Heheheh, Heheheh, MWWAHAHAHHA!!!! This is mostly another setup chapter to the next big event, but it’s still a lot of fun all by itself. Hope you all enjoy it.

This chapter has been betaed by *Michael*, and *Justlovereadin’* join me in thanking them for their work please.

**Chapter 8: Random Encounters ‘Helping’**

Near the center of Fiore was a town named Era, in the center of which was a large stone hill jutting up many times taller than the nearest buildings. On top of this hill was a series of buildings, many of them towers, surrounded on a few sides by an outer wall. In the tallest tower of this construction there was a conversation going on, the topic of which was the events surrounding Lullaby. But the people talking about it had a very unique perspective…

“One train almost derailed, structural support damage to a bridge, an entire Rune Knight company incapacitated, several dozen normal citizens injured, and an entire train station destroyed! Those damned Fairy Tail mages! What the hell do they think they're doing!” The speaker’s voice was old, with a whiny tone underscoring its obvious anger.

“Yet if Fairy Tail hadn’t stopped Eisenwald’s mad scheme, we'd be mourning the deaths of numerous guild masters. So, really, what are you complaining about?” asked a second voice.

This second voice was much younger than the first, as was its owner. He was a fit, twenty-something man with dark blue hair and an odd tattoo on his face coupled with gleaming, almost hypnotic eyes. He wore blue pantaloons and a blue and black jacket in contrast to the more formal robes that the other people around the table were wearing.

The only exception to this rule was a young woman around the same age as him, who had black hair which cascaded straight down her back. She wore a loose kimono at present, which emphasized her chest and her long legs, something she had occasionally used to her advantage. Not that any of the men around her complained about that; even old men who could barely see out of their beards liked some eye candy.

This woman spoke up now in agreement with her friend. Or at least most of the other people in the Council thought they were friends. They did often move in lockstep in these discussions, as they were doing now. “Exactly. What would've been worse, the death of over a dozen guild masters or a hostage situation in which no one died followed by the arrest of an entire Dark Guild? To say nothing of the demon that was apparently seen near Crocus.”

“I discount those rumors!” said another member of the Council, hastily. “There has been no proven sighting of a demon in Fiore for more than two hundred years!”

Another councilmember spoke up now. He was a short man, matching Makarov for his lack of height, with a long rectangular looking face and salubrious eyes. “What do you call the appearance of the Beast several years ago, then?”

“Those were unsubstantiated rumors! Only those Fairy Tail mages said it was a demon; everything else we’ve seen about it indicates that it was some kind of animal. And we all know how that guild has a verylimited understanding of what constitutes the truth, just like they have no idea of the word restraint!”

That drew a few scoffs from the three people who seemed to be standing up for Fairy Tail. But before any of them could say anything, another man, this one with the most magnificent beard in the room and a staff in hand, spoke up. “The fact of the matter is that this situation could have been diffused before the guild masters were targeted **without** putting people in danger. I won't say they were not acting in good faith, but the way Fairy Tail acted was over the top! We need to censure them.”

“Oh, yes, that would look fantastic: the Magic Council censuring the guild that helped stop an incident that we could be seen as having caused in the first place,” the young woman said, rolling her eyes. “After all, it was our mistake that allowed the majority of that Dark Guild to get away when we captured their former guild master.”

“Are you saying that it's our fault!” shouted the man at the head of the long oblong table. He was a large, fat, elderly man with a long beard, plaited at the end slightly.

“We’re saying that the public could see it like that.” The younger man backed up his friend calmly before going on in a more conciliatory tone. “That being said, the means and methods that the mages from Fairy Tail used do need to be addressed. They put a lot of lives at risk trying to fight Eisenwald in a straight up battle in the center of town. I vote we call in one of the mages involved to impress upon them our displeasure at how destructive they are.”

“Tell them it'll balance out, then? We split the penalties for destroying the train station; we don't jail them, but we also don't publicly congratulate them,” said another member of the Council. “Yes, that could work. And if we choose the right mage to call in it could have a carryover effect to the rest of that blasted guild.”

Leaning back, the woman, whose name was Ultear, hid a sigh very carefully, holding one hand up to her mouth as if she was hiding a smile as the rest of the Magic Council began to bend to Siegrain’s wishes. She was feeling rather ambivalent about the whole thing. Not the fact that Siegrain wanted to bring in a Fairy Tail mage for questioning, that she was fine with. The reports of water magic being used against the demon were interesting, even if they were so far unsubstantiated, coming from non-magical citizenry. *How long can it take those foolish Runic Knights to write up a damn report?*

No, that she had no issue with. The problem was that Siegrain was beginning to be a bit too overt for her tastes in his manipulations. Some of the demands he had made of her recently in terms of their various council duties pointed to him moving toward some kind of end again soon, and she wasn't here for that. Ultear was here to spy on the Magic Council, not take any real action beyond subtly steering interest in acting against specific Dark Guilds away at need.

*I’ve only recently discovered how they activate the Etherano cannon, but I've also found out that they have discovered another ancient weapon and are in the process of learning how to control it just like they already control Etherion. So my orders from Master Hades haven’t changed, which is irritating. I am supposed to back Siegrain as part of our agreement with the Oraci**ón Siete , but this is getting a little dangerous, to say nothing about how he’s been coming on to me at times.*

*Still, watching Siegrain make Erza squirm should be fun.* Ultear shivered then and blinked, sitting upright so quickly that she drew some looks from the others as she twisted around, trying to look behind her because she had just had the feeling of someone dropping cold water down the back of her shirt. *What the hell was that about?!*

Ultear settled down after a second, making as if she had just gotten a neck cramp or something, waving off the others’ looks as she made a mental note of that feeling. *It’s not paranoia if they really are out to get you…*

**OOOOOOO**

After ducking his way out of the group hug, which Elfman showed no sign of letting up, Ranma looked at Erza. “Where's Eribore, or whatever his name is?”

Erza wiggled out of Elfman's grip at that, thumping him on the shoulder again, and he let go of Lucy and Gray at the same time. She then pointed to where the four of them had initially appeared on the scene while Ranma was dealing with the demon.

There Ranma saw that the dark mage in question was lying face down in the dirt. Besides having been handcuffed by Ranma, someone had tied a rope around his body. To Ranma’s eyes it also looked as if he had also been dragged on his face. “Nice,” Ranma said, giving Erza a thumbs-up.

She chuckled at that, shaking her head before glaring at the man. “While I would normally not condone brutality to an unconscious opponent, none of us could have made as good speed as we did carrying the man, especially after Kageyama stole our car! Where is that one by the way?”

Before any other others could reply, the sound of tramping feet came to them from the direction of Crocus, and Ranma shook his head, looking between the road leading back into Crocus and the woods. “Here come the Rune Knights. I'd suggest handing that guy over to them and letting them deal with him. It might let them save a little face. Not that I particularly care about that, but the less questions asked about me, the better.”

Surprisingly, Makarov seemed to pick up on this and gestured Ranma out into the woods. “Well, I've got a lot of questions for you, boy, particularly about those tattoos your sporting now and how you think you can get away with calling me shorty. I can understand your desire to not deal with the folderol. So why don't you disappear for a bit and let the guild masters handle this.”

“That's mean, Makky!” the disturbing baby faced freak of nature said with a pout. “After all, I want to talk to Ranma-kun too. Hehehe, I think I’ve heard his name from one of my cutie mage-chans.”

“He's too wild for you!” said Goldmine, patting the other man on the shoulder and gesturing for him to follow Makarov as he led the way back into the town. “Trust me on that.”

The others exchanged glances, wondering why Ranma wanted to evade the Rune Knights. After all, he hadn’t done anything truly illegal yet, to the best of their knowledge, anyway.

But Erza nodded. “Those in your profession do their work best when you're not so well known, I suppose. Do you want me to take credit for the demon, then? I can say it was a new water using armor,” Erza said, ignoring her fellow mages looks of confusion and curiosity. If Ranma wanted them to know, he could fill them in.

“That'd be great,” Ranma said. “I'll hide out in the woods for, like, an hour or so and then come back when you’re done dealing with the runic idiots.”

Her lips twitching at his name for them, Erza was torn between remonstrating with Ranma and agreeing with him. She was a big believer in authority, and the Rune Knights were a sign of the Magic Council's authority, yet they were also kind of useless. Erza was enough of a realist to acknowledge that.

“That should be more than enough,” she said, leading the others off and taking Lucy's arm in hers when she seemed to want to protest. “We'll see you in a bit.”

Nodding, Ranma faded back into the woods, easily hiding himself in the darkness there for a moment before he closed his eyes, sending out his ki pulse once more. An instant later he turned in the direction of the massive magical signature he felt out there, disappearing under the Umi-Sen-Ken as he raced in that direction. The signature was at least a mile away now and moving further away as his pulse went out. Idly, Ranma wondered if maybe being watched by a devil from that long a distance was enough to activate his devil powers, or if they were just that sensitive. *And how exactly are you going to test that kind of theory?* he asked himself sardonically as he ran.

Soon enough he was within sight of where he felt the signature. Ranma twitched, feeling the Devil Slayer magic starting to spread once more through his skin, affecting his eyes somewhat and his muscles slightly. “I know you're here!” he said, coming out of the Umi-Sen-Ken. “Come out! Don't think for one moment I'm going to let you keep on spying on me!”

A woman slid out from the darkness of the tree foliage to one side of Ranma, hopping down lightly to stand across from him. From the light of the moon, Ranma could see horns on her head, glinting golden in the moonlight. She had white skin and a face that could've been carved from a statue it was so good looking, framed by black hair and only slightly marred by an odd mark on her forehead consisting of a circle with a dot in the middle and several small dashes around the top. Her lips were small but unmarked by any kind of lipstick. Her eyes were purple or black, it was hard to tell without better lighting,

But there could be no doubt that her figure was enough to deaden a man's mind: her breasts were larger than any Ranma had seen before, matched to a toned stomach and svelte hips, all of which were shown off by her currently wearing some kind of kimono-like thing with a leopard print on it.

At this sight Ranma’s Devil Slayer power activated even further, the dark whorls spreading to cover his entire body, but Ranma ignored it, instead blushing hotly as he tried desperately to keep his eyes on her face. But he couldn’t stop his control of his mouth getting away from him. “Um, who is your tailor? And uh…damn, but I bet you’ve got back pains from those things.” At that his eyes strayed down for another second before he rapidly shook his head.

“Somewhat, but not as often as one might assume. As for my clothing, I cannot remember. How did you know where I was?” she asked, her voice almost monotone, but still inquisitive rather than aggressive.

Not wanting to give any of his ki abilities away, Ranma shrugged. “I’m a Devil Slayer and a Dragon Slayer in one, though the first bit’s kind of new. The Devil Slayer magic allowed me to figure out your direction with a bit of effort, and then I used my nose to sniff you out once I was close enough. The only question I have for you, though, is, why did you stay around after I killed Lullaby the Blowhard?”

“I wish to test you,” the woman replied.

“Test me?” Ranma growled, then he had to dodge a punch as the woman flashed forward towards him, moving faster than someone with her body type should have been able to move. Still, she was nowhere near as fast as Ranma, and, thanks to the enhanced perception of her tells he seemed to have gotten from his Devil Slayer magic, he dodged her first attack like it was in slow motion. Though he did have trouble with the next one, which nearly tagged him on the chin, causing him to stumble slightly. The reason for this was that the blow came from a large book which had been hidden in the grass nearby. The book had suddenly flown up to slam into his chin without any warning beyond a faint light appearing briefly in one of her hands.

A kick came around, but Ranma blocked it, returning with a blow to her knee, which, in turn, the female demon dodged by the skin of her teeth, pushing off of his block adroitly and lashing out with another attack. The two of them exchanged attacks, with several dozen more books revealing themselves and floating towards Ranma, attacking him as if they had minds of their own. Each would fly towards him with the speed of a bullet, but Ranma would block or dodge them with ease. At times tree branches or bits of foliage would get in his way or fly toward him, but, while irritating because Ranma couldn’t predict them and only saw them coming occasionally, none of that amounted to much of an advantage for the woman.

Still, this and the woman’s own attacks slowly pushed Ranma backwards, since he was reluctant to show off more of his style to the woman than she might have already seen. *I don't know if she has some way to escape, and I'm getting the impression that this was some kind of scouting mission from a group rather than by her alone.*

It soon became apparent to Ranma that she was pushing herself hard to keep up with his speed, though her strength was closer to his own. Her style, too, was decent: better than most he’d fought in this dimension, though not up to even Ryoga’s standards back in his old world. *This gal is decent, around the same level as that guy in Capricorn’s body but physically stronger. Still, nowhere near my level.*

“So,” he said as he ducked under a punch which shattered a tree behind them. *Yep. Decent strength, not a lot of skill.* “Can I at least get the name of the demon gal who is trying to attack me?”

“Why would I give my name to someone whose story I am charged to end?” the girl asked, actually cocking her head quizzically to one side as if the question made no sense whatsoever to her.

This allowed Ranma to get in a blow. But she dodged at the last second, instead ripping her shirt to the left side of her chest rather than landing cleanly. In response she landed a blow to the side of his head that should have sent him reeling. But all it really did was make him blink.

“Fine, then I’ll figure out a name for you, babe,” Ranma said with a smirk, thinking, *Huh, she’s a lot better at dodging than she is at offense*. “So, horny-girl, why exactly are you trying to kill me? Watching over Lullaby I can understand, but I’ve never seen you before in my life, purple-eyes. Or are you just interested in me because of the whole Devil Slayer thing?”

“Grr… The name is Seilah. Call me babe again, and I will end your story right here!” Seilah growled, dodging a follow on punch and nearly slamming a palm into Ranma’s jaw, though he moved with the blow.

“Duly noted,” Ranma said, working his jaw for a moment, as that one had actually stung. He blocked several more punches, returning a kick that forced her to block in turn, nearly opening her up for another that whistled by her head.

He didn't dodge her follow-up blow though, the impetus of which smashed him through a tree behind him. He did, however, return it with a mule kick into her stomach which hurled Seilah up into the air.

No longer able to ignore his instincts, Ranma slammed his foot back down onto the ground and launched himself up after her. To his surprise, however, the woman seemed just as comfortable in the air as she was on the ground, hovering there and batting aside a few his attacks and returning her own, seemingly not at all discommoded by his ability to fight and dodge just as well in midair as he could on the ground.

At seeing his shocked expression in the moonlight, Seilah allowed a brief smile to cross over her features. “You are not the only one who has a mastery of midair combat. Are you so arrogant that you thought you were?”

“Nah,” Ranma grumped. “I just didn't see any wings on you so I figured ya couldn't fly, that's all.”

Seilah peered closer at his face as they grappled, strength against strength. “…Are you pouting?”

“Men don't pout,” Ranma pouted, going for a knee to the stomach.

She blocked with her own knee, disengaging with one hand and slamming a hard palm into his stomach. However, Ranma grabbed Seilah’s wrist before she could pull back, and a punch caught her on the side of her head right below her horn, sending her sideways through the air. She was able to break his grip a second later, and Ranma was forced to block and redirect the momentum from a roundhouse kick to remain in the air. She pushed off of that attack just as he did, however, negating some of his technique and swiftly floating away out of his reach.

Flipping himself once, Ranma let gravity reassert power over him, falling to the ground where he landed on his feet. There he stared up at Seilah, his eyes narrowed. *Okay, so what she lacks in actual combat ability she makes up for in intelligence. First time someone was able to negate my midair combat style. Then again, it’s not like I’m going all out here. This is more of my own kind of info gathering mission.*

“So it is through the use of my own attacks that you remain in the air,” she mused as she floated down to the ground. “That is an interesting style, but it has an obvious weakness.”

“Ya think so?” Ranma said with a scowl. *Okay, if that’s how you want it lady…*

Seilah had barely touched ground before Ranma was on her, attacking this time in earnest, his hands and feet flashing faster than they had been. The woman grimaced, but dodged or blocked as much as she could by the barest of margins, her dress taking further damage as she tried to keep up, not realizing that Ranma was still sort of playing with her.

In a furor of blows she almost pressed Ranma back for just a second, attempting to bring her long legs into better use on the offensive side of things. But Ranma didn't let her, pressing forward again and again, forcing her to use only her fists for offense, which seems to hinder her abilities somewhat. Even the random floating books and the tree branches getting in the way didn’t slow Ranma’s assault down enough for Seilah to gain an advantage.

For his part, Ranma was dealing with a distinctly unusual issue at the moment: he was getting turned on by this fight. Not that it would have been a mystery at all to any other man given the fact that the woman in front of him was practically falling out of her dress by this point. Indeed, Ranma occasionally got a glimpse of a nipple and saw a lot of cleavage more often than not, which seemed to arrest his eyes even as his body continued to move on automatic. *So I'm a breast man regardless of having a set of my own half the time, that's interesting but god damn it this is* ***not*** *the time!*

Another blow got through her defenses, ripping her dress further, but again she dodged at the last instant, avoiding any more than a little bruise, and Ranma nodded slightly. He could tell now that his skill in reading his opponent via his Devil Slayer ability wasn’t working as well against an intelligent Demon as it had against an unthinking brute. The woman seemed to recognize that he was reading her tells and had endeavored to do what she could to do away with them.

Eventually Ranma stumbled a little: one of Seilah’s books flew in, getting just a little too close to going below the belt for his current peace of mind. This allowed her to bring up a kick which Ranma was forced to block with his own leg. The two of them then pushed off one another, gaining some space and pausing as they watched one another across the intervening distance.

The woman frowned at him, unmindful of the fact that her dress was almost falling off her body at this point. “Why have you not brought out your magic?” she asked coolly, showing none of the pressure she was under in keeping up with Ranma physically.

“Why haven’t you brought out yours?” Ranma replied quickly, thankful the light wasn’t better as it let him concentrate on her face more than her body. “If you want to up the game you have to pony up first Seilah-chan.”

Seilah scowled but didn’t reply further. Ranma was the first Devil Slayer Seilah had fought, but she knew something of their abilities since, much to her chagrin and many of the others, Mard Geer had brought in a Devil Slayer recently to join the guild. She knew that their magic gave them some immunity to the various demonic Curses.

So that left her with her generic demonic powers of enhanced speed and strength, plus her Macro Curse’s ability to control other things around her. And that wasn’t enough. Even when she attempted to move entire trees to get in Ranma’s way, he was too fast for them to work. There were no stones of usable size, though she had used pebbles here and there. But Ranma hadn’t even seemed to notice their impact.

That left only direct magical attacks. But Seilah could only access those magical attacks if she removed her limiter and changed into her Etherious form, which Seilah had been flatly ordered by Mard Geer to not do at this point, just like all the other Etherious Demons in the field. Tartarus was in no way ready to reveal its true strength yet.

Indeed, she was actually going against orders at this moment, having revealed herself to Ranma in the first place. *The moment that I realized Ranma was aware of me I should've run away,* she remonstrated with herself. But the ease with which Ranma had dealt with the lesser demon, the sheer amount of strength he had gained since the time they had briefly crossed paths in Joya had intrigued her, and she wanted to see how good he was up close. *I overestimated my abilities greatly here. Even Kyoka-sama would have trouble with this one.*

As if reading her mind, Ranma grinned evilly. “And don't think you're getting out of here without answering some more of my questions, Seilah-chan. Unless you can teleport, there's no way you're fast enough to get away from me.”

“Then your story will end here!” Seilah growled, charging forward. *I must wait for an opening, something I can use to get away.*

Once more the two of them began to exchange blows. However, it soon became obvious that Ranma was continually upping the ante every few blows, moving faster and faster. *While I can match him in strength with difficulty, his speed is incredible!* Seilah thought, grimacing as more blows began to actually tag her rather than tear at her clothing. *Guh… I can't…keep…up…*

A second later a blow smashed into her side that she couldn’t block or dodge at all, hitting with all the power of a sledge hammer. Seilah doubled over, opening herself up to a knee to the head which flung her backwards with a gasp of agony. She barely blocked the follow-on blow, but couldn't stop Ranma from tripping her, only grabbing at him and rolling with him, trying to pin him down in turn even as her head rang like a tocsin.

