Can’t draw. Blech.

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 10: Downtime, Sorta**

Leaving the Rune Knights to deal with what Ranma called the boring aspects of the cleanup, the others followed Ranma to the port’s train station where, despite Natsu’s barely verbal protests, they all boarded the train, bound for Akane Resort. “Least let Wendy use that spell on us,” Natsu moaned as Ranma carried him aboard.

“I can’t because you’re already developing an immunity to it,” Wendy said, stepping aboard rather unhappily herself. She didn’t like moving vehicles any more than the other Dragon Slayers, but while Ranma could outrun a train it certainly didn't make it any easier to be on his back or shoulders as he did. Despite her stomach squeezing at the very idea, she would rather lay down and try to take a nap than deal with the various uncomfortable things that would bother her during that.

“Besides, Ranma has a trick you might wish to try, Natsu,” Erza said, entering the train beside them. “He smokes this kind of leaf that apparently helps him settle his stomach.”

“It also helps get us in touch with our Dragon instincts and makes meditation easier. Although I don't think you need any help in the instinct area,” Ranma said, somewhat irritably. Natsu’s durability bothered the heck out of him when he considered how much further along in his training Ranma was compared to the younger boy. *And let's not get started on Wendy and her latest breakthrough. The more strong opponents I face, the more I realize that this whole ki and Dragon Slayer influence fighting one another in my body is holding me back.*

“I’ll try anything once! Jus’ start using it ‘fore the train starts moving,” Natsu said, looking around and almost panicking even while his body dealt with the element poisoning. Dragon Slayers could eat their elements, in fact it was part of their power source. They could even, in extremes, eat other elements, but there was definitely a negative effect on their bodies both during and after such things, made worse by what the element in question was, and a few other factors.

Natsu had eaten lacrima infused with not just Ranma’s water-element style magic, but dozens of other types of magic, with only the poison-type magic from Cobra being close to anything like an actual element. This was so far beyond the pale for even a Dragon Slayer that it was a wonder he hadn’t died on the spot. Instead, he had powered through it for a time, only becoming sick once his adrenaline from the fighting left his system. But once it occurred, it was very, very bad, leaving Natsu unable to move his body beyond twitching uncontrollably.

He also **hated** transportation, and being on a train on top of his current issues was not a fun prospect.

Nodding agreeably at that, Ranma set Natsu down before sitting across from him, opening up a window so that the smoke from his pipe would carry into the other Dragon Slayer’s face. Wendy immediately sat between Ranma and the window, nuzzling against his shoulder and holding Carla once more in her lap like she was a large teddy bear.

The white furred Exceed, still rather exhausted, didn't even put up a token protest about being treated like this in public. Instead, she leaned back against Wendy's chest, her eyes already closing in sleep. Whereas Wendy had exhausted herself after the battle, healing everyone—to the best of her ability, anyway—she couldn’t help magical exhaustion or element poisoning. Carla had exhausted herself during the battle. Her freak out moments when facing the tentacle monsters and then sinking that ship had almost exhausted Carla’s ki reserves. And then, on top of that, she had to fly Wendy to the tower and even help Happy grab Erza as she fell through the massive hole in the tower’s interior.

“What’s wrong with them?” Simon asked Erza, gesturing to the Dragon Slayers as Ranma pulled out his pipe, his other arm curling over Wendy’s shoulders, pulling her closer. “And second hand smoke is bad for kids,” Simon said, staring rather sternly at the younger man.

Ranma quirked an eyebrow at him before puffing out a long trail of smoke straight up into Simon’s face. Instead of gagging and choking as he expected, Simon simply smelled something, then frowned, but Ranma answered his question before he could speak it. “It’s an herb, not tobacco. Don’t worry about it.”

As the rest of the train filled up, Erza explained the Dragon Slayers’ troubles with transportation. Then she began to ask Simon questions about the tower. They had already talked about what her friends knew about Jellal’s goals, which was scant little and what they knew about the Dark Guild Oración Siete that was helping him, which, again was nothing much. Wally and Millianna hadn’t ever seen them, and Simon had only seen Jiemma during the fight.

But when Mira and Erza described the one called Cobra to them, Wally spoke up. “Huh, that one sounds rather familiar to this dandy. I think there was a young boy who always talked to a snake of some kind in the cells. He spent most of his time curled up, his hands over his ears.” Leaning back in the train’s seat, Wally crossed one leg over his other knee, thinking. “I…can’t recall seeing him since we attempted our first rebellion. Still, it isn’t very dandy to hear that he survived only to join up with a Dark Guild.”

Ranma’s eyes narrowed at that, and he spoke up while Natsu breathed in the Dragon’s Breathsmoke, his tortured expression clearing slightly. “That other guy, Midnight, he was pretty young too. You think he could have been from the tower originally too?” He then described what Midnight looked like, looking at the trio across the aisle intently.

Millianna spoke up then. “Um, he sounds familiar, but I don’t remember his name. But the black and white hair, that I remember seeing before, nya.”

“So, Jellal might have let whoever the leader of the Oración assholes is—doubt it was Jiemma, given they were active before I ran into him the first time—pick and choose from the inmates at some point for his resources, or training, something like that I suppose. I’ll want you lot to write down anything you can remember of other kids your own age who you can remember from when you were younger and that you haven’t seen since. I’d think you guys’d be better than the oldsters.”

The older victims of Jellal’s hypnosis were going to be left behind to be repatriated to wherever they had originally come from by the Rune Knights. Ranma would check in on that on his way back to Magnolia from Akane Resort, a name that made Ranma twitch whenever he heard it. He had questioned most of them, but beyond a few who had acted as cooks and cleaners, none of them had interacted with Jellal after a certain point, throwing themselves into their work of building the tower. It was a sign of Jellal’s control of their lives that none of them had even thought that this was unusual until after they had been beaten and then heard Shô’s big reveal during the battle.

Simon sighed, looking towards the back of the train where Shô’s body, recovered and placed in a casket, had been loaded aboard the train. They would have a service of some kind for him at the resort, where they would send his body out to sea. The sea had meant escape and freedom for the ‘ex’-slaves for so long, it seemed fitting. “We will do that. I just wish that Shô was still alive to join us. I wanted to be free of Jellal for so long, but I never wanted someone else to pay the ultimate price for that freedom.”

“Don’t think of it like that,” Erza ordered. “If anyone besides Jellal is to be blamed for Shô’s death, that would be me. I failed to protect him from Jellal, and that is a mistake I will bear to the grave.”

“Don’t play that game. No one is to blame; you can’t control what your enemy does, and you didn’t even know that Shô was in danger before Jellal attacked him. Don’t try and blame yourself for something beyond your control. Jellal killed Shô. That is something he’ll answer for in the afterlife, not something you need to answer for in this one,” Ranma interrupted, looking at Erza sternly.

Staring back, Erza could only nod. Hearing the voice of experience like this from a young man barely a few years older than her was odd, but she couldn’t deny the impact of his words or of his eyes on her like this.

Just then Mira sat down alongside Natsu, glaring somewhat angrily over at Erza, who had taken the seat she would have wanted: next to Ranma, on his other side from Wendy. “The train’s about to start moving.”

“Is that what you were doing?” Erza asked.

“No, I was sending off a message,” Mira said, looking back over at Natsu. “I think our resident Dragon Slayer needs his cute little nurses to help him heal, so I sent off a messenger spell to Lisanna and Anna.”

“Who?” Simon asked, looking confused, as did the other two from the tower.

“My little sisters both have massive crushes on Natsu,” Mira replied without shame. “I have no idea if it’s really love, but they seem to think it is, and nursing a Natsu that can’t move might give them the time and courage to actually tell the big lug about it and even force him to understand what they’re saying.”

Wally and Simon both blinked, but it was Millianna who spoke up. “But wait, you said both of them have crushes? Isn’t that like, really bad, nya?”

“No, not really. They’ve agreed to share him,” Mira replied, shaking her head. “Again, not certain if that will remain the case once he starts realizing that girls are interesting, but we’ll see.”

Millianna looked over at her two friends. No one in their right mind would describe either Wally or Simon as perverts. Wally had never shown an interest in any girl except maybe some actresses in some old plays he had seen in a recording lacrima soon after they took control of the tower. And Simon had never shown any interest in anyone but Erza. Despite that, they both were now blushing and staring at nothing.

“Dude, sisters,” Simon muttered.

“That’s a mighty dandy situation Natsu’s found himself in,” Wally replied, then grimaced as Millianna smacked them both upside the head.

The rest of the train ride passed peacefully among the mages. Simon and the others were uncertain how they felt right now other than sorrow at their friend’s passing. Erza engaged them in conversations about what they wanted to do from now on and what Fairy Tail was like, as well as telling them about what Akane Resort was like. The three Dragon Slayers slept, or in Ranma’s case meditated. This left Mira and Levy to their own devices, and Mira talked to Levy about new ways to use her powers. The younger blue-haired girl had rather enjoyed being of as much use as she had been on this mission and wanted to further expand her repertoire so she could do the same in the future.

While she loved missions, which allowed her to play to her strengths—reading, languages and research—Levy wanted to become stronger than she was, something that sort of set her apart from her two friends, Jet and Droy. They were both satisfied with where they were in terms of their magical strength, competing about other things sometimes. They were great friends, but these days Levy had begun to feel that she wanted to push herself, and they didn’t.

With Mira and Erza both rather exhausted themselves, it was no wonder they quickly joined the dragon-slaying trio in sleep, leaving Levy to pull out a book and read until they reached the resort’s station. There, another train had just pulled in from a different direction. Levy led the way off the train, with Ranma carrying the still comatose form of Natsu on his shoulder, only for him and Wendy to pause, sniffing the air. “What is that? That smells almost familiar, but not quite,” Ranma mused.

Levy, on the other hand, simply was looking around when she spotted the individual whose scent Ranma and Wendy had caught. “Laxus, what are you doing here?”

Everyone turned to stare at the tall Lightning Dragon Slayer as he came off the other train. He looked utterly exhausted, his entire body drooping. He was also covered from near head to toe in dirt, dust, and what looked like orange goo of some kind. Just looking at it, Ranma could tell it was going to be one of those hard to remove stains. *Something like blood, but not human blood, for certain,* he mused, staring at his old frival. “And what the hell is that orange goop on you, man?”

“That’s the blood of these freaking, multiplying damned whack-a-moles I had to fight this last mission. They had some kind of replication magic. I had to kill them all within a few seconds of one another or else their magic would just multiply them back to their original numbers. It was distinctly uncool, and I felt I needed a vacation after that,” Laxus said, his face showing something like joy, almost, an expression none of the other Fairy mages would have thought to see there. He even smiled down at Wendy before he said, “But enough about me. What the hell, man!? You’re in Fiore again, and you didn’t try to contact me?”

“You’d know I was around if you had been back to your own guild hall,” Ranma retorted, clasping forearms with the other Dragon Slayer.

“True, I guess it has been a few months since I was home. But what brings you here to Akane Resort, and in the company of some of my guildmates?” Laxus asked, cocking a cool eyebrow at his former protégé and her rival in particular. The others didn’t really register as much bar Levy, whose magic he had always thought interesting.

 The three strangers and Erza broke off to take possession of something that was very obviously a casket. He fell silent then, staring at it, then at Mira, an unspoken question in his eyes. She waved her hand in front of her, saying, “Don’t worry, he wasn’t one of our guildmates. We tried to free him and a lot of other people from this megalomaniac named Jellal, but Shô, the man in the casket, died during a fight with Jellal. He was able to get the word out about the man’s megalomaniacal nature to his other friends, but Jellal noticed what he was doing and killed him for it.”

“What the hell have you all been up to?” Laxus asked, his eyes narrowed.

“Ousted that asshole Siegrain as a traitor; found out his real name was Jellal later on. Then fought him, three members of the Oración Siete, an ex-Guild Master from Pergrande, several of Erza’s former friends, who at the time were brainwashed, two dark guilds, and a tower full of ex-slaves turned devoted followers,” Ranma replied glibly. “After which I destroyed the tower itself.”

Laxus’s eyes narrowed. “Damn it. Fine, your mission was much more interesting than mine.” Even as he made this joke, though, Laxus was feeling rather angry. Yes, his last mission had been fun and somewhat tough, but it hadn’t been really life threatening, nor had it been nearly as important as this mission sounded like it had been. And even that mission had been the first in months where he had been able to cut loose. *Fuck, does Ranma have a nose for these kinds of situations?*

“Wasn’t a competition, but yeah, I suppose it was,” Ranma replied with a barking laugh. He and Mira then went into more depth on the fight they had just been a part of as Laxus led the way out into the resort town, where Erza and the others joined them with the large casket containing Shô’s remains. Erza and Ranma could have stowed it in their Requip spaces, but it felt like that would have been disrespectful.

“…Damn, you lot have been busy,” Laxus sighed. “Don’t worry about paying for anything, any of you. I already booked a suite for my stay; it won’t be much of a stretch to upgrade and get us all a place. Come on.”

Laxus continued to lead the way through the resort, all of them taking in the sights and sounds as they passed. Simon, Wally, and Millianna, in particular, were looking around in awe. They had, of course, heard of this place, but they had never visited before, never having been away from the tower even after Jellal had organized a regular supply schedule. Now, looking around them, they were all again forced to wonder why they had never questioned why they couldn’t leave the tower like that. Jellal’s control, and the fear he had placed in them of the outside world, had been insidious.

The Lightning Dragon Slayer flashed a bankcard at the front desk, had a very brief argument with the man manning it, and then calmly led them all through the reception area to the elevators. The elevator carried them to the topmost floor and directly into a series of suites that were situated directly on the hotel’s roof. They had their own small pool complete with chairs and a table, four bedrooms with accompanying bathrooms, a large sitting area, and a bar.

“Damn. Living in style, huh,” Ranma quipped, moving to the nearest room. It had two twin size beds, and he dumped Natsu on one of them.

“Feh. I don’t really spend a lot of the money I get on my various missions except when I’m dating, so splurging like this is fine once in a while,” Laxus replied, staring down at Natsu with a shake of his head. “He really ate lacrima crystals imbued with other people’s magic? I know we Dragon Slayers are able to eat other elements in extremes, but more than one element mixed up? Freaking crazy little bastard.”

“Yeah, he absorbed the energy the lacrima had taken from everyone else. Even mine,” Ranma groused. “I bet it’ll take him a while to get over it, but once he does, his magical reserves will have doubled, if not tripled. Insane little bastard. It should’ve killed him.” So saying, Ranma then began to smirk, smacking Natsu on the forehead, causing the younger boy to groan. “On the other hand, ya have to like his will, his drive to help his friends. I might not like his lack of any real fighting style or his desire to attack everyone stronger than him, but that aside, ya can’t help but like Natsu, y’know?”

“He’s a fucking weed; he grows on you,” Laxus said with a laugh.

Mira giggled. “I still remember the days when he was such a crybaby, always crying after someone had made fun of him or beaten him in a fight.”

“Wasn’t that normally you?” Erza said, rolling her eyes. “You always tried to make him cry because you thought he was cutest that way.” It was then Erza’s turn to smirk. “Heh, I wondered for a time if Lisanna had some competition for Natsu’s affections. I of course knew you had a sadistic streak.”

“Gah, you take that back! I’m no homewrecker,” Mira replied, pointing angrily at Erza, making no mention of whether she was a sadist. Then they both actually giggled like schoolgirls, causing Ranma and Laxus to exchange a bewildered glance.

“Where should we go, Ranma-nii?” Wendy asked, tugging lightly at his shirt.

“Hmm…. Well, one room for Mira and Levy, one room for Natsu and Happy, one room for Simon and Wally, another for the cat-chick and Erza. Which leaves this one for Natsu and Laxus. For us, I think we can set up the tent out in the living room, Wendy.”

“MMm!” Wendy replied with a happy nod. It had been years since they had first gotten that tent, and over that time they had upgraded it in many ways so that, while it wasn’t quite as sumptuous as the suite, it was definitely very comfy. Wendy loved it.

Mira had been about to object and offer to share a bed with the little girl, but seeing her happy smile instead asked, “Tent?”

“Heh, we bought this tent from Seven, and it’s quite a marvel,” Ranma replied with a grin.

“Huh. You’ll have to show me it sometime,” Mira said with a coquettish grin on her face, causing Ranma to laugh at the hidden innuendo of showing Mira his tent.

Blinking, Laxus raised an eyebrow as he looked between Mira and Ranma. *Did Mira just flirt with him? Bizarre.*

Erza looked at them all, then gestured out to the ocean visible out through the doors leading to the suite’s pool. It glistened slightly with the reflected light of the resort, but, for the most part, it was simply a deep, dark expanse with the nighttime sky merging almost seamlessly into it. “Before we do that, however, we have something else we need to do tonight.”

With Laxus joining them, the group made their way down through the bustling hotel and out along the beach until they were well away from anyone else. It was a slightly rocky, very broken up area, not suitable for sunbathing or games, and so was normally left alone even during the day, let along near to two in the morning as it was at the moment.

Ranma, Laxus, Wendy, Carla, Happy, Mira, and Levy stood behind the others as Erza and her friends moved forward to the ocean carrying between them Shô’s casket. None of them had any real idea what Shô would have wanted, but when they were younger the sea meant freedom, and Akane Resort was one of the places they had all wanted to visit when they escaped the tower. It seemed fitting that his body would rejoin that symbol from here.

