gray to keep him from killing the baby, he couldn't argue too strongly against something Gray wanted without being accused of being controlling again.

He would see Jellal, Natsu decided. Jellal was trepidatious about him spending so much time around Gray after what happened, even if Natsu was on his best behavior, so he would be eager to step in if Natsu explained the situation to him.

Mind made up, Natsu grabbed leftover beef from the night before and mushrooms from the fridge, and set to work dicing them for the night's dinner. He would make more trips to the guild and pull Jellal aside the next time he saw him. Jellal would know how to make sure that Gray saw more sunlight.

Chapter End Notes

I angsted a lot about where to put those pickles. It felt too lighthearted a thing to follow the previous chapters, but like it'd just be filler if I put it somewhere after the two manage to smooth things over. After a while. I kinda decided that even if it is a bit of a tone shift, I didn't really have any other ideas for how to start this chapter, and it's not the worst lead-in to the current state of affairs.

Besides, it gives me more chances to bring pickles up again later.
Mavis beamed at Natsu when he stepped into the guild the next morning, which meant she had good news about Zeref. It could be anything from him remembering to feed himself to noticing that she did her hair up differently to deciding on his own that it wasn't a good idea to draft blueprints for a drill powered by stolen souls that could dig into parallel universes and potentially shred the fabric of space and time.

Afraid to hear that his brother really had come up with such a terrible idea, Natsu returned her smile and waved, but rather than go up to her, scanned the guildhall for Jellal. His eyes passed over Elfman and Evergreen, who had given up on denying that they were a couple and now denied that they'd eloped, Lucy and Wendy playing cards, Gajeel talking to Laxus while his son waved, Levy showing Asuka a book…

Where was Gajeel's daughter?

"Na-suu!"

Natsu looked down and saw Shutora tugging at his pants leg. Despite his eagerness to recruit Jellal, he couldn't help but smile at her and swoop her up off the ground.

"Hey Shutora. Does your daddy know where you are?"

She put a finger to her lips and gave a comically loud "Sh."

Her daddy had good hearing, and turned to fix Natsu with the flattest look he possibly could. Natsu grinned back and stuck his tongue out. Gajeel's kids loved him, and he loved them, and he loved that Gajeel couldn't stand that.

"Let's take you back to your daddy before he gets mad at me," Natsu said, heading towards Gajeel's table. Gajeel was already mad, so there was no rush on that front, but Natsu didn't have time to babysit when he was supposed to be taking care of Gray.

"Noooo! Pway wit Na-suu."

"Soon, kiddo. I promise. Just not today."

"Meanie! Poopy! Fuckuh!"

Shutora struggled in his arms, but Natsu held her tight until he was within range of Gajeel's waiting arms.

"Thanks," Gajeel growled.

"Yeah. Watch what you say around her. I don't think it'll end well for you if Levy hears her repeat that last one."

The way Gajeel's scowl deepened, Natsu suspected that Levy had already heard and laid into her husband. "I'll keep that in mind."

Natsu left Gajeel with his snickering guildmates and swearing daughter and resumed his search for
Jellal. Gradually, the former fugitive had been coaxed away from the corner and out from under his hood, which ironically made him harder to spot. Now he could be anywhere in the building, and his vibrant, disheveled hair blended in with everyone else's in a way that his old thick hood never had.

An excited squeal from Erza turned Natsu's gaze up to the second floor, and he hurried upstairs to find her thanking Mira profusely for a slice of apple pie. Strawberries, hilariously enough, had not been to her taste since conceived. That she had suddenly stopped caring about her favorite cake should have been everyone's first clue that something was going on with her.

Jellal sat at her side, smiling at the simpleminded pleasure she took in her sweets. He stopped smiling when Natsu waved, but at least Erza waved back enthusiastically.

"How's the baby?" Natsu asked.

"Kicking," Erza reported.

"So she claims," Jellal added. His tone was light, but since his actual fiancée wasn't looking at him, he made no attempt to mask the glare he gave Natsu.

Lately, it was easier to talk to him in Erza's presence. Since he couldn't explain why he had it out for Natsu without going against Gray's wishes and telling the guild too many secrets, he had to play nice or else be smacked for being unduly rude to Erza's friend. Her friend who saved her from him when he was mad, no less.

Oblivious to the daggers her fiancé was glaring, Erza said, "He's not strong enough that anyone else can feel him yet, but he will be. Porlyusica says he's so active because I keep feeding him sugar."

"You feed him more than sugar, right?"

"Well, I have to now." Erza threw Jellal an accusatory look, and he made a show of rolling his eyes.

"That's very brave of you," Natsu sincerely told Jellal. Not many people would dare to tell Erza that she had to eat better.

"I've already been called in too many times to make sure Meredy looks after herself properly," Jellal said. "I had practice coming into this."

For the first time in weeks, the look of displeasure on his face had nothing to do with Natsu. It was no secret that he hated Meredy's husband for the simple crime of being her husband. Any failing on Lyon's part was regarded as a monumental and irredeemable sin worthy of capital punishment. Meredy was far easier to manage than Erza, but from Jellal's intervention alone, Natsu suspected that Lyon had it the roughest of anyone the guild knew with his wife's pregnancy. It must have taken a great deal of courage on Lyon's part to come to Jellal's town in order to check in on Jellal's pregnant friend.

"Actually, I was hoping you could put your practice to use on a friend of mine who's having a kid," Natsu said.

"Not me, right?" Erza asked. "He already spends enough time nagging me."

"Helping you. Do you want us to talk about your friend in private, Natsu?"

"I think they'd like it if we talked in private."

Jellal pushed himself up, leaned over to give Erza a quick kiss, and let Natsu lead him down into the
basement. Gray was the one who handled record keeping at the moment, having excused his dropping from active duty by saying he injured himself on a job and Porlyusica ordered him to take it easy, and with him still at home the basement was empty.

Still, Jellal scanned between shelves of the guild's archives before satisfied with their privacy. Only once he locked the door and searched the entire room for signs of life did he ask Natsu, "What did you do this time?"

"Enable him too much? I don't know. He's holed himself up. It's no good for him."

"He is trying to hide a pregnancy."

"But he doesn't look pregnant yet. Even when he strips, he just looks a little out of shape, and he's been freakishly good about keeping his clothes on lately. That's what has me more worried for him than anything. Besides, when was the last time you saw him?"

"Two days ago, and he didn't look pregnant then," Jellal admitted. "I would be there as often as you if Erza didn't need me. He's doing better now than when he first found out about what you did, but he's seen better days. What happened yesterday?"

"Nothing. He cried over pickles, but I think it was a mood swing thing. He started giggling over ice cream a minute later."

Jellal shook his head in disbelief. "You brought him pickles and ice cream. You're impossible, Natsu."

"No one told me it was a pregnancy joke! And he asked for the ice cream. Which is half the problem. Most of what he eats is junk."

"So stop bringing him junk."

"But he gets upset when I don't."

"Then... Just..." Jellal sighed, running both hands over his face and through his hair. "Okay. I'll talk with him about his diet the next time I'm over. I'll see if we can get him out more too. Maybe I can pretend Meredy's mad at me and I need him to go and make sure Lyon is taking care of her properly."

"You could also just ask Lyon to invite him over."

Jellal balked as if that option as unfathomable.

"Okay. I'll ask Lyon to invite him over."

"Fine. You do that. And in the meantime... No, wait. Would it be a good idea to get Meredy involved? She's been more on the spastic side since becoming pregnant, and she does like to gossip with Juvia. If she found out about the pregnancy... Maybe I could drag him along the next time I go to see her and say I need him to keep Lyon distracted so I don't have to deal with him while Meredy and I catch up?"

"That might work."

"We'll try that then. He can't be that bad, though. He still comes to the guild."

"He's been here four times since he found out about the baby. Once in the past week. You might not
have noticed, but he used to be here every day."

"Oh. I… I had noticed that some people are here more often."

Leave it to the guy who looked for reasons not to show up to think that Gray's absence was normal. Natsu looked around. The basement had been left in Gray's reliable hands, but there was a stack of books waiting to be returned to their shelves as tall as Natsu was. Gray didn't do half the work he'd been trusted with, and he hardly socialized anymore either.

"You can still push him when he's being stubborn without it turning into some 'you're just trying to manipulate me for your own aims again' type fight. You gotta get him up more."

Jellal leaned against a dusty bookshelf and crossed his arms. "You know, there's a reason why he doesn't listen to you anymore."

"Nooo. Really? What would that be?"

Jellal glared.

Sighing, Natsu threw up his hands in defeat. "Okay. Okay. Fine. I get it. Really. The reason Gray can guilt me out of making sure he looks after himself is because I feel guilty, okay?"

Jellal's arms stayed crossed.

"Look. I'm trying my best here. I don't know what more you want."

"You could go back in time and tell yourself to pick a better way of stopping Gray that didn't leave him feeling betrayed and stripped of all control."

"I mean, I can make Zeref build me a gate for that, but it's never gone well before when anyone does that. Him especially."

"He sent you to this era just fine."

"Yeah. And got himself cursed with immortality in the process. I'd like to not kill Gray by getting too close to him."

Technically, Zeref was cursed for intending to use the gate to stop Natsu from dying in the first place, and faced no penalties for sending people into the future, but Natsu wasn't taking any chances. Jellal spent too much time avoiding Zeref to know the details of how precisely he was cursed, and would never endorse a project involving Zeref anyway.

The mere mention of his brother was enough for Natsu to free himself from Jellal's bitter gaze. The former fugitive looked away, crossed arms tightening as if he needed to hold himself together.

"Let's… not do that, then."

"Yeah. Like Zeref said, what's done is done. Just gotta go forward from here."

Jellal turned further away from Natsu, who determined that if he kept invoking his brother's name, it would be overkill.

"Well, anyway, just in case that situation arise again… maybe you could teach me how to argue?"

"What?"
"Teach me how to argue," Natsu commanded.

"I think you have more experience arguing than I do. Especially with Gray."

"No. That productive arguing thing."

"Debate?"

"Yeah. Don't you do a lot of that?"

"With who? Erik? There's no debating Erik. He gets in your head and derails the conversation with all your embarrassing thoughts. Macbeth doesn't even respond half the time when I try to talk to him. And Erza… You can either convince her right away or not at all."

"Okay. Buy what about when you were on the Council?"

Jellal looked back at Natsu, eyes wide with innocent confusion. "What Council?"

"The one you served on when you voted to blast all of us with Etherion. Didn't you do that debate thing then? How did you convince everyone to vote to blast us?"

"I think I would remember something that major."

"You cited a law you voted to enact last week to help Mavis get us all off the hook over that melted train station. How do you… Are you just trying to get out of teaching me?"

"Anyway, I'll see what I can do for Gray."

Natsu grabbed Jellal by the arm as he walked back to the stairs, calling on his E.N.D. form in order to hold him steady when Jellal tried to pull away.

"Look. I get it. You don't like me right now, and I'm not fun to argue with on a good day, and I'm so bad with lessons that my brother who screwed his own life over just to save me gave up on taking care of me himself and left me in the woods with a dragon. What I'm asking of you is not fun. But you're the one who got on my case for not trying to talk Gray down, and I'm asking you to teach me how to do that without turning the conversation into a bitter fight."

Jellal glared back at Natsu, not at all intimidated by the scales or claws, and said, "Fine."

Natsu released him and suppressed his Etherious form, scales dissolving back into skin. "Thanks. Do you need to see Wendy?"

"No." Jellal tugged at the sleeve of his shirt, which wasn't long enough to hide the hand-shaped burn mark. "I need to see Porlyusica later. I'll ask her for a salve while I'm there."

"Sorry."

Jellal shrugged. "At least you're trying."

-M-

Mavis was waiting for Natsu at the top of the stairs when he came up.

"Zeref received development funding," she blurted out before Natsu could say hi.

"Is this supposed to be good news? Who's funding him?"
"The Council, believe it or not."

Natsu didn't believe it, actually. The Council had tried twice to penalize both Fairy Tail and Twilight Ogre for not running Zeref out of town, and then pressured the royal family to cut off trade with Alvarez if the empire didn't stop giving Zeref whatever resources he asked for to conduct his research.

"It's for the Archive Lacrima. Mest mentioned to an old coworker how it was easy to dig up research people logged with Archive magic without needing to learn Archive for himself, and how I could keep tabs on all of Zeref's projects without having to go all the way out to the lab to make sure he wasn't doing anything too reckless, and they mentioned it to more people and someone realized how much work it could save if they could set his lacrima up in different research facilities. There's no way to keep information private using the lacrima or only share it with select groups, so they wanted him to find a way to build on the existing Archive spell to make it do that. But nevermind that. The Council is willing to work with Zeref, Natsu. Isn't that great?"

"Maybe."

It could be encouragement Zeref didn't need, but it could also lead to more direction with his research, and more monitoring to make sure he didn't come up with any ideas that could be too damaging. It wasn't that Zeref never asked himself what could go wrong with a project. The issue was more that his genius didn't extend to coming up with answers for that question.

Mavis's smile faltered when Natsu didn't return it, so he forced a grin.

"Are you two fighting? He said he hasn't seen you too much the lately."

"No. I've been busy. I'll see him again soon."

"When you do, could you maybe… make him do something about all the frogs?" Mavis made a face. "I don't mind one or two, but they're everywhere. He wanted to make sure for Gray that nothing weird happened for a certain number of generations out. Although what Gray would need so many frogs for is beyond me."

She paused, peering past Natsu into the basement, and hummed in disappointment at the stack of books still waiting to be shelved.

"Sis?"

Mavis swatted him on the arm. She looked too young for anyone to call her Granny or Auntie and continue their tradition with Makarov, so most people stuck to Master or First or, jokingly, Ninth. Natsu, as a jab at her anchored relationship with Zeref, liked to speak to her as if she were a sister-in-law.

She hated it.

"You heard Gray was injured, right? I'm worried he might have downplayed it. He was supposed to help around the guild while he recovered, but he's barely here. Would you be able to check on him? He's your teammate."

"Yeah." Natsu tugged nervously at his scarf. "I'll let him know you were worried."

"And tell him that Zeref is pleased with how his frogs are doing."

"I'm sure he'll love to hear that one." It was more news for Natsu than Gray. Gray had no reason to
worry about how they baby would turn out when he didn't even want to live in the same country as it. But that Mavis was worried about his wellbeing was a good message to pass on.

Chapter End Notes

There's this one trilogy where one of the main villains, in the first book, has a scheme that involves stealing souls and using them to fuel a drill that can pierce different universes. I haven't been able to take him seriously since, because how comically evil must you be to build a soul powered drill?

Oh. Also, the frogs. The frog thing is… something that kind of kept coming up as a shorthand to reference Zeref's serum research, but I like what it turned into.
Frogs

Chapter Notes

In case anyone was wondering about the frog tag.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

One day it was Jellal who came over, insisting he needed help moving the last of his things out of his apartment. Two days later, it was Lyon, claiming that Jellal stole his wife and so he'd come to check on Gray again. Gray didn't necessarily mind the visit, but he wasn't keen on all the concerned looks Lyon gave him as he dragged Gray to the lake. The day after that it was Zeref of all people, which meant that it wasn't just Jellal conspiring to force him outside. He hadn't thought Zeref would be the type to insist on walking through town with anyone, but he was wrong.

"Mavis says that unless you're gravely ill, you have until the end of the day to do at least one job from the work she assigned you, or she's putting you on probation. If you are gravely ill, she's putting you on probation immediately for not telling her sooner."

If it had been Natsu or Lyon or even Jellal who came to say this, Gray might have flipped them off and shut the door. But it was Zeref. Gray did not possess the same fear of Zeref that Jellal did, but he still drew the line well before flipping Zeref off and slamming a door in his face for passing on a message. Besides, if Mavis had bullied Zeref into coming to town just to play messenger, she had to be serious about getting Gray moving. Rather than make it clear that he was sick of going out, Gray slumped over against the doorframe and let Zeref pass him a list of tasks Mavis needed down.

Most of it was work he knew he'd blown off. Cleaning and filing and reviewing supplies. Except…

"What does 'find new home for frogs' mean?"

"Oh." Zeref took the list back from Gray. "I meant to tear that one off before handing it to you."

Gray had already seen it on the list, but Zeref still tore carefully across the page to remove the one item, pocketed it, and handed the paper back to Gray.

"Okay. Now I'm curious."

"I was running an experiment involving frogs. Mavis wanted me to get rid of them, but I'm not done yet, and Natsu was interested in the results, so he wouldn't help her."

That right there was just about everyone Mavis could count on to go see Zeref and mess with his things. But Gray figured that he'd earned a little leeway for the whole accidental pregnancy that Zeref kick started. And if Natsu was against it, than he was all for it. "Let's clean up the frogs then."

"I'm not done with them."

"How many do you have?"

"I don't know. There were a lot before I realized anything was amiss, and then they got into the pond again."
Gray hesitated a moment, realizing this was a pregnancy serum experiment he was attempting to tamper with. But so long as he didn't recontaminate himself, that was a good thing, right? If Zeref couldn't get conclusive data, then he wouldn't risk pursuing any more tampering with that blasted concoction.

"The First says the frogs have to go. Let's get 'em." Gray grabbed a coat and stepped out, shutting the door behind him. "Do you have an estimate for how many there are?"

"I gave up a while ago. There's only ten mice right now, but that should change soon. I turned all the fish lose because they were overpopulating the pond, and I didn't have anywhere else to store them."

"Turned them lose where?"

"The lake I fished them out of in the first place." Seeing Gray's concern, Zeref added, "Don't worry. They were all cleaned first. I'm not about to risk dumping that serum into the town's water supply."

"Good. Who reminded you to do that?"

"No one. I'm not careless, Gray." Zeref actually looked offended. There was even a touch of red in his eyes, which Gray hadn't seen since the war.

Gray was taken aback before remembering that there was, in fact, a reason that Mavis and Natsu were generally the only ones who dealt with Zeref. Calmed down and freed from his curse or not, Zeref was still brimming with dangerous magic, and he was cursed in the first place after bristling all his life at people telling him that his research was going down dangerous roads. If there wasn't something special Mavis and Natsu knew to do to turn him away from a reckless idea, then it wasn't a stretch to think there was something special about how he regarded them that made him more prone to listening when they spoke.

"Sorry. I just thought The First would want to make sure, since she seems to care about you getting rid of everything."

The red faded back to black, but Zeref's expression was still drawn tight. "Sure."

"She wants the frogs cleaned up. Let's get them for her, okay?"

Zeref spun around and walked away, pausing briefly at the edge of the apartment building stairs to see if Gray would follow him down. Gray hurried after, wondering just how big a mistake he'd made thinking it would be therapeutic to poke a hornet's nest.

-0-

Gray hadn't been to Zeref's lab since the pond incident. At that time, it had been a fairly disorganized place. Anything dangerous that Zeref was actively constructing, he had the good sense to rope off and put up a warning sign for—as if anyone needed to be warned not to touch something Zeref Dragneel, the infamous Black Mage, designed without knowing what it did. Aside from that, Gray wouldn't have called the place orderly. Research notes and books had been scattered everywhere, but Zeref had a system* and knew where everything was. Natsu's house almost looked tidy in comparison, although Natsu thought that Zeref did a better job on account of how the papers were generally lumped together with other papers from the same project. Keeping the floors clean was not in the Dragneel genes, and Gray pitied whoever wound up with the kid he was carrying if it inherited that trait.

This visit was worse.
The last time, for whatever failing the inside of Zeref's place possessed, the outside looked fairly organized. There were a few incomplete structures, but nothing too out of the ordinary. Zeref had even carried on raising the chickens the guild left behind when they moved back into town, which Natsu thought was a good activity for him.

This time there were frogs everywhere. Everywhere. Who could blame Mavis for wanting them gone? It was amazing Zeref could live with so many frogs, because Gray would have thought only Frosch would find such conditions hospitable to non-frog life. He did his best to avoid them walking up to the old windmill, but still stepped on eight.

"How do you even keep track of them?"

Zeref shrugged. "I've kept an eye out for abnormalities. That's all. If they hadn't gotten loose, I might have let each generation go once the next was grown, but..." He looked around. Two frogs had hopped into the wrinkles of the sash draped across his torso. "I don't even know how many generation there are."

"Where do they go at night? Don't these things hibernate or something?"

"Not this breed. Back when I still thought it might not be a terrible idea to put that serum in a habitat, I wanted to make sure it didn't react strangely to extremities of weather, so I populated the test pond with species that would remain active year-round. They do move slower in the cold, but..." He turned the sash over and four frogs fell out. "Well, they're attracted to heat. It really frightened Mavis the other day. I did consider telling Natsu that we could move them deeper into the woods and I could walk out there to check on them, but between you and Jellal, he hardly has time to visit lately."

"What is Natsu doing with Jellal?"

"The last time was because he was concerned about getting you outdoors more, I think."

So that was why everyone suddenly had activities to involve Gray in. "He roped you into that too?"

"No. Mavis contacted me because she thought you were ignoring him and needed a fire lit under you. Apparently I'm her enforcer now."

"That's not a bad job for you. Maybe you can keep Natsu in line from now on when he gets all righteous too."

Zeref made a face at that and said, "Mavis already nags Natsu to keep me in line."

"Yeah. Well, you were on his case pretty hard when this came to light." Gray pulled back on his shirt so the fabric pulled tight around the subtle outward curve of his stomach. "Would've done me a lot of good if you jumped on that a week earlier."

"Sorry about that."

"Whatever. You did try to warn me, I guess. Picked a lousy messenger though."

Zeref bent down and started scooping frogs into his sash. "I really didn't expect that from him, since he always seems so determined to do right by his friends. But he's been better since, right?"

"I guess. He makes me hot chocolate whenever I want, and he taught me how to make things with ginger that help with the morning sickness, but it feels a lot like he's only doing what I ask because he already won. Does it sound weird putting it that way? Talking about what happens to the fetus like it's combat?"
"What does it think of that?"

"Nothing?" It didn't have a brain that Gray knew of.

"Sounds fine to me, then."

It was nice to have someone who didn't rag on him for getting an abortion, or tell him they were with him while dodging the subject of their own thoughts on the matter. But it did throw Gray off each time he heard Zeref speak so callously about it. Sometimes he wondered if the lingering effects of that curse made Zeref value what benefited one's self over the lives around him, but Zeref hadn't done any deliberate harm since the curse was broken. He even tended to chickens just to make sure wild dogs didn't get to them. And unlike Gray, he had yet to squash a frog under his shoe.

He was also struggling to hold a dozen squirming frogs in his sash, and Gray created a cage with narrow bars for Zeref to deposit them in.

"Do you and Natsu ever discuss it?"

"The subject hasn't come up since we decided on the collar and bracelet," Zeref said. "Can you make those bars a little taller? These frogs jump higher than you would think."

The bars were already at Zeref's shoulder, but Gray extended them above his head before taking his jacket off to scoop frogs into it. The sooner they were thinned out, the sooner he would stop stepping on them. Gray feared his body count would be in the twenties soon.

"Thanks." Zeref scooped a frog up in his hands and tossed it over the bars. "My offer still stands for an Archive Lacrima, by the way. If nothing else, you could use it to get in touch with me or Mavis without hoping Natsu will pass the message along properly."

"That's why you both need Communication Lacrima. Maybe you old farts haven't noticed, but they make these newfangled ones that fit in your pocket."

Aside from which, Gray wasn't sure how great an incentive a direct line to Mavis was. On the one hand, Mavis counting on Natsu to tell Gray to go outside spared Gray from a few extra days of work. On the other, it led to her resorting to asking Zeref for help, and now he was tossing frogs into an ice cage. He'd stepped on three more, although two looked like they'd make it, and caught thirty.

"Hang on. Why do I need to get in touch with you?"

"Natsu didn't tell me you needed more medicine for your morning sickness."

"That's because I'm not taking it ever again."

"Oh." Zeref paused in the middle of lifting two frogs, and one wiggled out of his grip. "Does this apply to all treatments, or just the one Natsu gave you in secret?"

Dear God, he was blunt. And Gray thought Natsu lacked tact.

"Just that one. Probably. Nothing else has made me feel sick just considering taking it, anyway. I think I drank my weight in ginger making sure my meals stayed down." The words were out of Gray's mouth before he thought to ask, "Why?"

"I looked into different potions and found a recipe for a cream that prevents stretch marks. You don't want any scars from this, right?"
Yes. Absolutely. Gray had spent so much time since seeing that little bump dreading when it would be a big bump, he hadn't given a moment's thought to what his skin would look like after being rapidly forced out to make room for that big bump. More scars in and of itself wasn't something that bothered Gray, but the reminders they carried mattered. As soon as the fetus was out of him, he wanted to forget all about how it was ever in him.

"That sounds good. Anything that could keep me from growing at all?"

"I don't think so. You can usually route magic that deals with a person's body to build upon natural existing patterns in biology rather than creating them to redesign the body from scratch, so the finer details of human anatomy aren't an area I've had extensive hands-on practice with, but—" A frog broke out of Zeref's grip and smacked him in the face in its attempt to jump to freedom.

Gray froze, waiting to see what Zeref's reaction would be when he came out of his stunned state.

"Forget it." Zeref tore his sash off and spread it out across the snow, then held his hand above the cloth. As if they were magnets, the frogs in his immediate vicinity all flew towards him, then fell onto the sash. He quickly bundled them up and hurled them into the cage like a trebuchet.

As Zeref drew in his second batch of frogs, Gray asked, "You don't have much hand's on practice, but...?"

"Oh! Right. Sorry. I don't think it would be safe for the fetus. The female pelvis is designed for a child to nest in properly, but you don't have that kind of room. If it can't grow out, you would either have to squash it, or press it back or up, which would be where your spine and lungs are. I don't think you want either of those seriously displaced, and confining it to a compressed space could cause complications. If you wanted to take such a steep risk of crippling your magic and making the pregnancy harder just to keep from looking pregnant, you might as well ask Porlyusica to go ahead and pull the fetus out after all."

Gray fell into silence, contemplating that as he helped catch frogs. Zeref's method was effective, but not one he could emulate. The best he could do was seal off the top of the cage once it was filled and make a second, and pick frogs up in his hands and toss them in. If he tried to make tools from ice to snatch them with, they jumped away from the solid blocks of cold.

His magic mattered to him, but every sacrifice involved in keeping it sounded dreadful. Giving up all dignity when it came out that he was pregnant was a steep price, and people would forever tease him about the baby. There was nowhere in the world where he could go to hide it too. Not when a pregnant man was sure to end up in gossip columns, if not blow up in magic news when people realized that man was among Fairy Tail's S-rank. Even if he badgered Zeref into pulling strings with Alvarez to make a spot for him to hide away there, anyone tasked with supplying him with food or medical care might still talk to friends and family. Especially if people were curious about what their retired emperor was hiding.

"There's no way to keep people from noticing?"

"Keeping people from noticing things isn't that hard," Zeref said. "A spell to make people ignore you completely would be child's play. I could enchant that necklace of yours right now to do that for you."

"What if I just don't want them to notice my stomach?"

Zeref paused to think about this in the middle of grabbing a bundle of frogs, and his catches began to hop away. "I don't know. If you knew the trick to it, you might be able to make that one specific
detail go unnoticed, but making people ignore specific details is a more complex process, and you would need to consciously focus your magic on the precise detail you want to hide at all times. I might be able to enchant something to do that for you, but it would need to be placed on the stomach. Like a navel piercing. Considering your stomach is going to expand rapidly, that might not be safe.”

Gray knew how large the average pregnant stomach got, and that it happened over the span of many months. Still, hearing the term 'expand rapidly' summoned the image of him ballooning out to Droy's size in under a minute. Absurd, of course, because no one needed to grow that large to carry a single baby, but Gray's imagination could be vivid at times. And his imagination wasn't done tormenting him. Since he called it out on not needing to grow *that* large, it provided him with an image of what exactly might cause him to swell to Droy's size. When he pictured a preteen sized mash-up of Natsu and Zeref bursting right through the wall of his stomach, Gray had to sit down. Luckily, Zeref had made enough headway with gathering frogs that there was room for them to clear out before they could be crushed under Gray's butt.

"Are you alright?"

"No."

Zeref slung his sash, which was now pale green with frog slime, over the edge of Gray's cage. "Let's take a break. You said it was mostly hot chocolate you wanted, right? I'm not as good with thermal spells as Natsu, but I can use a stove, and his recipe isn't hard to recreate."

It made sense that Natsu would have made hot chocolate for Zeref. Feeding himself was something Zeref struggled with, after all. That didn't stop Gray from resenting that Zeref was familiar with Natsu's treat. In fact, now that he thought of it, Natsu probably used to make it for Lucy all the time and he hated thinking of that too.

Why did it bother Gray? It took him until he forced himself back to his feet, followed Zeref inside, and sat down that he came up with an answer. He'd come to think of it as his special treat from Natsu.

How stupid.

He didn't want anything special from Natsu.

Natsu sucked.

Even if he regretted it, Natsu was a traitor. A traitor who stuck him with a kid. And he was only sorry about *how* he did it. He still would have stopped Gray some other way if he hadn't been willing to be underhanded about it. He'd never been looking out for Gray. He was looking out for the baby, and Gray needed not to make the mistake of thinking that Natsu was interested in *him* ever again.

To take his mind off of Natsu, he grabbed the nearest research note. It came off the floor rather than the table, since Mavis insisted that Zeref have some degree of living space open to host guests and *live* in. Although Gray suspected he was the only guest that Zeref hosted who wasn't already or soon to be family. The loft overlooking the main floor that was built after Zeref moved in was free of research notes, although it did have some clothes related clutter, and the small bathroom and shower had no paper for obvious reasons, but the table was the only part of the main floor that wasn't a mess. Even the little kitchen had more books than pans, and few of those were recipe books. If the basement was clean, it was only because Zeref was worried that something he was working on down there was at greater risk of catching fire than it was sitting right next to the stove.

He made three attempts at reading the research notes, deduced that they had something to do with the
mechanics of ancient and long outdated forms of healing magic where the healer took on their
patient's injuries, and set the paper back in its place. This was clearly something for the giant tower
under construction nearby, and possibly vital to making sure it functioned as intended. Gray didn't
want to be kicked out for messing up Zeref's system* and causing him to lose papers that he needed
to ensure that his tower was constructed properly.

Natsu entered his thoughts again when Zeref came back with hot chocolate. He passed a large coffee
mug filled with sweet and creamy goodness to Gray, and drank his own serving from an eastern-
style tea mug. Whether none of his dishes matched or he was putting off washing them as long as he
could, Gray didn't know. He almost asked, since he needed to forget about Natsu again, but Zeref
spoke first.

"I've been thinking about it, and I could probably convince Mavis to create an illusion for you. She'll
need to hear about the pregnancy soon whether this works or not, so we might as well tell her now."

"I know you can cast your own illusions."

"I can hide things or replicate my surroundings, yes. But I don't think you want a blank spot where
your stomach is, and by this point I'm sure there are some visible signs of your pregnancy."

There were. Gray scowled and looked away.

"I thought so. My mind isn't really wired for… images. Numbers and processes come easily to me,
but I can't draw much beyond simple diagrams, and maintaining an illusion that hides all traces of
your pregnancy in a way that looks natural would require weaving an illusion that shows your body
as if it weren't pregnant at all. I could make an illusion that replicates how you currently look, but we
would need someone more visually oriented to create an illusion that makes you look how you did
before conceiving. Mavis, for example."

"I'm good with images. Have me do it."

"You don't know how to create illusions. You would be worse for this than me."

Gray sighed. As guildmaster, Mavis did need to know. But he dreaded telling her. Be the child Natsu
or Zeref's, she was bound to look at it as a niece or nephew. That she and Zeref weren't actually
married yet would be irrelevant. Zeref was fine with letting Gray do as he pleased, and Natsu backed
off thoroughly enough after getting his way with getting Gray pregnant, so he wouldn't protest if
Gray gave the baby to an orphanage in another country. Assuming an orphanage would even take
the baby. They tended to be run by religious organizations, and those might not be too keen on a
child born to a male. Natsu wouldn't dare tell Gray he had to keep the kid. But Mavis? Mavis would
pitch a fit if she heard that her little niece or nephew was bound for a faraway orphanage.

She would know it was a Dragneel baby, too. She kept a close eye on Zeref's experiments, and she
had to know about the serum, so she would know how Gray came to be pregnant. And everyone in
Magnolia and all the surrounding towns knew that she, Zeref, and Natsu were the only human
beings regularly at the lab, so it wouldn't be hard to figure out the parentage.

"Is there any excuse we could give to have her weave this illusion without knowing about the
pregnancy?"

"Well, Natsu says you're staying in more and eating a lot of unhealthy foods. We could tell her
you've gotten fat and want to hide it while you get back into shape."

The image of him ballooning up and literally popping a too large child out resurfaced, and Gray
nearly threw up his hot chocolate.

Seeing Gray go pale and put a hand over his mouth, Zeref said, "No? I'll tell her the truth then, unless you think of another story. I want it in writing that I lied on your behalf, though. She'll have my head if she finds out and thinks I was behind it, and that doesn't reattach itself anymore."

"It used to?" A decapitated Zeref picking his head up in his hands and setting it back on his shoulders wasn't a pleasant visual, but it was a step up. To reinforce it and not the Droy fantasy as the disturbing thought of the day, Gray placed his hands on the table and created a small ice sculpture of Zeref holding his head under his arm.

Zeref gave the sculpture and amused smile. "Nothing that exaggerated. The one time I successfully tore most of my neck, a bit of it stayed connected. But yes. I've survived some very extreme suicide attempts. Porlyusica tells me that I've ingested enough poison in my life to have acquired an immunity to most everything."

"So… if you were to try again, you wouldn't go with poison?" The question was wildly inappropriate, but Gray couldn't take it back once it was out there. And Zeref had spent so many years trying to die that it always seemed odd to Gray how he persevered now that he was no longer immortal.

"As I am now, my mere existence doesn't endanger those around me. Natsu's life depends on mine, and I think I owe it to him not to cut his life short. Besides, Mavis wants to live too, and it would be a nuisance to pass on so long before her," Zeref said, setting his mug down and smiling at Gray as if there was nothing off about asking someone if they were still planning to kill themselves. "So there's no immediate harm in living, and some inconvenience dying. If I die before I'm old and gray, I'll be irritated to be separated from Mavis again, and upset for Natsu, but I'll still have lived too long a life to call it good. Dying doesn't bother me personally, but it's no longer the most appealing prospect either. Since I'm still here, and since I've made the name for myself I have, it seems acceptable to me that I use what time I have left to work on adding some bright spots to my legacy."

Thus the attempt to create the divide and conquer method for healing, and the water purification, and the design for making Archive accessible to those without magic. Gray nodded his approval.

"It does feel nice though." Zeref's smile broadened. "I can say 'what time I have left' and not wonder if that time will extend until the end of the world itself."

"I know that sounds nice for you, but to me being glad that your days are numbered sounds depressing."

"I'm glad you think that." The smile vanished. "Natsu tells me you sleep through much of the day if not made to do anything."

"There's not much to do stuck in the apartment."

"But you chose not to leave. No one has ever praised me for my social skills, but I can recognize the signs of depression when I see them, and you do have a reason to be depressed."

Gray bit his lip and said nothing.

"Does Natsu make it better or worse? I'll tell him I need him here if you need him gone."

Gray thought about it, and admitted, "He did get to me the first day, but he's been careful not to say anything to upset me since. I don't think he makes it worse."
"Keep letting him in then," Zeref ordered. "And go out and see your friends more. Once we have this illusion charm for you, spend more time with everyone at the guild. If nothing else, go walking in the woods, just to get out. Or if you want to see someone other than Natsu but aree avoiding your friends for fear of being found out, I can always use a hand out here. You shouldn't hole up alone, understood?"

"Yes." You didn't say no to Zeref when he spoke that firmly.

"Good." Zeref took another sip, and his mug was empty. "If you're feeling better, we should get back to capturing those frogs. Mavis won't come and help with the illusion if they're still here when I send for her."

Chapter End Notes

Have I mentioned Zeref is my fave in this fic? I had a lot of fun thinking of the kind of person he would be post-curse. Also, research projects and experiments going awry amuse me. All the frog antics were a lot of fun to write.
Zeref didn't tell Natsu what the ring's purpose was. All he said was that it was something Gray wanted. The jar of cream he at least specified was to help Gray prevent stretch marks, but the ring was just 'something for Gray'. Natsu already dreaded paying Gray a visit after the barrage of people dragging him outdoors, because Mavis also had a letter for Gray that Natsu wasn't allowed to open. Gray wasn't violent with Natsu. If anything, he acted more defeated than aggressive, which was something to worry about. But depending on what the letter was about, Gray still might shoot the messenger.

He almost only delivered the cream, but for all he knew the letter was something good, and Gray asked for the ring. Besides, he would have to admit that he withheld gifts if he didn't bring them. After sneaking Gray that potion for two straight months, he couldn't do anything involving Gray anymore without making sure Gray was fully informed.

Mavis had the best interest of all of her children at heart, even if Zeref had been the most flippant about the baby in favor of Gray's agency. Natsu had to trust that they were safe.

It was noon, but Gray was asleep when Natsu let himself into the apartment. He put his collar on before anything else and tried not to think of the dehumanization inherent in it. He'd heard Gray mumbled once or twice about being a "meat-sack baby factory" to Natsu, so Natsu could be his dog until the baby was born.

"Gray?"

No response. He probably crawled back into bed once he was done throwing up again.

With a sigh, Natsu tossed Zeref and Mavis's gifts on the kitchen table and turned the stove on. Gray would be more likely to come out of his room if there were sweets waiting for him in the kitchen. Natsu even splurged on fudge to try and bribe him outside with.

Once milk was heated and chocolate melted in, Natsu threw Gray's bedroom door open. "Wake up, Sleeping Beauty!"

He was rewarded with a low moan, and the sight of Gray pulling the bedsheets over his head.

"Come on. You gotta get up. You and the baby need food."

"I had breakfast," Gray murmured.

"It stayed down?"

"Yes."

"Great! But it's lunchtime now. Come on, Gray. I made hot chocolate."

"Cheater," Gray mumbled, forcing himself upright. "Is hot chocolate all you know how to make?"

"I can make brownies too."

"What do I have to do for those?"
"They're not on the menu today."

Gray lay back down.

"I didn't make it, but I did buy fudge. But you only get that if you come outside with me."

Sighing, Gray pushed himself back up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "I wondered when it would be your turn to drag me outside."

"I'm not dragging. I'm bribing. You get one half for going somewhere with me, but you only get the whole block if you come with me to the guild. It's been almost two weeks since the last time you came, and everyone knows you're not on a job. A lot of people are worried."

Lucy especially. Apparently Gray and been out to see her at a few particularly low points, and she d'deduced that he was under some mental stress and probably ought not to be left alone. The only reason she hadn't kicked his door down to make sure he was alright was because Natsu assured her that he, Jellal, and Lyon were regularly checking in. It had snowed nonstop for the past week since Juvia came back from a job too, having heard that her beloved Gray became a shut-in. Natsu had to have Mavis order Juvia to give Gray his space, knowing that she was prone to talking about the children she planned on having with him, and that Gray didn't want to talk about kids. It was only a matter of time before her willpower crumpled and she ran to see him anyway. As it was, her magic and mood already brought the rain, and it just happened that the rain crystalized on its way to earth.

But aside from those two, Erza fretted frequently about Gray, who she hadn't seen since before announcing her pregnancy. Levy wondered if his 'torn muscle' was a much worse injury than he'd first let on while Gajeel exacerbated the Juvia situation by musing about the chances that Gray might be working up the nerve to leave the guild. Several of the townsfolk, who had seen Gray head out of town with Zeref the other week, had been caught wondering if there had been an accident and Zeref hid the body. Romeo and Wendy had a running bet that Gray wasn't dead yet, but he was hiding a mistress and Juvia would kill him soon.

If Natsu heard his friends were worried, he would have jumped up to go reassure them. Gray gave Natsu a tried look, shoved himself to his feet, and lumbered into the kitchen before plopping down at the table.

"No fudge?" Natsu asked.

Gray thought about it. "Is anyone at the lake right now?"

"Probably. It's the best time of day for that."

"How about the woods?"

"No one wanders into the woods in winter."

Almost no one. Natsu could always keep warm, so he never worried about going in there as a place to clear his head, and he was unofficially the one the town relied on to find any less prepared and less fortunate fools who went in and never came back out. But Zeref had very bluntly told Natsu to make sure Gray had nothing in his apartment that looked like it could work as a noose, so Natsu saw no need to mention that.

Gray didn't challenge Natsu's assertion. He glanced over at the pot of hot chocolate on the stove and asked, "Do you think we could go out in the evening?"

"The cold wouldn't bother either of us."
"It won't damage my magic?"

The baby, he meant.

"That's a good question. We can strap you into coat. Or wrap a wool blanket around your stomach, if you don't want your whole body to overheat. And I can warm that area up if you feel it getting cold."

"I don't usually feel the cold."

"I can check the temperature on your behalf. You want to go to the lake when it's less crowded?"

"Yeah. If I have to go out."

The goal was to get Gray outside, but Natsu had already seen to it that Gray had to do enough.

"Going outside is an option."

"I want the fudge. Do I get the other half tomorrow if I go out again then?"

"Um… You shouldn't eat half of it in one day."

"It's okay. I'm eating for two, so I only get a fourth of it."

"That's still a lot of fudge to have in… It doesn't work like that!"

"Don't care," Gray said. "Is the hot chocolate ready?"

Grumbling, Natsu poured Gray a mug and turned the stove down so the milk would stay warm, but not boil over. "I looked up more healthy recipes. If you're going to eat so many sweets, then you need to eat better during meals. I can cook them whenever I don't have to go out on a job, and I'll leave you the instructions for easier, faster ones to make for yourself while I'm out of town. How does that sound for you?"

"That sounds like something a grandma would say, but I won't complain about someone cooking for me most days. At least as long as you don't put anything else in my food."

Score! Natsu had stuck primarily to scarcely snubbed meals like hamburgers or curry, but if Gray was going to have a healthy baby, then he needed a wider variety of meals. And he needed a lot of foods that would offset all the chocolate he was craving. If Gray hadn't been on board with that, then Natsu wasn't sure how to sell it. Telling Gray that he needed to eat healthy in order to ensure that the baby was healthy, Natsu suspected, would not be a good tactic. Since he didn't have to worry about that battle, he could let the jab at his past behavior go without comment.

He hadn't even bought more than a day's worth of vegetables, in case Gray rebelled against the new meal plan. Pleased with the easy success, Natsu turned to begin chopping cucumber, and had his back to Gray when asked, "What's this?"

Natsu looked back to see Gray inspecting the ring he'd left on the table.

"Gift from Zeref. Be careful putting it on. He wouldn't tell me what it was for."

"I think I know. Is this from him too?"

Gray had the letter torn open before Natsu could say no.

"Oh. It's The First."
His eyes scanned across the paper, bored frown deepening into a sour scowl as he moved down the page. When he was done, he tore the note in half.

"What did she have to say?" Natsu asked.

"Nothing."

"You're upset over nothing?"

Gray shoved his chair back and rose to feet, glaring. "It's none of your business why I'm upset!"

"Sorry." Natsu turned back to the cutting board. "But the ring is a good thing?"

"Assuming it works properly." Natsu heard footsteps moving away from him. "I need to check."

"It's not dangerous?"

"It's just a ring. When has a ring ever been dangerous?"

The bathroom door shut before Natsu could provide an answer, and seconds later he heard a whoop.

Natsu turned to go and see what had instantly lightened Gray's mood so much—not that it took a lot to radically alter Gray's mood as of late—and paused when he saw the two halves of the letter on the table. After a moment's hesitation, he snatched one half and skimmed it.


There was no sound of Gray about to open the bathroom door. Natsu took the other half of the note and held them together to read the full thing.

Mavis knew. Zeref recruited her to make some charm that Gray requested—the ring, no doubt—and had informed her of the pregnancy to explain the need for the charm. He must have skimmed the detail of Gray not wanting to have the baby, because she dubbed herself the aunt and was excited to meet her new little niece or nephew who might be the half-sibling off any children she had. Her only concern was how Larcade might react to more family living in town with them while he was stuck in the Alvarez capitol.

The words "you have to keep it" were never explicitly stated, nor was there any allusion to the thwarted abortion. Zeref probably hadn't told her, and while that was in keeping with Gray's wish to be the one who told everyone about what Natsu did, Natsu imagined it must be frustrating to see someone sound so excited without even a note of sympathy for having been force into his situation. Even if she did hint that she knew he wouldn't have chosen to be pregnant, the overall implication was that his pregnancy was a good, happy thing. And that she fully expected the child to stay in the same town as her.

Natsu returned the letter halves to their place and moved back to the cutting board, biting back a smile. Gray could still give the baby up if he wanted. No one was tying him to a chair and stopping him. But a guild master who was attached to that baby and had no hand in its conception or continued existence would be harder for him to argue against than Natsu, were Natsu to put up a fight for the child. Even if Gray explained that he didn't want the baby to her and detailed why he didn't want Natsu to have it, she would insist on taking it herself. And she always said that she'd sooner turn to Natsu for help with any children she had than count on Zeref's disproven parenting skills.
It wasn't a guaranteed win for Natsu. Gray could still give the baby up, and Mavis might be respectful enough of his wishes to not let Natsu have heavy involvement with the child. But it was a huge step in the right direction. For him, at least. He could see why Gray might be upset with the knowledge that he now had Mavis to contend with, and he was supposed to support Gray.

So he didn't let himself smile, and didn't mention anything about custody or the letter when Gray stepped out of the bathroom.

All his mental schooling to not react to the letter was a waste of effort, though. Natsu took one look at Gray and almost immediately forgot about Mavis.

"Where did your stomach go?"

"It's still here." Gray scowled down at his one again sculpted torso and patted the air just in front of it. "I can feel it, and my clothes still curve around it. But the ring hides it from view. See?" He pulled the ring off, and his baby bump reappeared. When he slid it back on, the illusion of defined abs returned. "It's a good thing it will be warmer once this thing is bigger, because I'll have to go around topless once it's too large for baggy clothes. But for now clothes still hide it, and I can take my clothes off again, too!"

Gray had rarely removed his clothes since becoming pregnant, which was still more alarming to Natsu than any other behavioral shift Natsu saw. Staying inside as much as possible when you were usually social? Concerning, but not unheard of. Gray periodically became unsociable on the anniversary of a bad event, or after something unfortunate happened. He always bounced back. Defying your vary nature and not walking around nude? Highly alarming. Gray didn't like going around nude, yet never had the self-control to stop himself from stripping. His baby bump fears had overpowered one of his strongest compulsions.

But the ring made him feel better, and he was shirtless now. Natsu beamed at him, because Gray feeling better was a good thing. A very good thing that Natsu had waited almost a month to see. Hopefully, being able to hide his bump would help him better cope with the remaining six months. Hopefully, still being able to feel the child inside him or his stomach bumping up against stretched skin that was only hidden from sight and not from touch wouldn't depress Gray again.

Hopefully seeing how he would look again once his pregnancy was over would help Gray not to stress over the temporary changes over the next few months.

Except the scars. Come to think of it.

"There's cream to help with stretch marks on the table too," Natsu said. "Ring or no, you should put that on."

Gray opened the jar then and there and scooped a dab of cream onto his finger. Spreading it over his invisible bump. At first the sleek beige dot was plainly visible, then it turned into a translucent film as Gray spread it out, and then it was gone.

"I like your brother," Gray decided. "I take back every nasty thing I ever said about him."

A lot of the nasty things Gray said about Zeref over the years had to do with his creating the demon that killed his parents, and the demon that used his father's corpse as a slave. Natsu highly doubted that a ring and some cream made up for that, but a good mood was a good mood, and he wasn't about to shoot Gray's mood down.

"So we're on for skating tonight?"
"Sure. But you're handing me that fudge as soon as we reach the lake. I still need a jacket, don't I?"

Natsu smiled. "It wouldn't hurt."

"I guess not. Skating at dusk. That doesn't sound so bad."

Chapter End Notes

Gray: When has a ring ever been dangerous?
Me: One ring to rule them all. One ring to find them. One ring to…

Anywho, sorry for the delay. Massive stupid essay due at midnight last night, and I spent the last two days fairly focused on that. (And also maybe feel a little burned out today. I don't even know where most of the day went. I just know I didn't have the energy to do anything with it.) The sad thing is that the chapter was already written. I just had to proofread one last time and do comment replies. If you knew how many chapters for this fic are written but not posted, you'd probably be disgusted in me. It was over 100,000 words by the end of August, although I haven't written nearly as much for this fic since. That's not counting author's note and reply stuff either. There's, like, a fuckton that I'm kinda just posting gradually because if I posted as I wrote, you'd get a massive dump in two weeks and then radio silence for three months. (Also gives me more time between when I wrote and when I proofread. Proofreading shit immediately after you just wrote it is terribly boring.)

Oh yeah. Larcade reference added last minute. I guess he's emperor now, since it turns out Zeref had an obvious successor. (I was kinda thinking originally that Invel could take over or whatever, but I don't recall ever specifying what the situation in this fic is with Alvarez since Zeref stepped down, beyond that they still pay for his toys.) I'm at the point in the writing of this fic where Gray's nearly due, although the story goes for a while beyond that point (which is kinda weird for me--I usually try to time these so the plot wraps up right around when they baby is due) so maybe I'll have him drop by to visit the kid that's either his cousin or his half brother. In either case, he's rather convenient as a character for adding to any further remarks Mavis makes about Zeref not being ideal father material.
With his bump safely hidden so there would be no unfortunate scenes if Gray accidentally took his shirt off while at the guild, he agreed to go see everyone four days after the lake trip. Natsu stuck to his ultimatum, and while he bribed Gray outside once more with a brownie, Gray wanted that fudge. He needed that fudge. And he didn't know where Natsu got it because Magnolia had three bakeries but no confectionaries, so you couldn't buy fudge in town. Going to the guild was less physical effort that taking a train to the nearest town that sold fudge, and dealing with his guildmates concerns after being gone two weeks would be easier than dealing with them if he put off making an appearance for months.

Besides, the more he made people worry, the more they would come and check on him. Juvia would turn into water to seep under his door, Erza would break the door down, Lucy would pick the lock, and then Gray would have twice as many people coming into his house and fretting over him. He much preferred dealing primarily with a too-guilt-ridden-to-be-forceful Natsu, with Jellal and Lyon calling from time to time and only visiting to push him around when Natsu reported he was getting to be too stubborn.

Gray put a lot of thought into his clothes, selecting something that would hang loose and almost certainly not betray the bump without looking suspiciously baggy. The amount of effort was unnecessary. The bump was still slight. At worst, he looked like someone who didn't lead a very active lifestyle. And 'pregnant' wasn't something most people who understood standard human reproduction suspected when they saw a man with a slight bump or baggy clothes. But it still mattered to him that he do his best to conceal every sign.

Minor bartering occurred on the way out the door, and Gray managed to argue his right to a sliver of fudge for setting out for the guild, with the rest left on his kitchen table for his return. (Chowing down on too much chocolate like he was Erza in a cheesecake store would raise eyebrows, so no fudge would be sliced at the guild.)

"Do you have an excuse ready for when you show up?" Natsu asked when they were too close to the building for Gray to successfully make a run for it.

"For what?"

"For not showing up in so long."

"I was only gone a few weeks. I've been out that long on jobs in the past."

"Everyone knows you didn't go out on a job. You told Mavis in front of the whole guild that you had to take it easy after you hurt your arm."

"Then I'll tell them I turned an ankle trying to avoid reinjuring my arm, and had to stay off my feet for a few weeks."
"And the reason you're not heading back out on work now?"

"Arm’s still injured."

Natsu looked down skeptically at Gray’s right arm, which Gray knew he was bound to use without thinking if he stayed at the guild too long. But Natsu put no time requirement on how long he had to stay to earn that fudge. Gray thought he could make it.

"When do we tell them the real reason?"

"No one is ever telling them."

"How do you plan to explain the baby?"

"Why would I need to? The rest of the guild doesn't have to learn it exists."

The only problem was that in order to avoid explaining *that* to the guild, he would have to explain to Mavis that she didn't get to be a godmother. There was a chance that she would see how much Gray hated his situation and agree that it was for the best to put the thing up for adoption far, far way. More likely, however, was that she would persist in seeing it as part of her family and push Gray, if not to raise the baby himself, then to at least keep it in the family.

Telling Natsu he couldn’t have the kid was easy, but Gray couldn’t think of any reason to give Mavis.

Objectively, he realized that Mavis taking the child would solve the bulk of his concerns. But the idea that this child he wanted nothing of would stay in town, the step-child of his guildmaster, with Zeref as not only a potential biological father, but a father figure, made Gray feel tense. Not just because of Zeref's track record as a father figure either. What would happen if, one day, someone revealed who the child's real mother was?

Natsu prodded him.

"Hm?"

"I asked if you were okay with Happy?"

"You told Happy?"

"Of course not!" Natsu's scowl could have meant he wanted to, or that he was offended that Gray thought he would. "But you've been gone for a while, and with everyone else I just said I checked from time to time and you were still alive but kinda moody. But Happy knows how often I go see you, so he knows we're hiding something."

"Moody?"

"Yes. Moody." Natsu set his jaw in a line and looked Gray firmly in the eye, not backing down from his outrageous accusation.

Gray would have objected, but he cried over pickles until ice cream sent him into a giggling fit, and there was no pretending that he wasn’t at the mercy of his hormones where his mood was concerned. Mood swings were something else he needed to be on guard for during his public appearance.

"So,” Natsu said, "how do you plan to go about taking care of yourself if you keep putting off coming to work? And don’t say I can pay for everything. I'm happy to pitch in, but unless you move
in with me, I would have to work around the clock to pay for both of us."

"I'm fine with that."

"I'm not. Mavis has the guild, Lyon is weeks from having a baby, and Jellal has Erza, which is like having to run a guild and look after three babies. Even Zeref doesn't think you should be by yourself right now, and unless you want to tell someone else about the baby, then it's eithering me or him watch… helping you out."

Watching you. Natsu meant to say watching you, and Gray kept his expression neutral. His behavior as of late had been out of the ordinary. He knew that. He felt he was entitled to that too, given how out of the ordinary his circumstances were. But after Zeref talked depression and suicide with him, Gray was keenly aware of how everyone else felt about his sudden downturn.

Natsu was tolerable. The whole mess Gray was stuck in was still all his fault, but at least he was sincere in wanting to make amends, and it was easier for Gray to get his way with anything he wanted with Natsu than anyone else who volunteered to play nanny. While the idea of having Natsu work overtime to pay both his rent and supplies did appeal to Gray, the idea of Jellal or Lyon pulling double duty did not. Those two would force him to go back to the guild and work eventually anyway. Zeref might not, but he would physically drag Gray across town if Mavis told him that she wanted Gray back at the guild. Not to mention, Zeref's company was…

"How long did it take you to get used to Zeref?"

Natsu frowned. "You're changing the subject."

"Not entirely. How long did it take?"

"I don't know. A few months. Half a year. Getting used to the idea that I had to see him all the time took a while, and then I had to get used to actually interacting with him. He was worse back then. He'd still say too totally different things and get confused if you called him on it constantly. It hardly happens anymore. Now he mostly just gets distracted. You helped him get rid of all those frogs, right? Mavis was railing on me to do it, but—"

"But you wanted to see if the serum would cause any birth defects."

"Well… yeah. That, and I figured he was less likely to feed it to his rooster if he was busy trying to keep track of so many frogs."

Gray stopped in his tracks to stare at Natsu.

"It scared Mavis, but I thought the frogs were good. They kept him occupied, and they weren't doing any serious damage. Zeref gets into more trouble than I do if nothing's keeping him occupied."

"Would he feed that stuff to the rooster?"

"Hopefully. If he does that, then he'll be busy with the rooster and all the new chicks. If he doesn't, then maybe he'll blow his whole lab up."

When you looked at it that way, Zeref feeding a rooster a serum to make it lay eggs did seem like a good venture. Gray didn't give Natsu and Mavis enough credit for keeping Zeref from making too massive of messes. He knew they kept Zeref in line, sure, but he always assumed that just meant talking him down when he tried to build another necromancy device, or if he took an interest in starting another war. He never realized they encouraged further exploration of avenues they knew were safe just in case a new project went horribly wrong.
It made sense. The water purification project was a new project, and look how wrong it went for Gray?

"But he's not awful?"

"It depends. He doesn't have too many bad days anymore, but they happen sometimes. How is all of this on topic?"

"I'm weighing my options."

Natsu *horrendously* misinterpreted that. "Most of Zeref's issues are lingering effects of the curse, and we both get into trouble all the time. We just have different ways of doing it. You want him to be the dad. He's smarter."

"Natsu, I don't care if it grows up smart. I'm not keeping it. I meant I'm weighing my options for people who might come and bug me when you're busy."

"Oh, He'd defer to Mavis on everything. He knows the whole town hates him—it's why he avoids coming here if he can. So if he had to see you all the time, he'd turn to someone who has experience with seeing you all the time for advice."

And that someone would tell her boyfriend that he needed to bring Gray to the guild. So he would stick to Natsu.

"So what's your excuse for working around the guild until the baby's born?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll say I needed downtime. I can pretend I have a secret girlfriend I don't want to be too far away from or something."

A secret lover *could* explain the baby, if he needed to explain it.

"Juvia will make sure you don't. She'd never leave you alone. And she knows how to get into your Communication Lacrima records." Natsu stopped just as they turned onto the street with the guildhall. "Oh yeah. Zeref says you're getting an Archive Lacrima and it's not an option, but he doesn't have one ready yet."

"I don't want one."

"Yeah. But the Council wants a bunch, and he needs people to help him test them and make sure they all talk to each other like they're supposed to. He just redesigned the ones he and Mavis were using, so it's not gonna give you boobs or anything. I mean, if you want to breastfeed, I'm sure he can—"

Gray smacked Natsu hard enough to send him stumbling back into a wall.

"Bad joke?"

"Terrible joke."

Natsu picked himself up off the ground and brushed snow from his rear. "Sorry. Erza's been to classes to help prepare her for being a mom. She keeps complaining about breastfeeding now. Jellal's trying to get her to come around to it, but it might take him until the kid is born."

"They argue about it in public?"

"Well, originally Erza just complained in public. Then Jellal tried to *very quietly* disagree with her"
when they were at a table alone. Then it turned into a public argument, and now they've stopped caring about how's around while they talk about her boobs."

"And she hasn't killed Jellal yet?"

"Nah. She likes him. You really should get out more. You're missing a lot. And everyone misses you."

They were almost to the doors now, and Natsu pushed them open to let everyone inside make his point for him.

Gray made it three steps inside without anyone noticing, then Juvia screamed."

"Gray!" He barely had any time to look her way before she had attached herself to his arm. "Juvia wasn't allowed to visit you in so long. Are you alright? You aren't sick are you? Or dying? Juvia can't bear to lose her precious Gray."

Gray looked to Natsu for help, and the well intending fool said, "He had someone else who's kept him busy."

"A woman?"

"Maybe? He says I don't get to see them, so I don't know."

With a pang of annoyance, Gray realized Natsu was discussing the baby as though it might be a secret girlfriend. While that played just fine into the excuse he'd said he would give, it was making Juvia squeeze his hand tighter and tighter, until he could see his fingers turning blue from loss of circulation. Aside from which, it was just plain obnoxious to hear his pregnancy and adoption plans phrased that way.

"Gray, how could you do this to Juvia?" Juvia cried. "What if we have to delay the wedding for this?"

There was a diamond ring on Juvia's finger. Gray wasn't the one who gave it to her; She bought it herself a few days after their engagement was declared and called off. Nothing Gray said could convince her to stop showing the ring to other women as she declared they leave him be, and he didn't even have the energy that day to make a doomed attempt at reminding her that there was no wedding to delay.

"Who is she, Gray?"

"Juvia, I think you're squeezing him too hard," Natsu said.

Juvia's grip loosened just enough for Gray to feel his hand again. "Who. Is. She?"

It was Lucy who came to Gray's rescue. "We'll have plenty of time to get the details. None of us have seen Gray in weeks. Give all of us a chance to catch up with him."

Lucy helped Gray extract himself and led him deeper into the guild, ignoring Juvia's furious questions as to whether she was Gray's mysterious new lover. Gray shot her a silent look of thanks.

"You look better," Lucy said. "Natsu said you came over on a rough day, but we saw so little of you sense. I thought he might have been covering for you."

It took Gray a second to realize she was talking about the day after he learned he'd been trapped in a
pregnancy. Back then he'd been too distraught to even consider self-maintenance, and everything he'd eaten whether he kept it down or not was something someone else pushed on him. His only thought going to Lucy's was that he needed a place to hide for the night. He must have really looked a fright to her when he showed up, if she was still concerned about that day. Then again, he was still dealing with the same problem. The only difference now was that he'd recovered from the initial shock.

"I've been to your house since, and you saw I was fine then."

"I saw you were anxious then."

Lucy cast a curious glance Natsu's way, causing Gray to curse internally. He forgot he'd indicated that they were together. Her eyes went to Gray's hand next, where the illusion generating ring sat on display. Her features set in a look of grim acceptance.

Maybe, Gray thought, he would give Lucy the baby. Just to spite Mavis if she wouldn't let him give it up to someone far away. The thing was more likely Natsu's than Zeref's, and Natsu called it family either way. It was going to be healthy to boot—since letting anything bad happen to it meant crippling his magic. So if would meet every standard of Lucy's that a regular adoption hadn't lived up to.

Except that meant letting Natsu have the kid. Conundrums, conundrums.

Wendy and Romeo sat at the table that Lucy guided Gray too, smiling at him as he approached. Juvia losing it if she went more than twelve hours without seeing Gray was normal, and it stood to reason that Lucy would be worried about seeing Gray while he was still pulling himself together. But Wendy and Romeo offered him such normal smiles, and Gray let himself hope that he was done having his absence addressed.

Then he sat down and Romeo said, "We were starting to take bets on whether or not you died. What's this about a new girlfriend?"

Mira, who had no doubt heard what Natsu said at the door, appeared almost from thin air to set a cup of water that no one asked for in front of Gray, then hugged her now empty drink tray and watched eagerly.

"It's nonsense, that's what it is," Gray said. "I just had to take it easy a bit after I hurt myself. Don't know why Natsu couldn't just say that."

"It was nice of Natsu to keep you company," Lucy said, but there was a note to her voice when she said that last word that made Gray wonder if she thought they were sleeping together.

"Well, it was the flame bastard's fault, so I guilted him into being my errand boy. If I'd put more thought into it at the time, I might have asked someone else. He's all I've had for company. It's hard to get out, but Zeref decided to push one of those Archive Lacrima of his on me, so I've been able to get in touch with other people to for more intelligent conversation." Hopefully, Zeref would have it delivered before anyone else came over to verify his claims.

The lie rolled off his tongue easily, and although Lucy looked five times as alarmed as anyone else and Gray worried about what and how she was imagining Natsu was involved in injuring him, Gray felt confident that he could get away with keeping the truth concealed. He would need a better excuse for a long-term absence, and didn't want to rely on the girlfriend lie he'd proposed that Natsu set up for him. But he wouldn't shut the story down. Just saying he was burnt out on jobs might get him off the hook for being inactive, but a solid phony social obligation story would let him skimp on
fewer real socializations. He'd only just arrived, and conversing already wore on him.

Realistically, in the back of his mind, Gray knew it would be near impossible to hide for the full nine months. Even with the illusion, his stomach would still be there. Sooner or later someone would feel it, or notice him sitting or walking oddly, and then it would all come crashing down. Maybe he could recruit Mavis and Natsu to help him hide it. Actors in shows could keep the audience none the wiser when they were pregnant and their characters weren't, so it was doable, but it would be a feat without the advantage of tightly controlling where everything was positioned relative to him, and what angle people saw him from.

Thinking of all the work that would go into making at least infrequent appearances while hiding his condition, Gray looked over at Natsu, and turned his head just in time to see a flying blue fuzz ball collide with Natsu's face.

"Natsu! I missed you!"

Laughing, Natsu reached up and pulled Happy off of his head. "You saw me this morning, buddy!"

"But you left to see that hussy again."

Happy turned to give Gray a devious grin that let him know the cat knew exactly where Natsu spent most of his time, and liked to tease his partner over it. He sincerely hoped that the choice of terminology there was only to get under Natsu's skin, and not because Natsu told him about that kiss.

Silently, Gray thanked Natsu for having the foresight not to invite Happy with his taunting ways to the apartment. But not wanting to look too curious about Natsu's affairs, he turned away and picked up the drink Mira left.

"You know that's not what goes on when you're gone."

"But if you don't do anything naughty when you abandon me all day to do naughty things with Gray, why are you wearing a collar?"

Gray choked on his drink, and had to spit his water back into the cup before he could asphyxiate on it.

"Maybe I want to wear a collar," Natsu said a little too defensively.


"Nobody but Juvia kisses Gray!" Juvia roared.

Gray looked frantically to his tablemates for help, but Lucy's resigned, allegedly knowing sigh only made the giddy grin on Mira's face widen, and while Romeo was trying not to laugh, Wendy had frantically hid her face in her hands to conceal her blush.

"Happy has it wrong," Gray insisted.

Lucy, the traitor, gave him a sympathetic smile. "It's okay. You two forgot to hide all the evidence. Elfman and Ever were discovered the same way."

"Get off me!" They heard Natsu yell. "Juvia, get off! We're not dating! We'renotwe'renotwe'renot!"

Gray refused to look.

"Is that what the ring is for?" Mira, ever so helpful, all but squealed. "Are you two already engaged?"
No wonder you're away so often if you've been working on wedding plans! I'm so happy! You've been so cold to Juvia lately, I was beginning to think I'd never be a bridesmaid again!

"Erza already picked you as her bridesmaid," Lucy said, but it was all but lost in the uproar as the misunderstanding spread like wildfire across the guild.

This had to be stopped before it got out of hand! If and when Gray's pregnancy was discovered, everyone would treat it like some miracle of his and Natsu's love!

Gray looked around frantically for Mavis, finally spotting her on the second floor balcony, watching the chaos below with a smug, pleased grin. She always did love drama. Gray did too, but not when he was at the center of it! He held out a hand in her direction and shouted, "First! Help!"

Mavis contemplated it and then, with a small sigh, said, "Children?"

She hadn't raised her voice at all, speaking in her normal, calm tone. There was no reason anyone should have heard her over the din, but the guild fell silent when she spoke.

"It seems we have a misunderstanding. Gray has been so nice as to play subject to Zeref's research, and Natsu is helping his friend and brother."

"In bed?" Someone asked.

Mavis's smile broadened. "I should hope that he isn't helping Zeref there."

Mira muttered to the table, "I would think she wouldn't mind Natsu giving him some pointers."

The remark earned a snicker from Lucy, but made Wendy squirm.

If Mavis heard it, she ignored it. Instead, she smiled down at Gray. "I see you're wearing the ring. I trust it works properly."

She was only trying to diffuse the suggestion that Natsu had proposed to him, but she was also drawing attention to the fact that it had some special purpose he'd requested. "Like a charm," Gray said, and hoped that would be last anyone spoke of it.

Lucy and Mira both cast the ring curious looks, and Gray folded his hands to make the dammed thing less visible.

Satisfied with the calm that had returned to the guild, Mavis added, "Before you go, I'd like to discuss this research you're assisting with. For Zeref. I'm going to visit this evening, so I can carry out the report on your behalf."

She wanted to talk with him in private about how she wanted to be the godmother, she meant. But Gray couldn't object publicly without raising suspicions. He smiled for Mavis and asked, "You're not afraid of the frogs?"

"What frogs?" Lucy asked.

Natsu, who had managed to escape Juvia after Mavis spoke up and since worked his way to the table, launched into a story about how his brother had taken to breeding frogs for God knew what reason, and they had gotten out of their cages and control. His account of what the frog herd looked like when last he visited was accused by the girls of being an exaggeration, but Gray felt he undersold it.
Conversation stayed light and mellow. The conflicting stories settled into Gray having agreed to help Zeref with some tests in addition to guild work while recovering from an injury that Natsu had a hand in. No one questioned any of these things happening in conjunction, because Natsu injuring Gray was highly believable, and since they all knew as it was that Gray was taking pay for helping Mavis with odd jobs, and that Mavis and Natsu essentially worked a second job full time managing Zeref, that Gray would have gotten involved with the black mage through those two was plausible. It helped that Mavis actually had assigned that stupid frog cleanup as if it were guild work.

The ring Gray ended up passing off as some special key for the Archive Lacrima that he didn't actually have yet. Natsu's collar, they honestly explained was Gray being vindictive with Natsu's hand in him having to go off of active duty. Granted, the collar did serve a functional purpose, but Gray hadn't known the specifics of that until he saw it in action. It was mostly the image of Natsu in a collar like a dog that appealed to him. As neither of them wanted anyone to know that it was a shock collar, Natsu was on his very best behavior.

He could have taken it off, but he didn't. Did it not occur to him? Gray didn't know how to tell Natsu he could without it sparking an argument where things were said that no one else needed to hear.

Lucy never stopped eyeing them suspiciously. After all, her information was that there was something between the two of them, and that Natsu's eventual sister-in-law who Gray was (supposed to be) working closely with as of late spoke up to squash a rumor Happy started before it could really take off wasn't enough to undo the damage Gray did by telling her that he and Natsu were in the start of something. But she had at least taken the hint that they didn't want the guild to think there was anything romantic between them, and she held her tongue.

Cana joined them, squeezing herself tight between Romeo and Gray while Natsu sat close on Gray's other side, and then telling Juvia she was really sorry there was no more room to sit next to Gray, but it was still possible to sit across the table from him and better see his face. Gray nudged her quietly in thanks. His arm still tingled from that vice grip when he first arrived.

Conversation was bearable. Once Gray had his story settled and made it clear that he wasn't up for talking about his second mystery injury, it switched to guild gossip and reports of jobs that Cana or Lucy went on—often with Macao or Levy's team. Gray knew he wasn't working, and that Natsu only worked as much as he had to in order to stay and look after him, but there was some essential detail that slipped his mind for why Lucy might have to go to Levy to find company for a job. He didn't bother to ask what that was. Putting on a smile and talking easily with everyone took too much effort, and he didn't want to appear anymore engaged in a conversation that he was merely tolerating.

Then Erza showed up.

Her arrival was the opposite of Gray's. There were no cries of excitement over how long she'd been gone, or complaints that she'd ignored people. No chaos that broke out over how she and Jellal walked in hand in hand. It must have become a common enough sight since Gray left, given how no one took the chance to tease Jellal and try to goad him into admitting that he liked Erza. People used to make a game of trying to force him past his guilt and closer to her, despite Erza discouraging them from pressing him.

It was nice for Jellal, to have finally come around to admitting to what he wanted and letting himself have it. Even if it only came about because a previous slip in his self-imposed penance put him in a situation where even he had to admit that he would be causing Erza more trouble than not by continuing to hold himself back. Gray was happy for him.
On the other hand, it would have been nice to go a few months more without seeing Erza. Not that Gray had anything against her, and the way she beamed at the sight of him made him feel guilty for having avoided her. But even if he hadn't wound up pregnant a second time, the first alone made it hard for him to look below her neckline. The way she glowed with her pregnancy made his stomach do flips. He felt himself withering away inside with his, and that was after having backed out of the first. He didn't need any more reminders than he already had that plenty of people handled the process of creating a child far better than he did.

She was going to tell him about her pregnancy. She was. He had put off seeing her since she told everyone, while she had stopped hiding and revamped her wardrobe to emphasize it. The tight Baby On Board t-shirt she wore had even obviously been the only thing she thought to put on to keep warm, since the jacket she shed looked suspiciously like one of Jellal's, while her poor fiancé was jacketless and shivering.

Cana vacated her seat as they approached, and while Juvia sprung up to try and take it, Jellal beat her to the spot. In the seconds when Juvia stared in contempt, Erza took her old spot directly across from Juvia, leaving the rain women to sit not quite directly across from Gray.

Normally, Gray was happy for any help with avoiding the full intensity of Juvia's constant stream of affection—be it deliberate like Cana and Jellal's, or innocent as Erza's. In this case, he'd rather have looked directly ahead to Juvia. Juvia wasn't pregnant, even if she'd suggested to Gray twice already that day that she felt left behind as everyone else their age had children. (Levy had her twins and Evergreen was trying and Meredy was due in only a few weeks, and if it weren't for Lucy and Natsu being stubborn, Juvia would be left in the dust! How could that be when her love for Gray was so great? At this rate she would have to wait as long as Mavis to have a baby.)

"It's good to see you, Gray," Erza said. "I kept missing you, and then everyone said you stopped showing up."

That was by design, but Gray checked to make sure he was smiling and said, "Yeah. Bad luck, I guess. I haven't had a chance to congratulate you yet."

She beamed. "Thank you. I wish you could have been there for the announcement. You should have seen Jellal's face."

Gray turned to Jellal, who had chosen just then to become fascinated by the undecorated wall in the opposite direction of Gray, making it impossible to see what expression he made.

"So?" Erza asked. "Who do you think will be the next closest to our boy in age? Evergreen hasn't let up with asking me about what I did to get pregnant—she doesn't believe it was an accident—but there's a chance for you and Juvia."

Erza, like Juvia, was in denial that an engagement could fail in less than a quarter of a day. Gray wasn't able to resent her for mistaking his intentions, given how her own beau went about things.

"I don't think I'm looking to be a father just yet." Or a mother. Or even a godfather. Being the honorary uncle of Lyon's child was pushing it.

Gray couldn't wait until his generation was past the point where everyone hooked up and started families. Maybe, when he was in his late thirties and finally felt ready to settle down, he could rope their kids into babysitting. Until then, he was sick to death of hearing about who was having a baby and who's baby was so cute and who was trying for a baby.

But Erza, clearly, couldn't get enough of the subject.
"What about you, Natsu?"

Lucy answered. "Natsu and I split up. And I don't think his current romantic pursuits are likely to end with a child."

Natsu, who had clearly not heard from Lucy about Gray's visit and had no current romantic pursuits that he knew of, looked puzzled by this. In all fairness, if Gray was a pursuit of his, he could still be confused by the assertion that his efforts wouldn't end with a child.

Erza was persistent. "Not even any chances of being an uncle, soon?"

"Not for lack of trying on Mavis's part," Natsu reported, glossing entirely over the existence of an adult nephew who was currently the emperor of the world's largest superpower. "She came to me the other day complaining about how Zeref spurned her completely, but when I asked him about it, he had no idea. He really thought she just wanted to visit him for coffee in the middle of the night, and it made more sense to him that she use her own coffee maker instead of making the walk out to see him."

"When did she contact him?" Romeo dared ask. Jellal and Wendy quite plainly didn't want to hear anymore of Zeref and Mavis's haphazard courtship.

"She said 'a reasonable hour' but he said it happened sometime after midnight," Natsu said. "I mean, Gramps used to stay up that late dealing with work if we caused enough trouble, but I don't think Mavis has ever felt the need to stay up like that."

"How are you doing, Erza?" Wendy blurted out, eager to get off the subject. "Is the baby kicking yet?"

"It is!" Said an equally eager Jellal. "If she lets you touch her, you can sometimes feel him for yourself."

For a half a second, Gray was amused. Wendy had grown to almost Lucy's height, filled out in every place they never hoped such a pure little girl would, and was a beacon of male attention, but matters of intimacy still flustered her. Having known her from a young age, it was endearing to see that one little way in which she had yet to grow up.

But then Erza spoke again, and Gray realized that Wendy had done him a horrible disservice.

"It's fun for him, but I'm suffering."

"She is not. This morning, she claimed she was happier than she's ever been."

"Hush, you. That was before he had to help me get my boots on. I can still manage slip-ons, but it was such a chore bending over. And I can't raise my legs as high anymore either. It's not like there's a lot of squishy fat that I can suck in or compress. There's a pretty solid obstacle in my way."

"Oh," Gray said. He knew he wasn't smiling anymore, and the way everyone else was, he was pretty sure he ought to be.

"That's enough, Cupcake," Jellal said, even though he never used pet names. It earned a snicker from Lucy and a brilliant look of glee form Erza, but wasn't a scandalous enough nickname to distract anyone from Erza's pregnancy gripes.

"Speaking of cupcakes, I threw one up yesterday. I'm excited as can be for Simon—"
"Rhysand."

"Percy." It seemed that she and Jellal had yet to settle on a name. "But I wouldn't mind if he came faster. Some days are good, but other days I just cry into a tub of ice cream."

"She's lying," Jellal said. "We don't buy that much ice cream at a time."

Gray had hoped to hear that it was how long morning sickness and mood swings could last that she was lying about, and pinched the back of Jellal's arm for getting his hopes up. Jellal flinched at the sting, but quickly masked any surprise and, realizing that he and Erza didn't pick the best audience, slipped a hand under the table to put supportively on Gray's leg.

"It hasn't been that bad," Jellal insisted.

"Easy for you to say. I'm the one who's pregnant." Erza set a hand on her cheek, giving a doe-eyed look that usually only Lucy feigned for sympathy. "I'm barely halfway through this and the baby already gets in my way so often. I wouldn't trade this for anything, but what would I do if you decided to run off on another job before I made the announcement? Imagine poor little me struggling alone when the baby's so big that it's all I can do to waddle?"

Gray stood, nearly knocking himself over when the bench behind him wouldn't budge under the weight of three other people.

"Sorry," he said. "I forgot, I'm supposed to report to Zeref before dinnertime."

"We have hours," Lucy said. "And Mavis wanted to see you."

"It's fine," Jellal insisted, which he shouldn't have done. Everyone still seated at the table stared in stunned silence. Jellal insisting that it was fine for his friends to consort with Zeref was akin to Juvia claiming she couldn't stand Gray's presence.

Gray took advantage of that stunned shock to make it most of the way out of the guild before he heard Natsu call for him to wait, and he picked up speed to try and make it back to his house and lock all unwanted guests out before Natsu could catch up to him. That fudge was already sitting on his table anyway, and he couldn't look at Natsu just then without thinking of whose fault it was that he would be large to tie his own shoes in the near future.

Natsu must have taken the hint when Gray didn't wait for him. It didn't take Gray long to realize he wasn't being chased, and when he did, he slowed to a walk. The pace gave him more time to focus on his reeling thought and less on keeping a fast pace as he ran halfway across town.

It also meant he didn't run clear past the cathedral. Gray paused at its grand wooden doors before shaking his head and pushing onward. Confessionals were for when you thought you'd done something wrong. The next time he saw Zeref, he'd try and talk about the pregnancy more. He knew what the church would say if they heard his situation.

Or if Natsu played delivery boy for that Archive Lacrima, maybe he would settle for Jellal. Even if Jellal silently judged him, at least he did his best to be supportive. But if he heard that Gray was having second, third, and fourth thoughts on a pregnancy that he hadn't been given a choice on in the first place, he might not keep his opinions to himself anymore. Jellal had spoken to Gray only at times when it looked like there was no changing how things happened. Gray didn't want to hear if he chose to weigh in on things once there was a chance that he could influence the outcome.
Besides, how was he supposed to say that he was considering forfeiting his magic to be able to still tie his shoes?

It was silly. Nothing Erza said was too horrible. Discomforting and inconvenient, sure, but Gray had Natsu to handle anything he couldn't similar to how Erza had Jellal. That was nothing worth giving up his magic over. But seeing her so misshapen with that bulge in her front and hearing that she had so much more to grow, and hearing her so eager to share any issue that came to mind with her pregnancy…

And hearing her cut Jellal down when he tried to play it off…

_It hasn't been that bad._

_Easy for you to say. I'm the one who's pregnant._

And Erza chose to be pregnant. Knew and hid it herself from everyone so that her lover could be there when she first announced it, and so she could see his reaction when he heard. Gray had wanted nothing of the sort, and only carried a child because Natsu thought it couldn't be that bad and hid it from him.

Gray was the pregnant one. It was easy enough for everyone else to say that it was something he'd make it through. Easy enough for Natsu to say the baby mattered more. Easy enough for Jellal to say that there was no fixing it. Easy enough for Mavis to say that the tangible proof of his torment should stay right in town where he could always see it. But he was the one who was pregnant, and if he'd already been robbed of the choice to not be pregnant without any harm to himself. So if he felt like he needed to not be pregnant regardless of the consequences, he felt he was owed that choice.

It was a silly thing to consider giving up his magic forever over being unable to tie his shoes, but Gray had eight weeks left to decide that he would, and if he only had a day to think on it, he'd have run straight to Porlyusica.

Chapter End Notes

Remember that kiss that Gray told Lucy about? It comes back a lot.
Chapter Notes

Since I forgot a chapter last week, y'all can have an extra one this week.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

With a low moan, Natsu extracted himself from the train seat and let Lucy help him out onto the platform. Using the excuse of not leaving Gray for too long, he had managed to avoid any work that he couldn't walk to for some time, but Gray begged to spend a week with Zeref of all people, and Lucy jumped on the chance to take Natsu on a higher paying job.

Not that Natsu couldn't use the money. Paying in part for Gray meant he ran out of funds faster. And he missed working with Lucy and looked forward to the day their whole team came back together. If Erza wasn't too busy with her baby and didn't prefer working with her husband, and if Gray wasn't too bitter about his baby to be on a team with Natsu again.

