**Chapter 6: Finally Meeting**

**Year 784**

Mirajane Strauss sighed happily as she entered the inn, pushing up her hood with one hand while moving to hold open the door for the other two girls with her. Though, given their heavy cloaks at present, the only thing that indicated they were female was their general shape: a bare hint of curves from one and much more pronounced curves on the other, almost as much as in Mira’s own case. “Finally, we’re dry and inside! Good grief, that rain is incredible.”

“God, I know!” her sister said, pulling off her own hood and looking behind them out into the rain, which was coming down in sheets, as the third of the girls entered. The rain was so heavy she couldn't see a single person out on the streets, and she also saw that the rest of the inn’s dining hall and even their common room was somewhat crowded from one end to the other. “It's almost enough to make me think that Juvia is in the area and having one of her moods.”

“Your Phantom Guild friend isn't that predictable, Anna,” Mira said, before turning to the third member of their party as she pulled off her cloak entirely, hanging it up on the nearby wall. This revealed the fact that she was wearing a long, dark purple dress which fell to just below her knees, with white ruffles along the bottom. The blouse accompanying it hugged her upper body, with two lines of buttons up the middle. The look set off her white hair and porcelain skin very well. Seeing her, no one could doubt that she was one of the top models of Fiore.

“I'm sorry about this, Bisca. If I’d known we'd run into such horrible weather I would never have asked you to accompany us on this modeling trip. But what with the rumors of that perverted newspaper reporter following models around, I wanted someone with us who could help spot him.”

“I volunteered for this Mira remember? I wanted to do some shopping in the area anyway, and it’s not like this is the first time I’ve been caught in the rain,” Bisca said, waving that off easily. Like the other two, Bisca was a rare beauty, with green hair straight down to just below her shoulders, deep brown eyes with purple hints set into a gorgeous face, though not quite as good looking as Mira, with a few frown marks around her mouth. She was busty too, which was shown to good effect in her current garb—that of a cowgirl—though she was not as curvy as Mira.

Her lips, painted a dark red color, quirked upwards. “Besides, it was fun watching the two of you at work: Mirajane, the beautiful yet somehow dangerous seductress, and Anna, the unspoiled girl next-door. It was a perfect double whammy. No wonder Sorcerer’s Weekly has always rated you as two of the top three ‘girls I’d like to have as a girlfriend’ since you started modeling.”

Anna laughed. That wasn’t her real name, though that was something that only her fellow Fairy Tail members knew about. She was the Lisanna that had somehow been transported to Earthland from Edolas. She had decided to switch her name to avoid confusion after only a few weeks of being in this new realm. Now, after two years, hearing that as her name was almost, but not quite, commonplace to her.

“As long as they know they can only look and never touch,” Anna said, waving her hands down her body. “This is only for Natsu-kun to touch.” The younger girl pouted then. “That is, if he ever grows up. I swear, I think he’d rather take part in a brawl than kiss a girl. How sad is that? Then again, Lisanna and I both think that once he does, it’ll happen quickly. Until then, at least he likes to hang out with us.”

“And that tells me a little too much about my sister’s imagination. Ugh,” Mira said, shaking her head. “You, Natsu, and Lisanna’s relationship is something I do not want to hear about, regardless of how far along you are.”

“Are you sure?” her sister teased, looping one arm with Mira's. “After all, it’s either talking about this or your relationship with Jenny.”

As Bisca laughed in the background, Mira rolled her eyes her voice lowering as they moved through the crowd towards the bar where the innkeeper was busy with a few other customers. “Oh God, not that again. Jenny’s my rival, not my lover! That was just a damn tabloid picture from a bad angle, that’s all!”

“I don’t know about that. After all, how often have Fairy Tail and Lamia Scale both accepted missions, and you both just happened to decide to take those missions?” Bisca asked, smirking at Mira as she joined the two of them.

“God, Bisca, not you too?” Mira moaned, pushing the other girl’s shoulder. “There’s nothing going on between Jenny and me.”

*That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it,* the demoness of Fairy Tail thought, ignoring the memories of one episode between the two of them with some difficulty. The two top models in Fiore had just dealt with a particularly irritating modeling job at a hotel, the photographers and director all having been perverted assholes.

The manager of the hotel whose promotion they had been doing hadn’t been, thankfully. Since the girls had gone through with the job before blowing their tops, he’d had no problem paying for the damages and then putting Jenny and Mira up for the night. It had seemed a sensible idea at the time to take their rivalry to the bar rather than outside at that point, and the two had ended up very, very drunk.

While nothing more than some heavy petting had gone on, both models had sworn not to repeat it.  *Although, given the lack of acceptable boys in Fairy Tail, that option is looking better and better. I might not be willing to go, what was the term that one asshole called it? Rug-muncher? I might not be willing to go down that road full time, but it was…nice…at the time.*

“Are you sure~~?” Anna teased.

“Positive,” Mira said, setting that thought aside and ruffling her younger sister’s hair with her free hand. She sobered slightly as they moved through the crowd, staring down at the displaced/alternate-dimensional sister that she had gained two years ago. There were times Mira still felt guilty about the Guild’s inability to find a way to send her home, to her real siblings. But even Master Makarov had no idea how to even begin trying to create a spell that could send someone across dimensions. *Her siblings must miss her terribly or worse, think her dead. I can't imagine what I'd be like if I thought my siblings had died.*

That was another lie. Mira could all too easily think about what she would be like if her siblings had died. They nearly had on that mission two years ago, and it had taken her months to get over the guilt. She had eventually bounced back, surprisingly because of her friendship with Erza. The redhead had refused to allow Mira to wallow in guilt for something that hadn't actually happened, and it forced Mira to realize that the only way to truly protect her sisters and brother was to get stronger. And in many ways the entire event had forced Mira to grow up somewhat.

*Not that I'm the only one who made that vow. Natsu did too, though he hasn’t been as successful going about it thanks to his whole attention deficit thing,* she thought with a small amount of fondness for her younger siblings’ would-be beau. How Lisanna and Anna had agreed to share Natsu was something she just didn't want to think about, but the fact that they had and seemed to love the oblivious Dragon Slayer straddled the line between sweet and hilariously silly at times.

Finally reaching the bar, Mira smiled brightly at the innkeeper. “We'd like some mulled cider if you have any, please. And a room for three if you think this rain won’t let up.”

“We’ve rooms available, miss. Can’t tell you about the rain, I’m afraid,” the innkeeper said with a smile, hearts appearing in his eyes as he stared at the three beauties on the other side of the bar. He waved his hand at the rest of the room. “All this is just from people around the town getting in out of the rain. In fact…”

He quickly turned, hurling a wooden tankard at a man who had been about to launch into the second refrain of a bawdy song. The mug smacked into the side of the other man’s head, sending him to the ground with a thump. “There are children present, Josef!” he shouted, eliciting giggles from all three Fairy Tail mages as well as hoots and hollers from the rest of the room.

The drunkard—Mira assumed that given the fact that the innkeeper knew his name and that none of the rest of the crowd had seemed surprised by the treatment—scowled. He made to stand up, but he was quickly pulled back into his chair by his friends, who pointed out that, yes, there were several children and teens present, all of whom looked soaked to the skin.

The rain had come up very suddenly. One second out it was all clear, then the next there were clouds in the sky and people wondering if it would rain, and a bare moment after that sheets of rain came down. There had been no gradual buildup: the weather had moved from clouds straight to near-typhoon levels of rain.

“You should try to find a seat by one of the fires, miss,” a barmaid said from nearby, having moved up behind the three girls. She smiled at them as she handed over a tray full of empty mugs, though her smile was not nearly as sincere as the innkeeper's. Mira could see more than a hint of jealousy in her eyes as she looked at the three beauties. “I’ll be right over with your drinks.”

Bisca and the others moved in that direction, though the green haired girl paused a second to whisper, “And there better not be anything extra in those mugs. I'll know if there is.”

“Do you think she would do that?” Anna asked, looking up at Bisca quizzically. Lisanna/Anna might have filled out pretty well over the last few years, but she hadn’t added many inches to her height.

Bisca nodded. “Oh, yeah. That look in her eyes, that is the look of local pretty girl who doesn’t like outside competition, though I also bet she’s more a tease than anything else. She’d spit in your meal if she thought you're prettier than her and she could get away with it.”

“Agreed, though I suppose you could say we would all have noticed,” Mira said. Like Anna, she had worked occasionally as a barmaid at the guild, though she preferred to either take modeling jobs or work S-Class jobs on her own. Watching over the guildhall and the Guild members who congregated there was more Lisanna’s thing than hers.

As they sat down, Mira caught Anna looking at her a smile on her face. “What?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Anna said with a laugh. “I just can’t get how much you've mellowed over the years. I remember seeing you wearing that gothic outfit when I first showed up; it was enough to give me a near heart attack! There's no comparison to what you were like then and now.” The fact that Mira’s clothing had changed to be closer to what Anna’s ‘real’ sister in Edolas wore was left unsaid.

“As much as I hate to say it, Erza was right. Not at the time,” Mira added hastily. While she and Erza had mellowed with age, they were still sort-of rivals. “But now that I’m older and my body’s grown to match, I understand her point. Putting it all on display like that with my body like it is now would just make people think I was cheap.”

“Not that it would hurt her to get out of that armor sometime.” Mira finished hastily then sighed, leaning back in her chair and sticking her legs out slightly towards the fire. It wasn’t the most ladylike pose, but who cared so long as her legs got warmer? “Ha, but then again, why should she bother? It’s not like there’s all that many men in the guild worth the effort to impress.”

When Anna made to object, Mira held up a finger, pointing at her dramatically. “Oh, please. Weren’t you just complaining about how dense Natsu was?”

Anna scowled at that underhanded blow. *How dare Mira-nee use my own words against me!* “Oh, yeah? Well what about Gray, or Loki, or Freed, or Bickslow? I know Laxus is sort of off limits thanks to how long you spent disliking him, and he has a girlfriend in another guild too, doesn’t he?”

“Thank you for not mentioning any of the older guild members. They hit on me enough when I’m acting as a barmaid as it is,” Mira replied dryly. “And as far as I know, Laxus might, though last I heard she could be breaking up with him .”

Bisca remained silent, taking the tankard of mulled cider from the edgy maid and sipping before she let her leave with a nod directed at both the barmaid and her fellow mages.

Mira nodded back before counting off points on her fingers. “Gray? He’s just like Natsu: he doesn’t seem to have any idea of what sex is or that girls should be interesting. All he and Natsu are interested in is fighting one another, getting stronger, and causing property damage. For Gray stripping comes somewhere in there, which is another point, of course.”

At her little sister’s look of confusion, Mira went on, making her face look as innocent as she could while she spoke in a bland tone of voice. “Why would I want to go out with the boy after seeing all he’s got to offer?”

Shuddering at that accurate but oh so traumatizing point, Anna attempted to rally her arguments while Bisca laughed agreement. “Okay, then what about Loki? He’s supposed to be quite the lady’s man, after all. Or Bickslow?”

Mira’s lips quirked as she realized that Anna had discarded the idea of Freed. He could almost be in the same mold as Natsu and Gray in showing no interest in women, though in his case it wasn’t just fighting he was interested in, but reading and perfecting his runes. *That and running after Laxus. Heh, yaoi fantasies galore there.*

“Bickslow first. One, he’s just as bad as Freed for trying to follow Laxus around. And third, he’s just not my type: way too mouthy in a bad way, his looks are sort of against him, and while he’s mouthy, he’s never actually gone beyond crass comments, not even flirting.”

“Loki then!” Anna replied triumphantly, though inwardly she knew she was losing this argument. *But I can tell that Onee-sama has been thinking about this for a while to have prepared arguments like this.*

“Hah. If I wanted a one night stand and was willing to watch him hop from my bed straight to another, maybe. From what his girlfriends say he definitely knows what he’s doing in the bedroom. He’s certainly better looking than the others. But he isn’t **real** enough for me. He’s all about flirting, no substance or any desire to be in a real relationship. No, I’m afraid I’m probably going to remain single just as long as you technically will, waiting for Natsu to realize that there’s more to girls than simply being friends with boobies,” Mira finished, becoming deliberately crude at the end.

Bisca chuckled at that, but Anna scowled, deciding to turn away from the subtly smug smirk on her sister’s face for easier prey. “Oh, don’t sit there all silent like that when you've got Alzack!”

Taking a sip from the mulled cider, Bisca let its warmth fill her while she worked to force a flush from her face. “Well, that would be nice if either of us could say more than a few romantic words to one another before blushing and going to pieces.” She sighed, holding her mug in her lap for a second. “And lately it’s just him doing the going to pieces thing. I was ready last week for him to ask me out, and what does he do: stumble, stutter, and then work up the courage to ask me to join him on a job!”

