This chapter has been betaed by *Michael* once more. Please join me in thanking him for spotting the myriad small mistakes, which might otherwise have ruined the flow of the chapter. I have also gone over and corrected a few canon FT mistakes that *Justlovereadin*’ pointed out after my initial post.

**Chapter 5: New Companions and Relationships**

Aboard a large airship powered by lacrima crystals and magics well beyond what was known by even the most advanced guilds of Fiore or Seven, there was a throne room. It was mostly rectangular, but with a slight circular bulge at one end where the throne sat. On that throne sat an old man. He was tall, with decently wide shoulders to go with a long, flowing beard and an eyepatch over one eye.

Nearby sat other chairs, smaller and less ornate than his, but each bearing a symbol on its back. In four of those chairs sat other people, whose looks and ages varied wildly. The youngest was a pink haired girl who looked around Wendy’s age or perhaps a year older. She was sitting next to the next youngest, a black haired girl with violet eyes and a body that was just starting on its path to womanhood at around 15. The two of them were poring over some papers together, scowling and nodding in turn.

Near to them sat two young men, older than the girls, but not by much. One of them had a serious mien to his tanned features, earrings and thick brown hair that stuck out in every direction. The other, who was younger than the first by a number of yeas, had an almost manic look to his face, with a wild mane of blond hair. The solemn man was reading what looked like an exercise magazine, of all things, while the other was cackling obnoxiously at something he saw in a viewing lacrima, a lacrima enchanted to record an image or send it out to other paired lacrima.

They all looked up as the old man spoke suddenly, looking up at them from his lacrima. “Caprico has fallen.”

“KAYAYAYA!!” guffawed the young man, slapping his thigh. “What!? That guy was supposed to be an up and comer, right? Almost ready to be offered a seat among the Seven Sins? And he died on a simple assassination mission? What a joke! KAYAAYA!”

“This is serious, Zancrow,” said the solemn man, glaring at him for a moment before looking at the old man. “Do we know anything about how he died, Master Hades?”

“No, Azuma. My agents were only able to get back to me several weeks after the fact. I suppose it could turn out that this general San Jiao Shi is tougher than Caprico expected, but I think not,” Hades replied, thinking. “This could be a sign that someone among the governments of Ishgar is aware of us expanding our influence. We will have to be on the lookout for that in the future.”

“Send me next, master,” Azuma urged. “I will avenge Caprico and make certain the name Grimoire Heart is remembered and feared throughout Minstrel!”

“No. We have already been paid, and any agreement is null if the individual sent dies. I will send some of my agents to the capital to discover what happened. Until then, you and Zancrow will continue to recruit more members.” Hades went on, turning his head slightly to address the black-haired girl. “Ultear, I have a job for you in Fiore. It will be a long term job, but it will, in the long run, both bring much information to us and provide cover for our own activities.”

As Ultear perked up, and the girl next to her pouted, the old man went on, smiling sinisterly. “With its number of mages, Fiore is the most dangerous threat to our ambitions and has access to information we need, to say nothing of the deadly weapon Etherion. So you, Ultear, will weaken Fiore from within…”

**OOOOOOO**

Laxus groaned irritably as he washed the dishes in his one-bedroom apartment. Ever since Gildarts had destroyed the men’s dorm after he had returned from Pergrande, all the men had been forced to find other accommodations. Laxus had an easier time of it than most these days thanks to his pay from S-class jobs. And to be fair, his apartment was actually damn nice for a single man like him.

That sort of connected to the reason why he was feeling so irritable: his attempt at having a relationship with Evergreen was failing miserably. He had known she was younger than him, which had caused some issues at first. But she had seemed more mature than the others her age both in body and in mind, so he thought it would work out. But that was just it. She had **seemed** to be.

She was still only fifteen, and while she wasn’t exactly a prude, she certainly wasn’t as interested in a purely physical relationship as Laxus was, and it turned out that she was also a bit of a romantic. At his age, Laxus not interested in finding his ‘one true love,’ but Evergreen was very interested in that, and she refused to go further than making out.

*Eesh. I try to feel her up once and she cold cocks me. What the hell is the difference between Evergreen shoving her tongue down my throat and me trying to feel her chest up over her shirt? And it was winter at the time, so she was wearing extra freaking layers.*

Sighing, Laxus finished putting the dishes away and looked again at the window set over his sink. *Yep, the slap mark is still there. Fuck me if Ranma wasn’t right about that whole ‘feminine fury’ shtick he tried to sell me. And here I just thought he was trying to be funny. I do wonder whatever happened to his old friend he was talking about.* Over the months they’d been together on the front line against the orcs, Ranma had told Laxus a lot about his past in the form of stories about a friend.

“I’ll probably have to break up with her. We’re clicking in terms of, well, making out, I suppose, but we’ve been going out for months now and we haven’t really clicked emotionally. I suppose that it’s better to break up now rather than let our relationship start affecting our friendship or, worse, the whole guild. Friendship matters more than romance at this point,” Laxus mused to himself, then blinked and stared through the window at something outside his apartment, which was at the edge of Magnolia right near where the forest began.

Sighing he turned and made his way out the back door, giving a few of his neighbors a show, given that he was still in the boxers he had slept in. Luckily there weren’t many at home this time of day, not that he would have cared. His attention was on the giant egg that sat high up in the one tree in the open area beyond his house. *So it wasn’t a dream last night. Isn’t that the kind of egg that Happy came out of? Ugh…*

Reaching up, he pulled the egg down and brought it inside, setting it on his sofa. “I’ll just bring you to Lisanna and Natsu and have the two of them decide what to do with you.”

After changing Laxus came back and was about to pick up the egg when it started hatching. “Wh…” Laxus groaned then moved backwards glaring at the egg.

A second later, the egg cracked and a little white cat with wings hopped out. “Lady!” it shouted flying around and then settling on Laxus’ head, its wings disappearing.

“Well, shit…” Laxus groaned, then growled as the little cat began to nibble at his headphones. “Damn it. Right. To the guild.”

As he walked through the town, however, Laxus was stopped constantly by girls rushing up to him wanting to see the little kitten. Natsu and Lisanna hadn’t ever run into this problem because Lisanna was always with Natsu when he was walking with Happy around the town. The few times Natsu and Happy walked around without her, Natsu would always rush to take to the rooftops to get away from the girls. Laxus, however, despite his technically not-single status, didn’t have a problem with this. *Hhmmm… Maybe I’ll be keeping you after all, little cat…*

**OOOOOOO**

“So that’s the capital?” Ranma asked, standing on a nearby hilltop and staring ahead of them. To one side several columns of Revolutionary Army troopers were moving towards the city in an organized manner. Most of the army would not enter the city. After all, even as organized as it was there was no way the city would be able to accommodate a whole army.

“What’s its name again, Oni-chan?” Wendy asked, looking down from her perch on top of Ranma’s head, from which she had been staring at the city in the distance.

To put it simply, the capital of Minstrel looked like someone had taken the towers of fairy tale castles and scattered them around the same ground as modern warehouses, apartment buildings, and huge, almost circus-like tents. This impression was helped by the fact that many of the towers leaned this way and that, and the warehouses were simply scattered throughout the city. Or the colors on display: the city’s buildings were a literal riot of colors: blue, green, pink, and red. It was easily the most colorful city Ranma had ever seen, to say nothing of the long green banners hung here and there throughout it in celebration of the revolution’s victory.

“It’s called Silken Dream. Don’t ask me why Silk is so prominent a name in Minstrel, Wendy. I really couldn’t tell you,” Ranma replied, reaching up to pat one of Wendy’s little feet. Idly he noted that her boots seemed to be wearing out and made a note to buy her some in the city before they left.

“Silly name, but pretty city. Are we going to stay here long?” Wendy asked.

“I don’t know. I’d like us to move on quick, but San wanted to reward us for our help against that Capricorn guy, and I want to figure out what this key is,” Ranma, of course, knew about holder magic and used Guns Magic himself, but when he tried to activate the key in the same way to get more information about what Capricorn wanted him to do with the key and where this Heartfilia family might be, nothing happened.

“Boo…” Wendy pouted. This city looked like it would be really fun to explore. Still, she understood that her Oni-chan would be roped into still more work if they stayed.

After the fight against Caprico and his subordinates, the two Dragon Slayers had stayed with the army for a while. Ranma had hoped to simply get San in touch with the kings, but even after he had, the kings had asked him to protect San until another Ranger could meet them in the capital.

Or rather, the two kings he talked to asked. Vicotronious was part of the discussion, of course, but none of the other kings Ranma had met before were. Instead, Ranma met the King of Caelum for the first time.

Luke Afterano was a visibly overweight man, wearing what looked to be an ostentatiously florid outfit with a heavy gold chain around his neck and a thin gold crown on his head. The colors coming through the small image of his upper chest and arm looked ostentatious to Ranma, rather like half a rainbow had puked on the man. The overweight bit wasn’t in question, given Luke’s heavy jowls and multiple chins.

The man hadn’t seemed happy to speak to Ranma, glaring at him for a while as the conversation continued. Ranma supposed that might be because Ranma had captured a relative of his in that whole pirate thing up in the northern ocean. Despite that, the man was shrewd and actually praised Ranma’s work in protecting San Jiao Shi from the assassins, though he wasn’t able to give Ranma any more information on Grimoire Heart other than the fact that it was a well-known Dark Guild, something anyone could have told him.

While Ranma had been talking to kings and guarding a general, Wendy had volunteered to help in the army’s hospital doing what she could to help the wounded. Wendy had never shown any sign of being squeamish before, but the idea of her seeing some of the wounds that could be caused during a battle made Ranma cringe. Thankfully, there were two other mages there working as healers, and both of them made certain to not let the little girl see anything too nasty, despite using her powers to help heal many of the worst cases. Cases that didn’t involve lost limbs, anyway.

Even so, Wendy had come back to their tent and cried herself to sleep several times during their time in the army. Ranma had done his best to comfort her, but was continually surprised that rather than cave or retreat from the sights she saw, Wendy went back every day and worked herself to exhaustion. By the end of two weeks, Wendy had earned the nickname of ‘the little angel’ from the army.

Luckily, there were no more battles after the two Dragon Slayers arrived, though the general ordered his troops out in small patrols practically every day. Those units had orders to try to put a halt to any reprisals or horrors going on as the serfs of Minstrel rose up against their former overlords. They did this by moving in quickly enough to arrest the nobles themselves, then stomping hard on any banditry going on. This was thankfully helped along by there being pockets of normality here and there. These were guarded by local serfs who clashed with others from other noble lands in the defense of their lords, who apparently had always treated them well. Ranma could have hoped that those pockets were the norm, but Ranma supposed he should be thankful there were any at all.

Not wanting further notoriety, Ranma and Wendy entered the city a ways away from the main thoroughfare, moving fast enough to watch the army’s march through the city, with San at the head of it. Ranma found them a place on a roof nearby, ostensibly to watch the parade, but really to make certain no one tried a last minute assassination. That would be astonishingly stupid, but Ranma figured that the former Barons might have embraced the idea of bringing San down before he could truly install Minstrel’s new government.

While Wendy was staring around in delight at the colors and the snapping pennants, Ranma kept his ears open, wanting to get a feel for what the locals thought about this beyond the cheering. *After all, any city would cheer the conquering army if they knew what was good for them, right?*

It turned out his worries were unfounded, though. The locals truly were happy the Revolutionaries had won, and the merchants in particular were looking forward to the change of management. The serfs, too, were ecstatic to see the end of serfdom, which was one of the basic tenets of the Revolutionary movement.

The ruling council was also long gone. They had apparently smuggled themselves out to a few waiting ships. The locals had heard that they were going to try and rally support from a large island that was also part of Minstrel called Buckler, of all things. *Heh, that’s not going to last very long at all from what King Conrad was saying. The man might not have liked me, but he liked the idea of further turmoil in Minstrel even less. I’ve no doubt that ship is going to find itself being attacked by ‘pirates’ or stopped by ‘random’ commerce schooners of the Caelum navy before they ever reach Buckler. Hmm… On the other hand, Conrad might just wait until they get there, then grab the whole island while San’s busy setting up his government.*

*Still, at least my part in all this is over with. I don’t mind the fights or even the traveling, but this sticking around afterward just to guard San is kind of irritating, and I* ***really*** *don’t like being tugged this way and that.*

Near the royal castle, called Tenor, again for reasons Ranma didn’t understand, Ranma spotted three men in dark cloaks on a nearby rooftop. *Ugh, really?* “Wendy, do you mind waiting here for a second?”

Wendy didn’t turn from staring at the castle, simply hopping off his head as she stared at it in awe. It was easily the tallest building she had ever seen. “I’ll be fine here, Oni-chan, don’t worry.”

“Good girl,” Ranma replied, moving off over the rooftops and disappearing into the Umi-Sen Ken. Now cloaked, he doubled back slightly and then around, moving over the rooftops easily.

The three men didn’t see him coming, busy as they were setting up what looked like a large makeshift ballista of some kind, but instead of a large crossbow bolt, it was fitted with what looked like some kind of glass container shaped like an arrow but filled with some greenish liquid. All three men were bent over the device, trying to angle it down so that it would be aimed at the doorway of the castle. They were having trouble with it, though, cursing under their breaths as they hefted the ballista up onto the wall of the roof. “Damn it, this thing is heavy!”

“Quit your bitching. It’s supposed to be heavy. We should have tried this earlier on the route,” said the second man.

“No chance. San Jiao Shi had guards on the main thoroughfare and halfway through the city. We had to do it here. Besides, the symbolism will be massive. And the stupid up-jumped peasants will be only too happy to blame it on the barons. Now let’s get this over with and get out of here.”

Having heard enough, Ranma reached forward over the men’s heads, plucking the bolt out of its groove. “Yeah, no. I’ve spent far too much damn time guarding San for me to let you kill him now.” As Ranma spoke his free hand flashed out, touching pressure points on two men before they could even flinch aside, freezing them in place.

The third man, standing on the other side of the small ballista, flinched back, dropping the weapon and turning to race off rather than try to fight their attacker. This didn’t save him.

As San Jiao Shi turned to enter the castle where he would begin work on creating a truly representational government, he paused, staring upwards. Then he turned at a commotion and frowned at seeing Ranma moving towards him. Gone was his cloak and the leaf of the Rangers, as it always was, save for when Ranma was actually acting as a go between for San and the kings.

The young man hoped to keep his status as a Ranger a secret, which he had been able to do thus far, though the rumors about him and Wendy were both numerous and hilarious by this point. San particularly liked the idea that the two of them were secret super soldiers he had been training to help him overthrow the government, though the idea of Ranma’s female form being his lover or Wendy his new harem girl were so flat out wrong that San made certain they never reached Ranma’s ears.

Behind him, Ranma dragged three unconscious men in heavy black cloaks with one hand. In the other he held a glass ballista bolt with green goo in it. The sight of that weapon mad San frown, but he waited to speak until Ranma reached him. “So, what would this be, then, my bodyguard?” That was the official story they had come up with: that Ranma and Wendy had offered their services in exchange for enough money to head to Fiore. Given their abilities and the fact that the best and brightest mages all went to Fiore eventually, this made sense to the masses of the army, or at least to those soldiers not busy coming up with further wild rumors.

“Yeah, these three were trying to set up an attack on you when you entered the palace. They were talking, though, and they weren’t sent by the barons.” He leaned in, whispering so only San could hear him over the tumult of the crowd and the shouted instructions of his soldiers. “Seems there might be another player in this war, though I don’t know if it’s the same one Vic was worried about.”

“I am never going to get used to the way you address royalty, Ranma, and I think I’m rather pleased by the fact you won’t be along long enough for me to do so,” San Jiao Shi replied. While he was very grateful to both Dragon Slayers for their help, Ranma’s personality was one that very few leaders could be happy about having around. “Still, I will question them closely to see if they will give up their employers. Now, could you please go and get your sister off my new castle?”

Ranma blinked in confusion for a moment, then turned to stare up to where Wendy had been earlier, only to burst out laughing. Still chuckling, he hopped up to land on a rooftop to one side and then jumped onto the roof of the castle. From there he scaled up the tower set to one side of the main castle to where Wendy was perched, balancing on the tip of the crenellation. “You and your love of high places.”

Later that day, while San began the work of creating a new government, Wendy and Ranma found the library of the palace. Like the palace proper, the royal library had been maintained after there were no more royals to use it, but it had not often been used. The room wasn’t large, only about the size of a large family room, and was set up like such a room, with numerous chairs and a large sofa of the old, heavily padded and lived in variety.

As Wendy curled up in a sofa that looked almost sinfully soft for a nap, Ranma moved around the library, getting a feel for how it was organized before looking for specific sections. To his surprise, the majority of the books were books on enchantments. Several rows of books were devoted to the subject. *Okay, right here is something that’s worth the trip!*

Some of the spells Wendy knew were not actually Sky Dragon Slayer spells but enchantments. The Vernier spell, for instance, wasn’t a Dragon Slayer spell, nor was Troia, though her healing spells were Sky Dragon Slayer Magic. She could eventually actually learn how to create and emplace permanent enchantments on things, like many of the spells on their camping equipment, only without the lacrima most of them had to use to power the spells. *Wendy could really use these books, though it’ll be a while before she can actually read them, unfortunately.*

Stuffing them in his Requip space for now, Ranma moved on, finding some history books along with two books on mediation designed to let the user get in touch with the Ethernano around them in the world rather than on the inside, and another dedicated to detecting the minds of other people. Both could be useful. He didn’t find any books about anything like the key that had somehow come from Capricorn, though, which was irritating.

But it was the history book Ranma actually opened to read now. Moving over to a sofa, he laid out, then smiled as Wendy quickly moved from where she had been napping to curl up next to him. “Comfy?”

Wendy nodded, snuggling in and looking up at him. “Did you find a book for me, Oni-chan?”

“I found several you’ll probably like in a few years, but only one you can probably read right now. It’s a story about a prince who is shrunk and has to go on lots of adventures in order to get back to his family. You want it now, or are you going to keep napping?” Ranma asked, then smiled as Wendy held out her hands imperiously. Ranma handed the book over, and for a time there was no more noise in the library other than the turning of pages.

The history book Ranma had found covered much the same as others he had read: it told the tale of an ancient nation where dragons and humans coexisted. But like all the other books he had read which mentioned that nation, it was vague and written well after the time that nation had existed. Despite that, the book did have one piece of information Ranma hadn’t seen before: it mentioned the location of the ancient nation’s capital. This forced Ranma to pull out his map of Ishgar, and he compared it to what the book was describing. *Huh…* “Hey, Wendy, after this I think we’re going to be heading for Bellum.”

“Kay,” Wendy said distractedly, most of her attention on the storybook in her hands. This caused Ranma to laugh, stroking her hair fondly.

With a destination in mind, Ranma wanted to leave as soon as they could. San Jiao Shi also was happy to see the two Dragon Slayers leave, but he also wanted to reward them for their aid. “Besides,” he said later that evening, “it would look very odd if you left so without visible remuneration.”

“I don’t need more money at this point. If I do, I’ll go trolling for bandits,” Ranma objected. “You let us have access to your new library, and, given the number of books I’ve taken from it, you’ve already rewarded me.”

“Ah, but it is not money I have in mind,” San replied, clapping his hands. The doors at the far end of his new study opened, and two servants entered, bearing some small treasure chests. They were followed by a man wearing a flowing purple and blue robe with the mark of a long road in red on the left of his chest.

As Ranma watched, the two servants set the chests down and opened them to reveal cloth. “Minstrel Song Silk. This product is the real reason why Minstrel cloth is world famous, and why there are places around the nation which are named for things involved in music,” San began as the two servants pulled the cloth out of the chests. “This silk can be enchanted with up to seven permanent spells. These spells can be permanently embedded into the material, always on, as it were, or can be activated at any time by the wearer. All without any lacrima needed. It is extremely expensive, but I feel a cloak for you and a dress for young Wendy would be a decent reward, no?”

“That works. What kind of enchantments are we talking about here?” Ranma asked intently, running a hand over the silk. The material was thick to the touch, like a heavy wool, only more so, but the feel of it was indeed like silk.

“What kind do you want?” the man in the robe asked. He was an older gentleman with a basso voice.

This discussion continued for some time. First, Wendy didn’t want a cloak, very happy with a coat that Ranma had bought her in Iceberg. The instant she felt the material, however, she wanted a skirt and blouse combo. While Wendy had gotten used to wearing pants most days, she preferred skirts.

While Wendy began to argue about the cut of the dress she wanted with the four women who would be actually be designing the clothing out of the Song Silk, Ranma talked with the mage who would be setting the enchantments about the enchantments Ranma wanted to see. Damage resistance was a given, of course, as was the ability to both retain heat and be heat resistant, to cool down, and to ward off the rain, for both Wendy and Ranma’s clothing. For Wendy’s clothing an enchantment to automatically resize both skirt and blouse as she grew was a must. Ranma was also still growing, so he was talked into getting the same set on his.

Ranma decided to add several more damage resistance enchantments on Wendy’s clothing just in case, as well as a speed enhancement spell like Vernier. He felt the combination of the spell on the Song Silk and Vernier would be amazing to see in the future. For his own, Ranma added a self-cleaning enchantment. This left him with one more slot, as it were, but Ranma decided to hold off on that until he figured out what he wanted.

However, he did ask for the scraps, long strips of cloth, to be given a weight enchantment. “Ahh, you want me to make them lighter? That’s a favorite enchantment for many reasons,” the mage, whose name was Fierro, said.

“Ah, no. I want a spell on them to make them heavier…” Ranma said, pulling out his lacrima sticks from his Requip space. Two of the women helped him wrap the sticks’ blunt ends with the silk, laughing all the while about playing with his shafts for some reason, which went right over both his and Wendy’s heads. In the end, the Escrima sticks had been covered with thin strips of Song Silk all along their lengths. They were enchanted to be damage resistant and then had the weight enchantment added. Now, while they looked the same, at Ranma’s command those little Escrima sticks could weigh as much as an elephant.

This process took more than a week, but after it was done, the Two Dragon Slayers moved on quickly, heading to Bellum.

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma and Wendy arrived in Bellum as winter began to close in on the city. This far south there wasn’t much snow, to Wendy’s displeasure. She had really enjoyed playing in snow when they passed through Iceberg. Instead, it became very cold and very windy, with heavy breezes coming off Bell Lake and hammering into the city. And while their new clothing kept them somewhat warm, they couldn’t do much against the wind.

With Wendy clinging to his back to get out of the wind, Ranma moved through the city, thinking. *Now, I could find a place to set up our tent, but I doubt I’d be able to find a place out of this wind, and I bet the locals’d frown on that anyway. Or, I could be proactive and find a place for us to stay. Wendy’s been complaining lately of wanting to find some new books to read, and given what I want to do we’re going to be here for a while anyway.* “Hey, Wendy, be on the lookout for any place that has rooms to rent, okay?”

Unfortunately, during the wintertime most of the populace that worked Bellum’s forests and few farms retreated behind the walls taking up seasonal lodging throughout the large city-state. This made finding a place almost impossible, but Ranma eventually found an inn that was willing to let the two of them live in its hayloft.

With the loft protecting them from the wind, Ranma swiftly put up the tent, with Wendy hopping inside almost before he was finished. Laughing, Ranma shook his head, but quickly followed, removing his cloak and dumping it over Wendy’s head, adding its heat to that of the clothing she had been wearing. While Ranma began to pull out some food, Wendy pulled out their sleeping bags, linking them up so she could snuggle with Ranma when they went to bed. “So, Wendy, I plan for us to stay here through the winter. I want to look through the libraries I wasn’t able to access last time and I want to explore the bottom of the lake. Would ya like it if I set up a tutor for you?”

“More history?” Wendy asked, her small face scrunched up in a cute sign of dismay.

“No. Mostly math, reading, and writing skills,” Ranma said, pulling the little girl into a hug. Since he had basically cheated into being able to read the local languages, there was no way he was going to tease her about her issues with being bored by history or anything else. “Would you like that? You might be able to eventually read more and better books.”

“Mmmm….” Wendy whispered, nuzzling into Ranma and practically falling asleep almost immediately. It had been a very long day after all.

The next day, while Wendy stayed snug in their little tent, Ranma went about the city trying to find a tutor for her, asking the local Mage Guilds and innkeepers. He eventually was pointed in the direction of a middle-aged woman who was a former teacher, who was currently dealing with empty nest syndrome. She was positively gleeful at the idea of having something to do with kids without the need to go back to a full class of kids immediately. And when Ranma introduced them, she and Wendy hit it off immediately.

With Wendy now being looked after and learning, Ranma changed into his female form and then went down to the docks. Even with the cold and the wind it was still bustling: thousands of sailors, longshoremen, merchants, and others moving about their business as bundled as they could get. To say that Ranma attracted attention when she stripped off her cloak was an understatement, though the flare of magic when she put the rest of her clothing away via Requip added to the hullabaloo. And while her swimsuit was about as sexual as a wet paper bag (this was why Ranma had chosen it), the fact that she was even thinking about diving into the cold water of the lake was more than enough to grab still further attention.

“Wh, what are you doing, you damn fool girl!” shouted a nearby dockworker, racing in Ranma’s direction. Others also shouted at the insane redhead, with one sailor going so far as to shout, “Whatever happened, it isn’t worth taking your life over, girl! Think it through!”

Ranma rolled her eyes, then hopped into the water without reply. She dove down then swam back up, her head bursting out of the water. The cold, like the pressure, didn’t bother her at all. Her hands glowed with magical energy as the water created a sphere over her head, capturing some of the air above the waves within it. With a jaunty wave to the onlookers, who were now lining the pier above her, she turned, diving straight down and away.

As she did, Ranma activated her Requip again, pulling out a magical light that, while expensive, could do the same job as a flashlight. Even Ranma’s eyesight wasn’t up to seeing through the murky depths of the lake.

After a few minutes of swimming straight down, taking in breaths from her limited supply only at need, Ranma frowned. *Okay, this lake is hella deep… Weird. I mean, it is really, really deep!* Turning, she gazed upwards and could barely make out where the water began to lighten above her from the sun. *Damn, really deep!*

Her eyes narrowing, Ranma continued on, diving straight down until she started to feel a little light headed. Realizing she was running out of oxygen, Ranma turned back, making her slow away upwards, moving slower now so as to avoid the bends.

When Ranma broke the surface, she realized that she had moved somewhat further out to sea from her starting point. “Hmm… I think I’m going to need a way to get more organized about this…” she mused as she treaded water.

It took Ranma several days to figure out how to organize her search, never having done anything like this before or having heard about anything similar. Nor could Ranma leave physical markers behind which could be seen from a distance. The lake was too deep for that, and even floating markers would have been tough to try, given the amount of traffic this segment of the lake saw. Eventually Ranma was forced to try and use markers on the land to judge her progress, and that really only worked while Ranma was by the edge of the lake.

Still, with the weather forcing them to remain in Bellum for a time, Ranma persevered. He worked on exploring the lake during the mornings and afternoons, spent his meals with Wendy, and worked with the local city watch to break up fights occasionally to earn some pocket change.

For her part, Wendy was happy to spend winter in the city. While Wendy enjoyed traveling with Ranma, it was because she was traveling **with** Ranma, rather than any liking of actual travel. And winter was her least favorite time to travel, the little Dragon Slayer not enjoying being cold at all.

But despite being relatively happy with their living arrangements and one another’s company, of course, both of them ran into various kinds of roadblocks. Ranma disliked how slow his progress was in searching the lake for this ancient city, so much so he was tempted to give up, but was too stubborn to. Wendy, in turn, had hit a wall in terms of her education. Her tutor had realized early on that Wendy’s writing ability was nowhere near her reading ability and had quickly shifted their sessions to emphasize that.

It might have been the frustration from all of this that caused the two semi-siblings to have their first real argument. On a slightly sunnier and less windy day than normal, Ranma had decided that the two could head to a real restaurant rather than eat in the inn whose hayloft they were staying in. The two of them were walking back to their temporary abode from the restaurant he had chosen when Wendy spotted a toy store down another street.

Pulling to a halt, she grabbed Ranma’s hand in both of hers and she turned, gesturing to the toy store. “Hey, Oni-chan, can we go in there?”

Ranma looked and sighed. “I don’t know, Wendy. Your tutor said you weren’t really able to concentrate yesterday. Do you really think you deserve a treat like that?”

Pouting, Wendy tried to pull Ranma in that direction, giving him the puppy dog eyes attack at the same time. “Please, Oni-chan? I only want to look, that’s all.”

Despite having many more years of life to call upon than his physical age would suggest, Ranma still had not developed any resistance to this dreaded technique. Sighing, he nodded and allowed Wendy to drag him towards the toy store.

Inside they found dozens of toys of all types and varieties, including many that looked really nice, if expensive. Ranma knew money really wasn’t an object for him at this point, but even so he didn’t want to spoil Wendy. *Well, not too much, anyway.*

He watched with a faint smile as Wendy raced around everywhere, trying many of the toys on display and staring in awe at more than a few. She seemed to be enjoying herself greatly, her earlier doldrums evaporating. *Now if only I could get over my own irritation at not finding that damn city! GRAAA….*

Eventually he called Wendy over to him. “Come on, Wendy. We have to head back if you want to be on time for Mrs. Macey.”

Wendy pouted at that, but nodded and dragged over several toys. “Oni-chan, can you buy these for me?”

At that Ranma frowned. “Now Wendy, you said we were only here to look. I told you already that your work with Mrs. Macey hasn’t earned you a treat. And your training with me hasn’t been very good either. You whined and begged out of it yesterday, and I agreed. But do you think that’s the kind of attitude that has earned a treat?”

Wendy looked as if she was about to cry. “But, Oni-chan…”

“No buts Wendy. Now come on,” Ranma said, reaching down to touch her shoulder.

At that point, Wendy did indeed begin to cry. “No! I want it, pleaaasssseee, Oni-chan? pleaseeeeee!”

“Wendy, come on,” Ranma groaned, uncertain how to deal with this. “You’re causing a scene now.” Indeed they were, since there were several parents of both genders looking at them, some commiseratingly, others more judgmentally.

Sighing, Ranma pulled off his cloak and dumped it over Wendy’s head. Thanks to their difference in size, the cloak acted like a blanket, covering her from head to toe. Wendy’s cries were somewhat muffled, and Ranma scooped her up in his arms, cradling Wendy to his chest as he turned toward the door. If she tried to fight back, her movements were sufficiently muffled by his cloak such that it didn’t matter.

Stepping out of the shop, Ranma made his way back to their dwelling, grimacing at the impact of the wind which had picked up once more. *Rule number five of Anything Goes Big Brothering: Don’t give in to the puppy dog eyes or crying. At least, not right away. Make use of rule number 1 instead.*

By the time Wendy, with her arms trapped in his cloak and squished against her own body, was able to even get her head out from the folds of Ranma’s cloak, they were back at the inn, and Ranma was hopping up onto the hayloft. She tried another sniffle, but the fight seemed to have gone out of her.

Ranma set her down then and, looking at her little red-eyed face, sighed, then shook his head. “I’ll tell Mrs. Macey that you’re not feeling well and be right back.” This didn’t take long, and Ranma was soon back. He found Wendy still standing in the same place she had been when he left.

She looked up at Ranma, then blinked, seeing Ranma in his female form. Ranma spent so much time swimming and perforce in his female form since they had arrived in Bellum that he/she was almost frantic about not spending any more time in that body.

Seeing the look, Ranma shrugged, sat down next to Wendy, and scooped her into her arms, running one hand down her back. “I figure if we’re going to talk about feelings, I should be in this form. It’s easier to think about them this way. Now, why don’t you tell me what brought along this moment of brattishness?”

Wendy opened up her mouth, but Ranma mock glared at her. “Yes, Wendy, you were indeed being a brat. I told you before we even entered the toy store that you hadn’t earned a treat. You told me you wanted to go there only to look, but then you tried wheedle a toy out of me. And when you didn’t get your way, you cried and whined. That’s being a brat, not at all like the little sister I know and love. So come on, tell me what’s bothering you.”

Wendy sniffled a little, but burrowed into Ranma’s soft chest and began to explain. It turned out that once more she had been trying to make friends with the local kids, but it hadn’t worked. She apparently didn’t look like a Bellumese and was a little too smart to get along with kids her own age, and a little too young, and far too shy, to get along with anyone older. This, coupled with the problems in learning to write, had made Wendy depressed. She hadn’t wanted to complain to Ranma, knowing her Oni-chan was having her own problems, but it had boiled out at that toy store. That and the honest fact she didn’t have any toys really except for a puzzle square and a stuffed dragon doll.

Hearing all that made Ranma apologize for not bending on the no toy rule, and she promised that they could go back the next sunny day. The redhead stayed curled up with Wendy for the rest of the day, forgoing training for once and simply spending time with the young girl: reading to her, wrestling with her, and even playing make believe with her stuffed dragon doll. But he also pulled out a promise from Wendy to try and do better in her studies with Mrs. Macey.

The next sunny day, as promised, Ranma took Wendy back to the toy store. There he and the little girl went through the store until Ranma found two toys he felt Wendy could play with for months and not get bored by: a large container filled with foam square puzzle pieces that could be fit together into different square based shapes and a set of small dolls made of something like playdough, but which you didn’t need to continually wet to reuse.

Ranma then asked Wendy which one she would like and watched in amusement as Wendy, her face scrunched up in thought, moved from one to the other, playing first with one set on display and then the other. Her confusion and her obvious desire to make the right choice was really funny. *New rule: While toys should be bought in moderation, forcing the little brother/sister to choose between two can be hilarious.*

Winter passed in this manner. Wendy slowly overcame her mental blocks and started to write and use math as well as she could read, though she still didn’t enjoy history and had problems keeping dates in her head. Her search for friends ended without any results, but, knowing the problem, Ranma had begun to make more time to be with Wendy. He would head out while Wendy slept in to explore the lake, then come back to spend a late breakfast with her before training for a time until Mrs. Macey came back.

While Wendy was with Mrs. Macey, who truly loved the magic tent, claiming it was warmer than her house, Ranma would train. Then, when Wendy was done with Mrs. Macey, the Dragon Slayer siblings would explore the city, with Wendy tucked into Ranma’s cloak in one way or another. Her skirt had been a good idea, but it just didn’t cover enough skin to be useful in this weather, despite its warming enchantments. Ranma would then put Wendy to bed and train some more or work for the local city guard if he was asked to.

All of this, of course, slowed down his/her search of the lake. But as winter began to end, Ranma found herself swimming over a large grotto. Or what looked like a grotto at first glance. Closer inspection under the light of her magical flashlight showed a building. Swimming slowly over it, Ranma absentmindedly smacked a too inquisitive shark out of her way as she stared at the tableau beyond.

