This has been beta-read by *Hiryo* for his Ranma know-how and Justlovereadin’ for his Fairy Tail knowledge. It has not been edited by Michael Duggan, so there will no doubt be more small mistakes, but I hope that doesn’t detract too much from the joy of reading it.

**Chapter 17: Repercussions, Discussions and Enforced Vacations**

Ranma and the others wearily made their way through the woods, reaching Jenny relatively quickly despite the fact most of them were having trouble putting one foot in front of the other. Kneeling next to the blonde woman, Ranma breathed a sigh of relief as she felt both the breath on her hand over Jenny’s mouth and a pulse underneath her fingers. Jenny was still alive despite all the shaking and crashing going on. “That's good, that’s damn good. But I wish we could do more for her.”

“Dwelling on what we cannot do will not get us any money at all, right?!” bellowed Hoteye. Ironically of all of them, he was the only one that still had enough magical energy to seem energetic.

That wasn't to say that if Hoteye had tried he could get away. Ranma was pretty certain that at this point she could still beat the tall man up and Erza was standing close by with a large and pointy looking pike, Bacchus was watching him carefully if blearily, and Loke too was nearby just in case, one arm free from where he was helping Erza along.

*Although if Mirajane would be able to spare any attention for him from watching Seilah is a question. Still, I don't think he will try anything,* Ranma thought, looking at the large man. During their walk, Hoteye had engaged Erza in a conversation about Wally as well as what had occurred in the Tower of Heaven after Brain had chosen to take him away with the others. The knowledge that the Oración Seis had continued to work with Jellal after he had taken command of the tower was both new too and bothered the heck out of Hoteye. Watching Ranma could almost see the scales falling from Hoteye’s eyes as he slowly broke through what remained of Brain’s brainwashing and indoctrination.

Setting that aside, Ranma turned to the others. “Okay now that we’re back here we need to organize a bit before moving on. “Mira, Seilah, you two gather up some cloth rags.”

Mira was about to object, seeing as they were in this middle of a forest. But then she sighed as she looked around at all of the dead bodies that were almost literally everywhere in sight. Bodies and parts of bodies littered this area of the forest and for leagues in every direction.

“Hoteye,” Ranma said, trying not to think along the same lines, “can you use your powers to create, like, a bed made of stone or something? We need to make certain Jenny’s head doesn’t move.”

Hoteye frowned then slowly nodded. “I can use my powers to reshape the land, create a concave sort of area to hold her body, and then remove my power from that that section of ground so that it hardens immediately. It will be a little tough but I think it is possible.”

“Good,” Ranma said, moving over to a tree, “Erza, help me out here. Bacchus, see if you can find those SE bikes Racer and his fellow speedsters were using. Loke, find Angel and get her back here to watch. Unless you think you can help create the bed?”

Loke shook his head. “I barely have enough magic left to stay corporeal, let alone do anything else.”

He knelt down next to Jenny, moving hair out of her face for a moment, staring at it sadly. “She's going to have scars you know. Such a pity, she’s one of the most beautiful women in all Ishgar.”

“Yeah well scars build character,” Ranma muttered, moving off.

Mira turned at that, her eyes flashing as she was about to bite Ranma's head off, but Erza caught her gaze and shook her head, pointing downwards. Mira followed her finger and saw that Ranma's hands were shaking, clenching and unclenching as he stared at a nearby tree. At that sight Mira subsided, nodding once to Erza before turning away, glaring at Seilah and jerking her head quickly to the side. “Come on, let's get this over with.”

Behind them, Ranma stared at a tree honestly unable to remember what he had been about to do for a moment, his distress at what had happened to Jenny causing his mind to go blank. Jenny had been one of the people that Ranma thought could handle this mission and he still thought that. During the ambush back in town, Jenny had proven her worth in several ways, helping Wendy with the wounded getting the two other Dragon slayers Gajeel and Natsu on their feet and then even helping with the other S-class mages. And in the fight in the woods, she had held her own entirely well, only to be faced with an opponent that she had never anticipated, that Ranma had never anticipated.

Ranma knew he had made the right decision on bringing Jenny along. Ranma knew he had made the right decision to come after the Oración Seis. He had even, probably, made the right decision to push through the smaller dark guilds. If not for the Devil’s arrival, that plan would've worked.

But none of that did anything to assuage his guilt and an immense amount of anger directed towards the Devil’s including Seilah. Ranma knew intellectually that Seilah had repented and that she had been against the attack entirely. For some reason his interactions with her, which he really wasn't willing to look at too closely at the moment, along with Wendy's had made an impression on her. *What does it say about Devils that even Wendy's moments of honest kindness and appreciation got through to her like that?*

Yet despite that, it was all Ranma could do after seeing those scars on Jenny's face to control himself from turning and smash Seilah's face in. *But that won't make my guilt go away* Ranma thought, *and like it or not, I was the one who put Jenny in this position, who put them all in this position. I was team lead, this was my mission and I was the one that came to them for help.*

Ranma was broken out of her thoughts by Erza grabbing her shoulder forcefully and turning the shorter redhead around, slamming her back against the tree she had just been staring at for more than five minutes. “Don't,” she ordered, and Ranma’s eyes widened. “Do not beat yourself over this! Do not assume all the guilt from this event. Whatever is going through your head, this was not your fault! Do you know why war is called a democracy?”

Ranma had to think for a moment and when she did, her lips quirked into a twitch that could never have been called a smile. “Because the enemy gets a vote too.”

“That's right,” Erza said with a nod, an answering dark smirk on her own face. “No plan survives contact with the enemy, that's why they're called the enemy. You want to hear anymore hoary old aphorisms? I've got several.”

Ranma surprised himself by chuckling at that and Erza smiled a little more naturally before going on more seriously, “Ranma, this mission was a disaster in many ways but it is no fault of yours. None of us anticipated that even after all of the shakeups going on with the Magic Council that there would still be spies within it able to tell the Oración Seis that we were after them. Perhaps we should have anticipated that someone would put two and two together and get four given the length of time it took us to get from Magnolia into Seven, but no one else thought of that either. Perhaps we should have anticipated an ambush, perhaps we should have anticipated one including poison.” She shrugged. “I'll grant you that one, considering that one of the enemies was a poison Dragon Slayer.”

“But even so, if they hadn't allied with Raven Tail, the poison wouldn't have done nearly as much damage to everyone. We never anticipated that Raven Tail and Oración Seis would be able to work together. And there was **no way we could have**,” Erza nearly roared the last five words into the shorter redhead’s face. “Raven Tail has always gone its own way it has never ever worked with any other guild. Even now I'm not certain how Brain was able to get them to agree to it this time.”

“Yet even with that, it would've worked out. If not for the devils,” Ranma said, her eyes flashing with anger.

Erza nodded seriously then thumped her in the chest with a finger, hard enough to leave a bruise and set Ranma's breasts to bouncing a little. “Exactly! **Another** enemy, who we didn't even know was around to vote, as it were, on the outcome of the battle. Again, nothing we knew of, or could possibly have anticipated could lead us to assume that they were around! You cannot second-guess your decisions hindsight in this instance serves no one!”

“I know all that,” Ranma said, pushing her hand away, before tapping her own forehead then her chest. “I know that up here. But not here. It doesn't make the guilt go away.”

“It shouldn't, but it should at least decrease it,” Erza said with a sigh. “Now come on, let's get working.”

Between the two of them, they cut out several long staffs, then splinted Ultear’s leg in several places, bandaging her badly fried foot as best as they could, which wasn’t much and then they moved back to Hoteye. He had created two makeshift beds of earth under the two wounded women. The ground had shifted to a clay composition and look, slowly lowering the two women into the ground for a few inches, before then rising up like a flowering pod. Jenny’s bed cradled her head very gingerly, keeping it still as possible.

These beds were still soft and Erza and Ranma pushed the long staffs through one side and out the other, before Hoteye slowly pulled his magic out of the earth, allowing the beds to harden as he went before pulling it away from them. This created two hard, rather heavy, but solid and stiff beds for the wounded.

Once that was done, Ranma went to work on further protecting, even though Ranma had to cringe at the very idea that she might have brain damage of some kind. As she was working, she couldn't stop herself from looking at Jenny’s scars once more. Her face was heavily marked with small slashes here and there from the visor of her helmet shattering, but Ranma felt most of those would disappear. The three wounds that would almost certainly leave scars was a long mark along one cheek, a cut across her nose, and then another scar going up and into her hairline along the right side of her head. Looking at that one, Ranma knew that led into the soft area Seilah had reported feeling, where Jenny’s skull had been broken.

Pulling her attention away from that, Ranma continued her task before looking over at the other bed where Loke and Mira were at work making Ultear’s leg comfortable. Erza had moved off into the woods, to see if there were any survivors among the dark guilds along with Hoteye, continuing their earlier discussion as they did.

Ranma honestly didn't think there would be other survivors. For one thing, even those unconscious or already dead had attacked them under Seilah’s curse, although thankfully the dead ones hadn't been able to use their magic. When those same people to come around again, he doubted that any of them had been pulling punches. Ranma at least hadn't been very gentle in putting them down before Ranma was taken out by the decision to eat the cursed water Torafuzar has launched at him and Mira.

Looking down at herself now, Ranma could still see large swirls of black magic on her skin here and there, disappearing under her shirt and around the neck and sleeve. *Blech, I always thought tattoos were ugly frankly and now I probably look like a tattooed skank! Someone up there has a very bad sense of humor. And come to think of it, they didn't disappear when I was away from Seilah. That's not good.*

*Regardless, we wiped out at least 10 dark guilds here, not including our actual target. I suppose from that perspective it's actually been a successful mission. But if Wendy and the others…* Ranma cut herself off from that thought. She couldn't think about it right now, not just wouldn't think about it because it served no purpose, no, she **couldn't** think about it. Because if she did, the anger at Seilah that she had been slowly building up inside of her since they had returned to Jenny would burst out, and she would do something she would regret for the rest of his/her life: break the martial arts code and harm a defenseless prisoner.

Taking her mind off those thoughts, Ranma concentrated on what she had actually been looking at in the first place, Loke and Mira working on Ultear. “Did you find any more wounds beyond her leg?”

“Well unsurprisingly, her foot is her worst injury, beyond that a dislocated knee and a shattered femur on that same leg, like we already knew. Beyond that Ultear's got a few cracked ribs, the wrist on her other hand is broken and she has a **big** bruise right over one of her breasts,” Mira said, before her hand smacking out into Loke's face as she pulled the ruins of Ultear’s shirt up to look underneath, noting that the bruise went a ways around her side, which Mira hadn’t been able to see before. “Don't look idiot! This is seriously is not the time!”

Loke shrugged. “Sorry,” he said looking away before turning his attention back to Ranma. “Her foot, as Mira said, is in her worst injury but she is suffering from severe extreme magical exhaustion. It's not life threatening but it could impact her mind.”

Mages, once they activated their magic could live without it, their bodies would keep going on. But if they pushed too far, the lack of magic would severely harm their brains.

Ranma choked off a gasp at that, one hand moving up to rub her face and squeezed her nose between two fingers. “Dammit! Another one who might have brain damage?!”

“It's not your fault,” Loke said with a shake of it or of his head. “If anything, it’s the Devil’s.”

Growling a little Mira looked over at Seilah, but Ranma shook his head, looking in the same direction. “No. Though, I fully believe that this mission would've gone a lot better without the devils sticking their noses in, this was a FUBAR from the very beginning. And I have to take some of the blame for that.”

Seilah looked uncomfortable under their gazes, but didn't look away, staring at the wounded the entire time. “You are notto blame for that. The Oración Seis’ information network is among the best in Ishgar, and they hid themselves very well after the initial shakeup that hit Fiore's Magic Council. They knew almost immediately that you were coming after them and went out of their way to make it seem as if they didn't. And Brain’s involvement with Raven Tail caught even us by surprise.”

“Let me guess, your spies were spying on them? Just as much as they were there to spy on the Magic Council?” Ranma asked.

“Exactly,” Seilah said with a nod. “And our spies have a, what is the phrase, a leg up?”

When the others nodded, she went on. “They have a leg up on most, since many of them do not even know their reporting to us. In many cases, I do not know how my Guild Master Mard Geer was able to do that, though in a few, they are responding to long-term spellwork by my curse. They are ordered to drop off information here, or go into a bar here and talk to an individual there every other week, passing on information in such a way that they do not even know they are doing it.”

“That curse of yours is a little too powerful,” Ranma groused.

“And yet all of you were easily able to overcome both my puppets and me,” Seilah said with a shrug. “So in that area, you are incorrect. My Absolute Command Curse is not all it… the phrase is, cracked up to be, is it not?”

The others nodded, and she smiled wanly. “Such interesting phrases you humans come up with. Far more interesting than most of your stories in point of fact.”

“Stories?” Mira said growling a little. “You mean our lives?”

