This has been edited by *Justlovereadin’* for FT knowledge, by *Michael* for small mistakes and by *Hiryo* for his Ranma knowledge. Hope you all enjoy!

**Chapter 14: It Takes All Sorts**

The day after the punishment party, Lucy woke up as the smell of breakfast hit her. The pain she felt upon waking caused her to groan, holding her head in her hands. “Oh my God, what did I drink?!” That thought percolated through her head for a moment and then she sighed. “More importantly, why did I try to drink so much of whatever it was!?”

“I do not know, Hime-sama,” said Virgo. The pink haired maid was standing beside her Hime-sama’s bed, her head bowed and her arms held in front of her chest demurely. “Will you punish me for my failure?”

“No,” Lucy groaned then looked around. Her last memories were very blurry, but she couldn’t remember getting home last night. “How did I get here, anyway? Don’t tell me that Natsu and that darned cat are here again? I sooo do not need to buy new drapes. Or a new sofa when Natsu torches it accidentally.”

“No, Hime-sama, your teammates are not here. As far as I know, you were brought home by Mirajane and her family along with Cana.”

“Cana… That's right. The party, the fight, and drinking… Why were we drinking again?” She then gasped and sat up, tapping her chest and breathing a sigh of relief, followed by a groan as she slumped back, holding her head once more. Before the potion had worn off Lucy had gotten quite drunk. Somehow Cana had convinced her to go shot for shot with her, which no sane individual should ever have agreed to.

She looked over at Virgo, holding out a hand weakly. “Help?”

The Celestial Spirit with the maid fetish (amongst others) obligingly pulled her Hime-sama out of bed and helped Lucy change, then guided her, still stumbling and holding her head, through the apartment into the small sitting area where Virgo had already prepared breakfast. This was one of the few things that she had Virgo do for her whenever she could. Lucy thought of herself as an okay cook, although she wasn’t very good at anything beyond sandwiches and salads. But even with that level of ‘skill,’ she couldn't make anything for breakfast to save her life. Mornings in general were hard on her and rarely began before ten or eleven.

She sat down and gestured for Virgo to join her, but the maid demurred, saying, “Hime-sama, as a maid it would be most discourteous to sit with you at the table. Besides, as a Celestial Spirit I have no need to eat the food of this realm in the first place.”

“Oh, sit down, Virgo,” Lucy said with a laugh, shaking her head. The coffee Virgo had made had helped her hangover tremendously. “You know I don't see you like that, and I know you all might not need to eat while here with me, but that doesn’t mean you don’t like eating. Now sit down before I order you to,” she finished, humor clear in her voice.

Celestial Spirits subsisted almost entirely on the magic of their summoner when in Earthland, but they were truly living beings and needed to eat in their own realm as regularly as any human did. They could sustain themselves in Earthland from the Ethernano of the world, but it wasn’t very efficient, and they would never be able to survive on that for long. Or, if they did, it would take a supreme act of will to try to do so.

“Punishment?” Virgo asked, perking up quite a bit.

Rolling her eyes at the maid's attitude, Lucy sighed and took a bite of her food, making pleased noises while continuing to wave Virgo into the chair opposite her. The maid sighed, but obeyed and dug in quickly into the food, showing that Lucy was correct: Celestial Spirits liked eating even if they didn’t get anything out of it. After a few compliments sent the direction of the food and a few questions about what Virgo had been up to since the last time Lucy had seen her—since before the fight against Phantom Lord—Lucy swallowed a bite of egg and asked, “So, um, is Aquarius still mad about what happened?”

Lucy had tried to talk to her Celestial Spirit directly since the fight against Juvia and the other two but had gotten her summoning refused for the first time in literally ever. Normally Aquarius was quite good about answering her summons, if only to chew Lucy out for doing so in the first place. The two of them were more like bickering siblings rather than being truly antagonistic with one another, and Aquarius, of all her Celestial Spirits, was the one Lucy was closest to, beating out even her first spirit, Capricorn, given how he was always in teacher mode. *Then again, no one has ever stolen her urn from Aquarius before, either.*

“I am afraid so, Hime-sama. She isn't talking to anyone, although I have seen her occasionally in the Celestial Spirit’s common lands.” Virgo now looked a little disturbed. “Now she sometimes blushes and then sends for her boyfriend.”

That caused Lucy to blink in shock. “Wait, she has a real boyfriend! I thought she was always lying about that. I demanded to know his name, and she never told me, always insisting on teasing me about it! Then she’d taunt me about never getting one of my own.”

Virgo smiled as well. After all, Aquarius was very hard to get along with at times. “She does have a boyfriend, Hime-sama. Scorpio. But I'm afraid that he hasn't been of much help of late. His own master has summoned him several times in the past few weeks.”

“That's interesting,” Lucy replied before her tone turned sly. “I don't suppose you could tell me who he serves, could you?”

“I am afraid not, although I could tell you that Aquarius has complained about Scorpio’s mistress indeed being a ‘mistress’ several times,” Virgo replied.

“Yeah, Aquarius would be the jealous type, wouldn't she?” Lucy mused, tapping her lips with a finger thoughtfully.

The two of them finished eating soon after that, but Lucy kept on glancing over towards a specific portion of her desk. It had been the first thing she'd checked after the Phantom Lord issue had been dealt with and she had come home. She wanted to make certain that none of the mages who had invaded her home had touched her treasure: her stack of letters to her dead mother. Those letters weren't anything anyone else would treasure, but they were precious to her.

But they also currently represented a problem, that problem being her father and his part in this debacle with Phantom Lord. Admittedly, Lucy doubted that any other legal guild would come after her in order to return her to her father, but Lucy knew there were dark guilds out there that might try to make a name for themselves by capturing a Fairy Tail mage. *Especially with the bounty that was on my head thanks to my father's desire to bring me back and control me.*

That meant that Lucy had to return home. She had to meet with her father and somehow convince him to back off, to leave her alone. That was not a conversation that she was looking forward to having, she confided to Virgo, but it had to be done.

“You know that we will be with you one hundred percent, Hime-sama,” Virgo said, gesturing from herself down to the pouch that held all of Lucy's keys at her side. “If he attempts anything physical, we will deal with it.”

“It won't be a physical contest, but a mental and emotional one,” Lucy replied with a sigh, standing up and starting to clean the table. “But it has to be done. I'll call you if I need you, Virgo. Thank you for the breakfast,” she finished with a smile, reaching out to ruffle Virgo's pink hair.

Virgo pouted, somewhat unhappy, in a way, to be treated so fondly rather than to be punished, as was her desire. But she bowed her head and disappeared after first clicking her fingers and sending most of the dirty dishes into the wash, despite Lucy having long since ordered Virgo to leave the cleanup to her. It was an obvious attempt to gain some punishment for herself the next time she was summoned (or showed up on a set schedule, as she had that morning), but Lucy just laughed and ignored it.

After a few moments spent putting the silverware and the remaining dishes away, Lucy looked around her apartment and then checked her pouch to make certain that she had her purse and her keys with her. Then, after breathing in deeply, which did interesting things to her chest though there was no one to see, she headed out the door, intending to go straight to the train station.

Outside, however, she found Cana, Levy, Natsu, and Happy all talking to one another outside, none of them looking worse for wear, as she had been earlier. They all looked up as Lucy exited her apartment and she blinked at them. “What, um, what are you all doing here? If you're here to see me, I'm afraid I have something I need to do today…” she said, looking around self-consciously.

“Stupid girl,” Cana said, moving to her side and pulling Lucy into a sideways hug. “You think we didn't know you were still hurting about your part in this business with Phantom Lord? Your old man practically put a hit out on you, after all. Who the heck would be able to move past that?”

“It makes me furious too!” Levy said with a shake of her head.

“I'm not so furious, but I do want some closure,” Lucy said, smiling at her two friends and not moving away from Cana’s hug. “I, I was going to go there and take care of this now; I didn’t want to worry you all.”

“It’s never a worry to care about a friend!” Natsu said with a roar, a pilot light visible in his mouth for a moment as he did. “You're not alone any longer; you're part of Fairy Tail! And your father needs to know that too!”

“Aye, sir! Luigi’s dad will just have to find another fatty daughter to boss around,” Happy said.

“All right,” Lucy said with a laugh while restraining herself from kicking the blue-furred Exceed. “Thank you, all! Your support means the world to me. But don't think I'm going to pay for all your tickets,” she said admonishingly, wagging her free hand at the others, though she didn't relinquish her hold around Cana as she said it.

This actually did cause a problem later on. Cana hadn't brought enough money to pay for her own seat. None of them had realized how much it would cost to go the full distance it would take to get from Magnolia to the nearest town to where the Heartfilia mansion was.

“You don't live in the town?” Cana asked.

“No,” Lucy said with a faint flush of embarrassment. “Our estate is kind of too large for that.”

“Ah, right, you're the runaway rich girl; I forgot,” Cana said teasingly, then frowned at Natsu. “Come on, man! You know I'm good for it.”

“No way!” Natsu said shaking his head and glaring hatefully at his hated enemy, the train. “If I have to get on that damn thing, then at least Happy can have his own seat.”

“Aye, sir! I don't want to share a seat with Natsu, because if I do he sometimes throws up on me!” Happy said, shaking his head.

“What’re you even doing here, you blue cat,” Lucy asked shaking her head. “If it's just to make jokes at my expense, then you can take a hike!”

“I'm Natsu's partner, and where he goes, I go. Besides, you're part of team with Natsu too now, which means I have to take care of you too.” At Lucy's continued look, Happy continued, “Besides, I don’t exactly want to be around Carla right now. She took too much pleasure in my pain yesterday.” Despite that, Happy didn't seem to show any signs of permanent mental scarring from being punished as they had been the day before. If anything, he looked pleased to be once more just wearing a backpack.

“Maybe you should take that as a hint that she's not interested,” Lucy suggested, or rather, stated in response.

“That's fine and all,” Cana said interrupting Happy's response, “but that still leaves me without a seat to myself. Am I supposed to stand the entire time?”

“We'll figure something out when we get on board,” Lucy said with a sigh as the train signaled that it was ready. “Come on!”

They soon found a booth for themselves. The trip would take a full day and a half, taking them straight from Magnolia almost to Fiore’s border with Bosco. Natsu instantly spread out over the two chairs he'd bought, removing the armrest between them so he could lay out, already beginning to groan as the train started to quiver and shake in preparation for leaving, with Happy curling up on his legs.

Cana glared at him, then sighed and just stood there for a moment before Lucy decided to do something about that. “Come on; you can sit with me.” She pushed Natsu's feet away from her and back on his own side, and Cana sat beside her, with Lucy flushing a little given how they were pressed together in the seat.

“Comfy?” Cana asked Lucy.

“…Yeah,” Lucy said after a moment. “Yeah, I think I am,” she said with a smile. Somehow that and the look she was giving Cana set Cana to blushing lightly too. But she didn't move away and took one of Lucy's hands in hers. Lucy squeezed it, and the two of them turned to the others, engaging Happy and Levy in a discussion about what the heck had happened the previous night. If they kept on holding hands and glanced at one another occasionally, that was no business but of anyone's but theirs.

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma, too, woke up, but, unlike Lucy, she felt no pain, since in her case it hadn’t been drink that had downed her. Rather, she had been completely blindsided by something that threw her body for a loop.  *What was that stuff that Makarov slipped me?*

**Flashback:**

Laughing, Ranma took a bite of the meal she'd ordered from the bar as she watched Erza stand up and race into the mass of people who were already fighting in affronted fury. Gray had just been felt up from behind, and ‘she’ hadn’t reacted at all save to turn around and break the other man’s hold. Now Erza was stomping a hole in the man's backside, and the rest of the guild was fighting all around her. “Just because she is technically a man despite evidence to the contrary does not mean that is alright, Wakaba!”

As Ranma watched, Natsu, who was fighting Elfman and a few others, laughed. “Hey, look at this!” the temporarily-turned-girl said, pulling open her shirt and flashing her breasts. Elfman and the others gaped, and Natsu launched herself in the middle of them, cackling.

Nearby, Erza scowled and began to move towards him, fingers twitching while Lisanna and Anna, who had been working through the still peaceful portions of the crowd, looked at one another and shook their heads. “Oh, Natsu,” they said as one, then quickly moved up the stairs to the second floor, leaving Natsu to her fate.

*Jesus, was I that bad when I first got this body?* Ranma asked herself. She then shuddered.  *Yeah, I probably don't want an answer to that one.*

She didn't notice Makarov's hand hover over her plate tipping some small, salt-like crystals down on top of her pasta. Ranma noticed a crunch of second later and frowned, but kept on eating, not detecting anything different in the taste.

A few tables over, however, Bisca had noticed and frowned, gesturing over to where Mirajane was sitting nearby. “Hey, what do you think master Makarov just put in Ranma's meal, there?”

“He's messing with the food?!” Mirajane asked with a growl, sitting up from where she had been sitting and cracking her knuckles angrily. “He knows he's not supposed to do that, but noooo! Whenever we use the potions his old friend left behind he always wants to experiment with some of the other things he left at the guild!”

Mirajane pushed her way through the crowd, smacking one or two guild members aside when they turned and made to attack her in turn before noting whom they were attacking. She negligently caught Natsu—who had been hurled through the air by Erza—by the shirt, and in turn, hurled her sideways. Soon she was standing in front of Makarov, glaring down at him. “Master,” she said coolly, “what’ve we told you about putting potions and stuff in people's foods?”

“It's a special occasion, my dear!” Makarov said, not responding to the question since he knew he couldn't, cackling and talking a long draft of his beer. It was the special stuff, too, much stronger than most of the ale they served in the guild. He always broke out the good stuff when he had the opportunity to play with the potions and other items his old friend had left him.

But Mira was, despite not actually spending much time cooking, the mistress of the guild’s kitchen, and she would not be denied. “Master…” she growled.

“Don't worry; it's nothing dangerous! It's just something to loosen Ranma’s inhibitions.” At Mirajane's continued glare, he hesitated and then went on. “Ahem, I, um, I noticed that Ranma doesn't seem to be getting drunk, despite having matched Cana shot for shot for a bit there. So I was wondering, what it would look like if Ranma got drunk?”

Ranma's water Dragon Slayer powers worked against the idea of him/her getting drunk, and, indeed, even eating solid foods was something that occasionally bothered Ranma, like he shouldn’t be doing it or there was no point to it. But Ranma liked solid foods far too much to give them up.

“What did Ranma do to you that is so terrible you would spike her drink to get back at her?” Mirajane asked skeptically.

“Are you joking!?” Makarov looked at her and for a moment, his inebriated state fading into righteous anger. “Did you not see how much paperwork I've been having the fill in over the past few days thanks to this latest debacle!?”

“But that's Phantom Lord's fault, not Ranma's,” Mirajane protested.

“Yes, but if Ranma hadn't become involved, I would've been able to get away with just a single report, not reams of them!”

Rolling her eyes at this justification, Mirajane shook her head, knowing that that was only a quarter of the reason at best. The real reason was twofold. One, Makarov was a pervert like many of the people in the guild above a certain age. He probably thought that getting Ranma to not attack Makarov violently would be easier if she was high. And two, once he was allowed to use the sex-change potion, Makarov **always** looked for a reason to use some of the other potions and medicines his old friend had left them.

“Don't go crying for sympathy once this blows up in your face. I’m going to be too busy telling you I told you so.”

Makarov huffed, then looked back to the now visibly disoriented-looking Ranma, hopping over to him, over the tables. “Ranma, you're looking a little dry there. Want to have a drink with me?” Between one step and the next, he ‘tripped,’ aiming himself toward the redhead’s chest.

But Ranma suddenly blinked to one side and then was back, looking down at Makarov as she hiccupped. “And you're looking short, old, and ugly, but I wasn't going to comment.”

