I can’t draw. ’Nuff said, really.

Thanks go to *Michael* for his awesome work on this. Though RL got in the way he still got it back to me and he spotted a lot of small mistakes throughout, making the chapter far better than it had been. Thanks also go to *Justlovereadin*’, for his mastery of Fairy Tail Knowledge and *Hiryo* for his Ranma know-how.

**Chapter 11: Multiple Fights, Same Issue**

About twenty minutes later the group left the hotel for the final time, heading towards the outskirts of the resort. While Laxus was still dealing with a hangover and looking at Ultear in something like awe. “How the hell did you do that? The night before last I beat you easy!” Then his eyes narrowed, and not because of the pounding headache. “You cheated.”

She smirked back at him. “‘If you're not cheating, you're not trying,’” she quoted, giving him a wink before turning away as he growled angrily. Last night had been rather fun, but she didn't want to get **too** close to him.  *Or to anyone, frankly, given the fact that I might have to betray them in the near future,* she thought. The fact this thought was clinical tinge with only a slight hint of real regret. Ultear was devoted to Grimoire Heart and it’s goal, utterly and completely. If she had to get close to someone then betray them, she would do it, but neither would she t search out such complications.

“Tell me again what we’re doing?” Laxus muttered, turning away from the Councilwoman, hiding his eyes from the glare of the sun with one hand until his other hand could pull out a pair of sunglasses. He put them on quickly, then moved after the others, grumbling irritably.

As they walked, Carla suddenly stopped and shivered, going down to her knees and hugging herself as if a chill had gone through her, looking around wildly.

“What's wrong, Carla?” Wendy asked quickly, kneeling next to her friend.

The cat-girl shook her head, still shuddering and looking around wildly. “That was, what the heck was that! I just had a feeling of someone having walked over my grave!”

“Someone must be talking about you,” Ranma said callously, “and said something you would find personally horrifying. Don't worry; I get those sometimes. It passes quickly.”

Leaving Wendy to comfort Carla, Ranma turned back to Laxus and explained what was going on: that they were splitting up to follow up on two missions that Jellal had put in the books. Laxus listened without comment, then grunted. “You have a map of where that other mission is, the one that you're going on, Ranma?”

Ranma didn't have much of a map, but Ultear supplied one that showed the area where the ‘human-shaped demon’ was supposed to reside. Looking it over, Laxus grunted again. “I don't know much about that area, but I do know that Mermaid Heel is based out there.”

“Mermaid Heel?” Ranma asked. “I never heard of that guild. It is a guild, right?

Laxus nodded. “Yeah, it's an all-girls guild, started about four years ago, I think. They're small time, but a guild that excludes men made some noise when it first opened.”

“Why am I not surprised that you know about an all-girls guild?” Mirajane asked teasingly, thumping her fist on Laxus's shoulder.

Laxus shrugged, not replying as Ranma asked, “So, are they man haters, a girl’s club writ large, or girls who have been abused by men before?” he asked, frowning as he said the last few words.

“More like all three at once from what I know,” Laxus said with a shrug looking over at Ultear. “You know anything more about them?”

She shook her head. “No, I wasn't part of the Council at the time that guild’s creation was approved. I do know for a fact they don't have any S-class mages in their guild and they're a very small one, around thirty something mages total. A few of them have shown up in modeling magazines, so I doubt that they are all man-haters or victims of abuse. Their guild master is.…” She frowned for a moment as she tried to remember. All Council members needed to know the names of every guild master. “Orca, I want to say. Sorry, but I can't put a picture up with the name.”

“That's fine. They might know more about this demon shaped like a man that’s supposed to be around there.”

At that point they had reached the train station where they would part. Wendy, Carla, Ranma, and Mira would head out straight to the area where this demon was supposed to be. There was no train into that section of the country, and the only one closest would take them well out of their way. It was going to be a trek for Mirajane, and she said so now.

Ranma shrugged. “I can carry you easily enough,” Ranma said with a shrug. “You can switch off with Wendy, and she can get some exercise.”

Mirajane grinned, moving to hug his side for a moment, pressing her breasts very deliberately against his body. “That sounds like a lot of fun!”

“It's only fun for the first few miles,” Wendy said authoritatively. “Then, if he keeps on running, it starts to get boring, and then actually starts to hurt a bit.” She pouted, pushing at her brother’s other side. “He’s too solid to be fun to sit on for that long even in his girl form.”

“I suppose that depends on your definition of fun,” Mira said coquettishly, grinning up at Ranma, who blushed only slightly and winked at her.

Erza was gritting her teeth angrily at this, but not overmuch. After all, she had only known Ranma for a few days, and, while she would like to see where their seeming mutual attraction went, she had decided last night that getting so worked up about a boy after so short a time was beneath her.

Laxus merely grunted as he stared ahead of them at the train before reaching over to thump Ranma on the shoulder. “What's this I hear about you having some kind of tobacco that lets you handle transportation easier?”

“It's called Dragon Seed,” Ranma said with a nod. “I found it down in Desierto. I always keep a bit with me.” He glared at Laxus. “And I'm not sharing it! I’ve only got so much, and I already gave some to Natsu before he and the others left. Besides, didn't you say that you were okay with transportation? I believe you called me a freak a few times when I mentioned my own problems with it when we were younger.”

Growling, Laxus shook his head. “Not anymore. I think it's somehow connected to our getting in touch with our Dragon side or something.” He paused and, still scowling, said, “I'll pay you?”

“I don't know,” Ranma said, smirking evilly. “You don't seem apologetic enough. Besides, is that any way to ask for a favor?”

Laxus grunted again, turning to glare at Ranma, who glared right back. “How about, ‘Give me some of that Dragon’s Seed before I smash your face in, please?’” he said angrily.

“Yah want it, come and take it, Sparky,” Ranma replied, bringing up his clenched fists.

When Laxus lashed out, Ranma’s forearm redirected the blow while his other returned a jab, which was, in turn, blocked. Ranma’s and then Laxus's hands moved faster and faster, both of them starting to call upon their magic, the fight quickly becoming serious.

“Boys…” Erza said dangerously. “We’re in public, and is this really that big enough a deal to come to blows about?” Her eyes flashed, indicating that it better not be, and both young men subsided, with Ranma smirking a little at his old friend.

“Fine,” he said. “You don't have to pay me. But if we haven't arrived in Magnolia yet before you all are done with that mission, look around for an apartment for me and Wendy.”

“Deal,” Laxus said with a nod.

Ranma nodded back and held out a pouch he was suddenly carrying, having pulled it out of his Requip space so smoothly that only Erza had seen the flash of magic from his hand. He opened it up and let Laxus pull out some of the leaves within. Looking at Ranma quizzically, he asked, “Not that I'm complaining, but I thought you said you smoked it.”

“I do, but I also crush it myself. I figured you could just chew the leaves since I don't know if you smoke.”

“No, I don’t. My vice is liquor, not smoking,” Laxus said dryly, nodding his thanks.

Ranma replaced the pouch in his Requip space and then turned, looking out over the tracks and hopping across quickly out into the open area beyond. “Well, come on! The day’s a’wasting.” Wendy hopped over too, landing on his back as Carla did the same to her, once more in her Exceed body, and Ranma raced off without another word, carrying both of them off and away.

He was moving as fast as Jet within a few seconds, and Mirajane stared after him, shaking her head. “A part of me is irritated that he didn't ask me if I was ready to go, and another part of me is wondering if he really thinks he can keep that speed up. Jet can only keep it up for, what, thirty minutes? And his speed is based off magic, not endurance, which is just a byproduct of his actual magic.”

Erza and Laxus both shook their heads. “At this point I wouldn't be surprised if he could keep that speed up all day,” Erza said honestly.

Laxus snorted. “The bastard is an endurance monster,” he supplied. “It was that way when we first met, and he wasn't even a teenager then. In fact, looking back on it, I bet I could put that first version of Ranma up against the present day Natsu in terms of endurance, and he’d still win. It's got nothing to do with his Dragon Slayer magic; it's all him.” He smirked at Mira, jerking a thumb after his old friend. “Which means, you better hurry to catch up, or else they'll leave you behind.”

Mirajane glared at him. “You're still an asshole sometimes, you know that, Laxus?” she said, the words harsh even if her tone was her normal every day one. “Takeover Soul: Satan!” With that her magic activated, and her body shifted into that of her Takeover form, with large black wings flaring out from her back. “I’ll see you both in Magnolia! And Erza, try not to be too broken up when I take the lead!”

With that she pushed herself off into the air and winged after the quickly disappearing Ranma, pushing her speed as fast as she could go.

With another snort, Laxus shook his head. “The two sexiest S-class mages in all of Ishgar competing for one guy, I wonder what the tabloids would say about that?” No one, not even his old man, would have been able to say if he was jealous about that or not, since he honestly wasn’t certain of that himself.

“Absolutely nothing, if you want to keep your head on your shoulders,” Erza replied dangerously. While she still had some respect for her old teacher, there were just some things she wouldn’t let go even from him. She then looked up as, in the distance, a train’s whistle went off. “And here's our train.”

 The three of them got on quickly, with Ultear speaking quietly to the first conductor they met. This got them a private stall in one of the forward-most carriages, where Ultear left the two Fairy Tail mages, ostensibly to go and pay for their passage with the conductor. The two of them had no reason to be more suspicious of this than Erza already was of Ultear, and she was happy enough that the councilwoman was not going to be around for a few moments, that she was wasn’t going to question it.

Instead of talking to one of the conductors, Ultear found an empty stall a few carriages down and pulled out her communication lacrima, with which she called the man who held her true allegiance rather than the Council, Master Hades of Grimoire Heart. She informed him what they were doing now, detailing the fight against Jellal and relaying what the others told her. This took her some time, but eventually she was finished, the sounds of the train’s passage now loud in the background.

“A chance to watch Deliora in action is one that could be useful, but I am glad that you will not have to go out of your way to do so. And you have already created something we can use in the future,” Hades mused.

“Master?”

“The Zalty persona that you created to interact with that Ice User. It's presence might come out, and we can use it to further interest this Ranger, Ranma, in a connection between Jellal and the demons, either Tartarus or the Oración Siete. I will send Meredy there immediately to aid in the deception. She will meet you when you arrive.”

“You mean to try to aim Ranma in the direction of one of the other Balam Alliance members?” Ultear asked in some surprise.

“If possible, yes,” Hades said with a nod. “While we might be allied with them, that doesn't mean I trust either of them. Further, simply making certain that he is not looking for us and turning the attention of other Rangers and, indeed, the governments of other countries away from us could be useful. Of course,” Hades went on with a slight evil sound of enjoyment in his voice, “you will also be able to see if anything of your mother still exists within the Iced Shell.”

“Nothing exists there!” Ultear barked back, her tone sharp and bitter. “And she stopped being my mother when she abandoned me.”

“True, but it would be an interesting experiment nonetheless. Where did you say Ranma was going to be?”

Ultear supplied the area of Fiore where Ranma would soon be operating, and Hades nodded. “We don't have any agents in that area, or even proxies, which is probably a good thing.”

“I would highly recommend that Azuma and Ranma never meet,” she said grimly. “They would either get along far too well for the good of our guild or could possibly level a continent.”

“I will take that under advisement. For now, keep doing what you are doing and contact me after the heat has died down. Nothing you learn on this mission or anything involved with Jellal is worth giving up your cover for, do I make myself clear? You must continue your work on the Council until you understand how those two magical devices are activated and how to stop them from doing so.”

“Yes, Master,” Ultear said and signed off without another word, stowing the lacrima within her own, albeit incredibly small, Requip space.

**OOOOOOO**

Having left the resort early the previous day, Natsu, Lisanna, and Anna had reached the Guild within a few hours of leaving, such was the speed of Fiore’s train system. Once there they had checked in with the master, and then Natsu had moved back into the main hall of the Guild, grabbing a drink from the bar and lighting it on fire before slurping it down. He looked over at Elfman and asked, “Where's Gray and Lucy?”

Elfman shrugged in ignorance. “I don't know. I just got back about fifteen minutes ago. Where are my sisters?” he asked in return.

Natsu couldn't quite keep a blush from his face as that question brought back to his mind what had occurred between the Strauss twins and him last night. With his body still dealing with element poisoning, he hadn’t been able to move much. Indeed, even now while he could move easily, Natsu could tell his magical powers were at an incredibly low ebb as his internal fire (as he thought of it) attempted to deal with the numerous different types of magic the lacrima he’d consumed had absorbed.

But the two twins hadn’t cared. In fact, they had had taken the opportunity to literally attack him, taking turns kissing him senseless. While one was kissing him, the other talked about the three of them: what Lisanna and Anna wanted, how they felt about him, and so on.

He didn’t know what he honestly thought about it all other than that kissing was a lot of fun, but Natsu instinctively knew that mentioning that kind of thing in front of their brother would probably not be a good idea without them around. “The two of them are in the back, getting ready,” Natsu replied, gesturing towards the bar and the kitchen beyond. “As for Mira, she stayed on for a few more days, I think. Wanted to catch up with one of her friends, erm, Jenny, I think her name was? And…I think she just liked being around Ranma,” he said, slowing down before brightening up visibly. “Not that I blame her for that; the guy’s so **strong**! I can't wait until he gets here so I can challenge him.”

“You do remember how easily he beat you down, right? I mean, it wasn't like Gildarts, one hit and you're out, but he was still a true man nonetheless!” Elfman said with a laugh.

“I'm different than I was then!” Natsu retorted, though it was less forceful than he normally would have said it.

Elfman shrugged his shoulders and looked up as his sisters entered the main hall. They seemed to almost be glowing, and he frowned, looking at their necks, which were visible in the outfits they wore as waitresses here at the Guild. Moving closer, he asked, “What are those marks on your necks, Lisanna-chan, Anna-chan?”

Natsu coughed uncomfortably and quickly pushed himself off and away from the bar, heading towards a table underneath the staircase. Unfortunately for Natsu, while Elfman didn't recognize those marks, there were a lot of men in the Guild who did, and a wail soon went up as they noticed it. “No! Our precious flowers have been defiled!”

“That can't be! Why!”

“Lisanna-chan, say it isn't so!”

“Anna, why have you forsaken me!?”

“What?” Elfman barked, now closer and able to see that the marks were tiny bruises. “What are you all talking about! It's not very manly to say stuff like that about one’s sisters, you know!”

“Those marks on their throats, those are hickies my large friend,” Loki said, patting Elfman commiseratingly on the shoulder. Now that Lucy was nowhere in sight, the resident playboy of Fairy Tail had once more crawled out from wherever he had hidden himself whenever the Celestial Key mage was around. “Trust me, I've left more than a few in my time.” His eyes glanced over to where Natsu was sitting down against the far wall, and as the flirt of Fairy Tail—he was not only better at it then Laxus, but he also had more than one girlfriend at a time, so he earned that nickname—smirked. “Something you want to tell us, Natsu?” he shouted over the hubbub around the Strauss twins.

Elfman turned with a roar. “Natsu! How dare you defile my sisters!”

Natsu actually yelped, dodging the blow. “Hey! They came on to me! I didn't even know about all that boy girl stuff until they explained it to me.” A flaming fist caught Elfman in the chest, hurling him away. “But if it's a fight you want, that's fine by me!”

The brawl that they engaged in then had a bit more of an edge to it than normal, thanks to Elfman, but swiftly ended when the master came out of his office and stomped on them with his Titan-sized feet for a bit.

After recovering from that with a fraction of his usual durability, Natsu sat at the table he had been originally heading towards when Loki had sold him out, sitting and watching as Lisanna and Anna moved through the Guild. There was still a lot of crying and whining from the boys and older men now. The girls—or the remaining girls, rather, since three of them were missing currently—were all giggling, taking every opportunity to ask them questions as they passed. Even Evergreen was smiling and happy for the twins as she asked them questions, which, coming from the normally haughty young woman, was a bit disturbing to Natsu.

“Why does that send a shiver up my spine every time it happens, Happy?” he asked his companion as Evergreen broke out into giggles, her eyes shifting towards him.

“I don't know. All you big people are a little bit bizarre to me anyway. Why were the two Strauss’s trying to suck your face yesterday?” Happy asked around a mouthful of fish.

That brought the memory back to Natsu once more and he allowed a goofy grin to grow on his face as he remembered how good that felt, how soft their skin had been, their scent in his nostrils. However, his mind balked when he tried to think of a way to explain it to his adopted son. “I don't know. Just put it down as a human mating thing, I think. That’d probably be best all-around.”

Happy nodded slowly, staring first at Natsu and then to the girls. “So sucking face is a mating thing? Does that mean I should do it with Carla?”

“Probably,” Natsu said, shrugging his shoulders. “They did it to me when I was just lying there, so, yeah, that makes sense.”

As Happy nodded, Natsu’s thoughts returned to the two girls and this whole girlfriend thing. Yesterday had been, first, weird, feeling things he hadn’t often felt before and certainly never for long enough to really think about them before. But seeing the two girls in their swimsuits and having no ability to fight, to concentrate on anything else, had forced him to do so. Then it had become really, really nice. That was all Natsu could think about their kisses. He didn’t even understand the hints he’d gotten that other things might be in the offing later.

But he still didn't know what to do or how to treat them now. He'd seen couples—Loki with his ‘flavor of the day’ (a phrase that Natsu was only beginning to understand); Laxus occasionally brought one of his girlfriends around—but Natsu hadn't really watched them, so didn't know what to do.  *I’ve even seen Gildarts with a woman but I can't remember what he said about them at all! Am I supposed to act like they did? All touchy-feely, with them and with other girls too?*

Gildarts would probably have been his role model in this as he was in fighting if Natsu had bothered to listen to anything the man said that didn't relate immediately to combat. Luckily for Lisanna and Anna, however, he hadn't. This meant he would be slapped far fewer times than Gildarts would have been in a similar situation.

He looked up from his introspective thoughts as the voice of one of his guildmates caught his attention. He watched as the man stood up, waving one arm and continuing something that he had been saying before. “…But if you ever decide you want to try a man rather than a Dragon, you know where to come.” With that he reached out and captured Lisanna’s hand, bringing it up to his lips.

At that act heat flared up with from within Natsu, and he growled angrily, pushing himself to his feet and charging forward before he was even thinking. He’d felt something like this before when people got too touchy-feely with one of the twins, but that had been nothing to the feeling he had now. “Stop flirting with my girlfriends, you bastards!”

“Shut up!” shouted more than one mage as they too came to their feet. “It's bad enough you've stolen our angels, but you can't steal our fun too!”

“That's right! Share the wealth!”

“As if a bore like you would know what to do with them anyway!”

“Do with them!?” Elfman roared, turning to that speaker and smashing him so hard the man flew through the air to smash headfirst into a nearby wall. “It's not manly to talk about ladies that way!”

Instead of trying to stop the fight, Anna and Lisanna simply laughed and got out of the way. Anna quickly used one of her magic staffs to teleport a short distance, as Lisanna used her Harpy Takeover form to take to the air, flying over the fight to land next to her twin. “That staff is easily the most useful I’ve ever commissioned.”

“I know, right?” Lisanna said, leaning happily against her sibling’s neck and shoulder. The two of them had been practically inseparable since Anna had appeared on Earthland, and, now that they had their man, it was even better. “I’m so glad that Erza and the master figured out you could use them, though how you can stand those modeling jobs, I don’t understand.”

