Hello all, and here is chapter nineteen of Making Waves. This is a bit of a prelude chapter, but I felt I couldn’t just jump straight into the Edolas arc without some more travel/buildup time.

**This has been edited by…Michael, Justlovereadin’ and Hiryo.**

**Chapter 19: One Journey Ends, Another Grabs you by the Danglies**

How long they had been fighting, Ranma didn’t know. All he knew was that the blue of the ocean around them was marked with concentric red circles, his blood and the Dragon’s blood mixing within the water before being diluted far more slowly than would have been natural in the real world. It made for pretty patterns, but Ranma refused to dwell on that.

Ranma was tired, ragged with exhaustion and pain. He’d been forced to freaking grow his limbs back a few times, something that he knew would’ve been impossible in the real world even with his ability at ki healing being as high as it was. But Ranma always bore in mind that this was, in fact, **his** damn mind and he wasn’t willing to admit defeat like that or let a mental apparition get away with taking his arms or legs. Beyond that, he had been slashed, bitten, crushed, hurled like a skipping stone more times than he could count—both in terms of how often it occurred and how many times he’d bounced—and had bits shredded by ultra-fast spinning water attacks more than once.

*But I’m still here, you fucker!* With every move he learned, with every strike he began to understand his opponent better. Every magical assault launched at him Ranma saw and could then anticipate better, even if he couldn’t pull off many of them. The longer the fight went on, the more Ranma’s ability to adapt and learn came into play.

The Dragon too was heavily wounded, and, unlike Ranma, it couldn’t use ki healing or, rather, use the fact that none of this was real in a physical sense and thus force its body to heal. The Dragon had a long gash going down its side, a missing fin from its face, and hundreds of spots, large and small, where its scales had been shorn off, as well as a missing a chunk of tail. It had also lost one of its front limbs entirely. But it was still going strong, still hurling out attacks, still controlling the water around them to such a degree that Ranma had had to spend at least a third of his attention trying to fight back against that control in the water directly around him so that the Dragon couldn’t just crush Ranma under continuous attacks or shred him utterly with an attack too wide to dodge and too fast to survive.

*On the plus side, there’s all this water around, and I’m still a guy,* he thought to himself with a sudden grin. Then he dodged yet another torrent of water that seemingly came from nowhere before bending backwards and under another attack with a superhuman level of flexibility.

Why he hadn’t turned into a woman, he didn’t know, but Ranma supposed that, again, whatever it looked like around him, Ranma was still inside his own mind. And whatever his body told the universe, Ranma was a guy through and through. Despite that one moment of levity, however, Ranma knew that he needed to end this soon. His last few water attacks hadn’t been anything to write home about and he could feel his ki also draining away.

With that in mind when the Dragon next attacked, he tried to close, eventually succeeding. Yet, even as he did, the Dragon twisted around, bringing its back leg to bear and clawing at Ranma. But Ranma had been ready for this. Instead of being clawed, he leaped up onto the Dragon’s leg and then higher into the air.

Ranma leaped upwards just enough to clear the Water Dragon’s claws, landing on the back of its head and then bouncing up into the air for a brief second. This looked to the Dragon as if he was almost presenting himself, like a gobbet of flesh tossed in its face. But instead of snapping him up midair, when the Dragon lunged forward Ranma twisted just enough to one side to land on the thing’s snout. Then, his hands glowing with more water magic than Ranma had ever been able to really manipulate at one time before (including when he had sunk the Tower of Heaven), Ranma slammed a fist forward into one of the eyes of this strange amalgamation of his own darker impulses and the Dragon Slayer magic within him. The Dragon roared and screamed, spasming and trying to fling its head around to get rid of him, but Ranma grimly held on both with his feet, glowing with a bit of ki, and with his fist, stuck through the thing’s eye, grabbing at the fibers within and using them like a rope.

*Let’s hear it for the Clinging Like a Gecko technique.*  As the beast continued to thrash this way and that, Ranma readied his next attack, and, when the Dragon had slowed down just enough, he punched out hard with his free hand into the thing’s other eye, blinding it entirely.

If Ranma had thought that the thrashing before this was tough, he hadn’t really been through anything just yet. Ranma lost his footing, but not his grip within the eye he’d already punctured and he didn’t lose his mind either. He was still thinking, and that eye had been a down payment on part one of his plan to finally kill this fucker. And he had still been gathering his magical energy.

The Dragon suddenly roared, and the water around it boiled, creating dozens, then hundreds of spouts, all shifting form to look like watery spears, spinning and swirling rapidly, more rapidly than anything nature could have created. If even one of those hit, Ranma knew, he’d not have the mental fortitude left to heal from it.

But the Dragon had started its attack too late. Above Ranma, massive wings of water built up from his back and then flashed down into his arms, spinning just as quickly and deadly as the spouts the Dragon had launched at him before. Ranma slammed his still free hand into the Dragon’s one remaining eye, shouting, “Metsuryu Ogi: Soryu Gekirou no Doriru (Dragon Slayer's Secret Art: Water Dragon’s Riptide Drill)!”

What came from Ranma’s hands weren’t swords or claws or even lance. No, they were instead drills, their entire lengths spinning, each few inches or so of water at a different speed in a concentric circle. The very water within them whined and howled as those buzz-saws moved, blasting into the Dragon through the eye-sockets and then into its brain. Blood spurted out over Ranma’s hands in a torrent, and a loud howl sounded as the dragon screamed in agony, but that ended abruptly as the attacks pierced its brain from front to back.

The Dragon’s body sagged underneath Ranma and slowly began to disappear. Ranma found himself falling down to splash into the water, where he sort of floated, gasping for air as he stared up at the sky. “How’d you like that, huh?!” he shouted, raising one hand into the air.

A second later Ranma noticed the sudden change in the way the water around him was moving. First, it was glowing, glowing as much as one of his own water magic attacks. Second, it seems to be flowing towards him, and he gasped in sudden astonishment as it began to permeate his body. “What the heck…?”

Just as this process had begun, Ranma found himself back in the real world, inside the stasis circle. As he started to feel the energies within him shifting around like a chemical solution of oil and water suddenly coming together, Ranma tried to open his eyes only to find that he couldn’t. He had entered his meditation with his eyes closed and then been frozen in that pose by the stasis field. *Ya know what? I don’t think we thought this all the way through. How the heck are they supposed to know when I’m finished? And how the hell long was I in there anyway? It felt like months!*

Months spent metaphorically fighting his draconic half for full amalgamation, something his body was paying for now with its level of energy. But even so, Ranma could feel the change in his ki and magical reserves, and it was good.

Thankfully for Ranma’s dubious sanity, he didn’t have to sit like that for long, as the voice of Belserion’s spirit snorted. “He did it. You may release the stasis field. Typhon’s powers are now entirely under the pigtailed one’s control. Well done, human. I honestly only gave you a thirty percent chance of winning that fight.”

Ranma growled a little at that internally, but decided not to take umbrage, simply shaking his head as soon as he was able. With Seilah, who had been the nearest of the quartet, stomping out the sigils, that only took seconds.

“Never tell me the odds,” he said aloud, grinning at Seilah in thanks before standing up fluidly, cracking his back and then his shoulders and neck and finally stretching his whole body, working out various kinks. After he was sufficiently loosened up, he stared down at his forearms for a moment, as he clenched his hands. *Good God, even weakened by the fight as I am, I feel damned good!* It was as if, Ranma reflected, he had been the rope in a tug-of-war contest, where both contestants were a part of him, unable to separate and always at war. He’d been pulled this way and that, been forced to take sides more than once, and even had had one half of the rope cut off entirely from the rest, only for the war to resume as soon as his magical core had reformed. But now both contestants had just…stopped fighting, and the strength the Ranma-rope had built up during the contest was still there, already rebuilding, if slowly, from this latest struggle.

And that was only on the energy side of things. That new acceptance carried over to the sheer physical side as well. He could literally feel his body thrumming with power now, despite being stiff from sitting so long. “Okay, this feels amazing,” he said aloud, taking a step forward to get out of the stasis circle. But when he put his foot down, the floor of the cave broke underneath him, solid stone cracked, leaving an indent. “Huh. Ooops.”

With a look of consternation on his face, Ranma reached over and picked up a nearby boulder. Ranma was pretty much an expert at controlling how much strength to put into something, and he should’ve picked it up with only enough strength to hold the boulder in the air. But not only did he pick it up with more strength than he had intended, his grip on the boulder actually shattered the rock between one second and the next.

Happy to see Ranma up and about Wendy had been about to race up to him and hug him exuberantly. It had been four days since Ranma had begun his mystical battle or whatever it was, and, while she had been happy to hear a few stories about Grandeenay, listen to a lot of interesting and fun stories about Erza’s ancestor, talk with Seilah about books or her own history, and, of course, talk with Belserion about enchantments, she had been very worried about her Onii-chan. Now, however, she hesitated. “If I hug you, do you think you can restrain yourself from squishing me too badly, Ranma-nii?” she asked, half-joking half-seriously.

Ranma smirked at that, opening his arms slightly. “Only one way to find out, kiddo.”

With a wary expression, Wendy completed her walk to her brother, whereupon they hugged. Ranma hugged her just a tiny bit too tightly, but not enough to hurt her. She was, after all, a Dragon Slayer herself. But she mentioned that and warned him about doing that in the future. “Not everyone is as un-squishable as I am,” she said with a laugh.

Ranma laughed too before he looked over at Erza and Seilah. He left one arm around Wendy’s shoulders, gently turning her back the way she’d come from and smiled at the two women and Carla, who was still in her cat form and looked somewhat miserable. *Shoot, she’s still having trouble getting used to the air up here?* “So, have I missed anything exciting?”

“Not particularly,” Erza said. She was smiling widely, however, and moved forward, grasping his forearm in a warrior’s grip. “Simply incredibly enlightening and interesting to me. It was, after all, about my family, but some of it would have bored other people to tears.”

Seilah shook her head. “I doubt it. Most of what Belserion said was fascinating. Indeed, many of his tales would have made amazing books.”

“I agree with Seilah,” Wendy said with a laugh. “Your ancestor sounded awesome!” Erza blushed at that and thanked the girl for the compliment, but then Wendy turned back to her brother excitedly. “Belserion, he knew so much! A few stories about Grandeenay and soooo much stuff about enchantments from Irene and everything. I’ve copied down a lot of spells he gave me. It was great!”

“Well,” Ranma said with faint smile as he leaned down to kiss her forehead before pulling back and looking around quizzically. “I’m happy that you had fun, Wendy, but you didn’t answer my question: how long was I out?”

“Four days,” Erza said. “I had to leave once to go hunting for some meat to add to our diet, but otherwise the provisions you had taken out from your weapons space was enough.”

“That’s good to know,” Ranma said with a nod, calculating in his head. That meant that they only had enough dried fruit, fresh fruit, and vegetables for another six days, maybe eight if they stretched it. And they would have to stretch it, since he knew that there was no more beef jerky or anything like that. Hunting for their food would probably slow them down once they started their trip out of these mountains. *Still, it can’t be helped.*

He realized, though, that he was building that thought on a false assumption. What if Erza wasn’t ready to leave yet? Still concentrating partly on not accidentally squishing Wendy beyond the point where she couldn’t be squished any longer, Ranma turned to the redhead and asked, “So, given the fact that it’s only been four days, I suppose you’d want another few weeks to talk to Belserion?”

“Not exactly,” Erza said, frowning. “While our discussions have been fascinating, they haven’t been enough to fully concentrate on,” she chuckled, looking around them, and it was only then that Ranma noticed that she or Seilah must have attempted to make the cave as comfortable as possible. The beanbags from the tent had been brought out, the tent itself set to one side and two fires had been set to either side of Belserion’s skull. They might have attempted to put up some of the dead bear’s skin over the cave entrance, but they hadn’t succeeded, the entrance being a bit too large. Carla was also looking simply miserable, and both Seilah and Erza were looking a little cold despite their clothing.

“I think that we need to move on,” Erza finished, giving voice to some of Ranma’s thoughts. “Though getting back here again will be a hardship, I think I would rather learn more about my ancestor, her nation, her husband, and the war she took part in at a later date, perhaps even in small chunks. I can’t say that this place is all that comfortable, and I would rather be back to the guild soon. Who knows what Natsu and those other reprobates will have gotten up to in my absence?”

“And I would like to head back to human civilization as well. I am almost out of books,” Seilah said, her tone implying that this was a catastrophe in the making.

“Oh, and how is that more important than my getting back to my friends?” Erza asked sharply.

Ranma sighed. Seilah and Erza normally got along…okay. Not great, but okay, bonding over a certain genre of books and a liking of landscapes, of all things. But they did occasionally have moments of friction like this. Seilah respected loyalty but saw friendship as something that should only be given sparingly, not to a whole guild as Erza had, and also seemed to dislike Erza’s in-your-face, take charge attitude. In return, Erza disliked Seilah’s selfishness, her seeming callousness to anyone she personally did not know, and the fact that she was practically obsessed with reading.

And there was also a certain amount of jealousy directed towards Seilah from Erza thanks to the demon girl’s proportions. *Not that I can blame Erza for that. I mean, damn!* More than once Seilah’s body had caused Ranma issues, attracting his attention like a lodestone.

Shaking that thought off, Ranma asked hesitantly, “Erm, ladies, can we please not argue?” In reply, he got two glares, which quickly shifted to looks of cool unconcern and a harrumph sound as they looked back at one another before looking away.

“Hah! Females, lad. You just can’t win against them. I should know, given all the time I spent with Irene and her predecessors!” Belserion’s spirit guffawed as its image hovered in the air above them. He then moved to hover over his body’s skull, looking at Erza. “But don’t worry about coming back here, Erza. I’ve been thinking about this since you arrived, and I think I finally figured out the right transformative-type spell to do it.”

“Spell to do what?” Ranma and Erza asked, staring up at the little ghost of the giant dragon.

“This.” As they watched, the spirit of Belserion slid back into its old vessel. But instead of trying to move or anything, the skull began to glow orange red and then a deep purple, and then it began to shrink.

“What’s he doing?” Ranma asked, cocking his head to one side.

“I think the purple means he’s trying to create something,” Wendy, the budding enchantress, said. “The red, that could be his soul, maybe? All dragons have a certain amount of fire magic in them, after all. The orange, I don’t know, which is kind of weird.”

As they watched, the skull continued to shrink and then slowly started to change shape until it finally shifted into one of the most primitive looking swords Ranma had ever seen. It was made entirely of bone, of course, but the edge looked as sharp as a dragon’s fang. It had a straight edge for most of its length, then two serrated edges sticking out either side.

The hilt was marked by two small ruby eyes. It was long and made to be used one or two-handed. It had a large spike as a pommel. Its guard was also made of two upward curving spikes reminiscent of Belserion’s horns. All in all, it looked both evil and extremely dangerous.

“Okay,” Ranma said slowly, staring at the thing. “That looks totally badass.”

“What is this? Belserion, are, are you…in there?” Erza asked, one hand twitching to pick up the blade already, before stopping herself.

“Well, my dear, while I’m not going to be in the habit of interacting with you all too often—that did take quite a bit of my vitality, after all—I think that eventually, at some point, you will have need of my guidance,” said the voice of Belserion, his voice a bare shadow of what it had been in ghost form and sounding weaker with each word. “That or my strength. So, I give you this blade. Wield me well.”

Seilah moved forward, kneeling down to examine the blade from pommel to tip. “Fascinating. Much of the magic I can sense in it seems to be within the edge, but also in the hilt. I would imagine that it can perform various actions, perhaps fire and other spells too, and I wouldn’t doubt that Belserion would create spells to make the weapon all the more deadly against his foes. I hesitate to touch it, however, since it is very likely to be ensorcelled against my kind.”

She turned back to the others, seemingly ignoring Erza as she walked past her to stand near Ranma and watching as he looked back at her, his gaze moving up and down her body. It wasn’t the first time she’d caught him doing that, and it made her feel very good, almost like how Kyoka looking at her had made her feel. “With that out of the way, we should move on. While watching Erza attempt to cook over an open fire is quite entertaining, I was serious when I spoke about my running out of books, and if Belserion is not around any longer to entertain, that need becomes all the more pressing.”

“Excuse me, what was that!?” Erza growled, grabbing up and waving her new sword rather threateningly. The sword instantly began to drain her reserves, but it wasn’t anywhere close to where it would bother her, and she glared at Seilah. “Do you want to repeat that?”

“I’m sorry,” Seilah said coldly, staring back at her. “Was it you or some other armor-wearing redhead that burnt the last three pieces of bear meat to ash when you were attempting to make jerky out of it?”

“Now, now,” Ranma said, clapping his hands together creating a sound like thunder and shocking them all, which actually worked rather well at the moment for his purposes. Pasting a smile on his face he looked at the two women who were looking at him in surprise along with Wendy and an angry looking Carla, who had her hands clasped over her ears. “None of that. Do remember that the cook is back, ladies, so you don’t have to fight about this.”

To his surprise both women glared at him again and then turned away with a second loud harrumph sound. “Um, is it somethin’ I said?” *Oh gods of luck, magic, and whatever else might be listening, please don’t let this be like Nerima, please? Pretty please!?”*

Wendy watched this with a giggle and then patted her stomach. “While I think Seilah was being a bit mean, I don’t suppose you could make something to eat before we leave, could you?”

“Sure, imouto. And while I’m doing that, maybe you can explain to me why I’ve gotten glared at twice for trying to play peacemaker.” *None of the girls back in Nerima could explain it, but, then again, they all wanted me to choose a side, and I doubt Wendy does.*

“Some things just are beyond the minds of men, Onii-chan,” Wendy said with a laugh, patting his arms and then twisting around him and pushing at his back, moving towards the packs as her stomach rumbled. She hadn’t wanted to say anything, but Seilah kind of had a point about Erza’s ability to cook over a campfire.

He was eventually able to produce a hearty stew of rice and vegetables, though, as Seilah had warned, Erza had burned what little meat had been left from the bear she had killed. After a solid meal, Ranma looked over at Erza, who nodded. The two of them went outside to check the weather, and both of them gasped in delight. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky now. The horrible rain and snow that they had been dealing with seemed to have abated for the moment and Ranma smiled happily. “Awesome! And it’s only a little bit past midday. What do you think, set off now or wait till tomorrow and set off first thing in the morning?”

“I rather think we should set off now. There’s no way that this good weather is going to last,” Erza said, her breath puffing in the wind as Ranma’s did the same. She was decked out in her warmest armor, a fur lined thing that with blue ornamental stripes over each piece of armor coupled with golden horns connected by a blue stripe of metal. The breastplate showed a four-leaf clover on the collar and an ornamented blue cross over her stomach. The pauldrons were massive, with points flaring upwards. The armor's skirt was long and also fur-lined in the interior, making it quite warm. The armor featured two different gauntlets on both arms. The gauntlets were, oddly, not matching, one covering her forearm with a fur lining around the wrist, while the right gauntlet was larger, going further up her arm but without fur. The armor also, thankfully, had a kind of latex-like under layer, which covered her legs and arms, where they would otherwise be open to the weather.

But Ranma was still dressed in his normal silk pants and shirts. Yet, despite that, she could feel the heat radiate off him. Not quite as physically as it would have from Natsu, but still, he was quite a bit warmer than most.

“Point,” Ranma said with a nod. With that, the two of them reentered the large cave and gathered the others up after Wendy and Seilah had put the equipment away. When that was done, they all gathered together and headed down the mountainside with Ranma carrying Carla on his head.

As they reached the edge of the ledge where they’d had to climb up a sheer rock face coming up, however, Ranma surprised Erza and Seilah by smirking over at them and then winking at Wendy. “So, have you ever seen how Dragon Slayers go down a mountain?”

Wendy began to giggle, while Erza replied with a small frown, “I can’t say I have, no. Why?”

“It’s a sight to see,” he said as Carla’s eyes opened wide, a scream growing at the back of her throat. Then, without another word, Wendy hopped onto his back, and Ranma jumped out into the air, where he started to fall as Wendy shouted out, “Sky Dragon’s Wing!”

For a moment Erza just blinked, then she shook her head with a laugh. “Well, I suppose we’re no longer searching for anything at this point, are we, and the sky is clear.” She looked over at Seilah, “Are you up for a little bit of a fly?”

Seilah, however, was already in the air, looking down at her. “What are you waiting for?”

Growling irritably, Erza summoned up her Black Wing armor. Once an aura of fire appeared around her warming her up, she leaped into the air on bat wings, flapping after them and down the mountainside. She couldn’t use any of her flight-capable armor for long in this cold, none of them giving her any protection against the temperature, but Erza could still keep up with them for now.

She soon caught up with Ranma and shouted, “While interesting, I fail to see what is so impressive! After all, unlike you, I’m actually flying! You are just falling with style!”

Ranma laughed, and Wendy giggled, and they replied as one, “If it works, don’t knock it!”

Over the next few days Ranma got used to his newly enhanced strengths and abilities, finding that, in many ways, they weren’t really a surprise, just extremely difficult to get used to. For one thing, Ranma knew that his strength had at least tripled from where it had been before. Oh, Ranma knew that he could be even stronger if he was using his ki abilities to consciously add to his strength, but that was a big difference from everyday strength, the difference between straining a muscle and simply walking along and using it.

His speed, on the other hand, hadn’t seems to be affected overmuch, which made a lot of sense when he thought about it. Dragons were not known for being very speedy creatures, simply monstrously powerful. *And I’d wager anything that my endurance is a lot higher too,* Ranma thought to himself the second night out from the cave, looking over at Erza and Seilah speculatively as they camped for the night. They had actually found a flat area large enough to set up the tent, and Wendy was moving around the campsite, humming to herself as she looked forward to a night within the tent rather than just in the sleeping bags.

