

Also, a note to everyone who knows the original Fairy Tail fic. Wolfheim and Draculos' shown magics and abilities were... well... they were **pathetic**. In no way worthy of the term Wizard Saints as shown by Jura or Makarov or even the Phantom Lord Emo. So I basically had to create their magic from the ground up, as well as its limitations and how they would use it. I hope you enjoy it despite that.

This has been edited by [Justlovereadin](#) and now [Hiryo](#).

Chapter 26: War's Cold Cost, Winter's Warmth

About an hour after the Wizard Saints had arrived, Wolfheim, Draculos and Jura had maps of the area, magically linked via a mix of Magic Script, Sensing Magic and Earth Magic, to the main map. As it updated, so too would their maps, little lines of red and green for the enemy and allied forces appearing, or as near as they could discern. The lines of the enemy were only really seen as they closed with the Minstrel army judging by reports from scouts and officers who had magical Helmet Phones, a relatively new magical invention that had recently arrived at the front, shipped to Minstrel from Seven and then down to the battlefield as fast as possible.

Jura had been amazed by them when he saw them. At first, they looked like simple helmets with heavy side flanges to cover the cheeks, which closed to protect the chin, neck and mouth leaving only the eyes unprotected. But on the interior of one flange these helmets had the same kind of magic microphone spell embedded in them that Jura was used to seeing at concerts and so forth back in Fiore. Here that runic script was part of a set, the other being some kind of signal relay based off of old Minstrel enchantments. San Jiao Shin had told them the spells on those were based off of the magic found in Ranger broches but were far less sophisticated.

Since the signals sent out the words of the microphone user and relayed back orders, they were more than sophisticated enough for Jura. There were eight hundred of them scattered throughout the army now, which was one of the reasons why San Jiao Shin had been able to coordinate his forces so well, the rest simply being his own skill and abilities. He was, after all, one of the three most experienced generals in Ishgar.

Wolfheim and Draculos quickly left the army camp, each of them heading out and away to the south and east in order to skirt around the area where the enemy were fighting the Minstrel forces. There they would wait for nightfall to get behind the enemy's army. Two people on their own, especially with night coming on, would have an easy time of doing that. They would be updating the map as they went, but also would be waiting for the most opportune moment to strike. San Jiao Shin was certain there had to be at least one, maybe more Demons with the Circle Army, hidden among their ranks somehow. Dealing with them would be the job of the two more powerful Wizard Saints. Jura's job was to create the fortress that San Jiao Shin had spoken about in order to halt the enemy's advance.

Jura moved toward the front, coming quickly within sight of the Minstrel army's defensive line. Finding the top of the first hill, he went to work behind the river as the Minstrel army held the line, San Jiao Shin pouring in a portion of his reserves in order to give Jura the little bit of time he needed for this to work. "Earth Magic: Crafting Mold!"

This was a basic Earth Magic spell, indeed, it was the first Jura had ever used. It basically first shifted the nature of the ground into the type of ground the user controlled. In Jura's case, this meant it shifted to a near-iron like hardness. Then the ground began to shift and mold itself as Jura willed it. Concentrating, his hands glowing the light yellow of Earth Magic, Jura began to shape the ground of the hill into a fortress.

This wasn't just a thing of ramparts as the name could have implied. Instead it was walls, deep ditches, large spikes and mounds of earth designed to break apart infantry or cavalry charges. Many of the positions were connected by more ditches hidden from view below their position, others looked to be connected from below but were in fact dead ends, killing ground surrounded by other strong positions where the defenders could take any attackers under fire from different directions, protected from assault.

What would have taken an army of engineers' days of backbreaking work, at the very least took Jura barely an hour and was the equivalent of a warmup exercise. As night fell, San Jiao Shin's reserves arrived and began to invest into the fortress, setting up their artillery pieces.

These were small cannons, each of were the size of a large man laying down, the barrel wide enough to shoot out a cannonball a little larger than a man's head on a straight trajectory. They could hurl them around nine-hundred yards with enough force to bounce when they hit the ground, tearing through flesh and bone in their way. Others were larger, magically powered cannons, with exploding shells, although there were only a handful of those among the forty cannons, a lot of cannons for the size of the force San Jiao Shin still had under his command, especially in comparison to the Circle Army. Artillery was one of the few places he was still superior to the enemy.

Throughout the night as Jura worked on the two fortresses, the forces of Minstrel slowly, and amazingly silently, removed themselves from the front, leaving behind straw dummies, fake swords, crossbows and rifles, before slowly shifting themselves to the hills as Jura prepared them. They were helped in this by the simple fact that even with magic, night battles were things only the smallest, most elite of units ever attempted. There were just too many ways things could become disordered or chaotic in a night action.

As the sun started to come up in the distance Jura was standing on top of the second hill, which was marginally closer to the river, his whole body still glowing the muddy yellow of Earth Magic as he stared through a viewing port on a tiny fort at the very top of the hill with one half of his concentration and finished the work on the fortress with the rest. He watched as the enemy started a dawn attack, and it was a somewhat organized one to boot, at least at first.

The Minstrelians original position had been just this side of the river, with enough distance between the small fortifications and the river to allow for a landing, but for both the river and the area on this side of it to be under fire both from rifles and from artillery, which was much bigger deal, of course. Yet the defensive fire as the Circle Army launched their pontoons across – the Minstrelians had

destroyed the bridges all along the river in either direction for hundreds of leagues – was desultory. The Circle Army responded instantly, more pontoons going across, carrying men stuffed like sardines across as quickly as possible.

“How can they be stuffed so tightly together?” Jura muttered, reaching to a large pouch at his side which held a few items, including a spyglass. He held it to his eyes and as he looked at the oncoming pontoons let out a hiss of shock, shuddering. Besides a single mage at the back and a steersman at the front, all of those people on those boats were undead. Very obviously so, their wounds visible through their clothing or on their heads. Soldiers of both sides had been turned, and now were working for the Circle Army. *Yet another sign that the demons are behind this. No normal mage would be able to raise so many, even if he was pushed to the point of exhaustion. It just wouldn't be possible.*

When they reached the near bank of the river, the undead launched themselves forward in an unorganized mass to take the original defensive position. Behind them came troops of a hundred plus infantry, each of them moving independently of the others, spreading out as they did, firing into the defensive works, a series of wooden and earth mounds. The undead smashed into and over these defenses, getting in among the tents and everything else that had been left behind, finding no living defender.

The last group of Minstrelions, a platoon of mounted infantry, had retreated after firing a few rounds from their rifles and two of the defender's artillery pieces whose axels had been broken. The Circle Army didn't even see them thanks to one of the troopers being a mage from the Invisible Hand, a Minstrel mage guild that specialized in various illusion and invisibility using mages.

As the undead tore into the dummies and tents they roared, a loud, angry throaty roar, despite being undead. Jura idly spent a few seconds wondering how that worked, before the cannons nearby began to fire.

Most of those twenty cannons were not magical, and the few that were, were currently husbanding their munitions. But that didn't make them any less deadly. Cannonballs the size of a man's head slammed into and through the undead forces now crawling all over the defender's original lines. A few of the cannonballs exploded on impact. More often than not they simply smashed through the undead, the ball ran out of the forward momentum. The worst were those, which hit right in front of the undead, before bouncing through their ranks.

The undead didn't recoil of course, they couldn't feel pain or fear. But the living troopers behind them, several of whom had also been caught in the attack, did. They did so by spreading out, trying to figure out where the fire was coming from, while the undead just milled in place for a time. Jura made a note of that: whatever spell controlled the undead certainly didn't give them their intelligence back, nor could they be ordered to take cover or do anything else very quickly.

At that point Jura was joined by three men. Two of them wore the rank marks of corporals and bore large cases on their sides and backs, filled with note paper for messages Jura presumed. The other man was a Colonel, older and with a certain weather-beaten toughness to him and he saluted Jura crisply.

Jura returned the salute, then smiling held out his large hand to the smaller man. The Colonel gripped it, and despite being so much smaller, there was no sign of giving that grip. "My name's Jian," the old man introduced himself slurring the words a little. His voice sounded as if he gargled with rocks, although the way he touched his throat indicated that it was caused by injury rather than being normal. "I'm in charge of the forward lines, my Lord."

"Excellent. I was afraid that King Shi might try to put me in charge!" Jura laughed. "While I will cheerfully hold my hand up to say I should be in charge of the magical defenses, giving orders to your men is not something I would be comfortable with doing. But before our opponents start a real attack on our positions here, is there anything about the construction you want to change?"

"You can do that? So easily I mean." Jian was no stranger to magic, in fact he was a mage himself, a Caster-Class Mage who could turn himself into steel for a set amount of time. But magic on the scale of constructing these fortresses so easily? *It took us longer to invest them than it did for him to create the fortress in the first place*, he thought with no small amount of wonder.

Jura heard that sense of awe in the older man's tone despite how gruff and distorted his words were, but he made no comment on it. He was a Wizard Saint, in a way such things came with the territory. He didn't like it, but he could understand it. "I can. That's why you can still see my magical aura. My magic is still permeating the ground of fortress here and out towards the other one. It would take me a few minutes and expand more magic if you want me to change something over there, but it's doable."

"Could you create a tunnel between us then?" the colonel asked quickly. "That way we can reinforce one position or the other at need."

"Certainly, and while I'm doing that, can you tell me how likely it is that they would be able to get past us in either direction? I'm afraid that, while I looked at the map King Shi had in his command tent, I don't actually know any of the terrain down here in Minstrel. I know there's a mountain to our left flank but other than that..." Jura shrugged, even as he went to work creating the tunnel the colonel had requested.

"Not likely at all," said one of the younger privates, freezing as the Colonel looked at him. He relaxed when the Colonel waved him to continue and did so, gulping at speaking in front of the intimidating Wizard Saint. "I'm from 'round here, Sir. About two miles downriver the river widens so much you can barely see the other side. It ain't very deep, but the bottoms all silt so getting across is impossible. Trying to make any kind of bridge across it would be hard too and we shattered the bridges all the way down to the city of Crescendo."

"As for the mountain, it's nearly as rocky for most of its length and height as those, um, whatever they're called that stick out of the swamps to the south that protect Midi's borders. I suppose they could get small formations through there but nothing large and not quickly either. Trust me, me and me mates lived in a hamlet right near here, and we took trips out to that mountain, we knows all the trails, and there isn't one that would let them enter on the river side of it and come out behind us."

"Those undead certainly wouldn't be able to. And if the enemy decide to cross here or move upriver around the mountain, it'll take them weeks, maybe a full month out of their way. If they go

down the other way, they'll start running into trouble from out of Crescendo." The Colonel's ruined voice almost oozed satisfaction as he looked around the top of the fortress. "And my Lord general, er that is the King has other reinforcements coming up, one of whom is a cavalry battalion. If they even try to get across the river in small groups to harass us, old Sian Lo will cut them to ribbons. I might not like the old ass but he's like a bulldog when it comes to running down enemy troops. No my Lord, my King's decision to hold here was a good one."

While the two of them had been talking, Jura had been working on the tunnel, and he finished as the colonel stopped speaking, the end of the moving stone pillar he had used to core out the tunnel bursting up out of the ground on the other fortress's top to screams of shock and fear, many men over there thinking it was an attack. The end here was a few feet away and Jura nodded toward it. "You might want to send one of your privates through to tell the others that this isn't a trap."

With that, Jura turned his attention back to the Colonel. Then there was a new sound in the distance. The sound of bugles singing out in a complicated sequence and both of them turned their attention back down to where the undead had been ground to paste by the artillery.

Looking from there to over the river and the enemy camp at the edge of his line of sight, Jura frowned. "What are they doing now?"

"They're going to push more zombies up, use the undead as meat shields for a bit, while they get more living troops across the river. They'll want to start spreading out and trying to figure out what they are dealing with, while also getting as many of their troops across the river as possible. Those pontoons ain't exactly well made. But they're going to push in with a magical assault soon and then follow them up with cavalry. The cavalry won't be anything but scouts, and they'll be followed directly by infantry. They're well-organized on the small scale, but they are not experienced," the Colonel replied, shaking his head. "Anyone who has any experience on the army level would know they would have to wait for the information they got from their cavalry to plan out a proper assault. But they might not understand what we have up here anyway."

He looked over at the Wizard Saint again, his eyes admiring. "From down below, this place doesn't look very good from below. It's only when you get behind that first line of stone stakes that you really realize what a trap this place be. We won't be in any danger of being pushed out for a long while. Hells, if they just insist on attacking us head on, they're going to lose more than half their army doing it and not just their undead monsters either."

Jura nodded at that, then frowned, looking out into the distance and wondering if that was as obvious to the demons who were behind all this. *And if so, what will they too? In fact, I wonder what my fellow Wizard Saints are up to...*

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At the moment, Wolfheim wasn't actually doing anything but waiting, growling in impatience, *I understand why I was chosen for this part of the plan, but damn me if waiting isn't boring!!*

Currently, he was high up in a tree in the very mountain that Jura and the soldiers had been talking about, watching events through his own spyglass with one of the local communicators nearby. The helmet, a one size doesn't quite fit all thing, had not been able to fit on his head at all thanks to his hair, which acted more like spun metal than actual hair follicles.

His task in this battle was simple. He was to wait until the majority of the Army had bunched an attack on the fortresses, gotten as much of their army across as they could. Then he was to move out, and flank them, pinning the enemy army between himself, the fortresses and the river. A river which would have been...divested of its pontoon bridges by that point by two Mages who would sneak in and destroy them via the water.

Wolfheim was fine with that. While his magic made him a beast in combat, his magic was such that he couldn't sustain it for very much longer than an hour before it started to impact his mind. No, the more prey that came to him the better. So he was hidden there to one side just waiting, watching Jura work, watched the enemy respond. He watched the enemy recoil, and now come on anew in dozens of probing cavalry attacks followed by an undead and infantry punch. It was quite obvious that Jura's creation of the fortresses right there practically on top of the front line had astonished the enemy commanders but that none of them really believed that those fortresses were as tough as they were.

"Feh, at least I have something to watch while I wait," Wolfheim growled, tearing at some beef jerky with oddly pointed teeth as he did, staring through his spyglass at the distant battlefield.

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Draculos on the other hand was quite busy elsewhere.

He had crossed the river in the dead of night, starting his crossing from the same position where Wolfheim was hiding himself at the moment, flying over the river. Once across, he moved silently, unseen through the night to come in at a sort of angle towards where the fight had initially been going on. Not the actual front. The Circle Army was about 50,000 strong in terms of their living troops, with another ten thousand undead and thus had to spread out dramatically every time they stopped and make camp in order to spread out the burden of foraging parties and so forth.

Draculos was practically invisible at night, simply one shadow passing above the army among many clouds. And once hidden in a small thicket, Draculos began his part in this war. "Blood Burden: Blood Bat!" he intoned, holding out his fingers as wide as they could go to either side of him. From each of his finger, tiny bats began to coalesce out of the darkness. When the eyes of the bats came awake, they glowed briefly, staring at him. "Go, seek out all those wearing bright blue colored sashes or bandannas. Bite them unseen and move on."

Draculos' bats were not living breathing creatures. They were creations of magic, things of blood and shadow, but they were sentient enough to follow a few simple commands to the best of their ability. For the first part of his attack, that would be enough, coupled with their other, inherent magic.

The bats slowly flew away in every direction from where he was standing, heading towards the mass of humanity that was just over the rise from where his current position. Draculos himself didn't move in the same direction. He continued to move at an angle, heading towards where he believed the Circle Army's camps were. His target was undetermined yet, but Draculos knew any command group would be there, rather than on the front lines.

Soon, he was within sight of the army, as portions of it continued to dig in for the night, and others pushed out in groups of around platoon size. He had passed by unseen several foraging parties and wondered how much luck they were having in that respect. Yes, this area was quite fertile, there were numerous homesteads smashed to either side of the river, and he could see several tiny hamlets being used to house large groups of troops, scattered within sight of where he was standing on another tree. One of those hamlets was just outside a cleared field around what looked like one of the main army camps.

He had sent ten more bats forward into this specific area with orders to remain hidden, riding the minds of his Blood Bats randomly in search of anything important looking as well as general information, and while he was building up a good mental picture of the enemy army, he hadn't seen anything that stood out as an important target just yet. *It looks as if that is just a forward camp, suitable for infantry and other such troops but not officers or nobles. But does that mean that their command structure hasn't arrived yet? Or is it because there are multiple camps like this? That would seem an awful lot of trouble for an army that is trying to push its way forward as fast as possible.*

Draculos frowned, hidden in shadows as he went over in his mind what the local King had told them about the command structure of the enemy army. They didn't have any officers beyond a certain rank, the equivalent of lieutenants and captains doing quite a lot of the work for the Army. Or at least none had been seen yet. The officers were marked out by blue sashes or bandannas, depending on their rank.

It was a very unusual command structure, with no real ability to split off into smaller groups beyond raiding parties of company size. This army was a hammer and they intended to strike is deep into Minstrel as they could get. *Although whether or not there will be other more follow-on armies coming out of Midi is a question.*

He remained hidden in a small farmhouse without a roof throughout the night, sending out his blood bats, gathering information via his bats as they in turn infected men throughout the Circle Army, gathering thralls. The bites of Draculos' bats worked to suppress the will of their victims, letting Draculos dominate them mentally at range and use their eyes and other senses just as he would a Blood Bat's.

At no point did he actually launch an attack. That was not his mission right now. *Let Jura be our shield, Wolfheim our sword, God Serena the hammer from on high. My task is to be our eyes, to gather information not only on our true enemy but on this army as well.*

While his blood bats did his bidding, Draculos could mentally ride one or two of them at a time, see through their eyes, then pass that ability onto their victim for a short amount of time. There was a distance limit to both, but the first one could be measured in days traveled, the second one in leagues. And as the sun began to rise in the distance, his spy mission began to bear fruit.

He had spotted several large odd-looking creatures the size of elephants. But they had the legs of a lizard and something of the temperament of a lazy gecko judging by what his thralls could see.

These were eldorens, beasts of burden that were not entirely unknown to Draculos having seen them in some of the southern nations before. The problem with them was that they just could not deal with the cold. At all. If it fell below mildly chilly, they started to become lethargic, unruly and irascible. Here in the south of Minstrel however, especially in what amounted to the middle of summer down here, they could haul a lot of material for the enemy army.

So one minor mystery is solved, how they are moving such a vast horde so quickly even with needing to slow down to forage. That, and their undead are not the shambling monstrosities of a certain type of fictional story. They can move quite quickly, and if not for the lack of food, and their obvious wounds, you would hardly know they were undead.

There were also a lot more craftsmen than he expected, specifically a few dozen scattered groups of lacrima engineers, something Draculos would never have expected to see in an army out of Midi where all magical use was so highly regulated, including that coming from magical items and lacrima-assisted enchantments.

But it was what those craftsmen were occasionally working on, which was most interesting. Not only were they knocking down houses, enlarging places here and there to house their troops, working on rifles and mending armor and so forth, but the lacrima engineers were also setting up large antenna-like poles, three to every scattered base camp. *What are those?*

The Wizard Saint's answer came quickly when work on one a bat was observing finished. The magical craftsmen linked it to some kind of battery the likes of which Draculos had never seen. However, its effect was enough to tell them what it was for a second later, a booming voice came out of the speakers set on top of the tower. Unfortunately, Draculos couldn't hear through his bats, their ability to understand what they were hearing was very minimal.

Instead, he instantly ordered the observing bat to find the nearest individual to infect.

This was a mere menial, one of several thousand Minstrel men Draculos had seen so far who had been pressganged into the invading army as slaves but who had yet to be forcibly converted. Yet he had ears, and a mind that could understand the human language rather than simply mental commands, which made him perfect for the current purpose. A second later, Draculos frowned as he listened to the message noting the effect on the man's mind at the same time as he began to feel another presence encroaching into his Domination Magic's control of the man.

On the surface the words were a simple pronunciation. "We are of the Circle and we are the future. This army is our sword, and with you got the glory of the future yet to be created, once magic is available equally to all. I am your prophet! I led you from isolation, I vanquished the demons, I am he

who was reincarnated from the Prophet that led you out of bondage and slavery to the mages who stole your lives, property, family and future every time they used their magics. Let the righteousness of our cause fill you, let it guide your arms, let it strengthen your limbs, let it steal your mind against the stern test before us!"

Beneath those fiery words, there was another noise, a kind of reedy, chanting voice that was almost enough to make Draculos grind his teeth. And with it came another presence, another mage or something attempting to push his domination spell out of the thrall's mind. It wasn't a conscious act, it was just an effect of some other kind of mind magic trying to take the man over via that chanting.

Excellent. I believe I found one way to mess with the enemy already. Destroying those antennas and their speakers will break whatever mental spell is causing this army to act so savagely. It might not be enough to cause them to rethink this invasion, but it will certainly cause quite a bit of turmoil in the ranks.

With that in mind, he began to create a mental map of where his new thralls were and began to give them commands. *"Stay away from them for now but keep an eye on the antennas and be ready to destroy them anyway you can upon my command."*

The sermon got louder as dawn broke, by which point Draculos had worked his way around and towards the back of the numerous Circle Army camps. There he had found a larger than average camp, and signs of still more supplies coming down the road. He waited there now, staring down at the supply train of the army, as well as what had to be the real commanders. These men were riding on a wide platform that was borne aloft by four of the large elephantine creatures, one for every corner. At the moment that platform wasn't moving, but it was obvious it would move forward with the rest of the army at need.

On that platform were two groups of people. One group was sitting at the far end with four of them sitting down, and eight more men standing up beside him all of them chained to an even larger antenna than the ones in the other camps. Draculos couldn't make out much at this distance and wasn't going to send in his thralls just yet, but it looked as if that was the center of the mind control magic. Why they were chained or how that magic worked he didn't know. But it was there.

On the opposite end of the platform were a group of four men. Again, at this distance Draculos couldn't make out much detail, but two of those people were chained. One of the slaves was fat to the point of obesity and squatted down to one side of the individual at the center of this group. The other one, sat in a meditative pose rigid, his eyes staring straight ahead, his body not moving at all. *That is not the way a slave would sit in front of their captors, chains or no chains. Strange.*

Two more men were standing up in front of the slaves and the one man sitting down on what was most definitely a throne, large and gleaming in the sun with the glint of rubies and oddly enough metallic sheen in the light. They wore long blue cloaks, with pointy helmets and swords at their sides. *Generals then.*

The man in front of them on the chair was massive, even from here Draculos could tell he would stand as tall as Jura with equally wide shoulders. He had long black hair down to his shoulders and wore

a simple white cassock, with a large golden medallion around his throat and a scimitar to one side of his throne.

As Draculos watched, he timed the man's mouth opening and closing with the words coming out of the speakers situated throughout camps of the Circle Army. *So, he is the one who is controlling the others? Odd that I cannot see any bloom of magic around him, even from this distance...*

But Draculos shrugged his shoulders minutely. He had never been an expressive person, even when he was by himself. He collapsed his spyglass then put it away, and went back to simply watching, waiting, occasionally sending out his bats in wide sweeps to either side of this command group. But he was staying well away from the commander himself. No, he did not want anything to give the game away. *And there is still no sign of any Devils with the Army. Until I spot them, caution is a better idea than overt force.*

He waited until the attack on the old front lines of the defenders began, waited until euphoria had turned to shock, waited still more as the Circle Army began to organize itself. He watched, as the back of the enemy army began to move, shifting this way and that, as two large massive things that Draculos had barely been aware of down the road in the distance came closer. When they did, although they were still more than ten miles distant from the two fortresses, he gasped in shock.

Because they were cannons. Truly massive guns several stories tall, made of metal and something that gleamed in the sunlight like glass. They were being pulled along on massive wheels, each of the wheels the size of a house, by teams of twelve eldorens each, a sign of how heavy they were.

So this is one of the secrets that the local King told us he felt the Circle were keeping in reserve, he thought to himself scowling as he stared at the massive creations. Only in Midi would someone be able to construct those things without the rest of Ishgar knowing. After this war, that isolation must end!!