“Mm, they’re not so bad,” Anna said with a giggle of her own, leaning. “Besides, it was those jobs that go me the swimsuits that finally pushed Natsu over the edge. And I’ve got a lot of other outfits I bet he’ll like just as much.”

Lisanna laughed wickedly, and the two of them linked arms and sat down on the bar before turning their attention back to the fight, shouting encouragement to their man and their brother.

However, the fight didn't go on for very long before the master once more appeared from his office. He leaped out of it, landing in the center of the guild before turning into his Titan shape, shouting and smashing at the pile of combatants before grabbing up Natsu and hurling him to the side to stand over him angrily. **“You! I know it was you, Natsu! Where is the S-class mission for Galuna Island!”** the titan roared.

Natsu rubbed his head from the impact to the wall but glared back up at the master. “What are you talking about!”

Shifting back to his normal form, Makarov stood on Natsu’s chest and glared down at him, his weight somewhere between his Titan body and his normal one. “Don't give me that line. You’re the only one idiotic enough to take an S-class mission without authorization after the time I punished Laxus for doing it!”

“Gramps, I haven't even been here for more than half a day! And I surely haven't been up on the second floor!” Natsu protested, angry that he was being blamed for something that he, for once, hadn’t done. *Not that it wouldn’t have been a cool idea.*

“That's true,” the master said, calming down a little. “Dammit, who could have taken it, then? Laxus hasn't been back; Mirajane and Erza are still out with Ranma on that Rangers’ mission,” he muttered under his breath as he hopped off Natsu. “Where could it have gone? And why that one, one of the most suspicious missions that I’ve ever seen come across my desk!”

“Well, I've got a question for you, old man,” Natsu grumbled as he pushed to his feet. “Where’s the Ice Prick?” Natsu wanted to rub into the Popsicle’s face that he’d gotten a girlfriend, while Gray hadn’t, seeing it as just another way to prove he was his rival’s better.

“Aye sir! I don’t see fatty Lucy anywhere either.” Happy said from nearby, where he had begun to gnaw on a fish.

The two of them stared at one another for a moment as a grin suddenly blossomed on Natsu's face, and a look of horror dawned on Makarov’s. In an instant they both shouted as one, “He's taken it!”

“Oh man, that's so nice!” Natsu went on excitedly. “If he gets to go on one, I just gotta go and grab my own,” he said, turning quickly and heading up the stairs before the master’s elongated hand grabbed him and pulled him back.

“Not a chance!” he roared into the Dragon Slayer’s ear before calming down once more, a crafty look crossing his features as he pointed at Natsu and Happy in turn with his free hand. “Instead, you go after him! You and Happy can catch up to them easily, and your nose will allow you to trail him wherever he’s gone. I don't care how you do it, but drag his carcass back here!” He released Natsu, smacking his hands together and grinning villainously. “While you do, I’ll prepare The Punishment™.”

Natsu grinned, his hands lighting up with his fire magic. “You sure about that, Gramps? I mean, Gray might not come quietly, you know.”

Makarov nodded, understanding full well what kind of chaos this was going to cause. “As long as you bring him back, I don't care how you do it. That means you can go crazy when you fight him, Natsu.”

“I'm getting all fired up now!” Natsu said with a grin, slamming his hands together, the fires around them igniting further. But then he paused, looking over at Anna and Lisanna, the fires around his hands going out. “I, um.…”

They both laughed, and Lisanna moved through the Guild and kissed him on the cheek before stepping back and letting Anna do the same. “Don't worry. You can leave us behind for this; we’ll still be here when you get back. Neither of us are into combat as much as you are, anyway, so we don't have to go on missions together or anything like that if we don't want to. It’s just, when we’re all here, we’ll spend time together, and we’ll show you what dates and…other things are like.”

Natsu grinned, then, surprisingly, daringly grabbed Lisanna in a tight hug, lifting her off the ground and kissing her hard on the lips. As Elfman roared in the background and Anna quickly used another one of her magic staffs to a immobilize the man, Natsu released Lisanna. She wobbled backwards and Natsu did the same with Anna before grabbing up Happy. “We’ll be back before you know it! Come on, Happy, let's go prove that fire beats ice once and for all!”

“Aye, sir,” Happy shouted, though inwardly he was looking at what had just occurred and wondering, *Is that really what I should try with Carla? I wonder if she’d taste like fish.*

**OOOOOOO**

It took Natsu only a few minutes to find Gray’s scent, and he raced through the air with Happy's help towards the nearby port. There he found Gray and Lucy about to step onto a small boat. Landing, he grinned evilly at Gray, punching him from behind. “Hey, Gray. What’s up, Ice Pop?”

The punch to the side of his head sent Gray spinning away, and Lucy screamed before recognizing who was doing the attacking and rolling her eyes. Gray stumbled, then turned and growled angrily, slamming his hands together as Ice magic began to form around them. “What the hell, lizard breath! You can't just slug someone out from the blue like that, but if it's a fight you want!…”

“Aye, sir!” Happy said hopping, off of Natsu to land next to Lucy. “That phrase is probably the most overused phrase by any Fairy Tail mage of all time.”

“Wouldn't doubt it at all, little blue,” Lucy said with a sigh, shaking her head as she stared at the fight about to occur.

“What the hell are you even doing here anyway?” Gray barked, glaring angrily at Natsu.

“The master sent me to get you! You took an S-class mission, and you’re not an S-class mage yet, duh. Now, I'd be down with that, but he said I can bring you back however I want, so prepare for a beat down!” Natsu said with a wide grin.

“Ex, excuse me,” said the fisherman whose ship they had been going to take to the island in question. He had introduced himself as Bobo to Lucy and Gray. “Um, but if he beats up your friend drags you back, how long do you think it would take for other Fairy Tail mages to come and take the job?”

Lucy sighed and shook her head. “For a S-class quest that’s labeled a twenty-year quest? I’ve no idea, sorry. Since none of our S-class mages are around at the moment, it could be as short as a week or as long as a few months.” *The only reason I was interested in taking the missing after I found out the level was because of the golden key. But I can't say I am unhappy to be talked out of it,* she thought. *What we’ve heard since arriving here makes this mission sound way too scary!*

“Wait!” Bobo shouted, looking appalled at that. He stepped up out of his small boat, moving between the two fighters before they could really come to blows. “Wait! I understand that you're angry that your friend broke the rules…”

“Hell, no!” Natsu said with a laugh. “Like I said, I'm not angry at that. I'm not even angry that he beat me to it. I just like the idea of fighting him with the master’s approval for once.”

“You know what, that does sound like fun!” Gray barked back.

“Then,” Bobo said wildly, still standing between them. “Can’t you fight him after the mission is completed? Please. I, I’m from that island, and I can tell you it needs help.”

Natsu stared at the man and then shrugged, the fire magic disappearing from his hands. “Why don't you tell us about it?” he ordered, then looked up at Gray. “If they need help, I'll go with you. Surely between the two of us we’re worth an S-class mage, right?”

Gray grinned and nodded. “Right.”

Initially he had wanted to go on this mission to prove that it could be done, that, despite Natsu’s work with Ranma, Gray hadn't been left behind by his rival. He had brought Lucy along as insurance. Lucy might not seem like much, but when she used her Celestial Spirits and fought alongside them she was actually quite strong. It'd been relatively easy to get her to her agree, too, once she saw the reward. But after hearing the story about Galuna Island from the fisherman, he knew that there were some things more important than his rivalry with Natsu.

That story was as bizarre as it was horrible. There was only a single small, simple village of fishermen and hunters on Galuna Island, which had its own separate society, relying on simplicity and being close to nature. But recently the sky over the island had turned a deep purple color at night. At the same time, all external contact, which had never been all that much to begin with, had ended abruptly. Weeks later, a strange disease had taken hold of the villagers, slowly transforming them into demons.

After listening to Bobo now, Natsu nodded seriously, though his serious nature didn’t last long as the man revealed his arm as an example of the curse afflicting his village. “That is so cool! I want an arm like that!” As the others, even Happy, stared at him, he coughed and went on more seriously. “Ahem. Well, yeah, obviously they need some help against this curse thingy too. Maybe we can find whoever’s doing it to them and punch them in the face until they stop.”

Lucy rolled her eyes. “Well, it looks as if we'll be going on this mission after all.”

**OOOOOOO**

In Magnolia, several hours had gone byafter Natsu had left before the doors opened, and Laxus and Erza entered with Ultear following. “Yo, old man, we’re back. And we need to talk to you for a minute,” Laxus said.

Makarov nodded, looking up from where he had been drinking only to nearly spit out his beer as he saw Councilwoman Ultear there. “Laxus!” he roared. “Don't tell me you got in trouble with the Council again?!”

Erza shook her head, moving past them. “It is nothing like that, Master. She is simply here to help us on a mission that connects to the…previous issue which I was called in for. How much did Natsu tell you about what we ran into?”

“Everything about the mission the Ranger dragged you and the others along on,” Makarov growled. “I'm not happy about that! You should never have been involved with a fight that dangerous. That’s what the Rune Knights are supposed to be for.”

Erza simply nodded, not saying anything. She knew that the master always had problems with missions that resulted in people dying and actually approved of that attitude, considering that it could always be the Fairy Tail mage that did rather than their opponents. Here, however, she didn’t agree with the idea that they shouldn’t have been involved, so said nothing rather than agree as she would normally have.

Instead Ultear spoke up. “Jellal posted a few missions on his own cognizance, one of which is a mission that Scarlet mentioned seeing on your message board, the mission to Galuna island? I’m here to record anything unusual so they know more about what Jellal's long-term plans might've been as well as any further underworld contacts he might have.”

Laxus nodded. “According to Erza and the others, he was involved with at least three Dark Guilds, including one from the Balam Alliance. So it stands to reason he might be involved with one of the other Alliance members. Ranma and Mira are checking out one mission, and, since that island is actually pretty near the nearest port to Magnolia, we volunteered to check this one out.”

“That and I'd bet you’d just love to run into some kind of demon or other, right?” Makarov asked dryly.

Laxus shrugged, though it fooled no one. “If it happens, I'm cool with that.”

“Well then, Councilwoman,” Makarov said, turning to her with a smile. “I'm glad you're here to help.” Then he suddenly disappeared from where he had been standing, reappearing behind her and reaching up to fondle her rear. “**So** happy! If they had to send anyone along on this kind of mission, at least they sent the prettiest one by far!”

Ultear glared and turned, her face flushing, but the master had already hopped away, cackling and she regained her equilibrium with difficulty before a small smirk worked its way onto her face. “Hmmf, you really are as perverted as they say, aren’t you Makarov-kun? This kind of action is exactly why you’re looked at as being as bad as your mages.”

 “Oh please, my dear. At least no one’s ever complained about me destroying things.” Makarov waved her argument off.

“Ah, but I have to wonder what your guild’s healer would say about it?” Ultear went on, tapping her chin with one finger as she smiled mockingly at Makarov.

Makarov shuddered while Erza actually nodded in approval at that. “N, none of that! Ahem, anyway what mission were you interested in again?”

“The mission to Galuna Island,” Ultear replied calmly, though she had also turned so her rear was protected by the front of the bar.

Groaning, the master put his head in his hands. “Of course, it has to be that mission!”

“What's wrong? And why don't I see Natsu, Happy, Gray, or Lucy anywhere?” Erza asked, looking around for them.

The master winced, and Laxus suddenly grinned. “He didn't!”

“Natsu didn't,” the master said, looking up before sighing and taking a quick quaff of his remaining drink. “Gray did before Natsu and the twins got back. I sent Natsu after Gray with Happy, but they haven't returned yet.”

“Which probably means Gray was able to convince Natsu to come along with them,” Laxus said with another laugh. “That little brat’s always been looking to jump to S-class before he's ready. Which means he’s going to be punished too, right, Gramps?”

 *Then again, in terms of magical reserves he might be ready now, given how much power he took from the lacrima of that freaking tower. We'll have to see about that after he fully recovers.*

“Most definitely. I’ll have to prepare two more potions. All of them will be given…**that**, as punishment,” Makarov said grimly.

Erza, on the other hand did not take this nearly as well. “I can't believe them! Gray's always been more respectful of the rules than Natsu.”

“Except the laws of common decency,” Ultear interrupted with a small smirk on her black-painted lips. “He is the one who’s always looking to strip off, correct?”

“Yep,” Cana and Laxus said as one, one amused, the other simply resigned.

Then Cana laughed, winking at Levy, who was sitting next to her and shaking her head at Lucy being convinced to go with the regular pair of troublemakers. “I’ve seen Gray’s junk more often than any boyfriend I’ve ever had. What about you, Levy-chan?”

“Do not ask me that, Cana!” Levy shouted with a blush on her face, while nearby Jet and Droy vowed to kill Gray as soon as they could.

Erza ignored them, continuing to talk as if they hadn’t said anything. “And he actually stole an S-class quest? And Natsu, ignoring his orders to bring Gray back like that? Rule breakers! I'm going to give them both a stern talking to.”

“Meh, I think **that** is more than enough punishment, whatever you want to do with them,” Laxus said with a shrug, causing Ultear to look between him and his grandfather, intrigue clear in her expression. “Come on; let's go.”

“Why are you so interested in this mission?” Master Makarov asked, looking at his grandson quizzically. While he knew that Laxus cared deeply for the Guild and its members, he never went out of his way to show it like this. “You do know it’s more likely to be a false alarm or a small time Dark Guild rather than anything substantial.”

Laxus allowed a wide, toothy smile to appear on his face. “Other people have instincts for food, how to spot a sale, how to find something, or how to read other people. Ranma, Ranma spots trouble. He finds it and then goes out of his way to do something about it. If he thought this mission was of interest, there is no doubt that we will run into some trouble out there.”

Internally, Erza was rather worried. She had lost numerous sets of her armor in the fight against Jellal, and it would be quite some time until they could be replaced, or repaired, as was the case with her Heavens Wheel armor. *Still, like Laxus says, Ranma's nose for trouble seems worthy of respect.*  “Are you going to teleport there?” she asked, looking at Laxus.

“I can't teleport that far while carrying a passenger,” Laxus said, poking a finger towards Ultear, who scowled and made to bite it, causing him to smirk at her. “We’ll take the train.”

“In that case I'll meet you by the train station,” Erza said. “I need to head back to my room and grab some more armor sets. I keep most of them on me, admittedly, but with so many of my normal sets battered and broken, the few prototypes I haven't added yet to my Requip space might come in handy.”

When they arrived at the port town and began to see about acquiring a ship out to the island, they ran into the same issue that Lucy and Gray had run into initially: no one was willing to take them. Even Ultear was unable to convince any of them to take her out on Council authority. The fishermen and various sailors were just too scared.

“Fine me, take my ship for a few weeks, revoke my fishing license, that's fine!” said one of them, shuddering and twisted away from them all. “But you'll not find me going anywhere near that cursed island!”

“Well, this is a problem,” Laxus grumbled, staring out over the ocean. “There's no way I could flash-teleport even myself that distance, not and arrive with any energy, anyway. What about you, Erza?”

She frowned thoughtfully. “I could probably fly there, but carrying passengers would be difficult for me. None of my armors are designed for that kind of thing, and unless I use one of the new prototypes, I won't have any offensive capabilities as I'm flying either.”

“I don't suppose either of you know anything about handling ships, then?” Ultear asked. “We could just commandeer a ship and leave the crew here, after all.”

The two Fairy mages shook their heads, and Ultear growled. “All right, then I'll have to call it in and get one of the Rune Knights’ ships down here. That'll take at least a full day, though!”

The three of them stood there thinking about what might be happening on that island, with Erza hopeful that, at the very least, Gray and Natsu would be strong enough to handle whatever it was together. *I want them alive to be punished, after all.*

Laxus was simply irritated, angry that he might miss out on a fight that Ranma had shown interest in. He had no doubt that the two irritating as hell mages would be all right.

For her part, Ultear hid her feelings well, since, while watching Deliora and the other demon sealed with him in action would be useful information, her own personal desire to smack the arrogant Ice Make user who was looking to release them from her mother’s Iced Shell upside the head was something that need not even be mentioned.

Just then there was the boom of a cannon in the distance, and a large ship, a galleon several times larger than most of the ships in port, came into the cove. Its cannons were booming in a full broadside to either side of the vessel, and its sails were painted with the skull and crossbones.

The three of them looked at one another, then sighed, and Laxus turned away. “I'm going to go for a drink and see if I can rustle up more of that Dragon Seed. This is a port, right? They should have it somewhere.”

Ultear nodded. “I'll call into the Council about this mission as well as what Ranma is up to. Unless, of course, you need my help to subdue them, Scarlett?”

Erza rolled her eyes at that but did not rise to the other woman's taunt beyond that. “No, I should be more than enough for this.” With that, she calmly walked away down the wharf along the half circle of the docks towards the ship.

Ultear smiled, turned, and moved away, leaping up onto the nearest rooftop and moving away from the docks before sitting on the edge of a roof in full view of several dozen people below. Once she sat down, she once more used a communication lacrima to call the Council, who, rather ominously, said that they would pass everything she told them on to the King. That was a sign that the king was still taking an interest in this whole fiasco with Jellal and that the Council was still under a lot of scrutiny. That wasn't good, but nothing that Ultear could do anything about here. *I will just have to trust Master Hades and the background he created for me.*

Once that long conversation was finished, Ultear made her way back to the docks to find the pirate vessel anchored out in the bay, its guns silent, as Laxus talked to a few local police authorities. He nodded in her direction, and the two of them boarded the vessel to find the entire crew there, kowtowing towards Erza in neat, orderly rows between the masts as she stood by the tiller, a whip in one hand, the captain of the ship on his knees right in front of her.

“I take it they've agreed to take us?” Ultear asked lightly as she hopped aboard.

Erza nodded. “They were unable to put up any reasonable defense against my argument,” she said with a chuckle.

Laxus took one look at the kneeling pirates and then at Erza with her whip and shuddered before resolutely turning his back and moving towards the back of the ship. *I didn't drink nearly enough to want to get involved with that.* Instead he sat down, staring out over the port, trying to ignore Erza’s bellows as she got the crew up and moving, and pulling out another Dragon Seed leaf chewing on it thoughtfully. *Interesting effect these have; very interesting, indeed. But not as interesting as what we might find out there.*

**OOOOOOO**

Within four hours Mirajane had decided that yes, Laxus had been correct about Ranma's endurance. Fortunately for her, this just meant that she could take him up on his offer to carry her. She was now clinging to his back like a limpet, her legs wrapped around his waist from behind and her arms around his shoulders and down to his chest. Perhaps because of this and the fact that each step they took her breasts rubbed against his back, that she had a lot of thoughts about where else that endurance could be used going through her head. *Hehehe! Oh, yesss…*

Nearby, Wendy and Carla flew just over their heads, working in tandem so that both of them took some of the exertions off the other. As far as Mirajane could tell, Wendy was keeping them aloft at times by pushing down on the ground, as if she was taking miles long hops with her magic powers, while Carla would glide for a bit then flap rapidly afterwards to regain some height while Wendy helped to do the same. Carla was once more in her normal cat form rather than her cat girl form: she had to stay in her Exceed form for long distance travel like this in order to conserve her magic.