They ended their tumble with Ranma on top of her, pinning her down by sitting on her stomach, his legs to either side of her, pinning her arms to the ground. He reached down, grabbing her horns and pinning her head down with them. “Enough! Unless you're going to start using magic, this match goes to me. Now, are you going to an… answer… some…” Ranma slowly stuttered to a halt as he realized the kind of position they were in, and also saw that her chest had popped entirely out of her shirt by this point.

There they were in all their glory, directly between his own legs and pressing into his crotch. Her breasts were soft looking but stuck out proudly with only a slight hint of sag, pressing into the inner sides of Ranma’s thighs. These magnificent white peaks were capped by dark black nipples, which had crinkled, either because of being exposed to the weather or for some other reason.

Ranma wasn't a prude any longer. He wasn't even entirely ignorant of what guys and girls could get up to. He hadn't experienced much of that personally, however, and this sight, what this looked to be a set up for, froze his mind entirely as a certain appendage began to rise to the occasion.

Staring up at him, Seilah briefly wondered why Ranma’s face had suddenly turned so red she could actually see the change in color in the moonlight, as well as why he had frozen. She realized why after a moment and began to blush herself, the feeling of Ranma’s hands on her horns and the pressure of his body on her stomach causing her insides to do cartwheels as it did when her lover, Kyoka, did the same thing. Her horns were one of Seilah’s erogenous zones, but half of the reaction was due to the fact that Ranma was a man. *A man, a human man, is…is…*

But Seilah didn’t lose her ability to function like Ranma had and quickly took advantage of Ranma's frozen state. Heaving her waist up she flung Ranma to the side, rolling and pinning him there in turn. Before Ranma could regain his senses entirely, Seilah did something that she would never have considered before that moment. Struck by a sudden inexplicable urge, she leaned in and kissed Ranma hard on the lips. Thrusting her tongue into his mouth, she thoroughly dominated the kiss even as she felt Ranma begin to respond.

Just as he was almost fully back to his self-awareness, however, Seilah pushed off him, leaping into the woods. As she went she threw a final taunt over her shoulder. “So much for not being able to get away from you. Our stories will intertwine again, Devil Slayer; I guarantee it!”

This caused all manner of bouncing, which Ranma couldn't stop from noticing. He stared after her, making no effort to get to his feet, stunned at what had occurred. “Well,” he said at last, coming back to himself and pushing to his feet, feeling his Devil Slayer magic fading slowly now there was no demon close by. “That was…something. And yeah, Seilah-chan, I can guarantee our stories will intertwine again too…” He paused then, shaking his head. “Damn, that sounded dirty for some reason.”

He returned to the others, thankfully finding that they had finished with talking to the Rune Knights. “That was more like an hour and a half, Ranma,” Erza said, frowning at him. Then she looked at him quizzically, noticing Ranma’s rather harried appearance. “Were you training? You didn't get enough exercise today?” she asked in amusement.

Lucy too noted Ranma’s appearance and shook her head. “What the heck happened out there?”

“Nothing,” Ranma said, shaking his head rapidly and squeaking for some reason as both women looked at him. “Nothing at all.”

Makarov read more into Ranma’s body language than the others and began to chortle. “What, did you run into a little lost maiden out there? Have a little bit of **fun,** did you?”

While Lucy scowled at that and Erza blinked, frowning, Elfman and Gray simply looked uncomprehending.

Ranma glared at the old man. “I will punt you like a soccer ball, you old raisin!”

“Enough,” Erza said. “Punish the guild master for his perversions later. I think we need to start heading back to the guild.”

Ranma nodded hurriedly, eager to change the subject. “Yeah, I kind of want to get back to Wendy as soon as possible. I know she, y’know, manipulated me a bit about it, but Wendy really does have issues with being left alone. How long will it take us to get back?”

That will depend on whether or not the bridge where Elfman and Erigor fought is still usable,” Makarov replied.

“It should be! As manly as our fight was, we didn't do that much damage to the bridge we were fighting on,” Elfman said.

“In that case, as soon as they can get the trains running, we’ll be able to head back. Tomorrow morning at the latest.”

“Ah, right. Trains,” Ranma drawled. “Hmm… Yeah, y’know what, I think I’ll just run back now…”

“Unfortunately, I’m afraid that the Rune Knights will block us from leaving just yet. And they might need to ask you some questions too…” Makarov said.

**OOOOOOO**

Wendy actually didn't have the time to wallow in her misery about having been left her behind, and not just because she was having fun with Mirajane and the other girls. Ever since having come back from where Wendy had flung him out onto the ocean, Natsu had been persistently chasing after her, demanding a rematch. The others had started to take her around Magnolia to show her the sights but Natsu started showing up barely fifteen minutes after the fight had ended. Even after Mira tried to scare him off that first time, Natsu kept coming back. Unfortunately, Lisanna and Anna had gone back to the guild after the fight to resume their jobs as barmaids, which removed the two people who were best able to get Natsu to listen to reason.

Despite that and her Onii-chan still being away, Wendy was having fun. Being around so many older girls was fun as heck! Carla didn't really get into the whole talking about fashion thing. Given her size, whenever Carla tried to shop for new clothes, the saleswomen, once they got over their surprise at a cat or cat girl, would always try to get her into children’s clothing, which infuriated Carla for some reason Wendy didn’t understand, since she quite liked that kind of clothing. And Ranma couldn't care less so long as she looked good in something. And neither liked gossip or simply taking in the sights like normal people. Being around Mira and the others was feeding a part of her little girl soul that Wendy hadn’t even known she had.

“Come on! Fight me!” Natsu whined as the girls walked out of a beauty boutique where Wendy had been given her first ever manicure. After Mira's last remonstrance about throwing a punch at a little girl, he was trying to get Wendy to throw a punch his way instead. But it wasn't working.

“No!” Wendy growled back, turning away and flouncing over to join Cana and Bisca where they were discussing where to go next. “You've already broken the promise you made. Why should I bother with you? Besides, I don't like fighting.”

“Come on, you’re a Dragon Slayer! You have to like fighting!” Natsu said as if it was the most natural thing in the world. “All I'm asking is for another spar! I won't even go all out, just like I didn’t last time!”

Wendy rolled her eyes. “I know you were trying as hard as you could last time,” she retorted, smiling as Bisca reached down to ruffle her hair. “And I'm not a combat junkie, such that teasing will make me want to fight you.”

“You think we should just hide back in Fairy Hills?” Bisca asked, looking over at Mira who was glaring at Natsu, her fingers twitching.

She **so** wanted to pound him, but before they left Lisanna and Anna had made her promise not to hurt Natsu if he didn't actually throw the first punch, and Mira had put the fear of…well…herself, in Natsu when he showed up again, so that wasn’t happening. “No,” Mira said angrily. “That'll be like giving into him. Besides, there's only so many things we can do in Fairy Hills, after all.”

“Well, that's from our perspective,” Bisca said. “Wendy, how would you like to go and see where we all live?”

“Where **you** all live,” Mira interjected. “I live with my siblings, remember.”

“Well then, why don't we start with your house?”

“That's fine and all, but Natsu will still follow us,” Cana interjected. She pulled out a small barrel from somewhere and took a long drought as she looked over to where Wendy was actually climbing up a lamp post to get away from Natsu. Or at least, that’s what Wendy would probably say, but since she seemed to really like being up high Cana figured that that was only half the reason.

*She's like a little cat sometimes, with her love of heights.* “You know he'll follow us. He’s the one guy in the guild who doesn't seem to understand the whole no men allowed thing.”

“And I reiterate my reply to that: I think he just hasn't gone through puberty yet!” Mira retorted.

Cana laughed. “Maybe you should ask Erza about that.”

Turning away from the ongoing issue with the two Dragon Slayers, Bisca joined Mira in staring at Cana. “Wait, what? How would Red know the answer to that?” Mira asked for both of them.

“They used to take baths together: Erza, Natsu, and Gray,” Cana replied. “You didn’t know?”

“No, I didn't,” Mira said with a grin crossing her features. “But that seems pretty juicy too.”

“You think that Erza would actually care?” Cana asked. “She was pretty open about it for a while.”

“Oh, trust me, there are ways underneath that armor of hers,” Mira said with a cackle. *How that ties into her love of erotic books, for one, and her lack of a boyfriend, for another. Both would cause an explosion, for certain.*

Then the eldest Strauss sighed, trooping over to Natsu to grab him by his scarf. “Natsu,” she growled angrily, actually summoning her demon form. “If you don’t stop pestering Wendy, you're going to have problems with me! Now back off!”

“But Mira!” Natsu said, his voice a whine. “She's a Dragon Slayer like me! There's no telling how much I could learn by fighting her!”

“You've already fought me once!” Wendy said. “Besides, you broke your promise,” she finished with a huff, turning her nose upwards and staring up into the sky.

“Come on! Those promises never count; everyone knows that! Why don't you want to show off your strength?” he said, his voice now sounding rather more frustrated than it had.

*Is this some kind of bonding thing for Natsu?* Mira thought.  *I know he's really close with Gildarts, and most of their interaction is just Natsu trying to fight Gildarts and being thrown around. Crud… I really have been looking at this too much from Wendy’s perspective. Some big sister I am.*  Somewhere over the years since the Beast, Mira had slowly begun to act like a big sister for all the guild at times, and that included Natsu.

“Look, Natsu,” she said, trying to calm her voice down. “I understand where you're coming from. I know that you’re ecstatic about meeting another Dragon Slayer like this. But Wendy is not only a Dragon Slayer. She is a little girl, and little girls, generally speaking, don’t like to fight. You can’t compare her to the way me or Erza were in the past. Instead, instead compare her to how Cana or Levy were. So, right now, you're coming off as a bully.”

That actually made Natsu think, and he frowned, scuffing the ground. “I don't want to do that, but **why** doesn't she like fighting! She's a Dragon Slayer, not just a little girl, whatever you say. We’re different. We’re all different from normal people. Fighting is in our very blood.”

“That may be true for you, but not for me,” Wendy replied, climbing down semi-reluctantly from the lamppost. Mira didn’t respond as Wendy actually leaped from the lamppost to land on her shoulder before jumping down to the ground. She wiped at her dress, then looked up at Natsu. “I understand that you think Dragon Slayers like to fight. And I guess that is true for you and my Onii-chan, but it's not true for me. I'll fight if I have to, and I kind of like some of the training I've done, but fighting for fun isn't something I'm going to do. Can you please understand that and stop pestering me!”

That finally seems to get through to Natsu, and he scowled. “Fine. I won't bother you anymore. But this Onii-chan of yours, Ranma? He'll be coming back for you, right? You said so, right?”

“Yep,” Wendy said. “And he likes the fight too. Not as much as you seem to, but he'll definitely fight you if you are persistent enough with him.” *Sorry, Ranma-nii, but you can handle Natsu-san better than I can…*

“Great!” Natsu said, giving her a thumbs up. Then he looked over at Mira and the others, pulling at his scarf for a moment. Now that he'd had his face rubbed into it, Natsu realized that he had really been acting out too much and decided to get all the apologizing with over with at once. He bowed deeply from the waist, shouting, “Sorry!” Then he grinned up at them. “You know I kind of get carried away sometimes.”

“That's fine and dandy, but you need to pick your opponents better. Don't let your instincts override your common sense. If you have any in the first place,” Mira said tartly

Cana chuckled at that.  *I wouldn't put any money on that one either way,* she thought to herself, ruffling Natsu's hair. Despite the fact that he had been irritating today, Natsu was one of the best guildmates any of them could ask for, always there for them when they needed help or cheering up. “Why don't you go see Lisanna and Anna. I bet they would like some fun. And besides, with you here, who's going to stop some of the other men in the guild from flirting with them?”

While Natsu really didn't understand the whole flirting thing, the idea of other men around Lisanna and Anna never sat well with Natsu. At Cana’s words he nodded resolutely and marched off without another word.

The four girls waited, then breathed a sigh of relief as Natsu turned the corner. “Right. That’s that,” Bisca said, clapping her hands. She glanced up, gauging the time of day from where the sun was in the sky. It was pushing evening, and she looked over at Mira. “It looks as if it's going to take at least another few hours before Ranma returns, so why don't we all get something to eat, and Wendy can tell us some more about the adventures she's gone on?” she asked, looking over at Wendy.

The young, blue-haired girl nodded agreeably. “You all have told me a lot about yourselves and everything your guild gets up to. It's only fair,” she said with a nod.

“What was the first adventure you had with Ranma?” Cana asked, leading the way not towards the guild, but towards a restaurant nearby that owed her a few free meals. *Heh, everybody says I’m lazy whenever I take a job in Magnolia, but free drinks are free drinks.*

“Oh, that's easy! While we did run into a few of those silly Vulcan creatures that never seem to realize they shouldn't mess with Dragon Slayers, the first real adventure we went on was us dealing with some pirates. Before that we had to play dress-up to enter a castle to talk to a king, and then we went after some pirates up north. It was really **cold**! But also kind of fun,” Wendy exclaimed, waving her hands to either side. “Ranma stood on the water, using his Dragon Slayer powers to stay like that, and I used mine to propel us forward.

“Tenryu no Owofuro(Sky dragons spinning tail)!” she said, giggling at the name she’d come up with for that move when she was younger. “It was a lot of fun, and I watched Onii-chan deal with the pirates from a ship that carried us out to sea.”

“That does sound like fun,” Bisca said, then paused and waved at three individuals coming down the intersection they had just passed. “Levy, Jet, Droy! Over here.”

The three newcomers paused, then smiled and moved towards the girls, looking at Wendy quizzically. “Did Master Makarov find another wayward kid?” one of them asked, squatting down to smile at Wendy, who shied away a little, looking at the three newcomers from behind Mira's leg. She was at her limit for interacting with new people by this point, and she didn't have her Onii-chan or Carla around to help either.

“This is Wendy. She's the Sky Dragon Slayer and the healer who helped me and my siblings a few years back. We’re watching her for her brother who went with Erza, Elfman, Gray, and Lucy on a mission to hunt down a Dark Guild. They should be back sometime tonight or tomorrow morning at the latest. Wendy,” Mira went on, putting a hand on the little girl's head, “this is team Shadow Gear. The girl is Levy, and the other two are Jet and Droy.”

“Nice to meet another blue haired girl,” Levy said, holding out a hand happily to the youngster. *And she's both younger and flatter than me,* Levy thought. Levy had a slight complex about how flat she was in comparison to the other girls in the guild.

“Are her brother and Wendy looking to join the guild?” Jet asked.

“Nope,” Wendy said with a shake of her head. “It's a great place to visit, but I don't think Ranma-nii’s job would allow him to join full-time.”

“Job?”

“Let's not talk about that here,” Mira ordered, smirking at the three newcomers. “You’re back early. Were there complications on your mission again?”

“Nothing like that, at least with the job. There were complications with getting paid,” Droy said with a shake of his head. “We cleared out the ancient temple, just like the locals wanted. But they didn't say anything about us not being allowed to openthe vault inside… or activating protective spells on it which will cause other people to be unable to enter it.”

Levy shrugged her shoulders. “They didn't ask us to open the vault; they asked us to clear out the local monsters. And the vault in question holds several cursed items, so I was never going to let anyone without magical abilities poke around in there. We already sent out a report to the Magic Council. Hopefully they'll send an inspector out that way to remove or destroy the cursed items.”

“We'll see you back at the guild, then, unless you want to join us for an early dinner?” Mira offered.

The three newcomers shook their heads and smiled down at Wendy. “No, I want to get back. We were able to pick up that new staff Anna wanted to try. I hope to see you around, Wendy,” Levy said with a smile. “Maybe if you’re still here tomorrow morning we can hang out then.”

“Okay,” Wendy nodded, then blushed as her stomach began to gurgle.

“At least in that area you're like our Dragon Slayers,” Mira said with a laugh. “Let's go get some food.”

“And booze!” Cana said, throwing her hands in the air.

Bisca rolled her eyes, then reached down to take Wendy’s hand. “If Cana gets drunk you might want to stop listening to anything she says. She's not a bad drunk; she just gets ruder, that's all. Cana, it might be best if you stay out of grabbing range.”

“Hey,” Cana said, pointing at Bisca. “Are you implying I might take advantage of little Wendy?"

“You’ve taken advantage of every other girl in the guild when you're drunk, stealing our first kisses!” Mira replied tartly. “Why should we think that Wendy would be immune to your kissing craziness!”

Blushing, Cana looked away. “Because she's so young?” she suggested lamely. After all, she couldn't argue the point. Cana had kissed every girl in the Guild, and the only one who had gotten a kiss before Cana kissed her was Evergreen.

The group soon sat down at a restaurant with an outside area, where they continued to share stories. Wendy asked Mira numerous questions about being a model and a mage at the same time, as well as how to be more confident in herself. Despite her training with Ranma, sometimes Wendy’s self-image bothered her, and Wendy often worried that she didn't put herself forward as she should.

Once Mira had answered all these questions, however, she changed the subject quickly. “How long have you been able to fly using your Dragon Slayer powers?”

“I don't **really** fly,” Wendy said, waving one hand in front of her face in an iffy motion. “It's more like I hop in the sky for a long period of time. I can glide—that's easy if I start from high enough—but I can't really fly like Carla can under my own power just yet. Ranma-nii's been training me to try and fly like that for a while now. We just haven't quite gotten there. Still, I'm able to hop for longer and longer periods and move more easily too!”

Bisca leaned forward. “Requip, healing, and Sky Dragon Slayer magic... Your brother seemed to indicate the first time we met that he was willing to pick up any magics he could and add them to his repertoire. In particular, he mentioned Guns magic. Do you practice that too?”

“Sort of,” Wendy said with a pout. “I'm not very good with it yet, but for my last birthday I got this.” The young girl held out a hand, and said, “Requip: gun.” In her hand there appeared a small, very tiny gun shaped to fit the palm of her hand.

Bisca looked at it closely, whistling as Wendy held it over the table towards her. The gun was not like a regular gun. Instead, it was shaped like a holdout pistol, the barrel poking out from a small circular sphere with a trigger poking out slightly next to it. A girl Wendy’s size could hold it in her palm and hide the entire thing beyond the small barrel poking out past her fingers. Looking closely, however, you could tell it was a very well made item, with ground lacrima glinting in the metal, a small lacrima crystal that looked violet in the light of the lamps nearby, and another one in the actual barrel.

“That doesn't look like it would have much stopping power, not from regular bullets, anyway. But is this a amplifier array here, and is that a second lacrima embedded into the inside of the barrel?” she muttered. This thing was a work of art, the kind of thing that would cost as much as one of Erza’s magical weapons. While Erza made more than any three of the other mages in the guild, she also spent almost as much as she made on her various suits of armor.

Wendy nodded. “The blacksmith who gave it to me is an old friend of Ranma-nii’s. We’ve stayed with him and his wife a few times. He tried to explain how it worked, but most of it went over my head. The gun basically shoots out compressed air pellets if I push my Dragon Slayer magic into it. I can only fire a few times before I have to let it rest or the crystal within it will break, but it's still a very good long-range punch. I've only used it once, though, since I’m not a very good shot,” she said, looking down at the table top.

“Well, I can help you with that,” Bisca said with a smile.

Cana and Mira both nodded, with Cana going on. “We have two Guns magic users in our guild, and Bisca is the best sharpshooter of the two. She's even won some competitions against other guilds’ Guns magic users.”

Having lifted the gun out from Wendy's unresisting hand, Bisca had been turning it this way and that, examining it while Cana talked, and now she gasped. “This maker’s mark! You got this from WL, William and Laitha of Appledore?”

“Yes,” she said with a nod. “Onii-chan knew them from before he met me. In fact, he helped them move from wherever they had been before to Appledore.”

“I am **so** jealous right now!” Bisca said, throwing her hands up. “Do you have any idea how much a personalized customized gun like that would cost here in Fiore? The lacrima and initial enchantment would actually be better here, but the metal and everything else? That has to be shipped, and the price is just so huge!”

