

His Own Armor

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/26380411) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/26380411>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Fairy Tail
Relationships:	Gray Fullbuster & Lyon Vastia , Gray & Team Natsu
Characters:	Gray Fullbuster , Lyon Vastia , Erza Scarlet , Natsu Dragneel , Lucy Heartfilia , Happy - Character
Additional Tags:	Fluff , Humor , Angst , Psychoanalysis of stripping habit , Erza being Erza , Gray's good with kids
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2020-09-09 Words: 6,453 Chapters: 1/1

His Own Armor

by [Rook2020](#)

Summary

While Gray is on a special assignment for Lamia Scale, Lyon leads the rest of his team to an interesting discovery. Could there really be more to Gray's weird habit than absentmindedness? Could it be fear-based? Stress-induced? A look into the psyche of one Ice Mage.

“Gray! Behave yourself!”

“Relax, Erza. I’m just rolling up my sleeves. Lay off me, will ya? You’ve been on my case all day! So who wants build a snowman?”

Peels of joy and laughter resounded in the town square, as Gray, surrounded by children of all ages, put his hands together in preparation for his next spell. Team Natsu had been in Margret Town since yesterday, helping the locals set up for the First Frost Festival, a yearly celebration to usher in the coming winter. To everyone’s disappointment, the weather hadn’t been cooperative, as a rare warm front had moved into the region the last few days. Though not an occurrence that would cancel the festivities, it still left a feeling of wrongness to the regular attendees. A First Frost Festival without Frost? Inconceivable. Fortunately for the citizens, Margret Town was home to the wizard guild Lamia Scale. And within said guild was their very own ice wizard, Lyon Vastia.

Being mostly a non-magical citizenry, they were slightly put off by the hard truth that, “No, I can’t just inject magic into the atmosphere and make it snow throughout the region. I’m not a weather mage. And frankly, such a power would be frighteningly dangerous in even the right hands.” However, being a good and proud citizen of the hometown of his guild, Lyon was more than happy to offer his assistance in providing smaller, localized wintry spots throughout the festival grounds. Having seen the grandiose plans of the organizers, however, he came to the conclusion that he did not want to spend the whole day feeling a constant drain on his magic. Being a master of dynamic ice make magic, he could populate the petting zoo with a menagerie of mystical ice creatures that would fill a child’s wonder for days. He could ensure an entertaining spectacle during the great Wintertide Parade down the Midway Plaza. But most of the festival goers would want a more interactive experience with the ice itself. Though he could provide a more hands-on supply of ice in many forms for the people to do with as they’d wish, static ice make just wasn’t his expertise, thereby requiring a greater amount of concentration to keep it going throughout the day. Loathed to admit any need of assistance, he’d put his pride below the joys of the people, and reached out to Fairy Tail’s own resident ice mage.

“I’ll lay a fist to his skull if he strips in front of all these people. I will not tolerate any indecency in front of these children.” Erza was currently perusing some of the nearby food venders, refusing to accept the lack of strawberry flavored confections due to their being out of season. She had decided that she would stay vigilant in keeping Team Natsu in line today, so as not to embarrass their guild in front of their friendly rivals in Lamia Scale. Lucy has proven to be a powerful ally in keeping Natsu under control. She’d ignore the stray comments from Happy about Lucy’s “scary Erza impression” for the time being. That left her with the responsibility of keeping Gray decent throughout the day.

“Maybe you could tone it down just a little, Erza,” supplied Lucy, approaching with Happy perched on her shoulder. Happy was currently doing his best to remove the stray bits of cotton candy from Lucy’s hair without her notice. To be fair, it was her own fault for allowing him to eat on her shoulder in the first place. Natsu kept snatching delightfully sweet threads from Happy’s treat otherwise. “Gray hasn’t lost so much as a shoe all day. Maybe you can relax a bit and join us at the ice skating rink. A lot of people’s been raving about it.”