“Those and your actual written novels,” Seilah said with a nod. “I have read every story I could, and very few of them held my interest. There are a few treasures among them, but I suppose that could be said for human stories as well.”

Erza and Hoteye came back at that moment and Hoteye asked, “So, as the one in charge of this group Ranma, what will happen to myself and this one?” he asked, gesturing toward Seilah.

Ranma ground her teeth as another flare of anger went through her. “Seilah's future will depend on what we find we get back to town,” he said coldly. “I'm not going to make any promises or even predictions of what might happen in the future there. As for you, are you willing to turn King’s Evidence?”

“I am,” the larger man said formally, bowing his shaggy head. “So long as I am able to contact my brother, and I will be given my freedom afterward to live with him, I will give every piece of information I have.”

“Answer me this then,” Loke said, gesturing all around them, “how did you all set this up? There is no way that this many dark guilds moving into the area wouldn't have been spotted by someone. Seven isn't like the former countries of Sin and Enca, it's civilized. Hell, near the edge of this forest, there's farmland and a town within a day’s ride so…”

“Ah,” Hoteye said with a wide smile. “That would be because my former master was able to break the Bank of Ishgar’s special teleportation arrays. He did so more than three years ago and we've been using them ever since.” He laughed wildly. “After all, money does make the world go round, right?! And we had to get some from somewhere.”

Ranma scowled at that. “Are you saying you’ve been stealing from the bank?”

“Quite a lot,” Hoteye said with a nod. “Most of it was spent but I know where a few of the guilds hid their excess cash, and where Brain had an emergency cache of his own.”

“Hoteye, that, that alone means that you've just bought your freedom,” Ranma said slowly shaking her head. The Bank of Ishgar had long refused to share that secret with anyone, despite the fact that it could do a lot of good in capable hands. The Kings would be salivating at the very idea of getting their hands on that, even if it was only of a limited utility. *And if the bank wants to bitch, the Kings can do something about it. Spying on the bank is one thing, taking advantage of a windfall like this is an entirely different and they can hardly be blamed for it then.*

“Indeed,” Hoteye said with a nod. “I also know most of our spies. And will willingly point them out, give their names or whatever the case may be. All I want, is my brother, myself, and enough money to live an easy life with him.”

“Done,” Ranma said with a nod. “By my authority is Ranger, you are now under my protection as King’s Evidence. We’ll talk with Meredrain as soon as we get back to town.”

“How?” Hoteye asked, blinking.

Ranma smirked. “There are secrets even more hush-hush than the teleportation arrays of the Bank of Ishgar.”

“Brain didn't know anything much about Rangers at all, you all are rather mysterious. Although, I will say that there were rumors about a super-powerful Ranger dealing with magical issues at the king's command going around the dark guilds of late,” Hoteye replied, somewhat apologetically.

Ranma frowned at that, but decided to put off thinking about that. *We'll see how wide those rumors have spread, before I decide what to do about them, or if I even have to do about them. I like a lot of what the Ranger badge did, but some of it, well…*

He shook his head at that, as Hoteye had continued speaking gesturing towards Ultear. “And in the spirit of our new contract, I have to tell you what I overheard about this one. When we returned to our cave and Brain was talking to her in such a way that indicated that she worked for one of the other members of the alliance.”

Ranma looked at him sharply, “Explain.”

Hoteye explained what had occurred after he and Brain had teleported back to the cave that had currently been their hideout. As he finished everyone else frowned, looking at Ultear. “But if that's the case, why did they fight? I meant it was freaking obvious that she fought her heart out,” Bacchus said for them all.

“I don't know,” Ranma said coldly, “but we’ll get answers one way or another out of her I think.

“That's fine and all, but what about her?” Mira asked insistently, pointing at Seilah.

“Like I said,” Ranma said, latching his eyes on to Mira. “What happens to Seilah will be decided after we return to the town. She told us that she at least tried to keep Wendy and possibly the others alive by creating hiding places for them, though admittedly the only one she knew was still alive when she did that was Wendy. Still, that was before she was hit by Nirvana, of she was able to I'd say she's earned if not her freedom, then her parole.”

Seilah understood that word, and moved forward slightly, before dropping to her knees in front of Ranma bowing her head. “I wish to do what I can to make amends for today. Though the effect of Nirvana has dissipated, I still feel the emotions it woke within me, the remorse for our actions. I have always been somewhat interested by humans, and have never understood the amount of scorn the other devils to feel towards you all. Envy and hate yes, there are many things among humans to be envious for, and many of you are dirty, smelly, and…”

“We get the point thank you,” Erza said with a growl. Then she sniffed at herself for a moment before blushing as Ranma looked at her with amusement. “Well, you go and smell yourself then!” she huffed angrily.

“Nope!” Ranma said with a mocking little pop of her lips when she said the ‘p’. “I don't want to knock myself out like that. Although maybe when we get back to town, we can find a bath.”

At that all of the girls there stared off into the distance before sighing hopefully. Hoteye just laughed boisterously at that, then Loke and Bacchus exchanged a glance and a grin, high-fiving surreptitiously as they both had the idea that was one bath that they would love to see.

“I had thought Devils were simply better than humans. We did not destroy the forest we do not fight amongst ourselves, we Devils of the Book, we had loyalty to one another and our purpose. We strove, we learned, and even if you humans were better at some things like cooking and writing, we were tougher, stronger and we could live forever. But then I was betrayed, betrayed by my lover. The one Etherious who I trusted the most, my lover, was willing to sacrifice me to live herself. That makes us no better than humans doesn't it?”

“I'd like to think that a lot of humans would try to rise above that kind of thing,” Ranma said with a frown, but then shrugged. “Still, I'll take your oath and I'll protect you if Wendy and the others are still alive. If not,” Ranma said, leaning down so that her face was right in front of Seilah's, “if not, you will pay for it just as your two companions did.”

Seilah did not quail under that look, she simply nodded her head. “I understand. A desire for vengeance like that is also something we and humans share.”

“That wouldn’t be vengeance, that would be justice,” Mira muttered, before turning away as Ranma seemed to shake his head at that.

The group then moved through the forest. Bacchus had found several dozen SE bikes. Ranma and Bacchus then connected four of them into two, stringing the beds containing Jenny and Ultear, while Angel shared a bike with Bacchus. “After all, how often is a lush like me going to be this close to a hottie like her? And without her screaming and trying to kill me?” He said, putting Angel on the bike in front of him on the bike. She was then tied down there and he grinned even more at the feel of her rear under him.

Loke chuckled at that, finding it somehow fitting while Seilah looked at the bikes stonily.

“What is it?” Ranma asked looking at Seilah as she finished, locking the steering of the second bike latched to Jenny’s bed. She of course had to then latch the wheels together at the spokes so that she had at essentially created the world's most odd-looking car out of two different bikes. It wouldn't last for long, and it certainly wasn't going to be up for any real maneuvering, but it would at least give Jenny the smoothest ride he could give her. Nearby this same treatment was being dealt to another two bikes and Ultear’s bed by Erza and Hoteye, the redhead proving surprisingly adept with her hands.

“I do not know how to ride,” Seilah said apologetically.

Ranma sighed at that, then gestured behind herself. “Get on.”

“I could simply fly,” Seilah replied, sounding almost flustered.

“None of us can though, and we’re not letting you out of your sight whatever your parole,” Mira said growling angrily at the Devil girl. Both the attack she had been a part of, the fact she was a Devil, and the fact Seilah was acting so docile now pissed Mira off something fierce.

At the same time, Erza ground her teeth at the idea of Seilah and Ranma sharing a bike for some reason, the feeling of it causing her eyes to widen. *This feeling, is this jealousy? How very unpleasant.*

“Sorry,” Ranma said with a sigh, “I think on that one I'd be overruled.” And, though it went against his/her normal personality quite a lot, Ranma wasn't feeling very forgiving either at the moment.

The young redhead blushed hotly as Seilah moved behind her, sitting down and hugging her around the middle from behind as she had seen Bacchus do with Angel. “Like this?”

“I guess,” Ranma said, flushing and both thankful and cursing the fact she hadn’t been able to change back to his male body yet. As it was Seilah’s breasts were pressing into the back and sides of her head as they simply squished against the back of her head rather than ‘his’ back. *Gahhh, they are so sooooft and giving, feels like they’re trying to suck me in! On the other hand, if I was a guy just now I’d bet my reaction to that’d be visible, and that’s one more can of worms I don’t want to open right now.*

“Let's go already,” Loke said, pouting irritably. He had offered to bike with Mira (but not Erza, Loke was still traumatized by the one time he’d tried to hit on Erza a few years back) and not only had Mira refused him, Seilah hadn’t even looked at him when commenting on her lack of driving skills.  *How in the world am I the only guy here who isn't currently hugging a woman!? There is something seriously wrong with the world.*

After that the group left, the roar of their engines preventing any further conversation except between Ranma and Seilah and neither was in the mood to talk. Ranma was worried about what they would find, and Seilah was in a very introspective, almost brooding mood, as she replayed the events of the battle how her words had never been taken seriously, how both Kyoka and Torafuzar had made light of her worries. And of course the moment Kyoka sacrificed Seilah to save Kyoka’s own life replayed continuously in her head. They had always been close, partners both in a literal and sexual sense, they had even exchanged words of affection many times. But all of that had mattered not at all. When Kyoka had felt her life was in danger, she had taken the most expedient way out of danger, by using Seilah as a shield.

About an hour out from the forest, their journey was interrupted by a blast of lightning as Laxus crashed to the ground nearby. Underneath his arms Laxus carried Cana, Lucy, and Wendy, and he dropped them to the ground going to one knee and breathing out deeply as he did so, shaking his head to clear it like they were so many parcels. He looked at the oncoming bikes, and then smiled wearily as he pushed himself to his feet. Laxus hadn't actually used much power against Ivan, who, despite that huge spell Ivan had tried on him, had gone through two fights already before he clashed with Laxus. But teleporting four people along with him in his Lightning Flash spell was an immense strain.

“Ranma-nii!” Wendy shouted, scrambling to her feet and racing towards them.

Ranma's face lit up at the site of her, and she waved back excitedly, a grin on her face as she shouted behind her, “Well, it seems as if you protected Wendy at least!”

Behind him Seilah nodded, the new emotions within her swirling in a new and somewhat happy pattern. “That, that is good,” she murmured.

But Wendy and the older two women had paused as they stared at Seilah on the back of Ranma's bike, their eyes flying wide in shock and fear. Cana moved to one side quickly, pulling out a few combat cards, while Lucy grabbed at her waist, gripping it tightly as she prepared to summon Sagittarius and Taurus, even crouching down, ready for combat as a thin whip appeared in one hand. “What is she doing here?!” all three shouted.

“That is a long story,” Ranma shook her head as the bikes slowed to a halt.

Ranma had intended to sweep Wendy into a hug, but Seilah got off their bike first. Then, astonishing everyone else there she went to her knees in front of Wendy and the others, actually pressing her forehead down into the ground. “I am sorry for what we did. I tried to talk to the other two out of attacking you, but we were given the order to observe and take advantage of the fights between your selves and the Oración Seis to kill as many from both sides as we could and the other two would not turn away from attacking the town.”

“Why the hell should we believe you!?” Cana snarled while Lucy looked somewhat bemused, her eyes straying to Cana’s hand, where two of her fingers were missing now.

“I do not know,” Seilah said, still with her head pressed to the ground. “I have no knowledge of how to ask for forgiveness, as such an emotion has never occurred to me in the first place. This manner, which I read of in a book from Minstrel, of addressing the issue seemed the easiest.”

Staring at the kowtowing Devil, Wendy held up a hand, speaking slowly. “She, Seilah, she could have buried us all under the rubble. She could have killed us for certain, and it, it wouldn’t’ve really taken that much time with her powers. Instead, she convinced the others she already had. Is, is that right?”

Seilah nodded. “That is correct. Then again, I could not stop them from fighting your brother and his force, so even that is my guilt to bear.”

“How many of you survived?” Ranma asked seriously looking between the still kowtowing Seilah and the three women.

“Actually…” Lucy began, looking over at Cana, who scowled, looking away.

“Wendy’s got a point.” Cana said gruffly, not looking at any of them. “Only two of us, Ichiya and Sherry died in their attack. Ichiya died protecting me from a blast from one of the other devils, that big bruiser with the fish face. What happened to him?” She asked, her hands clenched with both remembered fear and shame: shame that she’d had to be saved, shamed that it had only been the devils being careless that allowed any of them to live.

“I killed that one I think,” Ranma said looking over at Erza who nodded in confirmation. “I wasn't exactly in my right mind at the time, but yeah he's dead.