Erza caught his look and returned it with a raised eyebrow. “What are you thinking?”

“Oh, I was just wondering if either of you would like to spar for a bit?” Ranma asked, smiling in anticipation.

“Sparring is for those who wish to become stronger than they are or have a goal in mind that strength would be required to reach,” Seilah said, shaking her head. “I am neither of those things, so I will say no.”

“You don’t want to get stronger to help protect yourself from your former Guild members?” Ranma asked, cocking an eyebrow at her.

“No, I do not,” Seilah said, shaking her head. “I know that to be an impossibility. In a fight between demons like that, the curses involved would matter far more than what humans would call our actual magical strength. My curse can be completely blocked out if the individual’s will power is sufficient and the vast majority of my fellows have a lot of willpower to spare. Furthermore, I was the weakest of the demons of Tartarus physically by a wide margin. I could never have defeated Torafuzar, for example, or even Kyoka. Not unless I took her by complete surprise.”

“Your curses don’t work on one another?” Erza asked, wincing just a bit at the idea. Seilah’s curse really didn’t lend itself to one on one battles, but if she could control her opponent, then there wouldn’t be a fight in the first place.

“The more physical types of curses would work to a certain degree, but even their efficacy is lessened,” Seilah replied crisply. “As for my specific curse, I have never tried to use it on any other demon than Kyoka. I was able to control her actions to a limited degree, but not for very long. Indeed, looking back on it, I am forced to conclude that she was simply humoring me. Which means there is no chance of my curse working on the other, more magically powerful demons.”

Ranma nodded, setting that alongside everything else he had learned about the demons of Tartarus. By this point Ranma felt like he had a good feel for all of their abilities, curses, how they acted and a bit about what they how they fought. The difference there being that Seilah had seen how most of her fellow demons had done so in the past.

The only two that Seilah didn’t know much about were the ones named Keyes and Mard Geer. She simply knew that Master Geer was far more powerful than any of the other demons. Indeed, he was so strong that he had routinely faced four or more of the other more combat-oriented demons in sparring matches and had beat them without even leaving his throne. Now, knowing what those demons’ powers were made that very worrying, but there was nothing that Ranma could do about it right now.

In stark contrast, Ranma didn’t know anything about Keyes other than his appearance. Seilah simply described him as, “Too creepy to be around, staring at us as if we were parts of a puzzle or tools that should move to his direction. Master Geer has a certain amount of charisma and some leadership ability, which seems able to sand over rough patches of all of us interacting with one another. Keyes has nothing like that. He is simply very cold, logical and arrogant.”

Shrugging at Seilah’s thinking, Ranma turned to Erza. “What about you? You want to give that new sword of yours a test run?”

But Erza was already in her Sea Empress armor, minus the large sword that went with it. Instead, she was holding her new sword in a high guard position, her body twisted sideways towards Ranma. She smirked at him and then charged forward with a loud roar.

Ranma’s durability was also through the roof, as evidenced a few minutes later when Erza punched him in the gut when he overextended accidentally. Most of the times when he overextended like that it were deliberate a trap. This time it was actually real, and Erza, who hadn’t taken the bait before, pounced.

She ducked in underneath his outstretched arm and hammered in a blow that should’ve driven the breath out of his body. Instead he just took it, while she winced and pulled back, raising her sword in indication of a pause as she wrung out the hand which had hit him. “What in the world are you made out of now!? That was like hitting pure steel!”

Ranma shrugged. “I did mention that my durability was probably much higher now, right?”

“Hearing it and then feeling it are two different things,” the natural redhead mumbled, then blushed hotly as Ranma took her hand.

A second later he brought it to his lips and laid a kiss on it, first the back, then the palm, and then the pulse point on her wrist. “There. Does that make it all better?” he asked teasingly, his eye alight with humor and a certain amount of desire.

That look made Erza’s blush increase, yet she replied gamely. This whole flirting thing was quite interesting to her, and she was greatly enjoying it. “I don’t know. Perhaps you should kiss it a few more times, hmm?”

To one side Seilah looked on at this, some amusement plain in her face as well as another emotion that she had begun to feel more of late, and which she had noticed when watching Ranma and his flirting with Scarlet and, before that, Mulan. *Jealousy again. I rather dislike this emotion.*

Standing up fluidly, Seilah moved forward, taking up a position across from Ranma. He blinked at her, then released Erza’s hand and turned to face her fully. “I thought you said you didn’t want to spar?

“I changed my mind. I am out of books, after all, and simply watching the two of you go at it is quite boring.”

Erza shot her a look halfway between a smirk of victory and a smile of welcome, then stepped to one side, one of her regular blades replacing Belserion in her hand. The next second, the spar restarted with three sides instead of two.

Eventually it got to the point where the two women worked together, taking Ranma on both at the same time, but even then Ranma’s durability was such that, unless Erza was really willing to break out some killing techniques such as Benizakura or the magic she felt within Belserion, Erza couldn’t really damage Ranma overmuch.

“I’m not actually certain I like that,” Ranma said in response to her verbalizing that thought, causing her to look at him quizzically. “Oh, it’s good to have the durability if you need it, but I don’t want to start relying on it, if you know what I mean.”

“Of course,” Erza said with a nod.

Seilah lounged nearby after Wendy had healed her leg. She had attempted a high kick earlier during the spar, and Ranma had taken it on his forearm and then punched her underneath the thigh so hard it had actually lifted her off the ground from that point. She had then pulled something else in her leg—yes, even demons could pull muscles—in an attempt to stop herself from falling, only to find her arm, which had been waving wildly at the time, grabbed and herself then tossed into Erza.

The two women had not been looking at each other since then, though their blushes certainly did make Ranma grin to himself until Erza’s comment on his durability made him become more serious again. Now Seilah looked at Erza directly for the first time since that accident. “You have fought both Ranma and that other Dragon Slayer, the fire user, correct?”

“His name is Natsu, and yes,” Erza said with a nod. “Are you asking how they stack up?”

“Only in terms of durability,” Seilah replied, waving one hand. “I can well understand that, given his age and experience, Ranma’s story is much more advanced than Natsu’s.”

“Natsu has a way of surprising you,” Erza said quickly, acting on her instincts to protect and defend her guildmate. “He always gives one hundred percent, and I think he has a higher ceiling in terms of how strong he may eventually become than anyone else I’ve ever met. His strength is in his passion, and, like the fire that he uses, the hotter his passion runs, the hotter his flames go.”

Seilah was about to retort or make a salacious comment, but Wendy was still there, sitting beside her and listening to the conversation with Carla in her lap. Sighing, Seilah wondered how she had gotten so soft, but four days of talking with just Wendy and Erza, or, more often than not, simply Wendy, had continued her education in understanding the nuances of human interaction far more than she had previously learned just by reading books. She now understood that verbal words were counter-productive when dealing with humans and not just your target at times. Further, she didn’t want to use such in front of Wendy, especially since the coil of jealousy she had felt within her before had disappeared during the spar.

So she replied in a more neutral manner, “I understand all that, nor was I attempting to belittle him. I was simply asking your opinion on how their durability compared.”

Erza frowned for a few minutes, thinking. “I honestly don’t know,” she said at last. “I always think that Natsu is actually quite a bit more durable than he lets on. I can beat him easily enough, but he’ll just pop up fifteen, twenty minutes later looking none the worse for wear. Whereas Ranma, I’m simply having trouble hurting him at all at this point.” She looked at him quizzically, a wicked smirk suddenly appearing on her face. “I don’t suppose you’d allow me just to thump you for a time in order to discover just how good your durability is?”

“I don’t think so!” Ranma said with a laugh, causing both girls to laugh too even as Wendy scowled (more pouted, really) at the very idea.

“Ah, and there is the final nail in the coffin of using Erza as a role model for young Wendy on how a real lady should comport herself,” Carla muttered to herself. She had been noticeably quiet most of their time in Joya, the altitude having taken a fearsome toll on her despite her Aero magic, and her lack of physical endurance adding another factor.

Still, she hadn’t missed much and had simply been taking it all in. The demon girl still bothered her, but the affection and, dare she say it, friendship Seilah felt towards Wendy was enough to convince her to give her a chance. But Erza now exhibiting a certain amount of the combat junky attitude that had forced Carla to abandon the thought of using Mira as a role model was distressing. *Perhaps Bisca? In many ways she is far more normal, but her choice of clothing is rather…off for what I would like to see a young lady wear. And Jenny is just a bit too much in nearly every sense of the word.*

“Although, that does remind me of some of the ways I was trained before I became a Dragon Slayer,” Ranma went on.

“Oh, do tell,” Erza said, always interested in those stories. Seilah too looked up, her own interest plain to see.

Ranma went on to describe the body toughening technique aspect of the Kachu Tenshin Amaguriken as well as how his rival had thought he was learning how to explode bodies with a mere touch. That didn’t seem nearly as amusing to the two women, who both knew certain magics that could do that very thing, but the idea of tying someone up and then tossing large boulders at them amused both women to no end.

“These Amazons, are you certain they are not demons? That rather sounds like something Kyoka would have come up with, especially the idea of selling it as a training tool,” Seilah said, shaking her head. “Even your previous description of this Cologne creature made her seem almost demonic in nature.”

“Personally, I was thinking it sounded like something Natsu would think up when in one of his odder moods. Still, that does give me an idea.” With that, Erza unequipped her regular sword and then, in a flare of Requip magic, was suddenly holding a giant hammer. It was almost half again her own body height and made of stone, a simple sphere of rock. “Let’s see how good your durability really is, Ranma.”

“Just because my durability is so freaking high doesn’t mean getting hit won’t hurt, and it definitely don’t mean that I’m gonna to let you just hit me,” Ranma retorted, leaping away. “If you think you can tag me with that thing, you have another…”

Then Erza was in his face, her armor having swiftly changed to that of the misnamed Flight Armor outfit. Instead of letting her fly, this armor, which was sparse—more like an RPG’s version of armor than the real thing—with leopard print bits and pieces of metal, gave her immense speed, both in terms of reaction time and just flat out speed. This allowed her to cross the distance between them in a split second, and she winked at him even as she brought the hammer around even as he started to evade.

This was one thing that she had been working on for a while since Ranma had come back into her life, though at first was out of necessity, but she was close to almost perfecting it: mixing and matching different weapon types with different armor types rather than relying on full sets. It had given her a far vaster repertoire of tricks and abilities to use at any one time, so much so that this wasn’t the first time she had surprised Ranma. In terms of pure skill, Ranma was still well above her, but Erza was just damned adaptable and tricky.

On this occasion, Ranma couldn’t quite dodge out of range of the huge hammerhead, and the blow slammed into his side, the impact spinning Ranma away, off of his feet. *But then, Ranma is never more dangerous than when he is in the sky,* Erza thought ruefully.

Even as that thought crossed Erza’s head, Ranma used that momentum to launch himself further into the air, bouncing off a rock behind his former position and back towards Erza. A leg lashed out in a kick Erza was barely able to dodge even with her speed enhancing armor, and she backed away slightly.

“Are you certain you’re not a Sky Dragon Slayer?” she asked ruefully even as she Requipped another weapon instead of the hammer. This was a long staff with multiple smaller parts to it that came apart, each segment whirling around on its own under her command, even as other swords appeared in a whirling dance around her, controlled by her telekinetic magic.

Ranma laughed as Wendy giggled, throwing up her arms. “I’ve said the same thing more than once! But you should see me some time when I’m fighting seriously. You haven’t seen me use my Dragon Force, but with it, I can really fly occasionally. It’s great, especially with all the midair combat training Ranma-nii’s given me over the years.” Wendy didn’t like to fight, but she had quite a bit of pride when it came to her ability to fly.

Seilah smiled, sitting down next to the girl and pulling her into a gentle hug. For some reason Seilah just liked hugging Wendy, while Wendy, as always, just liked being hugged. “You are indeed a most formidable mage,” she said with a nod.

“Actually, that reminds me, Wendy. We need to test how strong my Dragon Slayer magics are now. Let’s do that tomorrow, okay?” *And I need to figure out my own Dragon Force too! Oh, that is going to be awesome!* Ranma thought before he nearly had his head taken off by Erza. Despite his enhanced durability, he was certainly not about to take a sword to the throat lying down.

But the next day the sky opened up on them again, dumping so much snow on them that it was literally impossible to see. Halfway through the morning it was the consensus of the group that they weren’t going to make any headway through this. “Especially since the snow drifts are slowly getting so big that little Miss Prissy-in-Puss would disappear in them,” Ranma quipped even as he looked around, his eyes serious as he tried to find a place for them to weather the storm. Eventually he found an outcropping of rock and, with Seilah’s help, created an igloo around them, much to Wendy’s delight. She insisted on helping design it, and eventually the thing looked like it was a squat turtle of some kind.

The group was snowed in for two days before the snowstorm finally stopped, and visibility returned, letting them move on in a world now white from top to bottom. But despite that lack of visibility, Ranma had hunted up a few wolves in the mountains. Though quite stringy, the bits and pieces which were edible after he once more accidentally lost control of his new strength had given them enough meat now to go with the rest of their supplies. Erza also supplied them with a pair of snowshoes, which Ranma used as a model to create a pair for everyone and off they went over the snow, with Seilah and Wendy both utterly entranced by the view around them.

The snow still slowed them down, though, and it took them four more days before they could get down to an altitude where Carla could make her own way. With that and the sky once more looking like it would snow, Ranma decided that they would celebrate by taking a day off of their trip. He spent the rest of that day trying to hunt, coming back with four snow rabbits: tiny, white-furred animals that had huge feet for their size.

Erza took one look at them and then up at Ranma before shaking her head and taking Wendy by the arm, turning her around quickly. “Come on, Wendy. I think it’s our turn to go out and find some wood.”

With that, she led the confused girl in the opposite direction of her just returned Onii-chan, who looked after them, blinking. “What was that about?”

“Ugh, dolt! Those animals are not predators or very dangerous looking. They are, in fact, quite cute. How do you think a gentle heart like Wendy would react if she saw you skinning those?” Carla groused, though she herself was fighting down a truly bizarre desire to snatch one of the juicy, sumptuous rabbits hanging from Ranma’s hand for herself. *Mmmmm, rabbit.*

“Um, oops?” Ranma said, frowning after his little sister. “Yeah, let’s get these skinned, and that means both of you help, Carla.” Ignoring her protests, he pulled out a small dagger from his camping kit and tossed it to the cat-girl, smiling internally at seeing her in her preferred form for the first time since they started up the mountains. “I mean it, Carla. The more hands on this, the quicker it’ll go.”

“Fine!” Carla groused, taking the knife and moving over to join Ranma and Seilah at the fire.

The demon girl had not complained, simply demanding the first taste of whatever Ranma was going to cook, to which Ranma agreed, handing over another small skinning dagger. He then flicked a finger and created a blade of water there, smirking as he tried to hold it in place to cut at the skin of the little rabbit, its edges swirling quickly. The blade broke numerous times as Ranma’s control for such fine work needed a lot more practice, but it still did the job, if far more slowly than the other two and keeping it going was a great control exercise. Luckily they still got the job done, and most of the meat was now out and slowly grilling to one side while Ranma used the remainder to create a thick rabbit stew.

When Wendy came back, she found Carla literally hovering over the stew pot, staring into it as if it held the secrets of creation. “Um, Ranma-nii, what are you cooking, and why is Carla looking at it like that?”

“Heh, let’s just say I think we just discovered the thing Carla likes as much as Happy likes fish,” Ranma said. *All these years and all I ever needed ta do to shut her up was cook a rabbit dish? Eesh, that’s as silly as it is irritating.*

The next day dawned bright and clear, if incredibly cold, the threat of snow having for once faded away. Ranma and Wendy went out that morning while Erza and a reluctant Seilah were still cleaning up the campsite.

The two Dragon Slayers moved well away from the others, with Wendy climbing up a sheer cliff face to one side and pulling out a pair of binoculars Ranma had given to her. “Ready!” she shouted down to her brother.

Ranma grinned and put his hands together to either side of his mouth, shouting out, “Soryu no Hoko (Water Dragon’s Roar)!” From his mouth came a large blast of magically imbued water, thundering forward very like someone had created a geyser with all the energy of a tsunami, only condensed and enhanced.

Wendy watched, her mouth dropping in shock as, not only did the attack go further than it normally would, disappearing out of sight even with binoculars, but it also visibly had more power to it too. Normally an attack would lose impetus near the end, the magic tied into the element in this case wearing out. But that wasn’t happening this time. As Wendy watched, her Onii-chan’s attack slammed into a mountainside almost at the edge of her vision and began to tear into it, gouging out the rock.

She shook her head in shock at the sight, impressed despite herself. She didn’t think that the attack was all that much more powerful than his original ones at first, but the effect said otherwise. “I estimate maybe twice as powerful, and it went for a lot further this time too,” she supplied as she hopped down to join Ranma.

“It’s my control, then, that’s truly been impacted,” Ranma muttered. He hadn’t actually put more power into that attack than normal, so he was getting much more out of an equivalent amount of energy. “That’s good. Heck, that’s great!”

Just then, though, there was a rumble in the distance, and a portion of the mountain that Ranma’s attack had hit with his attack began to tumble down.

The two Dragon Slayers looked at one another, with Ranma looking a little sheepish and Wendy, censorious. “So, that wasn’t me, right?” Ranma asked. “I didn’t just, you know, cause an avalanche accidentally, right? We don’t need to tell the others about this, right? Only, Erza has mentioned more than once about how she tries to control her guild’s over the top destructiveness, and I don’t think these mountains’d been able to take it if she and I fought for real, so…”

“Hmmm, I don’t know, Ranma-nii. That seems the kind of thing Erza might really want to know about. And it isn’t really the weather for thunder, after all, so I don’t think I could even lie in the first place,” Wendy mused, tapping her chin thoughtfully, a certain look in her eyes and her lips trying to twitch.

Ranma’s eyes narrowed as she looked at her sister. Given the amount of snow they had traveled through, Ranma routinely found herself changing from male to female, and had eventually just stopped caring about it, which had happened just now as the snow melted into her clothing. “All right, cut to the chase. What do you want, imouto?”

“Ranma-nii, that almost sounds like you’re trying to bribe me!” Wendy gasped in mock-shock.

“That’s precisely what I’m doing. Now name your price,” Ranma said mock grimly, poking her in the cheek.

She giggled and hugged Ranma’s side before climbing up to perch on her head, whispering as she passed Ranma’s ears. “Well, it occurs to me that that Girl Genius series was pretty good. And I would rather like to see more of them, but we only found a few of those books in that city with the funny name.”

“So you want me to find them, I suppose?” Ranma mused. “All right, that’s not so bad.”

“And maybe some chicken Parmesan for dinner?” Wendy wheedled. She too had a favorite meal, and chicken Parmesan was it. That and sweets of all kinds.

“The instant I can find a chicken,” Ranma said with a sigh again.

The two Dragon Slayers met up with the others, and Erza promptly asked, “What was that thunderous noise I heard earlier?”

Wendy replied in a butter-would-not-melt-in-her-mouth tone, waving her hands from her perch on Ranma’s head for emphasis. “It’s weird. We saw a lot of clouds in the sky and heard some thunder too. I think we need to get a move on, or else we might be getting sleeted on before too long.”

“It’s a little too cold for that, I would’ve thought, anyway. Still, I’ve never traveled in mountains like these before,” Erza mused. “Yes, let’s get a move on, then.”

They continued to travel northwest via the compass through the mountains, towards what Ranma had heard called the true Joya, the area of the country that was the most populated, around where the straits began. More than once, they had to stop and go to ground as massive snowstorms whited out the route forward. They remained able to deal with it, but still it slowed them down.

All their food supplies began to dwindle alarmingly. In response Ranma just stopped eating, giving his portion to Wendy and Carla, while Seilah and Erza both shortened their own rations without being told, the demon girl’s actions somewhat surprising Ranma. Still, they were making good time, Ranma knew, traveling at least fifteen to twenty leagues a day, flying and running as often as they could, with Ranma carrying Carla. In this kind of terrain and weather, that speed was pretty darn incredible, even for someone like Ranma. It would be close, Ranma knew, but he doubted any of the others would have to cut back on their food before they reached civilization.

Of course, as they traveled they also talked, with the three girls telling Ranma about the discussions they’d had with Belserion in more detail, and Ranma describing the fight against his inner dragon. “It was easily the toughest fight I’ve ever had, and if it hadn’t been happening in my own head, I would’ve lost numerous times. Dragons are no joke!”

“A portion of me really believes that should’ve gone without saying,” Erza replied dryly as Ranma finished speaking.

Of course, Erza had the most interesting tales to tell, considering that most of the ones Belserion had told them dealt with her own ancestor. That brought up an interesting question about a week into the trip, as Ranma was looking at her quizzically.

“What?” Erza said even as they ran along, the sky being so overcast and visibility so low that no one wanted to try to fly at the moment. Not when they could barely tell the difference between sky and stone, anyway. But thankfully there was no snow falling for once, which let them make time running over the snow with their big snowshoes.

Even Seilah was running, and that sight was enough to nearly make Ranma lose her mind. The demon girl either didn’t know about her watching or didn’t care, and watching her run like this was a treat for any man or, in this case, man turned woman.