And while I have some faith in my younger companion, I doubt even he would be able to stand up against the munitions one of those things can deliver. As he watched, several dozen fire mages came together around one such device. It was larger than any of them was tall, and wider across the body as well. *And thus I have my first target. Pity, I had hoped to announce my presence by attacking the so-called reincarnated prophet. But those things must be destroyed.*

With that Draculos moved out from where he was hiding, keeping to the shadows of a small copse of trees, then moving into the ruins of the few buildings, then out past them through a field of wheat that had been trampled to dust. There, he allowed his blood bats to go ahead of him, taking over anyone who could have been in a position to see him, before hopping down into a low ditch along the side of the road.

From there he was close enough to target the giant cannons, as they were slowly setting up to fire on the distant fortresses Jura had created. *Surely they can't hit from here... or can they?* Draculos mused, even as he turned and grabbed the sword arm of a lone scout that had thought he had been sneaking up on the Wizard Saint when in fact Draculos had summoned him here via the bite on the arm the man had sustained from one of his Blood Bats. A hand grabbed the man's throat, tearing it out, and

a gesture began to pull out the rest of the man's vitae even as two fingers in Draculos' other hand began to move in the air slowly.

Magic coalesced around them, black and red, as the former thrall's blood was used to create a magical circle, to which Draculos held up his hand, palm first as he glared at the two cannons. *I probably won't be able to destroy them both with a single shot, if they are as solid as they look from this distance, but I'm not about to get bogged down in little fights in an attempt to get closer.* "Blood Burden: Soul's Darkness!"

From the center of the magical circle, a blast of black and red ravaging energy shot out, crossing the intervening distance from where he was standing to slam into the side of one of the cannons, slicing the barrel off halfway up its length. As he had thought the beam tapered off afterwards, unable to hit the second one behind the first. But his timing had been lucky, and he had caught the gun right before the round within it could be fired in turn.

The explosion of the munitions inside the lower portion of the cannon blew it apart, sending the leftmost wheel to crash into its fellow. This spoiled its aim, and the cannon didn't fire.

At the same time, hundreds, perhaps more than thousand workers turned and pointed towards where the blast of magical energies that come from.

The enemy leader, the prophet, also noticed this assault behind his current position, and turned his diatribe through the speakers towards Draculos. "We appear to be under attack by a mage, a thief who has decided to stand against the future and the Circle! He has wounded us sorely, destroying one of our siege cannons. He must be bound in turn to serve!"

In response to this impassioned order, several thousand cavalymen broke off from where they had been moving out of the Circle's various bases on foraging parties and not involved in the battle on the other side of the river turned to race back towards the unknown attacker. They were followed by more than a few dozen scattered companies of infantry, which had been straggling out of the various scattered camps. All of them together actually created a semi-decent encirclement of Draculos' current position.

He was not retreating, however. Instead he simply launched a second magical last towards the second gun, causing one of its wheels to shatter at the admittedly poorly aimed blast. This sent the cannon collapsing onto its side crashing to the ground with enough force to hurl nearby workers off their feet.

With that done, Draculos closed his eyes, raising his hands to either side of his shoulders, as he reached out to his thralls. If anyone else had ever been born with a magic like his own, they would have seen thousands of tiny strands of blood red linking his fingers to his distant dupes. All two-thousand nine-hundred of them. He now gave them the order, *"Destroy the antennas. Cause havoc. Sell yourselves dearly."*

With that order given, Draculos mused, *I'm actually not sanguine about the ability of my domination spell to win against the magic of that chant, but considering I intend to cut off the chanting's*

source it shouldn't be an issue. With the antennas destroyed, and attempt to reestablish the spell work, instead simply cause more confusion.

Allowing himself a little smile at the thought, Draculos launched himself into the air, leaving behind his hiding place in the farmhouse, racing towards the prophet and the massive platform where he was sitting carried by the massive beasts. *Part of me would be grieving for the dumb animals, but, there is no room more for such pity.* With that thought in mind, Draculos created another magical circle in the air to pair with his first. An instant later he fired twin blasts towards the platform, or rather not the platform itself, but the beasts carrying it.

Yet as his attack flew forward, the magical beam was blocked, absorbed by a black miasma that came from the platform. It stretched out towards his attack, intersecting it and an instant later the magic dissipated harmlessly.

Then Draculos was dodging as something crossed the distance between the platform where he had been flying within an eyeblink. As he did, the attack looked like two massive arms with spikes on them trying to stab out from the sides, the totality flashing through where he had stood a moment ago.

“Dammit, stand still and die like human filth!” shouted a voice. The voice was loud, almost squeaky, yet not quite. Like the noise you would get if you took a very large man and made him speak after forcing him to breathe helium.

A second after Draculos dodged those arms, they retracted and one of the two slaves, the large obese one hurled himself off of the platform towards Draculos like a cannonball. The chains that had supposedly been keeping him there shattered like straw as he came on. Again Draculos dodged, but this time he flew upwards and to the right, leading the man away from the majority of the army units coming back towards him, back towards the blasted out territory that the Army had already traversed.

As he did, the man crashed to the ground, then leapt upwards, shrieking as he shouted, “Enough of this human guise!” his body shifting as he said it. “Its worth has come to an end!”

Not that Draculos needed those words to tell him that this thing was not human. This close, Draculos' blood-based magic, which he called Blood Burden, could tell him a good deal about the individual he was facing currently, and this thing wasn't human. His magic could tell him that the blood within that this creature did not move as that of a human would, instead it moved much slower, was far denser in a magical sense, and he could sense that it was somehow also just... different. *Like purple was to red, connected, yet fundamentally not the same.*

This supposition was born out as the creature finished transforming. When he finished, he was just as short as before but far rounder, far too much so for a human. He had a single eye set in a face, if it could be called that, which merged seamlessly into the rest of his round body. On his head he wore a helmet, or rather a molded piece of metal plate, which merged into other plates that covered his back and the back of his almost-humanlike arm. The creature also had a cheerful, grin on thick, heavy lips and a wide mouth, under which a necklace of some kind hung on his shoulders. The skin on his arms was a stripped baby-poo yellow and pinkish red in a striped form, colors which were matched by his striped pants.

Staring at Draculos, the creature flexed its fingers as it stretched. "I suppose I should thank you, I've spent months in that human guise! Even if you destroyed those cannons, hmm... I wonder what those were worth? Now, try to make this interesting!"

With that, the demon attacked, stretching out its arms and changing shape as it did. The spikes on them enlarged and the arms became almost whipcord thin, the vines thin and sharp all along their length.

Draculos dodged, twisting this way and that, as his hands glowed with magic. "Blood Burden: Iron Blood!" At his command, blood from the nearby dead from his initial attack flowed up into the air towards him, coalescing into a shield and a large sword, like an oversized rapier, almost complete with basket hilt. So armed Draculos calmly dealt with the demon's attacks, battering them aside, as he slowly began to analyze his attack pattern. He was not trying to close the range, rather he was opening it so as to use his distance attack once more. *I cannot see any hint of that miasma around this one, so perhaps it came from that other figure, the one who sits chained, yet has all the body language of a tyrant king.*

To Draculos' surprise and suspicion, the devil didn't make any great effort to try and close the distance between them. Instead it seemed content to lash at him from range, analyzing Draculos just as he was analyzing the creature. Very well, let me give him something more to think about. "Soul's Fury!" he roared, gesturing up over one shoulder with the hand that had originally held the shield. The blood of that shield reformed there, and this time the magic circle was for larger and glowed with more magical energy. A larger, far more intense beam of black and red magic lashed out towards the fat demon.

The fat demon laughed, stretching its arms out to either side as he shouted, "Absorption Curse: Absorption!"

An instant later Draculos' attack hit him and faded on contact, being absorbed into the creature. A second later it reached out its hands, towards Draculos seizing him before he could get away. "Absorption Curse: Connection! Your worth is mine!"

"I think not," Draculos said crisply, his own magical aura flaring out and breaking the creature's hold on him, his will proving the stronger almost instantly.

"Keep thinking that," the demon shouted, even as it attacked again, shouting out "Soul's Fury!"

But the attack, which came from the demon was small, far smaller than Draculos' and he dodged it with ease. The attack swept on, cutting through a distant forest like a laser beam, but the demon scowled, angry as if he didn't quite understand why he couldn't use it.

The point was the blood of course. It was an integral part of the spell, a medium for the power. *The creature might have been able to steal some of my magic, but he doesn't know everything that goes with it. Then too, this creature does not have nearly enough willpower to overcome my own.*

"GRAAH I'm going to crush you!" the demon shouted, launching attack after attack. It also seemed to be trying to do something else at the same time. Its body glowed, but then the glow faded without any change, and the demon seemed angrier than ever. "Why, why won't my Revolution work on you!? How much is your magic worth that I can't pay for it with my Curse!?"

“I have no idea what your Revolution is, so I could hardly explain its failure to you. However if I had to guess, I would say that my will is simply stronger.” Draculos answered, more to infuriate him further than anything else.

This tactic worked as the demon seemed to be furious at his Curse’s inability to work to its full potential against Draculos, and it pressed in hard. Its large arms flipped and twirled its legs lashing out even more flexibly than its arms, so fast and furious they resembled giant whips more than actual legs. The fat demon was a whirling dervish as it tried to hit Draculos. Yet it didn’t try to use its magic again, merely attempting to overwhelm Draculos physically.

Still, it was all Draculos could do to dodge, but since he was concentrating on that right now rather than attacking, he was able to do it. Draculos again retreated, faster and faster, moving this demon from near the back of the various army camps as shouts of shock and alarm began to overcome even the noise from the scattered antennas and even the main one nearby. It was evident that the slave breaking free and shifting form like that had spread as only horrible news could, and caused a lot of issues among the army, despite the Prophet’s continued histrionics.

As he retreated, Draculos missed the other slave stand up, also breaking its chains. The ‘slave’ stared around them, staring into the eyes of the prophet for a moment. It seemed to bow towards the prophet, a genuflection so fake that anyone who was not already enthralled by the magic coursing through the ongoing chanting, would have easily understood that it was but mockery. Yet some kind of order seemed to have been given to the Prophet, and he shouted commands, ordering the supply train to bunch up, and get away from where Draculos was fighting the other demon already.

A moment later, the slave was in the air, hovering there in a moment before shooting out towards Draculos and the demon he was fighting.

Meanwhile, Draculos had decided that he had gained enough distance from the Circle Army to deal with the demon without any interference. “Blood Burden: Strength of Night!” At those words, Draculos’ magical aura flared out once more, a bright corona flare of black and red magic, before the magic was rapidly immersed back into his body. The weapon in his hand also disappeared, the blood flowing into his mouth in a long stream. The next second, his eyes reopened as they began to turn red, while his veins started to pulse with red light from underneath his skin. The demon was able to close with him as the spell finished, his slower flying speed having cost to tremendously.

The next second, instead of running away and trying to keep the range open once more, Draculos closed. This surprised the fat demon, which shifted its arms into a close-range configuration, spikes and horns sprouting from them and from his center of mass. However, this proved no defense against Draculos. A single punch shattered many of the horns and spikes on the demon’s arms as they were crossed protectively in front of its body, and the next blow nearly took his head off.

“W, what...how...” The demon fell back in some shock.

“You made a mistake in following me out here and away from other souls you could reap, or any aid,” Draculos said calmly, his tone entirely belying the now almost wild, feral look in his eyes.

The demon was quick, and attacked even more ferociously, using scattered element attacks from souls it had absorbed before and his own built-in abilities. But Draculos, pumped up as he was on his magic thrumming through his veins was simply too fast and too strong for him. Another arm was broken as the demon stretched just a bit too long in place. Then a knee came up, slamming into the fat demon's center of mass. He was lifted off of the ground, and Draculos flipped himself up over the creature, grabbing its mouth with one hand, raising his other hand above him.

Then he quickly disengaged just in time to dodge a blast of magic that looked more like a fast-moving gas than an actual blast landing to one side of the first demon he'd been fighting. But the outskirts of the attack caused Draculos to sway away, his brow furrowed as he felt as if some of his magical powers had just been sucked out of him. But they weren't being absorbed, Draculos quickly realized, as he felt the magic within him. No, it was becoming inert like a small amount of the magical charge within the blood inside him had just been destroyed.

He turned in the direction of that blast, while ducking an attack from the first demon, returning a kick. His kick caught the demon right behind his knee and cracking it, dumping the demon to the ground in a cry of agony and pure pain filled fury.

In the sky above them, flew the other slave. But even as Draculos watched, he reached up to his face, and grabbed at the nose and eyes, tearing them away like so much paper to reveal the horrible inner form.

At first, there was actually not much of a difference, save in clothing, the slave's outfit having changed to that of a form-fitting robe with checkered pattern and high collar over an elegant collared shirt and tie. On his face the being wore a strange helmet that looked like a key of some kind on the top with the mark of Tartaros in the center of it, while the sides of the helmet merged once more under his jaw. In one hand he held a staff with an over-large crystal ball on its top.

It was his face however that made the being horrible to look upon. For instead of a human or near-human face, this being's visage was that of a skeleton that somehow retained a skin covering on it, yet which did not have a nose or, seemingly any eyes. Though the way was glaring down at them it was clear it could still see.

"Thank you for the assist Lord Keyes," shouted or rather wheezed the injured demon that Draculos had already been fighting. It pushed itself to its feet, glaring angrily at Draculos. "Between us we can deal with this human, no matter how much he is worth in human terms!" Once more, the demon made the word 'human' sound like that single word could encompass all of the disdain and contempt of a galaxy.

Yet to Draculos' surprise, the two demons did not immediately move to attack him in tandem as they should have. Instead, the one in the air began to mutter under his breath. As it did, the injured demon shouted, "Keyes you know I can't make out whatever you are muttering about!"

The skeletal demon glared down at his fellow then its mouth opened. That mouth seemed to have been stitched together before this, but when it opened, it showed an even more skeletal mouth than the rest of the face. The one called Keyes had a deep voice, rumbling and sounded somewhat

disused, but it certainly carried as much venom as the other demon's, only the venom there was not just directed at the human mage, but his counterpart.

"You are a fool, Franmalth. Until you revealed yourself, we would've had the situation well in hand, despite this one's attack on us. Instead, everyone in that area saw you transforming. Our captured mind control mages spells cannot cover that. Confusion will grow, and lack of faith in my magnificent creation spread. Your falling to human emotions has cost us dearly."

He pointed back the way they came towards the front of the battle, where the army had been moving across the stream and towards the fortresses, getting chewed up as they came by the defenders. "And at a time where the army is facing its sternest threat." He then pointed back, his arm moving almost like a steel bar towards Draculos, until the finger was pointed straight at him. "And then there is this one. A Wizard Saint, in case you did not recognize his abilities. Nor will he be the only one here. Such a concept would be most illogical."

"Who cares! So what if they're here, we can deal with them!" Franmalth shouted, launching himself towards Draculos.

If he thought Draculos was still distracted by the newcomer's arrival, he was soon shown differently. Draculos once more ducked under the attack, suddenly holding a goblet. It had been on his belt a moment ago, but now he used it almost like a weapon which smashed up into the demon's face. With the power behind that blow, it knocked the tooth loose and spun the demon to the side, as bright green blood spurted. It seemed to almost revolve around itself for a moment then flowed down into the goblet, congealing there.

Draculos stared at it, then even as he leaped away, he shivered, tipping it out. All of his senses were screaming at him that trying to imbibe in the blood of the demon would probably give him a momentary power up but was not going to be doing him any long-term favors. *So much for my curiosity on that score. I must get past these two and back to the battle proper, where I will have more human blood to work with.* The way his magic had dissipated, weakening him quite a bit a moment ago, disturbed Draculos immensely, even if it had been just a little bit.

That was as far as his thoughts could go before the demon hovering above him rejoined the battle, still looking furious with his fellow but unwilling to let Draculos continue living despite that. "Magic Barrier Particles." At those words a thick black miasma came from Keyes' outstretched hands, spreading towards Draculos, who hissed, kicking the other demon away into the mist. The mist however didn't do anything against the demon, who rolled through it.

The black gas shifted then, first coming in the form of tentacle-like tendrils of mist, which Keyes controlled like extensions of his body, trying to come in towards Keyes from various directions. Every time they came near Draculos, he felt his magic slowly ebbing away. Once, one of Keyes' attack clipped his lower leg, then spread all around it and Draculos felt more of his magic disappear. Not a lot, but enough to be worrisome.

Even more worrisome was the lack of blood around for his magic to use as a minimum. *I hate using my own blood for my magic, the Hunger it causes is terrifying.* Like many Lost Magics, Draculos'

magic came at a cost: it could literally eat itself alive in his body if Draculos used his blood to create his spells.

“I don’t think so!” Franmalth shouted, leaping in his direction, his arm flashing forward in a blow that took Draculos in the face. “Yes! I finally landed a hit!”

Draculos was flung backwards, crashing hard to the ground as he felt blood trickle down his face from gashes the knuckles and spike-like protrusions of the other demon’s fists had created on his face. “Blood Burden: Living Weapon!” The blood from his face congealed into dozens of tiny, foot long spears, which he hurled through the air towards Keyes.

Keyes wrapped himself in his Magic Barrier Particles spell, which seemed to be his only attack so far. But under Draculos’ direction the spears doubled up, a few of them going behind the others. Two of them got through the barrier in this manner with their magic intact to slam into Keyes’ chest with enough force to actually cause him to grunt in pain. He twisted with them however, raising his staff above his head, and creating a massive darkness there from the barrier particles which he was pumping out from his body, before he lashed out at Draculos again with it.

But Draculos had already moved, once more in the air he was flying away, his speed in the air better than either demon. Soon, he was over the same blasted out cratered remains of where the fight had begun, and almost ecstatically smiled as he realized that the bodies of the dead had not been removed yet. Landing in among them, he raised his hands in either direction and then shouted, “Blood Burden: Gathering!”

The blood of the fallen shifted towards him just as Keyes arrived, shouting out, “Curse: Necromancy!” and began to revive the dead bodies.

But those bodies were now desiccated, the blood of them twisted and pulled out from them by Draculos’ magic. For a moment the two of them fought for control of those bodies, but Draculos had already begun his attack, forcing Keyes to play catch-up, and without blood in those bodies, the zombies that Keyes created were weak, slow moving things, which Draculos batted aside with ease as he leaped back into the air.

However, this in turn opened him up for another attack of Magical Particles, which crashed over his body from head to toe, Keyes having anticipated his move. Indeed, it might well have had a massive impact on Draculos, if Draculos wasn’t still taking in the power of the blood all around him.

With barely a thought he used that blood to create a barrier against the particle attack of his enemy, the barrier growing to block more of Keyes’ magical barrier assault. With that shield in place between him and Keyes, Draculos turned, away intending to deal with Franmalth. But the fat demon was a single step closer than he thought and struck first. Draculos grunted as the blow landed on his upper arm as he turned towards Franmalth, with one spike stabbing deep into his arm.

Yet Franmalth’s transformed arm stuck there, the blood around the wound acting like cement, and for a moment the two of them looked at one another Franmalth trying to yank his armor out, almost manic with rage, so much so he forgot his own Curse’s abilities. It was as if seeing it not work before had made the demon simply toss aside his ability. Not that it would have worked anyway.

Draculos was certain now that Franmalth's absorption curse could not work on him without imbibing in his blood, where all of Draculos' magic truly lay. No one spell would have given Franmalth that.

"Blood Burden: Creeping Death." At Draculos' words the blood of the injury swelled up over the actual wound, covering the demon's arm, and moving up its arm to the rest of its body, where it formed a thin veneer of red.

"Yo, you, what are you gah, what is your body worth anyway!?" Franmalth thrashed and tried to break free, while Keyes battered against Draculos' blood shield which had encapsulated them in a sphere.

He eventually won through but by the time he did, his fellow was dead. The blood veneer had suddenly shifted its form, hundreds of thousands of tiny spikes, stabbing through like spears, each of them reaching for one another from Franmalth's body, blood spike reaching for blood spike within Franmalth's body.

By this point the blood shield was almost gone, and so was the blood of all of the fallen so far in this area of the ongoing battle. And Keyes was on Draculos, too close, far too close for Draculos to evade, the Magical Particles reforming into his body as he launched another attack, this time again from his staff. This time the outer edge of the magical particle attack exploded on impact as they crashed into Draculos' chest, sending him tumbling away from the direction of the main army.

This physical assault was followed up by a blast of purple black energy as Keyes growled out, "Judgment of Malefic Star!"

The second attack struck, and Draculos could feel the very magic which made up his body and the physical essence of it starting to decay, dying as that hit flung him away, slamming him through several walls in a nearby hamlet, ironically towards the remaining army units on this side of the river. He collapsed to his knees, grunting in agony through clenched teeth, blood pooling in his mouth. *Damn it, I underestimated the effects of that magic particle barrier attack, that hurt!!*

Keyes marched up to him, staring down at Draculos. "You will make a most magnificent corpse."

With that, he reached out and almost gently touched the top of his staff to Draculos' head tilting it backwards and intoning "NecroAK!"

That was as far as he got before Draculos spat in his face. The man paused, one hand rising, to wipe away the blood, but Draculos was already intoning, "Blood Burden: Blood Invasion!" The blood instantly shifted down very rapidly into Keyes' mouth, getting through via the holes left there by his skeleton-like visage. Once inside Draculos' blood began to battle with the blood within Keyes' own body. *I normally wouldn't bother with this attack due to the cost of using my own blood to power my magic, but in this instance, I believe it is justified given I will have to do my part against the rest of the army as well.*

Even as Keyes tried to transform his body the spell failed, his legs disappearing while his upper body did not, and then reforming, then his forearm arm joining the lower legs in shifting, the rest staying in his material shape.

“What... did you...” Keyes began as he tried again to dissolve into magic barrier particles.

Draculos with his hands outstretched towards them, a cold sneer on his face. “I’m inside you fool. My power is in my blood, all of it. And now because of a moment of inattention I am within your very body. You are a dead being walking, it’s only a matter of time.”

At this taunt Keyes tried to twist around, tried to bring up another spell, but the battle going on in his body was such that he couldn’t concentrate enough in order to actually cast a spell. He then grimaced and concentrated on trying to change his form back into the magical barrier particles once more.

For a moment, the willpower of the two opponents strove one against the other. Draculos was cold, practically cruel fury, as he rode the ongoing enchantment within his blood in Keyes’ body. In contrast after several minutes into the spell, Keyes began to panic, his inability to break free of his enemy’s spell and the fact that the Franmalth had already died causing Keyes to try to flee.

But it was far, far too late for that. “Blood Burden: Art of Agony!”

At that command, the blood in Keyes’ body shifted and he found himself in his full, physical body once more. He tried to lash out, but from within, the bit of blood that he had spat out had grown, feeding off the blood in the demon’s body. It now expanded like spikes in every direction, piercing up into Keyes brain, out through his chest, down through his legs, out through his back and arms. A second later it looked as if the demon had become part of some horrific example of modern art.

Draculos collapsed to the side gasping, magically spent to a degree he had not reached for centuries. His arm slowly began to reform, reusing what limited magical powers he had left. At the same time a hunger gripped him, a hunger he had not felt since he first awakened his power.

Wearily he stumbled to his feet, not even noticing a blast of distant magical energy. He nearly collapsed a second later as the earth rumbled beneath him, but he didn’t even look in the direction it came from. He didn’t notice anything, instead stumbling towards the nearest Circle Army units.

Of course he was seen. There were always outriders, scouts or foragers around an army’s encampments even during an ongoing assault, and there was a lot of chaos at the moment, a lot, which had only been exacerbated by what had just happened to the prophet, who was currently collapsing into a pile of skin, puss and flesh. The spell that had created the homunculus, like the undead which had served in the army, ended with Keyes death. The duration of how long an undead lasted from that point on would depend on the power of the soul inhabiting the undead body. And the homunculus, which had once been the reincarnated prophet of the faithful, didn’t have a will of its own.