“And so's the other one, Ranma turned her entire upper body into so much slurry!” Mira said with relish. *While part of me wants to have eaten their souls, that sight is still going to be a memory I’ll treasure.*

Wendy moved in front of Seilah, reaching down and pulling her to her feet or at least to her knees, looking her in the face. “I'll forgive you, I think. Like I said, you could have buried us all, instead you created those little domes around us. And… I felt like you didn't want to be there anyway. But I don't think the others will be so forgiving.”

“We’ll keep Seilah hidden for now. Seilah, when we come within sight of the town, you and I will go off and find a small hiding place for you, before I rejoin the others. For now though Wendy, do you have any magical reserves left?” Ranma asked.

“Hai Ranma-nii,” Wendy said with a sharp nod. “I've been resting, and eating Cana's air cards. They were kind of tasty,” she finished, actually licking her lips before flushing and looking away, like a little girl caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

Chuckling at that while Cana laughed, Ranma gestured over to the wounded women. “In that case could you see to Jenny… and Ultear, I suppose. Jenny is your priority though.”

“That's why I brought these two along,” Laxus said with a shake of his head towards Cana and Lucy. “Besides having missed out the fight in the town, Lucy has a few new spirits that she can use as support, and Cana's cards can also help you and maybe the others regain some energy.”

Lucy nodded, then moved around the others, towards Loke, who bowed from the waist. “My lady, I have done it! I have avenged my previous master and gotten her keys!”

“That's nice, but first thing’s first,” Lucy said, reaching for Loke’s hand and closing her eyes. There was a brief pulse of magic going from her and into Loke, before she stepped away with a smile. “There, you should be good to go for a while now. Don't hesitate to head back to the spirit world if you're feeling tired again.”

Loke smiled at that then Lucy took the keys from him, before looking over at Ranma. “Um, Ranma, I know she pissed you off, but would you mind giving Aquarius back her urn? It, um it doesn’t actually do anything for you, does it? And if you return it, I can get her to use it to give you a power up.”

The urn wasn’t a regular urn, it had been crafted in the Celestial Spirit realm and while it had several enchantments on it, if you didn’t have Celestial Spirit magic, you couldn’t use it. Ranma had found that to his cost the day after he had taken if from Aquarius. So she simply scowled, nodding. The power up right now would be fantastic, giving him some energy back, and Ranma was frankly done with being in ‘her’ female form right now.

“Might as well open one of these gates at the same time as I’ll be summoning Apus,” she said, holding out the golden key that told Lucy she was getting closer to her dream of having all the Zodiac keys, ignoring the look Bacchus was staring at her in shock. He knew something about Celestial Spirit mages, and the idea of one summoning two spirits at once was incredible.

Now that Ranma had agreed to give the urn back though, Lucy could care less about the looks other people were giving her. *Time to get to the bottom of what’s bothering Aquarius by going to the person who knows her best, Scorpio! Besides, I’ve been dying to meet the guy who could put up with her for so long.* “Open, Gate of the Scorpion! Scorpio!”

An instant later the gate opened and Scorpio appeared, “We are… Scorpio!” Upon arrival the male spirit bowed deeply towards Lucy, “We are, yes, Scorpio welcomes his new user, Lucy! We are happy to make a contract with Aquarius’s mistress!”

Now that he wasn’t fighting for his life against him and his user, Ranma was able to make out more details of the other spirit. He was slightly taller than Ranma but of marginally slimmer build in the shoulders, showing off a set of pecs under an odd red and gold flower-shaped neck ornament, matching something like a kilt he wore over a pair of black shorts, with the same kind of bandages martial artists used on his legs and forearms. His large tail ended in a gun shape at the end, which Ranma had already made note of in the fight in the town. His hair was oddly two different colors, white and red.

“That’s good to hear Scorpio, would you mind making a contract with me now?” Lucy asked, even as she opened the Gate of the Heavenly bird, directing it to hover over Erza and Mira. “Although that kind of brings up a point I’d like to talk to you about. You see, Aquarius hasn’t been responding to my calls ever since her urn was stolen, and I want to make certain there’s nothing wrong with her that returning it won’t fix.” She looked a little apologetic, “And um, I’d like to make certain she doesn’t just turn around and attack the person who took it, because that would just send us all back to square one.”

Blinking, Scorpio felt at the magic stream feeding his corporeal form from Lucy then looked over at Loke and then to Apus. Loke simply smirked at him, while Apus bounced in place twittering its healing song as it zoomed from one girl to the other. *Amazing, she has so much power she is able to sustain all three of us like this?* Then Lucy’s question registered and he huffed. “We are, I would like to know the answer to that question actually. We are, Aquarius has been… odd of late, even when we’re together she seems distant, staring off into space and flushing.”

Now it was Lucy’s turn to blink, then she shook her head. “Um, I really don’t know what to make of that one.”

Loke however smirked then looked over at Ranma. “Ranma, can I ask you what led up to your taking Aquarius’s urn from her?”

“A bit of smack talk I think… yeah, I got in her face and shouted at her, then she shouted back I shouted again, she attacked, I ate it, then closed took her urn and booted her hard enough to send her back to the Celestial spirit realm,” Ranma said with some difficulty. *If I remembered every encounter with someone I’ve pissed off, I wouldn’t have any more room in my brain for anything else.*

“Hohoh,” Loke said, chuckling lecherously. “So it’s like that is it?”

“We are going to have issues if you’re thinking of Scorpio’s girlfriend like one of your human floozies,” Scorpio warned, his tail moving to point at Loke over his shoulder.

“I’m doing nothing of the sort my friend. But tell me, when you two are together, how do you act?” When he saw Scorpio look confused, Loke elaborated. “What I mean is, when you’re on dates, who takes the lead? Who sets the pace?”

“We are, Aquarius of course. We are, what do you take me for, a pervert? We are, of course the woman should set the pace,” Scorpio huffed.

“Ooh, I like him,” Mira murmured, getting nods from Cana and Lucy, though Erza was looking a little thoughtful and Bacchus was starting to grin.

“Ah you see, that’s nice and all, but perhaps Aquarius would like a little more variety in your encounters,” Loke said delicately.

“He means she might want ya ta take charge, ta call her names and such,” Bacchus supplied with a laugh. “Some girls are wild like that ya know?”

Scorpio blinked. “We are, do you think so?”

Blushing now and trying to avoid Cana’s speculative gaze Lucy sighed, and cancelled the Gate of the Heavenly Bird, before pulling out another golden key. “Well, there’s only one way to find out. Open, Gate of the Maiden! Virgo!”

Her maid-dressed spirit appeared instantly, kneeling in front of Lucy. “Mistress, you called?”

“Hey Virgo, do you think you could find Aquarius and tell her I have gotten her urn back for her, but she needs to come and collect it in person. She won’t respond to my key.” Lucy knew that it had been Aquarius who had saved her life from the poison, but the water spirit hadn’t actually spoken to her during that, or after she had recovered.

“If I can, will I receive some punishment?” Virgo asked hopefully.

“Er, actually, if I’m following this right, it might be Aquarius who receives some,” Ranma said, getting laughing nods from Loke and Bacchus and a thoughtful look from Scorpio.

Virgo’s smile widened noticeably at that. “Oh, that sounds almost as good!” With that she disappeared, coming back an instant later carrying the angry, spluttering form of Aquarius under one arm, depositing the mermaid onto her tail on the ground before Lucy then disappearing, unwilling to burden Lucy with their connection further.

Growling angrily, Aquarius rose to her formidable height, using her tail to add to it as she roared at Lucy, “Damn it you blonde bimbo, can’t you take a hint! And what’s with you pushing yourself like this right after nearly dying huh! You worry the scales off of me and then turn around and not only sustain me but that idiotic lion and… and…” She trailed off blushing as she realized who the other spirit Lucy was currently sustaining a magical connection to was. “Scorpio!?”

“We are, yes my love, it is I Scorpio!” Scorpio said with a smile, moving over to hug Aquarius around the shoulders. “We are, you should calm down, our Mistress Lucy is hoping to get your urn back, won’t that be nice?”

Aquarius smiled at the knowledge that the two of them would share the same contractor now, then flushed slightly as she looked at Scorpio then to Ranma, who she recognized from their encounter a few weeks ago. “O, oh, so the red-haired bint’s come to her senses and wants to apologize huh?”

“Excuse me!” Ranma growled, getting into her face by the simple expedient of grabbing Aquarius’s scale bathing suit and tugging her face down to Ranma’s level. “What was that!? You’re the one who was using that massive splash attack without even checking if there were other people around! What would ya have done if you’d caught some normal citizen up in that, huh!?”

Looking at the now visibly red face of his girlfriend, Scorpio’s eyes widened, and then he looked wildly over to Loke who nodded soberly, very visibly biting his lip to keep from laughing. Bacchus too was giving the male spirit a thumb’s up. *Right, so either Aquarius has suddenly found she’s interested in girls, which is a near impossibility after so long, or she really does like being, being challenged or something similar.* A small smile formed on his face as his tail flexed. *Well, I can do that!*

“We are, I think that’s about enough!” Scorpio said firmly, wrapping his tail around Aquarius’s middle and squeezing, pulling her back upright and against his chest roughly, one arm going around her middle to join his tail. “We are, Aquarius, I thought you knew the proper way to speak to our summoner. We are, and you also were apparently in the wrong when your urn was taken. We are, perhaps Hime is wrong, and you do not deserve your urn back?”

To one side of the couple Virgo burst into existence, sustaining herself and actually wiggling in place as she looked at this eagerly. Ranma wondered how the pink-haired spirit had known what was going on, or if she had just popped back in the moment, she could, but decided not to question it. Instead, she backed away hurriedly and when Scorpio held out a hand, Ranma handed the urn back and backed away, turning his attention to the others with the eagerness of the very embarrassed.

While this had been going on Wendy had been looking over Jenny, and as the drama around Lucy, Aquarius and Scorpio died down, Ranma moved away from the others, going to one knee behind her, and putting her arms around Wendy’s shoulders tightly, hugging her so hard she oofed at him, but Ranma didn’t care, so grateful she was still alive. “So, how is she?”

“…I think she has a concussion at the least. My magic can heal the physical trauma, but not the mental” Wendy said after a moment, her fingers moving through Jenny’s hair very gently along the scalp to one side of her head. Her magic had already dealt with most of the glass cuts on Jenny's face. Even the one on the cheek had dimmed noticeably, and she had healed the internal bleeding within the cracked skull before repairing the skull itself. The last two scars, the one over the nose and the one, which had led up into the shattered part of Jenny’s skull, were still angry and red though.

“I’m sorry, I just don't know enough about the brain to tell you for certain there’s been no permanent damage done,” Wendy went on with a sigh, “I’ll finish healing her skull though, that shouldn’t do any more harm anyway. But she really should meet with the Porlyusica when we get back.”

“We’re not going to go back all that way to Magnolia just for her imouto, no matter how much I might want to,” Ranma said with her own sigh.

“Then I think we need to find more book-type healers. I just don't know enough about brains I'm sorry,” Wendy said looking a little desperate distressed. She liked Jenny, not as much as she liked Erza or Bisca, simply because they hadn't spent all that time together but the time they had to spend together had been great fun.

“Ranma, I think we've talked Aquarius around to helping you,” Lucy called.

“Ah, cool, I’d reaalllly like to change back to my male bod.” *And I’d like to know if these changes I’m feeling in my body carries over without any of the dragonification I was dealing with when I was splashed by water and changed back there. The mental changes I know won’t, the rest is up in the air.*

A moment later, Ranma ate the vestiges of an attack from Aquarius, gulping it down after having let a heated (courtesy of once of Erza’s many weapons) jet of water hit her, changing her into his male body. He could feel his body soaking in the water to refill his magic like a drowning man would water, and sighed at both the pleasure of that and the taste of it. “Thanks for that,” he said nodding to Aquarius. “And next time don't splash your allies as well as your enemies, okay? Or else ya might become urn-less again ya know?”

Aquarius harrumphed at that and probably would have replied scathingly, but Scorpio’s tail, still wound around her middle, tightened just enough to cause her to feel it, and she blushed hotly nodding quickly. A moment later, the two of them bowed towards Lucy and the spirits all disappeared.

“Fine then,” Mira growled, pointing at Seilah. “Now that that’s over with, we’ve healed up a bit and such, what should we do about this one? I’ll tell you plain, I want her in irons at the very least.”

Sighing Ranma looked around at the others. Erza shrugged unconcern, willing to follow Ranma’s lead. Cana scowled while Lucy looked away, not willing to give an opinion on this and rather feeling guilty about having missed out on the action. Wendy smiled both at Ranma and at Seilah, indicating she felt that Seilah’s repentant apology and the way she had helped her and the others hide was enough to win her acceptance. Bacchus didn’t bother looking at anything but Seilah’s chest. Loke too looked away, not having fought the demons.

*So the question is, should we just capture her and then be upfront about it, or not?* “Seilah, how likely is it if we openly have you be our sort-of prisoner like Hoteye that your guild will be able to try and spring you or do something else?”