But at the moment, Ranma’s attention was on Erza, which both flattered and intrigued her, considering Erza all too well understood where else it could have been at that moment. “I’m just wondering if you’re going to use your ancestor’s name,” he said simply, shrugging her shoulders. “I mean, I know where Scarlet came from, but…”

“Ah, er…” Erza stammered, thinking hard for a moment. “I… Scarlet was, was Jellal’s name for me, a mark of my time as a slave as I could not remember much of my life before that. I have since turned it into my own, but now, and knowing with my history…” She paused, actually halting in place for a moment as she thought. “Now that I have a heritage, and a proud one too, I think… Yes,” she said at last, nodding her head decisively. “Yes, I do want to change my last name. I will become Erza Belserion now. I think my ancestor, her achievements, and her legacy need to be acknowledged, as does Belserion and his teachings.”

“Yes!” Wendy said with a bright, happy nod. “He knew so much about enchantment. I mean, I think I learned more from talking with him in four days than I’ve learned on my own in three years!” Wendy had only seriously been studying enchantments since about a few months before they met Jenny. “Why, he even talked me through ways to actually control how long my enchantments could last!”

“Even your living body enchantments?” Ranma asked.

Enchantments, of course, came in many categories, but the simplest ones to understand were those that could be used to enchant people and those that could be used to enchant objects. Enchantments on people could, of course, be further broken down into helpful and harmful categories, but to the best of Ranma’s knowledge, Wendy didn’t know any enchantments that could be used to hurt. But she did know quite a few enchantments that could be used to help.

“Yes,” Wendy said with another emphatic nod. “I think I could create an enchantment that could work for a few hours now, with just a bit more buildup.”

“So…” Ranma asked slowly, as if she was talking to a little young child. “Why aren’t you using them now?”

Wendy paused and then looked around her as the others also turned to look at her. Then she shrugged and scratched at her hair sheepishly, in a move so reminiscent of Ranma that Erza looked between the two siblings in some shock. “Erm, sorry?”

At that Ranma laughed, and the others followed suit, even Seilah. A second later Wendy began to move from one to the other, holding her hands out as if to encompass them in a hug, but with several feet between them. She breathed in deeply, then thrust her magic out through her arms into the air around the person in front of her, the first being Carla.

Carla gasped as warmth flooded into her system, the cold of the air around her going away so abruptly that it was astonishing. Even the coat she had been wearing wasn’t this warm. Then she foundered as she actually floated off the ground, and Wendy’s enchantment continued.

The cat girl was now lighter, faster, and she felt as if she had just woken up from the greatest sleep she’d ever had. The others all got a similar treatment, four spells, or, rather, enchantments, put on them one after another so quickly and so adroitly that it was as if they were a single spell. That was darned impressive, and Ranma made certain that Wendy knew it with head pats and hugs before turning and leading the group onward. They now all raced through the mountains even faster than they had been going before.

The only other really important conversation that occurred as they went along—the rest being story exchanges or outright flirtations between the two redheads—was one between Seilah and Ranma. “You mentioned that you have no desire to keep training in order to defend yourself against your fellow demons and also no interest in going back. So what do you have an interest in?” Ranma asked.

Seilah frowned, thinking. “I do not know if I have ever really contemplated where my own story could go. Why do you ask?”

“Well, considering I’m the one that basically convinced the others who know you’re still alive to let that state continue, it’s sort of my responsibility, you know,” Ranma said, shrugging his shoulders. “Besides, I’d like to think you’re a friend. Friends look out for one another like that.” And Ranma knew that, despite Bisca’s injunctions against it, he did feel a lot of attraction, at least physically, towards the demon woman.

Seilah smiled at that, touched. *Humans and their desire to help other people, we have often all thought of it as a weakness, but I believe it to be a strength now*. “I think,” she said, “it will depend on many things. For one, whether or not any of my fellow demons realize that I’m still alive. If they do, any attempts to plan for the future would be foolish. For another, I was serious when I mentioned that my fellow demons and I have a near genetic desire to slay our creator, Zeref. If I stumble upon a clue as to his whereabouts or a way to do away with him, I do not know for a fact if I would be able to control myself from seeking his death.”

“Okay,” Ranma said with a nod. “I can understand that.” Or, at least, she could understand that Seilah thought that, anyway. “But what do you want to do? I’m not asking you what you think you’ll be able to do, I’m asking you what you **want** to do.”

She thought for a moment, then smiled once more and held the book that she had been attempting to read, without much success, alas, while flying along next to Ranma and the others. With her enchantments added into the equation, Ranma and Wendy’s falling with style technique had evolved into something almost approximating flight, henceforth the two of them had a great deal of fun with and which could carry all of them quite a ways. “I rather think I would like to open up a café of some kind. A place where people could find, read and buy books, while having good food as well.”

Ranma smirked at that, thinking it sounded rather like Seilah, though Ranma didn’t know if she could make a living like that without resorting to her curse to control other people in various ways. *Such as not actually buying the books, paying more than the food is worth, not noticing it’s crappy, etc*. Still, if you put those problems aside, it sounded like a good idea. Those kinds of places were a major hit back in his old world, and Ranma had only seen the like occasionally in this one. Oh, there were, of course, restaurants and stuff like that, but there was a big difference between them and a book café.

“That sounds like fun,” Wendy said with a nod. “I’d like that kind of place to. So long as they have more books like Girl Genius.”

“Of course,” Seilah said with a nod. “Although we would have to get someone else to do the cooking. I have mentioned that no demon has ever been able to cook before, and that includes myself.”

“Have you ever actually found someone to try to teach you?” Ranma asked.

“No, that has not occurred to me, though now that it has, I think that my former lover might have attempted such a thing in the past. And I know some of the others routinely kidnapped humans for a time when they wished to partake of good food. They even treated the cooks well for the duration of their time within Tartarus.”

“There’s a difference between teaching someone under duress and teaching someone because you want to,” Ranma said, rolling his eyes as Erza scowled, both of which bothered Seilah on some level.

“Do you think you can teach me, then?” she asked. She had seen Ranma at work whenever they had stopped on this journey and had heard from Wendy about more of his cooking skills.

Ranma shrugged. “Well, unless you want to learn about how to cook over an open fire, those kinds of lessons will have to wait until we’re back in Magnolia. But I don’t see any reason not to try. You couldn’t be any worse than Akane, after all.”

“Akane?” Seilah asked, though she noticed that Erza, running along beside them, seemed to recognize the name and not like it one bit.

“Meh, I’ll tell you about her another time. But trust me,” Ranma said with a laugh, “you just couldn’t be as bad as she was in the kitchen.”

**OOOOOOO**

Ultear smiled to herself as she watched Hisui eat while reading over a dozen reports at the same time, while nearby Arcadios did the same thing, though his notes were purely on the physical defense of the building and was a single sheet of paper rather than several dozen. Though young, the girl’s mind was such that she came across as more mature than most adults, and she exuded a level of command authority, an ability to almost demand attention that was quite phenomenal in someone so young. The girl also had no true ability to judge another person’s character, and Ultear could all too easily see that the girl was becoming a little too certain in her own opinions, but if caught early enough, that could be stopped.

*It truly has been an interesting experience working with her. Hmmm, I wonder if she would like Meredy. She would make a good bodyguard, and the young princess already has a formidable one. Between the two of them, and, in particular, Meredy’s odd sense of humor, they might manage to keep Hisui grounded.*

If she was honest, the young woman with Hisui, Minerva, was just this side of terrifying to Ultear. The girl’s magical power was incredible to Ultear’s senses, something that she had been able to do for several years now. It wasn’t an inherent ability based on her magic, but rather her magical senses, an ability that anyone could learn regardless of their inherent magic but which most did not even know existed. She would estimate that the girl was almost equal in magic to Ultear herself already, despite being only fourteen, if that.

“So, what do you think of yesterday’s find?” Ultear asked as she looked at Hisui across the breakfast table.

Hisui frowned, looking up from her reports and thinking. “I think all four of them should be let go,” she said regretfully. “I realize that they were never involved in actual spycraft, but working at that level of government requires a certain level of restraint, and none of those four young gentlemen seem to have it.”

“They carry on like they’re on a bender and can’t keep their damn mouths shut,” Hisui’s bodyguard said bluntly, shaking her head.

“You’re just irritated they flirted with you,” Hisui said teasingly, poking her friend in the ribs.

Said friend batted her hand away lightly but still smiled at Hisui. “That’s true,” Minerva said. “But you have to admit that I was the very definition of restraint. I didn’t even hurt any of them all that much.

“That’s true; you didn’t,” Hisui said in reply, smiling to herself. “You are learning.”

There was a story there, Ultear mused before checking off the four names on her paper. “Have you decided what will happen to young Anthony?” she asked, her tone becoming more sad than businesslike for a moment.

“Wouldn’t that be up to you?” Hisui asked, looking at her shrewdly. “Anthony is, after all, a mage. Making certain he follows the rules of his job and the letter of the law is your business.” Ultear winced, and Hisui smiled somewhat sympathetically, “Sorry, I’m not going to let you pass the buck on that one.”

Ultear sighed but nodded. “I’ll get with the rest of the Council together to decide his fate, then. At least the others are far more clear-cut.”

Through this latest investigation into corruption and espionage, several spies had been found out in the past month. Three of them were working for other countries. Two of them were gently let go with a firmly worded letter to their kings. One was a holdover from the old regime in Bosco who had simply sold his fealty to someone else the moment that the slave business which he had built his fortune on ended. He was a remarkably good clerk and had risen through the ranks almost as quickly as Ultear and Jellal had, but he had remained under the radar for all that until Hisui had begun a full audit of all paperwork in the Council, and he had been found attempting to escape.

Two others were spies who simply sold any information to anyone willing to pay. Three others, all of whom worked for the Oración Seis in the library and historical department, had been forced to spy in return for either covering up certain vices or paying for those vices.

Young Anthony was a perfect example of that. He was addicted to a certain type of drug, which the Oración Seis had supplied him with, after actually getting him addicted to it in the first place. As one of the chief time-keepers, those people who could who took the minutes of any daily or weekly meeting of the magic Council, he’d had a lot of information to pass on. Still, Hoteye had told them about him, and they had both caught him and were also keeping him from going into a withdrawal that would undoubtedly kill him.

The other two like that were far more clear-cut, and there was no doubt of their inherent guilt. One of them had a penchant for whores, expensive ones that he could never have managed to pay for on his own salary. The other had amazing gambling issues, in that he thought he was God’s gift to the sport, and everyone else thought he was the proverbial sucker born or, in his case, reborn, every minute. That was a very dangerous combination, and one that was almost tailor-made for causing issues of all sorts.

*The truly astonishing thing,* Ultear thought, *is that while I knew about all the others, young Anthony I didn’t know about*. “The poor boy,” she thought, saying the words aloud.

“So does that mean you’ve made a decision on what to do with him?”

“Getting him some help, for certain. Firing him as well,” Ultear said with a sigh, “also for certain. Despite the fact that he was addicted to this Mandrake Root—and isn’t that an odd name for a drug—and, if you read between the lines, it is pretty obvious that he was tricked into that addiction, he still sold out more secrets than any two of the other spies, all to the Oración Seis. I don’t think we can overlook that. *And I rather dislike becoming so much of a sophist, but needs must,* Ultear thought morbidly.

“That’s good,” Hisui said with a nod. “Firm but fair too,” she said, smiling simply at the older woman. “That’s almost precisely what Arcadios and I had decided to do with the young man too. I would have overridden anything else.”

“Then why ask me?” Ultear asked, even though she already knew the answer.

“Because we needed to know how you would deal with such issues in the future. We needed to know what **you** would do personally.”

“I understand it’s a test, and, yes, I understand why you wanted to know, but why did you ask me that question personally? Surely someone of the others with more seniority would have worked? They certainly seem to think they will be stepping into the top position,” Ultear pointed out, frowning.

“A person who has never even noticed the issues despite working here for longer than I’ve been alive? People who have proven that they are more than willing to cover up other people’s villainy in order to not look bad themselves? People who care **far** more about appearance and cracking the whip rather than actually keeping order or following the rule of justice? Even Gran Doma isn’t exactly covering himself with glory here in my eyes,” Hisui said sternly, almost harshly. “I’m honestly thinking of recommending that my father revoke the Magic Council’s remit to operate as a separate unit,” she said, shaking her head. “I think that was a mistake, and we should move them under our own auspices once more.”

“…That is a very big step to take,” Ultear said slowly, wondering how that would affect her own job and, more importantly, her own plans going forward. *If the Council is no more, then my mission would have failed… Meredy!*

Hisui waved one hand to the side, not noticing at present that the hand was holding several reports in it. “It wouldn’t happen all at once and I’m almost certain that my father will reject that concept. Still, you’ll be my voice to pass that on, under the table, so to speak. I want the Council to remember that they serve the law, not magic and not their own self-aggrandizement! Using you in this manner also sends another, subtle, message: that perhaps it’s time for new blood to take the place of the old.”

“That’s rather harsh, but I can understand it,” Ultear said with a sigh. “So are there any other bombshells you wish to drop?”

“Not at this time,” Hisui said, setting her reports down and taking a bite of her breakfast before dabbing primly at her lips with a napkin. “But I would advise you to continue to roll with the punches, as it were. Who knows what the future may bring?”

Ultear leaned back, crossing her arms under her sizable chest and taking a brief bit of pleasure as both younger girls almost, but not quite, glared at her for that movement. It was nice to see that she could rattle them in turn, no matter how petty the manner. “You are a very scary little girl, you know that, don’t you?”

Hisui smiled thinly, “And don’t you forget it.”

At that Ultear joined her in laughter, shaking her head. *Yes, I think I’ve decided to truly turn my coat at the most opportune time possible. If this little girl ever does become queen, she is going to be an absolute nightmare for the underworld to deal. Or, if that over-confidence remains, a threat to herself and the kingdom around her. Something to think about… For now, I should just continue to try to keep my cover on both sides and then wait for an opportunity to get Meredy away from Master Hades and the others. That’s the most important thing.*

Two days later, however, Ultear was not in a laughing mood as she stared at the magic carpet in front of her. “Why does the king want to see me in person?” she asked, not happy at all at this addition to her problems*.* Oh, Ultear knew what this was about, not that she was happy about it: the king was finally responding to being told about her by Ranma.

*And worse, the carpet is so small I won’t have any privacy in order to warn Master Hades, as he no doubt will expect. Crap, does the old one-eyed bastard have any spies in the royal castle?* After a moment’s thought, Ultear was forced to admit that, if he did, Hades had never shared their identity with her.

Hisui shrugged. “I rather think he would want to get your firsthand account of the battle.” She was being recalled to get some orders from her father in person and was going to use the time to round up two more clerks. The administrative side of the Magic Council had been the most corrupt, and she had fired a large number of the people who worked there for various infractions, out-and-out corruption, or worse, like in the specific cases of the spies.

“Or more like he’s a manic magic fan and wants to hear what the fights were like for no other reason than wanting to hear about the magic involved,” Minerva groused. “I could tell you about the times I’ve spotted him watching me exercise my own magic. At first, I thought it was because he was just an old pervert, but no. If he has some popcorn on him, you’ll know that this isn’t a serious meeting.”

“My father isn’t that bad and certainly wouldn’t use one of our nation’s precious magic carpets for such a spurious reason,” Hisui defended her father, but she also wasn’t looking at Ultear as she said that. Indeed, her faint air of embarrassment made her look her age for the first time since Ultear had met the extremely self-possessed young woman.

The three women boarded the magic carpet, and Hisui waved farewell to Arcadios, who was staying on to continue his reconstruction of the Magic Council’s security features. Gran Doma was there as well, and he nodded at them, though he was also looking rather put out that he hadn’t been called in by the king. Then again, he was one of only two other members of the Council that weren’t under suspicion at the moment, so he had to stay and lead the others through this period of turmoil.

The three of them made small talk as the magic carpet’s driver raced the carpet over the distance between Era and Crocus. It took them a bare few hours to cross the distance between the two ostensible centers of government before they were banking down to the royal castle on its large redoubt.

Hisui leaped off the carpet and barely had a few seconds to thank the driver before her father was there, hugging her across the shoulders. Even as short as she was, Hisui had a good few inches on her father, who was practically a midget. “Hisui! Oh, daughter of mine, I’ve missed you soooo much!”

“Father, we’re in public!” the young girl squeaked, not being very big on hugging even in private, let alone in public like this.

Pouting slightly, Toma let his daughter escape his grasp, nodding to the two other women, and if there was a brief hardening to his eyes as he looked at Ultear, you would have had to be a master dissembler, like Ultear, to have noticed it. “Ladies. Minerva, thank you as always for watching over my daughter. Miss Ultear, I’ve heard a lot about you, in particular from this latest escapade. Is it true that you would have been able to defeat Brain by yourself if not for his, what was it called?”

“His alternate personality, Your Majesty. We think Brain’s Zero persona was somehow connected to the man’s Second Origin, leading to an immediate heightening of his available magical power,” Ultear shrugged. “I suppose we should be thankful that there is no set methodology available for discovering an individual’s second magical core like that, else the overall battle against the rest of his guild would have been very different.”

“His tools, you mean. Those poor young people, brainwashed and led astray: Hoteye, Cobra, Angel, Racer, even that other one, Midnight. All of them molded to his way of thinking like so many attack dogs and then released against the rest of the world. The only one he didn’t brainwash was that large fellow, Ranma and the rest of them tangled with in the tower.” Toma shook his head, redirecting himself with difficulty, “That, in fact, is what I wanted to talk to you personally about: Brain’s method of brainwashing and, of course, how he found those young people. Please, come this way. I will want to send you all back to Era by tonight. Hisui, if you could find those clerks you wanted. Oh, and there is a young woman who has stopped by asking about someone matching the former councilmember Jellal’s appearance. If you could talk to her, I think we might have just found you a second bodyguard.”

Blinking at that, Hisui looked over to Minerva, who shrugged but nodded, and the two younger girls quickly curtsied and broke off from the king and Ultear the moment they entered the castle proper.

“Come with me,” Toma said, all his earlier affable nature evaporating in an instant. Somewhat darkly amused at the short king’s attempt to intimidate her, Ultear nodded and followed him up to the third floor.

There she was led into a small receiving room, the same one, though she didn’t know it, where Ranma, the king and Gran Doma had decided to go after the Oración Seis. The door closed behind her, and suddenly something activated somewhere within the room, and Ultear found herself within a large anti-magic field.

“I didn’t know you had such defenses built into your castle, Your Majesty,” she said ruefully, staring all around her before sauntering to a chair across from the king, not taking her eyes away from him but also not showing any obsequiousness either. She was in enemy territory right now, and that was a feeling Ultear was all too familiar with.

“Did you think the King of Fiore, the nation known as the center of magic for all of Ishgar, would not have something to protect himself from magic?” Toma replied, moving around the very tall, buxom woman and sitting at the table, gesturing for her to do the same across from him.

This particular anti-magic field was actually only part of a dual system, with several scattered small anti-magic fields within the castle’s environs and one larger, more proactive magic field around the castle that was supposed to attack anyone the king recognized as an enemy. Both could be overcome by raw power, but not once you were within the fields.

For a moment Toma did nothing but look at Ultear, and though there was a bit of the normal male reaction to her that she was used to seeing, the king’s eyes straying down to her chest once, for the most part his gaze was grim and assessing. “I have heard about it. About you being a spy, about you working for Hades, and also aiding, or at least working alongside, that madman Jellal. I have also heard about your turning your coat. But I wish to hear about all of that, in particular the last bit, from your own mouth. Only then will I agree to not act against you right now as a spy looking to destabilize my kingdom.” He smirked a little, gesturing to a few places in the ceiling and floor, “And if you think the anti-magic field is the only defense here, please think again. If I want you to leave here in chains, you lost any chance of stopping that the instant you entered this room.”

While she wasn’t certain she believed that, Ultear also had no desire to push right now. After all, the king could well be an ally down the road to the very simply goal she was trying to follow right now. So she began to explain about how she had first been found and then brought into Grimoire Heart, how she had been manipulated, what she had done as a spy, which ironically wasn’t all that much in terms of causing trouble on her own, and, of course, her confrontation with Brain. Then she went on to explain about her goal of getting Meredy away from the guild. “Once I have done that, I will disappear. I will leave behind the Magic Council, and you’ll never see me or Meredy ever again.”

Toma scowled, smacking his hand down on the table. “You will do nothing of the sort. I don’t like it, I don’t really like you, but you will serve at my leisure on the Magic Council until **I** say you have paid your debts!!” He glared at her. “Is that understood?”

Blinking in some confusion, Ultear slowly nodded, and the king went on. “And if this Meredy can be brought away from Grimoire Heart, she too will become one of my subjects and will be defended to the best of our ability.”

He waited until Ultear slowly nodded before standing up and gesturing to the door. “You seem sincere in this desire to aid in bringing down your old guild and saving this girl, Meredy, Ultear. Don’t prove me wrong."

**OOOOOOO**

It took them a while—even Ranma and the others with Wendy’s new speed enhancements could only go so fast through such terrain. None of her enhancements could deal with the sheer amount of snow or fog, which grounded them quite often, unfortunately. But with Ranma leading them and the compass she had, the five travelers were eventually able to get to the point where they started to see signs of habitation in the way of cleared trails and old mines.

Soon the four of them came out from around a long, narrow passage through twisted rock onto a small overlook to stare down into a valley that stretched from one horizon to another. Although, to call it a valley wasn’t doing it justice. It was certainly flatter than the mountains around it, but here and there Ranma could see large hills, smaller valleys, and glades, separated in numerous places by rivers, small and large, deep and wide. Or so he, having shifted forms that morning at breakfast and having stayed that way since, estimated from up here, considering that he could also see traffic on those rivers.