Mirajane and Ranma had been talking since she'd climbed onto his back about other demons he'd seen, what they would next have to expect, and what differences there were, possibly, between a human-sized demon and a large, totem-type demon like Lullaby or the Beast, whose size fell somewhere in between, and whose origin was unknown beyond the cave paintings Laxus had destroyed. They felt that this demon would probably be something like the Beast if shorter, but possibly smarter and thus more dangerous. This, of course, made Mirajane want to kick the crap out of it even more, remembering how that mission had gone into the toilet and how it had nearly cost her both her brother’s mind and her sister’s life.

Yet, oddly enough, Mirajane got the impression that Ranma was not telling her everything he could about human-sized demons. There was just something off about how he was speaking about the possibility and the fact that he'd never said where he had run into one or even if he ever had. It was strange, but wasn't something she was going to question him about.

Looking up, she saw Wendy came down again to take one of her huge hops. The little girl was giggling aloud and laughing as she shouted out her magic spell, Carla having canceled her wings to let them drop faster. Despite that sight bringing a smile to her face, Mirajane had another topic she wanted to talk about. “So, I understand the story about how you met Wendy, and why you decided to take her on, but what exactly is traveling with her like? Especially when she was younger. I can’t imagine that would have been very easy. Surely you should've thought of settling down somewhere at some point.”

Ranma waved a hand from side to side. “It was tough, but it was mostly tough because of her age, not because of the traveling. Traveling is something I'm very damn good at, and, with all the accoutrements we were able to pick up in Seven right after meeting one another, I was pretty much able to make traveling easy and fun enough for Wendy too. But taking care of Wendy, the kid, that was something else entirely. That was a lot of work there.” He shook his head with a laugh. “It wasn’t something I’d wanted, and I was young myself when we met, too. But, generally speaking, I think I did a decent job.”

Frowning, Mirajane asked, “Are you saying you wouldn’t want kids? Even when Wendy is older and grown?”

Ranma shook his head. “No, parenting Wendy was enough for me. I can see me being a teacher, a big brother again, but a father, a real, primary care provider? No. Worse, I know traveling is hard on kids. I said it was tough on Wendy too, but she is a Dragon Slayer, a lot tougher for her age than you would think.”

That caused Mirajane's frown turn into a scowl, and she leaned back, pushing away from Ranma so that her breasts were no longer pressing into his back and wishing that she could see more of his face from this angle. “So you don't see yourself settling down at all?”

“Settling down.… That's a loaded phrase,” Ranma said. “Can I see myself with a girlfriend? Sure, I'd love a girlfriend. But settling down in one place? My job normally takes me all around, for one thing,” he went on with a chuckle, glancing down to where his Ranger brooch sat on his chest. “On top of that, I've got quite a lot of wanderlust, y’know? What’s over that next hill, what does that island look like? That kind of thing.

He sighed, smiling almost whimsically. “Hopefully, by the time that Wendy is eighteen or seventeen we’ll have seen all of Ishgar, or as much as we can, and learned as much as I can. After that, maybe at that point Wendy will be willing to go her own way, and I'll be able to head into the interior of the continent or even visit the other 2 continents, heh, though probably not Alcatraz. I've been wanting to do that ever since Gildarts told me what about what I might run into there.”

“You're a madman, both for thinking that Wendy will ever want to leave you and for wanting to go into the interior,” Mirajane said, shaking her head, leaning back down, and speaking directly into Ranma’s ear, enjoying the sight of Ranma’s ears slowly turning red. “That little girl loves you, and I don't think that she’s ever going to want space like that. Although I do wonder if how she loves you might shift~~,” she teased, keeping her own real thoughts and feelings hidden as she teased Ranma on that topic for a time.

Inside, Mira was **not** happy with Ranma's answers to her questions. If there was one thing that Mirajane was very certain about, it was that she would want kids, and, frankly, despite being a little younger than Ranma—about a year or so, she estimated—she was ready to settle down now, or would be soon. Maybe not marry, but certainly have a relationship that could move in that direction. She also didn't really like traveling all that much, although she was willing to hold off on making a judgment on that until after she saw the tent and other accoutrements that Ranma seemed so proud of.

A few minutes later Ranma paused as he saw something through the trees. He slowed down a little, waiting until Wendy came down from one of her giant hops again, and raised his hands to one side. To Mirajane's surprise, instead of coming down the ground, Wendy came down on that arm, grabbing it and flipping herself around it for a moment before skidding to a stop next to Ranma, giggling happily. “That’s always fun, Ranma-Nii,” she said with a giggle.

Ranma grinned back at her but kept his arm out like that as Carla landed on it neatly, standing there as if she was a lady just standing on a balcony, even wiping her dress down. She had let Wendy loose a second ago before the girl had grabbed at Ranma's arm, not at all wanting to be part of that whirly-gig for a moment. Before Ranma could speak, she pointed in the same direction where he had seen something earlier. “There’s a stream of some kind, I think, over there, or a river. I am not too clear on the difference between a river and a stream.”

“Size,” Ranma said with a shrug. “Is it large enough and going in the proper direction for us to make use of?”

“I believe so, though of course you're far more of an expert on that kind of thing than I am,” Carla said haughtily, and Ranma nodded, flipping her lightly off his arm with a shake and setting Mirajane down on her own feet. *Not that it wasn’t fun, feeling her against my back like that, but all good things must come to an end. Besides, those questions she was asking earlier made me a little uncomfortable.* “Let's go in that direction, then.”

Mira took a moment to readjust her dress and skirt, thankful that she was wearing one of her more outgoing, outdoorsy sort of dresses, but her short skirt had still ridden up pretty badly. She looked up, noticed that Ranma had spotted that, and smirked before pushing her skirt back down. She then followed the others through the woods until they came to the river. It wasn't very broad, but it was deep looking, and it flowed out of sight around the trees in the proper direction that they had been traveling.

“Good,” Ranma said, looking around and spotting a downed tree nearby. “We can use this. Mira, help me with this. I want all the limbs off of it, the bark off, and the sides smoothed down.”

Mira frowned but nodded, pulling off the limbs easily and then changing into her Takeover form to use her Devil Spark on very low power to pare them down further so that the side of the log was smooth. As she did that, Ranma carefully smashed a few sections of the trunk and then began to cut into it with his hands, glowing with some kind of magical energy. His hand was moving so quickly that Mira could barely follow it. Within minutes Ranma had hollowed out enough space in the trunk for a few people to sit down comfortably, and then he went to work on the front and back of the trunk, creating the bow and then the stern of the log canoe, while Wendy joined Mira to work on the sides.

Within ten minutes they had what looked like a very makeshift but solid canoe. Ranma then pushed it into the water, wading out into it, which triggered his change. “If you are going to do that,” Mira said clinically, “you should have changed into a shirt that doesn’t cling so much.”

Ranma looked down at herself, then shrugged her shoulders and pushed the canoe back into the bank once she was certain that it would float. “It's not like I have many shirts that wouldn’t, and you're the only other person around here to look, so I’m good,” she said with a smile, before using one hand to pull out her shirt to make it even tighter over her chest, making the shapes of her nipples appear in the shirt. “Look all you want.”

Mira flushed a little and looked away quickly. The fact that Ranma's female form still looked vaguely like Erza was more than a little bothersome, despite the time she’d, admittedly drunkenly, experimented with Jenny. However, she got into the boat just as the other two did, sitting at the far forward position while Wendy sat at the back, with Carla between them. It made sense to sit that way so that if they ran into any monsters, Mira could take care of them. Wendy could've done the same, of course, but not as quickly or as easily as Mira.

“Everybody aboard?” Ranma asked with a grin, positioning herself in the water so that now she was half in and half out of it, her magic power glowing around her legs, visible through the water. “Everybody holding on?”

“Ready!” Wendy said, thrusting a tiny fist up into the air. Mira did the same, looking quizzically over her shoulder at Ranma who grinned back and then pushed through the water like a rocket, thrusting the boat forward.

Wendy flung her hands into the air and whooped, while Mira did the same with a grin. Carla, however, shook her head disgruntledly, once more in human form as she tied down her long blonde hair. “This is so undignified.”

“It's faster and less difficult for you, too,” Ranma said over the roar of their passage. “I don't see where you're complaining.”

Carla huffed and hunkered down, doing what that she could to stay out of most of the water spray. Even in her human form, the Exceed did not like getting wet.

This part of the trip went on for the rest of the day until the sun started to go down and the river course changed away from the direction they wanted to go. Both siblings seemed to have a lot of fun with it, while Carla seems to simply endure it. Mira thought it was fun, but she spent most of her time simply watching the two siblings tease and joke with one another, with Wendy mockingly saying that Ranma needed to get a new hairstyle occasionally, reaching out to play with her red hair, sticking it out this way and that.

*Ranma might say he doesn't want kids, but that doesn't mean he's not good with them.*  *There could be something there even if he says he doesn't want to settle down. But he also says he just wants to have fun, which is* ***so*** *not for me. If I wanted that I'd jump on someone like, well, like Laxus, maybe. A male gigolo of some kind, anyway. At least that way I’d know the physical side of things would be fun. Still, there is a lot to be said for Ranma despite that attitude, and who’s to say the right woman can't change his personality a bit?* she thought to herself with this smug little smile as she hopped to the side of the embankment, swiftly changing into her Takeover form and pulling the log boat up behind her with ease. “Are we going to use this again?” she asked.

Ranma looked over at the blonde cat-girl. “Carla?”

Carla huffed but nodded and, still in her human form, activated her wings, flying into the air and away to follow the river for a bit.

“She'll tell us if it comes back this way. If it doesn't, then there's no point. Wendy, let's get camp set up, okay?” Ranma said, turning back to the others.

Wendy nodded and, without another word, rushed off into the woods. Mira looked at her quizzically, and Ranma shrugged. “She'll be back with stones and with branches and dry leaves for the fire, along with any mushrooms or other vegetables she spots. If you could clear away the grass and moss for a fire, that'll be great. I'll set up the tent.”

“I'm looking forward to seeing the interior of this tent of yours,” Mira said with a chuckle. “Wendy seems to think it’s pretty awesome.”

“We like it,” Ranma said simply, pulling out the tent and its accompanying parts, then moving around and setting it up quickly while Mirajane cleared an area for a fire pit, then thoughtfully dragged the boat over for something to sit on.

As she was doing that, Wendy soon returned and began to create a fire pit, lining it with stones as Ranma finished the tent. “I didn’t find any veggies, Nii-san, but lots of branches, and I saw a few wild boars.”

“Excellent. I’ll head out and see if one of them is stupid enough to not run away,” Ranma said with a grin.

“Come on,” Wendy said, taking Mira's hand as Ranma moved towards the forest himself. “Let me show you the inside of the tent.”

Mirajane entered not even having to stoop much to get inside, and whistled as she looked around the interior. The interior of the tent was large and came with a soft floor to go along with it, centered around the heating and cooling paired lacrima. Several large bean bags were situated around the lacrima, with a few large sleeping bags beyond them. To one side of this was a tiny cleared area, where a few cooking utensils had been put. There were several lights illuminating the interior, including one that looked like a ladybug, while others looked like birds. The tent’s side had been colored here and there to look like different landscapes, and the ceiling was marked by thousands of tiny dots, which glimmered like tiny stars.

It definitely wasn't as high-class as Mirajane would've preferred. Further, the idea of sleeping bags was one she had never really gotten into. But, despite that, it looked very homey and nicely lived in.

Once back outside, they found that Ranma had returned with a large boar in one hand. Mira asked, “Um, are you going to need help with that?”

Ranma looked at her quizzically. “Have you ever cooked over an open fire?”

Mira shook her head, and Ranma nodded, gesturing to the supplies she had taken out. “If you could cut some bread and the vegetables and stuff for the stew, that'll be a major help.”

Nodding happily at that, Mira went to work quickly.

By the time they had gotten dinner ready, Carla came back. Landing nearby, she was puffing a little with exertion as she shifted back into her cat-form. “I went as far as I could go before coming back. This river doesn't wend its way back this way, though I think I saw a few more in the distance in the direction we’re already traveling. They don't meet up with this one, as far as I could tell, but they're there.”

Ranma nodded agreeably and held out a bowl of stew to the little cat, complete with fresh bread and a plate of boar cutlets. “Good job.” Carla nodded agreeably, taking the food and eating hungrily.

As they ate, Ranma described some of the places the two of them had camped out in over the years to Mira, with Wendy adding her own anecdotes. Far and away her favorite was the treehouse down in the forest of Bellum, which wasn't like camping at all, but there were others. One was a day when it was so rainy out they had just decided not to go anywhere and stay inside the tent, watching the rain from the flap. Another time they had been camping out in the snow, where Ranma had made them an igloo to stay in, with the tent set up inside of it. “That was a lot of fun!” Wendy supplied, giggling at the memory. “We made this huge dragon in the snow around our igloo with the entrance as it’s mouth, and a few passersby thought it was real!”

“Yeah, that was funny, although the fact they tried to attack it with pitchforks and other things when it didn't move wasn't so much fun. They nearly caused a cave-in, for goodness sake,” Ranma said with a laugh of her own.

“And then Carla,” Wendy said, continuing the tale and pulling her friend into a hug, which the Exceed, once more in her human form, allowed as she kept eating. “Carla starts shouting at them from the mouth of the igloo. They ran away, screaming, thinking they had woken the beast up, which was just funny.”

Mira smiled at that, shaking her head and returning with some talk about Fairy Tail and the troubles and fun times that she had had within the Guild. Ranma interjected a few times, asking about her rivalry with Erza as well as Natsu. The Fire Dragon Slayer had negated some of his initial impression on Ranma by the way he'd fought through the Tower of Heaven.

“I still think he's a cocky little so and so, and his attitude of challenging everything that’s stronger than him is really irritating. But you can't help but like the guy. Someone who will give his all just for his friends like that is a good’un.”

Mira smiled at that, wholeheartedly agreeing and wishing her sisters the best with Natsu. “My only problem there is, I wonder if Lucy is interested in him regardless of saying she wasn’t. Or vice versa, considering how often since she joined up that he's been around her.”

“I'd recommend just letting it happen. Romantic stuff like that is just not worth the trouble you can bring down on yourself by poking your nose in it,” Ranma said with a shrug.

Mira had the others in paroxysms of laughter with a few tales, and then asked Wendy, “So, what you think Wendy? Do you think you'd like to join up with Fairy Tail?”

“Oh, I admit it would be a great deal of fun,” Wendy said with a laugh, leaning against Ranma’s shoulder and still holding the only slightly shorter Carla in her lap. “But I'd have to choose between joining a guild like that and staying with my big brother, so I think I'll pass.”

Ranma nodded. “There is a difference between settling down for a lifetime, connecting to a guild like yours, and settling down for say a season or two, which is pretty much what I'm planning to do in Magnolia. I figured we'd stay for autumn and winter, but staying for longer than that.…” Ranma shook her head. “That's not going to happen.”

Scowling internally at that, Mira kept an affable smile on her face and she turned the conversation to other things. The three girls then went into the tent, with Ranma still on guard outside for a time. “I’ll move around for a bit, see if there are any dangerous animals about, and come back,” Ranma said, heating up some water to change back to his male form. “Don't wait up for me.”

Wendy took this at face value, curling up in her warm and exceedingly fuzzy sleeping bag with Carla, the two of them reading a book together. Listening, Mirajane decided that Carla was helping Wendy to enhance her vocabulary, and that the book was quite a few levels above where she had would have anticipated a young girl Wendy's age would read. For her part, she sat up in her own sleeping bag, a spare that Ranma had brought along, playing with her hair for a time before going to sleep, still thinking about whether or not she was interested enough to compromise the kind of relationship she was searching for and, if so, how to stake her claim now, before they returned to Magnolia.

**OOOOOOO**

Flying out from where the former pirate vessel had dropped anchor, Laxus, Ultear, and Erza saw Lucy on the beach, dodging around a.… “Is that a giant rat?” Erza said, her voice somewhere between horror at the very idea and confusion that such a thing was even possible.

“And is it wearing what looks like a very ugly dress? Complete with a bow in ‘her,’ and I use that term very loosely, hair?” Ultear asked.

“I think I'm just going to kill that thing on general principle,” Laxus muttered, looking away. “Such things cannot be unseen.”

By the time they arrived on the beach, however, Lucy had dealt with the rat-thing. Dodging around an attack from it, she had used a whip made out of cosmic energy. She wrapped it around the beast’s tiny forward arm, then twisted, pulling it off balance before a kick loading with spiritual energy hammered into its chest, hurling it away. “LUCY KICK!!!”

“Not bad,” Laxus commented, landing nearby.

“I learned how to do that from Capricorn,” Lucy said absentmindedly before gasping and turning in fright. “What are you two… three…doing here?” she trailed off, staring at Ultear.

“I’m not the person you should have a problem with right now,” Ultear said, stepping to the side as a visibly simmering Erza stepped forward, pointing a blade at Lucy.

“Lucy!” Erza roared, causing Lucy to quail and shrink in on herself. “I expected better of you! Why are you and Gray and even Natsu here! This is an S-class mission, and you should've known better than to be joining in on one of their wild adventures!”

“No, but listen, the people here really need help! I,…” Lucy stammered.

“That is no excuse for breaking the rules! You should've left it to an S-class mage, like the two of us,” Erza bellowed back, silencing the blonde. “Now I'll have to drag you and the others back for punishment! No doubt the master will put you through…**that**,” she finished, her tone turning somewhat distasteful. “Still, it’s no more than you deserve for your transgression.”

“Ah, **that**…” Laxus mused, shuddering. “I’m sorry for you, Lucy, but yeah, Gramps is a bit of a stickler for this particular rule, especially after I ignored it a few times when I was younger. Just,” he made a patting motion with one hand. “Just, um, just grit your teeth and get through it.”

Lucy stiffened up at that, seeing the fear and distaste on both her guildmates faces, and then twitched her head to the side, this way and that, looking for a way out as Erza lowered her sword. When the rat-thing she just dealt with began to stir and push to its feet, she took her chance, twisting around and racing to the woods.  *I've got to warn Gray and Natsu! Whatever punishment had Gray and even Natsu so terrified, she's offering I don't want any part of it!*

“Hold it right there!” Erza shouted after lashing out with a single kick that caught the rat-thing in the head, knocking it out. She Requipped a lasso then, twirling it around her head for a moment before lashing it forward to catch Lucy around the waist, pulling her to a stop and dragging her back. Once Lucy was sitting at the redhead’s feet, she began to use another rope to tie her up. “This is for your own good, you know, Lucy. If I had to chase you down, I would be forced to take steps to make sure you can’t run again.”

Ultear moved off to examine the rat-like creature, kneeling down and staring at it, though she was really staring out into the woods and beyond to the ancient temple where she knew Leon and his cronies were. She couldn’t see the beam of power coming down from on high that she knew was there, thanks to distance, but they had seen it while flying in, which meant they had arrived in enough time for her purposes.

She stood up abruptly, moving over to the others. “I'm going to head out into the woods towards that light we’re seeing from the Temple out there,” she said, gesturing in that direction. “You two, gather up the rest of your guildmates and head out in that direction tomorrow. We’ve lost all light at this point,” she ordered peremptorily, utilizing her guise as a Councilwoman before moving off into the woods.

Looking up from where she had been tying Lucy, Erza growled a little, staring after the other woman, her hands moving automatically. “That, that woman!”

Smirking at this, Laxus decided to have some fun. “You know, that's not the way to tie someone up,…” he said in a low voice, then began to give short orders on how she should tie Lucy up. This ended up with Lucy tied up more like she was participating in some kind of bondage play than an actual prisoner. Staring down at herself, Lucy then looked up at Laxus and the still simmering Erza, who was staring after the woman. “That was low, and you are a freaking pervert,” she said in the most deadpan tone she could manage.