Holding one hand on the casket containing the body of their friend in turn, they each spoke about a memory they had had with Shô that stood out to them and what he had meant to them all. After each one took a turn, they moved forward into the ocean pushing the casket out into the ocean. They waded in with it for a ways before pushing it as hard as they could out to sea as Simon made a small hole in the bottom.

Behind them, Ranma used his powers subtly, pushing the casket out to sea. Feeling out the area around them, he was able to find a current that would continue to carry it out and away from land until it sank, whereupon it would disappear beneath the ocean forever.

Behind them Ranma pulled out his guns, as did Wendy, and Mira called forth her Satan Soul. Nodding at the others, they aimed their hands or guns into the air, blasting out into the sky.

“Guns Magic: Flare!” Wendy and Ranma shouted as one. Bright red and green explosions of light lit up the scene from their shots.

Laxus, Carla, and Mira all launched their own attacks. Lightning crackled in giant balls, blazing off in wide splashes of color. Bolts of purple energy bloomed and exploded in turn. Flashes of blue flashed out through the air from Carla.

Erza Requipped her battered, broken Heaven’s Wheel armor. She launched some of her swords into the air with a slight wave of one hand, where they ignited with streamers of vary-colored fire and lightning, dancing in the sky. In her other hand she pointed another sword up into the air, womanfully holding back tears. “To Shô!”

“To Shô!” Wally shouted, his hands shifting into polygon guns and firing up into the air. “May he be a mighty fine dandy in the next life!”

“To Shô!” Millianna and Simon chorused, though they, lacking any long-range magic, had to rely on some fireworks they had bought on their way through the resort.

As the magic show started to fade away, Mira chivied Wendy along back to the hotel, telling her it was definitely past her bedtime. Carla went with her, nodding along and wondering if perhaps Mira could help in her battles against Ranma’s influence on young Wendy.

Laxus too left, feeling that, beyond offering some more fireworks, he had nothing to offer to this moment, with Ranma and Levy following him. Not having even seen Shô during the battle, Ranma had just as little to offer as Laxus, and Levy had barely even seen him.

Erza hugged Millianna as she began to cry, while Wally and Simon stayed silent for a time, staring out over the ocean, lost in their own thoughts for a time. After a few minutes, she broke the silence. “What are you three going to do now?”

“I, I do not know. It isn’t very manly of me to admit it, but I don’t know enough about the outside world to make any dandy plans. I do, however, want to search for my older brother. I was separated from him by the slavers, and I was never able to find him afterward. I think that he might have been sold into slavery elsewhere, or, maybe, as we discussed back at the port, he was given over to the Oración Siete to be trained as one of their members. It will be this dandy’s task to find out.”

“I think I want to join a guild, nya,” Millianna said hesitantly, moving away from Erza and rubbing at her sore eyes for a moment, drying her tears. “I, I want to get stronger. I don’t want anyone to control me, ever again!”

“You’re welcome to join Fairy Tail. All of you are,” Erza said quickly. She rather liked the idea of introducing her old friends to her family.

“No, I don’t think so. No offense, Erzie, but that’d be too much like I was mooching off you or something, nya. I’ll find a guild on my own, I think, nya.” Millianna emphasized her words with a quick shake of her head before laughing. “Besides, if I did that I’d be tempted to steal that Natsu guy’s partner away from him and that other little white-haired kitty too.”

Just as they entered the hotel, Happy and Carla both paused, shuddering in unison. Carla looked over at her fellow Exceed. “Did you feel as if someone just walked over your grave? Without, in fact, having one?”

“Aye, sir!” Happy replied, shivering again.

Back on the beach, Simon nodded. “I’ll join Wally for this. I, I have a little sister out there somewhere. I want to, I thought she was taken with us, but I never saw her in the tower, despite searching. Maybe, maybe she was given to the Oración Siete too. Regardless, I have to find her.”

 “Just so long as it is information that you are hunting for and not the group itself,” Erza said after a moment. “That group is incredibly dangerous, as we saw. If you find anything about their location or even members, you need to pass it on to the proper authorities, do not take it into your own hands or attempt to do something. And as to simply searching for your sister, remember that you can also ask guilds for help. Missing family members is a job that any guild would take on instantly, without even needing to get approval from the council.”

Simon snorted. “I saw that Ranma guy and one of the three sent to help Jellal fight it out. I’m not stupid enough to fight monsters like that. And, and I’ll remember that about the guilds, thanks.”

“While it isn’t very hard-boiled of a man to admit to such, I have to side with my large friend on the point about not fighting the Oración Siete,” Wally replied. *Unless, of course, my brother really is with them, in which case all bets are off!*

**OOOOOOO**

*There has to be a word for an action that is just slightly below that of the level with which one could use the phrase, ‘complete catastrophe,’* Brain mused to himself. Staring at the battered, near-crippled forms of Cobra and Midnight as they rested in their beds, he absently rubbed his throat where the tattoo signifying Jiemma’s connection to the spell that kept his alter ego, Zero, in check, should have been. Now it was gone, and that cage was weakened.

Not for the first time Brain lamented the experiment which had created Zero: his dark self, his hidden rage, his urge to destroy. It had been an experiment to recreate the effects chronicled as that which had been created by Nirvana, save in a controlled manner. But it hadn’t worked. Instead of being able to control the impulses, to bring it out and then stuff it back inside as he had wished to, his destructive impulses had created an alter ego. Worse this alternate personality wished to do naught but watch the world burn instead of simply conquering it.

*And the newest chain to keep him under control has been shattered because of this…this utter and complete fuck up!* Brain wasn’t one to curse, even in his own head. He believed curses unworthy of someone of his towering intellect. Yet there really was something therapeutic about using them when the situation called for it, and this situation certainly did.

One of his mages, indeed, one of the strongest of them and certainly by far the most durable, was now dead. Midnight, who he had long thought truly the strongest of his tools, given the nature of his magic, was so badly wounded it would be months before he would be back to normal.  *If, that is, he ever does return to normal*. *The damage done to his psyche might never heal.*

Midnight had never, in the years since Brain had first taught him to use his magic been touched by any enemy. Now, however, he had not just been beaten but nearly killed by one. It remained to be seen if he could bounce back from that.

Cobra too had been battered beyond belief, but thanks to the poison-type lacrima embedded in his system and the Dragon Slayer magic it gave him, Cobra would likely be fully healed within a week. And it was only because he had been able to think clearly that either of them had gotten away. *And he did bring out the minimal material we required…* Brain’s eyes twitched over to the bag Cobra had brought back with him, then sighed and moved toward it.

Without looking he began to bark orders to Racer, Angel, and Hoteye, all of whom were waiting by the doorway. “Racer, get me a large clear jar of glass, enough amniotic fluid to fill it, and several dozen copper needles. Angel, you go to my chest and pull out four lacrima for me, the black, the brown, and two of the power lacrima. I’ll also need that large copper prod. Hoteye, secure the area around this mansion. We’ll need to stay here longer than I foresaw.”

“What about Midnight’s injuries?” Angel asked as Racer raced off and Hoteye mumbled something about money needed to make the world go round, Angel wasn’t certain. She had lost all interest in his ramblings years ago and had even developed her ability to tune him out to such a degree that she didn’t even need to think about it anymore.

 Brain smirked nastily. “I’ve done enough to keep them from getting worse for now. But I need to get to work on preserving Jellal’s brain before the magical residue within it disappears entirely. Who would have thought that seminar I took in Seven on magical autopsies would come in handy?”

 His eyes whipped over to where Cobra was watching all this, his battered form laid out alongside his giant snake, who was also watching Brain closely. “After that, you had best tell us all more about what happened. We’ll need to figure out how badly this has set our plans back and whether or not this Ranger is going to be a problem in the long term.”

**OOOOOOO**

 The next day Natsu was still out of it thanks to the element-infused lacrima he had ingested during the battle, but that wasn’t about to stop him from trying to have fun. When he somehow heard that the others were heading to the beach, he had grabbed onto Laxus’s shorts before his temporary roommate had been able to leave. “Damn it, you asshole, let me go!”

“Nooo,” Natsu moaned. “Takenmewitchou,” he slurred.

“What? Natsu, you won’t even be able to do anything but lay there.”

“Still better’n here,” Natsu moaned, his words slightly easier to understand now. “Come on, Laxus, don’, don’t leave me here.”

“Ugh. Fine, you stupid asshole. But if you ever try to eat some other element again, I’ll freaking feed you so many lightning bolts you’ll fucking explode on it,” Laxus grumbled. “And if you think I’m going to help you into your swimsuit, think again!”

Ignoring Natsu’s muffled reply to that, Laxus picked up Natsu like he was a sack of potatoes under one arm. He was eager to get this day started. While last night had obviously not been the time to catch up with his old friend (Laxus was arrogant, not socially inept), he wanted to hear about what Ranma had been up to since that time when they had saved Mira and her sisters.

Outside in the main sitting room, Laxus found the rest of his fellow mages waiting for them. The girls were even wearing their swimsuits, presently covered with white bathrobes. These did nothing to protect their curves from his appreciative eyes or those of the other boys but covered their chests and thighs enough so that Laxus could only make out the colors of their respective swimsuits. Erza was wearing red, naturally, Mira black, and Levy and Millianna white and orange respectively.

Ranma too was now in his female form and was wearing a blue and black swimsuit, somewhat on display in comparison to the other girls since she wasn’t wearing a bathrobe. But the bathing suit was, while a two-piece suit, about as asexual as any bathing suit could be. It was a stripped suit that was like something *Where’s Waldo* would wear, which showed her stomach but scant else, covering her upper body above the belly button, her shoulders and upper arms, and then her waist done to her mid-thigh. Loose enough you could only make out a vague shape while also being tight enough to not restrict her movement.

“Hey,” Laxus said simply, gesturing over his shoulder. “Natsu wants to come with us. Where’re the other two? And Ranma, that suit is a little disturbing on you, knowing about your curse.”

“Nya, that was amazing,” Millianna gushed, staring at the boy-turned-redhead. “One moment he was all buff and guy-like, and the next he’s all short and squishy, nya.” She smirked, reaching out to poke Ranma in the tit, which she blocked. “If I was the sort to be jealous, those might make me doubt myself a bit, nya.”

“Stop that, damn it! What is it about girls getting all handsy with me in this form? What would you lot do to a guy who tried that kind of thing with you, huh?” Ranma groused before sending a smirk over at Laxus. “And that’s your own fault, dude. I found this suit and figured it was about the least sexy thing I could find for my body type outside a freaking bag. I’ve done my bit; you just need to stop looking at everything with a set of these with whatever thoughts a quick spark like you has,” she said, lifting up her breasts before letting them fall, where they barely jiggled before stopping, showing an incredible amount of firmness.

Again Millianna shook her head, muttering about, “Unfair!” The other girls there made no comment beyond laughing or pouting as Levy was.

But Laxus simply shook his head. “You’re telling me you can control your thoughts like that? You’re supposed to be a Dragon Slayer, you watery brat, not a monk.” He then smirked widely, showing quite a bit of fang. “And I might be quick to light up, but I’ve never been called quick to go off.”

“Meh, I have ‘em, I’m just selective in where I point ‘em. And also, TMI,” Ranma groused. His eyes drifted over to Erza and Mira, winking at them, and they both smirked back before turning to narrow their eyes at one another as he turned back. “Still, let’s get this party started!”

With that Ranma led the way to the elevator and out to the beach. There they found Wally and Simon, both dressed in off the rack swim trunks, laid out on lounge chairs with several more around them. They looked up and, as the girls deposited their bathrobes, began to blush, while Laxus allowed a low, long whistle to sound.

Mira wore a barely there bikini done in white and pink, the colors innocent enough, but the cut of the bikini very much not. The bottom was a side-tied bikini, which hugged her rear and her private parts while not covering anything more. She also had a long, almost see through sash tied around her waist, its color pink. Her top, which was a front tied bikini, hugged her chest, putting it on display too. Her legs were long and perfect, her hair falling in glossy white waves from her head, and her white skin shone with good health. On her face she wore a smirk, half-flirtatious, half-challenging.

Erza too wore a bikini. Her bottom portion almost looked like the one Mira wore, except with more material, covering her somewhat better while it was tied on both sides. Each cup of her top was triangular, covering her breasts entirely, the piece tied in the back. But to everyone’s surprise bar Ranma, Erza’s chest was actually at least a size, maybe two, larger than Mira’s, something Mira was very aware of but not trying to show it. Her suit was also black, standing out against her slightly tanned skin and crimson hair starkly. In contrast to Mira, she looked almost serious as she looked around the beach, her eyes narrowing like she was analyzing the beach for some reason.

Letting loose a coquettish giggle, Mira ran her hands up her body and into her hair, pooling it into a loose ponytail as she expertly cocked her head, winking at the four men. “Like what you see, boys?”

Laxus shook his head, whispering to himself, “Damn, I would tap that so hard…”

This did not stop the other Dragon Slayers from hearing and as Wendy blushed, Ranma smashed Laxus almost to the ground with a slap to the back of his head before looking at Mira. “Not in front of Wendy, dude. As for you, Mira, I think you know we do, else ya wouldn’t be such a famous model, would ya?”

Then she tapped the still flushing Wendy on the shoulder. The younger girl was dressed in a cute and very frilly yellow bathing suit. Ranma and Carla had actually agreed on it, and Wendy had thought it was a great birthday present. “Race ya!”

With that Ranma was off, racing towards the ocean. Wendy pouted behind him, her blush receding, then hopped into the air, shouting, "Tenryu no Chuu Heki (Sky Dragon's Air Burst)!" She shot off with the sound of a cannon, catching up to Ranma quickly and tackling her into the water. But it was Wendy who was flung back into the air with a whoop, where she hovered and began to use her powers to throw tons of water at her big brother turned sister.

Laxus dumped the moaning, almost entirely limp form of Natsu on one lounge chair, then immediately moved over to the nearby bar. “I want some food in me before I have some fun.” *And I need to get the image of those two out of my damn head. Erza’s like family for God’s sake, and Mira’s a fellow Fairy Tail mage. Don’t go pissing in your own pool like that, boyo. Remember what happened with Evergreen, several months of walking on eggshells around one another for no freaking reason.*

“Oy! Wait for me!” Cackling, Mira raced after the two of them.

Levy rolled her eyes and moved to sit by Natsu, while Millianna looked at Happy and Carla, pouncing on them. “Come on, nya! Let’s have some fun, kitties!”

“Let go of us, you crazy woman!” Carla shouted while Happy attempted to simply squirm away. “We are not your toys!” She transformed hoping to throw Millianna’s interest in her off, but even in her cat-girl form, Millianna did not let her go. *Of course, why did I think that would work, she’s a cat-girl wannabe as it is!*

“No, not toys, nya! Just furry and fluffy and amazing kitties!” Millianna replied, carrying them off. “Come on, nya. Let’s make a sand castle.”

With a chuckle at her old friend’s obsession, Erza was about to move to follow Ranma and the others. However Simon stopped her, a faint flush on his cheeks above the metal mask that was his lower jaw. “Um, Er, Erza, could I, that is, could I talk to you?”

“Of course,” Erza replied promptly, turning to look at Simon. “What is it, my friend?”

At the word friend Simon winced a little, but persevered. “I, I wanted to ask if you, that is… Would you like to, um, go around and see the rest of the resort?”

“I imagine I will in time. We’ll all go around together. I already heard Ranma promise to take Wendy to the amusement park, and he invited the rest of us to go with him,” Erza replied. “Today I would rather just play in the waves, rest, and, alas, do some paperwork.”

Simon found his thoughts, already having hit a roadblock, completely derailed by this last. “Paperwork?”

Grimacing, Erza nodded, looking away from Simon toward a particularly loud shriek from Mirajane, who had just realized that challenging a Water Dragon Slayer to a splash fight was a losing proposition even if she was in her Takeover Satan Soul form. “Yes, paperwork. I lost several of my armors in the fight against Jellal, and even my Heaven’s Wheel armor was broken in numerous places. I have to contact Heart Kreuz to replace them. Without them I am forced to rely on my remaining armors, which, unfortunately, limits me somewhat in a fight.”

She then added as an afterthought, “And it will cost tremendously. I might well have to sell back two of my latest prototype armors just to pay for the rest.”

“Erm, I see,” Simon said, then attempted to steer the conversation back the way he had originally wanted it to go. “But I was hoping that, um, that is, that you and I could go around…together?” he ended, his voice a slight squeak.

Blinking, Erza finally understood where her old friend was going with this. *He, he wants to date me? Did he develop these feelings when we were in the tower together?* Regardless, whether or not it was a crush from long ago or an infatuation, her answer to this situation would not change. “Simon, I realize why you’re asking, but I have to decline. I, you and I are not the same people we were when we were young. I see you, Wally, and Millianna as friends still, but I am afraid I could not see us being anything more than that.”

*And if I were to date anyone, I think there is another person ahead of you,* Erza thought, glancing towards Ranma again. Though in his female form, the shorter redhead grabbed her attention even now. It did not help that she’d had certain thoughts in that direction in any event. “I’m sorry, Simon, but I cannot return your interest.”