Things between himself and Gray had been okayish for a while. He hadn't triggered the shock collar since his first day, although neither he nor Gray suggested he go without it, and that seemed to have instilled some semblance of trust. Gray stopped bristling at his company, enjoyed all his sweets, thanked him for cooking, only sniffed drinks given to him sometimes to make sure there was nothing else added to them, and even tried those pickles and grudgingly admitted that they were good. The last time Natsu was over, he saw that Gray had worked his way through the jar—and started on the brine. So maybe there was some craving there, but after the initial pickle related meltdown Natsu wasn't about to call attention to that.

But it went south after that day at the guild. Natsu couldn't coax Gray into going again—not even with a whole box of fudge. While Gray used to cave to the threat of someone less enabling taking Natsu's post for the day, he started making requests that kept Natsu away, first wanting Zeref to make his own deliveries, then asking to stay with Zeref for a while when the black mage confessed that while he was happy to help, he hated making the trip into town to do so. Natsu might not have been too bothered by that. It was a break from the careful balancing act of trying to make sure Gray was taking care of himself properly while not wanting to come off as controlling when it was his last bout of controlling behavior that depressed Gray to the point of not taking care of himself properly.

Staying with Zeref wasn't a problem, in and of itself. It was just that Natsu remembered how his brother had callously dismissed the unborn baby's life completely on account of it not having developed enough to think yet. No emotion whatsoever. It isn't as developed as us, so it's fine to kill it at your leisure.

Well, it wasn't necessarily staying with Zeref who had no qualms about abortions when even Gray, who had one, had needed some way to justify it. It was that after Zeref dropped off that Archive Lacrima, Natsu peeked into Gray's living room once during dinner prep, and saw him, Gray, Gray Fullbuster, Ice Mage extraordinaire and core member of Fairy Tail, researching jobs he could work without magic.

That was ten times as terrifying as Gray having an abortion before the baby's heartbeat could be heard. He wasn't just thinking of ending an innocent child's life now. He was considering giving up a central piece of his own life to do so.
..Or not. Gray could just as easily have been looking for ways to bring in an income while he continued his concerning guild aversion. He may have even been looking purely out of boredom, since his entire social circle involved mages. He worked with mages, hung out with mages, clashed with magic law enforcement, and bought supplies from magic salesmen. Grocery shopping and collecting job information from clients were the only times Gray wasn't guaranteed to have an encounter with a magic user in his day to day life. And since he avoided the guild and all assorted social obligations and now had a wealth of information sitting on his coffee table to browse through, Natsu had seen Gray researching all manner of subjects out of boredom.

He couldn't ask. Not after denying Gray an abortion the way he did. Jellal might be able to, and Natsu had called him to explain his concerns, but Jellal wouldn't dare approach Gray about it until after he left Zeref's. If Gray really was considering it, and if he were to walk straight from the lab to Porlyusica's hut before his visit was over, they would never be able to stop him. Porlyusica might try to talk him down if his magic were at stake, but she'd quietly aborted one pregnancy for Gray already and told no one until she thought she was talking to someone who already knew. Heck. Gray might have even requested such a long stay at Zeref's so he could have time to recover from the procedure without anyone who might object laying into him.

Natsu took a job with Lucy because it had been so long and he couldn't say no. He wanted to have fun with her again. He always worried that normal one-on-one hangouts might be mistaken for him trying to get back together with her and hated how things weren't the same between them, even if everyone said they went right back to being friends the same as before. But he spent the whole time lost in his worries over Gray. He missed getting off at the right stop on the way to their client, failed to notice when he walked right into their target's trap, and then forgot to ask for payment for their work. Thank heavens he went out with Lucy, because no part of the job would have been taken care of without her.

Natsu trusted her to take care of things, so as they stood in the station waiting for the train they needed to transfer over to in order to get home, he let himself get wrapped up in worry once more. At least until Lucy grabbed him by the ear.

"Ow! Why?"

"You keep making that glum face. Trouble in paradise?"

"What does that mean?"

"You and Gray," Lucy said. Behind her, Happy snickered.

Natsu sputtered. "Me and…?" Did she mean that stupid confusion Happy caused at the guild? He thought Mavis cleared that up. "There's nothing between us. We're not together. Happy was only teasing."

"Was not! Maybe a little, but all he ever talks about it Gray now!"

Lucy's next words came out clipped. "I see."

She didn't believe him. And she regarded him with a bitter fire that she had no right to possess after she broke up with him—and over something that he said he didn't hold against her, no less! Nevermind that she ought to know that he would have told her immediately if he and Gray started dating. He wouldn't hide a relationship from her.

"You two look good together," she said, voice still harsh.
They must have, for her to still be convinced that there was something more going on. Natsu wouldn't lie and say he found Gray unattractive, but he knew even before the whole pregnancy mess started that they had different goals. The split with Lucy had finally stopped hurting enough that Natsu was ready to return to the dating scene and look for someone else to start a family with, while Gray couldn't enter the dating scene without Juvia tagging along to chase off everyone who came to close to him, and gave young children a wide berth. The Great Abortion Debate didn't need to take place for him to know that they were incompatible with what they wanted out of life.

Besides, even if it hadn't been a bad idea, he'd burned that bridge and torched all the woodland around it for good measure. He was lucky Gray still tolerated him. Even if, life plan issues aside, Gray had been someone who Natsu wouldn't mind pulling into the janitor's closet at the guild for some quality alone time, that option was strictly off limits. As things were between them, Gray was someone who Natsu could only hope would one day forgive him. Someone who was emotionally rattled by what Natsu did to the point that he needed someone there to make sure he ate more than chips and ice cream in bed all day, and who might make a rash decision that Natsu made himself the least qualified person to stop.

"We're not together," Natsu repeated. "I hurt Gray, and I'm trying to make amends while he deals with the fallout. That's all that's going on."

"That's not how Gray tells it."

Natsu felt his normally boiling blood run cold. He knew they talked, but Lucy never said anything specific about her encounters with Gray since he learned he was pregnant. Had he told her the truth? Natsu was willing to oblige Gray's request to let him hide everything as long as he wanted, and to let him be the one to tell everyone what happened, but Natsu wanted to be the one to own up to Lucy. He needed her to know that it wasn't some desperate bid to make up for her not being able to carry a child. If Gray told her, and if that idea took hold, he would never be able to fully dislodge it.

"What did Gray say?" Natsu asked. "I'm pretty sure he was with me telling everyone there was nothing."

"At the guild, sure. But what he said when he came to talk to me in private."

"And when was that."

"A few weeks ago," Lucy said. "What is going on with him anyway. The time before that, he came to my apartment looking like he'd been evicted and slept outside for the past week. It's not just some injury. I know it's not."

Natsu hesitated before saying, "It's not. But it's something he doesn't want anyone else to know yet. Just… What I did… It really upset him."

"But not so much that he's given up on you?"

"I… guess not?"

Natsu scrunched his brow, trying to process that. Gray had made a few more attempts that were less subtle than a kiss after that first big shocker, but that was before he learned that Natsu was only being so overbearingly nice to keep him from noticing he was pregnant. He hadn't caught Gray coming up with excuses to hold his hand or trying to subtly watch him since then, and there had certainly been no more attempts at kissing. Not after Natsu tried his best to make it clear that he wasn't trying to start anything romantic.
But then Gray had been surprisingly willing to let Natsu back in and give him a second chance. Could that be because of some lingering affection? Natsu was well and truly sorry for how he went about trying to stop Gray from killing his child, even if he stood by his conviction that it needed to be stopped somehow. Had Gray seen that and felt so assured that such a thing wouldn't happen again that he was willing to give Natsu a second chance on all fronts?

They weren't compatible. It was why he'd never considered Gray romantically before that kiss. Even if Natsu could somehow talk Gray into letting him keep the baby, Gray didn't want it. They would have a child between them in any relationship they attempted. Even if Gray sent the baby off to some faraway country and Natsu adopted a local child, the would have that kid to come between them. It just wasn't a good match, which was a shame. If it weren't for the issue of children, Gray would have been a good better half.

Not that Natsu really deserved Gray, whatever Gray thought of the two of them.

Was this how Jellal always thought about being with Erza?

"That's our train," Lucy said, pointing to a torture device as it emerged from its tunnel and slowed before the platform. "When we get back, can I go with you to see him?"

"He's at Zeref's," Natsu said. "And he's… He's been a little weird about seeing people lately. It'd be good for him, but I'd have to ask him first. I can't think of why he wouldn't want you over. Aside from maybe upsetting Juvia. But still."

"Yeah. Got it." Lucy gave the most strained smile Natsu had ever seen. "It's nice that he lets you in, even if he's shut the rest of us out."

"Yeah." Natsu mumbled. "Sorry."

Gray wouldn't have put everyone else off if Natsu hadn't hurt him first.

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Natsu hadn't totally lied to Lucy about where Gray was. He just neglected to mention that when the two of them split up, they left it that Natsu would fetch Gray and walk him home when he returned from his job. Only after Lucy went her own way did Natsu tell Happy where he was headed, and that he needed to go alone.

It wasn't until Natsu was halfway up the hill to the lab that he realized that Lucy wasn't just sore about them keeping secrets or Gray withdrawing from everyone. Lucy broke up with him over the idea that being with her forced him to 'settle' for adopting, and now she thought he'd run off and fallen for someone else who shouldn't be able to have a child of their own. With Gray being pregnant and all, it hadn't even crossed Natsu's mind before he and Lucy parted ways.

Well, she would sure be full of herself when the truth came out. Whatever Gray thought, they wouldn't be able to hide that he was pregnant indefinitely. Assuming Gray was still pregnant.

Natsu still hadn't thought of a good way to ask by the time he knocked on his brothers door. Thankfully, it took a minute for anyone to answer, giving Natsu more time to frantically form how he would ask.

The door belched out smoke as it opened, and when it cleared enough for one to see inside, Natsu realized that Zeref was standing in front of him. He wore the serenely calm expression that Natsu had come to realize was his resting face, which was concerning, because his clothes were tattered (and he was wearing thicker, protective gear for once), there were soot stains all up his arms, and he had a
head wound somewhere because blood seeped from his hair down his neck.

Gray forgotten momentarily, Natsu pulled Zeref out of the smoke and forced him to sit in the slush, ignoring his idiot brother's protests that what was left of his pants would get wet.

"You're not immortal anymore. You know you're not immortal anymore, right?" Natsu said, running his hands through Zeref's hair. "Whatever you were doing, what were you thinking doing it? Where were you hit?"

"Head," Zeref said unhelpfully. His voice had a disconcerting rasp to it. "It was an accident. That lens for the watch tower wasn't carved at the right angle. It reflected light differently from how it was supposed to in the plan. The machine I was using to modify it melted where the light hit, and then the whole thing overheated."

Natsu found the spot Zeref bled from, earning a wince from his brother as his hand passed over it. Whatever hit Zeref, it hadn't lodged itself in there, but the cut was still wide and bleeding heavily. "We'll have to take you to Porlyusica. How did overheating do this?"

In the midst of a coughing fit, it took Zeref a moment to answer. "It exploded before we could cool it back down."

"We?" Right. Zeref had a guest. "Where's Gray? Still in there?"

"No. Out back? I told him to go when smoke went everywhere. It would—" he coughed "—be bad for him to inhale it."

"It's bad for you to inhale it," Natsu reminded Zeref. To his exasperation, Zeref's eyes widened as if he'd forgotten again that he no longer automatically recovered from all damage. "Nevermind. Why was the door shut?"

"Because he went out the back door?"

There was already a door open and that much smoke had still gathered in the building? Natsu looked back to the door, which he could feel a breeze through, and while the smoke was thinner, it still hung heavy.

"You sit here," he instructed, pulling his scarf up over his nose as he spoke. "I'll get the windows open and get Gray, and then we are going to Porlyusica."

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The question of whether or not Gray was still pregnant settled itself when, after Natsu told Gray he had to help drop Zeref off to get stitches, Gray said, "Might as well. I'm overdue for a checkup on this stupid baby anyway."

He had the ring on, and a winter coat to boot, but Natsu could see that the coat looked a little tight around the midsection. Gray was coming up on the four month mark, and fast passing the point where Erza stopped hiding her pregnancy. He would have to walk around shirtless if he wanted to keep hiding what was happening inside of him, and he was still trying his hardest to keep his stomach properly heated to avoid any complications. If Natsu didn't get him out to see everyone within the week, Gray might put up a fight against even Jellal and Lyon's efforts to get him outdoors until the weather finished warming up.

There was no time to ask Gray, or to tell him about the new slab of bribe fudge that had been purchased to get him outside again. Zeref's gait grew increasingly unsteady, and his answers to
Natsu’s questions about what happened leading up to the injury alternated between sluggish and agitated, which Natsu and Gray both pegged as a bad sign. Twice as they drew nearer to the old healer’s hut, Zeref attempted to turn back and avoid dealing with her. The first time he caved to Natsu’s insistence that he needed to be looked at, but the second time it was only Gray playing up the severity of his injury and asking what Mavis would do if Zeref were permanently affected that made him give in.

When they reached Porlyusica's’s she took one look at Zeref, blood still oozing down his neck, and at the two people holding both his arms who clearly made him come to her, and grabbed her broom. While smacking people on the head was her preferred method of punishment, she made an exception for head injury patients, and instead jabbed the handle end of the broom into Zeref's stomach.

"How often do you need to be reminded you're not immortal anymore?"

The jab had triggered another coughing fit, and it took Zeref a minute to recover before he could rasp, "One or two times…"

"A week," Natsu added.

Sighing, Porlyusica grabbed Zeref by the arm and pulled him inside. "Fine. Sit—not on the bed! You're filthy. Take the chair. And you!" She pointed to Natsu. "Help get him washed up. Let's make sure he's not hiding any other injuries he's too stupid to realize are serious."

Natsu took a bucket meant for mopping and filled it in Porlyusica's sink, and had just started washing soot marks off Zeref's arm when Porlyusica snapped again.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Natsu looked up to see Gray frozen in the middle of quietly closing the door.

"Back in here. Now. You've blown off three appointments and I weep for that child to think it has someone like you supporting it."

"Don't talk to him like that," Natsu said. The last thing Gray needed was validation for the idea that he was the last person who should ever be pregnant.

His protest earned him a broom to the head, and he glowered as he returned to scrubbing at soot.

"I can—" Zeref coughed "—clean myself off."

"Yeah, but she told me to, and I don't want her any madder than—are these burns?"

"Oh. I guess they are."

Sure enough, angry red skin, bright and sleek with inflammation, revealed itself on Zeref's arm. While not every soot spot revealed a burn, Natsu found another ugly red mark on Zeref's other arm and one more on the back of his calf. The skin on his back looked only slightly agitated—no worse than a mild sunburn—but the protective gear there, which had been at its thickest around his torso, was almost completely burned away.

"Were you wearing a helmet?" Natsu asked. "How do you still have all your hair?"

It was a little singed at the ends, but from the shape of Zeref's clothes, Natsu would have expected the back his he head to be one big third degree burn.
"Is it still there? That's good." Zeref blinked heavily and gave Natsu an obnoxiously serene smile.

Taking a deep breath, Natsu reminded himself not to let it bother him. While he'd uncovered the burns, Porlyusica injected Zeref with a pain killer, and then gave him more tablets that would kick in as the injection wore off. For as much as it took to dull Zeref's pain, that he hadn't fallen asleep was commendable.

"He had a helmet," Gray confirmed. "We were both covered in protective gear, in case something went wrong."

Porlyusica froze in the midst of stitching to snap, "You were down there with him?"

"I'm fine," Gray said. "Actually fine. Not delusional fine like him. He got in front of me when he saw that thing was about to explode. Something cracked his helmet and I had to pry it off of him, and it was probably the helmet itself that left that gash."

"And then you left him in all that smoke?" Natsu asked.

"He said he had to make sure it didn't set off any of the other weird contraption down there and not to worry about it. I couldn't see that he was bleeding, and I'm not his usual nanny, so sorry for forgetting that Zeref forgets he's mortal."

"I am?" Zeref asked.

Porlyusica, who treated Zeref for some absentminded mishap that he forgot he needed to worry about every month or two, scoffed in disgust. Natsu, who also regularly reminded Zeref but also saw a lot more of people amazed by the amount of consideration that went into dealing with him, chuckled.

"Mavis managed to learn eventually," Porlyusica said. "I don't see why this one has such a hard time of it."

"He was immortal for way longer, and Mavis spent most of her time in that crystal," Natsu argued, but Porlyusica had already turned her attention to finishing Zeref's stitches. With no further direction, Natsu dug around for a burn salve and began to apply it before bandaging the injured sites. From past experiences with friends, he was intimately familiar with what that medicine looked like.

Porlyusica finished the stitches and, seeing Natsu had already started on the burns, moved over to Gray. Natsu tried to look preoccupied while she dealt with Gray, slowing down the speed at which he applied cream and wrapped bandages in order to give himself an excuse to stay through the checkup.

Gray was made to remove the ring, and Natsu peeked while he was spread out on the bed to look for tangible proof of the pregnancy. His stomach was certainly larger, but not quite to the point that you couldn't pass it off as weight gain. If Gray had all but left the guild and started gorging on chocolate earlier, no one would doubt that the bump was nothing more than normal fat.

They went through the general checkup questions. No. He wasn't nauseas anymore, or at least not often, and didn't need more medicine. He did notice that his mood was prone to fluctuations. Yes, he was eating properly. Maybe a few sweets, but everyone made sure he ate the right things on top of that. No movement yet. Was he supposed to feel movement yet? It wouldn't hurt when the baby moved, would it? Was there anything he could take to not feel it?

At that point Natsu ran out of burns to bandage, and the tablets were kicking in hard. Zeref was barely awake, and in danger at any point of falling from his chair. Porlyusica pressed a paper and
handbag on Natsu's and ordered him to take his brother home and put him in bed—and talk some sense into him before giving him his next dose of pain killers. Gray could get home on his own.

Grudgingly, Natsu got Zeref onto his back. The lab was probably still airing out, so Natsu decided to take Zeref back to his own home. He had a couch that people could crash on when unable to go elsewhere, and the shack was a little ways out of town, so Zeref would feel comfortably removed from everyone's disdain for him.

As he plodded through the slush and mud, Natsu rummaged through the bag and inspected its contents. Pain killers. Lots of them. Zeref's mistakes with his newfound physical vulnerability were rarely as serious or frequent as they used to be, but they had been bad and near constant when the curse was first broken, and the excessive amount of treatment he'd undergone led to him subsequently developing a substantial tolerance for anything Porlyusica made. He required doses that could knock out a horse. Aside from that, she'd included more burn salve, and thrown in an inhaler that Zeref would need to take for at least the next three weeks to make sure there was no long-term damage from smoke inhalation.

That meant at least three weeks of checking in on Zeref whenever his next dose of any medication was scheduled, since he never remembered that he needed medicine to heal the same as everyone else. Seeing that the inhaler medication was meant to be used whenever needed, and no later than eight hours apart at a time, Natsu sighed. Zeref would need a live-in nanny for that. Especially with the pain medicine muddling his ability to remember the rest of his problems. Mavis might be willing to hang out in the lab for a week or two once it was cleaned out, or press Zeref to stay in the guild infirmary and hope that none of the members who were less comfortable around him hurt themselves, but most likely, she wouldn't have the time to watch him constantly and would ask Natsu to handle it.

"This is ridiculous," Natsu said. "You're the older one. Why do I have to be responsible for you?"

"'S c'z yer fuck ups 'r small scale," Zeref slurred. One day, Natsu would remember to have a recorder on hand to let him hear how he sounded drugged out when he was fully alert.

"Still."

The fact that Natsu, Natsu Dragneel, was the more responsible one in any situation was absurd. He was the one who set things on fire because he got excited and forgot that setting things on fire was bad. Yet here he was worrying about who would make sure Gray got out of bed and ate properly because his older and more intelligent brother needed someone to push his medicine on him after he forgot that smoke inhalation could cause permanent damage.

Natsu stripped Zeref down once inside his house, briefly summarizing what happened for Happy as he cleaned the rest of the soot off of his brother and, upon finding no more burns, forced him into a shirt stolen from Elfman years ago before helping him get settled on the couch. Once that was taken care of, he took the time to read Porlyusica's note, expecting instructions on care for his brother that he would already know from every previous incident that involved being sent home with medicine.

He did not find what he expected.

_You really did a number on this poor boy, and I hope you're proud of yourself._

_Gray shows signs of depression and indicates a self-care deficit. I'm told he rarely makes his presence known around others anymore, so see to it that someone checks in on him regularly. It might be good to have someone with him around the clock, lest he decide to do anything rash._
Don't make things any worse for him, and keep that idiot brother of yours on a leash.

Porlyusica

Well, he supposed it was good to have medical backing for making sure someone was at Gray's daily. Except Natsu couldn't keep a close watch over Zeref and make sure Gray took care of himself at the same time. Unless Gray wanted to live with two Dragneels at once, and Natsu knew that no one, not even any of the Dragneels, wanted to live under the same roof with two Dragneels.

Natsu glanced back at Zeref, who was drooling on a couch cushion. He looked about half as bandaged as Natsu usually was after a bad fight, with gauze held over the head injury by more bandages. He might forget his medicine just from the head injury—immortality habits not needed. Natsu didn't leaving Zeref alone at the best of times, and this was not the best time.

"Hey, Happy? Would you be willing to make sure Zeref takes his medicine?"

"So you can leave me behind and play with Gray again?"

"Yeah. Please?"

Happy considered it, then crossed his arms and turned his tail to Natsu. "I'll help you convince him if he doesn't want it, but I'm not going to do it on my own."

"But I have to—"

"You're not ignoring me every time we get home!"

Natsu sighed. "Fine. I'll see if Mavis is up for it."

"She better not be!"

Knowing that Happy would try to convince Mavis not to take Zeref if he had the chance, Natsu stepped outside before pulling out his Communication Lacrima. It took a minute for the guild's lacrima to respond to the signal.

"Natsu?" Mavis asked.

"Hey, Sis. Zeref did it again."

"Oh no! What did he do this time? Did he forget to watch out for gravity? I know it hasn't happened yet, but it's only a matter of time."

"Nah. It sounded like some contractor didn't do things the way he told them to, and he didn't realize the mistake until right before it made a machine blow up. Gray's fine—he was there—but Zeref's got a bad cut on the back of his head and breathed in a lot of smoke, so someone has to be his nurse for the next couple weeks."

There was a pause before Mavis said, "Can you handle it? I'm behind with reviewing finances, and I just received a message from the Council for reparation payment. No doubt I'll read about your latest job in here."

Natsu had trashed a park, but the mayor had agreed to withhold the cost of repairs from their reward and not contact the council. That being said, he didn't doubt part of the guild's financial concerns dealt with similar incidents from him, and if Mavis was trying to guilt him by making him feel responsible for her workload, then she already had to be pretty determined not to be the one to look
after Zeref.

"It's nothing too intensive. He's got an inhaler that I don't trust him to use when he starts coughing is the main problem."

"And I have half the guildmasters in the country coming here for the regional meeting in three days and staying just as long. If he insists on acting difficult I can take him after that, but it wouldn't go over well if I had him with me when everyone shows up. They all say they're alright with the guild associating with him, but it's only because they're afraid of what might happen if they freeze out the guild that Zeref favors, and you know how people are when they realize who he is before they get the chance to really know him. And just think of poor Jellal. I got him to agree to help me pull this all off, and he'll be in a back room trying to hold himself together if he has to do it while Zeref is there."

"Fine. Fine. I'll nurse your boyfriend back to health for you."

"Thank you for taking care of your brother, Natsu."

"But you must see a lot of Jellal right now, huh?"

"Yes. He's in my office right now."

"Can you tell him he's gotta look after Gray for me?"

"Does he need looking after too?"

"Yes. Just tell Jellal. He'll get it."

"…Okay."

There was a wooden clack when Mavis dropped the lacrima to relay Natsu's message, and several minutes of silence before her voice returned.

"He says Erza wouldn't let him leave that long, so Gray would have to go everywhere with him. Would that be an issue?"

"That would be perfect. Thanks!"

"Sure… Make sure Zeref doesn't die."

"I'll do my best to thwart his efforts."

"Thanks."

The lacrima chimed to signal that Mavis had broken their link, and Natsu sighed and went back inside. Zeref must not have told her that Gray was depressed, and Natsu didn't want to be the one to explain it when it was his fault. Jellal would be happy to fill her in when she asked, though, and the next time they spoke, she would be angry enough to do much worse than end their conversation without a proper goodbye.

But that was fine. Everyone would be mad at him sooner or later, so for everyone who already knew about the pregnancy, he might as well get it over with. In the meantime, Someone was with Gray and making sure he got out, and Natsu could focus on his brother in peace.

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Zeref woke as Natsu worked on dinner prep, the steady wheeze of his sleeping breaths turning into a
rough cough, followed by a moan.

"You okay?" Natsu asked.

"How'd I get here?" Zeref asked.

"Carried you. Porlyusica gave you some stuff for pain, and it knocked you out."

"Stuff?"

"Medicine."

"Oh. Right. That stuff. Do we have any?"

Natsu shook his head in disbelief. Zeref hadn't even had his first dose before Porlyusica told him he would be taking something for pain for the next few weeks, and he'd already forgotten.

When Natsu took too long to answer, Zeref said, "I can make—"

"You are not making your own medicine. You took a metal scrap to the head, and the last round of pills can't have totally worn off yet, and it went so well the last time you tried. Porlyusica nearly murdered Mavis for letting you make yourself sick like that."

"I can follow a recipe, Natsu."

"When you're well, sure." Natsu pulled out three plates for himself, Happy, and Zeref. "That old bat sent us home with medicine. How does your throat feel?"

"Painful."

"Hang on."

Natsu left Happy to get them dished up and dug through the bag Porlyusica gave him until he found the inhaler. Zeref made a face when he saw it, but took it from Natsu and administered it himself. Lucky for him that he already knew how it worked. Natsu had been given no instructions, and had to pay attention to how Zeref did it for if he ever needed help while zonked out on pain pills.

What previous incident Natsu hadn't been the one to deal with that also involved Zeref needing to inhale medicine, Natsu decided he didn't want to know. He just appreciated that Zeref knew how to use an inhaler.

"How was that?"

Zeref coughed before croaking out, "Awful."

"So in the future, are we going to stand over an explosion and breath in the smoke?"

"Probably."

They both knew he'd forget again, so there was no use pretending. Natsu appreciated the honesty.

"Is Gray alright?" Zeref asked.

"Yeah. Thanks for shielding him. I mean, he can make a shield, but he didn't, so it was good you thought to get in front of him. How does your head feel?"
"Hurts. You said there's something for that?"

Natsu took a glass that Happy finished filling in the sink and handed it to Zeref. He drank half of it before Natsu had time enough to dig out pain pills. Usually, when he remembered to take them, Zeref took pills well. This time, perhaps because of all the smoke, he struggled to choke them down. That just made it all the more unfortunate that the dose instruction tapped to the bottle said to take fourteen at once. His eyes were watering by the end, so it must have been painful, but then the point of the pills was that they blocked pain, so the problem would fix itself soon.

"Should we tell Lucy you weren't able to ask Gray if he'd see her?" Happy asked as he carried dinner over to the couch.

Natsu froze on the middle of accepting his plate. With the explosion and the hassle at Porlyusica's, he forgot completely about Lucy's request. It took him a minute to think through the situation and come to an answer.

"Nah. Jellal's gonna take Gray out tomorrow, so she'll see him then."

"So we have Zeref?" Happy asked.

"For about a week, yeah. If he still needs help after that, Mavis'll be free."

Zeref made a face when Happy handed him a plate, and Natsu couldn't tell if it was because he didn't want to try and swallow anything else just yet, or because Mavis didn't want to see him immediately. Either way, it seemed like a good idea not to tell him that he'd been rejected because she was afraid of what her fellow guildmasters might think of him.

With his sore throat, Zeref was content at this point to stop talking, but Happy had put Natsu's concerns from earlier back in his mind, so before the pain medicine could kick in, he asked, "You know that thing I kept Gray from doing?"

Zeref looked to Happy, who was not at all amused with the blatant attempt to talk around him, and then back to Natsu. "Yes."

"He isn't thinking of doing it anyway, is he?"

"Is it any of your business if he is?"

"Yes."

Zeref stared at Natsu long and hard, then shook his head, set his plate down on the floor in front of him, and lay down on the couch.

"Zeref?"

"Yes, Natsu. He is. And if he decides to go for it, I'd better not hear you forced him not to a second time."

Chapter End Notes

Credits to faeriegates on tumblr for the idea of Zeref not properly adjusting to being mortal again.
I mentioned he’s my favorite in this fic, right? I really do enjoy writing him.
Gray agreed to suit up and go down into the basement specifically because he knew that if Zeref seriously hurt himself, then Natsu would be the one assigned to nurse him back to health. It wasn’t something he’d ever had to concern himself before, but the whole guild knew about the trouble Zeref and Mavis had with remembering their vulnerability back when the curse was first broken, and while he hadn't known that Zeref could still forget that injuries were to be taken seriously at the point that he was bleeding out, he’d at least known that the black mage still accident prone. Mavis informed them the guild periodically that Zeref would be in the infirmary anywhere from a few hours to several weeks, depending on the severity of the accident.

But he knew that Mavis would push the task of taking care of Zeref onto Natsu if things went south in the basement, having been there when Mavis dropped by to explain why it was important that Zeref stay out of the way while she hosted her meeting—and why it might be better if he also kept his appearances scarce in the days leading up to the event so there would be less town gossip floating around when her guests arrived. Had she been anyone but the First, Gray might have told her off for openly telling her boyfriend, albeit in a softer wording, that she was ashamed of him. But she was the guild's founder and current master, and Zeref assured them both that the request didn't bother him at all, although the tone he used when insisting on it to Gray once they were alone was a far cry from the cheerful and accepting one he used while Mavis was still there.

So when Zeref said the machine was overheating and could give out in any number of ways in a matter of minutes, and when he refused to leave before trying his best to fix the malfunction, Gray went down to try and cool the machine off. He hadn't realized Zeref was accident prone because he still hadn't committed to memory that he was mortal, and the head wound hadn't bled enough to seep through his hair when Gray wrestled him out of that dented helmet, and when Zeref insisted that until he knew for sure that he wanted an abortion, he needed to play it safe with the baby so he had to leave before he took in too much smoke, Gray assumed that Zeref would be up shortly after him. He thought nothing of it while he got outside and threw his soiled clothes off alone. Since there were two doors, he didn’t worry that he didn’t see Zeref come out the back. He didn’t know that Zeref would forget that the smoke was bad for both of them, and he was preoccupied with feeling his stomach and wondering if he had done any damage to the fetus to think about how long it took Zeref to reconvene with him.

It wasn't until Natsu came around to the back of the lab and told Gray that the three of them were going to go see Porlyusica right away immediately that Gray realized he'd thoroughly failed, and when he did, he wanted to scream. He wouldn't, because Natsu's ears were sensitive and Zeref definitely had a headache, if not a concussion. And because Zeref had been good to him all week and whatever issues Gray took with Natsu, while Natsu was fretting over his impossible brother's wellbeing was not the right time to give him more trouble. But Gray still wanted to scream. He wanted to tell Natsu that he really did try to keep Zeref from getting himself hurt, but he couldn't do so without admitting that he'd been down in that basement too, which would only make Natsu mad because he could have damaged the fetus.

Although in the end, Natsu heard about his involvement anyway. At least by that point he was too busy worrying about all of Zeref's burns. It was kind of refreshing for the damn kid to not to be Natsu’s number one priority for once, even if it wasn't Gray who Natsu cared more about than the stupid thing in that scenario.
But aside from just not wanting someone who eventually turned into a reasonably decent person from being hurt, Gray really didn't want Natsu to be tied up with Zeref's health for God knew how long. If Natsu was busy breathing down Zeref's neck, then someone else would come to breath down Gray's for him.

At the point that Natsu left Porlyusica's with Zeref on his back, Gray knew the next week would be bad, but he expected it to at least be bearable. Jellal and Lyon tag-teaming to force him outside and make him socialize and nag him with a fury that Natsu couldn't muster about how he needed to come to grips and move forward.

What he got was so much worse.

Jellal was too busy with guild work and Erza to drop everything just for Gray, and Meredy was to close to her due date for Lyon to leave unless there was an emergency, so Gray was the one who had to adjust his schedule.

He was getting to the point where it was hard to hide his stomach with clothes, and not safe yet to expose himself to the cold—which was a constant struggle to keep in check. When Jellal asked Gray to move in with him and Erza temporarily, the response was an immediate rejection. He tried to pass it off as not wanting to have to sit through all of the prep work and meetings Mavis had scheduled, but really, the thought of returning home from those meetings (which already sounded tiresome) to spend the evenings with Erza and all her chatter about babies and parents sounded like a personal hell. Not that Gray had the nerve to tell Jellal so, but he still felt that way.

So Jellal had nothing but good intentions when he packed a bag for Gray, took him to the train station, and sent him to Lyon's under threat of telling one more person about the pregnancy so they could hang around and help him out instead.

Gray arrived at Lamia scale around noon, wearing a baggy sweater that hid his bump, carting two suitcases, and contemplating turning around and telling Lucy what happened so she could be the one who nannied him under the excuse of just wanting to help out with anything to make his pregnancy easier. It had the added bonus Lucy most definitely not being pregnant, and she would also be more receptive to the explanation that he and Natsu weren't really together if she understood what was going on. If nothing else, she would at least replace her misunderstanding of thinking Natsu replaced her with someone else who couldn't be pregnant with the delusion that Natsu devoted himself to a relationship with Gray because Gray was pregnant. That had to be better for her confidence.

He grabbed his things and turned around, only to find Lyon right behind him. That was a face he hadn't expected to see so soon, and he yelped and threw a bag at Lyon's chest.

Lyon caught the bag with a glower. "You ruined it. I was going to startle you."

"You did startle me!"

"I was going to startle you on my terms," Lyon amended. "Anyway, I'm glad you made it alright. Meredy didn't tell me right away that you were coming. She thought Jellal sent you to spy on me 'for her best interest'. I told her you were having health issues and were only staying because Natsu has someone else with even bigger health issues to help for the week, but I didn't give her any details."

Gray tried not to look to disappointed as he took his bag back from Lyon. "Details on me or Zeref?"

"You. All I heard about Zeref was that he was Natsu's problem for the week, and your master is taking him after that. What happened?"
"He forgets he's not immortal and can take lasting damage."

"Serious injury, then?"

"Moderate. Some burns, head injury, and he breathed in a lot of smoke, but Porlyusica's an expert at fixing that after treating everyone Natsu's injured. Apparently he also forgets that he needs to follow a treatment regimen to get better. Jellal wouldn't have asked, and I didn't speak to Mavis about it, but if it requires live-in care instead of daily visits, there's probably something he needs every few hours."

"That sounds serious."

"He's Zeref. He'll be fine." That was the same mentality Zeref had that caused him to need a live-in caretaker, but Gray didn't care. "I think I'd be fine without someone 'helping with my health issues' too, by the way."

"Which is code for 'I want to stay in bed and only leave the apartment to restock on chocolate ice cream cake," Lyon said. "You're already here, so look at it as a vacation."

A vacation spent with an overbearing brother figure who would drag him everywhere he didn't want to go, and his very pregnant wife. Gray sighed.

"Don't be like that. Besides, it will be good for you to see what you're in for, don't you think?"

"Yeah. I suppose."

It was rash of him to give his magic up just from hearing Erza's petty mid-pregnancy complaints. He stood to gain some insight from seeing things end of term as well.

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It took Gray three seconds to decide that it was a mistake to let Lyon drag him home to Meredy.

"So you did come!" She did her best to throw her arms around him, but with her stomach in the way, she had to pull Gray forward so he leaned into her at an awkward angle. "We heard from Jellal this morning. Lyon says you haven't felt well."

"I guess not."

She pulled back, holding him at arm's length and studying his face. "Well, you do look more Juvia's color than normal. Are you not able to get out as much?"

"Not really."

"He can get out," Lyon cut in. "He doesn't enjoy it, but it's good for him, and he's not an invalid."

"Well, I'm sure Juvia usually drags you to a different date spot each day for you outdoors time, so we'll have to keep you on schedule here." Meredy patted Gray on the shoulder. "Speaking of Juvia, how are things with her? She keeps me updated, but I hear you're still dancing around a wedding date."

"Y-yeah."

This wasn't a minefield Gray wanted to even attempt to tread through. Lyon stopped revering Juvia like a goddess since meeting Meredy, but he was still the most critical of everyone when it came to Gray rejecting her. If Meredy had been fed Juvia's wistful tales as if they were objective truths and
then shared them with Lyon, then it probably sounded like they'd been engaged ever since the war and the only reason they hadn't married yet was because Gray was taking his sweet time setting up the most extravagant wedding he possible could. To tell him anything less would be to spend his week in the fifth circle of hell, rather than the lofty place already set up for him the first circle.

He did his best to look anywhere but at Meredy, but it was hard to avoid when she kept talking to him.

"It's too bad you two are taking so long. Honestly, I always imagined that when I learned I was having my first, I would go to you guys for parenting tips. But I suppose I can see the appeal of wanting to have more time to enjoy one another first. I tell her all the time, but be sure to let her know that when you two settle down, I'm there to give her any pointers she needs."

Gray managed a smile, but couldn't think of a good response. Come to think of it, Juvia had insisted they have a baby *immediately* ever since Levy announced she was having twins, but it was only after Meredy announced her pregnancy that Juvia went into overdrive pleading Gray for a baby. Meredy no doubt goaded her on.

"Are you not planning on having children?" Meredy asked, puzzled by the silence.

No children was no longer part of the plan, whether Gray wanted it or not.

"Gray must be tired from his trip," Lyon declared, taking Gray by the shoulder and dragging him towards the stairs. "I'll help him get set up in your old room and be back down, okay?"

Meredy gave Lyon a peck on the cheek. "I'll try my best to hold out until then."

Lyon took Gray upstairs and into the first room on the left, which looked like an odd cross between guest and lived-in room. The furniture had too much character not to have been someone specific's but the room was otherwise bare.

"Dinner's at five-thirty," Lyon said. "Get unpacked, get over whatever mood you're in, and when you come back down, don't make Meredy feel bad for trying to converse."

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Under the excuse of his mystery health issue and the two hour train ride being taxing, Gray managed to avoid leaving his temporary room until dinner. The Archive Lacrima, while neither small nor light compared to a Communication Lacrima, could fit in his luggage, and he spent the afternoon browsing records of last century artists, either sketching slap-dash copies of paintings, or recreating sculptures with ice. He didn't have much practice with paints and didn't know how to sculpt without magic, but an art related job didn't sound bad, if he *did* lose his magic. Learning to work with clay would be a task and a half, but Reedus would surely show him his way around a brush.

Not even Natsu would let Gray hide in his room during meals, and Gray gave no resistance when Lyon came up to get him.

"Try to be more amiable. You didn't come out here so you could still hide under your covers."

"No, I came out here because you all seem to think I need someone breathing down my neck, and Jellal blackmailed me into going along with that."

"I was told," Lyon said, "that the original point of Natsu helping you out was only meant to be a way for him to make amends by lightening the burden he and his… ah… his brother placed on you. What I've heard since is that you became so dependent that if left to prepare your own meals, you go to the
convenience store across the street and buy sweet buns, that you won't get out of bed if no one makes you, and that you have to be fought in order to get you to leave the house. So for all intents and purposes, you do need someone breathing down your neck. Natsu is just a convenient someone when available. What you're doing isn't healthy at the best of times, and you're not in a situation where you can afford to look after yourself so poorly. I know that you have a reason to be upset, but you can't do this, Gray.

"Now be amiable at dinner, socialize at least once this week without me twisting your arm, don't make us force you to eat the bare minimum needed to pass as healthy, and I'll tell everyone else who's worried about you that you might be back on track."

Gray weighed the pros and cons of telling Lyon that having to sit and spend quality time with Meredy would only give him more reason to withdraw into himself. He hadn't come to a decision on if he should say so or not when Lyon took his arm and led him downstairs.

The Vastia household had its own dining room, but with only two resident and the occasional guest, the leaf had been pulled from the dining table to make if a four-seater. Lyon and Meredy sat at opposite ends with Gray in the middle. Most likely, this was intended to let the couple face each other, but it had the terrible consequent of giving Gray a side view of Meredy.

As if seeing her waddle to the table hadn't been bad enough, She leaned back awkwardly in her seat in a way that made Gray wonder if she her child was too big for her to sit up straight. More than once during the meal, she placed her hand under her belly and attempted to lift is as well. When she caught Gray watching the gesture with concern, she smiled and said, "Just trying to relieve pressure. Uriel's gotten heavy."

Gray didn't really feel pregnant yet. There was no detectable movement from the baby and he hadn't bloated out enough to have that telltale look pregnant women had that Gray could best describe as 'misshapen', so for the most part he felt overweight. Because he'd done his best to block out thoughts of what lay in store for him, he hadn't stopped to consider what it would be like to carry that extra weight awkwardly on your front the further you went into your pregnancy.

Appetite gone, Gray set his fork down and excused himself from the table.

"You'll hang out down here with us, won't you?" Lyon asked.

"Yeah." If he didn't, Lyon would march upstairs and drag him back down. "I'll be on the couch."

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Unlike Erza, Gray was not yet to the point where it was a struggle to bend down and pick things up. This meant he was the one who picked up things Meredy needed, since she was well beyond that point.

If it were up to Gray, he would have gone to Lamia Scale every day. The guild had fewer members at that age where people looked to start families, and since he was 'Lyon's friend' to most of them, the amount of conversation he was expected to engage in was tolerably low. But Lyon must have felt he didn't do enough socializing while he was there and needed to not be pushed too far too fast, because he only went every other day. On the days he didn't go, he was to help keep Meredy company. Because Lyon excused everything Gray did as being due to his health, Gray couldn't beg off of this downtime without making Meredy suspicious.

He started counting down the hours until Mavis would take over with Zeref and he could go home.
At twenty-six hours before the guild meetings would adjourn and Mavis could fetch Zeref, Meredy started to complain about cramps. She assured Lyon that despite the pain it was nothing but the usual aches—which made Gray's stomach do a flip—and Uriel wasn't due for a few more weeks, so it was fine for him to run to the nearest store for the out-of-season watermelon she'd wanted all night.

So Gray was the only one home with her when her water broke.

It took them a second after it happened to process what it meant, both of them staring at the mess on the couch before Meredy swore and dropped the book she'd been trying to relax into.

"I thought you said you had weeks!"

"I thought I did."

"Why is this happening now?"

"Sometimes they come early." Meredy took a quick look at Gray, who was already trembling at the realization that he would be party to her labor and that was way more than he signed up for when he decided it would be good to see what he was in for. She judged herself to be the calmer of the two. "I'll gather my things. You call Lyon and tell him to meet us at the hospital. I know the way, but if you could walk with me… that won't be a health concern, will it?"

He should have said it would, but in his growing anxiety, Gray shook his head. He had no health issues that made escorting her a physical strain, so why would it be a health concern?

"Alright. I'm going to… I suppose I'll put a skirt on before I do anything else." Her sweatpants were soaked. "You don't have to drag the call out. Lyon knows where the delivery ward is."

She waddled out of the room, and only once she was gone did Gray think to pull out his Communication Lacrima. He held it up to punch in the security information and make the call, but saw that wet spot on the couch and carpet again and froze.

Meredy was about to squeeze a tiny person out of her. Gray didn't even know where he'd give birth from, but there had to be some way that the serum would let the thing inside of him out. He doubted Zeref went through and performed cesareans on all those fish and frogs.

Where the hell was his kid going to come out of? Would it be as painful as people always said labor was?

Meredy came downstairs in a heavy skirt to find Gray sitting where she left him, staring blankly at his lacrima. With a sigh, she pulled him to his feet, took the lacrima, and made the call. She told Lyon what happened as they walked, and had to keep looking back to make sure Gray followed her.

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Lyon arrived out of breath with two watermelon while the nurse was still making sure Meredy was situated properly in her delivery room. One look at the fruit was enough to make Meredy's lip curl in disgust, and with a shrug, Lyon tucked them away in the closet under Meredy's clothes. When the nurse left, he teased her about how her hospital gown looked like an oversized apron.

Gray watched them joke lightheartedly with one another, and for the first time since Meredy's water broke, he felt himself relax. He could even come down from his own worry enough to see that Meredy looked more relaxed, and he realized she must have put forth extra effort to be calm for him.

If things had worked out between himself and Juvia, they would have been in Lyon and Meredy's
place. For one brief moment, Gray let himself be caught up in a fantasy where he was part of a happy, recently married coupling like theirs.

It lasted a few seconds before Meredy moaned when a new contraction hit, and Gray's anxiety spiked again. How many hours had she been in labor for? How many hours did it last? He remember Levy claiming it took her over a day to deliver the twins, but surely it was twice as long with twins, right? Right? They said it became more painful the further in you went, but Meredy had to be near the end already. It couldn't be that painful, right? Pain was something Gray was used to. For the sake of his loved ones, he was willing to suffer through pain. But he didn't love the thing that had taken up residence in his gut.

The contraction ended, and Meredy and Lyon made light of it, Meredy teasing Lyon with the threat of a sensory link.

Gray almost asked if Meredy could link him to Natsu before his due date, which got him thinking. Really, he didn't want what Lyon and Meredy had with Juvia. What he wanted was for anyone other than him to be the one who carried his child, so that if he had to be a parent, he could be in Lyon's shoes rather than Meredy's. And even then, when he tried to picture what life might be like after that, he didn't see the nervous excitement Meredy and Lyon had for their son. He saw himself begging off of jobs like Gajeel did because he had to look after a baby, and showing up at the guild with massive bags under his eyes from months of no sleep because the baby kept waking up, and every part of his life for years to come revolving around a child he didn't ask for.

He didn't want what Lyon and Meredy had. It just looked better than his own prospects. Now that Mavis was excited for the baby, it would be near impossible to send it away, and at that point he would likely have to own up publically to its parentage, and everyone would forever expect him to accept some parental responsibility. People might even question him leaving the baby with Mavis, and if Juvia saw it as he chance to start a family with him, half the guild would pressure him to accept responsibility for the thing and let Juvia in to help him with it. Unless he wanted to beg Natsu for help—which was like giving him a perfect win for fucking Gray's life over—then he probably would end up giving in and taking Juvia's help. He wasn't suited for being one half of a parental team, much less a single mother.

What a nonsense fantasy. Juvia carrying his child. Even if he'd given in to her, he still would have fallen into that pond, and Natsu still would have tricked him, and he'd be in his exact same situation plus another brat or two that he didn't want. Except he'd also be with Juvia, who would have eagerly announced his pregnancy to the entire guild the moment she found out as if it were something to celebrate. Which would mean that he wouldn't have the chance to back out past that heartbeat milestone.

But he still had that chance, and when he thought of the alternative, that chance felt precious.

"Were you listening?"

"Huh?" Gray shook himself from his thoughts and looked at Lyon, who watched him with concern.

"I asked if you wanted to be added to her sensory link. So you can know what it feels like."

Know in advance, he meant, but Gray saw that Lyon hadn't been linked to her, and he was likely to feel it for himself soon enough.

He must have gone white thinking of that, because Meredy said, "I don't think that's a good idea. Causing him unnecessary pain when he's in bad health would be irresponsible—Aaah!"
She scrunched her eyes, clutching at Lyon's shirt as the pain from a contraction set in.

"Damn it," she gasped as the contraction ended. "How long is it going to take them to numb me?"

"I'm sure they're getting the medicine ready now."

They weren't.

There was a mudslide from the melting snow that delayed a delivery train. They had nothing to give Meredy for the pain.

She said it was fine when the apologetic nurse explained the situation. Women went without fancy modern medicine for centuries and she would too. Maybe for her, it was fine. Even though the contractions came faster and faster, electing increasingly pained moans as the hours ticked by with less time after each for anyone to try and bring levity to the situation.

Gray was pale as snow, his fists clenched so tightly on his pant legs that he'd lost all sensation in his fingers, his eyes focused on the hospital bed wheels rather than Meredy herself, when Lyon nudged him forward.

"It's almost time. You should see the birth."

Gray didn't think he should, but the words to say so wouldn't come out. He was helpless as Lyon guided him to the base of the bed.

He didn't want to look. He didn't, but his eyes betrayed him. Meredy's legs were spread too wide. She looked entirely too stretched out, in fact, and there was an inhuman bulge where no woman should—

"Is that the head?" Lyon asked. "Sweetie, he's almost here!"

That was a human bulge.

That was a human.

Gray's eyes rolled back in his head, and he fell over against Lyon.

Chapter End Notes

In which someone does a lot of damage with good intentions.
Natsu's intentions were to be right there at the train station when Gray returned. The trip was already delayed a day on account of Gray having fainted in the hospital. Meredy wanted to make sure he was rested before sending him home on his own.

But things got in the way. Mavis's guests dallied in town, and it was another day before Zeref could leave. He didn't protest the idea that after a week he still needed a caregiver, because he was coughing too hard when the subject came up and didn't think to use the inhaler until Natsu shoved it into his mouth. At least he was down to only twelve pills, so he was usually drowsy rather than completely out of it. He got Zeref to the guild infirmary the evening of the day after the meeting ended, and Mavis set herself up in the bed next to his to take night watch for bad coughing fits.

Then the next morning, when he meant to be there for Gray, he had to instead run back to the guild to deliver the burn salve, which he forgot to hand over with the rest of Zeref's medicine. On the way out, he was held up by Jellal (and Juvia and Erza, but mostly Jellal) who was simultaneously worried about Gray and Meredy, and wondering if Natsu had any idea what happened. All any of them heard was that Gray fainted after taking Meredy to the hospital.

Erza thought Meredy must have had her baby, and Gray fainted watching the delivery. Typical man. Juvia worried Gray might been terminally ill to show such physical weakness. Jellal thought Gray would faint, but also that Lyon wouldn't possibly call to tell him that Gray fainted and not mention that the baby was born. Even when Erik yelled from across the guild that with the way Jellal and Lyon got along, he absolutely would leave a detail like that out, the debate persisted. There was no way to escape without mentioning that he was on his way to fetch Gray, no way to mention that without Juvia deciding to accompany him, and no way to dissuade her without raising suspicion. Especially around Erza, the guild's biggest supporter of Juvia and Gray's failed romance.

By the time Natsu broke away, it was hours after when Gray's train was meant to arrive, so he went instead to Gray's apartment.

No one answered when he knocked, which could easily mean that Gray decided to go to bed before lunch. Natsu lacked a key, but the latch to the kitchen sink window was broken, so Natsu could lean over the front balcony to push the window up, then climb into it. If he lost his balance trying to reach, it would only be a two-story fall.

He wiggled his way inside, tossed his things onto the table, secured his shock collar, and climbed down from the kitchen counter. Gray's smell was fresh, but he heard no sounds of his presence. Not even the faint, steady breathing of someone who fell asleep and hour before noon.

Skeptical of the idea that Gray might not have immediately secluded himself in his house upon getting home, especially after Lyon reported his behavior had only gotten worse during his visit, Natsu still searched the apartment to confirm with his eyes that Gray was nowhere on the premise. For a moment, he let himself get his hopes up. Maybe Gray decided to go from the station to the guild, and Natsu just missed him. Maybe whatever happened that caused him to become harder to reach while at Lyon's made him realize how much he missed Fairy Tail, and he became more difficult for Lyon because Lamia Scale wasn't Fairy Tail. Maybe Gray finally had his feet back under him, and wouldn't need monitoring, and Natsu could go to sleep at night knowing he hadn't broken a friend and comrade.
But that didn't make sense. Gray had stopped by his apartment, and there was even a still-packed suitcase on the floor in his bedroom. The shades were down, but the desklight was on, and the ink on the note sitting beneath it glistened as if it were still wet.

The ink was wet.

Natsu stumbled over the suitcase rushing to read the note, smudging the bottom corner with his palm and he slammed his hands down to read. Eyes running across the letters, he felt his stomach sink deeper and deeper until it was at his feet.

It was a resignation letter.

Gray was leaving the guild.

Gray was leaving the guild because 'a medical incident' caused him to lose his magic.

Zeref's warning to Natsu echoed in his mind, demanding he not stop Gray if he decided to do something Natsu didn't like. He ignored it. This wasn't a mere objection to throwing the baby's life away. This was Gray throwing his passion away over a setback. If he went through with this, he would never be able to fight again. Not with anything more than his fists, which Natsu knew would never be enough. He wouldn't be able to protect his loved ones. Would lose guild access. Would never be able to make those works of ice and art that he created to pass the time. Everything he made from a simple crystal heart to the details of a weapon to ornate sculptures looked so lovely that Natsu avoided melting it if he could, and Gray couldn't lose that.

Gray was already depressed enough from being pregnant. He must not have been thinking straight, to feel he'd be happier if he gave up his magic.

The ink at the bottom of the page was still wet, which meant Gray couldn't have penned the note all that long ago. Natsu must have just missed him leaving, and he could only be going one place if he planned to have the baby removed.

Grabbing the letter in his fist, Natsu ran out the door. He stopped just long enough to call Jellal, and raced down the street as he waited for a response.

Jellal's voice came on. "Is he alright?"

"No! Quick! How do you talk people out of things?"

"Why? What is he doing?"

"No time! Answer my question!"

Jellal hesitated before answering. "The easiest way is to appeal to their own sense of reasoning. If you were upset about a businessman polluting a lake because it's bad for the fish, you might not be able to convince him to stop with that argument, because if he cared about the fish he probably wouldn't pollute the lake in the first place. But if you point out the cost of cleaning the lake and the odds that he'll be made to foot that bill, then it might not seem worth the cost to him to continue what he's doing. Even though the cost of cleanup might not be a major issue for you, it's more effective to focus your argument on it. The point isn't to make them share your passion for fish. It's to keep the lake from being polluted. You use whatever argument matters to them."

"Okay." What issues had Gray brought up for why he had to have that first abortion? Natsu should have paid more attention. He could focus on the magic aspect, but whatever issue Gray had with being pregnant had eclipsed his desire to maintain his magic. "What next? Stay levelheaded?"
"No. It helps, but being passionate doesn't necessarily hurt, depending on the situation. The important part is to stay civil. Don't interrupt. Even if you don't like what they have to say or find it inane, you let them say it. People suffer through debates because they want to convince you of their beliefs. If you don't give them a chance to make their case, it's not a debate. It's you shouting them down. They have no reason to put up with that, so they stop listening to you. Hear their points, explain why those points are wrong or irrelevant, and then give yours. And if they have a reason to think your points are wrong or don't matter, listen and then tell them why they're wrong there. That way they know they were heard, they know why you don't see things their way, and they have a chance to see your perspective."

"Got it." He could pretend to listen easily enough. Someone should have explained debate to him years ago. Jellal made it sound simple.

"Also, Don't attack them. Usually I would just say that in the sense that you shouldn't throw names and accusation at them, but in your case, don't punch them either. No one ever convinced anyone that they had a logically superior argument by punching their opponent when they heard something they didn't like."

"I'm still gonna call Gray a murderer."

There was a moment of silence, then Jellal swore. Over the sound of Erza scolding him in the background, he said, "This is why you should have told me what he was trying to do first. Okay. Hang on. I need to get somewhere private and—Erza this doesn't involve you. It's between Natsu and I and… Fine. I'll stay with Erik tonight. Are you still there, Natsu? I know you two talked about last time, but how much attention did you pay to how he justified what he did?"

"Um… None?"

Jellal swore again, and Natsu almost missed the sound of a door shutting.

"Are you alone now?"

"Yes. How much time do we have? Should I come?"

Natsu squinted and spotted Gray in the distance. He was walking, never looking back, and still in town. At that pace, it would take him a few hours to reach Porlyusica. "We have time. Will Erza kill you if you leave?"

"She's already going to eviscerate me, but leaving now would make things worse."

"I can handle it."

"It is really important that you not mess up, Natsu."

"I can handle it," Natsu insisted.

They had time, and he needed this instruction, so he slowed down. He would stop Gray before they were at Porlyusica's, but there was no sense in catching up before he was ready.

"Alright. Gray's first and foremost problem is that he doesn't want to be a parent. Not in any capacity. The next issue is that he doesn't think it's right to have a child only to give them a bad life —"

"Because you'd rather not have lived at all than gone through everything with the tower."
"I'm not the one you're trying to convince, Natsu. He doesn't think it's right, and he thinks that if he puts the child up for adoption, it will likely be in an orphanage until it's old enough to live on its own, which is a poor situation to grow up in. The third major problem is simply that being pregnant *scared* him. I don't know if it's the uncertainty of being male and going through it himself, or if it's pregnancy in general, because I know that he doesn't like hearing about Erza's pregnancy, but one way or the other, he's terrified of it."

"You knew that and you sent him to stay with Meredy?"

Jellal didn't respond.

"Well, fine. I woulda had him tell Evergreen and stay with her or something, but we can't have done too much damage this way."

"Unless seeing Meredy experience some pregnancy complication was what pushed him to try and do this," Jellal said. "I did *threaten* to bring Lucy in on the secret so he could stay in town, but he didn't indicate wanting that over staying with Lyon…"

"Well, maybe it should have been an offer instead of a threat," Natsu said.

"…Maybe."

Gray paused and looked back, and Natsu had to duck behind a pack of women arguing over where to go for lunch. Without realizing it, Natsu had closed two blocks of distance between them, and needed to let that space grow so Gray wouldn't be likely to hear his voice again. He didn't dare speak again until then.

So Jellal could talk uninterrupted. "The thing that you most need to keep in mind is that Gray didn't *want* an abortion. He thought he *needed* it. He hated having one, and he felt conflicted afterward. He didn't like to see the twins because he would feel guilty for not being able to adjust to the idea of fatherhood, or because he would wonder what that child might have turned out like. This is deeply emotionally disturbing for him, and you need to not paint him as a heartless monster for it."

Natsu gave a grunt to let Jellal know he could still hear.

"I mean it, Natsu."

"I heard you."

He really did get it. Sort of. Mostly. That's how it was for him when Zeref first settle in at the lab. He was family that gave up a lot trying to save his little brother—trying to save Natsu—and he wanted to make amends with those he cared about for the trouble he caused. Natsu could hate that Zeref endangered his friends, but he could recognize that Zeref's curse had badly messed with his head, and that he did owe Zeref his life, and so he'd felt obligated to give his brother a chance, even if everyone else agreed he shouldn't be trusted. Makarov nearly had Natsu excommunicated, and even after Natsu laid out his case and Mavis backed him, it still took some time before everyone calmed down.

It wasn't the same as what Gray wanted to do, but it was… kind of? Natsu had mixed feelings, and it was a long time before Zeref’s company was something he didn't mind and sometimes wanted rather than a burden he felt obligated to endure. And he certainly never appreciated being painted with the same stroke as Zeref cultists for supporting family.

Gray was almost to the edge of town and far enough ahead again for it to be safe to speak. Natsu tried to move carefully match his target's face as he resumed pursuit.
"So what do I do?"

"You find an argument that addresses those major issues in a way that appeals to his own sense of reason, and you do it without making him feel he's being attacked. 'You're killing a child' isn't going to cut it, because even if he isn't comfortable with what he's doing, if saying that was all it took to make him see the world the same way you do, he wouldn't hate you for saying it."

-Natsu's mind raced as he walked, stalking Gray as far as he safely could before Porlyusica would hear them to give himself as much time as possible to think of what to say to stop him. He had to stop him with words this time. Open engagement. Nothing underhanded. Underhanded hurt Gray too badly the last time, and Natsu had only barely begun to earn Gray's tolerance back. Neither of them could afford underhanded.

When Gray was getting dangerously close and Natsu still didn't have the perfect speech planned out in his head, he gave up on perfection and ran forward to grab Gray's arm.

"Hey!"

"What are you doing?" Natsu demanded.

"I'm going for a checkup. I fainted the other day, didn't you hear?"

"Liar." Natsu held up the note, crumbled and sweat stained. "You were going to do something rash without talking to anyone about it first. You even left a note so you could tell us after like…" He caught himself before he called Gray a coward. No attacking. "Like you don't trust."

"Of course not. If I did, you would have locked me in my apartment until it was too late to even give up my magic for this."

"The only one who ever locks you in your apartment is you," Natsu said.

"Well, I wouldn't have to do that if it weren't for you."

"You don't have to… Nevermind. You're making a mistake."

"The mistake," Gray said, "was letting things get this far."

"No. You've gone along with this since you found out because it's that or lose your magic. And you don't want that, Gray. You don't. This is less than a year. Giving you magic up is for life."

The phrasing felt odd on Natsu's tongue. Gray giving a few month's for the baby's life meant keeping his magic, while giving his magic up would be done to take the baby's life as well as, in a metaphorical sense, end his own.

But Gray didn't see it that way.

"You don't give a damn about my life, Natsu. If you did, you wouldn't have fucked it up."

Argue the points that matter to the person you need to convince, Jellal said. Be civil. Don't cut them off. Don't attack them. Remember that Gray is doing this because he feels like he has to, not because he wants to.

To hell with what Jellal said.
"You know what? You're not completely wrong. I want that kid to live. And I care more about its right to life than you're right to be comfortable for a few months. Especially since you're going out of your way to make this harder on yourself. Yeah. I should have told you that you were pregnant instead of hiding it like I did, but that's no reason to act like it's your issue alone and you get to sneak off and quietly kill the problem. You're surrounded by people who are here to help, Mavis was more than happy to make arrangements so you could work safely and then return to taking normal jobs after, and people have told you that they would be happy to raise the kid if you don't think you're ready to be a parent. But you feel like someone who had even less control over all of this than you shouldn't get to live at all because a few weird, uncomfortable months is too much for you."

Maybe it was a bit of a personal attack, and maybe it was rambling, but at least Natsu managed to keep himself by yelling by the time he finished. He could feel the collar tingle, and didn't doubt that it would shock him if he pushed any further. Not that he wanted to push further. There were much harsher words he held back, because he had no right to say them to Gray. That held true regardless of Jellal telling him not to attack.

If Gray ever received similar instruction from Jellal, he ignored them entirely. For the first few seconds after Natsu finished his tirade, he could only gape. Then, Gray's hand closed into a fist and he decked Natsu.

Natsu's instinct was to pick himself up and hit back, but he managed to stop himself from going quite that far with the whole 'attacking the person you need to convince' thing. A tooth felt loose in his mouth, but he pressed it into place with his tongue as he sat himself up, and didn't stand.

"What the fuck gives you the right to talk to me like that?" Gray demanded.

"Someone has to," Natsu said. "Everyone's willing to help you with this, and no one expects you to take care of a kid you didn't ask for. The only reason you and Lucy or Evergreen or Mavis don't have adoption papers drawn up already is because you think you're spiting me by not talking to anyone about it. You would rather give up your magic than have this kid and put it in an orphanage, and you'd rather put it in an orphanage than entrust it to someone who you know would raise it well because they're associated with me."

"That's not... I..."

"Am I wrong?"

It was like a dam broke. Gray fell to his knees, hands going up to hug his shoulders tight and eyes glassing over with tears.

"Gray?"

Gray said nothing, staring at the mud at Natsu's feet.

Seconds ticked by, then minutes. Natsu rolled off his rear and onto his knees, crawling on all fours to Gray. He held a hand out, hesitating a second before placing it on Gray's shoulder. The way Gray leaned into it was slight, almost imperceptible, but Natsu felt the shift in pressure.

It wasn't that Gray wanted an abortion. He thought he needed one. This wasn't how Zeref looked at it, callously dismissing the baby based on how much it's brain still had to develop. The last one was an emotional stress, and everything compelling him to go and have a second abortion had to be even more overwhelming for him to still consider it.

"What happened at Lyon's?"
It took long enough for Gray to speak that Natsu was worried he still might not answer. When it came, his voice was faint, the words choked out as if his throat had tried to close around them. "Meredy had her baby."

"And you were there for the next day?" Natsu remembered how little sleep the twins gave Gajeel and Levy when they were newborns, and wondered what Meredy was thinking, saying Gray should stay with *them* to rest. "You know you don't have to worry about that right. Plenty of other people are willing to handle it."

"So you can deal with the birth for me?" Gray asked. "Because that was the worst part."

"You were there for that?"

"Lyon thought… Lyon thought it would be good for me to see."

A million curt quips came to mind for that. So many that Natsu couldn't pick the best one before the time for curt quips was past, and they both lapsed into silence. Since he missed the immediate chance to offer any words, Natsu decided to instead pull Gray into a hug.

Gray tensed in Natsu's arms, then put one hand awkwardly around Natsu's back. Then he started to cry.

"I'm scared," he admitted. It was like the world shifted beneath them. The simple, hard fact that underlay every petty grievance Gray had with his own condition, or that he fretted over with Erza and Meredy, condensed into that basic truth.

Lyon encouraging Gray hadn't been the dumbest move ever, for as badly as it ended up rattling him. As someone who was pregnant and had long shied away from information on pregnancy, there was some sense in preparing Gray for what was to come. On the other hand, describing it to him could have sufficed without traumatizing him. He should have warned Lyon that Gray was already considering getting rid of the kid, and needed to be kept away from anything that might alarm him. He would have, but he hadn't even known that Gray ended up with Lyon instead of Jellal until the day before. He'd been busy enough with Zeref, and he trusted Jellal, and Erza wasn't so pregnant that Natsu thought it would truly terrify Gray, so he'd felt comfortable enough with the situation to not need to constantly check in.

Big mistake, it turned out. But if Gray was talking to him about what happened, then maybe that tirade a few minutes ago hadn't been too big a mistake for Natsu to still undo the damage of both.

"It's only a few hours. A day at most. We'll make sure you have medicine, so it won't hurt."

Between sobs, Gray said, "That's what Meredy th-thought, but the… the h-hospital didn't have any f- for her."

"Why not?"

"The train was out. N-no supplied delivered."

Natsu wracked his brain for a way to resolve that. "She was at a hospital. Lots of patients probably needed that medicine, and that's how they ran out. Porlyusica only treats the guild, so she isn't likely to use up all her potions. And if something stops Zeref from getting his empire to deliver anything he asks for, he can still tell Fiore he wants it, and everyone will make sure he gets it no matter what. So we have people who can make sure you absolutely have the medicine you need."

"She looked *deformed.*"
"Yeah, but you go back to normal once it's over," Natsu said. "Levy looks as tiny as she always did, doesn't she?"

Because Gray's face was buried in Natsu's chest, he didn't see the nod so much as feel it.

"It got in the way of e-e-everything she tried to… to do. R-right up until the end…"

"That's what I'm supposed to be here for. To help you with anything the pregnancy makes hard. You didn't forget that, did you?"

"…yes."

Gray could still do most things for himself. The problem was that he needed someone to push him to do those things, and Natsu and Jellal had become increasingly less covert about the fact that they were largely showing up like they were to make sure he didn't regress back into the non-functional state he entered immediately after learning about the baby. Natsu could forgive him for forgetting that it wasn't the original purpose of all those house visits.

"Are you going to be okay?"

"I don't know."

"You're strong, Gray. I think you'll be able to handle it. Just think of all the other times things were frightening. You've always pulled through, right?"

"It's n-not the same! Those… Those times… S-someone… There's always s-someone I c-c-care about who… who's in danger. J-just for a kid I d-don't… don't even want…" He hiccupped. "It's not the s-same. Going through that for a kid I d-don't want."

It was to bring a life into the world. His own child, who Natsu couldn't fathom not already loving, especially when you were the one who carried it. Even if you didn't already love it, Natsu couldn't wrap his mind around the idea that you might still not even let it live. But that was how Natsu saw things, and he needed Gray to reconcile from a way in which Gray saw things.

"Then don't do it for the baby. Do it for everyone else, who needs you to keep the baby so you can keep your magic. Think of all the times we wouldn't have made it without you. I would have been eaten by a stupid owl if it weren't for you, and then neither of us would be able to save Erza, and Jellal would still be crazy. Don't give up, so if something else attacks us a year from now, you'll be there for everyone you do care about."

He waited for Gray to tell him why that didn't work, and was met with silence.

"And for yourself, too. You don't want to give up your magic, Gray. You love it. Your life revolves around it. You can't give it up over this. Less than six months, Gray. You just have to hold out that much longer, and we're all here to help you through it."

Gray lifted his head to look at Natsu. His cheeks were puffy, but his eyes were drying up. He hiccupped, then looked to the ground beyond Natsu. Not maintaining eye contact, but not completely hiding his face either.

"This doesn't have to happen, so do you really want this Gray?"

"I…” Gray brought a hand up to rub his eye. "I want to go home."
Gray lumbered into the bathroom when they reached the apartment, and Natsu heard the shower kick on.

With things finally winding down, he took the time to check over the various items he brought over earlier, when he found the note. There were basic ingredients for hot chocolate, which Gray had yet to tire of despite it no longer being in season. There was fudge too. It was a mess compared to the store-bought slab. Natsu hadn't encountered another store that sold fudge while out on a job, so he'd attempted making his own and mixing in peanut butter for variety, and the consistency was all wrong. He needed to find a better recipe that explained how to get the peanut butter to have the same fudge texture, or maybe he needed to make peanut butter fudge separately, and then mix it with the regular chocolate.

Whatever the problem, it was subpar, but he'd tried his best. Since Gray was trying too, Natsu decided to leave him the fudge slice without nagging him into anything more that he didn't want. Not until he had a few days to cool down, at least. He and Happy could work through the rest of the failed batch, and have something higher quality for Gray next time.

It felt a little weird to think like that. Natsu usually ate vegetables raw because boiling them was a pain, and breathed on his meat to cook it before chowing down. He had to master more traditionally prepared recipes quickly with his largely unused home kitchen when he realized that Gray was going to need someone else to prepare proper meals for him, and that raw vegetables and meat Natsu breathed on probably wouldn't be acceptable offerings. Now he was teaching himself to make sweets on top of that. Lucy used to try the same thing on him, and it felt like he'd taken on her role with Gray.

He shook that thought from his head. Lucy had to be mistaken, thinking there was anything between him and Gray. Sure, Gray kissed him, but that was before all of this happened. There was no way Gray still considered him with any romantic inclination now. And Natsu had to constantly refrain from begging Gray to let him have the baby when it was born, while Gray was deadset on giving it up and not having kids for another ten years, if ever. It wouldn't work. It wouldn't work, and he didn't deserve Gray anyway.

Lucy was a bridge that burned. Once she learned Gray was pregnant, she'd only be all the more convinced that Natsu only wanted someone who could have a baby, too. It would be better if she were to get together with Gray. He couldn't make it work with either of them.

Which was a pity, because he liked the idea of both of them.

Natsu pushed all such thoughts aside when Gray stepped out. He had left his ring on the bathroom counter, and Natsu could see he was transitioning out of the phase where you could be mistaken for putting on weight and moving towards clearly looking pregnant. His eyes drifted up and saw that the shower hadn't erased all evidence of Gray's tears, but he didn't look quite as pale as he had before.

"I…" Gray ran a hand through his hair, trying to process thoughts efficiently when his mind was still reordering itself after his breakdown. "I should unpack."

"Alright. I'll throw a lunch together while you do that."

There were eggs and mayo in the fridge, and Natsu brought unions and celery. He could make a salad with that.

Gray hovered in the kitchen, watching Natsu fill a pan with water and plop eggs in before setting it to boil. Sometimes he shifted closer, but then he would step back again.
"Is there something else you need?" Natsu asked.

"No… I just… Thanks."

"For stopping you?"

"No. Not that. But… Thanks."

Chapter End Notes

And here we reach the point where I can freaking finally start shipping them!

I just… I couldn't make Gray do it when he was still too sore about Natsu. I needed some event for Natsu to show that he was learning from his mistakes and be more open and conscientious of how Gray felt so Gray could be more willing to trust him again. And Natsu jumping on Gray the moment he agreed to the collar deal would be weird, y'know? Like the whole thing was an elaborate plan to force Gray to start a family with him, and he's not subtle about it. Anyway, there's more specifically romantic drama from here on out. Still pregnancy stuff. But more romance.
Gray ate after he unpacked, then stayed in bed until dinner, and went to bed again after. Natsu didn't try to get him up and, drained as Gray felt, wouldn't have succeeded if he tried.

The next day was another story.

"You got to sleep all afternoon because a baby kept you up the day before, but you're not gonna feel good if you don't get any sun or air, and you need to move around. It's warmer today. Put that ring on and leave your shirt off and we can go for a walk in the woods before the town gets too busy, and then you can put off dealing with everyone else."

"I thought you wanted me to deal with everyone."

"I want you to get out more."

And so in the next two weeks their normal routine resumed, more or less. It rained regularly, but on nicer days Natsu dragged Gray outside for something to do that usually didn't involve going to the guild, and when he did force Gray to the guild, he obligingly arranged with Jellal for times when Erza wasn't there. Sooner or later, Gray needed to go on his own so people would stop making teasing remarks about how he only ever came with Natsu, but it seemed too tiresome to be worth the trouble. Even Juvia's crying about a love rival wasn't enough to motivate Gray to act more independently, despite his suspicion that it contributed to the rain.

He still hated what Natsu had done to him. He felt his lip curl in disgust each time he saw his true reflection in the mirror, and his stomach now weighed enough that he felt an ache in his back if he sat or stood too long in any one position. But there had been a change. A change that Gray mostly wanted to say was all Natsu, but that had resonated with him.

Natsu never grabbed him. Never held him. Never locked him in. Never fed him some story to try and make him think it was too late for an abortion after all. When he hit Natsu, Natsu didn't even hit him back. When Natsu held him, it hadn't been the vice grip of someone trying to keep you from escaping, but the gentle grasp of someone who wanted to console.

Natsu talked to him. Natsu talked to him and heard his concerns, and even if he hadn't swallowed his disapproval like Jellal, he'd heard Gray out and assured him that it was okay to stay the course. Gray wasn't confident in that, but Natsu wasn't wrong to say that giving up his magic was something he would regret, even if getting rid of the fetus was otherwise a good idea. Only two months earlier, Natsu had snuck medicine into Gray's drinks to keep the pregnancy from coming to light because he was worried he couldn't stop Gray otherwise, but this time, he'd shown no force. By Natsu standards, he'd been stunningly gentle, and if he didn't say all the right things, he said enough things right that Gray could think about what he saw with Meredy and not feel the urge to hurl.

Natsu heard him out, and coaxed him out of something that neither of them wanted him to have to go through with. That meant a hundred times more than subjecting himself to a shock collar.

So it took Gray by surprise when Zeref showed up one morning before any sane person would be up and about and handed him a bracelet that changed colors if its wearer lied. For a moment, he couldn't even process why he needed it.
"I suppose you could have Natsu continue to wear the collar if you want, but it reacts based on his own sense of morality, while the bracelet works objectively. If Natsu thinks he's in the right going behind your back, the collar might not shock him, but if you ask him if he's up to anything, the bracelet will give him away."

Gray took it, turned it over in his hand, and, after a moment's hesitation, clamped it onto his own wrist.

"This comes off, right?"

"Of course." Zeref grinned at Gray, eyes alight with amusement. "It's meant as a good faith gesture, not criminal interrogation. You must have known that, if you put it on before asking."

Gray missed Zeref being too out of it from pain medicine to think straight.

Holding his hand out, Gray said, "I don't want to be pregnant."

The bracelet glowed green, then faded back to silver.

"I did want that abortion."

Red. Gray scowled.

"I don't want an abortion."

Red again.

"What the heck?"

"They were both lies. That happens, when you're in a situation where no option is a desirable one," Zeref said. The amusement fled and his eyes dimmed, and it struck Gray that Zeref had spent centuries in such a situation. "Mavis has hardly left me alone, and I suppose Natsu didn't want to talk about it around her, so I haven't heard anything about… that. I take it you decided against one."

"Yeah." For the sake of his magic. So he could still be there for everyone. So he could get his life back on track once the baby was born, rather than derail it because he was afraid the kid might derail it in a different way. "I guess I did."

Jellal had beamed when Gray said as much, but Zeref only nodded in confirmation that he heard. "So the bracelet is to your liking?"

Gray set his hand down on the counter, no longer deeply interested in testing it. "Yeah. It checks out."

Zeref was focused on Gray's face, so he smiled and nodded again, but out of the corner of his eye, Gray saw the bracelet glow red.

-o-

It took Gray a while to decide what to do with the collar. His initial thought was to hurl it out the window, but he'd hate for someone to find it, see what great shape it was in, and put it on their dog. The shock it gave Natsu had looked tremendous, and the average dog didn't have the durability to withstand that.

Returning it to Zeref meant risking him thoughtlessly passing it off to someone who might use it for more sadistic means. Zeref designed it so the wearer could easily take it off, but it couldn't be hard to
modify that, and Zeref wasn't known for thinking through all the possible ramifications of his actions. It was a small preventative measure, because if Zeref was asked to make another collar, he could do it in a day. But that was a day that Mavis or Natsu had to catch wind of what he was up to and question the wisdom of it, and if he didn't have one on hand, he might not think to offer it to someone casually.

In the end, he tossed it in the trash, and then covered it with a wad of paper towel. There was a chance Juvia might find it while looking for treasures to put on her alter, but it had been a while since Gray or anyone else in the apartment building saw evidence of a dumpster diver. The trash seemed safe.

Natsu was out on a job that day. He'd gone off with Lucy specifically because Jellal was also out of town with work, and Gray had insisted on a day of freedom. The stipulation was that he had to show up at the guild for dinner, but that gave Gray most of the day to enjoy himself. The guild thing was non-optional, because the guildmaster would be sure to stop and talk to her future niece or nephew's mother should he show up, and would be able to tell her future brother-in-law if Gray kept his word or not. But Erza followed Jellal on work—even if it was too risky in her condition and she had to stay in the hotel once there, so there weren't too many problems with going to the guild. Just a possible Juvia encounter.

Sooner or later, Gray needed to face Erza again. But he was still shaken from the encounter with Meredy, and he wanted to keep his magic, so he was happy to avoid anything that might make him think about all the little parts of being pregnant that he would have to endure in order to remain a mage.

Just to show Natsu that he was a functional adult who could look after himself without supervision, he dug out a jar of broth that Natsu left in his fridge, chopped up vegetables, and dumped in rice and egg to make himself a slap-dash soup that probably met whatever nutrition needs Gray had. The important part was that it only took about five minutes and didn't require a recipe book.

The first half of his afternoon was spent copying artwork his Archive Lacrima showed him. Just paper and pencil still. Asking Reedus to teach him how to use paints could wait until it was too late for him to think he needed a new means of earning a living. After the Archive Lacrima chimed and a message from Zeref popped up asking, again, if he was satisfied with the bracelet, Gray sent a message back assuring him it was fine. Then, so he could make sure it was, he put the bracelet on and wasted a half an hour practicing with it to see if it could pick out half-lies and omissions, and how it reacted to situations in which you were ill informed. To his delight, the bracelet sizzled yellow when he tried to tell the truth in a misleading way, and yet…

"I'm glad to have this bracelet."

It turned red.

-o-

The woman who lived in the apartment bellow Gray's was an old widow. He often saw her while taking out the trash, and after a particularly good job, he might buy a gift from the bakery that he walked past going between his house and the guild, just because she was the most sociable of his neighbors, and it was nice to have a neighbor who you were on good terms with. She had checked in on him twice since news spread through town that Gray Fullbuster was no longer on active duty thanks to an injury, but seeing Natsu on her second visit, had been comfortable in the knowledge that Gray had a friend looking after him.

Inviting her up for dinner would be a nice gesture, and she could verify for Natsu that he wasn't
alone at dinner, and making a dinner that would convince her he was on top of things would ultimately be less effort than going to the guild. But even if it would be some proof that he could feed himself, it probably wouldn't suffice. He had to go or the next time he asked for a day off, Natsu would make sure Jellal still came by at some point during the day.

Not that Jellal’s company wasn’t enjoyable, but there was a difference between Jellal as a friend and Jellal as a deeply concerned friend who gave Gray no slack for fear that he would use it to hang himself.

So in the interest of being given more slack, Gray stuck to his word and went to the guild.

He expected Juvia to latch on to him the second he set foot in the room, but was wrong. He was still a block from the guild when he heard her voice.

"Gray! You've finally come without that home-wrecker."

Gray made a non-committal noise, which he'd found was the easiest way to respond to comments about romantic rivals that only she took seriously.

To be fair, Lucy took the idea of Natsu and Gray seriously. Gray seriously hoped that Natsu took the opportunity to talk some sense into her when they were off together on jobs, because she interpreted every denial Gray gave her as a cover-up. But Lucy was no ally of Juvia’s in the fight to make Gray reconsider calling off the engagement. She wouldn't say anything that might encourage Juvia to drive away anyone else Gray took an interest in.

"If Natsu didn't drag you here, then you must have come because you miss Juvia."

"I just ran out of ingredients, and it was less effort to come here than shop and make dinner."

So everyone caught on to the fact that he showed up only because Natsu made him? That was unfortunate. Hopefully his showing up as he had would help persuade people that he didn't need Natsu to make him get up and do things.

"Doesn't Gray still have to buy groceries for tomorrow?"

"Well… I also needed to talk to Mavis about work."

To his annoyance, his bracelet glowed green. With Natsu's financial support and what he had saved, Gray had managed to avoid financial disaster for two months, but he would have nothing for rent at the end of April if he didn't get his act together. He knew that, and he didn't need a stupid bracelet rubbing it in his face.

Too bad he couldn't be paid to hang out in Zeref’s lab and make sure he didn't do anything too crazy. Natsu would get everyone to put their foot down on that plan after that explosion in the basement.

