This has been edited by *Justlovereadin’* for FT knowledge, by *Michael* for small mistakes and by *Hiryo* for his Ranma knowledge. Hope you all enjoy!

**Chapter 14: It Takes All Sorts**

The day after the punishment party, Lucy woke up as the smell of breakfast hit her. The pain she felt upon waking caused her to groan, holding her head in her hands. “Oh my God, what did I drink?!” That thought percolated through her head for a moment and then she sighed. “More importantly, why did I try to drink so much of whatever it was!?”

“I do not know, Hime-sama,” said Virgo. The pink haired maid was standing beside her Hime-sama’s bed, her head bowed and her arms held in front of her chest demurely. “Will you punish me for my failure?”

“No,” Lucy groaned then looked around. Her last memories were very blurry, but she couldn’t remember getting home last night. “How did I get here, anyway? Don’t tell me that Natsu and that darned cat are here again? I sooo do not need to buy new drapes. Or a new sofa when Natsu torches it accidentally.”

“No, Hime-sama, your teammates are not here. As far as I know, you were brought home by Mirajane and her family along with Cana.”

“Cana… That's right. The party, the fight, and drinking… Why were we drinking again?” She then gasped and sat up, tapping her chest and breathing a sigh of relief, followed by a groan as she slumped back, holding her head once more. Before the potion had worn off Lucy had gotten quite drunk. Somehow Cana had convinced her to go shot for shot with her, which no sane individual should ever have agreed to.

She looked over at Virgo, holding out a hand weakly. “Help?”

The Celestial Spirit with the maid fetish (amongst others) obligingly pulled her Hime-sama out of bed and helped Lucy change, then guided her, still stumbling and holding her head, through the apartment into the small sitting area where Virgo had already prepared breakfast. This was one of the few things that she had Virgo do for her whenever she could. Lucy thought of herself as an okay cook, although she wasn’t very good at anything beyond sandwiches and salads. But even with that level of ‘skill,’ she couldn't make anything for breakfast to save her life. Mornings in general were hard on her and rarely began before ten or eleven.

She sat down and gestured for Virgo to join her, but the maid demurred, saying, “Hime-sama, as a maid it would be most discourteous to sit with you at the table. Besides, as a Celestial Spirit I have no need to eat the food of this realm in the first place.”

“Oh, sit down, Virgo,” Lucy said with a laugh, shaking her head. The coffee Virgo had made had helped her hangover tremendously. “You know I don't see you like that, and I know you all might not need to eat while here with me, but that doesn’t mean you don’t like eating. Now sit down before I order you to,” she finished, humor clear in her voice.

Celestial Spirits subsisted almost entirely on the magic of their summoner when in Earthland, but they were truly living beings and needed to eat in their own realm as regularly as any human did. They could sustain themselves in Earthland from the Ethernano of the world, but it wasn’t very efficient, and they would never be able to survive on that for long. Or, if they did, it would take a supreme act of will to try to do so.

“Punishment?” Virgo asked, perking up quite a bit.

Rolling her eyes at the maid's attitude, Lucy sighed and took a bite of her food, making pleased noises while continuing to wave Virgo into the chair opposite her. The maid sighed, but obeyed and dug in quickly into the food, showing that Lucy was correct: Celestial Spirits liked eating even if they didn’t get anything out of it. After a few compliments sent the direction of the food and a few questions about what Virgo had been up to since the last time Lucy had seen her—since before the fight against Phantom Lord—Lucy swallowed a bite of egg and asked, “So, um, is Aquarius still mad about what happened?”

Lucy had tried to talk to her Celestial Spirit directly since the fight against Juvia and the other two but had gotten her summoning refused for the first time in literally ever. Normally Aquarius was quite good about answering her summons, if only to chew Lucy out for doing so in the first place. The two of them were more like bickering siblings rather than being truly antagonistic with one another, and Aquarius, of all her Celestial Spirits, was the one Lucy was closest to, beating out even her first spirit, Capricorn, given how he was always in teacher mode. *Then again, no one has ever stolen her urn from Aquarius before, either.*

“I am afraid so, Hime-sama. She isn't talking to anyone, although I have seen her occasionally in the Celestial Spirit’s common lands.” Virgo now looked a little disturbed. “Now she sometimes blushes and then sends for her boyfriend.”

That caused Lucy to blink in shock. “Wait, she has a real boyfriend! I thought she was always lying about that. I demanded to know his name, and she never told me, always insisting on teasing me about it! Then she’d taunt me about never getting one of my own.”

Virgo smiled as well. After all, Aquarius was very hard to get along with at times. “She does have a boyfriend, Hime-sama. Scorpio. But I'm afraid that he hasn't been of much help of late. His own master has summoned him several times in the past few weeks.”

“That's interesting,” Lucy replied before her tone turned sly. “I don't suppose you could tell me who he serves, could you?”

“I am afraid not, although I could tell you that Aquarius has complained about Scorpio’s mistress indeed being a ‘mistress’ several times,” Virgo replied.

“Yeah, Aquarius would be the jealous type, wouldn't she?” Lucy mused, tapping her lips with a finger thoughtfully.

The two of them finished eating soon after that, but Lucy kept on glancing over towards a specific portion of her desk. It had been the first thing she'd checked after the Phantom Lord issue had been dealt with and she had come home. She wanted to make certain that none of the mages who had invaded her home had touched her treasure: her stack of letters to her dead mother. Those letters weren't anything anyone else would treasure, but they were precious to her.

But they also currently represented a problem, that problem being her father and his part in this debacle with Phantom Lord. Admittedly, Lucy doubted that any other legal guild would come after her in order to return her to her father, but Lucy knew there were dark guilds out there that might try to make a name for themselves by capturing a Fairy Tail mage. *Especially with the bounty that was on my head thanks to my father's desire to bring me back and control me.*

That meant that Lucy had to return home. She had to meet with her father and somehow convince him to back off, to leave her alone. That was not a conversation that she was looking forward to having, she confided to Virgo, but it had to be done.

“You know that we will be with you one hundred percent, Hime-sama,” Virgo said, gesturing from herself down to the pouch that held all of Lucy's keys at her side. “If he attempts anything physical, we will deal with it.”

“It won't be a physical contest, but a mental and emotional one,” Lucy replied with a sigh, standing up and starting to clean the table. “But it has to be done. I'll call you if I need you, Virgo. Thank you for the breakfast,” she finished with a smile, reaching out to ruffle Virgo's pink hair.

Virgo pouted, somewhat unhappy, in a way, to be treated so fondly rather than to be punished, as was her desire. But she bowed her head and disappeared after first clicking her fingers and sending most of the dirty dishes into the wash, despite Lucy having long since ordered Virgo to leave the cleanup to her. It was an obvious attempt to gain some punishment for herself the next time she was summoned (or showed up on a set schedule, as she had that morning), but Lucy just laughed and ignored it.

After a few moments spent putting the silverware and the remaining dishes away, Lucy looked around her apartment and then checked her pouch to make certain that she had her purse and her keys with her. Then, after breathing in deeply, which did interesting things to her chest though there was no one to see, she headed out the door, intending to go straight to the train station.

Outside, however, she found Cana, Levy, Natsu, and Happy all talking to one another outside, none of them looking worse for wear, as she had been earlier. They all looked up as Lucy exited her apartment and she blinked at them. “What, um, what are you all doing here? If you're here to see me, I'm afraid I have something I need to do today…” she said, looking around self-consciously.

“Stupid girl,” Cana said, moving to her side and pulling Lucy into a sideways hug. “You think we didn't know you were still hurting about your part in this business with Phantom Lord? Your old man practically put a hit out on you, after all. Who the heck would be able to move past that?”

“It makes me furious too!” Levy said with a shake of her head.

“I'm not so furious, but I do want some closure,” Lucy said, smiling at her two friends and not moving away from Cana’s hug. “I, I was going to go there and take care of this now; I didn’t want to worry you all.”

“It’s never a worry to care about a friend!” Natsu said with a roar, a pilot light visible in his mouth for a moment as he did. “You're not alone any longer; you're part of Fairy Tail! And your father needs to know that too!”

“Aye, sir! Luigi’s dad will just have to find another fatty daughter to boss around,” Happy said.

“All right,” Lucy said with a laugh while restraining herself from kicking the blue-furred Exceed. “Thank you, all! Your support means the world to me. But don't think I'm going to pay for all your tickets,” she said admonishingly, wagging her free hand at the others, though she didn't relinquish her hold around Cana as she said it.

This actually did cause a problem later on. Cana hadn't brought enough money to pay for her own seat. None of them had realized how much it would cost to go the full distance it would take to get from Magnolia to the nearest town to where the Heartfilia mansion was.

“You don't live in the town?” Cana asked.

“No,” Lucy said with a faint flush of embarrassment. “Our estate is kind of too large for that.”

“Ah, right, you're the runaway rich girl; I forgot,” Cana said teasingly, then frowned at Natsu. “Come on, man! You know I'm good for it.”

“No way!” Natsu said shaking his head and glaring hatefully at his hated enemy, the train. “If I have to get on that damn thing, then at least Happy can have his own seat.”

“Aye, sir! I don't want to share a seat with Natsu, because if I do he sometimes throws up on me!” Happy said, shaking his head.

“What’re you even doing here, you blue cat,” Lucy asked shaking her head. “If it's just to make jokes at my expense, then you can take a hike!”

“I'm Natsu's partner, and where he goes, I go. Besides, you're part of team with Natsu too now, which means I have to take care of you too.” At Lucy's continued look, Happy continued, “Besides, I don’t exactly want to be around Carla right now. She took too much pleasure in my pain yesterday.” Despite that, Happy didn't seem to show any signs of permanent mental scarring from being punished as they had been the day before. If anything, he looked pleased to be once more just wearing a backpack.

“Maybe you should take that as a hint that she's not interested,” Lucy suggested, or rather, stated in response.

“That's fine and all,” Cana said interrupting Happy's response, “but that still leaves me without a seat to myself. Am I supposed to stand the entire time?”

“We'll figure something out when we get on board,” Lucy said with a sigh as the train signaled that it was ready. “Come on!”

They soon found a booth for themselves. The trip would take a full day and a half, taking them straight from Magnolia almost to Fiore’s border with Bosco. Natsu instantly spread out over the two chairs he'd bought, removing the armrest between them so he could lay out, already beginning to groan as the train started to quiver and shake in preparation for leaving, with Happy curling up on his legs.

Cana glared at him, then sighed and just stood there for a moment before Lucy decided to do something about that. “Come on; you can sit with me.” She pushed Natsu's feet away from her and back on his own side, and Cana sat beside her, with Lucy flushing a little given how they were pressed together in the seat.

“Comfy?” Cana asked Lucy.

“…Yeah,” Lucy said after a moment. “Yeah, I think I am,” she said with a smile. Somehow that and the look she was giving Cana set Cana to blushing lightly too. But she didn't move away and took one of Lucy's hands in hers. Lucy squeezed it, and the two of them turned to the others, engaging Happy and Levy in a discussion about what the heck had happened the previous night. If they kept on holding hands and glanced at one another occasionally, that was no business but of anyone's but theirs.

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma, too, woke up, but, unlike Lucy, she felt no pain, since in her case it hadn’t been drink that had downed her. Rather, she had been completely blindsided by something that threw her body for a loop.  *What was that stuff that Makarov slipped me?*

**Flashback:**

Laughing, Ranma took a bite of the meal she'd ordered from the bar as she watched Erza stand up and race into the mass of people who were already fighting in affronted fury. Gray had just been felt up from behind, and ‘she’ hadn’t reacted at all save to turn around and break the other man’s hold. Now Erza was stomping a hole in the man's backside, and the rest of the guild was fighting all around her. “Just because she is technically a man despite evidence to the contrary does not mean that is alright, Wakaba!”

As Ranma watched, Natsu, who was fighting Elfman and a few others, laughed. “Hey, look at this!” the temporarily-turned-girl said, pulling open her shirt and flashing her breasts. Elfman and the others gaped, and Natsu launched herself in the middle of them, cackling.

Nearby, Erza scowled and began to move towards him, fingers twitching while Lisanna and Anna, who had been working through the still peaceful portions of the crowd, looked at one another and shook their heads. “Oh, Natsu,” they said as one, then quickly moved up the stairs to the second floor, leaving Natsu to her fate.

*Jesus, was I that bad when I first got this body?* Ranma asked herself. She then shuddered.  *Yeah, I probably don't want an answer to that one.*

She didn't notice Makarov's hand hover over her plate tipping some small, salt-like crystals down on top of her pasta. Ranma noticed a crunch of second later and frowned, but kept on eating, not detecting anything different in the taste.

A few tables over, however, Bisca had noticed and frowned, gesturing over to where Mirajane was sitting nearby. “Hey, what do you think master Makarov just put in Ranma's meal, there?”

“He's messing with the food?!” Mirajane asked with a growl, sitting up from where she had been sitting and cracking her knuckles angrily. “He knows he's not supposed to do that, but noooo! Whenever we use the potions his old friend left behind he always wants to experiment with some of the other things he left at the guild!”

Mirajane pushed her way through the crowd, smacking one or two guild members aside when they turned and made to attack her in turn before noting whom they were attacking. She negligently caught Natsu—who had been hurled through the air by Erza—by the shirt, and in turn, hurled her sideways. Soon she was standing in front of Makarov, glaring down at him. “Master,” she said coolly, “what’ve we told you about putting potions and stuff in people's foods?”

“It's a special occasion, my dear!” Makarov said, not responding to the question since he knew he couldn't, cackling and talking a long draft of his beer. It was the special stuff, too, much stronger than most of the ale they served in the guild. He always broke out the good stuff when he had the opportunity to play with the potions and other items his old friend had left him.

But Mira was, despite not actually spending much time cooking, the mistress of the guild’s kitchen, and she would not be denied. “Master…” she growled.

“Don't worry; it's nothing dangerous! It's just something to loosen Ranma’s inhibitions.” At Mirajane's continued glare, he hesitated and then went on. “Ahem, I, um, I noticed that Ranma doesn't seem to be getting drunk, despite having matched Cana shot for shot for a bit there. So I was wondering, what it would look like if Ranma got drunk?”

Ranma's water Dragon Slayer powers worked against the idea of him/her getting drunk, and, indeed, even eating solid foods was something that occasionally bothered Ranma, like he shouldn’t be doing it or there was no point to it. But Ranma liked solid foods far too much to give them up.

“What did Ranma do to you that is so terrible you would spike her drink to get back at her?” Mirajane asked skeptically.

“Are you joking!?” Makarov looked at her and for a moment, his inebriated state fading into righteous anger. “Did you not see how much paperwork I've been having to fill in over the past few days thanks to this latest debacle!?”

“But that's Phantom Lord's fault, not Ranma's,” Mirajane protested.

“Yes, but if Ranma hadn't become involved, I would've been able to get away with just a single report, not reams of them!”

Rolling her eyes at this justification, Mirajane shook her head, knowing that that was only a quarter of the reason at best. The real reason was twofold. One, Makarov was a pervert like many of the people in the guild above a certain age. He probably thought that getting Ranma to not attack Makarov violently would be easier if she was high. And two, once he was allowed to use the sex-change potion, Makarov **always** looked for a reason to use some of the other potions and medicines his old friend had left them.

“Don't go crying for sympathy once this blows up in your face. I’m going to be too busy telling you I told you so.”

Makarov huffed, then looked back to the now visibly disoriented-looking Ranma, hopping over to him, over the tables. “Ranma, you're looking a little dry there. Want to have a drink with me?” Between one step and the next, he ‘tripped,’ aiming himself toward the redhead’s chest.

But Ranma suddenly blinked to one side and then was back, looking down at Makarov as she hiccupped. “And you're looking short, old, and ugly, but I wasn't going to comment.”

This sent Laxus and the others nearby into laughter, including three that Ranma hadn't been introduced to before but who she knew all the same, thanks to Laxus having described them. Yet, after his laughter died out, Laxus leaned forward and looked at his friend questioningly. “Ranma, are you drunk?”

“’Course not, Sparky!” Ranma said, taking another healthy bite out of her pasta and pointing at Laxus with the fork as she chewed, saying “I'm a Water Dragon Slayer, my bod can handle enough alcohol ta float this guild hall, and I'd be fine!” Ranma also knew she would’ve been fine without that ability, given the amount of ki she had inside of herself. Her body would react to the negative influence of alcohol quickly, just as it did the Dragon Slayer magic after a certain point.

Unfortunately for Ranma, whatever Makarov had given Ranma had slipped past those defenses entirely. The tiny crystals in question, called Uplifting Fever, tricked the body into releasing a series of chemicals. Originating within the body, these were all natural and went directly into the brain, which created the high feeling.

Ranma stood up drunkenly, grabbing Makarov up and twisting him this way and that. Despite her weaving body, her hiccups, and her red face, Ranma’s voice was still clear. “Seriously, how can someone be so short? I know; you're some kind of doll, under control of someone else hidden in the room.” She twisted the now blustering Makarov back and forth. “Where's the lacrima, huh? Where is it?”

Laxus laughed and leaned back, thinking that this might be good fun. “Serves you right, old man,” he shouted at his grandfather, having caught what Makarov had done earlier just like Bisca had. Unlike her, however, he hadn’t cared and was hoping to make fun of Ranma. He was an asshole like that.

“Ranma,” Erza said as she took Ranma's hand and gently pushed it down towards the ground to make the other redhead let Makarov go. She had finished chastising Natsu and the others for their indecency and had hoped to come back and finish her strawberry cake despite the chaos still going on around them, including the sight of Lucy and Cana dancing to a song Reedus was playing on a fiddle. “I understand your incredulity that someone as short as the master could be alive, but he truly is an actual human being, and it isn't very respectful of you to lift him up like that. It's also not safe considering how much alcohol he has imbibed. He might throw up on you.”

“I suppose so, sexy.” Ranma said with a laugh, throwing her arms around Erza.

Erza blushed as this statement registered, then “EEEPed!” as Ranma suddenly smacked her on the rear.

Her face now bright red, Erza growled and threw a punch at Ranma, who was grinning at her even as she dodged, tossing Makarov negligently away. “You liiiiiked it,” she teased, dodging her attacks by the barest of margins, her movements so disjointed and wild that Erza couldn’t predict them.

Sitting nearby, Happy, who was, just like the others, still in his female body, stood up from where she had been sitting next to Laki and shouted, “Thief! He stole my line!”

“Stand still and take your punishment!” Erza growled

“Naaah. Who’d I look like, the pink chick that the blonde with the large…keys… can summon?” Ranma said in reply, dodging another punch and getting into Erza’s face. “Yer cute when yer all angry’n’stuff,” she said, her voice now slurring a bit.

Once more Erza blushed hotly but continued to try to punch the other redhead. Makarov soon joined in too, hurling a filled mug of ale at Ranma, who lackadaisically dodged, bending impossibly backward, then, catching it on her foot, sent it right back over Makarov’s head to smash into Mira, who had been standing nearby with Bisca, splashing them both. Ranma cooed, “Aw, sorry gals. I’da preferred ta get ya we…”

At that point Erza nearly caught Ranma with a punch from behind, interrupting her statement, much to the relief of the women nearby. “What the hell did you give Ranma mastER?!” Erza shouted, ending her voice in a shout as Ranma once more smacked her on the rear. “Darn it, stop doing that!”

“Shtop likin’ it!” Ranma replied back cheekily, then ducked behind a table, rolling away on the floor as Bisca and Mira joined in the chase.

Then Natsu, his body shifting back to male even as he raced forward, joined in. “Oh yeah, let’s get him!” Grey quickly followed him.

Laxus was laughing at all this, but he stopped laughing when a nearly naked Grey, also back to normal, was tossed into his face several minutes later. “Fuck you, Grey!” he roared, smashing Grey to one side, then growling and standing up, followed by the Raijinshu. “Fuck it, let’s beat on Ranma; he obviously needs it.”

Mira shrieked in shock as Ranma flipped over a punch and her body at the same time. Leaning heavily into her back the redhead whispered something none of the others could hear, which caused Mira’s face to go bright red until she turned and tried to kick out at the shorter girl. “…And honey and whipped cream!” Ranma caroled as she dodged and rolled away.

“Get back here!” Mira shouted, going after her as she called on her magic, followed quickly by the others.

**End Flashback**

Ranma chuckled, shaking her head. *Okay, so what I can remember, which ain’t much, I’ll admit, was an odd mix of super embarrassing and fun. Being on that side of a dodge game is kind of cool sometimes, but I’m gonna have to apologize to the gals I flirted with, s*he thought to herself. Then she grimaced as the feeling of her body registered, and, for the first time in a few days, it wasn’t because of her monthly monster.  *Darn it!*

Her Dragon Slayer magic had returned over the past few days since Aria had drained it slowly, but Ranma could tell now that it was back to full capacity, and her ki was back to fighting it. The naturalness of the fact that it had returned without her ki fighting the return even though it had once her magic had fully restored itself was beyond bizarre to Ranma, but it left her with some hope that the two powers within her could eventually be trained to get along. But for now, it was still damn irritating!

*It's like suddenly being crippled again after getting out of your wheelchair for the first time in years.* At that thought, Ranma frowned. *How many years have I been here, anyway? How many years has my ki spent fighting that? Darn it! What the hell did you not tell me about this Dragon Slayer business, Typhon, you old fart!*

Looking down at herself, Ranma’s frown turned into a smile, seeing Wendy nestled against one side and, astonishingly, Carla on the other. *Who would’ve thought she was a clinger when she's asleep?*  Wendy was also clinging to her in their shared sleeping bag, but that wouldn't surprise anyone who was in the girl’s presence for more than a few minutes. Carla had also stayed the entire night in human form. *That’s a pretty good sign of her growing magical strength.*

Despite that, though, Ranma slowly extricated herself from Carla, gently pushing the cat-girl’s arms apart, pulling that arm free, then skittering out from between the two of them and gently pushing Wendy so she rolled until she was within clinging range. As she stepped from the tent and out into the rest of the apartment, though, Ranma stopped, blinking, as scattered around the room and the rest of the apartment beyond were several of the other Fairy Tail mages, laying around in a haphazard fashion.

Gray, for some reason, was still undressed, though he had transformed back last night, obviously, once the potion had wound its course. That sight was disturbing on many levels, Ranma reflected, twitching away from Gray and then looking over at the others. She recognized Laxus and then the three mages nearest him.  *What in heck are they doing here?*

Shaking her head at this minor mystery, Ranma stepped around them, noticing that Erza was also sprawled out on a couch, and the announcer, Max, was lying on another one.  *Where did the sofas come from?*

Shaking her head once more, Ranma moved around them and into the kitchen, where she heated up some water and then dumped it over her head, returning to his male body for the first time in days with a sigh of relief. Once in his male body, he started cooking.

The sounds of his moving around the kitchen woke a few of them up, and Evergreen pushed herself to her feet and moved to join Ranma. Ranma glanced up at her out of the corner of his eye.

Evergreen was a woman of medium height, at five feet six, perhaps, with light brown hair, who was dressed quite provocatively in a green dress that left much of the top of her chest bare and clung to her body down to mid-thigh. She had a necklace of pearls around her neck and thin glasses over her dark brown eyes that Ranma thought looked like those a schoolteacher would wear, thought there was nothing like a teacher’s look in her haughty, arrogant face. On the upper portion of her left breast was her Fairy Tail mark in light green. She also had on a bit of light pink lipstick.

“So, how did you and the other lightning followers come over to my place last night?” Ranma knew the trio called themselves the Thunder God Tribe, but he figured that, since they didn’t actually use lightning magic, his name for them was better. “Why do you call yourselves the Thunder God Tribe, anyway? Doesn't Laxus do mostly solo jobs these days?”

“It's a name our team came up with years ago, when we were all Laxus’ students. These days I think we keep it for simple nostalgia. But we do tend to go out on missions together and often attempt to do the same with Laxus when we can.” Evergreen huffed, looking over at her still sleeping fellows. “Personally, I think they’re just fanboys, while I just think the gold’s better on the missions Laxus does.”

“What do you remember, if anything, about last night?” Ranma asked.

“I remember you become a monster flirt when you are drunk. But, then again,” she said with a smirk, her eyes raking Rama from head to toe, “I suppose that drink and other equivalent things do take away one's inhibitions. A little pent up, are we?”

Ranma rolled his eyes, but, as the others started to wake up, he didn’t answer.

Everyone moved to the table, holding their heads and looking askance. Even Erza looked as if she had gotten drunk last night, wincing occasionally at the noises of people moving around. Thankfully, she did not look like she was in a rush to try and hurt Ranma for his comments last night. Once they were sitting down, everyone started to eat quietly, and he tried to apologize, but Erza just glared at him, and he shut up.

Then Wendy woke up and hopped out of the tent, shouting, “Good morning, Ranma-nii, everyone!”

The Fairy Tail mages all grabbed their heads and groaned, even Laxus growling angrily, while Wendy cocked her head. “What’s wrong with you all?”

“My little sister can be so mean; I love it!” Ranma guffawed at the looks of pain on everyone’s faces.

“Indeed, when one is so uncouth as to drink to excess, one should pay the price the next day,” Carla said sagely.

Quickly Wendy apologized to their guests and took her place at the table, looking a little embarrassed. Still, everyone was now awake and through the worst of the pain enough to actually be able to concentrate on forming words together.

Freed immediately spoke up. “Laxus-sama told us about this mission that you and he are trying to put together in the next few days, and I have to ask if we can join in.”

Ranma glared over at Laxus who shrugged. “I told them that, as the king’s personal mage hunter, you’ve been given the task of finding those Oración assholes. Didn’t think it was a secret, really.”

“It kind of is, because the more people who know, the faster rumor about it will spread,” Ranma drawled. “That’s why I’m the one going around to the various guilds rather than the Magic Council simply sending for the mages I want to recruit. Still, you already told ’em, so ya can’t take it back. As for your question, though, no. The Oración Seis are S class dark mages, and one of them nearly killed Mira, with an admitted sneak attack, but, still, I want only S-class mages with me when we find them.”

“We've all gone in for the S-class trials, baby!” the other man said.

Though she couldn’t remember the man’s name, Wendy watched in amusement as the large dolls that followed him around went, ‘baby, baby!’  *If I was younger I'd be chasing those right now!* As it was, Wendy was wondering if they were enchanted in any way or if that was just his magic.

“Better question,” Erza said, her own head now clear as she pointed at Grey, who was still dressed in the dress from the previous night. “Why in the name of magic are you still dressed like that?”

Gray looked down at himself, then gasped. “Shit!” He quickly started to strip, but several growls from around the table stopped him, and he backed away rapidly, heading into the other room as he shouted, “But you know, that dark guild doesn't just have S-class mages, it’s also got other guilds working for it. And, besides, the Raijinshu aren’t the only ones who have been pushing S-class for a while! We want in!”

Ranma shook his head. “A small strike team still makes more sense than a larger one. Still, Gray’s right. I’ll think about it. If Fiore’s intelligence network’s figured out what dark guilds answer to the Brain and his assholes, taking them out at the same time we move against the Oración Seis themselves would be a good idea.”

“Won’t the rest of the Balam Alliance respond to this?” Evergreen asked logically.

“No. It might be called an Alliance, but I think that’s a little too big a term for what it really is,” Ranma replied. “Ya have to understand, these idiots ain’t good people, and each member of the alliance probably has their own goals. It’s more a nonaggression treaty rather than anything more powerful. So if we limit our attacks to the Oración Seis and those guilds which answer to it, and do it quickly before the other two Alliance members can worry about being our next targets, then we should be good.”

“You sound as if this’ll be the first of many missions against the alliance,” Laxus stated more than asked, his eyes narrowed in shrewd concentration.

“I don't know how they're involved with one another. What I just said was more an impression and my knowledge of how evil, arrogant people work. But I'm hoping that once we take out one, we’ll get enough information to figure out where the heck the others are based,” Ranma confided.

“Makes sense,” Laxus grunted, then gasped. “Evergreen! I was going to eat that sausage!”

“Then you shouldn't have been talking,” the glasses wearing girl said primly, cutting into the sausage that she'd speared from the main plate and biting down on one end almost vindictively. It was the last one, too, and the others began to bicker about it good-naturedly, ending the serious talk. Gray and Freed, though, had gotten what they could have from Ranma: a chance to come with him later.

After cleaning up, Wendy and Ranma left the house, heading out for the day, while the others had their own plans. The two of them, though, wanted to buy some permanent futon furniture sets, a few board-games for themselves, lounge chairs for out on the balcony, and extra blankets for out there as well for when winter hit. Already it was getting kind of chilly, meaning that Wendy also needed some more autumn weather clothing. “You need to stop growing,” Ranma said jokingly, pushing his little sister gently on the shoulder. “It's getting kind of expensive to buy you a new wardrobe every year.”

Wendy laughed, then pouted a little, looking down at her chest. “I only wish I could say I was growing in every way.” Underwear and a few dresses were the only things she’d bought when going around with the girls of Fairy Tail after they had arrived in Magnolia the first time.

“It will come eventually, Wendy. Don't worry about it,” Ranma replied, ruffling her hair with a smile.

The two went about their day until around three in the afternoon, when they finished shopping and dropped off their stuff back at the apartment. Ranma checked in at the guild, hoping that the pink haired healer Porlyusica had come back by then.

But Makarov, though, just shook his head. Like Ranma, he had woken up that morning without any real sign of the night before, though he warned Ranma to give the girls some time to get over their anger at him for how he had flirted with them all last night. “As for Porlyusica, you make the mistake of thinking that she ever even tells us when she's back or when she is out. Porlyusica is her own woman, Ranma, and has rarely if ever left her house to come here in person anyway. We go to her with injured unless they can’t be moved for some reason.”

“Can you at least give me an estimate of when she'll be back?” Ranma asked.

Makarov shrugged. “Given how long she already has been gone, maybe a day or two more?”

Nodding disconsolately, Ranma asked, “Can I reach any of the other guilds in that time to talk to their S-class mages?”

“No. None of the other guilds with S-class mages in them are close enough for you to get there and back. Remember, we’re all spread out over the entirety of Fiore, Ranma. Even if you could run as fast as I’ve heard you’re alluded to, you wouldn’t be able to get there and back.”

Ranma was about to scowl, asking, “But then, what should,…” then he paused as he caught Laxus smirking at him, and he responded with an evil looking grin on his own face. “You know what? Never mind. I think I know precisely what I'll be doing with my time.”

**OOOOOOO**

The next day Wendy set off to spend the day with Levy, and Ranma and Laxus went back out of the town towards the training area they had created the day before. It was about forty minutes jog away from the town, even for Ranma, but, considering the fact that they were throwing massive spells at one another, the distance was kind of necessary.

“Where’s Wendy?” Laxus asked as he hung his cloak up on a tree that the two men had decided was neutral territory during their spars. “We’re going to miss our healer if yesterday was any indication.”

“She has something to do with Levy today, and Mirajane, I think. They're going to help her with some of the more scientific terms in her enchanting books then help her experiment a bit.”

“Makes sense,” Laxus said with a nod. Mirajane wasn't an enchantress herself, but her sister Anna used a lot of enchanted items, and Mirajane had somehow begun to be able to discern a good one from a bad one when they were shopping. “And Levy…” Laxus shook his head. “That girl's been growing in leaps and bounds lately. I've known for more than ten years that she would be a fantastic support mage, but she's becoming a good direct assault mage too.”

“That magic of hers, Solid Script? It’s very flexible, yeah,” Ranma said with a nod. “Her physical endurance is just horrible, and magically she can’t seem to charge her attacks with enough power. Still, that can be overcome, I’d bet.”

“Indeed,” Erza said as she stalked into the clearing. Instead of a full suit of armor, she was wearing several bracers, vambraces, and a chest plate as normal, but each of them were from different sets of armor. She smirked at the two boys, spinning a spear in one hand and stabbing a sword into the ground next to her with the other, her normally stern eyes practically a weapon as she looked at them both. “Is this a private party, boys, or can anyone join in?”

Erza had decided to ask the local blacksmiths to concentrate on portions of her many different types of armor rather than whole sets. This way it gave her some defense against, in this case, direct physical assault, lightning, fire, and water magic, along with a heavy speed enhancement. And since most of her weapons had survived, her offensive power was still uninhibited.

Laxus frowned, backing away as he noticed the type of spear she was swinging and the rather disturbing glint in her eye. *Fuck, she really is holding a grudge form the other night. I thought she was too nice yesterday morning.*  “You know what, I think I’d prefer to spar with the Raijinshu for the day.”

For his part, Ranma too had seen the glint in Erza’s eyes and knew he was in for a beating. But rather than be worried, that made him just grin viciously, looking forward to this. “Heh, I’ve been wanting to spar with ya since I saw ya in action against Eisenwald. Sure, let’s see what ya got…babe.”

While Erza stiffened and blushed at the tease, Ranma turned to Laxus and said, “Damn, I knew you were blonde, but since when were ya yellow too? Ya gonna run from your former student like that?”

“What’d you say to me, you aqua-bitch!?” Laxus roared, his large arms glowing golden with lightning. “Fine! Let's do this!”

Without another word the three combatants came together in the middle of the current clearing, creating a boom that was heard for miles around.

**OOOOOOO**

Sighing, Wendy smiled up at the noontime sky. Though it was autumn, it was very nice here in Magnolia, and she looked around at all the girls spread out around the area. Fairy Hills had emptied for the day out onto its lawn. The girls scattered across the hill simply enjoying the nice weather. It was tradition here for the girls to spend almost all their time outdoors in autumn, since it was a short but calm season here in Magnolia and when winter hit, it hit with a vengeance.

Between her and Levy sat the armor that Wendy had been given so many years ago by the King of Pergrande. It shone silver in the light of her spells as they examined the spellwork on it. “What exactly do you want to add?” Levy asked, looking at the girl and then down at the writing scrawled everywhere in the circle of magic that currently surrounded the silver armor.

“I want to re-size it,” Wendy replied promptly, turning her head back down to look at the piece of armor. “It's too small for me now, although…not in the chest,” she muttered, shaking her head before going on. “And it smells if I wear it long enough. But it's the second most enchanted item we own, and, as you can see...”

“It's got **major** defensive spells on it already,” Mirajane said, leaning over the armor to get a better glimpse of some of the writing. She didn't understand most of it, but she could tell if one bit or another wasn't working together properly. She couldn't fix it, unlike the two other girls, but she could spot them. And she could spot a lot of places like that. “Where did you get this, anyway? It's such a weird mix of super-powerful magic and not very, well, good enchantments.”

“It’s not elegant,” Levy said with a shake of her head. “Like you said, the magic’s powerful but not very well controlled. You could get the same protection in this suit for half or even less magic pushed into the armor.” Levy couldn’t enchant things, but she could read the enchanted runes set into objects and knew a lot about it, having studied such things with Freed and others numerous times over the years.

“The King of Pergrande,” Wendy said with a smile. “He's a nice man, I suppose, if a little too serious.” Then she clapped her hands with a giggle. “But there's this one woman there, a swordswoman named Ikaruga? She's so funny! And she has her husband **so** totally wound around her fingers it’s hilarious to watch. He's the king’s younger brother, although he's fourth in line to the throne because the king has a few sons.”

“I don't think I'm ever going to get used to someone who mentions royalty so easily,” Levy said with a shake of her head. “Still, there is quite a bit someone with the skill to imbue magic into items could do here if we remove the enchantments already on the armor and take it all from the ground up. But I've got no skill at enchantments to help that part of the process, Wendy. Sorry.”

Wendy's face firmed. “I’ll do it! It’s supposed to be my armor, after all, and I want to see it.”

Mirajane nodded. “In that case, maybe you should talk to the blacksmith that Erza goes to? Although I don't think he'd be able to do anything with the armor itself, he might be able to tell you signs to watch out for when you’re coming close to the upper limit of the amount of magic it can take.” She tapped one finger against the armor, shaking her head. “Are you sure this is…”

“Yep, a kind of metal called mithril,” Wendy said with a nod. “Pergrande for steel, Fiore for magic,” she said in a singsong, laughing as the two Fairy Tail mages laughed with her.

Bisca came over at that point, ruffling Wendy's hair and laying out next to them with a sigh. Around her a few of her animals moved freely, getting petted by this or that female Fairy Tail mage, but most of them simply wandering around free. Even the lion and the anaconda that she had captured were moving peaceably among the people and the other animals who should've rightfully been their prey. Wendy had gasped at the sight of them all when she had arrived several hours ago and quickly moved around, petting this or that animal for a time before getting down to business. But Bisca had been busy with running her antelope, zebra, and horse and was only now resting for the first time that day.

She looked at the two as they moved around the armor, trying to figure out how to remove the enchantments on it without damaging the armor itself. “So this came from Pergrande? I don't suppose you saw any guns mages there, did you? They're known for the quality of their guns, but not so much the guns magic. Still, if anyone was able to develop something new, it might be there.”

“No. I know the weapon-smiths I told you about before, Bisca-san,” Wendy said, not looking up from her work. “I'm sorry, but we didn't actually get into any fights in Pergrande. It's a very nice, almost peaceful place where we went, and Ranma wouldn't let us go near the mountains.”

“Mountains? Oh right, Pergrande is situated right next to the continent. Isn't that how he and Laxus met? In an orc invasion down there?” Mira asked.

Wendy nodded, then thought for a moment. “Although, we did run into a few guns mages elsewhere, Bisca-san.”

“Any new spells you maybe could describe?” Bisca asked quickly.

“I don't know if you know them, but I have a few. Ranma also uses a few others.”

“I've talked to him about them, and I think I could replicate most of the ones he’s shared with me,” Bisca said with a nod.

“Well one was how to enlarge the magic bullet, but you take away from its ability to actually penetrate. Ranma said something about it hitting like a tank round, whatever that is, and not seeing the point to it because he could already hit that hard anyway. ‘If I wanted to hit something like that, I'd conjure up a water attack,’” she said, mimicking her older brother’s voice perfectly, eliciting many a laugh from the girls around her.

“And then there were a few others. Multi-shot, I think, was one of them, though I don't think the mage who was using it did it properly. He was only able to create three, and then they sort of sputtered out. And then a spell I remember seeing that had some kind of flame magic added to it.”

Bisca frowned, scratching at her chin thoughtfully. “That second one does sound as if it would be harder to manifest, but I bet I could pull it off. You'd have to imagine the one becoming the many and have already instilled in the first bullet enough magic to create the other bullets from their basic form once you willed it to. But the first, why would you need something like that? Instead, create the bullet magically, pack it with power, then try to instill it with separate spells. The first spell, penetration, then the other ones, damage and so forth,” she murmured, not noticing the looks she was getting as she went into her specialty, thinking hard.

Though she did look up when Cana, who had just returned from a trip with Natsu, Levy, and Lucy, sat down next to her with a grin. “You know, that sounded dirty there for a second. I just bet you want someone to penetrate you, don't you, Bisca,” she said, pushing the other girl’s shoulder.

“Eventually, maybe,” Bisca said with a laugh, while Wendy blushed hotly, understanding who they were talking about.

“Why do you want to get stronger, though?” Mirajane asked. “You never struck me as someone who was always thinking about new ways to use their magic or anything like that.”

“I think I need to, but I'm not the only one getting stronger,” Bisca said with a shrug, looking at Levy.

“I am,” Levy said hesitantly, then looked down at the work she and Wendy were doing. “But I'm worried about really pushing it and training to get better. I mean, my team…”

“If they can’t handle your getting stronger than they are, they would have already done something about it,” Bisca said bluntly. “You’ve been the strongest member of Shadow Gear for a while, and if that bothered Jet and Droy, they would've tried to get stronger themselves.”

“They are,” Levy said heatedly. “It's just they’re slower about it.”

“They're slow, period,” Mirajane said with a sigh. “How often have you said they're just friends? Come on!”

Levy scowled, unable to comment on that one since it was true. She had never seen Jet or Droy as anything but friends. Wendy, however came to Levy’s rescue, gesturing for the two of them back to the work on the chest plate and asking Bisca and Mira to be quiet while they worked.

Bisca sat there for a time, talking to Mirajane and watching the two blue-haired girls work, then she sat up, waving her hand in the air, which caused the others to a stop and see what had caught her attention. Erza and Ranma were coming up the hill to Fairy Hills, both of them looking much the worse for wear.

For some reason Ranma was in her female form, though that didn’t seem to matter at present, given that she was laughing at something or other as they came close, while Erza simply smiled. Ranma was limping slightly, and she had one heck of a shiner for some reason, despite her healing ability, which told those who knew her that she was probably exhausted. In turn, Erza was battered and was favoring her right side. The cut had been wrapped, but the red could still be seen marking a noticeable wound, a cut that ran up from her hand up her arm.

Forgetting her work for a moment, Wendy raced towards them, shouting, “Are you both all right? What happened?”

“Nothing bad, Wendy,” Ranma said with a shake of her head and waving Wendy off. “We just got a little too into our sparring, that's all.”

“He's right; don't worry,” Erza said with a smile, looking down at her arm. “I already bandaged it, and, while I don't heal as fast as this one seems to most of the time,” she said, kicking out to the side and catching Ranma in the leg, “I’ll heal in a few hours or so.”

Instead of retaliating, Ranma simply laughed, moving toward Wendy, her arms outstretched. “Meh, take it as a win that fighting you and Laxus wore me out to the point I‘m not healing right away. Now, come on! Give your big brother turned sister a hug!”

“No!” Now no longer concerned that the two of them were badly wounded, the stink that the two of them were putting off stuck in Wendy's nose. She leaped away, squealing, putting Bisca and the others between them. Bisca pointed at them both and, with Mirajane beside her, shouted, “Shower!”

Erza nodded and grabbed Ranma, dragging her along. “Come on. I was against trying that joke in the first place.”

“Wait! She might be a woman now, but Ranma's a guy! He can't be going into Fairy Hills,” Laki protested from nearby.

Ranma nodded at that and changed direction. The other girls ignored that in favor of looking at Erza in question. “Were you actually going to let him use your shower?”

“Yes, why wouldn't I? Natsu, Gary, and I have bathed together often enough,” Erza said, innocently enough.

But Mirajane and Bisca, at least, could tell that there was something else there too. It was clear to both of them that Erza had ulterior motives for that attempt to bathe with Ranma.

*Interesting,* Mirajane thought with an internal laugh. Personally, she had sort of given up on Ranma. Yes, he was good eye candy, very good eye candy, as a guy. But his female form bothered the heck out of her. Whatever anyone would say, her fights with Erza when they were younger were not unresolved sexual tension! And further, while Jenny might have enjoyed their moment of…experimentation, Mira had decided that girls weren’t for her. She would have to have at least been somewhat attracted to girls to be with Ranma, and, while Mira might have been willing to experiment further, she wasn’t willing to do so with someone who looked like her frival (friend rival).

Bisca simply giggled, winking at Erza, who tried and failed at keeping her innocent act up before she turned and headed into the dormitory. While she wasn’t certain where she stood when it came to Ranma’s curse, she knew that Erza was interested in Ranma too. But Bisca also realized that she and Ranma hadn’t done anything but kiss, and, as long as it didn’t become some kind of open competition for his affections, which Bisca couldn’t see happening anytime soon, she could deal with other girls being interested in Ranma.

Soon enough Erza and Ranma had returned, with Ranma having raced back easily over the rooftops and then up the hill without stopping. Now he skidded down to sit next to Wendy, smirking over at Bisca and Levy. “So, what have you all been up to this morning?” It was around four in the afternoon, but he hadn't seen Wendy since they had left the apartment at eight that morning.

Wendy explained what they had been doing and held up a thick notebook with several pages of notes written down on it in her large script about different enchantments, and then she looked at him with puppy dog eyes. Ranma rolled his eyes and poked her in the forehead. “Yes, you can try them out on me later.”

“Thank you, Ranma-nii!” Wendy said with a happy grin. The Sky Dragon Slayer was very good at support spells, and mixing more enchantments into that made sense to her. Then she looked at him quizzically. “Do we have anything else enchanted besides our tent equipment and your weapons? I know you won't let me take them apart.”

Ranma frowned thoughtfully, going through what he kept in his Requip space. “Um, our Song Silk cloaks, but you won’t be able to do anything about them; the magic can’t be separated. Um…” Ranma ummed. “Let me check my…other Requip space.”

With that, as the others looked on, somewhat bemused, Ranma pulled at his pants pocket, pulling it out with one hand while thrusting his other hand into it farther than should have been possible. To the watchers’ mystification, it didn’t even generate any kind of bulge in the pocket as he did so. In this way, Ranma began to explore his ki pocket.

“That is sooo not how Requip space works!” Erza muttered, cocking her head thoughtfully. “What in the world…?”

“Ranma-nii says that it is an offshoot of his first magic,” Wendy supplied, giggling as Ranma stuck his entire arm down into it for a moment.

The Fairy Tail mages all looked at one another and then shrugged. Personal magic was unexplainable in many ways, so they weren’t going to question it.

As they watched, Ranma pulled out a few knickknacks they had picked up from here and there, including a few old toys that Wendy gasped at, having forgotten Ranma had kept them. A few others knickknacks, including what looked like a gun barrel that Bisca swooped on; an emerald that blazed with light for a second before dimming instantly; a flower made of quartz; and what looked like a large, leaf-shaped spear-blade followed. The last was a long, thin black box, which looked relatively plain compared to the rest of the pieces.

Wendy sat down in the center of the junk, while the other girls looked over her shoulders and handed her pieces to identify. Wendy obligingly took each in her hands, and the magic flared up around her and the items in question. “Okay, so… This one, the quartz flower, is a Foe-spotter. Um… From…Joya, I think?”

“Sin, actually, or rather the land formerly known as Sin, since Pergrande annexed it,” Ranma supplied, having just pulled his arm out shivering slightly. “Damn cold in there for some reason. Still, great for storing meat and other stuff.”

“Again, not how Requip works,” Erza said dryly, shaking her head.

“Sin?” Wendy asked.

“Yep. It was during our second trip through Desierto about four months after we met Carla. She got sick with that weird cat disease, and we had to head to Desierto in a rush to get her cured?”

“I remember **that**,” Wendy retorted, waving off the interest the other girls were showing. “How could I not after nearly knocking myself out healing her all the time to keep the disease at bay?”

Even more than a year and a half later, that rankled badly. Wendy’s healing skills when it came to wounds was frankly phenomenal, and her speed with it put her well above even most experienced healers. Her skill with diseases, though, had never really gone beyond a certain level, and it had hurt not being able to heal her friend.

“Well, afterward we wanted to return to Stella quickly, so we hopped onto a ship and headed into Pergrande’s new territory. From there we were able to travel better roads all the way up to the Inland Sea. I found that Foe-spotter in a little job I did there for the local magistrate,” Ranma supplied. “You were still out of it after weeks of using your magics, and Carla was still badly dehydrated, so that’s probably why you can’t remember.”

“Well…I can’t do anything with this enchantment. It’s too difficult for me just yet,” Wendy said with a sigh, putting the Foe-spotting flower to one side.

“Is there actually any magic on this?” Bisca asked, holding the gun barrel.

“Nope, but it’s a decent piece, and it was created by our friends. Will was trying to experiment with different materials, but that one he was going to toss away as too expensive to mass produce,” Ranma said with a grin. “Wendy said you had gun envy, so…”

Bisca chuckled sheepishly at that while the other girls giggled. “So, how much do I owe you for this?”

“Meh, take it. I’ve got my two pistols, and I’m not a rifle person,” Ranma said with a shrug, missing Bisca’s blush at the princely gift. The barrel looked to be made of some kind of steel, which Erza later identified as a kind of hardened tungsten mixed with lacrima crystals to a perfect degree. It was, in every way, better than the rifle barrel Bisca was currently using.

Ignoring the older girls’ and Ranma’s talk, Wendy moved on. “The emerald has a really nifty light enchantment. Oooh, and it’s got a built in control amplifier thing, so you can set the power of it.” Quickly, Wendy marked down the enchantment’s runes in her notebook, taking several minutes to get each one right, while the talk continued around her.

“The spearhead might be interesting, but I have to admit to some curiosity about this one,” Erza said, pointing at the long, thin, matte black box.

“Ah, that daft box,” Ranma said with a growl, shaking his head.

“What box…?” Wendy said, looking up and then nodding. “Oh, that one! We never did find out how to open it.”

“What is it?” Levy asked as Erza reached down to pick it up.

“It's a memory box, really ancient magic. Those things are supposed to open at specific sounds or movements or anything,” Ranma said with a shrug. We never were able to figure it out. I mean, it could be literally **anything**…” He stopped as the box began to glow in Erza’s hand. “What the hell!?”

Erza held it up, wincing a little as her wrappings had come undone around her palm, unnoticed until she had picked the box up. “What is inside?”

“We don't know,” Ranma said as he watched the box begin to glow. Lines appeared here and there, with a kind of script between them, different from what had been visible when Wendy had cast her analyze spell. Golden light began to emanate from another few lines on the top portion of the box. “We found it in Bell Lake. It was the site of an ancient civilization’s capital city, a place where dragons and humans lived in harmony millennia ago. We found that box hidden in a statue of a dragon down there.”

As they spoke, the glow of the box began to become a little too painful to look at, and Erza hastily set it down, turning aside as the others did the same.

“What?” Mira asked in astonishment. “Dragons and humans living together!?”

“Yep. We found mention of it in a few history books here and there, and then we started to search the lake. That was…less than a year after I had found Wendy, I think.”

“You do realize that story just makes me want to learn more, right?” Bisca asked, with Erza nodding in agreement.

“I'm sorry; I'm a little distracted right now,” Ranma quipped, staring at the box and pushing himself forward between it and Wendy. “I'm just hoping whatever it contains isn't dangerous right now.”

Abruptly most of the lights faded, the power of the device concentrating on one end of the box, and then an image was suddenly broadcast up into the air. And everyone there gasped as they stared at it. For one thing, it was almost solid looking, and very colorful too, beyond what most long distance imagery lacrima could create.

For another, the woman’s face, which appeared there, looked almost exactly like Erza. Erza perhaps in fifteen or twenty years from now, but still, the resemblance was incredible. Her face was a little broader than Erza's, but her eyes were the same warm brown, her hair looked to be the same color, and there were enough features about it to make it very clear that the two of them were somehow related. Her upper body was also shown, which made more than one girl there think, *What the heck, is that what Erza’s hiding under those chest-plates she wears!?*  Mira, in particular, was feeling rather annoyed.

“Where did you get this again?” Erza breathed.

“I told you. Ancient ruins, ruins that were in the center of Bell Lake, which might have been created by some kind of old magical weapon or other striking the capital,” Ranma said, staring at the woman and then over at Erza. “Maybe it needed a descendant’s blood or something? That makes sense, I suppose.”

“I can’t help you there,” Erza said with a shake of her head as the image turned away, fiddling with something and almost disappearing to one side of the projection device or whatever was recording her ancestor’s face. “I don’t know anything about my family or, or anything, really. My earliest memory is living on the streets of a town out in the forest somewhere. It’s where I met Simon and his sister too, though I can’t remember what the girl looked like, alas.”

“Is this thing on already!?” shouted the woman in the image. “Come now, you all can't be that incompetent!”

The language was ancient, but Ranma understood it, as did the others around him, perhaps thanks to some magic in the box that allowed for translation. Regardless, more than one of the women there turned to look at Erza and said, deadpan, “Yep, they're related, all right,” as they heard the commanding tone the woman was using.

Erza simply nodded her head, watching the image. “Indeed, the resemblance is uncanny.”

After a few moments, the woman seemed satisfied and leaned back again, smiling into the pickup. “As this is on the eve of battle against the eastern dragons, I find it incumbent upon me to leave this memory box for my daughter, Erza. With the future so uncertain, I would have her know that when she comes into this world she was loved, even if I am not around to tell her that in person.”

At that Erza's eyes widened, and she began to cry softly. Bisca and Mirajane quickly hugged her from the sides, as did Levy from behind, staring over her head at the image.

Ranma, on the other hand, was just confused. *So, is that name just a coincidence or what? Some time travel magic? Does that kind of thing…? Wait, what am I saying? Magic. Of course it exists.*

“From the moment I learned I was pregnant barely a week past, I was terrified,” the woman confided. “I am, after all, a queen, and it has come just on the heels of my old friend Belserion returning from the continent and bringing with him news of the coming conflict against the eastern dragons. Their numbers are great, and our ability to fight them seems less than equal to the task.”

“Hah! ‘Less than equal,’ is that diplomatic talk for completely screwed?!” said a loud, boisterous voice.

The recording device tilted to watch as the woman stood up and moved to a nearby window. This caused more of her body to be visible, and Mira scowled further while Bisca and Levy both whistled, with Levy becoming somewhat depressed as she stared at Erza’s chest. Even Ranma could not stop the thought, *Holy shit, is that what Erza’s going to look like when she’s middle-aged? Sign me up!* He remonstrated with himself a moment later for being crass and sexist, but that didn’t stop the thought going through his head.

At the window, however, was a sight that made everyone watching the recording gasp. It was a huge eye, slightly tilted with a slit iris. Around it were scales, and, as the creature pulled away, some of the face could be seen. Horns thrust out from the side of its snout, the back of its head, and the large ear that could be seen poking out from one side of its face. Its scales were gray and heavy looking, and, for some reason, the whole face gave off the feeling of experience and age. Not anywhere near as much as Typhon had, but this dragon had definitely been around for a while.

“His face is even larger than Grandeeney’s!” Wendy gasped in shock.

“Yeah, it’s up there. Almost as large as Typhon’s, I’d say,” Ranma said before Mira and Bisca shushed the two Dragon Slayers. Erza was too busy just staring at the woman to acknowledge anything around her.

“But, then again, that’s why you have myself and the other dragons! You humans have proven too useful and fun to have around to just let our more barbaric cousins eat you all. That’s why I agreed to your idea about teaching some of you our magic, after all,” the dragon went on in a lower voice once the redheaded woman had reached him.

At that Ranma leaned forward eagerly, hoping for some more information about the Dragon Slayer magic, in particular anything he could learn about the weird transformation his arm had gone through on the train thanks to his experimentation. But, much to his dismay, the woman made no comment about that, instead tapping her stomach and looking back at the pickup.

She instead gestured at the giant creature with an airy wave of the hand. “This, daughter mine, is Belserion. He has been an ally of our family for a long, long time. Dragons, of course, live a **lot** longer than humans. If we win this war of ours, he’ll still be around when you come of age, I should think. Then you, too, will travel up the mountain of BelTar to his home to meet him alone for the first time. It’s a kind of test of courage for those men and women in our family.”

“Hmmpf, I certainly will attempt to still be around here for that. But even I am not immortal. I can be killed just like any other dragon,” Belserion said, his voice somber now rather than forcibly boisterous. “As such, I too have prepared something, a similar memory module wherein I will record all of the magic I know and have seen your mother try as well as more…personal…stories.” The good humor was back as Belserion went on. “For example the tale of how Irene here jumped the spell on her own test by a good five years. She was a tiny thing but brave for all of that. Scratched, her dress torn, her hair a mess, and there she was, standing at the front of my cave and demanding I come out and give her a ride back down the mountain!”

“Irene,” Erza murmured, the others all chuckling as Mira cackled something about how alike Erza was to her ancestor. In return, she earned an absent-minded punch to the shoulder from the armor-clad redhead.

Ranma, though, cursed a second later as Irene replied that that was fine and all, “But I’m not really recording this to teach my Erza, just to tell her about me if I’m not here to do it and to make certain she knows…” Irene’s face softened further, and she patted her stomach. “To know that I love her.”

“Yes, well,” Belserion replied, his own tone soft. “That too, I suppose. You humans and your parenting, you do a far better job than most of my kind.” He guffawed then. “The only female I could name among my kind that would ever be called motherly is Grandeeney, the Sky Queen, and she’s got a tongue on her that could crush gravel!”

Wendy’s eyes widened, and she leaned forward with a whimper, practically willing the device to tell her more about her mother. But that didn’t happen.

Instead Irene waved the dragon off and moved over to her chair again, ordering, “All right, thank you, apprentices. You all can leave now. I’m certain I can handle recording the rest of this message myself.” Once she sat down, she leaned into the pickup and said, “Now, where to begin? I suppose I should say that my marriage to your father might have been because of politics, but we have become close since, and…”

“Right!” Ranma said, moving forward to touch the device and picking up the device. “Mute? Pause? Turn Off? End transmission? End Recording?” At that last the thing finally subsided, the recording pausing for a moment with Irene’s face still smiling brightly into the pickup before disappearing.

Erza stepped forward, a look of longing on her face that caused the other Fairy Tail mages, and even Wendy, to smile bittersweet smiles. They all knew some of what she was feeling, after all.

“Ranma, I don't want to ask, but I, that is…”

“Yeah,” Ranma said with a nod, staring at the image still. “Yes, you can take it. She can’t be your mother unless she somehow travelled to the future, but regardless, she is, at least, your ancestor. From here on, whatever’s on here is going to be personal. Besides, we’ve already learned a lot.” He looked away and ruffled Wendy’s hair for a moment. “But, if you hear anything more about the dragons, particularly this one’s mother and…Igneel, I think his name was, that’d be great. And if she shows a map or mentions names of places…”

“…That might give you a clue as to where this mountain of BelTar is?” Erza said with a nod.

Looking at her, it was obvious to even Ranma now that Erza was holding in her tears with difficulty. Quickly he waved her off, saying, “Take it, with my blessing.”

Erza nodded and then leaned in, pressing a kiss to Ranma’s lips, something that's shocked several of the other girls there, though they couldn’t argue that the emotions of the moment called for it. As she walked off, Levy, Mira, or maybe even Laki, who had also been watching from nearby, might have said something to her. Bisca might have asked, only semi-seriously, which of them kissed better. She didn’t though. This moment was too emotional for her to tease Ranma about.

As it happened, though, someone else broke the moment for them. Carla and Happy flew up from the city, with Happy in the lead, his dark blue fur against the daytime sky catching Ranma’s attention enough that he turned to look. “Huh, isn’t that Happy? I thought guys weren’t allowed up here? Or is there an exception for other species?”

“You’re here, aren't you, or do you think you’d fall under that exception?” Bisca asked teasingly, happy, as were the other girls, to move past the emotional moments of the last few minutes.

“I wonder what they want,” Mira speculated, staring at the two incoming Exceed.

Before too long, Ranma and the others received the answer to this question. “Porlyusica was sighted in the forest!” Happy shouted. “She'll be back at her home tomorrow morning!”

**OOOOOOO**

With a mission coming up that took Levy away along with Bisca, Levy having asked the other girl to come with team Shadow Gear, just in case, and Mira having already made plans with her siblings and Juvia, Erza volunteered to lead the two Dragon Slayers through the woods to Porlyusica's house herself early the next morning. “While the others might have a problem with Porlyusica's attitude,” she confided, “I actually don't. After all, that would be rather discourteous of me, to have a problem with the woman who fixed my eye.”

“What's wrong with your eye?” Ranma asked, leaning in and staring into her face.

Erza blushed, pushing him away slightly. “Nothing, save for the fact that my left eye is artificial. It is why I was able to see through your broach’s illusions. I, I lost my eye when I was a slave. But Porlyusica created a magical eye for me, and even was able to emplace it without further trauma, mental or physical. I don't even remember any pain during the procedure.”

“Well that's a good sign,” Ranma said, as Wendy hopped up onto his shoulders to look into Erza's eyes herself, trying to discover if she could make out which one was the one that wasn't real. After all, as a healer herself, she had a vested interest in that kind of thing.

“Since you said you could see through illusions, I take it there are enchantments on it?” she asked.

“There are,” Erza said with a nod. “She's a somewhat decent enchanter too, though her main skill is, of course, healing. I don't think there's been a medical book could teach her anything in that area.”

Wendy nodded and continued to question Erza about Porlyusica, her healing powers, and why she wasn't, generally speaking, a normal part of the guild. That one Erza had no response to except a shake of her head. “I actually can't tell you where her distaste for humans come from. Whenever we ask her what's wrong with her in that area, she just gives us generalities, but many of us agree it's a little too intense for generalities to have really been the chief cause behind her distaste for humans. But no one knows what it might be. Well, perhaps the master does, but he won't talk.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Ranma replied, “I don't care why she doesn't like humans, so long as she's willing to help us despite that.” He looked closer at Erza and asked hesitantly. “Um, are you okay? The recording, well, I figure it can be kind of tough to learn so much all at once.”

“I am…coping. I know this woman, Irene, is probably not my mother. No magic could send someone through time to the future, none that I have ever heard of or Master Makarov, for that matter. Still, learning of my family’s history and this woman in particular has been fascinating.” Erza smiled as she spoke, and there was something like pride in her voice. “She was a queen, you know, Irene. Queen of Dragnof, she called her country. I know that means nothing today, but I can’t help but feel pride in my family’s accomplishments.”

“Understandable,” Ranma replied with a chuckle. The two of them talked about what Irene had said of herself, laughing at some of it, but unfortunately for Ranma’s quest for information, Irene hadn’t mentioned much that could be used to find the mountain of BelTar except that it was close to the capital. That probably meant it was in Joya or the south of Iceberg where it touched the lake, to which Ranma hadn’t gone just yet.

“When you go to look for it, I will be going with you,” Erza said bluntly. “If something is there, it is as much part of my family’s heritage as it is your own as a Dragon Slayer.”

Ranma looked at her and, after seeing the look of pure determination on her face, nodded slowly. “Agreed.”

Soon they came out into clearing in the woods, and Ranma stopped and stared. “Now **that** is an awesome treehouse. It looks even nicer than Mermaid Heel’s, or perhaps just better design, maybe.”

Wendy gasped, then raced forward, eagerness shining in her eyes as she stared up and down the tree. Carla, who had been silent for most of the trip, shouted after her, “Wendy! What have Ranma and I been telling you about that habit of yours!?”

But Wendy ignored the blonde cat-girl and started climbing up the side of the treehouse. Soon she crouched on a branch halfway up from where she had started, smiling at a few birds in their nest before climbing on.

However, her climbing was interrupted when a window to one side of her opened and an elderly woman with bright pink hair stuck her head out. “You reprobate, get off of my house!”

Wendy blinked at her, coming back to her senses somewhat. Then, hanging on with one hand, she actually bowed towards the woman. “I’m sorry, but may I please climb your house?”

“No!” Porlyusica shouted back, actually waving a broom towards Wendy as if to knock her off her perch. “Kids today, no common sense, no understanding of property!”

Wendy dodged by flipping herself over the broomstick with the one hand that was still holding her onto the side of the tree and then landing lightly on the windowsill directly above Porlyusica, clinging there and looking down at her before she sniffed. Then she looked at the woman a little more closely, cocking her head to one side as if she was trying to place a memory or didn’t quite understand what her nose was telling her. Then the broom caught her on the foot and nearly upended her off of the windowsill.

At that, Wendy flipped herself through the air and landed next to Ranma easily. While Carla remonstrated with Wendy, Wendy kept on staring out at Porlyusica, cocking her head to one side as she did so.

But Erza simply smiled up at the woman. “Lady Porlyusica, I hope you remember me from the last time I was here.”

“What, after you and Mirajane nearly destroyed the entire forest with your fight in the S-class trials? No of course I don't remember you,” Porlyusica said darkly, causing Erza to wince, and Ranma to smirk at her. “Who are these three you brought to my door? Although the blonde cat-girl looks mildly familiar to me.”

“This is Ranma and Wendy,” Erza said, introducing them, “and yes, you probably did meet Carla at one point.”

“Carla,” Porlyusica said staring at the cat girl thoughtfully. “If my memory isn't playing tricks on me, that was a small, white-furred cat that Laxus was using as—what did he call it? Oh yes: ‘babe bait.’ Such an ill-mannered young man, typical of humans, really.” With that she sniffed, leaned back in, and closed the window, leaving the others to stare up at it.

A sweatdrop forming on his head, Ranma asked, “So, are we supposed to just go away now, or…”

A moment later the door opened, allowing Erza to get out of replying. This was lucky, since, with Porlyusica, if she dismissed you like that, it was up in the air whether continuing to try to get her attention would be a good idea. “Well, come in if you're coming,” the old woman growled, glaring at them. But her eyes seemed to soften very slightly when she looked at Wendy.

Inside the tree house, they found a typical old woman's house with a nice little sitting room, a kitchen and a stairwell leading upstairs. There was a bed to one side and a rocking chair elsewhere, but Wendy had also seen that the upstairs room had looked as if it had a few beds as well.

“Well, introduce yourselves properly, I suppose,” Porlyusica said, sitting down at her rocking chair and staring at the newcomers.

Ranma nodded, gesturing to himself. “I'm Ranma Oceana, the Water Dragon Slayer. This is Wendy, the Sky Dragon Slayer.”

“Wendy Marvel,” Wendy said, actually dipping into a curtsy, which caused a brief smile to appear on Porlyusica's face and for Carla to nod in approval. “I'm sorry about the first impression I gave you, Miss Porlyusica. I just really like high places, and sometimes I get an uncontrollable urge to climb.”

“Humans are creatures with a mixed bag of impulses anyway; I shouldn't be so angry when one of them, especially one so young, is unable to control herself,” Porlyusica said in the most backhanded method of complimenting someone that Ranma had ever heard.

