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

**Chapter 18: Journeying with Dragons**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Books?” Wendy and Bisca asked in unison.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“An extra horse,” Ranma said.

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

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

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

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

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

“What’s steampunk?” Wendy asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“True Wizard Saints?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**OOOOOOO**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**OOOOOOO**

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

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

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

“Actually, it can,” Ranma replied.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**OOOOOOO**

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

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

“You are called Ultear then, councilwoman?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**OOOOOOO**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ranma hopped up to land beside her on the rooftop, then moved off quickly, coming back within seconds as the others walked through the town, finding it indeed empty. “Yeah, there’s nothing here for us, no inn, the bars look so rundown and smelly I don’t want ta go near them and there’s no one around either. Seilah’s right, let’s just move on.”

Shrugging Bisca nodded, pulling out a map. “If we leave town there should be a road leading deeper into Minstrel, that’ll split soon into two roads, where we’ll need to take the leftmost fork. That road will eventually start going southeast, towards Desierto. It’ll first lead us into another, much larger, town. It’s called Zòumíngqǔ and a lot of the towns and villages along the coast lead to there. If I can find a trail of my quarry anywhere it will be there.”

“Will this Zòumíngqǔ have books?” Seilah asked seriously.

Carla rolled her eyes at Seilah’s single-minded obsession with reading, but said nothing. She and Wendy had argued once already about the demon woman. Carla did not like Wendy’s liking of the demon girl, feeling she and Ranma were being far too trusting. Heck, even Erza seemed to believe that Seilah had become good for some reason, just because of a mind-altering magic which had since faded and a desire, before that event admittedly, to not injure Wendy. *In Ranma’s case I imagine it’s hormones, but in the other two, they are simply too soft for their own good!*

Instead of arguing about it however, she hopped up behind Wendy as Erza boosted the younger girl into the saddle before reluctantly turning to her own mount.

Bisca too didn’t really trust Seilah all that much, and shook her head. “You think you’re in a position to make demands like that? In what universe to even prisoners who’ve given their parole make demands of their captors?”

“Since she ain’t a prisoner and can pay for the books I don’t see a problem,” Ranma said with a shrug. “Besides, I have a trick I can use ta find her if she tries to run, and she knows it.”

Seilah flinched at that, but nodded, and after a moment Bisca let the matter drop. They all hopped onto the horses save Ranma and then Bisca added five more horses from the town’s stables, figuring the people here were in no position to use them.

With those remounts and Ranma’s natural speed, plus Seilah flying occasionally with Wendy to rest the horses more, although Ranma complained, “How the heck that horse can be tired after only carrying around your tiny weight is beyond me” they set a very brisk pace. They only had to spend one night out in the tent before reaching Zòumíngqǔ.

This was in fact the first night they would all spend in the tent. While Bisca had been in it before and Seilah had lived in it since the battle in the Worth Woodsea, Erza had never been inside it before, and as she entered she blinked in surprise, then smiled as she saw all the homey, little touches that Ranma and Wendy had added over the years. Stopping she examined the ladybug light before winking over at Wendy. “It’s very pretty, did you pick this out?”

Wendy suddenly looked shy while Bisca rubbed her hair affectionately and Seilah moved over to a few of their large beanbag sofas, sitting down in it in a surprisingly graceful move, ruined a moment later by her twisting around and showing them all her kimono clad rump for a moment as she pulled out a book, nestling down into the beanbag with a sigh of pleasure. While Ranma blushed and shook himself, Wendy nodded to Erza’s question. “Mm, I picked that out, but I had help drawing the pictures on the interior of the tent.”

“They are very good,” Erza replied with a smile exchanging a look with Bisca, and then asked Wendy to show her around the place while Ranma pulled out several extra blankets. With all of them there, there were two too many people for the number of sleeping bags they had, even with Wendy and Carla doubled up as they were. Bisca had her own, but neither Erza nor Seilah did. This would prove a problem later on, but for now, they could get by with the number of extra blankets they had.

Once they reached Zòumíngqǔ the group split up almost naturally. Ranma went to find an inn, Wendy and Carla went to find food for the next leg of their journey. Erza moved around the town with Bisca, asking questions about the group of Fiore ex-pats who had fled the country with their fraudulent earnings. And Seilah split off entirely to find a bookstore. They agreed to meet up for dinner at a small restaurant near the center of town they were referred to by the town watchmen who welcomed them to the town.

Thankfully for all concerned since her attitude had begun to turn rather grumpy and standoffish, Seilah’ obsession was well and truly catered to by Zòumíngqǔ. It was one of Minstrel’s chief printing centers, and as such had numerous small-scale bookstores. Seilah had a lot of fun exploring them, so much so she was late to meet up with the others.

They all sat down, figuring she’d turn up soon, although Bisca and Carla still had reservations about how much freedom the Demon woman was being given by Ranma. Yet somehow she had no desire to leave, seemingly fascinated by Ranma and Wendy, if for very different reasons. Ranma didn’t even look up at them as they speculated about where she could be, looking at Wendy in confusion. “Milk, really? Just plain strawberry milk, I’d have thought that a bit too sweet to have with dinner.”

“Um, no reason, I just felt like having some milk, that’s all,” Wendy replied, her eyes shifting away, sheepishly. *Seilah said this is her favorite drink and Erza said she liked it a lot when she was younger, so maybe…*

Looking at the little girl and biting her lip to keep from laughing, as she understood the real reason behind the milk, Bisca sighed and let the question of Seilah slide to one side for now. “So I was able to find a few innkeepers, bar hangers and even the local town watch but I need to check in with them after this. I want to make certain about some of their info later after we eat. But I can already tell you one thing: the last few shipments of slaves that would have passed through this town instead were diverted into Desierto.”

“Wait, what? No way would even the southern tribes put up with that. They might enslave their neighbors and stuff in their internecine wars, but buying foreign slaves? For what? They wouldn’t have the food to feed them, nothing for them to do, not that large a group,” Ranma objected.

“Agreed, the ranchers in the north wouldn’t use slaves either, but they were all sent that way, and bought and guarded by one person,” Bisca replied grimly. “She was described as a tall woman with tan skin, with armored greaves on her legs up to her hips, traditional Desierto clothing, with her silver hair done up to resemble ears.”

“That sounds like that bunny girl Natsu was raving about, the one he met during the battle to rescue Laxus, the one whose smell drove him wild,” Erza scowled. “What could Raven Tail have been doing with those slaves?”

“Wait, Natsu was raving about some dark mage girl?” Bisca asked, looking between Ranma and Erza. “Anna and Lisanna are going to be crushed.”

“Nah, he wasn’t raving about her in that way, he was praising the way she fought and the fact her smell made him want to eat her. She smelled, and this is a Natsu-quote ‘like the world’s largest, most mouth-watering bunny you just wanted to gobble her down’,” Ranma replied drolly.

“Ah, and then Gajeel chimed in agreeing with him, and said something like ‘and not in a good way either’,” Erza replied drolly, shaking her head.

Bisca blushed hotly at that joke, staring at Erza in some shock before she spotted the flush on the redhead’s face, then she calmed down a bit, smiling but also changing the subject. “Anyway, this place was able to shift gears to being a printing center, but there are still a lot of people who look back on those days positively. And word of ‘Ranma the pigtailed destroyer’ has spread to here too. We might want to set a watch tonight just in case.”

Wendy giggled, shaking her head as she hopped off her own chair into Ranma’s lap, pointing up at his face. “Nope, all we need to do is, just have us all in the tent and Ranma sleeping outside right in front of the door. That’d protect us all for sure.”

“Indeed, he would be a perfect guard dog in that case,” Carla added, with a smirk on her face as she looked at Ranma.

“That is so true, and yet at the same time, OY!!” Ranma groused, holding Wendy against him, gently tickling her sides while not letting her wiggle away.

Watching this Bisca shook her head. Bisca had seen how close they were before this, but it was still telling*. Ranma may not believe he’s good with kids, but that doesn’t mean it’s fact,* she mused*. While I’m nowhere near in a rush to settle down that’s still good to know for the future.*

Erza too was interested, but also knew that Ranma had no interest in creating more of a family than he already had, and why. Not just because of his wanderlust or Ranger status, but because he might well live for centuries with his body not aging any further than it already had. That didn’t mean she knew what this joke he and Wendy were laughing about was, though. “What are you talking about? Surely you can be attacked while asleep just like anyone else Ranma?”

Elsewhere, Seilah had found another bookstore to pursue on her way to the restaurant. This was an even smaller bookstore than most, although it had been oddly crowded before she entered, with several dozen men moving about. After she had, it had emptied quickly for some reason, despite her not using her Macro curse to make it so. Now she stood, frowning in introspection as she looked at a series of images the book was describing. “I do not think this is physically possible,” She mused aloud. “While I like fantasy stories I prefer to know they are fantasy stories rather than biographical as this book professes to be.”

“Now hold on miss,” said the storeowner. He had been watching her, his eyes latched onto Seilah’s chest despite her cloak, his breathing becoming oddly heavy as she stayed there. “I’ll have you know everything in that book is based on a real life account.” He began to breathe in and out heavily as he stared at her, his eyes turning almost glossy. “Hur, hur, hur, we could, hur, hur, try some of them out and see if you like.”

Seilah looked at him blankly for a second then shook her head and placed the book on the desk in front of him. “Wait. I will return.” With that she left, leaving the proprietor looking rather confused behind her.

Waling the two blocks to the restaurant took no time at all, and she spotted Ranma and the others easily among the crowd. *That red hair of Erza’s is rather distinctive.*

Ranma saw her coming and waved her over, while the others turned to watch. Erza just nodded, while Bisca cocked her head to one side, studying Seilah thoughtfully. “Hey Seilah, you’re late, did you find any bookstores?”

“Over a dozen actually. However right now, I want your opinion on something. Come with me,” Seilah said, reaching down and pulling Ranma out of his chair. Ranma didn’t fight this, instead letting Seilah drag him along, amusement plain in his face.

Leaving her drink behind Wendy hopped after them along with Erza, wondering aloud what Seilah had found. Bisca shrugged and followed them. “You coming Carla?”

“I think not. Given the night rush that’s occurring someone should stay here to keep our table. And to make certain the waiter doesn’t think we’ve done a dine and dash. Ranma and Wendy have done that a time or two, for ‘training purposes’,” the cat-girl said, rolling her eyes and making quote marks with her fingers.

Chuckling at that, Bisca moved after the others. Soon though, she spotted a change in the nature of the shops. They entered an area lined with bookstores soon after that, but of all the bookstores to lead them to, Seilah led them to the smallest of the lot. One with a pink sign and doorway. Narrowing her eyes, Bisca stopped Wendy from following the others, poking her head inside after Erza entered. Sure enough, the store was an adult bookstore.

“Nope,” Bisca intoned solemnly, blushing brightly as she turned Wendy away. “Nope, nope, nope. Not going there.”

Inside, Ranma wished he had spotted those clues before Seilah had pulled him inside. Now he stood, trying to control his heartbeat, staring straight ahead of him as Seilah marched to the back of the store and picked up a book from a pile of others. Beside him, Erza was also blushing, but looking around with interest despite that. “U, um, Seilah, what…”

“I want you to tell me if this is humanly possible,” Seilah replied, turning and moving to hold up a book with a series of illustrations in front of him.

Ranma barely had time to read the header of the book, which read as ‘Adventures of the Lust Dragon Slayer, The Special Edition before the image in the book nearly caused him to die by nosebleed. Yet despite that, Ranma couldn’t help himself from cocking his head to one side, then moving his hands this way and that as he tried to work out the image. “Um… I think so, but only by gymnasts and other people with really extreme levels of flexibility.”

Shaking his head, Ranma turned and practically disappeared as he raced to the door. Even with his control and knowledge having been expanded through conversations with the girls from Melona’s there was a limit to what Ranma could handle like this.

“... How odd,” Seilah mused, then shrugged. “Still, if that one scene is true to life then perhaps the rest is as well. Although I still do not believe it is a real biography.”

Erza looked at the door and then sidled up to Seilah’s side. “\*Ahem\*, So… do you have any recommendations?”

Outside, Ranma passed Bisca quickly, grabbing up Wendy and holding her in front of his face was to hide the monster blush he was sporting, although this did nothing to hide the issues he was having below the belt. Thankfully, as long as he stayed in front of Bisca she couldn’t see it. ‘Well, that was interesting, now let’s go have some dinner right?!”

Nodding silently and dealing with her own blush Bisca followed behind them. It took a while for Seilah and Erza to rejoin them carrying several bags of books, but thankfully none of them were marked by the pink glyph for that particular store. *Knowing my luck that just means that Erza has them in her Requip space.* The two of them chattered together about this or that novel throughout dinner and as they walked with Ranma to the inn he had found earlier, with Bisca splitting off for a moment. With it becoming night out, none of them were willing to travel further that day.

After having left the others behind for a time, Bisca entered the room Ranma had rented out, and was amused to find that as if they had been talking about before. Ranma had indeed set up the tent in the center of the room, with one bed pushed against the wall so that once they started to sleep, Ranma would just flip it onto its side to block the windows. The other bed remained, but Ranma had already pushed it out from the wall so that it was directly in front of the door. Bisca had to skirt around it, shaking her head with amusement as she did.

On that bed Wendy and Carla sprawled beside Ranma, the two of them reading avidly from a steampunk novel called Girl Genius that Seilah had recommended for her. Carla and Ranma had to help Wendy with some of the words, but Wendy seemed to be enjoying it a lot, making Carla somewhat chagrined since it was obviously another mark in Seilah’s favor. Seilah and Erza sat nearby on the floor using some of the pillows from the tent, one reading quietly, the other asking her some questions while cleaning some of her weapons, the first answering those questions in an absentminded manner.

 “Hey Bisca, You were saying earlier you might have found a trail of your quarry?” Ranma asked, looking up at the green-haired cowgirl.

“Yep, my contacts from earlier that were willing to talk to me about the foursome I’m after came through. Apparently, their arrogance and the way they threw around magic and money rubbed people the wrong way. But they are indeed heading into northern Desierto, the info the job’s owner passed on was right on that one.”

“I do wonder how he figured that part out,” Erza mused.

“Part of what they stole was a gem with some kind of magical tracker on it,” Bisca supplied. “Anyway, the longer the trail has to get cold, the more area they can cover, and believe me that’s not something we want. Desierto’s northern territories are just… you’ll have to see it to believe how harsh the area is. People say bandits always take to the mountains, and that might be true, but for people to truly disappear, you can’t go too far wrong with a vast expanse of mixed up badlands.” Bisca smiled a vicious sort of smile then, “Unless someone’s right on your heels of course.”

**OOOOOOO**

Ultear sighed, leaning back in her chair in the private carriage she had been given as a Councilwoman. This was a good thing, considering that later tonight she would need to give a verbal report to her ostensible real master, Hades. She was not looking forward to that, for obvious reasons. *I’m honestly not certain if I can lie to him. Hades always seems to know more about people and what is going on than is good for them, and considering the stakes I’m now playing for I can’t afford to hint at anything that could give the game away. Not until I have Meredy away from Hades and his guild. And what he might do to me or Meredy if he discovers I’ve turned against him…*

The fear of this last thought was enough to set her pulse to racing and make her hands clammy. Because of this, Ultear drank through several glasses of wine where normally she would only have the one while going over her notes for the upcoming meeting.