Indeed, there looked to be enough people down there to make a large city, easily as large as any city Ranma had seen in this world before. But it was spread out over a very wide area. Here and there, dotting the cliff faces, were mines directly next to large examples of what Ranma would’ve called apartment complexes, built into the rock of the mountains. There were docks, dozens of tiny ones, spread out everywhere, either feeding up into rivers down into the Straits, or to small pathways leading deeper into Joya. Out to the ocean side there were several dozen tiny lighthouses, each of them built out of equally large-sized blocks of rock jutting out from the ocean. Even in the midst of winter, there was a bustle to this place that was completely unlike anything they had seen since leaving Bosco.

“Wow!” Wendy murmured, shading her eyes with her hands as she stared down at the city. “It’s amazing!”

“It is that,” Ranma said with a nod, staring himself, joined by Seilah who took one look and nodded slowly.

“It looks as if it was taken out of a storybook.” Then she paused before going on. “Speaking of storybooks, I hope they have some stores.”

“You have a one track mind; has anyone told you that?” Ranma quipped.

Seilah shrugged, then looked around as Erza did the same, tearing her own eyes from the view with difficulty*. I thought I had seen cities and architectural wonders within Fiore, but this is phenomenal.*

“It looks as if it will take us hours to get down there,” Seilah said with a frown. “Either climbing down or…” Then she stopped and shook her head, staring at Ranma and Wendy’s grinning faces. “I just said something very silly, didn’t I?”

Ranma nodded with a grin still prevalent on his face, then rubbed Wendy’s head and leaped out into the sky beyond their current perch without another word. He even waved jauntily at the two women as he fell, causing Erza to chuckle quietly to herself. Then Wendy leaped after him with her own laugh as she shouted, “I’ll see you on the ground, Carla!”

With Wendy on his back, providing wings, Ranma fell through the air for several minutes. Then, about fifty feet above the ground, Wendy released him, and he began to spin, flinging his hands out to either side in a sequence to slow his descent. Then, when he landed, he rolled and flipped upwards into the air again to catch Wendy as she fell giggling with Carla clinging like grim death to her head. The next second Ranma was back on the ground, having nailed the landing better than any gold medalist coming off the bars could have, his arms once more flung to either side as Wendy hopped off, continuing to giggle.

“I can’t believe you two sometimes; I really can’t! How falling like that can seem fun to you is just so beyond me!” the cat-formed girl groused, leaping off and shifting to her girl-cat form quickly. “Honestly, why did I even think…?”

“Meh, you’re just being a sour puss because you think we were in danger, but that’s part of the fun,” Ranma said, shrugging.

Wendy reached forward, pulling a feebly protesting Carla into her arms despite the fact there wasn’t all that much of a difference in their sizes now, backing away from Ranma and giggling quietly. “You better look out, Onii-chan,” she said, pointing upwards.

To his surprise, Erza had followed them down using her Black Wing Armor. Then, having seen Ranma’s midair artistry before he came down, Erza had felt an inherent urge to compete. She had canceled her armor, dropping like a stone towards Ranma as she too attempted to mimic his earlier routine. But her added armor was throwing her off, and, despite the number of armors she had, which could give Erza the ability to fly, she didn’t have much experience moving in the air without them.

Instantly seeing that she was going to both, come in too quickly and had mistimed her last flip, Ranma rolled his eyes and took a step forward before catching her in his arms. “Heh. Best you leave that kind of thing to the professionals, Erza,” he teased.

“Ugh, darn it! I thought I had learned enough watching you two pull it off,” Erza groused. “Still, it was at least a fun experiemenTTTT!”

At that moment Seilah, who had also followed them down, slammed into them. She had not fallen to the urge to compete as Erza had, but what neither Erza nor Ranma had noticed was that their falling had disturbed a large eagle’s flight as it returned to its nest. The large bird was a rather belligerent beast, and when it saw Seilah falling towards it, it had attacked, getting in her face with its wings. With that she went out of control for a brief moment, losing control of her flight magic just as she too was about three feet above the armor wearing knight and Ranma, coming down directly on top of them.

All three of them went sprawling, and when the dust cleared, Ranma found himself on his back with the two women sprawled out on top of him. *Ugh, damn it. Is this some kind of anti-luck curse that only affects me when I’m around women? I mean, what the hell?* Not, mind you, that Ranma was truly complaining about finding himself at the bottom of a very pleasant pile. Ranma might not be a pervert, but he was a red-blooded young man, after all.

Above him, the women groaned. “Guh, damn it, Seilah, what the hell was that about!” Erza growled. “Are you always so clumsy or is it something special you put on for us right now?”

“If you had but noticed your own folly you would have seen the angry bird that your ungainly fall startled into attacking us. I was merely the first on its list,” Seilah retorted, pushing down at the oddly soft ground beneath her, trying to push Erza off her back. “As for waiting, you were taking too long, and I anticipated that your armor would cause you to fall faster than you did.”

“Oh, don’t give me that! I have had just about enough of you!” Erza growled as she finally pushed her hands down against the ground to either side of the pile.

“Oh, and you think you are so easy to get along with!” Seilah growled back, thumping her head up into Erza’s armor clad chest, her horns scrapping against the metal.

“You, you, gah! Whe, where do you think you’re touching!?” Erza began, her voice fading into a squeak.

“I am not touching you anywhere but your armor! How can I be touching you when you are lying on my back?” Seilah replied tartly, her own hands trapped underneath her prodigious chest, which was currently pressed nearly flat to the ground beneath her.

“Then whose arm is trapped under…” Erza began, then finally looked past Seilah’s large rear to see Ranma underneath the other woman. Quickly ascertaining that she too was sitting on him and precisely where she was doing so, she let loose a quick and quite cute ‘Kyaa!’ and hopped off, her face almost as red as her hair.

This allowed Seilah to push herself up too, and she did so, only to blush as she came nearly face to face with what Erza had been feeling moving under her rear. The sight caused her to frown in confusion for a moment before her knowledge of male anatomy came to her aid. She too flushed, pushing herself upright quickly, and then nearly moaned as Ranma mumbled something underneath her, his mouth moving along her panty-clad privates. She quickly hopped to her feet, blushing and staring as Ranma quickly turned onto his chest, willing himself to calm down before pushing to his feet.

The two girls quickly looked away, not quite glaring at Wendy who had been giggling at their misfortune to one side for her observation, then looked down to where Ranma was and then away, blushing. *Silk pants are not the best thing to wear at moments like these,* Erza noted, flattered beneath her embarrassment. At the same time Seilah was feeling much the same, along with a certain clinical observation that Ranma’s arousal seemed a good bit larger than she had read was normal for humans, matching a few of the men in some of the romance stories she had read.

It took Ranma a few minutes to recover his self-control before he could push himself upwards and stand alongside the others. He looked around, finding them at the base of a sheer rock face, a small path leading up the mountainside, presumably eventually leading to their previous position. Thankfully, no one was around to have seen their landing. To the other side the road led downward and into the series of smaller dales and the rivers that fed into them.

“Come on,” Ranma eventually said, gesturing that way. “Let’s go see if we can find a ship going back to Fiore.”

“Books first,” Seilah said, with Wendy nodding along, poking her big brother in the side meaningfully.

He sighed but nodded, and the group made their way down the path. Soon enough they started to pass other people and even began to see the buildings, boats and mines they had seen from above up close. And, thankfully for everyone around her, there was a bookstore for Seilah to ransack.

“I think I should start charging you for storing these books of yours in my Requip space,” Ranma teased.

“And how would I pay?” Seilah asked and then remembered a line she had read numerous times in her stories. “Perhaps with my body?”

Gulping, Ranma dropped the subject and quickly put Seilah’s new books along with Wendy’s in his Requip space.

A few hours later, the four of them were walking up a ramp to a small but still seaworthy ship. They had just boarded, moving to one of the two passenger cabins aboard near the aft of the ship, when a call came through on Ranma’s brooch.

He slowly moved away from the rest of the crew, twenty young men and women who were part of a company that routinely transported small bushels of metal, gold and copper across into Fiore. Once hidden in their room, Ranma cut his finger and let the blood into the broach, activating it. To his surprise, it wasn’t the King of Joya whose image appeared. Rather, it was Queen Rose. *Huh, we must be closer to the border with Bosco than I thought, although, isn’t his castle somewhere south and east*?

“Ranger Ranma,” Rose said with smile. “And how are you this day?”

“I’m well, Your Majesty, but what’s going on that you’re calling me? I thought I was still on vacation/probation or whatever and none of you royal types ever call me just to chat,” Ranma said with a grin.

“Indeed not. If we wished to chat we have people around us to serve just that purpose,” Rose replied, a warm, welcoming expression on her face despite his teasing.

Rose’s tone matched her face, which caused Erza to shake her head in astonishment as she hid herself behind the image of the queen of Bosco. She doubted she would ever get used to the way Ranma talked to royals. *It’s like Natsu’s irreverent attitude but warmer almost, with a bit of arrogance added in rather than innocence. And most of them seem to respond in like kind. Very strange.*

“And where is young Wendy?” she asked almost mock seriously. At that, and now knowing that this wasn’t anything of immediate concern, Wendy popped up, sitting in Ranma’s lap and waving at the queen. “Ah, there you are, child. And is this rouge still treating you well enough?” she ended teasingly. Rose had quite a sweet spot for young Wendy.

“Yes, Queen Rose,” Wendy said, bobbing her head.

“That’s good to know. Unfortunately, this isn’t entirely a social call, as I said earlier. I am calling because we have a very odd situation I would like your opinion on,” Rose said, looking between the two Dragon Slayer siblings. “And since you think so far outside the box I doubt you even know it exists, I thought of you.”

“Just my opinion?” Ranma asked, to be sure. “This is isn’t a call to action kind of meeting?”

“No, it is not, although I wish it could be. You are going back to Magnolia in Fiore, is that correct?”

“That’s right. I intend for Wendy and I to stay there for the winter at the very least.”

Erza blinked at that, still sitting out of the pickup range of the brooch, uncertain how Queen Rose would react if she knew that Ranma was using the brooch around other people. *This is the first time Ranma’s ever shown any sign he was thinking of staying longer than the winter. Interesting.*

“That’s good, because whatever this problem is, it is going to be entering Fiore shortly.”

“Perhaps you should just tell us what that problem is, then,” Ranma said, frowning and crossing his arms.

Rose sighed and nodded. “I would be more at home telling you what it is if any of us honestly knew. It’s all very odd and well outside anything I’ve ever seen reports about before. You see, magic is somehow disappearing in very small, localized areas. Not the magical items within, but the magic they contained and the very magic in the air too.”

Ranma blinked. “What?”

“That was my reaction too,” Rose said with a wry chuckle. “We don’t know how long this has been going on or what is even causing it. But recently a magical researcher from Seven was passing through Stella and witnessed something very odd: all the magical items in a small area simply vanished. There was no hint of exterior magic, no hint of foul play or external magic being cast. Something like a bubble of fog appeared suddenly, barely visible, according to the witness, and, when it disappeared, it took all of the surrounding magical items. The researcher didn’t see anything unusual but reported it all the same, and eventually that report, and others, made their way to my and a few of the other kings’ attention. We went through our records to see if we could find out anything else.”

“Really? Just that little bit of information was enough to get all of you to cooperate?” Ranma asked.

“Not at all,” Rose said dryly. “The same event happened down in Pergrande, however, trapping two mages this time and wrecking a townhouse where they had just been about to throw a few noble families dinner. The nobles witnessed it and said that from a distance it looked as if a small tornado had set down and simply sucked up the two mages and all of the magical items within their house.”

Frowning at that description, Wendy frowned. “And the mages haven’t returned?”

“No, they haven’t,” Rose said grimly. “Worse, the King of Minstrel found twelve different stories and anecdotes of similar events being reported down there during and right after his rebellion, the reports having never grabbed any attention. And there have been tales in my own country of similar circumstances along with Caelum.

“Is there a pattern to this?” Ranma asked.

“No,” Rose said, shaking her head. “But we think that someone else **is** trying to stop it, although how is still debatable.”

Ranma made a go on gesture and she continued, “More than a few times these occurrences have appeared but are somehow stopped before they grow too large. The man doing it was once spotted from afar with a magnifying glass: male of medium height and build with his face covered somehow, wielding a large staff.”

The Rose of Bosco shook her head. “But, nonetheless, more than three hundred people have died, both because of suddenly losing magical items or because they were mages and have been spirited away. The worst incident happened in Caelum, where a large ship was grabbed by whatever this is, and all the mages and magic abroad disappeared, thirty men and women gone in an instant. The incident was put down to a simple accident at sea, but the remains of the ship was recently found, and the lack of anything magical remaining aboard was telling.”

There was a moment of silence at that, but Ranma eventually broke it, shaking his head. “Okay, so we have this mysterious thing going on sucking magic and someone else trying to solve the issue, but on his own, right?”

“Apparently. The question then, of course, is how this individual discovered what is going on, what he is using to stop it, and why he hasn’t asked for help,” Rose replied, still scowling. “It isn’t like most people travel, after all, and, indeed, if someone is able to get around this, well, without the border guards noticing, that’s rather troubling all on its own.” The borders between most countries were open but were officially somewhat regulated, while others were closely watched, like Pergrande’s, Seven’s or, these days, Bosco’s.

Ranma grimaced but explained how very easy it would be for someone who could make their way overland to travel that way. He had done it, after all, and his being a Ranger had nothing to do with it. The borders of even Pergrande were like sieves if you got away from the roads, but that wasn’t something most royals liked to think about. It was a simple fact, though, that most people just didn’t travel all that much.

From there Ranma went on to make a few guesses as to what could be causing this issue, though none were very good, given the randomness of how this was occurring. He glanced toward where Seilah was—reading a book, obviously—behind the image, but she shook her head without looking up, indicating that whatever this was she had no idea what it could be. With that, Ranma had no idea about that aspect.

As for the man who might be stopping whatever this was from being worse, even there Ranma was at a loss as to what to do. “But if you’re asking me about how to find this guy, you’re not really giving me enough to go on. Maybe if you had something this mysterious guy had touched I could get a scent of him. Dragon Slayers are like bloodhounds for that. Maybe if you had some knowledge of where he was going I could get ahead of him and plot an ambush. But you’re not telling me anything about him except that he covers his face. Sorry, but that really isn’t enough to give you any help. I can keep a lookout, but that’s about all I can do.”

“At this point I’m uncertain if that wouldn’t be enough. Still, I wanted to ask,” Rose replied with a sigh. She hadn’t realized how easy it would be for a single person, at home in the wilds, to make his way around Ishgar, and that was quite worrisome. *I suppose I was rather naïve about that, given how easily the dark guilds are able to make their way around the peninsula.*

“Is there any kind of pattern to what attracts this magic sucking thing?” Ranma asked.

“A lot of magic condensing in one area seems to attract it; that’s pretty much it. That is why I think it’s heading into Fiore, obviously.” While other countries had magic, it wasn’t so everyday or prevalent as it was in Fiore.

“So any of the guilds in Fiore could be in danger,” Ranma said with a frown.

“Yes,” Rose said with a sigh. “As are my own. I have thought about informing them of this, but there is only so much we can do without knowing how they are being targeted. After all, I can’t tell them not to congregate or anything like that. Telling them about this would spread fear and confusion, and I’m not certain there would be anything beyond that.”

“Actually, that’s a good point: the randomness of this attack, if that’s what it is, rather than just some random natural event. If whoever is behind it has any control, they’d go after the Wizard Saints or other powerful mages,” Ranma supplied.

Rose blinked at that. “I hadn’t made that connection,” she said ruefully. “So you think this is uncontrolled?”

“I think at least that that aspect of it is,” Ranma said with a nod. “This guy following them around, he seems to be self-controlled, at least.”

She chuckled wanly at that, shaking her head. “Just be on the lookout. I’m afraid that’s all any of us can do. Other than that, I was wishing to pass on an intelligence report.”

“I am ever at Your Majesty’s service. In this case, that means I’m all ears,” Ranma said with a chuckle.

She rolled her eyes at that, but still continued. “Well, the fact of the matter is that, after the destruction of the Oración Seis, many dark guilds have gone underground, no longer being spotted near their known bases, and many of them have disappeared entirely. Three that I feared were beginning to operate in my own territory are gone now. They were spotted taking ship and heading south.”

“Into Mistral?” Ranma asked worriedly. Mistral had a lot of Gun mages, a few dozen mercantile-based mage guilds, a dozen scattered combat mages as part of their military, and, of course, Song Silk, so the country as a whole wasn’t exactly undefended. But bringing together enough forces to deal with a few dark guilds, which had banded together would be troublesome.

But Rose set his fears to rest on that score. “They’re not powerful mages, don’t worry. In fact, they’re kind of bottom of the barrel in terms of power. But the fact that they just up and moved, three of them at once, means that someone powerful is still flexing his muscles in the underworld even after the Oración Seis lost so badly, and the demons lost three of their numbers.”

“Do we have names on these guilds?” Ranma asked, glancing over to where Seilah had only just looked up from her new book, staring at him intensely through the pickup of Queen Rose.

“We do. The names of the guilds are Nexus, Legend and Century. Don’t ask me what meaning there is to their names. I have no idea as none of them were ever legal guilds,” Rose replied, looking at Ranma’s face closely.

Ranma glanced to look through the image of Rose at chest height, something that caused the image to blink. But he was really looking at Seilah, who prevaricated slightly, holding out two fingers, then three, and then shrugging. Ranma frowned, thinking how to put this without giving the source of his information away. “None of those sound familiar, but it seems to me that Grimoire Heart is after specific information like the Seis-suckers were, while also looking to cause as much havoc as they can. They also do much of their own work. I’ve heard of at least four members of the guild who revel in violence. Whereas with Tartarus, they are much less straightforward in the long term. I would say this move could be in keeping with some long term goal, but what that could be, I have no idea.”

“That makes sense,” Rose said slowly, thinking about the information she had on Grimoire Heart, which wasn’t all that much to her irritation, and on Tartarus, which beyond it being composed of demons was nonexistent. The reason they had gone after the Oración Seis was because, not only were its members known to only be six (seven before the battle in the tower), but they had actual information about it and eventually even about its goals. Tartarus and Grimoire Heart, they did not have that information. “But then, why are they going into Mistral?”

Again, Ranma subtly looked through Rose’s image towards Seilah. For the second time Rose caught that and wondered if Ranma was indeed staring at her bosom, which, while flattering, would be entirely out of character for the boy. But then she realized the pickup wasn’t actually covering that, and he was simply doing the equivalent of staring out into the distance as he thought*. Or is he? It isn’t like I can stare around my image there.*

But Seilah shook her head, indicating she had no idea. She blinked as Carla handed her a pen and a pad of paper, but she quickly used it to write out, ‘Perhaps they came up with something after our defeat? To regain some of their military strength. Master Mard Geer is very…’

At that point, Ranma’s attention was forced back to Queen Rose as she continued to speak. She went into detail on a few of the other, more dangerous guilds, two of whom had disappeared from where they had been under observation in Caelum. Those, she felt after talking to Caelum’s king, were the most dangerous.

After that, however, Queen Rose signed off, blowing Wendy a kiss before doing so. Contacting Ranma hadn’t made her feel any better, but at least they now had their best mage-type Ranger aware of this latest issue.

Once the queen was gone, Ranma looked over at Seilah. “So, new plans?”

“I think so, yes,” Seilah said with a nod. “It certainly sounds as if he has done something. Whatever is going on, however, I do not know.”

“I’m more concerned about the first issue the queen mentioned,” Erza interjected, a heavy frown on her face. “Magic and anything magical disappearing from an area like that?”

“That’s true,” Ranma muttered. “But again, like I told Rose, if we can’t find a target, there’s nothing we can do. And this doesn’t sound like anything we can actually fight in any event.”

“Unless it comes to us,” Erza said, shaking her head.

Wendy held up a hand, gathering their attention to her. “It could be an enchantment. If that’s the case, I could probably figure out a way to fight it, if it has some visible structure to it, anyway.”

“That’s my little sister,” Ranma said with a nod. “For now, though, let’s put this behind us.”

To one side, Carla sat, having listened but, for once, said nothing. But inside she was frowning, irritated and rather worried. Something about this, about the magic disappearing, called out to her. A distant memory, perhaps, something she was supposed to fear. But as Ranma turned toward her and gestured for her to follow the others out onto the deck, the feeling disappeared, leaving behind just a feeling of trepidation and worry for the future.

**OOOOOOO**

Mard Geer allowed a thin, cold smile to appear on his face as he walked around the human male in front of him. He was a tall, well-built young man with coal black eyes and the light blonde hair that was most common in the country his current plan targeted. His face was thin, almost gaunt, and his eyes seemed to burn with fervor as he stared straight ahead.

Looks, of course, could be deceiving. The human male in front of Mard Geer wasn’t actually human, but a creation of Keyes, an amalgamation of human tissue and demon magic, his mind simply nonexistent. It was merely a fleshy sort of coat. “Your necromantic abilities never cease to amaze me, Keyes. Excellent. He looks enough like the original to be related, but not near enough to seem too miraculous. Our new Prophet is everything we could ever want.”

To one side of the human construct another demon stood, wearing form-fitting robes with a high collar, the robe marked by a checkered pattern and covering a collared shirt and tie, something that always amused Mard Geer, given the incongruity of a demon wearing a tie of all things, one of the most useless human accoutrements he had ever seen. Keyes also wore an ornate headpiece almost like a crown mixed with a war helmet, in that it came down to cover either side of his face and head, an affectation that showed Keyes’s well-hidden arrogance. The skeletal demon, who had nothing of living human in his visage, thought himself a king. And as long as he was content to be king of the dead and not of his fellow demons, that was fine by Mard Geer. Keyes well knew where he stood in terms of their power levels.