Seilah did not hesitate to reply. “The only government my guild has not infiltrated in some fashion is the government of Midi. They Have some manner of defense against magics of many different sorts. While Master Mard Geer would not care about my life one way or another, he would not be willing to put up with the dishonor of having a Demon like myself captured. He would attack, kill me, and quite possibly as many other humans as he could in the immediate vicinity. He would take the entire guild to do it, as a show of strength.”

“So we keep it a secret, unless we can gather oh, six Wizard Saints or equivalent mages together?” Ranma asked looking over at the others.

“Between You, Master Makarov and Laxus, we might only have to find two or three more there,” Erza replied with a tight grin. She had measured herself against these Demons, and if there were more like Torafuzar out there, with his level of natural armor, she was going to have a devil of a time fighting them.

Mira scowled. “Fine, we keep her a secret for now, but what about telling the kings?”

“If the king’s attempt to act on any information gleaned either by my giving it freely or through torture, they will, of necessity have to tell others of their court. If they do, the results will be the same as if you had, what is the term, brought me in openly.” Seilah supplied, her tone analytical as if what she was saying was only logical.

“God damn it, so what do we do then?”

“She gave her parole, I’m inclined to believe it.” Ranma said firmly, with Wendy nodding along. He looked around at the others, but only Mira and Cana still looked as if they had reservations. “I’ll watch her, and then we can pass on her information piecemeal, so that no one knows she’s decided to throw in her lot with us after Kyoka betrayed her.”

Seilah would have said it was more that she was throwing her lot in with the two Dragon Slayer siblings rather than humanity as a whole. But she realized from their perspective it hardly mattered which it was. “I cannot return to my guild. Master Mard Geer and the others would be unwilling to put up with our losing here as we did, better to die than return thus. I have nowhere else to go but with Ranma, who I gave my parole to.”

“There you have it,” Ranma said with a sharp nod of the head, ending the discussion.

Hopping onto the bike that Loke had been using before, Cana actually smiled despite the discussion about Seilah as she felt Lucy behind her and the group continued on with Laxus heading back via his Lightning travel method. Wendy joined Erza on her bike and the party continued on.

Ranma peeled off as soon as they saw the town, hiding Seilah in a small culvert of the ground that created a hide from everyone in the town. “Are you going to be alright out here for a bit?” he asked, looking down at her wounds.

Looking at him in some confusion, she just nodded. “I will be fine.” She cocked her head as Ranma stood there, waiting for something, but she didn’t say anything and he sighed before turning away, still leaving her somewhat confused, both about what he had been waiting for but also about Ranma’s change of heart towards her.

Since Laxus had left another Rune Knight company had arrived via train along with numerous bushels of food, tents and other things to help the townsfolk, joining the other two already there with the Book Wyrms. The wounded were all being seen to, and an aid station had been set up, while more tents were being set up for the coming night, complete with cots. Work had even begun on clearing away the town of rubble to search for more survivors and wounded.

Jura was in charge of that activity. Leaning on a massive staff of stone, he directed the others this way and that. But thanks to the noise of the bikes they were met with a welcoming party consisting of two full squads of Rune Knights and Jura himself hobbling out after them with Natsu and Gajeel following.

All of their eyes widened at the sight of the bedraggled attack group. Everyone, even Ranma after his power-up from Aquarius’s water, looked as if they had been put through the ringer. Erza moved like the dead, and her normal armor was chipped and stained by blood, though her wounds had been healed. Mira looked as if she was on her last legs, though she at least didn’t have any blood showing from old wounds. Bacchus too was bruised and limping from a wound high up his leg he’d refused to let Wendy anywhere near (this might have had something with the bloodshot, manic look in Ranma’s eyes when he mentioned it).

The sight of Hoteye however arrested the Runic Knight’s attention, and after a start they moved forward, brandishing their staffs angrily. “Hoteye of the Oración Seis, you are under arrest!”

Ranma however got in their way. “He's with us. Leave him be for now.”

“I'm sorry sir, but we have orders from the King. We are to take any dark guild mage we find under custody,” The Rune Knight’s commander said. Then he motioned the company forward.

“And I am countermanding them. Hoteye and I have made a deal, and putting him in chains is not part of that. Look, I’m tired, cranky and I really would like to hit something. So stand down, or you will feel what it feels like to be punted over the horizon.” At that, everyone else who had been part of the fight in the forest moved forward putting themselves between Hoteye and the Knights.

“Your orders will be countermanded more formally the moment we can get in contact with the government,” Ranma said, not saying how that was going to happen. “For now, you'll just have to trust us.”

The Rune Knights were not in the mood to listen however and there might've been a fight, or Ranma might have been forced to reveal his Ranger status to even more people. But then Jura interceded quickly on their behalf. Staring at each face in turn, he nodded once then slammed the tip of his stone staff down causing reverberations in the ground and everyone stopping to stare at the large bald man. “On my authority as a Wizard Saint, I will allow this.” He looked at Hoteye seriously, gesturing to the town, “So long as you will help us here.”

“Of course,” Hoteye said with a laugh, moving towards them. “Between the two of us earth mages, if anyone is still buried in the rubble here, we will find them, like a pauper looking for money, right!?”

With that, the tension of the moment vanished and Wendy broke off to rush over to the tents marked by large red crosses. Ranma stared after her, shaking his head. *Huh, that’s another thing that seems to be prevalent in whatever dimension, weird.*

As he was looking that way Natsu and Gajeel were looking back at Ranma frowning. His scent had changed, becoming deeper, stronger, and far must draconic for some reason along with a dank stench, like a crypt or something similar. The tattoos on his face and hands were also new, and neither of them knew what to make out of them.

Ranma ignored them, motioning Erza to come over before she could move to look at Gray, her face pale and shaking as she saw his missing forearm. Wendy had not been able to reconnect it, that kind of thing was beyond her. Ranma had seen it, and saw the other mages, most of them simply laid out nearby, still dealing with the lack of magic or the aftereffects of the poison. All of them sported dressed wounds here and there, and like Gray’s arm, it showed how Wendy’s healing magic had been pushed past its breaking point.

“You're in charge here,” he said simply. “You and Jura work together okay? Make certain the Rune Knights don’t spook Hoteye to run. Also make sure that no one actually tries to leave the town once they arrive.”

Erza's brows furrowed. “Surely you don't think someone spying on us now?”

“Once bitten twice shy. I'm not willing to take chances, not with all of us as badly battered as we are.” Guilt again flashed across Ranma's expression, before he shook his head firmly. “Just keep an eye on them.” Then he leaned in whispering in the redhead’s ear, causing her to flush, though his words didn’t add anything to the sensation, being as far away from romantic as it was possible to get. “I need to check in with the Kings, tell them how this all went down.”

“Good luck,” Erza said meaningfully, also whispering. “I get the feeling you're going to need it.”

Ranma nodded glumly, and left the town, heading back to where he had left Seilah. The place he’d stashed her was hidden, so he figured it was a decent enough spot for this conversation. She looked up as he entered the small dip in the land, but he shushed her with a finger to her lips. “We can talk in a bit, I need to call in to my employers.”

Blushing lightly at the touch to her lips by Seilah smiled crossing her eyes to stare at Ranma's finger on her lips, wondering what she should do about it, and generally speaking somewhat uncertain about the feelings she had begun to feel at all. *On the other hand, I am most pleased that Ranma seems to have become much happier since seeing Wendy. Even having heard about the two dead, he has not blamed me for them and that is the best I can expect.* “I will remain silent,” she said with a nod.

With a nod, Ranma gestured and she moved to the other side of the small area. Once she was out of sight Ranma bit his thumb and then let a bit of his blood into the Rangers broach, activating it.

Almost instantly the king of Seven, Meredrain appeared, looking harried and worried. “Ranma, please tell me nothing else has gone wrong.”

“I think you need the other kings in on this Your Majesty,” Ranma said, his formal tone bringing the middle-aged king of Seven up short, looking at him in shock.

Ranma was very, **very** rarely formal with anyone. In fact, even among Rangers he was known for his informality and by this point, the king of Seven had interacted with four of the others. Whatever this was about it was extremely serious. So he simply nodded, and said, “Wait a moment I'll get them.”

With the communications magic available to them, Meredrain did so, with the king of Fiore, Toma being the first to link in. Both he and Meredrain looked intently at Ranma, while the other kings each popped in one after another, intense scowls on their faces until they saw Ranma’s face.

Queen Rose took one look at Ranma and shook her head. “You look exhausted,” she said simply. Of all of them, she was the one who knew Ranma the most and she could tell that he was near to his breaking point even though she had never actually seen it before. “Did anything happen to young Wendy?”

“Thankfully, no, though it was a near run thing. I should start from the beginning I suppose…”

From there Ranma described the mission from the moment they met up with Ultear and Gajeel at the train station, a meeting that caused the king of Fiore to explain a few things about why those two had been sent along. He then told them what had occurred with the poisoning, taking it on the chin as something that he should have anticipated given how long it had taken them to get to that town from Magnolia. Although he did say that their prisoner had informed him that the Oración Seis still had spies in among the Magic Council. That caused Toma to start cursing like a sailor, gaining amused looks from his fellows even as they commiserated with him.

Ranma then explained how he had fought the two dark guilds off and how Jenny had helped the other two Dragon Slayers revive and how Freed and the others had arrived to help. “After that we decided to split up into three. I led one team, Freed the others to chase after Raven Tail and Laxus. We left the most wounded and weakened behind with Cana and Wendy to look at. For more information about the Raven Tail fight you'll have to ask one of those who actually took part, but they got Laxus back and they apparently took Ivan at least prisoner. There was another girl in town in chains, a dark skinned woman with bunny ears of all things,” Ranma said shaking his head. “I don't know where she came from, but I'd assume she was part of Raven Tail that was left outside of the town.”

“She is known to us,” said the king of Minstrel, San Jiao Shin, nodding. “She comes from Desierto, and was known to have joined up with Raven Tail about a year or so ago. Their base of operations is also in the northwest of that land.”

At that, the king of Pergrande shook his head at the mention of Desierto, looking away quickly. The desert kingdom was a thorn in the side of what he felt was the smooth running of Ishgar, long the home of thieves, cutthroats and scum, all given a home there by the various clans and tribes that ruled there. If he had shared a border with it, Vicotronious would have conquered Desierto and put a stop to such long since.

Ranma went on to describe the fight in Worth Woodsea and then the appearance of the Devils as well as how the fight had changed at that point, and how they had learned since coming back that, the devils had attacked the town after they had left. He made no mention of Seilah, not yet. Even if he had wanted to mention it to someone, he wouldn’t have told Meredrain or Toma. Vicotronious and San Jiao Shin were possibilities, given he was closer to them, but even that he’d rather do in person.

Still that information was enough, to cause Meredrain to shake his head sadly and Toma to smack his hands down on his armrest. “This is insane! This mission has gone from bad to worse! How many of my mages did you leave to their death Ranma?!”

Ranma flinched at that, looking away but the king of Pergrande stepped in firmly. “Enough! Let him talk. And if we are going to start pointing fingers of recrimination, perhaps we should point at the Magic Council of Fiore again? Considering that they don't seem to have done a very good job of weeding out any further spies.”

That cause Toma to wince, but he nodded back grimly and apologized for his outburst. But unlike San Jiao Shin, Vicotronious or even the king of Caelum, Toma was not a warrior. He was a man with an excellent mind for industry, infrastructure and the mercantile domain, who had a near-childlike delight in magic and hated the idea of any of his realm’s mages dying on his own orders. It had, after all, been Toma who had come up with the mission against the Oración Seis in the first place.

Ranma went on, explaining how the three devils had died, once more making no mention of Seilah’s survival. Given their talk on that point, there was no way to tell the kings about it until after he was certain it wouldn’t get back to Tartarus. He did tell them about Hoteye’s suspicions, but downplayed it, telling about how badly Ultear had been wounded, suggesting she had simply played the role she had to in order to get Brain to drop his guard. While that actually made Toma smile grimly, the tale of Ichiya being dead, as well as one other mage named Sherry hit Toma, causing him to rail at Ranma again, but all of the other kings stepped in hard, even the king of Seven.

“Yes you lost people,” the king of the Caelum, Luke Afterano, said firmly. “But it could've been a lot worse. It could well have been horrible!”

“None of us had any inkling of Raven Tail even being in the area!” said Queen Rose firmly. “Let alone were willing to work with Brain.”

“To say nothing of the devils of Tartarus being in the area,” King windbag said, for once coming down on Ranma's side of things.

“So to summarize, while we took losses, those losses were not horrible. This was a military operation,” the king of Pergrande said. “In any such, losses are almost inevitable. And look at what we have gained. Nirvana destroyed. The Oración Seis practically wiped out: two prisoners, three dead, and one convert. Raven Tail, a Dark Guild equal to the trio of the Balam Alliance, wiped out, with three prisoners including Ivan Dreyar himself, the rest dead. And Tartarus, another member of the Balam Alliance, has lost three of its members. Along with those, we have at least thirteen smaller guilds wiped out, utterly.”