This sent Laxus and the others nearby into laughter, including three that Ranma hadn't been introduced to before but who she knew all the same, thanks to Laxus having described them. Yet, after his laughter died out, Laxus leaned forward and looked at his friend questioningly. “Ranma, are you drunk?”

 “’Course not, Sparky!” Ranma said, taking another healthy bite out of her pasta and pointing at Laxus with the fork as she chewed, saying “I'm a Water Dragon Slayer, my bod can handle enough alcohol ta float this guild hall, and I'd be fine!” Ranma also knew she would’ve been fine without that ability, given the amount of ki she had inside of herself. Her body would react to the negative influence of alcohol quickly, just as it did the Dragon Slayer magic after a certain point.

Unfortunately for Ranma, whatever Makarov had given Ranma had slipped past those defenses entirely. The tiny crystals in question, called Uplifting Fever, tricked the body into releasing a series of chemicals. Originating within the body, these were all natural and went directly into the brain, which created the high feeling.

Ranma stood up drunkenly, grabbing Makarov up and twisting him this way and that. Despite her weaving body, her hiccups, and her red face, though, Ranma’s voice was still clear. “Seriously, how can someone be so short? I know; you're some kind of doll, under control of someone else hidden in the room.” She twisted the now blustering Makarov back and forth. “Where's the lacrima, huh? Where is it?”

Laxus laughed and leaned back, thinking that this might be good fun. “Serves you right, old man,” he shouted at his grandfather, having caught what Makarov had done earlier just like Bisca had. Unlike her, however, he hadn’t cared and was hoping to make fun of Ranma. He was an asshole like that.

“Ranma,” Erza said as she took Ranma's hand and gently pushed it down towards the ground to make the other redhead let Makarov go. She had finished chastising Natsu and the others for their indecency and had hoped to come back and finish her strawberry cake despite the chaos still going on around them, including the sight of Lucy and Cana dancing to a song Reedus was playing on a fiddle. “I understand your incredulity that someone as short as the master could be alive, but he truly is an actual human being, and it isn't very respectful of you to lift him up like that. It's also not safe considering how much alcohol he has imbibed. He might throw up on you.”

“I suppose so, sexy.” Ranma said with a laugh, throwing her arms around Erza.

Erza blushed as this statement registered, then “EEEPed!” as Ranma suddenly smacked her on the rear.

Her face now bright red, Erza growled and, without a word, threw a punch at Ranma, who was grinning at her even as she dodged, tossing Makarov negligently away. “You liiiiiked it,” she teased, dodging her attacks by the barest of margins, her movements so disjointed and wild that Erza couldn’t predict them.

Sitting nearby, Happy, who was, just like the others, still in his female body, stood up from where she had been sitting next to Laki and shouted, “Thief! He stole my line!”

“Stand still and take your punishment!” Erza growled

“Naaah. Who’d I look like, the pink chick that the blonde with the large…keys… can summon?” Ranma said in reply, dodging another punch and getting into Erza’s face. “Yer cute when yer all angry’n’stuff,” she said, her voice now slurring a bit.

Once more Erza blushed hotly but continued to try to punch her. Makarov soon joined in too, hurling a filled mug of ale at Ranma, who lackadaisically dodged, bending impossibly backward, then, catching it on her foot, sent it right back over Makarov’s head to smash into Mira, who had been standing nearby with Bisca, splashing them both. Ranma cooed, “Aw, sorry gals. I’da preferred ta get ya we…”

At that point Erza nearly caught Ranma with a punch from behind, interrupting her statement, much to the relief of the women nearby. “What the hell did you give Ranma mastER?!” Erza shouted, ending her voice in a shout as Ranma once more smacked her on the rear. “Darn it, stop doing that!”

“Shtop likin’ it!” Ranma replied back cheekily, then ducked behind a table, rolling away on the floor as Bisca and Mira joined in the chase.

Then Natsu, his body shifting back to male even as he raced forward, joined in. “Oh yeah, let’s get him!” Grey quickly followed him.

Laxus was laughing at all this, but he stopped laughing when a nearly naked Grey, also back to normal, was tossed into his face several minutes later. “Fuck you, Grey!” he roared, smashing Grey to one side, then growling and standing up, followed by the Raijinshu. “Fuck it, let’s beat on Ranma; he obviously needs it.”

Mira shrieked in shock as Ranma flipped over a punch and her body at the same time. Leaning heavily into her back the redhead whispered something none of the others could hear, which caused Mira’s face to go bright red until she turned and tried to kick out at her. “…And honey and whipped cream!” she caroled as she dodged and rolled away.

“Get back here!” Mira shouted, going after her as she called on her magic, followed quickly by the others.

**End Flashback**

Ranma chuckled, shaking her head. *Okay, so what I can remember, which ain’t much, I’ll admit, was an odd mix of super embarrassing and fun. Being on that side of a dodge game is kind of cool sometimes, but I’m gonna have to apologize to the gals I flirted with, s*he thought to herself. Then she grimaced as the feeling of her body registered, and, for the first time in a few days, it wasn’t because of her monthly monster.  *Darn it!*

Her Dragon Slayer magic had returned over the past few days since Aria had drained it slowly, but Ranma could tell now that it was back to full capacity, and her ki was back to fighting it. The naturalness of the fact that it had returned without her ki fighting the return even though it had once her magic had fully restored itself was beyond bizarre to Ranma, but it left her with some hope that the two powers within her could eventually be trained to get along. But for now, it was still damn irritating!

*It's like suddenly being crippled again after getting out of your wheelchair for the first time in years.* At that thought, Ranma frowned. *How many years have I been here, anyway? How many years has my ki spent fighting that? Darn it! What the hell did you not tell me about this Dragon Slayer business, Typhon, you old fart!*

Looking down at herself, Ranma’s frown turned into a smile, seeing Wendy nestled against one side and, astonishingly, Carla on the other. *Who would’ve thought she was a clinger when she's asleep?*  Wendy was also clinging to her in their shared sleeping bag, but that wouldn't surprise anyone who was in the girl’s presence for more than a few minutes. Carla had also stayed the entire night in human form. *That’s a pretty good sign of her growing magical strength.*

Despite that, though, Ranma slowly extricated herself from Carla, gently pushing the cat-girl’s arms apart, pulling that arm free, then skittering out from between the two of them and gently pushing Wendy so she rolled until she was within clinging range. As she stepped from the tent and out into the rest of the apartment, though, Ranma stopped, blinking, as scattered around the room and the rest of the apartment beyond were several of the other Fairy Tail mages, laying around in a haphazard fashion.

Gray, for some reason, was still undressed, though he had transformed back last night, obviously, once the potion had wound its course. That sight was disturbing on many levels, Ranma reflected, twitching away from Gray and then looking over at the others. She recognized Laxus and then the three mages nearest him.  *What in heck are they doing here?*

Shaking her head at this minor mystery, Ranma stepped around them, noticing that Erza was also sprawled out on a couch, and the announcer, Max, was lying on another one.  *Where did the sofas come from?*

Shaking her head once more, Ranma moved around them and into the kitchen, where she heated up some water and then dumped it over her head, returning to his male body for the first time in days with a sigh of relief. Once in his male body, he started cooking.

The sounds of his moving around the kitchen woke a few of them up, and Evergreen pushed herself to her feet and moved to join Ranma. Ranma glanced up at her out of the corner of his eye.

Evergreen was a woman of medium height, at five feet six, perhaps, with light brown hair, who was dressed quite provocatively in a green dress that left much of the top of her chest bare and clung to her body down to mid-thigh. She had a necklace of pearls around her neck and thin glasses over her dark brown eyes that Ranma thought looked like those a schoolteacher would wear, thought there was nothing like a teacher’s look in her haughty, arrogant face. On the upper portion of her left breast was her Fairy Tail mark in light green. She also had on a bit of light pink lipstick.

“So, how did you and the other lightning followers come over to my place last night?” Ranma knew the trio called themselves the Thunder God Tribe, but he figured that, since they didn’t actually use lightning magic, his name for them was better. “Why do you call yourselves the Thunder God Tribe, anyway? Doesn't Laxus do mostly solo jobs these days?”

“It's a name our team came up with years ago, when we were all Laxus’ students. These days I think we keep it for simple nostalgia. But we do tend to go out on missions together and often attempt to do the same with Laxus when we can.” Evergreen huffed, looking over at her still sleeping fellows. “Personally, I think they’re just fanboys, while I just think the gold’s better on the missions Laxus does.”

“What do you remember, if anything, about last night?” Ranma asked.

“I remember you become a monster flirt when you are drunk. But, then again,” she said with a smirk, her eyes raking Rama from head to toe, “I suppose that drink and other equivalent things do take away one's inhibitions. A little pent up, are we?”

Ranma rolled his eyes, but, as the others started to wake up, he didn’t answer.

Everyone moved to the table, holding their heads and looking askance. Even Erza looked as if she had gotten drunk last night, wincing occasionally at the noises of people moving around. Thankfully, she did not look like she was in a rush to try and hurt Ranma for his comments last night. Once they were sitting down, everyone started to eat quietly, and he tried to apologize, but Erza just glared at him, and he shut up.

Then Wendy woke up and hopped out of the tent, shouting, “Good morning, Ranma-nii, everyone!”

The Fairy Tail mages all grabbed their heads and groaned, even Laxus growling angrily, while Wendy cocked her head. “What’s wrong with you all?”

“My little sister can be so mean; I love it!” Ranma guffawed at the looks of pain on everyone’s faces.

“Indeed, when one is so uncouth as to drink to excess, one should pay the price the next day,” Carla said sagely.

Quickly Wendy apologized to their guests and took her place at the table, looking a little embarrassed. Still, everyone was now awake and through the worst of the pain enough to actually be able to concentrate on forming words together.

Freed immediately spoke up. “Laxus-sama told us about this mission that you and he are trying to put together in the next few days, and I have to ask if we can join in.”

Ranma glared over at Laxus who shrugged. “I told them that, as the king’s personal mage hunter, you’ve been given the task of finding those Oración assholes. Didn’t think it was a secret, really.”

“It kind of is, because the more people who know, the faster rumor about it will spread,” Ranma drawled. “That’s why I’m the one going around to the various guilds rather than the Magic Council simply sending for the mages I want to recruit. Still, you already told ’em, so ya can’t take it back. As for your question, though, no. The Oración Seis are S class dark mages, and one of them nearly killed Mira, with an admitted sneak attack, but, still, I want only S-class mages with me when we find them.”

“We've all gone in for the S-class trials, baby!” the other man said.

Though she couldn’t remember the man’s name, Wendy watched in amusement as the large dolls that followed him around went, ‘baby, baby!’  *If I was younger I'd be chasing those right now!* As it was, Wendy was wondering if they were enchanted in any way or if that was just his magic.

“Better question,” Erza said, her own head now clear as she pointed at Grey, who was still dressed in the dress from the previous night. “Why in the name of magic are you still dressed like that?”

Gray looked down at himself, then gasped. “Shit!” He quickly started to strip, but several growls from around the table stopped him, and he backed away rapidly, heading into the other room as he shouted, “But you know, that dark guild doesn't just have S-class mages, it’s also got other guilds working for it. And, besides, the Raijinshu aren’t the only ones who have been pushing S-class for a while! We want in!”

Ranma shook his head. “A small strike team still makes more sense than a larger one. Still, Gray’s right. I’ll think about it. If Fiore’s intelligence network’s figured out what dark guilds answer to the Brain and his assholes, taking them out at the same time we move against the Oración Seis themselves would be a good idea.”

“Won’t the rest of the Balam Alliance respond to this?” Evergreen asked logically.

“No. It might be called an Alliance, but I think that’s a little too big a term for what it really is,” Ranma replied. “Ya have to understand, these idiots ain’t good people, and each member of the alliance probably has their own goals. It’s more a nonaggression treaty rather than anything more powerful. So if we limit our attacks to the Oración Seis and those guilds which answer to it, and do it quickly before the other two Alliance members can worry about being our next targets, then we should be good.”

“You sound as if this’ll be the first of many missions against the alliance,” Laxus stated more than asked, his eyes narrowed in shrewd concentration.

“I don't know how they're involved with one another. What I just said was more an impression and my knowledge of how evil, arrogant people work. But I'm hoping that once we take out one, we’ll get enough information to figure out where the heck the others are based,” Ranma confided.

“Makes sense,” Laxus grunted, then gasped. “Evergreen! I was going to eat that sausage!”

“Then you shouldn't have been talking,” the glasses wearing girl said primly, cutting into the sausage that she'd speared from the main plate and biting down on one end almost vindictively. It was the last one, too, and the others began to bicker about it good-naturedly, ending the serious talk. Gray and Freed, though, had gotten what they could have from Ranma: a chance to come with him later.

After cleaning up, Wendy and Ranma left the house, heading out for the day, while the others had their own plans. The two of them, though, wanted to buy some permanent futon furniture sets, a few board-games for themselves, lounge chairs for out on the balcony, and extra blankets for out there as well for when winter hit. Already it was getting kind of chilly, meaning that Wendy also needed some more autumn weather clothing. “You need to stop growing,” Ranma said jokingly, pushing his little sister gently on the shoulder. “It's getting kind of expensive to buy you a new wardrobe every year.”

Wendy laughed, then pouted a little, looking down at her chest. “I only wish I could say I was growing in every way.” Underwear and a few dresses were the only things she’d bought when going around with the girls of Fairy Tail after they had arrived in Magnolia the first time.

“It will come eventually, Wendy. Don't worry about it,” Ranma replied, ruffling her hair with a smile.

The two went about their day until around three in the afternoon, when they finished shopping and dropped off their stuff back at the apartment. Ranma checked in at the guild, hoping that the pink haired healer Porlyusica had come back by then.

But Makarov, though, just shook his head. Like Ranma, he had woken up that morning without any real sign of the night before, though he warned Ranma to give the girls some time to get over their anger at him for how he had flirted with them all last night. “As for Porlyusica, you make the mistake of thinking that she ever even tells us when she's back or when she is out. Porlyusica is her own woman, Ranma, and has rarely if ever left her house to come here in person anyway. We go to her with injured unless they can’t be moved for some reason.”

“Can you at least give me an estimate of when she'll be back?” Ranma asked.

Makarov shrugged. “Given how long she already has been gone, maybe a day or two more?”

Nodding disconsolately, Ranma asked, “Can I reach any of the other guilds in that time to talk to their S-class mages?”

“No. None of the other guilds with S-class mages in them are close enough for you to get there and back. Remember, we’re all spread out over the entirety of Fiore, Ranma. Even if you could run as fast as I’ve heard you’re alluded to, you wouldn’t be able to get there and back.”

Ranma was about to scowl, asking, “But then, what should,…” then he paused as he caught Laxus smirking at him, and he responded with an evil looking grin on his own face. “You know what? Never mind. I think I know precisely what I'll be doing with my time.”

**OOOOOOO**

The next day Wendy set off to spend the day with Levy, and Ranma and Laxus went back out of the town towards the training area they had created the day before. It was about forty minutes jog away from the town, even for Ranma, but, considering the fact that they were throwing massive spells at one another, the distance was kind of necessary.

“Where’s Wendy?” Laxus asked as he hung his cloak up on a tree that the two men had decided was neutral territory during their spars. “We’re going to miss our healer if yesterday was any indication.”

“She has something to do with Levy today, and Mirajane, I think. They're going to help her with some of the more scientific terms in her enchanting books then help her experiment a bit.”

“Makes sense,” Laxus said with a nod. Mirajane wasn't an enchantress herself, but her sister Anna used a lot of enchanted items, and Mirajane had somehow begun to be able to discern a good one from a bad one when they were shopping. “And Levy…” Laxus shook his head. “That girl's been growing in leaps and bounds lately. I've known for more than ten years that she would be a fantastic support mage, but she's becoming a good direct assault mage too.”

