I can’t draw so the originals ain’t mine.

Warning: This is a bit of a segue chapter. That doesn’t mean it isn’t important, since it is a segue chapter to the next two chapters and the issues therein, but don’t expect major developments or huge fights in this.

Thanks go to *justlovereadin*’ for his work as FT expert and small mistake guy and to Hiryo for looking at this for me. This month I wanted *Michael* to concentrate on FILFy, given how many mistakes there were in the last chapter, and given that he wouldn’t have had enough time to do both.

**Chapter 12: Rivals and Trolling**

Ranma and Mirajane carried the two comatose forms as they moved through the woods back to the guild, leaving behind the decimated, blasted land of the fight against Halphas. Ranma had to stop occasionally as her stomach rumbled at her, and she swayed, almost visibly weakened, though not so much physically as mentally and magically. Something in the pool she’d drained was both feeding her Devil Slayer magic, and fighting her ki and Dragon Slayer magic. It was losing thankfully, but it was giving Ranma ‘her’ first actual stomachache since arriving in this world.

Man! This is as bad as some of the food Akane forced me to eat! Freaking crazy blue-haired enemy of all that is good and tasty,” Ranma groused. “Damn it, this is so not an experience I wanted to feel again.”

“Hah, that Akane must’ve been some kind of cook,” Mira said with a laugh. “I've seen Natsu eat practically anything you could set on fire, and he’s never had a reaction like this.”

“Well, one time she tried to make curry with chicken. Instead of adding salt, she added sugar. The rice looked black. The chicken looked as if it came pre-chewed. The dressing itself was practically alive, literally moving away from the spoon as you tried to eat it. The first time she tried to make cookies, not only where they shaped oddly, but one of them was bad enough to knock me on my ass,” Ranma reminisced.

Mira rolled her eye. “You're pulling my leg. No one who’s ever cooked could ever mistake sugar for salt, you’d know the instant you tried it yourself.”

“She never taste-tested her own food.” At Mira’s still skeptical look, Ranma went on, his eyes locked in a thousand-yard stare. “At one point, she tried to experiment. She put peanut butter on salmon and then thought that adding fresh cut diced okra to rice plus Tabasco powder would make it taste good. Her cooking was a lethal weapon. I still sometimes have nightmares about it.”

“That's freaking disgusting. I still don’t know if I believe you but just, stop talking.” Mirajane said, shuddering and moving away.

They soon came within sight of the tree-boat that was the guildhall of the all girl's guild, Mermaid Heel. As they did, cheers broke out, shouts and exclamations nearly waking up Wendy from her sleep. Ranma shushed her, watching as Carla climbed off Mary's back, and shifted back into her human form.

She thoughtfully stood there, pushing some hair out of her face, as she looked at the women swarming out of the large treehouse towards them. “Was our fight with that demon so visible?”

“It was,” said Orca, holding the door to the guild open. “Hey you lot, stop crowding them and let’s get them inside.” Her guildswomen obeyed, though a few were still shouting questions or congratulations towards them.

As the trio entered with Ranma still carrying Wendy, Orca explained. “We saw a lot of flashes, and even heard some of the sonic booms that you were all letting out, a few tongues of flame, and huge hands of water.” She shook her head. “Truly, you Fairy Tail mages are a step above. I would never have thought that demon could be beaten by anyone not a Wizard Saint.”

Ranma was too tired, and too busy dealing with his stomach issues to bother correcting the woman on the whole Fairy Tail mage thing. “Let me put this one up somewhere, we need to talk to you about the aftermath of that fight anyway.”

“We have a dorm hall in the basement if you want to use it,” Orca replied, gesturing to a doorway Ranma thought looked like something a Hobbit would love. “The rooms down there are actually quite nice.”

“Hey wait!” said another woman. This one was dressed with a spider theme, had green hair done in drill shapes, and was quite tall. She was standing next to a short almost rotund woman, who was grinning wildly at them. “You have to tell us that about that fight! It really did look like something out of a Wizard Saint fight!”

Ranma and Mirajane shrugged at that, but Ranma shook her head at Orca’s question. “No, I'll put her up on the balcony for now. And as for the fight, Mira can fill you in if she wants.”

Soon enough Wendy was situated on the balcony allowing her a very nice view of the surrounding forest. Pulling out a sleeping bag, Ranma gently lifted Wendy into it, closing the zipper. Carla skipped past him exchanging a tired nod as she too got into the same sleeping bag with Wendy.

Down below, Mirajane was already describing what they had found out about the demon Halphas, to which Orca listened intently, nodding as she heard about the strange sacrificial pool. “I'll send out a dozen mages to destroy that pool this very day!”

“Destroying it might not be enough,” Ranma said with a shake of her head, sitting across from Mira and slumping down to rest her head on the table tiredly. “I have no idea how long it took for the magic to feed into the water, and considering that it was in a river, we can't ignore the idea that it might be a very fast process. I'll go and divert the water somehow elsewhere up above the waterfall. Destroying that pool is only the start.”

“We have other mages that can do that,” Orca assured the redhead. “Don't worry, by the time we’re done we’ll have erased that place and whatever it was used for from existence.”

Ranma nodded leaning back and rubbing her stomach for a moment, her hand moving up to knead at her eyes. “Okay,” she muttered to herself. “That demon was different from any of the others I’ve fought. It was smarter than most, had a healing factor and was also human-sized. It was almost like a mix of the other three forms, but I think it's a type three.”

“What is a type three, and I find it very disturbing that you’ve run into enough devils to want to categorize them,” Mirajane with a mock sympathetic shake of her head, the glint in her eyes giving it away.

“How did you get your first devil’s soul?” Ranma asked instead of answering.

Mirajane winced but answered readily enough, if in a very broad manner. “A demon attacked our town, and I was able to somehow defeat it. With that, my magic activated, and I took over its soul.” This was a very limited summary of an event that left her ostracized and forced her and her siblings to leave town as the peasants thought she had been cursed, but she didn’t feel like going into all that right now.

“And it didn't have a name, it wasn’t a giant?” Ranma asked.

“It had a name, Satan! It called itself All the world’s Evil,” Mirajane said with a growl. “It even spoke occasionally, taunting me and shouting about how I’d be a most flavorful morsel.”

“That was definitely a type three too,” Ranma murmured to herself, then shook her head. “All right, and your other one, the one with fire powers? Also, what do you get when you Take-over their soul?”

“Sitri? She was some kind of volcano demon who worshiped by locals in a she will smite us if we don't believe in her kind of way. A young boy in the town was able to get out a message to the Magic Council about it, when his sister was going to be sacrificed to the demon. I beat her down and took her soul,” Mira said, grinning. “From the three I've taken I've only gotten their powers and a certain amount of magical energy added to my core. Nothing from their personality carries over if that's what you're worried about. Well, except that I am a bit more prone to violence whatever the soul I’m using.” Mira chuckled then became serious. ‘Now freaking answer my questions!”

Ranma nodded slowly. “Okay, here's what I think. There are three types of devils in the world, devils, demons whatever you want to call them. Maybe we should use one term for one type, and the other for the other two? Whatever.” Ranma shook her head concentrating once more. “A type three is a sentient…” she paused thinking “maybe a concept? Call them are sentient concepts, centers of religion in some fashion involving blood sacrifice, or just simple faith. Some of them can be sentient like Halphas, some of them can be more bestial like the Beast or this giant shark thing I ran into in Caelum.”

Smirking Ranma cracked her knuckles. “Thing was used to being the baddest bastard in the water. Boy, was it surprised.” Shaking her head Ranma went on. “But whatever their intellect is like, there's no doubt that these ‘devils’ are created, almost, from the humans who worshiped their images or whatever.”

“That makes sense,” Orca said, having made no move to leave as the two of them talked. “There are Gods out there after all, so stands to reason that there'd be devils created in the same fashion.”

Ranma blinked. “What? There are actually gods out there? Geeze, that sounds weird just saying it.”

Orca shrugged her shoulders. “There are weirder things out there, trust me,” she said dryly. “There's even a magical branch lost magic obviously based on there being gods around, God Slayer magic, a Lost Magic like your Dragon Slayer magic is supposed to be.”

“I'll believe it when I see it,” Ranma said and then she sighed. “And if I do, it'll be just my luck have to fight one of them.”

Elsewhere the member of Grimoire Heart named Zancrow, sneezed loudly, feeling as his head had just been blown off. “Damn, ‘scuzeee…” he trailed off as he looked up, noting that he’d sneezed on Master Hades, whose one visible eye was twitching as he slowly stood up from the table they had all been eating at. “Oh fuck me...”

“Then there are the intelligent human sized demons, who seem to have some connection to Zeref, if only through the second type.” Ranma went on.

Elsewhere, it was Seilah’s turn to sneeze. Then she blinked, crossing her eyes in order to attempt to look down at her own nose even as she flew on. “What was that?”

“What do you mean by that?” Mira asked intently.

“Seilah was here to talk to Halphas, and she was there to observe Lullaby. That means whoever she is with, they've got some interest in other demons, and as for the Zeref connection, I've crushed more than my fair share of devil worshiping cults, who had their own little totems that could've created devils. Those items were all created by Zeref, so maybe intelligent devils like Seilah were created by him too?”

At that point everyone in Tartaros sneezed, then stared around them in shock, wondering whatever the heck that had been about.

“So why would they bother with that though? Numbers maybe? Or something else?” Ranma said to herself, again kneading her eyes with her knuckles, thankful that her stomach’s pain had finally started to subside.

“And how strong is Seilah?” Mirajane asked, trying to look as if the answer didn't matter to her at all and failing utterly. For some reason the giant breasted and gorgeous demon girl had gotten under her skin.

“That's a tough question, considering my Devils Slaying magic means I’m immune to her main power. She can do this thing where she can order items, plants and maybe people to move to her will. I felt it try to latch onto me it occasionally when we fought, but it didn't work. I think you could probably beat her one on one, but if you tried to fight here with a team, she’d turn them against you and it would make it much more difficult.” Ranma replied. “Mainly though she seems more of a support character than anything else.”

“And she didn't say anything? Didn't give a hint as to what their purpose was?” Mirajane asked going back to the original topic somewhat.

“No, she just said she was observing, and then she wanted to test me, but I’d bet she made that part up on the fly once I found her. Hell, I only got her name because I taunted it out of her.” the redhead laughed. “I think she didn't like to be called horny girl.”

“And why did you call her that?” Mirajane asked, glaring at Ranma as if the shorter girl had offended her somehow.

“Because she's got horns?” Ranma said with her head cocked to one side. “Why else would I’ve called her that?”

Mirajane sighed, and smacked her face with her hand. “Of course. I was just asking for that one.”

Ranma nodded, then suddenly hot water was spilled over her from behind as a voice shouted out “Oh-my-gosh I'm sorry! I wasn’t looking where I was… what the heck!?”

Ranma growled, wiping at his face and staring around only then realizing that everyone around them, all the guild members who had been looking at the two women, had just seen his change. And judging by the faces some of them had begun to make, this wasn’t going to end well. *Oh crap!*

“A man!” Yelled one girl. ‘He must’ve snuck in here under some kind of illusion! “

“Pervert!” Shouted more than one guildswoman, as the female mages around him started to launch spells. “Get him!”

Ranma rolled to the side and hurled pillows from the chair he’d been sitting on, knocking two girls flying. Then he rolled again, coming up and lashing out with a quick and light kick to a woman standing there, sending her staggering back into three of her fellows. Before they could write themselves, or the others correct their aim, Ranma had ducked out of the hall.

Outside Wendy had woken up from the commotion and now was looking over the side of the top of the balcony giggling and laughing as the ladies of Mermaid Heel boiled out of their guild and started to attack Ranma in earnest.

“Wendy, give me a hand here! They’ve all gone crazy!” Ranma yelled up at her.

“Okay,” Wendy replied, then slowly began to clap, while Carla tried her best to look disapproving of both Wendy’s response and what was going on below. In Ranma’s estimation, she failed miserably.

“Oh you're going to get it later,” Ranma growled smacking aside one of the women watching them fly towards where Mirajane and the others were standing around the entrance. He followed this quickly by using a punch from the suddenly shrunk and much more fit looking girl who’d been talking to the spider-themed woman and was then in the air, lashing out as lightly as possible all around him.

Mirajane had followed the rest of the ladies out and was talking to several of them, wiping away a fake tear even as her eyes glinted devilishly. “It was so horrible! He forced me to keep his secret, and every night he transformed back when we were in the tent and… and…”

“How dare you do something like that to Mirajane!” roared more than one voice, having easily filled in the blanks there just as Mira had intended. Suddenly the fight went from a farce to an actual fight, with many of the ladies showing no compunction to avoid aiming below the belt or at Ranma’s face.

Ranma of course had heard Mirajane pouring fuel on the fire, and growled angrily, pushing aside his desire not to actually injure any of these women to punch one straight back at the instigator. “That's it! If you want a flight you'll get one you silver-haired bitch!”

“Bring it on a red,” Mirajane roared back, transforming into her Satan Soul and knocking the unfortunate and impromptu missile to the side, ignoring her squawk of outrage and pain. “I’ve wanted to smash your face in for a while anyway!”

**OOOOOOO**

Elsewhere Seilah met with her fellow demons in their Guildhall of Tartaros. This was a massive floating square currently high above the mountains of Joya, higher and deeper into the crags and mountains than any human would ever venture. The square in turn was completely covered with forests and other environments, along with the large, very crude looking temple-like structure that was the sea of Mard Geer, head of the Demons of the Books of Zeref.

The longhaired, somewhat affable-seeming guild master lounged on his throne, his eyes pinning Kyoka where she stood. “So, the Iced Shell **did** damage and weaken the demons within that is good to know. And I thought the gray skinned totem demons I created by studying the originals had some promise too, their element resistance is quite high. “And yet you say this Laxus individual was able to get through it with his lightning?”

“Yes master,” Kyoka said with a nod. “I watched the entire fight, and I believe that neither the blonde lightning user nor the Scarlet woman was fighting to their fullest against Deliora and your…creations.”

Seilah blinked at that, hiding a small smile. Boring as they were, she had read thousands of human books. She knew the meaning of the term Scarlet Woman, and wondered if this red-haired woman had somehow irritated her sexual partner, or if she had made the joke without knowing. *Either would be most amusing.*

“And you Seilah, you ran into this Ranger that has interfered in our plans before?” Mard asked, bringing Seilah’s attention back to him. “The one that nearly killed Deliora years ago?”

“I did, Master Hades.” Seilah responded with a slight bow of her head. “However, the demon Halphas was there, and had already responded to the Rangers presence. If I had stayed, it would have become a three-way fight between the Ranger and his party on the one hand, myself on another and the demon a third. It could well have killed me if I stayed.”

Mard simply nodded, while the others looked on uncaring. Not even her lover Kyoka showed any kind of emotional response to that statement, not that Seilah had thought they would. Such things were for humans after all. Instead, she simply went on. “Afterwards, I believe that the Ranger probably won. However, there is a deeper issue here.”

“Indeed,” Mard intoned thoughtfully. “How did they discover Halphas’s existence so quickly? Further, news of what was occurring on Galuna Island should not have gotten out to anyone not since that experiment began. I thought our servants within the Council’s organization had deleted all information about the demons like Halphas, and kept any request for aid from the island form their ears as well.”

“I have thought of this, on my way back master, and I think I know what occurred. We are, after all, not the only spoons stirring this soup.” All of her fellow’s twitched at that. No demon had the ability to cook, and many of them had become to both envy humans and resent them for that simple ability.

“Further, the Ranger’s words pointed in the direction of an agent of one of our fellow Alliance members: he said that there had been a traitor on the Council itself, who had an interest in demons. And the activity on Galuna Island was a joint project after all.” For some reason, Seilah had to stop herself from referring to the Ranger as just Ranma. But that would have been far too friendly an address given the fact they were bound to become true enemies at some point. And when that thought occurred to her it too made her feel… oddly sad.

Mard leaned back thinking. “That little toy of Brain’s,” he said with a nod. “This does sound like his entire operation was, what is the term, rolled up? And by the last report I saw, the black haired wench was still in place, so that rules out Hades. Yes, that makes sense.”