“Did this mission spiral out of control?” Rose went on as the most senior king finished speaking in a more quiet voice, “Yes. Could it have been handled better, perhaps more intelligently? Yes. It should not have become such a big tremendous mission at least not right off the bat. Once the location of Nirvana had been discovered and the fact the Oración Seis were after it, Ranma should've been sent in with this Ultear woman just the two of them to destroy it and remove that threat forever. Then we could've moved on to the Oración Seis at a later time. But it was handled in this manner. And we cannot go back and change things. We can only be thankful that in the end, we gained far more than we lost. It's harsh, but Vicotronious is correct in that.”

King Toma frowned but slowly nodded. “I understand, but many guild masters treat their guild members like children. This will be hard on Baba and Master Bob in particular.” That it was hard for him to realize how badly a mission he had created had turned out was obvious too.

Yet even so, when Ranma guiltily began to offer to speak to them first, Toma shook his head quickly. “No, I will tell them. It was my mission, my decision to allow them to send weaker mages along when they suggested it, my decision to make this mission so large. I will tell them,” he said firmly. “They can vent their anger on me.”

Nodding once, Ranma let his eyes play over each king and the lone queen. “What do you want me to do?”

“Rest,” said Meredrain simply. “Stay there, until everyone is healed and ready to move on. “If you want to, check out this forest, see if you can find any kind of base of operations Brain was using. Rest, recover mourn. I will issue orders, and get them sent out to you to have Hoteye escorted to my capital as soon as possible and as quietly as possible.”

“He'll willingly tell you everything,” Ranma said simply. “Every spy, every connection, every person they bribed or whatever to pass on information. So long as you let him see his brother, Wally.”

“Describe this Wally for me?” The king of Iceberg said, speaking up for the first time. “You said, Erza Scarlet mentioned that they had just entered my country. I can get descriptions out, start searching for them quickly. Though we’re not nearly as populous as Seven, so it might take some time.”

Ranma did so, and the king of Iceberg, Adam De Soule, blinked. “Right,” he said slowly. “Well, at least with that description, it shouldn't take us long to find them if we can in the first place.”

“That’s nice, but there's one thing about the information Hoteye has already said that you should probably know,” Ranma said slowly, looking at all of them. This was something he had wanted to speak to all of the kings about this at once rather than just the king of Seven. “Hoteye told us how he had they had gathered the other dark mages to them. It turns out that they were able to figure out the teleportation array by the Bank of Ishgar.”

After shouts of exclamation surprise had resounded from each of them, Toma leaned forward, his eyes now gleaming at what this could mean. “That right there could be major! Break the bank of its monopoly on fast transportation just imagine what that could mean for trade!”

“It could also help us all of us police our territories far better,” Vicotronious said with a slow, grim nod. “We’ll have to think about how to get organized on that, and how to defend against it. After all, if the Oración Seis were able to do it, and if we start using it so often, someone else might be able to break the runic code eventually, block it or simply use teleportation arrays like that against us. It’s better to start thinking in that manner now.”

“Yes, but that is a discussion between us. Ranma, you can go get some sleep,” Rose ordered. “And I mean it. You look as if you're going to collapse. And, while I know this won’t make you feel better, you did very well Ranger.”

More than one of the others said the same thing, and Ranma smiled wearily as they disconnected him from the discussion. Ranma stared at where the images had been before closing his eyes and leaning his head back, tired in a way that had nothing to how his body was feeling.

Seeing Ranma looking so tired pulled at her new emotions and Seilah moved forward. At her touch to his forehead and face, Ranma opened his eyes to look at her, smiling sardonically at her, taking the Etherious Devil’s hand in his and squeezing once before realizing her hand and standing up. “I’ll leave me and Wendy’s tent for you here for the night, but after that, I need to head back to town.”

Blinking, Seilah slowly nodded. “I would be fine without it, but I… thank you nonetheless. Yet, you are certain I won’t run off? Why?”

“Where would you go?” Ranma asked bluntly. “You think your fellow Devils would take you back after you were a part of this defeat? After you failed?” His words and tone weren’t malicious, but they still Made Seilah frown slightly. She did however nod, acceding the point. Even so, she looked at Ranma quizzically. “You do not harbor any more ill-feelings towards me?”

“Wendy’s fine, and while I feel bad about Ichiya, Velos and Sherry dying, you didn’t actually kill them. I’ve also never been the type to hold a grudge. Admittedly, I know a lot of people who would say that makes me soft, but I prefer not to carry grudges with me. They’re just too heavy you know?” Ranma said whimsically.

Seilah cocked her head to one side at that, but Ranma waved off her confusion. “Trust me, you’ll get it eventually. Now come on, I’ll help ya set up the tent before heading back to town.”

They too worked at that silently until they were done, and Seilah entered the tent, blinking in pleased surprise at the interior before crawling into a sleeping bag laid out on the ground of the tent. She was asleep before she had actually finished pulling the top of the bag over herself.

Ranma left her there and reentered the town. By that point, night had closed in and the devastated town was now lit only by the scattered lights of numerous torches and two large bonfires, around which he spotted Rune Knights sleeping or moving around. He avoided them, moving deeper into the town.

He was intercepted by Mirajane, who came out of darkness beyond the fires of the camp. “So you’re really going to trust her, just like that?”

Ranma sighed. “Mira I know where you're coming from, but like I just told Seilah, hate and grudges are just too heavy to bear for long. Besides, you heard Wendy. Her heart was never in the attack, and Seilah helped protect her, hiding her afterwards. And that was before her mind was screwed over by Nirvana, which apparently among Devils seems to have had a near permanent effect. Besides, Wendy forgave her, that's enough for me.”

When Mira just glared at him, Ranma sighed again. “I'll check up on her tomorrow, remember she's still wounded and exhausted magically and physically. She's not going anywhere, hell I doubt she could even fly like she offered to before. I think you're letting your desire to eat her soul get to you,” Ranma said with a smirk.

Mira huffed at that, but there was indeed a bit of that in her thinking, as well as a lot of simple hatred towards demons. *Then again if I was going to treat all demons like enemies, or souls to be eaten, I would've headed out to Galuna Island where Erza and the others said there was an actual demon community.* She'd heard about those, and it had sparked a debate between Ranma and her because he felt those people weren't actually Devils or Demons as he understood the terms, rather they were simply another race, who had developed devil and demon -like characteristics somehow, “Or perhaps,” he had said, “their ancestors were too close to one of Zeref’s experiments? Who knows?”

As her mind touched on that topic, Mira wondered if Seilah knew about them, then yawned*. It is far too fucking late for me to think about this shit.* She said aloud “Fine, if you vouch for her, you get to watch her. I'm tired of it.” With that, she turned away and moved towards the tent set up for herself and a few of the other ladies.

Ranma watched her go then sighed and turned away, moving towards the tent housing the most badly wounded. They were being watched over by two townsfolk who Wendy had seconded to her help. But beyond Wendy only one of the other mages from the local guild had any healing ability, and he was asleep nearby, utterly exhausted. Still, she and Wendy had done their best, and none of the wounded, mage or townsfolk, were in danger of dying any longer.

But that didn't mean Jenny was at all close to waking up. Ranma sat next to her, staring between her and Ultear, then over to where Gray lay out to one side, his face contorting into an ugly expression of self-hatred. The pigtailed martial artist started to thumped the side of the stone piece of rubble that he was sitting on in a steady, hard, rhythm.

“What are you doing?” asked a soft voice.

Ranma looked up and over Ultear, and saw Juvia there. She was sitting next to Eve, Hibiki and Ren. All three of them had yet to wake up, magically and physically exhausted from the poisons and what little fighting they had done. Ranma thought that was honestly pathetic, but he wasn't going to say anything. Ichiya going out like a boss had redeemed all four of them in his eyes. And judging by the way Juvia was hovering over the downed trio, perhaps in hers too.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” Ranma asked, his hands halting the rhythmic thumping he had been doing, and not a moment too soon. A second later the front face of the rock cracked, and pieces started to slide off.

“Somewhat. Why were you thumping?” Juvia asked.

“I, I’m just a bit frustrated,” Ranma growled.

Juvia's eyes narrowed. “Juvia feels certain that someone else would've already said this, so Juvia will ask if you have already gotten the ‘it's not your fault’ speech? Juvia would hate to repeat everyone else's words.”

“Yeah,” Ranma said with a chuckle “yeah, I got that speech. Several times actually, from different perspectives. It turns out that this whole debacle isn't actually all that bad considering what we've gained from it.”

“Juvia can understand that. After all, you have smashed 15 dark mage guilds, two of them major ones, and one of which was part of the Balam Alliance that has so dominated the underworld. Any leader worth his salt would understand that that is a victory, regardless of the price,” She said gesturing towards The Trimens behind her, then to Gray. Lyon was nowhere to be seen, having thrown himself into helping the others helping the townsfolk, he had collapsed where he stood, trying through that work to mitigate the pain of having lost Sherry. “Yet from the perspective of a nation? This is a win, a tremendous one.”

Ranma bit back some angry words there but nodded his head. “I know, but I feel I could've done more, in fact I know I could've done more, if only my own training had allowed me to.”

Juvia frowned at that. “What do you mean?”

With a scowl, Ranma leaned back against the stone behind him and explained about his problems, about how the Dragon Slayer magic was actually a transformative kind of curse that wanted to take over an individual’s body “Unless you actually have someone competent enough to teach it to you properly, then you get dragonification antibodies or whatever. Not like me, who was taught by a senile old ass who neglected that part of my training! Seriously, it’s like teaching someone sword forms, and then neglecting to show them how to actually hold the damn blade!”

He went on to explain that his own former magic, which he called Life Magic, was fighting it, the struggle weakening them both in terms of what he could access from them. “I overcame that a bit in the fight here in the town, and then I think even more out in the forest, but even so, I can't say I've mastered the Dragon Slayer magic. I haven't made it my own as I thought I had. That is holding me back. And then there's this Demon Slayer stuff,” he said, gesturing to his face.

His features were barely visible in the torchlight of a nearby torch, and Juvia leaned close, examining the dark whorls on Ranma's face, causing him to flush a little. Juvia had snow-white skin, high cheekbones, a small, mouth not marked by any lipstick, a face made to smile and frown easily but in moderation, a pert little nose, azure blue hair down to her shoulders in loose waves, and midnight blue eyes that Ranma, ironically, felt a man could drown in.

A second later, she realized what she was doing and backed away hastily. “Juvia apologizes,” she said quickly, cocking her head to one side, her face flushed slightly. “Is this Devil Slayer magic a third side in this inner war?”

“…Sort of,” Ranma said thoughtfully. “It doesn't really fight my original magic, for some reason, but it definitely can't seem to get along well with my Dragon Slayer magic at all. It's like oil and water there.”

“And how have you been trying to train yourself to control these disparate magics?”

“Not so much control the fight, as switch between using one style and another,” Ranma said, then went on to explain how he had gone to Porlyusica and trained under her in order to help him visualize and separate his control, compartmentalizing it almost. “I want to treat them as if the two magics are like the different types of armor that Erza can summon from her Requip space.”

Juvia nodded thoughtfully then shook her head already seeing a problem with this. “And how did you create the breakthroughs during the fights?”

“Instinct,” Ranma said simply. “Instinct and desperation. That seems to be how I do a lot of stuff, but don't ask me how I do it after.”

“Then that is where you are going wrong,” Juvia said simply. Ranma frowned at her, and she chuckled or rather giggled, shaking her head. “Ranma, you are attempting to take someone else's templates and turn them to your own uses. That is not what you do with magic.”

“Actually it is,” Ranma said laughing a little as he tried to correct her. “I take other styles and then I work them into my own. That’s why I call my style Anything Goes.”

“But that is with martial arts,” Juvia said, “not an internal magical issue like this. Finding balance like that, is quite obviously not working, the template you are using is therefore faulty. You need to do what you did in the battles, you need to **fight** the powers within you. That is what Juvia had to do when Juvia first started to be able to transform into water. Juvia had to fight the instinct to stay that way, Juvia had to impose her will on the water, forcing it to transform back. Somehow figure out a way to force the Dragon Slayer magic submit to your will, not to try to keep them apart, but force them together.”

“I tried to do that for years before I met up with Porlyusica though,” Ranma said shaking his head. “It didn't work.”

“Then you need to try another method to do the same thing,” Juvia said frowning at that as she pulled at her sleeves and what was obviously a gesture that she had picked up. “Perhaps visualize out the Dragon Slayer curse as it were, as a separate entity within your mind that you can then fight and defeat? Use the memory of this… Typhon was it? Use him as a template.”