“At any rate, I suppose you should get on with it and tell me why you're here,” Porlyusica went on, almost glaring at three.

“We’re here for me, actually,” Ranma said, sitting down across from her.

“Why?” she asked bluntly. “You're the picture of good health from what I can see, almost obnoxiously so, in fact.”

Ranma blinked at that, but Porlyusica waved him off, setting her cane down for a moment. That cane was somewhat enchanted in order to allow her to look at a human body and see if there was anything wrong or broken within it, but it hadn't worked on Ranma. He glowed, quite literally, with good health to her eyes.

“I am, sort of,” Ranma said with a laugh before becoming serious. “The problem comes from the fact that I have two different magics within my body. One is my Dragon Slayer magic and the other is my original magic. My original magic is somehow constantly attacking the Dragon Slayer magic, and neither magic works to as high a level as well as it should. That's really hampered my durability and maybe a few other factors too. But durability is the main issue. Natsu is younger than me and hasn’t evolved his Dragon Slayer Magic nearly as far as I have, but he’s almost as durable as I am now, for example.”

“I've never heard of anything like that,” Porlyusica said, now actually sounding intrigued and gesturing for Ranma to continue.

“I’ve discovered other problems since. A week ago, I tried to see what would happen if I suppressed my original magic, call it Power of Life and allowed my Dragon Slayer magic to fully inhabit one of my arms entirely without conflict. As soon as I did, though, my arm changed into a dragon’s arm. It was intensely painful, and I had a devil of a time forcing the limb back to human form.

“Conversely,” Ranma went on, ruffling the Wendy’s hair for a moment, “I was in a fight a few days ago, and the magic user I was fighting was able to completely drain away my Dragon Slayer magic, letting my original magic fill my entire body without threat of that conflict. It made me…well…super strong and super fast and everything else super you can think of,” Ranma said dryly. “I mean, they had this huge robot, fifteen, twenty stories tall at the shoulder, and I broke it like it was a toy, ripped off its limbs and everything.”

There were quite a few things wrong with what Ranma was telling her, Porlyusica mused as she leaned back, staring at him thoughtfully. For one thing, magics did not fight one another like that. Even if they were of the same type—caster type with a side benefit of body-enhancement, as it was in this case—they would not normally fight one another like that so much as merge into an entirely new magic. That kind of thing happened all the time, which was why there were so many element-type mages, but few of them were exactly alike.

For another example, Erza didn't just use Requip magic, she used telekinesis and Requip merged into one. After all, very few people could use Requip to shift just their shoes, let alone from one entire armor set to another, and that didn’t even include her ability to manipulate her weapons. It was that mix and the fact that she had so much magical energy that had brought a practically every day magic like Requip to an entirely different level, a level that she had used to become the Titania of Fairy Tail.

For a second point, Porlyusica had never heard of an enhancement magic that could be called the Power of Life. However, the turning into a dragon part, that she had heard of before. “Come with me, boy,” she said abruptly, standing up. Then she paused and looked at Erza. “Why is Fairy Tail helping him?” she asked bluntly. “I don't see the fairy mark on him.”

“You might eventually,” Erza said with a faint smile, “but, to put it simply, he has helped those of us within the guild several times, and we all owe him.”

For a moment Porlyusica didn't get it, then her eyes twitched to Wendy and she slowly nodded. “You are the two who saved Anna and Lisanna from the Beast?”

“That and he tried to save me from slavers before I went to the Tower of Heaven. He met Laxus out in Pergrande where they saved each other's lives against the Orcs, and he's befriended many of us within the guild. Friendship can go beyond the guild's walls, after all,” Erza elaborated.

“I suppose it can. Humans are foul, smelly, and disgusting, but I can respect friendship, at least,” Porlyusica said, shaking his head. Then her eyes sharpened. “Well, what are you waiting for! Go and lay down on the bed!”

Once Ranma had done so, Porlyusica performed a series of magical tests, examining him all the while. But there was immediately a problem. “What is this other magic I see on you? It looks like a foreign curse.”

Ranma winced. “Ah, um, that’s a curse, yeah. Um, it changes me when I get wet into a woman. I can keep the water from touching me if I see it coming, of course, and even heat it up if I want to, but I can’t do anything about actually changing.”

“What?” Porlyusica said scathingly. “I don’t like jokes, fool.”

“It isn’t a joke, Miss Porlyusica,” Wendy said. “Ranma-nii’s had the curse ever since we met.”

Porlyusica spent over an hour forcing Ranma to change back and forth, jotting down notes all the while. Her mutterings on the matter included, “Impossible! A curse based on water contact yet not part of the water itself!” and “both bodies retain full sexual functionality,” something that caused him to blush hotly and Wendy and Erza to do the same. When he demanded what all this had to do with figuring out a solution to his problem, Porlyusica coughed, seemed to come back to herself, and then shrugged. “Well…it doesn’t. I got sidetracked there.”

After picking himself up off the floor where he had face-faulted, Ranma was about to give this old biddy a piece of his mind. But then she pushed him back into the bed and began to examine him in earnest.

Soon she moved on to other things, ordering him to perform specific exercises of all sorts while staring at him through a monocle. Then she had him meditate and do what he had talked about before: push his original magic, as Ranma had put it, out of his hand so that she could watch. When she first started to see the scales a few seconds after he had whispered that he was finished, she ordered him to stop and watched them recede.

Then she looked down at her notes and said bluntly, “You're lying about your magics fighting one another.”

Ranma blinked at that, and she went on easily. “The Power of Life, as you call it, is, in point of fact, life energy, the energy our physical forms create and dissipate on a daily basis. I have never, in my long life, seen anyone build it up to the point where it was a malleable, usable thing, but somehow you have. It acts slightly differently from magical energy from what I can tell, just different enough to not properly mix. Where the hell do you come from where you were able to build up your life energy to a level where you could use it to enhance yourself?!”

The only place where she could even think that could have been was Midi with their anti-magic bent. But if that was the case, no rumors of people with similar skills had ever reached her.

Ranma blinked, then opened his mouth, but Porlyusica stopped him by whacking him on the shoulder with her stick. “Second,” she went on, “there is no chance of you having been able to gain that level of control and ability at your apparent age, not on top of needing to learn how to use Dragon Slayer magic.”

With a sigh, Ranma sat up and looked first at Porlyusica, then over at Erza, the silent Carla, and Wendy. “How much do you want to know, and how much will you keep secret?” he asked, looking first at her and then over at Carla and Erza.

Wendy knew some of Ranma's backstory—he had shared it with her in bits and pieces, including the fact that he had originally come from another world and had been de-aged prior to coming to Ishgar. She didn't particularly care about most of it, although she knew enough to keep the de-aging part a secret in particular.

“Everything,” Porlyusica said. “I'm a healer, and I would never share anything a patient tells me in confidence.”

Erza looked affronted. “If you want to me to make a vow, I will do so, but I would keep your secrets regardless. Unless you just don’t want me to know?”

Thinking about it, Ranma shook his head. Frankly, it would feel a little nice to get this off his chest to someone, and he figured Erza would indeed keep his secret, as would Carla and Porlyusica. “All right, here's the thing. I'm not from around here. Before you ask, no, I'm not from wherever Anna came from either. From what I know, she comes from a world that at least has much of the same geography as this one, right?”

When the healer and the redhead nodded, Ranma went on. “Well, I come from an entirely different world. One which is much, much more advanced than this one technologically, at least judging by what I've seen in my travels. One day I was fighting one of my rivals when another rival used a magical item on me. Yet, understand, where I come from magic was beyond rare. Real magic, I mean, was a pipe dream for most of the people on the planet. But, because of where I lived and the fact I was a martial artist, I ran into a lot of it. The curse, for one thing, and…”

Ranma paused, looking at Porlyusica. “And a kind of mushroom that for some reason had the magical ability to age or de-age someone. They showed up a few days before this fight with my rival and de-aged me to around six or seven, I think.”

“Oh my god, he’s not lying,” Porlyusica said, breathing out heavily. “A mushroom that can de-age someone? A **mushroom**!? That’s, right…another world,” she muttered, shaking her head. “Go on. This person with a magical scroll, I presume he used it to send you here?”

“He probably screwed it up since I doubt that he meant to send me here specifically, but yeah,” Ranma said with a chuckle. “That guy was not exactly the brightest ember in the ashes, you know? Anyway, he sent me away, and I found myself somewhere in Ishgar.”

“What age were you before you were de-aged?” Erza asked.

“A little over eighteen, nineteen. But I was trained that entire life as a martial artist. I started when I was four, and I never really stopped afterwards. I rarely learned anything else—I didn't think a lot of anything else outside of the art was important. And I devoted myself to it, because, by the time I was old enough to make my own choice—if I was allowed to, anyway; that was pretty doubtful back then—I had fallen in love with the art.”

“…So,” Erza began with a smirk, “you basically cheated to get as good as you are? I mean, you had an entire past life to use to build up your skills.”

Ignoring that with lordly disdain, Ranma went on, looking at her seriously. “And then, not a day or two later after arriving in this world, I see Erza here and several other slaves, and the rest is history. I failed to break her and the others free, because it was the first time I'd really ever run into magic of that type: flames shooting from their hands, glowing energy disks, and other stuff like that. That and my child-like body. Long story short, the river we were fighting around washed me out to sea, where I eventually was found by Typhon.”

As Erza subsided, remembering that night, Ranma went on. “Typhon trained me in Dragon Slayer magic using this device he'd created. He called it a time chamber, where I could train a week in there for only a day out here kind of thing. But he was a senile old coot and eventually died through powering it. I was able to learn the beginnings of Dragon Slayer magic after he awoke it within me in my time within the chamber, but have since basically been muddling on, searching for information and clues about that and about…some other things he told me about ever since.”

“Muddling on!?” Erza said incredulously. “Even taking your martial arts abilities out of the equation, you are a stronger Dragon Slayer than Natsu! You and Laxus both are, but Laxus was not trained by a dragon.”

Porlyusica waved Erza to silence, then looked at Ranma closely. “You're still not lying,” she said eventually. “You're stretching the truth a bit, and you’re not saying everything Typhon told you, but you're not lying.”

“Why would I lie about that now?” Ranma asked with a shrug. “If you wanted to know everything, I just gave it to you, unless you were talking about a blow-by-blow account. It's been so long, I don't know if I could even give you one of those at all.”

“You don't act… That is,” Erza said, now concentrating on another factor of this being Ranma’s second life, “I mean, you don't come off as an old man, a middle-aged man, rather. You act mostly like you are your physical age.”

Ranma shrugged again. “Let's just say that in a lot of ways my old life was stunted outside the martial arts and leave it at that. There was definitely room for improvement, as teachers would say.”

“This Typhon,” Porlyusica began, directing the conversation back to the important matters. “He awakened your magic, correct? How did he do so?”

“He breathed on me using this special kind of breath,” Ranma replied.

“And he died. You're certain of that? You saw his body?” Porlyusica asked.

“Yes, of course,” Ranma said, giving her an odd look. “When I came out, he'd nearly killed himself trying to power the chief time chamber and died right there after telling me to live my life instead of trying to find…well, this asshole black dragon. To instead find other Dragon Slayers and help them as best I could. If you want me to try to find the cave and find his body for some reason, I don't know if I could. It wasn't like there were any, you know, landmarks above the water, and I have no idea even of the direction to go to search for it.”

“No, I didn't mean that. But you say all he did was awaken your own magic and fill it with Dragon Slayer power? And he didn't add anything else?”

“No,” Ranma said sharply, now getting annoyed. “What the heck are you talking about?”

“Wendy,” Porlyusica said, turning away. “Hop up onto the bed for a moment. I want to do a comparison. I’ve done a full body health check up on Natsu, but I can't remember all of the details just now.”

“So Typhon really died of old age? That’s truly awe-inspiring, frankly, to think of how old he must have been,” Porlyusica said while examining Wendy.

“Yep,” Ranma said with a nod. “He was kind of senile, too. Whenever we were talking before he literally locked me into the time chamber, he would lose the thread, double back, correct things. And you should've seen him; his eyes were just completely clouded over, and he moved like an invalid for all of his size.”

Ranma was tempted to say something like, ‘he moved and acted even older than you do,’ but one of the many skills he had learned in his new life here in Fiore was that there was such a thing as tact. So he didn’t.

Grunting irritably, Porlyusica finished her scan on Wendy and gestured her back to her other seat before sitting down herself in her rocking chair. “All right, there is a problem within you. First of all, both Natsu and Wendy have some kind of limiters set on their Dragon Slaying powers, a second element added to their magical cores. This…these, these antibodies, if you will, stop that, that seed of Dragon Slayer power from controlling and thus transmuting their physical forms. You don't have that. Your teacher should have added it near the end of your time with them, but he didn't. I presume because he was too weak by that point to do so.

“Is that Seed something I can create myself?” Ranma asked intently, while Wendy breathed a sigh of relief, causing Ranma to ruffle her hair in amusement. She pouted at him but said nothing.

“I doubt it is something you can learn, but you are welcome to try. As for more important matters, your initial life energy is absolutely correct when it treats the Dragon Slaying magic attempts to take over your body as a virulent disease. It's doing what it has to do, fighting the Dragon Slayer magic. But like in every conflict between you ugly, smelly, destructive humans that occurs between true equals, both sides are getting stronger as they fight.

“However,” Porlyusica said, “there **are** ways which you can use to suppress one energy in favor of the other or cancel one out for a time and let the other take over or, in your case, come to the fore and give you the durability you seem to crave, without letting it go further. There are certain meditation techniques that will allow you to divvy up segments of your mind and thus bring about more control over your twin powers. But this is predominantly going to be a mental solution rather than a physical one. There's nothing I can do for you physically, although I could teach you a few points on the body to hit to suppress your own magic. They won't work on your life energy, I don't think, but you’ll have to discover that through trial and error.”

“I'll take whatever help you can give,” Ranma said with a sigh. *Of course. I should’ve known better than to hope for a simple solution or even a perfect one*. “How long do you think it will take?

“If you spent all day every day on these exercises, you might be able to get to the point where you could switch between one magic and another or create a new, call it a new mix in your system between the two, in two or three years,” Porlyusica said bluntly.

Ranma gaped at her, but quickly regained control of his features and shook his head. “I might surprise you,” he said, determination ringing in his voice.

**OOOOOOO**

The next day Ranma and Wendy once more split off after leaving the apartment. After having breakfast with several of the others at the guild, Wendy would be going with Erza to talk to the blacksmith that she used as well as to compare her armor set with her own ideas of what she wanted on the base armor that she had gotten from Pergrande.

The discussion from the day before had made everyone involved come away with a lot of respect for the material, but not so much for the magic on the item in question. Even shipping the armor off to Fiore to get it en-spelled there and then sending it back, as the King of Pergrande had done, hadn't resulted in the armor being as good as what could be bought here, in terms of magic, at least.

During the day, Erza convinced Wendy to smelt the armor down after removing the enchantments. This was not exactly an uphill battle. When asked, Wendy shrugged her shoulders and simply stated that she would prefer a pair of bracers anyway. “I don't like getting hit, so armor is not nearly as useful to me in and of itself. I have several speed and offensive enchantments to try which sound more fun than weighing myself down with a lot of armor. And in any situation where I need to armor myself, I can always fall back on to…something else.”

“Something else?” Erza asked.

Wendy simply smiled, and Mira snickered from nearby, nodding her head in understanding. The sight of little Wendy belting out Dragon Force while fighting that weird double demon would stick with her for a while. There was no doubt in her mind that Wendy, for all her size, shyness, and desire to not fight unless she had to, was actually a stronger Dragon Slayer than Natsu or even Gajeel. *Huh, I wonder how she would stack up to Laxus?*

For his part, Ranma spent the morning basically getting smacked upside the head with a broomstick as he attempted to meditate on the specific images that Porlyusica was trying to teach him in order to compartmentalize his mind and thus his ability to use both magic and ki more easily than the extremely hard, painful process he had already come up with. Eventually she wanted to get him to the point where he could press his ki down enough to allow the Dragon Slayer magic to take over his physical endurance, but not enough to activate the Dragon Transformation magic.

That was a very, **very** thin line Ranma would have to walk, but, at this point, it was all he could do in order to utilize the entirety of his Dragon Slayer endurance. His mastery of that magic had come too far for anything else. This would also allow him to put more magic into any attack he launched, because the endurance would also affect his body’s ability to push out magic beyond his skin.

In a normal Dragon Slayer that change would already have occurred: minor transformations in the bones and internal organs to match those found in a dragon. In this manner, muscles became as a dragon’s and the organs of a dragon would allow the breathing and eating of the element. The original seed was meant to change the magic core and body into a more draconic element as, at its core, Dragon Slayer magic was a transformative type of magic, not a caster type.

In Ranma’s case, it had been able to create a magical core, but had not been able to do more than go halfway through the process of changing his body before his ki started to treat it as an invader. And, ever since, the two sides had been fighting each other, honing themselves against one another. Despite Ranma’s irritation at getting a face full of broom every few minutes, for the people in Magnolia it was an easy day. Elsewhere, however, plans were being set into motion…

**OOOOOOO**

The scribe looked around from where he was sitting in the library as he surreptitiously rewrote a few lines from the interrogation of the dark guild that Bisca, Alzack, and Ranma had taken out. A few of the members whose interrogations he had recorded had mentioned something about the Oración Seis being after a specific magical weapon, while another few had mentioned how they were working towards Nirvana. The man had long known what those lines could mean, but he had to wait until his true masters, the Dark Guild Tartarus, had contacted him with the knowledge that he could take it to the Magic Council. Now they had done so, and he quickly wrote up a report about a possible connection between those two phrases, handing it to his superior officer. A few moments later the officer was standing in front of the Magic Council, trying not to quail at the glare he was getting from the man who headed it now.

Unlike the former head of the Council, Gran Domawas fierce and very regimented in his mannerisms and in how he wanted the magical side of Fiore run. He had taken it as a personal affront that Phantom Lord had launched their assault on another legal guild the way they had under his watch. Gran Doma wanted to make a mark in order to solidify his position, and he had at last decided that going along with Ranma's suggestion of targeting the Oración Seis for destruction might be the best way to go about doing so.

It irritated him that the Ranger would get most of the glory, but he had already sent out a missive to the Ranger in Magnolia that would give him permission from the Magic Council to recruit S-class mages for this mission. That and a few other plans he was beginning to develop would allow the Magic Council to take the credit and Ranma the blame if things went wrong, or if the rest of the Balam Alliance started to strike at Fiore as a whole in retaliation.

“So are you saying we might be able to find a target now?” he asked the man in front of them.

“Perhaps, my lord. There is a definite correlation between this ‘Nirvana’ concept and the idea of Brain being after a secret weapon. But if it is a specific weapon, one we know anything about, that information is not in the lower level libraries. It could only be found in the Council’s personal libraries.” Personal, in this instance, meant private and secure information that the Magic Council had decided during its history were far too important to allow to be destroyed but also far too dangerous to let anyone besides themselves have access to. Weapons such as what this Nirvana might be were certainly counted among them.

While keeping her face grave, Ultear was listening to this and, internally, was hopping around gleefully. Access to that library was the final thing she needed to understand how Face was controlled and, if possible, how to block or duplicate that process. With that her mission among these idiots would be done. “Do we have any idea of what era it is from?” she asked, tempering her desires for a moment.

“I'm afraid not, my lady. You all would have to research that yourselves. Neither I nor any of my people have access,” the man said with a shrug.

Growling somewhat irritably, the head of the Council waved him off and looked around at the others. “Let us go,” he said simply.

Moments later the twelve of them found themselves standing in a library about half the size of the main Council library, but **nowhere** near as organized. In fact, it was the very definition of **dis**organized. There were very few actual bookshelves, dozens of piles of books, the shelves that were there were overstuffed, there were magical items scattered here and there with little labels on them, scrolls were stuffed liberally in the corners, and everything looked like it had been shoved in here to be forgotten.

The sight of it made Ultear’s eyes widen, but the others took it in stride. “It will have to be here somewhere,” Yajima said aloud. “Somewhere in this area we will find what Nirvana is and where it could possibly be.”

“But I refuse to allow any of the scribes or researchers in here with us,” Gran Domasaid, slamming his heavy staff down on the ground, causing it to crack slightly.

There was some kind of gravity magic at work there, Ultear reflected, though what precisely it was eluded her. The man was no threat to her regardless. But, at the moment, she couldn't have cared less about what magic the man was using. Instead, she was concentrating on what the mage had said. “Wait! You want us to go through all this?” Even with her true primary mission in mind, this looked to be rather daunting.

“What's the matter?” asked the one other woman on the Council caustically, moving around Ultear to the nearest pile. “Afraid of getting a little ink on your nails? A little dust in the eye?” The two of them had never gotten along, the older woman disdaining Ultear’s youth and good looks, while Ultear hated the old woman’s snippiness and the fact that she had remained on the Council despite the recent troubles.

Growling slightly, Ultear wondered how the woman would look like on a rack for a moment before shelving that pleasant thought and looking around. *Well,* she reflected, *if it gets me closer to killing Brain and ditching this bunch of senile bastards, I suppose going through the Council’s collected junk of a thousand years is a small price to pay.* “In that case, let's get organized here for a bit,” she said peremptorily. “Gran, assign each of us a different section to start with, and then we'll need to organize as we go.”

**OOOOOOO**

Three days after Ranma and Wendy had first met the woman, Laxus knocked on the door frame leading into the secondary room of Porlyusica's treehouse, a wide smirk on his face. “Sorry to interrupt,” he said to Porlyusica before looking at Ranma, although he really was somewhat sad to interrupt. Watching the old woman smack Ranma upside the head with a broomstick was not going to get old anytime soon, and he had spent at least five minutes just leaning there silently, watching just that. “But I figured you should know, we just got this from the Magic Council for you.”

Ranma hopped to his feet, dodging a blow from Porlyusica’s broom and taking the scroll from Laxus. Opening it and reading the contents as well as seeing the mark at the bottom, Ranma smirked too and looked up at Laxus. “It’s the official recognition of my powers from the king and the Magic Council, both agreeing with the mission and acceding to the idea of putting together a team of strong mages to see to it. Let’s go recruiting.”

“I’ll come with you,” Laxus said with a smile. “I want to meet Jura once again.” Then he looked at Ranma quizzically. “How is the training going?” He had upped his own training over the past few days, but he hadn’t seen Ranma much outside their afternoon spars.

“Slower than I would've preferred,” Ranma said with a sigh.

“You've only been at it for three days!” Porlyusica barked. “I told you it would take years!”

The fact that Ranma had done more in those three days than most people would've been able to do in twice the time was something that grated on her somewhat. His previous knowledge of how to meditate and create mental frameworks to work with his ki space and ki attacks had come into play, which meant that her earlier prediction would probably be off, which irritated the master healer. Then again, humans breathing nearby irritated her. With a scowl, she waved him off. “Go away! Why are you here anyway?! Get out!”

“Yeah, yeah granny,” Ranma said with a chuckle, heading out the door. “See you later.”

He ducked automatically as the broomstick flew through the air towards them, this time with the pointed end towards them rather than the broom end. “That was a remarkably calm response from her,” Laxus said with a chuckle.

A full day later the demonic engine that other people called the train disgorged Ranma and Wendy, along with Laxus and Carla, onto the platform of the city called Bronze Square. “God damn it, why didn’t I just run!?” Ranma groused.

“Because if you had, you would’ve had to follow the same route as the train or climb several mountains?” Laxus asked more philosophically. His motion sickness wasn’t nearly as bad as it was for Wendy, let along Ranma or Natsu. “Because it would have been irritating and not as comfortable, given the weather?”

Since it had rained and even sleeted at one point in the past day as the train crossed Fiore, that was no small consideration, and Ranma conceded the point irritably. Soon after leaving the train station, the quartet found themselves standing outside the guild Lamia Scale.

It was a large building like every other guildhall Ranma had seen. This particular one looked sort of, like a cathedral mixed with a pagoda, painted in tasteful shades of blue and surrounded by what looked like a rock garden for a lawn around it, with the smallest part in the front yard and then spreading out past it, out away from the city. The hall’s doors were large, as large as the ones Fairy Tail had, and on the doors was the sigil of Lamia Scale, a mermaid in side relief with its tail up.

Entering, Laxus immediately shouted, “Jura! Where are you?!”

Ranma sighed happily at that. “Ah, this takes me back. Where I came from, dojo destroyers announced themselves in much the same fashion.”

Many of the guild members around them glared or muttered but said nothing to the interlopers once they saw who stood in the doorway. S-class mages were rather famous throughout the nation they resided in. This allowed Ranma to look around, noticing that the interior of the room was different from Fairy Tail’s.

The entranceway was small and set with artwork on one side and a large bulletin board on the other and led into several stairwells leading up in every direction. Beyond that was a sitting room around a fourth the size of Fairy Tail’s hall for people to congregate in. Low music, something like classical piano, was wafting quietly from that room.

Nonetheless, Laxus’ shout most certainly carried, because soon enough a large man who Ranma actually recognized appeared.  *Oh, so that’s Jura. Huh, had completely forgotten that guy’s name. King Vicotronious did say he wanted to go to Fiore to help get stronger, didn’t he?*

Like the time they had met in Pergrande, the man at the top of the staircase had some of the appearance of an Earth Shaker monk, though his clothing had changed dramatically. He wore a poncho over his shoulders and his torso was crisscrossed with leather bands. His arms were covered from the wrists up to just below his shoulders by what looked like scale armor of some kind, very thin and formfitting. He wore a long kilt in a dark blue with yellow fur at the bottom and some kind of mountain pattern on it. But his face was much the same as it had been: bald, with large tilted eyebrows.

He looked and felt formidable to Ranma’s senses, and he frowned at Laxus for a moment, nodding at him formally, though there was a certain sparkle of good humor in his eyes. “Laxus, welcome. Might I ask what brings you here? I know you too well to think you would come all this way simply to challenge me, although, if you have, that would certainly make my week more interesting.”

“I am so tempted right now to take you up on that,” Laxus said with a smirk, but shook his head. “We’re not actually here for fun, unfortunately. This is Ranma Oceana, and he's got a proposal for you.”

Jura’s eyes widened as he looked at Ranma, and the two men nodded at one another, acknowledging the fact they had met before, while Wendy smiled up at the kind, bald, giant man whose head she had once stood on. She had the urge to do so once more, but fought it down.

“And why should the mighty Jura listen to weaklings such as you fools?” asked another, far more arrogant young voice. A blue haired man came out to stand at the top of another set of stairs, glaring down at them. His eyes widened as he saw Laxus there, but his arrogance did not dissipate at all, and he simply shook his head mournfully. “You Fairy Tail mages all are so full of yourselves, but even though you might have proven quite formidable when I saw you last, there is no chance of a mere S-class mage ever being strong enough to match Jura!”

“Strength and pride is love, and Jura is our guild ace, after all!” said a third voice, this time a female voice. She was a young woman around the blue-haired man’s age, with dark pink hair done up in a too cute twin pony tail look along with a cutesy pink dress, tight in the chest and going down to her ankles, but with a slit to one side of it which began at knee height.

At her looks, Ranma shook her head. *I don’t know if she’s trying to just go for cute or if she’s trying to look younger but decided halfway through to just look her age. Weird.*

Laxus raised one condescending eyebrow as he looked at the two loud newcomers and then turned back to Jura, who had also turned to the man with blue hair, a little surprised that he knew Laxus personally. “Lamia Scale allows criminals into its ranks now?” He waited a beat, then, as Jura’s eyes narrowed and the two other mages winced, he went on with a smirk. “Still, I have to say that at least they have joined a reputable guild rather than continuing to go around consorting with dark guilds and attempting to unseal demons.”

Jura's eyebrows now furrowed in a rather comical sight to Ranma, frankly, given the eyebrows in question. “What?”

“These are two of the four I told you about from the devil island, the ones who got away,” Laxus introduced. “The girl’s name is Sherry, I think, and the arrogant ass with the blue hair is Lyon.”

“I remember,” Ranma says thoughtfully. “I also remember that they should've been arrested for that, or at least be doing a bit of jail time, even if they were influenced by a dark mage.”

“They left while we were cleaning up,” Laxus said with a shrug of his large shoulders.

Jura was now glaring at the two other Lamia Scale mages. Under that glare, Lyon’s arrogance dissipated quickly as they hastily explained what had been going on. Afterwards the monk-like man shook his head. “Truly, you came here directly after performing something so potentially devastating as that? Perhaps grandmother should have looked into your pasts a little more closely. I am all for letting people have a second chance, but…”

“She knows. We were very open to how lacking in love our actions were. We've already been making recompense,” Sherry said with a sigh. “We haven't taken a single job she hasn’t okayed, and every time we do the money goes to both the guild and to several charity groups the guild takes part in.”

“That's a start, I suppose,” Ranma said with a nod. “And, seeing as no one in the village you ordered attacked actually died, I suppose I’ll forget about it. But we really do need to talk to you, Jura, unless you really do want to spar first?” he finished excitedly.

“I don't think so,” Jura laughed. “But if you have business with me, then you will have to go through my guild master.”

“Let’s go then.” Ranma held up the note he had been given from the Magic Council. “Where is she?”

The woman in question was almost as short as Makarov and just as old and wrinkly. In fact, the woman gave Ranma some serious Cologne vibes at first, until she started speaking, her voice loud and almost brash. That and the way she dressed—lots of jewelry in the form of earrings, bracers, and a necklace under a purple cloak and a blue dress—let Ranma banish that image.

The old woman, named, oddly enough in Ranma’s mind, Ooba Babasaama, read the missive from the Magic Council quickly, then hurled it back at Ranma, who caught it deftly between two fingers before putting it in his pocket. “Fine! You have the Magic Council's orders which can allow you to talk to my mage here, but that doesn't mean I have to like it. Nor does it mean I have to allow you to talk to him alone!”

“So long as no word of my mission gets out, I suppose I can explain things to you,” he said, looking askance at the two lesser mages while Wendy sat to one side, with Sherry smiling at her. Lyon, though, glared back at Ranma arrogantly.

“You dare to speak as if any in my guild would give away the secret! I’ll spin you!” Ooba shouted, hopping to the top of her desk, her hands clenching.

Ranma looked over at Laxus, who shrugged, and then over at Jura, who shook his head rapidly, indicating that, whatever it was, Ranma did not want to be spun. “Okaaaay….” he said slowly, “I suppose that makes some kind of sense. If you trust them, that's good enough for me.”

*For some of this anyway.*  *I suppose I could trust Jura and granny here with my Ranger status, but damned if I tell Lyon anything about me I don’t have to. That guy’s just rubbing me the wrong way,* Ranma thought

Aloud he said, “The truth is, I'm a troubleshooter for King Fiore, and he has decided that the Balam Alliance is getting too powerful. You might not have heard, but they were involved with the business that recently occurred on the Magic Council?”

“The former Wizard Saint being found to be a traitor,” Lyon said, nodding. “I've thought about going for that position myself, and I think I'll be able to convince them that I deserve that title. After all, while Jura is clearly stronger than myself, I am stronger than anyone else in this guild.”

“That's nice,” Ranma said blankly, while Laxus just guffawed slapping his thigh as if the other arrogant man had said something truly hilarious, and Ranma turned away, visibly dismissing Lyon. “Anyway, we know something about the mages involved, and if the Magic Council can find a target or someplace where we can stake out and wait for them or find out what their long term goal is if they have one, we mean to take out the Oración Seis. To that end, the king has decreed that I am to put together a team of S-class mages to take the fight to them.”

Lyon scoffed. “Don't count us out! Even if we aren’t S-class, I’ll show you how strong we are!”

Ranma shrugged his shoulders, having had about enough of Lyon's arrogance. “Fine, how about this?” he said with a somewhat mocking grin, standing up. “If you want to come, how about I give you a test?”

“What kind of test?” Jura asked, looking amused.

Ranma shrugged and, in a light flare of Requip magic, was suddenly holding his two Escrima sticks. “Let's see what they can do. How about a spar, say, a thirty minute match? One at a time or both at once, I don’t care.”

That, of course, made Lyon and even Sherry glare angrily at him. “I’ll allow it,” the Ooba said, chuckling and looking amused. She could sense the magical power within Ranma and knew those sticks were most definitely not his primary magical style.

Soon enough they were outside, with Ranma standing across from Sherry first. “I'm sorry to have to do this,” Sherry said, “but Leon is right; you shouldn't count us out just because were not S-class! Dolls Magic: Doll!”

From behind the woman one of the nearby trees was rimed with light pink magic, then it began to move, ripping itself out of the ground and moving towards Ranma at Sherry’s directions.

Ranma stared at with dull eyes as it came, shaking his head. Then, as the thing thrust out a fist, he stepped inside its guard so quickly that Sherry thought for a moment he had somehow teleported that short distance. Then one of his sticks rapped out almost negligently. Ranma didn’t even activate the magic of his Escrima sticks; he simply hit the dolls as hard as he could, interested to see what would happen.

What happened was that the doll was sent flying through the air as if it had been hit by a train. Ranma nodded. “Ah, not very heavy trees. Got anything else?” he asked cockily, winking at Sherry.

She glared at him and attempted to use other spells for a time. A Mud Doll and a Rock Doll were quickly conjured, one after another, but Ranma dealt with them both. The Mud Doll was smashed aside, this time by an Escrima stick moving so fast it created an airwave before him, which smashed the doll into pieces, splattering Sherry with mud. It reformed under her now furious direction, but Ranma just destroyed it twice more before the magic animating it finally gave out. The stone doll fared even worse. A single blow shattered it before a now desperate Sherry could fully animate it.

Then Ranma was in her face, one stick tapping down very gently on top of her head. She cringed as the blow flashed down, then glared at him when it just simply paused there on top of her forehead. She hadn't even felt it land. “You're out,” Ranma said cheerfully. “Next.”

“Interesting,” Jura said with a smile. “You haven't gotten any worse over the years from what I understand, Ranma. Do they still sing your praises in Pergrande?”

“Mine and Laxus’,” Ranma said with a nod, a thumb pointing towards the Lightning Dragon Slayer, who smirked cockily. “Speaking of,” Ranma said as Leon stepped forward, turning to Laxus. “If you ever head to Pergrande and to Appledore specifically, you might want to check in with the king. He said something about wanting to present you with another gift like he did to me long after the fact. What that might be, I don't know though…”

Affronted at being ignored, Lyon growled angrily, then used “Ice Make: Lion Pride!” to send a series of giant ice lions towards Ranma as he was looking away. “Don’t ignore me! Ice Make: Swallow attack!” This attack created dozens of swallow shaped ice sculptures that flew towards Ranma randomly.

The idea was to force Ranma to split his attention between the two attacks, to pin him in place and then overwhelm him in seconds.

But Ranma simply shattered the first lion to reach him almost negligently, smashing it to pieces. Then, as the Ice sculptures attacked him from every which way, he nodded with some respect plain on his face. “Not bad, but not very good either. Ya lack speed and stopping power both.”

For the next few seconds Ranma was busy dodging. His speed was such that even the swallows couldn’t tag him unless he was forced to stay put for a second. And, once Ranma leaped into the air, that was impossible. The birds died faster than Lyon could create more of them, and every time he did, Ranma smashed downwards at the attacking lions. All the beasts seemed to have a simple attack order and followed that regardless, which also was rather poor planning.

The ice lions might have had the hitting power the swallows lacked, but they didn’t have the speed or ability to jump up after Ranma well enough to catch him. Worse, in Ranma’s mind, the lions weren’t as durable as they should have been given their denser bodies and size. *Huh, gonna have to see if Gray’s power is any better in terms of staying power.*

Gritting his teeth, Lyon created more lions and swallows after Ranma had destroyed half of them, but his eyes widened as Ranma slowly made his way through the crowd of ice sculptures towards him. “Ice Make: Elephant! Ice Make: Giant!”

Two more ice creatures roared up, and he gasped, reeling backwards. Animating so many creatures at once was a sign of his power, but it was incredibly taxing: the larger the creature, the greater the strain. The lions had been bad, the swallows easy, but keeping both them and now two more meant Lyon could feel his magical energy draining away.

The giant roared silently and lashed out, its fists at a height to be able to hit Ranma. But Ranma kicked off one swallow, shattering it and bouncing over the huge fist of the giant. His Escrima sticks lashed out down and forward, shattering the arm and the head of the giant and sending its body plummeting down. Riding it for a moment, Ranma lashed out all around him, killing further swallows, then leaped clear to land on top of the elephant's back, smashing it with a double handed blow from his Escrima sticks. Its back exploded into ice shards at the hit, and the entire construct collapsed into shattered ice and snow.

Leaping away, Ranma was past the remained lions and within striking range of Lyon. His Escrima stick flashed out to rap on the man's hands, deadening them for a moment. Then the other stick came up and rested just against his neck. “You did better than Sherry, I'll admit,” Ranma said conversationally. “But you didn't have any plans for how easily I could deal with your constructs, and their basic durability is shit. You need to think about making them more solid than that.”

Gulping, his arrogance having been beaten out of him for the moment—it would come back quickly, alas—Lyon nodded, staring first at the giant construct that Ranma had dealt with so handily and then at the Escrima stick he was holding against his neck. “What kind of enchantments are on those?”

“I actually didn't use any of the enchantments on them,” Ranma said dryly. “That was just pure strength and speed.”

“Intriguing,” Jura murmured, looking over at Laxus, his natural urge to challenge himself coming to the fore. Laxus smirked back, his face full of fangs for a moment, but Ooba spoke up before any of them could do anything. “Enough,” she said, shaking her head. “It seems my mages’ training needs to be stepped up a bit. If a single Fairy Tail mage can deal with two of my best so easily, especially one I've never heard of before, I...”

“I told you, I'm not a Fairy Tail mage,” Ranma interrupted. “And just because I'm a wanderer doesn't mean I don't train myself.”

“Very well,” Jura said formally. “I will meet you in Magnolia when you discover our target has been found.” He then smiled more naturally then before, looking over at Laxus and then to Wendy and Carla. “There's even a reason for me to be there in the first place, one I imagine the young misses will enjoy. There is the traditional Fairy Parade coming up soon.”

“What’s that?” Wendy asked eagerly. She had been quiet for a time, letting her big brother have his fun, but this sounded interesting.

“Fairy Tail puts on a massive magical parade every year midway through the autumn season. It sort of grew out of the old harvest festival, you know? We all take part, and it's become one of the major highlights of the year for our portion of Fiore. Even other mages like Jura here have been known to turn up to watch.” Laxus supplied.

“Sounds fun,” Ranma said with a nod, getting an enthusiastic ‘Yes!’ from Wendy and even a happy hum from Carla, who had seen the parade several times when she was living in Magnolia. Then he made his Escrima sticks disappear into his Requip space, smirking over at Jura. “Now, unless ya want to take me up on my offer of a spar, I think we’re done here.”

Jura chuckled as Laxus smirked. “I called dibs on him long before you showed up, Ranma,” Laxus said, mock sternly. “I get to fight him first.”

“It's so nice to be in such demand,” Jura said dryly. “However, now is not the best time to think about such things,” he said indicating where his guild master was still berating Sherry and Leon for their poor showing. The sight of Carla watching and taking notes was not lost on Ranma, and he grimaced as Jura went on. “This is our training area, and I know from old experience that Master Babasaama will be pushing the two of them into training soon enough, which means we won't be welcome here. Still, I will agree to a three-way battle between us after the fight against the Oración Seis is finished. Will that suffice?”

Both younger men smiled widely, battle lust in their eyes, and nodded quickly, and Jura frowned internally. *Okay, what did I just agree to?*  Despite that misgiving, they said farewell to Ooba, as was courteous, but she didn't look away from where she was berating her two fellow mages, simply waving one hand at them, and they left the guild soon after that.

“So is it faster to go from here to Blue Pegasus, or should we head back to Magnolia first?” Ranma had wanted Jura to be the first person he recruited outside of Fairy Tail for this mission simply because of seniority: as a more experienced mage and a Wizard Saint, Jura would naturally be part of the leadership portion of this team he was putting together. But that didn't imply that he didn't have a few others he wanted to take along, with Jenny easily topping that list outside of Fairy Tail.

He wondered what he would do when he saw her, though, considering the kiss he and Bisca had shared.  *But, then again, neither of us said we were going out or dating or anything like that, and kissing can be part of feeling one another out anyway, right?*

“We’re actually closer here,” Laxus said, gesturing down the street back towards the train with a sigh. “Come on.”

“Can't we just walk there?” Wendy complained. “We could fly too; it’s nice out now.”

Laxus calculated in his head, then nodded. “Doing that might will take us the rest of the day if I’ve got a handle on how fast you two can travel, but yes, we could do that.” It wasn’t like Laxus wanted to get back on the train, after all.

With that Laxus led the way towards the end of the town, looking down at a map he had pulled from somewhere thoughtfully and then he pointed down one of the roads leading away from the city. “That way,” he said, then zoomed off, using his lightning magic to cross from where he had been standing to the edge of his vision as quickly as a lightning bolt.

“Oy, that's cheating!” Ranma bellowed, racing after him as fast as he could. Wendy giggled, then looked down at Carla, who sighed and changed back into her normal Exceed form before Wendy leaped into the air, whereupon the little cat flung out her wings and flew up to latch onto Wendy’s back.

The day started off pretty well, but halfway through the afternoon it started to rain badly. Ranma sighed, and when next Wendy landed next to him he pulled off his cloak, covering her with it, even as he felt his own body change at the hit of the rain. He could, of course, have kept the rain from hitting him, but frankly it wasn’t worth the effort. And despite the rain, it was still a nice day.

It was still raining that evening, however, when they reached the small town where Blue Pegasus had its guildhall. The town was small and off a large, winding river, where ships could be seen moving up the river despite the sun going down. The buildings were all made of varicolored bricks, and most seemed to be two story buildings with only a few larger. The people were still moving around under large umbrellas, but most seemed to be hurrying inside as the quartet arrived.

“I don’t suppose we could put this off until tomorrow?” Ranma asked, staring up at the rain, luxuriating in its touch. Once she set aside her irritation at being forced to change like this, Ranma always enjoyed the rain on days like this, something she put down to being the Water Dragon Slayer.

“Heh, that’d be nice, but no. When mages from another guild arrive in a town where a guild has its hall, its customary that they come by and pay their respects. After that crap with Phantom Lord, I’d bet that not doing so would rightly piss people off,” Laxus replied.

He looked over at Wendy who had just hopped over a large puddle with a laugh, Carla on her back. “Come on, you three; let’s get this over with. I know there’s a good inn here, and the faster we check in with the fat freak, the quicker we can get to bed.”

“Aw, is sparky tired?” Ranma cooed, smacking him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry; we’ll get you to bed soon.”

“Ugh. I could retaliate to that, but it would be so fucking wrong it’s not even funny. Let’s just go,” Laxus groused, causing Ranma to blink then blanch as she realized how that could have been taken. The sound of the redhead retching made Laxus smile once more, and he led the way down the street quickly.

Blue Pegasus's guildhall was a square building composed of the same bricks as the rest of the town, in this case pained pink. It had a pair of towers to either side of the entranceway topped by a railing. There was a fence up there too, which told the quartet the building’s rooftop might have something like a lawn or a sitting area. At the back of the hall the rooftop rose into a cathedral-like dome with a blue tiled roof, ending in a series of small pillars holding up an additional, tiny dome. Every few feet of the wall was broken by a high, thin window of varicolored glass. Above the entranceway was the sign of the guild, a blue horse’s head as shown from the side in the center of two blue waves.

“It’s pink,” Ranma said, staring at it in something approaching affronted horror.

“Yeah…” Laxus said with a sigh.

“What’s wrong with pink?” Wendy asked, looking at her fellow Dragon Slayers in surprise.

“Men tend not to like that color when in their teens or twenties,” Carla supplied. “I don’t understand it myself, though I know it is a major point of contention between Natsu and practically everyone else in the guild.”

Laxus and Ranma exchanged a glance, then sighed and moved to push open the large doors.

Inside Blue Pegasus looked like a high-end club. The floor was granite stone with a checkerboard pattern, the lighting was dim but welcoming, there were small lounges, each separated from the main floor by short staircases, and a few scattered bars dominating the central floor along with a dance area. Ranma could see that there were even a few of those revolving disco-balls set up in two separate rooms to either side of the main area.

As soon as Ranma and her friends entered, they were greeted by a sweet-sounding, almost cloying voice. “My, what do we have here? Three new roses entering our guild at the same time. Truly it’s a lovely evening, even if they come with such a boorish bodyguard.”

“Hmmf!” said a second voice, sounding both haughty and considerate at the same time. “I suppose you can come in and get out of the rain. Don’t misunderstand, though, I’m only being kind to you because it’s raining out.”

“Hmmm, you and your companion are quite cute, miss. May I have your names?”

Turning, the foursome looked at the speaker, and Ranma sweatdropped. *Good God, it’s a bishounen slideshow.*

The speakers were indeed very pretty young men. One was a shaggy-haired brown-haired young man around Laxus’ age with long eyelashes and a thin frame. Indeed, all three had the same somewhat thin frame without much in the way of muscles visible. The second man was a darkly tanned man with dark black hair. The last was a young boy who looked a bit older than Wendy, with light blonde hair in a neat bowl cut with dark green eyes.

The shaggy-haired young man spoke up as if he was the leader of the trio. “I do apologize if we startled you ladies. We should really have introduced ourselves. My name is Hibiki Lates.”

“Ren Akatsuki,” the dark-skinned boy said.

“And I’m Eve Tearm,” the young boy said. “And together we are the Trimens,” they all said as one.

Before any of the quartet could do anything, Hibiki had moved around Ranma and taken her hand in his, gently trying to pull her along. “Now that introductions are done, let me show you to a seat, and then we can get you something warm to take the chill of the damp off.”

*Hibiki, but as a first name not a last one. Guess I dodged the bullet there, although the idea of Ryoga trying to be a pretty boy is kind of disturbing as fuck,* Ranma thought, a spasmodic twitch beginning above one eye at the pretty boy’s flirtations.

Ren and Eve made for Carla and Wendy, joining Hibiki in waving farewell to Laxus. “And now that you’ve delivered them, you can go, Laxus. We don’t need other men here.”

While Wendy blushed and stammered and Carla slowly allowed her claws to slide out—yes, she had them in her human-cat form and yes, it sounded very much like knives coming out of their sheathes—Hibiki’s attempt to pull Ranma along had about as much effect as a child pushing on the side of a mountain. When Hibiki realized this, he looked back at the short redhead in surprise, to which she smiled.

He smiled back, but then froze as Ranma’s hand moved like a cobra. It first pulled away from Hibiki’s grip, then grabbed at his wrist and the next instant the pretty boy found himself in the air. “Yeah, never touch me again, dude. I know where those hands have been, and I don’t need to scrub my skin down with a scrubbing brush.”

Carla too had enough, and she leaped up, kicking Ren in the face and then lashing out with her claws towards Eve, who barely dodged backwards in time to avoid getting more than his jacket slashed to ribbons, though Carla hadn’t used her ki claws. “RRGH, away from Wendy, you, you gigolos! She is far too pure to even be in your thoughts, let alone touched by such as you!”

Blinking at that, Wendy began to calm down and was about to ask Carla what she meant by gigolo, but Carla hushed her quickly while Laxus started to laugh.

Even though he was now being held straight up by a girl who didn’t even come to his shoulder, Hibiki tried to keep his cool. “Ahem, I’m sorry if we offended you, dear lady, but you must understand, your beauty enchanted MeEEE!!!”

His words broke off into a squeal as Ranma negligently tossed him into Ren, sending both men to the ground. Then she hopped over them, making a point of almost kicking them in the heads as she passed. “Come on, Sparky; let’s find Jenny and get this over with.”

The only one still on his feet, Eve, looked down at his shredded shirt and said, “Um, well, if you would like to see Jenny, she’s up on the second floor. I believe she is scheduled to man the bar up there tonight. Are you a friend? Perhaps you’re looking to join our guild?” Then his training got the best of him, and he went on, moving forward to stand by Wendy. “I can tell you would be most welcome here.”

Wendy shivered and leaped into the air, kicking off it and zooming after her older brother towards the stairs. “So creepy!” she shouted to the laughter of many of the other guild members who had stopped their own drinking and what-have-you to stare at the Trimens’ epic failure.

Wincing, Eve moved over to help his two friends to untangle themselves but looked up with them as they heard the voice of their guildmate, Jenny. “Ranma!”

Jenny was dressed in a long cocktail dress, her hair was done up as if for a night on the town, but she had flat shoes on rather than heels and only a single necklace that looked like something which a child had made - with flowers and simple shapes made out of clay - to go with the rest of her ensemble. She was laughing as she raced down the steps and flung herself into the shorter redhead’s arms. “You came! I was afraid you would forget.”

Ranma hugged her back, shuddering very slightly in pleasure at the feel of the very curvy blonde mage pressed up against her own curves. “Aheh. Nah, never was any chance of that, though I wish I could say this was a social call. Er, I do have something I need to talk to you about though, serious stuff.”

“Tsk, I should’ve known this was too good to be true.” Jenny pulled away and then knelt down and hugged Wendy. “Hey, Wendy, how are you doing? It’s been a while since we were able to talk, huh? Still, I can see you’ve growing up into a pretty young woman.”

Wendy blushed at that but hugged back as Laxus smirked and moved up beside Ranma. “Wait, let me get out my camera first. This is going to be fantastic.”

Looking over Wendy’s shoulder, Jenny saw her three guildmates below and chuckled evilly too. “Do it.”

While Laxus prepared, Ranma began to concentrate, holding one hand above her head, which began to steam gently. Then she started to pull the water that had drenched her clothes out of it and up her arm where it began to warm up.

The three pretty boys were now watching this in some confusion, since Jenny wasn’t known to be that affectionate with most people. Kids, yes. She would hug kids if she knew them, and indeed that was where the necklace she was currently wearing had come from, as Ranma had surmised. Though much to his hidden chagrin, Eve had never gotten a hug from her.

Other women, though, as far as they knew she wouldn’t do that to her best friends within the guild. Not even Mirajane, as much as the tabloids attempted to create something between them. But all three men, who were, despite their current epic fail, experts when it came to women, could tell that there was more than simple friendship between Jenny and this strange redhead.

A second later, they got the shock of their lives as Ranma let the globe of now heated water fall down on her, changing him back into his male form. Hibiki began to gag, and the other two boys nearly shrieked in shock, as did many of the still watching guild-members. “What was that!?” Ren shouted, his voice no longer deep but high pitched as he pressed back and away from the redhead-turned-man.

“My curse,” Ranma replied, grinning evilly down at them as Laxus put away his camera. “I turn into a girl when I get wet, hence my reaction to ya earlier, pretty-boy. ’Less, of course, you still want ta hold hands?” he asked sardonically, causing Hibiki to back away quickly.

Jenny linked arms with Ranma, pulling him around and smiling as she now could stare into Ranma’s eyes without having to look down. “Much better. Don’t get me wrong, Ranma, I don’t have a problem with your female form, but I prefer to look you in the eyes, you know?” Then she leaned in and kissed him.

While not having anticipated that, Ranma didn’t exactly object, the same thoughts he’d had with Erza and Bisca going through his head. Until he made a promise to one of them or the other, he was free to have fun, just as they were. Since Alzack had gone with Bisca and Team Shadow Gear on their mission a few days ago, that was not a small consideration. So he kissed back, and Jenny moaned as Ranma’s arms went around her, holding her there as they attempted to kiss the living daylights out of one another.

Rolling his eyes, Laxus pulled Wendy along, the young girl looking at this with wide eyes and a blush on her face despite Carla’s attempt to drag her away. “Come on, kid. Let’s go see if we can find something to drink. They might even have a nonalcoholic version for you.”

Watching this, Hibiki glanced at his fellows with wide eyes. “Um, I am not certain how I feel about this.”

Ren grunted, looking away. “Disgusted and amused.”

“Aroused,” Eve said, causing the others to look at him. “What! Come on, just think about if Jenny had kissed ‘her’ instead.” Both of the other pretty boys had to concede that point, though they still dragged their younger compatriot along when he attempted to just stay and watch. Now that they knew these four guests were here to talk to Jenny, they’d leave it to her. Then, too, Hibiki had finally recognized Laxus and wanted no part of the S-class mage.

After a few minutes Jenny had to pull away to breathe, and the chuckles and catcalls from the rest of the guild caused her to flush slightly even as she leaned her forehead against Ranma’s. “Wow. I take it you’ve had an epiphany then.”

“Sort of,” Ranma said, turning slightly like he was about to dance with her there on the step leading up to the second floor. “Let’s just say that I decided to have some fun, then see where it all goes after.”

Jenny, of course, understood what that meant, and Ranma let his hands move away from her, letting her make the choice to move away or not. “In other words, you’re going to get to know several girls, but not go beyond, say… kissing, until you decide there’s more there than attraction?” she asked, not moving away.

“Yeah. Um, I know that makes me kind of sound like those three idiots downstairs, but…” Ranma began

“No, it doesn’t,” Jenny said hurriedly. “Ranma, there’s a difference between kissing and dating, dating and being boyfriend and girlfriend. It’s a natural part of dating. Not only that, but you’re being upfront about it. You’re not going to hide us from one another or try to get us into bed before making that commitment, are you?” When Ranma shook his head quickly, she went on. “See? They wouldn’t hesitate to bed anyone they could. You’re just flirting with us, getting to know us. I’m fine with it, though I can’t speak for every girl. Who else are you, ahem, interested in?”

“Erza Scarlet and Bisca Mulan,” Ranma said sheepishly. “Um, I might have already exchanged a kiss like that one with Bisca, but other than flirting, and a single quick kiss nothing’s happened with Erza.”

“I doubt anything more will happen with that one from what Mira has said about her over the years. Still, like I said, I’m fine with having some fun and continuing to get to know one another before we become exclusive.” In point of fact, Jenny had another boy she was in something of the same position with: professional photographer who had been taking pictures of hers for years. He was very fun, but just a little too weak, and seemed unwilling to commit while being far too willing hop into her bed, so they had become somewhat stuck where they were.

“Heh, good to know. But for now, unless ya want to do something tonight, we should go and talk with your guild master about the serious stuff I was here for,” Ranma said.

“Poo,” Jenny said, linking arms with Ranma and leading him up the stairs. “Rule one, Ranma: no girl would like to hear you have other reasons than to see her in a situation like this. Still, I’m fine with having a little date tonight, so let’s get the serious stuff over with.”

Master Bob was just as bizarre looking as he had been when Ranma saw him during the Eisenwald mission. When Jenny and Ranma, still arm in arm, found him (a label that was debatable in Ranma’s mind), he was trying to rub his cheek against Laxus, but the Lightning Dragon Slayer was keeping him back with both hands. Nearby, Wendy and Carla watched this, small drinks in their hands. “GAhhh, get away from me, Bob!”

“Mou, you’re such a bad boy, never calling me master…” Bob said, then brightened up, leaping away from Laxus and moving away from the small bar he had been drinking at before Laxus had found him. “Mah, Ranma-boy. You’re still just as handsome as ever. Oh, but what are you doing holding our Jenny’s arm like that? Is love in the air?”

Rolling her eyes at that, Jenny sat next to her Guild Master. Looking at Ranma and the others, she asked, “So, besides seeing little old me, what brought you here?”

Handing over the message from the Magic Council to start with this time, Ranma went through the same spiel he had given Ooba. Bob listened quietly as did Jenny, who actually, to Bob’s surprise, looked excited. She was, despite some issues with her endurance, a true S-class mage, and, like many such throughout Fiore, she had long chafed under the rules of the Magic Council that forbad them from going after dark guilds. Bob, too, had felt they should be doing more about the dark guilds than they were allowed to up to this point, so he agreed. “All right, since my cute mage here seems eager to join this team of yours, I’ll agree to it. But I won’t send her alone. I’ll also send Ichiya, our guild’s other S-class mage and…maybe one more.”

Ranma frowned, but Laxus spoke up, smiling beatifically. It was so bizarre on his face that Ranma just stared at him, but Laxus didn’t let that stop him, saying, “Actually, that sounds like a fine idea. From what I’ve heard of him, Ichiya has a habit of surprising people, and we might need that and his perfume magic.”

Lips quirking as he saw right through Laxus’ words to his real reason, Bob nodded. “Exactly, Laxus-boy. Now, have a drink! We can’t send you away without showing you some Blue Pegasus hospitality!”

That night Jenny joined them for dinner while Laxus hit up several of the local bars. Afterwards, Wendy and Carla stayed in their hotel room, which had a huge, circular bed that reminded Ranma rather strongly of something that could’ve been found in a love hotel back on Earth. This disturbed Ranma, but Wendy and Carla liked it and, coupled with some fruit snacks and her new book on enchantment and puzzles, were quite happy. Ranma and Jenny went on a date, just walking around town once the rain let up, and, while nothing more than kissing happened, both of them were happy with how it went.

That feeling of happiness did not last long after the quartet returned to Fairy Tail and Ranma told Erza and Mira about who had agreed to join them for this mission. “WHAT?! Why in the world would you agree to let, that, that…”

With Mira laughing her ass off to one side and Laxus being no better, Ranma and Wendy exchanged a bewildered glance before looking over at Carla. She sniffed. “Don’t look at me, you two. I haven’t been here for years, remember?”

Happy was nearby, while, thankfully, Natsu was out with Lisanna and Anna on a date. Happy didn’t understand why he couldn’t come with them, but he wasn’t going to argue after Lisanna had bribed him with a fish. Looking up from his meal, he started to explain. “Aye, Sir! Ichiya is someone Erza’s worked with before, but they don’t get along. Ichiya liiiikkeees her, but Erza…”

“Erza can speak for herself, thank you!” Erza barked, glaring at Happy, who shut up quickly.

Mira, on the other hand, spoke up from where she was leaning against the bar, using it to help her stay on her feet. “Embarrassed by your boyfriend, Red? Don’t worry; we won’t judge you for your weird tastes!” She too had met Ichiya. Indeed, she’d met all the Trimens before and found them hilarious, though only Hibiki was even marginally attractive to her.

“Damn you, Mira, you know I find Ichiya loathsome! If you think he’s boyfriend material, why don’t I send him your way, huh!?” Erza shouted as she turned to Mira. The two of them soon were facing off, actually grappling as they had when they were younger, and Carla could only shake her head with a sigh as Wendy watched from beside Ranma.

Ranma leaned over to Laxus, asking dryly, “I take it you knew this would happen?”

“Guilty as charged,” Laxus said with a smirk, putting his feet up as he stared at the fight brewing between the two S-class women. “I just wanted to get under Erza’s skin. Didn’t expect this, though. Still, a floor show is a floor show.” Besides, Mira was damned sexy when she was like this.

“Wait, you did it on purpose!? Laxus!” Erza roared, turning to the blonde only to get cold cocked by Mira.

“That’ll teach you to look away, Red!” Mira had been angsty lately given how she had not been around for the showdown with Phantom Lord, and her decision not to pursue Ranma had also left her without a boy she was interested in. So she was looking for some other kind of outlet.

She got it when Erza turned and tackled her to the floor. The two of them were soon rolling around as the rest of the guild shouted encouragement and bets, while Makarov wailed, “God damn it, no! No you two, don’t regress! Please! My heart, our bank account, they can’t take this!”

Watching this, Ranma laughed along with Laxus. *Yep, this guild is kind of a cool place.*

The next day, however, an oddly ragged, tired looking Ultear arrived in Magnolia. Finding Ranma’s address from Anna that morning, she showed up outside his room. Seeing the breakfast already laid out and the nice soft sofa, she grabbed some food and sat down, speaking a single sentence as she did. “We've found them.”

**End Chapter**

{When it starts, my suggestion would be to play first Disturbed’s Night and then Eye of the Storm by Wattwhite. Just saying}

This has been edited by me, *Justlovereadin’* for his Fairy Tail knowledge, and *Hiryo* for his Ranma knowhow. There will no doubt be more small mistakes than is usual in Making Waves because of this. Michael and I prioritized his help with FILFy this month.

**Chapter 15: Guild War, Part 1**

Sitting on the Dragon Slayer’s sofa Ultear looked like her arms had been dipped in ink, her fingers were bruised where they grabbed at the glass of orange juice, and her eyes looked listless, like a thousand yard stare. She moved like the walking dead, and had barely made it over to the sofa from the door before collapsing.

Ultear mumbled around her food, almost moaning in pleasure though if that was because of the food or the sunlight on her back (she had stretched like a cat when she sat down deliberately in the sunbeam). “I refuse to say anything until I’m finished eating. Or have alcohol. No, both.”

She literally did refuse to say further, despite Ranma poking her in the side with one of his escrima sticks. Every time he did those eyes would wake up for a very brief second promising pain, then would go back to dull and listless as Ultear’s hands moved automatically, shoveling hotcake and fruit into her mouth.

“What do you think happened to her?” Wendy asked worriedly, grabbing Ranma's hand when he moved to a poke Ultear with a stick again. “And you shouldn't prod her like that Ranma-nii.”

“It’s the sadist in me imouto,” Ranma said with a smirk, shaking his head. “As for what happened to her, it looks as if she got attacked by a library or something.”

Wendy blinked. “Attacked by a library?”

“That's about right,” Ultear said having just finished her hotcake and reaching for another with one hand while giving Ranma the finger with the other. “But you'll get nothing out of me until you take care of me for a bit.”

Ranma laughed. “Hey that right there was progress. But what is this you come here to tell me the news and to be pampered at the same time? Are all councilmembers so egotistical?”

Ultear glared at him, and growled out, “You bastard, who do you think started us on this whole damn project!?”

“True I suppose,” Ranma said, though his smirk was once more on his face. “All right, Wendy, can you clean her arms and look at her fingers for us? I’ll make her some tea; that should help sooth her more than orange juice, especially if I add a bit of the sauce.”

By the time Ultear’s arms were cleaned and her fingers seen to, Ranma had left the house and come back with some rum. It gave the black tea an interesting taste, but it was good and it soothed too, not a small consideration considering that Ultear’s nerves were still frazzled despite riding to Magnolia on the Magic Council’s Speedy Carpet, a magic carpet that could cover the breath of Fiore in less than half a day.

“So, as I said, or think I did anyway, we've discovered what Nirvana is,” Ultear said as she sipped her tea, “where it is and how it was hidden.” She shuddered. “We've also discovered that the Fiore Magic Council **seriously** needs to organize its hidden archives. Stacks upon stacks of papers,” she went on, her voice a drone, looking as if she was traumatized. “Things coming alive in them, like cockroaches, only evolved! One moment you're pulling files out trying to find dates, trying to find what they actually say and realizing that good penmanship **really** should be a necessity for high office, then out of the paper stack comes this giant cockroach **thing** as large as your face, looking for all the world like it wants to eat your eyeballs! And the sheer amount of paper and writing, and organizing and oh my god so much freaking paper and spells suddenly going off, containment fields shattering as you look at them and gahh!”

*I think I needed to bring more booze,* Ranma thought, scratching at his pigtail as Ultear started to cling to Wendy, practically weeping into the shorter girl’s hair. Wendy just patted the older girl on the head looking a little flummoxed as to what to do.

It took Ultear three more cups of rum enhanced tea and more food before she was somewhat back to normal. “Anyway, we were able to find everything we needed to plan and ambush the Oración Seis. What about you? Have you been able to gather up a combat force? Since we haven’t heard any rumors about unusual moves among the guilds I’d assume you have at least been able to be circumspect about it.”

“We have, we've even figured out a way to gather them here in Magnolia without drawing much attention. We’re all going to be meeting here in two days, during the Fantasia event,” Ranma replied.

“Good thinking,” Ultear said with a nod. “Still, this isn’t so interesting that I want to tell it multiple times, so who among Fairy Tail are you going to be taking on this mission? If you could gather them here now, I’ll tell all of you about what we discovered at once. Laxus at the least might have some insight.”

Ranma nodded, and left once more, returning a few moments later with Laxus, Erza, and Mirajane. “Only S class?” Ultear asked. “Smart thinking I suppose, although, if the Oración Seis have gathered their own forces as our contacts indicate, you’ll find yourself lacking the numbers to face them.”

“We have a few others waiting in the wings,” Laxus said with a grunt. “And both Jura and the two S-class mages from Blue Pegasus might bring some of their own mages.”

Nodding at that, Ultear reached into a pouch she had brought in and pulled out a large map of the peninsula of Ishgar, and then a few smaller maps, setting them on the floor in front of the sofa. One of the smaller maps was a map of Fiore, the other a map of Seven and the third Bosco. She then took out a few markers, small gray beads, which she began to down in seemingly random places. “These gray dots indicate Dark Guilds that are known to be associated with the Oración Seis in Fiore, Bosco, and Ishgar.”

“Sixteen of them,” Laxus said taking in the numbers at a glance. “Interesting. And of course their locations are known since the locals are too terrified of retaliation from the Oración Seis.”

“But if we cut off the head of the snake, surely those 16 guilds will be easy to round up afterwards with this information,” Erza said. “Indeed, we could even send out teams at the same time, The Thunder God Tribe for certain.”

