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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wendy blinked. “Attacked by a library?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ranma blinked and then shrugged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They are yes,” Jura said with a nod.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What am I, a pet?” Natsu growled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**OOOOOOO**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**OOOOOOO**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Wh, but, how… that is, I couldn’t…”

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

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

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

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

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

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

**OOOOOOO**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**OOOOOOO**

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

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

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

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

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

**OOOOOOO**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I'm a bit festivaled out,” Wendy said honestly, carrying several stuffed animals and with her small Requip space equally stuffed full of other animals now. She also was looking a little tired. Dealing with that many people and that much noise was kind of exhausting over time.

“In that case how but we all go to the Fairy Hill beach? We've got another four hours or so before we need to get ready for the parade. We can have a bit of a cookout, see if the other girls want to join us, a bit of a swim, and then head back to the guild to put the final touches on our carts. Or at least Erza and I can and little Wendy too.”

“M, me!?” Wendy squeaked. But I'm not part of Fairy Tail!”

“But you are a friend, and besides, there's no better place to experience the fair then as part of the parade” Bisca said, smiling at the younger girl and leaning down to rub her head tenderly. “I know I’ve got room on my float for you, and I bet Erza could make room on hers. As fun as the festival is for others, it’s more fun for us to be a part of it, to see and use our magics all together. Trust me Wendy, you’ll love it.”

While Wendy continued to stutter and thank her for that, Erza and Bisca led the way to Fairy Hills, where they all changed into bathing suits and headed down to the beach. It was a tiny bit cold since it was actually autumn, but despite that, the sun was great and the water was pleasant enough to swim in for short periods of time.

Erza wore the same swimsuit she had at Akane Resort, as did Ranma and Wendy. Erza looked amazing in hers as Ranma had known she would, and she spent about ten hours (to his mind, it was actually only a minute) just staring at the other redhead after she came down from the dorm. Tied on both sides the bottom half of the black bikini covered everything it needed like a second skin, showing offer her bare thighs and covering her rear yet somehow making it seem even more enticing. The triangular cups of her bikini top covered all of her chest yet Erza’s breast size was such that it still made Ranma’s mouth go dry.

She blushed brightly under the other redhead’s gaze, but preened all the same as she laid out a beach towel next to where Ranma was laying out. Nearby Carla and Wendy was happily mapping out a whole sand city, the younger girl earnestly using a long stick to mark out where the foundations of each building would go, the outer walls and so on. Even Carla was getting into it, given how detailed Wendy was being about it.

“Do you want to continue our contests?” Erza asked, pulling out a volleyball ball from behind her.

“Heh, you’re on, we’ll make it a battle of the redheads!”

“Oy, what are we chopped liver?” Jenny asked, following Bisca down the small walkway to the beach.

Ranma turned and gulped then looked away, putting a hand over her eyes. “Damn it, there’s only so much stimulation I can take girls!”

Jenny wore a brief bikini top which was almost made to look like a mesh thing, made of gold and pink flowers interconnected, covering a lot of her chest but somehow not at the same time, Ranma wasn’t certain how to explain it. Her swimsuit bottoms were the same color, but didn’t have the near-see-through quality, although they hugged her hips and privates like a second skin. Her hair was done up in another intricate display rather than down her back as it had been earlier, her lightly tanned skin shone with good health and she smiled and posed for Ranma as Ranma turned to look at her and Bisca, bouncing a bit in place to set her breasts to jiggling very slightly.

In contrast, Bisca’s was a far more simpler design, yet just as attractive. Her bathing suit was the style Ranma had heard called a V thong or something similar. Consisting of a single piece, the bathing suit started at a v-shaped bottom portion before going up Bisca’s back and front in two long strips of black and dark green to cover the sides and top of her breasts. Those strips were quite wide, but even so, there was a quite a lot of Bisca’s chest on display there. Even better in a way, was her white skin in contrast to the black of her suit. She blushed hotly under Ranma’s gaze, biting her red-painted bottom lip and looking back at her, chuckling quietly. “Ah, I remember wearing a bathing suit like that once, when I wanted to make certain no one was going to be looking at me. Are you that self-conscious of your female body Ranma?”

“Hah, please!” Jenny said, moving forward with Bisca and then sinking down onto the sand next to Wendy, staring in awe at the ongoing city planning in front of her. “Ranma was definitely flaunting it a bit ago. I’d wager it’s more like selective body armor right? The idea of a guy flirting with you is a little…”

“It makes my fists itch and my mind ache at the very mention of it, yeah,” Ranma said with a smile, moving away from them as she used one foot to mark out a square on the sand a ways away from Wendy’s ongoing plans. “Still, no offense to either of ya, but those swimsuits don’t exactly look appropriate for a game of volleyball.” *I’d love the view though if they tried…*

“Hah, you’ve never heard of sticky spells then. These swimsuits won’t come off whatever we do,” Jenny replied as she stood back up before leaning in, whispering so that the nearby Wendy wouldn’t overhear. “Not unless we want them to…”

Ranma, Erza and Bisca all blushed, and Jenny laughed wickedly, moving away from Ranma to where she estimated a corner of the court should be. “Well come on, let’s get this bit over with then we can begin. But I vote right now the two redheads here should be broken up between the two teams.”

After playing and swimming for a few hours, Ranma began to get hungry and pushed out of the waves, trying his best not to stare as Jenny and Bisca attempted to fight back against Erza in a splash contest, the origin of which Ranma hadn’t seen, having been diving at the time. “Alrighty, I’m hungry, so I’m going to go change and then grab some stuff for grilling, I see a grill over there. If any of you want some of those girly veggies tell me now or forever do your own cooking.”

Bisca laughed moving out of the water. “Yeehaw, a cookout!”

About forty minutes later Ranma returned to find the girls had set up the beach area around Wendy’s town for a cookout. The outer wall of Wendy’s city was at just the right height to sit on the grill had been prepped with charcoal, and Bisca had brought along mushrooms and peppers to pair with the meat, while Erza had dragged two logs over to make a triangle with the wall. They had also been joined by several dozen Fairy Tail members, Jura, Lyon and Sherry. The Trimens were also there, but under strict orders on threat of pain from Erza not to make trouble.

As Ranma leaped down from the top of the cliff, Bisca looked up from where she had been talking with a thoroughly red-faced Alzack and Nab to smile at him, her eyes racking over his form, wincing only slightly when she spotted his scars. Ranma had taken the time to change, and now wore a pair of swimming trunks and nothing else. This put on display his lower legs and his upper body to the appreciative gaze of many a girl there. Most of them were used to seeing Gray and Natsu, but there was something different about seeing Ranma like this.

It wasn’t the definition. Ranma’s body was extremely fit, a six pack you could grate cheese with, the muscles on his sides and arms all so sharply defined they looked like they were carved out of granite, and besides definition he also had more muscles on him than either Natsu or Gray, though he wasn’t up to Laxus or Elfman in size. Still to Fairy Tail that wouldn’t have been enough.

No, it was the scars and the way Ranma moved that set him apart. First, Ranma moved like an odd mix between an unstoppable object and a cat, all prowling grace and harnessed confidence.

And Neither Natsu nor Gray, the two men whose builds came closest to Ranma’s, had many scars. Ranma had a lot of them. Most of them were small, but one of them was quite large, a jagged circle the size of Elfman’s fist or so right over his stomach and, when he turned, it was clear it passed right through his body. Everyone there took one look at it and winced, wondering what had caused it. Bisca sighed, having seen the back of it before during their trip to capture that guild of spies and train robbers, but not having seen it in as good a light as this.

Only Erza just nodded her head down at it as Ranma moved to the grill. She hadn’t seen Ranma’s bare stomach before this, but of all the guild, she was the last person to be turned off by scars. “There must be a tale behind that one. It looks like a claw of some kind made it.”

“Good eyes ya got there, Erza. Yeah, this was caused the first time I ran into a demon. The same one you and the others helped kill on Galuna Island, Deliora.” Ranma grinned like a shark for a moment, smacking his shoulder against hers. “I was only about twelve or so at the time, and the thing woulda killed me if not for Iceberg’s court mages. But I still made it run away rather than finish me off.”

Erza nodded at that, an equally vicious yet approving smile on her face as she did. Nearby Bisca, who had been standing still, just staring at that scar for a moment, moved over to them picking up the grilling tongs

The cookout continued from there, getting larger for a time as more Fairy Tail mages joined them. Ichiya and the others came down too, causing Jet to race out for more food, but eventually it stated to get dark out, which was a signal for everyone to start leaving to get ready for the parade. Jenny and the others left to, hoping to stop in at their hotels before heading back out to catch the parade.

“So where exactly should we set ourselves up for the best view of this shindig anyway?” Ranma asked, gesturing to Jura, Jenny and the other non-local mages as they left. “I can’t imagine being so lucky that my apartment’s balcony would give me a good view of the whole thing.”

“What do you mean?” Natsu asked innocently, as he looked at Ranma from where he had just eaten the fire out of the grill. “You’re part of the fair, so why would you care about where to go to see it?”

“What?” Ranma asked, glaring at him.

“I signed you up as singer for the centermost float, that way your voice can reach the entire parade. We saw you singing and acting like a bard, I thought it fit,” Natsu said virtuously.

Ranma's net eyes narrowed. He honestly couldn’t tell if Natsu had done this to be an ass or because he thought Ranma would enjoy it, but decided after a second to go with the idea of the other Dragon Slayer just trying to be an ass.

But Erza came to Natsu's room rescue, putting in arm around Ranma’s, shoulder and squeezing gently, blushing very lightly at the smell of Ranma’s hair and the feel of his muscles under her arms. “Come on Ranma, it's all in good fun, and you can't deny that you do have a good singing voice. You can join me on my float, and sing from there.”

“Fine, but I will pay you back for this Natsu, that’s a promise,” Ranma intoned darkly, glaring at the Fire Dragon Slayer. For some reason that finally got through to the younger man, and he gulped, backing away quickly.

Jenny and Mira both rolled their eyes and, in an almost choreographed movement, both took an arm and dragged Ranma away. “Come on you, let’s get you ready for your big debut.”

**OOOOOOO**

At the same time, Lucy and Loke found Makarov in his office getting changed for his part in the parade. He smiled widely at them as they came in, but at the looks on their faces, he sobered. “What is it you two?”

“Master, Loke here has a request. A request I think we need to help him with, to get some closure…” Lucy began.

**OOOOOOO**

Later on, Ranma found herself once more a woman, this time dressed in something Mira had loaned her, a slinky lounge singer number in black with portions that flashed with red sequins as she moved her arms or twisted this way and that. The chest was teensy bit tight and Ranma had to let out the waist a bit, not that she would ever mention it in front of Mira.

Next to him, Juvia stood in a light blue bikini and skirt combo. The bikini was a large type of bikini that covered everything there, but despite that, Ranma had to shake her head and look away with a blush because Juvia, for all that she never dressed to show off, was just as good looking as any of the other girls he had spent the day with. Her waist was trim, though she was a bit wider than any of the others, but she also was quite large up top too. Ranma would estimate her size being somewhere around Erza’s, and maybe a bit fuller. Jenny had also done her hair up into a crown of blue tresses that looked both casual and amazingly difficult at the same time, something Ranma would never have thought possible.

Her smile too was enchanting a wide and happy beam of pleasure as she stared up at their float. “Juvia has heard about the Fantasia parade, but never dreamed to see it, let alone be a part of it! Juvia is soo excited!!!”

Ranma winked at her. “So am I, kind of. Oh, I’d prefer to not be in my female form or sing, but this looks like a lot of fun. Just don’t tell anyone. I want to get Natsu back for sticking me into this without asking me first.”

Juvia looked at the redhead, giggling quietly. She had seen Ranma’s curse in action several times by this point, and had gotten used to it, though there were still a few times it caught her by surprise. She had also enjoyed the few conversations the two of them had about water magic. So she brought a finger to her lips and winked back at the other girl. “Juvia promises to keep your enjoyment of this secret, Ranma-san.”

“Great.” Ranma replied with a smile, before turning his attention back up to the float. It looked like a representation of the guildhall in miniature, only done in garish colors and with a small balcony like structure going around it halfway up the sides of the wall. Above it was a banner proclaiming the name of Fairy Tail and below that was the stage where Ranma would be singing, complete with two large speakers.

It was the largest float, but in many ways it was the simplest looking. Bisca, Alzack, Nab and Max Alors had one that looked like a series of horses pulling a large pink, white and yellow carriage. The men all sat on the horses, and were talking quietly to one another now. On the carriage Bisca stood with another girl, a shorter looking girl with purple hair and glasses who Ranma must have been introduced to at one point but couldn’t remember the name of. Both of them wore a pink outfits lined with fur and with several lighter pink bows here and there. Bisca even had a polka-dotted kerchief tied around her neck resting down into her cleavage, and had left off her habitual cowgirl hat. At their feet rested a few long flags of multi-colors.

The Strauss family’s float consisted of a stone tower structure and an area right in front of the seeming entrance to it. There Elfman stood in his Takeover Beast form, while Lisanna sat next to him in her harpy form, talking quietly with Wendy. Anna and Mirajane were nowhere to be seen at present.

Beyond the two of them in either direction Ranma could see other floats. Erza’s was at the lead. It looked like a theater, with the backdrop of a light blue and dark blue canvas. In front of it, Erza stood calmly a sword in either hand, wearing a type of armor Ranma hadn’t seen her wear before. It consisted of a long red, gold and white skirt cut to look almost like the petals of a flower as it flared out from her legs. A yellow and silver breastplate that ended just above her breasts covered her stomach and chest. On her head, she wore a kind of tiara that consisted mostly of large feathered wings rising from above her ears. Wings also flared up from two armlets she had on her upper arms, her gauntlets gold and metal looking the most workmanlike of the entire ensemble. Her red hair flowed loosely down her back and at her neck she wore a tight choker with a small blue gem set into it. The whole thing probably wouldn’t work very well as armor, but it was certainly striking. It had certainly arrested Ranma’s attention when he saw it.

In the other direction over several more floats Ranma could see the large dragon float Natsu was controlling. He could even see a spurt of fire come out of its mouth as Natsu let off some steam. Elsewhere Gray stood on an ice sculpture made to look like Magnolia’s train station, with a wide area around him so he could create Ice sculptures as the parade went on. He knew there were others around, including Laxus’s which consisted of massive lightning rods stuck in every which way and Laxus himself dressed in a good suit, making that look a hell of a lot better than the Trimens could.

“Are you two ready?” Makarov asked, moving up to the two girls, whistling internally. *Hubba-hubba, why the hell does a man transform into that kind of body, and as for Juvia, why in the hell does she hide those massive knockers all the time!?*

“I guess, but what exactly am I supposed to be singing?” Ranma asked, snickering while Juvia giggled next to him at Makarov’s outfit. He looked almost like a clown minus the face-paint and nose, with a cap that had tiny cat ears on it. Something more different from the Titan-using Wizard Saint would have been impossible to find, which Ranma figured was sort of the point.

“Hah, anything you want so long as it’s upbeat. The parade will last for an hour start to finish, so twenty songs or so.”

Ranma winced. “Um, I don’t know if I know twenty upbeat songs. Most of my songs are either the kind you’d fight to, or that tell a story for when I pose as a bard.”

“Well, just do what you can,” Makarov said with a laugh. “We have Mira ready to step in and a lot of just musicals to play too.”

Nodding, Ranma raced off to find Mira, leaping up onto the Strauss Family’s float, knocking on the door of the papier-mâché tower. Mira stuck her head out, and smiled at Ranma, nodding in approval. “That looks good on you.”

“Thanks, but I think we need to be a little more organized about this whole musical accompaniment thing,” Ranma began. From there the two of them hammered out a plan, and not a moment too soon. As they were finishing there was a blare of a horn and Makarov shouted that it was time to go.

At the front of the parade Erza’s float started off, followed by two more then Bisca’s and at last Makarov’s with Juvia on it along with Makarov. Ranma hesitated, then leaped aboard, moving to join them. “When you start to see the crowd is when you should start singing,” Makarov ordered, wondering if Ranma really did have a good singing voice in his female form. *Natsu said she did, but what would Natsu know about good singing voices?*

“I’ve got this old man, trust me,” Ranma said then hopped up to balance on the tallest portion of the float. Staring ahead of her, she waited until she began to see the streets they were moving on start to fill up with pedestrians, then turned her attention on Erza, who had just begun her show.

“Dance my blades, Circle Sword!” Erza intoned, moving slowly, her blades flicking out languidly as if she was dancing, or doing a kata in slow motion. From all around her in a blaze of white magic appeared twenty swords identical to her current ones, longswords with small hilts, with wide wings coming up from the cross guard. They began to swirl and move around her in a display as beautiful as it was potentially deadly, but the warm smile on her face and Erza’s dress offset any concern anyone might have had about the blades themselves.