It was Gray's idea to add an ice rink to the middle of the plaza, even supplying literal ice skates for any who needed them. The festival goers took to it with gusto, marveling at the brilliance of the idea, and already looking forward to enjoying it next year. The festival organizers were quick to offer Gray a bonus for his contributions, as well as an advance if he'd consider returning for the next First Frost Festival.

Natsu came up behind Lucy, chomping down on a pair of giant turkey legs. Were they on fire? Receiving odd looks from those surrounding them wasn't a rare occurrence, so he payed them no mind as he dumped the chard bones in a bin, saying, "You sure you wanna risk it? It's only a matter of time before we get complaints of a streaker running around. Ouch! Happy! What was that for?!" Natsu, surreptitiously reaching for a sweet wisp of fluff, pulled back his hand, small tooth marks visible, not deep enough to puncture skin, but enough to pinch at least.

"Get your own cotton candy, Natsu. I bought this myself!"

"C'mon, buddy! Just a taste?"

"Nah uh! You said that about my funnel cake!"

"I said I'd buy you another one as soon as the line got shorter!"

"If you'd waited in that long line, you'd have been through it by now!"

"But the other venders had roasted turkey legs!"

"Mmm, mmm. This is the best cotton candy in the whole festival."

"How can it possibly be any different from all the other cotton candy out here?"

"I guess you'll never find out!"

"That's it! Gimme some of that!"

"Ahhh! You ruined it!"

"Natsu!" cried Lucy, "You just smashed that sticky mess into my hair!"

"My precious, sweet fluffiness!" lamented Happy.

Erza had just about enough, and was about to inflict her wrath upon the two, when Lyon appeared from the small gathering crowd.

"What's going on? I could hear you yelling all the way from the petting zoo." He shooed the gawkers away, passing out animated ice birds to the smiling children in the crowd. "I would appreciate you all not bringing your usual insanity to this event. Keep in mind that we only hired Gray. He gave his word that you'd all be on your best behavior if you were to come as well. Don't put him in a position where he'd compromise his performance and decency just because of your added stress."

Natsu took umbrage with Lyon's tone, if not his use of long, confusing phrasing. "What the heck are you on about? The only thing threatening his decency is his own stupid stripping habit!"

Lyon afforded Natsu an odd look, which didn't go unnoticed by the girls. "Why would he lose his clothes in front of a bunch of kids? They're harmless."

"What's 'harmless' gotta do with it? I'm wondering why you're not worried that he's gonna cause a bunch of parents to complain later on," Natsu replied in a huff.

Now Lyon was truly confused. Maybe it was his too few instances of interacting with Gray since they'd been reunited, and maybe his guild mates were so used to this habit, that it's become like a background noise to them, but he couldn't believe they'd never noticed the pattern. "Wait, are you trying to tell me that—"

"Lyon! We need you at the staging for the parade," interrupted Sherry. Toby and Yuka were close behind, Toby wearing a rather large sock stretched over his ears. Did he think it was a hat?

"Okay. I'll be right there." Watching them go, he turned to leave before Lucy stopped him, her words teeming with curiosity.

"Lyon, what were you about to say just now?"

He almost didn't answer, too impatient to deal with such obvious foolishness. But a quick glance in Gray's direction gave him pause. Currently, he was putting the finishing touches on a pretty impressive interpretation of Lamia, the serpent-tailed namesake of his guild. He was rather pleased and humbled by the fact that he'd chosen that image over a fairy or some other design, but he chalked it up to Gray's consideration that this was a local event, and any wonders he'd created so far had demonstrated that.

The children surrounding him were adding their own creations to the growing exhibit, with snowmen of all shapes and sizes joining the eclectic collection. One group was hanging a sock around the neck of a clumsy but passable snow sculpture of Toby, while what he assumed to be a sculpture of Yuka stood nearby. He could only assume it was Yuka, as one child kept trying to make a ridiculously large snow eyebrow stick to its head, before another came along with a pair of even longer branches to use instead. Even Jura was not left out, though the children seemed content to make just a bust of him. They seemed conflicted on just how round to make his rather prominently bald head.