“Well, that’s…romantic, right?” Mira tried, sharing a glance with her sister. All joking aside, Mira had only dated occasionally over the years, and none of her dates had gone as far as she and Jenny had in one drunken evening, nor had any of those relationships lasted longer than a few weeks. And while Lisanna and Anna had been ‘dating’ Natsu for years, with him that was more simply being really close friends than anything actually romantic. So Mira was sort of shooting in the dark and was honest enough to admit that to herself.

“No, not really. It was a bandit hunting trip up in the highlands, and it was boring beyond belief. Heck, even the bandits weren’t much of an issue. We didn’t exchange more than a few words that weren’t job or magic related, or guns in general, I guess.” Bisca sighed. “I want him to at least show some courage, enough to talk about **us**, if you see what I mean. It might seem old-fashioned, but what if we go out on a date and get to the point where we’re about to talk seriously, and he runs away at that point? That would hurt even worse that this limbo we’re in. I like him, I know I do, but there’s a vast difference between liking someone and being in a relationship with him.”

Realizing that this conversation was becoming just a little depressing, the three of them fell silent, watching the crowd around them and enjoying the warmth of their drinks and the fireplace. They looked up with several of the others in the room as the door to the inn banged open again. In stumbled a very short individual, covered from head to toe in a large cloak.

She stumbled, falling flat on her face, the hood flipping up as she squealed a little, shaking her head and sitting upright. “Stupid rain!” the little girl muttered, getting to her feet and moving towards the innkeeper, the cloak trailing behind her. As the trio of mages watched, she hopped up onto a bar stool and talked to the innkeeper, though now her words were drowned out by the noise of the crowd.

“Oh, she's so cute!” Anna squealed a little, swiftly getting up and moving towards the child through the crowd, most of which had gone back to its own business.

“Good grief, when is she going to grow up beyond loving cute things?” Mira said with a laugh.

“Oh, like you're in any better,” Bisca said, cocking her head to one side as she looked at the girl. From here they couldn’t make out much of her features, but she had blue hair tied into two long ponytails and a very cute looking face.

“It takes one to know one,” Mira shot back, pushing the other girl lightly in the shoulder.

Bisca chuckled, and the two of them stood up as Anna ushered the younger girl over to them. “Everyone, this is Wendy.”

“Hello,” Wendy said, smiling brightly, as she pulled off the large cloak she had been wearing, which was her Oni-chan’s, of course. The young Dragon Slayer thought she recognized two of the girls as being two girls she'd healed a few years ago, but Wendy’s long term memory for faces wasn’t all that good. Their bodies had also changed quite a bit since then.

*And mine hasn't,* she thought, pouting a little and looking down at herself. At twelve years old, Wendy was about a foot taller than she had been when she had first met her Oni-chan. She was also stronger, tougher, and all-around looked like a very energetic, outdoorsy sort of twelve-year-old girl. What she didn't have was anything like a chest.

Wendy stared with beady eyes at the three older girls for a moment before shaking it off quickly. “Miss Anna has told me her name and that you're all from Fairy Tail, right? I’ve heard a lot about you and your guild, but what are you doing around here? Or are we really that near Magnolia, I think it’s called?”

“You’re about twelve day’s travel by horseback or a day’s travel by train from there, Wendy,” Mira replied, patting the girl on her head. She noticed then that the girl’s hair was actually dry, though her face was wet. Her clothing, which was a very well made blouse and dress combo that was bright yellow and blue, was also dry.

*That is one really good cloak*, Mira thought, then looked closer at the dress and blouse. *And an equally good combo there. What is that material? It looks like she’s not even feeling the cold, not really.*

“That looks cute,” Mira said aloud, reaching out to tug lightly at the sleeve of Wendy’s outfit.

Wendy giggled in reply. “You like it?” she asked, looking a little shy. “I just changed its color myself last night. I thought the design looked good on me with my hair, but Carla thought it looked a little too plain.”

“Carla!” Anna and Mira said as one, looking at Wendy in surprise.. Bisca had heard of Carla, of course, as had Anna, who had been a major help in getting Happy over her leaving the guild, but neither had ever met the Exceed in person.

Mira asked the question they were all thinking. “Do you mean Carla, a little white-furred cat? She calls her species Exceed for some reason and can use Magic to summon up tiny wings?”

Blinking Wendy nodded. “Ah, yes. She’s been traveling with me and Oni-chan for the last two years or so? She’s become my second best friend and was…” Wendy blinked, looking away. “Um, a major help a few months back…”

Before their conversation could go any further, the door to the inn banged open once more, and two other individuals entered. One of them was markedly short, shorter than Wendy, barely coming up to her waist, and was dressed in a voluminous cloak which, if you looked closely enough, seemed about the right size for Wendy. The second was a redheaded girl.

She was not in a cloak. In fact, she wore what looked like jeans which didn’t quite fit and a sleeve-less black shirt clinging to her upper body like a second skin. She was somewhat busty, Mira thought, and the shirt definitely put that on display, given how wet it was at present. More than one of the men in the room was staring at the sight, but no one seemed to have the courage to approach her given the scowl on her face.

The redhead was also growling under her breath as she wrung out her hair and glared at her diminutive companion. “Why the heck did I have to forgo my cloak, huh? Just because you don't want to get your freaking fur wet like a prissy little puss then you asked Wendy for hers, and then she gave me those big old puppy eyes she can do, and for what!?”

“I am a somewhat catlike creature, you oafish brute, as I am certain you are aware!” said the short figure, pushing back her hood to indeed reveal a face like that of a cat. But it had a less-pronounced snout, a little nose, and was far more expressive and mobile than a cat’s. The individual was also standing on her back feet rather than all fours. “Getting our fur wet is quite a bit bigger of a deal than you humans getting your hair wet. You wouldn't want to deal with the smell or my temper when dealing with it!"

“Oh yeah, like your temper is all that good normally!” the redhead groused, gesturing to the innkeeper with one hand and then pointing over to where Wendy had stood up, waving at them through the crowd.

Wendy had already turned the instant the door had opened, waving her hands. The redhead smiled and moved in that direction, standing beside the fire for a second as she grabbed an empty mug from a nearby table. “You mind?” she asked rhetorically. Before the confused individual could ask, she gestured, and a ring of magic appeared around her arms before touching her shirt. There it seemed to pull the water out of her clothing and down her arm where it began to drip into the mug. He nodded at Wendy, then over at the three girls, blinking in surprise. “…Mirajane, right?”

“I am indeed, as Carla would no doubt tell you.” Mira said, smiling at the redhead before twitching her eyes over to the Exceed, who was over by the innkeeper, possibly ordering food. At first Mira had thought the redhead was Erza. She was certainly built like the redheaded knight: tallish with decently broad shoulders and quite a good body from what Mira could see. Now that she was closer, she could see there were a lot of differences too, though their hair was indeedthe same color.

Yet that was a minor consideration as she put two and two together, and Mira pushed herself to her feet, moving over to the redhead. “You would be Ranma, correct? Laxus’s friend?”

Ranma barely had a second to nod before Mira had quickly pulled her into a hug, ignoring the crow around them. Ranma blushed, feeling the other girl’s breasts pressing against her own and stiffened, uncertain what to do until Mira went on. “I never got the chance to thank you! By the time I woke up you were gone! Where did you go? Why did you have to take off so quickly? Laxus said it was some kind of mission, but wouldn't tell us anything more.”

“Yeah, well, that's kind of the nature of my work,” Ranma said sheepishly, putting her arms around Mira in turn for a second. It'd been a long time since he he'd had any kind of contact with a sexy girl. *Despite what Carla thinks when she’s transformed, she does not count! Damn hormones. Sometimes I wonder if they’re worth the aggravation.* Then Ranma would remember that kiss he’d shared with Jenny several years ago and the kisses he’d gotten the last time he’d passed through Appledore, and would admit that they might well be.

“And you didn't have to thank me,” Ranma went on aloud as Mira pulled back slightly, moving to her chair once more and gesturing Ranma into another one nearby that had just been vacated. Anna, however, took her turn to hug Ranma for Ranma’s part in saving her, then hugged Wendy just as tightly, whispering a fervent thank you into the girl’s ear. Lisanna knew that the girl’s magic had saved her life when she arrived in Earthland.

While this was going on Ranma pulled the chair over and sat down. Once Anna released her, Wendy scrambled up into Ranma’s lap, leaning back against her and sighing contentedly as Ranma pulled her cloak up over her like a blanket.

At a look from the other girls, Ranma shrugged her shoulders. “We've been on our feet for a few days trying to track down a Dark Guild. As for thanking me, you don't have to do that. Saving you and your siblings was more incidental then on purpose, I'm afraid. I was more in the area to kill that demon than anything else, and even that was luck, curse it.”

“Luck or not, you really helped us out there, and I don't mind telling you that,” Mira said, shaking her head. “I bit off more than I could chew on that mission, and I nearly got my siblings killed for it. If not for your arrival, that's what would've happened.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” Ranma said with a shrug. “Remember, my arrival didn't have anything to do with Laxus being there.”

Mira opened her mouth and shut it, realizing that Ranma really didn't want any praise from this. “Um, that’s true, I suppose, but it was really Wendy’s healing spells that saved the day.” With that and a beaming smile towards the now sleepy looking Wendy, Mira went on. “So, formal introductions. My name’s Mirajane Strauss, as you no doubt remember. This is Anna. Carla’s probably told you a lot about the guild, but…”

“But I’m the Lisanna who appeared in that flash of light,” Anna said, holding out her hand to Carla to shake as the young female feline joined them, alighting on the ground after using her magic wings to fly over the crowd. “I chose the name Anna for convenience’s sake.”

“Charmed, if you are anything like your…twin I suppose?” Carla said. She absently patted Wendy’s leg in passing before hopping up onto a chair of her own, using Wendy’s cloak to add a bit more height.

This close to the female Exceed, Mira could tell she had changed over the last two or more years since they’d seen one another. She hadn’t grown in height, but her choice of clothing had changed. Gone was her normal simple dress, replaced by pants and a shirt. At her side she wore a small pistol in a holster, and she had a tiny scar on one ear. Her eyes narrowed for a moment as she looked at Anna, as if she knew there was more to that story than the other girl was saying, but she didn’t comment.

“I like to think so,” Anna said with a smile.

Bisca held out her hands to Ranma and Carla in turn. “My name’s Bisca Mulan. I wasn’t a member of Fairy Tail before Carla left, so I doubt she’s mentioned me.”

“Meh, we’ve not talked as often about Fairy Tail as you might think, though I’ve been exchanging letters with Laxus for the past two years. Then again, he doesn’t really mention a lot of the rest of the guild except for the other S-class members and a guy called Freed. Say’s ‘he‘s the most disturbingly attentive lackey I never wanted.’” Ranma finished, grinning.

“Hmm… Is that all?” Mira said, pouting, not even bothering to follow up on the Freed angle there for something that could be far juicer. *Or at least give me some answers on an old mystery*. “And here I thought for the longest time he was lying about you not being a girlfriend.”

Ranma went still as stone and Wendy’s eyes widened from her sleepy state. Wendy quickly hopped off Ranma’s lap, moving over to Carla, who also moved back while Ranma’s eyes darkened as she stared at Mira. “I am going to show you one thing, and then you are going to take that back. If you don’t, I’m going to hit you.” Ranma paused and seemed to think before he went on. “And I don’t think I’ll stop any time soon.”

“Oh?” Mira said, and Anna and Bisca both blanched as they saw her smile becoming almost sinister. A few men who had been checking her out from within the anonymity of the crowd blanched and quickly looked away. “Sounds like fun. Let’s see this ‘one thing’ then, and then we’ll see if you can put your money where your mouth is.”

“Huh, and now I’m tempted to skip straight to punching you.” Ranma sighed theatrically, then picked up the now hot stein of water from where she’d set it down and dumped it over her head.

Mira’s eyes widened in shock as she saw the change occur, and Bisca spewed out the drink she had been taking a sip from as Anna’s eyes also widened. Gone was the red hair, replaced by black hair. Gone was the bust straining under a shirtless black shirt, replaced by a solid looking chest and wider shoulders. His legs, too, now filled in his pants better the length now matching his legs. “What in the heck?!”

“I know I’m new to this realm, but that isn’t normal, is it?” Anna asked Bisca in an aside who ignored her, moving forward to look at Ranma as Mira did the same.