On the other side of that first building was a city, a large one that stretched well beyond the sight of Ranma’s little flashlight. It looked to have been made mostly of stone, or perhaps something like concrete. *Hmm… Looks like a lot of these buildings were demolished at one point or another. Well at least now I know my guess about the ancient capital of the dragon/human nation being here was right. Still, makes me wonder what the heck happened to it. Was it a natural disaster of some kind that created Bell Lake, or something else? A magical attack?*

Ranma held back a shiver that had nothing to do with the ice-cold water around her as she thought about that idea. After all, Bell Lake was the same size as the Black Sea back in her old dimension. The idea of any magical attack that could do that was utterly terrifying. *But then, if something like that had happened, would it have left any of the capital intact?*

Still swimming forward, Ranma shook that thought off. *Well, whatever. It’s here, and I can only hope that there’s something here to find about Dragon Slayers, our magic and history. While my water manipulation skills have come a long way, I could use a better explanation of how to train more draconic things into my style, and any help I could get with Wendy would be great. I can train her in martial arts and stuff like that, but not in any special attacks from her school or how to get the most out of eating air.*

As if the thought about Wendy eating air had reminded her, Ranma found that she was once more becoming short of breath. *Damn it, I’m going to need to head back now.* While Ranma could hold her breath for far longer than even the greatest Olympic swimmer, there were limits, and despite being the Water Dragon Slayer, she needed to breathe. *It took me so long to get down here I barely had any time to search! Going to need to figure out a way to solve that issue. Maybe Wendy could help…*

Swimming slowly to the surface, Ranma had barely a second to breathe before she had to duck down to avoid being brained by a passing ship. It passed on, not even seeing her as he spluttered in its wake, screaming obscenities. Hopping up onto the water with a brief spurt of his magic, Ranma raced back to Bellum.

She found Mrs. Macey just leaving the tent, shaking her head once more. “Magic like that, it’s really amazing you know,” she said not for the first time as Ranma hopped up into the loft.

“Heh, I’ll tell the company that makes them that there’s a market here in Bellum for them, Mrs. Macey. It might be too far to ship, though,” Ranma said, giving the woman her daily pay and walking her to the gate of the inn as she asked, “So, how was she today?”

“Little Wendy was her normal darling self. We finished up all the final tests I wanted to give her; indeed, her progress was quite incredible. She will still need work on her vocabulary, but her reading and writing skills are more than acceptable, as is her math,” Mrs. Macey replied, then went into detail before shaking Ranma’s hand and wishing her well on the next leg of their journey.

Ranma had told the woman they would be moving on once winter broke, and they were making for Pergrande. As far as Mrs. Macey was concerned, the two of them were just two sibling mages looking around for a guild to join. She had even believed that Ranma’s curse was part of the price she made for control of water, which no real mage would have believed for an instant. Even in a nation with several prominent guilds, the nonmagical population didn’t really know much about how magic in general worked.

Bidding the woman farewell, Ranma returned to the loft and entered their tent, smiling at Wendy who was putting away some of her coloring and reading books. She smiled up at her, then eeped, as Ranma, still wet from her time in the water, made to pick her up in a hug. “NO!” she squealed hopping away.

The chase continued with much shrieking and laughter abounding in the tent until Wendy threw one of their small pillows at Ranma’s legs. Ranma decided to let it hit and flopped down comically. “Ugh, I am slain!”

Laughing, Wendy tossed several towels onto Ranma, then hopped onto the redhead, rubbing furiously. She giggled and tried to bolt as Ranma started to tickle her mercilessly. Eventually, however, Ranma simply hugged the little girl to her chest, laying on her side and staring at the small heat lacrima set into the floor of the tent.

Craning her neck, Wendy looked up at her Oni-chan. “Oni-chan? Is there something wrong?”

“Nope. Just thinking big thoughts, oh small one,” Ranma replied, smirking as Wendy puffed out her cheeks in outrage. “I found that city I was searching for. What do you think about coming back to Bell Lake sometime soon? I still want to go back to Appledore, since I wasn’t able to ransack, erm, that is, search their royal library for information. But after that we could swing through Bell Lake again, then choose a different direction from there. But I’ll need your help to search down there.”

“Mm! You can count on me!” Wendy replied, happy to be of help. This caused Ranma to smile and pull her into a deeper hug, which the little girl leaned into, once more giving that odd draconic purr.

The two Dragon Slayers left Bellum the next day, heading across the lake until they landed at the tiny trade town they had stopped at before, then headed up the river to Appledore. There Ranma once more found his friend’s house and asked if the two of them could impose for a few days. Laitha was there rather than William, but she replied just as quickly and affirmatively as her husband would have. “Of course you can, Ranma. We said we owe you more than we can ever hope to repay, and we meant it. You’re just in time to help with supper, actually.”

Seeing Wendy perk up at that, Ranma patted her head, pushing the girl into the house ahead of him. “Actually, if Wendy could help you with that for a bit, I have an errand I need to run over at another friend’s house. It won’t take long.”

Laitha nodded, putting a hand on Wendy’s shoulder and ushering her into the kitchen set to one side of the house’s front door. “We’re going to have fresh bread with supper, so if you could knead the dough out for me, that would be a major help…”

As Wendy nodded in the affirmative, Ranma turned and moved off through the city quickly. Supper sounded good, and he didn’t want to be late for it any more than he wanted to explain to Wendy why some of his other old friends were wearing so little.

Stopping in at Melona’s, he found the girls dressed for their chosen profession, as he had feared, but after the rounds of teasing were finished, Lisa provided him with the photos he was after of Gildarts. “Where the heck did you and that little cutie run off to anyway, Ranma? I had these all prepared, and the next day you’re no longer around, and no one knows where you went,” Lisa admonished, hands on her hips. “Now you come waltzing back in after the better part of a year?”

“Er, well, I’m sorry about that, but, um, in my line of work, well, crises kind of pop up sometimes,” Ranma replied, pulling at his pigtail sheepishly.

“Your line of work… You know what? I don’t think I want to know.” Lisa sighed, but held out the packet to Ranma. “Anyway, here they are. Since Gildarts hasn’t returned here since then, it shouldn’t be a problem, but if he does, know I’m going to tell him that you took those in the first place, all right?”

“Fine, that’s fine,” Ranma said. Actually, if the photos forced Gildarts to come after him that was more than fine with Ranma. Ranma knew he learned best when facing off against opponents above his weight class, and if there was a better way of describing Gildarts, he didn’t know it.

With the pictures in hand, Ranma returned to William and Laitha’s house for the evening just in time to help set the table and greet the man of the house as he came home from the factory next door. William reiterated his wife’s welcome, pumping Ranma’s outstretched hand and leading him inside. Though the look in the Royal Armorer’s eyes told Ranma that William had some idea of where Ranma and Wendy had run off to nearly a year ago now.

Since Ranma had Wendy practicing hopping around in the air or propelling them through the water throughout their journey since they left Bellum early that morning, she began to nod off almost before the meal was finished. This caused Ranma to gently grab her head before she could dunk it into the spaghetti they had been eating. With Laitha leading the way, Ranma put Wendy to sleep in their guest bed. Ranma would sleep either with Wendy or out on the sofa.

“It looks as if you’re still doing a decent enough job with young Wendy. I don’t mind telling you I really would never have imagined that,” William said dryly, pouring them all glasses of spiced peach brandy, a local favorite that both blacksmiths had come to enjoy.

Ranma didn’t particularly like any alcohol, but knew it would be rude of him to decline, so he sipped at his cup as he shrugged uncomfortably. “I’d like to think so, but there have been a few times where I have to wonder about the wisdom of me raising a kid in the first place. I love Wendy, sure, but up here,” Ranma tapped his forehead, “I sometimes have trouble remembering that she is totally dependent on me rather than just a martial arts student I’ve had to take on. Erm…you got any advice for me, Laitha?”

“Not really, no more than I gave the last time you were here, anyway. Maybe if you describe a few of these instances, we might be able to see a common thread,” Laitha replied dryly, slugging back her own drink, earning a dismayed squawk of protest from her husband.

It sounded well-rehearsed to Ranma, who figured it was one of those married couple things. “Sure. If you can see something I’m doing wrong, that’d be a big help.”

William and Laitha listened to the moments of friction that had popped up occasionally between Ranma and Wendy, but couldn’t spot anything they all shared. “Frankly, it sounds more like Wendy should be nominated for sainthood dealing with moving around like that, all the random upheavals and your daily regimen. Most girls her age would never be able to take that,” Laitha said after Ranma had finished.

“Well, if ya can’t give me any advice, would you mind promising to give her the Talk when she needs it?” Ranma asked, almost but not quite succeeding in keeping a tone of pleading out of his voice.

“Ha!” Laitha barked, while William looked more sympathetic. “Hells. no. That is all on you.”

“Damn it,” Ranma uttered. While that moment was years into the future, Ranma could feel it looming horribly. The first time he’d had the Talk with his old man was bad enough, to get the female version of it from Kasumi was worse. And besides the girls at Melona’s, Laitha was the only female friend he’d made in this world. *I suppose I could count Ikaruga among them too, but there’s no way I’d ask her to talk to Wendy for me. I’d have to be there to make sure she doesn’t go into too much detail or leave things out just to screw with me.*

Elsewhere in Appledore, Ikaruga paused in her walk beside her new husband as she suddenly sneezed explosively. “Ara.”

“Catching a cold, love?” Roland asked teasingly, before gesturing down to the kimono she was barely wearing. “Perhaps it’s a sign you should be wearing more?”

“Aa, but then where would your eyes go if I did not entice them at all times?” Ikaruga teased, her free hand trailing down the side of the kimono on one side of her chest as she looked at Roland with bedroom eyes. As he flushed and looked away, her pink lips twitched into a victorious smirk before she frowned, raising a finger to them thoughtfully. “Strange, though. I just had the odd feeling someone was talking about me in a most unflattering yet accurate manner…”

Taking some pity on Ranma, or so he thought, Laitha smiled, waving the bottle of local brandy. “How about this? If you can drink me under the table, I’ll agree to give Wendy the whole period talk when it comes time for it and if you’re in Appledore when it does.”

“Meh, that’s a lot of ifs, but I’ll take what I can get,” Ranma said. He took the glass offered him and slammed it back, barely even tasting the brandy before it finished its journey down to his stomach, but it still caused him to gasp in shock. He watched Laitha do the same, while William, a small smirk on his face, leaned back as he decided to be the referee.

The rest of the night passed in a blur to Ranma, and he fell asleep half on and half off his friend’s sofa, not having even come close to beating Laitha in her contest.

The next morning Wendy came in from her room woken up by the smell of breakfast. To her surprise, however, Ranma didn’t move from his place on the sofa, despite being closer to the kitchen than she was. Blinking in surprise, she turned to look at Laitha, who was doing the cooking, William having already left for the day. “Is there something wrong with Oni-chan?”

“Ah, nothing time and a lot of water won’t solve,” Laitha said, grinning impishly and winking at Wendy. “Why don’t you go and wake him up?”

Nodding, Wendy raced over to Ranma, but paused, wondering how to go about waking him up. It was the first time she would be waking him up instead of the other way around, and it had to be spectacular. With a shrug, she decided to just go with a way she’d heard some other kids do to their parents. She suddenly hopped, rear first, onto Ranma’s chest.

At that point Ranma learned something truly horrifying: falling into an alcoholic stupor blocked his ability to use Sleep-Fu. Wendy’s little body crashed rear first onto his stomach, causing Ranma to wake up with a sound somewhere between a gargle and a moan. The weight of her sitting on him didn’t bother Ranma, of course. The throbbing headache he instantly became aware of after becoming conscious was. “GAhhhh…. Wendy, why are you waking me up?”

Giggling and bouncing in place, Wendy replied. “Good morning, Oni-chan. Laitha says that breakfast is nearly ready, and you need to drink a lot of water to get over whatever is wrong with you,”

“Oh, she did?” Ranma grunted through his hangover, scowling over Wendy’s head toward Laitha. Carrying Wendy for a moment, Ranma entered the kitchen and moved to drop her into a chair while glaring at Laitha. “My vengeance will be swift and terrible,” he warned, grimacing at the light through the windows

“Troia!” Wendy intoned, holding a hand up to Ranma’s forehead from where Ranma had lifted her up.

Ranma felt his headache and queasy stomach disappearing under the touch of the cure-all spell. Ranma blinked, then hugged Wendy thanks for that, while Laitha looked on in shock. “Did, did she just…”

“Just get rid of my hangover entirely with a spell? Yep,” Ranma replied with a nod. “That’s my little Dragon Slaying nurse.” Wendy beamed at that, but then Ranma went on seriously. “Wendy, this is a great and terrible power you have. Promise me you will only ever use it for good.”

“I promise,” Wendy said, equally seriously, then both of them broke out into laughter as Laitha rolled her eyes.

After that Wendy and Ranma went to the royal palace, with Wendy once more perched on Ranma’s head, peering all around them. As soon as they entered, of course, Vicotronious knew about the Two Dragon Slayers return. But since he had no new job for the young Ranger and had gotten numerous reports on Ranma’s progress, he decided to leave them alone for a bit, then come down to the library when they had settled in for the day.

He found them working alone in one of the myriad little homey corners of the library Vicotronious had always liked himself. To his chagrin, his current librarian was nowhere in sight. Sighing at that, he made a mental note to fire the man. He spent far too much time in the wine cellar with the chief butler, not doing his job. Going over to the alcove, he stuck his head in, seeing the two Dragon Slayers curled up on a sofa. Ranma had one of the books Vicotronious had ordered his librarian to find for him, while the young girl was reading a book called ‘Enchantments for Dummies’ by Warrod, the Wizard Saint.

“Tell me at least that my librarian was here to point you in that book’s direction?” he asked.

Ranma looked up, then shook his head, and Vicotronious sighed before looking around and bringing back several other books which had been set aside behind the librarian’s desk. “These are all we have that mention dragons, I’m afraid. My soon to be former librarian might be a drunkard, but given enough time to see to a task he has done well enough to have retained his job for a few years now. That’s not enough to retain it after today, however.”

“Thanks anyway. I doubt I’ll find much, but…” Ranma paused, looking at the old king thoughtfully before going on. “Did you know there was a city where Bell Lake is now? It’s not right in the center of the lake, more to the south and east, but still, it’s down there.”

“No, that’s the first I’ve ever heard of it. How old is it, and why are you interested in it?” Vicotronious asked, somewhat shocked. The look Ranma had also told him that there might be a connection between that city and Bell Lake, a horrifying thought.

“It might be the capital of an ancient empire where dragons and humans lived together,” Ranma said, and then paused as he read something. “This book here mentions the name of the nation and its queen, the ‘Great Queen Irene,’ though it says it’s more legend than fact.”

“Ah, now that name I know. But I too thought it merely legend. Interesting. And you’re interested in it because you want to see if you can find anything more out about your Dragon Slaying magic?” Vicotronious had been told about Laxus and Ranma’s Dragon Slayer magics, though he had taken the idea of Ranma actually having been raised by a dragon with a grain of salt. Then Ranma had come back with a young girl seemingly left behind by another dragon, which had made him rethink that.

“That and any hint as to where Grandeeney, Wendy’s mother, could be. I’ve sort of hit a plateau on what I can figure out on my own, and Typhon never really gave me much instruction in the first place. He gave me just enough to make sure I knew how to call on my magic, then tossed me into the figurative deep end,” Ranma groused, patting Wendy’s head, feeling her stir from next to him and looking between Ranma and the king. “And Wendy, for all that her mother gave her a better grounding than Typhon did me, was too young to make use of a lot of the magic. And Grandeeney, whatever happened to her, didn’t leave any clues behind.”

Wendy sniffled a little at being reminded of her missing mother, but Ranma put an arm around her, holding her close, and her sad mood faded quickly.

“I see… Well, I’m sorry I couldn’t help you more than I have in having these books prepared for you. Unless there’s something else you need help with?” Vicotronious had a bit of a follow on gift (part gift and part payment, really) for Ranma, or rather Wendy, but he still wished to help the young Ranger as much as he could with his personal quests. The youth had served Ishgar so well since coming onto the scene that anything Vicotronious could do for him, he would.

“Yeah, actually, I’ve got something you could help me with.” Ranma held up a hand, and, in a flash of Requip magic, he was holding a large, golden key. “I’ve been trying to figure out what this is, but none of the mages I’ve talked to in Bellum or Minstrel had any idea, and I didn’t run into any mages in Desierto.”

Vicotronious looked at it closely, frowning as she saw the sign on it. “Is that a zodiac? Hmm… That rings a bell, but I can’t imagine where. I’ll ask around. There are a few mages in residence in the palace; maybe one of them will know.” He smiled. “Indeed, one of them is young Ikaruga, who you no doubt remember from the Orc War.”

“Ah, yeah,” Ranma muttered, looking down at Wendy and wondering if he wanted to introduce her to the nearly exhibitionistic sword mage.

“Heh, she’s mellowed somewhat since getting married, but not much, so I can see your concerns there. Still, she’s not the only one. A Rock and Earth mage is here too: a prodigy with it, I understand. The Earth Shakers has been trying to recruit him since he showed up, but despite having been born in one of their monastery training centers, he has a wish to go to Fiore. Since he has reached the end of what they can teach him about earth manipulation, he rather has a point.”

Vicotronious turned to a servant who had followed him into the library. A terse order, and five minutes later the mage in question was being ushered into the library. Ranma stood as he approached, as did Wendy, her eyes sparkling as she stared up at him. “Wow!”

The reason for this was the man’s size: he was at least as tall as Gildarts, possibly an inch taller, with equally wide shoulders, and the bald head and robes of the Earth Shakers. But while the clothing was the same, Ranma couldn’t see a guild mark on the back of his neck as he turned to thank the servant, so knew that he hadn’t officially joined them. From what he remembered, the Earth Shakers all had their marks at the point where their neck met their shoulders. He looked to be six or seven years older than Ranma, if he had to guess, with a serious but friendly face and deep brown eyes.

Before the king could introduce the newcomer, Wendy had raced forward and then begun to actually scramble up the mage’s body as he looked down at her, torn between amused and bemused. Ranma, however, held back a chuckle as Wendy perched on the newcomer’s head, looking around in awe. “Such a high place.”

“Um… How is she actually perching up there without me feeling any weight?” the man asked, rolling his eyes up to try and look up at the top of his own head.

“Anything Goes Aerial Style. It teaches you how to redirect your weight in a way that makes it feel as if you weigh nothing at all. Nice job there, Wendy,” Ranma said holding up a thumbs-up to the little girl. “But in the future you should probably ask permission before climbing people like that. Buildings are fine, trees and mountains better, but people need to tell you it’s okay before you can perch on them. And don’t do it to complete strangers either. Now come on, get down from there.”

Wendy nodded, blushing a little now as she realized what she had done to a complete stranger, overcome by her love of high places. She hopped over to Ranma, now sitting on his shoulders and hiding her face in his hair. “Sorry, sir,” she whispered, sounding extremely embarrassed.

“No harm done little miss,” the man replied, then looked over at Vicotronious.

The king smiled faintly, shaking his head. “Ranma Oceana and Wendy Marvel, be known to Jura Neekis. Jura, these two are wandering mages of a very ancient and strange style. Ranma you might have heard of from Guild Master Ordras. He was instrumental in beating off the Orc incursion several years back.”

“I have indeed. It is an honor to meet one of the mages who helped save Pergrande. I wish I was part of the decisive battles, but I was serving under Ungolo’s command at the time.” Jura replied, grasping Ranma’s hand after naming the king’s brother, who had been in charge of the middlemost Tine. His grip was strong, but his eyebrows rose as Ranma gave as good as he got. “Still, I doubt that the king asked me to stop in just to introduce us.”

“Nope. I wanted to see if you knew about what this could be?” Ranma asked, letting go of the mage’s hand and holding out the golden key.

Jura took one look and nodded. “Yes, I do. That is a Celestial Spirit key. It contains a link to a specific Celestial Spirit, which Celestial Spirit mages can use to create contracts with them. That branch of magic is somewhat exclusive, and its practitioners have never been very numerous. I believe that the only known mage who practices it is Miss Fiore, a model at the moment. I don’t know of any mage in Pergrande who uses Celestial Spirit magic that is certain.”

“So I’d have to be a Celestial Spirit mage to do anything to it? The spirit within asked me to send him to a family called the Heartfilias, but didn’t give me any information on why, other than a promise to keep. Given how it fell into my hands, I was sort of leery about sending it, too, without getting more information.” Despite Capricorn proving to be very different after the spirit of Zoldeo left him, after the fight Ranma hadn’t been willing to take him at his word. And then he had sort of, kind of…forgotten about it during their travels after leaving Minstrel’s capital.

“I’m sorry, but that’s all I can tell you. I suppose an advanced enchanter could come up with a way to create a ritual in order to contact the spirit, but that is all I could tell you.”

“Damn. Guess I’ll have to go with my first plan then: send it to Laxus, and hopefully one of the other Fairy Tail mages will be able to either use the key or, like you said, get an idea of why Capricorn wanted to go there.”

“I can arrange for a special mage-locked box if you want to send it to Fiore from here for you. But before you leave, come back here. I have another gift for the two of you, or rather, Wendy.” Wendy looked inquisitive, and the king smiled. “I sent to Fiore for a magical armorer specialist. I realize here in Pergrande we don’t make much use of magic armor, there being so few actual mages, but Fiore is different, as you might or might not have known.”

Ranma indicated that he did know that, and would indeed return the next day for the king’s gift. They did, and Wendy was outfitted with her new, improved armor. The magical armorer worked the suit of chain mail that Wendy had already been given, working several enchantments into the steel. Unlike with Song Silk, however, these enchantments would run on the wearer’s magical power rather than be self-contained, much like the various pieces of camping gear the two Dragon Slayers had acquired from Seven.

The final product could do several things on Wendy’s command, and others it would do automatically, though both types, of course, would drain her magical reserves. It could harden into plate mail on command or under impacts. It could give her powers of flight and speed, much like her Song Silk dress, and could enhance her strength to boot. It was an extremely expensive build on top of the original metal, which had been of the highest quality, but Vicotronious cheerfully footed the bill.

The armorer took two days to finish the armor, and the next day Ranma and Wendy once more left Appledore. With Wendy once more on his back, Ranma zoomed down the river back to Bell Lake. Once there it took him nearly an entire day to find the markers he had used ashore to mark where he had found the outskirts of the city. With Wendy now snoozing on his back, he returned to shore and set up camp nearby.

From there the two of them moved out onto the lake once more, early the next day. Ranma was once more in his female form, just in case, and Wendy was on his shoulders. “Ready, Wendy?”

“Ready, Oni-chan!” Wendy reported, even saluting as she stared down past Ranma’s shoulders to the water of the lake.

Blue magical energies grew from around Ranma’s hands, and she reached out, grasping the water around them and beginning to pull it up as she started to sink into the water. Once she was trading water with her legs rather than standing on the water, Wendy went to work too, gathering air around them. The result of their actions was a large globe around Ranma’s head and the upper half of Wendy’s body, her legs sticking out below it and out behind Ranma’s back.

“Okay, Wendy. I’ll do the steering, you do the power, right?” Ranma said, swimming so they were aimed down at a diagonal through the water and moving further down.

“Right, and I should be able to also use my Sky Dragon Slayer powers to create new air for our bubble,” Wendy said brightly. They had tested this before and found she could do it, but that it took a lot out of her to use Sky Magic when she wasn’t actually in the air. She could do it about fourteen times before she would have to rest, but that and the added speed she could add to their search even in water were a major help.

“Cool! Now, let’s get searching!” Ranma replied.

“Right! Tenryu no Owofuro (Sky Dragon’s Waving Tail)!” Wendy shouted, and the two of them shot down deeper into the water.

Wendy’s power allowed them to descend far faster than Ranma had been able to on her own, and they stayed down for nearly half a day before they retired, both Wendy and the magical flashlight they had been using showing signs of tiring. They found lots and lots of buildings, numerous statues, and other things which pointed to this indeed being at least a city, if not the capital, of the ancient nation where dragons and humans had lived together. With that first day’s exploring having gone so well, they both eagerly went back the next day and the day after that, fascinated by the search.

The second day they ran into a bit of a problem. As they swam right over the floor of the lake by a large, battered building of some kind, there was a stir under the rubble. Ranma saw it out of the corner of her eyes and turned in time to see a massive crab, as big as she was tall, pushing its way out of the sand and scuttling toward them. The thing was spiny and had huge claws, with tiny, beady eyestalks.

It clacked its claws angrily at the intruders, but Ranma quickly changed direction, shifting around the thing and sticking her hand out to grab a spine, using it to flip around and up onto the thing’s back. The thing kept going, trying to scrape her off as it scuttled through the ruins. Ranma tried to free a hand to strike at the thing, but it was moving around too wildly, and under the water Ranma couldn’t balance nearly as well as she would have been able to in the air or on the ground. Of course, to Wendy this was all good fun, and she was giggling and laughing as she hung onto Ranma as she hung onto the crab.

Eventually the crab tired, after which a hammer blow swiftly shattered its back carapace and destroyed its brain. Or at least Ranma thought it did; she wasn’t certain crabs had brains, really. Looking at Wendy, Ranma was unsurprised to see her staring at the crab in awe. “Let’s take a break early, okay, Wendy? I think a crab roast sounds delicious.”

But as their searching continued over the next few days, Ranma ran into a problem he cursed himself for not having realized earlier: that it had been so long a time since this city had been made. There were no books that hadn’t turned to sludge from the water. There were no statues that, while still retaining their shape, had not been worn smooth. There were no plaques, no lacrima, no signs, nothing. There were jewels and gold pieces, but they too had been worn smooth. Ranma took them, putting them into his Requip space, but they weren’t why the two Dragon Slayers were down here.

But that goal, to find something on the history of Dragon Slayers that could help them in their training or to give them an idea as to where Grandeeney had gone, seemed to have hit a dead end. It was a near crushing insight, given the fact they’d been at it for weeks, but Ranma persevered.

The reason for this was because the two of them had found the center of the city, and it was marked by several dragon statues scattered around a main parkland area of some kind. If there was anything to be discovered, Ranma felt, it would be here.

The two Dragon Slayers went over it for several days, and it was Wendy who finally spotted something. “Oni-chan, that one statue over there, the small one, way down there, its mouth looks weird.”

Ranma turned their course in the indicated direction until they hovered right in front of the dragon statue in question. Like all the others, its surface had been scoured smooth, but there was indeed something odd about its mouth. “Wendy, is it just me, or does it look like a chipmunk that bit off more than it could chew?”

“Hehehe, yep!” Wendy said, nodding her head and rubbing her neck against the top of Ranma’s hair.

“Hmm… Did any of the other statues have that kind of look?” Wendy shrugged at that, and the two of them went around making sure before coming back to the ‘chipmunk dragon,’ as Wendy had immediately dubbed it.

The two of them moved around it for a time, looking for anything else odd, but finding nothing. At that, Ranma tapped the statue with a finger. “Well, here goes nothing, Wendy. Hide your face behind my head, just in case.” Ranma waited until she felt Wendy duck behind her entirely, then pulsed her ki out into the rock in a manner she had learned when fighting a certain piggy. “Bakusai Tenketsu!”

With that touch the stone of the statue shattered, spreading in every direction, the sound of the explosion a loud rumble through the water. Ranma caught the bits that launched in their direction easily, tossing them aside, then lashed out to catch the metal box which had been hidden within the dragon’s mouth. It was matte black, about as wide and long as Ranma’s forearm. As she touched it, a single word suddenly blazed out on its side in gold before fading back into matte black. “Belserion? Now I wonder what that is, and what this is, too.”

**OOOOOOO**

“Oy, Laxus, ya got a package, retard! Does your girlfriend know you’ve got a secret admirer?” cackled Mirajane, to the delight of the rest of the guild as she hefted a package over her head. The devilish girl hurled it upward onto the second floor where only S-class mages could go.

“I don’t have a secret admirer or a girlfriend anymore, you little…” Growling, Laxus caught the package that Mira had hurled up with surprising accuracy, given that he shouldn’t have been visible from the first floor, and turned away as Mira continued to cackle. The tale of how he and Evergreen had broken up had spread throughout the guild, of course, and, even now, Mira and a few of the older men continued to make fun of him.

He opened it, then blinked as a small magical bird popped out of it. “This is for Laxus Dreyar, Laxus Dreyar. Please state what you called Ranma Oceana when you first met him by the count of three or the box will close again, three… two…”

Grinning, Laxus blurted the answer out and smirked as the bird and the runes around the device disappeared. Inside was a small wooden box tied shut with a ribbon and with a note attached to it. Opening the note, he read:

“Yo, Sparky, long time no see. I’ve been trying to get to Fiore for a few years, but other things keep coming up (smashing slavers, pirates, giant ass demons, that kind of thing). The latest issue saw me involved in a fight down in Minstrel against an asshole from some Dark Guild he called Grimoire Heart.”

Laxus scowled at that. *Lucky prick. They’re supposed to be one of the strongest Dark Guilds out there. Maybe they’d give me half a challenge, not like the pussies the Mage Council lets us take on.*

“Anyway, long story short, it looked as if the actual evil mage was some kind of spirit who had…taken over a spirit. Yeah, weird, I know, but apparently true. The second spirit in question is a Celestial Spirit who apparently was called Capricorn. He might have been used against his will, and his last words to me were that he wanted to be sent to the Heartfilia family. That’s all he said before disappearing. I tried activating the key thing later, but nothing happened. It took me a while to even find out what it was, let alone how to do anything with it. But I figured since you’re part of a guild, you might know a Celestial Spirit mage who could get more out of him. If not, then use your own best judgement as to whether to send it to the Heartfilias. Apparently they are a big time important family of merchants or something in Fiore.”

“I’m not your damn errand boy, Ranma,” Laxus growled, but without real heat.

His words, however, drew his grandfather’s attention from where he had been balancing on the guardrail looking down at the rest of the guild. He hopped closer, looking curiously at the box on the table in front of Laxus.

“But don’t think I’m asking you to do this for free. I’ve sent you some pictures from a certain prank you and I pulled on Gildarts in Appledore. Let’s just say the results were everything we could ever want. Hopefully I’ll be seeing you in person in a year or so; was thinking of swinging down to check out Midi, then up to Caelum and ending in Fiore. We’ll see how it goes. Hope you still have that electric personality of yours, Ranma.”

After reading that, Laxus quickly opened the box, pulling out the golden key first. Nearby, Makarov recognized it and quickly reached out a hand, grabbing Laxus’. “Who the hells sent you a golden Celestial Key, Laxus?”

“An old friend of mine that I met during my time in Pergrande. He took it after a battle against a Dark Guild mage,” Laxus replied, then looked at his grandfather quizzically. “Why, what’s so special about it?”

“Heh, if you’re not a Celestial Spirit mage or a collector, nothing. If you are, those bad boys are worth millions of jewels,” Makarov replied dryly. “Still, you certainly can’t use it. Are you going to sell it?”

“…No, I don’t think so. My friend says the spirit inside it or whatever wants to be sent to the Heartfilia family. They are the heads of a merchant guild, right?” Laxus asked.

“Indeed, and very rich besides. Still, let’s find out what the spirit has to say for himself…” So saying, Makarov hopped from the balcony onto the table in front of Laxus. Plucking the key out of his grandson’s hand, he set it down in the middle of the table and quickly went to work creating a series of runic glyphs around it.

Watching this, Laxus’ eyebrows rose. “I didn’t know you knew runes, Old Man.”

“Bah! When you get to be my age, it’s easier to list what magic you don’t know than what you do. The nature of Caster magic might keep me from using a lot of what I know, but runes are holder type magic, at least for something like this.” So saying, Makarov cut his palm lightly and let some of his blood touch a few glyphs.

There was a flash of yellow that caused a few of the mages down below to wonder what was going on up on the S-class level, and then a tall being who looked like a cross between a goat and a man stood there, looking somewhat bewildered behind his sunglasses. “My word, that was very strange indeed, and rather unpleasant, like being squeezed through a tube, almost. I have never been summoned in such a manner before. I take it that was some kind of ritual?”

“Indeed, Celestial spirit, it was. My name is Makarov. Your key has come into my grandson’s possession as a part of sending you to see the Heartfilia family. However, because they are a fairly important family and because you were apparently taken after a battle with a Dark Guild, I feel I need to make certain of your intentions.”

“Of course, that is perfectly understandable. My name is Capricorn, as you no doubt know. What you do not know is that I was once one of many Celestial spirits to have contracts with the Lady Layla Heartfilia. When she retired I was given to a servant named Zoldeo, who had a modicum of Celestial mage power. But he turned to evil and used a forbidden magic on me…”

From there, Capricorn explained how his body had been taken over, and how he had been used for several years to do perform evil deeds under Zoldeo’s control. He ended his tale by describing how he had been freed by Ranma and Wendy after they defeated him, along with Zoldeo’s own mad attempt at taking the Dragon Slayer over.

At that point, he was interrupted. “Wait, Ranma’s got a kid traveling with him!?” When Capricorn nodded, Laxus began howling in laughter, throwing his arms wide and shouting, “Know my pain and feel my suffering!!!”

Below them Erza scowled and looked up from where she had been about to engage Mirajane in another fight. “Why do I think Shishou just insulted me?”

Mira would have replied to that, but decided to let it go for once, looking up at the second floor too. “I seriously wonder what’s going on up there…” Then she spotted Natsu sneaking up the stairs. “Now that’s not a bad idea.” Swiftly moving around Erza, she followed the Dragon Slayer up the stairs, both of them crawling up them slowly and silently. The Take Over mage took a moment to thank Lisanna for having taken Happy with her today before they both stuck their heads out onto the second floor and watched the three people there, sweat dropping at the sight of Laxus cackling in laughter at something.

“It’s a goaack!” That was as far as Natsu got before Erza clamped a hand over his mouth as her arm clamped around his throat in a chokehold.

“Quiet, or they’ll see us!” the redhead whispered.

“Wh, where did you come from? And should you be up here at all, Ms. Goody-two-shoes?” Mira muttered.

“I have to admit to some curiosity myself. Besides, unlike you two, **I’m** a shoo-in to be nominated for the next S-class trials, so this isn’t breaking the rules so much as bending them,” Erza replied primly.

Mira would have taken offense at that, but Makarov had begun to speak again. Natsu wouldn’t have let that stop him from doing the same, but he was too busy trying to breathe, his hand tapping Erza’s in an effort to get her to let go.

“Yes, well, ignoring my crazy grandson, you’re saying you were supposed to be given to Layla’s daughter Lucy, should she show she was a Celestial Spirit mage?” When Capricorn nodded, Makarov went on. “That can be arranged, certainly. Thank you for your time, Capricorn, and I’m sorry for the inconvenience.”

As the goat man disappeared, Makarov turned back to his grandson. “Now, don’t you think it’s about time you told me about this friend of yours you made during that business in Pergrande?”

Laxus glared at his grandfather, but decided there was no reason not to tell him about Ranma beyond his old anger at his grandfather for expelling his father from the guild. “Ranma and I met during the orc incursion in Pergrande. He was an eleven year old punk ass at the time, but still damned deadly. If it wasn’t for him, we might well have been pushed out of the Tine the mages and I were fighting for, with a lot of losses of life. The two of us held the line against the orcs until more mages arrived, then spearheaded the assault to retake the Wall Fortress. We wouldn’t have been able to if not for Gildarts arriving.”