“True, but I bring it up because of this,” Ultear said pulling out a single red pebble. “Like I said we found what Nirvana, something the Oración Seis is looking for, and it's right here.” She set the red pebble down in the south of Seven, near, as Ranma would figure it anyway, to the border with Bosco, what Ranma thought of as the hump of Bosco. This was the Worth Woodsea, a vast forest which spread along the borders between Bosco and Seven, then entered Iceberg at its westernmost point.

He looked at the map for a moment blinking and Wendy gasped.

“What is it,” Mirajane asked, looking at the younger girl.

“That's actually kind of near where Wendy and I met,” Ranma said, pulling at his pigtail thoughtfully. “Odd coincidence that. But what is Nirvana?”

“A magical weapon created by a long the dead tribe called the Nirval or Nirvit, the writing’s so old and just horrible it was hard to tell what the real spelling was supposed to be. It was created, as far as we can tell, before Seven was created, even before the creation of Fiore.” Since Fiore had been a constituted, united, country before any but Pergrande and Minstrel, that was a long time ago for certain. Although, Ranma figured it wasn’t as ancient as the country Erza’s ancestor had ruled. “We don't know how it works, only that it is a city -sized weapon, an area of affect kind of thing, which can turn enemies into allies, and light into dark.”

“That is an extremely broad summary,” Erza said delicately.

“It sounds like semi-religious claptrap to me,” Ranma said with a grunt, echoed by Laxus while Wendy just looked worried.

“Yes, but, if it actually exists and can turn people who are good into bad, and maybe put them under the control of the individual who controls weapon in the first place, you can see why a Dark Guild would be after it,” Ultear replied with a somewhat theatrical scowl, not that any of the people in front of her picked up on the fake nature of her expression.

Even Master Hades had certainly been interested in the concept. However, after questioning Ultear closely on what had actually been written about Nirvana, he had determined that the weapon didn’t sound as if it could be truly controlled. “No,” Hades had said, “This weapon sounds more like a kind of war deterrent rather than a war ending weapon, something that will cause untold chaos on both sides. Be on the lookout for more information, perhaps Brain has discovered a way to control and direct the effect better than that.”

After that, Hades had given her permission to volunteer to go on this mission as a Council Representative. Since Gran Doma wanted this to be shown as a joint operation of the Seven/Fiore councils of magic under his new leadership, that was a necessity.

“Another world domination scheme,” Ranma said with a sigh. “God that’s boring.”

“So what, you want us to destroy it? I thought we were going after the Oración Seis,” Laxus said, a sneer on his face.

“A bad hunter follows, a good hunter waits,” Ranma said before Ultear say anything. “The Oración Seis, they've known where it was for a while haven't they?”

“We believe so yes, although we don't know how they figured it out,” Ultear said with a frown. “They didn't discover it from our archives at least, a positive byproduct of how freaking cluttered they are, though it hurts to say it. At any rate, we know that they have discovered it because four of these Dark Guilds,” she said gesturing to the gray pebbles, “have, according to Seven’s government, moved into that area in the past few months, and have started to scare people away from it.”

There she paused, and seeing Ultear wanted someone to ask a question Mirajane did. “Why aren’t the Oración Seis heading there themselves?”

“Because they lack the key to get in. The reason why Nirvana was even mentioned in our archives was because the Council of Seven and the Council of Fiore worked together at some point two hundred plus years ago to seal it away behind a giant illusion and protective shield of some kind. Without the correct key they won't be able to get to the weapon,” Ultear said.

“But…” Laxus said leaning back on the sofa he had commandeered with a sigh. “I'm sensing a ‘but’ here.”

“But, about three weeks ago the Royal Library of Stela was ransacked. Several old documents, and in particular, magical items were missing. A few of those had originally belonged to Seven, lost in a war between the two countries centuries ago, when Seven was a lot larger than it was today.”

Ultear shook her head tiredly. “Two of them in particular belonged to the Council at the time: a bracelet and something our records call the ‘Eye of Kuhn’, though what it is I have no idea. So we fully expect them to head to this place soon if they are not already. But they are still, as of yesterday, in Joya, possibly searching for something else they think they need. So if we move within the next few days, you all will have time to beat them to it and set up a trap for them.”

Ranma frowned. That sounded a little too much like wishful thinking, given there were four minor dark guilds already in the area. *But at the very least, we can wipe those guilds out before the Oración Seis get there.*

“The train system between Fiore and Seven is extremely good,” Erza said, marking out the distance. “If we leave from Magnolia, we should be at the border in six days, and from there to the nearest train station within one more. From there, maybe another day, perhaps less to reach the outskirts of the forest.”

Ranma marked out the distance, and estimated that it would probably take him and Wendy around seven days in total if he ran the whole way, and could keep going in the same direction without making detours, which given what he knew of the lay of the land was not very likely. Moreover, the others wouldn't be able to travel so fast.

“So, seven days on a train,” Laxus said, looking a little queasy at the idea. Ranma groaned too, and Wendy whimpered.

However, Erza was not as sympathetic as the three Dragon Slayers could have wished. “You all can sleep for most of that I suppose, and looking at this way, if the idea of that doesn't make Natsu stop bothering us to join the strike team, nothing will.”

“Speaking of, is this actually legal?” Mira asked, looking over at Ranma. “Don’t you have to clear it with the king of Seven since we’re bouncing across the border?”

Ultear and Ranma both nodded, and Ranma sighed. “Yeah, I might as well do that right now.” With that he waved the others to one side the room and said, “If you lot could keep quite that’ll make this go quicker.”

As the others retreated to that side of the room Wendy leaned in eagerly watching with her eyes glowing slightly as Ranma activated his Ranger broach contacting the king of Fiore. A short conversation later, and the images of both Toma and Meredrain’s faces were floating in front. Ranma outlined the plan going forward, and, as everyone else watched with various expressions ranging from amusement - Laxus - to awe - Mira and Erza - he asked Meredrain to pave the way for them anyway he could without being obvious about it. “We want to surprise these bastards if we can after all. But I figure since we’ll be doing so in Seven you deserved to know.”

“Gee, you are going to start what amounts to a miniature magical war in my realm and you ‘think’ I need to know?” Meredrain replied wryly. “If I took your blasé attitude at face value Ranma I truly would be concerned about you keeping that broach of yours.”

Ranma rolled his eyes. “You lot’ve got courtiers and your little toy soldiers to make nice, me I get stuff done. In this case, shutting down one of the three strongest dark guilds out there and maybe paving the way for more.”

“True. I’ll do what I can on my end, and yes, this Ultear from Fiore will have my full permission to requisition anything she needs, I’ll have the paperwork sent to her so she’ll be acting under my orders, since Seven’s Magic Council of course doesn’t have the power of Fiore’s,” Meredrain finished, looking slyly at the older Toma.

“Was that a dig in my direction? Well, I won’t say it wasn’t justified. I have been rethinking the amount of autonomy my nation’s Magic Council has of late,” Toma said, causing Ultear to wince on the other side of the image, though of course, neither king was aware of their hidden audience. “Still, that is a question I must think about most seriously in the future. “For now, Ultear has my confidence as well. Just shut the Oración Seis down, Ranma. Their plots and this plan to revive an ancient weapon worry me tremendously.”

Meredrain nodded, and without another word the two of them signed off. Smirking at his friends Ranma shrugged. “Well, that’s that.”

Over the next two days, the mages of Fairy Tail started to prepare for the Fantasia Parade and other mages from all over the country started to arrive, including Jenny, Jura, and, unfortunately, their hangers on. This proved to be a bit of an event, as Ranma had thought it might be given Erza's reaction to Laxus agreeing to let one of them in particular come along on this mission.

When they arrived, Ranma was standing in front of Erza at the bar, gesturing to one side with one of her swords, as he showed an example of a sword strike he had learned in China, which relied on smacking the flat of the blade of your own sword against the side of your opponent, using the bounce from this to aim the tip towards the enemy’s face. As he finished the move, the door was pushed open and the voice of Hibiki sounded out. “Greetings from Blue Pegasus to Fairy Tail! We the Trimens, have come here to brighten up your day prior to this evening’s festival!”

“That's right, but of course only the days of the womenfolk will be brightened by our presence,” Eve said, smiling brightly as if he hadn’t insulted more than two-thirds of the guild in front of him.

“Indeed, all the men should leave,” Ren said with a much more honest scowl.

“Have a nice day,” the trio of pretty boys said as one, moving to the side and bowing towards the door as if ushering every men within the guild out.

The response to this was, needless to say, rather negative, from the men folk anyway. “What was that you bastards!” a wall of voices yelled.

“Are you trying to pick a fight!?” Natsu shouted, sounding more excited than annoyed at the prospect.

“Don’t think just because you're pretty that you’re strong! A real man talks with his muscles!” Elfman roared.

Among the girls though were several delighted shouts. “Oh my God, its the Trimens! They're so cool!” one girl with glasses and purple hair shouted. “Wow, is that Hibiki! Damn he’s even hotter in person!” “I just want to pinch Eve’s cute little cheeks!”

Before anyone could move beyond shouting however, two more people pushed in behind the three pretty boys. “Enough you fools! We are not here to cause a ruckus, we are here to merely to pay our respects as is proper. Men!” She shorter of the two spoke, with a affected accent and a little verbal tick at the end.

“Of course master Ichiya!” Said the three pretty boys, bowing from the waist.

The new individual standing in the doorway was short, squat and block shaped, that was the impression Ranma got. Well that, and he was just damn ugly. He wore a decent looking white suit and stood with some confidence on super short legs with a stocky body, but his face was unshaven, his chin was two sharply defined squares on the backdrop of wide cheeks, he had messy light brown hear was just ugly in Ranma's opinion.

He seemed to not be the only one who share that opinion, because Erza had taken one look and shivered, moving almost as if she wanted to bolt, as she muttered. “Ugh, Ichiya!”

The man paused in the doorway, sniffing the air and turning in her direction at once. “But hark, this sweet parfume this could only be my honey! Erza!”

He leaped in her direction, and Erza responded quickly, grabbing him out of the air and twirling around shouting, “Who's your honey, you perfumed cube!” She hurled the man away, to slam into the far side of the guildhall and Ranma could hear the men shouting ‘men, macho men’ for some reason as he bounced along.

“Nice throw and catch,” Ranma said, with a smirk, handing Erza her sword back. “So that was that Ichiya guy? Huh, now I know why Happy, Laxus and Mira were teasing you about it. Still, don’t worry, I bet every S-class mage has to deal with unusual stalkers. Yours just happens to be another S-class mage.”

“Oh don't get me started!” Erza grumped before trying rather desperately to look on the bright side. “Still, you wouldn’t think it at first glance, or even the second or third, but he’s got some interesting skills with those magic perfumes of his.”

Ranma was about to reply when two feminine arms wound around him from behind, and two soft objects pressed into his back. “Not even going to say hi to me, handsome? I'm hurt.”

Jenny was dressed in a loose, flowing skirt in light purple which stopped right above her breasts and went down to her caves in a single piece, but with a long slit open to the side of it starting at her waist. Underneath was a white skirt with a slightly smaller slit that went down to her ankles. She had the same necklace on as the last time Ranma had seen her, coupled with a gold torque on the arm opposite her guild mark and a bracelet on the other wrist. Her hair was loose down her back in a flowing wave of gold, and a red flower was stuck behind her ear.

Ranma turned his head, rubbing his nose against Jenny's cheek, “Hi Jenny,” he breathed, inhaling the scent of her, putting an arm around her in a brief hug as he whispered. “I’m happy to see you gorgeous, but what’s with the clown troupe?”

“Hey yourself,” she said back, releasing him with a faint flush on her cheeks but sitting close by as she sent a smile towards Mirajane who was moving through the crowd now, trailed by her two sisters. They had been out back working on their parade float, the Strauss Special. Elfman, fumble-fingered as he was, had been sent inside earlier. “Mira, Anna, good to see you both!” she said, leaning back against the side of the bar and ignoring Ranma’s question for the moment.

She looked over at Erza and held out a hand. “I don't think we've ever actually met, have we? Jenny Realight.”

“We haven't, but we have a mutual rival in common,” Erza said with a faint smile, indicating Mira with a jerk of her head as she took the other woman's hand squeezing it as she would Mira becoming somewhat surprised by the strength of Jenny's grip. It was hard to remember sometimes, but Jenny Realight, for all the fact that she was at as famous a model as Mirajane, was also in S-class mage. *For all his quirks, Master Bob was a Fairy Tail S-class mage himself at one point. I should not underestimate anyone from his guild I suppose, even Ichiya.*

“Seriously Jenny, is there any reason why you brought the pretty boys and whatever that thing is supposed to be along?” Ranma asked quietly, gesturing towards the hole Ichiya’s body had created when Erza threw him.

Jenny laughed shaking her head. “Actually, Master Bob decided to send them along with us. He was worried about us not having enough ‘boots on the ground’ was the phrase he used for our, ahem, little shindig to come.”

Ranma blinked and then shrugged.

“Where is master Makarov?” Jenny asked looking around. “We to check in with him. Courtesy, you know.”

“Meeting with the mayor finalizing the order for the Fantasia parade,” Erza said. “He should be back in about an hour or so.”

At that, Jenny smiled brightly causing more than one man in the crowd of Fairy Tail mages to gain hearts in their eyes. Mira was one thing, yes she was pretty, but she was also scary as hell, so her impact was lessened quite a bit. But Jenny was, to their knowledge, just a sexy as hell model. “Oh yes. I'm actually looking forward to this, I haven't been able to get away from my modeling gigs to come and see the famous parade yet, but it's supposed to be one of the greatest magical events in Fiore.”

“We’ll be sure to put on a good show for you!” Mira said with a smile, hugging Jenny once then moving aside to let Anna do the same. Though they were of course rivals, each of them vying to be the number one model in the country, they still respected one another. And Anna, not being in direct competition with her actually got along quite well with Jenny.

“So you're going to be joining this party of ours? You sure you going to be up for it Jenny? It's been a long time since you took a combat mission after all.” Mira teased, having lowered her voice slightly.

“Don't underestimate me Mira,” Jenny replied tartly. “Unless you want to have a sparring session right here?”

“Oh that sounds interesting!” Erza said with a laugh. “Perhaps I should step in too, after all if we will be fighting alongside one another, we should know one another's abilities?”

“Sounds like a good idea to me,” Ranma said with a smirk.

“Oh? Then maybe you should change forms, that way we could sell tickets!” Jenny said with a laugh. “Four Fighting Flowers, duking it out!”

Ranma stuck out his tongue at her, but before Jenny could reply, Hibiki and Ren finished dealing with their ‘fans’ which in this case meant dodging Natsu and a few others who had taken offenses at their entrance. There were only two of three girls in the guild who seemed to look at them kindly, which must have been a shock to their systems, though they didn’t show it. Indeed, no sooner had they convinced Natsu and the others they didn’t want to start a fight than Ren and Hibiki started to flirt with Anna, Mirajane and Lisanna, putting their arms around the younger girl’s shoulders while smiling invitingly at Mira.

This brought a natural reaction from Elfman and Natsu. “What do you think you're doing you assholes, get away from my mates!”

“It’s not manly to hit on a brother’s sister in front of them!”

To one side, Eve was trying to flirt with another girl Ranma hadn’t met yet, the same a purple-haired girl with glasses who had seemed enthused about the pretty boy’s arrival earlier. He seemed to be getting somewhere, but Ranma wondered if that was a good thing for the kid considering the glint in the girl’s eyes. *Somehow, I don’t know if he’d be the man in that relationship…*

“How unsightly, the weak dogs yapping at one another before the true powers of this alliance arrive. Stand down you fools,” said a haughty voice from the doorway.

Ranma blinked and turned, then groaned. “What the… Jura, why the **hell** did you bring those two weaklings along?!” he asked, shouting the words for the entire guild to hear.

“Weakling! This coming from you, who would not hold a candle to Jura,” Lyon the Ice Make mage said with a scowl.

“I'm sorry, who was it who couldn't last more than five minutes against me, when I wasn't even using my magic?” Ranma said waving him off. “Word of advice asshole, reflected glory doesn’t work the way you seem to think it should.”

To one side Gray had just come in from where he and Loke had been working on their float. The two of them had decided to make one together months ago, so even though Loke had been outed recently by Lucy as a Celestial Spirit, they had decided to continue the work on it. Lucy and Cana were working together to create one, though theirs was nearly finished.

Now Gray stopped and blinked, staring at his fellow Ice Make user. “Lyon, what the heck?” His tone was confused, as if he wasn’t really certain what he was asking, there were so many questions he wanted answered just now.

“I apologize,” Jura said, his voice deep and resonant as he moved through the others at the bar. “My guild master was concerned that we wouldn't have the numbers to face the Oración Seis if they called in all of their dark those Dark Guilds that look to them for protection from persecution.”

Don’t worry about it sir. My own Master thought the same,” Jenny said, standing up and holding out her hand. She was somewhat intimidated by the large, bald mage, but she decided to put her best foot forward. “Jenny Realight.”

“I have heard of you Ms. Realight,” Jura said, his large hand engulfing hers in one of his own massive hands, before he turned and nodded respectfully to Ichiya who had just leaped across the guildhall from the hole in the wall he had made earlier. “Ichiya, well met.”

“Jura, your parfume is as powerful as ever, excellent, men!” Then he looked at Ranma and Wendy, crossing his arms in front of him, his pinky and ring finger extended. “But the two of you, your scents are new to me, yet even that newness cannot hide the fact they are powerful! For such a powerful parfume to come from a dainty young girl is unprecedented, and your strength, your perfume is odd, built of many parts for some reason, men.”

Ranma looked at Ichiya in surprise, and with a slight hint of respect. “That was surprisingly insightful given my first impression of you,” he said with a grin.

To one side of the gathered S-class mages Gray and Lyon where glaring at one another while Sherry found herself flustered as Loke started to flirt with her, rather well too going by her blush. Nearby Cana and Lucy found themselves under the assault of Ren and Eve, who had turned away from the purple-haired girl, almost running away from her in fact, even now he looked more disturbed than anything else. Neither Trimens seemed to notice that Cana and Lucy were not interested, though that might be because Cana was egging them on, gesturing down to her beer stein.

At the same time, Hibiki had kept up his own interests in Anna for just a bit too long after Natsu’s earlier warning, and was now sent sprawling by a punch from Natsu that sent him into the table where Cana and Lucy were being flirted at by Ren. This seemed to be the signal for an all-out Fairy Tail brawl, with Lyon gleefully taking the opportunity to “…prove my superiority once more against you Gray!”

Jura looked in that direction, then shook his head, then smiled and took a drink that Mira had just prepared for him “Do you think we should stop them?”

“No,” Ranma, Erza, and Mira said all at once. “Let them get their energy out this way. They’ll make less trouble the rest of the day,” Erza went on.

The S-class mages continued to talk to one another, as Erza and Ranma gave a description about Midnight and Cobra from their battles in the Tower of Heaven explaining their abilities and known magical powers. To one side the fight continued to grow, pulling in more of the Fairy Tail guild as it did.

It stopped abruptly when the master returned, pushing the door open and immediately going giant size as he bellowed out “what the hell is with this ruckus so early in the morning! You fools, with Fantasia coming up tonight you're going to use all your energy up like this!?”

That made most of the Fairy Tail mages back off, but Lyon smirked, standing there nearly naked as he grinned at Gray as he backed away. “So scared of that little shout, then I suppose that means that I win this match doesn't it?”

“Juvia thinks that the new pretty boy should be quiet,” said a new voice, moving out from around Makarov’s still Titan-sized form. Juvia scowled as she looked around at the ruckus, her eyes lighting up as she saw Anna and Lisanna, moving in their direction while exchanging a nod with Natsu and Ranma, who she had talked to a time or two as a fellow water mage. “While Juvia acknowledges that the irony is rather cutting, Juvia still finds it very rude that he decided to try to start a fight in someone else's Guildhall.”

Instead of responding to what Juvia had been saying however, Lyon was too busy staring at her, his eyes wide, his face going red. “Wow!” From behind his back, he pulled out a bouquet of flowers holding them out. “Your beauty is hot enough to melt my ice! I've fallen in love with you, please go out with me.”

Juvia blinked, flushed and then quickly backed away. “So creepy!”

“Love at first sight?” Ranma said blinking. “That’s a new one.” *Around here anyway. Please don't make him into a Kuno, please don't make him into a Kuno!* To shake that thought off, Ranma turned to look at Sherry and then Jura in confusion. “Wasn’t Lyon and the curly-haired girl involved anyway?”

“Unfortunately, I believe that is a one-sided infatuation rather than anything truly real,” Jura replied, one eyebrow rising in surprise up his face as he looked at Lyon as he moved towards Juvia, who in turn was trying to leave him behind.

Seeing this, and Wendy coming in from the back door with Carla and Happy where they had been looking at the parade floats in the back, Ranma decided to do his good dead for the day. “Hey! No stripping in front of my little sister you asshole!” With that he launched forward over Juvia’s head, his escrima sticks (he needed the bit of added range) flashing out to slam in a one-two blow on both Gray and Lyon’s heads flinging them in different directions to slam into opposite walls of the guildhall.

Juvia looked at him gratefully then moved over to where Ranma and the others were, along with Makarov, who slowly shrank down to his normal size. As they did, Mirajane asked. “Master, you were gone for a long time just to talk to the mayor, was there something wrong with the parade?”

“No, just forms to fill out. Since we decided to postpone the Miss Fairy Tail Contest till tomorrow instead of having it first, we had to shift some of the advertisements around,” Makarov replied with a glare at Ranma. “Since someone here is stealing away two of our largest draws.”

The Miss Fairy Tail Contest was part of the Fantasia Festival, not quite as big as the parade, but something that a lot of the locals looked forward to almost as much. This year with Erza and Mira missing the contest was going to be much smaller, and that had forced Makarov, Reedus and the mayor to scramble and redraw posters and other things of that nature. Ranma had even made this problem worse by pointing out that they couldn’t say anything that would hint to the two of them being on a secret mission, lest it somehow get back to the Oración Seis.

However there Mira and Erza’s brawl when Ranma and Laxus had returned from visiting Blue Pegasus worked in their favor. The news the two of them had hurt one another and damaged the guild in a brawl, and were being forced to endure their injuries under Porlyusica’s tender mercies, made a lot of sense to everyone. The two of them had even gone along with the ruse, acting subdued and contrite in front of the rest of the guild, whom Makarov knew couldn’t keep a secret to save their lives.

“Besides that, Juvia had a proposal that she wanted to talk to me about,” Makarov looked at Ranma. “Is that councilwoman still here?”

“Nah, but I can get in touch with her quick enough. She gave me a communication lacrima to use in case something came up. Why?” Ranma asked, looking over at Juvia with a smile. He felt rather sorry for her having been stuck in Phantom Lord. Ranma knew all about being caught in a situation you couldn’t get out of, and of dealing with people’s expectations too.

Juvia flushed, looking down at the ground. While Ranma had always been kind to her, she was still occasionally embarrassed about the joke he and Erza had made about her when they ‘met’ during her and her former teammates attempts to kidnap Lucy. “Juvia wants to speak to the council on behalf of Gajeel, ask him to work for them on missions such as the one Master Makarov has told me Ranma is going to go on soon. Gajeel was Juvia's only friend in the guild really, and only obeyed because it was the orders of the Guild Master. He really isn't as cruel as you might think, and never really did anything cruel or unusual that the guild master didn't order him to do. Further, he's strong! He could be a major help.”

“I’ll speak up for him as well. When I spoke to him after that mess finished he reminded me of someone else, someone else who was going down a dangerous path at one point, and who wasn't turned away from that path in time,” Makarov said sighing. “Besides, he’s a young man yet, he can learn best by example rather than punishment.”

Ranma shrugged, and Requipped the communication lacrima, handing it over to Makarov who took it but didn’t move to use it just yet, looking at Jura, Jenny and Ichiya. “Anyway, why don’t you all step into my office? We need to talk about this mission of yours more Ranma,” he said, whispering the last sentence.

In Makarov’s office they found Laxus laid out on a sofa, an icepack on his head. “Hehehe, that’s what ya get for trying to outdrink someone who can magically make the alcohol in her body disappear dude,” Ranma said with a laugh.

“Oh shut up!” Laxus groused. “I still say that’s cheating!”

“Ooh, yeah, hangovers suck,” Jenny commiserated, while Mira just nodded.

Once Jenny, Ichiya, and Jura along with Ranma, Mira and Erza were inside the office Makarov shut the door and looked around at them all. “I take it from the fact that you both brought other mages from your respective guilds that your masters were concerned with the same thing I am, that we need to worry about the smaller guilt Dark Guilds throwing in with Oración Seis?”

“They are yes,” Jura said with a nod.

Outside, Loke paused from where he had been about to remove Natsu from where he was crouching, his ear against the door. Instead he leaned in covering Natsu’s mouth with a hand and holding a finger up to his own, listening intently.

“Why is that such a concern?” Ranma asked bluntly. He pulled out the maps Ultear had given him, and pointed to where they were going to be waiting heading for waiting to ambush the Oración Seis. “I understand that taking out these four Dark Guilds around here would be a good idea, but surely the others are too far away to matter.”

“You would think so,” Makarov said with a sigh. “But of all of the Balam Alliance members the Oración Seis have built up a reputation for being able to arrive when one of their subordinate guilds are being targeted and for viscously dealing with any force that attempts to do so. Stella lost a full army legion recently after having done so, and as for within Fiore... Well, there was a reason why Titan’s Nose didn’t police that Bora fellow itself months back. They were nearly wiped out after taking on a job that caused them in turn to capture a dark guild, which looked to Oración Seis for protection and then only by one member of Oración Seis.”

“That is what Master Bob explained to us,” Ichiya said with a grim nod. “We don't know what powerful parfume they use to do it, if one of their mages practices mass teleportation or some other means. But we know that they are somehow able to, and that is really all we need to know. If they can do that, we might find ourselves facing all the guilds beholden to the Oración Seis, not just that group themselves, men.”

Scowling Ranma frowned. “I hadn't heard of any of that, and they didn't do that when Wendy, Bisca, Alzack and I attacked that guild of spies and train robbers.”

“They haven’t been able to do all the time,” Makarov said with a shrug. “And perhaps that guild was on the outs with them, or rather, obeying two masters as it were. Regardless, it’s a real problem.”

Ranma frowned. There was something off about the way Makarov was talking some assumption there. But he couldn't quite put his finger on what it was. “All right, but…”

Just then the door burst open and Natsu leaped inside shouting “Oh yes! That's right! That means you have to take me with you Ranma, if you're going to open up the job to non-S class mages, you **know** you have to take me with you!”

Ranma rolled his eyes, and leaned back in his chair, propping his legs up onto Makarov's desk, ignoring the older mage’s growl of irritation at this. “Really kid, so does that mean that you finished those exercises I asked you to do the last time you attacked me? Or are you going to break your word again?”

Somewhat against his better judgment (yes Ranma had some, blame needing to watch over Wendy and Carla’s influence) Ranma liked Natsu, anyway, but he did not like the fact that Natsu would just up and challenge him or the others whenever he seemed to have the urge to fight. It was irritating and frankly not worth Ranma's time to deal with. But every time he would come back from meditating with Porlyusica, Natsu would be there waiting to challenge him.

“Who cares about those exercises, all that matters is that I'm stronger today than I was yesterday!” With that he shot towards Ranma low and with his arms spread like wings, but Ranma Requipped a toothpick of all things then flung it out to smack with deadening force into Natsu's forehead, flipping him ass over kettle to land at Erza's feet where she had been standing by the inner wall.

Erza grumbled and stepped back as Natsu popped to his feet, and made to charge again, only to find Ranma having disappeared from his seat, which was spinning gently behind him. “What, where did he...GAH!!!”

A hand to the back of his head suddenly slammed Natsu down, and Ranma landed on his back, holding him down with one harm, while reaching to his sides as Ranma looked up at Erza, taking in a moment to take in the view of her long legs and currently armored form standing above him. “Is he ticklish?”

“Very,” Erza said with a chuckle then proceeded to watch as Ranma, still holding Natsu down by the head tickled him until he was forced to leap away as Natsu literally burst into fire to get away from them. Still, the pink-haired boy was definitely feeling it, gasping and holding his chest, trying to glare as his face was set in a rictus of laughter.

“Enough! This is my damn office you two!” Makarov shouted. “If you're going to fight, take it to the guild training center in the back.”

“We’re not fighting,” Ranma said, “I'm making a point. Natsu, since I've met you, your magical power has grown, but not your skill with it. You need to build up on your skills and abilities, not just your pure brute strength. Or should I beat you up with another toothpick?”

Natsu growled, and realizing Ranma wasn’t getting through to him, Erza decided to step in, much to the chagrin of Laxus, who’d been enjoying the floorshow while Mira and Jenny had just been talking in the background. “While that is true Ranma, you cannot deny that Natsu's strength could be useful on this trip. Perhaps we should think about taking him with us?”

As Natsu beamed, Erza went in for the kill. “But, we also can't just bow to his demands, or else he'd never learn.”

“What am I, a pet?” Natsu growled.

“An attack dog of some kind for certain,” Ranma said with a smirk before sighing dramatically. “Still, Erza's right. We’ll take you along kid, if, you don't attack any of us until we leave, and don't blow up anything until after this Fantasia parade is done. Don’t make any trouble, don’t cause any issues and don’t pick fights until we leave tomorrow. If you do, we won’t take you with us.”

“Wh…” Natsu glowered. That was a mighty steep price to pay, since picking fights and causing a ruckus were his first and second favorite things. *But I’ve already promised to go around with Lisanna and Anna today…* “You promise?”

At that, Ranma growled. “No I'm not going to promise, because you don't seem to understand what those actually mean! Just take it or leave it, kid.”

Natsu scowled, but nodded and walked out. “Come on Happy! We need to finish our work on our parade float anyway.”

Ranma shook his head, and Jura chuckled, staring between him, the aloof Laxus and the departing Natsu. “You Dragon Slayer's, you’re like the phrase ‘it takes all sorts’ in miniature.”

“What does that mean?” Laxus and Ranma asked as one, while Erza, the master and the others all laughed.

From there, they continued to plan out this mission. Ranma still didn’t approve of bringing along so many non-S-class mages, but understood he wasn’t going to change anyone’s mind despite ostensibly being the one in charge of this mission. He did however insist on adding even more backup, but while this might have seemed rather quixotic, Ranma instead wanted Bacchus to go on an entirely separate mission that just happened to put him just over the border with Seven. “I’ll send Ultear a message on that score once you and Juvia talk to her now.”

There was a small reason for this, beyond Ranma doubting the combat effectiveness of the mages from Blue Pegasus and Lamia Scale beyond the S-class mages. Even worse in Ranma’s mind was that the number of mages made it almost certain that at the very least the four dark guilds already operation around the Worth woodsea would learn they were coming from just the rumor mill once they crossed the border. That meant the element of surprise would be lost, so having even more force nearby might prove a very good thing.

Ranma was about to say something, but then Jenny took his arm. “Come on, we've got a full day and night to kill. Why don't you show me around, Ranma?”

“That's a lovely idea,” Erza said, getting up as well. “After all, I don't think you've ever been to Magnolia before, have you?”

Jenny scowled but looking at Erza decided that the offer wasn't an attempt from Erza to block her from having some time alone with Ranma, and nodded her head. “Sure, and I'd like to get to know you further anyway.”

Chuckling, Jura waved them off, sitting across from Makarov. “Go play you lot. I’ll come out to see the parade later, but for now, I think I would rather sit here and speak with Master Makarov.”

**OOOOOOO**

At the same time that the legal Guild's were gathering their strike team incognito, the secret of their assault on the Oración Seis became known to the group in question. Because like the other guilds in the Balam Alliance, they had infiltrated the governments of Fiore and numerous other nations enough to be able to spot any move by any magical force against them. This one though did take Brain by surprise. “They have found a connection between us and Nirvana?! How?” Brain growled. “We have been very careful in covering our tracks, both our own research and everything else we have been up to.”

“I, I do not know how they initially cottoned onto it master,” said a young man by the name of Timothy at the other end of the communication lacrima. He had been one of Brain’s researchers at Bureau of Magical Development in Iceberg, and had migrated to Seven. There he had gone to work for their Magic Council, which was more a council of research grants and other such than a true governing body of magic, which was even truer now that they had begun to merge with that of Fiore. “But it is clear that the Magic Council of Fiore knows what you're aiming for and this Ranger Ranma is after you.”

Brain looked over at Midnight, gesturing him tersely towards a large pack to one side of the hotel room they were currently sitting in. Midnight rolled his eyes, but moved in that direction. Much of his arrogance had been beaten out of him during the fight in the tower against Ranma and the others, and he was much more likely to both obey the rules and actually be awake these days than he had been before. His fear of being hit though was still there, and there was more than a little honest terror in his face when he heard Ranma’s name.

The black and whitehaired youth pulled out a map of Fiore, then of Seven and then the five other countries wherein they had subordinate Dark Guilds, marked out on the paper by tiny dots of ink. One of their markers was glowing a deep red rather than black and Brain scowled. “Those would be the Sherwood Men wouldn't it? A spy guild that answered to you I believe, Cobra?” He asked his eyes and voice cold.

Cobra winced. “It's possible they might have heard about Nirvana I suppose,” he said hesitantly. “I’m sorry Master Brain, what with my recovery from the battle against the Ranger and Fairy Tail I didn’t think to check in with my subordinate guilds.”

“Damn spies, always spying on their employers too,” Brain muttered, waving that off since it was true for all of them. None of them had thought to check in on their tools since the Tower debacle. Even he hadn’t since he had been trying desperately to get the information from Jellal’s brain they needed to access Nirvana behind the defenses the ancient Magic councils of Fiore and Seven had placed on it. But that experiment had failed unfortunately.

Yet at the moment, even Brain didn't realize that a one of their subordinate guilds spying on them as well wouldn't have been enough to warn Fiore’s Magic Council about their target. And in point of fact it was kind of stretching the point of credulity given how none of the Oración Seis ever talked about Nirvana except with one another. Thus he didn’t realize that one of the other Balam Alliance members might've had a hand in this, let alone both of them acting separately to sacrifice his guild for their own purposes.

“What should we do? If they get to Nirvana first, they might decide to destroy it,” said Angel worriedly.

“True, if this is really started by this Ranma, he would no doubt destroy Nirvana if he could to remove it from play at the very least. No Ranger worth the name would do otherwise. But we still lack the key, unless…” Brain looked back at the still-open communication lacrima. “Do we know if someone from the Magic Council of Fiore is going to be accompanying this mission?”

“It's possible,” timothy said with a nod. “We weren't asked by them to offer any aid, but I don't know for certain.”

“We’ll get in touch with our spies in Fiore now to see if that is the case,” Brain mused, thinking on his failure with Jellal’s brain. “That might constitute an opportunity, but we will still have to beat off this attack.”

“If that fucking Ranger is leading them again and they bring in even more manpower we don't have enough combat power to face them,” Cobra said honestly. “Not unless you get personally involved Master Brain, and even then it might not be doable. Not with someone like Laxus the Lightning King or others on that level joining the ones we faced in the Tower.”

“To say nothing of Jenny Realight,” Angel muttered. She’d had a brief run in with the S-class mage from Blue Pegasus which had nearly ended her dark mage career prematurely a year or so ago. She had been saved only by the fact that Jenny hadn't actually been after her, but rather the individual that Angel, and her celestial spirit Gemini, had been imitating at the time. A quick change, an even quicker get away, and the use of Gemini as a decoy, and Angel had escaped. Yet she still shivered at the memory of almost being blown up along with the house that she had been hiding in at the time.

“True,” Brain mused. “Perhaps it is time to call in an old favor.”

“The other Balam Alliance members won't help us, you know that,” said Midnight caustically.

“No, none of them. Rather, we need to call in an old favor as I said.” Suddenly decisive, Brain began to bark out orders. “Racer, Cobra, get in contact with your subordinate guilds. Midnight, you and Hoteye will be in charge of concluding our business here in Joya. Angel, contact our spies in Fiore, we need to know the route they're taking. If we can figure that out, then we can ambush them someplace in turn before they can do the same to us. Meanwhile, I will be heading into Desierto to see an old acquaintance. If the Fairies are leading the charge, then we need to set a Raven on them in turn.”

**OOOOOOO**

As they were showing Jenny around town, Erza and Ranma talked with Jenny about her abilities, some of which were a little surprising, even to Erza who had fought Mirajane on numerous occasions. But unlike Mirajane, who relied on a small number of extremely powerful, versatile souls, Jenny was more like a combination of Mirajane and Lisanna: she had a few monstrously powerful Take Over forms, most of them based on Jenny’s conversation with Ranma years ago, and then she had several dozen smaller, less versatile or simply less powerful forms, some like cannons she had come across in her lifetime and others simpler things, such as flashlights, kitchen appliances, a train, a magical car, and more.

“But enough about that kind of stuff, we don’t have to even start worrying about that stuff until we leave tomorrow!” Jenny finally exclaimed, a little irritated by the fact their conversation had been so one-sided, and only about her combat abilities too. If not for the glances Ranma was sending her way occasionally she would be a lot more irritated than she was, but those, and the fact Erza’s own look had changed to a more appreciative rather than a simply appraising or distant one, had allowed her to put up with it until now. “What besides training do you lot do for fun around here?”

“It depends normally. There are the normal things, shopping, reading, a few bars, the city also has a few tourist attractions, and a tiny beach down underneath the cliff Fairy Hills resides on. But that’s normally. Today, the festival is on! And the stalls should start right around… here,” Erza said with a smile, as they came out a smaller street onto a slightly larger thoroughfare.

Normally it would be just that, but today, as Erza had known, it was the start of the section of the city given over to the Fantasia Festival. The entire street, which wound through the whole city of Magnolia (it was one of many roads designed to be used in the Gildarts Shift as well) was lined with booths of all varieties. Food booths, small clothing stalls, competitive games of hundreds of varieties, art displays, magical displays, goods of all kinds. The Fantasia Festival might have been built around the parade Fairy Tail put on, but it was a major event for nearly half of Fiore, bringing in merchants, artists and others from everywhere.

Erza had been the one leading them through the city, and had taken the long route, so she could get to know their new teammates abilities and to surprise young Wendy and Ranma, who had come by the guild so early that morning they hadn’t seen any of this getting set up. Erza had come away impressed, and not, as she had first assumed, with just how Jenny was able to keep her hair so well coifed. Jenny truly was dangerous, and not just to the libidos of the male population.

*Or mine, if I’m honest,* Erza thought, glancing down at Jenny’s rear as she and Wendy raced ahead into the crowd, already beginning to look at some of the stalls in delight. Erza had known for a while that she was somewhat attracted to girls as well as men, it was why she liked the dirty books she bought off Levy occasionally so much. And Jenny’s sensuality hit her almost as much as it occasionally did with Mira, although Erza would sooner have cut off both her legs than to admit to that last point.

She broke off that thought quickly as Ranma held out a hand to her. “What’re ya doin’ spacing out Erza, come on! I see a stall with one of those whack-a-mole challenges. I bet I hit more than you do.”

“Hah, you’re on!” Erza shot back, her competitive side coming out quickly as she followed on Ranma’s heels.

Jenny looked over from where she and Wendy had just bought some cotton candy to see the two other mages march through the crowd to the unsuspecting vendor with the whack-a-mole, then looked down at Wendy. “Bets on which of them destroy the machine first?”

“No bet,” Wendy said firmly. “I’m not allowed to bet money, not after…” She clammed up her hands going to her mouth as she looked away.

“Oh-hoh?” Jenny knelt down next to the shorter girl, poking her in the side, blinking a little. *Huh, she might be small but geez does she have some muscle on her. Hehe though I doubt given her age and how I was at that age that’s much consolation for the lack of curves.* “My gossip meter just went through the roof! Someone has a story to tell there, hmm?”

Wendy blushed and quickly looked around. “Ah, look, they are challenging the whack-a-mole device now!”

It worked, for now. “I’ll get that story out of you later Wendy, never fear. Still, who do you think will win?”

“If it’s a test of speed, Onii-chan will never lose,” Wendy said with a firm nod.

“Ranma’s strength is rather his only good point, and of his physical abilities his speed is the most impressive,” Carla groused, before turning and smacking a young boy’s hand away from her ears. “I am not a doll you can just pet child!”

“Wah they’re real! A real cat girl!” the boy shouted. He made to crowd forward, intent on touching Carla’s ears or tail, the sight of a young looking cat-girl completely entrancing him.

Seeing several other boys and young girls taking an interest, and noticing that Wendy seemed to now feel the weight of the crowd around them a bit Jenny grabbed her hand and pulled both of them along with her, putting a special model’s smile on her face and an extra twitch to her step. “Excuse us please.”

With that the crowd of festival-goers made way for them, the men and boys too busy blushing and gawking to think about trying to approach, and the girls seething with envy or confusion. Soon the three of them were by Erza and Ranma, who were busy in their mole-duel.

“Ora, oraoraoraora!” Erza shouted, her hands moving like lightning, smashing every mole in sight faster and faster. She was so fast the magic in the device couldn’t keep up and it began to let loose a dangerous fizzing noise.

But not quite as fast as Ranma. The score at the back of the game booth could not keep up with his score, the numbers changing so fast the wooden rollers started to smoke due to friction while his machine started to spark rather alarmingly. The stall owned stared at this aghast and began to shout, “You both win, you both win, just stop!”

“What’s the final score!?” Ranma and Erza shouted as they stopped, almost glaring at the man.

“Who cares!” the man shouted, handing out the first prize gifts, two large stuffed moles with tiny hats, pants, and beady eyes. “You both win, just go away please!”

“That’s oddly unsatisfying,” Erza growled, turning away in a huff even as she hugged the large mole creature to her.

Jenny laughed, reaching out to touch the head of the stuffed mole in Erza’s hands as Ranma handed his down to Wendy who promptly hugged it to her in delight. She preferred cats, but moles were cute too. “Heh, you wouldn’t know it by how tightly you’re holding this little one too you. Are you going to give it a name Erza?”

Nodding gravely Erza looked down at her prize. “Diggum.”

Jenny, Ranma, Carla, and even Wendy looked at her, their faces deadpan, and she flushed. “W, well, I’m not very good at naming things.”

“I’ll call mine Earthclaw then,” Wendy said stoutly.

“Well, obvious names aside, I say we move on,” Jenny said, looping one arm around Ranma’s waist.

Her smile widened when Ranma returned the gesture. “Jenny’s right. The parade doesn’t start until tonight, and you all don’t have to start setting up until what, seven right? That means we’ve got nine hours to take this festival by storm.”

“OOOh!” Wendy cheered, stuffing her new mole animal into her limited Requip space. “Let’s go!”

Erza nodded her head firmly. “Indeed, I normally have to limit myself severely, being so busy making certain the more rowdy members of our guild do not make any trouble, but with Grey busy with Lyon, Mira watching Elfman, and Natsu bound by his promise with you Ranma, I wish to truly enjoy this festival today.”

Grinning evilly, Jenny let her arm drop from around Ranma and moved ahead of him and the others, her hips beginning to sway once more as she put on her model vamp expression once more. This arrested both Ranma’s movements and Erza’s, though thankfully for the redhead no one noticed her sudden stasis. “In that case Erza, let me show you something really fun. I call it, the art of the mooch. Ranma, you can watch too. I still remember that time we met at Buckler park. It wasn’t bad, for an amateur.”

“Excuse me!?” Ranma squawked, sounding honestly affronted. “Girl, I am a past master at Mooch-fu!” he then looked at her with a frown. “And I thought you said that was letting the side down when we met all those years ago.”

“Oh, darling, there was nothing wrong with the act itself, It was just you were so…obvious, and the fact you did it to my fellow employer, Tommy or whatever his name was,” Jenny said over her shoulder. “Watch and learn.” With that she moved towards a nearby food stall, where she took a few moments to read the menu and look at the food, doing nothing but simply playing with her hair and bouncing in place very slightly until the four people in front of her had gotten their food.

Then she moved forward still playing with her hair as she gave the stall owner a bright smile, causing the man, a middle-aged fellow with a wedding ring visible on his hand, to blush hotly and look away. Behind him, his wife began to scowl, but before she could do anything, Jenny struck. “Hey,” Jenny said, her voice that of an utter airhead, “I was supposed to meet my friend here, but she hasn’t shown up yet. She’s got all our money, but I’m really hungry and, I, well, I know this is silly, but could you…”

“For you miss it’s on the house!” The man babbled, thrusting an example of every type of food his stall into Jenny’s arms. “Just promise you’ll bring your friend back sometime today miss, and I’ll even treat her too!”

“Oh thank you!” Jenny said, sending him a flirtatious wink, before finishing brutally, “he’s a keeper, isn’t he miss?”

She walked away quickly, while behind her the man paled and turned to his steaming wife. Returning to the others, she popped a stick of grilled beef and vegetables into Erza’s gaping mouth before sending a victorious smirk to Ranma. “And that is how you do it. No need to lean over and show him the goods, no need to touch his hand, nothing but your voice and a tiny, completely kid-friendly show.”

“Hmmpf! Of course you know, this means war,” Ranma said darkly, gathering some water into one of his hands from the atmosphere.

“Th, that, how… why…That was immoral!” Erza stammered. Despite her protests though she still kept chewing the food Ranma had popped into her mouth.

“How?” Jenny and Ranma asked as one, with Jenny elaborating on their confusion. “Erza, I didn’t hurt anyone, well, I might have caused him to get hurt by his wife, but that’s a grey area. Or are you worried about me scamming food in the first place? I could have Wendy or Carla go pay him if it bothers you.” That seemed to cause Ranma physical pain, but Jenny just shrugged. “I’ve done that a time or two, when I mooched a free bikini or skirt out of some unsuspecting fool, then gone back and paid the shop for them after. Food though, that is free game.”

“I, that… very well. If, if you truly go back and pay for anything expensive you, mooch is it? Well in that case I can hardly call it immoral or against the law, certainly not on the level of the damage many in my guild cause on a daily basis,” Erza finished ruefully.

“What are you talking about Erza?” Ranma said, then dumped the water over his head, turning into his female form. “You’re going to be doing it too. The more the merrier for this kind of thing.”

“Wh, but, how… that is, I couldn’t…”

“Oh please!” Jenny said, reaching over to tap her knuckles against Erza’s chest plate. “If we change you out of that thing girl, I bet you could help us cut a swath of destruction through this festival they would tell tales of for generations. Especially if you and Ranma can pull off the twin thing well enough.”

Ranma laid a hand on Wendy’s head. “Plus we’ve got Wendy and Carla here, so we can really hit up the cuteness angle.” Seeing Erza hesitating, Ranma threw an arm over her shoulders. “Come one Erza. Look at it this way, if this guys really fall for it, here in Magnolia where a lot of them should know you at least even if they don’t for some reason recognize Jenny, then don’t the idiots deserve to pay for giving into their libidos?”

Biting her lip, Erza looked away, then slowly nodded, blushing slightly at Ranma’s proximity. “Very, very well, but we’ll have to go someplace for me to change first, and you’ll have to teach me as we go, I’ve never done something like this before.”

Jenny and Ranma exchanged victorious smiles at that, and Jenny joined Ranma, throwing an arm around Erza’s shoulders. “Just leave it to us Erza. You’re in good hands.”

“I feel kind of sorry for them,” Wendy said before munching on the cotton candy Jenny had handed her. “But oh well, free food.”

“Ranma’s corruption runs deep I see,” Carla said with a sigh. But she made no move to stop the group, following on their heels as they made for a nearby alleyway to let Ranma get changed.

**OOOOOOO**

Bisca stretched her shoulders and arms luxuriously, turning and waving goodbye to the stable owner as he shouted out, “Have a good festival miss Bisca!”

“You too, Mr. OIron! Make sure to stop by in time to see the parade would you! And thanks as always for taking care of our horses.”

The man replied that it was his pleasure, and Bisca turned away heading deeper into the town with a faint smile on her face as Levy fell into step beside her. The boys had already raced off, intent on heading to the guildhall to finish work on their floats. Their mission had gone two days longer than it should have taken thanks to a group of thieves attacking their client, and then the same client arguing about paying them extra for dealing with them. But right now, Bisca couldn’t care less about that skinflint. “I am looking forward to this. Hmm… I wonder what Ranma is up to…”

Beside her Levy chuckled. “Aren't you worried about what Alzack might think about that? You and he did go out on a date last night, didn't you?”

“We did but…” Bisca frowned “it's like, I’m not certain how to explain it. Yes, I can tell that Alzack is genuinely interested in me, but look, he and I spent so long dancing around one another, and then when I started to give him signals that I wanted to move things along, he didn't really respond very well. And while I suppose finally going on a real date with him was… nice, that's really all it was. On a date I want more than nice.”

“So you're going to let him down slowly or something?”

“One date doesn't mean we’re dating,” Bisca said firmly. “I don't have to let him down slowly, there was no picking him up in the first place. I…” she sighed. “Look, I had this talk with Alzack while you and your teammates were arguing with that cheapskate caravan owner. Can we just drop it?”

To Bisca, her attempt to start a relationship with Alzack was nothing to really talk about at the moment. That ship had sailed in her view, it just wasn't sailing very quickly out of the harbor. “Are you going to head straight to the fair, or are you going back to Fairy Hills?”

“Back to the guild first. We've been away so team Shadow Gear will need to get the lead out if we want our parade float done in time, and whatever the boys think that means I’ll need to do my part. Even so, we might not be able to see the festival until after the parade.”

“In that case, I’m going to turn off here,” Bisca said, throwing an arm companionably around the shorter girls shoulder and giving her a brief squeeze as Levy returned the gesture. “See you later.”

For a few moments Bisca walked through the streets along Magnolia, hearing the sounds of the fair but in no rush, simply meandering. About 20 minutes later, she was at the first booth that offered a shooting competition. She was about to take her turn, when she looked around at a flash of red in the periphery of her view. Turning, Bisca saw Erza and Ranma going around the fair, along with someone she recognized as the model Jenny Realight, Wendy and Carla in her human form.

As she watched, the two redheads leaned into one another as Ranma talked to a vendor, who had hearts in his eyes. A second later, he handed over several cones worth of ice cream to each of them for no exchange of money that Bisca could see.

She blinked, and turned away from the shooting booth to continue to watch as the quartet made their way through the fair devastating one booth after another until they were spotted her, whereupon Ranma began to lead them over in her direction. “Hey Bisca,” he, or rather she, chirped, her eyes lit up with delight. “Having fun?”

Bisca stared at the short redhead and then began to laugh. “Hahaha, not hehe, nearly as much fun as you are!” she said, holding her stomach as she doubled over. *A man, a man turned into a woman admittedly, but still a man using the flirt technique to mooch food! God that’s hilarious!* “And how did you convince Erza to go along with this!?” That added to the humor in a major way in her opinion.

“We told her that we would return any money we scammed off them after we finished our tour of the festival,” Jenny said, holding out a hand. “You're the sharpshooter Bisca right? Ranma told me about you. You helped him find the dark guild that started this whole mission of ours?”

“Sort of yeah,” Bisca said with a smile still on her face shaking the other woman's hand despite feeling mildly self-conscious about her outfit and hair next to the runway model in front of her. Jenny was drop-dead gorgeous. While Bisca was sort of used to being around great beauties thanks to Mirajane, it didn't make meeting Jenny any easier. Well, at least when it comes to my chest size I’ve got confidence. Bisca could tell she and Jenny were pretty much of a size, though maybe Jenny’s were a slight bit perkier.

Jenny seemed to recognize Bisca’s discomfort and put her at ease with a smirk, gesturing with a thumb over to Ranma. “Can you believe that this, this aquatranssexual here thinks that he can flirt better than me!?”

“I can easily believe that, belief is a powerful thing, whether or not that stacks up to reality though is in question there,” Bisca said with a laugh. “Still…oh, excuse me, it's my turn.” At the booth owner’s loud harrumph Bisca turned and barely even looking shot down the twelve targets on the far side of the booth.

Ranma looked at her, deadpan. “Really? Really? The phrase ‘stealing candy from babes’ just springs to my mind.”

“Oh really?” Bisca said, moving over and poking Ranma in the chest, feeling Ranma’s breast give under her hard finger for a moment. “That's interesting. And what about what you lot have been doing? How many of these poor merchants have you put out of business?”

“Hardly any,” Ranma said virtuously, but she refused to meet Bisca’s gaze, looking away shiftily. “One or two, five or six at the outside.”

“I don't know,” Erza said dryly, looking down the street to where they had begun. “I think that one stall Jenny started us off at has closed down at the very least.”

“Besides, you speak as if you could give me challenge too. Don't make me laugh!” Bisca continued.

To that, not only Ranma’s but Jenny’s and Erza’s eyes narrowed. “Them’s fighting words,” Ranma said, the other two nodding agreement.

A part of Bisca quailed at that, knowing exactly how competitive Erza was and how strong too. But this, this was **sharpshooting**! This was her area of expertise, and Bisca would be damned if she ever backed down at a challenge in her own specialty. “Bring it on!” she growled in turn, Requiping her rifle.

Jenny smirked, holding out her own arm. “Take over, Cannon.” Around her arm there appeared a large gun, only of a different shape than most, the barrel having a rectangular shape to it and coming to a point. Ranma recognized the shape is one that he had seen in the islands: it was a pintle-mounted magical weapon their ships used to target the crew of enemy ships. “Where to first greenie?”

**OOOOOOO**

Makarov looked up from where he was helping Natsu with his float. This was a tricky one because it had a small bass and gigantic balloon attached to it shaped in the form of a dragon, which Natsu could crouch in the center of breathing fire out the mouth or moving the wings with his arms. The interior of the balloon, which was more a series of interconnected balloons around a complex frame, had to be fitted just so. “There's that sound again.”

“What sound?” Natsu asked, his voice muffled as he was trying to thump something into place in the gears of his balloon.

“As if a thousand merchants had cried out in agony as their profit margins plummeted, then were silenced.”

Natsu slowly pushed himself out from underneath his card to stare at his master. “Master, you know you're quite odd sometimes right?”

A heavy punch to the stomach shut him up. “I don't want to hear that from you!”

**OOOOOOO**

It took the foursome doing the shooting about fifteen to twenty minutes to go through every shooting game in the festival. These ranged the gamut from the traditional shooting cans off the back kind of booth, to hitting moving targets. There were even two that had trick shots where you had to shoot off the side or back of the booth to get a bullet into the mark. At each, two of the four would start, then be followed by the next two, the winners of which would then challenge one another.

Every booth had fallen to their assault their prizes taken unmercifully to the squealing of the booth owners. Worse for many of them, Erza and Bisca handed out most of their prizes to passerby as they went. Ranma shared his with Wendy, who handed the ones she didn't want out, or had doubles of, to other kids as they moved along, while also keeping more than a few, figuring that all of them doing that would glut the local market. Jenny surprisingly turned out to have a beanie obsession, and only handed out the smaller dolls or stuffed animals, keeping the larger ones in her Requip space.

Having reached the edge of the festival Jenny and Bisca were talking about if they should turn around and just back that way, or circle around and restart the tour at the other side of the festival. But Erza interrupted them, pointing over their shoulders. “I think we've outlived our welcome ladies,” she said, sending a wink Ranma's way, which caused him to roll his eyes.

“Oh no it's the fuzz,” Ranma groaned, looking in that direction and seeing several dozen men wearing officious looking uniforms and carrying clipboards. With them were a few of the stall owners.

“The what?” the girls asked all turning to look at them.

“Never mind, just a description for rule-abiding types I've heard used in my travels,” Ranma said with a sigh, looking down at his bag of purloined toys before looking around at the crowd. Then he smirked, shouted “Free toys for everyone!” and hurled the bag into the air, where it upended all the toys inside falling out into the crowd.

Children and parents alike immediately began to leap up and grab at the toys as they fell, jostling this way and that, but thankfully not coming to blows like they would have if Ranma had tossed out money like that. This of course got in the way of the festival officials who had been making their way towards the mages.

“Shall we?” Ranma asked with a smirk, smacking her hip against Erza’s, who laughed and led the way off.

After they had left the festival behind Erza shook her head. “Well I don't think we will be able to go back to the festival. Unless we go in costumes…” she finished musingly.

“I'm a bit festivaled out,” Wendy said honestly, carrying several stuffed animals and with her small Requip space equally stuffed full of other animals now. She also was looking a little tired. Dealing with that many people and that much noise was kind of exhausting over time.

“In that case how but we all go to the Fairy Hill beach? We've got another four hours or so before we need to get ready for the parade. We can have a bit of a cookout, see if the other girls want to join us, a bit of a swim, and then head back to the guild to put the final touches on our carts. Or at least Erza and I can and little Wendy too.”

“M, me!?” Wendy squeaked. But I'm not part of Fairy Tail!”

“But you are a friend, and besides, there's no better place to experience the fair then as part of the parade” Bisca said, smiling at the younger girl and leaning down to rub her head tenderly. “I know I’ve got room on my float for you, and I bet Erza could make room on hers. As fun as the festival is for others, it’s more fun for us to be a part of it, to see and use our magics all together. Trust me Wendy, you’ll love it.”

While Wendy continued to stutter and thank her for that, Erza and Bisca led the way to Fairy Hills, where they all changed into bathing suits and headed down to the beach. It was a tiny bit cold since it was actually autumn, but despite that, the sun was great and the water was pleasant enough to swim in for short periods of time.

Erza wore the same swimsuit she had at Akane Resort, as did Ranma and Wendy. Erza looked amazing in hers as Ranma had known she would, and she spent about ten hours (to his mind, it was actually only a minute) just staring at the other redhead after she came down from the dorm. Tied on both sides the bottom half of the black bikini covered everything it needed like a second skin, showing offer her bare thighs and covering her rear yet somehow making it seem even more enticing. The triangular cups of her bikini top covered all of her chest yet Erza’s breast size was such that it still made Ranma’s mouth go dry.

She blushed brightly under the other redhead’s gaze, but preened all the same as she laid out a beach towel next to where Ranma was laying out. Nearby Carla and Wendy was happily mapping out a whole sand city, the younger girl earnestly using a long stick to mark out where the foundations of each building would go, the outer walls and so on. Even Carla was getting into it, given how detailed Wendy was being about it.

“Do you want to continue our contests?” Erza asked, pulling out a volleyball ball from behind her.

“Heh, you’re on, we’ll make it a battle of the redheads!”

“Oy, what are we chopped liver?” Jenny asked, following Bisca down the small walkway to the beach.

Ranma turned and gulped then looked away, putting a hand over her eyes. “Damn it, there’s only so much stimulation I can take girls!”

Jenny wore a brief bikini top which was almost made to look like a mesh thing, made of gold and pink flowers interconnected, covering a lot of her chest but somehow not at the same time, Ranma wasn’t certain how to explain it. Her swimsuit bottoms were the same color, but didn’t have the near-see-through quality, although they hugged her hips and privates like a second skin. Her hair was done up in another intricate display rather than down her back as it had been earlier, her lightly tanned skin shone with good health and she smiled and posed for Ranma as Ranma turned to look at her and Bisca, bouncing a bit in place to set her breasts to jiggling very slightly.

In contrast, Bisca’s was a far more simpler design, yet just as attractive. Her bathing suit was the style Ranma had heard called a V thong or something similar. Consisting of a single piece, the bathing suit started at a v-shaped bottom portion before going up Bisca’s back and front in two long strips of black and dark green to cover the sides and top of her breasts. Those strips were quite wide, but even so, there was a quite a lot of Bisca’s chest on display there. Even better in a way, was her white skin in contrast to the black of her suit. She blushed hotly under Ranma’s gaze, biting her red-painted bottom lip and looking back at her, chuckling quietly. “Ah, I remember wearing a bathing suit like that once, when I wanted to make certain no one was going to be looking at me. Are you that self-conscious of your female body Ranma?”

“Hah, please!” Jenny said, moving forward with Bisca and then sinking down onto the sand next to Wendy, staring in awe at the ongoing city planning in front of her. “Ranma was definitely flaunting it a bit ago. I’d wager it’s more like selective body armor right? The idea of a guy flirting with you is a little…”

“It makes my fists itch and my mind ache at the very mention of it, yeah,” Ranma said with a smile, moving away from them as she used one foot to mark out a square on the sand a ways away from Wendy’s ongoing plans. “Still, no offense to either of ya, but those swimsuits don’t exactly look appropriate for a game of volleyball.” *I’d love the view though if they tried…*

“Hah, you’ve never heard of sticky spells then. These swimsuits won’t come off whatever we do,” Jenny replied as she stood back up before leaning in, whispering so that the nearby Wendy wouldn’t overhear. “Not unless we want them to…”

Ranma, Erza and Bisca all blushed, and Jenny laughed wickedly, moving away from Ranma to where she estimated a corner of the court should be. “Well come on, let’s get this bit over with then we can begin. But I vote right now the two redheads here should be broken up between the two teams.”

After playing and swimming for a few hours, Ranma began to get hungry and pushed out of the waves, trying his best not to stare as Jenny and Bisca attempted to fight back against Erza in a splash contest, the origin of which Ranma hadn’t seen, having been diving at the time. “Alrighty, I’m hungry, so I’m going to go change and then grab some stuff for grilling, I see a grill over there. If any of you want some of those girly veggies tell me now or forever do your own cooking.”

Bisca laughed moving out of the water. “Yeehaw, a cookout!”

About forty minutes later Ranma returned to find the girls had set up the beach area around Wendy’s town for a cookout. The outer wall of Wendy’s city was at just the right height to sit on the grill had been prepped with charcoal, and Bisca had brought along mushrooms and peppers to pair with the meat, while Erza had dragged two logs over to make a triangle with the wall. They had also been joined by several dozen Fairy Tail members, Jura, Lyon and Sherry. The Trimens were also there, but under strict orders on threat of pain from Erza not to make trouble.

As Ranma leaped down from the top of the cliff, Bisca looked up from where she had been talking with a thoroughly red-faced Alzack and Nab to smile at him, her eyes racking over his form, wincing only slightly when she spotted his scars. Ranma had taken the time to change, and now wore a pair of swimming trunks and nothing else. This put on display his lower legs and his upper body to the appreciative gaze of many a girl there. Most of them were used to seeing Gray and Natsu, but there was something different about seeing Ranma like this.

It wasn’t the definition. Ranma’s body was extremely fit, a six pack you could grate cheese with, the muscles on his sides and arms all so sharply defined they looked like they were carved out of granite, and besides definition he also had more muscles on him than either Natsu or Gray, though he wasn’t up to Laxus or Elfman in size. Still to Fairy Tail that wouldn’t have been enough.

No, it was the scars and the way Ranma moved that set him apart. First, Ranma moved like an odd mix between an unstoppable object and a cat, all prowling grace and harnessed confidence.

And Neither Natsu nor Gray, the two men whose builds came closest to Ranma’s, had many scars. Ranma had a lot of them. Most of them were small, but one of them was quite large, a jagged circle the size of Elfman’s fist or so right over his stomach and, when he turned, it was clear it passed right through his body. Everyone there took one look at it and winced, wondering what had caused it. Bisca sighed, having seen the back of it before during their trip to capture that guild of spies and train robbers, but not having seen it in as good a light as this.

Only Erza just nodded her head down at it as Ranma moved to the grill. She hadn’t seen Ranma’s bare stomach before this, but of all the guild, she was the last person to be turned off by scars. “There must be a tale behind that one. It looks like a claw of some kind made it.”

“Good eyes ya got there, Erza. Yeah, this was caused the first time I ran into a demon. The same one you and the others helped kill on Galuna Island, Deliora.” Ranma grinned like a shark for a moment, smacking his shoulder against hers. “I was only about twelve or so at the time, and the thing woulda killed me if not for Iceberg’s court mages. But I still made it run away rather than finish me off.”

Erza nodded at that, an equally vicious yet approving smile on her face as she did. Nearby Bisca, who had been standing still, just staring at that scar for a moment, moved over to them picking up the grilling tongs

The cookout continued from there, getting larger for a time as more Fairy Tail mages joined them. Ichiya and the others came down too, causing Jet to race out for more food, but eventually it stated to get dark out, which was a signal for everyone to start leaving to get ready for the parade. Jenny and the others left to, hoping to stop in at their hotels before heading back out to catch the parade.

“So where exactly should we set ourselves up for the best view of this shindig anyway?” Ranma asked, gesturing to Jura, Jenny and the other non-local mages as they left. “I can’t imagine being so lucky that my apartment’s balcony would give me a good view of the whole thing.”

“What do you mean?” Natsu asked innocently, as he looked at Ranma from where he had just eaten the fire out of the grill. “You’re part of the fair, so why would you care about where to go to see it?”

“What?” Ranma asked, glaring at him.

“I signed you up as singer for the centermost float, that way your voice can reach the entire parade. We saw you singing and acting like a bard, I thought it fit,” Natsu said virtuously.

Ranma's net eyes narrowed. He honestly couldn’t tell if Natsu had done this to be an ass or because he thought Ranma would enjoy it, but decided after a second to go with the idea of the other Dragon Slayer just trying to be an ass.