“This is my real body. The female body you saw first here and way back then is a curse I picked up when I was young, younger than even Wendy here. It turns me into a woman with the application of cold water. Warm water changes me back, as you just… Um, what are you two doing?”

Bisca and Mira were both patting Ranma’s chest at the moment, with Mira going so far as to actually try to squeeze his pecs. Mira looked up at him with about as innocent an expression as she could manage. “Well, it could be fake somehow. It’s um… it’s better to make certain of these things…” Mira trailed off as she felt Ranma’s muscles under his shirt.

*Damn, those are nice.* Ranma might not have been as bulky as Laxus, but he was actually quite a bit more powerful physically than he looked, and his muscles were the sort of perfection you only saw in someone who spent his life training to fight and actually fighting.

“I, I’ve never seen a spell like that before,” Bisca muttered. “It could have been some kind of illusion magic.” *Wow, he’s even more ripped than Natsu and Gray! He’s built on such a slim frame, but he’s got so many muscles… Between him and Alzack…there’s just no comparison.*

To one side Wendy, who had hopped out of Ranma’s lap, stared at what was going on, her face slowly flushing. “I’m feeling uncomfortable, but I don’t know why, Carla.”

“It’s just a means of communication that adults often use which is far too much for a young lady like yourself. Pay it no mind,” Carla ordered.

“I assure ya, the curse is one hundred percent real. And if ya don’t mind, I’ve been wet enough times today. I’d rather not get wet again,” Ranma said, directing the last sentence toward Anna, who had picked up a cup full of some kind of drink. “Or sticky.”

“Really? That’s a pity,” Mira intoned, with the curve of her lips and her tone giving the words extra meaning.

Ranma stared at her deadpan, thanking Lady Luck for his ‘training’ with the ladies at Melona’s. *I might not have had the ‘full course’, but at least in terms of flirting I can hold my own.* “Yes, you might say I know more about women getting wet than any man alive.”

“HA!” Mira exclaimed, pulling back slightly while Bisca continued to run her hands around Ranma’s muscles.

Ranma grabbed her hand and was holding it still, letting their fingers intertwine. Bisca simply blushed, staring into his eyes but not trying to back away. This was the closest she had ever gotten to actually flirting with a man in a while, and though the curse had initially shocked her, she found she liked the contact. It took a cough from Carla to make her break away.

“Still, there’s only one way to make me really believe that you just changed genders entirely,” Mira went on, smirking at Ranma.

“If you’re gonna ask me to strip or something, I decline. We hardly know one another, after all,” Ranma quipped.

At that Bisca regained her somewhat scattered senses and moved back to her chair, with Mira doing the same.

None of them noticed the crowd around them which had noticed the sex change and, as one, had backed away from their drinks. Only a shout of, “You bastards, daring to impugn my product! If you think something like that could be caused by anything I sell, you’ve got rocks in your head,” from the innkeeper broke the stasis.

After that the crowd began to calm down, but they still all shifted away from the fireplace where the mages had congregated. Even here in Fiore odd magic like Ranma’s was best avoided by the general populace.

“Heh. Okay, I’ll agree that’s a darn good reason for you and Laxus to not be dating. Unless you swing that way, of course,” Mira said. She watched with a smirk as Ranma shuddered, pulling Wendy back into his lap as if to use the little girl like a shield against the very idea.

“You know, Happy was really distraught you left like you did, Carla,” Anna said in an effort to change the subject, while internally grinning. *Oh, wait until Lis hears about this! Mira’s finally showing real interest in a guy,* *and not only is it Laxus’ old friend, but he’s also able to transform into a girl which just happens to be the same girl that saved us against the Beast!* “Even with my arrival it really hit him hard. You could have written at some point, couldn’t you?”

“Hmmf. That supposes we were in any position to send a note. Or that I had any interest in feeding that tomcat’s unnatural fixation on me,” Carla intoned, rolling her eyes. “Honestly, just because I am the first female of our species he’s seen, he latches onto me like a limpet.” She held up a paw when Mira made to speak. “You know its true, Mira. He always followed me around, never trying to actually learn about my personality or even my likes and dislikes, just thrusting fish in my face. It was beyond annoying and not at all flattering!”

Mira and Anna looked at one another, trying to think of a counter argument and failing, before turning back to Ranma, who had watched this exchange with amusement. “You said you were hunting down a Dark Guild? You do know that’s illegal unless you’ve got a writ from the Magic Council?” Mira asked

“Not for me,” Ranma said with a shrug, while Wendy started to fall asleep again against his chest. “I'm not from Fiore, and my hunt for this guild began down in Bosco. As for why, there were rumors of the Dark Guild Eisenwald trying to find and unseal a weapon left behind by the dark mage Zeref.” Ranma’s eyes glimmered darkly, and Mira felt a thrill as she saw something violent and fell there. “Ya might say that dealing with stuff like that, especially demons, is my specialty.”

With a sigh, Ranma leaned back, hugging Wendy to him as he explained. “Unfortunately, the guild split up and I decided to follow their leader, thinking he would be the one to unseal it. Then they split up even more, and I lost the actual scent and wound up following the wrong trail. After dealing with seven of their mages, I learned that I’d been wrong all along: it wasn’t their leader, a guy named Erigor, who was going to unseal it at all, but a guy named Kaggie or something that had split off with an even smaller group right before I initially started trailing them.”

“So with that lead dead, we had to backtrack to try to find the other trail. This led us deeper into Fiore, which was fine, since I’ve been meaning to see Laxus in person again. What wasn’t fine was just as we’re within range of actually using our senses to try and find the asshole rather than word of mouth we lose it because of this rain.”

*I am the freaking water Dragon Slayer! I should be able to find the damn trail even in this weather. But no, my powers don't work like that, and even* ***my*** *nose gets deadened by this amount of rain.* Ranma groused internally. This had been far and away the most irritating hunt he’d ever been on.

“That's tough,” Bisca said with shake of her head. “I know I hate it when I lose a trail.”

Ranma looked at her, and the green haired woman smiled. “I'm Fairy Tail’s best tracker, though I specialize mostly in hunting people who take to the cities or plains than anything else. I'm also a Gun Mage. You said you’re a Water Dragon Slayer, right?”

“Among other things,” Ranma said with a laugh. “I never saw the point of just learning one type of magic, though I'll admit that Water Dragon magic is my most defining trait.”

“I thought I remembered you shouting out Water Dragon attacks when we fought my possessed brother,” Mira said, then reached over, grabbing Ranma’s hand and squeezing it. “I know you said I didn’t need to thank you, but I’m going to do it again. Thank you for helping us.”

Anna nodded once more, reaching over to touch Wendy’s shoulder.

Nodding at them, Ranma turned back to Bisca just as Carla’s food arrived, and the Exceed woke up Wendy to eat something. Wendy, Carla, and Anna moved off to a nearby table that had been vacated by the people leery of getting close to Ranma’s curse. Anna wanted to get to know the young girl who had saved her life as well as Carla, who had been so important a friend to many of her own important people in the guild, but whom she had never met.

This left the three somewhat older mages alone. “I can use Guns Magic, Requip, and a few minor magics besides those. But the guns really are the main thing, if you’re asking about my combat style. Guns for range, Water Dragon’s Slayer magic and martial arts for close in and if something **really** needs to die,” Ranma said.

While all three Fairy Tail mages flinched at the word ‘die’ for some reason Bisca nodded too. “So what kind of guns do you use?”

“I own three magic guns: two pistols and a rifle. I had them all custom made, and I’d bet you haven’t quite seen guns like them before,” Ranma said, interested in talking shop with another Guns Magic user. “Although I had to invent a lot of my magic gun spells from seeing them used by Dark Guild members and one old retired mage down in Minstrel.”

“That’s sort of the way we all come up with spells. And unfortunately, Guns Magic is one of the ones that’s easiest to learn and it can lend itself to banditry,” Bisca said, then smirked. “However, I think you’re going to have to back up that claim of me never seeing a gun like yours before. Seeing as I know more about them than handguns why don’t you pull out your rifle and let me be the judge, huh?”

Mira blinked at the number of innuendos she saw in that statement, but remained silent, watching as Ranma Requipped a long rifle with a sniper scope. When Bisca began to fawn over it, running her hands up and down its barrel, though, she had to say something. “Well Bisca, are you impressed with his…rifle?”

Blushing, Ranma looked away from the two girls, while Bisca just looked back at her friend blandly before upping the ante, pressing the rifle between her breasts in a very suggestive manner, so much so that many of the men in the crowd around them who were still watching had to look away with nosebleeds. “I have to admit I’ve ever seen one so powerful or dangerous before. The size is impressive too.”

The three of them held their positions for a moment then Ranma turned back and replied. “Well, most of my spells for my rifle deal more with penetration than power, but it can do that too.”

At that all three of them broke up laughing, causing the other mages to look at them quizzically. “Did we miss a joke, Anna-san?”

“Just Anna, please, and I think so. But if we did it was probably one that we wouldn’t have enjoyed,” Anna replied, exchanging a nod with Carla. Then she began to ask the two of them about their various magics, trying to keep their attention on her while the three older mages continued to talk.

“So where are you going to go from here?” Mira asked after getting her giggles under control, a faint, warm smile on her face, which oddly had nothing to do with Ranma being the same ‘girl’ who had saved her and her siblings from Mira’s hubris. It was simply refreshing to speak to a young man who didn’t try to hit on her, impress her, or not even notice the fact she was a girl in the first place. Ranma seemed willing to flirt, but wasn’t overt about it and wasn’t trying to impress her. He also wasn’t afraid of her, a major bonus given that Mira knew she often scared those around her. It came with being the ‘Demoness of Fairy Tail’.

Mira didn’t know if she was attracted to Ranma, not in a serious way, anyway. Yes, he was hot as a guy and sat on the line between cute as a button and drop dead sexy as a girl. But his female form bothered her somewhat, given how close it looked to Erza. Mira might have buried the hatchet with her rival somewhat over the last few years, but she and Erza still fought like cats and dogs occasionally. The idea of kissing Erza was a little disturbing to Mira.

Looking over at Bisca, she could see some of the same thoughts going through the sharpshooter’s mind. Mira hadn’t realized how irritating the state of things between her and Alzack must be from the inside, watching it being too amusing for words. But she understood it now after Bisca’s earlier speech on the matter and could tell that, while Bisca wasn’t truly interested in Ranma yet either, he certainly had her attention.

“Tough question. I’ve stopped in at both of the other inns in the town as well as the stage couch and a few farmsteads, giving out descriptions of the mages I’m looking for. This Kaggie guy’s got a distinctive haircut, so he should be easy to spot if he’s in the area. But unless I get a hint, I might be spinning my wheels for a while. Are there any local guilds? They tend to notice things, especially strangers who look weird passing through their area. Do you know of any?” Ranma asked.

“Hmm… The closest guild would be Quattro Cerberus. They are about…I want to say, a day along the eastern road from here?” Mira said, looking over to Bisca for confirmation.

“Don’t ask me. I’ve never worked with them. The rumors about their antics are bad enough. They aren’t bad,” Bisca hastened to add, “but they are an all guys guild, and they really overdo it with the drinking and the partying. And this is me saying it!”

Bisca and Mira both laughed at that, knowing exactly how weird it sounded for members of Fairy Tail to complain about another guild partying too hard. It was more the whole ‘no girls’ thing and the amount of drinking that bothered them.

“Yeah. The worst, or rather, best of the lot, since he’s their only S-class mage, is a guy named Bacchus. Bacchus will flirt with anyone in a skirt, which you might have to watch out for,” Mira said teasingly.

“Gotcha,” Ranma said, having no understanding of how Bisca had been sort of a hypocrite just then. “Still, they might be my best bet. But what brings you three into the area?”

Mira explained that she and Anna had been on a modeling gig nearby, with Bisca there to hunt down a paparazzi pervert, which she had done. Bisca had caught a glimpse of the man while he was trying to use his special magic camera to take pictures of the models through a wall as they changed, then hunted him down when he tried to disappear into the populace of the town they had been in at the time. Bisca had taken him captive, but not before shooting through the camera and destroying both it and the fingers of the pervert’s hand.

“Then we hop on a train, come here for some shopping before hopping on another train, and then this rain starts up. It’s so bad the train’s stopped. A few downed trees along the route, apparently,” Mira finished.

“But enough about us,” Bisca said, though inwardly she was happy at the look of approval on Ranma’s face. “Tell us about you. How did you meet Laxus? We’ve heard rumors you met in Appledore during the orc invasion, but no real details.”