Later that night, she was still reading through her notes thinking with hope in her heart that perhaps master Hades wouldn’t call her just yet, when, in a perfect example of the phrase ‘speaking of the devil’, her secret communication lacrima activated, and the old man’s voice came through.

A moment later, the image of Hades glowed in the Lacrima and she held it up to her face, letting him see her in turn. “You missed our last scheduled communication. The last we heard, you were due to meet the Ranger-led team sent to take down Brain’s group. Explain what happened,” Hades said without preamble. “I understand that something momentous has occurred, my spies in Seven have already reported about a great turmoil in the government there, and there are even rumors that someone among the Oración Seis was caught…” He finished leadingly, one wintry eyebrow cocked in query.

“Yes master. Would you like it in order, or should I skip ahead to that question?” Ultear began, leaning back and trying to project an air of calm as her master’s hologram grew out of the lacrima, almost glaring at her with his one good eye. *You’re used to being a spy Ultear, just because you’re now a double agent is no reason to lose your cool!*

For a moment Hades just looked at her, and Ultear fought to not show any reaction, simply staring back at him, projecting a professional yet weary air that she hoped the man bought. He seemed too, and he smiled slightly. “You don’t seem any worse the wear, whatever occurred. Explain from the beginning then. I always prefer to hear things in order after all.”

Ultear bowed her head, and began from the moment she and Gajeel got off the train, moving through the poisoning before mentioning the battle Ranma had with the two dark guilds and their lackeys. From there she somewhat leaped ahead, into the battles in the woods and her part, before going back and saying, “Yet while all that was happening, there was another group involved in all this. The demons of Tartaros seem to have decided that the Oración Seis needed to be sacrificed as well master, and they were waiting nearby to strike in force.”

That brought a startled look to Hade’s face and actually a bit of fear too. It was the first time Ultear could remember seeing that expression there and she tried not to revel in it, but it was hard. *You will pay for using me Hades!*

She watched as Hades regained control of himself, then began to ask her rapid-fire questions about the Demon’s involvement in the battle. Ultear answered them all, but had to preface her responses by saying that she personally hadn’t fought any of the Devils, she had been unconscious for much of it, her battle with Brain having gone against her. She was very honest about that portion of the fight, but only said that Brain had attacked her after she had released Nirvana.

Hades stared at her for a long time after she said that. “I see. His taunting you about your shared past that must’ve been very difficult to deal with,” he probed lightly.

“Only somewhat master,” Ultear replied. “You know I blame my mother more than the Institute for what occurred to me after all. Scientists cannot be held accountable for their actions when they are given such gifts after all, guinea pigs with no oversight around? But a mother, a mother should take care of her child shouldn’t they.”

Hades nodded slowly, still looking at her before he went on abruptly. “Describe these demons.”

Ultear did so from the descriptions she’d been given and Hades frowned. “This is both good and bad,” he said aloud. The fact that the demons were willing to operate so openly against Ranma, that is telling of how they see his threat level. They will know, as we do, that if we are too open in our activities, the countries will band together and beg the Wizard Saints to do the same. We could beat any one of the Wizard Saints, if the Guild was together and fought well. But two, or three? No, that would end us. I would have assumed the same was true of Tartaros, and doubly so now that they have lost three of their members. I do not know how strong they are, but surely losing three demons will hurt them almost as badly as such would hurt anyone else.”

“I can’t say anything about that master,” Ultear replied honestly. “I believe you would be correct in that, but we don’t know what their motivations were, only that they attempted to retreat rather than face Ranma in his mad Devil Slayer form and died before they could.”

Ranma hadn’t told Ultear about Seilah of course. He had told her one of the Demons had trash-talked during the battle, giving them all the information Seilah had given them.

“Where is this Ranger now?” Hades asked abruptly.

“I do not know. King Toma asked him not to return to Fiore for a time and to lie low apparently. Whether or not Ranma Oceana is actually able to do so given his personality is anyone’s guess,” Ultear finished dryly.

Hades actually chuckled at that. “Yes, your comments last time about not letting him and Azuma meet were well-founded. Do you have no idea where Oceana would go?”

“Only mumblings about being sent down to try to find Raven Tail’s headquarters by the king of Seven, master,” Ultear replied. “I’d hesitate to act on such though,” she cautioned, having no desire for Ranma, who was if not an ally, at least not an enemy, to face off against Hades or whoever else he might send after Oceana.

“The general vicinity of it has been known for a while, it is simply getting to it with enough force to do something about it that has eluded people. Desierto is neutral territory and generally lawless, which serves everyone far too well,” Hades murmured.

When Ultear blinked at that, the old man noticed but waved off her confusion. “Oh, the King of Pergrande is always making noises about what he’d do if he shared a border, but he doesn’t, and that is all it is, noise. Ignore it. And yet, the demons being on the move like this, that concerns me.”

Ultear looked at him hoping for an explanation, but Hades shook his head then looked at her sharply. “Your cover on the Council, it is still intact?”

“It is. No one was around when Brain and I had our confrontation, no one overheard our words to one another then. I still say I would’ve one if not for his cheating with that second personality thing,” Ultear grumbled, allowing a bit of actual anger to shine through for a moment.

“Very well, then you will remain in place for now. FACE still concerns me, even if your magic would be a perfect tool to destroy the Ethernano cannon. Retain your cover for now, if anything changes with FACE however, if you learn how to control it, or even how to deactivate it, take action at once. Do not wait for orders for me.”

Ultear nodded then the old man went on, and her heart nearly stopped. “I think I will assign Meredy the duty of trying to track down these Demons along with Ajax. I think we need to know more about Tartaros than we have in the past.”

“Are you sure that’s wise master?” Ultear asked, trying desperately to keep most of her concern out of her voice. Some concern was good, Hades wouldn’t believe anything else when it came to Meredy, but too much would be a very bad thing. “Surely following any hints of where the Keys of Destiny would be would be a better idea, bring us closer to our goal. After we have revived Zeref, the world would fall into our lap.”

“We have three of them already in our possession, I know where two of them are, and the parts for the sixth will fall into my hands soon enough, after which your powers can repair it easily enough,” Hades said a slight smile. “For the last two, I have no need of Ajax and Meredy, our newest addition, Bluenote will suffice and letting him rage for a bit will calm him down somewhat.”

“Very well master,” Ultear said, knowing she couldn’t push right now. “Who will you send to pick up a written version of my report?”

“One of our minor members I believe, perhaps the Yomazu, or Kawazu. Regardless, they will arrive a day after you to receive the written version of your report. I look forward to reading it,” Hades said.

Something in his tone made Ultear shiver even as Hades ended the communique, but there was nothing she could do about that, just making certain that Hades couldn’t find anything at fault in her report. *Or else I might not be the only one to pay for it.*

**OOOOOOO**

The northern territories of Desierto were something like Ranma knew Mongolia to be like: empty, with a lot of rolling plains, mountains here and there, rocks, deserts and just generally inhospitable terrain. The only difference was the heat, which was extreme during the day and plunged during the night. But with the abundance of plains the area was fit for cattle, if you had them in the first place and could bring them into the country.

This was proven within an hour of having crossed the border. Bisca and the others halted, alongside Ranma staring to one side at the large herd of cows and cattle coming towards them. There were thousands of them, and Ranma was reminded of a picture of herds of cattle from Australia, which he supposed some of this area actually kind of looked like. “So,” he asked looking up at Bisca on her horse, “where to?”

She pulled out a compass, and pointed away to Ranma’s right. “That way is south. We’ll need to go in that direction when we start for where Raven Tail’s base is supposed to be. Do we want to do that, or find the bounty heads first?”

Ranma thought about it for a minute, scratching at his pigtail thoughtfully then looking over to Erza. “Opinions?”

“Not much of one,” Erza said with a shake of her head. “If we capture that group however, would we have to keep them with us, or could drop them off somewhere out here?”

“If we pay the cattle owners to watch them they will. And considering that these four are supposed to have escaped with a lot of money, it won’t even be expensive for us,” Bisca said with a sly nod.

Ranma chuckled dryly at that. “Good point. In that case, let’s go after your bounties first. If you’re sure, you know where they’re heading?

“These four are city boys at heart. They’ll want to make their way across Desierto to Bell Lake, and from then into the city state itself. They’ll go straight across the prairies,” she said authoritatively.

“Why not down to the Straight Path?” Ranma asked.

“Because the area around the Straight Path isn’t all that safe. Up here, you have to deal with Prairie lions, the occasional animal down from the mountains, and the local variety of wolves, but even with all of that it’s better than further south,” Bisca replied promptly. “If I was going in that direction I certainly wouldn’t go out of my way down into the desert part of Desierto.”

Ranma nodded equably at that, and gestured her forward. “In that case, after you.”

Bisca mock-curtsied from the saddle and with a quiet whisper sent her horse forward. As the horse moved forward, Bisca looked down at the ground to either side, frowning.

“How long has it been since they passed through Zòumíngqǔ? And can you really pick up a trail out here?” Ranma asked, watching her intently, and not just because her leaning over like that put her chest on magnificent display. He was decent at picking up a scent, literally, and tracking animals and people, but even he would have said that trying to track a group over this kind of terrain would be the next best thing to impossible.

And as it turned out, Bisca wasn’t trying to find a trail like that, rather she was trying to figure out the lay of the land. “No, but it isn’t really necessary. Strangers in this area will always be spotted by someone. And while most people wouldn’t care one way or the other, they’ll talk about that kind of thing. And we’re only about two days behind them. We can make that time up easily I think, once someone points us in the right direction. Do you two think you can pick up a scent?” She asked, looking at the two Dragon Slayers.

Wendy shook her head. “Everything is new to me here,” she confessed. “I wouldn’t know where to begin.”

Ranma to shook his head. “We’d need to know what they’d smelled like at the very least. And unfortunately we don’t. We need a starting point, maybe something that smells like them?”

“In that case, it’s the paying for information method,” Bisca said with a sigh.

With that, Bisca took the lead once more, the others following behind her. The cattlemen quickly spotted them, and two men on horseback peeled off from the group around the cattle, waving them to a halt.

Ranma and the others complied, and the two men rode their horses up to them, looking askance at Ranma. “You folks lose one o’ yer horses then?” One of them asked.

He had what Ranma would have instantly called the equivalent of a mid-western American accent. Ranma had met more than a few Marines from that area, and could recognize it easily. “The horse hasn’t been found that I can out run,” he said aloud, smirking at the two men.

They laughed, thinking he was making a joke, but Bisca stepped in. “My name’s Bisca, I’m a Fairy Tail mage out from Fiore. We’re after a group of four thieves and con artists, who are guilty of quite a lot of crimes back in Fiore, but most of all simply stealing. I don’t suppose you two could help me figure out where they went, could you?”

The two men looked at one another, then one man shrugged. “Reckon we could, for the right price anyway.”

A few moments of haggling what went back and forth, after which the men were a bit richer and more willing to share what they knew. “Those four fellers, they didn’t stick around here, no lie. They had six horses, two of ‘em was rotating through the one horse that they started with that what didn’t have a rider, and they even had some food. I don’t know if they brought water ‘long, though by this point if they didn’t it’d be far too late.

“Why do you think that?” Ranma asked.

“Because even if there are wells and streams up here water still scarce unless you know what to look for. Look around you boyo said one of the men, the oldest one of the two. “Tell me if you can spot water?”

Ranma sniffed the air, trying to push past the all cloying smell of grass, and the cattle to one side, which a part of him was telling him were just Meals on Wheels, and not just his Dragon Slayer instincts either. Then he smiled and pointed to one side of the route they had been following. “That way,” he said.

The two men exchanged glances. “Aye, you’re right enough,” said the younger man. “How’d you know?”

“I’m a water mage,” Ranma said with a smirk. “If I’m trying to, I can find water like you all could find a stray cow.”

“Still, there’s no way those four could pull off that trick. They’ll need to buy water from some of us cattle owners. You just keep asking, and one or another group will point you in the right direction. Although for my money, I’m thinking they were trying to make their way across rather than down if you see what I mean,” said one of the cattlemen.

After thanking the man, the group sent their horses into motion once more. For the rest of the day they passed three more groups like that, a few people on horseback with hundreds of cattle between them, their horses shaggy, but quick and sturdy little animals. Soon it was pushing nightfall, and Ranma was wondering if they should set up camp, when Wendy and Carla returned from a mid- flight.

“Ranma-nii, I can see a large bonfire out there. There’s a huge community out there, three or four times larger than the others we’ve seen today. Or maybe it’s one made of many joined together? Anyway, they’ve created a makeshift town for the night and have put up this massive tent in the middle” Wendy said, throwing her arms out wide gaining emphasis of how big it was.

“Some kind of formal meeting between a few groups?” Ranma asked looking at Bisca.

“Either a marriage or an issue about herding rights,” she said definitively. “Most of these ranchers stick to their own clan or family groups except at selling time. But they come together for weddings, especially if it’s between two different clans.”

“You think we’ll find any more information there?”

“I know so,” Bisca said with a nod, already urging her horse forward.

Chuckling Ranma followed after, with the others trailing behind him, Wendy lighting on his shoulder for a moment, before leaping back up into the air with Carla still clinging to her back in cat form, her Aero Wings out and flapping.

Soon enough, they reached the large encampment, only to be halted by a group of five boys on horses. They were younger than Ranma but older than Wendy, all of them on the little horses, riding towards them. “Hold on there, strangers! Unless yer willin’ to dance or sing fer your food ya won’t be welcome here tonight,” said one of them giggling the words, although their eyes were locked on Bisca and the other girls.

“Meh, we’re okay with dancing I guess, but we also need some information. As for singing, I can sing, but nothing too formal,” Ranma replied. “Will that do?”

At that the boys all looked at one another, kind of confused at Ranma’s easy acceptance of their conditions to enter the camp and now openly wondering if they actually had the authority to let people enter the camp at all. Seeing this, Erza suggested helpfully, “If you don’t know, why don’t you go and ask someone?”

The boys all blushed, looking between her, Seilah, Bisca and Wendy, until Ranma growled at him a little, crossing his arms angrily his whole attitude shifting. “I’m going to assume that this is the part where you go to find some one of your elders to see if they’re willing to let us in for the night Instead of ogling my companions or my little sister!” he growled, cracking his knuckles audibly.

The sound carried quite well over the grasslands, and the boys quickly turned and raced backwards towards the campground.

A few minutes later, an older man came out, walking on his own two feet, and waiting several hundred yards ahead of them, his hand raised in greeting friendship. “Howdy strangers, you’ve arrived at a good time! We’re celebrating not one, but two weddings tonight! Although I’m afraid, then you are going to have to either sing or dance if you want a part of our fire and food,” he said in a good-natured drawl.

Ranma laughed at that before looking over at the others. “Yeah those kids told us about that. Well? What do you think?”

Erza blushed. “Well,” she said hesitantly “I suppose I could dance.”

Bisca laughed, pulling off her hat and tossing in the air with a loud, “Yeehaw, you just try and stop me!”

“If we do not wish to partake of the food, do we still need to sing or dance?” Seilah asked. “I am afraid I have never tried either and have no interest in adding such skills to my story.”