“Could it have been deliberate then?” Said a fourth demon speaking up for the first time. He had the look of a lizard-man crossed with a shark almost, but with dark purple scales and a horn rising from his head, with another horn, seemingly made of metal, jutting from his chin. For all his bestial appearance however, his words and manner were calm, almost dignified. “Could they be trying to make certain we don't become too strong?”

“Quite possibly Torafuzar,” the master replied agreeably. “In which case, have our tools be on the lookout to help point the filthy human mages in the way of the other filthy human mages we’ve been forced to ally. If they kill each other, then we will profit.”

Abruptly the master twitched, his eyes boring into Seilah as he asked, “this Ranma fellow, how dangerous is he?”

“So dangerous you should send some of us to kill him right now,” Seilah said, fighting back a small flush at the memory of the kiss they'd shared a few weeks ago. The memory of that and his touch on her horns made her analysis oddly hard to give voice to, but she did so anyway.

“Truly? Even if doing so would force us into the open when we are not ready for it?” the master asked sardonically. Yet his look made it clear he was expecting an answer.

“That I cannot answer. The Ranger dealt with me with kid gloves when he found me when I was observing Lullaby.” That wasn't something she liked to admit, after all she was a powerful devil, but Ranma, **the human**, she forced herself to change that thought, had astonished her with his speed and adaptability. “And,” she said aloud, “his unique Devil Slayer magic made him utterly immune to my curse as well as giving him the ability to somehow predict my attacks. Whether the first ability would carry over to any of your curses I cannot say, but the possibility is warrant enough for concern.”

There were mutters at that, that idea being one that only Mard Geer had heard of before. “He is fast, quick to adapt, has a very interesting bag of tricks given his Devil Slayer and Dragon Slayer magics, and is simply very, very dangerous.” Seilah finished.

Master Gear nodded thoughtfully at that, then looked at a map of Ishgar on a nearby wall. “With our agents scattered throughout Fiore’s Magic Council’s organization, we can direct their attention where we want it to go, and further, we know what Brain’s goal is, foolish as it is. Kyoka, I want you to make your way to where this Nirvana structure is being stored. Wait and watch, and if the opportunity arises, take it.”

“To do what master?” Kyoka asked, wanting it spelled out, an eager, almost ecstatic smile on her face.

“To kill this Ranger fellow and any other mage you can on either side of course,” Mard Geer said simply. “I will send two others with you I think, just to make certain. Seilah of course, and one other. I will have to think about that assignment in the next few days. For now, get messages to our agents, I will want them able to follow up on anything that could possibly be used to turn the Magic Council’s attention away from our own activities.”

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma and Mirajane found themselves on the trail once more that evening, having been kicked out of Mermaid Heel after the fight, despite Ranma's attempts to explain his curse to the gathered ladies of the guild. Mirajane's laughing in the background proved to everyone that at least her portion of what had been going on had been meant as a joke, and seeing that the curse was real rather than a mere illusion had set many of the girls back on their heels.

Yet between the two of them they had basically put half of the Guild into traction, only stopping their own fight when Orca shouted at them to do so at the top of her lungs with Wendy’s help. After which she kicked them out of the Guild.

On his back, Wendy was once more asleep her head pillowed in his hair. “I just hope she doesn't start mouthing at it again. Dragon Slayers going through teething issues is not fun,” Ranma said, hopping up into a tree branch to stare ahead, not even noticing Wendy’s weight, something that still took Mira by surprise occasionally.

“It looks like Orca was right, I can see the path winding around two hills out there, then towards what look like train tracks where we can probably hitch a ride. There were no train stations anywhere nearby, but getting onto a train without one of those was relatively easy for any mage worth his salt, In Ranma’s opinion. Or at least it should be Ranma thought, hopping back down looking to where Carla stood beside Mirajane. “I think we should rest on one of those hills, and catch the train in the morning. That way I can at least have some light to run beside it with, while you two and sleeping beauty can board the train.”

“Sounds like a plan Mira replied, though she looked as if she really wasn't paying attention, not even commenting on Ranma’s idea about running beside the train like she would have.

“What's wrong?” Ranma asked, leaping back down to the path and moving on at his normal ground-devouring rate.

Mirajane kept up with some difficulty, shifting into her Satan's soul and flying beside him for a few wing beats before she replied. “Orca offered to organize a transfer for me from Fairy Tail to Mermaid Heel and have me be her successor, the next guild master. Have to admit, I never thought of that in the future for me, but the idea would have a certain appeal”

“Bossing people around, deciding who can go on what adventure, and not going on one yourself?” Ranma asked, his nose wrinkling.

“Making certain that everyone in the Guild is trained, making certain they don't bite off more than they can chew, going on missions when I can which I do already and more importantly yes having that authority!” Mirajane said loftily. “Is that so wrong?”

“Not wrong, just not something I'd have fun with. And I don't see you leaving Fairy Tail anytime soon anyway.” Ranma replied.

“You have me there, on top of leaving my family behind,” she admitted. “Still, 15, 20 years down the line? When Lisanna and Anna have kids and Elfman’s found an actual, real-life girlfriend and spends time with her rather than staring at his own biceps? Maybe I’d prefer to move on rather than be the spinster aunt.”

In all honesty, Mira had brought the subject up to see what Ranma thought about the idea of thinking that far in the future, and she was sadly not disappointed. Ranma understood **responsibility**, but he would never aspire to have **authority**. The ranger emblem got around that issue, allowing him to take control, or simply move through whatever blocks there would have been a no for a normal person looking into the same issues, without actually giving him authority over other people.

As if conjured by her thoughts on that topic, Ranma's brooch began to quiver and shake, then glow indicating an incoming call. Ranma paused, pulling it off and setting it down on the ground, waving Mirajane back out of the pickup range. “King Toma, I’m here.”

An instant later, the image of King Toma Fiore appeared in the air above the brooch. Nodding at the Ranger be began to speak. “Ranma, I understand that you and Councilwoman Ultear were going to look into some missions that Jellal put into the system? Did you find anything more about his long-term plans? And what other underworld contacts he might've had?”

“Has Ultear checked in yet since our meeting in Akane Resort?” Ranma asked. “And did you understand everything I told you about the battle in the tower? I really don't want to go over all the old information.”

“She hasn’t checked in yet, but she recently sent a message to the council that my agents overheard telling she was back ashore at least, and had run into someone named Zalty who she thinks might be part of the Oración Siete for some reason. After that, contacted the Magic Council to demand more information…again. Given how they tried to withhold information from me one would think that they forget they work for me, not the other way around,” Toma said tartly. “They eventually told me about your suppositions and concerns about the missions you were investigating. Imagine my horror when I learned that both of them had to deal with demon sightings! The fact you are alive at all pleases me no end, but what did you find!?”

Ranma nodded and filled them in on his portion, after which he asked, “Did Ultear say anything yet about this Zalty guy you mentioned? That could be a better angle than me trying to pick up the trail from that giant snake. Further that won't lead me to any further underworld contacts, if I can do it at all it'll lead me directly to wherever Cobra and Midnight have holed up, maybe not even the rest of their guild.”

“If Jellal was actually serving their aims both in the Council and with that, that accursed tower,” Toma said, grimacing visibly in the image at the thought of what had been going on inside the tower of Heaven before going on, his voice resolute. “Then they have already declared themselves an enemy of my kingdom. But that is for later. I want you to come to Crocus, I want to speak to you in person.”

Ranma's eyes narrowed. “I don't want any medals or anything, that's not what this is about right?”

“No it's not. I just want to speak to you in person, get your personal impression of Ultear’s idea about Zalty while you share your views on your mission against this Halphas creature, as well as what you think personally were Jellal's goals, and how you would rate the Oración Siete in term of a threat to Fiore and Ishgar as a whole. If you could be here by sometime tomorrow that would be ideal.”

“I suppose I could do that, but you know that part of how Rangers work is anonymity right? I won't just walk up to your front gate or anything like that.” Ranma warned. “If you’ve got any excitable guards, I’d warn ‘em to expect someone trying to sneak past. Some kind of security review or something maybe?”

Nearby Carla slapped a hand over her face, having assumed her human guise, which she much preferred to her normal body. When Mira looked at her, Carla gestured her to lean down, which let the very short blonde cat-girl whisper in her ear. “Ranma led Wendy and I to sneak into the king of Bosco’s palace when the man insulted Ranma during a report after a meeting there a few years ago. It wound up with four of his guards tied up like targets and the king needing a doctor for a burst blood vessel.”

While Mira fought back snickers, Toma has already replied to Ranma’s statement with a chuckle. “You're not the first Ranger I've dealt with, I trust you'll find your own way in. In fact, I insist on it, it would be an interesting test of my guard’s abilities.”

“They're not going to like that, your majesty, but consider it done,” Ranma said with a grin.

Toma rolled his eyes, but cut the connection without further discussion.

“So are going to Crocus instead of Magnolia then?”

“I think so,” Ranma replied ruefully. “And here I figured just calling in a report would have been enough. But I'm afraid that means we probably shouldn't wait for a daytime train. At least going by the map, Crocus is at least twice as far from here as Magnolia is.”

“If going by train I suppose,” Mira replied with a shrug. “Let's go.”

The two of them raced through the forest for the rest of the evening, reaching the train tracks at around one, the train tracks laid out ruler straight across the land here, torn out of the forest. Once more consulting the map they turned roughly southwest, racing along the tracks until they came to a fork where the tracks they were following joined further tracks heading in different directions. The map came out once more, and by the time a train came by at around two in the morning they were ready, hopping with ease out of the dark before entering quickly. Ranma bought their tickets, and they all bedded down for the night on the train.

By midmorning, the train was pulling into the Crocus’s train station, and Ranma found himself being shaken out of a mediation period by Wendy. “We’re here Onii-chan,” she said, and Ranma stood up, ruffling her hair while looking at her suspiciously, as he put his pipe away once more. “You're looking a little too chipper for having been stuck on a train Wendy-chan, even with the Dragon Seed. Did you use Troia on yourself and not on me?”

Wendy looked a little shifty, and Ranma noogied her head gently, before gesturing her off the train after the rest of the passengers. “That'll teach you to be so selfish.” Beyond that though, he was more than willing to let the little girl use that spell on herself whenever she felt the need. Traveling on mechanical devices was much worse for Wendy, and Ranma in his female form, then it was for Ranma in his male form.

Crocus, was large, larger than Magnolia by at least twice again its size. Its buildings were equally larger, but everything they saw had an almost festive air to it, with every other house at the very least having flowerbeds here or there some dotting the roofs or even covering them entirely. Flowers were literally everywhere and here and there in the distance you could her strains of music over the normal hustle and bustle of a city. It was a beautiful place Ranma reflected, if a little ostentatious for him. Carla and Wendy on the other hand immediately decided they liked what they were seeing and they went around arm in arm to look at the flowers, the stalls, and into the stores as they went.

“Can we go exploring?” Wendy asked, looking back at Ranma from where she had just been given a pink flower for her hair by a kind old lady running a stall.

“What’s the matter imouto? You don’t want to make the acquaintance of another prince maybe? Afraid he won’t be as cute as Rose’s kid?” Ranma teased. At Wendy’s surprised blush he laughed. ‘What, you thought I didn’t know of your little crush? The Great Ranma sees all!”

Wendy blushed a bright red and she huffed, turning away. “Baka Onii-chan!”

“Actually King Toma has a daughter, possibly a little younger than Wendy herself,” Mira supplied ruffling Wendy’s hair. “So if you go with Ranma, you might make a new friend.”

Wendy shook her head, still blushing. “No thank you, I’d rather explore I think. And, well, most kids my age are kind of silly anyway.”

Before Mira could reply with the fact, it was well known that Princess Hisui was something of a genius and very mature for her age, Ranma relented. “I can trust the two of you to look after one another so once we find a hotel to meet up at, just in case my meeting takes the rest of the day, you can go off. Just try to stay off the rooftops, this is after all Fiore’s capital, they might not exactly be pleased with someone climbing all over them.”

“That's rich coming from you Mister Rooftop Hopper!” Wendy shot back, then laughed as Ranma picked her up, grinning at her face-to-face.

“I'm so proud, give me another few years, and I'll have you taunting and teasing with the best of them.”

“That's a horrifying thought,” Carla replied equally dramatically.

Eventually they found a motel that had rooms, but as they were about to enter, they saw Bisca coming out of it, tilting her hat with one hand so that it blocked the sun. “Yo, Bisca!” Ranma said, waving his hand.

Turning in the direction of the shout, Bisca spotted them, and came over with a smile exchanging a hug with Mirajane, and a handclasp with Ranma. “What are you doing here?” Mirajane asked as she pulled away from the hug.

“Alzack and I took a job to hunt down a groups of monster trainers who'd set some barely tamed Vulcans loose on the nearby farms. They were very good at hiding in the woods, and none of the Rune Knights could find their trail,” Bisca replied with a tight, almost strained smile.

“Wait,” Ranma said, blinking in astonishment. “Vulcans can be trained? Those giant ape-like beasties with the bad attitude and the egos?”

Bisca laughed, turning to walk with them into the hotel once more. “Barely, and they certainly aren’t anywhere near what I’d find interesting or cute enough to spend my time on. They're not what you'd call pliable either, but they can be made to acknowledge the human trainer as the leader of the pack. We sometimes see criminals using them as dumb muscle. What about you, what brings you to Crocus, and with Mira too?”

“We just finished a job, I don't know when the last time you checked in with the guild was, but we were on a long-term job to take out this Tower, which was being run by a corrupt Council official. He put in a few missions into the logs that Ranma here thought were interesting, and might’ve been able to tell us more about his long-term plans. I honestly don't know what we learned on our end, except for the fact that he's interested in demons, which we already knew,” Mira said with a scowl.

“I take it you fought them then?” Bisca asked, looking back at the other woman.

“Yes, I have a whole new soul to show for it too!” Mirajane replied with a grin. “I can't wait to show Erza and the others too I suppose, but mainly Erza. I’d bet now I could bitch-slap her into next week!”

“I imagine it’s suitably scary then,” Bisca said with a smirk, leaning down to ruffle Wendy’s hair who was looking between Ranma and the door into the hotel with a pout. “They have a lot of toy stores in that direction about three blocks down,” she said pointing to the left side.

Before Wendy could run off, Ranma grabbed his little sister's shoulder and Carla quickly got in front of her. “Now wait a minute, you'll need money, and I want to make sure that you know the name of the hotel, okay?”

Wendy nodded, then repeated the name several times and Ranma handed her a coin pouch. “Remember our rules about toys, they have to be small and durable,” Ranma said. “Unless,” he paused thinking, “keep to that rule for what you buy, but if you see any other toys you like, have them set it aside, and we can come back later. We’re going to spend a few months in Magnolia whatever else happens so we can buy some more toys, and have them shipped there, right?” Ranma wasn’t about to use his valuable Requip space for toys, and Wendy hadn’t learned how to use Requip very well, neither of them having much aptitude toward that magical school.

Mirajane nodded at that as did Bisca with faint smiles on their faces, and Wendy grinned. “Leave it to me!” With that, she and Carla headed off

“Still think you're not good with kids?” Mira asked.

“That was easy,” Ranma shot back. “I was giving her what she wanted, and just keeping control of the purse. You can't always judge how good someone is with a kid from a snapshot like that.

“Where is Alzack?” Mirajane asked as they finally entered the hotel, having blocked the door for a young couple. The young couple immediately pushed past them, heading up the stairs, while Ranma moved over to deal with the innkeeper.

“He's turning in the mission card and talking to our client,” Bisca said, her previously happy attitude diminishing slightly.

Mirajane looked at her quizzically. “What’s wrong?”

“It was just a mission again!” Bisca nearly growled. “We then stayed here together, but there was nothing. We had dinner in the inn instead of a restaurant, he didn't try to flirt with me he didn't even hold my hand when **I** initiated it! Am I just unattractive or something?” She finished disconsolately.

Mirajane smacked her upside the head. “Leave that kind of game for when you’re talking to a man, they don't know better. You know you're attractive Bisca, but if you don't feel enough towards Alzack to make the first move yourself then I don't know what to tell you.”

“I did make the first move, didn’t you hear me?” Bisca interrupted. “I tried to take his hand while we were walking through the town, he blushed stammered and shook me off, saying we couldn’t while we were on a mission, which we just finished! I even tried to give him a hug after we ate, but he just returned it, with a blush on his face and didn’t, you know, try to even kiss me on the cheek or anything. I don’t know why he’s so afraid, but I am at my wits end.”