Lyon tried not to laugh. He really did. It was as Gray was lifting a small girl over his shoulders (was that Gray's jacket she was wearing?) so she could place a beautiful ice-make crown on the Lamia sculpture's head, that Lyon returned his attention to the rest of Gray's team.

"I'm afraid I'm needed elsewhere, but I'll leave you with this. Everyone has their eccentricities, but there's always an underlying reason behind them. You don't just pick up a habit from repetition, though that's part of it. You have to look at the 'why' as well."

“The ‘why’ is because he’s a perverted stripper,” Natsu contributed absent-mindedly, as he helped pull strands of cotton candy out of Lucy’s hair.

“That’s your own conjecture. Maybe you should pay more attention. I’ve got to go. Enjoy the Festival. Try not to destroy anything.” With that, Lyon left for the parade grounds.

Left to their own devices, Team Natsu continued their own observations. Gray was currently leading all the kids in the construction of a couple of low lying snow forts. While some packed on more layers of snow, others were gathering an arsenal of snowballs. It looked like a war was brewing. Amazingly, to the team at least, Gray’s clothes remained stubbornly garbed on his person. Before Lucy could scream at Natsu for trying to eat the candy that he’d just freed from her hair (don’t be gross, Natsu), Erza stepped in.

“Alright! Challenge accepted,” she said with a deadly gleam in her eyes. Natsu, Lucy, and Happy each took a step back, Happy leaping onto Natsu’s head. Those eyes were trouble.

“What do you mean, Erza?” asked Lucy, totally confounded by Erza’s sudden determination.

“We have a team mission. Lyon has implied that we have wronged Gray in some way. We will correct this wrong at once. But first, we must gather intelligence.”

Natsu was looking longingly at the food stalls, visions of delectable treats floating in his head. “Do we have to? I’m still hungry!”

“You just ate two turkey legs!” cried Lucy.

“Barely a snack,” he replied.

“We shall commence the mission now. First, we will compile a list of every time Gray had lost any clothing in the last week, and write down the conditions in which they were lost. Then, we will follow him the rest of the day, and see what else we can observe.” Erza was in commanding general mode right now, so the others knew there was no stopping her.

“Can we at least stop for lunch first?”

Throughout the day, Team Natsu followed Gray as he performed his duties. A quick trip to the ice rink, to ensure enough skates were available for everyone, turned into an impromptu ice skating lesson for a group of preschoolers who seemed left out of the fun. That wouldn’t do at a festival. Before anyone could blink, ice skates, equipped with trainer aids on the sides, appeared on each of the children’s feet. The parents were quick to respond by taking their excited children out on the ice for the first time.

Some of the braver kids approached Gray, pleading eyes aglow, not even having to voice their desires for him to join them. Smiling, he reached out his hand to the little girl who still wore his jacket, who reached her other hand out to the next kid, who did the same. Soon, a long chain of giggling children were gliding across the ice, zig-zagging around the smiling onlookers. He taught those bold enough to try how to spin and glide, and even put his magic to work. Soon, all sorts of obstacles lay around to challenge the more seasoned skaters, while

the children enjoyed climbing over animal-shaped ice sculptures, and skating in and out of tunnels and ice houses.

Not a scrap of clothing was lost.

Reacquiring his jacket from the little girl, whose parents or guardians (the team couldn't tell) decided now was a good time to eat, Gray made his way over to the ice hotel. This one was Lyon's idea, though it was Gray's execution. In order to help with the local economy, an extravagant hotel made entirely of ice stood before the plaza. It was the centerpiece of the whole event, and attracted lodgers from all over the region who were looking for a new experience.

Patrons and tourists entered through a grand entryway into a spectacular light show, effortlessly put on by the sun's very light shining through the ice. All the decor and furniture were of the most crystal clear ice, the walls frosted over for privacy. Fine furs and fabrics offered cushioning and insulation from the cold.

The walls and ceiling were adorned with devil slayer-laced ice sconces and chandeliers, to be lit later in the evening by Natsu's ever-burning fire. He was promised a free buffet afterwards in thanks for that favor. Later on, everyone would be awed at the ice's ability to withstand the flames, to Natsu's chagrin. But whatever. Free food was free food.