"If Gray wants to take a job with Juvia—"

"I'm off active duty."

"If Gray wants Juvia's help with work at home—"

"I'm already helping Kinana and Mira. What would I need your…"

Gray's voice hitched in his throat at the mention of those two. Mira and Laxus argued regularly about whether or not she ought to stay home more if they had kids. He didn't know how Bisca managed
when Asuka was little, but Levy only took jobs on occasion, and only when someone was willing to babysit overnight.

But that wouldn't be him. That wouldn't be him because someone else would take the baby. He still vastly preferred the idea of it going to someone in another country, but for the sake of ensuring that it was adopted, maybe he would discuss plans with Mavis when he mentioned work.

"Gray?"

"Nothing." Gray strode past Juvia and towards the guild.

His arrival was met with laughs and jokes, because he hadn't been seen for a few days, and because he showed up with Juvia in tow rather than Natsu. Much to his annoyance, the line between who teased him about cheating on Natsu with Juvia and who asked if his coming alone meant he felt better seemed to be drawn by whether or not people pushed him to hook back up with Juvia. Those teasing being the ones who normally gave him grief for not surrendering himself to her.

His grip on the doorknob tightened as he scanned the crowd for an ally. Cana was in the corner drunk, and was in no shape to defend him from the taunts of anyone who didn't understand that he really wasn't ever going to marry Juvia. Jellal and Natsu and Lucy were all gone. Mira didn't really care about anything to do with relationships that wasn't happy gossip, so if there was no chance to hint at him and Natsu, then she would use Juvia. Elfman thought that a real man wouldn't keep a lady like Juvia waiting, and Lisanna was buddy-buddy with Juvia, so the whole Strauss family was a bust. Erik… Erik was free, but he was already flipping Gray off, so it was safe to say he wasn't interested in helping deflect Juvia's advances.

But behind Erik was Macbeth, likely sent over to help negotiate some guild pact on the grounds that he was friends with more Fairy Tail members than anyone else in Twilight Ogre. (A whopping two friends, which was none too shabby given the guilds' relationship.) Macbeth might not have cared one way of the other about the status of Juvia and Gray's relationship, but he would care if Juvia squealed too much, and Gray would take what he could get.

"This table is empty," Juvia pointed out as Gray passed the table by. "If Gray wants to have a private dinner with Juvia—"

"Then I would have invited you over. I'm here at the guild, so I want to spend time with the guildmates I don't get to see as much of," Gray declared before dropping onto a bench beside Erik.

Making no effort to mas his annoyance, Erik said, "Yeah. I haven't seen you since your episode."

The threat was clear. Go away or I might just tell everyone what's really happening with you.

"I never thanked you for helping Jellal and I with that," Gray said with a smile.

Gray thought his own implications there for good measure: Tell anyone, and Jellal will be up your ass about it.

Gray's threat won out. The former Oracion Six members rarely displayed any respect for the man who welcomed them into Crime Sorciere, but when push came to shove, his word was the law to them. And his enforcement of the law was just but terrifying. Jellal was on board with letting Gray keep his pregnancy secret for as long as he possibly could. Erik wouldn't risk getting on Jellal's bad side just to antagonize Gray.

Macbeth, on the other hand, had no knowledge of any secrets, nor reason to care about what exactly the two were threatening each other over.
"Is he going to put a shirt on?"

"Gray looks better without a shirt," Juvia insisted, throwing her arms around Gray's chest.

"Gray doesn't look how he should without a shirt," Erik said, eyeing Gray suspiciously.

Sighing, Gray ran his finger over the ring Mavis helped make for him, directing thoughts at Erik that centered around how the illusion was woven, how his stomach was too large to hide just with clothes, and how it could still be felt even if it couldn't be seen, so any shirt or jacket he wore would betray the bump.

Erik's eyes flickered down to Gray's stomach, then to Juvia, and a smirk spread across his face as Gray caught on to what had no doubt run through Erik's head. It was only a matter of time before she felt his stomach during one of her surprise hugs.

"So what is wrong with you?" Erik asked. "I take it that episode where Jellal of all people had to cheer you up was brought about from learning about your injury."

He knew. He knew, dammit, and he was putting Gray on the spot trying to come up with an excuse. Gray couldn't even remember anymore what he told everyone last time his prolonged absence from work was brought up.

But it turned out that invoking Jellal's name had earned him an ally. "No need to look so affronted. I only ask because I can hear you trying not to show pain when the rain woman squeezes you."

"You should stop that, by the way."

She squeaked and pulled her hands back, and Gray wanted to kiss Erik for what he'd done. Juvia constantly feeling him up was bad enough when he wasn't hiding a pregnancy, but that little lie would greatly cut his chances of being found for some time to come.

"J-Juvia will have to shout her love, in order to assure that Gray can still feel it."

"You will keep your voice down," Macbeth ordered.

It wasn't the same Juvia-buffer Cana and Natsu offered, but it worked. Erik didn't interject again after getting Juvia to keep her hands to herself, but that he managed to do that much was a miracle such that Gray almost treated Erik to dinner. The only thing stopping him was Erik catching thoughts of Gray's finances and mouthing that repaying him could wait. So he would treat Erik to dinner the next time he had money.

Juvia still made every attempt she could to convey her love through words, be it talking to Gray about wedding plans, how many babies she wanted and how they would all be so much cuter than Uriel and they'd have three before Meredy could have her second because their love was stronger than Lyons, and how it pained her to see Natsu monopolize Gray's time. But Juvia could never get too in depth into any subject or let her voice betray too much excitement about whatever fantasy she got herself caught up in, or Macbeth would snap at her. He already chose an out of the corner table to avoid the guild's ruckus, and he wouldn't stand for her bringing the noise to him. He didn't even stand for Mira hovering in the hopes of catching gossip when she brought dinner.

The blunt shoot-downs were ruder than what Gray was used to. Usually Natsu and Lucy and Cana found ways to gently redirect Juvia when she made Gray uncomfortable, or inserted themselves between him and her in a way that seemed innocent rather than deliberately obtrusive. But Gray didn't have to sit through thirty minutes of talk about baby plans, and if he had to, then he'd want to speak every bit as harshly as Macbeth by the time Juvia was done. And Macbeth could get away
with it. Juvia huffed at his words and people at nearby tables rolled their eyes at his typical anti-social nature, but if Gray were the one to snap they would be all over him for being so rude when she was only trying to show affection.

He ate his dinner with only a mild sense of guilt, and went to speak privately with Mavis in her office in better mood than he’d expected.

-o-

"Is that the truth telling bracelet?"

"Oh." Gray had forgotten he had it on. Lucky for him, no one else had asked. It had turned red so many times while playing along with Juvia that she would have flooded Magnolia in her tears if she learned its function. "Yes. Zeref brought it over this morning."

She sighed and shook her head. "He wouldn't stop begging me to let him work on it, but I half expected he would mess up in some way that would make it explode in his hands, and I've fallen behind on sorting through complaints from the Council. I couldn't afford to let him hurt himself again so quickly, and Porlyusica… She'd bite my head off!"

Gray nodded, taking note of both Council papers and Zeref as things that Mavis might need help with. He knew that Jellal helped with the former when it became too daunting for Mavis alone, so it didn't have to be the guildmaster who addressed the complaints, so long as she was aware of them. And he'd found in the past few months that Zeref's company wasn't as daunting as he once thought, so he wouldn't mind being the one to sit over him and make sure he took his medicine. He hadn't even considered making such an offer at the time of the explosion. If he hung out in the infirmary with Zeref, then everyone who knew about his own condition would be assured that he was at the guild and people would make sure he met his basic needs, and most everyone who he didn't want to deal with in large doses would stay away because coming close meant being in the black mage's proximity.

But… that was a missed opportunity that he hoped he wouldn't have the chance to snatch up in the future. Perfect a task as it was, Gray preferred that Zeref not seriously injure himself again. He would injure himself again, of course, but Gray still didn't wish it on him. For the first time, Gray worried about Zeref's immense capacity for self-harm for reasons beyond that it could jeopardize Natsu as well, as the two's lives were still tethered.

"If he really wanted to do good, he would make those for courts to use," Mavis said. "If a simple statement under a truth detecting spell could prove a man's guilt or innocence, Jellal might never have been imprisoned. I'm surprised he made it for you instead."

"Well, Natsu and I had a disagreement and—"

"I know what happened. The potions he snuck you. Why do you look surprised? I spent the last two weeks tending to Zeref while he was confused from his medicine and begged me continuously to let him work on that bracelet. Surely you didn't think he would conceal the reason for it under those conditions."

When she put it that way, it did seem like he'd set unrealistic expectation of Zeref. It was a blessing that so few people willingly placed themselves in his presence, even if it meant finding care for him was a hassle.

"So?" Gray asked, waiting for her to judge him for what he'd wanted.
"Well, that was bad of him, wasn't it? But there's no changing it now. I was surprised to hear you didn't want to raise that girl, but considering how you came to be in this situation, I can understand the dilemma. You aren't giving her away to some foreign country, are you?"

"No," Gray admitted. "I don't know for sure it would work out alright."

"Then—"

"I thought you might take… her? Who said it's a girl?"

"Porlyusica. I asked how you were doing when I went for more medicine for Zeref's inhaler. I have to visit him daily to make sure he still uses it through the end of next month. She didn't tell you?"

She'd taken a urine sample after Natsu and Zeref left using that same bubbly brew from when he was diagnosed, saying that the hormone patterns it detected would tell her. But Gray hadn't wanted to stay to hear the results, and skipped his last check-up with her out of dread.

"She probably meant to tell me."

It was a girl. The was a discomforting sense of attachment that came with that. The baby was no long a thing, no longer an it that took up residence inside him. He was carrying a girl.

"She probably did. As for this girl, I could take her, but… Are you sure I'm the best choice? She's more Natsu's than mine, and he's much better with children than I am. Any child I raise would also have Zeref for a father, and I think he could manage that in time, but I wouldn't say he's quite there yet. He's at least a little better now, but his track record…"

"Hm." Gray tried not to sound put off, and failed badly. "That's nice."

Mavis gave him a sympathetic smile and pushed herself onto her desk, bare feet swinging back and forth as she spoke. "I can see how you might not want Natsu to have the child, but he didn't act out of malice towards you. Don't you think he would keep her safe?"

Gray thought that if the girl grew up to be like Cana and got herself pregnant when she was fourteen, there was a real risk that Natsu force her to deal with it. Unless her uncle caught wind and bullied Natsu into letting her do what she wanted, which Zeref really might do. So it wasn't a guaranteed disaster, but there was still the concern that Zeref might not learn in time. He hadn't with Gray, after all.

"I don't think I want him to have her."

"Well, if you're certain of that, then I would love to take her, but do give it some thought."

Gray nodded. "Fine. Now about work…"

Mavis's face lit up. "Oh! You're going to do that, now?"

"H-hey. Don't make me out to be some kind of lay about."

"Then what have you been doing the last few months?"

The question was asked in innocence, but it felt like an icicle through the heart. Gray regretted not taking the bracelet off when Mavis first called attention to it, because the honest answer was that he spent that time lying about this apartment and letting others tackle as many problems for him as they could.
"I've been preoccupied," Gray said, which made the bracelet glow yellow. He'd been preoccupied with his misery and let it prevent him from doing anything.

Mavis smirked at the yellow glow, knowing full well that Gray had made little progress with anything in his life since going off active duty. "Well I can imagine you're busy. I haven't had time to do a thorough cleaning myself, so I've sorted all the books in need of a more serious sorting into those I need regularly and those that we only pull from the archives on rare occasion, so you can come by tomorrow and put them all back in their proper place. The shelves need a good dusting too. After that, since I'm told you're avoiding coming here regularly to cut down on the chances that people will learn about your condition, how would you like to be the one to shove an inhaler in Zeref's mouth on days when I'm busy? It takes hours that I could spend working to walk up there just to force him to remember his health, and Natsu seems preoccupied with you, and someone needs to make sure Zeref takes his medicine. It will only be on days when I have no time, of course. I think he might cry if I treated him entirely like a chore to push off onto others."

Thinking back to the way Zeref complained about Mavis making him hide from all of her guildmaster associates, Gray was apt to agree with that. The guild and the town at large approached the Zeref situation with the idea that they tolerated his presence because no one could really tell him no, but most of the town treated Jellal the same way, and everyone in the guild who knew he was a good person saw how it brought him down.

"Alright. Call me when you can't make it. I'll... I'll try to be here at least two or three times a week to help out with things."

"And more once you tell everyone what's going on?"

"Less." Did Mavis really think he would want to be around the guild more while everyone constantly teased him about being pregnant?

"More," Mavis said. "Everyone will say what they will when they find out, whether you're still pregnant when they have the chance to say it or not. I'll be lenient with you on work to give you time to figure out how to tell everyone on your own terms, but once you've told them, I expect you to work regularly again. Understood?"

Ultimately, Gray depended on Mavis's good will to have an income despite already shirking work as much as he had. Were he normally a salaried worker, any other boss would have fired him after the first week of him not showing up.

"Understood."

Chapter End Notes

It's not that I forgot to update. It's that I put it off over and over until it was time for the next update. Guess I'll do two updates again this week to make up for it...
A familiar panic found its way deep into the pit of Natsu's stomach when he returned home from his job and found Gray's apartment empty. They still had two weeks before the baby would be too far along for Porlyusica to consider performing an abortion. There was no note, which wasn't bad news, but it wasn't positive assurance either. And Jellal was out of town and Lyon was busy with his baby, so no one else had been there to make sure Gray didn't do anything stupid.

It wasn't the smartest thing Natsu ever did, but he called the one person he knew was headed to the guild to see if they heard anything.

"Hello?" Lucy's voice chimed from Natsu's Communication Lacrima.

"Hey. You're at the guild, right? Is Gray there? His apartment is empty."

The lacrima was silent long enough that Natsu thought he might have only imagined Lucy responding. When she finally spoke, her voice was so cold it felt like Gray was in the room freezing the walls over. "Oh. That's why you couldn't walk home with me?"

Yeah. Maybe he should have called Mira instead. Or Mavis. Mavis was often busy, but at least she didn't gossip like Mira. Calling Lucy right after bailing on her to go see Gray hadn't been the best idea.

On the other hand, a dozen responses ranging from insisting that she deeply misunderstood his and Gray's standing to pointing out that she broke up with him came to mind. It was entirely unfair for her to be jealous after he begged her not to leave over an issue she projected onto him.

Rather than poke that hornet's nest, Natsu said, "He's been off lately. I just want to make sure he's somewhere safe."

There was no verbal response this time, but Natsu heard stomping. After a minute, a loud clatter made him pull the lacrima away from his ear, but not because he heard Gray's voice.

"Hey! What did you throw that at me for?"

"You deal with him!"

"Deal with who? What on earth are you—"

Natsu cut the connection. Gray was at the guild, probably with people coming to his defense after having a lacrima abruptly thrown at him. He neither needed nor wanted to hear Lucy's tantrum. She told him that they could just be friends, and he told her that he and Gray were just friends, and if those two facts were hard for her to get around, then that was entirely her problem. And maybe unjustly Gray's at the immediate point in time.
Maybe it would be a good idea to go and make sure everyone knew what Lucy's tantrum was over.

-o-

Gajeel intercepted Natsu before he could entered the, slipping out the front door as Natsu approached and rushing up to meet him.

"If you're here for Gray, go home."

"Why? What happened. Is he hurt?"

"Huh. I took his side in the argument, but blondie's right. You really do have a thing for him, don't you? So the kiss was real?"

The kiss? What kiss was he…

The New Year's kiss! Natsu had almost forgotten that Gray told Lucy about it. Why had Gray told Lucy of all people about it? Didn't he know how much of a sore spot their breakup was? Did he not realize… well, there was no reasons he should have realized the breakup had to do with a lack of children, but it still looked bad for a person to go talking to someone's ex about how you kissed their old boyfriend.

Natsu knew Lucy suspected them of being together, and that she didn't take his honest denials seriously. Considering Gray told her about a kiss and potential romantic interest even after the second pregnancy came to light, Natsu could see why. But he hoped she would have at least taken their continued rejection of the idea to mean that they didn't work out as a couple.

"What exactly was said?"

"Lotsa stuff. The heck did you two split over anyway? She was yelling stuff like 'I didn't give him up so he could end up with someone like you.'"

Without thinking about it, Natsu pulled his scarf up over the lower half of his face, as if hiding his blush would make all the shame go away. He and Lucy were still close despite having ended things, and everyone knew that. He couldn't not hear them whispering about it whenever they sat next to each other at the guild. The mysterious nature of their separating while getting along every bit as well as they always had was a breeding ground for speculation. And with all the speculation about his love life, the teasing the guild had done about him always acting as Gray's escort as of late, Happy's fussing about constantly being left behind so Natsu and Gray could be alone together, and now Lucy going off, there would be no convincing everyone that it really was a big misunderstanding.

"Is Juvia there?"

"No. Lucky you. She'll drown you in the lake once she hears how you've been 'tending to Gray's wounds.' Any last requests? I'm not doing anything that involves leaving town, but I can take ya to the local bakery and get some doughnuts for your last meal, if you want."

"If I die, you're out a baby-sitter."

"You've already been spotty ever since you and Gray started bumping junk. Levy'n I have been taking shifts with work since New Year's."

"We are not—"

"Locking lips, then. Since the two of you're out now, maybe you can be madly in love at the guild
and start watching the kids for the day?"

"No. Juvia's going to kill me, remember? I can't look after your kids if I'm dead."

"She's out of town for the next two weeks. We've got some time to come up with a story to downplay this before she drowns you in your sleep." Gajeel paused. "So, uh… Did Gray kiss you?"

"Maybe. Kind of. At New Year's. I don't know why he told Lucy about it."

"So he was drunk," Gajeel said, but he sounded neither convinced nor convincing in presenting this part of the story they might give.

Gray hadn't been a heavy drinker before becoming pregnant, and Natsu had made sure he steered clear of alcohol after. He hadn't touched a mug for an entire month leading up to that kiss. People had seen the fight they had when Natsu stopped Gray that ended in both of them agreeing not to drink so long as the other didn't. No one would buy that they drank at their private, two person party that Gray told Juvia they were having in order to make Natsu feel better about his breakup with Lucy. Just for the fact that both of them were the sort of stubborn where they refused to be the first to cave, no one would believe it.

"We had sparkling grape juice…"

"Why did Gray kiss you?"

"It was just a misunderstanding. I think. I don't know! I was… I was being nice because I wanted something from him, and he misunderstood, and I tried to make it clear that I didn't have any romantic intentions after but… I didn't straight out say it. And apparently he told Lucy after learning what I was being nice for which he's still mad at me over that there is something romantic going on."

"To turn her against you?"

The possibility hadn't crossed Natsu's mind, but a moment's reflection was enough to tell him that he hadn't considered it before because it was ludicrous. "Gray wouldn't hurt Lucy just to spite me. He wouldn't deliberately start something that would upset Juvia, either. He's the one she'll give the most grief to when she hears about this, and then Erza will scold him for not being faithful."

"True." Gajeel put a hand to his chin, thinking about it. "You don't suppose he really likes you then? A rumor would be one thing, but if whatever you did to piss him off wasn't enough to make him lose interest and he really is into you, Juvia might actually murder you."

She wouldn't. Probably. Not on purpose, but there would certainly be throttling. Natsu pulled his scarf higher so it obscured his face completely and hoped he would become invisible to the world. Why did he have to call Lucy asking about Gray? And right after leaving her at the train station saying he had something too important to go with her to the guild, no less.

Because he panicked thinking Gray panicked over the baby again. But Gray wasn't the one panicking. Gray went to the guild without prompting. That was the exact opposite of concerning behavior, and Natsu went and upset Lucy and screwed it all up.

"You think he was just mad about whatever you wanted from him because he felt used?"

"No. Yes. Kind of. Not the way you're thinking. I'm pretty sure that if thinking I liked him that way had anything to do with how mad he got, it was a very, very, very small part of it." Natsu pulled his scarf down enough to see again. "I messed up bad. I was glad he still tolerated me, and then Lucy told me he came to her talking about how we might hook up and… I don't know. I have no idea
what's going on."

Gajeel looked back to the guild and made a face, and when he turned to Natsu again, it was clear from the way he shifted away from the building that he was trying to stall their entry.

"You like him?"

"Maybe? I don't hate him. And he's… not the most annoying person ever. I mean, he's annoying, but in a god way. I don't know if I'd say I feel anything romantic for him. Mostly I just feel bad. It's my fault he's off active duty, and he's been moody ever since and… And even if I did like him, with what happened…"

A smirk spread across Gajeel's face, showing his canine in a way that made that glint in his eye menacing. "So… yes."

Natsu glared at Gajeel. "No. Maybe. Besides, Gray and I… we don't want the same things, so it's stupid to pursue anyway."

Gajeel grunted, interest drying up as Natsu maintained his stance. He looked back to the guild once more and said, "Let's just go home. Lucy's gonna blow her top all over again if she sees you came to check on your boyfriend."

"He's not… That isn't… I… I just want to make sure he's not about to avoid the guild for another two months over this."

Oh God. Natsu could feel himself blushing. Stupid Gajeel. He was only flustered because of the situation, but it wouldn't be taken that way. Not by anyone. Not if Gajeel's questions were any indication of what people were talking about inside.

Gajeel regard Natsu then, slowly, deliberately, asked him, "Have you heard those stories of people trapped on the top floors of buildings that are gonna go down, and there's no way that they'll be rescued in time. Some a' them jump, even though the fall is too high, 'cause it's the last choice they get to make, or 'cause they want to get it over with quick."

Morbid. Natsu looked away. He didn't like to think about things like that. There should never be a situation where there was no hope left.

"You remind me of that right now. If there's a drop of sincerity in this, and given how both of you reacted, I'd say there is, then Juvia'll raise all hell when she gets back, and there's nothing you can do to keep her from catching wind. No rescue. And here you are, contemplating setting Lucy off again."

"She can't be that mad," Natsu said, but he knew that she could very well be.

It was her own feelings of inadequacy that she called things off over, no matter how much Natsu swore he loved her no less for her diagnosis. She left him because she felt like she wasn't enough if she couldn't have her own children, and that was something that would follow her through every other relationship she ever considered, if she didn't come to terms with it. Natsu had called her on exactly that during the climax of their breakup fight, and Gray running off to Lucy and saying there was love blooming between them was rubbing that accusation in her face.

Natsu chewed his lip, contemplating which way he wanted to die, and decided to jump out the window. -o-
He barely made it through the door before Loke shoved him back out, which should have been warning enough for him. If Lucy's spirits came out just to try and mediate the situation, she had to be pissed.

"You should stay out for now."

"No. I want to see Gray, and if Lucy wants to yell at me for that, then fine. We need to work this out anyway."

"Now is not the time to—"

"Hey!" Natsu cupped his hands over his mouth. "I'm here!"

Loke winced, and disappeared through his gate back to the spirit world before he could be accused of siding with Natsu in Lucy's eyes. And he was gone none too soon. A beer mug struck Natsu in the head moments after Loke vanished, shattering as it bounced down to his feet.

"Ow… Hi, Lucy."

She stood ten feet from the door, arms folded, hair disheveled. The pony tail he'd seen her tie before they got on the train that morning had fallen out, and there was a bruise forming on her arm that suggested that whatever tirade she might have gone off on with Gray, he hadn't been afraid to deal back whatever she served.

She was also glaring at him, and trembling, which were both bad signs.

"Now you're willing to come to the guild? Not when I invite you. When your boyfriend is here. Your boyfriend. Did you pick a man just to spite me?"

"No." If he'd thought that way, a male lover might have been a good way of telling Lucy that he really didn't need someone who could get pregnant. But he wasn't in the practice of having shallow affairs just to thumb his nose at an ex. "Things just happened and now I see him a lot. And Gray hasn't felt well lately, so I was worried for him when I didn't see him in the apartment and—"

"He's fine. Whatever body part he's pretending he injured, he's moving around just fine and I'm sick to death of you two making up excuses to go off and hide away together. The worst part is that you couldn't tell me any of this. I had to hear it from him. Even when I asked you outright, you would pretend there was nothing."

Behind Lucy, Natsu saw Happy shaking his head. He went for it anyway.

"Why should I have to tell you if I saw anyone? You dumped me. It's none of your business what I do now."

There was a collective sucking in of breath from the spectators in the guild as Lucy went stiff. However hard Gray struck her, Natsu was sure those words must have hit harder.

And worse, he realized, he'd phrased the statement in a way that made sense for if he were still single, but worked alright if he was dating too. His denial that he and Gray were a thing, thus far, was paltry.

"Natsu," Mira said, not moving from her place behind the bar counter, "I'm sure you and Lucy can work this out."

Work what out? Lucy just needed to calm down about the fact that…
Natsu's mind ground to a halt as the realization sank in. He and Lucy acted almost the same around one another as they had before breaking up. There were no dates or kisses or anything that they might need to kick Happy out of the room and draw the curtains for, but they still talked to one another the same way they always did, and all those jobs they'd gone on lately with just the two of them must have looked like something more to the guild.

Gray had a four hour engagement to someone who still pursued him, and half the guild insisted that it was only a matter of time before they would settle down together. Gray protested the idea so feverishly and Juvia pushed it so persistently that it was impossible not to see the sense from her that there was still something there, and impossible for the guild not to be blatant in whose side they took in the struggle.

Natsu and Lucy never argued about their relationship like that. Their split was quiet and abrupt, with no outwardly obvious hard feelings, and they stayed so close after by pretending to themselves that nothing changed and there was nothing more to discuss. There were people in the guild who thought that they would get back together when whatever silly issue that came between them was settled.

But it wasn't a silly issue. Lucy ended things. Called off the relationship because she thought that a baby with his blood mattered more to him than her. Lucy was quiet on the matter all those months because she didn't want to deal with the pity that would come when all her friends who were looking to start families learned she couldn't have a child of her own. Natsu was quiet on the matter because he couldn't bear to say allowed that, somehow, he hadn't been able to convince Lucy that he loved her enough not to care about that. She hadn't believed him. Hadn't had faith in his feelings, or was too wrapped up in her own to noticed that he wanted to be there for her.

And Natsu couldn't give his heart to someone who would never believe they had it. Not twice.

"No," Natsu said. "No. I don't think we can."

Lucy's expression tightened. "You—"

"I want to see Gray," Natsu said. "If you want to fight me later, I'm all for a brawl, but I'm not fighting over this. You ended it. I begged you not to, and you did it anyway, and I'm done." He looked to Mira, saw he'd get no help from her, and looked to Romeo instead. "Where is he?"

"The basement," Romeo answered. "Mavis chased everyone out so he could finish his work."

Or so whatever fight that started couldn't carry on long enough for the baby to get hurt, or someone to notice its presence. Mavis had gleefully let those books sit waiting for Gray for months. Another hour or two meant nothing to her.

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Gray was tense when Natsu stepped through the basement door, but he eased back when he saw who it was, and when Natsu shut the door behind him.

"You screwed up," Gray said.

"Me?" Natsu asked as he descended the stairs. "I'm not the one who told Lucy about that kiss. Hell, I wasn't even the kisser."

"I didn't know why you two broke up when I told her that."

"That's why," Natsu said. "I don't think we can."

"You—"
Natsu paused, catching the implication in those words. "How long was it after before you found out."

Gray looked sheepish. "Maybe… a minute. I went to ask her about it. I just told her about the kiss as an excuse for why I wanted to know. It's not like I had any way to foresee Happy planting that idea in everyone's head, and no one told you that you had to blow her off all the time to see me."

"Lucy can cook her own dinners."

"I came to the guild last night, like I promised. And I made myself lunch too, and—dammit, Natsu! I'm older than you! I shouldn't have to prove I can be a responsible adult!"

"You shouldn't," Natsu agreed, and that was all he could honestly say on the subject without risking a second 'lover's quarrel' in the span of five minutes. "Sorry Lucy threw her lacrima at you."

Gray shrugged. "Whatever. Sorry I turned her into a second Juvia, I guess?"

"It's fine." Calling her a second Juvia was a bit much. She was more a woman scorned than painfully clingy. "Hey, listen… About the baby…"

"Mavis said—"

"I don't want it."

Gray froze.

They had never discussed this. Not outright, anyway. Zeref might have mentioned it, and Natsu might have thought plenty about how he wished Gray would let him have it, but he never dared mention it. Not when Gray didn't want the pregnancy at all and Natsu stuck him with it. There was no way to ask without being framed as having treated Gray like a means to get his hands on a baby.

But Gray had known Natsu wanted it. Natsu loved kids too much to not want every last one he saw, and a child in his family whose mother wanted someone else to raise them was practically begging for him to insist that he assume custody. So of course, even if he never asked for the baby before, it was odd that he would reject it now.

"What are you playing at?"

"Nothing. I don't want it."

"How could you not want her? You love kids more than you love yourself!"

"Her?" For a second, Natsu's resolve waivered. A cute little angel with deep blue eyes and messy black hair… He shook the fantasy from his head. "N-no. I don't want her."

"Liar."

"Really."

Gray held up a silver band and said, "Want to prove it?"

Natsu didn't need to ask to know that Zeref had finally finished his lie detector, which was good timing. After all the teasing the collar earned him on previous outing with Gray, it would be unbearable to wear it now that everyone believed there really was something between them.

"No thanks. Not lying."
Gray grinned. "Really, now?"

Grumbling, Natsu sat down on the steps and said, "Lucy thought I cared more about having a baby than having her."

The teasing grin vanished from Gray's face. "Oh."

"Yeah."

He didn't need to say it. It was easy enough to figure out. They started seeing a lot of each other right when the baby girl would have been conceived, and when people learn Gray was pregnant, they could count back and realize the timing wasn't a coincidence. If it looked like he and Gray had a romantic affair, Gray had a baby, and Natsu took the baby, then it would look to Lucy like he really had placed a significant importance on someone who could give him a child.

They lapsed into silence, Natsu sulking while Gray awkwardly shuffled back and forth reshelving books. If he'd only heard Lucy's account of the breakup than it wasn't fair for Natsu to expect that Gray know why he'd been troubled by it. Especially not if Gray found out while absorbed in his own pregnancy problems. It wasn't his job to deduce how Natsu felt about things based on how Lucy described them.

Natsu was surprised Lucy told anyone, though. He had always assumed that for as wounded as he was by being doubted so severely, she had to have hurt worse to react to things the way she did. Just because Gray made the kiss out to be more than it was?

Remembering Lucy's claim that Gray said there was a potential relationship in the works, Natsu broke the silence to ask, "Did you make up the things you told her?"

"Like what? The kiss? You know that happened. I might have presented it as more serious than it was, but I didn't completely fabricate a story for her." Gray paused. "Um… Sorry. It felt like my business after you forced the baby on me, and—"

"It's fine," Natsu said. He'd invaded Gray's privacy first, so he had no leg to stand on if he wanted to be indignant anyway.

But despite that invasion, Gray hadn't made up what he told Lucy. So he really was still interested in Natsu? Even after what happened? He could certainly see Gray thinking it wouldn't amount to anything once he found out what Natsu was really up to, but to still have feelings even after learning…

"I'm sorry, too," Natsu mumbled.

Gray fumbled with the book in his hand, knocking two more off the shelf in his attempt not to drop it. He had to crouch down to gather them, and the spine of one looked damaged.

Immediately regretting that he brought them back to how he stopped Gray's abortion, Natsu said, "So anyway! Maybe I'll just be everyone's babysitter. Or get a second job as a nanny. I've done fine so far with that. Who knows. Maybe if I had a kid of my own, I'd get sick of having to look out for them around the clock anyway."

Gray snorted as he picked himself up off the ground with the books he'd dropped. "No you wouldn't."

"Hey. I'm trying to pep-talk myself here."
Gray started at Natsu long and hard, then turned to put the books back in their place. Only once he done did he say, "I don't think I'm going to use that bracelet."

"What? The one Zeref made?"

"Yeah. Mavis had some ideas for ways that it could be put to better use and… I don't think I need it anyway. It keeps telling me I don't like it. Zeref said he would make it when I was my most bitter, and the point of it is just so that I can feel like I can trust you, but… Well… I don't think that's an issue. You could have just taken that collar off and dragged me home, you know."

"Actually, I don't know what we're talking about right now."

"I was ready to give my magic up. Forever. And you just… Talked. It was nice, knowing that you would try to talk me down, rather than trick me again. But more than that… it was just nice that you would listen, you know? Even if you didn't try to hide how pissed you were that I would still 'kill the baby', you shut up about that and listened when I was scared and… I can't believe you're making me say this, but it meant a lot, okay? Thanks. I guess."

"Oh… Um… You're welcome?"

Natsu hadn't given it that much thought. He just knew Gray was making a mistake, and that he needed to stop him without making another mistake of his own. As for listening… it was hard not to. He'd already seen Gray break down too many times to ignore him crying like that.

"Anyway, I guess what I wanted to get to with that was that you shouldn't be too hasty about making decisions either. You love kids, right? So at least give it a day before you swear off of trying to have you own. Only idiots go and base their lives around trying to prove an ex wrong right after she screams at them." Gray paused, glancing to Natsu with a sly smirk. "I suppose that's par for the course, but you listened to me, so I'm open if you want to talk about her."

Natsu didn't want to talk about what happened with her. Not how she hadn't believed him back then, and not how she took out her issues on him now, and not how the guild had figured there was nothing wrong just because they had avoided the subject like the plague and done their best thus far not to completely lose each other over it.

Unless he failed up there. The next time he went on a job, he would have to ask someone other than Lucy. They'd managed for so long to avoid talking about what happened and just be friends, but if she really was that bothered by Gray, then Natsu was no longer sure that she understood the way he did that even if going back to being friends was doable, going back to being lovers was not. Not when she hadn't believed he loved her.

He would take a job with Mest, or get Romeo and Wendy to come with him. Or it could be just him and Happy like back before Lucy joined.

When Natsu took too long responding to Gray's offer, he awkwardly grabbed the next armful of books to busy himself with. His grunt as he lifted more than he ought to in his condition drew Natsu out of his wallowing enough to say, "You should only carry half of that."

"It'll take me twice as long to get done."

"Which means more time before Mavis gives you a task up on the same floor as Lucy. And Juvia. This secret lovers thing everyone thinks Lucy blew open is going to make problems with Juvia too."

"I am refusing to think about that until I absolutely have to," Gray said. "Just like you're refusing to think about Lucy."
"Kinda hard not to think about her," But Natsu took the hint. Gray was sore over not getting a proper response. "The offer... Thanks. I'll keep it in mind. And the baby thing too. I'll give it a little time before I really dedicate myself to that."

"Well, you decision is more reversible than mine—thanks to someone," Gray said.

The glare he shot Natsu then was nowhere near as fierce as it used to be. If anything, it was more peeved than furious. Natsu resolved to give his next fudge batch to Jellal, and find a strawberry fudge recipe to make for him to present to Erza as well. He probably would have handled talking Gray down better, but taking his advice had gone a ways for Natsu in mending the damage he did to his and Gray's relationship.

But Gray wasn't done talking. "You cut me off when you came in, but I wanted to tell you I'm thinking of giving the baby to Mavis. She... As long as this isn't too horrible, then I think I could stomach seeing her growing up, and Mavis would make a good mom. Even if everyone finds out who the real... er... mom is and this kid expects some sort of relationship with me. Being more like her uncle and seeing her around the guild is something I guess I could deal with. Like hanging out with Romeo or Asuka."

Natsu didn't even try not to hide his excitement at the thought of the little baby girl staying within his reach. "That's great!"

His tone earned him an exaggerated look that he absolutely deserved after giving a speech about how he didn't want the baby because he was swearing off trying for a kid. He was kidding himself if he said he didn't want Gray's girl.

"But," Gray said, "Mavis has a condition for taking her."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. It surprised me, too. So if I ask you any weird baby questions, and I mean any, then know it's just me making sure I can tell Mavis I'm doing what she wanted, okay?"

Baby questions. Erza had already come to Natsu and Levy both with quite a few of those. So Mavis wanted Gray to consider parenthood, and was going to grill him on the subject to make sure he thought about it and knew what it entailed? That made sense, Natsu supposed. Although he didn't get why Gray couldn't explain the situation outright so Natsu knew what child rearing knowledge to load him up with. Did Mavis want to hear all the good stuff about kids? The bad stuff? Gray already seemed to have a firm grasp on the bad stuff? What if she wanted the stuff to do improvising and tailoring how you handled each kid?

"Okay. Give me a question."

"No. I already heard enough from you on the subject for today."

"But—"

"More than enough," Gray insisted. "Now how about helping me with these books? They're not going to last me until Juvia gets back, but it gives us both an excuse to avoid Lucy."

Hard to say no when he put it that way. Natsu got up and descended the last few steps. Technically, he was supposed to make sure that Gray came to the guild to socialize, rather than find Gray already there and help him hide, but given the circumstances, he wasn't about to object.
The conversation didn’t meander about too much, did it? It kept getting on tangents and then I had to pull it back. It felt unfocused to me...
Gray didn't ask why when Natsu told him to take a day off from work. If Natsu pressed for it, there was probably a reason, and Natsu could be the one to explain that reason to Mavis.

He had been mostly diligent about showing up for work and gone to see Zeref twice over the past few weeks, and even if he still didn't quite feel like his old self, he did feel better. Natsu still cooked for him, because Gray wasn't about to complain about a free personal chef, and still had to push him to get out for things other than work, but Gray had at least stopped attempting to pass the day by napping. Still, a day off was a day off. The teasing over his and Natsu's 'relationship' was merciless, especially from Mira, and Gray wasn't about to complain if he didn't have to go to the guild and work with her.

He thought Natsu might have been worried about his health, or maybe Lucy was back from the mission she dragged Levy off on with her the day she blew up at them. But he felt fine, and as it turned out, it wasn't Natsu's ex causing the concern.

Natsu showed up about an hour after he called to tell Gray not to worry about work, carrying a bag of groceries in each hand and a home wrapped package of fudge. When exactly Natsu took to making his own fudge, Gray didn't know. The first slab had definitely been store bought. But with everyone already teasing them about how they had supposedly hid their feelings for one another all that time, Gray didn't dare ask. If, as he suspected, Natsu had taken up confection making just for him, then verifying that might look like he was fishing for romantic interest. He'd already made a fool of himself once that way, and once was enough.

He thought Natsu might have forgotten that he stocked the fridge only a day ago, but seeing Natsu pull sparkling juice out of one of the bags made Gray's eyebrows go up.

"What's the occasion?"

"Last meal. Figured I'd share it with you. Gajeel reminded me that Juvia gets home tomorrow."

Gray still refused to think about how Juvia would react to the misunderstanding about him and Natsu, and wiped all thoughts of her from his mind the second Natsu finished his sentence.

How nice of Natsu to put on a celebration for the two of them just for the sake of celebrating.

Since the idea was that his last meal be the grand one, the sparkling juice and fudge was off limits until dinner, and sat on the kitchen counter mocking Gray all afternoon. More than once he caught himself drooling thinking of it, and he ended up begging Natsu to make hot chocolate to tide him over until dinner time.

"Don't you think you have too much sugar?" Natsu asked. "It's probably not good for the baby."

"You brought fudge. You don't get to tell me I have too much sugar when you bring me fudge."

With a much suffered sigh, Natsu put a pot on the stove and grabbed a jug of milk from the fridge. "You do realize that all you have to do is heat milk and drop chocolate in to melt, right? You don't need me to do this for you."

"You also have to stir."

"That's not a lot of work."
"So it's not a big request."

When Natsu turned to give him a flat look, Gray gave Natsu the cheekiest grin he could muster.

"How is the baby," Natsu asked as he broke chocolate into pieces to melt faster. "Have you felt her move yet?"

"No. God willing, I won't ever feel that. Is that possible?"

"Depends on where the placenta is. If it's over the front of your stomach, you probably won't feel much."

"The what?" Gray pulled his ring off to inspect his stomach, and the skin looked normal. Zeref's cream had worked thus far in preventing stretch marks, and he noticed no discoloration. "Isn't Zeref the one who's supposed to need reminding to use layman's terms?"

"What? Placenta? You're pregnant, Gray. How do you not know that word?"

"I don't read up on this!"

"Well, lucky for you, one of us did." Natsu paused, then fiddled nervously with his scarf and admitted, "Well, one of us had to listen to Lucy and Levy when they read up on it. But I did look up a few things for you. Anyway, it is possible to not feel the baby. It just depends on where the baby is… um… attached. If she's in the right spot, you won't feel her, but it's usually better if she's not there. If the baby goes to long without moving, it means something might be wrong, and if you don't usually feel her move, you probably won't notice in time to get her help."

Now that Gray had resigned himself to the having the child and, potentially, allowing it in his life in some capacity, that mattered so much more than he thought it would. If he had to bring a child into the world, he wanted it to be a healthy child. And he wanted to not have his magic crippled because he let some ill fortune befall the baby while it was still inside him.

Which meant that he sooner or later, he would have to learn to tolerate feeling her move inside of him. Even when he reminded himself that he chose to remain pregnant (albeit over losing his magic) and that he did want to see the girl born, the thought of everything that led up to her being out of him still made his skin crawl.

So he put the idea of the baby moving in the same blocked off corner of his mind where he shoved thoughts about Juvia. Natsu could think about all the unpleasant things for him.

"Do you have a name for her?"

"Why would I? I'm not keeping her."

"Have you talked to Mavis about names?"

He hadn't, but he doubted she would give him one, even though she had to have settled on one already. Gray had only mentioned the baby once since he'd offered it to her, and she'd asked him how much thought he'd put into Natsu.

None. He only kind of hinted to Natsu that he'd been told to think of it because Mavis might check with Natsu to see if they discussed it, and when he told Natsu not to give up on having a child, he meant Natsu should adopt that blind baby Lucy snubbed. Mavis told him not to let spite influence his decision, more or less the same way he told Natsu the same thing the next day, and when you really came down to it…
"The difference between what happened with me and Lucy was that you loved her, and she thought you loved the idea of a baby of your own more, whereas I thought you liked me, and it turned out you liked the idea of the baby I was having more."

Natsu froze in the middle of pouring hot chocolate from the pan into a mug, and Gray immediately regretted giving voice to that thought. For one, the moment he said it and acknowledge aloud that, yes, he really had gotten his hopes up for Natsu and felt scorned when the truth came out, he was embarrassed with the confession and wished he could pull the words back. For another, the sentence held at least three landmines unrelated to the aforementioned misunderstanding, all of which he could have probably given Natsu at least mild warning before stepping on. And lastly, his statement had frozen Natsu so thoroughly that he didn't notice as chocolate milk overflowed from the mug and fell to the linoleum at his feet.

Gray wondered if Natsu had a little corner in the back of his mind to tuck Lucy away the same way Gray had one for Juvia.

Only when the growing hot chocolate puddle reached Natsu's toes did he realize he need to right the pan and set in on the counter, and by then, most of its contents had been sacrificed to the floor. He fumbled for paper towel to clean the floor with, and Gray took pity on him. "It wasn't a question. You don't have to respond to that."

"I should know how to."

He should, but he didn't have an answer, and Gray let the subject drop.

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The truth was that Gray didn't need Natsu to respond, because he knew what Natsu would say, whether Natsu felt comfortable with it or not.

The similarity that Gray had left unspoken was that both he and Natsu had ended up feeling undermined by someone they had feelings for, thinking there was romance at the front of the other's mind, when in reality the other put the idea of a baby first. But the difference, at least for Natsu, was that Gray's baby was more than an idea from the moment it was conceived, and that placed much higher stakes on the situation with Gray.

Gray could resent until the end of time that Natsu had gone behind his back to thwart the abortion, but he couldn't hold it against Natsu that he thought a fetus was as valuable a life as any other, and he couldn't hold it against Natsu that he wanted to save a life. He wanted to resent Natsu for that. Scream at him for thinking Gray was a murderer for getting rid of the first fetus, but he wouldn't. Couldn't. Natsu had been willing to listen to him, and to talk through all his fears and provide solutions and reassurance, and if Natsu was willing to try and see things Gray's way, Gray couldn't claim the empathetic high ground if he refused to acknowledge that Natsu had acted from the desire to save someone, rather than the desire to screw Gray over. Natsu was wrong, of course. Gray would maintain that until the end of time. But wrong and evil weren't one and the same. Besides, Natsu said it himself. He could live without a child if it would make Lucy happy, or even to prove to Lucy that he didn't need to be a dad, even if he wanted to. Natsu didn't love the baby Gray was stuck with more than he loved Gray. To him, the abortion was a more dire threat than the pregnancy. An easy judgment to make when you weren't the one pregnant, but Gray would be lying to himself if he said he never looked at abortion in as blasé a light as Zeref did.

So he held his tongue and kept the peace when Natsu served a nice dinner, and when he popped the corks off of the juice bottles as if they were champagne Gray felt a stinging sense of déjà vu. Here he was, with Natsu with him constantly to look after him and offer any help he could, mulling over the
status their relationship, drinking a children's substitute for alcohol from a wine glass, avoiding Juvia. There were only two major differences. This time Gray knew what Natsu was playing at, and he didn't see a romance with Natsu in the future.

And it was just the guild's teasing messing with his head that made it feel like he was lying to himself.
Jellal didn’t even ask when Gray showed up at his door at the crack of dawn the next morning. He and Erza had returned from a hybrid of a job and a vacation the day before to hear the rumor that had taken the guild by storm, and the speculation about how Juvia would react upon returning, and it didn't take a genius to figure out that Gray wanted somewhere other than his apartment to hide.

"Erza and I are setting out for the guild soon," he said as he stepped aside to let Gray in, "But you're free to lounge, and you can help yourself to anything in the fridge. The selection in there is… assorted, but I'm sure you'll be able to find something you like."

"Assorted. It's not all strawberry?"

"It's a variety of berries. And pickled everything but pickles. And cheese and cream. And I think we still have butter."

Gray raised an eyebrow at that, but said nothing. Jellal suspected he had unusual cravings at times, but he never heard of anything from Natsu other than Gray's expanded sweet tooth.

"Sorry I was away so long. Things had been fine lately, so I thought it would be alright, but it sounds like Natsu made a mess of things while I was away. We might need to tell them what's really going on to fix this."

"Honestly, them thinking I'm dating Natsu beats them knowing the truth." Gray paused, and peered around the entryway for signs of Erza.

"She's upstairs." She probably would be for a while too. Erza wasn't the sort who spent a long time fixing herself up by virtue of the fact that she could fix herself up just as well as anyone else in seconds with her magic. But lately she was the sort who spent a long time dragging herself out of bed.

"Good. About the rumor… it's mostly my fault. Natsu pissed Lucy off by asking her if she knew where I was after blowing her off, but I'm the one who gave her the idea we were together."

There was some logical explanation that made this behavior perfectly sensible. Jellal just needed to figure out what the hell it was fast, because it seemed like a dumb move to him, and he didn't want to offend Gray by asking. Still, he felt his eyebrows knit as he tried to puzzle the motive out, and Gray saw that.

"I told her we kissed and maybe we would hook up, so I needed to know what they broke up over in case it was something bad. I… kind of… wanted another reason to hate him after the whole sneaking me a morning sickness potion for two months thing."

Fair enough. Jellal still harbored some resentment for Natsu over that too, despite the fact that he wasn't the one Natsu deceived, and despite the fact that Natsu did seem to earnestly want to make amends. Even despite the fact that he was relieved that Gray hadn't been able to have an abortion. Some things were just wrong, but two wrongs didn't make a right.

Even from the perspective of wanting dirt on Natsu, Jellal could understand wanting to trade some sort of information to loosen Lucy's tongue. He wasn't exactly the type to thrive on drama, but you
couldn't avoid hearing about everyone's personal lives when your roommate at the time was a passive mind reader who loved to collect blackmail. He knew they split over something big, but Erik wouldn't tell him what, and he never presses for details. That they went about acting like they'd been nothing more than friends the entire time and declined to comment whenever anyone offered them a shoulder also raised some eyebrows. He had missed Lucy's explosion the other week, but hearing about it had been enough to make him finally admit that, yes, he wanted to know what was going on.

"I assume you're sworn to secrecy."

"No. And I wouldn't hold to that if I were after she threw everything in arm's reach at me while screaming to the whole guild about my 'love affair' with Natsu."

Gray unbuttoned his pants, and Jellal caught his arm before he could pull them off. Even if he knew it was to work with Mavis's illusion, it was already bad enough that Gray skipped on wearing a shirt.

"I heard she was mad."

"Mad is an understatement. I knew she could lose her temper, but that was a whole different level. Too bad Juvia's still convince I'll come around to her, or she could have caught Natsu on the rebound and had three babies with him before Meredy has her second."

Now that Jellal didn't want to ask about. It didn't take a genius to guess it had something to do with another plea of Juvia's, but Jellal refused to think about the possibility of that little white haired rat touching Meredy again.

"Why Natsu with Juvia? Just because they both want a baby?"

"And it's what Lucy dumped him over. Too bad I couldn't have her as an admirer. Kids wouldn't have been a problem for either of us. I didn't get breakfast before coming over. What all do you have pickled?"

It took Jellal a moment to say "Check the fridge." His mind was wrapped around Gray's words. Lucy left Natsu over him wanting a baby? Had he tried to force her into a pregnancy before trapping Gray in one? The idea made Jellal's skin crawl. Like there was some serial abuser in town who liked lording power over others by using them to breed.

The image didn't fit with how Jellal liked to think of Natsu, but neither did the way he deceived Gray.

Trembling from the idea, Jellal followed Gray into the kitchen and watched silently as he dug around in the fridge until he pulled out a jar of pickled asparagus and chili peppers. His silence must have come off as judgment, because Gray looked over at Jellal in the middle of forking vinegar soaked asparagus into a bowl and said, "Stop looking at me like that."

"Sorry I…"

Gray, after emptying the asparagus and chilies into the bowl, took a sip from the jar, and Jellal couldn't help but judge at that point.

"You know what? Just don't look at me."

"The vinegar, Gray?"

"Do you talk to your pregnant fiancée like that? No wonder your first engagement ended with no marriage."
"The vinegar?"

"Natsu brought a giant jar of pickles over a while ago. Apparently not knowing about the whole pickles and ice cream stereotype. I guess he made them without vinegar and I caved and tested out what they were like when you do it that way and… it might have been good."

Jellal couldn't help himself. "With ice cream?"

Gray turned the lip of the jar in his hand so it faced Jellal, then threw the remaining vinegar at him. Quick reflexes told him to turn his head before and chili juice got in his eyes, but not to jump out of the splash range entirely.

"Okay. I deserved that."

"You did."

"But drinking the vinegar, Gray?"

"I-I ran out of pickles, and they take a while to make, so I started drinking the brine while Natsu made more." Gray looked down at the jar, swishing what little contents hadn't escaped onto Jellal's jacket. "But this stuff wasn't as good as what Natsu makes."

The wistful note in Gray's voice might only have been for pickles, but it amplified the chill Jellal fought since hearing about Lucy.

"What's that face for? It's good brine. I swear it's not cravings. I mean, it's probably not just cravings. You have pig ears in your fridge, Jellal. There's no way this is the weirdest thing you've heard of anyone eating."

"No." Jellal raised a hand to wipe away vinegar in his hair and give himself an excuse to break eye contact, but thought better of it when seeing his hand was wetter. "I'm just surprised to hear you speak about Natsu with that tone, especially after hearing about what he did to Lucy."

"What did he do to Lucy?"

"You said their breakup was over him pushing her for a baby."

Gray's mouth fell open, and his face turned scarlet. "Crap! I already went and made one huge mess leading someone on. From now on, you have to tell me whatever you think I said. They split up over wanting a baby, but it wasn't like... Lucy kept miscarrying and—"

"And he left her over that?" The second Jellal said it, he knew he was jumping to false assumptions. Everyone knew that Lucy was the one to call things off.

"No. He went out and researched adoptions. She had some sort of self-esteem issue over not being able to have a biological child and left him, and he says he wouldn't take her back because she didn't believe him when he said he loved her more than he loved the idea of having his own kid. I don't think she's in the same boat. The reason she's pissed is that she thinks Natsu moved on to someone else who can't give him a kid, which is basically thumbing it in her face that he was fine with her and she panicked. And now Natsu's twice as determined as I am to hide the pregnancy because if she finds out I'm maybe carrying his kid, then it looks like she was right. And I can't even complain about getting caught in the middle of this because I'm the one who told her we kissed."

Jellal wanted to argue that they had no right to drag Gray into their cold war, but from the sounds of it, Gray did insert himself into the thick of things.
That also put a very different perspective on Natsu. Still not one that would make Jellal fully forgive him, but definitely a much less selfish one. Jellal knew that Natsu's first and foremost concern with Gray's pregnancy was that the baby live, but he had always suspected some desire to get his hands on a child he could claim as his by blood. To hear that Natsu put an existing relationship above the chance for a biological child discredited that theory, at least somewhat.

"Ah!" Erza's cry of disgust rang from upstairs. "Cana swore it would be sunny today!"

Jellal and Gray both looked to the window and saw heavy rain where it had been bright moments earlier.

"Juvia's back," Gray said.

"So early?"

"You think I came over when I did because I expected her past supper?" Gray asked.

"You do realize it won't stop raining until you talk to her."

"Yeah. But Natsu stopped over yesterday acting like a dead man walking because he planned to talk with her, and I'm fine letting him take the brunt of this."

Jellal was fine with that too. "So you're just here to avoid her."

"Well, I also wanted you to tell me I'm an idiot."

"Gray, I just watched you drink vinegar from a pickling jar. I don't need to be told to tell you that." And developing a habit of drinking out of a pickling jar by taking food from Natsu that he didn't watch be prepared, no less. Jellal wouldn't trust Natsu to handle his food if he watched the entire time.

The tease reminded Gray that he had pickled asparagus to eat, and he picked up his bowl and fork. "Not that. I've been thinking of something really stupid."

"Drinking mayonnaise?"

"Do not," Gray said, "make me throw up on your kitchen floor."

Jellal shut his mouth and nodded. No more teasing. Not anything that would make a mess he would have to clean up, and not anything that delayed Gray when he came wanting help.

"I need you to tell me I'm an idiot for liking Natsu. Talk me out of it."

For a second, Jellal didn't know what to say. All he could think about was Gray, lying prone on Porlyusica's bed and pale as snow, face swollen from hours as crying. Gray limp on his couch, only eating under threat of force feeding, mind somewhere so dark that Erik felt compelled to offer to get back at the person who put him in that state. Gray, completely shattered because he fell for Natsu, and it turned out Natsu was only interested in keeping him pregnant without his knowledge.

"That goes beyond simple idiocy."

"I know."

"He played you."

"I know."
"He tricked you."

"I know."

"He lied to you."

"I know."

"He couldn't even stop to talk to you."

"Yes he could," Gray argued. "I… He probably told you this, because I know you all convene behind my back, but I almost had another abortion after all, even though I would give up my magic. Watching Meredy give…" He paled. "Watching Meredy terrified me. But Natsu talked to me about it, and I wasn't as afraid after. And with the potion he snuck me… I think he did want to talk to me about it. But he didn't know how."

Recalling his own argument with Natsu on the subject, Jellal folded his arms, leaned back against the counter, and raised an eyebrow.

"A few weeks before it was too late, he asked me about trying to save someone even if it hurt someone else you cared about. I think he was getting at what he was doing. He already knew I was pregnant a second time when we argued about the first abortion not too long before that. I think he really wanted to talk me out of aborting rather than doing what he did."

But he still slipped Gray that potion for weeks after. "Would you have kept the baby if he told you about it?"

"God, no. Natsu convinced me more on the point of keeping my magic than anything else, and that wouldn't have been an issue the first few weeks."

Which meant the only way to save the baby would be to forcibly stop Gray, which put Jellal back in that theoretical dilemma where he could feel superior to Natsu for not being sneaky with how he got Gray to hold off on realizing what was going on, but he couldn't claim he was that much better if he openly stopped Gray from killing his child, and he couldn't claim to be a defender of the innocent if he did nothing to prevent the death of one of the most defenseless and innocent lives there was. It was one thing to not sound judgmental when he learned too late to do anything, but it was another to stand by and act supportive when Gray was on his way to get an abortion.

Jellal added being spared the need to figure out how he might handle that situation to the small list of things he was grateful for in the whole Gray Baby mess. The baby being alive being the only other thing on that list.

He put Gray defending someone who went behind his back on the list of things to begrudge Natsu for.

"Natsu did tell me about the near abortion," Jellal confessed. "We both agreed that for as long as you'd lasted, you would rather have your magic in the years to come than skip the second half of the pregnancy. I gave him an overview of what to say."

Gray stiffened. "Like what?"

"Listen to what your opponent says in an argument. Present points they care most about, not the ones that matter to you. Don't throw accusations at them. Debate points. I had to tell him you were scared too, since he hadn't listened to you before."
"But he still had to actually pay attention to what I said and say things that he knew mattered to me based on that," Gray argued. "The first time abortion came up, he said that anyone who got one was a murderer and refused to listen to me at all."

"Just because one—"

"And he took a lecture from you on talking to people rather than fighting me, or forcing me in some other way. Zeref gave him to a dragon because he was so stubborn about not wanting to learn, and he was willing to learn from you for this."

In the back of his mind, Jellal knew that the comment was meant to be one of personal growth on Natsu's part, but he chose to take it as Natsu being more willing to listen to him than Zeref. It gave him an excuse to continue his refusal of acknowledgement for Natsu's efforts to make up for the damage he did, and it was always nice to feel superior to Zeref. The idea even drew a grin to his face.

Although on that subject…

Jellal scowled and said, "Speaking of Zeref, what were you doing at his… lab… when that machine exploded?"

"Trying to cool the machine down."

"You know that's not what I meant."

Gray shrugged and stuck a forkful of asparagus into his mouth.

"Gray."

He chewed slowly, swallowed deliberately, and only answered one his mouth was empty. "I was already toying with the idea of an abortion after listening to Erza complain. I figured Natsu would yell at me, and you're nice, but you've never said you agreed with anything I did, so I thought you might say no on principle. I wanted someone who wouldn't get emotional about it, and he seemed like a good pick. And he was alright talking to that time with the frogs."

"What frogs?"

"The ones that bred out of control while he tried to make sure that my pregnancy wouldn't cause any weird birth defects in any grandkids."

"What pregnancy?"

Jellal whirled around to see Erza in the kitchen door. He looked back to Gray to make sure that he had Mavis's ring and no shirt, and then back to Erza, who was giving him a look that said she knew he was hiding something. Only while under Ultear's control had he ever been able to lie to her.

"Is he eating my asparagus?"

"It's mine now," Gray said.

"Jellal, did you give him my asparagus?"

"He missed breakfast. I told him to help himself to anything in the fridge."

Erza regarded them both warily. "Why come over this early? And before eating? Especially after avoiding me for so long."
Jellal hadn’t realized there was any avoidance going on, but the way Gray palled told him Erza was on the nose.

"Sorry," Gray said, not meeting her eyes or even fully looking her way. "Haven't felt well lately, and I didn’t want to bring you down. My apartment's going to flood soon. I wanted to avoid the worst of it."

Erza looked past them to the rain, then wordlessly waddled into the kitchen and to the fridge.

Based on Natsu’s estimate of when Gray conceived, she was only about two months ahead, but Jellal had noticed her gait shifting not too far off from where Gray was at currently. He kept meaning to ask Porlyusica in order to find out when Gray would need to worry about it, since the illusion Mavis made couldn’t hide how he walked. He just struggled to find a time to ask when Erza was out of earshot, and making the trip out to see her without Erza meant braving walking all the way across town alone.

Erza pulled strawberry jam and blackberries from the fridge and put a piece of bread in the toaster, then said, "I'm guessing if we're avoiding Juvia too that you really do favor Natsu over her."

"In the sense that I'm not interested in Juvia," Gray said, brushing over what he'd told Jellal about potentially having feeling for Natsu despite everything. "Please don't listen to everyone else. The kiss was just a stupid New Year's thing that Lucy blew out of proportion."

"Gray, who are you having an affair with, if not Natsu?"

Erza liked her toast dark—almost burned. The toaster popped while Gray stood struggling to come up with a convincing, unverifiable lie that would excuse his increasingly long silence. Jellal, learning from Gray's mistake with Natsu and Lucy, saw no point in throwing himself into the middle of the drama. Erza would still find out before they left the house, and without the excuse of being pregnant himself, Jellal would be eviscerated if he helped Gray lie at this point.

"Do either of you have a cigarette?" Gray asked when the silence could stretch on no longer. "Natsu took all of mine last year and I haven't had the chance to buy a new pack. I think I need one right now."

Erza looked to Jellal, who offered another shrug, and told him, "I don't think anyone on this street smokes, so you'll have to buy your own. You can borrow an umbrella after you answer my question. If you want anything now, we have wine."

"He can't have wine," Jellal said, knowing that Erza's offer was meant to loosen Gray's tongue. Since Gray was asking for drugs when he knew his condition, Jellal added for him, "You're not going out to buy cigarettes either. That's non-negotiable and I will report you to Natsu if you do."

"Why?" Gray asked. "So he can forcibly take them for you?"

The accusation was right on the nose, and shut Jellal up immediately.

"Erza's drinking wine while pregnant. I think I can have one cigarette."
"Erza is not drinking—"

"It's from Macao," Erza said. "He thought Jellal would need it if he lived with me, but not everyone needs a vice for when they're stressed."

Gray turned to Jellal with a pleading look, and Jellal was about to tell him off when understanding clicked.

Gray had never been a heavy smoker. If he took anything, it was usually on some special occasion. And he definitely hadn't smoked since at least last November. Natsu had been on him for it since learning about the pregnancy, and there was no way Gray could hide the scent from him. If Natsu caught Gray smoking with a baby, he'd have gone on full alert and made sure everyone else knew to be on guard. Gray didn't need a cigarette. He needed Erza distracted.

Too bad Erza was on full alert herself that day.

"I know why I'm not drinking, but why not Gray? And it's never been an issue before if he smoked. I know he's supposed to be injured, but I can't see how that would affect him drinking."

Her gaze turned to Jellal, who looked away. Since Erza saw so little of Gray, she asked regularly how he was doing, and heard nothing but normal reports. Maybe the odd comment about how he was more reclusive or less social, but no one had noticed anything physically wrong. Gray had never feigned any physical pain or disability. Jellal didn't even remember what Gray's injury was supposed to be, and he wasn't sure if Gray remembered either.

"The alcohol could cause internal bleeding," Gray bullshitted.

Erza gave a short, chilling laugh. "I'm going to cause you external bleeding if you don't tell the truth."

Gray grabbed Jellal, eyes wide and pleading, and Jellal gave the most consoling smile he could and said, "I can tell her for you, if you want."

Seeing he was without an ally, Gray let go of Jellal's sleeve and took his asparagus with him out of the room.

"Well?" Erza asked.

Jellal looked her up and down, considering the best way to present the news, and then said, "What if we named him Ezra?"

"Absolutely not. I still like Simon."

And Jellal still felt like that was rubbing the past in his face, but he let it go for the time being.

"Well, whatever we call him, there's going to be a girl his age at the guild. Only a few months younger."

"Gray's daughter?" Erza guessed.

"Gray's daughter."

"And the mother is…?"

"Gray."
Erza waited for Jellal to give a serious answer, but he already had. They both stared at each other, arms folded waiting for the other to change their tune first.

Finally, Erza cracked. "Who would the father be, if Gray is the mother?"

"One of the Dragneels."

"I'm serious, Jellal."

Jellal turned his hands up for her, showing he had nothing to offer. "We're not sure which. It could be Natsu or Zeref."

"How?"

"Zeref. Mostly."

The explanation satisfied Erza, and she peeked around the corner of the doorway Gray disappeared through to see if he was still there. Jellal tried to glance less openly, and saw Gray sulking on their couch.

There was a note of envy in her voice as she muttered, "He doesn't look a few months behind me,"

She stuck entirely to maternity wear now, needing special pants to fit around her hips and not slide down, and shirts that widened at the bottom in order to fit into anything. The baby sat low in her hips too, forcing her to change how she walked. No one could mistake her for anything but well into her pregnancy.

But when he saw Gray sit, Jellal saw adjustments there are well in Gray's own posture, which perfectly accommodated the growth he knew was only masked from sight.

"Well, some work has gone into keeping this a secret."

-o-

It was still raining hard when Jellal opened an umbrella and set out for the guild. The last time he tried to use Meteor in a rainstorm, he wound up flying through so much water in so little time that he felt like he smacked face-first into the ocean, so walking was his preferred method of transport when it came to such weather.

Erza was the one to suggest she leave while Gray hid in her house. Although she had taken Gray's insistence that he and Natsu weren't dating as a sign that there was still hope for Juvia, she agreed that not being around her when she first heard the rumors was a wise move on Gray's part. It would be a solid week before she calmed enough to listen to anything other than her own wild imagination, with everything the guild said about how Natsu and Gray were together. Jellal thought it a little much that Erza might need to leave her own home, but Erza was the one to deduce, around the point that Jellal summarized the events with Meredy, that seeing later stages of pregnancy that what he'd reached probably unsettled Gray.

There had been no attempt to exclude Gray from explaining everything to Erza. Jellal verified that he could explain why Gray hadn't done anything about the pregnancy, and while Erza raised an eyebrow at the story of Gray wanting an abortion and Natsu blocking it, she gave no other outward reaction. She nodded along to reasons Gray had for not wanting the guild to know and an overview of his not entirely recovered from depression, and had calmed from having it all hidden from her and being avoided by Gray by the time she was up to speed.
And then Gray surprised them by saying he was fine if Erza stayed.

"You can get here faster than Lyon if she goes into labor, and you're not going to make me watch. There's something I should ask her anyway."

Something he *should* ask her, not something he *wanted to*. That Gray also didn't say what that something was in Jellal's presence meant the question was likely meant for only Erza's ears, but that was fine. Jellal was gradually building more relations with the guild now that he stayed in town, and even when Gray was one of the only guild members Jellal reached out to his first few years in Fairy Tail, Jellal had never been one of Gray's only friends. He didn't need a monopoly as Gray's confidante, and it was good for Gray to reach out to more people. He excused himself to the guild to give Gray the opportunity to reach back out to everyone else in his life.

Jellal felt reasonably assured of Gray and Erza's wellbeing as he reached the guild hall, but when he opened the doors and water spilled out at waist level, he had questions about his own. When enough water had flooded out for him to have a clear visual of his legs again, he found Juvia hugging them.

"Erza!" Juvia sobbed. "Erza, Gray couldn't have forsaken Juvia, could he?"

Her eyes were closed, so Jellal gave her the benefit of the doubt in making such a mistake. "Erza isn't here."

A dozen voices all trying to reassure Juvia quieted, and then broke into riotous exclamation.

"Not here?"

"Is she bedridden?"

"He looks calm. She must be fine."

"Jellal came on his own? Without it being an emergency? Can he *do* that?"

Jellal felt his eyebrow twitch in irritation. Gray and Erza were definitely much better off than he was.

-0-

There was no doubt in Erza's mind that things were running smoother for Jellal. He had little to no interaction with Juvia, and Natsu would bear the brunt of her attention anyway. In fact, since Jellal had avoided the guild so much for so long, and usually came only when accompanying Erza, he probably wouldn't be noticed by anyone. At least, that's what made sense to her.

She, on the other hand, sat awkwardly on the opposite end of the couch. Both of them sipped on hot chocolate that Gray made and watched a local weather report on Erza's Lacrima Vision, where an in the know news anchor explained to the weatherman that Juvia had returned home and there was some drama dealing with her crush and his new boyfriend, so that must be why the prediction for clear skies was so wildly off.

"They're trying to be funny reporting on it," Erza said. "I hope this doesn't get picked up for national news. It will be trouble if Sorcerer Weekly hears it. We could ask Lucy to contact someone she knows from the magazine and keep quiet on the story."

Gray made a noise to indicate that he heard. It was slightly less than a grunt of affirmation, which was the best Erza had gotten out of him in the hour since Jellal left. Although now that she thought of it, Lucy was likely one of the last people who would help suppress gossip about Gray and Natsu, so an affirming grunt wasn't the appropriate response.
Still, it would be nice if Gray could at least look her way! She got that he didn't want to see how large his own stomach might get, but surely after seeing a full-term woman give birth, he knew that Erza's size wasn't the largest there was.

She took a sip of her drink, mulling the whole situation over. Natsu and Gray's struggle over the baby, Lucy's despair over being unable to have a child, Mavis and Zeref's various interferences, and the near abandonment by Gray of his magic to escape the situation. The last thing he needed was fake love drama with Natsu hitting national gossip levels.

Then Gray surprised her by speaking.

"If anyone asks, you made this."

"There's no shame in knowing how to melt chocolate into milk, Gray."

"If Natsu finds out I made it on my own, he'll tell me to do it myself whenever I ask him to make it for me."

Gray must have asked regularly. Erza smiled into her mug.

"Your secret is safe with me." She hoped he realized she meant all of them.

Gray grunted again and took another sip. Erza worried he would lapse once more into near silence, but instead he said, "My back hurts all the time now."

"Does it?"

"Yeah. I couldn't say it to Meredy, because she didn't know what was going on, and no one else went through that. Does it go away ever?"

Erza had accumulated more pregnancy related discomforts since she last saw Gray, and lost none. "Once the baby is born, I suppose. Is that what you wanted to ask about?"

Gray shook his head. "I already regret asking."

"You know what to expect with this child, right?"

"Natsu knows that for me."

Well, that was one way to survive a pregnancy when thinking about being pregnant gave you anxiety. Erza looked at Gray's flat stomach and, for the umpteenth time since hearing about the ring, wished she could see what he really looked like. She felt like she was on uneven ground, having to look like a blimp while Gray looked as though he were still in peek shape. Jellal told her she was still beautiful, but Jellal also told her once that they couldn't kiss because he had a fiancée, so how reliable was he?

Giving up on delicacy, Erza pulled her shirt over her head and passed it to Gray.

"H-hey! What?"

"No shirtlessness allowed in my house."

"But you—" She requipped into another maternity shirt, and Gray swallowed back his protest. "Fine."

He pulled the shirt over his head, and Erza glanced at it from the corner of her eye while making a point to keep her face angled towards the broadcast. Seeing Gray's stomach was smaller than hers
when she was at his stage was bittersweet. On the one hand, it was probably easier on Gray's psyche that he had a smaller baby. On the other, Erza didn't want to be the big one.

"So what did you want to talk about?" she risked asking. There was still a chance Gray would fall mute again, but at this rate he would never get around to it.

"Where did the fudge in your fridge come from?"

"That's your big question?"

"No. I'm still working my way up to it. Natsu made it, right? It looks like his fudge."

Erza scowled. Natsu had made it, and why Gray cared when he already knew, she couldn't begin to guess. "If I tell you, then you have to ask your real question next. My threat for external bleeding still stands."

"Fine."

"Natsu gave Jellal and I each a plate of fudge he made several weeks ago. I've been going through mine slower. Only one of us is still in the thick of things regularly, and eating for two doesn't mean nine months of all-you-can-eat. I've been strict with myself about having too much at once. Apparently it was a thank you for Jellal with some advice that helped the two of you get along better. I guess I was included because making me happy would make Jellal happy." If the fudge hadn't been strawberry flavored, she might have been affronted by the idea that her good mood was a reward for Jellal. "We thought he bought it, but Happy mentioned him making it later, which caught all of us by surprise."

"All of us?" Gray asked.

"Jellal and I, and Lucy, Evergreen, Laxus, and Elfman. Lucy was checking up with me when Natsu came over, and Laxus came to our table to tease Jellal." As she said it, Erza's brow scrunched in confusion. Lucy had been surprised to hear that Natsu knew how to make fudge, but Gray could tell on sight that Natsu was the one behind the fudge in her fridge. "Has he not offered you any?"

"He brings it over all the time to bribe me into doing things. Or just drops a block off after a bad day, sometimes. The flavors can get weird. I wondered what he did with all the test batches."

"I don't think he gives them to anyone else?"

That seemed to satisfy Gray, who smiled into his mug before saying, "The thing I wanted to ask while Jellal was gone was... sort of... What do you think Cyrus will look like?"

Erza looked overtly at Gray's stomach. "Is that what you're naming her?"

"I'm not naming her. Mavis can name her once I've considered Natsu to her satisfaction. I meant your baby."

"Cyrus?"

"It's close enough to Simon, and it won't make Jellal flinch every time he hears his own son's name for the rest of his life," Gray said. Erza knew she was right, but she still didn't want to admit that someone who gave their life for her was off-limits for baby names. "Have you thought about what he'll look like?"

"Like Jellal," Erza said. "But with my hair. I have a nicer color than him, but if he asks, I never said
He'd laugh it off and tell her that nothing was more beautiful than her scarlet locks, but she didn't want to sound like she was fishing for such praise.

"I've been wondering what she'll look like since I heard the gender," Gray admitted. "The first one too. I never even learned if it was a girl or a boy, and maybe it would have been a boy who looked just like me. That's supposed to be what men want, right? A little boy who grows up to be like them?"

"You wish it was a boy?"

"I wish I wasn't pregnant," Gray corrected. "But since I am... I guess I want the hair to be pink? If it has to be Natsu or Zeref's kid, then I'd rather it be the slightly less destructive one that she takes after. And besides... if the baby has black hair, I'll never know who the father is. Is that a weird thing to be bothered by when I don't plan to keep her? It's not like I slept with both of them."

"I... I wouldn't know. I've never been in that situation." Never had a child she wasn't overjoyed to know she'd have, even if her idiot fiancé and his frequent absences meant she couldn't fit into her dream wedding dress until after the baby was born. Never questioned it's parentage. Never even pursued the idea of a romance with anyone but Jellal, although for some time, that had more to do with avoiding people in general than it did with holding out hope that Jellal might reclaim his sanity. "Why couldn't Jellal hear this?"

Gray hesitated before saying, "Because he was upset earlier when he heard I wasn't as mad at Natsu anymore as I should be. When I told Lucy I kissed him, it was just to make her think I needed to hear her story, but by the time she told everyone else, it wasn't really a lie to say I wasn't thinking about him."

"He thought he was doing the right thing, and from everything I've heard, it sounds like he's done his best to minimize the damage it's done to you."

When Jellal came home, Erza was going to smack him. She had no doubt that Jellal was doing his best to support Gray, and some of that no doubt involve telling Gray what he wanted to hear while some of it involved telling him what he needed to be told. When Gray actually turned to face her, cheeks bright red with shame and eyes glassy, she knew Jellal had picked the wrong thing to say for this situation.

"You don't think it's stupid?"

"When is anything with Natsu not stupid? We all hold him close anyway. But I can put the fear of god in him on your behalf, if you think it's risky."

Gray sniffled, smiling for her as he rubbed an eye dry. "I think Zeref already does that."

Erza smirked. She hadn't needed to make herself imposing in months, with everyone already treading cautiously around her for fear of mood swings and Jellal pleading for her to sit back and let him handle jobs for the baby’s safety. But for Gray, she put on the sternest, coldest expression she could muster, and her reward was to see the chill that ran down his spine.

"I think I'm scarier, don't you?"
Yeah. So... school is kinda kicking my butt. Grade-wise I'm not doing too terrible yet, but there's about 150 hours of out of class work that we have to do which half my class didn't get to start on until weeks after class began, so I'm kinda scrambling a little right now to make up for lost time with that while not falling behind on the grade thing.

I still have buffer chapters, so I should have been updating. I just got so caught up in everything else that this just fell to the wayside.
Chapter Summary

Sorry. Sorry. I know I'm falling behind on the updates still. (I feel extra bad for the Butterfly Sanctuary readers.) I totally do mean to keep this updating regularly, but I get so caught up with everything I have going on for school that I flat out forget I have stuff like this to handle too.

No time for comment replies tonight. (The ones that are over a week old...) I've only finished three or the five things I have due today (one I kinda already accepted I'm going to have to do tomorrow, but the other one I still want in on time!)

Natsu found himself locked out of Gray's apartment. Even the kitchen window had a plank of wood slid along it to hold it shut, and he couldn't reach the bedroom or bathroom windows without going to Happy for help. There was a tree that almost reached the bathroom window, but the branch was too thin for Natsu to risk crawling across it.

There was no discernible reason for Gray to lock him out—and he could hear Gray in there, not coming to the door when Natsu called for him. Juvia had been back for a few days now without Gray upping the security at his apartment, and after walking through what was going to be the fourth day straight of perpetual downpour, he felt he'd earned the ability to go inside and dry off.

Grumbling, Natsu sat himself down on the balcony by the apartment door, keeping as much of himself as he could under the partial awning. "I'm not leaving until I see you!" he shouted at the door, but he could hear Gray not getting up from his chair inside.

Considering that Natsu had handled all of the Juvia fallout for both of them so far, that was downright rude. He still had bruises around his neck from where she'd grabbed him and shook him when he first showed up at the guild, and a million little cuts from water slices she'd thrown his way while demanding he stop lying and confess to why he would steal her fiancée from her.

There was a bruise on his back from pointing out that Gray called their engagement off after only a few hours—but that one was from Mira, for being so rude.

There was a bruise on his back from telling Juvia she needed to let Gray go.

There were two bruises on each side of the front of his torso from making the mistake of telling Juvia that while he did find Gray to be attractive, he didn't think they were compatible because they disagreed on the subject of children. Ironically, while one was for admitting that he found Gray attractive and thus basically confirming that the rumors were true, the other was for holding Gray back from starting a family.

Natsu might have gone back for more in the hopes that, sooner or later, Juvia would calm down enough to actually listen to him when he said it was all a big misunderstanding (but she needed to lay off Gray anyway), but he had received a call that morning from Mavis, informing him that she'd been notified that Lucy and completed her last job and was headed home. Juvia he could deal with, and Lucy he could kind of deal with, but Juvia and Lucy together was too much. He would rather let them meet up, commiserate, and work one another up than put himself between the two and face
both their wraths while trying to make it clear to both of them that they had it all wrong.

For all the good it would do. He'd seen a Sorcerer Weekly issue at a news stand on his way to Gray's, and the cover was a photo of the two of them. It was nonromantic. A shot of multiple guild members from last fall, snapped by a news crew that feigned interest in the guild at large as an excuse to interview Jellal specifically about his involvement in helping bring down a dark guild. Someone had cut out Gray and Natsu and set both of them to a white backdrop with pink hearts, and he didn't need to read any of the gossipy teasers to know what their big scoop was about.

Maybe someone already brought that magazine to Gray. Natsu didn't know anyone else living in the apartment building, but he knew that Gray talked to a few of his neighbors. Maybe one of them saw it and came over to ask about his love life. Like that old lady on the first floor. Her bedroom would be right below Gray's. She might have come knocking to make sure he wasn't going to do anything indecent before marriage with that young man who was over constantly. If she warned him that she would hear it if they got in bed together, then Natsu could see Gray locking him out.

Alternatively, he could just be pissed that it was now gossip all across the country that he and Natsu were together. How did the story even get to be that big? Natsu knew Fairy Tail as a whole attracted a lot of attention, and they were members of note, but ever since Jellal joined, tabloids usually only cared about him. Creep-shots of Erza and stories speculating about the state her pregnancy graced magazine covers at least once a month, but the headlines usually picked the term 'Jellal's baby' even when Erza was the focus of the article.

Since there was no sun to track the passage of time with, Natsu estimated that he spent ten hours sitting out there and sulking about the magazine before the door opened as wide as the chain would allow and Gray looked through to say, "I'm letting you in, but once you make hot chocolate, you have to leave."

"It doesn't work that way."

"Then you can't come in."

"You'll have to make your own hot chocolate."

The door shut, but Natsu heard Gray undo the chain, and seconds later the door opened wide.

"Fine. But you're making lunch, too."

If they hadn't missed lunch yet, then Natsu probably hadn't waited the ten hours it felt like he sat out there, but he was still miffed about being made to sit outside. Unless Gray has somehow rewritten history and made the secret romance drama primarily Natsu's fault, he had no business locking Natsu out over that magazine.

Gray took a seat at the table while Natsu set to work on lunch, trying his best to hide his mood. If anyone asked, the steam rising off of him was only an effort to dry all the rain water he'd amassed, and had nothing to do with being pissed.

Slamming a knife into Gray's cutting board hard enough to split the wood betrayed his irritation, and mumbled "I'll buy a new one" while he adjusted to continue chopping more carefully on the larger piece of cutting board.

"What's got you so sour?" Gray asked. "This weather has everyone down, but don't you think you're laying it on thick?"

Natsu almost pointed out that the weather would clear if he went and kissed Juvia and promised her
that everything with him and Natsu was just a misunderstanding. Revealing his pregnancy would put Natsu in an even more awkward place with Lucy, but it would let Gray easily explain away why Natsu saw him in secret so often. Maybe. Maybe not. Erza had informed Natsu that she knew what was really going on, but somehow was still convinced that there was romantic tension.

For all the good it would do if they could stop the rumor. Gray clearly preferred it to having people gossip about his pregnancy. It would have made Natsu's time dealing with Juvia a lot easier if he could give an honest answer for why he saw Gray so often, but for as much as Natsu blamed Gray for the drama, the pregnancy was on him. He couldn't tell everyone if Gray wanted it kept secret.

"Well?"

"Most people the weather has down didn't have to sit out in it for hours."

"It was a hour," Gray said before thinking to add, "Sorry."

"What was that about, anyway? Did Juvia come knocking earlier? You know I wouldn't beg to be let in while anyone who could make this worse for us was right there, right?"

