This has been beta-read by *Hiryo* for his Ranma know-how and *Justlovereadin’* for his Fairy Tail knowledge. It has not been edited by *Michael Duggan*, so there will no doubt be more small mistakes, but I hope that doesn’t detract too much from the joy of reading it.

**Chapter 17: Repercussions, Discussions and Enforced Vacations**

Ranma and the others wearily made their way through the woods, reaching Jenny relatively quickly despite the fact most of them were having trouble putting one foot in front of the other. Kneeling next to the blonde woman, Ranma breathed a sigh of relief as she felt both the breath on her hand over Jenny’s mouth and a pulse underneath her fingers. Jenny was still alive despite all the shaking and crashing going on. “That's good, that’s damn good. But I wish we could do more for her.”

“Dwelling on what we cannot do will not get us any money at all, right?!” bellowed Hoteye. Ironically of all of them, he was the only one that still had enough magical energy to seem energetic.

That wasn't to say that if Hoteye had tried he could get away. Ranma was pretty certain that at this point she could still beat the tall man up and Erza was standing close by with a large and pointy looking pike, Bacchus was watching him carefully if blearily, and Loke too was nearby just in case, one arm free from where he was helping Erza along.

*Although if Mirajane would be able to spare any attention for him from watching Seilah is a question. Still, I don't think he will try anything,* Ranma thought, looking at the large man. During their walk, Hoteye had engaged Erza in a conversation about Wally as well as what had occurred in the Tower of Heaven after Brain had chosen to take him away with the others. The knowledge that the Oración Seis had continued to work with Jellal after he had taken command of the tower was both new too and bothered the heck out of Hoteye. Watching Ranma could almost see the scales falling from Hoteye’s eyes as he slowly broke through what remained of Brain’s brainwashing and indoctrination.

Setting that aside, Ranma turned to the others. “Okay now that we’re back here we need to organize a bit before moving on. “Mira, Seilah, you two gather up some cloth rags.”

Mira was about to object, seeing as they were in this middle of a forest. But then she sighed as she looked around at all of the dead bodies that were almost literally everywhere in sight. Bodies and parts of bodies littered this area of the forest and for leagues in every direction.

“Hoteye,” Ranma said, trying not to think along the same lines, “can you use your powers to create, like, a bed made of stone or something? We need to make certain Jenny’s head doesn’t move.”

Hoteye frowned then slowly nodded. “I can use my powers to reshape the land, create a concave sort of area to hold her body, and then remove my power from that that section of ground so that it hardens immediately. It will be a little tough but I think it is possible.”

“Good,” Ranma said, moving over to a tree, “Erza, help me out here. Bacchus, see if you can find those SE bikes Racer and his fellow speedsters were using. Loke, find Angel and get her back here to watch. Unless you think you can help create the bed?”

Loke shook his head. “I barely have enough magic left to stay corporeal, let alone do anything else.”

He knelt down next to Jenny, moving hair out of her face for a moment, staring at it sadly. “She's going to have scars you know. Such a pity, she’s one of the most beautiful women in all Ishgar.”

“Yeah well scars build character,” Ranma muttered, moving off.

Mira turned at that, her eyes flashing as she was about to bite Ranma's head off, but Erza caught her gaze and shook her head, pointing downwards. Mira followed her finger and saw that Ranma's hands were shaking, clenching and unclenching as he stared at a nearby tree. At that sight Mira subsided, nodding once to Erza before turning away, glaring at Seilah and jerking her head quickly to the side. “Come on, let's get this over with.”

Behind them, Ranma stared at a tree honestly unable to remember what he had been about to do for a moment, his distress at what had happened to Jenny causing his mind to go blank. Jenny had been one of the people that Ranma thought could handle this mission and he still thought that. During the ambush back in town, Jenny had proven her worth in several ways, helping Wendy with the wounded getting the two other Dragon slayers Gajeel and Natsu on their feet and then even helping with the other S-class mages. And in the fight in the woods, she had held her own entirely well, only to be faced with an opponent that she had never anticipated, that Ranma had never anticipated.

Ranma knew he had made the right decision on bringing Jenny along. Ranma knew he had made the right decision to come after the Oración Seis. He had even, probably, made the right decision to push through the smaller dark guilds. If not for the Devil’s arrival, that plan would've worked.

But none of that did anything to assuage his guilt and an immense amount of anger directed towards the Devil’s including Seilah. Ranma knew intellectually that Seilah had repented and that she had been against the attack entirely. For some reason his interactions with her, which he really wasn't willing to look at too closely at the moment, along with Wendy's had made an impression on her. *What does it say about Devils that even Wendy's moments of honest kindness and appreciation got through to her like that?*

Yet despite that, it was all Ranma could do after seeing those scars on Jenny's face to control himself from turning and smash Seilah's face in. *But that won't make my guilt go away* Ranma thought, *and like it or not, I was the one who put Jenny in this position, who put them all in this position. I was team lead, this was my mission and I was the one that came to them for help.*

Ranma was broken out of her thoughts by Erza grabbing her shoulder forcefully and turning the shorter redhead around, slamming her back against the tree she had just been staring at for more than five minutes. “Don't,” she ordered, and Ranma’s eyes widened. “Do not beat yourself over this! Do not assume all the guilt from this event. Whatever is going through your head, this was not your fault! Do you know why war is called a democracy?”

Ranma had to think for a moment and when she did, her lips quirked into a twitch that could never have been called a smile. “Because the enemy gets a vote too.”

“That's right,” Erza said with a nod, an answering dark smirk on her own face. “No plan survives contact with the enemy, that's why they're called the enemy. You want to hear anymore hoary old aphorisms? I've got several.”

Ranma surprised himself by chuckling at that and Erza smiled a little more naturally before going on more seriously, “Ranma, this mission was a disaster in many ways but it is no fault of yours. None of us anticipated that even after all of the shakeups going on with the Magic Council that there would still be spies within it able to tell the Oración Seis that we were after them. Perhaps we should have anticipated that someone would put two and two together and get four given the length of time it took us to get from Magnolia into Seven, but no one else thought of that either. Perhaps we should have anticipated an ambush, perhaps we should have anticipated one including poison.” She shrugged. “I'll grant you that one, considering that one of the enemies was a poison Dragon Slayer.”

“But even so, if they hadn't allied with Raven Tail, the poison wouldn't have done nearly as much damage to everyone. We never anticipated that Raven Tail and Oración Seis would be able to work together. And there was **no way we could have**,” Erza nearly roared the last five words into the shorter redhead’s face. “Raven Tail has always gone its own way it has never ever worked with any other guild. Even now I'm not certain how Brain was able to get them to agree to it this time.”

“Yet even with that, it would've worked out. If not for the devils,” Ranma said, her eyes flashing with anger.

Erza nodded seriously then thumped her in the chest with a finger, hard enough to leave a bruise and set Ranma's breasts to bouncing a little. “Exactly! **Another** enemy, who we didn't even know was around to vote, as it were, on the outcome of the battle. Again, nothing we knew of, or could possibly have anticipated could lead us to assume that they were around! You cannot second-guess your decisions hindsight in this instance serves no one!”

“I know all that,” Ranma said, pushing her hand away, before tapping her own forehead then her chest. “I know that up here. But not here. It doesn't make the guilt go away.”

“It shouldn't, but it should at least decrease it,” Erza said with a sigh. “Now come on, let's get working.”

Between the two of them, they cut out several long staffs, then splinted Ultear’s leg in several places, bandaging her badly fried foot as best as they could, which wasn’t much and then they moved back to Hoteye. He had created two makeshift beds of earth under the two wounded women. The ground had shifted to a clay composition and look, slowly lowering the two women into the ground for a few inches, before then rising up like a flowering pod. Jenny’s bed cradled her head very gingerly, keeping it still as possible.

These beds were still soft and Erza and Ranma pushed the long staffs through one side and out the other, before Hoteye slowly pulled his magic out of the earth, allowing the beds to harden as he went before pulling it away from them. This created two hard, rather heavy, but solid and stiff beds for the wounded.

Once that was done, Ranma went to work on further protecting, even though Ranma had to cringe at the very idea that she might have brain damage of some kind. As she was working, she couldn't stop herself from looking at Jenny’s scars once more. Her face was heavily marked with small slashes here and there from the visor of her helmet shattering, but Ranma felt most of those would disappear. The three wounds that would almost certainly leave scars was a long mark along one cheek, a cut across her nose, and then another scar going up and into her hairline along the right side of her head. Looking at that one, Ranma knew that led into the soft area Seilah had reported feeling, where Jenny’s skull had been broken.

Pulling her attention away from that, Ranma continued her task before looking over at the other bed where Loke and Mira were at work making Ultear’s leg comfortable. Erza had moved off into the woods, to see if there were any survivors among the dark guilds along with Hoteye, continuing their earlier discussion as they did.

Ranma honestly didn't think there would be other survivors. For one thing, even those unconscious or already dead had attacked them under Seilah’s curse, although thankfully the dead ones hadn't been able to use their magic. When those same people to come around again, he doubted that any of them had been pulling punches. Ranma at least hadn't been very gentle in putting them down before Ranma was taken out by the decision to eat the cursed water Torafuzar has launched at him and Mira.

Looking down at herself now, Ranma could still see large swirls of black magic on her skin here and there, disappearing under her shirt and around the neck and sleeve. *Blech, I always thought tattoos were ugly frankly and now I probably look like a tattooed skank! Someone up there has a very bad sense of humor. And come to think of it, they didn't disappear when I was away from Seilah. That's not good.*

*Regardless, we wiped out at least 10 dark guilds here, not including our actual target. I suppose from that perspective it's actually been a successful mission. But if Wendy and the others…* Ranma cut herself off from that thought. She couldn't think about it right now, not just wouldn't think about it because it served no purpose, no, she **couldn't** think about it. Because if she did, the anger at Seilah that she had been slowly building up inside of her since they had returned to Jenny would burst out, and she would do something she would regret for the rest of his/her life: break the martial arts code and harm a defenseless prisoner.

Taking her mind off those thoughts, Ranma concentrated on what she had actually been looking at in the first place, Loke and Mira working on Ultear. “Did you find any more wounds beyond her leg?”

“Well unsurprisingly, her foot is her worst injury, beyond that a dislocated knee and a shattered femur on that same leg, like we already knew. Beyond that Ultear's got a few cracked ribs, the wrist on her other hand is broken and she has a **big** bruise right over one of her breasts,” Mira said, before her hand smacking out into Loke's face as she pulled the ruins of Ultear’s shirt up to look underneath, noting that the bruise went a ways around her side, which Mira hadn’t been able to see before. “Don't look idiot! This is seriously is not the time!”

Loke shrugged. “Sorry,” he said looking away before turning his attention back to Ranma. “Her foot, as Mira said, is in her worst injury but she is suffering from severe extreme magical exhaustion. It's not life threatening but it could impact her mind.”

Mages, once they activated their magic could live without it, their bodies would keep going on. But if they pushed too far, the lack of magic would severely harm their brains.

Ranma choked off a gasp at that, one hand moving up to rub her face and squeezed her nose between two fingers. “Dammit! Another one who might have brain damage?!”

“It's not your fault,” Loke said with a shake of it or of his head. “If anything, it’s the Devil’s.”

Growling a little Mira looked over at Seilah, but Ranma shook his head, looking in the same direction. “No. Though, I fully believe that this mission would've gone a lot better without the devils sticking their noses in, this was a FUBAR from the very beginning. And I have to take some of the blame for that.”

Seilah looked uncomfortable under their gazes, but didn't look away, staring at the wounded the entire time. “You are notto blame for that. The Oración Seis’ information network is among the best in Ishgar, and they hid themselves very well after the initial shakeup that hit Fiore's Magic Council. They knew almost immediately that you were coming after them and went out of their way to make it seem as if they didn't. And Brain’s involvement with Raven Tail caught even us by surprise.”

“Let me guess, your spies were spying on them? Just as much as they were there to spy on the Magic Council?” Ranma asked.

“Exactly,” Seilah said with a nod. “And our spies have a, what is the phrase, a leg up?”

When the others nodded, she went on. “They have a leg up on most, since many of them do not even know their reporting to us. In many cases, I do not know how my Guild Master Mard Geer was able to do that, though in a few, they are responding to long-term spellwork by my curse. They are ordered to drop off information here, or go into a bar here and talk to an individual there every other week, passing on information in such a way that they do not even know they are doing it.”

“That curse of yours is a little too powerful,” Ranma groused.

“And yet all of you were easily able to overcome both my puppets and me,” Seilah said with a shrug. “So in that area, you are incorrect. My Absolute Command Curse is not all it… the phrase is, cracked up to be, is it not?”

The others nodded, and she smiled wanly. “Such interesting phrases you humans come up with. Far more interesting than most of your stories in point of fact.”

“Stories?” Mira said growling a little. “You mean our lives?”

“Those and your actual written novels,” Seilah said with a nod. “I have read every story I could, and very few of them held my interest. There are a few treasures among them, but I suppose that could be said for human stories as well.”

Erza and Hoteye came back at that moment and Hoteye asked, “So, as the one in charge of this group Ranma, what will happen to myself and this one?” he asked, gesturing toward Seilah.

Ranma ground her teeth as another flare of anger went through her. “Seilah's future will depend on what we find we get back to town,” he said coldly. “I'm not going to make any promises or even predictions of what might happen in the future there. As for you, are you willing to turn King’s Evidence?”

“I am,” the larger man said formally, bowing his shaggy head. “So long as I am able to contact my brother, and I will be given my freedom afterward to live with him, I will give every piece of information I have.”

“Answer me this then,” Loke said, gesturing all around them, “how did you all set this up? There is no way that this many dark guilds moving into the area wouldn't have been spotted by someone. Seven isn't like the former countries of Sin and Enca, it's civilized. Hell, near the edge of this forest, there's farmland and a town within a day’s ride so…”

“Ah,” Hoteye said with a wide smile. “That would be because my former master was able to break the Bank of Ishgar’s special teleportation arrays. He did so more than three years ago and we've been using them ever since.” He laughed wildly. “After all, money does make the world go round, right?! And we had to get some from somewhere.”

Ranma scowled at that. “Are you saying you’ve been stealing from the bank?”

“Quite a lot,” Hoteye said with a nod. “Most of it was spent but I know where a few of the guilds hid their excess cash, and where Brain had an emergency cache of his own.”

“Hoteye, that, that alone means that you've just bought your freedom,” Ranma said slowly shaking her head. The Bank of Ishgar had long refused to share that secret with anyone, despite the fact that it could do a lot of good in capable hands. The Kings would be salivating at the very idea of getting their hands on that, even if it was only of a limited utility. *And if the bank wants to bitch, the Kings can do something about it. Spying on the bank is one thing, taking advantage of a windfall like this is an entirely different and they can hardly be blamed for it then.*

“Indeed,” Hoteye said with a nod. “I also know most of our spies. And will willingly point them out, give their names or whatever the case may be. All I want, is my brother, myself, and enough money to live an easy life with him.”

“Done,” Ranma said with a nod. “By my authority is Ranger, you are now under my protection as King’s Evidence. We’ll talk with Meredrain as soon as we get back to town.”

“How?” Hoteye asked, blinking.

Ranma smirked. “There are secrets even more hush-hush than the teleportation arrays of the Bank of Ishgar.”

“Brain didn't know anything much about Rangers at all, you all are rather mysterious. Although, I will say that there were rumors about a super-powerful Ranger dealing with magical issues at the king's command going around the dark guilds of late,” Hoteye replied, somewhat apologetically.

Ranma frowned at that, but decided to put off thinking about that. *We'll see how wide those rumors have spread, before I decide what to do about them, or if I even have to do about them. I like a lot of what the Ranger badge did, but some of it, well…*

He shook his head at that, as Hoteye had continued speaking gesturing towards Ultear. “And in the spirit of our new contract, I have to tell you what I overheard about this one. When we returned to our cave and Brain was talking to her in such a way that indicated that she worked for one of the other members of the alliance.”

Ranma looked at him sharply, “Explain.”

Hoteye explained what had occurred after he and Brain had teleported back to the cave that had currently been their hideout. As he finished everyone else frowned, looking at Ultear. “But if that's the case, why did they fight? I meant it was freaking obvious that she fought her heart out,” Bacchus said for them all.

“I don't know,” Ranma said coldly, “but we’ll get answers one way or another out of her I think.

“That's fine and all, but what about her?” Mira asked insistently, pointing at Seilah.

“Like I said,” Ranma said, latching his eyes on to Mira. “What happens to Seilah will be decided after we return to the town. She told us that she at least tried to keep Wendy and possibly the others alive by creating hiding places for them, though admittedly the only one she knew was still alive when she did that was Wendy. Still, that was before she was hit by Nirvana, of she was able to I'd say she's earned if not her freedom, then her parole.”

Seilah understood that word, and moved forward slightly, before dropping to her knees in front of Ranma bowing her head. “I wish to do what I can to make amends for today. Though the effect of Nirvana has dissipated, I still feel the emotions it woke within me, the remorse for our actions. I have always been somewhat interested by humans, and have never understood the amount of scorn the other devils to feel towards you all. Envy and hate yes, there are many things among humans to be envious for, and many of you are dirty, smelly, and…”

“We get the point thank you,” Erza said with a growl. Then she sniffed at herself for a moment before blushing as Ranma looked at her with amusement. “Well, you go and smell yourself then!” she huffed angrily.

“Nope!” Ranma said with a mocking little pop of her lips when she said the ‘p’. “I don't want to knock myself out like that. Although maybe when we get back to town, we can find a bath.”

At that all of the girls there stared off into the distance before sighing hopefully. Hoteye just laughed boisterously at that, then Loke and Bacchus exchanged a glance and a grin, high-fiving surreptitiously as they both had the idea that was one bath that they would love to see.

“I had thought Devils were simply better than humans. We did not destroy the forest we do not fight amongst ourselves, we Devils of the Book, we had loyalty to one another and our purpose. We strove, we learned, and even if you humans were better at some things like cooking and writing, we were tougher, stronger and we could live forever. But then I was betrayed, betrayed by my lover. The one Etherious who I trusted the most, my lover, was willing to sacrifice me to live herself. That makes us no better than humans doesn't it?”

“I'd like to think that a lot of humans would try to rise above that kind of thing,” Ranma said with a frown, but then shrugged. “Still, I'll take your oath and I'll protect you if Wendy and the others are still alive. If not,” Ranma said, leaning down so that her face was right in front of Seilah's, “if not, you will pay for it just as your two companions did.”

Seilah did not quail under that look, she simply nodded her head. “I understand. A desire for vengeance like that is also something we and humans share.”

“That wouldn’t be vengeance, that would be justice,” Mira muttered, before turning away as Ranma seemed to shake his head at that.

The group then moved through the forest. Bacchus had found several dozen SE bikes. Ranma and Bacchus then connected four of them into two, stringing the beds containing Jenny and Ultear, while Angel shared a bike with Bacchus. “After all, how often is a lush like me going to be this close to a hottie like her? And without her screaming and trying to kill me?” He said, putting Angel on the bike in front of him on the bike. She was then tied down there and he grinned even more at the feel of her rear under him.

Loke chuckled at that, finding it somehow fitting while Seilah looked at the bikes stonily.

“What is it?” Ranma asked looking at Seilah as she finished, locking the steering of the second bike latched to Jenny’s bed. She of course had to then latch the wheels together at the spokes so that she had at essentially created the world's most odd-looking car out of two different bikes. It wouldn't last for long, and it certainly wasn't going to be up for any real maneuvering, but it would at least give Jenny the smoothest ride he could give her. Nearby this same treatment was being dealt to another two bikes and Ultear’s bed by Erza and Hoteye, the redhead proving surprisingly adept with her hands.

“I do not know how to ride,” Seilah said apologetically.

Ranma sighed at that, then gestured behind herself. “Get on.”

“I could simply fly,” Seilah replied, sounding almost flustered.

“None of us can though, and we’re not letting you out of your sight whatever your parole,” Mira said growling angrily at the Devil girl. Both the attack she had been a part of, the fact she was a Devil, and the fact Seilah was acting so docile now pissed Mira off something fierce.

At the same time, Erza ground her teeth at the idea of Seilah and Ranma sharing a bike for some reason, the feeling of it causing her eyes to widen. *This feeling, is this jealousy? How very unpleasant.*

“Sorry,” Ranma said with a sigh, “I think on that one I'd be overruled.” And, though it went against his/her normal personality quite a lot, Ranma wasn't feeling very forgiving either at the moment.

The young redhead blushed hotly as Seilah moved behind her, sitting down and hugging her around the middle from behind as she had seen Bacchus do with Angel. “Like this?”

“I guess,” Ranma said, flushing and both thankful and cursing the fact she hadn’t been able to change back to his male body yet. As it was Seilah’s breasts were pressing into the back and sides of her head as they simply squished against the back of her head rather than ‘his’ back. *Gahhh, they are so sooooft and giving, feels like they’re trying to suck me in! On the other hand, if I was a guy just now I’d bet my reaction to that’d be visible, and that’s one more can of worms I don’t want to open right now.*

“Let's go already,” Loke said, pouting irritably. He had offered to bike with Mira (but not Erza, Loke was still traumatized by the one time he’d tried to hit on Erza a few years back) and not only had Mira refused him, Seilah hadn’t even looked at him when commenting on her lack of driving skills.  *How in the world am I the only guy here who isn't currently hugging a woman!? There is something seriously wrong with the world.*

After that the group left, the roar of their engines preventing any further conversation except between Ranma and Seilah and neither was in the mood to talk. Ranma was worried about what they would find, and Seilah was in a very introspective, almost brooding mood, as she replayed the events of the battle how her words had never been taken seriously, how both Kyoka and Torafuzar had made light of her worries. And of course the moment Kyoka sacrificed Seilah to save Kyoka’s own life replayed continuously in her head. They had always been close, partners both in a literal and sexual sense, they had even exchanged words of affection many times. But all of that had mattered not at all. When Kyoka had felt her life was in danger, she had taken the most expedient way out of danger, by using Seilah as a shield.

About an hour out from the forest, their journey was interrupted by a blast of lightning as Laxus crashed to the ground nearby. Underneath his arms Laxus carried Cana, Lucy, and Wendy, and he dropped them to the ground going to one knee and breathing out deeply as he did so, shaking his head to clear it like they were so many parcels. He looked at the oncoming bikes, and then smiled wearily as he pushed himself to his feet. Laxus hadn't actually used much power against Ivan, who, despite that huge spell Ivan had tried on him, had gone through two fights already before he clashed with Laxus. But teleporting four people along with him in his Lightning Flash spell was an immense strain.

“Ranma-nii!” Wendy shouted, scrambling to her feet and racing towards them.

Ranma's face lit up at the site of her, and she waved back excitedly, a grin on her face as she shouted behind her, “Well, it seems as if you protected Wendy at least!”

Behind him Seilah nodded, the new emotions within her swirling in a new and somewhat happy pattern. “That, that is good,” she murmured.

But Wendy and the older two women had paused as they stared at Seilah on the back of Ranma's bike, their eyes flying wide in shock and fear. Cana moved to one side quickly, pulling out a few combat cards, while Lucy grabbed at her waist, gripping it tightly as she prepared to summon Sagittarius and Taurus, even crouching down, ready for combat as a thin whip appeared in one hand. “What is she doing here?!” all three shouted.

“That is a long story,” Ranma shook her head as the bikes slowed to a halt.

Ranma had intended to sweep Wendy into a hug, but Seilah got off their bike first. Then, astonishing everyone else there she went to her knees in front of Wendy and the others, actually pressing her forehead down into the ground. “I am sorry for what we did. I tried to talk to the other two out of attacking you, but we were given the order to observe and take advantage of the fights between your selves and the Oración Seis to kill as many from both sides as we could and the other two would not turn away from attacking the town.”

“Why the hell should we believe you!?” Cana snarled while Lucy looked somewhat bemused, her eyes straying to Cana’s hand, where two of her fingers were missing now.

“I do not know,” Seilah said, still with her head pressed to the ground. “I have no knowledge of how to ask for forgiveness, as such an emotion has never occurred to me in the first place. This manner, which I read of in a book from Minstrel, of addressing the issue seemed the easiest.”

Staring at the kowtowing Devil, Wendy held up a hand, speaking slowly. “She, Seilah, she could have buried us all under the rubble. She could have killed us for certain, and it, it wouldn’t’ve really taken that much time with her powers. Instead, she convinced the others she already had. Is, is that right?”

Seilah nodded. “That is correct. Then again, I could not stop them from fighting your brother and his force, so even that is my guilt to bear.”

“How many of you survived?” Ranma asked seriously looking between the still kowtowing Seilah and the three women.

“Actually…” Lucy began, looking over at Cana, who scowled, looking away.

“Wendy’s got a point.” Cana said gruffly, not looking at any of them. “Only two of us, Ichiya and Sherry died in their attack. Ichiya died protecting me from a blast from one of the other devils, that big bruiser with the fish face. What happened to him?” She asked, her hands clenched with both remembered fear and shame: shame that she’d had to be saved, shamed that it had only been the devils being careless that allowed any of them to live.

“I killed that one I think,” Ranma said looking over at Erza who nodded in confirmation. “I wasn't exactly in my right mind at the time, but yeah he's dead.

“And so's the other one, Ranma turned her entire upper body into so much slurry!” Mira said with relish. *While part of me wants to have eaten their souls, that sight is still going to be a memory I’ll treasure.*

Wendy moved in front of Seilah, reaching down and pulling her to her feet or at least to her knees, looking her in the face. “I'll forgive you, I think. Like I said, you could have buried us all, instead you created those little domes around us. And… I felt like you didn't want to be there anyway. But I don't think the others will be so forgiving.”

“We’ll keep Seilah hidden for now. Seilah, when we come within sight of the town, you and I will go off and find a small hiding place for you, before I rejoin the others. For now though Wendy, do you have any magical reserves left?” Ranma asked.

“Hai Ranma-nii,” Wendy said with a sharp nod. “I've been resting, and eating Cana's air cards. They were kind of tasty,” she finished, actually licking her lips before flushing and looking away, like a little girl caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

Chuckling at that while Cana laughed, Ranma gestured over to the wounded women. “In that case could you see to Jenny… and Ultear, I suppose. Jenny is your priority though.”

“That's why I brought these two along,” Laxus said with a shake of his head towards Cana and Lucy. “Besides having missed out the fight in the town, Lucy has a few new spirits that she can use as support, and Cana's cards can also help you and maybe the others regain some energy.”

Lucy nodded, then moved around the others, towards Loke, who bowed from the waist. “My lady, I have done it! I have avenged my previous master and gotten her keys!”

“That's nice, but first thing’s first,” Lucy said, reaching for Loke’s hand and closing her eyes. There was a brief pulse of magic going from her and into Loke, before she stepped away with a smile. “There, you should be good to go for a while now. Don't hesitate to head back to the spirit world if you're feeling tired again.”

Loke smiled at that then Lucy took the keys from him, before looking over at Ranma. “Um, Ranma, I know she pissed you off, but would you mind giving Aquarius back her urn? It, um it doesn’t actually do anything for you, does it? And if you return it, I can get her to use it to give you a power up.”

The urn wasn’t a regular urn, it had been crafted in the Celestial Spirit realm and while it had several enchantments on it, if you didn’t have Celestial Spirit magic, you couldn’t use it. Ranma had found that to his cost the day after he had taken if from Aquarius. So she simply scowled, nodding. The power up right now would be fantastic, giving him some energy back, and Ranma was frankly done with being in ‘her’ female form right now.

“Might as well open one of these gates at the same time as I’ll be summoning Apus,” she said, holding out the golden key that told Lucy she was getting closer to her dream of having all the Zodiac keys, ignoring the look Bacchus was staring at her in shock. He knew something about Celestial Spirit mages, and the idea of one summoning two spirits at once was incredible.

Now that Ranma had agreed to give the urn back though, Lucy could care less about the looks other people were giving her. *Time to get to the bottom of what’s bothering Aquarius by going to the person who knows her best, Scorpio! Besides, I’ve been dying to meet the guy who could put up with her for so long.* “Open, Gate of the Scorpion! Scorpio!”

An instant later the gate opened and Scorpio appeared, “We are… Scorpio!” Upon arrival the male spirit bowed deeply towards Lucy, “We are, yes, Scorpio welcomes his new user, Lucy! We are happy to make a contract with Aquarius’s mistress!”

Now that he wasn’t fighting for his life against him and his user, Ranma was able to make out more details of the other spirit. He was slightly taller than Ranma but of marginally slimmer build in the shoulders, showing off a set of pecs under an odd red and gold flower-shaped neck ornament, matching something like a kilt he wore over a pair of black shorts, with the same kind of bandages martial artists used on his legs and forearms. His large tail ended in a gun shape at the end, which Ranma had already made note of in the fight in the town. His hair was oddly two different colors, white and red.

“That’s good to hear Scorpio, would you mind making a contract with me now?” Lucy asked, even as she opened the Gate of the Heavenly bird, directing it to hover over Erza and Mira. “Although that kind of brings up a point I’d like to talk to you about. You see, Aquarius hasn’t been responding to my calls ever since her urn was stolen, and I want to make certain there’s nothing wrong with her that returning it won’t fix.” She looked a little apologetic, “And um, I’d like to make certain she doesn’t just turn around and attack the person who took it, because that would just send us all back to square one.”

Blinking, Scorpio felt at the magic stream feeding his corporeal form from Lucy then looked over at Loke and then to Apus. Loke simply smirked at him, while Apus bounced in place twittering its healing song as it zoomed from one girl to the other. *Amazing, she has so much power she is able to sustain all three of us like this?* Then Lucy’s question registered and he huffed. “We are, I would like to know the answer to that question actually. We are, Aquarius has been… odd of late, even when we’re together she seems distant, staring off into space and flushing.”

Now it was Lucy’s turn to blink, then she shook her head. “Um, I really don’t know what to make of that one.”

Loke however smirked then looked over at Ranma. “Ranma, can I ask you what led up to your taking Aquarius’s urn from her?”

“A bit of smack talk I think… yeah, I got in her face and shouted at her, then she shouted back I shouted again, she attacked, I ate it, then closed took her urn and booted her hard enough to send her back to the Celestial spirit realm,” Ranma said with some difficulty. *If I remembered every encounter with someone I’ve pissed off, I wouldn’t have any more room in my brain for anything else.*

“Hohoh,” Loke said, chuckling lecherously. “So it’s like that is it?”

“We are going to have issues if you’re thinking of Scorpio’s girlfriend like one of your human floozies,” Scorpio warned, his tail moving to point at Loke over his shoulder.

“I’m doing nothing of the sort my friend. But tell me, when you two are together, how do you act?” When he saw Scorpio look confused, Loke elaborated. “What I mean is, when you’re on dates, who takes the lead? Who sets the pace?”

“We are, Aquarius of course. We are, what do you take me for, a pervert? We are, of course the woman should set the pace,” Scorpio huffed.

“Ooh, I like him,” Mira murmured, getting nods from Cana and Lucy, though Erza was looking a little thoughtful and Bacchus was starting to grin.

“Ah you see, that’s nice and all, but perhaps Aquarius would like a little more variety in your encounters,” Loke said delicately.

“He means she might want ya ta take charge, ta call her names and such,” Bacchus supplied with a laugh. “Some girls are wild like that ya know?”

Scorpio blinked. “We are, do you think so?”

Blushing now and trying to avoid Cana’s speculative gaze Lucy sighed, and cancelled the Gate of the Heavenly Bird, before pulling out another golden key. “Well, there’s only one way to find out. Open, Gate of the Maiden! Virgo!”

Her maid-dressed spirit appeared instantly, kneeling in front of Lucy. “Mistress, you called?”

“Hey Virgo, do you think you could find Aquarius and tell her I have gotten her urn back for her, but she needs to come and collect it in person. She won’t respond to my key.” Lucy knew that it had been Aquarius who had saved her life from the poison, but the water spirit hadn’t actually spoken to her during that, or after she had recovered.

“If I can, will I receive some punishment?” Virgo asked hopefully.

“Er, actually, if I’m following this right, it might be Aquarius who receives some,” Ranma said, getting laughing nods from Loke and Bacchus and a thoughtful look from Scorpio.

Virgo’s smile widened noticeably at that. “Oh, that sounds almost as good!” With that she disappeared, coming back an instant later carrying the angry, spluttering form of Aquarius under one arm, depositing the mermaid onto her tail on the ground before Lucy then disappearing, unwilling to burden Lucy with their connection further.

Growling angrily, Aquarius rose to her formidable height, using her tail to add to it as she roared at Lucy, “Damn it you blonde bimbo, can’t you take a hint! And what’s with you pushing yourself like this right after nearly dying huh! You worry the scales off of me and then turn around and not only sustain me but that idiotic lion and… and…” She trailed off blushing as she realized who the other spirit Lucy was currently sustaining a magical connection to was. “Scorpio!?”

“We are, yes my love, it is I Scorpio!” Scorpio said with a smile, moving over to hug Aquarius around the shoulders. “We are, you should calm down, our Mistress Lucy is hoping to get your urn back, won’t that be nice?”

Aquarius smiled at the knowledge that the two of them would share the same contractor now, then flushed slightly as she looked at Scorpio then to Ranma, who she recognized from their encounter a few weeks ago. “O, oh, so the red-haired bint’s come to her senses and wants to apologize huh?”

“Excuse me!” Ranma growled, getting into her face by the simple expedient of grabbing Aquarius’s scale bathing suit and tugging her face down to Ranma’s level. “What was that!? You’re the one who was using that massive splash attack without even checking if there were other people around! What would ya have done if you’d caught some normal citizen up in that, huh!?”

Looking at the now visibly red face of his girlfriend, Scorpio’s eyes widened, and then he looked wildly over to Loke who nodded soberly, very visibly biting his lip to keep from laughing. Bacchus too was giving the male spirit a thumb’s up. *Right, so either Aquarius has suddenly found she’s interested in girls, which is a near impossibility after so long, or she really does like being, being challenged or something similar.* A small smile formed on his face as his tail flexed. *Well, I can do that!*

“We are, I think that’s about enough!” Scorpio said firmly, wrapping his tail around Aquarius’s middle and squeezing, pulling her back upright and against his chest roughly, one arm going around her middle to join his tail. “We are, Aquarius, I thought you knew the proper way to speak to our summoner. We are, and you also were apparently in the wrong when your urn was taken. We are, perhaps Hime is wrong, and you do not deserve your urn back?”

To one side of the couple Virgo burst into existence, sustaining herself and actually wiggling in place as she looked at this eagerly. Ranma wondered how the pink-haired spirit had known what was going on, or if she had just popped back in the moment, she could, but decided not to question it. Instead, she backed away hurriedly and when Scorpio held out a hand, Ranma handed the urn back and backed away, turning his attention to the others with the eagerness of the very embarrassed.

While this had been going on Wendy had been looking over Jenny, and as the drama around Lucy, Aquarius and Scorpio died down, Ranma moved away from the others, going to one knee behind her, and putting her arms around Wendy’s shoulders tightly, hugging her so hard she oofed at him, but Ranma didn’t care, so grateful she was still alive. “So, how is she?”

“…I think she has a concussion at the least. My magic can heal the physical trauma, but not the mental” Wendy said after a moment, her fingers moving through Jenny’s hair very gently along the scalp to one side of her head. Her magic had already dealt with most of the glass cuts on Jenny's face. Even the one on the cheek had dimmed noticeably, and she had healed the internal bleeding within the cracked skull before repairing the skull itself. The last two scars, the one over the nose and the one, which had led up into the shattered part of Jenny’s skull, were still angry and red though.

“I’m sorry, I just don't know enough about the brain to tell you for certain there’s been no permanent damage done,” Wendy went on with a sigh, “I’ll finish healing her skull though, that shouldn’t do any more harm anyway. But she really should meet with the Porlyusica when we get back.”

“We’re not going to go back all that way to Magnolia just for her imouto, no matter how much I might want to,” Ranma said with her own sigh.

“Then I think we need to find more book-type healers. I just don't know enough about brains I'm sorry,” Wendy said looking a little desperate distressed. She liked Jenny, not as much as she liked Erza or Bisca, simply because they hadn't spent all that time together but the time they had to spend together had been great fun.

“Ranma, I think we've talked Aquarius around to helping you,” Lucy called.

“Ah, cool, I’d reaalllly like to change back to my male bod.” *And I’d like to know if these changes I’m feeling in my body carries over without any of the dragonification I was dealing with when I was splashed by water and changed back there. The mental changes I know won’t, the rest is up in the air.*

A moment later, Ranma ate the vestiges of an attack from Aquarius, gulping it down after having let a heated (courtesy of once of Erza’s many weapons) jet of water hit her, changing her into his male body. He could feel his body soaking in the water to refill his magic like a drowning man would water, and sighed at both the pleasure of that and the taste of it. “Thanks for that,” he said nodding to Aquarius. “And next time don't splash your allies as well as your enemies, okay? Or else ya might become urn-less again ya know?”

Aquarius harrumphed at that and probably would have replied scathingly, but Scorpio’s tail, still wound around her middle, tightened just enough to cause her to feel it, and she blushed hotly nodding quickly. A moment later, the two of them bowed towards Lucy and the spirits all disappeared.

“Fine then,” Mira growled, pointing at Seilah. “Now that that’s over with, we’ve healed up a bit and such, what should we do about this one? I’ll tell you plain, I want her in irons at the very least.”

Sighing Ranma looked around at the others. Erza shrugged unconcern, willing to follow Ranma’s lead. Cana scowled while Lucy looked away, not willing to give an opinion on this and rather feeling guilty about having missed out on the action. Wendy smiled both at Ranma and at Seilah, indicating she felt that Seilah’s repentant apology and the way she had helped her and the others hide was enough to win her acceptance. Bacchus didn’t bother looking at anything but Seilah’s chest. Loke too looked away, not having fought the demons.

*So the question is, should we just capture her and then be upfront about it, or not?* “Seilah, how likely is it if we openly have you be our sort-of prisoner like Hoteye that your guild will be able to try and spring you or do something else?”

Seilah did not hesitate to reply. “The only government my guild has not infiltrated in some fashion is the government of Midi. They Have some manner of defense against magics of many different sorts. While Master Mard Geer would not care about my life one way or another, he would not be willing to put up with the dishonor of having a Demon like myself captured. He would attack, kill me, and quite possibly as many other humans as he could in the immediate vicinity. He would take the entire guild to do it, as a show of strength.”

“So we keep it a secret, unless we can gather oh, six Wizard Saints or equivalent mages together?” Ranma asked looking over at the others.

“Between You, Master Makarov and Laxus, we might only have to find two or three more there,” Erza replied with a tight grin. She had measured herself against these Demons, and if there were more like Torafuzar out there, with his level of natural armor, she was going to have a devil of a time fighting them.

Mira scowled. “Fine, we keep her a secret for now, but what about telling the kings?”

“If the king’s attempt to act on any information gleaned either by my giving it freely or through torture, they will, of necessity have to tell others of their court. If they do, the results will be the same as if you had, what is the term, brought me in openly.” Seilah supplied, her tone analytical as if what she was saying was only logical.

“God damn it, so what do we do then?”

“She gave her parole, I’m inclined to believe it.” Ranma said firmly, with Wendy nodding along. He looked around at the others, but only Mira and Cana still looked as if they had reservations. “I’ll watch her, and then we can pass on her information piecemeal, so that no one knows she’s decided to throw in her lot with us after Kyoka betrayed her.”

Seilah would have said it was more that she was throwing her lot in with the two Dragon Slayer siblings rather than humanity as a whole. But she realized from their perspective it hardly mattered which it was. “I cannot return to my guild. Master Mard Geer and the others would be unwilling to put up with our losing here as we did, better to die than return thus. I have nowhere else to go but with Ranma, who I gave my parole to.”

“There you have it,” Ranma said with a sharp nod of the head, ending the discussion.

Hopping onto the bike that Loke had been using before, Cana actually smiled despite the discussion about Seilah as she felt Lucy behind her and the group continued on with Laxus heading back via his Lightning travel method. Wendy joined Erza on her bike and the party continued on.

Ranma peeled off as soon as they saw the town, hiding Seilah in a small culvert of the ground that created a hide from everyone in the town. “Are you going to be alright out here for a bit?” he asked, looking down at her wounds.

Looking at him in some confusion, she just nodded. “I will be fine.” She cocked her head as Ranma stood there, waiting for something, but she didn’t say anything and he sighed before turning away, still leaving her somewhat confused, both about what he had been waiting for but also about Ranma’s change of heart towards her.

Since Laxus had left another Rune Knight company had arrived via train along with numerous bushels of food, tents and other things to help the townsfolk, joining the other two already there with the Book Wyrms. The wounded were all being seen to, and an aid station had been set up, while more tents were being set up for the coming night, complete with cots. Work had even begun on clearing away the town of rubble to search for more survivors and wounded.

Jura was in charge of that activity. Leaning on a massive staff of stone, he directed the others this way and that. But thanks to the noise of the bikes they were met with a welcoming party consisting of two full squads of Rune Knights and Jura himself hobbling out after them with Natsu and Gajeel following.

All of their eyes widened at the sight of the bedraggled attack group. Everyone, even Ranma after his power-up from Aquarius’s water, looked as if they had been put through the ringer. Erza moved like the dead, and her normal armor was chipped and stained by blood, though her wounds had been healed. Mira looked as if she was on her last legs, though she at least didn’t have any blood showing from old wounds. Bacchus too was bruised and limping from a wound high up his leg he’d refused to let Wendy anywhere near (this might have had something with the bloodshot, manic look in Ranma’s eyes when he mentioned it).

The sight of Hoteye however arrested the Runic Knight’s attention, and after a start they moved forward, brandishing their staffs angrily. “Hoteye of the Oración Seis, you are under arrest!”

Ranma however got in their way. “He's with us. Leave him be for now.”

“I'm sorry sir, but we have orders from the King. We are to take any dark guild mage we find under custody,” The Rune Knight’s commander said. Then he motioned the company forward.

“And I am countermanding them. Hoteye and I have made a deal, and putting him in chains is not part of that. Look, I’m tired, cranky and I really would like to hit something. So stand down, or you will feel what it feels like to be punted over the horizon.” At that, everyone else who had been part of the fight in the forest moved forward putting themselves between Hoteye and the Knights.

“Your orders will be countermanded more formally the moment we can get in contact with the government,” Ranma said, not saying how that was going to happen. “For now, you'll just have to trust us.”

The Rune Knights were not in the mood to listen however and there might've been a fight, or Ranma might have been forced to reveal his Ranger status to even more people. But then Jura interceded quickly on their behalf. Staring at each face in turn, he nodded once then slammed the tip of his stone staff down causing reverberations in the ground and everyone stopping to stare at the large bald man. “On my authority as a Wizard Saint, I will allow this.” He looked at Hoteye seriously, gesturing to the town, “So long as you will help us here.”

“Of course,” Hoteye said with a laugh, moving towards them. “Between the two of us earth mages, if anyone is still buried in the rubble here, we will find them, like a pauper looking for money, right!?”

With that, the tension of the moment vanished and Wendy broke off to rush over to the tents marked by large red crosses. Ranma stared after her, shaking his head. *Huh, that’s another thing that seems to be prevalent in whatever dimension, weird.*

As he was looking that way Natsu and Gajeel were looking back at Ranma frowning. His scent had changed, becoming deeper, stronger, and far must draconic for some reason along with a dank stench, like a crypt or something similar. The tattoos on his face and hands were also new, and neither of them knew what to make out of them.

Ranma ignored them, motioning Erza to come over before she could move to look at Gray, her face pale and shaking as she saw his missing forearm. Wendy had not been able to reconnect it, that kind of thing was beyond her. Ranma had seen it, and saw the other mages, most of them simply laid out nearby, still dealing with the lack of magic or the aftereffects of the poison. All of them sported dressed wounds here and there, and like Gray’s arm, it showed how Wendy’s healing magic had been pushed past its breaking point.

“You're in charge here,” he said simply. “You and Jura work together okay? Make certain the Rune Knights don’t spook Hoteye to run. Also make sure that no one actually tries to leave the town once they arrive.”

Erza's brows furrowed. “Surely you don't think someone spying on us now?”

“Once bitten twice shy. I'm not willing to take chances, not with all of us as badly battered as we are.” Guilt again flashed across Ranma's expression, before he shook his head firmly. “Just keep an eye on them.” Then he leaned in whispering in the redhead’s ear, causing her to flush, though his words didn’t add anything to the sensation, being as far away from romantic as it was possible to get. “I need to check in with the Kings, tell them how this all went down.”

“Good luck,” Erza said meaningfully, also whispering. “I get the feeling you're going to need it.”

Ranma nodded glumly, and left the town, heading back to where he had left Seilah. The place he’d stashed her was hidden, so he figured it was a decent enough spot for this conversation. She looked up as he entered the small dip in the land, but he shushed her with a finger to her lips. “We can talk in a bit, I need to call in to my employers.”

Blushing lightly at the touch to her lips by Seilah smiled crossing her eyes to stare at Ranma's finger on her lips, wondering what she should do about it, and generally speaking somewhat uncertain about the feelings she had begun to feel at all. *On the other hand, I am most pleased that Ranma seems to have become much happier since seeing Wendy. Even having heard about the two dead, he has not blamed me for them and that is the best I can expect.* “I will remain silent,” she said with a nod.

With a nod, Ranma gestured and she moved to the other side of the small area. Once she was out of sight Ranma bit his thumb and then let a bit of his blood into the Rangers broach, activating it.

Almost instantly the king of Seven, Meredrain appeared, looking harried and worried. “Ranma, please tell me nothing else has gone wrong.”

“I think you need the other kings in on this Your Majesty,” Ranma said, his formal tone bringing the middle-aged king of Seven up short, looking at him in shock.

Ranma was very, **very** rarely formal with anyone. In fact, even among Rangers he was known for his informality and by this point, the king of Seven had interacted with four of the others. Whatever this was about it was extremely serious. So he simply nodded, and said, “Wait a moment I'll get them.”

With the communications magic available to them, Meredrain did so, with the king of Fiore, Toma being the first to link in. Both he and Meredrain looked intently at Ranma, while the other kings each popped in one after another, intense scowls on their faces until they saw Ranma’s face.

Queen Rose took one look at Ranma and shook her head. “You look exhausted,” she said simply. Of all of them, she was the one who knew Ranma the most and she could tell that he was near to his breaking point even though she had never actually seen it before. “Did anything happen to young Wendy?”

“Thankfully, no, though it was a near run thing. I should start from the beginning I suppose…”

From there Ranma described the mission from the moment they met up with Ultear and Gajeel at the train station, a meeting that caused the king of Fiore to explain a few things about why those two had been sent along. He then told them what had occurred with the poisoning, taking it on the chin as something that he should have anticipated given how long it had taken them to get to that town from Magnolia. Although he did say that their prisoner had informed him that the Oración Seis still had spies in among the Magic Council. That caused Toma to start cursing like a sailor, gaining amused looks from his fellows even as they commiserated with him.

Ranma then explained how he had fought the two dark guilds off and how Jenny had helped the other two Dragon Slayers revive and how Freed and the others had arrived to help. “After that we decided to split up into three. I led one team, Freed the others to chase after Raven Tail and Laxus. We left the most wounded and weakened behind with Cana and Wendy to look at. For more information about the Raven Tail fight you'll have to ask one of those who actually took part, but they got Laxus back and they apparently took Ivan at least prisoner. There was another girl in town in chains, a dark skinned woman with bunny ears of all things,” Ranma said shaking his head. “I don't know where she came from, but I'd assume she was part of Raven Tail that was left outside of the town.”

“She is known to us,” said the king of Minstrel, San Jiao Shin, nodding. “She comes from Desierto, and was known to have joined up with Raven Tail about a year or so ago. Their base of operations is also in the northwest of that land.”

At that, the king of Pergrande shook his head at the mention of Desierto, looking away quickly. The desert kingdom was a thorn in the side of what he felt was the smooth running of Ishgar, long the home of thieves, cutthroats and scum, all given a home there by the various clans and tribes that ruled there. If he had shared a border with it, Vicotronious would have conquered Desierto and put a stop to such long since.

Ranma went on to describe the fight in Worth Woodsea and then the appearance of the Devils as well as how the fight had changed at that point, and how they had learned since coming back that, the devils had attacked the town after they had left. He made no mention of Seilah, not yet. Even if he had wanted to mention it to someone, he wouldn’t have told Meredrain or Toma. Vicotronious and San Jiao Shin were possibilities, given he was closer to them, but even that he’d rather do in person.

Still that information was enough, to cause Meredrain to shake his head sadly and Toma to smack his hands down on his armrest. “This is insane! This mission has gone from bad to worse! How many of my mages did you leave to their death Ranma?!”

Ranma flinched at that, looking away but the king of Pergrande stepped in firmly. “Enough! Let him talk. And if we are going to start pointing fingers of recrimination, perhaps we should point at the Magic Council of Fiore again? Considering that they don't seem to have done a very good job of weeding out any further spies.”

That cause Toma to wince, but he nodded back grimly and apologized for his outburst. But unlike San Jiao Shin, Vicotronious or even the king of Caelum, Toma was not a warrior. He was a man with an excellent mind for industry, infrastructure and the mercantile domain, who had a near-childlike delight in magic and hated the idea of any of his realm’s mages dying on his own orders. It had, after all, been Toma who had come up with the mission against the Oración Seis in the first place.

Ranma went on, explaining how the three devils had died, once more making no mention of Seilah’s survival. Given their talk on that point, there was no way to tell the kings about it until after he was certain it wouldn’t get back to Tartarus. He did tell them about Hoteye’s suspicions, but downplayed it, telling about how badly Ultear had been wounded, suggesting she had simply played the role she had to in order to get Brain to drop his guard. While that actually made Toma smile grimly, the tale of Ichiya being dead, as well as one other mage named Sherry hit Toma, causing him to rail at Ranma again, but all of the other kings stepped in hard, even the king of Seven.

“Yes you lost people,” the king of the Caelum, Luke Afterano, said firmly. “But it could've been a lot worse. It could well have been horrible!”

“None of us had any inkling of Raven Tail even being in the area!” said Queen Rose firmly. “Let alone were willing to work with Brain.”

“To say nothing of the devils of Tartarus being in the area,” King windbag said, for once coming down on Ranma's side of things.

“So to summarize, while we took losses, those losses were not horrible. This was a military operation,” the king of Pergrande said. “In any such, losses are almost inevitable. And look at what we have gained. Nirvana destroyed. The Oración Seis practically wiped out: two prisoners, three dead, and one convert. Raven Tail, a Dark Guild equal to the trio of the Balam Alliance, wiped out, with three prisoners including Ivan Dreyar himself, the rest dead. And Tartarus, another member of the Balam Alliance, has lost three of its members. Along with those, we have at least thirteen smaller guilds wiped out, utterly.”

“Did this mission spiral out of control?” Rose went on as the most senior king finished speaking in a more quiet voice, “Yes. Could it have been handled better, perhaps more intelligently? Yes. It should not have become such a big tremendous mission at least not right off the bat. Once the location of Nirvana had been discovered and the fact the Oración Seis were after it, Ranma should've been sent in with this Ultear woman just the two of them to destroy it and remove that threat forever. Then we could've moved on to the Oración Seis at a later time. But it was handled in this manner. And we cannot go back and change things. We can only be thankful that in the end, we gained far more than we lost. It's harsh, but Vicotronious is correct in that.”

King Toma frowned but slowly nodded. “I understand, but many guild masters treat their guild members like children. This will be hard on Baba and Master Bob in particular.” That it was hard for him to realize how badly a mission he had created had turned out was obvious too.

Yet even so, when Ranma guiltily began to offer to speak to them first, Toma shook his head quickly. “No, I will tell them. It was my mission, my decision to allow them to send weaker mages along when they suggested it, my decision to make this mission so large. I will tell them,” he said firmly. “They can vent their anger on me.”

Nodding once, Ranma let his eyes play over each king and the lone queen. “What do you want me to do?”

“Rest,” said Meredrain simply. “Stay there, until everyone is healed and ready to move on. “If you want to, check out this forest, see if you can find any kind of base of operations Brain was using. Rest, recover mourn. I will issue orders, and get them sent out to you to have Hoteye escorted to my capital as soon as possible and as quietly as possible.”

“He'll willingly tell you everything,” Ranma said simply. “Every spy, every connection, every person they bribed or whatever to pass on information. So long as you let him see his brother, Wally.”

“Describe this Wally for me?” The king of Iceberg said, speaking up for the first time. “You said, Erza Scarlet mentioned that they had just entered my country. I can get descriptions out, start searching for them quickly. Though we’re not nearly as populous as Seven, so it might take some time.”

Ranma did so, and the king of Iceberg, Adam De Soule, blinked. “Right,” he said slowly. “Well, at least with that description, it shouldn't take us long to find them if we can in the first place.”

“That’s nice, but there's one thing about the information Hoteye has already said that you should probably know,” Ranma said slowly, looking at all of them. This was something he had wanted to speak to all of the kings about this at once rather than just the king of Seven. “Hoteye told us how he had they had gathered the other dark mages to them. It turns out that they were able to figure out the teleportation array by the Bank of Ishgar.”

After shouts of exclamation surprise had resounded from each of them, Toma leaned forward, his eyes now gleaming at what this could mean. “That right there could be major! Break the bank of its monopoly on fast transportation just imagine what that could mean for trade!”

“It could also help us all of us police our territories far better,” Vicotronious said with a slow, grim nod. “We’ll have to think about how to get organized on that, and how to defend against it. After all, if the Oración Seis were able to do it, and if we start using it so often, someone else might be able to break the runic code eventually, block it or simply use teleportation arrays like that against us. It’s better to start thinking in that manner now.”

“Yes, but that is a discussion between us. Ranma, you can go get some sleep,” Rose ordered. “And I mean it. You look as if you're going to collapse. And, while I know this won’t make you feel better, you did very well Ranger.”

More than one of the others said the same thing, and Ranma smiled wearily as they disconnected him from the discussion. Ranma stared at where the images had been before closing his eyes and leaning his head back, tired in a way that had nothing to how his body was feeling.

Seeing Ranma looking so tired pulled at her new emotions and Seilah moved forward. At her touch to his forehead and face, Ranma opened his eyes to look at her, smiling sardonically at her, taking the Etherious Devil’s hand in his and squeezing once before realizing her hand and standing up. “I’ll leave me and Wendy’s tent for you here for the night, but after that, I need to head back to town.”

Blinking, Seilah slowly nodded. “I would be fine without it, but I… thank you nonetheless. Yet, you are certain I won’t run off? Why?”

“Where would you go?” Ranma asked bluntly. “You think your fellow Devils would take you back after you were a part of this defeat? After you failed?” His words and tone weren’t malicious, but they still Made Seilah frown slightly. She did however nod, acceding the point. Even so, she looked at Ranma quizzically. “You do not harbor any more ill-feelings towards me?”

“Wendy’s fine, and while I feel bad about Ichiya, Velos and Sherry dying, you didn’t actually kill them. I’ve also never been the type to hold a grudge. Admittedly, I know a lot of people who would say that makes me soft, but I prefer not to carry grudges with me. They’re just too heavy you know?” Ranma said whimsically.

Seilah cocked her head to one side at that, but Ranma waved off her confusion. “Trust me, you’ll get it eventually. Now come on, I’ll help ya set up the tent before heading back to town.”

They too worked at that silently until they were done, and Seilah entered the tent, blinking in pleased surprise at the interior before crawling into a sleeping bag laid out on the ground of the tent. She was asleep before she had actually finished pulling the top of the bag over herself.

Ranma left her there and reentered the town. By that point, night had closed in and the devastated town was now lit only by the scattered lights of numerous torches and two large bonfires, around which he spotted Rune Knights sleeping or moving around. He avoided them, moving deeper into the town.

He was intercepted by Mirajane, who came out of darkness beyond the fires of the camp. “So you’re really going to trust her, just like that?”

Ranma sighed. “Mira I know where you're coming from, but like I just told Seilah, hate and grudges are just too heavy to bear for long. Besides, you heard Wendy. Her heart was never in the attack, and Seilah helped protect her, hiding her afterwards. And that was before her mind was screwed over by Nirvana, which apparently among Devils seems to have had a near permanent effect. Besides, Wendy forgave her, that's enough for me.”

When Mira just glared at him, Ranma sighed again. “I'll check up on her tomorrow, remember she's still wounded and exhausted magically and physically. She's not going anywhere, hell I doubt she could even fly like she offered to before. I think you're letting your desire to eat her soul get to you,” Ranma said with a smirk.

Mira huffed at that, but there was indeed a bit of that in her thinking, as well as a lot of simple hatred towards demons. *Then again if I was going to treat all demons like enemies, or souls to be eaten, I would've headed out to Galuna Island where Erza and the others said there was an actual demon community.* She'd heard about those, and it had sparked a debate between Ranma and her because he felt those people weren't actually Devils or Demons as he understood the terms, rather they were simply another race, who had developed devil and demon -like characteristics somehow, “Or perhaps,” he had said, “their ancestors were too close to one of Zeref’s experiments? Who knows?”

As her mind touched on that topic, Mira wondered if Seilah knew about them, then yawned*. It is far too fucking late for me to think about this shit.* She said aloud “Fine, if you vouch for her, you get to watch her. I'm tired of it.” With that, she turned away and moved towards the tent set up for herself and a few of the other ladies.

Ranma watched her go then sighed and turned away, moving towards the tent housing the most badly wounded. They were being watched over by two townsfolk who Wendy had seconded to her help. But beyond Wendy only one of the other mages from the local guild had any healing ability, and he was asleep nearby, utterly exhausted. Still, she and Wendy had done their best, and none of the wounded, mage or townsfolk, were in danger of dying any longer.

But that didn't mean Jenny was at all close to waking up. Ranma sat next to her, staring between her and Ultear, then over to where Gray lay out to one side, his face contorting into an ugly expression of self-hatred. The pigtailed martial artist started to thumped the side of the stone piece of rubble that he was sitting on in a steady, hard, rhythm.

“What are you doing?” asked a soft voice.

Ranma looked up and over Ultear, and saw Juvia there. She was sitting next to Eve, Hibiki and Ren. All three of them had yet to wake up, magically and physically exhausted from the poisons and what little fighting they had done. Ranma thought that was honestly pathetic, but he wasn't going to say anything. Ichiya going out like a boss had redeemed all four of them in his eyes. And judging by the way Juvia was hovering over the downed trio, perhaps in hers too.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” Ranma asked, his hands halting the rhythmic thumping he had been doing, and not a moment too soon. A second later the front face of the rock cracked, and pieces started to slide off.

“Somewhat. Why were you thumping?” Juvia asked.

“I, I’m just a bit frustrated,” Ranma growled.

Juvia's eyes narrowed. “Juvia feels certain that someone else would've already said this, so Juvia will ask if you have already gotten the ‘it's not your fault’ speech? Juvia would hate to repeat everyone else's words.”

“Yeah,” Ranma said with a chuckle “yeah, I got that speech. Several times actually, from different perspectives. It turns out that this whole debacle isn't actually all that bad considering what we've gained from it.”

“Juvia can understand that. After all, you have smashed 15 dark mage guilds, two of them major ones, and one of which was part of the Balam Alliance that has so dominated the underworld. Any leader worth his salt would understand that that is a victory, regardless of the price,” She said gesturing towards The Trimens behind her, then to Gray. Lyon was nowhere to be seen, having thrown himself into helping the others helping the townsfolk, he had collapsed where he stood, trying through that work to mitigate the pain of having lost Sherry. “Yet from the perspective of a nation? This is a win, a tremendous one.”

Ranma bit back some angry words there but nodded his head. “I know, but I feel I could've done more, in fact I know I could've done more, if only my own training had allowed me to.”

Juvia frowned at that. “What do you mean?”

With a scowl, Ranma leaned back against the stone behind him and explained about his problems, about how the Dragon Slayer magic was actually a transformative kind of curse that wanted to take over an individual’s body “Unless you actually have someone competent enough to teach it to you properly, then you get dragonification antibodies or whatever. Not like me, who was taught by a senile old ass who neglected that part of my training! Seriously, it’s like teaching someone sword forms, and then neglecting to show them how to actually hold the damn blade!”

He went on to explain that his own former magic, which he called Life Magic, was fighting it, the struggle weakening them both in terms of what he could access from them. “I overcame that a bit in the fight here in the town, and then I think even more out in the forest, but even so, I can't say I've mastered the Dragon Slayer magic. I haven't made it my own as I thought I had. That is holding me back. And then there's this Demon Slayer stuff,” he said, gesturing to his face.

His features were barely visible in the torchlight of a nearby torch, and Juvia leaned close, examining the dark whorls on Ranma's face, causing him to flush a little. Juvia had snow-white skin, high cheekbones, a small, mouth not marked by any lipstick, a face made to smile and frown easily but in moderation, a pert little nose, azure blue hair down to her shoulders in loose waves, and midnight blue eyes that Ranma, ironically, felt a man could drown in.

A second later, she realized what she was doing and backed away hastily. “Juvia apologizes,” she said quickly, cocking her head to one side, her face flushed slightly. “Is this Devil Slayer magic a third side in this inner war?”

“…Sort of,” Ranma said thoughtfully. “It doesn't really fight my original magic, for some reason, but it definitely can't seem to get along well with my Dragon Slayer magic at all. It's like oil and water there.”

“And how have you been trying to train yourself to control these disparate magics?”