“Hmm… Well, we did meet then on the front lines, as it were. And at first we didn’t really like one another, but…” From there Ranma explained how the two Dragon Slayers had met, as well as how they had bonded, first in the desperate fighting to reclaim the Tine of the Trident, then during the months spent in the cold, hunting and being hunted by Orc raiding parties. He ended the tale by talking about the massive fights which had, thanks to Gildarts’ arrival, won control of the Trident and the Wall.

Ranma still remembered those fights as some of the hardest he’d ever been in. Not because he had personally been in danger of dying often, though that too had been true occasionally. No, he remembered them as the hardest because they had been fighting for so long, and the outcome would have been horrible for so many people if they had failed. Under such circumstances, men of all backgrounds would bond together or break separately, and the two young men had become firm friends.

From there Mira and Bisca told Ranma about their own closest friends and a bit about the guild in general. At the other table, Anna, Wendy, and Carla continued to talk. Anna was now trying to convince Carla to come back to Fairy Tail, at least to visit. “I think your actually talking to Happy and Lisanna would give them some closure. The way you just took off during that mission was just sort of stinky to my mind. While they’ve gotten over it at this point, you can tell, sometimes, it still bothers them.”

Carla scowled, biting back her first retort. Despite being just as haughty as ever, she had also become somewhat more empathic and slightly less serious during her travels. “I can see us doing so for a short amount of time if we go through with Ranma’s plan and stop by Fairy Tail. But I refuse to rejoin the guild. Not only would being around Happy once more be irritating in the extreme, but I need to stay with young Wendy here. She needs some real female influence in her life if she isn’t going to become a hooligan like her brother.”

Reaching over, Wendy pulled Carla out of her chair and into Wendy’s lap, hugging the little cat person. “I love you too, Carla.”

Anna smirked at the blush on Carla’s face and the way she didn’t say anything in reply to that comment. *Yep, she’s really mellowed from what Lisanna told me about her.* “Well then, that’s easy to solve: you could both join Fairy Tail, or, in your case, rejoin, Carla.”

“No thank you, Anna-san,” said Wendy. “I would like to spend some time with the guild; I understand you have another Dragon Slayer there like Oni-chan and me? But Oni-chan can’t join a guild thanks to his job, and I don’t want him to leave me behind.” Despite having now spent more of her life with Ranma than she had with Grandeenay, Wendy was still somewhat traumatized by her mother leaving her.

“Well, I tried,” Anna said, filing that away. It sounded as if Ranma’s job wouldn’t allow him to legally join a guild, though that was weird to her. *But, then again, I don’t know a lot of Fiore’s laws, let alone those of other countries. So I suppose it could make sense somehow.* “Now, why don’t you tell me some of the places you’ve seen, Wendy-chan. I’ve not been able to travel much. In fact, this is the farthest afield I’ve been.”

Over at the other table the discussion had gone in somewhat the same direction: the three other mages were exchanging stories about missions and training. Ranma was interested in the places to see in Fiore, coming away with a more detailed picture of the country than he had before. He now knew the names of most of the famous guilds, but beyond their names and that Fairy Tail was based in Magnolia had no idea where the guilds were, or anything else about Fiore.

In turn, Mira was in awe of the amount of travel Ranma described. She was uncertain she’d like to travel like that without the comforts and people of home, but it certainly sounded fascinating. All the places he had seen, the number of people, and, more importantly to her, the number of different types of magic, were just amazing.

Coming from Desierto like she had, Bisca had seen a lot more travel than Mira, though most of it had been while on the run or simply when moving on after her petty crimes had been discovered. She also had wanted to get as far away from Desierto as possible thanks to certain issues there with her ex-family. So many of the better places Ranma had seen were just as new to Bisca as they were to Mira. The capitals, in particular, sounded amazing to her, as did some of the sights he had seen.

Bisca also knew a lot more about animals, and she and Ranma had a grand few minutes regaling Mira with how they had met many of the monsters in Gildarts’ book, of which she envied Ranma’s ownership. More often than not, Ranma would have both girls in stitches, or Bisca would have him and Mira nearly collapsing from laughter. This drew numerous looks and even some laughter from the crowd around them when one tale or other was reenacted in a loud enough voice to carry. None of them noticed that the crowd was thinning out now, the rain having started to let up as it became evening outside.

Eventually, however, they did, and Mira sighed, standing up and looking over at Wendy who seemed to be falling asleep in her chair. “I think the rain’s let up. We need to head over to the train station; see if we can get a train to Fiore tonight.”

Ranma looked in that direction too and quickly moved over, pulling the younger girl into his arms, where she nodded off against his shoulder almost immediately. “And I need to get this little one to bed for the night. I’ll do a final check through the town for my target, but then I think I’d like to get some sleep too.”

Nodding in agreement, Carla moved to stand with him. While talking to Anna had been very pleasant, and she hoped that Wendy would look to the girl and her older sibling as examples to try to live up to in the future, Carla was feeling just as tired as her young friend. She didn’t have the endurance of either Dragon Slayer, and, though she had been able to rest by catching rides with them a few times, the last few days had worn on her too.

She turned to the other women. “It was nice meeting you, Miss Anna and Miss Bisca. Mira, I’m happy that you have outgrown your…need to dress out, as it were,” Carla said diplomatically. Even Carla knew who not to mess with, and Mirajane Strauss was one of those. “But both myself and young Wendy need our beauty sleep, something we haven’t gotten of late thanks to this buffoon.”

By this point in their relationship Ranma had gotten used to all sorts of names being thrown his way by the haughty Exceed, so he simply rolled his eyes and smirked. “Yeah, some of us need all the beauty sleep we can get, not like it helps all that much with certain attitudes.”

Smiling and shaking Ranma’s hand, Mira wrangled a promise from him to look them up if he ever came to Magnolia before leading the way back to the door. As they walked out, cloaks once more shielding them from the bite of the cold wind coming in from the nearby ocean, Mira looked at her companions, a bright light in her eyes. “So, what do you think of those three?”

“Interesting for certain. Carla’s a little more understanding and less caustic than I expected. Wendy’s a real cute girl, though I could tell she’s also a strong mage. She certainly held herself like one, and if she’s a Dragon Slayer too, that makes sense,” Anna replied. “Ranma’s a real character, especially with that whole curse thing. And handsome too~?” she teased, looking at her older sister.

“He is that, though his curse is a bit out there. I’m not going to say more than that after one meeting. I’m not that kind of girl. Though his adventures were just incredible,” Mira replied easily, not responding further to her sister’s teasing.  *Yes, I flirted with the guy. So what? It isn’t as if I can practice that kind of thing with anyone in the guild. If they understood what was going on at all, they’d get the wrong idea and think I was serious.*

“His stories about fighting demons were especially interesting. When we meet up again, I might ask him more about that and how to find some for myself.” As a Takeover mage, Mira could take in the power of those demons she beat, just like Elfman had tried to do with the Beast.

“I thought his stories were fascinating too, and the way he was with Wendy was really cute,” Bisca said, a point all three of them agreed on. As fun as it was to meet a guy who could flirt back at you without coming on like a smarmy asshole, it was just as nice to see a man able to take care of a young girl like Ranma had.

“Oho?” Anna and Mira said as one.

“Does this mean Alzack’s place in your heart is in danger?” Anna teased.

Mira winced, shaking her head as she remembered what Bisca had said earlier on this point.

When she spoke, Bisca’s reply to Anna’s tease showed that Mira’s understanding was spot on. “It means Alzack better step up his game to keep that place. I’m not saying I’m interested in Ranma either. Like Mira said, one meeting certainly isn’t enough for that, but it definitely gave me a taste of what dating is supposed to be like.” Bisca replied.

“I’d definitely like to see them again,” Mira said. This was something which, again, all three Fairy Tail mages could agree with.

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma had to say that he was enjoying this second trip into Fiore far more than he had enjoyed the first one. For one thing, there was an utter lack of demons attempting to kill him or anyone else, though that was subject to change thanks to his current mission. For another, the roads in this area of the most magically advanced kingdom of Ishgar were much better than the ones he had seen previously. The scenery was also nice too, with rolling hills, long fields of grass, farmland, and, further inland, even bigger hills. There were only scattered examples of the forests that Ranma had seen the first time he was in this country.

*The company last night was also really nice too. Mira was fun and some of her stories were hilarious. Bisca was a great conversationalist, and, from what I saw of her, Anna was really nice too. Laxus never mentioned them except for Mira and Erza in his letters, the ass, but I suppose that makes sense given his general attitude. The weather, now, that could be better,* Ranma finished irritably, staring up at the cloudy sky.

It had yet to rain today, but Ranma was glumly certain that it probably would at some point. It only remained to be seen whether that would happen before or after his business at Quattro Cerberus was done.

To one side Wendy walked beside him, with Carla perched on her head. The little Exceed’s weight was next to nothing, certainly nothing that Wendy would notice after having been trained by Ranma for so long. Carla was currently discussing points of Fiore that she had seen while she was with Laxus, as well as other places that she had seen when in the company of Lisanna, Natsu, and Happy.

“Are you sure you don't miss that, what do you call him, ‘damn fool tomcat?’ You certainly mention him often enough,” Ranma teased.

“Of course not,” Carla answered promptly and much more calmly than Ranma had hoped. “He figures prominently in my stories of Fairy Tail because he always butted his way into whatever I was doing if he could. It has nothing to do with my own personal preferences.”

Ranma snorted and thought that was an easy excuse. He had a theory that Carla might be what had been called a tsundere back in his old dimension. Considering Akane and, though he didn’t want to admit it, Ranma himself had acted in such a manner a lot before coming here, he thought he could spot such things. And he routinely took any opportunity to get under Carla’s skin. The training to get Ranma over the neko-ken had worked, and he considered Carla a buddy, but not a real friend. Their personalities were just too different.

Realizing this, Wendy spoke up quickly. She had become very used to getting between her Oni-chan and her second best friend. (After all, Ranma-nii was both her Oni-chan and her best friend.) “What do you think of Fiore, Oni-chan?”

“Hmmm… I’m still undecided. It's a nice enough country if you're just describing it physically. There aren’t nearly as many bandits, there’s a lot more people than most other countries we’ve been in, and I like what I’ve seen of them. But some of the things I've heard about the magic council here are beyond stupid,” Ranma said.

*Actually, that is putting it mildly,* Ranma thought, shaking his head as he remembered what the king of Seven had told him. He had apparently been against the idea of Seven and Fiore’s magic councils joining together, and his concerns had proved valid. The magic council of Fiore and Seven was moribund, egotistical, and run by individuals whose understanding of bureaucracy was quite high, with their understanding of morality in inverse proportion to this.

Ranma would never put it like that himself, but that was almost word for word whatMeredrain had said. “And their own king refuses to do anything about it! He just gives them free reign!” Meredrain had raged. “As if he couldn't be bothered to rule his own nation!”

Ranma knew that was going a little too far. As far as he could tell, the Kingdom of Fiore was being run very well on the nonmagical side of things. It had a lot of steam trains as well as magical ones. Perhaps not as many as in Seven or Stella with its short ranged haulers, but they certainly serviced as much of the country as in Seven. Their roads were good and their people seemed to have enough money to get by. There was even a free press, with far more magazines and newspapers than Ranma had seen anywhere but in Pergrande the last time he was there. Their economy looked good from what he could tell, and there weren’t nearly as many bandits as he'd run into elsewhere, as he’d said. Although Ranma was uncertain if that last was because the king kept the peace, or whether the various Magic Guilds did.

But that was the crux of the matter: as nice a country as it seemed, Fiore had the greatest number of guilds anywhere. Some of them were small, acting much like guilds did in Seven, Stella, or Joya. Others, however, were far larger and stronger, almost independent of the Council in many ways, and were famous, the face of magic to the rest of the country, even all of Ishgar. And the way some of them acted sometimes left a lot to be desired.

Because of that, Fiore produced more Dark Guilds than any two other countries combined. This was especially true during the past two years, and it was a real problem because the Dark Guilds were continuing to become more organized throughout Ishgar. That was something no one wanted to see, but Ranma had been hearing mutterings of something called the Balam Alliance for a little over six months from both his own wanderings and the various intelligence sources he could access thanks to his Ranger status.

The Balam Alliance was composed of the three most powerful Dark Guilds, each of which had agreed to not act against one another, and each of which had dozens of smaller guilds working for them. The three names at the top included one name that Ranma had run into previously: Grimoire Heart. Ranma was uncertain how he’d rate their power levels, but they had to be pretty damn high.