Gray looked Natsu up and down, considering how to answer, then looked away and said, "Maybe I was busy."

"With what? Bad copies of other people's drawings? The Archive Lacrima isn't going to go anywhere."

Gray made a face, and Natsu let it drop. Whatever it was, it probably had to do with the pregnancy. Either Gray would decide it was something he needed help with and eventually ask Natsu about it, or it was some new discomfort that Gray would eventually throw a fit over while yelling about. Either way, Natsu would hear about it eventually.

"Speaking of Archive Lacrima, I've only used the one Zeref pushed on me for sending him reminders to eat. How does the actual Archive part work?"

"It… gives you access to archives," Gray said. "Ones that have been recorded with Archive magic."

"Like magazines?"

"I've found some articles on there, but most people who use Archive are researches, so it's generally scientific journals that… Oh. Oh no. No."

"Yes."

Gray shot up from his chair, slamming his hands on the table "No!"

"That's the face I made when I saw it."

Moaning, Gray slid back down into his seat, hands going over his head as he let his face fall to the table. "How bad is it? Did you bring a copy?"

"I didn't even read it myself, but it made the cover of Sorcerer Weekly. I thought if it was going to get picked up like that, it would have happened by now."

"Whoever on their staff trolls Magnolia for gossip news must have come looking for a scoop because Jellal returned from a job recently," Gray said. "They were probably looking for a story with him and Erza. Everyone started talking about us again because of Juvia's rain. Even the local news. And the
"I'm not reading it," Natsu said.

Gray lifted his head, serious expression set on his face. "For me. I can't go out in this rain. I could probably get away with going shirtless, but if I went inside somewhere with other people or someone got too close outdoors, they would see the water running over the space where my stomach actually is. I'll pay you back. Just get a copy."

Technically, since the rain could expose Gray's pregnancy, being his errand boy in bad weather did fall under Natsu's list of unofficial aide duties, but Natsu still had no desire to buy a gossip magazine about his own love life. Even when he heard the clink of Gray dropping coins onto the table, Natsu did his best to ignore the request. The second clink—a tip for delivery—didn't appeal to Natsu either. Unlike Gray, who Mavis barely paid enough to cover rent since he barely worked for her, Natsu took jobs regularly in order to make sure he could keep themselves and Happy fed, and have a bit left for a rainy day. He didn't need whatever spare change Gray had.

But the next incentive Gray threw sweetened the deal enough for Natsu to change his tune. "I'll tell you why you were locked out once I've read it."

"Will I be locked out again when I go and buy it?"

"No. I still need you to make hot chocolate."

With that assurance, Natsu set his cooking implements down and turned to leave without taking the coins, but Gray caught his arm as he reached for the door.

"On last thing."

"Yeah?"

"You gave Jellal and Erza fudge?"

"Yeah?" Had Jellal mentioned it the other day? Was that worth squeezing his arm so hard that his wrist was about to pop off.

"D-don't…" Gray averted his gaze. "Don't do that again."

"Why? Did he not like it."

"No. But… It's something you learned to bribe me, right? How am I supposed to feel if other people get it for no reason while I have to jump through hoops?"

How was he supposed to… what? He wasn't wrong that the fudge making was originally learned on his behalf—although Natsu and Happy had both put on a few pounds testing recipes until he got the hang of it, so it wasn't like Gray was the only one to ever have fudge. But Natsu had never considered that bribes might be its sole purpose, and he really wasn't asking a lot of Gray in telling him to walk to the guild.

But Gray looked offended, and Natsu didn't need a shock collar to tell him that he shouldn't upset Gray. And he had no good way to bribe Gray if he made fudge a casual gift either, and no need (or real ability) to bribe anyone else with sweets.

"Okay. It can just be for you for now."
Smiling, Gray let go. "Be right back, okay?"

Natsu rubbed his wrist and tried not to look too baffled by the… the mood swing. That must have been what he just saw. "Okay."

Hopefully the article wouldn't swing Gray's mood back to hand popping.

-0-

A Secret Love? This Fire and Ice Combo Makes For A Lot Of Steam!

Natsu could feel his eyebrow twitching as Gray pressed the magazine open the main feature article. He didn't have to read this. He didn't need to read this. He didn't want to read this. Yet hear he was, leaning over Gray as they read it together.

It turns out Jellal isn't the only one deeply in love in Fairy Tail.

"Did they have to throw Jellal in there?" Gray asked.

"Of course they did. When in the last five years have the written an article that didn't mention him."

The town is abuzz with rumors of a secret, scandalous love recently come to light. As we long suspected, Salamander has a burning passion for someone on his team. But it's not the lovely Lucy after all.

"Okay." Natsu grabbed a corner and closed the magazine on Gray's hand. "That's enough."

Gray swatted Natsu's hand away and opened the magazine back up. "I'm not done. I need to know what we're dealing with."

"It can't be worse than whatever rumors are going around the guild."

"It's a tabloid. Of course it can be worse. Let me know what it says so I'll know what to tell Lyon when he calls and asks if I lost my mind."

"All you have to tell him is that you lied to Lucy, she told the guild the lie, and it wound up in Sorcerer Weekly."

Gray gave Natsu a flat look and went on reading.

Fairy Tail's Gray Fullbuster, believed to be the fiancée of water maiden Juvia Lockser, has caught Natsu's eye. While the on-again-off-again nature of Lucy and Natsu's relationship means they were off-again (or were they?) when this new affair began, what of Gray? Our sources tell us that although he's known to be shy with his true feelings, there has been no one in his life but Juvia. Was this steamy romance kept secret for fear that it would jeopardize his marriage plans?

Gray had to stop there, pushing the magazine away and groaning as he ran his hands over his face and through his hair. Natsu hoped that meant he was at his limit to, but once Gray was finished emitting noises of disgusted distress, he pulled the magazine close again.

If the perpetual rain falling over Magnolia is any indicator, it seems Juvia was completely betrayed by this twist. No one saw it coming, but it's all true. Multiple sources have confirmed for us that Natsu and Gray have constantly been seen together for months, often going off alone to some secret hideaway, and an anonymous tip has informed us that there are make-out sessions abound.

At this point, Gray gave up and closed the magazine. "One kiss. One."
"Actually, we might want to skim the rest of that for names of 'sources' to beat up."

Grudgingly, Gray picked the magazine back up and said, "I get to beat them up first."

"Okay. But then I don't have to read the rest with you."

Gray grumbled at that, but obligingly didn't read the article aloud as Natsu resumed making lunch. Finally, having forced his way through it all, he said, "Gajeel and Mira."

"I should have guessed the had a hand in this. Surprised they didn't mention Happy. Anything else I should know?" Natsu asked.

"They approached Lucy, but she wouldn't talk to them. Also, it looks like the gist of this is that you're dating me to spite Lucy, and I might be ruined for marriage because of it. 'No one in my life but Juvia.' Please. As if anyone could have another relationship while Juvia thinks they're engaged."

Natsu had never put much thought into Gray's perpetual single status, largely because there was always drama with him and Juvia, but now that he thought of it, it was an oddity. Gray was young, attractive, able to support a spouse, and not immune to attraction. It did make sense that someone like himself ought to seek out a relationship, and that he shouldn't have too much trouble finding someone. Even if he didn't find the one, he ought to be more active on the dating scene. But now that Gray mentioned it, Natsu could also envision Juvia chasing off anyone else Gray took an interest in. There was, after all, a reason why Natsu had skipped going to the guild that day.

"Anything about me and Lucy?"

"Just some speculation on how heartbroken she must be. The writer thinks you'll be back together again soon. I guess they think you guys broke up more than once. Did anyone actually think you were getting back together?"

"A lot of people did," Natsu said. "Thanks for not being one of them."

Gray, who couldn't set foot in the guild without someone mentioning his relationship with Juvia to him, didn't need to ask what Natsu meant. Their guild was friendly and supportive and a beautiful family of choice, but sometimes supporting one person or getting too invested in something you expected your family to do led to them making things uncomfortable.

Natsu had chicken broth and onion heating and eggs cracked and ready to be beat in for soup, so while he waited for that, he dealt with their silent sulking over exes by prepping hot chocolate as well. Just as he was about to break chocolate into the milk, he thought to ask, "What was I locked out for?"

"Oh. Nothing really. I was going to get the door for you, but something distracted me."

"And then you spent an hour sitting at the table being distracted?"

"Well, I spent some of it contemplating filling a dutch oven with water and drowning myself in it, and I almost called Erza to beg for help."

"With drowning yourself?"

"With comforting lies about what the second half of a pregnancy is like," Gray said. "I saw Meredy's baby move before that thing tore its way out. Did you know that when these things get bigger, you can see them moving. There would be a handprint pushing out on her stomach. It was disgusting. Like someone out of an alien movie where the infected host is about to burst."
The first place Natsu's mind went with that was to make sure that Gray watched no movies about aliens that reproduced using human hosts. He wasn't sure if Gray could find anything like that in the magic archives, but he would ask Zeref about tweaking his lacrima to restrict it from accessing anything to do with aliens anyway. It took a few shameful stops along his train of thought before he realized what had Gray thinking about alien hosts, and he whirled around to face Gray so fast, he nearly knocked both the soup and milk off the stove.

"You felt her move?"

"Yes? I don't know. Maybe. I felt something. I've been feeling stuff all week but thought it was the baby doing something weird to me digestion. The last one was more here though." He rubbed a hand over what looked like thin air, but Natsu knew to be just below his belly button. "It just occurred to me that it's probably her. Not much else that could be moving there."

Gray felt the baby move! From Gajeel and Jellal's complaining, Natsu knew it would be a little while still before he would be able to feel it, and he would need to catch Gray in the exact right mood to get permission to touch, but Gray still felt the baby move. Natsu's heart swelled with pride at the idea that their baby was strong enough for Gray to feel her.

And then his heart deflated as he remembered that it would never be 'their' baby. Not fully. Not even if he was the father. Whatever the guild said and whatever the tabloids claimed, there was nothing between them. Lucy had planted the idea of him and Gray in Natsu's head such that it had taken root, but after she did the same with everyone else, Natsu learned that she hadn't even known what she was talking about. And Gray would give the baby to Mavis and Natsu might or might not be allowed to babysit for her.

Natsu turned back to the soup to hide his scowl. It was fine if they didn't raise her. What mattered most was that the girl lived. Natsu didn't need to be a big part of her life. It was nothing compared to knowing the girl would live. If he could see her and hear her laugh, the it was totally fine with him if there could be nothing between him and Gray because he put her first. Completely fine. He was beating the egg so hard as he mixed it into the soup that he sent broth flying everywhere because it was completely fine.

"Are you okay?" Gray asked.

"Fine!"

A rolled up magazine hit him hard on the back of the head, and Natsu looked back to see Gray holding an ice bazooka.

"What are you mad about? I'm the one that can feel a baby I didn't even want squirming around inside of me. Have you ever read those medical reports about fat people who get infested with maggots and realize it when they feel something ticking in their gut? Because that's all I can think about right now."

Medical reports. Natsu would have Zeref restrict Gray's access to medical horror stories too. Good fucking God that was horrifying to think about! How bored had Gray been when he read about maggot infestations?

"What's that look for? I can't go out in the rain, remember? And I can only copy drawings so many times before I get bored and browse other records."

"Browse something happier."
Gray made a face.

"Really. Besides, I don't think anyone's ever enjoyed having maggots, and most people are excited to feel their baby move for the first time."

"I don't even know when the first time I felt it was. And I'm pretty sure Meredy and Erza both have complained about their baby keeping them up at night with its movements."

"Just be excited," Natsu said. "Be happy that Mavis's baby is going strong. And say something right away if you go too long without feeling her move, because if she stops going strong, we need to take her to Porlyusica."

Gray snorted. "Nothing going to happen to her. Half the reason my magic's tied to her is to make sure nothing happens to her. Porlyusica said that it'd be near impossible for anything to go wrong with the baby unless I go out and try to get her hurt."

That was good news, but no one had ever mentioned it to Natsu. "When did you see Porlyusica?"

"When she stitched Zeref's head up."

That had been a month ago. Natsu closed his eyes and sighed, doubting he would be able to convince Gray to go for another checkup before he either gave up on hiding his pregnancy or the rain let up. Neither were likely to happen in the near future, and even if they did, Gray would still resist going to checkups.

But if his magic was supporting the baby girl's development, then it probably wasn't as urgent that he had a checkup as it was for someone like Lucy, who would likely lose every baby she had even with constant medical intervention. Still, it would give Natsu some peace of mind.

"You should see Porlyusica more often. If nothing else, she should know how your progressing, in case anything does come up."

"Go tell her then. Keep her up to speed."

"She might have something to help with your backaches."

"Ask her for it on my behalf."

"If you come along when I ask, I'll make whatever flavor of fudge you want."

A fire lit in Gray's eyes. "Strawberry."

"Strawberry? What are you? Erza?"

"She got to try your strawberry fudge before I did. It's not right."

Natsu almost didn't say anything to that, but since Gray cared so much about who else got fudge, he admitted, "Happy is my taste-tester to make sure all the new recipes work alright, so he tries everything before you do."

"That's fine. He's the taste tester. Erza got gift fudge that I haven't had."

"Okay. Okay. Strawberry fudge if you get a checkup."

"When the rain stops."
"You mean if it stops."

Natsu expected a victory grin from Gray, but his eyes dulled at the reminder of where the rain came from.

Juvia wasn't going to calm down until Gray confronted her. She never came out of such a deep funk without assurance from him, and Gray saying whatever it took to make her cheer up and let the sky clear up always redoubled her confidence in their undying love. Usually, it was just him going too long without talking to her that brought her down, most often a result of them accidentally staggering jobs so they kept missing each other. Or maybe she would say something that irked Gray in just the right way to make him lose his temper. When it came to that, bringing her back down was usually a matter of talking to her, or taking whatever offering she thought Gray would be enamored by.

Sure, Juvia often suspected she had love rivals, but it was usually strictly her imagination blowing this out or proportion when Gray interacted with another girl. Love rival panics never brought the rain because Gray's exasperated remarks the moment Juvia raised her concerns. This time the whole guild knew Gray kissed Natsu, and that came to light after months of teasing about how they suddenly spent so much time together. Lucy and Happy, who were supposed to know Natsu best, were both convinced that Natsu was involved with Gray and complained about how he blew them off to spend time with his boyfriend, and the whole guild took their word for it. And now the rest of the town and a tabloid had taken the guild's word for it.

Natsu couldn't see anything short of a long kiss and calling the engagement back on convincing Juvia that everything was alright. Even Gray coming clean about the pregnancy and Natsu's hand in his still being pregnant might now dissuade anyone. Erza still suspected romance, after all, and while they two of them weren't a couple, they did get along better than one might expect after what Natsu had done. The truth might convince everyone that there was nothing there, but it might also redouble their conviction of romance. After all, Natsu was a known lover of children, and wouldn't Gray conceiving his child be a strong motive to consider Gray as a romantic interest? Lucy would certainly push the idea that Natsu was swooping in on Gray because he wanted a baby.

Natsu suspected his expression mirrored Gray's, albeit not for the same reason. Going back to Lucy couldn't be as bad as pretending to love someone who alarmed you and refused to listen when you said you didn't want something like Juvia did, but it sounded bad enough. So Natsu didn't want Gray to have to pretend to feel more for Juvia than he did just to fix the rain. Besides, maybe Natsu had a little Juvia in him, but the thought of Gray kissing anyone else lit a jealous fire in Natsu's belly.

The soup and chocolate milk were well past done, and Natsu turned the burners off and grabbed bowls and mugs. "An umbrella," Natsu said. "I'll get one of those big beach umbrellas to make sure no rain hits you. We can walk to Porlyusica in the rain, and Gajeel can be the one to talk Juvia down. She can find someone else for her life to revolve around. Lucy. If she loved Lucy the way she loves you, then Lucy'd never doubt it."

"Natsu, we'd only look more like a couple if people see us under an umbrella together."

Natsu set Gray's soup in front of him, but help the hot chocolate just out of reach. "They already think we're a couple anyway. So do you want that strawberry fudge or not?"

Gray hesitated, then held his hand out for the mug. "Give me a few days to work myself up to this, but if it's still raining, then we'll try your umbrella. I'm going to need some way to get to work anyway."
Checkup

Chapter Notes

Just a reminder before this chapter starts: anything that happened prior to Gray and Invel crossing paths in the manga is only a part of this fic if I say it is.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Gray said a few days he meant something more to the effect of a week. Once or twice as he stalled on his check-up, the rain would lighten, but it never fully let up. The canal was almost overflowing from the constant rainfall, and Juvia's depression would reach crisis levels soon, but Gray didn't want to deal with it. He just didn't. He never asked to be her obsession. He fought against her when they met and he came to fight for her because he fought for his guildmates, and if he showed her the sun in saving Lucy or made her feel protected once she came over to his side, then that was nice, but he hadn't done any of that to make her love him. It was unfair of her to continue to pursue him despite so many rejections, and unfair of her supporters in the guild to act like she was owed his affection just for being so dedicated when he never asked her to be.

At least the weather wasn't entirely out of place. Magnolia didn't usually get quite so much rain in April, but it still received plenty. So long as the canal didn't flood, it would be alright if he just… didn't deal with her. The rain didn't come down as heavy anymore, so maybe she would calm down on her own. Or at least run out of tears.

He didn't owe it to her to keep mitigating blows. Not when she kept refusing to accept the word no.

But rain was rain, and even light rain could prove troublesome. The day that Gray could delay a checkup no longer came on a day of moderate rain, where water would still run over his stomach, but visibility wouldn't be too poor for people to see. Natsu showed up with an umbrella large enough to cover a picnic table, and Gray grudgingly got under it with him.

As they left the apartment building, he heard a door creak open and looked back. His downstairs neighbor smiled and gave him a thumbs up. She—and half the rest of the apartment tenants—had stopped by to congratulate him since that article spread around town. The man Gray shared a balcony with even hinted that Gray move in with Natsu. His girlfriend needed a place in town but didn't want to move in with him yet, and having her move next door would be perfect. Since everyone knew he and Natsu already practically lived together, why not live together in the place that one of them actually owned and stop bothering with rent payments?

"Give me the umbrella," Gray muttered when they went around the corner. "Give me the umbrella and walk in the rain. I'm not sharing an umbrella with you."

Natsu, who had caught the thumbs up as well, gave Gray a meek smile and said, "If the old lady says it's fine then you can take yourself home with it, but until then you're not supposed to do any heavy lifting in your condition, and I don't know how heavy 'too heavy' is."

"Natsu, it's an umbrella."

"That I took from a restaurant table. It's meant to be held by big pieces of furniture, not people."
Gray stopped dead in his tracks. "Okay. First off, we're returning this. Second—"

"I'll bring it back when we're done with it, and then you don't have to get wet. Not hurry up before she hits us for being late."

Natsu took one hand off the supposedly too heavy umbrella to take Gray's and pull him forward, and Gray hurried to keep pace and pulled his hand back. The two of them sharing an umbrella would look bad enough, but walking hand in hand on top of that was too much. Gray could only imagine the kind of gossip that would spark.

Telling Lucy about the kiss was a mistake. He should have guilted Natsu into explaining the breakup instead. He knew Zeref was making a lie detecting bracelet, so even if he didn't trust Natsu to tell the truth back then, he could have waited a few weeks to ask. All he had to do was accuse Natsu directly of poking holes in condoms, and they could have avoided so much drama.

"You look sour," Natsu noted. "Is the cold getting to you? We can share my scarf?"

The cold never got to Gray, but it was maddening that his face felt warm. He tried to look away so Natsu couldn't see him blush, but saw an amused civilian watching them who could clearly make out his expression from that angle. There was nowhere to hide.

"Stop teasing," Gray grumbled.

"We're stuck with all this stupid gossip until people get bored with it, unless you want to stage a breakup. But we can't do that until September, or else people'll get suspicious."

"Why September?"

Natsu, normally a yeller, leaned in too close and dropped to a whisper that could barely be heard above the patter of rain. "That's when you're due."

He had to sling an arm over Gray's shoulder and guide Gray forward, because the reminder that there was a day getting close and closer when the baby would come out made Gray seize up.

"Anyway, if we staged something and kept hanging out, they'd all say it was fake. Or temporary. That's how everyone was with me and Lucy, you know? I never even noticed, because you and Juvia always argued over where the two of you stood while we just kept hanging out like friends and didn't even talk about how we'd been a couple, but everyone acted surprised when this stupid secret couple stuff with you and me happened because they thought we'd get back together. I think even Lucy thought it. It was kinda surprising. It always seemed stupid when people didn't listen to you about Juvia, but I never thought they ignored me too."

Grateful for the distraction, Gray thought back to when he heard about the breakup. Natsu had skipped coming to the guild for the entire following week, and couldn't be found in his home, but Lucy showed up the morning after. You could tell she cried, but all she said was that they had their first fight. Mira told her that most couples did, and their relationship could weather it, Lucy said they already called the whole thing off, and since she and Natsu were done talking about it, so was everyone else.

Of course, they all still talked about it, if it was their first big fight, then it seemed crazy for them to give up in one night. No one could imagine Natsu doing something so awful that Lucy would give up so fast, and Lucy would have looked more guilt ridden if she'd done something wrong. Looking back, there had been an expectation that when Natsu came home they would argue it out properly, and the issue would be resolved and things would go back to normal.
When Natsu returned and they asked him what happened, he smiled for them and changed the subject, and both he and Lucy avoided talking about anything serious while acting like old friends. It was a few days of headshaking and gossip about how it wasn't good for a relationship to leave fights unresolved before people realized that Natsu and Lucy really weren't going through the motions of a couple anymore, but even then, people thought they were just being stubborn.

Hell, even after hearing the nature of their fight from Lucy, Gray still thought it would get revolved. Natsu was closer to Lucy than he'd ever been with another human being, and from the way he looked at Gajeel's twins like he wanted to take them home and how he'd been the one to take the first step for adoption, he clearly didn't need a wife who could bear his children. Lucy would have to come around to the idea that she could only have kids by adoption sooner or later, and when she did, Gray assumed that she would be willing to take Natsu back.

It wasn't until he heard Natsu's confession, heard the still raw hurt in his voice over how Lucy didn't think he loved her, that Gray realized they were done. And for all the flack he got with Juvia, he was so thankful he hadn't gone and done the same (aloud) to Natsu.

"Lucy's young, sweet, and cute. And there are plenty of guys who would be happy for a wife who won't tie them down with kids on top of all those things. If she doesn't get that you can't take her back, she will soon, and she'll be alright."

"Like you?"

Gray scowled. "It's kind of hard to move on from someone like Juvia when she can never let go. Did you go back to the guild again yesterday? I can see you got into another fight with her."

"Well, one of us has to try and calm her down."

"She can calm herself down. She's a grown woman. Just because—"

The canal came into view, and Gray immediately silenced himself, gesturing for Natsu to do the same. Juvia had snuck up on him from the water enough times for him to always be wary of her possible presence around any streams or ponds.

Natsu gave Gray a bemused look, but obliged his request for silence, only asking "Juvia?" once the canal was safely behind them.

"Better safe than sorry. Anyway, just because she still thinks there's something between us doesn't mean it's my job to always calm her down. It shouldn't be my job. You don't see me freezing the town over in despair every time I meet someone new and they never call after the first date because she tracked them down and told them I'm off limits."

Natsu nodded, then said, "Actually, what I meant was that Lucy could find a guy like you."

Because Natsu still had his arm over Gray's shoulder, it was easy to intervene and catch Gray when he stumbled in his surprise. The umbrella only slipped a little, and not enough so for either of them to get wet.

"Me?" Gray had entertained the idea of Natsu giving Juvia all those babies she begged for, but it had never occurred to him that Natsu might be thinking along a similar line with him and Lucy.

Him and Lucy? Well, he had nothing against her. She could hold her ground to Juvia, wasn't half as jealous—her explosion that caused the latest round of rumors notwithstanding, and knew when to back off when someone needed space. But…
But she wasn't his type. Visually, sure, but something about her just didn't click with Gray. Maybe it was hearing how easily convinced she could become that someone didn't care for her. Maybe blond just wasn't his color. Maybe he wasn't too keen on adoption himself and did want to leave the option of parenthood open down the road, and a girlfriend who couldn't get pregnant but would want to adopt as soon as she came to terms with her infertility wasn't the right match for him. Maybe he just couldn't see himself with someone who was Natsu's girl for so long.

She wasn't his type, but what Gray said was, "I'll take her, but only if you take Juvia."

Natsu threw his head back and laughed. "No deal! Not my type!"

"Yeah. She's been… I think she'd have handled the whole us thing better if I were a girl, so she could pat herself on the back for letting you have her dream baby, but even at her worst she's taken this better than Juvia does me making eye contact with another mammal." Gray paused. "Not that there is an us."

"Right!"

"But she just threw a few things at me. That's minor compared to flooding the town. And she thought we were dating for a while before she lost it over you blowing her off. So at least you can move on to other people, if you ever want to."

Gray expected another affirmation, but instead Natsu stayed silent. He wouldn't even look Gray's way.

"You like someone?" Gray asked.

Natsu glanced back to Gray and looked away again before saying "Maybe. Some things happened, so we're not as close as we used to be. And there's other issues but… There's someone I've been thinking about."

Lisanna. Gray knew immediately that he was talking about Lisanna. They were almost a couple before she went to Edolas, and could have been again if he hadn't met Lucy before she came home. Now that Natsu and Lucy were over and Lisanna had yet to settle down with anyone, he could easily be thinking of her again.

But some crazy little part of Gray's brain said it could be him. The pregnancy caused a huge rift in their relationship that Natsu was working hard to sew back together, and you couldn't not think of them together when the town whispered about it whenever they were seen in one another's presence. Especially after that Sorcerer Weekly article.

Thinking of that strawberry fudge that Natsu promised in exchange for actually going in for a checkup, Gray asked, "Do you ever do anything special for them?"

"Not really. We just hang out."

Gray made sure to smile, because he wasn't sure what expression he would show Natsu if he didn't. "Good luck with her."

"Yeah. Thanks."

-o-

Laxus stood outside Porlyusica's hut when Natsu and Gray arrived, and gave them and their shared umbrella a knowing grin before it occurred to him that Natsu was escorting Gray to Porlyusica.
"Hang on. You really do have a health issue?"

"You think The First would put up with me lately if I didn't?" Gray asked.

The question earned him a sheepish head shake. "You never seemed off with anything. I just figured… well… I hope you're okay."

Gray shrugged, slipping out from under the umbrella as they neared the door. "I'll live. Is Gramps in there?"

"Yeah." Laxus looked to the door. "Old man fell. Don't think anything's broken, but better safe than sorry."

"How's he doing?" Gray asked.

"So-so. He thought I was his dad this morning, but he knew it was me when I dropped him off. Porlyusica still chased me out, though. Took my account of things then said she'd have a better shot at getting his story if I wasn't right there for him to keep asking for help answering her questions. He's mostly answering them alright, from the sound of it."

Meaning Laxus could hear inside. Of all the dragon slayers, Laxus had the dullest senses, but he did still hear better than most people.

Gray was about to tell himself that wasn't really an issue when the door opened and Porlyusica stepped out. "He seems to be… Oh. It's you. Actually showed up when it wasn't an emergency for once, did you?"

Gray shot Natsu a glare. He could see Porlyusica roll her eyes out of the corner of his own, and heard Laxus snicker. Neither of them needed to know that he was only doing responsible adult things because Natsu bribed him like a child.

"Well, come in," Porlyusica said before turning to Laxus. "As for you. Makarov is sleeping now. He had a hip fracture, and he mustn't be moved until my potion is done mending the bone. Hopefully, he'll be less confused once the pain is cleared up. It should be about an hour. And you." She turned to Natsu. "Is that idiot brother of yours actually taking his medicine?"

Natsu straightened and said, "Yes Ma'am. And he's been accident free for two weeks."

She cringed. "Two weeks."

"Just some bruises. I'd have dragged him back here if he broke anything."

With a sigh, Porlyusica said, "I suppose it's better that I don't have to see him constantly. Sit in the chair, Gray. Your old master is taking up the bed, so I can stand while we discuss your health."

Gray gave Natsu a desperate, pleading look as Porlyusica herded him inside, and before the door shut he heard Natsu said, "Hey Laxus, walk with me, will you? Gray's gonna kick my ass if I
eavesdrop, and you look like you could use a distraction anyway."

Laxus looked grateful for the offer when the door closed, and Gray relaxed as Porlyusica shoved him into her chair. He didn't want to be alone to hear any news on his condition, but it was always nice for Laxus to have a mental break from Makarov's declining health, and that would keep him from hearing Porlyusica discuss anything about Gray.

"How is the old man?" Gray asked. "Aside from the fracture, I mean?"

"Not well, but then what's new?" Porlyusica asked. "It seems his moments of clarity are becoming fewer and farther between. Only a matter of time now before he's gone in all but body. If we're lucky he'll cling to some sense of self for another year. After that, we might see some terminal lucidity. But I wouldn't count on that happening for a few more years."

Gray almost didn't hear her add, "Unfortunately."

He shifted in his seat to get a better look at Makarov, still asleep in Porlyusica's bed. They all visited him at Laxus's from time to time, but he was strictly limited in the number of visitors he had in a day. The stress of too many people confused him. Gray and Natsu both rarely fought for the chance to see him. They never knew him in his prime, per se, but it was nice to have all of their stronger memories of him be ones from when his mind was still all there.

They said the only thing that held the dementia off so long was that he knew there was no one to replace him. Once Mavis was freed and cured, he could trust that Fairy Tail's founder could once again carry the legacy that he'd carried on for her, and he no longer resisted the decline of age.

Within a year of the war, he hadn't been fit to work anymore, and it was only a few months later that Laxus insisted Makarov move in with him.

"What all has Mavis told you?" Porlyusica asked, cutting Gray out of his premature mourning for the old man.

"Just that it's a girl. Is there anything else I need to know?"

Porlyusica hesitated, not wanting to admit that Gray's child was healthy enough that the constant checkup skipping had done no harm, then finally said, "Not related to the baby. She's fine, as near as I can tell. There's nothing wrong that I have the means to detect, and even if there was, we'd only remove her at this point if your own life depended on it."

Gray nodded. He had just passed the twenty-one week mark, and Porlyusica had told him there would be no elective procedure's one he hit week twenty.

"The concern then, is primarily with your own body. Your aren't meant to carry a baby the same way a woman is, and while your magic can help with that, I'll want to make sure your body doesn't undergo any additional strain because of how you're built. You're hips in particular. If the baby moves lower down as it grows and gets closer to delivery, then I would worry about what that might do to the hip bone. Will you come regularly for that, or do I need to keep fudge on hand to incentivize you?"

Gray swallowed and shook his head. A baby he wanted not to get attached to was one thing, but his body being wrecked was something he absolutely wanted to avoid. With the girl's movements becoming stronger by the day and his stomach too large and heavy to ignore even if he hid it behind an illusion, the pregnancy was becoming a stronger presence than ever in Gray's everyday life. Skipping checkups made it easier not to think about what was to come, but they didn't make it easier to forget about the pregnancy in its entirety anymore. And if what was to come was screwing him up
permanently, then he would do whatever Porlyusica said he needed to do to prevent that.

"Take your ring off," Porlyusica ordered. "I need to see you as you are, and feel where the bone is."

He stood for her while she pressed her fingers into various points in his side, answering questions on where he was or wasn't sensitive to touch. The inspection required sliding his pants down, and he hoped she wouldn't comment when his body reacted to being touched while near nude.

"Don't look so embarrassed," she said. "You think you're unique? Arousal while pregnant is common, boy."

That didn't mean he wanted to deal with it. Especially when being touched by an old lady.

"How common is being pregnant while male?" Gray asked.

"Very, if you're an animal Zeref got his hands on. I should tell you that he conducted a few experiments with fast repopulating animals when I mentioned my concerns about your hip. By his judgment, it would be better to remove the child surgically to avoid any risks."

"Wouldn't… wouldn't surgery be a greater risk?"

There was a pause before Porlyusica spoke, just long enough to let Gray know that there was something she was avoiding. "The recovery is longer for a woman if she has surgery, but you're not a woman, and this is the best route. So long as we wait for labor to begin, it shouldn't cause any harm to your magic. You'll still want to take it easy as you get into those last few weeks. Don't forget, stressing yourself into a premature labor can still cause you to lose your magic."

Gray tried to keep up a smile and a rye tone as he said, "Saying stuff like that will only stress me out, you know."

It didn't help him keep up a smile that Porlyusica gave him a consoling shoulder pat.

"I know you didn't want this, but you've done well, considering your circumstances. Just hold on a little longer."

It had been a few weeks since Gray last cried over his situation and he wanted to keep it that way, so while his throat constricted at the consolation, he didn't let himself break down. He gave a mute nod, and schooled his expression back into neutrality.

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The good news was that nothing was wrong with Gray's hip alignment. The bad news was that Natsu wasn't back from his walk with Laxus by the time Gray's checkup finished. There was also suspect news that was likely bad tucked into an envelope that Gray was supposed to hand off to Natsu. Probably an explanation about why exactly he was slated for surgery, since Gray had explicitly told Porlyusica that if there was anything else that he didn't have the ability to make his own determination on, he didn't want to hear it.

With the two of them taking their sweet time, Porlyusica decided to mix up another diagnostic potion for Gray to drink, so he sat in her main room with Makarov while Porlyusica quickly combined ingredients in a backroom, and was the only one there when Makarov woke up.

"Hello."

The voice took Gray by surprise. It was familiar, but too simple to be the voice he used to know. All
of Makavor's old cheer was gone, and it help only childish curiosity.

"Hey."

Gray smiled, remembering Laxus's lectures from his rare visits on how to handle Makarov. The old man would reflect whatever mood he sensed in others. Act calm and happy, and he would be more likely to relax and be at ease. Show signs of distress, and Makarov would become stressed trying to puzzle out what was wrong.

"Did you come to Porlyusica's too?" Makarov asked.

"I did. Natsu brought me?"

"Natsu?" Makarov looked puzzled. "That was good of him. I didn't realize he heard about Erza's eye. How nice of both of you to be here for her. She's new, so be sure to make her feel at home. This guild is her family now."

Gray's smile faltered, and he had to force it back.

"Yeah. Sure. She seems…" How much of what parts of Erza did he remember just then? "She seems shy. But I'm sure she'll open up soon."

Makarov nodded, beaming with pride that Gray would be so understanding. It made Gray die a little inside to receive such approval, thinking back to how he'd really reacted to Erza when she first came to the guild.

"And who were you again?"

He died inside the rest of the way. "I'm Gray."

"Oh, yes. Gray. I'm used to seeing you without your pants. You let yourself go, Gray."

He hadn't put the ring back on yet, and if it were anyone else commenting on his stomach, he would have reapplied the illusion immediately. But Makarov didn't need anything more confusing him, and Gray's appearance altering itself abruptly would definitely cause more confusion.

"What are you doing here, Gray? Were you hurt?"

This was so, so much worse than Laxus made it sound. He'd heard that Makarov was to the point where he often lost track of things said only a minute earlier, but he hadn't seen it for himself. He didn't even know what answer to give that would make sense in the old man's current state of mind. Whatever that state might be.

So he gave up on playing along to whatever he thought Makarov thought was happening.

"I came in for a checkup. I'm pregnant."

"Pregnant? Well, how did you get pregnant?"

"There was an accident with Zeref."

"What were you doing with Zeref? Isn't that dangerous?"

"Not really. He's Natsu's brother, you know. And he calmed down now, so the doesn't deliberately hurt people."
"Well, what did he do to you?"

"He had an experiment go wrong that let me pregnant."

Makarov’s eyes widened. "Pregnant? Really? Who’s the father?"

"I'm not sure. Natsu, most likely."

"How are you not sure?"

By time Gray finished explaining, Makarov wouldn't even remember what he'd asked. "I'm just being silly. It's Natsu."

"Natsu?"

"That's right."

"You and Natsu don't get along."

"We're friends now."

"Since when?"

"We started hanging out more a few years ago."

"Who started hanging out with you more?"

Gray almost wept with relief when Porlyusica came back in just then. Seeing the situation, she handed him his potion and he drank without instruction while she took over conversing with Makarov.

With Makarov distracted, Gray slid the ring back on to hide his stomach. Sooner or later Laxus would come back, and he didn't need to be privy to anything going on with Gray.

He sat there, waiting for the potion to finish working its way through him and spinning the ring on his finger as he listened to Makarov. Sometimes it was the same three or four questions circling through, over and over. Other times the downward turn of Porlyusica's lip at the sight of some book in her room would strike a chord, and he would be in a moment. It was never the present moment, but even if he didn't know what year it was, to hear him anchored in some event rather than endlessly grasping for an understanding of his surroundings was a step up.

The last time Makarov came to the guild, Gray had been out on a job. He didn't regret missing the visit. Supposedly, the old man could tell that he was in a guild, but not his own. The guildhall he grew up with collapsed in the fight with Phantom Lord, and he couldn't recognize the new building. Everyone had to reassure Gajeel afterward that he wasn't at fault. The guildhall had been destroyed multiple times since that fight, so even if he'd left the building be, Makarov wouldn't have known where he was.

Gray couldn't have been happier to see Natsu and Laxus return. He scurried out the door with Natsu while Laxus checked in with his old man.

"How's Gramps?" Natsu asked, looking back over his shoulder in concern as they walked away.

"Bad. Way worse than last time we saw him. Unless you've been by without me."

Natsu shook his head. "He still remembers you?"
"Sort of. When I told him who he was, he seemed to recognize me. He remembered we don't get along when I mentioned you."

Natsu smiled at that. It wasn't the same as having Makarov in the present with them, but to still be remembered in some capacity was what they clung to at that point. A lot of the newer members, Gajeel and Wendy and especially later additions like Jellal, were perfect strangers to him. Although he did stress at times about how he must have been in trouble with the council when Jellal was around. For that reason, Jellal tended to be around Makarov even less than he was around anyone else.

"I should probably stop by Laxus's soon," Natsu said. "Who knows how much longer he'll kind of be there, you know? It'd be good to talk to him before he's totally gone."

"Yeah. Don't count on a long conversation."

Natsu nodded, expression going somber again.

Makarov was old, Gray reminded himself. He lived a good long life, and they all knew that they would have to carry on without him someday. It just seemed... cruel. Family usually left the guild, or if someone died, it was abrupt. A swift end in battle, dying for a purpose. Watching Makarov's mind go so slowly and senselessly while his body held up was hard to watch. Gray didn't envy Laxus. They all knew he wouldn't have felt like he had to be the one who stepped up to took over Makarov's care if he weren't flesh and blood. None of them wanted the stress of having to see their old master that way day in and day out.

"We should get him flowers. Or beer. Does Laxus still let him have beer?"

"I don't think so." Gray scowled, but it wasn't so much at the thought of giving a senile old man something that would only confuse him more as it was the pressure increasing low in his gut. "Just stick to flowers. I'm sure Mira knows ones that have some significance to him. He'd like that more."

"You think? Alright. I'll ask next time we're... next time I'm at the guild."

As they made their way into town, conversation drifted from Makarov back to Juvia, and Gray was happy for the change of subject. Dealing with Makarov's mental decline was worse than dealing with a pregnancy. Gray would take a baby sitting on his balder and day over having to sit in that room and try not to crack while unable to give the man who gave him a home some sense of stability because he had grown too much to match how Makarov could still remember him. Getting out of there as fast as possible had been... Wait...

Oops.

Gray stopped, looking back towards the woods. "Porlyusica is going to kill me."

"Why? Did you tell Gramps something bad?"

"No. I had another test I was supposed to do. Urine sample. It slipped my mind after seeing Gramps."

"Should we go back?"

Gray looked at their surroundings. They were a few blocks into town, and while his apartment wasn't close, it was closer than Porlyusica's.

"No. She's either going to beat me up now or later, and it was just something we thought we'd try while waiting for you to get back. She didn't find anything wrong with either of us, and everything
was developing on track."

"I'd feel better if we went back."

"Good for you," Gray said. "But I drank a liter of diagnostic fluid that's now sitting in my bladder, which this stupid kid is now sitting on top of. I'm not going to make it back there before I wet myself."

He would have slugged Natsu for laughing at that if he weren't afraid of sudden movements. The bastard did realize it was his fault Gray couldn't hold it that long, right?

"Can you make it back to the apartment?"

"Maybe. I'd rather not try."

There weren't too many restaurants along the path they took. They could take a detour to one, although Gray would be embarrassed to go in shirtless and ask to use their toilet without ordering anything.

"Do you think it's more or less likely," Natsu asked.

"I don't know. More likely that I can make it back?"

Natsu urged Gray forward "Let's hurry, then."

Gray shuddered, feeling the baby bounce inside him with the movement. There were detours they could take to a restaurant along the way, but no guarantee that he'd be allowed to use their toilet if he wasn't a customer. And the detours were far enough out of the way that he wasn't sure he'd make it if they waited until the last second.

"Natsu, this thing turns my piss green. I don't want it all over my pants."

"We're hurrying."

"I'll hate you forever if you make me wet myself in public on top of everything else. No amount of fudge and hot chocolate will make up for this."

Growling, Natsu swept Gray up into a princess style carry, keeping the umbrella hooked under his armpit as he broke into a run. "We'll hurry faster then."

It took Gray a second to process what was happening, and he hid his face in his hands when it sank in. At least he could have the consolation of knowing that if he lost his hold on the potion now, Natsu would suffer for it too.

"If anyone sees us like this, it will only make the rumors worse."

"Same's true if we're seen together in any way," Natsu said. "We can't ask a restaurant for a jar to put the sample in, so we gotta get you home. I'll run it back to Porlyusica after."

"This is the worst day of my life," Gray moaned.

"No." Natsu looked at him and grinned. "Just the most ridiculous this week."

The umbrella bounced off a street lamp that Natsu nearly ran into with his attention off of Gray, and he turned his attention back to where he was going.
"Watch it!" Gray yelled.

Natsu just laughed and picked up the pace.

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If there was one upshot to the madness that was the trip home, it was that Gray was so frazzled by the time Natsu broke the umbrella when it caught on the apartment door that the conversation with Makarov had almost completely left his mind. Gray shifted his weight uncomfortably from foot to foot while Natsu quickly emptied a jar of pre-made sauce into the sink and washed the glass, hurried to the bathroom, and tried not to make eye contact as he returned the jar after.

"Is it supposed to be this green? Was this stuff green when it went into you?"

"Yes. No. It was red. It always comes out green. Just put a lid on it and take it away."

Chuckling at Gray's embarrassment, Natsu dug out a lid and capped the jar, then set it on the counter while he tried to straighten the stolen umbrella enough for it to be functional on the trip back to Porlyuisca's.

"If I'm not back in time to make dinner, there's leftovers in the fridge."


Natsu hesitated at the door. "Do you want me to tell you if she finds anything?"

"Only if it's bad, and then you can just tell me what I need to do to avoid it. You're pregnant' is more than enough bad news for me to deal with at once. And I mean things that I think are bad. I don't care if you think stopping them from happening is a bad thing." Recalling the letter, Gray pulled it from his pocket. "Speaking of which, this was for you."

Natsu took it, smiling, and waved as he left.

Chapter End Notes

Terminal lucidity is one of those really interesting cues that someone is about to die. When someone with mental degradation is on the way out, they suddenly have this moment of clarity again. It isn’t necessarily going to be a full mental recovery, but it’s a huge step back towards how they used to be. There could be seven years since it last felt like the person was really there and not just a confused shell with traces of their old self, and all of a sudden they’ll be themselves again. They’ll remember things they haven’t in years, and speak clearly and coherently. And then sometime in the next few days or weeks, they’ll be gone.

Incidentally, if I’m ever diagnosed with dementia, I want to have it in my living will to euthanize me once I degrade to a certain point. Aside from that last moment of clarity, there does get to a point where you’re really just existing, sometimes for years and years before the end finally comes. I’m happy to take care of people who would rather come to their natural end while in that state, but I’d rather not live like that, you know?

Except when it comes to taking care of people who do the circular conversation thing. I absolutely hate conversations with dementia patients who’re in such decline that they
can’t remember something you said 20 seconds ago. You know that when you finally excuse yourself, they’ll still have all the same questions they had when they came to you. It feels cruel leaving them like that, but there’s nothing you can do, and even if you try to stay there and make them feel like someone’s there to help give them answers, you find yourself answering the same three or four questions over and over in a loop.

“Where am I?” “You’re in the hospital. You fell and broke your hip.” “The hospital? Oh no. How did I get here? I live alone.” “No, ma’am. You live in a long term care facility. The staff called for an ambulance when you had your accident.” “There aren’t any places like that in Nebraska.” “We’re not in Nebraska. You moved three years ago so your family could be close by.” “But where am I right now?” “You’re in the hospital.”
Natsu had to buy his own large umbrella. If he took them from restaurant decks all the time, he'd get caught sooner or later. And he needed one for Gray, because Gray was so afraid people would see his stomach, and Natsu wanted to make sure that he still got up and out and about. He was finally back to getting out of his apartment when the rain came, and Natsu was determined not to let him backslide.

They had settled into a good rhythm. Gray wasn't as on top of things as he'd been before the pregnancy, but he was so much better than right after he learned. He ate without prompting. He was up with the sun and didn't go back to bed until the sun went down. He came outside. He talked to all his friend again. He even managed new developments in his pregnancy relatively well.

But he'd been very clear about not wanting to test how well he handled pregnancy developments that no one thought were good news, so Natsu kept the contents of the letter to himself. It was only a warning, and he could keep watch for the signs on Gray's behalf.

The umbrella did get Gray out more. If Natsu just wanted him to get out in some capacity, then they would go to a café for lunch. If it had been too long since the last socialization, Natsu would badger Gray into accompanying him while he paid a visit to individual guild members, many of whom snickered at the shared umbrella, or were concerned with Gray's health. Laxus had told Mira about running into them at Porlyusica's and how whatever was up with Gray, he needed regular checkups for it. That people had seen Natsu carry Gray home only added to the concern, because now there was a sense that he might be too weak to walk for himself. The vague medical issue excuse Gray gave that half the guild hadn't believed took on new life, and Gray now found himself assuring people that he wasn't in any danger of dying rather than insisting that he really wasn't in perfect health.

And Natsu just smiled.

Because Gray didn't want to know if there were any developments that no one thought were good news.

So Natsu kept the contents of the letter to himself.

They might have carried on like that indefinitely, with Natsu avoiding Juvia and Lucy save for one trip to the guild to take a job, and with Gray tightly controlling who he saw and when. At least until Gray's stomach became obtrusive enough that people would notice even if they couldn't see it.

Gray didn't even need to go to the guild. He had persuaded Mavis that rather than making him shelve books, he could copy them into the Archive, restricted to the access of only his and her lacrima. Mavis vastly preferred the books to the spell, but had to admit that the various tweaks that Zeref kept making to track down key words or better organize files (no doubt done with the intent of organizing his own research) it would be handy to have documents in the Archive. Gray's apartment was between her home and the guild, so she dropped off a new book for him whenever he finished copying one. It was even more mind numbingly boring than keeping the guild's record room tidy, but it was something he could be paid to do from home, so Gray committed himself to it. That he could commit to work again was also something Natsu was happy to see.
But it couldn't last. Natsu made plans for them to visit Lyon, with Gray spending the day at Lamia Scale while Natsu helped Meredy with little Uriel, but on his way to Gray's apartment, he noticed the churning canal water sloshing over the edges of the sandbag barrier the town had erected for fear of a flood, and resigned himself to a hard sell of taking Gray to see Juvia.

Gray wasn't wrong to say that he shouldn't have to be the one to deal with her. He was just wrong to think that he didn't have to. No one else had managed to soothe her, and it was going on a month straight of rain.

Gray smiled when he first opened the door to let Natsu in, but that smile vanished the moment Natsu said, "We're going to the guild."

Good thing the trip to Lyon's had been planned as a surprise. Natsu didn't want to know how much more upset Gray would be if he'd been looking forward to anything specific that day.

"Absolutely not. Not while she's still like this!" Gray gestured to the rain outside. "For once, there's someone in my life who she can't scare off, and she needs to learn to deal with that."

Someone who she thought was in his life, he meant. Natsu didn't see much point in correcting an obvious word fumble that Gray was probably internally screaming in embarrassment over as if was. Gray would never consider him after what Natsu did, any they both knew what he meant. A little slip of the tongue like that was likely just an accident after so much teasing from guildmates. Gray would never go for him, and Natsu could smile and keep his thoughts on that to himself too.

"The town's gonna flood at this rate. And the market where I buy everything I need for fudge is on the ground floor."

Gray glared. "Not even for fudge."

"If you get her to stop the rain, you can go out without worrying about the rain rolling off your stomach and giving the illusion away. No more umbrella."

Natsu kind of liked sharing an umbrella. But Gray complained about it constantly, so it had seemed like a good offer. The only real effect it had on Gray, however, was to turn his anger into a simmering pout.

Trying one last time, Natsu said, "If the guild floods, then the basement and the records room will get hit first. You're already running on nothing but good will getting Mavis to be as obliging as she is with working for her. Gramps wouldn't have even let you keep the baby a secret. Even if no one's going to blame you for it if Juvia floods the basement, you owe it to those books you can't be bothered to shelve to try and keep them safe."

It was a last ditch effort that Natsu would have considered total nonsense, but it worked. Gray huffed, looked around Natsu to the rain outside, and then said, "Fine. But I want a whole batch of fudge for this."

"What do you need a whole batch at once for?" Natsu asked, genuinely concerned. "You'll make yourself sick."

"No deal then."

Sighing, Natsu held his hands up in surrender. "A whole batch. I'll even mix it so you get four different flavors in each corner. You know I'll have to see Lucy too during this, right?"

Gray looked surprised by the reminder, even though they had been together when Bisca told them
that Lucy and Juvia were now commiserates in complaining about Gray and Natsu's relationship.

"Well..." Gray chewed on his lip, thinking of what to say to that. "If she gives you too much grief, I'll give you something to make her stop."

"Like what?"

"Like something I'll regret," Gray said. "Will Erza be there?"

"I don't know. Probably. Why?"

"I need backup in case I do something I regret."

Fair enough. Although why Gray would want Erza—who bought into the silly rumors about them being a couple—over the much more level-headed Jellal, Natsu had no idea.

They passed the time walking to the guild discussing silly things. What flavors of fudge Gray wanted in his special batch. The more Gray stretched his requests, the more Natsu explored his fudge making skills to come up with more impressive bribes, so Gray had an array to pick from. Caramel turtle was a definite go, and orange and maple were settled on not long after. Gray was still pitching the idea of a vinegar flavor that he totally didn't want just because of pregnancy cravings and Natsu wasn't allowed to laugh when they reached the guild.

Natsu was familiar with the sucking in of breaths as people saw them come in, having received the same response every time he showed up since Juvia and especially Lucy returned. What he hadn't expected was for Mira to wave to them and say, "How's the pregnancy coming?"

Gray froze in the door. Natsu tripped over his own feet and stumbled to the floor, and lay sprawled there. The guild burst into laughter, tension so thick that Natsu had nearly suffocated on it during previous visits melting away to nothing.

Rolling onto his back, Natsu saw Gray, pale faced, struggling to come up with words to ask how they knew. Then Laxus came out and placed a hand consolingly on Gray's back.

"Don't mind her. She's just being silly."

"H-how so?" Gray managed to ask.

"The old man's been babbling again," Laxus said. "I think the rain's getting to him. Haven't been able to take him to any of the old places he used to love in this weather, you know?"

Gray nodded, seeming to go paler than he had upon hearing Mira's jab. Neither of them had thought of how anyone else might be affected by the rain that he'd refused to try and address, and Natsu could see the guilt set in thinking of how that might have harmed Makarov.

Evergreen leaned in from a nearby table. "He wouldn't stop asking about your baby all night, Mira says."

"Just nonsense," Laxus grumbled. He was the one who put up with most of Makarov's confusion, and had the lowest tolerance for discussion about it.

His girlfriend, however, best coped with what she saw when she came over to help by sharing it with the world and the most positive spin she could find. "It was cute, in a way. He doesn't usually remember, but we told him quite a bit about you two hooking up. Even read him the article on it. Then all of a sudden, he became convinced you were having a baby."
"Oh," Gray said, looking very small.

It struck Natsu that Gray had only seen Makarov once since New Year's, and that was during a pregnancy checkup. Their secret keeping had robbed Mira and Laxus of the appreciation to be had in Makarov having a more lucid moment.

"Laxus said it's all nonsense—"

"It is!"

"—But you saw him recently, didn't you? I thought he might have been mixed up by you being at Porlyusica's for a checkup, if you mentioned anything about adoption. I'm sure Natsu is begging you to consider it."

"No," Gray said, and said fast enough that Mira mistook it for a suspicious denial and grinned.

If they'd been an actual couple and Gray wasn't pregnant with a baby that he planned to deny Natsu custody of out of spite, Natsu would have been all over Gray begging to adopt a child. The cutest baby in the orphanage, or whichever little boy or girl who was old enough to know their words showed the most spunk. Mira was up on enough relationship gossip to know that Natsu and Lucy had been eager to be parents, even if she didn't know about Lucy’s diagnosis, so it was an easy enough guess for her to make.

It was also far from the truth, but Gray seemed to think it was close enough to be worth getting flustered over, because he looked away and mumbled something incoherent.

Well, at least in a fantasy world where Gray didn't resent him for the pregnancy and Natsu actually had a chance with him, and where Natsu could convince Gray not to give the baby up, they now had a solid excuse for where the baby came from, assuming the manage to hide the pregnancy forever.

Too bad that starting their arrival at the guild by making it look like they were quietly looking into adoption would only exacerbate the situation with Juvia. Natsu tried to not even think of how Lucy would react.

Natsu picked himself up off the floor as rumbles about Gray and Natsu as parents made their way around the room. As luck would have it, neither Juvia nor Lucy were there, but Natsu knew they would be. Juvia was a terrible cook, and usually came to the guild to eat, and Lucy would be sure to come for the sake of seeing Juvia, if no one else.

Cana waved to them from a back corner, and Natsu waved back. An out of the way corner wasn't really Natsu's style, but it looked ideal for Gray, if he needed a place to sit any come up with a battle plan. Juvia would immediately detect his presence no matter where he hid, but it at least gave some false sense of obscurity.

Despite having been one of the first to realize that Gray really and truly meant it when he said the engagement was off and he would never marry Juvia, she was among the biggest supporters of Gray and Natsu's alleged relationship. She'd offered a card reading of their romance every time they saw her, and had probably already done one for Mira on the new baby rumor. But then a lot of the guild was pushing Gray towards one romantic pursuit or another that Natsu knew better than to think Gray wanted, and Cana at least wouldn't dwell on it for long.

She still grinned at the two as they approached and held a deck up for them. "Want to hear what your kid'll be like? Mira's taking forever with my beer, so I can give you a quality sober read."

Gray didn't dignify that with a response, which was a shame. Cana's readings were rarely wrong,
and Natsu wanted to hear what she thought was to come. Maybe she could get a read on who the father was.

"No? How about one for the how the happy couple's wedding will go?"

"We're not a couple," Gray said.

"Sure. Sure." Cana started shuffling cards.

"Do not give us a couple reading."

"I won't." She shot Natsu a sly grin, then held the deck out for Gray. "Cut it."

"No."

"It's for your health."

"Cut it," Natsu ordered.

Gray looked at Natsu, surprised. Everyone else was free to make whatever misassumptions they wanted with the vague lies Gray fed them and the hijinks they observed, but Natsu knew the exact status of his health. Since Gray was avoiding asking about the letter, Natsu knew what might be cause for concern with Gray's health better than Gray did.

With a forced sigh Gray reached out for the deck, hand hovering a second before he closed to last few centimeters to grab the cards.

He looked tense as he cut the deck into three smaller sections, reordering them and pushing the cards back to Cana, who then placed a hand to draw the first card.

"Gray!"

All eyes went to Juvia, who raced from the door to the back table where Gray sat. He shifted in his seat, looking around for some way to avoid having her grab onto him and potentially feel the baby. Seeing the incoming disaster, Natsu threw his arms around Gray and pulled him into a hug.

Juvia stopped a few feet short at the sight of the gesture, looking confused for a second before saying, "Natsu doesn't wish to be Juvia's love rival, does he?"

Natsu held Gray tighter.

"Let Gray go," Juvia said. When Natsu continued to ignore her, she looked to Natsu. "Tell him to let go."

Natsu's grip slackened. He'd done his job saving Gray from a pregnancy exposing hug. Now his behavior was counterproductive to making the rain stop.

Gray took one of Natsu's arms and held it in play, swinging his other over Natsu's shoulder. "You have no business telling me what I do with him."

The guild went dead quiet, and Natsu wanted to disappear. Even at his most blunt, Gray still didn't take that tone with Juvia. The worst he ever said to her was no, and only in an plain voice at worst. Too cold, and he'd prompt a rainstorm from her. Did he forget that he came to stop the rain?

Seeing the cold fortitude in Gray's eyes, Natsu swallowed and tried to look equally firm.
Gray wasn't trying to put a stop to the rain. He wanted to put a stop to the mess that lay between him and Juvia.

It took Juvia some time to find her voice. "Gray and Juvia are engaged—"

"Not since I called it off years ago. Four hours doesn't give you the right to ignore every 'no' I tell you for years after, nor do you get to stake a claim on me and scare away anyone else I take an interest in just because you refuse to accept that it didn't work out between us."

"Juvia knows Gray doesn't mean that."

"Juvia doesn't get to decide what Gray thinks for him," Gray said. "I don't want to spend my life with you. And I definitely don't want to spend my life putting up with you not accepting that." He pulled Natsu closer. "I moved on. It's about time you did too."

In the near silence that followed this declaration, Natsu heard Cana muffle a snort and whisper, "Not a couple."

"So," Gray turned his attention back to Natsu, who did not at that moment appreciate being the center of attention, "We were talking about adoptions, weren't we?"

Dear God. How determined was he to shake Juvia?

"J-Juvia… Juvia can be a surrogate. If Gray—"

"No!" Natsu snapped before Gray could. It was one thing to adopt a child who otherwise had no family. Letting his boyfriend get a girl he used to be engaged to pregnant so they could take her kid was well beyond where Natsu drew the line.

Then he remembered that Gray wasn’t his boyfriend, whatever Gray said to discourage Juvia. He was just a convenience. Someone who everyone already thought Gray was involved with, and someone who Juvia couldn’t run off. Someone who could be used to break her of her habit of blocking every attempt Gray made at finding someone new so that he could go on to find someone new.

And it was fine if Gray used him like that. Even if Natsu had only wanted to save Gray's baby and would never regret succeeding at that, he knew he picked the wrong way to go about it, and he knew Gray felt used and abused. There was no way that what Natsu felt was anywhere near what Gray did when he learned about Natsu’s lie. What right did he have to complain if Gray used him a little? He should be glad for the opportunity to help Gray out. To make amends.

"I…” Too much attention. Way too much. Everyone watching him when he and Lucy fought was bad enough, and no one treated him and Lucy as extremely as they did Gray and Juvia. "I don't want a baby that's only Gray's."

To try and look like a proper put-off boyfriend, Natsu gave his best pout face and rested his head on Gray’s shoulder, so Gray barely had to whisper the word "Liar" for Natsu to catch it.

He wasn't wrong. Natsu still hoped the kid was Zeref’s, and still wanted it for himself more than anything else, save for maybe one person in the room with him. If you were going to have a dangerous father with a long history of destruction either way, you might as well also have a father with brains. Natsu was pretty sure that, had he been the one with Zeref’s curse, he would have only done less damage overall by way of not knowing how to give life to his inclinations quite like his brother did.
"Gray?" Juvia asked.

"Sorry. No. I wish you the best of luck with any other men who come into your life, because the man in your life will never be me."

Juvia took a step back, eyes welling up with tears, and a murmur broke out in the guild. Natsu shut his eyes, listening to it all. People who felt Gray was being harsh, or even cruel. People who thought it was about time that he said something final one way or the other on her. People who were in disbelief over the fact that Gray actually meant it all those times that he pushed her away, and confused as to why he still caved and said nice things to her later. People who were still convinced that Gray was only being stubborn.

Another step back, and then Juvia's hand clenched into a fist and she lashed out, a stream of water flying at Natsu.

Tangled up in one another, Natsu didn't have time to react, and Gray could only get one hand up to form a shield. The ice make was weak, and cracked when the water hit it, but didn't give way completely.

An accusation was on Natsu's lips. For Juvia being unable to take Gray's rejection. For attacking a guildmate, even if he knew Juvia had hardly gone all out, and even if guild brawls were a common thing in Fairy Tail. For every spectator who thought badly of Gray for reaching the end of his rope after years of playing along with the obsessions of someone who he couldn't bring himself to love.

But before Natsu could let out any words that would get him in trouble later, Cana threw a card that smashed through Gray's shield and hit Juvia on the forehead.

"A'right!" she shouted, voice taking on a drunken slur that hadn't been there a minute ago. "It's been too long since we had a little fun 'round here."

One of the next three cards she threw hit Juvia again, but the other two hit Elfman and Droy. When Elfman roared and indignation and jumped to his feet, he knocked over Levy, which had Gajeel leaping up to get even.

Gray tightened his grip on Natsu as a brawl broke out, and Natsu gave a genuine pout. He worked as little as possible to stay with Gray as much as he could, and the quickest, highest paying job wasn't always the most fun. He was itching for a fight, but Gray couldn't fight at all. Not with the baby, and not if he wanted to keep presenting the image of someone who was struggling with a secret illness.

"Basement," Gray whispered.

Natsu nodded and checked for Juvia before letting go of Gray and getting up. She was in the thick of the fight, going ferociously at anyone who came close when she normally only got involved in a brawl insofar as to drag Gray out of one if some girl he was fighting got too close for her liking.

Biting his lip, he turned away and pulled Gray towards the basement door. It would be good for her to work off the initial wave of emotions that came with rejection. Natsu himself had needed to run off into the mountains and find things to beat up when he realized how horrible the disconnect between him and Lucy was.

Thinking of Lucy, he spun around to check one last time, and when he didn't see her, opened the basement door and slipped inside with Gray.

To his annoyance, he caught Macao giving him a thumbs up as he shut the door.
"I can freeze the surface of the canal," Gray offered. "It won't overflow, but water can still run."

Natsu nodded, looking deep in thought as he ran through that solution in his head. Zeref would have pointed out that the entire drainage system for the town involved water running off the streets into the canal, so it would flood either way, but a suggestion that appeased Natsu made Gray feel better.

In theory he could have told Juvia that he and Natsu were fighting, or some other story that would give her hope. He could have even blown Juvia a kiss and said he was only practicing with Natsu on ways to treat her special, but in practice the idea gave Gray goose bumps. He was tired of humoring her whenever the waterworks started, and tired of letting everyone who supported 'them' chew him out for not submitting to her. The longer he dragged things out, the worse it would get, and it had already gone on far too long. He was done.

But Natsu and everyone else, be they sympathetic to his plight or on Juvia's side, wanted the rain to stop. Gray could hear the rain on the roof from the basement.

"Mira's got water magic, so she can send all the water to the lake. And Levy can probably make something that'll give the water another way to get out," Natsu said. "I'm sure it won't flood too bad."

"Yeah… Sorry."

"Don't worry about it," Natsu leaned in, a lewd grin gracing his lips, "boyfriend."

Gray turned his back to Natsu so the fire slayer wouldn't see his blush.

"I know every orphanage within a five day's walk from Magnolia. If we're really looking to adopt —"

"Knock it off," Gray said.

It wasn't totally fair to Natsu to use him as a fake boyfriend like that, but everyone already bought into the relationship anyway, and a lover who was impervious to Juvia's love-rival harassment was a good start for finally breaking things off with her completely. Natsu would still owe him for the whole pregnancy by the time the act was up anyway. And until then, if Gray was going to go along with the rumors, then he had an excuse to push the limits of his relationship with Natsu and get a feel for just how serious a mistake he was making, falling for the idiot a second time.

Maybe it would be a chance to gauge how much Natsu liked him, too. If not, then maybe Gray could talk Erik into feeling Natsu out. Or talk Erza into bullying Jellal into talking Erik into feeling Natsu out. Gray had yet to get Jellal's blessings for his renewed romantic pursuit. Not that he needed Jellal's approval, for as much as it would make him feel less a fool for what he was doing, but the guild's greatest voyeur only reliably did as Jellal asked him, ignoring even Mavis most of the time. If you wanted a favor from Erik, Jellal's cooperation was the best way to get it.

"It's fine," Natsu said. "I felt bad enough last time knowing that I got a bunch of kids hopes up and didn't give a single one of them a home. I wouldn't want to go around asking to see a bunch of orphans I didn't have any intention of adopting."

"Did you ever consider just taking one? You don't need Lucy for that."

"I kinda do," Natsu said.

"Macao went without a wife just fine."
"Yeah, but Macao had Romeo with his wife first. No one takes your kid away just 'cause your wife left you, but there's laws against bringing a kid into a 'broken home'. You can arrange with someone who's gonna give up their kid to take it from them 'cause the government doesn't get involved, but once they're formally abandoned, there's papers you have to go through that you need a spouse for. I'd have to become a citizen in some country that does let you adopt without being married, and they usually require you be live there for a while before you can take a kid. I'd rather find someone from nearby anyway. Not take them too far from their home, y'know?"

The woods where Igneel raised Natsu, Zeref had once revealed, were cut down to set up a mining town two hundred years ago. Gray could see where Natsu was coming from there. On the other hand, Gray hated going back to his birthplace. The ruins of his town and his parents grave made him feel weak inside, and the idea of living even kind of close by made him anxious.

But adoption was off the table for Natsu unless he found someone else who he loved and who loved kids anyway, and in all likelihood that someone would be able to have their own children.

The thought was a sharp pang for Gray. It hadn't occurred to him until just then that he was pursuing someone who desperately wanted to be a parent, while Gray wanted not to be the father of his own daughter.

It really, really, really should have been Natsu who fell into the pond that day. That was before he and Lucy broke up, even, so it could have resolved things before they ever split.

Much to Gray's annoyance, that last thought gave him a sense of relief. Why? Because he wanted Natsu to have his heart broken? Because he thought it was worth the chance to be Natsu's pretend boyfriend, even though he had to be pregnant? Baby oriented as he was, Natsu had probably realized long ago that Gray wasn't his type. That was probably why he was never the one to initiate…

Now Gray was just being silly, but the thought pressed against the front of his mind, and he couldn't open his mouth without it coming out.

"When I kissed you, what did you think of it?" Gray asked.

Natsu considered the question, then said, "Fuck. He was already going to hate me enough for this. Him liking me will make it ten times worse."

The betrayal, he meant. He knew it would hurt Gray, and he realized it would only run deeper when Gray mistook all those seemingly kind gestures for something more.

"Is that why you backed off?" Gray asked, recalling Jellal saying Natsu felt guilty.

"I didn't think I could keep it up," Natsu admitted. "Even to save the kid. Just thinking about how you'd feel when you realized what I was doing…"

Gray didn't try not to sound bitter, because he was. "But you went ahead with it anyway."

"Yeah."

Gray looked back at Natsu. "Why?"

"For the kid," Natsu said. "And just… Jellal came and asked me what I was doing. I don't know if you sent him or what, but he said he heard that I'd been following you around like a second Juvia and wanted to know what my angle was. He was so accusatory about the whole thing and it just made me feel worse. I was going to just stop showing up and let you figure out what was going on, but the way he made me feel, I decided I was doing to tell you upfront and apologize, and just beg
"Uh-huh." Sure. That was why Gray could now feel a baby rolling around inside him. Because Natsu came clean and begged Gray to give her a chance.

"Really! But… when I was on my way to see you again it kinda sank in that it was a stupid fantasy, to think you would keep the kid just because I asked. Even though she's my family too, even though the might by my daughter, it wouldn't matter that I wanted her to live. I knew you didn't want to be a parent—you'd already told me that—and I thought it ought to be enough to say that I could take her off your hands once she was born. I'd already hidden the pregnancy from you for weeks and made you think I was doing what I was just because I liked you. You were going to be furious with me no matter when you found out, and you wouldn't let me have her, and since there was no one to take her, I didn't think you would keep her. It was too late not to hurt you, but I thought I could still save her."

He wasn't wrong there. Gray absolutely would have had an abortion the very same day if Natsu told him the truth back then. He might not have felt as betrayed, if only because Natsu would have explained things for himself, and in time for Gray to make his own life choices, but he still would have been bitter over having thought Natsu might like him, only for it to turn out that Natsu just cared about a baby he didn't want.

And here he was, walking right into the same trap.

"If I hadn't been pregnant, and you weren't doing anything underhanded that you felt bad about, would you have kissed me back?" Gray asked.

"No. Because I wouldn't have been at your apartment. We wouldn't have hung out enough that month for you to get away with skipping the guild party to avoid Juvia, and even if we were hanging out, I would have wanted to go to the guild party, and Juvia would have dragged you off then and never let you kiss me. I liked the idea of going to your apartment because it kept you away from alcohol."

"Let's pretend Juvia had the flu and I pulled you into a corner and kissed you here at the guild instead," Gray said. "Would you have kissed me back?"

Natsu looked to the stairs. No one had come down yet, but Juvia had a way of just appearing when Gray was around. "This is dangerous talk."

"I already told her I'm seeing you now and we're going to start a family. Kissing me isn't that big a deal, in comparison."

Natsu looked for another excuse and, finding none, but a good ten feet between himself and Gray before saying, "You're not allowed to hit me for answering."

"I'm going to hit you if you don't."

"Probably? I mean, I know you and Jellal both would pound me to dust if I did now. I'm not stupid. I blew my chance with you. But you're kinda fun to argue with, and I like having you by my side, and you look nice, and you're a good person even if you didn't want to keep the kid. Except you don't want kids."

You don't want kids… so I wouldn't even kiss you? So I'd be worried about what might come down the road if I decided to go with you? Natsu could have a casual affair with a woman where he took over with any children they had if she didn't want them, but with a man, they had to be a solid,
married couple. That, or they had to be willing to move to another country so Natsu could adopt outside of Fiore.

Natsu said he blew his chance with Gray, but Gray was beginning to think he never had much of a chance with Natsu to begin with.

"Why all this now?" Natsu asked.

"Because we have to play couple until Juvia gives up completely," Gray said. "If I have to make out with you in public for that, I want to know exactly what's going through your head this time."

Natsu made a face at that.

"Look at it this way. You get to prove to Lucy you don't need someone who can give you a baby anyway."

"Until she finds out your pregnant. And if the baby has pink hair, that would only make it worse."

The words were like a knife to the heart. Gray wanted Natsu to be the father.

"You were just going off a minute ago about how she could be your daughter."

"Yeah. And I already love her. But as far as things with Lucy goes, her looking like me would only cause trouble."

Gray stared at Natsu, trying to fathom the idea of loving someone you'd never even met. Never even heard about. He was no stranger to the concept of unconditional love, but he always thought there was an asterisks there and some fine print explaining that it came under the condition that the person you loved had at least been born.

But this was normal, wasn't it? Meredy and Lyon talked at length about all their hopes for Uriel and how excited they were to meet him. Jellal and Erza still hadn't settled on a name, but they lit up whenever asked about their child. People who actually wanted their children fell for them, or at least the idea of them, well before getting to see them for the first time.

For the hundredth time, Gray regretted that Natsu hadn't been the one to fall into the pond. Not because Gray didn't want to be the one who was pregnant, but because it seemed like a shame that Natsu didn't get to be as intimately connected to the kid as Gray had to be.

"Anyway," Natsu said, oblivious to Gray's pity, "Zeref would make a better father. I mean, not a father figure, but he's smarter than me."

Gray shook himself out of his thoughts. "Zeref could stand to be a little less smart. The thing he's best at inventing is new ways to get himself and others into trouble. I'd rather the kid have my brains."

Natsu grinned, eyes alight with glee. "If you don't want him to be a super genius, you should at least hope he gets his smarts from me so he's not a total idiot."

"Hey! Who are you calling an idiot!"

"Think about it. Who's family is smarter on average?"

"Who's family has caused less trouble on average?" Gray countered.

Natsu laughed, pure and mirthful in a way Gray hadn't heard in far too long, and it was such a sweet
sound that Gray didn't even care that he let himself get roped into talking about what he hoped the baby was like. This was a welcome change from all those unsettling looks of concern Natsu gave him as of late. Like he was about to slip back into the deepest depths of depression again.

Gray laughed along with Natsu, forgetting about the baby entirely. Forgetting about the rain. Juvia. The way Natsu had been overeager to have Cana do a reading on his health. That he was falling for someone he already made the mistake of loving once, who wanted something different from life than he did. For one blissful moment, Gray let himself forget about it all.

Chapter End Notes

Jesus fuck I was proofreading this and found notes and extra dialogue and couldn't remember if I moved on from this chapter without finishing it or if those were just reminders for things to add in wherever it best fit. It looks like some variant of the conversation comes up in chapter 27, so I guess it's the latter? Had a moment of panic there thinking I would have to write another scene for this story when I still need to reread everything after it and get back on track with this fic. Winter classes totally messed me up with keeping track of all this.
"Natsu, I have a favor to ask of you."

Natsu had no right to deny any requests from Gray, but he still wanted to. After the past week of being Gray's pretend boyfriend, his nerves were shot. If there was any way that Gray's request could be interpreted as a hint of romantic interest, Natsu would take it that way, and he knew he ought to know better than to think Gray was really interested in him.

"What."

"I want you to burn my clothes."

Natsu looked over at Gray. He was in one of his loosest pair of pants and, for once, had put a shirt on. He still wore his ring, but you could tell where his bump was because the shirt couldn't be pulled over it, and his pants couldn't be pulled all the way up on his hips.

"I'm fine to stage something with you in a closet, if we're planning to get caught," Natsu said, "But there's no one for us to put on a show for right now, and there are less destructive ways to disrobe someone."

Gray's face turned scarlet, and he stuttered over a few words before shouting, "Asshole!"

Only after Gray had slammed his bedroom door did Natsu notice the scent of arousal, and he bit his lip and fought the urge to blush as well. Gray was pregnant, he reminded himself, and his hormones were messing with him. There was no real interest. Gray was pregnant and anyone could have gotten that reaction by putting the idea of sex in his head.

A lot of things had just been in Natsu's head lately. Natsu knew his boundaries and made sure to stick to them, but pretending that he and Gray were in love and done with hiding it whenever they were in public made the lines blur. Now Natsu needed to know the public boundaries, the strict private boundaries, and when they were practicing how to act publicly while in private.

It wasn't real. They were only acting until Gray was confident that Juvia had been firmly dissuaded. When Gray suggested they eat out for lunch, it was only so people could catch them acting like a couple and gossip about it. And the only times Gray kissed him was in defiance when they were at the guild and he overheard someone talking about how much potential he and Juvia had. Natsu knew it was all pretend, and when the two of them were private, did his best to respect Gray's boundaries.

Gray made it hard though. Or rather, being Gray's fake boyfriend in public made it hard. Those coy smiles Gray gave him when trying to convince everyone that they were a thing or the way he would act flustered at restaurants when Natsu flirted was too much. Every hesitant smile Gray gave in the privacy of his home and every time Natsu said something that threw him for a loop and he needed a moment to recollect suddenly felt like a continuation of that public behavior, and Natsu had to remind himself that Gray was only acting.

And now getting aroused! Natsu knew Gray had no control of that, but frankly it was just rude of him to do that after messing with Natsu's head all week.

The idea did cross Natsu's mind that maybe teasing Gray hadn't been the best idea. It probably
crossed the boundaries set for when there was no one to pretend to be a couple for, and maybe Gray was as messed up by all the pretending as Natsu was. Maybe. Probably not. Gray still resented him for the pregnancy. He knew exactly how they were supposed to feel about each other. It was just Natsu who kept losing track of where he stood.

Something soft but dense hit Natsu in the back of the head as he ran through these thoughts, nearly knocking him into the cream of mushroom soup he was working on. After recovering his balance, he looked back at Gray, standing angrily near the hallway, then to his own feet, where the floor was littered with shirts.

"What…?"

"Burn them all," Gray ordered. He'd shed the shirt he wore earlier, which Natsu imagined was probably somewhere in the pile.

"Okay. But why?"

Something snapped in Gray, and he shouted, "None of them fit!"

Laughing was not the proper response in this situation, but Natsu couldn't help himself. He grabbed the counter to support himself, while Gray cried out in disgust and stormed back to his room again.

"W-wait! Gray!" Natsu called out between giggles. "Wait. I'm sorry. Come back out!"

"Go home!" Gray shouted from his bedroom.

Natsu looked to the soup, turned the burner down to a simmer, and went into Gray's room.

Gray sat on his bed, sheets swathed around himself so that you almost couldn't see where they fell over his stomach. He'd activated his Archive Lacrima, which was supposed to be in the living room where he couldn't hide in bed with it, and the curtains were drawn.

"Leave," Gray ordered.

Natsu ignored him and walked across the room to pull the curtains open, letting natural light back in. Gray only glared in response.

"You know you're gonna go back to your original size, right?" Natsu said. "Those shirts will fit again in a few months."

"That's a long way away. They'll be too old by then."

"You're more than halfway done. Just a few… Too old? What are you? A fashionista?"

Gray rolled his eyes. "No. Clothes don't last that long."

"Yes they do."

"Since when?"

"Since we started making them out of fabric and not banana peels. You don't seriously thing those shirts will go bad before you can wear them again, do you?"

"Uh, yeah."

"No! Clothes don't do that!" Natsu grabbed the edge of his vest and held it out. "This is two years
old! I've had this scarf since I was a kid."

"The scarf came from—"

"There is nothing special that keeps the scarf from spoiling. Clothes don't expire after a few months, Gray. They just get worn down when you wear them a lot. We can put your shirts in a box in the closet and they'll still be there for you next fall."

Gray deactivated the Archive Lacrima, giving Natsu a wary look as he asked, "If that's true, why do you have to replace them so fast?"

"I don't. You leave your clothes everywhere you go. That's why you're constantly replacing them."

Natsu expected Gray to fire back with some insult. Instead, he teared up. Completely unprepared for this, Natsu stood awkwardly over him, hand raised as if he meant to put it on Gray's shoulder, unsure what level of consolation it was appropriate to offer a fake boyfriend.

Seeing the hand, Gray tried to swallow back his sobs, but they kept coming.

Finally, Natsu had heard enough, and where the boundary was stopped mattering. If he put his hand somewhere he wasn't supposed to, Gray could just bite it off. He placed his hand on the back of Gray's head and bent over to rest his forehead on Gray's.

"It's okay."

Gray lowered his head. "Y-you think I'm s-stupid."

"I… say stupid things all the time."

"She'd be s-s-smarter if she had y-your brains."

"Well, obviously. But let's hope she gets your common sense."

This was the second time they had this conversation, and it still felt surreal to Natsu. After months of being told that the baby would end up in an overseas orphanage, the idea that he and Gray might banter over which parts of them the girl would take after was a strange thing. Not one Natsu minded, but one he knew would get his hopes up for nothing.

"Enough about her brain," Natsu said.

What he meant by that was that Gray could stop worrying about his own intelligence. Even if Natsu fully intended to tease him some months down the road for his clothing failure, there was no need to let Gray beat himself up over it when he was clearly having an unusually emotional day.

Gray took the line differently.

"I want her to h-have your hair."

Natsu froze, not raising his forehead with Gray's when Gray tried to look back up at him.

His hair?

They'd joked a bit about her brains the other day, sure, but Natsu thought it was just joking about the trouble Zeref could get into. He didn't think Gray really, actually, legitimately wanted the man who forced him to go through with the pregnancy, the man who he had repeatedly said would never be allowed anywhere near the baby that he didn't want near him either, to be the father.
"Natsu…?"

"I…"

Gray shoved Natsu back without warning and scurried backwards in bed, cheeks red as he averted his gaze. "N-nevermind. I didn't say anyth-thing. Just… H-hormones. I've b-been off all day."

"Yeah." Natsu had noticed. "I'll finish making lunch, okay? You take a little time to yourself, and I'll let you know when the food's ready."

Natsu made it out of the room and shut the door before his legs gave out beneath him. Mind going back to that touch, he put a hand to his forehead, and hoped he hadn't made a mistake in opening those curtains. Hoped Gray hadn't seen him blush. There were boundaries that couldn't be crossed, and actually wanting Gray was one of them.

Pushing unsteadily to his feet, Natsu hurried back to the stove to try and focus on the soup, but his mind kept going elsewhere. The way Gray blushed and looked away. He was only embarrassed because his mood swings had gotten the better of him, but it was so much like when Natsu suggested at a café the day before that Gray's eyes were prettier than any ice sculpture he could make. It was said as a joke, mostly. Gray did have nice eyes, but his talent for creation exceeded that, and after Gray was done feigning embarrassment, he'd stubbornly accused Natsu of deriding his artistic talent. Natsu was floundering around with the fake boyfriend thing, unsure how much to treat Gray like always, how much to treat him special, and what special even looked like after he thought he'd made Lucy feel that was only to learn how wrong he was.

Natsu tried to be flattering, teasing, romantic, flirty, and sometimes even lewd all at once, while Gray could perfectly put on that stubborn, embarrassed, not wholly open yet still receptive act that seemed like such a natural progression of his usual reserved behavior into the realm of romantic engagements. Natsu was jealous. The way Gray acted with him in public looked so sincere that he would almost mistake it for the real thing, if Gray hadn't told him it was an act.