But Erza came to Natsu's room rescue, putting in arm around Ranma’s, shoulder and squeezing gently, blushing very lightly at the smell of Ranma’s hair and the feel of his muscles under her arms. “Come on Ranma, it's all in good fun, and you can't deny that you do have a good singing voice. You can join me on my float, and sing from there.”

“Fine, but I will pay you back for this Natsu, that’s a promise,” Ranma intoned darkly, glaring at the Fire Dragon Slayer. For some reason that finally got through to the younger man, and he gulped, backing away quickly.

Jenny and Mira both rolled their eyes and, in an almost choreographed movement, both took an arm and dragged Ranma away. “Come on you, let’s get you ready for your big debut.”

**OOOOOOO**

At the same time, Lucy and Loke found Makarov in his office getting changed for his part in the parade. He smiled widely at them as they came in, but at the looks on their faces, he sobered. “What is it you two?”

“Master, Loke here has a request. A request I think we need to help him with, to get some closure…” Lucy began.

**OOOOOOO**

Later on, Ranma found herself once more a woman, this time dressed in something Mira had loaned her, a slinky lounge singer number in black with portions that flashed with red sequins as she moved her arms or twisted this way and that. The chest was teensy bit tight and Ranma had to let out the waist a bit, not that she would ever mention it in front of Mira.

Next to him, Juvia stood in a light blue bikini and skirt combo. The bikini was a large type of bikini that covered everything there, but despite that, Ranma had to shake her head and look away with a blush because Juvia, for all that she never dressed to show off, was just as good looking as any of the other girls he had spent the day with. Her waist was trim, though she was a bit wider than any of the others, but she also was quite large up top too. Ranma would estimate her size being somewhere around Erza’s, and maybe a bit fuller. Jenny had also done her hair up into a crown of blue tresses that looked both casual and amazingly difficult at the same time, something Ranma would never have thought possible.

Her smile too was enchanting a wide and happy beam of pleasure as she stared up at their float. “Juvia has heard about the Fantasia parade, but never dreamed to see it, let alone be a part of it! Juvia is soo excited!!!”

Ranma winked at her. “So am I, kind of. Oh, I’d prefer to not be in my female form or sing, but this looks like a lot of fun. Just don’t tell anyone. I want to get Natsu back for sticking me into this without asking me first.”

Juvia looked at the redhead, giggling quietly. She had seen Ranma’s curse in action several times by this point, and had gotten used to it, though there were still a few times it caught her by surprise. She had also enjoyed the few conversations the two of them had about water magic. So she brought a finger to her lips and winked back at the other girl. “Juvia promises to keep your enjoyment of this secret, Ranma-san.”

“Great.” Ranma replied with a smile, before turning his attention back up to the float. It looked like a representation of the guildhall in miniature, only done in garish colors and with a small balcony like structure going around it halfway up the sides of the wall. Above it was a banner proclaiming the name of Fairy Tail and below that was the stage where Ranma would be singing, complete with two large speakers.

It was the largest float, but in many ways it was the simplest looking. Bisca, Alzack, Nab and Max Alors had one that looked like a series of horses pulling a large pink, white and yellow carriage. The men all sat on the horses, and were talking quietly to one another now. On the carriage Bisca stood with another girl, a shorter looking girl with purple hair and glasses who Ranma must have been introduced to at one point but couldn’t remember the name of. Both of them wore a pink outfits lined with fur and with several lighter pink bows here and there. Bisca even had a polka-dotted kerchief tied around her neck resting down into her cleavage, and had left off her habitual cowgirl hat. At their feet rested a few long flags of multi-colors.

The Strauss family’s float consisted of a stone tower structure and an area right in front of the seeming entrance to it. There Elfman stood in his Takeover Beast form, while Lisanna sat next to him in her harpy form, talking quietly with Wendy. Anna and Mirajane were nowhere to be seen at present.

Beyond the two of them in either direction Ranma could see other floats. Erza’s was at the lead. It looked like a theater, with the backdrop of a light blue and dark blue canvas. In front of it, Erza stood calmly a sword in either hand, wearing a type of armor Ranma hadn’t seen her wear before. It consisted of a long red, gold and white skirt cut to look almost like the petals of a flower as it flared out from her legs. A yellow and silver breastplate that ended just above her breasts covered her stomach and chest. On her head, she wore a kind of tiara that consisted mostly of large feathered wings rising from above her ears. Wings also flared up from two armlets she had on her upper arms, her gauntlets gold and metal looking the most workmanlike of the entire ensemble. Her red hair flowed loosely down her back and at her neck she wore a tight choker with a small blue gem set into it. The whole thing probably wouldn’t work very well as armor, but it was certainly striking. It had certainly arrested Ranma’s attention when he saw it.

In the other direction over several more floats Ranma could see the large dragon float Natsu was controlling. He could even see a spurt of fire come out of its mouth as Natsu let off some steam. Elsewhere Gray stood on an ice sculpture made to look like Magnolia’s train station, with a wide area around him so he could create Ice sculptures as the parade went on. He knew there were others around, including Laxus’s which consisted of massive lightning rods stuck in every which way and Laxus himself dressed in a good suit, making that look a hell of a lot better than the Trimens could.

“Are you two ready?” Makarov asked, moving up to the two girls, whistling internally. *Hubba-hubba, why the hell does a man transform into that kind of body, and as for Juvia, why in the hell does she hide those massive knockers all the time!?*

“I guess, but what exactly am I supposed to be singing?” Ranma asked, snickering while Juvia giggled next to him at Makarov’s outfit. He looked almost like a clown minus the face-paint and nose, with a cap that had tiny cat ears on it. Something more different from the Titan-using Wizard Saint would have been impossible to find, which Ranma figured was sort of the point.

“Hah, anything you want so long as it’s upbeat. The parade will last for an hour start to finish, so twenty songs or so.”

Ranma winced. “Um, I don’t know if I know twenty upbeat songs. Most of my songs are either the kind you’d fight to, or that tell a story for when I pose as a bard.”

“Well, just do what you can,” Makarov said with a laugh. “We have Mira ready to step in and a lot of just musicals to play too.”

Nodding, Ranma raced off to find Mira, leaping up onto the Strauss Family’s float, knocking on the door of the papier-mâché tower. Mira stuck her head out, and smiled at Ranma, nodding in approval. “That looks good on you.”

“Thanks, but I think we need to be a little more organized about this whole musical accompaniment thing,” Ranma began. From there the two of them hammered out a plan, and not a moment too soon. As they were finishing there was a blare of a horn and Makarov shouted that it was time to go.

At the front of the parade Erza’s float started off, followed by two more then Bisca’s and at last Makarov’s with Juvia on it along with Makarov. Ranma hesitated, then leaped aboard, moving to join them. “When you start to see the crowd is when you should start singing,” Makarov ordered, wondering if Ranma really did have a good singing voice in his female form. *Natsu said she did, but what would Natsu know about good singing voices?*

“I’ve got this old man, trust me,” Ranma said then hopped up to balance on the tallest portion of the float. Staring ahead of her, she waited until she began to see the streets they were moving on start to fill up with pedestrians, then turned her attention on Erza, who had just begun her show.

“Dance my blades, Circle Sword!” Erza intoned, moving slowly, her blades flicking out languidly as if she was dancing, or doing a kata in slow motion. From all around her in a blaze of white magic appeared twenty swords identical to her current ones, longswords with small hilts, with wide wings coming up from the cross guard. They began to swirl and move around her in a display as beautiful as it was potentially deadly, but the warm smile on her face and Erza’s dress offset any concern anyone might have had about the blades themselves.

At the same time Bisca, Alzack and three other mages scattered throughout the parade pulled out their guns and aimed them into the sky. Over the cheering and some background music that had just began Ranma could hear Bisca shout out, “Guns Magic, Firework!”

From her gun and those of Alzack came dozens, then hundreds of tiny magic fireworks. They went off only a few stories above the city, a kaleidoscope of colors, white, green, purple, blue, red, dozens of hues from every color under the rainbow. At the same time, glowing images of animals both magical and not began to spread in the air out from a float behind Ranma, causing her to turn and see Cana, Lucy and a few others at work creating them. The two girls were dancing around one another, dressed like angels with small wings on their back and white blouses and pants, which hugged their figures as they danced around. Between them was a celestial spirit of some kind strumming on a lyre.

Shaking his head from wondering how Lucy was creating those animal images or if it was all Cana with her Cards Magic, Ranma turned back and began to sing, shifting words from the original with the ease of years of practice. “I, I, I am undefeated….”

Hearing the song Makarov shook his head with a wince. That wasn’t quite what he had met by upbeat, but looking ahead even as he danced around he could tell Erza liked it quite a bit as she had begun to dance around on her float faster and more energetically, her swords doing the same thing as her eyes lit up with more than just delight in the show she was putting on.

Luckily the next song Ranma chose was, while rather odd going after the one he had chosen for Erza, much simpler and more upbeat.  *After all, anyone who has ever fallen in love can tell you it’s like losing your mind.*

As she began to dance and wave her flags with Laki, Bisca smiled and high stepped, flashing her cowgirl boots this way and that as she smiled, laughing and happy, while in front of her Alzack continued to fire off starbursts above them. She made a point of waving at the people in the crowd as she danced, including Jenny who she saw in the crowd to one side.

For Ranma, the singing was a task he wanted to get over with, though many in the crowd would ask later who the new redhead was, wondering about her amazing voice and the numerous odd, but extremely catchy songs she sang. Sakura was a hit, as was Heart Goes Boom and Fluffy Time, even if Ranma had to translate them from Japanese into Ishgar’s language. Undefeated was memorable, as was the song Ranma sang for their float as it hit the center section of the parade route.

This one, Let it Go of *Frozen* fame, he had only heard once, but it had stuck in his mind. Hearing this song Juvia’s smile widened and widened until it looked like it was almost unnatural, though she wasn’t the only one. Lucy too grinned so hard her cheeks stung and she belted out the lyrics with Juvia and Ranma. “Let it go, let it go, and I’ll rise like the break of dawn, let it go, let it go, that perfect girl is gone! Here I stand in the light of day. Let storm rage on, the cold never bothered me anyway!”

Yet surprisingly the favorite song of the crowd was the translated Oretachiwa Family, a song Ranma had heard from a One Piece special she’d seen once with Kasumi of all people, who was a closet One Piece fan. It had stuck in his/her mind then because it was such a nice, peaceful time, coming on the heels of Happosai’s weakness moxibustion scheme and no one else being around to cause trouble. Yet the translated words, while not scanning as well in Ranma’s opinion, seemed to resonate with Fairy Tail, and the entire guild started to shout along when Ranma began the second chorus.

But for Ranma, her own part in the parade was minor in comparison to the magic, the girls and the Fantasia Parade. From the beginning with Erza and her sword dance, to Bisca and the comparatively simple flags everything Ranma saw entranced her. Gray’s magic was phenomenal, castles, towers, roses, waves, spears, solid state statues. Natsu and his nearly alive-looking dragon. Laxus created giant creatures of lightning, which swooped around the parade as his float sparkled with energy and lights in an intense display of light and noise. So much so, that Ranma thought later that many a heavy metal band would have eaten their hearts out with envy at what Laxus along had created.

Wendy used her air magic to send kites and small paper birds this way and that throughout the parade smiling and happy as she flew from one float to another in the same angel costume that Lucy and Cana were wearing. Bickslow sent spirit infused animals marching along the side of the parade, clowning around with the children. And everywhere were the lights, the small images of cavorting beasts moving this way and that. The Strauss siblings put on a play of two monsters attacking a castle to capture a princess and the knight defending her. Lucy summoned all of her spirits bar Aquarius to send up their magic in blasts of power with Virgo joining in dancing with Cana and Lucy. Wooden dolls or other wooden constructs appeared from a few of the floats courtesy of Laki. Juvia’s magic too was utterly amazing, fountains appearing here and there in both their own float and ion the ones to either side moving under her command. Lights flashed off the water in a cascade of rainbows as she shifted it into ships, birds, fantastic beasts and especially, for some reason, unicorns.

From beginning to end, the parade was utterly amazing, and the cheers of the festival-goers followed them as they slowly made their way through the town and back up to the guildhall.

By that point, everyone was exhausted, even Ranma. Her throat was sore from belting out song after song, and her feet hurt, making her peel off the high heels Mira had insisted she wear, unmindful of the fact she’d flashed Makarov as she he’d kicked them off. “Oh my god, why the hell do girls wear those torture devices!? They are worse than corsets!”

“Juvia agrees with you on the concept of high heels, yet also wonders when Ranma would have worn a corset.” The blue-haired asked as she hopped down from the float, smiling up at Ranma.

“Meh, had to pose as a maid a few years ago to infiltrate a rich assholes mansion. Turns out he was funding money to a Zeref cult. Nasty bugger,” Ranma smirked. “Boy was he surprised when I changed forms on him.”

Juvia giggled at that then watched as Ranma hopped over the float to the other side, reappearing around its edge once more in his male body and wearing his regular clothing. “That was quick.”

“Heh, Martial Arts Quick change!” Ranma said, moving over to her. “Now come on, let’s see what the old man wants, then I think I need a soothing drink for my throat and bed. This has been fun, but really tiring.”

“Juvia agrees to that,” Juvia said with feeling, before blushing rosily when Ranma linked his arm with hers and pulled her over to where Makarov had hopped down onto a small stand, with every Fairy Tail mage gathering around him.

“Alright everyone, that, I think we can all agree, was a parade to be remembered!!” Makarov shouted, to a cacophony of clapping and shouts from the mages around him. “We’ll know which float won the popularity contest tomorrow, however, I have to make an announcement about the Fairy Queen contest: since Lucy and Juvia have added their names to the list of girls who won’t be available, I have decided to postpone the contest. Juvia is going to be going to speak to the Council on behalf of Gajeel, and Lucy and Loke have something they need to do in the Spirit World. And Erza and Mira, as you all know, are still under house arrest. Just be lucky I couldn’t punish the entire city by making you both sit out of the parade!”

In the crowd, Erza and Mira both attempted to act contrite. Mira, Ranma noticed, did a much better job of looking as if she was serious and sad about being punished. Erza simply looked stoic, her eyes losing some of their joyful light as she visibly set aside the fun from the festival to think about the near future.

To his side, Ranma felt Juvia about to speak up, but Ranma shook her by the arm she was still holding onto, shaking his head and leaning in to whisper into Juvia’s ear, not noticing that Juvia had started to blush again. “Remember we should be keeping our movements as secret as possible.”

“Ah, um, Juvia understands,” Juvia stammered, almost melting in place, utterly unused to having a man this close to her.

Ranma noticed this and moved away, shrugging apologetically.

In front of them Makarov continued. “At any rate you brats, the mayor and I had a rethink right before the parade started and we have agreed to instead hold the contest on the first day of winter. Max, we’ll still go forward with selling merchandise and such tomorrow, Anna and Lisanna have both agreed to help you at that. But the contest will have to be moved.”

The old man smiled widely, spreading his small arms to either side. “A magnificent parade everyone, you all did me and our guild proud! Dismissed!”

This was answered with another cheer, and the crowd began to break up into teams or other, smaller groups. Juvia, feeling just as tired as Ranma, moved towards Erza and Bisca, who were talking with Laki, Gray and Elfman, Wendy leaning against Carla at their feet. She was surprised to see Ranma following her but he just smiled at her and then bowed grandly, his hand scraping the ground of the guild’s backyard. “Shall I walk you home ladies?”

Bisca smiled and held out a hand like a lady at court. “I would greatly enjoy that good sir.”

“I’m afraid I’m not going back to Fairy Hills just yet. I need to head out to pay those merchants back for our depredations,” Erza said, narrowing her eyes at Ranma.

“Wait, you were serious about that?” Ranma asked incredulously, then easily dodged a swat from the back of Erza’s hand. “Well, good luck with that, er, I suppose I should do my part then.” With a flourish of Requip magic, Ranma was holding a small pouch of coins, which he held out to Erza. “That should cover most of my bill and Wendy’s. Jenny’s, you’ll have to get out of her.” To Ranma’s mind, paying for the girl when on a date was a chivalrous thing, paying for when you were out with a group of friends having fun was the sign of a tool or a showoff.

“I’ll do that.” Nodding seriously Erza Requipped from the armor she had been wearing as part of the parade to her normal everyday armor marching off resolutely.

Erza’s primary armor had been replaced by this point along with all of the other armor sets she had lost during the battle against Jellal and his compatriots. All save the experimental ones anyway, the Sea Empress Armor and her Ataraxia Armor.

Ranma, with Wendy on his back and Carla in cat form resting on her head, walked the trio of girls back up to Fairy Hill, talking about the parade and their parts in it, generally just reliving the event and having fun. Only a few times did he or Bisca flirt with one another, not wanting to make Laki or Juvia uncomfortable.

When they reached Fairy Hills, Laki instantly went inside too tired for anything else. Juvia thanked Ranma for walking them home, even though she sensed it had been Bisca who he had been most interested in being around. This left Ranma and Bisca standing there effectively alone since Wendy and Carla both asleep.

“I’m glad you had fun Ranma,” Bisca said with a smile, leaning her head against his chest as he put his arms around her. “Just… I know about this whole mission that you’re starting tomorrow. I know it’s dangerous. I’m not going to get all misty-eyed or anything, but…”

She moved forward so that her chest, still clad in the same outfit she had worn during the parade, pressed against Ranma. At the same time she lifted her head so they were eye to eye with less than an inch separating their faces, her breath whispering against his mouth. “But I will promise you that if you and the others all come back whole of body and hale of mind, I will make it worth your while.”

“Oh?” Ranma whispered, licking his lips lightly the move causing Bisca to shiver. “And how exactly are you going to do that?”

“I think you can guess,” Bisca said then with a tilt of her head, she leaned in kissing him. Instantly Ranma responded, his arms tightening around her yet still gentle as he kissed her back ardently, his lips pressing against hers, ardent yet not quite demanding, then he opened his mouth and his tongue flicked out to gently tease her lips. Bisca hummed appreciatively and opened her mouth slightly, letting the intruder in to flick and dance around her own, pulling a louder moan from her.

Passion. If Bisca was asked to describe in one word what Ranma evoked in her, that is what it would be, passion, emotion, a thrill, all of that Ranma’s looks, touch and taste evoked in her. It was intoxicating in the extreme and she loved it. If not for the little body, she could feel clinging to Ranma’s back she might well have continued, maybe even invited Ranma inside despite the no boys allowed rule. But as it is, both of them were very aware of Wendy hanging limply on Ranma’s back, so the moment didn’t last.

Eventually Bisca pulled back, their tongues visible in midair for a moment before she swallowed convulsively, staring at Ranma, her eyes shining in the light of the dorm’s lampposts. “Consider that a down payment.”

“I will,” Ranma replied a little dazed as Bisca turned and entered the dorms winking at him over her shoulder as she did.

With that, Ranma was left alone in the night with his two asleep charges, unknowing that Juvia had seen the whole thing from inside. She had to bite back a squeal when the two of them started to make out, staring avidly, wondering what it would feel like, before slinking backwards as Bisca ended the kiss and turned entering the dormitory. Floating on cloud nine, Bisca missed her entirely and Juvia stayed there watching Ranma for a moment longer.

Outside Ranma looked around, wondering why his sixth sense was telling him someone was watching him, before he shrugged and turned away, heading back into town with his tiny burden. “Come on Wendy, I hear our sleeping bags calling my name. We’ve got an… irritating day ahead of us tomorrow.”

**OOOOOOO**

Cana was walking back to Lucy’s apartment with her, looking at her sort-of girlfriend out of the corner of her eye, wondering why she was being so quite. While neither of them had asked the other to become her girlfriend, they were certainly moving in that direction. They’d gone on a few dates, and had snuggled a lot of times, though they hadn’t actually kissed just yet, which Cana had been hoping to do tonight.

But the face Lucy was currently wearing drove that thought out of her mind. Even the way Lucy was still wearing their mock-angel uniforms from the festival and the way it put those huge breasts Cana loved to play with (she hadn’t done much more than massage them but **damn** were they soft) couldn’t take Cana’s mind off Lucy’s face. That was the face of someone who had something they wanted to say that another person wasn’t going to like.

As they turned onto the street that led to Lucy’s apartment, Cana decided to get it over with. She pulled Lucy over to the balustrade between the river and the street pushing her there and putting her arms to either side of Lucy, keeping her there as she stared into the shorter girl’s face. Cana was, while not being the biggest in terms of chest, was actually the tallest girl in Fairy Tail while Lucy was in the center of the pack. “Alright, spit it out Lucy, what’s been bothering you? Are you, that is, do you want to stop seeing me? Have you discovered you don’t, y’know, like girls as much as you might have thought? Or, um, maybe I’ve just come on too strong, I’m really sorry I…”

Cana didn’t realize she was kind of babbling at that point but Lucy quickly put a hand over her friend’s mouth, shaking her head with a light giggle. “No, nothing like that, I really like hanging out with you, and um, all that other stuff. There’s nothing wrong there. I just…”

She squeaked as Cana licked her palm then leaned down and hugged her tightly, kissing her neck and cheek. “Oh thank goodness! This is, you’re my first real, that is I’ve well, never…”

“I understand Cana, and yes, if you’re asking I’d love to be your um, girlfriend,” Lucy said, blushing hotly under the other girl’s kisses and the feel of her taller frame against her own the brunette’s breasts pressing into the top of her own and into Lucy’s collarbone with a very pleasurable… well, squishiness was the only way Lucy could describe it. Hugging Cana was just so much nicer than hugging a man and her perfume was nice and…

Shaking her head, Cana gently pushed the other girl away. “But um, there’s something I need to tell you. I, you know Loke? Well, as part of my agreement to take him on as one of my Celestial Spirits, he asked me to look for Ares and free her from her current master. That, we know she’s a member of Oración Seis. And, well, Ranma, he’s, for some reason he’s going to be leading a large group of mages after them starting tomorrow. And, well, Loke convinced me to join them.”

“What!?” Cana squawked, stepping backward to hold Lucy at arm’s reach, the better to stare into her face in shock. “Lucy, I know you’re a stronger mage than most think just because you don’t brawl with the rest of them, but this is, the Oración Seis, they’re killers, one and all! This is going to be way more dangerous than going after Eisenwald or even fighting the Element Four. Are you sure you are up to this?”

“No, not at all. But Makarov says that the plan is for the non-S-class mages to clear out the riffraff, the smaller dark guilds, while Ranma and the others take on the Seis themselves,” Lucy said, trying to talk herself into believing that was the way that it was going to go.

Cana instantly could see the idiocy in that statement though. “That’s a plan, you know why plans go wrong, the enemy gets a vote too!” she growled, poking Lucy in the sternum and for once not letting her hand drift to the blonde’s chest. “Do you honestly think you could take on even one of those monsters on your own?”

“No, but I know I need to do this,” Lucy retorted. “Loke and I have talked about it, and he needs the closure of defeating the mage who killed his former master, and we need to rescue Ares from her. I can’t back down from this and call myself a Celestial Spirit mage worth his loyalty!”

Cana stared at Lucy, trying to see any hint of waver in her face or eyes, but all she saw there was determination. Oh, there was fear there too, but determination was easily the more powerful emotion she could see. Finally she nodded, then leaned in again, very deliberately pressing her body against Lucy’s, before leaning down to kiss her.

Lucy’s eyes widened in shock, they hadn’t kissed on the lips yet after all, but that didn’t mean she hadn’t thought about it or didn’t want it to happen now. So she leaned up, moving her head to one side and kissing Cana back, feeling the taller girls arms around her tighten, pressing their chests together even more tightly. Their lips pressed together tightly too, though neither made the effort to let their tongues out to play as Ranma and Bisca had. No, that would be a bit too far just yet.

And when Cana pulled back, unlike Bisca, she moved to take her partner’s hand, pulling her along the street. “Come on Lucy. I think that if you’re going to go on this mission of your’s I’m damn sure going to make this night one to remember.”

She smirked at Lucy’s sudden incandescent blush and stammer although when Cana went on her voice was a little softer and far more tender than it had been. “And not like that, it’s just, have you ever just sat and fallen asleep snuggling with someone? I know I haven’t, but I’ve always wanted to.”

Lucy looked at the back of Cana’s neck, which had turned red with embarrassment, and then she smiled, squeezing her new girlfriend’s hand tightly. “Sure. Let’s do that.”

**OOOOOOO**

For all the fun the festival had been that mattered not at all the next day, as, at the break of dawn, Ranma, Wendy and all the mages of the three guilds going with him gathered at the train station. The station had been shut down, ostensibly for some work on the platform, but Ranma and the others entered in ones and twos to gather beside the train they would be taking. No worker was in sight as they did, another precaution.

It was so early, that Natsu, Wendy, Jenny, Ichiya, Eve, Sherry and Mira were still all looking quite dazed, and had to be roused out of their beds by their teammates in the first place. Happy was still asleep on Natsu's head and Carla, for once, was in her Exceed body, asleep in Wendy’s lap as she, rather shamelessly in Ranma’s opinion, took advantage of the younger girl’s kindness.

The group from Fairy Tail though did include a surprise. Ranma had thought it would be Elfman and Gray who would be added to the trio of S-class mages and Natsu. Instead, Lucy had taken Elfman’s place, standing next to Gray, Mira and Erza looking a little self-conscious, but determined. Added to this group was Juvia, who was standing between Ren and Lyon trying to make herself small as the two men glared at one another over her head.

“Lucy!? Oh yeah, team Natsu are all here, awesome!” Natsu shouted with fire coming from his mouth as he bounded over to his guildmates.

“What’s up with that name flame brain!?” Gray groused, shaking his head, not noticing that he had already stripped his shirt off despite it being so early in the morning.

“Hah, that’s what you know stripper, the name of the team is chosen by the strongest on the team, and that’s me!”

Since Erza was already glowering at the two boys, Ranma turned to look at Lucy. The two of them hadn’t talked much, beyond Lucy thanking Ranma for sending her Capricorn via Fairy Tail and occasionally in the guildhall while Ranma hung out with Laxus or one of the others. “Lucy, not to sound too demeaning or anything, but what’re you doing here?”

Lucy gulped. “Um you know about how Loke turned out to be a Celestial Spirit?”

“Loke, um… wasn’t that a girl’s, no wait that was Laki, eesh I’ve been introduced to too many mages lately,” Ranma groused. “Um Loke, blond guy, kind of a manwhore like those three only better at it?” He asked gesturing with one hand to the Trimens.

“Ahem, I resent that remark. Both the idea that Loke is better than us, and that we sell our affections so,” Hibiki said, while the other two frowned.

“Whatever.” With that Ranma promptly ignored them, looking back at Lucy inquisitively.

“He, um, Loke was a Celestial Spirit like I said. Um he used to be a partner of a Celestial mage that went out on a mission against Angel of the Oración Seis years back. She died, and took her keys. Loke convinced me to help on this mission so we could regain them freeing those spirits to bond to better, more honorable mages,” Lucy said, starting out a little timidly but finishing strongly, her tone frim and her eyes locked on Ranma’s. “I won’t let Celestial Spirits be used for evil! I won’t and I’ll do my best to fight them however I can!”

“Well said Lucy!” Erza said, having finished remonstrating (read beating) Gray and Natsu for fighting. She pulled Lucy into a hug, smacking Lucy’s head against her chest. “As should be expected of any Fairy Tail mage.”

“Okay, that makes some sense. In that case welcome aboard, though I don’t know if we’ll let you be involved in the fight against Oración Seis itself, we’ll have to see.” Moving over Ranma pushed Ren out of the way, looking at Juvia inquisitively. “And you? I presume this has something to do with your talk with the Magic Council?”

“Hai, it does,” Juvia replied, happy with the reprieve, not having enjoyed being the center of Lyon and Ren’s attention. “Juvia succeeded in convincing the Magic Council to let Gajeel earn his freedom through work, and will be going with you on this mission to work with Gajeel and Miss Ultear. She will meet us at the border with him. Juvia will be coming along because it was felt that having a mediator between him and the other Fairy Tail mages was a good idea.”

“Alright, that works.” At the moment Ranma was wondering if they were going to bring so many mages along that Oración Seis would still hear about it somehow despite all the prevarications in place to hide the fact they were all together. “Come on, let’s get out of here. We want to be out and away before most people around here are awake.”

Luckily for everyone there, Ultear and Ranma had time to organize this trip, with Ultear renting out three full carts for the Fairy mages and their allies. This train was one of those designed to carry passengers for long distances too, which meant that carts had several separated rooms and one of them also had its own kitchen.

Wendy, was first to find a compartment of her own. She quickly called dibs on the hammock, climbed up Ranma's back and leaped up onto it, curling up there and sighing. "High places are best places." Against Ranma’s hopes, Wendy was along because having a healer along was just too important. And more to the point, because Wendy refused to let Ranma just leave her behind for more than a week.

"How does that even work?” Erza asked curiously looking up at the little girl while the others filed in around her. "I would think that being oin a hammock that was already on something moving would make it worse."

“Your guess is as good as mine, I’m still getting used to the idea that motion sickness is a universal Dragon Slayer thing in the first place,” Ranma replied.

Laxus grumbled but nodded and laid out nearby on a bed in the same small compartment Wendy had chosen, sticking his feet up out of the window, and putting a piece of his long coat over his face, the rest of it bundled under his head as a makeshift pillow. The Lightning Dragon Slayer had found that for him, feeling some breeze over his body but having his eyes covered or closed helped him with his motion sickness.

Natsu hadn't discovered anything of the sort, and he was still outside the train, staring at it as if he wanted it to spontaneously combust. "Are you sure we can't just run there?! Or, ooh I could have Happy and Carla take turns flying me, how about that!?”

"Seeing as you didn't even ask me if I wanted to take turns flying you that would be a no," Carla grumped, before flying up to join Wendy.

“It would take me six days, maybe seven to get there in a straight line kid, and there's no way you can run as fast as I can,” Ranma said with a shake of his head. “Even if you could, by the time you arrived, you would be exhausted, and useless in the fight. Which is basically your only redeeming feature, remember?”

Natsu grumbled, but a small hand popped out, and pointed at Ranma then Natsu then Laxus, muttering ‘Troia’. Natsu immediately felt better about the whole trip, and hopped onto the train with a loud whoop. “Woohoo, let's do this!”

“Before the spell runs out,” Ranma cheered sarcastically from one side.

Natsu glared at him. “Why do you gotta rain on my parade?”

“Your parade was last night and no one rained on it, this is me just being factual,” Ranma said, gesturing behind Natsu to Lucy, who was holding her head and glaring at and Natsu. “Besides, it was either that, or let Lucy hurt you for yelling like that so near her.”

“Don't make loud noises,” Lucy enunciated. Some of us were up late last night.

“Oh?” Mira began as she grabbed Lucy's arm and pulled her into their compartment’s main sitting area. “And what exactly were you doing?”

“None of your business little miss gossip,” Lucy said huffily. She had gotten over much of her awe of at Mira by this point, and in no way wanted her and Cana’s relationship to become something for the whole guild to talk about.

Mira laughed. “That's all right. Since I know you were with Cana, I'll just let my imagination fill in the blanks.”

Ranma blinked at that, then looked at Lucy, then looked contemplative, as did Laxus, who had removed the sleeve covering his eyes to look at Lucy. Indeed, practically every other man there except for Natsu had contemplative looks on their faces at the moment. “Yep,” Ranma said after a moment too many a nod “that's definitely imagination worthy.”

“Oh but miss Lucy, if you had but asked, I would have joyfully accompanied you last night after the parade was over,” said Hibiki, moving up beside her.

“I would at least have walked you home. But don't think of it as me doing something special for you though, I’d do that for anyone,” said Ren, moving up on her other side.

Luckily for Lucy, Eve was too busy trying to get Wendy’s attention, having slipped past Ranma rather than remaining in the main train compartment with his fellow pretty boys. This didn’t prove to be very lucky for him because when Wendy squeaked at him to leave her alone, Ranma literally punted him out the door and down the train.

Jura was the last aboard, and seemed to fill the main compartment with his presence, a somehow nearly solid aura that forced everyone else to start moving on finding places to sit, or moving into the smaller compartments like Laxus and Wendy to layout. Moments later, the train began to move, but thanks to Wendy's spell, none of the Dragon Slayer's felt it at first. This didn't stop Ranma from moving into Wendy’s compartment, pulling out his pipe and closing his eyes as he began to smoke the Dragon’s Breath slowly, meditating further. Now that Porlyusica had taught him various new mental exercises, he wanted to use most of this trip to continue his training. *And if it keeps me from throwing up, as well, all to the good*. On a trip this long that was going to be a tall order.

OOOOOOO

As the train carrying her girlfriend pulled away from the train station Cana scowled, watching it go from a distant rooftop. Yes, she had wished Lucy well that morning, even made Lucy breakfast and hugged her goodbye. That for sure as hell didn’t mean Cana was happy about seeing her go. *Time to talk to the old man, and then see if I can figure out a way to maybe get wherever the hell she’s going as fast as Lucy is.*

OOOOOOO

After banishing the three pretty boys and Ichiya, either to their compartment or to the rest of the train, the girls didn't care, said ladies all gathered in the main sitting compartment and began to talk about the mission. Mirajane and Erza ran this portion of the discussion once more telling everyone about the mages that they had run into in the tower, which segued into getting to know one another further. Since most of the girls came from Fairy Tail, Sherry and Jenny did most of the talking at that point. Sherry going into detail on how she had run into Lyon, and so forth, while Jenny told how she and Mirajane had met for the first time, and how she had gotten into modeling over merely singing and being a showgirl as she had in her youth.

Juvia too did a large majority of the talk over the next few hours for that first day. The talk centered on magic, then cooking, crafting, and general stuff of that nature. Girls were social creatures, the majority of them anyway, and these girls were no exception. They occasionally left to explore the train, but since that inevitably brought them into contact with the Trimens or Ichiya, doing what they were best at, they always came back rather quickly.

Lyon and Gray too just talked or read books they had brought along to while away the time, getting on surprisingly well. Or they did, after Erza had threatened to castrate them with a dull spork if they caused trouble or stripped more than their shirts off at any one time that first day anyway. Jura joined Ranma in meditating, and seemed to change into a rock statue, coming awake only for a single meal each day. The trio of Dragon Slayers too only roused themselves to take in liquids, although every time the train stopped at a station they would all troop out and race alongside it for a few hours before leaping back on, though admittedly Natsu had to be continually coaxed back on with repeated use of Troia.

This left the girls and the two Ice Make mages with the fundamental trouble of traveling on trains for long periods of time: it was boring. There wasn't enough to do, and unless you planned accordingly, you got fed up with it really quite quickly. Of the girls only Erza had thought about bringing any books along, and even handing some of the less salacious ones out to the others wasn't making the trip pass any faster.

In response to this, on the second day out Jenny asked Wendy if they could borrow some of her games. This in turn caused Wendy to perk up quite a bit, even though the healing spell had worn off for the day. She tried to groan out instructions to Carla who did her playing for her, and for a time, she and the girls were happy as each could be, but eventually the motion sickness drove Wendy back into the hammock above Ranma's head.

As Erza helped Wendy back to her brother, she asked, “Ranma how are you feeling?”

Ranma's face was a little green around his pipe, but neither he nor the other two Dragon Slayers even looked up as she entered the compartment. “I'm doing about as well as we can I suppose,” he answered, his eyes still closed. “I'm just thankful for those little stops along the way, although I am seriously second-guessing myself on asking Wendy here not to use that healing spell on us for the entire trip.

“It wouldn't work anyway,” Wendy groaned. “Your body would build up an immunity within a few times Nii-chan, same for mine. The other two would probably last a little longer, but not the whole trip.”

“I'm sorry to hear that,” Erza said with a sigh. “Would you like me to do what I do to Natsu on train trips?”

“What exactly is that?” Ranma asked, his eyebrows narrowing in suspicion.

This suspicion was well-founded, since an instant later, Erza's fist flashed out, streaking in to impact his head in what would have been a knockout blow. Ranma blocked it, and glared at her. “Really, you knock him out?” Ranma said, deadpan

“Well it's either that, or put him to sleep some other way. You know how hard it is to get the smell of spew out of armor? Once was enough, thank you,” Erza said huffily.

“Makes sense, but the next time I ask you for an explanation, just give me an explanation, don't try it out on me,” Ranma said with a smirk around his pipe.

Erza replied with her own smile, and sat down next to him. “How is your training with Porlyusica going?”

“It's going okay, what she is teaching me to do is basically to create a sort of connection between a mental image in my mind and my control of my two magic styles,” he said obliquely, looking over to where Natsu was groaning and Laxus laid out with his eyes closed. “According to her, what I need to do is to somehow divide up my mind in order to be able to switch between one type of magic and the other, creating a measuring scale with each side containing a particular color of each type, so that when I want to emphasize one, I just imagine the balance changing. I'm not certain I agree with her, but the visualization training is helping me push one or the other power down to allow the other to take precedence, so it's all to the good. Still, there's no point if I can't do it fast enough to use in a fight, and at the moment it’s just really hard to build up that level of internal control.”

“Interesting,” Erza mused. “Perhaps instead of thinking of it in terms of compartmentalizing your mind like that, you should keep the idea of an outline, but liken it to armor instead.”

“What do you mean?” Ranma asked intrigued, actually opening his eyes to look at her for now, pulling his pipe out of his mouth and setting it in his lap.

“When I reequip, I don't really have to shout out the armor I'm searching for, though it helps. Each armor I have has a separate hook to it, a simple associated image, which my mind can reach out for. Perhaps something similar can be used in your case, linked to each limb or the overall effect you are going for rather than attempting to create a single image to give precedence to one magic or the other in its entirety, which I gather from what you just said is what you have been attempting.”

Ranma pulled at his pigtail thoughtfully, then asked a few questions about how she created each ‘hook’, whether or not she had to change that when she started to use portions of armor rather than the whole thing recently, and how it worked. In particular, he asked questions about how she mixed and matched weapons from her armor sets, which he felt would be the closest equivalent to what he wanted to do.

This conversation continued for most of the second day, as Erza demonstrated slowly how she channeled Requip into her weapons, and helped Ranma figure out ways to create that same sort of mental hook for his Dragon slaying and ki powers. It wasn't quite the same as what Porlyusica was training him for, but it helped.

On the fourth day, Jenny finally broke. “All right I'm bored!” she said, hurling her arms up in the air and flinging herself into a chair across from Mirajane tossing the book she'd been reading from Erza back to the redhead in question.

“You make it sound as if it's our job to entertain you,” Mirajane shot back. “If you want that, go find some boys to bat your eyelashes at.”

Jenny smirked, shaking her head. “Nope, none of that. But it has occurred to me that there is one topic we hadn't talked about yet, and you just mentioned it: Boys.”

Lucy rolled her eyes. She and Juvia had actually been getting on rather well. Both of them had a passion for mah-jongg, and had been playing Gray and Sherry, for a portion of each day which was rather fun and which eeked out Erza’s book collection and other topics. But now Gray looked up in fear and alarm and quickly stood up, followed by Lyon. “Well, I think if you ladies are going to be talking about that topic, I am out of here.”

“Are you sure~?” Mirajane said, getting into the spirit of things quickly. “You can talk about your secret boy crush on Natsu after all.”

“For the last time I'm straight darn it!” Gray roared, then turned around and exited the train compartment quickly with a chuckling Lyon following him, intent on teasing his fellow Ice Make mage about that point. After all, once we’re away from Erza our promise to her can hardly be thought to apply, can it?

The two of them intercepted the Trimens on their way back, Gray holding up his hand to them. “You don't want to enter there right now, they're about to discuss boys.”

“And Jenny's in there with them?” Asked Hibiki, paling noticeably.

“Yep, she's the one that brought the topic up.”

As one, the three pretty boys twisted around on their heels and marched away. “Nope, not going there.”

“Is she really all that terrifying?” Gray asked, falling into line with the others.

“She is if she gets analytical,” said Ren tersely. Then he paled. “Little Wendy isn't in there with them, is she?”

“No, why?”

“Like I said, it's scary when she gets analytical,” Ren replied, breathing a sigh of relief. “I’d hate to see what Ranma would do to her if she corrupted the poor little girl.”

“No, you just want to let Eve do that instead,” Lyon replied tersely, winning a coughing splutter from the youngest Trimens and laughter from the others.

While it was most certainly accurate that Jenny could be scary if she really got into the nitty gritty of comparing boys, Jenny wasn't about to go that far with this crowd. Mirajane might've been up for it, but Jenny had gotten to know Erza during their romp through the festival, and knew her to be a bit of a prude. In public anyway, Jenny had heard rumors that seemed to imply Erza was anything but underneath her armor. Juvia and Lucy also seemed to be much the same, and Sherry was an almost complete unknown despite the past few days forced association. So she simply asked, “So, does anyone here have someone they are interested in? If you want dirt about the Trimens or any other models, Mirajane and I can surely provide.”

Sherry giggled, and leaned forward eagerly taking her up on that offer for several of the models that Mirajane and Jenny had met. The two of them had quite a fun time for a bit, tearing down or building up this or that model, fielding questions from all of the other girls, even Lucy getting in on the action despite her current relationship with Cana. Erza only asked a few questions about this or that model who was known to also be a mage, all of whom had hit on her at one point or another when they met on missions.

“Although,” she said as the questions the others were asking wound down, “For irritating flirts, I suppose besides Ichiya there's always Bacchus.”

“Oh God, that drunk!” Jenny said with a laugh. “Quattro Cerberus had a job in the same town I had a modeling gig in once, and let me tell you, that crew of idiots aresoover-the-top! At a distance it's kind of funny, but close-up, when you're the target for their over-the-top **wildness!**” she suddenly shouted that last word, causing all the girls to leap away before going on calmly, “it really isn't.”

Erza nodded. “Bacchus was an idiot at one point, he tried to flirt with me while we were both accidentally assigned to the same job. Needless to say the buffoon didn't finish the missions because I was forced to beat him to within an inch of his life.”

“Is that your way of doing dealing with anyone who shows you a bit of love?” Sherry asked archly. “You'll be single your entire life if so.”

“Not that this Bacchus character sounds like that big a catch,” Lucy said, trying to head off an argument.

Erza however didn't take offense, she simply shrugged. “If I don't want someone to flirt with me, I will inform them of that fact in no uncertain terms.”

“Heheh, you didn't seem to mind it when Ranma was flirting with you the night at the festival,” Jenny said.

Erza blinked. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh come on,” Jenny said with a laugh. “Getting you to dress up in that Gothic Lolita outfit, leaning in and hugging you when you two did the twin thing, playing with your hair when we were on the beach?” *Tackling the pair of us when we were roughhousing in the water, tickling us, basically looking for any excuse to have his-then-her hands on us,* Jenny thought complacently. She had greatly enjoyed that, the coldness of the water hadn’t been the only reason why her nipples had been fit to cut glass. She only regretted that it hadn’t continued when he had transformed back to his guy form thanks to the number of Fairy Tail mages who had come down to join the cookout.

“The, that was flirting?!” Erza said, her face starting to light up at the implication.

“You didn't know,” Jenny gasped, then began to giggle at Erza's expression.

“And that doesn't bother you?” Mira asked redirecting her rival’s attention. “I thought you were interested in him too.”

“I am,” Jenny said with a shrug. “But it's not as if we made any promises to one another, nor as he made any promises to anyone else right?”

“Not to the best of my knowledge,” Erza stuttered, a blush still present on her face. “Certainly he hasn't made any promise to me or even an attempt to kiss me or anything similar, although he did walk Bisca home that night after the parade.”

“Yeah, Ranma mentioned her too,” Jenny said with a nod.

“Again, that doesn't bother you Jenny?” Mira asked, honestly curious. She knew of Jenny’s casual, almost lazy attitude to most of life, but would never have figured it would extend to relationships.

“Again, no” Jenny said with a laugh another laugh.

“So does that mean you're not interested in anything serious with Ranma?” Lucy asked, honestly curious. As at home as Ranma seemed in the guild, Lucy couldn’t get over how long he’d been traveling, and enjoying it. You didn’t just forget that kind of thing overnight.

“I wouldn't say that. I'd like it if something serious happened on the physical side of things, but I'm not exactly holding my breath waiting for it. Essentially I want to bed him, not marry him,” Jenny finished crudely, trying to get a reaction.

She succeeded and cackled wickedly as Mirajane and the others all blushed. “Come on! We’re all nineteen to twenty years old here, right? Raise your hand if you can honestly say that the idea of sex doesn't enter your mind at least once every hour.”

“I thought that was guys,” Mirajane answered with a huff, looking away while the other girls just continued to blush.

“No, they think about it every three minutes,” Jenny drawled. “Trust me, I know, remember who my guildmates are.”

“Ahem, yes well, I have to admit to some, ahem, interest in Ranma, though I wouldn’t say it is so… animalistic in nature,” Erza said eventually coughing into her fist as she did before looking over at Mira quizzically. “What about you Mirajane? I remember the two of us were near to coming to blows about our mutual interests in him before the Tower of Heaven, but you seem to have backed off since despite Ranma coming to live in Magnolia.”

Mirajane sighed. “I didn't want to outright say it,” she groused glaring at both her rivals irritably. ‘It feels too much like I lost to you in one of our matches or something. But yeah, I have kind of given up on Ranma. Her gaze centered on Erza as she said went on. “His curse bothers me, both for the obvious reason and the fact that, to put it bluntly, she looks too much like a miniature you, Erza. And I **do** want something serious. I know were young still, but I'm seriously thinking about settling down and, you know, having something permanent. Probably not kids, not for a few more years, but definitely something moving in that direction, husband, house, family.”

Jenny rolled her eyes at that. “I think you've had to step into the mother role for your sisters too much. It’s gotten to be where you are thinking in that manner automatically,” she said bluntly. “I don't like it. Live a little girl!”

“What about you then?” Erza asked looking at Jenny almost challengingly. “Do you have a problem with the fact he was, as you pointed out just now, flirting with me?”

“I'm not bothered by the fact he was flirting with you, I would've thought my still having fun with going around the festival with you would have shown that,” Jenny said, her lips quirking into a moue of irritation. “Like I said I don't want to marry the guy,” she smirked then, a sensual thing marked by her licking her lips. Now have him make my mind explode with stars, heck yes! Judging by what I've felt a time or two when he and I were kissing, he’s definitely got the equipment to be able to do that, and we know he's got the stamina.”

Now it was Mirajane’s turn to giggle wickedly, much more at home talking about the physical side of things, while the other girls all blushed. Juvia in particular was blushing at the memory of the kiss she had seen Ranma and Bisca share, and how Bisca had looked afterwards. Luckily no one around her could follow those thoughts, and they turned to Sherry and pounced on her instead. “What about you, any juicy details to share with us?”

“I doubt it,” Mirajane said sarcastically. “He's an ice user, and judging from Gray and Lyon’s attempt to flirt with Juvia right off the bat they seem to be as dense as their chosen element is cold. And don’t get me started on the effect all that ice has on them physically.”

“Alas, Mirajane is cruel, but I have come to believe she is largely correct. Indeed, the only hint of love I have seen him give anyone, is his sudden interest in Juvia,” Sherry said almost glaring at the other girl.

Juvia shook her head quickly. “Juvia is not interested! Juvia found it rather creepy, and in fact is not interested in any relationships right now. Perhaps after this mission, Juvia will feel as if Juvia has found her footing in Fairy Tail correctly and will think about looking for romance.” She looked a little wistful. “Doing so in Phantom Lord would've been problematic at best, stupid at worst.”

“So you're not interested in Gajeel? I had thought maybe that was why you were so willing to step up to the plate for him,” Erza said.

“No Juvia is not Gajeel's type, she is too strong,” Juvia said with a laugh. “Gajeel will probably not like me saying this but Gajeel is actually a classic romantic. He likes the tales about knights or wizards sweeping damsels off their feet. I've even caught him dressing up in a suit and attempting to learn how to play the guitar romantically.”

Mirajane and Erza, who had met Gajeel after the fight he'd had with Natsu, looked up in thought, trying to imagine him in a suit, and shook their heads is one. “Nope,” Mirajane said, “can't picture that.”

“Juvia knows,” she said with a giggle. “It really is as ridiculous as you think, made worse by him attempting to sing.” She looked a little wistful, turning to look towards the small room the Dragon Slayers had commandeered to wallow in their shared misery. “Juvia was surprised and impressed by Ranma’s singing voice. Juvia might enjoy seeing if it carries over, and indeed if he knows any more romantic tunes.”

This won her a nod from every girl there, even Sherry and Lucy. Ranma’s range and vocal ability had impressed a lot of people, so much so Jenny had wondered if maybe she should approach Ranma to see if he wanted to tour with her at some point. They would make a killing, two beauties with voices like theirs.

The conversation continued from there, freewheeling through boys that they had met, boys they had known when they were younger, which were quite a few for Sherry, Jenny and Mira, and not at all for the others, what they were looking for in a romantic entanglement, both physically and emotionally. But even so, the trip to the border between Fiore and Seven was slow and after the Fifth day on the train, basically everyone had joined with the Dragon Slayers in wishing it would get it over with quickly.

**OOOOOOO**

"And you are certain this will be ready by the time we wish to ambush them?" Brain asked his fellow guild master, Ivan Dreyar, looking at a large, bubbling concoction in a glass container set on the floor in front of him.

"It will be ready little Brain," said the other man, his tone a little manic as he pressed into Brains personal space just a bit too much. He was a little taller than Brain, his shoulders a little broader, and his face slightly older looking, bar his hair, which was black, as was his goatee. His eyes were deep set and seemed to gleam with obsession as he looked at Brain. "But you are certain that Laxus is with them?"

"According to my sources the only S-class Fairy Tail mage that isn't is Gildarts," Brain replied though he knew Ivan’s spies in Magnolia had undoubtedly already informed him of this. "If he was, I wouldn't have contacted you, instead I would have forced in my guild to flee from Seven and possibly deep into Minstrel or elsewhere in an attempt to get away, regardless of possibly losing access to our target. That one's power is far too great for me to want me to challenge him."

"True, true. He and my father, Titans both, in power if not in form, standing above the guild like giant guardians. Yet he is often gone, gone like a little bird," Ivan Dreyer former Fairy Tail mage and son of master Makarov said, gesturing with one hand and creating a small paper bird, which flew off into the distance.

Had Brain tracked it, he would have seen the bird scream and die near the edge of his vision, but he didn't, not daring to take his eyes off the dangerous dark mage before him. Ivan Dreyar was not one of his indoctrinated youths, no. Ivan and his guild were a power such to rival his own guild, though they stood apart from the Balam Alliance.

"And my father will learn that there is strength in shadows, and that he has allowed his children to bite off more than they can chew," Ivan finished, cackling a bit before he sobered so suddenly as to give most whiplash. "The poison will be ready. Will your subordinate guilds be ready to back us up if we can only get a few of them at once with the poison?"

"They'll meet us there. However, how can you be so certain that the poison will work on Dragon Slayers and S-class mage? Dragon Slayers are known for their ability to eat practically anything after all, one of these in particular."

“Natsu yes, I’ve heard of his recent exploits in that area. For that, we have Cobra’s poison to add to the brew, and that of his snake. With their venom added into the poison Kurohebi and I have already created, especially with the crushed poison lacrima mixed in there is no doubt in my mind that it will at the very least incapacitate the Dragon Slayer's among them. Or kill them. Other than Laxus, I don't need any of them alive after all," Ivan said, his voice sending a chill down Brain spine before he went on, starting to talk about the poison as if it was a favored experiment in a lab. “Ah, but this poison is even more special than that, why, getting it so the poison itself was tasteless and odorless was phenomenally difficult. The number of times we failed was…”

Brain sighed, but listened attentively, remarking internally about the need to deal with devils to gain his goals. After all, there were some evils that sickened even someone like Brain. *Still, hopefully this will be the last time I have to do so.*

**OOOOOOO**

Thankfully for all concerned on the train, the trip to the border where they would transfer to the next train did eventually end when after seven days they finally reached the border town called White Wash. “According to this brochure, it was named for a series of waterfalls nearby, but the river was diverted upstream a decade ago. Ranma, have you ever been here before?" Mirajane asked looking up from where she had been reading a brochure one of the train conductors handed her a moment ago as they exited the train.

"Nope," Ranma said, stretching alongside Natsu who had just a roared out ‘freedom’ at the top of his lungs, scaring everyone nearby bar the team themselves, although judging by their faces, Lucy and Sherry were set to bolt away from the madman too. "Wendy and I traveled by foot of course, and traditionally by the Straight Path, so we've never come this way before."

"And now we will never have to get on another one of those things again right?" Natsu shouted, getting into Ranma's face.

Without changing expression Ranma kicked him on the side of the head, sending him sprawling. "Don't do that, you have really bad breath and unfortunately, I can't say that. We need to get on another train and head deeper into seven and south from here."

"Actually" said a new voice, "we won't be taking the train from here on."

Ranma turned as did the others, and saw two people moving through the crowd towards them through the crowd, which thankfully hadn’t recognized any of them. Laxus was dressed almost normally to aid this, while Mira and Jenny were dressed in dresses and with no makeup on along with broad hats, they had brought along for this purpose.

The Water Dragon slayer recognized both of the newcomers as did most of the others, and Natsu's response probably should've been anticipated. "What the hell is that iron monger doing here?!" he roared.

"Please wait!” Juvia said, grabbing Natsu's arm and pulling it into her chest, as he made to move forward. "Juvia said at the outset Gajeel would be here for this mission as part of his payment to society. Did you not hear her?"

"The magic council agreed to that provisionally,” Ultear said from where she was standing next to Gajeel Redfox. “Although this isn’t a conversation we should have here, now is it?”

She gestured them all to follow her, and they were let into a small out of the way corridor of the train station which led into a small meeting room that was obviously the lunch room as well to given people were there eating when they arrived. She immediately tossed all of them out flashing her Magic Council badge, ignoring their grumbling about this being Seven, not Fiore since the two councils were known to have basically begun to amalgamate into one years ago. The process was ongoing and slooow, but members of both councils were respected in either country.

With that done, she turned to the others gesturing to the mage next to her. "Gajeel works now for the magic Council directly, and will continue to work for us until we believe he is paid off his debt to society, as Juvia convinced us he should."

“Don't act as if you're doing me any favors,” Gajeel scoffed, looking away. He looked back at Natsu growled “And if you think a rematch between us is going to go the same way the first one did you've got another thing coming. You blindsided me the last time, and youryour two girlfriends had worn me down a little.”

Something about the way Gajeel said that made Natsu's teeth ache as he gritted his jaw, and he made to surge forward again, only to be grabbed in a headlock by Ranma, and dragged back while Ranma glared at Gajeel.

Laxus crossed the intervening distance between them, grabbing Gajeel by the face, and squeezing hard. “Word of advice,” he said coldly, “you're here because Ultear over there says the magic Council is taking a shot on you and because Juvia thinks you’re something more than a waste of space. But don't forget that we are Fairy Tail, and you hurt some of ours!”

“I agree. The first thing you do is make him work with the guild that he attacked?” Jenny asked, understanding who this guy was now from everyone's descriptions of them. “I'm all for giving him a second chance, but asking him to work alongside the same guild he attacked on a mission like this, that seems foolish.”

“In that case, Juvia and Ultear get to watch him, as was the plan all along,” Ranma said, holding up a hand placatingly before anyone else could speak. “This is a serious mission, and it's **mine** ladies and gentleman. Given to me by the King of Fiore, endorsed by the king of Seven. If Gajeel can add to our combat power fine but if he endangers our mission,” Ranma said turning to glare at the man in question past Laxus’s hand on the other mage’s face, “I will put you down understood?”

“Understood,” Gajeel said with a nod as Laxus released him. “I have no intention of picking a fight with anyone here that doesn't pick one with me. And as for attacking Fairy Tail, I was ordered to do it. I wouldn't have done it otherwise.”

“And we’re supposed to believe that?” Laxus scoffed, turning away while Natsu continued to growl at Gajeel.

Grumbling irritably, Ranma shook his head and stared at Ultear. “You were saying something about us not being able to take the train?”

“The trains heading in that direction is dealing with a washed out train track at the moment. They'll have it fixed by tomorrow, but if we want to move on, we need to do it by our own two feet or by magical car,” Ultear said with a shrug. “I’ve already prepared several such, but I figure we get some food and rest from your journey anyway. I know I need it after being on our own train for so long from Era. Some actual conversation would be nice too.”

“Are we going to see any local help from Seven’s mages?” Ranma asked moving to her side of leading the way out of the room. “I doubt we need it, but having more aid to hand could be a good thing if we run into anything unexpected.”

“No, few mages in seven really have enough combat potential to add anything to the group you've already gathered, so it would be kind of pointless. Worse yet, that forest is almost entirely wilderness, with no nearby dwellings of any kind. There's even rumors that it was haunted at one point, though I don’t know if that was caused by the four dark guilds moving into the area or from before that.”

“Joy,” Ranma said with a drawl in his tone. “Well, whatever, what's there to eat around here?”

“A lot. This place specializes in restaurants of all kinds, it's an important crossroads between Seven and Fiore after all. Come on, I'll show you to some of the ones I like best, and we can all get some food,” Ultear replied, patting her taut stomach and ignoring the way Lyon was staring at her as if he had seen a ghost. “I am so freaking tired of train fair it isn’t funny.”

**OOOOOOO**

“Kurohebi, go,” Ivan said with a smirk as he looked through the eyes of his Shikigami. The Shikigami was one of several dozen spread around the town, and Ivan, using his Shikigami transfer magic, could stare through their eyes like he was there. This he was doing now, watching the lawful mages make their way into a restaurant. “Your target is the Blue Moon deli.”

The man so addressed was a pale, slim young man around Ranma’s age with black hair and black eyes. He had thin lips coated in black lipstick somewhat like Midnight’s and a thin, evil seeming smirk under slanted eyes with snake-like pupils and black eye-liner.

Without a word he moved out of the warehouse the two main Dark Guilds were hiding in, whispering, “Mimic Magic, Fullbody Change.” Between one step and the next Kurohebi’s face seemingly changed as if a thin skin had covered it, like a snake’s shed skin somehow recovering it. This changed his looks to that of a nondescript man who could blend into any background. His shirt also shimmered, as if it was trying to change like a chameleon to blend into the background.

Ivan turned to the other mages around him, the mages of his guild he had felt normal looking enough to bring into town and the six members of Oración Seis.

“Now we just have to wait.”

“How is Kurohebi supposed to get that poison just into the necessary meals?” Angel asked. She knew about the other mage’s espionage abilities, but even so, poison was tricky stuff. And they didn’t want to start a general slaughter, did they?

By the smile on Ivan’s face, Angel knew that assumption was wrong. “Why, he’ll simply poison every meal in the place my dear. We’ve brought more than enough poison along to be thorough about it.”

Angel shivered at that, but tried to keep it from showing, glancing over at Brain, who looked on stoically. That was a bit more than they normally did, slaughtering simple civilians, but it looked as if, with their goal so close, Brain was more than willing to go through with it.

Strangely enough however, the two allied Dark Guilds and their scattered servants, mages of two Dark Guilds, the Red Hoods and Axe Legends, were not the only dark mages in the area…

**OOOOOOO**

“They are prepared to start their ambush,” said Seilah, looking at Kyoka and their fellow Demon Torafuzar from where they sat in a church’s bell tower that overlooked the rest of the town, the remains of a large meal scattered around them. One thing even Torafuzar agreed with the others on was that human food was better, and taking an opportunity like this to chow down was only common sense. “This plan they have come up with seems roundabout, but could possibly work and could possibly even do so without weakening the Oración Seis as we had hoped.”

“Our mission is to observe, and kill anyone weak on either side,” Kyoka said with a shrug. “If that turns out to be just on one side that is perfectly acceptable.”

Seilah nodded, though she found herself dealing with a pang of misgivings, perhaps something a human would even call guilt as she saw Ranma and Wendy, the little girl who had complemented her horns and the surprisingly interesting young man. Still, they had their mission, and whatever this odd feeling inside of her was Seilah wasn't going to let it affect that.

**OOOOOOO**

The team finally found a restaurant where all of them could agree on the menu. Ranma, Laxus, Erza, Ultear and Jura sat at one table, discussing the plan going forward in low tones with the others all spaced out around them. Many of the other restaurant-goers took one look at the number of guild devices on their arms and clothing and quickly exited, wanting no party to whatever was going to happen here, but even so the restaurant was bustling, the background noise of eating and talking loud enough to cover their discussion.

Nearby, the others quickly began to order food none of the Dragon Slayer's having eaten much on the train for obvious reasons, while the others had quickly gotten tired of train fare as Ultear had. As they did, Gajeel and Natsu quickly began to lob barbs at one another across the table. It got so bad that by the time the food actually arrived, they were nearly to blows, with Natsu shouting, “alright that's it, let’s take this outside!”

Jura and Ranma both made to stand up, but Erza waved them back, with a sigh, standing up and moving over. “I've got this.

As the others watched, she smoothly walked over to the men's table and slammed their heads together. “Gentlemen!” she said glaring down at their twitching forms. “We are here to eat, and move on. We are not here to start a public incident. If I have to speak to either of you again, I will be very cross. Are we clear?”

Both of them nodded, Natsu looking terrified of Erza as normal, and Gajeel just nodding and rubbing at his head. As she huffed and turned away he whispered, “how the how the hell does her hits hurt so much?”

“If you are able to figure that out, tell me,” Natsu groused. “I've been trying to figure out the secret to her strength for years.”

“She’s right,” Ranma said, looking over at them and then passed them to Lyon and Gray who were arguing heatedly about something, though what it was he couldn’t hear. Lyon’s eyes though kept straying towards Ultear for some reason. “Far be it from me of all people to stop a good rivalry, but this is not the time. Let's just eat and go guys and girls.”

From then the meal passed uneventfully, right up until they were nearly finished. At that point, things began to go downhill rapidly. Ranma grumbled, holding his stomach and burping loudly, holding a hand up to his mouth. “Guh, ‘scuse me. Geez, maybe I shouldn’t have eaten so much after so many days on water and bread. My stomach is churning something fierce.”

*And since I’ve dealt with Akane’s cooking in the past that’s saying something,* Ranma thought ruefully, remembering the times he’d been force into the guinea pig role when Kasumi wasn’t cooking for one reason or the other. Even so, as Ranma moved towards the front of the restaurant Ranma couldn’t help but scowl at the amount of noises his stomach was making.

He was about to pause and concentrate on that feeling to get to the bottom of what was going on when Wendy grabbed his hand, pulling his attention down toward her. “Ranma-nii, I don't, I don't feel so good,” she said weakly. With that, she collapsed to one side, her face turning green. Ranma caught her, feeling his own stomach beginning to roil even louder at him and he grabbed at it with his free hand, grimacing. “What the hell! Was there something off with the food we ate?”

That thought lasted until he looked up, and saw every other member of the party were grabbing at their stomachs and keeling over one after another. Everyone else in the restaurant were also afflicted bar the waiters, who were looking around wildly, trying to help the customers nearest them. Many of them had already begun to still, blood and green pus flowing form their eyes, mouths and ears. *Poison, shit!!!*

The non-Dragon Slayer's had all crashed to the floor where they were, clutching their stomachs with foam coming out of their mouths, some of it tinted red with blood, but the Dragon Slayer's were still awake groaning and moaning. It was quite obvious they were in too much pain to concentrate on anything though, least of all a spell, and Wendy was even shivering as Ranma held her to him.

Seeing all this, Ranma realized he had only seconds if that to act, and he lifted Wendy, moving to the nearest table. *Ignore the civilians, can’t do anything for all of them just yet, if ever, Wendy’s my priority, then the others.*

Of the others, only Juvia, Jura and Ichiya were moving, though they too were obviously dealing with being poisoned. Juvia, the closest to Ranma at the moment, was leaning against the nearby wall, her face pale, but her eyes closed and concentrating. As Ranma watched, her body shifted into its water form and small green dots began to appear on her body, as she began to push the poison out of her system with difficulty, her form collapsing and reforming constantly. Ranma’s enhanced ears could hear something like a high-pitched whine of pain coming from her whenever she reformed into human form long enough to make it. Still, she seemed to be dealing with the poison as best she could.

Moving past Juvia to lay Wendy out on the table beside her, Ranma just lightly patted her on the head, saying, “Damn good thinking girl, keep it up.”

Once he had Wendy on the table, he laid a hand on her head, with a wince of effort pushed some of his ki into her and giving her body a leg up. He could tell she was already fighting off the poison, but that should help jumpstart the process.

Leaving her there to heal Ranma raced over to the others, as Jura did the same, pulling his own teammates upright and checking their vitals. The ground element mage was obviously pushing himself on through willpower alone, aided by the fact he hadn’t eaten more than a third of what the Dragon Slayers had eaten having honestly enjoyed the train fare, the only one who had after the first two days. Even so, his face was green and that green was spreading quickly, down his chest and to the rest of his body, with blood starting to come out of his mouth along with green foam.

But he ignored it in favor of taking care of his teammates, moving toward where Ichiya was, setting them down in the cloud that had come out from the Trimens commander’s vial of perfume and breathing it in deeply before speaking, his words interrupted by a hacking cough. “They’re alive,” he reported grimly, “but for how long I don't know.”