To say that this was causing consternation shock and fear among the higher-ups of the Army was as great an understatement as could ever exist. This and everything Draculos had done before had caused a little under a third of the army to fall into chaos. The portion on the other side of the river, with an enemy in front of them and a battle to concentrate on, seemed to still be retaining some cohesion. Not so much the forces on this side.

This band of riders had been among those who had responded to the first shout from the prophet. Seeing the enemy who had done such damage to their secret artillery guns, and who might have killed the prophet, gave them a purpose. They turned their horses toward him, shouting out in high, almost panicky voices, "There, there he is, kill him, kill the mage who dared attack the Prophet!"

The first one to reach him, found out that Draculos was not quite as dead as he appeared. He turned blood shot eyes towards the foremost rider and leaped towards him like a lion towards its prey, bearing horse and rider to earth.

The man barely had time to scream before Draculos' mouth clamped down on his throat and he drank deeply. The trooper's scream cut off abruptly that and he spasmed, while the horse tried to kick and get out of the way, a backhand snapping its neck almost without thought.

The other riders attempted to skewer Draculos with their lances as he was feeding, and their lances did penetrate his body, but they didn't leave. But just like Franmalth's transmuted arm, they found themselves stuck there. More than one arm broke there, but unlike the demon, these men could release their weapons and did, trying to circle around, either to try again or retreat, even the men involved didn't know.

Finished with his first victim Draculos stood up, unbothered by the weapons sticking into his body from various directions, wiping a tiny drop of blood away from his mouth, as he looked all around him at the now wide, frightened eyes of the Circle followers. "Forgive me, but there is a reason why I call my magic a burden. There is always a price that must be paid, especially for consuming so much of my reserves. To consume, I must in turn imbibe," he said, his voice deformed as he spoke around, two fangs glistening in the sunlight.

The man around him screamed. That scream spread, and the men of the Circle Army kept on screaming for some time...

OOOOOOO

Elsewhere, the day was not going any better for the Circle Army. Before Draculos had started his attack, the main body of the army, it's massive infantry formations - the equivalent of very loosely organized regiments, although each company still moved on their own just in the same general direction, had moved out from their camps and crossed the pontoons. The first rushing attack having failed, the circle generals began to dig in on the other side of the riverbed. They threw up heavy works as other infantry formations made their way forwards, heavily laden with mages to attack the fortresses.

These mages were what the Circle called 'turned' for the most part although there were a few mages who had been born in Midi. At the same time, still more cavalry groups moved to either direction, trying to see if there was a way around the natural defensive structure provided by the two hills.

Many of those cavalry groups never reached the mountains they were moving towards. Wolfheim hunted throughout that morning as Draculos moved into position, taking down groups of cavalymen here and there, moving closer, ever closer towards the main body of the enemy on the western side of the river.

Finally, the majority of that enemy army was either on the pontoon bridges they'd created or across the river. At that moment, the other part of San Jiao Shin's trap was sprung. Several mages who could transform into otters or other water-dwelling beasts moved through the dark, bloody water of the river towards the pontoons. They placed bombs, small and large, and then swam on, away downstream, leaving the area as fast as possible. Seconds later, the bridges exploded.

Watching this from his newest hide, a tiny, but extremely thick bush right by the river, Wolfheim really didn't need the verbal go-ahead from the King, but he received one anyway. "It's done." The king's voice came through the runic array inscribed onto the side of the helmet as Wolfheim held it up to his head. "They are launching a massive attack at Jura, and now a sizeable portion of their army is trapped on this side of the river. it's time for you to do your part, Wolfheim."

"Agreed," Wolfheim replied crisply, standing up on his haunches. *Finally! Let's get this over with!*

Having activated his magic hours ago, Wolfheim looked like a giant werebeast, with green fur, massive fangs and large claws. He now stood several feet taller than Jura or God Serena, with shoulders two or even three times as wide, his arms and shoulders marked by tufts of lighter colored green fur. His eyes were still human but were set in a face that looked like someone had taken a wolf's face and tried to mold it to look like a human's.

This was Wolfheim's Lycanthrope Transformation. Unlike the Take Over magic the Strauss siblings used, this was the only form he could take. But that didn't mean it wasn't a versatile magic. Because the creature in question was a mix of a human and the legendary Tundra Wolf of Iceberg, a magical creature that had once plagued that wintry country from one end of the other until being hunted nearly to extinction at great cost to the citizens of that country. With it came dozens of inherent magics.

All around him were hundreds of his victims, each of them having fallen victim to one such: Lycanthropy. These men had been transformed, malformed almost into human wolf hybrids. Monstrous in appearance, they stood on all fours, hunch-backed their forearms much larger than their back arms, claws that were as large as their formerly human hands with tiny heads on their large misshapen shoulders, with wide tails falling to the ground behind them. Their mouths were also hugely deformed as they slathered around giant teeth made to tear rather than to simply bite through something.

These were the men who Wolfheim had been dealing with since that morning, the former cavalry units of the circle that had been ordered up into the nearby mountain to see if they could find a route across that would allow them to get behind the two fortresses on the lower hills below. Slathering beasts, these men would now follow his orders as dutifully and as instinctively as a wolfpack would its pack leader, although it they wouldn't have any of the natural fears or self-preservation instincts of a beast, unlike when Vulcans used their Take Over magic to turn a human into a Vulcan.

The transformation wasn't permanent. Not unless he bit someone on the night of the full moon anyway. However, if he slashed or bit someone and they lacked enough magical power to fight off the curse, they would come under his control for a day or two, depending on whether or not Wolfheim bit them or used his claws, his saliva making the transformation a little more permanent. Afterwards, they would collapse, their bodies having used up weeks' worth of energy during the transformation time, remembering nothing of their time under his control.

Wolfheim often thought that was a kindness because like Draculos, Wolfheim believed his magic was something more along the lines of a curse rather than something to be proud of.

So engaged against the two fortresses was the enemy army that they barely had any lookouts or scouts in the same direction that they'd sent her cavalry before although they did have defenses bulwarks scattered here and there. The loping werewolves were almost upon them before a shout went up. Wolfheim was impressed that a few of the Circle's units were able to turn and present spears or a shield wall, while others began to fire with their rifles.

Those rifles too were interesting looking, not as good as ones that he had seen in Pergrande, but they were still side action loaders, if not as quick to fire. Most of the riflemen dropped to the ground, presenting the smallest target they could, while the others had to stand and face the oncoming enemy.

Of course, that wouldn't save them. Even as they shot down their former comrades in werewolf form, Wolfheim was loping forward, his hands shifting and moving in front of him as a magical circle appeared below him. "Wolf, Wolf: Ice Spikes!" he growled. Ahead of him, a corresponding circle appeared where he had gestured, capturing the entire front line of defenders, and then spikes erupted from the ground, impaling them, shattering the close-range aspect of that defense.

The guns still fired, and unlike Wolfheim himself, his transformed creatures didn't have any kind of durability or added enhancement to take punishment. Dozens went down, but then the others were in among their former fellows, with Wolfheim on their heels. His creatures couldn't pass on his lycanthropy, but he did so cheerfully now, laying about him with claw and fang, as he thought savagely *the Kings didn't need to send San Jiao Shin and it any additional army, because we, Draculos and I, are an army!*

Wolfheim had included Draculos in that thought because he knew what Draculos' powers could do. And he had just seen near the back of the battlefield from the fortresses' perspective several blue-sashed individuals turning on their own, knocking down what looked like poles of some kind with giant magical speakers on top of them.

For several minutes, Wolfheim continued his attack, mangling the flank of the attacking army, as aspects of it simply recoiled and others turned to engage him rather than continuing on towards the fortresses. Those fortresses of course continued to fire down into the attacks near them, their local artillery advantage allowing them to take an exorbitant toll. And most of the enemies mages were still the fortresses, unable to make their way back through their own lines towards this new attack and being used up in turn. Jura was there too, going on the offensive, stones spikes, massive hammers, and caverns opening all along the battlefields front, as the younger Wizard Saint gleefully went on the attack for the first time in this fight.

Around Wolfheim the numbers of the Circle Army once more worked against it. Not only because the more men around him, the more Wolfheim could infect, but also because now they simply could not get out of their own way, could not back away from his flank attack fast enough to reform a defensive line.

Without their pontoon bridges the majority of the enemy's infantry were stuck between the river and the attack already going on against the fortresses. They could retreat downriver away from those pontoons and Wolfheim's attack, but only by fully retreating from the battle entirely, and it would take them away from their supplies which were still on the opposite side of the river along with a little over a third of their army, the majority of their cavalry and engineers, along with their few medium-sized artillery pieces the circle possessed.

Worse for the Circle, while each of their unit commanders were able to react on their own, they lacked cohesion now separated from the prophet and their generals. The equivalent of company commanders were able to move their units, but they didn't coordinate with one another very well, and there wasn't a secondary officer between those commanders and the generals still on the other side of the river.

Wolfheim idly wondered how that kind of organization had come about. But really didn't care at this point as he bit one man in half, then slashed out to either direction with his clawed hands, infecting three more.

Those three swiftly began to turn even as their fellows watched in horror, shouting out imprecations at Wolfheim's magic. "The thief infests us! His magic is evil! Evil! Worse than any other!"

Wolfheim sneered at that, and ignored their words, eager to do more damage. *Damn all religions anyway!*

His rampage continued, until a strange scent reached him through the smell of the battlefield of gun smoke, blood, and everything else. He paused, his head moving up like a dog, which had caught the smell of a rabbit, and he turned quickly, smacking in the hand of an odd human who wasn't dressed like a circle soldier to one side. An explosion went off in the direction the man's palm had pointed, while a yellowish magical circle appeared below Wolfheim.

Quickly reacting, Wolfheim leaped away, shouting out "Wolf, Wolf: Howl!" From his mouth, a supersonic howl blasted out just as another explosion went off, slamming into the wave of the explosion and tearing it apart before he could reach him. The Circle soldiers all around him were not so lucky, more than a dozen of them having been blown into pieces, and others simply thrown through the air like broken dolls to land elsewhere in the battlefield.

He landed on his feet, absentmindedly slapping several infantrymen out of his way with a wave of one hand, to stare at the man who had attacked him. Although the man certainly wasn't human given his furry tail, pointed teeth slit-style pupil and black spots and the fact he had animal-like ears. Indeed, his hair looked more like fur, yellow-blond in color, and he had further markings on his arms that merged into hands which ended with small claws.

The man didn't give Wolfheim any time to wonder where he had come from. "Bomb Curse: Exploding Spiral!" the man shouted, raising one hand backwards, palm open before flashing it forward in an arc, creating a spiraling torrent of air. Wherever the spiral he created impacted the battlefield between the two combatants exploding against anything it touched, ground or people. Wolfheim was forced to keep using his howl spell to protect himself, while the death toll rose.

At that the entire army recoiled from this new horror. Groups of men and women under not enthralled commanders retreated pell-mell, a cutting down their fellows to get away from the mage battle, which had suddenly blossomed in their midst. Others still tried to move forward, tried to cut down the turned Lycans or join the attack on the hills as they had been ordered to.

Regardless, Circle soldier and local commander alike showed a remarkable grasp of common sense: they knew when they were overmatched and were willing to let the two mages battle it out. If this thought was perhaps tinged with contempt and religious horror directed at both mages equally due to what they were, that didn't change that underlying understanding.

And in the next second an area around Wolfheim once more began to light up with circular complex markings, but this time Wolfheim fought back, slamming his hand down onto the ground as he shouted out his spell, "Wolf, Wolf: Ice Shield!"

The shield came into play below him as it formed to Wolfheim's mind, and he was blown up onto it as if he was on a plate that had just been on top of a landmine. He felt that the landmine comparison was spot on, as the explosion below most definitely reminded him of similar magical attacks he'd seen before.

Midair, the yellow haired man appeared in front of him cackling. "Good, good, keep fighting! That'll make your death all the sweeter! And if I can kill other humans at the same time as I am fighting you, that's just a bonus!"

Wolfheim growled angrily yet didn't do anything when the man used the same spell he had done before, Exploding Spiral. The spell hit, and Wolfheim roared as his clothing and chest were exploded, which flung him back down to the ground. The man followed, landing nearby.

However, when the smoke cleared, Wolfheim was uninjured. He smirked at the other man, shaking his head. "Useless. You're strong, but not that strong."

The other man scowled angrily, then reached for him again, sending out another exploding spiral, which seems to be his fallback spell. However, Wolfheim disappeared for a second from his senses, leaping out from another nearby shadow, shouting out, "Wolf, Wolf: Shadow Run!"

The yellow haired man dodged the swipe to his head, reaching out with a flick of one hand, thumb, index and middle finger outstretched. "Bomb Orb!"

Again, Wolfheim disappeared into a shadow, but several dozen stragglers of the Circle Army who hadn't yet retreated and were fighting the transformed Lycans around them found themselves in the area of the yellow square. An instant later the bomb went off, eviscerating everything within. Pieces of human debris were scattered everywhere.

But at the same time, Wolfheim reappeared, right in the yellow-haired man's face. He grabbed him, then reached in to bite the blond man, but found his jaw stopped by his opponent who strained hard, pushing against the larger wolf monster. Wolfheim's lips shifted into a smirk then he lifted his neck explosively sending his opponent up into the air, where he was once more hit with a wolf howl.

A second later he righted himself in midair, floating there easily.

"You..." Wolfheim said, straightening up from his combat posture as he crossed his arms staring up at the other man. "You're no regular mage, are you?"

"Regular, how dare you use a word like that for me! Puny human realize that you stand in front of one of your betters! I am Jackal, a demon of Tartaros!"

"Excellent!" Wolfheim said with a nod. "Killing you demons is why we're here."

With that, Wolfheim once more disappeared, leaping upwards as fast as he could possibly go, lashing out with a kick that forced the yellow-haired man to duck. Even so he was thrown backwards he kicked out, yet found his foot bitten by Wolfheim. He kicked out again, landing a blow right between the eyes that would have shattered any normal wolf's head into pieces. However, this only forced Wolfheim to let them go as he shook his head to clear it of the hit.

Jackal looked down at his foot, which was now bleeding, and sneered as if he felt what the blood in the saliva of Wolfheim should be doing to him. "You think your measly magic will work on a superior demon!? Let me show you my own transformation instead!"

With that, he roared out like a beast, as his body slowly changed to match. His body shifted in height and width, coming up to Wolfheim's own lycanthrope form. His fur was yellow all over save for the black spots, and his jaw was far more like the Lycan's, a jackal's jaw and mouth, with wide, rending teeth.

Once he was done transforming, he floated down towards where Wolfheim stood, landing across from him. Then without a word the two of them charged with the newly transformed demon Jackal, shouting out, "Bomb Impact!" just as he reached Wolfheim.

Wolfheim grunted as the explosion struck him, but the explosion didn't occur at every impact, only where Jackal willed it, and he also got in his own shot in. "Wolf, Wolf: Icicle Tongue!"

The icicle nearly speared the Jackal through the mouth, but he dodged, twisting his head sideways to chomp down on the ice, even as he lashed out with a kick.

Wolfheim took the shot, grunting as the hit exploded on impact, hurling him away. Yet once more, when he finished rolling, he didn't look all that damaged. "Useless!"

Jackal howled, but Wolfheim howled too, launching his sonic spell once more, racing forward on its heels as he shouted, "Wolf wolf, Piercing Claws!"

This sent out slashes of silver colored magic from his claws, and Jackal was forced to defend himself by the Exploding Spiral technique. But he too charged forward, and Wolfheim found himself underneath the other wolf-like creature, where he lashed down with an axe kick, shouting out, "Impact Bomb!"

Wolfheim raised one hand, caught the descending foot and took the explosion. An explosion which should have shredded him and did. Because this time the wind had picked up slightly from somewhere else on the battlefield, dissipating the smoke enough for Jackal to see what went on right after his curse assault.

Instead of having been exploded, it only looked as if Wolfheim's hand had been incinerated. Except as Jackal was watching, the hand healed itself, regenerating from the stump so fast it happened in an eyeblink. "Useless," Wolfheim said coldly, even as he smirked at the other man, his eyes slowly beginning to get bloodshot. The longer he used this spell, Berserk Regeneration, the more it affected his emotions and ability to control himself. Wolfheim didn't like that, he had enough issues with his temper at the best of times outside of combat. He **hated** losing it during combat.

Yet whatever durability he had, wasn't stopping his enemies bomb based powers. His ice shield had worked earlier only because he had created the concave shield directly over the bomb. That meant he had to rely on his regeneration spell.

Another explosion slammed into his head, causing his powers of regeneration to activate once more, and he snarled, grabbing Jackal's arm. He did so for just a second, too quickly for Jackal to activate the explosion, and kicked out hard, catching Jackal on the inside of the knee.

He howled, going down to one knee, only to reach up to grab at Wolfheim's face once more when Wolfheim went for a bite. The two of them strained, then Jackal exploded Wolfheim's head once more with both hands on his jaw.

"What is up with this wolf guy trying to bite me anyway!? I knew humans were animals, but this is taking it too far," his words trailed off into a mutter as Wolfheim's head regenerated practically from the stump up.

Howling in fury, Jackal began an all-out assault, racing forward and slamming punch after explosive punch into Wolfheim's body. "Die, die! No human should be able to regenerate like that! No human should just be able to, to ignore my curse!"

As his explosion powers faded out after that furious assault, Jackal found his arms grabbed by the other giant wolf-like creature. Then he was head butted, seeing stars, as Wolfheim attacked even as his body continuing to reform from a few of Jackal's own earlier attacks.

He held on with one hand, smashing his other blow first into a punch that took Jackal the side of the head, then a throat jab, then a knee up into Jackal's balls. Everything he could do to stop Jackal from being able to concentrate on his spell Wolfheim did. Yet Jackal had durability and speed and strength far beyond any enemy Wolfheim had faced and we wrenched out of Wolfheim's grip quickly.

“GRAAAGH!!!” Jackal shouted, sending out explosive bomb bursts in every direction in order to gain some distance, but Wolfheim used his Shadow Run spell to keep the fight close, and when Jackal was again able to concentrate on his Explosive Touch, Wolfheim retreated, using his ice powers instead. These proved utterly ineffectual against Jackal, as he simply exploded them the instant they appeared, and Wolfheim couldn’t send them out fast enough to be a real threat. The same thing occurred with his sonic howl.

The two of them played at cat and mouse, at one point one was the mouse, at the other the cat: attack, defend, shift away try to land a telling blow before their positions shifted. But with his regeneration ability, and now with more time between calling upon it, Wolfheim retained his intelligence, and that gave him a massive advantage.

This played out at one point, when he seemed to stumble, and Jackal instantly took advantage, shifting around the attack that he had been about to launch closing hard as he shouted out, “Bomb Curse: Penetrator Impact!”

The explosion came, tore through Wolfheim’s left arm sending his forearm flying away, as his upper arm and half of his chest was shredded on impact.

“Wolf wolf, Howl!” Wolfheim shouted, and Jackal replied with his own attack.

The two of them let off their respective magics point-blank and again, it was Jackal’s who won, the howl being overcome with the sheer power of the demon’s curse.

But by this point, Jackal was huffing, his magic slowly exhausting itself. Even though Demonic curses didn’t run on the same Ethernano as human magic did, there was a limit to how much curse energy a demon could use at any one time without their body being affected. Their battle had carved the landscape into a hellhole, shattered a portion of the mountain, and the river ran red with the blood of the circle soldiers caught in the battle of Titans. But most of that damage had been done by Jackal and his explosive powers and that kind of exertion took its toll.

Other than the occasional howl and shadow jump, Wolfheim hadn’t been expending his magic save in regeneration, and thanks to his spell of Lycanthropy, regenerating was automatic, the equivalent of breathing in deeply for a human. It took little to no magic and was completely based upon the lycanthropic magic of his body. So Jackal had been putting out far more in terms of energy than Wolfheim.

Sensing this Wolfheim howled once more, but this time, two spells lashed out as one. “Wolf, Wolf: Hunting Gaze!” Jackal found himself unable to move for a split second, and in that split second, spikes appeared underneath him, smashing into and through his feet.

He exploded them, but they pinned him down for a precious second. The next instant, Wolfheim had crossed the distance between them. A silver-colored magic encompassed one of his Hands, coalescing and shimmering around his claws, spinning like the edge of a drill around each claw. “Wolf, Wolf: Piercing Claws!”

That attack took Jackal high up on one side of his chest, slicing through his extremely durable body, causing him to shout in anger and fury. Again, he exploded Wolfheim away, and yet as he watched in growing shock and even fear, Wolfheim reformed his wounded side and shoulder and came on again.

This process repeated three times more. But Jackal, with his legs now badly damaged, couldn't take to the air and so couldn't retreat. Wolfheim's long range spells might not have been able to get through his defenses, but he couldn't move any longer and that made him a sitting target.

"Wolf wolf: Howl Maximum!"

A massive sonic blast was sent down towards Jackal, who reflexively blocked it with his Exploding Wind spell, not knowing that this would give Wolfheim precisely what he wanted. The two combatants were obscured from one another for a moment from the smoke of the explosion, and in that second Wolfheim had used shadow jump again.

He appeared behind Jackal, as he howled out, "Wolf, Wolf: Piercing Paw!" The attack, his paw covered in silver-colored cutting magic, burst through Jackal's chest and out the other side. Pulling his arm out from the hole in Jackal's chest, Wolfheim took a few steps backwards, staring at his opponent, who was still kneeling on the ground.

"T, to think, to think that a human would beat me, would overwhelm me like this. But I will have the last laugh..."

Even as he spoke Jackal's body began to glow, and Wolfheim, being no fool, retreated quickly.

Jackal's cackling voice followed him shouting out, "You'll never get out of range! Never! All of my power, all of my being turned into explosive potential! If I die I'll take you with me!"

Wolfheim didn't bother replying, instead leaping into the water, just as Jackal's body did indeed turn into an explosion. The explosion rocked the ground all around like an earthquake, and caused a crater several hundred feet deep, even wider on the side. Soon the river began to flow in, the explosion having carved out a chunk into the river evaporating the water there just as it had flung men and material from well beyond that range away.

Wolfheim grabbed at the side of this new small lake, holding himself there while his body once more regenerated. He pulled himself out of the river slowly, gasping, now feeling the strain of continuous regeneration at last. Still, he pushed himself to his feet, and surveyed the battle, which had stopped by this point. The Circle Army was retreating in complete disarray on this side of the river, retreating south, leaving their fellows and the battlefield.

And on the wind, Wolfheim could hear shouts of the prophet being dead, the prophet being fake, how they had apparently been under some kind of magical control from the men he could see on the other side of the river.

Over there Circle member fought Circle member, and all of them fled the battlefield and the monstrous thing within their ranks as Draculos continued to feed.

Looking at his own part of the battle, Wolfheim sighed shifting his shoulders slightly then turned towards the distant fortresses, where he could see that fighting was still going on, even if it no longer involved the Circle or its army at all...

OOOOOO

At the front of the battle, the combat had become intensely furious about fifteen to twenty minutes after the Circle had realized that the fortresses were real. They kept on moving the undead up mainly to soak up the cannon fire from the defenders as the rest of the army got organized behind them, losing the vast majority of them doing it, but largely removing the cannons from the battle for a time. Beyond that Jura was, as his fellows, impressed at how quickly the Circle Army had realized what they were facing, and began to react to it on the company level.

Single groups of soldiers began to move quickly troops of infantry and cavalry moving forward or around the undead, moving into rifle range to the base of the hill forts, firing at the defensive positions there, or attempting to close. Several companies broke off instantly, using the undead to cover themselves as they moved out to either side of the pontoon bridges, digging in, do right outside of the range of the cannons. Others, galloped ahead, moving around the undead to either side, probing the flanks of the fortresses. They found no luck there either, and the tiny attacks were easily repulsed, while the groups digging in got into the way of the rest of their forces coming across the bridges.