“Well mysterious stranger, if you just want the hospitality of our camp, that’s fine so long as you got your own tent.”

“Oh, we’ve got our own tent,” Ranma said dryly. “Trust me on that one.”

That night, Ranma joined with a group of impromptu band members, talking quietly about what kind of music would be appropriate, how many songs they knew, and if they could learn any new ones. Mostly, he was just telling them what he was going to be doing. He couldn’t very well expect them to play along with anything he knew after only a few hours without any music sheets, and he already had a few magical instruments in his Requip space, which he could use to play the songs he wanted thanks to his oft-used cover as a bard.

Really, he just wanted to make sure that the songs he was thinking of playing were going to be if not appropriate, then at least accepted by the bride and groom. The groom was brought in, and he laughingly said that the songs sounded like a hell of a lot of fun to him. “Don’t know what my new bride’s going to feel though.”

“…I would go get her okay first. I wouldn’t want to be involved in any domestic violence issue between the two,” Ranma said worriedly. While his songs weren’t raunchy or anything like that, they didn’t even have dirty words in them, but they were certainly suggestive, and could be taken as somewhat demeaning if the woman was inclined to think that way.

Actually, it turned out that two brides were perfectly fine with it, so long as they and their new husbands got the first dance. Ranma of course had no issues with that, and the party was on.

The girls were a little more ambivalent about the entire event, something Erza gave voice to as they walked through the campsite, noticing all the looks they were getting. “Is it just me, or are there a lot more men here than women?”

Bisca shrugged in response to Erza’s question, while Carla nodded her head. “I noticed the same thing.”

“A lot more girls tend to leave the ranchers for, no pun intended, greener climes,” Bisca said at last.

“And where would that be around here?”

“Nowhere,” Bisca said simply. “The ladies who leave tend to work on the other side of the cattle selling business in the towns, or even the butchers. Or just leave it all behind when they come of age. I know I did, although to be fair my clan and most of those down south are a lot more patriarchal than they are around here. Here if a woman sticks around they can even rise to be head of their family or clan. Down there, never.”

Erza nodded at that, while Carla huffed. “Barbarians. Especially in this day and age, when magic is the great equalizer that seems horribly backward to me.”

When no one argued with Carla, Bisca looked over at Seilah. “Are you sure you don’t want to dance?”

“I’m quite positive I don’t know how to dance,” Seilah said tartly. “It isn’t something that Devils have ever been called upon to do. Besides, because we’ve been moving so often and going to sleep so early at night I haven’t had a chance to read more than three of my fifteen new books. Zòumíngqǔ had an entire series of mysteries that I had not even heard of before and they are quite good,” she said enthusiastically.

“You know,” Wendy said thoughtfully looking up at the tall demon girl “I’m thinking more and more that your idea of maybe building your own bookstore or library might be in the way to go for you in the future.”

Seilah shook her head, gesturing at her horns. “I rather doubt that any human would be willing to buy a book from a demon.”

“You’d be surprised,” Erza said shrugging winking at Carla. “I believe if we can get used to talking cats and talking cat-girls then getting used to demons will be easy, so long as they’re not actively trying to kill us anyway.”

While Seilah smiled at that, Carla frowned, tugging at her blonde hair. “I think I would rather join Seilah myself. I’ve never been that much of a dancer, especially given my size in comparison to most.” Saying that however was a ruse. She really wanted to keep an eye on the demon girl. Despite their days spent on the road, she was no closer to trusting Seilah than she had been when they first met. *She has to be up to something. Doesn’t she?*

“You can dance with me Carla,” Wendy said, hugging the cat girl from behind. “In fact I’d rather like it better that way. I don’t want to dance with strangers. So please?”

At that heartfelt plea, Carla had no defense, and she agreed to go with Wendy to the dance that evening. Bisca and Erza had no issues with dancing, and in fact went to the dual wedding beforehand, which they hadn’t had to, while Seilah stayed behind in their tent the entire night, contentedly reading from her books with no one to watch her, something both Carla and Bisca objected to ineffectually. They both thought it was deeply romantic, although the use of tanned leathers, horns, and horseshoes instead of roses, white lace and as decoration was kind of strange.

On the upside, the two girls hadn’t had to change their clothing much beyond Erza removing her swords. Bisca wore a pair of slightly longer shorts than normal, with a belt marked by loops of burnished bronze and copper disks and a tight blouse. Her hat was gone, and her hair was now tied in two long twined ponytails. She wore bracelets too, but even they didn’t really make her look dressed up per-se.

Erza however had changed a bit more, changing into a set of armor she called the Robe of Yuen that consisted of a purple kimono. It held a short sleeveless tunic decorated with flowers. The cut of it revealed a goodly portion of her cleavage and was also open on the sides. , It was held closed by a thick belt of flower-patterned silk circling Erza’s waist, tied at the side. She wore no jewelry, and her hair was left loose down her back.

Wendy had been rather in awe of Erza’s dress when she saw it and even Seilah had nodded in approval seeing the redhead in it. Indeed, they caused a bit of a commotion when they filed into the back of the tent being used for the two weddings. But eventually, after the weddings began, attention shifted to where it should have been all along: on the two brides as they were escorted down the aisle.

For a moment staring at the brides and grooms, Bisca could imagine herself walking down the aisle with someone six or so years down the line. Yet when she imagined the groom’s face, her imagination failed her, she couldn’t put Ranma’s face there for some reason and she frowned monetarily before shaking it off. Erza’s thoughts weren’t nearly as deep as that, she merely enjoyed the pageantry of it all.

Afterwards, the two girls met up with Wendy and joined the crowd of people entering into the largest tent. Inside they found it had been set up as a dancing area, wooden beams set along the earth to provide a floor. There were magic lights hanging from the ceilings and a few animals made from lights floating in places around the tent, and on a series of tables were punch and small finger foods of all sorts, set along one wall opposite Ranma and a group of would-be singers and musicians.

Ranma smiled at the girls, sending a wink their way before an older man beside him laughingly called up Jeremiah, Tomas, Sarah and Alicia, the new couples. “Let’s hear it for the happy couples!” the older man shouted, getting a cheering whopping cry from the people, shocking Wendy and Carla, who had already been gaping at how everyone was dressed. Weddings here were not exactly staid, respectful affairs it seemed, something that caused Wendy to smile widely while Carla simply rolled her eyes, her ears twitching among her hair.

“Now to start us off I present Ranma Oceana, who’s apparently been trained as a real-life bard over in Minstrel way!” the old man shouted, before gesturing Ranma forward.

“Hey all. This is a special song, and if you have issues with the way I sing, or my songs, I’ll apologize in advance but like the old man just said, me and mine are not from around here.”

That caused even more laughter, and some whistles from many of the men as they looked to Bisca and Erza. They both smiled and waved back, but didn’t do anything more to encourage the interest.

As they did, Ranma launched into his first song. “You drive me crazy, and I kind of like it, you showed me that apple girl, now I want to bite it. You make me crazy…”

By the end of the first song, everyone was on the dance floor with the two new married couples, switching partners, laughing and having fun. Ranma sang two more of his own songs which Bisca and the others hadn’t heard before, interspersing them with songs they had heard during the festival back in Magnolia and songs from the locals, where he would bow out and conduct a few of the magical, floating instruments to go along with them.

Through it all, Erza and Bisca felt Ranma’s eyes on them, as if he wasn’t singing for the crowd, no, he was singing for them. That might just have been an impression they had, but it was a powerful one, and both of them enjoyed it greatly. They both responded by dancing more wildly, moving towards him through the crowd and staying near the edge of the musicians area.

Bisca danced around and side to side smirking as Ranma sang out, “Shake it for me girl, shake it for me, oh country girl,” her moves emphasizing her rear and chest. At the same time, Erza actually danced like a fairy would, light on her feet, twirling, leaping, jumping into the air, her movements somehow enchanting rather than alluring. Both girls drew a lot of attention from the crowd around them, but refused all advances, moving away deliberately from anyone who tried to approach them, oftentimes using Wendy or Carla as shields against the more persistent.

For their part, Carla and Wendy had found a few other young boys and girls going to the after-party, mostly thirteen and younger, and begun to dance around with them after the first song. Carla was of course a big hit, since most boys and girls liked cats, and a cat-girl was really fun. Wendy, though shy, actually was a great dancer, and some of the other girls asked to join her a time or two in the air when she stepped up into the air via a Sky Dragon’s Boosted Step. The occasional inclusion of Bisca and Erza as they ran away from the men trying to flirt them up on the dance floor did nothing to bring the kid’s enjoyment of the dance down.

Eventually the young girl began to fall asleep, and Carla quickly started to chivy her out to their tent, joining many of the other young people. But the adults kept dancing for several hours.

Perhaps it was because the two girls had been drinking. Perhaps it was because Ranma had been singing and having a right good time, but whatever the reason, inhibitions had most certainly lowered. Whatever the reason, the two of them left that night, with Bisca controlling one of Ranma’s arms, and Erza the other. Perhaps it was because Seilah was out somewhere reading by the firelight of the main bonfire. Perhaps it was because Wendy and Carla were already asleep in one corner of the tent.

More likely, it was all of the above that led the trio into what happened. No sooner had Ranma sat down on one of the beanbag sofas within the tent that Erza was in his lap, leaning her forehead against his. The two of them stared into one another’s eyes for a few seconds saying nothing, and then they were both leaning forward kissing.

Erza’s lips were soft, soft and yielding slightly. They had a hint of cherry, fruit punch, and honey to Ranma’s senses, were as soft as Jenny’s or Bisca’s, pulling him in.

Ranma’s arms went around her, holding her against him. Since she was wearing the robe of Yuen there was no armor between them now, and Ranma simply held her tighter against him, while he began to lick lightly at her lips, inviting her to open her own mouth as he had his. When she did so, Ranma’s tongue plunged into her mouth, licking and sucking at her tongue as well, drawing an animalistic like moan from the redhead.

She began to slowly grind against him until one of his hands snaked down her back to her rear, entering from the side slit in her kimono to touch her bare rear, squeezing. She gasped at that, and pulled away, looking a little more lucid than she had been a few seconds before.

And in that moment, Bisca made herself known, sounding quite drunken at the moment. “You, you’se can’t monop, mono, can’t keeps him to yerself Erzie!” With that she pushed Erza in the side, causing her to topple off of Ranma’s lap, the redhead giggling as she fell to the soft sleeping bag laid out there.

Ranma barely had time to blink as Bisca took Erza’s position, and there was nothing staid or hesitant about this kiss. It was a full on French kiss from the beginning. The two of them made out ardently, with Bisca moaning, her arms around him, her soft chest pressing into his, reveling in his hard extremely powerful muscles, loving every minute of it as Ranma held her against him, his hand sliding up beneath her short skirt, kneading her thigh.

However, like Erza, Bisca didn’t have much endurance for liquor and despite the fact that her body was still responding to this stimulation, her mind was slowly beginning the shutdown from her exertions and the amount of alcohol she had imbibed. She pulled away, nibbling and sucking at his shoulder as back then Ranma felt her slowly stop, just nuzzling into his shoulder. He looked down at her but her eyes were closed, and her breathing was even. Scowling, he glanced between them, and shook his head. “Sorry old boy, looks like you’re not going to get any ‘help’ tonight.”

Besides, Ranma was kind of tired himself. While the alcohol hadn’t affected him at all, singing had, and his head was kind of ringing from the noise of the party. So with a sigh and the willpower of a martial artist – albeit used in an unusual manner he stood up, with Bisca still in his arms. He then knelt down to the side and laid Bisca out next to a now quietly snoring Erza, before lying out next to her, closing his own eyes.

This was how Wendy, Seilah and Carla found them last night. Somehow during the night all three of them had ended up tangled around one another, lying on top of the sleeping bag instead of within it.

“It’s a darn good thing that you all are fully clothed!” Carla growled she stalked up to the three of them, nearly shouting her next words “Because if you weren’t, I would be trying out my cat claws on all three of you for showing young Wendy something so shameful!”

“Don’t shout,” Ranma groaned, scowling as his sound-induced headache came back from last night. “Don’t make me punt ya Carla, Wendy’ll give me the googly eyes and I’d feel sad.”

“What, what the heck… ugh, my head… Did Cana convince me to drink again, and what, is with this feeling?” Erza groaned, trying to untangle herself and not having much luck. She blearily opened her eyes, and found her eyes barely an inch away from Ranma’s.

“Er, hi Erza,” he said sheepishly.

Erza’s eyes narrowed, then widened as she blushed almost as red as her hair. “Wait, that wasn’t a dream!?”

“I don’t know about you,” Ranma said somewhat jokingly, “but I tend not to dream about making out with sexy girls. My dreams tend to be more about martial arts, training, or just flying. If I remember them at all,” he added. Then, as Erza spluttered, he leaned forward, and kissed her very quickly and lightly on the lips, before pulling back. “Now, that didn’t feel so bad, now did it?”

At that, Erza’s blush receded slightly as she smacked him on the chest and looking away.

“That’s nice and all, but I think we need to start moving, and I’d rather whoever has my arm in a death grip release it please?” Bisca grumbled from one side, also trying to disentangle herself but not having any luck.

“I’m not moving until the person who’s knee is by my private parts does,” Ranma said very firmly. “And if ya could move extra slowly, I would seriously appreciate it. My durability might be really high even there but that doesn’t mean I like getting hit there anymore than the next guy.”

“This human mating ritual does not match that I’ve ever read about in any story in person,” Seilah said, her head cocked to one side. *This feeling, I wonder what it is. It is unpleasant, and yet also mixed up with introspection as I watch this. At least I know what introspection feels like.* “Should we help from you think she asked looking down at Wendy.

Wendy had turned away with a blush, since just because the three of them were fully clothed didn’t mean they were actually decent. She could see quite a lot of under boob from Bisca, and Erza’s kimono had bunched up, leaving her bare from the waist down. And Ranma was in his boxers. There was a certain part of Wendy, who drank in the sight of those muscles, but another far larger part was just mortified.

Eventually however the three of them got themselves untangled and the two girls made themselves more presentable. Ranma didn’t bother, figuring that they’d all seen everything or nearly everything he had to offer at this point, and his stomach was rumbling at him. Whatever else had changed in the lifetime he led here in this new world, one thing hadn’t. When Ranma’s master called, if he could he answered quickly.

“So have the two of you then decided to share Ranma’s affections?” Seilah asked, looking at Bisca and Erza. “I have read of such things in several of my books, the Queen’s Harem for one, although that was one woman many men. The Womanizer Who Became a Wizard Saint that was another. My personal favorite was one called The General and his War Prizes. It was not quite as romantic as the others, but it was far better written that any of them, and the sex scenes were much better.”

“Truly?” Erza asked, looking at Seilah with interest and speaking up, once forgetting Wendy and Carla were there. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen that one, do you think you could share your copy?”

“Let’s talk about something else,” Bisca hissed, with Carla nodding agreement. “This is not a topic of conversation for the breakfast table.”

“Well technically we don’t have a table,” Erza replied dryly, gesturing around to the inside of the tent but she subsided under Carla’s glare.

While Carla was attempting to enforce some modesty, Wendy had just moved over to help her brother with food. Nudging him in the side she whispered, “So, are you interested in both? I thought you were only interested in Bisca and Jenny.”