He paused, his eyes far away. “If you’ve never been in a war, you don’t know how it changes you, how the bonds formed in the heat of battle can really change you. We started as rivals and then became friends, and we learned a lot from one another. I later used some of the same training ideas we talked about on Erza, and I have to say it worked very well.”

Makarov looked at him thoughtfully. He could tell there was more that Laxus wasn’t saying, but really, that was enough for now. “Hmm. We’ll leave it at that, though I can tell there’s more you want to say.”

“Well, yeah, but we have a few eavesdroppers, Old Man,” Laxus replied with a drawl in his tone, pointing at the trio by the stairs.

Turning, Makarov scowled as Mira and Natsu made a break for it. “You little brats!” With that roar he gave chase, but Natsu doubled back, ducking underneath several tables on the second floor while Mira raced down the steps, forcing Makarov to choose whom to chase after.

Erza, on the other hand, stood still. “I apologize, Shishou, Master Makarov. I let my curiosity get the better of me. Please hit me.”

“None of that. You sort of had a right to hear that much, at least. It was the others I didn’t want hearing it,” Laxus said, shaking his head. “In fact, you might say that Ranma is another connection between the two of us. He was the friend who I mentioned to you once after you joined the guild.” Erza’s eyes widened at that and widened further as Laxus went on. “The next time I heard of him he was doing much the same thing: it was Ranma who smashed the slavers in Bosco.”

As that began to percolate through Erza’s mind, Natsu hopped onto the table in front of Laxus and dove towards the balcony in an effort to escape Makarov. This upended the box Capricorn’s key had come in, sending the other small pieces of paper in it into the air, floating around haphazardly. One of them nearly blinded Natsu, and he was caught the next instant and hurled down to slam like a fleshy meteor into the floor below them. Groaning, he looked up at Gildarts, who had just come in, having actually used the door for once. “Yo, Natsu. Getting a little ahead of yourself, are we?”

“Guh, I’d have gotten away with it if not for this… What is… PFFFHHAHhhahahah!” Natsu had pulled the paper away from his face only to find it was a picture: a picture of a bald and badly tanned Gildarts. “AHAHHAHAHA! A bald Gildarts!!!”

“Wh, what!” Gildarts snapped, grabbing the picture out of Natsu’s hands, tossing him to the side.

Up top, Laxus had grabbed a few more of the pictures and had begun to laugh too. “AHAHAHA! Oh, so that’s what he meant, hah! I didn’t know they took pictures!”

Hearing this, Gildarts turned, lashing out with Crash magic to bring the entire second floor down. The three people still up there fell with it, but landed on their feet. “You promised to never tell anyone about that incident!”

“I did, but Ranma never promised anything of the sort! Don’t blame me for the pictures, Old Man! Besides, I think you look a damn sight better in them than you do in real life,” Laxus retorted. “I think those pictures are masterpieces!”

Nearby, Makarov and the others all started to look at the pictures then from the pictures to the enraged Gildarts, trying desperately not to pour more oil on the fire.

But it was, alas, too late for that. “Oh ho, it sounds like Gildarts is going to have to choke a bitch.” Gildarts stated cracking his knuckles as his magical aura rose up all around him, pushing or crushing everything nearby.

Laxus stood, facing him, his body suddenly crackling with lightning. “You’ll never take me alive, Old Man!”

“I don’t want you alive brat!” Gildarts shouted then two of the three monsters of Fairy Tail charged one another.

Makarov (monster three) stared for a moment, terror overcoming his ability to respond. Not terror for what would happen to him, no, but the terror of what it would cost to repair the damage these two powerhouses would cause. “My guild, the city, nooooo!!!”

Just having entered the guild with Carla and Happy, Lisanna nodded brusquely and turned right around, followed immediately by Carla. “Right, I think it’s best we try to stay away from that.”

“Hmmmf. Thugs and mindless hooligans, the lot of them,” Carla said grumpily. Though younger than Happy by a year or so, her speech was better than Happy’s, though not by a wide margin. She spoke haughtily and seemed to have somehow developed a ladylike personality that was at odds with the guild as a whole, and with Laxus too.

“Well, look at it this way, Carla,” Lisanna said, reaching down to pick Carla up and set her on a shoulder. Behind them Happy had begun to cheer on Natsu in the fight as he began to attack anyone nearby. “At least this way it looks like Laxus won’t be using you to troll for girls today.”

Shuddering, Carla nodded at that.

**OOOOOOO**

Deciding to get it over with, Makarov left the next day to take the key to the Heartfilia estate personally. That this got him out of helping the rest of the guild repair the damage the fight yesterday had caused was just a bonus. The guildhall had been nearly leveled, and Laxus had been put in the hospital, along with Natsu who had tried to join in. Gildarts, looking much the worse for wear, would be leading the repairs, with the newly returned Gray and Cana helping him as much as they could. Though younger than most of the other Guild members, the two of them hadn’t been part of the fight and were stronger magically then any of the others who had tried to escape the fight rather than join in. Mira and Erza, who would normally have been there in their place, had been almost as bad in how much destruction they caused as Gildarts and Laxus had.

Makarov spent a few hours blissfully sleeping the day away on the train before hopping off at the nearest place to the Heartfilia estate. The estate was huge, beyond massive, sprawling across the same amount of space as Magnolia itself. At the far end he saw a mansion, about five stories tall with multiple wings and massive doors, larger than the doors that lead into the Fairy Tail guildhall.

He was met at the front door by a butler, who visibly sneered at the diminutive Guild Master. “Yeas, cahn I help you?” His tone and affected accent made it clear the man was thinking more about helping him off the estate and into the nearest dumpster.

Smiling, Makarov scratched at the back of his neck. He loved moments like this, when little tin pot dictators realized they had just bitten off way more than they could chew. The movement of his hand pulled out the necklace he always wore, which had a flat, silver-like disc on it, marked with a symbol on it that nearly every man and woman in Ishgar would recognize. “Yes, actually. I’m here to see a Ms. Lucy Heartfilia. Could you tell her that **Wizard Saint** Makarov is here to see her, please?”

The man seemed to shrink in on himself under Makarov’s even stare, and he disappeared with a speed that had Makarov thinking of young Jet. An instant later, however, the door burst open and a young woman appeared there. She looked to be about Levy or Lisanna’s age, but her puberty had come early and bountifully. The young, blond-haired girl wore a dress that was very in keeping with the rest of the mansion, but had simple flat shoes on her feet. She also had a face made to smile, but a few signs along her eyes that told Makarov she had cried herself to sleep a few times.

“Are you really Master Makarov of Fairy Tail!? I’ve heard so much about you and your guild! Is it true that Laxus Dreyar became an S-class at the young age of seventeen?! And that you held off the great beast of Bushaiin Village?”

“Haha! It is indeed, young lady. Do I have the honor of talking to Lucy Heartfilia?” Makarov asked, smiling and holding out his hand. That incident had occurred a few years after he had taken the Guild Master position, but it still made headlines these days, since it was only after that that he had been considered worthy of becoming a Wizard Saint.

“Oh, um,” Lucy began, then looked around and seemed to realize that her race to reach the door had outstripped any of the mansion’s servants. She grinned then, holding out her hand and shaking the old man’s hand eagerly. “Yep, that’s me! I, um, I’m really a fan of Fairy Tail,” she finished somewhat lamely.

“Ah, does that mean you are a mage as well, Lucy?”

“Er, well, I don’t know. I’ve always been fascinated by magic, though, and especially Celestial Spirit magic. And I remember that my mom was one, but…” For a moment there was look of loss on Lucy’s face that Makarov had become all too familiar with ever since he’d started to bring young children into the guild. Then a flash of anger crossed her face as she looked into the house. “I’ve asked my father about that, but he never answers me. He’s even forbidden me from looking at my mom’s stuff. And fired several of the older servants when he heard they were telling me about her magic and stuff.”

There was a sense here, Makarov thought, of a young girl slowly starting to build up more anger towards an overbearing parent than fear of him. That wasn’t good. A responsible, respectable adult would probably try to make peace between the two of them. Makarov, on the other hand, also got the sense that the overbearing parent wouldn’t take kindly to any such attempt, and his sympathy laid entirely with the girl, who might grow some great boob…that is, with the distraught young girl.

Coughing as he shook off the image of what Lucy would look like in a few years,Makarov slowly pulled out Capricorn’s key. “Well, then we can kill two birds with one stone, Lucy. You see, this key is…”

That was as far as he got before Lucy grabbed the key out of his hand, gushing over it. “Oh, wow! A Celestial Spirit key, a real one, and it looks like is one of the Zodiacs: Capricorn. Wow, these are really rare, and their spirits are so darn cool! I remember my mom telling me stories about them when I was younger. Those were always my favorites.”

Laughing, Makarov gestured at the key. “In your readings about Celestial Spirit magic, have you ever read about how to activate keys?”

Nodding, Lucy began to breathe in deeply, then her eyes and hands began to channel power into the key. It was a slow process, but it was obvious Lucy had begun training herself in how to channel her magic before this. Given that Celestial Spirit mages could not use other Caster and very few Holder magics, that was remarkable perseverance, Makarov thought.

Just as the glow of Lucy’s magic began to push into the key, Makarov heard a shout from inside the mansion. Through the still open doors he saw a middle-aged man with a rather unfortunate mustache racing down the steps, his face a red mask of fury. From behind him was the same butler who had answered the door. “You! You there! Get away from her! No daughter of mine will…”

But the man, obviously Lucy’s father, was too late. An instant after Lucy had begun to turn at his shout, her magic flared through the key and Capricorn appeared there, looking far more solid than during the ritual Makarov had used to summon him the other day.

Capricorn looked down at Lucy and quickly went to one knee in front of her, bowing grandly. “Lady Lucy, you look just like your mother did when she first became my contractor.”

“You, you knew my mom?” Lucy asked, her face showing a longing that made Makarov want to either hug her or beat her father into a bloody pulp for not telling the little girl more about her mother.

“I did indeed. In fact, I promised to watch over you for her once she began to fall ill. It will be my honor to see that promise through and make you a fantastic Celestial Spirit mage, if that is your desire,” Capricorn replied, a smile on his face as he bowed his head, one arm crossed over his chest, his other hand down on the ground.

“Never! I forbid it!” the man of the house bellowed, marching towards them. “Lucy is not going to follow her mother into that mage madness!”

He moved to grab Lucy’s shoulder, but Capricorn went from kneeling in front of her to holding the man’s hand lightly but firmly. “The duty of a Celestial Spirit is to protect the contracting mage. Even from her own family if need be. I do remember you as well, sir, interacting with Lady Layla. But I do not remember you being so petty-minded.”

The man seemed to stare at Capricorn for a moment before pulling his arm out and turning with a loud ‘hmmpf.’ “If the girl wants to waste her free time on learning magic, she may, but it better not cut into her etiquette and other lessons.”

“Of course,” Capricorn nodded, turning back to Lucy. “That will be fine, will it not, milady?”

“Erm, fine, I suppose. But before we start learning about magic, tell me about any adventures you had with my mom,” Lucy ordered. “I remember her telling me about some of them, but not many. And I think hearing about those adventures will serve to train me and let me get closer to my mom too.”

“I think we have an agreement, milady. But we should also look around for other keys. I remember that Lady Layla could call upon many other spirits, but her favorite was Miss Aquarius. If she retained any key after becoming sick, it would be Miss Aquarius.”

Nodding, Lucy turned back to Makarov, who had simply been watching events play out. “Thank you for this, sir. Bringing Capricorn here, I mean. You don’t have any idea what this means to me!”

“Oh, I think I do,” Makarov replied with a chuckle, reaching up to pet Lucy’s shoulder. “Just remember, my girl, that if you do ever want to follow the path of a mage, that my guild, Fairy Tail, will always welcome you. Whatever your circumstances might be.”

Lucy blinked at that, wondering how the elderly man had figured out she had sometimes thought about running away. But Makarov had already turned and walked off down the trail leading to the front gate before she could ask. She watched him go, then turned to Capricorn. “So, where do you want to start?”

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma and Wendy stayed on the shore of Bell Lake for a few days, trying to open the box, but that had been a complete and utter failure. Brute force, magic, even just attempting to find a seam hadn’t worked. But in trying to open the box, they discovered that the box was magical, extremely magical. After all, if it hadn’t been, a full power punch from Ranma should have at least dented it, rather than plow it several feet into the ground.

With that the two Dragon Slayers headed to Bellum to ask other mages for advice on what it could be. One of the mages, who dressed much the same as the mages Ranma had met years ago at the logging camp, helped them look through the guild library, a marked change from when Ranma had been looking for information on dragons. Then the mages had either laughed at him or ignored him, but the box was something solid and real they could see and touch, so they were more willing to help Ranma’s search for knowledge.

“What you have there is an ancient example of a memory box. There’s actually nothing in it; the box itself holds the message,” the mage said after pulling out several books and looking through them. “They fell out of favor because of the amount of time and magic needed to create them and the fact that the individual they were destined for needed to know how to open it.” The mage, one Isaac by name, shook his head ruefully. “And, given the sheer number of things that could be used as a key, that was a major problem.”

“What do you mean?” Ranma asked, while Wendy had sat down at a nearby table and pulled out her latest coloring book. It was quite a bit more advanced than the first few Ranma had bought for her and told a real story rather than just being a series of coloring pictures. Ranma had actually bought it a few stores down from the guild they were currently visiting on Mrs. Macey’s recommendation.

“Ah, you see, I mean, it could seriously be anything: a type of light, a tune, a sound, a specific heat level even. The only way to override the lock would be to have some blood from the individual who had last used it,” Isaac replied. “Worse, there’s no way to tell what the key could be.”

“Ouch,” Ranma muttered, laying a hand on Wendy’s head. “Still, thanks anyway.”

“Are you sure I can’t buy it off you? Even if we can’t see the message, studying the memory box could be fascinating,” Isaac said. “I think the guild would be willing to pay quite a bit of money for that.”

“Heh, I don’t think so, no. Wendy I will try to open it on our own time. Thanks for your help.” With that Ranma stood up and hefted Wendy onto his shoulders, book, crayons, and all. When Wendy made to object, Ranma smirked. “This way you can use my head as a table, Wendy.”

“Oh!” Wendy replied, nodding and setting her book on Ranma’s head. She didn’t look up for a while, and by the time she did they were deep into the ironwood woods which dominated Bellum. She looked around, staring up at the tall ironwood trees and watching as the sunlight from on high filtered down through their leaves. “Pretty…” Wendy then frowned, staring all around them. “Where are we going, Oni-chan?”

“We’re heading into the deep woods, Wendy. I want to help you create few more attack spells, and those tend to be destructive. There are several meditation type things I want to try out too.” In particular Ranma wanted to try and train his mage sight and ki sensing abilities, along with a few of the more esoteric martial arts skills he had seen back in in his previous dimension. *Until I can find out more about Dragon Slayer magic, I think I’ve reached a plateau of what I can succeed with on my own. But I can still become better at the martial arts, at least.*

“I’d also like to just get away from everyone for a while,” Ranma finished. Ranma was not really a natural city person: he could deal with cities so long as he could take breaks, but having been stuck in Bellum for so long over the winter had irritated him. “Besides, this way we can just eventually follow the shoreline through Bellum, then move across the sea from there to Midi. I’ve never been there before.”

‘Hhmmm… Okay, but that’s only so long as we can spend time in the trees,” Wendy said.

“Ha! I can go one better than that, Wendy. In those books of yours, have you ever seen pictures of tree houses?”

The squeal that nearly deafened him was her only reply, and Ranma laughed, hopping up into the treetops and away even faster than before.

With summer all around them, the forest was alive with birdsong and light, an amazing contrast to what it had been like when they had arrived in Bellum before. And with no real destination in mind other than simply getting away from other people for a while, the two Dragon Slayers wove through the woods with no set course, simply exploring. This deep into the forest all the trees were ironwood, making human habitation nearly impossible. Indeed, the two of them might have been the first humans to see some of the sights they saw: hidden waterfalls, massive clumps of ironwood trees taller than any castle, and strange, deer like animals which could hop like kangaroos through the underbrush, to name just a few. The sight of those particular animals had had Wendy nearly squealing again, wondering if they could be tamed.

Eventually, three days into their travel, Ranma found a perfect place for them to stop and set up a permanent camp. An ironwood tree had split for some reason in the distant past, its main trunk becoming two thick trunks splitting off at an angle, halfway up its height, but the tree was healthy despite that. Nearby a small rocky stream meandered down the side of a hill, its source under another ironwood tree’s roots. There was a tiny glade between the stream and the tree that was Ranma’s choice. And from nearby both Dragon Slayers could smell and hear animals moving around, animals that had not learned to fear man, perhaps, or simply didn’t know to fear the smell of the two Dragon Slayers.

“So, what do you think, Wendy?” Ranma asked, stopping as he leaped down from one tree to stand and stare up at the split ironwood tree.

“Pretty… This is an amazing place, Oni-chan!” Wendy gushed.

“Yep, which means we’ll have to be careful to add to it instead of wrecking it.” With that, Ranma set Wendy down and led the way away from the spot he had chosen by several leagues. Nearby he found several ironwood trees competing for space around where one of their fellows had apparently fallen, creating a break in the forest’s canopy. Deciding on two of them, Ranma pointed at one of them. “Okay, Wendy: training time. Let’s see you use your Roar on these trees. I want each large branch cut off as close to the trunk as possible, then the trunk cut as near to the base as we can get it.”

Nodding, Wendy moved around the tree, thinking about where to start the job. Ranma watched, and then, when Wendy pointed at one of the larger upper branches, nodded. “But step back a ways, Wendy, so the branches can’t fall on you.”

Once more nodding, Wendy did so, moving well away from the branches. “Tenryu no Hoko!!!” she shouted, sending out a roar. But Wendy had misjudged the angle of her roar slightly, and the spinning whirling mass of air smashed through the branch she had been aiming at and the trunk behind it. The trunk withstood it, only a quarter of its bulk being ripped away.

“Good power there Wendy, but we need to work more on your aim. Don’t worry though, that’s easy to fix. Here, let me,” Ranma said, moving forward and pulling away the now dead wood and setting it to one side. “Requip: paint.” A second later Ranma held a small tin of paint. “Tell me where you think you should aim.” He hopped onto Wendy’s tree and began to paint markers here and there under Wendy’s direction.

Once done, he smiled, sent the paint back to his Requip space, and then moved over to rub Wendy’s head. “Here’s your goal, Wendy: I want you to try your best to hit those marks. There are fifteen of them. If you can hit twelve dead on, I’ll let you have one of the cookies I bought back in Bellum.” Wendy’s eyes lit up, and he quickly held up a hand. “Only one, though. Those cookies are huge, but we don’t have many of them, and there’s no chance of us finding chocolate out here, so they’ll have to last us for a while.”

“Hai!” Wendy barked, turning back to the tree, her little face scrunched into a look of intense concentration. “Sorry, Mr. Tree, but it’s for a good cause! Tenryu no HOKO!”

*Heh, it’s all about motivation: rule number six.* So thinking, Ranma turned and moved over to the first few large branches that Wendy had already cut. Around one hand water appeared, and he began to cut the smaller branches off the larger ones, setting them aside in a small pile. Once that was done, Ranma placed his hands down onto the larger branch

Wendy paused in her own work, gulping in air and delighting in the hint of pine in it here, deep in the woods. She always liked to taste new air like this. Before she could start up again, she paused, watching Ranma work. “What are you doing, Oni-chan?”

“Power isn’t everything, Wendy. You need to train control just as much, if not more. This is a way for me to train my control. As to what I’m actually doing, what does it look like?” Ranma asked, his eyes closed. Around his hands magical circles of deep blue had appeared, showing that Ranma was using his Dragon Slayer magic.

At first, Wendy didn’t see anything more than that, but trotting over she saw something that looked like a shimmer of some kind of mist or steam coming out of the wood. As she watched, the steam began to turn into actual water seeping out of the tree. “Oooh... You’re pulling the sap out! That’s amazing. But…” Wendy paused, then smacked one fist into the palm of the other. “Oh, green wood wouldn’t be very good for building things, right? I didn’t think ironwood trees needed to be, um…”

“Seasoned is the word you’re looking for, Wendy. Good job. And yeah, they do. That’s why the Tree Huggers Guild has so many members.” The two Dragon Slayers exchanged a giggle at the Bellum guild’s name before Ranma went on. “They use a lot of different types of magic to take the water out like this.” Finishing his job, Ranma gestured, and the water from the now seasoned wood was flung to one side. He then wiped a hand over his brow. “It’s tough work, though, using my magic like this. Now, don’t you have a cookie you’re trying to win?”

Nodding, Wendy turned back to her own job.

For the next few days, the two of them worked on creating enough material for the treehouse that Ranma envisioned. It wasn’t actually a house, though, more a series of platforms, three of them. One of them, the tallest, was set up for the tent, which poked out of the canopy of the forest just enough to let the two Dragon Slayers gaze up at the stars. The second platform, set below that one, was set up for meals. The third and lowest was also the largest, build around and between both large trunks of the split tree for training purposes.

It had taken the two Dragon Slayers more time to prepare the material than for Ranma to actually create the treehouse, even with Wendy following him around and asking questions about what he was doing and how. Eventually Ranma actually had her start helping him by smacking in the makeshift nails, and also began to train her in finer control of her Sky Dragon Slayer powers, so that she could conjure up ultra-thin claws of wind that could slice through her target. The effort nearly put her on the ground the first few times, but as she got used to controlling her power to that degree, it became easier.

“Well, Wendy, I think we did good work, don’t you?” Ranma asked, only to blink as he noticed that once more Wendy had rushed up to climb to the highest point of their new house, gazing in awe all around her. “So, does that mean you don’t want s’mores?” he yelled up at her.

“What are s’mores?” Wendy called back.

“A treat we’re going to have for a job well done. Trust me, you’ll like them.”

At that, Wendy hopped her way down the tree, nearly falling twice, but catching herself both times. While her hand eye coordination had increased significantly over the years since they had met, Wendy still had issues sometimes with her footwork.

She discovered that Ranma had set up a small fire pit at the base of the tree. Once they had the fire ablaze, Wendy sat nearby wondering what these s’mores were. She watched as he roasted marshmallows, then stuffed a few pieces of their precious chocolate along with the marshmallows between two graham crackers, her eyes widening all the while. A single bite of the delicious treat was enough for Wendy to declare them the best treat ever.

This idyllic celebration was interrupted, however, by a roar from one side of the small clearing. Out from the trees around them stalked several large, dinosaur-like creatures. To Ranma’s eyes, they looked like a cross between a short T-rex and a lion. They had manes like lions and the general look of a T-rex, with a large head and short forelimbs, along with a long, thick tail. They were also running like a T-rex would, at least according to the few books on dinosaurs Ranma had ever seen. The roar, though, was more like that of a lion.

Staring at the things, Ranma groaned and hopped to his feet, lamenting the interruption. But Wendy’s response was much more violent. “Grrr!” she snarled, standing up quickly and lashing out with a Sky Dragon’s Claw at the nearest beast. While large, this attack was unfocused, and so hit more like a condensed blast of wind rather than a cutting force. It hurled the beast backwards with a cat-like squawk of dismay. “No interrupting snack time!”

“Huh, I wonder if one can osmose the Saotome stomach,” Ranma mused to himself, before launching himself forward, crashing into the next few monsters. Since the beasts were no real threat and they didn’t need to add any meat to their stores, he didn’t kill them, merely knocking one of them out. Wendy was only a little better, growling and launching long-range attacks at them every time one of them tried to get around Ranma, and eventually the pack of beasts gave it up as a bad job and raced away, leaving two of their fellows unconscious on the floor of the forest.

Staring down at the beasts, Ranma quickly pulled out Gildarts’s book and began to leaf through it. A second later he felt Wendy climb up his back, staring over his shoulder. To his surprise, however, the beast wasn’t shown in the book. “Huh. That’s cool, Wendy; we just discovered a whole new species. Maybe.” Staring down at the beast once more, Ranma said thoughtfully, “I wonder if they’re tamable?”

Wendy giggled at that, but then hopped off, racing back to their fire. “Well, if you’re going to try and do that, it means more s’mores for me.”

“Gah! Heck, no!” Ranma retorted, kicking the beasts out and over the forest like they were two overlarge footballs rather than dangerous predators, before turning and catching up with Wendy, hefting her into the air and tickling her furiously to her shrieks of laughter.

The two of them stayed there for a time, starting up a new daily regimen. They would wake up in the morning to explore the forest via the treetops, since that helped Wendy continue to train her coordination. Then they would return, and Ranma would continue to train Wendy more in the Aerial Style of Anything Goes. At this point that had shifted to how to maintain her balance in midair, along with some specific katas. After that Wendy would have some free time where she could do anything she wanted, so long as she remained within sight of Ranma. Mostly she used this time to play with her square puzzle pieces, creating amazing shapes with the small foam things, or reading, while Ranma trained himself nearby.

In the evenings Ranma would lead Wendy in her first meditation practices to get in touch with her magic power more, growing her reserves slowly. While she did that, Ranma tried first to work on his very limited mage sight. He hadn’t been able to make it any better since first coming up with the skill and had never found any books on the subject in any of the nations he had been in. He bet that Fiore would have some, but he was in no rush to once more retrace their steps through the nations between here and there overland.

He also began to train himself in ki sense, the ability to sense the ki of people around him. Cologne had used this technique extensively, as had Happosai, though his had seemed more haphazard, while Cologne’s was like a radar system that was almost always on. Ranma wanted that, and if he could enlarge his ki reserves at the same time, so much the better.

These two skills were, along with his personal preferences, the main reason Ranma had wanted to get away from civilization for a while, figuring that they would be easier to train without a lot of ‘background noise.’ And while the first eluded him entirely, Ranma made a lot of progress on the second.

Several days after they had finished work on the treehouse, Ranma was meditating alone one morning, allowing Wendy to sleep in since she had worked herself to exhaustion the day before mastering her Sky Dragon’s Claw attack to a better degree. He was trying to use the image of a flame to concentrate his mind, feeding all his errant thoughts into it.

One moment that was all he felt, then, the next, his consciousness expanded. It was as if he felt the flow of life all around him: the feel of the trees, the presence of various animals all around them, some birds which Wendy had begun to feed hopping around the tree above him, with squirrels and other little critters a little further away. His senses then found Wendy, a far brighter, more powerful spark, coming towards him. He idly noticed that she had left the treehouse at some point and wandered off, and he wondered what she had been distracted by this time. *Kids: what can you do?*

At that thought he came out of his meditation, a dull throbbing beginning behind his eyes. It was only then that he realized he was mentally exhausted from that short meditation exercise. Like magic, using ki in that manner called for more mental strength and flexibility than simple physical power. *Flexibility, I got; mental strength, well, that I’ll have to build up, just like any other muscle. It’s going to take a while before I can use that to pinpoint actual people, let alone have it on all the time like Cologne did. Eesh, that old woman was way more terrifying than I ever thought if she was able to keep that up for so long and still concentrate on the physical world around her. It could take me decades to get to that point!*

Shaking off that thought, Ranma turned in the direction he had sensed Wendy was coming towards him from. Staring down into the forest, he saw Wendy coming towards him, followed by what looked like a bear cub. She stopped as he watched, turning to give the little bear a scratch behind the ears with one hand, while holding out something for the little cub to eat in the other.

Behind them, Ranma could see a large mama bear following their trail slowly but surely.

Hopping towards the girl, he was not surprised that Wendy saw him coming and stopped, waving brightly up at him. “Oni-chan look what followed me home! Can I keep him?”

**OOOOOOO**

Standing once more on the balcony of the second floor of the guildhall, Makarov gestured with one hand towards Erza Scarlet, who was standing to one side of him staring down at the crowd of their guild mates. “Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Erza Scarlet, Fairy Tail’s newest S-class mage, and the youngest to ever receive that title in all of Ishgar!”

He looked over at his grandson slyly as he said that last, wishing to needle the brat. Even after the beat down Gildarts had given him, Laxus still had a little too big a head for Makarov. For her part Erza looked apologetic at having beaten her Shishou’s, or rather, former Shishou’s record. On the other hand, she was eating up Mira’s look of jealousy and the congratulations of her friends, even if Natsu was interspersing his praises with loud shouts for her to fight him. It all sort of evened out in his mind.

Yet, much to Makarov’s chagrin, Laxus didn’t look to care. Laxus and Carla had gone on a weeklong job recently to stop a herd of giant animals from overrunning a small town near the center of Fiore, so he hadn’t taken part in the trials. This had left it to Gildarts, who had put the redhead through the wringer.

Laxus simply smirked at his grandfather, shaking his head. “Whatever, Old Man. You know I was S-class ranked at least three years before you let me actually take the trials. That would’ve made Erza my equal in terms of age.” Ignoring Makarov’s scoff, Laxus turned to Erza, who had just stepped away from the balcony so as to not be drawn into a shouting match with Mira down below. “Since you’re S-class now, we should go on an S-class quest together to celebrate.”

“I think it’s a good idea. S-class jobs are very different from the normal jobs you’ve been **allowed** to go on before this,” Makarov said, emphasizing the word ‘allowed’ and looking back at Laxus with a glare, remembering how Laxus had stolen the request for mages to head to Bosco to help the new queen several years ago.

Erza nodded, smiling slightly. She and Laxus hadn’t had much time to even talk, let alone go on a mission together, for quite some time. It would be nice to catch up. *And maybe grill him on this whole dating thing.* While she had no interest in Laxus, having slotted him neatly into the older mentor, bad influence role years back, she found the idea of maybe dating in the future interesting, and he and Evergreen had been one of very few couples in the guild. The others were all older, and Erza would not give Evergreen the opportunity to lord anything over her by asking her for advice.

“Hmm, let’s to it, then,” Laxus said, standing up and moving to the S-class job board at the far end of the S-class area. “You can choose if you want, Erza, but make sure it’s something with enough combat to go around, no bounty hunts or investigation missions.”

Following Laxus, both Erza and Makarov read through the requests on the board, none of them noticing that once more Mira and the others of Erza’s age group had come up the stairs to spy on them. Eventually Erza chose a job to hunt down the Dark Guild Flame Bearers, a guild of various fire magic users who had turned from taking jobs to pure arson. They were considered dangerous, and had at least four S-class mages among their number, though Makarov scoffed at the idea that the smaller, less known guild’s S-class mages would be of equal skill to Fairy Tail’s. The last known location of the guild was only a few hours away by train, too.

The two of them decided to leave that very day, since it would probably take them a while to discover the trail of the guild after they reached the town where the Flame Bearer’s guildhall had been located before they had been declared a Dark Guild. “Why the fuck does the Magic Council just announce that declaration before they can actually move against the guild in question?” Laxus groused. “This is the second Dark Guild mission I’ve seen come around, and both could have been avoided if the Council realized they had to at least be in a position to arrest the assholes after giving out their fucking mandates.”

“Laxus, you shouldn’t curse so much,” Erza interjected, “or talk about the Magic Council like that. While this decision on their part might not have been wise, they are still worthy of respect.”

“Feh. You take a few jobs straight from them and then see if you still believe that. I’ve dealt with the governments of Seven, Bosco, Pergrande, and Caelum, and the most useless of them all is the Magic Council,” Laxus retorted, shaking his spiky head as the two of them entered Magnolia’s train station. “It’s as if setting up a separate administration just for mages sucked all the common sense out of those on the council.”

Rolling her eyes, Erza refrained from starting an argument on this point. Laxus didn’t really have any respect for anyone who, in his opinion, had gained their position via age or appointment rather than sheer power. If you weren’t strong, physically, mentally, or magically, Laxus didn’t have any time for you. It was an attitude that grated on some of the guild sometimes, but since he didn’t denigrate the others in the guild as he did the Magic Council, it didn’t cause many problems.

Instead of engaging Laxus in a pointless discussion on politics and the need for a bureaucracy (after all, someone had to do the paperwork, and it certainly wasn’t going to be Erza or anyone in Fairy Tail), she turned her thoughts to something else: the number of questions she wanted to ask Laxus about his friend, Ranma. The two of them had had literally no time in the past few weeks to talk, what with Erza training up for the S-class exam and Laxus being away on his own missions before that. But time had not made her questions about the young man turned boy who had tried to free her early into her life as a slave go away. If anything, the knowledge that he and the mage who had dismantled the slave trade in Bosco were one and the same had made her even more interested.

She looked up, however, as the nature of Laxus’ muttering changed. “Oy, what the hell are you brats doing here, huh?”

Looking in the same direction as her current partner, she saw the loathsome form of Mirajane standing in front of a worried looking Gray and an eager Natsu, the little flying cat Happy sitting on his head as always. Now two years old, the little ball of blue fur was becoming quite the snarky little so-and-so, but he helped Lisanna keep Natsu from causing too much damage in his daily challenges towards Laxus, Gildarts, Mira, or Erza. *Oddly enough, he doesn’t challenge Mirajane as often.*

“What's it look like?” Mira asked mock-innocently. Dressed as she normally dressed, Mira was incapable of doing anything truly innocently. “We’re going with you. You might need our help to get rid of this Dark Guild, what with having to lug around Erza’s fat ass.”

“What did you say!?” Erza growled, stalking forward.

Before she could get to her rival, though, Laxus spoke, his head in his hands. “God damn it, when did I become the guild babysitter?”

“Hey, I resent that!” Mira shouted, then leaned forward, bringing attention to her chest, which at fifteen had really begun to blossom. This was shown off easily in her normal goth tomboy clothing, though thankfully Lisanna had been getting her more interested in more girly clothing lately. “Unlike flatty Erza, I’m no child anymore. Want me to prove it, Laxus?”

Erza’s eyes nearly went as red as her hair at that taunt. “Damn it, you’re not the only one who’s grown breasts over the years, Mira! Unlike you I don’t have to thrust them into everyone’s faces just to make myself feel better!”

“Gah, who cares about that girly crap!” Natsu bellowed, stepping around the two girls and pointing at Laxus. “You’re taking on an entire guild of flame users; no way could I pass up the chance at that kind of feast.” He paused, looking sheepish before going on. “Er, I mean, no way could I pass up the chance to show that my Fire Dragon Slayer magic is the best Fire type magic around!”

“Hah, yeah right! That’s why I’m around,” Gray stated, moving around Mira from the other direction. “I want to prove that no Fire magic can do any better against my Ice mage magic than flamebrain’s can.”

Natsu turned, but before he could shout at Gray he felt the unfortunately all too familiar feeling of someone grabbing the back of his head and pulling him into the air. “If you idiots want to join Erza and me, you’re going to have to earn it. If you three can work together and put either me or Erza down for the count of three, I’ll take you along. If not, I…”

That was as far as Laxus got before Mira interrupted him, attacking Erza quickly with a Devil Spark. “Why didn’t you say so!”