Ranma had a flashback to a graphic novel series that he had read back in his old life called ‘Bleach’ at that, and scowled. “You’re not talking about something I'd have to fight over and over and over again whenever I want to use my Dragon Slayer magic to full effect, are you? ‘cause if so, I think I'll stick with what I'm doing now, thanks. I’d much prefer to have my mind be my own rather than have some kind of inner world where I have to battle my inner demons.”

“Inner world and inner demons really,” Juvia said dryly, before shaking her head. “No, Juvia is not speaking about that. But the way you are speaking, it makes me think that the problem truly lies with the need to force your body to acclimatize, to combine rather than to further divide. I'm sorry if that does not help.”

“No, that makes some sense I gotta admit. But I'm going to need to figure out a way to do it. And that's going to be hard without any other person around to teach me or even understand what I'm going through. Before you ask, no, Mirajane and Jenny don't have any ideas about this. Jenny doesn’t really take over the soul of a thing, more gives the concept of the thing a home according to her. And Mira’s never had to fight the soul of the demon she's devoured, she simply absorbs it, and it becomes part of her.”

“Now,” he said, standing up and moving over to ruffle her hair lightly, “Why don't you go get some sleep. I’ll watch them for the rest of the night.”

Juvia blushed hotly under his head pat, before nodding and moving off hurriedly. She was still not used at all to being around so many people who were outgoing, even kind despite her long association with Anna, and Ranma was much more touchy-feely than any other man she had ever been around*. I suppose that comes from raising a little girl from toddlerhood. Whatever the two of them might think, Ranma really is more of Wendy’s father then big brother in many ways. Although I have no doubt that that relationship has shifted as Wendy has started to hit her preteen years.*

Behind her, Ranma sat back down, looking over at Jenny and resting a hand lightly on her shoulder before pulling back, and staring up at the nighttime sky*. Never again. I'm not going to let this whole inner war crap continue! Juvia's right. If I can't find a balance that I can use as easy as breathing, what’s the point? And well, this is my fucking body! I rule it, not my Dragon Slayer abilities, not my devil slaying magic, me!*

With that, he pulled up his legs and instead of falling asleep, started to meditate. But soon his body betrayed him, and instead of falling into a meditation, Ranma simply fell asleep.

The next day, Ranma woke up, and though sore and still somewhat exhausted, joined the work on going in repairing the destroyed town, and dealing with the locals and the magical mages who had been wounded. He stopped by the wounded again on the other side of the town, checking in with Evergreen and Freed, as well as Lyon, who had been placed there when he had collapsed.

Evergreen was the worst injured of them all. Her paper leg had been wrapped in bandages in order to protect it, but Wendy had ordered that her leg not be returned to normal until Wendy had regained enough magical energy to see to it. Wendy knew enough about the human body to know that Evergreen’s injuries included major arteries in her leg being opened in multiple places, and unless Wendy was able to heal her entire leg almost on the spot, she might well bleed out quickly.

The dirty blonde-haired woman was remarkably upbeat about it. “It wasn’t every day,” she said, “where we even we of the Thunder God Tribe are part of destroying an entire dark guild the size and strength of Raven Tail after all.”

Ranma chuckled at that, and looked away briefly from the wounded to see the other three Dragon Slayers hard at work clearing rubble, bringing in lumber, from underwriting train and generally speaking keeping busy. All three of them, as with Ranma himself, had come through the battle in the best shape, with Erza being next. The natural redhead only had a few ribs bruised, although she had once more lost one of her armor sets. However she had only lost one, so in comparison to the fight in the Tower, that was almost chump change.

Laxus was nowhere to be seen. He had led a company of the Rune Knights out early that morning toward the Worth Woodsea. It would take them a while to get there, Laxus couldn't teleport them all, but they would gather up the bodies there, take notes of what dark guilds had been involved in the fight and so forth. Then they would probably bring in Hoteye to help bury them.

Currently Jura and Hoteye were working together nearby, clearing out more of the rubble. All the survivors had been found by this point, but the town itself was still horribly damaged from one end to the other. Hoteye created large square basements, then after the area solidified, Jura would raise foundations from them. *They work well together, oddly enough.*

A second later Ranma’s mind was brought back to the trio of wounded though as Lyon's voice grabbed his attention. “Why is there a guard over by the wounded tent where Councilwoman Ultear is being looked after?” He asked.

Ranma looked at him sharply, then around subtly, making sure no one else was in range to overhear. “Why are you asking?”

Lyon seemed to have an internal fight with himself before sighing. “She looks remarkably like our former teacher Ur, mine and Gray’s. I was utterly astonished by her appearance at the train station before all this began, and I would have addressed her then, if not for the fact that Gray hadn't said anything. When I talked to him during that damned meal, he simply said he didn't see the resemblance!” Lyon scoffed, glaring over at Gray who rolled his eyes then went back to staring down at where his arm should be. “Idiot. It's so plain to see it's astonishing. They have to be related in some fashion.”

Looking over towards the tent where Ultear hadn't been moved to have her own private tent, Ranma frowned at that. At first, it seemed as if the four guards around the tent were supposed to keep people out, but in reality, Ranma had ordered them into position to keep her inside not that the four of them knew it. With her foot the way it was, she wasn't going to go anywhere fast, but he didn't want Ultear to try to run off at all.

“I see,” he said mildly. “So you want to talk to her about that?”

“Yes,” Lyon said simply. “I must know their relationship.”

Ranma nodded, then watched as Lyon seemed to do pause before going on. “I have to know about that, and then I have to… I will have to go back to the guild when it comes to the time to leave. Did you know that Sherry had a young cousin? She wasn't supporting her on her own thankfully, but the money she was not donating as per our parole with Master Baba went to Sherria instead of herself. Sherry lived at the guild, took her meals there, and only bought herself very few dresses and such to change into. All her money went into paying off her debt and to that little girl. I don't know what her aunt, the girl’s mother, earns, but obviously it isn't enough.”

“I think we can get some counsel help there,” Ranma said with a thin-lipped smile. “In fact, I can almost guarantee it. So don't take that burden on yourself just yet Lyon. And…” he hesitated, before reaching over and grabbing the other young man's shoulder. “In terms of your parole with Baba, I think you are most definitely off the hook there too. I'm sorry this happened, but I think standing up for the others here in the town when the demons attack proved yourself.”

Lyon looked away guiltily at those words, knowing he actually hadn't done much. *For all my bluster, for all my ego, I was next to useless in this fight! And then there is Gray, who kept on fighting despite being so obviously outclassed, and who fought until he lost an arm. Indeed, he would've lost his life if not for young Wendy*!

“I must get stronger,” he said to himself, and Ranma nodded. That was a sentiment he could well understand, and he gripped the other man's shoulder again, before turning away, moving over to talk to Gray in turn.

**OOOOOOO**

Toma had demanded to send a message to Quattro Cerberus, Fairy Tail, Blue Pegasus, and Lamia Scale demanding that their guild master's come to see him in person in Crocus. This wasn't a subtle message, nor was the message that he sent the Magic Council. For the guild masters, the message was delivered via flying carpets, which would bring them back in the same fashion.

For the Magic Council, his message was even less subtle, for it came in the form of sending a full battalion of Rune Knights to Era with orders to lock the entire town down. No one was to go in and no one was to go out. All lacrima messages leaving the town were to be intercepted by the Rune Knight’s anti-magic field. Anyone working for or with, or in any way connected to the Magic Council was going to be closely examined, their pasts reviewed and their actions vetted since they joined the Council or began working for it. This process would be helped along by Hoteye once he was in direct contact with Meredrain and thereafter would be used to explain how they were going to be ousting any spies they discovered.

Meredrain was also doing much the same thing, although the magical side of Seven was not nearly as centrally organized as the Magic Council of Fiore was. It would take a little more time therefore for his anticorruption operation to really come into effect. Yet he would be provided Hoteye's personal aid in that.

The two kings were determined to clean house and this time as thoroughly as possible in Toma’s case. No longer would the Magic Council leak like a sieve. No longer would Toma be worried about the loyalty of the Magic Council or **anyone** in contact with them. To that end, he had sent his personal Guard Commander, Arcadios along, as well as his daughter, Hisui. Normally a girl her age would not be involved in something like this of course. But Hisui’s basic intelligence and ability to analyze people was one of the finest he had ever met despite her age and she had actually volunteered for it after hearing him bellowing orders to Arcadios.

Now Toma watched as the four guild masters were led into the same room where he, Ranma, and the Magic Council had spoken when Ranma had reported in about killing the demon Sitri after the Tower of Heaven. “Sit down,” he said sighing, before actually standing up himself. He moved around the room, filling five large goblets with bourbon, before sitting down once more and downing his. He then looked over at them, gesturing to his glass. “You might want to have some too,” he said simply.

“No offense your Majesty, but I think it wouldn't help us much at this point,” Makarov said, his voice a low growl as his hands gripped around one another so tight they went white and made audible cracking noises. “Just tell us what happened. The mission that Ranger, Ranma was on. It went bad, didn't it?”

“Yes it did. It wasn't a total disaster, rather it was a series of small disasters that Ranma and the others overcame but it cost them. It cost the kingdom of Seven, and it cost all of you and through you Fiore.” He first turned to Master Bob, bowing his head. “I regret to inform you that Ichiya Vandalay Kotobuki is dead. He died protecting Cana Alberona of Fairy Tail from a demonic attack. Jenny Realight was also severely injured, but she is currently stable, and in no danger of dying.”

“Demonic attack?” Makarov said, blinking some of his anger disappearing. “What were demons doing involved with this!?”

Toma held up his hand, almost glaring at the other shorter and older man. “In due time,” he said softly, before turning to Quattro Cerberus’ guild master. “Master Goldmine, I regret to inform you of the death of your mage Velos. Bacchus is fine and according to Ranger Ranma…”

“Wait that young man was a Ranger?! How did he become a Ranger, he’s so young!” Baba shouted, leaping to her feet.

“That is a story for another day,” Toma replied. “I was not involved in the decision, but while I have not always liked the way he's accomplished his missions, I have to say that he has always been effective.” Still looking at Baba, Toma steeled himself. “I also have to inform you Master Baba, that your mage Sherry is also dead. Killed in the same attack that claimed Velos’ life and Ichiya's.”

“And mine? Are my children all right?” Makarov asked, leaning forward now as his magic began to seep out of him, causing the other Masters to back away slightly, even as they also all looked shocked and appalled at having lost guild members.

“They are alive, although it was apparently a very near run thing for many of them, and a few are not altogether whole. It seems as if the Oración Seis knew about our efforts to finish them off so long in advance they were able to reach out to Raven Tail.”

At that name, all the anger suddenly left Makarov's body, and he collapsed slumping backwards, one hand going to his face. “Ivan! Ivan's guild. How, what did they do?”

“A poison attack to start with…” Toma began, explaining what they had been told by Ranma had occurred from start to finish. “We don't know how the Thunder God Tribe and the two Dragon Slayers freed Laxus, but they did and your son is now in custody. If I Have My Way,” Toma finished that segment of the story coldly, almost glaring at Makarov, “the king of Seven will be seeking the death penalty in his case.”

Makarov slowly nodded, looking away. Hearing that about his own son was hard, but with the body blows his fellow Guild Master's had taken, and the litany of disasters that had befallen this mission from start to finish, Makarov was left to count his blessings that none of his mages had been killed. “May I borrow one of the royal magic carpets Your Majesty? Porlyusica could undoubtedly help the wounded, and your magic carpets are far faster than any other means of transport that we have.”

“No!” Bob, growled, his normal affable, almost gay face distorted into a scowl of anger. “Blue Pegasus has access to an even faster means. The magical construct Christina! We will return to our guilds, and then I will pick you all up before heading to this town in Seven. Even with the need to pick you all up, we can be there within the day rather than four days from now as would be the case with the magic carpets.”

Makarov nodded gratefully, as did the other guild member members, each of them looking downcast. “I can't blame Ranma for this, but part of me seriously wants to blame someone,” Baba said shaking her head.

“Blame the demons,” Toma said simply. “I know I will be. Without them, no one would have died. Admittedly, it would still have been a near run thing for many, but Ranma's beating off the initial attack on them after they were poisoned would've saved them all.”

Goldmine shook his head. “They should never have been in that position. That's on us. We thought we knew better, we thought we were being so smart, adding to this mission every time we thought about it, we never really thought about what might happen if the Oración Seis learned we were aiming for them.”

The others nodded at Goldmine's words then he looked at them, then back to the king, a grim little smile on his face. “But you say they won?”

The king nodded, and explained the totality of the destruction of the Oración Seis and Raven Tail, which had already of course been known since his earlier comments. Then he went on to mention the thirteen other dark guilds that had been smashed throughout the battle and the destruction of Nirvana.

Both Bob and Baba nodded slowly, as Goldmine laughed. “Now that, that is one wild funeral pyre!”