His stomach did a flip, thinking of that. Gray wasn't a good match for him. Not if they couldn't agree on kids. He'd known that for some time. But he wanted Gray to be a good match. Even if he was the absolute last person Gray would go for, he wished he had another chance.

If only there had been some way to save the girl without having to betray Gray. If only Natsu had been the one to fall into that pond instead. He could have confided in Gray about it—since there was no way he could tell Lucy first when she didn't think he really loved her and would assume that him being pregnant meant everything between them was fine. He could have confided in Gray, and then let Gray have his laugh before relying on him to find the nerve to tell everyone else. Any maybe, in the meantime, they could have had something.

Wishful thinking. Gray didn't want a baby. Why would he take Natsu if it meant taking Natsu's kid? Especially since Natsu would have ended up having both children that serum would set him up with.

Actually, horrible scenario. There was a fifty percent chance Zeref was the dad, and that would hold true even if Natsu was the pregnant one. Having children with his brother would absolutely not be okay.

-o-

The soup was a mistake. Gray ate next to nothing of it, prodding with his spoon and regarding the bowl blandly. He was going so egregiously slow that Natsu felt he had to take his sweet time on his soup as well.
"If you don't like mushroom soup, you should have said so before I made it."

Gray shook his head. "No appetite today."

"Liar. If I made brownies, you'd eat the whole pan."

Gray gave Natsu a dirty look and defiantly put a spoonful in his mouth, but nearly choked trying to get it down.

There was nothing in the soup that Natsu hadn't fed him before, and at no point had Gray ever indicated any allergies. Natsu waited until Gray had finally swallowed before asking, "Are you alright?"

Gray took another spoonful and had it pressed against his lips before deciding better of it. He set the spoon down, then softly admitted, "I don't feel good."

Natsu tried to keep his voice neutral when he asked, "How so?"

"I don't know. Just… bad. Like how I did after I found out about… you know… all this."

Emotionally unwell. For a moment, Natsu almost melted with relief. He'd been terrified that Gray might admit to some new, dangerous pains. But feeling bad emotionally was still a bad thing, Natsu reminded himself.

"Do you think it's mood swings?" Natsu dared ask, then shoved a spoonful of soup into his mouth as an excuse to not answer right away if Gray exploded.

Gray shrugged. "Maybe. Some of it. It's not like I haven't been a mess lately."

"Do you want comfort food?"

"I don't want to eat at all."

"You still should."

"Or what? You'll force feed me with a funnel?"

Natsu froze in the middle of lifting his spoon, and a mushroom slid out and back into the bowl, making droplets of soup splatter around it.

"What… Where did you get an idea like that from?"

"Jellal." Gray paused there, looking back down at his soup before it occurred to him that this was an unsatisfactory explanation. "That's what he said he would do if I didn't eat right after I found out about the kid."

"Where did he get an idea like that from?"

"I didn't ask."

"Why did he threaten something like that?" Natsu pressed.

"Because I wouldn't eat, and he said I'd feel even worse if I didn't."

Silence set over them as Natsu contemplated whether or not to tell Gray the same thing. Under Natsu's gaze, Gray looked down in resignation at the soup, and forced himself to swallow another
spoonful.

Natsu would have liked to let it go until Gray was ready, not eager to hear if he had a part in Gray's mood, but to leave the issue unaddressed until Gray came around to talking on his own was to risk a backslide back into depression. And besides, Gray had thought it a much bigger gesture than Natsu thought it would be when he listened to all of Gray's concerns before.

"Maybe some of it is mood swings? What would the rest of it be?" Natsu asked.

Gray set his spoon down and folded arms, turning his head to look at the window rather than Natsu while he considered whether or not to answer.

"Gray?"

The answer came out as a whisper. "Everyone's going to find out soon."

"Huh?"

"The pregnancy," Gray said, volume and pitch creeping upward. "None of my clothes fit right anymore. I can't pull my shirts down, and my pants don't come up as high as they should, and I can't leave the pants at home and get away with nothing but boxers because I can't pull those up either. I… I just… Yesterday I heard Elfman commenting on it. How it's weird how long it's been since I even tried to wear a shirt, and how I'm not pulling my pants all the way up. People are noticing and it's only a matter of time before they figure out what happened."

Natsu wanted say it wasn't a big deal. They were all Fairy Tail mages. Gray might have to suffer through a little teasing, but everyone would still support him.

Except to Gray, that was a big deal. It was all he could do to cope with the situation without getting grief for it. And the more people who knew about the baby, the more opinions he would be faced with over what to do about the baby. If the pregnancy remained a secret then they could give the girl to Mavis and say that they gave up on adoption, but Mavis found a child she had to take home with her after accompanying them once. If the truth came out, Gray would face everyone's judgment for giving his daughter away.

"So…" Something to deflect Gray's fear of their judgment and teasing. "How about…" Anything. "How about this: If they find out, we tell them what I did. I shoved you into that pond, and I kept you from finding out you were pregnant until it was too late for you to do anything about it, so it's really all my fault, right? If they know that, then no one can really blame you for wanting to wash your hands of it all, and I don't think they'd tease you for being pregnant if they knew you really didn't want to be."

Gray shook his head.

"No? Why not."

"That would make them wonder why we're together."

"We admit to faking it after people misunderstood why I kept going to see you."

"Right," Gray said. "Faking."

"Is that a problem?" Natsu asked.

"A little."
"Oh! Right." Natsu smacked his forehead. "Juvia. She might think she still has a chance."

Attention still directed to the window, Gray gave a half-nod.

Natsu was at a loss. They could downplay what he did and then say they fell for each other while Natsu came to help Gray with his pregnancy, but he didn't dare suggest that. It wouldn't look good to suggest that the just omit the part where he tricked Gray in order to deliberately stop him from having an abortion, and to say that he fell for Gray while tending to his pregnancy needs... Gray might not have an issue with that excuse, but Natsu did. Natsu did because that sounded to him like it was only a step away from 'I hooked up with him because he's pregnant' and he didn't dare make such a claim when it could get back to Lucy.

"I'll kick the ass of anyone who gives you a hard time," he said instead.

Gray glanced over at him too offer a faint smile, then looked back to the window before asking, "And Lucy?"

Natsu wanted to say his ass kicking offer was all inclusive, but he was kidding himself if he thought he could really hurt her. There were lingering feelings towards her. Wounds that had scabbed over, but still bled when prodded. They didn't end in an explosive fight that he could storm away from and happily wipe her from memory after. She had swept the rug out from under his feet without realizing it, and torn it in a way that there was no repairing in the process, but there had been no malice or hate. Just hurt, and the desire to salvage whatever they could. They'd still been close. So close that before things with Gray heated up, there had been times where Natsu almost forgot they were no longer together.

Dealing with Lucy was too hard. The wound needed to become a scar before he could even think of it properly. Until then, Natsu would rather encase it in a box of gauze and duct-tape it over so nothing could get in or out.

"I'll plug my ears and make loud noises until she goes away."

Gray snorted, then had to cover his mouth with his hand to try and smother laughter that managed to break through his funk.

"That's a horrible plan!"

Natsu grinned and shrugged. "I'll deal with it when I have to. Things always work out in the end."

"They do, huh?"

"Sure. Sometimes it just takes a little longer. I thought you might hate me forever after what happened, and I hated that, but we're back to getting along alright, aren't we?"

"Yeah." Gray smiled in earnest, looking back to Natsu. "We are."

Oh good. Natsu hadn't actually been confident Gray wasn't just being nice for fudge and Juvia buffering. He was glad that line worked out.

"Is there anything else wrong?" Natsu asked. If Gray was going from largest to smallest concerns, there may be something in there that he had his priorities mixed up on.

"Not really."

"No new aches?"
"Still mostly my back. That, and at the rate things are going, I don't think I'll be able to make it all the way to the guild without having to stop and use the bathroom for much longer."

"That's everything?"

"Sometimes your brat keeps me up at night," Gray confessed. Thinking of Makarov, Natsu wondered if Gray meant to use that exact wording. "It's getting harder and harder to ignore when she moves. She's been driving me nuts all day."

Making no effort to look any less than completely engrossed in this idea, Natsu asked, "Is she moving now?"

"Yeah. Keeps jerking around in there. I called Erza to ask if that's normal. Apparently babies can get hiccups before they're even born. Isn't that awful? I have to deal with hers on top of mine."

"Think it's a nutritional deficit?" Natsu asked.

"Is this a lead-in to tell me to finish my soup?"

Natsu grinned. "You're not going to feel good if you don't eat."

"Fine. Fine." Gray picked his spoon back up, hesitating a moment before filling it, then hesitating again.

"It's not that bad," Natsu said.

"It's not. Just... I thought if you're so worried about how I'm doing, I should tell you I already feel a little better. So... Thanks."

-o-

Gray settled in for the afternoon working on copying books into the Archive, which Mavis still expected of him on every last day that he didn't come to the guild. With Gray's promise that he would keep his bedroom curtains open and eat when he was supposed to, Natsu fried hamburgers quickly for Gray to reheat for dinner, then went to do something he hadn't had the chance for since the secret boyfriend rumors first took hold.

He went to see Zeref.

Despite the rain, it was warm enough for Alvarez citizens to resume their annual migration to Magnolia to work on Zeref's tower. After the initial downpour from Gray's rejection—which had required all mages with relevant skills work to reroute water before Magnolia flooded—they had settled into a constant drizzle. It wouldn't be a good year for gardeners with so little sun, but it was light enough rain for most people to go out without concern for getting wet.

Locals and visitors alike wandered the streets. Some with umbrellas, others not bothering. It was no longer too wet for everyone's tastes, but the only dry place was the tower, which Zeref had set an enchantment around to repel rain.

That had been a concern for Natsu ever since the first group of Alvarians arrived two days earlier. The people of Alvarez were used to the idea that they weren't to stand too close to their former emperor, which prevented a lot of potential disasters right there. But sometimes Zeref closed that gap himself when he wanted to explain part of the tower's plans to whoever oversaw construction that day, or an Alvarian might panic and run to him if they caught him about to do something stupid and hurt himself. And once that distance was closed, suddenly Zeref would be surrounded by people
who were prone to encouraging his erratic genius, which was never a good thing.

Natsu was relieved to find Zeref not overlooking any construction for the day, but instead holed up in the basement of his lab with a book in his right hand.

"Are they still there?" Zeref asked as Natsu came downstairs.

"Yeah. Have you eaten today?"

"Oh! Food. I forgot."

"Lucky you, I saw that coming." Natsu tossed Zeref a paper-wrapped sandwich he'd grabbed while buying Gray groceries, and Zeref held the book up and caught it between the pages. "Maybe if you read upstairs, you'd notice it getting darker and remember dinner."

"You know I wouldn't," Zeref said, setting the book spine up and unwrapping the sandwich with his right hand as he spoke. "Besides, it's too noisy up there. It will be nice when the tower's done, but every year I regret not telling them to build it somewhere else."

Natsu looked upstairs, trying to get a look at the tower again through the solid walls of the first flood. "It's gonna be done soon?"

It had looked far from finished when Natsu showed up. And with the rate everyone worked at when the workers swapped out completely every couple weeks, he hadn't expected to see it completed for another year or two.

"The parts that matter. That architect who helped with the redesign had a lot of non-functional details that he thought would make the tower less 'ominous', and a myriad of structural support features that took forever. The outer casing is a work in progress thanks to that, but there's only a few parts left that are needed for the S-System. It will be a while still before the full structure is complete, but it should be functional well before the end of summer. Which is good, because we can start testing it in time to know if it's missing anything vital before it's too late to add on."

"Will that be noisy?"

"It might cause some abnormal light patterns. I'm sure the mayor won't mind."

Natsu was sure the mayor would assure Zeref it was no problem. Very few people had complaints to say to Zeref's face. Seeing how it went for Gray when he came to complain about the tower, that was probably wise of everyone.

"Jellal is going to love this," Natsu muttered.

Zeref's hearing wasn't as sharp as Natsu's, but he heard just fine. "I took his experience into account. There's a buffer in place that sections the magic energy the tower stores into multiple compartments, so it shouldn't explode this time. The amount of magic the S-System should need in most cases is paltry compared to the R-System, even for people who are so severely sick or injured that it would take a dozen subjects to spread the ailment enough to cure it. The only reason for the size is because it's easier to fine-tune something for that level of versatility when the pieces are larger."

"That's really the only reason?" Natsu asked.

Zeref shrugged. "I could probably have worked it down to the size of the Eclipse Gate and still been able to expect each part to be placed in proper alignment with minimal difficulty, but I would practically need to restart from scratch."
Jellal, Erza, Erik, and Macbeth had all come to terms with the giant tower that vaguely resembled their hellish childhood looming at the edge of the town and stretching higher and higher each year, so Natsu supposed it worked out in the end. That was still awfully inconsiderate of Zeref, and he's ask Mavis to scold him for it later.

Speaking of Mavis, she had done a remarkable job of cleaning up after the explosion. No doubt Zeref helped, but Natsu knew his brother would have devoted most of his energy to making sure all of his research was recovered. Mavis was the one who would have washed down the walls and painted over all the smoke marks left behind, and was no doubt the one who replaced a lot of the furniture as well.

Her touch had transformed the lab from a shabby old building into a vibrant place. Natsu knew that Zeref didn't care one way or the other about the floral pattern on his couch so long as it was relatively comfortable and, more importantly, large enough to hold him and whatever books he was sorting through, but the details all made the place feel more charming than calling it 'The Black Mage's Lab' did. The whole place seemed cuter, for as cute as you could make a building that Zeref was going to clutter with research. If you ignored the research notes, the weird machines, and the wall lined with rat cages, then it almost looked like somewhere Mavis could live.

Maybe that was the point, Natsu realized. Mavis did have living with Zeref as an end game plan, and he wasn't about to move into town. His lab being trashed might have been a blessing in disguise for her, since it gave her the chance to decorate her future home to her liking.

Natsu's mind was turning over the idea of Mavis making a serious push to become his sister-in-law, but his eyes still stared vacantly at the rats. Zeref followed his gaze, and the faint smile he'd worn when admitting to his laziness in designing the new tower vanished.

"How's Gray?"

"Hn? Oh. Sort of fine?"

"Just sort of?"

"He's upset right now. We're not going to be able to hide that he's pregnant for much longer, and we still don't know what exactly to say. The truth causes us both a lot of... drama. It would cause a lot of drama. But lying about it puts him in a situation he doesn't deserve to be in."

"And that would be...?"

"Everyone on his case about being pregnant, when it's really all my fault," Natsu said. "It's that, or Juvia and Lucy on our cases about how we ended things with them."

Zeref, bless his stunted heart, was much better with concrete analytics than he was emotional matters.

"Two people or the whole guild. That sounds like a tough call."

"Well, it's also the whole guild on my case if we tell the truth, but I earned that. If nothing else, I could have at least found a way to make Gray keep the kid without hiding what I was doing from him."

Zeref gave a grunt to let Natsu know he heard. By this point, they'd given up on actually discussing the subject of abortion with one another unless it involved trying to actively talk the other down from something. They had enough between them already without making a fight of anything else.

"Anyway, Juvia's really clung to Gray, and he's dead-set on getting her to move on. If she learns he lied about us being a thing, she might not believe him when he finds someone he's serious about."
And Lucy… Lucy's going to hate it either way when she learns Gray's pregnant, but we'll both hate it if she thinks that Gray and I got together because he's pregnant."

"Didn't you?"

"Not like that."

Zeref shrugged and took a bite of his sandwich. Matters of the heart weren't his forte, and he would take the emotionally driven Natsu's word for it that there was more to the situation than he could understand.

"Thash de onwy ishoo?"

"It's a big issue!"

Zeref swallowed "But he's not in any pain?"

Natsu paused, needing a moment to realize what Zeref was talking about.

"Not that he felt was worth mentioning. And I really pried."

"You should just tell him."

"He doesn't want to know."

"Well, he's an idiot then, and let's hope that baby inherited his brains, because I don't think the world could tolerate another person like either of us. But do keep trying to talk to him about it. He ought to know."

Natsu glanced at the rats again, all of which looked fine to him at the moment, despite the smell of blood in the basement. They were… well… rats. And the issue Zeref found once he started testing on them hadn't been a problem with any of the egg laying species he put in the pond, so there was no guarantee it would be a problem for humans. But he wished that Zeref had started testing with mammals sooner.

He felt something brush his arm, and looked down to see Zeref offering up half of his sandwich with his right hand. "You look like you're going to be sick. Did you forget to eat too?"

"No. He hasn't noticed anything yet, but I keep worrying…"

"Even if he does, it won't be a serious threat until labor starts. So far, every specimen I helped through that survived. I'm getting better at achieving recovery with them too."

"Right." Not the most confident instilling thing ever, but Natsu appreciated the effort.

There was no guarantee that all live births posed the same problem the rats did, and even then, most of the male rats managed just fine, but hearing that there were significantly more childbirth death from them than any egg laying creature Zeref had included in his pond population still made him anxious. If Gray started to show any signs that he might have the same problem, Natsu would insist on sticking to him like glue—even sharing a bed with him—to make sure that they could react immediately when labor came. With everything else Gray had done (or, more often, not done) in response to the pregnancy, he didn't trust Gray to mention immediately when he felt contractions. More likely was for Gray to go into denial until his water broke.

He hadn't shown signs of anything amiss yet, but Natsu was going to watch like a hawk regardless
of what Gray thought of it. He was the one who caused Gray to be exposed to the serum in the first place, and he was the one who stopped Gray from having an abortion. He wouldn't be the one who caused Gray to die giving birth.

"Don't look so grim," Zeref said. "Porlyusica tells me he already agreed to a c-section."

"He could still be hurt if... When did you speak to Porlyusica?"

"Yesterday." Zeref rolled his left sleeve up to reveal a bandage from shoulder to elbow that was a bloody brown and overdue for a change. "I scratched myself on some exposed wire."

Natsu would hazard to guess that Zeref's arm as less scratched and more gouged, and those wired had probably been thick cables, but it was nice to know that the bloody smell was from his brother being careless again and not any dead rats. Sort of.

"Does that hurt?"

"Only when I move it or hold it still too long."

"Do you have pain medicine?"

Zeref's eyes lit up. "I do! But it would make me tired, wouldn't it? I'll take it once the workers are gone, in case they have any questions for me before then. Thank you for reminding me. I hardly had any sleep last night. My arm kept me up the entire time."

"Yeah." Natsu mentally gave himself a pat on the back for having made Gray dinner in advance, because he could tell he was going to be a while with Zeref. "Put the book down and finish your sandwich. That won't heal if you don't eat. I'm going to go get bandages. Did Mavis restock after the smoke?"

Zeref nodded. He took another bite, but as he did, his attention drifted back to the book.

Natsu snatched the book from Zeref's hands. "Eat. I'll be right back."

"I can multitask."

"Were you reading while walking when you cut your arm?"

Natsu took Zeref's silence as a yes.

"You can have the book back once your sandwich is gone," Natsu said. "I'm going to get fresh bandages and make sure your cut isn't infected. If you die, I die. So humor me, alright?"

Rather than give voice to his grudging agreement, Zeref put another bite of sandwich in his mouth. Satisfied, Natsu took the book with him upstairs to check the closet for first aid supplies.

Zeref had an injury that whole time, and he didn't even noticed. He would need to be twice as vigilant with these things in the future.

Chapter End Notes

I forgot what my Zeref was like. I like my Zeref better than Mashima's.
Gray found carrying his own umbrella to be twice as embarrassing as sharing one with Natsu, which in and of itself had become twice as embarrassing after they started playing along with the rumors. The snickers everyone used to give seeing them together turned into shouts of encouragement, which might not have meant anything to Natsu, but every time Gray heard them, he thought for a second that the secret that he liked Natsu in earnest was out.

Really, a single umbrella wasn't so bad. The problem was that it was hard to explain why he wanted one for a light drizzle. Everyone else had given up on trying to stay dry now that the rain was so light, and Gray could hardly complain that the weather felt harsh when he was shirtless and his pants rode low enough that he worried they might fall off.

Now there was a thought. If he went around nude until it was time to give birth, his clothes would never give him away.

But he was already testing the patience of every business owner whose store or restaurant he visited without a shirt, and even Mavis would run short on patience if he showed up for work nude for months. As it was, he had already stretched that patience thin by not showing up for work so often. So while his only options for hiding the bump indefinitely were going around nude or hiding at home, nude wasn't an option.

Gray woke up that morning with a message in his Archive Lacrima from Natsu, explaining that he spent the night at Zeref's and would be with him until noon. Another injury apparently. Natsu planned on scouting out the least starry-eyed construction worker and assigning them the side job of making sure their former emperor ate meals and made sure he kept 'the part of his arm that's missing a scary amount of skin' disinfected and cleanly wrapped. Gray didn't even want to know how Zeref did whatever he'd done to himself.

Since Mavis's patience was stretched so thin and Gray was overdue for work, he set out for the guild on his own for the first time since telling Juvia that he and Natsu were dating. It would please Natsu to know that Gray still went out places without being nagged. But without the excuse of Natsu fretting over his health, Gray found himself mortified walking through drizzle with a wide umbrella.

I couldn't be helped. The drizzle barely hindered visibility, and would stick to his stomach if he let it hit him. Being found out as pregnant would be infinitely more humiliating than using an umbrella.

He ran through conversations in his head over and over as he walked to the guild for how to blame the umbrella on his mysterious health problem while excusing his perpetual shirtlessness. By the time he reached the guildhall he had a dozen different defenses, depending on which direction the conversation went, and was disappointed when no one asked. He looked stupid. He knew he looked stupid. He wanted the chance to defend how stupid he looked.

Mira gave him a strained smile and waved, and Gray waved back, unsure what to make of the expression. Before he had time to read it or anyone else's, someone took his arm and pulled him across the room.

"Ju—" Gray bit down on his tongue when he caught scarlet hair.
"I have baby photos," Erza said. Her smile was brighter than Mira's, and Gray didn't doubt she was excited to show the photos off, but there was still an anxious look in her eyes.

Out of the corner of Gray's own eyes, he caught Juvia and Lucy sitting together and watching him, and looked away. If everyone wanted him to avoid causing any drama with the two of them, then they were all on the same page.

"How did you get baby photos?" Gray asked. Erza was only two months ahead of him. She had a little while left before her baby was born.

"The sound machine," Erza said, ushering Gray over to a table with Jellal and Erik.

"Ultrasound," Erik said. The word fell from his tongue like a poison so vile even he couldn't stomach it.

Seeing Gray look puzzled by Erik's tone, Jellal said, "He can hear them."

"My apologies."

Erik accepted the token sympathy with a solemn nod, and moved aside to make room for Gray and Erza to sit next to each other.

While Erza dug through a bag for her ultrasound photos, Jellal rested his chin in his hands and asked Gray, "How have you been? It's been a while since you went anywhere on your own."

"Yeah. Natsu's dealing with family things this morning, and I felt like spending my few hours of freedom having you watch me like a hawk instead."

"What he means is he wanted Natsu to praise him for showing up on his own, despite his health," Erik said. Suddenly, Gray remembered why Jellal hated having Erik as a roommate.

Erza giggled, but Jellal's pleasant smile dissolved. That was normal. He disapproved of Gray's romantic pursuits just as much as Erza supported them.

Since Erza had already made it clear that she favored Gray following his heart over his head, Jellal made a bare bones effort to not be completely disapproving while in her presence. There was only a hint of reluctance in his voice when he asked, "How's Natsu been?"

"Fine…ish. He hasn't picked up on anything yet, I don't think. So that's good… I think. He's been as nice as he usually is."

Erza, having found her photos, spread them out on the table before saying, "I missed why he couldn't show up."

"Injury," Jellal said.

"Natsu's injured?"

"Zeref's injured. You'll have to ask Natsu for the details later. I didn't want them," Gray said. "Are these the photos? You're baby looks like a skeleton."

"They're ultrasound photos, Gray. They're not in color."

Gray blushed, mind racing for something to cover up his stupid comment with. That kind of idiocy was supposed to be Natsu's bread and butter, not his. With all his stupid avoidance of researching his condition…
"It's alright," Erza said. "You've only seen Porlyusica, haven't you? And you didn't get too involved with anyone else's pregnancy. You had no reason to know."

Erik's soft scoff suggested that this was something most people learned about before a wife or close friend had a baby, but Gray ignored it in favor of Erza's assurance. Why had he ever hidden from her? Even if he hated to think he'd be her size soon, she was such a blessing. If she and Jellal weren't already engaged, he might just ask her to marry him.

"I'm surprised Natsu doesn't drag you to more appointments," Erik said. "Everyone was all whispers about how Laxus saw you at some regular checkup, but you regularly skip 'em."

"You don't know that."

"Natsu's pretty frustrated by it, and he thinks louder than half the people here talk," Erik turned to give the guild a sweeping look of disgust. "And this place is pretty loud."

Made sense. Gray knew that Natsu found his lack of energy when it came to actively dealing with anything to do with the pregnancy vexing. But then Gray would have actively chosen not to be pregnant, if given the option in time, so he found it fair that he continue to be spared from actively pushing things forward on that front. And Natsu was never too pushy with him.

"I'm sure he'd drag me kicking and screaming if something were wrong, but there haven't been any issues yet. He's been surprisingly considerate lately."

"That must be a good sign," Erza said, which got Gray's hope up for all of half a second before Jellal not-so-softly scoffed.

Smiling a little too sweetly, Erza asked her fiancé, "Is something the matter."

"No."

The sweet smile remained, but the voice turned to steel. "Don't lie to me, Jellal."

Years of painful retaliations had taught Gray that you backed down when Erza used that voice, and he subconsciously scooted closer to Erik. Jellal, however, held Erza's gaze level and said, "He already fell for Natsu once before, and it only hurt him that much worse when we found out what Natsu was doing. Now, even though he hates the situation Natsu put him in, he's making the same mistake again."

"You think it's a mistake?" Erza asked.

"I don't think it's a smart move. You didn't see him when he was diagnosed. Natsu did that to him, and there are some things that you shouldn't forgive a person for to such a degree that you'd go and stupidly give their heart to them a second time, even if they show remorse."

Erik grinned and nudged Gray with his elbow, but Gray had already caught the flaw with Jellal's argument. Erza, to her credit, had the self-control not to lose it. Instead, she kept smiling sweetly and watched Jellal, waiting for him to pick up the contradiction in his words.

When too long passed without the slightest wince from Jellal, she asked, "Can you give me some examples, Jellal? What shouldn't you forgive?"

He caught on, and his cheeks turned the same color as his fiancée's hair. "I-I… That… I'm going to see what's taking Mira so long with our orders."
As Jellal stumbled to his feet, knocking the bench he was on over, and hurried off, Erza muttered, "That idiot is lucky I love him."

"He's looking out for me," Gray said.

"I know, and it's sweet of him, but that doesn't mean he's not an idiot."

She gave Gray a reassuring smile, which he returned. Maybe he could gradually ease everyone into the truth one by one, and then he'd have a whole guild full of allies like Erza. Now might not be a bad time too. It was still early, and with only a small portion of the guild present, it couldn't be too hard to single someone out. Cana, maybe.

Although on second thought…

"It's too early for lunch," Gray said. "Are you… Does the baby make you hungry before then?"

"Jellal makes sure I get enough for breakfast, and I carry my own rations for if I get hungry between meals," Erza said. "We didn't order anything."

"But—"

"I don't know where he went. He'll come back when he's done being embarrassed."

"So we won't see him for a good long time," Erik said.

Gray laughed at that, although Erza only chuckled nervously before checking to make sure Jellal wasn't at the jobs board. Before learning he was about to be a father, Jellal had never taken a job that lasted less than two months. If he picked another such job, she would have their baby before he came home.

Blushing when she realized that Erik and Gray both had more faith in Jellal, Erza said, "I was only playing along."

Cobra smirked. "Sure."

"Really!"

A heavy hand fell on Gray and Erza's shoulders, sparring the latter from any more teasing as Gajeel leaned over between the two. "How are our lovebirds doing today?"

Gray and Erza started talking at the same time.

"Jellal's being his usual stupid self."

"Natsu bailed for Zeref."

Gajeel snorted. "I obviously meant the two of you."

Neither Gray nor Erza could quite work out how Gajeel might have come to this conclusion, so Erik threw in a helpful, "You two smell similar. He thinks you're having an affair."

Gray felt the blood drain from his face. Not because of the accusation. Jellal knew he wouldn't sleep with Erza, and even if he didn't, he knew exactly what was going on in Gray's life. He knew there was nothing.

But his scent? When Gray thought of it, Natsu had hinted he knew about Erza's pregnancy before
they heard about her announcement, and he had dealt heavily with Levy while she was pregnant. He
must have been familiar with how the hormone shifts involved in pregnancy altered a person's scent.
Gray always thought that Natsu knew when he became pregnant because Zeref had calculated the
exact day, but when he thought of it, Natsu was always confident of how far along Gray was while
Zeref had only a vague recollection of when Gray had been exposed to the serum.

Was Gajeel hinting he knew what Gray's scent really meant? Did Wendy know? Laxus? Laxus had
the dullest senses of all the slayers, but they were still sharper than a normal human's. Why hadn't
Erik told him something was amiss before Zeref came by and mentioned the serum? They could
have avoided everything if one of them had just told him!

"If that's true, why's Demon-boy here been mute since I called you two out?"

Gray blinked, realizing Erza and Gajeel had been arguing the whole time his mind raced. That shit
eater grin on Gajeel's face made his insides twist. Was he just giving them grief like this to hint to
Gray that he knew what was really going on?

"You really suck at this," Erik said.

This, for Erza, was the last straw. "Excuse me?"

Because Gray was between the two of them, he had to grab her when she tried to lunge for Erik and
throttle him. Erik, much to Gray's annoyance, made no attempt to escape. Even as pregnant as she
was, Erza was a formidable adversary.

"I meant him," Erik said, jabbing his thumb in Gajeel's direction. "You and Jellal have been banging
for years now—don't think I don't know just 'cause you two never did it in the room next to mine. I
still heard him thinking about it when you come home. You don't think I'd tell the jerk if his woman
had a side guy? I'd have figured it out by now."

"Just giving Gray grief. Didn't expect Titania to be the one who got pissy over it."

"He has to take vitamins for his condition. Jellal makes Erza take the same ones for the baby. There's
your freaking scent. Piss off before I get Levy pissed with you."

"Like what."

"Like the twenty things you just thought of."

Gajeel stiffened, clicked his tongue, and left.

Gray waited until Levy pulled Gajeel aside to ask what he'd been talking about before saying, "I'm
not taking vitamins."

"Really?" Erik asked.

"Well..." If Natsu mixed any sort of supplement into Gray's food, Gray didn't know it. He didn't
think Natsu would add anything suspect to his meals without telling him after the last disaster, but it
would be good to check.

"You work that one out," Erik said. "Oh. And the scent thing? Super noticeable, but no one's going
to sniff you and think 'this guy is obvious knocked up' any more than they're going to see you
without that ring and thing 'this man clearly has a baby bump'. You smell like you're taking birth
control pills and you probably look like you have a tumor."
"Lovely. That's the exact look and odor I always wanted."

"Stop that," Erza ordered, throwing her arms around Gray. "He looks just fine. I've seen him with a shirt on, and he looks exactly how he should."

"But you know what's up with him. I'm just explaining how people who don't know might think."

Gray nodded, grateful for the reassurance, however offensively Erik had phrased it.

If people saw him next to Erza, and saw his stomach grow at the same rate as hers, Gray figured they would eventually work out what happened, even if 'pregnant' was no one's first assumption for what might be happening to a man. He still couldn't expose his stomach and brush it off as part of his mysterious condition and expect that no one would ever figure out the truth.

But he could assume that without being too obvious about what he was going through, people wouldn't work it out from one or two hints alone. If his scent was enough to tip someone off to his pregnancy, Natsu would have known what was up the first time he became pregnant, and approached him about the abortion when it happened. He only realized what the scent meant after Zeref told him about the serum.

-o-

Jellal came out of hiding around lunchtime, presumably because it was an appropriate time to make good on his word about seeing Mira for long awaited meals. Gray poked around at his food before eating it to see if there were any obvious signs that vitamins had been added, even though he couldn't think of any reason why they would be in food he ordered from the guild.

Natsu showed up about an hour after Gray finished eating, with his hair abnormally disheveled and a long tear down his pants. He looked around, spotted Lucy, and almost turned and left before Erza waved to him.

Seeing Gray, Natsu grinned and hurried over to their table.

"What happened to you?" Erza asked as he dropped down on a bench beside Jellal.

"Zeref. Had to change his bandages a couple times and he wouldn't take his pain pills."

"He needs pain medicine for a little peeling skin?" Erza asked, oblivious to the various gestures Erik made for her not to press Natsu for details.

That the mind reader looked a little green was the only real warning any of them had before Natsu said, "It's more like he got completely skinned and you can see deep into the muscle underneath. Did you know that you have to stick gauze in the hole when it's too big to sew back together? He's got some special cream that's supposed to make it all grow back instead of turning into a massive dented scar, but he screams when you put it on. Even when he's had stuff for pain, he still squirms and tears up and begs me to stop." Natsu paused, noticing Gray and Jellal's looks of horror, but also Erza's look of fascination. Since she was so interested, he decided to carry on. "The worst part is that he actually remembers the cream just fine, but faked forgetting it because he thought it would be easier to deal with the scarring than the pain, since he keeps forgetting the pain pills and then he doesn't want to take them while the construction people are there. In the end, I couldn't find anyone who was willing to force him to take the pain pills and put the cream on once they kick in. Everyone wussed when they heard you have to fight him to get the cream on. I'm gonna have to work something out with Mavis where one of us deals with him in the morning and the other sees him at night."

Erza chuckled at that, and Cobra managed a grin despite having clearly heard Natsu think about
much more graphic details of Zeref's injury than he gave.

"Do you want any other health stories, or can I hear why Gajeel keeps shooting all of us weird looks now?"

Gray opened his mouth to recount the Gajeel incident from earlier, but Erik spoke before he could. "Gray was wondering if you sneak anything into his food."

"Sometimes," Natsu said, and Gray felt his heart drop to his stomach. "Like, when he doesn't want vegetables. Bisca taught me how to grind them up and hide them in a sauce so he still gets them. Why?"

What?
Vegetables?

What?

Gray's expression must have been a sight to behold, because Jellal took one look at him and then had to turn away to try and smother his laughter. Still trying to process that Natsu had snuck something so absurdly benevolent into his food, and done so as if he were a picky child, Gray remained speechless as Erik burst out in thunderous laughter.

Erza, at least, was not amused at his expense. No. Her reaction was worse. She put a hand firmly on Gray's shoulder, looked him right in the eye, and said, "You need to eat your vegetables, Gray."

"I-I eat them!" Gray insisted, trying not to succumb to the urge to crawl into a hole and die.

"Most days," Erik threw in. Gray resolved to kill him later. Jellal could probably give him pointers on how to hide the body.

"He does usually eat them. But he needs to have them every day, not just most," Natsu said. "I thought he'd get mad if I asked him about any of the pill stuff Erza was taking, so I got Mavis to explain how to get all the stuff you need with food. But if only works if he eats it all, so I gotta get creative sometimes."

Gray looked around for a sufficient hole to crawl into and die. The basement looked like his best shot.

"I've got to get to work!" Gray declared, hurrying up from the bench. "I've been here for hours without doing anything. Sooner or later Mavis is going to get sick of me if I don't get my butt in gear."

Jellal was too busy trying not to laugh to say anything, and Erza was now more interested in how Natsu managed Gray's diet and whether or not he had tips for her baby. Gray almost made a clean get away, but Erik grabbed his hand and slipped a paper into it before he could escape. Gray grasped it tight and hurried away.

Only once Gray was safely in the basement, hidden behind a tower of books he needed to either reshel of Archive, did he stop to see what Erik wrote.

_He saw you two's exes and got his hopes up that you would kiss him to show off again._

Gray's first thought was that Erik hearing that he was pinning for Natsu was the last thing he wanted, before remembering that they openly discussed it in his presence. His next was that Erik was either
the best or worst ally in the world, for being able to read mind. But then Gray found himself staring at the words in worry.

Saw their exes, Erik wrote. If he meant Juvia, then wanting a kiss from Gray was exciting news. That was a major sign of reciprocation. If he meant Lucy, then that was just... blah. Of course Natsu would want to show off to Lucy that he was moving on and in love with someone even though they 'couldn't' give him a child. Gray wouldn't be able to reject him publically either, after how he made Natsu play along with Juvia.

Erik indicated both of them, so probably Natsu wanted a kiss for Lucy that Gray would instigate because of Juvia. Meaning that Gray in and of himself wasn't what was on Natsu's mind. Erik liked messing with people, and falsely inflating Gray's hopes would no doubt be a great prank for him.

Sighing, Gray pocketed the note and got to work.

-o-

Jellal and Erza didn't stick around for long after Gray left. It seemed they'd been holding off on leaving for a job in order to keep him company. Erza smiled and waved while Jellal gave Natsu a hesitant grin. That was a step up. Usually, once Erza looked away, Jellal either glared, or gestured to let Natsu know he was being watched.

That left Erik, who was eager to tease Natsu more on what a freaking mom he turned into, sneaking Gray vegetables. Natsu turned his voice out by focusing on thoughts of that stupid injury of Zeref's that he would probably be changing the bandages on for months. That got Erik to bail in short order.

But then there was no one left at the table, and no one else dared approach Natsu when Lucy rose and made her way over to him.

Natsu had avoided her since the first explosion. She wasn't a foe he knew how to fight. When they wordlessly agreed not to discuss the breakup, everything ran smoothly. They could still be friends and do all the friend things together that they used to. It took Natsu a little time to feel comfortable letting himself into her room again, and he was much more careful than ever before not to see her naked, and she stopped offering for him to stay for dinner or overnight, but it was mostly like they never dated at all.

Now he had to actually face things, and things that weren't an enemy he could punch or even Gray being stupid and needing some sense talked into him. The only direction Natsu saw things going between him and Lucy was down.

The worst part was, he didn't even know what all he might discuss with her. Their split, obviously, but what about everything with Gray? Natsu spent so much time either worrying about Gray or trying to puzzle out the signals Gray sent him that he was at a complete loss for what all he and Gray had actually done that might have upset Lucy.

But the longer he ran from her, the more things with Gray there would be to fight about all at once. Natsu expected that the amount of time they had left to feasibly hide Gray's pregnancy was under a month, and there was a decent chance some slip-up would occur at any point during that exposed them early. Even if he fully expected another explosion at that point, it would be less trouble than dealing with everything all at once.

He still had to remind himself not to bolt when Lucy came to a stop right in front of him.

"We need to talk," she said. "Walk with me."
Natsu looked up at her, wondering where she might go and what sort of whispered gossip he would suffer through afterward from people who forgot how sharp his hearing was.

"Why do we need to walk to talk? Here's just fine," Natsu said, doing his best to look like he didn't get what she was trying to do.

"I don't want anyone eavesdropping."

"No one's eavesdropping. They're all minding their own business," Natsu said, as if it wasn't quite at all the nearby tables and Mira hadn't come over to wipe down the table he sat at.

"Natsu."

"What did you want to talk about?"

Lucy glared, but she couldn't drag Natsu anywhere he didn't want to go, and making a fuss would only draw more attention. Grudgingly, she sat down across from him.

"I heard you and Gray are looking to adopt," she said.

Oh yeah. Gray had said that, hadn't me? Carp on a shit-biscuit. Did that man just forget that Natsu had his own relationship baggage while dealing with Juvia, or did he deliberately throw Natsu under the bus making a claim like that when things between him and Lucy weren't resolved?

"Yeah. Well, it's been discussed," Natsu said. "We're not going to start a family tomorrow or anything, but we've talked a bit about being parents, and he's asked about how adoption works. We need to settle on how many we want, still. And how often, if we end up adopting more than one."

There. Enough of that was true for Gray to play along easily, and the rest he could hopefully figure out how to play along with.

Natsu tried not to make direct eye contract while assessing Lucy's reaction, which made it hard to tell what exactly her reaction was. He had no idea what to make of her tone when she said, "We'd talked about five."

"We did."

Lucy hesitated before saying the next part.

"You told me you love me more than you want children."

"I did say that..." Natsu could bring himself to finish with at the time. It sounded too mean. In a way, it wasn't even true. There was a difference between knowing that you could never bring yourself to be with someone and throwing away your feelings with them. He could no longer see himself with Lucy, with someone who could push him away no matter how hard he tried to be his best for her, and maybe he didn't love her as much anymore, but he didn't not love her either.

"You love Gray just as much as me?"

Did he? Natsu thought about it. He cared for Gray deeply. He could say he was looking out for him due to a guilty conscious or out of concern, but he looked out for Zeref that way, and he did it with a lot more moaning and groaning and tried his hardest to minimize the time he was needed. He certainly wouldn't be as dedicated as he was with Gray should the person in need be, say, Gajeel. So if he were to be honest with himself, then there was definitely more at play for him in how he tried to be there for Gray the way he did. After spending so much time lamenting that they didn't agree on
kids and especially after the frustration and confusion with reminding himself that Gray's advances were just for show and he needed to keep to himself when they were alone, Natsu would be kidding himself if he said he wasn't attracted to Gray on some level. Hell, he'd been excited to see Lucy and Juvia when he came into the guild just because it meant there was a decent chance Gray would kiss him, and he'd never get a kiss if there wasn't someone Gray wanted to show off for.

Enough so to give up his dreams of parenthood? Or at least put them on hold while Gray spent the next decade enjoying himself in the hopes that he might one day be ready to settle down?

Natsu had no idea if he loved Gray enough for that. But then that wasn't exactly what Lucy asked him.

"No."

She looked relieved, and Natsu felt bad for what he still had to say.

"I love Gray more than you," Natsu said. "Because it's really hard to love someone when they call you a liar for saying you love them. And even though we don't agree on a lot of things, and we've had really rough moments, and he's really hot and cold at times and it gets confusing, and it might not work out, Gray believes me when I tell him how I feel. And that's way more important than agreeing on how many kids we want."

Granted, he had never officially told Gray he loved him. Because boundaries and whatnot. But Gray had been able to see that Natsu really regretted hurting him, and wouldn't do it again, and was trying his hardest to make amends. That meant more to Natsu than anything.

If he'd been similarly stupid with Lucy, would they have been able to get past it? Natsu realized he'd upset her when he vanished for a year, but they ended up never discussing it. He waited and waited for her to call him out for leaving her so he could justify himself, but it ended up being shoved into a corner and ignored. They had a million petty squabbles, but it was always easier for them to leave the big issues unaddressed. Pretend there was nothing wrong until the problem went away.

Lucy sat stone-faced, so Natsu kept talking, intent on making sure that she understood the problem the same way he did.

"It really didn't matter to me. Adopting. Really. I liked you. A lot. But... But getting dumped like that, with you saying that it had to be what I wanted... It hurt, y'know? I would have given up anything for you, and you made me give you up instead and it felt like you didn't even know who I was and... I don't know. Don't you think it's weird we never fought? I always thought we must get along good, but it's more like we avoided it. Hell, it's been over half a year since we broke up, and this is the first time we're actually talking about it. Except were not talking about it. I'm talking about it and you're looking at me funny. Please say something so I can shut up."

"Okay," Lucy said, and then said no more.

"That's it?"

"Okay. I'm talking. We're talking now, Natsu. What do you want to talk about?"

"I don't know! You're the one who came over to talk!"

"Fine then! Let's talk about how you left me over adoption then ran off with someone else who you would have to adopt with!"

"You left me!" Natsu was yelling now, and the whole rest of the guild was quiet, but he didn't care.
"You were the one who ended things over something that you thought I thought was a problem! And then you got mad at me for getting close to someone else afterward even though you went out and saw other guys since! What was I supposed to do? Sit and wait around in case you ever changed your mind and took me back?"

"You—" Lucy cut herself off with a growl, and Natsu wondered if the answer was yes. If she really had intended to come back to him once she came to terms with what the doctor told her. "You should have confronted me!"

"Why?" Natsu demanded. "I already said everything, and you still made me leave! What more was I supposed to do?"

"Do what you want! That's what you always do anyway, isn't it?"

"Not always," Natsu said. Because once upon a time he'd wanted Lucy, and apparently she'd expected him to fight for her even after giving up on him. "But I think that's what I'm gonna do this time."

And before Lucy could ask what that meant, Natsu stood and showed himself down to the basement where Gray was.

Chapter End Notes

I also forgot what my Erik was like. I should have given him more scenes.

I'm not a fan of Gruvia. The way Juvia acts creeps me the fuck out, to be frank. I'm never sure if I'm bashing her or staying true to her character, because if I wanted to portray someone negatively, I would write them the way she's written. (Literally named an OC after her because I wanted an obsessive unwanted admirer as that antagonist in an original story, and it helped me get in the zone with writing that character.)

Someone got on my case for not including Gruvia in my list of ships I like back when I was still politely quiet about not liking the ship, and then Gruvians descended upon me when I gave that person an explanation, and since then I've given pretty much no fucks what people think of me not liking Gruvia and have been pretty vocal about thinking that it's not only a terrible ship, but that the way it and Juvia are written as a whole has become progressively worse. Cuzz fuck y'all if you can't stand me explaining why I don't share your opinion when someone nags me to explain it. (Whatever people say about how she's had "great development" because she's happier or whatnot, she's basically regressed to the point where she can no longer stand on her own as an individual character in the story, and is more like an accessory to Gray's character. She also regresses back to pre-Phantom Lord behavior when Gray is gone, so her development is pretty dependent on his continued presence. Which is sad.)

Nalu, however, I have no real beef with. Same for Lucy. Neither are perfect and I am not invested in Nalu in any capacity, but I don't take umbrage with it. And sometimes the fandom comes up with really cute fics or art for them, and that's nice. So I felt really bad with how Lucy is portrayed in this fic. I'm trying to strike an okay balance between someone who's really emotionally distraught and hasn't handled things rationally to the point where it's become kind of destructive, and not making her look like a bitch. Not sure I've succeeded.
Something with the universe was deeply broken. The stars were out of alignment and the sky was in danger of falling, and at any moment the world might stop spinning completely. Gray could think of no other explanation for why he was the one coming to Natsu's house to see if everything was alright and insist that the slayer show up at the guild because everyone was worried about him.

Gray didn't ever really go to Natsu's house. Maybe a few times as a kid, to make fun of him for living in such a rundown looking place, but there was no need growing up. Lisanna could handle him, or Erza could go and scare him into doing whatever it was that warranted a house call. Lucy held the unofficial position of person-who-fetches-Natsu-if-need-be for the longest time, but apparently Lucy and Natsu had a shouting match the other day and now Natsu wouldn't come to the guild, so Mavis asked Gray to deal with him.

What the guild didn't know was that it went well beyond not just going to the guild. Even being seen on the streets by Lucy was too big a risk to take. Natsu had camped at Gray's for three nights, sleeping on his couch, until Mavis called them to say that she was falling behind on paperwork and he had to go see Zeref in her steed. Gray wasn't about to touch that hole in Zeref's arm, so Natsu slipped out in the middle of the night and spent the next couple of days running around the outskirts of town to go between his house and the lab.

So Gray wasn't enthusiastic for the conversation he was about to have. But hey. Natsu spent a lot of time coming to his apartment every day and making sure he took care of himself when he was too depressed to bother. Even if that wasn't Natsu's exact issue, and even if Natsu was the one who put him in that slump in the first place, Gray felt like he owed it to Natsu to try and be similarly helpful.

He knocked, and was disappointed when Happy opened the door.

"Gray! I didn't know you could walk all the way out here."

"Haha. Very funny. Is Natsu here?" He ought to be. Zeref's bandages were changed at morning and night, so noon had seemed like the best time to catch Natsu at home.

Happy scowled. "He is. It's really alright for you to come here on your own? I thought you were sick."

"Oh." He hadn't been teasing. "Y-yeah. I'm feeling better today. And it's not like I never stopped for rest. Natsu hasn't shown up for a few days now. I need to talk to him."

Happy looked over his shoulder, and didn't exactly look happy when he looked back at Gray. "He's in the bathroom. Does he have to go with you again?"
"Everyone at the guild keeps nagging me to bring him."

"And once he goes again, he'll spend all day with you, day after day after day," Happy said. "And I'll barely see him again."

Seeing Natsu without Happy had become such a common sight for Gray that he'd almost forgotten that Happy was left behind whenever Natsu came to visit. Since Natsu came to visit pretty much daily when not out on a job, and since he took as few jobs as he could in order to visit pretty much daily, that left only the night for Happy. And the poor guy hadn't even had that the nights Natsu slept over at Gray's.

"Sorry," Gray mumbled. He didn't exactly make Natsu force the pregnancy on him, but he did fall into a dependent state after, and at any point he could have told Natsu that it was alright for Happy to come over.

Happy had to know that too, because he didn't look the least bit convinced of Gray's sincerity as he said, "If you're sick, you're sick."

Gray gave a grunt of acknowledgement as he showed himself over to the couch. In all honesty, he would be well and truly screwed without Natsu's help. Reading up on his condition was all it took to make him hate life, and since he couldn't bring himself to research it, he didn't know half the things Natsu did to make sure it went off without a hitch. Apparently he had special dietary considerations while he still carried the kid. What were those? Who knew. Natsu found a way to meet them without Gray having to take all the vitamins Erza was apparently on. (Hopefully not sticking to his exact diet plan the past couple of days when he had to cook for himself again wouldn't mess the kid up for life.)

"How long does Natsu have to sit on the can for, anyway?" Gray asked.

"He's showering. He had blood on him when he came home."

"His or Zeref's?"

"I think it was Zeref's. He didn't look hurt."

Happy looked guilty as he pulled himself up onto the couch beside Gray. He knew better than any of them that Natsu wasn't the type to reach out when something perturbed him, and that was exactly what happened when he first learned he was Zeref's little brother. If anything else happened while those two were alone, Natsu might never mention it. Yet Happy let Natsu go by himself every time, preferring like most of the town to keep his own contact with the Black Mage to a minimum.

"I've never seen Natsu come back from Zeref's hurt," Gray said. "And the only time I've been hurt while up there, it was a mechanic accident that Zeref did his best to shield me from. He's... He's an oddball, but I do think he cares about the people who take the time of day for him. I'm sure he just bled on Natsu while those two argued over whether or not to treat his wound properly. Natsu and Mavis both made it sound like getting him to sit through wound care this time around is a task and a half."

"You don't think he'd do anything to them, do you?"

"Nah. If he were going to bite people's heads off for messing with his injuries, those two would be long dead by now."

"That's true..." Happy looked up at Gray. "Did you hear about the time Natsu had to pull him out of a machine before it chopped his arm off?"
"No. But I did hear about the time while he was still immortal when he beheaded himself, so I'm not surprised he almost let that happen."

"Wait! You mean his head came off?"

"No. It was still a little attached, from how he described it." Zeref shared that story while segwaying into a talk about depression, suicide, and how he didn't think Gray out to be left alone. Remembering that, Gray suddenly found himself much less interested in the topic. "Anyway, I haven't seen you much lately. How have you been?"

"Bored," Happy said. "Ever since the team split up, Wendy goes to help at the hospital when she doesn't want to go on a job, so she and Carla are rarely at the guild, and Lily's always busy helping Gajeel and Levy with the twins. And Erza's going to be busy with a baby for years, and Lucy and Natsu are fighting, so we're probably never going to get together again."

Gray patted Happy on the head. "Levy and Gajeel take turns working most of the time, so Erza can still find time for us. And once I'm up for work again, I'm game for going out with her and Natsu. Lucy too, once they've calmed down." If they calmed down. From the basement Gray didn't hear all of the parts they shouted at each other, and missed everything they didn't shout, but the guild's consensus was that it was a fight long coming and both of then let it all simmer until things boiled over. Those tended to leave more bitter feelings than when you tackled an issue right away.

The face Happy made cast similar doubt, but he nodded.

Gray wanted to ask then what he heard of the fight and how bad it might have been. No blows had been thrown, so it had to either be minor or really bad, but Natsu stepped out of the bathroom just then without even a towel.

He and Gray stared at one another, Gray making sure to focus on Natsu's face and nothing lower down—not even Natsu's normally exposed chest. He hoped Happy was focused on Natsu too, and that Natsu wasn't looking anywhere below the neck either. He could feel there was a need to try and cover his crotch before he gave away just how impressed he was at that moment with Natsu's physique, but his stomach was in the way, and Mavis's illusion kept his stomach from hiding his boner.

"Oh. Right. Sorry." Natsu turned and grabbed clothes from a pile on the floor, flashing his sculpted rear at Gray before he set to work dressing himself.

"Sorry for him. We don't own towels his size," Happy said.

"A-ah… Y-y-yeah. I can see how those… might be superfluous with Natsu."

"Okay! I'm decent!"

"You're never decent," Gray mumbled.

"Hey. Some of us can always remember our pants," Natsu said. "You're… Um… Yeah. You have pants."

Realizing he'd been spotted, Gray tried to shift so that it would at least be less obvious to Happy.

"You want a shower too?" Natsu asked.

"No."
"Are you sure. It's cleaner in there than most of the house, so—"

"I'm fine!" Gray turned so his back was fully to Happy, lest the cat look up at him in concern and see anything he shouldn't. "If I wanted to shower, I could do it at home. That's not why I'm here."

"What are you here for? Lunch? Most of the food I bought is in your fridge, but I can get something put together for you," Natsu said.

Gray felt a little paw fall on his bare back, and Happy said, "I'm sorry you're sick, but Natsu cooks way better because he takes care of you. He actually reads recipes now."

"Oh. Does he?"

Now that he thought of it, the things Gray saw Natsu 'cook' in the past were on the overly simple side. He knew Natsu had taught himself how to make fudge, but it hadn't occurred to him that most everything Natsu fed him was something Natsu learned to make on his behalf. Or the baby's, more likely. Gray was getting ahead of himself thinking that everything Natsu did was about him and not the kid.

"So?" Natsu asked. "Lunch?"

"I won't say no," Gray told him. "But everyone in the guild has been asking me if you're alright. You already disappeared on us once after you and Lucy first split. They want to make sure you're not about to do that again."

Natsu gave an affirmative grunt and went to check the fridge.

Gray gave him his time. Natsu let him wait weeks before finally telling Juvia he was done, and then played along with all the boyfriend nonsense afterward, so Gray had let Lucy go for a few days already, and could wait an hour more. Besides, the less happy Natsu was, the less likely it would be that Gray would get a nice, home-made lunch. Real discussion over the Lucy situation could wait while until the food was done. Was that petty of Gray? Maybe. But the baby gave him an appetite and it was Natsu's fault he had a baby, so Natsu couldn't complain.

Since there were no towels for if he took up Natsu's offer to use the shower, Gray excused himself to go a few hundred feet into the woods behind Natsu's house to take care of business.

Lunch was ready when Gray returned, although Natsu required he wash his hands before he could dig in. Of course he'd be able to smell what Gray was up to. Probably heard it too. Gray tried not to blush as he went to the sink. Porlyusica had noted that it wasn't uncommon when pregnant, and Natsu knew about pregnancy stuff, so he would surely understand that the baby was messing with Gray's hormones. It would be easy to blame the whole thing on the baby, should Natsu not be wholly receptive to the idea that Gray really did find him attractive.

In all honesty, it wasn't as though Gray never noticed Natsu was attractive before. Most of the guild's men were good looking, and Natsu wasn't too bulky for Gray's tastes. Plus, that smile of his was damn cute. He could melt people with that easier than any fire magic.

Aaand Gray shoved those thoughts aside before he could any other physical tip-offs.

Feeling a little bad over having hogged Natsu for so many months and not trusting himself to speak without embarrassing himself, Gray stayed largely silent through lunch, letting Happy and Natsu carry on a discussion about the tower and the construction workers.

It seemed Zeref's wound was now infected and he was mildly feverish, and while there was still no
brave Alvarian willing to apply any sort of disinfectant or struggle to apply the cream, Natsu had found some scrawny kid unenthused by construction labor who was happy to look after his former emperor's health if all he had to do was make sure the man was eating properly, resting as much as he needed to, and regularly taking something to manage his pain. In the meantime, construction had slowed so the foreman could verify with Zeref during the few points in the day where he was lucid that they were doing things properly. Despite that, Natsu thought the S-System would be functional within weeks.

Jellal would be thrilled to hear that.

Happy gathered their dishes, making a show for Gray of proving how useful he was and how it would totally be to his benefit if he were allowed to come along in the future when Natsu went to Gray's to help with his mystery condition. Gray gave him a reassuring smile, then attempted, for all intents and purposes, to make Natsu never set foot near him again.

"If I had to go face Juvia, you should be able to walk around town in daylight again even if there's a chance you and Lucy will cross paths."

"I didn't make you talk to Juvia until the town almost flooded," Natsu said, not missing a beat.

"Yeah. But no one counted on me for anything. I've got maybe another week or two before I can't do my own grocery shopping, and I can't afford my rent and meals anyway. And everyone's worried you're going to run off into the wilderness again and not come back this time."

Natsu huffed and looked away.

Gray was not a feelings person. It wasn't a deliberate attempt to match his personality to his ice magic, or some manly insistence that emotions were for girls. His mood swings had made it apparent to anyone who dealt with him lately that he was no stoic. But discussing feelings was awkward for Gray. Frightening even. Vulnerable. Something he didn't like to resort to if things didn't already hurt so bad that letting people in couldn't make it any worse. He had very little practice with discussing emotional things. When other people had an issue they chose to share with him, he did his best not to look like he was looking for an escape route.

But Natsu had been willing to talk Gray through whatever was distressing him throughout the pregnancy, and Gray felt a terrifying obligation to return the favor.

"Do you… Um… If you want to talk about it…?"

Natsu glanced up at Gray, then down at his hands. He took a deep breath, then asked, "Do you think Lucy excepted me to wait for her after dumping me? I wasn't supposed to stay single until she came back to me, was I?"

Gray's heart clenched. It was one thing to tell yourself that your hopes were too high pursuing someone who was only nice to you because of a guilty conscious, but the reality of hearing them pine for someone else was too much.

"I don't know," Gray forced out. "Would you have?"

"Dunno. Maybe? If she told me she just needed a little time and I had to wait."

"Did she tell you that?"

"No. She said we were done and I should find someone else. But then she acted like she wanted me to wait anyway."
"Will you?"

"No," Natsu said. "She said we're done and I should find someone else. And I found someone else. So I agree with what she said first. We're done."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I just… I don't know. I don't hate her, you know? Lucy… She was really hurt. So I think she maybe got too caught up in that, and didn't meant to hurt me too. But just because she didn't mean to doesn't mean she didn't. And… I mean… It hurt. Being sent away, and then seeing her move on and date other guys, and then finding out I was still supposed to wait for her even though she could see other people…"

"Maybe she just needed to work things out?" Gray suggested, unsure what else to say.

"Yeah. Well, woulda been nice if she could've worked things out with me," Natsu said.

What did Natsu normally say here? "Will you be okay?"

"I'll live," Natsu said. "It just… I don't know. It's confusing. I know why she did it, and I can't hate her for it, but if I saw her, I'd get mad again. I don't want to be mad at her. Right now I'm kinda… numbish? I like that more."

Gray had spent a few months feeling kinda numbish, and hearing Natsu say that, he suddenly understood why The Black Mage Zeref freaking Dragneel felt the need to talk to him about it.

"This new person," Gray said. "Maybe you focus on them."

"He doesn't like me," Natsu said. "Not like that, anyway. Sometimes I think he only tolerates me."

"Sometimes I only tolerate you too, but I still like having you around," Gray said. He meant the words to be consoling, but they seemed to deflate Natsu.

"I think it's pretty hopeless."

"You're supposed to be the guild's most obnoxiously optimistic member," Gray pointed out.

Natsu shrugged. "I felt pretty optimistic about Lucy. Even when it all fell apart, I still felt like the whole friends thing would still work alright. But everything was way worse than I thought."

Oh. Great. Now Gray had a mystery love rival and baggage that he needed to work his way around to convince Natsu that he really truly did want him. Now he knew how it felt to be Juvia and pine for some emotionally impaired jerk.

"Well… Hopefully whoever it is you're interested in now will be more straightforward with you," Gray said, even if he didn't really hope for that. He sure as hell wasn't being straightforward with Natsu, trying to feel him out for any chance of romance while passing it off as an act, and if this mystery love rival.

"They're not."

Gray resisted the urge to do a fist pump. He wasn't the worse of Natsu's suitors, but celebrating that might tip the scale.

"Sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?"
Natsu shook his head. "How are you feeling? Does anything hurt right now? Any new aches?"

"Same old," Gray said, hoping that any disappointment he showed would be mistaken for annoyance with his pregnancy and not with Natsu having moved away from the subject. Given how fast Natsu usually changed the subject when pressed to discuss things he didn't like, it had already been impressive that he spoke as much as he did.

"Nothing?"

"Are you ever going to tell me why you keep asking?"

"You told me not to."

"Oh… Did I?"

"Yeah. Just let me know if anything's ever a little sore, okay?"

Gray wracked his brain for things he told Natsu not to tell him, and landed on his claim after that checkup with Makarov that he didn't want to hear about anything that might go wrong—just how to avoid it.

"Um, my feet are a little sore."

"That's okay. I mean… I can carry you home, if you want."

"Absolutely not."

Gray's stomach was too large for Natsu to feasibly carry him on his back, and being held like a princess once had been one time too many. His legs would probably press against the bump anyway, which would look strange with the illusion still up.

"I can carry Gray," Happy offered. Gray flinched remembering he was there, and he was eager to prove that he should be included in things.

"It's fine," Gray mumbled, which was less final of phrasing and less confident of wording than he used with Natsu, and Happy took as a sign that there was an opening for him.

"It will be fine. I can carry you gently if you're worried about getting hurt," Happy offered.

Before Gray could find the heart to tell him that he really wasn't wanted, Happy but his paws and Gray's knees and pulled himself up onto Gray's lap. Or tried to, anyway. He got his feet up, tried to take a step, then bonked into Gray's stomach and fell backwards onto the floor.

"You okay buddy?" Natsu asked.

Happy shook his head, eyes wet with crocodile tears. "Nobody wants me! You keep telling me to stay away, and now Gray shoved me."

"No one shoved you," Natsu said, blind to Gray's frantic gestures for him to let it go.

"I definitely felt something."

Happy hopped up again, and Gray tried to grab him, but missed all but the tip of Happy's tail. That gave Happy enough room left to put a paw on Gray's stomach.

"There's something here, Natsu." Happy put his second paw on Gray's stomach, and Gray gave up
on clinging to his tail and let him step forward to press the rest of his stomach against the invisible bump.

And the baby, blast her, picked that moment to kick out at Natsu's face.

"It moved!"

"Hey! No fair!" Natsu snatched Happy up. "I never get to feel her move!"

He didn't? For a second Gray thought that maybe letting Natsu might be a good exchange for the name of his mystery love rival, but then he remembered that it was Natsu's fault he was pregnant. No baby for Natsu was Natsu's punishment for not letting Gray have no baby. And that meant no feeling the baby. Or would it be alright to let him feel her while she was still in Gray's stomach, so long as she didn't go to him once she was born? But then it might be cruel to let him feel her and get more attached when she wasn't going to stay with him.

Caught up in worries over hurting Natsu with the baby and the possibility that he wanted that after Natsu hurt him over the baby, Gray almost missed it when Happy asked, "What was that?"

Natsu looked from Happy to Gray and back again. "Well… That…Maybe… Gray, it's not something we'll be able to hide for much longer anyway. Want to just tell him?"

"No."

Natsu put a hand on Gray's shoulder and smiled at him as reassuringly as he could. "Everyone's gonna find out real soon, Gray. This'll be fewer shocked reactions at once."

It was also more times dealing with shocked reactions over all, but at this point Natsu had effectively locked Gray into having to tell. You couldn't dangle that kind of information in front of Happy and not be given hell for it. You couldn't talk about secrets with little time left before being exposed and not expect anyone to be suspicious.

"…fine."

"Take the ring off."

"That's more than I agreed to."

"Why does he have to take a ring off?" Happy asked.

"It's an illusion," Natsu explained. "Mavis made it to hide his stomach for him. Come on, Gray. Sooner or later you're going to have to switch to clothes that give it away anyway."

"Sooner or later I'm forgoing clothes for good," Gray swore, but he knew he could never willfully back up those words. With a heavy sigh, he took the ring and slid it off his finger.

Happy gasped, and Gray felt his cheeks burn with shame. He wanted to defend himself. It wasn't his fault he looked to deformed. Natsu was the one who punched him into the pond with that serum. Natsu snuck him medicine and kept him from finding out he was pregnant until it was too late to give the baby up without losing his magic. He didn't choose to be in the situation he was in.

"Did Gray's liver fail?" Happy asked.

"What? No. He's pregnant."

"But he's a boy."
"Yeah. But Zeref—"

"Gray's pregnant?" Happy gaped. "Who's the father?"

Gray's answer of "Natsu" clashed with Natsu's "We don't know."

And silence fell over the room in the wake of that contradiction.

"Natsu," Happy said finally, looking up at him in faux disappointment, "That's horrible of you. I never suspected you of all people might be a deadbeat dad. If you knocked Gray up, you need to take responsibility for him and the baby."

"What do you think I've been doing for the past five months?"

"I would argue that you were doing something very different for the first month," Gray said.

"Still more or less the same thing. Kinda. And anyway, there's only a chance I'm the father."

Now it was Gray who Happy turned his mocking disappointment towards. "Gray. Who would have thought you were the type to sleep around? I'm impressed you managed to see even one person behind Juvia's back, much less twenty."

"It's not like that!"

Happy snickered. "You must have—"

"That's enough." Natsu dropped a hand onto Happy's head, startling him out of his train of thought. "The reason you weren't in on this in the first place is 'cause I knew you'd tease him."

"The reason he wasn't in on this in the first place is because you knew he'd shame you if he knew your hand in this," Gray corrected.

"Well, teasing is the reason after I got found out," Natsu said. "We leave Gray alone about the baby."

"There's really a baby?" Happy asked. "He's not just super bloated because he's gassy?"

"You felt it move."

"It could still be gas. Is that why you and Gray are dating? You're making an honest woman out of him?"

"I'm leaving," Gray declared, pushing himself up from the couch and turning towards the door.

"Wait. Crap. Wait. Gray! He won't do it again. Don't leave me."

Because Gray was a terrible suitor and likely not the best suited for Natsu, he took two more slow steps while savoring Natsu's plea to stay, then hesitated as if making up his mind on whether or not to carry forward.

Happy would tease him. That was a fact of life. Happy would tease whether he meant to get under Gray's skin or not. He naturally phrased things in a way that riled people up. And Natsu was right. There hadn't been much time left before there was no more hiding it, no matter how deeply Gray wished to go through the whole pregnancy with none the wiser and quietly give the child away. He would suffer through the teasing because, at this point, he had no choice. Unless he holed up in his apartment again, there would be plenty of occasions in the future for Happy to tease him.
"Gray? I'll go to the guild with you if you stay."

"Fine," Gray turned around, trying his hardest not to grin. "If it'll get everyone else off my back about you."

Natsu only sighed in relief, but Happy caught on to what Gray had done and snickered.

"I thought you two were only pretending," Happy said. "So that's how it is."

Gray had a second to wonder how bad his semi-act was before Natsu told him, "It's not like that. Gray, tell him it's not."

Of course. Just because Happy didn't get to be privy to Gray's health issues didn't mean he couldn't hear about things that pertained in equal measure to Natsu. If Natsu had his own relationship drama to deal with on top of their fake dating, then he would naturally confide in Happy. Gray felt a streak on envy, realizing that if Happy didn't already know who this crush of Natsu's was, he would still be the first to learn.

"Gray?"

"What Natsu and I do at the guild is for show. So Juvia will understand I've moved on," Gray said.

"I think Juvia figured it out already," Happy said.

Gray thought she had too. Even the risk of her asking if he might reconsider her wasn't something he was overly worried about. It wasn't likely to be hard by that point to tell her no and have it stick. Juvia was persistent to a fault, but not stupid. It would cool Lucy down too to think Natsu was still on the table—assuming Natsu hadn't told her off too harshly during their last encounter. Gray knew those two were no more likely to get back together than he and Juvia were.

Less so, in fact. Gray had left Juvia over a level of fixation that she could still learn to tone down, while the more that came out about Natsu and Lucy's relationship, the more it sounded like it had deep seated issues that neither of them had been fully willing to address. That was the sort of problem that could kill a relationship for good, and while there was a lot that fell apart with Lucy that Natsu didn't fully understand, he seemed to at least grasp that things were beyond their capacity to fix.

Hopefully, that was an issue with the two of them combined, and not a problem that Natsu carried from relationship to relationship.

He looked at Natsu, those wide eyes starting back pleadingly at him, and for one blissful moment, imagined that he was this secret love interest, and Natsu was watching him for some sign that everything between them wasn't just an act.

It wasn't. Not on Gray's end, anyway. And he wanted so badly to tell Natsu that. But reality came back and he realized Natsu made that face only because he wanted Gray to dissuade Happy.

"It's Natsu's fault I'm pregnant, even if he might not be the father," Gray explained, glossing over all the little details like Natsu drugging him to prevent the pregnancy's termination despite knowing how badly Gray would want to end things. "He's helping me out with any issues that come up while I'm pregnant as a way of making up for that. Juvia isn't exactly a related problem, but the issue came to head, so Natsu helped with that as well."

Happy, mercifully, didn't ask how Natsu was the one responsible for some mishap of Zeref's. He also didn't look dissuaded from the idea that Gray's attraction was genuine, which might have had
something to do with Gray refusing to say outright that it was an act. He couldn't outright say with Natsu right in front of him that he was faking the whole thing. Especially when Natsu was currently in knots over having received unclear signals from Lucy. Gray couldn't act consoling about that, then claim he had no interest in Natsu while hoping that Natsu would reciprocate his interest.

Why couldn't Natsu have just been upfront with him about the pregnancy in the first place? It would have solved so many problems. The pregnancy wouldn't have happened, and Gray wouldn't have any past trauma with misreading Natsu's interest, and Natsu wouldn't have to act guilty ever, so there would be nothing between them on either end of the equation to make it hard for Gray to find out if he was liked.

It didn't matter. It didn't happen that way, and Gray just had to work things out for himself.

"Well, you promised me you'd come to the guild. Are we going or not?"

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Natsu sent Gray ahead, saying he would be right behind him and wanted a minute with Happy first.

Then he gave Happy the full story. Finding out about the serum before Gray, accidentally implying to Porlyusica that Gray had confided in him and he could safely be told about the abortion, lying to get the recipe, sneaking potions into Gray's drink so a second baby wouldn't die, and how devastated Gray had been when the truth came to light. With a little prompting from Happy, he even confessed that the kiss Lucy referenced from around the same point in time did, in fact, happen.

"But I wasn't trying to make him do that. He just got mixed up about why I was being nice."

"Did you like it?"

"Hell no! I was already messing with him bad enough before it turned out I was messing with his heart too."

"But if you weren't afraid of hurting him, would you like it?"

Natsu bristled, recognizing the tease for what it was. "Does it matter? He's not exactly about to let me do anything with him after what happened with the baby. I'm lucky he even puts up with me."

"In other words, you like it."

"Happy!"

Happy snickered. "You must llove it when he kisses you at the guild to show off."

"It doesn't matter. He's faking."

Happy hummed, swinging his legs back and forth as he sat on the couch and thought about this. "But what if he weren't?"

"He is."

Natsu wasn't sure how much more emphatically he could say it, and Happy still didn't seem to get it through his head. Gray would never love him. Not after what he did.

"Are you going to tell the rest of the guild when Gray tells them you two are having a baby?"

"We aren't having a baby," Natsu said. "Gray loves reminding me that even if he doesn't want to
keep her, she's not going to me. Best I can hope for is that Mavis'll take her and let me babysit. And I'm pretty sure that not letting me babysit is a condition for adopting her."

Happy put reassuring paw on Natsu's knee. "You wouldn't get to see her at all if she died."

Natsu nodded, trying to keep his face impassive. Gray had made it no secret that if he'd known about the baby in time, nothing would have stopped him from killing her. In that sense, it was hard for Natsu to fully regret what he'd done. But he wished he'd found a way to do it without hurting Gray. He wished Gray didn't resent him for what happened, and wasn't denying him the ability to keep the girl out of spite. Mavis wanted a family, but she wanted one eventually. Once she'd worked on Zeref as much as she could. Natsu was eager to take the girl right away, and even if he could still see his daughter or niece at the guild, he'd rather see her every day. Disregarding the real possibility that he would never get to be a parent for himself when he couldn't adopt and couldn't find anyone who wanted to start a family with him, he didn't want to be limited to only seeing the girl when he and she were both at the guild.

If it hadn't been for all the drama, Gray might have been able to offer the baby to Lucy instead. Natsu would probably be twice as screwed for getting to see her in that case, but at least she would go to someone who was as eager for a child as Natsu was, and at least Lucy wouldn't be in the same situation he was—not likely to have a biological child and not eligible to adopt unless they found someone else who wanted that.

Maybe, if Natsu were desperate enough, he could ask Zeref for some of that serum and find someone who didn't mind essentially being a sperm donor.

"I don't think we should tell anyone," Happy said.

"Hm?"

"If Gray wanted everyone to know, he would have told me himself," Happy said. "But he downplayed it a lot. He didn't make it sound like you did anything that bad, so I don't think he wants people to think you did anything that bad, even if he wants people to know you're at fault. It's probably really hard for him to explain that he still really likes you after what happened."

"I told you, Happy: He doesn't."

"See. That's exactly what I mean. And he can still blame you saying you dunked him into that serum anyway, so everyone can get why he's sore about it while thinking it was all an accident. That's better for handling things with Lucy anyway, don't you think?"

Natsu grumbled, but had to concede Happy's point. There was really no good way to handle things with Lucy. But his fake romance with Gray 'blossoming' after the pregnancy mishap would be an uncomfortable story to give, but it was easier to explain than trying to tell her that he deliberately drugged Gray to keep him pregnant but totally hadn't held it against her that she couldn't have kids. Even if it was the truth. He might have hoped against hope that Gray would let him have the girl, but he'd never expected to win Gray from his misdeeds, and Happy was delusional if he thought Natsu had a chance.

Unless Gray wanted to relent the act, then Natsu didn't foresee any good way to convince Lucy it was a misunderstanding. Even if they did come clean, because Lucy had been convinced that they were secretly an item for so long before coming out, she would no doubt suspect that 'we were only pretending' was an excuse to cover up a failed romance. After all, that was more or less what he and Lucy had done. Pretending they'd only ever been friends and there was no contested breakup to discuss.
"Fine," Natsu said. "I'll follow his lead."

Happy grinned. "I think he'd like that almost as much as he likes you."

"I'm telling you, that's not it."

Happy shut his eyes, clutched his paws together, and leaned started making smooching noises.

"Look. The condition for getting to come with me to Gray's is no teasing."

"If Gray says I can come then I can come, and I don't think he minds if I tease you."

"Over him?" Natsu asked.

Happy smirked. "He might like that more than anything else."

Natsu snorted in disbelief. "Whatever. Let's just get going. And you better drop it before we get in earshot of anyone who might tell Lucy."

Happy nodded, but the devious grin he wore told Natsu he was in for much worse teasing down the road. Jabs about him and Gray had been easy to brush off as late as that morning, but now that Happy knew the full story and still persisted in saying that there was something between the two of them, his words hit much too close to home.

Trying to look as nonplussed as he could, Natsu grabbed Happy and rose to leave, ignoring the way his partner studied his face as they moved.

"Natsu?" Happy asked. "Do you like Gray?"

"Does it matter?"

"Even if Gray doesn't like you, shouldn't I know how you feel? Who else are you going to talk to about it?"

Natsu hesitated, desire to maintain the secret of his selfish want for someone he'd hurt and rejected once already clashing with the wish that there was someone he could confide in.


"So you llllike him?"

Natsu fixed Happy with a stern look, and earned his umpteenth snicker for his efforts.

"Not a word around him."

"If he likes you—"

"He doesn't."

"If he tells me he does—"

"Who would go to you first?"

"Besides you?"

Lacking a good comeback, Natsu grunted and said once more, "Not a word around him," before setting out for the guild.
Chapter End Notes

Yeah. This chapter.

This chapter ended up having more happen in it than I expected. I didn't foresee the final scene until I started writing it. But I hope it came out okay?
Gray made it two more weeks in secrecy. He would have liked to make it another thirteen weeks and then gotten away with never having to fess up, but two more weeks where he could pretend that everything normal was better than nothing.

Happy, much to Gray's relief, was completely mute about the pregnancy. Save for ribbing Natsu once about those constant questions about any new aches Gray had. Teasing both of them about their relationship kept him satiated. Not that Gray particularly enjoyed the constant implications that every little gesture he made in Natsu's presence was a sign of genuine interest—especially since most of them were—but it beat hearing that he was fat, or had a motherly glow. And when he mentioned to Natsu that his chest felt tender lately and Natsu confessed that Zeref had observed his more recent mammal test subjects lactating, Happy went into a different room so Gray couldn't hear him laugh. That one had been ripe for teasing, and Gray had been stunned to see Happy leave the subject be.

"If there's anything else he noticed specifically with the mammals, let me know now," Gray said at that time.

Natsu hesitated, then asked, "Is there anything else bugging you lately?"

Sooner or later, Gray was going to hear that question enough times to give in and ask Natsu what he was so worried about.

With Happy quiet about the pregnancy, Gray wasn't immediately exposed, but letting him in on the secret wasn't without consequence. For months, the guild had been perturbed to see Happy regularly show up on his own while Natsu ditched him for Gray, so seeing the slayer and cat reunited caused a stir. The obvious revelation was that Natsu and Gray were now comfortable enough in their relationship that they didn't mind Happy as a witness anymore, and he was regularly questioned about what went on at Gray's apartment. (The little hairball loved to make a mountain of a mole hill. Natsu wiping up soup Gray spilled on the table became Natsu catching a little dribble on Gray's chin using his tongue before the two passionately made out.) That being privy to their private life meant that Happy also likely saw more signs of whatever was medically wrong with Gray only generated more interest, but Happy insisted that Gray didn't like it being discussed, so he wasn't allowed to tell.

Still, the interest was upped, and Gray felt himself watched more closely. His clothes were becoming increasingly ill-fitting, and Gray frequently found himself putting his hands on his back, trying to relieve the pressure the baby put on him. It was a comically typical position to expect to see a pregnant woman in, but out of place on a man who at least appeared normal. Still, Gray couldn't shake the feeling that sooner or later people would piece things together.

It made him antsy around the guild. He couldn't help Mira or Mavis with anything breakable, because he shook under everyone's scrutiny. Even though he'd begun taking on more tasks that let him be around everyone, he found himself slowly migrating back to the basement. At best, he might make occasional trips between the basement and Mavis's office as he carried books from the records room to the guild's Archive Lacrima. But he couldn't hide constantly. He had to make token appearances throughout the day to act like Natsu's boyfriend, and Mavis refused to let him eat in the records room or her office—even though she ate in both all the time. Working through meals was also forbidden for anyone under her employ who ate for two.
So by way of having been teased by everyone and especially Happy for all his boyfriend appearances to the point that he was too embarrassed to search for Natsu, and because Jellal, Erik, and Erza were all off on a job that day, Gray found himself needing to find someone else to sit next to while he ate. Unless he wanted to eat somewhere else. But while the rain had almost fully let up, there was still drizzle enough to make Gray reluctant, and Natsu had the umbrella.

The obvious answer was to find members of his team who he hadn't seen as much since his and Erza's pregnancies forced everyone to work separately, but Natsu and Erza were already gone, and Lucy wasn't around and Gray wasn't sure if it was okay for him to sit with her anyway.

Wendy, however, was still there.

To say that Wendy was still a member of their team was a bit of a stretch. She'd still worked with them regularly, but as she grew older and more people her age joined, she started going on more jobs with those newer members and tagging along with older members less. But she was still the next most likely person for Gray to have gone on jobs with, so when he caught his eye he waved, and she waved back.

It wasn't until he'd taken too many purposeful steps towards her that he saw that Juvia—previously hidden behind a pole—sat at the table adjacent to her. His steps faltered, but then he forced himself to keep moving forward. So long as it was obvious that Wendy was the one he came to sit with, it ought to be fine. Ideally, he should still be able to engage in awkward small talk with Juvia. Barring that, he at least ought to not be afraid to go anywhere near her.

So Gray sat across from Wendy, taking a seat at the edge of the table so he wouldn't be seen awkwardly fumbling to get his legs over the bench. No sooner was he seated than did she hold a hand up to his forehead and say, "If you feel ill at any point, I can help."

"I…"

"I know it must be something beyond what magic can fix, or Porlyusica would have already handled it or come to me by now, but I'm sure I can at least alleviate symptoms."

"Y-yes. I'll… I'll let you know."

Gray kicked himself internally for not having thought to include Wendy in the secret earlier. He was afraid to ask about help with his backache for fear that she'd notice the cause while easing that pain.

Wendy noticed the hesitance in Gray's voice, and returned it with an equally hesitant smile. Him keeping his health secret was the norm as of late, but that didn't mean everyone had to like it.

"We're all here for you," she said.

"Most of us."

"Lucy is…" Wendy looked around, then leaned in and dropped to a whisper. "You know why she and Natsu broke up, right?"