Lucy was foaming at the mouth and trembling as Ranma reached her table, along with Ultear, Sherry, Gray Lyon, all three of the pretty boys, and Jenny. Just as Ranma reached their table though, there was a sudden flash of light as one of her Celestial keys opened itself forcefully. Aquarius, the girl Ranma had stolen the urn from appeared, glaring at him and grabbing at Lucy, her eyes wide, frightened, but determined. Before he could do anything the two of them disappeared, leaving him blinking and surprise. *I didn't know spirits could do that, still I’ll have to hope Aquarius can help her.*

That unfortunately left the rest of the table, and Ranma moved to Jenny putting his fingers to her forehead, and concentrating. Ranma wasn't a good healer, he could figure out a bone was broken and set it, split things up and that kind of thing, yet none of that could help his friends now. Still, Ranma had learned long ago how to transfer some of his own ki into objects to strengthen them. He now did the same thing here transferring some of his ki into Jenny, trying to jumpstart the healing process as he had earlier with Wendy.

It started to work, some of the color fading from her face and Ranma moved to the others, draining his ki like water to help them fight whatever was inside them, eating away at their innards like an unholy combination of acid and poison. He began to feel a little tired, but ignored it, and further pushed down His Dragon Slayer magic too, unwilling to let it get away from him under these circumstances.

Just as he finished with them and was about to move on to Jura, the man seeming behind this turmoil and death made himself known. The man, a plain looking fellow at first must not have seen Jura or Ranma kneeling by their friends hidden by a tall banister as he came out from the kitchen. He took a moment then to tear at his own face revealing a much thinner face underneath some kind of snakeskin, his eyes like those of a reptile and his lips thin and black.

“Well that worked!” the man said with a cackle, moving through the restaurant, ignoring the dozens of dead bodies scattered around the place from the other restaurant goers moving around the banister to approach the wizards, still not noticing Jura and Ranma. This was, to put it simply, a tactical error.

Ranma growled, leaping towards him faster than the gothic looking young man could track. Ranma had his arm around the man’s neck and a claw like that of a dragon pressed into his jugular before he could blink. “You!” Ranma hissed. “What the hell did you do!?”

“Heack!!!” the man tried to cackle only for Ranma to tighten his grip. “N, nothing you can undo! The poison, it has crushed lacrima in it, you’ll never be able to heal them all. We’ve, we’ve won this fight before it even began!”

Ranma might have disagreed with that, perhaps even by snapping the mans’ throat he was so furious. But just then the side of the restaurant next to where the two of them were standing in suddenly exploded inwards, a massive beam of green energy smashing through wall and into Ranma’s side. Ranma grunted as it staggered him, which the man in his grip used to break free, leaping outside to join his fellows, the shapes of which Ranma could see through the dust and debris.

Jura had ignored the man’s arrival to reach for another perfume bottle from Ichiya’s bandoleer, but another beam smashed in the head hurling him to the ground. Even so, he reached out a hand to the ground and covered himself, Ichiya and as many of the others as he could with a stone bubble, the stone coming out of the ground in large squares to form the bubble.

Outside the restaurant, Brain looked through the hole he had just created while Kurohebi moved over to Ivan’s side. “I'm astonished that two of them were still moving. I thought your poison would do a better job frankly.”

“Bah, such outliers should have been anticipated,” Ivan said with a frown. “I believe Jura is keeping on his feet through willpower, which as a Wizard Saint I suppose we could have anticipated. But the other one, he looked as if he was just dealing with a case of diarrhea. Most disappointing,”

“I never thought I'd be thankful for Akane’s cooking,” said a voice, as Ranma pushed himself upright to glare through the wide hole at the gathered dark mages. He recognized Cobra and Midnight and smirked evilly, cracking his knuckles as he moved forward. “Joy, our prey comes to me.”

Inside though Ranma was really worried, though he wanted to do all he could to keep their attention on him and not the others, especially the Dragon Slayers, who were all in the open still. He knew that Cobra and Midnight alone would probably have given him a fight and here he was, facing down the rest of their guild and an entire different dark guild, mages who this group at least seems to respect rather than simply order around like peons judging by how they were all standing. That meant they might well be as strong as the Oración Seis.

Despite that, he couldn't figure out what guild they were from until he spotted the guild mark, a sideways image of a raven with a long tail and a sword-like image cutout of the center. *Raven Tail! Everyone tends to forget about them for some reason thanks to the Balam Alliance, and the fact they're not part of it. But they are just as dangerous as any of the big three. FUCK.*

“You!” Cobra shouted, and Midnight glared at Ranma, veins actually standing out in his thin, pasty-white neck. “We owe you a beating from the last time!”

“Come and try,” Ranma said with a laugh, charging forward, yet even as he did so Ranma’s mind was on the others and what had happened to them. “Wendy, code four-ten!” He howled at the top of his lungs.

“Nullpudding, go,” Ivan said coolly. As his guild members leaped forward, Ivan looked at Brain. “I presume your guild can handle him with that little aid? Because at this point, I think our alliance is concluded.”

“I would say we should keep the alliance going until we are both clear of the town,” Brain said hurriedly, not wanting to deal with Ivan trying to stab him in the back for some reason. “But yes, I think Cobra and Midnight can handle him with Nullpudding helping. “

They were interrupted by Nullpuding’s body slamming into the ground in front of them, and Ranma roaring towards them, dodging Cobra’s attacks as well as Midnight’s magic, as he closed with the two main minds behind this ambush. But both Guild Masters responded as one, turning their magics on him and sending Ranma flying through the back of the restaurant in a blast of green, black and white energy.

Grimacing Ranma smashed his way out of the house, grateful that it had been empty. He leaped into the air, racing along the rooftops back the way he had come, roaring as loud as possible. “Attention, everyone! Dark Mages have attacked this town, get under whatever cover you can find!!!!

Luckily for Ranma a lot of people had already begun running away after hearing the initial attack on the restaurant. That hadn’t saved the people inside, but at least most of the civilians were showing the brains god gave a gerbil to get the heck away from the fight. Unfortunately, that just meant they were still around someplace in a town that, for all its stone and concrete would rapidly prove to be quite breakable.

“Wendy, code four-ten!” He shouted once more as he closed with the dark mages.

That was a code Ranma and Wendy had come up with which meant for her to lay low and hide. It hadn’t been used, well, ever, but Ranma had made it up when she was younger and couldn’t fight. Right now though, it was much more important for Wendy to hide and wait it out rather than join the fight. Her healing skills could mean the difference between life or death for all of their friends, regardless of the little leg up Ranma had given them. *Got to lead these assholes away from the rest of them regardless, maybe get them out away from the town entirely.*

With that in mind, Ranma leaped up into the air using a Water Dragon’s Boosted Step, and then brought his hands down and forward encased in paws of water each nearly the same size as a city block. “Soryu no Doriru Kagitsume (Water Dragon’s Drilling Claws)!”

From each outstretched paws flashed five claws of water like drills flashing down towards the gathered dark mages. They scattered quickly or, in the case of Hoteye and Ivan, tried to shield themselves, with Ivan creating a shield of paper dolls with his Shikigami magic. This proved a mistake as even the impact of the attack drove Ivan off his feet, bursting though the paper shield and smashing him to the street. Hoteye, who had molded a portion of the street over himself, had to gulp as the water assault had shattered through his makeshift defense and deep into the ground, causing a large hole right in front of him. “Whoo, rather a dangerous young man that one, right!?”

“Kill the ranger!” Brain roared out, not that this had to be said for some as Midnight and Cobra had already raced forward, eager to take revenge on Ranma for his loss. Admittedly, Cobra wanted to kill Natsu and Erza more than Ranma, but fighting the Water Dragon Slayer would be a nice run up to murdering those two where they lay.

“Nullpudding, get up and help them,” Ivan ordered with a growl as he cancelled the wave of Shikigami dolls that had protected him. Most of them had been destroyed, but that hardly mattered, since Ivan could always create more. To his side, Nullpudding, a squat man with purple skin, horns and spikes sticking out of his skin in places grumbled and pushed himself to his feet from where Ranma had hurled him a moment before, leaping into the air following on Cobra’s heels. “Kurohebi, you go too.”

Up in the air, the Poison Dragon Slayer flew on Cubellios, closing quickly with Ranma. “Time for some payback Water-boy!”

Ranma however cancelled his Boosted Step and dropped, which Cobra had anticipated thanks to his Hearing Magic. Yet even so, once more Cobra faced a problem with his ability to anticipate his opponent’s moves: it mattered not at all, if he was too slow to take advantage of it. Between one millisecond and the next, Ranma unleashed a thousand punches faster than even Cobra could follow. He dodged some, but was hit by others. While none were powerful they still blew him backwards off Cubellios with a cry of anger rather than pain. Though artificial, Cobra was still a Dragon Slayer, and his durability was a good deal higher than most mages could boast.

Ranma tapped down for a brief second on Cubellios’ back, then flipped up and over Nullpudding, a kick sending Nullpudding flying in one direction as Ranma pushed himself down again towards the rest of the dark mages. *Hard, that guy’s already back!? He’s got some serious durability too, or maybe it’s just his head.*

“Spiral Pain!” Midnight roared, only to watch as Ranma dodged around the air that his spell had distorted somehow feeling the spell coming towards him. The attack continued on to smash into a building behind Ranma, but thankfully its inhabitants had already fled into its basement.

Then Midnight had to use his Reflector magic to block another blast of water. His eyes wide and becoming bloodshot with a mix of anger and fear he then leaped to the side, dodging a glowing ball of energy that blasted into the ground.

A second later, Ranma was past shooting towards the mages still by the restaurant where his friends were. *Got to get them away from the restaurant somehow!*

“Liquid Ground, Sand Pit!” Hoteye shouted. In front of him the entire street changed into a kind of liquid under his command, rising up to catch Ranma as he landed. The buildings to either side did the same, coming towards Ranma like twin waves from either side, leaving behind several civilians who screamed and raced directly away from the action.

In response Ranma flicked out and down with one of his escrima sticks suddenly appearing in a flash of Requip. Using that as a nail in the rapidly liquefying ground rather than his hand, Ranma launched himself sideways, catching Angel, who had just been standing by Brain, in the chest with a kick that sent her flying away with a cry of pain. It was only the fact that Brain attacked Ranma mid kick that kept Angel in the fight at all at that point, but that put Ranma back in midair away from Hoteye’s attack.

Still midair, Ranma lashed out to either side, “Soryu no Taitan Panchi! (Water Dragon's Titan Punch)!” This attack caught up two more mages from Raven Tail on one side and Brain and Hoteye on the other. The two Oración Seis members both shielded themselves and were only pushed backwards, but the two Raven Tail Mages were sent flying.

One was a young man with tanned skin and aqua colored hair, who quickly created a ball of metal in front of himself using it to shield his body but unable to deal with the momentum of the attack being thrown sideways with cry of pain. The other was a tall, almost spindly looking fellow who had large pointed nose and a black cloak covering him from neck to ankle.

*This Ranger is truly dangerous, but to try to fight us all, how stupid!* Brain thought. “Everyone, spread out and attack him at once, he cannot hope to match us all!”

At that point, Kurohebi made his presence known once more. He had leaped down from another rooftop closing in quickly, his hands gleaming suddenly with water magic like Ranma’s own only punch smaller. “Soryu no Panchi (Water Dragon’s Punch)!”

Ranma opened his mouth and consumed the magic, gulping it in and flipping himself in a circle, lashing out with a speedy kick that the other man never even saw coming, sending him flying to the side with a cry of pain. “Your magic tastes fucking horrible loser!”

He landed on a rooftop, staring around him with a smirk on his face and a wild gleam in his eyes as he saw the Dark mages of both guilds had spread out now. The only two missing were the tall man who looked somewhat like Laxus and the other two Raven Tail mages, the pointy-nosed man and the tanned fellow Ranma’s earlier attack had hit. “Come on!” he roared out leaping forward.

“Open, gate of the Scorpio! Open, Gate of the Chisel Key, Caelum!” Angel shouted, rubbing at her chest in pain and glaring hatefully at Ranma. In front of her two spirits appeared, a man with a tall, lean build, red and white hair and a scorpion tail coming up over his back from his rear. The second spirit was just a robotic looking cannon. The cannon immediately began to charge up, while Scorpio shouted out “Sand Buster, Revision!” which sent several blasts of sand and air like a sandstorm toward Ranma.

“Leave him to me,” Racer shouted, racing forward. “No one is faster than me!”

“Dark Rondo!” Brain roared out. From his staff there appeared hundreds of tortured faces, which slowly disappeared into the staff, then shot out in dozens of green and black beams of magical power.

“Dokuryu Totsuga (Poison Dragon’s Fang Thrust)!” This attack Ranma had seen once before when he and the others fought Cobra in the Tower of Heaven. It was shaped like a large fanged snakehead that raced towards Ranma, black and red with poison magic.

“Air Slicer!” Midnight shouted. This too Ranma had seen before a near invisible slice of air shooting towards him like an air cutter from Kuno’s sword.

The attacks were aimed directly at Ranma regardless of anything between him and his attackers further damaging the town around Ranma, and Ranma could hear the screams of pain and fear of the townsfolk. In particular a squad of five policemen had raced towards the fighting only to be immolated by Brain’s attack. Cobra’s attack came at Ranma through a building, killing two people within before blasting out the other side.

Ranma himself was forced do dodge this way and that, using his mastery of the aerial style to stay away from them. Then Racer was on him, and almost immediately Ranma realized something was wrong, the other man not only keeping up with his speed but also surpassing it, making it looks as if Ranma’s punches were so slow they missed him by miles. *What the hell!?*

“Motor!” Racer shouted, his leg disappearing to Ranma’s senses, which should have been utterly impossible. The next instant Ranma, off balance in midair for the first time since before puberty, was flung aside and into a building.

*Seven hundred kicks, and I was off-balance too! What in the hell, he’s not that fast, so what, it was almost as if, was I slowing down, no, what was…* Mid-thought Ranma leaped upwards over an attack from the cannon Angel had summoned, but then was again caught off balance somehow as Racer once more closed, and Ranma felt his body slowing down. Even his attempt to gather his water magic around himself to stop Racer’s next strike was slowed enough he was instead caught full on by a blast of Brain’s magic.

”Shit that hurt!” Ranma growled, pushing himself once more out of the wreckage of a building, hearing the screams of the people directly to one side of him. Eyes widening, he rolled in that direction, then flung his arms out to either side as he desperately gathered his magic. “Soryu no Shahei no Uroko (Water Dragon's Shielding Scale)!”

Four people, a family of some kind screamed as two magical attacks flashed through the dust and debris towards them, and through them towards Ranma. The globe of water appeared, absorbing the magical attacks, but this opened Ranma up to Racer, who moved in from the side before Ranma could blink.

A knife in his hand appeared at Ranma’s throat, as Racer smirked, his thin lips quirking into an unpleasant expression. “Hehe, you’re fast, but no one is faster than me. My kicks might not have fazed you, but I wonder how long you’d survive if I just cut your throat like this.”

“Racer, wait!” Midnight shrieked from nearby. “Don’t play with him like that, he’s at his most dangerous in hand to hand!”

“If you think you can just cut my throat asshole, do it,” Ranma said with a smirk, his chin flashing down. Racer didn’t realize what he was doing before he found his knife trapped between Ranma’s chin and his throat. He spent a precious second of time trying to pull it out, only to find his arm grabbed by one of Ranma’s hands in that bare instant of remaining still.

“Let go!” Racer shouted. His free hand flashed into dozens, hundreds of punches, but Ranma simply snarled, his teeth bared as he took it.

“Heh so that really is what’s going on!” Still holding onto Racer’s arm Ranma leaped away, to put more distance between himself and the civilians, dodging several other attacks having seen them coming before they got near him at the same time, none of which luckily went towards the family of civilians he’d just left behind. “You don’t speed yourself up, you somehow slow me down! But hate ta tell ya, once you’re in my grip like this, that hardly matters much, since you can’t move any faster. And as for your punches,” Ranma said, as Racer tried to stab him, the knife shattering against his skin. “My little sister hits harder than you!”

“Damn you, let, me, go!” Racer bellowed, trying to use his Slow Magic to slow Ranma down enough to break Ranma’s grip, or lash out at him hard enough, creating an attack that was something like Ranma’s own Amaguriken to Ranma’s senses. But Ranma’s durability was such that this was, indeed, like a child attacking a mountain. As for his grip, no matter how he twisted or tried to wrench away, Ranma’s grip just wouldn’t give way.

In return, Ranma used his Water Dragon Slayer magic to create a globe of water to side of him, then grimacing had to do the same to one side protecting another group of policemen from an errant blast. Then he finally got in an attack on his captive, but, with speed of the essence and Cobra closing in, wasn’t able to recoat his hand in water to add further stopping power. Still, his speed attack was enough.

Instead of attacking where he saw Racer in his slowed-down perception though, Ranma aimed at everywhere Racer’s head could possibly be, launching twenty punches at each point. In this manner, and with his movements curtailed by the grip on his arm, no matter how Racer tried to dodge, he was shit out of luck. “You think you’re magic makes you fast, welcome to the real thing!!” Ranma roared

To Cobra, who had just closed into hand to hand combat range with Nullpudding and Kurohebi, it looked as if Ranma’s arm had become a wave almost as Cobra desperately tried to dodge, his own movement like a streak to Cobra’s senses, effected as he was suddenly by Racer’s power. But then Ranma’s fist connected, there was the sound of a meat tenderizer at work and a flash of blood as Racer’s glasses and chin protector shattered along with his nose and several of his teeth.

Instantly Racer’s body fell limp in Ranma’s hand and he landed, tossing the unconscious Dark Mage away forced to raise his hands to either side as more long-range attacks hammered in. “Soryu no Shahei Kyutai! (Water Dragon's Shielding Globe)!”

The attacks broke through eventually and then Cobra was there getting in a punch to Ranma’s powered by his own Poison Dragon Slayer magic, trying to open Ranma’s face up with his poisoned claws. “Dokuryu Soga (Poison Dragon’s Twin Fang)!”

Nullpudding too closed, and Ranma cried out in honest pain as the purple-colored man’s large forearm caught him in the side of his chest. Still he used the momentum to take to the air once more as his healing ability went to work. *Fuck, what was that?! It was as if those spikes of his created fields of vibrations almost that carried into my body!*

“Keep it up!” Brain bellowed, lashing out with his magic from both hand and staff, green and black lances of magical energy. “Everyone, attack!”

At those words, more than two dozen men, including some who Ranma had thought were civilians a moment ago, appeared out of the alleyways of the town. All of them shucked off their normal clothing to pull on Red Hoods before lashing out towards Ranma with staff-based attacks, fire and lightning assaults lashing out. “Red Hoods keep the range open, Axe Legends close in! Everyone but Cobra, Nullpudding and Kurohebi keep the range open! Hoteye, stay back and look for a chance to trap him. Angel, you Midnight and I will keep trying to minimize his movements so the others can land a killing blow.”

From several buildings there came the crash of glass breaking and more than three dozen men jumped out. They all looked like they had been the victim of vampires, their bodies thin to the point of emaciation, yet in their hands they all carried huge axes nearly as large as they were. While Ranma was busy with the rest of the dark mages, they all hefted their axes slightly off the ground as they shouted, “Strength Magic, Berserker!” With that their bodies buffed out to resemble that of Elfman, and they all roared forward, hacking at Ranma, the ground or the scenery as they came.

These attacks, and still needing to guard civilians here and there as the magical assault continued to story the town around them, slowly pushed Ranma away from his previous position despite his best efforts, and Ranma cursed. But as the berserkers closed with him, they became a liability to the others, with Ranma using them as so many springboards or projectile weapons, hurling them around and generally making them look like idiots. Then when Nullpudding closed again, instead of letting him strike Ranma’s body cleanly, Ranma Requipped his escrima sticks and began to duel with him, smirking at Nullpudding’s shocked grimace. “You didn’t think I missed whatever magic that was your spikes contain did you!?”

As the battle moved away from him, Brain flung his staff to one side. “Klodoa, get Racer up and moving. It’s clear his magic is no help against this Ranger. But we can use him to get the councilwoman out and away now. We need her to open up the way to Nirvana.”

The staff, a long wooden gnarled thing with a skull that held a crystal in its mouth and a vaguely Native American look, nodded, its expression suddenly coming alive. “Of course, Master Brain, leave it to me!” The staff’s voice was an alloy of unctuous servility and arrogance and it hopped away quickly while Brian once more began to fire towards where Ranma could be seen fighting over the rooftops of the town.

“Fuck my life!” Ranma growled, his head ringing from another magical blow from Cobra even as he landed in among a group of the Red Hood gang. Ranma recognized them as a dark guild which looked to the Oración Seis for protection, but that didn’t matter at the moment. What did matter was they, and the Axe Legend idiots, had joined the fight, further forcing Ranma to concentrate on them.

He had even had to protect a few townsfolk from their attacks already by this point. This was hard, really hard and even with his continued use of his Water Dragon’s Shielding Globe. And Ranma, just like Racer, couldn’t avoid everything. Of them all though, Brain’s magical attacks were by far the worse, stronger than any attacks Ranma had seen up to this point, well above even the attacks of the devil Halphas and the attacks he’d faced from Jellal and the others in the tower. They were so strong, they nearly broke through Ranma’s durability, and he was really starting to feel it.

*Anything Goes, Anything Fucking Goes, come on brain, work it out!* Ranma growled, flipping over one attack and smashing Cobra and Nullpudding to either side. Nullpudding’s durability again surprised him, the magic coating his hands doing little more than making his punch hit harder than it would have instead of actually shredding as Ranma had hoped. Cobra’s body too took the hit, and before Ranma could attack either while they were off-balance he was forced to block another long-range attack grimacing as it hurled him into and through a fifth building.

Adaptation and integration of any style or attack they encountered was the central, overriding rule of the Anything Goes School of martial arts. It called for minds that could, in the heat of the moment, analyze, adapt and overcome. With magic, that was of limited utility since Ranma simply couldn’t use magic of the types coming at him. Worse, most of the time when Ranma wanted to use his gathered water to attack, he was forced to use it to defend himself or the civilians around the town. Only those who had basements to retreat into were truly safe given the power of the magic being thrown around, and only Scorpio of his attackers seemed willing to not just aim through them.

Yet there was still one thing Ranma could do mentally in order to overcome his enemy’s strategy and numbers: continue the work he’d been doing with Porlyusica.

To someone else, devoting time to this during a battle would be suicide. After all, Ranma hadn’t made much progress in creating the mental framework needed to really control switching between his ki and his Dragon Slayer magics and to say the least his attention should have entirely been on the fight around him. But Ranma had expended a goodly portion of his ki in his efforts to jumpstart everyone else’s natural healing ability, weakening that power within his body.

Further, he was someone who learned best by being forced to learn on the fly. That had been the case his entire life. It was what had allowed him to learn every technique showed him so quickly. It should have taken him months of preparation and time to create a real, working version. While taking a pounding the likes of which he hadn’t faced in years in monstrously intense combat, to create a barely controllable yet working version, took Ranma ten minutes.

By this point Brain was generally confident of their ability to kill the Ranger. Yes, his durability was a surprise, but they were grinding him down thanks to his foolish desire to protect the civilians around them and their numbers. Yes, he had nearly beaten Racer, and that was a concern, but they had been able to force him away from Racer before he could be finished off. *A better idea would have been to have Racer stay near him, slow him down, but Racer’s Slow Magic is very range-limited.*

*Still, we are wearing him down,* Brain thought as he lashed out with another dozen Dark Capriccios, single solid beams of green and black magic that specialized in drilling through anything in their way. This they did now, shattering through several houses towards his current target, almost certainly killing Brain didn’t care how many civilians.

Then he froze as Ranma burst through them, closing with Brain through the blasts of green and black magic, a route none of the others had thought to guard. Brain had an instant to gape at Ranma’s form, noticing that his entire body was covered now in scales before a punch caught him with enough force to hurl him through a nearby building, a shout of “See how you like it bastard!” ringing in his ears.

Groaning in pain, Brain pushed to his knees, hacking up a bit blood as he stared through the rubble of the ruined house at Ranma. Ranma stood there for a second with his hand outstretched. His arms were covered in scales of blue, his face covered likewise, his eyes slanted, almost reptilian. Indeed, his outstretched hand looked almost draconic, with claws instead of fingers. His teeth too had started to show as nearly pointed as he hissed. “Right, bastards, round two!”

“Kill him!” Brain shouted out as he flew backwards, pain and something approaching fear clear in his face for the first time in a very long time. “Kill him!”

His teeth bared in a snarl, Ranma dodged this way and that, his movements faster and far more controlled now, ignoring the few attacks that were still able to tag him as he moved towards the edge of the town. The Axe Legend mages closes once more, only to find to their shock their axes bounced off his dragon scales and they were no match for him in close combat. Each hit blasted one off his feet, every attack Ranma sent out struck with devastating force, pushing Cobra once more away from Cubellios in midair, then Midnight too was forced back purely on the defensive when Ranma started to use Guns Magic to attack him and the lesser mages around him.

Then Brain, Angel and her celestial Spirits found the range once more and with a roar, Ranma was forced to retreat. This retreat was exacerbated when Hoteye nearly captured his legs in his water ground mud attack then nearly took Ranma’s head off as he shifted the rubble of a nearby house into a punch that took Ranma in the side of the face before he could dodge away.

To the dark mages it looked like, despite his newfound durability and draconic appearance, Ranma was still being pressed back. Even Brain, once he resumed the battle, believed that, despite the fact that more and more of their attacks were beginning to miss him entirely.

The truth was very different. *Need to get these assholes away from the town, away from the rest of the populace.* Ranma knew many, possibly hundreds of people, had been killed in the battle already, despite his initial shout and his own efforts since to defend any civilians he saw get caught in the crossfire. The dark mages had been shooting through buildings to get to him after all. But he refused to let anymore get caught up in it, especially not considering Ranma was going to be adding to the carnage as soon as he could.

**OOOOOOO**

Looking around as his so-called allies’ shriek reached him, Ivan shook his head. “My, my, that ranger he seems to have become a major issue, doesn’t he?” He tilted his head in thought, then nodded, and created a few dozen red, glowing Shikigami, which flew over toward the tanned young man by his side. “Gapri, join the others in keeping that one away from me. Then meet me outside the town to the southeast.”

Grimacing as he held his bruised shoulder where he had landed after Ranma’s magical attack a few minutes ago, Gapri nodded reluctantly. His magic, Steel Molding, didn’t give his actual body any further physical endurance, though he had trained his speed as much as he could, and his casting speed in particular was fast, hence why he’d been able to protect himself from Ranma’s earlier attack. Yet the speed and power of it had really worried him. *Fuck, I should have convinced Master Ivan to take Swan instead of me on this ambush!* “Yes, Master Ivan.”

Smiling Ivan leaned down and hefted the groaning Laxus to one shoulder, having finished chaining him up with Shikigami chains, series of interconnected paper dolls. To Ivan they weighed nothing. To Laxus, they would be as strong as several tons of metal. “Come, come, my dear son, yorororo, it is time we have a family reunion. But not here, no, no, don’t worry. This reunion may take a long while, so we’ll have to wait until we are back in my home for it…. yororororo…”

He took a brief moment to look around at the other mages, then sent a smirk toward the two remaining dragon slayers, the only two who looked to be awake. “Yorrororo, the poison in you should finish its work soon, so don’t worry, it will all be over in moments. Tortuous moments of course, but still only moments.” He held out a hand over Natsu, the hand slowly glowing white and black. “Maybe I should end it here, hmm, an act of kindness towards my former guild?”

Natsu glared back at him, no fear in his face, only pain, hate and anger. Ivan stared back, then sighed as the sounds of combat grew louder for a moment, then he ducked down as something loud boomed in the distance, shattering windows throughout the town. “Yorororo, or perhaps I should not take the time? Saved by the boom, Natsu dear.”

With that he turned and, carrying his prize over one shoulder, left the restaurant through the door, even closing behind him for some reason despite the fact more than half the front of the restaurant was gone. “Yorororo, what a magnificent day!”

Still in the restaurant, Wendy was hiding under a mound of rock and rubble crafted into an igloo by Jura. Jura had been able to create a shield to cover himself, Jenny, Wendy, and Mirajane the closest to him, though this had left everyone else outside it at the mercy of the dark mages. But his constitution had failed him at that point, and he had fallen unconscious, his hands still outstretched keeping the stone hideaway intact even as the blood and foam dribbling from his mouth became a torrent.

At the same time Jura had fallen unconscious, Wendy had, thanks to the start Ranma had given her and her own Dragon Slayer constitution, slowly started to deal with the poison inside her. She was still weak and groggy, but even through Jura’s rubble igloo she had heard the code Ranma had shouted earlier, and so remained still and hidden while the restaurant suffered another series of magical attacks, some of which had shattered the protective shell.

Now she watched, her hands over her mouth as the dark mage with the insane-looking face picked up Laxus like a sack of wheat and began to move away. She waited until he was out of sight, then quickly turned reaching up to Jura only to freeze as she found Jenny’s hand covering her mouth, keeping her from shrieking in shock. “Je, Jenny, you’re awake?”

“Awake, but not exactly happy, ugh,” Jenny grimaced, gently moving Wendy to one side to look out into the rest of the restaurant and then gestured for Wendy to come close. “Take Over, Drop Hammer!” Jenny’s arm shifted into a large hammer the same size as her torso set into a long, wide piston of some kind. The hammer pressed back to her elbow then lashing out forward as if fired by a spring, smashing the rubble outwards.

Stepping over the rubble Jenny grimaced as she looked back into Jura’s hideout at the Wizard Saint and Mira, then around at the others. Natsu, to her astonishment, looked back at her, his eyes wild and wrathful as he tried to push himself to his feet despite a trial of blood and green goo dripping from his mouth. Gajeel too was awake, but other than continually smashing his hand down on the floor, didn’t seem able to move, the poison affecting him a little more than Natsu for some reason.

“H, how the hell are you alright?” Natsu groaned as Wendy looked between him and the others, trying to figure out where to start, looking almost panicked at the number of bodies scattered around the restaurant. All too many of them were already dead, normal civilians not having any kind if built in durability as most mages did no matter how weak their magic.

“I’m a freaking model, do you have any idea how often someone has tried to slip me date rape drugs or worse?” Jenny asked, shaking her head with a grimace that looked particularly ugly on her pretty face. “Of course I came up with a Takeover form that could help me, I V Tube. And I wouldn’t say I’m alright, I’m just not in any danger of dying. Not like my guildmates there.”

Jenny moved over to Ichiya, the only one of them moving, and her grimace deepening, began to search through the other S-class mage’s clothing, trying to find his perfumes. She knew for a fact that he had one that enhanced his body’s healing speed, and another that was a universal anti-poison remedy. Indeed, its mixture was the basis for what she had in her Take Over, I V Form. Moving his body slightly her grimace faded into a smile as she saw, like Ranma and Jura before her, that Ichiya had tried to get one of his vials open before the poison struck him down, the smell of it keeping him in the land of the living at least.

Ichiya, Ren and Hibiki though would probably have died if not for having been close enough to partake of some of it. Regardless, they were in a very bad way, their faces green and their bodies unmoving. Setting a hand to their necks, she could detect a brief pulse, but it was fading as she touched them. Hoping it would help she pulled out the stopper on both vials of perfume and set it between them.

“Wendy, concentrate on keeping the weaker members alive,” She ordered, before grabbing Sherry, Lyon and Gray in turn, moving them over to join her guildmates, hoping the perfume’s influence would help them. They all seemed to have tougher constitutions, but Sherry in particular was so pale and green it looked as if she was already dead. Gray was the best of them, but even he didn’t have much time left unless he got some help.

“Juvia will help as well,” said a third voice, causing both girls to twist around. What they had taken to be a puddle of spilled water in one corner of the room shifted as they watched into a person, solidifying into Juvia’s form before she stepped forward. “Juvia might not know healing magic, but she can use her liquid form to flush out any poisons from their stomachs. She must warn you though, this poison is a very nasty thing, it even has crushed poison lacrima in it and it will fight any healing magic we try.”

“We’ll see about that!” Wendy growled. She swiftly moved to kneel between the Trimens, holding her hands out over them. “Tenryu no Hiringo Kaze (Sky Dragon's Healing Gale)!” From her hands, a white and yellow miasma of magic spread out to cover the wounded. This was a wide angle healing spell that was intended to take care of lots of small wounds and bruises, and she hoped it would work for poisons too.

Beyond poison weapons a time or two however, she had rarely seen poison before and never on a scale like this. Her brows furrowed as the magic of the gale seemed to not stick to her patients as much as it should and none of them looked to be getting any better. “Darn it!” She cast the same spell again, this time pouring a lot more of her magic into it, and watched as the magic finally took, but even then not as much as it should have. “Ooh, double darn it!”

Moving from one to the other, now Wendy began to use “Tenryu no Ochitsuita Tsubasa (Sky Dragon’s Soothing Wing)!” to analyze each of them in turn. With this spell she quickly found that Juvia was right: this poison was made by mixing up four very different but still virulent poisons into once unholy concoction. Cubellios’ poison effected the whole body, Cobra’s effected the lungs almost melting them inside the person’s body. Kurohebi’s addition was more of a paralysis type that would kill slowly but could be healed, indeed that aspect seemed to be fading under the healing gale, but the other two issues had been unaffected. Thankfully its inclusion had slowed the impact of the first two issues. Even so, Sherry, Lyon and Gray’s lungs were nearly black with poison.

And Ivan’s addition to it, added to get the poison past the antibodies of the Dragon Slayers, was ground up poison lacrima, similar to the kind that had been embedded into Cobra so many years ago. It attacked literally every part of the body and spread quickly, though thankfully due to Kurohebi’s poison being included it didn’t act quickly, or else they would already have lost teammates. Carla, Sherry and Happy were very close to death even so.

Now that she knew what to do, Wendy laid her hands on the two Exceed first, gathering her magic and shouting, “Tenryu no Iyashino Iki (Sky Dragon’s Healing Pulse)!” A blast of white and gold magic entered both bodies, which began to glow with tiny pinpricks of green energy, the ground up poison lacrima attempting to fight her magic. But after a few seconds those pulses started to fade under her power, and their lungs started to heal, regenerating to how they had been prior to the poison.

But by the time she was finished with them, Wendy was gasping, her magic feeling almost drained. She spread her arms wide, and sucked in the air of the restaurant, taking it in and changing it into magical power, but only regained a portion of the energy she had expended. Even so, she moved over to Sherry.

But Juvia stopped her, touching a hand to Wendy’s shoulder. “Juvia will flush out the poison at the same time as you heal their bodies, that should help the process along.” Wendy nodded, and Juvia held a hand over Sherry’s mouth. As the littlest Dragon Slayer watched, the hand turned back into liquid form, spurting down into the dark pink haired girl’s open mouth. As she watched the water began to come back up, tainted dark green and red with blood. At the sight, Wendy shook her head and began to use her Healing Pulse again.

While Wendy and Juvia concentrated on the others, Jenny looked at the three S-class mages and the two Dragon Slayers. Jura and Erza looked to be in a bad way, while Mira’s face was slowly clearing up. Her body had slowly been toughened up over time to even poisons thanks to her Satan Soul even when she wasn’t actively calling on it.

Jenny shook her head, looking down at the grimacing Natsu and Gajeel. “Sorry boys, but I think Ranma needs as much help as we can give him as fast as we can, so we don’t have any time to waste on Wendy’s slow healing you all.” With that, she held out her hands to either side and gathered herself. “This is so freaking embarrassing, but needs must. Take Over, Stomach Pump!!”

“Wait, what?” Natsu groaned, blinking as Jenny’s body suddenly shifted forms in a flare of yellow magic.

Her normal attire had disappeared and her body had morphed into some kind of mechanical device he had never seen before. From the sides of it sprouted long tubes like so many tentacles, each of them about as thick as Natsu’s upper arm, ending in something like suction cups and with odd little bags to the side of the tubes. Above them, Jenny’s normal head could barely be seen past the sides of the large cube her body had become. Her legs too had been replaced by a series of small metal legs.

“…” For a moment the restaurant fell silent, as everyone conscious, and even Jura who was most decidedly not, seemed to stare at Jenny.

She quickly raised one of her tubes to hide her face shouting, “Don’t look, don’t look darn it! Gah! I hate this form! Ranma, you better appreciate this! Stomach Pump, go!” With that, the tentacles lashed out slamming down onto the mouths of the five people around her, the suction cups latching down.

Cringing at the sounds going on behind them, Wendy and Juvia both decided she didn’t want to see what was going on there. Instead, they concentrated on trying to purge the poison from Gray and the others while also healing them from the damage it had already done.

**OOOOOOO**

Ivan grimaced as he left the town, seeing that the ranger and the others had shifted their battle in the same direction he had hoped to leave. “Hmmm, well, I suppose luck must shine on both sides equally.” Still carrying Laxus on one shoulder and with Obra following him, he moved over to where Brain and Gapri were standing. “I take it that he was able to destroy all my special Shikigami Gapri?”

Shivering a little at the way Ivan was looking at him Gapri shook his head, wondering internally if he was more worried about being sent back into close combat with the ranger or what his guild master would do to him. “He destroyed some of them master but…”

“But the Ranger’s durability is such that he just shook off your explosive Shikigami!” Brain groused. “We seem to be wearing him down, but’s it’s slow going. I don’t suppose I can interest you in joining in Ivan?”

As Ivan watched, Ranma twisted around one blast from Brain, a lacrima stick landing like a pole on Nullpudding’s outstretched fist that he used to flip to the one side, dodging under another attack from Cobra and then several blasts from Midnight. That escrima stick, which deadened Nullpudding’s Vibration Magic, also must have weighed as much as a ton since it smashed Nullpudding down towards the ground crying out in agony, his arm broken.

“Hmm, hmmm, he’s like a little rabbit more than a dragon. Still, I suppose I should join you, we can’t have him chasing after either of us obviously.” Ivan said coolly, though inside he was rather impressed.

With that, he held up one hand, flicking his pointed fingers this way and that creating a massive series of Shikigami all in a row, then sending them forward in a flurry. They moved as fast as swallows, but even so Ranma dodged them all, and kept moving, something that made Ivan frown. For all his madness, Ivan was an incredibly experienced mage who had seen far more than his fair share of combat. He could see something odd about the way Ranma was moving. *Very strange, he just missed an opportunity to close with Cobra there, instead moving in the opposite direction, where he had to dodge many of my own Shikigami. Hmmmpf, admittedly he is also lashing out at them with water attacks and disrupting the magic in them, but why…*

Despite his self-control Ranma couldn’t stop a small, vicious smirk from appearing on his features as he started to form the spiral. Even with his ability to push down his remaining ki and let his Dragon Slayer scales cover his body, he had taken one hell of a beating getting the dark mages out of the city. Covered by the others Midnight’s near-invisible attacks had been especially effective, even if they lacked striking power now that Ranma was covered with draconic scales.

It had taken all his skill and speed to stay alive and he’d been forced entirely on the defensive, having to rely on his “Water Dragon’s Depth Pressure Scales” more and more. Worse, retaining his human form, pressing his Dragon Slayer’s transformation down enough to retain his human body, was taking so much of his attention he could barely concentrate on any magic attacks. *But there’s defense and then there’s* ***defense*** *assholes.*

Now that he was outside the town, Ranma began to push out his ki just slightly from his feet and legs, which were covered by his pants of course, so the fact they no longer were covered by scales went unnoticed. At the same time, he began to slowly call upon the Soul of Ice, his ki cooling down dramatically, so much so that Cobra, who was the only mage near him, shivered a bit, and Cubellios retreated in confusion.

Before either could do anything Ranma landed a blow on Cobra’s face that sent him flying to onside, then kicked off Cubellios’ head to flip away from Nullpudding, idly eating Kurohebi’s water attack once more before landing lightly on the ground then leaping on before Hoteye could capture him. That bit of magical energy allowed him to return some more into an attack that devastated four Red Hoods who had bunched up even as Ranma dodged around more attacks from the axes of the other smalltime guild.

“Ah, he’s coming our way,” Brain muttered, leaping away. “Ivan, I’d recommend you get away too, that Ranger is more dangerous at close range than at long.” It wasn’t so much that Brain was warning Ivan though, as informing him, wondering what Ivan would do next and prepared to use whatever it was.

“Weell, let me just test that, hmm?” Ivan said, racing forward. “Shikigami bomb!” He shouted, a mass of shikigami appearing in his hand and turning immediately into a mass of dark magic and lashing forward.

“Soryu no Taitan Ken (Water Dragon’s Titan Fist)!” Ranma roared desperately, lashing out with a massive fist of water magic that slammed into the oncoming mass of purple and black magic, dissipating it. Then he had to dodge several more, launched from Brain and Cobra both, before booting Nullpudding in the side of the head and then ducking around and under Cobra, grabbing him before the other Dragon Slayer could dodge, hurling him into the way of several attack from the Red Hoods as he continued on his path. More and more of the small time guild members attacked as they exited the town too, but Ranma continued to dance around them, a his teeth bared in a rictus snarl. Even so, the first attack had been the only one that would have broken his stride, and Ranma continued to create his spiral.

“What exactly are you up to, hmm, hmmm? These eyes of mine are not just for show,” Ivan nearly sang, as he lashed out again and again with his magic, frowning as a sense of unease filled him. Whatever the Ranger was doing, it was big.

He wasn’t the only one who could sense something. Cobra had been getting more and more nervous as they had exited the town, hearing Ranma’s heartbeat, cool, calm and without any hint of panic and now feeling the cold Ranma was exhibiting. This told the Poison Dragon Slayer Ranma had a plan, and after his brush with Ranma and seeing what he had done to Jiemma and Midnight before Cobra knew to be leery of that. “Everyone watch out, I think he’s…”

Before Cobra could finish his warning, Ranma’s attack struck. He lashed out upwards at no one in particular, his fist practically glowing light blue with cold infused ki as he shouted out, “Hiryuu Shouten Ha!!!”

From his upstretched fist the blast of cold air, blasted out, as if they had been transported deep into the north of Iceberg. This hit the hot air that had been caused by the auras of hate and anger from all the dark mages, enhanced further form the heat of the fire using Red Hood mages and many of the Oración Seis’ own magical attacks. The conflict between the hot and cold fronts created a monstrous tornado, which formed almost as fast as the dark mage’s could blink, dragging all of them into the air.

This wasn’t magic. This was simple use of the physics of weather. As such, Midnight’s magic failed to protect him, and he was torn off his feet up into the air with everyone else. Gapri had just launched himself forward in a leap, his Metal Form magic having formed his metal shield into a spear. He had not wanted to close with Ranma, again, but under Ivan’s glare he had felt compelled to. Instead though, he was plucked out of the air with a cry of shock. Nor was Nullpudding’s durability and speed any aid, and he cried out in pain and fear as the tornado took him from where he had been laying on the ground.

Ivan, Brain, Angel, her Celestial Spirits, every one of the two small-time guilds who had been trying to fight Ranma who had followed him out of the town, all of them were torn from the ground up into the air. Their screams of shock and pain resounding in the air as just like that, the battle turned against the dark mages in a way none of them had, for all their powers, foreseen.

The only one who could protect himself was Hoteye, who quickly used his magic on the ground underneath him. “Liquid Ground!” the ground around him swallowed him up pulling him down before the tornado could rip him free of its grasp.

Ignoring him for now, Ranma crouched and gathered his magic once more into his hands, fighting the effect of using so much Dragon Slayer magic balancing the ki in his body to keep his human shape as he roared out, “Soryu no Shi Sousha (Water Dragons Deadly Strafing)!” From his hands appeared dozens, then hundreds of crescent shaped blades of water, flashing up into the tornado. They wouldn’t be able to keep their form for long, but they would be deadly for the time they were. As they hit, above Ranma the tornado was dyed red with the blood of the weaker dark mages.

Gasping in air, Ranma concentrated, kneeling down and thumping his hand down on the ground, releasing his ki from his emotional control and letting it pour back into his skin, gasping in air. Both his ki and his Dragon Slayer magic had been badly depleted by the events of the battle so far, and he could feel the wounds he’d accumulated up to this point still there now that his dragon slayer side was being pressed further down in his skin. Ranma he had to finish this now if he could. “Moko Takabisha Barrage!!!” He shouted, his ki coming into his hands, tiny balls that blasted up into the tornado, pouring out his ki again like it was the water that powered his magic, which again slowly started to transform his body.

“I won’t let you! For my money I cannot let you have your own way, right!” Hoteye shouted as he emerged from his protective hole, and from around and underneath Ranma the ground softened, trying to envelop him. But Ranma burst clear by the barest of margins, turning to engage Hoteye, finding himself unable to close for a moment thanks to the ground coming alive in waves and unwilling to chance taking to the air with the tornado so close.

Inside the tornado, Brain had instantly realized this wasn’t magic and what had actually caused it. He had been a magical researcher for decades before going rogue after all. *Damn it, a hot and cold front, he used our magics and magical auras to create a heat wave and then moved in a spiral as he himself created a cold front. What magnificent magical control! No wonder he’s a ranger.*

And with that understanding, Brain understood how to get out of the tornado and began to communicate that to his guild-members via Thought Projection. Yet even as he did, he felt the mark on his face signaling Midnight’s life span and connection to the spell keeping his failed experiment Zero in check fade. He didn’t have much time to consider that, since the next instant a large blast of magical power in the form of a cerulean sphere slammed into his thigh, barely missing his crotch as he flew through the air. It acted like a punch from a man the size of Hoteye and he was flipped end over end and to the side, grimacing in more irritation than pain.

Like most mages of any real strength, Brain’s body was magically enhanced to add to his durability and speed. Indeed, Brain would rate his durability as well above that of Cobra. So he took the blow and calmly began to shift his body this way and that, riding the wind as best he could while husbanding his magical energy. *Angel, Cobra, don’t try to fight the tornado, let it push you around while containing your magical energies! The tornado is caused by heat and cold, without anything continually generating heat it will fade away! The moment it does, we need to leave instantly! Hoteye, try to disrupt the Ranger from sending further magical attacks into the tornado.*

He glanced up as streak flashed towards him and couldn't dodge in time. Gapri’s body slammed head first into his stomach, sending them both careening away. *By the drowned bosom of Gora!!* Brain cursed, before righting himself.

Ivan too had realized what was happening, but he couldn’t care less about his guildmates. Instead of trying to rally them, he sent a thought command to only one of them, the only mage he had brought into the city that hadn’t engaged in battle since Ranma had first launched his mad attack on them. *Obra, use Transfer now!*

Outside near the edge of town Obra stood, silent and watching while nearby Hoteye and Ranma engaged one another. He had never even tried to fight Ranma, simply following the battle as ordered. This was because Obra was not a person. Instead he was a puppet, created by Ivan and powered by Shikigami inside his body.

Nearby Ranma was once more in the air of course, avoiding Hoteye’s attacks with some difficulty, but pressing home his own assaults. To his surprise though, Hoteye’s durability was quite high, and he concentrated on protecting his face and eyes from Ranma’s attacks, and even used his magic to move backwards along the ground like he was skating, keeping his distance. He still took hits, but wasn’t going down as fast as Ranma could have hoped. Worse, Ranma’s magic and ki weren’t coming back from his earlier exertions: he had slowed down tremendously and was now unable to conjure up any water magic while keeping his dragon slayer powers from fully changing his body into that of a dragon. *Fuck me, this whole fighting on two fronts thing is for the birds!*

At his master’s orders, the puppet Obra held out its hand to one side and from the arm of its cloak a giant Shikigami unfolded toward the ground. A second later it flashed with white light, and Ivan stood there, the Shikigami having shifted position with him. He growled, but picked up Laxus from where he had dumped him to one side of Obra and made to leave, Obra flying high up into the sky like a kite at another order via Thought Projection. *I have what I came for, if we put enough distance between us, even should that Ranger win he’ll have to go after Brain and his young fools. Besides, I left Doll, Cannon and Swann several leagues to the south of here as backup in case Brain tried to betray me, they will help me just as much against any pursuers.*

With that in mind, he smirked and began to concentrate his magic into a new spell even as Ranma turned in his direction. “Gun’s Magic, Rapid Fire, Explosive Shot!”

Hoteye quickly folded the ground in front of him into a shield, but Ranma s bounced onto the ground where he used a Titan Step to send him flashing towards Ivan. “You think I’ll let you go!”

“Shikigami Magic, Thousand Page Copy!” Ivan shouted, and from him thousands of Shikigami spread in every direction. Each of them took on the form of Ivan carrying Laxus, with the original obscured for just a second by the mass of them. By the time they finished spreading out, Ivan had transferred once more to one on the outskirts.

“Fuck you too!” Ranma leaped up over an attack from Hoteye, his guns blazing. For this kind of thing, multiple enemies that you only had to hurt a little rather than a lot, the guns were perfect. Each magical bullet didn’t hit the target he aimed at, but they certainly destroyed the shikigami when they struck. Ranma rained down magical bullets like they were going out of style, the Shikigami disappearing as soon as they appeared.

At the same time, there was a snarl from one side as Natsu joined the fight. “Karyu no Ken (Fire Dragon’s Fist)!” He impacted the battlefield like a tiny meteor and dozens of Shikigami copies disappeared, forcing Ivan to reveal himself. “You might be able to copy your looks, but not Laxus’s smell you bastard!”

Ivan ducked and dodged another series of punches cursing all the while, yet even as he did, his hand flashed up, smashing into the side of Natsu’s arm. “Shikigami Transformation!” With that incantation he pulsed his magic into Natsu, intent on rewriting his existence as he would any bird or animal.

Natsu blinked in shock as his hand and arm turning into paper while Ivan scowled.  *The youth’s magical resistance is incredibly high!* But even so that was enough to give the older man the advantage, and Ivan lashed out with a kick, catching Natsu in the jaw and hurling him backwards.

“Tetsuryu no Uroko Kiba (Iron Dragon's Scale Fang)!” Gajeel shouted, leaping towards Hoteye.

Grimacing Hoteye lashed out towards him and Ranma both with an attack that blocked Gajeel’s incoming strike and hurled him onto his back foot, catching his legs as Hoteye’s masterful control of Water Ground took its effect. Ranma though dodged once more, blocking just enough of it to use the momentum from that to push himself into the air.

At the same time, the tornado died out. Several dozen bodies came crashing down, accompanied by a literal rain of body parts, Ranma’s Strafing attack having sliced the weaker dark mages into pieces along with the wind of the tornado itself. Nullpudding’s body fell with them, battered into something more resembling a purple pile of clay yet still alive, crying out in agony through a shattered face when his body slammed into the ground like a rock.

In contrast Midnight’s body bounce away limply, his spine shattered in two places and the side of his neck opened. Kurohebi and Gapri’s bodies were also somewhere among the shattered remains of the Red Hood and Axe legend mages. Having none of the endurance of Nullpudding, the two of them had been easy meat for the tornado and resulting attacks.

Angel, though battered, was encased in some kind of crystal coffin she had conjured up as the tornado ended which shattered an instant later, its outer edge showing numerous scratches and dents. “Open, gate of the Rider!” A second later, a metallic Pegasus appeared and Angel landed athwart its back, flying away without a backwards glance, utterly terrified by her near death experience. She didn’t even bother looking for her two spirits, both the cannon and Scorpio having been torn to pieces within the tornado and returning to the Spirit Realm.

Brain too was in one piece, and unlike Angel hadn’t had to rely on any defense, his durability up to the task with some ease. Despite that, he knew when to cut his losses. He landed nearby, and immediately lashed out with an attack towards Ranma, Gajeel and Natsu. “Dark Rondo!” like the attack he’d launched from his staff earlier this attack sent dozens of green and black energy blasts arcing towards his targets, somewhat unaimed but immensely powerful.

Yet even so, this attack was more to cover their retreat than do any real damage. “Enough! Retreat! Hoteye, Cobra, to me! We have what we came for and we have done enough damage here!” *And taken enough damage too, curse it! Midnight’s death was utterly unexpected, and without Racer here and Angel already retreating this is coming to be closer to a fair contest than I like, with Cobra already wounded and both of us having exerted ourselves to boot.* Ranma’s battle prowess had been a true game changer, and with two new Dragon Slayers recovering from the poison Brain was no longer willing to see if they could win here.

Cobra too had gotten through the tornado assault with little damage, although several of his fingers were broken, one of his ears had been shorn off, and his leg wasn’t working quite right. Even so, he looked around for his companion, more concerned about Cubellios than himself. “No, I’m not leaving without my snake!”

At the same time, Cobra said that Ivan was fighting back. “Shikigami Multi Arc Cannon!” From all the surviving Shikigami came a blast of black and white energy shooting towards Ranma, ignoring the other two Dragon Slayers.

As he had been in midair after dodging several blast of Dark Rondo, by all rights Ranma should have been a sitting duck from this attack arching in from seven different angles all spread out around the blasted battlefield. But somehow Ranma was still able to dodge most of the attacks sent at him, only getting hit by one of them, which took him in the back and side, flinging him to the ground. This actually won a cry of pain from Ranma, yet even so he slowly pushed himself to his feet.

At Ivan’s command, Obra flew down and Ivan leaped onto the back of his puppet, racing away to the south. At the same time, Angel and Hoteye had reached Brain, who was creating a teleportation spell around himself. It was a tough, energy consuming spell, but it would carry them to their new base of operations in the outskirts of the Worth Woodsea where Nirvana was hidden. “Cobra, get over here or I will leave you behind!”

Cursing, Cobra moved in their direction, only to be blindsided by Natsu, hammering a “Fire Dragon’s roar!” into his side. He screamed and was pushed towards Ranma, who raised himself on his hands and knees to see this, instantly responding with his own roar. The two attacks, fire and water, met and caused an explosion out of which Cobra was flung like a used dishcloth, his whole body a mass of scorch marks and bruises.

“By the temple of Quastor and it’s infernal guardian, no!” Brain shouted and then moved his hands to complete the spell as he felt another of the Prayer tattoos disappearing from his face. “Savor this victory Ranger, because today you have given us the key to our ultimate victory!”

Ranma snarled, but grabbed at Natsu as he made to leap forward, preventing him from smashing through the area where the three remaining dark mages had just disappeared in a flash of green light. “Don’t bother, they’re gone. And worse, that other bastard, he must’ve been the leader of Raven Tail, Ivan Dreyar, he looked a little like Laxus, he took Sparky away. I doubt we’re so lucky they are going in the same direction.”

“Who cares about that!?” Natsu growled, staring in the direction Ivan had flown off in. “I can track him easily enough! Laxus has a freaking distinct stench I can trace easy.” He looked around, calming down a little and shivering at the amount of blood and body parts scattered everywhere. It looked as if two entire acres or so had been just liberally sprayed with bodies and parts of bodies. Craters, weird, twisted rock spears and other devastation dotted the landscape and a lot of the town nearby had been just shattered, but it was the blood that was bothering Natsu right now. Laxus had been right when he stopped Natsu from killing Gajeel during his attack on Lisanna and Anna: Natsu wasn’t a killer and the reality of S-class missions shook him to the core.

Gajeel was much more pragmatic, moving among the bodies and slapping iron handcuffs on the few living mages among them. “Ranma’s right,” he said gruffly, even as he nodded respectfully in Ranma’s direction. “We have to regroup with Realight and the others, split up and go after them. We need to go quickly, but we can’t go off half-cocked.”

Even as he said that though it was all Gajeel could do to not stare at Ranma in something like awe. He had just fought four Dark Guilds, one of them a member of the Balam Alliance and one of the others at the same level, and while he hadn’t won, he hadn’t lost either. *Although judging by how slowly he’s moving, I’d wager he paid for it.*

Ranma breathed in deeply coming down from his battle high and wincing as his aches and pains let themselves be known, his ki so depleted it wasn’t starting the healing process just yet. *Yeah, gonna feel it in the morning.* Shutting that thought to the side, Ranma looked at his fellow Dragon Slayers quizzically. “Jenny? Jenny revived herself?”

Both younger Dragon Slayers shuddered, looking away. “Don’t ask,” they both intoned, before turning and leading the way back to the others as civilians of all sorts started to poke their heads out from various hiding places.

As they went, Ranma paused, and moved over to the unconscious form of Cubellios, gesturing Gajeel to him. “Let’s restrain this beastie for now. It might be an animal, but it was certainly following Cobra’s orders like it could think for itself.”

Back with the others they found Mira and Erza breathing evenly, but their faces still showed an unhealthy greenish tinge. Only Mira’s eyes were open, tracking everyone around her as her hands began to twitch as if she was close to moving. Jura, Gray and Lyon, Sherry and the Trimens were much worse off. Their bodies were still twitching occasionally even as they lay out next to Wendy, who was leaning back against the chest of Juvia who sat behind her, both of them looking incredibly weary.

Jenny stood in front of them, both hands shifted into guns that Ranma recognized as being lasers of some kind. She looked a little queasy, but easily better than the others. As the three Dragon slayers moved towards them through the ruined town she breathed a sigh of relief cancelling her Take Over and rushing forward to hug Ranma, who wordlessly returned it, squeezing tightly grateful beyond words that she and the others were still in the land of the living.

They stood that way for a brief second before Jenny jerked her head towards the others. “Mira and Erza should be up and about soonest, Jura too, that man’s durability for pain is kind of frightening. Wendy though has nearly exhausted her magic healing the damage the poison did as well as flushing it out of their system, and Juvia’s not much better. None of the others are going to be up and about for days unless we get in some more healing mages,” she scowled, looking like she wanted to spit, which coming from someone like Jenny was very telling. “We’re out of Ichiya’s perfume too, more’s the pity, it and whatever it was you did to the others kept them alive long enough for us to save them.”

“Us?” Ranma asked pulling back to look at her.

“Don’t ask!” Jenny, Natsu and Gajeel all intoned, while the trio of S-class mages, even Jura, shuddered where they lay. Shaking her head, Jenny went on seriously. “What about you?”

Ranma shrugged as if it was nothing, but Jenny could tell he had pushed himself to his limit, his body was bruised and battered and he wasn’t moving nearly as fluidly as Ranma normally did. She could also see hints of scales on his hands and neck. “Midnight is dead, Cobra’s unconscious and captured. Three of the Raven Tail mages are dead too, but two more got away. Gajeel here put the survivors in irons, and we’ve got a few of the civilians dragging them back into down.” Implied in his tone was that if they lived or died Ranma couldn’t care less. “At the same time, we’ve got others organizing rescue efforts. But Ivan took Laxus and Racer took Ultear, and they split up, which means we need to too. Whatever I cost them, they won this fight. We need to make sure we win the war.”

**End Chapter**

This is not the chapter I really wanted to put out. The Fantasia section and the ambush both spiraled larger and larger until I just ran out of time to continue the war. On the other hand, I think it’s rather turned out well, since this way I can take my time with the next chapter combat scenes and make them really good. Here, I don’t think I gave the magic being sent everywhere here the description it really deserved. Still, I hope you liked it, and look forward to the next month’s chapter!

A note on names: the names of most the Dark guilds I use here aren’t mine, they come from the wiki page and were briefly mentioned from the anime where Reedus shows the map of Dark guilds to Lucy with his magic pen. Beyond that, I use a few of the guilds shown in the anime during the Oración Seis arc, but otherwise I make them up on my own.

This has been edited by *Hiryo* and *Justlovereadin'*. It has not been edited by *Michael*, and I am afraid that means there will be a lot more small mistakes alas.

**Chapter 16: Guild War Part 2**

Having pulled back from the town, Seilah, Kyoka, and Torafuzar had watched the battle, not talking overly much, simply watching as best as they could from a nearby hiding place, a small culvert in the land several miles away to the southeast of the city. They all lay there, watching through a series of spyglasses they had taken from a shop while in town.

“We should go in now,” Kyoka said, her eyes narrowing as she watched the weak, pitiful humans moving about their ravaged town. From this far away, they couldn’t tell much about the interior of the town, something they had realized with chagrin when the fight started. Thankfully for them, most of the fighting had occurred above the rooftops, letting them see much of the action.

After that, there was the tornado, something that both intrigued and worried all three demons. They were no strangers to odd magic of course, but even from here, their demonic senses were such that they had been able to tell that tornado hadn’t been magic. It had been something else entirely, and if they hadn’t seen it spring up out of nowhere they might well have thought it was a natural phenomenon, which was just ridiculous.

Still, it was clear that both sides of this conflict had weakened themselves horribly at this point. That meant that Kyoka and her allies’ mission could begin. “Our priority should be to kill as many mages as we can, which means assaulting the humans in the town. After that is done, we can go after Brain.”

Kyoka wanted this mission over with. She hated reconnaissance missions, and the fact that she and Seilah were assigned them so often. Worse, she hadn’t had any time to play of late, either with Seilah or a random human she could torture to her heart’s content. She needed to hear their screams now, soon, or just leave.

However, Seilah shook her head. “I disagree. We saw two more human mages rejoin the battle, and from here, we cannot tell if others have also recovered. More than even killing mages we are supposed to keep our participation in this battle and thus our Guild’s strength and mission a secret.” Before Kyoka could interject, she went on. “Furthermore, we might be better served waiting for another reason.”

“Another reason?” Torafuzar asked, his voice something like an urbane-sounding growl. He was, given his greater strength, the real leader of this mission, but outside of food, which all Demons had come to enjoy, he disdained humans, not studying them to the extent Seilah or Master Mard Geer did. Further, while he was more physically and magically powerful in a one on one fight than either female, he tread carefully around both, since they could hurt him badly working together even if they couldn’t match him blow for blow.

“Indeed. Consider: humans of all types believe in being loyal to one another. It is, in a way a strength of their species. It can also be a weakness.” When both of her fellow demons turned to look at her, Seilah went on, “Ranma will be compelled by his mission, and fear, to continue his pursuit of Brain and his guild. They will, in turn head for Nirvana. But Ranma will not take any of the wounded with him, and they, in turn, will have to also send out forces to rescue their fellow who was captured by Raven Tail.”

Both other demons nodded, but looked somewhat uncomfortable at the mention of Raven Tail, an emotion Seilah also felt. The ‘rogue’ Dark Guild was an unknown element to them, having eliminated any attempt to spy on them and having no link to other dark guilds that could be used to discern their strength or goals. Master Mard Geer had attempted to solve this at one point by sending a Demon to them first with orders to observe and then with an offer to join them, to spy on Raven Tail from within. That Demon had never returned. A further attempt to use Seilah’s long-term Macro spell on a human that could infiltrate them had also been discovered and had failed.

Indeed, this operation was the first time Tartarus had run into Raven Tail since then, and Ivan Dreyar, their leader, greatly concerned the Demons. His power of Shikigami magic was one not even Master Mard Geer had run into before, and none of them had any idea of how it would fare, good or bad, against their own powers. This was why they hadn’t attacked him when he retreated, staying hidden even as he linked up with two other mages, neither of whom the Demons knew of.

“But if we stay concentrated, we can deal with Ranma, Brain and his fellows, then destroy Nirvana or take it for ourselves,” Seilah finished. “I realize Master Mard Geer did not seem to indicate it would be useful for us, but surely just having it in our power will turn out to be a good thing in the long term. Regardless, Ranma is the clear key, look how he nearly fought Brain and the others off. Take him out, the rest will crumble, and we can then slay the winners, making a clean sweep of all, one group after another.”

“Bah,” Kyoka said, waving that off. “I agree in principal but remember our orders: kill as many as we can while keeping our presence secret. And that means that once this Oceana leaves, we should assault the wounded before going after him.” she drawled the Ranger’s name, looking sharply at her sex partner, making it clear she had noted the use of the Ranger’s first name and Seilah’s familiarity with it. This wasn’t the first time she had heard that odd note in Seilah’s tone, and though she didn’t know why, it made her all the more eager to kill the Ranger off.

Seilah hid a wince caused both at the sneer in Kyoka’s tone and the plan. Kyoka enjoyed killing women, taking a sexual thrill in their screams as they died under her power. Moreover, Seilah knew that they would have to wipe out the whole town if they were to keep their presence secret. The idea of doing so was rather too much like coming out in the open for her. “If we do that and they leave some people behind to watch the wounded, killing them and then making certain we leave no survivors behind will take us too long.”

“Look,” Torafuzar said, pointing back towards the town, or rather, over it to a dust cloud in the distance. “We should get into the air. I want to know what is causing that.”

**OOOOOOO**

“There’s the town,” Cana said, as she, Bacchus, and their allies, raced on in the magic car she had commandeered for them in the next town over.

The same day Lucy and her group left Magnolia, Cana had forced Master Makarov to send her and the Thunder God Tribe to meet up with Bacchus. Her concerns were the same as the guild masters: that the Oración Seis would somehow be able to gather their troops so to speak, and overwhelm the team sent through sheer numbers.

But Cana had also had one more fear, which she put into words, “Old man, look, Lucy told me what was going on okay? And just looking around the guild I can tell we’re missing a lot of our strongest members. I also know how long it’ll take them to even reach the border with Seven. So who’s to say that the Oración Seis won’t hear about them coming?”