At the same time Bisca, Alzack and three other mages scattered throughout the parade pulled out their guns and aimed them into the sky. Over the cheering and some background music that had just began Ranma could hear Bisca shout out, “Guns Magic, Firework!”

From her gun and those of Alzack came dozens, then hundreds of tiny magic fireworks. They went off only a few stories above the city, a kaleidoscope of colors, white, green, purple, blue, red, dozens of hues from every color under the rainbow. At the same time, glowing images of animals both magical and not began to spread in the air out from a float behind Ranma, causing her to turn and see Cana, Lucy and a few others at work creating them. The two girls were dancing around one another, dressed like angels with small wings on their back and white blouses and pants, which hugged their figures as they danced around. Between them was a celestial spirit of some kind strumming on a lyre.

Shaking his head from wondering how Lucy was creating those animal images or if it was all Cana with her Cards Magic, Ranma turned back and began to sing, shifting words from the original with the ease of years of practice. “I, I, I am undefeated….”

Hearing the song Makarov shook his head with a wince. That wasn’t quite what he had met by upbeat, but looking ahead even as he danced around he could tell Erza liked it quite a bit as she had begun to dance around on her float faster and more energetically, her swords doing the same thing as her eyes lit up with more than just delight in the show she was putting on.

Luckily the next song Ranma chose was, while rather odd going after the one he had chosen for Erza, much simpler and more upbeat.  *After all, anyone who has ever fallen in love can tell you it’s like losing your mind.*

As she began to dance and wave her flags with Laki, Bisca smiled and high stepped, flashing her cowgirl boots this way and that as she smiled, laughing and happy, while in front of her Alzack continued to fire off starbursts above them. She made a point of waving at the people in the crowd as she danced, including Jenny who she saw in the crowd to one side.

For Ranma, the singing was a task he wanted to get over with, though many in the crowd would ask later who the new redhead was, wondering about her amazing voice and the numerous odd, but extremely catchy songs she sang. Sakura was a hit, as was Heart Goes Boom and Fluffy Time, even if Ranma had to translate them from Japanese into Ishgar’s language. Undefeated was memorable, as was the song Ranma sang for their float as it hit the center section of the parade route.

This one, Let it Go of *Frozen* fame, he had only heard once, but it had stuck in his mind. Hearing this song Juvia’s smile widened and widened until it looked like it was almost unnatural, though she wasn’t the only one. Lucy too grinned so hard her cheeks stung and she belted out the lyrics with Juvia and Ranma. “Let it go, let it go, and I’ll rise like the break of dawn, let it go, let it go, that perfect girl is gone! Here I stand in the light of day. Let storm rage on, the cold never bothered me anyway!”

Yet surprisingly the favorite song of the crowd was the translated Oretachiwa Family, a song Ranma had heard from a One Piece special she’d seen once with Kasumi of all people, who was a closet One Piece fan. It had stuck in his/her mind then because it was such a nice, peaceful time, coming on the heels of Happosai’s weakness moxibustion scheme and no one else being around to cause trouble. Yet the translated words, while not scanning as well in Ranma’s opinion, seemed to resonate with Fairy Tail, and the entire guild started to shout along when Ranma began the second chorus.

But for Ranma, her own part in the parade was minor in comparison to the magic, the girls and the Fantasia Parade. From the beginning with Erza and her sword dance, to Bisca and the comparatively simple flags everything Ranma saw entranced her. Gray’s magic was phenomenal, castles, towers, roses, waves, spears, solid state statues. Natsu and his nearly alive-looking dragon. Laxus created giant creatures of lightning, which swooped around the parade as his float sparkled with energy and lights in an intense display of light and noise. So much so, that Ranma thought later that many a heavy metal band would have eaten their hearts out with envy at what Laxus along had created.

Wendy used her air magic to send kites and small paper birds this way and that throughout the parade smiling and happy as she flew from one float to another in the same angel costume that Lucy and Cana were wearing. Bickslow sent spirit infused animals marching along the side of the parade, clowning around with the children. And everywhere were the lights, the small images of cavorting beasts moving this way and that. The Strauss siblings put on a play of two monsters attacking a castle to capture a princess and the knight defending her. Lucy summoned all of her spirits bar Aquarius to send up their magic in blasts of power with Virgo joining in dancing with Cana and Lucy. Wooden dolls or other wooden constructs appeared from a few of the floats courtesy of Laki. Juvia’s magic too was utterly amazing, fountains appearing here and there in both their own float and ion the ones to either side moving under her command. Lights flashed off the water in a cascade of rainbows as she shifted it into ships, birds, fantastic beasts and especially, for some reason, unicorns.

From beginning to end, the parade was utterly amazing, and the cheers of the festival-goers followed them as they slowly made their way through the town and back up to the guildhall.

By that point, everyone was exhausted, even Ranma. Her throat was sore from belting out song after song, and her feet hurt, making her peel off the high heels Mira had insisted she wear, unmindful of the fact she’d flashed Makarov as she he’d kicked them off. “Oh my god, why the hell do girls wear those torture devices!? They are worse than corsets!”

“Juvia agrees with you on the concept of high heels, yet also wonders when Ranma would have worn a corset.” The blue-haired asked as she hopped down from the float, smiling up at Ranma.

“Meh, had to pose as a maid a few years ago to infiltrate a rich assholes mansion. Turns out he was funding money to a Zeref cult. Nasty bugger,” Ranma smirked. “Boy was he surprised when I changed forms on him.”

Juvia giggled at that then watched as Ranma hopped over the float to the other side, reappearing around its edge once more in his male body and wearing his regular clothing. “That was quick.”

“Heh, Martial Arts Quick change!” Ranma said, moving over to her. “Now come on, let’s see what the old man wants, then I think I need a soothing drink for my throat and bed. This has been fun, but really tiring.”

“Juvia agrees to that,” Juvia said with feeling, before blushing rosily when Ranma linked his arm with hers and pulled her over to where Makarov had hopped down onto a small stand, with every Fairy Tail mage gathering around him.

“Alright everyone, that, I think we can all agree, was a parade to be remembered!!” Makarov shouted, to a cacophony of clapping and shouts from the mages around him. “We’ll know which float won the popularity contest tomorrow, however, I have to make an announcement about the Fairy Queen contest: since Lucy and Juvia have added their names to the list of girls who won’t be available, I have decided to postpone the contest. Juvia is going to be going to speak to the Council on behalf of Gajeel, and Lucy and Loke have something they need to do in the Spirit World. And Erza and Mira, as you all know, are still under house arrest. Just be lucky I couldn’t punish the entire city by making you both sit out of the parade!”

In the crowd, Erza and Mira both attempted to act contrite. Mira, Ranma noticed, did a much better job of looking as if she was serious and sad about being punished. Erza simply looked stoic, her eyes losing some of their joyful light as she visibly set aside the fun from the festival to think about the near future.

To his side, Ranma felt Juvia about to speak up, but Ranma shook her by the arm she was still holding onto, shaking his head and leaning in to whisper into Juvia’s ear, not noticing that Juvia had started to blush again. “Remember we should be keeping our movements as secret as possible.”

“Ah, um, Juvia understands,” Juvia stammered, almost melting in place, utterly unused to having a man this close to her.

Ranma noticed this and moved away, shrugging apologetically.

In front of them Makarov continued. “At any rate you brats, the mayor and I had a rethink right before the parade started and we have agreed to instead hold the contest on the first day of winter. Max, we’ll still go forward with selling merchandise and such tomorrow, Anna and Lisanna have both agreed to help you at that. But the contest will have to be moved.”

The old man smiled widely, spreading his small arms to either side. “A magnificent parade everyone, you all did me and our guild proud! Dismissed!”

This was answered with another cheer, and the crowd began to break up into teams or other, smaller groups. Juvia, feeling just as tired as Ranma, moved towards Erza and Bisca, who were talking with Laki, Gray and Elfman, Wendy leaning against Carla at their feet. She was surprised to see Ranma following her but he just smiled at her and then bowed grandly, his hand scraping the ground of the guild’s backyard. “Shall I walk you home ladies?”

Bisca smiled and held out a hand like a lady at court. “I would greatly enjoy that good sir.”

“I’m afraid I’m not going back to Fairy Hills just yet. I need to head out to pay those merchants back for our depredations,” Erza said, narrowing her eyes at Ranma.

“Wait, you were serious about that?” Ranma asked incredulously, then easily dodged a swat from the back of Erza’s hand. “Well, good luck with that, er, I suppose I should do my part then.” With a flourish of Requip magic, Ranma was holding a small pouch of coins, which he held out to Erza. “That should cover most of my bill and Wendy’s. Jenny’s, you’ll have to get out of her.” To Ranma’s mind, paying for the girl when on a date was a chivalrous thing, paying for when you were out with a group of friends having fun was the sign of a tool or a showoff.

“I’ll do that.” Nodding seriously Erza Requipped from the armor she had been wearing as part of the parade to her normal everyday armor marching off resolutely.

Erza’s primary armor had been replaced by this point along with all of the other armor sets she had lost during the battle against Jellal and his compatriots. All save the experimental ones anyway, the Sea Empress Armor and her Ataraxia Armor.

Ranma, with Wendy on his back and Carla in cat form resting on her head, walked the trio of girls back up to Fairy Hill, talking about the parade and their parts in it, generally just reliving the event and having fun. Only a few times did he or Bisca flirt with one another, not wanting to make Laki or Juvia uncomfortable.

When they reached Fairy Hills, Laki instantly went inside too tired for anything else. Juvia thanked Ranma for walking them home, even though she sensed it had been Bisca who he had been most interested in being around. This left Ranma and Bisca standing there effectively alone since Wendy and Carla both asleep.

“I’m glad you had fun Ranma,” Bisca said with a smile, leaning her head against his chest as he put his arms around her. “Just… I know about this whole mission that you’re starting tomorrow. I know it’s dangerous. I’m not going to get all misty-eyed or anything, but…”

She moved forward so that her chest, still clad in the same outfit she had worn during the parade, pressed against Ranma. At the same time she lifted her head so they were eye to eye with less than an inch separating their faces, her breath whispering against his mouth. “But I will promise you that if you and the others all come back whole of body and hale of mind, I will make it worth your while.”

“Oh?” Ranma whispered, licking his lips lightly the move causing Bisca to shiver. “And how exactly are you going to do that?”

“I think you can guess,” Bisca said then with a tilt of her head, she leaned in kissing him. Instantly Ranma responded, his arms tightening around her yet still gentle as he kissed her back ardently, his lips pressing against hers, ardent yet not quite demanding, then he opened his mouth and his tongue flicked out to gently tease her lips. Bisca hummed appreciatively and opened her mouth slightly, letting the intruder in to flick and dance around her own, pulling a louder moan from her.

Passion. If Bisca was asked to describe in one word what Ranma evoked in her, that is what it would be, passion, emotion, a thrill, all of that Ranma’s looks, touch and taste evoked in her. It was intoxicating in the extreme and she loved it. If not for the little body, she could feel clinging to Ranma’s back she might well have continued, maybe even invited Ranma inside despite the no boys allowed rule. But as it is, both of them were very aware of Wendy hanging limply on Ranma’s back, so the moment didn’t last.

Eventually Bisca pulled back, their tongues visible in midair for a moment before she swallowed convulsively, staring at Ranma, her eyes shining in the light of the dorm’s lampposts. “Consider that a down payment.”

“I will,” Ranma replied a little dazed as Bisca turned and entered the dorms winking at him over her shoulder as she did.

With that, Ranma was left alone in the night with his two asleep charges, unknowing that Juvia had seen the whole thing from inside. She had to bite back a squeal when the two of them started to make out, staring avidly, wondering what it would feel like, before slinking backwards as Bisca ended the kiss and turned entering the dormitory. Floating on cloud nine, Bisca missed her entirely and Juvia stayed there watching Ranma for a moment longer.

Outside Ranma looked around, wondering why his sixth sense was telling him someone was watching him, before he shrugged and turned away, heading back into town with his tiny burden. “Come on Wendy, I hear our sleeping bags calling my name. We’ve got an… irritating day ahead of us tomorrow.”

**OOOOOOO**

Cana was walking back to Lucy’s apartment with her, looking at her sort-of girlfriend out of the corner of her eye, wondering why she was being so quite. While neither of them had asked the other to become her girlfriend, they were certainly moving in that direction. They’d gone on a few dates, and had snuggled a lot of times, though they hadn’t actually kissed just yet, which Cana had been hoping to do tonight.

But the face Lucy was currently wearing drove that thought out of her mind. Even the way Lucy was still wearing their mock-angel uniforms from the festival and the way it put those huge breasts Cana loved to play with (she hadn’t done much more than massage them but **damn** were they soft) couldn’t take Cana’s mind off Lucy’s face. That was the face of someone who had something they wanted to say that another person wasn’t going to like.

As they turned onto the street that led to Lucy’s apartment, Cana decided to get it over with. She pulled Lucy over to the balustrade between the river and the street pushing her there and putting her arms to either side of Lucy, keeping her there as she stared into the shorter girl’s face. Cana was, while not being the biggest in terms of chest, was actually the tallest girl in Fairy Tail while Lucy was in the center of the pack. “Alright, spit it out Lucy, what’s been bothering you? Are you, that is, do you want to stop seeing me? Have you discovered you don’t, y’know, like girls as much as you might have thought? Or, um, maybe I’ve just come on too strong, I’m really sorry I…”

Cana didn’t realize she was kind of babbling at that point but Lucy quickly put a hand over her friend’s mouth, shaking her head with a light giggle. “No, nothing like that, I really like hanging out with you, and um, all that other stuff. There’s nothing wrong there. I just…”

She squeaked as Cana licked her palm then leaned down and hugged her tightly, kissing her neck and cheek. “Oh thank goodness! This is, you’re my first real, that is I’ve well, never…”

“I understand Cana, and yes, if you’re asking I’d love to be your um, girlfriend,” Lucy said, blushing hotly under the other girl’s kisses and the feel of her taller frame against her own the brunette’s breasts pressing into the top of her own and into Lucy’s collarbone with a very pleasurable… well, squishiness was the only way Lucy could describe it. Hugging Cana was just so much nicer than hugging a man and her perfume was nice and…

Shaking her head, Cana gently pushed the other girl away. “But um, there’s something I need to tell you. I, you know Loke? Well, as part of my agreement to take him on as one of my Celestial Spirits, he asked me to look for Ares and free her from her current master. That, we know she’s a member of Oración Seis. And, well, Ranma, he’s, for some reason he’s going to be leading a large group of mages after them starting tomorrow. And, well, Loke convinced me to join them.”

“What!?” Cana squawked, stepping backward to hold Lucy at arm’s reach, the better to stare into her face in shock. “Lucy, I know you’re a stronger mage than most think just because you don’t brawl with the rest of them, but this is, the Oración Seis, they’re killers, one and all! This is going to be way more dangerous than going after Eisenwald or even fighting the Element Four. Are you sure you are up to this?”

“No, not at all. But Makarov says that the plan is for the non-S-class mages to clear out the riffraff, the smaller dark guilds, while Ranma and the others take on the Seis themselves,” Lucy said, trying to talk herself into believing that was the way that it was going to go.

Cana instantly could see the idiocy in that statement though. “That’s a plan, you know why plans go wrong, the enemy gets a vote too!” she growled, poking Lucy in the sternum and for once not letting her hand drift to the blonde’s chest. “Do you honestly think you could take on even one of those monsters on your own?”

“No, but I know I need to do this,” Lucy retorted. “Loke and I have talked about it, and he needs the closure of defeating the mage who killed his former master, and we need to rescue Ares from her. I can’t back down from this and call myself a Celestial Spirit mage worth his loyalty!”

Cana stared at Lucy, trying to see any hint of waver in her face or eyes, but all she saw there was determination. Oh, there was fear there too, but determination was easily the more powerful emotion she could see. Finally she nodded, then leaned in again, very deliberately pressing her body against Lucy’s, before leaning down to kiss her.

Lucy’s eyes widened in shock, they hadn’t kissed on the lips yet after all, but that didn’t mean she hadn’t thought about it or didn’t want it to happen now. So she leaned up, moving her head to one side and kissing Cana back, feeling the taller girls arms around her tighten, pressing their chests together even more tightly. Their lips pressed together tightly too, though neither made the effort to let their tongues out to play as Ranma and Bisca had. No, that would be a bit too far just yet.

And when Cana pulled back, unlike Bisca, she moved to take her partner’s hand, pulling her along the street. “Come on Lucy. I think that if you’re going to go on this mission of your’s I’m damn sure going to make this night one to remember.”

She smirked at Lucy’s sudden incandescent blush and stammer although when Cana went on her voice was a little softer and far more tender than it had been. “And not like that, it’s just, have you ever just sat and fallen asleep snuggling with someone? I know I haven’t, but I’ve always wanted to.”