Being the architect and builder of this grand palace, of course he and his team were given free room and board. As he climbed the intricately designed stairwell to his room, the others stayed below, choosing to meet and gather their notes in the attached ice restaurant.

"I heard him tell Kyleigh that he was gonna take a nap before the parade. He looked pretty beat," Happy said around the fish in his mouth.

"Who's Kyleigh?" Natsu asked, confused.

Lucy, trying not to get upset at the long string of noodles hanging out of Natsu's mouth as he spoke, replied, "She's that little girl that was hanging out with Gray all day. She was wearing his jacket. I thought they were adorable together."

"Yes. Gray's always been good around children. He's always seemed comfortable around kids younger than him, even when I first joined the guild. You should have seen him with Romeo when he was a baby. I think Macao may have taken advantage of Gray's fondness over his son to get as much free babysitting as he could. Gray never seemed to mind." Erza paused over her rumination to take a bite out of the apple pie she'd been served. Though no match for strawberry cake, it was quite good. "Hmm, delicious. So, what do we have so far?"

Lucy pulled out her notepad, glancing over a hastily written timeline. After a pointless argument over the fact that visiting the guild's bathhouse and sleeping in just his boxers, or nothing at all at times (why did Happy even know that?), didn't count as stripping, they had all narrowed down the incidents to just four in the last week. Two were during fights with Natsu, and one was during a recent job evicting forest Vulcans from the woods just outside of Magnolia. The last one was just the other day, when Natsu had burst into the guild hall, carrying a crying Happy. They had been fishing all morning, and Happy had gotten a fish

hook stuck in his paw. Natsu was beside himself with panic, so while Lucy settled them both down at their usual table, Gray had ran to Fairy Hills to get Wendy. No one had batted an eye when he'd returned missing his shirt, so used were they all with his antics.

"The only pattern I can see is that he strips whenever he's running around or fighting. Which is all the time. Hey, Happy! They've got fish cakes!" Natsu was more than happy to put that most recent episode out of his mind. He hadn't been that scared since he thought Gray was on the verge of killing Frosch.

Lucy saw the same pattern, and theorized that he was probably uncomfortable with the effort-induced heat. She was ready to suggest putting an end to this "mission" when Erza spoke up.

"Why did he not strip at all today? It doesn't make sense!"

A stunned hush fell upon the crowded restaurant, and Lucy's face was inflamed as she ducked behind her notebook. "Could you keep it down? You're gonna get us thrown out!"

"No, think about it! He was running around all day, using his magic almost nonstop. It may not be warm, but it's not that cold out either. He must have built up a bit of sweat today. Plus, he fights practically naked on Mount Hakobe all the time. It can't just be the temperature."

Natsu pointed out, "He did lose his jacket earlier."

"No he didn't. He let Kyleigh borrow it. Remember? Cuz it was cold where they were," said Happy.

"Who's Kyleigh again? Is she strong? Can I fight her?!"

"Absolutely not! She's just a kid! And how could you forget her name already?" cried Lucy.

"I'm not forgetful. I'm hungry. Let's get dessert!"

"Although, maybe that's the key! He was just showing restraint because of all the kids."

Erza wasn't sold on the idea. "That's not likely, as he strips in front of Wendy all the time."

"Do we keep forgetting that Wendy's hardly a kid anymore? She's almost fourteen. All those kids today were probably in grade school."

"Until Wendy can fill out a bra, she'll always be a precious little girl in my eyes."

Now Natsu was glowing red in the face. "Can we not talk about girls and bra fillers?! There are young ears present!" he cried while unsuccessfully trying to cover his own and Happy's ears at the same time.

"Quit acting like you've never peaked in my panty drawer!" exclaimed Lucy as she slapped Natsu upside his head.

A harsh whisper interrupted their growing tirade. "What is wrong with you?! We're in a public place. Quit acting like a pack of uncouth ruffians and keep your voices down!"