Gray nodded and whispered back, "Miscarriages."

"I thought he might have told you. She came to me hoping I could fix it not too long before things fell apart between them, but until they fought the other day, I thought that Happy must have misunderstood and Natsu was the one to break things off. It didn't make sense to me that she would do it. But I asked her, and they broke up because she couldn't become pregnant and felt bad about keeping Natsu from having a child of his own, so it came as a shock her to that he found a
boyfriend.

A boyfriend who, in a perfect world, ought not to be pregnant. Not that it mattered, since Gray still wasn't on board with giving Natsu the baby. Once or twice, in a moment of weakness, he'd considered that offering Natsu the girl after all might be a good way to try and win affection from him, but he always rejected the idea. Letting Natsu see her, maybe he could handle, but bribing Natsu with a child in exchange for love was desperate at best, and extremely creepy no matter how you looked at it.

Since, by that point in the day, everyone had yet to discover what was wrong with Gray, he gave a bitter smile and said, "A sacrifice made in vain, huh?"

"Well… I wouldn't put it that way."

"She sees it that way."

"It was just… rubbing salt in the wound." Wendy winced when she said the words. "It's nothing against you. She was upset about it, and I don't think she was ready to see Natsu move on."

But Natsu hadn't been ready to lose her over an issue she projected onto him, or to have her mess with his head, however unintentionally, by making him wonder if he was supposed to wait on her. And even if Gray was messing with Natsu himself, thinking of that made him too indignant to care that he was the one to rub that salt in those wounds by hinting that he and Natsu were together than going full throttle enforcing the rumors over Juvia.

Speaking of Juvia, she had inched closer and closer throughout the conversation. Gray kept tabs on her out of the corner of his eye as he and Wendy spoke. He ought not to need to avoid her constantly, but that was only in theory, and this was his first time in a long time being near her without also being tangled up in Natsu's arms.

"Not that I'm not sympathetic to her, but I don't really appreciate her making it my problem," Gray said. "They never talked about it with anyone. It's not like I knew their history when I got myself involved with Natsu, and no one made her react to everything by leaving him."

Wendy gave a vague noise to indicate she'd heard, but took the middle road and didn't join Gray in talking ill of her. "Well, I hope you two manage to get it settled. I don't know if you'll be able to work again, but once Erza returns to active duty, it would be nice if she and Natsu and Lucy could all work together again."

"You think?" Gray asked. "Erza's getting awfully used to going along with Jellal now. I feel like the team's going to drift apart for good at this rate."

"That's not true!"

"Is it? We already lost you."

The pointer silenced Wendy for a good five seconds. There was no denying that. Even if you tried to argue that she hadn't been an original team member. They'd picked her up as a steady part of their team not too long after forming.

"Well, maybe everyone can still get together from time to time," She said. "For old time's sake."

"Maybe."

But Gray doubted it. He wouldn't mind working with Natsu still. They worked well together when
they weren't fighting, and he wanted to spend that extra time with him. (And that, come to think of it, was another point against giving Natsu the girl.) The rest of their team, he didn't see getting together for work much. Things with Lucy were messy enough, and would only get worse once she learned about Gray's baby. And aside from Erza relishing in all the extra time she got with Jellal now that he wasn't constantly avoiding town, he thought that they might end up staggering work like Gajeel and Levy often did, so arranging a mission with her would require timing things around when she could leave the baby in Jellal's hands. Or never, depending on how reliable a father she found Jellal to be, or how much she liked motherhood. Meredy had stopped working completely because she hated being away from little baby Uriel.

"Juvia worries that Gray might not be able to work at all," Juvia said. She startled Wendy when she spoke, apparently making her presence known to the younger girl for the first time since she sat down.

Gray assessed the statement and found nothing more than medical concern in it, even if her expression screamed anxiety, so answered as platonically as he could. "I'm not expecting to be sidelined forever. Hopefully, I'll be up for work again in... the next few months."

He almost said three. He had three months left. But then he remembered that unlike Levy and Meredy who were able to get back on their feet shortly after giving birth, he would be undergoing surgery. He swallow back a wave of nausea as the implications hit him for the first time. For however awful as Meredy made birth look, wasn't it still the way that babies were meant to come out? Zeref hadn't mentioned anything about dead frogs everywhere, and if he had, there was no way Natsu would have ever forced Gray to go through with things, right? Gray got that Natsu thought he was saving a life, but surely he would never willfully sacrifice Gray's for that of a fetus?

"Gray?" Juvia asked.

"Huh?"

"Juvia wanted to know if you could talk about what went wrong." She and Wendy both looked concerned. Had he missed the question once already? "At first, Gray said it was only an injury, but The First kept making concessions and Laxus said there were regular checkups with Porlyusica."

"Yeah." Gray looked away. "We said it was an injury because I didn't want to talk about it."

Juvia took the hint and stopped pressing. "It's good that Gray has at least one person to confide in. Natsu is lucky to be so trusted."

Natsu was lucky Gray had been too numb to throttle him after he learned about the baby. Zeref was the one who let Natsu in on what was going on—not Gray. But he had been a huge help in the end, and Gray would need to talk to him about how necessary that surgery was. Now that he really thought about it, if there was a viable way to not be sliced open, then that would be preferable. Probably. He didn't exactly want to be grotesquely stretched out like Meredy had been, but did he really need a giant scar across his abdomen to remind him that the little girl who followed Mavis around came out of him?

Since Juvia was still looking at him and he'd already missed responding to her once, Gray gave an uncomfortable grunt. "He's been helpful."

"Everyone can help," Juvia said.

"I'm fine with one helper. Adding Happy was one too many."
"I haven't seen Happy cause any trouble with your health," Wendy said. "He doesn't even mention it, and it wouldn't be like him to only make fun of it in private."

"Well… he doesn't," Gray admitted.

"Juvia hears Happy teasing Natsu and Gray about each other constantly." Juvia smiled as if this was a joyous thing, but it didn't reach her eyes. Gray gave her credit for trying. "Perhaps Gray is embarrassed to have Happy tease him over matters of the heart?"

"No," Gray said, but he undermined himself by blushing over it.

Juvia gave a solemn nod. "Juvia was afraid of that, but… Juvia… Um… Juvia is… happy for you?"

Gray didn't call her out on the lie, so it was Wendy who asked, "What do you mean?"

"Gray is always so pushy with Natsu when everyone is looking, but he becomes shy when he thinks no one is. Juvia thought… Juvia thought Gray might feel the need to be closer to Natsu than he's comfortable with at the guild." And Juvia didn't say a word about why she might think that Gray would feel the need to do that. "But when he's shy, Gray looks at Natsu the way Juvia always wanted Gray to look at her."

Gray stared blankly at Juvia, refusing to process that she had caught on to both the fact that he and Natsu were performing for the guild and that it was no longer entirely a performance for Gray.

"Juvia wants Gray… T-to be happy! Juvia wants Gray to be happy. So… If there's any way to help…"

She wanted the two of them not to have to avoid one another as well. Gray offered her a faint smile and a nod. "Thanks. I'll let you know."

He was completely unprepared for her to throw her arms over him, and went stiff in her embrace. "Thank you! Thank you! Juvia will be the best wingman! First, Gray needs to be bolder! Natsu doesn't notice when Gray is shy."

That, or Natsu was trying not to notice after how catastrophically things went the last time Gray tried to be bold. Granted, that kiss had almost gotten Natsu to let Gray learn about the pregnancy before it was too late, so maybe it wasn't a complete disaster. But kissing someone in private only to find out they were being nice to mislead you was still humiliating.

"Um… Juvia?" Wendy said, "I think Gray might not want to be hugged."

Juvia shook her head. "Erik said so too, but Natsu hugs Gray all the time."

Had they told Juvia that? Gray couldn't remember why they would have fed her such a lie, other than to spare him a little unwanted attention.

At least, he couldn't remember why until when Juvia finally pulled back and her arm bumped against his stomach.

She paused, not sure what exactly she'd felt. Then, since she'd already invaded her beloved Gray's personal space once since he'd rejected her for Natsu, she reached back out and placed a hand over the bump.

Unsure what else to do, Gray made a vague noise of discomfort and scooted away.
"Gray… Is something there?"

"No."

"Juvia felt something."

"Well, Juvia imagined it," Gray told her.

"Juvia most certainly did not imagine it!" Juvia insisted, reaching out again.

Gray grabbed her hand. "Just lay off!"

By this point, they had created enough of a commotion that people nearby were watching. Mira hovered nearby. She had likely been there since Juvia started talking, and definitely shown up when that hug happened. Natsu had emerged as well, and anxiously stood a few feet away. Gajeel and Laxus hovered nearby, deeply interested. No doubt both of them had noticed little ways in which Gray was off that had slipped the notice of others. They might have hoped to catch more hints of his mystery health ailment from Wendy.

Natsu took a step forward, accusations of Juvia trying to encroach on his boyfriend on his lips when Happy flew past and planted himself between her and Gray. While the gesture was appreciated, his protective actions combined with the fact that he'd been sensitive to Gray's health but loved giving him grief over his love life screamed that the real concern wasn't anything romantic, but that Juvia had stumbled upon something to do with Gray's condition. He might as well have screamed at her that she really had felt what she thought she had.

"Gray… are you hiding something?" Mira asked.

Obviously. He hadn't exactly made it a secret that his health status was a secret.

He looked desperately to Natsu for help as Juvia said, "Juvia knows she felt something."

And Natsu, the traitor, frowned at Gray and shrugged helplessly. He'd been saying himself that it was a matter of days—weeks at best—before everyone found out, so Gray should have known better than to think that Natsu would find this situation salvageable.

A glint lit in Mira's eyes, and she said, "Is the master using an illusion to hide Gray's condition."

"If she is, it's none of your business," Gray hissed.

"But we all want to help," Wendy said. "If it's so serious that you need magic to hide what you really look like…"

Gray stood, sending a glare at the crowd that compelled everyone to part for him.

"Gray?" Natsu asked.

"Don't."

"It's not something we could have hidden forever."

Gray didn't respond, setting off towards the door.

"Gray!" Natsu called out, running after him.

Gray whirled around to glare at him too.
"I'm sorry… It's just…"

It's just that there was no way to completely pass off what just happened, and there would be more and more slip ups as he entered his third trimester. And it was easier for Natsu to tell everyone now, rather than keep everyone guessing as more and more clues trickled in. Gray sure as hell hoped Natsu was sorry for that.

"Whatever," Gray muttered. "You tell them. I'm going home."

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Out of consideration for Gray, Natsu ran off and found Mavis before giving anyone an explanation, hoping that she might have some last saving throw to make. She didn't. Not when Natsu and Gray made a show of whether or not to tell everyone. Mavis could tell everyone to drop it, but it was too late for them to really let it go.

Next, Natsu sent Happy after Gray to find out how much he was supposed to say, and borrowed the guild kitchen to start making fudge while he waited for an answer. For as mad at Natsu as Gray had been over the whole potion business, Natsu still couldn't swallow the idea that he would get away with that. It didn't feel right to hurt Gray and then have that remain an exclusive secret even after the rest of the details of Gray's pregnancy came out. But Happy returned with very specific instructions on that matter. Tell everyone about the potions and they would find Natsu's corpse in pieces in the river.

So when Natsu sat down to explain to everyone, he emphasized the other way he was to blame. He heavily stressed how he had be the one to shove Gray into one of Zeref's tests, even though he knew how dangerous even the most simple and altruistic ideas could become in Zeref's hand. Genius though he may have been, he wasn't flawless. He never bothered to think of a way to keep the R-System from exploding once it was properly charged, for starters.

The exact timing of events was fudged. Natsu went out on a limb and guessed that Gray didn't want the whole world to know about the first abortion, so he skipped over that and didn't mention the specific time constraints Zeref had narrowed down for how the serum affected others. When asked why Gray would have accompanied Natsu to see Zeref in the first place, he couldn't explain that it was a construction complaint without making it apparent that Gray was exposed to the serum well before he became pregnant at the start of winter, so Natsu lied and said that they were much less steadily dating at that point, and Gray had thought he ought to have a better sense for what he was getting into with in-laws.

That earned a round of laughs. If you thought there was any credible chance of Gray agreeing to marry Natsu, then it was impressive he was still willing after fully realizing he had to take Zeref on as a brother-in-law.

He also skipped the detail of Zeref potentially being the father. Every major physical difference between Zeref and Natsu could be passed off as a feature of Gray's. If Zeref was the father, they could always pretend that the girl just took after Gray more, and if she was the same sort of dangerous genius, they could say it skip a generation.

When Natsu reached the part about Gray learning he was pregnant, he made sure to stress how utterly miserable Gray was with that fact, and how it was absolutely not acceptable to deliberately tease him for it. And if Happy could adhere to that then so could everyone else and he would personally pummel anyone who so much as thought about making Gray feel bad because Natsu tried really hard to make sure Gray pulled through his depression and he would not tolerate anyone sending him spiraling back down because they wanted to amuse themselves.
Once that was all taken care of, the rest of the story went easy. Gray's pregnancy, thank the heavens, had been an uneventful one thus far. The few steps taken to conceal it were more interesting than explaining how everyone was progressing as it should. The only other blip was Natsu mentioning that Mavis would most likely be the one to raise the child. Everyone had something to say about that, and Natsu had to stress that—yes, even if he wanted nothing more than to be his daughter's father, he was willing to let that go. Gray was terrified of parenthood, and it wouldn't work to force him to raise a girl he didn't ask for just because Natsu wanted her.

Natsu came close to saying just a little more. To mentioning that there was a chance things wouldn't go well. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. Telling everyone else and letting them worry when even Gray didn't know felt wrong.

He resolved instead to ask Gray for permission to speak in more detail to Wendy. Because if there was any way to ease his pregnancy aches, she was their best bet. And if there was any way to keep labor from wrecking him, then she was their best bet there as well.

His explanation finished, Natsu retreated back to the kitchen to finish the fudge. He had a feeling that Gray would be in need of a pick-me-up.

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Natsu found Gray in bed, curled up under the sheets. With the fabric over him, you could plainly see where the bump was. When Natsu pulled the sheets back, Gray still wore the illusion.

"I made fudge."

"I don't care."

"This is as fresh as it's gonna get without me making it in your kitchen."

"I'm not hungry."

Gray had missed lunch in all the drama, and it took a while to get everything squared away at the guild afterward. Natsu didn't believe Gray even before Gray's stomach grumbled.

"Sit up," Natsu ordered. "You can eat in bed if you want, but you're going to eat."

Gray glared up at him. "Because I'm eating for two?"

"Because you'll feel worse if you don't eat."

He left Gray lying there while he fetched a slice of fudge, then pulled him upright and held it up for him. Gray glared, but opened his mouth and let Natsu feed him the bite. Natsu decided it must have been payback that Gray's mouth closed over one of his fingers on top of the fudge. Gray just didn't have enough experience biting people to know you dug your teeth into them rather than running your tongue over their skin.

The fudge must have done the trick, because Gray's expression was less listlessness and more a supreme pout when Natsu withdrew from the room, face red, so flustered that he walked into the doorframe rather than smoothly escaping to the kitchen.

Confused as he was with what just happened, Natsu didn't need Happy hovering over him and snickering at how furiously he was blushing. But Happy was a social creature and Gray wasn't in a sociable mood, so Natsu it was that he hovered over and snickered at.
"He lllikes you."

"No. He's depressed again. And he blames me for it. What was he even doing talking to Juvia, anyway? Of course she was going to get all touchy-feely-grabby with him like that."

"It's just touchy-feely, Natsu," Happy said, but Natsu wasn't listening.

He seethed as he started on something more filling for Gray than fudge. Chopping at vegetables with enough force to leave deep gouges in the cutting board. Gray obviously knew she would do that, so why talk to her unless he wanted her to? Did he go see Juvia just to mess with him further? Was that what this was about? Act all lovey-dovey in public, then coy and flirty in private to make Natsu think it might not be an act, and then cozy up to some girl to knock Natsu down a peg whenever he thought there might be something there?

Was this payback for that New Year's kiss? Because that was not intentional, and Gray sucked if he was intentionally messing with Natsu.

"Natsu?" Happy asked.

Natsu glanced back at Gray's door to make sure it was shut, hand covering the lower half of his face as if it wasn't too late to hide his blush from Happy. He could still smell Gray's scent on his finger, and that homey scent was carrying Natsu's mind into dangerous territory.

"H-how far do you go when you're teasing someone?" Natsu asked.

"As far as I can without getting killed," Happy answer. "Why?"

"Okay. So… how far do you think Gray would go?"

"Gray isn't really the type to tease, is he? That's my thing."

"How about a prank?"

"That's your thing."

"Well, what's Gray's thing?"

"Not being open with his emotions and calling you stupid when your horse around."

So this was probably some setup to call Natsu stupid for thinking that Gray wasn't just pretending then. Because why would he be sincere, after what Natsu did to him? Why would he be especially after everyone found out about what happened to him?

"Natsu?"

"What?"

"He likes you."

"Does not."

"You should ask him."

"He was this close to murdering me back at the guild."

"That's better than how Lucy will be when she hears about the baby," Happy said. "She'll murder
you for real."

Natsu recoiled, having completely forgot that there was anyone else he'd been in a relationship with, much less that it crashed and burned. Lucy thought his and Gray's relationship was real even before they tried to convince everyone that it was. Whether or not Gray was acting, there would be drama when next Natsu encountered her.

He bit his lip, looking to the window, as if she might be right there watching him stress over what his not-boyfriend's mixed messages meant.

"W-well, I'll have to make the most of what time I have left. Pray for me, buddy."

"Only if you make fish for dinner."

Natsu shook his head and swept chopped cucumber, onion, and tomato into a bowl. "Gray picks dinner."

"But—"

"No buts. Did you have to tell anyone you laid an egg today?"

"Gray didn't tell anyone he was pregnant."

"And I didn't tell anyone you were laying an egg on your behalf," Natsu replied.

Seeing that competing over Natsu with Gray was a losing battle, Happy sat down on the counter and sulked as Natsu salted and peppered his mix and tossed it with a little oil. Only as Natsu picked up the finished salad did he say, "Gray didn't ask for that."

"Gray will still eat it. It has cucumbers."

"Gray likes cucumbers?"

"He did yesterday." It was hard to predict what Gray would want. Sometimes Natsu made something on request, only for Gray to lose his taste for it by the time it was ready to eat. But despite the initial meltdown they caused, pickles were a steady hit, as was the brine from the homemade jars that Natsu had in mass production back at his shack. And while cucumbers weren't pickles, Natsu had never seen Gray turn them down either.

So he felt reasonably confident when he returned to Gray's room with the bowl of salad in hand and offered it to him. That Gray had remained sitting up only made Natsu feel better.

Until Gray looked down at the bowl and said, "That's not fudge."

"Of course not. You can't survive on nothing but fudge."

"We'll never know if you don't let me try."

"You can have more comfort food once you finish your salad," Natsu said, hoping that Gray didn't spend enough time with Asuka or the Redfox twins to notice that this was something you usually said to people much younger than Gray.

But Gray seemed to be in the mood to not act his age, because he opened his mouth while making no move to grab the bowl.

Natsu bit back a complaint. Gray was just exposed to everyone as pregnant, after all, and a little
coddling wouldn't kill him while he came to terms with the day's events. Still, he was careful to hold his hand as far back on the fork as he could while he fed Gray. He wasn't about to attempt a repeat of that finger licking.

Gray obliged Natsu and ate every bite before reminding Natsu of his promise five minutes earlier for more fudge, and Natsu fetched him another slice. A comment about the little bit of fudge on Gray's cheeks from all the sugar he ate was bit back. Natsu was the one who enabled that sweet tooth, after all. And there would be better times to suggest that Gray maybe needed to at least get up and move around more if he was going to keep eating sweets.

He held this piece out for Gray to pick up, and Gray looked up at him expectantly.

"This feeding you thing had better not become a habit."

"My day turned out terrible," Gray said. "The kind of terrible that will follow me around for the rest of my life. Indulge me."

Natsu bit his lip and held the fudge up to Gray's. This time, there was no denying as Gray caught Natsu's finger between his lips and slowly released it that he was deliberate in his actions.

"What are you doing?" Natsu asked, all too aware of Happy watching from the door.

"Taking Juvia's advice," Gray said. "My day turned out terrible, so I'm taking whatever I can make up for it. Indulge me, alright?"

Natsu couldn't say no. Not when it was his fault Gray was pregnant, and he was the one to push Gray to admit that the jig was up. "Alright. Fine."

"Good." Gray grabbed Natsu's arm and pulled him closer. "Lie down with me."

"I-I need to… Dinner..."

"It can wait," Gray said. "I don't want anything for dinner unless you lie down with me for a while."

A while. Natsu could do a while. And he'd told Happy that dinner was what Gray wanted, so he had to ensure that Gray wanted something.

Natsu climbed over Gray and shot Happy a silencing look before lying down, and Gray flopped over beside him.

"Just stay like this," Gray muttered. "Let me pretend for a few minutes that that my life isn't a complete train wreck."

Chapter End Notes

that awkward moment when you make that character you hate the bigger person compared to the one you got nothing against because someone's gotta blow the lid on this conspiracy already.
Gray was evil.

Natsu could think of no other explanation for what happened the other day. He'd gone home a ball of frayed nerves after Gray made him snuggle the entire afternoon while talking about how he just wanted to pretend that his life was going the way he wanted for once. Then, waiting on Natsu's Archive Lacrima, there was a message sent after he left Gray's apartment explaining that it was nothing more than runaway pregnancy hormones making him weirdly emotional, and Natsu was to think nothing of it.


Hormones was an unwanted boner or crying over pickles. You didn't get weirdly flirty with someone and demand hours of snuggle time while talking about how it was what you wanted if you didn't like that someone. The most hormones did there was loosen up inhibitions.

Gray liked him. Genuinely liked him, at least on some level where Natsu played into his fantasies. He realized it was a horrible idea, right? As much as Natsu might have fantasized about it himself, he knew Gray could do better than him. And the issue of children—of what Natsu wanted and what Gray wanted and what passed between them because of that—were too big in reality to simply overlook.

Natsu hadn't the slightest clue how to explain all of that. Not when Gray's boldness wore off and he went back to pretending that all that affection he showed was only pretend. How much of it was pretend? Natsu enjoyed the show they put on for the guild because he could indulge in his own want for Gray with the comfort of knowing that Gray encouraged it while not taking the affection seriously. Did Gray do the same? Did Gray know that Natsu was always excited for the chance to kiss him?

There was no way to approach the subject when Gray wouldn't admit to it. No way to know how much Gray only faked when they were at the guild, or how much Gray knew Natsu wasn't faking, for as heavily as Natsu had to calculate what was acceptable at any given time. So rather than learn from his mistakes with Lucy and discuss things immediately, Natsu panicked. When he stopped by Zeref's lab that night to apply his cream, he contacted Gray to say that there had been a setback and he was staying a little longer than normal to make sure his brother was okay.

"Liar," Zeref said as Natsu deactivated his Communication Lacrima.

Natsu looked across the table at his brother, indignant. "He lied first."

Zeref shrugged at this. His eyelids drooped more than normal and his head lolled slightly, the painkillers Natsu gave him before making his call kicking in. Since Natsu was now crashing at his brother's while he figured out how to handle the situation with Gray, he was taking over Zeref's health. That meant regular medicine to keep his pain down, and absolute guaranteed application of that cream that would help heal the dent in his arm.

It took a moment with the medicine slowing his mind, but Zeref thought to ask, "What did he lie about?"
Natsu grimaced, wishing that Happy was willing to follow him whenever he visited Zeref. For once, he wanted the cat there saying all the embarrassing things for him. "He said he didn't like me."

"I thought he hated you…"

"I thought so too, but he definitely likes me now."

It would be a few more minutes before the medicine had worked deep enough into Zeref's system for Natsu to dare clean and treat his arm, so he passed the time by explaining what happened earlier that day. How much of the story Zeref would retain upon the drugs wearing off, he didn't know. He was similarly unsure if he was glad to have a reprieve from Zeref's judgment or wanted someone to be able to examine the situation for him and offer guidance. (Not that Zeref was the best person to seek out for love advice, but he was better than nothing. His straightforward take on relationships was sometimes insightful.)

Zeref nodded along to the story, head sometimes bobbing as if he were nodding off instead. When Natsu was all done explaining the dilemma, he asked, "Is he my brother-in-law now?"

"I think it's been enough time for use to clean your arm," Natsu decided. "Hold it out for me. We'll get this done quick."

Slow though his brain was, Zeref could remember every other wound cleaning he'd endured recently, and he turned so his arm was further from Natsu.

"Act you age."

Laughter bubbled up and out of Zeref's mouth. "How's a four-hundred-year old supposed to act?"

"Act older than me," Natsu amended.

The accusation of acting like he was the younger brother gave Zeref a pause, and he grudgingly pulled his sleeve up and set his arm on the table for Natsu.

From past experience, Natsu knew to hold Zeref's left hand with his own at any point that Zeref found rough. Otherwise, Zeref would flinch back and yank his arm away the moment it hurt worse. For as careless as Zeref was with his own wellbeing, he had a remarkably low tolerance for anything that exacerbated even the mildest of discomforts.

Zeref held still as Natsu unwrapped the outer roll of bandage with one hand, but whimpered when Natsu drew water into a syringe and squirted it over the gauze packed into the cavity in his arm.

"Hurts," Zeref muttered.

"It only stings a little," Natsu told him, although he'd never had such a deep gouge before, so he had no firsthand experience with which to make that claim. "It will hurt worse if I pull the bandages out while they're dry."

Zeref was the one to teach Natsu and Mavis that, having recalled Porlyusica's instructions several mornings into his latest injury before Mavis could force him to take his pain medicine, and after a few terrible days of ripping out dried bandages that tore and stuck to the exposed muscle tissue. It was better for infection not to resoak the gauze, but the wound had only been infected a few days and medicine had done a better job treating that than tearing out new skin had. Besides, the pain factor alone made it not worth attempting with such a difficult patient.

Once the wound was cleared Natsu dabbed the cream Porlyusica prescribed onto his finger and
tightened his grip on Zeref's hand.

"Close your eyes. Deep breaths. Think happy things." It was the same advice Bisca used to give Asuka right before she got a shot. Natsu had learned that, with Zeref's mind so sluggish, it was appropriate advice for him too.

Zeref tensed, shoulders raised and hand squeezing Natsu's as tight as it could. "It's gonna hurt."

"It will hurt forever if it doesn't heal right."

"Not forever," Zeref said, a serene smile cutting through his anxiety. "I won't be around forever."

"Yes, yes. I'm happy for you. You think about that while I take care of your arm, okay?"

Zeref nodded, relaxing back for two seconds before Natsu reached into his wound and made the first streak across the muscle.

He held tight to Zeref's hand as his brother thrashed and pulled back, trying to get out of Natsu's reach. The cream was an antibiotic on top of a mesh of herbs and powdered hippocampus bone that would facilitate tissue growth, and it stung Natsu's bare skin. He chose not to imagine what it felt like having it rubbed over such an ugly wound as he did his best to coat the entirety of the injury.

Once done, his fingers clean on a damp napkin and released his brother's hand. Zeref brother was trembling now, cheeks wet, and he looked at Natsu as if his little brother had declared his intentions to blow up orphans by planting a bomb in a puppy before kicking it through the open orphanage window.

"You did good," Natsu said, then leaned around the table to give Zeref a one-armed hug.

Zeref stiffened in the embrace, then leaned into it. The few years since the war hadn't been enough to satiate how severely touch-starved he was after centuries of needing to be cautious with his curse. At the same time, that deep rooted caution kept him from ever actively seeking physical affection.

While Natsu himself had no qualms with physical affection, being affectionate with Zeref was weird. They hadn't grown up together, after all. He grew up knowing Zeref as some great evil, and they hadn't gotten off on the right foot when meeting as adults. Even interacting with him was an acquired taste Natsu developed after having initially felt obligated to keep tabs on his brother after the curse was broken. Getting physical with his brother in a non-violent way was something Natsu had yet to get comfortable with, but holding Zeref in a hug was the easiest way to keep him obediently in place while waiting for the cream to set in.

He counted off the seconds, then released Zeref and took his hand again. Since there were no visible traces of the cream left, Natsu dipped a gauze pad into water, then packed it gently into the wound. Zeref squirmed, though not as violently as he had when faced with the cream. With only minimal resistance, Natsu managed to keep going virtually unhindered until, slowly but surely, he had completely filled the wound in. Once filled, he picked up a new roll of wrap bandage and began to circle it around Zeref's arm. This had to be done with both hands, but holding Zeref's hand was no longer required at this point. Even drugged up, Zeref knew this meant the bandage change and wound care was over, and he sat through it with no struggle.

Once the pain from the cream had dulled down enough for the medicine to be able to suppress it, Natsu knew Zeref would fall asleep. He shoved a sandwich in his brother's face to get him to eat as much as he could before he was too drowsy, then carried him up to the loft to go to bed. The basement couch was where the extraordinarily infrequent overnight guest usually slept, but Natsu
wanted to make sure Zeref didn't try and sneak out in the morning before he could be dosed again, so he climbed into bed with his brother. It wasn't like he hadn't already shared a bed with a man that day.

-Natsu woke the next morning to a heel grazing into his leg, and was greeted by the sight of the flattest look Zeref could give when he opened his eyes. Moaning, Natsu pushed himself upright and yawned before taking stock of their situation. It was the crack of dawn, which came early that time of year. Natsu was no late sleeper, but Zeref had still picked an awfully early time to wake him up.

"Something—" Natsu yawned again. "I something wrong?"

"Did you tell Mavis you're here?"

Natsu thought about it and shook his head.

"Then tell her someone's already here to nag me before she goes out of her way to do it herself," Zeref instructed.

Mavis must have complained the other day about being behind on work, if Zeref was interested in keeping her at bay. That wasn't consideration on Zeref's part. Mavis hinting that it was an inconvenience to be around him with whatever else she had going on at the time was a surefire way to make Zeref not want her around until he was done being bitter about the idea that he wasn't wanted. Someday, Natsu would find the right way to explain that one to Mavis, who always thought that Zeref was so eager to give her a break when she wanted one because he was being generous.

Natsu yawned once more, fell trying to get out of bed, and picked himself up off the floor before locating his Communication Lacrima. It was entirely too early to be up.

While he waited for Mavis to answer his call, Natsu watched Zeref slowly push himself up in bed. The medicine had clearly worn off, given how careful Zeref was not to disturb his left arm. That explained why he was up so early. The pain woke him. Natsu made the mistake of lying on Zeref's left side too, so that heel grinding must have been an effort not to put pressure on his arm by leaning over to shake Natsu awake with his right hand.

"Hello?" Mavis's voice rang through the lacrima.

"Hey. Where are you?"

"Home." A yawn sounded from her end of the line. "With coffee. You're up early. Is everything alright with Gray."

"No idea. I called to tell you I'm with Zeref, so I've got bandage duty this morning."

Something crashed on Mavis's end of the line. A metal pot hitting the floor? Natsu couldn't quite tell, but it left his ear ringing, and he had to hold his lacrima to the other side in order to hear Mavis.

"You left Gray?"

"Maybe? Kinda. Just a little. I told him it was a thing with Zeref, and I'll be back soon, and it's not like he was going to go to the guild today whether I was there for him or not." Natsu paused, unsure what else to say to downplay his bad move with. "He wasn't happy about me saying we needed to tell everyone, so..."
"So you found a reason to give him some space."

More like he ran away and hid, just like after the last time he realized Gray was falling for him. Natsu made an affirmative noise and, as an afterthought, added, "Jellal should check on him, maybe."

"Jellal won't return from his job for at least several more days. I'll see him myself when I head for the guild," Mavis said.

"Thanks, Sis."

He could hear her smiling when she said, "You can thank me by coming up with a new nickname."

The call ended, and Natsu looked back to the bed to find it empty. He whirled around and looked over the edge of the loft's railing and saw his brother trying to sneak out the door.

"Breakfast!" Natsu called to him.

Zeref looked up, making a face that said he didn't like to be patronized, but there was no mature way to dispute that he needed to eat, especially when he only had half a sandwich for dinner.

Of course, they both knew that what Natsu cared more about was finding a reason to keep Zeref from running off until he could change bandages again. But Zeref could hardly dispute that one either.

Sighing, Zeref sat himself down at the table and found a book to flip through. Natsu scowled at the clear message it sent. *If you want me to eat breakfast, then you make it.*

"Do you even know how to cook?" Natsu asked as he descended the stairs.

"I have the basics down."

"How can you be four-hundred years old and only have time to learn the basics?"

"There are more valuable things to spend that time on than food you don't even need," Zeref said. "Mavis leaves enough leftovers whenever she cooks, and you learned to cook recently too. And there's plenty of pre-packaged food in this era. So I can get by when you two aren't around."

"What happens after we're gone?" Natsu asked.

"Ideally, I'll be the first to die," Zeref said. "Mavis can die last. She deserves more time, after being trapped in that crystal for so long."

"H-hey. What about me?"

"You die when I die," Zeref reminded Natsu. "If I go first, then that's more time for you than if you die before me."

Oh yeah. Natsu forgot.

"Well… You should still learn to cook."

"I can fry eggs."

"Fry yourself eggs."

"No thanks. My arm hurts."
Natsu rolled his eyes. "Fine. What do you want?"

"Fried eggs sounds nice."

He was being difficult just to spite Natsu for thwarting him. Natsu knew it.

But if he didn't make sure Zeref ate, then Zeref wouldn't eat. Natsu melted butter into a skillet, cracked eggs over it, and doused it in hot sauce. Zeref didn't have Natsu's taste for spicy dishes, but that was what he got for having someone else cook a simple breakfast that he could handle on his own.

"Do I get any time with a clear head today?" Zeref asked.

"You can speak to the foreman before we get your arm taken care of. After that, you need to take it easy."

"I hate pain pills. Why can't they make something that doesn't turn you stupid?" Zeref asked.

"Stop hurting yourself so often, and you won't constantly be on pain pills."

There was no disputing that point, and Zeref fell silent.

Natsu scraped the eggs onto a plate and started an omelet for himself, giving Zeref's breakfast time to lose its warmth before carrying both plates over to the table.

Zeref took a bite of his eggs, grimaced at the hot sauce, and set his fork down.

"Why are you avoiding Gray?"

"You're only asking me to avoid eating breakfast."

"You're only calling me out on that to avoid answering my question."

"No. I'm calling you out because you need to eat. I told you what happened with Gray last night, anyway."

"Liar."

"Did too. How much do you remember when you're drugged up?"

"Not much," Zeref admitted. "Half the time, I'm not sure if I'm even remembering something that happened, or if I dreamed it."

It really was a shame that such a brilliant mind spent so much of its time on pain killers. Or not, if you considered how few dangerous research projects Zeref had delved into since his latest injury. Mavis had been forced to take over recording what did and didn't work with the latest model of Archive Lacrima, since Zeref was too drowsy to take care of it for most of the day.

"So?" Zeref asked. "What are you two fighting over this time?"

"Nothing."

"Of course."

Natsu growled. "It's not a fight."
"Natsu, we both know you didn't stay the night because you enjoy keeping me company that much."

"Just… Fine. Gray made me snuggle with him yesterday while talking about how he needed to be able to pretend his life was going the way he wanted."

"Out of the blue?"

"No. He ran away from the guild after everyone learned he's pregnant"

Zeref leaned forward, chin propped up by his good arm. "Your fault?"

"His!" Natsu insisted. "He was getting all cozy with Juvia, even though he started getting all cozy with me because he wanted her to leave him alone. Completely his fault that she felt his stomach."

Zeref nodded, eyes alight with interest. Guild drama was too trivial and distant a thing for him to care about, but his brother in a panic over drama that he was caught up in was a big scoop. Zeref wasn't exactly the best person to go to for advice, but that didn't stop him from perking up when he spotted a standard situation for one to act like an older brother and offer support.

"Anyway… He likes me. He likes me and he's an idiot for it and I fucked him up badly enough already that I can't believe he'd actually want me when he's moping about how this pregnancy that I put him up to just made him hate his life again. I can't believe he'd actually want me just considering what happened the first time he kissed me."

"He kissed you more than once and you just realized he liked you?"

"All the other times he said were an act! The act for the guild! Remember?"

Zeref had to think of it for a moment before nodding. Fake-dating someone to get an ex off their back wasn't a situation in which he could try to offer brotherly advice, which meant it was guild drama that he didn't care about.

"And what was it that happened after the first kiss?"

"I avoided him for a day, pretended it didn't happen, and then he found out I was being nice so I could slip a potion into his drink that would keep him from noticing he was pregnant."

"See, this is important context. How was I supposed to know what a terrible idea it was to enable you running away a second time if I didn't know there was a precedent for this?"

This was exactly what Natsu hadn't wanted to be called out on, and he did his best not to look ashamed when he asked Zeref, "If this is you trying to get out of me changing your bandages, it's not gonna work."

"Obviously. You love hurting me too much to pass up the chance when you're already here. But I am obligated to advise that you leave once you're done torturing me. You might not want Gray in love with you, but there are better ways to go about rejecting him."

Natsu grunted and looked away, now too ashamed to meet Zeref's eyes. Although hopefully, Zeref would be mistaken on what precisely caused Natsu's shame.

"Oh? You don't want to reject him?"

Dammit.

"Why can't you just go and tell him you like him back?"
"Because he's trying his hardest to pretend he doesn't like me. And I kind of ruined his life, even if it's mostly temporary with Mavis taking the kid. And we don't have the same—"

"Wait! Back up. When did Mavis agree to adopt Gray's kid?"

"I… I don't know. A while ago? There's a decent chance it's yours, so it's mostly like she's making sure that she's involved in your daughter's life."

"Well it would have been nice if I'd been involved in any discussion on the subject. No one even told me that it was a girl, much less that my girlfriend is taking her," Zeref said. "Are you sure she really agreed to that? I can see Mavis not taking my opinion into account, but not telling me at all about something as major as adopting a child is a little extreme."

"Yeah."

"Why would she not tell me about this?"

"I don't know. Ask her next time you see her. Can we get back to my problem? Because you cut me off before I could say that Gray and I don't want the same things because he's desperate to not be a parent and in a perfect world I'd already have five kids and be married to someone who loves them as much as I do."

"I don't see the issue."

"You don't think that won't keep being a fight? Only one of us could get things our way. Gray wants to give the baby to Mavis, so I would have to adopt if we were together—and we have to be married for me to be able to adopt. But that would force Gray to be a parent when he doesn't wanna be, and appeasing him means I don't get to be a parent and I can spend the rest of my life slowly dying inside watching those adorable twins be wasted on Gajeel and Bisca getting grandkids. I can smell Erza and Jellal when they come in together. At the rate those two go now, they're gonna have more than one kid. And I'll just be everyone's babysitter until the kids get too old to need me. Or worse—until some of those kids are old enough to babysit the other kids. It's only a matter of time before the twins are mature enough for Gajeel and Levy to leave them with Asuka. Then what's left for me?"

"Your husband," Zeref said.

"But I don't just want a husband! I want a family!" Natsu cried.

Zeref shrugged. He didn't particularly dislike children, but like Mavis, he had had figured out that he wasn't particularly skilled at managing them. A family was something that Mavis would end up shouldering most of the responsibility for, and he was in no rush to put that kind of responsibility on her when she already had a guild to run. If he had children—which might be the case starting that fall—then it would be Mavis's call.

"So tell Gray why you two wouldn't work out."
"I can't. He's pretending that everything that happened yesterday was the pregnancy making him act weird. If I try to bring it up now, he's going to deny knowing what I'm talking about."

"But avoiding him just makes the situation worse." Zeref leaned back and looked up at the ceiling, deep in thought. Or pretending to be, anyway. Zeref never spared deep thoughts on relationship advice. It didn't escape Natsu's notice that Zeref tried to subtly push his plate away as he made a show of thinking of what ought to be done. "I suppose it doesn't do to keep playing along with him and pretend you bought the act, after running away today. He should recognize the behavior."

"Yeah." Natsu shoved Zeref's plate back in front of him. "Nice try. Eat your breakfast or instead of treating your arm, I'll remove it. Anyway, I can't just play dumb. He'll know it's a rejection and then who knows what he'll do. Probably tell me to stop coming, for one. Right now he's only a half a step above you when it comes to feeding himself, and I don't think he even knows what he's supposed to eat with the baby. He's probably going to try and avoid the guild until he's done with the pregnancy after yesterday too, meaning someone's going to have to keep checking in on him and trying to get him outside again, and Jellal and Lyon are both busy with their own families. So I can't just leave him be."

Zeref scowled at the breakfast, but took another bite and made a show of having to force it down.

"So I'm screwed," Natsu said.

"Well, that's what you get for running away."

"I was kind of hoping you might have some advice."

It was only for a split second, but Zeref's gaze flickered away before coming back to Natsu. So he did have an idea. But he could be as petty as Natsu at times, and Natsu had tried to make those eggs inedible.

Finally, Zeref spoke. "We could rebuild the Eclipse Gate and prevent you from having ever run away."

"Real advice. You know, since you forced the two of us together in the first place because you wanted to be a good big brother and help me with him."

That did the trick. Zeref sighed and told Natsu, "You've had to set aside looking after him to keep tabs on me once already since this pregnancy issue came up. Keep acting like that's going on, and you might be able to pass this off as coincidental timing. That kid you set to harass me is due to leave soon, anyway."

That might work. All Natsu had told Mavis was that he was up with Zeref, Gray knew he was with Zeref, and that he didn't think Gray was going to the guild (and thus didn't need support for at the guild), so Mavis couldn't give up the game when she went to check on him.

"That might work."

"If you want to thank me, you could leave my arm alone."

"I'll make you a nicer breakfast," Natsu said. "We still have to deal with the arm."

-0-

Gray just about broke down in tears when he saw the message waiting for him in his Archive Lacrima. Being bold like Juvia said had gone disastrously. Of course it had. What was he thinking
taking advice from Juvia when her way of trying to show affection for him had ultimately pushed him away? He'd already tried being bold with Natsu before he knew he was pregnant, and that had gone terrible too.

Dread had settled into Gray's stomach the moment Natsu left his apartment the night before. Natsu was only being nice the last time because he wanted to hide the pregnancy. This time he was being nice out of guilt. Or because he wanted them to be friends again. Gray had gone and made the exact same mistake twice, and had scrambled to undo it. Natsu had only just vanished from sight of the window—which Gray would never admit to watching him from—when Gray scrambled to send a message explaining that what happened wasn't anything sincere and nothing should be made of it. He couldn't afford to lose Natsu. Not after everyone found out about him. Not when Lyon was in another town and busy with his baby and Jellal was in another town and busy with his pregnant wife. Not when he wasn't fully pieced back together from learning about the baby and needed Natsu as his support pillar. Not when he'd fallen for Natsu again and couldn't bear to hear that he was deluding himself for thinking there was anything there for a second time.

So when he saw the note saying that Natsu was at Zeref's, he read it through slowly, accepted that his excuse failed and Natsu was going to avoid him again the same as last time, and crawled back into bed. Lying on his back was too uncomfortable when he could feel the baby's weight pressing down on him, so he lay on his side and stared vacantly at the wall.

Mavis came to check in on him, but she had little more information for Gray than he already did. Natsu called her that morning and said she didn't need to worry about Zeref, and she'd offered to see how Gray was doing. He tried to lie for her and say he was fine, but he couldn't, because he really, really wasn't. Everyone knew he was pregnant, and gossip would no doubt be everywhere soon. Natsu didn't like him and abandoned him when Gray took things too far. He felt farther away from fine than he'd been in months. That he'd made no attempt at breakfast didn't help his case, and she scrambled eggs for him and promised to come back with something for him to eat with lunch.

Once she was gone, Gray gave up on trying not to cry. He'd never felt so worthless before. Natsu didn't want him, and he was too wrapped up in his misery to even feed himself. Thoughts of how much he'd depended on others to get by since the pregnancy began tormented him, and he wound up so disgusted with himself that he ended up in front of the toilet, violently throwing up the breakfast Mavis made for him.

He groaned, leaning against the sink cabinet. Of course Natsu wouldn't actually want him back. He already had a highly dependent brother who couldn't act like a fully functional adult, and that was exactly what the pregnancy had turned Gray into. Why would Natsu want a second one?

The unfairness of it left a bitter enough taste in his mouth to cut through the stomach acid on his tongue. Natsu was the one who put him in a situation where he had to go through with the pregnancy. Natsu had no right to judge him for how he failed to cope.

Then again, Natsu hadn't wanted Gray even before Gray fell apart, had he?

Gray's legs shook violently as he pulled himself up and rinsed his mouth out. His throat still burned, but that kind of distracted from the ache in his chest.

He messed up. He lost Natsu. He never had Natsu in the first place.

If he spent too much time standing, Gray was certain he'd collapse. He stumbled back into bed and hid beneath his sheets to escape the rest of the world.

Gray couldn't say how long he lay there feeling sorry for himself before he heard his Communication
Lacrima chime. He ignored it until it chimed again, and he realized that Mavis might be checking in on him. Maybe about to rush to his apartment to make sure he was alright. He didn't want to see her or anyone, and if he could use this chance to talk her out of swinging by for lunch, he needed to try.

He pulled the lacrima under his sheets with him and swiped the pattern to accept the call, an excuse for having been in the bathroom during the first chime on his lips when he heard the voice at the other end.

"Gray?" Natsu asked. "Are you alright?"

Natsu! Natsu called him! Gray couldn't possibly answer without betraying that he was not alright, so he grunted an affirmation.

"Sorry I'm not there. I swear, Zeref has the worst timing. No one's come by to bug you about being pregnant, right? I told them to leave the subject alone, but I wouldn't put it past Gajeel to come over and give you hell"

"'s fine," Gray choked out. He hadn't really believed Natsu's message. He'd really thought Natsu wanted to get away from him.

There was a moment of silence on Natsu's end before the question came. "You sure you're alright? You don't sound okay."

"I…"

"Still upset about the guild?"

"Yes." Gray mouthed out a silent thank you to the heavens for Natsu giving him that excuse. "Mavis…" He took a deep breath and tried to speak without his voice wavering. "Mavis came over at breakfast, but that's it."

"Tell her thanks for me," Natsu said, although Gray knew that Natsu had to have thanked her when he spoke to her earlier. "I'll be back in a few days, hopefully. Gotta find someone new to make sure Zeref's looked after during the day. The guy I had pushing pills on him is going home. Will you be alright until then? I might be able to check in for a few hour here and there. Maybe. I think I can time it to get there and back between the next time he needs medicine."

"Mm-mm." Natsu hadn't abandon him, but that didn't wipe away the feeling of worthlessness. "I think I can manage. But I'll let you know if anyone other than Mavis comes around."

"Or Jellal."

"You'll be back before him, right?"

"I have no idea when he's getting back. But I'll be back soon."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Mavis never called to let Gray know she was one her way, but he tracked the clock and estimated when she would show up. When she arrived, he had lunch ready for her.
This chapter made me happy. I got to include lots of Zeref bits. And making Gray really sad and then making him happy again put me in a good mood. By chance, I wrote this right before I had to proofread the chapter where Gray has his breakdown upon learning he's pregnant too (in case y'all were wondering how many chapters I sat on while making you guys wait for a weekly update, that I proof-read and posted this after basically being on hiatus all winter just feels like an even bigger f you) so it was nice to get that happy spot right before a lot of sad.
Proposal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took three days for Natsu to show up again, and two more past that where he spent the night at Zeref’s in order to take care of all his wound care to make sure that at least the most important parts were done before he finally found someone new to handle pain killers and lunch, at which point Mavis took back over with morning visits and Natsu's schedule returned to normal.

Until that was finally settled, Gray had to settle for check-ins over lacrima rather than seeing Natsu in person. Nothing too different compared to after the basement explosion incident. A little better, actually, because he didn't have Meredy to constantly traumatize him, Lyon to scar him for life by making him witness a labor, and Natsu was concerned enough with his wellbeing to want personal updates instead of asking Lyon behind Gray's back.

Gray was beside himself with joy to see Natsu back, lightly teasing him about his little ‘hormonal outburst’ the other week and acting the same as ever. But it was also vexing. He wanted to prove to Natsu that he was regaining his ability to function on his own. How was he supposed to do that when Natsu always started preparing the next meal before Gray could think to get on it? It was so insanely rude of Natsu to wait on Gray hand and foot. When Jellal came home and rushed to see Gray after hearing about what all he missed, he'd let Gray act like a proper host. Why couldn't Natsu be courteous enough to not constantly make sure Gray was taken care of?

"Is there anything you want me to make you?" Gray asked, giving up on all subtly. He'd missed his chance at lunch, and it was too early for dinner, but it was a decent time for a snack.

"Actually, I just finished making sandwiches," Natsu told him. "You only like pickles on their own, right? I can go back and add them to you PB&J, but I'm not sure you want that."

"I… no." Gray couldn't even begin to care about the pickle comment. By this point, he knew better than to think Natsu meant anything by it. But he'd wanted to at least make a snack.

Disappointed, he slunk back into the living room and sank into the couch. That Natsu came in a moment later wearing a bright smile and handed Gray a sandwich only rubbed salt in the wound.

"I can feed myself," Gray told him. "I'm not a kid."

He could see the internal conflict in Natsu's eyes, torn between being as supportive as he could and encouraging that Gray fully regain his footing, and wanting to tease him about how he hadn't done a whole lot of feeding himself the past few months.

"Maybe you can help with dinner."

"What's dinner?"

"Quiche."

Gray had absolutely no idea how to make that, but he nodded. All you had to do was mix a few things and put in the oven, right? Not hard.

"I can teach you to make fudge, if you want," Natsu offered. "You want some now, right?"
"I always want fudge," Gray confessed.

"I brought chocolate mint fudge today, by the way. But I can bring over ingredients tomorrow and show you how to make it."

"No."

Silence set over them, neither of them sure why Gray had turned down something that seemed like such common sense so quickly.

"You're sick of fudge?"

"N-no. I…" The reason hit Gray, and he turned scarlet, unable to meet Natsu's eye anymore. "U-um… That's just… too girly, you know? Making sweets. You can get away with it, but I'm already pregnant, and if it gets out that I'm doing something weird on top of… Huh?" His eyes were watering now with the reminder that his secret was out. He'd hidden from the guild ever since the reveal, but Mavis told him everyone grew increasingly worried by the day.

"Crap. There's chocolate ice cream if you don't want fudge anymore. Will that make you feel better? I can dish up a bowl now."

Gray shook his head, rubbing his eyes dry before he could fall apart over something he didn't have to deal with yet. "I'm okay."

"Is there anything you want?"

"Natsu, really. I'm fine."

"Because if you need a minute, I've gotta run errands for Happy and me, and I can grab whatever it is you want while I'm out."

Behind Natsu, Gray saw Happy shaking his head. They were all stocked up in the Dragneel shack. But now that the offer was out there in a way meant to not make Gray feel like he was imposing, Gray would hate to be rude and keep turning it down.

"Um… Maybe some blueberries."

Natsu nodded, grin stretching as wide as it could go. "Got it. Before I go, how's the sandwich?"

Gray hadn't taken a bit yet, but he obligingly tried it for Natsu, and squeaked in surprise when he tasted blueberry on his tongue. How? The jelly? Natsu made it with blueberry jelly? How did he know? Had Gray been craving blueberries the day before too? He couldn't remember having thought about them too awfully much, but he could have easily forgotten. The baby messed with his head in weird ways.

"Don't look so amazed," Happy said. "He got Cana to do a card reading on what foods he should bring you."

Natsu turned to glare at Happy, who fled the room.

To Gray's annoyance, the sandwich still tasted good despite knowing that Natsu was involving others in the guild in his pregnancy.

"Sorry," Natsu said. "Everyone's been pretty calm about it—and Gajeel came out yesterday and caught me before I made it to the guild to let me know Lucy was there. I'm kinda… You know…"
Giving her some time."

Avoiding her, he meant. Natsu never said it, but Gray suspected this was the real reason for jumping up to look after Zeref for a week rather than dragging him to the guild infirmary so Mavis could deal with him. Hiding in the lab to avoid his ex. No one liked it when Zeref was in the infirmary, but that was the norm whenever Zeref needed extensive care and the guild didn't have guests.

"Right. Anyway. I stopped in once she left, and everyone was worried about you. Because you tried so hard to keep this a secret, and then you vanished when it came out, and Mavis said they had to leave you alone, but she wasn't sure what all she could say, so she didn't tell anyone how you were doing while I was gone. I thought they might settle down a little if I asked for tips. I mean, so they didn't get so anxious that they ignore orders and barge in on you anyway. Bisca and Levy told me where to get some pillows that they swore make it more comfortable to sleep while you bigger, and Cana wanted to do a reading to tell the baby's gender, but when I said we knew it was a girl, she did one for cravings instead."

"How far out?"

"Just until tomorrow."

Gray nodded, making a mental note to check the new groceries for any oddities that might hint to whatever the baby would make him want in the coming day. Focusing on that mystery kept him from having to think about the guild getting in on his dilemma.

"Anything else I should know?"

"Not that I can think of. You don't what the fudge recipe. I guess I'll let you know when dinner is."

"Thanks," Gray said, grateful that Natsu was dropping the fudge subject.

Not that the idea of fudge whenever he wanted didn't appeal to Gray, but he already had Natsu's word that all Dragneel made fudge was for him and him alone, and that made it special. If he could make it for himself, that took the specialness away.

But he could never admit that. Not after his last attempt at letting Natsu know how he felt was such a near disaster. So he turned his attention to the Archive Lacrima that he was inputting records for Mavis into, took another bite of his sandwich, and let Natsu leave him be.

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All secrets were not created equal. Some, like the pregnancy, could be kept hidden for months. If you really put your mind to it, you could even keep the one who was pregnant out of the secret for as long as you needed. Others, like one's inability to cook quiche, came out all too fast. Gray tired not to let his humiliation show as Natsu relegated him to broccoli prep.

"I can cook."

"I'm sure you can."

"I cooked for myself all the time before you came in and messed with everything."

"Sorry about that. How are you holding up right now? Anything new?"

"I want that pillow you mentioned, because it's hard to sleep like this," Gray gestured to his stomach.
Now that the secret was out and the baby was too big for him to ignore she was there, he'd given up on Mavis's ring. That virtually none of his clothes could still fit meant he also wore only boxers. "My feet hurt, and sometimes I get dizzy if I'm up too long. That's bad, isn't it?"

"It's not good. But it's not abnormal," Natsu said. "That's everything?"

"Basically." So no hints about the mystery ailment Natsu was worried about. Gray needed to ask. He really ought to know. Responsible adults who weren't worthless and an unwanted burden kept track of their own health crises. "I was wondering about when... you know... when she comes out."

Natsu tensed. "Yeah?"

"Do I have to have surgery?"

Natsu tried to sound casual, but he still looked tense. "You wanna be stretched out like Meredy was?"

"No, but..."

"You should have surgery," Natsu said. "Zeref thinks it's safer, since you've got a whole kid and not a soft egg. Most of the stuff in that pond laid eggs."

"Is that why you keep asking me if I have any new aches?"


Gray looked down at himself, twisting to look more at his hip than his stomach. Porlyusica had warned that his male hipbone could complicate things. He hadn't thought it might be too serious, but he also hadn't asked for the details, and Natsu thought it was a major concern.

"Should I be worried?"

"Not yet. Just make sure to let us know if anything happens so Zeref and Porlyusica can deal with it in time."

Gray hesitated before asking his last question. "Did you know about this when you stopped me from having an abortion?"

"No! I'd have told you flat out if I thought there was any risk. Honest," Natsu swore. "I don't want anyone dead. I don't want you to kill the baby, and I don't want to kill you. And this won't. Because nothings bothering you yet, and even if it were, Zeref says he knows how to fix it before it gets serious. But he only found out live births don't go as smoothly after you'd been pregnant for a while, and I didn't know until that day we saw Laxus and Gramps."

That... wasn't what Gray had expected. He thought he might hear about something that would make labor hurt more, or that would make recovering from surgery take longer. Kill him? Was that what Natsu had been worried about all that time?

Natsu put a hand on Gray's shoulder, which Gray hadn't realized he needed until he felt it there. Even if Natsu was the one who got him into the mess he found himself in, the reassurance helped keep him grounded. The news that failure to report anything amiss could kill him if it wasn't addressed in time threatened to leave him adrift in the same way that learning he was pregnant in the first place had.

"You'll be okay," Natsu promised. "It wasn't an issue every time, or even most, and Zeref knows
how to fix it when something goes wrong."

"With rats, you mean," Gray said. "How do you know it's the same with humans?"

"We don't. But then we don't know it could be a problem with people either. The point is to be on guard for it. Any pain here." He ran a hand across Gray's pelvis, starting from his hip and moving down beneath his stomach.

Gray squirmed out of Natsu's reach before that hand could go anywhere dangerous. Being caught once already with an erection Natsu caused was one time too many.

Natsu pulled his hand back. "A-anyway. The worry is the baby can damage the bone there, so if it starts to ache, then you gotta say something. Zeref could save all the rats he caught before the damage got too bad, but if it does end up being a problem and you try to deliver normally, it can end bad. He and Porlyusica both thought that surgery would be best, just in case there're any eleventh hour problems."

"Promise it will be fine."

"Promise," Natsu said. "You're gonna be able to go back to your old life once the baby's born. I'll make sure of it."

Conversation died out with that comment. Gray didn't know what else to say. People died giving birth. He knew that. It wasn't anywhere near as common as it used to be, but complications happened and he wasn't ignorant to the fact that even when things seemed low risk, they could still go wrong. That was disconcerting, but not terrifying. Hearing that there was a significant risk for him specifically, on the other hand, left his focus too scrambled to properly clean and cut broccoli. In the end, Natsu had to take over that task for him.

Dinner came out and Natsu and Gray and Happy all sat down to eat, Gray still lost in thought. It was only as Natsu pulled out his latest fudge flavor and was about to set it down that he broke the silence.

"What is it about parenthood that scares you?"

"I'm not good with kids," Gray said. "And I work a lot. I used to—anyway. You can't take a job whenever you want if you have to find someone to look after your kid. I'm single, and it would have been one more excuse for Juvia to step in after I told her I thought we needed to see other people. I think I would have let her, too. Because I'm single, and not good with kids, and the thought of being home alone with one is… I mean… I'd probably kill them on accident. I don't even know how. I just know babies are good at killing themselves, and it's not hard to mess them up. And just… it's constant. Seeing Romeo or Asuka at the guild and playing with them as they grew up? I could handle that. But just one day in the same house as Lyon's baby was too much. There were no breaks. Even when it slept, if you spoke too loud, it'd wake up again."

"So what if you came over to help Mavis for a few hours when you weren't away working?" Natsu asked. "She's already going to ask me. Zeref has a track record for not handling kids well, and they're not living together anyway, so she's basically agreeing to take the girl on her own and raise a baby while running the guild. She likes babies, but it's a lot to juggle, and everyone knows the girl is yours, and she'll find out who her real mo—dad is sooner or later. Since she's staying in town now, you could be with her at the guild, right?"

"Give Mavis a break here and there?" Gray asked. "I'm not holding a baby. I'll drop it. But… I guess I could sit by the crib and call for help if she wakes up, or play with her a little when she's old enough."
It might help to keep the girl from resenting him if he was there as she grew up. Ever since Mavis found out about the baby and sending her to a far off land stopped being an option, Gray had worried what that would mean for him in the future. Romeo's mother had come back to town a year or so earlier wanting to reconnect, and he'd refused on the grounds that she abandoned him and his dad. Gray had hated to think that someone might hate him the same way, even if he weren't attached to them. With the girl staying in town, the possibility that he might want something to do with her once she was old enough to no longer make him anxious had also crossed his mind. Not a parent role, per se, but he didn't mind being the cool uncle.

That sounded fair. Fair-ish. He shouldn't have to do anything for a baby he didn't want to have in the first place, but now that he was stuck with her, he owed Mavis for giving him a way to escape parenthood without condemning his child to a loveless orphanage. He could lighten her load a little. And it sounded like Natsu would be doing more work than Gray, which was fair.

It took Gray a second to remember that he hadn't wanted Natsu to get a baby out of what happened, and knowing now that he might die if he didn't play things safe made that resentment flare up again, but he squelched it. Natsu hadn't meant to endanger him, and done his best to make sure everything went off without a hitch no matter how hard Gray made that for him.

Besides, if Mavis let Natsu be a surrogate father who she constantly took help from, then that would give Natsu more involvement with the girl without Gray feeling like he was trying to bribe Natsu into loving him by letting him take her. Maybe it would be enough for Natsu, and then that Natsu wanted a kid wouldn't be an obstacle between them. All Gray had to do was quietly let it slide that Natsu was going to be involved in helping Mavis.

"Was Mavis worried about how she'll juggle her work with being a mom?" Gray asked. He understood if she was. He really understood.

"Probably? I haven't asked her yet, but for some reason she didn't tell Zeref that she was going to be the one the baby went to. Also…"

Natsu bit his lip, watching Gray's face closely for any hints of disapproval.

"Also what?"

"I just thought… everyone else our age is settling down with kids. I know some people do that later. Jellal and Lyon and all. But I thought it might cause you some trouble, now that Juvia isn't keeping you from dating. Maybe someone could be really interested in you, but they don't want to wait to see if you'll ever feel ready to be a full-time parent. I thought if you were okay to be kind of present, then maybe that might be a way to make things work with someone who doesn't want to wait."

Gray snorted at the idea. "As if. Who ties the knot with someone on the understanding that they're hardly going to help with parenting?"

"It was just a thought," Natsu said, swatting Happy for snickering at that. "Would you do that, if you knew someone who was okay with it?"

Gray shrugged, unconvinced that such a person existed. They'd all seen Levy chew Gajeel out at the guild for not pulling his weight with the twins. Kids were a lot of work. Who volunteered to do almost all of that work themselves and overlook a deadbeat dad?

The thought of himself as a deadbeat dad made Gray scowl inward. What if that was how the baby ended up seeing him and Mavis?
"You don't like it," Natsu said.

"I don't see myself realistically finding someone who would want it."

"But if you did?" Natsu pressed. "Just pretend for a minute that you did find someone like that."

"I don't know. I guess? Ideally, I'd find someone else who isn't raring to be a mom." Which made Gray stupid for pining for Natsu, who probably hadn't doused himself in Zeref's serum to solve his lack of a child only because he wanted to make sure Gray was fully supported through his pregnancy first. That, and he might not have anyone who was willing to be the magic sperm donor. Zeref probably wouldn't care one way or the other about an estranged child, given how easily he gave Natsu up, but Gray wouldn't be shocked if he objected on scientific grounds to inbreeding.

For one sickening moment, it occurred to Gray that Lucy might volunteer to be the father of Natsu's child, since she was similarly eager to be a parent, and since they still got their biological dream baby together that way, and since they used to be so close and Natsu hadn't fully sorted out his feelings for her since their breakup.

Gray shook the idea off. Natsu swore he was done with Lucy, and told her as much. He couldn't be with someone who didn't believe he loved them. Natsu wouldn't leave Gray and run back to Lucy for a baby. Lucy didn't believe in Natsu's love.

But then Gray didn't either. Not when he kept thinking it might be there, only to spend the next day in heartache.

"My turn," Gray said. "If the way you felt about all of this changed, would you tell me?"

"This?"

"Me. The baby. Your role in it. Our... How we get along." Saying 'our relationship' felt like it would be too big a tip off for what he was really asking. "You would tell me, right?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

Natsu through his hands up in surrender. "The baby makes you moody. I'm not going to say something that oversteps my bounds and makes you throw things at me."

The argument devolved there, Gray getting sidetracked by whether or not he was moody and threw things while Happy exaggerated all of Natsu's claims of how bad his mood swings could get. By the time Natsu had to run to clean Zeref's injury and make sure his brother made it safely to bed, it was late, and Gray still didn't have a satisfactory answer.

And after an evening of teasing, Gray wasn't sure Happy could be trusted when the cat lingered in the door, letting Natsu go to see Zeref alone while he headed home. After all, how easy it would be for the cat to set Gray up to fail when he looked over his shoulder at Gray on his way out and said, "Natsu's used to be afraid to say he likes you because he thought you still hated him for the baby."

Being called moody all evening was the only thing stopping Gray from punting Happy out the door instead of giving him the most chilling smile manageable and gesturing for him to leave.

Only once Gray was alone with no one to tell him he couldn't mix the mint fudge Natsu forgot to pack away with chocolate ice cream and stuff himself with so much sugar that he got sick did it occur to Gray that Happy was speaking in past tense. Natsu used to think Gray still hated him, but
he’d worked out that Gray was willing to move on.

How or why, Gray didn’t know, although he wished he did. It mattered a lot if Natsu knew from some accidental tip-off that also revealed Gray’s crush, because the last thing he wanted was for Natsu to blatantly play dumb in order to avoid having to turn him down again. Had his lie about why he’d been physically needy the other day not worked after all? Natsu really seemed like he bought it, but he could be playing along. Did that count as playing dumb to avoid a discussion, or was it it being courteous and waiting for Gray to be bold without backtracking? What if Juvia did give solid advice?

While Gray downed a mug of water to desperately combat the thirst all that sugar gave him, he ran through all his recent interactions with Natsu from the context of Happy’s claim that Natsu liked him for some time but wouldn’t say it, and now knew that Gray liked him back. How far back could he go with that? Not back to when Gray first became pregnant, for sure. Natsu had admitted to nothing with Gray being personal at that point. But it was definitely safe to count that night’s conversation as happening not only after Natsu fell for Gray, but after figuring out that Gray liked him too.

And that made a sickening level of sense in context. Because Natsu had stressed before that children were a major factor for him in what he wanted for his life, but that marriage itself was only necessary because of children. If he could be single while adopting a child, he would have already adopted. Natsu was someone who really truly might not mind a significant other who didn't carry their weight with child rearing. Hell—he might see it as him getting more time with his kid.

There was a chance that Natsu hadn’t been proposing that Gray pitch something to Mavis, but was really feeling out the possibility of a compromise between him wanting kids and Gray wanting not to be tied down.

Gray’s first thought was to hope he passed the test, then to be certain he failed. He'd been too dismissive of the idea that such a setup could exist. But then he stopped to wonder how much he wanted to pass.

He wanted Natsu. He absolutely did. But that Natsu was assessing him at all in such a way meant that even if Natsu wanted him—and this was all assuming that Happy wasn't messing with Gray—then Natsu still wasn't willing to compromise his desire to raise a family. If Gray did give the baby to Mavis and Natsu ran to Zeref for that serum, what if he begged Gray to be the father? What if raising a baby turned out to be more work than Natsu was used to from merely babysitting, and he changed his mind about being alright with a patchwork relationship in which he had Gray as a lover, but not as a fellow parent? What would the arrangement be anyway? Living separately? Would Natsu expect Gray to move into that little shack of his and share a room with whatever child Gray didn’t want while still totally having no parental responsibilities?

It was a mess, trying to make it work. An absolute mess, and there had to be better people out there who Gray had less of a history with and could get into a relationship with without hassle over how to make their conflicting goals work for both of them.

There had to be someone better. Gray told himself over and over that there were better people out there than Natsu, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. He wanted Natsu, and there was a very real chance that Natsu wanted him. If at all possible, he wanted to find a way to make it work.

Chapter End Notes
10 chapters to go.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was all good and fine to want to make things work, but pulling it off was another matter entirely. Gray had experienced too many scares and false starts with Natsu to risk asking him up front about how they might manage as a couple. At least without getting a confirmation from someone more trustworthy than Happy. The only problem was that Gray had no idea who else he might be able to ask. Most of the guild firmly believed that Gray and Natsu had been secretly dating since some time before Gray was exposed to the serum—Natsu having been vague with the timing of events and the guild concluding that Gray caught him on the rebound from Lucy. They would all think Natsu was head over heels for Gray because the two of them had tried to persuade everyone of that for some time.

Ironically, the one person they wanted to convince was the only person who saw through the act. but despite that sharp eye of hers, Juvia wasn't high on Gray's list of people to go to. Everyone who so much as looked his way was a love rival in her books. She probably thought Happy was madly in love with him.

And then there was Lucy. Gray didn't expect her to be any better a judge of his standing with Natsu when she created the relationship confusion in the first place. Really, he didn't expect her to even be a good judge of how Natsu might react to a situation at all, given how things between them ended. But she at least saw more of what Natsu was like with children than anyone else had, and might have a better idea than Gray how feasible it was for the two of them to be in a committed relationship with Natsu shouldering the bulk of parental duties.

The idea of asking Lucy when things between her and Natsu and Gray were still raw was insane even before word of Gray's pregnancy came out, and would only be worse after. Natsu and Gray had both avoided going to the guild if they could, Gray not needing an excuse after his last visit, while Natsu had Mavis pass on that he was tending to either Zeref or Gray and thus couldn't come until further notice. But as always, Mavis was only so patient, and eventually Gray needed to return to the guild for work—unless he wanted to take over caring for Zeref. And when Gray forced Natsu to accompany him for his return two weeks after he last stormed out of the guild hall, Gray spotted Lucy and thought of the possibility of recruiting her for help.

Lucy made eye contact with him only for a split second, then looked down to the floor, no longer seeming to hear Levy speak to her. As Natsu's pretend boyfriend, and hopefully soon-to-be real boyfriend, Gray was obligated to take Natsu's side in the fight, but he couldn't help but feel bad for her. Things between her and Natsu could have been handled better, but she had never sought to do him or Gray any harm, and she'd been hurt herself.

Then Natsu steered Gray towards the basement, and Gray lost sight of her.

"C'mon," he said, loudly enough for everyone pretending not to stare at Gray to hear. "I'll help you work."

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As none of his clothes fit, Gray had resigned himself to coming shirtless with his pants riding low again, once more wearing Mavis's ring. He was grateful, albeit in a shamed sort of way, when Laxus followed the two of them awkwardly into the basement and offered him a shirt.
"I can't guarantee I'll be able to bring it back," Gray said as he pulled it on. It was tight around the stomach, but it made it around his stomach, and that was something in and of itself. Having such large guildmates was nice.

"It's an old shirt," Laxus said. "I was going to pitch it before Mira suggested you might want it."

Gray nodded, not asking when they'd decided to donate it to him. There had been no announcement ahead of time that he was coming that day, so Laxus had either stashed the shirt in the guild some days ago, or brought it with him each day in the hopes of being able to offer it.

"Thank you," Gray said. "It's... I'm still getting used to seeing myself like... this, but it's nice to have something I can pull down to my waist again."

Laxus nodded, failing to meet Gray's eye as he nervously joked. "For as hard as you had to work to pull it on, you probably won't shed it without noticing."

"I've gotten my fill of shirtlessness for the year," Gray lied. It was getting warmer, and the heat always got to him worse than everyone else. He was going to be in his third trimester all through summer too, and between all the baby fat and, purely theoretically a few pounds of actual fat that porking out on fudge had given Gray, summer would be killer. "Although I'll probably grow out of even this, soon."

"You want me to ask Elfman if he has any old clothes lying around?"

"No... I should make Natsu buy me a new wardrobe. Or borrow Erza's maternity clothes. She's always a few weeks ahead of me, and bigger anyway. I'm sure she has clothes that I can use."

"Evergreen would be happy to lend you Elfman's shirts," Happy pointed out. "She'll probably think they bring her and Elfman good luck with having their own baby."

Gray shuddered, imagining Evergreen insist that Elfman put on a shirt that they lent to that pregnant boy in their guild when he went down on her. He wished them the best of luck with not falling apart the same way Natsu and Lucy did, but he also wanted no part in their increasingly outlandish attempts to conceive.

Come to think of it, there was a major candidate for if Zeref wanted to test that serum on another human. It would be a shame for everyone who actually wanted to be pregnant but struggled to conceive for Zeref to scrap the ultimate fertility drug just because it accidentally turned one man's life upside-down. He made a mental note to suggest that to Zeref the next time they spoke.

Zeref! There was someone who Gray could for sure ask about Natsu. Natsu confided everything in Zeref. Not because Zeref was a good confidant, but because he had no one to spill the beans to. Mavis did the same, and Zeref had told Gray that he suspected they shared their drama with him as a way of trying to make him more aware of proper social reactions after having detached himself from society for so many centuries. Since they hid the pregnancy from Happy for so long, Zeref would have also been one of the few people Natsu had to shoot ideas off of with how to handle Gray. Natsu had undoubtedly shared the development of their relationship and his thoughts on it with Zeref, and Zeref wasn't a prankster like Happy. If he said that Natsu was falling for Gray, then he meant it for sure.

"Well," Laxus raised a hand to scratch the back of his head, looking anywhere but at Gray. "I suppose... Gramps wasn't quite out of it when he said you two are having a kid, was he?"

"No," Gray admitted. "He woke up during a checkup. I don't know if I should have told him."
"Nah. It was fine. He's… I mean… He doesn't really understand anything anymore. It's not like anything else you said would have made more sense to him and it's… I don't know. It's kind of nice that he could remember the truth for a couple days? He's going, you know. The old lady doesn't know how much longer he'll be alive, but it's kind of like he's already gone, even if he's still in the room with you. Like he died that first time he forgot who I was. But it still feels nice to tell him things. Maybe once he's… you know… up there he'll be glad that everyone kept sharing. He'd kick your ass once you two met again if you never told him something as major as being pregnant."

"Yeah." As an unspoken rule, you didn't keep Laxus from talking through how he felt about the situation with Makarov, but that didn't mean Gray was comfortable with it. "Glad I didn't do any more damage."

"Not much more damage you can do at this point. But that's… grim, isn't it?" Laxus met Gray's eyes. "Congrats. I know you don't want to be pregnant, but congrats anyway. A kid is… Well, I'm not the best with them, but everyone else's brats really liven this place up. It'll be fun to see yours run around too."

Not being the best with them either, Gray gave Laxus a nod, but said nothing.

"Anyway… Just wanted to say that. I have a couple more old shirts, if you want some variety. Just ask. Everyone's happy to pitch in."

Unsure what else to say, Gray said, "Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Just come up whenever you need anything. Except… maybe give it another hour or two. Lucy and Levy are leaving for a job after lunch and… well… sooner or later there's gonna be another fight with her, but that's between her and Natsu. He already shoved you into that weird experiment of his brothers that started this mess, right? No reason to let him drag you any deeper into this fight."

Behind Laxus, Gray saw Natsu glance up the stairs to the main floor and resignedly trudge up them, and suspected that he chose to have that fight sooner. That might mean that Gray would be going home alone, which he was hardly thrilled about. But the sooner things between Natsu and Lucy could resolve themselves, the better.

"You might want to hang out down here for a few hours, too," Gray warned. "I'm not perfectly balanced right now, so it would be great if you could help with any work that requires using the ladder."

"Isn't Natsu—oh." Looking over his shoulder, Laxus saw that Natsu was gone. "Alright. I can lend a hand while he's gone."

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Everyone cleared out as Natsu sat down next to Lucy, with even Levy putting a full table between the two of them.

Lucy herself looked like she'd rather be anywhere but there. Natsu refused to feel guilt for that. She left him.

"You wanted to talk?" He asked.

She looked to Levy for support, realizing for the first time that everyone but Natsu had put their distance between the two of them. It took her a moment after finding herself alone to come up with a response. "Are you going to storm out on me again?"
"No promises," Natsu said. "But I'd like this settled."

"Fine. How long did you know about Zeref's serum?"

"He stared working on it early last year," Natsu said. "Took me almost a year to find out about the side effects, if that's what you're asking. And I asked him a lot about the side effects too, since Gray's the first human to end up taking that stuff. It makes getting pregnant happen, but it's your own body that keeps you that way."

If there weren't an audience, or if Natsu were a little more bitter, he might have taken this chance to pitch adoption to Lucy again. Not for them, of course. That ship sailed long ago. But they as individuals could still find other people to start a family with, and the option would still be open to her once she married someone else.

The option to beg her future husband to take Zeref's serum was also open to her. Zeref would no doubt be happy to have a willing subject. One who could be talked into letting his progress be more closely tracked. Natsu had considered being one himself, and even the knowledge that he would need surgery and could still seriously injure himself if they didn't start the surgery fast enough hadn't dissuaded him. The only thing stopping him was that he lacked a willing magical sperm donor, since Gray hadn't seemed overly excited by the scenario Natsu proposed of being in a committed relationship with a parent. But he just couldn't bring himself to say it to her. He couldn't tell her that adoption wasn't her only option. Not when she left him because she thought he needed his own child rather than an adopted one.

"If you knew what it did before you and Gray got together, would you have told me?" Lucy asked.

"No. We were still broken up then, and not talking about it," Natsu said. "And it would be like you talking about how you found someone who wanted to give her baby up and were going to take the child for her. The potion wouldn't work the way you wanted anyway. Why rub salt in the wound?"

Levy had inched closer, seeing that neither of them looked like they were about to explode. In truth, Natsu felt less like exploding and more burned out. Burned out on pretending that things hadn't hurt, burned out on avoiding having to see Lucy hurt, burned out on worrying that she might hurt him again, and burned out on avoiding a resolution just because it might not be perfect.

He hoped Lucy felt the same, because if she snapped, he didn't have the energy to do anything but be blown over. Sitting next to her felt like the aftereffect of eating incompatible magic.

"You say that like there's no fixing things."

"There isn't."

"It's not like you to be pessimistic. I know you have Gray, but it's not like we can't be—"

"Friends. We can be friends, just like you said," Natsu told her. "You already ignored me when I told you what I wanted that night, so believe me now when I say friends is all we can be. Because I can't be with someone who ignores me, and if you can't listen to me this time, then at this point, we might not get to be friends either. We're already avoiding each other all the time, and I'm sick of it. We're going to stop this now, one way or the other. Please."

Levy stopped inching and moved back to Lucy's side. Gajeel had no stake in Natsu and Lucy's affair on either side, but Natsu still appreciated when the iron slayer similarly sat down next to him. He couldn't blame Gray for staying out of the mess. Even if he was the one of lit a fire under the powder keg and caused it to eventually go off, he hadn't known what he was doing at the time, and Natsu
was the one that left Gray seething when he set things in motion. Besides, Natsu and Lucy were the ones who left all those unresolved feelings to stew and boil over in the first place.

Still, it was nice to feel like there was someone ready to bat for him. Knowing that Levy would likely scold Gajeel for it later made the gesture all the more appreciable, and Natsu made a note to call Levy out on taking sides first if she tried to scold Gajeel for doing the same.

"I didn't start this," Lucy said.

She did. She absolutely did, and if Natsu had the energy, he would have called her on that. He was never hard on her over their continued failure to conceive. He'd been nothing but reassuring when she learned she could never carry a child to term. He was the one who looked for other ways to make things work, and she was the one who freaked out and said that they needed to end things for his sake.

But Natsu didn't have the energy to call her on it. And he was burned out on fighting her.

"Fine. You didn't. We're still settling it now."

He waited for her to say something. Anything. Lucy held her chin high and stared defiantly back at him in silence.

"Alright. I'll go first. When you dumped me, did you assume I'd be there to take back whenever you got over the news from the doctor?"

As soon as he said it, Natsu regretted deciding to have their talk at the guild. He'd thought that it might give him some support, or that he might lose his nerve he had to track her to her home when he was already making excuses not to see her at the guildhall. Now, it felt like he'd invited everyone to see him twice as naked as Gray ever got.

Lucy was ten times as self-conscious a person as Natsu, and he took solace in knowing that her keeping her chin up was a bluff. "Lisanna had a boyfriend already, and no one expected you to ever get together with Gray. I think everyone expected him to either stop running from Juvia or stay celibate for life."

"So, yes. You did think you could take me back when you felt like it."

Lucy had enough sense to hesitate before saying, "I did."

Mira had hovered closer than anyone else listening in, but at this point she stepped back, ushering others to follow her lead and move to the far end of the guild to go about their own business. It wasn't total privacy, but Natsu was grateful for the low, strained din of guild activity that made him no longer feel his voice boom in his ears while he spoke softly.

"You should have told me," Natsu said. "You should have told me if all you wanted was space."

Lucy rolled her eyes. "Since when do you ever give anyone space?"

That was all he had given her since things boiled over. But again, Natsu couldn't bring himself to explode over the comment, even if part of him wanted to.

"It hurt," Natsu told her. "You didn't listen to me. You said I didn't love you enough, and I couldn't be with you anymore because of that."

"I said you wanted your own child."
"You implied it then. You implied I didn't love you enough. Even though I begged you to listen when I said that you were what mattered most to me. Did you really mean that at the time, or was it the first excuse you thought to give because it was easier than asking for space?"

"Is there a right answer that will make you forgive me?"

"No," Either she lied to make things easier on herself, or she really hadn't believed him. Whether or not she was in a bad place, the number that did on Natsu's heart wasn't something he could easily overlook.

"It was somewhere between the two," she told him. "I wanted you to find someone else as much as I expected that you would still be there if I came around."

"Okay," Natsu said, unsure what else he even could say for that. "Thank you for… for being clear."

Lucy nodded, and Natsu was glad that he'd said something equally hard to respond to.

"There's no way to make things right?"

"You said it yourself," Natsu told her. "We can still be friends. Juvia and Gray are working on that too, and if she can do it, so can we. I think that's just about right."

"Just about, huh?" Lucy sighed, the ghost of a smile gracing her lips.

"Yeah. Good luck… um… good luck with…"

Gajeel leaned closer to Natsu and supplied, "Going forward."