“Not so much control the fight, as switch between using one style and another,” Ranma said, then went on to explain how he had gone to Porlyusica and trained under her in order to help him visualize and separate his control, compartmentalizing it almost. “I want to treat them as if the two magics are like the different types of armor that Erza can summon from her Requip space.”

Juvia nodded thoughtfully then shook her head already seeing a problem with this. “And how did you create the breakthroughs during the fights?”

“Instinct,” Ranma said simply. “Instinct and desperation. That seems to be how I do a lot of stuff, but don't ask me how I do it after.”

“Then that is where you are going wrong,” Juvia said simply. Ranma frowned at her, and she chuckled or rather giggled, shaking her head. “Ranma, you are attempting to take someone else's templates and turn them to your own uses. That is not what you do with magic.”

“Actually it is,” Ranma said laughing a little as he tried to correct her. “I take other styles and then I work them into my own. That’s why I call my style Anything Goes.”

“But that is with martial arts,” Juvia said, “not an internal magical issue like this. Finding balance like that, is quite obviously not working, the template you are using is therefore faulty. You need to do what you did in the battles, you need to **fight** the powers within you. That is what Juvia had to do when Juvia first started to be able to transform into water. Juvia had to fight the instinct to stay that way, Juvia had to impose her will on the water, forcing it to transform back. Somehow figure out a way to force the Dragon Slayer magic submit to your will, not to try to keep them apart, but force them together.”

“I tried to do that for years before I met up with Porlyusica though,” Ranma said shaking his head. “It didn't work.”

“Then you need to try another method to do the same thing,” Juvia said frowning at that as she pulled at her sleeves and what was obviously a gesture that she had picked up. “Perhaps visualize out the Dragon Slayer curse as it were, as a separate entity within your mind that you can then fight and defeat? Use the memory of this… Typhon was it? Use him as a template.”

Ranma had a flashback to a graphic novel series that he had read back in his old life called ‘Bleach’ at that, and scowled. “You’re not talking about something I'd have to fight over and over and over again whenever I want to use my Dragon Slayer magic to full effect, are you? ‘cause if so, I think I'll stick with what I'm doing now, thanks. I’d much prefer to have my mind be my own rather than have some kind of inner world where I have to battle my inner demons.”

“Inner world and inner demons really,” Juvia said dryly, before shaking her head. “No, Juvia is not speaking about that. But the way you are speaking, it makes me think that the problem truly lies with the need to force your body to acclimatize, to combine rather than to further divide. I'm sorry if that does not help.”

“No, that makes some sense I gotta admit. But I'm going to need to figure out a way to do it. And that's going to be hard without any other person around to teach me or even understand what I'm going through. Before you ask, no, Mirajane and Jenny don't have any ideas about this. Jenny doesn’t really take over the soul of a thing, more gives the concept of the thing a home according to her. And Mira’s never had to fight the soul of the demon she's devoured, she simply absorbs it, and it becomes part of her.”

“Now,” he said, standing up and moving over to ruffle her hair lightly, “Why don't you go get some sleep. I’ll watch them for the rest of the night.”

Juvia blushed hotly under his head pat, before nodding and moving off hurriedly. She was still not used at all to being around so many people who were outgoing, even kind despite her long association with Anna, and Ranma was much more touchy-feely than any other man she had ever been around*. I suppose that comes from raising a little girl from toddlerhood. Whatever the two of them might think, Ranma really is more of Wendy’s father then big brother in many ways. Although I have no doubt that that relationship has shifted as Wendy has started to hit her preteen years.*

Behind her, Ranma sat back down, looking over at Jenny and resting a hand lightly on her shoulder before pulling back, and staring up at the nighttime sky*. Never again. I'm not going to let this whole inner war crap continue! Juvia's right. If I can't find a balance that I can use as easy as breathing, what’s the point? And well, this is my fucking body! I rule it, not my Dragon Slayer abilities, not my devil slaying magic, me!*

With that, he pulled up his legs and instead of falling asleep, started to meditate. But soon his body betrayed him, and instead of falling into a meditation, Ranma simply fell asleep.

The next day, Ranma woke up, and though sore and still somewhat exhausted, joined the work on going in repairing the destroyed town, and dealing with the locals and the magical mages who had been wounded. He stopped by the wounded again on the other side of the town, checking in with Evergreen and Freed, as well as Lyon, who had been placed there when he had collapsed.

Evergreen was the worst injured of them all. Her paper leg had been wrapped in bandages in order to protect it, but Wendy had ordered that her leg not be returned to normal until Wendy had regained enough magical energy to see to it. Wendy knew enough about the human body to know that Evergreen’s injuries included major arteries in her leg being opened in multiple places, and unless Wendy was able to heal her entire leg almost on the spot, she might well bleed out quickly.

The dirty blonde-haired woman was remarkably upbeat about it. “It wasn’t every day,” she said, “where we even we of the Thunder God Tribe are part of destroying an entire dark guild the size and strength of Raven Tail after all.”

Ranma chuckled at that, and looked away briefly from the wounded to see the other three Dragon Slayers hard at work clearing rubble, bringing in lumber, from underwriting train and generally speaking keeping busy. All three of them, as with Ranma himself, had come through the battle in the best shape, with Erza being next. The natural redhead only had a few ribs bruised, although she had once more lost one of her armor sets. However she had only lost one, so in comparison to the fight in the Tower, that was almost chump change.

Laxus was nowhere to be seen. He had led a company of the Rune Knights out early that morning toward the Worth Woodsea. It would take them a while to get there, Laxus couldn't teleport them all, but they would gather up the bodies there, take notes of what dark guilds had been involved in the fight and so forth. Then they would probably bring in Hoteye to help bury them.

Currently Jura and Hoteye were working together nearby, clearing out more of the rubble. All the survivors had been found by this point, but the town itself was still horribly damaged from one end to the other. Hoteye created large square basements, then after the area solidified, Jura would raise foundations from them. *They work well together, oddly enough.*

A second later Ranma’s mind was brought back to the trio of wounded though as Lyon's voice grabbed his attention. “Why is there a guard over by the wounded tent where Councilwoman Ultear is being looked after?” He asked.

Ranma looked at him sharply, then around subtly, making sure no one else was in range to overhear. “Why are you asking?”

Lyon seemed to have an internal fight with himself before sighing. “She looks remarkably like our former teacher Ur, mine and Gray’s. I was utterly astonished by her appearance at the train station before all this began, and I would have addressed her then, if not for the fact that Gray hadn't said anything. When I talked to him during that damned meal, he simply said he didn't see the resemblance!” Lyon scoffed, glaring over at Gray who rolled his eyes then went back to staring down at where his arm should be. “Idiot. It's so plain to see it's astonishing. They have to be related in some fashion.”

Looking over towards the tent where Ultear hadn't been moved to have her own private tent, Ranma frowned at that. At first, it seemed as if the four guards around the tent were supposed to keep people out, but in reality, Ranma had ordered them into position to keep her inside not that the four of them knew it. With her foot the way it was, she wasn't going to go anywhere fast, but he didn't want Ultear to try to run off at all.

“I see,” he said mildly. “So you want to talk to her about that?”

“Yes,” Lyon said simply. “I must know their relationship.”

Ranma nodded, then watched as Lyon seemed to do pause before going on. “I have to know about that, and then I have to… I will have to go back to the guild when it comes to the time to leave. Did you know that Sherry had a young cousin? She wasn't supporting her on her own thankfully, but the money she was not donating as per our parole with Master Baba went to Sherria instead of herself. Sherry lived at the guild, took her meals there, and only bought herself very few dresses and such to change into. All her money went into paying off her debt and to that little girl. I don't know what her aunt, the girl’s mother, earns, but obviously it isn't enough.”

“I think we can get some counsel help there,” Ranma said with a thin-lipped smile. “In fact, I can almost guarantee it. So don't take that burden on yourself just yet Lyon. And…” he hesitated, before reaching over and grabbing the other young man's shoulder. “In terms of your parole with Baba, I think you are most definitely off the hook there too. I'm sorry this happened, but I think standing up for the others here in the town when the demons attack proved yourself.”

Lyon looked away guiltily at those words, knowing he actually hadn't done much. *For all my bluster, for all my ego, I was next to useless in this fight! And then there is Gray, who kept on fighting despite being so obviously outclassed, and who fought until he lost an arm. Indeed, he would've lost his life if not for young Wendy*!

“I must get stronger,” he said to himself, and Ranma nodded. That was a sentiment he could well understand, and he gripped the other man's shoulder again, before turning away, moving over to talk to Gray in turn.

**OOOOOOO**

Toma had demanded to send a message to Quattro Cerberus, Fairy Tail, Blue Pegasus, and Lamia Scale demanding that their guild master's come to see him in person in Crocus. This wasn't a subtle message, nor was the message that he sent the Magic Council. For the guild masters, the message was delivered via flying carpets, which would bring them back in the same fashion.

For the Magic Council, his message was even less subtle, for it came in the form of sending a full battalion of Rune Knights to Era with orders to lock the entire town down. No one was to go in and no one was to go out. All lacrima messages leaving the town were to be intercepted by the Rune Knight’s anti-magic field. Anyone working for or with, or in any way connected to the Magic Council was going to be closely examined, their pasts reviewed and their actions vetted since they joined the Council or began working for it. This process would be helped along by Hoteye once he was in direct contact with Meredrain and thereafter would be used to explain how they were going to be ousting any spies they discovered.

Meredrain was also doing much the same thing, although the magical side of Seven was not nearly as centrally organized as the Magic Council of Fiore was. It would take a little more time therefore for his anticorruption operation to really come into effect. Yet he would be provided Hoteye's personal aid in that.

The two kings were determined to clean house and this time as thoroughly as possible in Toma’s case. No longer would the Magic Council leak like a sieve. No longer would Toma be worried about the loyalty of the Magic Council or **anyone** in contact with them. To that end, he had sent his personal Guard Commander, Arcadios along, as well as his daughter, Hisui. Normally a girl her age would not be involved in something like this of course. But Hisui’s basic intelligence and ability to analyze people was one of the finest he had ever met despite her age and she had actually volunteered for it after hearing him bellowing orders to Arcadios.

Now Toma watched as the four guild masters were led into the same room where he, Ranma, and the Magic Council had spoken when Ranma had reported in about killing the demon Sitri after the Tower of Heaven. “Sit down,” he said sighing, before actually standing up himself. He moved around the room, filling five large goblets with bourbon, before sitting down once more and downing his. He then looked over at them, gesturing to his glass. “You might want to have some too,” he said simply.

“No offense your Majesty, but I think it wouldn't help us much at this point,” Makarov said, his voice a low growl as his hands gripped around one another so tight they went white and made audible cracking noises. “Just tell us what happened. The mission that Ranger, Ranma was on. It went bad, didn't it?”

“Yes it did. It wasn't a total disaster, rather it was a series of small disasters that Ranma and the others overcame but it cost them. It cost the kingdom of Seven, and it cost all of you and through you Fiore.” He first turned to Master Bob, bowing his head. “I regret to inform you that Ichiya Vandalay Kotobuki is dead. He died protecting Cana Alberona of Fairy Tail from a demonic attack. Jenny Realight was also severely injured, but she is currently stable, and in no danger of dying.”

“Demonic attack?” Makarov said, blinking some of his anger disappearing. “What were demons doing involved with this!?”

Toma held up his hand, almost glaring at the other shorter and older man. “In due time,” he said softly, before turning to Quattro Cerberus’ guild master. “Master Goldmine, I regret to inform you of the death of your mage Velos. Bacchus is fine and according to Ranger Ranma…”

“Wait that young man was a Ranger?! How did he become a Ranger, he’s so young!” Baba shouted, leaping to her feet.

“That is a story for another day,” Toma replied. “I was not involved in the decision, but while I have not always liked the way he's accomplished his missions, I have to say that he has always been effective.” Still looking at Baba, Toma steeled himself. “I also have to inform you Master Baba, that your mage Sherry is also dead. Killed in the same attack that claimed Velos’ life and Ichiya's.”

“And mine? Are my children all right?” Makarov asked, leaning forward now as his magic began to seep out of him, causing the other Masters to back away slightly, even as they also all looked shocked and appalled at having lost guild members.

“They are alive, although it was apparently a very near run thing for many of them, and a few are not altogether whole. It seems as if the Oración Seis knew about our efforts to finish them off so long in advance they were able to reach out to Raven Tail.”

At that name, all the anger suddenly left Makarov's body, and he collapsed slumping backwards, one hand going to his face. “Ivan! Ivan's guild. How, what did they do?”

“A poison attack to start with…” Toma began, explaining what they had been told by Ranma had occurred from start to finish. “We don't know how the Thunder God Tribe and the two Dragon Slayers freed Laxus, but they did and your son is now in custody. If I Have My Way,” Toma finished that segment of the story coldly, almost glaring at Makarov, “the king of Seven will be seeking the death penalty in his case.”

Makarov slowly nodded, looking away. Hearing that about his own son was hard, but with the body blows his fellow Guild Master's had taken, and the litany of disasters that had befallen this mission from start to finish, Makarov was left to count his blessings that none of his mages had been killed. “May I borrow one of the royal magic carpets Your Majesty? Porlyusica could undoubtedly help the wounded, and your magic carpets are far faster than any other means of transport that we have.”

“No!” Bob, growled, his normal affable, almost gay face distorted into a scowl of anger. “Blue Pegasus has access to an even faster means. The magical construct Christina! We will return to our guilds, and then I will pick you all up before heading to this town in Seven. Even with the need to pick you all up, we can be there within the day rather than four days from now as would be the case with the magic carpets.”

Makarov nodded gratefully, as did the other guild member members, each of them looking downcast. “I can't blame Ranma for this, but part of me seriously wants to blame someone,” Baba said shaking her head.

“Blame the demons,” Toma said simply. “I know I will be. Without them, no one would have died. Admittedly, it would still have been a near run thing for many, but Ranma's beating off the initial attack on them after they were poisoned would've saved them all.”

Goldmine shook his head. “They should never have been in that position. That's on us. We thought we knew better, we thought we were being so smart, adding to this mission every time we thought about it, we never really thought about what might happen if the Oración Seis learned we were aiming for them.”

The others nodded at Goldmine's words then he looked at them, then back to the king, a grim little smile on his face. “But you say they won?”

The king nodded, and explained the totality of the destruction of the Oración Seis and Raven Tail, which had already of course been known since his earlier comments. Then he went on to mention the thirteen other dark guilds that had been smashed throughout the battle and the destruction of Nirvana.

Both Bob and Baba nodded slowly, as Goldmine laughed. “Now that, that is one wild funeral pyre!”

Makarov shook his head at that, but understood the sentiment at least. He also could see tears glimmering behind Goldmine's ever present sunglasses, but wasn't about to comment. The look of grief had not left Bob’s face either, and Baba looked as if she was womanfully keeping her tears at bay through main will alone.

“Was there anything else you wanted us for your Majesty?” he asked looking over at the king.

“I want each of you to donate a mage good with paperwork and numbers to help Arcadios and my daughter Hisui to go through every single piece of paper and person involved with the Magic Council. We’ll be getting a new source of information on much of that soon, but I want the work started now,” Toma said grimly.

“Are you going to be replacing the entire Magic Council again?”

“There will be changes there yes,” Toma said with a sigh, “but most of the spying seems to have been done on the lower level, beyond Siegrain, so we’ll see what happens there. The only one of them who is exempt from this is young Ultear.”

“Truly?” Makarov asked with a frown. “I would have thought that her friendship with Siegrain would have meant that she was being the most closely looked at. Even her participation in this mission, would've simply made it easier for them to ambush them.”

Toma shook his head. “Not only was she one of those poisoned, but she was able to fight through the poison, Magic Council users apparently all carry an anti-poison kit which eventually was able to deal with it somehow, but she fought Brain, and was crippled for it. Ranma says that her foot was rather ugly to look at. And she had numerous other injuries as well as extreme magical exhaustion. If she is fit to come back to work, the Magic Council will have her.”

*And if she is not cleared of the suspicion Hoteye’s words passed on, the fact that she could be dealing with brain trauma will mean that we can safely remove her from office and keep her out of sight.* Toma said firmly. *If she really is connected to Grimoire Heart that will be another string we can pull to start unraveling their power structure too. Still, I refuse to condemn without evidence.*

After that, the meeting was adjourned. Soon after the four Guild Masters were sent back to their guilds on the same magic carpets that had brought them.

When he entered the Guildhall, Makarov was nearly bowled over by shouts and people rushing forward eager to hear the news. Everyone there didn't know what was going on, but when the Guild Master was called away by the King of Fiore himself like that, complete with magic carpet, then something **important** was going on, something big.

Those in the know were very few, but Bisca and Elfman were looking very worried. Elfman didn't know what the mission had been about, all he knew was that his older sister had left with Ranma and Erza, and then all of the other mages that had been in the town had also left, all at the same time. That had been enough for him to get very worried about what was going on, even more so than Erza and Mirajane being on the same mission again after the Tower of Heaven incident.

“What happened Master!?” Levy asked. “Did something happen with the Lucy and the others?”

“I, you can say so, yes,” Makarov sighed. “Before I start, let me say that everyone we sent is alive. And then let me explain what was actually going on.”

Everyone was shocked at the amount of duplicity that had been used to prepare for this mission and also astonished that it hadn't worked. More than one mage there, Elfman among them, growled angrily at how the Magic Council must have let loose this information, letting their mages be blindsided.

The demons getting involved shocked everyone. The losses that nearly had occurred were horrible, and everyone mourned those who had died from the other guilds while being thankful that none of their own had paid that ultimate price. And the story wasn’t even finished yet by that point.

Yet it was enough for Bisca, who turned and raced out the door shouting behind her “I’ll get Porlyusica!”

“…So we will be taking five of you with me and Porlyusica, aboard the flying Pegasus and the other Guild Masters and whoever they bring along. Now, who among you wants to go?”

That was a stupid question Makarov realized the instant it was out of his mouth as everyone started to clamor to go, but eventually he cut down the group to those that he knew would be able to help, and those that were connected to or associated with the wounded in some fashion. This included Bisca thanks to her friendship with Wendy and Ranma, but not Alzack, who winced at being separated once more from Bisca. He knew he hadn't quite lost yet, but he was losing in this whole relationship thing with her, with Bisca coming closer and closer to Ranma every time they interacted.

Lucy went thanks to her friendship with Lucy and Cana, leaving behind her partners. Elfman and of course Porlyusica were a given while Anna and Lisa also begged to go, and Makarov relented despite the fact that their sister had seemingly come through everything nearly unscathed.

About an hour after he finished the tale Bisca returned with Porlyusica, the healer looking rather harried after having been literally tied to the back of a horse for the journey. Not fifty minutes after that, the whole guild heard a roar of displaced air and rushed out of the Guildhall to stare up in the sky as the massive shape of Christina came down.

**OOOOOOO**

“So I need some way to, to fight this dichotomy within me, to conquer it entirely,” Ranma said, clenching and unclenching his hands as he stared from Laxus to Natsu to Gajeel. “Any ideas?”

It really irked Ranma to ask Natsu for help like this, considering how he was so much more along in his training in a lot of ways than Natsu, but he had to. A full day and a half after getting back to the town where this mission had started to go into the crapper Ranma could tell his body was stronger, faster and tougher now than it had been but that wasn't enough. He could also feel his ki trying to turn back time as he rebuilt it with the food he'd been eating, and once more had to use a lot of mental power to separate the two forces within him.

*I have to force them to work together as one! I need my ki to realize my Dragon slayers are part of me, and I need the Dragon Slayer powers not to try to fucking transform me… unless I want it to,* Ranma amended mentally.

The devil slayer magic in contrast had already started to fade under his mental struggles with it. It had heightened his ki to a certain extent, as well as his senses but because Ranma's ‘natural magic’ was his ki, it didn't have as much of an impact on the strength of it as it would have if he had actually had some original magic before becoming a Dragon Slayer.

Unfortunately, none of the other Dragon Slayer's had any idea. Natsu shook his head, nearly dislodging a sleeping Happy from his perch. The blue-furred cat hadn’t shown much energy since recovering from the poison, and mostly just slept or ate. “Sorry, I've never even heard of anything like this. What about you two?”

Gajeel shook his head. “The idea of transforming into a dragon is new to me, and kind of terrifying if I'm honest. Although,” he said with a grin, “it would be interesting to fly.”

Laxus shook his head too. “Sorry I can’t help you either. My original magic was lightning magic before my asshole of a father implanted the Lightning Dragon Slayer lacrima in me. And while unlike Natsu, while I might still be in danger of transforming, I've never felt that transformation occurring.”

Ranma slumped back, biting almost viciously into his sandwich. “Dammit! I was hoping. Hoping that one of you two,” he said gesturing towards Gajeel and Natsu “would at least have an idea of some kind of training I could do grapple with it. Something that your parents put you through maybe?”

Both of them shook his head their heads, but Natsu elaborated. “My old man never put me through any kind of mental training like what you're talking about. Igneel taught me my letters and stuff, but basically most of our training together amounted to him smacking me around with his tail or with a single claw.”

“Parents of the year that's what dragons are,” Ranma muttered taking another vicious bite of his sandwich.

Next to him Wendy gaped at Natsu, then over to Gajeel, who just nodded and she scowled. “Wow, my mama would’ve never dreamt of doing that to me! Ugh, that sounds so…”

“Barbarous?” Carla asked from beside Wendy. Since their return, the cat-girl had latched onto Wendy and never been more than a few feet from her friend, always ready to lend a hand or force Wendy to rest a bit when she was using her healing powers. Since she had nearly collapsed after trying to heal up Ultear’s foot and Gray’s arm, this was not a small thing.

The two cat people’s waking up was actually the smallest of the things that had changed over the past two nights since they had returned to the town where the poison attack had occurred.

For one thing, The Trimens had woken up to join the other mages. Upon hearing about Ichiya they had been the next best thing to inconsolable, only the stoic Ren still being able to gather enough will to help the others go about their various business. For another, the wounded townfolk had all been seen to as well, most of their wounds dealt with bar five cases of head trauma, which joined Jenny and Ultear. Several dozen tents had been set up for the townsfolk, and work was proceeding apace in rebuilding the town, with building material coming in every day.

This work was slower now than it had been the evening and morning after they had returned, because Hoteye and Jura were both gone. Under a request from the king, Jura was escorting Hoteye to Meredrain in Seventy-Seven. Mira had offered to go with him, but Jura had declined. The Wizard Saint was rather angry at himself that he had not been able to perform better than he had against the demons, but he had helped to create a tombstone for Sherry and mourned during the funeral for her and the others, so was more than willing to leave.

“Actually, there could be a clue elsewhere,” Erza said thoughtfully. “If we’re talking about learning more about the Dragon slayers after all...”

Ranma looked over at her in surprise, and she replied “that message that was left for me by my ancestor.”

“Holy shit, yeah that could work,” Ranma went on nodding with a smile blossoming on me. “Damn Erza I could kiss you right now.”

Erza blushed hotly, but didn't back away simply smiling at him, the errant thought of *Well, I might actually allow that if we were alone,* going through her head. But before she could begin to flush visibly at that idea they all looked up as there was a sonic boom like sound from above them, and high above them a small speck in the sky started to come down towards the ground enlarging as it came. They all stood up, and readied their magic fearing that this was some other enemy deciding to attack and getting their timing wrong.

But then the three Trimens shouted out, “Don't! They’re Friendlies, that's our Blue Pegasus!”

The mages stared up at the giant flying horse thing, while the Rune Knights assembled quickly. Half of them seemed to be assembling for parade review, the other half seems to be assembling in order to use their anti-magic staffs against the giant thing, and Ranma sighed, getting up from his seat and jerking his head over towards that group. “I'm going to go and make sure the lemmings don't do anything stupid.”

“Honestly,” Erza said falling in beside him, “it's like they don't have ears!” She then reached out to jab him lightly with a fist to the shoulder, or rather lightly for the two of them. Most other people could well have been yelling aloud in pain. “And if you do go to search out that mountain Belserion mentioned you will be taking me with you. You realize that correct? It is my family legacy after all.”

Ranma nodded. “Hadn't even thought of leaving you behind honestly. This journey should be as much about you as it is me, and besides, I like yer company.” At that Erza blushed again, looking away slightly and actually pulling at her hair self-consciously,

The two of them got the Rune Knights straightened out, the group that had been preparing to fight rather sullenly joining the others in parade to either side of the flying ship that had just landed. “What was that all about?” Mira asked as she joined them, followed by the others. She had been over with Lyon, Bacchus and the Trimens having lunch with them and trying to get the three pretty boy’s spirits up, with scant success.

They all now assembled to one side. Juvia attempted to skulk at the back but Wendy pushed back through the others and grabbed her hand, pulling her to the front, since in Wendy’s opinion without her the demons would have had an even easier time of overwhelming the mages who had remained in the town.

“The Rune Knights are feeling a little put upon,” Ranma said with a chuckle in answer to Mira’ question. “After all, they arrived too little too late to do anything for this fight and they always seem to play second fiddle to the mage guilds even here in seven. I find it, funny, but that's just me.”

“You’re horrible,” Lyon said bluntly, shaking his head.

The doors on the side of the giant Pegasus opened and Master Bob walked out, followed by several of his guild member, after which Makarov and several of the Fairy Tail mages came out, followed by Baba and her guild, and Quattro Cerberus and Master Goldmine. Ranma caught Bisca looking at him, and he waved very slightly towards her. She nodded back, then looked towards Wendy, then the others in turn getting small nods and smiles from those she knew indicating they were all right.

Her eyes, and the eyes of every other Fairy Tail mages, widened as they spotted Gray standing there without an arm. More than one eye watered at that, before looking around at the others, realizing how close it was. The sight of Evergreen using a crutch with her leg in bandages (though no longer paper thanks to Wendy and the Rune Knights) and the various small wounds and bruises still showing despite Wendy’s ministrations brought home to all of them how close this fight had been and they all paused, staring at Gray in particular.

But Porlyusica rushed past them, shouting angrily, “You humans and your stupid ceremonies! Show me to the wounded, now!” At that Porlyusica moved forward quickly, moving towards the tents with the Red Cross she could see behind the Rune Knights who made way for her hastily, almost fearfully.

Wendy growled a little looking after her and Ranma looked down at his little sister sharply. “Wendy, what's wrong?”

Wendy huffed. “Nothing.”

“Oh God! She’s becoming a teenager,” Ranma muttered, before kneeling down next to her as the impromptu welcoming party broke up, and the other mages move forward towards their friends. “Seriously,” he said, putting in arm around her shoulders. “What's wrong?”

“There's something about Porlyusica’s scent,” she muttered, looking away. “It bothers me. She smells like, like mom. Not quite, but far too much to just have met her or something, unless they stayed in close contact for months.”

“I thought at first it was my imagination, but every time… well I can smell her… but then, she, she doesn’t mention it, and hasn’t even once done so, despite me saying I was mama’s daughter and everything and it just bothers me, like she’s trying to keep it a secret or something only she can’t ‘cause I already know, and she should know that too, so maybe I should confront her or maybe there’s some reason why she hasn’t said anything and…” Wendy rambled, leaning against his shoulder lightly.

“Wendy, calm down. If you think she has some connection to Grandeenay, you’ve waited more than long enough for her to bring it up. Confront her about it and get it over with,” Ranma said simply. “If she’s got a big bad secret or something then at least she’ll have to acknowledge it, you can put it down to her being a an old b…porcupine of a woman and move on. On the other hand, maybe if you confront her about it, she’ll spill her guts, who knows until you try right?”

Worried about making their relationship even more strained and thus missing out on a clue to her mother’s whereabouts Wendy balked at that, while Elfman reunited with Mira and his younger siblings gave their big sister a hug before rushing over to the Fire Dragon Slayer. Natsu found himself on his back his arms filled with sobbing twins as they clung to him, almost glaring over at Gajeel who rapidly backed away.

Bisca moved towards the Dragon Slayer siblings, exchanging a quick hug on the way with Lucy, Cana and Erza in turn, before Lucy and Cana were inundated by the team Shadow Gear. The short Levy threw her arms around Lucy's waist and actually picked the taller and far curvier girl up in her exuberance to see her in one piece.

“God damn, am I happy I am to see you both alive and well. I knew this mission of yours whatever it was going to be dangerous, but nothing like this!” Bisca said, her red-painted lips compressed into a fierce scowl her eyes raking over both Dragon Slayers before she abruptly paused, becoming aware of the hug Ranma was giving out and the scowl on Wendy’s face, “Ah sorry, private moment?”

Wendy shrugged and Ranma did the same, standing up and smiling at her. With that okay Bisca hurled herself forward, hugging Ranma tightly enough to seem as if she was trying to break a rib, though it barely registered to Ranma. *Surprisingly strong,* he thought to himself, patting her on the back, letting his hand move up and down her back, from the back of her cowgirl skirt of the bare back below. “I'm all right Wendy is all right, though that was a far closer thing that I really want to think about.”

“You were blindsided, it happens” Bisca said, her voice muffled against his chest for a second before she pulled back to look at him sternly. “But you all came through at least.”

“Not everyone was so lucky,” Erza said from nearby turning to look at Master Bob, who was being shown it to the gravesite of Ichiya. Given his body had been literally torn apart by Torafuzar’s attack Ranma and the others had opted to bury him in the field where Ranma had used his Hiryuu Shouten Ha in a separate grave. It was marked by several dozen flowers, and a large stone that Ranma and Gajeel, with the Trimens’ aid had marked with a series of notes about his life, and how he had died.

Wendy nodded, also looking in that direction, then over to Gray and the group from Quattro Cerberus before her eyes slipped back to Porlyusica. “I'm going to go help her,” she said firmly, moving in that direction. “She should see Jenny first then Ultear. And maybe after that, after that we’ll talk.”

The others all nodded, watching her leave, before the mages started to drift away into some small's somber groups as they talked with the new lira arrived. “How bad was it, for you all against the Oración Seis I mean?” Bisca asked softly.

“I've seen worse, but not lately and not often,” Ranma said with a sigh. Given his strength at the time, Ranma would rate the war against the orcs at a higher level than the fights he had against the Oración Seis and even before that in the town against the Oración Seis and Raven Tail. But it would have been a near run thing.

Erza nodded somberly. “It was touch and go for a long while there in the Woodsea. Once the demons showed up, everything sort of fell apart. Ranma had done enough in the town for us to have a distinct advantage against the Oración Seis even after they had called in their tribute guilds, but the demons screwed all that up even if…” She cut herself off there, gesturing around them. “Even if they had tried to attack here first,” she finished, somewhat lamely.

Ranma shrugged at that, and Bisca looked at him sharply. “Something is going on,” she said, almost glaring at Ranma. Her eyes flicked over to Erza, who looked away hastily. “Erza, you couldn't spell liar if someone told you it began with an L, and you Ranma, while you're pretty good at disassembling most of the time, that shrug you just made was rather telling. Give,” she ordered.

“No,” Ranma said with a shake of his head. “That's one secret we’re going to keep for a while, until all this is settled anyway,” he said gesturing towards the guilds and the town. “Maybe later, after we’re leaving I'll tell you. But I'm not going to be browbeaten into it Bisca,” he said with a laugh, flicking her nose with a finger.

She huffed, but nodded and looked away her eyes latching on to Wendy as she disappeared into a tent gesturing Porlyusica to follow her. “How’s Jenny doing?” she whispered. “Wendy said she was injured a second ago right?”

“It could've been a lot worse,” Ranma said again. “But she is one of the reasons why I'm really glad that you all decided to bring Porlyusica along.”

“Heh, that wasn’t an easy thing let me tell you. I had to threaten her at gunpoint, and I doubt even that would have worked except I mentioned that Wendy might be among the wounded. At that she changed her tune slightly, but even then wasn’t actually willing to ride my horse back to town until I just lifted her up onto it and tied her to the saddle,” Bisca replied with a chuckle.

Ranma and Erza both looked at Bisca in shock and she shrugged unrepentedly. “Well, we needed her to come, and I certainly wasn’t going to take no for an answer.“

Laughing at that, Ranma led her over to the medical tents. The other Fairy Tail mages and those from Blue Pegasus had already gathered there bar Natsu and his two girlfriends who were nearby, listening to Natsu recount the fight against Raven Tail.

They gathered outside the tent with Jenny, and waited there, talking quietly.

Inside the tent, Wendy watched Porlyusica pull out a few instruments from a bag, which Wendy recognized as one spelled to be many times its physical size inside. She laid out several of them then started to examine Jenny, first her heartbeat, then her blood flow through her body, before looking in her ear on the side with the scar. She ran another along the scars, tsking as the small green stick turned black, then turned away, moving to pull out several different leaves, mortar, pestle and vial.

“What are you doing?” Wendy asked.

Porlyusica looked over at her and sighed. “I was checking to see if I could detect any foreign magics in her system, sometimes magical wounds leave a taint behind them. Mere magical healing won’t detect it if it’s subtle enough and you don’t know what to look for. Come over here, and I’ll show you.”

Nodding Wendy moved forward, while Carla took up position by the entrance to the tent. After a few minutes of explaining how Wendy could detect the taint on her own, Porlyusica explained, “I personally use a wand of a willow, willows react very negatively do dark magics for some reason. This paste will act like a sponge, drawing the taint out of the scar tissue and letting them continue to heal, whereas if we used healing magic, we might well have simply sealed the taint inside her.”

Wendy blanched at that, but Porlyusica went on, turning the work of crushing the ingredients over to her as she moved back to her bag, pulling out a few more instruments setting them up around Jenny’s head. “And these will be able to tell me if her brain is damaged in any manner… hmmm…”

Again Wendy listened intently, while Porlyusica diagnosed what she was seeing now, tiny images appearing here and there around Jenny’s head. Two of them were very brown and red in color, and she nodded slowly, explaining, “That means her long term memory center has taken a bit of damage, not much, but she won’t remember a few specific things perhaps. Short-term memory is fine, but the overall image tells me she might have a slight concussion and fine motor control issues, specifically in her face. That kind of thing is best to let heal on its own, and even once she’s awake I won’t do much with that.”

Nodding Wendy handed over the crushed ingredients then asked, “Porlyusica, why… why do you smell like Grandeenay!?” she blurted. “I, I mean you smell so much like her and yet not at the same time it’s weird!”

“I suppose I should have known you had been able to tell that,” Porlyusica replied with a sigh. “I, I’m not Grandeenay. I am, however, the Edolas version of her.”

Carla and Wendy both gasped at that, and the Cat-girl shouted, “But, but how?! That, I thought Anna was the only person who came from Edolas! And Master Makarov, he never even hinted he knew about Edolas before Anna arrived.”

“Makarov tends to know a lot more than he lets on Carla, and no, Anna wasn’t the first person to come from Edolas.” She sent a glance the cat-girls way that the blonde cat-girl had trouble interpreting before turning back to the discussion at hand. “And unlike Anna, I never hinted at wanting to go back. Makarov befriended me and I joined Fairy Tail eventually on the strength of my poultices, healing and ability with magical constructs, like Erza’s eye.”

She turned slightly to look at Wendy, who looked both annoyed and crestfallen. “Eventually, I did indeed meet Grandeenay, you’re right about that. The two of us talked, and even stayed together for a time as she taught me what she could about healing and vice-versa.”

“…Why didn’t you just tell me this at first?” Wendy asked, frowning and looking away.

“Partly because of Ranma’s presence and issues, it kind of drove it out of my mind,” Porlyusica admitted. “And partly because she didn’t want to encourage you to fight more. His influence on you is rather easy to see after all, and I didn’t want you putting yourself further in harm’s way.”

“That’s silly,” Wendy huffed. “Oh not the first part, dealing with Ranma-nii can sort of drive other stuff out of your head, or just drive you batty, I’ve seen both.”

“If anything he takes pride in that second and goes out of his way to make it happen,” Carla murmured.

“But it isn’t as if having access to more magic or new skills would make me go looking for fights any more than I do now.” Wendy continued, sending a pout her best friend’s way. “Ranma-nii and I don’t go looking for trouble most of the time, it comes looking for us.”

Porlyusica looked at her drolly until Wendy blushed and looked away. “I did say most of the time,” she muttered.

“Uhuh. Well, at any rate, now that you have brought it up I am more than willing to tell you about the spells I got from Grandeenay, certainly you could make more use of them than I could. More than four decades in this world and I still can’t use magic myself worth a lick,” Porlyusica huffed.

Wendy nodded but instead of asking about the spells or how long it would take or even if Porlyusica had the spells written down she was concentrating on something else entirely. “Ano, Miss Porlyusica, could, the spells are nice and all, but could you, could you tell me about your time with Mama?” she asked, her voice that of a young girl who desperately missed her parent, not the young healer or fighter Wendy was so often.

Smiling slightly, Porlyusica nodded, even as she started to apply the paste to Jenny’s face. “Certainly child. Hmm, I think it was the year…”

Several hours later, those waiting outside were rewarded with Porlyusica coming out. She breathed a sigh of resignation as she saw them all. Wendy followed, smiling now, moving over to Ranma moving to his side, with Carla following on her heels, also looking a little happier.

“Well, Jenny it was close. If not for some expert stabilization work on the scene, and Wendy's emergency healing a few hours later, Jenny's brain would've been permanently damaged. As it is, she will suffer the effects of a mild concussion, and may deal with some spasmodic facial twitches for a time after she wakes up. But once she wakes up and can answer questions, I can clear that up. That scar on the side of her head however, that is going to stay. That one and the small one across her nose are going to stay, though that one should pale significantly over time. The other one had some Demonic magic mixed into it, and while we’ve cleared the magic away, the scar will remain.

Mira breathed a sigh of relief. “That's good to hear.”

Ranma nodded too, looking into the tent wordlessly. He moved over to sit outside the tent, making his intent to wait until the blonde model woke up plain without the need to actually voice it.

“Ara, thank you, thank you so much Porlyusica-chan, you’re as good at healing as you are beautiful!” Master Bob shouted, actually crying in relief as he thanked her profusely, the fat-seeming mage holding her hands in his and pumping them up and down vigorously before she smacked his hands away and shouted her habitual ‘don't touch me, I hate humans’ line.

Ranma idly wondered if master Bob actually qualified as human given his fairy wings and general fairy appearance, but wasn't about to question that at the moment. The others all moved off to either continue helping to rebuild the town or just talk, while Wendy led Porlyusica off to Ultear’s tent. Ranma though stayed where he was along with Gray, Bisca and Erza.

The Ice-make user had been nearly as silent as his friend Lyon, subdued by the loss of his arm, or so most would have thought. Ranma on the other hand had seen the look in his eyes, and he knew that while Gray was subdued by what had happened, he was also angry, very, very angry not at anyone else even their enemies, but at himself, at his weakness.

The other young man’s words when he spoke up now proved Ranma had been correct about that. “How, how do I get stronger? How can I become a better fighter than I am now?” he asked, staring almost challengingly at Ranma despite a small plaintive tone in his voice. “I, I was next useless here, and we…” he trailed off, shaking his head.

Unlike most of the others left in town, Gray had more combat experience and knew that it had been arrogance or something similar that had led to their not being finished off by the trio of Demons. Jura knew it too, but wasn’t willing to question their good fortune, only vowing to get stronger before he left with Hoteye. Unlike Gray though, he had a lot of ideas about how to go about it and no long-term debilitating injury despite Wendy having had to regrow most of his guts and a portion of his spine. Whereas Gray had both a missing limb and only a few ideas on how to get stronger.

Ranma paused before answering thinking through his words. “I can give you a few ideas, but if you’re asking for an instant power-up look elsewhere. I don’t have anything like that for you.” When Gray nodded, he went on. “Alright then, I have a few ideas about your magic. First though, let’s talk martial arts…”

That conversation went on for a while of course. Ranma was an expert at martial arts, well beyond his knowledge of magic. He tried to impart a few ideas to Gray in that area, then went on to explain a few ways he could use his Ice magic, make it stronger and so forth. There Bisca surprisingly took part, going into the number of long range templates Gray could use, ranging from cannons to pistols and how to use them, while Erza had thrown herself into the discussion on martial arts, agreeing to help train Gray occasionally on the use of different weapons. After about an hour of this, the conversation slowed and Gray nodded and left, intent on his own thoughts.

“And make sure when you get a new arm you get a hidden weapon added to it,” Ranma called after him, causing Bisca and Erza to look at him incredulously and he shrugged. “What? If I lost an arm, I’d want at least some hidden dagger or something to sprout out on command. And you know he’s going to get a replacement at some point, why not get an upgrade?”

Rolling their eyes in unison at that, the two women glanced at one another, before Bisca started to ask a few questions about Ranma and Wendy’s plans going forward. This led to her telling the others about her own plans to take a bounty hunting job that would take her down to Desierto soon, and then Erza shifted the discussion back to the idea of her, Ranma and Wendy hunting down the mountain of BelTar, where Belserion’s memory capsule might still remain.

Erza and Bisca left when it became dinnertime to join the group out by the graves, where Masters Bob and Baba were starting an impromptu service for the dead. But figuring he wouldn’t be wanted in that, Ranma was still there later that night, when Quattro Cerberus’ Goldmine came along with Bacchus, the older man holding out a large tin to Ranma. “Drink?”

Ranma took it dubiously, but shrugged and took a sip before handing it back.

“What, you don't drink?” Bacchus asked, sounding almost shocked. “A wild bastard such as yerself, no way can you be a teetotaler.”

“I can't get drunk and nothing alcoholic really tastes of anything to me, nothing good anyway. Dirty water is the best I can explain it,” Ranma said bluntly. He took another sip before handing it back, leaning back slightly as he looked at the two of them. “You've got something to say?”

“There’re a lot of mixed feelings about you, Ranma,” Goldmine said equally bluntly after he took a long swig from the tin. “All four of us guild masters have a bit of guilt about how this went, we kept on blowing it up and adding bits and pieces to it. But it was your mission originally, and you came to us for help. You put the lives of our mages on the line and you led them into this fight.”

“You think I'm going to try to say I don’t carry some of the guilt from how this went you really don't know me very well,” Ranma said softly.

“Tha’s not what I said. There's a lot of mixed feelings,” Goldmine reiterated. None of us are really blaming you, as you seem to be. You might not know it, but a lot of us were thinking about moving around the magic Council and aiming for the Oración Seis on our own. That mission would've been low-key, but the same mages we sent here would've been on that one, and who knows what would've happened without you, Wendy, Gajeel and Ultear are along. But where Rangers go, battle follows, and that seems to be multiplied by a thousand in your case. Just don't look to any of us for help in the future. Makarov might allow it among his strongest, and Jura always goes his own way, but Bob… Bob’s guild is taking this hard and I don’t know what the future holds for them.”

Ranma looked at him, then over at Bacchus, who shrugged. “I've got your back Ranma. “If you need help, you can call me anytime. Despite Velos’ death, this mission went about as well as I think it could have after so many different enemies decided to stick their oars in,” He said in a far more serious manner than Ranma was used to.

Then Bacchus spoiled this impression by grabbing the tin out of Goldmine's hand and tipping it into his mouth until it was practically empty. “Ahhh, but, but heh, butssss. Eheh, next time I think we should listen to your advice about only bringing along S class mages.”

Goldmine winced at that, looking towards Baba in the distance. “Yeah, there's that too.” After that Goldmine asked a few questions about the mission, about what Ranma's plans going forward were, and what the reception of the mission had been among the other kings. As guild master, Goldmine had been told about Ranma's Ranger status, but he didn't come out and say it.

Ranma simply reported that his employers were happy enough with the outcome, and were following up on the total destruction of the Oración Seis’ spy network along with any other networks they could find. Eventually the two Quattro Cerberus members left to be replaced not five minutes later by Master Bob.

He and Ranma exchanged commiserations as well, although Bob was a lot more formal about it than Goldmine had been, and it was quite obvious that he didn't actually like Ranma all that much any longer. That was fine with Ranma, there was no reason he should be liked at this point.

Next came Baba, who was almost beside herself with grief at Sherry's senseless death. She apologized to Ranma for putting him and Jura in the position of leading Leon and Sherry, repeating much of what Goldmine it said: That while the mission had been Ranma's, how it had evolved from there had been their own fault, and that they all shared in the guilt.

In contrast, when he came around Makarov was much more like Goldmine. He brought a drink, and the two of them sat exchanging it for a time before Makarov spoke. “Guilt is a heavy thing to bear. Ask any leader and they'll tell you that in a second. But this, this wasn’t anything that you should find fault in yourself for. Feel regret, feel the weight of the lives that have been lost, but don't blame yourself for them. **I** was all set to blame you for them I'll admit, I was all set to blame **myself** for them just as much. But after hearing what actually happened, from Wendy primarily, once we arrived here I know that you, while not entirely blameless, really did do everything you could to both protect the wounded and see your mission through.

After another long, hard swig, Makarov hurled the now empty tin out into the darkness beyond the slowly rebuilding town. “I blame my son for this. I blame Brain for taking such young people and brainwashing them to do his evil bidding. And I blame the demons for playing carrion crow to this miserable battle. Learn from it, and move on,” he said, looking back at Ranma sternly before hopping to his feet. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need some more alcohol.”

*I wonder how many times I'm going to be told the same exact thing,* Ranma mused as Makarov walked off. *Still, at least this time I think it actually sank in.*

His thoughts broke off however as one of the Rune Knights moved out of the dark to stand before him, saluting. The Rune Knights didn’t know what Ranma was, but they had received orders the morning after Ranma’s return to town to obey his orders so he must have some rank. “Sir, you wanted to know when the Fiorian councilwoman showed signs of waking up. She has just begun to stir.”

**OOOOOOO**

Ultear groaned as she came awake then sat up abruptly, tearing off the thin blanket she found lying over her to stare at her foot in shock and horror, only vaguely realizing that it wasn’t nearly as bad as her last memory made it out to be. She was missing her toes on that foot, and the skin looked red and raw, but it was all there at least. In her memories it had been a black, mangled and twisted thing.

She gingerly reached down and touched it, finding it somewhat tender, but she could still move her ankle and even without toes the rest of her foot still responded. “The whole no toes thing is going to take some getting used to though,” she said aloud in a dazed sort of tone.

“Yeah that can be a bitch I’ve heard,” Ranma said from one side. Despite the words though, his tone was somewhat hard as he looked at her.

After getting over her shock at the suddenness of his announcing himself like that Ultear looked at back at him, then around. “What happened?” she asked.

“You tell me. I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt considering that I don't think if you are going to sell us out, the due has shown up at all, but…”

She looks back at him in shock, then frowned, her eyes shifting as she once more got her mental feet under her with the speed of an accomplished spy. “Hoteye, Racer or Brain. You took one of them prisoner.”

“We converted Hoteye,” Ranma said his teeth suddenly barred. “And **that** was a confession. So you really do work for Grimoire Heart?”

“Worked for, past tense,” Ultear said firmly. “I worked for Grimoire Heart before this.”

“Why past tense?” Ranma asked.

“First how many people know?” Ultear asked, holding up a hand. “I’m not trying to get out of telling you what you want to know, but I think I can be of much more help if my transgression to not come to light publicly.”

“Myself, Hoteye, Erza and the Kings. The others suspect that this is the case, but they don't know for certain that I have confirmed it just now.” For an instant, he wondered if Ultear would try to fight him, but Ultear was a very smart young woman, and knew that despite having woken up from her magical exhaustion-induced coma, she was in no position to fight Ranma, who looked back to fighting fit.

Instead she slowly nodded. “Well, my decision to leave Grimoire Heart starts with some information that I found about Brain: that he was in charge of the Magical Research Institute in Iceberg, where I was born. Where I was sent, because of my immense magical energy when I was younger.” The black-haired beauty’s teeth grit as she went on. “Where I was tortured, experimented on, treated like a guinea pig in the pursuit of science. I never knew Brain had been involved in it until I was assigned the mission of trying to figure out how the Oración Seis were linked to Jellal. Then one of the others mentioned it, and suddenly this mission became very personal for me.”

“Let me guess…” Ranma said with a sigh. “Brain said something to you that indicated that your own, call him your real employer, knew about that connection, and still wanted you to work with him?”

“Oh yes. Oh yes, you might say that…” Ultear began, staring off into the distance behind Ranma as she remembered their confrontation.

Flashback:

Brain and Ultear moved through the forest together Brain in the lead as he led them through the woods. In his hand he held Klodoa, which he used to unerringly pick out the route to where Nirvana was locked away under illusions and stasis spells placed on it by the mages of Seven, Bosco, and Fiore in ages past, along with its own creators, the Nirvit. Brain had explained all this as they walked at first, sounding almost like an academic, eager to share his knowledge of something interesting and unusual with someone else, which Ultear encouraged for a time, believing in the phrase knowledge is power.

But eventually the fell silent as they walked, having next to nothing to say to one another. Klodoa attempted to keep up a running commentary at first, but Brain glared his staff into silence quickly.

Actually, Ultear had a lot to say to Brain, but none of it would help her now and indeed most of it was stuff which shouldn’t be said until she had him dying at her feet. Faced with the man who had been behind the horror of her childhood, Ultear was having trouble controlling herself. But Ultear knew that Brain was a powerful mage, not just in willpower but magic, and she would only get one shot at this. *And the best time to strike at someone is when their guard is down, when they are just about to achieve their mind’s desire.*

Eventually the plain forest of the Woodsea started to be spotted here and there with scattered ruins, the remains of stone towers and wall covered by moss vines and even a few trees. Brain smiled holding out his free hand, his eyes blinking shut for an instant before he smiled. “It’s here!” With that he reached into a pouch and pulled out an ancient crystalized eyeball, holding it in front of him.

The air shimmered and suddenly a vast screen of nearly translucent purple, orange and gold magic appeared, spreading up and to either side out of sight, the shape above them shifting into what might be a dome, but the dome was almost too high for Ultear to see curve begin. The magic directly in front of Brain shifted into the shape of three large locks. Each of them was made of different colors of magic, and a second after appearing they began to pulse in uneven intervals.

Brain quickly scanned the trio of locks, then moved to the side and inserted the eyeball into one of them. Then, as that lock dissipated and the orange color started to leave the dome, he held up Klodoa. “Now Klodoa!”

“Yes, Master Brain!” the loud, semi-sentient staff burst into a flare of purple light which flashed out from his eye and mouth sockets into the corresponding lock. This time the whine of released magic was audible, and the thin veneer of magic became even thinner, the illusion aspect of it dissipating.

Now ahead of them Brain and Ultear could see a small city stretching away from them. It wasn’t very big, but it was entirely made of stone, and seemed to be surrounded by eight large, odd looking v-shaped statues of some kind. In the distance Ultear could now see a ziggurat of some kind set in what she assumed was the center of the city.

However, the gold portion of the dome of magic remained, and its pulsing was now becoming almost constant, a whine building up in the air. Brain quickly turned to look at Ultear full, gesturing her forward. “Now! Place your head inside the lock!”

While this had been going on, Ultear had thought about attacking Brain right now, but he had always kept one eye on her, and seemed prepared for any kind of treachery on her part. So she wordlessly stepped forward, placing her head, and more importantly, her eyes, within the visible manifestation of the ancient Fiore Council spell.

Something that was mostly unknown to many was that joining the Magic Council of any country wasn’t as easy as simply winning an election or proving yourself adept at both magic and bureaucracy. It involved becoming privy to both secrets and magics that most peoples didn’t even know existed. This included having a spell-key put into your eye by the council in order to access certain restricted areas or spells. The spell-key never changed, and was mostly invisible unless in use, and Ultear had been infuriated to learn that there were actual levels to the spell-key, which had blocked her from accessing FACE and the Etherano Cannon.

She was rather dubious that her level one spell-key would work on this protective enchantment, but evidently the spell-key having levels was something that hadn’t existed when Nirvana had been sealed away. Her eye glowed with a series of concentric gears, and the golden dome disappeared, leaving Nirvana open to them.

“Thank you my dear,” Brain said with a smile. “Now, come. Nirvana awaits.”

Walking through the city didn’t take that long, and soon they were on top of the Ziggurat, facing what was obviously a series of controls of some kind. Brain moved forward, and looked them over for a few minutes, then began to push buttons here and there, a book popping out of his pouch and hovering in front of him for a moment under Klodoa’s control.

As Brain’s movements became frenetic and his smile became something almost gleeful and even Klodoa busy and not looking in her direction, Ultear knew the time to strike had come. Without a word she lashed out with her Arc of Time magic, shifting the ground beneath Brain and around him through several thousand years, eroding them instantly. She had aimed for the entire top of the ziggurat, but the controls had somehow fought the effect.

At the same time, she used her glass orb, hurling it toward Brain, the orb flowing through a spell circle as it left her hand. “Luminous Minutes!” The orb became serval dozen beams of purple light, lashing out toward Brain.

But despite his enthusiasm for his current project, Brain was not as unaware as he looked. Dark Hurricane!” he shouted even as he fell into the hole. Around him a series of concentric whirling blasts of black and purple energy appeared, blocking Ultear’s attack for just the moment needed for him to avoid them. While Darkness magic didn’t lend itself to defense very well, this let him survive her initial assault, and he lashed out viciously in turn. “Dark Capriccio, Klodoa, attack her too!”

From his hands Brain lashed out with twin spiraling drills of black and purple magic, lashing up towards Ultear, who dodged them adroitly, before having to dodge another such attack shot at her from Klodoa. “Did you honestly think I wouldn’t be waiting for your inevitable betrayal my dear?” Brain shouted up through the hole, even as he lashed out with another spell, “Dark mages always betray one another, you might say it is a failing in the breed. Dark Gravity!”

The ground beneath Ultear caved in, intending to drop her down to his level, but that didn’t work because she lashed out with her Arc of Time spell Restore at the rock underneath her, reverting it back to its undamaged form even as it took the damage, blocking Brain’s attacks utterly. Then she leaped away, and lashed out again with her Arc of time magic hurling her ball down into the hole after brain. “Parallel Worlds!”

“This has nothing to do with being a dark mage, or Grimoire Heart or even your Oración Seis! This is between you and me!” she shouted, lashing out with another, not even named spell at Klodoa. For all its apparent intelligence it wasn’t, technically, alive after all. It had no defense as a living person or animal would to her Lost Magic, and it shriveled and rotted within seconds, the skull falling to dust before it could even scream. The crystal in its mouth survived only to shatter on the stone of the ziggurat’s roof.

Brain grunted in some pain as the thousands of cloned balls slammed into him, but he was made of quite stern stuff and he throw off the attack easily blasting his way out of the ziggurat even as the attack continued, shattering the globe at one point only to watch it reform instantly and then somehow return to Ultear’s hands. *Arc of Time, a truly formidable magic, even if it isn’t a direct assault type of magic. But not powerful enough!*

With that thought he was out in the open again and lashed out with a “Dark Scream!” Followed by a “Zero slash!” as he raced closer to Ultear. This spell created a whip of dark purple and black magic in one hand which he lashed out at Ultear with. “Oh, and what have I ever done to you then?”

“Do you remember the daughter of Ur Milkovich? The one who was brought to you because she had too much magical power!?” Ultear shouted, using her crystal ball now on defense, creating a Parallel World spell that made it always appear in front of any attack that would otherwise have hit her while dodging as best she could, lashing out with the same spell, splitting the spell effects in a way that only a master of magic could do. One attack still got through, hitting her shoulder, but she powered through it, her own magical durability quite high. “Do you remember the names of the children you tortured in the name of science!?”

“Of course I remember, though I am surprised you do, I would have thought Hades would have erased your memory of the past when he decided to take you in,” Brain said almost conversationally, before one blast of magic caught him in the knee, dumping him on the ground.

This opened him up to another attack from Ultear and she hurled her ball into the air. “Flash Forward, Infinite Sphere!” From all around the two of them thousands of crystal balls then blasted towards Brain, smashing him down to the ground.

Brain groaned in agony, but lashed out by pushing his hands to either side of his head aimed upwards towards Ultear. “Dark Rondo!” from his palms came hundreds and then thousands of what looked like lost souls, dark purple and black screaming heads aiming to envelop Ultear.

She leaped way but the spell followed her, and she was forced to use Luminous Minutes to dissipate it. This let Brain regain his feet, though his back, leg and head had paid for it, covered in bruises and with blood coming from numerous cuts. Before he could press his advantage though, Ultear did the last thing he expected: she closed the distance. A blade of light yellow magic appeared from her hands and she took to slashing at him with skill and speed pushing him on the back foot. “What do you mean by that!?”

Without being given the time to conjure up his powerful but relatively slow attack spells Brain was forced to fall back on the Zero Slash, and two long whips of Darkness magic appeared in his own hands. But Ultear was faster, and, though Brain didn’t like to admit it, the better hand to hand combatant, faster and far more precise than Brain, who was really more of a long or mid-range fighter despite his monstrous durability. Her attacks couldn’t do much damage alone, but each attack was painful, and she kept on aiming for his weak points, nose, eye, throat, armpit, and joints. It was only his own skill that kept him from being crippled quickly.

Realizing that within a bare minute of combat, he decided to see if he could get under her skin. “Oh please! That old bastard knew where you came from the moment he picked you up! Hell, he even admitted to me once when we met that he had taken you off my hands, bragged about creating a weapon in you, a girl who I felt was too powerful and unruly to use as one of my keys! I’ve always been amused by how well Hades was able to manipulate you and all those other disparate personalities in Grimoire Heart. Hah, but then again, he did much the same as I did, found you all young and then molded each of you into his tools!”

He hissed as a cut nearly took his ear off and another slice into his side, though not very deeply. Ultear couldn’t do enough damage all at once to put him down, and now her being close worked against her. One of his whips caught her and smashed her away with a cry of pain.

Yet she rolled with it, and thrust out her hands, creating another Luminous Minutes attack, blasting into and dissipating Brain’s Dark Capriccio which he had launched the instant he had time. “You don’t know what you’re talking about! Master Hades, he took us all in, he knows, he, he…”

“He knew what you went through and that I was the one who put you through what you call tortures Ultear!” Brain shouted, knowing his words were having an effect. “And whatever you might think, what Hades is after isn’t a perfect magical world or the source of all magic or anything else! It is simply despair! Zeref will never aid you in whatever your dream is girl! The Dark Mage Zeref will only decay anything that he touches!”

“RAHHH!!” Ultear roared, her magic going out of control her attack blasting through Brains’ smashing him back into the wall of a building behind him. At the same time one of his Six Prayers tattoos disappeared, signaling the defeat of one of his guild members. *What, how!? Damn it that Ranger and his allies must have caught up with us somehow.*

“Does, does the truth hurt?” Brain sneered, lashing out with another Dark Rondo, before jumping to the side and lashing at Ultear herself with Dark Gravity, intending to force her to her knees.

Ultear dodged that attack however by leaping into his first shouting, “Ice Make Dahlia! A giant ice flower appeared in front of her blocking and absorbing his attack. She then lashed out with another spell instantly. “Ice Make Bloom!” Several dozen large flower shaped rock projectiles lashed out toward Brain.

He destroyed several of them but two hit blasting him backwards and pinning one arm to his body in an icy grip. Another assault from Ultear’s orbs followed and Brain gasped as he felt himself slowly being pounded under. Even his immense endurance wasn’t up to taking this kind of assault for long, and he had already fought a hard battle today anyway. Worse, Brain could feel his magic starting to flag. *Fuck, she certainly didn’t trick her way onto the magic Council, now did she?*

Just then however, Brain felt his last two keys dissipate, and he instantly felt his alter ego, Zero, slowly started to emerge, his Second Origin magical core opening at the same time, flooding him once more with magic. His eyes turned red, and he lashed out with another spell as he began to laugh crazily. The sphere of darkness flashed forward far faster than his earlier attacks, catching Ultear in the foot even as she dodged to the side, and she screamed in agony. “Yes, pain agony! Give me more, give me everything, I will drown the world in destruction, for I am Zero!!!”

**End Flashback**

“After that, I fought him for something like a minute, then must have collapsed from magical exhaustion and the pain of my wounds. I would've had him!” Ultear growled, smacking one hand down her thighs so hard she actually winced before going on in a slightly more mollified tone. “I would've had him, if not for that secondary personality. It, it utterly overwhelmed me.”

Ranma slowly nodded, digesting what he had been told, and what had been explained. “So are you willing to turn King’s Evidence?”

“No,” Ultear said with a shake of her head. “While you are no doubt following up on anything Hoteye could tell you about the Oración Seis, my own employees also have their own spy network and the most irritating thing about it is that most of it actually isn't technically speaking a spy network. Most of the people who relay information to us simply think they're communicating with an old friend. I don't know who Master Hades was before he became Hades of Grimoire Heart, but he must have been important, because he has connections everywhere. If I turn Kings Evidence, not only will my life be in danger, but Meredy’s will and I refuse to allow that to happen.”

“Meredy?” Ranma asked.

“A young girl I adopted as you adopted young Wendy. She's older than Wendy, around fifteen or so, and comes from Iceberg, as I did. I took her in at one point,” Ultear replied, making no mention that it had been an attack by another Grimoire Heart inductee, Zancrow the Fire God Slayer magic user, who left the girl homeless. This was something she had hidden from Meredy for years, and she saw no point in sharing it with Ranma now. “He won't hesitate to use her to get to me and if he can't do that, he might just decide to kill her or brainwash her entirely against me. No, I have to stay the course, stay hidden.”

“I don't know if we’ll be able to do that, but I’ll get with King Toma and the others. I’ll tell the others that Hoteye was wrong too. Then when I can reach Toma on my own, I’ll tell him the truth. He'll probably use you as a double agent you know. That'll put you in even more danger,” Ranma said, now feeling more than a little pity for the black-haired beauty.