The fight that followed this was short and very nasty. Natsu and Gray against Laxus simply couldn’t land a single hit, the older mage making a fool of them and continually making them hit one another. The two eventually fell to infighting, after which Laxus simply shocked them into unconsciousness. Mira fought Erza for quite a bit longer, but again Erza overcame her with her greater endurance and ability to dodge more of her opponent’s attacks than Mira could. Mira simply couldn’t quite overcome the difference in training, it was as simple as that, hence her always trying to get Laxus or Gildarts to help her train in order to catch up to the girl she saw as her rival.

Standing on top of the pile of groaning bodies, Laxus looked around and sighed as he saw the damage the fight had done to the interior of the train station. The fact that said interior opened out to the exterior in numerous places was just icing on the cake. *Magnolians might be used to stuff like this with Fairy Tail having been here so long, but even so there’s a limit to what we can get away with.*

“While I don’t hold with most of Erza’s hall monitor attitude, you lot really do make us all look bad when you start fights in public places like this.” Ignoring Erza’s whine of, ‘not you too, Shi-er, Laxus?’ Laxus opened up a pouch and pulled out a pen and paper. Writing down a few quick lines, he turned and handed it to a nearby station operator. “Here. These are their names and the bank where they all have accounts. If they aren’t willing to help repair the damage they caused, they can at least pay for it.”

Below him Mira made a noise of disagreement, but Laxus simply shifted his weight slightly, causing the girl to wheeze and fall silent. With that taken care of, Laxus turned to Erza, sweatdropping as always at the sheer amount of luggage she carried around. “Well, let’s get out of here before Gramps finds out about this and decides we’re as much to blame as these three.”

Several minutes after the train carrying Erza and Laxus left, Lisanna showed up, sighing in exasperation as she walked into the badly mangled train station, nodding politely at the people around the three still out of it mages. She talked to a few of the workers there and gave the numbers of a few of the accounts the Strauss siblings used, along with the one account of Natsu’s she knew about. She asked only that they take a third of the money needed for repairs from them, and the final third from Gray’s once they got it out of her.

She threw her sister over one of her shoulders, then grabbed Natsu’s shirt, beginning to drag him away. Despite being noticeably younger looking than her sister and being of a slimmer build, Lisanna was quite a bit stronger than she looked. “See, this is why we can’t have nice things, Nee-chan, Natsu-kun.”

“Aye,” Happy said from on top of Lisanna’s head. It had been her little pseudo-son who had come and gotten her.

Lisanna had barely taken a few steps outside the train station before Mira pushed off her shoulder, walking next to the youngest Strauss without speaking. Lisanna looked at her, sighed, and continued to drag Natsu along silently, knowing Mira was in no mood to talk after her latest defeat at Erza’s hands.

In reality, Mira wasn’t as angry at her latest defeat as Lisanna thought. Mira knew she was coming closer and closer to beating Erza every time they fought. Erza was unpredictable, adaptable, and had both training, experience, and endurance, but all of those could be said for Mira too. It was the gap in the last two which Mira was slowly closing: experience through fights like this one and from missions, and endurance through training her magic. *I’m close to unlocking a new Take Over form, I can feel it. The next time the S-class exams come along, I’ll be ready for them, and then I’m going to wipe that smug smirk off Erza’s face at last.*

Hearing her sister start to cackle, Lisanna moved away from the oldest Strauss quickly, looking at her warily.

Back in the train station, Gray lay where he had been left, semi-naked and shivering, though for no reason that had to deal with the actual weather. “So, so cold…”

**OOOOOOO**

After Ranma had begun to get a handle on his new ki sensing ability, he decided it was time for the two of them to leave their idyllic little forest home. As he had said when they left Bellum the city, he did this by leading the pair of them southwest. He intended to follow the coast of Bellum into Desierto, then along it until they could then make a straight line with a compass across the ocean to Midi. From there they could again go across the ocean to Buckler, a large island that was part of Minstrel, then to Caelum, and finally to Fiore. Traveling via water like that would be good endurance training both magically and physically for both Dragon Slayers, and this would let Ranma see segments of Desierto he had not seen yet and Midi as well.

This would also allow Ranma to meet and talk to as many new mages as possible in the hopes of finding some way to access the memory box. Ranma felt that there had to be a way to at least narrow down the type of medium needed to unlock it, whatever the Tree Huggers’ librarian had said.

They had traveled through the forest for some time, and after about five days of travel the forest had begun to fade away. The forest shifted to rocky scrubland, while in the distance the Dragon Slayers started to hear the sound of the ocean. Moving in that direction, they discovered another reason why this area of the continent had no human habitation: the scrubland here that marked the end of the ironwood forest also marked the beginning of a large cliff face that ran straight down into the ocean. There was no let up as far as Wendy could see, hopping high into the air with a spyglass Ranma had bought in Pergrande.

“Really, wow. Well, that’s one minor mystery solved. Still, let’s see if it continues that way when we start into Desierto. After all, with my powers, it’s not like having the water down there is going to be that big a deal,” Ranma said, then felt Wendy’s familiar presence on top of his head. “And that means you get to walk until lunchtime, Wendy.”

Pouting, Wendy hopped off, running along beside Ranma for a time until her endurance began to flag. When that happened Ranma would switch to walking for a time, letting her regain some energy before running again. This happened several times as the land around the two Dragon Slayers changed, becoming rockier, and rockier. The last trees faded away completely, and even most of the bushes changed to some other type.

This type had a dark red flower that looked almost like a violet would, and Wendy was immediately entranced by them. She moved towards one of them, reaching for one of the flowers, but Ranma caught her hand in his own, far larger one. “Easy, Wendy. Look closer at what’s around the flower.”

Wendy did so and gasped, seeing several large thorns here and there. They seemed to glisten with something, but she couldn’t tell what.

As Wendy backed away, Ranma pulled out Gildarts’ book, and, unlike the time a few months back, it did have a picture of the bush. “’Bleeding Bushes. Perhaps the most aptly named thing in the world, these bushes have something on their thorns which stops your blood from hardening, whatever the word is. Their flowers are parts of really expensive potions once crushed and dried, but definitely not worth the scars to get them. The Rattaka, the unholy combination of a bee and an ant, like them too, and those buggers, pun intended, are poisonous.’”

“Mou, but they’re so pretty,” Wendy said, then sighed and nodded, moving further back.

“Pretty things often have thorns, Wendy. Trust me, that’s true for anything,” Ranma said dryly, before barking a laugh as the joke went over Wendy’s head.

Travel from then on slowed down as Wendy hopped through the air above the bushes and Ranma wove his way through them. They went on for miles, not in a solid mass, thankfully, but not spread out enough for Ranma to make good progress either, despite his speed. The problem was that the thorns were only rarely visible among the leaves of the bushes, and they were nasty even to Ranma’s healing ability. The first cut he got from one didn’t close until Ranma actually concentrated, mentally redirecting his ki into the area.

Ranma paused at one point, getting down on one knee and looking at the ground underneath the bushes. Scowling, he then stood up, not even looking up as Wendy settled down on his head. “What did you see, Oni-chan?”

“Bugs. Small bugs, but able to both burrow and fly. And that book said they were poisonous. We’re going to have to keep going through this mess and a bit away, Wendy. The bugs might not be attacking us as long as we’re moving, but I don’t want to chance setting up camp anywhere near them.”

Wendy looked a little worried by that, but nodded. She kept on flying as much as possible through the day, coming to rest permanently on Ranma’s back that evening, while Ranma pulled out some food for them to eat on the go. He kept traveling at this steady pace, which was much slower than he would have been able to do otherwise, for several weeks before they broke out of the deadly shrubbery.

Or at least seemed to. It was nighttime when they broke out into a wide area cleared of the Bleeding Bushes, but almost immediately Ranma noticed that the break wasn’t natural. The area was too regular, and the opened area seemed to lead into a small gully which would have been a natural place for such bushes, restarting a ways away on the other side of it and all around. Frowning, Ranma reached up to where Wendy’s head was slumped against his shoulder, waking her up with a gentle touch to her forehead. Wendy snorted but kept quiet as Ranma held his finger against her lips.

Both Dragon Slayers strained to hear and could make out voices coming from in the gully. Moving forward to the edge of the gully they saw it slopped gently downwards, and went on for a ways longer than Ranma had thought by at least another league. “People?” Wendy mouthed into Ranma’s ear. She well knew by now when to be quiet.

“Yeah, but I can’t think of a single reason for someone to be out here like this, hidden among the Bleeding Bushes. We might have stumbled upon something bad…again,” Ranma muttered.

Nodding, Wendy kept her mouth shut and eyes open as Ranma moved forward. As they did, Ranma stiffened, having noticed something that Wendy, thanks to her youth, had not: that the voices in the distance were speaking in cadence, like a song, or a ritual.

Moving forward even faster, yet still quietly, Ranma kept to the shadows of the gully, idly noting that there were several dozen fruit bearing plants down here, all of which must have been brought in at some point, since they weren’t native to the area. Whoever was hiding here had been here for a long time.

Soon, through the small copse of trees, Ranma could make out the light of a bonfire and dozens of shadows. Once more making certain that Wendy knew to be quiet with a finger to her lips, Ranma moved forward until he was close enough to see what was going on.

Ranma took it all in at a glance. There were possibly around a hundred people, mostly men but with some women, organized into a series of quarter circles facing what looked like an altar of some kind and another man in a reddish robe. The people in black were chanting some kind of mantra, while the man in red read off or recited something in a slow cadence. Set on the altar was a strange looking crystal shaped like dozens of odd animal skulls, only a few of which Ranma recognized from his time in Desierto, in the light of the bonfire, set on the far side of the altar.

Through the pathway set between the quarter circles, four more black robed men led several dozen chained prisoners. These were not slaves: they didn’t have that worn down, broken look, and their clothing was, generally speaking, of decent quality, despite the numerous tears that adorned them. But they were all chained heavily, their feet chained together and their arms chained in front of them to go with the gags around their mouths.

*I might not understand all I’m seeing, but I can tell enough. Human sacrifice is a no-no, people. Time to show you why.*  Backing away slightly, Ranma turned his head to whisper into Wendy’s ear, knowing that he would need her help if he was going to both stop the ritual and save those prisoners. “Wendy, these people are bad news. Those prisoners, they are going to try and kill them; not certain why. I’m going to start the fight from over there,” he said, indicating a point about twenty feet away from their current hiding position. “Once I get stuck in with the crowd, you head out and attack any of them between you and the prisoners. Get them out and back into the woods, okay?”

“Hai, Oni-chan!” Wendy stuttered, looking afraid, but determined. Ranma wasn’t worried. Once the battle was joined, Wendy’s Dragon Slayer nature would pull out enough adrenaline to get through her hesitance. She had proven herself time and again to be a lot tougher than her age would suggest, reminding Ranma strongly of himself when he met Ukyo, though Ranma knew he had lost his happy go lucky attitude soon after that meeting.

Moving away through the woods, Ranma quickly did just as he said he would, firing out a full powered “Soryu no Hoko!” into the mass of demon worshipers, cannibals, or what have you. The blast of tsunami like water slammed into fully half of the worshipers knocking most of those out of the fight, dead or broken.

“Requip: guns! Guns Magic: rapid fire!” Ranma shouted as he raced out into the opening, moving away from where Wendy was still hiding, grabbing all the survivor’s attention, one after another. His precise shooting took out first the high priest, or whatever he was, the scroll he’d been holding, now visible as Ranma had shifted position, and the four guards, before Ranma started to truly lay into the survivors.

All of those he shot went down permanently, with gaping holes in their chests. Ranma was not going to try and take prisoners of anyone who would practice human sacrifice.

Now, however those survivors got over their shock and regrouped. Many of them pulled out staffs, swords, or guns themselves and began to fire back. Ranma quickly sent his pistols back into Requip space and raced forward, getting in close. Fists and feet lashing out, he was in among them, hopping around, over and through them as his hits laid them out two or three at a time.

As this was going on, Wendy raced forward, heading for the prisoners. Sensibly enough, they had ducked down and were watching their rescue with wide eyes. About five of the cultists, however, had enough presence of mind to move in their direction, weapons raised intent on taking them captive.

Wendy hit them like the tiniest meteor in existence. “Vernier! Tenryu no Kyuu Souten (Sky Dragon’s Rapid Charge)!” With Sky Dragon Magic flaring out around her, she slammed into three of them, sending them rocketing backwards. Using what Ranma had taught her, she used that momentum to shift around and kick out at the fourth, while the fifth found himself being hit by the ironwood staff Ranma had bought her, the end of it coming down right between his eyes.

She landed gracefully in front of the prisoner who had been at the end of the line, gesturing quickly over her shoulder into the copse of trees that formed the rest of the gully. “Come on. I can’t break those chains; you’ll have to run with them for now until Oni-chan finishes with the rest of these people.”

Four more cultists realized what was going on at that point. One tried to simply shout it out, but the moment the words, “the prisoners,” escaped his mouth, he found it full of Ranma’s fist, shattering his teeth and jaw, hurling him backwards in a bloody ruin. The others tried to attack the prisoners, but Wendy protected them, smashing them aside.

With the prisoners out of the way and Wendy hiding with them, Ranma cut loose even more than had had been, lashing out with wide area Water Dragon Slayer attacks, ending the fight quickly. Only about two minutes after the prisoners had been taken out into the woods, the last cultist fell to a spinning heel kick that shattered his skull and the brain beneath.

Staring around the ruined, blasted, very water logged area, Ranma nodded in grim satisfaction before turning to the altar. “Now to destroy that freaky little statue thing.”

“You weak willed fools!” shouted a voice, loud almost to the point of pain for Ranma and Wendy, coming out of thin air, or so Ranma thought. It was only a second later that he realized it was coming instead from the statue.

Between one second and the next the statue glowed, a sickly, yellow mustard glow. The same sickly sort of glow appeared around the bodies of the cultists all around them: the bodies, Ranma realized sickly, that might have just acted in the same manner as the prisoners’ sacrifice would have. After all, what mattered were the souls or whatever being offered up, not where they had come from.

The glows from the bodies rose into the sky and streaks of smoke pulled towards the statue. Wendy and Ranma both tried to disrupt the steams, attacking them with magic, but it was like the mustard glow wasn’t real, with no substance for them to attack. “Wendy, get those prisoners out of here!” Ranma roared, sending an attack the statue’s way now.

The statue’s glow flared, and then there was a massive arm shooting out from it, blocking Ranma’s magic from impacting. “OW! You dirty human, I’m going to enjoy flaying your flesh from your bones!”

As Wendy obeyed, feeling fear for the first time in a very long time since meeting Ranma, Ranma tried another attack. It blew off chunks from the arm as the mustard glows from the bodies merged into the statue. Within seconds the statue was glowing almost as brightly as the bonfire Ranma’s attacks had put out at the start of the battle.

An instant later the statue was gone, and in its place stood a demon. It was shorter than the others Ranma had dealt with, only two stories tall, but it had the same near-birdlike legs, the same long arms. It had skin that looked like an amalgamation of several hundred different animals: fur, scales, chitin, and skin. It didn’t have any claws, its hands looking almost human-like, save for built up portions on the knuckles, and it had several forward curving spikes on its forearms, heavy, far larger spikes coming from its shoulders, and two curved fangs sticking out of its lip, going down. Its eyes were like that of a fly: wide and multi-faceted. From its head sprouted dozens of antennae.

“Damn, you’re ugly,” Ranma mused, staring up at the demon like a lumberjack staring at a recalcitrant tree. “A bit of a runt, though. What, your mama not feed you enough when ya were a little scrub?”

“I’ll grow on the souls of my victims soon enough, boy! Starting with you!” the demon roared. “I am the Demon Plagutarno, and after I kill you and these others, your souls will let me call forth the legions of bugs and animals which will…”

At that point the self-proclaimed Plagutarno was interrupted by a massive fist of water impacting him in the gut, or rather, the area where a human would have had a gut. Ranma followed this up by using a geyser of water shot from his feet to get in the demon’s face, his fist flashing out with one of his sticks held in it, slamming into the demon’s bug like eye. “Weight Max,” he intoned, right before the Song Silk draped club impacted. What would otherwise have been a pinprick, even backed by Ranma’s strength, hit like a blow from a titan, splattering the eyeball.

“I don’t give a damn about your villain speech, even if you’re the first demon I’ve met who can talk. Just shut up and fight!” Ranma shouted, pushing down and changing his direction when the demon tried to catch him with a return punch, flailing backwards and roaring in agony at his ruined eye.

“Your soul will be a feast, boy!” Plagutarno shouted. The antennae on the demon’s head twisted, and from their ends came out beams of magical energy, searing white energy in the moonlit night. Ranma dodged a few and used another torrent of water to shoot backwards out of a crossfire from several of them before launching another Water Dragon’s Titan Punch at the demon’s face. The demon, however, protected against that, and one of the beams caught Ranma in the legs.

Pain seared through Ranma for a moment, but his durability was up to the job of defending him from the magical blow. It hurt like a bitch, but only made Ranma’s skin look like it had been scalded, searing away his pants in the same moment. The worst thing the hit did was to upset Ranma’s sense of balance in midair, causing him to lose control of his magic, the torrent of water he had been using to stay in the air cutting out.

Before Ranma could recover, the demon’s fist found him. It smashed into his face and head, hurling Ranma down to crash into the ground far below. “Hah, that’s what you get, you stupid human! Know your fucking place: in the damn dirt with the rest of the bugs!”

However, when the dust from Ranma’s impact had settled, Ranma had stood up again. The blow had hurt and cracked a few bones. Indeed, Ranma could feel it had also knocked a tooth out. But again his durability was up to stopping the demon’s blow from really hurting him, and Ranma’s healing ability had already kicked in. “Soryu no Setsudane Tsume (Water Dragon's Cutting Claw)!”

The crescent shaped claw of magic infused water flew through the air, cutting deeply into the demon’s hastily raised arm. It was the same arm the demon had manifested to protect its cage, or whatever the statue had been. The forward facing spikes gave it some protection, taking the brunt of the cutting attack and breaking it up, getting sliced off in turn but protecting Plagutarno’s actual arm. It still cut deeply in sections, but the arm remained intact.

Launching himself forward, Ranma dodged further blows from the thing’s laser-like magical attacks coming from its antennae. He was forced to hop to one side, however, as Plagutarno tried to kick him, lashing out with a “Soryu no Kussaku Tsume (Water Dragon’s Drilling Claw)!” at the demon’s pivot leg.

Plagutarno, however, hopped up into the air from that same leg. It then roared, its antennae and mouth glowing as it fired a massive series of attacks towards Ranma. But Ranma dodged through them, disappearing under the Umi-Sen-Ken between one second and the next. One of the antenna beams slammed into his head and back, searing the clothing off Ranma’s back, but once more doing no more permanent damage. It did knock him out of his cloaking technique, however, and more of the demon’s attack hammered in, forcing Ranma to throw up his globe shield once more. Keeping it in place drained Ranma’s reserves something fierce, but nowhere nearly as much as it would have the last time he’d run into a demon.

As the demon landed from its leap, Ranma was in its face, “Soryu no Kussaku Tsume!” This time the attack hit, ripping out half of the demon’s throat. It screamed, one hand rising to its neck, the other lashing out towards where Ranma had leaped up into the air through main strength, rather than with his Water Dragon powers. Ranma pushed off the blow, moving with it and lashing out with a Water Dragon’s Cutting Claw, this time from his leg. It caught the demon in the side, cutting through to its ribs, but once again being stopped by the tougher substance of the demon’s bones.

But the damage had been done. With half its neck gone, Plagutarno was now falling back, trying to buy time for its slower healing power to heal the damage. Yet the demon’s damage couldn’t regenerate missing bits, and it was far slower than Ranma’s own healing ability. Now slowing down from its wounds, Ranma was able to get into Plagutarno’s blind side. A Soryu no Hoko caught it right in that side of the face, and this time Ranma put so much magical power into the attack that it shattered the demon’s skull. “Noooooo….”

The demon began to fall, but its body slowly began to disintegrate, revealing the falling statue. Another Water Dragon’s Roar lashed out, catching the statue in midair and disintegrating it in a welter of stone dust.

“Oni-chan, that was so cool!” Wendy shouted, coming out from where she and the prisoners had been hiding. A few of them were staring at Ranma in awe, while two of them, both young girls, were blushing brightly, staring at Ranma rather than the destruction he had caused. While Ranma’s durability had withstood the test of the battle, Ranma hadn’t been wearing his Song Silk cloak, and the antenna beams, which had acted almost like lasers, had seared his clothing away when they hit.

“Heh. Thanks, Wendy,” Ranma said, then frowned as he stared down at his hands for a moment as felt something shift in his magic aura. Something had been added there or had changed somehow, and for a moment Ranma had seen some kind of symbol all in black appear on his hands.  *That is weird. I’m going to have to see if I can meditate later and figure out what that was.*

Shaking it off, Ranma hugged Wendy back when she crashed into his legs at speed, chuckling and ruffling her hair before he moved on to the prisoners. “For now, let’s get you free of those chains, then get some food in you. After that, I need a change of clothes.”

After freeing the former prisoners and setting up a the grill for Wendy to make them some food, Ranma changed into new clothes, black pants and a white T-shirt, and moved well away from the area where Wendy and the others were underneath the trees. He picked up the weird book that the head asshole had been reading from and then made his way out of the gully into the rest of the desert.

Once there he pulled out his broach and, cutting his thumb, rubbed his blood into the recessed green lacrima. It glowed, and Ranma waited a moment. A second later Vicotronious’ voice appeared, sounding groggy. “Ranma? What’s wrong?”

“Relay me to the others. I want you and all the other kings up for this so I don’t have to go over it twice,” Ranma said grimly. Ranger broaches worked to allow the kings and their chosen troubleshooters to communicate over any distances, but the ranger could only contact the nearest king from his present position. Since Bellum was ruled by a merchant’s council and Desierto a series of chieftains, that meant Vicotronious in this case.

A heartbeat of silence passed and then the broach glowed. In front of him Ranma now saw an image of Vicotronious’ head and shoulders staring at him. The image was silent for another heartbeat, then it nodded. “We gave you that broach because we knew you’d find trouble. I suppose we need to also trust you to know when you need to talk to us all. But you better be right.”

Ranma simply nodded at that and waited. Over the next five minutes Vicotronious contacted the kings of Seven, Fiore, Caelum, Iceberg, Joya, and Stella, and the queen of Bosco. Luke once more seemed to glare at Ranma along with the King of Stella, whose name Ranma couldn’t bother remembering, simply thinking him as ‘the skinflint bastard.’ In contrast to those two Stella’s king simply looked on neutrally and the king of Iceberg just nodded.

“Well, we’re all here Ranma. Care to tell us why now?” Rose asked gently, though her eyes were hard. It was near to the time she’d be getting up anyway at this point, but damn it she needed her beauty sleep. She was getting scant little sleep as it is between running the country and trying to spend time with her young baby girl.

“I just fucking killed a demon and ran over a cult of demon worshipers. The demon called itself Plagutarno and spoke about how it would spread plagues via rats and bugs, but I was able to deal with him. The thing is, the demon worshipers had this book and this statue thing which contained the demon….” From there Ranma went into greater detail, describing the fight from start to finish. “So, I have to ask, is this kind of thing normal, or are we seeing more demon worshipers now, and, if so, why?”

At first the kings and queen had been disbelieving, but that hadn’t lasted. Now they were angry, very angry, and worried. “This isn’t the first demon Ranma’s been called upon to deal with, and even if you discount that, there have been other demon sightings of late,” the King of Iceberg said, drawing attention to the fact that his own capital had been attacked by one such.

“True, but Zeref worshipers have been around for hundreds of years. They are a weed: you can cut them back, but they always spring up again,” The King of Fiore said. He was a middle-aged man with a smiling sort of face and a well-trimmed beard. Through a lacrima sent hologram like this, that was all Ranma could tell. “The fact that they have been successful in bringing back demons, or bringing them to life from wherever they were stored, is not a good sign, but one we can either contain or simply endure.”

“Say that to the slaves or prisoners they sacrifice,” Ranma said harshly.

The King of Fiore flinched back, then his eyes narrowed, and he looked to be building up a head of steam, but Vicotronious cut him off. As the oldest there, Ranma supposed he was the one acting like the head of the conclave, if there was one in the first place. “Ranma is right. We need to be more proactive about hunting these groups down.”

“Damn Desierto anyway!” the king of Caelum groused. “I agree we should, but there are places where we can’t go. Desierto and Bellum we can influence, but what of Midi, Sin, and Enca?”

“Sin will not be a problem soon. My armies are marching into Sin as we speak. Enca will fall soon after. Pergrande has had to deal with their depredations for too long. Midi can look after itself; no Zeref cult would ever get by their censors,” Vicotronious replied.

“King Abdel and I will get in touch with San Jiao Shi. We might even be able to help him step into his role of king, if he hasn’t had any luck in finding notes about the various magics available to him as such,” Rose said. “That will leave dealing with the merchants of Bellum and Desierto’s chieftains to you, Glondrul.We need to get the word of these cults spread as fast as possible.”

“They can’t be organized,” protested the King of Stella, looking almost afraid at the idea. Then he went on, frowning. “But then, they don’t have to be, do they? Indeed, chaos could cause more trouble than if they were. This way we have to smash them each in turn, while if they were communicating, we could roll them all up one after another. Like Ranger Oceana did with the slavers in Bosco.”

“I like what I’m hearing, but I want to know more about these demon worshipers in general. I also want to know more about this Zeref bastard too.” Ranma said, bringing the rulers’ attention back to him.

The other kings turned to the King of Fiore, who scowled lightly, but as the king of the country which was at the front of magical research and use, he was the obvious choice to answer this question. “Zeref is a Dark Mage. He’s called a cursed god of magic from almost hundreds of years ago, well before Fiore and the other countries of today’s Ishgar. Where he came from, if that really is his real name, no one knows today. What is known is that he was the most powerful mage in existence, a master of nearly all magics, enchantments, and everything else. Eventually he was overcome, died, or sealed away; again, no one is certain. Many of the rumors say he is still alive, but with his magic sealed somehow. Rumors about him outnumber what is real, so the truth is a mystery. On the other hand, if he was still alive and at full power, the world would surely know it.”

The older man shook his head. “Zeref worshipers believe that by returning him to power or freeing him or bringing him back to life they can create a utopia. Beware such people, because those trying to create a utopia are able to stoop to such evils that most normal villains would shirk from.”

There the man changed tack. “Zeref is known to have dabbled in a lot of magic, but most of all Life Creation magic, the creation of demons in particular. We don’t know how many he created, but Fiore has several examples of his work sealed away in various hidden vaults. The more we study his work, the more we can try and contain further outbreaks.” He looked through the hologram at Ranma, one eyebrow rising. “I presume you took this statue intact? I’d like to see it sent to the Mage Council of Fiore as soon as possible.”

“I got no idea why you’d presume that at all. All of the cultists are dead; those that weren’t after the demon summoned itself into being killed during my fight with it simply because they couldn’t get out of the way fast enough. As for the statue, I destroyed it the second the fight was over,” Ranma said bluntly.

“WHAT!? Do you know how much we could have discovered if we were able to study that statue? The magic council could have figured out a spell to find similar items!” the Fiore king bellowed. “You had no right to destroy such a priceless artifact!”

“Your Magic Council has been saying similar things for decades now, always demanding that our mages hand over any artifacts of Zeref they find,” Vicotronious interjected, his voice harsh, bringing up the other king short. “And making no friends doing it either. We all acknowledge that Fiore and Seven are the centers of magical research and that many of the most powerful mages in history have come from or been trained in Fiore. We even acknowledge that your Magic Guilds are the largest and most powerful in Ishgar. That doesn’t give you the right to make policy like this for the rest of Ishgar, especially when your own polices are patently stupid.”

“Indeed, I believe that Ranma did right here. In fact, Ranma, I think we should order you to seek out and destroy such items wherever they can be found,” Rose said.

“No! If he does that we will never learn how they were created in the first place, and if we can’t do that, how can we try to find others? Besides, some of Zeref’s creations can’t be destroyed safely. Remember that Stone Disc from twenty years ago? The site of the explosion is still denuded of all life, isn’t it?” he asked, looking at the King of Joya, who stiffened angrily.

“If the Magic Council would at least give us updates on their progress then I could agree to that. But either they aren’t, or you haven’t been willing to pass them on to us. Which is it, I wonder?” said the king of Iceberg icily.

“Fine. I won’t argue that this Ranger should seek out and destroy any artifact of Zeref that he can find elsewhere in Ishgar. I can even agree that the idea of destroying his worshipers is a good idea. However, we need prisoners to question at least, and if any Ranger enters Fiore we will expect him to follow the laws of Fiore,” the King of Fiore said grimly. “That means no killing unless given the Order of Execution from me or the Mage Council. If you cannot follow these orders, then I do not want you in my country.”

“You are free to repudiate the agreement to allow Rangers to act in your stead, of course,” Rose said equably, though her eyes were hard. “And we can repudiate any and all trade with your country and impose an embargo on you in turn! From the way you’re talking you sound more worried about the chaos Ranma or others might cause than the threat of Zeref.”

“Indeed, if you’re going to throw stones at our Ranger here or our own policies, then I suggest you get your own house in order!” the King of Seven said angrily.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean!” the King of Fiore roared.

“It means that for every two good mages Fiore creates, it creates one mage who joins a Dark Guild. None of us are happy with the proliferation of Dark Guilds that start off in Fiore and then leave the country. Indeed, between you and Caelum, it could be said to be your major exports at this point!”

“Bah, you’re overreacting. None of the Big Three started in Fiore, and we shut down and arrest most guilds which break the rules. You’re all simply jealous that most of the Wizard Saints come from Fiore!”

“And I don’t want to hear any of that shit from you!” Luke roared at the King of Joya. “At least most of my guilds obey my orders! Unlike you, you tightfisted bastard!”

Listening to this, Ranma didn’t know what to think and decided his presence was rather surplus to requirements. The kings all seemed to have axes to grind with one another, and he didn’t need to stick around to hear it. “Right, well… I’ll leave you lot to it,” he said, tapping his broach and ending his portion of the transmission. The kings didn’t even seem to notice, so busy were they shouting at one another. “Yeesh. That’s the last time I call for all of them at once. Better to deal with them one at a time.”

As the images from his broach cut off, Ranma turned, hearing Wendy’s voice behind him. “Why were those old people being so silly?” she asked innocently.

Ranma figured she hadn’t recognized the King of Seven’s image, since it had been a few years since she had seen him. And seeing that she had brought some chicken skewers with her, Ranma had no interest in chastising her. “I’d have said egotistical and foolish rather than silly, but other than that, I agree with you, Wendy.”

The next day Ranma and Wendy started to help the prisoners along, out and away from the area of the Bloody Bushes that had been cleared. It wasn’t easy, and it slowed them down horribly, with Ranma actually needing to cut his way through rather than slide his way through the bushes. Apparently one of the dead cultists had been a mage able to control the bushes, or to make the thorns soft and turn aside, the prisoners weren’t clear on which it was. Luckily, the cultists had a lot of supplies, so there was no shortage of water or food, even if Ranma ended up carrying most of it in his Requip space.

More than a week after they left the gully they finally broke out of the area dominated by the Bloody Bushes. Almost immediately they saw a barely there road marked out on the rocky desert floor by a few white stones sticking out here and there, and one of the former prisoners pointed it out saying it would take them to a village. Since this was Desierto, Ranma decided that they had to walk the prisoners to the town at the very least, which again slowed them down considerably.

Several days after that they did indeed find a small village. But, not liking the looks of the locals, all of whom dressed the same and wore long white robes, Ranma and Wendy pushed on at once. The prisoners, at least a few of them, were welcomed, but Ranma saw looks sent his and in particular Wendy’s way that he didn’t like. So he dropped the supplies they had confiscated from the dead cultists and moved on.

From there Ranma led the two of them further south once more to find the shoreline. They followed along the cliff, using Ranma’s Water Dragon Slayer magic to pull up water from the ocean, then he separated the water from the salt, which was yet another training exercise for his self-control.

Now, with no one else slowing them down, Wendy and Ranma sped up, racing along the cliff. Eventually the cliff began to curve inland, then slowly ended, sloping down to what looked like a decent sized natural cove, complete with a decent sized town. “Huh, didn’t expect that…” Ranma muttered, looking at the town. “Well, let’s see what Desiertans are like here, Wendy.”

“I hope they are more friendly than the others we’ve seen, Oni-chan. I didn’t like the looks some of those people from the last village we saw gave me,” Wendy replied.

“I didn’t either,” Ranma said. “We’ll move on the instant we see any of those white robe guys; don’t worry, kiddo.”

Nodding, Wendy moved over from where she had been running beside Ranma, scrambling up his back to perch on Ranma’s head as per usual. “Still, don’t think I’ll be looking for high places, though,” she muttered.

“Good thinking,” Ranma replied with a laugh.

The moment they entered the town, however, both Dragon Slayers were arrested not by any unwelcome sight of white robes, but by a smell. It was a very pleasant smell, like hot cinnamon, sugar, and other good things, not quite overwhelming, but certainly the best smell the two of them had ever run into so far. The two of them turned as one, their noses leading the way as they wound through the town into a bazaar. It was packed with more than a thousand people, many of whom came from the ships Ranma could now see occasionally through breaks in the walls of the city.

“Incense, tobacco, cigarettes, cigars, a treat for your senses that can bring your minds to other realms, calm you down, energize you better than the greatest coffee!” shouted one shill into the crowd, before becoming surprised as Wendy and Ranma pushed through the crowd to his stall. “Er, yes, young master, can I help you?” he asked, trying hard not to stare at the little girl perched on the young man’s head like a bird.

The two Dragon Slayers sniffed around, then as one pointed to one of his samples, a small bowl filled with a reddish powder. “What is that?” Ranma asked.

“Ahh, we call that Findicay, or Dragon’s Breath in the old tongue. It’s an inexpensive smoking weed. For most it’s not really a refined enough smell, though it has some interesting calming effects on various animals,” the man replied.

“Dragon’s Breath?” Ranma murmured, feeling not so light headed as at peace, as if his aches and pains had just left him. Wendy too looked much the same way. “How much do you have on hand? And how much for a pipe?”

Ranma bought several dozen pounds of the strange type of tobacco, interested in what it would do for their senses long term. The two Dragon Slayers stayed in the city for a few days, replenishing their spice supplies as well as replacing some of their broken plates, buying breads and other things, which here were very expensive, unfortunately. As they did, they talked about their response to the smell, and Ranma meditated after smoking his new pipe a few times. As Ranma had hoped, the tobacco like substance helped him concentrate, and Wendy, when she tried it, also began to meditate on her magical core successfully for the first time.

However, beyond food and Dragon’s Breath, the town was rather like any other port town, and there just wasn’t enough there to interest them. So a few days after that they left. Ranma hopped out onto the ocean, her magic activating as she did. Ranma had changed to his female form for this, figuring to get it over with first. “Ready, Wendy?” she asked, ignoring the looks they were getting for the whole standing on water thing.