*But they are operating across the entirety of Ishgar rather than just in Fiore,* Ranma reminded himself. *Don't blame Fiore’s Magic Council for that particular issue, cesspit of stupidity though it might be. Heh. Damn, but Meredrain has a way with words.*

A second later the trio crested a small rise in the land, only to stop and stare at the building set to one side of the road in the distance. Cocking his head to one side, Ranma mused aloud. “Okay, I'll admit that wasn't what I had thought their guild hall would look like.”

In the distance was a single story building, or at least it looked like a single story building. There were four large statues on its roof, and if they were hollow, Ranma had no way to tell from here. They were of large dogs with three heads each, each statue looking like a different breed of dog, glaring out into the distance in every direction. Other than that, the building was basically a square, a long, wide square, with numerous windows and doorways. It was also a riot of colors: black, red, dark orange, and brown predominantly, with splashes of white scattered throughout. Most of those spots were in the shape of posters, but Ranma couldn't be certain from this far away.

As they continued to move down the road at the easy jog Ranma had taught Wendy to take when they were in a hurry the two Dragon Slayers swiftly became aware of something else: from the building they could hear the sounds of something, some kind of music that reminded him of heavy metal. It was hard to tell what it was just yet.

Wendy blinked and stared at the building, shaking her head. “Even if Anna-san and the others hadn't told us I think I'd be able to tell that there were no girls in this guild. That place looks ugly!”

Ranma waved his hand back and forth. “The statues are pretty well done, but yeah, the colors and the rest of the building are a little shabby.”

“That's one word for it,” Carla said, scowling. “If the interior matches the exterior, this will not be a pleasant experience for any of us.”

Carla’s words proved prophetic as the noise being blared out from inside the building grew as they moved towards it, quickly getting to the point where it was an almost physical force to the two Dragon Slayers and the Exceed by the time they were fifty feet away from the front entrance. Wendy whimpered, holding her hands over her ears. “It's too loud! How can anyone hear themselves think in that!?”

“From what I remember of heavy metal I don't think thinking ever comes into it, Wendy. It's all about bringing out emotions. But this music is more about noise than anything else, I think,” Ranma said, finishing rather lamely. *Strange, I liked some heavy metal music before running into this cacophony. Huh, never thought I’d ever use the word cacophony n a sentence, but there you are.*

“I, I don't have to go in there with you do I?” Wendy asked, shrinking backwards. Carla too was in pain, but in her case she had pulled her ears down, clamping them in place with her hands, and thus was far more successful in blocking out the noise.

“I don't think you'd be allowed in,” Ranma said with a wan chuckle, pointing ahead to one of the signs. There were several little signs along the walking path towards the Guildhall from the road they had been traveling, and one of them said, ‘only wild women allowed.’ “You’re many things but you're not wild Wendy.”

“And I'm quite proud of that,” Carla said, sniffing haughtily. “Though you certainly never had anything to do with it.”

“That would hurt if it wasn't so true,” Ranma said with a chuckle, ruffling Wendy's hair affectionately. Carla had changed Wendy a little since joining them. She was much more prone to wearing dresses and was more open about preferring to read or sight-see than to train. But she still put up with the training and was no less likely to turn the other cheek if someone started a fight with her than she had been before. She would never be the sort to go looking for a fight, and Ranma’s attempt to teach her how to trash talk had crashed and burned, but she would certainly finish anything someone else started, which was more than enough for Ranma’s sense of propriety.

“I think you two should wait out here. I'll nip in, speak to the guild master, and we’ll move on.”

“An excellent suggestion,” Carla enthused, hopping up onto Wendy's head. “Come Wendy, we shall move back a ways and wait by those trees over there. That should be out of the blast radius.”

“What, you think this is going to go that bad?” Ranma asked, although he could easily see that happening too. *If that music is that loud out here, then it will be even louder in there, ugh…*

“Let us just say that I know quite a bit about Quattro Cerberus from my time with Laxus. We never ran into them, but he had a lot to say about their guild. They are almost as prone to combat amongst themselves as Fairy Tail. They also all have a dog theme, which I am not enthusiastic about.”

“You know you keep on saying that you Exceed are different from cats, but you keep on doing things that make me think you really are.” With that Ranma hopped away, dodging some Neko-Claws from Carla with ease as he moved towards the door.

He paused halfway there to grab up a gob of dirt and stuff it into his ears. He played with it for a few moments until it blocked out as much sound as possible. Then he pulled out his pipe and lit up some of the Dragon’s Breath. The odd weed helped him to center himself, and he kept it clamped within his mouth, breathing in for a second. Then, having girded himself appropriately, he opened the door quickly and moved into the dark, smoky interior.

Wendy laughed, reaching up and pulling Carla off her head to hold her in her arms as she moved back towards the trees. “Let's get a good seat, Carla. If you’re right about someone starting something, I'd like to have the best seat in the house.”

Inside the guild the noise was even worse than Ranma had feared, his makeshift protection failing quickly as he entered. *Oh my God, I think my ears are going to start bleeding if I stay here for very long!* he thought, looking around him at the dusky interior inside. It was like any rundown inn he'd ever been in, though there were more bars, multiple doors leading off everywhere, and signs that said ‘tequila drinkers here,’ ‘music enthusiasts here,’ and on the ceiling, ‘everyone get **wild**!’

The interior wasn’t nearly as crowded as he’d feared. There were about a dozen people in sight, with more visible through the various doorways. Half the people he saw were embroiled in a fight of some kind, while the others looked to simply be drinking and listening to the music, which seemed to emanate from somewhere to one side of the room, reverberating throughout the entire building.

Near the door was a man who Ranma first thought was a unconscious drunkard. But as Ranma stepped inside and the door closed behind him, the man opened his eyes, staring up at Ranma and gesturing him deeper inside. “You here to drop off a job?”

“No, I'm looking for information,” Ranma shouted to be heard over the booming music. “I’d like to speak to your guild master?”

The man burped loud and long, but Ranma could barely hear it over the noise of the crowd around the fight and the music, which was simply going on and on! It was fraying his nerve so badly Ranma wanted to just back away from this idea entirely, but he couldn’t. Ranma needed information, and the only way to get that quickly was to check in with the local guild.

“I'll get him for you. You can wait outside if you ain’t wild enough to deal with how we hang!” said the man, standing up and sneering at the mud Ranma had stuffed in his ears. Ranma could see that he was dressed like a punk rocker, complete with a choker, something that Rama saw on several of the others.

“I think you're confusing wild with just stupidly loud,” Ranma drawled, cracking his knuckles. Frankly the noise was getting to him so much, he was tempted to just start a fight in order to throw people around in hopes of stopping it.

The man glared at Ranma, gave him the finger, and then walked off deeper into the guildhall. “Follow me, smartass!”

Ranma frowned, but nodded and followed him through the guild. Occasionally they were jostled as they moved through two more, smaller rooms, but the first time that happened, Ranma clamped down on the guys beer stein so nothing could escape and then pushed him hard into several other people. By the time the irate man could turn around, Ranma and his guide were gone, disappearing deeper into the guild.

Eventually they reached a smaller room with yet another bar. There were only two people in the tiny room, though there was also a dedicated barman behind the bar. This barman, amongst all of the others, was the only one wearing a suit, and he looked actually dapper, dressed in a suit more befitting a high end restaurant than the rest of this place.

“Hey, boss,” his guide said, and one of the two men turned.

He was the smaller of the two, an older man. Ranma estimated that he was in his fifties or so, with thin shoulders and arms and little muscle mass to him. He too had a collar on, along with sunglasses for some reason, and a witch’s hat. But for all that he looked harmless, Ranma could tell via his ki sense that he was the most powerful man in this place.

His ki blazed in Ranma’s eyes, and in this dimension magic and ki were (oddly, to Ranma’s mind) pretty much the same thing, since everyone here was born with Ethernano within them. While only mages could build up their Ethernano enough to use, and it grew in very odd ways sometimes to that point, the fact remained that the more a person had, the stronger they were.

The other guy sitting there was probably the guild’s number two at the very least. He was a tall man, about an inch taller than Ranma's own frame, equally wide in the shoulders, and Ranma could tell that he had trained his body to a high degree. He was drinking from a jug of something, but he looked at Ranma with sober eyes, sizing him up in an instant. This guy was dangerous, Ranma could tell immediately.

“You wanted to see me for something?” Said the older guy. “The name's Goldmine, and I’m the guild master of this **wild** guild!”

When he said the word wild, everyone else in the guild somehow heard it over the music and shouted it back, making Ranma stiffen and shake his head at the addition to the loud background noise. “That's cool,” he said, forcing a calm he really didn't feel at the moment. “Anyway, I’m a bounty hunter from out in Bosco,” Ranma went on, lying easily, “and I was hired to look into a group of Dark Guild members called Eisenwald. One of their members in particular is of interest to Queen Rose. He apparently has a power that can allow him to somehow break old magical protections. He looks like this…”

With that Ranma pulled a sketch he'd had made throughout this mission of the mage he was trying to trail. On it was a young man of medium height with what Ranma would describe as a pineapple head haircut.

“What's a bounty hunter out of Bosco doing hunting a guild from Fiore? How is that even legal?” Goldmine asked, looking from Ranma to the sketch.

“They crossed our border first,” Ranma said, still lying through his teeth. “Beyond that you'd have to take it up with your king, as he gave my queen permission for this mission.”

Goldmine smirked, pulling down his glasses to look at Ranma over them for a moment, and Ranma got the feeling that he could see right through him, but gave nothing away. The old guy probably knew he was lying at least in part, but Ranma doubted he could see the truth and, further, doubted he’d care. And if Ranma really did have to admit to being a Ranger, well, the old guy had to have some kind of office around here where they could talk in private, right?  *I’m sure as hell not going to spout it out in public like this.*

“What you're asking is for us to pass on information to you from our own sources in the area? Gotta tell you, we’re too **wild** to keep a list of contacts like that,” Goldmine said, and Ranma once again flinched at the wave of sound that came from the rest of the guild at the word wild. Even in this smaller, personal bar the sheer noise of the guild was like a physical force. “Still, do you have a direction he was going? We can point you in the right direction to get ahead of him if so, though he didn’t pass the guild on the main road. We’d have spotted him if he had.”

Ranma nodded and told them he had heard that the mage had seemingly been traveling east and south before he had lost the trail.

At that Goldmine pulled out a map from behind the bar, slamming it down on the top of the bar. “Okay, we’re here,” he said, pointing to a big W on the map superimposed on the image of a four headed dog. “There’re only a few ways through the area unless he's going cross-country. But even then he’ll have to pass through this town or go way out of his way up into the boonies here,” he said, tapping a series of rolling hill marks on the map. “It might look like hills on a map, but that's mostly rough broken terrain and is the home of a lot of **wild** animals.”

Again there was a blast of sound from rest of the guild, and Ranma growled low in his throat, his patience wearing thin and a dull headache starting up in his head. Still, he kept control of his temper. He wasn't going to be the first one to start something even with the noise eating at his self-control. “All right. So, if he hasn’t passed on the main road here, that makes sense,” he said aloud. “And I get there by going southeast, right?”

“That’s right, but that'll take you through some **wild** terrain too. You have to be on the watch, but I'll admit that probably cutting through there is faster than taking the roads,” Goldmine said.

Ranma knew now that the guy was trolling him. *Or he’s addicted to the word wild, either or.* But with the end in sight, he simply nodded, thanked Goldmine, and turned, only to feel a large hand smack him on the back.

“Now don't go off that quickly!” said the man that Ranma had pegged as a martial artist. “Surely your mission’s not so important you can't take a drink!”

“Actually, it probably is,” Ranma said smiling thinly and waving the man off. “Besides, I've got some friends waiting outside.”

Ranma was interrupted at that point by a beer stein flying through the hall towards him from the fight that had broken out in the main room. He ducked but didn't see the man behind him grab it out of the air and began to chug it right behind him. He did, however, feel it when the man spat it out, drenching the back of Ranma’s head with the sticky and of course cold drink.

“What the hell! Rooster, I thought I told you not to bring that… Homegrown… Swill here…” the man said, stuttering to a halt as did everyone else in sight as they became aware of the fact that Ranma had just changed into a girl.

Goldmine whistled, staring at the redhead. “Now that's an interesting trick, and one that’ll make you real popular with certain people, I’ve no doubt. But which body’s your real one?”

“The one you first saw,” Ranma said, growling as she wiped at the back of her head.

As he was doing this the man reached over and grabbed one of her breasts, squeezing it. “Holy shit, they’re real!”

That was as far as he got before a haymaker slammed into the side of his head and hurled him away. “All right, assholes!” Ranma growled, cracking her knuckles. “You just broke my last nerve!”

“You wanna go, bitch!” said more than one voice, as more of the guild crowded into the small room.