“That magic of hers, Solid Script? It’s very flexible, yeah,” Ranma said with a nod. “Her physical endurance is just horrible, and magically she can’t seem to charge her attacks with enough power. Still, that can be overcome, I’d bet.”

“Indeed,” Erza said as she stalked into the clearing. Instead of a full suit of armor, she was wearing several bracers, vambraces, and a chest plate as normal, but each of them were from different sets of armor. She smirked at the two boys, spinning a spear in one hand and stabbing a sword into the ground next to her with the other, her normally stern eyes practically a weapon as she looked at them both. “Is this a private party, boys, or can anyone join in?”

Erza had decided to ask the local blacksmiths to concentrate on portions of her many different types of armor rather than whole sets. This way it gave her some defense against, in this case, direct physical assault, lightning, fire, and water magic, along with a heavy speed enhancement. And since most of her weapons had survived, her offensive power was still uninhibited.

Laxus frowned, backing away as he noticed the type of spear she was swinging and the rather disturbing glint in her eye. *Fuck, she really is holding a grudge form the other night. I thought she was too nice yesterday morning.*  “You know what, I think I’d prefer to spar with the Raijinshu for the day.”

For his part, Ranma too had seen the glint in Erza’s eyes and knew he was in for a beating. But rather than be worried, that made him just grin viciously, looking forward to this. “Heh, I’ve been wanting to spar with ya since I saw ya in action against Eisenwald. Sure, let’s see what ya got…babe.”

 While Erza stiffened and blushed at the tease, Ranma turned to Laxus and said, “Damn, I knew you were blonde, but since when were ya yellow too? Ya gonna run from your former student like that?”

 “What’d you say to me, you aqua-bitch!?” Laxus roared, his large arms glowing golden with lightning. “Fine! Let's do this!”

Without another word the three combatants came together in the middle of the current clearing, creating a boom that was heard for miles around.

**OOOOOOO**

Sighing, Wendy smiled up at the noontime sky. Though it was autumn, it was very nice here in Magnolia, and she looked around at all the girls spread out around the area. Fairy Hills had emptied for the day out onto its lawn. The girls scattered across the hill simply enjoying the nice weather. It was tradition here for the girls to spend almost all their time outdoors in autumn, since it was a short but calm season here in Magnolia and when winter hit, it hit with a vengeance.

Between her and Levy sat the armor that Wendy had been given so many years ago by the King of Pergrande. It shone silver in the light of her spells as they examined the spellwork on it. “What exactly do you want to add?” Levy asked, looking at the girl and then down at the writing scrawled everywhere in the circle of magic that currently surrounded the silver armor.

“I want to re-size it,” Wendy replied promptly, turning her head back down to look at the piece of armor. “It's too small for me now, although…not in the chest,” she muttered, shaking her head before going on. “And it smells if I wear it long enough. But it's the second most enchanted item we own, and, as you can see...”

“It's got **major** defensive spells on it already,” Mirajane said, leaning over the armor to get a better glimpse of some of the writing. She didn't understand most of it, but she could tell if one bit or another wasn't working together properly. She couldn't fix it, unlike the two other girls, but she could spot them. And she could spot a lot of places like that. “Where did you get this, anyway? It's such a weird mix of super-powerful magic and not very, well, good enchantments.”

“It’s not elegant,” Levy said with a shake of her head. “Like you said, the magic’s powerful but not very well controlled. You could get the same protection in this suit for half or even less magic pushed into the armor.” Levy couldn’t enchant things, but she could read the enchanted runes set into objects and knew a lot about it, having studied such things with Freed and others numerous times over the years.

“The King of Pergrande,” Wendy said with a smile. “He's a nice man, I suppose, if a little too serious.” Then she clapped her hands with a giggle. “But there's this one woman there, a swordswoman named Ikaruga? She's so funny! And she has her husband **so** totally wound around her fingers it’s hilarious to watch. He's the king’s younger brother, although he's fourth in line to the throne because the king has a few sons.”

“I don't think I'm ever going to get used to someone who mentions royalty so easily,” Levy said with a shake of her head. “Still, there is quite a bit someone with the skill to imbue magic into items could do here if we remove the enchantments already on the armor and take it all from the ground up. But I've got no skill at enchantments to help that part of the process, Wendy. Sorry.”

Wendy's face firmed. “I’ll do it! It’s supposed to be my armor, after all, and I want to see it.”

Mirajane nodded. “In that case, maybe you should talk to the blacksmith that Erza goes to? Although I don't think he'd be able to do anything with the armor itself, he might be able to tell you signs to watch out for when you’re coming close to the upper limit of the amount of magic it can take.” She tapped one finger against the armor, shaking her head. “Are you sure this is…”

“Yep, a kind of metal called mithril,” Wendy said with a nod. “Pergrande for steel, Fiore for magic,” she said in a singsong, laughing as the two Fairy Tail mages laughed with her.

Bisca came over at that point, ruffling Wendy's hair and laying out next to them with a sigh. Around her a few of her animals moved freely, getting petted by this or that female Fairy Tail mage, but most of them simply wandering around free. Even the lion and the anaconda that she had captured were moving peaceably among the people and the other animals who should've rightfully been their prey. Wendy had gasped at the sight of them all when she had arrived several hours ago and quickly moved around, petting this or that animal for a time before getting down to business. But Bisca had been busy with running her antelope, zebra, and horse and was only now resting for the first time that day.

She looked at the two as they moved around the armor, trying to figure out how to remove the enchantments on it without damaging the armor itself. “So this came from Pergrande? I don't suppose you saw any guns mages there, did you? They're known for the quality of their guns, but not so much the guns magic. Still, if anyone was able to develop something new, it might be there.”

“No. I know the weapon-smiths I told you about before, Bisca-san,” Wendy said, not looking up from her work. “I'm sorry, but we didn't actually get into any fights in Pergrande. It's a very nice, almost peaceful place where we went, and Ranma wouldn't let us go near the mountains.”

“Mountains? Oh right, Pergrande is situated right next to the continent. Isn't that how he and Laxus met? In an orc invasion down there?” Mira asked.

Wendy nodded, then thought for a moment. “Although, we did run into a few guns mages elsewhere, Bisca-san.”

“Any new spells you maybe could describe?” Bisca asked quickly.

“I don't know if you know them, but I have a few. Ranma also uses a few others.”

“I've talked to him about them, and I think I could replicate most of the ones he’s shared with me,” Bisca said with a nod.

“Well one was how to enlarge the magic bullet, but you take away from its ability to actually penetrate. Ranma said something about it hitting like a tank round, whatever that is, and not seeing the point to it because he could already hit that hard anyway. ‘If I wanted to hit something like that, I'd conjure up a water attack,’” she said, mimicking her older brother’s voice perfectly, eliciting many a laugh from the girls around her.

“And then there were a few others. Multi-shot, I think, was one of them, though I don't think the mage who was using it did it properly. He was only able to create three, and then they sort of sputtered out. And then a spell I remember seeing that had some kind of flame magic added to it.”

Bisca frowned, scratching at her chin thoughtfully. “That second one does sound as if it would be harder to manifest, but I bet I could pull it off. You'd have to imagine the one becoming the many and have already instilled in the first bullet enough magic to create the other bullets from their basic form once you willed it to. But the first, why would you need something like that? Instead, create the bullet magically, pack it with power, then try to instill it with separate spells. The first spell, penetration, then the other ones, damage and so forth,” she murmured, not noticing the looks she was getting as she went into her specialty, thinking hard.

Though she did look up when Cana, who had just returned from a trip with Natsu, Levy, and Lucy, sat down next to her with a grin. “You know, that sounded dirty there for a second. I just bet you want someone to penetrate you, don't you, Bisca,” she said, pushing the other girl’s shoulder.

“Eventually, maybe,” Bisca said with a laugh, while Wendy blushed hotly, understanding who they were talking about.

“Why do you want to get stronger, though?” Mirajane asked. “You never struck me as someone who was always thinking about new ways to use their magic or anything like that.”

“I think I need to, but I'm not the only one getting stronger,” Bisca said with a shrug, looking at Levy.

“I am,” Levy said hesitantly, then looked down at the work she and Wendy were doing. “But I'm worried about really pushing it and training to get better. I mean, my team…”

“If they can’t handle your getting stronger than they are, they would have already done something about it,” Bisca said bluntly. “You’ve been the strongest member of Shadow Gear for a while, and if that bothered Jet and Droy, they would've tried to get stronger themselves.”

“They are,” Levy said heatedly. “It's just they’re slower about it.”

“They're slow, period,” Mirajane said with a sigh. “How often have you said they're just friends? Come on!”

Levy scowled, unable to comment on that one since it was true. She had never seen Jet or Droy as anything but friends. Wendy, however came to Levy’s rescue, gesturing for the two of them back to the work on the chest plate and asking Bisca and Mira to be quiet while they worked.

Bisca sat there for a time, talking to Mirajane and watching the two blue-haired girls work, then she sat up, waving her hand in the air, which caused the others to a stop and see what had caught her attention. Erza and Ranma were coming up the hill to Fairy Hills, both of them looking much the worse for wear.

For some reason Ranma was in her female form, though that didn’t seem to matter at present, given that she was laughing at something or other as they came close, while Erza simply smiled. Ranma was limping slightly, and she had one heck of a shiner for some reason, despite her healing ability, which told those who knew her that she was probably exhausted. In turn, Erza was battered and was favoring her right side. The cut had been wrapped, but the red could still be seen marking a noticeable wound, a cut that ran up from her hand up her arm.

Forgetting her work for a moment, Wendy raced towards them, shouting, “Are you both all right? What happened?”

“Nothing bad, Wendy,” Ranma said with a shake of her head and waving Wendy off. “We just got a little too into our sparring, that's all.”

“He's right; don't worry,” Erza said with a smile, looking down at her arm. “I already bandaged it, and, while I don't heal as fast as this one seems to most of the time,” she said, kicking out to the side and catching Ranma in the leg, “I’ll heal in a few hours or so.”

Instead of retaliating, Ranma simply laughed, moving toward Wendy, her arms outstretched. “Meh, take it as a win that fighting you and Laxus wore me out to the point I‘m not healing right away. Now, come on! Give your big brother turned sister a hug!”

“No!” Now no longer concerned that the two of them were badly wounded, the stink that the two of them were putting off stuck in Wendy's nose. She leaped away, squealing, putting Bisca and the others between them. Bisca pointed at them both and, with Mirajane beside her, shouted, “Shower!”

Erza nodded and grabbed Ranma, dragging her along. “Come on. I was against trying that joke in the first place.”

“Wait! She might be a woman now, but Ranma's a guy! He can't be going into Fairy Hills,” Laki protested from nearby.

Ranma nodded at that and changed direction. The other girls ignored that in favor of looking at Erza in question. “Were you actually going to let him use your shower?”

“Yes, why wouldn't I? Natsu, Gary, and I have bathed together often enough,” Erza said, innocently enough.

But Mirajane and Bisca, at least, could tell that there was something else there too. It was clear to both of them that Erza had ulterior motives for that attempt to bathe with Ranma.

*Interesting,* Mirajane thought with an internal laugh. Personally, she had sort of given up on Ranma. Yes, he was good eye candy, very good eye candy, as a guy. But his female form bothered the heck out of her. Whatever anyone would say, her fights with Erza when they were younger were not unresolved sexual tension! And further, while Jenny might have enjoyed their moment of…experimentation, Mira had decided that girls weren’t for her. She would have to have at least been somewhat attracted to girls to be with Ranma, and, while Mira might have been willing to experiment further, she wasn’t willing to do so with someone who looked like her frival (friend rival).

Bisca simply giggled, winking at Erza, who tried and failed at keeping her innocent act up before she turned and headed into the dormitory. While she wasn’t certain where she stood when it came to Ranma’s curse, she knew that Erza was interested in Ranma too. But Bisca also realized that she and Ranma hadn’t done anything but kiss, and, as long as it didn’t become some kind of open competition for his affections, which Bisca couldn’t see happening anytime soon, she could deal with other girls being interested in Ranma.

Soon enough Erza and Ranma had returned, with Ranma having raced back easily over the rooftops and then up the hill without stopping. Now he skidded down to sit next to Wendy, smirking over at Bisca and Levy. “So, what have you all been up to this morning?” It was around four in the afternoon, but he hadn't seen Wendy since they had left the apartment at eight that morning.

Wendy explained what they had been doing and held up a thick notebook with several pages of notes written down on it in her large script about different enchantments, and then she looked at him with puppy dog eyes. Ranma rolled his eyes and poked her in the forehead. “Yes, you can try them out on me later.”

“Thank you, Ranma-nii!” Wendy said with a happy grin. The Sky Dragon Slayer was very good at support spells, and mixing more enchantments into that made sense to her. Then she looked at him quizzically. “Do we have anything else enchanted besides our tent equipment and your weapons? I know you won't let me take them apart.”

Ranma frowned thoughtfully, going through what he kept in his Requip space. “Um, our Song Silk cloaks, but you won’t be able to do anything about them; the magic can’t be separated. Um…” Ranma ummed. “Let me check my…other Requip space.”

With that, as the others looked on, somewhat bemused, Ranma pulled at his pants pocket, pulling it out with one hand while thrusting his other hand into it farther than should have been possible. To the watchers’ mystification, it didn’t even generate any kind of bulge in the pocket as he did so. In this way, Ranma began to explore his ki pocket.

“That is sooo not how Requip space works!” Erza muttered, cocking her head thoughtfully. “What in the world…?”

“Ranma-nii says that it is an offshoot of his first magic,” Wendy supplied, giggling as Ranma stuck his entire arm down into it for a moment.

The Fairy Tail mages all looked at one another and then shrugged. Personal magic was unexplainable in many ways, so they weren’t going to question it.

As they watched, Ranma pulled out a few knickknacks they had picked up from here and there, including a few old toys that Wendy gasped at, having forgotten Ranma had kept them. A few others knickknacks, including what looked like a gun barrel that Bisca swooped on; an emerald that blazed with light for a second before dimming instantly; a flower made of quartz; and what looked like a large, leaf-shaped spear-blade followed. The last was a long, thin black box, which looked relatively plain compared to the rest of the pieces.

Wendy sat down in the center of the junk, while the other girls looked over her shoulders and handed her pieces to identify. Wendy obligingly took each in her hands, and the magic flared up around her and the items in question. “Okay, so… This one, the quartz flower, is a Foe-spotter. Um… From…Joya, I think?”

“Sin, actually, or rather the land formerly known as Sin, since Pergrande annexed it,” Ranma supplied, having just pulled his arm out shivering slightly. “Damn cold in there for some reason. Still, great for storing meat and other stuff.”

“Again, not how Requip works,” Erza said dryly, shaking her head.

“Sin?” Wendy asked.

“Yep. It was during our second trip through Desierto about four months after we met Carla. She got sick with that weird cat disease, and we had to head to Desierto in a rush to get her cured?”

“I remember **that**,” Wendy retorted, waving off the interest the other girls were showing. “How could I not after nearly knocking myself out healing her all the time to keep the disease at bay?”

Even more than a year and a half later, that rankled badly. Wendy’s healing skills when it came to wounds was frankly phenomenal, and her speed with it put her well above even most experienced healers. Her skill with diseases, though, had never really gone beyond a certain level, and it had hurt not being able to heal her friend.

“Well, afterward we wanted to return to Stella quickly, so we hopped onto a ship and headed into Pergrande’s new territory. From there we were able to travel better roads all the way up to the Inland Sea. I found that Foe-spotter in a little job I did there for the local magistrate,” Ranma supplied. “You were still out of it after weeks of using your magics, and Carla was still badly dehydrated, so that’s probably why you can’t remember.”

“Well…I can’t do anything with this enchantment. It’s too difficult for me just yet,” Wendy said with a sigh, putting the Foe-spotting flower to one side.