It took about an hour, maybe more, before the enemy got organized on the army level, during which Jura created another tunnel from the base camp well beyond the fortresses up to the secondary hill fort. At that point two small infantry assaults came forward, probing attacks, spreading out, and using their rifles to give one another cover from the rifle fire from the bottom of the fortress. The defender's artillery didn't bother with them, instead continuing to fire into the groups of scattered undead and other units at range, disrupting the now-larger efforts to dig in on this side of the river.

Despite the defenders not using their artillery on them, these small probing attacks to go anywhere, simply because the instant they got to the bottom of the hill, they began to run into the various defensive emplacements that Jura created. Spikes disrupted cavalry assaults. Hidden ditches claimed dozens of infantrymen. Rifles and crossbow from up high drove them off here and there, their slower fire made up for by the dozen Gun Mages who had joined the army.

After those probing attacks were beaten off, things became a little more serious. First, the attackers spread out, each infantry company moving away from one another so that no one fusillade from the defender's artillery could hit more than one company, the undead shield having been mauled to the point of uselessness. Larger groups of infantrymen moved forward at a run hitting here and there, probing here and there still, while others formed up behind them for a more serious assault. Others dug in well to the sides of the line of advanced between the pontoons and the two hill forts, their construction spreading quickly, but haphazardly, the army obviously not knowing yet if they were going to make their defense permanent or not.

The serious assault went in quickly at that point, more than thirteen thousand men, Jian expertly estimated. This was a little over twice as many men the defenders had in both forts combined. "However, being on the defense, especially what you've done to these forts, makes up for a lot of that. They are going to have one hell of a nasty time of it," the old man with the extremely sore throat said, his voice oozing satisfaction.

Yet this assault also included a large number of mages. This was the first time Jura had seen the mages within the circle, and he looked at them closely through his spyglass.

The first thing he noted was that all of them had tattoos on their foreheads, back of their hands and palms, those two visible only barely at that distance when they raise them. The ones on their foreheads were much larger and more obvious. While he couldn't really use runes, Jura was a Wizard Saint and he had access to quite a lot of information, but he had never seen anything like that's tattoos before. They looked almost otherworldly, with no relation to any of the runic script he'd ever seen before, which was surprising, since every runic language known could be found in the various libraries of Ishgar.

To Jura's eyes the central circle on the mages' foreheads were like brands almost. There were two small squares, the outline of which was constructed of runic text. These squares were set inside an infinity swirl of further text, lightly touching the corners of the infinity swirl. Within each of those squares was a single other rune, done far larger than the rest. Again, portions of the rune seemed to touch the outer edge of the square.

What they did, became quickly apparent as those mages entered combat. Several of them revealed themselves to be air mages, using Air Spirit magic. This was a particular kind of air magic that came from Desierto specifically several of the southern tribes. Jura couldn't hear them shouting their spells over the din of battle, but the particular movements and gestures they used was of a variety he had seen before when he was in Pergrande. They were routinely used by pirates, traders, and when Bosco was a center of the slave trade, slavers, particularly those who took females. He found himself completely unsympathetic to their current plights.

The gestures were copied by dozens of men and around them, who spread out gesturing above them. These men and women, like the rest of the army, had tiny tattoos that covered one hand from the wrist down, covering both sides of their hands. They glowed briefly pink, and the men seemed to shout something, even as they raised their hands to the sky. Above them twenty large shields of hardened air glowing green and white appeared, each of them several hundred yards wide.

These men quickly spread out, while the original mages collapsed like marionettes with their strings cut. Jura couldn't make out any wounds, but if their magic had been pulled out of them at, say, twelve times the normal amount for that spell, then it was no wonder the mages couldn't deal with the sudden drain. As Jura watched, men moved forward with gurneys, placing the mages on them, but not retreating just yet. *Odd. Very odd.* The, Jura supposed he could call them 'shared spells' continued to work however, guarding the infantry formations, blocking incoming cannon fire.

With those shields in place, the enemy infantry made a straight assault on the first fortress, while what light artillery the circle seemed to have on this side of the river tried to occupy the attention of the other fortress. These guns were not very numerous, and were not very good, however, especially

in comparison to the Circle Army's rifles, which were nearly as good as Pergrande's. Midi's artillery pieces were slow firing, heavy and lacked the range of the pieces the defenders were using.

As the range closed, other mages began to come into play. A few fire mages were the second to announce their presence. They used a type of fire magic that Jura hadn't seen before.

They seemed to conjure up wolves of magical fire. One beast formed in front of each of the mages, and six people around each of them also were able to conjure up similar beasts, although theirs were both smaller and seemed to be almost shapeless. Despite that lack of control these fire beasts were then sent forward towards the defender's lowermost positions, where they crashed against Jura's hardened earthen ramparts, or in one case, actually went over such into an empty ditch. A few of the beasts reformed after that first rush, while most did not their creators lacking the skill to control their forms. Those that remained moved on while their users went to their knees, one hand outstretched and directing the attacking flame beasts, grimaces of concentration on their faces.

But the defenders had already moved away, a calm purposeful movement, ceding the bottom of the hill without regret. Moving through several different avenues, which closed after them due to the use of dead drops, something the men had put in place during the night. The first groups of infantrymen that tried to charge up after them got caught in those dead end ditches and found themselves taking fire from every side from crossbowmen and riflemen, along with one Gun Magic mage, making short work of them.

At the same time, the fire beasts ran into the area of control Jura was maintaining. Spikes of earth or large boulders crashed through them, dissipating the magic. The wielders crumpled, joining the mages whose magic they had siphoned off.

Still, Jura now understood several things about the way the Circle Army used their mages. *They have a tremendous tactical advantage, able to use single... programmed, or mind controlled? Anyway, they can bring a lot of magic to the fore all at once, giving them a good punch. But they have no, hmm, call it endurance, since I don't know the military form.*

And those runes, as King Toma and King Meredrain speculated, are based off the Sensory Link Magic. If so, it can't be disrupted mid-spell, and seems to simply be based around just, catching spells used by nearby mages with the other side of the connected array. But there seems to be a bit of inflexibility to the types of spells the enslaved mages can use, and their overall power seems to be mediocre. Still that could just be the mages they have thus far enslaved.

Jura shook his head grimly. Whatever happened after this war ended, the rest of Ishgar was not going to let Midi continue its isolation. Those runes would be examined every way they could, their origins would be found, and they would be turned to well, Jura wasn't certain what would happen then. But they represented something new, something highly unusual, and perhaps a step forward in the understanding of both magic as a whole and runes in particular.

The regular infantry kept coming, while still more mages came up. Several of these were Earth Mages, or at least, that's what Jura supposed they were. As he watched, one of them used a spell, and both himself, and 10 other men around him, were covered by heavy stone armor, which Jura recognized

from his own forays into armoring himself. They charged forward, taking fire onto themselves in order to defend their fellows.

He nodded in respect to the sacrifice but wasn't about to let them get a foothold into the fortresses. When they came up out of the trench line at the bottom of the fortress that had already been cleared, Jura struck once more. "Earth Magic: Rock Avalanche!" he intoned simply.

As the attacking mages tried to move upwards, they stopped and stared as the earth in front of them suddenly rose into massive columns of stone. If the Earth mages had been able to cancel or redirect their armor into a single forward shield, rather than as simple armor spells, they might have been able to at least deflect his attack. However they couldn't and all along the front the Earth Mages and those who had borrowed their magic faced the flattened columns of stone shot out from the ground, slamming into their chests with all the force of a runaway train, shattering their armor, and hurling them backwards through the air to roll down the hill, or to simply hit the ground, broken.

More flame magic using mages moved forward, and now they were joined by several other varieties. More than a dozen of them were Rune users themselves, and as they came, these men were shouting something, but Jura couldn't hear it over the tumult of the battle.

If he had, the words would probably have disgusted him. "Kill the enemy mages, kill the thieves! Take their magic and give it back to the earth, back to the future!" were among the softest things these people were shouting. There is no such group so fanatical as those considered heretic by birth and who therefore feel they must work to expunge that sin.

As fast as they came forward, the flame mages found their feet suddenly disappearing as Jura created ditches directly under them. Stone fists came out of the earth, sending men sprawling, their necks snapped, or their faces simply staved in. "After all," Jura said to himself, "this is war." He would say a prayer for them later, but for now, he had to deal with the living.

The Rune using mages proved to be a little more difficult to deal with. They started to spread out areas of control, writing out runic script that gave them control of an area despite Jura's own magic. With a renewed assault by the rest of the infantry they advanced along with several staff mages.

Jura didn't realize what they were doing for a time, busy with more Earth mages who were hurling giant rocks and pieces of rubble towards the defenders.

Eventually however, he noticed that a large portion of the fortress facing the enemy was no longer responding to his command, and he frowned, before sending down a large-scale attack at the runic using mages. "Earth Magic: Cascade."

An entire line of spikes Jura had created in front of another trench shot into the air, enlarging as they went into giant stone snakes charging down towards the rune mages.

Caught before they started their next spell, two of the actual runes using mages were able to defend themselves. Those siphoning off their magic did not, and this new attack slammed into them, shattering the few hastily erected magical defenses, crushing several of them to a pulp, and sending the rest of them falling back in disarray.

By this point, the bottom of the fortress hills was now covered by infantry, of all stripes as they attempted to either try to get up the hills, or around their sides. Neither was going well, and a large majority of the defenders artillery had turned their attention away from taking pot shots at the distant enemy entrenchment's, or the few remaining undead to hammer into the lines and columns of infantry as they came forward now without any further magical shielding.

The abundance of mages in the enemy ranks, thanks to their sharing-thing had given them a massive advantage in the early going of the battle, but now, almost an hour in, most of those mages were either exhausted and had been removed from the fight, or they were dead, unable to overcome the defensive works and Jura's own magic. *They would have been incredibly deadly in an open field battle, but not like this.*

He took a break then, removing his hands from where he had them pressed into a prayer position in front of his chest, and releasing his control of the ground underneath the hill forts.

Jian looked at him and nodded with a faint smile. "I was about to tell you to do that."

"What?" Jura asked, blinking. He had been concentrating so much on the magical side of the battle he hadn't actually been looking at the overall picture.

"They just brought up some more of their artillery, and soft earth does better against that kind of thing that hard." Jian supplied

Jura blinked, then watched as several of cannonballs slammed into previously super hardened spikes. One of them was still slowly being drained of his magic, which had hardened it to that degree, and it shattered off at the impact, causing him to blink in surprise.

"They can get quite a bit of velocity on those cannonballs for some reason," said one of the other men around Jura and the colonel, shaking his head. "They've got the range advantage, but they're so slow firing, and they only have what, ten pieces like that?"

"Something like that. And this time, they brought those pieces up too far." Jian replied as they all watched a group of artillerymen nearby twisting their gun around to range in on the enemy artillery, taking them under fire one after another. Only two of the enemy pieces were pulled back and out of position fast enough to defend against this assault although they had battered several of the stone spike walls down.

Several minutes later, there were twin explosions in the distance, followed by more explosions somewhat closer at hand. Jian barked out a gleeful laugh as the pontoon bridges went up in explosions. Barely a second later Jura could see something else happening on the left flank of the Circle Army on this side of the river. He could see large, monstrous creatures smashing into the army there, and had to wince as he remembered what little of Wolfheim's magic he had shared with Jura during their planning session. *Wolfheim is correct, his magic might not be as directly overpowering as a few I could name, but that doesn't mean it can't be overwhelming like this.*

For a moment, Jian and Jura were silent, watching the trap spring. They couldn't tell much of what was going on with the remainder of the Circle Army on the other side of the river, but the Circle

Army had been cut into two dipropionate pieces, the smaller piece on the other side of the river with most of its baggage train. The larger bit was now caught between the river, the fort hills and Wolfheim's flanking attack.

The reality of their situation didn't look to be sinking into the Circle Army as a whole. Again, the lack of organization was telling. Each company continued to do what it had been ordered to, the attack on the forts continuing, the creation of ditches and defensive works, and even the companies on the side, which were under attack acted as individual units. There was no reaction on the battlefield level. And without that kind of reaction, of understanding, the large portion of the enemy army on this side of the river, perhaps as many as twenty thousand men even now, were doomed.

"I wonder..." the older man mused, only realizing he had spoken aloud when Jura made an interrogative noise, going on. "Oh, it's just, the Circle Army feels almost unfinished in a lot of ways. It's like, they understood what kind of army they wanted to build, but they decided to start this war before it was fully trained and equipped. They have some great bits of equipment: those rifles. They have the chained mages. They have those undead, I have no idea how they have that many necromancy mages. They have a few other secrets, and a massive pool of artificers, way more than I expected them to have, and some of their other logistical systems are amazingly good. Their tents, their clothing, their armor, all of that is nonmagical yet better than ours. Their cannons don't use magic, but even there a few of their pieces are very well made."

He scowled. "Yet as an army, they have a heap ton of issues. They don't have as many cannons as they should, as many tents, as many rifles. They don't have much organization on a battalion or regimental level. Their generals are untrained. Their logistics are good, but untried and disjointed. It's strange, unusual and... unprofessional I suppose."

While all that was interesting, and Jura would otherwise have asked Jian to go into greater detail, but he instead was feeling something in the distance a massive spike of magical potential that had just appeared at the edge of his senses. When mages got to a certain point in their training, they could sense magical build up around them, and Jura, as a former Earth Shaker of Pergrande, had taken this to an extreme degree thanks to his meditation training.

That magical potential had massive power behind it, so much power that Jura knew he was overmatched by whoever was putting it out. He was not exactly a vain man, indeed, the very idea was laughable, but Jura did have some pride in his own abilities and feeling that difference in strength was humbling in the extreme. As Jura watched, he saw the source of that magic, something small and fast coming towards him from near to the same area where he had first sensed the magical potential. *What is that?*

As whatever it was zoomed towards him, though he was able to see it was two somethings, two people possibly and they were the source of the magic he had been feeling. One figure was smaller than the other and broke off almost as soon as Jura could see there were two of them. It moved down towards the ground, disappearing behind intervening hills. The other however, was coming straight for them, faster and faster like a bullet picking up speed.

Soon Jura could make out more detail and calmly intoned, "Colonel Jian, I think it is time for you to move all your people to the other fort. I think we are about to come under attack from the real minds behind this conflict."

The colonel frowned, but then used his spyglass to look in the same direction Jura was with his own. He gulped and then nodded, before shouting out orders. The men around him started to move instantly, retreating into the tunnel in groups of forty, the artillerists abandoning their guns as more men raced down to convey his orders to the rest of the defenders.

With it even closer now, Jura could see the flying individual was massive, estimating that this creature would stand several feet taller than himself, and Jura was normally the tallest in any crowd. He also had four arms and light blue fur, scales or skin, it was impossible to discern which. It was clearly not human, and very clearly grinning widely, sharp, pointed teeth glinting in the sun as it flew forward.

As he came, he raised his hands above his head, and slashed them downwards, sending out blasts of cutting magic. There was no accompanying magical reaction appearing as they did, but the attacks still slammed into the defensive works here and there as well as into the attacking army, they destroyed several hundred yards of the ground, shearing through stone, tree and ground with ease. And people too. One minute the battle was going on, the next the attackers screamed in shock and fear, retreating quickly from the attack, shouts of dismay rising as the ground was littered with their own mutilated dead along with the defenders. More than two hundred Minstrelions had just been wiped out by what Jura had to think was a single opening shot, along with an equal number of Midians.

The few remaining mages among the Circle Army instantly reacted. They and those around them tried to defend themselves as the creature above them simply rained down death, lashing at the ground all around where he had stopped in midair with cutting blasts of wind magic, laughing as he slaughtered them.

But Jura was made of sterner stuff. "Earth Magic: Iron Rock Wall: Continuous formation!" he roared, gesturing with both hands as his body glowed yellow once more. From the ground all around the mountain, the ground came alive, rising to intercept the demon's attacks in a series of walls. As soon as one was cut apart, another rose to take its place, eventually halting the attack in some places, but not all. Here and there the cutting attacks still got through, cutting more men down. Between that and his first attack, Jura knew they had lost four hundred men or more.

Among the attackers, Jura had no idea of the number, but he knew it would probably be quite large. Whatever this was supposed to be, it broke the back of the attackers, the Circle troopers moving quickly, many of them having already been retreating from the assault Wolfheim had started to their right flank. In moments, another battle started up there and that mass exodus to the right of the battlefield became a near rout.

The Circle Army was no longer a real threat. That label had shifted over to the two demons attacking them.

I can't remain on the defensive against this creature, Jura thought, staring at the results of attempting to do so around the hill fort even as he continued to protect the Minstrelions as best he could. With a scowl he came back to himself once more, looking over at Jian. The Colonel nodded grimly

as more of his men died and others raced up to the top of the hill and the tunnel entrance. "Go get 'em sir."

Nodding sharply, Jura turned away and began to summon up his magic once more. "Earth Magic: Carrying Wall." From below him, another column of stone rose, rocketing him forward towards the attacker.

The demon of course saw him coming, but Jura leaped away as he attacked, not trusting any armor he could create in that brief instant to take the demon's attack. Another rock column rose to greet him, and he landed on it, facing his enemy now on almost the same level. "Brave of you, but it will avail you nothing. The time has come, the time is come to throw off this guise to do our own work. To slaughter humans!"

Gesturing with both hands, Jura launched a few preliminary attacks up towards the other creature, but the distance from the ground made it very obvious that they were incoming, and the creature simply smashing them aside with his own magic, or waited until one of them was close enough, shattering it with a punch rather than magic. That showed that the creature was also extremely strong, physically as well as magically. Not a good sign, Jura thought to himself, as he was rapidly pushed back onto the defensive. He launched attack after attack, but his attacks just weren't mobile enough to attack someone who remained in the air like that.

Not unless I get sneaky, he thought. "Earth Magic: Talus." This spell created a series of pillars around Jura in a pyramid formation, hiding Jura from sight for a brief second. He used that second to create a tunnel for himself, which he dropped into and tunneled as he went using his magic. Above him, the monster turned its attention to the Circle Army once more, slaughtering another hundred men.

A second later, Jura reemerged, several hundred feet away and launching a single massive attack from directly behind the demon. "Earth Magic: Supreme King Rock Crush!!"

The attack was wide, a flowing river of thousands of separate stones, flashing towards the demon but even that wasn't Jura's main attack.

The villain destroyed most of that attack with his own magic, but completely missed the next part of Jura's attack: two massive hands of pure magic that appeared to either side of him and slammed inwards. He howled in pain, and Jura did not let up. Even as he had launched that attack, he had gotten above the demon via another column of stone and slamming down a heavy fist of stone from above him. "Earth Magic: Iron Rock Fist!"

The demon looked up when the shadow covered him but was unable to dodge or protect himself before he was hit. The blow sent him crashing down into the earth.

Roaring in anger, the demon surged to his feet seemingly only slightly injured. But now Jura was in its face, shouting out another attack. "Earth Magic: Iron Rock Powder Explosion!!!"

"Tenga Goken: Mikazuki!" the demon shouted back, each of his four arms moving separately.

Like this the two of them traded blows, their attacks destroying one another only to be replaced by more. Now it was a much more even contest, however. Every time the demon tried to take to the air, Jura would hammer him back down again with an attack from every side with his Rock Avalanche. The demon couldn't deal with hundreds of tiny attacks fast enough to dissipate all of them, and while his sight was occluded, another massive fist would smash him back down to the ground. Still, the demon didn't look pained from any of these attacks, tanking them and returning his own, his attacks becoming more and more powerful as the battle went on.

In contrast, Jura taking damage bleeding from numerous cuts and wounds caused by near misses, one of whom had nearly taken his eye out, causing a deep gash across the side of his face head that was bleeding profusely, although thankfully not into his eyes. Another attack lashed out after the one that had nearly taken his eye aiming to take his leg off, but he had dodged at the last instant.

"Onimaru!" the demon howled and cutting force lashed out with both sets of arms creating 'X' shaped attacks flashing towards Jura.

Jura dodged most of these, but one of them scored across his chest, and another along one thigh. Normally a magical attack like this would have had trouble getting through Jura's stone-like durability, but once more the demon's cutting spell was able to get through, and Jura found himself bleeding still more. Yet he didn't stop attacking, didn't stop looking for an opening.

There was a massive explosion to their right, huge, bigger than any attack or magical event Jura had ever seen. The shockwaves found them here at the foot of the hill fort, and demolished the remainder of the defenses, while also carving out a chunk of ground and flinging people thousands of yards away through the air. Jura too was buffeted by the shockwave, but so was his enemy nearly losing his feet as he turned to stare in the direction of the explosion. "Jackal!?"

Jura didn't hesitate and shifted all the magic he had gathered for his defense straight into an attack. "Earth Magic: Diamond Crusher!"

This attack created several giant vices behind the demon, lashing forward towards him, as the demon was looking away. Before he could get away from the assault, it landed, catching two of his four arms. Then there were several blasts of pure magical energy, each attack more concentrated than in Jura's Supreme King Rock Crush. It got through the demon's durability this time, shattering the bones in the trapped arms from his hands down to his elbow

"Damn you, how can you a mere human hurt me!" the Demon shouted, launching a wide-angle attack in every direction with another Mikazuki spell, only one far more powerful. Everything around him was sliced, including the ground beneath him, forcing Jura back.

Then he began to change. Within a few seconds even as Jura tried to defend himself from the previous attack, the demon changed, becoming even larger, while his legs shifted shape, multiplying into tentacles. When his change was done, he launched another series of cutting attacks at Jura, who replied with his own defensive spell for a moment, before somehow finding the willpower to keep his Iron Rock Wall Continuous Formation in place and to launch his own attack.

This failed however when the demon launched himself forward, sending out cutting power as he bodily crashed through Jura's defenses, one hand grabbing at Jura's head before the Earth Mage could retreat. He brought the man's head down into a knee thrust, then its remaining free fist came in, slamming punches into Jura's chest, causing his ribs to crack. He gasped, and hung there in the demon's upper arms, completely at its mercy now. "Humans, always striving." There was no sense of admiration in those words, merely disdain. "Still, at least someone your size will fill me up, a full course meal all from one human."

Then he gasped once, his back arching in pain as a hand stabbed through him from behind. "One thing we humans do," said another voice from behind the demon, "is we help each other occasionally."

Jura stared with pain-filled eyes between the demon's mangled arms at the giant monster behind him. Wolfheim nodded to him, then wrenched his hand out of the demon's chest, still glowing with his silver magic. And then, he grabbed the demon's head, and roared before snapping his neck violently, tossing the body aside.

He stared around them at the scattered remnants of the Circle Army, which had begun to retreat downriver, then at the damaged and blasted hill fort, taking in the utterly changed landscape. Finished with his inspection, he sighed and sat down next to Jura, nodding to him as the larger man simply slumped in place, going down to one knee, holding his ribs as Wolfheim's transformed body shifted back into his normal one. "I think we need to get you to a healer," he said calmly, his own magical reserves practically nonexistent.

Then he looked out into the distance, towards where they could see some other magical battle occurring, flashes of lightning, torrents of fire and tornados rising to the sky above, shaking his head. "I think, whatever's going on out there, it's going to have to occur without the two of us."

OOOOOO

Several hours before the demons announce their presence, Master Mard Geer was staring into his observation lacrima device, frowning pensively. "It would appear as if at least one Wizard Saint has appeared." He then shifted, watching the attack on the two massive magma cannons, which he had helped to design were destroyed. "Make that two at the very least. We will have to become involved further than Franmalth and Keyes."

And it had to be one of the two I don't know nearly enough about to plan for, he groused. And this had been going so well too. I thought it would take at least another month before the Minstrel king called in help, and to send Wizard Saints at that. None of my plans for dealing with such are anywhere near complete. Still, depending on who, we might be able to overwhelm them.

"How are we going to cover that my Lord? That is, if we are still manipulating the humans into killing each other for us," asked Yakdoriga. He seemed a mix of frog and octopus, the mouth and tongue of a frog set into an almost octopus-like body. He had weird antenna on his head too, but they almost

seemed a minor note in comparison to the oddity of the rest of his body. He was their guild's chief information officer, now that Kyoka and Seilah were dead.