Ultear shrugged. “I have to make amends somehow for being used like that for so long.” *And a small part of me hasn’t yet given up on the idea of reviving Zeref and going back to change my past.*

“You realize there’s no way Toma will trust your word on this?” Ranma asked intently. “He’ll have to put someone in place to monitor you, carefully control what information you have access to.”

Ultear nodded calmly. “I’m used to being watched so that doesn’t matter to me. As for information I shouldn’t’ have access to, tell him when you can that I was entrenched into the Magic Council to learn about their weapons of mass destruction, the FACE system and the Etherion cannon. I have discovered how they use and aim the Etherion cannon, and the safety systems should be changed. I have only discovered the existence of FACE, nothing more yet. Until I do, or until Master Hades discovers something else called the Keys of Fate, I will remain in place in the Council, ostensibly his chief spy.”

Letting out a hiss of air slowly through his teeth, Ranma nodded in turn. “That, that will surely show you’re knowledgeable, trust is doubtful though.”

Ultear barked a laugh. “Hah! Trust doesn’t exist in this game Ranma, I have no illusions there. Just convince Toma to leave me in place until I can get Meredy away from the rest of the guild, and I will cooperate with any request or mission that doesn’t hinder that goal.”

With that, Ultear seemed to lose much of her energy and she closed her eyes. Ranma watched her for a moment, then realized she had fallen back asleep, exhausted by her exertions, before getting up and moving out of the tent leaving her there in peace. He paused as he nearly ran into Lyon. “She’s asleep for now, best to let her stay that way for a bit.”

Lyon paused, but nodded and moved over to sit nearby the tent flap. He wanted to talk to this Ur lookalike, and he was going to do it.

True to his word, Ranma did call Meredrain, leaving the town quietly and finding a tree to sit in as he did so, nowhere near where he had left Seilah, who like the others had mostly recovered over the last two days. But even though he trusted her somewhat, he didn’t think it would serve any purpose for her to hear this conversation.

Once connected, he told the two kings that he had cleared Ultear of the suspicions Hoteye’s words had garnered. “It turns out Ultear was acting as if she had been suborned by Jellal in his Siegrain guise in order to get Brain to lower his guard. It worked too, but she wasn’t prepared for his combat-alter ego. She had been planning this for a while, in order to get close to Brain and take revenge on him.”

He went on to describe what Ultear had told him of the fight. That and the knowledge she had been part of Iceberg’s Magical Research Institute cause Toma and Meredrain some winces, but neither could question the woman’s reasoning to play that part.

“So with that cleared up, do you have any new requests or questions for me?” Ranma asked, eager to move on.

Toma was too, happy that Ultear had proven herself trustworthy, which made Ranma wince a little knowing he’d have to tell Toma soon that wasn’t actually the case. Now however, the two kings exchanged a quick glance, and then Toma said hesitantly, “Actually, we don’t want you to take on any new jobs at this time. We would, in fact, much prefer if you could make yourself scarce for a while. And by that I mean, don’t return to Fiore at all.”

While Ranma was reacting to that, Meredrain cut in quickly. “Your missions, while successful, have started to garner some interest from rumor, authority figures you’ve brushed past and other such things.”

“Newspapers and magazines in particular. ‘The new wildcard of Fairy Tail, how COOOL is he?!’” Toma said quite obviously reading off the last sentence from something out of the lacrima’s pickup range. “Your ranger status is not quite known, but it is a very thin line between the rumors and connecting how a single mage could get away with what you have been. So we need you to be out of sight for a good few months, and not attract further attention.”

“I’m dealing with much the same issue, although in my case even my own espionage service is getting in on the speculation despite oaths to the contrary. And I’d rather like you to find Raven Tail’s base as we mentioned before. We know it’s down in Desierto, somewhere near the countries border with Joya, but we have no idea where of course,” Meredrain said.

Toma smiled. “Take a break, see the sights, don’t make waves, please?” he finished plaintively. “If you possibly can do so?”

“Erm, I suppose I can try, yeah,” Ranma said with a faint smile. “In fact, ya might say this works damned well on my end too. I’ve been meaning to get some serious training done anyway.”

Sharing a worried glance at that the two kings turned back to Ranma and said as one, “Just don’t make waves, please!” before signing off, getting the last word in. Ranma scowled at that, having hoped to talk to Toma alone, but the Ranger communications enchantment didn’t work like that. It could only connect to the nearest King, and if that king left the discussion, Ranma was forced out to. *I’ll have to take a bit of a trip into Fiore regardless then. Damn.*

Late that night, indeed as the sky started to lighten in the distance, a low mumble from the tent brought Ranma awake, so low no one but another Dragon Slayer could have heard it. Entering the tent quickly he found Jenny tossing and turning in her bed, raising one hand to her head. Ranma caught her hand lightly, kissing the back of it. “Easy there. Don't try to open your eyes, Porlyusica thinks that you’ll find them kind of sensitive. It's nighttime and you wouldn't see much anyway. How are you feeling?”

“Like someone just used my head as a football!” Jenny grunted. Then her eyes, which she had opened despite Ranma’s words, widened before narrowing as she stared angrily up at the top of the ceiling. “So we won then?” She asked, processing what she could remember with her current situation as quickly as she could.

“Yeah,” Ranma said with a nod. “We won.”

“Who killed that big green-scaled asshole?” Jenny growled her free hand flying to her face and the side of her head, wincing as she found the two scars.

“Me apparently, and that seems to’ve been a near-universal opinion of that guy. I kind of went a little crazy there when I saw you fall. You cut him and he… Torafuzar, was his name, he nearly caved in your head like…” Ranma shook his head.

Jenny thought about that for a moment then smiled. “So my being in danger made you go nuts? That's almost sweet.” Then her hand continued to rise towards her head. “And I remember getting hit in the head very, very freaking hard… though I can’t remember what my favorite food is or what day it is… weird.”

Her fingers were still on the scar on the side of her head before they moved lightly over her face again, tracing the scar moving across her nose. “Can I, can I get a mirror?” she asked softly.

Ranma sighed, but nodded and left the tent, coming back both with a mirror and some food. With him he brought Erza, Mira, Anna and Bisca, along with Wendy and Porlyusica.

After eating some of the food as Ranma filled her in on most of what had been going on (minus Seilah) Jenny expressed joy that even if they had been attacked the wounded back in town hadn’t all been killed as could so easily have occurred. Then she returned to her own issues and held the mirror up, looking at her face this way and that, scowling at the two scars before shrugging her shoulders. “Well, I suppose it could be a hell of a lot worse.”

She looked at Ranma who was once more looking guilty before she smacked him on the arm as hard as she could laying there in her weakened state, even as her face started to twitch spasmodically here and there. “If you're thinking guilty about this I'm going to get out of this bed and kick you in the balls. It was my choice to come along, you only asked. And I thought I was ready for this kind of mission. And I was right, to a point. I've got the versatility, but I need more magical reserves, or find another type of take over the doesn't take as much of my reserves to use. I don't suppose you have any ideas there?”

Ranma slowly smiled. “So you want to get stronger? You’re not the only one. Gray asked me for advice on that too, and I understand that even with Master Bob thinking about forbidding hard combat missions like against dark guilds the remaining Trimens might want to get stronger too.”

“About time,” Jenny grunted, although inwardly she grimaced at the idea of her guild swearing off harder combat missions. It wouldn’t matter much to their coffers for certain. Jenny knew she had been paid more on a single modeling mission than most S-class mages saw for three jobs. The Trimens brought in money like nobody’s business, even Ichiya had. Despite their poor showing with the girls of Fairy Tail they were immensely popular among the regular population. *But is that the kind of thing I want to do with my life*?

Out loud she said, “On combat missions they've always leaned a little too heavily on Ichiya. Eve in particular.”

“Well to be fair,” Ranma cut in. “Snow Magic? Besides creating a whiteout or burying people alive what could he use magic like that for which an Ice Make user couldn’t do better?”

Ranma chuckled at that, as did Jenny, but Jenny kept on glancing down to the mirror and her reflection. It was obvious that despite her tough talk, the blonde mage/model was bothered by the scar on the side of her face. It wound its way from under her hairline down along the side of her face, ending on one cheek. It wasn't disgusting or huge or anything like that, but it was definitely there, just like the smaller one across the nose. And she didn't like either of them at all.

“You're still beautiful,” Ranma said, flushing slightly at that, moving one of his hands to gently trace her scar. “This, this doesn't matter. If people think that scar messes with your beauty, they're not worth the time to go tell them to screw off.”

Jenny gurgled laughter at that, then gripped his arm lightly and pulled him into a kiss. Despite the people around them he didn’t object, and she smiled happily while Bisca and Erza both scowled, though only one of them understood the feeling that went through them at the sight.

Despite the others being there the kiss went on for some time, And Ranma found himself deepening it, his tongue entering her willing mouth and swirling around Jenny’s tongue, pulling her upper body off the cot as he squeezed her against him.

Eventually though Jenny needed to breathe, and Ranma pulled back, letting her fall back lightly onto the cot.

“So, what are your plans going forward?” she asked, her face flushed and a small, almost lusty smile on her face, but her body was still wiped out, and she didn’t want to take that moment any further at present.

Ranma twitched. “Well, I contacted Meredrain a few hours ago. I’m basically being ordered to get out of Seven and to not return to Fiore for a bit. He and Toma bluntly told me that I need to disappear for a while. The ‘Ranger Ranma’ has become too well known to be of further use as a Ranger, and my skills aren’t needed to wrap things up here.”

“Who would have thought?” Jenny asked, shaking her head, her lips twitching in humor while alas the rest of her face just twitched on its own, something Porlyusica took note of. “You oust a traitor on the Magic Council, defeat a demon, destroy an ancient magical construct that could've well spelled doom for countless hundreds of thousands of people, help in ending a guild war prematurely, and then lead a somewhat successful mission to take out one of the Balam Alliance members, running roughshod over another group that they had allied with. Who would have ever thought that would be enough to gain you a bit of fame?”

As Ranma gave her a deadpan look Jenny laughed. “Now all you need to do is rescue a princess and model in both your forms. Then you might well become the most famous person in Ishgar.”

Wendy giggled. “Does protecting a queen before she was one count? Because Ranma-nii did that before he met me. Or ooh, how about a general trying to be king? That was the time we ran into that weird possessed goat person who turned out to be a Celestial Spirit.”

“Bah, child I’ve seen San Jiao Shin and let me tell you, he would make one horribly ugly princess,” Carla quipped with a small smile.

As everyone else laughed Ranma pouted and tried to change the subject. “Ahem, anyway! I wanted to spend the rest of autumn in Magnolia leading into winter. But if I need to be out of sight out of mind, I can't head to Magnolia. Erza and I have instead decided to go on a journey to, well to find some family heirlooms of hers that we learned about from this memory capsule I found yeas go. That search will take us into Joya I think. Joya and its border with Bell Lake and up into where Bell Lake hits Iceberg. Somewhere in those mountains I'm going to find or at least I hope I'm going to find a clue that can tell me how to conquer my Dragon Slayer magic, so that it doesn't fight my primary magical the time. If I can get there to play nice with one another, I think my power levels will rise tremendously.”

“I’ll need to shop around in a town at some point for a few supplies for myself, but beyond that I am ready anytime. I am… most interested in finding this link to my family, regardless of how long ago that link had been forged,” Erza said, a small smile on her face as she remembered the message from the woman who must in some fashion be her ancestor. *I refuse to believe she’s my actual mother, ugh, I’ve read far too many fantasy novels to want to contemplate the idea of time travel. No, Erza’s just a, a traditional name, that’s right.*

“That makes sense. Still, if you're going to kill two birds with one stone why not three?” Bisca asked, speaking up for the first time since the entered the tent. While she and Jenny had been friendly towards one another during the festival, they hadn’t even met before that, so she had let Ranma and Mira do the talking. “You're supposed to find this Raven Tail base right? Well that's in Desierto, and I’m a Desierto native.”

When Ranma nodded, the green-haired cowgirl went on. “Plus, I told you I was thinking about taking a job bounty hunting a group of criminals that have headed down there according to the government that the Magic Council wants back. We can hunt them down, see to the Raven Tail Fortress and then move back up into the mountains of Joya to search for this mountain**.”**

“That works,” Ranma said with a nod. “Our tent is certainly large enough for more people.” Wendy also agreed, saying she’d like Bisca’s help to actually start training on her tiny holdout pistol, something Ranma had kind of neglected since they had received it.

Erza cocked her head thoughtfully staring at Bisca hard, while Bisca stared back just as challengingly. Eventually the redhead nodded. “I have no objection to having another traveling companion. It should be most interesting in many ways.”

Smiling thinly, Bisca replied, “I’ll teach you to ride a horse Erza, you’ll like it.”

Ranma coughed at that, grateful that none of them knew about what his name translated to from Japanese to English back in his old world. But the idea of the two learning to ‘ride a horse’, with him being the horse, was still enough to make him both blush and curse his now all-too active imagination.

At the same time, Jenny made a ‘tsking’ noise in the back of her throat. *Crap, all that time together, on the road admittedly, but with both Ranma and Wendy, and I’ll be stuck here. Darn it. Still, it won’t be the first time we’ve been separated for a long while.*

Just then, Master Bob came in and quickly began to shoo all the non-Blue Pegasus mages out politely but firmly. He wanted to talk to his mages alone, and Jenny needed her rest. Ranma stole a final kiss and whispered a promise to stop in to see her before heading on to Magnolia then left the tent, looking at his companions. “So, I’m thinking of leaving tonight. The sooner we get out of here, the sooner I’m out of sight as Meredrain wants me to be.”

Erza nodded while Bisca looked a little surprised but also nodded. “I’ll round up some horses for me and Erza, and maybe Wendy would like to learn how to ride too…” she paused as Ranma’s face turned white and he seemed to blanch, causing her lips to twist into a frown. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, um, nope, nothing, just a, a random thought. Yeah, um, that sounds like a good idea. Erza, you need to check in with Makarov right?” Ranma said, desperate to change the subject. *Damn you imagination!! Going to need some serious brain bleach for that one.*

“True, I shall go do so. Although I won’t tell the others we’re leaving, I don’t think any of us want Natsu to tag along, do we?” Erza asked.

“No,” Wendy replied firmly smiling as she thought about the idea of learning to ride a horse, something she had only done rarely and very poorly before this. “I think the first time he tried to pick a fight in the tent I’d be forced to hurt him.”

“You done talking to Porlyusica then?” Ranma asked, kneeling down next to his little sister, rubbing the side of his head against hers. “We can afford to stay here another day or so if you want.”

“Nope,” Wendy said nuzzling back and smiling happily, as her older brother’s smell and presence filled her senses. “Nope, Porlyusica-san and I talked while she helped heal Jenny, and we will talk again when we return to Magnolia. I know what the mystery was about, and her connection to mama, that’s enough for now. She’s got some spells to teach me when we get back though, that should be fun!”

When asked if he had any objections to Erza and Bisca going with the Dragon Slayer siblings, Makarov grumbled, but didn’t forbid it, just demanding they take a few messenger birds, handing off several of them to Erza for her use. Mira, the only other guild member told about their leaving looked a little irritated by it all, and shared glances with Erza and Ranma, the meaning of which Bisca couldn’t figure out, but that didn’t matter.

The trip down into Desierto would take them about a week or so, by first traveling into Bosco then across the straits into Minstrel. There they would travel into the north of Desierto, which, according to Bisca, was a very different area in comparison to the south where Ranma and Wendy had been before. Once they reached that portion of their trip, she would take over choosing their route as they hunted down both information on where Raven Tail’s base was and the group of Fiore natives who had escaped to Desierto.

That night after the funerals Ranma, Wendy and the two ladies of Fairy Tail, mounted on horses, left the outskirts of the still quite wrecked town. They oddly headed south of the town at first away from the road for a bit, with Bisca looking at Ranma and the others quizzically. “Um, not to put too fine a point on it, but where are you leading us?”

Ranma blanched a little, unseen in the dark. “Erk, well, that’s quite a tale to tell. Um, let’s just say that we have one more person that will be going with us and one more reason why I wanted to get out of sight…”

**End Chapter**

This has been edited by *Justlovereadin*’ and *Hiryo*, for their expertise in FT and Ranma. Neither they nor I are very good at spotting small mistakes and as such there will no doubt be a plethora of said. Hopefully not enough however to detract from your enjoyment of the chapter.

**Chapter 18: Journeying with Dragons**

Bisca knew that her face was twitching. She could feel it, her lips, her cheek, her neck, her eyebrow, everything. She could also feel her fingers twitching, but in their case they were twitching towards her holstered pistol twitching with a purpose beyond simply twitching. What had to take the cake was the speed with which one of her eyebrows was twitching. It honestly felt to her as if it was going so fast that it would fly off into the distance in a moment. “I’m sorry,” she said mock-pleasantly as she glared at the raven-haired woman with the giant tits, smooth long legs and oh yes, horns, *can’t forget the horns Bisca*, in front of her. “Perhaps you could explain this again. We certainly **cannot** be standing in front of one of the Demons who caused this mission to go from pear-shaped into the utter crapper!”

Erza blinked, looking at her thoughtfully, “You know, that could be perhaps the first time I’ve actually ever heard you curse.”

“I save it for special occasions,” Bisca growled. “How can you be all right with this?” she asked rounding to spear the redhead with a look, one hand rising to point at her angrily while the other did not move even slightly from where she was stroking her pistol’s grip.

The Titania shrugged her shoulders. “Wendy and Ranma raised good points, and I have to admit that she didn’t seem to be as into the battle as the other two were. I think that even for demons there are extenuating circumstances. It isn’t as if we are not entirely immune to such as that, look at Juvia. She attacked Lucy, and was part of an enemy guild after all.”

“That’s different!” Bisca hissed. “Juvia didn’t actively try to kill even you when you stopped her and the other three Element Idiots from taking Lucy!”

“Nor did I actively try to kill my enemies during this battle. I fought to incapacitate and hide them,” Seilah replied, shrugging her shoulders. “I’ll admit that that was not because of any moral compunction at the time, only that I wished to not slay young Wendy, but the fact remains I could easily have done far worse than simply hide them.”

“Thank you again for that,” Wendy chirped, smiling as she looked up at the tall demon girl. She had adopted a lot of Ranma’s mannerisms over the years, and even without that, unless someone was actively trying to kill her, she wasn’t the sort to hold a grudge. And, she had to admit to feeling some fascination towards the Demon woman.

Although if Ranma knew the reasoning behind that fascination, he wouldn’t have been as sanguine about the two of them spending time together. *I wonder if she can tell me how to grow a chest like that!*

Bisca growled angrily. “All right, Wendy is a child, but you need to explain this to me Ranma!” She said coldly. “Why are you keeping her a secret, why isn’t she hooked up to a lie detector or something and being pumped for all the information we can get out of her!?”

“A few reasons,” Ranma replied. “One, even with Seilah no longer actively working for them, the demon Guild Tartaros still has spies out there, much like Grimoire Hearts, or the Oración Seis had before they had been destroyed, although of course their spies were still out there. Two, the moment that any government tried to act on Seilah’s information, the fact that we captured her at the very least would become known. The government in question would then bring the wrath of Tartarus down on top of them, and there is no way to predict what form that anger would take.”

“And to be blunt, I don’t think the King of Seven could keep a secret if his life depended on it. The guy doesn’t really impress me all that much. King Toma at least has a very firm grasp on the mercantile realm, the King of Seven doesn’t seem able to act without his advisers or his wife in anything but emergencies, when he is forced to.”

“I don’t like her,” Wendy said with a small moue and a wrinkled nose. “I didn’t like the way she looked at you the last time we talked to the king and queen in person.”

“Yeah let’s not go there,” Ranma said flushing a little and looking away.

Erza blinked, and exchanged a look with Bisca before looking over at Seilah who cocked her head thoughtfully to one side. “It is well known that the Queen of Seven has what I have heard called a roaming eye.”

“Damn what a bitch,” Bisca hissed her anger somewhat diverted for a moment. But it quickly came back, and she looked at Ranma. “Okay fine I understand why you are keeping her a secret, at least until you can try to convince the Wizard Saints to gather or something of that nature, but why are you personally watching over for her.”

“Because she saved Wendy’s life,” Ranma said simply, to which Wendy just nodded.

At that, Bisca deflated, and raised a hand to her forehead. “Do you have a headache?” Erza asked solicitously.

“No, just some muscles here that are hurting now,” she muttered, rubbing at her previously twitching eyebrow. “All right,” she said at last, “that’s… fine I guess. I wasn’t part of the battle here in the town, so I really can’t say my opinion matters more than Wendy’s, but I’m **not** happy about this.”

Ranma shrugged. “I figured. And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry, but if Seilah wants to make it right by what she did, then I owe her from her saving Wendy to give her the chance.”

Bisca looked at him thoughtfully then nodded as if she had just had a major epiphany. “You were taken advantage of a lot in your past lives, weren’t you?”

At that Ranma winced, quickly looking away whistling. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said, trying to make a joke of it. That comment had hit far too close to home after all: he had been taken advantage of far too often back in his old world.

Wendy began giggling, having heard much of Ranma’s history by this point, while Erza, who had heard about a quarter of it, laughed, clapping Bisca on the shoulder so hard that she nearly sent the green-haired woman to the ground. “You don’t know the half of it,” she caroled, before walking off without further elaboration.

Seilah and Bisca actually looked at one another at that, then to the other three before sharing a shrug. Bisca then turned away, still nowhere near at home with the idea of traveling with the Demon girl. “Can animals be around you?” she asked eventually as the group of them moved along the trail. “Ranma plans to travel to the nearest town, and then get horses and such there before heading down to Bosco.”

“It would depend upon the animal,” Seilah said promptly. “I have been around cats quite often,” she said gesturing towards Carla, who was walking beside Wendy.

The cat-girl looked back at her, scowling. Carla had heard about Seilah from Wendy, and despite having heard more about how she had been used as a shield mid-battle and then turned than Bisca had been told so far, she had already given Ranma and Wendy an earful about trusting the demon girl. She had thought about banding together with Bisca, but had decided against it. All that would have caused would be for Ranma to become even more mulish and unresponsive on this matter than before.

“Bears also seem to like me for some odd reason,” Seilah said thoughtfully, stroking one of her horns. “Horses too. Tigers, cats, birds, reptiles of all sorts and monsters do not. The less said about what Vulcans think about me, the better, I feel.”

Ranma smirked suddenly, eager to get past the awkward atmosphere that had developed after they’d begun walking. “There’s a story there, isn’t there?”

When Seilah nodded once without further elaboration, he smirked pushing her shoulder very gently. He wasn’t certain how the demon girl would react to that kind of action. “Now, you can’t do that. You have to tell the story once asked.”

“That makes absolutely no sense,” Seilah said bluntly shaking her head. “I have never run into any rule to that effect in any story I have read.”

“There’s a lot of that going along,” Carla muttered, to which Bisca nodded sharp agreement.

“How about we share stories than,” Erza suggested. “It will make the time go faster.”

“So could actually running,” Seilah replied tartly before relenting. “Still, I will agree to that so long as we start running as well. Simply walking is rather boring without my books.”

“Books?” Wendy and Bisca asked in unison.

“Yes, books. While I have no desire to return to Tartaros thanks to my former sexual partner’s betrayal, I find myself missing my collection of novels and stories. It was rather extensive,” the raven-haired demon girl said modestly.

“Betrayal?” Bisca asked. At that point the story came out about how Kyoka had used Seilah as a shield, and how before that the two of them had been lovers, though Bisca got the impression there hadn’t been any emotional connection there beyond friendship. That story made her somewhat more sympathetic to Seilah, but she still didn’t trust the bigger-breasted girl overmuch.

For now though, she concentrated on something more pertinent at the moment. “Well, regardless, if you think I can keep up with any of the rest of you on my own two legs, you’ve got another think coming,” Bisca said, gesturing down to her legs. “I didn’t bring my horse along on Christina.”

Ranma and Erza exchanged a glance, then quickly played a game of rock, paper scissors, which Ranma lost, on purpose it had to be said. He smirked, moving over to the green haired woman, and lifted her easily into his arms in a Princess carry. “This better princess,” he asked, winking down at her

Bisca laughed, and shouted, “Giddy up Ranma!”

Ranma blushed again at that, but began to pick up the pace, with Wendy leaping into the air with Carla on her back and Erza transforming into her running armor. This both let her speed away and gave Ranma something to look at that was just as nice as the bundle he was currently carrying. Seilah too floated in the air beside the group and began to move.

At the same time, Seilah began to speak. “Kyoka and I were sent on a mission into a forest which was inundated with Vulcans, we were there to meet with a small time dark guilds we were interested in recruiting to our cause. But we found the entire forest overrun with those… creatures. They took one look at us, and attempted to take us captive. We beat several Vulcans, but there were always more of them. At first, they were mere animals but as we trekked through the forest looking for the Dark Guild in question, they slowly started to actually organize themselves into a semi-civilized attack force. When we discovered that the guilds we were looking for had also been subsequently overrun, Kyoko and I made the decision to destroy the forest from the air by calling in Jackal, another Etherious Demon who enjoys destruction… perhaps a little too much even for a Demon.”

Every woman there nodded their heads. “That was a good move. A civilization of Vulcans that would be a horror beyond imagining.”

Ranma looked at them quizzically. “I’ve no idea what you’re talking about. Vulcans’re just animals, they can be dealt with easily enough.”

“They’re perverts,” Erza replied bluntly. “They look at human women like the most ribald and uncontrolled human man would. Think Bacchus times a hundred,” she added somewhat helpfully.

Ranma thought about that, then thought about his female form, and shuddered. “Objection withdrawn,” he said, picking up the pace further.

“Now, since I’m the one doing all the work here,” he teased, shaking Bisca in his arms like she was a baby. “Perhaps this one should give us the next story?”

She shrugged, and began to speak about the first time she tried to tame a wild horse, then a tiger. Neither went very well, and that stories had the other humans and even Carla in stitches. Seilah simply nodded slowly, her lips twitching once or twice when the story went against Bisca, not that she was alone in that.

They soon arrived at the next town, where Erza made her way into town with Bisca and Wendy and Carla. “Any requests?” she asked.

“An extra horse,” Ranma said.

“You’re planning to ride?” Bisca asked quizzically.

“Nah, but we might need it,” he said obliquely.

Seilah frowned thoughtfully then reached into a pouch no one else had noticed she wore under her white kimono-like dress at the small of her back. When her hand came back out it was holding several dozen gold discs. They were unmarked, but they were pure gold, even Wendy could tell that just by looking at them. “If you could find any books it would be appreciated.”

Bisca took the get the gold discs, then slowly nodded. “Any preferences for type?”

“Fantasy,” Seilah replied promptly. “Historical if they do not have any fantasy, but if so, and you have to choose among them, perhaps look for the genre called steampunk?”

“What’s steampunk?” Wendy asked.

“They are a new variety of books that I have recently discovered out of Midi. Despite the fact that many are intensely anti-magical in wording, the basic premise is a society built upon steam power rather than magic power, where every person can be a scientist or creator. It is oddly fascinating,” the Demon woman confessed.

“I don’t think I’ve seen any of those,” Bisca stated slowly, having noticed her will thawed over their time on the roads towards the Demon girl. She was still quite wary of her and still felt that Ranma and Wendy were being far too trusting, but that only made her want to watch the Demon girl, not lash out at her any longer.

“You would not,” Seilah applied. “They’re not very well thought of in Fiore or in Minstrel simply because of where they come from. Seven I believe is far more open in what it sells.”

“In other words if booksellers think they’ll make a profit on them, they’ll bring them in,” Ranma said with a laugh. He’d heard of steampunk before back in his old world, but had never read any books about it.

The two of them watched the others move off down the road, and then Ranma turned, looking back the way they’d come through. “What is it?” Seilah asked, also looking in that direction.

“We were followed for a bit after we left town. Though I think our speed left whoever it was behind.”

“You allowed to someone to trail you?” Seilah asked in some surprise. She had thought that Ranma was more competent than that.

“Yeah, I wasn’t certain who it was at first, but I think it was Juvia,” Seilah cocked her head, having heard the name from Erza earlier that day, but not knowing who that was. Seeing that Ranma rolled his eyes and said, “The water user, the one who changes into water.”

That made Seilah both nod and wince a little. “Do you think that she saw me?”

“Probably,” Ranma said with a sigh. “Still, she doesn’t seem the type to leap to conclusions, so if she is still following us she’ll wait until she can talk to us. If not, then I hope she’ll just wait to talk to us once we get back.”

With a shrug, Ranma turned away, and sat down gesturing Seilah to do the same. “So,” he said with a small thin smile. “Interrogation time. What can you tell me about your Guild? Where is it located, how would you rate your strength against say the Wizard Saints both as individuals and en masse. How many are you? Is your spy ring as extensive as the others, or just more specific, your spies more highly ranked or whatever? What is your goal?’

Seilah had been anticipating this for several days now, and said so now. “I had assumed that something of this nature would come up, although I had expected it far sooner.”

Ranma shrugged. “I didn’t want to do it during the time I snuck out to check up on you, I wanted to wait until you were healed, and we were away from the town, specifically Mira if I’m honest. She was always going on about how we should be interrogating you whenever she and I had a quiet moment.” Actually, Mira had commented more than once about wanting to put Seilah down and eat her soul, but Ranma wasn’t about to pass that on now.

“Mirajane Strauss… yes,” Seilah said actually looking a little afraid for a moment, before answering his questions honestly. After all, she had no home to go back to and nothing to lose now. “In any event, I can inform you of much, although I cannot tell you of any of our plans going forward. Only our Guild Master knows those. I will start from our overarching goal. You might not have realized this, but there are different types of Demons in the world.”

“At least three,” Ranma supplied with a nod. “The Devils as I call them, those created by belief and formed by humanity’s thoughts. The second type is the mindless or almost mindless destructive monsters. And then there is you lot, demons who seem to be able to think, if not to actually feel like humans.”

That caused Seilah to wince for some reason she didn’t quite understand. It felt as if Ranma was implying she and other demons were limited in some fashion in comparison to humans, which couldn’t be the case, could it? *Although, given my recent experiences, perhaps it is,* she thought morbidly.

She shook her head at those thoughts, and answered Ranma’s questions. “Exactly, yes. The monsters as you put it were mostly created by the Dark Mage Zeref, and so were we. But we were different. We were created by a variety of curse magical books, each of us with a single overarching concept that we embody. Our book-selves were infused with so much Ethernano that it reached critical mass, and the spell within the book gained sentience, coming alive and forming into bodies. Because of that we call ourselves Etherious, or demons of the book.”

“How does that work?” Ranma asked, frowning as he leaned back against the grass, staring up at the girl who was kneeling next to him.

She really was quite beautiful he reflected, trying to stop his eyes trailing down her body. He’d be lying if that hadn’t had some effect on him. If for example, Torafuzar had been the one to surrender, Ranma probably wouldn’t have given him the chance. Seilah though, that was different in a lot of ways, and of course the two of them had met before. *Wait… does, is this an example of thinking with your dick? Not certain I like that…*

“I do not know exactly how it works. All I know is that all of us were once books, and then we were demons. Demons with our magical curses, like my Macro, or my former lover’s amplification. If you are asking how we formed humanoid bodies, again, I do not know.”

“That’s weird but not exactly the weirdest I’ve ever run into,” Ranma said bluntly. *That would still go to a few things I ran into in my past life, like that phoenix chick that sat on Kuno’s head, or the cursed cat bells of Maomolin, the cursed pools themselves, a ki draining teacher who goes from chibi to vampie, or… ugh… I really did run into a lot of weird shit didn’t I? I suppose I could think of it as good training for my new life though.*

“That is also bizarre to me but seeing as I am essentially a book given sentience and a female human’s form solely because my creator wanted my form to be that of a human woman to, for no discernable reason, I won’t say anything,” she replied bluntly in return, and the two of them actually exchanged a smile before she went on. “At any rate, we Etherious believe that we were created to fulfill a purpose, that purpose being to kill Zeref. Why that is, I do not know, but it is one of the few things we all agree on: that we were meant to try to kill him via our curses, a brand of magic humans could not use.

“How long ago was this, do you know?” Ranma asked, frowning. *So, is this Zeref just crazy, or did he have a time where he had a pity party and decided to end his own reign of terror or whatever?*

She thought for a moment then nodded. “Around four or five hundred human years ago I believe.”

Ranma blinked and then stared at her incredulously. “Are you serious!? You don’t look a day over 20!” *I know that ki can enhance a person’s life, but can magic do the same, or are Demons just not susceptible to aging?*

For some reason that made Seilah smile, and actually blush a little in a purely feminine response which her body performed without any input from her brain. “Thank you,” she said, her tone seeming both confused, but also sincere. Then she shook her head and went on. “At any rate, the others awakened at different times. And then about two hundred years ago Master Mard Geer began to gather us together on Tartaros.”

“We’ll get to that in a moment,” Ranma said, holding up a hand. “Let’s go back a bit. This dark mage Zeref, I’ve run into mentions of him a **lot.**  What can you tell me about him?”

Seilah shook her head. “I do not remember anything of my time with the master, only that I was meant to be an assistant. I remember a few snippets of words, mostly to do with experiments and his laboratory, but nothing more pertinent.”

“Can you at least tell me whether or not he is living or dead?”

“I know he was immortal at the time, much of the sentences I remember had to do with seeking ways to end himself. But if that implies he is still alive today I cannot tell you conclusively,” Seilah replied.

Ranma made an irritated noise in the back of his throat, shaking his head. “This Zeref guy, he seems to be the center of a lot of bad shit in this universe, I would just felt a lot better if I could figure out one where than other if he was still alive, or not.”

Seilah said nothing to that and he sighed and waved at her, “Never mind, go on.”

The woman nodded, and continued. She described how the demons had come together under the master, how he had created a floating island called Tartaros for them to live on, and how the master had slowly begun to develop the means of creating other demons, their spy network and the two overarching goals of their Guild. The first, was to dominate or wipe out humanity, and the second, to find out if there master former master was indeed still alive, and, following his own instructions, kill him.”

“Wait! You just told me that you don’t know if Zeref’s alive or not.”

“I do not,” Seilah said didactically. “However, Master Mard Geer believes that he is, and all of us Etherious demons believe that he wishes to die, that his immortality is a curse he wishes to be free of.”

“And you followed this Mard Geer guy’s plans?” Ranma asked. He didn’t know what to think about the idea of Zeref still being out there and his possibly wanting to die. That made him sound more like a tragic villain, which really, really did not match any of the shit Ranma had run into which had the bastard’s name on it.

Seilah frowned at that, one hand moving up to touch one of her horns, arresting Ranma’s thoughts. She noticed Ranma watching the motion, smiling slightly at the horns, something that was confusing her. *Shouldn’t human men find my horns something of a… what is the term used in so many of my novels, a turn off?* Ranma didn’t seem to care one way or the other.

“We did not follow him as you put it, at least at first. We came together more out of a sense of what humans would call perhaps camaraderie, although that is far too strong a term I believe. Say, rather we were brought together by mutual confusion as to why we existed or what we should do with that existence. Later, Master Mard Geer’s goals, first to find and revive END and then kill Zeref, became our goals, although not the most important ones. We, or at least Kyoka and myself, believed that dominating humanity was the true reason for our standing together.”

“Why did you want to dominate humanity? I mean, I know a lot of humans have that kind of thinking, but you all, it sounds as if you all didn’t start off with a lot of free will, so I’m just wondering if you all chose to express your limited free will that way or if maybe it was a thought Zeref gave you.”

That made Seilah blink. “…I do not know. We did not, we do not like humans and more than one of us believes that you humans are a scourge to the planet. But many of us were also extremely irritated by the fact that humans could do things we could not. Cooking for example, none of us can do more than cook over an open fire, and sometimes not even that. Or art, most of us do not have the imagination necessary. For example, we can draw a scene as we are looking at it, but creating an imagined scene, no. It, it just seemed to make sense to conquer you,” she said somewhat lamely even to her own voice.

“And now?” Ranma asked his mind going off on a tangent. “Now that you’ve broken away from your fellow Etherious demons, and can’t return, what do you want to do with your life?”

She thought about that, with one hand rising once more to her horn, as she thought long and hard for several minutes in silence. “…Perhaps start a library? A library where food could be served as well? I do not need to worry about my food intake as human women do, and I can think of no other more pleasant means to spend my life other than reading and eating food human chefs have created.”

Ranma winced. “I think you should keep that little bit of information to yourself,” he replied firmly. “You would rapidly come to understand that there’s hatred, and then there is loathing.”

Seilah blinked at that, then Ranma indicated she should go back to answering his other questions. She did so, and by the time the others had joined them, Ranma had a very good idea of both the power of Tartaros, and its long-term strategy. He would come back to ask about the various demons in the guild, their powers and weaknesses later. What he wanted right now was an overview in order to try to figure out what he should do from now on in regards to Tartaros.

Unfortunately, he didn’t learn enough to decided that, such as a target. It turned out that Tartaros, the floating island rather than the Guild, tended to move around a lot, and seemingly randomly, or under Master Mard Geer’s directions. That wasn’t very good in Ranma’s opinion: it gave the guild a major advantage against every country in Ishgar. Christina was the first flying machine Ranma had seen in this whole world, and only one in about 20 mages could truly fly. A flying fortress like Tartaros, with weapons to add to it, would be a devastating weapon of war.

When he said those thoughts aloud though, Seilah shook her head. “No. Master Mard Geer knows exactly how vulnerable we are in comparison to humanity. While humanity is divided, we have an opportunity to conquer you piecemeal, one nation suborned or defeated after another. If we come out in the open as you are supposing we could, the Wizard Saints would band together to wipe us out.”

“You’re certain of that?” Ranma asked. “Not the fact that they would wipe you out, but the fact that you all are so realistic about it?”

“We are,” she said firmly. “You do not know the power of the true Wizard Saints, they are intensely formidable.”

“True Wizard Saints?”

“That is a phrase that Master Mard Geer came up with for the top four. They make those lower in the order seem as if they are simply normal mages.”

At that point, their conversation was interrupted by a clatter of horse’s hooves on the trail. As Ranma turned to look, he saw Bisca riding up with Wendy riding another horse to one side of her with Carla behind Wendy in the saddle and Erza following behind on a third. Wendy’s face was a mask of concentration, but she looked as if she was not enjoying the experience just yet, Erza looked as if she was hanging on for dear life.

The redhead’s face was easily one of the most amusing sights that Ranma had seen in a while, and he laughed. This brought a glare from the Erza of course, and she huffed irritably at him, “If you must know, I’ve never ridden a horse before.”

“Really, I would’ve thought you had, what with the whole Valkyrie warrior-woman thing you’ve got going on,” Ranma teased slightly.

Bisca chuckled as she gently pulled Wendy’s horse to a stop, smiling at the young girl. She smiled back, hugging her horse around the neck while both horses sniffed the air, and moved over towards Seilah. Bisca blinked and watched as Seilah gently raised a hand, and petted the horses’ noses lightly, pushing them away as they tried to lip at her hair. “Are you wearing some shampoo or something?” she asked.

“A concoction of my own design yes. Horses in particular seem to like it. Cats…” she frowned looking at the Cat-girl behind Wendy. “Not so much.”

“Meh, don’t worry about it, after all, Carla is always telling us she’s not a cat right? That should mean she won’t let a little old smell get to her,” Ranma said with a laugh, looking over at Carla behind Wendy, who huffed and seemed ready to set into a diatribe. Although whether or not it would have been aimed at Seilah’s presence or the whole not being a cat thing was anyone’s guess as she had once more taken to glaring at the large-breasted Demon woman.

Deciding to nip that in the bud, Erza asked, “I don’t suppose you know where to go from here to the nearest port?”

“Yep,” Ranma nodded, gesturing the others to follow him around the town and to the west where they found another trail among four leading out of town. “But when we get there, I’m going to have to leave the group for a bit. There’s something that Hoteye told me about in confidence that I need to pass on to King Toma.”

Erza’s eyes narrowed, looking at Ranma thoughtfully with one eyebrow rising. He looked back at her, twitching a hand this way and that indicating she should let it go for now. Erza did so, but her return look promised questions to come. Bisca however simply took his words face value, and nodded, looking a little confused at the bit of nonverbal back and forth that had just occurred there. “That’s fine, we can get an inn for the day and wait for you. Although heading into Fiore is going take you a while.”

Ranma laughed. “No, it isn’t. You’ve seen me go at a decent clip it’s true, but not when I’m actually trying to go fast.”

It took the group about another two hours to get to the port city in Bosco. Once there Ranma asked Erza, Bisca and Seilah to watch Wendy, who pouted. “I am not a little girl any longer! I don’t need minders. In fact, given all the trouble you get into when you’re out on your own, don’t you need a minder more than me?”

“Probably,” Ranma said with a laugh, ruffling her hair affectionately. “But tradesmen and innkeepers will take them much more seriously than they would you if you were alone.”

That was undeniable, and Wendy subsided with nod, and then leaned over and whispered, “And when you get back you’re going to tell me the secret that you seem to think you’re trying to keep.”

Ranma winced at that, and bopped her on the nose with a finger. “Have I told you lately you’re too smart for your own good?”

“I’m a girl, being too smart for my own good is what makes me a girl not a boy,” Wendy replied loftily.

“What the heck is that supposed to mean?” Ranma asked, looking at her in confusion.

“I don’t know,” Wendy groused, looking away. It sounded a lot better in my head.”

Ranma laughed at that, as did the others watching as he turned away leaping up onto a nearby rooftop and out and away, speeding out of sight faster than Bisca could blink. “So that’s what he looks like when he’s really pushing.”

Wendy up however shook her head. “Nope, he’ll go even faster when he leaves the city behind. Now come on, let’s go find an inn.”

“Or a library,” Seilah said, looking around in interest. “It’s early yet after all.”

“Early for you maybe,” Erza replied, surreptitiously rubbing her rear. “Not so early for my rear and other parts. How do you ride these creatures for so long Bisca?”

“It’s all in the hips and legs,” Bisca said, slapping her inner thigh with a laugh. “You’ll get used to it.”

*“For some reason I felt a sense of defeat just now,* Erza thought, as she led the others deeper into the city. *This cannot be borne!*

As the girls fell into mild bickering about what to do with the rest of their day Ranma was already miles away from the town, racing so quickly that normal people couldn’t see more than a blur as he sped past. Ranma wanted to get this information into King Toma his hands before Ultear returned to Fiore’s counsel. Just because Ranma thought he could trust her didn’t mean he really was going to be trusting her completely, just like Seilah, whom he had basically put himself in charge of. Ranma wanted the King to put some people in place to watch Ultear in no uncertain terms, even if that put her in danger. Ultear’s position as a Councilwoman could still let her do a lot of bad things to Fiore if left on her own.

Although I don’t really think she’ll do anything*. I might not be more than a middling judge of character, but these days I’m getting slightly better at figuring out when I’m being lied to, and her anger at Hades and Brain was genuine. Her affection for this Meredy girl too.*

“I wonder if this Meredy girl would get along with Wendy?” he mused, as he raced on towards the nearest location where he could cross the border to Fiore.

**OOOOOOO**

At the same time that Ranma was racing across country towards Fiore’s border with Bosco, Master Mard Geer of the demon Guild Tartaros was frowning, leaning back in his throne, running a hand over a book in his lap. On its cover were spelled the letters E.N.D. Within it was the soul of END, the original demon created by Zeref, which should have become the guild’s true leader. But while others thought he held on to it as a symbol of loyalty, protecting it for their master as he went about trying to find END’s body and bring the two together, that was a lie. Rather he kept it on his person the better to make certain nothing could happen with it, so that he could retain his power over his fellow demons in the most efficient manner, wasting none of his considerable strength on educating them, or their lives when not necessary. Convincing the other Demons they needed to work together to kill their master was another way to get them to follow him in his real goal: to conquer the world and remake it so that only Etherious demons could exist.

All the other Demons had some loyalty to Zeref, to their creator, the inbuilt desire to fulfill his wish to kill him. Yet Mard Geer had been his second creation, and knew they had been discarded, discarded as unnecessary, as a mistake, their powers deemed unable to do that job. From that rejection had sprung not a desire to prove Zeref wrong, but to forge his own path. From that and his travels the world over had come a disdain for and then hatred of humans, filthy, disgusting creatures with their feeble minds and their emotions which all too often controlled their actions. No, they could not be allowed to continue to propagate so frivolously, they needed to be culled, contained.

But to do that, Mard Geer needed several things to occur. First, he needed Alvarez to remain separate, unable to act against Ishgar. That had been accomplished thanks to the humans of Ishgar and their weaponry, the fearsome Ethernano cannon. He was concerned about the weapon, but its cumbersome nature meant it would be useless against the Etherious demons, although it could be used against their floating island to devastating effect. In contrast FACE still concerned him greatly, as they had yet to discover anything concrete about it.

Mard Geer also needed the Wizard Saints of Ishgar to be scattered and divided. He was honest enough to know that those humans, who could barely be called that, such was their strength, could overwhelm all the Etherious demons save himself. And to Mard Geer, the idea of fighting his own battles to that extent was simply illogical. Yet no two Wizard saints, save Hyperion and Wollstein, worked together normally, or even willingly, so that made that condition easy to reach. So long as Tartaros stayed in the shadows, ready to strike and choosing when to do so carefully, the Wizard Saints were just another series of targets to Mard Geer.

And he needed information, information about every government in the world, information about any strategic weapon they could bring to bear information on their militaries such as FACE. Information was power, and these humans did not guard it nearly well enough against him.

However, that goal had recently taken a series of hits. His long-term recruitment of Devils, those creatures created by the thoughts of humanity and given physical form, had not been going very well. All of those creatures were very singular in their thought processes and very arrogant, and did not work well with others. He had gotten around this by working with Keyes to create his necromantic experiments, and several, lesser demons to serve the Nine Demon Gates.

But four days ago, the nine demon gates had suddenly become six, and Mard Geer’s hands clenched, only his having locked away his emotions in favor of his intellect allowing him any control. He had thought it a simple assignment, one with a high return for a little danger to his own people. Instead, he had lost three demon gate demons, for, from what he could determine so far, was very little in the way of gain.

The major target, the Ranger with the Water Dragon Slayer and Demon Slayer magic, was purportedly still alive, as well as many of the other mages. While the town where the ambush had occurred had been devastated, the town was nothing, simply the place where the battle began. It was worthless in his opinion one way or the other. No, it was the mages, it was the Ranger who needed to die. Someone capable of fighting against the demons as well as Ranma was able to do was a threat, especially considering his Demon Slayer magic.

Mard Geer knew this because Tartaros had one such individual in its ‘employ’ so to speak thanks to Keyes and he was easily one of the most dangerous combatants among them. *“Who knew Ice Make magic could be so deadly.* And in Silver’s case, the man hadn’t killed a demon, rather he had injured one, and been accidentally bathed in its blood while covered with open wounds of his own before expiring. The rest had been an experiment by Keyes, an experiment that had performed quite well, master Mard Geer had to admit. But just an experiment, not the reality of someone who had killed several Demons in his time.

Losing Seilah is a blow to our spy ring, that much is true. With her dead, the long-term Macro curse that she was using to control many of our spies has faded. *That is no doubt causing some consternation in the halls of power throughout Ishgar, but considering that she had hidden her form when manipulating those fools, it cannot be linked back to us. Indeed, I wonder exactly how many of her tools will willingly share what has occurred to them. If some do not, perhaps we can keep using their services via blackmail.*

*The loss of our chief torturer is just as easy to bear from a pure military standpoint.*  *We still have the rest of her squad, and all of them can be trained and experimented on further to bring out more power*. But in terms of military strength, the loss of Torafuzar was a serious blow to his plans. *Keyes is already working on plans to offset that and make certain such losses do not occur again, but that is for the future. But right now, we need some ways to continue to weaken the humans of Ishgar in such a way that it is not likely to backfire on us, and further cut down on their own combat potential…*

To do so, Mard Geer could see two ways forward. One, strike out hard, assault Seven’s capital and wipe it off the map in retaliation for what had happened to his pawns. But, they still didn’t know the capabilities of the FACE weapon and that would nearly require retaliation from the Wizard Saints. While Mard Geer could face any one of them, if they united even he would eventually fall. And two, continue to work behind the scenes, but in a much more proactive manner.

With that in mind, Mard Geer gestured, and a map of Ishgar appeared in front of them, the magic of his throne room activating to his desires. One nation in particular began to glow as he manipulated the map and he smiled thinly. *Yes, I think we can most certainly salvage this if we can convince the humans to do our work for us.* With that in mind, he stood up, and left his throne room, heading deeper and deeper and deeper into the depths of Tartaros. Mard Geer had a plan now and the humans would burn.

**OOOOOOO**

King Toma looked at Ranma in shock. “And you, you thought to keep this a secret?! That one of my Magic Council members truly is a spy, as Hoteye had hinted to you might be the case!?”

Ranma held up his hands, visible in the pickup. “Now hold on, I just told you, so it’s not like I’m hiding it…”

“You told me, yes and you told me Ultear’s reasons. But just because she realizes she’s been used all this time doesn’t mean that only damage she has already done to my nation goes away!” Toma roared.

“Actually, it can,” Ranma replied.

Toma frowned. “Explain,” he said tersely. ‘And it better be good,’ his tone said.

Despite the fact they’d gotten off to a rocky start, Ranma had to smirk inside. Despite his short stature and seemingly simple childish delight in magic, there was steel in the King of Fiore. “Her mission was simple, discover everything she could about the Ethernano cannon and another super weapon, one who whose name I haven’t heard of before called FACE, how it activates, how it’s controlled, everything. She was to do nothing else except to maintain decent relations with the other dark guilds, specifically, the Oración Seis in the form of Jellal.”

“That is…” Toma rubbed his forehead, sighing. “All right, that makes me feel a little better about this. But not all that much,” he warned.

“Then you’ll probably feel a lot better about this,” Ranma replied smirk. “She is willing to turn King’s Evidence the moment that she is able to get another person, a girl named Meredy, away from the rest of Grimoire Heart. And, just because she was their spy in Fiore doesn’t mean that she wasn’t in the know-how about all the other spies both there and abroad. She will even help us find the Guild itself, once she has time to get Meredy out. Plus, she can point out flaws in your security on the Magic Council side of things. I think it’s a good deal. But whether or not we go for it is up to you, of course your Majesty.”

“Yes, it is,” Toma said sternly. After several seconds more contemplation, he eventually nodded firmly. “I will discuss this personally with her. I name and I can excuse want to do her justice personally. I’ll have her work closely with my daughter a few days to get to know one another, and I’ll call them both home for consultation before sending them right back to work. Do you think she’s smart enough to be honest with me?” he asked looking at Ranma speculatively.

Like Ranma, Toma hadn’t actually liked the other man at first and a part of them still honestly didn’t. Ranma care about the status quo enough, and if he could spell the word ‘economy’, let alone knew the first thing about it, King Toma would be astonished. But, no matter if they liked one either, they needed to work together and that, Toma could do, having a long experience of working with people he found annoying. Master Bob was not the worst individual he had to deal with, although in dealing with him in person made that rather hard to remember.

Ranma just nodded, and Toma smiled. “Very well, I will follow up on this, but can I assume that you will be willing to work together with anyone else I can bring together to deal with Grimoire Heart when it comes time to do so?”

“Your majesty, you’d have to nail my feet to the ground to keep me away,” as he spoke, Ranma’s lips twitched into a smirk that showed a good deal of teeth. Which, though the look did scare him somewhat, Toma took as a good sign.

**OOOOOOO**

While Blue Pegasus, and Lamia Scale had left already, the mages of Quattro Cerberus and Fairy Tail had stayed. They wanted to help repair the town, which was called Redfen, and both guilds, by their nature were much more rough-and-tumble than the other allied guilds. They even dealt with their grief differently, by becoming rowdier and even more raucous, something which made many of the Rune Knights and the locals kind of uncomfortable, and thankful that not many of either guild had come with their guild masters.

However, before Lamia Scale had to leave aboard Christina, Leo had a mission he had to see to first…

“You are called Ultear then, councilwoman?”

Ultear looked up, from where she was writing out a report, nodding briefly at one of the two people she least wanted to talk to in the world. Or should that be four, considering I don’t want to talk to Ranma again, and I’m not looking forward to talking to the King either? “Yes I am. You had a question Mr. Vastia?”

“What is your last name?” Lyon asked persistently.

“Milkovich, if that is any business of yours,” Ultear said, setting the report down and scowling at him. “And you’re being quite rude right now.”

“That is lie,” Lyon said shaking his white-haired head. “Your first name is correct, but the last one is not, it is merely something you took on yourself.”

The Councilman’s eyes narrowed and she leaned back, crossing her legs in a sexy manner. “Oh really?” she drawled. “Then why don’t you tell me who I am?”

“You are the daughter of my old teacher, Ur,” he said simply. “You look far too much like her to be anything else, and that first name, that is a name I’ve heard before.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t there something about you know living with a person, or having positive memories of that person that should make you think of a mother figure?” Ultear growled, all hint of amusement disappearing instantly. “I have none of those from her. She left me with the Institute of Magical Research, do not expect me to acknowledge our familial relationship,” Ultear nearly snarled the last two words, getting to her feet. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have some work I need to be doing.”

Lyon stared at her, his eyes wide at her vitriol, but he gritted his teeth then went on before she could get out of earshot. “She cried herself to sleep you now.”

Ultear paused in her steps, turning to look at him. “What?”

“Ur. She cried herself to sleep. When I first met her, she was a wreck. A powerful mage, one of the most powerful in the nation of Seven, whose knowledge of Ice Make magic and combat were acknowledged far and wide, there was even talk of making her a Wizard Saint after she died did you know that? And yet…” Lyon went on unhurriedly, staring at Ultear, whose face had begun to read in anger, “And yet, for all that, she still cried herself to sleep two out of every three days.”

“She was a wreck,” he repeated. “Her hair was undone, there were bruises under her eyes from lack of sleep, her nails had been practically gnawed to the bone, she looked more like some grieving widow-woman rather than a powerful mage. I honestly pointed this out to her face,” Lyon said, with no small amount of amusement in his tone. “And she schooled me so quickly, it made my head spin. It seemed to help her, and it certainly helped me when she took me in. But she always cried herself to sleep about her daughter. Ur told me about what happened to her daughter, about how her magic had been so strong that she couldn’t control it, that she had nearly aged an entire town back to infancy then to old age.”

“A dog barked at me,” Ultear said with a slow nod as she remembered that incident from long before she had been sent to the magical Institute. It had not been a fun memory, but it was one of the few she had, which had her mother in it.

“Ur said she left you with the Institute, and when she returned for you, they told Ur you were already too far gone for them to help you control your powers, that you had died during one of their attempts to help you, your magic reversing on itself. They even gave her a box containing a young girl’s body and said it was you.”

“A mother should have known!” Ultear nearly shouted back, now completely losing her composure, her past catching up to her in no uncertain terms.

“Black hair, a very young girl’s body, the correct color of eyes, the shape of the face,” Lyon said counting off points slowly not breaking eye contact with the furious councilwoman. “That was enough to convince her that you really had died, that it was her fault for leaving you. Even later, when she learned that the Institute had treated you and the other children there as lab rats she still blamed herself.”

“I do not know what issues you have with your mother,” he said. “I do not know what horrors you were put through there. But if you hate your mother for leaving you, never believe that she did so because she wanted to be rid of you. She left you with them yes, and that was a mistake. She would have been the first person to say it. But it was a step mistake made out of love, because Ur honestly didn’t think she could help you, that going there was the best thing for you. And she did come back to try to get you out. She did try, and she did love you.”

“Why,” Ultear began in a choked voice why she tried it again, only to look away as she blinked back tears. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because of what Ur meant to us,” Gray’s voice said, as he moved to stand beside his friend, having come upon them unseen from around the rubble of the child of one of the buildings in the town. He nodded to Lyon, shaking his head. I never even saw the connection,” he said honestly. “But I guess I’m not so good when it comes to women and such.”

Lyon snorted at that, and even in her grief, Ultear could only roll her eyes at that monstrous understatement. It wasn’t as if her appearance was all that different to her mother after all. The only thing that was different, Ultear thought, was the size of her chest and the fact that she wore her hair long rather than short as Ur had. *And I am a bit more of a girly girl, whereas she was a tomboy from all I’ve heard.*

And that was honestly a lot. For all her hatred towards Ur, there was a reason why Ultear’s dream of a perfect world was to go back in time and stop her mother from dropping Ultear herself off at the Magic Institute. For all that her mother had left her, there was still a little girl in Ultear who simply wanted her mother’s love.

“Ur became our mother you see,” Gray went on, gesturing towards Lyon and himself, “yet for all that she meant to us, we, we didn’t fill that void in Ur herself. She might’ve started caring for herself after taking us in as a matter of course, but Ur, she still cried herself to sleep occasionally, and Ur would occasionally drink herself into a stupor thinking about her daughter, Ultear. We owe Ur a lot, a lot we could never repay even if, even if she was still alive.” Gray faltered at that point before rallying, “So if you, if you her daughter need any help, or are in any trouble, or anything like that, call us. We’ll come running.”

Ultear lips twitched at that, and she smirked. “That was almost sweet,” she cooed, my own stripping knights in shining skin,” she finished, glancing down to the fact that they had both already stripped off their shirts and pants as they talked to her. *Mother, what the hell did you teach these two!?*

Both men looked down, and the serious moment broke with the suddenness of a rubber band as they both shouted at the same time “Dammit! How does this keep happening to us me! Stupid Ur and her stripping habits!”

Watching them, Ultear began to laugh and kept on laughing even as a few tears fell before she wiped them away. The two boys looked away, letting her regain control of herself, and then looked back at her expectantly.

She smiled wanly at them, nodding her head to acknowledge what they were waiting for. “If I’m ever in trouble, you’ll be the first two I call don’t worry. If it’s a kind of trouble that a mage with all the subtlety of a series of a drunkard in a nunnery can help me with anyway,” she finished dryly.

The boy shoulders slumped at that but they said nothing. There was little they could say to that after all, since it was true. After a few more words and phrases of commiseration, the two boys left and she stared off into space for a time, before sighing, and going back to her work. After all, this report had to go to both the King, the Magic Council, and Master Hades too. *And it had better be good, if I want to make certain he doesn’t question my allegiance.*

As Lyon and Gray walked away from Ultear in silence for a moment, then Gray spoke. “I want to get stronger,” he said, staring out and away from his fellow Ice Make mage.

“I want to get stronger too,” Lyon said with a nod.

Now the two boys looked at one another, and in an astonishing sign of humility, it was Lyon who asked, “So, do we work together on this? Or do we ask someone else for help?”

“I actually have an idea there, well, above my talking to Porlyusica about a new arm,” Gray said, gesturing over to where Bacchus was sitting down and drinking after spending a large portion of the day using his bare hands to hammer in nails. “And,” he said as the two of them walked in that direction, “and yes, we need to work together. Even if Porlyusica is able to make me a prosthetic arm, I think I’d like to be able to create Ice Make attacks one handed. Maybe even use my deformity somehow.”

“…Was that like pulling teeth to you?” Lyon asked.

“Yes dammit!” Gray growled, waiting for his old rival to take a shot at him about that.

But to his surprise Lyon just nodded. “Good, at least it’s not just me.”

The two Ice Make mages were not the only ones thinking about ways to become stronger. Nearby, Natsu was also thinking of ways to become stronger. He wanted to stand on the same level as Ranma, a guy who had fought and actually kind of beaten two major dark guilds and their pawns all at once. “What do you think Juvia?” he asked, after talking it over with his two girlfriends, seeing the blue-haired girl walking by where they had been sitting. “Do you have any ideas about how I can get stronger like Ranma?! I mean it was so cool! He used this tornado thing, and…”

He froze as Juvia turned to glare at him the look in her eyes making him grab Anna and pull her in front of him as a shield against feminine fury. “Juvia does not wish to talk about Ranma right now. Juvia will be having words with him when he returns. For now, simply do not mention him in Juvia’s presence.”

Natsu nodded hastily and backed away, looking over to Lisa and then down at Anna where he still held her in front of him. “What do you think that was about?”

“I don’t know,” Anna said thoughtfully, her smirk at being used as a shield disappearing as she looked after her friend who had just started muttering to herself, looking down at her chest and then irritably out into the distance. “But whatever it is, I’m almost sorry for Ranma. I’ve not seen her so cheesed off before.”

“What does cheese have to do with it?” Natsu asked innocently, then grinned as Anna turned to pout at him. But he turned away to, asking his two girlfriends to excuse him for a moment as he moved off through the makeshift huts and other outbuildings that had replaced the initial tent encampment, sniffing the air occasionally. He was in search of someone very specific at the moment.

As she stalked away, Juvia muttered to herself, “It is the chest, it must be. Ranma is a boy for all that he can turn into a woman, she must have seduced him. But then, whatever could have made Wendy or Erza…” She frowned in thought for a moment.

*Juvia has heard some interesting rumors about Erza, Juvie would not put it past her to be seduced as well. But young Wendy? Surely, Ranma would not stoop to that?! No,* she thought, the oddity of that concept actually making her calm down. *No,* *there must be some other explanation.* *But what could that be? What could make Wendy forgive one of our attackers?*

Being at somewhat loose ends within the town Juvia had decided to follow Ranma and the others when they went, desiring to talk to Ranma about getting stronger herself. As a fellow water mage, she thought that Ranma could give her some insight. But then, Juvia had spotted Seilah, and all her thoughts about getting stronger went out the window. She had continued to follow them, observing from a distance (read: stalking) but had then been left in their dust when they sped up the pace. She had gotten to the next town a little after they left again with horses, and she could not ride, so had been forced to give up the chase… for now.