“Is there actually any magic on this?” Bisca asked, holding the gun barrel.

“Nope, but it’s a decent piece, and it was created by our friends. Will was trying to experiment with different materials, but that one he was going to toss away as too expensive to mass produce,” Ranma said with a grin. “Wendy said you had gun envy, so…”

Bisca chuckled sheepishly at that while the other girls giggled. “So, how much do I owe you for this?”

“Meh, take it. I’ve got my two pistols, and I’m not a rifle person,” Ranma said with a shrug, missing Bisca’s blush at the princely gift. The barrel looked to be made of some kind of steel, which Erza later identified as a kind of hardened tungsten mixed with lacrima crystals to a perfect degree. It was, in every way, better than the rifle barrel Bisca was currently using.

Ignoring the older girls’ and Ranma’s talk, Wendy moved on. “The emerald has a really nifty light enchantment. Oooh, and it’s got a built in control amplifier thing, so you can set the power of it.” Quickly, Wendy marked down the enchantment’s runes in her notebook, taking several minutes to get each one right, while the talk continued around her.

“The spearhead might be interesting, but I have to admit to some curiosity about this one,” Erza said, pointing at the long, thin, matte black box.

“Ah, that daft box,” Ranma said with a growl, shaking his head.

“What box…?” Wendy said, looking up and then nodding. “Oh, that one! We never did find out how to open it.”

“What is it?” Levy asked as Erza reached down to pick it up.

“It's a memory box, really ancient magic. Those things are supposed to open at specific sounds or movements or anything,” Ranma said with a shrug. We never were able to figure it out. I mean, it could be literally **anything**…” He stopped as the box began to glow in Erza’s hand. “What the hell!?”

Erza held it up, wincing a little as her wrappings had come undone around her palm, unnoticed until she had picked the box up. “What is inside?”

“We don't know,” Ranma said as he watched the box begin to glow. Lines appeared here and there, with a kind of script between them, different from what had been visible when Wendy had cast her analyze spell. Golden light began to emanate from another few lines on the top portion of the box. “We found it in Bell Lake. It was the site of an ancient civilization’s capital city, a place where dragons and humans lived in harmony millennia ago. We found that box hidden in a statue of a dragon down there.”

As they spoke, the glow of the box began to become a little too painful to look at, and Erza hastily set it down, turning aside as the others did the same.

“What?” Mira asked in astonishment. “Dragons and humans living together!?”

“Yep. We found mention of it in a few history books here and there, and then we started to search the lake. That was…less than a year after I had found Wendy, I think.”

“You do realize that story just makes me want to learn more, right?” Bisca asked, with Erza nodding in agreement.

“I'm sorry; I'm a little distracted right now,” Ranma quipped, staring at the box and pushing himself forward between it and Wendy. “I'm just hoping whatever it contains isn't dangerous right now.”

Abruptly most of the lights faded, the power of the device concentrating on one end of the box, and then an image was suddenly broadcast up into the air. And everyone there gasped as they stared at it. For one thing, it was almost solid looking, and very colorful too, beyond what most long distance imagery lacrima could create.

For another, the woman’s face, which appeared there, looked almost exactly like Erza. Erza perhaps in fifteen or twenty years from now, but still, the resemblance was incredible. Her face was a little broader than Erza's, but her eyes were the same warm brown, her hair looked to be the same color, and there were enough features about it to make it very clear that the two of them were somehow related. Her upper body was also shown, which made more than one girl there think, *What the heck, is that what Erza’s hiding under those chest-plates she wears!?*  Mira, in particular, was feeling rather annoyed.

“Where did you get this again?” Erza breathed.

“I told you. Ancient ruins, ruins that were in the center of Bell Lake, which might have been created by some kind of old magical weapon or other striking the capital,” Ranma said, staring at the woman and then over at Erza. “Maybe it needed a descendant’s blood or something? That makes sense, I suppose.”

“I can’t help you there,” Erza said with a shake of her head as the image turned away, fiddling with something and almost disappearing to one side of the projection device or whatever was recording her ancestor’s face. “I don’t know anything about my family or, or anything, really. My earliest memory is living on the streets of a town out in the forest somewhere. It’s where I met Simon and his sister too, though I can’t remember what the girl looked like, alas.”

“Is this thing on already!?” shouted the woman in the image. “Come now, you all can't be that incompetent!”

The language was ancient, but Ranma understood it, as did the others around him, perhaps thanks to some magic in the box that allowed for translation. Regardless, more than one of the women there turned to look at Erza and said, deadpan, “Yep, they're related, all right,” as they heard the commanding tone the woman was using.

Erza simply nodded her head, watching the image. “Indeed, the resemblance is uncanny.”

After a few moments, the woman seemed satisfied and leaned back again, smiling into the pickup. “As this is on the eve of battle against the eastern dragons, I find it incumbent upon me to leave this memory box for my daughter, Erza. With the future so uncertain, I would have her know that when she comes into this world she was loved, even if I am not around to tell her that in person.”

At that Erza's eyes widened, and she began to cry softly. Bisca and Mirajane quickly hugged her from the sides, as did Levy from behind, staring over her head at the image.

Ranma, on the other hand, was just confused. *So, is that name just a coincidence or what? Some time travel magic? Does that kind of thing…? Wait, what am I saying? Magic. Of course it exists.*

“From the moment I learned I was pregnant barely a week past, I was terrified,” the woman confided. “I am, after all, a queen, and it has come just on the heels of my old friend Belserion returning from the continent and bringing with him news of the coming conflict against the eastern dragons. Their numbers are great, and our ability to fight them seems less than equal to the task.”

“Hah! ‘Less than equal,’ is that diplomatic talk for completely screwed?!” said a loud, boisterous voice.

The recording device tilted to watch as the woman stood up and moved to a nearby window. This caused more of her body to be visible, and Mira scowled further while Bisca and Levy both whistled, with Levy becoming somewhat depressed as she stared at Erza’s chest. Even Ranma could not stop the thought, *Holy shit, is that what Erza’s going to look like when she’s middle-aged? Sign me up!* He remonstrated with himself a moment later for being crass and sexist, but that didn’t stop the thought going through his head.

At the window, however, was a sight that made everyone watching the recording gasp. It was a huge eye, slightly tilted with a slit iris. Around it were scales, and, as the creature pulled away, some of the face could be seen. Horns thrust out from the side of its snout, the back of its head, and the large ear that could be seen poking out from one side of its face. Its scales were gray and heavy looking, and, for some reason, the whole face gave off the feeling of experience and age. Not anywhere near as much as Typhon had, but this dragon had definitely been around for a while.

“His face is even larger than Grandeeney’s!” Wendy gasped in shock.

 “Yeah, it’s up there. Almost as large as Typhon’s, I’d say,” Ranma said before Mira and Bisca shushed the two Dragon Slayers. Erza was too busy just staring at the woman to acknowledge anything around her.

 “But, then again, that’s why you have myself and the other dragons! You humans have proven too useful and fun to have around to just let our more barbaric cousins eat you all. That’s why I agreed to your idea about teaching some of you our magic, after all,” the dragon went on in a lower voice once the redheaded woman had reached him.

 At that Ranma leaned forward eagerly, hoping for some more information about the Dragon Slayer magic, in particular anything he could learn about the weird transformation his arm had gone through on the train thanks to his experimentation. But, much to his dismay, the woman made no comment about that, instead tapping her stomach and looking back at the pickup.

She instead gestured at the giant creature with an airy wave of the hand. “This, daughter mine, is Belserion. He has been an ally of our family for a long, long time. Dragons, of course, live a **lot** longer than humans. If we win this war of ours, he’ll still be around when you come of age, I should think. Then you, too, will travel up the mountain of BelTar to his home to meet him alone for the first time. It’s a kind of test of courage for those men and women in our family.”

“Hmmpf, I certainly will attempt to still be around here for that. But even I am not immortal. I can be killed just like any other dragon,” Belserion said, his voice somber now rather than forcibly boisterous. “As such, I too have prepared something, a similar memory module wherein I will record all of the magic I know and have seen your mother try as well as more…personal…stories.” The good humor was back as Belserion went on. “For example the tale of how Irene here jumped the spell on her own test by a good five years. She was a tiny thing but brave for all of that. Scratched, her dress torn, her hair a mess, and there she was, standing at the front of my cave and demanding I come out and give her a ride back down the mountain!”

“Irene,” Erza murmured, the others all chuckling as Mira cackled something about how alike Erza was to her ancestor. In return, she earned an absent-minded punch to the shoulder from the armor-clad redhead.

Ranma, though, cursed a second later as Irene replied that that was fine and all, “But I’m not really recording this to teach my Erza, just to tell her about me if I’m not here to do it and to make certain she knows…” Irene’s face softened further, and she patted her stomach. “To know that I love her.”

 “Yes, well,” Belserion replied, his own tone soft. “That too, I suppose. You humans and your parenting, you do a far better job than most of my kind.” He guffawed then. “The only female I could name among my kind that would ever be called motherly is Grandeeney, the Sky Queen, and she’s got a tongue on her that could crush gravel!”

 Wendy’s eyes widened, and she leaned forward with a whimper, practically willing the device to tell her more about her mother. But that didn’t happen.

 Instead Irene waved the dragon off and moved over to her chair again, ordering, “All right, thank you, apprentices. You all can leave now. I’m certain I can handle recording the rest of this message myself.” Once she sat down, she leaned into the pickup and said, “Now, where to begin? I suppose I should say that my marriage to your father might have been because of politics, but we have become close since, and…”

 “Right!” Ranma said, moving forward to touch the device and picking up the device. “Mute? Pause? Turn Off? End transmission? End Recording?” At that last the thing finally subsided, the recording pausing for a moment with Irene’s face still smiling brightly into the pickup before disappearing.

Erza stepped forward, a look of longing on her face that caused the other Fairy Tail mages, and even Wendy, to smile bittersweet smiles. They all knew some of what she was feeling, after all.

“Ranma, I don't want to ask, but I, that is…”

“Yeah,” Ranma said with a nod, staring at the image still. “Yes, you can take it. She can’t be your mother unless she somehow travelled to the future, but regardless, she is, at least, your ancestor. From here on, whatever’s on here is going to be personal. Besides, we’ve already learned a lot.” He looked away and ruffled Wendy’s hair for a moment. “But, if you hear anything more about the dragons, particularly this one’s mother and…Igneel, I think his name was, that’d be great. And if she shows a map or mentions names of places…”

“…That might give you a clue as to where this mountain of BelTar is?” Erza said with a nod.

Looking at her, it was obvious to even Ranma now that Erza was holding in her tears with difficulty. Quickly he waved her off, saying, “Take it, with my blessing.”

Erza nodded and then leaned in, pressing a kiss to Ranma’s lips, something that's shocked several of the other girls there, though they couldn’t argue that the emotions of the moment called for it. As she walked off, Levy, Mira, or maybe even Laki, who had also been watching from nearby, might have said something to her. Bisca might have asked, only semi-seriously, which of them kissed better. She didn’t though. This moment was too emotional for her to tease Ranma about.

As it happened, though, someone else broke the moment for them. Carla and Happy flew up from the city, with Happy in the lead, his dark blue fur against the daytime sky catching Ranma’s attention enough that he turned to look. “Huh, isn’t that Happy? I thought guys weren’t allowed up here? Or is there an exception for other species?”

“You’re here, aren't you, or do you think you’d fall under that exception?” Bisca asked teasingly, happy, as were the other girls, to move past the emotional moments of the last few minutes.

“I wonder what they want,” Mira speculated, staring at the two incoming Exceed.

Before too long, Ranma and the others received the answer to this question. “Porlyusica was sighted in the forest!” Happy shouted. “She'll be back at her home tomorrow morning!”

**OOOOOOO**

With a mission coming up that took Levy away along with Bisca, Levy having asked the other girl to come with team Shadow Gear, just in case, and Mira having already made plans with her siblings and Juvia, Erza volunteered to lead the two Dragon Slayers through the woods to Porlyusica's house herself early the next morning. “While the others might have a problem with Porlyusica's attitude,” she confided, “I actually don't. After all, that would be rather discourteous of me, to have a problem with the woman who fixed my eye.”

“What's wrong with your eye?” Ranma asked, leaning in and staring into her face.

Erza blushed, pushing him away slightly. “Nothing, save for the fact that my left eye is artificial. It is why I was able to see through your broach’s illusions. I, I lost my eye when I was a slave. But Porlyusica created a magical eye for me, and even was able to emplace it without further trauma, mental or physical. I don't even remember any pain during the procedure.”

“Well that's a good sign,” Ranma said, as Wendy hopped up onto his shoulders to look into Erza's eyes herself, trying to discover if she could make out which one was the one that wasn't real. After all, as a healer herself, she had a vested interest in that kind of thing.

“Since you said you could see through illusions, I take it there are enchantments on it?” she asked.

“There are,” Erza said with a nod. “She's a somewhat decent enchanter too, though her main skill is, of course, healing. I don't think there's been a medical book could teach her anything in that area.”

Wendy nodded and continued to question Erza about Porlyusica, her healing powers, and why she wasn't, generally speaking, a normal part of the guild. That one Erza had no response to except a shake of her head. “I actually can't tell you where her distaste for humans come from. Whenever we ask her what's wrong with her in that area, she just gives us generalities, but many of us agree it's a little too intense for generalities to have really been the chief cause behind her distaste for humans. But no one knows what it might be. Well, perhaps the master does, but he won't talk.”

Shrugging his shoulders, Ranma replied, “I don't care why she doesn't like humans, so long as she's willing to help us despite that.” He looked closer at Erza and asked hesitantly. “Um, are you okay? The recording, well, I figure it can be kind of tough to learn so much all at once.”

“I am…coping. I know this woman, Irene, is probably not my mother. No magic could send someone through time to the future, none that I have ever heard of or Master Makarov, for that matter. Still, learning of my family’s history and this woman in particular has been fascinating.” Erza smiled as she spoke, and there was something like pride in her voice. “She was a queen, you know, Irene. Queen of Dragnof, she called her country. I know that means nothing today, but I can’t help but feel pride in my family’s accomplishments.”

“Understandable,” Ranma replied with a chuckle. The two of them talked about what Irene had said of herself, laughing at some of it, but unfortunately for Ranma’s quest for information, Irene hadn’t mentioned much that could be used to find the mountain of BelTar except that it was close to the capital. That probably meant it was in Joya or the south of Iceberg where it touched the lake, to which Ranma hadn’t gone just yet.

“When you go to look for it, I will be going with you,” Erza said bluntly. “If something is there, it is as much part of my family’s heritage as it is your own as a Dragon Slayer.”

Ranma looked at her and, after seeing the look of pure determination on her face, nodded slowly. “Agreed.”

Soon they came out into clearing in the woods, and Ranma stopped and stared. “Now **that** is an awesome treehouse. It looks even nicer than Mermaid Heel’s, or perhaps just better design, maybe.”

Wendy gasped, then raced forward, eagerness shining in her eyes as she stared up and down the tree. Carla, who had been silent for most of the trip, shouted after her, “Wendy! What have Ranma and I been telling you about that habit of yours!?”

But Wendy ignored the blonde cat-girl and started climbing up the side of the treehouse. Soon she crouched on a branch halfway up from where she had started, smiling at a few birds in their nest before climbing on.

However, her climbing was interrupted when a window to one side of her opened and an elderly woman with bright pink hair stuck her head out. “You reprobate, get off of my house!”

Wendy blinked at her, coming back to her senses somewhat. Then, hanging on with one hand, she actually bowed towards the woman. “I’m sorry, but may I please climb your house?”

“No!” Porlyusica shouted back, actually waving a broom towards Wendy as if to knock her off her perch. “Kids today, no common sense, no understanding of property!”