“Ouch,” Mirajane muttered, shaking her head. “So there's no spark there any longer between you?”

At that point Ranma returned to them, twirling a key ring on one finger. “Okay, I've got a room, Mirajane are you going to stay here and wait for me and Wendy or head back to the Guild too?”

“I'm definitely not going to simply sit here and wait for you,” Mirajane said bluntly. “I'll take the next train to Magnolia instead. I'm anxious to get back to the Guild and see how my sisters are doing, and if anyone is giving them a hard time about finally getting together with Natsu, including our brother. And if he’s not minding his own business…” Mirajane ended on a growl, an aura of pure darkness appearing around her. “I’ll have to teach him to not stick his nose where it doesn’t belong.”

“And there's the old Mirajane we all know and fear,” Bisca replied, poking Mirajane in the cheek.

Her aura disappeared as if it had never been, and Mirajane smiled beatifically at them. “Mah, I don't know what you're talking about.”

Both of her listeners rolled their eyes at that one, but shook her hand and watched Mira leave the hotel foyer afterward, before Ranma patted his stomach. “So, do you know where a good restaurant is around here?”

Bisca nodded, and then looked at him with a smirk growing on her face. “Are you asking me out on a date?”

“Since we've only talked once before this, no,” Ranma replied with a grin, reaching over lightly to push her shoulder. “I don't think you'd be that easy. But friends can have a meal together can't they?”

“Good answer,” Bisca said with a laugh, linking her arm with his and leading Ranma out of the hotel.

They soon reached the restaurant she had chosen. It was a nice place with an outdoor dining area, and a view of several of the city's fountains to one side. Ranma liked it and complimented her choice, then had even held her chair for her. “What a gentleman,” Bisca said with a smile, letting her hand run down Ranma’s forearm as she sat down.

“I’ve got my moments I suppose. I've been told that little things like that matter you know? I think I even understand it, it's to make you feel special or something like that,” Ranma said with a smile, moving his hand slowly out from under Bisca’s. *Huh, I’m getting kind of good at this whole flirting thing. Thank you ladies of Melona’s. Now if I only had a better idea of what kind of girl I was interested in. Jenny’s talk was kind of helpful I guess but not enough.*

“I probably shouldn't tell you this, as it's supposed to be a big secret from men, but yes. It's not about you being chivalrous or deferring to us, or putting us on a pedestal, I'm a tough woman and I certainly don't want to be part did all the time. But it is nice for you menfolk to acknowledge that yes, we are the fairer sex at times.” Bisca replied.

“Won't get an argument from me,” Ranma replied. “I might be a woman half the time, but that doesn’t mean I know all your secrets. Anyway, you once said you're a good tracker, right?” Ranma asked to get his mind off that issue, and the fact Bisca had just inadvertently flashed him some of her cleavage. “How would you go about tracking a flying snake?”

“What? You’re going to have to unpack that a bit,” Bisca said, taking her hat off and placing it to the side.

Ranma watched her hand move through her green tresses for a moment before again across from her, shrugging his shoulders. “It’s a long story. How much of it do you want to hear?”

“How about you start from your discussion with the Council?” Bisca asked. “I’ve not been back to the guildhall since you left in your Erza guise.” Bisca still wondered how Ranma had talked Erza into going along with such a thing.

Bisca hadn’t realized that Ranma was a Ranger before this. Nor was Ranma in any great rush to tell her or anyone else just yet.

Ranma nodded agreeably, and then began to explain how he had basically trolled the Magic Council which made Bisca laugh. Then he explained about Siegrain/Jellal and how he had basically hunted the false Councilman down once he had broken his cover in an attempt to kill Ranma.

At that point the food arrived, and Ranma took a few spoonsful of soup before continuing. As the Water Dragon Slayer, soups always tasted better than solid foods and this was no exception. “Anyway, at that point I decided to call Erza in to help because she had apparently been someone of specific interest to Jellal, and it turned out to be the right idea later on. There’s this whole background between her and the man who had been going as Siegrain that it’s not my place to share. But she brought along Natsu, Levy, and Mirajane.”

“Levy?” Bisca interjected at that point, blinking rapidly. “Really? I would never have thought she'd be all that interested in a combat mission like this, especially such a high caliber one.”

“I think it was more because they needed Levy’s help with transportation,” Ranma replied. “But she did pretty well, took out a lot of the cannons in the tower itself, and then helped a lot with the wounded and the small fry besides. She might be the greatest support mage for a Dragon Slayer but that doesn’t mean that she can’t fight if she wants to.”

Despite Ranma’s words, Bisca was grateful that Levy had gotten through what must've been a hard mission without meeting any of the more powerful enemies on the other side. “Okay, so where does this giant snake come in?”

Ranma went on from there as the two ate, with Bisca asking some questions as he described the fights, how Erza had finished off Jellal, and of course of the two enemy dark mages that had gotten away, if not unscathed. He finished by describing the giant snake whose bite had taken Mira out of the battle as well as he could, given that he had only seen it for a bare few seconds total. Most of his description he had gotten from Natsu and Happy.

“So… poisonous, can conjure up wings like Happy, not intelligent enough to speak, right?” Bisca mused, listing off the salient points. “But very poisonous and intelligent enough to at least be trained and act on nonverbal cues. That's an alpha predator wherever it goes, and it might well attack other alpha predators if it's just passing through their territory. It'll need to eat,” she said definitively. “Snakes normally are pretty good at being able to store energy, they can digest entire rats or what have you inside them and slowly digested, but something that large won't be able to do the same thing. Its flight ability will take a lot of energy if it’s like Happy and Carla’s, and its sheer bulk will demand more, kind of like an Anaconda only even larger. So if we find out where the trail began, I think I could follow it by tracking areas, which have recently lost their alpha predators. Is that the plan?”

“I don't know, I don't know what the king wants to talk about, but I don't have any other leads beyond this Zalty guy, and that’d be even tougher to follow. I'd like to figure out what the heck that tower was supposed to be for, what Jellal was to the Oración Seis, it should be Seis not Siete now, but more importantly? There are kids, children and teens, who disappeared during Jellal's time as the Tower’s owner. We know at least the two members who fought us were once kids in the tower, but what happened to the rest?”

Bisca shuddered at that. “You realize the Oración Seis, fair enough on the name change, will most likely have moved on from whatever base they were heading towards at that point right?”

“Yeah I know, but maybe we’ll find something, some piece of information to learn their long-term plans.”

Bisca leaned back in thought, popping another bite of her sandwich into her mouth. “You've taken out dark guilds right?”

“That's part of why I am an independent mage,” Ranma said with a laugh, still not wishing to discuss his Ranger status with Bisca, let alone in public. “I'm not constrained by the rules of the Magic Council.”

Bisca nodded. “I think I might have a better idea. Have you ever taken out a dark mage guild that was affiliated with the Balam Alliance?”

“I have,” Ranma said with a nod. “But that’s not saying much, since at this point most of the dark guilds are affiliated with one alliance member or other. The Oración Seis seem to have gone for a mixture of quality and quantity, Tartaros is all about quality and I think Grimoire Heart is about quantity. I’ve smashed more dark guilds affiliated with them than the others anyway.”

“But is there anything physical about those mages that told you they were allied with the alliance?”

“Yes, each of them had a mark on their wrists or ankles,” Ranma said with a nod. “Are you telling me I should just go hunting for dark guilds randomly?”

“No, but there is a dark guild that I’ve heard rumors of in this city since I arrived. Give me a few hours while you’re meeting with the king to look around for more information about it, and I'll get back to you. If that doesn't pan out, then I'm fine with going with you on this hunting trip.” Bisca said.

“Sounds like a plan. But for now, tell me more about you and Fairy Tail. What do ya do for fun? I get the impression Erza teases people for most of her entertainment, what about you?” Ranma asked.

Bisca laughed and as they continued to eat their meals the two traded questions, and a few more, far shorter, stories. They were still talking as they stood up from their table and a young man dressed in a somewhat similar manner as Bisca came around a bend in the street. He spotted the two of them walking and chatting and frowned, feeling a pang of something go through him at the sight. He walked up to them, leaning over the railing to speak to Bisca. “Hey Bisca, I have our money from our job, do you want your share now? Or should I drop it at the bank? And who is this?”

“Alzack,” Bisca said, blinking having honestly forgotten the man was around. She smiled at him though, resting a hand lightly on his shoulder and gesturing to Ranma. “Alzack, this is Ranma. I think Mirajane and I spoke about him at one point?”

“The Water Dragon Slayer, right?” Alzack nodded, reaching over to shake Ranma’s hand. Ranma smiled back and gripped his hand companionably while Alzack tried to bear down and squeeze the other man's hand, giving him the universal glare that meant ‘back off she's my girl’.

But Ranma had already turned away, looking back at Bisca and didn’t even notice the man was trying to squeeze his hand before he pulled away. “But are you certain you'll be able to pick up the trail that snake that way? I mean I realize it's a huge snake, but surely it can eat on the wing.”

“No,” Bisca said with a shake of her head, “you don't understand how animal hegemony works. In any area, there is an alpha predator. A wolf pack for example would be a level below that, but so high, that even the alpha predator wouldn’t want to mess with them. But there different types you see….”

From there Bisca went on, and Ranma nodded occasionally asking questions, until he became convinced that yes, Bisca knew what she was speaking about and Alzack breathed a sigh of relief, seeing as the two seemed to only have a professional relationship.

“So, this fascination with animals, is that why you have an entire room full of them?” Ranma asked. “So well-trained, that there'll all domesticated even ones that shouldn’t be? Wendy mentioned those, and specifically said something about a giraffe?”

Bisca blushed, looking away. “Well everyone has a hobby, and animal care is mine. It's gotten me into a trouble a time or two, and feeding them is always forcing me out on missions even now, but I wouldn't trade my furry friends for anything.”

Chuckling, Ranma stood up. “It was nice meeting you Alzack. Bisca, I'll see you back at the Hotel after I'm done meeting with my employer. If Wendy and Carla return, make sure they eat something? Wendy can get really cranky if she accidentally misses a meal, and Carla needs almost as much energy as the two of us to power her magic. She also took a nasty thump this past mission.”

“I'll see to it,” Bisca said with a smile, a smile that widened further when Ranma paid for their meal, and walked her out, and around the restaurant interior then out to meet Alzack outside again.

“What was that all about?” Alzack asked as he watched Ranma walk off, trying hard not to sound jealous as the two of them moved off toward the hotel.

“He was asking me for help in trying to track this animal that a few dark mages used to escape after his latest mission run,” Bisca replied, not wanting to go into the full story with him. It was far too long, and after all, every time someone retold a story, it lost some of the impact.

“And that's why he took you to a restaurant?” Alzack asked.

“We went to the restaurant because he was hungry, and because I thought this restaurant looked good,” Bisca replied curtly.

“So what, will you go back to the Guild and ask permission or will you just go off with this random wandering mage?”

“Are you jealous?” Bisca asked somewhat sharply now as she turned to him, moving in front of him so they both came to a stop.

“I don't… why would… I that is… maybe?” Alzack stammered, a little embarrassed at being called out about it. “I mean you and I… well…”

“You and I Alzack?” Bisca asked, stepping up closer to him, watching him blushing almost look away. You and I what? As far as I know, all that's been between us is some stammering, on both our parts admittedly, attempts to flirt a little, but not a lot, and a lot of missions with nothing else not even a **single** date! I tried to hold your hand last night,” Bisca said, the anger and hurt now clear in her voice. “And you didn't return it, you shook me off! If you can't even see your way to holding my hand in public, where do you think our relationship will go?”

“I…” Alzack blushed “I don't that is, I’m just not ready to, we’re friends and I don’t want to…”

Bisca looked rolled her eyes. “Come on,” she said, gripping his wrist and pulling him along. At least he was fine with that even though he was blushing. “You have until we meet back up with Ranma to decide what you want to do.

When they reached the corridor leading to their former rooms, where both of them had left their packs she pulled him to a stop. “Alright, moment of truth time. Do, do you, w-want to be my, my boyfriend?” Bisca asked, stammering now that she had decided to take this step put persevering even as her face suffused with a blush to match any she had previously. “Are you, are you going to be able to give me dates, to flirt with me, to give me something like romance?”

In reply, to her blushing and incredibly emotional plea, Alzack could only stammer, “I, I can try!”

“Then,” Bisca said blushing a little more if that were possible. “Why don't you kiss me right here?”

Alzack stared first at her, then around them, looking back to the front hall of the hotel. “Bu, but, really? There are so many people here…”

“Why should that matter?” Bisca said, cocking her head to one side, “I mean I'm not asking you to take me to bed or anything.” Alzack is blush was now atomic at that, and Bisca too was looking as if her head was going to explode. After a moment of silent blushing and some stammers from both of them, Bisca asked rather plaintively, “Don't you want to kiss me? Am I that unattractive?”

Unlike Mirajane, Alzack took this statement at face value. “No you’re beautiful! I mean yes I'd like to kiss you. Your just putting me on the spot is all.”

“Well I, **we've** been dancing around this for months now! I'd like to see some progress… please?” Bisca replied said, sounding tired now, her blush slowly dissipating. “I just want a kiss, is that too much to ask?”

Alzack continued to blush for a second before gaining control of himself, breathing in deeply, and then nodding resolutely. “A, all right.”

He put his arms around her, and Bisca did the same, placing her hands on his shoulders, willing her slight trembling away. Here it was, the moment of truth. The moment where she learned if there really was a spark between her and Alzack, or if the relationship the two of them had been trying to build was based more upon simple friendship and similar interests than real attraction.

Hesitantly Alzack leaned in tilting his head slightly to the left, and she matched him, tilting her head as well to her left. Their lips met, and pressed together, as Alzack tried to enfold her in his arms, while Bisca concentrated on the kiss. Eventually they pulled back, and Bisca’s eyes opened, her brow furrowing. Alzack in contrast was happy and smiling. “How, um how was that then?”

It was okay I guess for your first kiss… that was your first kiss right?” Bisca asked, sounding a little clinical to Alzack's ears.

“It was yes but um, only okay?”

“Honestly?” Bisca asked, now stepping back and pulling at her hair a bit. “Cana was a much better kisser.”

“Wait what?!” Alzack yelped, trying to keep an image of Bisca and Cana kissing like that out of his mind, to concentrate on what was more important, the fact it had actually happened and what it might mean.

“Oh come on!” Bisca said with a laugh. “You can't tell me you didn't know about her, everyone knows that Cana is a kissing monster! She's even kissed Erza and Mirajane for goodness sake. In fact I think the only girl that she hasn't kissed yet is Lucy.”

“Oh,” Alzack said both relieved and aroused at the images he was getting before his disappointment became strong enough to push them out. He looked at Bisca closely, asking hesitantly “So what does…”

“We’ll see,” Bisca said though inwardly Bisca thought she already knew the answer. There should have been some kind of spark there, and there hadn't been. The kiss had been okay, but that was it, nothing more than that. That might've been why she said what she said next. “Maybe you should ask her for kissing lessons?”

“That was possibly the harshest thing I've ever heard,” Alzack said with a muttered, looking away. He was getting the distinct impression that he had waited too long for Bisca, and she had now moved on to someone else, if only in terms of her attention. “Well, maybe I will do that but I still want to come with you if you're going to hunt this Dark Guild of yours down. You might need help.”

“I doubt it,” Bisca said with a laugh knowing how strong Ranma was just by the way Mirajane had spoken about him and the fights he’d described. “Still, you can come along if you want. She said, deciding to throw Alzack that bit of a bone. *After all, I don't know if I'm interested Ranma either just yet, I mean he's certainly attractive and fascinating, and funny, a good conversationalist,* *but I'm not interested in him! Definitely not yet. After all we've only talked a few times. I'm not that easy,* Bisca thought, turning to enter her room.

**OOOOOOO**

Barely a day after they had finished the job on Galuna Island to her exacting standards Erza led her fellow guild-members and the irritating council hanger-on back to Magnolia. When they arrived though, all of them looked around in confusion at the response form the townsfolk. Normally the Magnolia citizenry would be welcoming to at least Erza and Lucy, if not Laxus because he was a bit of an ass, and Natsu because he destroyed things, or Gray because he stripped. But instead of the usual looks of amusement, worry, disdain or welcome, now they were looking at them in something like pity.