Now she stared out into the darkness beyond the flickering lights of the campfires intense around the still building town, her thoughts calmer, but still grim. *Ranma has some answering to do. If Juvia does not like the answers, she will go to master Makarov, and through him the King!*

While Juvia was working herself up for a confrontation that was sadly several weeks in the future, elsewhere a father and son were having a rather fraught reunion…

Ivan sat on his knees in the center of a cage, surrounded by four rune Knights with magical suppressants on his wrists, feet, and around his neck. As a former Guild Master of a Dark Guild that had the reputation of Raven Tail, no one was taking any chances with him. But despite being nearby, those four Knights would hear nothing of the conversation, being effected by a sleep spell from Makarov at present.

Outside the cage stood Makarov, staring into his son’s face, which was above him by a few feet despite Ivan being on his knees at present. “Why Ivan? Why all this? Over eighty dead in this town alone! Most of them died during the fight with Ranma. Another twenty dead in the demon attack that your actions allowed to occur. And you tried to kill several of my children and the children of other guilds! Why!?”

“You know why, old man,” Ivan said with an evil glare to his face. “It’s all for the Lumen Histoire! Do you know what that power could be used for, what it could mean?! You are sitting on a treasure trove of magical power the likes of which the world has never seen! What are you using it for? Nothing!”

“I know what it is being used for now, and just because something could be used, does not mean it should be,” Makarov said with a sigh. “You were not ready to know that secret.’

“And does my son know it? The secret that the Guild is hiding? What you are sitting on, the means to further magical research, to further magic itself to a degree that this world has never seen!”

“It has seen it before, the dark mage Zeref, the Dragon Wars, the Guild Wars. Magic unchecked is not something anyone with any sanity would ever wish to see again. Certainly it is not worth the deaths that you caused here, the murders you planned to cause here. Do you even feel anything for their deaths!?” Makarov shouted, losing his temper and stamping forward to slam a slightly enlarged fist into the bars.

Ivan stared at him then started laughing wildly, “You lose your temper over, over something so small? Most of the dead weren’t even mages! Why should their deaths matter to you?”

At those words, Makarov sighed, and suddenly looked far older than he had a moment ago. “No,” he said to himself more than Ivan. “You don’t feel anything for those deaths, for the deaths you tried to cause. It hurts to say this Ivan, but I don’t think you and I will ever see each other again. Not in this life anyway.”

Walking away Makarov shook his head sighing sadly to himself. He had hoped to see something in his son, anything there that he could use to convince himself that he should talk the King of Seven out of executing Ivan, to instead imprison Ivan. But there was nothing there. Only avarice, only madness. It hurt Makarov deeply to know that one of his precious children, his own son had turned out like that. *Where did I go wrong?*

“You gave Ranma a speech before he left about not putting all the responsibility and guilt on his own shoulders alone old man,” Laxus said, coming out of the darkness between a few tents to loom over his grandfather. “Ivan is the only one who made his bed, not you. Never you. Don’t create more trouble for yourself like that, more guilt. Ivan was a piece of work, long before you excommunicated him. He’s a sociopath Gramps, nothing more,” Laxus said firmly. “And that has nothing to do with you or anything you did or didn’t do when he was growing up. I know my words won’t matter when the axe man comes calling, but it has to be said that I won’t be mourning the ass at all. What little familiar feeling I might have had for him died when he took part of this mass poisoning, and trying to kidnap me as he did. He would’ve also killed Natsu, Gajeel, freed and the others if they hadn’t gotten me loose.”

Chuckling, Makarov smacked him on the arm. “Since when did you get so wise?”

Laxus coughed, looking away somewhat sheepishly. “While I’ve been around you so long I suppose something had to stick, kind of like the common cold.”

Makarov chortled at how bad that line had been and Laxus smiled as he watched his grandfather march off through the tents in a much happier frame of mind.

He then turned and looked over a few of the other tenants, pausing a few steps later. “I can smell your scent brat, ya want something?”

From out between the tents the Fire Dragon Slayer moved forward to stand in front of Laxus. At first, he was scowling at Laxus having smelled him coming just as Natsu had been tracking Laxus. But then went down to his knees in a moment that honestly shocked Laxus. “Please train me!”

His eyes wide, Laxus stared down at the pink-haired Dragon Slayer. “Do you even know what that word means? It doesn’t mean all out brawling, it doesn’t mean fighting every hour of every day. It means **training**! Taking a few moves, doing them until you have mastered them and then moving on. Do you understand? I’m not going to let you just try to whale on me in a fight every time you want! If you decide to train with me were going to actually **train**,” he emphasized again.

At that Natsu twitched, and Laxus watched as the younger boy seemed to visibly fight with himself, his hands clenching and unclenching for a bit before he finally nodded, looking down at the ground with a pout. “All right fine! If that’s the only way I can get stronger, then so be it.”

Laxus smirked. “Excellent. We’ll start training when we get back to Magnolia. I doubt the locals want any more damage to the environment around here after was already occurred after all.”

Having just been about to launch himself to his feet in shock, Natsu now chuckled sheepishly at that, scratching at the side of his head, nodding agreement.

**OOOOOOO**

An hour after he had returned to the group he was currently traveling with found Ranma and Wendy arguing with Seilah, Erza and Bisca about taking a ship across the straits. “There’s no need for us to actually get on that contraption! We can just run over the ocean after all!” Ranma said, to which Wendy nodded firm agreement. After days of having to deal with stomach issues on the train into Seven there was no way either Dragon Slayer was willing to deal with that again for a long while despite that having been nearly a week ago by this point.

“As much as I think it a rather unladylike manner of travel, I have to admit that it isn’t anything they haven’t done before,” Carla said in somewhat lukewarm approval of the idea. “And to be fair, the two of them have indeed had to deal with enough stomach issues of late.”

Erza shook her head, rather amused at the idea, while Seilah, standing next to them with a hood covering her features, didn’t have an opinion one way or the other. Bisca on the other hand flushed as she stared at Ranma, thinking how romantic it would be to be carried across the ocean like that as the setting sun lights up the sky behind them. “It will only take a day to cross the straits on ship, how long will it take you?”

“We could be across in a quarter of that time if we were in a hurry,” Ranma supplied with a smirk. “We’ve done this before Erza.”

“Very well, but, Seilah, Bisca and I still would prefer to travel by ship.” With that, Erza turned and resolutely led the way down to the docks. “I wonder if that pirate captain and his crew are around here.”

“Pirate captain?” Wendy asked, moving to walk beside the redhead while the others followed, with Ranma taking up the rear position.

Rather than be for any above board reason like being on the lookout for trouble or something, this was **entirely** because this let him watch the girls walk in front of him. Bisca and Seilah had a way of somehow swishing their hips that was somehow hypnotizing. Bisca’s was aided by the fact she wore her short cowgirl skirt with the small tassels on it falling down to mid-thigh. Seilah didn’t have that at the moment thanks to the long cloak she was wearing to obscure her identity, but somehow the gentle curve of her rear under the cloak still drew Ranma’s eyes, and the cloak did nothing to hide her proportions from the front up top, which not only Ranma but a lot of other men around them had noticed. Erza in contrast strode rather than swished, but her legs were just as on display as Bisca’s and she had longer legs to boot.

“Hmm, they tried to attack Crocus while I was there. It did not go very well for them. After I had subdued them, I forced them to serve me, I mean us, when he went across to Galuna Island,” Erza replied. “Their ship was rather a nice one too.”

“Hahaha, that’s not what I heard,” Bisca said with a smirk. “I think Natsu and Gray both mentioned you going full dominatrix on them, complete with whip.”

Erza quickly slapped a fist into Bisca’s gut, just hard enough to stop her from speaking. “You shouldn’t listen to rumors, and I deny all such allegations. And even if such an event occurred, you shouldn’t use such terms in front of young Wendy.”

“Why?” Wendy asked, blinking. “I’ve heard that term before, it means people who like commanding other people right, like a captain or general. You took over the ship as its new captain, I don’t see what’s wrong with that.”

“AHHH, too bright!” Bisca groaned, holding up her hand to her eyes as Erza did the same, seemingly blinded by Wendy’s cute naiveté.

Ranma chuckled, surreptitiously reaching down to Carla and exchanging a high five with the cat girl, while Seilah simply looked on, watching the reaction with her lips twitching for some reason. She didn’t know why, but the reaction of the two other women to Wendy’s comment amused her.

The trip across the straights was uneventful. The four women left aboard the ship shared a cabin, and the two Fairy Tail mages got to know Carla and Seilah. While Erza had of course known Carla when she had been in the guild, they hadn’t actually talked since her return with Wendy and Ranma, and it was interesting to hear about Carla’s training with Ranma, and her new, offensive magical techniques.

In contrast Seilah was an entire unknown, and the girls found her a deep well of information on the world beyond Fiore. Since Bisca had only traveled to and from Fiore, never entering Iceberg, Caelum, Bellum or Pergrande, she was as interested in what Seilah could tell her about those countries as Erza, who hadn’t been to any of them either, save Caelum. On a personal level though, they all struggled to find something to connect to. Seilah didn’t seem to have any hobbies besides reading, and neither Bisca nor Erza were big readers, outside of a single genre for Erza anyway, one that was never talked about in polite company. They actually bonded however over talking about animals, further building up their talks from earlier in the trip. But there was no doubt, there was some tension between Seilah and the others.

When they arrived on the other side of the straits they met up with Wendy and Ranma at the docks, with Ranma standing there with a smirk on his face as Wendy perched on his shoulders, looking around with a small frown on her face before the girls joined them, causing it to turn into a smile. “What kept you?” Ranma teased.

“While horses are nice animals generally speaking, getting them out of the hold was rather more difficult than I expected,” Seilah supplied, pulling on the reins of her horse gently. The animal followed her willingly enough, nuzzling into the back of her cloak and sniffing heavily.

Erza rolled her eyes at that, but was too busy looking around in dismay at the state of the town. This was Iltsmansis one of several small towns dotting the edge of the straits on Minstrel’s side and although she hadn’t been here before, Erza had visited similar ports on the Bosco side and thus thought she knew what to expect: a small port town half fishing village, half supply port. But in this, her assumptions proved false. “What has happened here?” she asked in confusion. Bisca too was looking around in shock.

The town looked rundown, even here on the docks. The docks were nearly empty of ships. There were two dozen or so men lounging around, their clothing slovenly, ripped and dirty. They eyed the girls almost hungrily but seemed too apathetic to actually do something. The wharves were backed by several long, narrow warehouses, but every one of them looked empty and rundown. Looking deeper into the town, Erza couldn’t spot a single well-kept building within sight, all of them looking poor, and dingy.

“Ah, I think you’ll find the towns on the Minstrel side of the straits have suffered a lot since the slave trade died out. You might think that it would’ve hit Bosco hard, and it did, but most of these towns sprung up because they were used to supply the slaves to Bosco. If there was one thing Minstrel’s always had it was a surplus serf population,” Ranma supplied, growling a little as he looked around. “There are six towns like this all over on this side of the straits, and not nearly enough normal trade, or even fishing, to sustain them all at the level they were at before. Take away the slave trade, the pirates that aided it, add in how many years it’s been, you get a town like this.”

“Ah,” Erza said with a sigh. “Are we then supposed to feel guilty you think, for shutting down the slave trade? You did so within Bosco, and Laxus and I demolished the trade on the straits and the pirates that protected them,” Erza said, now smiling somewhat wolfishly.

Seilah picked up the tale from there as the group began moving into the town proper from the port. “You forget that serfdom has been all but abolished now in Minstrel thanks to king San Jiao Shin. Even the illegal slave trade has almost entirely dried up at this point.” The others looked at her and Seilah shrugged, a somewhat sheepish expression on her face as she gestured to her white dress peeking out from her décolletage under her cloak. “I went shopping in Minstrel for this outfit at one point, simply because I felt they would be able to see to my needs more easily.”

Nodding, Wendy looked around at the people around them, a few who had been close enough to overhear some of what they had been talking about, though thankfully not all of it, although one man was looking at them in confusion, his eyes latched not onto their faces, but Ranma’s pigtail. “So in other words, these people are…”

“Morons who can’t figure out another trade, evil dickheads who don’t want to and those who pine away hoping the past will come back, or just lazy buffoons unwilling to put in the effort of leaving to try and find a new job, whatever it might be,” Ranma replied with a loud laugh, and a dark look in his eye. After all people who supplied the slaves to others were, y’know, still **slavers.**

By their expression, Erza had the same idea, and she was now looking around too. Bisca rolled her eyes, moving to stand with Carla and Wendy, going down on one knee beside the girl. Wendy looked at her, then up at Erza who laughed just as loudly as Ranma, shouting, “Indeed, how pathetic can you be? First you make a living by taking people’s freedom away from them, then you can’t even act on your own to try to find yourself another way of live?”

Those words were heard by a lot of the people around them, and from out of a few alleyways, more than a dozen people quickly gathered. A lot of them were just shouting imprecations and insults back at the newcomers, but one of them, the same man who had been staring at Ranma’s pigtail suddenly shouted in a loud voice, “That’s him, the one with the pigtail! That’s the bastard Ranma, who gutted the trade in Bosco!”

At that, the locals should really have recoiled in horror, perhaps slinking back into the dark alleyways like the beaten hyenas that they were. Unfortunately, the thing about hyenas is that the majority of them, in particular the human variety, don’t have the intelligence to know when they are overmatched.

There was a moment of silence and then a roar from dozens of throats as everyone in sight roared and launched themselves forward. “Kill that fucker!” was the cry on most lips. As a war cry, it wasn’t the most eloquent, but it was heartfelt at least.

“Bring it on you bastards!” Ranma said racing forward with a manic laugh on his lips. “MWAHAHAHAH, I hate leaving a job half-done!”

Erza did the same Requipping a long iron staff and twirling it around her. “Death to slavers and all who help them!” she roared as she charged.

“Considering what we were talking about when we boarded the ship ‘Mistress Erza’, I’m not certain you should be allowed to say something like that,” Bisca grumbled. She Requipped a rifle in one hand and brought it to her shoulder, twisting this way and that to watch from behind and to the side.

“Ugh, why do I think that allowing Erza and Ranma to hang out will just exacerbate their instincts to cause mayhem rather than their positive sides?” Carla groused. She lifted into the air, watching all around.

“Well on the one hand I feel kind of bad for this, it really is like a pair of bullies beating on a lot of smaller kids all at once. But on the other hand, they supported the slave trade so… hmm…“ Wendy mused, then turned to look over at Seilah who had made no move to join the fight or even protect herself. “What about you Seilah?”

“I think this is unimportant and irrelevant,” Seilah replied crisply. “I further do not think either Erza or Ranma would need any help to deal with these riffraff. I will therefore use my time more wisely by looking around for a bookstore. I will see you at the town outskirts.” With that she leaped up onto a nearby rooftop, her cloak flaring out around her legs for a moment before she moved away.

Before Bisca or Carla could object to Seilah going off on her own a man’s body passed through where she had just been standing, slamming into a warehouse down by the docks. The impact shattered the wall he hit and the wall on the other side as Ranma’s cackling grew to manic levels distracting them just enough to let Seilah go off without protest. “AHahah, bowling with morons! Best game ever!”

Back on the ship, which had taken the ladies across, the captain of the ship saw what was happening, and shook his head continuing to order the ship around and back out into the sea. “I’ll have to tell other captains not to bother with coming by here any longer,” he murmured. “Doubt those two will leave a single building standing.” Having recognized Erza at least, he logically assumed the others were just as strong.

Actually, the fight ended far too fast for that level of devastation. The local gangs didn’t have enough people to create a fight like that, and after Erza and Ranma took to competing in how far they could smash their enemies, most of them began to run away.

Bisca was the first to notice this trend. She had taken to sniping at anyone with a gun on the other side while also instructing Wendy on her small holdout gun. Wendy had a hard time understanding its range, and how to modulate the power she fed into it. But her Air bullets were astonishingly powerful, smashing people flat and tossing them away. Carla would call out targets and Wendy would see if she could shoot them down. “Um, Erza, Ranma, I think that’s enough. They don’t seem to want to play anymore.”

Blinking Ranma paused, staring at the man he’d just lifted up and started to use as a flail against his fellows. Pouting he tossed him aside. “Yeah, I guess we are. We need to see if we can buy any information here after all.”

“Aww, no more?” Erza said, standing on top of a pile of other people, actually pouting as she calmed down before sighing and stretching her arms around her head, then smiling widely at Ranma. “That was oddly therapeutic.”

At that moment Seilah returned, a scowl visible on her face under the hood. “Can we leave now? There is not a single bookstore here. And indeed, I did not spot many other people beyond the people you have been playing with.”

Ranma hopped up to land beside her on the rooftop, then moved off quickly, coming back within seconds as the others walked through the town, finding it indeed empty. “Yeah, there’s nothing here for us, no inn, the bars look so rundown and smelly I don’t want ta go near them and there’s no one around either. Seilah’s right, let’s just move on.”

Shrugging Bisca nodded, pulling out a map. “If we leave town there should be a road leading deeper into Minstrel, that’ll split soon into two roads, where we’ll need to take the leftmost fork. That road will eventually start going southeast, towards Desierto. It’ll first lead us into another, much larger, town. It’s called Zòumíngqǔ and a lot of the towns and villages along the coast lead to there. If I can find a trail of my quarry anywhere it will be there.”

“Will this Zòumíngqǔ have books?” Seilah asked seriously.

Carla rolled her eyes at Seilah’s single-minded obsession with reading, but said nothing. She and Wendy had argued once already about the demon woman. Carla did not like Wendy’s liking of the demon girl, feeling she and Ranma were being far too trusting. Heck, even Erza seemed to believe that Seilah had become good for some reason, just because of a mind-altering magic which had since faded and a desire, before that event admittedly, to not injure Wendy. *In Ranma’s case I imagine it’s hormones, but in the other two, they are simply too soft for their own good!*

Instead of arguing about it however, she hopped up behind Wendy as Erza boosted the younger girl into the saddle before reluctantly turning to her own mount.

Bisca too didn’t really trust Seilah all that much, and shook her head. “You think you’re in a position to make demands like that? In what universe to even prisoners who’ve given their parole make demands of their captors?”

“Since she ain’t a prisoner and can pay for the books I don’t see a problem,” Ranma said with a shrug. “Besides, I have a trick I can use ta find her if she tries to run, and she knows it.”

Seilah flinched at that, but nodded, and after a moment Bisca let the matter drop. They all hopped onto the horses save Ranma and then Bisca added five more horses from the town’s stables, figuring the people here were in no position to use them.

With those remounts and Ranma’s natural speed, plus Seilah flying occasionally with Wendy to rest the horses more, although Ranma complained, “How the heck that horse can be tired after only carrying around your tiny weight is beyond me” they set a very brisk pace. They only had to spend one night out in the tent before reaching Zòumíngqǔ.

This was in fact the first night they would all spend in the tent. While Bisca had been in it before and Seilah had lived in it since the battle in the Worth Woodsea, Erza had never been inside it before, and as she entered she blinked in surprise, then smiled as she saw all the homey, little touches that Ranma and Wendy had added over the years. Stopping she examined the ladybug light before winking over at Wendy. “It’s very pretty, did you pick this out?”

Wendy suddenly looked shy while Bisca rubbed her hair affectionately and Seilah moved over to a few of their large beanbag sofas, sitting down in it in a surprisingly graceful move, ruined a moment later by her twisting around and showing them all her kimono clad rump for a moment as she pulled out a book, nestling down into the beanbag with a sigh of pleasure. While Ranma blushed and shook himself, Wendy nodded to Erza’s question. “Mm, I picked that out, but I had help drawing the pictures on the interior of the tent.”

“They are very good,” Erza replied with a smile exchanging a look with Bisca, and then asked Wendy to show her around the place while Ranma pulled out several extra blankets. With all of them there, there were two too many people for the number of sleeping bags they had, even with Wendy and Carla doubled up as they were. Bisca had her own, but neither Erza nor Seilah did. This would prove a problem later on, but for now, they could get by with the number of extra blankets they had.

Once they reached Zòumíngqǔ the group split up almost naturally. Ranma went to find an inn, Wendy and Carla went to find food for the next leg of their journey. Erza moved around the town with Bisca, asking questions about the group of Fiore ex-pats who had fled the country with their fraudulent earnings. And Seilah split off entirely to find a bookstore. They agreed to meet up for dinner at a small restaurant near the center of town they were referred to by the town watchmen who welcomed them to the town.

Thankfully for all concerned since her attitude had begun to turn rather grumpy and standoffish, Seilah’ obsession was well and truly catered to by Zòumíngqǔ. It was one of Minstrel’s chief printing centers, and as such had numerous small-scale bookstores. Seilah had a lot of fun exploring them, so much so she was late to meet up with the others.

They all sat down, figuring she’d turn up soon, although Bisca and Carla still had reservations about how much freedom the Demon woman was being given by Ranma. Yet somehow she had no desire to leave, seemingly fascinated by Ranma and Wendy, if for very different reasons. Ranma didn’t even look up at them as they speculated about where she could be, looking at Wendy in confusion. “Milk, really? Just plain strawberry milk, I’d have thought that a bit too sweet to have with dinner.”

“Um, no reason, I just felt like having some milk, that’s all,” Wendy replied, her eyes shifting away, sheepishly. *Seilah said this is her favorite drink and Erza said she liked it a lot when she was younger, so maybe…*

Looking at the little girl and biting her lip to keep from laughing, as she understood the real reason behind the milk, Bisca sighed and let the question of Seilah slide to one side for now. “So I was able to find a few innkeepers, bar hangers and even the local town watch but I need to check in with them after this. I want to make certain about some of their info later after we eat. But I can already tell you one thing: the last few shipments of slaves that would have passed through this town instead were diverted into Desierto.”

“Wait, what? No way would even the southern tribes put up with that. They might enslave their neighbors and stuff in their internecine wars, but buying foreign slaves? For what? They wouldn’t have the food to feed them, nothing for them to do, not that large a group,” Ranma objected.

“Agreed, the ranchers in the north wouldn’t use slaves either, but they were all sent that way, and bought and guarded by one person,” Bisca replied grimly. “She was described as a tall woman with tan skin, with armored greaves on her legs up to her hips, traditional Desierto clothing, with her silver hair done up to resemble ears.”

“That sounds like that bunny girl Natsu was raving about, the one he met during the battle to rescue Laxus, the one whose smell drove him wild,” Erza scowled. “What could Raven Tail have been doing with those slaves?”

“Wait, Natsu was raving about some dark mage girl?” Bisca asked, looking between Ranma and Erza. “Anna and Lisanna are going to be crushed.”

“Nah, he wasn’t raving about her in that way, he was praising the way she fought and the fact her smell made him want to eat her. She smelled, and this is a Natsu-quote ‘like the world’s largest, most mouth-watering bunny you just wanted to gobble her down’,” Ranma replied drolly.

“Ah, and then Gajeel chimed in agreeing with him, and said something like ‘and not in a good way either’,” Erza replied drolly, shaking her head.

Bisca blushed hotly at that joke, staring at Erza in some shock before she spotted the flush on the redhead’s face, then she calmed down a bit, smiling but also changing the subject. “Anyway, this place was able to shift gears to being a printing center, but there are still a lot of people who look back on those days positively. And word of ‘Ranma the pigtailed destroyer’ has spread to here too. We might want to set a watch tonight just in case.”

Wendy giggled, shaking her head as she hopped off her own chair into Ranma’s lap, pointing up at his face. “Nope, all we need to do is, just have us all in the tent and Ranma sleeping outside right in front of the door. That’d protect us all for sure.”

“Indeed, he would be a perfect guard dog in that case,” Carla added, with a smirk on her face as she looked at Ranma.

“That is so true, and yet at the same time, OY!!” Ranma groused, holding Wendy against him, gently tickling her sides while not letting her wiggle away.

Watching this Bisca shook her head. Bisca had seen how close they were before this, but it was still telling*. Ranma may not believe he’s good with kids, but that doesn’t mean it’s fact,* she mused*. While I’m nowhere near in a rush to settle down that’s still good to know for the future.*

Erza too was interested, but also knew that Ranma had no interest in creating more of a family than he already had, and why. Not just because of his wanderlust or Ranger status, but because he might well live for centuries with his body not aging any further than it already had. That didn’t mean she knew what this joke he and Wendy were laughing about was, though. “What are you talking about? Surely you can be attacked while asleep just like anyone else Ranma?”

Elsewhere, Seilah had found another bookstore to pursue on her way to the restaurant. This was an even smaller bookstore than most, although it had been oddly crowded before she entered, with several dozen men moving about. After she had, it had emptied quickly for some reason, despite her not using her Macro curse to make it so. Now she stood, frowning in introspection as she looked at a series of images the book was describing. “I do not think this is physically possible,” She mused aloud. “While I like fantasy stories I prefer to know they are fantasy stories rather than biographical as this book professes to be.”

“Now hold on miss,” said the storeowner. He had been watching her, his eyes latched onto Seilah’s chest despite her cloak, his breathing becoming oddly heavy as she stayed there. “I’ll have you know everything in that book is based on a real life account.” He began to breathe in and out heavily as he stared at her, his eyes turning almost glossy. “Hur, hur, hur, we could, hur, hur, try some of them out and see if you like.”

Seilah looked at him blankly for a second then shook her head and placed the book on the desk in front of him. “Wait. I will return.” With that she left, leaving the proprietor looking rather confused behind her.

Waling the two blocks to the restaurant took no time at all, and she spotted Ranma and the others easily among the crowd. *That red hair of Erza’s is rather distinctive.*

Ranma saw her coming and waved her over, while the others turned to watch. Erza just nodded, while Bisca cocked her head to one side, studying Seilah thoughtfully. “Hey Seilah, you’re late, did you find any bookstores?”

“Over a dozen actually. However right now, I want your opinion on something. Come with me,” Seilah said, reaching down and pulling Ranma out of his chair. Ranma didn’t fight this, instead letting Seilah drag him along, amusement plain in his face.

Leaving her drink behind Wendy hopped after them along with Erza, wondering aloud what Seilah had found. Bisca shrugged and followed them. “You coming Carla?”

“I think not. Given the night rush that’s occurring someone should stay here to keep our table. And to make certain the waiter doesn’t think we’ve done a dine and dash. Ranma and Wendy have done that a time or two, for ‘training purposes’,” the cat-girl said, rolling her eyes and making quote marks with her fingers.

Chuckling at that, Bisca moved after the others. Soon though, she spotted a change in the nature of the shops. They entered an area lined with bookstores soon after that, but of all the bookstores to lead them to, Seilah led them to the smallest of the lot. One with a pink sign and doorway. Narrowing her eyes, Bisca stopped Wendy from following the others, poking her head inside after Erza entered. Sure enough, the store was an adult bookstore.

“Nope,” Bisca intoned solemnly, blushing brightly as she turned Wendy away. “Nope, nope, nope. Not going there.”

Inside, Ranma wished he had spotted those clues before Seilah had pulled him inside. Now he stood, trying to control his heartbeat, staring straight ahead of him as Seilah marched to the back of the store and picked up a book from a pile of others. Beside him, Erza was also blushing, but looking around with interest despite that. “U, um, Seilah, what…”

“I want you to tell me if this is humanly possible,” Seilah replied, turning and moving to hold up a book with a series of illustrations in front of him.

Ranma barely had time to read the header of the book, which read as ‘Adventures of the Lust Dragon Slayer, The Special Edition before the image in the book nearly caused him to die by nosebleed. Yet despite that, Ranma couldn’t help himself from cocking his head to one side, then moving his hands this way and that as he tried to work out the image. “Um… I think so, but only by gymnasts and other people with really extreme levels of flexibility.”

Shaking his head, Ranma turned and practically disappeared as he raced to the door. Even with his control and knowledge having been expanded through conversations with the girls from Melona’s there was a limit to what Ranma could handle like this.

“... How odd,” Seilah mused, then shrugged. “Still, if that one scene is true to life then perhaps the rest is as well. Although I still do not believe it is a real biography.”

Erza looked at the door and then sidled up to Seilah’s side. “\*Ahem\*, So… do you have any recommendations?”

Outside, Ranma passed Bisca quickly, grabbing up Wendy and holding her in front of his face was to hide the monster blush he was sporting, although this did nothing to hide the issues he was having below the belt. Thankfully, as long as he stayed in front of Bisca she couldn’t see it. ‘Well, that was interesting, now let’s go have some dinner right?!”

Nodding silently and dealing with her own blush Bisca followed behind them. It took a while for Seilah and Erza to rejoin them carrying several bags of books, but thankfully none of them were marked by the pink glyph for that particular store. *Knowing my luck that just means that Erza has them in her Requip space.* The two of them chattered together about this or that novel throughout dinner and as they walked with Ranma to the inn he had found earlier, with Bisca splitting off for a moment. With it becoming night out, none of them were willing to travel further that day.

After having left the others behind for a time, Bisca entered the room Ranma had rented out, and was amused to find that as if they had been talking about before. Ranma had indeed set up the tent in the center of the room, with one bed pushed against the wall so that once they started to sleep, Ranma would just flip it onto its side to block the windows. The other bed remained, but Ranma had already pushed it out from the wall so that it was directly in front of the door. Bisca had to skirt around it, shaking her head with amusement as she did.

On that bed Wendy and Carla sprawled beside Ranma, the two of them reading avidly from a steampunk novel called Girl Genius that Seilah had recommended for her. Carla and Ranma had to help Wendy with some of the words, but Wendy seemed to be enjoying it a lot, making Carla somewhat chagrined since it was obviously another mark in Seilah’s favor. Seilah and Erza sat nearby on the floor using some of the pillows from the tent, one reading quietly, the other asking her some questions while cleaning some of her weapons, the first answering those questions in an absentminded manner.

“Hey Bisca, You were saying earlier you might have found a trail of your quarry?” Ranma asked, looking up at the green-haired cowgirl.

“Yep, my contacts from earlier that were willing to talk to me about the foursome I’m after came through. Apparently, their arrogance and the way they threw around magic and money rubbed people the wrong way. But they are indeed heading into northern Desierto, the info the job’s owner passed on was right on that one.”

“I do wonder how he figured that part out,” Erza mused.

“Part of what they stole was a gem with some kind of magical tracker on it,” Bisca supplied. “Anyway, the longer the trail has to get cold, the more area they can cover, and believe me that’s not something we want. Desierto’s northern territories are just… you’ll have to see it to believe how harsh the area is. People say bandits always take to the mountains, and that might be true, but for people to truly disappear, you can’t go too far wrong with a vast expanse of mixed up badlands.” Bisca smiled a vicious sort of smile then, “Unless someone’s right on your heels of course.”

**OOOOOOO**

Ultear sighed, leaning back in her chair in the private carriage she had been given as a Councilwoman. This was a good thing, considering that later tonight she would need to give a verbal report to her ostensible real master, Hades. She was not looking forward to that, for obvious reasons. *I’m honestly not certain if I can lie to him. Hades always seems to know more about people and what is going on than is good for them, and considering the stakes I’m now playing for I can’t afford to hint at anything that could give the game away. Not until I have Meredy away from Hades and his guild. And what he might do to me or Meredy if he discovers I’ve turned against him…*

The fear of this last thought was enough to set her pulse to racing and make her hands clammy. Because of this, Ultear drank through several glasses of wine where normally she would only have the one while going over her notes for the upcoming meeting.

Later that night, she was still reading through her notes thinking with hope in her heart that perhaps master Hades wouldn’t call her just yet, when, in a perfect example of the phrase ‘speaking of the devil’, her secret communication lacrima activated, and the old man’s voice came through.

A moment later, the image of Hades glowed in the Lacrima and she held it up to her face, letting him see her in turn. “You missed our last scheduled communication. The last we heard, you were due to meet the Ranger-led team sent to take down Brain’s group. Explain what happened,” Hades said without preamble. “I understand that something momentous has occurred, my spies in Seven have already reported about a great turmoil in the government there, and there are even rumors that someone among the Oración Seis was caught…” He finished leadingly, one wintry eyebrow cocked in query.

“Yes master. Would you like it in order, or should I skip ahead to that question?” Ultear began, leaning back and trying to project an air of calm as her master’s hologram grew out of the lacrima, almost glaring at her with his one good eye. *You’re used to being a spy Ultear, just because you’re now a double agent is no reason to lose your cool!*

For a moment Hades just looked at her, and Ultear fought to not show any reaction, simply staring back at him, projecting a professional yet weary air that she hoped the man bought. He seemed too, and he smiled slightly. “You don’t seem any worse the wear, whatever occurred. Explain from the beginning then. I always prefer to hear things in order after all.”

Ultear bowed her head, and began from the moment she and Gajeel got off the train, moving through the poisoning before mentioning the battle Ranma had with the two dark guilds and their lackeys. From there she somewhat leaped ahead, into the battles in the woods and her part, before going back and saying, “Yet while all that was happening, there was another group involved in all this. The demons of Tartaros seem to have decided that the Oración Seis needed to be sacrificed as well master, and they were waiting nearby to strike in force.”

That brought a startled look to Hade’s face and actually a bit of fear too. It was the first time Ultear could remember seeing that expression there and she tried not to revel in it, but it was hard. *You will pay for using me Hades!*

She watched as Hades regained control of himself, then began to ask her rapid-fire questions about the Demon’s involvement in the battle. Ultear answered them all, but had to preface her responses by saying that she personally hadn’t fought any of the Devils, she had been unconscious for much of it, her battle with Brain having gone against her. She was very honest about that portion of the fight, but only said that Brain had attacked her after she had released Nirvana.

Hades stared at her for a long time after she said that. “I see. His taunting you about your shared past that must’ve been very difficult to deal with,” he probed lightly.

“Only somewhat master,” Ultear replied. “You know I blame my mother more than the Institute for what occurred to me after all. Scientists cannot be held accountable for their actions when they are given such gifts after all, guinea pigs with no oversight around? But a mother, a mother should take care of her child shouldn’t they.”

Hades nodded slowly, still looking at her before he went on abruptly. “Describe these demons.”

Ultear did so from the descriptions she’d been given and Hades frowned. “This is both good and bad,” he said aloud. The fact that the demons were willing to operate so openly against Ranma, that is telling of how they see his threat level. They will know, as we do, that if we are too open in our activities, the countries will band together and beg the Wizard Saints to do the same. We could beat any one of the Wizard Saints, if the Guild was together and fought well. But two, or three? No, that would end us. I would have assumed the same was true of Tartaros, and doubly so now that they have lost three of their members. I do not know how strong they are, but surely losing three demons will hurt them almost as badly as such would hurt anyone else.”

“I can’t say anything about that master,” Ultear replied honestly. “I believe you would be correct in that, but we don’t know what their motivations were, only that they attempted to retreat rather than face Ranma in his mad Devil Slayer form and died before they could.”

Ranma hadn’t told Ultear about Seilah of course. He had told her one of the Demons had trash-talked during the battle, giving them all the information Seilah had given them.

“Where is this Ranger now?” Hades asked abruptly.

“I do not know. King Toma asked him not to return to Fiore for a time and to lie low apparently. Whether or not Ranma Oceana is actually able to do so given his personality is anyone’s guess,” Ultear finished dryly.

Hades actually chuckled at that. “Yes, your comments last time about not letting him and Azuma meet were well-founded. Do you have no idea where Oceana would go?”

“Only mumblings about being sent down to try to find Raven Tail’s headquarters by the king of Seven, master,” Ultear replied. “I’d hesitate to act on such though,” she cautioned, having no desire for Ranma, who was if not an ally, at least not an enemy, to face off against Hades or whoever else he might send after Oceana.

“The general vicinity of it has been known for a while, it is simply getting to it with enough force to do something about it that has eluded people. Desierto is neutral territory and generally lawless, which serves everyone far too well,” Hades murmured.

When Ultear blinked at that, the old man noticed but waved off her confusion. “Oh, the King of Pergrande is always making noises about what he’d do if he shared a border, but he doesn’t, and that is all it is, noise. Ignore it. And yet, the demons being on the move like this, that concerns me.”

Ultear looked at him hoping for an explanation, but Hades shook his head then looked at her sharply. “Your cover on the Council, it is still intact?”

“It is. No one was around when Brain and I had our confrontation, no one overheard our words to one another then. I still say I would’ve one if not for his cheating with that second personality thing,” Ultear grumbled, allowing a bit of actual anger to shine through for a moment.

“Very well, then you will remain in place for now. FACE still concerns me, even if your magic would be a perfect tool to destroy the Ethernano cannon. Retain your cover for now, if anything changes with FACE however, if you learn how to control it, or even how to deactivate it, take action at once. Do not wait for orders for me.”

Ultear nodded then the old man went on, and her heart nearly stopped. “I think I will assign Meredy the duty of trying to track down these Demons along with Ajax. I think we need to know more about Tartaros than we have in the past.”

“Are you sure that’s wise master?” Ultear asked, trying desperately to keep most of her concern out of her voice. Some concern was good, Hades wouldn’t believe anything else when it came to Meredy, but too much would be a very bad thing. “Surely following any hints of where the Keys of Destiny would be would be a better idea, bring us closer to our goal. After we have revived Zeref, the world would fall into our lap.”

“We have three of them already in our possession, I know where two of them are, and the parts for the sixth will fall into my hands soon enough, after which your powers can repair it easily enough,” Hades said a slight smile. “For the last two, I have no need of Ajax and Meredy, our newest addition, Bluenote will suffice and letting him rage for a bit will calm him down somewhat.”

“Very well master,” Ultear said, knowing she couldn’t push right now. “Who will you send to pick up a written version of my report?”

“One of our minor members I believe, perhaps the Yomazu, or Kawazu. Regardless, they will arrive a day after you to receive the written version of your report. I look forward to reading it,” Hades said.

Something in his tone made Ultear shiver even as Hades ended the communique, but there was nothing she could do about that, just making certain that Hades couldn’t find anything at fault in her report. *Or else I might not be the only one to pay for it.*

**OOOOOOO**

The northern territories of Desierto were something like Ranma knew Mongolia to be like: empty, with a lot of rolling plains, mountains here and there, rocks, deserts and just generally inhospitable terrain. The only difference was the heat, which was extreme during the day and plunged during the night. But with the abundance of plains the area was fit for cattle, if you had them in the first place and could bring them into the country.

This was proven within an hour of having crossed the border. Bisca and the others halted, alongside Ranma staring to one side at the large herd of cows and cattle coming towards them. There were thousands of them, and Ranma was reminded of a picture of herds of cattle from Australia, which he supposed some of this area actually kind of looked like. “So,” he asked looking up at Bisca on her horse, “where to?”

She pulled out a compass, and pointed away to Ranma’s right. “That way is south. We’ll need to go in that direction when we start for where Raven Tail’s base is supposed to be. Do we want to do that, or find the bounty heads first?”

Ranma thought about it for a minute, scratching at his pigtail thoughtfully then looking over to Erza. “Opinions?”

“Not much of one,” Erza said with a shake of her head. “If we capture that group however, would we have to keep them with us, or could drop them off somewhere out here?”

“If we pay the cattle owners to watch them they will. And considering that these four are supposed to have escaped with a lot of money, it won’t even be expensive for us,” Bisca said with a sly nod.

Ranma chuckled dryly at that. “Good point. In that case, let’s go after your bounties first. If you’re sure, you know where they’re heading?

“These four are city boys at heart. They’ll want to make their way across Desierto to Bell Lake, and from then into the city state itself. They’ll go straight across the prairies,” she said authoritatively.

“Why not down to the Straight Path?” Ranma asked.

“Because the area around the Straight Path isn’t all that safe. Up here, you have to deal with Prairie lions, the occasional animal down from the mountains, and the local variety of wolves, but even with all of that it’s better than further south,” Bisca replied promptly. “If I was going in that direction I certainly wouldn’t go out of my way down into the desert part of Desierto.”

Ranma nodded equably at that, and gestured her forward. “In that case, after you.”

Bisca mock-curtsied from the saddle and with a quiet whisper sent her horse forward. As the horse moved forward, Bisca looked down at the ground to either side, frowning.

“How long has it been since they passed through Zòumíngqǔ? And can you really pick up a trail out here?” Ranma asked, watching her intently, and not just because her leaning over like that put her chest on magnificent display. He was decent at picking up a scent, literally, and tracking animals and people, but even he would have said that trying to track a group over this kind of terrain would be the next best thing to impossible.

And as it turned out, Bisca wasn’t trying to find a trail like that, rather she was trying to figure out the lay of the land. “No, but it isn’t really necessary. Strangers in this area will always be spotted by someone. And while most people wouldn’t care one way or the other, they’ll talk about that kind of thing. And we’re only about two days behind them. We can make that time up easily I think, once someone points us in the right direction. Do you two think you can pick up a scent?” She asked, looking at the two Dragon Slayers.

Wendy shook her head. “Everything is new to me here,” she confessed. “I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

Ranma to shook his head. “We’d need to know what they’d smelled like at the very least. And unfortunately we don’t. We need a starting point, maybe something that smells like them?”

“In that case, it’s the paying for information method,” Bisca said with a sigh.

With that, Bisca took the lead once more, the others following behind her. The cattlemen quickly spotted them, and two men on horseback peeled off from the group around the cattle, waving them to a halt.

Ranma and the others complied, and the two men rode their horses up to them, looking askance at Ranma. “You folks lose one o’ yer horses then?” One of them asked.

He had what Ranma would have instantly called the equivalent of a mid-western American accent. Ranma had met more than a few Marines from that area, and could recognize it easily. “The horse hasn’t been found that I can out run,” he said aloud, smirking at the two men.

They laughed, thinking he was making a joke, but Bisca stepped in. “My name’s Bisca, I’m a Fairy Tail mage out from Fiore. We’re after a group of four thieves and con artists, who are guilty of quite a lot of crimes back in Fiore, but most of all simply stealing. I don’t suppose you two could help me figure out where they went, could you?”

The two men looked at one another, then one man shrugged. “Reckon we could, for the right price anyway.”

A few moments of haggling what went back and forth, after which the men were a bit richer and more willing to share what they knew. “Those four fellers, they didn’t stick around here, no lie. They had six horses, two of ‘em was rotating through the one horse that they started with that what didn’t have a rider, and they even had some food. I don’t know if they brought water ‘long, though by this point if they didn’t it’d be far too late.

“Why do you think that?” Ranma asked.

“Because even if there are wells and streams up here water still scarce unless you know what to look for. Look around you boyo said one of the men, the oldest one of the two. “Tell me if you can spot water?”

Ranma sniffed the air, trying to push past the all cloying smell of grass, and the cattle to one side, which a part of him was telling him were just Meals on Wheels, and not just his Dragon Slayer instincts either. Then he smiled and pointed to one side of the route they had been following. “That way,” he said.

The two men exchanged glances. “Aye, you’re right enough,” said the younger man. “How’d you know?”

“I’m a water mage,” Ranma said with a smirk. “If I’m trying to, I can find water like you all could find a stray cow.”

“Still, there’s no way those four could pull off that trick. They’ll need to buy water from some of us cattle owners. You just keep asking, and one or another group will point you in the right direction. Although for my money, I’m thinking they were trying to make their way across rather than down if you see what I mean,” said one of the cattlemen.

After thanking the man, the group sent their horses into motion once more. For the rest of the day they passed three more groups like that, a few people on horseback with hundreds of cattle between them, their horses shaggy, but quick and sturdy little animals. Soon it was pushing nightfall, and Ranma was wondering if they should set up camp, when Wendy and Carla returned from a mid- flight.

“Ranma-nii, I can see a large bonfire out there. There’s a huge community out there, three or four times larger than the others we’ve seen today. Or maybe it’s one made of many joined together? Anyway, they’ve created a makeshift town for the night and have put up this massive tent in the middle” Wendy said, throwing her arms out wide gaining emphasis of how big it was.

“Some kind of formal meeting between a few groups?” Ranma asked looking at Bisca.

“Either a marriage or an issue about herding rights,” she said definitively. “Most of these ranchers stick to their own clan or family groups except at selling time. But they come together for weddings, especially if it’s between two different clans.”

“You think we’ll find any more information there?”

“I know so,” Bisca said with a nod, already urging her horse forward.

Chuckling Ranma followed after, with the others trailing behind him, Wendy lighting on his shoulder for a moment, before leaping back up into the air with Carla still clinging to her back in cat form, her Aero Wings out and flapping.

Soon enough, they reached the large encampment, only to be halted by a group of five boys on horses. They were younger than Ranma but older than Wendy, all of them on the little horses, riding towards them. “Hold on there, strangers! Unless yer willin’ to dance or sing fer your food ya won’t be welcome here tonight,” said one of them giggling the words, although their eyes were locked on Bisca and the other girls.

“Meh, we’re okay with dancing I guess, but we also need some information. As for singing, I can sing, but nothing too formal,” Ranma replied. “Will that do?”

At that the boys all looked at one another, kind of confused at Ranma’s easy acceptance of their conditions to enter the camp and now openly wondering if they actually had the authority to let people enter the camp at all. Seeing this, Erza suggested helpfully, “If you don’t know, why don’t you go and ask someone?”

The boys all blushed, looking between her, Seilah, Bisca and Wendy, until Ranma growled at him a little, crossing his arms angrily his whole attitude shifting. “I’m going to assume that this is the part where you go to find some one of your elders to see if they’re willing to let us in for the night Instead of ogling my companions or my little sister!” he growled, cracking his knuckles audibly.

The sound carried quite well over the grasslands, and the boys quickly turned and raced backwards towards the campground.

A few minutes later, an older man came out, walking on his own two feet, and waiting several hundred yards ahead of them, his hand raised in greeting friendship. “Howdy strangers, you’ve arrived at a good time! We’re celebrating not one, but two weddings tonight! Although I’m afraid, then you are going to have to either sing or dance if you want a part of our fire and food,” he said in a good-natured drawl.

Ranma laughed at that before looking over at the others. “Yeah those kids told us about that. Well? What do you think?”

Erza blushed. “Well,” she said hesitantly “I suppose I could dance.”

Bisca laughed, pulling off her hat and tossing in the air with a loud, “Yeehaw, you just try and stop me!”

“If we do not wish to partake of the food, do we still need to sing or dance?” Seilah asked. “I am afraid I have never tried either and have no interest in adding such skills to my story.”

“Well mysterious stranger, if you just want the hospitality of our camp, that’s fine so long as you got your own tent.”

“Oh, we’ve got our own tent,” Ranma said dryly. “Trust me on that one.”

That night, Ranma joined with a group of impromptu band members, talking quietly about what kind of music would be appropriate, how many songs they knew, and if they could learn any new ones. Mostly, he was just telling them what he was going to be doing. He couldn’t very well expect them to play along with anything he knew after only a few hours without any music sheets, and he already had a few magical instruments in his Requip space, which he could use to play the songs he wanted thanks to his oft-used cover as a bard.

Really, he just wanted to make sure that the songs he was thinking of playing were going to be if not appropriate, then at least accepted by the bride and groom. The groom was brought in, and he laughingly said that the songs sounded like a hell of a lot of fun to him. “Don’t know what my new bride’s going to feel though.”

“…I would go get her okay first. I wouldn’t want to be involved in any domestic violence issue between the two,” Ranma said worriedly. While his songs weren’t raunchy or anything like that, they didn’t even have dirty words in them, but they were certainly suggestive, and could be taken as somewhat demeaning if the woman was inclined to think that way.

Actually, it turned out that two brides were perfectly fine with it, so long as they and their new husbands got the first dance. Ranma of course had no issues with that, and the party was on.

The girls were a little more ambivalent about the entire event, something Erza gave voice to as they walked through the campsite, noticing all the looks they were getting. “Is it just me, or are there a lot more men here than women?”

Bisca shrugged in response to Erza’s question, while Carla nodded her head. “I noticed the same thing.”

“A lot more girls tend to leave the ranchers for, no pun intended, greener climes,” Bisca said at last.

“And where would that be around here?”

“Nowhere,” Bisca said simply. “The ladies who leave tend to work on the other side of the cattle selling business in the towns, or even the butchers. Or just leave it all behind when they come of age. I know I did, although to be fair my clan and most of those down south are a lot more patriarchal than they are around here. Here if a woman sticks around they can even rise to be head of their family or clan. Down there, never.”

Erza nodded at that, while Carla huffed. “Barbarians. Especially in this day and age, when magic is the great equalizer that seems horribly backward to me.”

When no one argued with Carla, Bisca looked over at Seilah. “Are you sure you don’t want to dance?”

“I’m quite positive I don’t know how to dance,” Seilah said tartly. “It isn’t something that Devils have ever been called upon to do. Besides, because we’ve been moving so often and going to sleep so early at night I haven’t had a chance to read more than three of my fifteen new books. Zòumíngqǔ had an entire series of mysteries that I had not even heard of before and they are quite good,” she said enthusiastically.

“You know,” Wendy said thoughtfully looking up at the tall demon girl “I’m thinking more and more that your idea of maybe building your own bookstore or library might be in the way to go for you in the future.”

Seilah shook her head, gesturing at her horns. “I rather doubt that any human would be willing to buy a book from a demon.”

“You’d be surprised,” Erza said shrugging winking at Carla. “I believe if we can get used to talking cats and talking cat-girls then getting used to demons will be easy, so long as they’re not actively trying to kill us anyway.”

While Seilah smiled at that, Carla frowned, tugging at her blonde hair. “I think I would rather join Seilah myself. I’ve never been that much of a dancer, especially given my size in comparison to most.” Saying that however was a ruse. She really wanted to keep an eye on the demon girl. Despite their days spent on the road, she was no closer to trusting Seilah than she had been when they first met. *She has to be up to something. Doesn’t she?*

“You can dance with me Carla,” Wendy said, hugging the cat girl from behind. “In fact I’d rather like it better that way. I don’t want to dance with strangers. So please?”

At that heartfelt plea, Carla had no defense, and she agreed to go with Wendy to the dance that evening. Bisca and Erza had no issues with dancing, and in fact went to the dual wedding beforehand, which they hadn’t had to, while Seilah stayed behind in their tent the entire night, contentedly reading from her books with no one to watch her, something both Carla and Bisca objected to ineffectually. They both thought it was deeply romantic, although the use of tanned leathers, horns, and horseshoes instead of roses, white lace and as decoration was kind of strange.

On the upside, the two girls hadn’t had to change their clothing much beyond Erza removing her swords. Bisca wore a pair of slightly longer shorts than normal, with a belt marked by loops of burnished bronze and copper disks and a tight blouse. Her hat was gone, and her hair was now tied in two long twined ponytails. She wore bracelets too, but even they didn’t really make her look dressed up per-se.

Erza however had changed a bit more, changing into a set of armor she called the Robe of Yuen that consisted of a purple kimono. It held a short sleeveless tunic decorated with flowers. The cut of it revealed a goodly portion of her cleavage and was also open on the sides. , It was held closed by a thick belt of flower-patterned silk circling Erza’s waist, tied at the side. She wore no jewelry, and her hair was left loose down her back.

Wendy had been rather in awe of Erza’s dress when she saw it and even Seilah had nodded in approval seeing the redhead in it. Indeed, they caused a bit of a commotion when they filed into the back of the tent being used for the two weddings. But eventually, after the weddings began, attention shifted to where it should have been all along: on the two brides as they were escorted down the aisle.

For a moment staring at the brides and grooms, Bisca could imagine herself walking down the aisle with someone six or so years down the line. Yet when she imagined the groom’s face, her imagination failed her, she couldn’t put Ranma’s face there for some reason and she frowned monetarily before shaking it off. Erza’s thoughts weren’t nearly as deep as that, she merely enjoyed the pageantry of it all.

Afterwards, the two girls met up with Wendy and joined the crowd of people entering into the largest tent. Inside they found it had been set up as a dancing area, wooden beams set along the earth to provide a floor. There were magic lights hanging from the ceilings and a few animals made from lights floating in places around the tent, and on a series of tables were punch and small finger foods of all sorts, set along one wall opposite Ranma and a group of would-be singers and musicians.

Ranma smiled at the girls, sending a wink their way before an older man beside him laughingly called up Jeremiah, Tomas, Sarah and Alicia, the new couples. “Let’s hear it for the happy couples!” the older man shouted, getting a cheering whopping cry from the people, shocking Wendy and Carla, who had already been gaping at how everyone was dressed. Weddings here were not exactly staid, respectful affairs it seemed, something that caused Wendy to smile widely while Carla simply rolled her eyes, her ears twitching among her hair.

“Now to start us off I present Ranma Oceana, who’s apparently been trained as a real-life bard over in Minstrel way!” the old man shouted, before gesturing Ranma forward.

“Hey all. This is a special song, and if you have issues with the way I sing, or my songs, I’ll apologize in advance but like the old man just said, me and mine are not from around here.”

That caused even more laughter, and some whistles from many of the men as they looked to Bisca and Erza. They both smiled and waved back, but didn’t do anything more to encourage the interest.

As they did, Ranma launched into his first song. “You drive me crazy, and I kind of like it, you showed me that apple girl, now I want to bite it. You make me crazy…”

By the end of the first song, everyone was on the dance floor with the two new married couples, switching partners, laughing and having fun. Ranma sang two more of his own songs which Bisca and the others hadn’t heard before, interspersing them with songs they had heard during the festival back in Magnolia and songs from the locals, where he would bow out and conduct a few of the magical, floating instruments to go along with them.

Through it all, Erza and Bisca felt Ranma’s eyes on them, as if he wasn’t singing for the crowd, no, he was singing for them. That might just have been an impression they had, but it was a powerful one, and both of them enjoyed it greatly. They both responded by dancing more wildly, moving towards him through the crowd and staying near the edge of the musicians area.

Bisca danced around and side to side smirking as Ranma sang out, “Shake it for me girl, shake it for me, oh country girl,” her moves emphasizing her rear and chest. At the same time, Erza actually danced like a fairy would, light on her feet, twirling, leaping, jumping into the air, her movements somehow enchanting rather than alluring. Both girls drew a lot of attention from the crowd around them, but refused all advances, moving away deliberately from anyone who tried to approach them, oftentimes using Wendy or Carla as shields against the more persistent.

For their part, Carla and Wendy had found a few other young boys and girls going to the after-party, mostly thirteen and younger, and begun to dance around with them after the first song. Carla was of course a big hit, since most boys and girls liked cats, and a cat-girl was really fun. Wendy, though shy, actually was a great dancer, and some of the other girls asked to join her a time or two in the air when she stepped up into the air via a Sky Dragon’s Boosted Step. The occasional inclusion of Bisca and Erza as they ran away from the men trying to flirt them up on the dance floor did nothing to bring the kid’s enjoyment of the dance down.

Eventually the young girl began to fall asleep, and Carla quickly started to chivy her out to their tent, joining many of the other young people. But the adults kept dancing for several hours.

Perhaps it was because the two girls had been drinking. Perhaps it was because Ranma had been singing and having a right good time, but whatever the reason, inhibitions had most certainly lowered. Whatever the reason, the two of them left that night, with Bisca controlling one of Ranma’s arms, and Erza the other. Perhaps it was because Seilah was out somewhere reading by the firelight of the main bonfire. Perhaps it was because Wendy and Carla were already asleep in one corner of the tent.

More likely, it was all of the above that led the trio into what happened. No sooner had Ranma sat down on one of the beanbag sofas within the tent that Erza was in his lap, leaning her forehead against his. The two of them stared into one another’s eyes for a few seconds saying nothing, and then they were both leaning forward kissing.

Erza’s lips were soft, soft and yielding slightly. They had a hint of cherry, fruit punch, and honey to Ranma’s senses, were as soft as Jenny’s or Bisca’s, pulling him in.

Ranma’s arms went around her, holding her against him. Since she was wearing the robe of Yuen there was no armor between them now, and Ranma simply held her tighter against him, while he began to lick lightly at her lips, inviting her to open her own mouth as he had his. When she did so, Ranma’s tongue plunged into her mouth, licking and sucking at her tongue as well, drawing an animalistic like moan from the redhead.

She began to slowly grind against him until one of his hands snaked down her back to her rear, entering from the side slit in her kimono to touch her bare rear, squeezing. She gasped at that, and pulled away, looking a little more lucid than she had been a few seconds before.

And in that moment, Bisca made herself known, sounding quite drunken at the moment. “You, you’se can’t monop, mono, can’t keeps him to yerself Erzie!” With that she pushed Erza in the side, causing her to topple off of Ranma’s lap, the redhead giggling as she fell to the soft sleeping bag laid out there.

Ranma barely had time to blink as Bisca took Erza’s position, and there was nothing staid or hesitant about this kiss. It was a full on French kiss from the beginning. The two of them made out ardently, with Bisca moaning, her arms around him, her soft chest pressing into his, reveling in his hard extremely powerful muscles, loving every minute of it as Ranma held her against him, his hand sliding up beneath her short skirt, kneading her thigh.

However, like Erza, Bisca didn’t have much endurance for liquor and despite the fact that her body was still responding to this stimulation, her mind was slowly beginning the shutdown from her exertions and the amount of alcohol she had imbibed. She pulled away, nibbling and sucking at his shoulder as back then Ranma felt her slowly stop, just nuzzling into his shoulder. He looked down at her but her eyes were closed, and her breathing was even. Scowling, he glanced between them, and shook his head. “Sorry old boy, looks like you’re not going to get any ‘help’ tonight.”

Besides, Ranma was kind of tired himself. While the alcohol hadn’t affected him at all, singing had, and his head was kind of ringing from the noise of the party. So with a sigh and the willpower of a martial artist – albeit used in an unusual manner he stood up, with Bisca still in his arms. He then knelt down to the side and laid Bisca out next to a now quietly snoring Erza, before lying out next to her, closing his own eyes.

This was how Wendy, Seilah and Carla found them last night. Somehow during the night all three of them had ended up tangled around one another, lying on top of the sleeping bag instead of within it.

“It’s a darn good thing that you all are fully clothed!” Carla growled she stalked up to the three of them, nearly shouting her next words “Because if you weren’t, I would be trying out my cat claws on all three of you for showing young Wendy something so shameful!”

“Don’t shout,” Ranma groaned, scowling as his sound-induced headache came back from last night. “Don’t make me punt ya Carla, Wendy’ll give me the googly eyes and I’d feel sad.”

“What, what the heck… ugh, my head… Did Cana convince me to drink again, and what, is with this feeling?” Erza groaned, trying to untangle herself and not having much luck. She blearily opened her eyes, and found her eyes barely an inch away from Ranma’s.

“Er, hi Erza,” he said sheepishly.

Erza’s eyes narrowed, then widened as she blushed almost as red as her hair. “Wait, that wasn’t a dream!?”

“I don’t know about you,” Ranma said somewhat jokingly, “but I tend not to dream about making out with sexy girls. My dreams tend to be more about martial arts, training, or just flying. If I remember them at all,” he added. Then, as Erza spluttered, he leaned forward, and kissed her very quickly and lightly on the lips, before pulling back. “Now, that didn’t feel so bad, now did it?”

At that, Erza’s blush receded slightly as she smacked him on the chest and looking away.

“That’s nice and all, but I think we need to start moving, and I’d rather whoever has my arm in a death grip release it please?” Bisca grumbled from one side, also trying to disentangle herself but not having any luck.

“I’m not moving until the person who’s knee is by my private parts does,” Ranma said very firmly. “And if ya could move extra slowly, I would seriously appreciate it. My durability might be really high even there but that doesn’t mean I like getting hit there anymore than the next guy.”

“This human mating ritual does not match that I’ve ever read about in any story in person,” Seilah said, her head cocked to one side. *This feeling, I wonder what it is. It is unpleasant, and yet also mixed up with introspection as I watch this. At least I know what introspection feels like.* “Should we help from you think she asked looking down at Wendy.

Wendy had turned away with a blush, since just because the three of them were fully clothed didn’t mean they were actually decent. She could see quite a lot of under boob from Bisca, and Erza’s kimono had bunched up, leaving her bare from the waist down. And Ranma was in his boxers. There was a certain part of Wendy, who drank in the sight of those muscles, but another far larger part was just mortified.

Eventually however the three of them got themselves untangled and the two girls made themselves more presentable. Ranma didn’t bother, figuring that they’d all seen everything or nearly everything he had to offer at this point, and his stomach was rumbling at him. Whatever else had changed in the lifetime he led here in this new world, one thing hadn’t. When Ranma’s master called, if he could he answered quickly.

“So have the two of you then decided to share Ranma’s affections?” Seilah asked, looking at Bisca and Erza. “I have read of such things in several of my books, the Queen’s Harem for one, although that was one woman many men. The Womanizer Who Became a Wizard Saint that was another. My personal favorite was one called The General and his War Prizes. It was not quite as romantic as the others, but it was far better written that any of them, and the sex scenes were much better.”

“Truly?” Erza asked, looking at Seilah with interest and speaking up, once forgetting Wendy and Carla were there. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen that one, do you think you could share your copy?”

“Let’s talk about something else,” Bisca hissed, with Carla nodding agreement. “This is not a topic of conversation for the breakfast table.”

“Well technically we don’t have a table,” Erza replied dryly, gesturing around to the inside of the tent but she subsided under Carla’s glare.

While Carla was attempting to enforce some modesty, Wendy had just moved over to help her brother with food. Nudging him in the side she whispered, “So, are you interested in both? I thought you were only interested in Bisca and Jenny.”

“Bisca and I have, you know flirted and kissed before this yeah…” Ranma said slowly as he prepared some food for them all. “This was the first time Erza I did anything like that.”

“Hmm…” Wendy mussed, her lips quirking. She wasn’t certain what to think about all this romance stuff other than finding it both disturbing and interesting at the same time. She liked all the girls involved, and of course knew her Ranma-nii wouldn’t change much when it came to spending time with her. He’d made that clear all along. So really it all came down to if they were willing to share like Lisanna and Anna, or not.