Makarov had protested that they had taken every precaution to obscure what was really going on. But Cana kept on hammering at the time it would take for them to arrive in Seven in the first place, which he couldn’t argue about. Indeed, that time was something they all should have thought of, but Makarov reflected that perhaps they had all allowed some basic arrogance to cloud their plans.

“Fine then! What do you want to do? Go after them take even more of the guild into danger?” Makarov was truly torn with the idea of even more of his guild’s precious children going into danger, and wouldn’t have even allowed the S-class mages to join Ranma on this quest if he didn’t both see the need and had heard about what the Oración Seis was after from Ultear.

“What’re the Thunder God Tribe up to?” Cana asked. As someone who had taken part in the S-class exam several times in the past few years, she knew who the other strongest members of the guild were easily and knew that if Laxus was involved those three would be too.

“We were going to have them, and similar groups from other guilds, assault the other Dark Guilds that are subordinate to the Oración Seis at the same time,” Makarov replied, having no trouble sharing that aspect of the mission with Cana since she already was in the know of the rest of it and they were talking in his office rather than out with the rest of the guild. “Bacchus is supposed to be nearby in Seven already as direct backup too you know.”

“Then send me to meet him!” Cana said hotly. “As for the Thunder God Tribe, shift them to him too. Being close enough to help is a lot more important than taking out the minnows after the shark has been hooked!”

Makarov sighed but acknowledged the point, more concerned about putting more children in the way of such danger than anything else. That was the real reason why he rarely allowed even the S-class mages to take missions against Dark Guilds, knowing all too well they could be even more dangerous than hunting monsters.

*Still, Cana and the Thunder God Tribe are among the strongest non-S-class mages in the guild.* Freed was a near-shoe in to make that jump soon, with decent magical reserves and an encyclopedic knowledge of tactics and ways to use his eye-based Dark Écriture and runes. Bickslow was powerful too, if not to his friend’s level with Soul Possession magic and Figure Eyes. Evergreen’s fairy and eye-based petrification magics made her dangerous too.

And as for Cana, while she was a real lush most of the time, her magic was amazingly versatile. What she lacked was endurance and stopping power, which the others would make up for.

So Cana had left that very day, having Levy transport the four of them to the nearest port and then taking a fast schooner into Bosco, from there, they had crossed back over into Fiore to take another train into Seven. At the train’s first stop in Seven, they had met up with Bacchus and another man from his guild named Velo. The two of them had, of course, been in a bar and Bacchus had been trying to talk up a barmaid when the four Fairy Tail mages entered.

Upon seeing them, he smirked, throwing his hands wide as he moved in their direction. “Oh yeah, but here’s some gals who look like they’ll be even wilder!” He winked at Cana, “You here to finally take me up on my offer of a drink babe?”

“Ha, well I’m always up for a drink Bacchus,” Cana said with a smile, sitting down at the table Bacchus had been sitting at, but her words were serious as she went on. “Let’s just hope that’s all we’ll have to do. Now get me some beer barkeep and keep it coming!!”

“How uncouth,” Freed muttered, looking away. He was a young man with bright green hair who wore clothing resembling something like a suit, and who effected the air of either a gentleman or means, or an uptight butler depending on who you asked. His façade faded when he yelped as Cana threw an arm around his shoulders and pulled him down next to her.

His teammate Bickslow was a bit taller than Freed, with a strange mask covering most of his head including a knight’s visor that covered his eyes, leaving his mouth and cheeks bare. He wore clothing of black, dark purple and light blue pants, with skulls on either shoulder. He was also a bit of a party animal and slid into another booth, grinning as he clinked a glass with Velo.

“Drink, drink!” Bacchus howled with a grin as he too threw an arm around Freed’s shoulders, pushing a mug of ale into Freed’s face and forcing some of it down his throat. “Drink, eat and be merry!”

“It’s barely lunchtime you know,” Evergreen said with a roll of her eyes behind her glasses. “Doesn’t that matter? Oh, and that phrase isn’t nearly as cheery as you think if you actually finish the quote.”

Cana and Bacchus either didn’t know that, or weren’t willing to acknowledge it. Instead, they simply answered Evergreen’s initial question with a deadpan, “No, should it?”

Moments later however, the rest of that phrase ‘for tomorrow you might die’ came back to Cana as one of her cards activated with a shrill squeal. This caused Cana to pale and toss her mug aside in her haste to reach for her pouch, standing up as she did so.

Cana used Card Magic, a type of Holder magic based around using magic-infused cards created via mixing paper in a magical solution to create various effects. It was a semi-expensive kind of magic to make into a type that could be used in combat, somewhat like how Erza had to pay for her various armor sets. Worse, while Erza only had to be part of the process when it came to create the mental hook needed to call for a specific armor in such a way it appeared around her body (not an easy thing), Cana had to create her own cards, infusing them with her magic throughout the process.

Still, it was an incredibly versatile type of magic, and could be used for a variety of things, ranging from creating fire, water, weapons, communicate over long distances (indeed, that was a way a lot of people Ishgar-wide used Cards Magic for) and other, more specific types of magic. All that mattered was if the amount of magic the card had been infused with, both initially and during the activation phase, could match what was needed, which Cana had never had issues with, and her imagination, an area she also hadn’t had an issue with.

The card that was currently emitting a high-pitched wail was one Cana had made specially. It was a Heartbeat Card, a card that Cana had created and then linked via a tiny drop of blood to a person. In this manner, she would be warned if anything happened to the person that threatened their life. She had made several of these over the years, the first being for Lisanna and Anna after they returned from the mission that brought Anna to the guild. Others were for other friends throughout the guild, though she didn’t have one for everyone in it.

This card was special to Cana however because the person who it was linked to, the person who’s name glowed at the top of the card, was Lucy, Cana’s new girlfriend.And even worse, on top of screaming so loudly, the card itself was slowly turning black. That meant that Lucy wasn’t just in combat or injured, that meant she was dying.

For a moment Cana’s heart stopped, and she felt all strength leave her legs, not even noticing as Bacchus caught her, lowering her back into her chair. Then just as quickly as it began though, the wailing cut off, and the black of the card was halted in place. It didn’t recede, but it was halted and Cana found she could breathe again, her heart restarting, pounding in her chest.

“What happened, Cana?” Evergreen asked, pushing past Bickslow and Freed to reach Cana’s side, putting an arm around the other woman.

Cana quickly explained about her card and got to her feet pushing through the other mages as she picked up speed, heading for the door. “Come on, I don’t care if we haven’t been called in yet, Lucy and the others need our help.

After that, Bacchus had quickly caught up with her, and took over using the SE system on the car she had basically stolen from a store, while Freed tossed the previous owner a bag of cash he had pulled from his small Requip space. Bacchus had a much deeper magical reserve than Cana did, and with him operating the system and Bickslow driving, they left moments later.

That had been about forty minutes ago, and they were only now coming within sight of the other town, another ten minutes distant. But even here they could see smoke rising from the town, and as they closed, the extent of the damage took their breath away. “Wh, what happened here,” Velo asked, staring ahead of them in shock.

“We’re going to find out soon enough,” Cana replied grimly, occasionally looking down at Lucy’s heartbeat card, finding no more comfort there than before as the black showed no sign of receding even as a white arrow appeared at the top of the card, pointing towards where Lucy was in distress. “Now come on!”

**OOOOOOO**

Torafuzar scowled. “With the inclusion of more mages, it makes it likely we might miss someone spotting us in the battle and getting away. We’ll wait as Seilah said, then attack after. I’ll decide our first target at that point. Now, let’s get higher so we’re out of sight.”

**OOOOOOO**

As Mira was in the process of regaining her feet after her first attempt fell flat, Ranma moved over to a corner and used his Ranger broach to get in touch with Meredrain. While Seven didn’t have a real military per se, they had a decent militia based around a single keep in each county, which could respond to attacks on villages and such, as well as disasters. And this definitely rated as a disaster. He tersely explained what had occurred, then went on coldly. “Get any healing mages here that you can as well as anyone else in the area; I’m also going to be calling in Bacchus as soon as I’m done with you. But Wendy’s near exhausted already, and we’ve got hundreds perhaps more, wounded here.”

“How, how did this happen!?” Meredrain said, his voice trembling with fear and rising anger. “This, how did they know you were coming in advance? So much, they were able to prepare something like this! How did they hide within the town without anyone spotting them?!”

“Those are questions for later, but I suppose we’ll find a spy somewhere,” Ranma said wearily. While his ki was slowly returning, Ranma had pushed both his ki and his body to their limits today, first by offering up some of his life energy to aid the others then the fight afterward. Even his water magic was low. *Hell, it’s so bad Juvia’s looking tasty right now, and not for the usual reason!*

Nearby Juvia, who had just stood up and was now leaning on and being leaned on by Wendy shivered, and found she was both frightened yet blushing at the same time for some reason. That had not been caused by her tiredness, which was well beyond anything she had ever felt before, but more like someone had just stepped on her grave. Thankfully she didn’t see Ranma looking at her, and continued to help Wendy towards the road outside the restaurant, where the wounded had been moved a moment ago.

“True, and it will be up to my government and Toma’s to find the leak. I’ll cut orders to that effect, get in touch with the nearest militia and guild. But, and I hate to say it Ranma, but you really can’t wait for them to arrive. I don’t know where Brain could have gone, but if the Oración Seis kidnapped Ultear, that might mean she knows how to release Nirvana, some kind of code or something she has in her brain. Which means…”

“Yeah, I know,” Ranma cut Meredrain off, a breach of etiquette but which went unnoticed by both men. “Still, we’re not in any position just yet to go after him. Not even me. Natsu and Gajeel are the only ones here I’d rate as being anywhere near a hundred percent just yet, though Mira might be joining them soon, and Jenny’ll be there soon too.”

Sighing, Ranma looked around, just as help arrived in the form of Bickslow at the driver’s seat of a magic car, which squealed to a halt just outside the restaurant. “Huh, looks like I spoke to soon. Get those groups on the road Meredrain; I’ll talk to you later.”

With that Ranma ended the call, the king’s image disappearing before Ranma as he moved back through the rubble towards the others. He saw Cana jump out of the car looking around, practically frantic until Natsu said something to calm her down somewhat, then as he came closer, she turned to look in his direction. The slap though, he didn’t see coming. “You! This is all your fault!”

“Excuse me?” Ranma asked slowly, watching Bacchus and the others move out of the car then moving around the wounded or simply staring around in shock at the wrecked town.

Wincing and holding her hand, Cana barked, “You and this mission, if not for that, Lucy and the others wouldn’t have been poisoned!”

“Okay, one, I didn’t poison them myself, so that’s not my fault. Two, it was Lucy’s decision to come on this mission, not mine,” Ranma said, before sighing. “But yes, this is my fault. I should have known something like this was possible, and planned for it.”

“Oh? You would have somehow anticipated our being poisoned?” Jenny asked archly. “What hint did you see that was even a possibility? And how would you have stopped it from happening, when it was being done by a Dark Mage in disguise? Someone who you wouldn’t have recognized even out of his costume?”

“Yeah, Jenny’s right,” Mira said, shaking her head woozily. “This wasn’t your fault Ranma. Maybe we should’ve been on watch for an ambush, the distances involved should have made us think about that, but poison wasn’t something anyone could have seen coming.”

With that, she held her arms to her side and shouted out, “Take Over: Satan Soul!” An instant later she was clad in her base Take Over form, and the last bit of tiredness and pain from the poison left her instantly, her constitution ratcheted well above what it had been, her Satan Soul dealing with the vestiges of the lacrima laced poison in her system like it was some kind of treat rather than poison.

She bared her teeth at Ranma, her eyes flashing in her face as her wings snapped open behind her and her hands, now larger claws, clenched. “And I think it’s time we show the Oración Seis that doing an enemy a small injury is going to get their teeth kicked in!”

Cana scowled, but at the look in Mira’s eyes backed off. “Do we know anything about how the Celestial Spirits are treating Lucy’s poison?”

“No, but I imagine that she’ll be returned here after they finish healing her. Can’t tell you how long that would be though,” Ranma replied, his shoulders straightening after Jenny and Mira’s words. “For now, I think we should get organized and then, like Mira said, get after them.” With that, he looked over at the wounded.

Erza looked back at him then pushed herself to her feet, as did Jura. The Earth mage looked nowhere near fighting shape, while Erza looked queasy, as if she was going to throw up, but didn’t have more than a mild greenish tinge to her face, whereas Jura moved shakily and his hands were noticeably shivering.

When she caught Ranma’s quizzical face, Erza smiled wanly, “I had a piece of activated charcoal in my Requip space for just this sort of instance. I could not deal with most of the poison lest of all the poison lacrima within that concoction on my own, but the charcoal at least helped me somewhat.” Her wan smile shifted to a grimace, “If only I had thought to bring more, perhaps then Juvia and Wendy would not be so drained! I deserve to let someone to hit me for my selfishness!”

“Hit or spank?” Ranma quipped, waggling his eyebrows for a brief second, before turning back to more important things, the moment of levity, and the blush it had evoked from Erza, lightening his heart. He blew a loud whistle recalling Gajeel and Natsu from elsewhere in the town, then looked around at the others. “Alright, here’s what we’re going to do. Ichiya, the pretty boys, and Sherry are all still down.”

“So are Original Ice Prick and Ice Prick two point zero,” Natsu said, waving his hands at them.

“Like I said, Ichiya and all the pretty boys are still down,” Ranma replied, moving on even as Erza muttered about ‘it takes one to know one’. “So they aren’t going anywhere. We also have to leave someone here to watch them and help the townsfolk. That means Ichiya and Wendy. Juvia, you too, none of you look like you’re ready to fight a Boy Scout, let alone a dark mage.”

“What’s a Boy Scout?” asked several voices, while Wendy grumbled from where she continued to lean against Juvia. Neither of them protested though, utterly wiped out.

Cana spoke up now. “Actually, I might be able to help you Dragon Slayers at least.” They all looked at her, and Cana pulled out several cards. “Cards Magic, Hiding Cloud!” she shouted, tossing the card towards Juvia and Wendy.

While in midair the card flashed, creating a cloud that hid the two girls from view for a brief second. Then Wendy opened her mouth and gleefully activated her Dragon Slayer Magic, slurping the cloud slowly into her mouth, closing her mouth occasionally as if chewing, making nom, nom noises as she did.

“I’ve always wondered how it feels to activate that particular aspect of your Dragon Slayer powers,” Erza muttered, cocking her head to one side.

“Um, kind of like we’ve got an extra muscle in our jaw almost which clicks in our mind when we are using it?” Ranma replied, nonplussed, as he hadn’t ever had to put that into words before. “Don’t ask what our elements taste like, that varies wildly.”

Cana wasn’t done yet, and turned to Gajeel and Natsu first. “Cards Magic Torch, Cards Magic, Shuriken!”

“GHIGHI!” Gajeel snickered, as from one of the cards several dozen metal shuriken flew towards a blank wall nearby. That wall was actually the last one from that particular building still standing, and it was rather bizarre that it was doing so at all. But the shuriken never reached it, Gajeel catching each shuriken in his teeth like a dog before chomping down on them as if they were just thin, crisp cookies or something. “Mm, not bad, I agree with the shrimp, your magic doesn’t taste half bad, girl.”

While Natsu was munching on the fire coming from a small torch that Cana threw him, Wendy had finished her own meal and stood up, still looking a little shaky for a second. But under the effect of the magic enhanced meal that faded quickly and she marched over to Gajeel and kicked him hard in the shin. This sent him sprawling with a cry of pain and she huffed irritably, moving back to Juvia and this time letting the older girl lean on her. “Don’t call me shrimp, you, you metal monger!”

“Darn it, so close yet so far. I coulda made her so good at Martial Arts Smack-talk, but nooooo stupid Carla and Wendy’s desire to be a ‘proper lady’,” Ranma grumped. Carla on the other hand, who was still in Exceed form and not moving much, simply smiled smugly, if tiredly. “Still, you got anything for me?”

“Yep.” Cana had gotten over her anger at this point, or rather, her anger at Ranma. Loke she would still slap for putting Lucy up for this job, but her main anger was going to be whoever thought up the whole poison thing. “Cards Magic: The Prayer’s Fountain!”

Cana tossed that at Ranma’s feet, and midair it shifted into a blast of water, which burst into several streams, blasting out in every direction. Ranma quickly opened his mouth and gleefully sucked in as much of the magic-infused water as he could. He could feel his Water Dragon Slayer magic surging, not back to one hundred percent, but good enough to continue the fight.

Of course, this had a somewhat negative effect as Ranma’s ki was still horribly depleted by his earlier efforts. *Shit!* It was all Ranma could do to keep himself in a vaguely human shape, scales appearing once more over his entire skin. His face too shifted somewhat, becoming far more pointed and even his teeth changed to points, teeth of a pure carnivore rather than an omnivore. His back behind his shoulder plates started to itch too, but Ranma fought down the feeling, grabbing and trying to control the change. It was a lot harder now without his adrenaline pumping or threats around, but he was, just barely able to do it, using his still depleted ki to keep the change to this new Draconian form. It was tough, and Ranma found himself even more mentally exhausted than he had been, but he was able to do it.

The reaction of those around him was mixed. Erza blinked, then moved towards Ranma as his body was still shifting, laying a hand on his shoulder. “Fight it as best you can Ranma, you’ve got this, it’s your body right, it obeys your will, not the Dragon Slayer magic’s negative effects.”

Wendy too came over while Gajeel and Natsu both looked on, having seen something of this sort from Ranma when they first arrived on the battlefield earlier. “Soo nice, I want to be able to transform like that too!” Natsu shouted, fire spurting out of his mouth as he did.

The others looked more than a little disturbed, Ren and Sherry, both still laying there their bodies completely thrashed by the poison though no longer in any danger of dying, in particular looking now like they’d be sick for an entirely different reason. Jura looked stoic, though also worried, wondering what was going on here, and if this was a mental change as well.

Yet soon the change was finished and Ranma opened his eyes, cracking his neck this way and that, before looking around at the others. “So, um, yeah, this is sort of a downside of a Dragon Slayer. If you take your mastery of the magic too far, and you had an utterly complete old fart for a trainer, you might start to transform.”

Gajeel looked worried. “Oy, does that mean me and the, um young lady over there, and flameboy are in danger of transforming?” He’d been a bit flabbergasted by being floored earlier by Wendy’s kick to his shin, and had determined to be very respectful of her for the moment.

“No, Porlyusica-san, the healer Ranma-nii went to about this, examined both of us. Natsu and I have a separate seed of some kind that keeps the transformation at bay so long as we don’t overuse our powers. I suppose you could ask her to examine you later if you’re worried about it,” Wendy said, before stepping back and taking in Ranma’s new body thoughtfully. “I wonder if this is your version of Dragon Force.”

“Probably Wendy, although I’d prefer to just get a cool power-up rather than this full body change. The weight of my scales messes with my speed something fierce, and don’t get me started on how heavy it makes me feel,” Ranma groused. “Still it’s got a lot of good things going for it too, and if I have to continue the mission like this, I will.”

Though it looked to the others as if Ranma had fully transformed into some kind of man-dragon thing, the truth was, Ranma’s mental control was so strong that the change was actually only skin deep. After the incident with his arm, Ranma was extremely leery of letting go his control even a little bit, and when he had initially created a new balance between his ki and Dragon Slayer powers during the battle he had let his control only fade enough to let the Dragon Slayer magic infect his skin, not his innards. This, honestly speaking, was a mistake but Ranma wasn’t willing to admit it just yet. So the scales, weighed him down quite a bit.

“Hmm… your scales aren’t like a fish as I feared, they feel more like that of an iguana almost,” Erza mused, running one hand over Ranma’s neck and face, causing him to shiver at how it felt. “And your eyes haven’t changed at all, they are still that deep blue they always have been, even your pupils haven’t changed.”

Seeing the two of them interact, Juvia blushed, licking her lips lightly. “Juvia remembers a scene like this in ‘The Dragon Surprises the Virgin Sacrifice’.”

“Ooh, I read that one too,” Jenny said back with a smirk. “Heh, makes me wonder how low the scales go.”

Erza blushed brightly and backed away, even as a small trickle of blood appeared from her nose. She too had read that particular bodice ripper, and had to admit to some interest in the same kind of question the two other ladies were wondering about. “Ahem yes, well, now that you three have been powered up, what should we do now?”

“We need to go after Laxus of course!” Freed growled. “In fact we should have left already! Who know how much a head start his Father will have on us by this point!”

“Green-boy’s right,” Ranma said, cracking his knuckles. “But as I was saying before Cana stepped in, thanks for this Cana, you might well have just saved the day, but most of us are still down, and we need to help the people here.”

“That means I’m staying,” Wendy said firmly, looking past the gathered mages out into the town.

Jura grimaced, but nodded. “As am I, I’m afraid. I am nowhere near a hundred percent, and my magic can be used to best effect to search for survivors among the wreckage here.”

“Juvia must remain as well. Juvia’s magic power is returning slowly, but Juvia cannot regain magic quickly as Ranma can,” Juvia said sadly.

“Men, I, I am afraid I must stay here as well. My parfume magic might be able to power me up for short amounts of time, but my body is still dealing with the effects of the poison. However, my parfumes can help little Wendy and other healing mages, and even Jura and others in searching out for wounded,” Ichiya said from where he sat leaning against some wreckage. None of the others bothered saying anything, if they even could, since it was obvious they were out of this fight.

“I’ll stay here too,” Cana offered. “I can help with a few 'Cards Magic: Band-Aids' and I’ve got other cloud type cards to keep Wendy going. Plus, if the Celestial spirits bring Lucy back, I want to be here when she arrives.”

Ranma frowned and was about to protest, but once more he was interrupted. From within the restaurant, where Lucy had been sitting when Aquarius took her away, there was a bright yellow blast of magic and then suddenly Loke was there. But this wasn’t the Loke Natsu and the others knew from his time in the guild, even after he had been ousted as a Celestial Spirit.

Instead of his normal suit, tie and glasses, Loke wore a chest plate made of some kind of blue-tinted metal and no glasses. His hair was a little longer too for some reason, and on his hands were two gleaming knuckle-dusters of the same metal. His hazel eyes were flashing as he looked around, seeming ready to fight right off the bat, only calming down when he realized nothing was happening.

He turned toward them, but winced as Cana reached him. “Cana I…”

Cana shut him up by slapping him hard across the face. “That was for putting Lucy in this kind of a situation against enemies like the Oración Seis,” she growled. “Now, where is she!?”

“She is being held in stasis at the moment. The lacrima in the poison is somehow mutating within her thanks to her celestial magic, the Celestial Spirit King himself and Horologium are keeping her in stasis while we fight the effect,” Loke replied, shaking his head ruefully. “And you’re not the first lady to slap me for my part in this, Aquarius and Virgo both did the same thing, though I’ll admit I found Aquarius in um, call it older sibling bear mode instead of momma bear since she’d resent the implications, much scarier than Virgo.”

With that, Loke bowed his head towards Cana. “I’ll be apologizing to Lucy the instant we have her healed up, but I will apologize to you now. I knew this was a dangerous mission, but I convinced myself that Lucy, with myself and her other spirits, could handle it. That we could avenge Karen, regain Ares from her foul master. I was wrong to convince…”

“Oh enough of this pity party!” Erza barked, startling both Cana and Loke. “We are Fairy Tail! This family exists to help one another, to put ourselves on the line for other people! Lucy chose to do that! Do not denigrate that choice like this! Now, are you here to help or not Loke?!”

Loke looked at Erza, then chuckled and nodded. *That put it all in perspective didn’t it?* “I’m here to help. I opened the door myself, but otherwise I am back, as powerful as ever and willing to pitch in.”

“Good, now if there are no more freaking interruptions!” Ranma growled, causing everyone to back away slightly. The dragon-man waited, and then smirked, which looked very odd on his elongated face at the moment. “Good. Now, Freed was right, we have to split up, and all of you arriving here will let us do just that. Natsu, you think you can track Laxus?”

“Easily,” Natsu said confidently, “I know that sparky-bastard’s stench anywhere!”

“Good. You and the thunder God Tribe commandeer a magic car and get after Ivan,” Ranma frowned for a moment, thinking. He didn’t know the Thunder God Tribe very well, and would have preferred to send someone else with them, but he couldn’t figure out who for a second before he shrugged. “Gajeel, two noses are better than one, you go with ‘em.”

“Ghihi, got it,” Gajeel said with a smirk, nodding to the four Fairy Tail mages.

“That leaves me, Erza, Mira and Bacchus to head after Oración Seis,” Ranma said with a nod. “I think we all know where they’re heading to, but to make sure, we’re going to the Worth Woodsea. Once there, I’ll have to get in touch with someone and get a direction to follow to where Nirvana’s hidden. Once we do that, we take the fight to the Oración Seis, and I get to snap Brain in half. Literally, if I can swing it.”

“You do know the Worth Woodsea is like, half a day by train from here right, to the nearest town even, from there it’d be another hour or so,” Bacchus remarked, speaking up for the first time. While this was certainly a wild series of events, it wasn’t exactly his scene to be all serious like this. “No matter how fast you move, we won’t get there fast enough.”

“The Worth Woodsea’s massive, Nirvana could be anywhere within it. Even if Brain teleported straight to its nearest edge, we can try to get there before he can activate the weapon,” Ranma barked back, before shaking his head and turning to Wendy. “Wendy, can you…”

“Right Ranma-nii!” With that Wendy thrust her hands above her head, then to either side as her body began to glow a light greenish color. The color continued to glow brighter and brighter until she pointed her hands at the group, “Lle Vernier!”

The glow transferred to Ranma, Mira, Erza, Bacchus, Natsu and Gajeel, who all rose lightly off the ground, feeling their bodies becoming almost as light as a feather. Wendy gasped and nearly collapsed once more but found Juvia and Cana both putting their arms on her shoulders, supporting her. Sending them a grateful smile, she then turned back to her brother. “That, that should keep you going for about three hours Ranma-nii!”

“Fine, let’s get going,” Freed said, abruptly doing an about face and racing away through the devastated town.

The others followed, with Natsu and Gajeel shouting, “Don’t tell me what to do! Hey, stop copying, oy, I said stop!” before racing out of hearing range for most of those there.

“Thanks little sister,” Ranma said with a draconic grin, before picking up a pack of food he’d grabbed from another wrecked restaurant. Eating on the run wouldn’t be anything new to him, and maybe by the time they reached the forest he could have rebuilt a little more ki. “Now let’s go!” Within seconds he was out of sight, racing faster than most could track.

Growling lightly, Mira picked up Loke with her arms around his waist. “If you make one flirtatious comment Loke, I’ll freaking drop you, get it?!” Without waiting for a reply flew up into the air, rocketing off after Ranma.

“Take Over: Mecha Soul: SE Rocket Motorcycle!” Jenny shouted, and a second later, she had merged with a motorcycle. Once more it wasn’t the most glamourous looking form, with her hips merging into the seat at the back, her rear sticking up, as her hands formed into the front wheel, her face between the lights. Even as the others gawked, she blushed and revved her engine, racing off in turn.

Erza swiftly Requipped her best running armor, which really wasn’t armor at all. Rather it looked like the kind of thing that wouldn’t have been out of place at a school sports day: a visor to keep her hair out of her face, a skintight white shirt with red lines highlighting it here and there, and short shorts to go with a pair of sneakers. Yet the speed she raced off showed that whatever it looked like, this armor really did add to her overall speed.

Bacchus whistled then shook his head. “Ahh shit, this is no time to be impressed, wait for me you three!” With that he raced off after them, gulping down some alcohol from his flask and speeding up even faster to do so. An instant later, magic gathered in his feet and he began to bound over the landscape, moving several hundred feet with every leap and slowly passing Jenny before trying to catch up to Erza.

**OOOOOOO**

“We’ll kill the mages and anyone else in the town first,” Torafuzar said coldly, “Then we’ll go after the Ranger and the others, wait until they engage Brain and his fellows, then kill them all. Nirvana might not matter, but killing that many mages and then taking Nirvana back with us will be a major triumph to show Master Mard Geer.”

Seilah frowned, looking at the town and once again remembering a young girl who had called her horns pretty. “We should go after the Ranger now. He is the most important target. Anyone here we can come back and kill afterward.”

“No, we finish the weak off now, we can’t let them spread out or call in further aid,” Torafuzar said, while Seilah sighed but nodded.

Kyoka looked at her, her eyes narrowing as she snarled out a question that had been plaguing her since this mission began. “Why are you so certain that the Ranger is the only one that matters? Our orders were to kill as many as possible without revealing ourselves,” she reiterated, again giving Ranma’s title an added bit of contempt.

“He is adaptable, durable and, as we just saw, has now shown a certain mastery of his Dragon Slayer magic, magic which, historically, is even more powerful than our curses. Further, his Demon Slayer magic will make him even more dangerous. If we are not in position to kill him when he is engaged or wounded, it might well aid him in overcoming us. His growth also makes him dangerous, much more than the weak mages within the town. There is also the woman Mirajane to consider given her Take Over Demon Soul powers,” Seilah replied coolly even as she wondered the same thing internally. “Numbers are all well and good, but if we wipe out weaklings and let the strongest mages escape to beat Brain then we will have followed the letter of our orders, but not the spirit.”

To that, Torafuzar and Kyoka had no reply and it made even Kyoka think, rather than want to lash out and hear the screams of her victims. They looked at one another, and finally Torafuzar nodded. “We’ll still attack the town, but we’ll do so quickly, from a distance at first, then in close to finish off any mages while you concentrate your powers on the weaklings, shutting their senses down just in case. Ten, fifteen minutes after the Ranger and those with him are out of sight, then we’ll go after them from on high, higher than that flying one.”

Seilah nodded. “That seems fair,” she replied while trying to ignore the annoying feeling still gnawing at her gut for some reason.

**OOOOOOO**

The attack came out of nowhere. One moment Wendy and the others were moving out to help the scattered civilians in trying to create some sense of organization from the relief efforts, then the next a monstrous surge of water slammed into the town from on high. It was so massive, so powerful, that for just a moment, the still debilitated mages thought that Ranma had, for some reason, turned on them. It was so sudden, that had it not been for Jura’s presence, that initial blow would have killed everyone within the town.

But Jura was there, and he was not known as a Wizard Saint for nothing. A single glimpse of the oddly black water flashing down out of the noontime sky at them was all he needed. “Earth Magic: Iron Rock Wall!” he roared, his hands flashing out in every direction around him. From every direction amidst the rubble, there came a rumble and the stones of the town rose up in sections to create bulwarks against the tsunami crashing down from on high. This didn’t create a single shield that stopped the incoming attack cold, rather it created numerous smaller walls that redirected the water, like so many small dams trying to redirect a stream.

It was a battle of elements. It was a battle of brute force against intelligence. The contest only lasted an instant, but after the town had once more been ravaged, much of the outer town simply gone now, the buildings shattered, the people within, many of whom had been wounded already, wiped out. But the mages and the majority of the people, who had come together in the center to either help one another or receive aid, were saved, though most of Jura’s defense was shattered in turn save for the one he had grown over several dozen surviving citizens.

Then, as Jura gasped for air, his body trembling from the effort of using his magic to that extent on the heels of the poisoning, another attack commenced.

This attack was accompanied by two voices, both female, one almost dull and emotionless, the other wrathful yet somehow almost ecstatic, as if whoever was shouting was looking forward to what was coming. “Curse Magic: Enhancement! Curse Magic: Macro!”

Neither of these attacks was as visible as the tsunami had been, instead coming down onto the town like widely dispersed beams of light, green and blue. They struck the survivors, and when they did, the effects varied wildly.

Wendy gasped in pain as the green beam of magic hit her and her patient, one of the townsfolk who had been nearly crushed by debris during the earlier fight, feeling as if all her senses, including touch and pain, had been heightened to an insane degree. Every breath became not a revitalizing thing, but honestly painful. Her patient, dealing with the pain of crushed legs already, screamed out as the pain hit, and died as Wendy watched, causing her to freeze as she stared, the light going from his eyes.

Nearby, Lyon and Gray, who had been getting to their feet seconds before, gasped and collapsed, Lyon actually crying out in agony as the pain of their bodies, which like all the other mages were still dealing with the aftereffects of the poison, hit them. Carla, Happy, and Eve, who had been dealing with the worst of the after-effects, cried out as well and Wendy quickly turned in that direction, ignoring her own pain to shout out, “Tenryu no Hiringo Houkou (Sky Dragon's Healing Balm)!” This wave of healing magic washed over them, the feeling of it magnified a hundred fold.

Nearby a few citizens still out in the open cried out in pain and then fear as their bodies were hit by the foreign magic. Velo, who had been helping a few of them, did the same. Like Natsu had faced with Ivan, this magic sought to overcome them, and in this case did so without much conflict, transforming the nonmagical citizens into paper dolls, killing all it touched, including the Quattro Cerberus mage. Luckily, most of the citizens were still under cover of Jura’s defense, and thereby were not struck.

However, perhaps the blue wave of magic was even more insidious. It struck and did nothing, at first. Then the same cold, detached voice intoned, “Macro Magic: Control. Ignore your wounds and attack the nearest mages not under my control!”

Lyon gasped as he felt his body moving under the command of someone else, while nearby Gray did the same. They turned to Jura, the nearest S-class mage, and attacked. Lyon thrust out a hand and created a lion that roared and leaped towards Jura, while Gray shot out numerous small spears, creating another in his hands and charging forward.

Nearby Cana leaped backwards from Hibiki and Ren, who she had been helping to sit up, as both of them tried to grab at her. Ren then activated his magic. “Air Magic: Aerial Shot!” from his hands light yellow magic appeared, and shot towards Cana.

Hibiki did the same, “Archive: Force Blast!” From midair around him a series of odd screen-like projections appeared, flashing out towards Cana, Wendy and the nearby Ichiya.

Cana dodged the attacks from Ren, grimacing before tossing a single card in his direction, just as the beams of magic flashed over her position. “Cards Magic: Shocker!”

The Card hit Ren in the face, and transformed into a blast of electrical magic, flinging him backwards. But Cana was already under the control of the Macro curse and turned her attention to Wendy, launching several cards at her, which multiplied.

“Tenryu no Moeagaru Kagitsume (Sky Dragon’s Flaring Claws)!” Wendy shouted, dodging to one side at the same time. She moved around Hibiki’s attack, her own blast catching him in the center of his chest and flinging him back. Being under the enhancement attack, this pain caused him to scream and black out, burying him under a piece of rubble nearby.

She was unable to dodge however as the self-same rubble came under control of the Macro, and rose, attacking her and all the others, burying Wendy, Sherry and the three pretty boys along with the two Exceed.

Jura had been trained as a monk when he was young. As such, his mind was something akin to a fortress, every aspect of it under his control. He too was hit by the two magical assaults, yet even as he used his earth magic to defend himself from the two Ice mages, Jura grasped onto the Enhancement magic and used it, concentrating on the pain his body was feeling to keep out the effects of the Macro. Of course this method had a severe downside, and Jura let out a groan of agony as the pain in his stomach and intestines magnified, but he was still in control of himself.

The same could not be said for the two Ice mages, who attacked him fiercely even as they shouted out, “Jura, it’s not us, something is controlling us!”

“I know that damn it!” Jura shouted, a fist of stone smashing Lyon’s lion into pieces then moving on to slam Lyon to the ground, becoming a hand of stone trapping him there. He winced as Gray was on him before he could do more than create a half-wall between them, which the Ice make Mage leaped over, spear extending towards Jura’s face.

Yet Jura was not just magically but physically strong, and he grabbed the spear as it thrust towards him, his other hand flashing out to crash into Gray’s face, hurling him backwards. Gray rolled with the blow, deadening some of its force and let go of his spear, falling back and creating an ice hammer, ramming it down on Jura’s foot, causing him to bellow in pain.

Even so, Jura kicked out with his other foot, catching Gray in the side and tossing him backwards, right into Cana. Both of them were then blasted by Wendy, who had launched a magical attack towards Cana, which smashed Cana’s shuriken attack back towards them. The pain of the shuriken slicing into their bodies seemed to do the same thing Jura had been able to do, knocking them out the Macro control.

Nearby Ichiya had seen the effects of the beam and moved far faster than most would have credited, shouting out, “Parfume Magic: Mind’s Own Doll!” From his belt he produced a vile of perfume, sniffing at it, his eyes going blank for a second, just as the beam of power moved over him. Made to combat mind magics, this scent took over Ichiya’s mind with a single order, which was ‘ignore all other orders’ just as the Macro Curse hit. In its dissipated form, this meant that Ichiya was able to ignore the Curse’s effect.

While the others were fighting one another, Ichiya then took a deep breath and pulled out another perfume bottle. He breathed it in and stood up his eyes wild and his body moving as if he had just imbibed with a lethal dose of caffeine on top of the effects of the Enhancement curse. He paused then as the three instigators of this latest attack appeared. They came down out of the sky, flying as naturally as birds.

“Tsk, it appears as if spreading our curses to a wide are like that was a mistake. It spread out the impact too much,” one woman muttered as she alighted near the mages.

She was of somewhat average height, shorter than Cana by several inches, yet her chest was larger and her waist thinner, something which, in a less serious situation, Cana might have remarked upon. Cana could tell this because her body was covered by a skintight suit that emphasized her curves, showing off her thighs and ass. Her shoulders and arms were covered in a long, striped jacket with flaring which also completely hid her neck but covered her hands, letting only the tips of her sharp scaly talons show, matching her bird-like feet.

On her head, the woman wore a helmet, which covered most of her face except for her eyes and mouth. Hair protruded from the sides like, curving out around her face while in the center of her forehead was a large gem. When she turned her head, Cana could also see her hair fell down her back in a tight plait.

“True enough, but at least this way we have already eliminated the majority of the weaklings and potential witnesses. All that remains is to deal with the stronger enemies.” Her companion was another woman, and even given their situation, with this one Cana could not help but let out a whistle.

This woman didn’t have the feet or claws of the first, and indeed looked mostly human save for being the two large gold-looking horns protruding from the sides of her head, pointing upwards. She had black hair falling straight down her back, kept out of her face by a white band, her face framed by two long bangs that went over this band. On her forehead, she had a tattoo of some kind and she had another strap tied around her neck. Her clothing consisted of a blue leopard-printed kimono, wrapped around her torso with a thick, decorative yellow ribbon and thigh-high socks that reveal her heels and toe, without any shoes to speak of. Yet this clothing showed off the reason for Cana’s whistle: her breasts were enormous; several sizes larger than Kyoka’s whose breasts were already larger than Cana’s own.

“Enough, out of the pair of you. Concentrate on the here and now, and retain our dignity as Etherious Demons at all times. Such is the respect we owe our names of Tartarus.” This speaker was not a woman, most certainly, indeed, there was nothing about Torafuzar that looked human. His body was light purple and scaled like that of a lizard or shark, an impression given added weight by the dark red fin-like protrusion on his head facing forward. Small scales creased his neck, and while he lacked a visible nose, he had a purple horn like that of a rhino sprouting from the top of his head and a golden elongated armored plate covering his chin for some reason. He had massive arms trailing to either side of him like those of a gorilla trailing on the ground, save they too were covered by further scales, and had fin-like bladed protrusions on the outer sides.

“You!” Jura roared, his body glowing a dirty brown and yellow color as he began to gather his magic, staring at the demons angrily as he pushed away his pain. “What do Demons of Tartarus wish to gain by attacking us here? Should we take this as a sign the whole Balam Alliance has begun to move? Or that you are merely jackals, seeking to attack us when we are weak?”

“The second is closer to our orders, though it is somewhat distasteful to say it aloud,” the male-looking demon admitted. “Yet such is our orders, and to do otherwise would be even more unseemly. I will have you all die here, buried under my Curse, Black Water of Darkness!”

While Jura and Torafuzar were talking, Wendy had pushed herself out of the rubble groaning in pain, but thankfully the effect of the Enhancement Curse had faded for now. She pushed herself to her feet to glare at their attackers, her eyes widening as she recognized Seilah. Seilah looked back at her, a small grimace appearing on her face as Wendy scowled. “So you really are an enemy, Ms. Seilah? That’s sad.”

Seilah looked away, the eyes of the young girl bothering her for some reason she could not quite put into words. “This has been written in our disparate stories for years, Wendy Marvell. The plot your brother has chosen to follow meant our meeting was inevitable.”

“Damn, that was a convoluted speech,” Cana grunted, pushing herself to her feet, and glaring at the trio of self-professed demons. Her body was covered in cuts and scrapes, but while she didn’t like to fight as much as many of the other mages in the guild, that didn’t mean Cana was afraid of a little pain. “Still, all I care about is kicking your ass for attacking us like this, you boob monster!”

Seilah blinked then looked down at her chest, hefting up her rather monstrously sized breasts. “What is it with the amount of power these things seem to possess? I have read thousands of stories, yet I still fail to understand why they are so important. They are simply a part of the body after all.”

“You won’t ever understand Seilah, because you possess them in the first place,” Kyoka said, scowling a little at the reminder. She too did not know the reason, but in a strange, convoluted way, she had always felt that Seilah’s looks were better than her own just because of her chest size. She put it down to having been formed in the image of a female, but even being a female in shape, she could not quite fathom why she felt such things, only that she did.

Even so, she put that irritation to the side, smirking at the two women across from them. “I think I will deal with these two. A female’s screams are always sweeter, be it in pain or pleasure.”

“Okay, to quote my fa, fellow guild member Gildarts, ‘Cana’s going to have to choke a bitch now’, aren’t I?” Cana muttered, eight cards appearing among her fingers as she glared at Kyoka. “Let’s see what you can do face to face horny!”

“I will take him then,” Gray said, pointing at Torafuzar who merely looked back in unconcern.

“Drip, Drip. Do not count Juvia out just yet either! Water Slicer!” a new voice sounded out, as a blast of water flashed towards all three demons, forcing them to dodge, separating them.

When the attacks had commenced, Juvia had been the furthest away from the others, aiding in searching for survivors as Jura had just been about to, the ground mage having paused to clear an area in the center of the town to use as a makeshift hospital. She had been caught up in the water assault, but had dealt with it by simply transforming into water herself. The water mage had then been forced to deal with, once again, the poison of the water. Yet this poison was not laced with lacrima, rather it was based on carbon and other toxins within the water, which gave the water its black color. That kind of thing she could deal with easily.

Even better for Juvia, while she couldn’t take as much of the magical power of the water into herself as Ranma could have, that didn’t mean she couldn’t rejuvenate herself slightly with it. And much of the black water had remained in the area, little rivulets and pools lying here and there in the ruins.

This, even with cursed nature of its creation, gave Juvia water she didn’t have to create herself to work with, lessening the magic needed to launch her attacks slightly. No other mage would have been able to use it such given that curse, but Juvia had a natural advantage with such, able to merge her very being with the water and thus take control of it once Torafuzar had stopped pumping his curse into the water. “Beware the water, do not let any of it within your bodies, it is as poisonous in its own way as what we have already had to deal with today!”

While the three Demons tried to locate the new attacker, Wendy wordlessly launched herself forward shouting out, “DRAGON FORCE!!!” weakened and battered as she was already, Wendy knew she had to rely on her best trump card, and did so instantly, with a speed to action that she had learned at her big brother’s knee.

Around her, the other mages lashed out too, knowing they couldn’t let this battle go on for very long less their bodies give out around them. Cana tossed all but two of her cards at the demons, spreading them out with a speed and accuracy that was astonishing to see. Jura slammed his hands together and the rubble around them suddenly shifted allegiance, his willpower and mastery of ground magic overcoming Seilah’s broader style of control, crushing and shattering the bits of metal, wood and anything else within before flashing out towards the three demons.

For his part Gray darted forward, his hands smacking into one another as he used both hands the way his master had taught them, launching out spears, swords and spikes as he closed with Torafuzar. Around him, a lot of the water from the demon’s earlier attack also froze before launching at the demons from all around them.

Ichiya too shivered once then leaped forward, bouncing around like he had become a rubber ball as he attempted to close in. In one hand he held yet another vial of perfume, but he was waiting for some reason before smelling it.

At the same time, their enemies also had no interest in drawing this battle out any further than necessary. With the speed Ranma and the others were moving, they were well aware they would have to hurry to catch up to them in enough time to catch up to them and be in position to strike. On top of this, arrogance was not, to put it mildly, an emotion felt only by humans. Arrogance was what made even Seilah fight their enemies head on now rather than simply retreating back into the sky and relaunch their magics again, despite their initial attack coming so close to clearing the entire board clear of enemies.

From Cana’s cards flashed out several different attacks. Two of them were lightning, flashing towards Torafuzar as he raised another water-based attack. Two more flew towards Seilah, flashing with a bright blast of magic, like a strobe flare going off, causing Seilah to cover her eyes. Still two more were simple explosive-type cards thrown at Kyoka. The last two she kept in one hand while her other flashed down to her pouch for more.

Seilah didn’t see the impact of the water attack that flung her to one side, but the damage of it was negligible. “Macro:,” she muttered, concentrating her magic into the debris directly around her bringing it alive to her defense. Then she reached out with it towards Juvia’s former position, only to find her gone. The water mage had melted into the debris, shifting position like that to somewhere else.

Then a second later, Wendy barreled into her, a punch catching Seilah in the stomach, but she rolled with it and the two of them started to exchange blows. Wendy was smaller, faster and, though Seilah was reluctant to admit it, just as strong as the older female demon. But Seilah had experience, and this close, her magic was trying to take Wendy over too, not having much impact. Seilah thought that it was thanks to her draconic aura somehow making Wendy’s mind into that of a berserker. Regardless, Seilah’s curse slowed Wendy down somewhat and Seilah in turn had durability to spare.

Kyoka growled as she wiped her hand through the air, dissipating the smoke of the two explosive cards, leaping through the air as she activated a portion of her demonic powers. At the same time, she lashed out with her Enhancement Magic, which hit Cana and Wendy both, but in a very specific way this time. “Curse Magic: Enhanced Pain!!” The wounds both women had taken before this tripled, driving Cana to her knees and Wendy into crying out.

But the littlest dragon slayer kept moving, attacking as best she could, and now calling on her air magic to bounce between enemies when Kyoka closed with her, her talons shifting into the form of long whips. Those whips caught Wendy on the legs and arm, but they couldn’t wrap around her, stinging somewhat but not slowing her down. She howled in agony, but now it came closer to the sound of a wounded dragon than that of a young woman.

Unlike the two females, Torafuzar disdained dodging the water slicer attacks from Juvia, trusting in his armor to not be damaged by such weak water assaults. In the same manner, he ignored Gray’s attacks and Cana’s lightning assault, only concerning himself with Jura, singling him out as the strongest on the other side. Jura did the same, the two of them launched attack after attack at one another, so fast and hard they merged into one. “Ground Magic: Hydra Strike!”

“Black Water Barrage!” from Torafuzar came a similar attack, dozens then hundreds of large blasts of water, which appeared all around him in the air. When they hit, the attacks nearly cancelled out, causing the shark-looking demon’s eyes to widen. Here and there, the ground magic attacks punched through his own to slam into his body. This didn’t do much to him bar smacking him backward a few feet from the momentum, and he frowned. *So weak.*

With that he pushed off the ground, his magic becoming a swirl all around him, lashing out in every direction. *Best to finish this quickly.*

But he had neglected to take Gray into account, or the fact Gray had already shown the ability to freeze his water. This backfired now, as Gray dodged to one side of the water blast sent his way, then thrust his hands into it from the side.

The freezing power flashed along the water, catching Torafuzar’s outstretched arm on that side, pulling him off-balance for a second with the suddenness of it. Then Jura was there, shouting, “Ground Magic: Supreme Rock Crush!!” From underneath him and towards Torafuzar the ground and the debris flashed up, encasing Torafuzar. Then as it did, two golden hands appeared to either side, crushing the rocks against Torafuzar from all around him.

At the same time, Wendy was being hard pressed by Seilah, whose experience fighting Ranma in midair combat had stood her in good stead, completely defeating Wendy’s aerial combat style. But now, with Cana down from her pain-enhancing curse, Kyoka closed in. Her claws shifted to form long whips, which with she struck at the little girl’s back, forcing Juvia to form a foot of water between them to deaden the assault. This worked, yet opened her up in turn to Kyoka, who flashed a hand out into her body, activating her curse to the maximum, a look of ecstasy on her face.

Whatever her form, Juvia still had senses, she still felt. Whenever anything hit her water body, she felt it to a very limited degree: for example, a devastating punch would have felt like someone’s pinky pressing into her. Kyoka had just thrust her hand into Juvia’s body and then Kyoka’s curse activated, enhancing the feeling to the level where it felt as if she had done that to Juvia in her normal solid body.

“GAHHHHHH!!!!!” Juvia screamed her body reforming into a solid state in her shock, though thankfully this pushed Kyoka’s hand out as it did. The agony of it caused Juvia to fall unconscious to the ground. An instant later, Seilah’s control of the rubble came into play again, dumping several tons of wood on top of her.

But Wendy turned and roared, “Tenryu no Hoko (Sky Dragon’s Roar)!” right into Kyoka’s face sending her flying with a cry of shock. Before Wendy could turn around however, Seilah had leaped into the air, and when Wendy looked up at her, she felt the ground of the shattered house she’d been standing in collapsing around her, burying her within.

Kyoka shook her head and then looked up in shock as Ichiya, who had been trying to close in with the demons this whole time, was suddenly in her face. “Parfume Magic: Blast of Power!” Having just taken a deep whiff of his last perfume bottle, Ichiya suddenly became a giant of muscle, larger than Jura or Torafuzar, “Take this, men!!!”

The blow hammered into Kyoka and hurled her backwards again, her head honestly ringing from the blow. *What, how did he get so strong!* To get some distance, she leaped into the air seeing the battle as a whole for a moment, her hands instantly flashing out. “Enhancement Curse: Song of Pain!”

Nearby, Jura’s attack had seemed to take out Torafuzar, or so he hoped. But then the tomb he had created shattered and Torafuzar stood there, his arms thrust out to either side. “Is that all? Disappointing. Still, I will give you some respect for standing at all at this point.”

Gray immediately attacked, shouting out “Ice Make:” before he was interrupted, the demon leaping sideways toward him. Gray dodged, but was still caught by the side of the punch. A few long spikes sticking out of the demon’s arm caught him cutting all the way through his arm just above the elbow and sending it flopping to the ground. Gray screamed in agony, falling back as blood burst from his wound, the pain of it with Kyoka’s magic added in too much for his body to take.

With the Ice mage dealt with, Torafuzar turned back to Jura, lashing out at him with a blast of water magic. “I will put you out of your misery now ground mage! Crushing Wave!” This water attack was much denser than any of his others, like a drill rather than a hammer, the water shifting in concentric swirls, drilling through Jura’s attempt to block and then right through the mage in question punching straight through his stomach and out the other side.

As Jura fell in a welter of blood, Wendy pushed herself out of the rubble, her Dragon Force form disappearing as her magic left her, leaving her gasping in agony and exhaustion. But nearby, she could see Cana lying out on the ground, with Kyoka about to stab her, her claws having elongated into swords. Underneath her foot, Ichiya was on the ground clothing at his stomach in agony, while Kyoka ground his head into the ground. “GaaaHHH!!!”

Gathering what little magic she still had, Wendy roared out “Tenryu no Tsuukan Kagitsume (Sky Dragon’s Piercing Claw)!” thrusting her hand out towards Kyoka.

Kyoka looked up sharply, her claws stabbing into Cana’s hand instead of her neck, but she was able to get one hand up in time to chop at the incoming attack, shattering it. The impetus pushed her off her perch however, and with Cana’s screams in his ears Ichiya roared up, smashing an underhanded blow that threw her through the air, causing a gasp of agony from her. “MEEEN!!”

At the same time however, Wendy had gone after the target to most help her friends, not the one closest to her. She looked up and into Seilah’s face before a blow to her neck sent her down and out, unconscious. An instant later, she was buried under the debris of the town once more.

This left Cana and Ichiya the last two standing, and a second later, that too changed. Torafuzar turned and launched an attack towards them both, which crashed into and through Ichiya’s body, tearing his enhanced frame to pieces as he stood in front of Cana. Yet despite his sacrifice Cana too would have been hit, but it bought her enough time to use one of the two cards she had in her off-hand.

These cards were called ‘Transfer’ and ‘Chameleon’, and they were Cana’s emergency escape cards. The first teleported her a short distance, porting her away to land inside another ruined building, hidden from sight from the three demons, for now anyway. To keep from being found again Cana bit down hard on the ground underneath her, while the pain of her speared hand throbbed and her other card activated, covering her in a chameleon cloak to hide her presence.

For a second, Torafuzar stared, watching as the oddest looking human he’d ever seen fell to the ground, cut in twain by his earlier attack. Then he looked around, and nodded grimly. “This has taken us overlong. We must leave now in order to catch up to our real targets and the Oración Seis.”

“I don’t know,” Kyoka said, holding her stomach lightly. That one blow from Ichiya had possibly bruised a few of her ribs, his physical might being something she had not anticipated. “Perhaps we should make certain the rest of these fools are dead?"

Behind the two other demons, Seilah tensed. She was somewhat uncertain of the others, but she knew Wendy at least still lived, having commanded the rubble to fall on her in such a way as to entomb rather than injure her and the others. Seilah still had no idea why she had done so, but she had and if the other two found out…

“No. Two S-class mages are dead now, their healer is dead too, and I can no longer sense the magical reserves of the others. And at present, we cannot spend further time here. I’m not nearly as fast as you two and the sense of those S-class mages are already at the edge of my perception curse it!” With that Torafuzar leaped into the air, and gestured the others to follow him, moving off as quickly as he could. “Come, we go!!”

*I have given you a chance little Wendy, I hope for your sake you take it.* Seilah mused, following her fellow Etherious demons into the air.

Behind them, Cana didn’t wait for long before rushing out, Band-Aid cards desperately appearing in her hand as she rushed to save those among her companions that she could.

**OOOOOOO**

Ultear was no stranger to pain, although admittedly, poison was a new one and it forced her to curse her Arc of Time’s inability to affect anything living. Once Ranma had done whatever it was, he had to give her body a jumpstart though, Ultear had been able to activate her tiny Requip space and pull out a Bezoar, a type of formula that canceled poison in the body. It was hellaciously expensive, but council members were given it as part of their position to deal with situations similar to this one. It didn’t do anything for the lacrima granules inside her body, leaving her still quite weak, but she was no longer in danger of dying at least.

She had done this slowly so that no one around noticed, then cracked an eye open to check out what was going on, listening intently. Then Ivan had entered the ruined restaurant, and fear had frozen her, forcing Ultear to close her eyes again.

When it came to the other dark guild, Grimoire Heart had a simple rule: Do **not** come near Raven Tail. Something about Ivan worried Master Hades greatly, beyond his apparent magical power. And of all the dark guilds, Raven Tail was the most odd there was no other way to put it. The way Ivan recruited was odd, the way he moved his guild was odd, his goals were unknown and the man himself something of a mystery.

Now however in his presence, Ultear could illuminate some of that mystery: whatever else, Ivan was strong. His presence practically filled the restaurant, and she shivered as she caught a glimpse of his eyes. *God, they look so freaking mad they don’t look quite human any longer.*

Regardless, she stayed still as Ivan came in then heard a few others coming in. “Ara, ara~~ and what are you doing here, kiddy Racer?” Ivan asked, and Ultear noted even his voice sounded crazy.

Racer’s voice replied, sounding like he was in pain, quite muffled and a little high-pitched for a man. “I’m to pick up the council rep. She might have some information we need.”

“For Nirvana?” the madman asked, then Ultear heard an indrawn breath and Ivan’s cackling. “That old thing, hah! It will never work quite the way your Brain might think. Still, if you want that little toy, take her. I only want my former guinea pig.”

“Right…” Racer replied, moving over to Ultear and picking her up. Given her years of acting, it was child’s play to act as if she was still under the power of the poison. Although being carted off over Racer’s shoulder like she was a sack of wheat wasn’t fun.

Seconds later they were on their way, riding an SE motorcycle out of the town, Ultear slung onto the back and tied there like a parcel. “Gah, don’t know who’s crazier, that Ranger asshole for thinking he could fight us all, or Ivan and his just being bat-shit crazy.” As they raced on, the road must have turned so that Racer could see back the way they had come, because the next thing Ultear heard was Racer muttering, “Although, considering he isn’t exactly losing yet, my money’d be on Ivan.”

Ultear was about to make a funny quip and then try to take Racer out and make her escape, but then his SE motorcycle suddenly revved up, she mentally sighed. *Well, I wanted to take out Brain most of all, I suppose I’ll just wait for the right chance. Besides, I have no idea about Racer’s magic other than it has something to do with speed. Best to wait.* The fact she was going to kill Brain was not in question, not even Master Hades’ orders to just observe was going to keep her from murdering the man responsible for her torment in the Bureau of Magical Development.

Oddly enough, it felt like only a few minutes had passed before Ultear, looking around, surreptitiously, noticed them entering a forest. Around her from out of the woods came the sounds of revving engines and she quickly closed her eyes, but could still hear as more than a hundred other SE motorcycles joined Racer. “Hey boss, who’s the cutey you’ve got there, are we into kidnapping now?”

“Hah, with the trade in Bosco shut down ya’d have to keep her personal, or go all the way around Ishgar and try to sell ‘em in Enca before those freaking Pergrandians finish their conquest of it,” another voice said. “Although lookin’ at her, I’d go for the first option.”

“Enough of that you louts, Master Brain wants her for something,” Racer shouted back. “Besides, Angel would slaughter the lot of you, and then I’d have to recruit more Harpuia and who’d want to go to all that work huh?”

That won Racer some laughter, but thankfully for the men in question they all stopped making comments like that. After that, they seemed to travel for an hour or so through the woods, having to slow down tremendously due to the trees. But eventually they stopped and Ultear, once more slung onto Racer’s shoulders like a parcel, chanced slowly opening one eye to look behind him. She saw a small clearing dominated by a pond, with a tiny waterfall at the far end heading down into the trees on the other side. *Quite a pretty place actually.* She thought, then scowled as they entered what was no doubt some kind of cave.

There she was pulled off of Racer’s shoulder and found herself propped against the wall. Then she heard another voice shout out, “Master Brain, you used your emergency teleportation spell!? But, but that, what happened!? The Six Prayers, it’s weakened!”

“Tell me something I do not know Klodoa!” growled Brain who then addressed Ultear. “And you can stop playing possum my dear. After all, I need your brain and one eye intact, nothing else. Don’t test my patience, this day has already not gone anywhere near according to plan, and a part of me would like nothing better than to make you scream.”

At that, Ultear scowled, her brain looking for angles even as she opened her eyes and noted with some shock that three of the six members of Brain’s guild were nowhere to be seen. And much like Racer, Hoteye and Brain looked battered, if only around the edges, while Racer’s face looked like someone had used it as a punching bag. “Do you expect me to cooperate then Brain?” she asked in the hopes of gaining time. “If so you’re thinking far too little of a member of Fiore’s Magic Council.”

“The Magic Council? Do you honestly think I am unware of your true allegiances, Ultear? After I helped Jellal gain a seat right beside you?” Brain asked, sounding more amused now.

Ultear smirked, making to shrug though her body was still not exactly up to moving. “Well then, is this a declaration of war, Brain? You think you can break the Balam Alliance and take on Grimoire Heart?”

“Hohohoh, not at all my dear,” Brain said, as he gestured for Ultear to stand up. “Although I do have to wonder about why you were with this group?”

“Assassination, and observation,” Ultear lied glibly. “Knowledge is power after all, and even after he ousted Jellal from the Tower of Heaven we still don’t know enough about Ranger Oceana’s abilities.” She then grimaced. , “And it has to be said once Gran Doma made the decision to send someone along with this mission, as the youngest and fittest on the council I was the obvious choice, curse it.”

“Hmmm,” Brain murmured, and then shrugged. “Well, in any event, do you have any objection to helping me unseal Nirvana?”

“Of course not, so long as I can take your guarantee back to Master Hades that you won’t turn it on the rest of the Balam alliance.” Ultear then frowned, looking around at the other two. “But, forgive me for asking, but what happened to the rest of your guild?” She then leaned forward. “And…hmm, it looks like our wanted posters are wrong, or did you have more tattoos on your face when those were created?”

Brain twitched at that, while Racer also scowled. “That’s right, what the hell happened while I was taking care of this bitch!?”

“Before that, I think we need to prepare. This Oceana fellow is such that I have no doubt he’ll be after us again,” Brain growled.

“Mhhm, just like money makes the world go round that youth will try to follow his mission, right!?” Hoteye said his perpetual odd smile on his face. “Yes if he does, and if he has somehow manage to recover, we might well be in a bad way without our fellows.”

“Indeed. Hoteye, you and I will be mass teleporting our underlings here. Racer, you will be in charge of your Harpuia, they will be our first line of defense,” Brain said, leading them out of the cave and into the small glade outside, showing Ultear his back. For just a moment, she was tempted to take him out then and there if she could, but she saw that the living staff hadn’t stopped staring at her in Brain’s hand. *No chance then.*

She followed them out and listened as Brain outlined the plan. “This is the Worth Woodsea; remember that every inch of it is our battleground, a defense in depth! We will place our lackeys throughout, and drown Oceana and anyone else he manages to revive under the weight of bodies alone!!”

As Racer leaped onto his motorcycle, Hoteye prepared an area to one side of the pond for the teleportation glyphs. These were something their guild had stolen from the Bank of Ishgar, a proprietary secret of the only bank to have branches throughout Ishgar. They were a massive power, but Brain had cracked their teleportation arrays years ago, and had used them to set up their dark guild empire. With them, they could transport to and from any guild they had forced to serve them.

As Hoteye was doing this, Brain looked down at Klodoa. “You, find Angel and bring her back here. Her cowardice can be forgiven just this once, but we need her back here.”

“Of course Master Brain, leave it to me!!” With that, Aero Magic Wings burst out from the sides of the staff, lifting it into the air and away.

As the staff disappeared up into the sky, Brain turned to Ultear. “As for you and I, my dear, I am afraid we have some walking to do.”

“Certainly, I hadn’t thought it would be so convenient as to be near this position you had already designated as a fallback point. However, I still would like to know what went wrong,” Ultear replied ‘innocently’. “After all, from my perspective your ambush went off without a hitch.”

*If I have to wait until we’re away from the others in order to take my shot at your life, at least this way I can have some fun too.*

**OOOOOOO**

At the same time that the Oración Seis were pulling in their troops in order to create a defense in depth for Ranma and, at the very least the two Dragon Slayers they knew had recovered from the poison, those two Dragon Slayers were using their noses to lead the Thunder God Tribe on Ivan’s trail. They had detected him meeting up with two unknown scents, then a few false trails but they never lasted long before one of the other Dragon Slayer would realize it, and they would double back to find the real one. The difference between would be that there fakes would sometimes let loose a faint smell of paper to their senses.

Eventually, Natsu's nose led them off the road they had been following onto a small back-trail - it could hardly be called a road -up into a series of hills that were very odd looking, Gajeel thought as he raced along beside the SE car. They were short hills, but they were blocky too, with sheer sides scattered here and there, and the trail they were following entering ravines and such-like. It was as if someone had come along and carved those bits out of the landscape, of some massive magical weapon had been used to do the same thing.

When he voiced those thoughts to Evergreen, the young woman sitting in the car seat nearest where he was running, she frowned, looking around and nodding. “It is indeed. None of us come from Seven originally though, so if you're asking us to explain what created these hills, you're going to be sorely disappointed.”

“Not disappointed, didn't want to hear about their histories,” Gajeel grunted, shading his eyes. Before he was even finished talking, the others were also doing the same thing and he smiled grimly. “Just wanted to make certain that we were all on the same page here.”

Bickslow smirked, his dolls moving out from around him to shift in every direction pulling off the SE link. “That it would be a perfect area for an ambush? Oh yeah baby, we know.”

“Baby, baby!” echoed the souls linked to his dolls, while on the other side of the car, Natsu also started to slow down a little.

Freed frowned, looking up at Natsu from where he had been writing out magical glyphs on one of the many scrolls he had been working on as the chase continued. He had left the trail finding to the two Dragon Slayers as he prepared what he could for a fight against a mad Guild master and his allies. “Were we making up that much time on him?”

Natsu nodded grimly then looked over at Gajeel who also nodded. “The scent’s been getting fresher with every minute that passes, and has been ever since we found it again 20 minutes ago, plus those other two, newer scents.”

Freed hopped out of the car, gesturing the other two members of his team to do the same. Evergreen huffed, but did so, moving away from the others, her hand coming up to her glasses in preparation. “Ivan,” Freed started to say conversationally as he pulled out his rapier, “is a melodramatic, manipulative, sociopath. If were getting close, he will certainly turn on us, the better to hurt Fairy Tail.”

Natsu nodded, though he hadn't known anything about Ivan or Raven Tail at all before this day had begun. But what he had seen of Ivan in the restaurant after the poisoning certainly made him believe Freed's words and the seriousness on his face would have shocked many of his friends. And Laxus and Ranma for certain would have goggled as he did the sensible thing and asked Freed, “What are we going to do about it? Rather than simply running ahead believing in his strength to get them through.”