Simon winced but nodded, taking this in stride. “I sort of thought that ship had sailed, but I had to try.” He then looked towards where Wally was laid out in a lounge chair nearby, looking positively miserable. For some reason Wally did not do well with the heat and the direct sunlight. Simon and the others had long supposed this was just down to his shape being more a series of polygon-like blocks rather than a human body.

With that thought in mind, he abruptly said, “Wally and I have decided to head back to the port; connect with some of the others, the older ex-prisoners. Wally wants to know if any of them can tell us more about the Oración Siete, if they remembered seeing anyone unusual around the tower, and I want to question them about my sister. In my case it’s a long shot, but it’s a starting point at least.”

Shaking his head Simon went on. “Then we mean to head to a few places Jellal had mentioned he had allies in over the years. We want to get on their trail as soon as possible. While we do that, I’ll be looking for my little sister and asking every guild we pass, large and small, to look for her too.” He then smiled, a warm, if somewhat weak, smile. “And, to put it bluntly I want to get away from the sea for a bit. It might have meant freedom to the rest of them, but to me it always was just another barrier to it.”

“Ah,” Erza said, making no move to try to soften her last blow or indicate that she understood the real reason why Simon had just changed his mind on agreeing to the plan, which Wally had brought up that morning. He had attempted to convince his friends to leave then, but Millianna wanted to go her own way to find a guild to belong to. Simon had postponed answering at the time. Unfortunately, the reason for such was now plain to Erza and dealt with. *I am sorry Simon, but I never saw you in that manner. And to do so now after meeting one another for the first time in such a long while, that would be simply wrong.*

With that thought she smiled at Simon and then over at Wally. “I wish you both luck on your travels, but remember, my offer remains open: you will always find a home in Fairy Tail.”

Simon nodded back and watched as Erza turned, racing off to join the ever-escalating water fight, which had now started to swamp large portions of the beach and scare other beachgoers away. Erza summoning some kind of spear and twirling it into the water before lashing out towards Ranma with it did nothing to quiet things down.

Watching this with a sweatdrop cascading down the side of his face and noticing the sheer joy on Erza’s face as she joined in the fun, Simon sighed. “So much for that dream….”

The Fairy Tail troop stayed on the beach for the rest of the day, joined around mid-afternoon by Lisanna and Anna. Gray had invited himself along with Lucy. Gray tried to hide his interest in what Natsu and the others had been called in for by saying he wanted to make certain Natsu hadn't done anything to embarrass Fairy Tail, but curiosity had dragged him there by the hair. Lucy’s motivations were much easier: she figured it was an excuse to have some fun in the sun.

Though their fellow guildmates weren't the first to notice their arrival. That honor went to the numerous men on the beach and, beyond that, in the hotel's reception area.

"Holy hell, would you look at that! Twins! Dude, we totally have to chat them up," said one brawny looking beach goer to his fellow steroid enthusiast.

"Wait a minute, I think I recognize them. That's Anna Strauss, the model voted 'girl you'd like to call your little sister' three years in a row and the 'essential girl next door' two years running. The other girl must be her sister Lisanna. The mags have always said she's too shy to join her sisters in modeling, but they are supposed to be identical twins."

"Heh, that might mean Lisanna’s an easier mark. Me, I want a piece of the blond. Check out the size of those bazongos," a third man interjected.

"This has been a most auspicious day. First Mirajane Strauss shows up, then her sisters? I am so very glad we decided to use your condo this week for our meeting," another far older and obese man muttered to his friend, an equally elderly if far fitter looking man, who simply nodded. "I wonder if either of them would be more interested in an elderly gentlemen than her sister seemed to be earlier?”

Whatever plans any of the watchers might have had, they were interrupted by Mira shouting, "Hey, you four! You made it!" The famous model trotted over to her newly arrived friends, her Takeover soul retreating and leaving her in her normal body. Behind her came the others save for Wendy, who merely waved and moved over to join the two cats and Millianna, where the cat lover had essentially forced the two cats to make a sand castle with her.

"Glad you called us in, nee-chan," Lisanna said, hugging her sister and causing many a nosebleed in the men who were attempting to be subtle in their stares from around the beach as their chests pressed together. Even Laxus and Ranma had to look away for a brief moment, something that none of the girls thankfully noticed as Anna took her turn to hug their older sister. "Where's Natsu?"

A weak wave from Natsu, who was lying out on the lounge chair where Laxus had dumped him, caught both twin's attention, and they hurried over without another word, cooing over the boy. He looked up at them blearily and then, to their delight, began to blush as he took in their attire. Both girls wore relatively modest bikini style swimsuits in white and yellow, with long sashes of yellow silk that matched Mirajane’s setting off their short-cropped silver hair and their healthy pink skin. Though they didn’t have as much in the way of busts as their older sibling, the swimsuits definitely put on display what they did have, and their legs were a match for the older Strauss woman, to say nothing of their rears, which Natsu couldn’t see at present.

And, as shown by his blush, even the normally oblivious Natsu was affected. "Lisanna, Anna, um, what're you doing here? Um, not that I'm unhappy about it our anything, just wondering," he squeaked. His voice sounded much more understandable now, though he still wasn’t able to move his body.

*Success,* both girls thought, with Anna adding a surreptitious fist bump as Lisanna sat down next to her Natsu, leaning down to run her fingers through his wild pink hair. "Mira-nee sent us a message about how you pushed yourself to hard and were hurt. Did you really have to push yourself that hard, Natsu?" she asked sternly, something that really didn't quite work.

"Yeah, Matchstick, going all out like that and not even finishing the fight. Come on, you're going to give Fairy Tail a bad name,” Grey said, coming over and poking in where he definitely wasn't wanted just then. “Or was the enemy you faced some kind of monster beyond even you?”

“What’d you say, Popsicle!” Natsu roared, trying to surge to his feet only to turn green as if he had suddenly found himself on some kind of transportation.

He slumped back, but Anna caught him as Lisanna rounded on Gray. “Gray! If you’re just here to pick a fight like you and Natsu do all the time, then you can go away right now! Or else you’ll have to deal with the two of us!”

“Come on, doofus,” Lucy said, grabbing Gray by his wrist and dragging him away.

As Lucy and Gray joined them, Laxus and Ranma shook their heads sadly, with the aquatranssexual saying, “Not cool, man. You don’t butt in on a semi-romantic moment like that. Not unless you got feelings for the girl, er, one of the girls, in question.”

“That’s right. It’s, like, rule number four or even three of the Bro Code,” Laxus added, nodding sagely.

Gray scoffed, moving to strip down from his swim trunks, only stopping as Ranma growled low in her throat. For some reason it was scarier to Gray now that Ranma was female, and he settled for replying verbally. “Bah! That Flame Brain wouldn’t know what romance was if it hit him upside the head like a cannonball.”

“That’s sort of what my little sisters are doing right now, Gray,” Mira muttered. “Honestly, can you be that dense?” She then looked around frowning. “Speaking of dense men, where’s Elfman? I thought he would come with the girls to try and protect them.”

“He had just left on a job when your messenger bird arrived,” Gray grunted in reply, then shook his head. “And I still say you’re giving Flame Brain too much credit. I can see the twins being obvious about it, but even so, Dragon Breath won’t know what to do in reply.”

“Dragon Breath? You’re reaching there, streaker, given there’s three other Dragon Slayers here. And actually, guys and gals, I think we might be barking up the wrong tree here,” Ranma said, smiling beatifically. “I think it isn’t that he’s dense; I think we were closer when we said butting in might be allowable if the person butting in was interested in the girl.” Just as Mira was about to squeal for some reason Ranma didn’t comprehend, Ranma held up a hand, still smiling that pretty yet somehow rather terrifying smile as she looked at Gray. “But instead of being interested in Lisanna or Anna, Gray’s trying to blow their romantic moments because he’s interested in Natsu.”

“WH, what the hell? Where did you get that from!?” Gray squeaked, backing away and looking rather horrified, his already pale skin palling even further.

“’Hmm…. You know, that is true. They say that opposites sometimes attract. You fight like an old married couple…” Laxus mused, quickly getting in on the teasing. He absolutely loathed Gray’s stripping habit, and anytime he could mock the Ice Make user he was up for.

“You also go looking to fight one another all the time,” Mira said, an evil smirk appearing on her face while Lucy and Erza began to blush hotly. “And I’d say seven out of ten times where you strip all the way it’s during one of your fights with Natsu. That could be taken as flirting, you know.”

Still smiling that calm yet somehow scary smile, Ranma reached over and gently patted Gray on the shoulder, reveling in the way Gray flinched under her touch. “Don’t worry, Gray. We understand,” she said soothingly. “You’re just confused. It’s obvious no one’s taught you about how to properly show you like someone. Just talk it out with Natsu and….”

“Gah! That’s it!” Gray shouted, bringing his hands together. “I’m not gay, damn it! Ice Make: spear!” With that, an ice spear appeared from his hands and one hand clenched into a fist on his other palm.

 However, Ranma simply smashed the spear to pieces with a single punch, her lips twisting into a smirk. “Oh, ya wanna go, ice prick?”

Before this could escalate Erza stepped forward quickly, conjuring up two simple swords and sending them to halt directly in front of Ranma and Gray’s necks. “Absolutely not!” she shouted, staring both of them down and then flicking an angry glare over at Laxus, who looked as if he had been about to join in. “If you want to spar, take it somewhere else. We’ve already been getting some looks from our earlier splash fight.”

With that she turned to Gray. “Gray, you have to admit that your stripping is strange and that you need to leave Natsu alone for now. If you don’t, you might earn the ire of Lisanna and Anna, and I don’t think you’d like what the two chief cooks for the guild could do to you to get you back.”

Gulping, Gray nodded, conceding the point. In reply, the sword previously threatening his gullet retreated quickly.

With a harrumph, Erza turned to the others. “Ranma, Laxus, if you want to spar, please take it somewhere well away from the resort so that nothing we have to pay for gets damaged. Mira, please stop trying to make fun of Gray’s possible orientation.

“…Possible orientation, oy,” Gray began, only to shut up as Erza glared at him.

“Good.” With that Erza turned away, her swords disappearing back into her Requip space.

“Well, you heard the lady,” Ranma said, looking over at Laxus, who grinned.

Ranma left for a moment, and came back in his male body wearing shorts and t-shirt. Then he and Laxus followed Erza’s instructions, heading out of the resort to a nearby empty stretch of shoreline. They were at it for a few hours, by the end of which it was pushing midday, and both of them were getting hungry.

The fight between them hadn’t gone very far since neither were willing to break out their high-end attacks. Even where they were, that would have brought attention they didn’t want. But it was enough to prove to one another that each of them had grown stronger. For his part, Laxus was pleased. His lightning based teleportation ability had been honed to a fine point, so that he could actually teleport his arms and legs, which gave him the speed to match Ranma’s Amaguriken for a few minutes. He wasn’t nearly as controlled or precise, but that could be worked on. His combat style had also evolved, coming closer to Ranma’s ability in that area. His strength was also near equal to the other man’s the sound of their fists impacting like the boom of thunder heard for leagues around.

Where he still lost out, though, was in adaptability, agility, and sheer skill. Ranma had a trick or a move for any situation and used his escrima sticks and guns like extensions of his own body, flowing into those styles with a speed and fluidity that was almost terrifying. Laxus could beat him out in durability, but Ranma could still dance round him, matching Laxus’s lightning skills.

As they were walking back they talked, exchanging good-natured insults and advice in equal measure. Ranma’s for Laxus was simple. “You need to branch out magically. Get yourself some more pinpoint accurate long-range skills or spells. And maybe add a weapon to your repertoire. Not a gun, something mid-range. A kusarigama, maybe? Something you can conduct your electricity through.” At Laxus’s quizzical look, Ranma elaborated. “Um, think of it like a chain with scythe blades connected to weights at either end. Nasty weapon, but hard to use properly.”

“Hmm…makes sense. I’ve looked into that kind of thing before, but I’ve never run into any blacksmiths that could make something like that without a model to work from. But weapons like that could help a bit, especially when I’m fighting alongside other people and have to worry about collateral damage,” Laxus mused.

“And penetrating type damage. Ya might run into enemies whose hides protect them from lightning or blunt force attacks,” Ranma replied with a nod.

Laxus nodded, then stared at his frenemy as they reached the outskirts of the resort, hopping easily over the security fence around the resort designed to keep animals away. “What’s up with your durability?” Laxus asked bluntly. “When I hit you, you felt it a lot more than you should have given how long it’s been since we last met. I’d say you’re barely more durable than Natsu at the moment, and you’re not the type to train up everything else and figure you just can dodge everything.”

For just a moment Ranma contemplated lying or waving that off, but shook it off quickly. Laxus wasn’t like Ryoga or Mousse, willing to take advantage of any perceived weakness. *Nah, he’d just want to kick the crap out of me at my best.* “I’ve got two different magics fighting it out in me,” he replied equally bluntly. “I only figured it out in the past half year, and since then I’ve been trying to find a way to somehow push one down over the other, but it’s hard as hell. One, my first magic, the magic I learned from my old man, is fighting against my Dragon Slayer magic. It makes me insanely durable itself, but the Dragon Slayer magic fights that too. On the other hand, my first magic gives me an ability to heal that has to be seen to be believed. It’s a toss-up, really.”

Laxus scowled in thought. “But if it’s like Dragon Slayer magic in how it effects the body, then you can’t consciously control it, right?”

“Not those aspects, no, not normally. I can sort of do it when I’m seriously injured, help direct it to heal my wounds, but it’s not perfect. And the durability aspect? Never even tried to control that before. That’s sort of why I’m having a lot of difficulty with figuring out how to control it,” Ranma replied.

Laxus continued to scowl. “Wish I could help you with that. The best bet would be to talk to my old man. Mind you, you’d have to force him to take it seriously.” Laxus’s scowl turned into a smirk. “And, given you can become a bounciful redhead with a tiny splash of water, that’ll be almost impossible.”

 “Did you just call my female form bounciful?” Ranma asked, shuddering. “That’s nightmare fuel, man.”

“Oh, shut up,” Laxus groused, then changed the subject. “So, beyond training, what’ve you been up to?”

That discussion took them back to the beach, where they found Mira, Erza, and the near-human form of Carla laying out on the lounge chairs. Lisanna and Anna were nearby, helping to erect a now two-story tall castle in front of Natsu, who was shouting instructions to them, while to one side, Millianna, Wendy, and Lucy were at work on another castle. Smaller, this one looked far more intricate, and Wendy was directing the other two. Gray was nowhere to be seen, and Happy was curled up by Natsu’s feet.

“You haven’t mentioned where the hell Carla learned that trick,” Laxus groused, looking away. Ever since his attempt to date Evergreen crashed and burned, Laxus had made the decision to not date anyone within the guild again. It was not worth the effort. But sometimes, when he saw Mira like this or when he bought her centerfold, he had second thoughts about that.

“Carla figured that trick out about a year and a half ago. She was sick of being treated like a cat or a stuffed doll. Don’t ask me where she got the idea from though. She says it might be a racial magic thing, like the wings, but she doesn’t know for sure.” Ranma smiled, looking at Wendy having fun with other people and actually putting herself forward as she ordered the two older girls around. “We’re still working on her magical endurance for it.”

“Disturbing, wherever it came from,” Laxus muttered.

“I heard that!” Carla replied, one eye opening and glaring at Laxus who rolled his eyes and looked away.

“Oh, hey, you two. Have a nice time?” Mira quipped, her lips twisting in amusement as the two men tried to not stare at her or Erza. She stretched, smiling as she saw Ranma flush and look away a bit.

However before she could say anything else, to her frank astonishment Erza spoke up first. “Perfect timing, Ranma. Here.” She held out a tube of sunscreen. “Could you get my back for me?”

“Was that a trick question?” Ranma asked, sitting down to one side of Erza, who lay back down, rolling so that she was on her back.

To one side Mira was watching this with shock written plain on her face, and then her face twisted as she caught the faint smile on Erza’s face as she turned away from Ranma. *Oh, is that how it is, you bitch!? Fine, it’s on!*

Seeing this, Laxus decided to move to one side, a smirk on his face. *Oh boy, it looks as if Ranma has somehow restarted Erza and Mira’s rivalry. This could be funny as hell.*

Ranma didn’t catch either girl’s expression. Rather, he was busy enjoying the sensation of Erza’s skin under his hands. He began by her feet, rubbing in the sunscreen slowly until the white of it disappeared, leaving Erza’s skin glistening slightly. Then he worked on her calves, feeling the powerful muscles under her skin twitch under his ministrations, his rubbing in of the sunscreen becoming a slow massage that worked over first her outer then her inner thigh. He skipped over her rear, seeing as it was covered by her bikini bottom, and moved to her arms, again feeling the muscles moving under her skin as Erza began to breathe a little harder, a little faster.