At that point, Seilah quickly brought Wendy into a conversation about the Girl Genius books that she had gotten Wendy interested in, letting Bisca, Erza and Ranma talk alone at the other end of the table. Deciding to bit the bullet, Ranma began. “So, I’ll go out on limb and say that last night was a bit of a surprise to all of us.”

Erza snorted. “In a way I suppose. I don’t think I was prepared to…”

“Grind against him like you were dry humping him?” Bisca asked, feeling somewhat irritated.

“Yes that. And while I have to admit to being a little ambivalent about how that part went, I liked it, I like it a lot. But I think I would’ve preferred to choose to go that far, rather than most of the voting being done by the amount of liquor last night,” Erza said, blushing and looking away for a moment before looking challengingly over at Bisca. “So, though it was not in the manner I would have preferred, I am officially throwing my name into the ring for Ranma’s affections.”

I would’ve also preferred not to be drunk,” Bisca said with a shrug instead of responding to that statement. “At least that way,” she said with a wink at Ranma, “I wouldn’t have fallen asleep just when it was getting good.”

“If it helps you any, I think I fell asleep right after,” Ranma said, frowning thoughtfully. Then looking down at himself, where he had been finally forced to put on some clothing by Carla after he had finished cooking breakfast. “Although how I undressed last night is anyone’s guess.”

Erza laughed at that, then looked at the other two thoughtfully. “I, I think then we need to all state our long term intentions for this,” she said, gesturing first to Ranma then to herself, then to Bisca and then back to Ranma. “I realize that most relationships, they don’t actually explicitly state what they want out of it, but I think given the complexities and how badly this could go wrong, we need to.”

“I’ll agree to that,” Bisca said with a nod. “But I think Ranma should go first.”

“Ouch,” Ranma muttered, crossing his arms and looking away. “Putting me on the spot aren’t you?”

“Were you sober or drunk last night?” Bisca asked tartly, her own arms folding under her bust as she practically glared back at him.

“…Fair point,” Ranma said, turning back and bowing his head slightly to the two girls. “Although I will say I’ve already told both you and Jenny, that I wasn’t interested in settling down or for really building a one-on-one relationship yet not until I got to know people.

“I think what Bisca as it is implying Ranma, and I agree with her, is that we’re a bit beyond the getting to know you stage,” Erza replied.

Ranma slowly nodded. “So, beyond me telling you what I want out of a relationship we should out some ground rules and all that stuff?”

The two girls nodded, and he slowly nodded back once more. “Okay, I’ll agree with that actually. First and foremost, I think we all need to agree to not do anything that the other person is uncomfortable with. If it’s the three of us together like this on our trip, then we have to taking everyone’s feelings into account. If it’s just two of us, then it’s just the other person. I’m not so interested in public displays of affection? But neither am I going to say no to express my affection for someone publicly. There is a middle ground I think.”

“Those kind of rules are always good Ranma,” Bisca said, somewhat impatient. “But I think we really need to know the level of commitment we can expect from you, and what you want to see from us.”

“That’s a good question,” Ranma said with a hollow laugh even as he flinched a little at the word commitment. “I wish I had an answer.”

“What you mean?” Erza asked.

Ranma sighed, looking at the two girls then over at Seilah and the others. “Could you gals give us three some privacy please?” Once the uninterested Seilah had led the innocently curious Wendy and the simply nosy Carla out he turned back to the two women, in particular Bisca, working up his courage slowly. “Okay, so… some of this Erza already knows, it came out during my discussion with Porlyusica, but…”

From there Ranma filled Bisca in on his real origins and how his initial abilities were not based on magic but ki, life energy. Bisca had a lot of questions but Ranma asked her to wait on them until he was done, finishing with, “And so um, the upshot of that kind of thing is that, well… I won’t age much… if at all.”

At that, all the questions about Ranma’s old world, his old life and the origins of Ranma’s curse went right out the window. “WHAT!?” Bisca knew her voice had risen into something like a squeak, but at the moment she didn’t care, and nor, to judge by her look, did Erza, as she was staring at Ranma, her eyes narrowing in speculation.

“Yeah, that’s one of the reasons why er, y’know, I’m not in any rush to start settling down or starting a family. I, I’ll probably live well into my hundreds and still look like I do now. When ya learn how to actively manipulate your ki is when your body starts to just, not age,” Ranma finished lamely, shrugging his shoulders.

“…” Bisca honestly could not find anything to say to that. It was one hell of a revelation. *But, but should that really matter? I can think it will later on, but right now, no.* “Okay, that’s big, and I can see it starting to matter to me personally when I start to age in the future, but that’s for in the future. Right now, though, I don’t want to settle down either, but I don’t want to date you if you then turn around and start acting like Gildarts or Loke, flirting with every girl that comes around. A few, who I already know about is fine, but not more than that. That includes Seilah!!”

Ranma opened his mouth to protest that him and Seilah weren’t like that, but Bisca silenced him with a finger cocked like a pistol right between his eyes. “I know it isn’t like that now, but it could be in the future. I’ve seen how you, and, admittedly, every other male looks at her. I don’t want you to let your hormones control you like that.” When Ranma reluctantly nodded, she went on. “And I also want to know that when you and I have time together, you’re not just going to then run off to another girl right after if that makes sense.”

A portion of that was a lie really. Bisca knew that eventually she did want to have kids, and would want to settle down. She would want a marriage, a house, all that. But that was years in the future. She wasn’t a normal peasant or townswoman, she didn’t have any reason to rush and wouldn’t, not until she was in her thirties at best. Still, the idea her lover wouldn’t age with her was a revelation, and one it would take time for her to process. For now she had put it aside, but she knew that wasn’t the most healthy way of dealing with it.

“I as well don’t see an issue. Mages routinely age more gracefully than nonmagicals, Master Makarov is quite a bit older than you might think for instance given how spry he is,” Erza said.

“Perverted little gnomes are all spry, that’s not exactly a good thing,” Ranma groused.

But while the girls heard him, they were unwilling to be diverted and Erza continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “I too am not looking to settle down. Moreover the, the idea of children… kind of frightens me if I’m honest,” Erza laughed self-consciously, tapping her armor. “After all, I don’t think they make armor for pregnant women. And the whole body changing thing…”

“Heh, I heard you were enough of a terror when you starting to grow curves, I certainly wouldn’t’ want to be around you when your body changes again,” Bisca said with a smirk, earning a wry laugh and a gentle slap to the shoulder from Erza before the green-haired girl looked back at Ranma. “So that’s one reason why you don’t want to settle down with any one girl, anything else.”

“Well there’s my Ranger status, kind of hard to settle down in one place when your job might call you away or, alternatively, make ya really unwelcome in any one place after you find trouble there,” Ranma said, looking at Bisca for a response and pouting when she simply waved him off and said she had figured out what he was weeks back.

With that taken care of, he went on more reluctantly. “And… there’s also the issue that I’m kind of… scared of commitment.” Even now admitting to being scared of anything was hard as hell to Ranma, but it had to be said. He thought that maybe Jenny had already figured that out, and indeed might have something of the same issue, if not for the same reason, but Erza, the most emotionally closed off of the girls he was currently flirting/in a quasi-relationship, and Bisca, the most normal of the trio, needed to hear it aloud.

Bisca reached over and took his hand, squeezing. “This is something from your old life, right?”

Slowly Ranma nodded, looking over at Erza. “I told you something about the people I had met and lived with in my old life, but there was a lot more to it. I, I had never originally settled down until I was around sixteen. Was on the road my whole life before that with my old man, Genma, I just told ya about him,” he went on, flicking his gaze to Bisca and squeezing her hands in turn, his thumb slowly starting to caress the back of her hand. “But when we got there we moved in with this family called the Tendos, and out of the blue I was told I had to marry one of them.”

As Bisca flushed at his gentle touch and tried to concentrate on his words Erza nodded, gesturing him to go on while fighting back a pout. I’d never even been around a girl before that for long enough to figure out they were interesting or anything. My old man, he also put this idea in my head that girls were weak and useless.” Bisca stiffened at that despite his touches and Erza nodded, again having heard that before. “Well anyway, it didn’t go well.”

From there Ranma opened himself up more than he ever had before, telling the two girls things he had never shared with even Wendy or anyone else. He told them about Akane, about the mistakes he’d made being very honest about it, and about how she in turn had treated him. About how there had been other girls after him for various reasons and how they had all acted both to one another and to him, and how he had not really understood a lot of it at the time, and how eventually he had started to finally grow up and move on, only to find none of the others were willing to do the same, forcing him to try to break it off with all of them one after another. How that process had been interrupted by Gosunkugi and the age-regression mushroom and how he had subsequently been sent to Earth Land.

“So yeah, while I’ve got some experience with being in a relationship, sort of, none of it was good or normal,” He finished dryly. “And whenever I hear the word commitment or fiancé I want to run for the hills.”

“What a bitch,” Erza replied at last, having sat silent throughout the tale. “That is, what a bitch!”

“Which one?” Bisca asked, finally pulling her hands away from Ranma, who had continued his gentle caresses of them throughout his tale. The lack of sensation caused a shiver to go through her, but she wanted to concentrate now, and that had been seriously distracting. *How the heck did he just make my hand an erogenous zone, seriously!?*

“For my mind, I think Ukyo and Shampoo were just as bad as Akane in their own ways, one not realizing her dream for the future isn’t one Ranma was willing to be shaped into.” *And that is food for thought indeed in the long term. Still, for right now, isn’t it,* Bisca thought, fighting back an urge to frown.

“Actually I was thinking of Nabiki when I said that, but all of them would fit the bitch mold, and yes I too think Kodachi sounded insane and can be discounted on account of that,” Erza said dryly. “But I could indeed have been speaking of all of them. But in particular Akane and Ukyo. They should have been much more understanding about Ranma’s curse.”

“Yeah, heh, ya kinda need to realize the curse is here to stay too,” Ranma said with a sigh. “So, ya asked what I wanted out of a relationship? Understanding I suppose, and someone who won’t rush things. Fun I guess, in all the forms we can agree to. Adventure, romance, someone I can talk with and train with, someone good with Wendy who can sort of step into an older sister role for all the girly things I can’t be without being a second Carla. That’s about it I think.”

“Oh hell yes!” Bisca said, standing up and moving around the table. “Adventure, romance, I want that too! I’m fine with your curse Ranma, I don’t want to monopolize you or anything, I just want your attention on me when we’re together, and like I said, I don’t want to date a Loke. Can you promise that at least?” *We might not be perfect together, but perfects a goal, not a requirement in a relationship. And no way do I want to lose what he can make me feel.*

Erza too stood up and moved toward Ranma from around the tiny folding table that served Wendy and Ranma when they ate inside the tent, un-equipping her armor as she moved. “For my part you know I too want adventure, and someone to train with, someone to walk side by side with and fun sounds fantastic to me. But while I don’t have any issues with your curse, indeed I think it is rather fascinating, I too would rather not share your affections with too many girls. But I promise not to sabotage your relationships with the others. It is just, if you decide to only pursue one of us, tell me and whoever else isn’t chosen? I think we deserve that at least.”

“Heh, ya don’t have to worry about that. I think three girls is more than enough for me, too much really ta give ya all the time ya deserve,” Ranma nodded firmly then reached out and pulled each girl down towards him, sitting them on his thighs. IT was a squeeze, but since Erza had just gotten rid of her armor, it was actually quite nice. “So… we’re good then?”

“Hmm…” Bisca looked across at Erza, and after a moment, the redhead saw her look and nodded. With that approval, Bisca leaned down as Ranma arced his body up towards her, kissing her on the lips. On his other knee Erza blushed a red almost as bright as her hair, but didn’t turn away, watching as Ranma and Bisca kissed, with Ranma’s arms around them both.

Then it was Erza’s turn. Ranma pulled back from Bisca, allowing the cowgirl mage to lean back and breath heavily, her eyes almost smoldering before turning to Erza and very gently pulling her down to him. Erza’s kiss was a little more hesitant at first, but she opened her mouth quickly where Bisca hadn’t and their tongues began to dance against one another pressing their bodies against one another.

Eventually though Erza too need to breath, and she pulled away, leaning her head on Rama’s shoulder and breathing heavily, her chest heaving licking her lips in a display of girl-next-door sexiness that almost unmanned Ranma. “Yeah… we’re good I think.”

Smirking, Bisca put one arm around each of them, taking command of Ranma’s other shoulder as she hummed wordless agreement. Then, in an effort to calm down rather than jump both of them, she asked, “So, what was that bit about perverted little gnomes you mentioned before? Are there more like Makarov out there?”

“Gah, I hope not. If Happosai somehow followed me…the horror, the horror,” Ranma moaned, actually looking terrified. At their looks at that, Ranma sighed and went on a tangent to explain about Happosai and then Cologne, causing the serious atmosphere to disappear for a time.

**OOOOOOO**

“You want me to add **what** into your arm?” Porlyusica asked, looking askance at Gray.

“A retractable dagger,” Gray replied. “Ranma was right, if I’m going to get a metal arm, I might as well get one that can double as a weapon.”

For a moment the mages around him were silent, then Elfman said softly, “Damn but that is manly,” and for once, not even his sisters could argue with him.

**OOOOOOO**

For all the time it took them to find the four Fiorian criminals, actually capturing them was simplicity itself. Bisca asked about them whenever they ran into local herders, and with that and Ranma and Wendy’s enhanced senses, she eventually found a trail. Wendy started to fly up in the air to do recon with Carla’s help of course and Seilah beside her. Running down the foursome after that was only a matter of time, and with the speed they could make not much of that, taking barely a quarter of the day.

Then once they found them, the fight was over before you could blink. Wendy came out of the sun from on high, using her new gun skills that Bisca had been training on and Ranma’s pistols rather than her tiny holdout gun, taking out two of the criminals before they even knew what was happening. Seilah then used her curse to stop the panicking horses and Ranma and his two new girlfriends rose up and knocked the two conscious criminals out. It was literally as quick as that.

After dropping their four prisoners off with the nearest group of ranchers, the party continued their way southward. With the local’s directions, Bisca was able to lead them unerringly through Desierto into the dusty dirt and scrub-covered segment that connected the far south’s desert with the more diverse area of the north.

It was a very rocky area the kind of area where just living day to day would be rough for any number of reasons. “Just the kind of area a dark guild would decide to build their base in. Can’t dark guilds ever make their homes in nice looking places? Is that too much to ask,” Bisca mock-whined.

“Hah! You think you have it hard, at least with me around you won’t ever be lacking for water, right?” Ranma asked, creating a globe of water over his hand and letting it slowly fall to fill up a water bottle.

“Ugh,” Erza groaned, looking away. “That is so disturbing.”

“Huh, why?” Ranma asked.

“It just looks like you are condensing your sweat and asking us to drink it,” Erza said, shaking her head.

“EWWW!!” Wendy groaned looking as if she was going to throw up.

“Heh, think you broke my imouto’s mind there Erza,” Ranma said with a chuckle, reaching up to pat Wendy’s leg as she rode beside him on one of the horses.

She shuddered, then hopped off the horse and taking Carla in her arms hopped into the air. “I’ll scout ahead a bit, see what I can find. I need some exercise to get that idea out of my head Erza!”

Seilah silently followed her, setting her book aside and rising from one of the horses. In her opinion, horses were something she could not use often enough. Why, they let her read and keep up with the group at the same time! But Ranma had made it clear already on this trip he didn’t want Wendy flying ahead of the group alone.

As the Demon woman flew after Wendy, Ranma smirked at Erza. “Huh, so I gotta ask, did you plan this?” When she looked at him blankly his smirk widened. “To get the three of us alone I mean?”

Bisca laughed at that while Erza flushed and spluttered. “Well I don’t think she should be rewarded for traumatizing young Wendy like that, so why don’t you hop up here first big boy and let the mean old redhead to stew on her own for a bit?”

Erza continued to sputter as Ranma did just that, alighting on the saddle behind Bisca and putting his arms around her, kissing her neck. Erza grumbled but said nothing, having gotten used to, and rather enjoying, being able to flirt like that openly. That, and they had all agreed not to sabotage one another’s time with Ranma, or, if it came to it, each other.

About an hour later, Ranma had switched to Erza’s horse, but they all stopped as Wendy alighted next to them from where she had been flying in the sky a moment ago. Seilah came down next, calmly waiting nearby. “We found it,” Wendy reported, pointing ahead of them. “It looks empty, but also kind of weird from the sky. Like someone designed it to be looked at from the sky, to make it look like a skull. Tacky,” she said shaking her head.

“And ugly,” Carla said.

“That too,” Wendy agreed as Carla hopped off her back. Any other girl might have been scared by the sight of a giant skull like that, but Wendy had seen a lot scarier things traveling with Ranma.

“Seilah what do you think?” Ranma asked.

“The fortress in question is rather large, and as Wendy stated, looks as if someone molded the work of one of those jagged rock formations to create something that is supposed to look like a mad king’s crown from the ground, and the skull of a raven from up top. How they contrived it I do not know, nor can I speak to the anesthetics of it,” Seilah said, having just pulled a book out and frowning irritably at the interruption. While she could read and walk at the same time, she couldn’t fly and read at the same time, and she hadn’t had much time to read in the past two days.

“That wasn’t what I was asking,” Ranma said with a laugh. “I mean, did you see anything moving either?”

Seilah frowned in thought, looking back the way she and Wendy had been flying before speaking slowly. “Other than sand moving I did not see anything else moving know. Whether or not that implies there is something beneath the sand I cannot say. I have read many stories of creatures hiding underground and in the sand.”

Ranma frowned at that then shrugged. “All right, Erza and I will go in first. Bisca, back us up with your rifle. Seilah, Wendy, take some water, and when you’re done drinking I’ll want you two as air patrol.”

“That is an interesting idea, always having someone in the air,” Seilah said putting away her book again with a sigh as she finished drinking. “Where did you come up with it? I have not run into it before in any of my stories.”

“I’ve fought a few flying mages before besides sparring with Wendy, and while most of them can’t match me with my aerial style of combat, it always occurred to me that as part of a larger group they could do a lot of good,” Ranma replied.

Moments later, Wendy hopped into the air with Seilah beside her and Carla once more in her cat form strapped to her back, her Aero Wings flashing out. “Tenryu no Takameru Ho (Sky Dragon’s Boosted Step)!” Wendy shouted and the next second, she and Seilah were flying high up over the air, winging their way towards the target.

As the flyers disappeared above them, Ranma and Erza nodded towards Bisca, who had finished tying off the horses while the flyers had been taking drinks of water. She nodded back, and the three of them made their way forward.

As they went, the terrain changed from scrub brush to rocky desert, giving them some cover that they used as often as possible. Bisca trailed the two frontline combatants, her rifle to her shoulder, looking through the sniper scope ahead of them. Occasionally she broke off to either side and climbed up a rock to get a better view.

Ranma, Erza and Bisca were within sight of the monolith that was the Raven Tail base, when they saw the sand beginning to shift ahead of them. They paused and began to back away, but it was too late. The sand ahead of them quickly formed into two giant sand snakes, their mouths open and gaping as they hissed silently, and lashed towards them.

“Some kind of enchantment trap?” Ranma asked with a scowl, pulling back a fist and letting fly with a Water Dragon’s Claw, which shredded the topmost portion of one of the sand snakes, blasting it apart like a wave would a sand castle. Yet the rest of it kept coming, and he blinked before it slammed into him. The head reformed even as he stumbled backwards, followed by two more heads sprouting up from the sand.

Erza had attacked at the same time Ranma had, one of her sword blades flashing out in an arc that send a cut of air towards the attacking snakes. It sliced the head off her target, but once more, the snake didn’t seem to even notice the damage. It barreled forward and Erza jumped to one side, slicing and slicing it to pieces. Then she yelped as the sand underneath her shifted, leaping away as another snake formed round where she had been standing, biting at the air.

Bisca shot into the thing attacking Erza with no effect, and she cursed, before gathering her magical energy into her rifle again and shouting “Guns Magic, Boom Shot!”

The sonic attack dissipated the sand, smashing the snake into dust. Yet just like with Erza and Ranma’s attacks, the destroyed snake informed almost instantly.

“Frack! The enchantment isn’t in any one creature! It’s got to be in the sand around the base itself,” Ranma growled, smashing at the sand hydra now attacking him with his fists.

He was also not taking to the air, instead staying on the ground and sending out blasts of water into it via stomps of his feet. He had noticed that the clumps of wet sand hadn’t reformed, and figured the water was somehow messing with the enchantment. With it being so dry here, that was taking a bit out of him, way more than creating water for the party, but Ranma estimated he could deal with the strain for at least two hours or so.

“I would say so, and it isn’t just us who are now under attack. Look up there!” Erza shouted in between dodging the fangs of the many headed hydras that were attacking her now.

Ranma chanced a glance upwards, and growled angrily. The reason why Seilah, Carla and Wendy had not come down to help them was because they were having their own issues. Several hundred crows made of sand had risen into the air from all around the stone fortress winging their way up towards the two flyers, who were now engaging the birds in an aerial duel.

That moment of inattention nearly cost him as one of the sand creatures slammed it’s snout into him, carrying him into the air but he flipped with the impact, landing on top of one hydra head, before flipping himself off, lashing down at the thing with a Water Dragon’s Titan punch. The Titan fist slammed into the snake, burying it into the ground, crashing into and through it, while also spreading water throughout the impact area of around the shot, wetting the sand. A second later however, the portions of the snake that worked wet broke off from the portions that were, and began to it reform and attacked again.

“This is some kind of guards spell or enchantment! I saw something like this in a Bank of Ishgar branch in Fiore. They’ll just keep reforming unless we find the core,” Bisca said from behind them. She had changed position twice, but was keeping her distance, using Explosive and Boom shots to back up Erza and Ranma, although honestly speaking neither seemed to be in danger. *In fact, they seem to be enjoying themselves, freaking combat junkies.*

“And how do we do that?” Ranma asked almost sardonically, dodging and attacking in a single move that left another sand snake cut in half, but one half was already wiggling, reforming from the copious amounts of sand all around. “There’s so much sand even if I tried I couldn’t wet it all down, and I don’t see anything that could be the core?”

Above them, Wendy reared back a punch that sent a crow flying, shattering the sand of its makeup. Yet the grains of sand slowly reformed even as they fell to the earth, and she pouted as she dodged around several other crows. Behind her, Wendy felt Carla shift, and obligingly shifted her flight down and to the left, avoiding a diving crow from her blind spot, twirling around to lash out with a kick that sent that crow to join its fellow as so much scattered sand. “This is getting irritating!”

“Indeed,” Seilah said, smacking one bird aside with a wave of one hand, then flipping herself up, in what would’ve been a scandalous display of leg and thigh if anyone were bothered to look, to kick another bird in the chest, shattering its makeup. She had tried to command the birds around her to stop attacking, and those birds had, but more had quickly reformed below her area of control and launched themselves up into the air against them. Whatever was controlling this was hidden to her influence at the moment.

*Unless I can stop all the sand in the area from moving. That will be difficult, the crows were not fighting my control so much as each of the* *sands were, multiplying the issue very badly. Still it is a way forward.*  “Wendy, I’m going to apply a bit higher, see if you can guard me for a moment while I gather my magical energy.”

Down below, Erza and Ranma were now working together, flinging out as much water as they could. Ranma’s attacks had become more diffuse rather than solid, as he scattered water all around them to go with what he was sending out via his feet. At the same time, Erza had shifted into her sea empress armor and begun to lash out with her trident, creating massive plumes and spears of water. In this manner, they were slowly pushing forward towards the Raven Tail fortress.

Yet even as they did, the enchanted creatures became more numerous and craftier. Several of them stayed behind the others now, and began to shoot blasts of sand towards the two attackers. These attacks didn’t do much damage to Erza or Ranma, but Bisca had been forced to leap off a rock behind them. The rock had been shattered by the sand attack, but her return shot had blasted one of the long-range defenders to pieces.

“Yeah, okay this has gone from kind of fun to being irritating,” Ranma said, voicing the same thought that his little sister had a few seconds before. “They can’t hurt us much, whatever this is, sand is still sand, and it can’t accelerate itself enough to really do much damage to us.”

“Not to us,” Erza said with a grunt, as she took a blow from a tale of one of the hydras. It made her stumble backwards, but her sea Empress armor was actually quite decent in terms of it being armor as well as water manipulation. She rolled with it, stabbing her Trident down into the tail, and sending a plume of water throughout the creature, which solidified its entire form. “But Bisca or more normal mages would find this a deadly challenge rather than simply an inconvenience. We also don’t know how this enchantment is being powered, which could be a very bad thing.”

That caused Ranma to become serious once more, and he nodded. The two of them once more pushed forward hard, splitting up and taking the defenders from the sides while Bisca remained behind.

At the same time, Wendy had gained Seilah enough time for her to concentrate her powers on the entire area around them. “Macro, all sand must cease moving!”

Below, the three people on the ground found their opponents frozen in place, while the sand underneath them also froze unable to reform into new attackers. Ranma could see the sand was very visibly straining to move, the little granules of the hydras in front of him twitching in place, the same as the ground below. But under the command of Seilah’s curse, they could not disobey.

“If someone could please hurry to find whatever core is creating this, I would appreciate it,” Seilah shouted, her voice carrying over the suddenly quiet battlefield. “This is quite like trying to control several billion different objects all at once, and regardless of the lack of sentience or the size of the objects, I cannot keep this up for long.”

Without another word the three on the ground raced around the now frozen creatures, entering the fortress as Wendy alighted on the roof. She was the first person to run into a second layer of defense, and she pouted once more as Carla leaped off her, moving to the side as three Gargoyles rose from the stone of the roof. “Darn it!”

“Ivan Dreyar must have been quite paranoid,” Carla concurred, before rushing forward, her cat claws cutting into the gargoyle, sending it stumbling backwards. “But look at it this way my dear, there is a limited amount of stone for these creatures to become unless they wish to destroy the fortress they are meant to defend.

“Tenryu no Hoko (Sky Dragon's Roar)!” Wendy shouted in response, her Sky Dragon’s roar smashing two more gargoyles into pieces.

The trio below also ran into stone monsters, which formed out of the stone of the fortress itself, and began to troop towards them. “I’m sensing a theme here,” Ranma grumbled, leaping up over a punch, and landing one himself, which shattered the large Vulcan-sized ogre that he had just been fighting.

It reformed far more slowly than the sand creatures outside, and he smirked suddenly. “I wonder if the spell can control these things if we just crush them into sand.”

“Let’s find out,” Erza replied tartly, her sea Empress armor shifting into her normal armor. But instead of wielding a sword, she now wielded two hammers. They were short shafted, with large heads, which looked as if they drums rather than metal. The two of them went to work, smashing another one of the stone and iron golems into pieces, Erza’s hammers sending reverberations through the thing. They wouldn’t have been worth much against the sand outside since the sand would just reform as it did under Bisca’s bullets, but against these creatures, it made the rock into sand very, very quickly.

For her part Bisca dodged around this fight, racing forward, and kept moving, thinking hard about what she’d heard about Ivan, speaking aloud as she did. “A megalomaniac, the others said, with a huge ego, and a penchant for using birds and things with that paper magic of his. So he probably put his personal room up top. “But Wendy’s no doubt up there working downward, so let’s cover all the bases we can.”

She raced downstairs and found a large room, which had several doorways leading into it. In the center of the room was a large dais, on top of which glowed a giant ruby red lacrima. It was many faceted, and it glowed the color of blood. There were handprints on here and there, that looked even more like dried blood than the crystal itself, and down onto the ground and away down the open doors she could see. They too glowed slightly, like ground lacrima almost, but it was the crystal that just had to be the center of the enchantment working all around them.

Pausing at the threshold to the door, Bisca looking down at the doorway and shook her head. “Nope!”

With that, Bisca raised her rifle and began to fire rapidly into the room at the crystal. Her first few shots banged off the thing, but she rapidly changed to Penetrator, and then Explosive. The first one would hopefully penetrate the outer portion of the crystal and the second bullet would hit the same exact point that had been weakened by that, a double blow. She kept on firing even as another two stone creatures pushed out form the walls, pouring on the magical bullets.

Finally, there was a loud cracking noise, and the crystal exploded, forcing Bisca to dodge backwards with a cry of shock. The whole room was peppered with lacrima shards and the explosion that occurred gouged out the rock all around, obliterating the dais without a trace along with much of the rest of the room.

Outside, Seilah was gasping with effort having had to stop flying, floating down to the top of the fortress to concentrate more of her power on keeping the sand from moving. The resistance vanished then with such alacrity Seilah nearly gasped, before she released her hold on the sand. The instant she did, the sand creatures collapsed into sand once more.

“They did it,” she said to Wendy, who had just come back up from downstairs.

“Yep, though I think I am going to get Ranma to teach me more about aerial combat,” she muttered, gasping in wiping at her brow. “This was not fun.”

Seilah however sent a smile her way. “On the contrary, I think you did quite well.” Wendy blinked, then Seilah gestured all around them. “You are dealing with the fact that it’s so hot out here Wendy,” she said gently. “Not the actual exertions of the battle. You and Carla both worked like a well-oiled team, don’t denigrate that.”

Wendy nodded thoughtfully at that. “So just more endurance than?”

“That would probably be helpful,” Carla said slowly. “I’ve been training my magical core so much in order to retain my human form for longer but I have neglected my physical endurance, as have you.”

As Wendy nodded, Seilah gestured back down the way the two height-challenged girls had come from. “That is for later. Right now, let us go down to discover what they found. Part of exploration stories is the discovery of treasures after all.”

Inside, Ranma pouted as the Titan he’d been fighting collapsed. “Darn it! After that stuff outside that was actually fun.”

Erza rolled her eyes at that, her hammers disappearing, replaced by a single longsword, which she held down, ready but not in her way. “Come on, let’s go find Bisca.”

They found Bisca coming up towards them hand held high, and quickly exchanged high-fives with the woman. “Well, that was more than I expected if I’m honest. I’ve never run into a dark Guild before that had that kind of defenses on its fortress. That kind of thing, I know costs like the dickens to create.”

“Not even the cave that we found with the Oración Seis were using as a forward base to explore the Woodsea had anything like that,” Ranma agreed. He and Hoteye had done that two days after the battle against the Oración Seis ended, but as Hoteye had warned, they hadn’t actually found anything. The Oración Seis had not had a permanent base of operations, instead traveling through Fiore, Seven, Stella, Joya, and Bosco almost randomly at times, while at others seeking out specific objectives as a group.

“I think it has to do with the mental makeup of the leader in question,” Bisca said, but she became serious as she looked at them. “That thing was created with blood magic, and I think there are actual prisoners down there, but I wanted to check on you all before heading down to free them.”

“Good thinking, don’t want noncombatants running around until we have secured the area,” Ranma said with an approving smile. “Still, Erza, you go and guard Bisca, Bisca can you get them free?”

Bisca nodded, putting her rifle back in her tiny Requip space and pulling out one of her pistols. “Yeah, I’ve got a few Bullets that could do the job.”

“You do that, while I head up to Wendy. Between the four of us, those three and I can clear the rest of this fortress.

That didn’t take long thankfully, and the four searchers, after marking out one room for further exploration, joined the two Fairy Tail mages below. Seilah quickly hid her head in a cloak Ranma had been carrying for her in his Requip space, as several hundred people were escorted out in groups of fifty up into the light of day. All of them were emaciated, their wrists and ankles marked by sores, but beyond that, and a general lack of any kind of muscles – so much so many of them could barely move let alone walk on their own – they hadn’t been physically beaten. But given the amount of damage their years long confinement had given them that was scant comfort.

“How many slaves did you say were brought in here?” Ranma asked as he joined Bisca. While Bisca had to use her magic bullets to blast apart the chains, Ranma simply tore them apart. Erza, with Wendy taking over guiding the people out, could cut the chains and restraints apart just as easily.

“Over 200,” Bisca replied. “According to the records I found anyway. It was such a high number that it still stuck in the minds of people even years later and so unusual too, someone taking ownership of them there and then guiding the lot of them into Desierto. We’ve found some hundred and eighty so far and…,” she paused, shaking her head, “and ten, maybe eleven skeletons. They are so mixed up in a pile in one of the rooms I can’t tell.”

“That is bad,” Ranma said softly, shaking his head. “That… well, Ivan’s going to be getting the death penalty anyway, I suppose we can’t kill him twice can we?” he asked, only slightly joking.

“We could ask them to make it painful,” Erza said scowling as she cut through the last chain in the room, releasing an elderly-looking man to collapse into the arms of two more just like him.

While Bisca and Erza were dealing with the prisoners, and Wendy was healing them as best she could, Seilah and Ranma left them to it in order to explore the rest of the fortress. They found the scattered rooms of the guild members interesting, but not overmuch, though Seilah found the books scattered here and there throughout the rooms fascinating, piling up the mostly fantasy novels in one place. In the largest room, however she found several tomes on magic, enchantments and other things. Wendy said at one point she was interested in enchantment, is that true?”

“Yeah,” Ranma said. “I think she’s somewhere below apprentice at them, but she has enjoyed what little bit she’s been able to deal with.

“In that case, we should take these books here, and the others I’ve already found for me.”

“Shouldn’t we be taking all of them?” Ranma asked.

“No,” Seilah said shaking her head. “Some of these are cursed. Furthermore, I think there is actually a curse on this bookshelf too. But it was only meant for humans.”

“Lucky us then,” Ranma said, nudging her in the side.

Seilah smiled faintly. She had slowly gotten used to Ranma’s friendly gestures, which she had never dealt with before from any of her fellow Devils. They were… nice. She paused as her fingers touched one book, then frowned pulling her hand away. “Why ever would someone build a book that looks like part of the books case?”

“What?” Ranma asked turning from where he had been looking at a tapestry set to one side, poking at it.

Seilah repeated herself, gesturing at the book. “This book is not a book,” she said, with an affronted tone.

Ranma read the title, allowed, staring at it. “The Rise and Fall of the Empire, The Story of Minstrel the Great, As Told by One Who Lived it.”

“Historical fiction based around the time when mistral rules most of Ishgar,” Seilah replied. “It’s a very hard to find novel, one of a series which I found the last member she means volume right of. Obviously I couldn’t follow most of the characters, but it was most interesting, not at all boring like most human stories based on real life are.”

Staring at the book thoughtfully, Ranma nodded. “And you say that isn’t a book? “

Seilah shook her head irritably, “As I said, no it is not.”

“In that case, why don’t you pull it out anyway? Can you move it at all? Because this is reminding me of some stories, which had hidden passages and stuff behind bookcases and stuff. Surely you’ve run into that kind of thing before.”

Shrugging, the demon woman obeyed, pulling on the book from its topmost corner. There was a clacking noise, as internal levers went to work, and the bookshelf slid to the side.

Inside was nothing much, or nothing interesting to the two of them anyway. Ranma felt that maybe other people would be interested in the two large bags of gems and gold nuggets. The slaves for certain could make good use of the treasure. But what he was interested in was on the shelf above that stuff. “And is that a printing press?”

Seilah stared at it and then nodded thoughtfully. “It could be, I’ve not seen one before.”

Ranma groaned, slapping her hands to his face. “Let me get this straight, on the one hand, we have the Oración Seis, who were stealing money from the bank of Ishgar. And on the other, we have Raven Tail, who might have been printing their own?!”

“I do think it is as bad as you might assume. If you look closely, you see that they have the printing press, but not one of those things, what are they called, the wooden slats that create the image for the money?” Seilah asked. She didn’t know much about the human economy but she had read stories that had mentioned it.

“Oh thank goodness,” Ranma muttered. “I would hate to deal with the Kings’ squealing about how the economy was doomed or whatever.”

“There is however a book in here,” she said with interest, reaching in. There was a flash, and Seilah’s other hand came up to grab at a spear point that had just shot out of the side of the small alcove. I wonder why Ivan Dreyar was this paranoid?” she said mildly, snapping the thing.

“I don’t think he was paranoid at all,” Ranma interjected, watching her work. “I think he was just plain nasty. He just wanted to hurt whoever came after him that’s all.”

“That makes more sense I suppose given what is known of his personality.” With that, Seilah handed the book to Ranma who took it gingerly, opening the pages. It was a hand written tome, marked with a lot of different colored paper and looked more like a makeshift notebook than a true journal.

When Ranma opened it, this was confirmed in no uncertain terms because each page, or each series of pages, were notes on different Fairy Tail members. It covered their adventures via newspaper clippings, with little anecdotes set next to it, information gleaned about how this or that mage fought, via discussion with bystanders and a lot more. The sheer amount of information that Ivan had collected was scary.

When he showed the book to Erza, she was of much the same opinion, glaring at it angrily. “Will you have to turn that in for evidence to the Kings?” She asked, looking very worried as she flipped through the pages denoting the skills of Cana and a number of other mid and low-tier mages who were known to work solo.

Ranma shook his head, not even glancing at her, instead looking at the prisoners out the window. They were all resting in the ley of the fortress, under cover from the sun but still outside of the first time in years. “No, I won’t have to. We were just supposed to come here and look around, they had no idea what was here, and given how many spies and shit we’ve been dealing with I’m not about to trust something like that to any government. The prisoners, that printing press and the treasure, that’ll be enough for the Kings.”

“Good,” Erza said sharply. “I’m going to keep a hold of this for now, I’ll hand it over to Makarov when we get back to Magnolia. Perhaps, there are those in Magnolia was passing on information, and their identities can be discovered through careful reading of this. But I don’t think any non-Fairy Tail mage should have this information.”

“Agreed,” Ranma said, the swiftness of the agreement causing Erza to smile at him.

Bisca came over to them then, wiping her hands down. “Wendy and I have done what we can to the prisoners, she’s leaving now with Carla and Seilah to bring in the closest ranchers to really help us here, and get in touch with the King of Minstrel to have even more help waiting for us at the border. We just can’t help these people on our own. But…” she added, smirking and pointing at Ranma. “Right now, I think it’s time for our personal water fountain to go to work.”

Snorting, Ranma nodded and followed the two women out of the room and down to the entrance.

**OOOOOOO**

The King of Seven looked at the five clerks lined up against the wall, then back to Hoteye, who was sitting next to his brother before over to his two closest, most trusted advisors. “Are we done speaking on this topic, you think?”

His Prime Minister and his queen both frowned in thought, looking over at their own clerks, two each. “I think we have the names of all the spies answering to the Oración Seis in Seven, Iceberg and Fiore we’re going to get. Further, I’m not very happy about the amount of penetration they apparently had in Caelum, and I think the Queen Rose is going to be calling for her headsman several times once we pass on the information about Bosco’s court to her,” the Queen said dryly.

“Almost undoubtedly my love,” the King of seven replied smiling blandly. He was a younger man than his wife by nearly a decade and it was often said that in Seven Meredrain reigned, while Sala ruled. Yet they actually did care for one another quite deeply, and worked together very well. She handled the economy and internal politics, while he personally controlled the spy network and speaking with other royals.

“Hoteye,” the King went on, turning back to the semi-prisoner. “Do you have anything more to add?”

Hoteye shook his head. “Not at present about the spy rings no. Does that mean we will be moving on to another topic now? After all, time is money!”

“You and money,” Wally shook his cube-shaped head. “It’s not very dandy to obsess so much about material things brother.”

Before the two very odd looking mages could fall into their gentle bickering once more, the queen leaned forward, her eyes gleaming. “Now, let us talk about this teleportation array of yours…” The world, she reflected as Hoteye began to talk, was about to change. And it would be up to them to guide that change in the right direction.

**OOOOOOO**

Getting the prisoners to the nearest ranch hands took even longer than Ranma had feared, though that was because of the speed of the ranchers rather than anything else. Seilah and Wendy had found a large band of ranchers nearby, and they were more than willing to help. Indeed, they were willing to do more than help, they were eager to take all of the slaves with them into Minstrel. Apparently, it was nearly time for them to take in their cattle to market anyway. They didn’t have nearly enough horses to go around the prisoners however so they put the prisoners on the actual cattle, and tied them down there. It was a kind of funny sight, but Ranma was pleased to see it.

He had, of course, had to travel ahead of them into Minstrel in order to contact San Jiao Shin and tell him what was happening and despite being appalled at the fact two-hundred slaves had been kept by Raven Tail for so long, he was more than pleased with the outcome of this little foray. “I must say though, this isn’t quite what I think any of us had in mind when we told you to maintain a low profile,” the older man teased Ranma, shaking his head.

“It’s my version of it,” Ranma said, only somewhat sheepishly. “Deal with it.”

“You have a very odd way of talking to Kings Ranma, I hope you never lose that,” San Jiao Shin said with a sigh. He had aged noticeably after becoming king of Minstrel, and Ranma found himself rather hoping that the old man would start taking things easier after this.

After the former slaves were in Minstrel territory being looked after by the locals, and Erza had taken credit for the mission covering Ranma’s rear end, the group returned to the other clan of ranchers and their four prisoners to Zòumíngqǔ. But unfortunately, since their crimes hadn’t happened in Minstrel, the locals were unwilling to keep them for very long. That meant either they all had to return to Fiore to drop them off there, or Bisca had to at the very least.

Bisca, Erza and Ranma discussed this as they travelled to the nearest port town, one that had survived and even grown after the slave trade in Bosco had ended. Eventually it was agreed that Bisca would break off from the group. She wasn’t happy about it, but she had a duty to the guild and to the job, she had taken to see these four back to be tried.

At Erza’s urging, the others left Bisca and Ranma to walk the prisoners down to the ship she’d be taking across the straits. As Bisca growled and muttered to herself, Ranma shook his head, putting an arm around her shoulders. “Cheer up, we’ll all be back in Magnolia in a few weeks, a month at the outside.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Bisca said childishly, thrusting out her bottom lip in a truly adorable pout. “Erza will have you all to herself for all that time.”

“If you don’t count the fact we’ll be travelling as fast as we can, along with Seilah, Wendy and Carla sure,” Ranma quipped, trying hard not to stare at those ruby-painted lips.

“…I…we never, that is, do you think that, if… I… that is…” Bisca began, speaking hesitantly. “I, just we didn’t ask you to commit to us, and you never ask us to do likewise… It’s just… Alzack. I don’t know how to get him to stop without hurting his feelings, and he’s still my friend and…”

Ranma thought for a moment then sighed, pulling Bisca to a halt and giving the foursome a glare to keep them moving. “Listen Bisca, that’s right we never made any promises or anything. If you want to see if Alzack can, what was it, step up his game? If he can, and you want to, go for it. I won’t mind, so long as ya don’t kiss or anything like that right in front of me.

Bisca bit her lip. Ranma was a lot closer to what she had been hoping for than Alzack, at least in the short term, in the long term she couldn’t say. But the reality of sharing had not been fun except when she was on the receiving end of Ranma’s attentions. Watching him kiss Erza or cuddle with her on the trail had been irritating, if not quite making her jealous. Because of that, and the image of the wedding and her inability to picture Ranma as the groom made a part of her wonder if Alzack could give her some actual romance then perhaps the two of them would be better together, and then she wouldn’t have to share. And while she had kissed Ranma in his female form a few times, it hadn’t made her body buzz and shudder as it had kissing his male side. “So you’d be fine if I went on a few dates then?”

Sighing Ranma nodded, “I’d be fine with that Bisca, just make sure that it’s what you really want. This whole emotions thing is kind of complicated after all.”

Laughing Bisca agreed to that before continuing the walk. After stowing the quartet in the hold, they remained there for a time, finding a small area between crates, where Ranma instantly began to kiss her what was happening. He pulled Bisca against him, and Bisca started to moan, slowly humping her waist against his their hands moving everywhere. Then he pulled back, smiling at her gently, winking. “Something to remember me by, yea?”

Bisca’s blush and happy grin was still on her face as she watched him hop back over the side of the ship to the quay.

After Bisca’s ship had left on high tide, Ranma and the others left the port town quickly, heading towards Joya. With their horses and the fact Ranma and Erza could run, and Wendy, Carla and Seilah fly, the horses could run free without any burden at least for half the day. Because of this, their speed picked up by quite a bit, and soon the farmlands gave way to mountains. The border of Joya came up and was passed quickly, marked by a single train coming out of Joya and heading deeper into Minstrel, along with a single road next to it.

The reason for the lack of anything else was easy to see soon after they crossed the border. The mountains of Joya did not gradually begin to go up as they would in Stella, but with an abruptness that was startling. One moment they were racing along a slowly rising series of hills the next they were at the base of jagged mountains. It wasn’t like the Escarpment between Pergrande and Seven, but it was almost as impassable save for the one train track. Even the trail they were following became little more than a hiking path rather than a real road.

They could barely find a place to set up their tent the way was so heavily lined with rocks and trees. This in turn forced them up into those trees to rest, which was fine for Ranma and Wendy (who loved it), but Erza found herself having difficulties until Ranma hit on a simple solution. “Why don’t you share my sleeping bag Erza?”

Erza blushed at that and almost glared at him. While the two of them had taken to kissing, or even outright making out, every night if they could get some time alone, that was a step too far in her opinion. But given his history in his past life, Erza knew she shouldn’t jump to conclusions. “Explain,” she said tersely.

Blinking at her tone, Ranma thought for a minute, then blushed. “Eeep, um, not like that! Er, not that it wouldn’t be, um fun, but er, it’s way too early for…”

“Thank you Ranma I understand what you’re saying,” Erza interjected quickly before Ranma’s old habit of sticking his foot in his mouth came back. “Could you explain what you actually meant to say please?”

“I mean, my sleeping bag has a spell that’ll let it stick to anything. Wendy and I bought these two the last time we were in Stella, the north of the country has a lot of these deep valleys and some nifty local enchanter guilds.”

That had been before Wendy had begun to be interested in enchantment, and unless they wanted to take the sleeping bags apart, she couldn’t’ get to where the enchantments were housed. And it was too cold for Ranma to want to deal with being covered in frost when he woke up, so just going without was not going to happen. And Seilah was already sharing Wendy and Carla’s double beanbag, leaving only Ranma’s.

“I think I will be fine with my blankets, and perhaps a proper used of my various weapons,” Erza said thoughtfully. “I… appreciate your offer, but I think given the newness of our relationship, it is still far too early for us to share a bed, or sleeping bag in this case. Even with us just sleeping as we would be.”

“Okay, um, good luck I guess,” Ranma replied, on the one hand disappointed, on the other relieved. This way he’d not get his rear kicked for a certain physical reaction to Erza’s closeness. But on the other hand, he wouldn’t experience that closeness. *At least not yet,* a certain part of his mind said a thought he pushed to the side for now.

Later that night however, Erza’s makeshift hammock collapsed as she rolled out of bed, landing on the ground below with a loud yet still cute “Kyaa!” Since she had landed on a bush below she wasn’t injured physically despite being in her flannel sleeping wear. Her pride did take a ding, however.

For a moment the night was still, then a groggy Wendy asked the question everyone there was thinking. From the depths of her sleeping back, which was pulled up over the heads of the three differently sized ladies, she asked sleepily, “Erza, did you just squeak?”

“No, no that’s your imagination Wendy, go back to sleep,” Erza huffed, glaring up at the tree while Seilah shook her head and Ranma snickered very, very quietly to himself.

With the light of the moon above, she was able to redo her hammock in about forty minutes, during which her movements and mutters kept the others awake. Two minutes after falling asleep in it however, her issues with tossing and turning came back and dumped her to the ground once more with a thump.

This time she kept from squeaking, if barely, though that didn’t do much to save her dignity. “Ugh, just share Ranma’s sleeping bag already,” groused Carla. “We ladies need our beauty sleep. And he might be the one man in the world who would never try anything you don’t want him to regardless of circumstances.”

Grumbling, Erza moved over to Ranma’s tree, climbing it easily and finding Ranma had already opened the insulated sleeping bag for her. “Not one word,” she warned, but her lips had already begun to twitch at the look of wry amusement and commiseration Ranma was giving her.

“I didn’t say a thing,” Ranma replied, holding the sleeping bag open for her.

With a sigh Erza lay out on the sleeping bag next to Ranma, nuzzling close before sipping the bag closed around them. The two of them lay there for a moment in one another’s arms, then Erza, who had been moving around slightly to get comfortable, frowned as a certain issue made itself known. “Ranma, that had better be one of your pistols,” She warned in a heated whisper, her face lighting up.

“Erm, nope, but what did ya expect, I ain’t a monk or a saint, and you’re too damn sexy not to react to,” Ranma whispered back. “If it wasn’t so blasted cold out I’d have to deal with my hair being frozen I’d volunteer to change forms, but for tonight you’ll just have to deal with it.”

Erza’s flush increased at that. She knew objectively that her body was attractive, but she thought that her choice of nightwear, a baggy one-piece flannel outfit that was as warm as it was childish, would have taken care of that. *Evidently not,* she thought with both chagrin and a surprising amount of pride. “We, well try to keep it to yourself then.”

“Impossible,” Ranma replied bluntly, to which Erza found herself actually blushing again. The two of them subsided after a bit but it was a long time before either of them actually got to sleep. Yet when they did, Erza astonishingly found that her tossing and turning had subsided. Though from then on while in Joya she asked Ranma to change forms. Though honestly speaking, this didn’t make things any easier, feeling the other girl’s breasts rubbing against her back or shoulder was no less embarrassing, and no less a turn on, than feeling Ranma’s length between her buttocks in his male form.

During the day the terrain here in the mountains slowed their movement for a few days and Ranma eventually sold their horses to a group of travelers heading the other way. This freed them up quite a bit, since the trail ahead of them was not horse-friendly.

After that, they saw signs here and there leading off the hiking trail into what were obviously mines here and there. Towns were practically nonexistent, and those that were there were built into abandoned mines. When the odd group reached these towns, they would start asking about the history of the area or about any odd mountains in the area. Erza figured, and Ranma agreed, that Belserion’s mountain would not only be associated with odd legends even now, but also would have some feature that made it stand out.

As they went however, they didn’t learn much. Most of the locals were not very welcoming, and the history of the area was not very well known, or really cared about. But Seilah came to their rescue here. She sought out not people but books, written legends, historical documents. There were never very many in one place, and she, to her horror, never found a single library. But as they continued, she put together the history of the area. It turned out that Ranma was right, Joya had come into being after a day when the sky had turned blood red and there was shaking of the earth. After that, the mountains had been changed, made sharper and more dangerous, but also far richer in ores. Between her and Ranma, they found a direction to go from their third day in the country, towards Bell Lake and a little north of it to a mountain there called simply ‘Fang’.

Their fourth day in going this direction they left any kind of human habitation behind, and to Erza and Seilah’s surprise, their pace actually picked up again. Wendy and Ranma had been in the mountains before in Stella and had gotten it down to an art form. Wendy routinely went ahead, marking down the routs for them to take with small white chalk marks, and with Seilah and Wendy both flying as often as possible, that only left Ranma and Erza walking, or climbing as best they had to.

Here Erza’s upper body strength helped immensely, allowing her to keep up with the others despite their advantages. The weather was all sorts of horrible too: overcast sky every day, as they trekked through the mountains. It rained one out of every three day, making them all miserable, and Ranma spending a lot of time in his female form during the day too, which was irritating but there was nothing she could do about it if Ranma wanted to conserve her strength. But thankfully for him, Erza quickly showed that couldn’t care less which body Ranma was currently wearing the very next night.

Grumbling angrily, Ranma pulled the sleeping back over the both of them, shivering slightly at the cold. She could handle the cold relatively easy so long as she was dry. Wet and cold, well, despite her durability, she was still human, and even now after drying off as best she could she was still uncomfortable. The fact that it had been raining so nastily all day hadn’t done much for her endurance either. She slowly started to bring out her ki, heating herself and Erza up, but it was still slow going. “Freaking weather, this better be worth it, no offense Erza.”

The taller redhead nodded, trying to bite back a blush and her own shivers as Ranma and she pressed chest to chest. Ranma had found them a tiny overhang to sleep under, but it was too small and tilted for their tent so the two sleeping bags were no stuck to the rock of the mountainside on an angle. It wasn’t very comfortable, but getting slightly more so as Ranma started to act like a human-sized heater.

The fact the other girl’s chest was only separated by one layer of flannel and one layer of silk from her own, their breasts rubbing and pushing against one another, was however the main factor determining her blush. And was that her nipples? Something rock hard was present at the tip of the other girl’s chest, and despite the layers separating them Erza had to bite back a gasp as those hard points rubbed against her own, her body reacting to the sudden stimuli. “Gah, um, \*ahem\* yes well I understand that. Our trip into Desierto was a jaunt in the park in comparison to this.”

Ranma nodded, her own face flushed. “Um, I’m also sorry about this Erza. I know changing into my female body’s a, well a solution to my not-so-little little problem, but it does come with its own negatives. If you’re not comfortable sleeping this close to another woman I can underst…”

That was as far as Ranma got in his self-effacing ramble before Erza decided to show that she had no problem with his female body. She leaned down the slight distance needed and laid her lips on Ranma’s own. It was the first time they’d kissed when Ranma was in his female body, and instantly Erza could tell the difference. For one thing, Ranma was surprised, letting her take the initiative, which Erza honestly didn’t like all that much, but what she did like, and indeed enjoyed, was how soft Ranma’s lips in this form was. The hint of cherry and dampness from the rain only added to the sensation. “Just, shut up,” Erza hissed after pulling back, huffing. “I don’t hah, care, about hah, your body. It’s still you regardless.”

Then Ranma was leaning up and shifting until she was laying on top of Erza, and it got even better. Hands did not wander beyond backs save for gentle squeezes of each other’s rear or sides, and they didn’t start humping or anything like that, but it was easily the most intense make-out session they’d had since that fateful night in the rancher’s camp.

After that, the ice was truly broken, and the two redheads took to making out every night for a few minutes ostensibly to warm themselves up. It wasn’t even, technically, a lie. It did warm them both up something fierce. Afterwards they would talk, talk about their pasts, about training, about magic, about the world, talk until they fell asleep, cuddled against one another and would have to be roused from somnolence by Wendy or Seilah, both of whom were early risers.

Eventually they started to go so high, that Carla started to have trouble breathing, and had to stop helping Wendy fly, letting her leap ahead on her own. A few hours after that, even Erza was beginning to feel it, the thinness of the air up here getting to both of them. In contrast, Ranma didn’t seem to feel it at all, which astonished Erza, and when they looked at Seilah, she shook her head. “While I am not so used to tramping around mountains like this, I am very used to living at heights even higher than this.

That was scant cover comforts to Erza, who had, on occasion compared herself to Seilah. Physically, those comparisons did not do her, or Bisca when she was with them, any credit. Erza knew she lost to Seilah in the chest apartment. She had Bisca beat by at least a full size if not more, but Seilah had at least two sizes on Erza in turn. Bisca had been quite irritated about that, but had gotten over it quickly.

It also got even colder, with how high they were going, but none of them complained, especially Ranma since they had at last left the rain behind and he could spend the days at least as a man again. Ranma gave his song silk cloaks to Seilah, and Erza had several types of armor that allowed her to keep up with the chill. Wendy also had given her coat to Carla, while she and Ranma didn’t even seem to feel it, at least at first. Eventually, Wendy too started to show signs of being cold, but Ranma kept on going tirelessly, while she shared her coat with cat-form Carla now.

“And my ancestors did this as a rite of passage?!” Erza grumbled as she hauled herself up a sheer rock face following Ranma doing the same in turn, following Wendy and Carla who had alighted above them. The young girl was visibly turned away staring ahead of them and around the corner of the precipice they were climbing.

“I know that is kind of impressive,” Ranma said, hauling Erza upwards.

“I don’t think I could’ve done this track when I was fifteen, you?” Erza said in reply.

Ranma shrugged, not answering. “I bet that it wasn’t as tough back then.”

“How so?” Seilah asked, coming up behind Erza and gently pushing the other woman up with a hand on her rear. Erza blushed slightly at the contact, but it wasn’t the first time she or Seilah had to push each other up like that. It had happened quite often since the air became so thin Seilah couldn’t fly for very long.

“Remember we know that some magical weapon hit the capital of the country that your ancestor Irene ruled. It shifted the entire landscape around it, beyond creating Bell Lake itself and these mountains. It might have then carried any mountain already there up on top of the new ones, like the dirt on a shovel is pushed up its length by the dirt underneath.”

Erza nodded that, and joined Ranma on the ledge. They both reached down for Seilah pulling her up, using their free hands to grasp onto the side of the rock so they didn’t lose their purchase. Then the three of them tracked up the small, thin flat section of the mountain to where Wendy was waiting. They rounded the corner, only to stop and stare at the same thing that had held Wendy’s attention. Carla too was staring from where she was perched on Wendy’s head in her cat form, just staring in awe.

“I think Ranma,” said dryly after a moment, “that we’ve arrived.”

The others all just nodded their heads, staring ahead of him. Ahead of them, was a Dragon’s Fang. It looked as if some master carver and his descendants through untold generations had worked on creating something that looked natural, yet also unnatural at the same time, a thing of wonder as well as some shock. It looked like a dragon’s fang a long, serrated thing without any blemishes or signs of trees or anything else to obscure the granite face. It jutted outward slightly from the rest of the mountains around it.

Ranma pointed that out as they all continued to stare. “I mean look at it, it looks as if it was a single boulder that was sort of shifted by the earth moving. Hah, I was right!!”

“Incredible,” Erza said with a sigh, staring at the sight.

“It reminds me of the first time I saw an iceberg,” Wendy said, her hands clapped in front of her chest. Or, a giant whale out to sea. Only bigger and solider.”

“Solider is not a proper word,” Seilah said, but she rested one hand lightly on Wendy’s head, or would have if Carla were not in the way. Instead of working Wendy’s hair a bit, she ended up scratching the white furred cat person’s neck not even noticing what she had been doing. “But I agree, it is marvelous.”

She then winced as Carla smacked her hand away with a hand laced with blue ki light. “I am not cat! I do not require petting, or pampering of that nature.”

“Naa, just in every other nature,” Ranma replied dryly. “You having a nice ride up there? Is ooh little paws sore?”

They all just stared for a few more moments while Carla and Ranma exchanged barbed quips until Erza shook her head. “Come on, it’s not getting any closer.” With that, she started forward, heading towards the distant Fang.

Getting there took several more days, even at the pace this group could go, but eventually they reached it. Once there, they ran into a problem. It wasn’t only that the mountain looked as if it had been carved, it actually was a single almost insanely huge piece of stone. There were cracks and crevices, but there was no path upwards. Erza took one look at this and said again “And my ancestors made this track as a rite of passage!”

Wendy however pointed out that there were a couple places that looked as if they had been carved out, tiny little handholds here and there and steel rust left on the rock elsewhere from where something had been rusted all away. Using these marks, they wound their way up the mountainside, running into trouble later that night. The problem was, there was no place to lay out. Either they had to keep going and make it in a day, or they would have to figure out a way to tie themselves to the rock and sleep.

So they kept going, pushing through the night with difficulty. Seilah, Wendy and Ranma provided light, while Erza provided rope, and a series of daggers that could be used as makeshift pitfalls to help them along. By the time they reached the top, everyone bar Ranma was exhausted and even he was feeling it.

But at last their climb ended at a tiny, well-hidden flat area. It was a small archway, leading into a tiny cave leading into a large cavern. Taking a look inside, Ranma whistled. “Yeah…I think we found what we were looking for. In fact, I’m certain of it.”

“How are you certain?” Seilah asked, having heard something in Ranma’s tone she hadn’t heard before, a kind of reverence, and respect.

“Just come in here and you’ll see,” Ranma replied, and all of the others trooped in after. And when they did, all of them had to nod their heads. This, this was kind of very obviously what they were seeking. The reason being, there was a dragon’s skull laid in the center of the room.

It was perfect, very well-preserved, its mouth set into a permanent predatory grin, with two fangs jutting out and to the side from the jaw. It had two upward curving horns coming from the sides of its lower jaw up to above the back of the skull, which in turn was marked by two triangular-shaped horns. A third horn was set directly on its snout going upward like a rhino’s. In its eyes were set two large circular black objects, which bore a distinct resemblance to the memory box that had led them to search out this place.

Clapping his hands twice in front of him Ranma then pressed them together over his chest and bowed from the waist respectfully to the skull, with the others following suit. Even Seilah did so, though she didn’t honestly know why. Ranma had never struck her as the sort of deluded individual who preyed to one of the gods after all. Still, there was something almost solemn about the skull ahead of them, a dignity that forced respect from beyond the grave.

“This has to be Belserion,” Ranma said, moving forward to touch the thing lately. Doesn’t it?

“I would assume so, unless Belserion killed another dragon and used its skull as an ornament,” Erza replied, her tone dust dry.

The two of them thought back to what the dragon it seems like you that brief moment it seemed, and Ranma shook his head. “Nah.”

Erza shook her head. “No he didn’t seem the type.”

“That’s good,” Wendy muttered, having shivered a little at the very idea, though even she felt Belserion had come across as someone who wouldn’t kill for something like that. Getting over her shock, she walked around the skull, whistling slightly. The dragon’s skull was about fifty feet tall, and four times that feet snout to back and was about another forty feet wide. “He was even bigger than mom when he died! I didn’t think that was possible.”

Ranma scratched his head thoughtfully, staring at the skull. “Actually, his head looks a little smaller than what I remember of Typhon.” All the others looked at him askance, and he shrugged. “Maybe dragons keep growing as they age? Remember Typhon died of old age.”

“That sounds strange to me,” Erza expressed, but shook her head. “So we found it, and I would assume those globes are the memory modules, but how do we activate them?”