“Bisca and I have, you know flirted and kissed before this yeah…” Ranma said slowly as he prepared some food for them all. “This was the first time Erza I did anything like that.”

“Hmm…” Wendy mussed, her lips quirking. She wasn’t certain what to think about all this romance stuff other than finding it both disturbing and interesting at the same time. She liked all the girls involved, and of course knew her Ranma-nii wouldn’t change much when it came to spending time with her. He’d made that clear all along. So really it all came down to if they were willing to share like Lisanna and Anna, or not.

At that point, Seilah quickly brought Wendy into a conversation about the Girl Genius books that she had gotten Wendy interested in, letting Bisca, Erza and Ranma talk alone at the other end of the table. Deciding to bit the bullet, Ranma began. “So, I’ll go out on limb and say that last night was a bit of a surprise to all of us.”

Erza snorted. “In a way I suppose. I don’t think I was prepared to…”

“Grind against him like you were dry humping him?” Bisca asked, feeling somewhat irritated.

“Yes that. And while I have to admit to being a little ambivalent about how that part went, I liked it, I like it a lot. But I think I would’ve preferred to choose to go that far, rather than most of the voting being done by the amount of liquor last night,” Erza said, blushing and looking away for a moment before looking challengingly over at Bisca. “So, though it was not in the manner I would have preferred, I am officially throwing my name into the ring for Ranma’s affections.”

I would’ve also preferred not to be drunk,” Bisca said with a shrug instead of responding to that statement. “At least that way,” she said with a wink at Ranma, “I wouldn’t have fallen asleep just when it was getting good.”

“If it helps you any, I think I fell asleep right after,” Ranma said, frowning thoughtfully. Then looking down at himself, where he had been finally forced to put on some clothing by Carla after he had finished cooking breakfast. “Although how I undressed last night is anyone’s guess.”

Erza laughed at that, then looked at the other two thoughtfully. “I, I think then we need to all state our long term intentions for this,” she said, gesturing first to Ranma then to herself, then to Bisca and then back to Ranma. “I realize that most relationships, they don’t actually explicitly state what they want out of it, but I think given the complexities and how badly this could go wrong, we need to.”

“I’ll agree to that,” Bisca said with a nod. “But I think Ranma should go first.”

“Ouch,” Ranma muttered, crossing his arms and looking away. “Putting me on the spot aren’t you?”

“Were you sober or drunk last night?” Bisca asked tartly, her own arms folding under her bust as she practically glared back at him.

“…Fair point,” Ranma said, turning back and bowing his head slightly to the two girls. “Although I will say I’ve already told both you and Jenny, that I wasn’t interested in settling down or for really building a one-on-one relationship yet not until I got to know people.

“I think what Bisca as it is implying Ranma, and I agree with her, is that we’re a bit beyond the getting to know you stage,” Erza replied.

Ranma slowly nodded. “So, beyond me telling you what I want out of a relationship we should out some ground rules and all that stuff?”

The two girls nodded, and he slowly nodded back once more. “Okay, I’ll agree with that actually. First and foremost, I think we all need to agree to not do anything that the other person is uncomfortable with. If it’s the three of us together like this on our trip, then we have to taking everyone’s feelings into account. If it’s just two of us, then it’s just the other person. I’m not so interested in public displays of affection? But neither am I going to say no to express my affection for someone publicly. There is a middle ground I think.”

“Those kind of rules are always good Ranma,” Bisca said, somewhat impatient. “But I think we really need to know the level of commitment we can expect from you, and what you want to see from us.”

“That’s a good question,” Ranma said with a hollow laugh even as he flinched a little at the word commitment. “I wish I had an answer.”

“What you mean?” Erza asked.

Ranma sighed, looking at the two girls then over at Seilah and the others. “Could you gals give us three some privacy please?” Once the uninterested Seilah had led the innocently curious Wendy and the simply nosy Carla out he turned back to the two women, in particular Bisca, working up his courage slowly. “Okay, so… some of this Erza already knows, it came out during my discussion with Porlyusica, but…”

From there Ranma filled Bisca in on his real origins and how his initial abilities were not based on magic but ki, life energy. Bisca had a lot of questions but Ranma asked her to wait on them until he was done, finishing with, “And so um, the upshot of that kind of thing is that, well… I won’t age much… if at all.”

At that, all the questions about Ranma’s old world, his old life and the origins of Ranma’s curse went right out the window. “WHAT!?” Bisca knew her voice had risen into something like a squeak, but at the moment she didn’t care, and nor, to judge by her look, did Erza, as she was staring at Ranma, her eyes narrowing in speculation.

“Yeah, that’s one of the reasons why er, y’know, I’m not in any rush to start settling down or starting a family. I, I’ll probably live well into my hundreds and still look like I do now. When ya learn how to actively manipulate your ki is when your body starts to just, not age,” Ranma finished lamely, shrugging his shoulders.

“…” Bisca honestly could not find anything to say to that. It was one hell of a revelation. *But, but should that really matter? I can think it will later on, but right now, no.* “Okay, that’s big, and I can see it starting to matter to me personally when I start to age in the future, but that’s for in the future. Right now, though, I don’t want to settle down either, but I don’t want to date you if you then turn around and start acting like Gildarts or Loke, flirting with every girl that comes around. A few, who I already know about is fine, but not more than that. That includes Seilah!!”

Ranma opened his mouth to protest that him and Seilah weren’t like that, but Bisca silenced him with a finger cocked like a pistol right between his eyes. “I know it isn’t like that now, but it could be in the future. I’ve seen how you, and, admittedly, every other male looks at her. I don’t want you to let your hormones control you like that.” When Ranma reluctantly nodded, she went on. “And I also want to know that when you and I have time together, you’re not just going to then run off to another girl right after if that makes sense.”

A portion of that was a lie really. Bisca knew that eventually she did want to have kids, and would want to settle down. She would want a marriage, a house, all that. But that was years in the future. She wasn’t a normal peasant or townswoman, she didn’t have any reason to rush and wouldn’t, not until she was in her thirties at best. Still, the idea her lover wouldn’t age with her was a revelation, and one it would take time for her to process. For now she had put it aside, but she knew that wasn’t the most healthy way of dealing with it.

“I as well don’t see an issue. Mages routinely age more gracefully than nonmagicals, Master Makarov is quite a bit older than you might think for instance given how spry he is,” Erza said.

“Perverted little gnomes are all spry, that’s not exactly a good thing,” Ranma groused.

But while the girls heard him, they were unwilling to be diverted and Erza continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “I too am not looking to settle down. Moreover the, the idea of children… kind of frightens me if I’m honest,” Erza laughed self-consciously, tapping her armor. “After all, I don’t think they make armor for pregnant women. And the whole body changing thing…”

“Heh, I heard you were enough of a terror when you starting to grow curves, I certainly wouldn’t’ want to be around you when your body changes again,” Bisca said with a smirk, earning a wry laugh and a gentle slap to the shoulder from Erza before the green-haired girl looked back at Ranma. “So that’s one reason why you don’t want to settle down with any one girl, anything else.”

“Well there’s my Ranger status, kind of hard to settle down in one place when your job might call you away or, alternatively, make ya really unwelcome in any one place after you find trouble there,” Ranma said, looking at Bisca for a response and pouting when she simply waved him off and said she had figured out what he was weeks back.

With that taken care of, he went on more reluctantly. “And… there’s also the issue that I’m kind of… scared of commitment.” Even now admitting to being scared of anything was hard as hell to Ranma, but it had to be said. He thought that maybe Jenny had already figured that out, and indeed might have something of the same issue, if not for the same reason, but Erza, the most emotionally closed off of the girls he was currently flirting/in a quasi-relationship, and Bisca, the most normal of the trio, needed to hear it aloud.

Bisca reached over and took his hand, squeezing. “This is something from your old life, right?”

Slowly Ranma nodded, looking over at Erza. “I told you something about the people I had met and lived with in my old life, but there was a lot more to it. I, I had never originally settled down until I was around sixteen. Was on the road my whole life before that with my old man, Genma, I just told ya about him,” he went on, flicking his gaze to Bisca and squeezing her hands in turn, his thumb slowly starting to caress the back of her hand. “But when we got there we moved in with this family called the Tendos, and out of the blue I was told I had to marry one of them.”

As Bisca flushed at his gentle touch and tried to concentrate on his words Erza nodded, gesturing him to go on while fighting back a pout. I’d never even been around a girl before that for long enough to figure out they were interesting or anything. My old man, he also put this idea in my head that girls were weak and useless.” Bisca stiffened at that despite his touches and Erza nodded, again having heard that before. “Well anyway, it didn’t go well.”

From there Ranma opened himself up more than he ever had before, telling the two girls things he had never shared with even Wendy or anyone else. He told them about Akane, about the mistakes he’d made being very honest about it, and about how she in turn had treated him. About how there had been other girls after him for various reasons and how they had all acted both to one another and to him, and how he had not really understood a lot of it at the time, and how eventually he had started to finally grow up and move on, only to find none of the others were willing to do the same, forcing him to try to break it off with all of them one after another. How that process had been interrupted by Gosunkugi and the age-regression mushroom and how he had subsequently been sent to Earth Land.

“So yeah, while I’ve got some experience with being in a relationship, sort of, none of it was good or normal,” He finished dryly. “And whenever I hear the word commitment or fiancé I want to run for the hills.”

“What a bitch,” Erza replied at last, having sat silent throughout the tale. “That is, what a bitch!”

“Which one?” Bisca asked, finally pulling her hands away from Ranma, who had continued his gentle caresses of them throughout his tale. The lack of sensation caused a shiver to go through her, but she wanted to concentrate now, and that had been seriously distracting. *How the heck did he just make my hand an erogenous zone, seriously!?*

“For my mind, I think Ukyo and Shampoo were just as bad as Akane in their own ways, one not realizing her dream for the future isn’t one Ranma was willing to be shaped into.” *And that is food for thought indeed in the long term. Still, for right now, isn’t it,* Bisca thought, fighting back an urge to frown.

“Actually I was thinking of Nabiki when I said that, but all of them would fit the bitch mold, and yes I too think Kodachi sounded insane and can be discounted on account of that,” Erza said dryly. “But I could indeed have been speaking of all of them. But in particular Akane and Ukyo. They should have been much more understanding about Ranma’s curse.”

“Yeah, heh, ya kinda need to realize the curse is here to stay too,” Ranma said with a sigh. “So, ya asked what I wanted out of a relationship? Understanding I suppose, and someone who won’t rush things. Fun I guess, in all the forms we can agree to. Adventure, romance, someone I can talk with and train with, someone good with Wendy who can sort of step into an older sister role for all the girly things I can’t be without being a second Carla. That’s about it I think.”

“Oh hell yes!” Bisca said, standing up and moving around the table. “Adventure, romance, I want that too! I’m fine with your curse Ranma, I don’t want to monopolize you or anything, I just want your attention on me when we’re together, and like I said, I don’t want to date a Loke. Can you promise that at least?” *We might not be perfect together, but perfects a goal, not a requirement in a relationship. And no way do I want to lose what he can make me feel.*

Erza too stood up and moved toward Ranma from around the tiny folding table that served Wendy and Ranma when they ate inside the tent, un-equipping her armor as she moved. “For my part you know I too want adventure, and someone to train with, someone to walk side by side with and fun sounds fantastic to me. But while I don’t have any issues with your curse, indeed I think it is rather fascinating, I too would rather not share your affections with too many girls. But I promise not to sabotage your relationships with the others. It is just, if you decide to only pursue one of us, tell me and whoever else isn’t chosen? I think we deserve that at least.”

“Heh, ya don’t have to worry about that. I think three girls is more than enough for me, too much really ta give ya all the time ya deserve,” Ranma nodded firmly then reached out and pulled each girl down towards him, sitting them on his thighs. IT was a squeeze, but since Erza had just gotten rid of her armor, it was actually quite nice. “So… we’re good then?”

“Hmm…” Bisca looked across at Erza, and after a moment, the redhead saw her look and nodded. With that approval, Bisca leaned down as Ranma arced his body up towards her, kissing her on the lips. On his other knee Erza blushed a red almost as bright as her hair, but didn’t turn away, watching as Ranma and Bisca kissed, with Ranma’s arms around them both.

Then it was Erza’s turn. Ranma pulled back from Bisca, allowing the cowgirl mage to lean back and breath heavily, her eyes almost smoldering before turning to Erza and very gently pulling her down to him. Erza’s kiss was a little more hesitant at first, but she opened her mouth quickly where Bisca hadn’t and their tongues began to dance against one another pressing their bodies against one another.

Eventually though Erza too need to breath, and she pulled away, leaning her head on Rama’s shoulder and breathing heavily, her chest heaving licking her lips in a display of girl-next-door sexiness that almost unmanned Ranma. “Yeah… we’re good I think.”

Smirking, Bisca put one arm around each of them, taking command of Ranma’s other shoulder as she hummed wordless agreement. Then, in an effort to calm down rather than jump both of them, she asked, “So, what was that bit about perverted little gnomes you mentioned before? Are there more like Makarov out there?”

“Gah, I hope not. If Happosai somehow followed me…the horror, the horror,” Ranma moaned, actually looking terrified. At their looks at that, Ranma sighed and went on a tangent to explain about Happosai and then Cologne, causing the serious atmosphere to disappear for a time.

**OOOOOOO**

“You want me to add **what** into your arm?” Porlyusica asked, looking askance at Gray.

“A retractable dagger,” Gray replied. “Ranma was right, if I’m going to get a metal arm, I might as well get one that can double as a weapon.”

For a moment the mages around him were silent, then Elfman said softly, “Damn but that is manly,” and for once, not even his sisters could argue with him.

**OOOOOOO**

For all the time it took them to find the four Fiorian criminals, actually capturing them was simplicity itself. Bisca asked about them whenever they ran into local herders, and with that and Ranma and Wendy’s enhanced senses, she eventually found a trail. Wendy started to fly up in the air to do recon with Carla’s help of course and Seilah beside her. Running down the foursome after that was only a matter of time, and with the speed they could make not much of that, taking barely a quarter of the day.

Then once they found them, the fight was over before you could blink. Wendy came out of the sun from on high, using her new gun skills that Bisca had been training on and Ranma’s pistols rather than her tiny holdout gun, taking out two of the criminals before they even knew what was happening. Seilah then used her curse to stop the panicking horses and Ranma and his two new girlfriends rose up and knocked the two conscious criminals out. It was literally as quick as that.

After dropping their four prisoners off with the nearest group of ranchers, the party continued their way southward. With the local’s directions, Bisca was able to lead them unerringly through Desierto into the dusty dirt and scrub-covered segment that connected the far south’s desert with the more diverse area of the north.

It was a very rocky area the kind of area where just living day to day would be rough for any number of reasons. “Just the kind of area a dark guild would decide to build their base in. Can’t dark guilds ever make their homes in nice looking places? Is that too much to ask,” Bisca mock-whined.

“Hah! You think you have it hard, at least with me around you won’t ever be lacking for water, right?” Ranma asked, creating a globe of water over his hand and letting it slowly fall to fill up a water bottle.

“Ugh,” Erza groaned, looking away. “That is so disturbing.”

“Huh, why?” Ranma asked.