He now just nodded his head, acknowledging his guild master’s words before gesturing over to a map and asking, “Our plans?”

“Oh, the plans are already going strong. The rumor mills working, the guns and other items are on the move, and we’ve even begun to plan out some ‘natural disasters’ that can be blamed on one side or the other. We ourselves will soon be in position. It will be somewhat slow if we want to make certain everything is primed for our Prophet’s appearance. But eventually… Yes, eventually war will begin, and we will start weakening the humans further.” Mard Geer smiled over at Keyes, “And you, Keyes, will have as many bodies as you could possibly desire for your experiments.”

The other demon bowed once more as, around them, the floating cube that was the guild’s headquarters continued to move southward, toward their target.

**OOOOOOO**

Bisca had thought long and hard on the way home about what she wanted, about what she hoped to have in a relationship. It had been a very trying time in many ways, an enforced amount of soul searching that was distinctly uncomfortable. To her Ranma was passion and adventure and excitement, but that wasn’t all she wanted in a relationship. She wanted more: stability underneath the excitement, some plans for the future. Ranma couldn’t, or wouldn’t, give her those. The fact that he’d be away for months on end or just always traveling was a reality she thought she had come to grips to right until she left him there on the wharf and then hadn’t seen him or even heard from him in more than a month.

She also wanted romance, and while Ranma was able to be romantic, that ran straight into the biggest issue she had with staying with Ranma: sharing him. Bisca was not one of the near-mindless wizard-chasers who had flocked around Loke. And while she had no issues with Ranma’s curse, that was a far cry from being involved with him/her and another woman. She had thought honestly that she was fine with it that day after the dance and wedding down in Desierto, but the reality had not been pleasant when she was traveling with Ranma and the others.

Then, in the town where she was to turn in her bounties, Alzack had sort of ambushed her, dressed to the nines and with a bouquet of lilies, her favorite flower. It was obvious that someone had given him both a talking to about romance and a shot to the spine, because he had only stuttered once while asking her out. Then Alzack had wined and dined her and did everything he could to convince her that, despite the numerous stop and starts to their relationship, there could still be something there.

“Something real, something…permanent, maybe?” he had said, pulling at his collar. But then his nerves steadied out, and his face had hardened into something intense and rather handsome too. “I don’t want to be set aside. I don’t want to lose this without a fight. And I don’t think you do either.” Then, as the date had wound down, they had kissed, and while it hadn’t lit her nerves up and caused her to see stars, it had been good, really good. Bisca had almost been tempted to ask if he’d been practicing and, if so, how, but she hadn’t, not having wanted to ruin the moment.

So Bisca was in a sort of funk about which relationship she wanted to follow, which type of relationship she really wanted. *God damn it, why can’t it be simple? Why can’t I just figure out which makes me happier? But that’s just it: Ranma makes me happy when I’m with him, when I’m in his arms and he’s kissing me and ooh…* Shaking her head, Bisca continued down the street, smiling absentmindedly at a few kids. *But then when we’re apart, all the issues of being in a relationship with someone whose job can pull him away, which forces him to travel most of the time, and who is also pursuing a relationship with at least two other girls rears its head. And Alzack is… He’s dependable, kind, funny, and he really has been doing an amazing job on the romance aspect. There’s none of the nerves-on-fire passion there is with Ranma, but there’s certainly a goodly portion of desire there.*

She was pulled out of her thoughts as she heard a voice shouting out to her. She turned to see Wendy and Carla moving down the snow covered streets, the young girl waving happily at her while, behind them Erza, followed. Ranma was nowhere in sight at first, but he leaped down from a nearby rooftop to join them, and Bisca smiled, making her way over to the group. “You took your sweet time!” she teased, though there was a bit of real irritation there too as she hugged Ranma. “What happened?”

“Mountains are really hard to move through, especially when they get so high you can barely breathe, let alone fly, and the snow certainly didn’t help matters,” Ranma replied as he hugged her back. “Even for me, that was damned tough.”

Shaking her head at that, Bisca moved out of his arms and exchanged a hug with Erza before giving an extra-large hug to Wendy, and, as she did, Bisca felt as if she had a bit of an epiphany*. I want a kid eventually, maybe in a year or two. Ranma, though, he’s already been a father for all the Onii-chan/imouto thing, and, like he told us, he’s got no interest in settling down or having kids. I can’t honestly blame him for that, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want kids. And Alzack, he can give that to me. Stability… It might not be sexy as adventure, but I think it is even more important, and, coupled with the romance, I think I could be very happy with Alzack.*

Straightening, Bisca let out a breath and then thrust her shoulders back resolutely. *If I’m going to do this, it’s going to be now.* With that in mind, Bisca turned to Ranma and asked, “Um, can, can I talk to you for a moment? Alone?” She looked over at the others then Ranma.

Ranma nodded and led the way around a corner into the lee of a building, but then, when he moved forward to give her a hug, Bisca held up a hand, holding him at arm’s length. “No, um, none of that. I do just want to talk, and this, this’ll be difficult enough without you hugging me or, or touching me at all, really.”

“Ah. That, that doesn’t sound good. I presume this is serious relationship discussion time?” Ranma asked, wincing. “Um… Or is this an, ‘it’s not you, it’s me’ thing?”

“Heh. It’s both, though I would say with that second one, yeah, it’s never always just the person doing the breakup. In this case it is both of us, and…” Bisca steeled herself and pressed on, her red-painted lips pressed firmly together. “I don’t think this is going to work out.”

From there Bisca explained how she’d basically been forced to do some serious soul searching, how Alzack had finally tried to give her some romance and had succeeded. Then she went on to explain all the issues that she could see becoming ever larger if they continued to try to pursue a relationship. “And, and Alzack and I could have a family eventually, something you basically told us point blank you weren’t interested in. I…” She deflated, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, Ranma, but basically, I think what I really want and what I thought I wanted were two different things. The heart isn’t a very easy thing to understand, unfortunately.”

“I see…” Ranma replied, feeling a bit of tightness in his chest akin to the pain that he felt when he realized he and Akane wouldn’t work out all those years ago. *This hurts, a bit more than I thought it would honestly, I suppose that’s because of how much more I know about relationships at this point and how physical we got. Still, I can’t say she’s not making the right decision here.*  “I, I’m sorry. I’m sorry to see you go. Sorry we didn’t work out. But, if you’re happy, then that’s enough, y’know? You gotta see to you, and I can’t, can’t change myself to match what ya want perfectly.”

Bisca sighed sadly. “I’m sorry too that we didn’t work out, but I have to say I was never interested in perfection, Ranma. It’s just, being with you came with too many downsides and caveats, and when I set aside how you make me feel, my, my body’s physical reaction, my decision, sadly, made itself. A portion of me is still not happy about it, but that’s a much smaller part than the amount which thinks this is the best idea.”

“Again, as long as you’re happy, girl, that’s all that matters. I’ll get over it, maybe try to whip up some ice-cream and drown my sorrows in yummy goodness, or is that kind of thing only allowed for girls, and boys just have to soldier on?” Ranma asked, his sense of humor giving him a foundation to lean on for a moment.

“Heh. Well, if so, you’ve got a unique way to still take advantage of it, don’t you?” Bisca teased.

The two of them smiled at one another, and some of the tension evaporated. The sadness was there, but it wasn’t as prevalent as it had been before. “I hope you, Erza, and Jenny continue to have fun together, Ranma, and you better keep looking out for Wendy or else!” Bisca said, a smile on her face.

“I hope so too, and if Alzack treats you bad, just smash him one for me. Oh, and you can keep the rifle barrel. In fact…” Ranma paused and pulled out a pad and pen from his Requip space before writing down a few short lines and then an address. “This is a letter of introduction. If you ever want to go to Pergande, you can look my friend the gunsmith up, and he’ll hook you up with a full gun to go with that.

Bisca bit her lip, trying not to say that that was easily the best present she’d ever gotten. That rifle barrel, with the amount of work on it, would be equal in worth to a large house complete with full renovation. “Thank you, Ranma.” For a moment they just looked at one another, not certain how to end the conversation, but then Ranma just nodded at her, gave her a final smile and turned away to rejoin the others. Bisca watched him go, then shook her head and sighed, turning away. She still wasn’t happy with this decision, but she felt it was the right one right now.

Elsewhere, Ranma’s smiles shifted into a scowl for a few seconds. Then he smiled as he smelled a certain fire breather on the wind and turned to catch a fist covered in flame as Natsu leaped down from a nearby rooftop, shouting, “Ranma, fight me!”

Ranma’s water easily dissipated the fire, and he twisted, bringing Natsu down and around until Ranma was standing behind him, locking in a neck hold with one hand as he noogied the younger man mercilessly. “Ah, for once, kid, you’ve got great timing. Let’s take this outside the town, though.” He looked over to where Erza, Carla and Wendy were waiting. He had already brought Seilah to his room and left her there with her books and the camping gear, so she would be fine. In fact, she’d even convinced him to buy a few more books on the way. “I’ll see you over at the guildhall, okay? Just…got some steam to work out.”

“Steam! Hey, that was a pun, a right good one!” Natsu said, grinning even as he tried to get out of Ranma’s choke. “Still, let’s go! This time I’ll win!”

“You truly do not persuade when you can’t even get out of a simple arm lock,” Carla retorted, flinging her blonde hair back with a sigh and an eye-roll. Then, even as Ranma led Natsu off, she blinked and slowly moved her small frame behind the very slightly larger Wendy as she looked around. “But where the flaming moron is, the blue fool is sure to follow… Gah!”

“Carla, there you are! I was so worried that you’d gone away again! Please don’t leave me; I’ll give you all the fish you could ever want, I promise!” Happy shouted as he latched onto the cat girl’s back, having acted the ninja far better than he ever had before.

“GAAHAHHHHH!!” Carla shouted again, trying to get Happy off her, but he clung like a limpet until Wendy tickled his sides, forcing him to let go. Then the little girl stood between her friend and Happy, trying to talk her down from murder.

“Ahh, it’s good to be home,” Erza murmured, turning to watch a massive plume of steam appear in the distance.

**OOOOOOO**

Jenny was not a happy camper right now, although that ‘right now’ had been going on for weeks, ever since she had returned from Seven, if she was honest. This latest bit of irritation was simply a few more straws on the camel’s back. “What do you mean, you don't want to employ me anymore?” she growled, crossing her arms underneath her chest and tapping one finger against the upper half of her other arm while her foot made a staccato noise on the floor. To any connoisseur of female anger™, this was the equivalent of the point where someone should be talking about setting up a virgin sacrifice for the nearby volcano.

The man across the desk from Jenny cringed and then looked over at her Blue Pegasus guildmate, the man who had been acting as her manager for so long, standing to one side of Jenny. “Jenny, it's nothing to do with you. Calm down,” he said softly, reaching out to take her arm.

“This was a modeling job, and suddenly they don't want to use me. Exactly how isn't this personal?” she asked tartly, glaring at the man. He backed away quickly, and she turned to her original victim. “Well?”

He flinched most agreeably, but even as he did, his eyes tracked to the scar along one side of her face. “Ah, so that's it,” she said suddenly, her voice ice cold now where before it had been raging. “Because my face is scarred, you think I'm not modeling material any longer?”

The man gulped and then looked again at her guildmate for a moment. Seeing no help there, he began stammering. “You see, it’s, well, it's a matter of type, you know? Mirajane has the dangerous woman angle nailed, her sister the girl next door, and you're supposed to be, well, the sexy seductress or the naïve songbird.”

“Excuse me!” Jenny gasped, glaring at the man even harder now and reaching forward to grab the top of his desk with her hands, her magic aura appearing around her. “I am a certified S-class mage! I am no one's mere seductress, and I am certainly no one’s naïve **anything**!”

“We, well, we know about your magic, but that really has, um, never been a selling point for you…” the man replied, trailing off as Jenny glared before rallying a bit. “You're just supposed to be a sexy glamour girl. Glamour girls don't have scars,” he finished, his tone now making it sound almost as if she had gotten a scar just to spite him.

“I'm a mage first, a model second! I thought everyone understood this! I thought that added to my mystique!” Jenny growled. *If I couldn't keep being a mage, I wouldn't have become a model at all.*

The man just shrugged. “I'm sorry, but while scars on a man can be kind of sexy, scars on a woman, especially on their moneymaker, their face, no chance, even one like that. Now, if you just want to sing for us, we could set up something...”

Rolling her eyes, Jenny gave the man the finger and turned away. “In that case, don't expect to get your down payment back. I’m out of here, loser.” As she turned away, her upraised arm shifted from giving him a finger to holding a futuristic-looking gun before turning sideways around to point at him. While full body Mecha Take Overs were hard, weapons were relatively easy to call up. “Unless, of course, you have a hankering to spend most of your cash on medical bills.”

As the man stammered in sudden fear, Jenny stalked out of his office and down the hall, shaking her head. She wouldn't really have fired at the man, but at the ceiling? Doing a bit of public restoration and damage, that she could’ve done. *It would've been very therapeutic, for darn sure,* she thought. “Is this a one-off problem or something I’m going to run into all the time?”

“I am afraid it might be the latter,” her guildmate said cautiously, staying well away from Jenny's reach. “As undiplomatic as that man was, you, Mirajane and her sister Anna did sort of have different demographics that you called out to. With that scar, it makes it look as if you're trying to horn in on Mirajane's territory, at least in part.”

“Good,” Jenny barked, snorting with laughter at the very idea. She wouldn’t have a problem with that. Instead, she rather thought it was an excellent idea. She and Mirajane were rivals, after all, and the idea of taking some of Mirajane's fan base away from her was just as satisfying as beating her for the number one model in Fiore.

The man winced, and Jenny rolled her eyes. “What now?”

“It's just, I'm not certain how well that would go. I'm certain the ratings of any photo the two of you are in would skyrocket, but what happens when the two of you take your fighting beyond simply attempting to appeal to more of one type of demographic than the other?”

“Are you saying that Mira and I don't have any self-control?” Jenny asked, amusement banishing her dark mood for the moment.

“Considering that the last time the two of you were on a job together you ended up fighting and nearly leveled the hotel you are staying in, I think it's a viable worry,” the man replied tartly.

“That was a special case. We weren't fighting one another, we were fighting against this group of sleaze-balls that were taking pictures!” Jenny groused. It had also led them into a bit of experimentation, which Jenny knew she didn't regret. But she had gotten the impression on the train into Seven that Mirajane did regret it.

“Nonetheless, word of that event went around, even if the owner of the hotel and the person who paid for that modeling job was willing to front the money to pay for the damages. No one is going to want to pay out money for you both, and to make any headway you’d need to convince people who sign up Mira to sign you instead.” The man shook his head, his face showing what he thought of the odds of that.

Jenny scowled and then looked down at the suitcase that she had left outside her normal changing room for this job. Sighing, she hefted it up over one shoulder before turning her attention back to the matter at hand. “So, you think my modeling days are over?”

“Your pure modeling days, perhaps,” the man said apologetically. “Maybe if you helped out with our escort service a bit, people would get used to your new look,” he wheedled. Jenny had never been part of the escort services that blue Pegasus offered like Trimens or, indeed, most of the rest of the guild, although unlike what the name implied, they very rarely acted as simple sex objects. Instead she had gone out on modeling gigs, and since that was pretty much the same thing, the master had always allowed it. But Jenny had also gone out on a lot more combat missions than most of the others, bar the late Ichiya. She also was a very talented singer and dancer, which the man supposed she could fall back on now.

Actually, that could have been the furthest thing from Jenny's mind. *Oh, I like singing and dancing, and I liked modeling. But what I really wanted to do was to help people, and with the guild no longer taking combat missions, that really throws a wrench into that plan.* Singing and dancing, to Jenny's mind, were things that she did either for fun or to bring in the money quickly, unlike modeling. She had truly begun to love that, getting a thrill out of having her picture taken, knowing what that meant and, of course, how many men and even women looked at her to get their jollies off. It sated Jenny's exhibitionist streak, a foible of her personality that she was well aware of. Singing was all right to do the same kind of thing, if you chose the right venue, but it wasn't as easy or as sexualized as getting her picture taken and put into magazines.

So with two of her favorite jobs blocked, one because of the scar on her face, which honestly Jenny didn't see as all that important—*I mean, it just came down one side of my jawline, after all; it isn't anything huge—*and the other closed to her because of her guild deciding to back away from violent jobs, Jenny was at a crossroads. *Do I stay with the guild, change my tune to tuning, so to speak, or…*

Jenny looked down at her shoulder where the symbol for Blue Pegasus lay beneath her heavy winter jacket. She touched that spot gingerly with her other hand, that hand closing over it, and then sighed, pulling her hand away. *We’ll have to see. I don't want to make a precipitous decision yet. But honestly, moving on, that seems like an idea that I could get behind.*

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma smiled as he entered the guild, ignoring the light bruising on his chest and shoulder. For once, he had fought like all those pathetic earthbound opponents he’d faced before, taking and dealing out damage straight up, and it had felt oddly good. Most of that, he was certain, was because of his and Bisca’s backing away. They hadn’t, after all, been actually dating, so he couldn’t say that they had really broken up, now that he’d thought of it.

But the rest of the reason was that he had also proven that his new durability was higher than Natsu’s. Oh, the fire user’s durability was indeed incredible, and his endurance too. Ranma had actually waited a few minutes after beating him into unconsciousness, and then the boy had sprung to his feet and just charged him again as if he had never been hurt. But, even so, it was Ranma who had walked away, and with only a few bruises to show for it. So he was in a great mood as he entered the guild, his grin only diminishing slightly as he spotted Bisca and Alzack at the back. *I told her to go with the one that could make her happy. She did that. I can’t then turn around and bemoan that choice of hers.*

Putting that thought out of his head, Ranma looked around eagerly. “All right, where’s the Lightning Bitch!? I’ve had my warm up, now it’s time to get to the real thing!”

“If you’re talking about Laxus, he’s not here,” Gray supplied, waving at him with his new arm, which looked almost normal right up until his thumb shifted at a mental command into a bottle opener.

Ranma’s eyes widened involuntarily at that, and he shook his head. *Okay, there’s some serious magic involved in that thing. That Porlyusica, she sure knows her stuff.* “Where is he, then?”

“Off with the Thunder Tribe. They wanted him along to some festival or something,” Gray said with a shrug.

“Damn, so who else am I gonna fight, then?” Ranma pouted, looking around. Erza wasn’t there, though Ranma knew she had said something about going to the hot baths or something the moment they got back. *Thinking about it, Wendy and Carla are probably with her*. They really hadn’t taken the time to bathe much in Joya, and even when Ranma or Erza had heated the water, it just hadn’t been the same, always needing to be quick before the water cooled. And then, on the way back, they hadn’t taken any time at all which could have slowed them down further.

He looked over at Makarov, who was staring at him for some reason. “What about you old man? Or oooh, you and Mira both? Bet you I could beat some life into those old bones of yours.” He frowned as he looked around, scowling. “Damn, she’s not here either? Come on!”

Makarov didn’t respond, still staring at Ranma for a moment. *What the fuck!? His magical aura, it’s, it’s at least half again the size it was, at worst, and that’s with him controlling it so well too. Where in the world did he come by that kind of… Second Origin perhaps?* His thoughts slowing to a halt at that, he finally became aware that Ranma had come close enough to wave his hand in front of Makarov’s face.

He batted it away, shaking his head. “Gah, enough of that, brat. And as for your question, I’m going to answer ‘hell, no’ on that one. These old bones have more than enough life in them as they are, and I, for certain, have no desire to let you try to take your frustrations out on me. Why don’t you grab Gray and a few of the others and see if they can give you your proper workout?”

Shrugging, Ranma looked over to Gray. “Well, what about it, frosty? You up for possibly proving you’re tougher than Natsu? He was the warm-up, after all.”

“Heh, I am so there,” Gray replied with a smile, leaving his chair behind.

Just then, though, there was a loud screeching noise, which caused Ranma to gasp in pain as he slammed his hands over his ears. A moment later a speaker system Ranma hadn’t noticed before activated, and a shout echoed out over the town. “Warning, Gildarts shift! Warning, Gildarts shift!”

“Gildarts?” Ranma asked, his smirk at Gray’s attitude seguing into a real, excited grin of anticipation. It almost made Gray back up due to the sheer manic joy in it.

It did make Makarov nearly scream in fear. “NO!!! No way in hell are you going to fight Gildarts! Not here, not in the town, not in Ishgar! Take it to the continent if you want to do it anywhere!”

“Meh, would you settle for a no magic spar instead? I’ve always wondered whether Gildarts had any kind of martial arts to him, or if he was as boom happy as the rest of you FT folk,” Ranma replied, shaking his head.

A moment later Gildarts smashed his way through the wall to one side. The large man looked around as if confused for a moment, then moved towards Makarov. “Yo, old man! You’re still short as ever, but where is everybody? Hell, the only ones I see here that I recognize are those old drunks and Gray.”

“The Strauss family is out on a family trip to a ski resort. Erza is at the baths with young Wendy, one of our guild’s friends. Laxus is out with his three stalk…er, I mean friends,” Makarov replied, burping at the end as he smiled up at the far larger man, but his eyes narrowed as he took in how the man was standing. “It’s good to see you back, Gildarts, but I take it because you came back so quickly that the hundred year quest was too much for even you?”

“HAHAHHA!” Gildarts laughed loudly while everyone else bar Ranma stared at the two older men. Then, as he scratched the back of his head, Gildarts sighed. “Yeah, that job was too hard, even for me. It was impossible.”

“Huh!?” shouted more than one voice, and Makarov sighed, nodding, his eyes going down Gildarts’ body to his arm and leg. “Well, at least you survived. S-class mages have been going on that mission for decades now, and none but you have ever returned. I’ll count that as a win.”