Makarov shook his head at that, but understood the sentiment at least. He also could see tears glimmering behind Goldmine's ever present sunglasses, but wasn't about to comment. The look of grief had not left Bob’s face either, and Baba looked as if she was womanfully keeping her tears at bay through main will alone.

“Was there anything else you wanted us for your Majesty?” he asked looking over at the king.

“I want each of you to donate a mage good with paperwork and numbers to help Arcadios and my daughter Hisui to go through every single piece of paper and person involved with the Magic Council. We’ll be getting a new source of information on much of that soon, but I want the work started now,” Toma said grimly.

“Are you going to be replacing the entire Magic Council again?”

“There will be changes there yes,” Toma said with a sigh, “but most of the spying seems to have been done on the lower level, beyond Siegrain, so we’ll see what happens there. The only one of them who is exempt from this is young Ultear.”

“Truly?” Makarov asked with a frown. “I would have thought that her friendship with Siegrain would have meant that she was being the most closely looked at. Even her participation in this mission, would've simply made it easier for them to ambush them.”

Toma shook his head. “Not only was she one of those poisoned, but she was able to fight through the poison, Magic Council users apparently all carry an anti-poison kit which eventually was able to deal with it somehow, but she fought Brain, and was crippled for it. Ranma says that her foot was rather ugly to look at. And she had numerous other injuries as well as extreme magical exhaustion. If she is fit to come back to work, the Magic Council will have her.”

*And if she is not cleared of the suspicion Hoteye’s words passed on, the fact that she could be dealing with brain trauma will mean that we can safely remove her from office and keep her out of sight.* Toma said firmly. *If she really is connected to Grimoire Heart that will be another string we can pull to start unraveling their power structure too. Still, I refuse to condemn without evidence.*

After that, the meeting was adjourned. Soon after the four Guild Masters were sent back to their guilds on the same magic carpets that had brought them.

When he entered the Guildhall, Makarov was nearly bowled over by shouts and people rushing forward eager to hear the news. Everyone there didn't know what was going on, but when the Guild Master was called away by the King of Fiore himself like that, complete with magic carpet, then something **important** was going on, something big.

Those in the know were very few, but Bisca and Elfman were looking very worried. Elfman didn't know what the mission had been about, all he knew was that his older sister had left with Ranma and Erza, and then all of the other mages that had been in the town had also left, all at the same time. That had been enough for him to get very worried about what was going on, even more so than Erza and Mirajane being on the same mission again after the Tower of Heaven incident.

“What happened Master!?” Levy asked. “Did something happen with the Lucy and the others?”

“I, you can say so, yes,” Makarov sighed. “Before I start, let me say that everyone we sent is alive. And then let me explain what was actually going on.”

Everyone was shocked at the amount of duplicity that had been used to prepare for this mission and also astonished that it hadn't worked. More than one mage there, Elfman among them, growled angrily at how the Magic Council must have let loose this information, letting their mages be blindsided.

The demons getting involved shocked everyone. The losses that nearly had occurred were horrible, and everyone mourned those who had died from the other guilds while being thankful that none of their own had paid that ultimate price. And the story wasn’t even finished yet by that point.

Yet it was enough for Bisca, who turned and raced out the door shouting behind her “I’ll get Porlyusica!”

“…So we will be taking five of you with me and Porlyusica, aboard the flying Pegasus and the other Guild Masters and whoever they bring along. Now, who among you wants to go?”

That was a stupid question Makarov realized the instant it was out of his mouth as everyone started to clamor to go, but eventually he cut down the group to those that he knew would be able to help, and those that were connected to or associated with the wounded in some fashion. This included Bisca thanks to her friendship with Wendy and Ranma, but not Alzack, who winced at being separated once more from Bisca. He knew he hadn't quite lost yet, but he was losing in this whole relationship thing with her, with Bisca coming closer and closer to Ranma every time they interacted.

Lucy went thanks to her friendship with Lucy and Cana, leaving behind her partners. Elfman and of course Porlyusica were a given while Anna and Lisa also begged to go, and Makarov relented despite the fact that their sister had seemingly come through everything nearly unscathed.

About an hour after he finished the tale Bisca returned with Porlyusica, the healer looking rather harried after having been literally tied to the back of a horse for the journey. Not fifty minutes after that, the whole guild heard a roar of displaced air and rushed out of the Guildhall to stare up in the sky as the massive shape of Christina came down.

**OOOOOOO**

“So I need some way to, to fight this dichotomy within me, to conquer it entirely,” Ranma said, clenching and unclenching his hands as he stared from Laxus to Natsu to Gajeel. “Any ideas?”

It really irked Ranma to ask Natsu for help like this, considering how he was so much more along in his training in a lot of ways than Natsu, but he had to. A full day and a half after getting back to the town where this mission had started to go into the crapper Ranma could tell his body was stronger, faster and tougher now than it had been but that wasn't enough. He could also feel his ki trying to turn back time as he rebuilt it with the food he'd been eating, and once more had to use a lot of mental power to separate the two forces within him.

*I have to force them to work together as one! I need my ki to realize my Dragon slayers are part of me, and I need the Dragon Slayer powers not to try to fucking transform me… unless I want it to,* Ranma amended mentally.

The devil slayer magic in contrast had already started to fade under his mental struggles with it. It had heightened his ki to a certain extent, as well as his senses but because Ranma's ‘natural magic’ was his ki, it didn't have as much of an impact on the strength of it as it would have if he had actually had some original magic before becoming a Dragon Slayer.

Unfortunately, none of the other Dragon Slayer's had any idea. Natsu shook his head, nearly dislodging a sleeping Happy from his perch. The blue-furred cat hadn’t shown much energy since recovering from the poison, and mostly just slept or ate. “Sorry, I've never even heard of anything like this. What about you two?”

Gajeel shook his head. “The idea of transforming into a dragon is new to me, and kind of terrifying if I'm honest. Although,” he said with a grin, “it would be interesting to fly.”

Laxus shook his head too. “Sorry I can’t help you either. My original magic was lightning magic before my asshole of a father implanted the Lightning Dragon Slayer lacrima in me. And while unlike Natsu, while I might still be in danger of transforming, I've never felt that transformation occurring.”

Ranma slumped back, biting almost viciously into his sandwich. “Dammit! I was hoping. Hoping that one of you two,” he said gesturing towards Gajeel and Natsu “would at least have an idea of some kind of training I could do grapple with it. Something that your parents put you through maybe?”

Both of them shook his head their heads, but Natsu elaborated. “My old man never put me through any kind of mental training like what you're talking about. Igneel taught me my letters and stuff, but basically most of our training together amounted to him smacking me around with his tail or with a single claw.”

“Parents of the year that's what dragons are,” Ranma muttered taking another vicious bite of his sandwich.

Next to him Wendy gaped at Natsu, then over to Gajeel, who just nodded and she scowled. “Wow, my mama would’ve never dreamt of doing that to me! Ugh, that sounds so…”

“Barbarous?” Carla asked from beside Wendy. Since their return, the cat-girl had latched onto Wendy and never been more than a few feet from her friend, always ready to lend a hand or force Wendy to rest a bit when she was using her healing powers. Since she had nearly collapsed after trying to heal up Ultear’s foot and Gray’s arm, this was not a small thing.

The two cat people’s waking up was actually the smallest of the things that had changed over the past two nights since they had returned to the town where the poison attack had occurred.

For one thing, The Trimens had woken up to join the other mages. Upon hearing about Ichiya they had been the next best thing to inconsolable, only the stoic Ren still being able to gather enough will to help the others go about their various business. For another, the wounded townfolk had all been seen to as well, most of their wounds dealt with bar five cases of head trauma, which joined Jenny and Ultear. Several dozen tents had been set up for the townsfolk, and work was proceeding apace in rebuilding the town, with building material coming in every day.

This work was slower now than it had been the evening and morning after they had returned, because Hoteye and Jura were both gone. Under a request from the king, Jura was escorting Hoteye to Meredrain in Seventy-Seven. Mira had offered to go with him, but Jura had declined. The Wizard Saint was rather angry at himself that he had not been able to perform better than he had against the demons, but he had helped to create a tombstone for Sherry and mourned during the funeral for her and the others, so was more than willing to leave.

“Actually, there could be a clue elsewhere,” Erza said thoughtfully. “If we’re talking about learning more about the Dragon slayers after all...”

Ranma looked over at her in surprise, and she replied “that message that was left for me by my ancestor.”

“Holy shit, yeah that could work,” Ranma went on nodding with a smile blossoming on me. “Damn Erza I could kiss you right now.”

Erza blushed hotly, but didn't back away simply smiling at him, the errant thought of *Well, I might actually allow that if we were alone,* going through her head. But before she could begin to flush visibly at that idea they all looked up as there was a sonic boom like sound from above them, and high above them a small speck in the sky started to come down towards the ground enlarging as it came. They all stood up, and readied their magic fearing that this was some other enemy deciding to attack and getting their timing wrong.

But then the three Trimens shouted out, “Don't! They’re Friendlies, that's our Blue Pegasus!”

The mages stared up at the giant flying horse thing, while the Rune Knights assembled quickly. Half of them seemed to be assembling for parade review, the other half seems to be assembling in order to use their anti-magic staffs against the giant thing, and Ranma sighed, getting up from his seat and jerking his head over towards that group. “I'm going to go and make sure the lemmings don't do anything stupid.”

“Honestly,” Erza said falling in beside him, “it's like they don't have ears!” She then reached out to jab him lightly with a fist to the shoulder, or rather lightly for the two of them. Most other people could well have been yelling aloud in pain. “And if you do go to search out that mountain Belserion mentioned you will be taking me with you. You realize that correct? It is my family legacy after all.”

Ranma nodded. “Hadn't even thought of leaving you behind honestly. This journey should be as much about you as it is me, and besides, I like yer company.” At that Erza blushed again, looking away slightly and actually pulling at her hair self-consciously,

The two of them got the Rune Knights straightened out, the group that had been preparing to fight rather sullenly joining the others in parade to either side of the flying ship that had just landed. “What was that all about?” Mira asked as she joined them, followed by the others. She had been over with Lyon, Bacchus and the Trimens having lunch with them and trying to get the three pretty boy’s spirits up, with scant success.

They all now assembled to one side. Juvia attempted to skulk at the back but Wendy pushed back through the others and grabbed her hand, pulling her to the front, since in Wendy’s opinion without her the demons would have had an even easier time of overwhelming the mages who had remained in the town.

“The Rune Knights are feeling a little put upon,” Ranma said with a chuckle in answer to Mira’ question. “After all, they arrived too little too late to do anything for this fight and they always seem to play second fiddle to the mage guilds even here in seven. I find it, funny, but that's just me.”

“You’re horrible,” Lyon said bluntly, shaking his head.

The doors on the side of the giant Pegasus opened and Master Bob walked out, followed by several of his guild member, after which Makarov and several of the Fairy Tail mages came out, followed by Baba and her guild, and Quattro Cerberus and Master Goldmine. Ranma caught Bisca looking at him, and he waved very slightly towards her. She nodded back, then looked towards Wendy, then the others in turn getting small nods and smiles from those she knew indicating they were all right.

Her eyes, and the eyes of every other Fairy Tail mages, widened as they spotted Gray standing there without an arm. More than one eye watered at that, before looking around at the others, realizing how close it was. The sight of Evergreen using a crutch with her leg in bandages (though no longer paper thanks to Wendy and the Rune Knights) and the various small wounds and bruises still showing despite Wendy’s ministrations brought home to all of them how close this fight had been and they all paused, staring at Gray in particular.

But Porlyusica rushed past them, shouting angrily, “You humans and your stupid ceremonies! Show me to the wounded, now!” At that Porlyusica moved forward quickly, moving towards the tents with the Red Cross she could see behind the Rune Knights who made way for her hastily, almost fearfully.

Wendy growled a little looking after her and Ranma looked down at his little sister sharply. “Wendy, what's wrong?”

Wendy huffed. “Nothing.”

“Oh God! She’s becoming a teenager,” Ranma muttered, before kneeling down next to her as the impromptu welcoming party broke up, and the other mages move forward towards their friends. “Seriously,” he said, putting in arm around her shoulders. “What's wrong?”

“There's something about Porlyusica’s scent,” she muttered, looking away. “It bothers me. She smells like, like mom. Not quite, but far too much to just have met her or something, unless they stayed in close contact for months.”

“I thought at first it was my imagination, but every time… well I can smell her… but then, she, she doesn’t mention it, and hasn’t even once done so, despite me saying I was mama’s daughter and everything and it just bothers me, like she’s trying to keep it a secret or something only she can’t ‘cause I already know, and she should know that too, so maybe I should confront her or maybe there’s some reason why she hasn’t said anything and…” Wendy rambled, leaning against his shoulder lightly.