Lucy looked at the back of Cana’s neck, which had turned red with embarrassment, and then she smiled, squeezing her new girlfriend’s hand tightly. “Sure. Let’s do that.”

**OOOOOOO**

For all the fun the festival had been that mattered not at all the next day, as, at the break of dawn, Ranma, Wendy and all the mages of the three guilds going with him gathered at the train station. The station had been shut down, ostensibly for some work on the platform, but Ranma and the others entered in ones and twos to gather beside the train they would be taking. No worker was in sight as they did, another precaution.

It was so early, that Natsu, Wendy, Jenny, Ichiya, Eve, Sherry and Mira were still all looking quite dazed, and had to be roused out of their beds by their teammates in the first place. Happy was still asleep on Natsu's head and Carla, for once, was in her Exceed body, asleep in Wendy’s lap as she, rather shamelessly in Ranma’s opinion, took advantage of the younger girl’s kindness.

The group from Fairy Tail though did include a surprise. Ranma had thought it would be Elfman and Gray who would be added to the trio of S-class mages and Natsu. Instead, Lucy had taken Elfman’s place, standing next to Gray, Mira and Erza looking a little self-conscious, but determined. Added to this group was Juvia, who was standing between Ren and Lyon trying to make herself small as the two men glared at one another over her head.

“Lucy!? Oh yeah, team Natsu are all here, awesome!” Natsu shouted with fire coming from his mouth as he bounded over to his guildmates.

“What’s up with that name flame brain!?” Gray groused, shaking his head, not noticing that he had already stripped his shirt off despite it being so early in the morning.

“Hah, that’s what you know stripper, the name of the team is chosen by the strongest on the team, and that’s me!”

Since Erza was already glowering at the two boys, Ranma turned to look at Lucy. The two of them hadn’t talked much, beyond Lucy thanking Ranma for sending her Capricorn via Fairy Tail and occasionally in the guildhall while Ranma hung out with Laxus or one of the others. “Lucy, not to sound too demeaning or anything, but what’re you doing here?”

Lucy gulped. “Um you know about how Loke turned out to be a Celestial Spirit?”

“Loke, um… wasn’t that a girl’s, no wait that was Laki, eesh I’ve been introduced to too many mages lately,” Ranma groused. “Um Loke, blond guy, kind of a manwhore like those three only better at it?” He asked gesturing with one hand to the Trimens.

“Ahem, I resent that remark. Both the idea that Loke is better than us, and that we sell our affections so,” Hibiki said, while the other two frowned.

“Whatever.” With that Ranma promptly ignored them, looking back at Lucy inquisitively.

“He, um, Loke was a Celestial Spirit like I said. Um he used to be a partner of a Celestial mage that went out on a mission against Angel of the Oración Seis years back. She died, and took her keys. Loke convinced me to help on this mission so we could regain them freeing those spirits to bond to better, more honorable mages,” Lucy said, starting out a little timidly but finishing strongly, her tone frim and her eyes locked on Ranma’s. “I won’t let Celestial Spirits be used for evil! I won’t and I’ll do my best to fight them however I can!”

“Well said Lucy!” Erza said, having finished remonstrating (read beating) Gray and Natsu for fighting. She pulled Lucy into a hug, smacking Lucy’s head against her chest. “As should be expected of any Fairy Tail mage.”

“Okay, that makes some sense. In that case welcome aboard, though I don’t know if we’ll let you be involved in the fight against Oración Seis itself, we’ll have to see.” Moving over Ranma pushed Ren out of the way, looking at Juvia inquisitively. “And you? I presume this has something to do with your talk with the Magic Council?”

“Hai, it does,” Juvia replied, happy with the reprieve, not having enjoyed being the center of Lyon and Ren’s attention. “Juvia succeeded in convincing the Magic Council to let Gajeel earn his freedom through work, and will be going with you on this mission to work with Gajeel and Miss Ultear. She will meet us at the border with him. Juvia will be coming along because it was felt that having a mediator between him and the other Fairy Tail mages was a good idea.”

“Alright, that works.” At the moment Ranma was wondering if they were going to bring so many mages along that Oración Seis would still hear about it somehow despite all the prevarications in place to hide the fact they were all together. “Come on, let’s get out of here. We want to be out and away before most people around here are awake.”

Luckily for everyone there, Ultear and Ranma had time to organize this trip, with Ultear renting out three full carts for the Fairy mages and their allies. This train was one of those designed to carry passengers for long distances too, which meant that carts had several separated rooms and one of them also had its own kitchen.

Wendy, was first to find a compartment of her own. She quickly called dibs on the hammock, climbed up Ranma's back and leaped up onto it, curling up there and sighing. "High places are best places." Against Ranma’s hopes, Wendy was along because having a healer along was just too important. And more to the point, because Wendy refused to let Ranma just leave her behind for more than a week.

"How does that even work?” Erza asked curiously looking up at the little girl while the others filed in around her. "I would think that being oin a hammock that was already on something moving would make it worse."

“Your guess is as good as mine, I’m still getting used to the idea that motion sickness is a universal Dragon Slayer thing in the first place,” Ranma replied.

Laxus grumbled but nodded and laid out nearby on a bed in the same small compartment Wendy had chosen, sticking his feet up out of the window, and putting a piece of his long coat over his face, the rest of it bundled under his head as a makeshift pillow. The Lightning Dragon Slayer had found that for him, feeling some breeze over his body but having his eyes covered or closed helped him with his motion sickness.

Natsu hadn't discovered anything of the sort, and he was still outside the train, staring at it as if he wanted it to spontaneously combust. "Are you sure we can't just run there?! Or, ooh I could have Happy and Carla take turns flying me, how about that!?”

"Seeing as you didn't even ask me if I wanted to take turns flying you that would be a no," Carla grumped, before flying up to join Wendy.

“It would take me six days, maybe seven to get there in a straight line kid, and there's no way you can run as fast as I can,” Ranma said with a shake of his head. “Even if you could, by the time you arrived, you would be exhausted, and useless in the fight. Which is basically your only redeeming feature, remember?”

Natsu grumbled, but a small hand popped out, and pointed at Ranma then Natsu then Laxus, muttering ‘Troia’. Natsu immediately felt better about the whole trip, and hopped onto the train with a loud whoop. “Woohoo, let's do this!”

“Before the spell runs out,” Ranma cheered sarcastically from one side.

Natsu glared at him. “Why do you gotta rain on my parade?”

“Your parade was last night and no one rained on it, this is me just being factual,” Ranma said, gesturing behind Natsu to Lucy, who was holding her head and glaring at and Natsu. “Besides, it was either that, or let Lucy hurt you for yelling like that so near her.”

“Don't make loud noises,” Lucy enunciated. Some of us were up late last night.

“Oh?” Mira began as she grabbed Lucy's arm and pulled her into their compartment’s main sitting area. “And what exactly were you doing?”

“None of your business little miss gossip,” Lucy said huffily. She had gotten over much of her awe of at Mira by this point, and in no way wanted her and Cana’s relationship to become something for the whole guild to talk about.

Mira laughed. “That's all right. Since I know you were with Cana, I'll just let my imagination fill in the blanks.”

Ranma blinked at that, then looked at Lucy, then looked contemplative, as did Laxus, who had removed the sleeve covering his eyes to look at Lucy. Indeed, practically every other man there except for Natsu had contemplative looks on their faces at the moment. “Yep,” Ranma said after a moment too many a nod “that's definitely imagination worthy.”

“Oh but miss Lucy, if you had but asked, I would have joyfully accompanied you last night after the parade was over,” said Hibiki, moving up beside her.

“I would at least have walked you home. But don't think of it as me doing something special for you though, I’d do that for anyone,” said Ren, moving up on her other side.

Luckily for Lucy, Eve was too busy trying to get Wendy’s attention, having slipped past Ranma rather than remaining in the main train compartment with his fellow pretty boys. This didn’t prove to be very lucky for him because when Wendy squeaked at him to leave her alone, Ranma literally punted him out the door and down the train.

Jura was the last aboard, and seemed to fill the main compartment with his presence, a somehow nearly solid aura that forced everyone else to start moving on finding places to sit, or moving into the smaller compartments like Laxus and Wendy to layout. Moments later, the train began to move, but thanks to Wendy's spell, none of the Dragon Slayer's felt it at first. This didn't stop Ranma from moving into Wendy’s compartment, pulling out his pipe and closing his eyes as he began to smoke the Dragon’s Breath slowly, meditating further. Now that Porlyusica had taught him various new mental exercises, he wanted to use most of this trip to continue his training. *And if it keeps me from throwing up, as well, all to the good*. On a trip this long that was going to be a tall order.

OOOOOOO

As the train carrying her girlfriend pulled away from the train station Cana scowled, watching it go from a distant rooftop. Yes, she had wished Lucy well that morning, even made Lucy breakfast and hugged her goodbye. That for sure as hell didn’t mean Cana was happy about seeing her go. *Time to talk to the old man, and then see if I can figure out a way to maybe get wherever the hell she’s going as fast as Lucy is.*

OOOOOOO

After banishing the three pretty boys and Ichiya, either to their compartment or to the rest of the train, the girls didn't care, said ladies all gathered in the main sitting compartment and began to talk about the mission. Mirajane and Erza ran this portion of the discussion once more telling everyone about the mages that they had run into in the tower, which segued into getting to know one another further. Since most of the girls came from Fairy Tail, Sherry and Jenny did most of the talking at that point. Sherry going into detail on how she had run into Lyon, and so forth, while Jenny told how she and Mirajane had met for the first time, and how she had gotten into modeling over merely singing and being a showgirl as she had in her youth.

Juvia too did a large majority of the talk over the next few hours for that first day. The talk centered on magic, then cooking, crafting, and general stuff of that nature. Girls were social creatures, the majority of them anyway, and these girls were no exception. They occasionally left to explore the train, but since that inevitably brought them into contact with the Trimens or Ichiya, doing what they were best at, they always came back rather quickly.

Lyon and Gray too just talked or read books they had brought along to while away the time, getting on surprisingly well. Or they did, after Erza had threatened to castrate them with a dull spork if they caused trouble or stripped more than their shirts off at any one time that first day anyway. Jura joined Ranma in meditating, and seemed to change into a rock statue, coming awake only for a single meal each day. The trio of Dragon Slayers too only roused themselves to take in liquids, although every time the train stopped at a station they would all troop out and race alongside it for a few hours before leaping back on, though admittedly Natsu had to be continually coaxed back on with repeated use of Troia.

This left the girls and the two Ice Make mages with the fundamental trouble of traveling on trains for long periods of time: it was boring. There wasn't enough to do, and unless you planned accordingly, you got fed up with it really quite quickly. Of the girls only Erza had thought about bringing any books along, and even handing some of the less salacious ones out to the others wasn't making the trip pass any faster.

In response to this, on the second day out Jenny asked Wendy if they could borrow some of her games. This in turn caused Wendy to perk up quite a bit, even though the healing spell had worn off for the day. She tried to groan out instructions to Carla who did her playing for her, and for a time, she and the girls were happy as each could be, but eventually the motion sickness drove Wendy back into the hammock above Ranma's head.

As Erza helped Wendy back to her brother, she asked, “Ranma how are you feeling?”

Ranma's face was a little green around his pipe, but neither he nor the other two Dragon Slayers even looked up as she entered the compartment. “I'm doing about as well as we can I suppose,” he answered, his eyes still closed. “I'm just thankful for those little stops along the way, although I am seriously second-guessing myself on asking Wendy here not to use that healing spell on us for the entire trip.

“It wouldn't work anyway,” Wendy groaned. “Your body would build up an immunity within a few times Nii-chan, same for mine. The other two would probably last a little longer, but not the whole trip.”

“I'm sorry to hear that,” Erza said with a sigh. “Would you like me to do what I do to Natsu on train trips?”

“What exactly is that?” Ranma asked, his eyebrows narrowing in suspicion.

This suspicion was well-founded, since an instant later, Erza's fist flashed out, streaking in to impact his head in what would have been a knockout blow. Ranma blocked it, and glared at her. “Really, you knock him out?” Ranma said, deadpan

“Well it's either that, or put him to sleep some other way. You know how hard it is to get the smell of spew out of armor? Once was enough, thank you,” Erza said huffily.

“Makes sense, but the next time I ask you for an explanation, just give me an explanation, don't try it out on me,” Ranma said with a smirk around his pipe.

Erza replied with her own smile, and sat down next to him. “How is your training with Porlyusica going?”

“It's going okay, what she is teaching me to do is basically to create a sort of connection between a mental image in my mind and my control of my two magic styles,” he said obliquely, looking over to where Natsu was groaning and Laxus laid out with his eyes closed. “According to her, what I need to do is to somehow divide up my mind in order to be able to switch between one type of magic and the other, creating a measuring scale with each side containing a particular color of each type, so that when I want to emphasize one, I just imagine the balance changing. I'm not certain I agree with her, but the visualization training is helping me push one or the other power down to allow the other to take precedence, so it's all to the good. Still, there's no point if I can't do it fast enough to use in a fight, and at the moment it’s just really hard to build up that level of internal control.”

“Interesting,” Erza mused. “Perhaps instead of thinking of it in terms of compartmentalizing your mind like that, you should keep the idea of an outline, but liken it to armor instead.”

“What do you mean?” Ranma asked intrigued, actually opening his eyes to look at her for now, pulling his pipe out of his mouth and setting it in his lap.

“When I reequip, I don't really have to shout out the armor I'm searching for, though it helps. Each armor I have has a separate hook to it, a simple associated image, which my mind can reach out for. Perhaps something similar can be used in your case, linked to each limb or the overall effect you are going for rather than attempting to create a single image to give precedence to one magic or the other in its entirety, which I gather from what you just said is what you have been attempting.”

Ranma pulled at his pigtail thoughtfully, then asked a few questions about how she created each ‘hook’, whether or not she had to change that when she started to use portions of armor rather than the whole thing recently, and how it worked. In particular, he asked questions about how she mixed and matched weapons from her armor sets, which he felt would be the closest equivalent to what he wanted to do.

This conversation continued for most of the second day, as Erza demonstrated slowly how she channeled Requip into her weapons, and helped Ranma figure out ways to create that same sort of mental hook for his Dragon slaying and ki powers. It wasn't quite the same as what Porlyusica was training him for, but it helped.

On the fourth day, Jenny finally broke. “All right I'm bored!” she said, hurling her arms up in the air and flinging herself into a chair across from Mirajane tossing the book she'd been reading from Erza back to the redhead in question.

“You make it sound as if it's our job to entertain you,” Mirajane shot back. “If you want that, go find some boys to bat your eyelashes at.”

Jenny smirked, shaking her head. “Nope, none of that. But it has occurred to me that there is one topic we hadn't talked about yet, and you just mentioned it: Boys.”

Lucy rolled her eyes. She and Juvia had actually been getting on rather well. Both of them had a passion for mah-jongg, and had been playing Gray and Sherry, for a portion of each day which was rather fun and which eeked out Erza’s book collection and other topics. But now Gray looked up in fear and alarm and quickly stood up, followed by Lyon. “Well, I think if you ladies are going to be talking about that topic, I am out of here.”

“Are you sure~?” Mirajane said, getting into the spirit of things quickly. “You can talk about your secret boy crush on Natsu after all.”

“For the last time I'm straight darn it!” Gray roared, then turned around and exited the train compartment quickly with a chuckling Lyon following him, intent on teasing his fellow Ice Make mage about that point. After all, once we’re away from Erza our promise to her can hardly be thought to apply, can it?

The two of them intercepted the Trimens on their way back, Gray holding up his hand to them. “You don't want to enter there right now, they're about to discuss boys.”

“And Jenny's in there with them?” Asked Hibiki, paling noticeably.

“Yep, she's the one that brought the topic up.”

As one, the three pretty boys twisted around on their heels and marched away. “Nope, not going there.”

“Is she really all that terrifying?” Gray asked, falling into line with the others.

“She is if she gets analytical,” said Ren tersely. Then he paled. “Little Wendy isn't in there with them, is she?”

“No, why?”

“Like I said, it's scary when she gets analytical,” Ren replied, breathing a sigh of relief. “I’d hate to see what Ranma would do to her if she corrupted the poor little girl.”

“No, you just want to let Eve do that instead,” Lyon replied tersely, winning a coughing splutter from the youngest Trimens and laughter from the others.

While it was most certainly accurate that Jenny could be scary if she really got into the nitty gritty of comparing boys, Jenny wasn't about to go that far with this crowd. Mirajane might've been up for it, but Jenny had gotten to know Erza during their romp through the festival, and knew her to be a bit of a prude. In public anyway, Jenny had heard rumors that seemed to imply Erza was anything but underneath her armor. Juvia and Lucy also seemed to be much the same, and Sherry was an almost complete unknown despite the past few days forced association. So she simply asked, “So, does anyone here have someone they are interested in? If you want dirt about the Trimens or any other models, Mirajane and I can surely provide.”