Wendy dodged by flipping herself over the broomstick with the one hand that was still holding her onto the side of the tree and then landing lightly on the windowsill directly above Porlyusica, clinging there and looking down at her before she sniffed. Then she looked at the woman a little more closely, cocking her head to one side as if she was trying to place a memory or didn’t quite understand what her nose was telling her. Then the broom caught her on the foot and nearly upended her off of the windowsill.

At that, Wendy flipped herself through the air and landed next to Ranma easily. While Carla remonstrated with Wendy, Wendy kept on staring out at Porlyusica, cocking her head to one side as she did so.

But Erza simply smiled up at the woman. “Lady Porlyusica, I hope you remember me from the last time I was here.”

“What, after you and Mirajane nearly destroyed the entire forest with your fight in the S-class trials? No of course I don't remember you,” Porlyusica said darkly, causing Erza to wince, and Ranma to smirk at her. “Who are these three you brought to my door? Although the blonde cat-girl looks mildly familiar to me.”

“This is Ranma and Wendy,” Erza said, introducing them, “and yes, you probably did meet Carla at one point.”

“Carla,” Porlyusica said staring at the cat girl thoughtfully. “If my memory isn't playing tricks on me, that was a small, white-furred cat that Laxus was using as—what did he call it? Oh yes: ‘babe bait.’ Such an ill-mannered young man, typical of humans, really.” With that she sniffed, leaned back in, and closed the window, leaving the others to stare up at it.

A sweatdrop forming on his head, Ranma asked, “So, are we supposed to just go away now, or…”

A moment later the door opened, allowing Erza to get out of replying. This was lucky, since, with Porlyusica, if she dismissed you like that, it was up in the air whether continuing to try to get her attention would be a good idea. “Well, come in if you're coming,” the old woman growled, glaring at them. But her eyes seemed to soften very slightly when she looked at Wendy.

Inside the tree house, they found a typical old woman's house with a nice little sitting room, a kitchen and a stairwell leading upstairs. There was a bed to one side and a rocking chair elsewhere, but Wendy had also seen that the upstairs room had looked as if it had a few beds as well.

“Well, introduce yourselves properly, I suppose,” Porlyusica said, sitting down at her rocking chair and staring at the newcomers.

Ranma nodded, gesturing to himself. “I'm Ranma Oceana, the Water Dragon Slayer. This is Wendy, the Sky Dragon Slayer.”

“Wendy Marvel,” Wendy said, actually dipping into a curtsy, which caused a brief smile to appear on Porlyusica's face and for Carla to nod in approval. “I'm sorry about the first impression I gave you, Miss Porlyusica. I just really like high places, and sometimes I get an uncontrollable urge to climb.”

“Humans are creatures with a mixed bag of impulses anyway; I shouldn't be so angry when one of them, especially one so young, is unable to control herself,” Porlyusica said in the most backhanded method of complimenting someone that Ranma had ever heard.

“At any rate, I suppose you should get on with it and tell me why you're here,” Porlyusica went on, almost glaring at three.

“We’re here for me, actually,” Ranma said, sitting down across from her.

“Why?” she asked bluntly. “You're the picture of good health from what I can see, almost obnoxiously so, in fact.”

Ranma blinked at that, but Porlyusica waved him off, setting her cane down for a moment. That cane was somewhat enchanted in order to allow her to look at a human body and see if there was anything wrong or broken within it, but it hadn't worked on Ranma. He glowed, quite literally, with good health to her eyes.

“I am, sort of,” Ranma said with a laugh before becoming serious. “The problem comes from the fact that I have two different magics within my body. One is my Dragon Slayer magic and the other is my original magic. My original magic is somehow constantly attacking the Dragon Slayer magic, and neither magic works to as high a level as well as it should. That's really hampered my durability and maybe a few other factors too. But durability is the main issue. Natsu is younger than me and hasn’t evolved his Dragon Slayer Magic nearly as far as I have, but he’s almost as durable as I am now, for example.”

“I've never heard of anything like that,” Porlyusica said, now actually sounding intrigued and gesturing for Ranma to continue.

“I’ve discovered other problems since. A week ago, I tried to see what would happen if I suppressed my original magic, call it Power of Life and allowed my Dragon Slayer magic to fully inhabit one of my arms entirely without conflict. As soon as I did, though, my arm changed into a dragon’s arm. It was intensely painful, and I had a devil of a time forcing the limb back to human form.

“Conversely,” Ranma went on, ruffling the Wendy’s hair for a moment, “I was in a fight a few days ago, and the magic user I was fighting was able to completely drain away my Dragon Slayer magic, letting my original magic fill my entire body without threat of that conflict. It made me…well…super strong and super fast and everything else super you can think of,” Ranma said dryly. “I mean, they had this huge robot, fifteen, twenty stories tall at the shoulder, and I broke it like it was a toy, ripped off its limbs and everything.”

There were quite a few things wrong with what Ranma was telling her, Porlyusica mused as she leaned back, staring at him thoughtfully. For one thing, magics did not fight one another like that. Even if they were of the same type—caster type with a side benefit of body-enhancement, as it was in this case—they would not normally fight one another like that so much as merge into an entirely new magic. That kind of thing happened all the time, which was why there were so many element-type mages, but few of them were exactly alike.

For another example, Erza didn't just use Requip magic, she used telekinesis and Requip merged into one. After all, very few people could use Requip to shift just their shoes, let alone from one entire armor set to another, and that didn’t even include her ability to manipulate her weapons. It was that mix and the fact that she had so much magical energy that had brought a practically every day magic like Requip to an entirely different level, a level that she had used to become the Titania of Fairy Tail.

For a second point, Porlyusica had never heard of an enhancement magic that could be called the Power of Life. However, the turning into a dragon part, that she had heard of before. “Come with me, boy,” she said abruptly, standing up. Then she paused and looked at Erza. “Why is Fairy Tail helping him?” she asked bluntly. “I don't see the fairy mark on him.”

“You might eventually,” Erza said with a faint smile, “but, to put it simply, he has helped those of us within the guild several times, and we all owe him.”

For a moment Porlyusica didn't get it, then her eyes twitched to Wendy and she slowly nodded. “You are the two who saved Anna and Lisanna from the Beast?”

“That and he tried to save me from slavers before I went to the Tower of Heaven. He met Laxus out in Pergrande where they saved each other's lives against the Orcs, and he's befriended many of us within the guild. Friendship can go beyond the guild's walls, after all,” Erza elaborated.

“I suppose it can. Humans are foul, smelly, and disgusting, but I can respect friendship, at least,” Porlyusica said, shaking his head. Then her eyes sharpened. “Well, what are you waiting for! Go and lay down on the bed!”

Once Ranma had done so, Porlyusica performed a series of magical tests, examining him all the while. But there was immediately a problem. “What is this other magic I see on you? It looks like a foreign curse.”

Ranma winced. “Ah, um, that’s a curse, yeah. Um, it changes me when I get wet into a woman. I can keep the water from touching me if I see it coming, of course, and even heat it up if I want to, but I can’t do anything about actually changing.”

“What?” Porlyusica said scathingly. “I don’t like jokes, fool.”

“It isn’t a joke, Miss Porlyusica,” Wendy said. “Ranma-nii’s had the curse ever since we met.”

Porlyusica spent over an hour forcing Ranma to change back and forth, jotting down notes all the while. Her mutterings on the matter included, “Impossible! A curse based on water contact yet not part of the water itself!” and “both bodies retain full sexual functionality,” something that caused him to blush hotly and Wendy and Erza to do the same. When he demanded what all this had to do with figuring out a solution to his problem, Porlyusica coughed, seemed to come back to herself, and then shrugged. “Well…it doesn’t. I got sidetracked there.”

After picking himself up off the floor where he had face-faulted, Ranma was about to give this old biddy a piece of his mind. But then she pushed him back into the bed and began to examine him in earnest.

Soon she moved on to other things, ordering him to perform specific exercises of all sorts while staring at him through a monocle. Then she had him meditate and do what he had talked about before: push his original magic, as Ranma had put it, out of his hand so that she could watch. When she first started to see the scales a few seconds after he had whispered that he was finished, she ordered him to stop and watched them recede.

Then she looked down at her notes and said bluntly, “You're lying about your magics fighting one another.”

Ranma blinked at that, and she went on easily. “The Power of Life, as you call it, is, in point of fact, life energy, the energy our physical forms create and dissipate on a daily basis. I have never, in my long life, seen anyone build it up to the point where it was a malleable, usable thing, but somehow you have. It acts slightly differently from magical energy from what I can tell, just different enough to not properly mix. Where the hell do you come from where you were able to build up your life energy to a level where you could use it to enhance yourself?!”

The only place where she could even think that could have been was Midi with their anti-magic bent. But if that was the case, no rumors of people with similar skills had ever reached her.

Ranma blinked, then opened his mouth, but Porlyusica stopped him by whacking him on the shoulder with her stick. “Second,” she went on, “there is no chance of you having been able to gain that level of control and ability at your apparent age, not on top of needing to learn how to use Dragon Slayer magic.”

With a sigh, Ranma sat up and looked first at Porlyusica, then over at Erza, the silent Carla, and Wendy. “How much do you want to know, and how much will you keep secret?” he asked, looking first at her and then over at Carla and Erza.

Wendy knew some of Ranma's backstory—he had shared it with her in bits and pieces, including the fact that he had originally come from another world and had been de-aged prior to coming to Ishgar. She didn't particularly care about most of it, although she knew enough to keep the de-aging part a secret in particular.

“Everything,” Porlyusica said. “I'm a healer, and I would never share anything a patient tells me in confidence.”

Erza looked affronted. “If you want to me to make a vow, I will do so, but I would keep your secrets regardless. Unless you just don’t want me to know?”

Thinking about it, Ranma shook his head. Frankly, it would feel a little nice to get this off his chest to someone, and he figured Erza would indeed keep his secret, as would Carla and Porlyusica. “All right, here's the thing. I'm not from around here. Before you ask, no, I'm not from wherever Anna came from either. From what I know, she comes from a world that at least has much of the same geography as this one, right?”

When the healer and the redhead nodded, Ranma went on. “Well, I come from an entirely different world. One which is much, much more advanced than this one technologically, at least judging by what I've seen in my travels. One day I was fighting one of my rivals when another rival used a magical item on me. Yet, understand, where I come from magic was beyond rare. Real magic, I mean, was a pipe dream for most of the people on the planet. But, because of where I lived and the fact I was a martial artist, I ran into a lot of it. The curse, for one thing, and…”

Ranma paused, looking at Porlyusica. “And a kind of mushroom that for some reason had the magical ability to age or de-age someone. They showed up a few days before this fight with my rival and de-aged me to around six or seven, I think.”

“Oh my god, he’s not lying,” Porlyusica said, breathing out heavily. “A mushroom that can de-age someone? A **mushroom**!? That’s, right…another world,” she muttered, shaking her head. “Go on. This person with a magical scroll, I presume he used it to send you here?”

“He probably screwed it up since I doubt that he meant to send me here specifically, but yeah,” Ranma said with a chuckle. “That guy was not exactly the brightest ember in the ashes, you know? Anyway, he sent me away, and I found myself somewhere in Ishgar.”

“What age were you before you were de-aged?” Erza asked.

“A little over eighteen, nineteen. But I was trained that entire life as a martial artist. I started when I was four, and I never really stopped afterwards. I rarely learned anything else—I didn't think a lot of anything else outside of the art was important. And I devoted myself to it, because, by the time I was old enough to make my own choice—if I was allowed to, anyway; that was pretty doubtful back then—I had fallen in love with the art.”

“…So,” Erza began with a smirk, “you basically cheated to get as good as you are? I mean, you had an entire past life to use to build up your skills.”

Ignoring that with lordly disdain, Ranma went on, looking at her seriously. “And then, not a day or two later after arriving in this world, I see Erza here and several other slaves, and the rest is history. I failed to break her and the others free, because it was the first time I'd really ever run into magic of that type: flames shooting from their hands, glowing energy disks, and other stuff like that. That and my child-like body. Long story short, the river we were fighting around washed me out to sea, where I eventually was found by Typhon.”

As Erza subsided, remembering that night, Ranma went on. “Typhon trained me in Dragon Slayer magic using this device he'd created. He called it a time chamber, where I could train a week in there for only a day out here kind of thing. But he was a senile old coot and eventually died through powering it. I was able to learn the beginnings of Dragon Slayer magic after he awoke it within me in my time within the chamber, but have since basically been muddling on, searching for information and clues about that and about…some other things he told me about ever since.”

“Muddling on!?” Erza said incredulously. “Even taking your martial arts abilities out of the equation, you are a stronger Dragon Slayer than Natsu! You and Laxus both are, but Laxus was not trained by a dragon.”

Porlyusica waved Erza to silence, then looked at Ranma closely. “You're still not lying,” she said eventually. “You're stretching the truth a bit, and you’re not saying everything Typhon told you, but you're not lying.”

“Why would I lie about that now?” Ranma asked with a shrug. “If you wanted to know everything, I just gave it to you, unless you were talking about a blow-by-blow account. It's been so long, I don't know if I could even give you one of those at all.”

“You don't act… That is,” Erza said, now concentrating on another factor of this being Ranma’s second life, “I mean, you don't come off as an old man, a middle-aged man, rather. You act mostly like you are your physical age.”

Ranma shrugged again. “Let's just say that in a lot of ways my old life was stunted outside the martial arts and leave it at that. There was definitely room for improvement, as teachers would say.”

“This Typhon,” Porlyusica began, directing the conversation back to the important matters. “He awakened your magic, correct? How did he do so?”

“He breathed on me using this special kind of breath,” Ranma replied.

“And he died. You're certain of that? You saw his body?” Porlyusica asked.

“Yes, of course,” Ranma said, giving her an odd look. “When I came out, he'd nearly killed himself trying to power the chief time chamber and died right there after telling me to live my life instead of trying to find…well, this asshole black dragon. To instead find other Dragon Slayers and help them as best I could. If you want me to try to find the cave and find his body for some reason, I don't know if I could. It wasn't like there were any, you know, landmarks above the water, and I have no idea even of the direction to go to search for it.”

“No, I didn't mean that. But you say all he did was awaken your own magic and fill it with Dragon Slayer power? And he didn't add anything else?”

“No,” Ranma said sharply, now getting annoyed. “What the heck are you talking about?”

“Wendy,” Porlyusica said, turning away. “Hop up onto the bed for a moment. I want to do a comparison. I’ve done a full body health check up on Natsu, but I can't remember all of the details just now.”

“So Typhon really died of old age? That’s truly awe-inspiring, frankly, to think of how old he must have been,” Porlyusica said while examining Wendy.

“Yep,” Ranma said with a nod. “He was kind of senile, too. Whenever we were talking before he literally locked me into the time chamber, he would lose the thread, double back, correct things. And you should've seen him; his eyes were just completely clouded over, and he moved like an invalid for all of his size.”

Ranma was tempted to say something like, ‘he moved and acted even older than you do,’ but one of the many skills he had learned in his new life here in Fiore was that there was such a thing as tact. So he didn’t.

Grunting irritably, Porlyusica finished her scan on Wendy and gestured her back to her other seat before sitting down herself in her rocking chair. “All right, there is a problem within you. First of all, both Natsu and Wendy have some kind of limiters set on their Dragon Slaying powers, a second element added to their magical cores. This…these, these antibodies, if you will, stop that, that seed of Dragon Slayer power from controlling and thus transmuting their physical forms. You don't have that. Your teacher should have added it near the end of your time with them, but he didn't. I presume because he was too weak by that point to do so.

“Is that Seed something I can create myself?” Ranma asked intently, while Wendy breathed a sigh of relief, causing Ranma to ruffle her hair in amusement. She pouted at him but said nothing.