Wendy clung to her back, grinning as she prepared herself, her magic aura appearing around her legs. “Ready, Oni-chan!”

“Then let’s go!” Ranma shouted, and the two Dragon Slayers set out over the open sea.

**OOOOOOO**

Gildarts had left for a century level quest, a quest that had not been completed successfully for a hundred years but which was still viable. Laxus had bowed out swiftly, though only at the last minute. His note of, ‘sorry old man I forgot a dentist’s appointment,’ was so unbelievable and irritating that Makarov had decided to jump right to **IT** the next time he saw his grandson rather than give him a chance to defend himself.

But thinking about that did not change the reality of the situation Makarov found himself facing: that only one of his three current S-class mages were available to take part in the S-class exam. And of course, like clockwork, Mirajane Strauss, one of only three mages Makarov felt was capable of being an S-class, had found the path leading to Erza Scarlet.

“Heheheh. This has got to be some kind of fate, bitch. Seriously, this is the way it had to play out. You, me, fighting for me to become S-class,” Mira said gleefully. She stood across from Erza in her Satan Soul Take Over mode: her arms and feet were covered in lizard-like paws up to her elbow, her hair was standing on end, and a black scar had appeared to go down from her forehead to her cheek, crossing over her eyelid. Her face had matured slightly, becoming harder and more angular. Her body too had matured slightly, becoming curvier, which was shown off by her outfit, an equally lizard-like outfit which covered her privates but left her hips and thighs bare, along with showing a bit of her cleavage.

“I wouldn’t want it any other way, skank!” Erza retorted hotly. At present she was wearing one of her newest sets of armor, the Heaven’s Wheel Armor, with numerous blades flying all around her.

“You might've been able to get a leg up on me over the years because Laxus was training you, but now, now I've learned too! I've learned to take my Take Over to a whole new level!” Mira shouted in reply.

“Laxus might have given me a bit of extra training, but I am as good as I am because of my own will and strength to be the best I can be. Don't blame my beating you so often on his teaching! After all, you got some training from him a time or two in the past! As for your new Take Over form, bring it on!” With that Erza raised a hand, and then gestured forward. At that gesture Erza’s magic grasped the spinning swords that had been dancing around her body towards Mira. “Circle Sword!”

At the same instant Mira's body began to glow, and an instant later she shouted, “Take Over Form: Sitri!” A second later there was a bright flash, and Erza’s swords were thrown back, shattered or simply shifted off target. And out of this blinding flash came Mira’s new form. Gone were the green scaled hands and feet; gone was the tail. In its place were blue scales, high, lizard-like ears, wings, and an even more plunging neckline.

Erza cocked her head thoughtfully to one side, conjuring up another pair of swords to her hands as she prepared herself. “Amazing,” she said dryly. “You truly have upgraded. Your sluttiness, that is!”

Mira didn't bother applying verbally, instead crossing the intervening distance faster than even Erza could keep track of for a second. A blow hammered into her face, hurling her backwards, but Erza skidded along the ground, blocking and deflecting the next few blows with her swords before another blow got through defenses, slamming into her stomach and heaving her upwards and away.

Midair, Erza Requiped new armor, a cheetah-like outfit equipped with a spear, the sight of which made Makarov go goggle-eyed for a moment, since it looked like nothing more than a furry bikini. Still in midair, she flipped over and landed, sprinting forward faster than Mira could follow as she in turn had raced forward to keep the momentum of the fight. The spear, which was only vaguely dulled, hammered into her gut, hurling Mira away. A second blow came in, hammering into Mira’s head as Erza pressed on.

But Mira recovered enough to put her arms between the next few blows, striking back quickly and taking to the sky, limiting Erza’s ability to use her legs as another means of attack. At this point Erza realized that, while she was keeping up with Mira now in terms of speed, her actual hitting ability was nowhere near good enough to get through this new Sitri form’s natural defenses.

Between one second and the next, she Requiped into another new outfit: the Flame Empress armor that she had bought last week. She had intended to wait to use this until Natsu was able to give her an actual fight. She could tell the young boy had a lot of magical potential in him and that eventually he might be as powerful as she was or even stronger. But it had the mix of power and flight, which could allow her to fight this new form of Mira's on equal footing.

A second later Mira gasped as the next blow smashed through her defenses, hurling her into the air. Erza immediately closed once more, and the two most powerful women of Fairy Tail began to exchange blows throughout the sky. Their battle took them literally through several hundred trees, a crashing thump occurring as they slammed into a boulder, shattering it.

They disengaged for a second at that point, rolling along the ground despite their wings. A moment later Mira shouted, “Soul Extinction!” and Era responded with her own attack, “Flame of Darkness!” Both women instantly dodged their opponent’s attack. These attacks continued, of course, slamming into the ground and doing further damage to the woods, which had long been the place where Fairy Tail’s S-class exams took place.

Huge furrows about a mile long were seared or blasted into the ground, destroying trees, bushes, and one luckless rabbit in its warren. Mira’s attack was thinner, but seared deeper into the ground, along with going slightly farther. But Erza’s attack was far wider by about five yards.

Seeing all this finally broke the old man out of his stupor. “All right, all right, fine!” he shouted, racing forward and waving his hands frantically, tears streaming down his face. “Mira, you’re an S-class now! Just stop destroying the training area, both of you!”

The two girls ignored him, still going at it hammer and tongs until he transformed into his Titan form to separate them by force. By then it was too late. The training area was utterly demolished, with several fires needing to be put out and the entire area looking more like a war zone than a forest.

“… I’ve got both the local mayor, the Magic Council, Wizard Saint Warrod, and numerous hunters and trappers screaming into my ear about the damage you two did to the forest! Paying for the remunerations will cripple Fairy Tail’s budget for years, and that’s to say nothing of what Warrod has threatened to do to me personally if Fairy Tail even looks at another one of his forests! What the hell do you two have to say for yourselves?!”

Makarov was currently pacing in front of the two thoroughly hammered girls, while Porlyusica, an irascible old woman the same age as Makarov who served as Fairy Tail’s chief nurse, saw to their injuries. They were in her home deep in the same woods the two young women had almost entirely flattened, and given how close their fight had gotten to said home, Porlyusica’s ministrations of the two were a little more forceful than they would normally be. Makarov’s tone too was somewhat sharper than it would normally be to any of his children, but he was also crying and shaking as he paced, which took away from the effect.

Despite this, Mira was unrepentant, putting her hands behind her head as she leaned back, letting Porlyusica treat her and Erza's wounds. Erza was somewhat more repentant, looking down with her arms crossed in her lap for all the world like a chastised child.

Despite that their response to this question was almost comically alike. “She started it!” they both said, pointing at one another.

An instant later Porlyusica slammed her fists down on the top of their heads, beating Makarov to the punch by a bare second. “I hate humans, and your destruction of this forest just proved my point! So you two should just sit there quietly and let me heal you.”

Growling, the Grand Master leaned back in his chair rubbing at his forehead. “So you’re both to blame, fine. That just means you'll both be taking turns cleaning up the mess you made! And instead of putting this on the guild’s shoulders, I’ll be taking all of the remunerations out of **your** pay checks!”

“Master, you can't do that!” Mira shouted. “You know my siblings and I pay for our own apartment!”

“And I need money to buy more armor. And to replace two of them,” she said, glaring over at Mira. Mira had shattered two sets of Erza’s armor during their fight. In return, Mira had taken a broken thighbone, and several of her fingers had been broken as well, while Erza had come away with light bruising. Copious numbers of bruises and cuts, but the same could be said for Mira, so that evened out.

“This is my caring face,” the Grand Master said, staring at them with a glare that sent a shiver down their spines. “If you two are going to act like brats, then you're going to at least pay for the damages you cause!”

With that, in a final huff, he pulled out a small rolled up scroll marked with the Fairy Tail guild mark done in wax treated in a magical formula, hurling it towards Mira, who caught it. “There, your official S-Class certificate. And I don’t want to see either of you back at the Guild until the damage is repaired!”

The two girls winced as he slammed the door to the nurse’s tree house home, then looked at one another before sniffing and turning away. After a moment the two were kicked out of Porlyusica’s home, literally smacked out of the door with a broom and a screech in their ear about how Porlyusica hated humans.

The two of them walked through the woods and, after only a few minutes, came to the start of the area they had demolished. They stopped there, staring out over it, then rather sheepishly turned to one another. “I think they have a point. We um, we really did overdo it, didn’t we?” Erza said, her tone far more hesitant than any Fairy Tail mage had ever heard.

“Yeah, I guess we did,” Mira replied.

The two girls stood there in silence once more, united in embarrassment more than they ever had been by anything else. That, and a bit of pride too. After all, it wasn’t every mage who could destroy hundreds of acres of forest without even trying.

As they walked through the blasted, torn area of forest, Erza sighed. “I wonder where Master Makarov will host the next S-class exams. I know he said he would be holding off on them for a while, but he never said where they would occur. Still, it’s a pity they won’t be held for a while. I know that Natsu and Gray were looking forward to their own shots at becoming S-Class.”

“Ah, that’ll just make them cuter,” Mira said with a laugh. “Their crying, whining faces are so funny! It makes me want to tease them more.”

“You are evil,” Erza said dryly.

“Don’t I know it!” Mira said with a laugh.

**OOOOOOO**

If Ranma had to describe the nation of Midi in a single word, that word would be disappointing. The two Dragon Slayers put to shore in a large port town, the size of which was almost as large as the ones Ranma had seen in Minstrel and Seven. Yet almost immediately Ranma noticed something very odd.

For one thing, there weren't any lacrima lights on the streets. There were large braziers stuck here and there, but none of the ubiquitous lacrima lights which Ranma had seen in nearly every other large city they had been in and even in some towns, like the port in Desierto from which the two Dragon Slayers had put to sea.

For another, Ranma noticed the type of ships in the harbor. They were all of a kind here. Most of them looked like river barges, which made sense, since Ranma could see a large river passing through the town heading further inland. The others were all small galleys, ones that didn’t look like they would be able to head out into the deep ocean. There were only four other ship types, and all of them, heavy-bottomed galleons that flew the Minstrel flags, sat at anchor well out from the docks for some reason.

Ranma slowly realized those ships were the only ones that were flying a foreign flag. The rest, every single ship beyond the four, flew the flag of Midi, a red stripe across a white background. *That's very weird. Is the city under lockdown or something?*

As two Dragon Slayers moved through the docks after hopping up onto the port, Ranma quickly noticed the looks they were getting, which seemed to flow out from where they had hopped up onto the wharf as word of mouth spread the news. They became worse when Ranma took a moment to change back to his male form, having been turned female after a brief squall out at sea. These were not the normal shocked, astonished, disturbed, or intrigued gazes that they would've gotten anywhere else after arriving like that or after someone saw his curse. No, these looks were antagonistic. *Now is that because we’re strangers, or something else?*

As they moved to the city, Ranma noticed that the looks were not just directed at him, but at Wendy, who he had just told to practice hopping up into the air for something to do as he began to look around for an inn to stay at. She too noticed this almost immediately and stopped her practice, moving quickly to hide behind Ranma's legs, worried and now feeling both embarrassed and scared.

Resting a hand on her head, Ranma stared around at them, one eyebrow raised as he cocked his other hand into a fist. “Anyone got anything they want to say?”

Something about Ranma's stance and eyes warned off the crowd of dockworkers and sailors around them, who backed away, muttering under their breath. “Mages,” Ranma heard more than once, a tone of disgust, even hatred, in the voices who said it. “Thieves,” another voice said, spitting to one side and moving off quickly.

“Wendy,” he said slowly, “I think we need to move on. I want to ask a few questions, figure out what's going on here, but I don’t think it’s a good idea to stay the night here, okay?”

Wendy nodded, almost trembling against the back of Ranma said legs. “I'd like to leave now, Oni-chan!”

Ranma turned, going to one knee and pulling Wendy up into a hug, holding her in one arm and feeling her curl up into his neck and shoulder. “Yeah, I know, but I still want to know what’s going on here. If they’ve had problems with mages or something like that, we can do something about it. If it’s more historical or something, well that we can’t do anything about, and we’ll move on, okay?”

He felt Wendy nod against his neck, and Ranma moved further into the town, now moving quickly enough he could hopefully leave word of mouth behind. Soon enough he found an inn, though this inn also looked like a café of some kind. The innkeeper, or a worker, anyway, was outside cleaning up some of the tables set out under an awning, and Ranma called to him as he strode up to the gate which separated the outer tables from the street. “Excuse me, but can you answer some questions for us?”

The man turned, sizing them up as strangers in an instant. But he didn’t become immediately antagonistic, so that was a start. “That depends on the question, stranger. If you're asking where to register yourself for your stay in Midi, that’s down the street and…”

“Register? Um, no,” Ranma said, shaking his head quickly. “I'm just wondering why we’re getting so many strange looks.”

The man's face seemed to close down a little as he took that in. “You mages?”

“Yes. But that’s never been a problem anywhere else!” Ranma said tartly.

“It is a problem here,” the man said calmly, even as he stepped backwards and away from them, putting a table between them as if he thought Ranma was going to attack him. No, Ranma realized after a second. Not as if we’re going to attack him, as if we’re diseased. “We don't want mages here,” he said simply.

“Yes, I understand that,” Ranma said, grasping his evaporating self-control with both hands. “My question is, why? Have mages caused trouble here in the recent past or something? If so, I'd be more than willing to step up and bring them to justice or whatever.”

“No, it's nothing like that,” the man said, not relaxing the slightest. “You're a mage: that's enough. You see, mages steal from the world. You steal the Ethernano from the air we breathe, the ground you stand on. You cheat further generations, further people from life with every act of magic you take.”

The man smiled sadly as if he was condescending to Ranma, which among a few other things got Ranma's back up like no one's business. “It's not your fault that you were raised to be a thief. Magic is flashy; magic is simple and an easy solution to life's problems. In that manner it will always gather those of weak will. Under the Faith of the Circle here in Midi we have created a society that is not weak. We have no need of magic. We do not steal from the world around us like you, and we do not welcome those who do. We don't want to proselytize or convert by the sword, but neither do we want you around.”

Ranma's teeth ground together as he clenched his jaw muscles from spitting out something that would probably get him into a lot of trouble with the locals.  *Not that the idea of caving in a few of their faces isn't fun, but it wouldn't exactly set a good example for Wendy. I'm a bad enough role model in a lot of other ways for that to be added to the list.* “Are there any libraries here?” he asked instead.

“There are, but no outsider would be allowed into them . Unless you are looking to learn more about the Faith of the Circle?”

“Right,” Ranma said turning around abruptly.  *No information is worth putting up with this crap.* “That's enough of that. I might be tired, but I’m not so tired that I want to stay a single day in this place.”

He turned away and nearly ran face first into a tall mountain of a man in a dark red suit holding a clipboard. Behind him were several other large men. All of them were armed with rifles though they looked even older than the ones Ranma had seen years ago in Pergrande. “Are you the mage which just arrived?” the man said abruptly, glaring hatefully at the two Dragon Slayers.

“Just arrived and just leaving,” Ranma said, while Wendy once again burrowed her head into his neck, unwilling to see the looks of scorn and hate on the locals’ faces.

“Excellent,” the man said, smiling. It was a very obviously a foreign expression on his hard face. “Then you would not mind us escorting you back to your boat?”

“We didn't take a boat. I used my magic and my own damn feet to cross the ocean from Desierto,” Ranma said, growling, now itching for a fight. He wouldn't actually throw the first punch, but if they did, Ranma was in the mood to educate them on how bad an idea it was to antagonize him.  *I won't even use magic to do it!*

The man's face tightened at that. “In that case, let us escort you out of the city now! We do not want thieving mages here.”

Rolling his eyes, Ranma nodded and stepped forward deliberately, moving into the man's personal space, holding the man’s black eyes with his own blue eyes. “Well, you going to get out of the way?”

The man glared at him, but Ranma simply stared back. Eventually it was the larger man who backed away, following after Ranma. Ranma sent him a sneer, but went willingly and made no move to twit the man or his guards after that. A few minutes later Ranma and Wendy were once more out on the ocean, speeding out of port.

“I'm sorry we couldn't stay there, Wendy,” Ranma said.

“I'm not, Oni-chan!” she said, shuddering which Ranma felt where she was pressing into his back. She was also using Sky Dragon Slayer magic to send them along the waves at a fast clip. She could now do so for over a few hours, whereas when Wendy had first done this activity she had only been able to do it for less than one hour. “I really didn't like that place at all. What was he saying about us being thieves? We’re not thieves!”

“It's all bunch of religious, cr, um, dung, Wendy,” Ranma said correcting himself quickly. He had been trying to not curse in front of Wendy for a while now and wasn't about to let running into those assholes stop him from doing so. “Don't worry about it, Wendy. I can keep going for a few days like this.”

Keeping the shoreline in sight at all times, Ranma rounded the Cape of New Midi and then headed up past it, stopping in at the first port in Minstrel he spotted to buy more supplies and rest for a time. From there however he didn’t head further inland but back out to sea, heading for the island of Buckler.

If Midi was a gross disappointment, Buckler proved to be more than expected, even well before they actually made landfall. Once more standing on Ranma's head, Wendy shaded her eyes with one hand, staring ahead of them for a moment. “Oni-chan, I see something out there that looks like a giant circle thing sticking out of the land. Is that more of the Circle religion from Midi?” she asked hesitantly.

“I don't think they’d go into big stuff like that, Wendy,” Ranma said, hopping up into the air for a moment from where she, after another squall, had been using her magic to skate along the top of the water. At the top of her hop, she hurled Wendy higher into the sky. “Here, let’s get you a better look!”

“Hehehe! Tenryu no Nobashita Tsubasa (Sky Dragon's Flaring Wings)!” Giggling, Wendy thrust out her arms, slowing her descent and almost hovering as she peered ahead of her. Then she slowly drifted back down to be caught in Ranma’s arms, still laughing. As she reported what she saw, Ranma kept on going, cradling Wendy in her arms now rather than on her back. “I don't know what it is. It looks as if it's like some kind of small train or something, with a loop and weird twirls in the distance. It's huge, though!”

“That sounds like a roller coaster, Wendy,” Ranma said slowly as she recognized what Wendy was describing. “And I think it's a very good excuse for you to use your healing spell on us so we don't get motion sickness. Just trust me; you'll enjoy it when we get there. In fact, if there’s a roller coaster there, that probably means there’s an entire amusement park here.”

Ranma went on to describe what a roller coaster was, and Wendy started to nod eagerly, agreeing with the redhead that it sounded like something she would find fun. “Well then,” she said, speeding up and leaving a wake behind them now. “Let’s stop wasting time!”

Coming ashore, this time Ranma didn’t bother changing back to his/her male body, figuring there might be a water portion of the park too. Said park had become more and more visible as they closed with the island. It seemed to dominate at least a quarter of the island, with the skyline equally dominated by the larger roller coaster and at least fifteen other rides Ranma could see from the small, well organized port where they came ashore. The roller coaster was called Magic Mountain, rather unimaginatively in Ranma’s opinion, but the entire place looked simply amazing, something like what Ranma had heard of Tokyo Disney.

Wendy didn't know where to look. She darted here and there, peering over the fence that separated the outside world from the amusement park, trying eagerly to get a view of each of the rides in turn. Ranma waited in line, figuring it would be better to buy a ticket then to simply hop over the fence like she could. *Can't do that kind of thing anymore, Ranma. You have to be the responsible Oni-chan,* she thought morosely.

However, the money she spent on their tickets cleaned Ranma out of ready cash. Worse, a sign on the door as they entered the park said that they did not except barter here. That was not a good sign if they wanted to eat any food while in the amusement park, but Ranma realized with a start that she was already in ‘his’ female form anyway, so had a solution readymade for that problem. *It's been a while since I pulled that trick. In fact, I can’t remember if I have used the whole flirt for food thing since arriving in this universe.*

Looking down at her body, Ranma nodded. Ranma was now the same age or thereabouts that she/he had been before the mushroom incident that de-aged her right before Gosunkugi’s rent-a-spell magic sent her here.  *So I could certainly pull that off without needing to find a loli-creep. That works,* she thought to herself, gesturing for Wendy to come over and take her ticket as well as the band on her wrist which signified they had paid. Then the two raced into the amusement park, having no need to buy a locker for their stay.

For the next few hours the two Dragon Slayers raced from one of ride to another, stopping a few times to let Wendy cast Troia so they could keep enjoying the rides. Other than that and the knowledge that they were building up an immunity to that spell which might cause them trouble in the future, the two Dragon Slayers had a lot of fun.

Eventually, however, their stomachs began to grumble. Wendy patted hers then looked up at her big brother, currently big sister, pleadingly. “Can we have some food, Oni-chan?”

“Sure,” Ranma said then looked around for a café. Finding one, Ranma sent Wendy to get a seat for them, before heading towards the bar, putting a bit of a sing to her steps as she moved, leaning slightly and quickly pulling at her shirt to make it stick to her body’s curves even more than usual. *Pity we didn’t come straight here after we hit up the water rides, but we work with what we have.*

As she moved toward the counter, which wasn’t very busy at the moment, thankfully, Ranma slowed down, her eyes lingering on a blonde girl Ranma’s age or slightly younger who had just left the counter with something that looked like a salad. She was—there was no other way to say it—gorgeous. She had a trim, athletic frame save for her chest and hips which were on display thanks to the bikini she wore. She also wore a strip of cloth tied around her waist that fell to one side of her hip and down the back of her leg a diaphanous thing of blue and pink in contrast to her suit which was a light blonde color almost matching her hair. Said hair was done up in a ponytail that trailed down to near mid-back, and two long strips of hair framed a face which could have been on any magazine, with long eyelashes and full lips, finished with a bright blue flower in her hair and eyes of a blue only slightly lighter than Ranma’s.

As the two of them passed one another, Ranma found herself actually trying to make conversation with the girl for some reason, nodding at the flower in her hair. “I like the flower, though I suppose with my hair color I'd have to find another type.”

The girl laughed and nodded, but moved off without saying anything. Breathing a sigh of relief at that and the fact that it had stopped her from making a fool of herself, Ranma continued to the counter. *Damn it, Ranma. Yes, she’s beautiful. That’s no reason to forget you’re a girl too at the moment. Besides, it’s not like you and Wendy are going to be staying around here for long enough to get to know her, really.*

With that thought Ranma leaned down, her breasts smooshing into the counter and giving the pimple-faced boy on the other side a view straight down her shirt. “Hey,” the redhead said breathily. “How’re you doing, cutie?”

Because of her attention on her technique, Ranma missed the fact that the blonde had turned back as she heard Ranma begin his flirt assault.Her eyes widened in surprise at the move actually working. The blonde’s blue eyes then narrowed, and she scowled. *That redhead is totally letting the side down, acting like that! I’m all for getting guys to fall over themselves trying to win my affections, but there’s a difference between that and scamming the park out of its money! Ugh, I’m going to have to have a talk with her. Although it is kind of hilarious that Ricky fell for it.*

Following behind the redhead, the blonde wondered whether she was just going to laugh at her or give her a piece of her mind for letting the side down like that. She watched from a nearby table as the redhead set the tray down at a table which already had a young, and very cute blue-haired girl, the table out of sight from the counter where she had gotten the food. The redhead said something to the girl then marched off to one of the large family bathrooms rather than the girls’ bathroom for some reason.

Undeterred, the blonde girl followed her target into the bathroom. She paused, watching the girl pull her shirt off followed by her pants, revealing boys underwear and the fact the girl didn’t believe in bras. Not, the blonde reflected, that she needed them. The girl’s stomach was so taut there was an actual six-pack there, and her breasts, topped with tiny cherry red nipples, stood high and proud on her chest.

The girl’s nakedness might have made the blonde pause, like one artist surveying another’s work, but she still wanted to give her a piece of her mind. So she strode through the few people in the family bathroom until she stood right behind the girl and opened her mouth only to stutter to a halt as, without skipping a beat and ignoring everyone around them, the redhead dumped a small cup of hot water over her head, transforming into a man.

Stumbling, the blonde began to fight back a blush as she took in the girl turned man. He stood at least a foot taller than the girl he had been and was just as fit, if not fitter. While he didn’t have the build of a weight lifter, his body was tight with incredibly well developed and toned muscles, even the muscles most men didn’t even know they had to exercise, like those in his calves or his sides. The six-pack the redhead had sported was now even sharper, visible as the black-haired man turned slightly to pull his shirt on once more.

“What, what the…” the blonde stuttered, bringing the man’s attention to her. “What just happened!?”

“Um… You mind?” Ranma asked, grabbing his pants and pulling them on quickly. “Last I heard it was rude to stare at someone as they were changing.”

“That’s normally the case, but I doubt your kind of change is what most people think of when they think of the word!” the blonde retorted, beginning to smirk at Ranma. “I came in here to give you a piece of my mind about how you flirted that food out of poor Tommy, but I think there’s a story behind this whole changing genders with water thing that I just have to hear.”

“It isn’t my fault. I have jewels and things I could exchange, but there’s no barter here,” Ranma protested, having felt both dirty and underhanded as he flirted his and Wendy’s food out of the man behind the counter. Having had his female body for so long Ranma had gotten used to the idea that both forms were his, and knowing ‘she’ was being lusted after by men made Ranma just feel dirty. “And wasn’t his name Timothy? At least, that was what his nametag said. And what’s your name anyway, miss? My name’s Ranma. Suppose if you’re going to harangue me ya should know my name.”

“Jenny, Jenny Realight. Heh, you must not be from Buckler if you’ve never heard of me, I’m one of the Sparkles, the mascots of the park here,” Jenny replied, waving the name correction off. It wasn’t like she was friends with the other park worker, after all. “As for the no barter thing, that we can do something about. Now,” Jenny said, flirtatiously linking her arm with Ranma’s. “Why don’t you tell me that story, handsome?”

“If you want to, you can join my little sister and me for lunch. It’s kind of a long story,” Ranma replied, actually doing something he would never have done back in his old world or before the girls at Melona’s had tutored him in the soft side of romance. He linked his arm with Jenny’s in turn, taking her hand in his and walking out of the bathroom like that.

Sitting down, Jenny quickly got the shy Wendy on her side by cooing about how cute she looked and promising to do something with her hair later. “You’ve got great hair, darling. Just letting it fall loose like that is a waste.” Since despite being a girl himself half the time Ranma wasn’t anything like an expert on femininity, Wendy lapped this up.

Sitting down across from Jenny, Ranma recounted the same story he’d told Laxus and others who had inquired about his curse: that he had been cursed when he was younger thanks to his father’s stupidity. It was close enough to the truth it wasn’t even a lie, just a story that left out a lot of details.

The two of them began to talk about magic in general, the places the two Dragon Slayers had seen, and other things of that nature. Ranma was unsurprised to find that Jenny was a mage, quipping, “Well anyone could see there’s something magical about you.”

Blushing at Ranma’s rather smooth compliment, Jenny hid it with a cough and a hand over her mouth. Though she had heard things like that before, for some reason Ranma’s tone told Jenny he really meant it. “Nice one, but I’ve heard that line before. Anyway, yes, I’m a Take Over mage. Though instead of anything that’s technically alive, I Take Over the soul of different mechanical devices. It’s called Machina Soul.”

She sighed, shaking her head and looking away. “I’d like to join a guild someday; my parents were part of Blue Pegasus when they were younger. But I just don’t know if my magic’s strong enough to get me in.”

Ranma had heard about Blue Pegasus from Laxus years ago, but their name hadn’t come to his attention since so he figured they were a Fiore guild. He knew that the best and brightest of other countries tended to head to Fiore, though he wondered how that trend had started. Ignoring that idle thought, Ranma stared across the table at Jenny. “Are you worried about your magical reserves or that your actual magic is too weak?”

Laughing ruefully, Jenny looked down at her plate of salad, having carried it with her as she had chased after Ranma earlier. “Both? I mean, I think I’ve got a decent reserve of Ethernano, but enough to match up to Fiore mages? And my magic is also really limited to the mechanical things I’ve been in contact with.” She sighed, picking at her salad. “I’m proud of my body; I’m happy I can use it as a model here, and I’ve no doubt I could do the same thing in Fiore. But I’d really like there to be more to me than a pretty face.”

“Hmmm… Well I can give you some ideas about growing your magical core, though I bet you’d be able to find exercises and meditation techniques to do that in Fiore easily. But as for your magic… Hmmm…” Ranma mused then began to smirk, remembering a lot of the mecha anime he had seen glimpses of here and there during his time in Nerima. “Tell me how your magic actually works. Do you need to be able to see or touch the device you’re trying to take over?”

“No, I just need to be able to find the device’s soul.” Jenny laughed. “It’s really hard to explain, but I basically open my mind to the Ethernano around us and then create an image in my mind of the device whose soul I’m searching for. The soul then comes to me, the speed of which depending on the soul’s power. Touching the device helps a lot, but it isn’t always necessary.”

“What do you mean about the soul’s power?” Ranma asked intently, leaning forward now.

Flushing somewhat at the intense look in Ranma’s eyes and realizing that he really was trying to help her, Jenny replied just as earnestly. “It depends. Sometimes for simple souls it has to do how loved the specific item was. In others it has to do with how important the item is to its users, how many people use it, and other factors.”

Scratching at his pigtail thoughtfully, Ranma nodded. “I wonder… Hmm… Okay, here’s an idea. Have you ever tried to find the soul of something that doesn’t exist here? I mean, something that has been imagined?”

Jenny chuckled sheepishly. “Yeah, I um, I have… There was this story about a magic lamp I read once, a lamp that could light up the nighttime sky for hundreds of miles around and warned of dangers to its owners. I really liked the idea, and I thought being able to light up like that could help me and the other Sparkles in our shows. It did, too. Saved big on special effects.”

“Excellent,” Ranma said, thinking how best to go about doing this.

Next to him, Wendy giggled. “Oni-chan, you’ve got that ‘martial arts madman’ look again.”

“Heh, guilty as charged, little sister. Tell me, can you draw any, Jenny? I figure your job would be easier with a visual aid?”

“I know a man who can use a magic pen. Would that do?” Jenny asked.

“Yeah, it would. See, here’s the thing. During my travels I ran into books that depict these giant robots… Um, those are like fully mechanical men who sometimes move via being controlled like a pilot, other times like nearly living body armor.”

Jenny’s eyes widened as Ranma began to describe them in more detail, then they began to glitter as a fierce grin came to her face. This sounded like it had a lot of promise, a **lot** of promise. She finagled a promise from Ranma to come with her during his and Wendy’s stay on Buckler to her artist friend. With a visual aid, Jenny’s attempts to find the machine’s souls would be easier.

For his part Ranma figured this was a shot in the dark. He had no idea if Jenny would be able to pull the soul of Gundam, or whatever else she could find, from one dimension to another. He didn’t have any idea if the souls of one dimension’s make believe machines would carry over, or if all souls went to the same place. But it was the best idea he could give Jenny for a new direction to take her power.

From there Wendy reentered the discussion, asking whether Jenny could recommend anything in the park or out of it for them to do.

Unfortunately, Jenny reported that there wasn’t much outside the park to do unless you had loads of Minstrel currency. Buckler was part-park, part nobleman’s holiday resort, with the price of a lot of the other things the island offered being commensurately expensive. “And if you haven’t booked a room in the hotels in advance, you won’t find a room anywhere for any amount of money,” she finished.

That wasn’t good news for the two Dragon Slayers, since they hadn’t seen even a fifth of what the park had to offer. There were several longer rides, including one that traveled deeper into the island and into a series of caves there that Ranma was particularly interested in, which they hadn’t tried. Wendy also wanted to see the petting zoo and maybe even go horseback riding, which was another thing the park offered.

Jenny however also offered a solution. “I can put you both up at my place, if you like?” she asked, smiling down at Wendy while also glancing Ranma’s way, a small smile on her face. “It’ll be a bit of a squeeze, but that’ll be fine.”

“Um, are you sure your parents won’t object?” Ranma said, looking back at Jenny and wondering what she was really offering here beyond the obvious.

“Since my parents both died a few years back, that would be a no,” Jenny replied dryly. She waved off Ranma’s apologies, saying he had no way of knowing. “The house is still mine, though it was actually never designed as a home for more than two people. I came around as an accident, apparently.” She smiled at Wendy. “You can share the bedroom with me, while your Oni-chan here sleeps on the sofa.” She shifted enough to send a wink at Ranma as she continued. “So long as I can trust him to not ravish a nubile, young maiden like me?”

Rolling his eyes at that, Ranma stood up to grab their plates and take them over to drop them off. “Question is, do you want me to or not?” he whispered as he passed Jenny, causing her to giggle and flush at the same time. Jenny honestly wasn’t certain what her answer to that question was though.

Agreeing to meet up later that day, Jenny broke off from the duo then to head to her job. After a few more hours of going around the park, Ranma and Wendy decided to take in the show Jenny had said she was a part of, which turned out to be half Sentai show, half concert. Both of them enjoyed it for very different reasons. Wendy enjoyed getting into shouting with the rest of the young kids when called upon, while Ranma enjoyed the sight of Jenny prancing around the stage, using her magic occasionally as her part demanded it, but otherwise simply moving around in the same bikini she had been in when they met earlier. Though he certainly wasn’t shouting or screaming at her and the other Sparkles, that didn’t mean he wasn’t enjoying the show they were putting on.

With Wendy standing on Ranma’s head the two of them were very visible and Jenny, who was singing backup to the main singer of the small group, saw them both smiling and waving their hands. That sight caused Jenny to smile for real in turn, a far gentler, more personal smile than the one she had to show the audience.

Meeting up later that day, Jenny showed the two Dragon Slayers to her house, laughing and chatting happily with Wendy about the show while Ranma followed behind them, taking in the sights. Since Jenny had winked at him when the two girls passed by him Ranma figured he was allowed. This was proven with the way Jenny put an extra swing into her hips as she walked.

The house she led them to was a small, one-story house with a single main room connected directly to a kitchen, a bathroom and a single bedroom. Figuring it was his job as a guest and knowing it was time for dinner, Ranma moved to the kitchen immediately, calling out over his shoulder, “Since you’ve been kind enough to give us a place to stay, cooking is the least I can do in return. Any requests?”

Unfortunately for Jenny, and even Ranma’s, hopes, it had been a long day for Jenny, and after a delicious dinner she couldn’t outlast Wendy as she had hoped. Instead both girls were nearly falling asleep on the couch as Jenny plaited Wendy’s hair, trying to figure out which look suited her best and which Wendy was most comfortable with. Instead, she retired with Wendy to get changed and headed straight for bed. And despite his earlier attempt at flirtation, Ranma was nowhere near comfortable enough to go after her, especially not with Wendy sharing a bed with her.

Later that night Ranma was woken up from his position on Jenny’s sofa by his Ranger brooch going off. Grumbling, he grabbed it and stared at the image of the king of Caelum that popped into existence over the small tea table next to the sofa. “What’s the issue?” he grumbled, though he didn’t say anything more than that, despite the hour. Given the impression he’d gotten from Luke of Caelum, he wouldn’t be bothering Ranma about minor issues. If it had been the King of Seven or Blowhard the Overcompensating he would have, but not for this one.