Wendy shrugged ignorance of that, and the conversation shifted from there, with Cana now taking more and more a part. To the surprise of the other two girls she hadn’t started to drink heavily. Yes, she was still drinking—she wouldn't be Cana if she wasn't—but she wasn't getting drunk, which was the important thing.

Eventually Wendy began to nod off at the table, and Bisca quickly stood up, moving around the table to pick her up. “Come on. You can stay with us in Fairy Hills for the night. If Ranma comes back at some point tonight, the rest of the guild can direct him there.” She smirked. “Although he’ll have to shift to his female form to get in.”

The group made their way towards the guild dorms, meeting up with Carla on the way. She had gone with Lisanna and Anna back to the guild to talk to them some more, with Happy following along. Thankfully, Natsu had come in a few minutes before, and he and Happy had headed off home, allowing Carla to finally escape Happy’s unwanted affections for a time. As the two of them waited for the girls to decide where they’d be sleeping, Carla asked, “So, what do you think of Fairy Tail?”

“Mmm, they’re nice… Fun. I hope Ranma-nii decides we can stay here for a bit,” Wendy replied, smiling. Then her lips turned downwards. “I wonder what’s keeping him?”

**OOOOOOO**

The Rune Knight leader, a captain or commander—Ranma wasn’t certain what their rank insignia meant and really didn’t care to correct his ignorance—did indeed have time to come back to question the guild masters and the Fairy Tail mages again. Specifically, he questioned the whereabouts of Lullaby: the magic flute version, not the demon.

When they all pointed to where Ranma was talking with Elfman and Gray, he marched over and demanded that it be handed over to him. Needless to say, this did not go very well.

“First,” Ranma said evenly, “you don't get to demand anything from me after your troops ran away like little bitches with their tails between their legs.” He was being deliberately antagonistic at this point, more irritated with himself that he had allowed Seilah to get away than for any other reason, though, despite being a Ranger, he still did have some problems with governmental authority.

As the Rune Knight commander seemed to inflate angrily, Ranma held up a second finger. “Second, I can't hand it over to you. I destroyed it. The pieces,” he went on in a somewhat more helpful tone of voice, “are back where we fought the demon, if you want to collect them.”

“What, that…” the Rune Knight spluttered. “H, how dare you! That is a priceless magical artifact of…”

“Yep, it's worth zilch, all right. You're right about that,” Ranma interrupted with a grin.

“Do you have any idea what the Magic Council could've learned from that!”

“What they could and could not do?” Ranma asked, cocking his head in confusion. “Besides which, why do you think I’d ever hand it over to your Council? The flute was hidden in Bosco. If I was going to turn it over to anyone, it would be Queen Rose, who gave me the job in the first place.”

That caused the spluttering Rune Knight to go quiet for a moment, then he went on slowly. “In regard to that, I think you'll find that regulations agree that if a magical item is recovered in another country it automatically becomes the property of that country.”

“I'm not a barrack room lawyer,” Ranma said with a laugh. “And I don’t need to argue with you about it. Like I said, I destroyed it.”

“There will be consequences for this, you know,” the Rune Knight said, unable to let it go at that.

“Tell someone who cares,” Ranma said with another laugh and turned back to his discussion with Gray and Elfman, who were both grinning at this point. “So yeah, like I was saying, sending out your magic over a distance is kind of like…you have to visualize it in your head, almost like you're sending out a lasso or something like that. If you want to cover an entire area, well, what I did here…”

The Rune Knight growled, unused to being ignored, but the foreigner and the Fairy Tail mages continued to ignore him, and he turned away in a huff. As irritating as Ranma was, he couldn't simply arrest a mage for being disrespectful. And since Ranma seemed to have destroyed the flute through ignorance of what should've occurred here in Fiore, he couldn’t arrest him for that either.

It was pushing midnight by the time the trains started up once more. With Erza and Gray pushing him, Ranma was forced onto the train, still arguing. “No, really. I’ll just run alongside. Seriously, it’ll be much easier.”

“But not nearly as much fun for us, nor as restful for you. Come now, Ranma. While I am fully behind the idea of daily exercise, doing the equivalent of sprinting for hours on end just to get around feeling some motion sickness is a bit silly,” Erza said, smirking at the back of Ranma’s head.

“Silly, she says. Silly,” Ranma groaned. “My greatest weakness, and she calls it silly. Beautiful but cruel, Erza. That’s you.”

Because he was facing forward, Ranma didn’t see Erza blush at his tease. Lucy did but didn’t comment, being a little (okay, a lot) intimidated by the Fairy Queen.

Despite Gray and Erza pushing him, Ranma paused a moment in the doorway to their carriage. There he lit up his pipe again, inhaling the Dragon’s Breath several times before taking a step forward.

“I wonder what it is about Dragon Slayers that causes your motion sickness. I mean, I've seen Natsu on a train, on a cart, on a horse drawn cart, and on a boat.”

“Ship,” Elfman corrected pedantically, holding up a finger. “If you're talking about what happened when you two first met, that was a ship, not a boat.”

“What's the difference?” Lucy asked, pouting quizzically.

“Size,” Elfman replied bluntly. “Besides which, ships are more manly!”

Rolling her eyes at that obvious answer, Lucy went on, turning back to Ranma. “It's always the same. The moment the thing starts moving, Natsu goes down within seconds.”

“Which, again, makes me think that maybe the guild should invest in some of that Dragon Smoke or whatever is for him,” Erza said with a faint smile. “At least you don't look like you're going to throw up.”

“Like I said, I can sell him some, but I'm not going to sell him more than one or two pipes worth,” Ranma groaned. “I don't have enough of it on hand. As for your question, Lucy, I don't know. Wendy and I have ridden on one another occasionally, and it doesn't bother us. Heck I've even had Carla fly me around once or twice, and it doesn't bother me, and she routinely does that with Wendy for hours. It's mechanical transportation that does it.”

“Wait, does that mean you can ride horses?” Lucy asked, fighting to keep a blush off her face as her mind tried to banish the automatic image it had conjured from what Ranma had just said. There was nothing wrong with what he’d said, really. It was just too easy to see it as an innuendo, and her mind had automatically gone there despite knowing the fact that Wendy was so young and the fact that they saw each other as brother and sister.

Looking around surreptitiously, Lucy was grateful for the fact that only Erza seemed to have had her mind taking that path. *Maybe only girls notice that kind of thing, or maybe,* she thought more sardonically, *the boys in this guild are just idiots.*

“I probably could,” Ranma replied with a shrug, “but what would be the point? I mean, I can run faster and longer than any horse. You did see me actually along the side of the train at one point, right?”

“That…is true, yes,” Lucy said, sweatdropping. “You could do that even carrying Wendy?”

“Easily. She's a light weight.” With that Ranma changed the conversation, looking over at Erza. “So, I've heard a lot about you from Laxus over the years, and I'm wondering if you'd like to have a spar at some point?”

“You're going to hang around Magnolia for a bit, then?” Erza asked, her eyes glinting eagerly with the idea of challenging herself against a Ranger like Ranma.

“I intend to stay until I can at least touch base with Laxus, and then maybe a few weeks longer,” Ranma said with a chuckle. “Then, too, Wendy and I haven't exactly been able to explore Fiore before this.”

“You don't have to check back in with your current employer?” Erza asked circuitously. While she felt that Ranma should probably trust Makarov with the fact that he was a Ranger, it wasn't her place to bring it up.

“Nope. I tend to go wherever the wind takes me,” Ranma said with a laugh, although he technically did need to contact Queen Rose and the Fiore King about what had happened. “My job isn't normally one where I have to be directed like that. I find my own short term goals wherever I go.”

“Then I have no issues with sparring with you, say, the day after we get back? I'd really like to see how I stack up against a more experienced Dragon Slayer.”

“Hey, can anyone get in on this, or is this an exclusive party?” Gray asked eagerly. “I'd love to see how my ice stands up against a water mage.”

“You have had over a year now the challenge Julia to a match, yet you never have,” Erza retorted. “You can wait your turn now until after I defeat him.”

Ranma’s eyebrows twitched at that, but before he could respond Elfman cut in with a shout. “It is manly to spar! I request that I go third.”

“Fine,” Ranma said, leaning away a little since Elfman was currently sitting next to him on the train bench. “Just don't shout in my ear again. I'll have to punt you off the train.”

*I'll need to come up with some way of stopping that from becoming an issue. Admittedly, sound magic doesn't seem to be very common, but the way that demon knocked me off my stride with a single misplaced noise assault is telling. Maybe reinforce my ear drums with ki? No, that would have the opposite effect. Hmm, something to think about.*

At the moment, however, Ranma had something else he wanted to concentrate on. “Y’know, you seem pretty confident you’ll beat me.”

“No offense intended. I am certain you are powerful and experienced,” Erza said hastily, truly not meaning to give offense. “However I would wager that my various unknown abilities will be able to combat your own.”

“Huh. In that case, how about an actual wager, then?” Ranma asked, his smirk the same type which would have sent his rivals back in Nerima into a fury. “Or are you scared to put your wallet where your mouth is?”

“I will never back down from any such challenge!” Erza growled, leaning forward and staring into Ranma’s eyes. “When I win, I want you to pay for a month’s worth of strawberry cake!”

“Fine. And when I win, we go out on a date,” Ranma said. He was actually interested in Erza, just like he sort of was with the other girls he had met in Fairy Tail, and he figured taking her out on a friendly date could be fun.

Erza blushed at that blunt come-on, though not overmuch, given the fact she wasn’t unused to people flirting with her like this. But coupled with Ranma’s earlier offhand comment, it had a certain effect. “V, very well. I accept,” she said, much to the shock of the thee Fairy Tail mages around them, even Lucy.

Ignoring the looks from her friends with difficulty, Erza coughed into her hand, deliberately changing the subject. “So, at one point you said you used Guns magic and that you fought with a stick. Is that your only hand-to-hand weapon form?”

“Well, other than **un**armed entirely, yeah,” Ranma said. “I tried out one gun and one stick at one point, but it didn't really add anything to my repertoire. I mean, I'm so fast with my Requip that I can shift from two guns to two sticks easily, and being without either is still my preferred form. What about you? Do you use twin swords like you did on this mission all the time, or do you switch off too?”

“I switch off depending on the situation and the armor I call on. I'd like to think of myself as an expert with most hand-to-hand weapons, but of course there's always more to learn,” Erza said, her voice confident as always yet also lacking in any overarching sense of pride now. “I do prefer to use swords.”

“Have you ever tried to use your telekinesis on another opponent’s weapons?”

Erza smiled. “Now that would be telling, wouldn't it?”

“Actually,” Lucy interjected before the two warriors could go off on a ramble about their respective styles, “**I'd** like to learn more about your curse, Ranma. Do you have to remain in it for a certain amount of time between shifts? What about taste, does that change? There are so many questions! I mean, what do you think is the biggest difference between a girl and a guy's body?”

“Weight distribution,” Ranma answered promptly. “When I went through puberty, I had to almost retrain myself entirely in some of my martial arts forms thanks to how my chest started to get in the way and threw me off my balance. As for taste, I suppose you could say that, yeah. It doesn't really change my preferences in what I like to eat, but it definitely does change how they taste. Steak doesn't taste nearly as good, while chocolate and sweet things taste even better.”

“And you’re a Water Dragon Slayer, how does that affect your eating habits?” Gray asked. “Flame brain eats most of his food only after setting it on fire.”

“Well for one thing, when I drink plain water or something like that I get a lot of different flavors, good and bad depending on the source of it. Most of the time I drink plain water these days simply because it's cheaper and it tastes just as good as orange juice or soda or anything like that,” Ranma supplied easily.

Then he winked at Lucy. “Most of the time, anyway. Speaking of tasting different in one form or another though the first time I tried a chocolate smoothie, well let me just say that I was very glad I was alone in the tent at the time, or I would've had to answer a lot of awkward questions from Wendy.”

Lucy and Erza both blushed at the implications, while it went straight over Gray and Elfman's heads.

“What are you all talking about?” Makarov asked quizzically, looking up from where he had been writing something down on a piece of paper. “What curse form? Is it dangerous?”

“Not at all,” Lucy said with a smile. “It's just weird. He changes into a girl when he gets wet!”

“Not when I get wet, when cold water gets on me,” Ranma corrected. Then he gasped in shock as Makarov tossed a bottle of water he pulled from somewhere into his face.

“Wow! You really do change genders!” Makarov shouted as he leaped over, hopping into Ranma’s lap and reaching out to touch his chest. “Oh my got they feel real! HAAHAH!”

Twitching Ranma reached up and calmly wiped out at her eyes clearing them from the water. “You know, you're not the first short pervert I've met. That old asshole was incredibly durable, always bouncing back whatever I did to him. Let's see,” she said slowly, cracking her knuckles and raising her fist above her head. “If you can say the same!”

Makarov hopped away, and Ranma leaped to her feet to chase after him. But just then the train finally started to move, and Ranma groaned, falling back in her chair and muttering about why the hell it was more painful in his female form. Reaching into her weapon space Ranma pulled out a water bottle of her own. “Thank God I refilled this water bottle when we were waiting for the train,” she muttered, heating it up in her hand and then dumping it over her head. Once more a male, Ranma leaned back, glaring angrily around. “Now, where’s the pervy-jiji?”

Erza shook her head. “Don't even try it. Not on a moving vehicle, anyway. You'll have to wait until were back in Magnolia to flay master Makarov.”

“And you wouldn't have a problem with that?” Lucy asked quickly. “I mean,” she stuttered as Erza looked at her. “You are, erm, I mean, you can come off as sort of the guild’s rules enforcer. Wouldn't attacking Master Makarov go against the rules?”

“Not when he is literally asking for it by acting like a pervert,” Erza said dryly. “Master is known as a bit of a pervert, so whatever you wish to do to him is fine. If you can even catch him, anyway. He's quite fast.”

“Whatever,” Ranma said, puffing on his pipe again and then pointing at Erza. “So, tell me more about these armors you use. I've only seen you in a few so far. But you said you have hundreds of them?”

“I think you're fishing for information before our match,” Erza said with a laugh. “But very well, I’ll humor you so long as you have any exact questions and answer mine in turn.”

Ranma did, and the conversation moved on from there. Lucy soon became quite lost and turned her attention to the latest Sorcerer Magazine. Surprisingly, Gray began to talk to her about it. Despite the fact that he stripped so often, Gray did actually have a mind for fashion. Elfman, in contrast, pulled out a magazine called Muscles Weekly and began to read it.

Thankfully, for his own safety and for Ranma’s state of mind, Makarov made no sign of coming back anytime soon. He was, in fact, nearby, but hiding his presence somewhat, watching Ranma and thinking deeply about what he had seen of Laxus’s old friend and what he had been told about him over the years too.

As the conversation continued, Ranma began to realize why Erza was thought of as one of the strongest woman in the Magic Kingdom. Beyond what he had seen, it was the sheer number of different styles that she already knew. Her spear style, swords style, sword and shield style, telekinesis, and even the number of armors. Ranma had sort of dismissed Requip as an offensive style magic, but between his earlier conversation with Erza and this one, he was being forced to rethink that idea. He was still a little concerned because a lot of her abilities seem to come from her various outfits, but being able to use them at all was impressive to the extreme.

For her part, Erza was eagerly asking Ranma as many questions as she could possibly think of about the number of styles he knew and understood. The breadth of his knowledge was frankly astonishing. Ranma knew the names of and could describe the differences between one style and the next to an astonishing degree. She found herself looking forward very much to crossing swords with him, and now understood why his semi-friendship with Laxus had forced Laxus to push himself as hard as it had.

Eventually the conversation petered out, with Erza refusing to give Ranma any more information and vice versa. By mutual consent they agreed to stop asking one another questions until their match, and Ranma leaned back, closing his eyes and puffing on his pipe until he slowly fell into an uneasy sleep as the others, minus the pipe, of course, did the same.

**OOOOOOO**

The wait for the trains to actually start working was not the only problem they faced on their trip back to Magnolia. They had to change trains at Oshibana, the town where Ranma and the others had fought Eisenwald. A large portion of the train rails by the station where they fought had been badly damaged by the same spell of Erigor’s which had destroyed the station. Trains were getting by this by having people and cargo unload from one side of the damage and then getting on a train on the other side. But without the train station and its equipment, this was slow going, on top of which Ranma and the rest had to wait for a passenger train to arrive to take them the rest of the way.

During this enforced layover, the others decided to see if they could find a bar that was still open and get some food or, in Makarov’s case, booze. Ranma bowed out, saying he wanted to get some more sleep, though, given the wink Erza gave him, that cover story evidently didn’t fly with her.

Leaping up to the top of a nearby building, Ranma made certain there were no windows open nearby or any other way someone could overhear before he sat down, leaning against a small shed set on top of the roof. Pricking his finger, he smeared the blood into the recessed area on his broach, activating it, the glow of the lacrima lighting his face eerily in the moonlight.

A moment later, the King of Fiore, Toma E. Fiore appeared. He was an older man of Vicotronious’ generation, but with none of the Pergrandian’s intensity to offset his age. Instead, Ranma had, in their few interactions, found him mostly laid back and rather standoffish. Toma had always given Ranma the impression that he simply let the Magic Council act on its own to control his country’s mage population, while he concentrated on the normal, civilian side of things. On top of that, Ranma had been surprised to find he actually ran a decent espionage force, though he had refused to give Ranma the means to contact them when Ranma followed Eisenwald back into Fiore. Because of all these mixed signals, Ranma wasn’t certain what to think of the man.

“Ranger Oceana, do you have any idea what time it is?” the man groused. He had white hair in a very simple cut, parted in the middle, with a fat, flat nose and deep-set eyes, which Ranma knew were brown, having seen his image before this. Since Toma always had the image just show his face, that was all Ranma could see of the man.

“I know it’s about three in the morning or so here, so however you cut it, it’s too late or too early. But I figured I’d give you a heads up to pass on to Rose about how my hunt for Eisenwald went,” Ranma replied with an overdone shrug, so that the man on the other size of the communication could see it.

Toma’s image twitched visibly at how Ranma addressed Queen Rose Bosciona by her first name, but he didn’t comment, having run into Ranma’s irreverent attitude before this. Instead he just nodded. “I got a very garbled report of some kind of demon sighting a few hours ago, so I can understand the urgency, at least. What happened? Were there any casualties? Is the demon still free somewhere? Will you need backup?”

“No, the hunt’s over with. The demon’s dead, and all the Eisenwald mages are in custody with the local Rune Knights, who, by the way, were utterly pathetic. I don’t know what kind of training they were given, but it kind of sucks,” Ranma replied. “Let me start from the beginning…”

From there Ranma started his tale, describing the ups and downs of his mission from the moment he crossed into Fiore. He was blunt about it, not trying to hide the number of mistakes he had made, making it clear that the Fairy Tail mages had been a major help from beginning to end. He then told Toma about his fight with Lullaby, not mentioning his Devil Slayer magic or Seilah. For one, Ranma knew he couldn’t talk about that fight without blushing and stuttering, given how it ended, and for another, Ranma was still uncertain what to think about that confrontation at all.

Throughout Ranma’s report Toma remained quiet, simply listening, his eyes glinting and a smile on his face at the descriptions of the fighting. It was evident to Ranma that the king liked those parts best for some reason. When Ranma finished the report, he nodded rapidly. “Amazing. And you’re right, Fairy Tail seems to have helped you save the day. There’s a reason why they are known as one of the best guilds in my country, after all,” he said, ending with a bellowing laugh.

Then he seemed to become serious for a moment, staring at Ranma thoughtfully. “You have quickly become known as the best Ranger to deal with magical issues of all sorts, but how are you with dealing with paperwork and investigations?”

“Um… I’m very good at sneaking around and decent at lock-picking, but paperwork is a bit of a mystery for me. I can investigate the physical side of things easily, put not the paperwork side. Why? I mean, ain’t there another Ranger who specializes in that? Jardan, right? He’s supposed to be a wizard at it,” Ranma said, frowning.