Lyon appeared unannounced, and Team Natsu suddenly remembered where they were, as they took in the befuddled looks and scornful gazes pointed their way. Natsu, Happy, and Erza responded in their usual manner and shrugged it off, while Lucy gave a small, apologetic wave from behind her notepad. “What’s gotten you guys so riled up?” Lyon asked.

Erza straightened her posture and radiated an air of conveying a mission report, as she broke down everything her team had done since last talking to Lyon. She seemed awfully proud of their theories, though ended on a note of uncertainty as a final conclusion was just beyond their grasp.

Lyon stared, pulled up a chair, and stared some more. He saw different looks in their faces. Lucy was still embarrassed at her team’s behavior, Natsu was trying to flag down one of the reluctant wait staff, and Erza was proud of their accomplishments so far. He eyed Lucy’s notepad, and seeing what was written on it, gestured for permission to see it. Understanding what he wanted, Lucy gave it up, and sat back as he read everything they’d observed.

“I can’t believe you took notes. You can’t do anything half-heartedly, can you? I only suggested you pay more attention, not stalk him everywhere he went.”

Erza rose to the challenge in his voice. “Of course we put our best effort into this mission. Passion and determination defines us as Fairy Tail mages. “

“I thought it was friendship and family.”

Natsu was quick to respond. “We don’t hold the monopoly on friendship and family. Those should be the life blood of any guild.”

Lyon was impressed by these words from the usually laid back dragon slayer, so his next words were more confused than accusatory when he asked, “Then how can you not be aware that Gray puts on his armor when he disrobes?”

That got all their attention. Though noise permeated around the room, silence fell like a blanket over their table. They shared looks with each other, not comprehending what he meant. Natsu broke the silence with his usual misunderstandings.

“When did he learn to use Requip Magic?! Erza! Did you teach him? That’s not fair! Teach it to me, too! Though now that I think of it, Jellal might get pissed at everyone if they saw you wearing the same kind of armor Gray wears. And what’s the point of invisible armor, anyway?”

Everyone was just shocked at Natsu’s complete 180 turn, from the wise purveyor of the magic of friendship, to the confused yet lovable little dragon before them. Lucy came to his rescue; first by finally catching the attention of a passing waiter, and ordering some food to hopefully fuel his brain, and then explaining that invisible armor wasn’t a thing. Natsu was adamant that they could never really know that for sure if they couldn’t see or feel it. They couldn’t argue with that logic, and moved on.

“If you’d look at your own notes, you’d find the pattern. His habit kicks in whenever he’s fighting, right?”

Happy was the one to point out that the last occurrence was when he'd gotten hurt. He told Lyon the whole story from that day.

"And how did you all feel when Happy was hurt? Worried? Scared even? Don't you think Gray felt the same?"

Lucy had a puzzled look. "So you're saying Gray strips when he's scared? I mean, I've seen him fight some pretty scary things, but I never took him to be afraid of them."

"I don't buy it. Popsicle-britches isn't scared of anything but crying women and Erza, and he's usually naked before she even gets there!"

"Wow, Natsu. That's a high compliment coming from you," Happy said as he chewed on a bread stick.

Lyon tried to hold onto his patience just a while longer. They were Gray's friends. He could do this. "Fear may be part of it. But I think you should have noticed by now that his habit often manifests in times of high stress. You see him almost every day. How could you not know this?"

Everyone had unsure looks now. Lucy felt shame as she replied, "Could this actually be true? Could he have developed that habit because of stress? And we never noticed anything wrong! What kind of friends are we?"

"Just hold on, Other-popsicle. You trying to say Gray's got some weird mental thing going on?"

"It's nothing like that. Gray isn't crazy, nor is he perverted or going through a mental crisis, or anything like that. If you've got a moment, I think I can explain where Gray is coming from." After several nods of approval, Lyon began. "You all know what happened to him as a child, how he'd lost his family and home to Deliora. But it wasn't just those that he lost. His entire village was wiped off the map. He'd lost all the friends he grew up with. All his neighbors. All the familiar places and things that a child instantly recognizes as the very symbols of 'haven' and 'security.' Can you imagine being the seven-year-old lone survival of such a tragedy, and not breaking down? That day is forever cemented in his mind as the most powerless he'd ever felt.