“Sorry to interrupt your sleep, Ranger Oceana, but I’m hoping you’re already on Buckler?” Luke asked, his voice brusque but also sleep addled, something that made Ranma come awake even quicker. “This is serious: war.” What little fugue Ranma had left disappeared at that word. “A fleet tried to come across the ocean from Alvarez recently and while we’ve dealt with that we…”

“Wait, what? You’re going to need to unpack that,” Ranma said, hopping up and grabbing his clothing, changing brusquely.

“Vicotronious told you we’ve all been worried about Alvarez? Well, my response to that was to create dedicated squads of fast moving schooners to patrol the eastern oceans between Ishgar and the continent as far out as possible. They passed the word along via communication lacrima over a month ago, more than enough time for us to gather our forces,” the King of Caelum explained patiently. “Between them and similar schooners from Minstrel we are able to cover the majority of the ocean around Ishgar.

Nodding at that, Ranma came back and sat down in front of the image again, pulling on his cloak and setting the brooch to clasp it in place. “So you want me to meet up with your fleet? You’ll want as many mages with you as you can get, I’d bet.”

Surprisingly, however, Luke shook his head. “No, like I said before you interrupted me, we’ve dealt with the Empire’s fleet already. It’s turned back for the most part. The Mage Council of Fiore let loose with some new weapon they’ve created, or just figured out how to work again. Damn King of Fiore is being tight lipped about which. In any event, it wiped out half the fleet with a single blast. My navy and Minstrel’s are fully up to stopping most of the remaining fleet if they try to reform, especially since we have two Wizard Saints working with us.”

“But one of the leakers has some kind of mage on it, and neither of the Wizard Saints was close enough for us to divert them to attack his ship. We don’t know what kind of magic he’s using, but a full squadron of my galleons was torn apart when they tried to close with it. The ships’ crews were simply torn apart; we have no idea how.

“Whatever magic he used isn’t up to taking out ships at extreme range, so a schooner had we’ve been able to follow along. It’s heading for the Minstrel mainland, hence why I asked if you had arrived in Buckler yet.”

“I have. Show me a map and tell me as much as you can,” Ranma ordered brusquely. The ship following the leaker had been updating its position every hour, so Luke was able to tell Ranma where the two ships were pretty precisely. They were straight south of Buckler, moving towards the mainland of Minstrel rather than the closer Buckler, presumably because that would give the mage aboard and whoever else was with him more area to hide in, if that was what he wanted to do.

“Okay, I’ll need you to keep directing me to them once I’m out on the open ocean,” Ranma said after a second’s perusal, ignoring a gasp from one side of the room. He couldn’t ignore the fact that Jenny had come out of her room dressed in a very flimsy looking negligee, blushing and looking away despite his best attempts not to.

Jenny’s wavy, blonde hair was now loose down her back instead of tied in a ponytail, her two short bangs still framing her face. Her lipstick was also gone, but Jenny’s light blue eyes stared out from that beautiful, expressive face over a physique that was slim, but with a decent-sized bust and hips for their age. A body, moreover, that was barely covered by some kind of camisole that showed off bare legs and a decent portion of her décolletage. It didn’t actually show any more of her body than her outfit from when they met earlier that day, but for some reason it seemed far more personal and inviting.

Thankfully, Luke wasn’t looking at him, his image having turned away for a second. “I can do that. Ranger Oceana, Ranma… We need that ship stopped. That mage took out an entire squadron of galleons and his ship didn’t even slow down. We can’t let a mage like that get lose and mingle with the general populace. The amount of damage he could do before we could send a mage strong enough to take him out, it doesn’t bear thinking about.”

“I know. I’ll stop him,” Ranma said, standing up. “Let me write up a message to Wendy, and I’ll call you once I’m out on the open water.” With that Ranma tapped the brooch, looking over at Jenny. “You heard?”

“I, I did. You’re a Ranger? I thought those were a myth!” Jenny said, moving over toward Ranma, staring in awe at the brooch on his pectoral. “That’s amazing!”

Ranma gulped, looking away. Jenny might or might not have been doing it on purpose, but she had just given him a look straight down her negligee’s top. Her breasts, a bare cup size, if that, smaller than Ranma’s female body, tried to grab his attention, but Ranma refused to let them, even though he saw her light pink nipples in there winking at him. “Guh, um, yeah. But um, you, you can’t tell anyone, okay? Half of a Ranger’s ability to do what we do is because we are unknowns, not like the Wizard Saints. So please, please don’t tell anyone!”

“I won’t. It’s just, um, wow.” Jenny shook her head, smirking up into Ranma’s handsome face. “I thought you had the whole kindly yet mysterious mage thing going for you before this, but now, this just takes it to a whole other level.” Then she became serious, stepping back and looking towards the doorway where Wendy still slept in Jenny’s old room. “I’ll tell Wendy where you’ve gone, but don’t expect me to look after her if you don’t come back! I might like kids, but I’m too young to want to look after one full time! So you better come back, got it, mister?”

“Heh! Yes, ma’am,” Ranma replied with a grin. Then, feeling greatly daring and remembering the flirting they’d been doing, he leaned down and kissed her on the lips. The kiss lasted for a few seconds as Jenny made no move to back away. It was perhaps the sweetest thing Ranma had ever felt, way better than his very limited experience with kisses before this. Jenny’s lips were soft, so very soft, and they tasted something like cherry, only not quite. Nor was Jenny a passive participant, kissing Ranma back, their lips moving against one another in the oldest dance in the universe. They kept the kiss light, their mouths closed, but that didn’t matter.

Eventually Ranma moved back, smiling lightly at Jenny, noticing her blush as he felt his own blood rushing to both his face and other areas, his heart pounding. “For luck.”

“Hmmm…” Jenny whispered, stepping back, one hand rising to touch her lips. “For luck,” she repeated, then shook herself, trying to dispel her blush with little success as she sent a smirk Ranma’s way. “Well, if you play your cards right, there just might be more of that if you come back in one piece.”

Ranma smirked right back at her, then raced to the door and away. About an hour later he was well out to sea, Buckler receding in the distance behind him. As it did, Ranma cut his thumb open, smearing his blood into the green lacrima of his brooch. “Okay, I’m out to sea. Direct me.”

For a few hours Ranma raced on over the ocean following Luke’s directions, turning south and west more often than any other direction. Soon he spotted the schooner trailing his target, passing it by like the small, fast little craft was standing still as the sun crested the horizon. A few of the crewmen cheered as he did, and Ranma waved in their direction, but otherwise ignored them, staring ahead of him.

Soon after that Ranma came close enough to see the Alvarez ship over the horizon. He then sped up, clenching and unclenching his hands as he prepared for action.

On the ship Ranma was closing with, a very nervous, almost scared crewman was high up in the crow’s nest. Like the rest of the ship’s crew, he was dealing with a series of fears: First, even days after the event, the memory of the Fiorans’ new superweapon was seared into his brain: the flash of light from on high, the flare of power, the explosion, the sight of half of the fleet disappearing in an instant. Second was the more normal fear of the mages which dominated the Empire. One of which, indeed, one of the most terrifying, was currently aboard his ship.

A mage, furthermore, that was just as dedicated to their current mission as he was furious at the recent disaster the fleet had run into. He had killed both the captain and the first mate in the past few days when they questioned him, and the rest of the crew was gloomily certain he intended to kill them or otherwise cover the evidence if they were somehow able to break contact with the schooner that was dogging their steps. But that seemed an impossibility to him.

Alas, his problems were about to become a lot worse. The man blinked, then frowned as he stared toward the schooner that had been following them at a distance, then shouted desperately down at the rest of the crew and the mage down on the deck. “Mage incoming! He’s, he’s walking on the fucking water!”

The mage scowled at that, moving to the back of the ship and pulling at his gloves. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man in his late twenties with extremely short black hair and a prominent forehead marked by a small skull tattoo. He had no eyebrows and currently had dark circles around his wild eyes and stubble. He wore a white turtleneck and black pants at present.

“Where? There he is…” he muttered, staring through a spyglass as the approaching mage came towards them over the water. “Neat trick that, walking on water. Still, I’ll show him not to underestimate me the instant he comes within range of my magic. I… What is he doing now?”

Ranma didn’t know anything about the mage he had been sent to stop from getting ashore, but he knew his own strengths and that he had one major advantage the other mage couldn’t: this was the ocean. And as a water Dragon Slayer, there was precious little that could fight Ranma on an even playing field here. He also knew something else: in a real fight, playing fair was for chumps. So as he closed with the ship, instead of standing out like a sore thumb by continuing to race over the water, Ranma canceled his Water Walk technique, dropping into the water.

Quickly pulling a pocket of air over her head, the redhead dove down at a diagonal, swimming strongly and using her magic to propel her through the water as quickly as possible. She dove deeply enough that the water obscured her form entirely from view on the surface, then, still from that far away, launched an attack straight up at the ship’s keel.

“Soryu no Kussaku Tsume (Water Dragon’s Drilling Claw)!” Ranma whispered, not shouting the technique, since that would have taken more of her precious air. The attack lashed upwards like a mix between a waterspout and incredibly condensed vortex. It hit and shattered the ship’s keel, blasting through it and up through the next two decks.

One moment the crew and the mage aboard the ship were tense, all of them searching for the mage sent against them. The next there was a thunderous sound of shattering timber, screams of the wounded, and a shout from below. “The keel! He’s shattered the keel! We’re taking on… water! My God boys the ships sinking!”

As the crew began to race around to try and slow their ship’s inevitable demise, the mage scowled, staring down into the water. “Damn it, he’s a water mage! Then this is his environment… I’m going to have to play the long game here. Don’t you dare underestimate this man from Alvarez, boy!”

The first lieutenant of the ship raced up to him, his face desperate. “Lord Jacob, sir, what can we do?! With the keel broken, there’s no way we could ever stop the water from pouring in, and we’re too far from shore to survive in our rowboats.” As he spoke the young man’s face firmed as if he had come to his own conclusion of what to do, something his next words confirmed. “Lord Jacob, unless you can offer an alternative, I’m afraid we’ll have to surrender to the Ishgarians. There’s no other way to protect thhHEEE!”

The young officer’s voice broke off as a dagger seemed to just appear, thrusting through his throat and out the other side. “Surrender? I think you forget your purpose here…”

The nearby crewmembers stopped and stared as their officer fell to the deck, gasping. “Listen up, all of you pawns,” the now named Jacob said softly, staring around at them all. “There will be no surrender, no prisoners taken, one way or another. You fight or you die; those are your choices.”

Another attack from below broke this tableau, and not in the direction Jacob had hoped. The attack finished the job of shattering the ship’s keel entirely in half, and the ship began to break apart, sinking quickly. In a choice between Jacob’s wrath and the ocean, these men, all professional sailors, knew their chances were better with the ocean. As one they turned and bolted for the ship’s few lifeboats, pushing them over the side and jumping in.

The sight of this enraged Jacob. “If there is one thing I cannot stand among the young, it is rudeness. If there is one thing I cannot stand among soldiers, it is cowardice!” Jacob bellowed then disappeared to all mortal senses. An instant later the men near him began to die to pinpoint accurate attacks. Slashed throat, shattered spines, stabbed kidneys or lungs: every time he struck he killed, though the length of time it took his victims to die varied wildly. And not a one of them even saw him attacking them.

About fourteen of the ship’s crew got away however, leaving Jacob, still invisible, alone on the ship as it sank. But his berserk rage had been a feint at least in part, since he had used this opportunity to empty one of the lifeboats of sailors. Hopping form the sinking ship as the back of it went down, he landed so lightly on the empty lifeboat that there wasn’t even a ripple from his touching down. The lifeboat still moved this way and that in the wake of the ship’s sinking, but no one could have told Jacob was there any longer.

Below the ship, Ranma had moved far enough away to let the wreckage of the ship sink to the bottom of the ocean, one hand raised in front of her face as she prayed for the souls of the sailors who had gone down with it. *You lot might have been ordered to invade Ishgar, but I bet it wasn’t anything personal for you lot, just as this wasn’t for me. Hopefully, in the next lifetime you’ll have a better chance at a peaceful life.*

Thinking her job pretty much done, Ranma began to move back towards the surface. As she did, however, she felt the water around her begin to move, then more and more of it, as if the water was being sucked into a vacuum cleaner. *What the heck!*

Ranma quickly backpedaled as the water around the wreck and about a mile straight down just disappeared, complete with anything and everything that had been in it. She was barely able to get out of the range of whatever odd attack was going on. Despite that, Ranma then pushed out of the water around the now empty zone, leaping forward through the air and upwards using the bits and pieces to quickly race to the surface, breaking out above the sea level just as the waters below her began to crash into the vacated space behind her.

An instant later Ranma’s instincts screamed at her, and she dodged something unseen, the sound of it causing a ripping noise through the air as it passed through where his neck had been a second before. “What the hell?!” Ranma growled.

Standing on the water once more, Ranma looked around, but didn’t see anyone near enough to have launched that attack. The only people she saw were survivors of the ship, rowing for all they were worth away from the place the ship had gone down. It was a sign of their desperation that they had moved far enough away to actually be able to ride out the surge of water as the ocean tried to fill in the void left by the attack, whatever it had been.

*So that means whoever is attacking me is either hiding among them and sniping from long range, or is close and invisible. But they’d have to be using either that empty lifeboat or the bits and pieces of flotsam to stand, unless the attacker is a water mage too. But no, that wasn’t a water attack just now.* These thoughts zoomed through Ranma’s mind at a speed that would make light seem slow in comparison, and a decision was reached in the next second. Ranma disappeared under the Umi-Sen Ken and moved away from her former position, her eyes scanning the lifeboat for any sign someone was there. Realizing it was the most obvious place for someone invisible to be Ranma also launched a few low powered Water attacks that way.

But Jacob had already moved away his position on the lifeboat and was now balancing on an oar among the jetsam of the explosion. Having watched his opponent disappear, Jacob knew he wasn’t alone in using invisibility. *Still, that hardly matters since my own magic extends to seeing invisible things. I can’t quite see the bitch herself, but I can see an outline of her at least and that’s enough. However I will need to get closer to finish her, though. Can’t give away that trump card without getting the best return I can for it. Even so, that changing form thing is weird even for Ishgarian mages…*

Jacob had seen the moment Ranma had changed form when he dove into the water through the spyglass but being a thoroughgoing professional he couldn’t care less about the reasons behind it. Shaking that thought off, Jacob began to jump from one bit of debris to the other as he moved to intercept Ranma.

What followed was a game of cat and mouse, though of course Ranma would never have put it like that. Both invisible mages stalked one another, with only one actually able to see the other. But unlike Ranma, who moved freely, Jacob couldn’t walk on water and had to make his way by the debris all around him. A powerful mage he might be, but Jacob still couldn’t breathe under water. He had also never tried to use his invisibility while submerged.

He launched several of his daggers at Ranma, and even tried to use his spatial magic Transportation to catch her. But every time Ranma would simply drop into the ocean and shoot away, putting so much water between them that Jacob couldn’t reach the redhead with the maneuver, his separate space filling up with water.

Despite this Jacob was eventually able to close the distance because Ranma was still firing blind. He finally maneuvered around Ranma, leaping from one large piece of debris behind the redhead and attacking instantly, leaping forward with his knife outstretched.

Danger senses shrieking at her Ranma turned just in time to avoid being stabbed through the guts. Instead, the knife, both invisible and sharpened by Jacob’s Assassination Magic, skittered across her ribs, opening up a long gash there despite Ranma’s durability. That worried Ranma immensely, but she could feel her healing ability already kicking in thanks to her ki reserves.

In reply Ranma blindly lashed out first with a Soryu no Tsume, then, as the wide ranged attack slapped into Jacob, followed up with a punch to the man’s jaw. She grunted as it felt like she had just punched concrete, but Ranma persevered, bringing up her other hand to grab the unseen man’s shoulder, using the fat water was still dripping off his invisible form to do it.

Jacob grunted under the blow, but returned it, his fist smashing into the redhead’s face as his other hand pulled out another dagger. Disdaining the overhead thrust that was so loved by artists and storytellers he thrust upwards for the redhead’s kidney.

But Jacob was still visible thanks to the water dripping off him, and Ranma blocked the blow, her forearm catching Jacob’s right behind the wrist. That same hand then flashed up. “Kachu Tenshin Amaguriken!” Ranma shouted, her arm disappearing with a speed that left the original version of this technique in the dust by a wide margin.

Jacob gasped in agony as he felt, not one, but hundreds of punches land on his chest and stomach in less than an eye blink. Even so, he tried to turn and move so that the blows didn’t land all in one place. That was why only one rib cracked under the assault rather than his entire stomach caving in under the blow. Wrenching to the side, he tried to break the redhead’s grip, but Ranma didn’t let him. “Fine, you little brat! I’ll just pound you into the dirt!”

What followed was a slugfest, a duel of machine guns at point blank range. Unwilling to let Jacob go and not knowing if he could move around as well as she could, Ranma didn’t let go, continuing to grab at Jacob’s shoulder. Occasionally she would let lose a kick, splashing some of the water up to soak Jacob more, just to be able to see him thanks to the water. But for the most part Ranma was content to rely more on her martial arts skills than she had in her more recent fights: blocking and attacking, moving around that one point of contact with an ease that made her opponent look slow. That wasn’t to say she didn’t take hits. The man from Alvarez was good, very good, and insanely durable, far more than any opponent Ranma had fought in this world or his old one.

For Jacob, it was a very frustrating fight. He tried to use guns: but his attacker dodged the bullets almost as soon as she saw the flash of the muzzle which Jacob couldn’t hide. The redhead still got hit, but not often and the bullets didn’t do enough damage. Every time he tried to use a knife, Ranma would either see it coming and block it or dodge just enough to avoid a critical injury. And he couldn’t bring his hands together in order to activate his Spatial magic and capture Ranma in his teleportation space. This forced Jacob to rely on his fists and feet, which was not his preferred style. And Jacob’s durability was being pushed to the breaking point by his opponent’s speed technique. He could feel his bones break as the fight continued, but pushed through the pain with the ease of his mental conditioning as the Emperor’s Assassin.

Eventually, however it was Ranma’s durability that began to flag. She knew it, too, feeling her ki flagging from healing all her wounds, and feeling the un-healed wounds piling up. *Fuck! So much for trying to play this like Ryoga!*

Between one moment and the next Ranma decided to change the dynamics of the fight once more. *If I can’t break through his endurance with just my fists, then it’s time to bring magic back into play!*

Soryu no Hoko!” Ranma suddenly roared, throwing a full powered Water Dragon’s Roar straight into his enemy’s teeth.

Jacob saw it coming in just enough time to try to move with the attack, which wrenched his body out of Ranma’s grip and away over the ocean. It hurt like blazes too, the high-powered water attack acting like a battering ram made of thousands of knives cutting into his skin. But even that he could have endured. Indeed, Jacob almost threw off the attacks, smashing his hands together and sending the water that formed the attack into his teleportation zone. But Ranma had already ducked under the waves once more, avoiding the magical attack.

The next instant, however, Jacob ran into the real problem with Ranma’s attack: it had carried him over the water well away from any of the floating debris he had been using. With a roar of shock and despair, Jacob plunged into the ocean. He tried to swim for the surface, only to find his legs grabbed from below.

Staring down, he didn’t see Ranma as he had feared, but a shark. Attracted to the bloody bodies of the crew Jacob had in large part caused the entire area was teeming with sharks of all kinds. This one was a true monster of the deep, larger than Jacob was tall, and its maw had grabbed at Jacob’s entire thigh. His durability was up to this attack, but other sharks had quickly closed, having arrived too late to get to the smorgasbord already laid on for them.

This and the fact that he hadn’t thought to breathe in doomed Jacob. He tried to fight off the sharks, indeed, he killed many of them, but their blood brought more swimming toward him. They slowed him down, and by the time he could free himself of them he was too deep to reach the surface before Ranma could intercept him.

Ranma hit him like a shark, too, smashing into the now visible man, his Escrima sticks out and adding both weight and striking power to his hits. Jacob desperately tried to fight Ranma and the sharks off, tried to get close enough to partake of the redhead’s own bubble of air. But Ranma grimly kept the man from doing so.

As Jacob gasped and thrashed blindly, desperately for the surface, Ranma finally leaned in, letting the man stick his nose and mouth into her air bubble. “Surrender, or else I’ll GURK!!” Ranma cut off and pushed the man down and away from her as she felt the man try to stab her in the stomach. Despite Jacob still having a lot of strength for a drowning man, the blade didn’t penetrate much as Ranma had moved the instant she saw the man’s shoulder shift minutely in a manner that couldn’t be attributed to the water or the sharks. It hurt like blazes, and, given her other wounds, it might well leave another scar to add to Ranma’s collection, but it had told her something else: Jacob would sooner die than surrender.

Pulling well back from Jacob, Ranma created a Soryu No Kussaku Tsume aimed to the smallest diameter she could create and aimed it right into Jacob’s wide, now desperate mouth. This way she bypassed most of the man’s durability and put him out of his misery. The attack drilled into Jacob’s mouth and then up into his brain and out the other side of his head, leaving him headless.

Staring at the body and absentmindedly noting that the sharks weren’t bothering her, Ranma stared at the man’s body. She didn’t pray for his soul, not after he had spat at Ranma’s attempt to save him, but she stayed there until the sharks had completely obscured the other mage’s body from view, then kicked up towards the surface. She had a report to give.

It took Ranma a full day to get back to Buckler after the fight, having left the remaining sailors from Alvarez in the custody of the schooner’s crew. They would be treated well, even allowed eventually to settle in Caelum, Luke told the now male Ranma. So long as they told his people everything they could about Alvarez and the reasons behind its enmity with Ishgar. Luke confided to Ranma that he figured the grunts wouldn’t know anything, but it was better than nothing.

Ranma couldn’t care less about that. He was just tired, sore, and wanted a break. His Dragon Slayer magic allowed him to completely fill his reserves, but his body was still damn sore, and worse, Ranma knew he had really made a bit of a fool of himself after his initial success in that battle. He castigated himself for fighting like he had, for treating it like a fight after it had been just him and the other mage, like he would have in fight with a rival in his old world. Meeting his opponent blow for blow when he didn’t need to had been stupid in the extreme. But it was done now, and Ranma just wanted to put aside what he had done for a while.

Arriving on Buckler, he was immediately met by Wendy, who had been checking the port every few hours for him. “Oni-chan!”

Ranma, grateful for the fact he’d had a shower and time to change his clothing, grabbed Wendy out of the air from where she had just leaped at him from the highest building in the area. He smiled as he twirled her around, then pulled her into a hug, lifting her to his chest with one arm. “I take it ya missed me, then?”

“Mmhhmmm…” Wendy rumbled contentedly, nosing into his neck.

“Heh, she’s been coming here to look for you every day for a while, Ranma.” Ranma turned to see Jenny walking up to him, dressed in a similar but different colored bikini from the one she had been wearing when he left. She walked up to Ranma, looking at him critically, then linked her arm with his free arm, pulling him and, perforce, Wendy along. “Come on. I had an early shift today, and I think you look like you need a rest. I’ll even do the cooking this time.”

The two of them did not talk about Ranma’s job, his face and his sober eyes told Jenny this was a topic to not have in front of Wendy. And after Wendy, having been pampered quite a bit by Ranma and even having had a story read to her, was put to bed, Jenny learned she was right. Wendy might have seen death, even war, before, but she hadn’t seen anything quite as bad as the battle Ranma had been a part of. The Alvarez mage’s death was particularly gruesome.

Jenny hadn’t seen war. She hadn’t seen combat at all beyond cleaning up some drunks and one pirate attack she’d been involved in stopping a few years back. Despite her desire to become a guild mage and having lived on her own for several years, Jenny still had a somewhat naive view of the world.

The story was beyond horrifying to her, and she looked at Ranma, no, Ranger Oceana, in a new and not altogether positive light. She moved away from where she had been sitting next to Ranma on her sofa, turning away slightly and hugging herself. “I, I don’t… That’s horrible! I….”

“I warned you it would be,” Ranma said, pulling out his pipe and lighting some of the Dragon’s Breath. To others the smell was merely nice, to Ranma and presumably other Dragon Slayers, it both smelled extremely nice and was calming.

“If it makes you feel any better, until the mage attacked me after my first attack on the ship, I was going to try and take them all prisoner after that. Figured I did enough damage at that point. But that damn mage, he fought and he was so freaking strong! If he could have hit me with that mass teleport thing or was able to fight as well on water as he could on land, he could have beaten me and gotten clean away,” Ranma continued.

He scowled then. “And according to the prisoners we did take, the man had begun to kill the crew of the ship when they started to abandon ship. He had also killed the officers before that, to force the ship on to Ishgar rather than let them retreat to Alvarez after the initial battle.”

“But you still killed him. And your initial attack certainly killed some of them.” Jenny looked away. “I, I know it was war, but… But I don’t know how I feel about that. About how it seems to have been so easy for you.”

“Easy?” Ranma retorted, trying not to get angry at Jenny’s tone, which was a mix of shock and censure. “I suppose killing them was easy in terms of my actually doing it. How I feel about it? That’s never easy. I’ve killed before: cultists, bandits, rapists. Killing them was hard, but it had to be done, and I don’t regret that. All of them were right where they wanted to be, doing what they chose to do. I’ve never before killed people who were simply doing their damn jobs. That I’ll remember. And it will haunt me.”

“But you still did it,” Jenny said softly. “I… I need to think about this, Ranma. I’m sorry.” With that Jenny stood up, hesitated, and leaned down, giving Ranma a kiss on the cheek. Before Ranma could do anything she had swiftly moved toward the bedroom, closing the door behind her.

Breathing in some of the tobacco-like Dragon’s Breath, Ranma shook his head with a sigh. “Well, fuck.”

Over the next two days Ranma tried to put what had happened behind him, enjoying a few days of just having fun, not even training for a change. Instead, he and Wendy continued to have fun around the park, exploring all of it and taking part in all of the activities they offered that Wendy thought looked interesting.

Jenny still took time whenever she could from her job to be around them and still let the two of them stay at her apartment. At one point Ranma did meet her friend with the magic pen. He drew up several dozen designs as Ranma described what he could remember of different mecha, then drew Wendy a self-portrait riding a little white dragon which Wendy loved and forced Ranma to put in his Requip space.

Yet Jenny still kept her distance from Ranma. She was friendly and kind, but there was no more flirting. No more touches, no more looks. That hurt Ranma, but he could understand it. People who had never seen war would always respond like this to those like him, who could handle such things, even if they never liked it.

And Ranma had to admit he did like it. Not the killing, and he hoped that he never would like that aspect. But the thrill, the adrenaline, pitting himself against strong opponents, pushing himself to his utmost. That Ranma did like. He liked that a lot.

Eventually Ranma began to get tired of the park and decided it was time to leave. Wendy wanted to stay longer, but knew that many of the things she enjoyed, Ranma didn’t, or, like now, got tired of.

As they were leaving, Jenny stood nearby, watching them silently. Ranma turned to her, a small, somewhat sad smile on his face. “Um, guess it’s time to go.”

“Guess so,” Jenny replied. Then to Ranma’s surprise, stepped close and kissed him on the lips. It wasn’t a very deep kiss, but it was a lingering one, and Jenny hugged him tightly at the same time, infusing a sense of warmth into Ranma to offset how cold she had been to him over the past few days. Ranma returned the kiss his own arms around her, but made no move to deepen the kiss, knowing this wasn’t the time for it, especially with Wendy looking on in confusion and growing disgust. “Ewww!!”

Jenny eventually stepped back, looking up at Rama through her long eyelashes. “If you’re ever in Fiore and stop by the city where Blue Pegasus has their guild hall, look me up, okay? We, we might pick this up again, hmm?”

Nodding, Ranma smiled lopsidedly at Jenny, his tongue flicking out and licking his lips unconsciously. “Heh. I’ll, I’ll, um, be sure to.” With that Jenny stepped back, and Ranma stepped to Wendy’s side, letting her scramble up him to perch on his head. A second later Ranma hopped off the wharf, triggering his Dragon Slayer magic. Ranma stood there on the water looking back at Jenny, who looked at him. Then, with a final smile, Ranma turned away, moving out to sea as Jenny turned away.

Yet while Ranma and Wendy had been having fun, the rest of the world reacted to what occurred in this brief, but bloody attempt at invasion…

**OOOOOOO**

“I am angry, Ultear,” the old man said calmly, though it was the calm of a forest around a volcano about to erupt. “I am very angry! You have been at your task for going on two years, and you had no knowledge of this new weapon!?”

“I hesitate to correct you, master, but I did know and reported that some of the Magic Council were working closely with a few historians on something, something they were keeping secret even from the rest of the Council,” Ultear replied. The young woman had continued her journey to becoming a truly gorgeous woman, her curves growing to the level that even now, at barely seventeen, she was the envy of grown women: her face without blemish, her dark black hair lustrous, and her lips inviting, despite the purple lipstick. “And as I have yet to be elevated to the Council, it should not come as a shock that they have successfully kept such hidden from me or your little toy.”

The woman’s calm manner served to actually make the old man’s calm manner become reality, and he slowly nodded. “Yes, that’s true. Thank you for reminding me that your task was indeed a long term one, Ultear, and I am sorry I jumped down your throat. But this…this Etherion?” When he said the word like it was a question. The girl on the other end of the communication nodded. “This Etherion is worrying. I think we need to change some of your orders, Ultear, and I will do so for my pawn as well…”

**OOOOOOO**

Nor was the leader of Grimoire Heart the only one who was rethinking things at this point. Other kings and queens had sat up and taken notice of this display of power, and so too had the leaders of the other two most powerful Dark Guilds.

Mard Geer scowled, looking at the memory of the use of this so-called new magical weapon. Unlike the humans, he knew what it was, a thing from the wars thousands of years ago which had decimated the world. How the Fiorans had been able to figure out how to use Etherion was something else, but it was clear the game had changed. *I will have to stop trying to push forward with my attempts to wipe out humanity by the creation of new demons, curse them! And I need more information on this new weapon. And if the other nations of the humans will try to recreate new weapons to match it.*

With that in mind, Mard gathered his fellow demons and gave them new marching orders: conquer Dark Guilds and force them to serve Tartarus. “We will use their resources to search for more information on Zeref’s presence, this Alvarez place, Etherion, and other weapons of that nature.” This caused much consternation among his followers, but Mard Geer crushed their concerns with ruthless dispatch, forcing them to obey him through power, just as he had brought them together in the first place.

**OOOOOOO**

Laxus and Carla had just returned to the guildhall from smashing yet another Dark Guild. This time the guild, the Rainbow Darkness, had been a real Dark Guild, one that had never been a legal guild at all, simply a bunch of nasty assholes who had been brought together by an even nastier asshole who took the mantle of Guild Master and gave them a name. They had been involved in drug dealing and blackmail for years throughout Fiore, but once their headquarters had been found the Magic Council had been quick to allow a mission to take them out. Laxus had just been lucky enough to grab the mission before any of the other S-class mages from other guilds could.

Now Laxus was busy listening to a new song on his headphones and drinking some good ale and reading news that the mage councils of Fiore and Seven might be joining together into a single group. But Carla’s attention was elsewhere. She was standing on the balcony nearby, watching Mira and her two siblings talking about a mission that Mira had just taken from the S-class board on the second floor.

“So, we’ll meet up in an hour at the train station, okay?” Mira said, smiling at her siblings, her voice audible to Carla thanks to her better than human hearing. Mira had mellowed slightly over the years since Carla had met her, and then slightly more since she and Erza had somehow buried the hatchet during her S-class exam, but she was still the Devil-girl of Fairy Tail often enough that the kind smile she was showing her siblings right now was rare indeed.

“Hai, Nee-chan! I am so ready for this! A real man must become stronger to protect his family!” Elfman bellowed. Of the three siblings, Elfman had changed the most over the years. He had a new scar on his face, had grown several feet in height, and had added so much to his shoulders that he looked almost as wide as Laxus was. His clothing, too, had changed. He now wore a single piece, dark blue jacket. The back of it had the words ‘Aim to be the greatest’ on it, with ‘the greatest’ being far larger than the rest.

Lisanna giggled. Of the three siblings, she had changed the least as she grew up. She was still the same gentle, kind-hearted girl that was a favorite with most of the guild. Even Laxus, who rarely had time for either of the younger Strauss’s since they just weren’t strong enough to interest him, liked her well enough, and Carla liked her the most out of the rest of the guild. Carla even liked her more than she liked Laxus, though given their often prickly relationship, that wasn’t saying much. She normally worked around the guildhall as a barmaid unless she was out on jobs with Elfman or Natsu.

Elfman, on the other hand, was simply annoying these days ever since he had hit puberty, or at least Carla thought of it like that. As someone who identified as a proper lady, Elfman’s whole ‘man’ bit was beyond irritating to Carla. She had taken to trying to convince Laxus that some shock therapy would cure Elfman of it, very loudly, every time Elfman called Carla a ‘man.’

“Yep. I’ll meet you both at the station. I’m already packed so all I need to do is find Natsu and Happy and tell them I’ll be away for a bit,” Lisanna said.

“Ugh, you and your beau are so cute it’s enough to give me cavities, Lisanna. Still, that’s fine. I’ll give the job to Master Makarov, then head home to grab us some supplies.” With that Mirajane dismissed her siblings and moved over toward Makarov.

Carla watched this for a while, unseen by the Strauss siblings or anyone else, since she was up on the second floor balcony. *Of course if that irritating tomcat were around that wouldn’t be the case, but thankfully, he and his equally asinine companions are off fishing. I swear to the First Magic, the next time he tries to flirt with me by giving me fish I’m going to slap him with it!*

As the Strauss siblings left, Carla noticed that Erza too was gone, out on a mission of her own. This left Laxus, and perforce Carla, alone on the S-class floor. But that too barely registered to the white-furred cat. No, it was the sight of the trio of Strauss siblings taking on an S-class mission together that was occupying her mind.

Like Happy, Carla’s magic was the ability to conjure up wings and fly, but unlike Happy, Carla had a secondary magic. It was one that she barely understood and couldn’t control: the power of precognition. Often times her images were small and useless, other times it was just confusing. But sometimes she got a vision of the future that she could actually understand. She had used it occasionally to help her and Laxus while on missions, and at one point had helped to put them in a position to help prevent a plague of locusts from causing a local famine. She had never told anyone about it, and only Laxus had figured out that she had such a power.

Now she saw a series of images: Lisanna’s pain filled face, Mira’s tear-streaked expression, a redheaded girl facing a massive shadow, rain, and the image of a young girl. This young girl had blue hair and a small, spare frame along with a cute face, and it wasn’t the first time Carla had seen her. She had seen that girl’s face numerous times when she first started to have visions, though it had faded over time.

Shaking her head to dispel the images, she rushed over to Laxus. Whispering into his ear, she told him about the mission. Nodding, Laxus stood up and flash teleported down to stand next to his grandfather. “You sure that’s a good idea Old Man?”