That was a bit of an understatement, actually. Four of the kings Ranma had talked to had commented on the fact that Jardan was to numbers and accounting what Ranma was to magic and martial arts: a type of savant who could see patterns in things that others couldn’t. The man was not a mage by any means and apparently would be useless in a fight, but he was able to ferret out secrets in numbers that would have taken entire companies of clerks to find in half the time.

“Indeed, hence my question. You see, your own report about the faulty and low-grade lacrima being sold through the auspices of my Magic Council reached me, and I asked Jardan to start looking into it and other things: little, minor mysteries that have impacted trade here and there throughout Fiore. Taken as single incidents they were nothing to worry about, but Jardan has seen a pattern, and one which is rather worrying due to the size of it,” Toma replied, his image leaning back, his good humor now entirely gone. “Something is going on, either incompetence on a massive scale, which I cannot abide, or something else.”

Ranma nodded slowly, not commenting. Frankly he had a lot of problems already with the way the Magic Council ran things and had the files to prove that there was something going on with them already beyond some kind of money laundering or whatever Toma was talking about. The King of Seven wasn’t the only one who was unhappy with the trend they had seen in how the Magic Council did things, specifically with how they dealt with Dark Guilds. Indeed, he had folders from Seven, Bosco, Caelum, and even Minstrel on that score which he had been collecting for years. *Like Toma said, taken as single events none of them would really matter, but there’s a definite pattern there once you look.*

“So, what do you want from me?” he asked instead.

“I will send you the pertinent information. I take it you are going back to Magnolia?” When Ranma nodded, Toma smiled before going on more hesitantly. “It should be waiting for you when you get there. I’d like a mage’s opinion on it. And if you think there is something there, I would like you to investigate my Magic Council for me. I really would prefer not to take this step, but this issue seems too large for me to ignore, especially given there have been actual deaths involved.”

“Understood. Don’t know how good I’ll be in that kind of Investigation, but I’ll see what I can do,” Ranma replied.

“Good. The information will be held at the train station in Magnolia for you under your name of Oceana, and it will come from ‘merchant Hisui,’ that’s my daughter’s name. Read through it, then do whatever you think necessary, Ranger. That is, after all, why you Rangers were created in the first place.” Without another word Toma ended the communication spell on his end, leaving Ranma in the dark of the night once more.

True to the king’s word, by the time Ranma arrived back in Magnolia there was indeed a series of blue folders in a binder waiting for him under a seal which he had to remove before he could open them. Since it was morning, and he had been away nearly an entire day, Ranma put looking at them off, worried about having left Wendy ‘alone’ for so long. “This is the longest time I’ve ever been away from her since I found her. I just hope she’s not weepy or depressed. I can’t stand it when Wendy’s depressed,” he confided to the others after supposedly coming back from a trip to the bathroom, where he had picked up the folders, hidden now in his Requip space.

“Hopefully they'll be at the Guild,” Erza said, patting him on the shoulder. “And don’t worry about Wendy. I’m certain Mira and the others will have watched over her. She should have spent the night up in Fairy Hills with the other girls. Don't worry, I'm sure nothing has happened to her.”

“Meh. I'm not worried so much about anything physical having happened to her,” Ranma said with a smile. “She's a tough little cookie, despite the fact that she doesn't like to show off. And I doubt that Mira or any of the others would let anything come on. Nah, I'm worried about how she's taking having been left behind for so long.”

“And whether or not she'll force you to do something to make up for it, even more so than what she already wrangled out of you before we left, is also a consideration,” Erza replied dryly.

“That too,” Ranma replied with a sigh.

Ranma needn't have worried. While Wendy had, of course, missed him, she had greatly enjoyed her time around girls. Despite having spent a night away from snuggling with Ranma, she was in a cheerful upbeat mood when she spotted him and the others from where she and Carla were flying above Magnolia. “Look Carla, there’s Ranma-nii!”

“Indeed, I see them, Wendy,” the little white cat said from where she was latched to Wendy’s back via a strap system she and Ranma had developed, her magic wings flaring out to either side of them. This let her have her paws free, just in case, which, given her ability with the Neko-ken, was no small thing. “Shall we go and greet them?”

“Hehe, Yep! Levy-san, Natsu-san, Mira-san! Follow me! Sky Dragon’s Dive Attack!” Wendy shouted, flipping herself and kicking off of the air into a dive downwards towards Ranma. With Carla’s wings stabilizing them they zoomed down like a runaway missile. “Raaannmaaa-niiiii!!!”

Hearing the shout, Ranma looked up, smiling as Wendy slammed into him as Carla expertly let herself out of her harness, hopping to land daintily nearby. Keeping his feet easily, he twirled around, dissipating the impetus of her tackle, his arms going around her in as tight a hug as she was giving him. “Hey, Wendy. Did you have fun?”

“Yep,” Wendy chirped. “It was really fun. We went to all these different shops, and I had something called a manicure, though I didn’t see any men in there, and then I had a sleep over with Bisca, Cana, and the rest of the girls at Fairy Hills. Bisca-san has all of these animals in her room, and they are so amazingly well trained I was able to hold a bunny in my hands, and it was sooo fluffy!”

Eventually running out of air, Wendy slowed down, smiling brightly up at Ranma. “Did you find that Dark Guild and that flute demon?”

“Yep,” Ranma said, making his tone just as upbeat as hers had been.

She pouted at that, but he cocked her head back against his and looked up into the air to see Mira and a girl he hadn’t met before flying in. Above them there looked to be some kind of rocket going off or something, but he ignored that for now, concentrating on the two girls.

First to take his attention was Mira. With her magic activated she looked like a cross between a succubus and a lizard of some kind. She had the wings and was wearing an outfit that Ranma thought looked like it came from a succubus. Her outfit looked almost like a swimsuit, with most of her stomach and chest on display while hugging Mira’s sides and hiding just enough of her breasts to keep her nipples from view. Her forearms had shifted into those of some kind of demonic creature, becoming larger, scaled, and with sharp claws. Mira’s ears had grown somewhat pointy, and a long mark that looked almost like a crack had appeared on her face, running down from right above her left eye and down Mira’s cheek, though the eye itself was obviously working. Her hair, too, was sticking straight up for some reason.

*Huh. That’s oddly sexy looking. Hell, it’s even more in-your face than the outfit Seilah was wearing.*

The girl he hadn’t met before wasn't doing her own flying. Instead she was sitting on a cloud and pushing behind her with something else. The cloud was shaped like the words ‘solid cloud,’ while in her other hand the blue-haired girl was using the word ‘wind’ to push her along. *And that’s an interesting kind of magic there.*

Behind him Lucy's voice grabbed Ranma's attention, and he turned his head to look at her as she stared at the girl on the cloud. “Levy-chan! How? That, that's amazing!”

“Wendy helped me figure it out,” Levy said with a laugh, hopping off of her cloud and dismissing it with a wave of what looked like some kind of pen. “My magic has always been very adaptable, but I never really thought about how to use it like this!”

“She's good at it too,” Mira supplied, clapping the shorter girl on the shoulder, almost sending her stumbling. “She nearly kept up with me and Wendy this morning when we were racing along. What took you guys so long, anyway?” she asked, looking first at Ranma then at Erza, her look changing to a challenging one. “What's the matter, Red? You have trouble keeping up or something?”

Knowing that Mira was always more combative once she had called on her Demon Soul powers, Erza did not take offense as she would have years ago to that comment. Instead she simply shook her head. “Not at all. The fight, however, damaged the train tracks quite a bit, so we had some trouble getting back.”

“I could've just run it, but no, I had to stay with the group…” Ranma said jokingly, pushing at Erza's armor clad shoulder. She pushed back with a laugh, and the two of them grinned at one another. During their discussion the two of them had found in one another kindred souls of a sort, combat junkies who strove to be the best they could be.

Looking at this, Mira frowned. She really didn't want Erza to make a claim on the new guy, but it wasn't like she could do that either just yet.

Ranma, however, turned back to look at Levy. “So, Levy, right? What is your magic?”

“Solid Script,” Levy replied. “I can write out elements like this or anything else, and the word, or name, will be made of that element. Like the ‘wind’ word I was using to push myself along.”

Ranma stared at her, his mouth agape. “You are, like, the most **perfect** support mage ever for a Dragon Slayer. Like, seriously. Please tell me you’ve teamed up at least occasionally with Laxus and Natsu?”

“Hehe. Well, um, I’ve gone on a few jobs with both of them, but neither of them have made any attempt to team up with me permanently,” Levy said bashfully, looking at the ground for a moment. “I'm not a real fighter, so I tend to work on other kinds of jobs with my own teammates. We’re called Team Shadow Gear.”

“Ano, Ranma-nii… Um, speaking of other Dragon Slayers,” Wendy said, leaning back off of Ranma's shoulder, almost hanging onto his waist by her legs as she poked her fingers together. “I, um, have to apologize for something. See, Natsu was really bothering me about fighting him, even after he promised not to! So I, I told him that he could fight you whenever he wanted.”

Ranma simply shrugged. “Okay, fine. I'd like to see what this other Dragon Slayer has to offer anyway.”  *Besides, being attacked every time, hell, that sounds just like being back in my old world. And maybe this time I’ll actually have some fun. Plus, Natsu doesn’t sound like the type to hold a grudge after I beat him.*

“Um, well, then you might want to get ready!” With that Wendy leaped away, hurrying to put Erza between her and where Ranma was standing, which Carla had already done.

Ranma turned and looked up at that, watching as Natsu zoomed down with a trail of fire coming from his feet, a blue-furred Exceed Ranma hadn’t seen before clinging to his back, his wings out and directing them. “Yahoo! Ranma, fight me!” Natsu bellowed at the top of his lungs as he zoomed downward. “Fire Dragon’s Iron Fist!”

Ranma swiftly dodged a bit to one side while conjuring up his water magic powers around his hand. As Natsu flew past where Ranma had been standing, Ranma grabbed Natsu’s arm with the hand covered in water. In a welter of steam, that water spread to engulf Natsu entire arm, dousing his flame. Before Natsu could realize what had happened, Ranma had twirled around, hurling him into the ground.

Having hopped away at the last minute, Happy stared between Ranma and Natsu, shaking his head. “Our ninja assault failed, Natsu. We need to retreat and come up with another plan, nin-nin!”

“They were playing sky ninja for some reason,” Wendy whispered from where she was still hiding behind Erza. This was a good thing, since Natsu’s impact with the road had thrown up chunks of the cobblestones, which Erza, Elfman, and Mira blocked or caught, protecting the other girls.

Gray simply ignored them, being too far away from the point of impact to be hit. Now he shook his head. “Damn, Ash-for-brains, I knew you were weak, but that was freaking sad!”

“Shut up, Icicle Prick!” Pushing himself to his feet, Natsu glared down at his arm and ignited it again despite it still being wet from the water. “No amount of water is going to douse my flames!”

“We’ll just see about that,” Ranma replied with a smirk.

“Right!” Natsu bellowed, charging forward.

This time Ranma leaped up over him, smacking his hands down onto the back of Natsu's head. This caused him to stumble forward to where he slammed into Erza, face to armored chest.

“Natsu,” she growled angrily. “What are the rules about starting fights around the city!? That's what we have sparring areas for back in the Guild!” Before Natsu could back away, Erza kicked him hard in the stomach, sending him flying over the rooftops.

“Not bad distance,” Ranma said professionally. “You could've put a little more power into it; you didn't wind up enough. I’d give you a seven out of ten.”

Erza huffed irritably at that, showing no sign of thinking it strange to give points about such things. “I promise I'll do better next time.”

“Maybe we could make a game of it,” Gray said, smirking. “Punt-the-flame-brain.”

“You say that as if you're able to do it at all,” Mira said dryly. “Isn't he ahead of you in your fights, nineteen to eighteen?”

“Hah! You’re wrong, Mira! It’s the other way around!” Gray crowed.

Erza and Elfman, however, both took the wind out of his sails quickly. “No, she’s right. It’s nineteen to eighteen in Natsu’s favor, at least. It might be more like twenty-one to sixteen.”

“No way!” Gray shouted, stripping suddenly, flinging his clothes in every direction. “I’m at least closer to tying with the flame freak!”

“Kyaah!” Wendy shouted, twisting away and burying her head into Lucy’s waist.

“Damn it, Gray! What did I tell you I’d do if you stripped in front of Wendy-chan!” Ranma bellowed, lashing out now with his own kick. It caught Gray in the center of the chest, hurling him up an out of sight into the sky. Turning back to Erza, Ranma winked. “See, that’s how you do it.”

“I see…” Erza said with a nod, looking as if she was taking notes mentally. “The wind up is more important than I realized when you want to get distance rather than injure.”

“Exactly. It’s an entirely different style, you see…” Ranma began, moving down the street as Mira led the way back to the Guild Hall.

To Ranma’s mild amusement he had to come back to the score he had given to Erza when they came within sight of the massive Guild Hall. Because in front of them stood Natsu, standing right in front of a small crater he must have made when he landed. “Hmm… Did you really intend to have him land right by your Guild Hall?”

“Yes,” Erza replied, keeping her face almost expressionless as she responded.

“Realllly?” Ranma asked, leaning in close and looking at Erza with some skepticism.

“Yes, really. I wouldn’t lie about something like that,” Erza replied, pushing him away and twisting to one side.

“Huh. Well, okay, then. I’ll up your score to an eight out of ten. That’s pretty decent distance and aim…for an amateur, anyway,” Ranma said, a grin spreading across his features.

Erza reared back, her expression shifting into one of affronted pride. “Who are you calling amateur!”

In reply Ranma simply smirked, pointing ahead and to one side of where Natsu was still standing, now glaring at them for having stopped so far away but not moving to attack again. “One, two, three…”

As Ranma hit three, Gray appeared, falling with a crash into the street. “Amateur, see? Gray, you better have found some shorts or something or I’ll go through with my threat from the train!”

“Gah!” Gray shouted, leaping up from where he had crashed and rushing inside the Guild Hall before the dust of his impact had settled.

“Hmmpf. That… Very well. It seems at least in that specific area I have much to learn,” Erza muttered. Even Mira nodded agreement with that, and the group continued to walk toward the entrance to the Guild Hall.

“Hahah! That’s what you get, Stripper!” Natsu shouted, laughing at his rival before turning back to Ranma and the others. “Now, come on! Water Dragon Slayer!” he bellowed with a grin. “Fight me! Let's find out what's really stronger, fire or water!”

But before Natsu could launch himself forward, Gray came back out, once more dressed. He stripped so often the Strauss twins kept five different sets of clothing for Gray at the bar. “Hey, I think Ranma showed pretty well which would win when you attacked a few minutes ago, Pinky! And besides, I've got dibs after Erza! You’ll just have to wait your turn.”

“So if I beat you, Stripper, I can take your spot, right! Sounds like a plan,” Natsu shot back before slamming his forehead into Gray’s as the two began to grapple with one another.

As the two forgot about the rest of them, Ranma shook his head. “Does this happen often?”

“More often than I care to think about,” Mira said with a sigh, which was shared by every other girl in sight. Even Lucy, the newest member of the guild, joined in.

“For today, though,” he said with a smile down at Wendy. “I believe I promised I’d buy my little sister here a few things.”

At that Wendy smiled widely and looked over to Carla. Carla too nodded and stood back slightly, placing her hands over her chest as she intoned, “Transformation Magic: Human Form.” With that Carla’s body changed to that of a young girl who looked the same age as Wendy, with white hair. She retained her tail and ears, and her dress had shifted with her, which was part of the spell.

Lisanna chuckled, having seen this form the evening before along with the others, while nearby, Happy seemed to pout, looking away. “That is so strange. I doubt I’ll ever get used to it. I mean, you’re very pretty, Carla, but I never would have guessed you could develop that kind of ability.”

“Nor I, to be honest. But Ranma, despite being a bore, lout, and all around buffoon at times, was also an excellent teacher,” Carla replied, her now human mouth twisting into a scowl, as if praising Ranma physically hurt. She looked over at Happy’s expression and smiled thinly. *I should have done this sooner, but it still is not quite second nature to me just yet. Very fun, though, and I hope it will keep Happy from chasing after me.*

Carla linked an arm with Wendy, the two of them now looking almost like siblings despite Carla‘s ears and tail. She turned her attention back to Ranma as Wendy reached up to take her older brother’s hands. “Come, I know just the place. Mira-san and the others showed us both around, and now we can do the same with you.”

However, before the two Dragon Slayer siblings and Carla could get away, they were interrupted by Natsu, who had smashed back into the Guild Hall. “Oh no you don't! You're not leaving until I get my fight!”

Ranma groaned, but pushed Wendy away lightly and stood there on the road, facing Natsu and making a come hither gesture with one hand. “Well then, come on. Let's get this over with.”

At this point Makarov intervened. Having gone ahead while the others waited for Ranma to come back from the bathroom at the station, he had come out of the guild to see what all the fuss was about. Now he thrust out his hand, activating his Titan magic before slamming a gigantic palm between the two of them. “Enough, you two! I won’t have mages fighting out in the open! Just think of the repair bills, damn it! No, if you want to fight you’ll do it back at the guild’s sparring ring.”

“Which is what I said earlier, Natsu! You seriously need to start listening more often,” Erza said with a huff.

“Yeah! Let’s go!” Natsu barked happily.

“Aye, sir!” Happy shouted, landing on Natsu’ shoulder.

“Now, wait just a minute! Ranma and I have already agreed to fight one another. You’ll just have to wait your turn to challenge our new friend, Natsu,” Erza said sternly.

“Bah, I say let ’em go. It isn’t like it’ll take Ranma long to beat Natsu down, if he’s really as strong as Wendy said,” Mira retorted. “You’ll get your pain fix after that, I’m sure, Red.”

While Natsu whined at that, Erza thought about it logically. “Hmm, that is true.” She then smirked, moving to clap a hand on Ranma’s shoulder. “Just don’t forget about our little bet. I’m looking forward to all that free strawberry cake.”

“But not our date after I win? I’m hurt,” Ranma replied with his own smirk.

“Wait, what?” Mira said, holding up a hand quickly. “What date?”

But Natsu grabbed at Ranma’s arm, pulling him along the streets before he could reply. “Never mind that stuff! Let’s go!”

Turning, Mira looked at Erza for an explanation, her eyes narrowing.

“Ranma and I have a bet about who will win. My victory will ensure he pays for my strawberry cakes for a month. If he wins, I have agreed to go on a date with him,” Erza replied with a very faint blush on her cheeks.

“It sounds like you win either way,” Mira groused, seeing the blush and knowing that it meant Erza was interested in Ranma too. *Hmm… So does this mean I need to step up my game, or that he’s not interested in me as I had thought?*

With that in mind, Mira sidled up to Ranma, throwing an arm around his shoulder. He didn't object to this, and she smirked internally, sliding a little closer, just enough to press her chest very lightly into his arm. “So,” she said coquettishly, “you've already promised Erza a match, and, if you win, you want to go on a date with her? I feel I should be asking for similar treatment~…”

“Erm, well, I can fight you after I'm done with the others, I suppose,” Ranma said, making no move to move away or acknowledge the fact that he could feel Mira’s breasts against his arm. It wasn't as if it was unpleasant, after all, and if she wanted to flirt with him, that was fine. While he wasn't exactly looking for a relationship, he wasn't blind to the idea of one either, or even just some fun with a girl, regardless of how far it went. “And if ya want a date, well, I suppose I can do that too after our match.”

Moments later Ranma and Natsu stared across from one another in the sparring ring. The ring, along with several other training areas, was located in the backyard of the Guild Hall, a large area that stuck out from the rest of the city and was surrounded by a dense forest.

Luckily for everyone involved, it was only midmorning, and most of the guild members hadn’t yet shown up for one reason or another, so the onlookers were all able to spread out and get a good view of the fight. The only two who were there were Lisanna and Anna, who joined Happy in holding up tiny ‘Go Natsu’ signs.

“All right, this match is to knock out or ring out. Beyond that, no blows to the boy bits or eyes and no killing blows. Other than that, go!” Makarov shouted from the sidelines.