Sherry giggled, and leaned forward eagerly taking her up on that offer for several of the models that Mirajane and Jenny had met. The two of them had quite a fun time for a bit, tearing down or building up this or that model, fielding questions from all of the other girls, even Lucy getting in on the action despite her current relationship with Cana. Erza only asked a few questions about this or that model who was known to also be a mage, all of whom had hit on her at one point or another when they met on missions.

“Although,” she said as the questions the others were asking wound down, “For irritating flirts, I suppose besides Ichiya there's always Bacchus.”

“Oh God, that drunk!” Jenny said with a laugh. “Quattro Cerberus had a job in the same town I had a modeling gig in once, and let me tell you, that crew of idiots aresoover-the-top! At a distance it's kind of funny, but close-up, when you're the target for their over-the-top **wildness!**” she suddenly shouted that last word, causing all the girls to leap away before going on calmly, “it really isn't.”

Erza nodded. “Bacchus was an idiot at one point, he tried to flirt with me while we were both accidentally assigned to the same job. Needless to say the buffoon didn't finish the missions because I was forced to beat him to within an inch of his life.”

“Is that your way of doing dealing with anyone who shows you a bit of love?” Sherry asked archly. “You'll be single your entire life if so.”

“Not that this Bacchus character sounds like that big a catch,” Lucy said, trying to head off an argument.

Erza however didn't take offense, she simply shrugged. “If I don't want someone to flirt with me, I will inform them of that fact in no uncertain terms.”

“Heheh, you didn't seem to mind it when Ranma was flirting with you the night at the festival,” Jenny said.

Erza blinked. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh come on,” Jenny said with a laugh. “Getting you to dress up in that Gothic Lolita outfit, leaning in and hugging you when you two did the twin thing, playing with your hair when we were on the beach?” *Tackling the pair of us when we were roughhousing in the water, tickling us, basically looking for any excuse to have his-then-her hands on us,* Jenny thought complacently. She had greatly enjoyed that, the coldness of the water hadn’t been the only reason why her nipples had been fit to cut glass. She only regretted that it hadn’t continued when he had transformed back to his guy form thanks to the number of Fairy Tail mages who had come down to join the cookout.

“The, that was flirting?!” Erza said, her face starting to light up at the implication.

“You didn't know,” Jenny gasped, then began to giggle at Erza's expression.

“And that doesn't bother you?” Mira asked redirecting her rival’s attention. “I thought you were interested in him too.”

“I am,” Jenny said with a shrug. “But it's not as if we made any promises to one another, nor as he made any promises to anyone else right?”

“Not to the best of my knowledge,” Erza stuttered, a blush still present on her face. “Certainly he hasn't made any promise to me or even an attempt to kiss me or anything similar, although he did walk Bisca home that night after the parade.”

“Yeah, Ranma mentioned her too,” Jenny said with a nod.

“Again, that doesn't bother you Jenny?” Mira asked, honestly curious. She knew of Jenny’s casual, almost lazy attitude to most of life, but would never have figured it would extend to relationships.

“Again, no” Jenny said with a laugh another laugh.

“So does that mean you're not interested in anything serious with Ranma?” Lucy asked, honestly curious. As at home as Ranma seemed in the guild, Lucy couldn’t get over how long he’d been traveling, and enjoying it. You didn’t just forget that kind of thing overnight.

“I wouldn't say that. I'd like it if something serious happened on the physical side of things, but I'm not exactly holding my breath waiting for it. Essentially I want to bed him, not marry him,” Jenny finished crudely, trying to get a reaction.

She succeeded and cackled wickedly as Mirajane and the others all blushed. “Come on! We’re all nineteen to twenty years old here, right? Raise your hand if you can honestly say that the idea of sex doesn't enter your mind at least once every hour.”

“I thought that was guys,” Mirajane answered with a huff, looking away while the other girls just continued to blush.

“No, they think about it every three minutes,” Jenny drawled. “Trust me, I know, remember who my guildmates are.”

“Ahem, yes well, I have to admit to some, ahem, interest in Ranma, though I wouldn’t say it is so… animalistic in nature,” Erza said eventually coughing into her fist as she did before looking over at Mira quizzically. “What about you Mirajane? I remember the two of us were near to coming to blows about our mutual interests in him before the Tower of Heaven, but you seem to have backed off since despite Ranma coming to live in Magnolia.”

Mirajane sighed. “I didn't want to outright say it,” she groused glaring at both her rivals irritably. ‘It feels too much like I lost to you in one of our matches or something. But yeah, I have kind of given up on Ranma. Her gaze centered on Erza as she said went on. “His curse bothers me, both for the obvious reason and the fact that, to put it bluntly, she looks too much like a miniature you, Erza. And I **do** want something serious. I know were young still, but I'm seriously thinking about settling down and, you know, having something permanent. Probably not kids, not for a few more years, but definitely something moving in that direction, husband, house, family.”

Jenny rolled her eyes at that. “I think you've had to step into the mother role for your sisters too much. It’s gotten to be where you are thinking in that manner automatically,” she said bluntly. “I don't like it. Live a little girl!”

“What about you then?” Erza asked looking at Jenny almost challengingly. “Do you have a problem with the fact he was, as you pointed out just now, flirting with me?”

“I'm not bothered by the fact he was flirting with you, I would've thought my still having fun with going around the festival with you would have shown that,” Jenny said, her lips quirking into a moue of irritation. “Like I said I don't want to marry the guy,” she smirked then, a sensual thing marked by her licking her lips. Now have him make my mind explode with stars, heck yes! Judging by what I've felt a time or two when he and I were kissing, he’s definitely got the equipment to be able to do that, and we know he's got the stamina.”

Now it was Mirajane’s turn to giggle wickedly, much more at home talking about the physical side of things, while the other girls all blushed. Juvia in particular was blushing at the memory of the kiss she had seen Ranma and Bisca share, and how Bisca had looked afterwards. Luckily no one around her could follow those thoughts, and they turned to Sherry and pounced on her instead. “What about you, any juicy details to share with us?”

“I doubt it,” Mirajane said sarcastically. “He's an ice user, and judging from Gray and Lyon’s attempt to flirt with Juvia right off the bat they seem to be as dense as their chosen element is cold. And don’t get me started on the effect all that ice has on them physically.”

“Alas, Mirajane is cruel, but I have come to believe she is largely correct. Indeed, the only hint of love I have seen him give anyone, is his sudden interest in Juvia,” Sherry said almost glaring at the other girl.

Juvia shook her head quickly. “Juvia is not interested! Juvia found it rather creepy, and in fact is not interested in any relationships right now. Perhaps after this mission, Juvia will feel as if Juvia has found her footing in Fairy Tail correctly and will think about looking for romance.” She looked a little wistful. “Doing so in Phantom Lord would've been problematic at best, stupid at worst.”

“So you're not interested in Gajeel? I had thought maybe that was why you were so willing to step up to the plate for him,” Erza said.

“No Juvia is not Gajeel's type, she is too strong,” Juvia said with a laugh. “Gajeel will probably not like me saying this but Gajeel is actually a classic romantic. He likes the tales about knights or wizards sweeping damsels off their feet. I've even caught him dressing up in a suit and attempting to learn how to play the guitar romantically.”

Mirajane and Erza, who had met Gajeel after the fight he'd had with Natsu, looked up in thought, trying to imagine him in a suit, and shook their heads is one. “Nope,” Mirajane said, “can't picture that.”

“Juvia knows,” she said with a giggle. “It really is as ridiculous as you think, made worse by him attempting to sing.” She looked a little wistful, turning to look towards the small room the Dragon Slayers had commandeered to wallow in their shared misery. “Juvia was surprised and impressed by Ranma’s singing voice. Juvia might enjoy seeing if it carries over, and indeed if he knows any more romantic tunes.”

This won her a nod from every girl there, even Sherry and Lucy. Ranma’s range and vocal ability had impressed a lot of people, so much so Jenny had wondered if maybe she should approach Ranma to see if he wanted to tour with her at some point. They would make a killing, two beauties with voices like theirs.

The conversation continued from there, freewheeling through boys that they had met, boys they had known when they were younger, which were quite a few for Sherry, Jenny and Mira, and not at all for the others, what they were looking for in a romantic entanglement, both physically and emotionally. But even so, the trip to the border between Fiore and Seven was slow and after the Fifth day on the train, basically everyone had joined with the Dragon Slayers in wishing it would get it over with quickly.

**OOOOOOO**

"And you are certain this will be ready by the time we wish to ambush them?" Brain asked his fellow guild master, Ivan Dreyar, looking at a large, bubbling concoction in a glass container set on the floor in front of him.

"It will be ready little Brain," said the other man, his tone a little manic as he pressed into Brains personal space just a bit too much. He was a little taller than Brain, his shoulders a little broader, and his face slightly older looking, bar his hair, which was black, as was his goatee. His eyes were deep set and seemed to gleam with obsession as he looked at Brain. "But you are certain that Laxus is with them?"

"According to my sources the only S-class Fairy Tail mage that isn't is Gildarts," Brain replied though he knew Ivan’s spies in Magnolia had undoubtedly already informed him of this. "If he was, I wouldn't have contacted you, instead I would have forced in my guild to flee from Seven and possibly deep into Minstrel or elsewhere in an attempt to get away, regardless of possibly losing access to our target. That one's power is far too great for me to want me to challenge him."

"True, true. He and my father, Titans both, in power if not in form, standing above the guild like giant guardians. Yet he is often gone, gone like a little bird," Ivan Dreyer former Fairy Tail mage and son of master Makarov said, gesturing with one hand and creating a small paper bird, which flew off into the distance.

Had Brain tracked it, he would have seen the bird scream and die near the edge of his vision, but he didn't, not daring to take his eyes off the dangerous dark mage before him. Ivan Dreyar was not one of his indoctrinated youths, no. Ivan and his guild were a power such to rival his own guild, though they stood apart from the Balam Alliance.

"And my father will learn that there is strength in shadows, and that he has allowed his children to bite off more than they can chew," Ivan finished, cackling a bit before he sobered so suddenly as to give most whiplash. "The poison will be ready. Will your subordinate guilds be ready to back us up if we can only get a few of them at once with the poison?"

"They'll meet us there. However, how can you be so certain that the poison will work on Dragon Slayers and S-class mage? Dragon Slayers are known for their ability to eat practically anything after all, one of these in particular."

“Natsu yes, I’ve heard of his recent exploits in that area. For that, we have Cobra’s poison to add to the brew, and that of his snake. With their venom added into the poison Kurohebi and I have already created, especially with the crushed poison lacrima mixed in there is no doubt in my mind that it will at the very least incapacitate the Dragon Slayer's among them. Or kill them. Other than Laxus, I don't need any of them alive after all," Ivan said, his voice sending a chill down Brain spine before he went on, starting to talk about the poison as if it was a favored experiment in a lab. “Ah, but this poison is even more special than that, why, getting it so the poison itself was tasteless and odorless was phenomenally difficult. The number of times we failed was…”

Brain sighed, but listened attentively, remarking internally about the need to deal with devils to gain his goals. After all, there were some evils that sickened even someone like Brain. *Still, hopefully this will be the last time I have to do so.*

**OOOOOOO**

Thankfully for all concerned on the train, the trip to the border where they would transfer to the next train did eventually end when after seven days they finally reached the border town called White Wash. “According to this brochure, it was named for a series of waterfalls nearby, but the river was diverted upstream a decade ago. Ranma, have you ever been here before?" Mirajane asked looking up from where she had been reading a brochure one of the train conductors handed her a moment ago as they exited the train.

"Nope," Ranma said, stretching alongside Natsu who had just a roared out ‘freedom’ at the top of his lungs, scaring everyone nearby bar the team themselves, although judging by their faces, Lucy and Sherry were set to bolt away from the madman too. "Wendy and I traveled by foot of course, and traditionally by the Straight Path, so we've never come this way before."

"And now we will never have to get on another one of those things again right?" Natsu shouted, getting into Ranma's face.

Without changing expression Ranma kicked him on the side of the head, sending him sprawling. "Don't do that, you have really bad breath and unfortunately, I can't say that. We need to get on another train and head deeper into seven and south from here."

"Actually" said a new voice, "we won't be taking the train from here on."

Ranma turned as did the others, and saw two people moving through the crowd towards them through the crowd, which thankfully hadn’t recognized any of them. Laxus was dressed almost normally to aid this, while Mira and Jenny were dressed in dresses and with no makeup on along with broad hats, they had brought along for this purpose.

The Water Dragon slayer recognized both of the newcomers as did most of the others, and Natsu's response probably should've been anticipated. "What the hell is that iron monger doing here?!" he roared.

"Please wait!” Juvia said, grabbing Natsu's arm and pulling it into her chest, as he made to move forward. "Juvia said at the outset Gajeel would be here for this mission as part of his payment to society. Did you not hear her?"

"The magic council agreed to that provisionally,” Ultear said from where she was standing next to Gajeel Redfox. “Although this isn’t a conversation we should have here, now is it?”

She gestured them all to follow her, and they were let into a small out of the way corridor of the train station which led into a small meeting room that was obviously the lunch room as well to given people were there eating when they arrived. She immediately tossed all of them out flashing her Magic Council badge, ignoring their grumbling about this being Seven, not Fiore since the two councils were known to have basically begun to amalgamate into one years ago. The process was ongoing and slooow, but members of both councils were respected in either country.

With that done, she turned to the others gesturing to the mage next to her. "Gajeel works now for the magic Council directly, and will continue to work for us until we believe he is paid off his debt to society, as Juvia convinced us he should."

“Don't act as if you're doing me any favors,” Gajeel scoffed, looking away. He looked back at Natsu growled “And if you think a rematch between us is going to go the same way the first one did you've got another thing coming. You blindsided me the last time, and youryour two girlfriends had worn me down a little.”

Something about the way Gajeel said that made Natsu's teeth ache as he gritted his jaw, and he made to surge forward again, only to be grabbed in a headlock by Ranma, and dragged back while Ranma glared at Gajeel.

Laxus crossed the intervening distance between them, grabbing Gajeel by the face, and squeezing hard. “Word of advice,” he said coldly, “you're here because Ultear over there says the magic Council is taking a shot on you and because Juvia thinks you’re something more than a waste of space. But don't forget that we are Fairy Tail, and you hurt some of ours!”

“I agree. The first thing you do is make him work with the guild that he attacked?” Jenny asked, understanding who this guy was now from everyone's descriptions of them. “I'm all for giving him a second chance, but asking him to work alongside the same guild he attacked on a mission like this, that seems foolish.”

“In that case, Juvia and Ultear get to watch him, as was the plan all along,” Ranma said, holding up a hand placatingly before anyone else could speak. “This is a serious mission, and it's **mine** ladies and gentleman. Given to me by the King of Fiore, endorsed by the king of Seven. If Gajeel can add to our combat power fine but if he endangers our mission,” Ranma said turning to glare at the man in question past Laxus’s hand on the other mage’s face, “I will put you down understood?”

“Understood,” Gajeel said with a nod as Laxus released him. “I have no intention of picking a fight with anyone here that doesn't pick one with me. And as for attacking Fairy Tail, I was ordered to do it. I wouldn't have done it otherwise.”

“And we’re supposed to believe that?” Laxus scoffed, turning away while Natsu continued to growl at Gajeel.

Grumbling irritably, Ranma shook his head and stared at Ultear. “You were saying something about us not being able to take the train?”

“The trains heading in that direction is dealing with a washed out train track at the moment. They'll have it fixed by tomorrow, but if we want to move on, we need to do it by our own two feet or by magical car,” Ultear said with a shrug. “I’ve already prepared several such, but I figure we get some food and rest from your journey anyway. I know I need it after being on our own train for so long from Era. Some actual conversation would be nice too.”

“Are we going to see any local help from Seven’s mages?” Ranma asked moving to her side of leading the way out of the room. “I doubt we need it, but having more aid to hand could be a good thing if we run into anything unexpected.”

“No, few mages in seven really have enough combat potential to add anything to the group you've already gathered, so it would be kind of pointless. Worse yet, that forest is almost entirely wilderness, with no nearby dwellings of any kind. There's even rumors that it was haunted at one point, though I don’t know if that was caused by the four dark guilds moving into the area or from before that.”

“Joy,” Ranma said with a drawl in his tone. “Well, whatever, what's there to eat around here?”

“A lot. This place specializes in restaurants of all kinds, it's an important crossroads between Seven and Fiore after all. Come on, I'll show you to some of the ones I like best, and we can all get some food,” Ultear replied, patting her taut stomach and ignoring the way Lyon was staring at her as if he had seen a ghost. “I am so freaking tired of train fair it isn’t funny.”

**OOOOOOO**

“Kurohebi, go,” Ivan said with a smirk as he looked through the eyes of his Shikigami. The Shikigami was one of several dozen spread around the town, and Ivan, using his Shikigami transfer magic, could stare through their eyes like he was there. This he was doing now, watching the lawful mages make their way into a restaurant. “Your target is the Blue Moon deli.”