“I doubt it is something you can learn, but you are welcome to try. As for more important matters, your initial life energy is absolutely correct when it treats the Dragon Slaying magic attempts to take over your body as a virulent disease. It's doing what it has to do, fighting the Dragon Slayer magic. But like in every conflict between you ugly, smelly, destructive humans that occurs between true equals, both sides are getting stronger as they fight.

“However,” Porlyusica said, “there **are** ways which you can use to suppress one energy in favor of the other or cancel one out for a time and let the other take over or, in your case, come to the fore and give you the durability you seem to crave, without letting it go further. There are certain meditation techniques that will allow you to divvy up segments of your mind and thus bring about more control over your twin powers. But this is predominantly going to be a mental solution rather than a physical one. There's nothing I can do for you physically, although I could teach you a few points on the body to hit to suppress your own magic. They won't work on your life energy, I don't think, but you’ll have to discover that through trial and error.”

“I'll take whatever help you can give,” Ranma said with a sigh. *Of course. I should’ve known better than to hope for a simple solution or even a perfect one*. “How long do you think it will take?

“If you spent all day every day on these exercises, you might be able to get to the point where you could switch between one magic and another or create a new, call it a new mix in your system between the two, in two or three years,” Porlyusica said bluntly.

Ranma gaped at her, but quickly regained control of his features and shook his head. “I might surprise you,” he said, determination ringing in his voice.

**OOOOOOO**

The next day Ranma and Wendy once more split off after leaving the apartment. After having breakfast with several of the others at the guild, Wendy would be going with Erza to talk to the blacksmith that she used as well as to compare her armor set with her own ideas of what she wanted on the base armor that she had gotten from Pergrande.

The discussion from the day before had made everyone involved come away with a lot of respect for the material, but not so much for the magic on the item in question. Even shipping the armor off to Fiore to get it en-spelled there and then sending it back, as the King of Pergrande had done, hadn't resulted in the armor being as good as what could be bought here, in terms of magic, at least.

During the day, Erza convinced Wendy to smelt the armor down after removing the enchantments. This was not exactly an uphill battle. When asked, Wendy shrugged her shoulders and simply stated that she would prefer a pair of bracers anyway. “I don't like getting hit, so armor is not nearly as useful to me in and of itself. I have several speed and offensive enchantments to try which sound more fun than weighing myself down with a lot of armor. And in any situation where I need to armor myself, I can always fall back on to…something else.”

“Something else?” Erza asked.

Wendy simply smiled, and Mira snickered from nearby, nodding her head in understanding. The sight of little Wendy belting out Dragon Force while fighting that weird double demon would stick with her for a while. There was no doubt in her mind that Wendy, for all her size, shyness, and desire to not fight unless she had to, was actually a stronger Dragon Slayer than Natsu or even Gajeel. *Huh, I wonder how she would stack up to Laxus?*

For his part, Ranma spent the morning basically getting smacked upside the head with a broomstick as he attempted to meditate on the specific images that Porlyusica was trying to teach him in order to compartmentalize his mind and thus his ability to use both magic and ki more easily than the extremely hard, painful process he had already come up with. Eventually she wanted to get him to the point where he could press his ki down enough to allow the Dragon Slayer magic to take over his physical endurance, but not enough to activate the Dragon Transformation magic.

That was a very, **very** thin line Ranma would have to walk, but, at this point, it was all he could do in order to utilize the entirety of his Dragon Slayer endurance. His mastery of that magic had come too far for anything else. This would also allow him to put more magic into any attack he launched, because the endurance would also affect his body’s ability to push out magic beyond his skin.

In a normal Dragon Slayer that change would already have occurred: minor transformations in the bones and internal organs to match those found in a dragon. In this manner, muscles became as a dragon’s and the organs of a dragon would allow the breathing and eating of the element. The original seed was meant to change the magic core and body into a more draconic element as, at its core, Dragon Slayer magic was a transformative type of magic, not a caster type.

In Ranma’s case, it had been able to create a magical core, but had not been able to do more than go halfway through the process of changing his body before his ki started to treat it as an invader. And, ever since, the two sides had been fighting each other, honing themselves against one another. Despite Ranma’s irritation at getting a face full of broom every few minutes, for the people in Magnolia it was an easy day. Elsewhere, however, plans were being set into motion…

**OOOOOOO**

The scribe looked around from where he was sitting in the library as he surreptitiously rewrote a few lines from the interrogation of the dark guild that Bisca, Alzack, and Ranma had taken out. A few of the members whose interrogations he had recorded had mentioned something about the Oración Seis being after a specific magical weapon, while another few had mentioned how they were working towards Nirvana. The man had long known what those lines could mean, but he had to wait until his true masters, the Dark Guild Tartarus, had contacted him with the knowledge that he could take it to the Magic Council. Now they had done so, and he quickly wrote up a report about a possible connection between those two phrases, handing it to his superior officer. A few moments later the officer was standing in front of the Magic Council, trying not to quail at the glare he was getting from the man who headed it now.

Unlike the former head of the Council, Gran Domawas fierce and very regimented in his mannerisms and in how he wanted the magical side of Fiore run. He had taken it as a personal affront that Phantom Lord had launched their assault on another legal guild the way they had under his watch. Gran Doma wanted to make a mark in order to solidify his position, and he had at last decided that going along with Ranma's suggestion of targeting the Oración Seis for destruction might be the best way to go about doing so.

It irritated him that the Ranger would get most of the glory, but he had already sent out a missive to the Ranger in Magnolia that would give him permission from the Magic Council to recruit S-class mages for this mission. That and a few other plans he was beginning to develop would allow the Magic Council to take the credit and Ranma the blame if things went wrong, or if the rest of the Balam Alliance started to strike at Fiore as a whole in retaliation.

“So are you saying we might be able to find a target now?” he asked the man in front of them.

“Perhaps, my lord. There is a definite correlation between this ‘Nirvana’ concept and the idea of Brain being after a secret weapon. But if it is a specific weapon, one we know anything about, that information is not in the lower level libraries. It could only be found in the Council’s personal libraries.” Personal, in this instance, meant private and secure information that the Magic Council had decided during its history were far too important to allow to be destroyed but also far too dangerous to let anyone besides themselves have access to. Weapons such as what this Nirvana might be were certainly counted among them.

While keeping her face grave, Ultear was listening to this and, internally, was hopping around gleefully. Access to that library was the final thing she needed to understand how Face was controlled and, if possible, how to block or duplicate that process. With that her mission among these idiots would be done. “Do we have any idea of what era it is from?” she asked, tempering her desires for a moment.

“I'm afraid not, my lady. You all would have to research that yourselves. Neither I nor any of my people have access,” the man said with a shrug.

Growling somewhat irritably, the head of the Council waved him off and looked around at the others. “Let us go,” he said simply.

Moments later the twelve of them found themselves standing in a library about half the size of the main Council library, but **nowhere** near as organized. In fact, it was the very definition of **dis**organized. There were very few actual bookshelves, dozens of piles of books, the shelves that were there were overstuffed, there were magical items scattered here and there with little labels on them, scrolls were stuffed liberally in the corners, and everything looked like it had been shoved in here to be forgotten.

The sight of it made Ultear’s eyes widen, but the others took it in stride. “It will have to be here somewhere,” Yajima said aloud. “Somewhere in this area we will find what Nirvana is and where it could possibly be.”

“But I refuse to allow any of the scribes or researchers in here with us,” Gran Domasaid, slamming his heavy staff down on the ground, causing it to crack slightly.

There was some kind of gravity magic at work there, Ultear reflected, though what precisely it was eluded her. The man was no threat to her regardless. But, at the moment, she couldn't have cared less about what magic the man was using. Instead, she was concentrating on what the mage had said. “Wait! You want us to go through all this?” Even with her true primary mission in mind, this looked to be rather daunting.

“What's the matter?” asked the one other woman on the Council caustically, moving around Ultear to the nearest pile. “Afraid of getting a little ink on your nails? A little dust in the eye?” The two of them had never gotten along, the older woman disdaining Ultear’s youth and good looks, while Ultear hated the old woman’s snippiness and the fact that she had remained on the Council despite the recent troubles.

Growling slightly, Ultear wondered how the woman would look like on a rack for a moment before shelving that pleasant thought and looking around. *Well,* she reflected, *if it gets me closer to killing Brain and ditching this bunch of senile bastards, I suppose going through the Council’s collected junk of a thousand years is a small price to pay.* “In that case, let's get organized here for a bit,” she said peremptorily. “Gran, assign each of us a different section to start with, and then we'll need to organize as we go.”

**OOOOOOO**

Three days after Ranma and Wendy had first met the woman, Laxus knocked on the door frame leading into the secondary room of Porlyusica's treehouse, a wide smirk on his face. “Sorry to interrupt,” he said to Porlyusica before looking at Ranma, although he really was somewhat sad to interrupt. Watching the old woman smack Ranma upside the head with a broomstick was not going to get old anytime soon, and he had spent at least five minutes just leaning there silently, watching just that. “But I figured you should know, we just got this from the Magic Council for you.”

Ranma hopped to his feet, dodging a blow from Porlyusica’s broom and taking the scroll from Laxus. Opening it and reading the contents as well as seeing the mark at the bottom, Ranma smirked too and looked up at Laxus. “It’s the official recognition of my powers from the king and the Magic Council, both agreeing with the mission and acceding to the idea of putting together a team of strong mages to see to it. Let’s go recruiting.”

“I’ll come with you,” Laxus said with a smile. “I want to meet Jura once again.” Then he looked at Ranma quizzically. “How is the training going?” He had upped his own training over the past few days, but he hadn’t seen Ranma much outside their afternoon spars.

“Slower than I would've preferred,” Ranma said with a sigh.

“You've only been at it for three days!” Porlyusica barked. “I told you it would take years!”

The fact that Ranma had done more in those three days than most people would've been able to do in twice the time was something that grated on her somewhat. His previous knowledge of how to meditate and create mental frameworks to work with his ki space and ki attacks had come into play, which meant that her earlier prediction would probably be off, which irritated the master healer. Then again, humans breathing nearby irritated her. With a scowl, she waved him off. “Go away! Why are you here anyway?! Get out!”

“Yeah, yeah granny,” Ranma said with a chuckle, heading out the door. “See you later.”

He ducked automatically as the broomstick flew through the air towards them, this time with the pointed end towards them rather than the broom end. “That was a remarkably calm response from her,” Laxus said with a chuckle.

A full day later the demonic engine that other people called the train disgorged Ranma and Wendy, along with Laxus and Carla, onto the platform of the city called Bronze Square. “God damn it, why didn’t I just run!?” Ranma groused.

“Because if you had, you would’ve had to follow the same route as the train or climb several mountains?” Laxus asked more philosophically. His motion sickness wasn’t nearly as bad as it was for Wendy, let along Ranma or Natsu. “Because it would have been irritating and not as comfortable, given the weather?”

Since it had rained and even sleeted at one point in the past day as the train crossed Fiore, that was no small consideration, and Ranma conceded the point irritably. Soon after leaving the train station, the quartet found themselves standing outside the guild Lamia Scale.

It was a large building like every other guildhall Ranma had seen. This particular one looked sort of, like a cathedral mixed with a pagoda, painted in tasteful shades of blue and surrounded by what looked like a rock garden for a lawn around it, with the smallest part in the front yard and then spreading out past it, out away from the city. The hall’s doors were large, as large as the ones Fairy Tail had, and on the doors was the sigil of Lamia Scale, a mermaid in side relief with its tail up.

Entering, Laxus immediately shouted, “Jura! Where are you?!”

Ranma sighed happily at that. “Ah, this takes me back. Where I came from, dojo destroyers announced themselves in much the same fashion.”

Many of the guild members around them glared or muttered but said nothing to the interlopers once they saw who stood in the doorway. S-class mages were rather famous throughout the nation they resided in. This allowed Ranma to look around, noticing that the interior of the room was different from Fairy Tail’s.

The entranceway was small and set with artwork on one side and a large bulletin board on the other and led into several stairwells leading up in every direction. Beyond that was a sitting room around a fourth the size of Fairy Tail’s hall for people to congregate in. Low music, something like classical piano, was wafting quietly from that room.

Nonetheless, Laxus’ shout most certainly carried, because soon enough a large man who Ranma actually recognized appeared.  *Oh, so that’s Jura. Huh, had completely forgotten that guy’s name. King Vicotronious did say he wanted to go to Fiore to help get stronger, didn’t he?*

Like the time they had met in Pergrande, the man at the top of the staircase had some of the appearance of an Earth Shaker monk, though his clothing had changed dramatically. He wore a poncho over his shoulders and his torso was crisscrossed with leather bands. His arms were covered from the wrists up to just below his shoulders by what looked like scale armor of some kind, very thin and formfitting. He wore a long kilt in a dark blue with yellow fur at the bottom and some kind of mountain pattern on it. But his face was much the same as it had been: bald, with large tilted eyebrows.

He looked and felt formidable to Ranma’s senses, and he frowned at Laxus for a moment, nodding at him formally, though there was a certain sparkle of good humor in his eyes. “Laxus, welcome. Might I ask what brings you here? I know you too well to think you would come all this way simply to challenge me, although, if you have, that would certainly make my week more interesting.”

“I am so tempted right now to take you up on that,” Laxus said with a smirk, but shook his head. “We’re not actually here for fun, unfortunately. This is Ranma Oceana, and he's got a proposal for you.”

Jura’s eyes widened as he looked at Ranma, and the two men nodded at one another, acknowledging the fact they had met before, while Wendy smiled up at the kind, bald, giant man whose head she had once stood on. She had the urge to do so once more, but fought it down.

“And why should the mighty Jura listen to weaklings such as you fools?” asked another, far more arrogant young voice. A blue haired man came out to stand at the top of another set of stairs, glaring down at them. His eyes widened as he saw Laxus there, but his arrogance did not dissipate at all, and he simply shook his head mournfully. “You Fairy Tail mages all are so full of yourselves, but even though you might have proven quite formidable when I saw you last, there is no chance of a mere S-class mage ever being strong enough to match Jura!”

“Strength and pride is love, and Jura is our guild ace, after all!” said a third voice, this time a female voice. She was a young woman around the blue-haired man’s age, with dark pink hair done up in a too cute twin pony tail look along with a cutesy pink dress, tight in the chest and going down to her ankles, but with a slit to one side of it which began at knee height.

At her looks, Ranma shook her head. *I don’t know if she’s trying to just go for cute or if she’s trying to look younger but decided halfway through to just look her age. Weird.*

Laxus raised one condescending eyebrow as he looked at the two loud newcomers and then turned back to Jura, who had also turned to the man with blue hair, a little surprised that he knew Laxus personally. “Lamia Scale allows criminals into its ranks now?” He waited a beat, then, as Jura’s eyes narrowed and the two other mages winced, he went on with a smirk. “Still, I have to say that at least they have joined a reputable guild rather than continuing to go around consorting with dark guilds and attempting to unseal demons.”

Jura's eyebrows now furrowed in a rather comical sight to Ranma, frankly, given the eyebrows in question. “What?”

“These are two of the four I told you about from the devil island, the ones who got away,” Laxus introduced. “The girl’s name is Sherry, I think, and the arrogant ass with the blue hair is Lyon.”

“I remember,” Ranma says thoughtfully. “I also remember that they should've been arrested for that, or at least be doing a bit of jail time, even if they were influenced by a dark mage.”

“They left while we were cleaning up,” Laxus said with a shrug of his large shoulders.

Jura was now glaring at the two other Lamia Scale mages. Under that glare, Lyon’s arrogance dissipated quickly as they hastily explained what had been going on. Afterwards the monk-like man shook his head. “Truly, you came here directly after performing something so potentially devastating as that? Perhaps grandmother should have looked into your pasts a little more closely. I am all for letting people have a second chance, but…”

“She knows. We were very open to how lacking in love our actions were. We've already been making recompense,” Sherry said with a sigh. “We haven't taken a single job she hasn’t okayed, and every time we do the money goes to both the guild and to several charity groups the guild takes part in.”