“I wonder what they're going to do about it?” whispered one woman to another, leaning close like gossiping housewives.

“It is sad isn't it? I wonder what they'll all do?” The woman’s confederate replied.

“Shh!” said a man nearby. “They’ve been away, they don't know, and I for one don’t want to explain what happened to them, especially that group of hotheads.” With that, he moved away, heading down a small side street. The women fell silent, but made no move to follow, simply watching the now confused Fairy Tail mages and Ultear walk down the street, garnering more looks as they went.

“Something's off,” Laxus stated the obvious, to which everyone else nodded. “Let's pick up the pace.”

What was wrong was easily apparent the moment they came within sight of the Fairy Tail guildhall. Normally the guildhall was cheery, noisy, and colorful. Now, all of that was still true except for the noisy part, and the fact that the guildhall had several large steel pylons smashed into it from every direction like giant spears. “What the hell!” Natsu shouted, racing forward.

He was followed by the others, all of them just as angry, though Laxus in particular was seething, little bits of electricity coming off his body at intervals. Ultear brought up the rear, one eyebrow raised in unseen amusement as she wondered what was going on here.

“Gramps, what the hell happened,” Natsu shouted bursting through the front doors. But the moment he turned toward Makarov he found himself smacked aside by the guild master.

“This,” Makarov said, waving his hands at the large steel spikes they were visible from the inside of the hall, “this is nothing. Some punk from Phantom Lord came over and vandalized the place. Who cares? And you, Natsu have something much more important to worry about right now!”

“Leave the flame retard for now Gramps. I care,” Laxus growled. “This is our Guildhall! And you’re just going to let them come in here and do this without doing something to them?”

“It was an attack made out of anger,” Makarov said, still sounding calm despite the fact his grandson had lifted him up and shaken him with those last few words, smacking aside his hands and hopping back down to the tabletop he’d been sitting on. “I bet Jose has already heard that you're being considered to take over Siegrain’s Wizard Saint position.”

As Laxus scowled at that Makarov went on. “Two Saints in the same guild, especially the one he already considers a rival? No, Jose will boil for a bit, then he'll calm down and things will go back to normal. Besides,” Makarov said mockingly, smacking one of the steel pillars “this is good steel. I bet we could sell it for quite a bit.”

“This is showing weakness Gramps not strength! I understand why you're doing it, no one wants a war, but this could only be the beginning.” Laxus growled, sounding calmer, but not exactly happy all the same. ‘Besides how did it even happen in the first place?”

“Bah, the steel-using brat came by in the dead of night after everyone had left, so there was no one here to fight back. And if they do try to escalate from here, if they come seeking blood instead of simply vandalizing, then we will make war not a moment before.”

“I don't get it,” Natsu shouted. “This is our home, old man! How can you sit there so calmly?!”

Erza shook her head. Having calmed down far more quickly than any of the others she now sat down, looking at Natsu coolly. “What is a guild?” she asked. “Is it the building? Or is it our conviction? Is it our desire to stand together against anything? That is what it is to me. This building matters not at all.”

“Oh yeah,” Cana said from one side, pausing in her drinking to smirk over the giant barrel she was drinking from. “Well they also attacked Fairy Hills.”

Her back straightening Erza growled, suddenly shifting into her Heaven's Wheel armor. While it had lost some of its intimidating aura, the glare on Erza’s face and the fact that her eyes had suddenly gone red and begun to glow with hellfire, more than made up for it. “**They die**!”

“Just kidding,” Cana said, then grunted as Erza smacked her on the head sending her to the floor.

“That wasn't funny!” the redhead huffed.

Cana rolled her eyes but had to smile as some of the gloom and doom the guild had been showing when they entered had disappeared. The last vestige of it dissipated as Anna and Lisanna entered from the kitchen, carrying trays of food, their smiles widening happily at the sight of Natsu.

In return Natsu rushed over to them asking, “Are you all right, you weren't here when this happened were you? If either of you were hurt, I swear I’ll burn Phantom Lord to the ground!”

Lisanna kissed him on the lips lightly, before pulling away letting her sister do the same, even as they set down their food and ignored the fact that their older brother was standing nearby. “We’re fine Natsu, thanks for worrying about us though.”

“No PDA please!” shouted more than one voice, while others simply booed or hissed at Natsu.

“Screw you!” he shouted, turning as his hands lit up with fire magic. “I don't even know what that means!”

Cana hopped up from where Erza had smacked her and moved behind Lucy, squeezing and rolling her breasts from side to side. “Public displays of affection, like this~~.” She cooed, as Lucy gasped, blushed and squirmed. “Lonely souls who don't have a girlfriend and have a snowball’s chance in hell of getting one don't like it when their pathetic nature is rubbed into their faces.”

“Gah, Cana, stop that!” Lucy's shouted, trying to break free and not having much luck.

His magic disappearing form his hand, Natsu watched this with a small frown as he cocked his head.  *I know she's stronger than that, that Lucy Kick of hers is deadly! Why can't she get out of it?*

Shaking her head Erza moved to pick Cana up by the back of her very spare shirt, pulling her back and sitting her down elsewhere. “You know it's all right to just tell her no,” she said addressing Lucy.

“I have, it doesn't work as you can see!” Lucy replied hotly, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Then you need to tell her more forcefully,” Erza countered.

“I think that all only works for you Erza,” Lucy sighed. “Besides, I think it's just her being friendly…?” The fact that she ended on a questioning note said Lucy wasn't at all certain of that. And in fact, Lucy was uncertain if she wanted it to be that way, though Erza didn’t realize that.

This was heavily reinforced when she blushed bright red a moment later when Cana winked at her, and the lush moved back to where she had been sitting next to Lucy. “So,” she said companionably, nudging the other girl “What did you lot get up to? And how did Gray ever talk you into taking an S-class mission without permission?”

Ultear sighed having looked at all of this and shaking her head. “I will return to the Magic Council. If Phantom Lord is actually going to seek conflict with another guild that will fall on our shoulders to try and head off. I also have to report back to them in person about the mission we just performed, and this Zalty character.”

At Makarov's look of question, Ultear waved his interest away, keeping her rear away from him almost automatically as she moved to the door. “Laxus and the others will tell you. Until next time Fairy Tail,” she said with a smile, turning around and quickly leaving.

As she did, Laxus grabbed his uncle's arm when it had begun to stretch towards her rear. “Bad Gramps,” he muttered. “Let's not get the Councilwoman on our bad side again, okay? Do you need a time out?”

“Stupid brat,” Makarov muttered pulling his arm free. “Such things should be savored no matter who the target is.”

“Like you could savor anything at your age,” Laxus said with a guffaw, only to be smashed upside the head by a Titan-sized fist that sent him hurtling sideways into and through one of the guild’s walls.

“Is that any way to talk about your elders, brat?! “ His disreputable grandson dealt with for the moment, Makarov turned to the others. “As for you Happy, Natsu, Gray and Lucy, prepare for **that**!”

“Actually I vote that we wait on that until Mira, Ranma and the kid come back.” Laxus said zapping out of the rubble of his passage through the wall without any visible sign of injury. “I think he'll get a kick out of it.”

“Oh come on, Gramps, do we have to go through with **that**?” Grey asked shivering, as Natsu blanched, trying to hide behind a giggling Straus twosome along with Happy.

When even Cana sighed, Lucy screamed, “Seriously, what is **that**!?”

“You will go through with **that**, Or else I'll send you to the Magic Council with orders to make you their scribe for a month! Your handwriting needs help anyway.” Makarov shouted at Gray, ignoring Lucy’s question. The blonde was incensed when everyone else did too, none of them answering her questions about this horrible punishment she had coming.

Outside, Ultear had gotten into a carriage that she had called ahead for, smiling politely at the driver. ‘Home to the council, Frogger, but don’t bother going too fast, I still need to edit my report.”

“Yes miss,” the frogman sitting on the driver’s seat replied.

Inside the carriage Ultear’s smile turned real as she sat down across from Meredy, who had gotten into the carriage with the Frogger none the wiser. She tapped the side to indicate the man should get going, then looked at Meredy, who nodded, indicating with her hands covering her ears that the man wouldn't be able to hear them.

With that done, Ultear leaned back and looked at her young charge with interest. “So what did you think of the Fairy Tail mages? And were you able to spot any sign of that mysterious flying person that was watching the island earlier?”

“I did near the end of the battle against the demons,” Meredy said with a nod. “Again, I think she was a woman, but other than that I cannot tell you anything. She was flying high, far higher than I would think that most mages could go though. And she was just standing there.”

“You mentioned that before,” Ultear mused, then shook her head. “And your impressions on Fairy Tail?”

As if she had been hand asked to hand over an essay, Meredy pulled out a sheath of paper, and handed it over while she spoke. “Impressive. The S-class for Fairy Tail is well beyond what the term habitually means for most guilds. I believe Scarlet, Erza, is strong enough to be a Wizard Saint like Dreyar, Laxus. They killed those demons easily, and could probably have done so even if they hadn’t been weakened by the time in the ice. Nonetheless, I do have some ideas on about their powers and how Grimoire Heart can counter them if we need to…”

**OOOOOOO**

As Bisca and Alzack were having their discussion, Ranma had made his way towards Fiore’s royal castle. Situated in the center of the city, it was separated from it by an outer foundation that rose several stories over the other buildings of the city. Ranma supposed it was a manmade version of the spire that held the Magic Council.

Ranma moved around the place until he found a spot that looked to be out of the way enough to be clear of guards for the short time he’d need to climb over the wall. *I can’t just use the Umi-Sen-Ken here, that would be cheating and besides I don’t want to terrify the guards here, just give them a little wake-up call if need be*. *Getting in without leaving any evidence behind, walking straight past people without being seen, that would be a whole other level of freak out.*

Even without his cloaking ability Ranma was remain unseen as he climbed up the outer wall. The people down below didn’t look up, and there were no guards along the balustrade up top and Ranma climbed up without any difficulty. Up top, he knelt down in the ley of a large potted plant and looked around for a few minutes, before shaking his head regretfully. “So, no spells or anything to warn them about intruders? That’s rather sad.”

The castle beyond was a massive mansion. It was somewhat square-sided but its roof looked uneven, with a few crenellations here and there, flat rooftop there and rounded portions, finishing up with a tower in the center that looked like something more at home as part of a church. As Ranma peered upward, he even saw some of that tower was being held up by pillars. Between the real castle and the outer balustrade of the foundation was a sprawling garden, with numerous fountains and lacrima lampposts.

Shaking his head at the blatant sign of wealth that royals tended to gather around themselves, he made his way rapidly through the gardens towards the main building. He moved like a ghost, shifting from one bit of shadow to another, not so much hiding as simply avoiding attention. This progress was halted by a voice shouting from a small bench he’d missed in a curve behind a rose bush. “Excuse me, you there! You do not resemble any of the guards or gardeners I know of, and you definitely are not dressed as a servant either. If you are a thief of some kind, I regret to inform you that the guards in the palace are most formidable. It would be best for all concerned if you simply left the way you came in.”

Ranma turned and to look at the speaker and blinked. Contrary to the image, the calm, measured tone and choice of words gave him the speaker was not an old lady, as in someone past their thirties. Instead, it was a young girl, possibly fourteen or so standing with an incredibly haughty look on her face. She was short, had a white dress that fell down to just above her ankles, green hair of a color lighter than Bisca’s and tied up in an uncomfortable looking bun and stood there glaring at him sternly, her hands twitching on her arms where she had crossed them over her chest.

On her brow, she wore what looked like a small crown of some kind. *What’re those things called again?*  Shaking that thought off, he grinned, sending a chilling opportunity. “And who exactly’re you little miss?”

“I am a princess Hisui and I am asking the questions here intruder,” she said sharply, pointing a stern hand towards him now with a somewhat familiar looking key in it.

But before she could do anything with it, Ranma was in her face, plucking the key it out of her fingers looking at it that way and that. “This is one of those whatchamacallit, Celestial Keys right? The kind that summon spirits form another world or something?”

“Give that back at once,” Hisui shouted her haughty look giving way immediately, but Ranma held it up over her head.

“What’s the magic word?” Ranma teased.

“Give it back or I’ll have the guards execute you!” Hisui retorted, then kicked him in the shins. An instant later she hopped away, holding her foot and wincing in pain.

“Yeah, that wasn’t smart really. UM, are you okay?” Ranma asked, leaning forward to take the young girl’s elbow in his hand, holding her upright when she looked to be about to lose her balance.

“Grrr, just, just give it back you, you interloper you!” Hisui growled rubbing at her sore foot but now making no move to wrench away from him.

Ranma rolled his eyes, but turned as someone shouted, “Milady are you okay? I heard a shou…intruder get away from the princess!”

A man had just rounded the corner of the mansion Ranma had nearly reached possibly having just stepped out of a door there. He was a well-built man of near Ranma’s own height with spiky black hair that made Ranma think of a Saiyan for some reason and an equally spiky beard, darkly tanned skin and was currently wearing full plate armor, it’s shoulders marked by large pauldrons that stuck up like shields. Seeing Ranma with Hisui he charged forward, a longsword coming out of its sheath at his side as he raced forward.

“Ah, so there are actually guards here, I was beginning to wonder,” Ranma quipped charging forward. To the shock of both Hisui and the man the man’s first blow went wide as Ranma leaped up over it, landing as light as a feather on the man’s blade. “Nice sword ya got here man, though it ain’t worth much if you can’t hit what you’re swinging at.”

From there he ducked and dodged around, always landing either on the blade or the man’s shoulders, never throwing an offensive blow. He wasn’t here to fight after all, just having fun at the moment.

A few minutes into his fun though, another individual showed up. This time it was a woman came out from a nearby maze, grumbling irritably and looking behind her as if she was thinking of how best to destroy the maze somehow. She was a very good looking, if young, woman of around sixteen or so, with a distinct Minstrelian look to her features, lightly tanned skin, and was currently wearing a long dress with a breastplate over it. Despite that, her curves were such it was clear she was well on the way to becoming a great beauty.

Turning away from the maze she looked a little confused for a moment before racing forward, her hands sparking with magic only to stumble to a halt as she got close enough to get a good look at Ranma’s face and seemed to recognize Ranma. “Ranma!”

At that shout Ranma turned, absentmindedly grabbing the guard’s arm and flipping him to land with a resounding crash to the ground, stunning him for a second as Ranma moved away. Then he blinked as he slowly recognized the girl who had just teleported herself forward. “Minerva? Wow, you’re looking good, but what’re you doing here?”

“What is going on here?” the Princess asked, looking between the man who Ranma had so easily dealt with and Minerva. “Minerva, you know this man?”

“Yes your Highness, this is Ranma, the man who saved me from the scumbag that called himself my father.” Minerva replied with a smile. “I’d wager he’s here for some other reason than stopping by to say hello. He has a job as…”

Ranma interjected quickly. “I’m sort of a troubleshooter, if you know what I mean.” There was no way he wanted to openly talk about his Ranger status in public, even in a place like this. If Ranma had learned one thing while rubbing elbows with the high and mighty on this world, it was that servants were everywhere, and there were few nobles who really noticed them.

“I see, and you are in my father's employee then?” Hisui said her eyes widening as she seemed to make the intuitive leap to what he was implying from what he was saying. Ranma reflected that the young lady really was quite smart, even if her experience and ability to read people left much to be desired. “But then why did you sneak in? Why did you not simply tell me, rather than assault me as you did.”

“Assault!?” Shouted the as-yet unnamed guard, only for Ranma to smack him upside the head, sending him back to the ground.

“Get your mind out of the gutter. I took her golden key when she threatened me with it, then she kicked me in the shin and you two arrived, that’s all.” With that thought Ranma tossed the key back to the girl, and then winked at her. “Well for one thing, picking on you looked like fun. And for another, a lot of what I do, needs to be done on the down low. The more people who know about me less I'm able to actually accomplish.”

“That actually makes some sense I suppose,” Hisui said with a sigh, all of her bluster disappearing.

Ranma nodded then looked at Minerva. “Seriously, Minerva what are you doing here? I heard from Rose you had left Bosco, though not why, and that you’d come to Fiore to join a guild.”