The man so addressed was a pale, slim young man around Ranma’s age with black hair and black eyes. He had thin lips coated in black lipstick somewhat like Midnight’s and a thin, evil seeming smirk under slanted eyes with snake-like pupils and black eye-liner.

Without a word he moved out of the warehouse the two main Dark Guilds were hiding in, whispering, “Mimic Magic, Fullbody Change.” Between one step and the next Kurohebi’s face seemingly changed as if a thin skin had covered it, like a snake’s shed skin somehow recovering it. This changed his looks to that of a nondescript man who could blend into any background. His shirt also shimmered, as if it was trying to change like a chameleon to blend into the background.

Ivan turned to the other mages around him, the mages of his guild he had felt normal looking enough to bring into town and the six members of Oración Seis.

“Now we just have to wait.”

“How is Kurohebi supposed to get that poison just into the necessary meals?” Angel asked. She knew about the other mage’s espionage abilities, but even so, poison was tricky stuff. And they didn’t want to start a general slaughter, did they?

By the smile on Ivan’s face, Angel knew that assumption was wrong. “Why, he’ll simply poison every meal in the place my dear. We’ve brought more than enough poison along to be thorough about it.”

Angel shivered at that, but tried to keep it from showing, glancing over at Brain, who looked on stoically. That was a bit more than they normally did, slaughtering simple civilians, but it looked as if, with their goal so close, Brain was more than willing to go through with it.

Strangely enough however, the two allied Dark Guilds and their scattered servants, mages of two Dark Guilds, the Red Hoods and Axe Legends, were not the only dark mages in the area…

**OOOOOOO**

“They are prepared to start their ambush,” said Seilah, looking at Kyoka and their fellow Demon Torafuzar from where they sat in a church’s bell tower that overlooked the rest of the town, the remains of a large meal scattered around them. One thing even Torafuzar agreed with the others on was that human food was better, and taking an opportunity like this to chow down was only common sense. “This plan they have come up with seems roundabout, but could possibly work and could possibly even do so without weakening the Oración Seis as we had hoped.”

“Our mission is to observe, and kill anyone weak on either side,” Kyoka said with a shrug. “If that turns out to be just on one side that is perfectly acceptable.”

Seilah nodded, though she found herself dealing with a pang of misgivings, perhaps something a human would even call guilt as she saw Ranma and Wendy, the little girl who had complemented her horns and the surprisingly interesting young man. Still, they had their mission, and whatever this odd feeling inside of her was Seilah wasn't going to let it affect that.

**OOOOOOO**

The team finally found a restaurant where all of them could agree on the menu. Ranma, Laxus, Erza, Ultear and Jura sat at one table, discussing the plan going forward in low tones with the others all spaced out around them. Many of the other restaurant-goers took one look at the number of guild devices on their arms and clothing and quickly exited, wanting no party to whatever was going to happen here, but even so the restaurant was bustling, the background noise of eating and talking loud enough to cover their discussion.

Nearby, the others quickly began to order food none of the Dragon Slayer's having eaten much on the train for obvious reasons, while the others had quickly gotten tired of train fare as Ultear had. As they did, Gajeel and Natsu quickly began to lob barbs at one another across the table. It got so bad that by the time the food actually arrived, they were nearly to blows, with Natsu shouting, “alright that's it, let’s take this outside!”

Jura and Ranma both made to stand up, but Erza waved them back, with a sigh, standing up and moving over. “I've got this.

As the others watched, she smoothly walked over to the men's table and slammed their heads together. “Gentlemen!” she said glaring down at their twitching forms. “We are here to eat, and move on. We are not here to start a public incident. If I have to speak to either of you again, I will be very cross. Are we clear?”

Both of them nodded, Natsu looking terrified of Erza as normal, and Gajeel just nodding and rubbing at his head. As she huffed and turned away he whispered, “how the how the hell does her hits hurt so much?”

“If you are able to figure that out, tell me,” Natsu groused. “I've been trying to figure out the secret to her strength for years.”

“She’s right,” Ranma said, looking over at them and then passed them to Lyon and Gray who were arguing heatedly about something, though what it was he couldn’t hear. Lyon’s eyes though kept straying towards Ultear for some reason. “Far be it from me of all people to stop a good rivalry, but this is not the time. Let's just eat and go guys and girls.”

From then the meal passed uneventfully, right up until they were nearly finished. At that point, things began to go downhill rapidly. Ranma grumbled, holding his stomach and burping loudly, holding a hand up to his mouth. “Guh, ‘scuse me. Geez, maybe I shouldn’t have eaten so much after so many days on water and bread. My stomach is churning something fierce.”

*And since I’ve dealt with Akane’s cooking in the past that’s saying something,* Ranma thought ruefully, remembering the times he’d been force into the guinea pig role when Kasumi wasn’t cooking for one reason or the other. Even so, as Ranma moved towards the front of the restaurant Ranma couldn’t help but scowl at the amount of noises his stomach was making.

He was about to pause and concentrate on that feeling to get to the bottom of what was going on when Wendy grabbed his hand, pulling his attention down toward her. “Ranma-nii, I don't, I don't feel so good,” she said weakly. With that, she collapsed to one side, her face turning green. Ranma caught her, feeling his own stomach beginning to roil even louder at him and he grabbed at it with his free hand, grimacing. “What the hell! Was there something off with the food we ate?”

That thought lasted until he looked up, and saw every other member of the party were grabbing at their stomachs and keeling over one after another. Everyone else in the restaurant were also afflicted bar the waiters, who were looking around wildly, trying to help the customers nearest them. Many of them had already begun to still, blood and green pus flowing form their eyes, mouths and ears. *Poison, shit!!!*

The non-Dragon Slayer's had all crashed to the floor where they were, clutching their stomachs with foam coming out of their mouths, some of it tinted red with blood, but the Dragon Slayer's were still awake groaning and moaning. It was quite obvious they were in too much pain to concentrate on anything though, least of all a spell, and Wendy was even shivering as Ranma held her to him.

Seeing all this, Ranma realized he had only seconds if that to act, and he lifted Wendy, moving to the nearest table. *Ignore the civilians, can’t do anything for all of them just yet, if ever, Wendy’s my priority, then the others.*

Of the others, only Juvia, Jura and Ichiya were moving, though they too were obviously dealing with being poisoned. Juvia, the closest to Ranma at the moment, was leaning against the nearby wall, her face pale, but her eyes closed and concentrating. As Ranma watched, her body shifted into its water form and small green dots began to appear on her body, as she began to push the poison out of her system with difficulty, her form collapsing and reforming constantly. Ranma’s enhanced ears could hear something like a high-pitched whine of pain coming from her whenever she reformed into human form long enough to make it. Still, she seemed to be dealing with the poison as best she could.

Moving past Juvia to lay Wendy out on the table beside her, Ranma just lightly patted her on the head, saying, “Damn good thinking girl, keep it up.”

Once he had Wendy on the table, he laid a hand on her head, with a wince of effort pushed some of his ki into her and giving her body a leg up. He could tell she was already fighting off the poison, but that should help jumpstart the process.

Leaving her there to heal Ranma raced over to the others, as Jura did the same, pulling his own teammates upright and checking their vitals. The ground element mage was obviously pushing himself on through willpower alone, aided by the fact he hadn’t eaten more than a third of what the Dragon Slayers had eaten having honestly enjoyed the train fare, the only one who had after the first two days. Even so, his face was green and that green was spreading quickly, down his chest and to the rest of his body, with blood starting to come out of his mouth along with green foam.

But he ignored it in favor of taking care of his teammates, moving toward where Ichiya was, setting them down in the cloud that had come out from the Trimens commander’s vial of perfume and breathing it in deeply before speaking, his words interrupted by a hacking cough. “They’re alive,” he reported grimly, “but for how long I don't know.”

Lucy was foaming at the mouth and trembling as Ranma reached her table, along with Ultear, Sherry, Gray Lyon, all three of the pretty boys, and Jenny. Just as Ranma reached their table though, there was a sudden flash of light as one of her Celestial keys opened itself forcefully. Aquarius, the girl Ranma had stolen the urn from appeared, glaring at him and grabbing at Lucy, her eyes wide, frightened, but determined. Before he could do anything the two of them disappeared, leaving him blinking and surprise. *I didn't know spirits could do that, still I’ll have to hope Aquarius can help her.*

That unfortunately left the rest of the table, and Ranma moved to Jenny putting his fingers to her forehead, and concentrating. Ranma wasn't a good healer, he could figure out a bone was broken and set it, split things up and that kind of thing, yet none of that could help his friends now. Still, Ranma had learned long ago how to transfer some of his own ki into objects to strengthen them. He now did the same thing here transferring some of his ki into Jenny, trying to jumpstart the healing process as he had earlier with Wendy.

It started to work, some of the color fading from her face and Ranma moved to the others, draining his ki like water to help them fight whatever was inside them, eating away at their innards like an unholy combination of acid and poison. He began to feel a little tired, but ignored it, and further pushed down His Dragon Slayer magic too, unwilling to let it get away from him under these circumstances.

Just as he finished with them and was about to move on to Jura, the man seeming behind this turmoil and death made himself known. The man, a plain looking fellow at first must not have seen Jura or Ranma kneeling by their friends hidden by a tall banister as he came out from the kitchen. He took a moment then to tear at his own face revealing a much thinner face underneath some kind of snakeskin, his eyes like those of a reptile and his lips thin and black.

“Well that worked!” the man said with a cackle, moving through the restaurant, ignoring the dozens of dead bodies scattered around the place from the other restaurant goers moving around the banister to approach the wizards, still not noticing Jura and Ranma. This was, to put it simply, a tactical error.

Ranma growled, leaping towards him faster than the gothic looking young man could track. Ranma had his arm around the man’s neck and a claw like that of a dragon pressed into his jugular before he could blink. “You!” Ranma hissed. “What the hell did you do!?”

“Heack!!!” the man tried to cackle only for Ranma to tighten his grip. “N, nothing you can undo! The poison, it has crushed lacrima in it, you’ll never be able to heal them all. We’ve, we’ve won this fight before it even began!”

Ranma might have disagreed with that, perhaps even by snapping the mans’ throat he was so furious. But just then the side of the restaurant next to where the two of them were standing in suddenly exploded inwards, a massive beam of green energy smashing through wall and into Ranma’s side. Ranma grunted as it staggered him, which the man in his grip used to break free, leaping outside to join his fellows, the shapes of which Ranma could see through the dust and debris.

Jura had ignored the man’s arrival to reach for another perfume bottle from Ichiya’s bandoleer, but another beam smashed in the head hurling him to the ground. Even so, he reached out a hand to the ground and covered himself, Ichiya and as many of the others as he could with a stone bubble, the stone coming out of the ground in large squares to form the bubble.

Outside the restaurant, Brain looked through the hole he had just created while Kurohebi moved over to Ivan’s side. “I'm astonished that two of them were still moving. I thought your poison would do a better job frankly.”

“Bah, such outliers should have been anticipated,” Ivan said with a frown. “I believe Jura is keeping on his feet through willpower, which as a Wizard Saint I suppose we could have anticipated. But the other one, he looked as if he was just dealing with a case of diarrhea. Most disappointing,”

“I never thought I'd be thankful for Akane’s cooking,” said a voice, as Ranma pushed himself upright to glare through the wide hole at the gathered dark mages. He recognized Cobra and Midnight and smirked evilly, cracking his knuckles as he moved forward. “Joy, our prey comes to me.”

Inside though Ranma was really worried, though he wanted to do all he could to keep their attention on him and not the others, especially the Dragon Slayers, who were all in the open still. He knew that Cobra and Midnight alone would probably have given him a fight and here he was, facing down the rest of their guild and an entire different dark guild, mages who this group at least seems to respect rather than simply order around like peons judging by how they were all standing. That meant they might well be as strong as the Oración Seis.

Despite that, he couldn't figure out what guild they were from until he spotted the guild mark, a sideways image of a raven with a long tail and a sword-like image cutout of the center. *Raven Tail! Everyone tends to forget about them for some reason thanks to the Balam Alliance, and the fact they're not part of it. But they are just as dangerous as any of the big three. FUCK.*

“You!” Cobra shouted, and Midnight glared at Ranma, veins actually standing out in his thin, pasty-white neck. “We owe you a beating from the last time!”

“Come and try,” Ranma said with a laugh, charging forward, yet even as he did so Ranma’s mind was on the others and what had happened to them. “Wendy, code four-ten!” He howled at the top of his lungs.

“Nullpudding, go,” Ivan said coolly. As his guild members leaped forward, Ivan looked at Brain. “I presume your guild can handle him with that little aid? Because at this point, I think our alliance is concluded.”

“I would say we should keep the alliance going until we are both clear of the town,” Brain said hurriedly, not wanting to deal with Ivan trying to stab him in the back for some reason. “But yes, I think Cobra and Midnight can handle him with Nullpudding helping. “

They were interrupted by Nullpuding’s body slamming into the ground in front of them, and Ranma roaring towards them, dodging Cobra’s attacks as well as Midnight’s magic, as he closed with the two main minds behind this ambush. But both Guild Masters responded as one, turning their magics on him and sending Ranma flying through the back of the restaurant in a blast of green, black and white energy.

Grimacing Ranma smashed his way out of the house, grateful that it had been empty. He leaped into the air, racing along the rooftops back the way he had come, roaring as loud as possible. “Attention, everyone! Dark Mages have attacked this town, get under whatever cover you can find!!!!

Luckily for Ranma a lot of people had already begun running away after hearing the initial attack on the restaurant. That hadn’t saved the people inside, but at least most of the civilians were showing the brains god gave a gerbil to get the heck away from the fight. Unfortunately, that just meant they were still around someplace in a town that, for all its stone and concrete would rapidly prove to be quite breakable.

“Wendy, code four-ten!” He shouted once more as he closed with the dark mages.

That was a code Ranma and Wendy had come up with which meant for her to lay low and hide. It hadn’t been used, well, ever, but Ranma had made it up when she was younger and couldn’t fight. Right now though, it was much more important for Wendy to hide and wait it out rather than join the fight. Her healing skills could mean the difference between life or death for all of their friends, regardless of the little leg up Ranma had given them. *Got to lead these assholes away from the rest of them regardless, maybe get them out away from the town entirely.*

With that in mind, Ranma leaped up into the air using a Water Dragon’s Boosted Step, and then brought his hands down and forward encased in paws of water each nearly the same size as a city block. “Soryu no Doriru Kagitsume (Water Dragon’s Drilling Claws)!”

From each outstretched paws flashed five claws of water like drills flashing down towards the gathered dark mages. They scattered quickly or, in the case of Hoteye and Ivan, tried to shield themselves, with Ivan creating a shield of paper dolls with his Shikigami magic. This proved a mistake as even the impact of the attack drove Ivan off his feet, bursting though the paper shield and smashing him to the street. Hoteye, who had molded a portion of the street over himself, had to gulp as the water assault had shattered through his makeshift defense and deep into the ground, causing a large hole right in front of him. “Whoo, rather a dangerous young man that one, right!?”

“Kill the ranger!” Brain roared out, not that this had to be said for some as Midnight and Cobra had already raced forward, eager to take revenge on Ranma for his loss. Admittedly, Cobra wanted to kill Natsu and Erza more than Ranma, but fighting the Water Dragon Slayer would be a nice run up to murdering those two where they lay.

“Nullpudding, get up and help them,” Ivan ordered with a growl as he cancelled the wave of Shikigami dolls that had protected him. Most of them had been destroyed, but that hardly mattered, since Ivan could always create more. To his side, Nullpudding, a squat man with purple skin, horns and spikes sticking out of his skin in places grumbled and pushed himself to his feet from where Ranma had hurled him a moment before, leaping into the air following on Cobra’s heels. “Kurohebi, you go too.”

Up in the air, the Poison Dragon Slayer flew on Cubellios, closing quickly with Ranma. “Time for some payback Water-boy!”

Ranma however cancelled his Boosted Step and dropped, which Cobra had anticipated thanks to his Hearing Magic. Yet even so, once more Cobra faced a problem with his ability to anticipate his opponent’s moves: it mattered not at all, if he was too slow to take advantage of it. Between one millisecond and the next, Ranma unleashed a thousand punches faster than even Cobra could follow. He dodged some, but was hit by others. While none were powerful they still blew him backwards off Cubellios with a cry of anger rather than pain. Though artificial, Cobra was still a Dragon Slayer, and his durability was a good deal higher than most mages could boast.