“How much do you want to wager that we activate them the same way that the other one activated?” Ranma asked, while Seilah looked confused, not having heard about the issues they had operating the memory box.

“My blood,” Erza said in dawning realization. “That feels a bit morbid, but I suppose it is a surefire way to make certain that no one besides family can activate something.” With a sigh, she pulled out one of the same daggers they’ve been using to as makeshift pitons, and cut her finger lightly, before pressing it down into the eye socket onto the metallic seeming ‘eyeball’ within. Nothing happened. She twitched her hand to the other one, but still nothing happened. “I think perhaps we were wrong.”

For a moment, despair threatened to well up. They had come so far, tracking been so difficult, and now they would have nothing to show for it? After all, if that wasn’t it, they had no clue what the key could be to unlock the hidden memories. After all it could literally be anything, sound, sight touch, even smell.

But then Ranma thought of something. “Wait a minute. Your ancestor, wasn’t she a Dragon slayer?

Erza nodded, “Yes she was. Why?”

“Well, I’m just thinking, that if she was a Dragon slayer, maybe she thought anyone tramping up here would be taking part in the training as one?” With a quick nod Ranma and Erza both cut their thumbs again, and as one pressed them into the sockets switching off after a second.

That worked. The metal spheres began to glow, the glow growing so quickly, that it blinded them all. A second later, a miniature Dragon, - although to call in miniature was a bit of a misnomer it was at least 200 feet wide from snout to tail - hovered in the air above them.

The dragon looked down at them with a wide grin as his eyes spotted Erza first. “That red hair!” he roared with laughter. “That hair, bwahahaha! That has to mean that you are the daughter of Irene, Erza. Of all the traits in your family, that red hair always breeds true!”

His eyes flicked to Ranma, and he frowned, before seeming to sniff the air. How an apparition from a memory could detect anything, or in fact was acting so alive, Ranma didn’t know. However, it seemed to have worked, because the creature reared back, and stared at him in surprise. “A Water Dragon Slayer of all things. I didn’t know that old Typhon was going to join our little experiment. I have to assume it happened after I died.”

“Probably centuries after,” Ranma said with a sigh. “The names Ranma, and this is Erza Scarlet, we think that Irene was her esteemed ancestor.”

“Ancestor…” the dragon mused, sniffing the air thoughtfully. “Perhaps. If the traits of that family have all breed true perhaps. I’ll not speculate about that.”

He sniffed the air again, and turned to stare at Seilah his good humor and calm air disappearing in an instant. Belserion snarled wrathfully, then leaped forward, his shade moving from above his skull. “Demon! Foul get of darkness, are you one of those things that fool Zeref was trying to make or a creation of the evil of human minds given form!? Regardless, I will get rid of you right now!”

As the others watched Belserion’s ghost swooped down on Seilah, its maw opening as it tried to bite her head off. Then he tried to slash at her body with his frontal claws, even breathe out some kind of breath attack. The attack didn’t happen, and nor did any of his attacks connect. Because, although he seemed to have forgotten, Belserion was still a ghost.

Her face even more deadpan than usual, Seilah shook her head. “Oh dear, I am under attack by a will o’ the wisp, whatever shall I do?”

“Grahh!!! Erza, if you truly are of the Dragnof’s royal line why are you with such as this!?” Belserion roared.

“It’s rather complicated, but from that I understand you know about Demons?” Erza asked, trying hard not to laugh at the ghost’s predicament. That wouldn’t be very politic after all.

“Of course I do. I was called the Sage Dragon for a reason while I was alive. This one even smells of Zeref, that, that mad thing! To call him human is to denigrate the term,” Belserion growled before going on, his voice rising with each word until the cavern shook with it, though how a ghost’s words could do that was anyone’s guess. “So explain to me this complication, or else I swear I will find some way to kill this one where she stands!”

This took a while, during which Belserion flew around Seilah, examining first her and the others from every angle. Eventually he harrumphed like a champion, cutting Ranma off. “Enough! In other words, you have beaten this Demon and forced her to serve you. Well enough for now.”

With his interest in Seilah assuaged (and no way to kill her, which he might well have done if he could despite Ranma’s explanation) Belserion turned to look at Wendy. He ignored Carla, who was once more in her cat form, and curled up on Wendy’s head sound asleep. Since she’d had to climb three times as much as any of them, or even twice as much as Wendy, none of them were bothered by her sleeping like that. “You smell of sky magic. That would be Grandeenay then. That’s another one I would think wouldn’t join our project, if only because she didn’t want to take in a child just to turn them into a weapon against our fellows.”

Wendy quickly curtseyed, then twisted her neck at an odd angle, baring her throat. It was a dragon move if ever there was one, and it was something that Ranma had never seen from her before, but it and the curtsy seemed to amuse the old dragon, and waved his tail airily. “I’m not that formal child. While Grandeenay might’ve taught you manners, I’m not Grandeenay,”

“But what do two Dragon slayers, a cat a nonhuman, and you, young Erza, wish to do here?” He looked at her as a thoughtfully, “I’m afraid you seem a little too old to survive the process of imbuing you with Dragon Slayer magic, and my shade would not be able to give you the training necessary in any event.”

“I am more than willing to talk about your… ancestor,” Belserion went on, pausing before he said the word ancestor. “Her nation, or my agreement with your family, or myself,” the giant dragon spirit laughed again at that. “I suppose I could say that my works and myself are my favorite topics if I do say so myself.”

At that, Erza just gave him a deadpan look, while Ranma rolled his eyes, and Wendy cocked her head to one side while Seilah slowly shook her head. “Everyone’s a critic,” Belserion muttered.

“Our reasons are twofold Belserion,” Erza said. “I do indeed want to learn about my ancestors and her nations, although I have no desire to learn Dragon slayer magic at this point. But Ranma here has a question first.”

“Actually,” Ranma said with a smile, “Wendy probably should ask her questions first. Ladies always go first.”

“Why ever would that be?” the large Dragon muttered, shaking his head while every woman there, even Seilah smiled, and Wendy hopped over to give her Nii-chan a big hug before turning back to the spirit. “Still, ask away little one.”

The next hour, Wendy bombarded Belserion with questions about Grandeenay, about the Dragon Slayers, about what had caused them to become such and where he might think Grandeenay could have gone to hide herself, if Wendy could follow, and why she had left in the first place. Like this, they all learned about the Dragon King Festival about the rise of Acnologia, the former Dragon Slayer who had gone mad, and started to slay every dragon he came across. So many in fact, that the dragons had nearly gone extinct in Ishgar, retreating to the continent to the north of the peninsula.

That wasn’t good, nor was the fact that as a dragon, this Acnologia would have nearly as much life force as one of them, and could ostensibly live for a very long time indeed. “Is there any chance he’d have died of old age too?” he asked hopefully.

Belserion boomed another laugh. “You wish boy! No, Typhon was already old by our reckoning when the Dragon Festival started. But he died of old age, truly? Did he give you something to keep the transformation at bay before he died? In my time that was a major issue.”

“No,” Ranma growled, “that’s part of the problem. The other part is my initial magic.”

“You lie,” the old dragon said complacently. “You could learn other magics after becoming a Dragon Slayer, small incidental one that would have no impact on your body or magical structure. But if you learned anything before Dragon Slayer magic, you would never have been able to do so.”

Ranma frowned at that. “All right fine, here’s the truth then.” He looked over at Seilah, and then began to speak about how he had come to this world from his own, how there magic didn’t exist, and how he used a form of power based around the energy of his body.

Belserion listened intently, asking questions here and there, but mostly simply staying silent. Seilah asked far more questions mostly about Ranma’s old world, what it was like and especially what kind of novels could be found there. She didn’t seem interested in technology at all, merely the books and the food. Eventually Ranma wound down, having talked about his training with the ancient dragon Typhon, and how it had ended.

At that, Belserion shook his head. “Daft old fool! With what happened with Acnologia, Typhon should have figured out something in order to keep the Dragon cells merged into your body with his magic from overcoming you. He certainly had enough time to do so!”

“Well he didn’t,” Ranma said sharply, “and since I’ve reached a certain plateau, I’ve been dealing with issues about it! I’m a lot weaker than I should be in a lot of ways because of this conflict, and I am sick of it!”

“Hmmm…” Belserion fell still, the image slowly tracing his upward curving horns with a claw. “Hmmm, I think we can find a solution. That solution though is going to be very difficult on you.” When Ranma scoffed, he chuckled grimly. “You see, the dragon cells in your body are not just going to be transforming your body, they’re going to be creating a sort of draconic personality that would take you over if you fully transformed. The trick will be to draw that personality out, and kill it. Once you do, your Dragon Slayer powers and transformation should be entirely under your control. Of course this is all experimental, but it sounds as if it should work.”

“…Are you saying I’m going to have to fight some kind of mental battle against a dragon?” Ranma asked slowly, while the others were frowning in confusion or worry.

“That’s correct. We need to bring it to the fore, the personality I mean. From what you describe, it won’t be quite at the level where it would come forward on its own to overpower your sense of self, so you might have an advantage. But we will see,” Belserion mused. “That is, of course, if you’re brave enough to try. Because if you lose, you, as a human, will die, and you as a dragon will be reborn.”

“How do we go about it?” Ranma said with a sigh. He waved off Erza’s protests about this being an insane idea, and even Wendy looking at him fearfully. Ranma had to do this. He had an entire booklet now about the demons from Tartaros after weeks of talking to Seilah, and knew that while Torafuzar was one of their toughest, he’d had a natural advantage there, and an ability to get through Torafuzar’s vaunted armor. Against some of the others, he did not have the first and their general speed and long-range attacks were such the second might not matter.

“The answer to that is simple,” Belserion said smirking a little evilly now. “You just need to chip off a bit of my skull here, and eat it. The bone of a dragon will accelerate the process of transformation enough the personality will fully form. But first, you all will need to create an enchanted stasis field. That will keep the effect of the bone from affecting your body, but not your psyche. Because of that, the draconic personality the wake up, and the two of you will have to fight it out.

“Why can’t they talk it out?” Wendy said with a scowl, not liking Belserion’s idea or the fact her Nii-chan had jumped on the idea of fighting a dragon of all things (and yes, she knew what irony was and aware of it now). “While Typhon sounds very forgetful and kind of… silly,” she said hesitantly, “he doesn’t sound like a bad person.”

“The power of the draconic personality type is only vaguely connected to the dragon who gave you your Dragon Slayer powers young one,” Belserion said with a sigh. “The actual personality is based upon all of the feral instincts of a dragon, without any of the control. Added to that, is the negative id all you humans have within you, which merges with the draconic personality.”

“Let’s do this then,” Ranma said with a sigh.

For the next 20 minutes, Ranma, Wendy and Seilah went to work creating the enchanting state while Erza put up the tent and created a fire as the light shining in from outside slowly turned to night. Seilah proved to be a dab hand at runes, and Wendy picked up the array easily, pointing out where the others had gone wrong, and basically ordering them around like a little general, causing many a smile on the faces of the other two.

Carla slept through it all, curled up nearby.

Eventually Wendy and Belserion were satisfied, despite the fact that Belserion tried to put in a few mistakes, just to see if Wendy caught him apparently, or so he said. Ironically Ranma actually believed him when he said it, though that didn’t make him want to smack the old dragon a good one any less.

Then, once more under Belserion’s instructions, Ranma chipped off a portion of his skull at the far back, before stepping into the stasis area and sitting down. The others sat nearby read to activate it, and Ranma smiled at them all. “Well, here goes nothing.”

Then he raised the bone to his mouth chomped down. It tasted pretty much like you’d expect 1000+-year-old Dragon bone to taste like, nothing very much, but what was there, was awful. Ranma grimaced at the taste, but forced it down.

As the pieces of the skull hit his stomach, Ranma’s body instantly went still, his eyes rolled back in his head, and his friends activated the stasis circle around him. Moments later, they watched as Ranma’s eyes seemed to turn to glass almost, his mind visibly going elsewhere.

In his head, Ranma found himself standing on an endless ocean. There was nothing but blue sea from one horizon to the other, all around him as he turned. The sound of the sea was almost overwhelming, the roar of the waves unbroken by any other sound.

Then there was a roar, and from out from the water sprouted a massive head. It was huge, scaled and marked by a few horns spouting out and down to the side looking like fins almost, here and there on the head and neck area. It was large, easily the size of the head that Belserion had left behind. But other than being smaller, it was Typhon to the light. Without a word he roared, spitting out a blast of water towards Ranma, who ducked into the water, before coming up and attacking in turn.

The dragon’s tail suddenly blasted out of the water, clipping Ranma and sending him flying out through the water, into the air where he flipped himself, before coming down onto the water, hovering there.

He wiped blood from his lip, and growled, “Well, if I thought this was going to be easy, I wouldn’t be as interested. Let’s do this, you scaly bastard! I’ve been wanting to kick your ass for years Typhon!” he roared forward, his forearms up to his elbows covered with water Dragon Slayer magic, the same going up his legs to his knees.

Across from him, the young facsimile of the ancient dragon roared out a challenge of its own and raced forward. The two monstrous beings clashed and the battle was joined.

Out in the real world, Belserion nodded. “That should do it.” While the others watched in shock as Ranma began to twitch and spasm despite the power of the stasis circle, the spirit turned blandly to the redhead. “So, tell me more about yourself Erza, and then we can get to your questions for me at last.”

**End Chapter**

This has been edited by *Michael*, *Justlovereadin’* and *Hiryo*.

**Chapter 19: One Journey Ends, Another Grabs you by the Danglies**

How long they had been fighting, Ranma didn’t know. All he knew was that the blue of the ocean around them was marked with concentric red circles, his blood and the Dragon’s blood mixing within the water before being diluted far more slowly than would have been natural in the real world. It made for pretty patterns, but Ranma refused to dwell on that.

Ranma was tired, ragged with exhaustion and pain. He’d been forced to freaking grow his limbs back a few times, something that he knew would’ve been impossible in the real world even with his ability at ki healing being as high as it was. But Ranma always bore in mind that this was, in fact, **his** damn mind and he wasn’t willing to admit defeat like that or let a mental apparition get away with taking his arms or legs. Beyond that, he had been slashed, bitten, crushed, hurled like a skipping stone more times than he could count—both in terms of how often it occurred and how many times he’d bounced—and had bits shredded by ultra-fast spinning water attacks more than once.

*But I’m still here, you fucker!* With every move he learned, with every strike he began to understand his opponent better. Every magical assault launched at him Ranma saw and could then anticipate better, even if he couldn’t pull off many of them. The longer the fight went on, the more Ranma’s ability to adapt and learn came into play.

The Dragon too was heavily wounded, and, unlike Ranma, it couldn’t use ki healing or, rather, use the fact that none of this was real in a physical sense and thus force its body to heal. The Dragon had a long gash going down its side, a missing fin from its face, and hundreds of spots, large and small, where its scales had been shorn off, as well as a missing a chunk of tail. It had also lost one of its front limbs entirely. But it was still going strong, still hurling out attacks, still controlling the water around them to such a degree that Ranma had had to spend at least a third of his attention trying to fight back against that control in the water directly around him so that the Dragon couldn’t just crush Ranma under continuous attacks or shred him utterly with an attack too wide to dodge and too fast to survive.

*On the plus side, there’s all this water around, and I’m still a guy,* he thought to himself with a sudden grin. Then he dodged yet another torrent of water that seemingly came from nowhere before bending backwards and under another attack with a superhuman level of flexibility.

Why he hadn’t turned into a woman, he didn’t know, but Ranma supposed that, again, whatever it looked like around him, Ranma was still inside his own mind. And whatever his body told the universe, Ranma was a guy through and through. Despite that one moment of levity, however, Ranma knew that he needed to end this soon. His last few water attacks hadn’t been anything to write home about and he could feel his ki also draining away.

With that in mind when the Dragon next attacked, he tried to close, eventually succeeding. Yet, even as he did, the Dragon twisted around, bringing its back leg to bear and clawing at Ranma. But Ranma had been ready for this. Instead of being clawed, he leaped up onto the Dragon’s leg and then higher into the air.

Ranma leaped upwards just enough to clear the Water Dragon’s claws, landing on the back of its head and then bouncing up into the air for a brief second. This looked to the Dragon as if he was almost presenting himself, like a gobbet of flesh tossed in its face. But instead of snapping him up midair, when the Dragon lunged forward Ranma twisted just enough to one side to land on the thing’s snout. Then, his hands glowing with more water magic than Ranma had ever been able to really manipulate at one time before (including when he had sunk the Tower of Heaven), Ranma slammed a fist forward into one of the eyes of this strange amalgamation of his own darker impulses and the Dragon Slayer magic within him. The Dragon roared and screamed, spasming and trying to fling its head around to get rid of him, but Ranma grimly held on both with his feet, glowing with a bit of ki, and with his fist, stuck through the thing’s eye, grabbing at the fibers within and using them like a rope.

*Let’s hear it for the Clinging Like a Gecko technique.*  As the beast continued to thrash this way and that, Ranma readied his next attack, and, when the Dragon had slowed down just enough, he punched out hard with his free hand into the thing’s other eye, blinding it entirely.

If Ranma had thought that the thrashing before this was tough, he hadn’t really been through anything just yet. Ranma lost his footing, but not his grip within the eye he’d already punctured and he didn’t lose his mind either. He was still thinking, and that eye had been a down payment on part one of his plan to finally kill this fucker. And he had still been gathering his magical energy.

The Dragon suddenly roared, and the water around it boiled, creating dozens, then hundreds of spouts, all shifting form to look like watery spears, spinning and swirling rapidly, more rapidly than anything nature could have created. If even one of those hit, Ranma knew, he’d not have the mental fortitude left to heal from it.

But the Dragon had started its attack too late. Above Ranma, massive wings of water built up from his back and then flashed down into his arms, spinning just as quickly and deadly as the spouts the Dragon had launched at him before. Ranma slammed his still free hand into the Dragon’s one remaining eye, shouting, “Metsuryu Ogi: Soryu Gekirou no Doriru (Dragon Slayer's Secret Art: Water Dragon’s Riptide Drill)!”

What came from Ranma’s hands weren’t swords or claws or even lance. No, they were instead drills, their entire lengths spinning, each few inches or so of water at a different speed in a concentric circle. The very water within them whined and howled as those buzz-saws moved, blasting into the Dragon through the eye-sockets and then into its brain. Blood spurted out over Ranma’s hands in a torrent, and a loud howl sounded as the dragon screamed in agony, but that ended abruptly as the attacks pierced its brain from front to back.

The Dragon’s body sagged underneath Ranma and slowly began to disappear. Ranma found himself falling down to splash into the water, where he sort of floated, gasping for air as he stared up at the sky. “How’d you like that, huh?!” he shouted, raising one hand into the air.

A second later Ranma noticed the sudden change in the way the water around him was moving. First, it was glowing, glowing as much as one of his own water magic attacks. Second, it seems to be flowing towards him, and he gasped in sudden astonishment as it began to permeate his body. “What the heck…?”

Just as this process had begun, Ranma found himself back in the real world, inside the stasis circle. As he started to feel the energies within him shifting around like a chemical solution of oil and water suddenly coming together, Ranma tried to open his eyes only to find that he couldn’t. He had entered his meditation with his eyes closed and then been frozen in that pose by the stasis field. *Ya know what? I don’t think we thought this all the way through. How the heck are they supposed to know when I’m finished? And how the hell long was I in there anyway? It felt like months!*

Months spent metaphorically fighting his draconic half for full amalgamation, something his body was paying for now with its level of energy. But even so, Ranma could feel the change in his ki and magical reserves, and it was good.

Thankfully for Ranma’s dubious sanity, he didn’t have to sit like that for long, as the voice of Belserion’s spirit snorted. “He did it. You may release the stasis field. Typhon’s powers are now entirely under the pigtailed one’s control. Well done, human. I honestly only gave you a thirty percent chance of winning that fight.”

Ranma growled a little at that internally, but decided not to take umbrage, simply shaking his head as soon as he was able. With Seilah, who had been the nearest of the quartet, stomping out the sigils, that only took seconds.

“Never tell me the odds,” he said aloud, grinning at Seilah in thanks before standing up fluidly, cracking his back and then his shoulders and neck and finally stretching his whole body, working out various kinks. After he was sufficiently loosened up, he stared down at his forearms for a moment, as he clenched his hands. *Good God, even weakened by the fight as I am, I feel damned good!* It was as if, Ranma reflected, he had been the rope in a tug-of-war contest, where both contestants were a part of him, unable to separate and always at war. He’d been pulled this way and that, been forced to take sides more than once, and even had had one half of the rope cut off entirely from the rest, only for the war to resume as soon as his magical core had reformed. But now both contestants had just…stopped fighting, and the strength the Ranma-rope had built up during the contest was still there, already rebuilding, if slowly, from this latest struggle.

And that was only on the energy side of things. That new acceptance carried over to the sheer physical side as well. He could literally feel his body thrumming with power now, despite being stiff from sitting so long. “Okay, this feels amazing,” he said aloud, taking a step forward to get out of the stasis circle. But when he put his foot down, the floor of the cave broke underneath him, solid stone cracked, leaving an indent. “Huh. Ooops.”

With a look of consternation on his face, Ranma reached over and picked up a nearby boulder. Ranma was pretty much an expert at controlling how much strength to put into something, and he should’ve picked it up with only enough strength to hold the boulder in the air. But not only did he pick it up with more strength than he had intended, his grip on the boulder actually shattered the rock between one second and the next.

Happy to see Ranma up and about Wendy had been about to race up to him and hug him exuberantly. It had been four days since Ranma had begun his mystical battle or whatever it was, and, while she had been happy to hear a few stories about Grandeenay, listen to a lot of interesting and fun stories about Erza’s ancestor, talk with Seilah about books or her own history, and, of course, talk with Belserion about enchantments, she had been very worried about her Onii-chan. Now, however, she hesitated. “If I hug you, do you think you can restrain yourself from squishing me too badly, Ranma-nii?” she asked, half-joking half-seriously.

Ranma smirked at that, opening his arms slightly. “Only one way to find out, kiddo.”

With a wary expression, Wendy completed her walk to her brother, whereupon they hugged. Ranma hugged her just a tiny bit too tightly, but not enough to hurt her. She was, after all, a Dragon Slayer herself. But she mentioned that and warned him about doing that in the future. “Not everyone is as un-squishable as I am,” she said with a laugh.

Ranma laughed too before he looked over at Erza and Seilah. He left one arm around Wendy’s shoulders, gently turning her back the way she’d come from and smiled at the two women and Carla, who was still in her cat form and looked somewhat miserable. *Shoot, she’s still having trouble getting used to the air up here?* “So, have I missed anything exciting?”

“Not particularly,” Erza said. She was smiling widely, however, and moved forward, grasping his forearm in a warrior’s grip. “Simply incredibly enlightening and interesting to me. It was, after all, about my family, but some of it would have bored other people to tears.”

Seilah shook her head. “I doubt it. Most of what Belserion said was fascinating. Indeed, many of his tales would have made amazing books.”

“I agree with Seilah,” Wendy said with a laugh. “Your ancestor sounded awesome!” Erza blushed at that and thanked the girl for the compliment, but then Wendy turned back to her brother excitedly. “Belserion, he knew so much! A few stories about Grandeenay and soooo much stuff about enchantments from Irene and everything. I’ve copied down a lot of spells he gave me. It was great!”

“Well,” Ranma said with faint smile as he leaned down to kiss her forehead before pulling back and looking around quizzically. “I’m happy that you had fun, Wendy, but you didn’t answer my question: how long was I out?”

“Four days,” Erza said. “I had to leave once to go hunting for some meat to add to our diet, but otherwise the provisions you had taken out from your weapons space was enough.”

“That’s good to know,” Ranma said with a nod, calculating in his head. That meant that they only had enough dried fruit, fresh fruit, and vegetables for another six days, maybe eight if they stretched it. And they would have to stretch it, since he knew that there was no more beef jerky or anything like that. Hunting for their food would probably slow them down once they started their trip out of these mountains. *Still, it can’t be helped.*

He realized, though, that he was building that thought on a false assumption. What if Erza wasn’t ready to leave yet? Still concentrating partly on not accidentally squishing Wendy beyond the point where she couldn’t be squished any longer, Ranma turned to the redhead and asked, “So, given the fact that it’s only been four days, I suppose you’d want another few weeks to talk to Belserion?”

“Not exactly,” Erza said, frowning. “While our discussions have been fascinating, they haven’t been enough to fully concentrate on,” she chuckled, looking around them, and it was only then that Ranma noticed that she or Seilah must have attempted to make the cave as comfortable as possible. The beanbags from the tent had been brought out, the tent itself set to one side and two fires had been set to either side of Belserion’s skull. They might have attempted to put up some of the dead bear’s skin over the cave entrance, but they hadn’t succeeded, the entrance being a bit too large. Carla was also looking simply miserable, and both Seilah and Erza were looking a little cold despite their clothing.

“I think that we need to move on,” Erza finished, giving voice to some of Ranma’s thoughts. “Though getting back here again will be a hardship, I think I would rather learn more about my ancestor, her nation, her husband, and the war she took part in at a later date, perhaps even in small chunks. I can’t say that this place is all that comfortable, and I would rather be back to the guild soon. Who knows what Natsu and those other reprobates will have gotten up to in my absence?”

“And I would like to head back to human civilization as well. I am almost out of books,” Seilah said, her tone implying that this was a catastrophe in the making.

“Oh, and how is that more important than my getting back to my friends?” Erza asked sharply.

Ranma sighed. Seilah and Erza normally got along…okay. Not great, but okay, bonding over a certain genre of books and a liking of landscapes, of all things. But they did occasionally have moments of friction like this. Seilah respected loyalty but saw friendship as something that should only be given sparingly, not to a whole guild as Erza had, and also seemed to dislike Erza’s in-your-face, take charge attitude. In return, Erza disliked Seilah’s selfishness, her seeming callousness to anyone she personally did not know, and the fact that she was practically obsessed with reading.

And there was also a certain amount of jealousy directed towards Seilah from Erza thanks to the demon girl’s proportions. *Not that I can blame Erza for that. I mean, damn!* More than once Seilah’s body had caused Ranma issues, attracting his attention like a lodestone.

Shaking that thought off, Ranma asked hesitantly, “Erm, ladies, can we please not argue?” In reply, he got two glares, which quickly shifted to looks of cool unconcern and a harrumph sound as they looked back at one another before looking away.

“Hah! Females, lad. You just can’t win against them. I should know, given all the time I spent with Irene and her predecessors!” Belserion’s spirit guffawed as its image hovered in the air above them. He then moved to hover over his body’s skull, looking at Erza. “But don’t worry about coming back here, Erza. I’ve been thinking about this since you arrived, and I think I finally figured out the right transformative-type spell to do it.”

“Spell to do what?” Ranma and Erza asked, staring up at the little ghost of the giant dragon.

“This.” As they watched, the spirit of Belserion slid back into its old vessel. But instead of trying to move or anything, the skull began to glow orange red and then a deep purple, and then it began to shrink.

“What’s he doing?” Ranma asked, cocking his head to one side.

“I think the purple means he’s trying to create something,” Wendy, the budding enchantress, said. “The red, that could be his soul, maybe? All dragons have a certain amount of fire magic in them, after all. The orange, I don’t know, which is kind of weird.”

As they watched, the skull continued to shrink and then slowly started to change shape until it finally shifted into one of the most primitive looking swords Ranma had ever seen. It was made entirely of bone, of course, but the edge looked as sharp as a dragon’s fang. It had a straight edge for most of its length, then two serrated edges sticking out either side.

The hilt was marked by two small ruby eyes. It was long and made to be used one or two-handed. It had a large spike as a pommel. Its guard was also made of two upward curving spikes reminiscent of Belserion’s horns. All in all, it looked both evil and extremely dangerous.

“Okay,” Ranma said slowly, staring at the thing. “That looks totally badass.”

“What is this? Belserion, are, are you…in there?” Erza asked, one hand twitching to pick up the blade already, before stopping herself.

“Well, my dear, while I’m not going to be in the habit of interacting with you all too often—that did take quite a bit of my vitality, after all—I think that eventually, at some point, you will have need of my guidance,” said the voice of Belserion, his voice a bare shadow of what it had been in ghost form and sounding weaker with each word. “That or my strength. So, I give you this blade. Wield me well.”

Seilah moved forward, kneeling down to examine the blade from pommel to tip. “Fascinating. Much of the magic I can sense in it seems to be within the edge, but also in the hilt. I would imagine that it can perform various actions, perhaps fire and other spells too, and I wouldn’t doubt that Belserion would create spells to make the weapon all the more deadly against his foes. I hesitate to touch it, however, since it is very likely to be ensorcelled against my kind.”

She turned back to the others, seemingly ignoring Erza as she walked past her to stand near Ranma and watching as he looked back at her, his gaze moving up and down her body. It wasn’t the first time she’d caught him doing that, and it made her feel very good, almost like how Kyoka looking at her had made her feel. “With that out of the way, we should move on. While watching Erza attempt to cook over an open fire is quite entertaining, I was serious when I spoke about my running out of books, and if Belserion is not around any longer to entertain, that need becomes all the more pressing.”

“Excuse me, what was that!?” Erza growled, grabbing up and waving her new sword rather threateningly. The sword instantly began to drain her reserves, but it wasn’t anywhere close to where it would bother her, and she glared at Seilah. “Do you want to repeat that?”

“I’m sorry,” Seilah said coldly, staring back at her. “Was it you or some other armor-wearing redhead that burnt the last three pieces of bear meat to ash when you were attempting to make jerky out of it?”

“Now, now,” Ranma said, clapping his hands together creating a sound like thunder and shocking them all, which actually worked rather well at the moment for his purposes. Pasting a smile on his face he looked at the two women who were looking at him in surprise along with Wendy and an angry looking Carla, who had her hands clasped over her ears. “None of that. Do remember that the cook is back, ladies, so you don’t have to fight about this.”

To his surprise both women glared at him again and then turned away with a second loud harrumph sound. “Um, is it somethin’ I said?” *Oh gods of luck, magic, and whatever else might be listening, please don’t let this be like Nerima, please? Pretty please!?”*

Wendy watched this with a giggle and then patted her stomach. “While I think Seilah was being a bit mean, I don’t suppose you could make something to eat before we leave, could you?”

“Sure, imouto. And while I’m doing that, maybe you can explain to me why I’ve gotten glared at twice for trying to play peacemaker.” *None of the girls back in Nerima could explain it, but, then again, they all wanted me to choose a side, and I doubt Wendy does.*

“Some things just are beyond the minds of men, Onii-chan,” Wendy said with a laugh, patting his arms and then twisting around him and pushing at his back, moving towards the packs as her stomach rumbled. She hadn’t wanted to say anything, but Seilah kind of had a point about Erza’s ability to cook over a campfire.

He was eventually able to produce a hearty stew of rice and vegetables, though, as Seilah had warned, Erza had burned what little meat had been left from the bear she had killed. After a solid meal, Ranma looked over at Erza, who nodded. The two of them went outside to check the weather, and both of them gasped in delight. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky now. The horrible rain and snow that they had been dealing with seemed to have abated for the moment and Ranma smiled happily. “Awesome! And it’s only a little bit past midday. What do you think, set off now or wait till tomorrow and set off first thing in the morning?”

“I rather think we should set off now. There’s no way that this good weather is going to last,” Erza said, her breath puffing in the wind as Ranma’s did the same. She was decked out in her warmest armor, a fur lined thing that with blue ornamental stripes over each piece of armor coupled with golden horns connected by a blue stripe of metal. The breastplate showed a four-leaf clover on the collar and an ornamented blue cross over her stomach. The pauldrons were massive, with points flaring upwards. The armor's skirt was long and also fur-lined in the interior, making it quite warm. The armor featured two different gauntlets on both arms. The gauntlets were, oddly, not matching, one covering her forearm with a fur lining around the wrist, while the right gauntlet was larger, going further up her arm but without fur. The armor also, thankfully, had a kind of latex-like under layer, which covered her legs and arms, where they would otherwise be open to the weather.

But Ranma was still dressed in his normal silk pants and shirts. Yet, despite that, she could feel the heat radiate off him. Not quite as physically as it would have from Natsu, but still, he was quite a bit warmer than most.

“Point,” Ranma said with a nod. With that, the two of them reentered the large cave and gathered the others up after Wendy and Seilah had put the equipment away. When that was done, they all gathered together and headed down the mountainside with Ranma carrying Carla on his head.

As they reached the edge of the ledge where they’d had to climb up a sheer rock face coming up, however, Ranma surprised Erza and Seilah by smirking over at them and then winking at Wendy. “So, have you ever seen how Dragon Slayers go down a mountain?”

Wendy began to giggle, while Erza replied with a small frown, “I can’t say I have, no. Why?”

“It’s a sight to see,” he said as Carla’s eyes opened wide, a scream growing at the back of her throat. Then, without another word, Wendy hopped onto his back, and Ranma jumped out into the air, where he started to fall as Wendy shouted out, “Sky Dragon’s Wing!”

For a moment Erza just blinked, then she shook her head with a laugh. “Well, I suppose we’re no longer searching for anything at this point, are we, and the sky is clear.” She looked over at Seilah, “Are you up for a little bit of a fly?”

Seilah, however, was already in the air, looking down at her. “What are you waiting for?”

Growling irritably, Erza summoned up her Black Wing armor. Once an aura of fire appeared around her warming her up, she leaped into the air on bat wings, flapping after them and down the mountainside. She couldn’t use any of her flight-capable armor for long in this cold, none of them giving her any protection against the temperature, but Erza could still keep up with them for now.

She soon caught up with Ranma and shouted, “While interesting, I fail to see what is so impressive! After all, unlike you, I’m actually flying! You are just falling with style!”

Ranma laughed, and Wendy giggled, and they replied as one, “If it works, don’t knock it!”

Over the next few days Ranma got used to his newly enhanced strengths and abilities, finding that, in many ways, they weren’t really a surprise, just extremely difficult to get used to. For one thing, Ranma knew that his strength had at least tripled from where it had been before. Oh, Ranma knew that he could be even stronger if he was using his ki abilities to consciously add to his strength, but that was a big difference from everyday strength, the difference between straining a muscle and simply walking along and using it.

His speed, on the other hand, hadn’t seems to be affected overmuch, which made a lot of sense when he thought about it. Dragons were not known for being very speedy creatures, simply monstrously powerful. *And I’d wager anything that my endurance is a lot higher too,* Ranma thought to himself the second night out from the cave, looking over at Erza and Seilah speculatively as they camped for the night. They had actually found a flat area large enough to set up the tent, and Wendy was moving around the campsite, humming to herself as she looked forward to a night within the tent rather than just in the sleeping bags.

Erza caught his look and returned it with a raised eyebrow. “What are you thinking?”

“Oh, I was just wondering if either of you would like to spar for a bit?” Ranma asked, smiling in anticipation.

“Sparring is for those who wish to become stronger than they are or have a goal in mind that strength would be required to reach,” Seilah said, shaking her head. “I am neither of those things, so I will say no.”

“You don’t want to get stronger to help protect yourself from your former Guild members?” Ranma asked, cocking an eyebrow at her.

“No, I do not,” Seilah said, shaking her head. “I know that to be an impossibility. In a fight between demons like that, the curses involved would matter far more than what humans would call our actual magical strength. My curse can be completely blocked out if the individual’s will power is sufficient and the vast majority of my fellows have a lot of willpower to spare. Furthermore, I was the weakest of the demons of Tartarus physically by a wide margin. I could never have defeated Torafuzar, for example, or even Kyoka. Not unless I took her by complete surprise.”

“Your curses don’t work on one another?” Erza asked, wincing just a bit at the idea. Seilah’s curse really didn’t lend itself to one on one battles, but if she could control her opponent, then there wouldn’t be a fight in the first place.

“The more physical types of curses would work to a certain degree, but even their efficacy is lessened,” Seilah replied crisply. “As for my specific curse, I have never tried to use it on any other demon than Kyoka. I was able to control her actions to a limited degree, but not for very long. Indeed, looking back on it, I am forced to conclude that she was simply humoring me. Which means there is no chance of my curse working on the other, more magically powerful demons.”

Ranma nodded, setting that alongside everything else he had learned about the demons of Tartarus. By this point Ranma felt like he had a good feel for all of their abilities, curses, how they acted and a bit about what they how they fought. The difference there being that Seilah had seen how most of her fellow demons had done so in the past.

The only two that Seilah didn’t know much about were the ones named Keyes and Mard Geer. She simply knew that Master Geer was far more powerful than any of the other demons. Indeed, he was so strong that he had routinely faced four or more of the other more combat-oriented demons in sparring matches and had beat them without even leaving his throne. Now, knowing what those demons’ powers were made that very worrying, but there was nothing that Ranma could do about it right now.

In stark contrast, Ranma didn’t know anything about Keyes other than his appearance. Seilah simply described him as, “Too creepy to be around, staring at us as if we were parts of a puzzle or tools that should move to his direction. Master Geer has a certain amount of charisma and some leadership ability, which seems able to sand over rough patches of all of us interacting with one another. Keyes has nothing like that. He is simply very cold, logical and arrogant.”

Shrugging at Seilah’s thinking, Ranma turned to Erza. “What about you? You want to give that new sword of yours a test run?”

But Erza was already in her Sea Empress armor, minus the large sword that went with it. Instead, she was holding her new sword in a high guard position, her body twisted sideways towards Ranma. She smirked at him and then charged forward with a loud roar.

Ranma’s durability was also through the roof, as evidenced a few minutes later when Erza punched him in the gut when he overextended accidentally. Most of the times when he overextended like that it were deliberate a trap. This time it was actually real, and Erza, who hadn’t taken the bait before, pounced.

She ducked in underneath his outstretched arm and hammered in a blow that should’ve driven the breath out of his body. Instead he just took it, while she winced and pulled back, raising her sword in indication of a pause as she wrung out the hand which had hit him. “What in the world are you made out of now!? That was like hitting pure steel!”

Ranma shrugged. “I did mention that my durability was probably much higher now, right?”

“Hearing it and then feeling it are two different things,” the natural redhead mumbled, then blushed hotly as Ranma took her hand.

A second later he brought it to his lips and laid a kiss on it, first the back, then the palm, and then the pulse point on her wrist. “There. Does that make it all better?” he asked teasingly, his eye alight with humor and a certain amount of desire.

That look made Erza’s blush increase, yet she replied gamely. This whole flirting thing was quite interesting to her, and she was greatly enjoying it. “I don’t know. Perhaps you should kiss it a few more times, hmm?”

To one side Seilah looked on at this, some amusement plain in her face as well as another emotion that she had begun to feel more of late, and which she had noticed when watching Ranma and his flirting with Scarlet and, before that, Mulan. *Jealousy again. I rather dislike this emotion.*

Standing up fluidly, Seilah moved forward, taking up a position across from Ranma. He blinked at her, then released Erza’s hand and turned to face her fully. “I thought you said you didn’t want to spar?

“I changed my mind. I am out of books, after all, and simply watching the two of you go at it is quite boring.”

Erza shot her a look halfway between a smirk of victory and a smile of welcome, then stepped to one side, one of her regular blades replacing Belserion in her hand. The next second, the spar restarted with three sides instead of two.

Eventually it got to the point where the two women worked together, taking Ranma on both at the same time, but even then Ranma’s durability was such that, unless Erza was really willing to break out some killing techniques such as Benizakura or the magic she felt within Belserion, Erza couldn’t really damage Ranma overmuch.

“I’m not actually certain I like that,” Ranma said in response to her verbalizing that thought, causing her to look at him quizzically. “Oh, it’s good to have the durability if you need it, but I don’t want to start relying on it, if you know what I mean.”

“Of course,” Erza said with a nod.

Seilah lounged nearby after Wendy had healed her leg. She had attempted a high kick earlier during the spar, and Ranma had taken it on his forearm and then punched her underneath the thigh so hard it had actually lifted her off the ground from that point. She had then pulled something else in her leg—yes, even demons could pull muscles—in an attempt to stop herself from falling, only to find her arm, which had been waving wildly at the time, grabbed and herself then tossed into Erza.

The two women had not been looking at each other since then, though their blushes certainly did make Ranma grin to himself until Erza’s comment on his durability made him become more serious again. Now Seilah looked at Erza directly for the first time since that accident. “You have fought both Ranma and that other Dragon Slayer, the fire user, correct?”

“His name is Natsu, and yes,” Erza said with a nod. “Are you asking how they stack up?”

“Only in terms of durability,” Seilah replied, waving one hand. “I can well understand that, given his age and experience, Ranma’s story is much more advanced than Natsu’s.”

“Natsu has a way of surprising you,” Erza said quickly, acting on her instincts to protect and defend her guildmate. “He always gives one hundred percent, and I think he has a higher ceiling in terms of how strong he may eventually become than anyone else I’ve ever met. His strength is in his passion, and, like the fire that he uses, the hotter his passion runs, the hotter his flames go.”

Seilah was about to retort or make a salacious comment, but Wendy was still there, sitting beside her and listening to the conversation with Carla in her lap. Sighing, Seilah wondered how she had gotten so soft, but four days of talking with just Wendy and Erza, or, more often than not, simply Wendy, had continued her education in understanding the nuances of human interaction far more than she had previously learned just by reading books. She now understood that verbal words were counter-productive when dealing with humans and not just your target at times. Further, she didn’t want to use such in front of Wendy, especially since the coil of jealousy she had felt within her before had disappeared during the spar.

So she replied in a more neutral manner, “I understand all that, nor was I attempting to belittle him. I was simply asking your opinion on how their durability compared.”

Erza frowned for a few minutes, thinking. “I honestly don’t know,” she said at last. “I always think that Natsu is actually quite a bit more durable than he lets on. I can beat him easily enough, but he’ll just pop up fifteen, twenty minutes later looking none the worse for wear. Whereas Ranma, I’m simply having trouble hurting him at all at this point.” She looked at him quizzically, a wicked smirk suddenly appearing on her face. “I don’t suppose you’d allow me just to thump you for a time in order to discover just how good your durability is?”

“I don’t think so!” Ranma said with a laugh, causing both girls to laugh too even as Wendy scowled (more pouted, really) at the very idea.

“Ah, and there is the final nail in the coffin of using Erza as a role model for young Wendy on how a real lady should comport herself,” Carla muttered to herself. She had been noticeably quiet most of their time in Joya, the altitude having taken a fearsome toll on her despite her Aero magic, and her lack of physical endurance adding another factor.

Still, she hadn’t missed much and had simply been taking it all in. The demon girl still bothered her, but the affection and, dare she say it, friendship Seilah felt towards Wendy was enough to convince her to give her a chance. But Erza now exhibiting a certain amount of the combat junky attitude that had forced Carla to abandon the thought of using Mira as a role model was distressing. *Perhaps Bisca? In many ways she is far more normal, but her choice of clothing is rather…off for what I would like to see a young lady wear. And Jenny is just a bit too much in nearly every sense of the word.*

“Although, that does remind me of some of the ways I was trained before I became a Dragon Slayer,” Ranma went on.

“Oh, do tell,” Erza said, always interested in those stories. Seilah too looked up, her own interest plain to see.

Ranma went on to describe the body toughening technique aspect of the Kachu Tenshin Amaguriken as well as how his rival had thought he was learning how to explode bodies with a mere touch. That didn’t seem nearly as amusing to the two women, who both knew certain magics that could do that very thing, but the idea of tying someone up and then tossing large boulders at them amused both women to no end.

“These Amazons, are you certain they are not demons? That rather sounds like something Kyoka would have come up with, especially the idea of selling it as a training tool,” Seilah said, shaking her head. “Even your previous description of this Cologne creature made her seem almost demonic in nature.”

“Personally, I was thinking it sounded like something Natsu would think up when in one of his odder moods. Still, that does give me an idea.” With that, Erza unequipped her regular sword and then, in a flare of Requip magic, was suddenly holding a giant hammer. It was almost half again her own body height and made of stone, a simple sphere of rock. “Let’s see how good your durability really is, Ranma.”

“Just because my durability is so freaking high doesn’t mean getting hit won’t hurt, and it definitely don’t mean that I’m gonna to let you just hit me,” Ranma retorted, leaping away. “If you think you can tag me with that thing, you have another…”

Then Erza was in his face, her armor having swiftly changed to that of the misnamed Flight Armor outfit. Instead of letting her fly, this armor, which was sparse—more like an RPG’s version of armor than the real thing—with leopard print bits and pieces of metal, gave her immense speed, both in terms of reaction time and just flat out speed. This allowed her to cross the distance between them in a split second, and she winked at him even as she brought the hammer around even as he started to evade.

This was one thing that she had been working on for a while since Ranma had come back into her life, though at first was out of necessity, but she was close to almost perfecting it: mixing and matching different weapon types with different armor types rather than relying on full sets. It had given her a far vaster repertoire of tricks and abilities to use at any one time, so much so that this wasn’t the first time she had surprised Ranma. In terms of pure skill, Ranma was still well above her, but Erza was just damned adaptable and tricky.

On this occasion, Ranma couldn’t quite dodge out of range of the huge hammerhead, and the blow slammed into his side, the impact spinning Ranma away, off of his feet. *But then, Ranma is never more dangerous than when he is in the sky,* Erza thought ruefully.

Even as that thought crossed Erza’s head, Ranma used that momentum to launch himself further into the air, bouncing off a rock behind his former position and back towards Erza. A leg lashed out in a kick Erza was barely able to dodge even with her speed enhancing armor, and she backed away slightly.

“Are you certain you’re not a Sky Dragon Slayer?” she asked ruefully even as she Requipped another weapon instead of the hammer. This was a long staff with multiple smaller parts to it that came apart, each segment whirling around on its own under her command, even as other swords appeared in a whirling dance around her, controlled by her telekinetic magic.

Ranma laughed as Wendy giggled, throwing up her arms. “I’ve said the same thing more than once! But you should see me some time when I’m fighting seriously. You haven’t seen me use my Dragon Force, but with it, I can really fly occasionally. It’s great, especially with all the midair combat training Ranma-nii’s given me over the years.” Wendy didn’t like to fight, but she had quite a bit of pride when it came to her ability to fly.

Seilah smiled, sitting down next to the girl and pulling her into a gentle hug. For some reason Seilah just liked hugging Wendy, while Wendy, as always, just liked being hugged. “You are indeed a most formidable mage,” she said with a nod.

“Actually, that reminds me, Wendy. We need to test how strong my Dragon Slayer magics are now. Let’s do that tomorrow, okay?” *And I need to figure out my own Dragon Force too! Oh, that is going to be awesome!* Ranma thought before he nearly had his head taken off by Erza. Despite his enhanced durability, he was certainly not about to take a sword to the throat lying down.

But the next day the sky opened up on them again, dumping so much snow on them that it was literally impossible to see. Halfway through the morning it was the consensus of the group that they weren’t going to make any headway through this. “Especially since the snow drifts are slowly getting so big that little Miss Prissy-in-Puss would disappear in them,” Ranma quipped even as he looked around, his eyes serious as he tried to find a place for them to weather the storm. Eventually he found an outcropping of rock and, with Seilah’s help, created an igloo around them, much to Wendy’s delight. She insisted on helping design it, and eventually the thing looked like it was a squat turtle of some kind.

The group was snowed in for two days before the snowstorm finally stopped, and visibility returned, letting them move on in a world now white from top to bottom. But despite that lack of visibility, Ranma had hunted up a few wolves in the mountains. Though quite stringy, the bits and pieces which were edible after he once more accidentally lost control of his new strength had given them enough meat now to go with the rest of their supplies. Erza also supplied them with a pair of snowshoes, which Ranma used as a model to create a pair for everyone and off they went over the snow, with Seilah and Wendy both utterly entranced by the view around them.

The snow still slowed them down, though, and it took them four more days before they could get down to an altitude where Carla could make her own way. With that and the sky once more looking like it would snow, Ranma decided that they would celebrate by taking a day off of their trip. He spent the rest of that day trying to hunt, coming back with four snow rabbits: tiny, white-furred animals that had huge feet for their size.

Erza took one look at them and then up at Ranma before shaking her head and taking Wendy by the arm, turning her around quickly. “Come on, Wendy. I think it’s our turn to go out and find some wood.”

With that, she led the confused girl in the opposite direction of her just returned Onii-chan, who looked after them, blinking. “What was that about?”

“Ugh, dolt! Those animals are not predators or very dangerous looking. They are, in fact, quite cute. How do you think a gentle heart like Wendy would react if she saw you skinning those?” Carla groused, though she herself was fighting down a truly bizarre desire to snatch one of the juicy, sumptuous rabbits hanging from Ranma’s hand for herself. *Mmmmm, rabbit.*

“Um, oops?” Ranma said, frowning after his little sister. “Yeah, let’s get these skinned, and that means both of you help, Carla.” Ignoring her protests, he pulled out a small dagger from his camping kit and tossed it to the cat-girl, smiling internally at seeing her in her preferred form for the first time since they started up the mountains. “I mean it, Carla. The more hands on this, the quicker it’ll go.”

“Fine!” Carla groused, taking the knife and moving over to join Ranma and Seilah at the fire.

The demon girl had not complained, simply demanding the first taste of whatever Ranma was going to cook, to which Ranma agreed, handing over another small skinning dagger. He then flicked a finger and created a blade of water there, smirking as he tried to hold it in place to cut at the skin of the little rabbit, its edges swirling quickly. The blade broke numerous times as Ranma’s control for such fine work needed a lot more practice, but it still did the job, if far more slowly than the other two and keeping it going was a great control exercise. Luckily they still got the job done, and most of the meat was now out and slowly grilling to one side while Ranma used the remainder to create a thick rabbit stew.

When Wendy came back, she found Carla literally hovering over the stew pot, staring into it as if it held the secrets of creation. “Um, Ranma-nii, what are you cooking, and why is Carla looking at it like that?”

“Heh, let’s just say I think we just discovered the thing Carla likes as much as Happy likes fish,” Ranma said. *All these years and all I ever needed ta do to shut her up was cook a rabbit dish? Eesh, that’s as silly as it is irritating.*

The next day dawned bright and clear, if incredibly cold, the threat of snow having for once faded away. Ranma and Wendy went out that morning while Erza and a reluctant Seilah were still cleaning up the campsite.

The two Dragon Slayers moved well away from the others, with Wendy climbing up a sheer cliff face to one side and pulling out a pair of binoculars Ranma had given to her. “Ready!” she shouted down to her brother.

Ranma grinned and put his hands together to either side of his mouth, shouting out, “Soryu no Hoko (Water Dragon’s Roar)!” From his mouth came a large blast of magically imbued water, thundering forward very like someone had created a geyser with all the energy of a tsunami, only condensed and enhanced.

Wendy watched, her mouth dropping in shock as, not only did the attack go further than it normally would, disappearing out of sight even with binoculars, but it also visibly had more power to it too. Normally an attack would lose impetus near the end, the magic tied into the element in this case wearing out. But that wasn’t happening this time. As Wendy watched, her Onii-chan’s attack slammed into a mountainside almost at the edge of her vision and began to tear into it, gouging out the rock.

She shook her head in shock at the sight, impressed despite herself. She didn’t think that the attack was all that much more powerful than his original ones at first, but the effect said otherwise. “I estimate maybe twice as powerful, and it went for a lot further this time too,” she supplied as she hopped down to join Ranma.

“It’s my control, then, that’s truly been impacted,” Ranma muttered. He hadn’t actually put more power into that attack than normal, so he was getting much more out of an equivalent amount of energy. “That’s good. Heck, that’s great!”

Just then, though, there was a rumble in the distance, and a portion of the mountain that Ranma’s attack had hit with his attack began to tumble down.

The two Dragon Slayers looked at one another, with Ranma looking a little sheepish and Wendy, censorious. “So, that wasn’t me, right?” Ranma asked. “I didn’t just, you know, cause an avalanche accidentally, right? We don’t need to tell the others about this, right? Only, Erza has mentioned more than once about how she tries to control her guild’s over the top destructiveness, and I don’t think these mountains’d been able to take it if she and I fought for real, so…”

“Hmmm, I don’t know, Ranma-nii. That seems the kind of thing Erza might really want to know about. And it isn’t really the weather for thunder, after all, so I don’t think I could even lie in the first place,” Wendy mused, tapping her chin thoughtfully, a certain look in her eyes and her lips trying to twitch.

Ranma’s eyes narrowed as she looked at her sister. Given the amount of snow they had traveled through, Ranma routinely found herself changing from male to female, and had eventually just stopped caring about it, which had happened just now as the snow melted into her clothing. “All right, cut to the chase. What do you want, imouto?”

“Ranma-nii, that almost sounds like you’re trying to bribe me!” Wendy gasped in mock-shock.

“That’s precisely what I’m doing. Now name your price,” Ranma said mock grimly, poking her in the cheek.

She giggled and hugged Ranma’s side before climbing up to perch on her head, whispering as she passed Ranma’s ears. “Well, it occurs to me that that Girl Genius series was pretty good. And I would rather like to see more of them, but we only found a few of those books in that city with the funny name.”

“So you want me to find them, I suppose?” Ranma mused. “All right, that’s not so bad.”

“And maybe some chicken Parmesan for dinner?” Wendy wheedled. She too had a favorite meal, and chicken Parmesan was it. That and sweets of all kinds.

“The instant I can find a chicken,” Ranma said with a sigh again.

The two Dragon Slayers met up with the others, and Erza promptly asked, “What was that thunderous noise I heard earlier?”

Wendy replied in a butter-would-not-melt-in-her-mouth tone, waving her hands from her perch on Ranma’s head for emphasis. “It’s weird. We saw a lot of clouds in the sky and heard some thunder too. I think we need to get a move on, or else we might be getting sleeted on before too long.”

“It’s a little too cold for that, I would’ve thought, anyway. Still, I’ve never traveled in mountains like these before,” Erza mused. “Yes, let’s get a move on, then.”

They continued to travel northwest via the compass through the mountains, towards what Ranma had heard called the true Joya, the area of the country that was the most populated, around where the straits began. More than once, they had to stop and go to ground as massive snowstorms whited out the route forward. They remained able to deal with it, but still it slowed them down.

All their food supplies began to dwindle alarmingly. In response Ranma just stopped eating, giving his portion to Wendy and Carla, while Seilah and Erza both shortened their own rations without being told, the demon girl’s actions somewhat surprising Ranma. Still, they were making good time, Ranma knew, traveling at least fifteen to twenty leagues a day, flying and running as often as they could, with Ranma carrying Carla. In this kind of terrain and weather, that speed was pretty darn incredible, even for someone like Ranma. It would be close, Ranma knew, but he doubted any of the others would have to cut back on their food before they reached civilization.

Of course, as they traveled they also talked, with the three girls telling Ranma about the discussions they’d had with Belserion in more detail, and Ranma describing the fight against his inner dragon. “It was easily the toughest fight I’ve ever had, and if it hadn’t been happening in my own head, I would’ve lost numerous times. Dragons are no joke!”

“A portion of me really believes that should’ve gone without saying,” Erza replied dryly as Ranma finished speaking.

Of course, Erza had the most interesting tales to tell, considering that most of the ones Belserion had told them dealt with her own ancestor. That brought up an interesting question about a week into the trip, as Ranma was looking at her quizzically.

“What?” Erza said even as they ran along, the sky being so overcast and visibility so low that no one wanted to try to fly at the moment. Not when they could barely tell the difference between sky and stone, anyway. But thankfully there was no snow falling for once, which let them make time running over the snow with their big snowshoes.

Even Seilah was running, and that sight was enough to nearly make Ranma lose her mind. The demon girl either didn’t know about her watching or didn’t care, and watching her run like this was a treat for any man or, in this case, man turned woman.

But at the moment, Ranma’s attention was on Erza, which both flattered and intrigued her, considering Erza all too well understood where else it could have been at that moment. “I’m just wondering if you’re going to use your ancestor’s name,” he said simply, shrugging her shoulders. “I mean, I know where Scarlet came from, but…”

“Ah, er…” Erza stammered, thinking hard for a moment. “I… Scarlet was, was Jellal’s name for me, a mark of my time as a slave as I could not remember much of my life before that. I have since turned it into my own, but now, and knowing with my history…” She paused, actually halting in place for a moment as she thought. “Now that I have a heritage, and a proud one too, I think… Yes,” she said at last, nodding her head decisively. “Yes, I do want to change my last name. I will become Erza Belserion now. I think my ancestor, her achievements, and her legacy need to be acknowledged, as does Belserion and his teachings.”

“Yes!” Wendy said with a bright, happy nod. “He knew so much about enchantment. I mean, I think I learned more from talking with him in four days than I’ve learned on my own in three years!” Wendy had only seriously been studying enchantments since about a few months before they met Jenny. “Why, he even talked me through ways to actually control how long my enchantments could last!”

“Even your living body enchantments?” Ranma asked.

Enchantments, of course, came in many categories, but the simplest ones to understand were those that could be used to enchant people and those that could be used to enchant objects. Enchantments on people could, of course, be further broken down into helpful and harmful categories, but to the best of Ranma’s knowledge, Wendy didn’t know any enchantments that could be used to hurt. But she did know quite a few enchantments that could be used to help.

“Yes,” Wendy said with another emphatic nod. “I think I could create an enchantment that could work for a few hours now, with just a bit more buildup.”

“So…” Ranma asked slowly, as if she was talking to a little young child. “Why aren’t you using them now?”

Wendy paused and then looked around her as the others also turned to look at her. Then she shrugged and scratched at her hair sheepishly, in a move so reminiscent of Ranma that Erza looked between the two siblings in some shock. “Erm, sorry?”

At that Ranma laughed, and the others followed suit, even Seilah. A second later Wendy began to move from one to the other, holding her hands out as if to encompass them in a hug, but with several feet between them. She breathed in deeply, then thrust her magic out through her arms into the air around the person in front of her, the first being Carla.

Carla gasped as warmth flooded into her system, the cold of the air around her going away so abruptly that it was astonishing. Even the coat she had been wearing wasn’t this warm. Then she foundered as she actually floated off the ground, and Wendy’s enchantment continued.

The cat girl was now lighter, faster, and she felt as if she had just woken up from the greatest sleep she’d ever had. The others all got a similar treatment, four spells, or, rather, enchantments, put on them one after another so quickly and so adroitly that it was as if they were a single spell. That was darned impressive, and Ranma made certain that Wendy knew it with head pats and hugs before turning and leading the group onward. They now all raced through the mountains even faster than they had been going before.

The only other really important conversation that occurred as they went along—the rest being story exchanges or outright flirtations between the two redheads—was one between Seilah and Ranma. “You mentioned that you have no desire to keep training in order to defend yourself against your fellow demons and also no interest in going back. So what do you have an interest in?” Ranma asked.

Seilah frowned, thinking. “I do not know if I have ever really contemplated where my own story could go. Why do you ask?”

“Well, considering I’m the one that basically convinced the others who know you’re still alive to let that state continue, it’s sort of my responsibility, you know,” Ranma said, shrugging his shoulders. “Besides, I’d like to think you’re a friend. Friends look out for one another like that.” And Ranma knew that, despite Bisca’s injunctions against it, he did feel a lot of attraction, at least physically, towards the demon woman.

Seilah smiled at that, touched. *Humans and their desire to help other people, we have often all thought of it as a weakness, but I believe it to be a strength now*. “I think,” she said, “it will depend on many things. For one, whether or not any of my fellow demons realize that I’m still alive. If they do, any attempts to plan for the future would be foolish. For another, I was serious when I mentioned that my fellow demons and I have a near genetic desire to slay our creator, Zeref. If I stumble upon a clue as to his whereabouts or a way to do away with him, I do not know for a fact if I would be able to control myself from seeking his death.”

“Okay,” Ranma said with a nod. “I can understand that.” Or, at least, she could understand that Seilah thought that, anyway. “But what do you want to do? I’m not asking you what you think you’ll be able to do, I’m asking you what you **want** to do.”

She thought for a moment, then smiled once more and held the book that she had been attempting to read, without much success, alas, while flying along next to Ranma and the others. With her enchantments added into the equation, Ranma and Wendy’s falling with style technique had evolved into something almost approximating flight, henceforth the two of them had a great deal of fun with and which could carry all of them quite a ways. “I rather think I would like to open up a café of some kind. A place where people could find, read and buy books, while having good food as well.”

Ranma smirked at that, thinking it sounded rather like Seilah, though Ranma didn’t know if she could make a living like that without resorting to her curse to control other people in various ways. *Such as not actually buying the books, paying more than the food is worth, not noticing it’s crappy, etc*. Still, if you put those problems aside, it sounded like a good idea. Those kinds of places were a major hit back in his old world, and Ranma had only seen the like occasionally in this one. Oh, there were, of course, restaurants and stuff like that, but there was a big difference between them and a book café.

“That sounds like fun,” Wendy said with a nod. “I’d like that kind of place to. So long as they have more books like Girl Genius.”

“Of course,” Seilah said with a nod. “Although we would have to get someone else to do the cooking. I have mentioned that no demon has ever been able to cook before, and that includes myself.”

“Have you ever actually found someone to try to teach you?” Ranma asked.

“No, that has not occurred to me, though now that it has, I think that my former lover might have attempted such a thing in the past. And I know some of the others routinely kidnapped humans for a time when they wished to partake of good food. They even treated the cooks well for the duration of their time within Tartarus.”

“There’s a difference between teaching someone under duress and teaching someone because you want to,” Ranma said, rolling his eyes as Erza scowled, both of which bothered Seilah on some level.

“Do you think you can teach me, then?” she asked. She had seen Ranma at work whenever they had stopped on this journey and had heard from Wendy about more of his cooking skills.