“Ah, well, as you know I had been getting training in my magic for some time, so that did look like a good idea. But when I came to Crocus, I wound up helping to put down a kidnapping attempt of Princess Hisui, and she offered me a position as her personal bodyguard. Given the fact it came with room in the castle, board, and access to their library I decided to forgo joining a guild to take her up on the offer.” Minerva replied, then looked a little sheepish. “Um, as to why I left Bosco so quickly…”

“Minerva put the crown prince into the hospital wing when he flirted with her in a drunken stupor,” Hisui interjected dryly.

“Ouch, well, I wouldn’t mention that if you meet up with Wendy at any point, as she rather likes him. I think he’s a bit of an ass personally, but then again he's a teenage boy so it kind of goes with the territory.” Ranma replied.

“You were a teenager when I met you, does that mean you were an ass too?” Minerva asked with a giggle, which caused Hisui to blink in shock and look at her friend and bodyguard in surprise. Minerva had never giggled before, laughed yes, but never giggled.

“I don't think I've ever grown out of being one frankly.” Ranma said with a nod towards Hisui.

Hisui smiled back, almost unwillingly. Ranma was a rogue, but he seemed to be a likable enough one. “Well, I have no doubt that my father is waiting for you somewhere Ranma. Arcadiosdo get up. And please, show him the way?”

“Of course Your Majesty. Come on you,” Arcadios growled.

Ranma rolled his eyes, but followed Arcadios as willingly as he was able to do anything someone else wanted him to do. Inside though, Ranma was pleasantly surprised to discover that Toma wasn't willing to meet with him in the open, rather Ranma was taken to the King’s own personal suite of rooms. And Arcadios, despite glaring at him with every turn, led him through the palace without anyone else seeing him.

Eventually Arcadios opened the door for Ranma and bowed him through the private chambers. “Don't think your attitude will be forgotten here! We take the defense of the castle seriously, and the defense of his and her Highness. Be respectful in tone, and make certain you address His majesty appropriately, or you’ll have to deal with me.”

“Oooh is that a threat?” Ranma said with a laugh, stepping up into Arcadios’ face. “I don't respond to threats, and as for calling him his Majesty, why? He isn’t my king.”

The door behind Arcadios opened, and Toma stuck his head out. He was a short fellow, almost as short as Makarov if nowhere near as old. At the sight of the head of the palace guard glaring at Ranma and vice-versa, he shook his head with a sigh. “You Rangers, all of you seem to have an overinflated opinion of yourself, or a highly jaundiced view of royal families. I'm not certain which.”

“As rangers were supposed to call people out on their bullshit, so I suppose it could be both,” Ranma said with a grin, stepping around the suddenly twirling guardsmen who had just been about to go to one knee. “And the less you tell your people about me, the better frankly. I don't need this guy or anyone else to try to tell me how to do my job. Or are you telling me that Jardan put up with this?”

Rolling his eyes once more but didn’t reply. After all, as fixated on numbers and bookkeeping as he was, Jardan had even less liking for unnecessary pleasantries than Ranma. Toma gestured into the room. “Come in and let’s get started I doubt anyone wants to spend more time on this discussion than we already have to.”

Ranma entered and found himself a large library, but one with only one door, and a single desk set directly in the middle. Around it were several soft chairs, and the king flopped into one of them, gesturing Ranma into another as he picked up a report and then a lacrima, setting it on the table. He began to tap it with his fingers, and suddenly several images appeared in a half circle above the table, showing four different faces, each face coming out of a difference facet of the jewel.

One of them Ranma recognized as Ultear and the others looked like members of the Council to him, though he recognized one of them, the short guy who seemed to be a friend of Fairy Tail. Ultear sent him a smile and he returned it, before examining the others closely, leaning back in his chair as Toma began. “Gentlemen, now that the crisis with this Jellal traitor has been dealt with, I would like your impression about Jellal, how he was able to get in the Council, and what his long-term goals could have been.”

The four Council members looked at one another, then one of the two that Ranma didn't recognize spoke out. He looked to be a tall man, with stern features and an eyepatch under a large wizard’s hat. “Your Majesty,” he said, his book voice rough and businesslike, “I have the pleasure of being the new Council head. My name is Gran Doma.”

“Yes, yes,” Toma groused waving Gran Doma to silence. “I allowed you all to have internal elections as to who would be your new head, someone from a lower position risen to it rather than from the Council itself so long as you picked someone who I could work with. At the moment, it is not looking good. Now get on with it! This Jellal was a clear and present danger to Fiore in its clarity, not just to your Council's credibility. Which, I shouldn't have to add, is in the latrine at present!”

Gran Doma winced but nodded. For some reason he sent a glare Ranma's way, but it was imminently ignorable washing off of Ranma like water off a duck’s back. “Very well. Judging by what material evidence we have found and the previous existence of the Tower, we believe that Jellal was on the Council in order to enact a single specific plot. He wanted us to eventually find out about his Jellal persona, then using his Siegrain alter ego he wanted to try to force us to attack the tower via the Magic Council's secret weapon, Etherion.”

Toma spluttered back, looking shocked, but Ranma slowly nodded. “That actually makes sense. That tower was built almost entirely of Lacrima. It could have absorbed the attack. But what would he have used the power for? It can’t have been because of all that dream crap he fed the other former slaves.”

“Actually we think that was exactly what it was about,” Ultear replied seriously despite her lips twitching at Ranma’s tone. “They felt that with that power, they would be able to revive Zeref, who would in turn lead the world to paradise. “

“Where the idea of a dark mage leading people to paradise came from I have no idea,” Ranma said dryly. “Everything I've seen connected to that asshole tells me that he really didn't care about anyone else, only his own experiments and even then not often. Yeah he was powerful, but he was a complete dick who seems to have had a demon fetish and was also possibly insane. So whether or not he is still alive somewhere, or can be revived, or brought back from the dead or whatever these idiotic cultists believe, is rather beside the point. Why anyone thinks he would actually do anything they ask him to is beyond me.”

Ultear twitched, her mouth working, as if she was trying to laugh, or at least that was how Ranma viewed it through the Lacrima. In reality, she was trying to keep a scowl off her face, and her hands had tightened clenching on the sides of her chair out of range of the pickup.  *How dare he?! How dare Ranma make fun of Zeref, make fun of all of us who believe in him! Zeref was the most powerful mage of all time! And once we have revived him to his full potential, he will lead us in recreating the world in our image.*

Despite that however, Ultear did have another thought, a thought that said: *Ranma is right, how are we going to force Zeref to make the world in our vision? How exactly were you going to force him to help you overpower your Arc of Time spell to remake the world as you want to? Perhaps Master Hades has another reason in looking for the Keys…*

“They believed it, they believed it so strongly, that it was only Jellal's own actions, which convinced them to believe they had been lied to.” Eyepatch said stiffly. “However, we have confirmed that Jellal was in contact with not only a few of the Oración Siete but their actual guild master, Brain.”

“Um, that should be Seis not Siete, now. They’ve lost a member remember?” Ranma interjected, a grim smirk on his face.

“What information do we have about the Oración Seis?” Toma asked, nodding agreeably at Ranma’s correction, which even the others simply nodded at save for Ultear who let a wicked little smirk flash across her face.

Pulling out a sheaf of paper, Gran Doma began to read. “In all actuality, we have more information about Brain than any of the others, our agreements with the espionage services of the other nations of Ishgar have served us well here. Although it’s odd that no one knows what his magic is, while everyone knows what the rest of the group use.”

As everyone looked at him he went on smoothly. “Brain, former name unknown, he assumed that name at some point in his past. He was from Seven originally, and was found to have tremendous magical potential when young, based around mathematics at the time it’s said, but how that came about or if is in fact true, we do not know. He rose through the ranks of Seven’s court mages, until he took the place of one of them, and then effectively retired after convincing the then-king, the current king’s father, to give him funding to create a Magical Research Society, which took several years to get off the ground. Eventually it was destroyed in a magical accident, which totaled the entire institution.”

Gran Doma shook his head. “Nearly 3 weeks after that event he became known as a dark mage after killing several investigators that wanted to question him about the incident, and making out with at least two of the children that had been entrusted to his care because of immense, out of control, magics. The others all died thanks to the explosion.”

Hearing all this Ultear twitched for the second time in this meeting, almost glaring at her fellow councilmembers, something that Ranma did catch, but didn't really care enough about to think about. *Brain?! Brain was the bastard who experimented on me!? Master Hades, could he have known about that? Did he know we are allied with the man who tortured and experimented on me when I was younger?*

“Beyond their powers, and some hints about their looks thanks to Ultear's work on identifying what they looked like,” Gran Doma began.

“You mean my work right?” Ranma said with a grin that was all teeth as he looked at the man. “Or did nothing of my original report filter down to you?”

The man glared back and Toma harrumphed to get everyone's attention. “Gentlemen, we are working on this together. If you cannot work with the Ranger, then I will demand that the Council find someone who can to take your place.”

“He is an unaffiliated mage Your Majesty, I realize he is a Ranger, but the Ranger system is one that is easily corrupted their being beyond our control. Having such a powerful mage out of our control is unacceptable if we are supposed to make certain the law is obeyed.”

“We’re supposed to be out of your control so we can actually do the things you can't, cross borders, hunt down Dark Guilds, find problems you lot are missing, and generally speakin’ just gettin’ shit done,” Ranma said leaning back and crossing his legs, putting his hands behind his head the picture of insouciance while even his accent had changed to show this. “We answer to the King and Queen of course, not you lot. We’re living through the cleanup of one such problem, or would you have been happier if Jellal had gone through with his plan?”

The man glared, but didn't say anything.

“Enough,” Toma said with a sigh. We’re not here to talk about Ranma or the Rangers, we are here to talk about the Oración Seis. How many dark guilds are affiliated with them?”

“At least eighteen others spread throughout the peninsula,” Ultear said promptly. “It was higher, but those eighteen are the only ones still active. Ranma and his attack group dealt with three at the tower. Two of them have been hunted down and eliminated in Pergrande some undefined time in the past few months, and another in Minstrel”.

“I have to imagine that they would have taken action against Minstrel or Pergrande if they were in a position to move as an entire guild, but the beating Ranma and the others dealt out, especially the death of one of their members, has probably made them a little cautious for the foreseeable future. They don't have access to a healer after all, and healing magic is the rarest sort.” Toma mused.

We've been in contact with the mages in seven, Bosco, and Caelum to make certain that they keep an eye on their own healing mages, just in case,” said the one who liked Fairy Tail.

“Putting aside his alliance with the Seven morons, the one thing that we need to know: why was he researching and interested in demons and Zeref,” Ranma interjected. “Remember there's that too. What did you find on your mission Ultear?”

Ultear relayed all the information she could, and Ranma frowned. “This Zalty guy, you really think he’s another member of the Oración Seis?”

“According to the report I’ve seen, one of their members has an ability to change form apparently. That one's name is Angel, and she's known to imitate or indeed entirely transform herself into other people, whereupon she is able to use their magics, something thought impossible before.” Ultear replied

“So the Oración Seis in turn could be interested in Zeref, and more specifically his demons,” Toma said with a frown. “That, that isn't good. In fact that is a danger that needs to be addressed. If they somehow figure out a way to create demons like Zeref did, then not only Fiore, but all of Ishgar could be in danger.”

Smacking his tiny fist down on the side of his chair, Toma nodded abruptly. “Very well! I as king Toma of Fiore ask you Ranger Ranma if you will take on the mission of finding and bringing to justice the Oración Seis. Whatever their interest in these demons, whatever the ‘wish; they were going to use the tower for, they must be hunted down and stopped.”

“Your Majesty I counsel caution on this,” said Gran Doma sending a glare on his way when he made to speak. “This is an incredibly dangerous idea. These six mages are among the deadliest in all of Ishgar, worth a battalion of Rune Knights each! And they have a veritable army of other dark guilds answering to them. It could lead to outright war.”

“Their numbers wouldn't matter,” Ranma interjected. “Those are just guilds that pay them fees, protection money and stuff I suppose, and they've been forced to take a step back from protecting them thanks to their losses, which means we'll just have to figure out where the Oración Seis are and take them on.”

“And that means a team of mages or others in order to do so,” Gran Doma said again. “How many of those would we lose in this mission?”

“That is a risk, but one I feel we have to take,” Toma replied firmly. “Ranma do you take this charge?”

“Can I recruit mages from multiple guilds for this mission? I’m confident in my own skills but to take on six bastards as strong as or stronger than that asshole child-beater at once is kind of beyond me,” Ranma asked, not happy about admitting that but seeing no way not to.

“Yes in fact we would prefer it that way, in that manner no one guild will be badly weakened with their members out of circulation, or if they die while under your command, as they might,” Gran Doma said severely. “I still believe this is folly Your Majesty. It would be best to discover more about the Oración Seis Siete before we act against them.”

Toma smiled thinly. “As you are so against the idea, you and the Council need not be part of it. Ranma will be acting as my personal representative and will have nothing to do with the Council.”

At that Gran paled, and the other two spoke up quickly. “That’s not necessary Your Majesty,” the short guy said quickly. “We fully agree with your desire to act against the Oración Seis. However we should be aware that the Oración Seis might have spies watching the guilds. Instead I think we should send a blank S-class request to the guilds then tell them to expect a ‘government representative’. That will be vague and yet garner their interest without anyone knowing what is really going on until Ranma briefs them.”

With a smirk towards Gran Doma’s Ranma nodded. “I'll start recruiting when I get to Magnolia then. I'll bring at least two mages from Fairy Tail then I’ll pay a visit to Iron Rock Jura and a few others maybe.”

“I wonder,” said one of the councilmen who had been silent this entire time. “If the Balam alliance will be able to sustain itself with just two, or if that in turn will cause conflict.”

Now that it came to it, Ultear was wondering the very thing. There had been an uneasy peace between the three of them and distinct different realms of influence. How that would change with only two of them in direct opposition for control of the underworld, she didn’t know what would happen. But despite her own misgivings, she had her orders and would see them carried out. *Still I wonder if I can finagle a reason for me to go and take part of the fighting. I owe Brain, and now that I know that, he’s going to pay in blood!*

After leaving the small library, Ranma followed the guard through the palace again, once more neither hearing nor seeing anyone else around them. Soon they entered a small out-of-the-way supply room, and the guard moved to a series of small birdlike statues, picking one up and holding it out to Ranma. “You know how to use one of these?” He asked condescendingly.

Ranma rolled his eyes but disdained from messing with Arcadios further and took the messenger bird from him, tapping it twice on its head. Inside the statue, the series of small lacrima activated, and the embedded spells slowly started to power up. After a moment the birds eyes open, and it chirped “a message, a message, please record after the beep...BEEP!!”

At that, Ranma began to speak quickly. “Hey Sparky, this is Ranma, I don't know if Mirajane will have reached you guys just yet, but don't go anywhere, unless of course you want to miss out on going Alliance hunting. I should be there within a day or two, but I'm following up a new lead on where they might be. I won’t want to move after them though without a full team, I’ve been told from on high that that would be a very good idea, and then I can pick whoever I want from any guild to accompany me. Sounds pretty fun, right?”

With that he tapped the birds head again, and intoned, “Take this to Laxus of Fairy Tale in Magnolia.” With messenger birds, you had to speak clearly the name of the city, and then the name of the individual they were supposed to search out, or else they just wouldn't go anywhere. And sending them from one country to another was impossible, no messenger bird could contain enough mental capacity to have more than a few locations embedded within it. Ranma had been forced to listen to the rants about that from a trio of enchanters in Seven a few years back while Wendy was helping at a local hospital.

“We’ll want that back you know,” the guardsman grump, watching it fly off of Ranma's finger, its wings a blur as it moved to the window he had opened. “Those are expensive!”

Ranma shrugged, and gestured for Arcadios to lead him out of the Castle without another word.

Heading back to the hotel, Ranma found Wendy and Carla there at a table in the foyer. Both of them were pouring over what looked like a giant puzzle of some kind, with thousands of tiny little puzzle pieces. “Before you say anything,” she said looking up at it with a bright grin “It’s reusable, it has 12 different images that we can put it together as, and as long as we have the box, it has a return spell embedded on it somehow.”