Ranma tapped down for a brief second on Cubellios’ back, then flipped up and over Nullpudding, a kick sending Nullpudding flying in one direction as Ranma pushed himself down again towards the rest of the dark mages. *Hard, that guy’s already back!? He’s got some serious durability too, or maybe it’s just his head.*

“Spiral Pain!” Midnight roared, only to watch as Ranma dodged around the air that his spell had distorted somehow feeling the spell coming towards him. The attack continued on to smash into a building behind Ranma, but thankfully its inhabitants had already fled into its basement.

Then Midnight had to use his Reflector magic to block another blast of water. His eyes wide and becoming bloodshot with a mix of anger and fear he then leaped to the side, dodging a glowing ball of energy that blasted into the ground.

A second later, Ranma was past shooting towards the mages still by the restaurant where his friends were. *Got to get them away from the restaurant somehow!*

“Liquid Ground, Sand Pit!” Hoteye shouted. In front of him the entire street changed into a kind of liquid under his command, rising up to catch Ranma as he landed. The buildings to either side did the same, coming towards Ranma like twin waves from either side, leaving behind several civilians who screamed and raced directly away from the action.

In response Ranma flicked out and down with one of his escrima sticks suddenly appearing in a flash of Requip. Using that as a nail in the rapidly liquefying ground rather than his hand, Ranma launched himself sideways, catching Angel, who had just been standing by Brain, in the chest with a kick that sent her flying away with a cry of pain. It was only the fact that Brain attacked Ranma mid kick that kept Angel in the fight at all at that point, but that put Ranma back in midair away from Hoteye’s attack.

Still midair, Ranma lashed out to either side, “Soryu no Taitan Panchi! (Water Dragon's Titan Punch)!” This attack caught up two more mages from Raven Tail on one side and Brain and Hoteye on the other. The two Oración Seis members both shielded themselves and were only pushed backwards, but the two Raven Tail Mages were sent flying.

One was a young man with tanned skin and aqua colored hair, who quickly created a ball of metal in front of himself using it to shield his body but unable to deal with the momentum of the attack being thrown sideways with cry of pain. The other was a tall, almost spindly looking fellow who had large pointed nose and a black cloak covering him from neck to ankle.

*This Ranger is truly dangerous, but to try to fight us all, how stupid!* Brain thought. “Everyone, spread out and attack him at once, he cannot hope to match us all!”

At that point, Kurohebi made his presence known once more. He had leaped down from another rooftop closing in quickly, his hands gleaming suddenly with water magic like Ranma’s own only punch smaller. “Soryu no Panchi (Water Dragon’s Punch)!”

Ranma opened his mouth and consumed the magic, gulping it in and flipping himself in a circle, lashing out with a speedy kick that the other man never even saw coming, sending him flying to the side with a cry of pain. “Your magic tastes fucking horrible loser!”

He landed on a rooftop, staring around him with a smirk on his face and a wild gleam in his eyes as he saw the Dark mages of both guilds had spread out now. The only two missing were the tall man who looked somewhat like Laxus and the other two Raven Tail mages, the pointy-nosed man and the tanned fellow Ranma’s earlier attack had hit. “Come on!” he roared out leaping forward.

“Open, gate of the Scorpio! Open, Gate of the Chisel Key, Caelum!” Angel shouted, rubbing at her chest in pain and glaring hatefully at Ranma. In front of her two spirits appeared, a man with a tall, lean build, red and white hair and a scorpion tail coming up over his back from his rear. The second spirit was just a robotic looking cannon. The cannon immediately began to charge up, while Scorpio shouted out “Sand Buster, Revision!” which sent several blasts of sand and air like a sandstorm toward Ranma.

“Leave him to me,” Racer shouted, racing forward. “No one is faster than me!”

“Dark Rondo!” Brain roared out. From his staff there appeared hundreds of tortured faces, which slowly disappeared into the staff, then shot out in dozens of green and black beams of magical power.

“Dokuryu Totsuga (Poison Dragon’s Fang Thrust)!” This attack Ranma had seen once before when he and the others fought Cobra in the Tower of Heaven. It was shaped like a large fanged snakehead that raced towards Ranma, black and red with poison magic.

“Air Slicer!” Midnight shouted. This too Ranma had seen before a near invisible slice of air shooting towards him like an air cutter from Kuno’s sword.

The attacks were aimed directly at Ranma regardless of anything between him and his attackers further damaging the town around Ranma, and Ranma could hear the screams of pain and fear of the townsfolk. In particular a squad of five policemen had raced towards the fighting only to be immolated by Brain’s attack. Cobra’s attack came at Ranma through a building, killing two people within before blasting out the other side.

Ranma himself was forced do dodge this way and that, using his mastery of the aerial style to stay away from them. Then Racer was on him, and almost immediately Ranma realized something was wrong, the other man not only keeping up with his speed but also surpassing it, making it looks as if Ranma’s punches were so slow they missed him by miles. *What the hell!?*

“Motor!” Racer shouted, his leg disappearing to Ranma’s senses, which should have been utterly impossible. The next instant Ranma, off balance in midair for the first time since before puberty, was flung aside and into a building.

*Seven hundred kicks, and I was off-balance too! What in the hell, he’s not that fast, so what, it was almost as if, was I slowing down, no, what was…* Mid-thought Ranma leaped upwards over an attack from the cannon Angel had summoned, but then was again caught off balance somehow as Racer once more closed, and Ranma felt his body slowing down. Even his attempt to gather his water magic around himself to stop Racer’s next strike was slowed enough he was instead caught full on by a blast of Brain’s magic.

”Shit that hurt!” Ranma growled, pushing himself once more out of the wreckage of a building, hearing the screams of the people directly to one side of him. Eyes widening, he rolled in that direction, then flung his arms out to either side as he desperately gathered his magic. “Soryu no Shahei no Uroko (Water Dragon's Shielding Scale)!”

Four people, a family of some kind screamed as two magical attacks flashed through the dust and debris towards them, and through them towards Ranma. The globe of water appeared, absorbing the magical attacks, but this opened Ranma up to Racer, who moved in from the side before Ranma could blink.

A knife in his hand appeared at Ranma’s throat, as Racer smirked, his thin lips quirking into an unpleasant expression. “Hehe, you’re fast, but no one is faster than me. My kicks might not have fazed you, but I wonder how long you’d survive if I just cut your throat like this.”

“Racer, wait!” Midnight shrieked from nearby. “Don’t play with him like that, he’s at his most dangerous in hand to hand!”

“If you think you can just cut my throat asshole, do it,” Ranma said with a smirk, his chin flashing down. Racer didn’t realize what he was doing before he found his knife trapped between Ranma’s chin and his throat. He spent a precious second of time trying to pull it out, only to find his arm grabbed by one of Ranma’s hands in that bare instant of remaining still.

“Let go!” Racer shouted. His free hand flashed into dozens, hundreds of punches, but Ranma simply snarled, his teeth bared as he took it.

“Heh so that really is what’s going on!” Still holding onto Racer’s arm Ranma leaped away, to put more distance between himself and the civilians, dodging several other attacks having seen them coming before they got near him at the same time, none of which luckily went towards the family of civilians he’d just left behind. “You don’t speed yourself up, you somehow slow me down! But hate ta tell ya, once you’re in my grip like this, that hardly matters much, since you can’t move any faster. And as for your punches,” Ranma said, as Racer tried to stab him, the knife shattering against his skin. “My little sister hits harder than you!”

“Damn you, let, me, go!” Racer bellowed, trying to use his Slow Magic to slow Ranma down enough to break Ranma’s grip, or lash out at him hard enough, creating an attack that was something like Ranma’s own Amaguriken to Ranma’s senses. But Ranma’s durability was such that this was, indeed, like a child attacking a mountain. As for his grip, no matter how he twisted or tried to wrench away, Ranma’s grip just wouldn’t give way.

In return, Ranma used his Water Dragon Slayer magic to create a globe of water to side of him, then grimacing had to do the same to one side protecting another group of policemen from an errant blast. Then he finally got in an attack on his captive, but, with speed of the essence and Cobra closing in, wasn’t able to recoat his hand in water to add further stopping power. Still, his speed attack was enough.

Instead of attacking where he saw Racer in his slowed-down perception though, Ranma aimed at everywhere Racer’s head could possibly be, launching twenty punches at each point. In this manner, and with his movements curtailed by the grip on his arm, no matter how Racer tried to dodge, he was shit out of luck. “You think you’re magic makes you fast, welcome to the real thing!!” Ranma roared

To Cobra, who had just closed into hand to hand combat range with Nullpudding and Kurohebi, it looked as if Ranma’s arm had become a wave almost as Cobra desperately tried to dodge, his own movement like a streak to Cobra’s senses, effected as he was suddenly by Racer’s power. But then Ranma’s fist connected, there was the sound of a meat tenderizer at work and a flash of blood as Racer’s glasses and chin protector shattered along with his nose and several of his teeth.

Instantly Racer’s body fell limp in Ranma’s hand and he landed, tossing the unconscious Dark Mage away forced to raise his hands to either side as more long-range attacks hammered in. “Soryu no Shahei Kyutai! (Water Dragon's Shielding Globe)!”

The attacks broke through eventually and then Cobra was there getting in a punch to Ranma’s powered by his own Poison Dragon Slayer magic, trying to open Ranma’s face up with his poisoned claws. “Dokuryu Soga (Poison Dragon’s Twin Fang)!”

Nullpudding too closed, and Ranma cried out in honest pain as the purple-colored man’s large forearm caught him in the side of his chest. Still he used the momentum to take to the air once more as his healing ability went to work. *Fuck, what was that?! It was as if those spikes of his created fields of vibrations almost that carried into my body!*

“Keep it up!” Brain bellowed, lashing out with his magic from both hand and staff, green and black lances of magical energy. “Everyone, attack!”

At those words, more than two dozen men, including some who Ranma had thought were civilians a moment ago, appeared out of the alleyways of the town. All of them shucked off their normal clothing to pull on Red Hoods before lashing out towards Ranma with staff-based attacks, fire and lightning assaults lashing out. “Red Hoods keep the range open, Axe Legends close in! Everyone but Cobra, Nullpudding and Kurohebi keep the range open! Hoteye, stay back and look for a chance to trap him. Angel, you Midnight and I will keep trying to minimize his movements so the others can land a killing blow.”

From several buildings there came the crash of glass breaking and more than three dozen men jumped out. They all looked like they had been the victim of vampires, their bodies thin to the point of emaciation, yet in their hands they all carried huge axes nearly as large as they were. While Ranma was busy with the rest of the dark mages, they all hefted their axes slightly off the ground as they shouted, “Strength Magic, Berserker!” With that their bodies buffed out to resemble that of Elfman, and they all roared forward, hacking at Ranma, the ground or the scenery as they came.

These attacks, and still needing to guard civilians here and there as the magical assault continued to story the town around them, slowly pushed Ranma away from his previous position despite his best efforts, and Ranma cursed. But as the berserkers closed with him, they became a liability to the others, with Ranma using them as so many springboards or projectile weapons, hurling them around and generally making them look like idiots. Then when Nullpudding closed again, instead of letting him strike Ranma’s body cleanly, Ranma Requipped his escrima sticks and began to duel with him, smirking at Nullpudding’s shocked grimace. “You didn’t think I missed whatever magic that was your spikes contain did you!?”

As the battle moved away from him, Brain flung his staff to one side. “Klodoa, get Racer up and moving. It’s clear his magic is no help against this Ranger. But we can use him to get the councilwoman out and away now. We need her to open up the way to Nirvana.”

The staff, a long wooden gnarled thing with a skull that held a crystal in its mouth and a vaguely Native American look, nodded, its expression suddenly coming alive. “Of course, Master Brain, leave it to me!” The staff’s voice was an alloy of unctuous servility and arrogance and it hopped away quickly while Brian once more began to fire towards where Ranma could be seen fighting over the rooftops of the town.

“Fuck my life!” Ranma growled, his head ringing from another magical blow from Cobra even as he landed in among a group of the Red Hood gang. Ranma recognized them as a dark guild which looked to the Oración Seis for protection, but that didn’t matter at the moment. What did matter was they, and the Axe Legend idiots, had joined the fight, further forcing Ranma to concentrate on them.

He had even had to protect a few townsfolk from their attacks already by this point. This was hard, really hard and even with his continued use of his Water Dragon’s Shielding Globe. And Ranma, just like Racer, couldn’t avoid everything. Of them all though, Brain’s magical attacks were by far the worse, stronger than any attacks Ranma had seen up to this point, well above even the attacks of the devil Halphas and the attacks he’d faced from Jellal and the others in the tower. They were so strong, they nearly broke through Ranma’s durability, and he was really starting to feel it.

*Anything Goes, Anything Fucking Goes, come on brain, work it out!* Ranma growled, flipping over one attack and smashing Cobra and Nullpudding to either side. Nullpudding’s durability again surprised him, the magic coating his hands doing little more than making his punch hit harder than it would have instead of actually shredding as Ranma had hoped. Cobra’s body too took the hit, and before Ranma could attack either while they were off-balance he was forced to block another long-range attack grimacing as it hurled him into and through a fifth building.

Adaptation and integration of any style or attack they encountered was the central, overriding rule of the Anything Goes School of martial arts. It called for minds that could, in the heat of the moment, analyze, adapt and overcome. With magic, that was of limited utility since Ranma simply couldn’t use magic of the types coming at him. Worse, most of the time when Ranma wanted to use his gathered water to attack, he was forced to use it to defend himself or the civilians around the town. Only those who had basements to retreat into were truly safe given the power of the magic being thrown around, and only Scorpio of his attackers seemed willing to not just aim through them.

Yet there was still one thing Ranma could do mentally in order to overcome his enemy’s strategy and numbers: continue the work he’d been doing with Porlyusica.

To someone else, devoting time to this during a battle would be suicide. After all, Ranma hadn’t made much progress in creating the mental framework needed to really control switching between his ki and his Dragon Slayer magics and to say the least his attention should have entirely been on the fight around him. But Ranma had expended a goodly portion of his ki in his efforts to jumpstart everyone else’s natural healing ability, weakening that power within his body.

Further, he was someone who learned best by being forced to learn on the fly. That had been the case his entire life. It was what had allowed him to learn every technique showed him so quickly. It should have taken him months of preparation and time to create a real, working version. While taking a pounding the likes of which he hadn’t faced in years in monstrously intense combat, to create a barely controllable yet working version, took Ranma ten minutes.

By this point Brain was generally confident of their ability to kill the Ranger. Yes, his durability was a surprise, but they were grinding him down thanks to his foolish desire to protect the civilians around them and their numbers. Yes, he had nearly beaten Racer, and that was a concern, but they had been able to force him away from Racer before he could be finished off. *A better idea would have been to have Racer stay near him, slow him down, but Racer’s Slow Magic is very range-limited.*

*Still, we are wearing him down,* Brain thought as he lashed out with another dozen Dark Capriccios, single solid beams of green and black magic that specialized in drilling through anything in their way. This they did now, shattering through several houses towards his current target, almost certainly killing Brain didn’t care how many civilians.

Then he froze as Ranma burst through them, closing with Brain through the blasts of green and black magic, a route none of the others had thought to guard. Brain had an instant to gape at Ranma’s form, noticing that his entire body was covered now in scales before a punch caught him with enough force to hurl him through a nearby building, a shout of “See how you like it bastard!” ringing in his ears.

Groaning in pain, Brain pushed to his knees, hacking up a bit blood as he stared through the rubble of the ruined house at Ranma. Ranma stood there for a second with his hand outstretched. His arms were covered in scales of blue, his face covered likewise, his eyes slanted, almost reptilian. Indeed, his outstretched hand looked almost draconic, with claws instead of fingers. His teeth too had started to show as nearly pointed as he hissed. “Right, bastards, round two!”

“Kill him!” Brain shouted out as he flew backwards, pain and something approaching fear clear in his face for the first time in a very long time. “Kill him!”

His teeth bared in a snarl, Ranma dodged this way and that, his movements faster and far more controlled now, ignoring the few attacks that were still able to tag him as he moved towards the edge of the town. The Axe Legend mages closes once more, only to find to their shock their axes bounced off his dragon scales and they were no match for him in close combat. Each hit blasted one off his feet, every attack Ranma sent out struck with devastating force, pushing Cobra once more away from Cubellios in midair, then Midnight too was forced back purely on the defensive when Ranma started to use Guns Magic to attack him and the lesser mages around him.

Then Brain, Angel and her celestial Spirits found the range once more and with a roar, Ranma was forced to retreat. This retreat was exacerbated when Hoteye nearly captured his legs in his water ground mud attack then nearly took Ranma’s head off as he shifted the rubble of a nearby house into a punch that took Ranma in the side of the face before he could dodge away.

To the dark mages it looked like, despite his newfound durability and draconic appearance, Ranma was still being pressed back. Even Brain, once he resumed the battle, believed that, despite the fact that more and more of their attacks were beginning to miss him entirely.