“That's a start, I suppose,” Ranma said with a nod. “And, seeing as no one in the village you ordered attacked actually died, I suppose I’ll forget about it. But we really do need to talk to you, Jura, unless you really do want to spar first?” he finished excitedly.

“I don't think so,” Jura laughed. “But if you have business with me, then you will have to go through my guild master.”

“Let’s go then.” Ranma held up the note he had been given from the Magic Council. “Where is she?”

The woman in question was almost as short as Makarov and just as old and wrinkly. In fact, the woman gave Ranma some serious Cologne vibes at first, until she started speaking, her voice loud and almost brash. That and the way she dressed—lots of jewelry in the form of earrings, bracers, and a necklace under a purple cloak and a blue dress—let Ranma banish that image.

The old woman, named, oddly enough in Ranma’s mind, Ooba Babasaama, read the missive from the Magic Council quickly, then hurled it back at Ranma, who caught it deftly between two fingers before putting it in his pocket. “Fine! You have the Magic Council's orders which can allow you to talk to my mage here, but that doesn't mean I have to like it. Nor does it mean I have to allow you to talk to him alone!”

“So long as no word of my mission gets out, I suppose I can explain things to you,” he said, looking askance at the two lesser mages while Wendy sat to one side, with Sherry smiling at her. Lyon, though, glared back at Ranma arrogantly.

“You dare to speak as if any in my guild would give away the secret! I’ll spin you!” Ooba shouted, hopping to the top of her desk, her hands clenching.

Ranma looked over at Laxus, who shrugged, and then over at Jura, who shook his head rapidly, indicating that, whatever it was, Ranma did not want to be spun. “Okaaaay….” he said slowly, “I suppose that makes some kind of sense. If you trust them, that's good enough for me.”

*For some of this anyway.*  *I suppose I could trust Jura and granny here with my Ranger status, but damned if I tell Lyon anything about me I don’t have to. That guy’s just rubbing me the wrong way,* Ranma thought

Aloud he said, “The truth is, I'm a troubleshooter for King Fiore, and he has decided that the Balam Alliance is getting too powerful. You might not have heard, but they were involved with the business that recently occurred on the Magic Council?”

 “The former Wizard Saint being found to be a traitor,” Lyon said, nodding. “I've thought about going for that position myself, and I think I'll be able to convince them that I deserve that title. After all, while Jura is clearly stronger than myself, I am stronger than anyone else in this guild.”

“That's nice,” Ranma said blankly, while Laxus just guffawed slapping his thigh as if the other arrogant man had said something truly hilarious, and Ranma turned away, visibly dismissing Lyon. “Anyway, we know something about the mages involved, and if the Magic Council can find a target or someplace where we can stake out and wait for them or find out what their long term goal is if they have one, we mean to take out the Oración Seis. To that end, the king has decreed that I am to put together a team of S-class mages to take the fight to them.”

Lyon scoffed. “Don't count us out! Even if we aren’t S-class, I’ll show you how strong we are!”

Ranma shrugged his shoulders, having had about enough of Lyon's arrogance. “Fine, how about this?” he said with a somewhat mocking grin, standing up. “If you want to come, how about I give you a test?”

“What kind of test?” Jura asked, looking amused.

Ranma shrugged and, in a light flare of Requip magic, was suddenly holding his two Escrima sticks. “Let's see what they can do. How about a spar, say, a thirty minute match? One at a time or both at once, I don’t care.”

That, of course, made Lyon and even Sherry glare angrily at him. “I’ll allow it,” the Ooba said, chuckling and looking amused. She could sense the magical power within Ranma and knew those sticks were most definitely not his primary magical style.

Soon enough they were outside, with Ranma standing across from Sherry first. “I'm sorry to have to do this,” Sherry said, “but Leon is right; you shouldn't count us out just because were not S-class! Dolls Magic: Doll!”

From behind the woman one of the nearby trees was rimed with light pink magic, then it began to move, ripping itself out of the ground and moving towards Ranma at Sherry’s directions.

Ranma stared at with dull eyes as it came, shaking his head. Then, as the thing thrust out a fist, he stepped inside its guard so quickly that Sherry thought for a moment he had somehow teleported that short distance. Then one of his sticks rapped out almost negligently. Ranma didn’t even activate the magic of his Escrima sticks; he simply hit the dolls as hard as he could, interested to see what would happen.

What happened was that the doll was sent flying through the air as if it had been hit by a train. Ranma nodded. “Ah, not very heavy trees. Got anything else?” he asked cockily, winking at Sherry.

She glared at him and attempted to use other spells for a time. A Mud Doll and a Rock Doll were quickly conjured, one after another, but Ranma dealt with them both. The Mud Doll was smashed aside, this time by an Escrima stick moving so fast it created an airwave before him, which smashed the doll into pieces, splattering Sherry with mud. It reformed under her now furious direction, but Ranma just destroyed it twice more before the magic animating it finally gave out. The stone doll fared even worse. A single blow shattered it before a now desperate Sherry could fully animate it.

Then Ranma was in her face, one stick tapping down very gently on top of her head. She cringed as the blow flashed down, then glared at him when it just simply paused there on top of her forehead. She hadn't even felt it land. “You're out,” Ranma said cheerfully. “Next.”

“Interesting,” Jura said with a smile. “You haven't gotten any worse over the years from what I understand, Ranma. Do they still sing your praises in Pergrande?”

“Mine and Laxus’,” Ranma said with a nod, a thumb pointing towards the Lightning Dragon Slayer, who smirked cockily. “Speaking of,” Ranma said as Leon stepped forward, turning to Laxus. “If you ever head to Pergrande and to Appledore specifically, you might want to check in with the king. He said something about wanting to present you with another gift like he did to me long after the fact. What that might be, I don't know though…”

Affronted at being ignored, Lyon growled angrily, then used “Ice Make: Lion Pride!” to send a series of giant ice lions towards Ranma as he was looking away. “Don’t ignore me! Ice Make: Swallow attack!” This attack created dozens of swallow shaped ice sculptures that flew towards Ranma randomly.

The idea was to force Ranma to split his attention between the two attacks, to pin him in place and then overwhelm him in seconds.

But Ranma simply shattered the first lion to reach him almost negligently, smashing it to pieces. Then, as the Ice sculptures attacked him from every which way, he nodded with some respect plain on his face. “Not bad, but not very good either. Ya lack speed and stopping power both.”

For the next few seconds Ranma was busy dodging. His speed was such that even the swallows couldn’t tag him unless he was forced to stay put for a second. And, once Ranma leaped into the air, that was impossible. The birds died faster than Lyon could create more of them, and every time he did, Ranma smashed downwards at the attacking lions. All the beasts seemed to have a simple attack order and followed that regardless, which also was rather poor planning.

The ice lions might have had the hitting power the swallows lacked, but they didn’t have the speed or ability to jump up after Ranma well enough to catch him. Worse, in Ranma’s mind, the lions weren’t as durable as they should have been given their denser bodies and size. *Huh, gonna have to see if Gray’s power is any better in terms of staying power.*

Gritting his teeth, Lyon created more lions and swallows after Ranma had destroyed half of them, but his eyes widened as Ranma slowly made his way through the crowd of ice sculptures towards him. “Ice Make: Elephant! Ice Make: Giant!”

Two more ice creatures roared up, and he gasped, reeling backwards. Animating so many creatures at once was a sign of his power, but it was incredibly taxing: the larger the creature, the greater the strain. The lions had been bad, the swallows easy, but keeping both them and now two more meant Lyon could feel his magical energy draining away.

The giant roared silently and lashed out, its fists at a height to be able to hit Ranma. But Ranma kicked off one swallow, shattering it and bouncing over the huge fist of the giant. His Escrima sticks lashed out down and forward, shattering the arm and the head of the giant and sending its body plummeting down. Riding it for a moment, Ranma lashed out all around him, killing further swallows, then leaped clear to land on top of the elephant's back, smashing it with a double handed blow from his Escrima sticks. Its back exploded into ice shards at the hit, and the entire construct collapsed into shattered ice and snow.

Leaping away, Ranma was past the remained lions and within striking range of Lyon. His Escrima stick flashed out to rap on the man's hands, deadening them for a moment. Then the other stick came up and rested just against his neck. “You did better than Sherry, I'll admit,” Ranma said conversationally. “But you didn't have any plans for how easily I could deal with your constructs, and their basic durability is shit. You need to think about making them more solid than that.”

Gulping, his arrogance having been beaten out of him for the moment—it would come back quickly, alas—Lyon nodded, staring first at the giant construct that Ranma had dealt with so handily and then at the Escrima stick he was holding against his neck. “What kind of enchantments are on those?”

“I actually didn't use any of the enchantments on them,” Ranma said dryly. “That was just pure strength and speed.”

“Intriguing,” Jura murmured, looking over at Laxus, his natural urge to challenge himself coming to the fore. Laxus smirked back, his face full of fangs for a moment, but Ooba spoke up before any of them could do anything. “Enough,” she said, shaking her head. “It seems my mages’ training needs to be stepped up a bit. If a single Fairy Tail mage can deal with two of my best so easily, especially one I've never heard of before, I...”

“I told you, I'm not a Fairy Tail mage,” Ranma interrupted. “And just because I'm a wanderer doesn't mean I don't train myself.”

“Very well,” Jura said formally. “I will meet you in Magnolia when you discover our target has been found.” He then smiled more naturally then before, looking over at Laxus and then to Wendy and Carla. “There's even a reason for me to be there in the first place, one I imagine the young misses will enjoy. There is the traditional Fairy Parade coming up soon.”

“What’s that?” Wendy asked eagerly. She had been quiet for a time, letting her big brother have his fun, but this sounded interesting.

“Fairy Tail puts on a massive magical parade every year midway through the autumn season. It sort of grew out of the old harvest festival, you know? We all take part, and it's become one of the major highlights of the year for our portion of Fiore. Even other mages like Jura here have been known to turn up to watch.” Laxus supplied.

“Sounds fun,” Ranma said with a nod, getting an enthusiastic ‘Yes!’ from Wendy and even a happy hum from Carla, who had seen the parade several times when she was living in Magnolia. Then he made his Escrima sticks disappear into his Requip space, smirking over at Jura. “Now, unless ya want to take me up on my offer of a spar, I think we’re done here.”

Jura chuckled as Laxus smirked. “I called dibs on him long before you showed up, Ranma,” Laxus said, mock sternly. “I get to fight him first.”

“It's so nice to be in such demand,” Jura said dryly. “However, now is not the best time to think about such things,” he said indicating where his guild master was still berating Sherry and Leon for their poor showing. The sight of Carla watching and taking notes was not lost on Ranma, and he grimaced as Jura went on. “This is our training area, and I know from old experience that Master Babasaama will be pushing the two of them into training soon enough, which means we won't be welcome here. Still, I will agree to a three-way battle between us after the fight against the Oración Seis is finished. Will that suffice?”

Both younger men smiled widely, battle lust in their eyes, and nodded quickly, and Jura frowned internally. *Okay, what did I just agree to?*  Despite that misgiving, they said farewell to Ooba, as was courteous, but she didn't look away from where she was berating her two fellow mages, simply waving one hand at them, and they left the guild soon after that.

“So is it faster to go from here to Blue Pegasus, or should we head back to Magnolia first?” Ranma had wanted Jura to be the first person he recruited outside of Fairy Tail for this mission simply because of seniority: as a more experienced mage and a Wizard Saint, Jura would naturally be part of the leadership portion of this team he was putting together. But that didn't imply that he didn't have a few others he wanted to take along, with Jenny easily topping that list outside of Fairy Tail.

He wondered what he would do when he saw her, though, considering the kiss he and Bisca had shared.  *But, then again, neither of us said we were going out or dating or anything like that, and kissing can be part of feeling one another out anyway, right?*

“We’re actually closer here,” Laxus said, gesturing down the street back towards the train with a sigh. “Come on.”

“Can't we just walk there?” Wendy complained. “We could fly too; it’s nice out now.”

Laxus calculated in his head, then nodded. “Doing that might will take us the rest of the day if I’ve got a handle on how fast you two can travel, but yes, we could do that.” It wasn’t like Laxus wanted to get back on the train, after all.

With that Laxus led the way towards the end of the town, looking down at a map he had pulled from somewhere thoughtfully and then he pointed down one of the roads leading away from the city. “That way,” he said, then zoomed off, using his lightning magic to cross from where he had been standing to the edge of his vision as quickly as a lightning bolt.

“Oy, that's cheating!” Ranma bellowed, racing after him as fast as he could. Wendy giggled, then looked down at Carla, who sighed and changed back into her normal Exceed form before Wendy leaped into the air, whereupon the little cat flung out her wings and flew up to latch onto Wendy’s back.

The day started off pretty well, but halfway through the afternoon it started to rain badly. Ranma sighed, and when next Wendy landed next to him he pulled off his cloak, covering her with it, even as he felt his own body change at the hit of the rain. He could, of course, have kept the rain from hitting him, but frankly it wasn’t worth the effort. And despite the rain, it was still a nice day.

It was still raining that evening, however, when they reached the small town where Blue Pegasus had its guildhall. The town was small and off a large, winding river, where ships could be seen moving up the river despite the sun going down. The buildings were all made of varicolored bricks, and most seemed to be two story buildings with only a few larger. The people were still moving around under large umbrellas, but most seemed to be hurrying inside as the quartet arrived.

“I don’t suppose we could put this off until tomorrow?” Ranma asked, staring up at the rain, luxuriating in its touch. Once she set aside her irritation at being forced to change like this, Ranma always enjoyed the rain on days like this, something she put down to being the Water Dragon Slayer.

“Heh, that’d be nice, but no. When mages from another guild arrive in a town where a guild has its hall, its customary that they come by and pay their respects. After that crap with Phantom Lord, I’d bet that not doing so would rightly piss people off,” Laxus replied.

He looked over at Wendy who had just hopped over a large puddle with a laugh, Carla on her back. “Come on, you three; let’s get this over with. I know there’s a good inn here, and the faster we check in with the fat freak, the quicker we can get to bed.”

“Aw, is sparky tired?” Ranma cooed, smacking him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry; we’ll get you to bed soon.”

“Ugh. I could retaliate to that, but it would be so fucking wrong it’s not even funny. Let’s just go,” Laxus groused, causing Ranma to blink then blanch as she realized how that could have been taken. The sound of the redhead retching made Laxus smile once more, and he led the way down the street quickly.

Blue Pegasus's guildhall was a square building composed of the same bricks as the rest of the town, in this case pained pink. It had a pair of towers to either side of the entranceway topped by a railing. There was a fence up there too, which told the quartet the building’s rooftop might have something like a lawn or a sitting area. At the back of the hall the rooftop rose into a cathedral-like dome with a blue tiled roof, ending in a series of small pillars holding up an additional, tiny dome. Every few feet of the wall was broken by a high, thin window of varicolored glass. Above the entranceway was the sign of the guild, a blue horse’s head as shown from the side in the center of two blue waves.

“It’s pink,” Ranma said, staring at it in something approaching affronted horror.

“Yeah…” Laxus said with a sigh.

“What’s wrong with pink?” Wendy asked, looking at her fellow Dragon Slayers in surprise.

“Men tend not to like that color when in their teens or twenties,” Carla supplied. “I don’t understand it myself, though I know it is a major point of contention between Natsu and practically everyone else in the guild.”

Laxus and Ranma exchanged a glance, then sighed and moved to push open the large doors.

Inside Blue Pegasus looked like a high-end club. The floor was granite stone with a checkerboard pattern, the lighting was dim but welcoming, there were small lounges, each separated from the main floor by short staircases, and a few scattered bars dominating the central floor along with a dance area. Ranma could see that there were even a few of those revolving disco-balls set up in two separate rooms to either side of the main area.