Moving Erza’s long, flame-like hair from her back, Ranma began to work on her back and sides. By this point he had decided to ignore the fact they were kind of in public and had decided to make certain Erza really got some enjoyment out of this. *And if it pays her back for flirting with me during that splash fight, that’s all the better.*

Erza bit back a moan as Ranma released some old tense muscles in her back and side. The feel of another person’s hands on her bare body like this was well outside her normal realm of experience. *Perhaps I, I did not think this through a much as I should…mmm….have…. “*Eep!” She let out an involuntary gasp as Ranma’s hands reached her neck, wringing out some of the tension there in turn.

To one side, Mira coughed. “Um, Ranma, I don’t suppose I could ask you to help me next?”

Elsewhere, Laxus had found Gray at the bar, where he was slugging back what looked like an entire bottle of rum. *Huh, wonder what’s up with him? Gray isn’t normally that hard a drinker.* Shrugging that off as unimportant, Laxus turned with a drink of his own, watching the ongoing castle battle and the little bit of drama around Ranma. *Like day time television at its best.”*

**OOOOOOO**

“So, what was that about?” Mira asked, almost pleasantly. It was now evening time, and the Fairy Tail mages had returned to their rooms to get ready for that evening. They would be trying out the casino, while Wendy would go and watch a children’s play with Happy and Carla.

The only three who weren’t there were Natsu, Lisanna, and Anna. Natsu was still under the weather, and the Strauss twins were staying with him. Or rather, he was staying with them. The two of them had gotten an entirely separate room when they arrived earlier that day and had moved Natsu in there with them. Neither Erza nor Mira knew whether or not that arrangement would include Happy, and right now had no attention to spare on that possible love triangle over their own.

“What was what about?” Erza replied, though of course she knew what it was.

“You know very well what. You asking Ranma to put on some sunscreen for you. Did you suddenly become an invalid when I wasn’t looking?” Mira asked tartly. “Did you lose your inhibitions when you took off your armor?”

“Oh, don’t give me that! You’re just angry that I stole a march on you,” Erza said huffily. “Besides which, Ranma gave you a massage too.”

“Only after he was done with you! That’s not nearly as good as being first!” Mira riposted. She then huffed irritably. “So, are you really interested in Ranma? You’ve never been interested in any boy so far as I know.”

“There is a first time for everything,” Erza muttered with a blush. Ranma interested her somehow, his strength, his confidence, his looks, and, above all, his personality. To her, Ranma was the whole package, something that she hadn’t seen in any other man before. And while she was a novice when it came to romance, Erza had decided to pursue this new interest in the same manner that she did everything: full speed ahead. Or as full speed as her nerves could handle. Which, Erza had to admit, wasn’t very much after that afternoon.

“Hmmpf! So we’re in competition again, huh?” Mira said. She had been afraid of this after their confrontation in the guild hall. A part of her reveled in the idea, but most of her knew this might well break their somewhat fragile friendship.

“I believe we have been for a bit now,” Erza replied. Then Erza held out her hand. “However, let us make a vow. We are both mages of Fairy Tail, and we shouldn’t let a boy come between us. So, no attacking one another physically or verbally in front of him, and no attempts to sabotage one another. And if either one of us realizes this, this attraction is leading us into more…permanent waters,” she said with a stutter and a blush, “then we have to make it plain to the other. All right?”

“Ugh, leave it to you to be all formal about this,” Mira groused, but she was smiling as she did. She held out her hand and shook Erza’s. “May the best woman win.”

Nearby, Lucy poked her head out of the bathroom, her hair up in a towel and another one around her chest. “Did I miss something?”

At that, the two other girls broke off and Mira pointed dramatically at Erza. “And now for the next battlefield: evening dresses!”

That night, when Erza and Mirajane came down from their rooms, Ranma took one look and gasped lightly, his jaw dropping, an expression that brought Laxus’s attention towards the elevator too. Laxus took one look and began to mutter under his breath. “Remember, boy, don't piss in your own pool. Don’t date within the guild again; don’t date within the guild again. Ranma, I don’t know whether to thank you, curse you, or demand to know your secrets right now.” He sighed then before shaking his head and turning away.

Mirajane wore a black dress that, technically speaking, should've looked rather normal, indeed, almost puritanical in cut. It was a black and silver number that started from a tight neckline, covering her entire chest except for a little triangle around her belly button, and then went down to right below her knees. Beyond that little triangle cut out around her belly button, there was no actual skin showing, though it left her arms bare up to the shoulders.

But that was without considering the body that lay underneath it or the fact that it fit said body almost like a second skin. Her hair was also done up in a very elaborate coif, and she wore a pair of earrings along with some kind of pin thrust through her hair, all done in silver. Ranma idly thought that maybe silver on white wasn't a good idea, but other than that, there was absolutely nothing about Mirajane's appearance that he could complain about. Indeed, the very idea of complaining about even that little bit was absurd.

In contrast to Mirajane's little number, Erza’s was rather more obviously daring. It consisted of a crimson dress with straps going over her shoulders and the length of it going down to near her ankles. It was daring because it had a slightly plunging neckline showing a fair bit of the cleavage she had been showing all day along with a slit on the side of the dress that allowed quite a bit of her thigh to be seen as she walked. Her hair fell loose down her back, and, unlike Mirajane, she didn't wear any earrings or any other kind of jewelry bar a bronze bracelet around one wrist. She didn't even wear much in the way of cosmetics, which Mirajane did: rouge on her cheeks, lipstick, and eyeliner. Erza only had some lipstick on.

Ranma moved towards them, dragging Laxus behind him as he continued to mutter about, “God dammit, why are we in the same guild? Maybe I really need to rethink that shit….”

The four of them met up, and Ranma held out his hand, taking each girl’s in turn and bowing over them, but not touching them to his lips. “You both look amazing,” he said honestly. “What the heck is the occasion?”

“No occasion, Ranma,” Erza said, then smirked. “Other than the fact that we rarely get to dress up at all, anyway.”

“Oh, that is so true,” Mira said with a grin, waving at a few people who had pulled out recording devices and begun to snap pictures of her. “I love our guild and everyone in it, but, other than Loke and Freed, none of the people in it are willing to dress up for anything less than a Council command. This is a bit of luxury for us all, not just the two of us. I mean, look at Levy and Lu-chan.”

Behind the two of them came Levy and Lucy. Lucy was wearing a white and blue dress, which was somewhere between Mira and Erza’s in style, but with a frilly bottom on the skirt. It was tight around the chest, empathizing her large breasts, but also had a slightly plunging neckline, allowing some of said bounty to be seen. She also wore eyeliner, lipstick, and a pair of pearl earrings.

Wendy, Carla, Happy, and Millianna were nowhere in sight. Having no interest in trying out the casino, the three of them had stayed up in the suite for now, using the outdoor pool and several floating animals to play around with. Simon and Wally were already somewhere in the casino, trying out games of chance and seeing no need to wait for their new friends. That, Ranma had expected, but he also didn’t see any sign of Gray, Anna, Lisanna, or Natsu.

While he was wondering where those four were, Laxus looked at Lucy in surprise, shaking his head. “You know, I heard we'd gotten a new member, one that was to my old man’s liking,” he said, taking Lily’s hand and kissing it lightly on the back of it. He then smirked at her. “It’s good to know that you are continuing the Fairy Tail tradition of only allowing the most gorgeous girls into the Guild.”

She blushed lightly and laughed with the other three Fairy Tail girls as they smirked at him. It was a running joke that, indeed, there was not a single bad looking girl within the guild. Even Levy and Laki, a Wood Make mage, were very cute, possibly even beautiful if you were into their particular body types: slim, trim, and with rears that would not quit.

Levy’s dress was a sort of mirror image of Mirajane’s, though with a slightly shorter skirt and in a dark blue color. Her back was also very nearly bare beyond her shoulders until right above her rear. Ranma had never understood the allure of that kind of dress, but wasn't about to say anything right now. It had taken two lifetimes, but tact had finally begun to make some headway against his thick skull.

Mira interrupted Laxus. “The plebeians are gathering, Ranma. I suggest we be off before we girls get mobbed.”

With a nod, Laxus led the others out of the hotel and down the streets to the nearest casino. There he was greeted at the door and came back to the group with several stacks of chips, which he passed out to the others. “Don't spend it all in one place,” he mock-ordered, then looked around at the girls. “Any one of you want to try your hand at blackjack?”

“Not against you, you damn card shark,” Mirajane muttered, shaking her head and looking around the casino with a hint of interest flashing through her eyes. She’d been the poster girl for a few casinos, but she hadn’t spent much time actually in them.

Lucy, however, was eyeing the poker table and turned back, cocking an eyebrow at Laxus. “Card shark?”

“Every time there's a card game at the guild and Laxus is involved, Laxus wins it, hands down. He's even beaten Master Makarov,” Mirajane replied, while Erza nodded alongside her.

“It is true, Laxus is very seldom beaten in games of chance like that, although I think that after a certain point chance no longer comes into it,” Erza added.

“Well, of course not,” Lucy said disarmingly. “There's skill in any game of cards.”

“Does the new girl think she's up to the challenge?” Laxus asked mockingly. When Lucy nodded, he waved at the tables all around them. “In that case, I'll let you choose your poison.”

“Poker,” Lucy declared, leading the way. Next to her Levy stayed silent, having decided to follow after her friend, thinking this might be very good entertainment. “But I’ll warn you now, I need the money. My apartment is expensive!”

“You don’t live in Fairy Hills?” Laxus asked, a little bemused by that.

“It's not **that** expensive, and I prefer to live alone. Or I would if a certain Dragon Slayer wasn't always busting in, coming through the windows, or burning off my lock!” Lucy groused.

Erza laughed at that, shaking her head. “Natsu doesn't understand the idea of personal property. I sometimes think that is a problem across our guild, given how much destruction we routinely create.” She paused then, frowning thoughtfully. “Although, I haven't heard of Natsu busting into anyone’s actual house before this. I wonder if that gives more weight to Cana's idea,” she mused, looking out over to Mirajane for her opinion.

Mira, however, wasn't listening. She was instead staring at a poster on one of the walls. Following her line of sight, Erza turned in that direction, as did the others. “Is that Jenny?” Ranma asked himself, cocking his head to one side.

The poster on the wall was indeed for Jenny Realight, advertising that she was due to perform a live show at the resort’s restaurant that evening. The same show, Ranma remembered, that Simon and the others from the tower had hoped to see that evening. *I hope they were able to get tickets.*

“You know Jenny?” Mira asked in a startled yelp, whipping around so hard that it caused her hair to almost come undone from its elaborate coif. “**How** do you know Jenny?”

“We met a few years back when she was still on Shield, working at that massive amusement park they have there,” Ranma said obliquely. “I had to be called away on a bit of a mission the same day we met, and she watched Wendy for me for the next day or two. I came back, and we spent some time there, but not much, and it was several years ago. Haven’t seen her since.”

He made no mention of the fact he and Jenny had kissed or that he had been really interested in seeing where that went at the time. In a way, Ranma was still dealing with the idea of being interested in girls who wouldn't immediately believe that any sign of his interest meant he was willing to marry him. It was very nice, almost heady feeling, as was the niggling thought at the back of his head that the two girls on either side of him at the moment were truly interested in him, rather than having some ulterior motives.

“But where’s the stripper, anyway?” Ranma asked, changing the subject. “I haven't seen him all day since he arrived. I thought he’d be plying us all with questions about the battle of the tower.”

“He did do that while you and Laxus were having your fun,” Mira replied.

“You have to understand that Gray and Natsu view each other as rivals. I know I joined in on the fun earlier about whether or not that speaks to Gray’s sexual orientation,” Erza said, flushing slightly as she mentioned this, despite not having done so earlier. “But they see each other as one another’s chief rival within the guild. Now that Natsu has been part of a job that is of clearly S-rank, Gray feels as if he has been left behind somewhat. Which is just silly, of course. They're both as close to S-class as each other.”

Ranma cocked his head to one side, thinking about that. “Really?” Then he paused, thinking before he went on. “Okay, I can see that. Natsu's got the power and the endurance, but Gray has a lot of power himself and more versatility, but nowhere near as much durability, right?”

“Exactly!” Erza exclaimed, nodding her head seriously. “I wish they could learn more from one another, not that I think that either of them will ever be able to use any other magics. Even if they could, I doubt they would be able to psychologically. But there has to be some way to make fire a little more versatile than Natsu’s normal method of burning, searing or blasting through everything. Whereas Gray just needs to work on his endurance….”

“Both in actual magical ability and how long he can go without stripping,” Mira interjected before turning to more fun topics. “So, do you want to hit up the tables too?”

“No, I don't have a good poker face, I'm afraid,” Ranma said with a chagrined look.

“Really? You're able to act so well,” Erza replied in surprise, leading the way deeper into the casino.

“Actually, I don't act like other people. I mean, I dress up as other people, sure. I disguise how I walk or look from a distance, but actually acting like someone else? Nope. Besides, poker isn't about acting, it's about **not** **reacting**, about not letting your face just say precisely what you wanted to, which is really hard.” Ranma laughed, gesturing for the two girls to follow him towards the row of machines set to one side of the casino. “Once, when I was really young a friend of mine and I got in trouble when we met up with this guy called the Gambling King or something, and he took us for all we were worth. Of course, we were just toddlers basically at the time, so we didn't take it very seriously…or very well.”

“What did you do to him?” Erza asked shrewdly. She could well remember how strong Ranma was when he had attempted to free her and had no problem imagining an even younger Ranma dealing with one card shark. *And if he was truly targeting children, then I have no sympathy for him whatsoever.* Beside her, Mira was simply grinning, waiting for the punchline.

“After he demanded that we hand over our clothes and my friend’s yatai—erm, that’s like a portable food cart—we knocked him out, tied him up, took our money back, and then further tied a mattress around him before tossing him in the river,” Ranma said, smiling. “Ahh, that’s a good memory, that.”

“But he came back, years later,” Ranma went on, his lips twitching into a grin as he watched the two girls who were now nearly keeled over with the effort of keeping in their laughter, just imagining a four-year-old being able to do that to a grown man.

“And, and then what happened,” Mira asked between gasps.

“Well, I hadn’t learned how to hide my emotions any better yet. So they all showed up on my face, and he beat me and several other acquaintances again. My face was so easy to read that I had to find a…unique solution to it. I tried to train it so I wouldn't react, so hard that I actually developed bruises on my face thanks to the numerous punishments I took in that time.”

Ranma further explained the mechanism of that training which had Mira now giggling behind one hand, her training as a model coming to the fore. Erza, however, was nodding her head sagely, following the description and wondering if she could set something similar up for training Levy or some of the other less combat capable mages in the guild.

“Eventually we realized the training just wasn’t working. However, that gave me a clue. Instead of making my face not react, why not just hide it? So I wrapped my entire face with cloth bandages, and faced the Gambling King like that again. After a few more tricks and sleight-of-hand stuff between us, we eventually won again, but when he vowed to come back again to reclaim his lost property, we tied him up once more and then tossed them into the ocean instead of a simple river. Figured that way he might not come back again.”

By this point both girls were now laughing aloud at the images that Ranma had described, but then they reached the machines and Erza quickly regained control of herself, sitting down next to Ranma. “I did not take you for someone who would like games of chance like this. Even if you can't play any card games there are others like roulette wheels or the darts competition I can see over there.”

Ranma glanced at the darts competition then shook his head. “Nah, that kind of thing is too easy for me to win. This one is a little bit trickier.”

“Trickier how, Ranma?” Mira asked, leaning against his back as he sat there, her hands moving down his chest and resting on his firm, incredibly muscled stomach. This, not incidentally, pressed her breasts against his back, and she smirked as his face began to flush at the contact.

But he didn't respond beyond that, simply resting one hand on hers as the other flipped a coin into the slot and grabbed the handle of the slot machine. “It's actually a good method to train your reflexes and hand eye coordination. Watch.”

He pulled the lever once, starting the game, then waited, his eyes glued to the machine. He frowned as he watched the numbers and images blur past, the other two watching too, but before they could notice a pattern, Ranma's hands swiped forward viper quick as he pulled the lever again. An instant later the three lines of ‘jackpot’ lined up, and he smirked as coins began to pour out of the machine.

“I might not have a poker face still, but reflexes, reflexes I got,” Ranma said with a grin, turning to the others and handing them handfuls of coins. “I think I'm going to go pay Laxus back, then maybe see if I can take this casino for all it's worth.”

Laughing, Erza and Mira broke off from Ranma then, moving in their own directions. Erza moved to join the poker table where the others were, joining Levy in simply watching the action between Lucy and Laxus, who had quickly cleaned out of several other participants and, even as more sat down to take their places, were locked in a duel.

Mira, on the other hand, went to try her luck at the roulette wheel. She, perforce, smiled and charmed the people around her as they recognized who she was, putting on her public persona swiftly. She did have to slap down anyone attempting to proposition or flirt with her slightly more harshly than she normally would.

Coming back from the desks where he had exchanged the coins for cash and a few more coins, Ranma was startled when he heard a voice shout, “Ranma!?”

Ranma turned in the direction of the shout to see a face from the past striding towards him. Jenny Realight was indeed here and, like the other girls, was dressed to the nines. She wore a slightly more decent-seeming dress than either Erza or Mira, a pink frilly number which accentuated her legs and thin waist while hiding everything it had to. She had a necklace around her neck and her blonde hair done loosely down her back to her shoulders in loose blonde curls.