"But then, my master and I found him. Master Ur saw a darkness in him that she gave her very being to be rid of. She taught us both everything we know about ice maker magic. Part of that training involved enduring extremely cold temperatures in the snowy plains of Isval. He didn't enjoy it at first, but he took to it with a determination that defied common sense. Whenever he shook off his clothes in preparation for training, I could look in his eyes and tell, he would get stronger. That was his mission. His creed. Whenever he was with us on the ice, his whole being changed. I think that in his subconscious, he always felt the most powerful whenever he was training with Ur. I'm not even sure he noticed it, but at some point, somewhere deep inside, he must have realized that every time he threw his shirt off, it was when he was becoming stronger.

We weren't together for very long, and it was almost ten years before I could experience first hand what he could truly do, but he got strong. So strong. During our battle against Oracian Seis, I caught that same look in his eyes again. And against Rufus Lore from Sabertooth. And against the dragons that kill—...that almost killed him. Can you see now? He doesn't strip just because he's afraid or stressed out. He does it when he needs to be strong. When he gets serious in a fight with his rival. When he's defeating an enemy. Or when he's protecting a friend. He's not just throwing off his shirt. He's gearing up to battle."

Team Natsu was stunned. They never could have imagined such implications in Gray's actions. An uncomfortable silence loomed. Lucy wondered aloud, "So that's why he hadn't stripped today. Because he never felt threatened."

"He's always had a heart for children. He tends to let his guard down when he's around them. It's hard to feel threatened when he's surrounded by innocence. Something he hadn't been able to experience himself since that day," was Lyon's quiet reply.

Erza, who had been strangely silent since Lyon showed up, found her voice. "The armor around my heart."

They all looked her way when she said this. "What do you mean, Erza?" asked Lucy.

"Gray had often chided me in our younger days that I kept myself bound in armor, and wouldn't allow anyone to approach me. It was a very lonely time. I never would have thought that Gray was speaking from his own experience. He'd always understood that physical armor wasn't what truly protected me. It was the love and acceptance of my friends. My will to fight for them is what gives me strength. Gray only puts on his armor when he feels the need to fight."

"You guys are using too many metaphors, but I think I get the gists of it. So what do we do? Should we run up and get all mushy and hug it out or something?" came Natsu's response.

"You'll do no such thing. I only told you these things so you'd have better understanding. I don't want him thinking there's anything wrong with him. Yeah, it's weird, but it's better than feeling oppressed and powerless. Maybe you could cut him some slack. Just remember that he's not even aware of it half the time." Checking his watch, he added. "Well, I've got to get going. I'm actually supposed to pick him up for dinner before the Wintertide Parade. We're going to be performing together. I hope you won't take it the wrong way if I don't invite you. It's been a while since we've had a chance to reminisce, just the two of us."

"Not at all. Please pardon us for taking so much of your time," Erza replied.

Dessert arrived shortly after Lyon left, but they decided to take it to go. If Gray saw them on the way out, he'd want to join them. They wanted him to enjoy as much time with his "brother" as he could before going home. With that decision made, they took their food to stake out a nice viewing spot for the parade. It was a lovely day for a picnic.

"Gray-ni! That was amazing!"

As soon as Gray stepped away from the crowded vendors stall, he was encompassed in as tight a glomp as a five-year-old girl could muster. The parade was magnificent. Lyon and he had chosen to perform various folktales from their homeland of Isval, with Gray creating the various props and settings, and Lyon bringing all kinds of heroes, villains, and creatures to life. It was a bold move to render these tales with no narrator or dialogue, but the rich sceneries and well choreographed fights and moving portrayals were a sight to behold. Needless to say, Kyleigh was enthralled.

“It pleases me beyond all the heavens that my lady enjoyed herself, little princess. Where are your aunt and uncle? You didn’t run off again, did you?”