The truth was very different. *Need to get these assholes away from the town, away from the rest of the populace.* Ranma knew many, possibly hundreds of people, had been killed in the battle already, despite his initial shout and his own efforts since to defend any civilians he saw get caught in the crossfire. The dark mages had been shooting through buildings to get to him after all. But he refused to let anymore get caught up in it, especially not considering Ranma was going to be adding to the carnage as soon as he could.

**OOOOOOO**

Looking around as his so-called allies’ shriek reached him, Ivan shook his head. “My, my, that ranger he seems to have become a major issue, doesn’t he?” He tilted his head in thought, then nodded, and created a few dozen red, glowing Shikigami, which flew over toward the tanned young man by his side. “Gapri, join the others in keeping that one away from me. Then meet me outside the town to the southeast.”

Grimacing as he held his bruised shoulder where he had landed after Ranma’s magical attack a few minutes ago, Gapri nodded reluctantly. His magic, Steel Molding, didn’t give his actual body any further physical endurance, though he had trained his speed as much as he could, and his casting speed in particular was fast, hence why he’d been able to protect himself from Ranma’s earlier attack. Yet the speed and power of it had really worried him. *Fuck, I should have convinced Master Ivan to take Swan instead of me on this ambush!* “Yes, Master Ivan.”

Smiling Ivan leaned down and hefted the groaning Laxus to one shoulder, having finished chaining him up with Shikigami chains, series of interconnected paper dolls. To Ivan they weighed nothing. To Laxus, they would be as strong as several tons of metal. “Come, come, my dear son, yorororo, it is time we have a family reunion. But not here, no, no, don’t worry. This reunion may take a long while, so we’ll have to wait until we are back in my home for it…. yororororo…”

He took a brief moment to look around at the other mages, then sent a smirk toward the two remaining dragon slayers, the only two who looked to be awake. “Yorrororo, the poison in you should finish its work soon, so don’t worry, it will all be over in moments. Tortuous moments of course, but still only moments.” He held out a hand over Natsu, the hand slowly glowing white and black. “Maybe I should end it here, hmm, an act of kindness towards my former guild?”

Natsu glared back at him, no fear in his face, only pain, hate and anger. Ivan stared back, then sighed as the sounds of combat grew louder for a moment, then he ducked down as something loud boomed in the distance, shattering windows throughout the town. “Yorororo, or perhaps I should not take the time? Saved by the boom, Natsu dear.”

With that he turned and, carrying his prize over one shoulder, left the restaurant through the door, even closing behind him for some reason despite the fact more than half the front of the restaurant was gone. “Yorororo, what a magnificent day!”

Still in the restaurant, Wendy was hiding under a mound of rock and rubble crafted into an igloo by Jura. Jura had been able to create a shield to cover himself, Jenny, Wendy, and Mirajane the closest to him, though this had left everyone else outside it at the mercy of the dark mages. But his constitution had failed him at that point, and he had fallen unconscious, his hands still outstretched keeping the stone hideaway intact even as the blood and foam dribbling from his mouth became a torrent.

At the same time Jura had fallen unconscious, Wendy had, thanks to the start Ranma had given her and her own Dragon Slayer constitution, slowly started to deal with the poison inside her. She was still weak and groggy, but even through Jura’s rubble igloo she had heard the code Ranma had shouted earlier, and so remained still and hidden while the restaurant suffered another series of magical attacks, some of which had shattered the protective shell.

Now she watched, her hands over her mouth as the dark mage with the insane-looking face picked up Laxus like a sack of wheat and began to move away. She waited until he was out of sight, then quickly turned reaching up to Jura only to freeze as she found Jenny’s hand covering her mouth, keeping her from shrieking in shock. “Je, Jenny, you’re awake?”

“Awake, but not exactly happy, ugh,” Jenny grimaced, gently moving Wendy to one side to look out into the rest of the restaurant and then gestured for Wendy to come close. “Take Over, Drop Hammer!” Jenny’s arm shifted into a large hammer the same size as her torso set into a long, wide piston of some kind. The hammer pressed back to her elbow then lashing out forward as if fired by a spring, smashing the rubble outwards.

Stepping over the rubble Jenny grimaced as she looked back into Jura’s hideout at the Wizard Saint and Mira, then around at the others. Natsu, to her astonishment, looked back at her, his eyes wild and wrathful as he tried to push himself to his feet despite a trial of blood and green goo dripping from his mouth. Gajeel too was awake, but other than continually smashing his hand down on the floor, didn’t seem able to move, the poison affecting him a little more than Natsu for some reason.

“H, how the hell are you alright?” Natsu groaned as Wendy looked between him and the others, trying to figure out where to start, looking almost panicked at the number of bodies scattered around the restaurant. All too many of them were already dead, normal civilians not having any kind if built in durability as most mages did no matter how weak their magic.

“I’m a freaking model, do you have any idea how often someone has tried to slip me date rape drugs or worse?” Jenny asked, shaking her head with a grimace that looked particularly ugly on her pretty face. “Of course I came up with a Takeover form that could help me, I V Tube. And I wouldn’t say I’m alright, I’m just not in any danger of dying. Not like my guildmates there.”

Jenny moved over to Ichiya, the only one of them moving, and her grimace deepening, began to search through the other S-class mage’s clothing, trying to find his perfumes. She knew for a fact that he had one that enhanced his body’s healing speed, and another that was a universal anti-poison remedy. Indeed, its mixture was the basis for what she had in her Take Over, I V Form. Moving his body slightly her grimace faded into a smile as she saw, like Ranma and Jura before her, that Ichiya had tried to get one of his vials open before the poison struck him down, the smell of it keeping him in the land of the living at least.

Ichiya, Ren and Hibiki though would probably have died if not for having been close enough to partake of some of it. Regardless, they were in a very bad way, their faces green and their bodies unmoving. Setting a hand to their necks, she could detect a brief pulse, but it was fading as she touched them. Hoping it would help she pulled out the stopper on both vials of perfume and set it between them.

“Wendy, concentrate on keeping the weaker members alive,” She ordered, before grabbing Sherry, Lyon and Gray in turn, moving them over to join her guildmates, hoping the perfume’s influence would help them. They all seemed to have tougher constitutions, but Sherry in particular was so pale and green it looked as if she was already dead. Gray was the best of them, but even he didn’t have much time left unless he got some help.

“Juvia will help as well,” said a third voice, causing both girls to twist around. What they had taken to be a puddle of spilled water in one corner of the room shifted as they watched into a person, solidifying into Juvia’s form before she stepped forward. “Juvia might not know healing magic, but she can use her liquid form to flush out any poisons from their stomachs. She must warn you though, this poison is a very nasty thing, it even has crushed poison lacrima in it and it will fight any healing magic we try.”

“We’ll see about that!” Wendy growled. She swiftly moved to kneel between the Trimens, holding her hands out over them. “Tenryu no Hiringo Kaze (Sky Dragon's Healing Gale)!” From her hands, a white and yellow miasma of magic spread out to cover the wounded. This was a wide angle healing spell that was intended to take care of lots of small wounds and bruises, and she hoped it would work for poisons too.

Beyond poison weapons a time or two however, she had rarely seen poison before and never on a scale like this. Her brows furrowed as the magic of the gale seemed to not stick to her patients as much as it should and none of them looked to be getting any better. “Darn it!” She cast the same spell again, this time pouring a lot more of her magic into it, and watched as the magic finally took, but even then not as much as it should have. “Ooh, double darn it!”

Moving from one to the other, now Wendy began to use “Tenryu no Ochitsuita Tsubasa (Sky Dragon’s Soothing Wing)!” to analyze each of them in turn. With this spell she quickly found that Juvia was right: this poison was made by mixing up four very different but still virulent poisons into once unholy concoction. Cubellios’ poison effected the whole body, Cobra’s effected the lungs almost melting them inside the person’s body. Kurohebi’s addition was more of a paralysis type that would kill slowly but could be healed, indeed that aspect seemed to be fading under the healing gale, but the other two issues had been unaffected. Thankfully its inclusion had slowed the impact of the first two issues. Even so, Sherry, Lyon and Gray’s lungs were nearly black with poison.

And Ivan’s addition to it, added to get the poison past the antibodies of the Dragon Slayers, was ground up poison lacrima, similar to the kind that had been embedded into Cobra so many years ago. It attacked literally every part of the body and spread quickly, though thankfully due to Kurohebi’s poison being included it didn’t act quickly, or else they would already have lost teammates. Carla, Sherry and Happy were very close to death even so.

Now that she knew what to do, Wendy laid her hands on the two Exceed first, gathering her magic and shouting, “Tenryu no Iyashino Iki (Sky Dragon’s Healing Pulse)!” A blast of white and gold magic entered both bodies, which began to glow with tiny pinpricks of green energy, the ground up poison lacrima attempting to fight her magic. But after a few seconds those pulses started to fade under her power, and their lungs started to heal, regenerating to how they had been prior to the poison.

But by the time she was finished with them, Wendy was gasping, her magic feeling almost drained. She spread her arms wide, and sucked in the air of the restaurant, taking it in and changing it into magical power, but only regained a portion of the energy she had expended. Even so, she moved over to Sherry.

But Juvia stopped her, touching a hand to Wendy’s shoulder. “Juvia will flush out the poison at the same time as you heal their bodies, that should help the process along.” Wendy nodded, and Juvia held a hand over Sherry’s mouth. As the littlest Dragon Slayer watched, the hand turned back into liquid form, spurting down into the dark pink haired girl’s open mouth. As she watched the water began to come back up, tainted dark green and red with blood. At the sight, Wendy shook her head and began to use her Healing Pulse again.

While Wendy and Juvia concentrated on the others, Jenny looked at the three S-class mages and the two Dragon Slayers. Jura and Erza looked to be in a bad way, while Mira’s face was slowly clearing up. Her body had slowly been toughened up over time to even poisons thanks to her Satan Soul even when she wasn’t actively calling on it.

Jenny shook her head, looking down at the grimacing Natsu and Gajeel. “Sorry boys, but I think Ranma needs as much help as we can give him as fast as we can, so we don’t have any time to waste on Wendy’s slow healing you all.” With that, she held out her hands to either side and gathered herself. “This is so freaking embarrassing, but needs must. Take Over, Stomach Pump!!”

“Wait, what?” Natsu groaned, blinking as Jenny’s body suddenly shifted forms in a flare of yellow magic.

Her normal attire had disappeared and her body had morphed into some kind of mechanical device he had never seen before. From the sides of it sprouted long tubes like so many tentacles, each of them about as thick as Natsu’s upper arm, ending in something like suction cups and with odd little bags to the side of the tubes. Above them, Jenny’s normal head could barely be seen past the sides of the large cube her body had become. Her legs too had been replaced by a series of small metal legs.

“…” For a moment the restaurant fell silent, as everyone conscious, and even Jura who was most decidedly not, seemed to stare at Jenny.

She quickly raised one of her tubes to hide her face shouting, “Don’t look, don’t look darn it! Gah! I hate this form! Ranma, you better appreciate this! Stomach Pump, go!” With that, the tentacles lashed out slamming down onto the mouths of the five people around her, the suction cups latching down.

Cringing at the sounds going on behind them, Wendy and Juvia both decided she didn’t want to see what was going on there. Instead, they concentrated on trying to purge the poison from Gray and the others while also healing them from the damage it had already done.

**OOOOOOO**

Ivan grimaced as he left the town, seeing that the ranger and the others had shifted their battle in the same direction he had hoped to leave. “Hmmm, well, I suppose luck must shine on both sides equally.” Still carrying Laxus on one shoulder and with Obra following him, he moved over to where Brain and Gapri were standing. “I take it that he was able to destroy all my special Shikigami Gapri?”

Shivering a little at the way Ivan was looking at him Gapri shook his head, wondering internally if he was more worried about being sent back into close combat with the ranger or what his guild master would do to him. “He destroyed some of them master but…”

“But the Ranger’s durability is such that he just shook off your explosive Shikigami!” Brain groused. “We seem to be wearing him down, but’s it’s slow going. I don’t suppose I can interest you in joining in Ivan?”

As Ivan watched, Ranma twisted around one blast from Brain, a lacrima stick landing like a pole on Nullpudding’s outstretched fist that he used to flip to the one side, dodging under another attack from Cobra and then several blasts from Midnight. That escrima stick, which deadened Nullpudding’s Vibration Magic, also must have weighed as much as a ton since it smashed Nullpudding down towards the ground crying out in agony, his arm broken.

“Hmm, hmmm, he’s like a little rabbit more than a dragon. Still, I suppose I should join you, we can’t have him chasing after either of us obviously.” Ivan said coolly, though inside he was rather impressed.

With that, he held up one hand, flicking his pointed fingers this way and that creating a massive series of Shikigami all in a row, then sending them forward in a flurry. They moved as fast as swallows, but even so Ranma dodged them all, and kept moving, something that made Ivan frown. For all his madness, Ivan was an incredibly experienced mage who had seen far more than his fair share of combat. He could see something odd about the way Ranma was moving. *Very strange, he just missed an opportunity to close with Cobra there, instead moving in the opposite direction, where he had to dodge many of my own Shikigami. Hmmmpf, admittedly he is also lashing out at them with water attacks and disrupting the magic in them, but why…*

Despite his self-control Ranma couldn’t stop a small, vicious smirk from appearing on his features as he started to form the spiral. Even with his ability to push down his remaining ki and let his Dragon Slayer scales cover his body, he had taken one hell of a beating getting the dark mages out of the city. Covered by the others Midnight’s near-invisible attacks had been especially effective, even if they lacked striking power now that Ranma was covered with draconic scales.

It had taken all his skill and speed to stay alive and he’d been forced entirely on the defensive, having to rely on his “Water Dragon’s Depth Pressure Scales” more and more. Worse, retaining his human form, pressing his Dragon Slayer’s transformation down enough to retain his human body, was taking so much of his attention he could barely concentrate on any magic attacks. *But there’s defense and then there’s* ***defense*** *assholes.*

Now that he was outside the town, Ranma began to push out his ki just slightly from his feet and legs, which were covered by his pants of course, so the fact they no longer were covered by scales went unnoticed. At the same time, he began to slowly call upon the Soul of Ice, his ki cooling down dramatically, so much so that Cobra, who was the only mage near him, shivered a bit, and Cubellios retreated in confusion.

Before either could do anything Ranma landed a blow on Cobra’s face that sent him flying to onside, then kicked off Cubellios’ head to flip away from Nullpudding, idly eating Kurohebi’s water attack once more before landing lightly on the ground then leaping on before Hoteye could capture him. That bit of magical energy allowed him to return some more into an attack that devastated four Red Hoods who had bunched up even as Ranma dodged around more attacks from the axes of the other smalltime guild.

“Ah, he’s coming our way,” Brain muttered, leaping away. “Ivan, I’d recommend you get away too, that Ranger is more dangerous at close range than at long.” It wasn’t so much that Brain was warning Ivan though, as informing him, wondering what Ivan would do next and prepared to use whatever it was.

“Weell, let me just test that, hmm?” Ivan said, racing forward. “Shikigami bomb!” He shouted, a mass of shikigami appearing in his hand and turning immediately into a mass of dark magic and lashing forward.

“Soryu no Taitan Ken (Water Dragon’s Titan Fist)!” Ranma roared desperately, lashing out with a massive fist of water magic that slammed into the oncoming mass of purple and black magic, dissipating it. Then he had to dodge several more, launched from Brain and Cobra both, before booting Nullpudding in the side of the head and then ducking around and under Cobra, grabbing him before the other Dragon Slayer could dodge, hurling him into the way of several attack from the Red Hoods as he continued on his path. More and more of the small time guild members attacked as they exited the town too, but Ranma continued to dance around them, a his teeth bared in a rictus snarl. Even so, the first attack had been the only one that would have broken his stride, and Ranma continued to create his spiral.

“What exactly are you up to, hmm, hmmm? These eyes of mine are not just for show,” Ivan nearly sang, as he lashed out again and again with his magic, frowning as a sense of unease filled him. Whatever the Ranger was doing, it was big.

He wasn’t the only one who could sense something. Cobra had been getting more and more nervous as they had exited the town, hearing Ranma’s heartbeat, cool, calm and without any hint of panic and now feeling the cold Ranma was exhibiting. This told the Poison Dragon Slayer Ranma had a plan, and after his brush with Ranma and seeing what he had done to Jiemma and Midnight before Cobra knew to be leery of that. “Everyone watch out, I think he’s…”

Before Cobra could finish his warning, Ranma’s attack struck. He lashed out upwards at no one in particular, his fist practically glowing light blue with cold infused ki as he shouted out, “Hiryuu Shouten Ha!!!”

From his upstretched fist the blast of cold air, blasted out, as if they had been transported deep into the north of Iceberg. This hit the hot air that had been caused by the auras of hate and anger from all the dark mages, enhanced further form the heat of the fire using Red Hood mages and many of the Oración Seis’ own magical attacks. The conflict between the hot and cold fronts created a monstrous tornado, which formed almost as fast as the dark mage’s could blink, dragging all of them into the air.