“Hey, Jenny,” Ranma said with a grin. “Fancy seeing you here.”

“Fancy seeing you here too, Ranma,” Jenny said, putting her arms around him in a hug that caused many of the passersby to glare angrily at him. Two men who had been following Jenny, wearing suits and carrying what looked like clipboards, gasped in shock. One of them began to glare even worse than the other men around them, his eyes narrowing into slits.

She then leaned up and kissed him, and both of those men almost went catatonic, one turning white, the other red with barely concealed fury. Ranma returned the kiss lightly, but didn't deepen it, pulling back a little afterwards. His smile had changed into a smaller, yet warmer expression than his earlier grin. “Is this the way you always greet your old friends?”

“No, only the ones I've kissed before. That was to tell you I’ve missed you,” Jenny said with a smirk, then she held up a hand intoning, “Takeover, Mecha Soul: Gundam Deathscythe!”

An instant later, her hand was covered in a black gauntlet of some kind which looked mechanical in nature. Indeed, for a moment Ranma thought he recognized it, then the gauntlet in question was smashing into his gut with enough force to double him over, and any such thought was smashed out of his head. Ranma gasped doubled over slightly, staring up at Jenny.

“And that is to show you that not only have I been keeping up with the training idea that you gave me, but also to show you I’m kind of pissed you didn’t try to find me or contact me! A girl likes to know she's been appreciated, you know?” Jenny said with a huff, waving her hand to one side.

The two men behind Jenny had recovered themselves now. The one with the previously white face was smiling now, while the man who seemed so angry was simply watching, his hands crossed over his chest.

“Duly noted,” Ranma grunted, rubbing his momentarily sore stomach before the pain went away quickly, noticing the response to this act from the two men. “Still, it is good to see you,” he said, a smile once more on his face.

“Heh, even if after I slugged you one? That’s nice,” Jenny replied with an equal grin, linking her arm in his. “So, what brings you out this way? Rest and recovery from something, I presume?”

“Pretty much. I can't say anything much about it in public, but it involved a slaving ring, a mage with the power of a Wizard Saint, and at least three members of one of the larger, more powerful dark guilds out there.”

Jenny grimaced. “How do you use so few words to paint such a vivid picture? And you handled this alone while also dragging little Wendy along for the ride, no doubt.”

“No, I actually had some help from Fairy Tail,” Ranma replied. “And I’ll have you know, while Wendy did have to fight, she was never in any real danger. She’s a lot tougher than you might think, and she also comes with a bodyguard besides me these days, free of charge.”

“Huh…,” Jenny said, her tone suddenly very cool as she cocked an eyebrow at him. “You wouldn't happen to have met my rival among them, would you? A girl named Mirajane?”

“Yeah, I did,” Ranma said, wincing as he saw the warning signs but not seeing any way out of replying. “She's also here with Erza and a few of the others from Fairy Tail.”

There had been a time when Ranma wouldn't have admitted that, would have instead attempted to try to hide Mira away from Jenny and vice versa or else escape entirely. Those days were long past because Ranma had learned that women had something in common with most animals: they pounced when they sensed your fear.

It seemed to work, because Jenny’s smile was back and she seemed suddenly quite happier. “So this wasn’t a date after a hard mission or anything?”

“No, nothing like that.” He sighed then and leaned into Jenny, whispering in her ear.

This would've normally caused her to shiver, the feel of his breath on Jenny’s delicate ear making her remember that time they'd kissed in the past while she wondered where that could've gone if they had both been in a position to let it. But Ranma's words shoved those thoughts out of her head.

“Most of it's not my story to tell, but Erza had some shared history with the target of my latest mission, and he had enslaved a few of her old friends. One of them died during the fight, and we’re all here recover.”

“Understood,” Jenny said with a sigh. “I am an S-class too you know. I've been on a few missions where the body count is a little too high. So I completely understand wanting to unwind.”

There was a loud cough from behind them, and Jenny turned angrily, then sighed as her manager, a fellow mage from Blue Pegasus, held up his wrist, showing his watch. Jenny had started to employ him to help her organize her time better so she could pick up more missions while also keep her singing/modeling career going, but that didn’t mean she liked the reminder. Scowling at the man and waving him and the other man, a local manager off, Jenny turned back to Ranma. “Look, I have to go. I have a show tonight.”

“What kind of show?” Ranma asked, interrupting her.

“Just a song and dance show at the Jungle Fever. It’s nothing risqué, just the same sort of thing I used to do on Shield but without the whole adventure park angle or other people. It's family-friendly and everything, sort of,” Jenny said with a wave of a hand.

“Laxus is here. He apparently got us all a table there tonight, so maybe we’ll see your show,” Ranma said with a smile.

“I'd love to see you and Mira,” Jenny said, all her earlier irritation at Ranma knowing her rival gone. After all, despite the fact they were rivals, they were friends at the same time, a relationship much like the one that Mira had with Erza, only with far less in the way of taunts and physical combat between them. *And I actually haven't met Erza before this.*

“Great, so we’ll see you then if we can.” He glanced at the time too and sighed, disengaging their hands. “I have to go. I'll tell Mira you said hi. But beyond the show, will you be free tomorrow?”

“Probably not,” Jenny said with a sigh. “I'm also here for a modeling job, and those can be irritatingly long at times.” Then she brightened. “Although, if Mira's up for it I might get her to join me. At least that way I’ll have some company. Unless,” she said with a smirk, leaning in to Ranma’s personal space. “You want to give it a try?”

“Try to be a model, a female model? I don't think so,” Ranma said the laugh. “Still, how about this: I'll take Wendy to the amusement park tomorrow morning, and she can spend the rest of the day at the beach with the others. Whatever Mira says, I'll come over and keep you company and protect you from all the perverts out there too.”

He then snorted, tapping his stomach. “Though after that punch you gave me, I doubt you need protecting.”

“Excellent,” Jenny said with a grin, leaning up to kiss his cheek this time.

Ranma held her in a hug, then winked at her before releasing her. As Jenny walked away, however, he groaned internally. *What the hell, hormones?! Three girls now? This is not going to end well for me, I can just tell.* He also noticed the glare the one guy was giving him before he followed Jenny, but couldn’t care less about that.

Unfortunately for Ranma, his troubles didn't stop there. He met up with the others, and rather sheepishly informed Mira of Jenny putting on a show at the same restaurant they were due to eat at. He figured it would be worse to let her realize Jenny was there when she first came out for her show.

However, when she heard of Jenny's plea for aid, Mira jumped on it with both feet. “That sounds like a good idea. These kinds of jobs can always take so long, and having a friend around can make them much more bearable. I’ll go with you in the afternoon tomorrow, Ranma, don't worry. Between us, we can probably spring Jenny from her mission in time for her to actually hang out with all of us. I'd love to introduce her to the rest of you,” she said, smiling somewhat disingenuously over at Erza, who growled, realizing that Mira had just stolen a march on her there.

Ranma was in the uncomfortable position of being between the two of them for the moment, but then Wendy arrived, giving him an excuse to break away, smiling as he reached out and ruffled her hair, which caused her to pout as she tried to push his hand away. “You look good, Wendy-chan.”

The bluenette wore a slightly more formal version of her normal dress, complete with sparkly sequins here and there and a dark blue color almost going to purple. It was open underneath her armpits and fell to her knees. It was a little more daring than Ranma wanted to see on her, but the girls had all agreed that it was appropriate. One male voice against four female voices certainly was not going to carry the argument. *Or five if you count Carla,* Ranma thought, looking down at the anthropomorphic cat, who was standing beside Wendy, looking around disdainfully at the numerous flashes going off all around them.

Laxus led the way from the casino to the restaurant down the street. The restaurant was large, built around an area that had been made to look like a jungle, with numerous trees and bushes around the tables. These were in turn set on a few raised daises, letting everyone see down into an open area which could double either as a small theater or as a dance floor.

There was already a small but very talented band playing as the large group was led to a table, where, to Ranma’s surprise, there was someone he recognized already sitting there. “Oh no, not her,” he muttered. “This is probably not going to be good.”

Erza, too, recognized the woman. She narrowed her eyes at the sight of the woman waiting for them. “What is **she** doing here?”

“Hope that it’s just as a messenger rather than a harbinger,” Ranma replied, remembering all too easily how the femme-fatale of the Magic Council had tried to use her wiles on him, as well as the feeling he had around her that she wasn’t quite what she appeared to be.

Ultear stood up smiling at all of them and gesturing for them to sit down before she looked to Laxus. “I understand that you were the one who made the reservations? You don't have to worry about your deposit; I'll pay for everything tonight. I am….”

“I know who you are,” Laxus interrupted, taking her hand and bowing over it, giving it a light kiss as he sent her a smirk. “My old man has mentioned you a time or two. You're here to talk to this one,” he said, flicking Ranma in the side of the head with a finger, “about his latest mission, I suppose, right?”

Ultear’s eyes narrowed, looking at them all, and Ranma shrugged, leaning in as he rounded the table. “Laxus knew aboutthat a while ago, as do Erza and Mira, and Wendy, of course. The others only know about the latest bit.”

“Ah,” Ultear said, in response, knowing this meant that Ranma had left his Ranger status mostly out of things. With that she turned back to Laxus. “That is exactly correct. But there's no need to be overly formal about it. We just have some questions about how the battle went, specifically about what we saw on our long-scrying crystal connected to the ship that took you all there.”

She looked seriously at Ranma. “We saw glimpses of what had to be members of the Dark Guild, Oración Siete, flying away from the scene. Cobra’s large flying snake is rather distinctive. Was he the only member there, or were there others? Was Jellal, in fact, working for them, or was he an actual member of their guild?”

Ranma nodded grimly, and they all sat down. Given the fact that this discussion was going to be a serious one, Wendy sat at the far end of the table with the two Exceed, with Lucy and Levy between them and the others. Ranma sat with Laxus across from him, sitting alongside Erza to one side and Mira on the other, with Ultear sitting next to Laxus.

He looked around quizzically. “Are the twins not joining us?”

Mira shook her head. “No, they're going to stay up with Natsu.” She smirked at the other girls. “Lisanna said there is no way they’re leaving this resort single.”

Ranma and Laxus rolled their eyes at that, while all the girls, even Ultear, giggled. The others looked at her in shock, and Ultear shrugged. “What? I might be a hardened bureaucrat, but that doesn’t mean I’m not a woman.”

“Do you even know what we’re talking about?” Erza asked tartly.

“The story about how Anna and Lisanna Strauss are both attempting to get with the retarded Salamander of Fairy Tail has made the rounds of even the Council a few times,” Ultear replied dryly, then flicked her eyes to Mira. “Although I was honestly always more interested in where a second Lisanna came from than their love lives.” She looked shrewdly around the table, cocking an eyebrow. “Does anyone want to say anything on that point before we get back to the real reason why I'm here?”

“Nope,” Laxus said with a shake of his head. He and Makarov had made the choice not to ever mention the idea of a parallel world where magic was dying to the Council or to anyone else if they could help it long ago, and he stuck with that now.

“Not even a little,” Mira said cheerfully. “They’re both my sisters, and I love them very much, even if I have to wonder about their choice in men.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” Ranma said, looking down at the menu.

“I honestly have no idea either,” Erza said hopefully, meeting Ultear's gaze. Her eyes narrowed as she launched her own assault. “Nor do I have any idea why you're trying to be so friendly.”

Ultear sighed, some of her smirk disappearing. “I realize you don't trust me, Erza, and I understand why. I always seemed to move in lockstep with Siegrain, didn't I? Is that even his real name, by the way?”

“It is not,” Erza replied, her voice curt. “The man you knew as Siegrain was, in fact, simply a Thought Projection of the real man. The real man was named Jellal, and he was the leader of the Tower of Heaven. Wally, Millianna, and Simon were all slaves there, and, like the rest, they will tell you they were duped by him into believing the lies Jellal sold them.”

“We realized it was a tower, and we feared it might be the Tower of Heaven. That…system…is known to the Council, but we thought it destroyed years ago. I wonder how the Council missed that! Our Navy might not be nearly as good as Mistral or Caelum’s, but we should at least know what islands are inhabited around our territory!” Ultear said with a sigh. “Two of my fellows are looking into that aspect as we speak.”

“I don't know,” Erza replied, her tone far more normal than before, though she was still slightly glaring at Ultear. She did not like Ultear, not one bit. Far too often Ultear had been in the background whenever she’d have to deal with ‘Siegrain.’ The woman had always struck her as a bit too good at staying in the background, and Erza knew the black-haired woman had far more magical power than she let on.

Still, she was a member of the Council and hadn't apparently sided with Jellal in his fight against Ranma, rather being another victim, perhaps, of Jellal’s magically enhanced charisma. That wasn't enough to convince Erza to trust the other woman, but she was willing to go along with things for now. “I have to assume there was some kind of spell around the island keeping people from noticing it, although how it worked, I don't know.”

“Perhaps if we had been able to study the tower before you destroyed it—oh, and the island it sat on—we’d be able to say more,” Ultear said, her lips twitching into a taunting little smirk to Ranma, who shrugged unrepentantly. Then she became serious once more, looking at Erza. “I realize you don’t trust me, so I feel I need to ask. Will you permit me to question your friends?

At Erza’s nod, she then questioned Simon and the other survivors from the Tower, pausing only when the waiter came by to take their orders, Ultear having already taken the opportunity to order some wine and appetizers for the table before they had arrived. Throughout all this, a magic dictation quill was going beside her until she nodded slowly. “Very well, I have enough information about the background, or as much as we’re going to get.”

“Now,” she said, looking around at the Fairy Tail mages. “Let's get to the actual fight. Wendy-chan, you and…Carla-san? Your parts in this fight were visible enough you don’t have to participate in this.”

This didn't take very long and halfway through their meal Ultear was finished, putting away her notes quickly before turning to another topic entirely. *Master Hades will be very interested in a copy of those later. For now, let’s see if I can find out anything more about the Ranger.* “So Ranma, how long do you envision staying within Fiore?”

“I had initially hoped to stay put for a few months, into the autumn before heading further south for the winter. Heh, what with how quickly this mission came up, I haven't even had time to look for a place in Magnolia yet!” Ranma groused. “More importantly, I still want to find out more about what Jellal was up to. Did he really think that the Heaven System could call for Zeref? Where did he get that idea? There's too much we don't know about his motivations and real interests.”

“In terms of real interests, we can help you there,” Ultear said, passing over a thin binder done in some kind of dark purple lizard hide. “In there you will find the missions that were commissioned by Jellal or allowed through on special dispensation by Jellal before facing the full committee. It makes for some interesting reading. Though I'll give you a summary right now. He was very, very interested in demon sightings and anything connected to Zeref. Hardly shocking, I know, but the actual missions could possibly give you some more information.”

After that Mirajane and Laxus combined to turn the attention of the conversation to something else. Mira and Erza talked to Erza’s old friends about their plans in the days to come, while Ranma actually moved down the table to sit next to Wendy to talk about the amusement park with her, Carla, and Lucy.

Happy interjected at this point. “Wendy, are you going to use that light blue spell of yours so you can actually go on the rides?”

“Yep, and it’s called Troia, Happy-san,” Wendy replied, pouting at the blue-furred Exceed. “I don’t call your wings, ‘those flappy white things,’ do I?”

“Aye, sir,” Happy replied. “But with that, I’d bet that Natsu will want to try the rides. He’s never been able to go on them before without throwing up before.”

Mira heard this and turned, about to make some comment about Natsu already being given a ride, but Ranma thought quickly and slapped a hand over her mouth. “Not in front of the kiddies, please, Mira.”

Rolling her eyes, Mira complied, turning back to Millianna and going back to explaining about the other guilds whose members she had met.

With Ranma moving away like that, Ultear was unable to attempt to converse with him without being obvious. So instead, she allowed Laxus to pull her into a conversation about the Council and Jellal's Wizard Saint status. Since he had been called the unofficial eleventh Wizard Saint a few times in the past few years, Laxus had a vested interest in that. Ultear teased him about it but eventually replied that, yes, there was a chance that he would be named an official Wizard Saint after this.

Nearby a few men who were sitting at a table hidden from the one with the Fairy Tail mages by a few trees looked up at this. They craned their necks down and around and started to mutter angrily as they saw the number of Fairy Tail guild marks the people at the nearby table were sporting. “Two Wizard Saints in one guild?” one of the others muttered to another. “That's just not going to fly!”

“We have to tell the boss about that, though I doubt there's anything we can actually do about it…,” another man said, his voice angry and bitter.

“We might not be able to do anything about the Lightning King over there, but the others are fair game…,” said a third man. He was a tall but thin bald man with very dark skin and wearing sunglasses, even inside. He and the others all wore jackets, some with ripped sleeves, some with short sleeves. None of them looked as if they should have been let in to the Jungle Fever, but they were still there, if hidden from the rest of the patrons.

“I don't know, man. There's some stories about that Mirajane chick, and isn't that the Titania in the red dress? I'm not going to mess with the strongest woman in Fiore,” the first man replied.

“We can target the others,” said the black man, waving his hands. “They can't always all be in one large clump. They'll break off to do their own thing, and then we’ll strike at the weaker members. That pigtailed guy, for one.”