"Yes! Good luck with that," Natsu said, relieved to find the conversation wrapping up. "It'd be nice to work with you again."

It took Lucy a moment to find her voice. "We'll have to put a team together."

Natsu nodded, nearly melting against Gajeel in relief. There was something to salvage, and he was glad to hear her imply that they wouldn't be alone if they worked together again. That would be too much too soon, but he hadn't known how to say that he shouldn't be alone with her without coming off as bitter.

He was bitter, he realized, as Gajeel and Levy took over the conversation. He sank into himself and let them have their slightly too loud debate over whether or not the two of them would be able to take Natsu and Lucy along on a job together then that left the twins with neither their parents nor either of their usual babysitters. He was bitter indeed to hear Lucy's full confession. That she had been convinced he wouldn't want her, yet still taken him for granted and assumed that even if she chased him off, he would come back to her as soon as she asked.

But she hadn't accused him of going to Gray because he really did care that much about having his own child, and she hadn't accused him of forcing the pregnancy on Gray. Natsu didn't dare ask if she suspected as much. Didn't dare ask what she thought of him dating someone who, despite being pregnant with a child that was allegedly his, planned on giving the baby away. And Natsu was so relieved not to have to deal with that after fearing it for so long that he didn't have the strength to stand.

He sat there, not quite listening to the Redfoxes talk for half an hour before he quietly excused himself to go find his supposed boyfriend. Gray was right were Natsu left him, sorting through books and determining which were the oldest and most in need of being added to the guild's magic archive.
before the physical records could completely fall apart. To Natsu's surprise, Gray was not only still in Laxus's shirt, but Laxus was helping him. The lightning slayer even had his opinions about what Gray ought to spend his time transcribing. There were a number of old photos and sketches of the guild, and various books containing drawings of rune circles and such which Gray had passed over, because he had no way to add the images.

"I've seen The Ninth go through records on her Archive Lacrima. People do store images in it."

"People who can use Archive Magic do. The lacrima doesn't include that ability. I can't draw in there myself, much less copy a drawing in. It only lets me write."

"Maybe you didn't look hard enough."

"I don't think the lacrima copies images," Natsu said. "I can ask Zeref about a way to make that work when I see him tonight. It's kind of a new feature, so it will probably keep him busy longer."

Laxus paused, as uncomfortable with the subject of Zeref as most were. "Is that a good idea? Giving him stuff to do? He's not going to slip up with that tower of his if you split his focus?"

"No. That thing's his baby. He already checks the tower every morning to make sure everything's going according to the blueprints," Natsu said. "The Council will probably want to be able to use images too, and if he spends the time where he's not working on the tower working on a new way to improve the lacrima, then that's time he isn't spending on something dangerous."

Dangerous for himself or others. Natsu didn't really need to clarify. Zeref just spelled danger wherever he went.

Natsu worried sometimes about the idea of Zeref outliving him and Mavis, and who exactly would go an keep tabs on his brother if that happened. Most if the guild avoided him despite Mavis forcing contact whenever she had to bring Zeref into the infirmary, and virtually no one from Alvarez saw anything wrong with Zeref's behavior. They all grew up hearing about their genius king who was basically immortal, and whose word was that of god. No matter how many times Natsu tried to explain to the visitors who came to help with the construction, no one ever seemed to commit to memory that they had to make sure Zeref didn't hurt himself, or that he received medical attention if he did. None of them ever went against his word, to the point that Natsu had to make daily visits to look and see how Zeref was doing despite there being a hundred or so people already up by the lab with him.

You would think Laxus might understand Natsu's plight. He had to take care of Makarov, who was a million times worse off. But most of the guild, similar to Alvarez, saw only the Black Mage. They all nodded along to the stories of projects he'd proposed that Mavis or Natsu had to shoot down, realizing some way that his latest idea could be trouble that Zeref either didn't think of or didn't feel was a valid concern. (The latter was endlessly frustrating for Natsu, given how Zeref got himself cursed. You would think someone so smart would be a faster learner. Maybe Gray was onto something hoping his daughter didn't get Zeref's brains.) There was no convincing the guild that Zeref was only unintentionally harmful, and needed to be redirected from dangerous notions. There was no convincing them that it was perfectly safe to see him so long as you did it regularly, and that he was going to get himself killed one way or another if left all alone. He would starve himself stupid forgetting to eat, then give himself another injury like the cavity in his arm, then die from a terrible infection when he neglected to have the injury addressed.

In a sad sort of way, Natsu didn't even need a kid if he wanted someone to look after. And they all knew from Mira's complaints that Laxus felt similar—too busy tending to Makarov to even consider moving onward with his life. If Makarov still had his mind, he'd be horrified to see his grandson in
that position.

There was a bright side to dealing with Zeref. He was aware enough of the imposition all his oversights caused for Natsu and Mavis that he was generally willing to do whatever they said to make being around him easier. If he really, truly didn't want to let them tend to his arm, Mavis would never be able to get near him. Natsu would have to knock him unconscious. He dropped projects that Natsu and Mavis raised objection with, even if he disagreed with whatever grievance they took. He even set his own interests aside to work on something Natsu or Mavis asked for, so giving him more to do with the Archive Lacrima was a brilliant idea.

"While he's at it, have him find a way to tweak file sharing," Gray said. Natsu could have kissed him for coming up with more to keep Zeref occupied with. He could kiss Gray in general, really, but helping with Zeref was a good excuse. "It's a pain if I want a message to show up at a certain time, and I have to share it then instead of having some way to set a time for it. Actually, some way to clearly distinguish stuff I'm writing just to send a message and actual records that I want to share with people would be nice too."

Archive Magic lacked any means of tracking the passage of time in and of itself. Finding a way to implement Gray's requests—which were pretty good ones as it became increasingly apparent that all of Zeref's Archive Lacrima testers were treating the device like an instant mail carrier—would keep Zeref busy for weeks.

Natsu did kiss Gray for the idea. "That's great. Giving him a project like that could keep him out of trouble for a month."

"A month?" Laxus asked.

Gray laced his voice with concern, but his face was aglow. "What if his basement explodes again?"

"Mavis cleared out all the dangerous looking stuff the last time that happened. It's just a bunch of rat cages down there now. I'll send a note back with one of the Alvarians saying that their former emperor is very busy with a task entrusted to him by the Council, and if he asks for unrelated supplies in the meantime, they should remind him to stay focused on his current work."

How workable that would or wouldn't be was questionable. Invel would move heaven and earth to do whatever he felt was best for Zeref, regardless of what everyone else had to say on the matter. Larcade might be more willing to go against orders if he thought he was helping to keep his dear father safe, but he was also prone to doing the opposite of what would make Natsu happy. Because they were just one big family of adult children at the end of the day. That note would have to be sent by Mavis.

"Well, if you think it's safe..." Laxus said. "I still question letting him run his experiments at all. It sounds like even the ones that ought to be harmless can cause a lot of trouble."

He gestured to Gray's stomach, which the stretched out shirt only made more apparent. Laxus's donation was a temporary solution to the long-standing shirtless problem, and now that Gray was taking charity from the rest of the guild and resigned to the fact that he needed clothes that could fit, Natsu would find him clothes that fit better.

Gray shied away when a hand came to close to his stomach, not yet comfortable with the fact that everyone knew his situation.

"You don't tell Zeref he can't do things. You tell him he shouldn't, and if he thinks you're being reasonable, he goes along with you," Natsu said. "There's a reason we haven't outright stopped him..."
from building that giant tower."

Laxus and Gray both grimaced at the reminder of the tower, which Natsu thought was unfair. It was even more unfair when Laxus used the tower as his excuse to leave, saying, "That reminds me, I need to speak to Mavis about the construction. Gray, it was nice catching up with you."

Because Gray returned Laxus's farewell with a wave and such a warm smile, Natsu decided not to tell him that Mavis was spending the day out by the lab. Zeref had finally grown fed up with only seeing her for wound care and told her that she could either spend more time at his place or else invite him over, and sufficiently guilted her into coming by accusing her of treating him like a chore. That happened every so often. Mavis could only make requests that Zeref not bring his reputation into her guildmaster business enough times before it got deep beneath his skin.

Laxus would have known that too. He was dating the girl who helped keep track of all guild affairs, and Mira would have let him know that Mavis left her in charge.

"I wanted to speak to Mavis too, actually," Gray said.

"I think she's busy."

"But Laxus just—"

"Went to keep her busy. I had some stuff I keep forgetting to nag her about too. When we see her, we can gang up on her." By this point Zeref had probably already asked, but Natsu still needed to know for himself why Mavis never shared with Zeref that she was going to take Gray's child.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this went up late. My laptop was being a little shit and wouldn't load the rich text editor AO3, so I just... kept delaying. Next chapter will still be Sunday, barring any unforeseen computer issues. I'm getting a new computer that should arrive week, so hopefully it'll work alright and there will be no more problems after that.
Zeref’s lab and home was the former guildhall, once a one story building with a basement and a relatively high ceiling thanks to an excess of rafters. It had since been renovated to include a loft overlooking the main floor, which was more or less visible from the front door.

The only people who generally let themselves into the lab where Zeref’s brother and girlfriend. Even the construction workers announced their presence outside the door and waited for Zeref to open it, if they even approached the building at all. The lack of privacy on the inside, thus, was not a huge concern. Zeref wasn't bothered by being seen by his standard guests in a state of undress, Natsu had never cared much about anyone being stark naked, and Mavis had eventually gotten used to seeing Zeref in compromising situations due to the fact that sometimes, when she and her boyfriend were alone, they did things that required you first remove your clothes.

So the layout was no problem for the building's resident and it's standard guest, but posed a bit of an issue when Gray turned up and, from the front door, was made keenly aware of the fact that Zeref and Mavis were busy with things that involved no clothes.

Gray meant to blurt out an apology, but the words that stumbled out of his mouth weren't quite the right ones. He hurriedly shut the door, leaned against the outside wall, and buried his face in his hands.

Mavis had left some time during the day when Gray returned to work, and hadn't been back since. Betting pools had been drawn on whether she was simply shirking work after having successfully shoved it all off onto Mira, catching up with her boyfriend after several months of putting work first, or if Zeref finally snapped and killed her. It seemed that the second was right, which, come to think of it, should have been obvious from the money Natsu put money down on that possibility. However, Zeref was still involved in some form of murder, because Gray felt like he died a little inside.

If his stomach weren't in the way, he'd have slid down the wall and sank to the ground and maybe even encased himself in ice to further hide from embarrassment. Gray wasn't like Natsu or Juvia. He couldn't brush off seeing something so intimate, nor did it excite him and send his imagination into overdrive. He should have said nothing and quietly slipped out so they wouldn't know he accidentally walked in on them, but he panicked and blurted out… what did he blurt out? Something about carrots? Good God did he ever wish he could disappear.

Mavis came out to find Gray, scarlet face in his hands, unwilling to raise his head and make eye contact when she cleared her throat.

"I don't know why you're the one who's embarrassed" she said when he wouldn't look at her.
"You're not the one who was caught naked this time."

This time, she said. But then she had a point. Embarrassed as Gray was, being walked in on would be much more embarrassing for Mavis. Maybe Zeref too. Who knew with him?

"I… can't imagine you would have been sent to fetch me," Mavis said, looking down to Gray's stomach. Natsu had told her that Gray was back to coming to the guild, and Mira assured her that everyone was being sensitive to both Gray's condition and his feelings about it. He wouldn't be sent
out of town and up into the hills just to deliver a message. Especially not when Natsu was the
favorite to send to Zeref's house.

"No. Um… Is Zeref… busy?"

"Not anymore."

Gray wished she hadn't put it that way.

Mavis opened the door back up and ushered Gray in, following after him. Zeref was coming down
the stairs as they entered. His hair, in its disheveled state, resembled Natsu's. His tunic was on
backwards, and the sash that he insisted every outfit he wore must have was nowhere to be seen.
Since his tunic came down to his knees, Gray decided not to ask if Zeref was wearing shorts, or had
nothing on underneath.

Come to think of it, Mavis's dress moved through the furniture as if it wasn't even there, so she must
have worn an illusion. Gray took stock of himself and found that his pants and boxers were still on
and the shirt Laxus gave him was still tight around his midsection. For as much of a fight as it was to
get on, he wasn't sure he could get the shirt off if he tried.

It was strange to be the most appropriately dressed person in the room for once. Gray tried his best
not to think of the circumstance creating such an unlikely phenomenon.

"Is something wrong?" Zeref asked. "You aren't dying, are you?"

"Zeref! He's allowed to interrupt us for less urgent things than that."

"It seemed like the most likely explanation. If it were a minor medical issue, he would have gone to
Porlyusica. If he and Natsu were fighting, Natsu would have beat him here. If he were only looking
for a casual visit, he would have visited someone else."

The whole thought process was laid out with a pleasant smile, but like Zeref always had when
explaining the logic behind something he did. The tone was neutral. It probably meant as much to
him as the explanation for how moonlight was actually reflecting the sun. But that last remark still
made Gray feel guilty for never visiting Zeref for the sake of visiting Zeref. Natsu did so sometimes,
and Mavis was clearly in the midst of such a meeting. Gray had to admit that Zeref wasn't as awful
as he used to think, and it wouldn't hurt to offer him a little company.

Especially since Gray came to ask Zeref about the odds that they might become brother-in-laws.

"It's kind of a Natsu visit, but we're not fighting. You and I will be fighting if you tell Natsu I
visited."

"Should I leave?" Mavis asked.

"Only if you refuse to swear to secrecy."

Mavis's eyes narrowed. "Are you concealing something from Natsu?"

"Only something that it's in his best interest not to know about. Unless he does want to know it, in
which case I'll tell him."

"Which is why you're asking Zeref?"

"Yes."
Satisfied with the response, Mavis gave a nod of approval and turned to the kitchen. "I'll make tea. Is there anything else you want while you're here?"

"Chocolate." Gray always wanted chocolate. In fact, right then he was curious as to what it would taste like if you mixed Natsu's homemade pickles with some of that fudge he left in the fridge. But that was dangerously close to pickles and ice cream territory, and Gray would never admit such a craving aloud.

"I… might be able to make some instant hot chocolate. Zeref doesn't exactly keep a broad stock of ingredients."

Natsu had spoiled Gray for hot chocolate, and the watered down, rehydrated stuff that Gray used to make for himself was no longer enjoyable. But it was the closest he was going to get to good chocolate, so he nodded before turning his attention to Zeref.

"I hope you aren't going to make me guess," Zeref said. "I only know about information Natsu didn't want to share with you, and he tells me you finally asked about the pelvis issue, so at this point I think he's run out of secrets."

Gray didn't realize secrets had still been a concern for him until he felt something lighten in his chest. Given how he wound up pregnant in the first place, there was always a seed of doubt in his mind as to how sincere Natsu was and whether or not he was hiding something. No matter how much trust Gray placed in Natsu, some small voice pointed out that history said he could be making a terrible mistake.

What would life be like if he fell for Natsu without the pregnancy? Natsu and Lucy split up either way, and Natsu could avoid being chased off from Gray whether he had a baby to take care of or not. Would Gray have ever considered Natsu if not for so much close contact? Would Natsu have considered Gray?

Well, whether or not Natsu considered Gray with the pregnancy was still a matter of question, and that was why Gray was there.

"Does Natsu only come to you when we fight?"

"Natsu visits daily to get on my case about my arm," Zeref said. Gray had forgotten about that injury, and it explained why Zeref and Mavis chose the position he did for… for…

He banished that thought from his head. This wasn't about Mavis and Zeref's relationship. This was about Natsu.

"Does Natsu only ever talk to you about me when we fight?" Gray clarified.

"No. He talks my ear off with concerns that he's afraid to raise with you, or if you do something that he's not sure how to handle. Just ask me outright what you're fishing for. This is taking too long."

Gray didn't need to hear that from someone who complicated issues for eight extra years by being too vague with Natsu, and who loved to take his sweet time getting to the point when explaining how things worked. But he also didn't want to dally when he'd interrupted Mavis's romantic getaway.

"Happy says Natsu likes me. Is that true, or am I being set up for a prank?"

"Of course he does. He wouldn't put up with you as long as he has if he didn't enjoy your company. Haven't you two been on a team for years now?"
"Zeref, I think he means romantically."

To Zeref's credit, he didn't look the slightest bit embarrassed with such a misunderstanding. "Oh. Yeah. He was real worked up about it, because you kept snuggling with him and he didn't know how to respond when you tried to pretend it was nothing."

Gray would have given anything just then to have Zeref's ability to keep a straight face. He looked to Mavis for help, but saw her watching with entirely too much interest.

"H-how… How did he want to respond? Did he mention that?"

"He didn't know, I think," Zeref said. "You don't want kids and he does, so he thinks the two of you getting together would be a bad idea, but he made it sound like that was the only thing holding him back."

"And you… have no issue telling me this?"

"Well, he didn't know how he was going to tell you, and if he tried, then for as clearly as you misunderstood his explanation—"

"Then being too vague when it matters most must run in the Dragneel family," Mavis finished.

From the face Zeref pulled, Gray suspected that wasn't how he intended to finish that sentence.

"But…” It was an awfully personal thing to casually share behind your brother's back.

"Natsu knows you like him. There's no sense in keeping you in the dark," Zeref said. "You two need to either come together and agree that this baby issue is grounds not to go any further than you have, or find a way to settle it so it won't cause trouble for your relationship down the road."

Like Natsu was trying to do, feeling Gray out for how willing he might be to be with someone who had a child if he wasn't expected to assume too many responsibilities. It wasn't a terrible idea, but if you wanted it to be workable, it was a much more complex arrangement than could be worked out when you spoke in purely hypothetical terms.

It wasn't until after Gray left the lab, when he was down the hill and back in town and too far to turn back, that he realized that neither of them had said a word about the child he was currently pregnant with. It seemed like you would bring something like that up when talking about getting into a relationship with someone who wanted a kid—particularly when that someone was quite likely the father.

-o-

It was almost midnight when Gray made it back to the apartment. Now that he'd resigned himself baggy clothes, it would be obvious to anyone one the street that he was pregnant. Thus, he only took to the streets at times that just about no one else would, and avoided streetlamps wherever possible.

Gray had avoided all interactions with neighbors or other civilians, and hadn't dared look at the news. It hadn't slipped his notice either that his guildmates were pussyfooting around his pregnancy. Grateful as he was that Natsu convinced them it was a sensitive matter, that meant they weren't going to share any bad news with Gray, like what the tabloids were no doubt saying about his condition. Someone would have let it slip to the town. With Magnolia already on high alert with gossip news radars with Jellal and Erza's romance, it would have hit the ears of a reporter soon enough.

So when Natsu woke him late in the morning the next day, grim faced and holding the latest issue of
Sorcerer Weekly, Gray was sure that his secret was as out as it ever could be. He'd resigned himself to that happening once the guild found out. If anything, he was surprised by how long it took for his condition to wind up the subject of national gossip.

"How bad is it?" Gray asked, eyeing the cover. Natsu had it rolled up, but he could make out blue and red hair.

"Terrible."

"Really?" It couldn't have gotten too high of billing if they put Jellal and Erza on the cover

"It's a nightmare Gray. Jellal and Erza got along so well. And I was counting on him to be the really thoughtful one if I ever messed up with you. I can't believe he'd do this to her! I'm gonna have to pound some sense into him when he gets home."

Gray leaned over the edge of his bed and tugged the magazine from Natsu's hand, unfurling it to read the headline. It seemed Jellal was caught in bed with two women who were not his pregnant fiancée, and now they were in the midst of a nasty breakup.

Already, Gray could see what had happened, although why it happened, he couldn't quite guess. Natsu, however, went on believing the tabloid.

"She's due in just a couple weeks. Did he forget that? That asshole said she was every bit as beautiful to him pregnant, so what was he doing sleeping with some side girl behind her back?"

While Natsu rambled, Gray picked his Communication Lacrima up from his nightstand and called Jellal. He and Erza were back from their job and not working again until after the baby was born, since Erza had been advised by her doctor to quit traveling if she wanted to carry to term, and Jellal had been advised not to leave her alone in the last few weeks if he wanted not to be castrated. But there were too many people out for Gray to make the trip to their house.

Jellal's voice came from the lacrima. "Hello?"

Natsu fell silent, whirling on Gray.

"My condolences for your second breakup with Erza this month."

"Actually, I think the last one was four months ago," Jellal said. "I didn't know you paid attention to Sorcerer."

"I don't, but it seems Natsu does."

Natsu held a hand out for Gray to give him the lacrima. "Lucy got me hooked. Give me the crystal so I can scream his ear off."

"Natsu doesn't get how they work, though. Do you know who the anonymous source was, or did the reporter make this one up himself?"

"I'm the source," Erza's voice declared. "I told them to pretend it was an anonymous friend quoting me so Jellal wouldn't accuse me of ratting him out. I haven't seen the story yet. What quotes did they use? I had some good ones."

Gray skimmed the article, and spotted a few quotes describing graphic enough ways in which Erza planned to have her revenge that he felt their ought to be a mature content warning on the front cover. "We might have different ideas of good, but they picked some… interesting quotes."
"They skipped all the violent ones, didn't they?"

"They did not."

While Erza applauded herself, Jellal took back over his end of the lacrima. "How are you doing, by the way? Things are getting a little… difficult with Erza's pregnancy, so I haven't had a chance to visit, and we keep missing each other at the guild. Are you alright? I heard you were… not happy when the pregnancy came out."

"That's one way of putting it. But I'm okay. Natsu makes sure I eat everything I'm supposed to and handles errands, and the guild knowing hasn't been as horrible as I thought it would be. Yet. Is there a reason you two told the tabloids you're breaking up?"

"It keeps attention on us," Jellal said. "As far as we could tell, no one's talked about how you're pregnant yet, and once the baby's been born there will be no proof, so any claims it happened can be discounted. At least so long as Zeref doesn't expose anyone else to that serum. But you and Natsu are still something of an interest story, and if anyone looked for a new scoop there, they might see you before the pregnancy is over. So we thought we might monopolize the headlines for a bit to keep attention off of you two."

"Thanks… but… Don't you hate being in the news?"


Erza pitched in. "According to Sorcerer, I'm the eighth girl he's had an ugly, public breakup with."

Gray snorted. "You dated seven other girls?"

"That's what I'm told," Jellal said. "They can't have been that great, because I don't remember a single one's name."

"Not even his fiancée's," Erza added.

Jellal sputtered indignantly, and Gray ended the call so he wouldn't have to listen to them argue over whether or not that jab needed to retire.

"So there you have it," Gray told Natsu. "Just tabloid gossip jumping on made up stories blown them out of proportion. Well, the reporter didn't make it up, since Erza lied about it. Those two's relationship is fine. You don't need to beat Jellal up."

Natsu looked disappointed to no longer have the excuse. Gray couldn't remember when the last time the two of them fought was, but it hadn't ended well for Natsu. Since he couldn't tap into his full E.N.D. form unless his book was opened, Natsu could only access a certain level of etherious power. It irked him to no end to technically be one of the most powerful creatures in existence while there were still guild members who overpowered him in a normal fight. It would never stop irking him until he managed to beat Jellal, Jellal sucked at being subtle about it when he went easy on someone, and when he went all out he could beat a non-etherious Natsu. So it would probably irk Natsu until he drew his last breath.

"You beat him the first time," Gray pointed out.

"Yeah, but that was with Etherion, so it doesn't count."

"Your magic let you use Etherion. That should count for something."
"It's not the same."

Gray gave up and let it drop. "Did you come here just to tell me they broke up?"

"No. I came to tell you that you gotta either become nocturnal or get back to a normal schedule. You're all wonky right now and it's bad for the baby if you mess your body up with your weird sleep pattern. Also I wanted to ask if I should make brunch or just give you a snack and then hold off on cooking until lunchtime."

Gray yawned and looked at his clock. It was already past eleven.

"Let's cook now and call it lunch," Gray said. He'd wanted to give Natsu grief for waking him up so early just to panic over a gossip tabloid, but it wasn't so early after all.

But it sure was nice of Jellal and Erza to put themselves in the spotlight like that. Especially since Jellal hated all the attention. Gray would need to think of some way to repay the favor, but he already owed them too much for the support they'd shown before that morning.

Come to think of it…

"Hang on. No one outside the guild has hear of the pregnancy?"

Natsu shook his head. "Mavis threatened probation for anyone who let it slip. Zeref says three people can only keep a secret if two are dead, but so far everyone's been careful about it. No one talks about it outside, and I don't think anyone's mentioned it to family who aren't part of the guild. You just had 'a mysterious illness' for a long time now, so everyone can keep saying that's what it is to people who still don't know. You're so ridiculous… Um… You're so careful about not being seen too, so that helps. But maybe we can see if Mavis can make a ring that hides your stomach with clothes? I mean, it might take more than one ring so it can look like you have multiple outfits, but then you could go outside when it isn't midnight."

That was a good idea coming from Natsu. In fact, that was a good idea in general. If Gray only needed to keep a ring on in order to appear clothed, that could spare him an untold number of embarrassments in the future.

"You should have suggested that yesterday. I could have asked when I spoke to her." She'd been right there. With Zeref. Gray probably could have left with some accessory that would make him the illusion he wanted.

"Oh. Yeah. Zeref told me about that."

Gray froze, remembering Zeref's sentiment about how important openness was. Of course. He'd been so willing to hand out his little brother's secrets. He would turn and blab about Gray too.

"You okay?"

"What exactly did Zeref tell you?"

"That he through the two of us ought to talk more now that everything was out, whatever that means." Bless Zeref and his tendency to get vague when he forgot that the whole world wasn't up to speed with him. "He also said you walked in on him and Mavis at a really bad time. I thought it might have been him losing his virginity, but he got really upset when I asked and said that happened a while ago. I thought he was lying, but Mavis backed him up. I mean, she was annoyed that we were talking about it, but she backed him up. How did he do that, anyway? He's too loopy when he's on his pain killers, and he barely moves his arm at all when he hasn't taken anything for pain."
"Please don't press me for details."

Realizing just what he'd asked Gray to recount, Natsu's cheeks turned the slightest shade of pink.

"A-anyway, you wanted lunch? I'll make something for you. And see about getting Mavis to make those rings. Once she's back from her vacation, of course. No need to interrupt them again. In the meantime, I'll get people to visit, or bring you more books for that Archive uploading thing, okay? You've gotta take better care of your health."

Gray sighed, exasperated with the babying. Even when he, a grown man, went to bed was now a sign to Natsu that he wasn't fully capable of taking care of himself. Maybe getting together with Natsu was a bad idea just because Natsu would forever treat him like one of those children he wanted so badly.

Actually, even if it was a nice break that Zeref hadn't let slip that Gray was fully aware of what Natsu thought of him, Zeref hadn't been wrong. They could tip-toe around one another until the end of time, looking for some way to feel each other out, or they could speak upfront and settle matters. And that's what Gray would do. Soon. As soon as he'd laid out exactly how he thought they needed to handle Natsu's plan for how to make things between them work. Natsu already got to set the rules for Gray's pregnancy, so Gray would be the one to say how things had to go if Natsu really wanted to be with him.

Chapter End Notes

Certain lead-ins to a scene are just fun to do. Is it fun to spend a few paragraphs at the start of a chapter explaining architecture and regular behavioral patterns just to set up for Gray walking in on Zeref having sex? Yes. Yes it is.
Things were weird for Natsu.

Everyone kept telling him how great it was that he was there for Gray, which was all good and fine if you were them and didn't know what Natsu did. For Natsu, it was like a little shot of guilt every time he heard how lucky Gray was. Dunking Gray in that serum in the first place was an innocent mistake, but everything after that had been deliberate, and it didn't sit right with Natsu to see Gray upset over his secrets coming to light while Natsu got away with his hand in everything.

Checking on Gray in the morning because he holed himself up to hide his condition from the town, because if he was left alone then what if he stopped feeding himself again, and then coming to the guild and hearing about what a wonderful friend he was when he forced Gray into that situation… It was hell. And he couldn't even complain about it, because everyone who knew what he did knew that Gray had it worse.

It was a mistake to give Gray the idea of more illusion accessories. Ever since hearing there might be a way to go out in broad daylight without his condition being on full display, Gray had been all too compliant with Natsu's request to keep a normal sleep schedule. He'd rejected Natsu's suggestion that he sleep in the guild infirmary while they waited to ask Mavis if she could make a new illusion, and was back to being a shut-in. At least Natsu could now bring someone different with him from the guild every evening for dinner, so he didn't feel like he'd led Gray to be completely isolated again, but he still didn't feel good.

It took a week to get around to asking Mavis about making another illusion too. The centenarian child in a young adult woman's body had been all too happy to leave everything in Mira's busy hands once she finally got around to shirking work, and Natsu didn't dare go out to Zeref's to visit her. Hearing about Gray's mishap was good fun, but being the one to potentially walk in on his brother having sex with the guildmaster was where Natsu absolutely drew the line.

But good on Zeref for finally shedding that virginity. Even if it wasn't that recent an event. It only took him centuries.

All that aside, Gray had recently taken to acting an all new kind of strange. No more was he content merely to shut himself in his room. Now he had to stare at Natsu constantly. The sketch books in which he used to recreate artworks to pass the time were now shoved into a corner in the living room, and Gray instead took notes in a notebook that he snapped shut whenever Natsu peeked in on him. Whatever Gray was now looking up on his Archive Lacrima, he hid it behind the documents he was typing into the Archive for Mavis if Natsu approached.

Not that Natsu didn't know the access code for Gray's Archive Lacrima, and he could smell that notebook tucked beneath the couch cushions, so it was pretty easy all in all to find out what Gray was up to. But Natsu couldn't bring himself to do it. Not when he already put Gray in such a predicament and everyone slowly suffocated him with guilt by showering him in well intended and falsely earned commendations.

-Natsu jumped for joy when, over a week after Gray took the suggestion of more rings as an excuse
to stay home, he came to the guild and found that Mavis had returned to work. While he elation
didn't quite measure up to Mira's, he finally had a chance to ask her to kill Gray's excuse to lounge
around all day and not leave the apartment.

The only thing that kept him from bursting into her office was the possibility that his brother came
back with her. Highly unlikely, but still something Natsu was concerned about.

Mavis bid him to enter when he knocked, and Natsu found her alone with the smallest stack of
papers he'd seen on her desk in months.

Seeing Natsu eye all her empty desk space, Mavis grinned. "Isn't the stain in the wood such a lovely
shade? I forgot what the surface of my desk looked like. Maybe I should just hand the guild over to
Mira. There's so much more bureaucratic work involved in the position since the last time I held it,
and she can handle that better than me."

Natsu shrugged at that. Mavis turning the guild over so soon after Makarov entrusted it to her
wouldn't sit well with anyone. But if Mavis was less busy, then Zeref would get blown off less often.
Sometimes Natsu wondered if his brother occasionally slipped a deliberate terrible idea into his
schedule just to ensure that Mavis would keep coming around to make sure nothing would go
horribly wrong in her absence. Usually it seemed like Zeref genuinely didn't realize when an idea
could go wrong, but every now and then, one of them seemed too obvious for him to have missed
that it was a mistake.

"Maybe you could pay Mira extra to help out more?" Natsu suggested.

"Maybe. So what's this visit about? Zeref didn't send you to say I forgot anything, did he? I'm going
to be back tomorrow anyway."

"You know, Sis, I think you're getting carried away with this vacation."

"For his arm," Mavis said. "It's a lot better now, but it has a while to go still before it's fully healed.
Besides, it's only a matter of weeks now before Zeref feels good enough again to go back out to the
construction. If you're still busy with Gray, then we'll need to designate someone to keep him from
gouging the right side, too. This is the worst injury he's had in years. I don't want a repeat of it."

By Gray's account, Zeref's arm was already in good enough shape for him to be pretty active again,
but Natsu held that thought in. He was there to ask for a favor. No need to remind Mavis that both
her and Natsu's boyfriends (of a sort) had told him about the current state of her sex life.

"I'm gonna miss not worrying about him causing even more trouble, but I won't miss cleaning that
wound," Natsu said. "But since you see him tomorrow, there was something I wanted to two of you
to do."

"We're not sorting anything else out between you and Gray," Mavis said. "It's on you two. If you
need to run to one or the other of us with all of your problems, then your problem are too big for the
two of you to make things work."

Natsu hadn't recalled going to Mavis with any of his concerns about a relationship with Gray, but
then Gray had been up to see Zeref while Mavis was there, and Zeref wasn't much of one for lying
or playing dumb. Especially since Natsu hadn't bothered to ask Zeref to keep his romantic concerns a
secret. (There weren't a whole lot of people Zeref had the chance to blab to, after all.) If she asked
what was going on between the two of them, he would have told her.

"Well… that's… I don't think Gray is interested," Natsu said. Gray had seemed absorbed in his own
thing ever since Natsu tried to propose an arrangement with children that satisfied both of them, anyhow. Maybe he finally gave up when he realized that Natsu really was deadset on the whole kid thing.

That was probably for the best. Justifying that Natsu could have a child who Gray was sort of the second parent for when Gray had made it clear that he didn't want Natsu to have his child would be a mess anyway.

"Anyway, you know that ring you made Gray that hid his stomach?"

Mavis nodded. "He gave it back once he started wearing shirts again. I guess there isn't much point, now. Since it doesn't actually make his stomach disappear, the fabric gives away the act."

"But you can make illusions of clothes too, right?"

Mavis, in response, poked a finger through her sleeve. Natsu wondered how often she layered an illusion over herself rather than getting dressed.

"Okay. So could you make something that makes it look like Gray's wearing clothes and his stomach is… y'know… not out there." Natsu gestures with his hand around his own stomach, drawing a curve in the air around where Gray's baby bump stuck out to. "He likes having stuff he can fit in, but he only goes outside at weird times so the town won't see his stomach. And now that he actually puts clothes on again, he's back to throwing them off at random anyway."

"He would look like he was wearing the same outfit day after day."

"So maybe three or four charms for different outfits? I know where he packed away all the clothes that don't fit right now. If I grabbed you some of his old stuff, could you make something so it looks like he's wearing them?"

Mavis bowed her head and thought about it. "Probably. I don't have a clear memory of his clothes anymore, if I were to be honest. But it would be a more convincing illusion if it looked like outfits he's really worn before. The main problem I can think of is his gait. He moves around now like someone who's pregnant. The town still thinks it's a mystery illness, so we may be able to pass it off as that, but illusion or no, one could see that he's not in normal physical condition. Also… he's one slab of fudge short of fat."

Natsu put a finger to his lips and shushed Mavis. "You can't say that. He'll hit you."

"Stop feeding him so many sweets."

"Sweets make him calm down whenever the baby gets him worked up. And it's not that much weight. Once he's back to work, he'll be back to normal fast."

"But he could gain more. My old illusion recreated his old physique, around his abdomen, and it would look weird now if he stepped out with a six-pack and squishy arms and cheeks. If I make him an illusion fitted to that size and he gets bigger, then it could look like the clothes are embedded in his skin."

"Okay, okay. I'll be more careful, and tell him we've gotta not go crazy with fudge anymore so the illusion works right." Gray probably wouldn't get too upset if Natsu framed it in those terms. Natsu didn't need Gray accusing him two-fold of making him fat—between all the sugar he supplied and the fact that Gray was pregnant because of him. "But you can do this for him?"

"Erza and Levy never asked for this much with their pregnancies," Mavis said, but there was already
a glint in her eye that told Natsu she was thinking of how to make the illusion as realistic as possible.

"You say that like Erza's not pregnant anymore. And I saw her yesterday. She's twice as needy as Gray." Of course, Gray had depended heavily on others since he learned he was pregnant while Erza only became particularly difficult as she drew close to labor.

"W-well… I thought she wasn't."

"She is. And she chose to be pregnant too—or at least to stay pregnant, so it's not really fair to Gray to use her like that. Besides, Evergreen's asks for three times as much help with just trying to get pregnant."

"Which is a pity. It's almost as if this guild is cursed to only have children when out of wedlock."

"You and Zeref better tie the knot quick, in that case."

Mavis's cheeks only turned moderately red. She and Natsu both knew that the risk was there.

"So you can help?" Natsu asked.

"I suppose I should. Just… never so much as hint anything to do with Zeref and babies again."

That was a tall order. "What if you decide to get pregnant with him later on?"

"Natsu, please. Not now."

"What about Gray's baby? He said you were taking it. Isn't Zeref a candidate for father? Were you planning not to share the kid with him? Is that why you didn't tell him you agreed to adopt a baby?"

"Were you the one who told him about that?" Mavis asked. "He was furious with me when he found out. I can't remember the last time he yelled like that. Usually he just smiles in that way that lets you know he's holding back when something upsets him. And if you push him too far for that, he just guilt-trips you."

"Well… it's a pretty major thing to hide."

"I don't need a scolding on hiding upcoming children from you of all people," Mavis said.

"Least it sounds like your stab at it didn't end as badly as mine."

"True. Zeref only sulked for a week."

"Why wouldn't you mention it to him anyway?" Natsu asked. "It's not like he would have stopped you."

"I… didn't want to get him excited about it," Mavis admitted, eyes darting away from Natsu. "Since I asked Gray to consider you, and then the two of you… I suppose you're not together, but it seemed like there was a chance. I agreed to take the baby on the stipulation that there wasn't anyone else Gray knew to give her to, essentially, so I didn't think I should tell Zeref that he was expected to step up and be a parent when it wasn't for sure."

"Gray won't let me have that baby. Ever. He's over completely hating me and even likes me now, for some reason, and he still never says a word about me so much as babysitting," Natsu said.

It was… Well, it wasn't completely unfair. Natsu hadn't done what he did to Gray in order to use him as a means to get a child. He'd been trying to save the girl. But that offering to take her off Gray's
hands had been part of his initial solution for Gray then being stuck with a baby he didn't want meant that, at least at some level, Natsu had sought to benefit from what happened. He couldn't complain about it if Gray wanted to punish him by denying him the girl.

"Have you asked him since things improved between you?"

"As if! I like him not hating me. I'm not about to poke that hornet's nest." She might as well have gone and asked him to dunk Gray in that serum again and force a second and third kid out of him.

Mavis met Natsu's eye again, gaze firm despite her light smile. "You should ask. It seems like there's a lot the two of you don't discuss."

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Natsu kept quiet when he brought Mavis Gray's clothes the next day, wanting not to encourage any further conversation on dangerous subjects. Once that was handled, he proceeded to avoid her until word came in that she and Zeref had completed a new set of illusions.

A week passed. Erza gave birth, and Natsu went with most of the guild to visit her and little baby Cyrus in the hospital. Afraid to be seen with a sizable pregnant belly in a maternity ward, Gray sent his regards along with Natsu, and promised to visit her once she was back at home.

A new issue of Sorcerer Weekly was released teasing baby photos, but it seemed no one on the staff had managed to sneak a camera past Erza. Instead, the article talked about how Erza had no doubt taken some. There was also an article about her forcing Jellal to come back and help, which Natsu supposed wasn't entirely false. He had been in the hospital when Erza very explicatively explained to Jellal what she would do if he snuck off on a job and left her alone with the baby. In any case, Jellza gossip (as it was apparently dubbed in the celebrity tabloid world) was still the high interest story. There wasn't so much as a footnote about how Natsu had been on his own around town for the previous two weeks.

Natsu wondered if that might change once he and Gray were seen out and about again. He toyed with different article headlines as he walked back from the guild after picking up the rings Mavis enchanted. Would it be presented as if they had resolved some fight that went unreported previously? Maybe the two of them might be caught eating out and it would be presented as getting close to popping the question.

Most likely, they were bellow notice. Most of Fairy Tail was only gossip worthy when not in legal trouble because Jellal was such a gossip magnet, and if someone came out hoping for a scoop on him and it turned out he wasn't doing anything scoop-worthy, then the antics of guild usually met the needs of reporters on a slow news day. Jellal was in the midst of a huge fake fight and had a four-day-old son. All eyes would be on him.

Pity. Natsu had pretended that it was thanks to Lucy that he read those magazines, but the truth was that he started buying them each week after Natray became the backup relationship story to report on when there was nothing new with Jellza. Even if he didn't think it would work out between him and Gray, it was fun to imagine it might. The magazines were good fodder for that.

The last issue only just came out, so Natsu had plenty of time to fantasize about an article that would likely never come might look like. In the meantime, he needed to focus a bit more on reality. Gray had withdrawn into his apartment again, and now Natsu had the means to force him back out.

Given what a task it was to get Gray back to going out into the world after he first learned he was pregnant, Natsu half worried that even with the new set of rings, Gray might look for other excuses
Gray ignored Natsu entirely as he studied Mavis's handiwork, first looking down at himself and contorting as best he could to get a full view, then running off to the bathroom to check the reflection and verify that his stomach was hidden at all angles. Natsu was left in the doorway, still holding the other four rings and feeling a little rejected after Gray hadn't said a word to him.

"I might have told him what you were up to at the guild when I flew ahead," Happy told Natsu. "He wouldn't stop complaining about how long it took you to get here. I think he was going stir-crazy."

Natsu supposed that made it better, but he still preferred that Gray show him a little more enthusiasm for the help.

Actually, that was a lot better. Gray being eager to get out again was exactly what Natsu wanted. He just also wanted a little thanks, maybe.

Gray stepped out of the bathroom grinning like an idiot, and because he was so cute, Natsu decided not to point out that he had a hand on his invisible stomach. If you knew the illusion was there, it was a silly slip up, but Natsu would need to help Gray keep an eye out for that gesture when they were out around town. It looked a little off, when it appeared that his clothes were on him like normal but his hand was way out there. And Gray always did have trouble being mindful of what he did in relation to his clothes.

Come to think of it, they would need to be careful with what clothing Gray actually wore out of the house. It wouldn't look good if he dressed from head to toe then put on one of the rings, and started shedding clothes that people couldn't see he was wearing as he walked down the street. After so many years of no one being able to cure Gray of that habit, Natsu wasn't even sure where to begin with addressing that.

"Maybe you should just wear boxers with those," Natsu decided aloud. "If you lose them, it won't look as weird as if someone sees you toss off a maternity shirt."

"Since when has anyone ever seen me in the act?" Gray asked, which Natsu had to admit was a fair question. Gray deliberately removing his clothes wasn't something hard to see if you were there at the right time. In fact, he was removing his maternity shirt as he spoke. But when he stripped without thinking, his clothes seemed to vanish the moment you turned your head.

"Do you want to go to the guild now?"

"No. Tomorrow for sure. We have to see Erza first. Did they ever stop fighting over a baby name? Jellal didn't let himself get bullied into calling the kid Simon, did he?"

"Cyrus," Natsu said. Why that made Gray hesitate, he couldn't tell. "Jellal seemed pretty pleased with it. I think anything other than Simon would have been good for him. Are you sure you want to see her? You did pass out the last time."

"The last time I saw the birth. I can handle seeing someone who gave birth a couple days ago. I…"

"You're probably up for it," Natsu supplied.

"Yeah… Probably. How is Cyrus?"

"He's a newborn. He cries a lot, and he's really pink. But he's cute when he isn't crying. The weird one is Erza. Half the time she chases you out of the room when she wants to breastfeed, but the other
half of the time she gets offended if you try to leave, because it's totally natural and nothing to be ashamed of." Natsu paused, recalling how he ended up with a bruise that his pants leg hid. "I told her that peeing is natural too. I don't think she liked that. But, um… Speaking of breastfeeding…"

"No. No. Absolutely not. Not in a million years. I would sooner cut my chest off."

Natsu gave the most reassuring nod he could, having expected that response. "Zeref wanted me to let you know that you probably are going to lact… lacta… Whatever the word is. Make milk. There's some formula that they give women to make them stop, and he said if you want, he can adjust it specifically for your body chemistry."

This time, when Gray froze, Natsu fully understood why.

"You don't have to feed the baby at all. You could have the medicine as soon as she's out, and Zeref says that the milk thing should stop happening in about twenty-four hours."

"The milk thing where milk comes out of my nipples."

"Yeah. That thing. Um… but your chest might be sore for another week or two. Is it sore now?"

"To the touch, yeah. That's because of the milk thing, isn't it?"

"Probably? I mostly looked up the stuff to do with how the baby grows and what to eat and stuff for how to help support someone who was pregnant. Lucy… looked up all the stuff we thought only she would have to deal with."

Natsu expected a negative reaction for Gray for slipping up and saying Lucy's name. Disapproval for not being able to talk about his time with her without stumbling, or pity for not yet being over it. He didn't know what to think of the oddly appraising expression Gray made.

"I suppose I should ask Erza then, which is all the more reason to go see her now. Come on. I miss being out in the sun."

-o-

Hospitals were Natsu's all-time least favorite place to be. They smelled like disease, chemicals, and diseases that were stronger than those chemicals. Since he planned to be at Gray's side during labor unless instructed otherwise, Natsu was glad Gray would have his daughter under Porlyusica's supervision, with Zeref and Wendy on standby in case there was any need for major magical intervention. Even if he was barred from being there, he was glad Gray wasn't going to be in a hospital at all. Hospitals killed people.

Gray looked on edge as well, although Natsu suspected that was less to do with the smells and all the weird alarms going off every few minutes, and more to do with the fact that this was his first time using Mavis's new illusion. Walking into a maternity ward while trying to hide that you were very noticeably pregnant had to be nerve wracking.

He relaxed by the time they made it to Erza's room without anyone asking when he was due. As if Natsu had made it so with his discussion earlier, they came in mid-breast feed, and this time Erza insisted they stay. Natsu and Gray both awkwardly took seats by her bed, unsure where to look without being obvious about the fact that they were trying not to look at her breasts.

Not that they hadn't seen Erza naked plenty. Just… having a baby on top of her somehow made it different from her usual openness around them.
"Cyrus looks… pink," Gray said, which was a sure sign to Natsu as any that he told the truth all those times he swore he didn't know what to do with babies.

Cyrus looked normal for a newborn. A little pink, sure, but that was normal. He also looked adorable. He had a round face and his mouth made the cutest O-shape when you picked him up, and if he did anything with his left hand, his right mimicked it. He had Jellal's olive eyes, but his hair was more purple than it was either his mother or father's color.

Cyrus looked like a perfect little boy, and all Gray could think to call him was pink.

Erza, similarly familiar with Gray's claims that he didn't know how to handle himself where kids were concerns, gave Gray a nod and a smile. "That's normal right after birth. He'll be a precious little peach soon enough."

"Does he cry a lot?"

"He's a baby," Erza said. "But so far, he doesn't seem too fussy. He latches right on, too. Meredy says Uriel never stops screaming, so I'm glad Cyrus looks like he'll be mellow."

"Takes it from Jellal," Natsu said, which earned him a playful swat from Erza.

It was a fair comment, though. No one would look at Erza and think of mellow. Even when she was calm, it was a crazy sort of calm. Jellal didn't have her eccentric streak, and for as easy as he was to fluster, it took a lot to excite him. He didn't feel emotions any less than Erza, but while she might get hyper when happy, he would smile and, if you caught him in an especially good mood, be more willing to play along with the guild's regular brand of crazy. If baby Cyrus took mellow from anyone, it was his dad.

"Which of those is the normal one for babies?" Gray asked. "The mellowness or the constant screaming?"

"It's usually somewhere in between," Natsu said. Gajeel and Levy's twins had both been fussy little squirts, but Bisca hadn't felt Asuka was particularly easy or hard in terms of temperament. No easier or harder than the average baby, at least.

Gray grunted in affirmation to let Natsu know he heard, then reached out and poked Cyrus's cheek.

Cyrus made that little O that he did with his mouth.

"So… does he need anything?"

"Well, he just ate," Erza said. "So far, he goes to sleep once he's done eating."

"But it takes more than feeding them, right? Like… Don't you have to change diapers and… I don't know… bathe them?"

"I can see why you didn't feel suited for this," Erza said. Natsu had to admit, he was gaining a lot of new insight into just how unadept Gray was with babies himself. He'd taken something of an 'everyone who wants to can learn' attitude towards parenting, but Gray had a lot to learn. At least Natsu knew from seeing him with Asuka and Romeo that Gray could handle school-aged children just fine.

Not that it really mattered. Because Mavis wasn't going to get her wish and the baby would go to her instead of Natsu, and Gray would never take an interest in a relationship with someone who wouldn't respect his wish not to be involved in children until he was ready. If he was ever ready. If this was
how Gray was with newborns, Natsu feared Gray would never be ready. It was probably for the best that Mavis would get the baby, because eight weeks was not enough time to prepare Gray for even helping under supervision for a few hours here and there in the week.

If nothing else, watching Gray hesitantly poke the baby again was an eye opener. He tapped the child gingerly, like Cyrus was made of tissue paper. Up until just then, Natsu had never fully realized just how afraid Gray really was of having to handle a baby. It put his reluctance to be a parent in a whole new light.

But then maybe, if Gray did ever agree to that detached parenting setup, he would be more okay with adopting an older child. That was a big part of the problem for Lucy, seeing that most of the children waiting to be adopted were past infancy.

"He's… He's cute?" Gray finally said after poking Cyrus a third time.

Natsu bit back a laugh at how unsure Gray sounded, but Erza did not.

"Was that the wrong thing to say?"

"No. No, I'm glad you think my son is cute. Would you like to hold him?"

"Absolutely not." Gray held his hands up and apart, lest Erza force Cyrus into his arms. "If I drop him, you'll kill me."

"Come on. You've already carried one baby for months now without hurting it. I'm sure you could hold Cyrus for a few seconds."

"No. I value my life too much. And you don't want me screwing up his either."

Natsu leaned forward and held his hands out. "I can hold Cyrus."

"You've held him before."

"I want to hold him again."

Since Gray now had his hands folded behind his back, Erza passed Cyrus carefully into Natsu's arms.

"You… really trust him to hold your child?" Gray asked, which was completely unfair. Sure, maybe Natsu broke a lot of furniture and streets and buildings and ships, and maybe he was quick to punch people if they got on his nerves, but he would never let anything happen to a baby.

"He knows what he's doing."

Gray scowled, cocking his head slightly as he studied the baby in Natsu's arms.

"I can help you hold him, if you want," Natsu offered, even though he didn't really want to hand Cyrus over to Gray. "But you gotta agree fast. He's gonna get mad if we don't let him go back to sleep soon."

"I don't—"

"You get to pick dinner if you say yes."

Gray had his way with sweets, because comfort food was the easiest thing Natsu could offer to help Gray out when the pregnancy put him in a slump. Meals, however, were based around his nutrition
needs. Natsu tried to avoid *hated* items, but requests were often denied in favor of what was healthiest for Gray.

Was it belittling to bribe an adult capable of cooking for himself by offering him control of what he ate? Yes. Insanely so, in fact. But rather than pull that stubborn, embarrassed look Gray usually made when Natsu beat him to the stove and cemented himself as the dinner cook night after night, Gray instead looked thoughtful at the offer. The kind of thoughtful that was less weighing pros and cons of meal agency and more scheming something petty. Whatever dinner he requested, it would be an elaborate and involved one.

"F-fine. You have to hold him too. If he falls, it's *completely* your fault."

"I'm not going to let a baby fall," Natsu said, earnestly offended. "Here. Hold your arms out like I have mine."

"Fine. Like this?"

"That's it." Natsu set Cyrus as gently as he could in Gray's arms, leaving on hand over the baby's chest and another held out beneath Gray's arms for assurance that he wouldn't let Cyrus fall. "There. See? Isn't he cute."

"Take him back."

"You're not gonna drop him. Even if I let go, you've got him steady."

"You don't know that for sure!"

"Shush." Erza leaned forward. "He's about to go to sleep."

"I-in my arms? No. Absolutely not."

Erza gave Gray a stern look that silenced all protest instantly. "Once he's sound asleep, we can move him *gently* back into his crib. Hold still or he'll start crying."

What she really meant by that was not to move Cyrus around too much until he'd gone to sleep, but Gray froze completely. Natsu placed his own hand more firmly on Cyrus to account for the rigidness with which Gray now held him.

Cyrus, blissfully oblivious to the distress his infant fragility caused, yawned and closed his eyes.

"You're not about to pass you, are you?" Erza asked. "If you are, then Natsu should take Cyrus back, even if it'll make him cry."

"N-no. I'm fine. Just… H-he's cute. I just don't want to drop him."

"All you have to do is keep your arms under him," Natsu pointed out. "It's not like he's old enough to squirm outta your grasp."

Gray gave Natsu a nervous smile before dropping his gaze back to Cyrus, where that nervous smile turned to a nervous frown and, after a few minutes of waiting to make sure that the baby was firmly asleep, a not so nervous smile.

"He really is cute," Gray said when Natsu took Cyrus away and set him back in his crib. "When he's sleeping, anyway. Even if he cries *less* than a normal baby, I won't envy you while he's awake."

"Ah." Erza grinned from ear to ear. "And here I thought that would magically make you want a baby
of your own."

"I already have one. And I'll be perfectly fine when someone else has her instead," Gray said.

Natsu chuckled at that, hoping it hadn't come out forced. Erza said it in jest, but Natsu had earnestly hoped that holding a baby without calamity striking might make Gray more interested in the prospect of parenting.

Not that it really mattered. But any little point in favor of the family plan Natsu had proposed was a point that made it feel a little less impossible.

Realistically, Natsu needed to stop fantasizing about Gray and accept once and for all that it wouldn't work. Fried was single. He could date Fried. It was just hard to move on from the idea of him and Gray when they spent more time together than a lot of married couples, everyone thought they were dating, and Gray kept pushing the boundary of how physically affectionate he could get while still denying that he liked Natsu at least as much as Natsu liked him.

It wouldn't work. They wanted two different things, and Natsu needed to accept that and move on.

Chapter End Notes

Reading back over it, this chapter feels like filler. I think I must have started it with then intent of actually making Gray lighten up about kids, then felt like it would be too cliche while I was in the middle of writing him holding the baby. Ah well.

Hospitals really do fuck you up, if anyone was wondering. "Hospitals kill people" isn't some silly line I wrote for Natsu. It's something any hospital staff will say, albeit not usually to a patient's face. If you need to be in one then you need to be in one, but the longer you're there, the higher the odds that someone will do something to you that makes you leave in worse shape than you were in before. Might not even be something that was really preventable. I knew an old guy who went to the hospital as a pneumonia precaution and a combo of lazy doctors and well intending but incompetent nurses led to him needing surgery on his bladder. And those IV lines? Major infection risk. Sometimes you just gotta give people medicine that way, but let me tell you: it is not good when you accidentally shoot bacteria straight into someone's blood.
Hurt

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Natsu had a whole speech planned. He spent over a week hammering it out, making it perfect, recruiting Happy to spot any sentiment, and sentence, any word that could be taken the wrong way. He trapped Gray in a pregnancy, and he already tricked Gray into suspecting romance and broken his heart once before, even if he wasn't trying to. He wanted be thorough in laying out his position. He needed to make it absolutely clear that he liked Gray and didn't want to hurt him, but it really was better for the both of them if they didn't try to turn their fake romance into a real one.

Helping in this was that Gray made fewer and fewer gestures, becoming increasingly caught up in his secret project that Natsu didn't get to look at. He often bailed on work when they went to the guild, locking himself in Mavis's office and telling Natsu to handle his record management for him. There were fewer times for Natsu to screw up and reciprocate Gray's affection, and more distance between the two of them, for as much distance as there could be while Natsu still regulated Gray's meals, gave him massages when his back or feet ached, and walked with him everywhere to stop others from accidentally bumping into his stomach and try to mask how the baby effected his gait.

He wrote it all out, revised it time and again, and when he came back to his house each night, recited it over and over until he fell asleep with the final draft still in his hands. He learned it inside and out, and finally, with Gray less than six weeks away from his daughter coming into the world, Natsu was ready to give his rejection.

Working up the nerve to break Gray once again, hopefully for the last time, Natsu dragged his feet. He made pancake batter in his own kitchen and poured it into a jug, and grabbed a pan with a lid, which he heated with his hands as he took his sweet time walking to Gray's house, checking every so often to make sure he didn't burn the bacon. For good measure, he had Happy fly into a shop as they passed by to purchase root beer and ice cream. Root beer floats were neither a breakfast food nor a usual compliment to pancakes, but they kinda went with bacon if you got a bacon burger.

No one could be too upset to if they had pancakes, bacon, and root beer floats, right? Right?

Natsu opened the door to Gray's apartment, holding a cast-iron pan in one hand and balancing a jug of pancake batter on his, and nearly dropped both when Gray tackled him in the doorway.

"I-is something wrong?"

"It hurt!" Gray said.

"W-what!" Natsu tossed the jug to Happy and reached over Gray to haphazardly drop the pan on the kitchen counter. "Is she coming now? She can't come now. It's too early. Porlyusica said your magic would help keep her in until she was ready."

"No!" Gray said, looking up at Natsu teary eyed. "My waist. Like Zeref said. It hurts, Natsu."

-Jellal's claim that not eating never helped with one's mood still held true, so Natsu left Happy to fry the pancakes while he called Zeref, and Gray made himself a root beer float in the meantime to take his attention of the ache in his hips.

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Jellal's claim that not eating never helped with one's mood still held true, so Natsu left Happy to fry the pancakes while he called Zeref, and Gray made himself a root beer float in the meantime to take his attention of the ache in his hips.

"I-is something wrong?"

"It hurt!" Gray said.

"W-what!" Natsu tossed the jug to Happy and reached over Gray to haphazardly drop the pan on the kitchen counter. "Is she coming now? She can't come now. It's too early. Porlyusica said your magic would help keep her in until she was ready."

"No!" Gray said, looking up at Natsu teary eyed. "My waist. Like Zeref said. It hurts, Natsu."

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It wasn't as bad as Natsu had feared at first. Gray explained the sensation in full for Natsu to relay to Mavis, who was visiting Zeref, who seriously needed his own Communication Lacrima.

It was a dull ache. Nothing debilitating. It went away if he lay down for long enough—for as much as any of his aches went away, but the more he was on his feet, the more he felt it. It probably started a few days prior to when Gray realized it was there, but there were so many physical discomforts from the pregnancy that he didn't even notice new ones until they went beyond mild twinges.

Zeref could only make educated guesses on how exactly to handle a human male pregnancy, since Gray was the only subject thus far. Cushions that could help redistribute his weight when he sat were suggested, and Happy left after putting the last of the batter in the pan to buy those. Other than that, Gray was advised to spend as much time as he could recline. Mavis would go speak to Porlyusica (who also needed a lacrima considering how helpful it would be to reach her immediately in an emergency) and they would both stop by the apartment later in the day to take a closer look at Gray and see what else they could do.

Natsu carried Gray into the living room and set up pillows to let him recline in reasonable comfort against the armrest of his couch. An actual recliner chair might be needed, depending on what Porlyusica had to say about Gray's condition.

There was no way Natsu could give Gray any other bad news while they waited to hear how serious a health concern they were dealing with. Natsu brought breakfast into the living room and balanced a plate on Gray's stomach.

"I'm sorry," Natsu said. "I really never would have let things get this far if I knew this might happen."

"Well, I'm stuck with it now, so 'sorry' doesn't really fix things," Gray said.

"Porlyusica can fix anything. And Zeref's really smart. They'll make sure this turns out alright." Natsu hoped he sounded more confident than he felt. He'd never be able to live with himself if Gray ended up crippled because of him. It was only supposed to be nine awkward months, and then Gray could go back to his own life while the baby got to live.

"Yeah. Porlyusica fixed you up just fine, E.N.D..

"Zeref fixed that." Mostly. The demon nature was still there, buried deep, and at times it flared out with Natsu's temper. But the trigger no longer came so rough that he writhed and pain and felt his heart stop briefly whenever the change came on, and he could suppress it much better than before.

"Well, I don't think Zeref's about to get himself cursed again on my behalf."

"You're not going to die. We're going to be too on top of this for anything to go that badly. And Between Zeref and Porlyusica, there's no injury they can't fix. Even if it takes Zeref a few months to make the right doohickey to fix you. Which he shouldn't need to, because we'll be on top of this."

"What if they have to take her out early to stop any damage?"

"Then they…" Natsu paused, realizing the real question there. If Gray's pregnancy ended before his magic was ready to release the baby, then he would end up magicless. "Then we talk a lot. See what damage might come. Figure out how long it would take to recover, and which route we'd rather go. And if it takes a while to get better, I'll be with you through it, okay? Anything you need me for, I'll do."

Not the best promise to make when you still needed to tell someone that you didn't want to date
them, but by this point Natsu had to admit to himself that he wouldn't have a good opportunity to
turn Gray down until he was assured by someone who knew what they were doing that he was
going to be alright, and even then, it would take a little while longer before Gray was collected
enough to take another blow.

Remembering his outrage when he fell for that story about Jellal turning on Erza just before Cyrus's
birth, Natsu felt his stomach do a flip. Enough time for Gray to pull himself together if Porlyusica
didn't have too terrible of news would land them in the last few weeks leading up to the birth.

"Stop looking at me like that," Gray said

"Sorry. I just… I don't like to see you so scared."

"Well, you knew all this shit scared me early enough to tell me what was going on and let me fix it
before it got out of hand."

Natsu mumbled an acknowledgement that he'd heard Gray, unwilling to admit that he should have
said something when Gray still wished he could have aborted if he'd known, and knowing better
than to argue while Gray was laid out on the couch with orders not to stand unless he had to.

Seeing he would only get so much out of Natsu from that angel, Gray hissed in frustration and turned
his head away. "Forget it. Snapping at you won't make Porlyusica come any faster anyway."

"Probably not."

"I hate this. I feel like shit."

"You'll feel worse if you don't eat."

"Natsu, this is junk food."

"It's grain and protein. And some sugar, which is a good mood lifter in the moment," Natsu argued.
"It's something else to think about."

"You want me to forget that I'm—"

"Focusing on scary things just makes you feel worse," Natsu said. "We can't do anything more than
this until Porlyusica comes, so there's no point in making yourself feel worse. If you want to hate me,
focus on how your feet are sore instead, and yell at me for that."

Perhaps because the proposed activity involved still tearing into Natsu, Gray was willing to try this
method of distraction. There were still times where he looked anxiously to the window, or rubbed at
his hip, but the complaints that came out were all the normal ones. How hideous he looked with a
swollen stomach. How badly his feet hurt when he put all that extra weight on him, and how Happy
said they looked bloated, which was all he had to go by when he couldn't even see his own feet.
How much his back ached. The way his chest was so tender and, god dammit, if he ended up
leaking milk he would soak a rag with the stuff and use it to water board Natsu for making his body
do that.

The familiarity of the complaints, none of which were quite so serious as the possible damage the
latest development might deal, gave Gray something to ease back with, and he found the appetite to
finish his breakfast while they waited.

Happy returned with a cushion for Gray, which Gray declined to use. By that point, he'd reached as
comfortable a state as he could on the couch, and didn't want to risk sitting upright at the table again
only to find it wasn't as tolerable.

"Lying down is probably better anyway," Natsu argued. "But we'll want that cushion for when Gray has to sit up. I had to go light on the syrup so it wouldn't drip all over him. Planning meals around how messy they are to eat lying down all the time would be too hard."

"You think I will have to lie down from now on?"

"Course not. It'd be inhumane to tell you that you have to."

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"Bed rest."

Those were the first words out of Porlyusica's mouth after entering the apartment. She's swept in with such a singleminded focus that she ignored Happy greeting her, and listening without responding to Gray's unprompted account of the pain he felt while she prodded at the area of interest. Only once she'd examined to her satisfaction did she finally open her mouth.

"What if I need to use the bathroom?" Gray asked, eyes darting to Natsu.

He'd failed at so many attempts to prove that despite that low moment a few months back, he was capable of taking care of himself. If Natsu had to bring him a bedpan, he would never live down the shame. Natsu might never mention it again, and it would still eat away at Gray.

"You can get up for that, stupid child. But as much as possible, I want you lying down. The less weight pressing down on your hips, the better. We need you to last to term."

"R-right." Gray put both hands on his stomach, looking at it as though the child inside might burst out through his skin at any moment. "We can do that? It won't do any lasting damage?"

"Removing her too soon would cripple your magic. But we'll keep an eye out for the moment your magic unbinds from her. We may be able to perform surgery a few days before she would be ready to come out on her own. A week or two, if we're lucky."

A week or two? If they'd told him that there was a chance he could have a c-section weeks before he would otherwise go into labor, he'd never have objected to surgery.

"How will we know when that happens?"

"It would be easiest if the resident mad scientist could inspect for you, but he doesn't like to come into town now, does he? The coward wouldn't even be the one tell me you needed to be looked at. Probably thinks I'd lock him up so he won't get himself hurt again."

Natsu laughed at that. "You would."

"By this point, I've half a mind to. But since he would never give me the chance and he's not likely to come out here every day—and I don't imagine you want to live with him until it's time for the baby to be born—I suppose I'll have to be the one to inspect you."

"How often?"

"Daily! You think I would say the situation is serious enough that you have to stay in bed, only to leave you there. Suppose I only came by once a week and something happened the day after my last checkup? It wouldn't even need to be something bad. We could reach the point where it's safe to
begin surgery, and you would go through six more days of this for no reason. And you!" She jabbed a finger at Natsu. "You're already taking care of him, aren't you? You had better be here for all emergencies."

Natsu had to work still. No one paid him to look after Gray. And Gray wasn't even the only person he looked after. "Who will take care of Zeref?"

"Mavis," Natsu said. "Zeref's not so bad with his arm anymore. It isn't nearly as hard to take care of it. And he's done with all the important oversight for his tower, so if she wants to drag him to the guild infirmary, he'll be content there as long as she packs whatever research material he wants for him."

True, but it glossed over the detail of Natsu not being able to afford to stay in town long enough to make sure Gray was taken care of around the clock.

They couldn't ask Mavis for more charity. She already put up with too much. Gray now regretted all those time he took advantage of her sympathy for his plight and didn't do the work she asked of him.

But Natsu never raised the issue of finances. He nodded along to Porlyusica's instructions for everything he ought to take care of on Gray's behalf, asking little questions here and there. "Can Gray still sit at the table for meals?" and "Would it be alright to lie propped up like this? He might have trouble archiving things for Mavis lying down?" Never anything about how on earth he would manage spending, potentially, six weeks at Gray's with no means to obtain funds.

"You're going to go broke looking after me," was the first thing out of Gray's mouth when Porlyusica left. To his disgust, Natsu looked amused.

"And here I thought you'd be more worried about yourself. I'll be fine. I still have a week or two of food money, and I can borrow when that runs out. Mavis is taking the baby anyway, so once this is over, I'll have plenty of time to work off anything I owe."

Right. Mavis and the baby. Gray had pretty much nailed down a proposal for exactly how he wanted a relationship between him and Natsu to go, but he couldn't say it now. After all his snapping at Natsu (and he was still mad, and would go back to snapping once Natsu convinced him there was no real financial concern), Gray could hardly ask Natsu to stop faking being his boyfriend and get with him for real. Especially when Natsu knew there was a longtime crush. It would look like he was trying to take advantage of a bad situation to guilt Natsu into agreeing to go out with him. Besides, before they could work out how things might work between them with Natsu wanting to be a parent, they needed to work out how things might work until Porlyusica was ready to operate on him.

"That's a lot."

"It's food money for a few weeks. Happy can fly books back and forth for you so you can still do work on recording everything with Archive. Or we can set you up in the guildhall, if you want."

Gray bit his lip as he thought about it. That would make it easy enough for someone to fill in for Natsu if he needed to take a job, and Mavis would probably offer him meals at that point, which would nullify Natsu's need to pay for both of them. But he would feel much more exposed than in his apartment. Everyone knowing he was pregnant was bad enough. Them knowing it was a bad pregnancy would be worse. He didn't want everyone to peek in on him every few minutes to make sure he was still okay.

"No?" Natsu said, reading something on Gray's face. "Okay. I guess I'd like my own bed if I was on bed rest too."
"N-no. I could stay in the infirmary."

"But you'd rather be here, right?"

"It's fine. It'd be easier on you."

"Gray, I am giving you the *choice* to do what you want."

"Well, you're about thirty weeks late on that," Gray replied, but the remark only drove Natsu's point home. He hadn't been given a say in being pregnant, and that was Natsu's fault. He was under no obligation to make helping with his pregnancy complication as easy for Natsu as possible. If Natsu was willing to take a loan to cover his expenses while looking after Gray, then Gray would let him.

"You don't really want to go to the guild. I can tell you don't."

"You caught me. I don't."

"Okay. We can go back to how it was before. With visitors."

"No."

Gray saw panic in Natsu's eyes, and silently cursed. This wasn't like when he found out he was pregnant. He had energy. He could put one of those rings on and get up and go out and spend time with people if Porlyusica hadn't told him he needed to stay down. This wasn't him withdrawing.

"I don't want them to know about this, okay? Just… give me this. They already found out I was pregnant. I don't want to have to tell them that *this* happened. I don't want them mentioning this whenever the pregnancy comes up. I already didn't want them to be able to remind me in some casual conversation years from now that I was pregnant. Give me that, okay?"

Natsu hesitated, studying Gray's face, then relaxed. "Okay. I'll say the rings malfunctioned. We can make something else up if they come to see you on your own and see you lying down."

"Tell them I'm tired. It's not too far from the truth."

"Being tired and being injured are pretty far removed."

"I'm always tired, Natsu. Carrying your stupid baby everywhere is exhausting," Gray said. When Natsu opened his mouth to protest, he tacked on, "Even if it's Zeref's, it's yours. You're the one to blame for it being here."

Natsu shrugged. He would never consider his hand in that blame. All of Gray's discomfort and despair and danger, he was willing to accept fault for. The baby living? Natsu didn't accept blame for that. He took credit. Gray had come to realize that months ago, and reminded himself to be happy for the fact that Natsu at least cared that what he'd done had caused a lot of hurt.

"I'll say you're tired and not up for it if someone offers to come visit, then. But it's gonna look weird, after all those times I said that people had to see you even if you were holed up and avoiding everyone."

"Find a way to excuse that, then. I just want there to be as few people as possible who can recount this."

Natsu didn't look happy about it, but gave a compliant nod.

"Except Jellal. And Erza, I guess. They should know they can stop feeding all those tabloids phony
gossip now. It's not like I can get out anymore, so no one's about to see anything from me that could give away my condition."

"I think everyone's gonna guess your condition tanked if you stop going outside and the guild's medic visits you daily."

Gray had no good retort for that. In his mind, the world outside his apartment was already an abstract that he wouldn't be touched by for the remainder of his pregnancy unless it was invited inside. He had forgotten completely that people would see Porlyusica come to his apartment day after day.

But the alternative were Zeref visiting daily—which would be more miserable for everyone involved—or not getting treatment and potentially being pregnant longer than he had to be. That something was medically wrong with him was a well-known fact by that point. He would suffer through speculation about the visits.

"Whatever. You're moving in until this is all over?"

"I guess so. Would you be alright if I left for a few hours to bring my things over? We can't leave the couch set up for you if I crash on it, so I'll grab a futon. Happy can fetch you anything you need in the meantime."

"Yeah. Okay."

Natsu staying over. Gray would have preferred that happen purely because Natsu wanted to stay, with none of the pregnancy and health scare and bed rest crap making Natsu feel compelled to come. But he'd take whatever silver lining he could.

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Gray lacked Natsu's super hearing, but his apartment wasn't large, and the door between the living room and kitchen was open. When Natsu returned with his belongings and Happy rushed to greet him at the door, Gray could hear them whispering. Neither was particularly good at being quiet.

"Is it really a good idea to borrow money? I can still work. If no one wants to take a job with me, I can look after Gray while you're gone for the day."

"It's fine. We can pay it back soon enough once he's better."

"What if he takes a long time recovering?"

"Then it'll take a little longer to pay back."

"This is a dumb idea."

"Yeah. But it's my fault Gray's like this. I gotta do the best I can for him. Besides… I just… I gotta, okay? Gray's owed something good after all this and… And I'm not sure what else I can give him."

He wasn't wrong, but Gray still didn't like it. Natsu taking on whatever debt he did in and of itself was no great tragedy, but doing it on Gray's behalf made Gray feel all the more like a burden. They knew that, too. If they weren't worried about him overhearing financial concerns, Happy wouldn't have rushed to have that talk in another room.

So Gray put on a big smile and pretended nothing was wrong when Natsu and Happy stepped into the room, Natsu with a box under one arm and a futon in the other.
"Are you okay?" Natsu asked.

"Fine. Why?"

"That smile is creepy. You aren't in pain, are you? You gotta let me know. If this hip thing gets too bad, we need to ask Porlyusica if there's anything that can take the pain away without hurting the baby."

"I'm more concerned with the baby hurting me."

"Well, hurting the baby hurts your magic, so you should care about her too," Natsu said. "Do you need anything right now? Do ice packs work on you? I can get a hot water bottle instead. Do you have a bottle, or does Happy need to run out for one."

"I'm fine. Nothing worse than the usual aches," Gray said?

The baby was uncomfortable no matter what orientation he lay in, but lying down, even at a gradual angle, had relocated most of the stress away from the bone that Zeref and Porlyusica were worried the pregnancy might seriously damage.

"I'll get your Archive Lacrima set up. Where should I drop my things? You want me sleeping in your room, or in here? Happy says I snore, but if I'm in another room I might not here if you need help during the night."

"Um…"

Gray knew from sharing a bed on missions that he could sleep through Natsu snoring, but he couldn't ask Natsu to share a room with him when he was planning to ask Natsu to share a life with him as soon as it was socially appropriate.

"I can sleep with Gray," Happy offered. "I'm quiet. I'll get you if he needs anything I can't handle in the middle of the night."

"Alright." Natsu dropped his belongings unceremoniously on the living room floor, and Gray hoped the loud thud didn't upset his downstairs neighbor. "Do we have any books you can work on right now?"

Gray shook his head. Up until he realized what the sensation in his hips was, he'd planned on actually going to the guild and working in the record room. Everything he might have wanted to bring home the day before, he left so he could have it where he wanted when he showed up for work.

With a shrug, Natsu reached down for a stack of sketchbooks to the side of the couch. "Well, you can do that art copy thing, then. Do any of these sketchbooks have blank pages?"

"Don't touch those!"

Natsu froze, then looked up at Gray in confusion.

"J-just… I'll read whatever research notes Zeref logged. See if there's anything I should warn you that he's up to. Leave those alone."

The pad on the top of that stack had been converted into a brainstorming book where Gray kept all his notes as he and Mavis worked out an exact setup to make a relationship between himself and Natsu work, and Natsu was going to get that proposal from Gray's mouth and not some hastily
scrawled notes.

"Do you need a new sketchpad?"

"I can make ice sculptures. Or grab something on my way back from the bathroom next time I'm up," Gray said.

Come to think of it, he would need to keep track of when he last went, lest he start making the excuse of needing to go constantly because he was fed up with having to lie down constantly. Saying he could stay in bed for over a month was all good and fine, but now that Gray contemplated actually doing it, it sounded horrifying. Had there really been days where Natsu had to drag him out of bed? He couldn't imagine not wanting to get up.

"I'll get started on lunch then," Natsu said. "Whatever you want is fine. We don't have to worry about a strict baby diet today."

"Anything cold sounds good," Gray said. It was entirely too hot a July, and he didn't know if that was because it was hotter in general, or because being pregnant meant increased body insulation. "Can I get another float? Or a popsicle, maybe."

"Can't you make your own ice?"

"Can't you eat your own fire?"

"Okay, okay. One float coming up."

Six weeks tops, Gray told himself as Natsu scurried off to the kitchen. Six weeks in bed to keep the baby from doing any more damage, and then he would be as free from the kid as he could be, free of his apartment, and free to go back to his regular life. It couldn't be too hard.

Chapter End Notes

I don't have author's notes for this chapter. Sometimes I write 'em right after finishing a chapter and sometimes I write 'em right after proofreading, but for this chapter and probably the next one, I appear to have done neither.

Well, that's fine. Had some drama so I guess I can kinda... vent about that a little maybe? If my trying to be balanced on presenting abortion stances didn't clue anyone in, I'm big on the idea of empathizing with other viewpoints and being able to get along with people despite ideological differences. Had to leave a group of friends that I was spending a lot of time with the last... three months maybe? Probably could groveled and been re-accepted, but you don't really need friends like that, you know? It would have set this shitty precedent where I'm expected to surrender my right to speak if someone of a different race or orientation disagrees with me, and where the burden of making amends is entirely on me even when I can't see where I've done anything wrong, and even though I tried to smooth things out without it coming to that, everyone was really firm about how I either had to basically grovel or else they would all leave. I neither need nor want friends with whom I can't be on equal terms, so... yeah. Sorry to unload that. It was my first time really getting into an online community and I've been
floundering for friends for quite a while since all my irl ones split to schools in different states. Probably gonna be upset about it for a little while but it all went down last night and this morning, so it's super fresh in my mind.

They were kind of shitty friends anyway. I had to bite my tongue a lot when they said things that offended me, and I wasn't really able to be myself around them. I'll be better off without them. Just need a little time to mend.
By day three of bed rest, Natsu was practically begging Gray to stay put.

"You're going to hurt yourself," he kept saying when Gray tried to get up from the couch.

To which Gray would always reply, "Easy enough for you to say. You can still move around. Why don't you try staying put for once?"

Natsu almost missed the time when Gray was so depressed he didn't so much as roll over in bed unless shoved.

If he could, he would trade places with Gray. Hell, if there had been a way to take the pregnancy on for him from day one, Natsu would have offered. He didn't think he'd fare any better on bed rest. In fact, he was confident he'd be stir crazy to the point of insanity in a matter of hours. But maybe he would have avoided the same damage Gray ended up with, since Zeref thought it happened less than half the time. And either way, he felt bad seeing Gray stuck in bed over a choice Natsu made for him.

But he'd feel even worse if Gray suffered any permanent damage, so he had to be strict with Gray about following the doctor's orders. Gray behaved himself when Porlyusica came in for checkups, but the moment she was gone, he became restless.

"I'll ask the old lady to move in with us until you're all better if you keep this up," Natsu threatened the next time he saw Gray trying to get up.

"I need to pee."

"You peed ten minutes ago."

"I'm kind of pregnant, Natsu. Your kid pushed all the rest of my organs out of the way. There's not a whole lot of room right now for my bladder."

"You could hold it more than ten minutes four days ago."

Gray threw a pen at Natsu. When Natsu picked it up, he folded his arms over his chest and said, "Give that back."

"Seriously?"

"I'm stuck on the couch, Natsu. There isn't a whole lot I can do to entertain myself."

"The offer to transfer you to the guild still stands. Everyone else could help keep you entertained."

"Everyone else didn't make me pregnant. You're here nonstop now anyway. Maybe you could do more to keep me from dying of boredom."

He'd already forgotten about the bathroom, Natsu noted.

"I brought you more sketchpads, and all the guild work for Mavis that you're not doing. I can see if anyone has board games I can borrow, but other than that I'm not sure how you expect me to
entertain you in bed."

Natsu was aware of that unfortunate wording as soon as it left his lips, but he hoped Gray hadn't picked up on it.

"How much activity do you think is safe lying down?" Gray asked. "Erza said it's not supposed to be an issue if your pregnant, but that's for a normal pregnancy. I mean, I didn't ask her, but she and Jellal must have wrapped up just before I visited them. Do you think it would be okay as long as I don't put any weight on my hips?"

Natsu averted eye contact. "I think it would be hard to find a comfortable position. But… Um… Sorry. If I hadn't gotten you involved in this…"

"Nah. I mean, fuck you for the pregnancy, but it's mostly Juvia behind the majority of the time that I haven't been able to get laid. You?"

"Not since Lucy and I broke up. My reclusive brother gets more action than me now," Natsu admitted.

It was a perfectly reasonable response, and one that should have pleased Gray, since it meant Natsu had been celibate the entire time they'd been in close contact. Instead, Gray’s face fell.

"What? Was I not supposed to mention that? Sorry. I forgot you walked in on him."

"No… just… I guess it makes sense. Lucy said you two nearly had kids a couple times, and you were dating for a while, so you would have slept with her. I was just hoping you would have a little less experience."

It took Natsu a second to work out why someone who was attracted to him might want someone who didn't know what they were doing in bed. He looked back at Gray, studying him closely before risking asking such an uncomfortable question.

"Do you… not have that much?"

"O-of course I do," Gray said. "I looked good before you and this kid came along. You think no one would want me?"

No. But Natsu could see no one wanting to risk Juvia's wrath, and Gray hadn't been as warm to others for more than a few months prior to Juvia joining, so there was a very good chance that no one had approached him before Juvia was there to chase away competition.

Asking if Gray was a pregnant virgin was bolder than Natsu dared be, so instead he said, "You still look good."

"Liar. I'm fat."

"You're pregnant."

"I'm fat and pregnant, which is twice as bad."

"You're not fat, Gray."

"Am too. You told me yourself that I had to pay more attention to how much weight I put on."

"Okay. Fine. Maybe you gained a few pounds more than you're supposed to. It'll come off soon enough once you can be up and active again, and you weren't fat in the first place, so it's not a huge
"Easy for you to say. *You're* not the fat and pregnant one."

Mood swings were funnier when Jellal was recounting all the trouble Erza's gave him. Natsu wanted Gray to go back to fidgeting and using the bathroom out of boredom every three minutes.

"You are *not* fat, okay? And you still look good to anyone who think that pregnancy doesn't look like some sort of body horror mutation. You look *good*, okay? You look attractive still. If you weren't on bed rest with damaged hips, I'd have no issue fucking you." It took Natsu a second to hastily add, "If we were together! I-I'm not… That is… Since I'm just here for your health… I'm not coming on to you, I swear."