Freed frowned, staring ahead of them into the odd hills, or perhaps they should be called canyons, he thought idly, scratching at his chin. “Bickslow, send your babies up high. I'm sorry, but they're going to be playing bait for us. Evergreen, you and I will wait until we know what we’re facing before lifting off after them. Natsu, Gajeel, I'm sorry to ask this of the two of you, but as Dragon Slayers, you're the most durable here. I want you to take point.”

Natsu just nodded, and moved ahead of the others, fire beginning to flare all around him as he started to lose his temper thinking about Ivan and what the asshole could be doing to Laxus. Laxus was arrogant, prideful and prickly, even a bit of an asshole himself. But he was still Natsu's guildmate, still Natsu's fellow Dragon Slayer, someone he respected and actually liked in a weird sort of way. “Let's get it on!” he roared suddenly, flame bursting out of his mouth.

“Gihihi, about fucking time!” Gajeel laughed, and the two of them raced ahead of the others.

Freed followed swiftly, his rapier in his hand, already drawing on himself. Thanks to the eye-magic called Dark Écriture, Freed could draw runes in the air or on random items without needing paper or any other normal medium, though of course he could use those to. Now he wrote on himself, using the spell, Dark Écriture: Demon, which morphed his body into a combat form, something along the lines an Etherious demon could create, and indeed something of the same look too. Originally, the name of this spell had been Dark Écriture: Darkness, but Laxus had pointed out that was one of the lamest spell names he’d ever heard, and Freed, who practically worshipped Laxus, had quickly changed it.

This form was highly magic-intensive, but gave him the ability to fight at a level of one of the guild’s true close range specialists. It included magic wings too, but at this point they weren’t visible just yet as he and Evergreen raced after the two dragon Slayers.

The woman grumbled quietly to herself, but didn't say anything to any of the others, pulling out from her waist two daggers, twirling them expertly in her fingers. After fighting the other female mages of Fairy Tail for so long Evergreen had been forced to learn some close combat skills, and could also use these daggers to direct her Fairy Magic.

Behind them, Bickslow stood still for a moment as from his waist several dozen little wooden dolls began to float, enlarging as they left his person. Then they began to float into the sky everywhere around them. He gestured forward with one hand shouting, “Go my babies!” and all of them flew outwards and upwards into the hilly area in front of them.

**OOOOOOO**

As the team had predicted, ahead of them Ivan waited, high up on a hill overlooking the trail behind them shading his eyes and chuckling quietly to himself. “Come into my parlor, said the Raven to the Fairy.”

“Shouldn't that be spider, boss?” asked a large man beside him. Ivan himself was quite tall, but the man standing next to him was a little bit taller, and far wider in the shoulders. He was dark skinned man with green hair tied into dreadlocks that held stones on the ends. Currently shirtless he showed off tribal tattoos across his chest in light blue and wore black pants and gloves. Yet despite his size, the two weapons on his back still looked too large for him to use comfortably.

“Perhaps Doll, perhaps. But fairies are much more intelligent than flies, and yet here they come seeking out their natural enemies, we ravens. I have already snatched up my prize for the day, but I am not so against taking still more,” Ivan said with a chuckle.

Watching as the group below came forward at a run now, a woman standing next to the two men grunted, crossing her arms and looking irritable. “They're not coming on so madly anymore. Someone among them is a thinker.”

“And what does that matter dear Swan?” Ivan asked, another chuckle coming from his mouth.

Swan grimaced. “Just means were going to be in for a fight master.”

“A fight on land we have prepared a fight we have wanted for a long, long time!” Ivan said with a laugh. “A fight against children, unprepared for the real world. We will kill them all and I will send my father their skulls. And then, when we move against him for the Lumen History he will already be broken by grief.”

Swan grimaced again, deeper this time. When it came to Fairy Tale, her guild master lost what little semblance of sanity he retained most of the time. Once more, for the five-hundred and fifty-sixth time – yes, she had counted - Swan wondered about the intelligence of joining Raven Tail. But at the time, she really hadn't had much of a choice. It was either that, go alone or get captured by the authorities of her clan for murdering several Desierto clan chieftains. *And all because I didn't get the memo that our war with them was over*. She thought yet again, for the five-hundred and fifty-fourth time.

“Let's do this,” she said now, tapping her legs on the ground, and smirking as she felt her battle lust start to grow in anticipation of the oncoming fight.

Ivan chuckled, and gestured to either side, glancing over his shoulder at Laxus, who glared back at him, his body still dealing with the poison of course and with the added weight of several tons of chain Shikigami. To him, their creator, those felt like nothing, only the paper that had made them. To Laxus, their victim, they were an insurmountable weight pressing down on him with twenty tons worth of weight.

“Go,” he said simply and all around them hundreds, thousands of paper ravens lifted off at his gesture, shooting forward.

“Rabbit Combat Magic: Chameleon Rabbit!” Swan said, moving to one side and disappearing from view, just like the chameleon rabbit of Desierto, leaped down into the crevice in front of them.

Doll too prepared for the battle swiftly, pulling a gigantic Gatling gun from his back. It was the kind of thing that Ranma would have taken one look at and thought was an antiaircraft gun from a destroyer in a museum or something similar, so heavy it would have taken four of more normal men to lift, but Doll hefted it with ease. “Guns Magic: Explosive Shot! Speed Shot! Scatter Shot!”

**OOOOOOO**

The sudden fire from on high coming towards them was not a surprise to any of them, although the sheer amount of it startled Evergreen and Freed somewhat. Gajeel on the other hand simply laughed, shouting out “Tetsuryu no Uroko (Iron Dragon Scales)!” and charged through the gunfire towards where it was coming from. “Gihhihi, gonna have to do more than that!!!”

Natsu leaped to one side, his neck snaking to one side as he bit at one of the flying bullets that looked like a tiny fireball, before spitting it out, kicking up off of the side of the thin canyon they were moving through, then to the other side and upwards.

He blinked as a strange smell hit him, right before a kick slammed into his face with punishing force, hurling him backward and down. He rolled with it though, and came up grinning as a woman appeared in midair above him, landing lightly in front of them. She had dark, heavily tanned skin, green eyes and silver hair styled to look like bunny ears protruding from her head, or maybe they were real, Natsu couldn’t tell. Her attire consists was an armor breastplate that covered her large chest, before giving way to a black dress that fell like a loincloth down her front. She also had leg armor around her calves and up to her thighs, though she was oddly not wearing any footwear.

She tapped the ground, and a vibration thrummed through the air and ground. A tremendous boom was heard and underneath her, the woman created a large crater, the side of it swiftly moving towards Natsu, Freed and Evergreen at the force of the strike.

At the same time, the Shikigami had flashed down towards them from every direction. Here though the Dolls Bickslow had created proved their worth as something like a dogfight began. Green beams of energy flashed out from each of them in multiple directions, and as these attacks hit the Shikigami they dissipated. Only the ones at the far edges and well beyond the team got through to slam harmlessly into the ground, quivering there like so many knives before going limp like the paper they were made of.

There were a few hundred stragglers but Evergreen turned her attention to them at once, shouting out, “Fairy Machine Gun: Leprechaun!” flinging her daggers to either direction then in front of her. This sent her attack out in waves impacting the incoming Shikigami, destroying them as she took cover from the guns magic assault coming in from ahead of them.

Freed created a runic shield ahead of him with his Dark Écriture. Thrusting his rapier forward with the shield as if it was some kind of umbrella, he leapt into the air through the incoming fusillade to join Gajeel trying to close with the people who had ambushed him. *Darn it, should I use one of my prepared arrays? No… not yet.*

Next to Doll, Ivan cocked his head thoughtfully, staring at the mages recognizing them from his information about Fairy Tail. “So, my former experiment’s followers and the two Dragon Slayers. Interesting, but it does not change what I should do. Target the weakling, remove it and move on.” With a mental command, his masterpiece the large doll Obra moved out from a hiding place behind where Evergreen and the others were and Ivan transferred to another Shikigami hanging from Obra’s arm there.

Simultaneously, Swan and Natsu began to fight. Natsu was being thrown off by the other woman's scent for some reason, her scent making his instincts go haywire. Not in the way that Lisanna and Anna did, more like something about her was calling to the predatory side of him, wanting to make him chase and eat the woman. *Is it because of her ears? She smells like a freaking giant rabbit! Gah, it’s like the first time Lisanna changed into her bunny form all over again.*

Fire magic met some kind of vibration-based magic. A fist ‘style’ if it could be called that – and if you asked Ranma, it **really** couldn’t - met a style based primarily on kicks. They smashed one another across the canyon, up into the air and backwards several times, all in the time it took Ivan to close with Evergreen behind them.

She looked up from where she had been busily destroying the incoming Shikigami, to stare at Ivan, quickly grabbing at her glasses and pulling them down, “Eyes Magic: Gorgon Eyes!”

But Ivan replied by thrusting two fingers in front of him, creating to Shikigami which flew up and got in the way of his vision as he waved his other hand forward, creating several hundred Shikigami around his arm. This coalesced into a magical blast of black and purple energy that flashed towards her in a beam around a foot wide.

Staring at it, Evergreen thought it looked something like Mira's attacks. The two of them had sparred numerous times, which meant she was fully prepared to dodge, and did so rapidly. She leaped into the air, twirling around and shouting, “Fairy Magic: Fairy Flashing!” blocking and redirecting several smaller such attacks but Ivan was on her, before she could gain more distance.

His hand flashed out, grabbing her leg, as he intoned “Shikigami Magic: Transformation.”

Evergreen could feel his magic surging through her body, and screamed, as she felt her body begin to change.

Yet before he could finish, Bickslow was there riding up on one of his dolls, shouting out his own magical attack. “Figure Eyes!!” Though this magic, a type of control type magic couldn’t overcome the difference in brute power between them, he was able to force Ivan away from Evergreen, breaking his grip on her leg, and saving her from transforming further.

She in turn flipped through the air, and hurled her daggers at him shouting “Arcing Fairy Blast!” As Ivan ducked underneath them, she pulled off her glasses again, trying to bring her primary magic into play and finish this fight.

But Ivan’s Shikigami got between him and Bickslow’s gaze, breaking his magic. Ivan had made a habit of analyzing all the better known Fairy Tail mages and ducked away, turning entirely away from her to engage Bickslow. A single energy blast caught him point-blank, sending Bickslow backwards, and then Ivan grabbed his head, and twisting him around until he was facing Evergreen. She couldn't cancel her magic quickly enough, and Bickslow froze solid into stone, which-dropped towards the ground below.

Evergreen was about to swoop down to save her comrade when Freed was there, having turned away from closing with the guns magic user, flying through the air and thrusting forward with his rapier. “Dark Écriture: Slay!” he shouted, a blast of black and purple magic shooting out from his sword, while also throwing one of his prepared runic arrays down towards the ground. It slapped into the ground below Bickslow and his dissent slowed until he landed lightly as Freed himself closed with Ivan.

Nearby, Swan was getting frustrated. She was landing a lot more hits the Natsu was, but she wasn't getting through his durability. Every time she knocked him down or back, which thanks to her vibration magic was every time she landed a hit, he would bounce back up like a freaking jackrabbit! “What does it take to put you down?!” she roared angrily.

“A heck of a lot more than you've got!” Natsu growled, having finally analyzed his opponent’s attacks. The woman with the rabbit-like ears moved like a dancer, strong, certain, always in motion, never still, her whole body in total control. She dodged nearly every punch he threw out, even dodged his magical attacks with a dexterity that was incredible. But that didn’t mean she was invulnerable.

When she flipped upwards to bring her leg down on his head, he brought his own hand up and smashed it into her steel clad foot, grimacing as the vibrations began to work their way through him. But even so he shouted out his own magical attack in a roar, “Karyu no Tekken (Fire Dragon’s Iron Fist)!” Instead of a blast of power, this just started a fire that licked out swiftly trying to encompass his target.

Swan screamed in pain as the fire licked at her but still moved away dancing in place and around for a brief second to put out the fires on inner clothing, then looked up in shock as Natsu closed the distance before she could recover. She couldn’t move away in time and a blazing fist slammed into her face, hurling her backwards and into the side of the ravine.

There she slid to the ground seemingly unconscious, her durability nothing much in comparison to the force Natsu could put out. Nodding at that, Natsu turned his attention to where Ivan and Freed were dueling in the air. “Karyu No Takameru Ho (Fire Dragon’s Boosted Step)” He roared aloud, and from his feet came a blast of fire that threw him into the air, where he flung his hands out to either side, fire raging from them. “Karyu no Yokugeki (Fire Dragon’s Wing Attack)!”

Natsu’s fire spread out, and finished off the last of the flying Shikigami, allowing the last few dolls, many of which had been destroyed, to concentrate and fire a beam of magic at Ivan. In this manner Ivan found himself sorely pressed, or at least appeared to be.

Elsewhere in the battlefield, Gajeel had forced his way through the mass of Guns Magic fire, and leaped up starting to climb up the side of the ravine to close with the Gun mage there. To his surprise though he hadn't retreated, and simply waited right up until Gajeel stuck his head over the side, whereupon he brought out another weapon from the bandoleer on his back. This time it was a handheld cannon, shorter-barreled and only having one barrel rather than the multiple barrels of his Gatling gun, but no less deadly. A single round shot out from it to slam into Gajeel’s head, tossing him backwards.

It should've broken his neck, but Gajeel was an Iron Dragon Slayer, who prided himself on his durability even beyond that of other dragons. He clung grimly to the side of the crevice, and pulled himself further upwards again.

Ivan retreated slightly from the combination of Natsu, Freed and the remaining dolls of Bickslow grimacing. Natsu's fire magic was a natural deterrent against his own Shikigami magic, leaving him with only his direct attacks, which Freed was quickly beginning to counter with his own runic based magic. And the doll’s combined magical assault was irritating to deal with forcing him to dodge.

Meanwhile, Evergreen was moving through the air towards the Guns Magic user, intent on attacking him from above to break his concentration on Gajeel, and on where Bickslow's frozen form still lay on the ground. She would release him later, but couldn’t take the time right now fearing it would make her a target.

Doll saw her coming, and gestured to one side, flinging the Gatling gun off of his other arm even as he continued to fire down at Gajeel with the larger caliber bullets of his cannon. “Guns Magic: Sentinel!” The Gatling gun grew several legs, alighting there, and he shouted the order “Anti-Air!”

From that, the Gatling gun twisted on its mount, firing up into the air at Evergreen, Freed and Natsu. Evergreen was barely able to dodge, her clothing being torn along with the fairy wings that grew from her back, dumping her down towards the ground with a cry of pain. Natsu took a few bullets too, which threw off his attack on Ivan long enough for one of his attacks to get through. Freed took a few hits, but grimaced and kept on closing trying to get within hand-to-hand combat range of Ivan, believing his rapier and his ability to write runes on his opponent could bring this fight to a halt.

This proved to be a mistake, as Ivan gleefully showed. He dodged around Freed's blazing rapier, a fist slamming into Freed's throat once, twice, three times in quick succession before Freed could dodge or guard himself. Freed began to gasp, grabbing at his throat and falling backwards through the air, but then found himself grabbed around the middle by Ivan, who hurled him into Natsu, forcing Natsu to cancel his fire aura.

“Shikigami Magic: Paper Rain!” Ivan shouted, pointing towards both of them with both hands. All around him, thousands of Shikigami appeared from his sleeves. Then a second later, they lashed out and down like so many raindrops. Only this rain was made of paper edged into blades that flew faster than any bullet or raindrop could ever move.

And when they hit, they did a lot more damage to Natsu and Freed than the bullets of the guns magic user had. They sliced into even Natsu's skin, opening up hundreds of paper cuts over his entire body. The pain of it was so much that Freed screamed in agony, and Natsu was forced to guard his face, which opened him up to a renewed assault by Swan, who had regained consciousness quickly.

“Vibration Magic: Double Thunderclap!” she roared, pushing off the ground with her hands and kicking Natsu in the face then hundreds of times in the chest. Each kick was accompanied by Vibration Magic, which sent the impetus of the kick deeper into his body flinging Natsu backwards in a cry of pain.

Seeing this, Gajeel grimaced, and tried to surge upwards, but then blinked in shock as the fire from above suddenly cut out. Evergreen had been able to get close enough even falling through the grant air, to activate her eyes magic on Doll, and he was frozen above them into stone just like Bickslow. The Gatling gun was still shooting at her even as she fell, and she took a few hits, including to the leg that had previously been turned into a paper, causing her to grimace in pain as she plummeted into the ground. But he was out of the fight and that meant the way was clear for Gajeel.

“Gihihih, nice girl!!!” Gajeel laughed, and pushed himself up the incline again, landing next Laxus who glared at him. His face was still looking green, and with several thousand Shikigami all around his form in chains.

Before Gajeel could move to try and free Laxus, however, Ivan was there, grabbing Gajeel from the back of the head. Gajeel kicked off the ground moving with Ivan’s grip and over it to bring his knee down on top of Ivan's head, forcing him to back away then twisting into a magical attack. “Tetsuryuso (Iron dragon’s Lance)!” His hands shifting into two long clubs, he nearly caught Ivan before he could retreat, forcing Ivan back and into the air.

Nearby Natsu grimaced, being pressed back by Swan, unable to get any time to bring out his magic, having to defend his face and chest. Worse, he was starting to feel faint, bleeding badly from his thousands of paper-cut-like wounds, so much so that every step he took he left a bloodied trail. He grunted again in pain as Swan, flipped herself, bringing her feet up to hammer into his jaw, sending vibrations through his entire brain, rattling him and causing him to step backwards, but he dropped and kicking out hard, catching her in the chest and finally gaining some distance.

Freed had been hurt far worse from the paper assault than Natsu and he lay gasping, his combat form slowly dissolving around him as the pain cut into his ability to concentrate. Evergreen was nearby and watched as Ivan started to toy with Gajeel, tossing him down into the cavern and launching attacks at him lazily laughing as he shouted, “Dance little fairy, dance former phantom brat. So sad, to rise so far and yet only to fall!”

She crawled over towards Freed, hoping that Natsu could occupy Swan long enough for her to get to her friend. *So much for our tactics, we weren’t nearly as ready for Ivan’s Shikigami magic as we thought!*

But Freed wasn't just still alive his brain was still ticking over like the well trained device it was. Instead of waiting for Evergreen to help him, he was frantically reaching into a pocket pulling out something he had been working on while Bickslow had been driving the SE car. When Evergreen reached him, Freed grabbed her hand with surprising strength despite the fact that he was literally covered in papercuts and losing blood at a tremendous rate.

He pressed something into her hand, whispering, “Get it to Laxus!” Then he pulled out something else, a large scroll that he set on the ground nearby, causing a small circle of magic to start glowing around them, healing them slowly.

Feeling the magic activate Ivan turned and frowned as he stared at the two. Moving in that direction, he held up a hand and was about to attack them, when Natsu turned from fighting Swan howling as he roared out “Karyu no Hoko (Fire Dragon’s Roar)!”

This forced Ivan to dodge, but opened Natsu up to Swan. She reached forward, her hands clasping onto either side of Natsu’s face. “Vibration Magic: Brain Dead!”

A second later, thousands of waves of vibration went through his head from one side to the other, bouncing into one another in the center and then back. Even Natsu wasn't durable enough to take that kind of assault, and his brain simply shut down from the continuous hits, his body going limp in her grip.

Yet in turn, Natsu’s attack had allowed Gajeel to close the distance and he slammed a blade home into Ivan’s side. Ivan protected himself with one arm, but he could feel that arm breaking under the assault, hurling him through the air and sideways.

At the same time Evergreen took her chance, pushing off the ground with her one working leg to fly up into the air and away towards where Laxus was resting.

Ivan turned to look and shouted out, “No!” He sent another thousand Shikigami after her, but she surrounded herself with her fairy dust particles in a defensive version of her Fairy Bomb: Gremlin. This protected her just long enough to reach Laxus, and slap the large scroll down to cover his head, crashing into the ground to one side and rolling past him.

The scroll had activated as she unfurled it and Laxus could feel his body begin to fight through the poison.

The scroll was a step into the area of healing for Freed, much like the one Freed had used on himself a second ago. His magic was based upon creating runic arrays, within which one rule was prominent, splitting that area off from the rest of the world. In this case, he had written that any individual within the radius of ten feet would be healed of any internal poisons. It had taken him the entire trip out from the town where the initial attack had occurred to create a working array like that, but it **had** worked: the evidence of which was Laxus starting to lose the greenish tone to his skin.

As Ivan roared in anger and moved to finish off Gajeel, Laxus started to push himself to his feet. He still had to deal with the twenty ton of weight on him, but he pushed through it, standing and grabbing at the chains holding him with both hands. Ivan turned in that direction as did Swan as Laxus’ magic began to form through the air all around him, his eyes crackling like lightning bolts.

“Don't bother brat!” Ivan laughed. “You're nowhere near strong enough to break that chain!”

“Shows what you know old man!” Laxus roared back. A great effort he sent lightning through the chains, flinging out his arms in either direction, shattering the chains and tossing their pieces everywhere.

Ivan and Swan didn't have any time to be surprised, because the next second, Laxus hurled himself forward. Over one shoulder, he created a massive electrical bolt he hurled at Ivan shouting, “Rairyu no Hiyou Kagitsume (Lightning Dragons Flying Claw)!”

As Ivan was dealing with that, Laxus suddenly shifted direction, disappearing in a blast of lightning in mid-step to reappear next to Swan where she was standing over a down to Natsu. A quick double-punch to her chest hurled her backwards. “Rairyu no Kakudo Burasuto (Lightning Dragon’s Furious Blast)!”

At that impact, several hundred thousand bolts of electricity surged through Swan sending her backwards with a scream. Already having been taxed through fighting Natsu, her body just couldn’t take this, and when she hit the ground, she bounced several times before rolling to a stop, her body limp as she fell into unconsciousness.

With that done, Laxus moved towards Ivan stalking towards him really, clenching and unclenching his hands. He gestured Gajeel away with one of them growling “go help Evergreen and the others. I've got this.”

“Arrogant even now!” Ivan said with a laugh, as he sent out a Thought Magic command. His doll Obra appeared to one side, and between them they created several million Shikigami, which started to move all around them, so much that they blocked out the sun above before moving out sideways as well, almost blanketing the sky to either direction. “Yet what else could I expect from a failed experiment? Someone so weak, that he still follows my foolish father's ideals? Do you even know the secrets of Fairy Tail, do you even know what we are hiding, what is buried beneath our Guildhall?!”

Laxus didn't reply, his aura building up all around him as he cracked his knuckles one after another. His skin began to transform into small scales here and there as well. It wasn't Dragon Force, simply a sign of his growing rage as he brought forth his magical power. For a moment, he was tempted to use Fairy Law as he had against Jose, but decided against it. There he'd wanted to make a point that Fairy Tail was simply better than Phantom Lord, to beat him with a traditional Fairy Tail spell. Here though, here Laxus just wanted to beat his old man until even his toenails squealed for mercy.

“Regardless, you will be coming with me! If I cannot get my answers from you, your body will get me the answers from Makarov! You and the others here. Go, Million Shikigami Blast!” Ivan shouted.

As the veritable mountain of Shikigami flashed towards him, Laxus thrust his hands to either side, and then brought them together in to either side of his mouth concentrating his magic into his mouth. “Rairyu no Hoko (Lightning Dragon’s Roar)!”

The lightning assault flashed out to meet the incoming wave, and to the shock of Ivan smashed through it as if his Shikigami had lost all their magic, dissipating the massive assault and protecting Laxus and the others with him. The next second, Laxus was in Ivan’s face, a fist crackling with lightning slamming into his jaw and shattering it, hurling him backwards.

A kick to the other side, caught Obra, shattering the giant doll into pieces, then Laxus disappeared, flashing towards his father in a bolt of lightning, grabbing his head and pile-driving the man into the ground. Before Ivan could even right himself, another blow to the back of his back broke something, hurling him forward again to tumble end over end across the ground. He barely had a moment to look up, blood dribbling from his mouth, before Laxus was above him.

His entire body was once more lit up with magic, as his hands were clasped above him. “You might be a badass dark mage, you might be strong, but after a full day of fighting my friends, thinking you're a match for me is just **stupid**! The power of Fairy Tail has always been in family old man, you never understood that! But you're going to after today! Metsuryu Ogi: Ikazuchi Tsuchi (Lightning Dragon’s Secret Art: Thunder Hammer)!”

A blue white bolt of lightning power slammed into Ivan from on high as Laxus brought his hands down onto Ivan's head and Ivan screamed as the attack hit. Smoke began to curl off his body, as his eyes rolled up and he fell insensate to the ground.

Laxus stepped backwards, glaring at the man then reaching down to grab him by the throat, picking him up and also checking for a pulse at the same time. It was there, barely but there, he nodded grimly, dragging him over to where the tanned woman laid, grabbing her by one of her ears and dragging her along.

Even that pain wasn't enough to rouse Snow from oblivion, and he dumped their bodies next to where Freed laid, going to one knee next to his friend and patting him on the shoulder. That was enough for Freed, who smiled back, nodding his head at the man he had sworn to follow years ago.

“So,” he said, as he moved over to where Natsu lay, picking him up and moving him in the circle Freed had created to stop the bleeding from his paper cuts. Nearby, Gajeel moved to lift up Evergreen and moved towards the distant form of Bickslow. “What happened back in the town, and where the hell are we in relation to it anyway?”

**OOOOOOO**

“Wh, what happened here?” muttered a young man wearing the armor of a militia lieutenant, blue armor with gray stripes and yellow shoulder plates marking his rank. He was at the head of a column of soldiers staring at the devastated town, all of them wearing looks of horror on their faces. It had been a long, long time since minor Dark Guilds had made trouble or a monster had attacked any town or even village in Seven. This was the worst disaster to hit Seven ever as far as this young man was concerned.

Beside him a far older mage shook his head, staring over square-rimmed glasses at the destruction. Around him, his guild, the Book Wyrms, also looked on in shock. They were a research guild primarily, dealing with better ways to use energy lacrima and so forth rather than anything else, but they had numerous doctors and healers among them, and that, coupled with the fact their hall was nearby, meant they had joined this reaction force. “I don’t know, but I think we need to get in there as fast as possible.”

As they marched into the town, it got worse. First there were the bodies, then the damage to the town itself, and finally, they found the mages they were here to help. Only two of them were moving, and all of them were bloody and battered, a few clearly near death.

One of them, a young brunette, who was wearing several wrappings over numerous wounds, in particular around one hand, which seemed to be missing fingers, turned at their approach. Her hands filled with cards with a speed that made many of the militia and guildsmen back away before she seemed to realize who they were. “About fucking time!” she shouted coarsely. “Now, get the fuck over here and help us!”

Most of the mages hustled forward to the wounded, with the woman, who introduced herself as Cana telling them to care for the youngest one there, a young girl with blue-hair who seemed awake but wasn’t tracking, as if she had a concussion. “Get her up and healed, and maybe we can get the others on their feet faster, though I doubt it.”

The other person who was able to move around was, of all things, a small white-furred cat girl, the sight of which made the young man remember a few fantasies he’d had as a teenager. The snarl on her pretty face and the fact she looked ready to kill however drove such thoughts out of his mind. She stood over the young girl protectively until two of the healers went to work, and then stepped away, watching them like a hawk. The way she moved though indicated she too was dealing with exhaustion at the very least.

Despite that, the young man had a job to do. “Um, miss, ma’am, where, that is, where are all the people?” he asked. Despite the number of bodies they had found, there weren’t nearly as many as they should have been. “Are they buried underneath here or elsewhere?”

Cana turned and smiled thinly gesturing toward one of the few remaining constructs that still looked vaguely manmade in the town. “A lot of the townsfolk are in here. Jura, he, saved them from the initial attack and sealed them inside, I doubt the second wave of attackers even knew they were there.”

“Jura, Jura Neekis, the Wizard Saint!?” shouted one of the mages, his eyes widening as he took in the horrendously wounded bald man Cana had indicated. “Seriously, what happened here?!?”

“A lot,” Cana and Carla said as one, with Cana going on. “And none of it good.” She too stared at Jura, shaking her head, “He’s alive, but how the hell he was still alive for the time it took me to get Wendy to him and have her use what little magic she had left to keep him that way I don’t know. Him and Gray - that’s the half-naked man over there with one arm - are the worst wounded along with that little blonde kid over there. He took a blow to the head, and might have a concussion or worse.”

She made no mention of the two bodies laid out under blankets. One was over Ichiya, his body having been blasted into pieces, but Cana had found and gathered them together, a grisly task but one she did willingly enough, wanting her savior to have at least some . The other blanket covered Sherry. She had just been unlucky and caught a stray blast from Torafuzar, which had removed a part of her head.

Just then, there was a flash from nearby, right over the rubble of the restaurant, and then Lucy was there, although Carla noted idly she wasn’t wearing the same clothing she had been. Instead, she wore a dress of green that left much of her chest bare in a triangle from the shoulders down coupled with green leggings that covered her legs entirely. In her hand she held a golden bow, an arrow made of energy forming on the string. She looked around then down at the rubble, her face paling as she took in her friends, the weapon changing into energy and merging with the dress as she did. “Oh my god, what the hell did I miss!?”

That was the last thing she could say before Cana reached her, pulling her into a hug as she whispered, “Gods of magic, I am so glad you’re alright!”

A few tearful seconds later, Lucy turned her attention to other things, pulling out first a golden key Cana had seen before. “Open, Gate of the Maiden! Virgo”

A moment later, another young woman stood there in a maid outfit that was a cross between a normal maid outfit and a fetishists dream. Her frown was rather off-putting at present though. “Hime, while I am always at your service, I thought Milord Celestial Spirit King had told you to take it easy with your magic.”

“I know that, but this is an emergency. We need you to dig under that mound over there and get the people inside out, Virgo,” Lucy ordered. Before Virgo could reply, she had already turned around, pulling off a small necklace from around her neck, the center of which was a small cross inset into an oval, the background of which was a bright red color, almost a ruby. “Open, Gate of the Heavenly Bird! Apus!”

A moment later, a tiny hummingbird made of yellow and green light was there, and Lucy ordered it over to the wounded. There it started to glow even brighter, the light seeming to suffuse the surroundings. A few seconds later, Lucy saw the wounded began to breathe easier, some of their bruises disappearing.

“Where did you get that one?” Cana asked. “You didn’t have that key among your collection when you left Magnolia.”

“It was how Milord Celestial Spirit King healed me; he controls a whole garden full of little celestial beasts like that.” Lucy turned back to Cana and after tugging her into the radius of the light. As she watched, Cana seemed to stand taller, her wounds disappearing like the others. It was kind of draining on Lucy’s magic, but it was obviously doing a world of good here. “Now, tell me more about what happened, and where the others are.”

**OOOOOOO**

While Wendy’s boosting spell hadn’t lasted for more than a few hours, it had been enough for Ranma and his companions to nearly reach the edge of the Worth Woodsea, racing past the town they would have stopped at if they had been able to take the train they were supposed to. Shortly after slowing down, Ranma signaled through use of his pistol as he crested a small hill, staring down and out onto the Woodsea, which stretched from horizon to horizon as far as he could see, with a series of mountains backing them up in the far forest.

Ranma looked at the others around him, a small shiver going through him as he looked at Erza in her ‘speed armor’ as she slowed down next to him, looking ahead and down into the forest. Bacchus was next to arrive, easily the most fresh and smirked back at him, before taking a swig from a large gourd at his side, which even from here Ranma could smell the strength of, twitching his eyebrows suggestively as he leered at Erza.

Turning back to them quickly, Erza spotted that look and scowled, her hands clenching then making a twisting motion, causing Bacchus to wince and move away quickly as Mira arrived, from the look on her face, half-amused, half-exasperated. Loke, for all the seriousness of their mission and what had already occurred, had been unable to abstain from flirting with her. A second later, Jenny too arrived quickly shifting out of a somewhat embarrassing looking Mecha Form to stand there, blushing faintly.

Smiling grimly at them all, Ranma held up a hand and gestured to the Worth Woodsea. “This is where the Oración Seis have come from, but as you can see that doesn’t actually tell us much. I’ve been thinking about it since we left, I think I can find the scent of the mages I fought if I get close enough, but that isn’t nearly as easy, moving through a forest as books make it out to be, unless I get lucky and find a starting point. So here’s what we’re going to do. Mira, hate to ask ya, but I need you to stay in the air and give us some oversight, tell us about anything unusual you see before we hit it.”

“Right, play bait, got it,” Mira said caustically, cracking her shoulders then her knuckles, which, given they were currently covered in scales, made for a very odd sound indeed. “Let’s get this started. I want my freaking pound of flesh for the whole poison thing!”

“Bacchus, you have some way to signal Mira?” Ranma asked knowing Erza and Jenny did.

“Yep,” Bacchus said with a smirk, pulling out a tiny vial of something. “Let’s just say that Natsu guy ain’t the only one who can breathe fire.”

“Hah, and here I thought your breath was deadly enough on its own,” Jenny deadpanned before gesturing down into the forest. “But I agree with Mira, let’s get on with this.”

“Let me try something,” Ranma said, closing his eyes and trying to slip into the Umi-Sen-Ken. Yet he found himself unable to, his mind just couldn’t concentrate on the necessary process on top of everything else he was dealing with, just as he hadn’t been able to use it in the battle earlier. “Blargh, so much for that.” Ignoring the looks the others were giving him Ranma then turned and, without another word, raced on, heading into the woods.

Spread out and searching for a trail they all soon lost sight of one another, as Ranma had feared would be the case. Still, he found a trail of some motorcycle users and then picked out Racer’s scent swiftly after that. Signaling the others with a blast of water, he gathered them once more, and, with Mira still flying overhead, raced on, moving faster once more, now that they had a trail.

This actually didn’t go on for long, because for all of Brain’s intelligence, his pawns were still dark guild mages: arrogant to a fault. Even after his beating, Racer didn’t really think they could all lose again, not knowing what Ranma was like now and he had not pulled his personal guild back into the forest more than a half-day’s travel for most. For the S-class mages, this meant barely an hour’s travel.

Soon they heard the sound of motorcycles moving through the forest around them and an instant later the dark guild Harpuia made their presence known. Racer led them flashing forward, lashing out with a lance of all things at Erza, who tried to dodge, Requipping into her normal armor.

But even so, thanks to Racer’s Slow Magic, couldn’t dodge it in time and grimaced as the lance smashed into her breastplate hurling her off her feet, shattering with the impact. She rolled with the blow and stood up quickly, Swinging a blade which Racer dodged easily, flashing out into the woodlands as more Harpuia appeared.

Dozens of them attacked from all around, the sound of their engines drowning out one another in such a way that Ranma couldn’t figure out which way they were coming from. Ranma leaped up, grabbing a branch and kicking out to either side, smashing two of the motorcyclists off their machines. Flipping upwards, Ranma then kicked off the branch, a punch quickly taking another mage, this one an odd monkey-looking man.

“OOOk , Ook, we are the Vulcan Take Over guild Mercedes! Bow to our perfect Vulcan forms!” shouted one mage, similar to Ranma’s third victim.

“Ook, ook, women!” shouted another. “Take Over: Vulcan!” that roar was taken up by dozens of throats, and the monkey-mages transformed into the familiar Vulcans, which charged towards Ranma and his friends, in particular the two women on the ground.

“Oh great, perverts who willingly choose to turn into even more perverted monsters!” Jenny groused to herself, her arms flashing as she concentrated. “Take Over: Cannon!” Like during their matches at the festival Jenny’s arm shifted into a kind of cannon, but this time it was both arms, and she pointed them at two different Vulcans, opening up not with the trainer rounds as then, but real ones, which smashed into the Vulcans, tossing several of them back in quick succession. The rounds weren’t enough to kill, but the monkey monsters weren’t going to be getting up anytime soon.

At the same moment, Erza dealt with a few more speed demons, before the Vulcans were on her, much to their instant regret. Erza showed them no more mercy than Jenny, cutting them down with ease, using the back of the blade to shatter bones instead of cutting them in half, but it was doubtful that the Vulcans she dealt with noticed the difference as they slipped into the land of the unconscious.

For his part, Ranma had taken to the trees with an ease even Vulcans could barely match. His clawed hands slashed, his fists smashed, and the Vulcans who tried to come after him flew away. *Huh, say this, for how much being in this near-dragon form has slowed me down, it’s certainly upped the power of my strikes. Those should have been the equivalent of chops to the neck, strong enough to knock them out, but not much more. They’re knocked out alright, but the whole flying after being hit thing I didn’t expect.*

Despite the serious nature of the hunt, Ranma had to deal with a lot of instincts from being in this near-dragon form. It had taken a while for them to start getting through his mental control, but now they were there: a sense of enjoyment in the fight that bordered far too near bloodthirst for Ranma’s presence of mind, to find an ocean to swim in, a sense of dislocation, a desire to fly, and, oddly enough, some other instinct that had acted up back when Erza came close, which Ranma decided to not put into words.

Still, Ranma beat them back with difficulty, keeping his mind on the important thing: use Racer’s scent to find Brain hunt him down in turn, and cave in his head, hopefully before he could activate Nirvana. With that in mind, Ranma shouted out, “I’m going to go ahead, see if I can find Brain, push through these assholes and come after if you can!”

With that he moved forward once more, his draconic form moving so fast as to be a blur to most of the Dark mages. Despite that, he kept on running into more and more dark mages. Some were pushovers, Caster types with guns, staffs or other such items.

A few were surprising, like the mages who used a kind of art-based magic to craft giant birds and dragons which leaped out of the woods to assault Mira, who was the only one able to keep up with Ranma at this point, Bacchus and the two other ladies having been slowed down by the sheer amount of mages. Each of these constructs didn’t have much hitting power, but they did get in her way and occasionally Mira winced when one or the other crashed into her, but otherwise not doing anything to slow her flight.

Others were more dangerous. There was one guild out there that moved through the forest so well, Ranma was barely getting a hint of their scent, let along what they looked like. They used Guns magic, sniper rifles to be precise. The first they knew of this guild showing up was when one bullet smacked into Mira’s stomach causing her to gasp and halt in midair, letting some of the conjured beasts hit her, taking her down into the foliage of the forest. Another bullet found Bacchus in the shoulder as he was dealing with a dozen other mages, tossing them about and generally having a right good time. The blow hurt, but not enough to slow him. Erza saw a flash and turned to cut still another bullet in half with her blade.

Mira crashed down next to Ranma and the two of them turned furiously on the conjurers. “Evil Spark!” Mira roared sending several small bolts of black and purple energy, while Ranma closed, his claws raking.

Ranma wanted to conserve his magic for a time, but Mira had no such need, not having already gone through one tough fight today. Once she was certain she knew where her targets, and her friends were, the Satan Soul user let loose, blasting out with an area of effect attack that wiped out several dozen attackers at once and shattered every single bit of foliage in the area.

Looking at her handiwork, Mira laughed wildly, always enjoying when she could cut loose. “Look at it this way, with the number of dark mages we’ve seen, Brain must’ve called in every guild they’ve got under their thumb. We should see a sharp downturn in crime in Seven, Fiore, Bosco, even Iceberg after this! I think, I even saw a few beast riders and I know that Ccc are based in Iceberg. I helped chase them out of Fiore, now I get to finish the job.”

“Yeah but right now they’re just annoying,” Ranma grumped irritated both by the attacks and the fact he couldn’t let ‘em rip just like Mira had. *And of course, it makes me have a lot of questions about how they got here without that movement being discovered. Crud, looks Makarov was right about the Oración Seis having some kind of teleportation magic, I thought that teleport Brain did at the end of the fight in the town was just an emergency kind of thing. Hell, isn’t that kind of teleportation magic really tough, I thought the Bank of Ishgar was the only ones who could do that. Someone seem’s to’ve copied their magic, not good.*

The further into the woods they got, the more dark guilds they ran into, slowing even Ranma down. Racer made a few appearances, trying to take on Erza or the others, flashing in and out. He, at least, had learned more than a bit of caution after his earlier beat down at Ranma’s hands. The other Oración Seis members soon made their appearance as well.

“Hahaha! Like a bloodhound after money you are, Ranger! Still I will have you stop here, right! Ground Magic: Mudpit!” Hoteye shouted as he attacked from a small hill in the forest. The ground around him and towards Ranma turned into sludge, trying to pull him down into its depth, but Ranma leaped to a tree then away. Still, even the trees had begun to sink, and Ranma scowled, his fangs showing.

“Fire!” shrieked a voice nearby, Ranma turned bringing up his hands and using them to block the blast of flashing energy that slammed into him, tossing him backwards into the radius of Hoteye’s magic. Swiftly Ranma Requipped his escrima stick, thrusting it down into the goopy mess, using it as a mount to flip up and further to another sinking tree nearer Hoteye’s hill. From there he crossed the range, which the ground mage had hoped to use as a clear area, his claws flashing.

Hoteye had no wish to get close to Ranma again, believing it had been the rest of the battle, which had kept Ranma from concentrating on him that allowed him to come through the battle in the town, rather than his durability. He swiftly molded the ground into a shield in front of him, then daggers, using the ground to move away from him, disappearing into the surrounding trees.

This didn’t save him though, as Mira dived down on him, “Soul Extinctor!” The wide blast of purple and black power nearly took Hoteye unawares, and he dodged to the right. But when the attack hit the ground it exploded, the explosion throwing him away, though not doing much damage.

She landed nearby, a wicked, predatory smirk on her face as her tail lashed. “You’d be Hoteye then, good I was hoping for a challenge.” With that she roared forward, sending several attack spells at Hoteye, who was forced to protect himself, trying to use his Ground Magic to try to slow Mira down with scant success given her ability to fly so freely.

Ranma however broke off from the fight, racing through the trees. His job was to find Brain and Ultear, not get bogged down in these small fights. As he did so Racer again made himself known, attempting to attack Ranma from behind, ignoring his odd transformation, eager to pay Ranma back for how easily he’d dealt with the speedster before. But Ranma turned, grabbing the lance – Racer had evidently gotten another from somewhere – before it could hit, pulling Racer off his motorcycle.

“Gear Change: Red Zone!” Racer yelled, and Ranma felt his senses slow down, then dozens of blows from all around. Instead of using his power to make every blow seem like a dozen, Racer used it to move around Ranma fast enough so he couldn’t get caught again. Yet Racer’s blows didn’t even register to Ranma thanks to his scaly armor.

While analyzing the assault Ranma acted as if Racer was actually doing something, grimacing and falling backwards then lashing out not where his senses told him Racer was, but where Ranma knew he would be, catching him by the leg. “Got ya again moron! Your hits don’t matter, your magic is dumb, and I am now going to break you like a wishbone!” he growled happily about to do that very thing as he lifted Racer into the air.

Racer was saved by another blast of magic from nearby catching Ranma in the back. Not letting Racer go, Ranma turned still holding him in on hand in the direction of the blast. Shooting forward at a rush along the blast’s ruler straight path, smashing Racer into several dozen trees as he went, the man nearly falling unconscious in his lazy grip but still awake, if barely. At the end of it, he sniffed in deeply, before fighting another surge of that instinct he had felt before around Erza as the scent of the woman, Angel, hit him along with the smell of metal and something else too. Yet it was the scent of the woman that hit him hardest, pun intended, and he felt himself respond.

“Grrr,” Ranma growled. *Yep, this whole turning into a dragon thing comes with a lot of shit I don’t want to deal with right now.* “Girl I don’t know how you are hiding, but I can still smell you!”

He reached out rapidly to one side with his free hand, pushing through some kind of cloth screen that perfectly mimicked the surrounding forest. It was like a chameleon cloak, only better, since even holding it, Ranma couldn’t really detect where it ended and the background of the forest began until he pulled it to one side to stare at Angel.

Even as he stared though, the Angel in front of him burst into a cloud, revealing two little doll-like beings, which danced in the air. “Gemini, Gemini!” they shouted, and then flashed in a burst of gold, their door closed by Angel.

Growling again, Ranma shook his head, and turned away, only to find he had lost the trail he had been following, Racer’s earlier brush with him masking it. “Damn it Slowmo, this is all your fault!” he groused, holding up Racer as he remembered the dick was still in his hands.

Before he could move to finish Racer off, more dark mages appeared, attacking him from every direction and Ranma decided to use the fool as a shield for a moment as he concentrated on trying to find the trail again. But a lot of the dark mages had decided by this point that attacking him was the easier option between him and Mira. That meant more and more of them tried to pile in on Ranma.

Elsewhere, Erza, Bacchus and Jenny had yet to run into any real opposition, but the dark mages were incredibly numerous, slowing their progress through the woods tremendously even as Erza started to use area of effect attacks of her own. And unfortunately for everyone, lawful mages and dark mages alike, things were about to get a good deal worse.

High above them the three Etherious demons were all scowling as they stared down at the forest. “There is too much greenery, we can’t see what is going on, can’t pick out the best moment to strike,” Kyoka growled, putting all their thoughts into words.

“True, but we can at least hear the progress they are making. They don’t seem to be moving very far…” Seilah said, before turning as there was an odd blast of magic to one side heading deeper into the woods. “That felt like a long term spell being negated.”

“Brain has released Nirvana then,” Torafuzar said, frowning in thought as he analyzed the distance between their current position and the spell. “Hmm, they have come a long ways, they are nearly to Brain even now.”

“We should end this now then,” Kyoka growled, becoming bored with this observation business, there not being nearly as many screams for her just yet. “We know now that we can take these so-called powerful mages on easily let us do away with them before he can get Nirvana working. Who knows what impact it could have on us?”

“I disagree,” Seilah said promptly, making her sex partner turn to her with a glare, but Seilah met the other female demon’s gaze evenly. “Oceana’s Demon Slayer magic is still an unknown and further we saw his transformation. We should wait until he is as weakened by combat as much as possible. Rather, we should look for some method to halt or slow Brain’s progress in breaking Nirvana then kill them both at the height of their battle.”

“You’re sounding either as if you are more concerned about this human’s wellbeing than anything else, or frightened of him. Which is it I wonder?” Kyoka said, getting into Seilah’s face, her arms moving around Seilah almost lovingly but gripping her hard, tightening a little harder than Seilah was comfortable with.

“Neither, I am simply weighing the dangers of his Demon Slayer magic as higher than you are, having seen it in action. I have no wish to see if it synergizes with his Dragon Slayer magic,” Seilah said, feeling their chests pressing against one another. Normally she would welcome this kind of contact, but Kyoka was definitely not in that particular mood. “Further, there is the Take Over mage to consider.”

Torafuzar ignored their antics, staring down as he frowned in thought. As he did, he saw one of the humans a female with crimson hair, slicing through a tree before smashing it towards a group of other humans wielding a weapon he recognized as wands. The tree smashed into them, knocking them over like an odd human game he had seen at one point before.

At that sight, he scowled. “We go now,” he decided. “If we don’t, Oceana and his group will win through. It’s obvious that numbers are not telling nearly as much as we could have hoped, and the Oración Seis have already lost too many members to fight these mages on an even footing. At least not without Brain being involved, but I also am concerned about Nirvana, and want us out of the area before he activates it.”

He turned to the other two, glowering at them both. “You, Kyoka will head down to fight with me right away, we’ll target those two mages that are closest to one another, the blonde and the human male. Seilah, you will use your powers throughout the area to get the bodies of the human mages up and moving at first, then when they are used up, transfer to manipulating that redhead. She seems the strongest of them, after which we will leave.” Torafuzar figured that by that point, Brain would have activated Nirvana, and he had no desire to be on this side of any superweapon, even if he didn’t have any idea what it could do.

“Yes!” Kyoka howled, racing downwards towards the targeted mages.

Bacchus looked up hearing a whistling sound and barely got an arm up in time to block a blow from some woman with a helmet on and armored hands, or what he thought were armored hands anyway until he saw them close up as one of them slammed into his forearm. Then he noticed how much it looked like Mira’s Satan form as he shifted around, moving with the energy of the blow to launch his own back at the woman. “Don’t know what I did to you babe, but just because you’re a hotty don’t mean I’ma gonna let you cold cock me, I ain’t that drunk.”

“I don’t need your permission to kill you fool,” the woman said with a sneer on her dark purple lips. “Enhancement Magic: Song of Pain!” from her a blaze of dark green magic flashed out, impacting Bacchus, and causing him to stumble as suddenly his feet and legs started to pain him, and his shoulder, where he had taken a magic bullet earlier, began to blaze with agony, a lot more pain than he had felt when he was hit the first time. “Guhhhh…” Bacchus grimaced nearly going to one knee.

“Oh hell no bitch!” Jenny shouted, turning her magic cannons on the other woman, then dodging to one side as she heard the rush of water, which slammed into and carved away at the ground where she had been standing. A second later the instigator of the attack landed and flashed towards not Jenny, but Bacchus, who had been dealing with the woman, whose fingers had changed into whips that she had used to lash out at him.

Bacchus however dodged around the attack from the newcomer, dodging in such a way that he took the attacks from the woman kicking out hard into the man’s side and sending him flying into the woman, only for the man to stop himself before their bodies actually hit. Now though both Bacchus and Jenny could get a glimpse of who they were fighting, and their eyes widened. “De, demons!” Jenny stammered, before getting control of herself. “Where, why are you here!?”

“To kill you!” Torafuzar said simply launching himself back towards the man, lashing out to one side with another black water attack that nearly caught Jenny.

Around them, the other mages had stopped attacking the two legal mages, wondering what was going on and secretly thankful for the reprieve. However their relief was felt too soon, because the next instant a wide blast of blue magical power flared out around the area of the forest currently being remodeled by the ongoing conflict. “Macro:,” a coolly analytical voice intoned high above.

Nearby, Ranma looked up as he heard screams of fear abound nearby, and scowled, looking ahead of him. He had sensed a blast of some kind of magic earlier, but couldn’t make out what it was and thought he was close to wherever Brain was using Ultear to get through the defenses around Nirvana. But hearing those screams, made him wonder if he should turn back. The next instant made it clear, he had to, as Erza flashed passed him, propelled by some kind of water attack.

She skidded to a halt nearby, her blades up between her and the attack, but that hadn’t done much to deaden the impact of it. “Ranma, demons!” she barked. “Human sized and shaped, they just launched an attack and...”

“Fuck, switch off with Mira, her Take Over power makes her better suited for fighting demons, finish Hoteye off then try,” that was as far as Ranma got before dozens of dead mages all around them rose up and attacked. They moved like puppets with the dead simply shambling forward like zombies to attack hand to hand. But the unconscious ones were somehow able to use magic, and they moved and acted as one.

The two mages leaped away, retreating from this renewed assault. Nearby Mira also retreated, Hoteye and Angel having been fighting her and now taking advantage of this new element added to the battle scene. Even the trees around them had come alive, trying to grab at them or swing their branches around like wooden fists.

This last was because of another Dark Guild, the Rubberneckers, who could transform plants into rubber and manipulate them to a certain degree. Now, Seilah did the manipulating to a far greater degree than any of the weak dark guild members the trees moving under her control. So too did the dead and the weak-minded, which was the vast majority of the dark mages around Ranma and his allies.

“Regroup on me!” Ranma roared, sending up a blast of water magic, then summoning more around his hands and feet, flashing out attacks all around, intent on smashing the trees and anything inside them for a moment.

Angel shrieked as an attack nearly took her head off, and shook her head. “That’s it! I am soooo out of here! Screw this noise, Brain can have his Nirvana I just want to get out of here!”

“I don’t think so!” Loke bellowed. He had been stalking through the forest to one side of Ranma’s advance ever since he’d heard Ranma shouting about finding Angel, moving faster through the forest than any of the others save Ranma, as if the energy of the forest had made him stronger somehow, which suited the King of Beasts. Loke had then smashed several dark mages, some dead and nearly worthless, some still alive and able to use their magic. He had kept moving all the time, looking for Angel, blending into the background of the forest as best he could, which, given his normal character and clothing, was strangely quite good.

Angel turned and stared at the Celestial Spirit eyebrow rising as she stood up, staring out to one side as Ranma continued to create a small cleared area, gathering his friends to him with roars to regroup and blasts of water magic. She frowned, staring at the man she knew was a Celestial Spirit. “Am I supposed to know…oh wait, you’d be Leo, or Loke, wouldn’t you? The spirit who rebelled against Karen Lilica right?”

She laughed, her hands placed on her hips before trailing up her body, bringing to attention that she was wearing a short dress made up of white feathers that split just above her navel to reveals a lot of her cleavage, so much so that she looked in danger of bouncing out, though unlike Ranma, Loke knew of sticky spells. The revealing v-cut was lined by a row of long feathers wrapping around her shoulders to form a feathery collar to either side of wing-like tattoos which stood out on her collarbone. Below the waist it was much more modest, splaying out in a wide skirt that came to her knees, continuing the feather motif. She also wore long blue leggings and gloves.

“Are you here for little old me then? Are you sure we can’t come to… some alternate accommodation?” she said, her tone sultry even as she thought about how to get out of this.

Loke glared at her, his eyes flaring angrily as he held up a hand that began to glow yellow then he extended a single finger as he smirked, “You murder Karen along with who knows how many others in your time as a dark mage and then you poison my current mistress. How about no, you fucking bitch.” Without another word he launched himself forward, both hands glowing with yellow energy.

Backing away rapidly, Angel cursed. She was quite low on magical power right now, after the fight earlier with Ranma in the town and then this one now. *I should have never agreed to come back, freaking Klodoa! God, if I see that freaky thing I’m going to break it in half! We didn’t have a fucking day to set up, we had a few damned hours, and they nearly blasted through all our dark guilds in less than half a freaking hour!!!!!*

Despite being as heavily indoctrinated as the others Angel had, like Hoteye and Cobra, in some measure fought against Brain’s ‘instruction’, unlike Racer and Midnight who embraced it in their own ways. Hoteye had his obsession with money, Cobra, his bond with Cubellios. Angel’s was, arguably, the most normal: self-preservation. Yes, she was something of a sadist, but she was also a person who put preserving herself over everything. Faced with certain death she put her life above even her dream of becoming an Angel in the sky, far above this putrid, sinful life via Nirvana.

If Klodoa hadn’t threatened her, she would possibly have simply never come back, escaping deeper into the Worth Woodsea and out the other side, putting the whole guild thing behind her. Now she was running on fumes. Continually calling on her spirits on and off, especially Gemi and Mini had drained her something fierce, and she was being pressed hard by a Celestial Spirit whose specialty was close range combat, the area where she was least capable.

So she did what she always did, Angel thought of a way to escape. To that end, she ducked another punch, which shattered the tree behind her and thrust out a key she hadn’t used yet today. “Open, Gate of the Ram! Ares!!!”

A second later in a blast of pink and yellow energy, Ares appeared between her and Loke. This spirit was a pink haired girl who looked like the very definition of timid, standing there looking away, her hands clasped in front of her. She had dark pink hair down to her shoulders in thick curls and two small rams’ horns sticking out of the side of her head. The image was finished by the woolly outfit she wore, which was a single dress that started above her breasts and covered everything from that to right above her knees, and long wooly gloves and leggings.

Loke instantly stopped, staring. “Ares…”

*Yes, I knew that would work.* Angel thought twisting around the shattered tree and racing away, shouting over her shoulder, “Ares, wool bomb and then run!”

Elsewhere in the woods another woman glared angrily at her foe, but unlike Angel, Jenny had no intention of running. While Kyoka slashed in and out cutting at her with talons which shifted forms as she needed, she also was using her ‘curse’ constantly, each hit causing fifty times the amount of pain they should have on both Bacchus and Jenny. That, and the horde of dead and still living dark mages around them attacking mindlessly despite their shouts and screams of not being under their own control, kept the two mages away from Ranma’s rally point.

*Time to bring out the big guns!* She thought grimly. Jenny took a deep breath, then ducked under a new attack before she shouted, “Take Over: Mecha Soul: Gundam!” With that, her body was covered in a blaze of light, and when it disappeared she was covered by a full body armor. It was white and metallic, looking like a suit of armor only not quite, with a helmet that completely covered her head, her eyes hidden behind a visor. In one hand, she held a rifle and in the other, she held a hilt for some reason without a blade.

Kyoka blinked cocking her head to one side. “Interesting, but if you think such flimsy looking armor will protect you from meAAAHHH!”

Without any warning thrusters burst out from Jenny’s back, and the back of her legs, hurling her forward. The odd hilt in one hand flared with magical energy and a blade of energy appeared there, slicing forward. It was so fast Kyoka could barely dodge in time, and the side of her helmet was sliced off along with searing a cut into the side of her cheek. She rolled desperately, then sprang into the air and away only to grunt as Jenny turned on a dime, blasting out with her rifle and forcing Kyoka away before turning to bring her gun to bare on Torafuzar.

He too danced away, allowing Bacchus to pull back too, grabbing at a flask at his waist. But before he could do anything, Torafuzar struck back, a wide wave of black water looking to entrap them. Jenny grabbed Bacchus’s arm and blasted backwards at speed, zipping through the trees as the attack continued.

Seconds later, they reached the area Ranma had designated as a fallback point, Ranma leaped over them, a wide grin on his draconic face. “Thanks for the meal!” he roared, opening his mouth and using his Water Dragon Slayer powers to suck the water into his mouth.

As he did, Ranma’s eyes widened as he realized that might not have been the best idea without knowing where the attack had come from, because as he digested the water, not only did it power his Dragon Slayer powers more, but it also activated his Demon Slayer powers. *Oh freaking shit!!!!!*

It felt like he was being torn up inside, and not just because of all the foreign elements in the water making it taste like shit. His Demon Slayer powers and Water Dragon powers fought one another in his body for dominance. A second later Ranma crashed to the ground, ignoring the shouts of those around him as he concentrated on the war inside his body.

Torafuzar smirked hopping over the downed mage and launching an assault on the others, his eyes widening as the one who had nearly killed Kyoka leaped into the air and away flashing towards him from above. He held up a hand, then for some reason his survivor’s instinct screamed at him and he dodged to one side, the girl’s sword slicing into the ground. He then whirled around, his hands flashing up to block blades from the redheaded one, only to feel a punch from the male he had been fighting before. “Enough! Drowning Globe!”

From one hand he lashed out towards Jenny, capturing her in a globe of water. With her dealt with for now, he kicked out at Bacchus, only to watch as Bacchus flipped over the blow, lashing out with a kick that made his head ring. *What, where did that strength come from!* he thought, dodging a punch only to take what should have been a light slap to his chest.

Instead, he felt a blast of magical power at the impact that blew him off his feet and across the battlefield. “Chop Hanging Palm! Take that you shark-faced fucker!”

“Requip: Armor of the Heaven’s Wheel Armor!” An instant later, she was clad in her shining armor and from all around her dozens, then hundreds of blades appeared, as she directed them with both hands she flung the swords forward towards the demon. “Blumenblatt!!! Keep him away from Ranma, I don’t know what happened there, but we need to protect him for now!”

Torafuzar pushed himself up from the ground, grimacing as he felt out his chest, noticing several shattered scales there. *Hmmmpf, these mages are tough at least, worthy of killing.* Then his eyes widened as he saw what looked like an overflowing wall of pointed steel coming towards him. “Well… this is going to hurt.”

As Torafuzar was buried under a mass of metal, Kyoka came back into the fight, but Bacchus had to blink at what she looked like now even as he dodged dozens of whips that had bloomed from her fingers. “Um, damn babe, I’m all for showing some more skin, but your transformation’s a bit…much.”

“This is my Etherious form fool, and it is the last thing you will ever see!” Having felt real, honest pain from Jenny’s sword, Kyoka had decided to transform into her ultimate fighting form. Once transformed, Kyoka’s mask shifted somewhat, showing horns had grown from the sides of her head. Her hair had changed into feathers and lengthened somewhat, with her clothing shifting into feathery, and black armor which only covered her arms and tow thin straps around her torso, revealing a lot more of her stomach and breasts. Her talon-like feet had also grown, as had her hands.

She smirked and smacked aside Bacchus’s blows, slicing at him with her hands changed into blades only to scowl as his wild movements completely evaded her attacks. For the next few moments she took hit after hit, only able to move just enough so that the magic of each palm strike missed her, but unable to land any blow in turn. Realizing this she fell back entirely on the defensive, concentrating on a new magical attack. When it was ready Kyoka waited until Bacchus was almost in her face before she opened her mouth and a blast of magic flared out. “Enhancement Curse: Ultimate Form: True Pain!”

Bacchus couldn’t dodge this, and he screamed as the beam hit not only with physical force but magical as well. He was thrown backwards crashing through several dozen trees until he slammed into a rock and bounced over it to land, screaming on the ground.

The typically drunk S-class mage was no stranger to pain. He’d been trained to deal with it to harness the pain or shunt it aside and used such skills constantly on a subconscious level. But he learned now there was pain and then there was **agony.**  The blast of energy had somehow ignited every nerve ending in his body to a level fifty times worse than the enhancement curse before, and with every impact he felt as if he would rather die than deal with the pain. He felt the touch of the grass underneath him and that too caused him pain, though thankfully not nearly as much as the rest of the stuff he’d hit in his flight.

Yet somehow, he pushed through it. Perhaps because of his half-inebriated state, he was able to push through it. He grasped at his gourd and, instead of drinking from the flask, he reached for the bottom, wincing as touching the gourd caused further pain. But he slowly pulled off the bottom of the gourd, and then poured the contents down his throat.

This wasn’t beer. It wasn’t mead. It was instead pure swill, the kind of thing called moonshine or worse. And the effect was near to instant, making Bacchus drunker than he’d been in years, and oh, blessed relief, it deadened the pain. It also caused his higher brain functions to flee for their lives, but that, to Bacchus was a secondary concern at the moment.

Around his currently prone form, nineteen mages made their presence known, ten of them racing forward to finish off the prone Quattro Cerberus mage. “Finish him off while he’s weak!”

Bacchus’s eyes opened to sliver, and he hiccupped, before woozily twisting to one side, his hand lazily flashing out to shatter a sword someone had tried to spear him with. He flipped up into the air, and a kick send another mage flying. Then he dodged several more magical assaults, wind-based in nature before closing, looking like a cross between a drunkard and a zombie. His hits though, those felt more like they came from a mountain made flesh, and men were sent flying, while all attempts to hit Bacchus failed miserably, or even humiliatingly in some cases.

With the most oddly irritating mage dealt with, Kyoka turned on Erza, smashing her backwards when she attempted to close, only to blink as Erza took the blow and rolled with it, Requipping into another suit of armor. This one was a the Lightning Empress armor and she roared, flashing away to one side, her glaive swinging out and slicing into several of Kyoka’s whips when she tried to use them a second later. Then she was inside the other woman’s reach, her glaive gone and a sword in its place as she shifted into another suit, the Morning Star Armor.

This was made of orange and yellow leather-like material at the shoulders along with a cape of the same color, the armor underneath a simple suit of formfitting dull silver armor with a matching pair of arm guards and large knee guards, her thighs further covered by fishnet leggings. In her hands she held two short-hafted morning stars, which she smashed into Kyoka’s claw-hand and shoulder, the hits emitting a blast of Light magic, which hurled Kyoka back, but was unable to actually damage Kyoka’s Etherious form more than causing light burning.

“Tsk, lacking stopping force I see,” Erza grunted, before spinning into a kick, Requipping into another armor mid-kick. The foot of the Adamantine Armor took Kyoka in her chest hurling her backwards with a whoof of escaped air.

“Cursed human filth! How many armors do you...?!” Kyoka spluttered, then looked up and gaped as a massive axe flashed down towards her. Kyoka dodged at the last second and watched as the axe created a massive crevice in the ground from where it hit. Snarling she then launched herself toward Erza, who raced to meet her even as more dark mages attacked her, Jenny and Bacchus.

**OOOOOOO**

At the same time Kyoka and Erza began to fight, Torafuzar pushed himself to his feet, pulling out the last sword, which had struck him. Those swords had been hurled at him so fast they had actually penetrated his skin a bit, but only a bit. *But even a shark can die from so many pinpricks form a piranha. Time to get serious.*

With that in mind, he changed into his Etherious form, a wide, dangerous smile growing on his face as he grew several feet taller and wider, the smile showing larger and sharper teeth as two fins grew out of the sides of his face, the pointy fin on his head enlarging and becoming even more of a fin than before. His chin plate also somehow grew, becoming larger and more squared. His arm blades, the same he had used to nearly kill Gray with, were absorbed, but his forearms and hands grew even larger somewhat resembling gauntlets now. As his clothing too had been shredded by his transformation several small holes appeared around his far larger frame, aligned in lines up and down his upper body while he had gained a segmented tail, though it was on the small side, something like that of a tadpole.

With a mighty roar, he launched himself forward towards where Erza and Kyoka were still engaged in combat. He was somewhat surprised to see Kyoka being so heavily pressed. *But then again, both Seilah and Kyoka are worth more to Master Mard Geer for their brains and curses than pure combat potential.*

Erza barely had a second to see the monstrous form of the second demon closing before his fist caught her in the side. It was only because she was wearing her heaviest, most powerful armor that she wasn’t taken out of the fight right then and there, and as Torafuzar’s fist hit her, there came a blast of water that threw Erza through the air despite her heavy armor, which shattered at the impact.