“We’re right here, Gray-San. Thank you again for all your hard work. You really didn’t have to spend so much time with our little Kyleigh, but we’ll always appreciate it,” Kyleigh’s aunt said breathlessly as she and her husband caught up to the two. “It’s time to go, baby girl. Say buy to Big Brother Gray, now. “

Kyleigh turned her eyes to Gray and said sadly, “You have to go home now?”

Gray set the tray of drinks he’d bought on a nearby table so he could rearrange Kyleigh on his hip. “Not until tomorrow. How about, if you’re auntie and uncle say it’s okay, I come by in the morning and take you out for breakfast with my friends. You’ve been wanting to meet them all day.”

With a quick turn towards her family, she implored, “Can we, pleeease?”

“Only if you can get home to bed right away, or you’ll sleep right through breakfast,” her uncle replied with mirth.

“Oh, no! I gotta go or I’ll miss our play date! Buy, Gray-ni!” With a quick kiss on his cheek, she was handed off to her uncle, and they were soon lost in the crowd.

“I saw that little blush!”

“Yeah, Snowflake! I never new you were such a softy!”

Lucy and Natsu were aglow with warmth and humor, but Gray wasn’t about to point out the blush on their own cheeks. He knew what they saw and how they really felt about it, so he could give them a pass.

“So I take it you enjoyed the show?”

“That ice dragon was awesome! I wanna fight one right now! Where’s Lyon?”

“He went with his team back to the guild hall. We’re gonna meet up for breakfast tomorrow if you want to join.”

“Of course. We would never stand up a princess on her little play date,” Erza said with laughter in her voice.

“You heard all that, huh?”

“I thought it was adorable. Erza and I were giddy all day watching you with the kids.”

“You guys were watching me all day?” Gray asked with an weirded out expression on his face.

“Of course not. Why would we need to do such a thing? We were merely enjoying all the festivities and happened to see you here and there. Nothing more,” Erza replied aloofly.

“Uh huh,” he said, unconvinced. But whatever. It’s been a long day. “Well, you saved me a trip to find you guys. I hope you’re thirsty. I got you all the official drink of the First Frost Festival.” Gray took a drink out of the tray and handed one to each of his team mates. They were each different colors, and had strange, dark balls floating in them.

Lucy asked, “Are these made from ice?”

Gray gave a bemused look as he said, “It *is* a festival celebrating all things icy and cold. Try it.”

A little perplexed, they each took tentative sips. Happy almost choked on the strangely chewy ball in his drink, but after another try, he was sold. “Hmmm! Delicious! What is it?”

“They’re bubble tea smoothies. All the venders sell them. But that one over there is special. It’s the only one that sells the special ones.”

“Spicy cinnamon!? Awesome! Is there any more left? Happy, let’s get in line, quick!”

“Aye, sir!”

“And off they go,” Said Gray as he sipped at his green tea smoothie.

“I love passion fruit. Thanks, Gray. It’s really good. But what’s so special about them?”

“Hmm? Not all of them. Just hers.”

A little confused, Lucy looked to the side to see Erza with an almost euphoric look on her face. Her cheeks were rosy, her eyes wide in joy and wonder. She seemed to take a moment to savor every sip of the cup of perfection.

“It’s strawberry,” he said with a smirk. “That vendor owns a bunch of greenhouses. He has strawberries all year round. He mentioned that to me as I was helping him set up shop yesterday. Thought you’d enjoy it.”

Erza was still lost in the explosion of flavor, but not too lost to grab Gray in a bone-crushing hug with one arm while she sipped from the other.

Lucy looked on with laughter, before she decided it’d be best to keep an eye on Natsu and Happy. “I’m gonna catch up to the other two before they start something. You wanna meet up at the hotel?”

Erza, taking a break from the ambrosia, released Gray and replied, “We’ll wait and all walk back together.”

Taking her leave, Lucy didn’t try to hide the smile on her face. She truly was blessed with such wonderful friends.

Enjoying the delightfully chewy bubble from her cup, she looked up at Gray to thank him for the consideration. He beat her to it.