At his shout the two Dragon Slayers launched themselves forward, their hands already covered by their magics. When they clashed steam erupted, covering the sparring ring and almost blinding the onlookers as the two slammed their fists into one another.

Ranma had at first thought he’d be able to douse Natsu’s flames again just as easily as he had in Natsu’s initial attack. But the other Dragon Slayer kept funneling his magical powers into the fire around his arms, keeping them going and steaming away Ranma’s water long after a regular flame would have gone out.

*The boy’s got massive magical reserves, at least. Not as large as mine, though*, Ranma thought, pushing more of his own power into the water. *And his situational awareness needs work.*

Indeed, Natsu was concentrating so much on his flames that he didn't notice Ranma's other fist flashing out until it slammed into the side of his head. The blow sent him stumbling backwards, and then he was flung backwards as Ranma’s kick caught him in the stomach.

“Decent instincts and magical power, not so much anything else. Ya want to stop now?” Ranma asked.

“Bah! You’ll sing a different tune when I burn away your ocean, Oceana!” Natsu shouted. With a growl his arms ignited from elbow to fingertip and his legs did the same from knee down. “Karyu no Tekken (Fire Dragon’s Iron Fist)!”

To one side Lucy sidled up to Mira and Erza, who were watching the action and commenting on it to one another. “Erm, do you think they're going to become another Natsu and Gray, and for the same reason? Fire and water don't mix just as much as fire and ice.”

“I don't think so,” Erza said simply. “While Natsu is a strong mage with an immense amount of potential and heart, I don't believe he has the skills necessary to fight Ranma in a one-on-one just yet.”

“That and they don't have the unnecessary baggage weighing them down that Gray and Natsu do,” Mira supplied with a smirk, having noticed Gray coming back out of the guild to one side.

“Unnecessary baggage? You mean Natsu and Gray’s years of being rivals?” Lucy asked, confused and wondering about the almost dirty look on Mira’s face.

“Nope, I mean Gray's unresolved sexual tension towards Natsu,” Mira replied with a laugh. “It's the opinion of a few of the girls that he's either completely asexual, having used his Ice magic so often the cold’s affected his ability to that use his little icicle, or he's gay.”

As Lucy blushed and Erza began to shake her head, trying to dispel that image, Mira turned her attention back to the fight. She watched as Ranma ducked under a punch from Natsu, guiding the blow over his head with a flick of his hand, as his other fist pummeled Natsu's chest. *Damn, he is so fast!*

Natsu staggered back slightly, but raised a leg to kick out, which was caught in turn. But before Ranma could take advantage of that, Natsu kicked off the ground with his other leg, throwing that leg around in a kick, forcing Ranma to release Natsu or block the kick with his other hand.

He did, grabbing Natsu's legs in both hands. Swiftly twirling in place, Ranma laughed. “Alleyooop!” With that he let go, and Natsu was flung backwards to slam back into the side of the Guild Hall. He crashed through to the shouts and exclamations of astonishment and anger at the destruction to the guild from the few guild members inside.

Natsu, however, didn't care, grabbing up some of the bits and pieces of the wall and hurling them at Ranma, who shattered them with punches. But this allowed Natsu the time to follow through, shouting out “Karyu no Hoko (Fire Dragons Roar)!”

“Soryu no Tsume (Water Dragon’s Claws)!” Ranma shouted, smashing his own water claw into the oncoming fireball. Natsu’s most powerful attack was engulfed in steam, dissipating well before it could reach Ranma.

But even so, Natsu didn’t give up or even slow down. Instead he raced forward, using the steam to close with Ranma. “Karyu no Yokugeki (Fire Dragon’s Wing Attack)!”

Again and again they exchange blows, and, again and again, Ranma blocked the fire attacks of his opponent with water. As he did, Ranma analyzed Natsu.

*Very good strength, nearly up to what I was when I was his age when I arrived in Nerima, though nowhere near where I was when I reached that age this time around. Speed and coordination are both good. Not great, but his style’s more static than mine, so that doesn't really matter as much as it would with a more mobile style. And don’t get me started on his durability!*

That last thought was tinged with something approaching envy. While Natsu was in no way near to Ranma’s own durability, he was far closer than he should have been given the difference in their ages and Ranma’s ki reserves. But because his ki and his Dragon Slayer abilities were constantly at odds in that area in particular, Ranma hadn’t made nearly as much progress in his durability as he had in his speed or style. The fact that it had taken him so long to realize what was going on galled Ranma at times when he thought of it, and he was no closer to figuring out a solution that would work in actual combat now than he was when he first identified the issue.

Shaking his head at that, Ranma focused once more on his opponent. *He could take most of the mages I’ve met and Ryoga, maybe even Pantyhose, back in my old world, given his magic. Herb, on the other hand, is probably his better in a lot of ways. He seriously needs training. He's got animal instincts, but he hasn't made the jump from them to combat instincts.*

“Which is probably why you're trying fight everyone and their mother,” Ranma said aloud, following up on those thoughts as if he’d spoken them all aloud. Natsu paused, frowning at him, and Ranma took advantage of this by pulling on his hands, as they were grappling, throwing Natsu just a little off-balance, enough to get a kick in to hurl Natsu away.

“But just throwing yourself at stronger opponents won’t work on its own. You need training, kid,” Ranma said, straightening up from his fighting crouch. “You know how to throw a mean punch, but you don't know how to segue from a punch into a kick very well. You don't have much actual style to your assault, just pure instincts and physical ability. Those can only carry you so far, kid.”

“I don't need any of that!” Natsu growled. “I just need to challenge strong opponents, and when I beat them I'll get stronger! And stop it with the kid crap! You’re not that much older than me!”

*What do you think you are, a Saiyan?* Ranma thought, but did not say aloud. “Fine, kid. If you want me to fight you, fine. But once I beat you, you’re going to have to do a series of tests before the next time, or else I just won’t fight you.”

“Grr! Wendy said you would let me, though!” Natsu growled, really irritated that these two weren't following their instincts as Dragon Slayers.

“You can challenge me, you can even throw punches, but I won't fight you,” Ranma said flatly. “I’ll just let you hit me until you get tired of it.” *And if, in this way, I get some durability training, hey, it’s all to the good, right?*

Blinking at that, Natsu actually began to scowl before pausing and staring at Ranma’s stern features. Nearby Elfman shook his head as Gray and more than a few of the other mages who had begun to gather to watch the fight frowned. “That wouldn’t be a very manly way of dealing with a challenge, Ranma.”

Ranma shrugged. “Ya want to discourage a combat junky, never give him what he wants.”

Indeed, Natsu now looked like a puppy denied a treat. “Fine., what do you mean, a series of tests?”

“I'll tell you after I beat you,” Ranma said simply.

“You mean, if you beat me!” Natsu's shouted. His ire and his fires ignited once more. “Karyu no Kagizume! (Fire Dragon’s Claw)!” With that Natsu charged forward as if he had just used a rocket under his feet, aiming to slam his equally burning fists into Ranma's body. But Ranma leaped over the blow, coming down with a crescent kick that Natsu was barely able to turn around in time to block.

From there, Ranma began to dodge in the air, lashing out only occasionally as he continued to analyze Natsu’s style while giving him some pointers to work on right away. Now that the he knew the level the other Dragon Slayer was at, he had moved from potential friend/rival to young kouhai—junior student—who needed some pointers to take the next step forward.

At one point Natsu thrust out a palm, but instead of dodging Ranma blocked it with his forearm and connected with his own punch that sent Natsu reeling, the magic about his arms guttering out under a new hiss of steam thanks to the water around Ranma’s arms. “You telegraph your attacks too much, and they take too much time. Short jabs, controlled movements; none of this wild wailing.”

Growling, Natsu called up his magic, but before he could finish his spell, Ranma was in his face, a hard chop coming for his neck, which Natsu barely dodged with a yelp, letting it slam into his shoulder instead. “You take too long to bring up your magic.”

This continued for several moments as Ranma went on the attack. He pushed Natsu back and around the sparring ring, the younger Dragon Slayer now utterly unable to regain any of the initiative.

More than half of the guild had arrived at this point and come out to watch the show and most of them were now staring in shock. Yes, they had seen Ranma deal with Natsu earlier but that had been a one-off sucker-punch sort of thing. Whatever else could be said about Natsu, he was one of the best fighters in the guild. To see him being taken apart so easily by this relative stranger was something none of them had anticipated when they came to the guild that day.

Except, that is, for the girls who had seen Wendy fight Natsu the day before and the group who had gone with him against Eisenwald. All of them took it in stride, although Erza was nodding her head sagely at the advice Ranma occasionally shouted out. “I've told them the same things numerous times,” she said as an aside to Lucy, who was watching this with her mouth wide open. “Natsu and Gray both telegraph their attacks too much. Natsu also seems to think that volume adds more power to his magic attacks, when all it really does is warn his opponent what he’s about to do.”

Lucy swallowed involuntarily, knowing that could've just as easily been sent her way when she used her spirits. She tended to shout the orders to them when she really didn't have to. “Oh, heheh. Well, at least that bit’s easy to fix, right?”

Back in the fight, Natsu had just been tripped up once more, falling flat on his face as Ranma hopped away. “On the other hand,” Ranma said, watching as Natsu once more picked himself up off the floor, “your endurance is pretty decent, at least when it comes to taking punishment. You ever push yourself physically to the limits in terms of endurance, Natsu? Like how far you can run a day or whatever before feeling exhausted?”

“Lots of times,” Natsu growled, shooting forward once more. This time, though, he began to show that he had been listening. He wasn't telegraphing his attacks much, and he came in at Ranma in a far more controlled manner.

But when Natsu tried to power up his magic, it still took a lot of time, something that Ranma instantly pointed out while also taking advantage of it. “Don't try to push all of your magical power into each attack!” he growled, slamming a punch into the side of Natsu face, then getting behind him and grabbing him by the back of his vest, hurling him over his shoulder to land face first into the ground.

He tried to get behind Natsu again to lock him in a chokehold, but Natsu rolled, breaking Ranma's grip on the back of his shirt and flinging out a kick that Ranma had to leap over. “Good! You reacted damn well there. Keep it up.”

“Is this a spar or a training session?” asked one of the watchers.

“I think it would depend on who you ask, Romeo,” Mira said with a laugh. “Ranma sees it as a training session, whereas I think Natsu’s just trying to kill him at this point.”

Indeed, by this point Natsu was getting frustrated. For a bit he had sort of tried to follow Ranma's advice, but now he was just getting irritated, his inability to really land a punch getting to him once more. “Dammit, stay still!”

“No,” Ranma said coldly, irritated at that. “You won't learn anything if I just let you hit me when we’re sparring like this.”

Watching as Natsu growled incoherently, Ranma shook his head. “You're letting your Dragon Slayer instincts control you,” he said before he ducked under a punch instead of using it to take to the air again. An elbow slammed into Natsu’s gut, doubling him over, and Ranma then powered up into an upper cut that caught Natsu on the chin, sending him flying backwards.

Before he could land, Ranma had leaped up after him and slammed a punch into the side of his face at Amiguriken speed, accompanied by the sound of a machine gun going off, though, of course, no one in this world would have recognized such. By the time they both hit the ground once more, Natsu was unconscious, his body landing like a sack of flour.

Standing back, Ranma shook his head, looking over at Erza. “He's got fantastic endurance, but his Dragon Slayer instincts sort of bleed over into his combat instincts. He has to separate the two and add a lot more actual style to his repertoire.”

“I agree,” Erza said, moving over to check Natsu for injuries. Despite the viciousness of that last attack Natsu was only lightly bruised here and there, Ranma having gone very easy on him. “However, how do you differentiate the two? And getting through to Natsu, that has always been the issue.”

“Good questions,” Ranma mused, tugging at his pigtail thoughtfully.

“What do you want to have him do before you’ll accept his next challenge?” Erza asked.

“Control exercises,” Ranma stated bluntly. “Not emotional ones—I don't think he'd get very far with those without some kind of example or something. I'll have to think about those more. But you saw him take so much time between attacks, right? He needs to learn how to push just enough magic into his attacks so that he can call them up quicker.”

“That's one of the reasons why no one has nominated him for the S class trials yet,” Mira supplied, moving over to join the two of them as Lisanna and Anna moved to Natsu. “He's got fantastic endurance, great magical potential and ability, but not enough adaptability. He’s also not exactly a thinker, and a lot of times on S class missions you run into things where you need to think through a solution.”

“I can’t help, teaching him how to think things through,” Ranma said with a laugh. “That took me a long time myself. But the rest, I think I can help them if he wants it. **And** if he works at it. If he just turns around and keeps on trying to fight me even after agreeing to my terms, I'm not going to put up with it.”

“Don't be too hard on Natsu,” Erza said, watching the Strauss twins pulling Natsu to his feet, their arms wrapped around his middle. “Despite his combative tendencies, Natsu’s one of the best friends anyone could have, and there's no one I'd rather have my back in a life or death fight, even Laxus.”

“I can see that, I suppose,” Ranma said. “Still, it wouldn't hurt him to broaden his horizons away from Dragon Slayer magic and into some actual combat styles.”

Wendy giggled and said happily, “That’s a little bit like the pot calling the kettle black, isn't it, Onii-chan? You are kind of combat mad.”

“Guilty as charged, I suppose, little person,” Ranma said, winking at her. “Now, I think we were about to go and do something, right?”

Just then however, their conversation was interrupted by a shout from nearby. “Erza Scarlett! By order of the Magic Council you will come with me.”

Everyone there turned in the direction of a small pathway leading around the Guild Hall from where the shout originated. There they saw a short frog-man standing at the head of two columns of Rune Knights, bunched together too much to look really intimidating, but still a presence at his back.

At this sight Wendy shivered and rushed to hide behind Bisca, who was the nearest one to her. “What's the matter, honey?” she asked, looking down at the young girl quizzically.

Carla spoke up for the gagging Wendy, moving over to join the two of them from where she had been speaking to Levy. “Ranma made a meal with frog’s legs once, and it was rather disgusting, even for me. It was worse than the times we had to eat lizards when we were traveling through Desierto. Wendy nearly gagged on the smell alone.”

“Really,” Bisca said with a smile on her face as she ruffled Wendy’s hair, deciding to poke fun at the little girl for a second as the others moved into more comfortable talking distance with the frog-man. “Isn’t that a bit like cannibalism, a Dragon Slayer eating lizards?”

Wendy pouted at that so adorably it was all Bisca could do not to pick her up and squeal at how cute she was. “No! I might be a Dragon Slayer, but that doesn't make me a dragon myself. And some lizards are kind of tasty if you get the right spices. But nothing could make me ever want to eat frog legs again!”

The frog man coughed, having overheard them and looking a little bit irritated and dyspeptic. He had also fallen silent, however, until the others were close enough to have a conversation without shouting.

“I am Erza Scarlett,” Erza said before he could say anything. “What does the Magic Council want with me?”

The frog-man recovered himself and nodded at her abruptly. “You are under arrest for the destruction of Oshibana station as well as damage to one of the nation’s trains. You will come with me to the Magic Council’s Tower of Knowledge where they will question you on the matter personally. If found guilty you will be imprisoned for willful misuse of magic.”

As the rest of the gathered guild roared in anger at that, Erza took the news stoically. “Very well. Give me a moment before…”

But she in turn was stopped by voice. “Yeah, how about no,” Ranma said, stepping forward from where he had been walking beside her and Mira. “That's just pathetic and stupid. For one thing, Erza’s magic is well known and certainly wasn't part of how the train station was destroyed. You already have the culprit for that. For another, the destruction to the train wasn't much, and that was me and Lucy.”

“Don't get me involved in this!” Lucy screamed, trying to hide behind the larger Cana, who was actually the tallest girl in the guild. Cana giggled at that, but didn't make any move to try to get away as Lucy pressed up against her from behind, trying to hide her face in Cana’s hair.

“Be that as it may, Erza Scarlett, as leader of this group, will be brought in for questioning,” the frog man said sternly.

“And I’m saying no. That's just not going to happen, frog guy,” Ranma replied, now within arm’s reach.

“It is an order from the Magic Council,” the frog said angrily, gesturing to the Rune knights behind him. “Who are you to deny them?”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Ranma said, moving over and touching his broach for a moment, allowing it to appear. “You know what this is?”

The frog's eyes widened in astonishment. Of course he did. **Every** government official throughout Ishgar knew with those marks meant. Most of them would never have seen them except when they were informed about them, but they were still part of every government official’s education. He nodded. “I, I… Yes, I…”

“Good,” Ranma said with a thin smile, keeping his voice down and indicating with one hand that the frog-man should do the same. *Damn, it seems as if lady luck has actually worked in my favor this one time.* “In that case you know that unless your orders come from King Toma Fiore, mine supersede any others. Which means I can countermand them,” Ranma went on in a low voice as he waved the Fairy Tail Guild away.

The frog-man gulped at that, images of what would happen to him if he came back empty handed going through his mind. “But, but I can't…”

“You can,” Ranma said grimly, reaching for and grabbing the frog man's shoulder, “or I can contact Toma personally right here and now and get him to agree to it. Will you argue with him in person?”

The frog man gulped, then shook his head. “What would you have me do, Ranger?”

“You were told to bring in someone for questioning by the Magic Council. So, you're going to take me to them. And if you try to warn them I’m coming, it will go very poorly for you,” Ranma said, working out a plan as he went along.

“But they're expecting Erza Scarlett!” the frog-man said, trying to make his tone more helpful than confrontational, understanding now what Ranma had in mind, at least in general terms. “The moment they don't see her and see you instead, they’ll know that something is wrong.”

“Don't worry about that,” Ranma said with a laugh. “I'll figure something out there. Now, go back your troops and tell them what's happening, and I'll meet you by your carriage or whatever in a second.”

“…Very well,” the frog-man said with a sigh.

As the frog-man ordered his knights back out to the main road, Ranma returned to the others, and Erza immediately began to remonstrate with him. “Ranma, you can't just…”

“Stop,” Ranma ordered, holding up a hand and glaring at her, leaning in to whisper so only she and Mira, who was the next nearest, could listen. “What part of my occupation did you not understand? I don't answer to your Magic Council, and I barely have to follow Fiore’s laws at all. Besides, I'm sort of using this to follow up on something I was told last night when I checked in. It's called killing two birds with one stone, Erza. Go with it.”

“Nonetheless, I don't think you should have been so confrontational with them.”

“Really?” Ranma said with a laugh. “If you think of that as confrontational, you really don't want to be there when I meet the council.”

“So…” Natsu said, having recovered and having made his way over quickly after learning what was going on. “You're not going to get arrested and neither is Erza? I want to be clear on this. Because, let me tell you, fighting the entire Magic Council sounds like a hell of a lot of fun, and if we have to it to defend our family, we’ll do it!”

“It does sound fun, doesn’t it,” Ranma said with a grin, holding out his fist to the other boy who gleefully slammed his own into it. “Unfortunately, that's not in the cards just yet. Although if it does get to that point I’ll keep your name in mind.”

Makarov, however, was much more serious when he came over to them. “Boy, do you know what you've done! You've denied the Magic Council. And in my Guild Hall! Or right outside my Guild Hall, which amounts to the same thing. They'll think I’m in cahoots with it whatever you do.”

“No, they won't,” Ranma said, looking over at Erza and Mira. “After I'm gone, tell him, okay? Right now I need to get ready to go. Besides, their calling in Erza Scarlett has nothing to do with questioning her about the fight against Eisenwald. It's all about them trying to flex their nonexistent muscle, trying to show that they’re on the ball or whatever. It’s stupid, and I'm not going to put up with it. Erza had nothing to do with that destruction. She followed my orders on this mission, and she's too damn good a mage to be blamed for something that was not her fault.”

“You just be careful, okay? If the Magic Council doesn't recognize your authority they might try to throw you in jail,” Mira said seriously, scowling somewhat at the way Era had flushed just a little bit at Ranma’s words.