Having waited to be recognized, Ranma was kind of irritated as the rest of the guild welcomed Gildarts home, and the old guy didn’t notice him. *Well, it has been the better part of a decade, I suppose,* he thought as he watched Natsu burst in, seemingly fully healed from the beat-down Ranma had given him. *Huh, impressive durability on that boy, gotta say. But brains, that’s another story.*

He watched as Natsu was grabbed and flung straight up to smash through the ceiling after shouting his patented ‘fight me’ line. “Maybe later, okay, Natsu?”

As the rest of the guild laughed and slowly retreated from the large Crash Mage, Ranma moved forward, smacking Gildarts on the back just as he took a beer from Laki, who was filling in at the bar for the absent Mira. The taller man coughed on his beer and then turned to send a glare over his shoulder. “Hey, not cool! You don’t mess with the beer!” Then he paused, staring at Ranma, his eyes narrowing. “Huh, you don’t look like a member of the guild. Are you new?”

“Hah, no! The only newcomers we’ve added since you left on that mission is Lucy. And there’s the Iron Dragon Slayer Gajeel you might’ve heard about him when he was with Phantom Lord.” Thanks to his role in rescuing Laxus and Natsu and Juvia speaking up for him, Gajeel had been offered a place in Fairy Tail. They had gotten away with this relatively easily, since the Magic Council were so busy with internal issues at present the fate of one mage who had been forced to work for them, to work off his debt to society, did not register to any of them. “And Lucy, she’s the blond over there with the huge knockers!” Makarov said, pointing.

“Master!” Lucy shrieked, covering her chest and trying to crouch down enough to hide herself from the older man’s looks. “Is, is that any way to talk about one of your mages!?”

“That’s right, master. You take your jokes too far sometimes,” Cana said, scowling at Gildarts and Makarov with a lot more heat in her eyes when she looked at Gildarts than his laughing at the joke really warranted. Then she went on, throwing an arm over her girlfriend’s shoulders. “Besides, this particular pair of cantaloupes is mine to play with.”

Ranma had turned to watch this interaction, which was precisely what Makarov had hoped for. “But, then again, even if he hasn’t joined the guild…” As he said the last word, Makarov threw his beer at the back of Ranma’s head and laughed wildly as the change occurred. “Ranma does bring a pair of his own around sometimes.”

“GRAH!” Ranma growled, sounding remarkably like Carla when faced with Happy and his attempts at courtship.

She swung at Makarov, who leaped away with a laugh. He did not, however, dodge the resulting blast of Water Dragon magic that slammed into him sending him to join Natsu in his upward journey. With that nuisance dealt with satisfactorily, Ranma turned back to Gildarts, flipping her wet hair out of her eyes and glaring up at the taller man. “Do you remember me now!? Damn, and I thought the elderly only started having problems when they hit their seventies. Was I wrong about that or wrong about your age?”

Gildarts’ eyes narrowed dangerously at that, but his lips were twitching into a smirk as he replied, “Oh yeah, I remember you now. That curse of yours is kind of memorable, Ranma. Although the last time I saw you, you didn’t have those,” he said before poking Ranma in the chest.

Ranma’s hands flared with magic as she smacked Gildarts’ hands away from her, but the magic dissipated almost as soon as it formed around her hand, Gildarts Crash magic tearing it apart, changing the water into tiny blocks before dissipating and falling to the ground as normal water. As they did though, Gildarts failed to block the kick that Ranma had sent from mid-air, having catapulted herself there from via the tiny bit of momentum he had gained from Gildarts smacking her hand aside. The kick slammed into the side of Gildarts’ head, causing him to stumble sideways before he righted himself.

As he did, Ranma’s eyes narrowed as she stared at the man, having heard something odd just then, the sound of metal on metal or gears shifting, perhaps. “No touch,” she said, waving a finger in front of herself. “Unless you want to take this outside?” she said, cracking her knuckles. “Then you can try, and I can try ta neuter you. Or smash your face in. Either or, I’m not fussy.”

“Is that a challenge, Ranma?” Gildarts asked, touching his cheek thoughtfully. *That was a hell of a kick!* Thanks to his Crash magic, Gildarts had a physical durability that put even Natsu’s to shame. It took quite a bit to actually hurt him, but Ranma had done just that, and for a moment the idea of challenging the little redhead to a spar seemed like a good idea. “Be a shame to break you in half like that after not seeing your sorry, yet oddly sexy, ass for so long.”

The short redhead might have gone for him just then for that comment when another redhead walked through the front doors, glaring around until her eyes alighted on the first redhead. “Ranma, is this really how you treat a long lost friend?”

“Laxus is my friend,” Ranma said with a smirk, ignoring the hilarious looks of the people around them at anyone claiming Laxus as a friend (acquaintance, rival, role model, guildmate, sure but friend?). “Gildarts is just this old guy who came along and saved our asses. That didn’t mean we were actually very friendly. Quite the opposite, in fact, Mr. ‘I like to send pre-teen boys to brothels.’”

“He did what!?” shouted more than one voice, the loudest belonging to, oddly, Cana.

Ranma was about to explain that when Gildarts spoke up. “I just wanted you both to get a bit of an education. And if we were friendly before you did that little prank on me, we’re sure as hell not friendly now,” Gildarts said, remembering that prank and the time he was bald all too easily now as he looked at the redhead. *Oh yes, beating this little punk down is looking better and better*. “I think you had the right idea, Ranma. Why don’t we take this outside? Out past the town limits somewhere, anyway.”

“None of that,” Erza said, stepping between them and pushing them both to one side of each other, one hand on Ranma’s head and the other on Gildarts’ chest.

It was only then that Gildarts actually looked at Erza and shook his head, his eyes widening as he took in the armor-wearing woman. “Damn! I’m only gone, what, three years or so, and you grow up on me, Erza!?”

Erza smiled warmly at the older man and then swiftly chopped him on the forehead. “If you’re thinking about flirting with me, do think again, Gildarts. I’m afraid I’m not attracted by men old enough to be my father.”

“I’m hurt,” Gildarts said, shaking his head and backing away, holding one hand to his chest. “That you would think so little of me that I’d flirt with one of the guild’s precious children.”

“That would be because I know you,” Erza replied with a light laugh.

There was a whistling sound from above, and Makarov and Natsu started to fall back through the holes they had made upon exiting the Guild. Gildarts sighed and then caught Natsu out of the air with one meaty hand, looking around thoughtfully. “Where’s Happy?”

“He’s a little tied up at the moment,” Erza replied, chuckling while Natsu also looked around, somewhat confused at his buddy’s absence. He looked over at Erza, demanding an explanation, but Erza was already speaking. “He was getting a little too irritating for Carla, and Wendy decided that for both their sakes he needed some time out. Last I saw of him, Wendy had tied him to the church’s steeple.”

“That’s my little sister,” Ranma said with a laugh, moving over to and then hopping over the bar. There she grabbed a glass and filled it with water before she started to heat the water with her ki. The instant it was warm she tossed it over her head.

Then Ranma had to duck as Makarov came after him again, this time with several of the others. “What the hell? You all have some kind of death wish?” he shouted as he ducked underneath the bar to dodge splashes of cold ale.  *Why couldn’t it be water? I can keep that from touching me for a bit, anyway. Huh… Actually, I haven’t even tried that yet. That would’ve been a great test for my newfound level of control over my Dragon Slayer powers.*

“Can you blame us?” said one man who had the look of a biker gang member or some kind of thug trying to desperately hold on to his youth via his haircut and slouch. He was smoking from a pipe and standing next to a man of similar age, who was holding onto two mugs of ale and grinning at the sex changing martial artist. “With Mirajane and her sisters out and Juvia also on a mission, we need some eye candy around here, dammit!”

“Then look at Erza!” Ranma said, dodging another attack from Makarov and sweeping a leg kick around that glowed blue, creating a wave of water all around him that smashed the old man away. “She’s a natural redhead, and she’s gorgeous to boot. Why the hell are you complaining! Besides, there’s always Bisca, now that she’s back, anyway, and she’s smokin’ too. And I don’t think Cana and Lucy mind you looking so long as you don’t try touching!”

While Bisca was not in the guildhall any longer, having exited previously with Alzack, the reactions of the others mentioned thusly were mixed, while the faces of those few other girls not mentioned were very negative indeed. While Erza blushed, looking away, Levy looked down at herself and became very mopey. Cana laughed, putting her arms under her chest and thrusting it out slightly while she nuzzled against a large barrel of ale to one side, and Laki growled, imaging what kind of wooden torture device Ranma would look better trapped in.

Lucy, on the other hand, simply blushed and covered her chest letting Cana reply for them both. “For my part, you can look all you want, but to touch you’d have to do a lot better than just buy me drinks. As for Lucy, she’s mine,” she said, suddenly holding several dozen cards in both hands, which began to glow magically. One of which hands, like Gray’s arm, had been replaced by a substitute, making Ranma once more think that Porlyusica was some kind of genius with those things. “Does anyone want to argue?”

That caused Lucy to both blush and smile, but every man around them backed away rapidly, shaking their heads.

“You see! And Bisca has Alzack to protect her,” said one of the others, nodding his head sagely. “There’s only so much look but don’t flirt men can take.”

“You don’t see Natsu or Gray doing it,” Ranma groused as he leaped over into the crowd, smashing two of his attackers aside with light, well-placed blasts of water.

This was interrupted by someone who had not been taking part in the fight sitting up from one of the booths, instead watching with a toothy grin. “GIHIHIHI!” Gajeel pushed off of the back of the booth and leaped forward, his hands suddenly turning into metallic claws. “If this is a fight with the Water Dragon Slayer, count me in! I’ve wanted to measure myself against you for weeks now!”

“Bring it on, Rusty!” Ranma shouted in return.

“Oh yeah!” Natsu shouted, bursting out from the woodwork to one side where he had fallen earlier, fire appearing all around him as he knocked Gray and another man flat. “I’m all fired up! Let’s do this!”

“Damn you, flame brain, get back here!” Gray roared, smashing the Fire Dragon Slayer in the back of the head with large spear of ice. An ice spear harder and stronger than any Ranma had seen before from him, and created faster too, which was something he noted even as Gajeel closed with him.

Soon the fight became widespread with everyone in the guild throwing punches at everyone else. Lucy and Cana attempted to stay out of it until one man was smashed down onto their table, his hands flailing and touching their chests in such a way that, accompanied by his sudden grin, made it clear that that was not exactly accidental. They hurled him off them and stood up, burning with the fires of anger as they shouted, “You want a piece of us!?” and launched themselves into the fight, Cana wielding an empty mug and Lucy shouting, “LUCY KICK!” and performing admittedly textbook perfect high kicks to whoever came in range.

The only people that didn’t get involved were Laki, who was womanning the bar, Gildarts, Makarov and Erza. Gildarts laughed at it all, leaning back against the bar with Erza to one side and the master sitting down now on the other. “Is there any reason why you decided to try that, master?” Erza asked while Laki prepared a strawberry shortcake sandwich for her.

“Not particularly, although I could say that it’s fun to mess with the pigtailed brat or that he owes me some laughs for making me worry about my children so,” Makarov said before he looked at Gildarts angrily, smacking him on the arm with a Titan enhanced punch, causing the other man to wince. Few knew it, but even if he didn’t change his body shape in any way, Makarov could actually imbue punches or kicks with the power of his full Titan form, just incredibly concentrated. “That and I wanted to make certain that you and that reprobate don’t cause even more property damage than you already will by your mere presence!”

“I can’t deny that,” Gildarts said sheepishly. “Fighting that guy, er, girl, would be a lot of fun! He’s a lot stronger than I thought he might be by this point.” He then chortled, shaking his head and motioning at his chest. “And a lot bigger too!”

Rolling her eyes, Erza ignored the older man’s habitual perversions even as Makarov giggled agreement and the nearby Laki shivered. “Ranma likes to push himself. His dedication to what he calls the Art and to combat in all its forms is actually quite admirable,” Erza said, looking out into the throng where Ranma had just gotten Gray in a cross over arm bar somehow, lifting him up over his head on his shoulders. With the Ice Make user locked in place and unable to break free, his flailing legs and head became weapons as Ranma twisted in place, smacking people off-balance and then kicking out hard against Gajeel’s arms. This launched Ranma into the air, from where he threw a now woozy Gray down into the mass of fighters, cackling all the while.

Makarov grinned suddenly, leaning over towards her. He waited until Erza had taken the cake Laki handed her and was just biting into the first forkful before saying, “So, does that mean the two of you are an item? That little smile of yours just now looked a little special when you were talking about him.”

Her mouth full, Erza blushed and coughed, dropping her fork to clang onto the plate and raising a hand to slap at her armored chest, with Gildarts smacking her back as she choked on the food. When she recovered she turned, her face a mixture of embarrassment and anger. She raised a fist intent on smacking the Guild Master a good one for that, but before she could respond appropriately, he asked, “Well, is it? Are the two of you dating now? You were certainly away long enough together, and with only little Wendy and Carla as company for a good while too!”

“I, that is, we, sorta?” Erza squeaked. Yes, squeaked, Gildarts, Makarov and even Laki noted. Whatever had happened, Erza’s odd reaction to romance (note: romance, not smut) was still there. “We’re, that is, we’re not exclusive, but yes.”

“Not exclusive?” Gildarts asked, blinking in shock. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Erza shrugged, shaking her head as she slowly recovered and glaring at Makarov before turning back to her lovely, beautiful, tasty strawberry cake. “It’s something special between us. I’m not going to discuss it here.”

She speared her strawberry shortcake with a fork almost viciously, bringing it up to her mouth as both men laughed. But before she could bite down, one of the other Guild members, a man named Nab, was hurled towards them and slammed into her unsuspecting back, causing her to nearly poke her eye out with a fork full of strawberry shortcake, his head smacking into hers. Erza’s face slammed down into the strawberry shortcake in front of her, cracking the plate underneath and squishing the cake into her face.

Nab groaned, shaking his head as he pushed himself to his feet and grabbing at the totems around his neck. “Dammit! Don’t make me angry, you lot!”

“Shut up and take a job sometime, lazy ass!” shouted a voice from within the throng.

In response Nab roared and was about to call upon his magic when a terrible red aura flickered around the periphery of his vision. He quickly turned and then gulped as Erza slowly pushed herself back upright, twisting around on the bar stool to stand up, one hand pushing the remains of her delectable snack off her face. “Oh my gosh! I am so sorry, Erza! I didn’t mean it! I was tossed out…” he babbled, his face turning white.

“No excuses!” she screamed, grabbing his face and leaping into the pile where she began to use his body like a flail, smashing people left and right. “Defilers of the most sacred food, you will pay for your effrontery with your bodies!”

Ranma was the only one who didn’t scream and run. Instead he leaped towards her, a kick lashing out towards her face, which she blocked deftly with the face of Nab. He flipped himself over Erza to land behind her and then pushed backward in a lunge with an elbow extended to her kidneys. She grunted at that, staggering forward as he laughed. “That sounds kinky. Is there something you want to share with the group, Erza?”

Blushing hotly now beneath her anger, Erza growled, tossing Nab aside to smash Natsu to the ground as she summoned up two small war hammers in either hand. They were simple nonmagical war hammers, but for pounding fools there was little better. “Stay still and take your punishment, defiler of the strawberry!”

“I haven’t defiled anything,” Ranma said with a yelp even as he bent backwards to dodge a blow, one of his legs coming up in a kick that would’ve taken Erza in the chin if she had not dodged away. “Or is that a request? Defile you or the strawberry? Both? Use one on the other? Kinky.”

Ranma always got flirty during and directly after a fight, something Erza had noticed before on their journey. This was something she quite liked, although it would be an uphill battle to get her to admit it.

Soon enough the rest of the Guild were down, only Gray and Natsu still awake, the two of them brawling to one side. Ranma noticed idly that Gray seemed to have added some new moves along with a lot more control and speed in his Ice Make use since the last time Ranma had seen him in action. There were some actual martial arts styles beginning to show through there, including some moves from Drunken Style and Open Palm that Bacchus used.

*That’s impressive as hell,* he thought, although earlier he had also noticed that Natsu had trained himself to a high degree as well. It was interesting, and he liked seeing the youngsters. That was the last moment he had free from Erza though, as one hammer was quickly replaced by a staff, enlarging her reach by several meters. The end of the staff slammed into Ranma’s shoulder with punishing force, hurling him away.

“Looking away when you’re supposed to be concentrating on me? I’m hurt,” Erza quipped, actually winking at him.

“Judging by the bruise you just gave me, that’s my line,” Ranma groused, grinning and coming back in against the redhead. He wasn’t really hurt, of course, but the fact that Erza had connected so cleanly made him enjoy this fight all the more.

As the others slowly started to recover, the two of them danced around one another, limbs flashing and hands moving. When it started, none of the watchers could really tell, but at some point Ranma’s movements became not attacks, but touches. Erza’s weapons also disappeared, her own attacks becoming caresses here and there on Ranma’s chest and side. The fight became a spar and then something almost like a dance, each of them striking not to injure, but to entice, touch, or stroke.

“Sparring as flirting. If I hadn’t seen it, I wouldn’t believe it,” Gildarts said, shaking his head.

The martial artist and the redhead continued to spar for a time before Ranma caught Erza’s leg as she went for a high kick. Ducking underneath it, his arm flicked up and down, catching her leg against one of his shoulders before she could recover or move into another attack. At the same time, his other hand tapped her on the inside of her knee before tracing upwards with a finger, winking at Erza. “Why don’t we stop here for now?” he said a little huskily as he felt the muscles underneath her leg twitch under his touch. “We wouldn’t want to go too far, too quickly now, would we?”

The double entendre there made Erza blush hotly before she nodded, even though she wasn’t willing to let Ranma get the last flirt in. Ranma let her foot go, but then stilled as Erza slowly lowered her leg, letting her foot travel down his chest, before flicking off right above his groin. For some reason that was sexy as hell, and Ranma knew that he was the one blushing now. *So I’m a tiny bit of a masochist. That’s new but not entirely unexpected.*

Gildarts began to laugh, shaking his head. “That’s an interesting way to tame the savage redhead,” he shouted, getting a very pointed glare from Erza and a nonchalant shrug from a still blushing Ranma. But then Gildarts sobered, looking between the three Dragon Slayers. “You’re Gajeel, right?” he asked, pointing at the Iron Dragon Slayer.

The younger nodded, looking a little defensive. “Yeah, and you’re Gildarts. The so-called mage of certain-destruction.”

“That’s a new one,” Gildarts quipped, shaking his head. “Who’s been calling me that?”

“My old Guild Master,” Gajeel replied, shaking his head. “What do you want?”

“Ah, that explains it. Jose was always an ass, but a smart one, or else he’d have tried to make trouble while I was around.” The Crash Magic mage smirked, but there was nothing humorous about his expression as Gajeel flinched. “Oh yeah, I’ve heard about the guild war he launched in my travels. If he tried that shit while I was here, that would not have gone well for him.”

Turning his gaze from a shivering Gajeel, Gildarts let his magical aura fade back to the background, looking at Ranma and Natsu, the latter somewhat affectionately, having come to see the youngster like he was a son. “I want you there to come by my house later. I have something I need to talk to you about.”

Ranma blinked at that but then shrugged. “I’ll grab Wendy and we’ll meet you there in about an hour or so.”

“That should be fine,” Gildarts replied but then blinked. “Who’s Wendy?”

About an hour later Gildarts frowned up at, or at least tried to frown up at, where Wendy was perched quite happily on the top of his head. “High places are best places,” she said, smiling happily down at him and Ranma, while sneaking glances towards Gajeel. The two of them had not talked much during the time when Wendy and Ranma were trying to help rebuild the wrecked town and had never talked before that. She had already made a opinions on Natsu—likable, a little simple, and even more of a combat junky than her Onii-chan—and Laxus—prickly, gruff, but actually very nice if just as obsessed about strength as Ranma-nii—but wondered about the personality of the Iron Dragon Slayer.

He was looking back at her and then over at Ranma thoughtfully, but said nothing. Ranma didn't think it was because he didn't have anything to actually say. Rather, he seemed the quiet sort who preferred to listen to what other people were talking about first.

“You wanted to speak to us?” Ranma said, reaching out quickly to grab Natsu as he made to turn on his fire powers and attack Gildarts again in excitement. He didn’t really seem serious about it. Rather, his attacking Gildarts seemed to be a major part of their interaction. “Later,” Ranma said, forcing the younger boy to sit down. “I think this is a serious conversation time.”

Gildarts chuckled widely, shaking his head. “You've got that right.” He looked at Natsu closely, then over to the other Dragon Slayers. “Are all of you still looking for your parents?”

Natsu answered instantly as did Wendy, shouting “yes!” along with Natsu as she leaped off of the older man's head and then hopped into Ranma's arms, where she cuddled in and looked up at the taller man as he stomped around the small Spartan room that made up the majority of his house. The house was badly dilapidated, which made Ranma wonder how much of a role model this guy was for Natsu, considering the Fire Dragon Slayer’s own house.

The older man smiled somewhat wanly at them, nodding his head slowly. “I figured. But I'm telling you to stop.”

Ranma's eyes narrowed as he leaned back, staring at the older man while Natsu exploded in outrage and Wendy whimpered. He exchanged a glance with Gajeel, subtly gesturing towards Gildarts’ arm, which Gajeel caught.

As the old man paused in his pacing, Gajeel whipped out one of his own hands and smacked his hand down on the arm that Gildarts had been hiding underneath his parka. When he did so his hand clanged like it had just hit metal, and he leaned back.