"We are not," Mard Geer said with a sigh, watching Franmalth break his cover. "Our agents on the ground have been forced to reveal themselves, that will do too much damage to the hypnosis effect that we have been able to manipulate them with, even if the prophet himself is still a viable option. Regardless, the chance of killing at least a few Wizard Saints is not one to be overlooked either. Together they are a threat, but if they did not know we are involved they might not have gotten involved in this war. Jackal, Ezel," he said pointing at them both. "You will get involved now. See if you can kill the one in the hill forts quickly, then join the battle against Draculos. We don't know enough about his magical abilities for me to be sent when about our odds of facing him."

Jackal scoffed, crossing his arms arrogantly. "My Lord, you're putting too much emphasis on their abilities. They're merely human after all, how could either of them face a superior demon."

"It is precisely that kind of thinking that has cost us three Demon Gates already," Mard Geer said coldly. "No, we will be cautious here. Draculos is going to be held at bay by Keyes and Franmalth. Together, their defensive skills should be able to defeat Draculos' magic, whatever it is."

He broke off as something flashed in his observation crystal and watched as the bridges exploded, cutting the Circle Army in two. *A smart move against humans who can't fly as easily as they walk like we do.* And then he continued to watch as another Wizard Saint made his presence known. "Wolfheim, another Wizard Saint. His abilities seem purely physical and close range in nature, for the most part at least." He mused, changing what he was saying in midstride as he saw Wolfheim use something that looked like ice magic. He was tempted to send his own ice mage, Silver Fullbuster, down to do battle with him. One of Keyes' better creations, the ice mage Silver, was able to use Ice Devil Slayer Magic, and was immensely powerful, for a human. But he decided against it.

"A slight modification to your orders. Eden, you will face the weakest one Jura. Kill him, and as many of the enemy troopers as you possibly can." He paused thinking, then shrugged. "In fact, go as wild as you want both of you. As I said, the time has come to discard our tools in the Circle. We will have to come up with other means to make the humans do our work for us."

Both demons grinned at that, having never been as enthused with the idea of using human pawns as Mard Geer or Keyes were. Keyes because this allowed him access to undead bodies he could practice his necromancy on, while Mard Geer was simply coldly logical. He felt they could do a lot of damage to human unity this way, even if they wouldn't be as thorough about killing the enemies as demons would be.

The two demons left, and Mard Geer turned back to watch the battle on his crystal. Not twenty minutes later his eyes widened in shock as Draculos overcame Franmalth. The fight against Keyes seems to be almost over as well, which he did not like.

The other fights seem to be going our way but even so, it is time to bring more power down on them. Then we can wipe out the rest of the battlefield, both sides. So long as humans die in giant numbers, I care not how we do it. And perhaps if the Prophet survives we can even have Midi create another army to continue the war.

Even as Mard Geer was thinking about sending off his last two minions to turn the tide there, another Wizard Saint was about to make his entrance, utterly unseen and unfelt by Mard Geer or any of his followers. Because none of the demons of Tartaros had ever felt the need to have lookouts. After all, as high as they were, they knew nothing could sneak up on them.

As it turned out, they were entirely wrong in this assumption.

From up above them, God Serena looked down at the massive cube, tempted to almost feel awe that someone had constructed such a thing. It was several miles to a side, a massive cube in shape and obviously had its own gravity, because a lot of its surface was covered with water that didn't fall off, regardless of what side of the square it was on, even the underside. What wasn't covered with water was covered with rocky outcroppings that quickly shifted into buildings. One was a massive structure that looked almost like a castle mixed with a church of most Baroque design.

The whole effect was fascinating to look at, but that wasn't what he was here for, and God Serena grinned as he began to gather his magic. No, he was here to smash it, its owners, the demons undoubtedly and anything else he could get away with. Despite being number one Wizard Saint, God Serena had never really been able to go all out, and he was gleefully eager for the opportunity to do so.

"Gale Dragon magic and Purgatory Dragon magic combined," he howled, gathering one kind of magic in one hand, the other in his other hand. "Searing Tornado Penetrating Tongue!" From his conjoined hands, a blast of magic that looked almost like the tongue of flame from a Dragon lanced down towards the cube.

But this was no ordinary flame. God Serena had through the use of two magics that could interact almost automatically, created a Unison Raid spell. The fires caught in the tiny, intensely condensed tornado folded back on themselves, becoming hotter and hotter, turning into plasma, a state of being that didn't explode as fire would upon hitting the target, or cut as an air attack would, but which would instead sear through anything it touched.

The attack wasn't as wide in diameter as he had hoped for, but it still seared straight one corner of the cube and deep into the bowels of the massive floating creation. Even the heat at the outer edge of the attack was hot enough to melt stone and steam away water, while the attack itself stabbed into the cube, literally coring it from one corner on a diagonal down into its core before the demons even knew they were under attack.

Inside his throne room Master Geer instantly reacted, shouting out a command to the configuration of the cube, which started to groan and shift, moving into what could possibly have once become a giant monster shape. However, the instant that the attack hit, Master Geer knew that Cube was done for. Deep in the bowls of the Cube, Plutogrim's heart, his own laboratory had just been destroyed by the attacker's magic, taking with it the magical devices that kept the Cube in the air and powered everything else within the Cube too, including his and Keyes' ongoing experiments.

Mard instantly leaped into the air, smashing his way out into the open air above his throne room with a wave of his hand, and a barely formed magical spell, which destroyed the ceiling with dozens of tearing vines.

Then he was up in the air above, watching as the cube listed, and then slowly started to descend, picking up speed as its descent continued. The other two demons who had still been in his throne room, Yakdoriga and the silent Tempester followed him out.

Tempester was a larger, more human-like demon with a dark snout along with thin lips, and a short-cropped beard circling his jawline, the same yellow as his long hair that fell below his neck with the front covering his forehead down to his oval-shaped eyes. His legs and arms were fully human save for the fur covering them, but his snout was larger, more jutting forward than a human's mouth, and with much sharper teeth.

They were both glaring around them angrily, talking over one another, even the calm and levelheaded, if somewhat unemotional Tempester shocked by what had occurred. "What happened, who attacked us, who is so foolish..."

Master Geer waved them to silence, a whip made of a vine that coiled at his waist to grab at their throats, constricting until they stopped prattling. He then gestured to where God Serena hovered, serenely staring down at them.

"You three are demons then? The Main Man is not impressed."

This was bad, Master Geer thought to himself. God Serena was one of the reasons why he had decided not to ever challenge the Wizard Saints in a direct battle before this. *And yet, he thought*, calming down slightly, releasing his two minions from his grasp, *the odds favor us, three or perhaps four on one.*

He had already discounted the other minor demons that abounded within the confines of the cube, they would die, or they could live. What occurred to them was no concern of his. But Silver would be out here eventually, that zombie was too powerful, too independent and stubborn to die in there, even without direct orders to save himself. That particular zombie was far too strong-willed to be caught out like this even without actual orders.

With that in mind, he decided that even if they had lost their mobile fortress, he could at least remove one of the greatest threats to their plans going forward. "Spread out and attack. Kill him."

Tempester responded instantly, charging forward, his hands thrust out in front of him. This created a cyclone, which sped towards its his target. It was small, but powerful fit to tear apart anything it struck.

But God Serena merely laughed, and opened his mouth wide eating the magic attacking him. He gagged instantly, spitting to one side the instant the attack cut off. "Yuck! Your magic tastes foul!"

"Calamity Curse," the man intoned even as he closed. "Inferno!"

That attack was eaten in turn, despite God Serena gagging again but a lightning attack from Yakdoriga got through as God Serena was busy digesting, slamming into God Serena's back and he growled angrily, turning around to glare at the creature.

Then Master Geer got into it, shouting, "Dea Yggdrasil!" With that shout he created a massive sphere of light green and purple magic, out of which a tree as wide again as the cube that had just crashed launched towards God Serena. The tree's limbs also extended, reaching for his enemy.

Despite being on the backfoot God Serena smashed the part of tree to pieces, then closed with Yakdoriga, who lashed out again with its lightning magic. But again God Serena dodged, kicking off midair, and rolling with it, to engage Tempester as he closed, the two of them exchanging punches and blows faster than anyone normal would have been able to follow.

"Gale Dragon's Song of the Wind and Moon!" God Serena shouted, launching a quick air attack right into Tempester's face.

The demon cried out in pain and shock and was flung away, but the very nearness of the two combatants stole much of the energy of God Serena's attack, since that attack was meant to be fed magic over time, unlike the roars of other Dragon Slayer's. So despite being flung away, Tempester was still in one piece, able to concentrate on his own attack, which was to release miasma, his outstretched hands sending it towards God Serena.

Seeing this attack and with his instincts screaming at him, God Serena used his fire attack on it, watching as his attack lost magic even as it hit the black mist, but doing a lot of damage to the attack, burning it away despite losing its magical properties.

"That is demonic particles, they eat away at the essence of magic, and will act as a poison as well," Tempester intoned, his voice low, lethargic, almost uncaring. "I have been given an order to liquidate you, and I will do so in the most..."

That was as far as got they got before God Serena shouted angrily, "You think you can stand against the Main Man!? Lightning Dragon's Flashing Claws! Purgatory Dragon's Thrusting Fang!"

God Serena lashed out with lightning and blasts of pure fury all around him, forcing Tempester and Yakdoriga away. His attacks continued to carve out chunks from the cube as it crashed to earth, and the ground below them, but the two Demons were just a bit too mobile to be caught by such small-angled attacks at range.

Master Geer smashed the one attack that came near him to the side with one hand and then attacked in turn. "Rose explosion!" From nowhere a rose appeared, capturing God Serena in its petals, before exploding all around him.

But as Ranma had learned over his years in this dimension, the durability that Dragon Slayer magic gave its users was **incredible**. God Serena came out of the explosion looking no worse for wear, except for a bit of his hair being singed, and an annoyed tic appearing in one corner of his eye. "You messed up my dharma wheel!"

Mard's next attack was much more serious. Having closed in a bare second, he slammed out a hard punch that caught God Serena in mid-rant on the side of his head, sending God Serena's sideways midair. Before he could right himself, Yakdoriga was on him, grabbing at his back, its tongue looping around his head as he intoned, "Electric Charge!"

The chief demon kept up his attacks, punches and kicks coming fast and furious, while Tempester too joined in the pounding.

God Serena dodged more than he was struck however, even as he tried to fling Yakdoriga off his back. One hand kept the demon's tongue from moving over his eyes, which only left his other one free to block or attack. Every time he tried to create magical attack though, Yakdoriga unleashed another electrical attack, cutting into his concentration. And with his mouth covered, God Serena couldn't try to eat the attack.

So instead, he simply released his aura, the aura of his Purgatory Dragon Slayer power specifically. The magic appeared around him like a heat haze, and his magic instantly began to make his skin as hot as magma. And Yakdoriga was not up to dealing with that. He screamed as he felt his tongue, stomach and hands burning. "M, master, it burns!!!"

He was about to let go but Mard Geer's voice hissed out over the sizzling sound of burning frog. "If you release your grip on him Yakdoriga I will kill you myself. Tempester!"

At that call Tempester joined the battle, shouting, "Downpour!"

While the attacks were made out of rain, the rainfall itself was so intense that it drove God Serena downward and practically extinguished the heat of God Serena's Magma Dragon powers. It also increased Yakdoriga's lightning powers and he shrieked out attack after attack, electrocuting the human mage.

Yet this just seemed to enrage God Serena further, and he worked his free hand between their bodies, taking two hard blows from Mard Geer, one of which knocked a tooth loose and another that he knew was going to leave a bruise on his ribs despite his immense durability. They merely served to make it clear to God Serena that he had to get free quickly. As soon as his hand was between him and Yakdoriga, he shouted out, "Cavern Dragon's Crushing Grip!"

This instilled a grip into his hand so magically enhanced that it could crush diamond, and he used it to tear at Yakdoriga's chest, ripping out his intestines in an instant. Yakdoriga screamed, releasing his grip and God Serena heaved the dead frog off him. He was singed and his hair was standing on end, bits and pieces of his clothing had been charred by the lightning, and he had several bruises on bits of his chest and along one side of his face, but he was otherwise unharmed.

"His durability is incredible," Tempester announced, his tone showing no sadness or shock at Yakdoriga's death. "I do not know if I have any magical attack that can get through it."

"Concentrate on creating your Miasma for now, sicken him over time. I think it is time to stop holding back," Mard Geer ordered, even as his body started to shift twitching into his ethereal form. In this form Mard Geer assumed the guise of the quintessential demon, wide cloven hooves, fur mixed with armor-like bared muscles, large hands ending in claws, demonic wings made of leather and bone, and a face covered by a metal armor under a pair of horns that stuck out of his black hair. His voice too had changed, deepening considerably. "Silver, attack."

At that, a middle-aged man announced his presence at last from the rubble of the cube beneath them. He was a large man, almost as tall as God Serena, although not quite as wide either. He had chiseled, scared features, and black hair styled into spiky strands. He wore heavy armor across his chest, shoulder plates, and thick clothing underneath in dark brown and light tan. He had a short-cropped goatee, and cross shaped earrings. "Ice Devil's Rage!"

From his mouth, a wide-angle attack burst forth, freezing the ground in front of him and the air above it as he aimed his attack up at the Dragon Slayer. Since he was right beneath God Serena, Mard Geer having used telepathy to direct him, the attack struck, and God Serena found himself frozen from the waist down. He flared his Purgatory Dragon Slayer powers again, melting himself out almost as soon as the attack struck, but this still opened him up to two more attacks from Mard Geer. "Rose Explosion! Thorn Curse: Thorns!"

From all around God Serena on the ground, massive, hill-sized vines shot out of the ground towards God Serena. They tore up the ground and the former cube, shattering it further and changing the landscape for more than a mile around the fight, but God Serena was still mobile enough to dodge between them. The trouble for him came in the form of Tempester and Silver. Tempester simply attacked, hurling out Cyclones and Thunderbolts

In contrast, Silver concentrated on freezing attacks, and sending giant Ice Minions up the vines to leap at God Serena. "Ice Devil's Ice Minions!" He was also somewhat more talkative, "Sorry about this young man, but orders are orders, no matter how unchivalrous it is to gang up on you like this. Then again, I suppose you did destroy Cube, so we're kind of even."

"I'm going to do more than that!" God Serena roared back, keeping his Purgatory aura up for a moment even as he started to pull out more attacks. For now, he concentrated on simply dodging, get a handle on Mard Geer's abilities and skills, along with Silvers. This allowed Mard Geer to somewhat dictate the battle and he pulled away, using his Thorn Curse and controlling the Thorns he had already created, further tearing apart the ground all around them.

The battle entered a sort of lull for a few minutes, but then the battle started to turn against the demons. For no reason anyone could see, Silver fell to one knee, shaking his head as he stared all around him blearily. The moment passed quickly, so quickly that none of the demons flying above him had seen or even understood what happened, until Silver turned on Mard Geer, shouting out, "Ice Devil's Freezing Crescendo!"

This was a far more narrow-angled, but more powerful attack than the one Silver had used to try and freeze God Serena, and it flashed through the air like a beam rather than a fog.

Mard Geer defended himself, using his Thorn Curse to create a large shield, which started to freeze, then cracks even as Mard pumped more energy into the shield, trying to offset the freezing effect. Silver however was undaunted, and directed his Ice Minions in to attack Mard as well, while racing up one of the giant Thorns, closing on him fast.

The king of Hell knew instantly what happened. Keyes was dead, and with it, the mental control he retained over his undead creations. And Silver was a soul whose strength had interested Mard since he had watched Silver put up a fight against Deliora, many years ago. It hadn't been a long flight, but his

ability to even block one blow from Deliora and make the demon bleed, however slightly, had interested Mard Geer enough to have him be taken by Keyes for his experiments. And since then, he had proven his worth several times over. Only now, without Keyes controlling him, Silver could act on his hatred for the Demons who had enslaved him and killed his wife and family.

Silver's next words showed this hypothesis was correct. "Damn you! I am going to eat your fucking souls for what you forced me to do! For every person you had me kill, I will have my pound of flesh!"

Pitiful, human emotions do not belong in combat. He has already made a mistake, attacking me like this, but he will make more, and I will take advantage of them with ease.

With Silver attacking Mard, that left Tempester to fight alone against God Serena, which he took advantage of, launching himself through the maze of giant thorns after the dirty-blond haired demon. When he came close though he had to deal with the miasma the Demon was putting out, and he did so by shouting out, "Purgatory Dragon's Penetrating Wing!"

With this, he burrowed through the miasma around Tempester. Tempester defended himself by launching out attack after attack, air, fire, and water. "Cyclone, Inferno, Downpour!" He was throwing out more attacks and more magic than many entire guilds could have created each attack flashing through the sky between them.

But each time Tempester tried to launch a fire or air attack, God Serena would simply eat them, adding their magical power into his own. They were incredibly disgusting, and he could feel his stomach roiling, his internal magic slowly changing. Yet even so, they were giving him a bit of a powerup, and he knew the main fight was just beginning, so every little bit helped.

After eating the last one though, drawing the torrential rain of Downpour into his mouth, God Serena decided to take the next step to that main fight by removing the bit player. *And I always find it delicious irony when the Main Man can use the magic of his enemies to destroy them.*

"Sea King Dragon's Demolishing Fang!" His hand glowed with water magic as he thrust it out, creating a battering ram of water

That attack took Tempester straight in his face, which disappeared in the blast of blood and magical energy, rocking him backwards. He cried out in agony, but Tempester still responded with spell of his own. "Thunderbolt!" he roared out, tossing the spell in a throwing motion, and engulfing God Serena in a sphere which then encapsulated him in a lightning field.

He growled and ate the lightning down shaking his head in disgust but then God Serena was free, to see the miasma coming at him. Behind it he could see Tempester's one hand covering his face in agony, the other thrust out directing his miasma.

"Purgatory Dragon's Blazing Hell!" God Serena howled. His fist encased in fire he swung it around in circle ending in thrusting his hand out towards Tempester. This burnt the miasma away all around him and forced Tempester to dodge while the attack continued on, torching the Thorns all around them and a good deal of the ground.

So busy dodging this attack was Tempester that he didn't see God Serena had gotten above him in the air until it was far too late. "Acid Dragon's Searing Entropy!"

From each of his fingers, balls of acid as large as God Serena's hands, flashed out, bracketing Tempester from every angle. The Demon was still able to dodge most of them, but one landed on his face searing into the hand he had been holding up in front of his face as he cried out in agony, burning through it, and into his already ravaged face. He fell through the sky towards the distant ground and God Serena smirked. "The bit players always buy it first my former enemy! Cavern Dragon's Earth Destruction!"

With both hands outstretched towards the falling Tempester, God Serena's Cavern Dragon Slayer magic reached out, and as Tempester hit the ground beneath him the ground exploded in a massive radius incinerating and burying Tempester under thousands of tons of rock, as the thorns and portions of the cube and everything else in the blast radius was utterly destroyed. When the attack ended, the ground below more resembled a crater in Desierto than a plain in Minstrel.

However, as God Serena had been dealing with Tempester, Mard Geer had finished dealing with Silver. As the undead mage's body began to fail him without an upper body, had disappeared, turned into mulch by another massive tree appearing right in front of his chest, carrying on embedding the creature into the ground. Both tree and the upper body of the former Devil Slayer disappeared in God Serena's explosion.

The two remaining combatants turned to one another now, pausing in their battle for just a moment to take stock of themselves.

God Serena wasn't showing it, but he was hurting slightly. The continuous lightning assaults that he hadn't been able to eat earlier from the freakish frog-octopus thing, the earlier attacks from Mard Geer, which had nearly busted his jaw, and made him unable to use his roar attacks without a great deal of pain, and his overall physical durability was beginning to fail him, he could feel it.

However, his magic was still as strong as ever, thanks to Tempester and the various elements attacks he had eaten from the stoic demon. He could feel a queasy feeling building up in his stomach because of those, and he knew that curse, while still being able to be eaten carried a sort of food poisoning feeling with it. But despite that God Serena knew he could win this, and that confidence caused a wide, eager snarl to appear on his face.

Mard Geer knew it as well, but also knew that if he tried to retreat, God Serena would simply catch him from behind. While he wasn't as hurting physically as his enemy, his magic was somewhat depleted at the moment, and his purely physical abilities was nowhere near enough to damage the human mage even in his transformed state. *I severely underestimated a Dragon Slayer's durability, and that cost me my chance to run away, as did Silver's betrayal.*

And for all his nigh-overwhelming magical power, he didn't have God Serena's number of magics or various skills. *I have to end this quickly before his greater durability and adaptability can turn the tide.*

With that, he broke their momentary stare down racing forward as he intoned the spell to create the Explosive Rose again, before shouting out another spell. Once more from the dead ground

below sprouted hundreds of giant vines. From these Vines thorns exploded in every direction, attempting to cut into God Serena.

God Serena dodged, used his own attacks to burn away the thorns, and then tried to close.

But Mard Geer kept the range open, launching Rose Explosions and Dea Yggdrasil attacks his way. Then when he thought that he had God Serena pinned, shouted out a new 'small' scale attack. "Prison Flower!"

All around and through the existing Thorns a giant monstrous flower erupted into being, many times the size of a Rose Explosion. The attack lashed out with lightning fast barbed chains created from Mard Geer's magical powers, deep purple and black, thousands of them from practically every direction at once.

This attack did what no other attack had done before during this battle: it got through God Serena's durability in a few places, slicing and cutting into his skin.

But not everywhere, and he tore his arms loose before launching himself forward with another attack. "Gale Dragon's Flashing leap!" This got him close enough that Mard couldn't dodge backwards in time, and the Tartaros Guild Master took a hard punch to the chest. The two of them began to exchanged blow after blow, with Mard also trying to get away again, but God Serena refused to let him, pressing in so hard he didn't bother to use actual attacks, just hammer blows full of barely formed magic.

As Mard had feared, in close combat it was the Dragon Slayer's endurance to pain, which began to turn the tide. Even in his Etherious Form, Mard Geer just didn't have the physical toughness of a Dragon Slayer as well-trained as God Serena did. Each blow was telling on him far more than on his enemy and he was slowly being pushed onto the backfoot. *I have to get some distance again!*

Allowing his enemy to get in two free shots to his chest, Mard Geer gestured down to the ground. Even as he felt the armor over his ribs buckle another massive thing of chained rose thorns blasted out of the ground, reaching up to grasp at God Serena. It caught one leg, and then tore into it, lacerating it in a few places, causing God Serena to howl in pain and lash out at the thorny prison instead of pressing Mard Geer, who instantly put some more distance between them and intoned another spell. *I had hoped to use this on our creator, the Great Zeref, but...*

"Momento Mori!" Mard Geer screamed aloud, and a miasma-like cloud appeared all around the two combatants soaring into the heavens. Faces could almost be seen in that darkness, ghastly caricatures, moaning horror filled faces of Mard Geer's victims, their souls turned into the power for this spell. From each of these faces, thin beams of purple light flashed towards God Serena from every direction, and he roared once more in agony as his body was drilled constantly one way than the other, more and more hitting him. Then Mard Geer added another attack into the tumult, launching another Prison Flower, hoping to end any ability God Serena might have to defend himself from the Death Spell.

However, God Serena was nowhere near done. He spread his hands apart, shouting out, "Purgatory Dragon's Soul-Rending Roar!" The fires engulfed the thorns, searing through and then

pressed on in every direction, crashing into the tumult of purple and black lights of Momento Mori, the Death Spell no longer able to get to his body.

He stood now, and it was immediately clear once more that Mard Geer's attack had done the Dragon Slayer a lot of damage. His body was bruised in numerous places, a few bones in his in his legs was broken and one in his hand. He was also bleeding from a few cuts large and small. Despite all that however, he was still glaring at the almost undamaged Mard Geer,

And before Mard could open the range once more, God Serena launched himself forward. The battle once more became a slugfest, with God Serena attacking so quickly and hard that Mard couldn't retreat or even gather enough concentration for a spell. Another blow landed, which cracked ribs in Mard Geer's ethereal form. Another grab at the wings and God Serena shouted, "Cavern Dragon's Diamond Crusher!"