“What do you mean brat?” Makarov replied before draining his mug of beer and cocking an eyebrow at his grandson.

“I mean letting Mira take her two siblings out on an S-level mission with her. I don’t think it’s a good idea,” Laxus said, hoping to block off the image from occurring in the easiest way possible. Mira was touchy at the best of times. If she learned he was trying to interfere with her taking jobs, especially with her siblings, there’d be hell to pay. Mira couldn’t take Laxus in a fight, of course, but she could make his life miserable in a lot of little ways.

“Bah. You need to trust your fellow guild members more, Laxus. Mira’s an S-class mage, and she’ll keep the other two safe. You can’t always protect your kids; sometimes you need to let them protect one another,” Makarov retorted.

Laxus eyes narrowed. He trusted Mira, and, more, he respected her power, just as he respected Erza’s. Yet he also trusted Carla’s visions. Whether they could prevent them was a different matter. So he pressed on. “But there’s a difference between letting the kids prove themselves and trusting them in the deep end, Gramps. I trust Mira to handle herself on S-class jobs, but to protect herself and her siblings? Elfman’s an okay fighter, but Lisanna’s not, and…”

“Brat, that’s enough! I let Mira choose that job since it’s an easy one, a barely S-class monster hunt. The Take Over mages can handle it easy, and maybe Elfman will be able to get over whatever obstacle’s blocking him from doing a full body Take Over,” Makarov cut Laxus off. “If you think they can’t, why don’t you do something about it?”

Laxus scowled, but nodded at that, realizing that his grandfather was challenging him here. “Fine, maybe I will.” With that he marched off, intent on following the Strauss siblings at a distance, just in case. On his shoulder, Carla glared back at Makarov for a moment, getting a wink for her trouble, which caused her eyes to widen before she turned to look in the direction they were going.

Neither Laxus nor Carla saw Makarov breathe a sigh of relief behind him. “That wasn’t very nice, master,” Cana said, shaking her head at the old man’s manipulation, having watched all this and seen the wink too.

“Bah. If he hadn’t volunteered for it, you think he’d have followed my orders to trail them? You need to know how to motivate people, Cana-chan,” Makarov said. He took the guild’s copy of the mission that the Strauss siblings had decided to take, scowling at it before pushing it into his pocket. “I’ll be leaving soon. You’re in charge while I’m away Macao.”

Macao, a middle-aged man who was going through a rough patch in his marriage at the moment, scowled but nodded as he looked around the guild. It looked as if he and Wakaba were the most senior members, and, of the two of them, he was also the only one sober at the moment. An issue Makarov solved by smacking Wakaba away from the bar with his Titan hand. “As for you, you drunk, help him out. Until I get back, no more drinking for either of you!”

Scowling, the diminutive Guild Master hopped off his stool and made for the door. “I’m going to go talk to the Magic Council. Laxus is right: there’s something off about this mission, and I want to know what. I could swear I saw the same mission twenty years ago!”

Cana frowned at that, following him with her eyes until he was gone. Then she hopped over the bar and grabbed the first bottle of beer she could. “Oy!” Macao shouted.

“Heh. He said you and Wakaba over there can’t drink. Never said nothing about me~~!” Cana, the newest addition to the guild’s ‘Lush Club’ said, before downing the bottle and putting Master Makarov’s words out of her mind.

**OOOOOOO**

Caelum had been somewhat boring in terms of things to do beyond training in comparison to their last stop, but Ranma and Wendy had both learned a lot from talking to and observing other water and air mages there. They had even developed a few Unison Rave attacks in the half a year they stayed there moving from island to island. But after wintering on one of the islands and with spring once more upon them it was now time to move on. Both Dragon Slayers were eager to explore Fiore, having heard a lot about Fiore as they traveled.

Ranma and Wendy soon arrived in Fiore at a small port called Cambletown, apparently named for a sailor who had found the tiny cove that made for a decent, if small, port. Ranma had heard that the place was famous for its fried fish, a small local type of freshwater fish which looked like piranha but tasted great.

The two Dragon Slayers bought several of them on sticks and began to walk around the town, happily munching on their meals as they walked. “Mm, so, do you know where we should go from here, Oni-chan?” Wendy asked.

“Nope,” Ranma said cheerfully. “We’ll need to find some maps or find someone to give us directions to Magnolia. Pity this place doesn’t have a train station.” As Wendy wrinkled her nose and went to speak, Ranma ruffled her hair, halting her words. “We could then just follow the tracks however long it took us to get to Magnolia.”

Ranma paused as he noticed a sign nearby at a coach’s hall. “‘Beware of the beast?’ I wonder what that is?” With Wendy following him, Ranma moved to ask a man working in the field next to several dozen heavy oxen. “Excuse me, but what’s this about a beast?”

“The Beast, lad. You need to capitalize it. It’s not a problem here, but further inland in the next district over. For all that, though, it’s been bad for business here. If you want to know more, you’d have to head inland to that district. I wouldn’t recommend it, though, since the last few teams of drovers who left haven’t returned yet,” the man replied, shaking his head sadly.

The two Dragon Slayers looked at one another, then Ranma shrugged, turning back to the other man. “Tell me, does this town have a library?”

“Hah! You’re joking, aren’t you? Don’t even know anyone but the mayor who has more than two books to rub together. Leastwise, not ones they’d share with anyone. Hell, not even the taxman…”

“Right, got it,” Ranma said, sighing. Even here in Fiore most peasants didn’t own books. Most everyone Ranma had talked to in this world knew how to read, but that was a far cry from doing it for pleasure and thus having books.

He looked down at Wendy who stuffed the last of her fish into her mouth, chewing quickly then nodding up at him. With that the two Dragon Slayers left the town. After leaving the last building behind, they began to run, picking up speed as they went. About an hour later Wendy flagged, but she used her magic to hop into the air, flying on for another two hours before dropping down onto Ranma’s shoulders. He didn’t even slow down, simply reaching up with a hand to pat her head as he picked up further speed. “Should I use Vernier, Oni-chan?”

“Nah, we’re not in that much of a hurry, and we have no idea how far we have to go. Better conserve your energy, Wendy-chan,” Ranma replied.

Despite that rather negative assumption, Ranma was able to cover the distance between Cambletown and the next town within a day, with Wendy running with Ranma twice more before resting on his back for the rest of the journey. The two Dragon Slayers walked into town that very evening, and Ranma quickly found an inn for them. While Wendy was having a bath, Ranma went downstairs and found the innkeeper, asking him the same question he had asked the coachman back in the first town.

“The Beast? Aye, he’s a problem around here. About three stories tall, with purple fur, green scales, horns, and claws, and all.” The man said it with a bit of humor in his tone, but it was obvious he was trying to keep his own spirits up. “The town’s lost a lot of people to it over the past few weeks. The mayor, he did the right thing by sending in a request for it to be killed, but it took a while for the Mages to figure out how to rate the damn thing.”

“Hmm… That’s not good. You hear that anyone has taken up the job?”

“Not yet, but I hear that it’s been sent to the best guilds out there: Phantom, Fairy, Pegasus, Scale, even a few more,” the innkeeper said, shortening the names as if the guilds themselves were living people and were famous to boot.

“Huh. Okay, that’s interesting.” *And means I might not have to deal with it. That’s good, though I still want to know more about it.* “And you say it was this town’s mayor who sent it out?”

“Yep,” the innkeeper said, then frowned. “Funny thing, though. Could swear me grampie told me tales about the same kind of Beast.”

That caused Ranma’s eyes to narrow, but he left the discussion where it was, returning to the room. He found Wendy was asleep as he entered, but she opened her eyes, holding her hands out in silent plea for a hug. Ranma quickly swept her up in his arms, nuzzling into her hair for a moment. The two of them stayed that way before Ranma carried Wendy over to the room’s small table, setting her into one chair as he took the other.

While pulling out some food he’d bought from his Requip space, Ranma explained what he was going to be doing. “So, we might stay here for a while so I can look into this. I’ll hit up the library—it’s a small one, apparently, but there is one here—tonight. Then, first thing tomorrow, I’ll try to talk to this mayor. What do you want to do?”

“Hmmm… I’ll stay here and read, I think, Oni-chan, unless you want my help?” Wendy asked. While she was a good fighter, she really never went out of her way to go looking for fights.

“No, that’s fine. I’ll leave some money tomorrow morning for you to use if you want to go out and buy things. I trust you remember the rules I’ve taught you about going around on your own?”

“Hai!” Wendy giggled. “Always be polite to people unless they’re rude to me. Don’t talk to strangers unless you are trying to buy something. Trust your sense of smell and stay away from anything that smells bad. Don’t let anyone grab me, and if someone tries, kick them where it hurts.”

“You got it!” Ranma replied, clapping slowly before leaning over the table to kiss Wendy on the forehead. “That’s a good girl.” Wendy giggled happily at that, and the two siblings ate their dinner.

After they finished, Ranma pulled out all the toys and books he had in his Requip space for Wendy before leaving the room and heading to the library. The library here was a single one-story building, and not a large one. But it was still a library, full of books. Local history books were rare, but they were telling.

A few of them had short blurbs about ‘the Beast’ appearing, then being beaten or killed, and each time the Beast was slightly different in appearance, which might have been why no one had connected it. *Or no one around here realizes they could all be the same beast, or demon, resurrecting itself from its real body or cage or whatever the hell those things are.*

It also apparently took a while, and the time between appearances was random—if there was a pattern there, Ranma couldn’t see it—which might have been another reason why no one connected the dots. The last time had been over seventy years ago, so there was no one alive here who had been alive during the Beast’s last permutation.

Sighing at that, Ranma moved toward the mayor’s office. Much like the library, this was a small building, but it was a very busy one, with several people working on various ledgers in a row before the mayor’s office. When he was informed that Ranma was a mage, the man still made time to speak for him, though he clammed up with Ranma admitted he wasn’t part of a guild. “If you’re not part of an official guild, why are you here?”

Surprised by the way the mayor had changed his tune at that, Ranma shrugged. “I wanted to learn more about the Beast. Does it have a common hunting ground? Where has it attacked the most? How wide is the area where its attacks have been reported? How many attacks haven’t been reported, but are thought to have occurred?” Given his remit as the official King’s Conclave Demon Hunter, Ranma took his job seriously.

The mayor blinked, then narrowed his eyes. “Why do you want to know?”

“I’ve killed creatures like this Beast before. I want to know about this one so I can hunt it in the same way,” Ranma replied easily. *After all, that’s pretty much the truth, isn’t it? Though I had to do precious little actual hunting against the other demons I’ve killed.*

“We’ve already paid the Mage Council and received word that an S-class mage has been dispatched from a fully accredited guild.” The mayor said, waving Ranma off. “I thank you for your interest, but your services are not wanted or required here, Wanderer.”

Ranma blinked. “Wait, what?”

But the mayor had already turned away and Ranma noticed the other workers in the open office were also giving him looks. Not as if he was diseased, but as if he wasn’t trusted, a look he had last seen in Midi. *What the heck? Are guilds that important here? Even in Seven I never received that kind of reaction.*

Returning to the inn where he had left Wendy, he asked the innkeeper about it, and the man shrugged. “That attitude’s coming from two points: one, wandering mages just aren’t as trusted by law abidin’ citizens as guild mages are. Guild mages have to obey rules, follow through on requests, and, if they don’t, can be punished via the law; wandering mages can’t. And most wandering mages are either too weak to matter or are criminals here in Fiore. I’m from Caelum myself, so I know that ain’t always the case, but most Fiorans don’t realize that.”

As Ranma nodded at that, the man went on. “And for another, what happens here in Fiore is there’s bit of back and forth for getting your jobs approved. Ya write off to the MC, er that’s Mage Council, what’s going on, they give you a figure, there’s haggling, then you send in the agreed upon amount, which is held by the MC until the mages who take the job arrive and take care of whatever it is. You can go around that if you’ve got a guild in yer town or city, but that’s the normal way of doing it.”

“Huh. Doesn’t seem very efficient.”

“Since when do the words government and efficient ever go hand in hand, mate?” the man replied with a laugh.

Ranma laughed too even as he thought. *The mayor obviously is worried I’ll beat the Beast and then demand money, money they’ve already paid to the MC. And they also just as obviously don’t trust mages unless they’re part of an accredited guild. Well, whatever, that just means I’ll have to do this the hard way.*

Returning to their room, Ranma explained to Wendy what was going on and then began to explore the town with her. Unfortunately, there really wasn’t much to do here, since this was a small town, off the beaten path for the most part. The town didn’t even have any shops that sold maps except for just the area surrounding it, rather than the district in general.

Still, Ranma bought one of them, and then that evening after putting Wendy to bed, snuck into the mayor’s office. He found a few dozen papers which gave him some direction as to where the attacks had been occurring as well as the times of those attacks. There were others which spoke of disappearances, farms that had been emptied of people, and loggers or even just hunters who hadn’t returned, so Ranma had a general idea of where the Beast had first appeared.

He also learned that the mayor of this town actually wasn’t the only one who had reported the Beast. He and four others, including one from a larger town called Yellowstone, had pooled their money to pay for an S-class request. *So the Beast actually isn’t just from around here. That means I’ll have a wider area to search for it, damn it.*

The next day Ranma decided the two Dragon Slayers could move on to Yellowstone. There he ran into the same sort of disdain from the mayor as he had in the first, but he got a larger, more detailed map and, when he once more practiced his stealth skills, found that the mayor here actually had a map showing where the attacks had been reported, including the ones Ranma had learned about in the last town.

There were also far more people and more things to do in this town, so Ranma had no qualms about leaving Wendy there for a day. Once more he explained to her what he would be doing, as the skies overhead began to darken, promising rain. Wendy, however, was adamant that she wanted to go around and explore for a bit. “Hmmm… Okay, Wendy. In that case I’ll leave my Song Silk robe with you. That’ll keep you dry. Don’t want the healer to get sick, do we?”

“Mm!” Wendy replied, hugging Ranma around the waist. “Don’t worry, Oni-chan, I’ll be here all ready to heal you again.” Then she pulled back, waving an admonishing finger in front of her. “But if you come back really hurt again, Oni-chan, I’ll be giving you a stern talking to. And I’ll tie you to the bed so you’ll have to listen!”

“Oh, really? You and what army!?” Ranma replied, reaching forward with both hands to start tickling Wendy unmercifully despite her best attempts to run away.

Soon after that Ranma left the town, running out into the fields beyond and then beyond that into the hills to the west. There he began to look around for any sign of the Beast. He soon began to find plenty, along with signs of recent fighting: smashed trees, deep furrows of the ground, crushed rocks, and other things, as he moved deeper into the small mountain range.

At that point rain began to fall, and Ranma, mindful of wanting to conserve his magic power, let it hit, drawing some into her mouth after she changed. The redhead then began to move deeper into the mountains, no longer following the trail of combat, but away, circling around it. *If the demon is but a product of something like that totem I destroyed in Desierto, it would lead the mages away from its prison or real body or gah! Okay let’s just call it the demon’s real body from now on; it’s easier that way. Besides, since that asshole Plague-whatever had been able to escape at any time, I doubt prison was ever really applicable.*

About ten minutes after she began to circle around the fighting, Ranma stopped, sniffing the air. *That’s a smell I haven’t smelt in years… Now there could be other assholes out there that smell of electrical current and dragon scales, but…*

Moving in the direction where the smell was strongest despite the rain, he found his quarry standing in the shadows of a tree overlooking the fight. Ranma looked in that direction and saw three mages who had to be related, given their hair color, squaring off against the Beast, who looked like a demon for certain. *Yep, called that one.*

Turning away from that, Ranma leaped up next to Laxus, who had turned, the wind having just changed direction enough to carry Ranma’s scent to him despite the rain. “Yo, Sparky. Long time no see.”

“Ranma!” Laxus reached out, grabbing Ranma’s forearm in a warrior’s clasp. “I’d give you a manly hug right now, but that would be kind of awkward,” he went on, shaking his head and waving a hand at Ranma’s current form.

“Yeah. But we can catch up later. Listen, that Beast they’re fighting down there…” Ranma quickly explained why she was there and hunting the demon. She didn’t tell Laxus she was a Ranger, only that she had been hired to hunt down rumors of demons, not saying who hired her just yet. Despite it having been years since they had seen one another, she did trust Laxus, but it would take too long to explain.

Laxus listened intently, wondering how the hell Carla had figured out something was going on here before shaking his head. “You’re right, we can catch up later. I’ve got a shit ton of questions I’d love to ask you, but right now I think we need to concentrate on this. So you think we need to smash this totem thing before we can really kill the demon? That we’re just dealing with the body?”

“That’s right,” Ranma replied. “The problem is that I figure it could reconstitute its body immediately if it wanted to. It’s certainly killed enough people since it showed up this time. I…” She broke off as one of the mages below, the leader, if Ranma was any judge, landed a powerful blow on the demon in return for taking one herself. There was a sickening crack heard over the sound of the rain as the mage’s arm broke, but the Beast’s chest was shattered in turn, hurling it backwards.

Ranma whistled in appreciation. “That was damn brave of that girl, protecting that guy there. Her arms got to be busted in several places though.”

“That’s Mirajane, and, fuck it, Carla was right. Protecting her siblings on an S-class mission is too much. Still, she seems to have… What the?” Laxus cut himself off, staring at Ranma’s face where small black whorls had appeared around her eyes. “Ranma, where did the tattoos come from?”

Making no indication that she had heard the other Dragon Slayer’s words, Ranma continued to stare down at the battlefield below. The second girl, who had been transformed into some kind of harpy creature, had shifted back to what Ranma supposed was her normal form and run over to the one Laxus had called Mirajane. The other Fairy Tail mage, the young man down there who had arms that looked like a minotaur’s, had made his way over to the dying demon and laid his hand on it. The man’s arm had gone back to normal, as he did.

But that wasn’t all Ranma was seeing. Her odd, newfound power of spotting and understanding demonic energy she had gained from killing Plagutarno allowed her to see more than that. She hadn’t been able to figure out anything about that before this no matter how hard she tried, but it was coming in handy now. She saw the spirit, the essence of the demon, leave its physical body and divide. Half of it entered the man, while the other half rose unseen into the air where she lost it. “Did you see that!?”

“See what?” Laxus asked, worried by the tone in his old rival’s voice. “It’s just Elfman trying to Take Over the… Oh no, don’t tell me. Did that thing’s soul just take him over instead?”

“Yes, damn it! And worse, it somehow divided too. The other half is gone now.” Looking at Laxus, she asked, “Do you think you can search around for its main body and kill it? If it’s divided, I have to believe the main body is strong enough to revive itself for some reason. I have no idea why, but…”

“Mirajane,” Laxus said quickly, nodding down at the girl. “Her Take Over form is Satan Soul, so maybe there’s some kind of connection there. If you can help my guild mates here, I’ll search around for the main body…” In the distance a roar bellowed just as Elfman finished transforming into an exact replica of the beast he and his siblings had just been fighting. “Not that it’s going to be difficult.”

“Find the main totem thing!” Ranma shouted as she leaped down. “If you don’t it can reform itself again later!”

Mirajane had thought it was over. Sure, her arm was broken badly, and she felt weaker than a kitten after the near to an hour running fight against the Beast. Whoever had labeled it S-class had not been kidding. But the fight had appeared over, a final Soul Extinction having caved in the Beast’s chest, shattering ribs and perforating its insides.

That had been before she heard Lisanna’s shout. “Elfman no!” The youngest Strauss had been hurrying to her older sister’s help, only to turn back as Elfman didn’t follow, instead moving toward the Beast’s corpse.

Behind Lisanna’s shoulder Mirajane saw Elfman touch the demon and pushed herself to her feat. “No, Elfman! It’s too strong for you!”

But it was too late. Elfman had touched the demon’s side and had entered the Take Over trance. An instant later, Elfman’s body swelled, and the Beast stood there. It was around two stories tall, immensely broad in the shoulders, with a mix of fur and scales. Its fists were slightly larger than its body size would suggest, and its arms were almost apelike. It had horns coming from its head and a large beard, with deep-set red eyes devoid of any intelligence or hint of Elfman’s personality.

“Elfman!” both sisters yelled as one, and a second later Lisanna put herself between Mira and their overcome brother. He raised a fist, bellowing a roar as Mira tried vainly to pull together enough magical power through her pain to resume her Take Over form.

Lisanna didn’t even try to fight, simply standing there, holding her arms out wide. “Elfman, it’s me, Lisanna. Come on, you can do this. Beat it back…”

The Beast made no sign it had heard her, simply bringing its fist around in a blow that would have crushed Lisanna had it landed. “Lisanna, run!” Mira shrieked, fear for her sibling nearly stopping her heart.

Then a red streak impacted the side of the Beast’s head, hurling it to the side and away. The streak resolved itself into a short, buxom redhead. Mira’s first thought was “Erza!?” Never before had she been happy to see her rival. But then she looked closer and noticed this girl wasn’t wearing any armor, instead being dressed in loose silk shirt and pants, with soft slippers on her feet, of all things.

“Ain’t Erza, whoever that is,” Ranma said, looking behind her for a second before turning to the Beast once more. It had moved with her blow and now leaped, first to one side, then away, launching a beam attack from its mouth. “Soryu no Shahei Kyutai (Water Dragon's Shielding Globe)!”

As her wall of water fought against the Beast’s beam, Ranma looked back at the two girls. Both of them had started at the Water Dragon part of his attack, but Ranma set that aside. “Listen, I ain’t ever tried to fight a Take Over mage before.” *And tried to keep them alive, anyway,* she mentally added. “So, if I knock that thing out, will it force your brother back to his normal body?”

“Y, yes,” Lisanna said, slumping to her knees in relief. “If you can do that without hurting him…”

“Heh, never said that, miss. Just asked about the knocking out thing,” Ranma said, leaping forward. The Beast roared, clapping its hands in front of it, causing a shockwave to flash out through the air, but Ranma dodged it by pushing water out through her legs to jump up and over the attack, only to eat a beam attack from the Beast’s mouth. Lisanna and Mira shouted in shock, but Ranma survived the attack, even though it hurled her away and broke some bones, the beam acting more as a kinetic force than a heat beam like those Plagutarno had used. She also, somehow, was able to push herself just out of the beams straight path somehow.

The beam still hurled her away to crash through some trees before she hammered into a boulder, which cracked under the impact. The demon roared triumphantly, launching itself after her, but Ranma once more gathered a geyser of water under her feet and shot forward, gut checking the Beast with both her Escrima sticks held up above her head like the battering ram on the prow of a ship. The Beast cried out in agony as its own weight met Ranma’s momentum, nearly causing it to cave in around the hit for a moment before it was sent flying backwards.

Mira winced, shaking her head in something like admiration as the redhead started to wale on the Beast. As fast and as agile as the Beast was, and it really was despite its size, something that had caught Mira by surprise several times, the Erza-lookalike sans armor was jumping around it even faster than Lisanna had been able to in her Take Over rabbit form. Still, the Beast’s sheer mass and its healing power seemed to take Ranma by surprise, its moves quickly becoming more certain and quick despite its wounds from the gut check.

Its dexterity also took Ranma by surprise. One minute and the next Ranma had been driving the beast back then the beast had used one hand to flip itself over an attack. A second later it kicked out at Ranma before launching into a series of punches far faster than anything its size should have been able to move.

Pushing herself to her feet, Mira growled, then began to gather her magical energy. A second later she was once more in her Satan Soul form, too weak to use her Sitri form. “Come on, Lisanna, we have to help her! That’s our brother, and that means it’s our mess to clean up!”

“R, right!” Lisanna said, quickly changing into her giant rabbit form in order to close with the fight before changing into her harpy form as they reached it.

Ranma might have warned the two off, but this demon’s durability and, moreover, its speed was giving her fits. There was also something wonky going on with her combat instincts. It was as if they were trying to tell her two slightly different things at once, throwing off her concentration and coordination. *Damn it, I thought whatever changed in my magic core after I killed Plagutarno was small and barely noticeable! Guess it took facing another demon to really activate it, though!*

“Darkness Stream!” A beam of purple and black magic slammed into the demon’s side, disrupting its attack on Ranma.

A second later Ranma saw Mirajane flying over the Beast, her own form also rather demonic, with a long reptilian tail, wide leathery wings, and claws on her hands and feet. “It tries to adapt. Mix up your magic if you can, or it will develop an immunity to your magic attacks. And don’t get hit by that orange beam it shoots out form between its horns that acts like a massive electric shock!”

“Got it, thanks!” Ranma supplied, summoning up a water Dragon’s Titan fist from midair right beside Lisanna and smashing it down into the demon, pinning it for a second before launching other attacks forward. Holding back from using her more dangerous techniques so as to not permanently harm Elfman was also holding her back. “Speaking of shocking, I wonder what the hell Laxus is up to?”

“Wait, Laxus? What do you mean!?” Mira shouted in reply, swooping down and grabbing onto the Beast’s back. “Evil Spark!” Her own electric attack flashed from her clenching claws into the demon’s hide, causing it to squeal in agony. Despite that it still threw her off, lashing out with its own attack at the same time, shooting out tendrils of darkness that flashed out from its form to smash all three mages away. “Okay, that was new…”

Ranma grunted, a portion of her instincts having attempted to tell her about the new attack while her other instincts had urged her to close in and finish the demon off. *I seriously need to figure out what the hell is happening there!* That was for later, though. An instant later Ranma leaped forward, bearing Lisanna to the ground as the Beast lobbed another new attack out, a small black ball which exploded where Lisanna had been a minute ago.

Mira replied in kind, a Soul Extinction, smashing the ground right in front of the demon and hurling it off its feet, the Take Over mage unwilling to target the Beast itself with her more dangerous attacks. “See what I mean!? Now, what was that about Laxus!?”

“Is this really the time for that, sis!?” Lisanna yelled, hopping out of Ranma’s arms and trying to gather her magical energy to reenter one of her Take Over forms.

Elsewhere, Laxus had streaked through the forest via his lightning teleportation towards the sound of the roar. The Beast there, while just as troublesome as the one Ranma and the two Strauss girls were facing, was facing one large disadvantage: Laxus was under no obligation to hold back as Ranma was being forced to. Laxus teleported this way and that around the beast, having already flash-fried some of its skin off with his other attacks. He had taken a few shots in turn and was looking much the worse for wear, not having Ranma’s durability or healing factor, but with his teleportation ability he was even faster than Ranma, and the Beast’s physical attacks were a non-factor.

Finally having built up his attack enough, Laxus roared out, “Rairyu no Netto!” From all his previous teleportation spots around the demon lanced out small bolts of lightning, all merging together into a net smashing into and through the Beast’s body from numerous directions. So much electricity hit it at that point that its durability failed. The now sparking and smoking demon fell to its knees, and Laxus finished it with a “Rairyu no Hoko!” the Beast could barely look through its smoking eyeballs at the attack before it landed, crisping its flesh from its bones before almost atomizing it.

With that out of the way, Laxus once more began to leap around, peering through the rain all around as he tried to find the totem Ranma had told him would be here. With his teleportation ability he combed through several acres of mountainous forest in a bare few minutes. With that skill he was eventually able to find it.

The totem wasn’t quite as Ranma had described. It wasn’t an object, like the statuette of Plagutarno, but a massive picture of the Beast on the stone wall of a cave. If not for the light of his lightning teleportation, Laxus would have missed it. The painting was glowing a sickly green and black, its edges pulsing almost like a heart, its eyes a deep red that seem to track Laxus as he moved around it.

And in the center of the painting was a series of runes much like the ones Levy and Freed made use of, only raw, almost evil looking. They too pulsed with something like a heartbeat, and the ones over where the Beast’s heart would be looked as if they had been drawn in fresh blood, despite the fact this painting might have been here for centuries.

But to the Lightning Dragon Slayer there was also the scent of the thing and the cave too: blood, lots of blood. Old blood, stale blood, dried blood, fresh blood. The cave reeked of it, like an abattoir gone wrong. And there were bones coating the floor, so many the original stone of the cave was completely obscured, old and new.

The urge to destroy the entire cave was too great to ignore and Laxus threw back his head, the muscles of his neck standing out starkly as he poured about a fourth of his total magical power into the attack. “**Rairyu no Hoko!!**”

Back at the fight against the possessed Elfman, Mira fell to her knees. She could feel herself slowly losing consciousness from her wounds and magical exhaustion. Lisanna was crumpled nearby, having been hurled through a tree while Ranma had been busy pulling herself out of a ditch she’d made after taking another blast of the Beast’s breath attack.

Mira’s eyes widened as the Beast roared, and a white light appeared in the air above Lisanna’s position. The light seemed to be some kind of gravity attack, because it picked up Lisanna and began to drag her up toward it. “Lisanna, no!” she shouted, trying to push herself to her feet, but her body wouldn’t obey her.

Luckily, Ranma was there. The redhead launched herself forward, howling “Guns Magic: Overload!” The shots took the Beast in its eyes, sending it stumbling back and roaring in pain, though Ranma knew the Beast wasn’t permanently damaged: it’s durability was too high for that. But it still let Ranma grab Lisanna out of the air where she had nearly reached the light. She then hurled her towards Mira, taking a wild blow from the Beast as she did, which would have possibly killed Lisanna despite Ranma stopping her from entering the light, which had suddenly enlarged to fill the sky above them. Mira idly noted that whatever it was, the light was blocking the rainfall, then her sister’s hurled body slammed into her, and the pain of that on top of her wounds and magical exhaustion nearly caused Mira to black out, and she howled in agony.

Ranma grimaced, hearing that, but it had either been that or try and shield Lisanna from the punch of the Beast. Standing up from where the blow had hurled her, she howled. “God freaking damn it, this whole not wanting to hurt you bad thing is for the damn birds!”

With that she lashed out again with two Titan fists, larger than most she conjured, slamming them down onto the Beast, pushing it down and holding it there, her teeth grimaced in effort. Despite the rain falling on her, renewing her magical reserves slowly, the effort of trying to fight her own instincts, which were screaming at her about ways to kill the possessed Elfman, was taking a toll on her concentration and ability to actually wield her magic powers.

As she watched, however, the Beast gave out a last, despairing wail and slumped. Its body began to shrink, its features swiftly receding to reveal the form of Elfman, as in the distance Ranma heard a thunderous crash like a small avalanche.

Slowly Ranma allowed her technique to fade, breathing in deeply. Then she looked up as the light failed to fade. Whatever attack the demon had been launching was still there, hovering above them. As she watched, a body appeared from it, falling towards the ground, and the light flicked out.

Racing forward, Ranma lunched herself into the air, catching the body just as Laxus appeared in a flash of lightning. Ranma nodded to him, then looked down at the body she was holding, staring at Lisanna in shock. “How the heck…”

The redhead turned with Laxus to stare at Mira, who was still holding Lisanna’s body. It was only then that they realized the two Lisannas wore different clothing. For a moment they were silent, then as Mira, who had also been staring at her sister’s body double, began to faint, Ranma said quickly, “Whatever this is, it isn’t my fault.”

The last thing Mira heard before she blacked out was Laxus bellowing in laughter.

**OOOOOOO**

Walking through the town, Wendy walked down the near-empty streets, being careful to not stand on the hem of the cloak she was wearing, a tough task, since it was so big it was almost like wearing a tent. The sky had opened up a few minutes after Ranma had left, but since Ranma had also left his cloak with her, the rain didn’t bother her at all, the cloak covering her from head to toe. It was even warm too.

She squeaked, however, as the sound of thunder reached her ears. She had never liked that sound. Still, she was soon near to her destination, a small magic store that doubled as a bookstore. Wendy had spotted it while walking around with Ranma earlier that day.

Stepping inside she found a small, white haired cat standing nearby. Wendy would have probably squealed and bolted over to pat it, if not for the fact it was dressed in a very nice little dress and a was glaring out into the rain like the weather had personally insulted her. “Um, is something wrong?” Wendy asked hesitantly.

Carla turned from glaring out into the rain, irritated by both it and the fact Laxus had left her behind to stare up at the girl who had talked to her. While she knew she was next to useless in a fight, it still bothered Carla when Laxus left her behind every time he went into a combat situation. Her irritation at that and the weather, however, disappeared, and she tried not to stare at the girl from her visions. “Um, ahem, nothing is wrong. Just the weather. I loathe when people compare my species to cats most of the time, but some stereotypes cross over, and one of them is that I don’t like rain.”

While she didn’t understand the word ‘stereotypes,’ Wendy nodded. “I see. Erm, I’m Wendy. What’s your name?”

“Carla,” Carla replied, smiling graciously and reaching up to shake the girl’s hand.

“Erm, can, can I pet you?” Wendy asked, looking both shy and eager.

Rolling her eyes, Carla nodded. “Since you were polite enough to ask, yes, you may.” A second later it was all Carla could do not to purr as Wendy petted her then lifted her up into the air nuzzling into her.

Carla might have objected to that, but then found herself pulled into a warm cloak. “If you want to go somewhere, I can take you like this, okay?” Wendy said brightly.

Still a little shocked about having met the young girl she’d had dreams about in the past, Carla shook her head. “No, I don’t have anywhere in particular to go. I was waiting in town for an acquaintance to finish a job in the woods nearby. We didn’t intend to stay in town for very long, so we didn’t get a room.”

“Oh! Then you can come with me. My Oni-chan and I have a room here. He’s off on a mission too, so I’m alone there. We could even pick up some food on the way,” Wendy said excitedly. The little cat-person was very fluffy and seemed nice, so Wendy was happy to see if she could make a new friend.

“That, that sounds very nice, actually,” Carla said then began to ply the young girl with questions about herself, her brother, and anything else. Wendy answered readily and asked her own, mostly about Carla and her magic. Soon enough they were chatting like old friends, ensconced in the room Ranma had rented, playing a board game Ranma had bought on Buckler for the two of them.

For her part, Carla was both horrified and somewhat impressed by what she had heard about Wendy’s life so far. She was horrified that the little girl was being dragged all around Ishgar by this reprobate of a brother, but she was also impressed that the girl could do so much with her magic already. She was also horrified by how Wendy sometimes spoke, a hint of a hick accent showing up sometimes, and how she dressed, in jeans and a t-shirt rather than a dress or a blouse and a skirt as any young lady should. It was obvious to Carla that the girl needed a real woman’s touch in her life rather than this boy with the odd curse Wendy had mentioned, and Carla wondered how to go about giving that to her.

Later Wendy looked up as the door to her and Ranma’s room opened and leaped to her feet excitedly, followed by Carla, moving with the girl toward the door. “Oni-chan, look! This is…” Wendy trailed off as she saw that Ranma wasn’t alone. A tall, tough looking blonde was following her, and both of them were carrying other people on their shoulders or in their arms, three of whom were girls and all of whom both looked similar and smelled somewhat the same to Wendy.

For his part Ranma, who had changed back to his male form the moment ‘she’ had entered the inn, had stopped in the doorway, his eyes wide and fear streaking through her at the sight of the furry devil. There were a few things fighting the assumption that said furry demon was in fact a furry demon. Point one: furry demons didn’t walk on their hind quarters. Point two: cat faces didn’t look nearly as expressive as this creature’s. Point three: while one could dress up a furry demon in clothing, there was a difference between that and one looking so natural in clothing as this one did, as it, this bore repeating, **stood on its hind legs**.