“No thanks are needed. I wanted to surprise you with something I knew you’d enjoy. And also, to apologize for being gruff with you earlier. I know you meant well.”

Erza felt equal parts happy and sad at that. She’s glad he wanted to do things like this for her, but she’s sad that she made him feel like he owed her anything. “No apology is necessary. I need to learn to relax more. This is a festival after all. Besides, you looked like you had everything under control. You really had a captivated audience today.”

“Yeah, the parade went pretty well. It was fun.”

“The parade was amazing. But I was talking about those kids you were playing with. They were having the time of their lives, I think. And you seemed especially taken by that little girl.”

A shadow passed over his eyes for a moment before they lit up again. He said with a sad smile, “Yeah, Kyleigh. She’s a precious little thing. Full of life and spirit. She’s gonna be a heartbreaker, that one. She’s so strong. Admirably so... Especially with what happened to her family.”

Sensing a shift in his mood, she asked somberly, “What happened?”

“A pack of Wyverns happened. Took out almost half the villagers before they were sated. Her mother hid her in a crevice in the wall surrounding the village. It was barely enough to fit her. Her aunt and uncle aren’t related by blood. She was her mother’s best friend, so she took Kyleigh in, moved her here with her husband. Been raising her since she was two.”

There was a melancholy air about them. No wonder he was so taken by that little girl.

He brightened immediately. “It’s fine. She’s happy. Her guardians are wonderful people. And she’s always full of joy. It’s almost contagious.”

“Well in that case, I look forward to our play date tomorrow.”

“You really were paying attention, weren’t you?”

“Not so much. But we’re trying to.”

Deciding to ignore that vague response, Gray felt a bout of mischievousness coming on. It’d been a long, tiring day, but oddly enough, he was feeling a little restless. Maybe he’d napped too long, or his opponents during the snow ball fight weren’t challenging enough, but he was itching for a little tussle. Reaching down to gather some of the snow lightly dusting

the ground, he stood up while forming a firmly packed ball. “Erza, since we’re in a pretty jovial mood right now, I’d like to apologize in advance, and beg for mercy against any recompense you may require of me later.”

After meeting her eyes and then glancing ahead, she followed his gaze towards an oblivious Natsu, who was finishing up the last of a pile of spicy cinnamon bubble tea smoothies. Instead of getting mad as she usually would, she saw the glint of mirth in his eyes, and decided that maybe he deserved to let off a little steam after a hard day’s work. After all, even she’d come to realize that their fights were just a means to show their respect and affection towards each other.

Not that she’d make a habit of this.

Simply taking a sip from her drink while turning her gaze towards a rather fascinating looking cloud in the sky, Gray took her hint and gave her the biggest, most childlike grin she’d seen on his face in a long time. He reared back his arm and let loose with all the force he could. Natsu almost fell from his chair at the impact of the unpleasantly cold slush on his face. He stood up immediately and zeroed in on his target. With a look of wrath mixed with excitement in his eyes, he started gathering snow as Lucy backed away in an act of self preservation.

“You’re going down for that, Frost Bite! Get ready to feel the burn! I’m all fired up!”

“You tell him, Natsu!” Happy cheered from above, well out of the way of the coming crossfire.

“Bring it on, Match Stick!” With that, Gray flung his shirt off towards Erza’s general direction, and pandemonium ensued. It wasn’t long before an all out snow war started between all the citizens gathered in the immediate area. Gray’s team had the advantage of an unending supply of snow, as the other side failed to realize that the snow on the ground was there only by Gray’s leave. Not that he’d take advantage of that fact, and make the other side’s weapons suddenly disappear. That’d be unsportsmanlike.

Erza looked on with an exasperated sigh. She bent down to pick up his shirt as Lucy approached. “You’re not going to join in the fun?”

Lucy scoffed. “As if. I’m not getting in between those two monsters in the middle of a war. So, I guess you’re not gonna scold him for losing his shirt just now?”

Looking down at Gray’s shirt in her hands, she just shook her head and smiled. Not today.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!