Laxus smirked. “Hey, I'm not the one who was tying you up.”

Erza turned to look around at that and looked down at what her hands had been doing while her mind was busy thinking very bloody thoughts about the Councilwoman. “What, tha, that, um.…” She blushed hotly. “What is this! Lucy, who did this to you? It looks like.…” She blushed again and fell silent.

“Like a scene from one of your books?” Laxus asked, his smirk still on his face. He then reached down, hefting Lucy onto his shoulder, making no move to actually release her from her bondage, pun intended.

Erza punched out hard, catching Laxus on the side and causing him to groan and release Lucy, whereupon Erza grabbed her. She pulled off the ropes except for one around her wrists, and then tugged on it lightly. “I don't know what you're talking about,” she said to the groaningS-class mage.

“Sure you don't,” Laxus grunted. “And that was a cheap shot!”

“Where are the others?” Erza asked, looking at Lucy and ignoring Laxus rather pointedly.

“I don't know. We agreed to meet up back at the village, though, if we got separated, so if we go there we probably have a better chance of finding them than if we went out searching everywhere.”

“Lead on, then,” Erza urged, pushing the other girl lightly in the shoulders. “And while we’re moving, you can tell me why you agreed to go along with this mad scheme. You haven’t struck me as one to regularly break the rules.”

Lucy shrugged. “I ran away from home. Does that count?” At their surprised looks, she shrugged her shoulders again. “Let's just say that a few of my decisions, and the fact I wasn't interested in business or marrying to help my father's business grow, caused a bit of a rift within our family. There was only so much Capricorn could do to shield me from that kind of thing, and, even though he disagreed with my decision, he didn't stop me from running away.”

“So you're more of a rule breaker than I thought, but that doesn't explain why you decided to go on this S-class quest. You definitely do not strike me as the type to want to risk your life like that,” Erza said.

“Did you see what's on offer as the reward? A golden key! You better believe I wanted a piece of that kind of thing. It was my mother's dream to bring all the golden keys together and be friends with all of their spirits. I want to follow that dream, and this could be another step in that direction.”

“So you're another dreamer,” Laxus said with a huff, half impressed, half amused. “You’ll fit right in with this guild.”

The three of them fell silent as they moved through the jungle towards the distant village, where they were challenged immediately by the guards on duty. One of them pointed at Erza. “You there, strip to prove you've got the Fairy Tail mark!”

Lucy gave him the finger shouting, “I was here earlier, darn it! What is it with you people and asking me to strip!”

“You've got a nice palisade,” Laxus said slowly, his hands sparking with lightning, his own guild mark on display for a moment on his left shoulder in the light of his attack. “It would be such a shame if anything were to happen to it or anyone currently standing on it.”

The watchers gulped but ordered the outer wall open. The three of them entered where, after being accosted by the village chief shouting about how they needed to destroy the moon, they found Gray and Natsu in one of the tents.

**OOOOOOO**

Walking through the woods, Ultear paused, staring up into one of the trees above her and smiling lightly. “Hello, Meredy. How are you?”

The girl that hopped down was a young girl of short stature around Wendy’s age or perhaps slightly older. She had short, pink hair like Natsu’s, only slightly darker, with bright green eyes. She was currently wearing a tight, purple leotard with brown, thigh-high boots which had white stripes at the top, and was covered by a long cloak, the same cloak Ultear had used as ‘Zalty.’ She smiled slightly at Ultear, but there was nothing slight about the hug she gave the other woman. “Ultear. You are well?”

“I am,” Ultear said, returning the hug. “Did you have any trouble playing the Zalty persona?”

Meredy shook her head. Moving out of the hug with some reluctance, she then pulled out a mask and outfit that Ultear had used to cover her identity when she met with Leon. In her other hand she held a small lacrima about the size of a person's mouth, which could indeed be emplaced in the mouth of the mask. The outfit, too, had a few other be-spelled bits and pieces embedded in it which would allow a partial shape-shift of the face as well as the chest.

*Not,* Ultear thought sardonically, *that Meredy would actually need that last as I did.* “What happened after you arrived?”

“The fool Leon is still of the opinion that your Zalty simply wishes to aid in killing the demons for the simple thrill of seeing it fight.” Meredy replied in her normal clipped, almost unemotional tone. “He and his foolish followers, including the three former Lamia Scale mages, have continued with the Moon Drip project in ‘Zalty’s’ absence. The two demons should be freed sometime within the next week or less.”

“That’s good, but please skip to what happened after the Fairy fools arrived,” Ultear said, her tone teasing to take any sting out of her words.

The younger girl flushed very slightly but nodded. “I did not observe the Fairy Tail mages’ arrival, but apparently they ran into some trouble on the sea. After meeting with the local villagers they moved on to the temple and found the demons several hours before your own arrival. Thanks to my aid, we found them with ease. However Fullbuster, Gray, target three, seemed to recognize the fool Leon. After exchanging meaningless words, the fool Leon defeated Fullbuster, but he was then saved by target five, Dragneel, Natsu. Knowing of your arrival and the fact we were to toss this entire mission under the train, I convinced the fool Leon and the others to search for other mages on the island before launching an attack on the village and the known mages tomorrow at dawn.”

Ultear nodded slowly. “Did any of them get an idea of your magic?”

“Negative. I used Maguilty Sense: Sensory Link on various animals to find the mages, but began the spell long before I met up physically with the fool Leon and the others. Do they know about your magic, Ultear-sama?” Meredy asked.

“Good girl,” Ultear said, patting the other girl on the head. “And as to your question, no. My magic is distinct, and Erza, at the least, will be making a report to the Ranger, and, if he asks, he can discern what the Wizard's Council believes my magic to be quickly enough.”

“And will we now switch places? I am concerned that one of the mages will ask me something of your past dealings,” Meredy asked, her voice worried.

“They shouldn’t. After all, I actually haven’t interacted with them all that much. And while you could probably pull off a reasonable of me for a short amount of time, playing Zalty is far easier. And I don't think you would be able to flirt,” Ultear said wryly.

“What?” Meredy said, stopping and staring at her in shock.

Ultear waved her hand. “It was just an attempt to get close to the Ranger at first, and now I'm getting close to the S-class mage, Laxus.”

Meredy frowned, going through her memory. “Laxus, S-class mage, Fairy Tail. Number two on the list of Fairy Tail enemies. But you flirt with him?”

*Is she jealous?* Ultear thought, giggling to herself before leaning down and giving the other girl a light peck on the forehead. “Don't worry; it's nothing serious. I just wanted to see if I could learn anything about him and about the Ranger Ranma, who apparently is his friend. It worked too: I got the full tale of how they met and found out quite a bit about what might have led up to that Pergrande Civil War a few years back that we didn't know. I've also discovered more than a few things about Dragon Slayers which might be useful fighting them in the future.”

“Understood,” Meredy said, looking a little flustered, though. Whether that was because of the kiss on her forehead or the fact that Ultear had allayed her fears was up in the air. She then paused, looking around them and moving into the shadow of a tree, gesturing for Ultear to follow. Confused, Ultear did, and Meredy said, “Have to report something unanticipated. I arrived a few hours before the Fairy Tail mages, as I said, but before they made for the temple, I saw something, someone, watching the island from on high.”

“Someone watching? Someone flying and watching from the air?” Ultear asked, frowning. Flight magic wasn’t exactly unusual, but someone who could just stay in the air without moving long enough to observe long term events was very rare. It spoke of someone who was fearsomely powerful if they could be that blasé about the magical strain of such a thing. “Could you make out his or her features?”

“She looked like a woman, erm, the shape, anyway.” Meredy gestured at her chest, making motions like she was describing someone with larger breasts than even Ultear. “But with a giant horn coming from her head and wings. Other than her wings and the silhouette, however, I could not make out anything concrete. She did not see me, thankfully, nor has anyone else marked her out. She was hiding very well among the clouds. But even that brief glimpse made me very worried, and she has since moved even higher in the air.”

Frowning, Ultear thought about that and about the mysteries of Deliora and the fight that had ended when it and its fellow had been captured in Iced Shell. And why, in point of fact, Deliora was not alone in that battle when before it had always been alone.

“It looks as if we’re not the only ones interested in Deliora,” she mused aloud. Thinking about it, she shook her head. “I wouldn't worry over much. I would presume that, whoever that is, she is here simply to observe. Unless she actually acts, we will continue with our plan. Now, when it comes time for an actual fight to break out, here is what you need to do.…”

**OOOOOOO**

Entering the village, they found Natsu and Gray, with Natsu snoring like a foghorn on one side of the fire and Gray on the other, staring out into the darkness, a dangerous, cold glare on his face. It broke as he saw the two of them, and Natsu snorted awake as Gray turned, pushing himself to his feet and pointing at them both. “What are you two doing here?!” Gray shouted.

“Laxus!” shouted Natsu, hopping to his feet and roaring forward. “Fight me!”

Laxus dodged to one side, grabbing Natsu's head with his hand as the smaller boy ran past and then ramming him down into the ground, face first. “Not now. I'd hate to give you a concussion right after you survived the stupidity of eating so many elements at once. You’ve pushed your luck enough for one year.”

With that he turned back, only to pause and watch as Erza remonstrated heavily with Gray, who was glaring back at her, before turning away without a word.

Yet, instead of threatening to cut Gray in half for that temerity as she normally would have, Erza stared at him thoughtfully. “I haven't seen that look on your face in a long time,” she said. “What's wrong?”

“Is it because of that demon we found?” Lucy asked, coming into the tent to sit down to one side and look up at Gray and Erza, ignoring the twitching form of Natsu for now while Happy wailed over his best friend. *Huh, Natsu doesn’t seem to have gotten back to normal just yet.*

“Demon? What demon?” Laxus asked sharply.

“There were these two big demons sealed in a kind of purple ice underneath this temple we found at the center of the island. And when I say big, I mean they were **huge**, just as large as Lullaby was and even wider in the shoulders, less sickly looking. It looked as if Gray recognized them,” Lucy, said, looking over at the Ice Make user.

Gray huffed in irritation, looking away. “It's got nothing to do with any of you, not even the guild, so butt out!”

“You honestly expect us to do that?” Erza asked sardonically, shaking her head. “For one thing, we, that is, myself, Laxus, and our… companion, actually were going to come on this mission ourselves, so we’ll be taking over now.” She smirked evilly at the three of them. “Which doesn’t mean you won’t be punished for trying to take an S-class mission in the first place. The master told me he was preparing four potions for…**that**. I daresay none of you will enjoy it.”

Happy shivered while Natsu balked, his face turning so white it looked as if he had turned into a ghost. “Seriously, what is **that**!?” Lucy cried, staring first at the two frightened mages and then over at Erza and Laxus’s looks of mock sympathy.

But Gray simply glared angrily at Erza, uncaring of the punishment to come. “You can't! This is something I have to do. I have to beat it out of them; figure out why they're trying to revive the demons!”

“Perhaps,” Erza began, looking between Gray and Lucy, “the two of you should start at the beginning.”

Later that night, Gray lay awake his hands pillowed underneath his head as he stared at the ceiling of the tent. He wasn't actually seeing it, though. Instead, his mind was replaying the events of long ago for the second time that day.

**Flashback:**

Gray had traveled through Iceberg from Ice Den to the town where Ur had been seen, the greatest Ice Make user in Ishgar. He wanted the woman to take him on as an apprentice in order to learn how to use his magic so he could get vengeance for his parents. Finding her was tough, and it pushed him hard, traveling through the frozen tundra, though it also helped him get more in touch with his magic, the cold making him able to control his own temperature and imagine the Ice within him.

When he found Ur, he was rather surprised to find the woman was quite young, possibly only in her early thirties, with dark black hair in a simple bob cut and a fit body, the kind that made her get many a proposition from men whenever she was in town. The younger boy standing before her, though, didn't seem to be interested in anything but her magic. Refreshing, but also rather irritating. “Why do you want to learn from me, kid? I already have an apprentice, after all, and I don’t know if I can handle two power hungry brats,” Ur had asked.

“Because this is something I must do,” Gray said. “Something I have to do to avenge my family!”

Ur had promptly turned him away saying, “I'm not going to teach anyone who becomes a vengeance fueled monster.”

It took weeks of camping out by her doorstep to get her to agree to train him. A little over a year had gone by with Gray and his fellow student, a young man his own age named Leon, learning Ice Make magic. They had also begun to adopt some of the mannerisms of their teacher, much to their chagrin whenever they were around other people. It was a fun, fascinating time as Gray started to get used to his magic and using it. It also started to heal his soul, warming the cold that was within him ever since his parents had died.

But it all came to an end in the same fashion as Gray's previous life had: with the roar of a demon.

The two boys had noticed for a few days that Ur had been meeting with a few other mages from around the area. These were the leaders of a large family of hunters, who used Bow magic to hunt, the leader of a miners guild, most of whom were also mages, and a few others water and fire mages who could create animal companions made of their element along with one Snow Make mage. This man’s magic was like an Ice Make mage, only with snow. He and Ur seem to clash heads every time they talked. Regardless, it was obvious that something was going on.

Eventually Ur actually talked directly to them. “All right, you two, I can tell you both have been wondering what's been going on with me meeting with all of the others. There's a problem, a big one, a big one called the demon Deliora incoming. It's been sighted several times, moving in this direction. So we've been making plans to evacuate the village, draw its attention elsewhere, maybe even ambush it. That demon’s been rampaging throughout Iceberg kingdom, but this time we've been able to get ahead of it with some of our mages.

“The water and fire users?” Leon had asked, frowning in thought. He was what Gray thought of as a bishounen boy (not realizing that the label could also be sent his way) with light blue hair carefully coifed and an extremely arrogant attitude. His dream was to surpass Ur in terms of Ice Make magic, and he resented the time Gray took from their one on one training. Despite that, there was nothing wrong with his mind. “I thought they looked a little too regimented.”

“Those mages are apprentices to the court mages who were sent to the Army for a time to help train them to fight and, specifically, to fight this demon. When the demon first showed up again we asked for help from other nations, but we thought we had more time, and none of them have responded yet, apparently. So it's down on us,” Ur said cheerfully, though there was something very brittle about it.

 Not that Gray had noticed at the time. He was too consumed with thoughts of revenge and anger towards Deliora.

“So you two are going to be sent off with the rest of the townsfolk if it comes within sight.” Leon made to protest, but Ur shushed him quickly. “None of that! I know you two are strong, but you’re young yet, and you're not as skilled as I'd like you to be before going up against even a human opponent, let alone something like Deliora. Leave this to us.”

“But, Master, if the full power of the court mages couldn’t do anything to this demon, what makes you think the rest of you will have a chance!” Leon asked. “You’ll need us!”

“Because we’re prepared for it this time. It's not coming on us suddenly out of the blue; we’re the ones that are going to surprise Deliora this time. We won’t have to be saved by a random wandering mage this time!” Ur said with conviction before sobering. “Now, come on, the two of you need to learn where to go and who to report to during the evacuation.”

As Gray had half-feared, half-hoped it would, the demon Deliora was spotted the very next day coming towards them, but, thanks to the Wind Anima mages, the ambushers and townsfolk were warned of its coming. Ur bundled the two kids into their clothing—they would be around other people, after all—and pushed them out the door as she moved with them toward the town. There she met up with the other mages, handing off the two boys to a few older men and women who had volunteered to organize the evacuation. The rest of the town was then evacuated.

While the boys and the last of the townsfolk raced off, Ur and the mages went to work. Gray had no idea what preparations they had made or how well they did. By the time he could run away from his supervisors and Leon, the battle around the town had already begun. And whatever planning the mages had been able to do had come undone instantly.

Because Deliora wasn't alone: there were two other demons with it. Deliora was taller and stronger looking, with larger arms and a wild feral appearance, though it had seemingly been injured quite badly in the past.It had numerous small scars crisscrossing its body, one of Deliora’s birdlike feet had been replaced by a fleshy-looking, square stump, and its other leg had a large scar on it. One of Deliora’s eyes was a blind white mess, and that side of its face was heavily scared and missing teeth along with chunks of its mouth and ear. And one arm from just above the elbow looked to be of the same gray-skin as its two fellow demons.

They were shorter, and, unlike Deliora, their skin had a grey, almost sickly look to it. Or rather like clay perhaps, and they had no hair. They had human-like hands; smaller horns than that of Deliora coming out of their skulls; wide, bulging eyes; but they had the same birdlike legs as Deliora. And, unlike Deliora, they were uninjured.

Or they had been before this battle began. As Gray watched from a nearby copse of trees, he saw one of these new grey-skinned demons falling into a snow pit of some kind as he heard the shouted words of the Snow Make mage shouting, “Snow Make Secret Art: Endless Pit!”

The demon sunk into the trap up to his waist even as he lashed out, killing several Fire and Air users who had been attempting to use their Element Creatures to fight the demons. But their elemental attacks didn’t seem to be able to do anything to the two unnamed demons, while Deliora cried out in anger and fury, singed and cut, but only slightly.

A series of loud thrumming noises was heard even where Gray was hiding as the family of hunters all fired as one. Five of them fired at the eye on the demon in the pit, five to the left eye and five on the right, and this time the attack hit home. The magical arrows hit with all the force of a non-magical cannonball, and five of them were enough to get through the magical durability of the creature, destroying the demon’s eyeballs.

It roared and screamed, lashing out in either direction as the mages fell back, losing one more of their number but moving out of the demon’s range for the time being. It then attacked the other two demons accidentally, its claws finding Deliora’s side and battering Deliora to one knee while the other hand grabbed its fellow’s arm and dug in deeply with its claws. Driven mad by the pain of its destroyed eyes, it pulled that demon close and made to bite it, but the second, heretofore exactly alike, demon pulled back.

After that the two uninjured demons tore their maddened fellow to pieces. Deliora grabbed its arm and, when it moved to bite him in turn, the other grabbed it by the back of the neck and twisted hard, ripping its head off. There was no blood, though, and the demon slowly began to turn into some kind of smoke.

“What the hell are you doing out here!?” Leon shouted into Gray’s ear.

He jumped, twisting around, and thumped Leon hard in the chest. “Don’t do that! And what the hell are you doing out here, anyway!?”

“That was my question, you asshole!” Leon barked, then his eyes narrowed. “You’re not out here so you can try to take advantage of things and get your revenge, are you? I.…” Leon paused as he stared over Gray’s head, making Gray turn, his face going white as Leon’s did the same.

As they watched, Deliora turned from where it and its fellow had dealt with their third member, its mouth opening. An instant later its breath weapon lashed out to destroy much of the town around them and, with it, more than half of the miners there to join this fight. Deliora’s fellow demon took a few arrows to its face, but with the Hunters unable to hit the creature's eyes, those arrows were useless. The other demon leaped forward into the woods where the shots had come from, shattering dozens of trees under its bulk. An instant later it lashed out, its hands flashing all around it like a maddened ape attempting to crush a fly in an effort to find whoever had been shooting it.

The arrows of the hunters quickly fell silent, while Ur and a few of the others rushed forward to engage Deliora. But, while it might have been more susceptible to their attacks than the other one had been to element based magic, it still had an incredible amount of magical resistance.