Another one of the men smirked. “Actually, given the ‘in’ we have with the resort manager, I might have a better idea. Especially if any of them are heavy drinkers. We’ll show them all that Phantom Lord is the real top guild in Fiore!”

The meal passed relatively well after that, with a lot of laughter and tale telling and smiles all around. Simon, Wally, and Millianna were all welcomed by the others now that their questioning by Ultear was done. They fully got into the night, turning it into a bit of a wake for their friend on top of the ceremony from the night before and a party celebrating their freedom at last. Ranma returned to his original chair to talk with Ultear and Laxus for a time, joking and trading barbs with Laxus throughout the meal.

About halfway through the meal, it got even better. The music began to rumble out louder than before, a drumroll of sound as a door in the far wall from the entrance to the restaurant opened. “Ladies and gentlemen, be prepared to be amazed by the musical talents of Akane Resort’s own poster girl, Jenny Realight!”

Wendy and the others turned excitedly and watched as Jenny emerged from the alcove, waving at the crowd, even making kissing signs as she walked forward, sending a single wink out towards the Fairy Tail table. “Hello, Jungle Fever! Are you having a fun night? That's what I like to hear! Now let's make this even more fun!”

From there she launched into a singing number. Her well-trained voice and extreme range allowed Jenny to sing several different types of songs. She started out with pop, moved into country, and then stayed on jazz for the rest of the time. Of course, most of those titles weren't the ones used in this world for those types of songs, but that was what Ranma thought of them as.

He supposed that in that area, at least, the odd duality between his past world and this one in terms of how people had evolved made sense. There were, after all, only so many different types of music out there. If their names had matched up as well, then Ranma would've been a little disturbed.

Ranma couldn't say that he really enjoyed most of the concert. The atmosphere was cool and the emotional impact of it pretty fun, but he had yet to figure out a way to control his hearing, and this much noise was a bother to deal with.

By the time Jenny ended, Wendy too looked a little sore and extremely tired. But before Ranma could say it was time to take her to bed, Millie had swooped in, grabbing her and Carla up in her hands. “Kitty sleepover, nya!” she shouted before she started to push through the slowly dissipating crowd with her charges.

One was not protesting at all, and the other was protesting volubly enough for three of them. “Let me go, darn it, you, you uncouth barbaric fetishist! Enough is enough, darn it! Must I be plagued with always being picked up like this?!” Carla bellowed.

Ranma was about to follow them, when Ultear grabbed his hand. “Now, where are you off to, Ranma? The night is still young, after all. And young Wendy-chan seems to have a minder for the evening already.”

With that, Ultear pulled Ranma down the steps to the dance floor. The musicians had taken over from Jenny once her show had ended, and there was numerous people already dancing there.

With Millie and Carla watching Wendy, Ranma decided that yes, he could afford to have some time to himself.

Mira made a ‘tching’ noise in her teeth and hopped off her chair, moving after the two of them. Erza, too, stood up along with Laxus, Levy, and Lucy.

As they danced to a fast, snappy beat, Ranma leaned in speak into Ultear’s ear, which was the only way they would be able to speak given that the music now getting louder. “So, is there any reason why you're still here with us? Don't you have enough information already?”

“You're not the only person who has been suffering these past few days,” Ultear shouted back even louder, her voice carrying over the music as she leaned up into him. “I might not have been bleeding or sweating like you all, but my hands are near crippled from all the writing I've been having to do. And if I see another pen anytime soon, I'm going to freak!”

Ranma and the others nearby had quickly backed away during this minor tirade. Ultear breathed in deeply trying to calm down. “Sorry, it's just there has been so much of a kerfuffle about this, and all that has fallen on our heads, and by our heads, I mean mine, since I was the ‘closest’ of the council with Jellal. None of the others seem to realize that that proximity made me just as vulnerable to his mental control, whatever magic he was using, as anyone else.”

“Understood,” Ranma said. “If you want to have a few days to rest and relax, that's fine by me. I was just asking.”

“Good,” Ultear said, turning around and latching onto him once more. “Now, dance!”

Of course inside Ultear was thinking other thoughts. Ultear had initially come here to see if she could seduce Ranma but number of other people around them had swiftly shot that down. She could also tell that at least two of the other girls already present were interested in him.

Ultear was many things, but she wasn't stupid. She knew that if she wanted to throw her hat in that particular ring, it would no doubt take attention from her real job, that of continuing to worm her way into a position of power on the Council. *I still need to find out more about that second weapon and how to shut it down. That, unfortunately, needs to be my priority.*

Besides which, Ultear wasn't so proud that she wouldn’t admit when she was overmatched. She felt she could handle either the so-called Fairy Queen or Mirajane the Devil Bitch, but certainly not both.

To Ultear’s thinly veiled displeasure, however, Erza moved between them as another song began. “I have to wonder, Ranma, does this count as our date?”

“Hmm, nah,” Ranma replied, more than happy to get away from Ultear. For all that she was gorgeous, there was still something about her that set his hair on end. And besides which, dancing with Erza seemed like it would be fun, given the fact the redhead’s normal poise had deserted her from the moment she had stepped out onto the dance floor. Now she looked almost off-balance, trying to look at the dancers around her and copy their movement, but blushing all the while.

Ranma put his hands on her waist and smiled. “Let me lead, huh?”

“F, fine,” Erza muttered, and, to the displeasure of a nearby Mira, who was dancing with Levy and Lucy at the time, the two of them whirled through the dancers. That wasn’t to say that Ranma’s feet were safe, though, and Erza stepped on them several times.

Erza sighed, but Ranma shook his head. “Don’t apologize, Erza. It’s not like it hurts all that much. Besides, I remember when I first learned martial arts ballroom dancing. It was not a pretty sight. My partner had to wear armored boots.”

“And whatever is wrong with wearing armored boots?” Erza said in mock-indignation. Then both of them laughed, and the dance continued.

After the one dance, however, Mira quickly moved over, pulling Ranma to one side as she deliberately pressed her body against the side of his own. “I think it’s time you dance with someone who isn’t a mortal threat to your feet. Come on!”

“Erm, okay…,” Ranma said, not really having a problem with this, of course, but he did have a problem with the look Mira and Erza were giving one another.

“I do not believe Ranma and I were done just yet,” Erza said with a growl, pulling Mira away. “What did we say earlier about not getting in one another’s way.

“I don’t think I asked your opinion!” Mira retorted. “And that’s only if one of us or the other isn’t rubbing it in!”

As Mira and Erza glared at one another, Ranma decided to beat feet. He honestly wasn’t certain how to deal with this other than try to get away, though Ranma knew that this was only putting off the problem, as he had in Nerima for so long. But this was also very different from Nerima.  *There, the girls all sent me pretty damn mixed signals, and all of ‘em were interested in me at first because of honor or obligation. Here, it’s pretty obvious that Erza, Mira, and even Jenny are interested in me for me, though I think that Jenny, at least, is willing to just have fun and not get all…complicated.* By which Ranma, of course, meant emotional about things beyond simply liking one another and wanting to have fun physically.

*And I’ve made it worse by showing interest in all of them in turn. But, but given how physical they’ve been in showing their interest since we arrived here, can they honestly blame me for that?* Ranma thought as he snuck away using the quiet feet, sneaky feet technique his father had invented. This was a mix of making certain he was noticed but overlooked entirely, moving away silently but with the exaggerated motions of someone who just had to be making a joke of the entire thing. Onlookers, of course, noticed him, but the people he was running from didn’t.

As he left the dance floor, Ranma started to think about what he really wanted in terms of the girls or, more accurately, a girlfriend. Before he could get beyond the whole ‘more kisses, they’re amazing’ stage, however, one of the girls on stage with Jenny earlier waved him over to her. Cocking an eyebrow at that, Ranma made his way towards the girl who spoke up quickly when he reached her. “Umm, Ranma, right? Jenny asked if you could join her backstage.”

“Um, sure, I guess.” Ranma muttered, looking over his shoulder as he felt rather than saw Erza and Mira start looking for him among the dancers. “Lead the way.”

After Erza had butted in on them, Ultear had stepped back from her interest in Ranma and simply watched the events going on around him, amused to see him try to sneak away as he did. But when she moved to follow him, a hand gripped her shoulder and spun her around, pulling her back onto the dance floor before she could recover. “Just watching that drama play out isn't fun. You need to have little fun on your own,” said Laxus, smirking down at her. “Why don’t you show me some moves, council girl? The night’s young, after all?”

To that, Ultear could only shake her head. “You think you can dance better than me?”

“Not better, but certainly longer,” Laxus said with a leer.

“In that case, oh Lightning King, put your feet where your mouth is,” Ultear replied, twisting and turning away to dance to the rhythm of the music.

Over the next hour or so, Laxus proved that his endurance was indeed better than hers was. Her sore feet proved that point very well for him. However, he was gracious in his victory, and, as she hobbled off the dance floor, he took her by the elbow and asked, “You want to join me for a drink?”

“I don't think you could afford it,” Ultear said with a smirk.

Laxus looked back at her blankly. “I'm an S-class mage who doesn't actually use all that much money he gets on missions, and I already pay for my own drinking habit. You think you're you can drink more than that? A little thing like you?”

“That sounds like another challenge,” Ultear said with a laugh, hobbling a bit faster out of the restaurant towards the nearest casino, which, of course, would have a bar area. “Let's go see if you can once more put your body where your mouth is.”

“I can do that in all sorts of ways,” Laxus replied, his tone mildly flirtatious.

Ultear laughed, and a few minutes later they reached the bar area. There, another sort of contest began. They didn’t have shots, though—Ultear hated the taste of pure liquor like that. Instead they downed various different types of mixes, with the one who finished first choosing the next. “You should stop by Fairy Tail some time,” Laxus said as he put down a B-52, smirking across at his opponent, who was looking a little bleary-eyed.

Ultear waved a languid hand, setting her own glass down and using the same motion to signal a waiter to come over once again. “And, jush, vhy is that? I should think yours guild would loathe da zery idea of a councilmember being ‘ear Magnolia.”

“My fellow guildmate, Cana, is the strongest drinker I know. Hell, she routinely drinks me under the table and would think of this as simply a light start to the evening,” Laxus said, enunciating each word carefully so as not to slur them.

Ultear laughed, while internally she was wondering if she should let this go any further or simply bow out and find Ranma again. He had not reappeared from the back room of the restaurant by the time they had finished dancing, and she had been watching out the windows just to see if Ranma left Jungle Fever from the front entrance. *He could've gone out the back, I suppose, but one of the workers I bribed to keep an eye on that should've informed me if so.*

Her eyes also flicked to one side, watching a group of Phantom Lord mages who had entered the bar a few minutes after they had. One of the men sat at a nearby table to overhear the conversation Laxus and Ultear were having, but she allowed that. After all, she wasn't actually talking about anything secret. Most of their conversation had been about drinks, sports, and, surprisingly, fashion. It turned out Laxus was a bit of a clothes horse and had talked on that topic with a refinement and understanding that she would not have expected from a big, bad alpha male like him.

She had instead made a point of mentioning the fact that she worked for the Council several times. Now it seemed to have finally gotten through to the man, because as she glanced that way he moved off, meeting up with his fellows.

*So, my quarry has disappeared and has gathered interest from at least two, possibly three other very powerful women. He and the others told me enough about the fight in the tower to let me have some idea of Ranma’s capabilities, if not all of his tricks, as well as basically stating that he would be going after any information that could link Jellal to the Oración Siete. Or should that be Seis, considering that Ranma killed Jiemma? I know how long he will be in Fiore for, where he will be staying, and generally speaking what Ranma’s short-term goals are. So, all told, Master Hades and the Council will both be pleased by my mission here.*

*The only part of this mission that hasn't gone as I had hoped is that I have only been able to flirt with him, what, two times, three, in the entire evening? I had hoped to do more. But,* Ultear thought to herself, reiterating the position she had taken at the dining table*. I certainly won't be able to devote as much time to that seduction as it would probably take, and doing so while working against several other women would be time consuming in the extreme.*

*No, I will have to let this go,* she thought with more than a pang of regret. Ranma was, after all, a fascinating mystery wrapped up in an attractive package. But she had not become perhaps the most accomplished and certainly most successful spy for any Dark Guild in history by not knowing when to cut her losses.

*That doesn’t mean I won't try to flirt with him whenever I see him, but for now, my official and unofficial mission here is done. So why not have some fun,* Ultear thought as the waiter arrived at their table. She cocked an eyebrow challengingly at Laxus. “I think we’re ready to move on to the harder stuff. What about you?”

**OOOOOOO**

Millie, Wendy and the Exceed were almost back to the hotel when they were interrupted by a voice out of the darkness. “Little fairy flies shouldn't be off on their own at night, especially after they mouth off like you did back there! Phantom Lord's going to show you that we’re the strongest guild around!”

Out of the crowd of resort goers all around them four mages pushed their way forward, glaring angrily at Millie and the two Exceed. Though she hadn’t been part of Fairy Tail for a while, Carla still bore the mark on her shoulder, which was far more prominent in her cat-girl form than in her Exceed body, which she had been in since coming down with Wendy. Not, alas that it had stopped Millianna from cuddling her. Happy, of course, also had it on his back, which was also visible, though he thankfully had begun to wear pants most of the time.

Millie stood in front of the cats and the yawning Wendy, snarling, her claws appearing one hand and a loud loop of magic forming around the other. “If you think I'm going to let you hurt the kitties you've got another think coming, nya!”

“You don't have their mark; this ain’t your fight,” said one of the other men before a barrel was pressed up against the back of his head.

“There are two types of men in the world,” said a voice from behind him. “The type to walk away when their friends are in trouble and the type who steps up to the plate and does what he can like a dandy. Nighty-night.”

With that the man behind the former speaker fired, and a bolt of magical energy impacted his head from a mere few inches away, sending him into darkness.

Two of the other mages made to move forward but were stopped by another voice intoning, “Darkness Magic: Dark Moment.” The lights of their personal worlds went out as both of them were enveloped in a magical darkness that covered everything they could see.

The last looked up and saw Wendy breathing in deeply. He recognized that stance and shouted, “Wait, no way! You can't be a….”

“Tenryu no Hoko (Sky Dragon’s Roar)!” she said, sending only a minuscule amount of her magic into the attack. But it was enough to send the last man wheeling away into the darkness that had consumed his fellows. There were three loud crashes, and the darkness around them disappeared, showing all three of them on the ground. Before they could get up, Carla was in them along with Millie, smashing their heads down into the ground with their clawed hands.

Carla huffed, smacking her hands together and moving back to Wendy. “Well, now that that's over with, perhaps we can actually get back to our rooms without any further interruption.”

“We’re still going to have our sleepover, nya,” Millie caroled as she once more picked up Carla and Happy.

“Darn it,” Carla muttered, as she once more found herself in Millie's grip, with a willing Wendy following alongside them now, once more yawning and looking as if she was about to fall asleep on her feet.

“I wonder what all that was about?” Simon muttered as he and Wally moved to join the others, heading back for an early evening. The fact that Simon was carrying a large amount of alcohol back for the two of them was not worth mentioning. The two of them had decided to get decidedly drunk, talk about girls, and their missing siblings. And neither of them was willing to do so in public.

“Who knows?” said Wally with a shrug.

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma found Jenny just entering her changing room, and she smiled, giving him a come-hither gesture with her hand. “Come on, Ranma. I want to talk to you alone, and I figured this way no one is going to interrupt us.”

Ranma nodded. Any other man might have wondered if that was all Jenny wanted, inviting him into her boudoir, but Ranma didn’t think like that. Nor would he be open to more than talking, given his earlier thoughts and his concerns about Erza and Mira. “So, what did you want to talk about?”

“Hold on a sec.” Jenny turned aside, pulling out a screen and then stepped behind it, grabbing up some jeans and what looked like a blouse of some kind. “Now, don’t peek~,” she said teasingly.

“Feh, don’t be insulting,” Ranma said with a wave of his head, moving over to a chair, pulling it out, and putting his feet up on the dresser. He also turned away as the silhouette of Jenny began to strip behind the screen.

“So, what have you been doing with yourself? Still traveling with Wendy?” Jenny asked, pulling off the special strapless bra she wore, letting her breasts jiggle for a moment. Her chest wasn’t as big as what she had seen from Erza, but she and Mira were almost of a size. But she didn’t pose or attempt to do anything more than change as she listened to Ranma tell her a very brief summary of the past few years.

“Wait, that cute cat girl is the same race as Happy?!” Jenny asked in shock, sticking her head out from behind the screen in shock. “Seriously? They don’t look anything alike!”

“That’s her Human Form magic,” Ranma replied, now turning from where he had been staring at the wall. “She figured out how to do that a few years back, nearly eight months after we first met. It’s helped her in a lot of ways. How do you know about Happy, anyway?”

“I’ve met him and Natsu before. Once I was called in to help clean up after one of his missions. Happy was hilarious, Natsu…unrepentant. Seeing as he had smashed a local corrupt sheriff and his team of deputies, I sort of thought he had a point at the time, though he didn’t have to send so much debris everywhere in the fight,” Jenny replied, stepping out from behind the screen and smirking at Ranma. “And you didn’t even try to peek, you big, bad Ranger man.” She then sobered slightly. “You know how rare that’d be? How few men would be able to look away from me changing like that? And yes, I know that my body can be seen behind that.”