That sound arrested Natsu's outrage, and he paused, staring at Gildarts. “Gildarts, are you wearing armor or something?”

“It's not so much what I'm wearing, kid,” the older man replied with a laugh, stepping back and whipping off his parka to stand there revealing both his heretofore hidden leg and arm. Both of them were gone, the arm from the upper arm down and the leg from the knee down. They had been replaced by prosthetics, but unlike Cana’s or Gray’s, these looked metallic and built for durability and strength far more than aesthetics. “This is why I don't want you looking for dragons, Natsu,” he said seriously. “This was done to me by a dragon.”

Wendy, Gajeel, and Natsu all stared in shocked horror while Ranma scowled, staring at the wounds and then at the rest of Gildarts, noticing that his ribs were done up in tape too and looked to have been badly wounded at some point in the last month or so if he was any judge. “Wh, what happened?” Natsu asked, his voice sounding almost crushed as he stared at his idol and role model being so badly wounded.

“I'll never forget it. It was huge, blotting out the sky above me, and fast, among the fastest things I've ever seen. I didn't even have time to blink, and it took off my arm. That's how fast it was. How strong. I didn't have a chance! That black dragon, it's a vicious creature. That’s why I’m saying not to go looking for rumors about dragons anymore, Natsu. If you run into that thing…” Gildarts shook his head. “I know how much finding your father means to you, but I want you to live and that means not tangling with that monster.”

“I'm a Dragon Slayer!” Natsu shouted leaping to his feet. “If this other dragon knows something about…”

“He didn't say a damn word to me, Natsu!” Gildarts cut him off, shaking his metal arm in the younger man's face. “It just attacked. It didn’t have anything to do with my mission. It just saw me, maybe it felt my magical power or something. But whatever the reason, it attacked me faster than I could speak. And if it can do this to me, what do you think it would do to you, to your friends if they followed you along on this mission to find your father?”

Ranma stayed silent as Natsu stuttered, stumbling to a halt and then turning away. Ranma simply nodded his head at the older man and then asked, “What did it look like, this dragon that attacked you?”

“Big, wing-span so wide it could cover a city. Four limbs, a giant tail with several spikes along its length. Its scales were almost as black as a starless void with these little whorls of blue here and there on its surface occasionally,” the older man replied. “Why, do you know something about it?”

Ranma sighed and leaned back, looking down at Wendy in his lap before looking around at the others. “The name of that Dragon is Acnologia. It, or maybe he, is a remnant of the original Dragon Wars thousands of years ago. The first, original Dragon Slayer—her name was Irene—was friends with an ancient Dragon named Belserion, and he left this spirit thing somehow behind it...”

“Wait, Irene?” Natsu said, twisting around to stare at Ranma. “The same woman that was Erza's ancestor? Is that where you guys went!?”

“Yeah,” Ranma replied with a nod, not questioning how Natsu knew about that. Erza might’ve told him or one of the other girls who had seen the image of Irene’s little memory box. “We didn't anticipate the thing Belserion left for her being a spirit that could tell us so much, kid, or I might have invited you along,” Ranma said somewhat apologetically, but not really. “I'd apologize for that, but we had no way of knowing. We thought it would all be personal stuff for Erza, and so we went off by ourselves, me to help her find the place and maybe a hint as to how to make my body and Dragon Slayer magic stop fighting, and Wendy…”

“Wendy along for the ride,” Wendy replied, smiling a little and speaking as if she were just completing her big brother’s thoughts. “It was fun meeting Belserion, though. He was funny.”

“Did he say anything about our parents? Mine was named Metalicana,” Gajeel asked, speaking up for the first time.

“And mine was named Igneel!” Natsu said, actually showing restraint in not reaching out to shake Ranma or Wendy in order to get answers out of them faster.

Wendy pouted a little, shaking her head. “Sorry. The only ones that he really got along with were my mama and a few of the others who he said had died, though he had a few opinions on those too, I remember. He said that Igneel was a hothead, but he wasn't nearly as stubborn or set in his ways as some of the others. If you caught him in a good mood he was quite likable, but he liked to fight far too much for Belserion's taste.” She giggled a little, looking at Natsu and thinking, *like father, like child*. “He called him a young whippersnapper with far too much fire in his belly for his own good.”

“That’s an impossibility!” Natsu said, but he looked a lot happier than he had a few minutes ago as Gajeel groused, scowling and looking away. “But he didn't know where any of them could've gone?”

“No. Belserion left that message while the wars were still going on. He didn't know anything that happened after his death, obviously,” Ranma replied for the siblings.

Wendy looked up at Ranma, one eyebrow quirked, and Ranma understood what she was asking: should they mention the fact that this dragon spirit now inhabited a sword among Erza's collection? But Ranma shook his head, indicating that they shouldn't tell anyone that. If Belserion wanted to talk, that was one thing, but on the trip through Joya Erza had attempted to strike up a conversation with her new sword only to be ignored most of the time. Apparently once that spell had finished, talking took a lot out of the Dragon, and Ranma wanted it to be Erza and Belserion's choice to reveal him to the other Dragon Slayers.

“That makes sense, I suppose,” pouted the Fire Dragon Slayer.

At the same time, the Iron Dragon Slayer just groaned again. “Hardheaded and set in his ways, that's all the guy was able to tell you about Metalicana?”

“Pretty much,” Ranma said with a nod. “Sorry.”

“Yes, Belserion didn’t really… Well, dragons, most of them, weren’t exactly sociable, and Belserion tended to not get along with the more combative dragons. He was an intellectual; that’s why he was called the Sage,” Wendy supplied.

“Whatever,” Gajeel mumbled, irritated at himself for getting his hopes up like that.

“I want your promise,” Gildarts said, drawing all of their attention back to him as he sat down on his bed, staring at Natsu. “I want your promise,” he repeated, “that you won't go after Acnologia. That **thing** is a killer. No matter how strong you are,” he said, his eyes flicking over to Ranma, “You're not up to his weight level.”

Ranma begged to differ on that, but he didn't say anything as Natsu mumbled something that might charitably have been called an affirmative response. After all, who knew? It could be true. Instead Ranma simply looked back at the old man. “And your running into the black-scaled bunghole had nothing to do with your hundred year quest?”

“No,” Gildarts said with a laugh, amused at Ranma’s attempt to not curse in front of Wendy. “I barely got to the area the request specified before that black dragon found me. I don't know if that's a coincidence or not, but when I was being looked after by the locals they said they saw something that night, some large bright flashes or something in the distance. So who knows, maybe the black dragon was there to fight the Cyclops of Mount Senedis and running into me was just a happy chance.”

“Whatever,” Gajeel grumped for a second time while Natsu growled, stood up, and moved towards the door, exiting quickly. Gajeel quickly followed him out, not looking at the others as he did.

Wendy watched them go, shaking her head. “They're just as sad as I was about not learning more about where my mama could have gone,” she said to the others. “They just don't want to admit it. And they don’t want to admit that Acnologia is beyond them.”

“Heh, well, knowing that his enemies are beyond him seems to be a chronic problem with Natsu,” Ranma said with a chuckle, ruffling her hair. *For my part, I’m patient. I can wait for this Acnologia to come to me if he’s going to hunt down other Dragon Slayers as Belserion told us he would. If not, well, maybe I can entice him to fight me someplace where I would have an advantage…*

Wendy giggled, and Ranma stood up, letting Wendy crawl up him to perch on his head even though she stared longingly at Gildarts for a moment before Ranma moved towards the doorway. “Thanks for the information, old man,” Ranma said, absentmindedly giving Gildarts the finger. “And when you’re feeling better we’ll have that match.”

Gildarts rolled his eyes, tossing the table that was sitting next to his bed after Ranma with a shout of, “I'm not that old, you bastard!”

Ranma ducked quickly, moving like a mambo dancer, so low that the table missed. Wendy, who didn’t move from her position on his head, laughed with him as they exited the cabin.

Outside it was snowing again, the kind of large, wet snowflakes that told Ranma these were going to be sticking around for a while, adding to the amount of snow already on the ground. “Well, Wendy, back to the apartment?”

“Actually, would you mind if I had a sleepover at Fairy Hills? All the girls are going to be putting together a sleepover party to celebrate Levy’s birthday. Even Mira, Lisanna and Anna are going to be back by then, and I thought it sounded nice.”

Ranma nodded. “That's fine. It'll give me a chance to teach Seilah some cooking without anyone being bothered by the inevitable smell of burning and such.”

That evening Ranma and Wendy walked up to Fairy Hills to be met by Erza and several of the others. “Hey, Wendy, glad you could make it,” Levy said with a grin, exchanging a high five with the other height-challenged girl while nodding to Carla. “You're holding that form longer every time I see you.”

“It is most helpful, yes, especially since little girls don't tend to pick me up this way. Well,” Carla corrected herself with a chuckle, poking Wendy in the side, “except for this one.”

“You know I do it with love, Carla,” the little girl said with a laugh of her own, hugging her best friend to her while Carla shook her head but made no effort to pull away. Then Wendy looked up at her Onii-chan. “Are you sure you don't want to join?” she teased. “I'm sure they have some cold water somewhere.”

“Ha ha ha, Wendy,” Ranma said, mock glaring at the girl. “I think I've spent more than enough time in my female form of late, thank you so very much.”

She giggled again, and Ranma rolled his eyes, winking at Erza as if to say, ‘See what I put up with?’

The natural redhead chuckled, then hugged him and told him that she would see him tomorrow. “And if you spar with Gildarts without me around, I will be most put out with you.”

Ranma frowned and then gulped as Erza stepped back and entered the dormitory, her hips swaying. He then looked up and caught Bisca watching them. He smiled up at her, watching as she waved down at him before turning away. *Yep, that’s gonna be awkward for a bit, ain’t it. Damn, this whole breaking up thing is hard. No wonder Laxus doesn’t date girls in the guild. Although, judging from the looks he was giving Mira back in Seven, that idea might have been taking a severe beating lately.*

Juvia came out then as Erza entered. She had come back from a mission a bare few hours ago and had just come out of her room when she heard Ranma’s voice. Now her eyes narrowed at the sight of the pigtailed mage, although they softened noticeably as they noticed Wendy. She nodded at them all and then said simply, “Juvia neglected to purchase several items Juvia will need in the near future. Juvia will be heading out now to get them. Juvia, however, wishes to ask Ranma some questions, one Water user to another.”

Ranma shrugged, gesturing for Juvia to fall in with him as he turned away. “Sure. I've got some shopping of my own to do even if I am only going to be cooking for one tonight.”

As she turned to go inside Fairy Hills with Wendy, Carla paused, staring up into the sky as a premonition of danger hit her like an icy wave. Something would happen tonight, something life changing, something that would affect Wendy, her, Ranma, and everyone else in this town. But she couldn't sense where it was coming from or where the epicenter would be. All she could see was clouds in the future, like a tunnel of lightning and darkness. And the feeling of something else, something she had forgotten long since.

*What is that?* She probed the image silently, trying to discern if this was a premonition of the future that she could use to change that future. But it didn't give. Even when she attempted to think of ways to get young Wendy out from the town, it didn't change. The end would come regardless.

With a sigh she stopped the action, moving up to stand beside Wendy as one of the other girls held the door open for them. *I don't know what that is, but it's obviously best to stay here with Wendy and guard her, whatever it is.*

While Juvia had said she wanted to talk, the two of them were silent as they moved away from the others. This allowed Ranma to look at her for a time out of the corner of his eye. Juvia was a slender young woman around the same age as Erza with azure blue hair a slight shade lighter than Wendy’s, which matched her dark blue eyes above a small nose and a small, if somewhat inexpressive, mouth. She had snow-white skin and a somewhat busty figure shown off by a long blouse that left her shoulders half-bare and a long skirt down to below her knees made of white and blue, and she wore a blue-crystal cravat that showed the Fairy Tail mark. *Huh, I wonder where her actual guild mark is?*

Once they were they were well out of earshot, Juvia turned on Ranma, her face almost wrathful. “Juvia wonders just what Ranma is thinking!”

Ranma backed away at the sudden eruption of feminine fury as the girl began to growl at him, angrily advancing until they were practically chest-to-chest. “Juvia knows you are not a fool, but Juvia wonders if you allowed your male mind to be taken over by your hormones! It is the only explanation Juvia can think of for letting that demon girl live, and not only live but travel with you! Now, what is going on!?”

Ranma looked back at her and then smiled lopsidedly, setting aside the question of how she had spotted Seilah for now, at just how amusing this was. “You’ve kinda been holding that in for a while, haven't you?”

Backing away, Juvia threw out her arms and exhaled, actually smiling slightly. “Oh, you have no idea!” She then sighed and nearly collapsed, shaking her head a little before becoming serious once more. “But Juvia would still prefer to know, what was Ranma thinking?”

“Let's walk and talk,” Ranma said with a sigh, “I think I do owe you an explanation.”

“No shit,” Juvia barked back, then one hand rose to her mouth, covering it in surprise.

Ranma laughed quietly and then gestured for her to keep moving. “Come on. Her name, by the way is, Seilah, and she actually isn't all that bad once you get to know her, so long as you like reading and treat books with some modicum of respect.”

The deadpan look he got in return for this statement caused Ranma to laugh again, but he hurried on quickly. “Anyway, the fact of the matter is…

From there he began to explain how he and Seilah had first met months before the events in Seven, how the two of them had gotten along somewhat, and how the woman actually liked him and Wendy. “But she was under orders and couldn't get out of it. So there was no way she could simply, you know, not fight with her companions against you and the others.”

“And you simply allowed her to weasel out of the consequences of that attack?” Juvia growled, stared at Ranma angrily.

Ranma held up his hands. “I understand where you’re coming from, but Seilah’s already given me a lot of information about Tartarus, which I’ll start dropping off to the kings soon enough, and, after that, we should be able to hopefully deal with them much more easily than we would otherwise. And remember, both Wendy and I vouch for her.”

“Ranma’s vouching for her is questionable at best,” Juvia replied tartly. Then she mellowed a little, “Wendy’s willingness to speak up for her, though, which is something Juvia would normally put down to Wendy’s inherently gentle nature. However,” she went on, still glaring at Ranma and now poking him with a hard finger in the chest as they walked, “Juvia demands the right to actually talk to her. If she is not showing enough remorse for Juvia, then Juvia will tell people about her and will fight you to do it.”

The fight within the town against the demons had been easily the hardest, most closely fought battle that Juvia had ever been in against an opponent who manifestly had no compunction whatsoever about killing her. It had been terrifying to feel so overmatched, to know that she had only lived thanks to the fact that killing her would have taken just a little bit more time than the demons were willing to spare on it. She didn’t like that feeling; she didn’t like it at all. And the idea that Wendy and Carla had both agreed to let Seilah live after that galled Juvia*. Although, come to think of it, she really wasn’t the one that Juvia had the most trouble with. She never used her curse on Juvia, whereas that water using demon would’ve brutally killed Juvia if he had the chance, as he did Ichiya.*

Ranma caught her hand in his and squeezed gently, nodding his head and releasing her hand after a second before she could even start to blush at the contact. “Okay,” he said simply.

“Wh, that, that easily?!” Juvia asked, blinking in surprise.

“Yeah, it’s that easy,” Ranma replied. “I don’t know if you’ll get along—I ain’t promising that—but I think you’ll see that she does feel some genuine guilt for her part in that fight.”

Still somewhat bemused that Ranma was so willing to let her interview Seilah, Juvia followed behind him as he entered the market district. There she began to come back on-balance and started to help haggle with some of the merchants for the food he was buying. Immediately after that, they headed back to Ranma’s apartment.

There they found Seilah waiting for Ranma to return and, of course, reading a book. She looked up as Ranma entered, her eyes only widening slightly at the sight of Juvia behind him. Juvia glared at her and then spoke before Seilah or Ranma could. “Juvia has been told that you are repentant for your part in the attack on the town and that you wish to make amends. That you have no wish any longer to harm Juvia or any of the others that were there.”

“That is correct,” Seilah replied calmly. “And even when we attacked, it was nothing personal. I had no specific reason to be angry or hateful towards you. It was simply a job that I was ordered to do, one that I did not enjoy.”

“But is that only because of Wendy’s being there, or because you have what we humans would call a conscience and did not wish to harm any of us instead of just her?” Juvia asked tartly, while Ranma moved around her and entered small kitchen area, setting out the groceries that the two of them had bought.

Seilah watched his progress, almost ignoring Juvia for a second before shaking herself and looking back at the blue-haired girl. “I would say that I did have something of a conscience. I would further say that having such is not nearly as prevalent among humanity as you seem to be indicating. I will freely admit to being quite self-serving, but are not most humans? In their pursuit of gold, power, women, or men as dictated by their preference? Or even drink and drugs, although the interest in those is something I have never understood. Why would someone like to abuse their bodies and senses like that?”

“Don’t look at me,” Ranma said with a shrug from the kitchen area. “I never understood it either.”

Juvia growled, stalking forward and glaring at the other girl. “Juvia is still not hearing what she wants to hear!”

Seilah simply looked up at her calmly. “I am apologetic for my part in that battle. I had no wish or desire to kill anyone, though if you want honesty, at the time I would not have shed a tear for any of you if you had died other than young Wendy. I simply expended a little more effort to protect and hide all of you rather than her alone. Afterwards I was betrayed by my own people, my own lover, as you would put the term. That betrayal rocked my universe, shook my belief in the primacy of demon-kind over humanity, and made me question everything I had done up to that point, making me feel further guilt about my role in the battle at large. Since then I have kept an open mind about humans in general, my own kind, and our interactions, and have tried to, for want of a better term, become a better individual.”

Juvia scowled, crossing her arms and tapping the fingers of one hand on her other forearm and then shook her head. “Juvia does not agree with this. Juvia believes that you are a threat. However… However, Juvia is willing to be overruled on this manner. If Cana, Erza, Ranma, the drunkard, and Wendy are all willing to vouch for you, I will follow their recommendations for now.”

A bare month and a bit ago, Seilah would have replied with something rather scathing or simply not replied all. But since she had begun to spend more time around humans and, in particular, Ranma and Wendy, she had learned the fact that niceties actually mattered. So rather than snap back at Juvia, she simply nodded and said, “Thank you,” before turning her attention back to Ranma. “Are you going to teach me how to cook now?”

“I figure we can start simple,” Ranma said with a nod, gesturing her over. “Grilled chicken skewers and a side of salad.”

Juvia’s stomach rumbled, reminding her that she hadn’t eaten since that morning, and she held up a hand rather more meekly than she had been acting since entering the apartment as both Ranma and Seilah looked at her. “Juvia does not suppose that Juvia could join you for this?”

Ranma shrugged acceptance, while Seilah looked at her, her eyes narrowing slightly as she said nothing. For some reason she had been looking forward to being alone with Ranma even if they were only going to be practicing cooking. Actually, Seilah did know why she wanted to be alone with Ranma, though she was leery of putting it into words or acting on it. He was fascinating, powerful and handsome in his male form while being beautiful in his female form. Even if he was a human—although, as a Dragon Slayer, Seilah felt that that point was rather debatable—she knew she was attracted to Ranma. The weeks they had spent with Ranma basically stuck in his female body had exacerbated this issue, being the form she was most comfortable with being attracted to.

The two women found themselves glaring at one another, Juvia glaring back at Seilah in retaliation for Seilah’s glare at her while not knowing the cause of the sudden attitude change. But they broke off as Ranma began to set out the things that he would need to cook this meal, motioning Seilah over to join them. She sent a smirk Juvia’s way and moved over to join him in the kitchen, pressing against Ranma’s side.

Juvia’s eyes widened at this, and she rolled her eyes, now understanding why the other woman had been glaring at her and, oddly enough, feeling somewhat reassured. *If she can feel something so human as jealousy and attraction to a human to boot, then perhaps she really isn’t as purely evil as I feared.*

For his part Ranma blushed somewhat at the contact, beating down his more primal instincts at the feel of Seilah’s truly gigantic chest pressing into his side and arm. The demon woman’s overflowing mountains were truly attention grabbing. “Okay, first we’re going to start by teaching you how to cut things and how to peel things: what tools to use, how to hold the knife, and so forth. Then we’ll move on to the topic of pasta, which is an essential skill for any chef. After that, seasoning.”

As he continued, the two women simply listened as Ranma explained, with Seilah pulling away slightly, thinking that perhaps she should be taking notes on this. She watched Ranma’s hands as he chopped a few mushrooms, first slowly and then faster as he smiled up at her.

That smile caused Seilah to smile in turn, and she found herself rather enjoying it. She smiled and bit her lip as Ranma took her hand and showed her how to hold the knife and then how to hold and use the peeler, removing the skin from a pepper, or the Ishgarian equivalent, anyway. It looked kind of like a pepper, but the skin was more like that of a carrot, hence the peeler.

Seilah had no trouble at all with wielding a cutting knife, though she tended to put a little too much pressure into the knife, cutting into the wood underneath. That was simply a sign that she needed more training in how to control her own strength, which Ranma was well used to. It was, however, when they started to talk about the need to cook things where they started to run into problems.

When it came to actually boiling the tomatoes in order to peel them more easily for the sauce, she set the setting too high and then kept on checking it, even after Ranma warned her not to. That was kind of amusing to Ranma, but that paled in comparison to the problem of spices. “Are you certain that I need to only add a little bit of salt to the pasta before cooking it? That seems counterintuitive given the amount of water.”

“It might be counterintuitive, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t true,” Ranma said.

Seilah frowned but turned away, setting the salt down and picking up another tin of seasonings. “Pepper, then, and perhaps this for more taste. I rather liked it when I tried it earlier.”