Ur and the other survivors there, after a bare minute of this, attempted to retreat, trying to pull the demons’ attentions away from the caves in the southwest where Gray and Leon were supposed to be along with the rest of the village’s survivors. But this seemed to indicate to Deliora that its fun was over. Even as Gray raced forward to join the fight, Deliora once more used its breath attack.

In an effort to protect them both, the Snow Make mage gestured at the ground and began to flare his power into it with one hand pulling Ur down into the snow with him as the attack hit. “Snow Make: Deepening Shield!” he roared, his voice carrying to where Gray, and Leon, who was following him, were racing forward. The snow from all around them flowed around the two mages, hardening as much as his magic could make it, a massive dome of ice.

The coruscating beam of power lashed out with a light so bright that both boys cried out in agony, covering their eyes and diving into what snow was nearby. When they pushed themselves out of the now softly steaming snow, the entire area had been simply…changed. What little of the town that remained was now gone, replaced by a massive crater where the beam initially hit. From there a marginally smaller furrow had been sliced out of the ground, and many of the surviving mages were simply gone now. Around this furrow the snow had been burned away, revealing the ground underneath, ground that had not seen the sun for far longer than the town had been there.

For a moment all was still, then the demons turned away, roaring triumph as they seemed to sniff the air, searching for further prey.

Racing forward, Gray shouted, “Ur, are you there? Ur!” Leon quickly joined him, raging angrily.

 From the only remaining patch of snow, Ur pushed her way to the surface. Behind her, the Snow Make mage’s body revealed itself, and it was a body. Its skin had been seared off half its length, the man’s side which had been nearest the magical assault, and Ur’s desperate attempt to pulse her own magic into the snow, hardening it, hadn’t spread far enough before the attack slashed close-by.

Worse, the snow hadn’t protected them from some of the debris the attacks had caused. There was a piece of wood like a spear of some kind in her side, the side of her head was caked with blood from some other bit of debris , and one of her fingers had been torn off by something.

Staring at the two demons, Ur paused, staring over their shoulders up into the air, for some reason, as Gray and Leon arrived. There, up in the sky above, was someone simply standing there, watching. It was perhaps the most disturbing thing Ur had ever seen: a normal seeming human with long dark purple hair standing in midair.

The man was staring down at the demons as they obliterated their victims, writing something down in a long scroll, like he was a scientist taking notes. He seemed to note that she had spotted him and smiled before flying higher up in the air, so high she could no longer see him. “Di, did you see that?” she whispered in shock and fear before scowling. “Wha, what are you two doing here!?”

“We’re here to get you out, Master,” Leon immediately grabbed her by the arm and started to pull her away from the demons, making for the nearby woods where the boys had been hiding, rather than to the shelter. The demons, Leon had noticed, were turning inexorably in that direction.

For his part, once he was assured she would live, Gray turned his own attention to the demon who had claimed his parents and now all these other people. Thoughts of that, of the vengeance he wished to wreak on Deliora, had brought him to this point, but now, as he watched Deliora and its unknown companion march in the direction of the other townsfolk, Gray felt a new urge rise up in him: an urge to stop them, not just to get his revenge but to defend those people.

Racing towards them, he bellowed, “Ice Make: Giant Spear!” The spear lashed out, catching Deliora in the back. But that wasn’t meant as a real attack. Rather, it was just meant to make the two demons stop moving in their ground devouring strides. As they did, Gray used his Ice Make powers to slide over the land like a snowboarder on the cleared ground. Before the demons knew it, he was close to them with his hands crossing in front of him, his Ice Make magic covering his hands and slowly changing form into a sort of purple color rather than the normal blue.

“NO!” Ur shouted, pushing Leon to one side and flashing up a shield meters thick between Gray and the two demons. Deliora had responded far faster than Gray had anticipated, and this shield saved his life, though it shattered in the doing, and Gray was hurled away, landing with a cry of agony as his arm shattered. Yet he still launched an attack at Deliora, which turned its baleful gaze on him and away from Ur.

Leon followed, launching an attack of his own, but the second demon replied with a breath attack, and Leon’s attack halted, shifting into another massive shield. This, again, was little defense, but just enough for Leon to use his Ice Make magic to create a bird to fly him out of the beam’s trajectory. It fell apart almost instantly due to the heat, but Leon was still alive as he fell through the air to land with a groan on the ground, his leg giving out just as Gray’s arm had for him.

But the two attacks had just barely taken the demon’s attention from Ur. She had gathered her power and now stood actually between the two demons, and, as they moved to attack her students, she performed the spells that Gray had been about to use. Her entire body glowing purple, she flared out her arms from where they had previously been crossed in front of her, shouting out her final attack. “Iced Shell!”

From her hands came a surge of power into the world around them, raising ice up over the demons’ legs before either could even blink, the cold of the attack freezing the blood in their veins at the same time. From Ur's body, ice began to form, slowly encompassing the entire area as the demons’ movements slowed, their bodies freezing solid. The ice continued to grow until it contained just the two demons and Ur herself, her body slowly disappearing and becoming one with the ice.

**End Flashback**

*It should've been me! It should've been me who sacrificed himself to stop the demon; it should've been me!*   *I should've been the one to do it! I was the one looking for vengeance. Not her, not Ur. Now she's dead, her soul encased in that ice forever, keeping those two demons entrapped.* Gray thought, remembering her last words to the two of them, how she had told them to live their lives and not live for vengeance or ambition. It had caused a falling out, with a distraught Gray taking her words to heart and Lyon blaming him for Ur’s death for some reason, saying they could have gotten away if not for Gray jumping in as he had.

*And now Leon is trying to release the demon!? Release the demon our teacher gave her life to defend against? No way; no chance in hell! I will not allow Deliora or that other demon to be released, never! Tomorrow, tomorrow you and I are going to finish this, Leon. And then I'm going to drag that thing somewhere deep into the ocean where it can never be found again!* Gray snarled to himself.

**OOOOOOO**

As was usual while camping, Ranma woke up early, but, instead of staying within the tent or exercising outside of it, he decided to head out into the woods to figure out how far they had to go before they entered the territory where this demon sighting might have occurred. He did this by climbing the trees and trying to discern any landmark other than the river to use as a point of reference, having already found the river on the map.

He spotted the distant mountains, or what counted as mountains in this area, anyway, and with the help of a spyglass he was able to make out a hint of the just risen sun on water out there, corroborating what Carla had reported the night before. With that done, he had a rough idea of the direction they had to travel as well as how long it would take them.

Arriving back at camp, he began some exercises while also pulling out of his Requip and ki space the ingredients for breakfast, setting them aside before going back to his exercises. *Turning my ki space into a refrigerator: my old man would approve, though I doubt Mousse would be at all amused.*

Soon Wendy woke up, noisily exiting the tent and giving him a hug before starting her own exercises. Carla too woke up, exiting the tent with something that looked like affronted dignity on her face. “I'll get the kettle boiling, since someone here doesn't seem to be feeling very hospitable,” she said, moving in that direction.

Ranma chuckled at that, but continued his exercises until Mirajane came out, and he promptly began to laugh. “Heheh, are you okay, Mira?”

To say that Mirajane was not a morning person was an understatement. Her two sisters were, which was why they were always at the guild first to deal with anyone there in the mornings. However, given how many of the guild members drank, mornings were a slow, fragile affair for all of them. So life at the guild hall didn't really pick up until around noon, which suited Mirajane down to the ground. She had a lot of trouble waking up in the mornings and disliked morning people intensely, which was one of the reasons why she and Erza were still semi-rivals even though they had mellowed dramatically over the years.

Now she glared at Ranma and then over at the boiling kettle, the noise of which had finally woken her up. “There better be coffee here,” she growled dangerously, looking as if she was about to enter her Satan Soul form without actually calling on her magic.

“I'm sorry, but no,” Carla said. “I have herbal tea.”

“Herbal tea,” Mira drawled, her fingers beginning to twitch. “Herbal tea?!”

“We also have water and orange juice,” Wendy supplied helpfully.

“Where is the coffee?!” Mira snarled again. “You must have something here!”

“Nope, sorry,” Ranma said with a shrug. “We have a lot of sugar, though. You could make yourself some sweet tea or something.”

Grumbling, Mira did just that, but the jolt of sugary happiness was, while pleasant, not a substitute for real caffeine. She watched as Ranma and Wendy practiced martial arts, the two Dragon Slayers then quickly breaking down the camp as Mira finished her meal. Once they were done, Wendy hopped up onto Ranma’s back with Carla changing back to her Exceed form and perching on Wendy's head in turn.

They all then looked at her expectantly, and Mira sighed, pushing to her feet and summoning her Take Over magic. Instantly she was wide awake, the strength of her magic invigorating her, and she nodded at them. “Let's go.”

Ranma nodded and led the way through the woods, racing at a pace that Mira had to fly to keep up with once more. She skimmed over the trees now that they were in a deeper forest and she couldn't see them so easily. She was still doing that when they broke out from the forest into a farming area around a small hamlet of four or more decently-sized buildings. Setting Wendy and Carla down, Ranma made his way forward as Mira joined them, alighting to her feet before canceling her magic.

A few of farmers were already in the field, of course. They stopped and waved at the strangers, who waved back, and Ranma shouted, “Excuse me, do any of you know how to get to the Guild Mermaid Heel from here?”

“I do,” said one of the farmers, moving towards them. “But I’m not certain you'd be welcome there. They don't allow boys to enter the Guild Hall.”

“That's no problem,” Wendy said with a giggle, dumping a canteen of water over Ranma’s head. Mira giggled while the man gaped, and Ranma turned, giving her adopted little sister a sideways glare.

Eventually the farmer regained control of his senses enough to nod. “I see. If you are cursed to be a boy, then they might make an exception. There's a little pathway that starts over there on the other side of our hamlet. Take it until you come to a fork. One way will lead you back westward until it meets up with one of the King’s roads, the other will take you to Mermaid Heel eventually.”

“Is it just the Guild? I mean, is there anything else built up around it?” Ranma asked.

“There are a few small river-based fisheries, but no, nothing else.”

Putting that information to one side in her mind, Ranma led the way to the path, walking now, with Wendy and Carla in her cat-girl body falling in behind Mira and Ranma. Now that they were just walking, observing the area, Mira spoke up about something odd that she had noticed. “He didn't seem all that concerned about the demon, did he?”

“No, he didn't,” Ranma said with a sigh. “I'm wondering if this is a dead end or just rumors that went out of control. Although, I also noticed that each of those families had a cart set up outside, and they was packed full of stuff in every case.”

Frowning thoughtfully, Mira nodded. “Those houses, they looked kind of new to me.”

“Yep, that too, I think. If something is happening around here, well, these people are ready to get the heck out of here at a moment’s notice. Maybe the demon is real, but they have learned they can run away from it or something.”

Eventually the forest around them slowly started to change. Not in a sinister manner, just that it was becoming more brush and less tree as they moved up into the hills and mountains. They also began to hear the sound of running water, and Carla flew up into the sky to scout it out for them.

Eventually she came back, shaking her head. “There is a river ahead of us, a small one, but still decently sized, and you’ll see one of those fisheries we were told about soon enough, though there is no one there at present. But a little further along the river there is a bend to it, and at that bend, you'll just have to see it to believe it. It's actually one of the more impressive Guildhalls I've seen. Not in size, but in sheer uniqueness. You truly have to see it to believe it.”

Soon enough the quartet crested a small rise and saw the river. The trail they had been following wound its way along the river towards their destination, a destination which caused Wendy to gasp in delight, and, without a word, she raced forward.

Like Carla had described, there was a curve to the river here, and at that curve was a gigantic tree. About the size of a large building, the willow tree thrust out from the edge of the embankment out over the bend in the river, with giant roots and branches visible. Among those branches there was a giant house built out of the tree’s central trunk and many of its branches, along with what looked like half a ship pushed out into the river bend, merging from the willow’s roots.

The image was completed with a large platform on the top where several women could be seen walking around or, as Wendy came closer, lying out on lounge chairs and sunning themselves. The women moving around stopped as they spotted the incoming travelers, then blinked as Wendy leaped into the air, landing next to those up in the branches.

“Hello!” she said chirpily, then hopped up on to the balcony nearby, the tallest portion of the tree, and sighed happily. “High places are best places.”

The girls there all looked at one another and shrugged their shoulders before one asked, “And who are you lot?”

“I'm Wendy,” Wendy said, not turning away from the view. “That's Ranma,” she said without even looking, pointing at her friends quite accurately all the same. “That's Mirajane from Fairy Tail, and that's my friend, Carla.”

Ranma shouted, “Wendy, what’ve I told you about climbing buildings without asking?”

“It's not a building, though, it's a tree.” Wendy replied stubbornly.

“It's a tree with the building in it. Now come down here,” Ranma replied while Mira laughed to one side.

One of the girls shouted down, “She’s fine up here. I get the impression we don't have to worry about her falling or anything?”

“Not anymore. She got out of that phase when she was seven or eight, I think. Though she still trips on occasion,” Ranma teased, looking up at his sister.

At that Wendy finally turned to stick out her tongue at him, then went back to staring all around her. She actually curled around herself for a moment like a dragon as she stared out over the distance.

“What is it with Wendy and high places?” Mira asked as they moved over a small bridge towards the amazing guild hall.

A bridge which, Ranma was quick to spot, was incredibly well detailed and crafted. Here and there, among the trees, she could see other areas of the treehouse which had been finely detailed with flowers, banded designs, and animals. This was obviously a place that had been lovingly cared for a very long time. *I thought that Mermaid Heel was a new guild, but this place doesn't look new to me.*

He shrugged at Mira’s question, by which time they had reached the entrance. Ranma opened it, letting the other two enter first and then entering herself. Inside, there was a desk to one side of the circular doorway, a series of small benches around little alcoves against the other wall, and a bulletin board against the far wall.

At the desk sat an old woman. She was tall and thin with the darkest skin Ranma had ever seen in this life or the last. It was as if someone had created a skin tone called midnight, then aged it for centuries, adding scars here and there and lots and lots of wrinkles, like stars in the sky. She also had short-cropped gray hair and only one ear. She looked at them both and then nodded. “Mirajane Strauss. I am happy to speak to one of the strongest women in Fiore. I’m Guild Master Orda. Who are your companions?”

At the name, Mirajane Strauss, a few of the women around the place perked up, moving forward and exclaiming, “Mirajane! Oh my God, it is her!”

“I saw your latest spread in Sorcerer’s Weekly! Do you have any advice for someone who wants to break into modeling?”

“Screw that!” said one of the others. “She so strong! Do you have any advice for someone who's trying to become an S-class mage?”

Carla too drew a lot of attention from some younger girls. “Oooh, she’s so pretty, a cat girl! What do you do to your hair?”

“Ca, can we pet you?” asked another one, already doing so and making the polite question a moot one.

Smirking as Mira was inundated by requests of that nature, Ranma moved around the group and nodded to the guild master. “My name’s Ranma. I'm a sort of special investigator helping the Magic Council at the moment, looking into one of their own. It turns out that.…” From there the redhead explained what was going on and that the man had created a mission to look into the rumors of a demon in the area.

The old woman frowned. “I think I know what the rumors, as you put it, are about, and yes… there are demons occasionally sighted in the area. But there are actually two of them. Well, perhaps. Our legends aren't really clear about that. All that's really known is that they can change their forms slightly and that there are **probably** two of them. Legends are much clearer on what kind of magic they use. Darkness magic, Cosmic magic, and Water magic.”

“Change their forms? Are they normally human sized?” Ranma asked hurriedly.

“Yes. Sometimes they are two females, sometimes two males, sometimes male and female, sometimes no gender anyone can discern. They can also transform into other things and people too, sometimes. The last time they appeared, around seventy years ago, they did that and caused a lot of havoc despite the people living here having long since discovered they could simply leave the area and wait for their bloodlust or whatever to die down before returning.”

Ranma frowned, leaning back and crossing her arms. “That's bizarre. I’ve never heard of anything like that before. Could it be that they have some kind of illusion magic which keeps their real form hidden randomly?”

“That is what my thought was when I first came into the area and heard about it,” Orda said with a shrug. “They haven't been seen since I was but a baby and taken away from here by my parents.” Orda scowled. “I remember they said later we lost two out of every five people. They were too slow to run, you see.”

Narrowing her eyes at that, Ranma digested it for a moment, but then she asked. “But if they have this transformation magic, they don’t need to attack like that openly. Have there been any mysterious deaths or anything like that?”

“The demon or demons don't work like that,” Orda replied promptly. “They are more like a natural disaster. They appear and destroy everything around them. But if there's nothing in the area, they'll subside and we can return after a few weeks. We do know that that time is rapidly approaching, hence why our Wood magic people are slowly shaping a ship out there. That way we can take our home with us, hopefully. Other people have already left the area.”

Scowling, Ranma nodded, and Orda looked at her closely. “Are you planning to fight them? I wouldn’t recommend it. My parents told me that the time the demons appeared when I was a child, they were faced with four S-class mages. They died on that mission, and the demons still ran amok.”

Ranma’s eyes flew wide open at that. “Wait, what! I didn't read anything about this mission having ever been given to the Council before!” *Are we dealing with another cover up here?*

“I don’t know about that. But my parents were very clear on that point. They complained rather loudly about how they had paid for it, but the mages ended up not helping them at all,” Orda replied. She looked at Ranma’s grim face and sighed. “If you follow this river, you’ll find the center of the demons’ territory. What is there, no one knows, but the area they plunder is in a rough circle from that area out.”

Scowling further, Ranma nodded at her and made for the doorway, finding Carla walking beside her, looking rather grim. She had escaped from the girls who had surrounded her and had evidently heard some of that last bit. “It's clear that I chose the right freaking mission to come on,” Ranma muttered to her, getting a wry snort of agreement from the cat-girl.

A few minutes later Ranma had collected Mira and Wendy, and they began to head out into the woods, following the river as Orda had told them to if they wanted to really find the demons. As they did, Ranma looked down at Wendy seriously. “Wendy, if it comes to it, you have my full permission to use **that technique,** all right?”

Wendy’s eyes widened, but as Ranma explained about the dangers they might be facing, she nodded firm, if rather tremulous, agreement.

**OOOOOOO**

Laxus lowered his hand after blasting the vat of acid that the giant rat-thing had been carrying and the beast carrying it. Glaring angrily around, he shook his head. “Stupid rock-paper-scissors!” Earlier that morning, once they had all awakened, he and Erza had played a game of rock-paper-scissors to see who would stay to guard the town against the inevitable counter-attack by the group trying to release Deliora.

Laxus had lost. This forced him to remain, while Erza and Lucy went after the boys, who had left even before the sun was fully up. Laxus didn't think they left together. It was more likely that Gray had left first to have a showdown with this Leon jackass who was trying to undo their master's work, and Natsu had gone after them. Either to help or to hinder, Laxus didn't know, nor did he really care.

“That should count as protecting you lot from attack,” he said now, glaring around him angrily. “I'm off to see if there is anything on this island that's actually worth my time.”

“That's fine and all, but first you must destroy the moon!” shouted the old chief, reaching for him with a clawed hand. “The moon, destroy it! The source of all our agonies!”

“Old man, if you touch me I will electrocute your ass!” Laxus said, holding up a hand in front of the older man, sparking with lightning. “If we wanted to, Fairy Tail could certainly destroy the moon, but right now we've got bigger fish to fry. Once we’re finished dealing with whoever is using Moon Drip, your issue with turning into demons should be solved anyway.”