“It just looks like you are condensing your sweat and asking us to drink it,” Erza said, shaking her head.

“EWWW!!” Wendy groaned looking as if she was going to throw up.

“Heh, think you broke my imouto’s mind there Erza,” Ranma said with a chuckle, reaching up to pat Wendy’s leg as she rode beside him on one of the horses.

She shuddered, then hopped off the horse and taking Carla in her arms hopped into the air. “I’ll scout ahead a bit, see what I can find. I need some exercise to get that idea out of my head Erza!”

Seilah silently followed her, setting her book aside and rising from one of the horses. In her opinion, horses were something she could not use often enough. Why, they let her read and keep up with the group at the same time! But Ranma had made it clear already on this trip he didn’t want Wendy flying ahead of the group alone.

 As the Demon woman flew after Wendy, Ranma smirked at Erza. “Huh, so I gotta ask, did you plan this?” When she looked at him blankly his smirk widened. “To get the three of us alone I mean?”

 Bisca laughed at that while Erza flushed and spluttered. “Well I don’t think she should be rewarded for traumatizing young Wendy like that, so why don’t you hop up here first big boy and let the mean old redhead to stew on her own for a bit?”

 Erza continued to sputter as Ranma did just that, alighting on the saddle behind Bisca and putting his arms around her, kissing her neck. Erza grumbled but said nothing, having gotten used to, and rather enjoying, being able to flirt like that openly. That, and they had all agreed not to sabotage one another’s time with Ranma, or, if it came to it, each other.

About an hour later, Ranma had switched to Erza’s horse, but they all stopped as Wendy alighted next to them from where she had been flying in the sky a moment ago. Seilah came down next, calmly waiting nearby. “We found it,” Wendy reported, pointing ahead of them. “It looks empty, but also kind of weird from the sky. Like someone designed it to be looked at from the sky, to make it look like a skull. Tacky,” she said shaking her head.

“And ugly,” Carla said.

“That too,” Wendy agreed as Carla hopped off her back. Any other girl might have been scared by the sight of a giant skull like that, but Wendy had seen a lot scarier things traveling with Ranma.

“Seilah what do you think?” Ranma asked.

“The fortress in question is rather large, and as Wendy stated, looks as if someone molded the work of one of those jagged rock formations to create something that is supposed to look like a mad king’s crown from the ground, and the skull of a raven from up top. How they contrived it I do not know, nor can I speak to the anesthetics of it,” Seilah said, having just pulled a book out and frowning irritably at the interruption. While she could read and walk at the same time, she couldn’t fly and read at the same time, and she hadn’t had much time to read in the past two days.

“That wasn’t what I was asking,” Ranma said with a laugh. “I mean, did you see anything moving either?”

Seilah frowned in thought, looking back the way she and Wendy had been flying before speaking slowly. “Other than sand moving I did not see anything else moving know. Whether or not that implies there is something beneath the sand I cannot say. I have read many stories of creatures hiding underground and in the sand.”

Ranma frowned at that then shrugged. “All right, Erza and I will go in first. Bisca, back us up with your rifle. Seilah, Wendy, take some water, and when you’re done drinking I’ll want you two as air patrol.”

“That is an interesting idea, always having someone in the air,” Seilah said putting away her book again with a sigh as she finished drinking. “Where did you come up with it? I have not run into it before in any of my stories.”

“I’ve fought a few flying mages before besides sparring with Wendy, and while most of them can’t match me with my aerial style of combat, it always occurred to me that as part of a larger group they could do a lot of good,” Ranma replied.

Moments later, Wendy hopped into the air with Seilah beside her and Carla once more in her cat form strapped to her back, her Aero Wings flashing out. “Tenryu no Takameru Ho (Sky Dragon’s Boosted Step)!” Wendy shouted and the next second, she and Seilah were flying high up over the air, winging their way towards the target.

As the flyers disappeared above them, Ranma and Erza nodded towards Bisca, who had finished tying off the horses while the flyers had been taking drinks of water. She nodded back, and the three of them made their way forward.

As they went, the terrain changed from scrub brush to rocky desert, giving them some cover that they used as often as possible. Bisca trailed the two frontline combatants, her rifle to her shoulder, looking through the sniper scope ahead of them. Occasionally she broke off to either side and climbed up a rock to get a better view.

Ranma, Erza and Bisca were within sight of the monolith that was the Raven Tail base, when they saw the sand beginning to shift ahead of them. They paused and began to back away, but it was too late. The sand ahead of them quickly formed into two giant sand snakes, their mouths open and gaping as they hissed silently, and lashed towards them.

“Some kind of enchantment trap?” Ranma asked with a scowl, pulling back a fist and letting fly with a Water Dragon’s Claw, which shredded the topmost portion of one of the sand snakes, blasting it apart like a wave would a sand castle. Yet the rest of it kept coming, and he blinked before it slammed into him. The head reformed even as he stumbled backwards, followed by two more heads sprouting up from the sand.

Erza had attacked at the same time Ranma had, one of her sword blades flashing out in an arc that send a cut of air towards the attacking snakes. It sliced the head off her target, but once more, the snake didn’t seem to even notice the damage. It barreled forward and Erza jumped to one side, slicing and slicing it to pieces. Then she yelped as the sand underneath her shifted, leaping away as another snake formed round where she had been standing, biting at the air.

Bisca shot into the thing attacking Erza with no effect, and she cursed, before gathering her magical energy into her rifle again and shouting “Guns Magic, Boom Shot!”

The sonic attack dissipated the sand, smashing the snake into dust. Yet just like with Erza and Ranma’s attacks, the destroyed snake informed almost instantly.

“Frack! The enchantment isn’t in any one creature! It’s got to be in the sand around the base itself,” Ranma growled, smashing at the sand hydra now attacking him with his fists.

He was also not taking to the air, instead staying on the ground and sending out blasts of water into it via stomps of his feet. He had noticed that the clumps of wet sand hadn’t reformed, and figured the water was somehow messing with the enchantment. With it being so dry here, that was taking a bit out of him, way more than creating water for the party, but Ranma estimated he could deal with the strain for at least two hours or so.

“I would say so, and it isn’t just us who are now under attack. Look up there!” Erza shouted in between dodging the fangs of the many headed hydras that were attacking her now.

Ranma chanced a glance upwards, and growled angrily. The reason why Seilah, Carla and Wendy had not come down to help them was because they were having their own issues. Several hundred crows made of sand had risen into the air from all around the stone fortress winging their way up towards the two flyers, who were now engaging the birds in an aerial duel.

That moment of inattention nearly cost him as one of the sand creatures slammed it’s snout into him, carrying him into the air but he flipped with the impact, landing on top of one hydra head, before flipping himself off, lashing down at the thing with a Water Dragon’s Titan punch. The Titan fist slammed into the snake, burying it into the ground, crashing into and through it, while also spreading water throughout the impact area of around the shot, wetting the sand. A second later however, the portions of the snake that worked wet broke off from the portions that were, and began to it reform and attacked again.

“This is some kind of guards spell or enchantment! I saw something like this in a Bank of Ishgar branch in Fiore. They’ll just keep reforming unless we find the core,” Bisca said from behind them. She had changed position twice, but was keeping her distance, using Explosive and Boom shots to back up Erza and Ranma, although honestly speaking neither seemed to be in danger. *In fact, they seem to be enjoying themselves, freaking combat junkies.*

“And how do we do that?” Ranma asked almost sardonically, dodging and attacking in a single move that left another sand snake cut in half, but one half was already wiggling, reforming from the copious amounts of sand all around. “There’s so much sand even if I tried I couldn’t wet it all down, and I don’t see anything that could be the core?”

Above them, Wendy reared back a punch that sent a crow flying, shattering the sand of its makeup. Yet the grains of sand slowly reformed even as they fell to the earth, and she pouted as she dodged around several other crows. Behind her, Wendy felt Carla shift, and obligingly shifted her flight down and to the left, avoiding a diving crow from her blind spot, twirling around to lash out with a kick that sent that crow to join its fellow as so much scattered sand. “This is getting irritating!”

“Indeed,” Seilah said, smacking one bird aside with a wave of one hand, then flipping herself up, in what would’ve been a scandalous display of leg and thigh if anyone were bothered to look, to kick another bird in the chest, shattering its makeup. She had tried to command the birds around her to stop attacking, and those birds had, but more had quickly reformed below her area of control and launched themselves up into the air against them. Whatever was controlling this was hidden to her influence at the moment.

*Unless I can stop all the sand in the area from moving. That will be difficult, the crows were not fighting my control so much as each of the* *sands were, multiplying the issue very badly. Still it is a way forward.*  “Wendy, I’m going to apply a bit higher, see if you can guard me for a moment while I gather my magical energy.”

Down below, Erza and Ranma were now working together, flinging out as much water as they could. Ranma’s attacks had become more diffuse rather than solid, as he scattered water all around them to go with what he was sending out via his feet. At the same time, Erza had shifted into her sea empress armor and begun to lash out with her trident, creating massive plumes and spears of water. In this manner, they were slowly pushing forward towards the Raven Tail fortress.

Yet even as they did, the enchanted creatures became more numerous and craftier. Several of them stayed behind the others now, and began to shoot blasts of sand towards the two attackers. These attacks didn’t do much damage to Erza or Ranma, but Bisca had been forced to leap off a rock behind them. The rock had been shattered by the sand attack, but her return shot had blasted one of the long-range defenders to pieces.

“Yeah, okay this has gone from kind of fun to being irritating,” Ranma said, voicing the same thought that his little sister had a few seconds before. “They can’t hurt us much, whatever this is, sand is still sand, and it can’t accelerate itself enough to really do much damage to us.”

“Not to us,” Erza said with a grunt, as she took a blow from a tale of one of the hydras. It made her stumble backwards, but her sea Empress armor was actually quite decent in terms of it being armor as well as water manipulation. She rolled with it, stabbing her Trident down into the tail, and sending a plume of water throughout the creature, which solidified its entire form. “But Bisca or more normal mages would find this a deadly challenge rather than simply an inconvenience. We also don’t know how this enchantment is being powered, which could be a very bad thing.”

That caused Ranma to become serious once more, and he nodded. The two of them once more pushed forward hard, splitting up and taking the defenders from the sides while Bisca remained behind.

At the same time, Wendy had gained Seilah enough time for her to concentrate her powers on the entire area around them. “Macro, all sand must cease moving!”

Below, the three people on the ground found their opponents frozen in place, while the sand underneath them also froze unable to reform into new attackers. Ranma could see the sand was very visibly straining to move, the little granules of the hydras in front of him twitching in place, the same as the ground below. But under the command of Seilah’s curse, they could not disobey.

“If someone could please hurry to find whatever core is creating this, I would appreciate it,” Seilah shouted, her voice carrying over the suddenly quiet battlefield. “This is quite like trying to control several billion different objects all at once, and regardless of the lack of sentience or the size of the objects, I cannot keep this up for long.”

Without another word the three on the ground raced around the now frozen creatures, entering the fortress as Wendy alighted on the roof. She was the first person to run into a second layer of defense, and she pouted once more as Carla leaped off her, moving to the side as three Gargoyles rose from the stone of the roof. “Darn it!”

“Ivan Dreyar must have been quite paranoid,” Carla concurred, before rushing forward, her cat claws cutting into the gargoyle, sending it stumbling backwards. “But look at it this way my dear, there is a limited amount of stone for these creatures to become unless they wish to destroy the fortress they are meant to defend.

“Tenryu no Hoko (Sky Dragon's Roar)!” Wendy shouted in response, her Sky Dragon’s roar smashing two more gargoyles into pieces.

The trio below also ran into stone monsters, which formed out of the stone of the fortress itself, and began to troop towards them. “I’m sensing a theme here,” Ranma grumbled, leaping up over a punch, and landing one himself, which shattered the large Vulcan-sized ogre that he had just been fighting.

It reformed far more slowly than the sand creatures outside, and he smirked suddenly. “I wonder if the spell can control these things if we just crush them into sand.”

“Let’s find out,” Erza replied tartly, her sea Empress armor shifting into her normal armor. But instead of wielding a sword, she now wielded two hammers. They were short shafted, with large heads, which looked as if they drums rather than metal. The two of them went to work, smashing another one of the stone and iron golems into pieces, Erza’s hammers sending reverberations through the thing. They wouldn’t have been worth much against the sand outside since the sand would just reform as it did under Bisca’s bullets, but against these creatures, it made the rock into sand very, very quickly.

For her part Bisca dodged around this fight, racing forward, and kept moving, thinking hard about what she’d heard about Ivan, speaking aloud as she did. “A megalomaniac, the others said, with a huge ego, and a penchant for using birds and things with that paper magic of his. So he probably put his personal room up top. “But Wendy’s no doubt up there working downward, so let’s cover all the bases we can.”

She raced downstairs and found a large room, which had several doorways leading into it. In the center of the room was a large dais, on top of which glowed a giant ruby red lacrima. It was many faceted, and it glowed the color of blood. There were handprints on here and there, that looked even more like dried blood than the crystal itself, and down onto the ground and away down the open doors she could see. They too glowed slightly, like ground lacrima almost, but it was the crystal that just had to be the center of the enchantment working all around them.

Pausing at the threshold to the door, Bisca looking down at the doorway and shook her head. “Nope!”

With that, Bisca raised her rifle and began to fire rapidly into the room at the crystal. Her first few shots banged off the thing, but she rapidly changed to Penetrator, and then Explosive. The first one would hopefully penetrate the outer portion of the crystal and the second bullet would hit the same exact point that had been weakened by that, a double blow. She kept on firing even as another two stone creatures pushed out form the walls, pouring on the magical bullets.

Finally, there was a loud cracking noise, and the crystal exploded, forcing Bisca to dodge backwards with a cry of shock. The whole room was peppered with lacrima shards and the explosion that occurred gouged out the rock all around, obliterating the dais without a trace along with much of the rest of the room.

Outside, Seilah was gasping with effort having had to stop flying, floating down to the top of the fortress to concentrate more of her power on keeping the sand from moving. The resistance vanished then with such alacrity Seilah nearly gasped, before she released her hold on the sand. The instant she did, the sand creatures collapsed into sand once more.

“They did it,” she said to Wendy, who had just come back up from downstairs.

“Yep, though I think I am going to get Ranma to teach me more about aerial combat,” she muttered, gasping in wiping at her brow. “This was not fun.”

Seilah however sent a smile her way. “On the contrary, I think you did quite well.” Wendy blinked, then Seilah gestured all around them. “You are dealing with the fact that it’s so hot out here Wendy,” she said gently. “Not the actual exertions of the battle. You and Carla both worked like a well-oiled team, don’t denigrate that.”

Wendy nodded thoughtfully at that. “So just more endurance than?”

“That would probably be helpful,” Carla said slowly. “I’ve been training my magical core so much in order to retain my human form for longer but I have neglected my physical endurance, as have you.”

As Wendy nodded, Seilah gestured back down the way the two height-challenged girls had come from. “That is for later. Right now, let us go down to discover what they found. Part of exploration stories is the discovery of treasures after all.”

Inside, Ranma pouted as the Titan he’d been fighting collapsed. “Darn it! After that stuff outside that was actually fun.”

Erza rolled her eyes at that, her hammers disappearing, replaced by a single longsword, which she held down, ready but not in her way. “Come on, let’s go find Bisca.”