Wendy held up the box, and Ranma looked closely at it, seeing it was actually covered with lacrima dust-infused paint. Looking at the pieces, he saw they two were similarly painted. “And how much did this cost?”

“All of the money you gave me,” Wendy said with a shrug. “I thought it was well worth the price.”

Ranma rolled his eyes. “All right, if you're happy with that I suppose that's fine. He nodded over to where Bisca and Alzack were sitting, waving at him. Sitting down with the two of them he asked, “not going to join in?”

“Puzzles aren't really my thing,” Bisca replied with a smile. “Unless they’re of nature scenes. What they're working on right now is to a view of the city of Magnolia from on high. How’d it go?”

Ranma shrugged. “Interestingly, despite a rather rocky beginning. I met the princess, who is quite mature for her age up here,” Ranma said with a grin, tapping his forehead, before gesturing down to his body. ‘But not so much anywhere else.”

“Ouch!” Alzack said with a laugh, trying to put his feelings about Bisca possibly being interested in Ranma to the side. Bisca may not have said anything, but Alzack knew somehow that it had been her interactions with Ranma that had brought their own interactions to a head as it had. “Hope you didn't say that to her face.”

“Even I have limits,” Ranma said with a chuckle of his own, looking over at the other young man. “So, you use gun magic too right?”

“Guns magic, criminal tracking and horsemanship are my specialties,” Alzack said with a nod.

“So does that mean you were able find those rumors you were talking about before?” Ranma asked looking over at Bisca. “You said something about at dark guild operating somewhere nearby?”

“The nearby part is actually not so accurate, nearby in terms of train distance but that’s not saying much,” Bisca replied with a chuckle, pulling out a map and laying it between the three of them, with Alzack and Ranma helpfully holding the edges down as she marked out the train route and pointed to the forest where the Dark Guild operated. “On horseback or on foot they’re about seven days away from here, deep in one of the forest the train tracks pass through. And going will be immensely slow once you hit the forest.”

“I suppose I don't have to ask this but there's no other guild halls near there, right?” Ranma asked.

“Depends on what you mean by near,” Bisca said with a smile, pointing to the northwest in that direction about. “About another two stops past the edge of the forest is the guild Blue Pegasus, and in the other direction on a different line, about two day’s journey by express train, is Lamia Scale.”

“Interesting…” Ranma mused as he filed that name away. Ultear had mentioned that two of the mages that her group had met on the cursed island had mentioned being from that guild to Laxus, and Ranma knew of a mage there that he might want to recruit from Laxus too. “That's the guild with Iron Rock Jura in it, right?”

“That's right,” Alzack said with a nod. “We've actually met him a time or two,” he said gesturing to Bisca and himself. “A very serious but friendly enough individual, though why he insists on shaving his head I don't know. He and Laxus have had a few run-ins, spars that, well…”

“That cause a lot of damage to the surrounding environment,” Ranma finished with a grin. “I know the type. Hell I am the type. Still that's a good idea there.”

“Why?” Alzack asked.

Ranma looked around, then leaned in conspiratorially, and both gun mages leaned into, giving Ranma a **very** decent view down Bisca’s shirt, but he didn't comment on that, making eye contact with both of them. “With the Oración Seis being involved in what happened with Jellal, interested in Zeref and demons in general and possibly based in Fiore somewhere, King Toma has decided to lift the ban on going after Dark Guilds.”

“Given how much damage Jellal might have done and did that makes sense,” Bisca said with a nod. “But why were you asking about Jura? Surely that's a job for the Rune Knights?”

Ranma blinked at her and then looked over at Alzack. “She actually said that with a straight face, I'm impressed.”

Alzack chuckled, while Bisca raised both of her hands to give them both the finger. “Screw you guys! But I'm serious, going after the Oración Seis, that’s incredibly dangerous. You might have to kill, and you might be killed in turn.”

“That’s why I’ll only bring S-class mages along with me,” Ranma replied seriously. “And why the Rune Knights aren't up to the task. Although the king made some noise about possibly sending someone along as a representative.”

“How long are you going to take put together this team of yours?” Alzack asked.

“I’ll start when we get back to the Fairy Tail Hall,” Ranma said, changing his plans on the fly. After all, Laxus was a touchy jackass, so it would be better to recruit him first lest he take offense. Then he cocked his head quizzically. “Does your hall have a formal name, or does it just go by the Guildhall or something?”

“Guildhall. Why would we name our home?” Alzack asked with a confused shrug of his shoulders.

Ranma nodded at that. “Yeah I kinda thought it was pretentious when I heard that Mermaid Heel had named their guild house.”

He thoughtfully began tapping the map Bisca had taken out. Unlike the map of Pergrande Ranma had, or even his map of Seven or Bosco it wasn't quite as detailed as he would've liked. The king of Fiore preferred to employ engineers to work on continually expanding his trains and roads rather than employing cartographers to map the country’s geographic features further than they needed to. But it had most of the features marked out anyway.

His tapping finger had moved from Magnolia to where Bisca had said Lamia Scale and Blue Pegasus were then came to rest on the image of a river, moving it up slowly. “And somewhere along here is Phantom Lord.”

“You're not thinking of recruiting one of them for your group are you?” Alzack asked in shock. “The only one of them that's even remotely nice is Juvia Lockser, one of their Element Four. She’s a friend of Anna’s and is powerful enough, but I doubt her guild master would give her permission to work with a Fairy Tale mage even if you have the king's permission.”

Ranma shrugged. “Now, I was just thinking of heading that way at some point anyway, I wanted to check out the other ‘strongest guild in Fiore’ after all,” He replied not hinting at why he was going to do so. Alzack had no need to know about his Ranger status after all, and Bisca didn't know about it.

They both looked at him quizzically at that, but Ranma didn't reply. “Now where would this dark guild be operating out of in the forest?”

“Around here,” Bisca supplied, pulling out a magic pen and actually marking a circle on the map momentarily. “They need to be close enough to the train tacks to get onto the train, but distant enough to throw off any pursuit coming from the same train. They also need to be deep enough in the forest to let them have some time to warn of people coming. I’d bet they have a few small outposts for scouts at the edge of the forest, but their main camp will be near here, the deepest part of the forest where even hunters and trappers don’t bother going.”

When Alzack nodded in agreement, Ranma smiled at Bisca, then looked over at Wendy. “Hey Wendy, are you recovered enough to fly, maybe carry a passenger?”

Wendy looked over at him then looked over at Carla, and after a few moments they both nodded. “We could do that Ranma-nii,” Wendy said with a nod. “What’re we doing?”

“We’re going dark guild hunting,” Ranma said with a smile.

Wendy nodded at that, asking no more questions and going back to her puzzle. After all, it wouldn’t be the first time they did that. And Wendy had always liked puzzles, the foam ones that could be put together into different square shapes that Ranma had bought her years and years ago had been one of her favorite toys until they started to fall apart, but she had never found any others that were quite as durable until she found these here in Fiore.

“Do you want us to come along?” Bisca asked.

Ranma shrugged. “Do you know those woods?”

Bisca nodded, as did Alzack. “We’ve hunted dangerous animals and beasts through the outskirts of that forest before, and we actually learned quite a bit about the guild there. There's a lot of rumors about them, including what kind of magic the guild uses. Oddly enough, most of the rumors say that they don't actually kill people. They steal stuff from the trains, riches and food. But most of the time they seemed to just lurk on the train unseen, listening to everything and then eventually showing up later to allegedly blackmail people.”

“That is kind of weird. And how good are you at sneaking around?”

Bisca looked blank for a moment. “We’re both hunters, I think that our ability to sneak around should've been assumed.”

Ranma held up his hands in a sign of surrender, and nodded. “In that case, since it's still early, I suggest we get going now.”

“We have horses.” Alzack said, gesturing to her as himself and Bisca. “But what about the two of you?

Bisca rolled her eyes. “I've already heard about how fast they can move when they want to, let's just go get our horses Alzack, and let’s hope their magic horseshoes hold up.”

As the two of them left the hotel heading to where they had left their horse’s, Bisca asked “Are you sure you want to come along with us? I'd already volunteered, and you know how I feel about dark guilds abusing guns magic.”

“I might not feel as strongly about that as you do, but I do still want to bring them to justice.” *And besides, I don't think I want to leave the two of them alone together*, *even if Wendy would be there too. Bisca's showing far too much interest in Ranma for my liking, even if you set aside what happened between us earlier.*

Sighing Bisca nodded, and the two of them retrieved their horses, meeting Ranma and Wendy back at the hotel, where Bisca immediately took charge and led them out of the city along the train tracks for a time before splitting off. Alzack stared as Ranma and Wendy kept up with the horses, then shook his head and decided to put it down as a Dragon Slayer thing, before concentrating on following Bisca, who was in the lead.

After leaving the suburbs of the city behind, they wound their way through large swaths of farmland, with Bisca and Alzack waving as they passed a few farmers. Soon enough however, Ranma and Wendy began to leave them behind, racing forward so fast the horses couldn't keep up. “They can't think to keep that pace up for long can they?” Alzack asked, looking down at his now lathered horse. “Wendy I can understand flying like that, but Ranma?”

“Mirajane said he had an amazing amount of endurance,” Bisca said with a chuckle. *As well as some other things that I won't mention at the moment about what that endurance could be good for.*

About a few hours after that she dropped out of the saddle, walking with her horse for a moment as she let loose a loud whistle. As Bisca had expected, both Dragon Slayers turned, Wendy actually flipping herself in a full 360 twirl in the air, to the consternation of Carla who as was usual, had been acting as her wings. Ranma trotted back, and both Alzack and Bisca were appalled to note that he wasn't even sweating. Indeed, he looked as fresh as they had started.

“What's up?” Then he looked at the horses. Even with their magic horseshoes making them move faster than if they had been sprinting while feeling as if they had walked at a canter, the horses still looked lathered. “Oh yeah,” he said blandly, his eyes sparkling with mischief. “That does tend to happen.”

“We just passed a farm. We could leave the horses there, but there's no way we could keep up with you at that pace,” Alzack admitted rather reluctantly while Bisca laughed at Ranma’s show of pride.

“Cool,” Ranma said with a nod. But don’t worry about keeping up, Wendy and I will carry the two of you, that's why I asked Wendy if she was recovered earlier.”

Bisca and Alzack retraced their steps to the farm they'd seen and paid the farm owner to look after their horses for three days, figuring that this trip wouldn’t take longer than that, even on foot. The extra money the farmer would make if they came back early would simply be a bonus to make sure that he didn't sell their horses the moment they left.

When they rejoined the two Dragon Slayers, Alzack opted to be lifted into the air by Wendy, with Ranma readily agreeing. Carrying another guy after all was kind of wrong in his opinion. “I suppose I could change into a girl, and carry you that way…”

“Um, no, that would be even more wrong, for me anyway.” Alzack laughed and let the little girl latched onto his back, with Carla on hers.

"Tenryu no Takameru Ririku (Sky Dragon's Boosted Takeoff)!" Wendy shouted, air magic appearing all around her legs and back. An instant later, the force of the magic threw them into the air with all the grace of a catapult. Alzack whooped in delight, and then the three of them were airborne, with Wendy keeping them there with her air dragon magic, and Carla directing them as they went, resuming the massive ‘jumps’ the two of them used to cover ground.

Ranma grinned, turning around percent his back to Bisca. “Shall we?”

Bisca was tempted to force him to carry her in a princess carry, but decided against it, simply stepping forward and putting her arms over his shoulders, blushing slightly as her breasts pressed into his back. Then she blushed even brighter as Ranma reached down and back, putting his hands under her thighs right below her skirt. The feel of his hands on her naked thighs right below her skirt was rather distracting. “R, ready,” she said, her voice cracking as blood once more flooded her face.

“Good. Now, hang on,” Ranma replied and without another word raced on, picking up pace until he was sprinting along, going faster than even a racing horse would have been able to. And to Bisca’s intense surprise, he kept on going throughout the day, just racing on tirelessly. The bouncing and jostling and the feel of his back and hands did to her what it had done to Mira before this, and she felt her body slowly responding.

In this manner the two Dragon Slayers crossed the vast amount of the distance they had to cover in a single day, stopping only once for a lunch. As sunset began, Bisca could barely make out the vast black mass of the forest ahead of them and whistled in Ranma’s ear. “My god you Dragon Slayers don’t mess around when you want to cover some distance do you? We should probably stop and rest at the edge of the forest though before heading deeper in. And don’t expect to move that fast once were among the trees. We’ll need to go slowly to make certain we find any hints of the Dark Guild’s presence.”

Ranma nodded, but they pressed on until they were close to the edge of the forest. This prove to be in error however as it began to rain, the droplets little slivers of silver in the fading light. Bisca blinked as Ranma growled, and began to concentrate his eyes narrowing even as they ran on. His body heated to an unnatural degree, while a vast majority of the raindrops coming towards them began to redirect to either side above their head.

“How long can you keep that up?” she asked. The two of them had talked about a lot of their disparate magical skills, but this was a new one.”

“Not for very long,” he grunted, still racing forward to join up with Wendy and Alzack, who had just put down at the edge of the forest, both of them shouting about how they’d own, as if the trip had been a race. “It takes a lot of concentration to keep that kind of control up and moving all around you especially when you're moving to.”

Before they reached them Ranma sighed, and began to let the rain hit him. Most of it heated up before it hit him, but eventually even that faded and within a few steps, Ranma's curse activated. Under Bisca’s arms and legs, the hard muscular back and hands holding her shifted to the lighter muscles of his feminine form.

Of course, the most dramatic change was how the grip she had around Ranma's chest shifted her hands now actually groping her chest. “My, that was rather interesting. Tell me, are these as sensitive as a real woman’s or do your nerves remain the same in either body?” she said, squeezing once.

This caused Ranma to flush and turn her head to glare at the green-hair girl. “Don't play with those as if you own them!”

“Just comparing,” Bisca said mockingly, moving her hands away slightly, but not before her fingers dragged on Ranma's nipples, causing her to shudder underneath Bisca. *That was kind of fun,* Bisca thought to herself, chuckling, *Damn, I wonder is that what Cana feels whenever she messes with Lucy?*

Grumbling the short redhead crossed the short distance between them and Wendy’s group, whereupon her hands dropped from where they had been supporting Bisca’s legs, a clear hint she should get off. She did so, sending a smile Ranma’s way and then turning to the other three, saying brightly, “Well, that was interesting.”

“It was very fun!” Alzack said with a grin, ruffling Wendy's hair. “I’ve always wondered what it would be like to fly, and that was even more amazing than I thought it would be.

Wendy grinned back at him, then looked at Ranma questioningly. “Where do we go from here?”

“Deeper into the woods I suppose,” Ranma said glaring up at the still raining sky. Wendy had already pulled out a small poncho from her small Requip space. She didn't have much of an aptitude towards Requip, but she could still use it for a few changes of clothing and she and Carla both were wearing them now. Bisca had also produced a poncho from a small pouch, after getting off Ranma’s back while Alzack had simply pulled the hood of his desert style coat over his head.

Ranma sighed, but also pulled out his/her Song Silk cloak, pulling the hood up, before looking at Bisca and Alzack. “Do we have a direction to go from here?”

Alzack nodded, pointing out through the woods. “That's the direction of the train, Wendy and I spotted one moving along there in the distance, not with any detail, but it’s in that direction for sure. We should head deeper into the woods but at a diagonal from heading straight to the track.”

“Sounds like a plan.” With that, Ranma led the way through the woods. The rain made it impossible for them to even think about looking for tracks for a while, but that didn't stop Bisca from occasionally climbing a tree to look around them through her sniper rifle’s scope. She was a much better long sharpshooter than Alzack, although Alzack's abilities to find and follow a trail in civilized areas, from suburbs and farm to cities, was much better than her own.

Eventually Bisca did start to spot some signs of other people having passed through, which she reported to the others as the rain began to let up. They soon found what looked like an oft-used little hideaway, which would have been used by a scout or guard set here to watch the forest’s edge. But by that point it was full dark out, and finding any trail became impossible. “I think we’ve found a starting point, but in this rain and with night coming on, we need to stop,” Bisca reported.

Scowling Ranma shook her head. “We passed a small ravine a few minutes ago. I think we need to retrace our steps to there, create a hide over it and wait for daytime before finding the trail.”