Laxus actually wasn't certain about that one. There was something **off** about how these people smelled to him, and it wasn't always connected with those who had visible demonic limbs or other things. Regardless, he glared at the old man—who backed off—before he turned and exited out the front gates of the primitive looking village. *And what's up with that, anyway? If this island had any kind of normal relations with the rest of Fiore, surely they should've been able to at least bring in some better building materials or at least techniques. Something really weird is going on here.*

“You did well to stop our acid attack, but that just means we’ll have to do things the hard way,” said a voice from in front of him as Laxus wound his way into the forest. He paused, cocking his head to one side as he stared at the two very odd looking mages.

One of them was short, very short, barely coming up to Laxus’s waist. He was wearing what looked like something from Mistral, the same kind of pattern and cut, anyway. He also looked vaguely from like he was from Mistral: an angular face, black hair, and slightly slanted eyes. The other one looked as if someone had crossed a ugly cat-boy with an equally ugly human. He had a vaguely catlike face and features and stood there shirtless with long arms hanging down as he stooped forward slightly, a grin on his face.

Laxus sighed, shaking his head. “I'll give you both one chance to leave with your skin intact. Get out of my way or fry.”

“You aren't the only one here from a large mage guild, lightning user,” said one of them. “The two of us, as well as Sherry, were part of Lamia Scale. We know all about powerful mages. Perhaps you've heard of Jura, the Rock Fist?”

Laxus smirked. “Oh, is Jura on this island somewhere?”

The other one spoke up. “Of course not, you idiot! What a stupid notion, as if he'd ever be involved in something this illegal!”

“It's not illegal; there just aren't any laws that say we can’t do it,” said the other one.

“Pity,” Laxus muttered. “I'd have loved to have a rematch with him. Our last one ended inconclusively.”

That caused the two mages in front of him to stare before the catlike one shouted, “As if, you idiot! No way a weakling like you could match up against Jura!”

An instant later Laxus was standing behind him, grabbing his head as lightning shot through him, causing him to scream out in pain before Laxus threw him to the side, unconscious. “Being called a weakling by people who don't even recognize me, let alone are in any way strong themselves, **irritates** me,” Laxus said coldly, smirking as the song on his headphones changed to Thunder Road. “What about you? Are you going to take my offer to run?”

“That was impressive but ultimately futile,” said the second mage. “My magic, magic cancellation, means that no attack you launch can hurt me.”

“That might have been true if I hadn’t already launched an attack,” Laxus said with a sigh.

There was a flicker to the side of the man’s head, and a bolt of lightning struck him from the side from barely a few inches away. He had no time to bring up his magic and found himself hurled sideways, his eyes already rolling back as the lightning flashed through his system.

Laxus shook his head, moving over to check to see the two were still alive. They were, and he sighed before pushing himself back up to his feet, moving through the forest towards where Lucy and Gray had pointed out was the direction from there down to the Temple.  *If I’ve been relegated to dealing with the cannon fodder, I'm going to be supremely pissed off!*

Marching through the woods, Laxus found himself occasionally attacked by groups of what looked like demon-worshiping cultists, almost, further cementing in his mind that this mission was indeed something that Jellal must've been interested in, because it, in turn, was connected to Zeref. *Good. That means maybe even if the demon doesn't break through, I might find something here worth my time.*

Moving around a bend in the path he was generally following, he found Lucy standing next to two beings who he recognized immediately as Celestial Beasts. One of them was a giant minotaur-like creature wielding a massive axe and with the coloring of a Holstein more than anything else. The second was a maid, of all things, with pink hair, a small body, and a stacked chest.

He walked forward, smacking aside one of the cultists as he did so, then brought down his foot on another who was trying to get up, smashing him back to the dirt. “I see you were relegated to dealing with the weaklings too,” he growled.

Lucy looked up, having just kicked a man so hard he was lifted off the ground, then smashed the man with an elbow that caused his head to fly sideways, taking the rest of his body with it, thankfully. She shrugged. “I actually prefer it this way. Gray has a bone to grind with that leader guy, and I'm not nearly as into destruction for destruction’s sake as Natsu…or Erza either, though please don’t tell her I said that.”

Laxus cocked his head at that, and Lucy shrugged again. “He said he had an idea to destroy the Temple in order to stop the Moon Drip from dropping on the Iced Shell.”

“Makes sense,” Laxus mused. “More sense than I'd expect from him most of the time. But then again, he does seem to have some decent enough instincts when he bothers using them.”

At that point the two celestial beings had finished with the rest of the cultists, and the giant ax wielding creature shouted, “We’re done, Mistress Lucy! Does that mean I can see those lovely udders of yours!?”

“Not at all,” Lucy said happily. “Thanks for your help,Taurus .” With that, she pulled out a key and thrust it forward, causing the being to disappear with a moo.

“I, too, am finished, Hime-sama,” the pink haired maid said, curtsying. “Does that mean it is time for punishment?”

“You're a former rich girl, and you have a kinky maidservant. I like where this is going,” Laxus mused, looking at Virgo thoughtfully. “Punishment?”

Lucy blushed hotly. “That's, that's just her!” she stammered. “I didn't even…the only thing I said was that she could dress me as a Hime, nothing more! Everything else is just her own delusions!”

“Well then, in that case, I will disappear for now, Hime-sama,” Virgo said with a small pout on her face. “And it is not a delusion. Rather, it is a lifestyle choice.”

Laxus laughed while Lucy continued to blush hotly. “Why don't you head back to the village?” he said after recovering. “I finished off a few of their mages, and you can tie them up and wait for the rest of us.”

Lucy scowled but eventually nodded. “Fine. Though I'll warn you, Erza went ahead, and I don't know if she was looking to help Natsu and Gray or find that Ultear woman.”

“Let's hope for the first,” Laxus muttered, waving her off and stomping on his way slowly through the woods. “If Erza can’t put aside her suspicion and antipathy for Ultear, their fight could probably level this entire island.”

“So scary!” Lucy muttered, shaking with fear for a moment before she turned resolutely away from the temple.

Laxus was still pushing his way through the woods, up the slight slope of the tiny mountain towards the temple, when the top of the temple exploded outwards and reverberating roars were heard. He stopped then and couldn't stop himself from smiling. He then pulled off his headphones and stowed them in his small Requip space, flinging off his coat and hanging it on a convenient branch.

An instant later he disappeared in a blast of lightning, appearing further up the slope, then disappearing again, continuing up and up until he landed on the remains of the top of the mountain, staring at the two demons there. Nearby, Gray pushed himself out of the rubble, while Erza was already attacking one of the demons.

“You want to explain what happened here?” he asked, looking over to where Natsu had just pushed out of the rubble, carrying Ultear on his back.

**OOOOOOO**

Just before dawn, Gray and Natsu had left the village, one after the other. Gray had hoped to leave and intercept the enemy mages before they could attack the village, if that was their aim, but also to seek out Leon and confront his fellow Ice Make user. Natsu had followed him for a time, but then broke off when Gray called him out, agreeing with the Ice user that this was his fight. “Just don’t shame the name of Fairy Tail!” Natsu ordered, holding out his fist.

“Heh, never doubt it!” Gray said, thumping the Dragon Slayer’s fist with his own before turning and moving up the mountain.

Watching him for a moment, Natsu cocked his head thoughtfully and then smirked. “Idea!” With that Natsu moved off in a different direction, entering the temple mountain thing (Natsu wasn’t certain where one began and the other ended, or if it even mattered) and then began to move through the temple, marking out a few pillars.

“Natsu Dragneel?” a quiet voice asked, but Natsu had already turned, staring into the dark.

A beautiful, black haired woman moved out of the shadows, her body covered by a black cloak. “I’m Ultear of the Magic Council. Hopefully Laxus and Scarlett told you I was around?”

“They did, though they didn’t say you were so good at sneaking around,” Natsu said before shrugging. “What’re you up to?”

“Trying to follow the masked man, the one called Zalty,” Ultear said, scowling. “He’s very slippery, though. I had hoped to find a boat or however he had gotten on the island, but I lost him.”

“Yeah. That bastard, he’s the reason Gray and I lost to these assholes,” Natsu said, ignoring the fact that it had actually been their lack of teamwork that had been the real cause for their retreat. “He fires out these kind of, not quite there sword things. If they hit they don’t leave a mark, but you feel a lot of pain. Between him and that Leon guy, they were able to beat us off.”

“Hmm.… You didn’t hear any spellwork?” Ultear asked.

“Nope,” Natsu said, already turning away and moving toward a pillar. “Now, butt out for a sec, lady. I got an idea of how to stop these idiots’ plans right now!”

As Ultear watched, Natsu smashed the pillar. Above them the temple started to shiver like an earthquake was happening, but the Moon Drip kept falling down onto the ice deep within the temple, if at a different angle. “Okay!” Natsu yelled happily. “One more time!”

“I don’t think so!” said a voice, and suddenly there were dozens, hundreds of barely visible swords flying through the air. Natsu yowled in pain, then blanched as a dozen large ice cats came towards them.

But they melted as Ultear stepped forward, her hands flaring with magic. “Flash Forward!” she said calmly, smirking at the masked man. Her magic, Arc of Time, could reverse or accelerate the time of things, and she had just flashed the time of the ice lions forward so they melted. “You’re called Zalty, correct? The Magic Council has a lot of questions for you. Come along quietly, please.”

“I thought I sensed more than one mouse running around tonight!” the man said, cackling wildly. “Unfortunately, I have nothing to say to lackeys of the corrupt magical system! I will always fight the man, man!”

*Oh, dear. Meredy’s overdoing it a bit,* Ultear thought with an internal giggle, keeping her stern façade up with difficulty. “If you won’t come with me peacefully, I’ll have to use force!”

“Ooh yeah, count me in!” Natsu roared, forgetting his original plan, his hands igniting with fire.

“Come and try it!” Zalty replied, and dozens more Sensory Swords appeared all around her, flashing forward at both of them. Ultear just dodged around, , while Natsu smashed the swords away, though he still gritted his teeth each time his hands touched them. But this allowed him to close the distance, forcing Zalty to dance backward.

Again ‘Zalty’ used the magic she was ‘borrowing’ from her Sensory Link to Leon, lashing out with lions, tigers, and even an ice dragon which made Natsu go, ‘Ooo!’ But he still destroyed them as he could, while Ultear tried to close, her magic seemingly having a range limitation.

As they did, the Moon Drip finished it’s work. The Iced Shell prison around the two demons cracked, shattering in places, and Deliora began to move, shattering still more as it let loose a roar. “RAAAAGGGHH!!!”

The roar was so loud that Natsu paused in his attack, and he held up his hands to his ears. This let Zalty hit him with another attack, a large yellow ray of some kind of magic that rocked Natsu back.

Ultear retreated instantly, moving away from the fight. “I have to Revert the Iced Shell on those demons! Hold Zalty here, Natsu!” This was actually a bluff: Arc of Time couldn’t affect anything organic, and that included the spell Iced Shell, which was essentially Ur in ice form. If she could, Ultear might well have reversed it enough to free her mother, if only to kill Ur for abandoning her.

“Oh no you don’t!” Zalty shouted, leaping forward over Natsu, closing with Ultear. Ultear twisted around, her hands flaring with magic, but her attack—Natsu didn’t see what it was—missed, hitting a nearby pillar and turning it into dust and sand.

Zalty, however, closed his hand, lashing out to touch Ultear’s forehead, and she rocked backwards with a scream of pain as Zalty intoned, “Sensory Sodom: Overload.”

Natsu howled, smashing Zalty in the side with a fiery fist, but he simply rolled with the blow. “HAHAHah! You’re too late, Fairy fools! Far too late!” With that he disappeared around a corner in the temple, and the temple around them began to collapse.

**OOOOOOO**

Now as Laxus watched, Natsu pushed Ultear behind one of the rocks in a probably vain effort to protect her from attack. “I don't know what that guy did to her,” said Natsu. “It looks as if she got a jolt straight to her brain or something. And don’t ask me what the two icicles were up to. Erza just appeared a few seconds before you did; said she had been clearing out cultists.”

“Some kind of attack magic,” Laxus said with a scowl. He could do something like that if he concentrated hard enough, sending an electric pulse straight through a person's brain like that, though most of the time it really wasn't needed. “It takes time to set up, but there’s little you can do to defend it.”

“Maybe,” Natsu said, then he turned back and grinned wickedly up at the demons. “Now I'm getting all fired up!” Setting his feet, Natsu brought his hands up to his mouth and roared, “Karyu no Hoko (Fire Dragon’s Roar)!” aiming at the fist of the gray-skinned demon as it swung towards Erza.

But while his assault connected, the magical attack didn't do anything. The demon’s fist plunged through the fire, dissipating it and only getting light burns on its hand for its trouble. That was enough to gain the demon’s attention, though, and it turned to them.

Laxus decided to get involved then too, and flash-stepped straight up into its face, launching his own roaring attack. “Rairyu no Hoko (Dragon’s Roar)!”

The demon stumbled back, screaming with pain as one of its eyes burst under the amount of electricity that it had just taken, but it still struck out with a fist faster than Laxus would've expected, catching him in the side and hurling him away. As he flew through the air, Laxus righted himself using his flash-step again to get back, by which time Natsu had closed the distance and was trying to wale on the creature, launching himself high into the air with Happy's help to attack the demon’s chest and upper body as well as its stomach.

But the kid just didn't have enough magical power to punch through the demon’s tough hide. And with one of its eyes gone, the demon was now concentrating on protecting its face with one hand, protecting its eyes, which seemed to be a distinct weak point. As Laxus attacked once more, Natsu was slammed down, flattened like a pancake by a heavy blow.

This, however, made the demon overextend, and, instead of smashing into the demon’s main body, Laxus attacked that arm. “Rairyu Tenmetsu Tsume (Lightning Dragon’s Flashing Fang!)” he snarled, the lightning magic coalescing in his hands and then spearing out in the shape of a sharp fang made of lightning, a slight rotational aspect to the blade.

Nearby, Gray had been partially caught by a kick from Deliora and hurled backwards, his ribs broken. Gray might have been incredibly durable most of the time, but he’d already gone through one heck of a fight against Leon, who lay unconscious nearby. Because of that Gray’s magic core was near empty, and his body had been run ragged.

He was also facing a nightmare from his past which had ravaged his life not once, but twice, and had seemingly walked through everything that anyone had thrown at it. So he could, perhaps, be excused for thinking that even with Laxus and Erza there that this was a fight they couldn’t win, even as Erza’s attacks made Deliora stumble backwards. “Get back, everyone,” he said, coughing blood from his mouth as he brought his arms together, facing out towards the two demons. “You, you can’t kill them. They’re too strong! I, I need to.…”

Suddenly Erza was there, moving back from where she had just sent dozens of blades buzzing around Deliora’s head. Before Gray even realized she was there, Erza thumped Gray on the back of the head so hard he nearly collapsed, ignoring his wounds. “Enough of that! We are Fairy Tail mages! We do not sacrifice ourselves like that, especially needlessly!” She glared up at the demon, twin swords in her hands as she stood there in the ruined form of her Heaven’s Wheel Armor. “Can you not feel it? Both of these demons are far weaker than they should be. We can deal with them.”

As if in answer to her words, the demon that Natsu and Laxus were fighting shrieked in enraged pain as the lightning blade Laxus had created sliced deep into the side of its elbow. The arm hung uselessly at its side after that.

Even as Laxus hastily flung up a lightning shield to protect him from a blast of magic from the demon’s mouth, Natsu rejoined the fight, battered and bleeding, but still going strong. “HOOWA!!! That’s the way! Cut it down by inches! I’m getting totally fired up now!” Around his entire body a conflagration burst into being, and he slammed bodily into the demon, his punches smashing and blasting apart the demon’s chest in chunks and pieces.

“You see!” Erza shouted in delight, watching as Deliora finally decided to ignore the blades dancing and flashing around its face. “We can do this!”

Before she could go on, she hastily Requipped her armor. “Wingblade Prototype!”

Her armor shifted suddenly into something that could only vaguely be called armor. It was now a gown with shoulderless sleeves accompanied by a flower petal on her left hand. From the armor’s back rose five large blades in the shape of a loose set of feathers attached via thin, unarmored arms which moved under her direction. The swords that made up the clearly unfinished armor’s wings could be twisted and shifted into a limited shield. She held it in place against a blast of magic from Deliora which had been fired toward her and Gray. She gritted her teeth but held it there, wincing as the attack went on, the shield failing in places as the swords came apart under the heat of the beam. But when it ended, she twirled, the remaining blades of the shield flying out and slamming into the demon at points. Thanks to the armor not having any of the enchantments on it she had wished for it to, they did not with much penetrating power but they did at least stick into the demon, eliciting another pained roar.

“Requip: Sea Empress Armor!” Erza shouted even as she leaped over a kick that caused Gray to scramble out of the way. In midair she shifted into this new armor, like the last one, an unfinished prototype. The armor was barely there, but more closely resembled a swimsuit with extra bits rather than armor.

The breastplate seemed to be designed to resemble seaweed and barely covered Erza’s remarkably ample chest with thin chains hanging from it over Erza’s exposed parts and another along the belly with a fifth chain visible around her neck which, in turn, was guarded by a large collar. This ‘breastplate’ merged into the pauldrons, which were also green plates decorated by grey, fin-like spikes. This armor did have gauntlets which covered Erza’s forearms and connected to elbow guards made to look like shells. This left her biceps clear along with her stomach and thighs, though her privates were covered by a long cloth connected to the bikini bottoms by a pair of fasteners shaped like sea stars.

Despite its unfinished nature, however, the offensive power of this armor was near where she wanted it to be, the form of it being two swords. One sword was made of water, and it lashed out into a long, whip-like shape that caught the demon in the fist, slicing deeply and redirecting the blow into the air before returning to a normal longsword shape. In Erza’s other hand was a sword built like a claymore, almost, but made of crystal, its blade shimmering in the sunlight.

The sight of the water attack drove Deliora mad for some reason, and it attacked with another thundering roar, its hands flashing out towards Erza, but she dodged through its attacks with ease, despite them coming so quickly from so large a monster. She then smiled grimly, remembering a story Ranma had told her. *He’ll be so angry he missed this.* “That’s right, beast. I can use water magic like the one who wounded you so much, who forced you to flee all those years ago! Now I will finish the job.”

The demon roared, enraged, and attacked even faster, but Erza still dodged around the attacks, taking to the ground occasionally but mostly staying in the air, the Sea Empress Armor giving her the ability to fly. It actually had been supposed to let her swim without breathing, but the armorer had gotten it wrong. *Not that I’m complaining at this point!* she thought ruefully as she gathered the magic needed for her own attack. “I will finish this in one attack, beast!”

Nearby, Natsu and Laxus had seemingly switched places at this point, with Laxus blasting away at the demon’s chest, his lightning enhanced fists cratering the beast’s gray hides as Natsu had been smashed aside. But Natsu was still game, and he had learned from watching Laxus. Instead of once more attacking the demon’s body, he aimed at the back of one of its knees. “Karyū no Yokugeki (Fire Dragon’s Wing Attack)!” The attack, while not having been shaped as well as Laxus’s, was able to sear through the skin and burn away the tendons behind its knee. The demon screamed, but before Natsu could get fully away, it had twisted around, smashing a fist down into Natsu that flattened him against the ground once more.

“Brat must’ve built up an immunity to that kind of attack,” Laxus muttered before pressing his attack, dodging under a blast from the demon’s mouth toward him.