“Then they'll be very disappointed in the outcome,” Ranma said simply, patting her on the back and then looking over at Erza. “However, I will sort of need to be in disguise for this. So can you help me be Erza Scarlett for a bit?”

Erza smiled at that, and her eyes were twinkling. “I can help you with that, I think. Although, I would like you to take a recording device along if possible. While you're right, I probably shouldn't be there for your conference with the Council, a few of their reactions in particular might interest me.”

“Recording device, got it,” Ranma replied with a smirk. “Now, I need some of your armor and maybe some of your chest straps.”

“How do you know I wear chest straps, Ranma?” Erza said, holding her arms up over her chest even as she turned away to lead the way into the Guild Hall.

“The way you move in that armor,” Ranma replied with a faint smile. “How about your hair? Do you do anything with it beyond the obvious? I mean, it’s amazing way you have it, but do you ever put it into a ponytail like I do, or do I need to figure out some way of making my hair longer?”

Flushing once more at Ranma’s praise, Erza shook her head. “I think you can get away with just having it short, but it will have to be loose. And you'll need contacts for your eyes,” Erza went on as she led the way to the women's room.

“I have some. This won’t be the first time I've had to go undercover,” Ranma said with a chuckle. “Impersonating a specific person isn’t something I’ve done before, but it shouldn't be all that difficult.” With that he dumped a bottle of cold water all over his head before following Erza into the girls room, ignoring the shouts of shocked surprise from the onlookers. “Now, come on. Let's make me pretty!”

Erza laughed at that, than followed the other redhead willingly into the girls’ room. Soon afterward, Ranma was in one of the bathroom stalls as Erza handed the shorter redhead her normal chest plate. “I still don’t know why you don’t want my help to put it all on.”

“I might look like a girl, but I’m a guy up in my head, Erza. You want a guy you’ve known for less than two days to see what you have underneath your armor?” Ranma asked, pulling off her shirt and putting on a chest wrap.

“A blouse and my wraps?” Erza asked, her brow furrowing. She then heard a grunt and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing. I just thought we were the same size up top. Turns out, not so much,” Ranma muttered, her face a blush as she pushed both her hands up into the chest cavity. *Damn, she’s got at least a full size on me, and that’s with wrapping them up!* “I’m going to have to stuff a bit.”

After dressing in much the same outfit Erza was wearing, Ranma exited the stall. She put her hands on her hips and smirked at Erza. “Well, what do you think?”

“I think you might want to bring some high heels or something similar. You are at least three inches shorter than me,” Erza replied dryly. “Now, let’s work on that makeup of yours. Meanwhile, you can tell me why you want to beard the council in its lair.”

A few minutes of humiliation later—Ranma had never worn rouge or lipstick, which Erza did in very tiny amounts—the two redheads walked out to shouts of shock and fear. “Oh my God, there’s two of them!” seemed to be the consensus of the majority of the guild, while more than one man was just staring and blushing.

“Wow, that’s really weird,” Natsu said bluntly. “That curse is odd on its own, but seeing you dress up like Erza makes it even worse. It’s like she somehow summoned a slightly shorter version of herself.” The Fire Dragon Slayer’s eyes widened. “You’re not going to help her enforce the rules or anything, are you!?”

“Not at all. I’m not exactly much for rules most of the time. Not even the rules of physics,” Ranma replied, smirking at her own little joke. “Still, if I get this reaction from you lot, that means I can probably trick anyone else I run into on this trip.”

As she moved toward the waiting frog-man, who had come into the guild as Ranma was getting changed, Wendy raced over to Ranma, taking her hand in both of hers. “No way are you leaving me behind, Onii-chan, not again. There won’t be any big demon on this trip, after all.”

“But Wendy, this is going to be a really boring job, you know. I’m going to be stuck in meetings the instant we get there for hours on end. Surely you’d like to stay here with Carla and our new friends?”

“We’d love to have you and Carla here,” Mira supplied, followed by nods of agreement from most of the nearby guild members. The only one who wasn’t nodding was Makarov, who was looking at Erza quizzically, wondering how the heck Ranma had talked her into going along with this ruse.

“Nope. I don’t want to be left behind again!” Wendy growled, which from her came out as somewhat out of character, but there was no denying the stubbornness in her eyes.

“Well, I hope you brought a magic light and some coloring books, or else this is going to be a very boring trip for you,” Ranma said with a sigh, leaning down and giving her a kiss on her forehead. “I’ve got a lot of reading on my own to do.”

“Best to hide her in the carriage’s trunk for the trip,” the frog-man said tiredly. “Several of the Councilmen have farseeing lacrima that they could use to check up on our progress back to Crocus.”

“What about you, Carla?” Ranma asked, looking over to the Exceed, who was still in her human form.

“I think not. This sounds like a political job, and I would rather not have to deal with that. The last time we had to, there was that mad court wizard who wished to dissect me, remember?” Carla said, growling at the memory. “Besides, this way I can stay to find us an apartment or house to live in while we stay in Magnolia. I presume we are still planning to do so for a time?”

Nodding at that, Ranma sighed. “You sure you still want to do this, Wendy? Carla’s right, this is just me putting the fear of their king into them. No fighting, nothing really interesting.”

“I'm sure, Onii-chan,” Wendy said firmly. “You left me behind on that last job; you're not doing it again, even if Carla stays. I don’t want you to get into that kind of bad habit.”

Nodding at that, Ranma turned to the Fairy Tail mages, smirking at them all. He’d enjoyed his time around the guild to this point and hoped to return after this…well, he wasn’t certain what to call this. Personal quest? Mission? Lucky break? Whatever it was, he was looking forward to once again pointing out to government officials that they were idiots. “We’ll be back in a few days, and I hope you’re around for our match, Erza, as well as Laxus. Where the heck is Sparky, anyway?”

“He took an S-class mission tracking down some kind of underground monster that was digging under towns and train tracks out there,” Makarov supplied, still looking at the boy-turned-girl and Erza quizzically.

“Feh. Oh well, I’ll meet up with him eventually, I guess.”

OOOOOO

“GRAAAHAHH!” Laxus roared, bringing his hands forward and down, lashing out with dozens of interconnected lightning bolts that slammed out from him in a wave. He was aiming them towards what looked like seven oddly shaped holes in the ground. Each hole was about the size of a normal human being in diameter and was very deep at the same time. Around him were the ruined fields of several farms as well as a road.

Out of one of the holes burst a worm-like creature the same general size of the hole in width but far, far longer. Its head was full of jagged, serrated teeth like those of an eel, and it had what looked like frills going down its sides, which thrust upward, firing off long spines like spears the instant it exited the ground.

Dodging around these spears, Laxus watched as the thing smashed back down into the ground. Behind it three more popped up out of holes, with only one of them being hit by his lightning assault. It shrieked and fell back into its hole, blocking it. Yet at the same time more of the monsters burst out of the ground, smashing two nearby farmhouses and doing further damage to the road.

“Hahahah!” Laxus laughed, actually enjoying this mission. It had been almost a year since he had a mission where he could just let loose like this. “It’s like playing whack-a-mole with a mole that’s trying to hit back! Hahahahah!”

**OOOOOOO**

Standing in a window and staring over at the entrance to the Magic Council's office, Jellal, or Seigrain as he was called in this iteration, smiled thinly, seeing the carriage and the frog-man they had sent to Fairy Tail returning. He continued to watch as Erza Scarlett got out of the coach and calmly entered the building, her manner as regal and untouchable as a knight. “There she is, standing proud and tall. It's time once more to put some real fear into her, I think. Time to make that stiff back bow.”

“The way you talk to yourself like that as if I’m not even in the room is a little irritating,” Ultear said bluntly as she turned away. “And I still don’t understand your obsession with Scarlet at all. Still, I suppose we all need our hobbies. Let’s just get this over with quickly, though, so we can go on to more important things.

Jellal smirked and made to follow, but paused, turning back to stare out the window once more as Erza reached the front door. “Strange, I thought she was taller than that.”

**OOOOOOO**

Just as she was entering the foyer, Ranma stopped, biting back a sneeze as she felt a felt a shudder go down her back.  *Weird, okay so the sneeze is a sign someone just made a crack about my size, the nose twitching with the sneeze told me that. But what the heck caused the shudder? That wasn’t a someone just declared me their love or love rival, those shivers start at the base of the neck and the small of my back. Ugh, a whole new type of shudder, joy.*

“Lady Scarlet, the jails are this way.”

Ranma ignored the guard who had just spoken, moving deeper into the tower. At the same time he looked over to where the carriage was being driven around the edge of the tower to the back. She saw Wendy poke her head up into the back window, waving at her. Ranma smiled back briefly, then kept going, following the directions the frog-man had given her.

“Miss Scarlet, wait. Miss, I said wait. Wait, damn it!” When she reached the staircase leading upwards, the guard who had tried to direct her grabbed at Ranma’s arm, but Ranma twisted just enough for the attempt to miss. An instant later the guard lost his balance and fell on his rear, causing his armor to clang.

Moving up the stairs Ranma was faced with several more guards, but she ignored them, ducking and dodging around them, making the heavily armored and armed knights look like idiots. She didn’t hurt or even strike them—what would be the point?—but she left more than a dozen bruised egos and bodies in her wake despite that.

Eventually Ranma reached the door that the frog-man had said led into the conference room. There two more guards stood, their polearms crossed in front of the door. When they saw Ranma coming toward them, one shouted, “Halt! No one may enter here except those commanded to by the council.”

“Wrong!” Ranma said cheerfully, stepping forward towards them at a brisk pace. The two guards attempted to bring their polearms to bear on the redhead, but she danced between them. Ranma’s hands flashed out viper-quick, grabbing the polearms and pulling the two guards off-balance so they crashed to the floor behind her. Before they could think of getting to their feet, Ranma reached the door and smashed it open with a kick.

Within the room was an oval table set sideways in relation to the door. On the other side of it sat several old men of various looks and ages, the oddest looking of which was an extremely short old man with a face that looked almost like a rounded square to his almost rectangular face and amazing eyebrows. A young looking blue-haired man with a weird tattoo on his face who looked a few years older than Ranma and a beautiful black-haired woman of a similar age were the only ones there who looked younger than their sixties. Ranma felt her eyes drawn to that girl, who was looking back at her, not with the shock or rage the others were showing, nor even the trepidation of the square-jawed old man with the amazing eyebrows. No, she was looking on with interest and possibly a hint of amusement.

“Wh, what is this!? Erza Scarlet! I know that you Fairy Tail mages do not understand propriety, but this is too much!” one man bellowed. He was possibly the oldest one there, with a long flowing beard that reminded Ranma of Gandalf from the Tolkien stories, though his body certainly was nowhere near as fit as the wandering wizard.

“Guards! Where are the guards! How did she get this far so quickly?” shouted a second one at the same time. He wore a hood and had the largest sideburns Ranma had ever seen, coupled with tiny sunglasses balanced on his nose.

The other oldsters might have continued in that vein, but the young man’s voice cut through the hullabaloo. “You’re not Erza Scarlet. Who are you, impostor?” His eyes were locked on Ranma, his face stern and calculating, his expression having changed quickly from one of condescending amusement the instant Ranma had entered the room.

“Well, for one thing, your guards suck,” Ranma drawled, stepping forward to the side of the table, Requipping a gun and aiming it at the floor. “For another, the tattooed punk is right. I ain’t Erza Scarlet. Guns Magic: Flash!”

As the flash went off with the intent to blind the people around her, Ranma pulled off the armor plate she had been wearing along with the grieves and everything else before using the ‘Swift Change’ martial arts technique to change out of the rest of her clothing in a blink of an eye. The flash dissipated while Ranma pulled out a water bottle, heating it up and dumping it over her head.

By the time everyone had gotten their eyesight back, Ranma had changed to his male body and clothing before pulling out a chair and sitting across from the council, propping his feet up on the table as he pulled out his broach. “The names Ranma Oceana, and as for why I’m here,” Ranma flipped his broach to land on the center of the table, facing up. “Unless you people really are idiots, then you know what that broach means.”

More than one of the councilmembers recoiled at the sight of the broach as if it was a snake suddenly popping up into existence in front of them. While her fellow young councilman stayed silent, the young woman’s eyes widened, and she stared at it thoughtfully, even leaning forward to tap it with a finger. “I honestly didn’t think Rangers were real, let alone that these broaches still existed. Magnificent workmanship even in terms of just their physical design. The enchantments on these things is supposed to be amazing…”

“B, bah!” the man in the center scoffed. “You probably stole that anyway! No real Ranger would simply barge in here like this!”

“That tells me you know nothing about how Rangers operate. Each broach is keyed via blood to the Ranger and remains with the Ranger in question until he dies.” Ranma reached out, plucking the broach back up and setting it in place on his chest, smirking at them all. “I…am… a… Ranger. I am fully empowered by the Kings’ Conclave to be one of their trouble-shooters throughout Ishgar. This means you answer my questions, not the other way around.”

“Tha, that might be true elsewhere, but this is Fiore! Here, when it comes to magic, the Magic Council’s words and person are sacrosanct. You cannot simply barge in here and demand answers from us!” another man shouted.

“Would you like me to call up king Toma on this, and let us all ask him his opinion?” Ranma asked, tapping the broach on his chest. “Considering it is partly his request I’m here in the first place, I’m sure he’d love to talk to you all.”

The short old man spoke up, placing a placating hand on the oldest councilman’s shoulder, though he had to reach up to do it. “Don’t, Org. You know that the king will back the Ranger. We will just have to deal with this. I am Yajima, young man. I take it that your being here instead of Erza Scarlet means you have questions or were involved in the Eisenwald incident?”

“I certainly have questions about that, and I was indeed involved. But I also have a few other points I need to bring up with you lot.” At that, Ranma leaned forward slightly, sniffing the air over the conference table before scowling. “And I will have my questions answered by people, not thought projections! I want every member of this council here in person, in five minutes. You don’t show up, I’ll assume that’s an admission of guilt and start poking around further than I was already going to.”

“This is the first time I’ve dealt with a Ranger, but surely there is some kind of formality to this?” the blue-haired man asked, looking around at the others. “This odd foreigner comes out of the blue and flashes an admittedly powerful magical artifact and we are all expected to just obey his orders?”

“Do not let your ignorance blind you, Siegrain,” said Yajima. “Ranger Oceana may be a foreigner, but that broach gives him the authority to speak in the king’s voice in a way none of us could without a specific remit. I suggest you all follow his wishes in this.”

“Can I ask, how did you know some of us were using thought projections?” the young woman asked, leaning over the table and flashing a generous amount of cleavage Ranma’s way.

Ranma allowed himself to look down for a brief second, but then answered her question in as bland a tone as possible. “I could smell only three distinct scents in this room, and one of them was my own.”

“Wait, three?” the man in the center of the group scowled, looking around. “Who…”

“You’re real, Yajima’s real, and the old lady over there at the end,” Ranma supplied, thumbing his nose with a smirk. “Dragon Slayer senses, old man. Gotta love ’em. You’ve got two minutes now, by the way.”

The man turned to glare at the younger two people there. “Siegrain, Ultear, you know how to use Thought Projection magic? Why haven’t you reported this to the council? All magics of every council member need to be part of their public record.”

“I only learned it recently and can’t use it for very long,” the young woman named Ultear supplied quickly. “Barely a few hours a day.”

“And I…actually forgot about the need to inform the council at all,” Siegrain said with a shrug.

“Um idiots, you’re still talking when you should be walking. Unless you want me to come and find you, and you really don’t want me to do that,” Ranma said irritably. “This is going to be tedious enough without these delays.”

**OOOOOOO**

Cursing to herself, Ultear canceled her thought projection, standing up from the desk in her quarters where she had been sitting and making for the door as quickly as possible. Outside she met Jellal coming out of his room, looking even more worried than she was. This was understandable given Jellal had to come from the Tower of Heaven rather than his room. It was only his foresight in setting up a teleportation array in his room that allowed him to cross the intervening distance at a considerable cost in his magical reserves. Those arrays were one-use only magical devices whose power use was second only to the cost of having one made in the first place.

“What are we going to do?” she asked under her breath as they raced to the staircase leading down. The other council members who had been using their thought projections had thankfully been doing so from elsewhere in the council’s complex. *Probably from the library and his mistress’s quarters, if I know Michello and Leiji.*

“I don’t know, damn it! I never anticipated a Ranger just showing up out of the blue like this,” Jellal muttered, pulling out a pill of dark blue color and tossing it back. It was a short term energy pill that would allow him to renew his magical reserves faster than he would have otherwise been able to. “Hell, I never anticipated one showing up at all! Do you know the last time a Ranger made his presence known in Fiore? I sure as hell don’t!”

By this point Ultear had begun to regain control. “Well, beyond wanting to take us to task about how Eisenwald was handled, is there anything you’re involved in that could have brought a Ranger’s attention?”

At the raven-haired beauty’s choice of the word, ‘your,’ Jellal halted, grabbing her arm, pulling Ultear to a stop. “**We’re** involved in, you mean. Remember, Ultear, anything I’ve been involved in, you have too!”

Narrowing her eyes, Ultear said nothing, but given that answer she knew that it might well have been something that Jellal had done which had captured King Toma’s attention, and thus the Ranger. *Which means I’m being faced with a simple question: do I go down with him or throw Jellal to the wolves. Oh dear, what a choice. Then again, I should probably check in with Master Hades when I can.*

**OOOOOOO**

Once the entire council was physically present, Ranma began. “So, whose bright idea was it to prosecute one of the mages who cleaned up after your stupidity?”

“You cannot talk to us that way, boy!!” shouted the mage in charge. He was evidently not doing very well with finding out he could be called on the carpet too.

“The broach means I can. This ain’t the kind of problem I thought I’d be signing up for when Queen Rose and the rest decided to offer me the job, but it does have some perks,” Ranma replied, his smirk suddenly widening into a snarl as he went on. “Such as telling people like you lot to shut up and listen! Now, I ask again, whose bright idea was it to bring in for questioning someone from the guild which saved not only dozens of lives but cleaned up after your mistake?”

Ranma’s eyes flashed around the council, and only Yajima was able to meet his gaze evenly. After a moment that worthy answered. “We wished to have a first-hand account of the battle. Nothing else would have happened beyond perhaps a single night spend here in the tower. We well know that this incident could have been much worse if not for Fairy Tail’s involvement.”

From the looks on their faces, most of the others didn’t agree with that. The two youngest, whose names Ranma had heard were Ultear and Siegrain, were the exceptions.

“That might make sense, **if** your envoy didn’t make it a point to say that Erza Scarlet was under arrest when he showed up. Or that she would be questioned for her part in what happened in Oshibana rather than the whole demon thing. So, why was Erza Scarlet singled out instead of, oh, I don’t know, the ‘unknown water using mage,’ maybe?” Ranma asked, his tone becoming more sarcastic with every sentence. “This kind of thing smacks of a personal issue.”

After a few minutes everyone looked at Siegrain, who looked back stonily for a moment before shrugging. “We assumed she was in charge of the operation against Eisenwald. I personally thought the water using mage was simply Erza in a new type of armor. Would you like us to apologize to her or Fairy Tail formally?”

“That could be a start. Still, let’s set that aside for now. After all, it let me set up this meeting, didn’t it?” Ranma said, his teeth flashing in a smile without any humor in it whatsoever, although he was laughing inside at the fact that the man had come up with the same cover story Erza had about who had dealt with Lullaby. “There are two points that I’m supposed to bring up to you lot. Both are sort of broad and made up of different parts that a lot of other people have worked on. I’m just the messenger bringing them to you, as well as coming to you preaching the gospel of **common sense**!”

With that last word Ranma brought his fist down on the table so hard it bounced. It would have shattered if Ranma had wanted it to but he didn’t so it simply bounced, making the councilmen, except for Siegrain, once more, shift uncomfortably. “When you morons declare a guild illegal, the proper procedure should be to do so once you have entirely surrounded said guild so that as few of the fuckers get away as possible! This is common sense! Instead, you declare it, **then** send in your Rune Knights, who basically can only capture the idiots who are too stupid or too arrogant to run away. Why?!”