The grip that had previously torn Yakdoriga's intestines out so easily crushed the joint of the wing that he had just grabbed, mangling it, and as Mard Geer shouted in agony, God Serena twisted at the waist, hurling him down to the ground. Even as he fell though, Mard Geer landed a magically assisted blow, which caused a chain like vines to wrap around God Serena, pinning his arms to his side, and crushing inwards.

Even as the grip broke another rib and crack a bone in his lower left arm, God Serena burst out of it with a shout of, "Storm Dragon's Lightning Aura!" The attack exploded the vines off him as if they had all been hit by lightning. He then lashed out with a roar from the same school. "Storm Dragon's Plasmic ROAR!!!"

This blast of multicolored electrical energy caught Mard Geer in the chest adding even more impetus to his fall and causing him to howl in pain as the attack ate at his chest like a living thing. Yet Mard Geer concentrated through the pain, using the distance to launch another Thorn attack. Vines the width of trees sprouting between them, reaching for the sky trying to smash or grab at God Serena. This worked and God Serena crashed to the ground about a hundred yards away from his foe.

But when Mard Geer tried to attack once more, God Serene, pushed himself to his knees and launched another attack, his hands filled with varicolored green energy. "Acid Dragon's Searing Bolt!"

This seemingly small attack lanced through the vines and the miasma Mard Geer raised as desperately called up another Momento Mori spell. That spell still struck, and a moment later the purple and black bolts from the faces hidden in the darkness knocked God Serena back to his knees. But the acid, which Mard had ignored as being too small to harm him, struck too, hitting Mard Geer's shoulder, eating away at his armor almost instantly. He cried out in further pain and shock, rolling on the ground to get the acid off him before it could do further damage.

By the time he was done that, God Serena was on his feet once more and Mard Geer turned to look his way, only to gape in shock.

God Serena had been hammered once more by the Momento Mori spell. Not an inch of his visible body wasn't black and blue, and most of his clothing had been charred away. One arm hung

loosely from his side, and half his face was a mass of blisters. Blood was running liberally down his body from hundreds of open wounds, and Mard Geer could actually see a bit of bone sticking out from

All around God Serena magic soured up in the form of a Dragon's long serpentine neck, each one a different color corresponding with the dragon lacrima embedded in God Serena. Then they all wove around one another and crashed back into him as he put his hands up to either side of his mouth. "Dragon Slayer's Secret Art: Eightfold Path's World Rending ROAR!!!" From his mouth a blast of magic the same eight colors of his lacrima flashed out like a rainbow twisted into a weapon of unholy destruction, flashing across the intervening distance toward Mard Geer.

Mard Geer tried desperately, raising his hands and creating a thick shield of Thorns as he backed away rapidly pouring as much power as he had left into regenerating the shield as God Serena's attack ate into it. But his earlier exertions cost him, and it was God Serena's attack which won out, wiping the shield out of existence within moments and then going on to slam into Mard Geer's upper body. Not even the so-called King of Hell's magical and physical durability was up to stopping an attack made of the powers of eight dragons.

Mard Geer, the leader of the Tartaros, the man who had plunged two countries into a pointless war, instigated an invasion from the continent into Pergrande and who had personally slain or caused to be slain more than a million humans over the centuries, died, his upper body disappearing in a blast of ravaging magical might fit to immolate a continent.

For a moment God Serena stood a few steps away from the two legs of his former enemy as they stood there for a moment. Then as those legs started to turn into dust and black magic particles, he collapsed to his knees, then onto his face, far more exhausted than he could ever remember being in decades. And in far more pain too. A heck of a lot more pain, more pain than he had ever felt since the dragon lacrima had been surgically emplaced into him.

Despite all that however, there was one thing God Serena had to do before calling in someone to help him. Twisting painfully onto his back God Serena raised his uninjured arm into the air and shouted, "That's what you get for messing with the Main Man dammit!!!!"

OOOOOO

"... So with their main army shattered, I intend to sweep the field of the remaining Circle units as soon as I can get more men up here. I don't think many of the remaining units will fight now those on the western bank of the river that are cut off from supplies, even if they still retain some unit cohesion. On the other side, despair, self-disgust and Lord Draculos'... hunger has destroyed their army as completely as I have ever seen."

"What were your own losses like in this final battle?" the old king of Pergrande asked. "And do you still want our aid?"

“My losses were relatively light all things considered, less than four hundred men dead during the Circle Army’s attack and the battle against the demons. This was entirely due to Jura halting the demon he fought in place, letting my men retreat.” San Jiao Shin shook his head. “What my men told me of their fight is... otherworldly. Wolfheim helped to shatter more than twenty thousand men in a single battle. And what Lord Draculos did to the men on the other side of the river... there is a reason why Wizard Saints are given their positions and this battle showed that most starkly.”

Jura was, in his estimation, a man whose magic and abilities he could understand and see only as something dozens of steps up in power to what he understood of Earth Magic. Wolfheim too, he could at least somewhat comprehend his magics and abilities, despite how dangerous they could be. Draculos and God Serena’s however were another matter entirely. God Serena because he was simply so insanely powerful, and Draculos’ because his powers frankly terrified San Jiao Shin now that he had seen them in action.

The current conference was happening in San Jiao’s command tent with the special communication lacrima that every king or queen in Ishgar had, transported with the rest of his retinue to near the front. “I also have to thank you Meredrain for the helmet communication devices. They made coordinating a lot easier.”

Meredrain nodded, but then asked, “And God Serena is certain he didn’t leave enough demons alive to be an issue?”

“He’s certain. He didn’t scour the ruins of the cube he shot down, but he did do a brief fly over. Only four of them ever came out to fight him, and there were numerous bodies crushed among the ruins. I’ve already got men over there surveying the damage, along with Wolfheim to protect them. If they find anything we’ll know soon enough. I was getting reports of, strangely, bunny-eared demons, low-level demons that looked like a cross between a gargoyle and Vulkan, but nothing to indicate they have found anything alive.”

The questions on the demons went on for some time, with Meredrain, Rose and the king of Caelum taking the lead in questioning San about them and their abilities. It was decided that while Minstrel would take command of the sight, and San Jiao would be in command of the force heading into Midi, the other nations would also supply materials and manpower. The king of Pergrande and Rose of Bosco were adamant on this point.

“It cannot be seen by the Midians as their simply being reconquered by Minstrel. Even in the best case scenario that would cause trouble. We must show them that their isolation is at an end and this, this insane religion will no longer be allowed to perpetuate its lies. Past wrongs done to your ancestors cannot be allowed to blind you to reality,” Rose intoned passionately.

“The whole Earth Shaker guild will be arriving in three days. I sent them through the lake to Joya, and they are traveling from there down to your border. How long they take to arrive after that is up to you. I have two Rifle battalions, two cavalry regiments and their baggage train also being assembled as we speak in Falconhome.”

Falconhome was a port city that served the long Mediterranean-like sea that fed up into Pergrande and was lined with sin on one side and the massive forests of Bellum on the other.

“Roland will be in charge, but he has orders to put himself and his men at your disposal as soon as they arrive. However, I would appreciate you sending some ships to guard our transport vessels.”

San Jiao Shin nodded in thanks, grateful he would have a good second in command, who also came with a mage of such strength, as Lady Ikaruga was purported to be. He then looked over at the others. The king of Caelum agreed to let his navy step in to patrol the ocean where the Minstrel navy would normally patrol, in order to free up more ships and stoops to be used against Midi. Joya, Stella, Bosco agreed to send supplies and aid for the refugees and the army. Iceberg would see to filling out any orders for lacrima from San Jiao gratis for as long as the war lasted.

Meredrain promised to send more communication helmets, and that his magi-scientists had made a breakthrough in replicating the mass teleportation arrays that Brain had stolen from the Bank of Ishgar. “The array has been proven to work, all that is left now is to get a copy to each of our nations. I trust we can all weather the storm of anger from the bank, and protect the arrays so it is not misused in the future?”

There were some chuckles at that before Toma offered to post various jobs in Minstrel to help with the refugees to his guilds, then asked, “But are you going to request that God Serena and the others stay to help? I honestly can’t see that as a good thing in most of their cases.”

“Indeed not,” San Jiao replied, his eyes flicking to one side of his tent and beyond to where God Serena was having his wounds seen to by a group of female nurses. Wolfheim and Draculos had both retreated to another tent with several barrels of wine to share between them, while Jura was still doing what he could to aid the wounded. “God Serena and Wolfheim are both free to leave as they wish. I would like to retain Draculos for the moment, since his powers will help in gathering information and prisoners both now and when we break into Midi. Jura too I will request to remain here to help the rest of my army across as more units arrive. I would like to retain his services until we have marched into Midi proper, if not longer.”

Toma agreed to that and then leaned back, letting the words of the other kings wash over him for a moment. It had been close, a very close thing in all four contests. And if the demons had not been as unconscionably arrogant as they had been to think they could win by splitting their numbers and so ignorant of God Serena being there up until he attacked, it could well have become a rout with all three of the other Wizard Saints, San Jiao Shi, and his army being killed once the Demons brought in more members to the fights occurring on the ground.

As it was, he knew they had won. The war of the Circle wasn’t over, by any stretch, but without Tartaros aiding them, Midi was going to fall to the Coalition Army.

Just as importantly, this meant that of the Balam Alliance two had been wiped out. *And then there was one...*

OOOOOO

At the same time that the kings were talking about the events down in Minstrel, one of their Rangers was heading back to his winter quarters in Magnolia.

Erza had tried. She really had. She had given her all in this contest just as she would have if she was fighting for her life, pushing her body to its limits. But, in the end, she'd had to concede defeat. Ranma's endurance was just too much even during sex. Admittedly at first, he had been just as fast to reach a crescendo as she was, but his endurance was such that he could just keep going, and after more than a day and a half of sweaty naked fun, Erza had ceded the battle.

She did so with becoming grace, rolling off of him, and closing her eyes as she muttered, "Fine, you win, now let me sleep please!" No matter how much Ranma teased her about it later, she was not whining. That was base slander.

She woke who knew how many hours later to the feel of cold wind in her face, and the sound of crunching snow as well as the movement of another body against her own. Opening her eyes Erza found herself on Ranma's back, draped over it like a lump. She was also, thankfully, once more clothed in her winter outfit along with the addition of a large woolen hat on her head.

"You awake?" Ranma asked, not turning to look at her as he raced through the woodland.

"I believe so. Certainly, I don't ever dream about being carried like this. If carrying at all comes into my dreams, it's usually me carrying other people to safety, or someone carrying me Princess style as we move into a boudoir somewhere to do debauched things to one another." Normally Erza wouldn't be that open with someone else about her carefully hidden perverse side, but well Ranma and she **had** been incredibly perverse with one another already, so it seemed as if hiding that aspect of her personality from him wasn't really necessary.

In reply Ranma just chuckled, turning now to give her a light kiss on the cheek. He nuzzled into the side of her head, pushing back her hair to get to her cheek and Erza smiled, leaning her head into the caress.

She loved this aspect of Ranma. He was an extremely tactile person, enjoying touching, and being touched in turn by those he cared about, and despite the fact that she coated herself with armor for nearly her every waking hour, Erza to enjoyed that kind of contact too, so long as it didn't happen in public.

The two of them stayed silent for a time as Ranma raced over the wintry landscape. The snow that had forced them into the tent in the first place had kept going, and Ranma had to actually dig them out a bit, but had done so without regret, indeed he had even whistled while he worked, buoyed by recent memories. That night had been possibly the most fucking incredible time of his life. Ranma had learned more about the female body and frankly his own, then he had ever thought possible and to have shared that with someone he knew he was coming to love made it even better.

Erza too was content, hugging Ranma, happy that her armor was not between them at the moment. She was warm, happy, and even though they were moving, cuddling with Ranma. Bliss.

“So um, does this... did what we did change your mind on, um, the other girls and everything?” Ranma asked. A part of him didn’t think it would, or should, and was extremely unhappy that it might considering Ranma’s relationships with the other two girls in his life. But another part of Ranma’s brain thought it should, since it signaled their relationship had changed to something else, evolving to something far above what it had had been. Both parts of him agreed though it was best to seek out Erza’s opinion as soon as possible.

But Erza didn’t hesitate, simply stating firmly, “No. You are still more than welcome to be with the other girls. I, I have to admit that I am... intrigued by the possibilities there, and I know that Jenny and Juvia both have true feelings towards you as well. I would have had a problem with Edo-Wendy given her general attitude, but I think I can, at the very least, get along with Jenny and Juvia, even if nothing more happens there.”

“Um, okay, but... we are a permanent thing right? You won’t regret this later or... I want to be with you, but I want, I mean, I want to know if you’re...” again Ranma stumbled over his words and cursed both his old man and him for his almost crippled ability to talk about romantic feelings. *Freaking old man and his whole emotions are weak thing! And damn me too! I should have been asking those girls at Melona’s for real romance advice not just flirting advice, but real emotions feelings and junk.*

Erza chuckled, and kissed Ranma on the cheek, nuzzling into him in turn. “I certainly wouldn’t have gone that far with you if I didn’t think that we would be a permanent thing and I don’t see that changing anytime soon.”

For a time they simply ran on, the two new lovers just nuzzling their heads against one another. Then Ranma asked, “Any idea of what will we tell the others? Are we going to try to keep this a secret? I gotta warn ya, from what little I know about this stuff, I think that it’s ...I don’t know, supposed to be obvious or something when two people have slept together. Every manga or book I’ve read that has that kind of thing has the couple’s friends and family members noticing some kind of change in them. And, heh, well... you’re still not able to walk right now...”

“Hmph, I expect that state of affairs should change soon.” After that Erza frowned thinking. “I agree that does seem to be a, a trope I think it is called in most literature. Furthermore, I believe in society there is a certain double standard after such private moments in what goes on after moments like that which we have shared. Women are supposed to giggle and tell their friends and any sisters they might have about the experience, while if they do the same men are seen as braggarts or gigolos. I’m uncertain why that is.”

She fell silent for a second, her attention grabbed by a badger that had just popped its head out of a hole to one side of Ranma’s trek before she turned her attention back to Ranma. “But I think what we shared was an extremely personal moment and I would prefer that we keep it to ourselves. So if you don’t wish to share it, I won’t either.”

Ranma breathed a sigh of relief. “Good. I... what we shared, that’s special. It should stay between the two of us.”

“Good,” Erza said with a smile, and the two of them shared a kiss. It was somewhat awkward, admittedly, turning like that with Erza on Ranma’s back, but Erza enjoyed it, as much of a promise of

what they just said, as a statement of the fact that both of them wanted this relationship to be permanent. And if his face was any indication Ranma did too. He had a smile on his face that you would have to use magic to remove, and Erza barely held back a snicker at the sight.

Simply declaring it so was only half the battle of course, both of them knew that. The idea that you wouldn't need to work at a relationship to keep it going was a fallacy. Love could only do so much, it would be up to them to put in the work, to spend time with one another, to communicate, to always be open with one another. Neither of them had any experience in romance, beyond what Ranma had with the other girls up to this point, but both of them were certain that if they put as much effort into their relationship as they did in their Art, (or magic,) they would make it work both for them and for Juvia and Jenny if they were willing to do the same.

After that was settled the two lovers kept talking, shifting topics now to the other girls in Ranma's life and then on to broader topics. One such was whether or not Master Makarov was correct in that Ranma wouldn't be able to activate his Second Origin was something they talked about for several hours, coming to the conclusion that judging by what Ranma said he felt when he used both magic and ki together, Makarov was correct. His ki filled in his Second Origin, which opened up a lot of interesting questions. "I mean, Wendy has shown a bit of ki ability, and so has Carla. Does that mean they won't be able to open up their Second Origins?"

"Setting that aside the question of whether or not Exceed would even have Second Origins, it might be the case for Wendy. On the other hand, perhaps were looking at this backwards."

"What do you mean?" Ranma asked, cocking his head, which tickled Erza's nose.

At that, she finally decided to push off his back and moved on her own. For about fifteen steps. Then her legs gave out from under her despite how stubbornly she was ordering them not to. A second later Ranma realized she was no longer running beside him and returned, crouching down in front of her asking mock-solicitously. "You all right?"

"No, my legs simply refuse to obey my commands. They are clearly in revolt!" Erza growled, glaring down at her legs. "If I had an extra set, I would get rid of you."

"Yah, kind of a pity that legs aren't like armor," Ranma quipped, grinning and touching her legs, the slight bit of tights-covered between her skirt and fur leggings that had revealed itself in her tumble to the snow.

Erza shivered, feeling her nipples harden underneath the cloak and winter Geer she was wearing in lieu of her armor. *Okay, is that going to be something new, every time he touches me, I'm going to get flashbacks? Or is that something that I'll just have to deal with until you know I'm used to it.* The redheaded mage then grinned salaciously, causing Ranma to both gulp and blush even as she was still thinking to herself. "Oh yes, I predict a lot of getting used to it, oh yes, lots of time spent getting used to it in the future."

She paused, then looked over at Ranma's blushing, intense face as he stared back at her, a slow smile growing on his face. "Well, erm, I can't think of many better ways to spend my winter than um, getting you used to that..."

Erza actually let loose a very cute 'Eep' as his words brought her back to herself. "D, did I say that aloud?"

Ranma nodded, then gestured down again at her legs changing the subject for both their sakes. "Do you want to get on my back again?"

Still blushing almost as red as her hair, Erza nodded and Ranma lifted her him onto his back. Facing the back of Ranma's head was easier at the moment, and the conversation shifted back to what a Second Origin could be. From there, it segued into training in the winter and other things. Books predominated, although how they got on to that topic Ranma wasn't quite clear, having been talking about meditation at one point before that.

His passenger's sudden silence at the question of 'what kind of books do you like' though was telling. He cocked his head at her, turning his head just enough to look Erza in the eye with one of his own, the eyebrow above that eye quirking upwards. "Something you want to tell me?"

Erza laughed, shaking off her embarrassment like an ill-fitting cloak. Hugging Ranma from behind as she leaned her forward, pressing her forehead against his. "Let's just say, that we've already proven that a lot of things in my favorite books proved accurate and a lot of other stuff fell well short of what two extremely fit young people can do. And I look forward to trying other things."

"Oooh, so ya like that kind of literature then?" Ranma teased, "Levy was telling the truth when she mentioned that? Funny."

"She did what?" Erza growled her tone suddenly changing. "I'm going to have to give that little girl a talk when I see her."

Ranma laughed at that and the journey back to Magnolia continued.

By the time they were within sight of the city, Erza had some of the feelings left back to her legs, which was a good thing in her opinion. She didn't want to give anyone a hint about what had happened between herself and Ranma, even if she knew that it was going to be practically impossible to keep someone like Mira or Jenny from figuring it out."

The two of them were seen walking, and more than one of the townsfolk did a double take at seeing Erza hand-in-hand with the boy, but most smiled and nodded at her, making no comments. That was left up to Natsu, who didn't make any comment about that, only the fact that Ranma was there.

"Ranma fight me!" he shouted racing towards them from a street they had just passed.

Ranma sighed, twisting around and ducking under Natsu's flying, flaming kick, pulling Erza down with them so she too could dodge...

Now one of her feet came up, arcing around to catch Natsu in the side of the head. He took it like a champion then as he landed flipped himself onto his feet only to find Erza glaring angrily at him. "Natsu, what have I told you about starting fights in the middle of that city!?"

“Erza!? Er, I um I didn’t see you there! And... well I mean he’s been gone for, well, you were with him so you know, and I, well I had to challenge him! I mean I’m allowed to challenge him after so long right?”

“No, not right,” Ranma replied, tugging at his pigtail thoughtfully. “I can’t remember mentioning you are allowed to attack me so long as you kept up your training or anything like that. That’s the kind of thing I would remember.”

“Agreed, that made absolutely no sense.” With that Erza brought a hand down in a karate chop down onto Natsu’s head faster than he could block it. “And your form is still horrible if that was able to get through,” she added, shaking her head.

“Yeah, that shouldn’t have gotten through your guard if you were...”

At that point he was interrupted in turn by a small weight thumping onto his truck shoulders, and two arms hugging him tightly. He smiled then leaned his head back, his hair rubbing against Wendy’s belly as he looked up at her, smiling. “Hey, you. You miss me, Wendy-chan?”

“Yes!” Wendy grumbled, hugging him all the tighter.

If he was anyone else, that hug would have begun causing Ranma some pain, but Ranma wasn’t anyone else. “I did offer to bring you with us.”

Wendy chuckled at that shaking her head looking over at Erza and holding out a hand for a high five. “I don’t think Erza-san would’ve liked that. Normally people don’t like little sisters or little brothers along on dates.”

“Was that what we were doing?” Ranma asked mock-innocently.

Erza however simply slapped Wendy’s hand, exchanging a firm nod with the little girl. “That was what occurred, yes.”

Ranma laughed, and Erza chuckled, the two of them catching one another’s eyes for a second.

Wendy looked between them, cocking her head thoughtfully. Something had changed between them, there was a new, new closeness, sort of. She could sort of kind of sense it, like a magical feeling almost in the air. Strange.

But, she set it aside for now, hugging her brother’s head again, then switching to one shoulder and perching there, before hopping down to walk between them, grabbing Ranma’s hand. “Come on, Carla and I have been practicing cooking, and we were actually able to make something good last night. We made good meatballs, and we even were able to make a pasta that was pretty decent too if a little thicker than we thought it should be.”

“Sounds lovely,” Erza said with a smile, as she joined the other two.

Ranma replied in the affirmative, then jerked his head at Natsu, who hopped to his feet, and made to join them. "So, have you been practicing since we were gone?"

"Yep," Natsu said with a grin. "I'm a hell of a lot stronger today than I was when you left. That's why I wanted to challenge you!"

"Cool. Then you and Gajeel can may be show it to me tomorrow, since that's a spar day. Remember what I said, we have a weekly schedule and we're going to keep to it. Just because I was gone doesn't mean anything. I expect you to put in the sweat. If you don't want to and just want to challenge me or whatever, yer not worth my time," Ranma warned.

Natsu grinned and saluted while echoing his little buddy's catch phrase, "Aye sir!"

The rest of that evening passed and eventually, with Erza telling Natsu about the mission and absolutely nothing about the date as the five of them had dinner.

When Carla plied her with questions about it whether or not it had indeed become a date as she had said earlier, Erza told her and Wendy about the two of them watching the snow fall together and having a few kisses. Nothing steamy whatsoever. Yet Carla too seemed to sense that something more had happened. She said nothing however, believing firmly that kind of thing was not for Wendy's young ears.

However, unknown to the four of them, Natsu had not been the only one to see them arrive. Mira had been out shopping for the guildhall and had pulled out of sight behind a snowdrift as Wendy led the others off to the Dragon Slayer's apartment. She watched Ranma and Erza closely, noting their new proximity and also something else. Despite not looking like she had been sparring or anything, it looked as if Erza was limping. *OH MY GOD!!!!*

Let it be said that Nerima did not have a monopoly on those, which made leaping to conclusions something of an international sport. The gossipers in Fairy Tail, of whom Mira was chief, could do the same thing. It was just that in Mira's case, she often reached the correct conclusion.

Skirting around the returning lovebirds, she got ahead of them, racing toward Fairy Hills. She nearly ran Anna over as she rounded a corner, leaping up over her younger sister as Anna squawked in shock, falling back onto her rear in the snow. "Gah! Mira-nee!?"

Mira instantly turned and helped her up, giving Anna a quick hug in apology with her free arm. "Sorry about that Anna. I wasn't watching where I was going."

"Why were you in such a rush anyway?" Anna asked, somewhat bemused by the near-crash.

"Oh, just up to Fairy Hills. I wanted to talk to the girls there about something~," Mira caroled.

Anna didn't let her go with that though, and simply hung onto Mira's free arm to keep her from running off.