Ranma shrugged uncomfortably. “It just didn’t seem right, y’know?”

Jenny giggled at that and sat down on her dresser, facing him. “And that’s part of why I’m interested in you despite it being years since I saw you last. The other parts, well, you’re hot as hell in ether form, you’re funny, and you’re strong. You’re not easily intimidated, and you don’t seem the type to intimidate in turn.” She then smirked, leaning forward and placing a hand on Ranma’s knee. “All of that is also why you’ve garnered some interest from Erza and Mira. Now, I don’t know much beyond Erza’s reputation about her, but I have rarely seen Mira give most men a second glance, let alone a second dance.”

She laughed once more at Ranma’s poleaxed expression. “Oh, come on, you can’t tell me you’re surprised.”

“Erm, not so surprised you noticed as how open you are about it,” Ranma muttered, flushing a bit.

“Hah!” Jenny laughed, though this time there was scant humor in it, and her tone was serious as she went on. “Ranma, I’ve no doubt I’m the only non-virgin among the three of us. I’ve dated five boys since I met you, and one of them lasted long enough to get into my bed, although I’ll admit that that was more because of the alcohol than anything else.” She shook off her dark mood after a moment and smiled faintly. “I’m also in Blue Pegasus and routinely deal with the Trimens, who are simply the biggest bunch of egotistical man-whores in all creation. So if you’re going to talk to anyone about this, it better be me, hmm?”

Slowly, Ranma nodded. “Yeah, I guess you got a point to that. It’s just…. Okay, this isn’t the first time I’ve had girls fighting over me, but this time it ain’t because of honor obligations or weird ass laws or an asshole father. They’re interested in me, and I suppose on some level I’m interested in the two of them and, and you too. Though I seriously would prefer to get to know you again before we do anything beyond that kiss ya gave me earlier.”

“I am not easy Ranma, nor do you need to worry about hurting my feelings by being honest,” Jenny replied with another laugh. “So, you and the three of us. Your flirting is your version of getting to know them, or just reciprocating?”

“A bit of both. Um, it, it sort of just happened, y’know? First I met Mira and this other girl from Fairy Tail named Bisca, and we got to talking, then teasing. After that I met Erza, and she and I, it turns out we share a lot of interests, and we got to talking. No flirting with Erza until today, though. So, I mean, we….”

Nodding slowly, Jenny paused. What she said next might wreck any chance she had with Ranma, but it had to be said. “So, let’s look at it from another side of things. I think we can safely assume some of what attracts you to us. It’s not like you’ve had any more time to get to know us then we have you. But what exactly are you looking for in a girlfriend?” Her lips twitched into an impish little smirk. “Unless, of course, you’re also interested in a boyfriend, though I doubt that.”

Ranma shuddered, making a point to actually spit to one side, ignoring Jenny’s cry of, ‘Oh gross!’ as he did. “Hell, no. But that is sort of part of it. Um, I mean, any girl who I go out with would have to like my female form too.”

“I suppose that could be a problem for some, though it’s probably not as large a hurdle as you might think. Geez, Ranma, this is like pulling teeth with you. Stop dodging the question. What are you looking for in a girlfriend? What are you looking for in a relationship?”

“To the first, strength and good looks, I guess, though that sounds kind of shallow, I suppose? A sense of humor; they’d have to be kind of adventurous, able to put up with all the bullshit that I find or attract,” Ranma said with a sigh. “And, I guess...maybe a willingness to travel with me, within reason, I suppose? I mean, I routinely put down roots for a few months here and there, but I’m always traveling.”

“And Wendy and this Carla catty-girl?” Jenny asked.

“Oh, yeah. Um, any girlfriend would have to get along with them too, I guess. Wendy’s my little sister and my charge, so I ain’t about to leave her anywhere for long, and Carla comes sort of as her plus one,” Ranma replied, his lips twitching into a smirk as Jenny laughed.

“Children? Are you looking to settle down?”

“Gah, no!” Ranma said with a shake of his head. “I’ve been looking after Wendy since she was five already, and Carla on top of her for the last few years. That’s enough parenting for me, thanks. I’m not, I mean, I’m not looking for anything permanent. I don’t want to make plans like that, since I’m always moving around and, more often than not, finding trouble.”

Jenny smiled in approval at that. She had no desire to be tied down, have kids, or anything like that. “Traveling the world sounds like fun. Not certain I’d be okay with traveling all the time, but eight out of every twelve months, maybe? I already travel a lot.”

“It is; it really can be. Provided ya have the equipment.” From there Ranma shifted the conversation to that topic, and then Jenny replied by asking about the weird local laws he had mentioned before. Eventually, though, they both realized it was getting late.

Jenny sighed. “After my modeling job tomorrow is done I’ll be leaving for another mission. It’s time sensitive, so I will be doing that even if Mira can help me tomorrow. I don’t suppose I could interest you in coming with?”

“Heh. Sorry, no. I need to go over the information Ultear brought with her before deciding where to go from here,” Ranma said before reiterating what he had said at dinner that evening. “There’s just too many questions about Jellal’s motivations and interests for me to leave it just yet. I wish I could just head back to Magnolia and hang out with the Fairy boys and girls, but that’s not going to happen.”

“Hmmpf. You make it sound as if Fairy Tail is the only guild that’s worth hanging out with,” Jenny huffed, then shook her head. “But I’ll have a promise from you to drop by within a month at the most to Blue Pegasus so you and I can have some more time together. Okay?”

Ranma was about to nod, but then a memory struck him, and he paused. “Um, this may sound odd, but what’s your guild master’s name?”

“Master Bob, why?” Then, as Ranma looked a little queasy, Jenny got it and laughed. “Oh, you’ve met him, then? Don’t worry; I’ll protect you,” She cooed.

Just then the door opened and five men entered, glaring. “Oy, oy, oy! What’s all this, then! Typical Fairy Fucker, getting preferential treatment like this!”

“Um, what?” Ranma asked, twisting in his chair and looking at them quizzically. Jenny, too, scowled, falling to her feet from where she had been sitting.

“We heard you Fairies going on and on about how you lot are the greatest guild in Fiore. Well, we’re Phantom Lord, and we think that’s full of shit!” the same man said as his fellows spread out. “We’re going to show you lot who’s really the strongest around here.”

“…” Jenny and Ranma exchanged a glance, then turned back as Ranma held up points on his fingers. “Okay, point one: how exactly are you going to prove you’re stronger than someone by bringing in more numbers on your side of things?” As the men growled, he held up another finger. “Point two: neither of us are Fairy Tail mages, just friendly with ‘em.”

“Prove it!” shouted one of the men, looking a little confused and worried now, though not because of what Ranma had been saying. Instead, he and several of the others besides the spokesman had been looking at Jenny since they had entered the room.

Shrugging, Ranma hopped to his feet and winked at Jenny. He first twisted his arms this way and that to show his arms didn’t have a guild mark on them, then pulled off his shirt and tossed it to the side. He then turned in place while Jenny began to whoop in good humor. “Woohoo! Take it off! Take it all off!”

As the men began to growl and look uncomfortable, Ranma placed a hand on his pants. “Gah, enough!” the man in the lead bellowed, looking both angry and embarrassed now. “All right, we believe you!”

“Oh poo,” Jenny muttered, reaching forward to run a finger down Ranma’s back. *By the first magic, he is sooo muscley! He doesn’t have the size or the visible thews, but, gods, his definition!*

“Fine. So you, you’re not a Fairy Tail mage. What guild do you belong to, then?” the leader said, now glaring at Ranma as he casually pulled his shirt back on.

“None. I’m an independent. I was on a mission and met up with the Fairy Tail mages; you’ve seen me with them during that. I’m still going around now to see what guild I want to join. And this is…”

“If they don't know who I am, they've been living under a rock,” Jenny said with a laugh, turning her gaze in the interloper’s direction once more.

“Um, right, sorry…,” the leader said, while his followers simply stared. “So wait, you’re thinking of joining a guild!? Then why don’t you come and check out Phantom Lord?”

“Well, I've seen how FT works, might as well see what the other largest guild in Fiore is like and directly compare the two. We’ll see after my current job is done. Wouldn’t do to leave that behind; any guild I’d join after that wouldn’t like that,” Ranma said.

“Awesome,” the man said with a nod, then looked around at the others before gesturing them back toward the door. “We’re situated in Oak Town. It’s on the river Remira; you can find it on any map of Fiore.” The man pulled out a map and began to give Ranma directions.

As they were doing this, none of the men noticed the glint in Ranma's eyes before they apologized and moved to the door. As they closed the door, Ranma’s Dragon Slayer assisted hearing overheard the men muttering to one another.

“Hey, man, what the hell? You know the boss won’t like you just offering a spot in our guild to any random asshole.”

“Idiot! You saw how Titania and the Mirajane were all over him, and here he is with Jenny Realight! Come on, man, getting three hotties attention like that, he’s got to be using some kind of undetectable Charm Magic. The boss would love that, and we’d get the side-bennie’s too!” the man replied.

Rolling his eyes at that, Ranma put the map in his Requip space before turning back to Jenny, finding her looking at him. “What are you going to do to those poor idiots?” Jenny asked, having seen the glint in Ranma’s eyes, which the other men had missed.

“Oh, nothing to them, but…. Let’s just say that Jellal’s actions weren’t the only ones causing me to have issues with Fiore’s Magic Council. Still, now I know where their guild hall is, and after I’ve figured out what Jellal and his backers were up to, and if they can or can’t resume it, I might look them up, for a…number of reasons.”

Jenny scowled at that. Despite all the jokes about blondes and models being rather airheaded, she was far more intelligent than she normally let on and was a master at reading tone and expression. “You do know the Guild Master of Phantom Lord is a Wizard Saint, right?”

“Cool, then I’ll be two for two,” Ranma replied blandly, causing Jenny to laugh aloud.

**OOOOOOO**

While Ultear and Laxus had quit the dance floor and left the Jungle Fever entirely, Mirajane and Erza had simply moved to a nearby table and ordered a few drinks for themselves, waiting for Ranma to come back out. It didn't occur to either of them that he would escape out the back way, but they wanted to talk to him, and neither of them was willing to let the other out of their sights at the moment. Their earlier attempt at a semi-truce had failed at the first hurdle, and they kept glaring at one another. Each of them had ordered a single drink and begun to nurse it as they kept watch, neither noticing it was having an impact well beyond that which a single drink should have at first.

“Do you think Jenny is interested in him too?” Erza asked, sighing faintly as she gave voice to the thought that they both had been wondering about up to this point.

“I don't know,” Mirajane said with a sigh. “Despite how she acts sometimes, Jenny is actually pretty darn smart, and she isn't at all easy or anything like that. If Ranma was telling the truth and they only met for a few days several years ago, there's no way he could've made that big an impression on her. I mean, I know she’s dated a few times. Jenny even had something going with one of her guildmates at one point, though that ended rather abruptly after only a few weeks.”

She pauses as Erza shuddered and drank down a large gulp of her drink, looking at Erza with apology plain in her eyes. “Ah, sorry. I know you have problems with Blue Pegasus. Sorry to bring it up.”

“It, hah, it’s fine,” Erza wheezed, not noticing that her hand had actually warped the wood of the table for a moment, actually digging into the table for a moment as she tried to calm herself down. “It’s fine. Ichiya’s simply, I shimply consider him anosher type of monster, one that needs ta be avoided at all costs,” she mumbled.

Mira laughed, but went on more seriously. “Maybe they really are catching up. I wouldn't worry about Jenny stealing a march on us.”

“You are rather overly fond of that phrase,” Erza said, now enunciating her words carefully as she looked at her friend/enemy. “Is there reason for that?”

Mira flushed. “It’s, it’s a line that’s used in a few o’ my bodice-ripper novels. I’ve got an entire bookcase worth of ’em.” At the end of that speech, Mira blushed, looking down at her drink. If she had been sober, she would've never admitted to that, not in a million years.

Erza, however, simply nodded. “I have read some of those, but they’re too tame fer my tashtses. I prefer ta read erotic novels,” she said, her voice slurred even as she leaned over to whisper that, falling flat on the table as she did.

“Ihs that supposed to be a big secret?” Mira asked, attacking her friend/enemy to cover her earlier moment of inebriated honesty. “I means, everyone practically knows it already; they just’re scared to mention in front of you. And can you blame them? You might have no body modesty to speak of, but it's like whenever something romantic or erotic comes out, you blush, stammer, and then slam someone with one of those gauntleted fists of yers.”

“Fairy Guild has ’nough problems with rowdiness, drunkenness, and public destruction, and of course Gray and his public displays to add further to our bad reputation,” Erza said, pushing herself off of the table and leaning back in her chair, crossing her arms under her chest.

This, of course, caused Mira to glance down at said chest and glare angrily. “I’s got a question,” she said, pointing across the table at Erza. “Where’ve you been hiding d’ose!?”

“I haven't been hiding them. I've simply been covering them with my armor,” Erza said, looking down at her own cloth-covered chest.

“Oh ho, it seems our connection with the manager here finally did something right. They’re both stinking drunk!” said a nearby voice, causing both women to look blearily in that direction.

Next to their table five men stood. Each of them had the Phantom Lord badge prominently on forearm or even on the face of one of them.

The speaker was a slightly taller than normal, a black skinned man with a bald head and an odd pair of glasses that caused Mira to giggle and point. “Wheshes the other lens,” she slurred before tipping back and cackling, almost falling out of her seat, but catching herself and falling forward instead.

“Yeah, these two are out of it!” said the man, grinning evilly. He began to bring his hands forward into fists, preparatory to using his magic. “When we’re done with you two, you’ll know who the strongest guild in Fiore really is!”

“Hold on,” said another man. “This is the Titania and Mirajane Strauss dressed up like that, and they’re drunk as hell. We’d be fools not to take advantage of this.”

By this point Erza had somewhat blearily understood was going around, and she pushed herself to her feet, glaring angrily at them all. “If you shrink, tink, think I am drunk enough for you to take advantage of, you, you can shrink again!” she shouted, pointing at them and lifting her chin so much she was actually facing the ceiling rather than the five Phantom Lord mages.

Mira, too, understood now and pushed herself to her feet, where she began to sway. “Don't you dare look down on me just because I'm a pretty face! This amount of liquor is noshing, nothing! We’ll beat all twelve of you!”

“Let's knock them out first, then we can decide what to do with them after,” said another man, magic flaring around his fists. Electricity began to flare around them, and he grinned. “Element Magic: Knockout Fists!”

He raced forward only for Mira to dodge to one side, grab his arm right behind where the magic was coruscating off his skin, and flip him over her head to slam into another nearby table.

“Sound Magic: Howling!” shouted the leader. From his hands a purple circle of magic appeared, and thousands of discordant, high-pitched musical notes flared out towards both of the drunk girls.

Mira collapsed underneath it, avoiding the stream of loud, screeching noises easily. Erza leaped over it, landing next to him. Before he could turn a hard punch sent him reeling backwards. He was still on his feet, and he turned angrily, all of his fellows now surrounding the two women. “They still got some fight in them, but they can't face us all.”

“I beg to differ!” Erza shouted bombastically, pointing a finger straight up. “Prepare yourselves to faysh my most powerful armor!”

At that, the five Phantom Lord mages stepped backwards as the Requip magic appeared around Erza’s body. But instead of some kind of armor appearing, her magic had seemingly not followed her will very well. She now wore what was quite obviously a bathing suit, a simple one-piece, blue swimsuit the likes of which high school academies would use for their swim team. The image was finished by a large fishing pole appearing in one hand.

“Oh, yeah,” said one of the other man, laughing as he pulled out a staff from his own Requip space, the ends of which began to flare with some kind of black colored magic. “That's really intimidating there, Titania!”

He was answered by a punch from Mira, who was now cackling, sounding somewhat like she had called upon her Satan Soul, though nothing physical pointed to that. Before the others could figure out that maybe, just maybe, drunk S-class mages were still S-class mages, the two girls were on them, with Erza using her fishing pole like a whipping stick, smashing several of them up to their knees, then over the head, laying them out easily, while Erza punched out two of them, still cackling wildly.

The noise and confusion of the fight had brought Ranma and Jenny out from the back of the restaurant. Ranma took one look at the wreckage left behind after the fight and laughed. “Damn, I thought those guys were smarter than that,” he said, moving over to where Erza was now actually sitting on top of one of the tables, cackling and holding the fishing pole like she was actually fishing.

Jenny moved past him. “There is more going on here than I think we can see. I know Mira. She can hold her drinks pretty well. Not fantastically well,” she said judiciously, remembering a time where both of them had kind of lost control, “but one drink sure as hell shouldn't have had that much of an impact.”

She waved over to where Mira was sitting, giggling quietly to herself as she thumped a crying man's head against the floor. “Hehehe, stop crying; it's too cute! Stop crying; it's too cute!”

“I think you've had enough, Mira,” Jenny said, taking her hand in hers and leading her away. “What do you drink?”

With Mira leaning on her, Jenny pulled her friend over to the table, leaned down, and looked at the drink thoughtfully before taking a single sip of it and then spitting it out.