To Ranma’s surprise, however, the council was able to actually come up with a comeback to this allegation. The chief of the council, whose name was Crawford Seam, leaned forward intently, tapping the table himself for emphasis. “The fact of the matter is, we don’t have enough Rune Knights to go around. Most of the Knights are being used in large garrisons here and there, the rest distributed in penny packets throughout Fiore. We can’t call on normal troops to help take on a Mage Guild, of course, so we’re left to try and move troops around whenever we get word that a guild has started to act in an unlawful manner.”

“On top of that, we, of course, need to investigate the rumors; make certain they are accurate and not just a sign of how a guild is acting. For example, if we listened to rumors about how destructive Fairy Tail is we would have to arrest them. But when we investigate further, of course, we always find out that most of the time the destruction they leave behind is in pursuit of their jobs at the time,” Siegrain said, his eyes sly. “I have to wonder, though, what your connection with that guild is, Ranger. Your taking Erza’s place here smacks of collusion.”

“Queen Rose of Bosco asked me to look into rumors about Eisenwald looking for Lullaby. Given what happened, she was right to do so,” Ranma replied with a shrug. “I brought in Fairy Tail as part of my mission rather than letting them operate separately. And as for me taking her place, that was just me being… Call it making the best of an opportunity.”

“Does that mean you’ll be handing over Lullaby to us, then?” asked the old woman who hadn’t been using a thought projection, whose name Ranma hadn’t heard yet. “We had reports of it being destroyed, but surely no one would destroy such a priceless magical artifact.”

“Yep, it’s gone. I crushed it after I killed the demon inside,” Ranma said bluntly, smirking at the looks of shock this evoked. “But you were saying it isn’t so much that you declare a guild a dark and don’t try to contain them, it’s more that they learn about that coming before you’re in position?”

“We can show you the allocation and organizational chart if you want?” Ultear said quickly, recovering faster than the others at the idea that Ranma had killed the demon Lullaby and then destroyed the flute. It was worrisome, and the way Ranma talked about it seemed to imply that he had done similar things before. *If so, if he’s some kind of expert on fighting Demons, then I need to learn as much about him as I can. Yet another reason to get on his good side…and throw Jellal to the wolves when it comes time. Still, I can’t do anything about that right now.*

Ranma sighed, but nodded at that suggestion and actually spent several minutes going over those items with the council. It seemed to match up, at least on the surface. *So they want me to at least believe that all the issues with more Dark Guilds coming from Fiore was caused by a lack of troops? Bull and shit. Time to start dropping some of the bombs I was passed just in case of a meeting like this.*

“This seems to make sense, but only the surface. For one thing, there’s been a noted uptick of the number of guilds which have escaped intact enough to remain organized guilds in the last two years.” Ranma looked around the table, his eyes homing in on Ultear and Siegrain. “Which would almost coincide to when the two of you were elevated to this council, wouldn’t it?”

“Indeed it does, but I think you are looking at it the wrong way. Instead of saying that more dark guilds have been able to get away from the law, say rather that the council has become better at finding out which guilds are breaking our laws,” Siegrain said calmly, with Ultear nodding agreement beside him.

“Let’s suppose that’s true. It still leaves a lot of problems from any outsider’s perspective.” Ranma held up his hand and activated his Requip magic, pulling out several folders, each of them containing several pages of notes. “These weren’t actually gathered by me for the most part. In fact, I was only involved in this one,” he said, tapping one finger down on a red folder among the myriad blue and black. “The ones with black on them come from Seven, Bosco, and Caelum’s espionage agencies, with the help of your own king. The blue comes from another Ranger, who was brought in at King Toma’s personal request.”

Waving her hand over the folders one after another, Ultear copied them using council magic and passed them along, watching in amusement as nearly everyone else on the council began to sweat in worry. *Hah! This is fucking ironic. Here I am, a spy for Grimoire Heart, one of the three Dark Guilds which created the Balam Alliance, and I’ve been keeping my ‘official’ nose cleaner than this lot! Jellal, I suppose, could be excused, but the others? Aren’t they supposed to be the good guys?* “What exactly are we looking at here?”

“First, we’re going to talk about my personal pet peeve with you lot beyond the number of Dark Guilds that Fiore seemingly creates: the issue with faulty lacrima,” Ranma said grimly, holding up the red folder. “The fact that I actually had to keep notes on it is only part of the reason it irritates me, the other is the fact that people actually died because of it.”

From there he went on to describe the exploding incident, finishing by glaring around the table. “Now, that is purely a question of quality control, which is something you lot are supposed to oversee. Who here is supposed to watch over that kind of thing, and why haven’t you caught these issues before this?”

This caused an intense discussion, or as Ranma thought of it, a game of pass the buck. Each council member tried to pass it off to the others save for Ultear, who bluntly stated she had nothing to do with lacrima distribution or anything else. She specialized in leading the council’s own intelligence apparatus, which brought her under fire from Ranma too for a bit, but she womanfully defended her position while the others tried to pin the blame for that issue on each other. After all, no one wanted to be even partly to blame for accidents which had killed people.

From there, however, Ranma reached for the black pile of folders. “So you people are so worried about your image and being blamed that none of you have any set area of control. Great, you’ll all hang together, then,” Ranma said, ignoring the fact that Ultear had not joined in on that.

She huffed irritably, but didn’t interrupt him as he went on. “These files pertain to Dark Guilds or specific wizards which have crossed the borders into other countries and performed crimes there. Two-thirds of these folders, the ones marked with the various ensigns of the other countries are specific mages from legitimate guilds. I have been told that most of this information was passed back through diplomatic channels to you, but you haven’t followed up on them. The rest are about dark mages or entire guilds which have traveled into Fiore from other countries. Which you lot haven’t done anything about.”

Here Ranma leaned forward again, slamming his hands palm down on the table. “Why not!? If you don’t have the manpower, why don’t you allow the various legal guilds to go after them in larger numbers? I know you let them go after a few, here and there.”

“What you are talking about could lead to war! Fiore saw in ancient times where guild wars would lead. It is better by far to let the Dark Guilds stay in the shadows until we can move against them in strength, sniping at them one by one in the meantime,” shouted Crawford. He was a large, fat man with a large, bushy beard which ended in two buns, his patience with a young man taking him to task obviously wearing thin.

“Would you say the same if it was your family, or your livelihood they prey on?” Ranma growled back. “What you’re espousing is either a sign of senility or cowardice. Which is it?” He glared around at the council. “Don’t think just because I stopped shouting at you means that I’m not pissed off at you for not doing your jobs! If your Rune Knights can’t handle it, call on your mages! Or else every time one of these dark mages or guilds act out, paying for the damages will come out of your personal pockets! Every time someone dies from them or is kidnapped and sold into slavery, you’ll have to find some way to pay for it!”

This caused yet further uproar, but Ranma had a response to that ready. Concentrating for a brief second he pulled his ki up into his face, activating Soun Tendo’s demon face. **“Enough, already!**” the giant head roared. “This isn’t up for fucking debate!”

Ultear actually squealed in shock, hopping away from the table as the rest followed. Even Siegrain looked unnerved by the sudden body morph.

After glaring at them for a second with eyes the size of their heads, Ranma let the technique end and continued in a more normal volume. “This is a Ranger, fully empowered by your king and the kings of all Ishgar, giving you an **order**! By the time I leave today, I will have your word that you will start giving more jobs to the legal guilds to get them to clear out your dark guild problems, or else I will get in contact with Toma and have you lot all replaced by people who’ve got spines.”

More than one voice attempted to shout in protest at that idea, but the demon head made a reappearance and they shut up quickly. Siegrain was the first one to simply nod acquiescence, knowing that they, at least, had to make it look like they were going to follow the Ranger’s orders. Once his back was turned they could go back to business as usual, which for him was making certain there was a small but steady trickle of recruits heading toward the island where his Tower of Heaven was being built.

The others followed suit, with Ultear being the next one and Yajima, a former member of Fairy Tail, coming in directly after. The rest were slower to accede, and, by the time they did, Siegrain was certain they were coming to the end of this ordeal.

However, the next instant any feeling of complacency Siegrain might have harbored was smashed out of his head by Ranma holding up the stack of blue folders. “These were all compiled by Ranger Jardan at King Toma’s request. And all of them have to do with what he called fiscal and material oddities. Wood going missing, stone, food, and lacrima crystals not showing up where they should, driving up prices throughout the nation, something Toma takes seriously, apparently.”

Siegrain started to tense at that, knowing precisely where all those goods were going. After all, the Tower of Heaven couldn’t build itself. His men and the slaves doing the actual construction needed food, and the island was too small to grow its own. Food, steel, and lacrima crystals were all needed for the tower. A tower over a hundred stories tall and as wide as a sports field wasn’t something that he could create overnight.

While the other council mages were all looking rather confused, Ultear knew now where this was going. *Oh dear, I do believe it is time to abandon Jellal to his fate. Now, how to best go about doing so?*

“Jardan did some digging,” Ranma went on, seemingly not noticing the reactions he was getting, “and he found out that a lot of these shipments were diverted on the Fiore Magic Council’s say-so. So, where did it all go, and why?”

As the council members to a man and woman began to protest their innocence, Ranma began to end the meeting, ordering them all to go and get the paperwork for their personal holdings as well as records showing how much they were paid as councilmen. Since even councilmen had to pay taxes, this type of paperwork was something they would all have to have. Plus, the council members also had two magical books tied to their position as councilmen called the orders and voting books. The councilmen called them the yellow and white books. With them, they would be able to track any order any of them gave to the various workers, knights, and officials who answered to the council.

Though he kept it from showing with the ease of long practice, Jellal was panicking inside. He knew perfectly well that his holdings would not withstand much scrutiny at all, and his order book would be damning as well. *Damn it, the Tower won’t be ready for another two months, and I need to retain my position as part of the council in order to convince them to hypercharge it with the magic of the Etherano cannon. How do I get out of this? How…*

A plan occurred to him then. It was a desperate one, but one he felt had a high chance of success. *This Ranger might be tough enough to slay a demon like Lullaby, but that is nothing, not when he has no reason to expect an attack. And if I can make him disappear, I can talk the others into thinking he simply left, convinced of our innocence. Look at their faces. The old idiots are so off-balance they’ll jump at the chance to just forget this little meeting ever happened. The only exception is Yajima, and Ultear and I can use charm magic or something else to make him forget.*

With this plan in mind, he spoke up as the others finally ceased trying to delay the inevitable. Like all bureaucrats everywhere, the councilmembers were always afraid of being asked questions, but they could not get out of this. “Gentlemen, ladies, I for one agree that the allegations brought before us merit our attention and the attention of the king on our affairs.”

The others all looked at Jellal in shock, but after a cough he went on in a tone of voice that made it clear he was choosing his words carefully. “However, we all have, shall we say, items, purchases, or holdings that we would rather not air to the public, which includes one another. Might I ask, Ranger, that we all meet with you in private to go over our books?”

Ultear hadn’t joined the rest of the discussion before this point, preferring to go through the blue folders. They detailed numerous mercantile reports, cross-indexed from one port with the next, and tabulations from the ships themselves. Several of the differences, whether the weight of the shipment or the amount of crates or whatever, were noted and then cross-referenced to what was highlighted as ‘verbal orders from a council messenger.’

Others were marked by other notations, mostly ‘attacked by bandits,’ or other ‘attacked by’ statements. No physical description of the messenger matched from one incident to another, and they didn’t even match the individuals known to carry messages for the council. And these notes in turn showed the investigation that they had not, as Ranma had indicated earlier, come entirely from his fellow Ranger.

It was only Ultear’s time on the council that gave her the self-control that kept her eyes from widening. *The king, the king put most of this together with his investigation teams! I, Master Hades and I, we all thought he didn’t care at all about how the magic council ran itself. But… Is this a sign of that he does care and is watching us, or is this a sign of that he watches trade more closely than we thought? Damn it, whatever else happens, I must report this to Master Hades.*

Hearing Jellal’s suggestion, Ultear quickly seconded the motion. “I agree. After all, so long as the money we’re spending comes from our jobs as councilmen, what we spend it on, so long as it is legal, at any rate, should be private. I doubt anyone would be very interested in how much I spend on massage oils or clothing, after all.

Ranma shrugged unconcern. “Fine, yeah, whatever. I’m not interested in whether or not you have a second vacation house or are boinking your mistress on the side. I’m interested in where those lacrima and the rest of this material went!”

*And even then, that’s not what I’m really interested in. I’m more interested in why the council ain’t been going after Dark Guilds. Though I’ll be the first to admit the two are probably connected. Wish I had more to go on. I’m not Jardan, I can’t follow a paper trail! I am getting some really odd vibes off of the blue boy. And, yeessh, that Ultear woman; I can’t tell what’s up with her. The rest, other than shorty, anyway, are just shocked. Off-balance and worried. And I bet I can knock them further off-balance during a one-on-one session.*

“Very well, we will go in reverse order of seniority. I,” Crawford said.

“No,” Ranma interjected calmly. “We do this as randomly as possible in the next room over. You lot go get as much of your paperwork as you’ve got. I’ll pick my victims randomly, and we’ll go from there.”

The Council acceded to that demand quickly enough, rushing out the room as fast as their mostly old bodies could take them. Once they were gone, Ranma moved over to the nearest window, where he found Wendy perched happily on the tiny stone railing looking over the town around the council tower. She turned as Ranma poked his head out, smiling up at him. “Hey, Ranma-nii! Are you nearly finished?”

“Nope. Sorry, imouto, but it looks like this is going to be an all day job. Listen, why don’t you climb up to one of the other rooftops over there, not the central tower, but one of the others, and keep an eye out, okay? If you see anyone riding off on horseback in a huge hurry or a magic carriage rushing off, could you make a note of the direction and keep an eye on them until they’re out of sight?”

Wendy’s eyes sparkled. This sounded like spy stuff, which was far more interesting than just fighting to her. “Do you want me to follow them, Onii-chan?”

“Mmmmm… Only if you can stay out of sight. If not, only make a note of the direction, okay?”

Pouting at that, Wendy nodded. *I bet I could follow them anyway, but I guess Ranma-nii’s right…*

As the two siblings were talking, the council had been making their way up the tower to the floors where they all had their private quarters. Siegrain tried to get Ultear’s attention, but she was purposefully avoiding his eyes, speaking to Yajima right up until that old fool had split off to enter his room. “Ultear, I have a plan. If that Ranger disappears, everything can go back to normal. You saw the others; they all are terrified of being asked questions like this, and…”

“Are you insane!?” Ultear hissed, looking around quickly to make certain they weren’t being overheard. “Did you even bother to look into those blue binders he handed us? While Oceana might have been following up on the number of Dark Guilds and mages we’ve been letting go, the investigation into what I presume were your activities have been going on for a much longer time and came from the king! He knows something is wrong. If Oceana disappears, they’ll just send more investigators.”

“But it will at least buy us time, time which we can use to hide our activities. And don’t even try to pin all this on me, Ultear. You’re involved in this too.”

“I understand that, of course. Don’t worry, I have your back if you think it best,” Ultear said, patting Jellal on the shoulder.

*What you don’t seem to understand is that Oceana is a lot more dangerous than you seem to think. He is a Ranger who specializes in killing demons, after all. And second, our work in halting missions designed to clean up the Dark Guilds is so scattered that no one is going to find them. Especially given the fact that I think you’re planning something really stupid.*

A second later she was in her room, using her communication lacrima to check in with Master Hades. “Master, we have a situation here.”

While Ultear was checking in, Jellal was gathering enough of his paperwork to make it seem as if he was doing what the Ranger had ordered. He was not checking in with his co-conspirator and old mentor Brain, confident in his abilities. He was, after all, a Wizard Saint. *And I was able to win that appellation through the use of a Thought Projection that had only fifty percent of my power. This fool should be no trouble to assassinate!*

**OOOOOOO**

Master Hades listened intently, steepling his fingers as he thought deeply on this issue. “Will this Oceana fellow be able to find anything incriminating on you personally?”

“If he questions hard enough and looks at some of the decisions I've made, the jobs I've had a part in sending out to the guilds, Ranger Oceana might be able to discover my interest in Zeref,” Ultear said after a moment's reflection. “Alone, however, that won’t matter much. Whether or not he will be able to tell I have had a hand in steering the council away from confronting the various Dark Guilds, that I cannot say with certainty. I’ve been very subtle there, so I doubt it, but it is a possibility, and with the stakes we’re playing…”

Ultear shrugged, though there was no one to see. Her lacrima only transmitted sound, not image, like the one Ranma used. “The question is, is our alliance with the Oraci*ó*n Siete more important than my remaining in place? I think that Siegrain is going to do something precipitous. I have no idea if he’ll succeed or not, but either way our position on the council will no longer be secure. I’ve agreed to follow his lead to avoid suspicion, but there are ways I could offset that.”

“Correct…” Master Hades thought for a few moments, then nodded slowly. “Your information on Etherano was fascinating, especially the research plans you found and copied. And the information you recently shared about the council’s scientific teams working on controlling a second type of ancient weapon disturbs me greatly. Further, even if you'll have to be more circuitous in the future, having a spy on the council is worth quite a bit more to our long-term goal then continuing to work with Brain and his band of indoctrinated fools.”

At that Ultear surreptitiously pumped her fist twice. *Finally*, she thought, thinking the word very loudly indeed.

“Do what you can to create a more positive impression. If Siegrain's attempt at, what, assassinating the Ranger?” When Ultear nodded, he scoffed. “Fool. Those Rangers who specialize in combat and magic tend to be very good in their fields. When he fails at that, the king will no doubt move to either replace or install his own puppets within the mage council. I am hereby ordering you to do what you can and must to make certain your position remains intact if not secure.”

“Even if I have to fight Siegrain myself?” Ultear asked, an anticipatory smirk appearing on her face. While she was uncertain she could beat the other dark mage in a one-on-one fight, she could certainly give him a run for his money, and aiding this Ranger against him would be easy.

“If need be, but only if need be. While I believe that we can dispense with the direct alliance between the Oraci*ó*n Siete and ourselves, that does not mean I wish to come into conflict with them at this time.” Hades once more paused there and looked closely at Ultear. “However, if Siegrain is able to get away somehow, this Ranger will go after them. They are like bloodhounds at times. If that happens, get as close to him as possible and learn everything about him you can. We need to know if he will be a threat to our plans going forward.”

“Yes, Master,” Ultear said with a faint smile. That sounded a lot more interesting than just staying around here and trying to spy on the old men and what they were up to.

“Good. Do not contact me again until events have run their course. It would be best to assume such communications will no long be safe.” With that Hades cut the connection, leaving Ultear alone once more in her room. Still smiling, Ultear hid the lacrima once more by simply deconstructing it into pieces, spreading them around her room in various bookcases before leaving her room.

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma's theory on how boring this part of his investigation would be quickly proved correct over the next hour. He'd gone through two of the Council members’ books chosen at random already and had found little that grabbed his personal interest. Yes, there were some signs that one of them, at least, was fudging his books slightly, taking kickbacks or whatever they were. And the second one seemed to have not one, but three mistresses on the side! All of which he was paying for from his council funds. The guy was actually up front about it when Ranma confronted them and Ranma had to admit that the councilman having three mistresses at his age was kind of impressive in a disturbing never-want-to-think-about-it-ever-again sort of way.

But neither points were anywhere near what he was here to look into. Frankly, beyond putting the fear of their king into them and forcing them to go after the Dark Guilds from now on, the rest of this job should probably have been left to Jardan. The only problem was the possible connection with the way the Magic Council hadn’t been doing its job in terms of the Dark Guilds and the theft of so many resources.

Finally, it was the turn of Ultear, the young woman with the magnificent black hair. *Well, at least this way I’ll have something nice to look at,* Ranma thought as Ultear entered the office he’d commandeered. Then he subtly shook his head. *Guh. I’m turning into a freaking pervert like Hiroshi and Daisuke. Seriously need to get a girlfriend or something.*

Ultear plopped several folders of her own down next to Ranma’s and then sat down across from him, crossing her legs and arms as she did. “So, how does this go? Do you question me, go through my yellow book, or do we get right down to the interrogation? Although I don’t see any chains, whips, or red hot irons. Pity.”