At the look her younger sibling was giving her, Mira finally relented and explained. "I think that... well let's just say that I think during the days they were gone Erza and Ranma might have flown past where you, Lisanna and Natsu have gone in your relationship."

Anna blushed hotly at that, and let her go, backing away quickly. "But, but what does that have with you being in such a hurry?"

"Everything!" Mira pinwheeled her arms, nearly sending the groceries flying. "I need to talk to the other girls, we need to talk to Erza, to know what it's like to gossip about her man! It's a rite of passage for any girl to go through the grilling of their peers. I know I've been through it every darn time I've been on a date let alone anything like this!"

"Are you sure you're not jumping to conclus..."

"Erza was limping! Erza! Limping!!" Mira interrupted. "You know how she is about injuries and not showing pain. And neither of them looked like they'd been sparring. And there was this, this closeness to them. It's obvious."

That convinced Anna. Erza was not the kind to go beyond a certain level of closeness with just anyone. If she had gone all the way with Ranma though, Anna could understand it. "Well okay, if you're sure, Lisanna and I will join you and the others in Fairy Hills and we can ambush her there."

In Fairy Hills, Mira quickly rounded up Cana, Juvia, Jenny, Lucy and several others. During winter, even the girls who didn't live in Fairy Hills tended to use it as a meeting place. They all loved the guild, but sometimes the fighting and the throwing of full steins of beer and the madness got too much, and in the winter without the ability to use the outdoor pool or other things, that feeling got worse quickly. All of them agreed to see if they could convince Erza to spill the goods.

Erza and Ranma rather put the final nail in the coffin of anyone who might have disputed Mira's supposition when Ranma walked her to the entrance, as he had Bisca the night of the Festival.

The two of them looked at one another for a few seconds then Erza smiled. "I will see you tomorrow early to join you, Juvia and Wendy for training. Would you like me to bring over everything for breakfast?"

"Glad you didn't say anything about helping me cook, I've heard stories about that," Ranma teased, then as Erza's cheeks puffed out in an adorable pout leaned in and kissed her. She gasped, but kissed back though neither attempted to deepen it, simply pressing their lips tenderly against one another. After a few seconds, Ranma pulled back, winking at Erza. "I'll see you then. And maybe when Wendy goes over to spend time with Seilah we can...find something else to do?"

"I'd like that," Erza replied licking her lips as she understood precisely what Ranma was talking about. *Hopefully by then my body will have recovered enough to have more fun.*

She watched Ranma hop away down the hill, his footsteps so light on the snow he didn't even leave a mark despite not following the plowed trail back into town, chuckling quietly. *I certainly have fallen for a very odd soul, haven't I? Then again, I suppose that's fair enough considering my own life.*

With a final laugh Erza limped into Fairy Hills only to nearly squeak in shock as Mira suddenly appeared beside her.

“My, my Erza~, you look like you’re positively glowing! Is there something you want to share with the rest of us?”

Erza flinched away from her old friend/rival, but then realized Jenny was on her other side and Juvia was also there in the doorway to the rightmost hallway.

The look in Juvia’s eyes was somewhere between considering, amused, and jealous, which made for a very compelling stare.

“I, I have no idea what you’re talking about!” Erza grumped quickly moving from between Jenny and Mira, heading towards the stairs up to her floor. Due to the number of armors Erza had to rent an entire floor’s worth of rooms. There was a limit to how much magic Erza was willing to use in order to create her various Requip spaces, and many of her armors were either too old for her to want to keep around, or too specialized to have available for every job.

“Sure ya don’t. Then at least tell us why you’re limping. Do you need one of us to get Porlyusica?” Jenny asked.

“Gah!!!” N, no!” Erza said, nearly panicking. “That is, no, it’s not necessary, just, just a pulled muscle. Or ten.”

“Along with some deep tissue bruising,” Mira muttered, causing Erza to blush.

“F, fine, so what!? Yes, Ranma and I were, were intimate, but that doesn’t mean I have to share the details with you. With any of you,” Erza added, staring in particular at Juvia and Jenny. “I would hope that, when you and Ranma are together, you would show the same respect for your relationship.”

“... Hah, okay, but we are all having a party later tonight to celebrate my moving out Erza, and you’re invited, so don’t get too into your nap up there, ‘k?” Cana said, joining the conversation from the other direction across from Juvia.

“I will be there,” Erza said with a smile.

As Erza walked up the stairs, Jenny frowned irritably at Erza’s vehement refusal to share, although a part of her did respect the woman’s decision. She’d always thought that girls kissing and telling then denouncing the boys for doing the same thing was stupid. However, this wasn’t just Erza keeping her sex life private, this was Erza keeping what she and Ranma had done from other interested parties, girls who were involved with Ranma in a similar manner. As such, Erza should have told at least her and Juvia a bit about what to expect, whatever she thought that said about how Erza felt about the relationship in question.

Especially since I told her what happened between Ranma and I went to clean out my apartment, and the fact she probably used a few of the moves I told her about! It’s our right to know darn it.

Next to her Mira scowled staring at Erza's retreating back. "You know what we have to do now, don't you?"

"Respect her wishes?" Lucy suggested hesitantly as she came out from where she had been hiding behind Cana in the corridor across from Juvia, moving forward into the foyer beside her girlfriend. *I'm still not certain why I'm here at all darn it!*

"Pout and whimper until we get our way?" Juvia asked.

"Get her drunk enough to actually answer our questions," Jenny and Cana replied as one, before surreptitiously exchanging a low five behind Lucy's shocked and appalled back.

Lucy turned to remonstrate with her girlfriend but was silenced by a kiss that took her breath away. "Don't worry love, it's not like we're going to hurt her or anything. She won't even notice her dignity's gone."

"I have a bit of hooch we can put into her drink. She normally drinks like a fish anyway, so she won't notice anything special until it's too late," Cana cackled.

"Mmhmm, and I can even add some to her strawberry shortcake. It wouldn't be the first time," Mira giggled wickedly. "And Cana gave us the perfect excuse too."

That night, the women of Fairy Hills and Mira created an impromptu party to celebrate Cana moving out to live with Lucy. The fact she had practically been doing that for more than a month now didn't matter, the party was to celebrate her 'officially' moving out. It was as good an excuse as any to try to get Erza as drunk as she could possibly be.

The only two not there were Evergreen and Bisca. Bisca was out on a date/job of her own with Alzack, while Evergreen was out with Freed and Bickslow on a job.

The redhead attempted to get out of coming to the party at first, saying she was tired from her mission. But Levy and Laki refused to let that happen, nearly dragging Erza out of her room and into the foyer where the party was happening. Once there, with music in the background, good finger food, and lots of jokes being tossed around Erza enjoyed herself, but every time she turned around, someone was handing her a new mug of beer.

Soon Mira decided her old rival was drunk enough, shown by her wobbly stance, slightly glazed eyes and blush. Mira sidled up next to her, nodding across Erza's chest to Jenny who did that same. A moment later, the blonde former model started them off, her voice calm and soothing as the other girls started to gather more tightly around the redhead. "So, is there anything you want to tell us Erza? Something juicy?"

"MMM.... Nope," Erza mocked. "Whas, whashever, whatever, goes on between Ranma and me is jusht that, between us."

"But Erza we're all asking you here. You're the first to go that far you know, besides Jenny here, and telling us what to expect would be a major help," Levy rejoined.

Erza hesitated, the idea of helping the other girls getting through to her sloshed brain somehow. Mira piled it on. "That's right Erza, none of us know firsthand about what goes on. Now, what happened between you and Ranma?"

Juvia's contribution however was less than constructive, giving Levy's words the lie even as she tried to back the shorter girl's points, "MMhmmm, that's right. Was it good? Did he do the corkscrew maneuver or the French Flipper Trick?"

"What is the French Flipper Trick?" Lucy asked.

"I'll show you later," Cana said, a wicked smirk on her face.

For some reason that made Lucy blush about as rosily as a human being could and still contain any blood anywhere else in their bodies. But to all of their surprise, Erza simply hiccupped, and stared at them, her eyes drooping slightly in her drunkenness. "Nope, made promise. Not gonna go there."

"Lovey I respect your opinion tremendously and I completely understand why you won't tell these hangers on," she said, looking at Mira and the other girls the older of whom was now looking back at her in shocked betrayal. "You can settle them down with a few simple questions, they're all virgins anyway. Now, I on the other hand have a vested interest in this topic. One even you have to admit. Was he able to find your one spot that really got you going? He learned to do that on me. Did you show him how you could move your hips just so, I told you to do that. You owe me girl!"

Erza seemed to think about this, then looked at Mira and the other girls, nodding, her voice remarkably without slur at the moment. "It hurt slightly, but that was because of me. I went a little too fast. Just try to reach the clouds and rains before you get to that point however and you should still be good to go. If the man doesn't want to use his tongue for things other than kissing, then you might have problems."

She fell silent then and stood up abruptly, glaring at them all in a drunken rage. "But thashh all you'll get frommm me, you foul temptreshers!"

"That's simply not enough darling or should I call you mistress?" Jenny whispered into Erza's ear, one hand far too familiarly on Erza's back and sliding upwards. "Come on mistress, you can give your little slave girls an idea of what to expect from their Master can't you?"

Unfortunately, this tactic backfired hugely. The next instant, Jenny found herself across Erza's knee, one hand rising to slap her ass hard, hard enough to cause her to yelp in pain. "Bad girls get punished!" Erza shouted drunkenly. She glared all around at the others even as she continued to slap Jenny's rear. "You'sh all jusht wait yer turns, all bad girlssh needssh ta be punisshed."

Now, while a part of Mira was eager to take up the challenge inherent in that glare, the rest of her knew full this was sooo not the time. Nope, nope, nope, she thought to herself, shaking her head quickly. "Right, Erza's got a point, girls. Let's just leave the bad girl to her punishment, which she has wholeheartedly deserved." *That'll teach you to cut me out like that.*

"You bitches, don't just leave me here!" Jenny shouted.

“Your sacrifice is not in vain my dear,” Mira said from the doorway. How she’d gotten there from deep inside the main game room was a question.

It was quickly joined by a similar question on how Lucy had covered the distance, since she was now leaning against the wall next to Mira, gasping for breath. They looked back, and saw Lucy was still there smiling at them all. Then the Lucy sitting with the other popped like a balloon, replaced by two small creatures floating in midair. This was the Celestial Spirit Gemini, one of Lucy’s newest Spirits.

Thinking quickly, Levy used her Solid Script magic to create a slide along the ground with a frictionless surface then leaped forward, skidding across the intervening distance on her belly, just underneath a grab from Erza.

Jenny was now tucked under her other arm, and whenever she opened her mouth, Erza squeezed. Jenny was now gasping for air and wondering what the hell she had gotten herself into. *Curse my poor impulse control!*

Juvia attempted to turn into water, splashing down and dripping away. A second later she found herself being pulled backwards as Erza summoned up her Water Empress spear, pulling the water-mage back to her. She was then flung to the side to splat against the wall, where she found herself facing down the spear from Erza’s Lightning Empress armor. “Takes yer punishment, or it’ll go worse for you.”

Gulping Juvia transformed back into her human form, and then found herself bound and tossed over one of Erza’s shoulders, while Jenny, her arms pressed against her side, remained where she was tucked under Erza’s other arm.

With two girls corralled, Erza looked at Cana frowning. Cana however held up her hands. “I didn’t ask you any questions, and you can’t touch me, I’m already in a relationship. If there is any punishment to give out, my girlfriend should be the one doing it.”

That seemed to get through to Erza, and she nodded seriously, turning woozy eyes towards Lucy pointing at her. “You. Tomorrow morning, you will come here. Leshon, lesion, lessons. I’ll give you in whips.”

“Why do I think you’re not talking about just using a whip in combat?” Lucy asked with a dry little laugh.

“Thash too,” the drunken redhead said, nodding her head seriously, before her free hand snaked out to grab Cana by the back of her neck. “But fer now, I’m a discipline this one for ya.”

“Um... be my guest,” Lucy replied trying hard not to look at Cana’s suddenly pouting face. As Erza turned to Laki she and Erza instead quickly made themselves scarce, racing away through the hall of the dorm building. Moments later, she asked, “What do you think she’ll do to them?”

Mira shrugged. “Oh, nothing too horrible. I hope.”

Hours later, Jenny growled at Cana and Laki and Juvia. “Well this is another fine mess you’ve gotten me into!”

"I got you into," Cana growled, although there was no real anger in it, merely discomfort. "Don't you even try that girl, this was all you!"

"You agreed with me, and you provided the hooch," Jenny said virtuously. Or as virtually as a drop-dead gorgeous blonde in her knickers tied to a wooden cross could be. Astonishingly, that wasn't much. "Although maybe we should be blaming the one who actually made all these things in the first place, hmm, Laki!"

"I'm with you on that," Cana growled out, also staring to the bed where Laki, the owner of the room they were all in at the moment lay.

"Don't make fun of my aesthetics darn it!" Laki growled back. "All of this is just, just art, for the décor of the room! I never intended it to be used!"

"Juvia has two thoughts at the moment." Juvia was also tied to something, in her case a wide wooden wall that had been tipped so that she was face down towards the ground, and which contained hundreds of hands, each of them holding feathers, the entire contraption connected to a lacrima crystal and a controller of some kind. She might have retained some of her clothing, but once Erza had finished with her she had lost all of her dignity.

"Oh, do tell," Cana grunted, wishing she could turn her head enough to see any of the others. In contrast to Jenny, Cana was also still clothed, but in her case she was tied down sideways on a wooden horse. Her head was almost against the ground, her hair pillowed underneath her, her legs and arms tied to the stands of the wooden horse. *Still, could be worse I could be tied up on top of it. This isn't exactly a comfortable position, but it is much better than the alternative.* "

"Juvia's first thought is that Erza has missed her calling. Juvia knows several hundred rich men and more than a few women who would pay to have been put through the, shall we say full mistress routine."

"Oh God, can you imagine how horrible she would be if she could actually get paid for this?" Laki muttered. She was on her bed with her rear in the air and her ankles and wrists chained to the ends of two wooden bars. Thankfully Mistress Erza had stopped from spanking her as hard as she did Jenny. *Although I would never have thought she would be as good at using all of my little toys as she is. Still, being on this side of things is most definitely not to my liking.*

Craning her neck, Laki looked around warily. "Where did she go?"

"She went to take a bath, and I've been hearing snoring for a few minutes," Jenny grouched then looked over at Juvia. "What were you saying my dear?"

Juvia's eyes narrowed, and she thrust her nose up arrogantly in the air as much as her present straits would allow her to. "Juvia has decided that all of you are horrible influences on Juvia, and Juvia will no longer listen to any plans or advice you all come up with. Juvia will instead find Ranma and ask him to at the very least show Juvia as good a time as he has shown Erza and Jenny."

“You’ll probably have much better luck with that than with continuing to question Erza,” Jenny said with a sigh. “Dammit, I was not expecting this.”

“Good,” Laki grunted, trying to free herself and only succeeding in twisting around and sitting up, her ankles and hands still tied to the wooden bar. “If you had been expecting something like this and gone ahead with your ‘get her drunk, get her talking’ plan, we would be having words right now, and my magic, specifically my Would Make: Dam of Shy Love would be doing my talking for me.”

For a moment, all four girls fell silent after that, listening to the distance snoring from Erza. Then, Cana glanced aside, and looked up at her manacles or rather across at her manacles, considering her present position. “So, none of you can get free either?”

Jenny sighed, rattling the chains on her. “Magic suppressing cuffs. I’ve seen the like before.”

“Mira and Erza used them when we were younger to build up physical muscle. I didn’t know she kept them. Or that she’d enlarged their sizes over the years,” Cana supplied.

“Ah, I was wondering where that addendum to my domicile had come from,” Laki said with a nod, staring down at her own chains, which were not magical but were metal and tough enough she couldn’t get out of them.

“Great, yes thank you for explaining that. And just so we’re clear, that was a big fat no Cana I can’t get free either,” Jenny stated snarkily.

The other girls didn’t bother to answer. After all, considering all of the separate predicaments they found themselves in, if any of them could’ve gotten free, the moment Erza had turned her back they would have. “You don’t think Erza is going to leave us here all night, do you?” Juvia asked. Silence was on her only answer to that one, and she groaned. “God dammit.”

OOOOOOO

The next few weeks passed relatively uneventfully although Erza was quite quizzical as to why every girl in Fairy Hills, even Evergreen and Bisca who hadn’t even been there walked with tiptoes around her, or why Lucy had rather blushing shown up to her door the morning after she’d returned and asked when they were going to start her whipping lessons. Of course Erza had agreed, even if she couldn’t remember having offered to teach her how to use her whip better. Still, her migraine in the morning had informed or something that happened so she discounted that, as well as the fact she woke up on the floor in her room.

Luckily for the girls, they had been released a few hours afterwards by Levy and Lucy, who had won the undying gratitude of all four of the girls that had been captured by the mad redhead. Mira on the other hand would have to deal with pranks from all five of them for several weeks after.

Winter continued to press in, with more and more snow on the ground. Gray and Natsu started to make a lot of money keeping the streets relatively clear, although the fact this led inevitably to fights was not as appreciated by anyone. The work on the as-yet unnamed book café continued, the girls targeting a springtime grand opening.

Training continued for everyone around Ranma and even Ranma himself, as he took to practicing switching from using his ki to using his magic and then both at once. It was hard to call on both consciously, but he was more than pleased with how his two powers had worked together, bringing his durability to the same level as the other Dragon Slayers and then pushing it beyond.

And of course, Ranma sparred with Laxus, who had awoken his Second Origin. The other young man's control was shot to hell the first few months, but as winter slowly came to an end, his self-control returned. Their matches flattened several hundred acres of forest, doing more and more damage each time they fought. He and Erza also sparred, as did Ranma and Jenny, and occasionally Ranma and Juvia, who added several new magical attacks to her repertoire.

During this time, Wendy joined the other two Dragon Slayers in their training, twice a week and at least once every week the three younger Dragon Slayers would all gang up on Ranma in a full on spar. Natsu of course was still annoyed that he couldn't do that every day, but with both of his girlfriends, Mira, Erza, Master Makarov, and Ranma on his case, he had finally gotten into his head that simply attacking Ranma every time he saw him wasn't the way to get stronger. Or perhaps it was Ranma's threat to tie him to a train and leave him there for the rest of the winter. Who knew?

However, Natsu's growth astonished Ranma. Oh, he wasn't learning his martial arts forms nearly as quickly as Ranma had hoped. But his physical strength, his abilities with his magic and more importantly his magical control were growing exponentially. Ranma knew within a few months that Natsu would never be a skilled fighter, as someone like Ranma or Erza or, even though he downplayed it most of the time, Laxus. But he would become a tough fighter and a good one. He still did a few foolish things every day, but Ranma felt he was coming along nicely.

On a personal level, Ranma went on several dates, more than a dozen with Juvia, most of which were small-scale in comparison to the two major ones he'd had with Erza and Jenny respectively but they were good. During this time mutual attraction and similar magic had turned into something deeper, even if Juvia was not in any rush to consummate the relationship as Ranma had with Erza.

And did so frequently now that initial hurdle had been cleared. The two of them were young, extremely fit, and very much into one another so it was natural they would take to this new form of exercise enthusiastically.

They never let Wendy cotton on to how far they had gone or what they got up to in the apartment at night though. Carla knew, but she was thoroughly with them on keeping it a secret from Wendy for now, and even helped Ranma clean up occasionally.

Jenny took their physical relationship a bit further than making out a time or two, but not often, content like Juvia to get to know Ranma further. At the same time, she was also concentrating on making a place for herself in Fairy Tail. Not a week went by without her taking a job some place and trekking out in the winter to do it.

Ranma sometimes went with her along with Wendy. The youngest Dragon Slayer had reached a point in her training with Porlyusica that she only had one more attack from her mother to learn, and her healing training had reached the point where they were now into more rote memorization, what kind of wounds could exacerbate others and so forth. Therefore, she decided to take it easier going forward into the winter, and she had decided very **very** pointedly, that she was sick of being left behind by her big brother, even if it had been her decision the last two times.

Not that she regretted doing so, she loved the fact that Erza had basically begun to move in with her and Ranma. Not a day went by without Erza coming by to share breakfast or some other meal with them, along with the other girls. It was great for Wendy, because Erza had already become something of a role model for her, almost as much as her Onii-chan. She even had given Wendy a sword a few days after their return with which Wendy had proven to actually be quite eager to learn to use, unlike the small pistol that had been a present from their friends in Pergrande.

Jenny too had taken to teaching Wendy something, fashion in her case. This too Wendy enjoyed and oddly enough, Ranma got into it too. Of course, there was a very good reason for this:

“Tell me Ranma,” Jenny said as she stepped out from behind the curtains of the dressing room, wearing a sundress almost like Wendy’s “Do you think this is a little too small on me?”

The dress in question came only a little below her waistline in fact, showing Jenny’s magnificent legs to full effect, and hugged her chest and stomach like a second skin. It had straps rather than shoulders to which left most of her own shoulders bare, and she preened slightly at the stupefied, blushing look on Ranma’s face, while several other men nearby had to hastily turn away to find tissues to staunch nosebleeds.

“I, I think that is probably just on the other side of indecent,” he stammered. “Unless you’re trying to start a riot anyway. If so, then yeah, it looks great.”

“Oh well, it was worth a shot. I like the cut of it, and the design is pretty isn’t it?” she asked winking at Wendy, who was watching their antics, a faint blush on her own face as she realized the two of them were flirting.

Then she seemed to deflate, patting her own chest, as she stared forlornly up at Jenny. “I don’t think I’m going to wear it now either.”

“Oh don’t be like that dear,” Jenny said. “Eventually you’ll be wowing the boys too.”

Wendy’s blush receded slightly as a thoughtful look appeared on her face, while to one side Ranma began to idly clean his nails. With a large, extremely sharp dagger he’d pulled from nowhere. As his eyes turned cold and a far deeper blue than normal.

Jenny giggled at them both before hopping back into the dressing room. She then came out with a slightly longer dress. This one was most definitely made for winter, coming down to below her knees and accompanied by leggings of a light blue variety. The upper portions of the dress were heavy wool, with a sort of coat sewn directly into the dress. The fur was also blue, a light blue almost greenish color that really brought out what Jenny’s eyes, which Ranma commented on instantly.

She blinked, then looked to the mirror, and smiled as she realized he was right. It really did bring out her eyes, and her cheekbones too, even if it did sort of bring attention to the scar on her cheek as well. Still, Jenny was fine with that. But the fact that Ranma had noticed that it brought out her eyes, rather than the fact that it hugged her chest so much, took Jenny aback and she shook her head, biting her lip.

“You don’t agree with me?” Ranma asked surprised.

“Not that,” she said, before sashaying over to him. She then leaned down and gave him a long kiss, before pulling away, heading back into the dressing room as Wendy eeped and looked away with a blush and Carla shook her head with a scowl of censure. As she walked, Jenny called over her shoulder unmindful of the fact that every man there and several men outside who had been staring into the window at her were now thinking murderous thoughts towards Ranma, “Just thinking how lucky I am to have met you.”

So, shopping with Jenny had actually become one of Ranma’s favorite pastimes.

In contrast, Juvia was not into shopping. She had a few colors she was willing to wear, and she refused to even think about wearing red, yellow, or other brighter shades. She liked blue black and white, different shades of color in that spectrum were fine, but she knew what she liked, thank you very much.

On the other hand, Juvia of all three of the girls who he had introduced Yoga to, took to its best, along with the Tai Chi exercises that Ranma was teaching Wendy. She showed up for every exercise with the little girl, and Ranma was getting to the point where he was really tempted to make an excuse to send Wendy away one day in order to jump Juvia. She seemed to enjoy teasing him like that, but not actually taking it past the kissing stage.

Juvia also enjoyed trying different foods the most. Erza was fine with trying different foods so long as that didn’t extend to desserts. If the restaurant did not have her strawberry shortcake, she would flatly refuse to go. Jenny was at the other end of the spectrum. She was willing to try something so long as she knew exactly what went into the meal. If she didn’t then she definitely was not going to eat it.