They all attempted to glare at her, But Ranma simply smirked, giving them all the finger. “You're the ones who started this, so don’t complain when I kick all your asses!”

At that point the man he’d hit came back with a flying kick, gleefully shouting, “So you really do have a wild side! The name’s Bacchus, babe. You’ll be screaming it soon enough!”

Ranma ducked under the kick, then headbutted upwards, aiming towards the guy’s balls, but Bacchus dodged at the last instant, backing away slightly as more men came forward racing towards Ranma, howling what was obviously the catchphrase of the guild and their battle cry. **“Wild!”**

Ranma, however, simply smacked them all aside, bringing her arm up quickly to block a blow from Bacchus, then jumping back as the man followed up with a round house kick. *Fast and some decent training, a palm strike style,* Ranma thought, pushing an open palm strike to one side and then tapping it upward before launching a punch of her own, pulling back when she saw Bacchus was about to catch his punch.

That palm that he would’ve used was glowing white with magical energy, the purpose of which Ranma had no way of knowing. She found out a moment later, however, as the man thrust forward with the same palm. Ranma dodged it, but the blow struck the outer wall of the guildhall. The entire wall from one side of the room to the other exploded outwards form the force of it.

”Hikasho,” Ranma said with a nod, dodging still more punches from Bacchus while taking out two more of the guild’s mages. They had just run in and tried to tackle her rather than use any magic, which Ranma thought was rather stupid. “But there’s a problem with that kind of style.”

So saying, Ranma leaped over the next series of strikes and then, just as Bacchus was thinking she was going to go for a shot to the head, flipped underneath a blow, lashing out with a kick that took Bacchus in the thigh. This unbalanced Bacchus just enough that he wasn’t able to dodge the follow on blow. “You can’t redirect your upper body very well, and its kicks are way too linear.”

Bacchus grunted in pain as he once more found himself airborne, this time smashing through an interior wall and into several of his guildmates. *Fuck, this guy can punch! I felt that even through my buzz.* Rolling along the ground he, watched as Ranma dealt with several more of his guildmates, not even being slowed at all. With a grin, he then launched himself back in, closing fast.

Busy with the rest of the guild and leery about Goldmine joining, in Ranma didn’t notice Bacchus coming until the other man was on him. A magical palm thrust nearly caught Ranma, but she dodged at the last second, letting the palm catch another one of the guild, hurling him out through the already broken wall. In reply, Ranma flipped around, bringing her leg down in an axe kick.

But Bacchus dodged it at the last second, and this time Ranma couldn’t dodge Bacchus’s own kick, not even having seen it coming since Bacchus had just completely shifted his style. Now his entire hand back and palm were glowing, along with his feet. The magic infused kick caught Ranma in the side, hurling her through multiple interior walls until she smashed into a large magical device of some kind.

Almost instantly the music warbled to a halt, and Ranma, despite finding herself sitting in glass and metal rubble, smiled widely. The music was gone, and it was like a weight had been removed from Ranma’s mind. *There are some real downsides to this whole Dragon Slayer thing, beyond my own ki rejecting some of it.*

Shaking that thought out of her mind, she hopped up, grinning at the horde of Quattro Cerberus mages glaring at him. “Nice hit, but if ya think that was the end of this, you’ve got another think coming.”

“Awful cocky there considering I just floored you, babe,” Bacchus said before guzzling some more ale.

“Yep,” Ranma said, “because now I don't have to deal with that damn music any longer!” With that Ranma shot forward, a blow coming so fast and so swiftly that Bacchus couldn't even think of blocking. Ranma’s small fist embedded itself into Bacchus’s chest, hurling him backwards.

Continuing, Ranma blocked another blow from a guild member with thick arms and wider shoulders. She then used the momentum of a kick from someone else to leap into the air, kicking out as the other guild members began to join the fight.

From then on the redhead was always moving, never sitting still. She also stayed in the air, which seemed to confound several of the guild members. Bacchus, however, didn't mind it at all, taking to it easily and even leaping into the air occasionally to launch kicks at Ranma. Ranma analyzed Bacchus’s new style and discovered that he had mixed Hikasho with Drunken Fist. His kicks were immensely powerful, shattering the ground and anything else he hit, but Ranma’s durability was up to blocking or redirecting them.

The real threat came from Bacchus’s hands, which he used as cutting or thrusting weapons, and the hits from them hurt like hell. *Its sort of like fighting that guy from Alvarez again, only with more skill and a bit less speed. Thankfully, I’ve run into both his styles before, if not the magic he’s using.*

A series of Kachu Tenshin Amaguriken punches hurled several of the doggies away, allowing Ranma to touch down on the ground for just a second as Bacchus launched into a series of wild Drunken Master attacks. Bacchus had just a second to realize what was going to happen before Ranma had leaped up over one of his kicks and a boot caught him in the chin, hurling him up through the ceiling.

Grimacing and moving her shoulder where a chop had landed, Ranma looked over at Goldmine, who grinned at her, holding up his mug. “Don’t look at me. I’m just having fun watching this wild fight!”

Rolling her eyes, Ranma launched herself out onto the roof where Bacchus was waiting. The man’s endurance wasn’t quite up to the madman from Alvarez, but it was still very high. He kicked out just at the right time to catch Ranma as she hopped up, catching Ranma in the back and hurling her into and through the top of one of the large dog statues.

He followed up quickly, only for Ranma to grab his hands, seeming none the worse for wear. Bacchus clenched his body and tried to lower his center of gravity, but still found himself airborne when Ranma lifted up and mule kicked him in the chest, hurling him once more into the air.

Ranma leaped after him, and from then on the battle became extremely one sided. Bacchus, for all his decent durability and ability to adapt, was no match for Ranma in the air. His blows seldom landed at all, and when they did, their momentum became Ranma’s plaything. In return Ranma’s blows got through Bacchus’s defenses more often as the fight continued. Eventually Bacchus began to lose consciousness form the pain.

“You’re good, but when you changed to Drunken Master you sacrificed tactics to make yourself as random as possible. That makes you vulnerable to someone who can follow your movements,” Ranma said, sounding almost clinical despite the manic grin she was wearing. “Damn good fight despite that, though.”

“Heh, every rose has its thorns, I suppose,” Bacchus said, grinning at the redhead as she once more flipped up into the air above him, staring up at her through the blood splattering his face. “It’s been wild, babe!”

“And don’t call me babe!” Ranma roared, bringing her clenching fists down on his back. Bacchus was slammed down toward the guild, smashing into it with all the impetus of a rock thrown by a trebuchet. This and the damage done to it earlier caused more than half the building to collapse in on itself with a rumble.

Standing over the wreckage of the guild, Ranma tossed Bacchus aside and glared at Goldmine, who had watched and simply laughed as all this went down, even following the two outside. Indeed, the old man was now perched on one of the three still intact statues, having watched the last few moments of the fight with interest. “What about you? You want to go too?”

To her surprise, Goldmine just laughed, shaking his head. “Nah, the place was due for renovation, and Bacchus needed his ego burst for him. This’ll do him good in the long run. Though I'd like to offer you a place in the guild! You just proved you’re the most wild lady akkk!” He dodged the thrown beer mug easily. “All right, you just have shown that you'd fit right in here, okay?”

“Yeah, how about no,” Ranma said shaking her head and moving away, growling under her breath as she felt the sticky gunk of the numerous drinks that had hit her during the fight. “I need a damn shower!” Sighing, she pulled out a small flask and heated it as she walked, pouring it over her head to change back.

Behind him Goldmine smirked, shaking his head as he stared down into the hole Bacchus’s body had made. “So, that’s the guy Makky said has had such an influence over Laxus. Have to say I can see it now, and why Makky was always confused about Ranma’s gender too. Even for a mage, that whole body change is something weird to contemplate.”

Nearby, Wendy looked at Ranma as he came up to them, shaking his once again wet hair out, happy to have at least started on wiping off the ale. “I take it negotiations broke down,” Carla drawled, while Wendy finished chewing the popcorn she had been eating while watching the fight between her Oni-chan and the other strong mage.

“Yeah, ya might say that,” Ranma said, looking up at them. “Still, I got the information first. Hop on, Wendy, and you too, Carla. We’re going to **run** now.”

**OOOOOOO**

Mirajane sighed as she moved through the guild, slamming down beer bottles here and there while smacking aside any thrown steins with ease whenever they came close, oftentimes returning them directly to their owners.  *How do my sisters keep talking me into helping them here? Manning the bar, signing people up for their missions, fine. I like to keep track of everyone just in case they run into trouble. But this whole barmaid thing? That is so much more their scene than mine it’s not even funny.*

“Ne, Mirajane, would you like to go on a date with me?” said a middle-aged man with dirty blonde hair and a long pipe in his hands.

“Ah, that’s no fair!” shouted a much younger man. “Don’t date him, Mira; date me!”

“Neither of you have the balls to go out with me anyway! Besides you've got a wife to boot, Wakaba!” Mira said, using a branch of Transformation magic to shift her face for a moment into that of the man’s wife.

“AH, no!!! Please don't do that!” Wakaba shouted back as the man and his ridiculous pompadour retreated rapidly.

Mira growled, shifting back her face back to normal as she moved towards the bar. “As if I’d go out with anyone so old or weak anyway!” she shot back over her shoulder, eliciting much laughter and many groans from the crowd.

She paused for a second with a grin on her face as she watched Natsu and Gray fighting. Thankfully, they were following the now-reinforced ‘no magic allowed’ rule, which was enforced by all of the S-class mages on hand. That might only be Mira at the moment, but that was more than enough of a threat for these two, given how often she'd beaten them down when they were younger.

*With as destructive as these two can be, that’s a damn good thing. They aren’t* *S-class just yet: Gray doesn’t have the endurance or striking power, and Natsu lacks the magical versatility necessary. But they are for sure going to be nominated this year given how much stronger they’ve gotten over the years. I'm proud of them, heh, though I’d never say it to their faces.*

Sitting behind the guild’s bar, she leaned back and looked around the guild, noting where Cana was hugging a large beer barrel like a lover, rubbing her cheek against it, which was disturbing now that Mirajane thought about it. Nab, the useless putz, was still over by the guild's message board, searching for the perfect job as he had been since joining up a few months back. There was her brother, berating Vijeeter about something, the mime mage taking it docilely, an acknowledgment of guilt perhaps.

Here and there were others sticking out from the crowd, though in here that wasn't saying much. Every Fairy Tail mage could stick out from the crowd. *And I wouldn't have it any other way,* she thought, her gaze shifting over to her two sisters.

Anna and Lisanna were laughing and joking with one another and the crowd as they moved around their duties, the dual darling bargirls of the guild. As she watched they linked arms, spinning in place wildly so fast they became a blur during which Lisanna transformed her clothing into the same kind that Anna was wearing.

“There,” Anna said shouting at one of the other young men in the guild. “If you want to date me, pick who is who here!” she said putting her arm around the other girl.

Mira laughed while Natsu looked up, growling angrily as he hurled Gray to one side and charged like a bull into the rest of the guild. Natsu might not know what dating was or why girls should be interesting to him, but he still didn't like the idea of anyone sniffing around either of the Strauss twins.

*As if he’s got anything to worry about. They always do this trick, and none of them have guessed right or can even tell them apart at all unless Anna’s posing for a magazine or Lisanna’s using her magic.* Anna, of course, had no magic of her own, but she was slightly more certain of her body and looks than Lisanna and had been the one to start modeling, even dragging Mira into it. That wasn’t to say Mira regretted it. She loved modeling almost as much as she liked the fights she sometimes got into with Jenny or Erza. But there was no denying that her siblings were both better people persons than Mira.

In one of the back corners Mira could make out their newest member, Lucy, sitting and talking to Levy. The two of them had become fast friends since Lucy had shown up with Natsu, fresh from helping Natsu take out a slaving ring. Apparently Lucy was a writer of some kind, and Levy was helping edit her work, or something like that, anyway.

*Thank God Erza wasn't around when we heard about that ass, Bora. She would've flipped her freaking lid! A slaving ring operating like that so close to Magnolia? The damage Natsu did to Crocus would’ve seemed a baby’s temper tantrum in comparison.*

Since then Lucy had done two more jobs with Natsu and Lisanna. The girl had impressed both of them apparently. She was tough, had some combat ability on her own, even though her magic didn't loan itself to that, was a wicked whip user, and had not one but four of the most powerful Zodiac keys in existence.

“Hey,” said a voice, bringing Mirajane's attention to the bar in front of her as Bisca sat down at the bar.

“How’re you doing, Bisca?” Mirajane asked with a smile, then looked at Bisca more closely, seeing her glaring over her shoulder towards Alzack. “Oh dear, again?”