Ranma shrugged. “Well, unless you want to learn about how to cook over an open fire, those kinds of lessons will have to wait until we’re back in Magnolia. But I don’t see any reason not to try. You couldn’t be any worse than Akane, after all.”

“Akane?” Seilah asked, though she noticed that Erza, running along beside them, seemed to recognize the name and not like it one bit.

“Meh, I’ll tell you about her another time. But trust me,” Ranma said with a laugh, “you just couldn’t be as bad as she was in the kitchen.”

**OOOOOOO**

Ultear smiled to herself as she watched Hisui eat while reading over a dozen reports at the same time, while nearby Arcadios did the same thing, though his notes were purely on the physical defense of the building and was a single sheet of paper rather than several dozen. Though young, the girl’s mind was such that she came across as more mature than most adults, and she exuded a level of command authority, an ability to almost demand attention that was quite phenomenal in someone so young. The girl also had no true ability to judge another person’s character, and Ultear could all too easily see that the girl was becoming a little too certain in her own opinions, but if caught early enough, that could be stopped.

*It truly has been an interesting experience working with her. Hmmm, I wonder if she would like Meredy. She would make a good bodyguard, and the young princess already has a formidable one. Between the two of them, and, in particular, Meredy’s odd sense of humor, they might manage to keep Hisui grounded.*

If she was honest, the young woman with Hisui, Minerva, was just this side of terrifying to Ultear. The girl’s magical power was incredible to Ultear’s senses, something that she had been able to do for several years now. It wasn’t an inherent ability based on her magic, but rather her magical senses, an ability that anyone could learn regardless of their inherent magic but which most did not even know existed. She would estimate that the girl was almost equal in magic to Ultear herself already, despite being only fourteen, if that.

“So, what do you think of yesterday’s find?” Ultear asked as she looked at Hisui across the breakfast table.

Hisui frowned, looking up from her reports and thinking. “I think all four of them should be let go,” she said regretfully. “I realize that they were never involved in actual spycraft, but working at that level of government requires a certain level of restraint, and none of those four young gentlemen seem to have it.”

“They carry on like they’re on a bender and can’t keep their damn mouths shut,” Hisui’s bodyguard said bluntly, shaking her head.

“You’re just irritated they flirted with you,” Hisui said teasingly, poking her friend in the ribs.

Said friend batted her hand away lightly but still smiled at Hisui. “That’s true,” Minerva said. “But you have to admit that I was the very definition of restraint. I didn’t even hurt any of them all that much.

“That’s true; you didn’t,” Hisui said in reply, smiling to herself. “You are learning.”

There was a story there, Ultear mused before checking off the four names on her paper. “Have you decided what will happen to young Anthony?” she asked, her tone becoming more sad than businesslike for a moment.

“Wouldn’t that be up to you?” Hisui asked, looking at her shrewdly. “Anthony is, after all, a mage. Making certain he follows the rules of his job and the letter of the law is your business.” Ultear winced, and Hisui smiled somewhat sympathetically, “Sorry, I’m not going to let you pass the buck on that one.”

Ultear sighed but nodded. “I’ll get with the rest of the Council together to decide his fate, then. At least the others are far more clear-cut.”

Through this latest investigation into corruption and espionage, several spies had been found out in the past month. Three of them were working for other countries. Two of them were gently let go with a firmly worded letter to their kings. One was a holdover from the old regime in Bosco who had simply sold his fealty to someone else the moment that the slave business which he had built his fortune on ended. He was a remarkably good clerk and had risen through the ranks almost as quickly as Ultear and Jellal had, but he had remained under the radar for all that until Hisui had begun a full audit of all paperwork in the Council, and he had been found attempting to escape.

Two others were spies who simply sold any information to anyone willing to pay. Three others, all of whom worked for the Oración Seis in the library and historical department, had been forced to spy in return for either covering up certain vices or paying for those vices.

Young Anthony was a perfect example of that. He was addicted to a certain type of drug, which the Oración Seis had supplied him with, after actually getting him addicted to it in the first place. As one of the chief time-keepers, those people who could who took the minutes of any daily or weekly meeting of the magic Council, he’d had a lot of information to pass on. Still, Hoteye had told them about him, and they had both caught him and were also keeping him from going into a withdrawal that would undoubtedly kill him.

The other two like that were far more clear-cut, and there was no doubt of their inherent guilt. One of them had a penchant for whores, expensive ones that he could never have managed to pay for on his own salary. The other had amazing gambling issues, in that he thought he was God’s gift to the sport, and everyone else thought he was the proverbial sucker born or, in his case, reborn, every minute. That was a very dangerous combination, and one that was almost tailor-made for causing issues of all sorts.

*The truly astonishing thing,* Ultear thought, *is that while I knew about all the others, young Anthony I didn’t know about*. “The poor boy,” she thought, saying the words aloud.

“So does that mean you’ve made a decision on what to do with him?”

“Getting him some help, for certain. Firing him as well,” Ultear said with a sigh, “also for certain. Despite the fact that he was addicted to this Mandrake Root—and isn’t that an odd name for a drug—and, if you read between the lines, it is pretty obvious that he was tricked into that addiction, he still sold out more secrets than any two of the other spies, all to the Oración Seis. I don’t think we can overlook that. *And I rather dislike becoming so much of a sophist, but needs must,* Ultear thought morbidly.

“That’s good,” Hisui said with a nod. “Firm but fair too,” she said, smiling simply at the older woman. “That’s almost precisely what Arcadios and I had decided to do with the young man too. I would have overridden anything else.”

“Then why ask me?” Ultear asked, even though she already knew the answer.

“Because we needed to know how you would deal with such issues in the future. We needed to know what **you** would do personally.”

“I understand it’s a test, and, yes, I understand why you wanted to know, but why did you ask me that question personally? Surely someone of the others with more seniority would have worked? They certainly seem to think they will be stepping into the top position,” Ultear pointed out, frowning.

“A person who has never even noticed the issues despite working here for longer than I’ve been alive? People who have proven that they are more than willing to cover up other people’s villainy in order to not look bad themselves? People who care **far** more about appearance and cracking the whip rather than actually keeping order or following the rule of justice? Even Gran Doma isn’t exactly covering himself with glory here in my eyes,” Hisui said sternly, almost harshly. “I’m honestly thinking of recommending that my father revoke the Magic Council’s remit to operate as a separate unit,” she said, shaking her head. “I think that was a mistake, and we should move them under our own auspices once more.”

“…That is a very big step to take,” Ultear said slowly, wondering how that would affect her own job and, more importantly, her own plans going forward. *If the Council is no more, then my mission would have failed… Meredy!*

Hisui waved one hand to the side, not noticing at present that the hand was holding several reports in it. “It wouldn’t happen all at once and I’m almost certain that my father will reject that concept. Still, you’ll be my voice to pass that on, under the table, so to speak. I want the Council to remember that they serve the law, not magic and not their own self-aggrandizement! Using you in this manner also sends another, subtle, message: that perhaps it’s time for new blood to take the place of the old.”

“That’s rather harsh, but I can understand it,” Ultear said with a sigh. “So are there any other bombshells you wish to drop?”

“Not at this time,” Hisui said, setting her reports down and taking a bite of her breakfast before dabbing primly at her lips with a napkin. “But I would advise you to continue to roll with the punches, as it were. Who knows what the future may bring?”

Ultear leaned back, crossing her arms under her sizable chest and taking a brief bit of pleasure as both younger girls almost, but not quite, glared at her for that movement. It was nice to see that she could rattle them in turn, no matter how petty the manner. “You are a very scary little girl, you know that, don’t you?”

Hisui smiled thinly, “And don’t you forget it.”

At that Ultear joined her in laughter, shaking her head. *Yes, I think I’ve decided to truly turn my coat at the most opportune time possible. If this little girl ever does become queen, she is going to be an absolute nightmare for the underworld to deal. Or, if that over-confidence remains, a threat to herself and the kingdom around her. Something to think about… For now, I should just continue to try to keep my cover on both sides and then wait for an opportunity to get Meredy away from Master Hades and the others. That’s the most important thing.*

Two days later, however, Ultear was not in a laughing mood as she stared at the magic carpet in front of her. “Why does the king want to see me in person?” she asked, not happy at all at this addition to her problems*.* Oh, Ultear knew what this was about, not that she was happy about it: the king was finally responding to being told about her by Ranma.

*And worse, the carpet is so small I won’t have any privacy in order to warn Master Hades, as he no doubt will expect. Crap, does the old one-eyed bastard have any spies in the royal castle?* After a moment’s thought, Ultear was forced to admit that, if he did, Hades had never shared their identity with her.

Hisui shrugged. “I rather think he would want to get your firsthand account of the battle.” She was being recalled to get some orders from her father in person and was going to use the time to round up two more clerks. The administrative side of the Magic Council had been the most corrupt, and she had fired a large number of the people who worked there for various infractions, out-and-out corruption, or worse, like in the specific cases of the spies.

“Or more like he’s a manic magic fan and wants to hear what the fights were like for no other reason than wanting to hear about the magic involved,” Minerva groused. “I could tell you about the times I’ve spotted him watching me exercise my own magic. At first, I thought it was because he was just an old pervert, but no. If he has some popcorn on him, you’ll know that this isn’t a serious meeting.”

“My father isn’t that bad and certainly wouldn’t use one of our nation’s precious magic carpets for such a spurious reason,” Hisui defended her father, but she also wasn’t looking at Ultear as she said that. Indeed, her faint air of embarrassment made her look her age for the first time since Ultear had met the extremely self-possessed young woman.

The three women boarded the magic carpet, and Hisui waved farewell to Arcadios, who was staying on to continue his reconstruction of the Magic Council’s security features. Gran Doma was there as well, and he nodded at them, though he was also looking rather put out that he hadn’t been called in by the king. Then again, he was one of only two other members of the Council that weren’t under suspicion at the moment, so he had to stay and lead the others through this period of turmoil.

The three of them made small talk as the magic carpet’s driver raced the carpet over the distance between Era and Crocus. It took them a bare few hours to cross the distance between the two ostensible centers of government before they were banking down to the royal castle on its large redoubt.

Hisui leaped off the carpet and barely had a few seconds to thank the driver before her father was there, hugging her across the shoulders. Even as short as she was, Hisui had a good few inches on her father, who was practically a midget. “Hisui! Oh, daughter of mine, I’ve missed you soooo much!”

“Father, we’re in public!” the young girl squeaked, not being very big on hugging even in private, let alone in public like this.

Pouting slightly, Toma let his daughter escape his grasp, nodding to the two other women, and if there was a brief hardening to his eyes as he looked at Ultear, you would have had to be a master dissembler, like Ultear, to have noticed it. “Ladies. Minerva, thank you as always for watching over my daughter. Miss Ultear, I’ve heard a lot about you, in particular from this latest escapade. Is it true that you would have been able to defeat Brain by yourself if not for his, what was it called?”

“His alternate personality, Your Majesty. We think Brain’s Zero persona was somehow connected to the man’s Second Origin, leading to an immediate heightening of his available magical power,” Ultear shrugged. “I suppose we should be thankful that there is no set methodology available for discovering an individual’s second magical core like that, else the overall battle against the rest of his guild would have been very different.”

“His tools, you mean. Those poor young people, brainwashed and led astray: Hoteye, Cobra, Angel, Racer, even that other one, Midnight. All of them molded to his way of thinking like so many attack dogs and then released against the rest of the world. The only one he didn’t brainwash was that large fellow, Ranma and the rest of them tangled with in the tower.” Toma shook his head, redirecting himself with difficulty, “That, in fact, is what I wanted to talk to you personally about: Brain’s method of brainwashing and, of course, how he found those young people. Please, come this way. I will want to send you all back to Era by tonight. Hisui, if you could find those clerks you wanted. Oh, and there is a young woman who has stopped by asking about someone matching the former councilmember Jellal’s appearance. If you could talk to her, I think we might have just found you a second bodyguard.”

Blinking at that, Hisui looked over to Minerva, who shrugged but nodded, and the two younger girls quickly curtsied and broke off from the king and Ultear the moment they entered the castle proper.

“Come with me,” Toma said, all his earlier affable nature evaporating in an instant. Somewhat darkly amused at the short king’s attempt to intimidate her, Ultear nodded and followed him up to the third floor.

There she was led into a small receiving room, the same one, though she didn’t know it, where Ranma, the king and Gran Doma had decided to go after the Oración Seis. The door closed behind her, and suddenly something activated somewhere within the room, and Ultear found herself within a large anti-magic field.

“I didn’t know you had such defenses built into your castle, Your Majesty,” she said ruefully, staring all around her before sauntering to a chair across from the king, not taking her eyes away from him but also not showing any obsequiousness either. She was in enemy territory right now, and that was a feeling Ultear was all too familiar with.

“Did you think the King of Fiore, the nation known as the center of magic for all of Ishgar, would not have something to protect himself from magic?” Toma replied, moving around the very tall, buxom woman and sitting at the table, gesturing for her to do the same across from him.

This particular anti-magic field was actually only part of a dual system, with several scattered small anti-magic fields within the castle’s environs and one larger, more proactive magic field around the castle that was supposed to attack anyone the king recognized as an enemy. Both could be overcome by raw power, but not once you were within the fields.

For a moment Toma did nothing but look at Ultear, and though there was a bit of the normal male reaction to her that she was used to seeing, the king’s eyes straying down to her chest once, for the most part his gaze was grim and assessing. “I have heard about it. About you being a spy, about you working for Hades, and also aiding, or at least working alongside, that madman Jellal. I have also heard about your turning your coat. But I wish to hear about all of that, in particular the last bit, from your own mouth. Only then will I agree to not act against you right now as a spy looking to destabilize my kingdom.” He smirked a little, gesturing to a few places in the ceiling and floor, “And if you think the anti-magic field is the only defense here, please think again. If I want you to leave here in chains, you lost any chance of stopping that the instant you entered this room.”

While she wasn’t certain she believed that, Ultear also had no desire to push right now. After all, the king could well be an ally down the road to the very simply goal she was trying to follow right now. So she began to explain about how she had first been found and then brought into Grimoire Heart, how she had been manipulated, what she had done as a spy, which ironically wasn’t all that much in terms of causing trouble on her own, and, of course, her confrontation with Brain. Then she went on to explain about her goal of getting Meredy away from the guild. “Once I have done that, I will disappear. I will leave behind the Magic Council, and you’ll never see me or Meredy ever again.”

Toma scowled, smacking his hand down on the table. “You will do nothing of the sort. I don’t like it, I don’t really like you, but you will serve at my leisure on the Magic Council until **I** say you have paid your debts!!” He glared at her. “Is that understood?”

Blinking in some confusion, Ultear slowly nodded, and the king went on. “And if this Meredy can be brought away from Grimoire Heart, she too will become one of my subjects and will be defended to the best of our ability.”

He waited until Ultear slowly nodded before standing up and gesturing to the door. “You seem sincere in this desire to aid in bringing down your old guild and saving this girl, Meredy, Ultear. Don’t prove me wrong."

**OOOOOOO**

It took them a while—even Ranma and the others with Wendy’s new speed enhancements could only go so fast through such terrain. None of her enhancements could deal with the sheer amount of snow or fog, which grounded them quite often, unfortunately. But with Ranma leading them and the compass she had, the five travelers were eventually able to get to the point where they started to see signs of habitation in the way of cleared trails and old mines.

Soon the four of them came out from around a long, narrow passage through twisted rock onto a small overlook to stare down into a valley that stretched from one horizon to another. Although, to call it a valley wasn’t doing it justice. It was certainly flatter than the mountains around it, but here and there Ranma could see large hills, smaller valleys, and glades, separated in numerous places by rivers, small and large, deep and wide. Or so he, having shifted forms that morning at breakfast and having stayed that way since, estimated from up here, considering that he could also see traffic on those rivers.

Indeed, there looked to be enough people down there to make a large city, easily as large as any city Ranma had seen in this world before. But it was spread out over a very wide area. Here and there, dotting the cliff faces, were mines directly next to large examples of what Ranma would’ve called apartment complexes, built into the rock of the mountains. There were docks, dozens of tiny ones, spread out everywhere, either feeding up into rivers down into the Straits, or to small pathways leading deeper into Joya. Out to the ocean side there were several dozen tiny lighthouses, each of them built out of equally large-sized blocks of rock jutting out from the ocean. Even in the midst of winter, there was a bustle to this place that was completely unlike anything they had seen since leaving Bosco.

“Wow!” Wendy murmured, shading her eyes with her hands as she stared down at the city. “It’s amazing!”

“It is that,” Ranma said with a nod, staring himself, joined by Seilah who took one look and nodded slowly.

“It looks as if it was taken out of a storybook.” Then she paused before going on. “Speaking of storybooks, I hope they have some stores.”

“You have a one track mind; has anyone told you that?” Ranma quipped.

Seilah shrugged, then looked around as Erza did the same, tearing her own eyes from the view with difficulty*. I thought I had seen cities and architectural wonders within Fiore, but this is phenomenal.*

“It looks as if it will take us hours to get down there,” Seilah said with a frown. “Either climbing down or…” Then she stopped and shook her head, staring at Ranma and Wendy’s grinning faces. “I just said something very silly, didn’t I?”

Ranma nodded with a grin still prevalent on his face, then rubbed Wendy’s head and leaped out into the sky beyond their current perch without another word. He even waved jauntily at the two women as he fell, causing Erza to chuckle quietly to herself. Then Wendy leaped after him with her own laugh as she shouted, “I’ll see you on the ground, Carla!”

With Wendy on his back, providing wings, Ranma fell through the air for several minutes. Then, about fifty feet above the ground, Wendy released him, and he began to spin, flinging his hands out to either side in a sequence to slow his descent. Then, when he landed, he rolled and flipped upwards into the air again to catch Wendy as she fell giggling with Carla clinging like grim death to her head. The next second Ranma was back on the ground, having nailed the landing better than any gold medalist coming off the bars could have, his arms once more flung to either side as Wendy hopped off, continuing to giggle.

“I can’t believe you two sometimes; I really can’t! How falling like that can seem fun to you is just so beyond me!” the cat-formed girl groused, leaping off and shifting to her girl-cat form quickly. “Honestly, why did I even think…?”

“Meh, you’re just being a sour puss because you think we were in danger, but that’s part of the fun,” Ranma said, shrugging.

Wendy reached forward, pulling a feebly protesting Carla into her arms despite the fact there wasn’t all that much of a difference in their sizes now, backing away from Ranma and giggling quietly. “You better look out, Onii-chan,” she said, pointing upwards.

To his surprise, Erza had followed them down using her Black Wing Armor. Then, having seen Ranma’s midair artistry before he came down, Erza had felt an inherent urge to compete. She had canceled her armor, dropping like a stone towards Ranma as she too attempted to mimic his earlier routine. But her added armor was throwing her off, and, despite the number of armors she had, which could give Erza the ability to fly, she didn’t have much experience moving in the air without them.

Instantly seeing that she was going to both, come in too quickly and had mistimed her last flip, Ranma rolled his eyes and took a step forward before catching her in his arms. “Heh. Best you leave that kind of thing to the professionals, Erza,” he teased.

“Ugh, darn it! I thought I had learned enough watching you two pull it off,” Erza groused. “Still, it was at least a fun experiemenTTTT!”

At that moment Seilah, who had also followed them down, slammed into them. She had not fallen to the urge to compete as Erza had, but what neither Erza nor Ranma had noticed was that their falling had disturbed a large eagle’s flight as it returned to its nest. The large bird was a rather belligerent beast, and when it saw Seilah falling towards it, it had attacked, getting in her face with its wings. With that she went out of control for a brief moment, losing control of her flight magic just as she too was about three feet above the armor wearing knight and Ranma, coming down directly on top of them.

All three of them went sprawling, and when the dust cleared, Ranma found himself on his back with the two women sprawled out on top of him. *Ugh, damn it. Is this some kind of anti-luck curse that only affects me when I’m around women? I mean, what the hell?* Not, mind you, that Ranma was truly complaining about finding himself at the bottom of a very pleasant pile. Ranma might not be a pervert, but he was a red-blooded young man, after all.

Above him, the women groaned. “Guh, damn it, Seilah, what the hell was that about!” Erza growled. “Are you always so clumsy or is it something special you put on for us right now?”

“If you had but noticed your own folly you would have seen the angry bird that your ungainly fall startled into attacking us. I was merely the first on its list,” Seilah retorted, pushing down at the oddly soft ground beneath her, trying to push Erza off her back. “As for waiting, you were taking too long, and I anticipated that your armor would cause you to fall faster than you did.”

“Oh, don’t give me that! I have had just about enough of you!” Erza growled as she finally pushed her hands down against the ground to either side of the pile.

“Oh, and you think you are so easy to get along with!” Seilah growled back, thumping her head up into Erza’s armor clad chest, her horns scrapping against the metal.

“You, you, gah! Whe, where do you think you’re touching!?” Erza began, her voice fading into a squeak.

“I am not touching you anywhere but your armor! How can I be touching you when you are lying on my back?” Seilah replied tartly, her own hands trapped underneath her prodigious chest, which was currently pressed nearly flat to the ground beneath her.

“Then whose arm is trapped under…” Erza began, then finally looked past Seilah’s large rear to see Ranma underneath the other woman. Quickly ascertaining that she too was sitting on him and precisely where she was doing so, she let loose a quick and quite cute ‘Kyaa!’ and hopped off, her face almost as red as her hair.

This allowed Seilah to push herself up too, and she did so, only to blush as she came nearly face to face with what Erza had been feeling moving under her rear. The sight caused her to frown in confusion for a moment before her knowledge of male anatomy came to her aid. She too flushed, pushing herself upright quickly, and then nearly moaned as Ranma mumbled something underneath her, his mouth moving along her panty-clad privates. She quickly hopped to her feet, blushing and staring as Ranma quickly turned onto his chest, willing himself to calm down before pushing to his feet.

The two girls quickly looked away, not quite glaring at Wendy who had been giggling at their misfortune to one side for her observation, then looked down to where Ranma was and then away, blushing. *Silk pants are not the best thing to wear at moments like these,* Erza noted, flattered beneath her embarrassment. At the same time Seilah was feeling much the same, along with a certain clinical observation that Ranma’s arousal seemed a good bit larger than she had read was normal for humans, matching a few of the men in some of the romance stories she had read.

It took Ranma a few minutes to recover his self-control before he could push himself upwards and stand alongside the others. He looked around, finding them at the base of a sheer rock face, a small path leading up the mountainside, presumably eventually leading to their previous position. Thankfully, no one was around to have seen their landing. To the other side the road led downward and into the series of smaller dales and the rivers that fed into them.

“Come on,” Ranma eventually said, gesturing that way. “Let’s go see if we can find a ship going back to Fiore.”

“Books first,” Seilah said, with Wendy nodding along, poking her big brother in the side meaningfully.

He sighed but nodded, and the group made their way down the path. Soon enough they started to pass other people and even began to see the buildings, boats and mines they had seen from above up close. And, thankfully for everyone around her, there was a bookstore for Seilah to ransack.

“I think I should start charging you for storing these books of yours in my Requip space,” Ranma teased.

“And how would I pay?” Seilah asked and then remembered a line she had read numerous times in her stories. “Perhaps with my body?”

Gulping, Ranma dropped the subject and quickly put Seilah’s new books along with Wendy’s in his Requip space.

A few hours later, the four of them were walking up a ramp to a small but still seaworthy ship. They had just boarded, moving to one of the two passenger cabins aboard near the aft of the ship, when a call came through on Ranma’s brooch.

He slowly moved away from the rest of the crew, twenty young men and women who were part of a company that routinely transported small bushels of metal, gold and copper across into Fiore. Once hidden in their room, Ranma cut his finger and let the blood into the broach, activating it. To his surprise, it wasn’t the King of Joya whose image appeared. Rather, it was Queen Rose. *Huh, we must be closer to the border with Bosco than I thought, although, isn’t his castle somewhere south and east*?

“Ranger Ranma,” Rose said with smile. “And how are you this day?”

“I’m well, Your Majesty, but what’s going on that you’re calling me? I thought I was still on vacation/probation or whatever and none of you royal types ever call me just to chat,” Ranma said with a grin.

“Indeed not. If we wished to chat we have people around us to serve just that purpose,” Rose replied, a warm, welcoming expression on her face despite his teasing.

Rose’s tone matched her face, which caused Erza to shake her head in astonishment as she hid herself behind the image of the queen of Bosco. She doubted she would ever get used to the way Ranma talked to royals. *It’s like Natsu’s irreverent attitude but warmer almost, with a bit of arrogance added in rather than innocence. And most of them seem to respond in like kind. Very strange.*

“And where is young Wendy?” she asked almost mock seriously. At that, and now knowing that this wasn’t anything of immediate concern, Wendy popped up, sitting in Ranma’s lap and waving at the queen. “Ah, there you are, child. And is this rogue still treating you well enough?” she ended teasingly. Rose had quite a sweet spot for young Wendy.

“Yes, Queen Rose,” Wendy said, bobbing her head.

“That’s good to know. Unfortunately, this isn’t entirely a social call, as I said earlier. I am calling because we have a very odd situation I would like your opinion on,” Rose said, looking between the two Dragon Slayer siblings. “And since you think so far outside the box I doubt you even know it exists, I thought of you.”

“Just my opinion?” Ranma asked, to be sure. “This isn’t a call to action kind of meeting?”

“No, it is not, although I wish it could be. You are going back to Magnolia in Fiore, is that correct?”

“That’s right. I intend for Wendy and I to stay there for the winter at the very least.”

Erza blinked at that, still sitting out of the pickup range of the brooch, uncertain how Queen Rose would react if she knew that Ranma was using the brooch around other people. *This is the first time Ranma’s ever shown any sign he was thinking of staying longer than the winter. Interesting.*

“That’s good, because whatever this problem is, it is going to be entering Fiore shortly.”

“Perhaps you should just tell us what that problem is, then,” Ranma said, frowning and crossing his arms.

Rose sighed and nodded. “I would be more at home telling you what it is if any of us honestly knew. It’s all very odd and well outside anything I’ve ever seen reports about before. You see, magic is somehow disappearing in very small, localized areas. Not the magical items within, but the magic they contained and the very magic in the air too.”

Ranma blinked. “What?”

“That was my reaction too,” Rose said with a wry chuckle. “We don’t know how long this has been going on or what is even causing it. But recently a magical researcher from Seven was passing through Stella and witnessed something very odd: all the magical items in a small area simply vanished. There was no hint of exterior magic, no hint of foul play or external magic being cast. Something like a bubble of fog appeared suddenly, barely visible, according to the witness, and, when it disappeared, it took all of the surrounding magical items. The researcher didn’t see anything unusual but reported it all the same, and eventually that report, and others, made their way to my and a few of the other kings’ attention. We went through our records to see if we could find out anything else.”

“Really? Just that little bit of information was enough to get all of you to cooperate?” Ranma asked.

“Not at all,” Rose said dryly. “The same event happened down in Pergrande, however, trapping two mages this time and wrecking a townhouse where they had just been about to throw a few noble families dinner. The nobles witnessed it and said that from a distance it looked as if a small tornado had set down and simply sucked up the two mages and all of the magical items within their house.”

Frowning at that description, Wendy frowned. “And the mages haven’t returned?”

“No, they haven’t,” Rose said grimly. “Worse, the King of Minstrel found twelve different stories and anecdotes of similar events being reported down there during and right after his rebellion, the reports having never grabbed any attention before this due to that upheaval. And there have been tales in my own country of similar circumstances along with Caelum.”

“Is there a pattern to this?” Ranma asked.

“No,” Rose said, shaking her head. “But we think that someone else **is** trying to stop it, although how is still debatable.”

Ranma made a go on gesture and she continued, “More than a few times these occurrences have appeared but are somehow stopped before they grow too large. The man doing it was once spotted from afar with a magnifying glass: male of medium height and build with his face covered somehow, wielding a large staff.”

The Rose of Bosco shook her head. “But, nonetheless, more than three hundred people have died, both because of suddenly losing magical items or because they were mages and have been spirited away. The worst incident happened in Caelum, where a large ship was grabbed by whatever this is, and all the mages and magic abroad disappeared, thirty men and women gone in an instant. The incident was put down to a simple accident at sea, but the remains of the ship was recently found, and the lack of anything magical remaining aboard was telling.”

There was a moment of silence at that, but Ranma eventually broke it, shaking his head. “Okay, so we have this mysterious thing going on sucking magic and someone else trying to solve the issue, but on his own, right?”

“Apparently. The question then, of course, is how this individual discovered what is going on, what he is using to stop it, and why he hasn’t asked for help,” Rose replied, still scowling. “It isn’t like most people travel, after all, and, indeed, if someone is able to get around this, well, without the border guards noticing, that’s rather troubling all on its own.” The borders between most countries were open but were officially somewhat regulated, while others were closely watched, like Pergrande’s, Seven’s or, these days, Bosco’s.

Ranma grimaced but explained how very easy it would be for someone who could make their way overland to travel that way. He had done it, after all, and his being a Ranger had nothing to do with it. The borders of even Pergrande were like sieves if you got away from the roads, but that wasn’t something most royals liked to think about. It was a simple fact, though, that most people just didn’t travel all that much.

From there Ranma went on to make a few guesses as to what could be causing this issue, though none were very good, given the randomness of how this was occurring. He glanced toward where Seilah was—reading a book, obviously—behind the image, but she shook her head without looking up, indicating that whatever this was she had no idea what it could be. With that, Ranma had no idea about that aspect.

As for the man who might be stopping whatever this was from being worse, even there Ranma was at a loss as to what to do. “But if you’re asking me about how to find this guy, you’re not really giving me enough to go on. Maybe if you had something this mysterious guy had touched I could get a scent of him. Dragon Slayers are like bloodhounds for that. Maybe if you had some knowledge of where he was going I could get ahead of him and plot an ambush. But you’re not telling me anything about him except that he covers his face. Sorry, but that really isn’t enough to give you any help. I can keep a lookout, but that’s about all I can do.”

“At this point I’m uncertain if that wouldn’t be enough. Still, I wanted to ask,” Rose replied with a sigh. She hadn’t realized how easy it would be for a single person, at home in the wilds, to make his way around Ishgar, and that was quite worrisome. *I suppose I was rather naïve about that, given how easily the dark guilds are able to make their way around the peninsula.*

“Is there any kind of pattern to what attracts this magic sucking thing?” Ranma asked.

“A lot of magic condensing in one area seems to attract it; that’s pretty much it. That is why I think it’s heading into Fiore, obviously.” While other countries had magic, it wasn’t so everyday or prevalent as it was in Fiore.

“So any of the guilds in Fiore could be in danger,” Ranma said with a frown.

“Yes,” Rose said with a sigh. “As are my own. I have thought about informing them of this, but there is only so much we can do without knowing how they are being targeted. After all, I can’t tell them not to congregate or anything like that. Telling them about this would spread fear and confusion, and I’m not certain there would be anything beyond that.”

“Actually, that’s a good point: the randomness of this attack, if that’s what it is, rather than just some random natural event. If whoever is behind it has any control, they’d go after the Wizard Saints or other powerful mages,” Ranma supplied.

Rose blinked at that. “I hadn’t made that connection,” she said ruefully. “So you think this is uncontrolled?”

“I think at least that that aspect of it is,” Ranma said with a nod. “This guy following them around, he seems to be self-controlled, at least.”

She chuckled wanly at that, shaking her head. “Just be on the lookout. I’m afraid that’s all any of us can do. Other than that, I was wishing to pass on an intelligence report.”

“I am ever at Your Majesty’s service. In this case, that means I’m all ears,” Ranma said with a chuckle.

She rolled her eyes at that, but still continued. “Well, the fact of the matter is that, after the destruction of the Oración Seis, many dark guilds have gone underground, no longer being spotted near their known bases, and many of them have disappeared entirely. Three that I feared were beginning to operate in my own territory are gone now. They were spotted taking ship and heading south.”

“Into Mistral?” Ranma asked worriedly. Mistral had a lot of Gun mages, a few dozen mercantile-based mage guilds, a dozen scattered combat mages as part of their military, and, of course, Song Silk, so the country as a whole wasn’t exactly undefended. But bringing together enough forces to deal with a few dark guilds which had banded together would be troublesome given the size of the country.

But Rose set his fears to rest on that score. “They’re not powerful mages, don’t worry. In fact, they’re kind of bottom of the barrel in terms of power. But the fact that they just up and moved, three of them at once, means that someone powerful is still flexing his muscles in the underworld even after the Oración Seis lost so badly, and the demons lost three of their numbers.”

“Do we have names on these guilds?” Ranma asked, glancing over to where Seilah had only just looked up from her new book, staring at him intensely through the pickup of Queen Rose.

“We do. The names of the guilds are Nexus, Legend and Century. Don’t ask me what meaning there is to their names. I have no idea as none of them were ever legal guilds,” Rose replied, looking at Ranma’s face closely.

Ranma glanced to look through the image of Rose at chest height, something that caused the image to blink. But he was really looking at Seilah, who prevaricated slightly, holding out two fingers, then three, and then shrugging. Ranma frowned, thinking how to put this without giving the source of his information away. “None of those sound familiar, but it seems to me that Grimoire Heart is after specific information like the Seis-suckers were, while also looking to cause as much havoc as they can. They also do much of their own work. I’ve heard of at least four members of the guild who revel in violence. Whereas with Tartarus, they are much less straightforward in the long term. I would say this move could be in keeping with some long term goal, but what that could be, I have no idea.”

“That makes sense,” Rose said slowly, thinking about the information she had on Grimoire Heart, which wasn’t all that much to her irritation, and on Tartarus, which beyond it being composed of demons was nonexistent. The reason they had gone after the Oración Seis was because, not only were its members known to only be six (seven before the battle in the tower), but they had actual information about it and eventually even about its goals. Tartarus and Grimoire Heart, they did not have that information. “But then, why are they going into Mistral?”

Again, Ranma subtly looked through Rose’s image towards Seilah. For the second time Rose caught that and wondered if Ranma was indeed staring at her bosom, which, while flattering, would be entirely out of character for the boy. But then she realized the pickup wasn’t actually covering that, and he was simply doing the equivalent of staring out into the distance as he thought*. Or is he? It isn’t like I can stare around my image there.*

But Seilah shook her head, indicating she had no idea. She blinked as Carla handed her a pen and a pad of paper, but she quickly used it to write out, ‘Perhaps they came up with something after our defeat? To regain some of their military strength. Master Mard Geer is very…’

At that point, Ranma’s attention was forced back to Queen Rose as she continued to speak. She went into detail on a few of the other, more dangerous guilds, two of whom had disappeared from where they had been under observation in Caelum. Those, she felt after talking to Caelum’s king, were the most dangerous.

After that, however, Queen Rose signed off, blowing Wendy a kiss before doing so. Contacting Ranma hadn’t made her feel any better, but at least they now had their best mage-type Ranger aware of this latest issue.

Once the queen was gone, Ranma looked over at Seilah. “So, new plans?”

“I think so, yes,” Seilah said with a nod. “It certainly sounds as if he has done something. Whatever is going on, however, I do not know.”

“I’m more concerned about the first issue the queen mentioned,” Erza interjected, a heavy frown on her face. “Magic and anything magical disappearing from an area like that?”

“That’s true,” Ranma muttered. “But again, like I told Rose, if we can’t find a target, there’s nothing we can do. And this doesn’t sound like anything we can actually fight in any event.”

“Unless it comes to us,” Erza said, shaking her head.

Wendy held up a hand, gathering their attention to her. “It could be an enchantment. If that’s the case, I could probably figure out a way to fight it, if it has some visible structure to it, anyway.”

“That’s my little sister,” Ranma said with a nod. “For now, though, let’s put this behind us.”

To one side, Carla sat, having listened but, for once, said nothing. But inside she was frowning, irritated and rather worried. Something about this, about the magic disappearing, called out to her. A distant memory, perhaps, something she was supposed to fear. But as Ranma turned toward her and gestured for her to follow the others out onto the deck, the feeling disappeared, leaving behind just a feeling of trepidation and worry for the future.

**OOOOOOO**

Mard Geer allowed a thin, cold smile to appear on his face as he walked around the human male in front of him. He was a tall, well-built young man with coal black eyes and the light blonde hair that was most common in the country his current plan targeted. His face was thin, almost gaunt, and his eyes seemed to burn with fervor as he stared straight ahead.

Looks, of course, could be deceiving. The human male in front of Mard Geer wasn’t actually human, but a creation of Keyes, an amalgamation of human tissue and demon magic, his mind simply nonexistent. It was merely a fleshy sort of coat. “Your necromantic abilities never cease to amaze me, Keyes. Excellent. He looks enough like the original to be related, but not near enough to seem too miraculous. Our new Prophet is everything we could ever want.”

To one side of the human construct another demon stood, wearing form-fitting robes with a high collar, the robe marked by a checkered pattern and covering a collared shirt and tie, something that always amused Mard Geer, given the incongruity of a demon wearing a tie of all things, one of the most useless human accoutrements he had ever seen. Keyes also wore an ornate headpiece almost like a crown mixed with a war helmet, in that it came down to cover either side of his face and head, an affectation that showed Keyes’s well-hidden arrogance. The skeletal demon, who had nothing of living human in his visage, thought himself a king. And as long as he was content to be king of the dead and not of his fellow demons, that was fine by Mard Geer. Keyes well knew where he stood in terms of their power levels.

He now just nodded his head, acknowledging his guild master’s words before gesturing over to a map and asking, “Our plans?”

“Oh, the plans are already going strong. The rumor mills working, the guns and other items are on the move, and we’ve even begun to plan out some ‘natural disasters’ that can be blamed on one side or the other. We ourselves will soon be in position. It will be somewhat slow if we want to make certain everything is primed for our Prophet’s appearance. But eventually… Yes, eventually war will begin, and we will start weakening the humans further.” Mard Geer smiled over at Keyes, “And you, Keyes, will have as many bodies as you could possibly desire for your experiments.”

The other demon bowed once more as, around them, the floating cube that was the guild’s headquarters continued to move southward, toward their target.

**OOOOOOO**

Bisca had thought long and hard on the way home about what she wanted, about what she hoped to have in a relationship. It had been a very trying time in many ways, an enforced amount of soul searching that was distinctly uncomfortable. To her Ranma was passion and adventure and excitement, but that wasn’t all she wanted in a relationship. She wanted more: stability underneath the excitement, some plans for the future. Ranma couldn’t, or wouldn’t, give her those. The fact that he’d be away for months on end or just always traveling was a reality she thought she had come to grips to right until she left him there on the wharf and then hadn’t seen him or even heard from him in more than a month.

She also wanted romance, and while Ranma was able to be romantic, that ran straight into the biggest issue she had with staying with Ranma: sharing him. Bisca was not one of the near-mindless wizard-chasers who had flocked around Loke. And while she had no issues with Ranma’s curse, that was a far cry from being involved with him/her and another woman. She had thought honestly that she was fine with it that day after the dance and wedding down in Desierto, but the reality had not been pleasant when she was traveling with Ranma and the others.

Then, in the town where she was to turn in her bounties, Alzack had sort of ambushed her, dressed to the nines and with a bouquet of lilies, her favorite flower. It was obvious that someone had given him both a talking to about romance and a shot to the spine, because he had only stuttered once while asking her out. Then Alzack had wined and dined her and did everything he could to convince her that, despite the numerous stop and starts to their relationship, there could still be something there.

“Something real, something…permanent, maybe?” he had said, pulling at his collar. But then his nerves steadied out, and his face had hardened into something intense and rather handsome too. “I don’t want to be set aside. I don’t want to lose this without a fight. And I don’t think you do either.” Then, as the date had wound down, they had kissed, and while it hadn’t lit her nerves up and caused her to see stars, it had been good, really good. Bisca had almost been tempted to ask if he’d been practicing and, if so, how, but she hadn’t, not having wanted to ruin the moment.

So Bisca was in a sort of funk about which relationship she wanted to follow, which type of relationship she really wanted. *God damn it, why can’t it be simple? Why can’t I just figure out which makes me happier? But that’s just it: Ranma makes me happy when I’m with him, when I’m in his arms and he’s kissing me and ooh…* Shaking her head, Bisca continued down the street, smiling absentmindedly at a few kids. *But then when we’re apart, all the issues of being in a relationship with someone whose job can pull him away, which forces him to travel most of the time, and who is also pursuing a relationship with at least two other girls rears its head. And Alzack is… He’s dependable, kind, funny, and he really has been doing an amazing job on the romance aspect. There’s none of the nerves-on-fire passion there is with Ranma, but there’s certainly a goodly portion of desire there.*

She was pulled out of her thoughts as she heard a voice shouting out to her. She turned to see Wendy and Carla moving down the snow covered streets, the young girl waving happily at her while, behind them Erza, followed. Ranma was nowhere in sight at first, but he leaped down from a nearby rooftop to join them, and Bisca smiled, making her way over to the group. “You took your sweet time!” she teased, though there was a bit of real irritation there too as she hugged Ranma. “What happened?”

“Mountains are really hard to move through, especially when they get so high you can barely breathe, let alone fly, and the snow certainly didn’t help matters,” Ranma replied as he hugged her back. “Even for me, that was damned tough.”

Shaking her head at that, Bisca moved out of his arms and exchanged a hug with Erza before giving an extra-large hug to Wendy, and, as she did, Bisca felt as if she had a bit of an epiphany*. I want a kid eventually, maybe in a year or two. Ranma, though, he’s already been a father for all the Onii-chan/imouto thing, and, like he told us, he’s got no interest in settling down or having kids. I can’t honestly blame him for that, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want kids. And Alzack, he can give that to me. Stability… It might not be sexy as adventure, but I think it is even more important, and, coupled with the romance, I think I could be very happy with Alzack.*

Straightening, Bisca let out a breath and then thrust her shoulders back resolutely. *If I’m going to do this, it’s going to be now.* With that in mind, Bisca turned to Ranma and asked, “Um, can, can I talk to you for a moment? Alone?” She looked over at the others then Ranma.

Ranma nodded and led the way around a corner into the lee of a building, but then, when he moved forward to give her a hug, Bisca held up a hand, holding him at arm’s length. “No, um, none of that. I do just want to talk, and this, this’ll be difficult enough without you hugging me or, or touching me at all, really.”

“Ah. That, that doesn’t sound good. I presume this is serious relationship discussion time?” Ranma asked, wincing. “Um… Or is this an, ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ thing?”

“Heh. It’s both, though I would say with that second one, yeah, it’s never always just the person doing the breakup. In this case it is both of us, and…” Bisca steeled herself and pressed on, her red-painted lips pressed firmly together. “I don’t think this is going to work out.”

From there Bisca explained how she’d basically been forced to do some serious soul searching, how Alzack had finally tried to give her some romance and had succeeded. Then she went on to explain all the issues that she could see becoming ever larger if they continued to try to pursue a relationship. “And, and Alzack and I could have a family eventually, something you basically told us point blank you weren’t interested in. I…” She deflated, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, Ranma, but basically, I think what I really want and what I thought I wanted were two different things. The heart isn’t a very easy thing to understand, unfortunately.”

“I see…” Ranma replied, feeling a bit of tightness in his chest akin to the pain that he felt when he realized he and Akane wouldn’t work out all those years ago. *This hurts, a bit more than I thought it would honestly, I suppose that’s because of how much more I know about relationships at this point and how physical we got. Still, I can’t say she’s not making the right decision here.*  “I, I’m sorry. I’m sorry to see you go. Sorry we didn’t work out. But, if you’re happy, then that’s enough, y’know? You gotta see to you, and I can’t, can’t change myself to match what ya want perfectly.”

Bisca sighed sadly. “I’m sorry too that we didn’t work out, but I have to say I was never interested in perfection, Ranma. It’s just, being with you came with too many downsides and caveats, and when I set aside how you make me feel, my, my body’s physical reaction, my decision, sadly, made itself. A portion of me is still not happy about it, but that’s a much smaller part than the amount which thinks this is the best idea.”

“Again, as long as you’re happy, girl, that’s all that matters. I’ll get over it, maybe try to whip up some ice-cream and drown my sorrows in yummy goodness, or is that kind of thing only allowed for girls, and boys just have to soldier on?” Ranma asked, his sense of humor giving him a foundation to lean on for a moment.

“Heh. Well, if so, you’ve got a unique way to still take advantage of it, don’t you?” Bisca teased.

The two of them smiled at one another, and some of the tension evaporated. The sadness was there, but it wasn’t as prevalent as it had been before. “I hope you, Erza, and Jenny continue to have fun together, Ranma, and you better keep looking out for Wendy or else!” Bisca said, a smile on her face.

“I hope so too, and if Alzack treats you bad, just smash him one for me. Oh, and you can keep the rifle barrel. In fact…” Ranma paused and pulled out a pad and pen from his Requip space before writing down a few short lines and then an address. “This is a letter of introduction. If you ever want to go to Pergande, you can look my friend the gunsmith up, and he’ll hook you up with a full gun to go with that.

Bisca bit her lip, trying not to say that that was easily the best present she’d ever gotten. That rifle barrel, with the amount of work on it, would be equal in worth to a large house complete with full renovation. “Thank you, Ranma.” For a moment they just looked at one another, not certain how to end the conversation, but then Ranma just nodded at her, gave her a final smile and turned away to rejoin the others. Bisca watched him go, then shook her head and sighed, turning away. She still wasn’t happy with this decision, but she felt it was the right one right now.

Elsewhere, Ranma’s smiles shifted into a scowl for a few seconds. Then he smiled as he smelled a certain fire breather on the wind and turned to catch a fist covered in flame as Natsu leaped down from a nearby rooftop, shouting, “Ranma, fight me!”

Ranma’s water easily dissipated the fire, and he twisted, bringing Natsu down and around until Ranma was standing behind him, locking in a neck hold with one hand as he noogied the younger man mercilessly. “Ah, for once, kid, you’ve got great timing. Let’s take this outside the town, though.” He looked over to where Erza, Carla and Wendy were waiting. He had already brought Seilah to his room and left her there with her books and the camping gear, so she would be fine. In fact, she’d even convinced him to buy a few more books on the way. “I’ll see you over at the guildhall, okay? Just…got some steam to work out.”

“Steam! Hey, that was a pun, a right good one!” Natsu said, grinning even as he tried to get out of Ranma’s choke. “Still, let’s go! This time I’ll win!”

“You truly do not persuade when you can’t even get out of a simple arm lock,” Carla retorted, flinging her blonde hair back with a sigh and an eye-roll. Then, even as Ranma led Natsu off, she blinked and slowly moved her small frame behind the very slightly larger Wendy as she looked around. “But where the flaming moron is, the blue fool is sure to follow… Gah!”

“Carla, there you are! I was so worried that you’d gone away again! Please don’t leave me; I’ll give you all the fish you could ever want, I promise!” Happy shouted as he latched onto the cat girl’s back, having acted the ninja far better than he ever had before.

“GAAHAHHHHH!!” Carla shouted again, trying to get Happy off her, but he clung like a limpet until Wendy tickled his sides, forcing him to let go. Then the little girl stood between her friend and Happy, trying to talk her down from murder.

“Ahh, it’s good to be home,” Erza murmured, turning to watch a massive plume of steam appear in the distance.

**OOOOOOO**

Jenny was not a happy camper right now, although that ‘right now’ had been going on for weeks, ever since she had returned from Seven, if she was honest. This latest bit of irritation was simply a few more straws on the camel’s back. “What do you mean, you don't want to employ me anymore?” she growled, crossing her arms underneath her chest and tapping one finger against the upper half of her other arm while her foot made a staccato noise on the floor. To any connoisseur of female anger™, this was the equivalent of the point where someone should be talking about setting up a virgin sacrifice for the nearby volcano.

The man across the desk from Jenny cringed and then looked over at her Blue Pegasus guildmate, the man who had been acting as her manager for so long, standing to one side of Jenny. “Jenny, it's nothing to do with you. Calm down,” he said softly, reaching out to take her arm.

“This was a modeling job, and suddenly they don't want to use me. Exactly how isn't this personal?” she asked tartly, glaring at the man. He backed away quickly, and she turned to her original victim. “Well?”

He flinched most agreeably, but even as he did, his eyes tracked to the scar along one side of her face. “Ah, so that's it,” she said suddenly, her voice ice cold now where before it had been raging. “Because my face is scarred, you think I'm not modeling material any longer?”

The man gulped and then looked again at her guildmate for a moment. Seeing no help there, he began stammering. “You see, it’s, well, it's a matter of type, you know? Mirajane has the dangerous woman angle nailed, her sister the girl next door, and you're supposed to be, well, the sexy seductress or the naïve songbird.”

“Excuse me!” Jenny gasped, glaring at the man even harder now and reaching forward to grab the top of his desk with her hands, her magic aura appearing around her. “I am a certified S-class mage! I am no one's mere seductress, and I am certainly no one’s naïve **anything**!”

“We, well, we know about your magic, but that really has, um, never been a selling point for you…” the man replied, trailing off as Jenny glared before rallying a bit. “You're just supposed to be a sexy glamour girl. Glamour girls don't have scars,” he finished, his tone now making it sound almost as if she had gotten a scar just to spite him.

“I'm a mage first, a model second! I thought everyone understood this! I thought that added to my mystique!” Jenny growled. *If I couldn't keep being a mage, I wouldn't have become a model at all.*

The man just shrugged. “I'm sorry, but while scars on a man can be kind of sexy, scars on a woman, especially on their moneymaker, their face, no chance, even one like that. Now, if you just want to sing for us, we could set up something...”

Rolling her eyes, Jenny gave the man the finger and turned away. “In that case, don't expect to get your down payment back. I’m out of here, loser.” As she turned away, her upraised arm shifted from giving him a finger to holding a futuristic-looking gun before turning sideways around to point at him. While full body Mecha Take Overs were hard, weapons were relatively easy to call up. “Unless, of course, you have a hankering to spend most of your cash on medical bills.”

As the man stammered in sudden fear, Jenny stalked out of his office and down the hall, shaking her head. She wouldn't really have fired at the man, but at the ceiling? Doing a bit of public restoration and damage, that she could’ve done. *It would've been very therapeutic, for darn sure,* she thought. “Is this a one-off problem or something I’m going to run into all the time?”

“I am afraid it might be the latter,” her guildmate said cautiously, staying well away from Jenny's reach. “As undiplomatic as that man was, you, Mirajane and her sister Anna did sort of have different demographics that you called out to. With that scar, it makes it look as if you're trying to horn in on Mirajane's territory, at least in part.”

“Good,” Jenny barked, snorting with laughter at the very idea. She wouldn’t have a problem with that. Instead, she rather thought it was an excellent idea. She and Mirajane were rivals, after all, and the idea of taking some of Mirajane's fan base away from her was just as satisfying as beating her for the number one model in Fiore.

The man winced, and Jenny rolled her eyes. “What now?”

“It's just, I'm not certain how well that would go. I'm certain the ratings of any photo the two of you are in would skyrocket, but what happens when the two of you take your fighting beyond simply attempting to appeal to more of one type of demographic than the other?”

“Are you saying that Mira and I don't have any self-control?” Jenny asked, amusement banishing her dark mood for the moment.

“Considering that the last time the two of you were on a job together you ended up fighting and nearly leveled the hotel you are staying in, I think it's a viable worry,” the man replied tartly.

“That was a special case. We weren't fighting one another, we were fighting against this group of sleaze-balls that were taking pictures!” Jenny groused. It had also led them into a bit of experimentation, which Jenny knew she didn't regret. But she had gotten the impression on the train into Seven that Mirajane did regret it.

“Nonetheless, word of that event went around, even if the owner of the hotel and the person who paid for that modeling job was willing to front the money to pay for the damages. No one is going to want to pay out money for you both, and to make any headway you’d need to convince people who sign up Mira to sign you instead.” The man shook his head, his face showing what he thought of the odds of that.

Jenny scowled and then looked down at the suitcase that she had left outside her normal changing room for this job. Sighing, she hefted it up over one shoulder before turning her attention back to the matter at hand. “So, you think my modeling days are over?”

“Your pure modeling days, perhaps,” the man said apologetically. “Maybe if you helped out with our escort service a bit, people would get used to your new look,” he wheedled. Jenny had never been part of the escort services that blue Pegasus offered like Trimens or, indeed, most of the rest of the guild, although unlike what the name implied, they very rarely acted as simple sex objects. Instead she had gone out on modeling gigs, and since that was pretty much the same thing, the master had always allowed it. But Jenny had also gone out on a lot more combat missions than most of the others, bar the late Ichiya. She also was a very talented singer and dancer, which the man supposed she could fall back on now.

Actually, that could have been the furthest thing from Jenny's mind. *Oh, I like singing and dancing, and I liked modeling. But what I really wanted to do was to help people, and with the guild no longer taking combat missions, that really throws a wrench into that plan.* Singing and dancing, to Jenny's mind, were things that she did either for fun or to bring in the money quickly, unlike modeling. She had truly begun to love that, getting a thrill out of having her picture taken, knowing what that meant and, of course, how many men and even women looked at her to get their jollies off. It sated Jenny's exhibitionist streak, a foible of her personality that she was well aware of. Singing was all right to do the same kind of thing, if you chose the right venue, but it wasn't as easy or as sexualized as getting her picture taken and put into magazines.

So with two of her favorite jobs blocked, one because of the scar on her face, which honestly Jenny didn't see as all that important—*I mean, it just came down one side of my jawline, after all; it isn't anything huge—*and the other closed to her because of her guild deciding to back away from violent jobs, Jenny was at a crossroads. *Do I stay with the guild, change my tune to tuning, so to speak, or…*

Jenny looked down at her shoulder where the symbol for Blue Pegasus lay beneath her heavy winter jacket. She touched that spot gingerly with her other hand, that hand closing over it, and then sighed, pulling her hand away. *We’ll have to see. I don't want to make a precipitous decision yet. But honestly, moving on, that seems like an idea that I could get behind.*

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma smiled as he entered the guild, ignoring the light bruising on his chest and shoulder. For once, he had fought like all those pathetic earthbound opponents he’d faced before, taking and dealing out damage straight up, and it had felt oddly good. Most of that, he was certain, was because of his and Bisca’s backing away. They hadn’t, after all, been actually dating, so he couldn’t say that they had really broken up, now that he’d thought of it.

But the rest of the reason was that he had also proven that his new durability was higher than Natsu’s. Oh, the fire user’s durability was indeed incredible, and his endurance too. Ranma had actually waited a few minutes after beating him into unconsciousness, and then the boy had sprung to his feet and just charged him again as if he had never been hurt. But, even so, it was Ranma who had walked away, and with only a few bruises to show for it. So he was in a great mood as he entered the guild, his grin only diminishing slightly as he spotted Bisca and Alzack at the back. *I told her to go with the one that could make her happy. She did that. I can’t then turn around and bemoan that choice of hers.*

Putting that thought out of his head, Ranma looked around eagerly. “All right, where’s the Lightning Bitch!? I’ve had my warm up, now it’s time to get to the real thing!”

“If you’re talking about Laxus, he’s not here,” Gray supplied, waving at him with his new arm, which looked almost normal right up until his thumb shifted at a mental command into a bottle opener.

Ranma’s eyes widened involuntarily at that, and he shook his head. *Okay, there’s some serious magic involved in that thing. That Porlyusica, she sure knows her stuff.* “Where is he, then?”

“Off with the Thunder Tribe. They wanted him along to some festival or something,” Gray said with a shrug.

“Damn, so who else am I gonna fight, then?” Ranma pouted, looking around. Erza wasn’t there, though Ranma knew she had said something about going to the hot baths or something the moment they got back. *Thinking about it, Wendy and Carla are probably with her*. They really hadn’t taken the time to bathe much in Joya, and even when Ranma or Erza had heated the water, it just hadn’t been the same, always needing to be quick before the water cooled. And then, on the way back, they hadn’t taken any time at all which could have slowed them down further.

He looked over at Makarov, who was staring at him for some reason. “What about you old man? Or oooh, you and Mira both? Bet you I could beat some life into those old bones of yours.” He frowned as he looked around, scowling. “Damn, she’s not here either? Come on!”

Makarov didn’t respond, still staring at Ranma for a moment. *What the fuck!? His magical aura, it’s, it’s at least half again the size it was, at worst, and that’s with him controlling it so well too. Where in the world did he come by that kind of… Second Origin perhaps?* His thoughts slowing to a halt at that, he finally became aware that Ranma had come close enough to wave his hand in front of Makarov’s face.

He batted it away, shaking his head. “Gah, enough of that, brat. And as for your question, I’m going to answer ‘hell, no’ on that one. These old bones have more than enough life in them as they are, and I, for certain, have no desire to let you try to take your frustrations out on me. Why don’t you grab Gray and a few of the others and see if they can give you your proper workout?”

Shrugging, Ranma looked over to Gray. “Well, what about it, frosty? You up for possibly proving you’re tougher than Natsu? He was the warm-up, after all.”

“Heh, I am so there,” Gray replied with a smile, leaving his chair behind.

Just then, though, there was a loud screeching noise, which caused Ranma to gasp in pain as he slammed his hands over his ears. A moment later a speaker system Ranma hadn’t noticed before activated, and a shout echoed out over the town. “Warning, Gildarts shift! Warning, Gildarts shift!”

“Gildarts?” Ranma asked, his smirk at Gray’s attitude seguing into a real, excited grin of anticipation. It almost made Gray back up due to the sheer manic joy in it.

It did make Makarov nearly scream in fear. “NO!!! No way in hell are you going to fight Gildarts! Not here, not in the town, not in Ishgar! Take it to the continent if you want to do it anywhere!”

“Meh, would you settle for a no magic spar instead? I’ve always wondered whether Gildarts had any kind of martial arts to him, or if he was as boom happy as the rest of you FT folk,” Ranma replied, shaking his head.

A moment later Gildarts smashed his way through the wall to one side. The large man looked around as if confused for a moment, then moved towards Makarov. “Yo, old man! You’re still short as ever, but where is everybody? Hell, the only ones I see here that I recognize are those old drunks and Gray.”

“The Strauss family is out on a family trip to a ski resort. Erza is at the baths with young Wendy, one of our guild’s friends. Laxus is out with his three stalk…er, I mean friends,” Makarov replied, burping at the end as he smiled up at the far larger man, but his eyes narrowed as he took in how the man was standing. “It’s good to see you back, Gildarts, but I take it because you came back so quickly that the hundred year quest was too much for even you?”

“HAHAHHA!” Gildarts laughed loudly while everyone else bar Ranma stared at the two older men. Then, as he scratched the back of his head, Gildarts sighed. “Yeah, that job was too hard, even for me. It was impossible.”

“Huh!?” shouted more than one voice, and Makarov sighed, nodding, his eyes going down Gildarts’ body to his arm and leg. “Well, at least you survived. S-class mages have been going on that mission for decades now, and none but you have ever returned. I’ll count that as a win.”

Having waited to be recognized, Ranma was kind of irritated as the rest of the guild welcomed Gildarts home, and the old guy didn’t notice him. *Well, it has been the better part of a decade, I suppose,* he thought as he watched Natsu burst in, seemingly fully healed from the beat-down Ranma had given him. *Huh, impressive durability on that boy, gotta say. But brains, that’s another story.*

He watched as Natsu was grabbed and flung straight up to smash through the ceiling after shouting his patented ‘fight me’ line. “Maybe later, okay, Natsu?”

As the rest of the guild laughed and slowly retreated from the large Crash Mage, Ranma moved forward, smacking Gildarts on the back just as he took a beer from Laki, who was filling in at the bar for the absent Mira. The taller man coughed on his beer and then turned to send a glare over his shoulder. “Hey, not cool! You don’t mess with the beer!” Then he paused, staring at Ranma, his eyes narrowing. “Huh, you don’t look like a member of the guild. Are you new?”

“Hah, no! The only newcomers we’ve added since you left on that mission is Lucy. And there’s the Iron Dragon Slayer Gajeel you might’ve heard about him when he was with Phantom Lord.” Thanks to his role in rescuing Laxus and Natsu and Juvia speaking up for him, Gajeel had been offered a place in Fairy Tail. They had gotten away with this relatively easily, since the Magic Council were so busy with internal issues at present the fate of one mage who had been forced to work for them, to work off his debt to society, did not register to any of them. “And Lucy, she’s the blond over there with the huge knockers!” Makarov said, pointing.

“Master!” Lucy shrieked, covering her chest and trying to crouch down enough to hide herself from the older man’s looks. “Is, is that any way to talk about one of your mages!?”

“That’s right, master. You take your jokes too far sometimes,” Cana said, scowling at Gildarts and Makarov with a lot more heat in her eyes when she looked at Gildarts than his laughing at the joke really warranted. Then she went on, throwing an arm over her girlfriend’s shoulders. “Besides, this particular pair of cantaloupes is mine to play with.”

Ranma had turned to watch this interaction, which was precisely what Makarov had hoped for. “But, then again, even if he hasn’t joined the guild…” As he said the last word, Makarov threw his beer at the back of Ranma’s head and laughed wildly as the change occurred. “Ranma does bring a pair of his own around sometimes.”

“GRAH!” Ranma growled, sounding remarkably like Carla when faced with Happy and his attempts at courtship.

She swung at Makarov, who leaped away with a laugh. He did not, however, dodge the resulting blast of Water Dragon magic that slammed into him sending him to join Natsu in his upward journey. With that nuisance dealt with satisfactorily, Ranma turned back to Gildarts, flipping her wet hair out of her eyes and glaring up at the taller man. “Do you remember me now!? Damn, and I thought the elderly only started having problems when they hit their seventies. Was I wrong about that or wrong about your age?”