They found Bisca coming up towards them hand held high, and quickly exchanged high-fives with the woman. “Well, that was more than I expected if I’m honest. I’ve never run into a dark Guild before that had that kind of defenses on its fortress. That kind of thing, I know costs like the dickens to create.”

“Not even the cave that we found with the Oración Seis were using as a forward base to explore the Woodsea had anything like that,” Ranma agreed. He and Hoteye had done that two days after the battle against the Oración Seis ended, but as Hoteye had warned, they hadn’t actually found anything. The Oración Seis had not had a permanent base of operations, instead traveling through Fiore, Seven, Stella, Joya, and Bosco almost randomly at times, while at others seeking out specific objectives as a group.

“I think it has to do with the mental makeup of the leader in question,” Bisca said, but she became serious as she looked at them. “That thing was created with blood magic, and I think there are actual prisoners down there, but I wanted to check on you all before heading down to free them.”

“Good thinking, don’t want noncombatants running around until we have secured the area,” Ranma said with an approving smile. “Still, Erza, you go and guard Bisca, Bisca can you get them free?”

Bisca nodded, putting her rifle back in her tiny Requip space and pulling out one of her pistols. “Yeah, I’ve got a few Bullets that could do the job.”

“You do that, while I head up to Wendy. Between the four of us, those three and I can clear the rest of this fortress.

That didn’t take long thankfully, and the four searchers, after marking out one room for further exploration, joined the two Fairy Tail mages below. Seilah quickly hid her head in a cloak Ranma had been carrying for her in his Requip space, as several hundred people were escorted out in groups of fifty up into the light of day. All of them were emaciated, their wrists and ankles marked by sores, but beyond that, and a general lack of any kind of muscles – so much so many of them could barely move let alone walk on their own – they hadn’t been physically beaten. But given the amount of damage their years long confinement had given them that was scant comfort.

“How many slaves did you say were brought in here?” Ranma asked as he joined Bisca. While Bisca had to use her magic bullets to blast apart the chains, Ranma simply tore them apart. Erza, with Wendy taking over guiding the people out, could cut the chains and restraints apart just as easily.

“Over 200,” Bisca replied. “According to the records I found anyway. It was such a high number that it still stuck in the minds of people even years later and so unusual too, someone taking ownership of them there and then guiding the lot of them into Desierto. We’ve found some hundred and eighty so far and…,” she paused, shaking her head, “and ten, maybe eleven skeletons. They are so mixed up in a pile in one of the rooms I can’t tell.”

“That is bad,” Ranma said softly, shaking his head. “That… well, Ivan’s going to be getting the death penalty anyway, I suppose we can’t kill him twice can we?” he asked, only slightly joking.

“We could ask them to make it painful,” Erza said scowling as she cut through the last chain in the room, releasing an elderly-looking man to collapse into the arms of two more just like him.

While Bisca and Erza were dealing with the prisoners, and Wendy was healing them as best she could, Seilah and Ranma left them to it in order to explore the rest of the fortress. They found the scattered rooms of the guild members interesting, but not overmuch, though Seilah found the books scattered here and there throughout the rooms fascinating, piling up the mostly fantasy novels in one place. In the largest room, however she found several tomes on magic, enchantments and other things. Wendy said at one point she was interested in enchantment, is that true?”

“Yeah,” Ranma said. “I think she’s somewhere below apprentice at them, but she has enjoyed what little bit she’s been able to deal with.

“In that case, we should take these books here, and the others I’ve already found for me.”

“Shouldn’t we be taking all of them?” Ranma asked.

“No,” Seilah said shaking her head. “Some of these are cursed. Furthermore, I think there is actually a curse on this bookshelf too. But it was only meant for humans.”

“Lucky us then,” Ranma said, nudging her in the side.

Seilah smiled faintly. She had slowly gotten used to Ranma’s friendly gestures, which she had never dealt with before from any of her fellow Devils. They were… nice. She paused as her fingers touched one book, then frowned pulling her hand away. “Why ever would someone build a book that looks like part of the books case?”

“What?” Ranma asked turning from where he had been looking at a tapestry set to one side, poking at it.

Seilah repeated herself, gesturing at the book. “This book is not a book,” she said, with an affronted tone.

Ranma read the title, allowed, staring at it. “The Rise and Fall of the Empire, The Story of Minstrel the Great, As Told by One Who Lived it.”

“Historical fiction based around the time when mistral rules most of Ishgar,” Seilah replied. “It’s a very hard to find novel, one of a series which I found the last member she means volume right of. Obviously I couldn’t follow most of the characters, but it was most interesting, not at all boring like most human stories based on real life are.”

Staring at the book thoughtfully, Ranma nodded. “And you say that isn’t a book? “

Seilah shook her head irritably, “As I said, no it is not.”

“In that case, why don’t you pull it out anyway? Can you move it at all? Because this is reminding me of some stories, which had hidden passages and stuff behind bookcases and stuff. Surely you’ve run into that kind of thing before.”

Shrugging, the demon woman obeyed, pulling on the book from its topmost corner. There was a clacking noise, as internal levers went to work, and the bookshelf slid to the side.

Inside was nothing much, or nothing interesting to the two of them anyway. Ranma felt that maybe other people would be interested in the two large bags of gems and gold nuggets. The slaves for certain could make good use of the treasure. But what he was interested in was on the shelf above that stuff. “And is that a printing press?”

Seilah stared at it and then nodded thoughtfully. “It could be, I’ve not seen one before.”

Ranma groaned, slapping her hands to his face. “Let me get this straight, on the one hand, we have the Oración Seis, who were stealing money from the bank of Ishgar. And on the other, we have Raven Tail, who might have been printing their own?!”

“I do think it is as bad as you might assume. If you look closely, you see that they have the printing press, but not one of those things, what are they called, the wooden slats that create the image for the money?” Seilah asked. She didn’t know much about the human economy but she had read stories that had mentioned it.

“Oh thank goodness,” Ranma muttered. “I would hate to deal with the Kings’ squealing about how the economy was doomed or whatever.”

“There is however a book in here,” she said with interest, reaching in. There was a flash, and Seilah’s other hand came up to grab at a spear point that had just shot out of the side of the small alcove. I wonder why Ivan Dreyar was this paranoid?” she said mildly, snapping the thing.

“I don’t think he was paranoid at all,” Ranma interjected, watching her work. “I think he was just plain nasty. He just wanted to hurt whoever came after him that’s all.”

“That makes more sense I suppose given what is known of his personality.” With that, Seilah handed the book to Ranma who took it gingerly, opening the pages. It was a hand written tome, marked with a lot of different colored paper and looked more like a makeshift notebook than a true journal.

When Ranma opened it, this was confirmed in no uncertain terms because each page, or each series of pages, were notes on different Fairy Tail members. It covered their adventures via newspaper clippings, with little anecdotes set next to it, information gleaned about how this or that mage fought, via discussion with bystanders and a lot more. The sheer amount of information that Ivan had collected was scary.

When he showed the book to Erza, she was of much the same opinion, glaring at it angrily. “Will you have to turn that in for evidence to the Kings?” She asked, looking very worried as she flipped through the pages denoting the skills of Cana and a number of other mid and low-tier mages who were known to work solo.

Ranma shook his head, not even glancing at her, instead looking at the prisoners out the window. They were all resting in the ley of the fortress, under cover from the sun but still outside of the first time in years. “No, I won’t have to. We were just supposed to come here and look around, they had no idea what was here, and given how many spies and shit we’ve been dealing with I’m not about to trust something like that to any government. The prisoners, that printing press and the treasure, that’ll be enough for the Kings.”

“Good,” Erza said sharply. “I’m going to keep a hold of this for now, I’ll hand it over to Makarov when we get back to Magnolia. Perhaps, there are those in Magnolia was passing on information, and their identities can be discovered through careful reading of this. But I don’t think any non-Fairy Tail mage should have this information.”

“Agreed,” Ranma said, the swiftness of the agreement causing Erza to smile at him.

Bisca came over to them then, wiping her hands down. “Wendy and I have done what we can to the prisoners, she’s leaving now with Carla and Seilah to bring in the closest ranchers to really help us here, and get in touch with the King of Minstrel to have even more help waiting for us at the border. We just can’t help these people on our own. But…” she added, smirking and pointing at Ranma. “Right now, I think it’s time for our personal water fountain to go to work.”

Snorting, Ranma nodded and followed the two women out of the room and down to the entrance.

**OOOOOOO**

The King of Seven looked at the five clerks lined up against the wall, then back to Hoteye, who was sitting next to his brother before over to his two closest, most trusted advisors. “Are we done speaking on this topic, you think?”

His Prime Minister and his queen both frowned in thought, looking over at their own clerks, two each. “I think we have the names of all the spies answering to the Oración Seis in Seven, Iceberg and Fiore we’re going to get. Further, I’m not very happy about the amount of penetration they apparently had in Caelum, and I think the Queen Rose is going to be calling for her headsman several times once we pass on the information about Bosco’s court to her,” the Queen said dryly.

“Almost undoubtedly my love,” the King of seven replied smiling blandly. He was a younger man than his wife by nearly a decade and it was often said that in Seven Meredrain reigned, while Sala ruled. Yet they actually did care for one another quite deeply, and worked together very well. She handled the economy and internal politics, while he personally controlled the spy network and speaking with other royals.

“Hoteye,” the King went on, turning back to the semi-prisoner. “Do you have anything more to add?”

Hoteye shook his head. “Not at present about the spy rings no. Does that mean we will be moving on to another topic now? After all, time is money!”

“You and money,” Wally shook his cube-shaped head. “It’s not very dandy to obsess so much about material things brother.”

Before the two very odd looking mages could fall into their gentle bickering once more, the queen leaned forward, her eyes gleaming. “Now, let us talk about this teleportation array of yours…” The world, she reflected as Hoteye began to talk, was about to change. And it would be up to them to guide that change in the right direction.

**OOOOOOO**

Getting the prisoners to the nearest ranch hands took even longer than Ranma had feared, though that was because of the speed of the ranchers rather than anything else. Seilah and Wendy had found a large band of ranchers nearby, and they were more than willing to help. Indeed, they were willing to do more than help, they were eager to take all of the slaves with them into Minstrel. Apparently, it was nearly time for them to take in their cattle to market anyway. They didn’t have nearly enough horses to go around the prisoners however so they put the prisoners on the actual cattle, and tied them down there. It was a kind of funny sight, but Ranma was pleased to see it.

He had, of course, had to travel ahead of them into Minstrel in order to contact San Jiao Shin and tell him what was happening and despite being appalled at the fact two-hundred slaves had been kept by Raven Tail for so long, he was more than pleased with the outcome of this little foray. “I must say though, this isn’t quite what I think any of us had in mind when we told you to maintain a low profile,” the older man teased Ranma, shaking his head.

“It’s my version of it,” Ranma said, only somewhat sheepishly. “Deal with it.”

“You have a very odd way of talking to Kings Ranma, I hope you never lose that,” San Jiao Shin said with a sigh. He had aged noticeably after becoming king of Minstrel, and Ranma found himself rather hoping that the old man would start taking things easier after this.

After the former slaves were in Minstrel territory being looked after by the locals, and Erza had taken credit for the mission covering Ranma’s rear end, the group returned to the other clan of ranchers and their four prisoners to Zòumíngqǔ. But unfortunately, since their crimes hadn’t happened in Minstrel, the locals were unwilling to keep them for very long. That meant either they all had to return to Fiore to drop them off there, or Bisca had to at the very least.

Bisca, Erza and Ranma discussed this as they travelled to the nearest port town, one that had survived and even grown after the slave trade in Bosco had ended. Eventually it was agreed that Bisca would break off from the group. She wasn’t happy about it, but she had a duty to the guild and to the job, she had taken to see these four back to be tried.

At Erza’s urging, the others left Bisca and Ranma to walk the prisoners down to the ship she’d be taking across the straits. As Bisca growled and muttered to herself, Ranma shook his head, putting an arm around her shoulders. “Cheer up, we’ll all be back in Magnolia in a few weeks, a month at the outside.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Bisca said childishly, thrusting out her bottom lip in a truly adorable pout. “Erza will have you all to herself for all that time.”

“If you don’t count the fact we’ll be travelling as fast as we can, along with Seilah, Wendy and Carla sure,” Ranma quipped, trying hard not to stare at those ruby-painted lips.

“…I…we never, that is, do you think that, if… I… that is…” Bisca began, speaking hesitantly. “I, just we didn’t ask you to commit to us, and you never ask us to do likewise… It’s just… Alzack. I don’t know how to get him to stop without hurting his feelings, and he’s still my friend and…”

Ranma thought for a moment then sighed, pulling Bisca to a halt and giving the foursome a glare to keep them moving. “Listen Bisca, that’s right we never made any promises or anything. If you want to see if Alzack can, what was it, step up his game? If he can, and you want to, go for it. I won’t mind, so long as ya don’t kiss or anything like that right in front of me.

Bisca bit her lip. Ranma was a lot closer to what she had been hoping for than Alzack, at least in the short term, in the long term she couldn’t say. But the reality of sharing had not been fun except when she was on the receiving end of Ranma’s attentions. Watching him kiss Erza or cuddle with her on the trail had been irritating, if not quite making her jealous. Because of that, and the image of the wedding and her inability to picture Ranma as the groom made a part of her wonder if Alzack could give her some actual romance then perhaps the two of them would be better together, and then she wouldn’t have to share. And while she had kissed Ranma in his female form a few times, it hadn’t made her body buzz and shudder as it had kissing his male side. “So you’d be fine if I went on a few dates then?”

Sighing Ranma nodded, “I’d be fine with that Bisca, just make sure that it’s what you really want. This whole emotions thing is kind of complicated after all.”

Laughing Bisca agreed to that before continuing the walk. After stowing the quartet in the hold, they remained there for a time, finding a small area between crates, where Ranma instantly began to kiss her what was happening. He pulled Bisca against him, and Bisca started to moan, slowly humping her waist against his their hands moving everywhere. Then he pulled back, smiling at her gently, winking. “Something to remember me by, yea?”

Bisca’s blush and happy grin was still on her face as she watched him hop back over the side of the ship to the quay.

After Bisca’s ship had left on high tide, Ranma and the others left the port town quickly, heading towards Joya. With their horses and the fact Ranma and Erza could run, and Wendy, Carla and Seilah fly, the horses could run free without any burden at least for half the day. Because of this, their speed picked up by quite a bit, and soon the farmlands gave way to mountains. The border of Joya came up and was passed quickly, marked by a single train coming out of Joya and heading deeper into Minstrel, along with a single road next to it.

The reason for the lack of anything else was easy to see soon after they crossed the border. The mountains of Joya did not gradually begin to go up as they would in Stella, but with an abruptness that was startling. One moment they were racing along a slowly rising series of hills the next they were at the base of jagged mountains. It wasn’t like the Escarpment between Pergrande and Seven, but it was almost as impassable save for the one train track. Even the trail they were following became little more than a hiking path rather than a real road.

They could barely find a place to set up their tent the way was so heavily lined with rocks and trees. This in turn forced them up into those trees to rest, which was fine for Ranma and Wendy (who loved it), but Erza found herself having difficulties until Ranma hit on a simple solution. “Why don’t you share my sleeping bag Erza?”