After they had helped set it up and entered the tent, both Bisca and Alzack gazed around in delight at the interior of the tent that Ranma and Wendy had. “This is amazing,” Alzack said honestly. “Where did you get it?”

“Seven,” Ranma said with a nod, while Bisca snorted, remembering how jealous she had been of Wendy’s little hold out pistol, and knowing Ranma probably had weapons that were at least as good. “It was expensive, and don’t ask me about how much it cost to upgrade some of it later on, but still, it was well worth it.”

“I have got to get one of these myself, though I've never been out of Fiore before, could be interesting,” Alzack said looking over at Bisca who pouted a little.

“You know I wouldn't be able to afford one, most of my money goes to my friends you now?” She replied to his look with a scowl.

“How many animals do you have?” Ranma asked with a laugh as she moved over to set up some hot water.

Wendy and Bisca looked at one another, giggling and saying as one, “lots!”

**OOOOOOO**

In the dingy bar that was the Phantom Lord Guild headquarters in Oak Town, the Steel Dragon Slayer Gajeel laughed, smirking around it his fellow Phantom Lord members roared their own laughter. He was a wild looking man with black hair, slightly tanned skin, and metal studs over his eyes with black, ragged looking clothing. “Fucking Fairy fools! They didn’t even have any guards on their building or anything!”

“They're a bunch of weaklings! Had they any balls, they would've already been here to pay us back!” shouted another Phantom Lord member.

“Let’s face it, Fairy Tail knows we’re the really the strongest guild out there! They’re just admitting it without coming after us even after what Gajeel did!” Yelled a female voice, which elicited even a greater response from the crowd.

From a third floor observation deck overlooking the main bar area Guild Master and Wizard Saint Jose watched this, with the other S-class mages of his guild, which were called the Element 4. He was a tallish, slim middle-aged man with long, black hair falling straight down to his shoulders and a thin mustache shaped like downward facing horns, a long and sharp face to go with equally sharp seeming eyebrows and pointed ears. He also had nearly black lips, for some reason no one had been brave enough to try to discover. He wore a long gray coat done up tight to his body with a belt and various buckles, tall boots and matching pants, giving him a vague militant look. Around his neck he wore a tie, on which the mark of his Wizard Saint status acted like a clasp.

“Let Gajeel have his fun with the others,” he said, with a sneer, his mustache moving rather disturbingly. “We need to keep our eyes on a greater prize. Fairy Tail might be getting too big for its britches with this announcement that Laxus is going to be elevated to official Wizard Saint status, but that is nothing. We can knock them down a peg or two at any time. But welding that to this new job I’ve found us could bring in more money than the Guild has seen in a decade in but a single day.”

“What, really?” Asked one of the Element 4, a man named Sol. He was a very thin man dressed in a somewhat decent brown suit who wore a monocle over one eye, and he spoke with a very odd accent. “What could be so lucrative about attacking Fairy Tail, monsieur?”

“Lucy Heartfilia. A very, very rich merchant princess, and the most recent member of Fairy Tail,” Jose said, his lips now twisting into an evil smile. “Her father wants her returned, and made more… pliable… to his wishes in the future.”

The other three men laughed at that, and Jose chuckled. “How sorrowful!” wailed the larger of the two men. The only one as tall as Jose, he was wider in the shoulders, a very prominent chin and wore a long green cloak an equally green hat, and a necklace that had a red painted skull on it. He also wore a blindfold, which Jose and the others knew was the way he controlled his magic power. “It is truly tragic for a daughter to run away from her loving father!”

Juvia Lockser did not laugh. She was a blue haired woman with a serious seeming face, midnight blue eyes, and a buxom figure hidden under a coat and dress combo that looked like something designed to be used in the winter. She simply stood there stoically, holding an umbrella over her head and the tiny raincloud raining down over her head. The raincloud was always there these days, especially dark looking while she was around the rest of her guild. “Drip, drip, drip, will the father real pay us that much?”

“Oh yes, and even if he doesn't, we can manipulate events so that even once we hand her over, he'll still owe us.”

Juvia nodded at that, though inwardly she shivered at the idea of what that might entail. She frowned deeper however when Jose went on. “Capturing the girl will be your task Juvia. Your Water Manipulation magic makes you easily the best at that kind of thing.”

“Master, Juvia has to argue against this,” Juvia said, moving towards their master to that she too was standing by the balcony looking down at the rest of the Guild. “There have been rumors of quite a big issue with the Magic Council, which in turn has caused the King to clamp down on them. This in turn will make them come down hard on any Guild acting out. Even more disturbing is the rumor of one of the mysterious Rangers being active in Fiore. Surely now is not the time to act so openly.”

“It **is** the time,” Jose said bluntly. “The Magic Council will be busy trying to reorganize itself, this Ranger is but a rumor, and even if he was real we could easily avoid him. You simply don't want to attack Fairy Tail!”

With that last sentence Jose's power rose, a miasma of darkness crushing the three of them into the ground, while also sending many of the Guild members below to their knees. “You just don't want to attack Fairy Tail!” he reiterated, his eyes turning black as he stared down at Juvia like she was something he had scrapped of his boot. “Your friendship with that aberration has dulled your senses and your sense of loyalty to this guild. Do not let it make you back away from this task now, or else!”

“Yes master Jose,” Juvia replied, her throat constricting in agony both at the pressure, and at what she was going to be forced to do. *Anna, Juvia is sorry but Master Jose, to defy him is something Juvia cannot do.*

**OOOOOOO**

The next day, Bisca woke up to only to find that Ranma had woken up even earlier and was gone from the male side of the tent. She, Carla and Wendy had taken one side of the tiny lacrima-warmer, while Alzack and Ranma had taken the other. Sticking her head out of the tent, she found Ranma outside, shirtless at present for some reason, currently performing an odd kind of push up.

In actuality, Ranma's had lost one set of clothing in the battle against Halphas, both his pants and his shirt having been shredded. He hadn’t taken the time to replace them in Crocus, so had no wish for his sweat to ruin another shirt. That, and he figured the rest of the group would sleep in for a bit.

Bisca stared in something approaching awe as Ranma continued to perform his version of a push up. His upper body was in the usual position but instead of touching the ground his feet and legs were held perfectly perpendicular to the ground. Then he pushed himself upward, and then slowly rotated his body first until his legs were straight up in the air, before lowering his body again then lowered himself until his nose was touching the ground before doing it all over again. It was an awe-inspiring sight, both in control and strength, made even more impactful as he muttered under his breath “Nine-hundred-ninety-five,” as she watched, followed by “nine-hundred and ninety-six.”

Bisca had seen Laxus and Elfman do some exercises in the past, though not as fluidly. More importantly she had seen Gray and Natsu do some exercises too, their bodies being much more her type than the two musclebound members. But neither of them would have been able to do something like this, not so controlled and purposeful at any rate.

At the sight Bisca found herself feeling real, honest to goodness lust for one of the few times of her life. She’d been a fangirl for Ren, one of the Blue Pegasus Trimens before meeting the man in person, and had even been in a relationship once with a rather handsome merchant back when she had been Mulan Rouge and had been traveling across Ishgar. But the lust she’d felt back than paled in comparison to watching Ranma like this.

For his part Ranma had spotted her sticking her head out of the tent, and smirked a little, deciding to put some of his knowledge about how to flirt to good effect. Finishing his thousandth rep, he flipped upright and moved into a fluid kata. It was one designed to build coordination and speed, and had been originally taken from Silat Tari, a version of the Silat school that emphasized fluid movements and coordination. He moved slowly, treating it like it was simply a form of choreographed dance almost, going faster with each iteration slowly working up a sweat.

Watching this Bisca gulped, staring at his muscles and how they move so fluidly, the sweat building up on his skin. Feeling her hands move down her body Bisca snapped out of it, pulling back into the tent just in time as Wendy started to stir.

Over breakfast, both Carla and Alzack wondered why Bisca blushed occasionally as she looked at Ranma, and about the small smirk. Alzack scowled seeing it, wondering what he had missed, and almost glaring at Ranma now, understanding that even if the two of them didn’t end up together, it had been her interaction with Ranma that had convinced Bisca to try and push in order to figure out what their relationship could be like. *Curse you Ranma Oceana!*

Ranma blinked as he finished a bite from his breakfast omelet, frowning and looking around. *Huh, why do I think someone just cursed my name? Ah well, at least it didn’t feel like someone vowed vengeance on me, that’d be the last thing I’d need right now.*

Several hours later after they had spread out from the original scout post Bisca had found, Alzack picked up enough of a trail to follow through the woods. Since going unseen was important now, Ranma took the lead, disappearing under the Umi-Sen-Ken while Carla, of all people, took the lead with the others, moving through the forest unobserved as possible.

Alzack looked at her as they stopped to let Wendy and Bisca climb a tree to scout around their back trail just in case. Counter-tracking like that was a must when sneaking up on human opponents. “I’d heard a lot about you from The Strauss Siblings and Happy, but none of them ever mentioned you being so at home in the woods. Quite the opposite in fact.”

Sniffing Carla looked away, a faint flush on her face. “Yes, well, if you go on missions that bring you out into the wild often enough you start to learn things.” *And the look Wendy gave me the few times I complained about being out in the woods convinced me that I needed to do just that,* the blonde cat-girl thought.

Near to midday they started to spot more signs of humans in the woods, traps, a few designed hidey-holes currently empty, and then three observation posts high up a few trees. Ranma spotted those while he was ranging ahead, and came back quickly, finding them looking down at a trail left by several people moving through the woods in a different direction than the one they had been following. The original trail disappeared among the new ones.

Quickly reporting on what he found, Ranma ordered the others to follow him as he began to circle wide through the woods from the observation posts. Doing so took them well out of their way, but they still found more signs of humans being in the area. At one point they even bumped into a returning hunter, carrying a buck on his back and a Magic Gun on his hip. But thankfully even though Ranma had ranged ahead of them once more, Wendy heard him coming and got the others into hiding before the man spotted them.

Eventually, with Alzack and Bisca watching for signs they made a full circle, coming back to a position, which allowed them to face towards the original three observation posts Ranma had spotted earlier. Once they did, they fell back slightly to another small section of the forest where a tree had been knocked over recently, hiding under its boughs for the rest of the day, waiting for nightfall. After all, they didn’t want anyone to get away, and a night attack was best to cause the kind of confusion that would let them capture the whole guild. That, and any hunters or scouts that were out during the day would probably return to camp. Even the guards would be tired and cranky from being on watch at night instead of sleeping or drinking or whatever it was Dark Guild mages did at night.

That night they easily bypassed the four outposts, with Ranma noting that two of them were empty now, and Ranma quickly took out the one remaining man, tying him up before following the others. The two Guns Mages were once more having trouble moving through the darkened woods, but they were still moving as silently as possible, so Ranma was willing to put up with their lack of speed.

Eventually they found the main camp, hidden in a large depression artfully concealed by bushes and other things. But for all that, they had been put in an effort to remain unseen from the air, Ranma had been right: there were only a few guards on duty at night.

“All right here’s the plan,” Ranma said after coming back from moving around the perimeter of the camp. Kneeling on the ground he drew a large circle and then marked around the exterior of the circle a little blue glow coming from one finger so that they could see. “There are two guards here, here, and here.”

“Two guards in each space, or separated?” Alzack asked.

“In a single hide,” Ranma said. “Each of them is an observation post, but the sight of them at night is limited at best. “I think we take them all out easily enough, and we’ll be in, before they know it happened, so long as you two have a way to take people out quietly?”

Bisca nodded, pulling out a long strip of wood, and placing it around her sniper rifle’s barrel, smirking at Ranma. “This will muffle the sound, and if we can get in the right position, the light for our Guns Magic won’t be seen.”

“Good thinking. Carla, you take out the nearest twosome, Bisca, the left, Alzack the right, I’ll take out the guards directly across from here,” Ranma ordered. “Wendy, I'll want you in the air to attack from that angle. There’s nothing like attacking from the sky to demoralize your enemies.”

Wendy sighed, nodding but also pouting. “Hopefully after this we’ll have some time off Ranma-nii. All this fighting is starting to wear on me.”

Ranma nodded. “I’ll make a note of that hopefully so Wendy. Regardless, I might be able to get you some time off, even if I can’t get myself any.” *Not that I need any time off from fighting.* Ranma might not have been so manic about it, but he was just as much of a combat junky as Natsu. Still, he understood Wendy needed some time off.

His response to her point gained Ranma a quizzical look from his sister, but he ignored that for now. “Wait until you see a bright blue light in the sky, that’ll be a signal for us to attack.” Bisca and Alzack nodded as Wendy climbed the nearest tree, gathering her magic to leap into the air when the signal was given as Ranma moved off.

Ranma moved around the camp taking out the guards there, with Bisca shooting the two assigned to her unconscious from a distance out the ones on the left from that point, and Carla knocking out the nearest ones with Alzack taking the others from close up. Within 20 minutes of them having split up, the combat ended and no alarm had been raised. None of them had even gotten off a single attack.

After waiting a few minutes, Ranma concentrated, his ki appearing in his hand, and then flaring up into the air. As the ball flew he whispered, “Requip, guns!” in a slight flare of magic his hands filled with the weapons he required. A second later he raced forward, fast but silent.

The instant he started down into the depression he saw several men looking up in confusion from the carefully concealed fires. He idly wondered why they were so concerned about hiding from being spotted form on high, but set that aside as he began to fire, taking out two of the men before the others realized they were under attack. “Guns Magic, stun bolt!”

Seeing numerous mages piling out of the tents and the central cabin Ranma closed the distance smirking widely. “Requip, sticks!” His guns disappearing, Ranma lashed out with his escrima sticks, smacking men this way and that.

The guns mages on the other hand stayed at long-range, firing down into camp. Alzack closed to within a hundred paces, his twin guns appearing in his hands as he went. “Guns Magic: Rapid Fire! Guns Magic: Thunderbolt!” From his guns came small bolts of electrical power, arcing into and through many of the Dark mages, including several who had attempted to grab up their own guns.

Ranma watched this with interest, not having seen that second spell before. The difficulty of using two types of guns magic at once was a difficult task too, but Alzack did a very good job with it, taking out several of the attackers as they tried to split off. Bisca too was doing a great job, her shout of “Guns Magic: Snipe Shot!” ringing out before she started to fire. Each shot hit an enemy mage in the head or chest, smashing through more than a few tents to do so.

The defending Dark Mages had three magical types apparently: a sound-based caster type that created attacked which flew through the air like a physical force, reminding Ranma of something out of the Street fighter game. Most of this group tried to break out and attack Bisca under command of a man who shouted, “Get in close and gut the bitch.”

A second later he flew backwards, his head sparking and his eyes wide as Bisca retorted, “That’s no way to talk to a lady!” The charge did them no good, bringing them out into the open where she could gun them down even easier, going “Rapid Fire!” to do so, though she had to keep moving to avoid their return shots.

The second type was an earth element caster type, which created large fists and hands from the ground, and shot them towards the attackers. But Ranma simply shattered the ones that came at him, getting past them and in the mages faces before they could recover. Bisca and Alzack both had a harder time with those, their guns relatively useless against the large earth fists, but Bisca simply shot past the hands while Alzack, dodged and got in close to take them out form the sides before they could turn their magic back towards him.

But strangely enough, a few of the mages didn't try to fight with their magic. They closed with swords and spears, which was the definition of suicidal when it came to dealing with Ranma. Another group of ten broke out in the direction of Carla, disappearing under some kind of chameleon magic, barely visible in the fires of the camp. However they were still there, their scents and sounds carrying all around them and they met Carla waiting for them with her Cat Fist claws.

The survivors of that attempt to escape and the sonic magic users retreated to rejoin their fellows. But then Wendy dropped on them from above, and the fight ended swiftly under her wide angle attack of “Tenryu no HOKO (Sky Dragon’s Roar)!!!” with her attack blasting out more like a wave than a stream it wasn’t very powerful, but it still knocked them off their feet, making them easy meat for the others.

Grabbing up a piece of wood from one of the fires Ranma tossed it to his nearest friend, who turned out to be Alzack. He caught it, and Ranma shouted, “Wendy, back into the sky to make sure that we didn’t miss any of them. The rest of us, let's move around and tie these people up.”