“I'm almost tempted to actually tell him about the two of us flirting with Ranma. Maybe thinking that he might have some competition would convince him to man up!” Bisca said, shaking her head. “I mean, it is sweet how he stammers and blushes, and okay, I’ll admit I’ve got the same kind of problem, but we've been dancing around one another for months now! Can’t he just ask me out on a date?”

“Couldn’t you ask him out on a date?” Mira asked.

“I haven't tried,” Bisca said sighing. “And you know why: I wanted him to be the one to say it. Still, if he can't get up the composure to ask me out by this weekend, I'll ask him out Saturday. …I think I can at least get the words out…” she said, sounding a little less certain as she finished.

Mirajane smiled, knowing Bisca had just as many problems speaking to Alzack, her longtime teammate, about the romance between them as he did to her. Mirajane thought it cute, but also found it rather telling that when it came down to it, Bisca hadn't had any problems with flirting with Ranma when they met a few days ago, whatever the real reason behind it. *Maybe it is just the emotional thing that's bothering them, or maybe deep down neither wants to mess up their friendship?*

“By the way, did you tell Laxus and the others we met up with them?” Bisca asked.

“Laxus, yes; the others, no. I think Anna told Lisanna, but neither of them have mentioned anything about having seen Carla to the others. You know how Happy would get. He’d drag Natsu out of here trying to hunt Carla down again at the mere rumor she was nearby. He’d be like Natsu is around even a hint of Igneel’s presence.”

“Which doesn't even consider the fact that Ranma and Wendy were both Dragon Slayers,” Bisca said with a nod.

The fact that Laxus’s longtime friend had been a Dragon Slayer had come out after Ranma had helped Laxus save the Strauss siblings. Natsu had been all set to try and hunt him or her down, but Laxus had also explained that Ranma's caretaker had died of old age and had never told him anything about any other dragons. That had depressed Natsu at the time, but had also calmed him down. Still, every now and then, for a few weeks afterwards, Natsu could be found trying to boil away the ocean as he shouted, “The minute I see this Ranma guy I'm going to challenge him! He's gotta be tough!”

“That is so Natsu it's not even funny,” Bisca said with a sigh. “Why are all the boys in this guild idiots?”

“Since that applies to my own brother, I prefer the phrase driven,” Mira said with a laugh. “I think the only two I would label as real idiots, besides the old morons who keep on trying to flirt with me, anyway,” she said, glaring to one side and sending Macao backing rapidly away from the bar, “are the two from team Shadow Gear.”

Ironically, those two were the most normal men in their age group in the guild. But when it came to girls, they had about as much intelligence as they did when it came to combat: that is, none at all. They had been chasing after Levy for more than a few years since they had joined the guild, but Levy just saw them as really good friends and had gone out of her way to show this numerous times.

“I have to wonder, though,” Bisca said, looking around conspiratorially and then leaning in, her breasts pressing down into the top of the bar as she did. “I have to wonder if and how Lucy is going to join NAL.”

This was the term the other girls had come up with for the odd-seeming three-way relationship between Lisanna, Anna, and Natsu. Because, as one of the other girls had put it, “Both Anna and Lisanna want Natsu to nail them.’” Whether it was a real relationship or if Natsu just enjoyed hanging out with them, not knowing that ‘mommys and daddys’ did things together, was up in the air.

“Given the amount of time Natsu's been spending around her, I wouldn't be surprised. I'd be a little disturbed, but not surprised,” Bisca drawled.

“Ha! You just don't get it, do you?” Cana said, moving over to sit by them, flopping down into the bar stool and slamming a large mug of beer down as well. “Mira, refuel me!” With that Cana smirked, leaning toward Bisca and whispering, not that she had to given the amount of background noise. “It's all about sexual magnetism.”

“You’re drunk,” Mira said bluntly, but she nevertheless refilled the brown haired girl’s stein. “Still, let’s hear your latest crackpot theory.”

“Okay, work with me here. Laxus is about halfway to being as much a womanizer as Loki, right? Only difference is that he goes out with one girl at a time, and for longer, okay? Yet, with his personality, he has to have something else going for him besides his reputation and magical power since most of the girls he’s gone out with were not fangirls, right?”

Cana didn’t wait for her listeners to nod before going on. “So there has to be some other reason for him being able to pull in all of those girls. And it just can’t be his personality!”

“You’ve already mentioned his personality,” Mira objected, though she was amused with where this could possibly be going.

“Since it’s so bad it bears repeating. But that just leaves either money or pheromones. Now Laxus is rich, but none of his girlfriends have ever been gold diggers either, as far as I know. But pheromones? Well, Dragons are supposed to be like animals, right, and animals find mates via scent. So while Natsu’s mind might not be smart enough to realize he’s a pole to their hole, his body is giving out pheromones to attract mates!”

Cana stopped, feeling the deadpan looks the other two girls were giving her. Mira, in particular, shook her head. “Please, I grew up in this guild right next to you, Cana. There’s no way you’re going to shock me with anything you say.”

“Heh, one of these days I will shock you, Mira. I promise! Still, that was one theory. My other is that maybe Anna and Lisanna are just not Natsu's type! Maybe he looks for a girl with a bit more boom to her bust! And let’s face it, Lucy's got a fantastic bust.”

Both Bisca and Mira had admit that was certainly true, if only because of how much Lucy unconsciously flaunted her breast. Lucy was at least a size, maybe more like a size and a half, larger than Mira, and Mira knew she had been the bustiest girl in the guild before Lucy had joined. Although given how Erza went around wearing armor all the time, that wasn’t as certain as Mira would have liked in relation to her old rival. Bisca and Cana were close, but not that close. **{check EMAIL!!!}**

“Then again,” Cana went on, ignoring the looks the other two women were giving one another. “I'm still not certain if Natsu, Anna, and Lisanna are in a relationship at all. It's more like Anna and Lisanna have staked their claim in him, and him not really quite understanding what's going on. He has hit puberty, right?” she asked, looking over at Mira.

“Why the hell’re you looking at me like that?” Mira said, giving the other girl the finger, causing her to laugh.

The three of them looked over as the door to the guild opened, and, to Bisca and Mira’s surprise, they saw Wendy standing there. She looked around hesitantly, then ducked, gasping, as a stein of beer slammed into the door above her head. She glared angrily around, then huffed and moved inside, flouncing towards the bar before brightening as she saw who was sitting there.

As she did, she passed the fight going on between Natsu and Gray, and Natsu paused, sniffing the air for a moment, which let Gray get in a punch to his face. This sent Natsu into Elfman, who joined the fight with a roar of, “A real man talks with his fists!”

“That's what you get for not paying attention, flame brain!” Gray laughed. For once he actually had pants on, though how long that happy state of affairs would last was anyone’s guess.

Behind Wendy came Carla, who stared around her in disdain. “It seems this bunch of riffraff haven’t changed much. What a pity.”

Luckily, Happy was nowhere to be seen at the moment, having headed out to go fish that morning after having been on a job with Natsu, Lisanna, and Lucy. He apparently hadn’t had any fish while on the job and so had determined to fish the day away.

“Wendy,” Mira said, hopping up over the bar like it was a high jump, even her skirt clearing the top of it easily. By the time she landed the blue haired girl had reached the bar and was smiling up at Mira and Bisca. Anna had also spotted Wendy and Carla by this time, and she and Lisanna moved through the crowd to greet her. Slowly, said crowd began to realize that something new was happening, and the fights here and there and the discussions began to die down as they recognized Carla. There wasn’t much uproar about her arrival, though, given that Carla had only really been close with Lisanna, Happy, and, more distantly, Laxus, Evergreen, and Natsu.

“How are you doing, Wendy?” asked Mira, going down to one knee and shaking her hand. “And where is that Oni-chan of yours?”

Wendy smiled, pointing back over her shoulder towards the door. “Ranma-nii’s out buying supplies, though hopefully we won't need to use them just yet. We’re actually here to ask a question of a Ms. Erza Scarlet.”

“Really?” Mira asked, frowning. “What about? I'm afraid Erza’s not here yet. But she should be back any day now from her last job if it’s important. It was a simple monster extermination gig, nothing big for her.”

“And do you want anything to drink?” Lisanna asked, smiling brightly down at the little girl. *She is just sooo cute! Anna was right about that. You just want to cuddle with her!*

Nodding at that, Wendy gestured for Carla to reply while she looked around, visibly restraining herself from doing something. What that was, Mira couldn’t tell, but by the smug smile on Carla’s face it must have been something the little prim pussy had been working on with Wendy for a while.

“We found the trail of the group of dark mages that we were trying to find, only to lose them again in a town about a day and a half south of here. They split up again, you see, and the one we were most interested in went off on his own. We weren't able to distinguish his scent from the crowd, and no one was able to tell us in what direction he went, so we…pretty much lost the trail again. However, the barman at the bar they were all staying at said that they had been talking about some kind of plan and had been overheard by a redhead. I recognized his description of Erza right away, of course.” Carla explained.

“So we came here hoping to meet her,” Wendy finished, smiling. “I've also heard stories about Erza-san, and about you, Ms. Mira, from the writings that Uncle Laxus sends Oni-chan.”

“**Uncle** Laxus?” Cana said, sputtering a little, as did more than a few of the other nearby listeners. It was true that Laxus had mellowed since he was younger, but he still believed that strength was more important than anything else and was never going to be exactly soft or approachable.

“Well, he is a friend of Oni-chan’s,” Wendy said with a shrug, not seeing the reason for their astonishment.

She recoiled a second later as Natsu thrust his face close to hers, sniffing hard and ignoring Anna and Lisanna’s shouts of shock. “You've got an interesting scent. It’s almost like mAGGH!”

“Tenryu no Tekken! (Sky Dragon’s Fist)” That was as far as he got before Wendy’s little fist caught him right in the stomach with all the power of her Dragon Slayer magic behind it, hurling him backwards to crash through several, thankfully empty, tables. “No sniffing a lady!” Wendy shouted angrily as the rest of the Guild looked on in shock at one of their strongest members being floored by a little girl. “It's rude.”

“HEHEHE!” Mira cackled, then reached down and gently picked the girl up, standing her on the bar behind her. Wendy immediately seemed to like it, calming down for some reason while Carla pawed her face with one hand. “Ladies and gentlemen, may I present Wendy Marvell the Sky Dragon Slayer and the little girl who saved Anna's life and helped me and my other siblings get over our injuries from facing the Beast!”

For a moment there was still silence, then a roar or approval from the gathered mages, even Lucy and the others who had joined the guild since that incident joining in. They were all drowned out by Elman’s bellow of, “What a man!!!”

“Ano, er, I’m a girl, though,” Wendy muttered, blushing hotly, looking down at her feet, and kicking the bar stool while Carla floated beside her.

Being closest, Lucy came over second, holding her hand out to the little girl. “I’m Lucy, a new girl here. How do you do? So you use healing magic?”

“Healing magic, enchantments, and Sky Dragon Slayer magic mostly,” Wendy said with a smile, shaking the girl’s hands and trying not to feel envious of her bust line. *Remember what Carla said. I'm only twelve; I’ll grow in the future.*

Loki came over a second later came over, bowing grandly to the young lady. “If it's true that you saved one of the jewels of the Guild, then we owe you a tremendous debt. Our lives would be far darker without Anna and Lisanna in it, isn't that right, guys?” he said, moving up towards them only to stop and stare at Lucy and then from her down to her belt, where numerous keys rested. He backed away rapidly. “Wait! Lucy, you're a celestial mage!”

“Yes,” Lucy said, turning away from Wendy to look at him with the best deadpan look Wendy had ever seen. “That's not exactly a secret, you know.”

“I'm afraid I have to cut our relationship short, my dear!” he shouted, turning away and moving towards the door.

“What relationship?” Lucy asked, still deadpan, causing Wendy to giggle.

“He's new too, isn't he?” Carla mused.

“He joined a few months after you left,” Lisanna supplied, looking down at her old friend fondly and reaching down to rub her head. “And how have you been?”

“I have been doing as well as could be expected. I'll admit that travel doesn't really suit me, but Ranma at least understands that when a lady travels she must travel in some style. And though I hate to admit it, he does look after Wendy about as well as a male could be expected, though, saying that, he is only a part-time male,” Carla said with a wicked chuckle. “I think it’s his female side that allows him to look after her at all.”

“I got lost there,” Lisanna said, exchanging a confused glanced with Lucy.

“You'd have to see it to believe it,” Carla said with a shake of her head. Surprising everyone else, Bisca and Mira both nodded agreement.