At the same time that that fight was coming to a close, Erza had gathered enough magical energy for her own. “Crystal Sword: Penetrating Wave!” she shouted, hurling her Crystal Sword forward. At the same time her other sword, the one made of water, disappeared. From the hand that had previously been holding her Crystal Sword came a geyser, thrusting the sword forward with all the power of a tsunami, condensed into a thin beam of water. The Crystal Sword, with its special property of being immune to damage from water-based attacks, zoomed forward faster than even she could see.

It slammed into and through Deliora’s throat, and, upon impact, its magic once more did its job, translating the Water magic by thrusting it forward and around the point of impact. This, in turn, cut, or rather, exploded, the demon’s neck from one side to the other. The now decapitated Deliora barely had time to gargle a scream before the light of its fell life force disappeared from its eyes, its body collapsing to the side.

At the same time Laxus landed between the ears of the gray-skinned demon. Grabbing at the horns with both hands, Laxus roared out, “Rairyu no Gekido Raiun (Lightning Dragon’s Raging Crescendo)!”

From the heretofore clear sky came first dozens, then hundreds of lightning bolts, converging on Laxus where he pumped them straight into the demon, electrocuting the demon . The demon screamed as its other eyeball popped and screamed more as its brain fried under the amount of electricity Laxus was pumping through it.

An instant later the screams died as it continued to shudder from aftershocks. Falling to the side, the demon’s body swiftly began to dissipate into the greasy smoke that all demons seemed to create after death.

Hopping away, Laxus landed next Natsu, smirking down at the battered Fire Dragon Slayer. “And that is how we do it!”

“Showoff,” Natsu muttered, pushing himself to his feet irritably, while nearby Ultear started to stir. “You wouldn’t have been able to do that if I hadn’t weakened it for you.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Laxus said with a smirk.

Gray stared in shock at Laxus and then Erza, who didn’t even look winded all that much, and shook his head, his words the same as the hidden Meredy’s along with one other, hidden, watcher far, far above them. “Amazing! So this is the power of a Fairy Tail S-class mage?”

Meredy shook her head under her mask, already moving off to the small spit of land at the far edge of the island where her small boat had been hidden away. *Dangerous. Those mages are dangerous. I must report all this to Master Hades.*

“Hmmf. It would appear some humans, at least, might put up a fight once it becomes time to cleanse them,” said the third voice who had so accidentally joined Gray and Meredy in a chorus. Kyoka stared down at the mountaintop and its blasted, shattered surroundings, then shrugged and started to fly away. “But, then again, I don’t have to watch over that incompetent Deliora or Master Geer’s experiment any longer, so I will take this as a win. Even if I am under orders not to reveal myself.”

Later, as they walked through the woods, Ultear told them about the man that she had met up with, with Natsu collaborating what she was saying.

“So either this guy was involved with Jellal or is in the same kind of business,” said Laxus thoughtfully. “But you didn't get a look under his mask?”

“Not at all,” Ultear said with a shrug, looking over at Natsu. “His odd brand of magic took me by surprise while I tried to use my magic to rewind the Iced Shell’s time.”

Natsu shook his head but then added, “I got a smell of him, though, and it was weird. It smelled almost like iron and flowers. Weird mix, right? I mean, even Erza doesn’t smell like that.”

“Are you saying he could've been a girl under the mask?” Ultear asked, evincing some shock at the idea. “I didn't feel any chest or anything when he pressed against my back.”

“Transformation magic, perhaps,” Laxus said. “It would make sense. Even if you can transform your body, your smell doesn't automatically change that much. Regardless, I’d bet that Ranma will be interested in it all.”

“He would have been happier if we had captured these mages! This Leon fellow and his helpers, at the least,” Ultear objected, glaring at Gray. “You had no right to just let him go as you did.”

“Bah, the man had lost and then seen that Deliora was defeated without any input from him. For a man like Leon that’s more painful than any amount of jail time.”

“That’s not your call to make!” Ultear replied sharply, but then sighed and turned away. “Still, I would say we learned quite a bit for Ranma.”

Later, after a bit of a showdown with the people of the village who turned out to actually be peaceful demons, something that shocked most of them, the group made their way back to the ship. “I still say it was wrong for us to take the reward,” Erza muttered.

“They were the ones offering it, and we are S-class mages, and we were going to take this mission anyway. I don't see what's the problem here,” Laxus muttered back, hefting some of the cash in his hand. “Besides, don't you need some more ready cash to pay for the repairs to your armors?”

Erza twitched as that shot went home, then sighed and nodded, looking over to Lucy who was rubbing her hand against the Golden Key cooing at it gently. Happy, too, was looking at that and shook his head. “I know you’re fat, Luigi, but I didn't think you were disturbing too!”

“Shut up, you damn cat!” shouted Lucy, making to stomp on him. “And I am not fat!”

“Help me! She's going to stomp me flat with her fat foot!” Happy wailed, racing away to hide behind Natsu.

“Serves you right,” said Erza and Ultear together before glaring at one another and then away.

Lucy went on quickly in an effort to make certain the two women didn’t come to blows. Lucy had learned to err on the side of caution with that sort of thing when it came to Erza, though she had no idea why the redhead hated the councilwoman. “You never mention a woman's weight, especially if she isn't fat in the first place!”

“Then what do you call those?” Happy asked, pointing at Lucy's breasts. “Aren’t they fat?”

“They’re a very special kind, made to seduce and make men crazy,” Laxus said with a smirk, causing Lucy to cover her chest with her hands and Erza to smack him upside the head while Ultear giggled.

This all went over Natsu's head, but he shook his head and shouted, “Come on! Laxus, you said I could challenge you later, right?”

“Never said anything of the sort,” Laxus said, teleporting past Natsu, grabbing the back of his head, and slamming it down into the ground the same way he had the night before.

Leaving him there to twitch, the rest of them moved on to the ship in the distance, Ultear shaking her head. *Fairy Tail mages are such an odd bunch. Fun, though.*

**OOOOOOO**

Several hours travel by horse from Mermaid Heel’s headquarters, many of the local rivers all merged into one right underneath a waterfall. Under the waterfall the water was a deep pool, but the pool was also rather shallow around the edges, allowing for a small underwater seat. It looked almost like it had been man made, if haphazardly, along the edges. There was also a large cave behind the waterfall, the floor of which rose abruptly halfway through to connect to another cave where a small living area had been created over time.

In the water by the edge of the pool sat a demon or, rather, one demon with two bodies. The two of them looked almost exactly alike. The only thing differentiating one from the other was that one had green eyes, the other blue. They both had sky blues scales covering them from top to bottom like some kind of fish, the stomach and face scales being a lighter blue and consisting of finer scale. Long, pointed ears made of scales extended backwards and upwards from their heads. They had pointed, fin-like protrusions along their forearms and lower legs, and a stocky tail rose out of the water behind them, shining with the same blue scales mixed in with shiny metal plates like rings along their length. As one turned to grab a fish and bite off its head, it revealed both pointed, sharp teeth and what looked almost like angel’s wings on its back.

Nearby on the bank stood Seliah ofTartaros , dipping her foot in the water as she looked at the two demons. They looked back at her, both sides waiting for the other to speak. It was Seliah who broke the uncomfortable quiet. “Greetings, Halphas. I come from Master Mard Gear with an offer to welcome you intoTartaros.”

“We know what you are,” said one of them before the other took up the tale. Truly, the two demons were one being, and why they bothered with having two bodies at all was a mystery, although Seliah had a theory

“We have heard of you through the rivers that feed into our territory. What we have heard…”

The first one took up the conversation. “…Is not to your credit. You are all fools…”

“…Fools,” emphasized the second one, causing Seliah to start twitching a little. This back-and-forth speech was most irritating, especially when added to the insults. “Fools who serve that mad creature Zeref. Or that magic creation of his, Mard Gear.”

“We are older than you,” said the first one, its tone somewhere between content and unconcerned. “Older by far. We will…”

“…Continue to be here long after you are all gone. The blood,…” the blue-eyed demon, the first one said.

“…Sacrifice,” they both said as one, teeth flashing. “Is all that matters. This is,…” the green eyed one said.

“…Our territory. We will not leave it, and every thirty years we will destroy anything within. Animals, monsters, humans…”

“…Humans~~,” said the second one, giving the word an odd lilt as if it was savoring it. “The finest sacrifice, the most blood, the most power.” Again they sighed as one, like a gourmand savoring a treat.

Seliah frowned. She, her lover Kyoka, and several of the others had argued against approaching these two or, rather, this one demon, the demon Halphas. It was not, as it bluntly stated, a creation of the great mage Zeref like those demons in Tarturus, beings of the books he had created. Rather, it was one of several dozen or perhaps more, original demons, who had been around far longer than Zeref.

Master Mard Gear theorized that these demons were created by the gestalt awareness of humanity at some distant time in the past, their awareness somehow coming into being either through some kind of metaphysical threshold being passed or perhaps the local gestalt centering on an item or token, much like gods. The item or token theory certainly held true in a few areas, and Tartaros had had some luck gathering such. In the case of others, such as Halphas, it was a place they were linked to.

This place in particular had been the site of a large…Seliah hesitated to call it a civilization, a tribe would perhaps be the better word. In any event, they had been a very ugly group of blood worshipers who took power from blood and believed in a water deity, feeding the blood of willing and unwilling sacrifices into the pool here at the base of the waterfall. How they did this and what their rituals could have been, no one knew. That had been long before even the days of the Guild Wars here in Fiore, long before the continent had even been abandoned. Seliah had supposed Halphas had been a deity in those years: the kind that embodied to separate, directly opposing one another but still seen as part of a single deity.

For a moment Seliah thought about that, about the ages that had passed and what this demon might have seen. She felt interest stir within her, but it was abruptly halted as the demons spoke again in their eerie, disturbing, and very irritating back-and-forth.

“Blood is the key,” said one Halphas body, looking at her, its eyes beginning to gleam red.

“Blood is the key,” said the other, its own eyes gleaming. “Your blood, little demon, would serve just as well.”

“That blood would cost you. Your story would come to a very abrupt end,” Seliah said, bluffing slightly. While she knew that she would be able to put up a fight against these two if she transformed, she didn't know if she could win. The dual nature of this demon would give her quite a bit of trouble even **if** in overall magical power she could win. *On the other hand, my curse should work on them,* she thought to herself, staring at them angrily.

They seemed to realize that too and subsided back into their pool, their lips curled in contempt for her and their pointed teeth once more on display. “We will not joinTartaros. We will not speak to…”

“…One such as you again. If, perhaps, that mad creature comes to us himself…”

“…We will then speak with him and, perhaps, even agree. So long as…”

“…We get enough blood.”

“But only if he comes here to treat with us…”

“…personally,” they said as one.

“The fact that you cannot meet him where he is now is, of course, also an issue,” Seliah said caustically. “Your story is all to easy to understand in that area. You are tied to this little pool and cannot leave your territory even if you wanted to.”

The two demons growled angrily in unison, standing up abruptly. This revealed their full bodies, which were androgynous. As they left the water, their bodies transformed slightly, into one male and one female. The female’s features shifted into those of Seliah herself, while the male’s features shifted through dozens, then hundreds of faces as they glared madly at Seliah. “Begone, demon! Your blood would make us far stronger, and we **hunger**!” they said as one.

Seliah’s eye twitched, and she held up a hand, gesturing with two fingers towards them as her curse’s power appeared around her hands. “Stop,” she ordered.

They paused, their bodies trembling, then slowly began to move, and she made a hissing noise deep in her throat before leaping into the air. “I will go and convey your message. Just do not think for one moment that Master Mard Gear will be as accepting of your arrogance as I was.”

With that she flew off into the distance, leaving Halphas alone. They stared first after her and then at one another, their bodies twitching suddenly into gender neutral forms as they broke out of the hold her curse had created on them with ease. “Fool,” they said as one, then paused, staring at one of the rivers leading out from the pool. “Someone comes!” one went on, though now there was no difference between the two.

“Someone powerful,” said the second one, an aura of power flaring up around both of them as they took to the sky, winging their way towards the incoming humans. “Blood!”

**OOOOOOO**

Leaping up from where they had just been following the river, Carla clamped onto Ranma's back, her wings flaring out as Wendy used her own magic power to boost herself into the air and Mirajane activated her Satan soul, flying up through the treetops to get a better idea of the lay of the land. They stopped suddenly, staring at a woman flying towards them. Ranma gestured for Carla to drop him, and he landed lightly on a treetop while Mirajane landed nearby with Wendy.

“She looks familiar,” Wendy mused, scratching at her chin. “I think I've seen her somewhere before”.

“You have?” Ranma asked, looking at his little sister quickly. “Where?”

“I don't know. When I was a lot younger I think, before we made our treehouse down in Bellum, for certain.”

“That is a few years back,” Ranma teased, ruffling her hair even as his eyes latched onto the woman. She had seen them too, and, though she hesitated at the sight of Mira, she slowed her pace, staring down at Ranma impassively. He simply blushed, remembering how their last meeting had ended, and waved a hand. “Um, hey, Seliah. You're…not the demon reported in this area, are you?”

“I am not,” she said, confirming to Mirajane that she was, in fact, a demon, and that the two of them knew one another, which was something she didn't particularly like. “Are you here to end this demon’s story?”

“I am,” Ranma said, his body tensing subtly. “Is that a problem?”

“Not at all,” Seliah said with a shrug. “Halphas is rather arrogant and most irritating, almost human in that regard. If you could end its story then that is all to the good in my eyes. Even you humans would benefit from it, and I, for once, would not care about that aspect either.”

She blinked and looked down at Wendy as the young girl spoke up abruptly, a smile on her face. “Oh, I recognize you now! You're the woman I met at the festival in Joya. I still think your horns are pretty, miss.”

Mira chuckled at that, and Seliah seemed to smile. She nodded politely to Wendy, then looked back at Ranma, her eyes narrowing. “Are you somehow following me?”

“Nope,” Ranma said, then shrugged. “There was a bit of a kerfuffle on the Wizard’s Council for this country; one of its members was a traitor. He was interested in this Halphas, and that, in turn, grabbed my attention.”

That caused the woman to frown. “I see. Then, in that event, we have no conflict unless you wish to make one.”

Mirajane growled. “You're a demon! How can we trust your word? You might just wait around in the area until we do your dirty work, taking out this Halphas demon, and then you can try to swoop in and fight us while we’re weak.”

“A logical strategy and assumption,” Seliah said with a nod, taking no offense and, in fact, being amused by it. *I sense demonic type magic in her somehow, yet she is also human. A hybrid, perhaps, or is her magic of a type that lets her manipulate demonic energies? No, the sense of a demon is too large for that, almost as if she has a soul of a demon in her thrall.… A Takeover soul, Demon type, then? Very dangerous, and discovering such a one makes this mission worth it even without getting Halphas to join us.*

“However, it is also based upon a false presumption. I have met this one before,” she said, gesturing at Ranma, “and I know that he is beyond me.”

Mirajane looked over at Ranma, who coughed and looked away a little, a blush on his face. She frowned at that, then looked back up at Seliah, who was also now looking away feeling blood rushing to her face for some reason she could not fathom. “I see,…” Mira growled. “Then I would suggest you keep on flying, devil girl! Or else I just might want to see how **I** do against you.”

Seliah shrugged and floated higher into the air. “I will not wish you luck. Whoever wins this, myself and my master will win.”

Before anyone else could question what she just said, Seliah was racing away as fast as she could fly. Which was very fast indeed, Mirajane had to admit. She then turned to glare at Ranma. “So, that would be the human-shaped demon you met before? Is there any reason why you're blushing at the moment?” she asked tartly.

“Indeed,” Carla said with some amusement from where she had been standing, silent, during the exchange. “That is most unusual for you.”

“I don't think this is the right moment for this conversation,” Ranma said brightly, pointing ahead as something else flew towards them. In the distance the two bodies that composed the demon Halphas could be seen, its scales gleaming in the light of the sun. “I think were about to have violent-type company.”

Mirajane turned in that direction and scowled, seeing the two demons winging their way towards them now. “If there are two, why did that bitch a moment ago speak about this Halphas like there was just one? Fuck it, we’ll continue this discussion later,” Mirajane growled angrily, sweeping away to the side through the air.

Once more Ranma felt back whorls began to appear all over his body even as he could feel the battle in his body once more becoming a three-way war. It was slightly distracting, which impacted the new ability to read his opponent. But he knew from experience that it wouldn’t be enough to really slow him down. Balancing lightly on the treetop that should never have been able to take his weight, he stared ahead as the demons came closer. “Wendy, Carla, get high! Come down and hammer them if you can, but stay clear until we have an idea of the powers this demon possesses and it’s certain Mira and I need help.”

Shifting back to her Exceed form, Carla hopped up onto Wendy's back, sliding into the special harness there, her wings flaring out as Wendy pushed off of the tree branch that she was standing on and flared high up into the sky. For a moment the two demons paused, then one of them soared forward towards Ranma, the other angling away towards Mirajane. “Divide and conquer!” Ranma shouted. “Let's assume they are weaker apart.”

“Fine by me,” Mirajane shouted back, then began the party by shouting, “Soul Extinction!” A bright blast of purple and black magical power shot from her clawed hand only to be met and then battered to the side by a similar energy blast from one of the demons.

Even as one of their bodies blocked that, the demon narrowed its four eyes, scowling angrily. That type of blast told it much about one of the mages facing them: a mage that must have taken over the soul of one of its fellows, a demon that had been created by the darkness in humanity itself.  *The human must pay for that!*

Ranma brought his hands together and launched a Moko Takabisha towards the demon coming towards him, watching as it attempted to bat the ball aside. But the ki blast had quite a bit more energy in it then its size presaged, and ki wasn’t magic, not quite. The demon was only able to make it explode short of where it would have impacted its face.

The blast blew that portion of Halphas’s body off course, singeing its scales lightly. And, before it could regain its balance in midair, Ranma was on it, having crossed the intervening distance in a single leap, smashing into the thing. A hard blow to the face caught it solid, and then a point blank “Soryu no Tsume (Water Dragon's Claw)!” ripped into its wing, which immediately began to regenerate.

The demon snarled, enraged, clawing at Ranma with one hand while energy built up in the other before trying to blast him with a point-blank spell which looked like an Evil Spark.

But Ranma grabbed it by the shoulders and flipped himself up and over the attack, bringing his leg down in a kick that took the demon in the face, sending it flying backwards.

Yet the demon in front of him didn't seem discouraged or even hurt by the blow. Instead, it shifted its body entirely, its wings becoming larger and more leathery, its body shifting from what had been asexual into something more mannish its mouth also becoming covered by blue scales. Its body’s weight also seemed to grow, its hands enlarging along with its tail.

From every finger and from its tail came blasts of magical energy, coruscating through the air. Ranma dodged most, but the one from the tail seemed to be heat-seeking, and it tagged him in the side, flipping him up and around in midair to crash through the trees. He pushed off quickly, though, flying upwards again and gathering his own magical power to lash out with a, “Soryu no Kyojin Panchi (Water Dragon’s Titan Punch)!”

But the demon’s hands quickly shifted back into what they had been before. It too gathered water energy, meeting Ranma's blast with one of its own. The two giant water fists, one made to look like a Dragon's claw, the other a full demon’s claw, similar yet different at the same time, strove against one another in midair over the forest, both of them straining against one another.