Erza blushed at that and almost glared at him. While the two of them had taken to kissing, or even outright making out, every night if they could get some time alone, that was a step too far in her opinion. But given his history in his past life, Erza knew she shouldn’t jump to conclusions. “Explain,” she said tersely.

Blinking at her tone, Ranma thought for a minute, then blushed. “Eeep, um, not like that! Er, not that it wouldn’t be, um fun, but er, it’s way too early for…”

“Thank you Ranma I understand what you’re saying,” Erza interjected quickly before Ranma’s old habit of sticking his foot in his mouth came back. “Could you explain what you actually meant to say please?”

“I mean, my sleeping bag has a spell that’ll let it stick to anything. Wendy and I bought these two the last time we were in Stella, the north of the country has a lot of these deep valleys and some nifty local enchanter guilds.”

That had been before Wendy had begun to be interested in enchantment, and unless they wanted to take the sleeping bags apart, she couldn’t’ get to where the enchantments were housed. And it was too cold for Ranma to want to deal with being covered in frost when he woke up, so just going without was not going to happen. And Seilah was already sharing Wendy and Carla’s double beanbag, leaving only Ranma’s.

 “I think I will be fine with my blankets, and perhaps a proper used of my various weapons,” Erza said thoughtfully. “I… appreciate your offer, but I think given the newness of our relationship, it is still far too early for us to share a bed, or sleeping bag in this case. Even with us just sleeping as we would be.”

 “Okay, um, good luck I guess,” Ranma replied, on the one hand disappointed, on the other relieved. This way he’d not get his rear kicked for a certain physical reaction to Erza’s closeness. But on the other hand, he wouldn’t experience that closeness. *At least not yet,* a certain part of his mind said a thought he pushed to the side for now.

Later that night however, Erza’s makeshift hammock collapsed as she rolled out of bed, landing on the ground below with a loud yet still cute “Kyaa!” Since she had landed on a bush below she wasn’t injured physically despite being in her flannel sleeping wear. Her pride did take a ding, however.

For a moment the night was still, then a groggy Wendy asked the question everyone there was thinking. From the depths of her sleeping back, which was pulled up over the heads of the three differently sized ladies, she asked sleepily, “Erza, did you just squeak?”

“No, no that’s your imagination Wendy, go back to sleep,” Erza huffed, glaring up at the tree while Seilah shook her head and Ranma snickered very, very quietly to himself.

With the light of the moon above, she was able to redo her hammock in about forty minutes, during which her movements and mutters kept the others awake. Two minutes after falling asleep in it however, her issues with tossing and turning came back and dumped her to the ground once more with a thump.

This time she kept from squeaking, if barely, though that didn’t do much to save her dignity. “Ugh, just share Ranma’s sleeping bag already,” groused Carla. “We ladies need our beauty sleep. And he might be the one man in the world who would never try anything you don’t want him to regardless of circumstances.”

Grumbling, Erza moved over to Ranma’s tree, climbing it easily and finding Ranma had already opened the insulated sleeping bag for her. “Not one word,” she warned, but her lips had already begun to twitch at the look of wry amusement and commiseration Ranma was giving her.

“I didn’t say a thing,” Ranma replied, holding the sleeping bag open for her.

With a sigh Erza lay out on the sleeping bag next to Ranma, nuzzling close before sipping the bag closed around them. The two of them lay there for a moment in one another’s arms, then Erza, who had been moving around slightly to get comfortable, frowned as a certain issue made itself known. “Ranma, that had better be one of your pistols,” She warned in a heated whisper, her face lighting up.

“Erm, nope, but what did ya expect, I ain’t a monk or a saint, and you’re too damn sexy not to react to,” Ranma whispered back. “If it wasn’t so blasted cold out I’d have to deal with my hair being frozen I’d volunteer to change forms, but for tonight you’ll just have to deal with it.”

Erza’s flush increased at that. She knew objectively that her body was attractive, but she thought that her choice of nightwear, a baggy one-piece flannel outfit that was as warm as it was childish, would have taken care of that. *Evidently not,* she thought with both chagrin and a surprising amount of pride. “We, well try to keep it to yourself then.”

“Impossible,” Ranma replied bluntly, to which Erza found herself actually blushing again. The two of them subsided after a bit but it was a long time before either of them actually got to sleep. Yet when they did, Erza astonishingly found that her tossing and turning had subsided. Though from then on while in Joya she asked Ranma to change forms. Though honestly speaking, this didn’t make things any easier, feeling the other girl’s breasts rubbing against her back or shoulder was no less embarrassing, and no less a turn on, than feeling Ranma’s length between her buttocks in his male form.

During the day the terrain here in the mountains slowed their movement for a few days and Ranma eventually sold their horses to a group of travelers heading the other way. This freed them up quite a bit, since the trail ahead of them was not horse-friendly.

After that, they saw signs here and there leading off the hiking trail into what were obviously mines here and there. Towns were practically nonexistent, and those that were there were built into abandoned mines. When the odd group reached these towns, they would start asking about the history of the area or about any odd mountains in the area. Erza figured, and Ranma agreed, that Belserion’s mountain would not only be associated with odd legends even now, but also would have some feature that made it stand out.

As they went however, they didn’t learn much. Most of the locals were not very welcoming, and the history of the area was not very well known, or really cared about. But Seilah came to their rescue here. She sought out not people but books, written legends, historical documents. There were never very many in one place, and she, to her horror, never found a single library. But as they continued, she put together the history of the area. It turned out that Ranma was right, Joya had come into being after a day when the sky had turned blood red and there was shaking of the earth. After that, the mountains had been changed, made sharper and more dangerous, but also far richer in ores. Between her and Ranma, they found a direction to go from their third day in the country, towards Bell Lake and a little north of it to a mountain there called simply ‘Fang’.

Their fourth day in going this direction they left any kind of human habitation behind, and to Erza and Seilah’s surprise, their pace actually picked up again. Wendy and Ranma had been in the mountains before in Stella and had gotten it down to an art form. Wendy routinely went ahead, marking down the routs for them to take with small white chalk marks, and with Seilah and Wendy both flying as often as possible, that only left Ranma and Erza walking, or climbing as best they had to.

Here Erza’s upper body strength helped immensely, allowing her to keep up with the others despite their advantages. The weather was all sorts of horrible too: overcast sky every day, as they trekked through the mountains. It rained one out of every three day, making them all miserable, and Ranma spending a lot of time in his female form during the day too, which was irritating but there was nothing she could do about it if Ranma wanted to conserve her strength. But thankfully for him, Erza quickly showed that couldn’t care less which body Ranma was currently wearing the very next night.

Grumbling angrily, Ranma pulled the sleeping back over the both of them, shivering slightly at the cold. She could handle the cold relatively easy so long as she was dry. Wet and cold, well, despite her durability, she was still human, and even now after drying off as best she could she was still uncomfortable. The fact that it had been raining so nastily all day hadn’t done much for her endurance either. She slowly started to bring out her ki, heating herself and Erza up, but it was still slow going. “Freaking weather, this better be worth it, no offense Erza.”

The taller redhead nodded, trying to bite back a blush and her own shivers as Ranma and she pressed chest to chest. Ranma had found them a tiny overhang to sleep under, but it was too small and tilted for their tent so the two sleeping bags were no stuck to the rock of the mountainside on an angle. It wasn’t very comfortable, but getting slightly more so as Ranma started to act like a human-sized heater.

The fact the other girl’s chest was only separated by one layer of flannel and one layer of silk from her own, their breasts rubbing and pushing against one another, was however the main factor determining her blush. And was that her nipples? Something rock hard was present at the tip of the other girl’s chest, and despite the layers separating them Erza had to bite back a gasp as those hard points rubbed against her own, her body reacting to the sudden stimuli. “Gah, um, \*ahem\* yes well I understand that. Our trip into Desierto was a jaunt in the park in comparison to this.”

Ranma nodded, her own face flushed. “Um, I’m also sorry about this Erza. I know changing into my female body’s a, well a solution to my not-so-little little problem, but it does come with its own negatives. If you’re not comfortable sleeping this close to another woman I can underst…”

That was as far as Ranma got in his self-effacing ramble before Erza decided to show that she had no problem with his female body. She leaned down the slight distance needed and laid her lips on Ranma’s own. It was the first time they’d kissed when Ranma was in his female body, and instantly Erza could tell the difference. For one thing, Ranma was surprised, letting her take the initiative, which Erza honestly didn’t like all that much, but what she did like, and indeed enjoyed, was how soft Ranma’s lips in this form was. The hint of cherry and dampness from the rain only added to the sensation. “Just, shut up,” Erza hissed after pulling back, huffing. “I don’t hah, care, about hah, your body. It’s still you regardless.”

Then Ranma was leaning up and shifting until she was laying on top of Erza, and it got even better. Hands did not wander beyond backs save for gentle squeezes of each other’s rear or sides, and they didn’t start humping or anything like that, but it was easily the most intense make-out session they’d had since that fateful night in the rancher’s camp.

After that, the ice was truly broken, and the two redheads took to making out every night for a few minutes ostensibly to warm themselves up. It wasn’t even, technically, a lie. It did warm them both up something fierce. Afterwards they would talk, talk about their pasts, about training, about magic, about the world, talk until they fell asleep, cuddled against one another and would have to be roused from somnolence by Wendy or Seilah, both of whom were early risers.

Eventually they started to go so high, that Carla started to have trouble breathing, and had to stop helping Wendy fly, letting her leap ahead on her own. A few hours after that, even Erza was beginning to feel it, the thinness of the air up here getting to both of them. In contrast, Ranma didn’t seem to feel it at all, which astonished Erza, and when they looked at Seilah, she shook her head. “While I am not so used to tramping around mountains like this, I am very used to living at heights even higher than this.

That was scant cover comforts to Erza, who had, on occasion compared herself to Seilah. Physically, those comparisons did not do her, or Bisca when she was with them, any credit. Erza knew she lost to Seilah in the chest apartment. She had Bisca beat by at least a full size if not more, but Seilah had at least two sizes on Erza in turn. Bisca had been quite irritated about that, but had gotten over it quickly.

It also got even colder, with how high they were going, but none of them complained, especially Ranma since they had at last left the rain behind and he could spend the days at least as a man again. Ranma gave his song silk cloaks to Seilah, and Erza had several types of armor that allowed her to keep up with the chill. Wendy also had given her coat to Carla, while she and Ranma didn’t even seem to feel it, at least at first. Eventually, Wendy too started to show signs of being cold, but Ranma kept on going tirelessly, while she shared her coat with cat-form Carla now.

“And my ancestors did this as a rite of passage?!” Erza grumbled as she hauled herself up a sheer rock face following Ranma doing the same in turn, following Wendy and Carla who had alighted above them. The young girl was visibly turned away staring ahead of them and around the corner of the precipice they were climbing.

“I know that is kind of impressive,” Ranma said, hauling Erza upwards.

“I don’t think I could’ve done this track when I was fifteen, you?” Erza said in reply.

Ranma shrugged, not answering. “I bet that it wasn’t as tough back then.”

“How so?” Seilah asked, coming up behind Erza and gently pushing the other woman up with a hand on her rear. Erza blushed slightly at the contact, but it wasn’t the first time she or Seilah had to push each other up like that. It had happened quite often since the air became so thin Seilah couldn’t fly for very long.

“Remember we know that some magical weapon hit the capital of the country that your ancestor Irene ruled. It shifted the entire landscape around it, beyond creating Bell Lake itself and these mountains. It might have then carried any mountain already there up on top of the new ones, like the dirt on a shovel is pushed up its length by the dirt underneath.”

Erza nodded that, and joined Ranma on the ledge. They both reached down for Seilah pulling her up, using their free hands to grasp onto the side of the rock so they didn’t lose their purchase. Then the three of them tracked up the small, thin flat section of the mountain to where Wendy was waiting. They rounded the corner, only to stop and stare at the same thing that had held Wendy’s attention. Carla too was staring from where she was perched on Wendy’s head in her cat form, just staring in awe.

“I think Ranma,” said dryly after a moment, “that we’ve arrived.”

The others all just nodded their heads, staring ahead of him. Ahead of them, was a Dragon’s Fang. It looked as if some master carver and his descendants through untold generations had worked on creating something that looked natural, yet also unnatural at the same time, a thing of wonder as well as some shock. It looked like a dragon’s fang a long, serrated thing without any blemishes or signs of trees or anything else to obscure the granite face. It jutted outward slightly from the rest of the mountains around it.

Ranma pointed that out as they all continued to stare. “I mean look at it, it looks as if it was a single boulder that was sort of shifted by the earth moving. Hah, I was right!!”

“Incredible,” Erza said with a sigh, staring at the sight.

“It reminds me of the first time I saw an iceberg,” Wendy said, her hands clapped in front of her chest. Or, a giant whale out to sea. Only bigger and solider.”

“Solider is not a proper word,” Seilah said, but she rested one hand lightly on Wendy’s head, or would have if Carla were not in the way. Instead of working Wendy’s hair a bit, she ended up scratching the white furred cat person’s neck not even noticing what she had been doing. “But I agree, it is marvelous.”

She then winced as Carla smacked her hand away with a hand laced with blue ki light. “I am not cat! I do not require petting, or pampering of that nature.”

“Naa, just in every other nature,” Ranma replied dryly. “You having a nice ride up there? Is ooh little paws sore?”

They all just stared for a few more moments while Carla and Ranma exchanged barbed quips until Erza shook her head. “Come on, it’s not getting any closer.” With that, she started forward, heading towards the distant Fang.

Getting there took several more days, even at the pace this group could go, but eventually they reached it. Once there, they ran into a problem. It wasn’t only that the mountain looked as if it had been carved, it actually was a single almost insanely huge piece of stone. There were cracks and crevices, but there was no path upwards. Erza took one look at this and said again “And my ancestors made this track as a rite of passage!”

Wendy however pointed out that there were a couple places that looked as if they had been carved out, tiny little handholds here and there and steel rust left on the rock elsewhere from where something had been rusted all away. Using these marks, they wound their way up the mountainside, running into trouble later that night. The problem was, there was no place to lay out. Either they had to keep going and make it in a day, or they would have to figure out a way to tie themselves to the rock and sleep.

So they kept going, pushing through the night with difficulty. Seilah, Wendy and Ranma provided light, while Erza provided rope, and a series of daggers that could be used as makeshift pitfalls to help them along. By the time they reached the top, everyone bar Ranma was exhausted and even he was feeling it.

But at last their climb ended at a tiny, well-hidden flat area. It was a small archway, leading into a tiny cave leading into a large cavern. Taking a look inside, Ranma whistled. “Yeah…I think we found what we were looking for. In fact, I’m certain of it.”

“How are you certain?” Seilah asked, having heard something in Ranma’s tone she hadn’t heard before, a kind of reverence, and respect.

“Just come in here and you’ll see,” Ranma replied, and all of the others trooped in after. And when they did, all of them had to nod their heads. This, this was kind of very obviously what they were seeking. The reason being, there was a dragon’s skull laid in the center of the room.