Elfman at that point barged in, grasping Wendy in a crushing hug. Or what most assumed was a crushing hug. Wendy simply took it, gasping only once. She was a lot stronger than she looked.

What actually irritated her was Elfman bellowing in her ear, though the words he spoke negated that. “Thank you for saving my sister!”

“Erm, it’s all right. I um, I was only there because my oni-chan was, and it was him who really saved you all, him and Uncle Laxus,” Wendy said, not even wheezing under Elfman’s bear hug, something Mira and Cana both noticed. She was instead staring around and then up at the top of his head. “But could I ask for a favor?”

“Of course!” Elfman bellowed back. “If it is within my manly power I will grant it!”

“Can I perch on your head?” Wendy asked, her eyes sparkling.

“Eh?” Elfman blinked, as did everyone else.

Believing that to be close enough to consent, Wendy wriggled up out of Elfman’s grip, then flipped herself up further to land feet first on top of his head, sighing happily as she perched there, looking around at the interior of the guild. “Mmmhm, high places are best places.”

At that point Natsu burst out from the wreckage of the two tables he had hit after Wendy punched him, hurling them away as he marched forward, pointing at her excitedly. “You, girl, fight me!”

It had not been a good few moments for Natsu, and it wasn’t going to get any better, because just as he made that declaration the doors to the Guild Hall opened once more, and Ranma entered. “Ohohohoh,” he said, cracking his knuckles. “Is someone trying to pick a fight with my little sister?”

“Fine, then! I'll fight you first!” Natsu shouted, turning and facing him while most of the rest of the guild winced. Mira, on the other hand, simply cackled, knowing precisely what was going to happen, as Bisca muttered short prayer for Natsu’s soul.

Ranma cocked his head thoughtfully, then shook it. “Nah. Come to think of it, you don't look worth my time.” With that he turned away, his eyes brightening as he noted Mira, Bisca, and Anna. “Hey, girls,” he said, waving at them and moving in that direction. “Wendy, I…”

At that point Natsu had had enough of being ignored and raced forward. “Karyu no Tekken (Fire Dragon’s Fist)” he shouted, but Ranma simply sidestepped Natsu, then hammered his elbow backwards into Natsu so fast that it looked as if he had gone from one position to another via teleportation rather than actually moving. Natsu once more found himself in the air and flying backwards, smashing into and through the door.

But there was no corresponding thump as he landed, and Ranma turned quizzically to look through the doorway. A few seconds later Erza Scarlett strode over the rubble of the door, having grabbed Natsu out from the air with one hand. She was holding him upside down for the moment. “Natsu,” she growled. “What have I told you about starting fights with magic and the Guild!”

“Not to,” Natsu whimpered. “Please don't hurt me!”

“No excuses!” Before he could finish, Erza had hurled him back through the doors to crash once more into the back of the Guild Hall. She then stalked forward, glaring around her. Behind her, through the trashed doorway, could be seen a massive horn, which had been gilded with gold and other things on a large cart.

“Now then! During my travels, I, of course, kept abreast of what my guild members were doing. And while the master may have forgiven you, I will not have you sullying the name of Fairy Tail. Vijeeter…”

“Damn,” Ranma muttered, nodding his head towards the redhead as she launched into a full diatribe. “She really does look sort of like my female form, doesn’t she?” he said as an aside to Mira and Bisca while Erza laid down the law. “And why the heck is she acting like some kind of hall monitor?”

“She does, but she might be a little bit bustier than you,” Mira said clinically, ignoring the last question for now. While she didn’t like Erza’s uptight attitude, she had to admit that a lot of the people in the guild needed it. “It’s hard to tell under that armor of hers, though.”

Ranma shrugged. “Not like it's anything I'm interested in.”

“Oh, so you're not…interested?” Mira said, sliding up to him and lightly pressing into his side.

“That's not what I meant, and you know it,” Ranma said, pushing back against the girl.

Elsewhere, Anna and Lisanna exchanged a glance and a smirk. “See what I mean?” Anna whispered to her twin.

“I know! OMG, a guy who isn't scared of her, is strong in magic, and isn't a smarmy ass? And one she's interested in too? This could be really interesting,” Lisanna replied with a giggle.

Not liking how close his dear older sister was getting to this newcomer, Elfman decided to step in then, though he didn’t do so violently, as Cana, who was also watching, had expected. He simply pulled Ranma into a hug, trying his hardest to squeeze the life out of him but finding it impossible. “I can’t thank you enough for helping to stop me when I had become the Beast! While it would have been more manly to control the demon within, I could never have lived with myself if my manly search for power had cost me my sisters! Now, meeting you, the only manly thing to do is pay you back however I can!”

“Heh. It’s all right, big guy.” Ranma said. Then, looking at Elfman’s serious expression, he realized that Elfman truly did feel the need to pay him back somehow. “But if you feel that way, I could use your help on a job I’m doing right now.”

Elfman stepped back, nodding seriously. “Name it!”

Finishing her diatribe against the rest of the Guild, Erza turned, looking at Rama thoughtfully, her eyes narrowing as if she was trying to remember something. “I'm sorry,” she said slowly, interrupting Ranma and Elfman’s discussion. “You look familiar, but you're not a member of the Guild. Might I ask what you're doing here?”

“Looking for you, actually, Erza Scarlet,” Ranma said with a smirk. “And I think we have run into each other a time or two. My name's Ranma.”

Erza’s eyes widened, then she marched forward and held out her hand. “Then I have to thank you,” she said softly. “Your attempt to rescue us from those slavers didn't work, but it was the bravest thing I'd ever seen, and it helped me build up enough bravery to make a break for it on my own later.”

At the same time she said that she was also fighting back a blush. She remembered seeing Ranma in Bosco and the compliment he had paid her. And she might have, kind of, developed a bit of a long distance crush on Ranma, given that and what Laxus had told her about him over the years.

“Then it at least served something. I wish I could've done more,” Ranma said, equally softly. “I always wish I could do more in moments like that.”

Wendy nodded firmly behind him. “We find a lot of those groups, slavers and kidnappers, and whenever we do we smash them good!” Though not a combative person, there were things that bothered Wendy quite a lot, and slavery was one of them, right up there with invading her personal space with intent to sniff. So if it meant taking out a slaving band, she'd willingly throw herself into any fight.

“Then you do good work,” Erza said, smiling happily up at her and holding a hand towards the younger girl as a way to fight off her blush still more. “But I don’t think we’ve been introduced.”

“This is my little sister, Wendy,” Ranma said, reaching up to touch Wendy's waist while she still stood on Elfman’s head, having balanced there throughout the large man’s bear hug to Ranma.  *I suppose I should be lucky that she hasn't tried to climb up onto that second-story area or flown up to one of the chandeliers*, Ranma thought.

“But actually, I'm not here jst to shoot the breeze. I'd love to, and, after my mission’s done, I'll definitely come straight back here to do that. I’d like to hear about your magic style and meet up with Laxus again. And maybe even speak to another Dragon Slayer when he’s not being an idiot. But right now, we have a bit of a mission.”

“A mission that brings you to see me?” Erza asked, nonplussed. She was also wincing, considering that Natsu had truly brought his current predicament, being unconscious in a corner, upon himself.

“Yep,” Ranma said. “Tell me, do you ever hear anyone talking about Eisenwald or the names Kagayama or Erigor recently?”

Erza became serious. “I have, though I have to ask why are you interested in them?”

“They were over in Bosco earlier this year; wrecked a few towns searching for some information apparently. Because of that, the Queen asked me to hunt them down. But I lost the trail several times,” Ranma said, shaking his head. “It took me too long to get to where they were the first time Queen Rose was informed of them, and then whenever I gained on them they split up or did something else to throw me off the damn trail.”

“I see. And you got my description from the bartender where I overheard them?” Erza asked after Ranma finished explaining. “That makes sense, and yes, I did hear them talk about their plans. I believe that they might be targeting the Guild Masters; I don't know how, exactly. They mentioned unsealing a weapon, and a lullaby, for some reason, but what those mean in conjunction, I have no idea.”

Ranma was about to explain, when Lucy interjected, her eyes wide. “Lullaby! That's an ancient weapon, some kind of spell that will activate and put everyone to sleep until they die. I read about that in a book years ago about, about Zeref…”

“Exactly,” Ranma said with a nod. “The life force that thing will drain will probably feed itself, allowing it to transform into a demon.”

There were gasps all around, while Mira simply nodded thoughtfully. “That makes sense and explains why you’re so focused on this mission. You did say that demons were your specialty. What are you, some kind of Queen’s Royal Demon Slayer?”

“Something like that, Mira,” Ranma said, touching a portion of his cloak and winking at her.

At this blatant invitation, Mira's eyes turned demonic as she activated a bit of her take over power, which allowed her to use the eyes she would have had if she had fully called upon the Satan’s Soul. This allowed her to peer through the tiny illusion that was hiding a piece of Ranma's cloak. There, acting as a broach, Mira saw an image of a leaf shaped device of intricate work and gasped.

Erza, too, surreptitiously took a look as well with her magic eye, which allowed her to see through illusions. Her eyes widened, and the two of them exchanged glances as Ranma had turned away, answering a question from someone else about the Lullaby.

“So, what do you say, big guy,” Ranma said, looking up at Elfman. “You in?”

“I don't know,” Erza said as the reverberations of Elfman's reply reached them from the far corners. “Do you really think that the three of us alone will be enough? I had intended to ask for both Gray and Natsu’s help on this myself.”

At that everyone looked to where Natsu lay and Gray stood. It was also at that point that the fact that Gray had stripped again registered on more than one person, and the Fairy girls all groaned, turning away as the men rolled their eyes.

But what sealed Gray’s fate was the fact he had just stripped in front of Wendy, of all people. “KYaaa!” Wendy screamed, turning away and holding her hands over her eyes.

“I see you haven’t beaten that dirty habit of yours, Gray! And in front of a young girl no less!” Carla shouted also turning away.

**Kapow!!!** Between one second and the next Ranma had crossed the intervening distance between him and Gray, and a punch had slammed into Gray’s chest hard enough to hurl him backwards to slam into the same wall Natsu was stuck in. He quickly joined his rival in the land of the unconscious, Ranma’s bellow of, “Don’t you dare show such shit to my little sister!” ringing in his ears.

“Three of us?” Ranma asked then, looking at Erza quizzically and seemingly ignoring what he had just done to the stripping pervert.

“Of course I will not allow you to take on this mission alone. And you surely aren’t thinking of taking young Wendy on such a mission.”

While a portion of Ranma bristled at the whole ‘not allow’ thing, he simply nodded. “You’re right about the no Wendy thing. She’s been growing like a weed lately, and the only thing we have that auto-sizes to fit is her Song Silk outfit, so she needs an entirely new wardrobe. I was going to ask Mira or one of the others to take her on a shopping trip, on my tab.”

Wendy nodded at that. They had talked about this, and since her panties were actually getting uncomfortably tight these days, she had gone along with it. It would also allow her to spend time around other mages, and girls at that, which she hadn’t been able to do for several years.

“Oooh, you tread dangerously, Ranma,” Mira teased. “Giving a few girls permission to use your credit to shop.”

“Heh, it would be if the magical card I’d give you wouldn’t keep track of all the purchases. I know Wendy’s sizes, so I’ll know when the things you buy won’t be going to her,” Ranma replied to Mira’s implication, a smirk on his face. “Besides, from what I’m seeing it’s not like any of you ladies need a wardrobe change. You’re perfect as you are.”

“Smooth, real smooth,” Mira said, fighting back a blush, while more than one of the other girls there did the same, including Erza, who wondered if he meant her too given the armor she wore continuously. “Where’d you learn to trot out lines like that, and can we send some of the pigs in this guild there?”

“Heh, um, you probably could if you could send them to Appledore. As for the line, meh. It’d only be a line if it wasn’t true,” Ranma said before turning back to Erza. “But yeah, I think we’ll be strong enough.”

“What would your official mage rank be?” Erza asked seriously, also setting aside the strange rush of blood to her head she’d just felt. “I've heard a lot about your abilities and your doings, but nothing official.”

“Darlin’,” Rama said with a laugh, causing Erza to blush full force now and Mira to smirk, “I am beyond S-class, easily. Speaking of, how strong is Laxus?” he asked, looking around.

“He is not called the unofficial Wizard Saint these days without reason,” Erza replied dryly.

“Well, I’m at least as strong as he is. Besides, this is an official mission from the Queen of Bosco, so really, you can either come with me, or you can eat my dust. What's it going to be?” Ranma asked, smirking as he knew what the answer would be.

**End Chapter**