“Wouldn't know what to do with the chain in terms of torturing, and as for the whip, I think you'd probably like that, or at least feign it,” Ranma said dryly, leaning back in turn and looking at her thoughtfully. “Although, since you asked, we’ll start with a question-and-answer session. Ultear Milkovich, you're one of the Council members I have to admit I was most interested in meeting.”

“Mah, I’m flattered, Ranger Oceana. But what exactly have I done to garner such interest?” Ultear asked coquettishly.

“There's not a lot publicly known about your past, you or your magic. All I could find out was that it was supposedly an ancient Lost Magic. You joined the Council five years ago as mid-level mage functionary, then worked your way up to a Council aid, then onto the Council itself in an astonishingly short amount of time. But what were you doing before you joined the Council? And what made you want to in the first place? Why didn’t you just join a guild?” Ranma asked.

“As to your last question, I have a problem with guilds. My parents were supposedly part of one, but since I’ve never seen their faces or remember anything about them, that should tell you all you need to know about that particular issue,” Ultear said, letting her arms fall as she leaned back, her chest thrust forward for a moment. “As for what I was doing before that, my magic is extremely difficult to use. It took me years upon years of practice to be able to control it appropriately without being a danger to those around me.”

“After all,” she said, stretching her hands above her head and then bringing them back down, letting her fingers trace down her face and then her side. “It has to do with controlling time, and if that backfired on me, well, that would just be a travesty.”

“I suppose it would be,” Ranma said, keeping his voice calm even as he could not stop his eyes from following the movements of her hands for a second until they disappeared below the desk. “So, where did you train?”

“Here, in Fiore, at a little town called Sunset in the western mountain range.” *And if you follow up on this inquiry you’ll find lots of brainwashed people and a few plants Master Hades has placed there to cover just such an eventuality. He is nothing if not thorough.*

“Bah. You call those mountains; I call them hills. Go to Pergrande or Joya and you'll see real mountains,” Ranma quipped, even as he made a mental note of the name. He probably wouldn’t follow up on it, but if Toma’s espionage services hadn’t already done so he’d pass it along.

“I haven’t traveled nearly as much as a Ranger like you, no doubt, do,” Ultear said with a sigh. “I think I'd rather like to, but that was never my calling. I'm sure, however, that if you go to Sunset, you will find lots of people remember me.”

“I'm sure,” Ranma said, smirking and giving her a wink. “You are rather memorable, after all.”

Ultear smiled that, then answered Ranma's question about why she wanted to join the Magic Council. “As for joining up with the bunch of old people, I wanted to make a difference.”

Ranma looked at her, his face deadpan, and Ultear laughed. “Didn’t believe that one? Fine. I really thought it was an easy job with lots of high pay that would give me a lot of free time to concentrate on my own research. And there's a certain part of me that likes to order people around.

“As for the mystery behind how quickly I rose in the council’s rank, that can be put down to my magic as well. The Magic Council is always interested in bringing in people with powerful magic. Despite our age, that's why myself and Seigrain were able to join.”

“The two of you do seem a pair. Is that because you're both so much younger than the rest of the old folks club, or do you feel you have to work together to offset your age? Or is there something more going on,” Ranma asked, twitching his eyebrows up and down suggestively.

“Ugh,” Ultear said, shaking her head. “No thank you. He’s a bit too self-centered and far too arrogant at times for my taste. That tattoo on his face might make him seem dashing or dangerous to some girls, but I think of it more as a skin infection. Personally, I think he just got drunk at one point and someone thought it would be funny to tattoo him up like that with a, what are they called, tramp stamp? A tramp stamp on him, only on his face.”

Ranma laughed at that, and Ultear smiled faintly as she successfully derailed that line of questioning before going on with her own. “But speaking of our ages, aren’t you rather young to have been able to win enough notoriety that a king or queen recommended you for the Ranger brooch?”

“Let's just say my life has been fraught with peril and leave it at that. Besides, I'm supposed to be the one doing the questioning. What exactly is your job on the Council?”

“And there we have a question that I bet none of my fellow Council members are very happy with. Like you rightfully pointed out earlier, we don't really have set job areas or areas of interest. I assumed command of our intelligence apparatus, but that isn’t an official title, and most of my decisions in that post have to be ratified by the rest of the council. There are a **lot** of decisions that require us all, very few decisions that can be made by just one of us, and just a lot of discussion. As the self-chosen head of gathering intelligence, I have to bring up any large decision to the council for debate; I can’t make it on my own. It's always been that way. You'd have to ask one of the old timers why.”

“What's your area of interest, then?”

“A little of this and little of that,” Ultear replied, still smiling. “I don't particularly care about lacrima creation or distribution, if that’s what you’re asking, and I have no interest at all in simple mercantile endeavors like the rest you told us about. That sounds far too tedious for me. My yellow book will tell you that.”

“Then I suppose we should segue to going over your order book. And then your expense book, as well as asking you specifically about certain dates,” Ranma finished with a groan.

“You're the one that asked for all this,” Ultear said dryly. “You can't then turn around and say it it's boring and have anyone care at all.”

Ranma scowled at that but pulled her order book towards him. Going through it, at least, took very little time, thanks to the magic inherent in the books. Ultear’s account ledger took quite a bit longer, but eventually they were finished. Besides some questionable orders about investigating this or that legal guild, or not investigating in a few cases, Ranma didn't find anything unusual in the order book. In terms of her expense reporter, there were a few questionable purchases, things that cost a lot more money than they should have, but Ranma wasn't interested in that aspect, so he simply set them aside for someone else to investigate.

Despite that, Ranma was a little put off by Ultear for some reason. He felt that there was something odd there, her body language or her eyes or something that hinted at more than was there on the surface. She certainly used her body to redirect attention, but that was flirtatious, not criminal, and he couldn’t say he didn’t enjoy it. And if there was anything hidden in her books, he couldn’t discover it.

He tried to engage her in further discussion about how she voted on various matters, in particular anything that touched on Dark Guilds either as a group or a specific such guild. But his attempts to sound her out there ran into the fact that Ultear rarely actually said anything during such meetings, instead just voting with the majority. She had spoken against the idea of attacking the Balam Alliance members and did so now, defending her position and that of the council. She didn’t persuade Ranma, of course, but he felt she did honestly worry about how many good mages might die in a direct confrontation with those three guilds. Still, Ranma was slightly suspicious of her all the same.

After that, Ranma dealt with the old guy who seemed to like Fairy Tail. He was the easiest by far, although at first Ranma thought he might be trying to buy out all the restaurants in the nearby town. It turned out, however, he was just trying to invest in them and then learn their cookery secrets. While odd and sort of wrong to use council functionaries as spies, that wasn't technically illegal, and Ranma let the man go.

He was down to his final two Council members by that point, Siegrain and one more old guy, and Seigrain was the one he called next, randomly pointing at him as he came out of the office. “Let's get this over with,” Ranma groaned, moving back to his chair and leaning back slightly.

At this point Ranma was pretty certain he wasn't going to find anything really incriminating. Yes, incompetence and moral cowardice should be punishable, but that wasn’t his area of expertise. He’d leave that to Toma Fiore.

“So, Siegrain,” he said in a drawl, now utterly bored with this entire affair. “What were you doing before you joined the Council? I also note you were elevated directly to the Council rather than spending time at the lower levels, thanks to the strength of your magic. You were even named a Wizard Saint? That's amazing, I suppose.”

“Well, there's a very simple reason for that. People in power always wants to gather further power to themselves. I represented something new and interesting, and they thought that, given my age, they could influence me. Just as they thought they could do the same with Ultear. If I had known how boring the job would be I wouldn’t've taken their offer, of course,” Siegrain replied with a laugh as if he didn’t have a care in the world. He followed Ranma into the room, setting down his yellow book and expense book before moving to sit down.

He turned slightly away from Ranma to locate the chair, hiding his chest and one arm from Ranma’s sight for an instant before turning. His hand glowing with yellow magic, he leaped across the table without any warning, his hand flashing toward Ranma’s throat in a textbook killing stroke. “But as boring as this is, I can't let you oust me just yet!”

Before the blow could land, Ranma kicked off the desk, flipping backwards over his chair and thrusting out with both hands, slamming them into the side of the desk, hurling it into Siegrain. This forced Siegrain to use his other hand to smash the desk to pieces, and Ranma dodged his initial blow entirely.

Then Ranma was on Siegrain, grinning and laughing, of all things. “About damn time!”

It was at that moment that Jellal wondered if maybe he had made a mistake here...

The next instant he stopped questioning that, both because he could no longer afford to take the time to do so and because Ranma's fist had just burst through his defenses to slam into the side of his head, sending him reeling backwards.

Growling, Siegrain summoned up his magic, which was called Heavenly Body Magic. Based around taking the power of celestial objects and using them through the body of the mage, it was a dangerous and very flexible magic. His magic covering his entire body in a yellow aura, Siegrain burst forward like a runaway star, shouting, “Meteor!”

With that Siegrain slammed into Ranma with enough force to carry them both backwards into the wall and through it, out into the air beyond. Ranma grunted in pain, not having anticipated the speed this guy had. But not only did the impact not really hurt all that much, but he was still able to grab Siegrain's arms where they had been attempting to throttle him. With that hold Ranma flipped himself up and over Siegrain, slamming a fist down hard into the back of his head, sending him tumbling further down through the air. “Nice try, Siggy, but you’re going to have to do better than that!”

But Siegrain righted himself, his magic seemingly giving him the power of flight too as well as enhancing his durability. He fell away for a second before reactivating his magic, using it zig and zag around the area as Ranma continued to fall towards the ground. Not willing to assume that the ground would finish Ranma off, he attacked again, aiming to slam a punch into Ranma’s back after zigging around him to be in that position.

So fast was he that his opponent, especially since he was falling through the air, out of control, should never have been able to see him. But Ranma had turned at the last instant, and one of his arms looped around Siegrain's, pulling him in. The two pummeled one another, Siegrain not able to break Ranma’s grip. For his part, Ranma began to move close to Amiguriken speed to keep up with the blows of his opponent, but even so he was smiling as he did.  *Hell, yes! This has made my freaking day!*

All around them alarms began to blare in the various buildings of the Magic Council’s Tower of Knowledge.

Rune Knights boiled out of several of the buildings, and then three of the major Council also made their presence’s known, sticking their heads and arms out of various windows to stare at the fight. “What's going on!” shouted one of them querulously.

That shout brought Jellal back to himself. His attempt at assassination had failed the instant Ranma had dodged that first blow, and now they were fighting out in the open. *Fuck. I should have retreated the moment that first shot failed and, if not that, kept him in the office. At least that way we wouldn’t be out in the open for all to see*.

This left Jellal with only a few options. One, he could keep fighting and kill Ranma and then every other witness in the tower and town. This was admittedly somewhat doable, although it certainly wouldn't be easy. The second option, just to run away, didn’t quite appeal. *If I beat Ranma I could call in Brain to help me brainwash all of the townsfolk, council, and council workers. Between him, myself, and Ultear, we could do that, and if I cut communications…*

As he thought that, a kick from Ranma nearly doubled him over. “Oy! Concentrate on the fight, asshole!”

Growling, Jellal slammed a palm into Ranma’s wrist, forcing him to let go. With that he zoomed away, regaining some distance, having realized that Ranma was simply his better in terms of hand to hand combat. It was astonishing, given the speed and durability advantage Heavenly Body magic gave him, but also something he was honest enough to realize.

Jellal then had to duck his head as a shiny silver ball zoomed through the space it had just occupied.

“You know,” said Ultear as she hopped out from one of the windows to land on a balcony nearby. “I think that we can take your attacking a Ranger sent by the king as a sign that you're guilty of something, yes, Siegrain?”

“So you betray me too?” Jellal growled.

“The word betray implies I was on your side to begin with,” Ultear quipped, calling back her silver ball to her hand before she leaped up to the roof, standing more or less parallel with Siegrain. “Just because we mostly agreed on certain issues and generally worked together because of our ages in comparison to the rest of the council doesn’t mean I was on your side or even like you, really.”

She watched as Jellal’s eyes narrowed before going on. “But I'm the last person you should be worrying about right now.”

Jellal had just an instant to wonder what she meant by that before Ranma's Water Dragons Claw slammed into his chest, smashing through the protection of his magic and hurling him upwards into the air. He felt a rib break despite his magic’s protection at that blow.

Despite the pain of that, Jellal righted himself, dodging a massive construct of water made to look like a giant dragon paw. Instead of going back on the attack after dodging, he glared down at first, Ranma, then over at Ultear and the rest of the major Council who were coming out of the windows here and there. Two of them were also now firing off spells towards him.

Realizing now that he couldn’t fight Ranma and the rest of them all at once, Jellal knew his plan to simply wipe Ranma out then brainwash everyone else wouldn’t work. That left just running away, leaving behind years of labor. *But, then again, this persona was never meant to last for very long.*

He wondered for a moment if he should out the Grimoire Heart bitch. He decided, however, that no, he wouldn’t do that. After all, there was the possibility she was playing the long game still. *With her here I can then order her to follow through with our goal, that of convincing the council to fire Etherion at the tower. I don’t like having to rely on her for that after this, but it’ll have to do.*

“Damn you, Oceana,” he roared aloud, his magic flaring around him. “You might think you’ve won something here, but you’re wrong! This was merely a prelude to what’s to come. When I create the perfect world, you and those like you will have no place in it!”

With that Jellal dodged to the side, this time dodging Ranma as he boosted up towards him on blasts of water. Before Ranma could redirect himself, Jellal turned and rocketed away in a blast of yellow energy. He once more began to zigzag as he streaked away from the town. He didn’t slow down at all nor choose a set course until he was well beyond the horizon from the tower.

Behind the fleeing former councilman, Ranma growled, letting his Water technique fail, falling to the outer wall of the enclave. Landing there he stared after Siegrain, wondering aloud, “Hmm… I wonder if I could catch up to him? He’s moving fast, but I doubt he could keep it up longer than I could run.”

“Before you do that, shouldn’t you at least give us some kind of explanation as to what went on here?” said a voice tartly behind him. Ultear and two other council members landed to either side of Ranma, looking at him with some concern and a lot of suspicion on their faces.

“Your fellow councilmember attacked me,” Ranma said with a smirk. “It sure as hell brightened up my day. Well, right up until he got away, anyway.” *Damn it, if I’d only brought Carla along, but then again, there wasn’t enough room for her and Wendy in the carriage’s boot. I wonder where Wendy is right now?*

Turning away from watching the yellow light of Siegrain’s flight head over the horizon, Ranma looked at Ultear and the old fogies. “Any of you have any idea what he could possibly be up to with that much raw material?”

“None,” Ultear replied for all of them as more of the council joined them. The only one who didn’t was one who remained behind to start repairing the hole Ranma and Seigrain had made in the side of the main tower. “I know him better than most, but he never shared anything much about his past other than where he trained and with who. Beyond that, he had an interest in Zeref and his creations, but that could be said for all of us.”

Ultear supposed she could have pulled out some hints from her perfectly shaped rear, but decided against it. *I’ve seen some of Ranma’s skills in a fight, let’s see if he’s resourceful out of one…*

“We’ll have to put out an APB on him,” said another councilman, pulling at his long beard in distress. “I wouldn’t have believed someone like Siegrain, a Wizard Saint, was able to act like that, but he must have feared you would find something out. Running away like he did, that is the most obvious sign of guilt you could ever expect to see.”

“Don’t bother with that. I’ll hunt him down one way or another. I just…need…a …direction…” Ranma said slowly, looking up and smiling at something above and behind the councilmembers. They all turned to see a young, blue-haired girl floating down towards them.

Wendy alighted next to Ranma, looking at him quizzically. “I kicked up really, **really** high and followed whoever that was part of the way like you said I should, Ranma-nii. He kept on moving all over the place for a bit, then settled down on a straight line.”

“Show me, Wendy-chan,” Ranma said picking her up and racing towards the nearest tower There he leaped up from one balcony to another, making his way upwards, hopping off a gargoyle, and landing on top of the Tower’s tallest tower. There he pulled out a compass, looking down at Wendy expectantly.

He didn't notice as a few of the major Council members including Ultear floated up beside them, watching as Wendy pointed. “That way, Onii-chan. He was going really fast, but he eventually settled down going in that direction.”

“Northwest,” Ranma said, looking from where Wendy was pointing down to the compass he had pulled out of his Requip space. “That's the direction of the ocean, right? That is, if he isn’t hiding somewhere in Fiore.”

“Eventually, yes,” said Yajima. He looked both worried and sad, staring out over the vista with his mostly-closed eyes. “But not Caelum. That would put him in the waters between Caelum, Fiore, and the northern continent. But there is no way a mage could fly all that way, no matter how strong. The storms up there are fierce, and the sheer distance is impossibly daunting.”

Crawford spoke up. “He won’t be hiding in Fiore, **that** is for certain. While I never have had need to before, my magic, Super Archive Real-Time Link, can find any mage I’ve met throughout Fiore, including Siegrain. Since he knows that and that we’re hunting him, Siegrain won’t stay in the country.”

Ranma scowled. “And who’s to say he won’t change direction once he reaches the ocean? Even if we can close the ports down to anyone looking like him, there’re magics which he can use to change his appearance. Not good at all. Still, he’s an arrogant ass, to think he could take me out and then just whitewash over everything. That’s a sign of someone with a major megalomania issue. I can’t see him doing that. No, his base is somewhere out there along that line.”

Whirling on the council, he glared at them all, in particular Ultear. “Is there anything, anything at all that you can tell me about Seigrain, something to give me some idea where he could be hiding out there? Anything out of the ordinary?”

Ultear and the others looked at one another, and then Yajima said cautiously, “He seemed to have an inordinate interest in Fairy Tail and Erza Scarlet in particular. As we said earlier, it was his suggestion that Erza would be brought in.”

“That's true. He talked about Erza several times. For a while I thought they were an item or, perhaps, exes,” Ultear lied. “He mentioned a secret she needed to keep, but beyond that…” Ultear shrugged before walking over to look down at Wendy, a real smile on her face, the difference slight but telling. Though slightly younger, the blue-haired girl reminded her of Meredy. “And who’s this, hmmm?”

“This is my little sister, Wendy. She’s a Dragon Slayer too, and today she was my little eye in the sky,” Ranma said, ruffling Wendy’s hair. “Wendy, this is Ultear and a bunch of old guys whose names I can’t bother remembering.”

As the council either snorted in good humor or glared—mostly glared—Ranma turned his attention back to the matter at hand. “If Siegrain and Erza have a history, then maybe we should call her in for real. I don't suppose you have some kind of really fast mode of transportation?”

The Magic Council all looked at one another, then down at the damage Siegrain and Ranma had done to the Tower of Knowledge in their brief battle. “We may have someone that can help. Doranbolt should be able to return with her by tonight,” Crawford said.

“Tell him to bring Natsu Dragneel with Erza if he volunteers to come and to meet me at the nearest port to this straight line,” Ranma ordered. He looked out over the distance in the direction where, somewhere, this Siegrain character was hiding planning who knew what. “I said I’d call him in if I got into a fight, and I think an extra Dragon Slayer might very well be needed soon...”

**End Chapter**

It always irritated me how hands off Toma was in canon (that and how dumb he and his daughter were to be fooled so utterly to open the gate) and the fact that no one noticed Jellal building the tower? Especially with the massive amounts of lacrima needed. Yeah, no. As for the rest, they have magazines, which equals printing presses, which equals paperwork, which equals lots of records. So here we go, using logic and real world concepts to blow up canon.

As for Jellal not being under Ultear’s command, that’s even simpler to explain. Not once since then did Ultear ever use possession magic. Not once. Indeed, I think the whole idea that he was being controlled like that was set up to be an example Shounen stupidity, ‘friendship solves everything’, ‘bad guys can be redeemed sometimes’ BS. Not going to happen here.