“Now wait,” Ranma said, grabbing her hand instilling it. “You don’t add that spice to boiling the pasta. That is for fish. It won’t taste good with chicken ravioli anyway.”

“But they are both meat, are they not?” Seilah asked quizzically. “What is the difference?”

“Well, while they both are the central portion of a meal, they aren’t the exact same thing. The texture is different, the taste is very different, and how you season them, in many ways, is different too. You have to watch out for that kind of thing. Besides, the spice for this should be in the sauce, not the interior so much.”

Narrowing her eyes, Seilah began to get a little irritated the whole process when, whenever she reached for another spice to add to the chicken filling or the sauce, she was stopped. But Ranma’s calm instruction and the fact that he would take her hands to gently guide her away calmed her down tremendously.

Later on, when she started to roll out the pasta, Seilah went at it in the same aggressive manner that she had been using to cut the mushrooms and other things, slicing through bone and fat both. She didn’t seem to understand that she needed to watch what she was doing either, because she was constantly looking over at Ranma for instruction even as her hands moved. This was a little gratifying, he supposed, but not exactly conducive to actually performing the operation in question.

Still, Ranma felt they had actually performed pretty well, and between the two of them, they had created a decent enough meal. It wasn’t very good looking, and most of the ravioli Seilah had made opened in the water, but she had followed instructions relatively well as long as he was watching. He dreaded the idea of letting her try to cook on her own, though.

The three of them talked for several minutes, a back-and-forth discussion about types of food, mainly, that the three of them had seen or tasted. Ranma, of course, had seen more types of food than the other two, but Juvia described what sounded like one of the best hamburgers that Ranma had ever heard of, complete with near-sexual moaning that nearly unmanned him. She also described a kind of steak that he would liken to wagyu steak back in his old world. For her part, Seilah described places she had eaten, in particular food fairs that she and her former lover had gone to occasionally. She hadn't known the names of or how to cook any of the foodstuffs she had seen, of course, but that had in no way taken away from her enjoyment in eating them in the first place.

All in all it was a very pleasant meal, and Ranma enjoyed it just as much as he had enjoyed eating with Seilah and the others on the trail. Better, even, considering that the food was much better than he could've made out over an open fire. Eventually, though, it got too late, and Ranma turned to stare out into the sky, shaking his head. “It's near to midnight, I think,” he said, standing up. “Juvia, let me walk you home.”

Juvia smiled at that, actually curtsying as she stood up from the table. “Juvia thanks Ranma for the courtesy, but he does know that Juvia is a mage, does he not? Juvia is perfectly capable of walking herself home,” she teased.

“Ranma knows, but Ranma would feel more sanguine if Ranma did so, and, besides, this way Ranma can check on Wendy at her sleepover,” Ranma drawled.

At that Juvia pouted at him, pushing his shoulder with one hand. “Juvia would prefer Ranma not to make fun of her verbal tick. Juvia has attempted to train herself out of it many times over the years only to fail. It is not an affectation but a true speech impediment.”

“Sorry,” Ranma said sheepishly, looking away even as he moved to head to the door. “I didn't mean anything by it. Seilah, I'll be back in about forty-five minutes, then we’ll learn the down side of cooking: cleaning up afterwards.”

Seilah blinked, then looked down at the table and sighed, understanding his point. She also watched the two of them go, her eyes narrowed. *There is that jealousy emotion again.* With a sigh, Seilah set that to one side and moved back over to the sofa where she had left her book previously.

Outside, the snow had shifted, coming down harder yet in odd pattern, swirling more than actually settling, with high winds beginning to pick up, billowing here and there on their trip through the town. The two of them discovered that they were the only ones out and about, not seeing a single soul as they moved through the town towards the side where it abutted the small hill leading up to the Fairy Girls dormitory. About halfway there Ranma began to slow down, stopping his discussion with Juvia about different water techniques and, more importantly, how to use them both in close and long-range combat.

She noticed immediately and came to a halt beside him, looking at him quizzically while Ranma actually crouched down, his teeth suddenly bared as his hands formed into claws. “What is it?” she asked quickly. “You look as if you have seen a ghost.”

“Not so much a ghost as a feeling. The feeling of impending danger. When you’ve faced enough enemies, ambushes, and knock down drag out fights like I have, you develop a kind of seventh sense.”

“Seventh?” Juvia asked. “Surely Ranma means the ‘sixth?’”

“No, I started using my sixth sense when I was in middle school. The seventh sense is what tells you that the universe as a whole is about to screw you over. The sixth sense is more for physical dangers. They’re kind of related, admittedly, but not quite,” Ranma replied.

Juvia quirked an eyebrow and then moved around Ranma to put her back to him, staring around herself. He smiled at her willingness to trust his feeling, then, after a few moments, slowly un-crouched, muttering, “I don't know if it's a physical threat or something else, but my seventh sense is just screaming at me right now.“

About to make a comment, Juvia paused, staring down the road that she had been facing. “Who is that? Juvia thought the two of us were the only ones out here in this weather.”

Ranma quickly twisted around her and stared in the same direction. Moving slowly down the street, like someone carrying a great burden, or at least a great exhaustion, was a man wrapped from head to toe in a cloak, turban and long flowing scarves. They hid all of his appearance other than his eyes, which neither of them could make out at this distance. He was carrying a large staff of some kind, made from wood, Ranma could tell, as well as a bandanna covering his hair, the front of it visible on his forehead underneath the hood.

*Someone takes keeping his personality a secret seriously.* He looked over at Juvia speculatively even as his mind connected this guy with the stories that Queen Rose had sent her. “Does he look like a Fairy Tail member to you?”

She shook her head resolutely, her own sense of being disconcerted by the evening prickling. “Not one that Juvia has been introduced to. I think we should go say hi, don't you?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Ranma said with a nod.

Juvia strolled down the streets towards the man, who was looking around at the buildings as if he was searching for an address, while Ranma backed away, moving around a building, out of sight. Then he took to the rooftops, moving silently over the snow.

“Excuse Juvia,” she said politely as the man reached her. The street they were on was one of those canal streets, which fed into the nearby ocean, down to the cliff face. With a large house to one side, there were only two directions he could go. “But can you please tell Juvia what you are doing out so late?”

The man stopped a good distance away from her, raising his staff, and Juvia immediately became tense, but then Ranma was behind the man, a fist lashing out at him. Astonishingly, the man heard him and turned, but Ranma’s fist still smashed into the top of the staff, shattering it as he came down through the air, landing behind the man. The man leaped sideways to balance on the small guardrail protecting walkers from falling into the canal, and off his back he pulled another staff, much like Anna would have.

“You weren’t about to attack my friend there just now, were ya?” Ranma asked, smirking evilly, his other hand lashing out so quickly the man flinched, expecting the blow to land on his face, but instead Ranma tore away the scarf covering his lower face. “Now, let’s see what…” Ranma’s words stumbled to a halt, and he stared. He still couldn't see much of the man's face, but what he saw was enough. “**You**!”

The man tried to open his mouth to speak, only to break off as Ranma surged forward, a fist lashing out to shatter his second staff, followed by a kick so fast the man barely got his arms up in time. The blow hurled him up and across the canal onto the street on the other side, where he slammed into a snowdrift. Ranma leaped after him, growling angrily, landing in the drift of snow and reaching forward.

But the man had used another, short staff on the snow, and it exploded outward, trying to capture Ranma in turn. Even as Ranma used his magic to burst out of the snow, the cloaked man leaped up toward one of the nearby rooftops, using another staff to create a blast of wind that landed him neatly onto one of the roofs. He then ran off, whatever he had been intent on doing forgotten in his desire to get away from Ranma.

The Water Dragon Slayer, though, wasn’t going to let that stand, and he raced after him, leaping up onto the snow-covered rooftop in pursuit. The other man saw him coming and lashed out with several different staves, but Ranma dodged or ducked their attacks. The only one that caused him to even leap away was one, which created a sort of magical mine underneath Ranma, a runic array that nearly took him by surprise. But the man just wasn’t able to get away from the faster, stronger Ranma, and near the edge of the town Ranma finally caught up with him, taking the man off the rooftop from the side.

“Grah, you!” he shouted, grabbing and flipping the man several times to slam down into the snow with Ranma on top of him, grabbing at the back of his cloak and tearing it away. “You, what are you doing still alive!?”

The man, who turned his head to stare up with one eye at Ranma, was Jellal: same blue hair, same angular face, even the same eyes. The only difference, maybe, was the fact that his tattoo was on the wrong side of his face. Ranma wasn’t certain about that. And that face looked a little more worn and weary rather than megalomaniac.

“What are you doing still alive, Jellal? I thought Erza cut you in freaking half!?” Ranma growled again as Juvia joined them. Using her water powers to create her own version of the Boosted Step technique, she hopped directly over the canal water and up onto the bank.

The man's eyes flicked from Ranma to Juvia and then back again. “Whoever you might think I am, I am not that person,” he said. “I am not this Jellal. I, the name is Mystogan and I meant no harm.”

“Then why were you trying to cast a spell on Juvia?” Ranma asked, not letting up, instead reaching down and tearing the rest of the man’s backpack away and tossing it to one side. “I don't know where you come from, but where I come from that kind of thing is sort of frowned upon.”

“I,” the man stammered, “I am on a mission. I, it’s better if there aren’t too many witnesses to the…”

“Explain this mission of yours,” Ranma said, grabbing the man and lifting him out of the snow before slamming him back into a house’s wall so hard that the man groaned in pain.

“The, there’s going to be an anima here,” he said, his voice sounding more tired than pained or fearful. “And I'm too tired to stop it! It's too big, and I don’t have enough magical power to stop it!”

“What is an anima?” Ranma said just as, above them, the sky opened up.

It was almost as if they had been caught in a tornado that was made of cloud, silence, wind, and flashes of light, like lightning but not quite, more sudden striations of colored lights than electrical discharges. One moment everything was all right, then, the next, the storm descended, moving in from the exterior of the town. Ranma stopped and stared as the magical lights dotting the town's outskirts here and there went out, and his eyes widened.

He grabbed the man, tossing him over one shoulder as he looped his other arm around Juvia's waist, hefting her into the air and sprinting away from the incoming lights and fog. “Anima, you said! That’s the thing that's been going around stealing magic?”

“Yes,” the man said, gasping a little. Ranma had not been kind to the man during their brief running fight, and he was feeling it right now on top of his body's exhaustion. “Their speed, that is, the speed with which they are appearing has been picking up lately, as have their sizes. I haven't been able to do…”

“Whatever! I so don’t need the exposition right now. How do we fight them!?” Ranma interrupted, leaping from one rooftop to another. Behind them, the anima storm followed the fleeing trio as Ranma made his way across the snow-capped town.

In his arms, Juvia concentrated on not blushing too hard and not letting the rest of her body shut down in response to Ranma lifting her up like this. She twisted slightly in Ranma’s grip to look behind them at the encroaching wave of fog and light, watching as more and more of the magical crystal lights of the city were extinguished. “Whatever this anima is, what will it do if it catches mages?” she asked suddenly.

“It will take them with it. I don't know what happens on the other side, but everything magical is simply absorbed into the anima. I believe it forms some kind of crystal on the other side, like an artificial lacrima, but I don't know for certain,” the man said.

“How do you know anything about this thing, anyway?” Ranma said, leaping across the canal much like the one where the fight had taken place, dragging the man with him. The two of them landed easily on the other side, continuing on.

He was not, Juvia realized, heading towards the Guildhall or even his apartment. No, he was racing towards Fairy Hills. *Interesting to see his priorities, although I suppose I shouldn’t complain, considering he’s still carrying me,* she thought wryly.

“That would take too long to explain,” the man said. “But we can't fight this one; it's too huge!”

“How did you fight them before?” Ranma demanded, shaking the man before letting him go once more to run on his own.

“If you can catch the anima bubble in a null field like those Runic Knights use as it forms, you can shrink it, stop the absorption process until whoever is on the other side gives up. But at this stage, and an anima this size? It's too late. Everything magical within Magnolia is going to be absorbed. I’ve never seen an anima this large before!” the Jellal-lookalike said, sounding almost shocked. “I never even knew they could create ones this big.”

*Wendy, Carla, Erza, Bisca and the others!* Ranma thought, leaping from the last building of the town proper down onto the slope leading up to Fairy Hills. He raced forward only to stop and stare as, from that side of the town, another edge of the circle of fog and smoke that was the anima crashed over the building, racing towards them inexorably.

He turned back, his thoughts awhirl as he stared. Then he looked at Juvia and saw that she was panicking too. He looked over at the man angrily, his own panic rising. *If this thing was just a physical thing of fog, maybe a Hiryuu Shouten Ha could work to dissipate it, but not now!* “Is there any way to protect ourselves from it, any way to stop it absorbing us?”

The man frowned for a moment, thinking hard. “I don't know; I'm sorry. The only thing I can think of is perhaps magics that are not native to the other dimension might not be able to be absorbed. Like your Dragon Slayer magic, perhaps. Dragons never evolved in my home dimension.”

“Every word out of your mouth just makes me want to question you further,” Ranma growled angrily. Then, as he looked up, the sphere of light and fog was almost upon them, and he shook his head. *It’s crazy, but it might just work. No choice but to try it.* “Juvia, turn into water!”

“What? But surely in my water state I will be even more susceptible!” she shouted back, staring all around her in near-panic.

“Maybe, but in your water form we can also hide you.” Juvia looked at him wildly, and he shrugged wanly. “Well, you remember that joke you made about my eating you?”

Juvia blushed, but then Ranma leaned forward and grabbed her around the shoulders. “It's the only way.” *If we’re going to lose everyone else in this guild, I'm damn well going to save at least one person.*

At the look in Ranma's eyes Juvia calmed down and quickly transformed into her water body, then, feeling greatly daring, she leaned forward and kissed him on the lips. It wasn’t like being kissed in her physical body, of course. It felt more like letting a sip of water splash against his lips. But just as she did, Ranma opened his mouth to activate his Water Dragon Slayer magic.

He gasped, and in that instant he sucked Juvia’s entire body into his mouth and then held it there like holding a mouth full of water. For good measure he put both of his hands over his mouth as the fog of light and fog crashed over them.

One minute Ranma could see through the fog to the town all around them, the next everything was gone. Ranma could feel his body being pulled in several directions, almost, as well as being electrocuted and twisted. But when he fought against it, it was just like fighting against a heavy current: hard, but doable, made worse by the fact that he couldn’t use his hands. Despite that, eventually he burst out of the fog, only to find himself standing on what looked and felt like a massive cloud of some kind.

*What is this?* Ranma thought, staring all around him and then into the distance to where Fairy Hills should be. He looked to one side to see where the man had gone only to find him gone, absorbed or something else, Ranma wasn’t sure. *Dammit!* Despite that, Ranma closed his eyes, concentrating on his ki sense. When he couldn't feel anything trying to pull him or anything like that, he decided to chance letting Juvia out.

He opened his mouth and leaned over, letting the water form of Juvia dribble out from his mouth. Once the water was pooling on the cloud-like substance below them Juvia reformed, blushing hotly and staring up at him, shaking her head. “That was bizarre! Juvia has no wish to have that occur ever again!” *Although the feel of his tongue moving through Juvia was very… Gah, no, don’t think about it!*

“Sorry, but it was the best I could think of,” Ranma shrugged.

“Juvia understands and is grateful, if somewhat traumatized,” she said, staring around them. “Where are we?”

Ranma stared around too. First, it seemed as if they were in a large tunnel of cloud with no sky above them, but there was sky to either side in the distance. One direction showed a clear blue sky, no sign of storm or snow. The other direction showed a nighttime sky of Magnolia, minus the lights and the town, of course.

“If I had to guess,” Ranma said slowly, “I think we’re somewhere between the dimensions. That guy was right, at least. Whatever device or spell an anima is, it wasn't able to do much to my Dragon Slayer power. Which means…” He turned, orienting himself in the direction where the Fairy Hills had been from their present location and racing in that direction. Blinking in surprise at his sudden shift, Juvia stayed put for a second before realizing what Ranma was doing and racing after him. “Wendy!” Ranma shouted. “Wendy! Where are you?”

As he came close, he saw Wendy thrusting herself out of the white, staring around in shock and horror. She looked up as she heard her name called and gasped in relief as she saw her big brother, pushing herself further out of the whiteness of the cloud and racing towards them, slamming into his chest with a cry of, “Ranma-nii! They all, they all disappeared! Mira, Erza, Levy… They all were, were sucked into this thing right along with me, and now they are gone! There were these lights, and then fog inside the building, and…”

“I know,” Ranma said, shaking his head and hugging her tightly. “We ran into the same thing. The entire town was caught up in this anima. We found someone who called it that, but we don’t know what created it or why.”

“That name,” said a voice, and Ranma looked behind Wendy to see, to his surprise, that Carla had also not been absorbed and now was pushing out of the cloud too. “That name is familiar. Something about it…”

Ranma looked around, frowning as he tried to orient himself. “Anyone know where Natsu and Gajeel live?”

It turned out no one knew where Gajeel lived, but both Juvia and Carla knew where Natsu stayed when he was in town: a small shack on the outskirts skirts of town, the description of which matched the one Erza had given him of the other Dragon Slayer’s accommodations once, though Erza had never given him any directions. “He must’ve been one of the first ones caught up in this, then,” Ranma mused.

As he finished speaking there was a loud dull ‘crump’ sort of sound to one side of where Wendy and Carla had pushed themselves out of the cloud. They all turned in the direction of the sound, and a large tower clock burst out from the cloud cover. It had arms, short stubby legs, and an elderly-looking, mustachioed face.

Lucy was inside the glass face of the clock along with three other people, all squished together so much that none of those staring at them could actually tell where one body ended and the other began, save for their heads. “That looks **really** uncomfortable,” Ranma remarked, reaching forward and unlatching the lock, allowing all four of the girls inside to tumble out.

“It was,” Cana groaned, even though she was blushing hotly. *Being that close to my girlfriend: yes, please. Being that close to my girlfriend and two other girls in an enclosed space where none of us can barely breathe? No thank you.*

“What happened?” Ranma asked.

“The four of us were in the first floor’s kitchen, cleaning up after the dinner and snacks. None of us had taken part in actually making the meal, so we had to clean,” Lisanna said, gently pushing her sibling off of her and then standing up and pulling Anna to her feet before moving over to stand beside Wendy as she continued to speak. “Then this clock guy appears next to Lucy shouting about some kind of other-dimensional attack. None of us believed it, but then we see this fog outside the window, and Cana turns, leaps over the countertop and tackles all three of us into the clock. I honestly never thought we’d all fit. It’s a little bigger inside there than it looks.”

Anna nodded while Ranma scratched at his ponytail, staring from Lucy to the celestial spirit clock and then out all around them. “I suppose it would take one kind of dimensional magic to fight another.”

“That’s what I think too,” Lucy said, hugging Cana to herself as they stared around. “What, what happened? Where is everyone?”

Ranma explained what he knew even as he turned away, looking towards Carla and Juvia to lead them to Natsu's house. The two of them took the cue, though Anna and Lisanna quickly understood where they were going and raced ahead of them.

“And this guy just disappeared during the actual attack? And we have no idea if he was caught up in it or just escaped somehow?” Cana said, walking beside Ranma through the cloud and trying to put to one side what she was actually seeing all around her even as she scowled irritably. All four of the girls were sore and in pain from their time inside the clock, however brief it might have been, and Cana knew that she was going to have a bruise on her left side from someone's elbow for a while.

“Yeah,” Ranma said, nodding his head. “If not for the fact that he told me that this thing might not be able to handle my Dragon Slayer powers, I would be thinking that he was the one behind all this, or at least formally allied with whoever is, to say nothing of his face.”

“His face?” Carla asked, looking up at him quizzically.

“He looked like Jellal,” Ranma said bluntly.

Something about that caused Carla to pause, racking her brain for something. “Did he say he came from this other dimension?”

“That's what I assumed, reading between the lines.”

Carla frowned. There was something there, something just on the edge of her memory, but she couldn't quite grasp it. For whatever reason, her visions were just not working so well, and her memories of what she might have heard while still in the egg were gone. They had stopped working very well the instant that she had met up with Ranma and Wendy. Indeed, the one she had had earlier that day had been the first one she had had in years.  *Darn it, this whole event is bothering me for some reason, but I can’t put my finger on it.*

Walking beside the cat-girl, Cana looked over at her and then over at Ranma, jerking her head back to the cat-girl, then pointing first at Ranma and then around them. Ranma frowned, but after a moment understood what she was saying and shrugged in response. If there was a reason Carla hadn’t been absorbed, he didn’t know it.

Soon enough they found Natsu, whereupon he was basically bowled over by the two siblings, who hugged him and Happy to them excitedly. Filling in the other Dragon Slayer on what they knew took but a moment, but in that moment the atmosphere around them began to change. The cloud that they were standing on looked to be dissipating, two swirls of air appearing in either direction and pulling it apart.

“It looks as if this anima thing is going to close soon. We’ll have to move quick,” Ranma said, kneeling down in front of Juvia and Cana, “come on, let’s get going!”

“Why are you letting us do this again?” Juvia asked quizzically even as she moved to get on his back, holding onto his outstretched arm while Lucy took his other side.

Ranma shrugged. “I'm figuring we have a seventy-five percent chance of arriving wherever we’re going in midair,” he said dryly.

“Wherever we’re going?” Cana asked, cocking a wary eyebrow.

Ranma pointed ahead of them to the sky that didn't look like the one they'd left, smirking at them all. “Well, we are going to get our friends back, aren’t we?”

The Fairy Tail mages all around them answered with a roar, and they raced forward with Ranma in the lead with the two girls on his back, racing into the unknown.

**End Chapter**