“What is it?” Ranma asked, dragging Erza to her feet and trying not to blush at how very well she filled out a swimsuit that was designed for a person at least two cup sizes smaller than she was. To say Erza was in danger of spilling out was an understatement.

“It's called Weasel's Piss. It’s a kind of concentrated cocktail that you can dump into other drinks. It doesn't have any actual flavor to it, but it has a kick like you would not believe,” Jenny groused.

“That's not good,” Ranma said with a frown. “Could they have slipped that in without the waiter or whoever noticing?”

“Doubtful, though I doubt the waiter would've had anything to do with it. That would cost him his job, at the very least. Weasel’s Piss isn't exactly illegal, but if anything had happened, he would've been an accessory.” Jenny scowled. “I knew the manager of Jungle Fever had a bad reputation, but I thought it was just because he was so smarmy and flirtatious, I didn’t see any other sign he was crooked. I guess I’m not as good at spotting that kind of thing as I thought.”

Ranma looked around at the unconscious mages and shook his head. “Well, I'm not going to get any answers out of this lot, primarily because if I investigate Phantom Lord after this, I don't want them to have reasons to be angry with me already. Where can I find this manager guy?”

“He's got an apartment nearby on the third floor of the building right next to this one. It doubles as a storage space for the restaurant.” Jenny pointed it out for him before moving over, with Mira on one arm, to take Erza from him, pulling the giggling girl to her other side. “You’ll find him there while I will try to get these two back to your hotel.”

Erza looked up at her and then tried to pull away, pointing at Jenny with a wobbly finger right between the eyes with her free hand. “Oh my God, not you too!?”

Jenny looked at her quizzically, then over to where Ranma had already turned away and moved out of the restaurant towards the building she had indicated. But Erza’s next words brought her attention back to her two charges, causing Jenny to flush red. “Are you interested in him too?”

“God, seriously?” Mira muttered, leaning her head on Jenny's shoulder and putting one arm around her waist to help steady herself. “I know he's hot, but come on!? Is it that rare to find a hot, powerful mage who know how to flirt but aren’t utter tools?”

Jenny looked down at Mira blandly, then replied, “Yes, yes it is. The most powerful mages either become utter tools, as you said, or simply are entirely asexual. It’s the difference between Gildarts or Iron Rock Jura. And, unlike Gildarts, Ranma isn't a tool and is actually quite handsome.”

“Must've made quite an impression on you,” Mira muttered, with Erza mumbling agreement. “Thought you met him only once before this?”

“Let's just say that he helped me and my magical training along tremendously,” Jenny replied. “He helped me achieve my dream by showing that I could do it myself all along. That's not the kind of thing you forget. Now, come on. Let's get you two back to your room. I wouldn't want to be your heads in the morning....”

**OOOOOOO**

While Jenny lead the two drunk girls back to their hotel, Ranma found manager, still awake and scribbling some notes down in an office adjacent to his apartment, which was, indeed, as Jenny had said, on the second floor of the storage building set to one side of the main restaurant. He entered silently, and, before the manager knew what was happening, he grabbed him from behind and twisted until his head was pointing downwards and his feet were tied to a rope hanging from a ceiling fan. “What the? Wh, who are you!?”

“I'm the person who’s going to use you like a piñata in a moment,” Ranma said, pushing the man lightly in the stomach and sending him spinning through the air in a circle. “Did you have a part in those Phantom Lord idiots trying to spike the drinks of the Fairy Tail mages?”

“What are you talking about?” the man said in response, glaring at him, but under Ranma's icy blue glare, the man immediately began to quail. “They, they threatened me….”

“Yeah, I don't think so,” Ranma said with a sigh, pushing the man again and sending him to move like a pendulum in the air this time rather than in a circle. “You've already used two of your strikes, I’d think carefully about answering the next question **very** honestly. Did you let them use that Weasel’s Piss stuff?”

“Y, yes,” the man stammered. “It's part of my agreement with Phantom Lord. They supplied me certain commodities that I can't buy openly, and they can sometimes use some of the product themselves.”

“Of course,” Ranma said with a sigh. “A resort like this would no doubt attract scumbags. You're going to write down that information, and then you're going to forget this conversation ever happened. Furthermore, you're going to stay away from Jenny and the Fairy Tail mages during our stay here. You won't **ever** tell Phantom Lord we had this conversation. If you do, this info will be found by the Rune Knights or one of the Mage Guilds, okay?”

The man calmed down almost instantly at that, now looking at Ranma speculatively despite still being tied upside down. Ranma simply looked back at him, and the man said slowly, “Do you work for the Council or something?”

“Or something,” Ranma replied dryly. “But what I am is none of your business. Now, are you going to write that information, or am I going to have to use you like a piñata?” *It might not help me in the long run, but turning that bit of information over to Ultear might get the ball rolling on an investigation from the Council’s position on Phantom Lord, so I won't have to deal with it. Who knows? Stranger things have happened, after all.*

**OOOOOOO**

The group of mages that had tried to attack Erza and Mirajane met up with the group that had attacked Wendy and the others as well as the four that had been following Ultear and Laxus. “Well, that didn't work,” said one of them dryly, one of the few uninjured there.

This was immediately remedied by one of his friends smacking him upside the head and sending him sprawling with a magic staff. “Shut your trap! At least you didn't get your ass kicked by two drunk women who looked as if they were barely able to stand up! God, this was fucking humiliating.”

“What should we do now?” asked another man.

“Get the hell out of here, find some town nearby and a bar or something to lick our wounds at, then head home,” the bald, black-skinned man said. “And we never say anything about what happened here to anyone.”

“Why the hell not?” groused one of the ones who had been hurt the most by Wendy’s one attack. “The boss needs to know that Fairy Tail’s getting stronger, bringing in new blood, if that little girl is any example.”

“She might not be given what that other guy said. And besides, do you really think that the boss will take our loss like this lying down? He won't attack Fairy Tail about it, though. No, he'll take it out on us first!”

To that, the other man simply had to nod in understanding. Their boss would indeed do that. Jose would take any excuse he could to attack Fairy Tail, but he also wouldn't stand for anyone making his guild look like idiots, and, unfortunately, that was what they had done today. The others began to nod one after another, seeing their leader’s point, and they all started to limp down the street towards the train station, still quietly grumbling to one another.

**OOOOOOO**

Jenny's prediction of hangovers proved prophetic the next day not only for Erza and Mira, but also for Laxus. However, she hadn’t known about Wendy, the miracle worker. After finishing her work, the tiniest Dragon Slayer found herself in a glomp from Mira, who cuddled into her with a smile. “Oh, Wendy, you are my favorite person right now!”

Nearby Erza and Laxus nodded rueful agreement while Ranma laughed, but they were interrupted by a bellow from the doorway. “Oy, let Wendy go, Mira! She needs to cast that Troia spell on me! Man, I’m looking forward to this! I’ve never been to an amusement park before!”

Behind him, Lisanna and Anna finally made an appearance. Their hair was mussed, there were a few marks on their necks, and their eyes were shining. Taking one look at her sisters, Mira squealed and raced forward, pulling them both to the side and chattering excitedly. Ranma decided this probably meant they had succeeded in getting Natsu to realize they were interested in him, and he and Laxus quickly escaped, meeting up with Lucy, Levy, and, surprisingly, Ultear outside the hotel. “You going to come with us?”

“Hmm…. I think that Laxus here owes me an amusement park ticket. Or are you reneging on our little bet?” Ultear asked.

“Hmmpf. I still think I won that match,” Laxus growled before smirking. “Then again, I suppose that there’s only one way to really see who won. Another drinking contest.”

“Agreed,” Ultear replied quickly before smiling. “But you’re still paying for the amusement park.”

Later, as they were walking back from the amusement park, Laxus and the others spotted Lucy and Levy making their way towards the train station.

“Leaving already?” Millianna asked, racing over to the other girls. They’d sort of bonded about books and talking about different guilds. Lucy had done a lot of research on various guilds before deciding to join Fairy Tail, despite the fact that she had met Master Makarov and felt she owed him. Between her and Mirajane they had helped Millie narrow down the guilds she was interested in by quite a lot.

“There is a book signing nearby from a famous author in a nearby town,” Levy said, hopping on her feet excitedly while Lucy simply nodded, her expression a wide beaming grin. “We’re going to go over and see if we can get our books signed before heading back to the guild.”

“We weren't planning to leave for another day,” Laxus said, shrugging his shoulders, “but if you want to leave early, I'm not going to stop you.”

“My rent’s due tomorrow,” Lucy said with a sigh and a wicked smirk as she looked at Laxus. “So I need to get back and cash in my hard earned money.”

Laxus growled at that reminder. Lucy had matched him trick for trick when they were playing cards the other day, and between the two of them they had taken the casino for all it was worth. But when they had faced off against each other it had proved inconclusive, something Laxus definitely did not like.

While the others went back to the tower, Ranma and Mira joined Jenny for the rest of the day. With Mira’s help and Ranma’s reluctant assistance in dealing with smarmy photographers, Jenny finished the job in enough time to spend the evening with them, eating and having fun with the Fairy mages and their friends. The Phantom Lord mages were nowhere to be seen, and, once on the hotel’s private beach, they weren’t even bothered by paparazzi. That didn’t mean there wasn’t a crowd, but it was a much more sedate one.

Despite that, a day of a now crowded beach and the amusement park left Wendy ‘peopled out,’ and she opted to stay in the suite on their final day at the resort. Ranma did the same, intending to get some meditation done, which he began early in the morning.

Halfway through the morning, however, Ranma’s meditation was interrupted by a shriek from Wendy. “Cannonball!” He barely had time to open his eyes before a wave of water cascaded over him.

Glaring through her wet hair, Ranma cocked an eyebrow at Wendy, who was giggling at him. “Okay, now that’s just askin’ for trouble.”

After dealing out the appropriate punishment for this, Ranma moved inside to sit down at the table, wiping her hair off and muttering, “Damn young brat is getting more and more like me every day. Wish I could figure out if that was a good thing or not.”

 She paused by the lounge table, then sighed and sat down, pulling open the folder Ultear had given her last night, which had been lying there. Now she opened it to the first page and began to read. This activity was interrupted about twenty minutes later as Ultear came in from one of the rooms. She plopped down, her hair and skirt immaculate as she smirked at Ranma.

 Ranma cocked an eyebrow at her. “You’re looking chipper this morning for some reason.”

 “Heh. Your friend Laxus attempted to beat me at a drinking game last night. He lost,” Ultear said discreetly, staring at Ranma for a moment. *All right, I have to admit that while his female form is cute, this curse of his is a bit off-putting.* She crossed her legs, and watched as the redhead’s eyes flicked up to her legs and back with a smile. *His hormones are still that of a guy though. I suppose I can work with that.*

 Looking to another room, Ranma cocked his ears slightly and could just about make out the noise of someone snoring up a storm from the room Laxus had to himself, now that Natsu had left. *Thank goodness for that. I really don’t want to see what a hungover Laxus would do to Natsu if he acted his normal self around Laxus.*

 “Do you have any questions about the missions Jellal sponsored?” Ultear asked, crossing her arms under her chest. This brought attention to her chest, which, while not as big as Erza’s (and hadn’t that been a shock, but at least one Ultear shared with Mirajane Strauss), were still of a very decent size.

 “Meh, not really. I figure at least half of these were covers for some of his material gathering missions.”

 “We noticed that too. Missions to take out bandits here and there or move Rune Knights or local guild mages out of the way for his suppliers. Others we think were missions designed to take out suppliers who gouged him or left evidence behind,” Ultear said. “There’s a pattern there too. At first he was incredibly careful, then he became more slapdash, never realizing that someone could be putting the raw numbers of all the supplies going missing together.”

 “Right. But…there were a few missions that are interesting to me, I think. Missions that have been accepted by a few guilds but haven’t been followed up on. A few of them to Fairy Tail, one or two to Phantom Lord, and one to Lamia Scale.”

 Erza and Mira came out then, moving to join the others. “Missions Jellal sponsored?” Erza asked. “There are still missions from that man on our mission board? I will immediately return and remove them.”

 “Not just yet. I need those missions. Oh, you can remove them, but only after making certain none of your guildmates have tried to complete them or taken missions in the same area,” Ranma replied. “And, honestly, most of these are things I’ll pass on to King Toma, let his espionage team follow up on them. There are only two that I’ll follow up on personally.”

 Erza winced at that, knowing that was precisely what her friends Wally and Simon should have done. But they hadn’t trusted the kingdom to do anything after so long since Wally’s brother and Simon’s sister had gone missing. “I see. And I would assume that those two mission are going to be combat intensive?”

“Heh, more than likely. The first mission details a demon sighting in mountains southwest. It also specifies that it is an ancient, man-shaped demon that might have been created by Zeref. The mission continues to say that it routinely terrorizes the territory every dozen years.”

“I know that one,” Ultear said, frowning for real now and actually telling the truth. “I asked him for information on that, but he would simply smile this smug smile at me and say he had heard about it from some of his own personal resources. If the demon is man-shaped, then it will be unique among the demons Zeref created, which were all supposed to be shaped as monsters, then twisted into other shapes after.”

Ranma said nothing, wondering about the demon girl he had fought with after destroying Lullaby. “Hmm…. That’s true, I suppose,” he said, giving nothing away. “But yeah, that’s why I think it’s interesting, and the fact it’s been sighted so routinely. Kind of like the Beast, only maybe more intelligent? I want to know why Jellal was interested in it. Was it just because it was a demon and therefore connected to Zeref, or something more specific?”

“I want that one,” Mira said preemptively, grabbing the mission out of the binder and looking at it avidly. “If you’re going to be investigating that mission, then I am **so** joining you.”

“Why?” Ranma asked, not turning down the suggestion but wondering where it had come from.

“I use Take Over magic, specifically Devil Soul Take Over. If I beat a demon like that and take it over, it will serve me as a major power up,” Mira replied, having no reason to not tell the trio around her how her power worked.

“What was the other mission you thought might be interested in?”

“Removing the curse from Galuna Island,” Ranma said. “Jellal helped this mission through the system within a week of it actually showing up, and…is this right? No one knows who actually asked for it?” When Ultear nodded, Ranma went on. “Now, removing curses can be tough or hard, but this one was an S-class mission for some reason. That, the lack of information on it, and the prize makes it stand out to me.”

 The two Fairy Tail girls looked at him, and he shrugged. “Part of the reward is a gold Zodiac key. Those things are supposed to be really rare, right?”

“Actually, there I know some more information. There were sightings of several demonic entities—small, warped creatures, not very strong but numerous—on that island for years. The mainland has no trade with it, nor vice-versa. And there have been numerous ships which have gone missing there in recent months, starting a week or so before the mission turned up so mysteriously in the Council’s mission inbox,” Ultear said.

With Jellal dead, she could toss what remained of his operation under the bus without thought. *The fact that this will give me a chance to possibly thump that arrogant Ice Make user a good one is a bonus.* “There were also unsubstantiated reports of something large being brought to the island months before that.”

“Hmmm…,” Erza mused. “And you think that this mission will be dangerous. But it is already in our books?”

“Fairy Tail and several others accepted that mission, yes. Fairy Tail also accepted the other one, but according to this, Makarov slapped it with a twenty year quest label,” Ranma replied, to which they all nodded. While the Council decided the level of a mission, guild masters could use labels like this to make certain their guild members knew what they were getting into.

“Well you can’t be in both places at once. And, given what the councilwoman just said, they could both be time sensitive. One of them is linked to numerous disappearances, so the sooner we act on that, the more lives we save,” Erza mused. “The other might be like a ticking bomb, the time when this ‘human-shaped’ demon goes on a rampage coming up soon. I propose we—that is, Fairy Tail and myself, personally—take on this mission to Galuna Island, while you deal with the other.”

She didn’t like the idea of Mira having time alone with Ranma while they pursued this mission, but her sense of both honor and fair play said it had to be. He had gone with her on the mission against Eisenwald, after all, and Erza could not in good conscience wait on the mission to Galuna Island either.

“I agree,” Ultear stated before following up her original thought. “In fact, I’ll go with you. That way you’ll have a council rep already on hand if need be.”

Erza stared at her in irritation, but had to concede that such a thing would be helpful. *And there is no chance of me asking for Yajima, since this woman was apparently assigned to this case. Curse it.* “Very well. I propose we return to Magnolia, then move to the nearest port to Galuna via train. It will cut our time down tremendously.”

“Whereas me, Wendy, Carla, and Mira should leave from here, since we’re closer to it from here,” Ranma replied with a nod.

“After which, you and Wendy will head back to Magnolia, yes?” Erza said, looking at Ranma, a very faint flush on her cheeks giving away her real reason for being interested in his answer.

“Yep,” Ranma said with a smirk. “Well, we’ve got a plan now. Anyone want to wake up Laxus so we can get going?” There were no takers, and Ranma sighed before moving to wake up his snoring friend.

**End Chapter**

Oddly enough, in many ways this Ranma would get along a lot better with Yang from *Semblance of Hope* than the Ranma in that story. Odd thought, but true. In other news, I don’t know why, but a lot of this chapter fought me for some reason. The flow would not respond to my will at all. Hopefully from now on, I can get back into a better rhythm for this story as the fights start back up.