She flew through the air, but Erza quickly shifted to another suit, the Black Wing Armor with which she controlled her flight. A spear of equal make appeared in her hand and she hurled it forward, before dancing around an attack from Kyoka, which flew past her, her arms once more having shifted into blades. The spear caught Torafuzar on the forearm and bounced as he moved to punch her again, she grimaced as a kick from Kyoka took her in the head, staggering her and opening up a gash over one eye.

The blood began to drip into her eye, and the pain of Kyoka’s hit, enhanced further by her curse, threatened to bring Erza to her knees. But like Bacchus, Erza was no stranger to pain, and even this was nothing like having her eye removed, cut out as she hung on the wall of her cell when she was younger. *Still, facing two of them at once is a little much.*

Thankfully she didn’t have to. Nearby, Jenny had been forced to cancel her Gundam Take Over, it being useless in the water, the thrusters not firing. But she had simply shifted to another model, a larger, bulkier suit that could be used underwater with claws and a single, roving eye she called the Zeon model. Jenny didn’t honestly like using it, because it looked like the kind of thing you’d expect a villain to use, but it worked to get Jenny out from the water. She instantly rumbled forward, crashing into Torafuzar.

The two of them were equally matched in terms of size, and the claws of her suit smashed into Torafuzar’s head, making him stumble backwards though she wasn’t able to cut his skin. A second later she grimaced as Torafuzar’s body shifted, spikes appearing along his arms and chests stabbing into their suit, shattering her armor but not hitting anything vital thanks to the size of it. Jenny grabbed him, and twisted around, hurling him off his feet and to the side, gaining her time to shift once more. “Take Over: Mecha Soul: Gundam Deathscythe!”

This was a different kind of Gundam model, and was her most dangerous hand to hand form, most of its energy concentrated into the scythe, and its longer energy blade. But calling on a third high-powered Take Over like this instantly started to drain Jenny. She didn’t have massive magical reserves, though she had trained over the years to enlarge the reserves she had. Despite that training, Jenny knew she didn’t have much time. *I have to finish this quickly.*

Nearby, two other fights were nearing their conclusion, including one that was, somewhat, Ranma’s fault. In his rush to intercept the water attack earlier, Ranma had hurled Racer away while he was still awake. Racer had even had some fight left in him, and once he got close to Mira, he had attempted to suicide, taking her with him.

*On the other hand, who knew commenting on his resemblance to Erza’s friend Wally would have had such an effect?* Mira thought, nodding to Hoteye, whose last second save had protected her from Racer’s attempt at suicide. Like Ranma before her, Mira had stopped Racer’s movement, and after that, he really hadn’t been a challenge, forcing him to attempt to blow himself up, and her with it. “Thanks for the save there.”

“Hahaha, it is fine, after all, if you were not alive to vouch for me I cannot imagine how much money I would need to convince your allies to not imprison me before I meet my brother, right?” Hoteye said as he removed the igloo from around them.

Mira nodded and then glared around them. The two of them had broken off their fight when Mira had made a comment about Hoteye looking like Wally’s description of his brother. It turned out this was correct, and even as a dark mage, Hoteye had been using much of his personal money to search for the younger boy, although Mira was uncertain honestly which of them was the younger brother.

Whatever the case the mention of meeting Wally, and the fact he too was searching for Hoteye, had been enough to convince Hoteye to halt their combat until Mira could convince him she had met the other boy, describing the fight in the tower, Wally’s ‘dandy’ fixation, and in particular how he liked to dress, which apparently had been something Wally had begun long before he was enslaved. With this, the ceasefire became a truce in return for Mirajane’s introducing Hoteye, or Richard, to his brother.

It was almost as if Wally’s name had somehow broken through some deep indoctrination, reinforcing a part of Hoteye that had never given in to Brain’s brainwashing. Whatever the case, it made Mira happy to see it, having felt somewhat sorry for Hoteye and the other children taken from the Tower, knowing they must have all been brainwashed by Brain. Indeed, it made her sad that Midnight, another kid from the Tower, had died against Ranma earlier that day.

Now the two of them were still free of the constant fighting they had seen since they first ran into racer and his Harpuia. She frowned, staring in the direction, she had felt a surge of magic several minutes ago, and then back the other way, hearing the sound of combat, which hadn’t dimmed at all just yet. She was torn as to what to do, go to the aid of her friends and allies, or continue on to engage Brain, who she figured would be where the magic she had felt earlier go off.

A second later however, the decision was taken from her. Loke and Angel both came out of the woods, moving towards her as Angel shouted, “Open, Gate of the Scorpion! Scorpio! Open, Gate of the Chisel! Caelum!” An instant later, all three spirits attacked while Angel moved around them, moving to close in for some reason, looking haggard, and drained beyond belief.

“What the heck!?” Mira barked, then her eyes widened in realization. *Fuck, they’ve been taken over by whatever spell keeps on throwing the Dark Mages at us, whatever their health. Hell, it looks like whatever it is, is forcing Angel to use her magic despite having been drained to a level that she shouldn’t have any left she can consciously access. Oh this is so not good.*

“Run Mira, I’m not myself!” Loke shouted as he felt his body racing forward, magic gathering into his hands. “Some kind of magic has…”

“Yeah I know damn it!” Mira barked back, scowling angrily. Taking on Racer, Hoteye and the numerous other mages she’d had to kill in the past few minutes had taken it out of her and she wanted to conserve her energy for now. Staring around her, she tried to spot whoever was doing this even as she backed away from Loke, dodging a blast of sand and then another blast from the other spirit, who had suddenly shifted to look like Brain somehow. The attack from it wasn’t nearly as bad as from the man himself, but it was certainly worrisome.

“Whoever is controlling them must be somewhere above, right!?” Hoteye remarked. “Or else the effect would have been limited to one area of the battlefield rather than the entirety. You must go and search them out now, I can hold these two here for a time.” With that he gestured, magic flashing around him in a hallow of yellow and brown.

Angel leaped backwards, just in time to avoid being sucked into the ground as his magic interacted with the ground in front and towards the two of them. Loke simply thrust down a hand, shouting, “Regulus Impact!” The ground imploded with a wet plop, but he used the moment this bought him to leap towards a tree, which had been upended nearby. From there he tried to close, lashing out with a blast of yellow magic.

Mira leaped upwards, dodging the blast of magic, and then kept going, her wings powering her into the air. “I’ll see you soon Hoteye, just don’t die on me, else we’ll never be able to reintroduce you to Wally!”

While that fight started in earnest below her, Mira looked all around her in the air before spotting the person who must have been causing a lot of their grief in this fight. “You!!” she roared, then without another word flew towards her target as fast as she could.

Seilah saw the Take Over mage coming and turned in her direction, frowning heavily as she debated breaking off her control of the mages below to try to control Mirajane. But she decided against it, and instead reached out with her curse to the area directly below her, pulling up every bit of debris and shattered foliage she could from all around and under her, gathering it and hurling it from directly below and to just the front of the attacking mage. She even concentrated especially on a few bits of rocks and wood, hurling them through the air as fast as she could.

This made her concentration on the rest of her Macro field waver, dumping the dead bodies her will had forced to continue serving.

Mira yelled aloud in pain as a log smashed into her stomach hurling her further into the air while taking her breath away. A second later, a piece of rock moving far faster pierced her wing, tearing a hole in it and Mira could feel herself starting to fall. *Oh, if that’s the way you want to play it bitch, let’s play!* “Take Over: Satan Soul: Sitri!”

With that, she shifted form into her second Demon soul, the blast of magical power searing everything around her into ash. Once she was transformed, Mira gathered her flames around her and shot forward like a comet, aiming to slam bodily into Seilah.

Seilah’s eyes widened, then she canceled her own flight, ducking under the incoming assault, realizing an instant later that this had been a mistake: in air combat, giving up the height was a deadly blunder. She learned this to her cost as Mira skidded to a halt, and then started to bombard the now wildly dodging Seilah with fireballs large and small.

One of them hit her shoulder, and Seilah hissed in pain, the fire of it so strong it got right through her durability. She twisted around, ducking underneath another blast, then suddenly paled as Mira was in her face, having dived down on her like a hawk chasing a swallow. “Hi!” Mira chirped mock-happily, right before she snarled and a punch took Seilah in the side of her head sending her down to earth with a cry of agony.

**OOOOOOO**

Instantly the whole battlefield changed. Bacchus, who had been dealing with a lot of dead, living and unconscious opponents looked around him blearily as they all fell like dolls with their strings cut. Erza and Jenny too noticed a difference, and their opponents scowled, realizing what it meant, though neither woman was really in a position to take advantage of it, the two Demons pressing them hard regardless of the minor mages.

Even Angel and Loke were suddenly freed of Seilah’s Macro curse. Angel had a brief second to revel in having control of her body once more, before she found herself falling forward, her body reacting to her state of utter magical exhaustion. To one side her spirits both disappeared, her magic no longer able to sustain their presence. A second later, she felt her body pulled down into the earth by Hoteye’s magic. “Damn it, I can’t freaking win today at all.”

“Nope,” Loke said, backing away from Hoteye, whom he just landed a hit on that had staggered the taller man, possibly even knocking a tooth loose. “Sorry about that big guy. I seriously was not myself just now.”

“Hohoho, think nothing of it, after all pain and wounds matter not at all if the payoff is big enough. I’m talking about money, of course!” Hoteye said with a loud laugh.

“Right…” Loke sweatdropped, then moved over to Angel scowling down at her. “A part of me should just kill you for what you did to Karen and what you and your guild tried to do to Lucy. But that wouldn’t be the Fairy Tail way, killing a helpless enemy.”

“Ugh,” Angel groused. “Great, just great, my last possible attempt to keep any dignity today as a member of Oración Seis is gone.”

“Don’t look at it that way my dear. After all, look at me,” Hoteye said, in a normal tone of voice, something that caused Angel to blink in surprise and stare at him in something like shock. “Young Miss Strauss told me she met my brother, Wally, the reason why I was so obsessed with money, is still alive and searching for me. If that is the case with my situation, when I know we were both caught and imprisoned in the tower of heaven, could it not be the case with you and your younger sister?”

Angel paused at that, looking stricken and Loke could see in her something of a conflict between the person she might have been without Brain’s indoctrination on top of the agony of her time in the tower to the individual Brain that had twisted her into being. After a long silent moment, she huffed. “I suppose that can be a kind of comfort.

He then smirked and sat down next to her, his hands reaching down into the goopy mass of the ground in front of her. “Angel, babe, you haven’t even begun to lose your dignity. Now, I wonder where on your body you keep your keys?”

“Hey, wait, don’t, eeek! N, not there!” Angel shouted as she felt Loke’s hands push through the muck the ground had become around her, patting her down here and there. Hoteye blinked, watching this before turning away, feeling just a bit dirty.

**OOOOOOO**

“You know, I knew the second I saw you I wanted to cave your face in,” Mirajane said conversationally as she set down next to where she had just planted Seilah, a wicked smirk on her demonic face. “So maybe I should thank you for the opportunity.”

Grimacing Seilah pushed herself to her feet, her dress torn from the impact and her face seared along one side yet she still glared at her enemy. “Perhaps so, I indeed felt that our stories would come into conflict as well upon meeting you.” She then placed her hands on her chest, blue magic coursing through her hands. “But if you think that I will let you simply defeat me without giving it my all, you have another thing coming.”

Seilah was not like the other Etherious demons, in that even Kyoka had been created more to fight than anything else had. Seilah had been created to be a research assistant and general servant to Master Zeref, although she had never actually served in that role. As such however, she could not readily enter her Etherious combat form like the others. But Seilah had long ago found a means to get around that limitation: she could simply issue an absolute command to herself.

Now Seilah’s Macro curse surged through her body, removing all her internal limitations and activating her Etherious form. When it faded, Seilah’s nearly human body had changed into a much more demonic form. Her skin had darkened to a dark brown, her horns larger, her eyes glowing yellow. Her hair also had become wilder, and her kimono had burst revealing a bare chest covered in an intricate tattoo, which began at the choker around her neck, winding down to her stomach and hips, with her guild mark printed onto her stomach, underneath a heart-shaped design. Her lower body also changed, her legs more like stilts ending in sharp blades and widening up to her hips that now flare out into two wings.

“Hmmmpf, you think a measly power up is going to save you from the beat down you richly deserve, think again!” Mira roared, flashing forward, her clawed hands coated in flames. “Take this!!”

In reply Seilah raised a hand, and Mira saw an eye open on her palm. From the eye, a blast of power flashed out towards her, which Mira dodged at the last minute, seeing it searing past her. Then Seilah was in her face and a blow like a giant’s fist smashed into Mira’s side, forcing her on the back foot. She moved with it, twirling around and kicking out, but Seilah caught her leg and brought her elbow down onto Mira’s lower leg. Mira gasped in pain but launched a point-blank fire spell at Seilah, to force her away, but then was blasted in turn by another beam of energy from Seilah’s hand.

Mira gasped in pain as the beam struck pushing her backwards several feet, but she had been able to get one hand between her body and the attack, canceling some of it with an attack of her own. Fire magic roared out from her palm and the two of them stood locked there, their attacks one against another.

Then Seilah brought out her other hand and clamped it over the outstretched wrist of her other arm. Unseen by Mira another eye opened on that palm, and Seilah shouted, “Demon Eyes: Magnify!” A surge of power flashed through from that second eye into Seilah’s arm and then into the attack, instantly overpowering Mira’s own and pushing her arm back and out of the way before slamming into Mira’s body with enough force to hurl her off her feet and away through the woods, the damage it caused so great Mira lost control of her Sitri form.

She finally slithered along the ground, rolling several feet as the attack ended, the momentum it imparted slowly bleeding out. Her whole body was steaming, bruised and blistered, her shirt having been immolated leaving her in nothing but her pants. She turned her head to one side, gasping in agony her eyes widening as she saw Seilah look at her from more than six hundred yards away, having been carried that far away by the blast. She tried to reach inside to pull out her latest form, but found she couldn’t gather enough energy to pull it fourth. *Fuck, my magical core, taking on Hoteye, Racer and all their small fry really took it out of me.*

Looking around, she found that she had been flung into the area of the forest where Erza, Jenny and Bacchus were fighting the other two demons. *Fuck me!*

Back where their initial clash had occurred, Seilah too was gasping, though Mira couldn’t make that out from where she was. Being in Etherious form in the first place was rather unnatural to her, and it left her feeling drained. She had also been putting a lot of magic into her Macro field throughout the battlefield once Torafuzar had made the decision to join in. Dominating so many minds, no matter how weak-willed, would have been tough. Animating the dead and the rest of the battlefield as much as she had was far worse.

As Mira’s body bounced by, Jenny’s scythe flashed, in on Torafuzar, who dodged aside, already having lost several of his spine to the odd energy blade and unwilling to see if his Etherious forms armor could stand up to it. He returned a blow that even despite her Gundam armor doubled Jenny over, yet she used her suits thrusters to barrel forward, head-butting him in the chest and throwing him off balance.

This nearly cost Torafuzar his head as Erza swung in with a monstrous claymore, her body clad in black demonic looking armor as she roared a wordless war cry. The blade, more a massive club than a sword, crashed into his shoulder, piercing his armor in a welter of blood, but Torafuzar grabbed at Erza’s arm, then brought around his other fist in a blow that she was forced to block.

Elsewhere, Kyoka barely had a second’s attention to spare to the arrival of Mira’s near comatose form, being hard pressed by Bacchus, who had arrived but moments before. “What kind of stupidity is this!” she shrieked. “You use inebriation to not feel pain, are you mad?!”

“Nar so madish cutsehhi,” Bacchus slurred his body twitching around her blades even as several sprang from the side of her arm in an effort to skewer him. A palm smashed into her jaw, magic pulsing out and shattering Kyoka’s helmet on that side, and the rest of her already badly damaged helmet fell off, leaving her pointed chin and scaled features bare to the world. “Ish not madishness ifn works,” Bacchus finished, doing a handstand, his legs kicking out like a horses into Kyoka’s chest and upper body.

“Curse it!” Kyoka snarled using her body morphing skill to create a series of blades. Bacchus’s magic powered blows were incredibly strong, and she didn’t want to feel what they would do to her if they struck cleanly. But his erratic movements were giving her fits, as they had since the start of this fight for both herself and Torafuzar.

Just then a blast of water magic flashed between them, an errant attack from Torafuzar gone wild as Erza struck his hand. Not that he cared, having just hammered a blow into Jenny that send her flying backwards. Still, Kyoka took the moment to regain some control, turning to attack Mirajane and at least finish off one of their opponents. She flew in that direction away from Bacchus, her hand shifting into a long blade, which she thrust down toward Mira.

Erza saw this, and roared out in anger, “NO!!!” ignoring Torafuzar, she turned in that direction, her armor shifting in an instant into her Giant Armor with which she hurled a spear towards Kyoka.

Dodging the blade forced Kyoka to skid to a halt, which in turn allowed Bacchus to close in again. The drunk lashed out with a kick the caught Kyoka in the side of his face only to be forced to dodge himself as Seilah arrived with a blast of blue energy. He was able to dodge it at the last instant, having seen it coming out of the corner of his eye, but this allowed Kyoka to stab him in the side. Her blade didn’t find much purchase, Bacchus’s durability, like his speed, having been somehow enhanced further by his alcohol intake, yet it still opened a nasty gash across his chest and pushed him off balance. A second later, a blast from Seilah caught him in the side and he was hurled away from Mira. He crashed to the ground nearby, out of the fight, half of his body a mass of bruises and burns.

But this had bought Mira enough time to dig deep and call out, “Take Over: Satan Soul: Halphas!!!”

When the magic faded away Mirajane now had horns made of long blue scales extending backwards from her head to a point, matching scales that had appeared a on her face. Her ears had also become pointed. Her forearms and hands as well as her legs were also covered in scales and she had even grown a large tail of a similar blue. The look of a dark blue one-piece suit with pointed shoulder-pads covered her body now, exposing her arms and legs, open at the front and the back to show her stomach, a large amount of cleavage, and upper back from which two sky-blue wings composed of numerous spiky scales sprouted.

“Round two bitches!” Mira-Halphas roared smashing Kyoka off her feet with one punch as she summoned a globe of cosmic type magic and shot it out toward Seilah who barely dodged in time. The two demon females fell back rapidly, now looking very worried.

They were right to do so, as in this form, Mira was far faster than she had been before. She crossed the intervening distance and smashed Kyoka aside, grasping Seilah’s throat and twisting to body slam her into the ground before releasing her, grabbing at Kyoka’s whips, pulling her in, and nearly shattering her jaw with a punch that sent her flying backwards, then tearing her whip nails out before kicking Seilah so hard in the head she was sent flying ass over kettle. She lay there, gasping in air for a second before pushing herself to her feat beside her sexual partner.

Even so, Mira could feel her magical reserves plummeting like air out of a tire, and given how she had already felt tired before, she knew she had to end this quickly. With that in mind, she concentrated her remaining magic into her hand, which began to glow with varicolored lights. “Cosmic Darkness Stream!” she roared lashing out towards Kyoka, judging her the most dangerous of the two since she was on her feet and though battered, didn’t look as tired as Seilah.

Kyoka looked at the attack in horror, then, with no cover and no time to dodge out of the way, she did the only thing she could. She grabbed Seilah and pulled her between the oncoming beam of magic and herself.

Gasping in shocked betrayal, Seilah threw up a shield of magical energy but this only saved her from instant immolation. The attack still hit, searing into her body and pushing her back into Kyoka, who continued to use her as a shield or a second before hurling herself sideways out of the beam’s range.

Nearby Jenny was also having trouble, her breath coming in gasps as she felt her body slowly starting to shut-down due to magical exhaustion. She stumbled to her knees, and it was only Erza’s being there that kept her from being finished off right away. Erza kept his attention for a few seconds, letting Jenny regain her feet as she canceled more than half her takeover Form, her armor disappearing around her legs and chest, leaving her arms and head clad in black armor and with the energy scythe still in one hand.

A the same moment Kyoka sacrificed Seilah to save herself from Mira, Jenny surged to her feet, lashing out towards Torafuzar with what she knew would be her last strike before she was forced to retreat. “Just die already!”

Even engaged with Erza blade to claw, Torafuzar saw it coming and dodged just enough so that the scythe didn’t bury its energy blade in his stomach which would have been a fatal blow. Instead, the energy blade sliced deeply along his side, and he roared in agony, whirling around. Erza of course attacked him as he did, but her blades couldn’t penetrate his back and side as Jenny’s had, and she looked on in horror as Torafuzar’s fist, with a coating of energy to add further to the force of his blow crashed into the side of Jenny’s head.

Jenny was still wearing her Gundam helmet, but the armor of this form had already proved to be unable to stand up to Torafuzar. And this time she hadn’t even been able to move to deaden some of the impact. The blow caved in the side of her helmet, shattering the visor, the armor of the helmet, and the skull beneath. Her armor and weapons disappearing, Jenny dropped boneless to the ground at Torafuzar’s feet, blood pooling on the ground underneath her.

**OOOOOOO**

While the others had been fighting against the demons, Ranma had been battling for both his sanity and humanity. Dragon Slayer magic was, at heart, transformative. It wanted to change its users into dragons, which was not, as others thought, just a physical change. It was also a mental one, as Ranma now knew having had to deal with a few odd, dangerously self-destructive and just plain destructive instincts since he had shifted back into this half-dragon, half-human form.

Demon Slayer magic was an enhancement magic in nature: it enhanced a person’s existing magics, and gave them some immunity to Devil curses. Yet that was not the entirety at all. Demons were, after all, tainted creatures. Killing them tainted the soul of those that did it. Eventually perhaps, Ranma’s control of the Devil Slayer magic would be such that he could simply bring it up at will or even permanently merge it into his body like his ki or Dragon Slayer magic. But right now, powered by the devil magic Ranma had eaten in Torafuzar’s curse water, it was in turn eating at his mind, trying to remove his empathy, kindness and many of the other emotions that made Ranma human.

It was also, at the same time, trying to change him back into his base human form, the Demon Slayer Magic unable to merge with the Dragon Slayer magic, something like oil and water. While Dragons could become demon slayers, their magic was such that the sin of doing so could not gain any leverage on them. It was only humans that could become tainted by Demon Slayer magic.

With his ki so badly depleted from the day’s exertions, Ranma was nearly unable to combat the two magics impact on his body, and they went to war with one another. As he lay there in agony, his body shifted one second to the next as one magic or the other gain an upper hand. His arms legs, even his head turned into a dragon only smaller, shifting back to human form before they could begin to grow, his skin marked by so many whorls of darkness that nothing of his original skin color could be seen underneath.

Ironically, if the demons had simply moved away from his body enough so that his senses couldn’t detect them, the Demon Slayer magic would have lost its impetus, and the Dragon Slayer magic would have won through, possibly changing Ranma irrevocably into a dragon. But the two powers battling it out in his body allowed Ranma time to regroup his scattered willpower and push through the pain of that battle. And if there was one thing Ranma had an overabundance of, it was willpower, the sheer unwillingness to give in, a determination to press on regardless of anything that happened to him. So Ranma concentrated on pushing out the new instincts and thoughts that were not his own.

With his mind finally his own, the Demon Slayer instincts beaten down for now, Ranma turned his attention to the ongoing battle for his body, grimly grabbing at the Water Dragon Slayer magic in him, using the Demon Slayer magic and his ki to beat his Dragon Slayer magic into submission. It was hard, harder even than attempting to let his Dragon Slayer magic have free reign in his skin during the earlier battle.

But eventually Ranma’s will had won through, and the shifting in his body slowly began to end. He opened his eyes, trying to see what had been going on all around him while he was basically in a coma. Unfortunately, the first thing Ranma saw as his eyes opened and he pushed himself to his knees nearby was Jenny collapsing, blood flowing out from her head as her armor, including her now crushed helmet, disappeared.

At the same time, there was a blast of magic somewhere in the distance as Nirvana activated. It coated the Worth Woodsea from one end of its immense length to another, its power finding purchase here and there. Nirvana, in this diffuse form, didn’t really affect those firmly on the light side of the spectrum or the dark, something Brain, for all his research didn’t know. It only affected those who were teetering between light and dark, pushing them to the side they would normally have been least likely to fall towards.

Of course, light and dark were but euphemisms for good and evil, and the difference between those two ‘absolutes’ was always in degrees rather than simple on/off states. It didn’t take much to push a person into that state of mind where he or she teetered between the two, ready to be pushed to the opposite side they would otherwise have drifted towards thanks to Nirvana’s spell. And perhaps the worst thing one can say about an evil person is they would lack empathy for their fellow living beings, and lacked any kind of limits.

Of course, Nirvana in this defuse form wasn’t an absolute. Even if an individual was teetering in the shadow between good and evil, a strong enough will could overcome it easily enough, possibly not even notice it.

Wounded sorely and shocked at her sexual partner’s betrayal, Seilah found herself crying as she felt all her anger, disdain for humans and hate disappear from her mind. Those emotions were replaced by empathy and other emotions she could not understand.

His mind taxed to the breaking point by a near constant war against his Dragon Slayer powers, followed by still more internal conflict, Ranma didn’t even notice Nirvana’s impact. All he felt suddenly was hate, fury and a need to kill and keep on killing as walls even Ranma didn’t know he still had on his actions disappeared.

Ranma’s blue eyes, which had **never** changed, not even during the recent conflict between his Demon Slayer and Dragon Slayer magic, turned blood red. He slowly stood up, his clawed hands flaring out to either side as water began to appear around them, swirling faster and faster, a control Ranma would have struggled with had he been conscious coming at an instinctual level now.

Erza screamed in anger and grief as Jenny collapsed, her short swords changing into a giant club as she shifted into her Purgatory, smashing Torafuzar in the side before he could turn to face her again. Her target grunted, and the large demon could feel a few ribs go. But Erza’s couldn’t do enough damage to get through Torafuzar’s Etherious form’s scaly hide, his defense being the best of any demon of the book.

He turned to her, his fist flashing out but Erza dodged it changing into yet another suit of armor. This one was her Flight Armor, which emphasized speed and mobility and she lashed out, her blade bouncing off his hide several hundred times in a second.

Nearby Mira too looked horrified as she looked at her friend then turned back to her opponent only to gasp as a blast of energy hit her. “Enhancement Magic: Song of Pain!” Mira gritted her teeth, a low wail escaping her, but she pushed through the pain once more and closed with Kyoka, while nearby Seilah cried softly on the ground, looking down at herself and all around her at what she had helped create.

A second later, Seilah cried out in pain for an entirely different reason as all of them suddenly felt pressure, a presence pressing down on them as if they were face to face with a monster beyond any of them. Erza stumbled, and Torafuzar stilled, his magic flickering out from around his hand where he was about to launch an attack at her as he turned to look at where the feeling was coming from. Even Kyoka and Mira broke off from one another to look in that direction, only to freeze in shock and fear.

Ranma stood there, but even in comparison to how he had looked before, with his draconian features, he looked different now. His scales, which had been the same color as his skin before, were now a deep blue, with swirls of black here and there. From his back had sprung two large wings, like those of a dragon only smaller. From his spine had come a tail, and from his shoulders two large wings. In contrast, his face had reverted somewhat to a more human form, though his ears had enlarged for some reason, and he was now bald, the back of his head a mass of scales. And his eyes, when Erza saw those blood red orbs even she backed away.

Those red orbs took in the four people still moving, Seilah and the downed Bacchus. And then Ranma moved, so fast that none of them could track him. The next instant he was standing between Erza and Torafuzar. A blow flashed out to either side, animalistic, wild, an attack more like a dragon than a human, a raking of claws rather than a punch or chop.

It crashed into Erza’s chest hurling her backwards with a cry of agony as her Flight Armor shattered, along with a few ribs. But she got off lightly, because the claw that struck her hadn’t had magic around it.

The other did, and instead of simply striking, Ranma’s attack did the one thing only Jenny’s energy scythe had done up to that point: it penetrated Torafuzar’s Etherious hide. The area Ranma’s fist hit was covered with water, moving like a whirlpool, its speed maxed to a level that would never be found in nature. At its impact, Torafuzar’s steel-hard scales were shredded along with everything underneath.

Torafuzar gaped at the feel of a large portion of his stomach suddenly missing and fell to his knees, gasping as black blood burst out in a tumult. *He tore through my armor, the armor that is strongest among any Etherious!! Dangerous,* ***dangerous****, Seilah was right, and we were wrong. This Ranger is truly a threat!*

That was his last thought as Ranma’s other hand came around from where he had smashed Erza away to punch straight through Torafuzar’s neck. As Torafuzar, still alive somehow despite missing a large portion of his guts, tried to reach up to grasp Ranma’s arm, his other hand came up and grabbed Torafuzar’s head. The next instant despite Torafuzar’s desperate grab Ranma tore his head clean off.

Letting loose a roar of pleasure, Ranma began to kick the downed demon, seemingly not noticing that it was already dead.

“Holy shit!” Mira screamed, “What the hell is…”

“De, Demon Slayer. I think Ranma’s Demon Slayer powers have overwhelmed his psyche,” Seilah said weakly from where she lay nearby, staring at Ranma in shock and no small amount of fear. Not having noticed Nirvana’s assault herself, this was the only logical conclusion she could reach.

Kyoka too was terrified by this sudden turn of events. But unlike the other two, she turned and ran, flinging herself into the air and away. No way was she going to stick around and try to fight something like that. *I have to get away, have to report this!*

This proved to be a mistake. Ranma’s head snapped up, his blood red eyes locking on Kyoka. A second later, he was in the air flying after her faster than she could fly away. She had a brief second to look behind her before Ranma grabbed her by the leg and twisted, shattering her leg in several places before tossing her back down towards the ground.

“GYAAAAAa!!!!!” she screamed then Ranma was on her, his hands crashing into her back. There was a sickening series of cracks causing those still on the ground to wince, and then the two of them smashed into the ground.

Ranma crouched over Kyoka’s dead body smashing it with his hands, a blast of Soryu no Hoko (Water Dragon’s Roar) tearing down into Kyoka’s head and just completely mincing it into slurry. He roared then, not in triumph or joy at the killing, but in rage, not at the dead, but at the world, as he kept on smashing his hands down onto the body.

“Good god,” Erza whispered. “Is, is this what Ranma could do if he stops holding back?” A second later, she cringed as Ranma turned in her direction. He then surged to his feet and charged her roaring as his body was suddenly coated with water that began to swirl once more.

“Don’t try to fight him!” Seilah shouted, causing Mira to look at her in surprise while blood began to drip from Seilah’s mouth. “Don’t try to fight him, the Demon Slayer instincts are driving him!”

“Why are you trying to help us?” Mira asked, her eyes narrowing. She winced as Erza, now in her Adamantine Armor, was sent flying by a kick backed by Ranma’s magic, the armor denting on the impact but somehow able to stay in one piece, though Mira could tell it wouldn’t last for long.

“I, I don’t know. I, I have these, these emotions within me, I, I, feel grief, I want to help?” Seilah asked, frowning, covering her bare chest with one hand. “I, I feel as if we were in the wrong attacking you all. I don’t know why.”

“Remember what that councilwoman said about Nirvana,” Erza shouted, now dashing away from Ranma in her Cheetah suit, then back in at him, grabbing his outstretched arm and flipping him only to have to dodge a blow from his tail. “It is supposed to \*oof\* turn light to dark or something, right?! That must have been the light we saw a moment ago! That might have effected Ranma too!”

“That, that could do it, yes,” Seilah said, frowning. “If so, if it is a mental shift caused by exterior stimuli, perhaps a great enough shock could force a reversal of perspective.”

“You just said a lot of big words there,” Mira said dryly, scowling. “Still, I think I’ve got just the thing.” With that, she concentrated and from one hand a globe of water appeared. “Keep his attention on you for a second, Red!”

“Oh, like I’ve a got any, GAH!” Erza shouted, as Ranma attempted to take a bite out of her shoulder. Thankfully her current Armor gave her the speed to dodge if barely, but she knew if Ranma could land even a single hit it would be enough to tear her in half, and given how fast he was it was only a matter of time. “Just do it already!”

In the distance several loud crashes could be heard then, which caused Ranma to pause. He turned away from Erza to stare in that direction, growling as he sensed something, perhaps larger prey, in the distance.

Mira saw this and took her chance, blasting at Ranma with a large radius attack from behind. It hit and staggered him forward only a half-step, but more importantly, it triggered the curse.

Regardless of the other magics in Ranma’s body and his no longer entirely human body, Ranma still had his curse. Jusenkyo body-transfiguration curses changed anyone falling into them into the body of the person or thing that had originally fallen into the cursed pool, with minor differences such as hair color and shape or height behind decided by the genes of the person. Herb’s people had used the springs for generations to gain brides in this fashion. The original form mattered not at all, and in this case, the fact Ranma was in this weird hybrid form didn’t matter either.

Ranma’s body changed genders as his body shrunk slightly, his scales disappearing, and a ragged cry of agony burst out of Ranma as his tail and wings disappeared along with his Dragon Slayer-like form, her skin marked in numerous places by the black whorls of her Demon Slayer magic. The redhead stumbled forward her body wracked with pain. As it did, Erza, saw the change had effected not just Ranma’s body, but also his mind, with the red of her eyes disappearing, the shock of the sudden change knocking him out from the strange berserk mindset Nirvana had caused. “Wh, what the heck… what happened?”

“Nirvana made you go crazy,” Erza said simply, Requipping a staff to use as a prop so that she didn’t fall over, not bothering to try to change armors again. She was practically exhausted and there was one more thing she had to do with her magic power. *Or rather two,* she thought, glancing over at Seilah. She then frowned, as there was another booming noise from the distance.

“Um, what?” Ranma began, then her face paled making the whorls on her face stand out even more and she whirled, nearly falling over as her body’s exhaustion made itself known. “Jenny! Gah, what the, why am I so tired? Guh, never mind, Jenny!” she growled trying to move as fast as she could in the direction of her friend.

As the booming noises started to become almost as regular as footsteps, all the conscious mages ignored that in favor of making their way over to Jenny, with Mira rather reluctantly carrying Seilah with her. The demon’s wound, a massive amount of burning across her chest and stomach region, was showing signs of closing under Seilah’s curse being turned on her body, her curse basically ordering her own body to heal as quickly as it could, giving her a slight healing ability, but only a slight one. Yet even setting that aside, it was obvious any fight the demon girl had was not going to make an appearance anytime soon. Instead, Seilah looked like an emotional wreck, not that Mira cared at this point about her. Indeed, it was only the need for questions that had stopped her from just finishing the bitch off.

When they came together by Jenny and Ranma made to lift her up though, Seilah held a hand up, stopping him. “Don’t move her! This woman’s head has been badly hurt and any jostling to her brain could prove fatal. Do any of you have any healing ability?” she asked, gesturing Mira to set her down. Mira did so eagerly, as if touching the woman made her itch or something, and Seilah began to probe Jenny’s neck with her fingers, then her chest before shifting up the side of her neck.

“I do, I have a Nurse Armor that allows me to put people in a kind of stasis with its medicine where their wounds won’t get worse, and the wraps can even heal small injuries. I don’t think it will be very effective for large things like this though,” Erza said, kneeling down next to Ranma as she stared at Jenny, guilt and remorse plain on her features while the background booming got louder.

“Do not look guilty Ranma,” Seilah said seeing that look. “None of what happened was your fault. You were instead dancing to the tune of our master Mard Geer, and the other member of the Balam Alliance, Grimoire Heart. They determined separately that the Oración Seis had grown too arrogant, and had to be used to draw away attention from their own activities. The three of us were then ordered here to kill as many from both sides as we possibly could, a task we accomplished all too well.”

“Wait!” Mira growled, reaching down to grab at Seilah’s barely there kimono which Seilah had pulled around her body, Mira’s grip tearing the already badly damaged item apart as she tried to lift Seilah up. She stumbled back, as the kimono gave way, but while the view she was now being given cause Ranma to blush and even Erza’s eyes to widen, Mira’s anger was undaunted as she worked through the implications of that. “Doesn’t that mean you were going to attack the wounded we left behind!?”

At that, Ranma’s blush disappeared, and Erza Requipped a short sword, placing it against Seilah’s neck. Seilah was undaunted however and simply nodded. “We already attacked them. I tried my best to try to talk my two fellows out of that. I had no wish to end young Wendy’s story, having found her a rather pleasant child the two times our plots intertwined before. But I failed.”

Ranma reached up and grabbed Erza’s arm, pulling her away from Seilah. Instead, Ranma’s hand took its place, clenching around Seilah’s throat with a grip that made it clear both that she was trembling in rage, and that she would snap Seilah’s neck like a twig if she didn’t hear what she wanted. “What happened there?” Ranma growled feeling her Demon Slayer side trying to act up but squelching it ruthlessly. She was filled with more rage than any other time she could remember at the idea of Wendy being attacked like that, but she needed to know what was happening. And Ranma’s Code would also not let her kill a defenseless prisoner. *Honor, you are a fucking bitch sometimes.*

“We attacked. The one called Jura and the other one with an odd face who used Perfume Magic put up a good fight, but we defeated them and the others, including young Wendy,” Seilah sighed. “I hid her from my fellows under a carefully constructed hideaway made of rubble as well as the others, but I cannot tell you for certain if any of those other mages lived, though I know Wendy was still breathing when I hid her. I’m sorry.”

The look of genuine remorse on her face and the drop of her shoulders made even Mira actually believe her when she said that. But even so, Mira could barely suppress the desire to kill this monster who had attempted, at the very least, to kill her guildmates. *Ugh, I suppose if I can stomach Gajeel’s presence for a bit after his assault on my sisters, I can stomach this bitch until we know the full extent of her crimes.* Not wanting to look at the bitch any longer, Mira looked down at Jenny, stroking her shoulder. “Can you tell us anything about Jenny? I can tell she’s alive but…”

“She is, her heartbeat is erratic but steady. However, I think her skull is fractured, badly,” Seilah said, probing very, very gently at Jenny’s skull, wincing when she found a few places that were definitely softer than they should have been. Her face had also been heavily slashed by pieces of her visor. Her eyes were unmarked, but her nose, both cheeks and her forehead were slashed badly.

Mira scowled, looking up and around towards the booming sounds as Erza quickly shifted into her nursing outfit and began to gently, with Seilah’s help, wrap Jenny’s head up in bandages. Then it was Mira’s face to pale. “Um girls, I think we have a problem, a big one!”

Ranma looked up as did the others at Mira's exclamation, to see a giant spider like creation miles long and miles wide striding through the forest, looming above them, one foot coming down towards them even as they looked up. “How in the hell did that thing get so close!?” Ranma yelped.

“Concentrating on the closer issue I would think,” Seilah replied before, thrusting her hand upwards, reaching out with her curse. “Macro: Move Your Foot to the Side!” she ordered. The Absolute Order Curse activated on the giant leg above them and the foot shifted, missing them by several dozen yards.

It still slammed into the ground with enough force to send tremors through the ground though, causing Ranma to grimace as she looked down at Jenny, holding her still with a gentle hand right below her chest. “Even that was too close! What the heck is that thing?”

“It must be Nirvana,” Seilah said before any of the others could. “It is after all supposed to be a weapon. It stands to reason the platform itself will be dangerous.”

“Sarcasm is not what I need right now,” Ranma growled, glaring up at the spidery thing. “…So Ultear and Brain are up there then?”

“Most likely,” Erza said, placing her short sword on her shoulder and glaring up at the thing, which had just backed away, as if whoever was controlling it had realized that one of its foot had gone awry, and was searching for them but was having difficulties thanks to how small they were in comparison to it. “I don't have much in the way of magical reserves left,” she confessed.

“Nor do I,” Mira said with a scowl, glaring at Seilah.

She shrugged her shoulders still looking repentant, before looking down at Jenny. “Your magic seems at least to be working to keep her wound from getting worse Miss Erza, but these vibrations through the ground are not going to be doing her any good at all,” she reported.

Ranma growled, then looked down at herself, before nodding slowly. *Alright, well, I have a bit of magical power left, not a lot, no chance of my calling on my Dragon Slayer powers. Still, that just means I need to be tricky.* With that, she racedtowards the oncoming foot that was once more trying to move in their direction. “Keep any of the feet away from Jenny!” she shouted over her shoulder. “I’ll take out Brain!”

“Ranma wait, are you certain you can take him on alone!?” Erza shouted.

Ranma didn’t reply, simply giving her a thumb’s up while racing on, and Erza growled. “What!? What the heck does that mean anyway?”

“Redhead, what can you do?” Mira said, smirking.

“Oh shut up skank!” Erza grunted, turning back to Jenny.

Yet, Erza did have a point. The Water Dragon Slayer was in pain from how many times her body had changed shape over during her earlier mental battle, and her ki nearly exhausted. This left Ranma without the energy to perform a lot of his more powerful attacks. And as the Dragon and Devil Slayer left Seilah behind him, the Devil Slayer magic didn’t retreat from her body as it should have, a worrisome development, although it wasn’t actually messing with her mental faculties any longer, which was good.

*And it ain’t like I have a choice anyway.*  Ranma thought with some amusement. *There ain’t no redo, no retreat, do or die. Heh, but when did I ever say I wanted ta live forever anyway?*

When she reached the foot Ranma simply kept going, racing up the side of it like it was road. “Clinging like a Spider technique for the win ya mangy octopus thing!” she shouted, before concentrating and pulling out one of her escrima sticks. It was the only one she had left, having lost another one somewhere during the running battles of the day, probably against Hoteye. Despite that, the moment she reached the halfway point she turned and slammed the stick down onto the side of the leg, which had still been was moving sideways towards her friends, as fast as she could. “Max Weight!”

The magic imbued in the song silk wound around the escrima stick activated, making this hit almost like being smashed by a blow from Makarov. It crushed the leg off the strange construct at that point, sending the area of the leg below crashing to the ground below. This once more made Nirvana back away slightly to recover its balance.

“I think I've got enough magic to do something like that,” Erza said, with a nod, truing from where she had wrapped both Seilah and Jenny with the bindings from her Nurse Armor. “Purgatory armor!” she shouted, and then flew towards another foot on the other side of them, which had begun to swing in their direction.

“What about you?” Mira said, kneeling down next to Seilah looking at Jenny rather than the woman.

“I'm afraid not,” Seilah said, holding her hand over Jenny's head. She was trying to use her magic in an entirely different way, ordering Jenny's brain and heart to keep working as she had done to her own body in order to enhance her body’s ability to regenerate, which was very minor, worse than even a human’s. But she couldn't tell if the magic had any impact. Indeed, it was obvious that Erza’s Nurse Armor bandages were doing a far better job on both Jenny and Seilah than her own magic. “At present I can probably order another leg away from us if I have to, but fighting you moments ago, and then taking that blast from you when Kyoka used me as a shield, has almost depleted my magical reserves. But transferring up to the body will allow me to control the whole thing at once if I strain at it.”

Mira nodded, gently moving some of Jenny's hair away from her face to stare at the cuts that had been opened up across it, wincing. *I hope Wendy can do something about that, or else I'm afraid her modeling career at least is over. I don't honestly know what she'll think about that to be honest.*

Straightening up she glared at Seilah shaking her head. “Don't think for one minute helping us here and telling us about what was going on with Ranma makes us even!” she snarled. “We are in no way even! And you will have to answer for your actions here.”

“I will if I must. For now, we still need to deal with Brain and Nirvana though,” Seilah said, frowning as she looked around. That statement was brought about by the fact that the leg Ranma head cut off had shifted, all the pieces of it flowing back up into the air to connect with the rest of Nirvana. “And that is going to be more difficult than you might think.”

“Do you have any communication magic?” Mira asked setting aside her anger at the devil girl for a moment. “As far as I know, Hoteye, and Loke are still alive, maybe they can help.”

“I can use Thought Projection magic,” Seilah said, holding out her hand towards Mira. Mira hesitated, then touched the other woman's hand, and looked at in the distance, trying to figure out in which direction those two might be from, where they were as Seilah sent their minds out under her directions.

It worked, and she found both of them, standing over Angel’s unconscious, twitching form to one side of the direction Nirvana had been going. She informed them what was going on, asked them to help divert Nirvana away from where Jenny was wounded and then became astonished as she felt another mind nearby where she's was still kneeling. “Bacchus, you’re still alive!?”

Bacchus woozily pushed himself to his feet, then stared up and up and up some more at the towering thing above him. Then he pinched his cheek, and shook his head. “Nope, not some weird dream like that time I fell asleep and a spider was crouched on my nose, ugh.” Then he heard Mira's voice in his mind and for a moment, wondered if it really was a dream, before shaking his head and responding. “Yeah I'm still here, hell of a lot battered, a little burnt around the edges, and depressingly sober because of it. But I'm still going.”

For a moment, Mira dithered as to what they do, then shouted into the mental link, causing Seilah to wince. “Get into position to destroy the legs, maybe if you take out enough of them, we'll overcome the damn thing’s healing ability.”

“That should've been repair abilities,” Seilah said primly, staring up at it, then back down to Jenny.

Mira did the same, wavering again. She really did **not** want to leave Jenny like this, but she didn't know if the others could destroy enough of the legs to do what she hoped. *We’re going to have to hope that Ranma can kill Brain quickly,* she thought grimly.

**OOOOOOO**

That thought was on Ranma's mind too, as she leaped over the wrecked remains of an ancient cityscape, a small one to be certain, but still a city. Everything she could see was made of stone covered in moss, and it spread for about two miles in every direction in a circle with a squat, pyramid-like structure in the very center.

As Ranma started to make for that point, she immediately began to take fire from that pyramid, lances of green and black energy flashing towards him. The size and duration of the attack was surprising, but Ranma was able to dodge them all despite that, leaping down into alleyways and out of sight before racing on and dodging this way and that before racing along a wall and then back up. Reaching the pyramid Ranma was surprised when the attacks stopped, but wasn’t about to look a gift horse in the mouth, ascending swiftly.

On top of the pyramid Ranma found Brain standing in front of what looked like some kind of control center, his hands clasped behind his back as he looked at her. But this was not the Brain Ranma had fought earlier that day. Brain’s hair had gone silver, his tattoos had disappeared, his skin had become paler, and his eyes now glowed red as Ranma's had during his madness after watching Jenny collapse. Even his clothing had changed to a more combat oriented appearance and there was a sneer on his face as he looked at the female Ranma.

“Interesting look,” Ranma said, smirking slightly as she cracked her knuckles.

As she spoke the redhead’s eyes flicked sideways to one side of Brain where Ultear lay unconscious, blood flowing from her mouth and several wounds along one side of her body, her foot in particular looking as if it had been crushed. All around them and out into the city Ranma could see a lot of damage, presumably from when Ultear had somehow roused herself enough to fight back. Ranma wondered idly how she had done that, but set it aside for now. And near Ultear, she also noticed the staff that Brain had been using earlier that day, withered to ash, leaving it’s glass ball and the headdress behind. Again Ranma ignored it, to concentrate on the man of the hour.

The man sneered. “Hahaha, I am not Brain, I am Zero! I am the dark, destructive side of Brain that even he was frightened of! He wanted to conquer the world, to imprint his personality in every realm and nation. I just want to see them destroyed. With this Nirvana, the world will burn! And what does the world send against me? A pathetic woman and you, some redheaded tattooed whore?”

Ranma spat to one side, noticing offhand her blood looked a little too black for her preferences, but otherwise ignoring it. “Keep jawin’ asshole, that’ll make this all the sweeter!” With that Ranma closed the distance in a millisecond, her escrima stick appearing in her hand smashing into Zero's chest and hurling him backwards through one of the buildings below them.

“Guh, that, that brat is fast!” Zero gasped, pushing out of the rubble. Once he was out, he gestured with both of his hands, sending green and black magic flashing towards Ranma. “But don’t think it is enough to stop me! Dark Scream!!”

Ranma ducked and dodged most of them, but one of them hit her leg, spinning her off balance. Yet Zero had to blink in astonishment watching Ranma right herself, kicking off another wall and closing, her escrima stick disappearing and her hands suddenly full of pistols. “Guns Magic Flare!”

“AHHh,” Zero roared, holding one hand to his now blinded eyes, shooting out several black balls of magic from his hand randomly and hitting nothing. The next second, Ranma was close in again, and the Song Silk bound Escrima sticks hammered in, just missing his neck and cracking into Zero’s shoulder as he turned, causing a lot of pain but not taking him down the next second he shouted out “Dark Gravity!”

A blast of black colored magic caught Ranma around the legs, shattering the wreckage they had been standing on as Zero jumped away. The ground of Nirvana collapsed, attempting to bury Ranma in chunks of rock.

But Ranma kicked out, bouncing up and away using the momentum of the collapse to actually escape the area effected by the spell. Zero immediately began to attack, launching more of those black magic balls at her with one hand while sending a Dark Capriccio at Ranma with the other.

*No choice but to take a few hits to close!* Ranma growled irritably, ducking under the green and black beams and charging forward and returning fire, although she lacked the reserves to make her magic bullets anything more than a nuisance. As she had predicted she couldn’t close again without taking a few hits, but did so surprisingly well, just like the one to her leg earlier. Before Zero could belatedly try to retreat Ranma was on him a blow aiming for Zero’s elbow as Zero thrust an arm forward, Ranma’s fist a blur of speed as she poured her remaining energy into throwing a series of blows that made the Amaguriken look slow.

Zero saw that, and created a blast of magic with his hand, pushing his hand in between Ranma's target and the incoming blow. Even as Zero’s raw darkness magic ate and seared at Ranma’s hand though her own punches got through the magic breaking Zero’s palm and the elbow behind it, causing him to cry out in pain. A second later, the Escrima stick once more thrust forward, trying to catch Zero in the throat, but he dodged backwards, taking the blow on his chest and getting hurled away.

“Die, just die you freak!!” Zero roared in pain and fury, gathering his magical power and sending a black wave of what looked like tormented towards Ranma. “Genesis Zero!!!”

Ranma barely had a moment to get another guns magic shot off before Zero’s attack hit. Ranma screamed as she felt her body being practically consumed by the darkness magic. At the same time the impetus of the assault hurled her away, slamming her down and through several buildings and out the other side, and Ranma lost his last escrima stick in the tumble.

This attack was supposed to not only do physical damage, but also tear at an individuals’ very soul, erasing it from existence. Ranma felt it try, felt the attack eat into her ki, her soul, but Ranma fought back, snarling and roaring inside her head as her body flipped and rolled away, smashing into a circle of rocks set into a small open area of the city.

Ranma tried to push herself to her feet, tried to shake off the black magic attack, but Zero’s spell clung to her like phosphorous almost, burning away at her. Nearly anyone else would have been burned alive already, even Erza or Mira in their strongest armors and souls respectively. But Ranma was, though she didn’t know it, benefiting from the effects of her earlier mental battle with her Dragon Slayer and Devil Slayer magics.

Before that internal battle erupted, Ranma had only been allowing the ‘disease’ of the Dragon Slayer magic access to his skin, changing his skin to scales and other such small, purely surface changes. Earlier however, during the internal war between his Devil Slayer and Dragon Slayer magic, the Dragon Slayer magic had changed a whole **lot** more than that. It had changed Ranma’s muscles, bones and organs to better allow him to use his Dragon Slayer magic. His durability had thus shot up well above what even his ki could have allowed unconsciously, though his speed was far less.

In essence, once Ranma had beaten his warring magics down, before Nirvana had hit him, Ranma had reached a whole new pinnacle of power in the oldest way possible: he had conquered it. And it had carried over afterward during his induced madness and even after when Ranma was turned into a woman. In essence, Ranma’s durability was now at Natsu’s level, if not a bit more in her base state.

Still, that wasn’t going to save her. Ranma had been running on fumes when the fight began, and now those fumes were being burned away by Genesis Zero. But she was still aware, still looking for a chance. A chance, that was right next to her. As Ranma pushed off the side of the circle of rocks she realized what it was, a well. The well was mostly dry, but there was a bit of water still at the very bottom.

Without hesitation, Ranma hurled herself over the edge of the well, crashing down off the side of it twice before hitting the bottom. The water was barely enough to cover her hands, but Ranma still desperately stuck her head into it, sucking it up swiftly. It tasted horrible, brackish and dead almost, but it still revived Ranma enough for her throw off the Genesis Zero spell.

For a moment she fell back, gasping and sore, but now feeling a bit better than she had been. She took a brief moment to search her Requip and ki space for anything that contained water, finding none. She had used the two bottles of water she’d had in there during the train trip to wash her mouth out of all things, and hadn’t had any time to refill them since. *I should’ve thought of that before we left the town, way too fucking late now.*

She frowned, looking down at her hand, and thinking hard. It was obvious she had to end this fight soon, or else Zero would just wear her out, regardless of her body’s durability, the reason behind which Ranma began to understand, putting a grim smile on her ace, unseen in the dark of the well. She looked down at her hands and thought about her attacks. *Can’t do Neko-Ken, can’t quite control the claws at command yet. No Yama-Sen-Ken, don’t have enough ki, same for anything else curse it. But Zero’s so tough my hits aren’t doing enough damage fast enough, curse it!*

But thinking about the claws gave him an idea as he thought about his more powerful Dragon Slayer attacks. Holding her hand up to her face, she began to smile grimly. *I might not be able to make a big attack, but…* With an idea in mind Ranma now climbed up the inside of the well, bouncing off each side until she was out, where she cut to the side, once again hiding in an effort to close to where she had last saw Zero, hoping he hadn’t moved.

Ranma’s last magic bullet attack had actually done some damage, having caught Zero in his eye as he finished shouting his own spell. It had seared his eye somewhat though it hadn’t destroyed it, and he hadn’t moved very much howling in pain. His remaining eye however did see Ranma, who was forced to start dodging wildly as Zero roared in anger flaring out magical attack after attack.

For a moment, they were locked in a stalemate, with Ranma trying to close and Zero trying to kill him while remaining at range, having no desire to let Ranma close. Zero was furious his ultimate attack hadn’t done the job, but had no wish to let Ranma harm him further, and had realized that the redhead was very much a close in specialist.

Yet Zero didn’t know, and Ranma had kind of forgotten that he wasn’t in this alone. He had friends, including one reformed demoness. After another minute of this stalemate, that fact came back into play to bite the master of the Oración Seis where it hurt.

Seilah had left Mira with Jenny, and had flown up, landing on one corner of the town, flying not taking much magical effort for her, thankfully. She stood there, staring around with interest at it, before kneeling down, pressing her hands to the device, and with a grimace concentrated her will and magic into Nirvana. “Macro: Halt in Place!”

For all its size, Nirvana was a single object, if slightly alive thanks to decades of absorbing magic. That meant controlling it was somewhat simple in comparison to how Seilah had been forced to use her curse’s powers throughout the day, if far more energy intensive than she would have liked. It shuddered to a halt, slowly, but it did start to slow, then stop, eventually unable to shift its feet under the power of her will.

Blood began to drip from Seilah’s mouth, and the bindings on her wound also turned red as she gritted her teeth, pouring out her life force into her magic. But Seilah, determined to do what she could to atone for her earlier actions, bore down, and the almost animalistic mind of Nirvana could not overcome her.

The sudden cessation of movement threw Zero off his stride and his attacks halted for a brief second. Yet that brief second was enough for Ranma. The next instant she was in Zero’s face, a hand flashing for his chest in a slash rather than a punch or chop. Water Dragon Slayer power tipped her finger swirling as fast as Ranma’s will could force them to go, creating claws about an inch long of water that was moving about as fast as the water attacks he had used in his earlier feral state. It wasn’t much, but those inch long claws of water punched straight through flesh, muscle, heart and bone as they raked straight across Zero’s chest, all of his durability no match for the pinpoint power of the assault, as Ranma shouted, “Soryu no Tekketsu Kagitsume (Water Dragon's Gouging Claw)!”

Zero died before his body even hit the ground, his red eyes clouding over as his body fell back onto the unfeeling ground of Nirvana.

With a tired sigh, Ranma stared down at Zero’s body for a second before she turned away, moving back through the city slowly, one hand coming up to rest on her face, which had taken a blast right before Nirvana had juddered to a halt. She moved even slower now, exhaustion hitting both mind and body. But she still had a job to do, though honestly no idea how to do it just yet. “How the heck are we going to stop this thing now?”

A second later he felt someone trying to connect to her mind, a feeling he had only felt a few times before, but she still allowed it and felt as well as heard the impact of Seilah's mental words on her own mind, cool and almost soothing. She informed him that Erza, Mira and several others were on their way up, with Mira and Erza carrying Hoteye, Bacchus and Loke.

Moments later, Erza and Bacchus met Ranma by the central control, where she was kneeling by Ultear. Mira and Seilah were not with them. Seilah could not move, such was the attention needed on keeping Nirvana from moving. She could though keep the Thought Projection going. Mira on the other hand, was simply unwilling to let Seilah alone for a moment, a part of her waiting, almost hoping for Seilah to revert so she could finish her off and eat her soul.

Kneeling there, Ranma felt for a pulse and found one surprisingly enough. It was weak but it was there, and Ranma estimated that if they could get her some help quickly enough, she'd be able to recover for the most part. Her foot though, was another story. It was missing several toes, and was seared nearly to look more like a piece of charred meat than an actual human foot.  *Even if Wendy was standing right here I don't know if she'd be able to do much about that, shit what the heck hit her?* It didn’t occur to Ranma that the same attacks she’d been dealing with from Zero had done this in a single shot.

“What do we do?” she asked bluntly, looking up at the others and pushing herself to her feet. The adrenaline had long since left her body, leaving Ranma in more pain than she had **ever** been, even back in his old world when he had been struck by hot and cold water at once. *Shit, all that shifting my body did earlier and the rest of the damage I’ve taken is really taking a toll.* Even so, she powered through it, grabbing at some nearby rocks to remain upright.

Seilah frowned, looking around and thinking hard before speaking through the Thought Projection*.* “I think we can destroy it. Indeed, I think we must do so to end its threat.”

“With the controls busted that’s a given.” Ranma replied along that same link, as he gestured towards them then down towards Ultear again despite Seilah not being able to see. “The controls must’ve been busted at some point during Brain and Ultear’s fight. But it doesn't exactly leave us with any way to really order this thing to a stop, unless you can keep doing it indefinitely?” he asked addressing Seilah.

Seilah shook her head, blood continuing to drip from her mouth as she hissed out the words through clenched teeth as she replied back through the magic. “Even now, it is trying to fight my control. I am so weak at the moment, it may well break through within another five minutes. Whatever you need to do, you had best do it now!”

“And Jenny's still down there,” Ranma said grimly, causing the others to nod. “Seilah, can you order it to back away?”

“I… can,” Seilah said as more blood dripped from under Erza’s Nurse Armor bandages and she started to feel feint. “My order does not matter. The time it will take this thing to power through my command will not change.”

“Good, order it away, back and deeper into the Woodsea. As soon as we’re twenty miles away or so, we’ll start trying to destroy this thing.” Ranma ordered.

“How?” Bacchus asked, wiping at his mouth. He had just downed an emergency jolt of whiskey, so he was no longer as painfully sober, but he still felt a hell of a lot weaker than he liked, and also felt far more pain too. “We saw the way that leg you chopped off regenerated.”

“I believe I can help with that,” said a voice from nearby. The trio of mages turned swiftly, swords coming up and magic coalescing only to pause and stare at the spirit that floated before them.

It was of a small, slim old man with a long white beard and mustache combo that grew up into sideburns, which in turn merged with two bushy eyebrows. His forehead showed a tattoo, composed of a dot surrounded by two arches of the same red color. His chest was bare, but he wore a pair of pants at least, and on his head he wore something like something Ranma had seen in some cartoons set in the American Wild West. “If you wish to destroy this creation of ours, the madness of my people, I will gladly give you my aid.”

“What are you?” Ranma asked with a growl in her tone.

“I am Roubaul, the last spirit of the Nirvit people. We created this object. I have long stood guard over it. I felt the defenses upon it break earlier, and I attempted to aid that young woman there in her fight against Brain with my knowledge of this device, but we failed. His alternate form was too strong for her to overcome once it took over.” The man replied, shaking his head gravely.

“Okay, great, whatever, we don’t have time for a history lesson,” Ranma said as Nirvana reversed course and moved away from where Jenny still lay on the ground beneath them. “Just tell us what we have to do!”

“At the joint point where every leg grows out of the body of Nirvana is a giant lacrima. These power the legs, and its magical intake as well as its regeneration. They must all be shattered within a second of one another, or else the others will power the instant repair function, and you will be back to square one,” Roubaul replied quickly.

Mira frowned looking down at Seilah and reluctantly speaking up through the Thought Projection, an image of the old man having appeared before them too to relay his message. “There are eight legs, and only six of us. I doubt that Seilah is up to even moving, let along doing any offensive magic.”

“I can destroy two of them I think if anyone has any water I can drink,” Ranma said, clenching and unclenching her hands. “I won't be worth much afterwards though.” *Fuck if I know if I’ll even be able to walk.*

“I can do so as well,” Erza said nodding staunchly even as a part of her quailed at using that much magic after the day they’d had.

“As for water,” Loke said with a frown. “What about that urn you stole from Aquarius?”

“Doesn’t work when separated from her apparently,” Ranma said with a shrug. “Trust me I tried that, like, the very next day after I took it from her. If it was a source of endless water I doubt I’d ever give it back to her, whatever I told Lucy at the time.” *And holy hell would that have made this job easier!*

“That’s a pity.” Erza frowned, then asked, “I have a bottle of watered-down wine I keep in my Requip space to switch out with alcohol when I can’t get out of seeming to drink at upscale events. Will that do?”

“Oy, I want some of that!” Bacchus groused, but he fell silent as Ranma glared at him.

“You don’t need the alcohol to fuel your magic, me, I need its water content.” The redhead held out a hand towards her fellow redhead. “Gimme.”

A moment later, she had drained the wine bottle entirely and could feel the water content of it filling up her reserves far more than the bit of water at the bottom of the well had. She nodded in thanks to Erza before signaling she was ready, and with that they all leaped away and down onto the rooftops of the city and away. Soon they were all in position with the spirit directing them where they had to go from the central pyramid via the spirit’s own Thought Projection.

The lacrima were each held in small basement-like structures directly above where the mass of Nirvana led down into the legs. The lacrima in question were giant spheres, easily the size of an adult standing up, and was just as wide, held aloft on tinny glass girders over stone plinths. They glowed white with the magic they were drawing from the environment, but there weren’t any defenses around them thankfully.

Once in position, they had to wait as Ranma gathered her energies, having very little magical power left and needing to concentrate it all as she could. But then, at the command, they all attacked as one, shattering the lacrima.

Erza’s attack, was two weapons, as she wore her full Lightning Empress Armor. At the same time she had called upon Benizakura, the sword able to translate her magical power into a blade for maximum offense. The hurled lightning glaive destroyed her second target, timed so as to happen at precisely the same instant as everyone else’s attack.

Ranma could barely concentrate on two attacks at once, but she did it. Standing directly between her two targets, Ranma roared and thrust out her hands to either side, screaming out, “Soryu no Tsuukan Shita (Water Dragon’s Piercing Tongue)!” The two attacks were tiny in radius, barely as wide as her thumb. But they still went far enough to drilled through the target buildings and the lacrima within.

Feeling the will of Nirvana abruptly vanish to her senses, Seilah let loose her control over Nirvana. It shuddered in place, then between one second and the next started to simply… come apart. The groaning of stone on stone rose to a near-tortuous level, as if all of the concrete connecting one stone to another had simply dissolved, leaving the stones to fall towards the ground as they should.

From where she stood Ranma blinked woozily, collapsing to her knees and then her side, gasping for air. Only then did the shaking of the ground underneath register and she muttered, “Well shit,” as the entire Nirvana structure collapsed on the group to the ground with the seven mages still aboard it.

Minutes later as the dust settled and the ride finally started to subside, Ranma groaned, and wearily pushed herself out from underneath a few of the rocks that had fallen on her, raising her head to the sky and shouting, “Anyone alive out there?!”

Her friends slowly started to shout out that they were still alive, and she sighed and nodded, moving resolutely towards the nearest voice, which happened to be Erza's. Several minutes later, they had all found one another. Ranma tensed then looking at Seilah, and wondering if now whatever mental change had overcome her would revert, but she showed no interest in leaving, simply leaning and being leaned on in turn by Hoteye, who had been the closest one to the devil girl to one side, with Mira the other. Mira in turn was helping Bacchus along, who looked very much the worst for wear of all of them despite still being on his feet. Mira though was still glaring death at Seilah, while Erza moved to her side, conjuring up her Nurse Armor once more to replace the bindings on the Devil girl’s chest.

With that worry abated for now, Ranma led the way through the ruined structure where they soon found Ultear thanks to her nose, swaying from side to side and occasionally stopping to rest. When they at last arrived, the spirit of the last Nirvit was nowhere to be seen. Ranma supposed the old guy had finally gone to his rest or something similar, but frankly she was too fucking tire to care.

None of them said a word as Loke lifted Ultear into her arms, and Ranma turned, leading the way into the forest beyond and where they had been forced to leave Jenny. None of them had any energy to talk, to celebrate or even to question Seilah further on everything that had occurred today. They had won, at a horrendous cost, a cost that even now didn't yet know the entirety of. But for now, at least the fight was over. That would have to do.

**End Chapter**