The next morning dawned with about seventy odd prisoners looking at one another disconsolately as they were forced to sit beside their former tents and cabin. Ranma hadn't found anything incriminating inside, except for a few written out orders, and numerous sheets of some kind of notes. The orders were interesting, but showed nothing he could use to discover where the Oración Siete were hiding out.

“Maybe this stuff has something to do with the mages some didn't use their powers last night,” Ranma said with a shrugged tossing a packet of the notes over to Bisca. She caught it, and with Alzack reading over her shoulder slowly nodded. “It’s in some kind of cipher, but that makes sense. Still I’d bet one of those mages with the chameleon magic is the one we should question about the Oración Siete. If the Oración Siete were willing to bring this group under their aegis, then they must have had something to offer, in this case, information.”

Ranma nodded, looking past them to the group outside. “So how should we play this? Straight up questioning, or try to beat it out of them?”

“I vote good cop bad cop, one of us to put the fear of God into them, the other one to sound like he’s reasonable and nice,” Alzack said swiftly.

This worked like a charm. With Ranma standing over them, his hands covered with water magic and his eyes blazing with ki (the others thought that too was water magic) and Alzack trying to be the nice one, they quickly got answers. It turned out that this guild, called the Sherwood Men, didn't actually do much in terms of fighting or anything of that nature, which Ranma supposed made sense given last night. Instead, they relied on extortion, exchanging information, gathering information, and outright theft.

A lot of the information they gathered they passed on for free to the Oración Seis in lieu of the normal protection fee and they knew they weren’t the only dark guild that did that. There were others, two of which they knew the location of, which Ranma carefully marked down on a map to pass on to the Magic Councils of Caelum and Stella, where those guilds were located.

Then Ranma leaned forward into the speakers face, his eyes blazing further. “But if you think that's enough information to save you, think again! What do you have about the Oración Seis, what’s their goal!? What is their interest in Zeref and demons!”

“We, we don't know where they are based or anything like that!” the man shouted, scurrying back into his fellows, who also cowered away. “Gah, get him away from me!”

Alzack grabbed Ranma by the shoulder and slowly pulled him away. “Now Ranma, we've been over this several times, you can't just terrify them like that, you'll never get answers that way. And no, you can’t just cripple them either!” he admonished, turning his head away for just a second to hide his grin, since Ranma had indeed threatened to ‘twist your legs and arms so they resemble so many pretzels’ a moment ago. “Can you tell us anything about their goals?” Alzack asked turning back to the prisoners.

One of the prisoners spoke up cautiously. The Sherwood Men didn’t seem to have a guild master, so all of them had been brought in for questioning. “Um, I think they’re searching for something in the South East, down in that massive forest there. Something called Nirvana, but that's all we can tell you.”

Ranma frowned at that, then nodded slowly, his magic and ki slowly dying away as well as the headache, which had given his act just that bit more realism. “Fine, that'll do for now.”

With that Ranma left, heading out deep in the forest, ostensibly to go to the bathroom, but to really call this in to King Toma, who promised to pass the name on to the Magic Council since it didn't ring a bell with him and to pass on to his fellow rulers the names of the dark guilds gathering information for the Oración Seis in their nations.

Several hours later a train passed by dropping off a load of Rune Knights who tramped through the woods rather noisily in Bisca’s loud opinion, to take custody of the prisoners. “Will that train take us to Magnolia?” Alzack asked their leader.

The other man, slightly tallish young man with slicked back black hair and glasses shook his head, while his fellows moved their anti-magic circles around the mages they were to take prisoner. “It does not, but we will inform the train station employees in Crocus that you are out here. The next train to magnolia will make a stop where this one dropped us off so they can pick you up as you requested.”

“Oh, well, that’s nice,” Ranma said with a grimace, tapping his stomach with one hand while Wendy nearby, leaned her face down into Carla’s hair with a pout. “I suppose I could always just race alongside go and the rest of you lot could wait for the train. I've had about enough of those deathtraps as it is.”

“Dragon Slayers and transportation,” Alzack said with a chuckle. His spirits had risen during this trip, as it seemed that while Bisca might be interested in Ranma, Ranma wasn't actually doing anything to attract that attention specifically, which meant he still had a chance. While Bisca might have decided that their relationship wasn't going anywhere, that didn't mean he had, and he wanted to see if he could change her mind.

Bisca reached over and hugged Ranma playfully, looking up into the sky. “Come on Ranma, we killed most of the day waiting for the Rune Knights and questioning those prisoners. “Are you telling me you’d prefer to race through the night rather than try to meditate or nap on a train at the same time?”

Leaning against her slightly caused Bisca to flush but not move away, Ranma let loose a semi-playful groan. “Ugh…”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” Wendy snarked, looking irritable. “I have a much harder time on trains and other things.”

“True, but you can fall asleep easier than I can,” Ranma said with a laugh. “But I suppose you're right, some meditation time might help.”

“Might help what?”

“Just a little problem I've been having with some of my magic,” Ranma said moving away from Bisca and staring down at his hands. “Something I want to solve if we’re going to go after the Oración Seis.”

“When you do, who do you think you're going to take?” Bisca said idly as they moved away from the roommates, heading towards the distant train rails, where they would find a place to wait out the time it took for another train to come by going to Magnolia.

“Laxus for certain,” Ranma said simply, “Erza maybe, Mirajane maybe. Then Jura, and Jenny. Maybe two more S-class mages on top of that?” *Or Natsu, if the others think he’s up for it. He might not be S-class, but he’s close, and he’s a tough little spaz.*

“Jenny? Jenny Realight?” Alzack asked in astonishment, a minor blush suffusing his features. Like many a man in Fiore, he had pinups of Jenny and Mirajane, although he hid his interest in both far better than most. “Are you sure? I know she’s officially S-class but…”

“She's strong,” Ranma said with a nod. “Nearly doubled me over with a punch when we saw one another at Akane Resort. I trust her to be strong enough for this.”

“I'm not certain if I should be hurt or relieved that you didn't think of me or Alzack,” Bisca said with a chuckle.

Ranma shrugged. “If you want to be part of the mission, I suppose we could use some more hands just in case they have other dark guilds with them when we find them. But no offense to either of you, but I wouldn't want you fighting the Oración Seis themselves.”

“None taken,” both guns mages replied as one, then looked at each other and laughed at the unintended twin-speak moment. They knew their limitations, and fighting powerful caster mages like those was well beyond them.

The train arrived a few hours after evening fell, pulling to a stop and the conductor getting out nodding politely to them all. “By order of the Rune Knights, I'm hereby stopping to pick you lot up. It's not something we do normally, so I think you should feel a little thankful.”

Ranma rolled his eyes at that and leapt up onto the train. “Just get this death trap moving would you?”

The four of them were quickly ushered into a private little booth, and as the conductor called ahead to the engine to get the train restarted, Ranma pulled out some more Dragon Seed and began to smoke it on his pipe, breathing in deeply before puffing out directly in Wendy’s face, to the shock of Bisca and Alzack. Before they could ask what he was doing Ranma explained what the smoke did, and then handed Wendy a blanket from his Requip space before the younger girl hopped over into a corner and curled up there resolutely closing her eyes as she tried to get to sleep.

As the scent of the Dragon Seed filled the small compartment, Alzack decided to get some sleep himself, with Bisca soon emulating him, leaning against the inner doorway. Carla just pulled out a book from her own Requip space, a hardcore magical theory book that was far too dry for Ranma or Wendy to enjoy. Ranma however grumbled, as did Wendy as the train began to move. Wendy clenched her eyes tight and breathed in deeply once more, letting the Dragon Seed help her even as her stomach worsened.

Ranma grit her teeth and closed his eyes, but not to sleep, since he knew that would be impossible. Instead he started to meditate, thinking about the current mission he found himself on. *I wonder how long this mission will go. Hell, I wonder whether I'll end up dealing with all the Balam Alliance one after another. If so I no longer have a choice, I can’t keep on trying to simply use meditation to figure out this issue with the three-way war I’ve got going on in my body.*

*Dragon Slayer magic: incredible durability, strength, and offensive magic. But for some reason my body is rejecting it, and has been since I was given it. I gotta wonder why that is, but can’t do nothing about it. Demon Slayer magic, extreme ability to read demonic opponents, immunity to specific spells from the buggers, though not their physical attack magic, and of course again my body tries to reject it, like it’s a virus, though at least there I know why and it can’t come out without a demon nearby.*

Ranma had noticed during the last fight that he had begun to feel hate, a whole lot of hate and rage, along with a desire to destroy, the issue made worse when he drank in the tainted water of that cursed pool. But he had simply overcome it by ignoring those emotions entirely, having seen them as simply the water trying to infect him or empowering his Demon Slayer magic further.

*And then there’s my ki. Strength, slows the process of aging to a crawl, durability, but not as much as Dragon Slayer magic, though I could be wrong about that since they are constantly* ***fucking*** *fighting one another! Healing well above anything the other two can give me, and endurance, which at least the other magics don’t negate, for the most part anyway, plus it’s the one I think I’ve pretty much mastered as much as I can without facing another ki user again. My ki senses… there I can use it, but finding magic users is a bit tougher than it would have been if they were using ki.*

His stomach lurched for a moment as the train slowly went around a bend in the tracks but he continued to think about his current issue even as the conductor’s voice came over an intercom, informing them they would be pulling to a halt soon due to an issue on the tracks ahead of them. *Okay, so let’s try this: removing the ki from my arm, so that my Dragon Slaying power can ‘win’ there, see what happens. It should be theoretically impossible, but when have I ever let that stop me.*

With that thought, Ranma concentrated on his ki reserves, feeling the pulse and flicker of them through the pressure points in his body, the veins in his flesh, the cells of his skin. Then he glanced down at his left hand and before the idea that maybe he should wait on this until the train stopped moving, he began the slow process of redirecting the ki from the limb into the rest of his body.

Luckily for Ranma, the train had stumbled to a halt thanks to some rocks, which had fallen onto the tracks. However workers from the train were already out and working on it. Bisca stood up, looking at her fellow travelers and smirked, saying, “I’ll go see what they are up to, make certain it’s a natural stop.”

“Thanks Bisca,” Ranma murmured, not looking at her but aware enough of his surroundings to reply. “I’m a little busy trying to play with my, um, call it my internal magic, or I’d come with you.”

Bisca chuckled. “I noticed when you started glowing Ranma.”

“Wait, what?” At that Ranma opened his eyes, only to watch her leave the little booth, smirking over her shoulder at him.

“Yep, you were glowing, bright blue and gold, kind of pretty too.” She quipped, giving him a wink before the door closed, noticing as she did that Ranma had allowed his eyes to flick only once down to her rear before concentrating on her face. *Hmm, I rather like that, interest and control.* With that thought she moved to the front of the train, hopping off at the forward most entrance and moving to the workers, her rifle appearing in her arms.

Looking over at the other three Ranma found all of them asleep, even Wendy and rolled his eyes. *Well if no one is awake to be bothered by it, I’ll just see what I can do here.*  With that he went back to his meditation, slowly redirecting the ki in his arm back into the rest of his body. It was kind of painful at first, but as his ki was removed from his arm, Ranma could feel his Dragon Slayer magic filing the arm.

There was a shift of something, Ranma felt it for a second and suddenly as Ranma opened his eyes and looked down at his he gaped. “Holy hells, was not expecting that…”

His voice woke up Alzack, who blinked opened his eyes and then stared. “Erm, am I still dreaming?”

“Nope… this is really kind of um, real but...” Ranma fell silent, flexing his clawed and dragon-fied arm, staring at the claws that looked sharp enough to carve steel. *Hell, at least now I know why my ki is fighting my Dragon Slayer magic. It really is a virus, if you take it too far the Dragon Slayer magic takes you over! Fucking Typhon, what the hell did you do to me you old bastard?!*

Wendy came awake then, only to shriek. “Ranma-nii! What happened!?”

That shriek broke Ranma’s concentration on ki and keeping it out of his arm. It flooded back in with a vengeance, and Ranma grunted, biting back a scream as his arm tried to be both dragon forelimb and human arm at once. In way it was like something he had experienced the few times he had been in hot or cold water and then splashed with the opposite temperature. That had up to this point been the most painful thing Ranma had ever dealt with. But this was the same thing, but in a far more violent way. The scales of his dragon arm tried to fight back, and there was actual blood spurting in places as the two powers within Ranma’s body fought for control of the limb.

“FUCKK!!” he growled out as Wendy leaped forward, trying to grab at his arm.

Bisca came back then, growling irritably and placing her rifle in her small Requip space as she opened the door only to go to her knees next to Ranma and Wendy. “Oh my god what happened!?”

“I don’t know! Hold him down, I need to cast some healing spells!” Wendy said, her hands glowing green and white but she was unable to hold onto Ranma’s arm to direct the spells.

Alzack leaped forward and between the two of them he and Bisca held Ranma’s flailing, wildly transmutating arm in place to let Wendy perform her spells, with Carla looking on in shock, unable to help. Ranma for his part concentrated on the internal battle, directing his ki and eventually pushing the Dragon Slayer magic back to its previous level in the limb in question.

Eventually his arm was back to normal, though Ranma had lost all feeling in the limb, something akin to if the limb had a tourniquet wrapped around it. But Ranma knew the feeling would come back, he could feel the ki within refilling itself from the rest of his body. “Well, that was an um, interesting experiment.”

“What did you just do!?” roared everyone all at once, with Wendy’s being the strongest voice by quite a bit. Her lips trembled as she fought back tears and her eyes blazed with anger at Ranma’s blasé attitude toward what she thought of as a major issue.

Sighing and sheepishly pulling at his pigtail, Ranma explained what he had been doing, and why, though he explained his ki away as his original, primary magic, which was based around self-healing rather than go into detail about how it was a nearly entirely separate energy source. As he did, feeling came back to his arm, and Ranma sighed flexing the limb this way and that.

Bisca frowned taking his hand in hers and staring at his arm as he flexed it, blushing as Ranma’s fingers squeezed hers. “So, um what you’re saying is that if you take your mastery of your Dragon Slayer skills to a high enough level you actually turn into a dragon?!”

“But I don’t wanna!” Wendy wailed, her fear for her Onii-chan replaced entirely with fear at the prospect of transforming like that.

“I don’t think so Wendy, I think it’s just me.” Ranma said ruefully. “I’ve told you all along that Typhon tried to speed me through my training, and was an old dotard of bastard too. I’d lay odds the old fart neglected to do something or add some kind of special training or magic to his training me because he wanted to get me as far along as possible. You and Natsu should be fine. Laxus too, given he ain’t a natural Dragon Slayer. Me though…”

“That makes some sense,” Bisca said, releasing Ranma’s hand and standing up, moving back to her original seat as the train finally started to move. The two Dragon Slayers immediately began to look ill, and Ranma whipped out his pipe once more and relit it, tamping in a new load of Dragon seed. As they did, she looked at Ranma thoughtfully. “I’ve never heard of magics fighting against one another like that, let alone inside someone’s body. Still, I think we might know someone who could help.”

Ranma looked up in interest at that as Alzack smacked his fist into his palm. “That’s a good idea actually! Porlyusica is a master healer, and of meditation magics. There’s nothing she doesn’t know about the human body, and how to figure out how magic can affect it. I bet she could help a lot. Maybe figure out some way to force your magics to work together, without the Dragon Slayer magic overwhelming the rest, or maybe she knows a way to banish the Demon Slayer magic at least. That magic doesn’t sound like it’s worth the cost to me.”

While Wendy looked interested in meeting another magic healer, after all she had only met four of them throughout all their travels, Ranma slowly nodded. “She’s what, your guilds healer then?”

“She is, though she never comes to the actual guild hall. We need to go to her. Porlyusica doesn’t like other humans all that much, and stays to herself deep in the woods. Still, she’s one of the best.” Bisca affirmed, with Alzack nodding along. From there they both went into stories about how this or that guild member had been healed by the pink-haired healer.

**As they did, Ranma slowly nodded. “Well then, I suppose we have another reason to set down roots for a bit now. I need to solve this issue, but the only solution I’ve come up with has some serious downside. I don’t know how much anyone else can help me but at this point I’ll try anything!”**

**End Chapter**

So, a lot of setups in this chapter, though not much depth. On the other hand, the next two chapters will have both comedy and violence galore. Won’t say much for fear of spoilers, but let’s just say that Ranma gets to punch another Wizard Saint LOL.