Elsewhere Mirajane and the demon facing her flew around one another, hitting, then moving away. Lashing out with magical power, zooming over the forest and then up, then down, and all around in what looked for all the world like a dogfight of some kind. If jets had the same maneuverability as helicopters plus their own natural speed, of course. Devil Sparks, Soul Extinction, and other spells crisscrossed the air between them, with Halphas conjuring up a shield of water energy around one of its forearms, using it to block the physical blows coming in from Mirajane. It then used its other hand to create a cascade of darkly distorted water, blocking out Mirajane's view of the demon for a moment.

When she blasted her way through, the demon was seemingly gone, with Wendy and Carla in its place, scowling down at a hole in the forest below them. Mirajane looked in that direction and then ducked under an attack from this seeming Wendy, her elbow flashing into the creature’s chest and hurling it away. “Did you really think I would fall for that!?” she shouted aloud, shaking her head. “Really! You stink of dark magic, and Wendy’s about as pure as any aura I’ve ever felt!”

The demon’s form shifted, becoming something like the form now facing Ranma, except this one still retained something of its feminine frame, with a slight curve to the chest. Other than that they were exactly identical, complete to the now glowing red eyes, which fired a beam of energy towards Mirajane. She blocked it with her forearm, wincing as the heat of it seemed to burn the scales of her green-scaled forearm. She looked up in shock as the demon closed, grabbing her head and hurling her down into the ground. Mira righted herself, but the demon flew over her, blasting down at Mira with both hands, darkness magic from one and some other magic that Mirajane had never seen before, although it looked something like Jellal's Cosmic Magic, from the other hand.

Mirajane couldn't dodge all of the attacks, and she howled as one of them smashed into her knee and the other one ripped into her wing, sending her tumbling downwards.  *Shit! This demon is strong! I'm going to have to break out all of my tricks here.*

An instant later, as the demon moved to continue its attack, it was struck but from behind by a “Tenryu no Hoko (Sky Dragon's Roar)!” which hurled it downwards to smash into the trees near Mirajane. Wendy followed up with a kick to the face and a shout of, “Air Dragon's Mighty Stomp!” The condensed wave of air pressure that she had created underneath her foot, which would've hurled her upwards in one of her giant jumps, normally, smashed into the demon's head and hurled it sideways through several trees. It eventually crashed into a large boulder, which cracked under the impact.

“Now, Carla!” Wendy shouted, landing next to the wounded Mirajane.

At her cry, Carla shouted out her own attack, flying down towards the demon. “Cat Fist claws!” she shouted, her ki claws appearing and slicing forward even as she kept her distance. Four crescent shaped claws that looked to most like magic flew towards the demon.

Sensing the deadliness of the attack, the demon raised up a giant shield via its water magic which absorbed the blow. An instant later the demon flew through previously solid water like it was so much air, its fist lashing out in a punch aimed at the cat-girl’s chest.

Somehow Wendy got between them right before the blow could land, grabbing the demon’s wrist and halting the attack. She flipped up and over it to land a kick across the demon’s face with the boom of a cannon going off, the sign of another Air Dragon's Mighty Stomp going off.

But this time the demon was ready, its body having shifted into a larger more powerful form. It took the blow without flinching, hurling Wendy down to the ground where it lashed out with a magic blast. It caught Wendy in the chest, and she yelled aloud in pain but rolled away from it even as the blast continued to try to track her.

And then Mirajane was in the demon’s face, a hard blow to that face halting the magic attack. “Evil Explosion!” she roared, and a point blank magical attack blasted this thing off of its feet again, shattering much of the surrounding trees and searing large portions of the demon’s skin. Yet, even so, the demon’s healing ability came to the rescue, healing the damage even as its scales shifted slightly, becoming darker and harder.

Undaunted, Mirajane kept up the attack while Wendy and Carla regrouped, coming in from either side. It occurred to the demon then that splitting its attention between them like this had not been the proper thing to do. Each segment of it was slowly getting overwhelmed. Its shape shifting magic was able to deal with some of the attacks by forming into armor that could match them, but the number of magical types it was facing negated that, and its shifting entirely into other forms had been unable to throw its opponents off their stride. That left simply wearing them down, and the demon didn’t think it could do that separately like this.

As the demon fighting Ranma was thrown backwards from his magical assault, it shifted form, becoming smaller and faster with several more wings forming out of its legs. In this new form it flew around Ranma, dodging his attacks and moving to aid its fellow.

“Oh, no you don't!” Ranma shouted, landing lightly on a tree branch and then roaring out, “Soryu no Takameru Ho (Water Dragon's Boosted Step)!”

Just as the smaller demon was about to strike Wendy from behind, Ranma caught up to it, a punch to the back of its head hurling it over Wendy's head to land by its fellow. Ranma landed next to his sister, who looked to be wincing a little, holding her chest. Ranma growled angrily, then nodded to her. “Spread out! Take them from all sides! And Wendy, use **it**!”

Nodding resolutely while wondering how the heck a nice conversation with the pretty horned lady had turned into such a dangerous fight so quickly against these other demons Wendy gathered her internal magic. Breathing in deeply, Wendy took in the air of the battlefield while Ranma, Mirajane, and Carla took the fight to the demons for a second. As she did, her body began to glow.

Together, the two demons worked like a single unit, guarding, defending, and attacking all as one. This didn't mean that the three attackers couldn't get in any attacks, but it was becoming far harder, with the demons’ ability to work together almost canceling out Ranma's abilities to sense their movements and his general speed advantage. Worse for the attackers, the demons’ ability made certain that any damage done to one was covered by the other until the damage healed. Even as the land around them started to be destroyed by the magic released—lines of earth carved out, a crater appearing all around them—the two kept going.

Mirajane, in particular, found herself hard-pressed to keep up and snarled as another blow got through to her face, making her jaw clench and blood to flow from a cut on her lip. The next punch to get through nearly caved in her ribs, hurling her backwards. “FUCK!” she howled, then flipped in the air, her talon-like feet digging into the ground as she brought herself to a halt, her eyes beginning to glow as she began to concentrate. *Time for a power up, I think!*

At the same time Mira was thinking that, Wendy had finished gathering her magical power to her and shouted, “Sky Dragon Force!” A pillar of energy appeared around the little girl, and her features changed abruptly. Her skin became whiter, with scales appearing here and there on her forearms, back, and ankles that were shaped like wings, her hair turning light purple at the same time to match her eyes.

An instant later she charged forward, slamming bodily into one of the demons even as it tried to shift its form to become heavier and more solid. A punch was barely blocked, the blow instead shattering the fin along one of its forearms. Another blow caught it in the open mouth, shattering teeth. That blow hurled it back, causing it to smash into the other demon’s back.

That demon turned, lashing out at Wendy, but she ducked under the attack, kicking out hard and taking out its leg as Ranma came in, smashing a blow to its face, then roaring aloud as he brought up his other hand. “Soryu No Doriru Kagitsume (Water Dragon's Drilling Claw)!”

That attack ripped off one of the demon’s arms, causing it to let loose the first noise it had made since shouting for blood when it first closed with them. It screamed in agony even as the wound began to heal and another arm slowly began to pop out from where it had been torn off.

“Keep it up!” Ranma shouted.

The other demon came back into the fight then, lashing out at both Dragon Slayers with water attacks, but Ranma roared, opening his mouth and sucking the water attacking them into his mouth. It tasted foul, so freaking foul, the most disgusting thing he’d ever tasted this side of Akane’s cooking, like stale iron, curdled blood and fermented rat. But Ranma was able to keep it down and used it to power his next attack while also putting as much of his own magic into it as he felt he could. *Who knew I’d ever* *be thankful to have gone through eating Akane’s cooking?*  “Soryu no Hoko (Water Dragon's Roar)!”

His attack was like a tsunami in miniature, coupled with a twisting maelstrom. It slammed both demons away and through dozens, then hundreds of different trees and boulders, the two demons crashing and tumbling away. They both screamed then in pain and raw anger.

But the attack didn’t kill them! Even as their arms and pieces of their heads were torn off by the attack, they started to heal. As Ranma’s attack ended the two of them began to blast out Demonic and Cosmic energies, tagging both Dragon Slayers and Carla who had just been flying down to try and attack them from behind.

The attack smashed Carla in the gut, hurling her out of the air with a cry and knocking the cat unconscious. Wendy gasped in pain, but, thanks to her Dragon Force, she was able to take the blows just as Ranma could, and they raced forward with Ranma exchanging his magic attacks with the demon.

An instant later between one step and the next, Mira roared out, “Take Over Soul: Sitri!”

The Satan Soul instantly faded out in a flash of flame, out of which Mira strode in a new form. In this body she wore a blue and white dress coat over a similarly colored body suit. The coat had a large black collar, and the dress was closed around the body suit by two belts around her waist, but open beyond that. Mira had also grown horns on the side of her head, thick yellow horns with slight points. Her hair had also grown tremendously. Her claws had shrunk, replaced by claws that looked like they were crossed with gauntlet.

“Evil flame!” A ball of fire so bright it seared the eye was launched towards the demons. One of those demons twitched around the other, firing up a giant wall of water. The two attacks created a huge amount of steam, so hot it forced even Ranma and Wendy back.

It also allowed the two demons to try to break contact and use their shape-shifting.

“Where did they go?” Wendy asked, glaring angrily around her. She didn't like to fight, but she had joined in the fight initially knowing that Mirajane had been getting pushed back, wanting to give her some help. Now her friend was down and injured, unconscious, and Wendy was beginning to take this fight very seriously indeed. A tiny part of her also liked to show off her Dragon Force. It gave her a nice little feeling of pride inside that she was able to do something her Nii-chan couldn't.

Ranma scowled, shaking his head. “Use your senses, Wendy. They can shape shift; they might have shifted into a tree or rock or something. That's new,” he said as an aside, looking over to Mirajane as she landed next to them.

“It's my most powerful Take Over soul,” said Mirajane, glaring around her, her voice deeper and more resonant than it had been before, and she smirked. “Besides, if you want to fight water, you need to bring the fire.”

“I don't think that actually works, but whatever. It must by Fairy Tail logic,” Ranma said with a faint chuckle, taking stock of Wendy’s injuries and the number he’d taken before they’d healed, thanks to his own ki healing. This demon was tough and skilled, and letting the two of them link up was obviously a mistake.

Sniffing the air, Ranma frowned in puzzlement, one of his eyes being covered in black lines for a moment as he stared around them. Just as he was about to point, Wendy pointed in a different direction, shouting, “There they are!”

 One of the demons had been trying to imitate a tree. That was the demon Wendy had spotted, able to sniff it out. Demons smelled different, and this one, in particular, smelled otherworldly. Wendy idly wondered why that was, since what she had smelled of Seliah had smelled nice, in a sort of cloying way.

The other demon had shifted into a snake, of all things, slithering around behind them before transforming back into its demon form. As Wendy and Mira were about to launch attacks at the tree, it attacked from behind. But Ranma had seen lines of some kind of energy feeding into the tree and the snake moving around behind them and turned. He grabbed the punch as it was about to hit Wendy, flipping himself upwards into a kick that caught the thing in the face, hurling it backwards.

Both girls twisted in that direction, and the tree suddenly shifted, between one second and the next transforming into the demon’s body, hurling itself forward.

It caught Mirajane in the back, smashing her into Wendy and rending at Mira’s cloak, tearing it into strips despite the magical defenses on it before she turned, her steel claw clad fists lashing out with more speed and power then the demon had previously seen from her. It caught the demon on the chin, hurling its head backward before a flame blast nearly seared a hole in the demon’s chest but for its last minute dodge, instead flash-frying a chunk of its side.

Then Wendy grabbed it from the front and smashed it down into the ground, headfirst over her shoulder.

But the demon didn't seem to notice the impact against the ground, its hands flaring with cosmic energy, one beam of which caught Mirajane in the chest, the other which caught Wendy in the head, hurling her backwards with a cry of pain. Ranma turned with a snarl, his own hand filled with magical energy as he clamped it down onto the demon’s chest, the piercing fang this time ripping through the demons chest and out the other side, causing both of them to keen in agony, that demon stumbling backwards even as it healed from a shot that should've killed it.

“Do we have to kill them both at the same time or something?” Mirajane shouted, leaping over Ranma to engage the demon he had been fighting a second before. Behind her Wendy howled, sending a point blank Tenryu no Saige (Sky Dragon’s Crushing Fang) into the demon which had injured her, trying to follow up on Ranma’s attack. She was hurt but still very game, and her Dragon Force gave her as much durability as Ranma had.

Maybe. I.…” Ranma frowned, staring at whatever the hell his Devil Slayer magic was trying to tell him. Overlaying his normal sight were red lines. They throbbed as Wendy’s attack hit home, nearly slicing one of the Demon’s legs off despite the demon having shifted its scales to a form to try to deflect her Air element. But as Mirajane smashed the demon she was currently fighting, the one line between the demons separated enough for Ranma to see a very thin line moving elsewhere. “What the?…” Then the Halphas body currently fighting Wendy pushed through her assault to strike at Ranma, and he had to dodge to one side, still thinking hard.

“I’ve got an idea!” Ranma shouted, a magically powered version of his old Amaguriken attack hurling the demon back, its body broken in hundreds of places for a moment. Not bothering to press his advantage, Ranma turned away, racing off even faster than he had been running before to get to this area in the first place. “Hold them off here for a bit!”

“Wait, what?” Mira shouted in return, taking a blow to the side of her head that did little but twist it around. She turned and slammed a fiery, magic infused hand into the demon, scorching its scales black and then deeper. A blow of cosmic magic took her in the chest, making her release the Halphas’s body she was fighting and double over in pain, but she rolled to the side to avoid another blow that had just been about to take her in the chin.

Snarling in fury, Wendy (and boy, was Mira having to reevaluate her!) hurled the demon she’d been fighting into its fellow, letting Mira push upright and launch her own attacks. “Trust Ranma-nii! He knows how to fight and spot weaknesses better than anyone! He’s spotted something!”

Halphas, however, was not stupid. It too realized that the most dangerous threat had retreated from combat for a reason, and, worse, he was racing towards its pool. Without any change in expression, one of them began to back away, but Wendy wouldn’t let it. She zoomed into the sky faster than it could and dove down, hammering into it with a “Tenryu no Yokugeki (Sky Dragon’s Wing Attack)!” The condensed hurricane slammed the Halphas demon into the ground, shattering the area around it for over a hundred yards in every direction. The attack would keep it pinned into the ground as long as Wendy kept it up. The other Halphas-body turned and, instead of helping its fellow, broke off, racing around them and towards Ranma.

“Oh, hell no!” Mira shouted. “Evil Fire Flare!” she howled, both hands thrusting forward. The attack slashed out like a crescent, red, purple and black. It took the Halphas demon from the side, slicing deep into its hastily enlarged form, cutting one of its legs right off and deep into the knee of the other leg. Even as it fell, the demon fired back, the blast taking Mira in the chest, but, thanks to her Sitri form, she just took it, barreling through the attack to close the distance. “You’re not going anywhere!”

Ranma trusted the two of them to keep the Halphas demon off him, racing away towards where the line of red his Devil Slayer magic saw lay out like a filament in the air. The land he raced through was now changed, thanks to the fight: shattered, broken, burning, and scarred. But the rivers, he noticed, hadn’t been affected. Not that he cared about either of those observations right now.

The red line dove into the water of a pool underneath a giant waterfall, and he stared at the deep, dark water. For some reason the water here looked darker than even the deepest ocean depths, and he scowled angrily, wondering what the heck was going on here. Despite not knowing exactly what it was, however, Ranma had an idea of what to do about it. First he shattered a few nearby boulders, hurling them into the stream beyond the waterfall, cutting off the water for a moment. Without a thought he jumped into the water, triggering the change, then pushed her head down into the water, her mouth wide.

It tasted foul. *No, that was an understatement,* Ranma thought, fighting back her gag reflex. It tasted as if Akane had somehow mixed all her creations into one monstrous meal and then forced it down Ranma’s throat. It was so foul she couldn’t even think of words to try to describe the flavors except for the word tainted. It was tainted, wrong and fundamentally vile in a way Ranma had never run into before. That didn’t stop Ranma from sucking all the water she could into her mouth. She then spat it up and out of the pool, and did it all over again.

It took Ranma three times, but she eventually emptied the pool to find a stone of some kind in the bottom of the pool. It was in the center of skulls and other bones, which carpeted the stony bottom of the pool. Raging, Ranma hopped over to it, her hands lashing out with her own Neko-claws, thinking it might be immune to magical attacks, especially water-based ones.

The stone wasn’t cut by her ki claws. Instead, it just shattered like brittle glass. There was the sound of a tortured scream and an explosion of suddenly released power, hurling Ranma into the side of the pool with enough power to embed her in the rock, making her cry out in agony. But whatever spells that had connected that rock to the Halphas demon were severed instantly.

The Halphas demon screamed now in pure rage, trying to break off their fights and regroup, but despite the one having just broken out from under Wendy’s attack, Mira closed with them, slamming one of their bodies into the other and snarling out a “Soul Extinction!” The beam of power slammed into and through both of them, ripping out the chest of one and the stomach of the other. And this time, this time they didn’t heal. This time they felt it, and both fell to their knees, slumping to their sides.

A triumphant grin on her face, Mira marched up to the dying demons and leaned down, grabbing their heads, one in each metal-gauntleted hand. “Take Over!”

Wendy landed nearby, gasping and shuddering, her Dragon Force dissipating within seconds, leaving her so weak she could barely stand. “Oh, my. I, wow, I really do not want to do that again.”

This was a sentiment that Ranma could fully appreciate. While the actual fight hadn’t honestly pushed Ranma all that hard save in the magical attacks, taking in the tainted water had really taken it out of her. It had somehow fought Ranam in a way, the taint attempting to use her Demon Slayer magic to twist her in turn while also fighting off her control. But she had done it, and now, as her Devil Slayer magic dissipated, Ranma wearily climbed up the forty feet or so of stone before getting to the seat-like area around the side of the pool. She then pulled herself up onto the embankment where she lay for a few seconds, then pushed herself up to her feet and wearily made her way back the way she had come.

The redhead found Wendy first, wobbling on her feet, and caught the young girl before she could fall, pulling Wendy up into her arms. “Did, did I do good, Ranma-nii?” the tired girl whispered, nuzzling into the redhead’s chest, very happy that Ranma was in his softer, more squishy female form right now.

“Yeah, imouto, you did it all right! We won,” Ranma said, cuddling the younger girl for a moment before looking over her shoulder.  *Gonna have to come back when I feel up to it to destroy that pool more permanently. I can’t sense any more demons, but some things just should not be allowed to exist.*

He looked over to Mira, who had made a crutch for herself before coming out of her Take Over: Sitri form. Once she had canceled it, some of the injuries Mira had taken had made themselves known on her normal body in the form of a horribly bruised knee, thigh, and side. Despite that, there was a shine of triumph in Mira’s eyes as she moved to lean on Ranma’s free side, while Carla moaned in pain on her back. “Well, that was fun. We should head back to Mermaid Heel now. I think they definitely owe us a few rounds of drinks for this day’s work.”

**End Chapter**

Two thirds of this chapter I loved, while a third I hated. I absolutely loathe having to write out bits that go near to the original like I had to here but that aren’t so different as to be fun. It’s like pulling teeth. On the other hand, everything else, I think, went very well. Please as always tell me what you think, and I hope you enjoyed it!