This wasn’t magic. This was simple use of the physics of weather. As such, Midnight’s magic failed to protect him, and he was torn off his feet up into the air with everyone else. Gapri had just launched himself forward in a leap, his Metal Form magic having formed his metal shield into a spear. He had not wanted to close with Ranma, again, but under Ivan’s glare he had felt compelled to. Instead though, he was plucked out of the air with a cry of shock. Nor was Nullpudding’s durability and speed any aid, and he cried out in pain and fear as the tornado took him from where he had been laying on the ground.

Ivan, Brain, Angel, her Celestial Spirits, every one of the two small-time guilds who had been trying to fight Ranma who had followed him out of the town, all of them were torn from the ground up into the air. Their screams of shock and pain resounding in the air as just like that, the battle turned against the dark mages in a way none of them had, for all their powers, foreseen.

The only one who could protect himself was Hoteye, who quickly used his magic on the ground underneath him. “Liquid Ground!” the ground around him swallowed him up pulling him down before the tornado could rip him free of its grasp.

Ignoring him for now, Ranma crouched and gathered his magic once more into his hands, fighting the effect of using so much Dragon Slayer magic balancing the ki in his body to keep his human shape as he roared out, “Soryu no Shi Sousha (Water Dragons Deadly Strafing)!” From his hands appeared dozens, then hundreds of crescent shaped blades of water, flashing up into the tornado. They wouldn’t be able to keep their form for long, but they would be deadly for the time they were. As they hit, above Ranma the tornado was dyed red with the blood of the weaker dark mages.

Gasping in air, Ranma concentrated, kneeling down and thumping his hand down on the ground, releasing his ki from his emotional control and letting it pour back into his skin, gasping in air. Both his ki and his Dragon Slayer magic had been badly depleted by the events of the battle so far, and he could feel the wounds he’d accumulated up to this point still there now that his dragon slayer side was being pressed further down in his skin. Ranma he had to finish this now if he could. “Moko Takabisha Barrage!!!” He shouted, his ki coming into his hands, tiny balls that blasted up into the tornado, pouring out his ki again like it was the water that powered his magic, which again slowly started to transform his body.

“I won’t let you! For my money I cannot let you have your own way, right!” Hoteye shouted as he emerged from his protective hole, and from around and underneath Ranma the ground softened, trying to envelop him. But Ranma burst clear by the barest of margins, turning to engage Hoteye, finding himself unable to close for a moment thanks to the ground coming alive in waves and unwilling to chance taking to the air with the tornado so close.

Inside the tornado, Brain had instantly realized this wasn’t magic and what had actually caused it. He had been a magical researcher for decades before going rogue after all. *Damn it, a hot and cold front, he used our magics and magical auras to create a heat wave and then moved in a spiral as he himself created a cold front. What magnificent magical control! No wonder he’s a ranger.*

And with that understanding, Brain understood how to get out of the tornado and began to communicate that to his guild-members via Thought Projection. Yet even as he did, he felt the mark on his face signaling Midnight’s life span and connection to the spell keeping his failed experiment Zero in check fade. He didn’t have much time to consider that, since the next instant a large blast of magical power in the form of a cerulean sphere slammed into his thigh, barely missing his crotch as he flew through the air. It acted like a punch from a man the size of Hoteye and he was flipped end over end and to the side, grimacing in more irritation than pain.

Like most mages of any real strength, Brain’s body was magically enhanced to add to his durability and speed. Indeed, Brain would rate his durability as well above that of Cobra. So he took the blow and calmly began to shift his body this way and that, riding the wind as best he could while husbanding his magical energy. *Angel, Cobra, don’t try to fight the tornado, let it push you around while containing your magical energies! The tornado is caused by heat and cold, without anything continually generating heat it will fade away! The moment it does, we need to leave instantly! Hoteye, try to disrupt the Ranger from sending further magical attacks into the tornado.*

He glanced up as streak flashed towards him and couldn't dodge in time. Gapri’s body slammed head first into his stomach, sending them both careening away. *By the drowned bosom of Gora!!* Brain cursed, before righting himself.

Ivan too had realized what was happening, but he couldn’t care less about his guildmates. Instead of trying to rally them, he sent a thought command to only one of them, the only mage he had brought into the city that hadn’t engaged in battle since Ranma had first launched his mad attack on them. *Obra, use Transfer now!*

Outside near the edge of town Obra stood, silent and watching while nearby Hoteye and Ranma engaged one another. He had never even tried to fight Ranma, simply following the battle as ordered. This was because Obra was not a person. Instead he was a puppet, created by Ivan and powered by Shikigami inside his body.

Nearby Ranma was once more in the air of course, avoiding Hoteye’s attacks with some difficulty, but pressing home his own assaults. To his surprise though, Hoteye’s durability was quite high, and he concentrated on protecting his face and eyes from Ranma’s attacks, and even used his magic to move backwards along the ground like he was skating, keeping his distance. He still took hits, but wasn’t going down as fast as Ranma could have hoped. Worse, Ranma’s magic and ki weren’t coming back from his earlier exertions: he had slowed down tremendously and was now unable to conjure up any water magic while keeping his dragon slayer powers from fully changing his body into that of a dragon. *Fuck me, this whole fighting on two fronts thing is for the birds!*

At his master’s orders, the puppet Obra held out its hand to one side and from the arm of its cloak a giant Shikigami unfolded toward the ground. A second later it flashed with white light, and Ivan stood there, the Shikigami having shifted position with him. He growled, but picked up Laxus from where he had dumped him to one side of Obra and made to leave, Obra flying high up into the sky like a kite at another order via Thought Projection. *I have what I came for, if we put enough distance between us, even should that Ranger win he’ll have to go after Brain and his young fools. Besides, I left Doll, Cannon and Swann several leagues to the south of here as backup in case Brain tried to betray me, they will help me just as much against any pursuers.*

With that in mind, he smirked and began to concentrate his magic into a new spell even as Ranma turned in his direction. “Gun’s Magic, Rapid Fire, Explosive Shot!”

Hoteye quickly folded the ground in front of him into a shield, but Ranma s bounced onto the ground where he used a Titan Step to send him flashing towards Ivan. “You think I’ll let you go!”

“Shikigami Magic, Thousand Page Copy!” Ivan shouted, and from him thousands of Shikigami spread in every direction. Each of them took on the form of Ivan carrying Laxus, with the original obscured for just a second by the mass of them. By the time they finished spreading out, Ivan had transferred once more to one on the outskirts.

“Fuck you too!” Ranma leaped up over an attack from Hoteye, his guns blazing. For this kind of thing, multiple enemies that you only had to hurt a little rather than a lot, the guns were perfect. Each magical bullet didn’t hit the target he aimed at, but they certainly destroyed the shikigami when they struck. Ranma rained down magical bullets like they were going out of style, the Shikigami disappearing as soon as they appeared.

At the same time, there was a snarl from one side as Natsu joined the fight. “Karyu no Ken (Fire Dragon’s Fist)!” He impacted the battlefield like a tiny meteor and dozens of Shikigami copies disappeared, forcing Ivan to reveal himself. “You might be able to copy your looks, but not Laxus’s smell you bastard!”

Ivan ducked and dodged another series of punches cursing all the while, yet even as he did, his hand flashed up, smashing into the side of Natsu’s arm. “Shikigami Transformation!” With that incantation he pulsed his magic into Natsu, intent on rewriting his existence as he would any bird or animal.

Natsu blinked in shock as his hand and arm turning into paper while Ivan scowled.  *The youth’s magical resistance is incredibly high!* But even so that was enough to give the older man the advantage, and Ivan lashed out with a kick, catching Natsu in the jaw and hurling him backwards.

“Tetsuryu no Uroko Kiba (Iron Dragon's Scale Fang)!” Gajeel shouted, leaping towards Hoteye.

Grimacing Hoteye lashed out towards him and Ranma both with an attack that blocked Gajeel’s incoming strike and hurled him onto his back foot, catching his legs as Hoteye’s masterful control of Water Ground took its effect. Ranma though dodged once more, blocking just enough of it to use the momentum from that to push himself into the air.

At the same time, the tornado died out. Several dozen bodies came crashing down, accompanied by a literal rain of body parts, Ranma’s Strafing attack having sliced the weaker dark mages into pieces along with the wind of the tornado itself. Nullpudding’s body fell with them, battered into something more resembling a purple pile of clay yet still alive, crying out in agony through a shattered face when his body slammed into the ground like a rock.

In contrast Midnight’s body bounce away limply, his spine shattered in two places and the side of his neck opened. Kurohebi and Gapri’s bodies were also somewhere among the shattered remains of the Red Hood and Axe legend mages. Having none of the endurance of Nullpudding, the two of them had been easy meat for the tornado and resulting attacks.

Angel, though battered, was encased in some kind of crystal coffin she had conjured up as the tornado ended which shattered an instant later, its outer edge showing numerous scratches and dents. “Open, gate of the Rider!” A second later, a metallic Pegasus appeared and Angel landed athwart its back, flying away without a backwards glance, utterly terrified by her near death experience. She didn’t even bother looking for her two spirits, both the cannon and Scorpio having been torn to pieces within the tornado and returning to the Spirit Realm.

Brain too was in one piece, and unlike Angel hadn’t had to rely on any defense, his durability up to the task with some ease. Despite that, he knew when to cut his losses. He landed nearby, and immediately lashed out with an attack towards Ranma, Gajeel and Natsu. “Dark Rondo!” like the attack he’d launched from his staff earlier this attack sent dozens of green and black energy blasts arcing towards his targets, somewhat unaimed but immensely powerful.

Yet even so, this attack was more to cover their retreat than do any real damage. “Enough! Retreat! Hoteye, Cobra, to me! We have what we came for and we have done enough damage here!” *And taken enough damage too, curse it! Midnight’s death was utterly unexpected, and without Racer here and Angel already retreating this is coming to be closer to a fair contest than I like, with Cobra already wounded and both of us having exerted ourselves to boot.* Ranma’s battle prowess had been a true game changer, and with two new Dragon Slayers recovering from the poison Brain was no longer willing to see if they could win here.

Cobra too had gotten through the tornado assault with little damage, although several of his fingers were broken, one of his ears had been shorn off, and his leg wasn’t working quite right. Even so, he looked around for his companion, more concerned about Cubellios than himself. “No, I’m not leaving without my snake!”

At the same time, Cobra said that Ivan was fighting back. “Shikigami Multi Arc Cannon!” From all the surviving Shikigami came a blast of black and white energy shooting towards Ranma, ignoring the other two Dragon Slayers.

As he had been in midair after dodging several blast of Dark Rondo, by all rights Ranma should have been a sitting duck from this attack arching in from seven different angles all spread out around the blasted battlefield. But somehow Ranma was still able to dodge most of the attacks sent at him, only getting hit by one of them, which took him in the back and side, flinging him to the ground. This actually won a cry of pain from Ranma, yet even so he slowly pushed himself to his feet.

At Ivan’s command, Obra flew down and Ivan leaped onto the back of his puppet, racing away to the south. At the same time, Angel and Hoteye had reached Brain, who was creating a teleportation spell around himself. It was a tough, energy consuming spell, but it would carry them to their new base of operations in the outskirts of the Worth Woodsea where Nirvana was hidden. “Cobra, get over here or I will leave you behind!”

Cursing, Cobra moved in their direction, only to be blindsided by Natsu, hammering a “Fire Dragon’s roar!” into his side. He screamed and was pushed towards Ranma, who raised himself on his hands and knees to see this, instantly responding with his own roar. The two attacks, fire and water, met and caused an explosion out of which Cobra was flung like a used dishcloth, his whole body a mass of scorch marks and bruises.

“By the temple of Quastor and it’s infernal guardian, no!” Brain shouted and then moved his hands to complete the spell as he felt another of the Prayer tattoos disappearing from his face. “Savor this victory Ranger, because today you have given us the key to our ultimate victory!”

Ranma snarled, but grabbed at Natsu as he made to leap forward, preventing him from smashing through the area where the three remaining dark mages had just disappeared in a flash of green light. “Don’t bother, they’re gone. And worse, that other bastard, he must’ve been the leader of Raven Tail, Ivan Dreyar, he looked a little like Laxus, he took Sparky away. I doubt we’re so lucky they are going in the same direction.”

“Who cares about that!?” Natsu growled, staring in the direction Ivan had flown off in. “I can track him easily enough! Laxus has a freaking distinct stench I can trace easy.” He looked around, calming down a little and shivering at the amount of blood and body parts scattered everywhere. It looked as if two entire acres or so had been just liberally sprayed with bodies and parts of bodies. Craters, weird, twisted rock spears and other devastation dotted the landscape and a lot of the town nearby had been just shattered, but it was the blood that was bothering Natsu right now. Laxus had been right when he stopped Natsu from killing Gajeel during his attack on Lisanna and Anna: Natsu wasn’t a killer and the reality of S-class missions shook him to the core.

Gajeel was much more pragmatic, moving among the bodies and slapping iron handcuffs on the few living mages among them. “Ranma’s right,” he said gruffly, even as he nodded respectfully in Ranma’s direction. “We have to regroup with Realight and the others, split up and go after them. We need to go quickly, but we can’t go off half-cocked.”

Even as he said that though it was all Gajeel could do to not stare at Ranma in something like awe. He had just fought four Dark Guilds, one of them a member of the Balam Alliance and one of the others at the same level, and while he hadn’t won, he hadn’t lost either. *Although judging by how slowly he’s moving, I’d wager he paid for it.*

Ranma breathed in deeply coming down from his battle high and wincing as his aches and pains let themselves be known, his ki so depleted it wasn’t starting the healing process just yet. *Yeah, gonna feel it in the morning.* Shutting that thought to the side, Ranma looked at his fellow Dragon Slayers quizzically. “Jenny? Jenny revived herself?”

Both younger Dragon Slayers shuddered, looking away. “Don’t ask,” they both intoned, before turning and leading the way back to the others as civilians of all sorts started to poke their heads out from various hiding places.

As they went, Ranma paused, and moved over to the unconscious form of Cubellios, gesturing Gajeel to him. “Let’s restrain this beastie for now. It might be an animal, but it was certainly following Cobra’s orders like it could think for itself.”

Back with the others they found Mira and Erza breathing evenly, but their faces still showed an unhealthy greenish tinge. Only Mira’s eyes were open, tracking everyone around her as her hands began to twitch as if she was close to moving. Jura, Gray and Lyon, Sherry and the Trimens were much worse off. Their bodies were still twitching occasionally even as they lay out next to Wendy, who was leaning back against the chest of Juvia who sat behind her, both of them looking incredibly weary.

Jenny stood in front of them, both hands shifted into guns that Ranma recognized as being lasers of some kind. She looked a little queasy, but easily better than the others. As the three Dragon slayers moved towards them through the ruined town she breathed a sigh of relief cancelling her Take Over and rushing forward to hug Ranma, who wordlessly returned it, squeezing tightly grateful beyond words that she and the others were still in the land of the living.

They stood that way for a brief second before Jenny jerked her head towards the others. “Mira and Erza should be up and about soonest, Jura too, that man’s durability for pain is kind of frightening. Wendy though has nearly exhausted her magic healing the damage the poison did as well as flushing it out of their system, and Juvia’s not much better. None of the others are going to be up and about for days unless we get in some more healing mages,” she scowled, looking like she wanted to spit, which coming from someone like Jenny was very telling. “We’re out of Ichiya’s perfume too, more’s the pity, it and whatever it was you did to the others kept them alive long enough for us to save them.”

“Us?” Ranma asked pulling back to look at her.

“Don’t ask!” Jenny, Natsu and Gajeel all intoned, while the trio of S-class mages, even Jura, shuddered where they lay. Shaking her head, Jenny went on seriously. “What about you?”

Ranma shrugged as if it was nothing, but Jenny could tell he had pushed himself to his limit, his body was bruised and battered and he wasn’t moving nearly as fluidly as Ranma normally did. She could also see hints of scales on his hands and neck. “Midnight is dead, Cobra’s unconscious and captured. Three of the Raven Tail mages are dead too, but two more got away. Gajeel here put the survivors in irons, and we’ve got a few of the civilians dragging them back into down .” Implied in his tone was that if they lived or died Ranma couldn’t care less. “At the same time, we’ve got others organizing rescue efforts. But Ivan took Laxus and Racer took Ultear, and they split up, which means we need to too. Whatever I cost them, they won this fight. We need to make sure we win the war.”

**End Chapter**

This is not the chapter I really wanted to put out. The Fantasia section and the ambush both spiraled larger and larger until I just ran out of time to continue the war. On the other hand, I think it’s rather turned out well, since this way I can take my time with the next chapter combat scenes and make them really good. Here, I don’t think I gave the magic being sent everywhere here the description it really deserved. Still, I hope you liked it, and look forward to the next month’s chapter!