Gildarts’ eyes narrowed dangerously at that, but his lips were twitching into a smirk as he replied, “Oh yeah, I remember you now. That curse of yours is kind of memorable, Ranma. Although the last time I saw you, you didn’t have those,” he said before poking Ranma in the chest.

Ranma’s hands flared with magic as she smacked Gildarts’ hands away from her, but the magic dissipated almost as soon as it formed around her hand, Gildarts Crash magic tearing it apart, changing the water into tiny blocks before dissipating and falling to the ground as normal water. As they did though, Gildarts failed to block the kick that Ranma had sent from mid-air, having catapulted herself there from via the tiny bit of momentum he had gained from Gildarts smacking her hand aside. The kick slammed into the side of Gildarts’ head, causing him to stumble sideways before he righted himself.

As he did, Ranma’s eyes narrowed as she stared at the man, having heard something odd just then, the sound of metal on metal or gears shifting, perhaps. “No touch,” she said, waving a finger in front of herself. “Unless you want to take this outside?” she said, cracking her knuckles. “Then you can try, and I can try ta neuter you. Or smash your face in. Either or, I’m not fussy.”

“Is that a challenge, Ranma?” Gildarts asked, touching his cheek thoughtfully. *That was a hell of a kick!* Thanks to his Crash magic, Gildarts had a physical durability that put even Natsu’s to shame. It took quite a bit to actually hurt him, but Ranma had done just that, and for a moment the idea of challenging the little redhead to a spar seemed like a good idea. “Be a shame to break you in half like that after not seeing your sorry, yet oddly sexy, ass for so long.”

The short redhead might have gone for him just then for that comment when another redhead walked through the front doors, glaring around until her eyes alighted on the first redhead. “Ranma, is this really how you treat a long lost friend?”

“Laxus is my friend,” Ranma said with a smirk, ignoring the hilarious looks of the people around them at anyone claiming Laxus as a friend (acquaintance, rival, role model, guildmate, sure but friend?). “Gildarts is just this old guy who came along and saved our asses. That didn’t mean we were actually very friendly. Quite the opposite, in fact, Mr. ‘I like to send pre-teen boys to brothels.’”

“He did what!?” shouted more than one voice, the loudest belonging to, oddly, Cana.

Ranma was about to explain that when Gildarts spoke up. “I just wanted you both to get a bit of an education. And if we were friendly before you did that little prank on me, we’re sure as hell not friendly now,” Gildarts said, remembering that prank and the time he was bald all too easily now as he looked at the redhead. *Oh yes, beating this little punk down is looking better and better*. “I think you had the right idea, Ranma. Why don’t we take this outside? Out past the town limits somewhere, anyway.”

“None of that,” Erza said, stepping between them and pushing them both to one side of each other, one hand on Ranma’s head and the other on Gildarts’ chest.

It was only then that Gildarts actually looked at Erza and shook his head, his eyes widening as he took in the armor-wearing woman. “Damn! I’m only gone, what, three years or so, and you grow up on me, Erza!?”

Erza smiled warmly at the older man and then swiftly chopped him on the forehead. “If you’re thinking about flirting with me, do think again, Gildarts. I’m afraid I’m not attracted by men old enough to be my father.”

“I’m hurt,” Gildarts said, shaking his head and backing away, holding one hand to his chest. “That you would think so little of me that I’d flirt with one of the guild’s precious children.”

“That would be because I know you,” Erza replied with a light laugh.

There was a whistling sound from above, and Makarov and Natsu started to fall back through the holes they had made upon exiting the Guild. Gildarts sighed and then caught Natsu out of the air with one meaty hand, looking around thoughtfully. “Where’s Happy?”

“He’s a little tied up at the moment,” Erza replied, chuckling while Natsu also looked around, somewhat confused at his buddy’s absence. He looked over at Erza, demanding an explanation, but Erza was already speaking. “He was getting a little too irritating for Carla, and Wendy decided that for both their sakes he needed some time out. Last I saw of him, Wendy had tied him to the church’s steeple.”

“That’s my little sister,” Ranma said with a laugh, moving over to and then hopping over the bar. There she grabbed a glass and filled it with water before she started to heat the water with her ki. The instant it was warm she tossed it over her head.

Then Ranma had to duck as Makarov came after him again, this time with several of the others. “What the hell? You all have some kind of death wish?” he shouted as he ducked underneath the bar to dodge splashes of cold ale.  *Why couldn’t it be water? I can keep that from touching me for a bit, anyway. Huh… Actually, I haven’t even tried that yet. That would’ve been a great test for my newfound level of control over my Dragon Slayer powers.*

“Can you blame us?” said one man who had the look of a biker gang member or some kind of thug trying to desperately hold on to his youth via his haircut and slouch. He was smoking from a pipe and standing next to a man of similar age, who was holding onto two mugs of ale and grinning at the sex changing martial artist. “With Mirajane and her sisters out and Juvia also on a mission, we need some eye candy around here, dammit!”

“Then look at Erza!” Ranma said, dodging another attack from Makarov and sweeping a leg kick around that glowed blue, creating a wave of water all around him that smashed the old man away. “She’s a natural redhead, and she’s gorgeous to boot. Why the hell are you complaining! Besides, there’s always Bisca, now that she’s back, anyway, and she’s smokin’ too. And I don’t think Cana and Lucy mind you looking so long as you don’t try touching!”

While Bisca was not in the guildhall any longer, having exited previously with Alzack, the reactions of the others mentioned thusly were mixed, while the faces of those few other girls not mentioned were very negative indeed. While Erza blushed, looking away, Levy looked down at herself and became very mopey. Cana laughed, putting her arms under her chest and thrusting it out slightly while she nuzzled against a large barrel of ale to one side, and Laki growled, imaging what kind of wooden torture device Ranma would look better trapped in.

Lucy, on the other hand, simply blushed and covered her chest letting Cana reply for them both. “For my part, you can look all you want, but to touch you’d have to do a lot better than just buy me drinks. As for Lucy, she’s mine,” she said, suddenly holding several dozen cards in both hands, which began to glow magically. One of which hands, like Gray’s arm, had been replaced by a substitute, making Ranma once more think that Porlyusica was some kind of genius with those things. “Does anyone want to argue?”

That caused Lucy to both blush and smile, but every man around them backed away rapidly, shaking their heads.

“You see! And Bisca has Alzack to protect her,” said one of the others, nodding his head sagely. “There’s only so much look but don’t flirt men can take.”

“You don’t see Natsu or Gray doing it,” Ranma groused as he leaped over into the crowd, smashing two of his attackers aside with light, well-placed blasts of water.

This was interrupted by someone who had not been taking part in the fight sitting up from one of the booths, instead watching with a toothy grin. “GIHIHIHI!” Gajeel pushed off of the back of the booth and leaped forward, his hands suddenly turning into metallic claws. “If this is a fight with the Water Dragon Slayer, count me in! I’ve wanted to measure myself against you for weeks now!”

“Bring it on, Rusty!” Ranma shouted in return.

“Oh yeah!” Natsu shouted, bursting out from the woodwork to one side where he had fallen earlier, fire appearing all around him as he knocked Gray and another man flat. “I’m all fired up! Let’s do this!”

“Damn you, flame brain, get back here!” Gray roared, smashing the Fire Dragon Slayer in the back of the head with large spear of ice. An ice spear harder and stronger than any Ranma had seen before from him, and created faster too, which was something he noted even as Gajeel closed with him.

Soon the fight became widespread with everyone in the guild throwing punches at everyone else. Lucy and Cana attempted to stay out of it until one man was smashed down onto their table, his hands flailing and touching their chests in such a way that, accompanied by his sudden grin, made it clear that that was not exactly accidental. They hurled him off them and stood up, burning with the fires of anger as they shouted, “You want a piece of us!?” and launched themselves into the fight, Cana wielding an empty mug and Lucy shouting, “LUCY KICK!” and performing admittedly textbook perfect high kicks to whoever came in range.

The only people that didn’t get involved were Laki, who was womanning the bar, Gildarts, Makarov and Erza. Gildarts laughed at it all, leaning back against the bar with Erza to one side and the master sitting down now on the other. “Is there any reason why you decided to try that, master?” Erza asked while Laki prepared a strawberry shortcake sandwich for her.

“Not particularly, although I could say that it’s fun to mess with the pigtailed brat or that he owes me some laughs for making me worry about my children so,” Makarov said before he looked at Gildarts angrily, smacking him on the arm with a Titan enhanced punch, causing the other man to wince. Few knew it, but even if he didn’t change his body shape in any way, Makarov could actually imbue punches or kicks with the power of his full Titan form, just incredibly concentrated. “That and I wanted to make certain that you and that reprobate don’t cause even more property damage than you already will by your mere presence!”

“I can’t deny that,” Gildarts said sheepishly. “Fighting that guy, er, girl, would be a lot of fun! He’s a lot stronger than I thought he might be by this point.” He then chortled, shaking his head and motioning at his chest. “And a lot bigger too!”

Rolling her eyes, Erza ignored the older man’s habitual perversions even as Makarov giggled agreement and the nearby Laki shivered. “Ranma likes to push himself. His dedication to what he calls the Art and to combat in all its forms is actually quite admirable,” Erza said, looking out into the throng where Ranma had just gotten Gray in a cross over arm bar somehow, lifting him up over his head on his shoulders. With the Ice Make user locked in place and unable to break free, his flailing legs and head became weapons as Ranma twisted in place, smacking people off-balance and then kicking out hard against Gajeel’s arms. This launched Ranma into the air, from where he threw a now woozy Gray down into the mass of fighters, cackling all the while.

Makarov grinned suddenly, leaning over towards her. He waited until Erza had taken the cake Laki handed her and was just biting into the first forkful before saying, “So, does that mean the two of you are an item? That little smile of yours just now looked a little special when you were talking about him.”

Her mouth full, Erza blushed and coughed, dropping her fork to clang onto the plate and raising a hand to slap at her armored chest, with Gildarts smacking her back as she choked on the food. When she recovered she turned, her face a mixture of embarrassment and anger. She raised a fist intent on smacking the Guild Master a good one for that, but before she could respond appropriately, he asked, “Well, is it? Are the two of you dating now? You were certainly away long enough together, and with only little Wendy and Carla as company for a good while too!”

“I, that is, we, sorta?” Erza squeaked. Yes, squeaked, Gildarts, Makarov and even Laki noted. Whatever had happened, Erza’s odd reaction to romance (note: romance, not smut) was still there. “We’re, that is, we’re not exclusive, but yes.”

“Not exclusive?” Gildarts asked, blinking in shock. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Erza shrugged, shaking her head as she slowly recovered and glaring at Makarov before turning back to her lovely, beautiful, tasty strawberry cake. “It’s something special between us. I’m not going to discuss it here.”

She speared her strawberry shortcake with a fork almost viciously, bringing it up to her mouth as both men laughed. But before she could bite down, one of the other Guild members, a man named Nab, was hurled towards them and slammed into her unsuspecting back, causing her to nearly poke her eye out with a fork full of strawberry shortcake, his head smacking into hers. Erza’s face slammed down into the strawberry shortcake in front of her, cracking the plate underneath and squishing the cake into her face.

Nab groaned, shaking his head as he pushed himself to his feet and grabbing at the totems around his neck. “Dammit! Don’t make me angry, you lot!”

“Shut up and take a job sometime, lazy ass!” shouted a voice from within the throng.

In response Nab roared and was about to call upon his magic when a terrible red aura flickered around the periphery of his vision. He quickly turned and then gulped as Erza slowly pushed herself back upright, twisting around on the bar stool to stand up, one hand pushing the remains of her delectable snack off her face. “Oh my gosh! I am so sorry, Erza! I didn’t mean it! I was tossed out…” he babbled, his face turning white.

“No excuses!” she screamed, grabbing his face and leaping into the pile where she began to use his body like a flail, smashing people left and right. “Defilers of the most sacred food, you will pay for your effrontery with your bodies!”

Ranma was the only one who didn’t scream and run. Instead he leaped towards her, a kick lashing out towards her face, which she blocked deftly with the face of Nab. He flipped himself over Erza to land behind her and then pushed backward in a lunge with an elbow extended to her kidneys. She grunted at that, staggering forward as he laughed. “That sounds kinky. Is there something you want to share with the group, Erza?”

Blushing hotly now beneath her anger, Erza growled, tossing Nab aside to smash Natsu to the ground as she summoned up two small war hammers in either hand. They were simple nonmagical war hammers, but for pounding fools there was little better. “Stay still and take your punishment, defiler of the strawberry!”

“I haven’t defiled anything,” Ranma said with a yelp even as he bent backwards to dodge a blow, one of his legs coming up in a kick that would’ve taken Erza in the chin if she had not dodged away. “Or is that a request? Defile you or the strawberry? Both? Use one on the other? Kinky.”

Ranma always got flirty during and directly after a fight, something Erza had noticed before on their journey. This was something she quite liked, although it would be an uphill battle to get her to admit it.

Soon enough the rest of the Guild were down, only Gray and Natsu still awake, the two of them brawling to one side. Ranma noticed idly that Gray seemed to have added some new moves along with a lot more control and speed in his Ice Make use since the last time Ranma had seen him in action. There were some actual martial arts styles beginning to show through there, including some moves from Drunken Style and Open Palm that Bacchus used.

*That’s impressive as hell,* he thought, although earlier he had also noticed that Natsu had trained himself to a high degree as well. It was interesting, and he liked seeing the youngsters. That was the last moment he had free from Erza though, as one hammer was quickly replaced by a staff, enlarging her reach by several meters. The end of the staff slammed into Ranma’s shoulder with punishing force, hurling him away.

“Looking away when you’re supposed to be concentrating on me? I’m hurt,” Erza quipped, actually winking at him.

“Judging by the bruise you just gave me, that’s my line,” Ranma groused, grinning and coming back in against the redhead. He wasn’t really hurt, of course, but the fact that Erza had connected so cleanly made him enjoy this fight all the more.

As the others slowly started to recover, the two of them danced around one another, limbs flashing and hands moving. When it started, none of the watchers could really tell, but at some point Ranma’s movements became not attacks, but touches. Erza’s weapons also disappeared, her own attacks becoming caresses here and there on Ranma’s chest and side. The fight became a spar and then something almost like a dance, each of them striking not to injure, but to entice, touch, or stroke.

“Sparring as flirting. If I hadn’t seen it, I wouldn’t believe it,” Gildarts said, shaking his head.

The martial artist and the redhead continued to spar for a time before Ranma caught Erza’s leg as she went for a high kick. Ducking underneath it, his arm flicked up and down, catching her leg against one of his shoulders before she could recover or move into another attack. At the same time, his other hand tapped her on the inside of her knee before tracing upwards with a finger, winking at Erza. “Why don’t we stop here for now?” he said a little huskily as he felt the muscles underneath her leg twitch under his touch. “We wouldn’t want to go too far, too quickly now, would we?”

The double entendre there made Erza blush hotly before she nodded, even though she wasn’t willing to let Ranma get the last flirt in. Ranma let her foot go, but then stilled as Erza slowly lowered her leg, letting her foot travel down his chest, before flicking off right above his groin. For some reason that was sexy as hell, and Ranma knew that he was the one blushing now. *So I’m a tiny bit of a masochist. That’s new but not entirely unexpected.*

Gildarts began to laugh, shaking his head. “That’s an interesting way to tame the savage redhead,” he shouted, getting a very pointed glare from Erza and a nonchalant shrug from a still blushing Ranma. But then Gildarts sobered, looking between the three Dragon Slayers. “You’re Gajeel, right?” he asked, pointing at the Iron Dragon Slayer.

The younger nodded, looking a little defensive. “Yeah, and you’re Gildarts. The so-called mage of certain-destruction.”

“That’s a new one,” Gildarts quipped, shaking his head. “Who’s been calling me that?”

“My old Guild Master,” Gajeel replied, shaking his head. “What do you want?”

“Ah, that explains it. Jose was always an ass, but a smart one, or else he’d have tried to make trouble while I was around.” The Crash Magic mage smirked, but there was nothing humorous about his expression as Gajeel flinched. “Oh yeah, I’ve heard about the guild war he launched in my travels. If he tried that shit while I was here, that would not have gone well for him.”

Turning his gaze from a shivering Gajeel, Gildarts let his magical aura fade back to the background, looking at Ranma and Natsu, the latter somewhat affectionately, having come to see the youngster like he was a son. “I want you there to come by my house later. I have something I need to talk to you about.”

Ranma blinked at that but then shrugged. “I’ll grab Wendy and we’ll meet you there in about an hour or so.”

“That should be fine,” Gildarts replied but then blinked. “Who’s Wendy?”

About an hour later Gildarts frowned up at, or at least tried to frown up at, where Wendy was perched quite happily on the top of his head. “High places are best places,” she said, smiling happily down at him and Ranma, while sneaking glances towards Gajeel. The two of them had not talked much during the time when Wendy and Ranma were trying to help rebuild the wrecked town and had never talked before that. She had already made a opinions on Natsu—likable, a little simple, and even more of a combat junky than her Onii-chan—and Laxus—prickly, gruff, but actually very nice if just as obsessed about strength as Ranma-nii—but wondered about the personality of the Iron Dragon Slayer.

He was looking back at her and then over at Ranma thoughtfully, but said nothing. Ranma didn't think it was because he didn't have anything to actually say. Rather, he seemed the quiet sort who preferred to listen to what other people were talking about first.

“You wanted to speak to us?” Ranma said, reaching out quickly to grab Natsu as he made to turn on his fire powers and attack Gildarts again in excitement. He didn’t really seem serious about it. Rather, his attacking Gildarts seemed to be a major part of their interaction. “Later,” Ranma said, forcing the younger boy to sit down. “I think this is a serious conversation time.”

Gildarts chuckled widely, shaking his head. “You've got that right.” He looked at Natsu closely, then over to the other Dragon Slayers. “Are all of you still looking for your parents?”

Natsu answered instantly as did Wendy, shouting “yes!” along with Natsu as she leaped off of the older man's head and then hopped into Ranma's arms, where she cuddled in and looked up at the taller man as he stomped around the small Spartan room that made up the majority of his house. The house was badly dilapidated, which made Ranma wonder how much of a role model this guy was for Natsu, considering the Fire Dragon Slayer’s own house.

The older man smiled somewhat wanly at them, nodding his head slowly. “I figured. But I'm telling you to stop.”

Ranma's eyes narrowed as he leaned back, staring at the older man while Natsu exploded in outrage and Wendy whimpered. He exchanged a glance with Gajeel, subtly gesturing towards Gildarts’ arm, which Gajeel caught.

As the old man paused in his pacing, Gajeel whipped out one of his own hands and smacked his hand down on the arm that Gildarts had been hiding underneath his parka. When he did so his hand clanged like it had just hit metal, and he leaned back.

That sound arrested Natsu's outrage, and he paused, staring at Gildarts. “Gildarts, are you wearing armor or something?”

“It's not so much what I'm wearing, kid,” the older man replied with a laugh, stepping back and whipping off his parka to stand there revealing both his heretofore hidden leg and arm. Both of them were gone, the arm from the upper arm down and the leg from the knee down. They had been replaced by prosthetics, but unlike Cana’s or Gray’s, these looked metallic and built for durability and strength far more than aesthetics. “This is why I don't want you looking for dragons, Natsu,” he said seriously. “This was done to me by a dragon.”

Wendy, Gajeel, and Natsu all stared in shocked horror while Ranma scowled, staring at the wounds and then at the rest of Gildarts, noticing that his ribs were done up in tape too and looked to have been badly wounded at some point in the last month or so if he was any judge. “Wh, what happened?” Natsu asked, his voice sounding almost crushed as he stared at his idol and role model being so badly wounded.

“I'll never forget it. It was huge, blotting out the sky above me, and fast, among the fastest things I've ever seen. I didn't even have time to blink, and it took off my arm. That's how fast it was. How strong. I didn't have a chance! That black dragon, it's a vicious creature. That’s why I’m saying not to go looking for rumors about dragons anymore, Natsu. If you run into that thing…” Gildarts shook his head. “I know how much finding your father means to you, but I want you to live and that means not tangling with that monster.”

“I'm a Dragon Slayer!” Natsu shouted leaping to his feet. “If this other dragon knows something about…”

“He didn't say a damn word to me, Natsu!” Gildarts cut him off, shaking his metal arm in the younger man's face. “It just attacked. It didn’t have anything to do with my mission. It just saw me, maybe it felt my magical power or something. But whatever the reason, it attacked me faster than I could speak. And if it can do this to me, what do you think it would do to you, to your friends if they followed you along on this mission to find your father?”

Ranma stayed silent as Natsu stuttered, stumbling to a halt and then turning away. Ranma simply nodded his head at the older man and then asked, “What did it look like, this dragon that attacked you?”

“Big, wing-span so wide it could cover a city. Four limbs, a giant tail with several spikes along its length. Its scales were almost as black as a starless void with these little whorls of blue here and there on its surface occasionally,” the older man replied. “Why, do you know something about it?”

Ranma sighed and leaned back, looking down at Wendy in his lap before looking around at the others. “The name of that Dragon is Acnologia. It, or maybe he, is a remnant of the original Dragon Wars thousands of years ago. The first, original Dragon Slayer—her name was Irene—was friends with an ancient Dragon named Belserion, and he left this spirit thing somehow behind it...”

“Wait, Irene?” Natsu said, twisting around to stare at Ranma. “The same woman that was Erza's ancestor? Is that where you guys went!?”

“Yeah,” Ranma replied with a nod, not questioning how Natsu knew about that. Erza might’ve told him or one of the other girls who had seen the image of Irene’s little memory box. “We didn't anticipate the thing Belserion left for her being a spirit that could tell us so much, kid, or I might have invited you along,” Ranma said somewhat apologetically, but not really. “I'd apologize for that, but we had no way of knowing. We thought it would all be personal stuff for Erza, and so we went off by ourselves, me to help her find the place and maybe a hint as to how to make my body and Dragon Slayer magic stop fighting, and Wendy…”

“Wendy along for the ride,” Wendy replied, smiling a little and speaking as if she were just completing her big brother’s thoughts. “It was fun meeting Belserion, though. He was funny.”

“Did he say anything about our parents? Mine was named Metalicana,” Gajeel asked, speaking up for the first time.

“And mine was named Igneel!” Natsu said, actually showing restraint in not reaching out to shake Ranma or Wendy in order to get answers out of them faster.

Wendy pouted a little, shaking her head. “Sorry. The only ones that he really got along with were my mama and a few of the others who he said had died, though he had a few opinions on those too, I remember. He said that Igneel was a hothead, but he wasn't nearly as stubborn or set in his ways as some of the others. If you caught him in a good mood he was quite likable, but he liked to fight far too much for Belserion's taste.” She giggled a little, looking at Natsu and thinking, *like father, like child*. “He called him a young whippersnapper with far too much fire in his belly for his own good.”

“That’s an impossibility!” Natsu said, but he looked a lot happier than he had a few minutes ago as Gajeel groused, scowling and looking away. “But he didn't know where any of them could've gone?”

“No. Belserion left that message while the wars were still going on. He didn't know anything that happened after his death, obviously,” Ranma replied for the siblings.

Wendy looked up at Ranma, one eyebrow quirked, and Ranma understood what she was asking: should they mention the fact that this dragon spirit now inhabited a sword among Erza's collection? But Ranma shook his head, indicating that they shouldn't tell anyone that. If Belserion wanted to talk, that was one thing, but on the trip through Joya Erza had attempted to strike up a conversation with her new sword only to be ignored most of the time. Apparently once that spell had finished, talking took a lot out of the Dragon, and Ranma wanted it to be Erza and Belserion's choice to reveal him to the other Dragon Slayers.

“That makes sense, I suppose,” pouted the Fire Dragon Slayer.

At the same time, the Iron Dragon Slayer just groaned again. “Hardheaded and set in his ways, that's all the guy was able to tell you about Metalicana?”

“Pretty much,” Ranma said with a nod. “Sorry.”

“Yes, Belserion didn’t really… Well, dragons, most of them, weren’t exactly sociable, and Belserion tended to not get along with the more combative dragons. He was an intellectual; that’s why he was called the Sage,” Wendy supplied.

“Whatever,” Gajeel mumbled, irritated at himself for getting his hopes up like that.

“I want your promise,” Gildarts said, drawing all of their attention back to him as he sat down on his bed, staring at Natsu. “I want your promise,” he repeated, “that you won't go after Acnologia. That **thing** is a killer. No matter how strong you are,” he said, his eyes flicking over to Ranma, “You're not up to his weight level.”

Ranma begged to differ on that, but he didn't say anything as Natsu mumbled something that might charitably have been called an affirmative response. After all, who knew? It could be true. Instead Ranma simply looked back at the old man. “And your running into the black-scaled bunghole had nothing to do with your hundred year quest?”

“No,” Gildarts said with a laugh, amused at Ranma’s attempt to not curse in front of Wendy. “I barely got to the area the request specified before that black dragon found me. I don't know if that's a coincidence or not, but when I was being looked after by the locals they said they saw something that night, some large bright flashes or something in the distance. So who knows, maybe the black dragon was there to fight the Cyclops of Mount Senedis and running into me was just a happy chance.”

“Whatever,” Gajeel grumped for a second time while Natsu growled, stood up, and moved towards the door, exiting quickly. Gajeel quickly followed him out, not looking at the others as he did.

Wendy watched them go, shaking her head. “They're just as sad as I was about not learning more about where my mama could have gone,” she said to the others. “They just don't want to admit it. And they don’t want to admit that Acnologia is beyond them.”

“Heh, well, knowing that his enemies are beyond him seems to be a chronic problem with Natsu,” Ranma said with a chuckle, ruffling her hair. *For my part, I’m patient. I can wait for this Acnologia to come to me if he’s going to hunt down other Dragon Slayers as Belserion told us he would. If not, well, maybe I can entice him to fight me someplace where I would have an advantage…*

Wendy giggled, and Ranma stood up, letting Wendy crawl up him to perch on his head even though she stared longingly at Gildarts for a moment before Ranma moved towards the doorway. “Thanks for the information, old man,” Ranma said, absentmindedly giving Gildarts the finger. “And when you’re feeling better we’ll have that match.”

Gildarts rolled his eyes, tossing the table that was sitting next to his bed after Ranma with a shout of, “I'm not that old, you bastard!”

Ranma ducked quickly, moving like a mambo dancer, so low that the table missed. Wendy, who didn’t move from her position on his head, laughed with him as they exited the cabin.

Outside it was snowing again, the kind of large, wet snowflakes that told Ranma these were going to be sticking around for a while, adding to the amount of snow already on the ground. “Well, Wendy, back to the apartment?”

“Actually, would you mind if I had a sleepover at Fairy Hills? All the girls are going to be putting together a sleepover party to celebrate Levy’s birthday. Even Mira, Lisanna and Anna are going to be back by then, and I thought it sounded nice.”

Ranma nodded. “That's fine. It'll give me a chance to teach Seilah some cooking without anyone being bothered by the inevitable smell of burning and such.”

That evening Ranma and Wendy walked up to Fairy Hills to be met by Erza and several of the others. “Hey, Wendy, glad you could make it,” Levy said with a grin, exchanging a high five with the other height-challenged girl while nodding to Carla. “You're holding that form longer every time I see you.”

“It is most helpful, yes, especially since little girls don't tend to pick me up this way. Well,” Carla corrected herself with a chuckle, poking Wendy in the side, “except for this one.”

“You know I do it with love, Carla,” the little girl said with a laugh of her own, hugging her best friend to her while Carla shook her head but made no effort to pull away. Then Wendy looked up at her Onii-chan. “Are you sure you don't want to join?” she teased. “I'm sure they have some cold water somewhere.”

“Ha ha ha, Wendy,” Ranma said, mock glaring at the girl. “I think I've spent more than enough time in my female form of late, thank you so very much.”

She giggled again, and Ranma rolled his eyes, winking at Erza as if to say, ‘See what I put up with?’

The natural redhead chuckled, then hugged him and told him that she would see him tomorrow. “And if you spar with Gildarts without me around, I will be most put out with you.”

Ranma frowned and then gulped as Erza stepped back and entered the dormitory, her hips swaying. He then looked up and caught Bisca watching them. He smiled up at her, watching as she waved down at him before turning away. *Yep, that’s gonna be awkward for a bit, ain’t it. Damn, this whole breaking up thing is hard. No wonder Laxus doesn’t date girls in the guild. Although, judging from the looks he was giving Mira back in Seven, that idea might have been taking a severe beating lately.*

Juvia came out then as Erza entered. She had come back from a mission a bare few hours ago and had just come out of her room when she heard Ranma’s voice. Now her eyes narrowed at the sight of the pigtailed mage, although they softened noticeably as they noticed Wendy. She nodded at them all and then said simply, “Juvia neglected to purchase several items Juvia will need in the near future. Juvia will be heading out now to get them. Juvia, however, wishes to ask Ranma some questions, one Water user to another.”

Ranma shrugged, gesturing for Juvia to fall in with him as he turned away. “Sure. I've got some shopping of my own to do even if I am only going to be cooking for one tonight.”

As she turned to go inside Fairy Hills with Wendy, Carla paused, staring up into the sky as a premonition of danger hit her like an icy wave. Something would happen tonight, something life changing, something that would affect Wendy, her, Ranma, and everyone else in this town. But she couldn't sense where it was coming from or where the epicenter would be. All she could see was clouds in the future, like a tunnel of lightning and darkness. And the feeling of something else, something she had forgotten long since.

*What is that?* She probed the image silently, trying to discern if this was a premonition of the future that she could use to change that future. But it didn't give. Even when she attempted to think of ways to get young Wendy out from the town, it didn't change. The end would come regardless.

With a sigh she stopped the action, moving up to stand beside Wendy as one of the other girls held the door open for them. *I don't know what that is, but it's obviously best to stay here with Wendy and guard her, whatever it is.*

While Juvia had said she wanted to talk, the two of them were silent as they moved away from the others. This allowed Ranma to look at her for a time out of the corner of his eye. Juvia was a slender young woman around the same age as Erza with azure blue hair a slight shade lighter than Wendy’s, which matched her dark blue eyes above a small nose and a small, if somewhat inexpressive, mouth. She had snow-white skin and a somewhat busty figure shown off by a long blouse that left her shoulders half-bare and a long skirt down to below her knees made of white and blue, and she wore a blue-crystal cravat that showed the Fairy Tail mark. *Huh, I wonder where her actual guild mark is?*

Once they were they were well out of earshot, Juvia turned on Ranma, her face almost wrathful. “Juvia wonders just what Ranma is thinking!”

Ranma backed away at the sudden eruption of feminine fury as the girl began to growl at him, angrily advancing until they were practically chest-to-chest. “Juvia knows you are not a fool, but Juvia wonders if you allowed your male mind to be taken over by your hormones! It is the only explanation Juvia can think of for letting that demon girl live, and not only live but travel with you! Now, what is going on!?”

Ranma looked back at her and then smiled lopsidedly, setting aside the question of how she had spotted Seilah for now, at just how amusing this was. “You’ve kinda been holding that in for a while, haven't you?”

Backing away, Juvia threw out her arms and exhaled, actually smiling slightly. “Oh, you have no idea!” She then sighed and nearly collapsed, shaking her head a little before becoming serious once more. “But Juvia would still prefer to know, what was Ranma thinking?”

“Let's walk and talk,” Ranma said with a sigh, “I think I do owe you an explanation.”

“No shit,” Juvia barked back, then one hand rose to her mouth, covering it in surprise.

Ranma laughed quietly and then gestured for her to keep moving. “Come on. Her name, by the way is, Seilah, and she actually isn't all that bad once you get to know her, so long as you like reading and treat books with some modicum of respect.”

The deadpan look he got in return for this statement caused Ranma to laugh again, but he hurried on quickly. “Anyway, the fact of the matter is…

From there he began to explain how he and Seilah had first met months before the events in Seven, how the two of them had gotten along somewhat, and how the woman actually liked him and Wendy. “But she was under orders and couldn't get out of it. So there was no way she could simply, you know, not fight with her companions against you and the others.”

“And you simply allowed her to weasel out of the consequences of that attack?” Juvia growled, stared at Ranma angrily.

Ranma held up his hands. “I understand where you’re coming from, but Seilah’s already given me a lot of information about Tartarus, which I’ll start dropping off to the kings soon enough, and, after that, we should be able to hopefully deal with them much more easily than we would otherwise. And remember, both Wendy and I vouch for her.”

“Ranma’s vouching for her is questionable at best,” Juvia replied tartly. Then she mellowed a little, “Wendy’s willingness to speak up for her, though, which is something Juvia would normally put down to Wendy’s inherently gentle nature. However,” she went on, still glaring at Ranma and now poking him with a hard finger in the chest as they walked, “Juvia demands the right to actually talk to her. If she is not showing enough remorse for Juvia, then Juvia will tell people about her and will fight you to do it.”

The fight within the town against the demons had been easily the hardest, most closely fought battle that Juvia had ever been in against an opponent who manifestly had no compunction whatsoever about killing her. It had been terrifying to feel so overmatched, to know that she had only lived thanks to the fact that killing her would have taken just a little bit more time than the demons were willing to spare on it. She didn’t like that feeling; she didn’t like it at all. And the idea that Wendy and Carla had both agreed to let Seilah live after that galled Juvia*. Although, come to think of it, she really wasn’t the one that Juvia had the most trouble with. She never used her curse on Juvia, whereas that water using demon would’ve brutally killed Juvia if he had the chance, as he did Ichiya.*

Ranma caught her hand in his and squeezed gently, nodding his head and releasing her hand after a second before she could even start to blush at the contact. “Okay,” he said simply.

“Wh, that, that easily?!” Juvia asked, blinking in surprise.

“Yeah, it’s that easy,” Ranma replied. “I don’t know if you’ll get along—I ain’t promising that—but I think you’ll see that she does feel some genuine guilt for her part in that fight.”

Still somewhat bemused that Ranma was so willing to let her interview Seilah, Juvia followed behind him as he entered the market district. There she began to come back on-balance and started to help haggle with some of the merchants for the food he was buying. Immediately after that, they headed back to Ranma’s apartment.

There they found Seilah waiting for Ranma to return and, of course, reading a book. She looked up as Ranma entered, her eyes only widening slightly at the sight of Juvia behind him. Juvia glared at her and then spoke before Seilah or Ranma could. “Juvia has been told that you are repentant for your part in the attack on the town and that you wish to make amends. That you have no wish any longer to harm Juvia or any of the others that were there.”

“That is correct,” Seilah replied calmly. “And even when we attacked, it was nothing personal. I had no specific reason to be angry or hateful towards you. It was simply a job that I was ordered to do, one that I did not enjoy.”

“But is that only because of Wendy’s being there, or because you have what we humans would call a conscience and did not wish to harm any of us instead of just her?” Juvia asked tartly, while Ranma moved around her and entered small kitchen area, setting out the groceries that the two of them had bought.

Seilah watched his progress, almost ignoring Juvia for a second before shaking herself and looking back at the blue-haired girl. “I would say that I did have something of a conscience. I would further say that having such is not nearly as prevalent among humanity as you seem to be indicating. I will freely admit to being quite self-serving, but are not most humans? In their pursuit of gold, power, women, or men as dictated by their preference? Or even drink and drugs, although the interest in those is something I have never understood. Why would someone like to abuse their bodies and senses like that?”

“Don’t look at me,” Ranma said with a shrug from the kitchen area. “I never understood it either.”

Juvia growled, stalking forward and glaring at the other girl. “Juvia is still not hearing what she wants to hear!”

Seilah simply looked up at her calmly. “I am apologetic for my part in that battle. I had no wish or desire to kill anyone, though if you want honesty, at the time I would not have shed a tear for any of you if you had died other than young Wendy. I simply expended a little more effort to protect and hide all of you rather than her alone. Afterwards I was betrayed by my own people, my own lover, as you would put the term. That betrayal rocked my universe, shook my belief in the primacy of demon-kind over humanity, and made me question everything I had done up to that point, making me feel further guilt about my role in the battle at large. Since then I have kept an open mind about humans in general, my own kind, and our interactions, and have tried to, for want of a better term, become a better individual.”

Juvia scowled, crossing her arms and tapping the fingers of one hand on her other forearm and then shook her head. “Juvia does not agree with this. Juvia believes that you are a threat. However… However, Juvia is willing to be overruled on this manner. If Cana, Erza, Ranma, the drunkard, and Wendy are all willing to vouch for you, I will follow their recommendations for now.”

A bare month and a bit ago, Seilah would have replied with something rather scathing or simply not replied all. But since she had begun to spend more time around humans and, in particular, Ranma and Wendy, she had learned the fact that niceties actually mattered. So rather than snap back at Juvia, she simply nodded and said, “Thank you,” before turning her attention back to Ranma. “Are you going to teach me how to cook now?”

“I figure we can start simple,” Ranma said with a nod, gesturing her over. “Grilled chicken skewers and a side of salad.”

Juvia’s stomach rumbled, reminding her that she hadn’t eaten since that morning, and she held up a hand rather more meekly than she had been acting since entering the apartment as both Ranma and Seilah looked at her. “Juvia does not suppose that Juvia could join you for this?”

Ranma shrugged acceptance, while Seilah looked at her, her eyes narrowing slightly as she said nothing. For some reason she had been looking forward to being alone with Ranma even if they were only going to be practicing cooking. Actually, Seilah did know why she wanted to be alone with Ranma, though she was leery of putting it into words or acting on it. He was fascinating, powerful and handsome in his male form while being beautiful in his female form. Even if he was a human—although, as a Dragon Slayer, Seilah felt that that point was rather debatable—she knew she was attracted to Ranma. The weeks they had spent with Ranma basically stuck in his female body had exacerbated this issue, being the form she was most comfortable with being attracted to.

The two women found themselves glaring at one another, Juvia glaring back at Seilah in retaliation for Seilah’s glare at her while not knowing the cause of the sudden attitude change. But they broke off as Ranma began to set out the things that he would need to cook this meal, motioning Seilah over to join them. She sent a smirk Juvia’s way and moved over to join him in the kitchen, pressing against Ranma’s side.

Juvia’s eyes widened at this, and she rolled her eyes, now understanding why the other woman had been glaring at her and, oddly enough, feeling somewhat reassured. *If she can feel something so human as jealousy and attraction to a human to boot, then perhaps she really isn’t as purely evil as I feared.*

For his part Ranma blushed somewhat at the contact, beating down his more primal instincts at the feel of Seilah’s truly gigantic chest pressing into his side and arm. The demon woman’s overflowing mountains were truly attention grabbing. “Okay, first we’re going to start by teaching you how to cut things and how to peel things: what tools to use, how to hold the knife, and so forth. Then we’ll move on to the topic of pasta, which is an essential skill for any chef. After that, seasoning.”

As he continued, the two women simply listened as Ranma explained, with Seilah pulling away slightly, thinking that perhaps she should be taking notes on this. She watched Ranma’s hands as he chopped a few mushrooms, first slowly and then faster as he smiled up at her.

That smile caused Seilah to smile in turn, and she found herself rather enjoying it. She smiled and bit her lip as Ranma took her hand and showed her how to hold the knife and then how to hold and use the peeler, removing the skin from a pepper, or the Ishgarian equivalent, anyway. It looked kind of like a pepper, but the skin was more like that of a carrot, hence the peeler.

Seilah had no trouble at all with wielding a cutting knife, though she tended to put a little too much pressure into the knife, cutting into the wood underneath. That was simply a sign that she needed more training in how to control her own strength, which Ranma was well used to. It was, however, when they started to talk about the need to cook things where they started to run into problems.

When it came to actually boiling the tomatoes in order to peel them more easily for the sauce, she set the setting too high and then kept on checking it, even after Ranma warned her not to. That was kind of amusing to Ranma, but that paled in comparison to the problem of spices. “Are you certain that I need to only add a little bit of salt to the pasta before cooking it? That seems counterintuitive given the amount of water.”

“It might be counterintuitive, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t true,” Ranma said.

Seilah frowned but turned away, setting the salt down and picking up another tin of seasonings. “Pepper, then, and perhaps this for more taste. I rather liked it when I tried it earlier.”

“Now wait,” Ranma said, grabbing her hand instilling it. “You don’t add that spice to boiling the pasta. That is for fish. It won’t taste good with chicken ravioli anyway.”

“But they are both meat, are they not?” Seilah asked quizzically. “What is the difference?”

“Well, while they both are the central portion of a meal, they aren’t the exact same thing. The texture is different, the taste is very different, and how you season them, in many ways, is different too. You have to watch out for that kind of thing. Besides, the spice for this should be in the sauce, not the interior so much.”

Narrowing her eyes, Seilah began to get a little irritated the whole process when, whenever she reached for another spice to add to the chicken filling or the sauce, she was stopped. But Ranma’s calm instruction and the fact that he would take her hands to gently guide her away calmed her down tremendously.

Later on, when she started to roll out the pasta, Seilah went at it in the same aggressive manner that she had been using to cut the mushrooms and other things, slicing through bone and fat both. She didn’t seem to understand that she needed to watch what she was doing either, because she was constantly looking over at Ranma for instruction even as her hands moved. This was a little gratifying, he supposed, but not exactly conducive to actually performing the operation in question.

Still, Ranma felt they had actually performed pretty well, and between the two of them, they had created a decent enough meal. It wasn’t very good looking, and most of the ravioli Seilah had made opened in the water, but she had followed instructions relatively well as long as he was watching. He dreaded the idea of letting her try to cook on her own, though.

The three of them talked for several minutes, a back-and-forth discussion about types of food, mainly, that the three of them had seen or tasted. Ranma, of course, had seen more types of food than the other two, but Juvia described what sounded like one of the best hamburgers that Ranma had ever heard of, complete with near-sexual moaning that nearly unmanned him. She also described a kind of steak that he would liken to wagyu steak back in his old world. For her part, Seilah described places she had eaten, in particular food fairs that she and her former lover had gone to occasionally. She hadn't known the names of or how to cook any of the foodstuffs she had seen, of course, but that had in no way taken away from her enjoyment in eating them in the first place.

All in all it was a very pleasant meal, and Ranma enjoyed it just as much as he had enjoyed eating with Seilah and the others on the trail. Better, even, considering that the food was much better than he could've made out over an open fire. Eventually, though, it got too late, and Ranma turned to stare out into the sky, shaking his head. “It's near to midnight, I think,” he said, standing up. “Juvia, let me walk you home.”

Juvia smiled at that, actually curtsying as she stood up from the table. “Juvia thanks Ranma for the courtesy, but he does know that Juvia is a mage, does he not? Juvia is perfectly capable of walking herself home,” she teased.

“Ranma knows, but Ranma would feel more sanguine if Ranma did so, and, besides, this way Ranma can check on Wendy at her sleepover,” Ranma drawled.

At that Juvia pouted at him, pushing his shoulder with one hand. “Juvia would prefer Ranma not to make fun of her verbal tick. Juvia has attempted to train herself out of it many times over the years only to fail. It is not an affectation but a true speech impediment.”

“Sorry,” Ranma said sheepishly, looking away even as he moved to head to the door. “I didn't mean anything by it. Seilah, I'll be back in about forty-five minutes, then we’ll learn the down side of cooking: cleaning up afterwards.”

Seilah blinked, then looked down at the table and sighed, understanding his point. She also watched the two of them go, her eyes narrowed. *There is that jealousy emotion again.* With a sigh, Seilah set that to one side and moved back over to the sofa where she had left her book previously.

Outside, the snow had shifted, coming down harder yet in odd pattern, swirling more than actually settling, with high winds beginning to pick up, billowing here and there on their trip through the town. The two of them discovered that they were the only ones out and about, not seeing a single soul as they moved through the town towards the side where it abutted the small hill leading up to the Fairy Girls dormitory. About halfway there Ranma began to slow down, stopping his discussion with Juvia about different water techniques and, more importantly, how to use them both in close and long-range combat.

She noticed immediately and came to a halt beside him, looking at him quizzically while Ranma actually crouched down, his teeth suddenly bared as his hands formed into claws. “What is it?” she asked quickly. “You look as if you have seen a ghost.”

“Not so much a ghost as a feeling. The feeling of impending danger. When you’ve faced enough enemies, ambushes, and knock down drag out fights like I have, you develop a kind of seventh sense.”

“Seventh?” Juvia asked. “Surely Ranma means the ‘sixth?’”

“No, I started using my sixth sense when I was in middle school. The seventh sense is what tells you that the universe as a whole is about to screw you over. The sixth sense is more for physical dangers. They’re kind of related, admittedly, but not quite,” Ranma replied.

Juvia quirked an eyebrow and then moved around Ranma to put her back to him, staring around herself. He smiled at her willingness to trust his feeling, then, after a few moments, slowly un-crouched, muttering, “I don't know if it's a physical threat or something else, but my seventh sense is just screaming at me right now.“

About to make a comment, Juvia paused, staring down the road that she had been facing. “Who is that? Juvia thought the two of us were the only ones out here in this weather.”

Ranma quickly twisted around her and stared in the same direction. Moving slowly down the street, like someone carrying a great burden, or at least a great exhaustion, was a man wrapped from head to toe in a cloak, turban and long flowing scarves. They hid all of his appearance other than his eyes, which neither of them could make out at this distance. He was carrying a large staff of some kind, made from wood, Ranma could tell, as well as a bandanna covering his hair, the front of it visible on his forehead underneath the hood.

*Someone takes keeping his personality a secret seriously.* He looked over at Juvia speculatively even as his mind connected this guy with the stories that Queen Rose had sent her. “Does he look like a Fairy Tail member to you?”

She shook her head resolutely, her own sense of being disconcerted by the evening prickling. “Not one that Juvia has been introduced to. I think we should go say hi, don't you?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Ranma said with a nod.

Juvia strolled down the streets towards the man, who was looking around at the buildings as if he was searching for an address, while Ranma backed away, moving around a building, out of sight. Then he took to the rooftops, moving silently over the snow.

“Excuse Juvia,” she said politely as the man reached her. The street they were on was one of those canal streets, which fed into the nearby ocean, down to the cliff face. With a large house to one side, there were only two directions he could go. “But can you please tell Juvia what you are doing out so late?”

The man stopped a good distance away from her, raising his staff, and Juvia immediately became tense, but then Ranma was behind the man, a fist lashing out at him. Astonishingly, the man heard him and turned, but Ranma’s fist still smashed into the top of the staff, shattering it as he came down through the air, landing behind the man. The man leaped sideways to balance on the small guardrail protecting walkers from falling into the canal, and off his back he pulled another staff, much like Anna would have.

“You weren’t about to attack my friend there just now, were ya?” Ranma asked, smirking evilly, his other hand lashing out so quickly the man flinched, expecting the blow to land on his face, but instead Ranma tore away the scarf covering his lower face. “Now, let’s see what…” Ranma’s words stumbled to a halt, and he stared. He still couldn't see much of the man's face, but what he saw was enough. “**You**!”

The man tried to open his mouth to speak, only to break off as Ranma surged forward, a fist lashing out to shatter his second staff, followed by a kick so fast the man barely got his arms up in time. The blow hurled him up and across the canal onto the street on the other side, where he slammed into a snowdrift. Ranma leaped after him, growling angrily, landing in the drift of snow and reaching forward.

But the man had used another, short staff on the snow, and it exploded outward, trying to capture Ranma in turn. Even as Ranma used his magic to burst out of the snow, the cloaked man leaped up toward one of the nearby rooftops, using another staff to create a blast of wind that landed him neatly onto one of the roofs. He then ran off, whatever he had been intent on doing forgotten in his desire to get away from Ranma.

The Water Dragon Slayer, though, wasn’t going to let that stand, and he raced after him, leaping up onto the snow-covered rooftop in pursuit. The other man saw him coming and lashed out with several different staves, but Ranma dodged or ducked their attacks. The only one that caused him to even leap away was one, which created a sort of magical mine underneath Ranma, a runic array that nearly took him by surprise. But the man just wasn’t able to get away from the faster, stronger Ranma, and near the edge of the town Ranma finally caught up with him, taking the man off the rooftop from the side.

“Grah, you!” he shouted, grabbing and flipping the man several times to slam down into the snow with Ranma on top of him, grabbing at the back of his cloak and tearing it away. “You, what are you doing still alive!?”

The man, who turned his head to stare up with one eye at Ranma, was Jellal: same blue hair, same angular face, even the same eyes. The only difference, maybe, was the fact that his tattoo was on the wrong side of his face. Ranma wasn’t certain about that. And that face looked a little more worn and weary rather than megalomaniac.

“What are you doing still alive, Jellal? I thought Erza cut you in freaking half!?” Ranma growled again as Juvia joined them. Using her water powers to create her own version of the Boosted Step technique, she hopped directly over the canal water and up onto the bank.

The man's eyes flicked from Ranma to Juvia and then back again. “Whoever you might think I am, I am not that person,” he said. “I am not this Jellal. I, the name is Mystogan and I meant no harm.”

“Then why were you trying to cast a spell on Juvia?” Ranma asked, not letting up, instead reaching down and tearing the rest of the man’s backpack away and tossing it to one side. “I don't know where you come from, but where I come from that kind of thing is sort of frowned upon.”

“I,” the man stammered, “I am on a mission. I, it’s better if there aren’t too many witnesses to the…”

“Explain this mission of yours,” Ranma said, grabbing the man and lifting him out of the snow before slamming him back into a house’s wall so hard that the man groaned in pain.

“The, there’s going to be an anima here,” he said, his voice sounding more tired than pained or fearful. “And I'm too tired to stop it! It's too big, and I don’t have enough magical power to stop it!”

“What is an anima?” Ranma said just as, above them, the sky opened up.

It was almost as if they had been caught in a tornado that was made of cloud, silence, wind, and flashes of light, like lightning but not quite, more sudden striations of colored lights than electrical discharges. One moment everything was all right, then, the next, the storm descended, moving in from the exterior of the town. Ranma stopped and stared as the magical lights dotting the town's outskirts here and there went out, and his eyes widened.

He grabbed the man, tossing him over one shoulder as he looped his other arm around Juvia's waist, hefting her into the air and sprinting away from the incoming lights and fog. “Anima, you said! That’s the thing that's been going around stealing magic?”

“Yes,” the man said, gasping a little. Ranma had not been kind to the man during their brief running fight, and he was feeling it right now on top of his body's exhaustion. “Their speed, that is, the speed with which they are appearing has been picking up lately, as have their sizes. I haven't been able to do…”

“Whatever! I so don’t need the exposition right now. How do we fight them!?” Ranma interrupted, leaping from one rooftop to another. Behind them, the anima storm followed the fleeing trio as Ranma made his way across the snow-capped town.

In his arms, Juvia concentrated on not blushing too hard and not letting the rest of her body shut down in response to Ranma lifting her up like this. She twisted slightly in Ranma’s grip to look behind them at the encroaching wave of fog and light, watching as more and more of the magical crystal lights of the city were extinguished. “Whatever this anima is, what will it do if it catches mages?” she asked suddenly.

“It will take them with it. I don't know what happens on the other side, but everything magical is simply absorbed into the anima. I believe it forms some kind of crystal on the other side, like an artificial lacrima, but I don't know for certain,” the man said.

“How do you know anything about this thing, anyway?” Ranma said, leaping across the canal much like the one where the fight had taken place, dragging the man with him. The two of them landed easily on the other side, continuing on.

He was not, Juvia realized, heading towards the Guildhall or even his apartment. No, he was racing towards Fairy Hills. *Interesting to see his priorities, although I suppose I shouldn’t complain, considering he’s still carrying me,* she thought wryly.

“That would take too long to explain,” the man said. “But we can't fight this one; it's too huge!”

“How did you fight them before?” Ranma demanded, shaking the man before letting him go once more to run on his own.

“If you can catch the anima bubble in a null field like those Runic Knights use as it forms, you can shrink it, stop the absorption process until whoever is on the other side gives up. But at this stage, and an anima this size? It's too late. Everything magical within Magnolia is going to be absorbed. I’ve never seen an anima this large before!” the Jellal-lookalike said, sounding almost shocked. “I never even knew they could create ones this big.”

*Wendy, Carla, Erza, Bisca and the others!* Ranma thought, leaping from the last building of the town proper down onto the slope leading up to Fairy Hills. He raced forward only to stop and stare as, from that side of the town, another edge of the circle of fog and smoke that was the anima crashed over the building, racing towards them inexorably.

He turned back, his thoughts awhirl as he stared. Then he looked at Juvia and saw that she was panicking too. He looked over at the man angrily, his own panic rising. *If this thing was just a physical thing of fog, maybe a Hiryuu Shouten Ha could work to dissipate it, but not now!* “Is there any way to protect ourselves from it, any way to stop it absorbing us?”

The man frowned for a moment, thinking hard. “I don't know; I'm sorry. The only thing I can think of is perhaps magics that are not native to the other dimension might not be able to be absorbed. Like your Dragon Slayer magic, perhaps. Dragons never evolved in my home dimension.”

“Every word out of your mouth just makes me want to question you further,” Ranma growled angrily. Then, as he looked up, the sphere of light and fog was almost upon them, and he shook his head. *It’s crazy, but it might just work. No choice but to try it.* “Juvia, turn into water!”

“What? But surely in my water state I will be even more susceptible!” she shouted back, staring all around her in near-panic.

“Maybe, but in your water form we can also hide you.” Juvia looked at him wildly, and he shrugged wanly. “Well, you remember that joke you made about my eating you?”

Juvia blushed, but then Ranma leaned forward and grabbed her around the shoulders. “It's the only way.” *If we’re going to lose everyone else in this guild, I'm damn well going to save at least one person.*

At the look in Ranma's eyes Juvia calmed down and quickly transformed into her water body, then, feeling greatly daring, she leaned forward and kissed him on the lips. It wasn’t like being kissed in her physical body, of course. It felt more like letting a sip of water splash against his lips. But just as she did, Ranma opened his mouth to activate his Water Dragon Slayer magic.

He gasped, and in that instant he sucked Juvia’s entire body into his mouth and then held it there like holding a mouth full of water. For good measure he put both of his hands over his mouth as the fog of light and fog crashed over them.

One minute Ranma could see through the fog to the town all around them, the next everything was gone. Ranma could feel his body being pulled in several directions, almost, as well as being electrocuted and twisted. But when he fought against it, it was just like fighting against a heavy current: hard, but doable, made worse by the fact that he couldn’t use his hands. Despite that, eventually he burst out of the fog, only to find himself standing on what looked and felt like a massive cloud of some kind.

*What is this?* Ranma thought, staring all around him and then into the distance to where Fairy Hills should be. He looked to one side to see where the man had gone only to find him gone, absorbed or something else, Ranma wasn’t sure. *Dammit!* Despite that, Ranma closed his eyes, concentrating on his ki sense. When he couldn't feel anything trying to pull him or anything like that, he decided to chance letting Juvia out.

He opened his mouth and leaned over, letting the water form of Juvia dribble out from his mouth. Once the water was pooling on the cloud-like substance below them Juvia reformed, blushing hotly and staring up at him, shaking her head. “That was bizarre! Juvia has no wish to have that occur ever again!” *Although the feel of his tongue moving through Juvia was very… Gah, no, don’t think about it!*

“Sorry, but it was the best I could think of,” Ranma shrugged.

“Juvia understands and is grateful, if somewhat traumatized,” she said, staring around them. “Where are we?”

Ranma stared around too. First, it seemed as if they were in a large tunnel of cloud with no sky above them, but there was sky to either side in the distance. One direction showed a clear blue sky, no sign of storm or snow. The other direction showed a nighttime sky of Magnolia, minus the lights and the town, of course.

“If I had to guess,” Ranma said slowly, “I think we’re somewhere between the dimensions. That guy was right, at least. Whatever device or spell an anima is, it wasn't able to do much to my Dragon Slayer power. Which means…” He turned, orienting himself in the direction where the Fairy Hills had been from their present location and racing in that direction. Blinking in surprise at his sudden shift, Juvia stayed put for a second before realizing what Ranma was doing and racing after him. “Wendy!” Ranma shouted. “Wendy! Where are you?”

As he came close, he saw Wendy thrusting herself out of the white, staring around in shock and horror. She looked up as she heard her name called and gasped in relief as she saw her big brother, pushing herself further out of the whiteness of the cloud and racing towards them, slamming into his chest with a cry of, “Ranma-nii! They all, they all disappeared! Mira, Erza, Levy… They all were, were sucked into this thing right along with me, and now they are gone! There were these lights, and then fog inside the building, and…”

“I know,” Ranma said, shaking his head and hugging her tightly. “We ran into the same thing. The entire town was caught up in this anima. We found someone who called it that, but we don’t know what created it or why.”

“That name,” said a voice, and Ranma looked behind Wendy to see, to his surprise, that Carla had also not been absorbed and now was pushing out of the cloud too. “That name is familiar. Something about it…”

Ranma looked around, frowning as he tried to orient himself. “Anyone know where Natsu and Gajeel live?”

It turned out no one knew where Gajeel lived, but both Juvia and Carla knew where Natsu stayed when he was in town: a small shack on the outskirts skirts of town, the description of which matched the one Erza had given him of the other Dragon Slayer’s accommodations once, though Erza had never given him any directions. “He must’ve been one of the first ones caught up in this, then,” Ranma mused.

As he finished speaking there was a loud dull ‘crump’ sort of sound to one side of where Wendy and Carla had pushed themselves out of the cloud. They all turned in the direction of the sound, and a large tower clock burst out from the cloud cover. It had arms, short stubby legs, and an elderly-looking, mustachioed face.

Lucy was inside the glass face of the clock along with three other people, all squished together so much that none of those staring at them could actually tell where one body ended and the other began, save for their heads. “That looks **really** uncomfortable,” Ranma remarked, reaching forward and unlatching the lock, allowing all four of the girls inside to tumble out.

“It was,” Cana groaned, even though she was blushing hotly. *Being that close to my girlfriend: yes, please. Being that close to my girlfriend and two other girls in an enclosed space where none of us can barely breathe? No thank you.*

“What happened?” Ranma asked.

“The four of us were in the first floor’s kitchen, cleaning up after the dinner and snacks. None of us had taken part in actually making the meal, so we had to clean,” Lisanna said, gently pushing her sibling off of her and then standing up and pulling Anna to her feet before moving over to stand beside Wendy as she continued to speak. “Then this clock guy appears next to Lucy shouting about some kind of other-dimensional attack. None of us believed it, but then we see this fog outside the window, and Cana turns, leaps over the countertop and tackles all three of us into the clock. I honestly never thought we’d all fit. It’s a little bigger inside there than it looks.”

Anna nodded while Ranma scratched at his ponytail, staring from Lucy to the celestial spirit clock and then out all around them. “I suppose it would take one kind of dimensional magic to fight another.”

“That’s what I think too,” Lucy said, hugging Cana to herself as they stared around. “What, what happened? Where is everyone?”

Ranma explained what he knew even as he turned away, looking towards Carla and Juvia to lead them to Natsu's house. The two of them took the cue, though Anna and Lisanna quickly understood where they were going and raced ahead of them.

“And this guy just disappeared during the actual attack? And we have no idea if he was caught up in it or just escaped somehow?” Cana said, walking beside Ranma through the cloud and trying to put to one side what she was actually seeing all around her even as she scowled irritably. All four of the girls were sore and in pain from their time inside the clock, however brief it might have been, and Cana knew that she was going to have a bruise on her left side from someone's elbow for a while.

“Yeah,” Ranma said, nodding his head. “If not for the fact that he told me that this thing might not be able to handle my Dragon Slayer powers, I would be thinking that he was the one behind all this, or at least formally allied with whoever is, to say nothing of his face.”

“His face?” Carla asked, looking up at him quizzically.

“He looked like Jellal,” Ranma said bluntly.

Something about that caused Carla to pause, racking her brain for something. “Did he say he came from this other dimension?”

“That's what I assumed, reading between the lines.”

Carla frowned. There was something there, something just on the edge of her memory, but she couldn't quite grasp it. For whatever reason, her visions were just not working so well, and her memories of what she might have heard while still in the egg were gone. They had stopped working very well the instant that she had met up with Ranma and Wendy. Indeed, the one she had had earlier that day had been the first one she had had in years.  *Darn it, this whole event is bothering me for some reason, but I can’t put my finger on it.*

Walking beside the cat-girl, Cana looked over at her and then over at Ranma, jerking her head back to the cat-girl, then pointing first at Ranma and then around them. Ranma frowned, but after a moment understood what she was saying and shrugged in response. If there was a reason Carla hadn’t been absorbed, he didn’t know it.

Soon enough they found Natsu, whereupon he was basically bowled over by the two siblings, who hugged him and Happy to them excitedly. Filling in the other Dragon Slayer on what they knew took but a moment, but in that moment the atmosphere around them began to change. The cloud that they were standing on looked to be dissipating, two swirls of air appearing in either direction and pulling it apart.

“It looks as if this anima thing is going to close soon. We’ll have to move quick,” Ranma said, kneeling down in front of Juvia and Cana, “come on, let’s get going!”

“Why are you letting us do this again?” Juvia asked quizzically even as she moved to get on his back, holding onto his outstretched arm while Lucy took his other side.

Ranma shrugged. “I'm figuring we have a seventy-five percent chance of arriving wherever we’re going in midair,” he said dryly.

“Wherever we’re going?” Cana asked, cocking a wary eyebrow.

Ranma pointed ahead of them to the sky that didn't look like the one they'd left, smirking at them all. “Well, we are going to get our friends back, aren’t we?”

The Fairy Tail mages all around them answered with a roar, and they raced forward with Ranma in the lead with the two girls on his back, racing into the unknown.

**End Chapter**