Gray stared at Natsu, eyes wide, cheeks scarlet, jaw slack, and said nothing.

"Um… Just… forget I said anything. A-anything… board games! I bet Bisca and Alzack have a bunch still. Asuka was into them for a while. If you're bored, I can ask to borrow one. I already told everyone that your rings aren't working and you're tired all the time anyway, so you're staying at home until the baby's born. They'll totally get it if I say you need some stuff to pass the time."

"Um…"

"O-or maybe I can run and buy one now?"

Anything to escape the situation.

"I… uh…" Gray met Natsu's gaze, then they both quickly looked away. "Before Juvia… I wasn't really looking that seriously for someone and… Um… We were going to… in her room… but it kinda killed the mood to see my face on all the décor and then… we weren't together… and no one else gave me a second date with her hanging around so… I… might not have… much experience."

"Mm." Natsu stared as intently as he could at the wall to the right of Gray. "Sorry about that. With the baby too. Um… Juvia seems to be on board with the whole still being friends thing, so… you should have better luck now."

Gray took a deep breath in and out, and in his peripheral vision, Natsu could see Gray look right at him. "Juvia said I need to be bolder."

"That's good advice." In moderation, Natsu thought. Juvia took her own advice far too far, but Gray was way off at the opposite extreme.

"So would you give me some hands on pointers?"

Natsu's brain shortwired, and he found himself staring blankly at the wall.


Zeref said…

Zeref…

Zeref *told* Gray that Natsu wasn't entirely opposed to the idea of them getting together? That had been shared in confidence! Granted, most of that confidence was Natsu being confident that Zeref only had Mavis to share information with, and that Mavis would know better than to blab about who
liked who, but still!

"I'm never talking to Zeref again," Natsu said to himself.

"Okay. Cool. Are we still talking? Please tell me we're still talking. You don't have to sleep with me, but I really don't want to have to go to anyone else for help while I'm stuck in bed."

"I… um…" Natsu looked to the door, which wasn't too far away. He could make a run for it again, but he didn't really have that luxury this time. Gray needed someone with him to help during bed rest, and Happy left on a job with Gajeel and Pantherlily the day before.

"Natsu?"

Natsu looked back to Gray, who was biting his lip with worry, skin paler than normal. His eyes had already glassed over, and Natsu making a run for it for a third time post confession had no doubt crossed his mind as well.

"I… don't think that's a good idea for you to sleep with anyone right now," Natsu said, trying to keep his voice neutral. It kept jumping up in pitch no matter how hard he focused on speaking slowly and evenly. "With the injury and all… You can ask Porlyusica tomorrow if it's safe."

Gray was still pale, and his eyes still glassy, but his jaw set in a firm line and his gaze hardened. "Are you trying to avoid saying no outright? I asked you outright. I think I deserve an outright rejection."

"I… Look… I…" Natsu looked away. "I think—"

"Eyes on me."

Forcing himself to look back, Natsu said, "I like you… but you could do better."

"The only reason I'm not kicking your ass as hard as Erza did when Jellal told her that is because I'm stuck in bed."

"Literally everyone else on the planet hasn't drugged you," Natsu said. "And besides… even if I did it because I wanted the baby to live… I do want a kid, Gray. And you don't. So… I don't think it would work. I like you. A lot. But I don't think it would work."

"I know," Gray said. "Zeref told me."

"He—"

"So if we made that work anyway, would you have me?"

Yes. But Gray had already laughed off Natsu's idea for how it might work.

"Natsu?"

"That's the main problem," Natsu admitted. "That and that you could do better."

Natsu would feel as lousy accepting Gray as he would rejecting him. Why, of all the people in the world, did Gray have to keep falling for him? This had to be how Jellal felt, and Jellal at least had the excuse that someone made him hurt Erza. It didn't matter if Natsu let himself have Gray or if he rejected Gray's feelings again. Either way, Gray deserved better after what Natsu put him through.

"I…" Gray looked to his stack of sketchpads. The ones that Natsu wasn't allowed to touch that he knew weren't full. "I've been working on something with Mavis. With the baby. I'm not bribing you
or anything. You can do this whether you want to be with me or not. She's not really… If you two hadn't been fighting, I might have asked Lucy to take the girl instead, because I think Mavis feels like it's a little early for her to be a parent too. A-anyway, Mavis is going to need help. So I said it would be okay if, maybe, you took the baby for a few days in the week," Gray said. "Mavis thought she'd like to have her over the weekends when she doesn't get as much paperwork to sort through, so she can focus more on parent things, and there were a couple days where she thought that she could work from the lab and make sure Zeref looks after her properly. It ended up being Tuesday and Wednesday they decided were busiest. I guess because the Council usually spends all of Monday figuring out what work to dump on the guild masters? So on those days, if you wanted, they'd be happy if she could stay with you."

Natsu was pretty sure he could feel his jaw hanging down, but he wasn't able to process much, mind stuck on the idea that Gray was not only acknowledging aloud that he would have some level of involvement in his daughters life when, previously, he wasn't supposed to babysit if she would even stay in town with them. Joint parenting. Gray was suggesting joint parenting with Mavis.

"I mean… we still don't know if you or Zeref is the dad anyway, and from the way Mavis was planning to manage things, it sounds like the baby will be spending two nights at the lab if you go with this, or four if you don't. So it's kind of like splitting her between her possible dads. Unless she comes out with pink hair. But pink's kind of recessive, so I don't think we're going to get lucky and see any really obvious signs of who the dad actually is."

Joint parenting. Gray actually letting him have the kid, even in some small capacity. But in a way where he could be a significant part of her life as she grew up, and not just for a few years before she was old enough to be trusted on her own while her parents were busy, at which point Natsu would become one more face at the guild where her mom worked.

"Well? Don't just stand there. It was your idea first. You wouldn't have her for most of the week, but —"

"But I'm lucky to have her at all."

Gray glanced away and gave a grunt in affirmation. "That's not exactly what I planned on saying."

"You said it plenty before. I… Yeah. I'd like that. Thank you."

"You said it plenty before. I… Yeah. I'd like that. Thank you."

"What I was going to say," Gray said, and he had to stop there to draw in a deep breath and, Natsu suspected, remind himself of that bold moved advice, "is that it gave you more time to spend with me. Doing normal couple things, I mean. Not this."

"But I'm lucky to have her at all."

Gray glanced away and gave a grunt in affirmation. "That's not exactly what I planned on saying."

"You said it plenty before. I… Yeah. I'd like that. Thank you."

"What I was going to say," Gray said, and he had to stop there to draw in a deep breath and, Natsu suspected, remind himself of that bold moved advice, "is that it gave you more time to spend with me. Doing normal couple things, I mean. Not this." He gestured to the setup they had put together so he could reach everything he might need without having to get up from the couch. "Like what we were doing before, only not just for show, and when I'm not pregnant."

Going out with Gray. Going out with Gray for real. Natsu shoved the baby to the back of his mind to be excited about later. He'd already run away from Gray's feelings twice, and put the baby before him once in a very major way. Gray deserved to have his undivided attention for this.

"Yeah," Natsu said. "I'd like to try and make us work."

"Even if you don't think we can pull it… Wait… Really?" Gray paused in the middle of pushing himself up to protest. "You'll go out with me?"

"Why not? I like you," Natsu said, reaching over to press Gray back down against the couch. "If there's a way to make us being together possible, I want to try it."
"You won't go back on—"

Natsu pressed his lips to Gray, cutting off any doubts as best he could. They had kissed a few dozen times before, but be it for show or a confession, it was always at Gray's discretion. It felt good to be the one to initiate a real kiss for once. Natsu hadn't realized how badly he'd wanted to make a call with Gray—one that he knew Gray wanted—until he did it.

Gray tugged with his teeth at Natsu's lips as he pulled away, not ready to part yet, but it wouldn't be good for either of them to go too long without air.

"Okay." Gray's words came out breathless. "Go ask Porlyusica how much it's safe to do in bed while I'm on bed rest. Now."

"Excuse me?" Natsu smirked. "I require at least three dates first."

"You're just saying that to buy time until the baby's out. We've been on at least three dates."

"Real dates. Where I'm not wondering how much of it is you liking me but wanting me to think it's an act, and how much is you wanting people to think you like me."

"Goddammit, Natsu. Let me have this."

"Three dates. I'll pay for them," Natsu insisted. "Besides, you weren't the one around Gajeel and Levy all the time when she was pregnant. I might not have a lot of hands on experience here, but I can still take a lesson from what others went through. It's easier when you're not pregnant. We should make your first time a really good one."

He rolled his R, voice dropping to a deep purr and making Gray blush. This was further than he dared go while they were faking it, when all they needed to do was look romantic for Juvia and there was the risk of getting too comfortable with Gray when he might have still only put up with Natsu in order to have someone to help him deal with whatever came up during the pregnancy. He had plenty of tricks he honed with Lucy that he could dust off and put back to use again. Some might need a little more tweaking for their new recipient, but given the way Gray went scarlet, it was safe to say that he knew at least one thing that worked well with his new boyfriend.

Boyfriend. Natsu liked the ring of that word. He still thought Gray was mad for wanting him, but Gray wanted him, and he wanted Gray to be happy. Gray deserved to be happy, so Natsu would have to try his hardest to be someone who deserved Gray.

Chapter End Notes

Haha. So it turns out I'm the kinda petty who whines about irl drama in her author's notes. Did I mention that my friend Willow stole my jacket and she's dead to me now?

Ah… no. I kid. Really, I'm feeling better now. Last week's update came a couple hours after the breakup and it was fuckin' raw, but I'm pretty much over it. I knew most of those guys for like two months and the more distance I have from what went down, the more obvious it becomes that it really wasn't a good fit for me. They can keep doing them and I'll just keep looking for better placement for myself.
The novelty of having a boyfriend who waited on you hand and foot while you were injured wore off fast.

That wasn't to say Gray was already bored with Natsu, or that he didn't mentally do a fist pump whenever Natsu kissed him on the cheek for no reason. It was just that having a boyfriend was only exciting enough to outweigh the humdrum of bed rest for a few days before it turned into something that merely made his condition more bearable. Sex might have helped, but Natsu was adamant about waiting on that, and Gray was kind of curious about what his more experienced boyfriend might be able to do that they couldn't try while he was pregnant. There was also the detail of Porlyusica smacking him on the head and telling him that any extra force down there was absolutely off limits until she gave the go ahead—and hormones or no, his thoughts needed to go more to his health than to lust. But it wasn't like that eliminated oral, and Gray was getting to be so fed up with all his health precautions that he was itching to break some rule she set for him. Sex seemed like the best one.

But none of that. Not when Natsu kept insisting they get to know each other in other ways first. If Gray wanted to be fair, he could admit that Natsu spent most of their fake dates trying to play a part while stepping on eggshells making sure not to get too into the role, so the degree to which Natsu felt like they had gotten to be comfortable in the idea of one another wasn't quite on par with Gray. Gray didn't really want to be fair while pregnant, on bed rest, with months of mounting sexual frustration on top of years of Juvia cock blocking, but he didn't have much of a choice. He couldn't force himself on Natsu if he wanted to, so he settled for the kisses and the soft way Natsu caressed him, and buried his face in Natsu's chest whenever he was carried between his bed and couch.

He liked to breath in Natsu's scent during those moments, jealous of Natsu's sharp nose that didn't need such close proximity in order to pick up its lover.

"What do I smell like?" Gray asked once.

"Like you," Natsu replied, which couldn't have been less helpful.

"That's it? You're not going to say peppermint or forget-me-nots or anything nice?"

"Most people don't smell like those things," Natsu told him.

"Well, I thought you smelled like smoked wood, but you know what? You just smell like your shitty old self."

Natsu grinned at him with that grin that Gray had come to learn meant he had been deemed to be in the midst of a mood swing that required humoring. "Well, I've gotten so used to everyone's smells after all these years. Everyone's scent is theirs now. But I guess I could try to think of comparisons."

It was a little bolder a move than Gray would usually dare take from Juvia's advice, but he still heard himself ask, "What does Lucy smell like?"

"Kind of like Lisanna."

"Lisanna isn't a scent, Natsu," Gray said, putting as much irritation into his voice as he could to hide his relief that Natsu didn't have a more romantic answer to automatically give for Lucy.
"Oh yeah. Um… Lisanna smells sort of… milky? But it's not the same for Lucy. You're more like… cold? You smell cold."

"Cold isn't a scent either."

"I'm trying here."

"I don't believe you. You don't usually suck this hard at things you honestly try at."

It was sort of meant as a compliment, but Natsu threw his hands up in surrender. "Ask Wendy the next time we see her. That's the best I've got." And with that, he retreated to the kitchen.

If they hadn't fought so much growing up, Gray might have been worried about what such a trivial subject turning into an argument might mean for their relationship, but he could tell a silly spat from a real fight. Besides, one of the few advantages to being stuck with a child was that he could blame his behavior on mood swings if Natsu was still sore about it later. Natsu had probably already written it off as such (and Gray wasn't entirely sure he was wrong). As for bed rest because of the child, the only upside was that Natsu let him get away with anything that Porlyusica hadn't explicitly forbidden.

Downsides included, but were not limited to: mind shriveling boredom, a persistent ache in his derriere from spending such an excessive amount of time on it, a bad case of cabin fever, a deep longing to see another face despite his resolve not to make everyone aware of the sudden health scare, and the nagging fear that he may end up with permanent reminder of it all even if he suffered through all those other negatives only to end up with irreparable damage anyway.

Even if Natsu promised he would never let Gray suffer such a serious injury, Gray wasn't a fool. There was nothing either of them could do at that point beyond play it safe and hope for the best. Natsu may have rightfully felt responsible for any damage that resulted from the pregnancy, and Gray appreciated that his boyfriend was determined not to cripple him for life, but it wasn't enough. Determination only powered Natsu through fights. If it worked in all facets of his life, he'd have come up with a better scent for Gray than cold.

But even if Gray ended up injured, he knew Natsu had believed there was no chance of the pregnancy ending with serious damage when he first locked Gray into it. Gray might resent until the end of time that Natsu had all but forced him to have a child—placed an unborn fetus above the feelings of a friend, but he didn't have the will to keep seeing it as a personal attack. Natsu's intentions were misplaced, but he hadn't set out to hurt Gray. Of course, if Natsu felt bad about everything that happened, Gray wasn't about to stop him. It wasn't like he made Natsu feel unduly guilty, and if that guilt earned him some additional special treatment, he wasn't about to turn that down.

-o-

There was no major active time in Gray's day, and not enough space for his stomach for Gray to eat full meals in one sitting. He grazed at all hours and lost all sense of schedule. At times of day where his Lacrima Vision had news to report, he turned it on and listened to whatever was going on in the world beyond his apartment. If he was awake at night when there was only silence from the screen, then he would sketch, or make sculptures, or, if he was especially bored, skim whatever theories Zeref had uploaded to the Archive. The material was all too dense for Gray, but it gave him something to do to pretend for Natsu that he wasn't bored senseless. Sometimes he even did the archiving work he promised he'd handle for Mavis.

"How many more days of this do I have?" Gray asked during one of Porlyusica's daily visits.
"We're exactly one month from your official due date," Natsu told him.

Gray moaned.

"Stop that," Porlyusica ordered. She wasn't looking at either of them, so they assumed it was both of them that she spoke to. "Your magic is already loosening its hold on the child, Gray. If we're lucky, it should be a few more weeks."

Gray looked to Natsu, expecting him to ask if it would be safe for the baby to remove it early. Natsu's attention, he found, was set entirely on the area a few inches below where the baby was.

Most children could survive being born a little early. Gray remembered that from when Meredy went into labor. It wasn't ideal, but it was something that could be managed, and having a child up to two weeks before your due date wasn't considered early at all. Natsu might not have wanted the girl to be a preemie, but the risk to Gray's health if they delayed the birth was a bigger concern.

"Good," Gray said, then had to think of a reason for why he'd said it to spare himself from voicing his thoughts on Natsu. "I'm really tired of resting."

"You'll rest afterward too, you fool," Porlyusica said. "There's always recovery after surgery, and I'll need to see just how serious the damage to your hip bone is."

"Wendy can help with the worst of the recovery," Natsu said. "It shouldn't be as long… right?"

"It depends," Porlyusica said. "No matter how talented Wendy grows to be, there are always limits to that power. Not everyone is that mad brother of yours. Most mages can only work within the limitations of their chosen magic, and if you can only heal so much damage at a certain rate, then that's that. If your brother wanted to be useful and devise more efficient healing spells that people could more easily use, then we wouldn't need to have this conversation."

Gray looked to Natsu, expecting some defense of Zeref. The debate over what he should spend his time researching was a common enough one, and Natsu was often defensive of it. Zeref was a mad genius, but he had to work within the realm of theoretical possibility. Devising new means of healing a person wasn't out of the question, but if something that was both more efficient and more accessible were easy to do, then Zeref would whip out new spells that should have been thought of centuries ago instead of building a giant tower just to make it so existing methods of healing had an easier time working on any one patient.

The guild knew Natsu's curt 'if you think it's so easy to make any spell then why don't you try it?' by heart. Gray almost quoted it for Porlyusica just to spare his boyfriend a smack on the head. But what came out of Natsu's mouth instead was, "Everything now is so we don't have to worry about that once she's born, right? I could… maybe… there might be something Zeref could do…"

"Zeref's already done plenty," Gray said. It was thanks to Zeref that they knew to be on the lookout for the exact problem he was dealing with, which was huge.

It was also thanks to Zeref that Gray was pregnant at all, which was reason enough not to encourage him to start any new projects. The last thing Gray wanted was to end up laying eggs on top of having a baby, and he no longer put such a mishap past Natsu's brother.

"I agree. Plenty more than he should have," Porlyusica said, mind clearly going the same direction as Gray's had. "There doesn't seem any new developments that we should worry about. I'll continue to come by daily in case your magic is ready to let the baby go early. I think we might get lucky with her."
Natsu threw his arms around Gray's shoulders. "It's going to be alright, then?"

"Most likely," Porlyusica said. "But we still need to be on the lookout. He's not in the clear yet."

"But he's close," Natsu said, hugging Gray tighter. "See, Gray? Just a little more playing it safe, and then everything's gonna be okay."

Chapter End Notes

When the characters predict everything is fine and it's not the last chapter, you know everything is gonna be smooth sailing.

Anyway, I apologize for this chapter. It gave me far too much trouble, and reading back over it, it just feels like it's lacking something.
The weeks blurred. Day after day trapped in the same few spots. Gray knew it was for his own good. It kept the pregnancy from doing any more damage than it had to. Made it so he could have a faster recovery after. Reduced the chances that he would break something too badly for the combined power of Wendy and Porlyusica to fix. Still, there were times when Natsu's constant reassurance was the only thing that kept Gray from deciding it wasn't worth it.

He'd suffered through thirty-eight weeks of pregnancy. No way was he going to do something to screw himself up in the final stretch. If we were going to throw it all away, he might as well have given up his magic all those months ago.

Gray had done as best as he could all those months, and he was doing his best to adhere to bed rest so that the whole thing wouldn't be for naught. But despite how much he tried to be on guard like Natsu and Porlyusica said, he still failed to react when he felt the first pangs of discomfort in his stomach. His whole body was one big bundle of discomfort at that point as it was. As for how he tossed and turned in bed yet couldn't sleep, he put that down to the general awkwardness of having a full term child occupying your entire midsection. Porlyusica thought that they were only a day or two away from being able to operate, and rather than count sheep, Gray counted down the seconds until her next visit.

The latest ache on his long list of reasons to hate being pregnant wasn't even a constant one. It came and went with huge stretched of time in between. He might not have even identified it as something new, except Happy crawled up onto bed in the middle of the night and put an ear to Gray's stomach.

"Is the baby restless?"

"No. Why?"

"You keep rubbing your stomach."

"It's just cramps," Gray said before his brain caught up to his mouth. "Shit."

"Do you need to use the bathroom?" Happy asked. "I'll go wake Natsu up."

Gray caught Happy by the tail before he could leave the room. "Wait. Happy. Shit. I think the baby's coming."

Happy looked back at Gray, taking in his wide eyed panic, and gave a solemn nod before flying off.

Gray's hand went not to his stomach, but to his waist. He didn't think he would feel it externally should anything crack, but what if he could? Porlyusica had wanted them to react right away when he recognized he was in labor. He could feel that ache in his hips, but it was always there. He couldn't tell if it was worse or not. The more he fretted over it, the more every ache seemed to amplify.

He was breathing fast and shallow when Natsu came into the room, and nearly broke into tears when Natsu kissed him on the forehead.

"It'll be okay," Natsu told him. "Happy's going to get Wendy and Zeref. Let's get you to Porlyusica."
"No," Gray gasped. "No, no, no, no. I can't move. What if the wrong angle—"

"Porlyusica has to do the surgery," Natsu reminded Gray. His voice was so soft it send a chill of fear down Gray's spine. That was the voice they talked with Makarov with when they were worried it might be the last time they saw him. "We can't deliver the baby here. I'll be gentle with you. You'll be okay. Okay?"

Not okay. None of what was happening in any way resembled okay. Gray whimpered when picked up and buried his face in Natsu's chest. How was he supposed to think being in labor was okay? There was a baby in him that was trying to force its way out!

-o-

Gray hadn't passed out from hyperventilating on his way to Porlyusica's but he wished he had. He didn't need to spend as much time as Natsu researching pregnancies to know what it meant when he suddenly soaked his pants. And Natsu tried his best, but it was uncomfortable to be carried while a baby was trying to get out of him. He could feel the pressure mounting inside him as Natsu ran for Porlyusica's hut. Gray would have liked to be unconscious through all of it.

They beat Happy there, which was good and bad. It meant Natsu was fast, but also that there was time still before both of Porlyusica's helpers arrived.

"What if they don't come in time?" Gray asked as Natsu helped him onto a table. Porlyusica didn't want him on the bed, and Gray was grateful to her for not saying aloud that her concern was how much blood he might lose when they cut him open.

"They'll be here."

"But what if they're not here soon enough? What if—" He stopped, feeling another contraction. It wasn't unbearable agony, but he still whimpered. The baby was coming and only one third of the people who were supposed to get it out safely were there.

"Breath," Natsu said.

Gray nodded and inhaled for longer than he needed to.

"Couldn't we have done this when you came over earlier?" Gray asked

"Your magic wasn't ready to separate earlier," Porlyusica said. "I admit, it would have been nice for this not to happen in the middle of the night, but Wendy and the fool should wake up fast when they hear what they're needed for. In the meantime, take this." She handed Gray a potion that he recognized by scent. A sleeping draught that everyone had to take whenever Porlyusica intended to perform a more invasive treatment on them. "We can't being the surgery until Zeref is here. I'm not about to excuse the possibility that there's important medical information the fool forgot to brief me on, but we also can't start until you're asleep. The sooner you take that, the sooner it will kick in."

Gray didn't need to be told twice. He downed the potion and lay on his side on the table, trying to keep Natsu's advice about breathing in mind until sleep would take him. In and out. In and out. He focused on making sure oxygen kept getting where it needed to be while Natsu rubbed his hand and said all the standard reassuring things that Gray was sure he'd rehearsed.

His breathing slowed no because Natsu's words were calming, but because the constant whirl of his brain slowed as he felt the potion take effect. Words became harder to focus on. Sounds and sights muddled as he let himself drift off and hope that everyone else could take care of things one last time.
He saw the door to Porlyusica's open just as his eyes shut. Good. He was in good hands.

-o-

As soon as Gray was no longer in need of keeping calm, Natsu let himself panic.

No one told Happy to get Zeref first. Why did no one tell Happy they needed Zeref first? Wendy was there to help heal after the surgery, and a little to make sure he didn't bleed out during. They needed Zeref to start the procedure. Natsu knew that even Happy had the town's aversion to Zeref's lab, but surely for as many times as Natsu went up there and returned alive, his buddy knew it wasn't that dangerous to visit Zeref. Besides, Gray needed Zeref.

"He should have woken Mest up," Natsu said, pacing in a tight circle in Porlyusica's little cabin. "Mest could have gone straight to everyone else's homes and brought them right here."

"We'll be fine," Wendy said, although Natsu would have felt better if Wendy hadn't said it while hovering over Gray and actively slowing his labor to try and keep 'issues' from compounding. Zeref had no problem telling him exactly what could go wrong in the most jargon-laden detail, so why couldn't Wendy give him details? What issues was she slowing the development of?

"Stop pacing," Porlyusica ordered. "You're distracting me."

"Distracting you from what? You're not doing anything. What if Gray dies?"

"Gray won't die," Wendy promised. "I'm looking after him."

"But—" Natsu cut himself off before he could distract the person looking after Gray. Things could go wrong even when Wendy was there, but there was nothing more that Natsu could do except to place his faith in her. It was out of his hands.

It had been in his hands, though. Zeref placed control in his hands however unwittingly almost a year ago. And it was no one's fault but Natsu's that Gray was now unconscious on a table, waiting for someone to come and help with a surgery that should have already been well underway.

Natsu sank into a chair and buried his face in his hands. All he wanted was to save that baby girl. He didn't want her life in exchange for Gray's.

"Tell me he'll be okay again," Natsu said. "Please."

"He'll live," Wendy said.

That should have been some comfort, but she didn't tell him what he wanted to hear. Natsu was afraid of what she might say if he asked her to repeat what he wanted word for word.

He hadn't been able to show any signs of panic while Gray needed someone to keep him calm, and he would have to put on a brave face when Gray woke up again. If no one could promise him that Gray would be okay, then Natsu wasn't sure when next he'd have the chance; He took the opportunity to cry while he could.

No one said anything to him, and that was fine. Porlyusica knew what he did. She knew he didn't deserve her sympathy when Gray was in peril because of him. Wendy didn't know, and Natsu was glad she didn't stop to show concern for him either. All her attention needed to be on Gray. Hearing anyone show concern for him just then would be hard enough, but hearing it from someone who might let Gray's health slip while distracted by him would be one more thing Natsu would never be able to forgive himself for.
It was hard to say how long he sobbed into his hands. Each second felt like a year. All Natsu could say was that he thought his tears dried up, but he started weeping a second time, though with relief, when the space beside him distorted and Zeref manifested in the room.

Wendy raised an eyebrow at that. The council had forbidden Zeref from teleporting following the Red Beastoid Incident two years ago, but no one was about to call him on trying to make haste. No one said anything about his hair looking more disheveled than Natsu's, nor about the boxers that were all he'd worn to bed and the lack of anything else he thought to throw on before rushing to help. Although Porlyusica did comment when he failed to stifle a yawn.

"You had better be awake for this. How much medicine did you take before you went to bed?"

Zeref yawned again. "What answer are you more likely to hit me for?"

"Zeref," Natsu said, hope that things could go right already clashing with fear.

Zeref looked down at Natsu, concern laced in his brow at the weakness in his little brother's voice, then back to Porlyusica. "None. My arm is killing me. I've only been awake a few minutes, but I took something for that. It should kick in any time now. We can start. I'll be fully awake before you're done with the incision."

As far as answers could go, it was the best Natsu could hope for when Zeref was plainly still waking up. Porlyusica gave Zeref a once over and, satisfied with what she found, began the setup for the surgery.

Chapter End Notes

I'm falling behind on my proofreading. Almost posted this without checking it over just to get it up before midnight.
As awareness returned to Gray, it occurred to him that the room was quiet. He had expected someone to shove a crying baby into his arms and demand that he name it. For a moment he worried that he was still in labor. The horrible pain in his stomach was another contraction and they hadn't been able to get the baby out. (And how could they? A baby was way too big to pull out of any part of him.) He was going to be pregnant forever.

But the pain was a constant sensation, not like the coming and going contractions, and there was no great weight. Gray reached down and felt his stomach. It was bigger than he wanted it to be. Too big to just be any weight he put on from all of Natsu's sweets, but not nearly big enough for the girl to still be in there. The firmness it held before he went to sleep was gone. In its place was row of stitches that were sore to the touch. Odd. The plan was that Wendy would heal him before he was even awake.

Finally looking around, Gray saw that he had yet to be moved from Porlyusica's cabin. It was light out, but there was no Porlyusica, nor a Wendy, nor even Zeref, who he'd been told would take part in the baby's removal. The only other person in the room was Natsu, asleep on a wooden chair at Gray's bedside.

It was entirely possible that the surgery only recently ended and everyone else was in the back doing whatever it was that you did with a newly delivered baby. Wiping it or something. Since Gray ached something awful and Natsu was in arm's reach, he shook Natsu until his boyfriend stirred awake.

"Mmf… Gray?"

"Hey. You see Porlyusica pull out pain medicine for Zeref every few weeks, right? Think you could find me a few pills?"

Natsu picked up a bottle from the bedside table and took two pills from it, then place a hand under Gray's head and lifted it up. "Already on it. Try not to move too much."

"As if." He wasn't doing anything until he had a better sense of what shape he was in. Waking up in pain was never a good sign, and he wasn't about to do anything to make his situation worse.

Natsu also had a glass ready, which he held for Gray to help him drink.

"Do you want the good new or the bad news first?" Natsu asked.

That there was bad news at all made Gray want to go back to sleep and stay that way. He needed time to mentally prep himself, so he said, "Good."

"You're not pregnant anymore. Porlyusica got her out just fine without any harm to your magic, and your stomach should be back to normal soon—minus the scar. We'll have to make up a story about a really cool battle that you got that from," Natsu said. "Mavis has the baby for now. Er… we're calling her the baby. No one was sure if you wanted to be the one to name her or not. Zeref is sorta calling her something else anyway, but if you want to pick out a name, then we can make him abide by it."

"I don't care," Gray said. She was his daughter, but of everyone involved in raising her, he planned
"You don't even want to hear it?"

Gray hesitated. "I should make sure he didn't name her something dreadful, shouldn't I? What did he call her? Mildred? Ethel?"

"Marina. He liked her eyes."

"Okay." If that was bait for Gray to ask what Marina looked like, he wasn't going to take it. "And the…" He took a deep breath. "And the bad news?"

Natsu bit his lip and looked to the door. "Maybe we should wake Porlyusica up for this?"

"She'll hit you," Gray said.

"You'll think I deserve it," Natsu said, which was already a bad sign. "Gray, I… I didn't…" He looked away. "I'm sorry. I fucked up."

Gray reached out and took Natsu's hand. "There was bad damage, wasn't there?"

"Wendy ran out of magic. She thinks… she might be able to fix it a little more. But there was already a lot of stress on the bone before you went into labor, and it took a while for Happy to reach Zeref and then for everyone to get the baby out." Natsu reached down, holding a hand over Gray's waist. "There are two fractures here and here. The bone was split here, but Wendy patched it up enough. She thinks she might be able to make it… functional. But she said it will always hurt. There's a chance you might be in a wheelchair most of the time too. The cushion we already bought might… help… y-you… I-I… I n-never meant for a-any of th-this… And I p-promised… p-promised that you'd b-be… okay…"

Since his hipbone was injured, Gray felt he probably shouldn't try to sit up, otherwise, he might make some effort to wipe the tears pooling in Natsu's eyes. Instead, Gray shut his own.

"It's alright," Gray said.

It wasn't.

"I should have realized I was in labor."

But he shouldn't have been in it at all.

"This isn't your fault."

It was.

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Natsu dreaded the day they took Gray back to his apartment. Porlyusica and Wendy moved Gray so delicately while they discussed how to go about treating his injuries. It was out of their scope to heal him beyond what they already had. One built up a resistance to Wendy's magic that took time to wear off, and Porlyusica was limited to what her potions could do. The damage to the bone was beyond an apothecary's limits, and by the time Wendy could try and heal the bone more, it would mostly have mended wrong on its own.

"If Chelia still had her magic, she could fix this," Wendy said. "I didn't even mention it to her
because I knew it would make her sad, but I wish she were here to help."

Gray made a noise of affirmation, but said nothing. He hadn't even look at them. He hadn't looked at anyone since telling Natsu not to take the blame for it. Natsu knew better than to think it wasn't his fault. He knew better than to think Gray didn't know better. But he couldn't mope over his own guilt, nor could he find the right words to console Gray while so paralyzed with guilt. If he opened his mouth to speak, he knew he would cry again.

At first, Gray's face had been one of grim determination, but over the hours, as Wendy and Porlyusica woke up from the long procedure, it had melted into one of despair. His eyes were still shut. His face was so pale. Was that what he looked like when he learned he was pregnant? No wonder Jellal had hated Natsu for so long after the truth came out.

There was so much more that needed to be sorted out. Natsu couldn't possibly leave Gray after the injury, nor could Gray be expected to handle things for himself while recovering, especially if he had to learn to live with a wheelchair. Neither of them had a source of income nor were at leisure to work. Sooner or later, the baby would be too much for Mavis and for as much as he'd already taken to his Marina with no curse to make it dangerous to love her, no one wanted Zeref alone with her. Natsu was perfectly willing to handle a baby on his own, but a baby on top of helping Gray was more than he had bargained for. There would be more sorting through things. Debts that Natsu was no longer sure he could repay. He might even have to give up custody of Marina up entirely, depending on how poorly Gray recovered.

Natsu slung his arms over the back of the chair he had yet to move from and buried his face in them. Why couldn't Zeref have come sooner? Why couldn't Porlyusica have taken Gray to her hut a day earlier and started surgery the moment labor started? Why did things have to fall apart?

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So everyone would stop worrying, Gray opened his eyes to have a few bites of dinner. Aside from that, the only time he bothered to take anything or respond in any way but to grunt was when the pain medicine wore off.

At least Natsu had been right about one thing. Maybe the baby ruined his life beyond just giving him nine weird months, but unlike with Meredy, there was an abundance of things Gray could use to aid in numbing himself.

No one had asked him if he wanted to see the baby, and he was fine with that. He might want to see her in a month or two. Maybe a year. Whenever he knew how bad the damage was and had settled into living with it. Part of Gray wasn't even sure he wanted to see Natsu, although he knew that the one thing that could make the whole situation worse was Natsu leaving him.

He let Wendy be the one to help him eat anyway.

Evening came, and Porlyusica stepped out to go inform Mavis of Gray's status while Wendy went into the backroom to rest. Natsu was still there to help Gray with any basic things he couldn't do while stuck in bed. Gray didn't have the energy to speak to Natsu, nor did the silence in the cabin all day suggest that Natsu had the energy to speak at all. That was fine.

The pain pill made Gray tired. He could see why Zeref would hate them, but it was a welcoming sensation. He had just recently taken two when Jellal visited.

"Is he okay?" were the first words Gray heard when the door was thrown open. It was a struggle to lift his head and look when his eyelids were so heavy, but he managed. Jellal was already standing
over him, concern openly on display on his face. "We heard from Mavis. Erza wanted to come too, but… Why didn't you tell us this could happen?"

"Wasn't supposed to," Gray managed.

"They can't do anything for it?"

Gray shut his eyes again. "Too much for Porlyusica. Wendy already hit her limit on it. Too bad to heal right on its own."

Jellal leaned over to gingerly hug Gray. For the first time since he'd heard the news, Gray felt tears well up.

He hadn't wanted this.

"Natsu?" Jellal asked. "Do you think…"

Gray opened his eyes once more to see that Jellal had seen Natsu's own despair and given up on his question, walking right past the slayer to study some of the tools that Porlyusica had yet to put away. It must have been a hectic surgery, getting the baby out quickly and taking care of her while trying to salvage as much of Gray as they could. No one involved had woken up before noon. Who knew where Zeref even was?

"I haven't been that good of a friend, have I?" Jellal asked. "I led Natsu right to you when you were still upset. I didn't support any decision you made. Natsu was right to say I only acted high and mighty about what he did to you because I was never the one in the position of having the chance to try and talk you down from an abortion. I haven't done anything for you since we found out about all of this."

Gray wasn't sure what he was supposed to say like that, and suspected he wouldn't know even if the drugs weren't slowing his brain. He stared and said nothing.

"I think I might know how to fix this. But you've spent enough time as a guinea pig. I wouldn't dream of asking you to go right back to being one."

Jellal always was the fastest in the guild. Even if he'd been at his sharpest, Gray wouldn't have been able to react in time to stop him from grabbing a knife and making one neat slice in his arm, all the way to the bone.

Chapter End Notes

Betcha didn't see that coming.

I'm not going to give the context by which I came to consider this (it weirdly primarily has to do with shipping Haru and Lucia from Rave Master), but I've wanted an mpreg baby of Gray's sired by Zeref named Marina for about a year and a half prior to starting this fic. Made it about 20 chapters into this one and realized: "Fuck. Wait. I can actually have my Marina!"

So officially, Zeref actually is the biological father, because Zeref has to be Marina's
daddy. Otherwise she wouldn't be Marina. But in-story it will forever be a mystery. The only idea I ever heard for how the baby should look involved having Natsu's pink hair. I feel like I let all my readers down.

Oh! Sidenote. For reasons unrelated to the plot, I might be adding more chapters onto this story than originally planned. I usually do one epilogue chapter for mpregs that show the new parents being parents, but this time I'm considering maybe two or three, just to get different stages of little Marina's growth. For the first time ever with this fic I'm actually in a position where I don't already have the next chapter already finished, so it'll come down to whether or not my muse is there once I start on the epilogue, but we'll see.
Jellal had stayed just long enough for Natsu to frantically grab Wendy so she could determine that he'd severed nerve and tendon, the former being beyond her ability to heal and the latter taking time even with her magic. Then, with just enough magic cast over him so he wouldn't bleed out, he left. Natsu was no more vocal having seen that madness, and Wendy was similarly stunned to silence. Only Gray felt the need to talk restored. To demand to know what happened. To rage at all of them for not having done something. To scream. Jellal wasn't the most mentally fortified himself, and now Gray had gone and dragged Jellal down with him.

Porlyusica returned to find blood all over her floor and started snapping at everyone as she rushed to re-sew Gray's incision, only to find it still intact. The story of what transpired in her absence sent her into a rage. In the calm that followed when she finally burned all her anger off, with the help of more pain medicine, Gray drifted into an uneasy sleep.

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Jellal was back again the next morning, this time with Erza in tow. Gray didn't know who was looking after Cyrus. He didn't ask.

Jellal's arm was bandaged, but his fingers moved alright as he waved when they stepped in. He looked like a man who hadn't slept all night, which made him about half as frazzled looking as Erza, but the Gray had slept most of the last twenty-four hours and he was sure he looked worse.

Gray couldn't move from bed, so he was grateful to Natsu for springing from his chair to grab and inspect Jellal's arm before asking, "What did you do? Turn back time? It was too much for Wendy to heal. Is this a prosthetic? How long does it take to make a prosthetic like this? It looks like the real thing."

"It is the real thing," Erza said. "How is Gray?"

"He's… not talking much." That was Gray's cue to pipe in, but he felt Natsu was on top of things. "We're still not sure how much he'll heal, and he's taking it kinda hard. He… I'm sorry. How is Jellal's arm not still half sawed off?"

"It wasn't half sawed off in the first place," Jellal said.

Erza gave him a nudge, and he deliberately avoided everyone's gaze in response. She gave a rough shove. When he didn't respond even after being pushing into Porlyusica's work table, she told Natsu and Gray, "Jellal went to see Zeref."

"You don't have to say his name out loud," Jellal muttered.

"Honey, you let him test his toy on you. You don't get to pretend you can't even bear to talk about him anymore," Erza said.

"Tested which toy?" Natsu asked. Gray hadn't kept tabs on what all Zeref did. He had his own problems to worry about. But there must have been something dangerous he was up to that Gray hadn't heard of for Natsu to look so anxious.
Jellal opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out. He looked to Erza for help, and was obliged with only a moderately exaggerated sigh.

"The tower. Jellal was able to gather up several other participants who were willing to be the first test subjects to see if the S-System works as intended." Erza smiled down at Gray, who was too hung up on the idea that Jellal had volunteered to test some crazy design of Zeref’s to process any potentially related concepts. "That would help you, right? If the damage could be divided between people, it should be within Porlyusica’s abilities to heal it, or at least to ensure that it heals neatly, and Wendy can treat everyone else."

Gray looked to Jellal in amazement. The man who could forget to breathe whenever Zeref was around, so wracked with fear that he would become corrupted and wish to serve the Black Mage again, had volunteered to be a test subject for the scaled down version of the very tower he had been brainwashed to construct a decade ago. Sure, there had been times during the pregnancy where Jellal wasn’t the best friend possible, but he’d always meant the best for Gray. To show that level of dedication went above and beyond anything so trivial as refraining from openly judging Gray for his abortion or being reluctant to approve of a relationship that he thought would get Gray hurt.

"Thanks," Gray said. What else could he say? That was more than he’d ever done for Jellal.

Yet Jellal nodded and said, "I owed you one."

If Zeref’s tower worked, Gray would owe him and Jellal both a million.

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Getting to Zeref’s lab was always a pain. He lived outside of town and up a hill, and the length of the walk gave you plenty of time to reflect on whatever life choices led you to visit a place like Zeref’s lab. With a busted hip, it was even more painful. Everyone spent some time fussing over the best way to transport Gray before someone thought to fashion a stretcher for him that Natsu and Jellal could carry, but it was hardly ideal. There was only a flimsy sheet supporting Gray, so he sank into the fabric and could feel his hip being pressed against the wrong way. Jellal was taller than Natsu, so the two kept naturally easing into positions where Gray wasn’t held level, despite their best efforts to hold him steady. For all the difference it made. There was no way to be perfectly steady while walking up a steep dirt hill.

Gray, like most sane men, had never set foot inside Zeref’s S-System tower. To the best of his knowledge, only Alvarez citizens saw no problem with it, and even Natsu only went in when his brother’s safety somehow depended on it. He didn’t have Jellal or Erza’s degree of trauma related to towers that Zeref designed, but there was still something eerie about the structure. It didn’t look like it had been made to intentionally be creepy, but the lacrima used to make it was black and opaque, with sharp angles and unfinished areas that made it look like the ruins of an evil demon’s castle in a grim fairytale.

Despite that, Gray found himself glad to be inside. Parts of the outer structure and ornamental details of the interior were still being finished, but the floors inside were smooth. Someone had thought to install a pulley system as well, and Gray could be laid down on it and gently lifted up to the floor where the altar resided.

"Mavis must have come up with this idea," Gray said as Natsu and Jellal carefully slid him onto the platform to be lifted upstairs. "This kind of thought has her name written all over it."
"You people could give me a little credit." Zeref's voice could be heard before he could be seen.
Gray looked around and saw him descending the stairs leading up to the altar. "The tower's purpose
is to aide in treatment of patients. Obviously I would have put some thought into the limitations of
someone in need of using it when I redsigned the structure. The council wouldn't permit me to set
up the first one somewhere easy to access, but otherwise this is all designed to make things as easy as
possible for the patient."

"The council told you to build this no less than twenty miles from any town," Natsu said.
Zeref shrugged. "It's out of the way enough. If they felt this wasn't excessive enough, I'm sure they
would have told me."

Sometimes, Gray wasn't sure if Zeref genuinely didn't realize how few people had the nerve to stand
up to him, or if he just feigned that little bit of airheadedness so it wouldn't look like he was throwing
his weight around. He wasn't the most socially savvy man around, but you couldn't build the world's
largest empire without a sense of power play.
Most of the time, however, Zeref just seemed too caught up in whatever genius plan was on his mind
to even attempt social. "Jellal, I told you not to come back."

Jellal had seemed pale all morning. Whether that was because of blood loss or the general trauma of
having to interact with Zeref, Gray didn't know. He guess the latter, because upon hearing that, Jellal
turned pure white.

"Do you have a problem with him?" Erza demanded.

"I'll have to recalibrate the system to ensure that his existing injuries aren't also transferred if he wants
to participate this time. That's why I asked him to find someone in better condition to substitute for
him. You two don't expect me to use both of you, do you? Natsu told me you had a baby recently.
I'm not sure how fast Wendy would be able to heal you, so it seems like one of you ought to sit this
out."

Erza and Jellal exchanged glances, and Erza raised her hand to volunteer before Jellal caught it and
asked Gray, "Do you mind if we need a few more minutes of setup?"

"Try an extra hour," Zeref corrected.

"If you're putting up with part of this for me," Gray gestured to his hip, "then I'm not going to
complain about a little extra wait to make things work out better for you."

Jellal nodded, then turned back to Erza. "You wouldn't want me holding Cyrus while my arm is still
healing, so it doesn't make sense for you to injure yourself as well."

Erza gave him a not-so-light shove, grinning like a wife who wanted to appear amicable but was
already forming a tirade in the back of her mind that it wasn't socially appropriate to give around their
friends. "Oh please, Jellal. You just want to play the martyr."

Zeref shrugged and turned back up the stairs. "Come with me then. I'll turn the lift on to bring Gray
up and we can get started. Natsu, Lucy… Wait. You're Erza. Erza, if you think of anyone else who
might be willing to help, then you should have time to go get them. Someone without their own
health issues, preferably. I've been up all night trying to set this up for Gray and I'm sure there will be
more configuring still once the tower scans him. No need to add any more work to this than we
already have."
Gray's hope, when Zeref said they were adding an hour to calibration time, was that he could still be home for lunch. Maybe in a wheelchair with injuries that required he still take it easy a little longer, but still back at his own apartment.

Natsu left and got lunch for everyone while Zeref worked about on 'calibrating things', which took entirely too long even though the other two volunteers that Erza had found (Elfman and, of all people, Macbeth) had no medical issues that added to the time.

"What exactly is the hold up?" Gray asked when Natsu returned with hoagies for everyone. Store bought. There had been some debate over whether or not Natsu should take part in the S-System or keep up his own health to help Gray, but Natsu insisted on taking on some of the pain and Happy thought he could handle anything so long as Mavis held onto baby Marina for a little longer, so Natsu was already transitioning into not cooking.

Zeref was silent for a long time, pausing from typing into something resembling an archive lacrima to visibly contemplate how to respond before he finally decided to tell Gray, "The S-System is picking up more health issues than I anticipated. I'm trying to be precise with making sure the tower only picks up the bone injuries."

Gray tensed. "What else is there?"

Another pause passed before Zeref said, "Well, it's my own fault for forgetting to account for the surgical incision. If Natsu wanted to share that with you then it would be fine, but I don't think anyone else here needs to be a part of that."

"We don't," said Macbeth.

"That aside, you… um…" Zeref looked to Natsu. "What's the socially appropriate thing to say here?"

"I don't know. Want to whisper it to me first?"

"No," Gray insisted. "I can handle hearing it."

Zeref grimaced, but went on. "Well, the S-System is set to identify any deviations from what the lacrima has been fed to recognize as a sign of health and… How should I say this? You're not that fat, but—"

"I've heard enough," Gray said. What a mercy it was that Macbeth, unlike Erik, didn't need Jellal around to tell him to act polite. Jellal himself had stepped out for 'fresh air' two hours earlier and Gray hadn't seen him since, although Natsu promised he was still in the general vicinity of the tower.

Natsu gave Gray an apologetic smile then and said, "It's really not that bad."

"Shut up. It's your fault."

It was a little bit his own fault, Gray knew. Meredy and Erza had both managed not to gain any more than the healthy amount of baby weight during their pregnancies, and there was absolutely no way that Jellal hadn't been as willing to supply Erza with an endless stream of cakes and other sweets the way Natsu had always kept Gray stocked with fudge. He'd been too willing to indulge himself, consequences be damned.

Gray pinched his arm, wincing at the pudge. He was far from Droy's level, but he was no longer someone that people would happily overlook walking around shirtless. If Zeref's contraption made it so Gray could heal full and fast, then fixing his form would absolutely be a top priority.
Natsu kept up that apologetic smile, and Gray was happy he didn't say anything to the effect of 'I'll love you no matter how you look,' because that would just be admitting that he looked bad.

The time after Zeref admitted that the process was taking so long because Gray was too fat passed in awkward silence, so Gray was grateful that it was only two hours before Zeref advised Natsu go sniff Jellal out and drag him back. Gray was, in truth, fine with Jellal not taking part. Even if Jellal's guilt complex dictated that he offer himself up as sacrifice, that he'd tested the tower already was above and beyond any repayment that he thought he owed Gray. On the other hand, the more people participating, the less injured everyone would be at the end, meaning the faster Natsu would recover if Wendy couldn't heal him right up. Since Gray still had some recovering to do either way, he preferred having Happy and Natsu being there for him to sharing Happy with Natsu. It didn't take a genius to know who Happy would give priority to, however unintentionally.

There was still a little time left after Jellal returned. Zeref had to scan everyone else and make sure they didn't transfer anything to Gray. At this point it became apparent that Zeref had created what was quite possibly the most effective diagnostic tool in the world on accident, but Gray didn't comment on this. Giving Zeref a new project in making a tool specifically for the sole purpose of diagnosing would mean distracting Zeref from operating the S-System. Gray would point out to Natsu later that his brother had invented something amazing in the process of inventing something else. Natsu would no doubt love to have an easy project to distract Zeref with that had already been proven safe.

Despite him taking a mental note to tell Natsu is idea later, all thoughts on the matter fled Gray's head when Zeref announced "It's ready. Get in position."

Natsu gave Gray's hand one last squeeze before making to get up, and Gray tightened his own grip and held onto Natsu's place.

"I have to let go, or I can't help," Natsu said. "I'll still be right here for you."

"I know," Gray said. "I just…"

Natsu bent over and brushed Gray's bangs aside before kissing him on the forehead. "Part of me wishes it could just be me helping you through this. That I could be the one bearing your pain after I caused it."

"It wouldn't be as effective if it were just you."

"I know."

"A man always does what's best for his love!" Elfman roared, breaking any sweet moment the two might have been in the midst of. "And as a man, of course I would help the two of you."

Elfman's declaration wasn't as moment ruining as Macbeth piping in to say "I'm only here because I thought Jellal might come around and give me grief for not helping out if I said no, and I don't like visitors."

Natsu and Gray exchanged wry looks. This was what they got for accepting the help they did. But then just because not all of their friends could read the mood didn't make them any less valuable of friends.

Gray didn't release Natsu's hand, but he loosened his grip enough that Natsu was able to slide it out. Natsu gave him one last caress, then stood and walked to the platform that Zeref had specified for all participants outside of the patient to stand on.
"I love you," Gray said.

Natsu smiled back, and Zeref flipped the switch.

Chapter End Notes

I have had a day. Honestly, even though I managed to finish this chapter before work, work drained me too much to proofread. Forgive me for any typos. Also I'm just... not responding to comments I missed from last chapter. Sorry. I love hearing from you guys. I just... I have so little energy for anything that isn't mindless indulgence. It took me so long just to find it in me to open up the websites where I post this story, then more time to actually upload the document. I fear it may take me so long to find the energy to post that it will be Monday by the time this chapter is up.
It was four months before Gray saw her.

Three blissful months of being the sole center of Natsu's world. The first few weeks after had been less pleasant. Natsu had healed almost immediately under Wendy's touch, but Gray was still immune. He needed more treatment and rest, but no one suggested anymore that he might need a wheelchair. After his second checkup, Porlyusica even decided that he wasn't likely to have much pain—so long as he stay put until he was healed.

They had spent the time when he was trapped in bed kissing, cuddling, and going as far as the doctor allowed. When he was back on his feet, they had done everything else. Worked together. Skipped work after having already met their client because they saw a great spot for a date. Left their date early because Natsu had promised to show Gray exactly how you could please a man once they hit that third date.

It had been a good time. Gray was almost back to his pre-pregnancy shape, and when he saw himself in the mirror, if he covered the c-section scar with his hand, he could pretend that he'd gone through nothing more than nine strange months before life went back to normal. Before life became better than normal.

But after three months, Mavis said Gray had been given enough time to recover and asked if Natsu could fulfill his promise of looking after Marina. They'd talked about it the night before he picked her up, and Natsu slept in his own home for the first time in months, saying he would need to babyproof the house before he brought Marina there. After all, Gray had said he could manage an older child, and he could manage a helping out here and there, but a three-month old needed too much for you to live under the same roof as her and not hear how constantly she was in need of care.

Gray spent the first day that Natsu had Marina in his apartment, telling himself he enjoyed the alone time. The second day, after celebrating a second lonely lunch, he decided that his deal with Natsu did technically involve lending a minor hand here and there while Marina was still a baby. Natsu was the parent, and Gray was just an extra set of hands when he felt like it, so if the baby did anything he didn't want to be a part of, he would back out.

That's what he told himself, but when he reached Natsu's doorstep and heard screaming inside, his hand shook too badly for him to grasp the doorhandle.

What if it didn't go as planned? What if Natsu expected more from him after all? It was all good and fine to say you were fine having less help with a child, but letting it go when someone refused to help you while you were in the midst of struggling to manage one was a different matter. Natsu had gone against Gray's wishes once in a very major way with Marina, and while Gray knew he would never make that particular mistake again, if Natsu thought there was no harm in asking for a little more help on a particularly difficult day…

Gray only heard Natsu's voice as a low murmur when Marina's shrieks died down, and swallowed heavily trying to imagine what might have been done to hush the baby. The only way he could think of to make one quiet down was to drop it.

He left without so much as knocking.
There was no way Natsu hadn't smelled Gray outside his house, but neither of them said a word about it when Marina was back in Mavis's hands and Natsu showed up at the apartment once more.

Natsu's time with Marina came again, and once more Gray found himself alone in his apartment.

It was petty of him to sulk the way he did. Childish. If he didn't want to be a big part in raising the baby, then he wouldn't be, but he needed to get over himself wishing Natsu were still around to take care of him. He was a grown man in his mid-twenties. Before the baby, he was perfectly capable of handling himself. After the baby, or rather after almost a year of having someone around constantly to take care of him, Gray found everything difficult. He had to relearn basic skills like thinking to make dinner far enough in advance for it to be ready at dinner time. The bed he'd never shared with Natsu anyway felt too empty with only him in it. He would wander from room to room of his tiny apartment, unsure what he was looking for until he realized he was seeking company.

He owed Natsu nothing in terms of help with Marina, but on some level he wanted to be a part of whatever mattered in Natsu's life. More than that, he wanted to finally remind Natsu that he was a capable adult. He could enjoy Natsu five days a week and not fall apart the last two while hiding in fear of a small child.

He still gave it another week before he finally made himself go to Natsu's house while Marina was there.

There was no sound of crying from inside, so Gray didn't dare knock. He turned the doorknob as slowly as possible and winced at every creek the hinges made as the door eased open. Oil. He would oil those hinges the first day Marina was gone.

Each slight noise made his heart accelerate, thinking he might disturb the sleeping girl. When the door finally opened enough for him to see inside, he nearly screamed in despair when he saw two deep-blue eyes stare at him.

The little girl blinked, her head rested on Natsu's shoulder. She didn't scream or cry or squirm, but she stared so much that Gray might have done all of those things, had Natsu no taken notice of him.

"Didja miss me?" Natsu asked.

The honest answer was a simple yes. Desire to see Natsu and to prove to Natsu that he was a functional adult once more were what drove Gray to little shack past the edge of town.

"I thought it was about time I meet her."

The look of delight on Natsu's face was worth far more than any approval Gray could have received for being able to pull himself together in his boyfriend's absence. So much so that Gray felt he had to add, "Meet her, not hold her or feed her or anything else," before Natsu could get any wrong ideas and hold him in any higher regard than he deserved.

Part of Gray wondered if it was in retaliation that when Natsu held Marina up for Gray to see, he cooed, "Say hi to Mommy."

Gray waited for Marina to say the cursed word, but nothing resembling mommy or mama or anything of the sort came out of her lips. In fact, nothing came out. She opened and closed her mouth a few times while continuing to stare at Gray, then her attention pivoted to something on the wall.
"Does she… not acknowledge me?"

"She's a baby, Gray. She can't talk yet."

"But you told her to…"

"What did you want me to tell her?"

"I don't know. Why tell her anything when she can't talk?"

"She won't learn to talk if she doesn't hear people talking."

Gray wanted to argue that, but Natsu was the one who knew things about babies. If that was how Natsu said babies worked, Gray would take his word for it, Marina wasn't crying, and Natsu seemed to have a firm grip on her, so Gray took the chance to do what he'd claimed he would and study her. She not only had his eyes, but his hair, making it perfectly impossible to tell who her father was. If it had ever even been possible. If Gray had the necessary recessive trait for pink hair, there was no way to reasonably argue that Zeref didn't also have it. Someone—probably Mavis—had purchased her a dark blue dress to go along with her eyes. Gray hadn't even realized that baby clothes came in colors other than pastel blue and pink.

He stared at her long and hard, then said, "Her hands are too small."

"They're normal sized."

"Can she even wrap her fingers around your thumb?"

"Gray, she's a baby. Babies are supposed to be small."

"But isn't she… too small?"

"If babies came bigger than this, you would have been in a lot more trouble when it was time to get her out of you," Natsu said, which silenced any further protest Gray had about size. "Really. You saw Gajeel's twins and Cyrus. I can let it slide if you don't know anything about how to raise a baby, but you can't pretend you didn't know what they look like."

"I'm not pretending."

"That makes it so much worse."

Gray wanted to tell Natsu that he didn't show up just to be belittled, but before he could, Natsu stepped aside and nudged with his head for Gray to step inside.

"Come on in. You don't have to do anything with her if you don't want to, but you should at least watch. If there's ever an emergency, I'd leave her with Gajeel before you, but you should at least know enough of what goes into this to be able to hold a basic conversation with someone who finds out you had a kid. It'll look bad if Sorcerer decides to do an interview about the baby and us and you don't even know where the diaper goes."

"I'm not that inept," Gray said, but if it was just watching, then it couldn't hurt. He would observe a little, then go to the guild before he observed enough that Gajeel might turn into Natsu's second pick.

-Marina was twelve months old when there was finally an emergency. Natsu was out of town on a
job in which the client requested him specifically. Mavis and Zeref had already agreed to have the baby for two weeks straight, but that fell apart when Zeref as called back to Alvarez temporarily to deal with a Larcade-related crisis and Mavis, two days later, was summoned by the Council to discuss a critical issue with a rising dark guild.

Gray would have said no if anyone asked him, but he was still offended that no one did before leaving Marina with Gajeel.

He only went to the Redfox residence so he could report to Natsu that she was alright. All he cared about was that he didn't look heartless to Natsu. He might have lingered longer than he needed to in order to verify that everything was okay. He might have corrected the twins on how rough they could be with a baby when they tried to take advantage of their mother's turned back. He might have even held Marina's hand for a little while as she tried to walk. But he still would have said no if anyone asked him—which they should have—and when Gajeel dragged on their farewell that afternoon and hinted that Gray was welcome to take Marina with him, Gray pretended not to notice.

When Gray caught wind that Natsu was back from his job, he wasted no time in getting himself over to his fiancé's old shack. The sound of giggling from an open window slowed Gray's footsteps as he approached. Some part of him had wanted to think he would be the first Natsu saw upon coming home, but with Zeref and Mavis still out of town, it made sense that Natsu would have picked Marina up first—even if it wasn't one of the designated days for him to have her.

Gray tried to muster up the energy to be mad, but couldn't be. The plan he and Mavis worked out hadn't dealt with situations where one person or another was unavailable on the day they were supposed to have Marina, but Mavis had set the precedent for what to do after Gray gave birth, holding onto Marina for months while Gray recovered enough from the experience for Natsu to feel it was safe to take time away from him.

From surprise alone, he almost opted to not see Natsu, but he was there, and he'd seen Marina enough before that he could no longer tell himself that avoiding her was an acceptable reason to abandon all other plans he'd made for the day. He let himself into the house.

Natsu turned away from Marina's crib to smile up at Gray, and Marina looked too, pointing and giggling. "Hey! I missed you."

"I missed you too…" Gray's gaze slid from Natsu to the little girl. "No welcome home date, I take it?"

"Not with Sis out of town." In two months, Mavis would actually be his sister in law, and she wasn't looking forward to not being able to tell Natsu that they weren't related. "We can do something here," Natsu offered.

It wasn't as bad an offer as it might have once been—if you ignored the baby. Parenthood had finally compelled Natsu to turn the house from a rundown bachelor pad into something that the average person would deem a passable living space. His many mementos were sorted and set on shelves out of reach. His training gear stayed in a shed he set up behind the house. His floor was free of clutter, and dishes were washed as they were created.

He'd even fixed the patchwork job over holes in the wall, having recruited Gray and Laki to ensure that the house remained an easy to control temperature for the baby. All in all, the house almost looked like one Gray could bear to live in. Maybe it could use a second room so the sleeping and common area weren't the same space, but he was getting tired of paying rent and owning a house in
town was expensive. If it didn't mean sleeping under the same roof as a baby half the week, he might propose moving in and potentially buttering Laki up for more construction.

Gray stepped inside expecting to be greeted by screaming, but was instead met with silence. He peered over Natsu's neck and saw that Marina was asleep.

It would be just his luck that the girl would have Natsu's hearing, but Gray dropped to a whisper and said, "She fell asleep fast."

Natsu nodded, wowing Gray with his ability to similarly whisper. "Babies do that. She'll only be out for a few hours, but we can make use of that time. If Happy comes back, we might get to sneak out while she's asleep."

Gray looked at the baby in disbelief. He'd always assumed it was safe to leave those things along while they were sleeping.

"We'll just keep quiet," Natsu said, taking Gray's hand and pulling him into the bathroom. "Come on. My tub is big enough for both of us."

She was two the first time Gray decided to try and prove to Natsu that he had meant it when he said that he could handle slightly older children. That it was just babies that bothered him. He still wasn't going to accept responsibility for her when it was all on Natsu that she'd been born in the first place, but he could handle her for one night. Just so Natsu would stop looking so sad those three days of the week that he could play with her at the guild, but Mavis took her home.

Don't touch that!" Gray said, dashing for the little girl to grab her hand and gently remove from it the knife that she held by the blade. He had thought the drawer to be out of reach, but she was inventive enough to shove a chair over to it and get inside.


"No."

He threw the knife back into the drawer and capped it over with ice, the same way he had all the floor-level cabinets that had made for more obvious child hazards. He thought he'd been on top of the whole toddler-proofing thing, but no one told him what little problem solvers someone could be at that age. He couldn't help but glance to the cupboards and wonder just how high up he would need to go. Anything glass was last best left out of her reach…

A scream turned his attention back to the floor, where Marina had covered her own ears before shrieking at him. He could already imagine what the neighbors would say about all the noise.

"Calm down!"

"Mine!"

Gray held a hand up, but hesitated, he had seen Mavis spank Marina in the past, but Natsu was aghast by both Mavis; discipline of their daughter and the total lack of discipline from Zeref. (Too many people already hated him for Zeref to dare upset his precious little girl, he claimed. But every time he got caught up in a project and didn't dote on her as much as she wanted, she claimed to hate him anyway.)

Gray didn't have the mental fortitude to withstand a spoiled toddler the way Zeref did, but he couldn't
spank her like Mavis or his own parents and face that disappointed look from Natsu when he caught wind. How he was to then keep Marina—who had shifted from screaming to making a show of holding her breath—from playing with knives, Gray hadn't the foggiest.

When the little girl's face showed a tinge of blue and Gray wasn't sure if wrenching her jaw open to make her breath would be as heinous an act as to slap her rear, he grabbed his communication lacrima and hastily punched in the code to call Natsu.

"Quitting alread—"

"She's not breathing!"

The other end of the line was dead silent for a second before Natsu swore. "I thought you were kidding when you said you'd kill any kid we left you alone with!"

That was not what Gray needed to hear when he was growing increasingly certain that his options were to let Marina suffocate or stab herself to death. "She's not… She's not dead yet. How do I make her want to breathe?"

Another terrible pause. Gray was past the point of being able to count the seconds that Natsu was silent for, but he could feel his heart pounding, and he counted twelve beats before Natsu started laughing.

"What? What?"

"She's just throwing a tantrum, Gray."

"She's not breathing." Her lips were completely blue.

"Well, she'll have to start again eventually. Usually she gives up before she faints, but if she faints then she'll start breathing then whether she wants to or not."

There were no pillows in the kitchen, and Gray didn't dare run out of the room to grab one. He threw down the oven mitts at Marina's feet in the hope that those might cushion a fall, and crouched to catch her with one hand if need be, the other had still on his lacrima.

"Are you sure that's safe?"

"It's that or teach her that she gets what she wants if she acts that way. I mean, someone already taught her that she gets what she wants whenever she wants it, but she needs to at least learn that she can't pull something like that on anyone other than Zeref."

Gray watched Marina warily, twitching more than she did, not wanting to have her drop on his watch. He reserved enough focus for listening to Natsu, but devoted too much to Marina to be able to form a reply.

"Do you want me to come over?" Natsu asked. "It's your first time being with her overnight. Taking care of her all alone is a pretty big leap."

"Yes," Gray said. Three hours earlier he'd sworn to Natsu that he'd watched others look after her enough times and at enough different points in the day that he knew what he was doing.

"I'll be there soon…ish," Natsu said. Gray might have protested, but Marina suddenly gasped for air. "Try and hang in there until I can make it over. Happy's out, so it'll take me while to walk there."
"Run," Gray said. Marina might not gasp for air before passing out the next time she decided to hold her breath.

He could hear Natsu laughing on the other side as their line disconnected.

It took, at a running speed, a good fifteen minutes to get from Natsu's to Gray's, and Gray had a sinking feeling that Natsu wasn't going to run the whole way there, and might not even leave immediately. He regarded Marina warily, as if she was a bomb that might self-destruct at any moment if he wasn't careful.

Marina's attention had already wondered from him and the knives he'd denied her. He chased her into the living room to watch as she crawled onto the couch and started poking at his Archive Lacrima.

"Play time," she told him.

Gray started looking left and right for any of the toys that Natsu had brought over when he first dropped her off at his apartment two hours ago. Had it only been two hours. He snatched up a doll and offered it up to her.

"Play," she insisted, slapping both hands against the lacrima.

There was nothing damaging she could do with the device. Following a prank by Natsu, Gray had Zeref rework it so that one needed to know a special code to be able to send messages under Gray's name. Marina could write gibberish messages and pull up records that she couldn't read, but that was the extent of what she might be able to do.

Marina squealed with delight when he activated the lacrima, but once it was on she spent three seconds inspecting it before pointing to Gray's opening screen and asking "What is this?"

"It's... an archive lacrima," Gray said, at a loss for what else to tell her. She would have more exposure to them than most toddlers. Zeref's device was a standard for research centers, and most guilds or larger businesses owned one or even two or three, but they were still uncommon in households. That her Daddy and Mama both owned one and her Papa was constantly tinkering with them gave her an edge over other kids in knowing what the device might be.

"No plays," she said, pointing harder at the screen.

It took it a second for Gray to catch on. Zeref—that bastard—must have added something to one of the lacrima in his lab that Marina could play with. Maybe he even gave it to Natsu and Mavis. And Gray was lacking.

Fine. What was the point of having a toddler in your house for the day anyway if you set them up to play on a screen and left them to do your own thing?

"How about lunch," Gray suggested. If nothing else, he knew how Marina liked her food. He always paid attention to anything Natsu made, even if it was simple kiddie fair.

Marina didn't seem to hear him. But she let him carry her to the kitchen table with the doll, and once there that doll was of enough interest to hold her attention. Gray couldn't help but smile as he heard her converse with it while he tried to quickly pull a peanut butter and jelly sandwich together.

It wasn't the prettiest sandwich he'd ever made, which caused Gray to fear it might be snubbed as he put it on a plate and offered it up to her, but Marina took one look at it and instead snubbed it with the declaration, "No crust."
Thank the gods she knew the word crust. It was hit or miss how well she could explain herself when she didn't know the name of something she wanted.

And thank the gods that her request was such a simple one. Gray grabbed a knife and quickly sliced the crust off in front of her. He threw the offending scraps out then looked back to Marina to see her scowling at him, and the color drained from his face. He braced himself for another fit over wanting the knife he had gone and carelessly showed off in front of her.

"No," Marina told him. God he hated that word. "No heart."

She crossed her arms and glowered down at the sandwich in a way that Gray would have found cute were Natsu the one trying to feed her. They were in for a war if he wanted to get her to eat, unless he could figure out her latest concern.

Reluctantly, Gray called Natsu again.

"Did she pass out?" Natsu asked. If you could punch someone long distance, Gray would have. Natsu didn't even sound out of breath.

"I made her a sandwich, but she's mad that there's no heart," Gray reported, grimacing at the relative calmness in his voice. He heard nothing from Natsu's end of the line, but knew Natsu well enough to know that his fiancé was laughing on the inside at how Gray had panicked earlier over what turned out to be nothing. "I didn't exactly make her lunch with a lot of love, but…"

"Mavis has a heart shaped cutter that removes all the crust and cuts the remainder of the sandwich into the shape of two halves of a heart," Natsu said. "I think she feeds the left-over parts to Zeref."

"Good. He needs to eat more often."

"I know. Of all the things to forget. Anyway, Marina likes her PB&J that way. I usually try and cut it the same way with a knife. That's what she's asking you for."

"She's not really asking," Gray said, but he got the point. "Thanks. Are you close?"

"I should be there in ten minutes. Maybe fifteen." Gray could have heard he heard a creak in the background that sounded exactly like the one Natsu's front door made. He gave himself a generous estimate of another half-hour. "Think you can make it that long without calling for help again?"

"No promises."

But he would certainly like to make it that long on his own. He said he could manage Marina for a day, and he wanted to prove he wasn't completely incompetent. She was his daughter, at least in some capacity, and he had sat on the sidelines and watched others enjoy her enough times that he ought to be able to pull off what they made look natural.

He set his lacrima down and went over to the table where Marina was glowering at her food. Only when he put both hands together and called on his magic did she glance up at him, gasping as he pulled his hands apart to reveal a cutter made of ice, shaped perfectly to decrust her bread while slicing it into a heart shape.

Gray was not a religious man, but he sent a prayer to every god he could think of to ask that Marina not mind if his bread-cutter wasn't in the exact same shape as the one Mavis used.

Marina stared up at him, up at his cutter, and then watched slack-jawed as he sliced her sandwich with it. He paused, waiting for her to scream, but instead she clapped her hands and cried, "Again!"
She could mean one of two things, and making another ice creation was less work than making another sandwich to slice up. Gray put his hands together and formed a small ice dog. Dogs, to Happy's chagrin, were Marina's favorite.

That time his handiwork was met with a scream, or rather a squeal of delight. Marine grabbed the ice dog from the air and hugged it tight, not caring about the cold and wet that came with it.

Unable to help but smile, Gray tried his hand at Lyon's style, making a second ice dog that ran circles around the foot of the table. Marina clapped, leaping up to chase it, and Gray laughed and made a second dog for her to run after, both of them having forgotten about the meal completely.

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The apartment was covered in ice by the time Natsu arrived, and Marina had put on a jacket in order to keep from shivering as she chased Gray's ice around the house. His moving works were less detailed than what he was capable of when he used static ice. Animals lacked facial features and were riddled with anatomical errors. Knowing that Natsu would never notice didn't stop Gray from flushing with embarrassment to have such sloppy work on full display.

Natsu took one look at the scene, Marina giggling and squealing while her lunch sat untouched on the table, Gray grinning despite himself, and lit up like the sun itself.

"Don't get too excited," Gray told him. "I'm burning out fast."

"But you managed," Natsu told him.

Gray doubted he could manage a full day, but Natsu wasn't wrong. He managed. He couldn't say if he was worried or not about the possibility that Mavis might ask him to handle Marina for a few hours here and there when she was busy at the guild.

- o -

"I'm surprised though," Gray said the next time Mavis came by to pick Marina up. He had to wait until the girls were gone, because Marina had a fight with her Papa and wanted to stay with Daddy longer before Mama took her back, and there was no talking while she kicked and screamed. "By this point, I would have thought you would be begging for three more."

"Three more kids?" Natsu asked.

"Or four, even." Gray shut the door to Natsu's house and took a seat on the lawn. He'd made no date plans when it was hard to know when Mavis would come by, and if they were going to hang out without paying to eat somewhere then the grass in front of Natsu's house was as good a place as any.

"Zeref's almost gotten approval to release that poison of his as a legitimate fertility treatment, right? There's nothing stopping you from signing on for the final trial before they put it on the market. You could have another child… two more children from that."

The thought gave Gray a pause. It had been a long time since he thought of the first pregnancy. He had focused on getting back into shape, on getting back into his career, and on his relationship with Natsu. That first child who he never even learned the gender of, saying he could never go through with having them… him. Maybe that child could have been a son.

The idea of a boy with blue eyes like Marina but Natsu's pink hair flitted through Gray's mind, and he tried to crush the image before it could take root.

He could have had that boy. He survived one pregnancy, after all. He wasn't going to sign on for a
second, but he survived forty weeks of one. Maybe whatever made the pregnancy with Marina go wrong at the end wouldn't have happened, but then maybe it would have happened both times, and he wouldn't have been able to recover fully between the first and second pregnancy.

He wouldn't—couldn't—go down that road. It was easier not to think about.

"They're gonna make it a controlled substance, so it's not really on the market," Natsu said, dropping down beside Gray on the grass. Relieved to have something else for his mind to focus on, Gray lay down and looked up at the clouds, comfortable enough to make it harder to escape should things go south before he asked, "Why? I can tell you firsthand, there's nothing addictive about it."

"Yeah, but it's… I mean… you know firsthand that it's potent. They're going to stock it in clinics, but you can't take it home to use because the Council's worried about people using it without telling their partner, or dosing someone with it out of spite, or stuff like that. Zeref says it's giving him a headache because now there's some group campaigning to him for it to be freely available for people who think it's embarrassing to ask their doctor to help them have a baby."

"That sounds about right." And good on the Council for thinking ahead with that potential abuse of the serum. It wasn't like Zeref would consider it. With every passing year, it seemed like there were more people involved in Zeref's projects, making sure he hadn't overlooked some major ethical or safety detail.

Come to think of it, more and more other people had started working with Zeref. They were even setting up an S-System near Crocus, although the blueprints were classified. Supposedly there were concerns about them being reverse engineered into another R-System although, as Jellal pointed out, plenty of less savory types could easily get their hands on those blueprints long before the S-System was devised. There was apparently a published paper on how to build it that had been circulating in academia for centuries.

"Any idea what he'll do once the last trial is over?"

"Oh, he's already off to his next project. This time he's interested in some means of traveling to the future. You can kinda do that with the Eclipse Gate, but only if you arrange for someone to open the gate for you at the point in time that you want." Gray had comfortably lowered his guard when Natsu added, "Anyway, I wouldn't join the trial. Having more kids sounds like fun, but we'd have the same situation where you're only sort of warming up to being a parent and don't want to touch anything that can't walk, right? It kinda works with Marina because Mavis has her so much of the week, even if I'm not fond of that, but if we had a kid who was only mine and yours, would you be alright with me having them around the clock? You'd have to go on most jobs without me. 'Sides, it's cute to watch you pout on the days you have to share me, but I think you might cry if there was no day when you had me to yourself."

"I don't pout," Gray said, but he didn't debate any of the other points. Jellal and Erza's second child was three months old, and they both liked to tease Gray by offering to let him babysit her so they could have a moment to themselves.

"You're pouting right now."

"Am not."

Natsu gave Gray a grin that was just begging for a fist to the face, but punching him would only reinforce his absurd notion that Gray was jealous of the attention that his lover gave their daughter.
"I'm not."

"Anyway," Natsu said, "You've seen how Cyrus is around Charlotte. I don't think I could handle having you and Marina jealous when I give another kid attention."

"Stop comparing my behavior to a toddler's," Gray said, although he was glad to see one more point for Natsu to make as to why one child was plenty.

He had heard horror stories from Lyon with both new children they had since Marina's birth, but he hadn't really believed what he heard about how difficult it could be to make a child accept a new baby in the family until mellow little Cyrus threw a tantrum over Jellal telling him to ask his mommy for a piggyback ride because he was holding the new baby. Or rather, Gray hadn't believed it until Erza took the baby so Jellal could pick Cyrus up, only for Cyrus to keep screaming because actually he wanted Mommy to hold him.

"If you come back one day and tell me your pregnant anyway, I'm leaving you," Gray told him. "One pregnant man in the guild is more than enough."

The sheepish look Natsu gave made Gray's heart sink. "One in all of Fairy Tail's history, or one at a time."

"I will leave you, Natsu." At least, Gray thought he might. Surely Natsu wouldn't spring a second child on him, even if he was carrying his own child the second time around.

"I had nothing to do with it!"

"Oh God." Gray rolled off his back and onto his feet, ready to take whatever action was necessary if Natsu said anything worse. "What happened this time?"

"Fried signed up for the final trial," Natsu said. "One of the other doctors involved thinks he's worked all the kinks out of… well… your experience, so they were looking to see if they could get anyone to test that. Lucy wasn't eligible, and the two of them… A-anyway, you definitely won't be expected to help with their baby. Lucy's already so eager to have kids that I don't think she'll remember that she has to share them with her husband."

"Oh," Gray said, for lack of any idea what else he could say. Slowly, he sat back down and lowered himself onto his back. He could hardly protest that. For as little as he envied Fried, if the fool signed up knowing what he was in for…

Everyone was already getting together and starting families by the time Gray learned about Marina. Wendy was old enough that she would start thinking of it soon, so Gray could hardly complain about anyone his own age. He had been glad to see Fried finally move on from Laxus, and over the moon to see Natsu and Lucy finally move on from one another well enough to converse about parenting. He could be happy to see the two of them settle down, whether or not them doing so involved having to think about pregnant men again.

"So that just leaves—"

"Don't say it," Natsu said.

For as supportive as she tried to be, neither of them dared wed, much less wear their engagement rings. Juvia had given up on being Gray's wife, but she hadn't moved on to the point of finding someone new. Her life almost seemed to revolve around Gray's romance rather than her romance with Gray. Not quite as obtrusive, and it gave her more space to enjoy the rest of the guild's company so long as Gray kept her assured that he was happy, but neither of them had figured out a good way
to tell her she wasn't their pick for Maid of Honor, and Mira caught wind and spoiled their plans the
time they tried eloping.

"It'll be nice to have someone close to Charlotte's age," Natsu said. "She can play with Lucy's kid,
and then Marina and Cyrus can play together without having to worry about entertaining a younger
sibling."

"Or they could make friends outside the guild," Gray pointed out.

"I guess they could." Natsu, who Gray suspected couldn't name a single resident of Magnolia outside
of the guild, said. "Any chance you could give Fried pointers or... do you not want to go there?
Zeref only told me about him when I picked Marina up Monday night, so I haven't talked to him
about it yet. If you don't wanna help, he'll never hear that I asked you about it."

Gray had to consider it a moment before saying, "I guess. If he wants to talk about it. You mean the
pregnancy, right? Not actual child-rearing."

"Yeah. Like... what helped keep you comfortable, or what certain warning signs felt like. It's not
like anyone's going to ask you for actual parenting tips."

Gray scowled up at the clear sky. He certainly wouldn't be a dispenser of parental wisdom, no matter
what happened. But despite knowing that Natsu meant nothing beyond perhaps light teasing, hearing
it that way made it feel like a jab.

"Do you think I ought to know?"

Natsu looked away, knowing he treaded on thin ice. "If you don't want to you don't have too. You
said you're too young to settle down, right?"

Almost four years ago. Gray would be lying if he said he was eager to change up the comfortable
routine he had fallen into, but for all the hassle of it, he would also be lying if he said he hadn't
enjoyed his time with Marina. Particularly the part where Natsu was also there to make sure that his
time with Marina didn't end in disaster.

"Maybe... I could try staying the night with you when it's your turn to have her," Gray said. "If it
works out, we could ask Mavis about holding onto her three days of the week, or alternating three
and four days, so she doesn't grow up seeing you as the side parent who takes care of her when
Mavis and Zeref are busy. We're not taking her full time though."

Maybe they could renovate Natsu's house and live there together after all. No more living apart half
the week. The older Marina got, the closer she came to the age range where Gray knew what to do
with her. She was a part of his life whether he would have chosen to let her in or not, and for all that
he found himself unsure what to do with her at times, he wouldn't chose to force her out if given the
opportunity.

"Really?" Natsu asked.

"We're all kind of family," Gray said. "Besides, maybe I want her to share you with me a little
more."

Chapter End Notes
Damn. I was all hyped to post this the same day the final chapter came out, and then I just… kept not being able to finish it. I actually did write the last scene that day, but reading back over it, it kept feeling like it was missing something. It was always my plan to have Gray never make it to being a full-time parent, but to warm up to Marina as he spent more time with her, but once I got to actually writing it, I kept feeling like it was too rushed. Over 150,000 words were spent on him not wanting to have a child and being really stressed over the idea of being ill-suited for parenthood and wanting more time before he settled down. I don't have in in me to extend this story with a dozen more chapters, but I feel like if I really wanted to do this transition justice, I probably should have done a ton more chapters rather than tried to fit it all into one final update.

Oh well. 'Tis done. Finally. Like, fucking finally. I cannot begin to express the depths of my guilt over making y'all wait so long for this. I had the last line written for over a month and at some point I kinda just chickened out and went to write this and that for other fandoms instead because I just didn't want to have to face this last chapter and the scenes I needed to add and that feeling that it was never enough.

I still gotta finish Butterfly Sanctuary too. Dear God have I been cruel to that fic's readers. I used to pride myself on keeping regular updates with everything I did and I think I'm updating an average of… every three months with that fic? Yeah. I've gotten bad. Maybe I'll start waiting until I finish stories before posting them, rather than writing a fair number of chapters and then expecting to keep writing at a good pace.

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