Something else however happened near the end of winter, something that took Ranma and Erza by surprise, although everyone else seemed to have known it was coming.

Ranma, currently in his female form thanks to an issue with the apartment’s hot water, entered the Fairy Tail guildhall to meet Erza and Jenny for lunch. Juvia had spent breakfast with him, and Wendy was sleeping in with Carla, having spent the night over with Seilah, Edo-Wendy and Katerina again.

She paused, surprised to find that practically every guildmember was in attendance. Juvia was the only one missing that he knew personally. Shrugging, the unnatural redhead slid into a booth next to Jenny across from three of the four Strauss siblings, with Elfman between the two twins, and Mira nowhere to be seen. “Is there something going on today?”

“You don’t know?” Lisanna asked, oh and then blinked. “Oh, of course, you and Wendy aren’t part of the guild. It’s sometimes hard to remember given how much time you spend here.”

“Wouldn’t it be romantic to join up with your girlfriend’s guild to be with her more often?” Anna asked winking at Jenny.

The Strauss twins knew Erza at least had made the offer. But though the two didn’t know about it, Ranma still had his obligations as a Ranger, and while right now he was simply waiting for his next mission, he couldn’t in good conscience join a guild. Unless investigating that guild was part of his next job.

Ranma simply shrugged in response, looping an arm around Jenny’s waist, leaning in to give her a kiss. She turned her head and hummed happily as the two girls pressed their lips together for a few seconds, before pulling away. This was more than enough Elfman to blush and look away which Jenny caught, kicking him under the table as she intoned, “Prude.”

He huffed but didn’t reply, looking away sternly as his two younger siblings began to pat his shoulders commiseratingly.

Juvia came in then and Ranma raised her free hand waving to her. Behind her, surprisingly, came Wendy, Seilah and the other two from the café. Both of them had also joined the Fairy Tail Guild, more to simply belong, than the fact they wanted to go on missions. But still the entire guild had welcomed them with open arms. Their officially joining had been cause for celebration, but Ranma reflected that Fairy Tail seemed to think the sun coming up was cause for celebration, or at least they would if most of them knew what a sunrise looked like.

Moving through the crowd, Juvia sat down next to Ranma, leaning in lightly against the shorter redhead’s side and sighing faintly. “I’m back Ranma,” she said, giving Ranma’s name as much inflection as she would if she had said the words ‘my love’, causing Ranma to flush, but she willingly put an arm around her shoulder, kissing her forehead as she smiled at Wendy who had just pulled up a few chairs to join them. Seilah sat down, and Wendy hopped into her lap, with Carla sitting next to them with Panther Lily, the two of them talking quietly.

She seemed to do that a lot, Ranma reflected. Ranma looked at Seilah quizzically, and she shrugged her shoulders gesturing to where alter Cana had sat down, along with Edo-Wendy. “These two asked me to come today. Apparently Master Makarov has something to ask me after an announcement he’s going to make.”

The others all nodded at that, and Ranma looked around, blinking as she realized something. None of the S-class mages were in attendance, which was odd, since even Gildarts hadn’t gone anywhere for more than a day or two this winter.

Natsu announced his presence then, coming in through the large doors like a rocket, to slamming a mission request down on the bar, shouting, “Finished! And this time, I was even able to keep from destroying things!”

“Aye sir, he only destroyed the villain’s warehouse, and a lot of their stolen goods!” Happy shouted from his shoulder, before looking around for his fellow Exceed.

“But protecting the stolen goods wasn’t mentioned in our mission request,” Natsu retorted, trying to look virtuous and failing miserably.

The girl behind the bar was new, although she smelled vaguely familiar to Ranma for some reason. But she simply nodded with a laugh at Natsu’s attitude, and stamped it approved gesturing over to the stage set to one side. “You’re just in time.”

Hearing this, Ranma turned in that direction and saw a few of the Fairy Tail mages setting something up there. “What’s going on?” Ranma asked.

“You’ll see,” the Strauss twins said as one.

Lucy too looked a little confused where she sat nearby, as did Gajeel. Ranma noticed all of the newcomers looked confused, while none of the old’s time Guild members look at all confused. Most of them looked anxious or anticipatory.

Ranma turned his attention to the stage, watching as Erza, Mira, Gildarts, and Laxus all came out, standing two to a side of Master Makarov as he moved to the front of the stage.

“All right everyone,” Master Makarov said into the mike. “This is the moment you’ve all been waiting for, it’s that time of year again! With the spring thaws comes...”

“The S-class exam!” shouted everyone.

“Oh, that’s what’s going on,” Ranma said with a nod.

“You’re not at all interested at how you’d stack up?”

Ranma looked at Anna quizzically, shrugging his shoulders. “I’m not part of the guild, but I routinely throw down with your S-class mages. So, no I don’t really care about my ranking.”

She blushed, realizing her question had come out as a little taunting, but before she could apologize, all of them looked back up at the stage as Makarov went on. “I will now read out the members who in my estimation have proven themselves to be worthy of trying out for the exam! I’m going to be reading them off in random order, so don’t think where you are on the list implies anything!” he finished with a growl, directed entirely towards Gray, Natsu and Elfman, of whom only Elfman had the grace to look abashed.

“First, Levy McGarden!”

“Eehh...Levy gaped, while her teammates, Jet and Droy whooped to either side of her.

“Why the heck are they so happy, doesn’t that just mean Big Mac’s acknowledging that she’s stronger than them?” Ranma didn’t have much time for Jet or Droy, both of whom seemed to not care how weak they were and who would much rather chase after Levy than train

Lisanna winced while Anna just looked quizzical. “Ouch, but also true. Um, Big Mac though?”

“Makarov, Mac. And he uses Titan magic ergo, Big. Trust me it’s a lot more flattering than most of the nicknames I could give the Master Pervo,” the redhead replied.

“Natsu Dragneel!”

“Wooha!!!” Natsu shouted, throwing his hands in the air and whooping in delight before pointing at Ranma and then up at Erza, Mira and Laxus. “That’s right, I’m coming for you!”

“What part of I’m not in the Guild was vague, dude?” Ranma groaned, shaking her head. Oh, Ranma had thought about joining a time or two, but while he enjoyed the Guild in small lots, they were simply a little too loud and noisy for his tastes most the time. Combative he could deal with, drinking, carousing and being so loud all the time, morning noon and night, no. He had enough of that with just Natsu, thank you.

“Third, Elfman Strauss!”

“Becoming S-class is the destiny of a man!” Elfman whooped, throwing his arms around his sisters and hugging them both tightly.

“Three, Mest Gryder!”

“That makes sense, he was close last year,” muttered several of the others. At the same time the man so indicated a thin, slightly close certain middle-aged mage with close-cropped hair and a scar on his face sat up from where he had been drinking with several of the other older set.

Ranma blinked, staring at him thoughtfully, trying to remember if he had ever seen him before, but couldn’t bring him to mind. Still everyone else seemed to know who he was, so Ranma let the mystery slide.

“Fourth, Cana Alberona!”

Cana nearly spat out her ale and looked up at the stage in shock as Lucy patted her back. “Wait, what? But I I haven’t even been taking missions lately!”

“No, but you have been training, exercising, and getting better with your cards magic. All of that shows that you’re taking your training as a mage more seriously,” her father said from the stage,

She pouted at that, scratching at her nose but she couldn’t actually say he was wrong. She and Lucy sparred against one another several times a week and were continually using the mornings at Lucy’s apartment to try out new attacks or tactics on one another.

“Fifth, Gray Fullbuster!”

“Excellent!” Gray said, smashing his two fists together gleefully. “No way am I going to let the Flamebrain get ahead of me.”

Before Natsu could take offense at those words, Makarov went on. “Juvia Lockser!”

Juvia smiled and looked over at Ranma for his reaction, smiling as she saw Ranma’s proud look towards her as Jenny pouted. She should have been mentioned too, but Makarov felt she had to remain in the guild for a little longer than a single winter. She had also yet to take anything but combat missions, so had yet to show him the versatility he wanted to see in his mages. Even Natsu, Gray and Elfman had taken the odd find a missing person, help build something or solve a mystery type mission.

“Sixth and last, Freed Justine!”

The serious-faced, stern looking Freed nodded, a smile cracking his visage for a moment. “Yes. To be closer to Laxus, I must become S-class.”

On the stage Laxus shivered, while hearing the same thing over the tumult of the crowd, Ranma guffawed, to which Laxus glared and shouted, “I’ll get you for that Ranma I swear to God!”

“Bring it on Sparky!” Ranma shouted back, hopping to her feet.

“Enough! The last thing we need right now is you two fighting right in the middle of the guildhall.” Makarov glared at his grandson, knowing glaring at Ranma was about as useless as glaring at a rock, until the younger man subsided and Ranma huffed, sitting down quickly. “This year is going to be special because we have so many S-class mages here all at once and so many people being nominated. So I’ll say it plain: all four of my S-class mages are going to take part in this one.”

“Wait, even Gildarts!” Gray asked, looking horrified while the others bar Natsu also looked concerned.

“It’s time to put up or shut up,” Gildarts said with a laugh. “If you think you have what it takes to be S-class that means you have to stand against the best. We’re going to be there to make certain you can do just that.”

Ranma tuned out the rest of this, figuring it had nothing to do with him. He looked over to ask Seilah, “Do you have any idea what he wants with you?”

Seilah shook her head, and when the Guild Master had finished, reluctantly asked Wendy to hop out of her lap, so she could go see what was up. To everyone’s surprise Panther Lily also moved to talk to Makarov.

After Wendy decided to head back to the café, Alter-Cana had decided that tonight would be a night for taste testing, and Wendy was going to help set up the place for it.

Of course Katerina and Edo-Wendy went with her, leaving Ranma behind to continue to talk to Jenny and Juvia for a time, until Erza could join them. Then they would head to his place for a bit before heading to the café in turn.

It was snowing again as they exited the guildhall and Wendy shook her head, looking up at the taller girls and up at Carla, who was walking beside her, looking pensive. The cat girl had been quiet almost all day, and Wendy was getting a little concerned for her friend. “Ano, is Master Makarov certain that winter is nearly over?” I mean she gestured up and then around at the piles upon piles of snow everywhere. If not for Natsu and the other mages keeping the streets clear the snow would have been at least up to Edo-Wendy’s head, if not more. “It doesn’t look as if it is, you know?”

Katerina shook her head under her parasol, which she used even in winter. She was wearing a white and gray flowing dress lined with fur, pink mittens, a large scarf, and an equally large hat, once more lined with fur. “I have no idea. We are still getting used to this world’s weather really. Back in Edolas we rarely get this much snow, let alone became this cold, save in the northernmost portions of the country.”

Wendy nodded. “That is the way it was down in Minstrel, or at least the center portion and southern portions of Minstrel Pergrande and Bellum. Erm... those are the only places we stayed in winter when we weren’t really high in the mountains, which, um, you know are always colder. Nice though. The views can be just amazing, and when Ranma-nii and I go gliding it’s really fun to start from that high up!”

Laughing the two Edolas natives plied Wendy with questions about her time traveling in the wilds, which Wendy responded to eagerly. As much as she loved being around Erza and all the other members, a part of her missed living on the move with Ranma, always seeing something new over the horizon.

Their conversation continued until they were just as they were about to enter the site of the shop, where a voice interrupted them from behind. “Excuse me. Might I talk to Wendy for a moment?”

The three girls turned to see Mest Gryder there, staring at them thoughtfully.

Edo-Wendy smiled winsomely, pointing at herself and cocking a coquettish thigh, one hand on her hip. “Are you looking for me handsome or for my little shadow here?”

“Hey!” Wendy muttered, kicking her alter very lightly (**VERY** lightly for her) on the shin. “If anything, you’re my shadow. I was here first!” The two Wendy’s glared at one another, then burst into laughter, As Katerina smiled.

The silent Carla however had not taken her eyes off of the man. There was something off about him, something she couldn’t quite put her paw on, and it was making the odd ‘off’ feeling she had been dealing with the entire day worse. She did not like that at all. So when the man indicated he wanted to talk to her charge, she barked out brusquely, “Well, what do you want from young Wendy then?”

Mest smiled at her, then gestured over them back towards the guildhall. “You heard that we are having our S-class exams, right?” Wendy nodded, then all three women blinked as Mest’s eyes seemed

to rove to the side, staring into the snowfall. "Snow," he mused, "I wonder what it tastes like as it falls...a single flake..." With that he opened his mouth, and hopped up onto a nearby balustrade, opening his mouth wide to catch a few falling snowflakes.

The three human girls sweatdropped while Carla huffed, shaking her head. *So that's what was bothering me. He's another imbecile just a different kind of one.* "You were about to say something you annoying little man!"

"Little'?" Edo-Wendy made a show of waving her hand at her own head height, which Mest met and exceeded by an inch or a little more, then down to Carla's own miniscule height. "I think you need to get your eyes examined tiny tot."

Carla huffed angrily, and it was Wendy's turn to keep her attention on the odd man in front of them. "Um, hello?"

Mest seemed to come back to himself, shaking his head. "Sorry, I sometimes get distracted. Too much curiosity. At any rate, I want you."

Carla hissed, claws appearing as she stood in front of Wendy. "How dare you!"

"Erm, is he one of those polygons Ranma-nii's warned me about?" Wendy asked backing away quickly, her own hands rising defensively.

The other two were a little slower to leap to conclusions, but they were even faster to tease. "Oh my, soliciting a girl like that, no matter her age is so gauche," Katerina said, flicking her parasol to one side to get the snow off it, and then pointing it like a rapier towards Mest. "I would retract your statement good sir, or at least modify it."

"The word my dear mini me is lolicon. And where we come from, that's against the law dude," Edo-Wendy said, with a laugh. "I think you need to work on your phrasing. You really don't want rumors of that kind to get around people will be lining up to tear you literally them from limb."

Carla paused at that staring down at her own claws thoughtfully then shook her head. "Nope, he's not here, I get to decide what to do with him, and I decree that he is my new scratching post."

"Wait wait wait wait wait, I didn't mean like that!" Mest shouted, panicking slightly.

Katerina's parasol swept to the side and gently nudged Carla back two steps. "The belief that this was the case is why we aren't attacking you sirrah, merely making fun of you and threatening your body with..." she glanced down at Carla. "Dismemberment or flaying? I do so prefer to be precise."

"Flaying first," Carla said grimly.

Wendy giggled, shaking her head as she calmed down from her initial somewhat panicky response to an adult man seemingly propositioning her. "If Ranma was here, he'd approve wholeheartedly, but he would also say, what was that he said that time a few years ago? When that one nasty drunk man tried to get into our room in Stella?"

Carla thought back to that particular episode, humming thoughtfully and calming down still further. "I think he was something about hoping he that he liked cheese, because he was going to be on the moon for a while. Or something like that. It didn't make sense of the time, but I remember Ranma having to pay to repair the roof of the room, and the story above us, and the rooftop beyond that. We stayed in that place for what a week and a half and they still hadn't found the man's body by the time we were leaving."

The man across from them paled during this small tale and he was beginning to rethink things, but he plunged ahead regardless. "Ahem um, moving on from my bad phrasing, umm what you might not know is that Master Makarov is actually thinking of asking your big brother to step in as one of the challenges, alongside Seilah. It's allowable in the guild rules as outsiders to help as challenges, but not as allies. However, there are so many of us assume that you will be joining Fairy Tail in the near future and I was able to get special dispensation to ask you to join me as my partner."

"Again, choose your words more carefully," Carla said coldly, "what do you mean 'partner'?"

Mest blinked, then looked at the three blank faces in front of him, and sighed. "Oh, I see you all left before we were told about what would go on during the S class exams. The one being examined can choose one other person to help them as a partner. Our guild believes in teamwork and helping one another, you know? And I was hoping to ask Wendy. I thought it would be a great idea, on many levels for both of us."

Wendy cocked her head thoughtfully to the side, then shook it, looking away. "Um, w, why do you want me as your partner?" Despite Ranma's best (or worst depending on your point of view) efforts and all the girls who had become friends with her in the past half a year since she and Ranma had come to Fiore, there was still a lot of the shy young girl in Wendy.

"Are you joking?" Mest asked incredulously. "I've seen you train, I've seen you in a spar. I know you're stronger than Natsu and your magic is far more adaptable than his as well. My own magic is more oriented towards getting out of trouble, rather than fighting. I can fight, I'm a decent staff and knife fighter, and I am excellent at solving mysteries, noticing things and solving problems. But if it comes down to a slogging match in an enclosed space, I don't honestly have much faith in my abilities. I want someone who can help me with that."

"Surely there is someone else you can ask?" Carla inquired, as Wendy flushed and looked away, poking her fingers together. Getting praise from more than her big brother or Carla always threw her off.

Mest shook his head counting off names on his fingers. "Freed is taking Bickslow. Loki made a promise years back that he would help Gray. Lucy and Cana are pairing up of course, just like Natsu has Happy. Juvia and Jenny are pairing up as well, they are going to be a team to watch. Elfman paired up with Evergreen, and for some reason, Levy is pairing up with Gajeel, of all people. So that rather neatly removes all of the most capable mages except for Bisca who has had a cold for the past few days, and Alzack, who refuses to go anywhere without her."

Wendy blinked at that, then blinked again, staring up at Edo-Wendy and Katerina in shock. “Is that, um is it weird to everyone else as it is to me, I mean... didn’t he sort of really hurt her and her team when he was with Phantom Lord?”

“I did hear about that incident from Mira, but perhaps this is his way to atone?” Katerina mused. “Or perhaps it was never personal for him and she understands that? Neither of us were here during that incident after all.”

Carla nodded, thinking things through. “He does seem to be a bit of hardheaded sort of boy. Perhaps he is trying to make it up to her like this. Or perhaps he just knew he’d be a better partner than Jet or Droy. But what about Panther Lily? With his combat form, and his ability with swords or any other weapon, he’s a dangerous combatant too.”

“And he’s joined the guild already, not like me,” Wendy said

“I thought about it, but I don’t think his magic is as adaptable as yours nor as powerful. Plus he’s a close range combatant, which is where my own skills lie if I can’t rely on my magic. So if I run into any of the S class examiners, I would like to have someone who can add new skills and abilities rather than double down on ones I already have.”

Wendy frowned. She understood the idea of maybe bringing in outsiders to help examine people, but surely you would want the examinees to at least keep to their own guild. It seemed a little weird to allow outsiders in on that, even by a special compensation. Further, even though all his points were logical and well thought out, it felt as if he was trying to pressure her into an agreement. “Um, a, ano, I’m, I’m not going to agree to be your partner one way or another right now, not until I check in with Ranma-nii.”

Mest frowned but nodded. “That’s smart, I simply wanted to make the offer now.”

He backed off quickly at that point he noticed that the other three women were now looking at him shrewdly, wondering if there was a little more to his trying to partner with Wendy than he was saying. There was, but he wasn’t about to come out and actually tell them that he worked for the Magic Council, and that he had been ordered by the head of said Magic Council to try to bring the two nonaligned Dragon Slayers along on this trip. He didn’t know why he’d been told that, but he was not going to disobey his orders.

And not only does Ranma frankly scares the living shit out of me at times, but I was told he would be brought along through other means, Mest thought as he left the girls. That only left Wendy, although that went a lot worse than I ever expected it. Kami, I hope they don’t spread around that lolicon crap. That’s the last thing I need. Still, I do wonder why they are so adamant that the two of them join these S-class exams?

OOOOOO

If Mest had been able to listen in on what was going on in Ranma's apartment at that moment, he would have an explanation for his orders. Ranma was there, taking the time to hang out with Juvia and Jenny for a bit, talking strategies.

Over the winter, Ranma's apartment had changed. The bedroom remained somewhat plain save for three small dressers, a privacy screen, and a clothes rack, although there were designs and little swirly pattern on the wall. In the main room however, things had changed a lot. There were two more sofas set in an open triangle pattern, several more lamps had been added, giving the room, a lot of soft lighting. The walls had been painted to resemble tree bark here and there, interspersed with vines climbing down from hanging baskets, courtesy of Jenny. A bookcase had been added, the dining table enlarged, the wood a sort of cherry brown color and the chairs with it replaced by more comfortable ones. There was even a carpet on the floor from one wall to the other, a thick woolen green color.

Juvia and Jenny sat on a sofa each at present across from Ranma. The two of them had decided to pair up, because they had gotten used to fighting alongside one another against Ranma in their sparring matches over the winter. They knew their strengths and weaknesses and how best to work together.

"Then too," Juvia said with a self-deprecating giggle, "if you take out the S class members, the two Dragon Slayers, Bisca, and the two Strauss siblings, I don't actually know anyone else." Bisca had not been nominated for the S class exams and given how well her relationship with Alzack was going, no one wanted to separate them.

The three of them talked strategies, what they would be doing in terms of training leading up to this examination, and so forth for a few hours. Ranma would shift his training for both of them and for the two Dragon Slayers, to incorporate their partners and to also toss problem-solving at them.

"After all, not everything comes down to combat, no, there's going to have to be something else to these examinations too. There's more to S-class than raw strength. As much as you and Natsu might not believe it," Jenny quipped, leaning in to give the once more male Ranma a kiss on the cheek.

She then looked at the time, then hopped to her feet quickly, kicking up her coat she had been wearing when she arrived, not at all incidentally flashing a lot of her inner thigh and panties towards Ranma. She noticed him look, flush and grin and smirked. Little moments like that were what made having a boyfriend fun in her opinion. "Right now, I think it's time that we get going if we don't want to be late to the taste testing over at Edo-Wendy's."

Ranma glanced time, then nodded as well, while Juvia reluctantly sat up from where she had been laying out on the sofa nearby. She was still slightly sore from this morning's exercises, as she always was on days when Ranma worked her through her paces directly after working her through Yoga and Tai Chi. Despite the soreness however she was never going to say anything about it, or even complain.

There were two reasons for that. One, she could deal, getting more supple, more flexible with every week that went by. And for another, Ranma had offered to give her massages, and having his hands on her, well it was enough to turn her into a puddle of ecstasy. Quite literally, alas, but Juvia was getting better at controlling that reaction.

Ranma was about to join them when he felt a heat on his chest and looking down, he saw his Ranger brooch glowing. Groaning in irritation, Ranma waved the girls out. "Go on, I got to the bathroom for a bit, and there's no point in you two waiting for me."

Juvia nodded, not having noticed the brooch doing anything, while Jenny looked at Ranma more shrewdly, having heard his groan even if she hadn't seen the brooch activate. Still, she nodded, and exited the apartment with Juvia.

Once he was alone, Ranma bit his finger, straining somewhat to get through his own durability and let a bit of the blood from that wound trickle onto the top of the brooch. Instantly, the hologram projected from the brooch in front of him showed Toma, smiling somewhat grimly. "Ranma, good you were quite prompt this time around..."

Ranma nodded back. "Toma. I take it that there is a mission for me? Is it about that **issue** we were talking about the last time we spoke?"

"It is indeed. We just got a report from our inside woman that they will be attacking Tenrou Island, which Fairy Tail owns, during the upcoming S-class exams that will be held there. We know where Grimoire Heart will be now Ranma and I want you in a position to destroy them..."

End Chapter

In this chapter I wanted to show what warfare in Earth Land was like without men and women having sooo many different powers it would make any kind of normal fight almost impossible. I also wanted to show the Wizard Saints actually being able to live up to their name. I hope I did that well enough here. But god was it a struggle. I think I'm glad I have the rotation going as I do, because a month-long break from this story after this is just what the doctor ordered.

I decided that while Jenny would push to second or even third base, she'd be perfectly happy to stay there a few months, and Juvia would be content on first. So I decided not to, *ahem* deepen their relationship with Ranma just yet. Maybe right before they leave for Tenrou Island, but not just yet.

And for those who are wondering, Mest is indeed an agent for the Magic Council. Retconning him to being a mindwiped member of Fairy Tail spying on them in turn does not pass my Sanity check. And yes, there are reasons why someone in the council want Wendy along with Ranma on this trip.