Before Ranma’s mind could decide one way or another, further evidence was added. “Laxus, whatever happened to you all? And introduce yourself to a lady, you brute!” the white creature barked out, her tone that of a highborn lady affronted by the manners of the riffraff before her.

That allowed the Ranma OS to slot this new stimuli into an entirely new memory slot, that of the ‘snarky furry thing,’ rather than ‘furry demon.’ “Yeah, yeah. Introductions all around: I’m Ranma. Wendy, this is Laxus, you've heard me talk about him. But right now we need your help with these four.”

Wendy nodded brusquely, her normal little girl attitude dropping away to be replaced by her nurse’s personality, something she had perfected during their time in Minstrel with the Rebel Army. “Right, set them on the beds, two to a bed. Carla-chan, run downstairs and get some more pillows and blankets,” she ordered. “We might need to elevate their heads if they’ve taken head wounds.”

The small furry not a cat thing puffed up at being ordered about, torn between shock and something like irritation, but Laxus simply nodded at Wendy, setting Mira and Elfman on one bed while Ranma set the two Lisannas side by side. That sight seemed to cause Carla to break out of her stupor and race for the door as Laxus addressed Wendy. “Nice to meet another Dragon Slayer, even if you’re like this one and were actually trained by a dragon rather than having a crystal embedded in you. How did you and Carla meet?”

“We ran into one another walking around town. It began to rain and she was stuck in a small store,” Wendy replied absentmindedly as she looked the four siblings over. “This one is the worst injured,” she said promptly, her hands hovering over the Lisanna lookalike Ranma had caught. There was a gash right below the hairline there and some blood crusted in her hair. “I think she might have a cracked skull… Back away for a second.”

Looking at Ranma, Laxus did as Wendy ordered. “Is she really a decent healer? At her age?”

“Don’t let Wendy’s age fool you; she’s great at healing. A lot of the Sky Dragon Slayer magic she knows is based off healing. Just watch,” Ranma replied.

“Tenryu no Ochitsuita Tsubasa, (Sky Dragon’s Soothing Wing),” Wendy intoned, sending a surge of her magic through the Lisanna lookalike’s open mouth, nose and ears. As that spell began to work its way through her patient’s body, Wendy held her other hand above the cut whispering, “Tenryu no Iyashino Iki (Sky Dragon’s Healing Pulse)!” With the first spell having identified the injuries, the healing pulse went to work quickly healing the damage, even the damage Wendy couldn’t see physically. After only a second, what would have possibly been a life threatening injury was healed to nothing, and Wendy stood back, smiling happily. “Next!”

Carla came back then, having done quite a bit better than requested. She was followed by the innkeeper who had three mattresses, which Ranma and Laxus helped him set up on the floor along with blankets, moving the healed to them after Wendy saw to them.

For her part, the only one who gave Wendy any trouble was Mirajane, who had fractured her arm. She had to ask Ranma to set the bone before healing it as good as new. Even so, not fifteen minutes after they returned, all four of the Strauss siblings were healed and laid out on their respective beds. Of course, Wendy couldn’t do anything to help their magical exhaustion.

Having watched her work, Carla shook her head in admiration, though she was still trying to reconcile the shy, shrinking violet of a girl she had seen in her visions with the admittedly still shy, but confident and happy girl she had met today. Setting that mystery to the side for a moment, Carla looked between the two Lisannas. “Is this some kind of odd magical accident? Whatever happened out there, Laxus?”

“A near disaster, just like what you warned us might happen, Carla,” Laxus explained, then looked over at Ranma. “You want to tell them or should I?”

“Er, you can tell them, I suppose. But first, what the heck is Carla? I mean, she looks like a furry demon, but she talks like a high class girl and dresses like one too.”

“Hhmmf. At least you can recognize class when you hear it, you barbarian. Imagine, taking a young girl like Wendy around all of Ishgar as you have been!” Carla hissed, causing Ranma to flinch back slightly. “As for what I am, beyond being a lady, of course, is an Exceed. If you wish to know more about my race, I cannot help you. Myself and an oafish blue-furred buffoon of a tomcat are the only two of my race we have ever heard about.”

“I found her about…I want to say a year and a half ago. She hatched from a giant egg.” Laxus caught Ranma’s look of confusion at that and rolled his eyes. “Don’t ask. I think she began to speak within a month of hatching, which was way better than the other Exceed she’s talking about. His name’s Happy, and I’m of the opinion Natsu dropped him on his head a few times in the egg. Where they came from, no one knows.”

“Hmmf. Don’t act as if we’re the only mystery around. After all, there are where you Dragon Slayers came from and this Lisanna look alike,” Carla said. “Let us focus on this present issue.”

Laxus and Ranma looked at one another, then shrugged. “Yeah, I got nothing. One minute there this light in the sky, which incidentally tries to suck Lisanna A up into itself, then there’s Lisanna B falling out of it.”

“I wasn’t even there for that bit, so don’t look at me, Carla.” Carla scowled at that and opened her mouth, but Laxus shot her a glare. “Unless you have something constructive to say, I think that mystery has to remain an open book for now until Lisanna B wakes up.”

Giggling, Wendy pulled Carla into her arms, hopping up in turn onto the bed next to Ranma and leaning against his side. “Oni-chan’s told me a lot about the time you and he were together in Pergrande. Can you tell me more? Carla was telling me about Fairy Tail and some of its members.”

“Huh. Well, I suppose we have nothing better to do until these four wake up. But I think your Oni-chan here should go first. I’m just freaking fascinated to learn how you two met,” Laxus said, changing what he had been about to say there as Ranma gave him a glare.

His eyes then flicked back to Wendy. “I’m seriously interested in how he rates a nice, kind little girl like you, and all I get are saddled with older teen types who think they know everything! I mean, come on, there’s the stripper, the combat freak, my first disciple who’s both a rules addict and possibly a masochist, and then there’s Mira, whose tongue could curdle milk and who liked to try to hit below the belt whenever I told her I wasn’t interested in training her. When I first heard about you traveling with a child I thought maybe you’d know a measure of my suffering, but noooo!” Laxus growled, looking as if he wanted to reach over and hit Ranma.

“But surely Carla is a help?” Wendy asked innocently. She didn’t understand some of the words Laxus had used there, but understood that he was complaining about having to take care of troublesome children. Having met more than a few brats and bullies when she and Ranma stayed in one city or another, she understood that.

Laxus and Carla looked at one another, and then Carla gave a regal sniff and looked away while Laxus rolled his eyes. “Let’s just say that Carla’s and my personalities clash and leave it at that.” Laxus hated taking orders, was the very definition of a loner for the most part, and didn’t exactly have the greatest caring manner. Carla was obstreperous, arrogant in her opinions and intellect, and was more than willing to insult anyone. She also seemed to want to try and steer Laxus’ actions occasionally, and he didn’t like that one bit, though he did tend to go along with things at times, just like this one. They might have gotten along when she was younger, but they had not been very close, and that had gotten worse as Carla grew up.

Now Laxus allowed a small smile to appear on her face. “I’ve never been much of a hugger like you are, girl, so there’s that. And like Carla said, there’s also a specific nuisance for her at the guild in the form of the other Exceed I mentioned.” With that he looked over at Ranma. “So, like I said, you should go first.”

“Well then, where to begin? I suppose I should start by saying that the Beast wasn’t the first demon I’ve had a run in with. That honor goes to a big bastard named Deliora I ran into in Iceberg.” Ranma began, while Laxus and Carla both listened intently along with Wendy. Ranma had a great gift for storytelling, which he had used on occasion during their travels.

From there, Laxus told Ranma about Fairy Tail and about another Dragon Slayer being there. “But Natsu has no more idea about where his father went than you have of dragons in general. He’s also the combat junkie I mentioned earlier. It’s like he can’t stand not fighting, not flinging himself at the strongest opponent around with no real understanding of the concepts of training or tactics or styles; he plays it by ear all the time.” Laxus scowled. “The irritating thing is, it works out a lot of the time, and he’s got immense potential, both magically and as a fighter. It’s just frustrating he isn’t bright enough to really see how to make the most of it.”

“Bah, at least Natsu is smart enough to know that the world does not revolve entirely around food. In that he is better than that blasted tomcat,” Carla groused.

“True,” Laxus groaned. At Wendy and Ranma’s quizzical looks, Laxus explained about Happy’s infatuation with Carla and his attempts to ‘woo’ her. Ranma and Wendy both blanched at the mention of how much the fish he had left at their apartment had stunk up the place, shuddering at what it must have been to a Dragon Slayer’s sense of smell. Throughout this exchange Carla didn’t even try to leave Wendy’s lap, instead leaning back against her and looking more at peace than Laxus had ever seen her.

This interlude was interrupted by Ranma’s brooch beginning to glow from where it still was pinned to his cloak, which hung in turn at the moment from the back of the door leading into the room. Ranma jumped to his feet and made for it. As he put the cloak on, the image of Queen Rose appeared, pulsing out from the lacrima to stare at him. “Ranma, we have a bit of an emergency, one that you told us several months back that you wished to have us label your particular bailiwick.”

Laxus’ eyes widened, but he stayed silent, shaking his head sharply as Carla made to ask a question. This looked important; questions could come later.

“A demon? Funny thing, Your Majesty, I just dealt with one such here in Fiore. A real nasty peace of work it was, too,” Ranma said, nodding his thanks towards Laxus. “Where’s this problem cropped up exactly?”

“Along my border with Stella. A group of demon cultists has found something and are trying to call forth a demon from a book they stole from somewhere. We don’t know where, or even if it’s real, but if it is…” Rose trailed off, shaking her head.

“Got it. But why can’t you nip this in the bud on your own?”

Rose winced. “Ahh. I was hoping you wouldn’t ask. But they are operating out of the lands of a noble who has been against my reforms, not” she said, attempting to take on the tone of an old man and actually succeeding to a startling degree. “That I have anything against a powerful government or getting rid of the slave trade, abhorrent practice. But there’s something fundamentally wrong about a woman wielding such power. It’ll go to her head, don’t you know. Bound to in time.”

Looking as if she wanted to spit, Rose changed back to her regular tone of voice with a sneer on her face. “So I can’t just send in troops without substantive evidence that would hold up in court. The word of my spies would not, and should the existence of my spy ring get out, that too would be damning. No, I rather think this is a time for Ranger Oceana, or rather, the wandering mage Ranma to just wander into trouble once more.”

Wendy giggled, coming around the image to stand beside Ranma and curtsying prettily. “And that’s something we do so well, Your Majesty.”

“Well, more your irresponsible poster child of a brother than you, my dear,” Rose said, smiling at the little girl. They had yet to meet in person, but Rose had talked to Ranma and Wendy a few times when they were shadowing San Jiao Shi in Minstrel, and Rose had developed a soft spot for the girl, just as she had for Ranma.

“We’ll be there as soon as possible, Your Majesty, though how fast that will be I can’t say until we cross into Bosco. I have no idea about how far that is from our current position. I’ll contact you then,” Ranma said bowing his head formally.

“Manners, from you? Will wonders never cease?” Rose replied dryly, then cut the connection.

For a moment the room was silent, then Ranma turned, rubbing at his pigtail as he looked at Laxus, ignoring Carla for a moment who was also staring wide-eyed at Wendy and Ranma. “So um… yeah. I’m afraid me and Wendy have to go.”

Laxus slowly shook his head. “Yeah, I can see that. So, you hadn’t mentioned being a damned Ranger before this! By the One Magic, Rangers are rarer than Wizard Saints!”

“And just as mysterious as the Wizard Saints are visible,” Ranma replied quickly. “So you can’t go and blab about this. I wouldn’t be half as effective if it became common knowledge.”

Shaking his head, Laxus seemed to be stunned for a moment, then he guffawed. “You know, I used to think the two of us would remain relatively close in terms of power and skill. Even when I heard about your fights against that mage who had enthralled Capricorn I thought that. But now I think you’ve left me behind! Of course there’s only one thing for me to do to rectify that: for me to push to become a Wizard Saint, the youngest Wizard Saint ever! That’ll even up the score nicely, don’t you think?”

Ranma laughed too, and the two men clasped forearms, thumping one another on the shoulder while Wendy looked on in confusion, and Carla rolled her eyes. *Men!*

A moment later Ranma and Wendy started to repack their gear prior to Ranma stuffing it all into his Requip space. At that point as Ranma was saying goodbye to Laxus and making a promise to make for Magnolia after this job was done (unless something else came up of course), Carla spoke up. “Take, take me with you!” she blurted, sounding both needy and uncertain, more uncertain than Laxus had ever seen her before. “Please, I would truly like to see more of the world, and…”

Carla fell silent, unable to come up with a way to explain her connection to Wendy in such a way that would make sense to Ranma. “And I think Wendy could use a real lady’s influence to counterbalance yours,” she said instead, rather lamely in her opinion.

However, Ranma didn’t spot it, instead staring at the furry-demon-like Exceed in thought. Wendy spoke before he could, picking up Carla and hugging her to her, bringing out the full power of her puppy dog eye attack. Carly unconsciously added to the cuteness factor of the move so much that it went from having the ability to turn brains into mush to actually being cavity inducing. “Please, Ranma? I’ve always wanted a pet and more friends, and Carla can count as both!”

That caused Carla to look up at Wendy incredulously, spluttering with indignation, but Ranma ignored that, rubbing at Wendy’s head thoughtfully as he looked first at Carla, then over to Laxus. Ranma actually wasn’t against the idea, though he didn’t think much of what he had seen of Carla so far. However that was a secondary consideration to his main idea: that the Exceed could, given her furry demon appearance, help Ranma figure out a way to beat the Neko-ken. And if he mastered the Neko-ken, his combat abilities would sky rocket! “What do you think, Laxus?”

“I think Carla’s her own cat woman, and I think she is grasping this chance to escape the guild and Happy stalking her,” Laxus replied dryly. “If you decide to take her with you, be warned: she’s got a tongue on her that can strip off paint. And is a little too free with those little claws of hers. But it’s up to you, Ranma. Can you handle taking care of a pampered Exceed who’s never roughed it in her life along with little Wendy here?”

“Well, when you put it like that…”

Wendy and Carla both protested at that, and eventually Ranma caved. “All right, you can come with us, on a trial basis, at least. We’ll see how you stand up to the trip to Bosco. For now, let’s go!” Ranma said, turning to the door and not even slowing down as Wendy clambered up to her usual perch. “Missions like this are time sensitive.”

Startled it took a moment for Carla to realize Ranma had just left her standing there. Only Wendy calling back to her got the Exceed in motion, and she immediately called forth her wings, hovering there in the air to stare at Laxus. He smiled at her and waved her off. “Go on, get out there. You and I both know we weren’t exactly the most compatible of friends. I think you’ll do fine with Wendy. I’ll see you when Ranma finally follows through with his promise to stop by the guild one of these days.”

Carla nodded, then, surprising Laxus, flew forward to kiss him on the check before turning to the window. “Be safe, Laxus, and remember: just because dating Evergreen didn’t work out, that doesn’t mean there aren’t other ladies out there for you.” Opening the window, Carla flew out into the rain to catch up with the other two Dragon Slayers, leaving Laxus alone with the four Strausses.

**OOOOOOO**

Mira groaned, stretching slightly as her mind slowly came back online. *Ugh… Magical exhaustion sucks…* Then the memory of what had been happening as she blacked out came back to her, and she made to get up only to have a heavy hand land on her shoulder, pushing her back down. “Don’t,” said a familiar and not altogether liked voice. “Your siblings are all safe. Just rest.”

“Laxus?” Mira muttered, opening her eyes despite how bleary they were and turning in the direction of the voice. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Feh. Lucky for me I wasn’t expecting you to be grateful,” Laxus scoffed. “Carla had a feeling that something was wrong about this mission of yours, so she and I came after you. I ran into an old friend of mine and together we killed that demon that you were fighting.”

“Wh, you mean the Beast?” Mira asked, her memories a jumble. “It was a demon? That makes sense, and I suppose that’s why my brother lost control of its soul.”

“That and the fact the soul in this case wasn’t the entirety of the demon. Ranma explained it to me, sort of. It turns out that to kill demons like that you have to find their phylactery, the thing that is actually containing their souls. In this case it was an ancient looking painting in a cave way out there. Elfman’s attempt to use Take Over split the thing’s soul, and the other half reformed. I had to deal with it on my own before I destroyed the painting,” Laxus replied.

“You had to fight that thing on your own? Ouch.” Mira frowned, then slowly began to smile. “So, your friend’s name is Ranma, huh? Is she your girlfriend?”

“GAHH!” Laxus groaned, holding his stomach as if he was sick. “NO!!! Just, no. There are more reasons than I care to list why that is not only just plain wrong, but disturbing. But yeah, Ranma’s my friend. And without him, you might have died yesterday.”

*Or lost one of my siblings, or maybe even both of them,* Mira thought, the idea of that causing her more pain than the idea of her own passing. She chuckled then, shaking her head. “Y’know, funny thing is, I must have taken a hit in the head near the end of that fight. I could swear I saw two Lisannas at one point. Funny how the head works.” At that thought she looked down at her arm. “How’d you heal me, anyway?”

“As for that, Ranma had another girl with her. She healed you and your siblings in about fifteen minutes flat, the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. Even Porlyusica would have been slower than that,” Laxus said, moving forward and sliding one hand underneath Mira’s pillow, lifting it up and sliding in another pillow. “And as for your seeing two Lisannas, you did.”

Mira’s eyes widened as she stared at the two mattresses laid out along the feet of the two beds in the room. On both of them lay a Lisanna. They were exactly alike, though one had a tiny scar along her hair line, and they were wearing different clothing. “Wh, what the freaking hell!!??!!”

Both Lisannas and Elfman stirred at her shout. Elfman sat up abruptly, staring around, his face horrified until he saw his siblings. Then the fearful guilty look on his face faded into one of shock before his eyes rolled back up into his head and he slumped back onto the bed.

“Mou, Mira-nee, why’re you shouting?” one Lisanna muttered, while the other simply whimpered, holding her head before blinking.

A second later the first Lisanna looked up in shock as her own voice reached her from nearby. “Mira-nee, what happened? The last thing I remember is…”

Both Lisanna’s sat up as one and stared at one another while nearby Laxus smirked and leaned back, more than happy to let the chaos of this moment carry itself out. To his surprise, however, Lisanna A, the one wearing the clothing he remembered her wearing when the Strausses left the guild, simply frowned in confusion. “Hmm… Some kind of weird mirror magic?”

“Huh, that’s actually not a bad guess,” Laxus said with a chuckle.

Lisanna B looked at them all, then seemed to stare at Laxus. “La, Laxus? But, but how… You’re dead! I saw your body! You… This is…” Then her eyes looked over to Elfman and her eyes widened further. “What’s going on!? When did Elfman become so tanned, or so buff!?”

Lisanna A had jumped up to race over to her older sister, intent on checking her out, but seeing Mira moving her arm easily and the growing distress on her own face, Lisanna instead turned in her direction, moving to sit on the same mattress and pulling her body double into a hug. “There, there. I don’t know what’s going on or where you came from, but we’ll get to the bottom of this, okay?”

Gulping in air, Lisanna B slowly backed away from her complete mental breakdown and nodded shakily. “Th, thank you... Just, just answer me one question: are you all still members of Fairy Tail?”

“Hell yes!” Said Laxus and Mira as one. They looked at one another, then laughed and Lisanna B joined in wetly.

It took a while, but eventually the story came out. Lisanna B, who quickly agreed with Lisanna to change her name to Lis, came from an alternate universe of some kind. A world where Magic was scarce, and Fairy Tail was outlawed for their use of it and refusing to follow orders from the King of Edolas, a nation which apparently covered the entire peninsula of Ishgar. How she had gotten here or what that meant, she had no idea.

Eventually Laxus decided that they had to head back to the guild to get Makarov’s opinion on things. That and everyone’s reactions to a second Lisanna coming back with them would be hilarious. By the look on her face when he said it was time to head home, Mira was thinking the same thing. That and deeper, guilty looking thoughts, much like Elfman who had been noticeably silent since waking up. Still, Laxus was confident they’d get through it eventually.

The trip back to the guild was dominated by Lis and Lisanna chattering away at one another, becoming seemingly the best of friends almost instantly. Mira seemed happy about that, while Elfman looked bemused, and Laxus drowned them all out with his headphones on max. Eventually they were home, and Laxus hurled open the doors. “We’re back, you bastards!”

The guild members present all turned and shouted welcome back and other things, only to grind to a halt as they stared at the two Lisannas coming in behind Laxus and Mira. “What the hell!?” was the general consensus at that point. Cana and a few others had been caught mid drink and were now pouring their drinks down their fronts rather than their throats, and Makarov had slumped sideways, his eyes wide and unseeing. Laxus idly noted that Erza was nowhere in sight, probably out on her mission still, since it had been one with an investigation side to it. Gray too was missing.

But the best reaction was from Natsu. He had charged forward, either to attack Laxus or to greet Lisanna, but stumbled to a halt so fast he lost his footing flipping forward head over heels to land at Mira’s feet. Happy too had looked shocked, falling backwards off the table he had been standing on, muttering, “two mamas?”

“Ara, Natsu. I like a guy falling for me as much as any gal, but I don’t think I’d approve of you two-timing my sister,” Mira drawled, standing to one side.

“Natsu!” shouted Lis and Lisanna, moving forward as one to help him up. They looked at one another, then giggled and pulled Natsu up into a three-way hug before moving over to the nearest table and once more chattering away. Natsu just stared, his eyes wide as he turned his head back and forth between them.

“What the hell happened out there, Laxus?” Makarov asked, having recovered from his surprise.

The two S-class mages moved over to him, sitting down next to him. “That, Old Man, is a very long story…”

After leading the two younger mages into his office, Makarov listened intently to the battle from beginning to end, with Mira speaking first, then Laxus. When Laxus described the painting and the feel of it, he shuddered along with the two mages, then grasped his grandson’s hand, squeezing it tightly, both for destroying it and for the role he had played in saving several of the guild’s other children. Makarov also became more interested in this Ranma person now than ever before. *But I could have sworn that Laxus said Ranma was a guy?*

Shrugging off that mystery Makarov looked over at Lis, who he had asked to join them. “Well, I hate to say it, but I don’t know anything about this Edolas place. And I’ve never heard about someone traveling between universes like that. I will keep my eye out for any information on that, but know, my dear, you are welcome here. For now, I think we should probably keep the idea of you coming from another world secret. I can’t imagine that the Magic Council would react calmly to the idea of other worlds, especially one which is losing its magic for some reason. They would be afraid you might try to somehow steal ours or simply invade and would overreact for certain.”

“Erm, thank you, sir, and I agree. Like I told my family and Laxus, I have no idea how I wound up here, but I did, and that means someone back home might have found a way to get here too,” Lis said, looking uncomfortable.

“What’s the matter, my dear?” Makarov asked, seeing that the girl was feeling that way because of him.

“Well, it’s just, most of the people I see here I know from the Fairy Tail guild in my own world. But I don’t recognize you, sir. And that blue cat… Something’s off about him too, though I can’t for the life of me remember what.”

“Huh,” Makarov muttered, frowning at that while also thinking about Carla’s absence. He hoped she wouldn’t be away for too long, but if she wanted to follow this young girl around, who was he to tell her she couldn’t? Happy will be saddened by it however.

Setting that thought aside, “Well, perhaps I too died at some point like Laxus. You say he was guild master when he died?” Lis nodded, not seeing the smirk on Laxus’ face at that news or the eye-roll Makarov made before he continued. “Well in that case my dying earlier, possibly before you even joined the guild, makes sense. Are there any other changes you’ve noticed?”

Lis laughed. “Well, there are a few mages missing I think, including one of my better friends named Juvia. I’ll have to look for her, I think. I’d like to get to know her here too. But as for mages being here that weren’t part of the guild back home? Um… There is one. Mira-nee mentioned something about an Erza? Well, um… In my world there’s an Erza Knightwalker, but she’s not part of the guild. In fact…”

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma growled angrily as he smashed the head of a would-be cultist into the ground, then flipped up and over him. “Now, Wendy!”

“Hai, Oni-chan! Tenryu no HOKO!!” Wendy shouted, slamming a full powered breath attack into the group of cultists between him and the book they had been reading from. They all screamed, hurled every which way or just hammered down into the ground.

With the way clear Ranma barely touched the ground before leaping forward once more, grabbing at the book and the large candlestick that the cultists had been praying to. He hurled the candlestick up into the air, and a Water Dragon's Cutting Claw cut the thing in two just as it began to glow ominously. The glow snuffed out followed by a faint scream, and Ranma turned dropping the book and pulling out his pistols from his Requip space. “Guns Magic Rapid Fire!”

“Tenryu no Yokugeki! (Sky Dragon's Wing Attack)!” Wendy shouted from nearby. If the actual demon had manifested, Ranma would have quickly ordered her and Carla to run away. But against merely mortal enemies Ranma wasn’t going to try and shield her from fighting.

*Especially since this lot doesn’t even have any mages among them,* Ranma thought. *I wonder where Carla is.* He didn’t see her and wondered if the cat-like Exceed had decided not to take part. She had certainly been horrified at the very idea of letting Wendy fight at all, but while Ranma could easily have dealt with the group of demon worshipers on his own, he might not have been able to get close enough to the demonic candle if he had. This way was much easier.

An instant later it was all over bar the cleanup. This time Ranma hadn’t killed any of the cultists, since he had actual authority figures to turn to here in Bosco. “Great job, Wendy. That was a clean sweep, and no demon to fight this time either.”

Wendy smiled at that, but the smile soon disappeared, and Ranma sighed. It was coming up onto the anniversary of Grandeeney’s disappearance, and Wendy always became sad around this time of year. Ranma would continually try to cheer her up or take her mind off things, but sometimes it just didn’t work, and Wendy would have to have a good cry in order to eventually feel better for herself.

As Ranma and Wendy were going around tying the injured up, then healing them, Carla finally showed up. “I still cannot believe you would let Wendy fight like that, you, you barbarian! I knew you were an uncouth, egotistical lout, but that is going entirely too far!”

“Carla, I like to help Oni-chan whenever I can. Besides, this time wasn’t nearly as bad as a few other fights I’ve been in. They never even came close to me,” Wendy replied before Ranma could.

“But they could have! A young lady your age should not be so close to danger. You should instead find a nice guild and settle down for a few years. Not be dragged hither and yon by this, this…” Carla stuttered to a halt, one claw pointing up at Ranma as he finished tying up the last of the cultists.

“You’ve called me a barbarian and uncouth lout already, so this time it should be either ‘fool’ or ‘irresponsible buffoon.’ You really need some more insults, y’know, though I appreciate the fact you don’t actually curse in front of Wendy,” Ranma commented, not looking up from his work until he finished tying up the last cultist. With that done he moved over to where he had dropped the book, pulling it open. Like the one he’d found down in Desierto, there was nothing inside but the word Zeref, written over and over. Growling, he pulled out some matches and set it alight.

Tossing the book away, he pulled out his pipe and tamped some of the Dragon’s Breath into it, lighting it up before tossing the match away. The calming smell wafted over him and the area around him prompting Wendy to come over burrowing into Ranma’s side and breathing in deeply.

“Grr…” Carla muttered, but followed them as they left the building. Ranma let loose a smoke ring, then handed the pipe down to Wendy, who held it nearby, smelling it with a smile on her face.

Ranma then spent a few minutes calling it in to Queen Rose, holding the two broken bits of the candleholder to show it to her. “I don’t have any idea what this demon would have done or even if there was a demon inside it in the first place, but the cultists were very real. None of them matches the description you gave me of Baron Fassano, though. Whatever he’s up to against you doesn’t include backing demon worshipers. You want me to turn them over to him?”

“Hmmm…” Rose said, her image becoming smaller as if she was leaning back. “I think so, yes. I have agents there, and if any of them ‘escape’ or are released for some reason before they are sent to the mines, well, that will give me another string to hold against him. You’re certain they wouldn’t be able to try and summon another demon?”

“I didn’t say anything about that, but no I don’t think so. Thing is, I have no idea how these cultists are figuring out how to try and summon these demons anyway. All the books they’ve been using just say Zeref’s name over and over again. I can’t tell you more than that.”

“That is enough then. Turn them over to his men. Will you be coming by my capital again?”

Ranma shook his head. “No, Wendy and I are going to head out to sea again and make for Fiore.”

“In that case I will say farewell for now, Ranma, and young Wendy too,” Rose said with a smile before she cut the connection.

Several hours later Ranma had turned the cultists over to the locals. A little bit after that Ranma was walking through the forests of Bosco once more towards the nearest port, ignoring Carla’s mutters as he smoked on his pipe and Wendy nuzzled into the back of Ranma’s head. The Dragon’s Breath helped Ranma keep calm as Carla lay on the top of his head, the feel of her body up there, the fur against his skin and hair bringing back bad memories.

He looked up, however, as he heard the boom of thunder in the distance and sighed, noticing it was also getting dark quickly. “Time to put up the tent, Wendy. Looks like it’s going to rain.”

“Kay,” Wendy replied, hopping off his back. She still looked sad, since they were in a forest somewhat similar to the one where Grandeeney had left her.

Ranma quickly put up the tent, and the three travelers crawled in, Ranma hesitating just long enough as Carla entered to be caught some in the rain. But thanks to still wearing his Song Silk, Ranma didn’t get wet. Pulling the cloak off, he set it aside, then reclaimed his pipe from Wendy once more before sitting down next to her. Carla had already pulled out a book to read to Wendy, the two of them exchanging a glance over the girl’s head.

It had been about two weeks since Carla had joined them, and in that time they had not warmed to one another. Ranma was blocked from doing so because Carla, for all that she wasn’t a cat, was enough of one to make him very uneasy around her. She was also demanding and very much a complainer when it came to life on the road. Even the tent and their sleeping bags, things that Ranma thought were almost like gifts from the gods, they were so amazing, did not meet her requirements.

For her part, Carla hated the fact Ranma was so uncouth, didn’t seem to care about her opinion very often, and was a ‘barbarian,’ something that she told him practically every other hour. She also seemed to resent that Wendy always looked to him first rather than her when it came to any discussion between them. And she had also said at one point that his smell bothered her, which was odd, but since she couldn’t explain why that was Ranma ignored it.

Yet for all that, both cat and man loved and cared for Wendy. And the two of them wanted to keep up her spirits up as she was feeling down at this point. So while Ranma set out Wendy’s favorite meal, Carla read to the girl, with Ranma interjecting with noises here and there. Eventually Wendy fell asleep, cuddling Carla like a toy.

Ranma lifted them both up and placed them in the sleeping bags. He then smoked his Dragon’s Breath pipe for a time as he began to meditate on his ki. It had been a while since he’d had time to simply mediate, since they had left Desierto, in fact. He was interrupted by a voice pulling him out of his meditation.

“Are, are you all right?” Carla asked.

Ranma looked up, only now noticing that Carla had left the sleeping bag. She stood in front of him, holding out a cup of hot chocolate. “D, don’t misunderstand! I still don’t like you or approve of the fact that Wendy looks up to you so much. But you looked cold, and we had already made some of this, so it would go to waste otherwise.”

Taking the cup, Ranma sipped at it, smiling as the scent of it mixed with the Dragon’s Breath. It was an odd combination, but a good one. He refrained from telling Carla he really didn’t notice the cold much at all, not even in his past life and certainly not in this one.

The two of them were silent for a time, then Carla asked the question. She had woken up in an effort to hopefully bury the hatchet with Ranma. As long as they were both involved with Wendy, and it certainly looked like Ranma was going to be a permanent fixture in Wendy’s life, they would have to learn to get along with one another. “You…you sometimes seem scared of me. I was wondering if you could tell me why.”

Ranma paused, thinking about how to answer until he had a plausible story that made no mention of cross-dimensional travel. “I wasn’t raised from a baby by Typhon like Grandeeney raised Wendy. I was found by him when I was around nine after running away from my old man. He was an asshole. A really good teacher; it’s because of his training I am so good at fighting. But one of the things he tried to teach me was called the Cat Fist…”

After explaining about that, Ranma waited for Carla’s reaction, which was horror, of course. “How? That’s, that isn’t training, it’s child abuse!”

“Yep. So I ran away. Trouble is, it might have saved me from further pain, but I’m still terrified of ca, cats. There, I said it,” Ranma said, shaking his head. He then looked at Carla. “I don’t suppose you’d be willing to help me with that?”

Carla paused, then nodded slowly. “How about a trade? You let me help teach Wendy how to be a proper lady, and teach me as much as you can about how to fight, and I’ll help you with that.”

“I won’t let you try and turn Wendy into a full time girly-girl; she wouldn’t go for it. But other than that, you have a deal,” Ranma said, holding out his hand. Carla held out her own tiny paw, and they shook hands as the rain outside the tent picked up once more.

**End Chapter**

Had a lot of issues thinking of how I wanted to end this chapter, but I decided to end it here. That lets me use the last time skip to cover the Neko-ken and Ranma’s Demon Slayer magic. Just so it’s clear, the year is now 782.

About Edolas and Makarov: I am of the opinion that Makarov would not know about Edolas. I very much doubt that Mystogan would explain it to him. Indeed, I doubt very much that Siegrain in Edolas would tell anyone - he was desperate to work on his own to keep the two worlds separate, despite the fact that if he had more people to help, they might have been able to stop the Anima from activating anywhere long enough to suck in enough Ethernano to keep the process going. He might have been forced to when he joined up, but even then, I think that Makarov would have been doing more to help him in closing the anima than in canon if he knew.

Jacob vs Ranma: This Jacob isn’t as strong as he was in canon, being more than ten years younger. The battlefield was also against him to a phenomenal degree. Given those two points I think that Ranma defeating him, with difficulty, is believable. I also think it beyond silly to assume that Alvarez wouldn’t send a Spriggan or two with the invasion fleet. I also know that Zeref said at one point he stopped the invasion plans just as much as the attack from Etherion, but I think that the loss of a Spriggan would be enough to force him to step in and stop any more actions from the ‘failed experiment’ who calls himself Zeref’s son.

Demons in general: I’ve decided to make them, and Zeref by extension, darker and more obviously the products/examples of dark magic. Still uncertain if I’ll have Zeref or Acnologia be the uber-villain of the piece

Jenny: I’ve never used a blonde girl in a pairing before LOL. But seriously, I think she’s the kind of person who would follow her emotions and also be very upfront about things. She’d also certainly be a bit of a flirt, In turn, I think at this point Ranma would sometimes like to let his hormones out to play. Jenny would just as certainly react badly to the story of Ranma’s battle against Jacob et al. She would also eventually get over it. Whether or not something serious eventually occurs between them is something I will have to see about. However she IS going to be a lot stronger than in canon. I love the idea of having her be Mira’s rival in more than just their modeling regardless of what I decide in terms of pairings.