As soon as Ranma and her friends entered, they were greeted by a sweet-sounding, almost cloying voice. “My, what do we have here? Three new roses entering our guild at the same time. Truly it’s a lovely evening, even if they come with such a boorish bodyguard.”

“Hmmf!” said a second voice, sounding both haughty and considerate at the same time. “I suppose you can come in and get out of the rain. Don’t misunderstand, though, I’m only being kind to you because it’s raining out.”

“Hmmm, you and your companion are quite cute, miss. May I have your names?”

Turning, the foursome looked at the speaker, and Ranma sweatdropped. *Good God, it’s a bishounen slideshow.*

The speakers were indeed very pretty young men. One was a shaggy-haired brown-haired young man around Laxus’ age with long eyelashes and a thin frame. Indeed, all three had the same somewhat thin frame without much in the way of muscles visible. The second man was a darkly tanned man with dark black hair. The last was a young boy who looked a bit older than Wendy, with light blonde hair in a neat bowl cut with dark green eyes.

The shaggy-haired young man spoke up as if he was the leader of the trio. “I do apologize if we startled you ladies. We should really have introduced ourselves. My name is Hibiki Lates.”

“Ren Akatsuki,” the dark-skinned boy said.

“And I’m Eve Tearm,” the young boy said. “And together we are the Trimens,” they all said as one.

Before any of the quartet could do anything, Hibiki had moved around Ranma and taken her hand in his, gently trying to pull her along. “Now that introductions are done, let me show you to a seat, and then we can get you something warm to take the chill of the damp off.”

*Hibiki, but as a first name not a last one. Guess I dodged the bullet there, although the idea of Ryoga trying to be a pretty boy is kind of disturbing as fuck,* Ranma thought, a spasmodic twitch beginning above one eye at the pretty boy’s flirtations.

Ren and Eve made for Carla and Wendy, joining Hibiki in waving farewell to Laxus. “And now that you’ve delivered them, you can go, Laxus. We don’t need other men here.”

While Wendy blushed and stammered and Carla slowly allowed her claws to slide out—yes, she had them in her human-cat form and yes, it sounded very much like knives coming out of their sheathes—Hibiki’s attempt to pull Ranma along had about as much effect as a child pushing on the side of a mountain. When Hibiki realized this, he looked back at the short redhead in surprise, to which she smiled.

He smiled back, but then froze as Ranma’s hand moved like a cobra. It first pulled away from Hibiki’s grip, then grabbed at his wrist and the next instant the pretty boy found himself in the air. “Yeah, never touch me again, dude. I know where those hands have been, and I don’t need to scrub my skin down with a scrubbing brush.”

Carla too had enough, and she leaped up, kicking Ren in the face and then lashing out with her claws towards Eve, who barely dodged backwards in time to avoid getting more than his jacket slashed to ribbons, though Carla hadn’t used her ki claws. “RRGH, away from Wendy, you, you gigolos! She is far too pure to even be in your thoughts, let alone touched by such as you!”

Blinking at that, Wendy began to calm down and was about to ask Carla what she meant by gigolo, but Carla hushed her quickly while Laxus started to laugh.

Even though he was now being held straight up by a girl who didn’t even come to his shoulder, Hibiki tried to keep his cool. “Ahem, I’m sorry if we offended you, dear lady, but you must understand, your beauty enchanted MeEEE!!!”

His words broke off into a squeal as Ranma negligently tossed him into Ren, sending both men to the ground. Then she hopped over them, making a point of almost kicking them in the heads as she passed. “Come on, Sparky; let’s find Jenny and get this over with.”

The only one still on his feet, Eve, looked down at his shredded shirt and said, “Um, well, if you would like to see Jenny, she’s up on the second floor. I believe she is scheduled to man the bar up there tonight. Are you a friend? Perhaps you’re looking to join our guild?” Then his training got the best of him, and he went on, moving forward to stand by Wendy. “I can tell you would be most welcome here.”

Wendy shivered and leaped into the air, kicking off it and zooming after her older brother towards the stairs. “So creepy!” she shouted to the laughter of many of the other guild members who had stopped their own drinking and what-have-you to stare at the Trimens’ epic failure.

Wincing, Eve moved over to help his two friends to untangle themselves but looked up with them as they heard the voice of their guildmate, Jenny. “Ranma!”

Jenny was dressed in a long cocktail dress, her hair was done up as if for a night on the town, but she had flat shoes on rather than heels and only a single necklace that looked like something which a child had made - with flowers and simple shapes made out of clay - to go with the rest of her ensemble. She was laughing as she raced down the steps and flung herself into the shorter redhead’s arms. “You came! I was afraid you would forget.”

Ranma hugged her back, shuddering very slightly in pleasure at the feel of the very curvy blonde mage pressed up against her own curves. “Aheh. Nah, never was any chance of that, though I wish I could say this was a social call. Er, I do have something I need to talk to you about though, serious stuff.”

“Tsk, I should’ve known this was too good to be true.” Jenny pulled away and then knelt down and hugged Wendy. “Hey, Wendy, how are you doing? It’s been a while since we were able to talk, huh? I can see you’ve growing up into a pretty young woman.”

Wendy blushed at that but hugged back as Laxus smirked and moved up beside Ranma. “Wait, let me get out my camera first. This is going to be fantastic.”

Looking over Wendy’s shoulder, Jenny saw her three guildmates below and chuckled evilly too. “Do it.”

While Laxus prepared, Ranma began to concentrate, holding one hand above her head, which began to steam gently. Then she started to pull the water that had drenched her clothes out of it and up her arm where it began to warm up.

The three pretty boys were now watching this in some confusion, since Jenny wasn’t known to be that affectionate with most people. Kids, yes. She would hug kids if she knew them, and indeed that was where the necklace she was currently wearing had come from, as Ranma had surmised. Though much to his hidden chagrin, Eve had never gotten a hug from her.

 Other women, though, as far as they knew she wouldn’t do that to her best friends within the guild. Not even Mirajane, as much as the tabloids attempted to create something between them. But all three men, who were, despite their current epic fail, experts when it came to women, could tell that there was more than simple friendship between Jenny and this strange redhead.

A second later, they got the shock of their lives as Ranma let the globe of now heated water fall down on her, changing him back into his male form. Hibiki began to gag, and the other two boys nearly shrieked in shock, as did many of the still watching guild-members. “What was that!?” Ren shouted, his voice no longer deep but high pitched as he pressed back and away from the redhead-turned-man.

“My curse,” Ranma replied, grinning evilly down at them as Laxus put away his camera. “I turn into a girl when I get wet, hence my reaction to ya earlier, pretty-boy. ’Less, of course, you still want ta hold hands?” he asked sardonically, causing Hibiki to back away quickly.

Jenny linked arms with Ranma, pulling him around and smiling as she now could stare into Ranma’s eyes without having to look down. “Much better. Don’t get me wrong, Ranma, I don’t have a problem with your female form, but I prefer to look you in the eyes, you know?” Then she leaned in and kissed him.

While not having anticipated that, Ranma didn’t exactly object, the same thoughts he’d had with Erza and Bisca going through his head. Until he made a promise to one of them or the other, he was free to have fun, just as they were. Since Alzack had gone with Bisca and Team Shadow Gear on their mission a few days ago, that was not a small consideration. So he kissed back, and Jenny moaned as Ranma’s arms went around her, holding her there as they attempted to kiss the living daylights out of one another.

Rolling his eyes, Laxus pulled Wendy along, the young girl looking at this with wide eyes and a blush on her face despite Carla’s attempt to drag her away. “Come on, kid. Let’s go see if we can find something to drink. They might even have a nonalcoholic version for you.”

Watching this, Hibiki glanced at his fellows with wide eyes. “Um, I am not certain how I feel about this.”

Ren grunted, looking away. “Disgusted and amused.”

“Aroused,” Eve said, causing the others to look at him. “What! Come on, just think about if Jenny had kissed ‘her’ instead.” Both of the other pretty boys had to concede that point, though they still dragged their younger compatriot along when he attempted to just stay and watch. Now that they knew these four guests were here to talk to Jenny, they’d leave it to her. Then, too, Hibiki had finally recognized Laxus and wanted no part of the S-class mage.

After a few minutes Jenny had to pull away to breathe, and the chuckles and catcalls from the rest of the guild caused her to flush slightly even as she leaned her forehead against Ranma’s. “Wow. I take it you’ve had an epiphany then.”

“Sort of,” Ranma said, turning slightly like he was about to dance with her there on the step leading up to the second floor. “Let’s just say that I decided to have some fun, then see where it all goes after.”

Jenny, of course, understood what that meant, and Ranma let his hands move away from her, letting her make the choice to move away or not. “In other words, you’re going to get to know several girls, but not go beyond, say… kissing, until you decide there’s more there than attraction?” she asked, not moving away.

“Yeah. Um, I know that makes me kind of sound like those three idiots downstairs, but…” Ranma began

“No, it doesn’t,” Jenny said hurriedly. “Ranma, there’s a difference between kissing and dating, dating and being boyfriend and girlfriend. It’s a natural part of dating. Not only that, but you’re being upfront about it. You’re not going to hide us from one another or try to get us into bed before making that commitment, are you?” When Ranma shook his head quickly, she went on. “See? They wouldn’t hesitate to bed anyone they could. You’re just flirting with us, getting to know us. I’m fine with it, though I can’t speak for every girl. Who else are you, ahem, interested in?”

“Erza Scarlet and Bisca Mulan,” Ranma said sheepishly. “Um, I might have already exchanged a kiss like that one with Bisca, but other than flirting, and a single quick kiss nothing’s happened with Erza.”

“I doubt anything more will happen with that one from what Mira has said about her over the years. Still, like I said, I’m fine with having some fun and continuing to get to know one another before we become exclusive.” In point of fact, Jenny had another boy she was in something of the same position with: professional photographer who had been taking pictures of hers for years. He was very fun, but just a little too weak, and seemed unwilling to commit while being far too willing hop into her bed, so they had become somewhat stuck where they were.

“Heh, good to know. But for now, unless ya want to do something tonight, we should go and talk with your guild master about the serious stuff I was here for,” Ranma said.

“Poo,” Jenny said, linking arms with Ranma and leading him up the stairs. “Rule one, Ranma: no girl would like to hear you have other reasons than to see her in a situation like this. Still, I’m fine with having a little date tonight, so let’s get the serious stuff over with.”

Master Bob was just as bizarre looking as he had been when Ranma saw him during the Eisenwald mission. When Jenny and Ranma, still arm in arm, found him (a label that was debatable in Ranma’s mind), he was trying to rub his cheek against Laxus, but the Lightning Dragon Slayer was keeping him back with both hands. Nearby, Wendy and Carla watched this, small drinks in their hands. “GAhhh, get away from me, Bob!”

“Mou, you’re such a bad boy, never calling me master…” Bob said, then brightened up, leaping away from Laxus and moving away from the small bar he had been drinking at before Laxus had found him. “Mah, Ranma-boy. You’re still just as handsome as ever. Oh, but what are you doing holding our Jenny’s arm like that? Is love in the air?”

Rolling her eyes at that, Jenny sat next to her Guild Master. Looking at Ranma and the others, she asked, “So, besides seeing little old me, what brought you here?”

Handing over the message from the Magic Council to start with this time, Ranma went through the same spiel he had given Ooba. Bob listened quietly as did Jenny, who actually, to Bob’s surprise, looked excited. She was, despite some issues with her endurance, a true S-class mage, and, like many such throughout Fiore, she had long chafed under the rules of the Magic Council that forbad them from going after dark guilds. Bob, too, had felt they should be doing more about the dark guilds than they were allowed to up to this point, so he agreed. “All right, since my cute mage here seems eager to join this team of yours, I’ll agree to it. But I won’t send her alone. I’ll also send Ichiya, our guild’s other S-class mage and…maybe one more.”

Ranma frowned, but Laxus spoke up, smiling beatifically. It was so bizarre on his face that Ranma just stared at him, but Laxus didn’t let that stop him, saying, “Actually, that sounds like a fine idea. From what I’ve heard of him, Ichiya has a habit of surprising people, and we might need that and his perfume magic.”

Lips quirking as he saw right through Laxus’ words to his real reason, Bob nodded. “Exactly, Laxus-boy. Now, have a drink! We can’t send you away without showing you some Blue Pegasus hospitality!”

That night Jenny joined them for dinner while Laxus hit up several of the local bars. Afterwards, Wendy and Carla stayed in their hotel room, which had a huge, circular bed that reminded Ranma rather strongly of something that could’ve been found in a love hotel back on Earth. This disturbed Ranma, but Wendy and Carla liked it and, coupled with some fruit snacks and her new book on enchantment and puzzles, were quite happy. Ranma and Jenny went on a date, just walking around town once the rain let up, and, while nothing more than kissing happened, both of them were happy with how it went.

That feeling of happiness did not last long after the quartet returned to Fairy Tail and Ranma told Erza and Mira about who had agreed to join them for this mission. “WHAT?! Why in the world would you agree to let, that, that…”

With Mira laughing her ass off to one side and Laxus being no better, Ranma and Wendy exchanged a bewildered glance before looking over at Carla. She sniffed. “Don’t look at me, you two. I haven’t been here for years, remember?”

Happy was nearby, while, thankfully, Natsu was out with Lisanna and Anna on a date. Happy didn’t understand why he couldn’t come with them, but he wasn’t going to argue after Lisanna had bribed him with a fish. Looking up from his meal, he started to explain. “Aye, Sir! Ichiya is someone Erza’s worked with before, but they don’t get along. Ichiya liiiikkeees her, but Erza…”

“Erza can speak for herself, thank you!” Erza barked, glaring at Happy, who shut up quickly.

Mira, on the other hand, spoke up from where she was leaning against the bar, using it to help her stay on her feet. “Embarrassed by your boyfriend, Red? Don’t worry; we won’t judge you for your weird tastes!” She too had met Ichiya. Indeed, she’d met all the Trimens before and found them hilarious, though only Hibiki was even marginally attractive to her.

“Damn you, Mira, you know I find Ichiya loathsome! If you think he’s boyfriend material, why don’t I send him your way, huh!?” Erza shouted as she turned to Mira. The two of them soon were facing off, actually grappling as they had when they were younger, and Carla could only shake her head with a sigh as Wendy watched from beside Ranma.

Ranma leaned over to Laxus, asking dryly, “I take it you knew this would happen?”

“Guilty as charged,” Laxus said with a smirk, putting his feet up as he stared at the fight brewing between the two S-class women. “I just wanted to get under Erza’s skin. Didn’t expect this, though. Still, a floor show is a floor show.” Besides, Mira was damned sexy when she was like this.

“Wait, you did it on purpose!? Laxus!” Erza roared, turning to the blonde only to get cold cocked by Mira.

“That’ll teach you to look away, Red!” Mira had been angsty lately given how she had not been around for the showdown with Phantom Lord, and her decision not to pursue Ranma had also left her without a boy she was interested in. So she was looking for some other kind of outlet.

She got it when Erza turned and tackled her to the floor. The two of them were soon rolling around as the rest of the guild shouted encouragement and bets, while Makarov wailed, “God damn it, no! No, you two, don’t regress! Please! My heart, our bank account, they can’t take this!”

Watching this, Ranma laughed along with Laxus. *Yep, this guild is kind of a cool place.*

The next day, however, an oddly ragged, tired looking Ultear arrived in Magnolia. Finding Ranma’s address from Anna that morning, she showed up outside his room. Seeing the breakfast already laid out and the nice soft sofa, she grabbed some food and sat down, speaking a single sentence as she did. “We've found them.”

**End Chapter**

This is another sort of segue chapter. I think from now on in this story I will try to keep to this kind of outline: one action chapter, one segue/character interaction/world building chapter. It seems to work out.