It was perfect, very well-preserved, its mouth set into a permanent predatory grin, with two fangs jutting out and to the side from the jaw. It had two upward curving horns coming from the sides of its lower jaw up to above the back of the skull, which in turn was marked by two triangular-shaped horns. A third horn was set directly on its snout going upward like a rhino’s. In its eyes were set two large circular black objects, which bore a distinct resemblance to the memory box that had led them to search out this place.

Clapping his hands twice in front of him Ranma then pressed them together over his chest and bowed from the waist respectfully to the skull, with the others following suit. Even Seilah did so, though she didn’t honestly know why. Ranma had never struck her as the sort of deluded individual who preyed to one of the gods after all. Still, there was something almost solemn about the skull ahead of them, a dignity that forced respect from beyond the grave.

“This has to be Belserion,” Ranma said, moving forward to touch the thing lately. Doesn’t it?

“I would assume so, unless Belserion killed another dragon and used its skull as an ornament,” Erza replied, her tone dust dry.

The two of them thought back to what the dragon it seems like you that brief moment it seemed, and Ranma shook his head. “Nah.”

Erza shook her head. “No he didn’t seem the type.”

“That’s good,” Wendy muttered, having shivered a little at the very idea, though even she felt Belserion had come across as someone who wouldn’t kill for something like that. Getting over her shock, she walked around the skull, whistling slightly. The dragon’s skull was about fifty feet tall, and four times that feet snout to back and was about another forty feet wide. “He was even bigger than mom when he died! I didn’t think that was possible.”

Ranma scratched his head thoughtfully, staring at the skull. “Actually, his head looks a little smaller than what I remember of Typhon.” All the others looked at him askance, and he shrugged. “Maybe dragons keep growing as they age? Remember Typhon died of old age.”

“That sounds strange to me,” Erza expressed, but shook her head. “So we found it, and I would assume those globes are the memory modules, but how do we activate them?”

“How much do you want to wager that we activate them the same way that the other one activated?” Ranma asked, while Seilah looked confused, not having heard about the issues they had operating the memory box.

“My blood,” Erza said in dawning realization. “That feels a bit morbid, but I suppose it is a surefire way to make certain that no one besides family can activate something.” With a sigh, she pulled out one of the same daggers they’ve been using to as makeshift pitons, and cut her finger lightly, before pressing it down into the eye socket onto the metallic seeming ‘eyeball’ within. Nothing happened. She twitched her hand to the other one, but still nothing happened. “I think perhaps we were wrong.”

For a moment, despair threatened to well up. They had come so far, tracking been so difficult, and now they would have nothing to show for it? After all, if that wasn’t it, they had no clue what the key could be to unlock the hidden memories. After all it could literally be anything, sound, sight touch, even smell.

But then Ranma thought of something. “Wait a minute. Your ancestor, wasn’t she a Dragon slayer?

Erza nodded, “Yes she was. Why?”

“Well, I’m just thinking, that if she was a Dragon slayer, maybe she thought anyone tramping up here would be taking part in the training as one?” With a quick nod Ranma and Erza both cut their thumbs again, and as one pressed them into the sockets switching off after a second.

That worked. The metal spheres began to glow, the glow growing so quickly, that it blinded them all. A second later, a miniature Dragon, - although to call in miniature was a bit of a misnomer it was at least 200 feet wide from snout to tail - hovered in the air above them.

The dragon looked down at them with a wide grin as his eyes spotted Erza first. “That red hair!” he roared with laughter. “That hair, bwahahaha! That has to mean that you are the daughter of Irene, Erza. Of all the traits in your family, that red hair always breeds true!”

His eyes flicked to Ranma, and he frowned, before seeming to sniff the air. How an apparition from a memory could detect anything, or in fact was acting so alive, Ranma didn’t know. However, it seemed to have worked, because the creature reared back, and stared at him in surprise. “A Water Dragon Slayer of all things. I didn’t know that old Typhon was going to join our little experiment. I have to assume it happened after I died.”

“Probably centuries after,” Ranma said with a sigh. “The names Ranma, and this is Erza Scarlet, we think that Irene was her esteemed ancestor.”

“Ancestor…” the dragon mused, sniffing the air thoughtfully. “Perhaps. If the traits of that family have all breed true perhaps. I’ll not speculate about that.”

He sniffed the air again, and turned to stare at Seilah his good humor and calm air disappearing in an instant. Belserion snarled wrathfully, then leaped forward, his shade moving from above his skull. “Demon! Foul get of darkness, are you one of those things that fool Zeref was trying to make or a creation of the evil of human minds given form!? Regardless, I will get rid of you right now!”

As the others watched Belserion’s ghost swooped down on Seilah, its maw opening as it tried to bite her head off. Then he tried to slash at her body with his frontal claws, even breathe out some kind of breath attack. The attack didn’t happen, and nor did any of his attacks connect. Because, although he seemed to have forgotten, Belserion was still a ghost.

Her face even more deadpan than usual, Seilah shook her head. “Oh dear, I am under attack by a will o’ the wisp, whatever shall I do?”

“Grahh!!! Erza, if you truly are of the Dragnof’s royal line why are you with such as this!?” Belserion roared.

“It’s rather complicated, but from that I understand you know about Demons?” Erza asked, trying hard not to laugh at the ghost’s predicament. That wouldn’t be very politic after all.

“Of course I do. I was called the Sage Dragon for a reason while I was alive. This one even smells of Zeref, that, that mad thing! To call him human is to denigrate the term,” Belserion growled before going on, his voice rising with each word until the cavern shook with it, though how a ghost’s words could do that was anyone’s guess. “So explain to me this complication, or else I swear I will find some way to kill this one where she stands!”

This took a while, during which Belserion flew around Seilah, examining first her and the others from every angle. Eventually he harrumphed like a champion, cutting Ranma off. “Enough! In other words, you have beaten this Demon and forced her to serve you. Well enough for now.”

With his interest in Seilah assuaged (and no way to kill her, which he might well have done if he could despite Ranma’s explanation) Belserion turned to look at Wendy. He ignored Carla, who was once more in her cat form, and curled up on Wendy’s head sound asleep. Since she’d had to climb three times as much as any of them, or even twice as much as Wendy, none of them were bothered by her sleeping like that. “You smell of sky magic. That would be Grandeenay then. That’s another one I would think wouldn’t join our project, if only because she didn’t want to take in a child just to turn them into a weapon against our fellows.”

Wendy quickly curtseyed, then twisted her neck at an odd angle, baring her throat. It was a dragon move if ever there was one, and it was something that Ranma had never seen from her before, but it and the curtsy seemed to amuse the old dragon, and waved his tail airily. “I’m not that formal child. While Grandeenay might’ve taught you manners, I’m not Grandeenay,”

“But what do two Dragon slayers, a cat a nonhuman, and you, young Erza, wish to do here?” He looked at her as a thoughtfully, “I’m afraid you seem a little too old to survive the process of imbuing you with Dragon Slayer magic, and my shade would not be able to give you the training necessary in any event.”

“I am more than willing to talk about your… ancestor,” Belserion went on, pausing before he said the word ancestor. “Her nation, or my agreement with your family, or myself,” the giant dragon spirit laughed again at that. “I suppose I could say that my works and myself are my favorite topics if I do say so myself.”

At that, Erza just gave him a deadpan look, while Ranma rolled his eyes, and Wendy cocked her head to one side while Seilah slowly shook her head. “Everyone’s a critic,” Belserion muttered.

“Our reasons are twofold Belserion,” Erza said. “I do indeed want to learn about my ancestors and her nations, although I have no desire to learn Dragon slayer magic at this point. But Ranma here has a question first.”

“Actually,” Ranma said with a smile, “Wendy probably should ask her questions first. Ladies always go first.”

“Why ever would that be?” the large Dragon muttered, shaking his head while every woman there, even Seilah smiled, and Wendy hopped over to give her Nii-chan a big hug before turning back to the spirit. “Still, ask away little one.”

The next hour, Wendy bombarded Belserion with questions about Grandeenay, about the Dragon Slayers, about what had caused them to become such and where he might think Grandeenay could have gone to hide herself, if Wendy could follow, and why she had left in the first place. Like this, they all learned about the Dragon King Festival about the rise of Acnologia, the former Dragon Slayer who had gone mad, and started to slay every dragon he came across. So many in fact, that the dragons had nearly gone extinct in Ishgar, retreating to the continent to the north of the peninsula.

That wasn’t good, nor was the fact that as a dragon, this Acnologia would have nearly as much life force as one of them, and could ostensibly live for a very long time indeed. “Is there any chance he’d have died of old age too?” he asked hopefully.

Belserion boomed another laugh. “You wish boy! No, Typhon was already old by our reckoning when the Dragon Festival started. But he died of old age, truly? Did he give you something to keep the transformation at bay before he died? In my time that was a major issue.”

“No,” Ranma growled, “that’s part of the problem. The other part is my initial magic.”

“You lie,” the old dragon said complacently. “You could learn other magics after becoming a Dragon Slayer, small incidental one that would have no impact on your body or magical structure. But if you learned anything before Dragon Slayer magic, you would never have been able to do so.”

Ranma frowned at that. “All right fine, here’s the truth then.” He looked over at Seilah, and then began to speak about how he had come to this world from his own, how there magic didn’t exist, and how he used a form of power based around the energy of his body.

Belserion listened intently, asking questions here and there, but mostly simply staying silent. Seilah asked far more questions mostly about Ranma’s old world, what it was like and especially what kind of novels could be found there. She didn’t seem interested in technology at all, merely the books and the food. Eventually Ranma wound down, having talked about his training with the ancient dragon Typhon, and how it had ended.

At that, Belserion shook his head. “Daft old fool! With what happened with Acnologia, Typhon should have figured out something in order to keep the Dragon cells merged into your body with his magic from overcoming you. He certainly had enough time to do so!”

“Well he didn’t,” Ranma said sharply, “and since I’ve reached a certain plateau, I’ve been dealing with issues about it! I’m a lot weaker than I should be in a lot of ways because of this conflict, and I am sick of it!”

“Hmmm…” Belserion fell still, the image slowly tracing his upward curving horns with a claw. “Hmmm, I think we can find a solution. That solution though is going to be very difficult on you.” When Ranma scoffed, he chuckled grimly. “You see, the dragon cells in your body are not just going to be transforming your body, they’re going to be creating a sort of draconic personality that would take you over if you fully transformed. The trick will be to draw that personality out, and kill it. Once you do, your Dragon Slayer powers and transformation should be entirely under your control. Of course this is all experimental, but it sounds as if it should work.”

“…Are you saying I’m going to have to fight some kind of mental battle against a dragon?” Ranma asked slowly, while the others were frowning in confusion or worry.

“That’s correct. We need to bring it to the fore, the personality I mean. From what you describe, it won’t be quite at the level where it would come forward on its own to overpower your sense of self, so you might have an advantage. But we will see,” Belserion mused. “That is, of course, if you’re brave enough to try. Because if you lose, you, as a human, will die, and you as a dragon will be reborn.”

“How do we go about it?” Ranma said with a sigh. He waved off Erza’s protests about this being an insane idea, and even Wendy looking at him fearfully. Ranma had to do this. He had an entire booklet now about the demons from Tartaros after weeks of talking to Seilah, and knew that while Torafuzar was one of their toughest, he’d had a natural advantage there, and an ability to get through Torafuzar’s vaunted armor. Against some of the others, he did not have the first and their general speed and long-range attacks were such the second might not matter.

“The answer to that is simple,” Belserion said smirking a little evilly now. “You just need to chip off a bit of my skull here, and eat it. The bone of a dragon will accelerate the process of transformation enough the personality will fully form. But first, you all will need to create an enchanted stasis field. That will keep the effect of the bone from affecting your body, but not your psyche. Because of that, the draconic personality the wake up, and the two of you will have to fight it out.

“Why can’t they talk it out?” Wendy said with a scowl, not liking Belserion’s idea or the fact her Nii-chan had jumped on the idea of fighting a dragon of all things (and yes, she knew what irony was and aware of it now). “While Typhon sounds very forgetful and kind of… silly,” she said hesitantly, “he doesn’t sound like a bad person.”

“The power of the draconic personality type is only vaguely connected to the dragon who gave you your Dragon Slayer powers young one,” Belserion said with a sigh. “The actual personality is based upon all of the feral instincts of a dragon, without any of the control. Added to that, is the negative id all you humans have within you, which merges with the draconic personality.”

“Let’s do this then,” Ranma said with a sigh.

For the next 20 minutes, Ranma, Wendy and Seilah went to work creating the enchanting state while Erza put up the tent and created a fire as the light shining in from outside slowly turned to night. Seilah proved to be a dab hand at runes, and Wendy picked up the array easily, pointing out where the others had gone wrong, and basically ordering them around like a little general, causing many a smile on the faces of the other two.

Carla slept through it all, curled up nearby.

Eventually Wendy and Belserion were satisfied, despite the fact that Belserion tried to put in a few mistakes, just to see if Wendy caught him apparently, or so he said. Ironically Ranma actually believed him when he said it, though that didn’t make him want to smack the old dragon a good one any less.

Then, once more under Belserion’s instructions, Ranma chipped off a portion of his skull at the far back, before stepping into the stasis area and sitting down. The others sat nearby read to activate it, and Ranma smiled at them all. “Well, here goes nothing.”

Then he raised the bone to his mouth chomped down. It tasted pretty much like you’d expect 1000+-year-old Dragon bone to taste like, nothing very much, but what was there, was awful. Ranma grimaced at the taste, but forced it down.

As the pieces of the skull hit his stomach, Ranma’s body instantly went still, his eyes rolled back in his head, and his friends activated the stasis circle around him. Moments later, they watched as Ranma’s eyes seemed to turn to glass almost, his mind visibly going elsewhere.

In his head, Ranma found himself standing on an endless ocean. There was nothing but blue sea from one horizon to the other, all around him as he turned. The sound of the sea was almost overwhelming, the roar of the waves unbroken by any other sound.

Then there was a roar, and from out from the water sprouted a massive head. It was huge, scaled and marked by a few horns spouting out and down to the side looking like fins almost, here and there on the head and neck area. It was large, easily the size of the head that Belserion had left behind. But other than being smaller, it was Typhon to the light. Without a word he roared, spitting out a blast of water towards Ranma, who ducked into the water, before coming up and attacking in turn.

The dragon’s tail suddenly blasted out of the water, clipping Ranma and sending him flying out through the water, into the air where he flipped himself, before coming down onto the water, hovering there.

He wiped blood from his lip, and growled, “Well, if I thought this was going to be easy, I wouldn’t be as interested. Let’s do this, you scaly bastard! I’ve been wanting to kick your ass for years Typhon!” he roared forward, his forearms up to his elbows covered with water Dragon Slayer magic, the same going up his legs to his knees.

Across from him, the young facsimile of the ancient dragon roared out a challenge of its own and raced forward. The two monstrous beings clashed and the battle was joined.

Out in the real world, Belserion nodded. “That should do it.” While the others watched in shock as Ranma began to twitch and spasm despite the power of the stasis circle, the spirit turned blandly to the redhead. “So, tell me more about yourself Erza, and then we can get to your questions for me at last.”

**End Chapter**

I had intended to put in a bit with Jenny, and have a portion already written, but I decided I was taking too much time to finish this chapter, and it was getting too long as it was. I apologize for that, but really, a lot of it can be shown in brief flashbacks at this point.