“Wendy, calm down. If you think she has some connection to Grandeenay, you’ve waited more than long enough for her to bring it up. Confront her about it and get it over with,” Ranma said simply. “If she’s got a big bad secret or something then at least she’ll have to acknowledge it, you can put it down to her being a an old b…porcupine of a woman and move on. On the other hand, maybe if you confront her about it, she’ll spill her guts, who knows until you try right?”

Worried about making their relationship even more strained and thus missing out on a clue to her mother’s whereabouts Wendy balked at that, while Elfman reunited with Mira and his younger siblings gave their big sister a hug before rushing over to the Fire Dragon Slayer. Natsu found himself on his back his arms filled with sobbing twins as they clung to him, almost glaring over at Gajeel who rapidly backed away.

Bisca moved towards the Dragon Slayer siblings, exchanging a quick hug on the way with Lucy, Cana and Erza in turn, before Lucy and Cana were inundated by the team Shadow Gear. The short Levy threw her arms around Lucy's waist and actually picked the taller and far curvier girl up in her exuberance to see her in one piece.

“God damn, am I happy I am to see you both alive and well. I knew this mission of yours whatever it was going to be dangerous, but nothing like this!” Bisca said, her red-painted lips compressed into a fierce scowl her eyes raking over both Dragon Slayers before she abruptly paused, becoming aware of the hug Ranma was giving out and the scowl on Wendy’s face, “Ah sorry, private moment?”

Wendy shrugged and Ranma did the same, standing up and smiling at her. With that okay Bisca hurled herself forward, hugging Ranma tightly enough to seem as if she was trying to break a rib, though it barely registered to Ranma. *Surprisingly strong,* he thought to himself, patting her on the back, letting his hand move up and down her back, from the back of her cowgirl skirt of the bare back below. “I'm all right Wendy is all right, though that was a far closer thing that I really want to think about.”

“You were blindsided, it happens” Bisca said, her voice muffled against his chest for a second before she pulled back to look at him sternly. “But you all came through at least.”

“Not everyone was so lucky,” Erza said from nearby turning to look at Master Bob, who was being shown it to the gravesite of Ichiya. Given his body had been literally torn apart by Torafuzar’s attack Ranma and the others had opted to bury him in the field where Ranma had used his Hiryuu Shouten Ha in a separate grave. It was marked by several dozen flowers, and a large stone that Ranma and Gajeel, with the Trimens’ aid had marked with a series of notes about his life, and how he had died.

Wendy nodded, also looking in that direction, then over to Gray and the group from Quattro Cerberus before her eyes slipped back to Porlyusica. “I'm going to go help her,” she said firmly, moving in that direction. “She should see Jenny first then Ultear. And maybe after that, after that we’ll talk.”

The others all nodded, watching her leave, before the mages started to drift away into some small's somber groups as they talked with the new lira arrived. “How bad was it, for you all against the Oración Seis I mean?” Bisca asked softly.

“I've seen worse, but not lately and not often,” Ranma said with a sigh. Given his strength at the time, Ranma would rate the war against the orcs at a higher level than the fights he had against the Oración Seis and even before that in the town against the Oración Seis and Raven Tail. But it would have been a near run thing.

Erza nodded somberly. “It was touch and go for a long while there in the Woodsea. Once the demons showed up, everything sort of fell apart. Ranma had done enough in the town for us to have a distinct advantage against the Oración Seis even after they had called in their tribute guilds, but the demons screwed all that up even if…” She cut herself off there, gesturing around them. “Even if they had tried to attack here first,” she finished, somewhat lamely.

Ranma shrugged at that, and Bisca looked at him sharply. “Something is going on,” she said, almost glaring at Ranma. Her eyes flicked over to Erza, who looked away hastily. “Erza, you couldn't spell liar if someone told you it began with an L, and you Ranma, while you're pretty good at disassembling most of the time, that shrug you just made was rather telling. Give,” she ordered.

“No,” Ranma said with a shake of his head. “That's one secret we’re going to keep for a while, until all this is settled anyway,” he said gesturing towards the guilds and the town. “Maybe later, after we’re leaving I'll tell you. But I'm not going to be browbeaten into it Bisca,” he said with a laugh, flicking her nose with a finger.

She huffed, but nodded and looked away her eyes latching on to Wendy as she disappeared into a tent gesturing Porlyusica to follow her. “How’s Jenny doing?” she whispered. “Wendy said she was injured a second ago right?”

“It could've been a lot worse,” Ranma said again. “But she is one of the reasons why I'm really glad that you all decided to bring Porlyusica along.”

“Heh, that wasn’t an easy thing let me tell you. I had to threaten her at gunpoint, and I doubt even that would have worked except I mentioned that Wendy might be among the wounded. At that she changed her tune slightly, but even then wasn’t actually willing to ride my horse back to town until I just lifted her up onto it and tied her to the saddle,” Bisca replied with a chuckle.

Ranma and Erza both looked at Bisca in shock and she shrugged unrepentedly. “Well, we needed her to come, and I certainly wasn’t going to take no for an answer.“

Laughing at that, Ranma led her over to the medical tents. The other Fairy Tail mages and those from Blue Pegasus had already gathered there bar Natsu and his two girlfriends who were nearby, listening to Natsu recount the fight against Raven Tail.

They gathered outside the tent with Jenny, and waited there, talking quietly.

Inside the tent, Wendy watched Porlyusica pull out a few instruments from a bag, which Wendy recognized as one spelled to be many times its physical size inside. She laid out several of them then started to examine Jenny, first her heartbeat, then her blood flow through her body, before looking in her ear on the side with the scar. She ran another along the scars, tsking as the small green stick turned black, then turned away, moving to pull out several different leaves, mortar, pestle and vial.

“What are you doing?” Wendy asked.

Porlyusica looked over at her and sighed. “I was checking to see if I could detect any foreign magics in her system, sometimes magical wounds leave a taint behind them. Mere magical healing won’t detect it if it’s subtle enough and you don’t know what to look for. Come over here, and I’ll show you.”

Nodding Wendy moved forward, while Carla took up position by the entrance to the tent. After a few minutes of explaining how Wendy could detect the taint on her own, Porlyusica explained, “I personally use a wand of a willow, willows react very negatively do dark magics for some reason. This paste will act like a sponge, drawing the taint out of the scar tissue and letting them continue to heal, whereas if we used healing magic, we might well have simply sealed the taint inside her.”

Wendy blanched at that, but Porlyusica went on, turning the work of crushing the ingredients over to her as she moved back to her bag, pulling out a few more instruments setting them up around Jenny’s head. “And these will be able to tell me if her brain is damaged in any manner… hmmm…”

Again Wendy listened intently, while Porlyusica diagnosed what she was seeing now, tiny images appearing here and there around Jenny’s head. Two of them were very brown and red in color, and she nodded slowly, explaining, “That means her long term memory center has taken a bit of damage, not much, but she won’t remember a few specific things perhaps. Short-term memory is fine, but the overall image tells me she might have a slight concussion and fine motor control issues, specifically in her face. That kind of thing is best to let heal on its own, and even once she’s awake I won’t do much with that.”

Nodding Wendy handed over the crushed ingredients then asked, “Porlyusica, why… why do you smell like Grandeenay!?” she blurted. “I, I mean you smell so much like her and yet not at the same time it’s weird!”

“I suppose I should have known you had been able to tell that,” Porlyusica replied with a sigh. “I, I’m not Grandeenay. I am, however, the Edolas version of her.”

Carla and Wendy both gasped at that, and the Cat-girl shouted, “But, but how?! That, I thought Anna was the only person who came from Edolas! And Master Makarov, he never even hinted he knew about Edolas before Anna arrived.”

“Makarov tends to know a lot more than he lets on Carla, and no, Anna wasn’t the first person to come from Edolas.” She sent a glance the cat-girls way that the blonde cat-girl had trouble interpreting before turning back to the discussion at hand. “And unlike Anna, I never hinted at wanting to go back. Makarov befriended me and I joined Fairy Tail eventually on the strength of my poultices, healing and ability with magical constructs, like Erza’s eye.”

She turned slightly to look at Wendy, who looked both annoyed and crestfallen. “Eventually, I did indeed meet Grandeenay, you’re right about that. The two of us talked, and even stayed together for a time as she taught me what she could about healing and vice-versa.”

“…Why didn’t you just tell me this at first?” Wendy asked, frowning and looking away.

“Partly because of Ranma’s presence and issues, it kind of drove it out of my mind,” Porlyusica admitted. “And partly because she didn’t want to encourage you to fight more. His influence on you is rather easy to see after all, and I didn’t want you putting yourself further in harm’s way.”

“That’s silly,” Wendy huffed. “Oh not the first part, dealing with Ranma-nii can sort of drive other stuff out of your head, or just drive you batty, I’ve seen both.”

“If anything he takes pride in that second and goes out of his way to make it happen,” Carla murmured.

“But it isn’t as if having access to more magic or new skills would make me go looking for fights any more than I do now.” Wendy continued, sending a pout her best friend’s way. “Ranma-nii and I don’t go looking for trouble most of the time, it comes looking for us.”

Porlyusica looked at her drolly until Wendy blushed and looked away. “I did say most of the time,” she muttered.

“Uhuh. Well, at any rate, now that you have brought it up I am more than willing to tell you about the spells I got from Grandeenay, certainly you could make more use of them than I could. More than four decades in this world and I still can’t use magic myself worth a lick,” Porlyusica huffed.

Wendy nodded but instead of asking about the spells or how long it would take or even if Porlyusica had the spells written down she was concentrating on something else entirely. “Ano, Miss Porlyusica, could, the spells are nice and all, but could you, could you tell me about your time with Mama?” she asked, her voice that of a young girl who desperately missed her parent, not the young healer or fighter Wendy was so often.

Smiling slightly, Porlyusica nodded, even as she started to apply the paste to Jenny’s face. “Certainly child. Hmm, I think it was the year…”

Several hours later, those waiting outside were rewarded with Porlyusica coming out. She breathed a sigh of resignation as she saw them all. Wendy followed, smiling now, moving over to Ranma moving to his side, with Carla following on her heels, also looking a little happier.

“Well, Jenny it was close. If not for some expert stabilization work on the scene, and Wendy's emergency healing a few hours later, Jenny's brain would've been permanently damaged. As it is, she will suffer the effects of a mild concussion, and may deal with some spasmodic facial twitches for a time after she wakes up. But once she wakes up and can answer questions, I can clear that up. That scar on the side of her head however, that is going to stay. That one and the small one across her nose are going to stay, though that one should pale significantly over time. The other one had some Demonic magic mixed into it, and while we’ve cleared the magic away, the scar will remain.

Mira breathed a sigh of relief. “That's good to hear.”

Ranma nodded too, looking into the tent wordlessly. He moved over to sit outside the tent, making his intent to wait until the blonde model woke up plain without the need to actually voice it.

“Ara, thank you, thank you so much Porlyusica-chan, you’re as good at healing as you are beautiful!” Master Bob shouted, actually crying in relief as he thanked her profusely, the fat-seeming mage holding her hands in his and pumping them up and down vigorously before she smacked his hands away and shouted her habitual ‘don't touch me, I hate humans’ line.

Ranma idly wondered if master Bob actually qualified as human given his fairy wings and general fairy appearance, but wasn't about to question that at the moment. The others all moved off to either continue helping to rebuild the town or just talk, while Wendy led Porlyusica off to Ultear’s tent. Ranma though stayed where he was along with Gray, Bisca and Erza.

The Ice-make user had been nearly as silent as his friend Lyon, subdued by the loss of his arm, or so most would have thought. Ranma on the other hand had seen the look in his eyes, and he knew that while Gray was subdued by what had happened, he was also angry, very, very angry not at anyone else even their enemies, but at himself, at his weakness.

The other young man’s words when he spoke up now proved Ranma had been correct about that. “How, how do I get stronger? How can I become a better fighter than I am now?” he asked, staring almost challengingly at Ranma despite a small plaintive tone in his voice. “I, I was next useless here, and we…” he trailed off, shaking his head.

Unlike most of the others left in town, Gray had more combat experience and knew that it had been arrogance or something similar that had led to their not being finished off by the trio of Demons. Jura knew it too, but wasn’t willing to question their good fortune, only vowing to get stronger before he left with Hoteye. Unlike Gray though, he had a lot of ideas about how to go about it and no long-term debilitating injury despite Wendy having had to regrow most of his guts and a portion of his spine. Whereas Gray had both a missing limb and only a few ideas on how to get stronger.

Ranma paused before answering thinking through his words. “I can give you a few ideas, but if you’re asking for an instant power-up look elsewhere. I don’t have anything like that for you.” When Gray nodded, he went on. “Alright then, I have a few ideas about your magic. First though, let’s talk martial arts…”

That conversation went on for a while of course. Ranma was an expert at martial arts, well beyond his knowledge of magic. He tried to impart a few ideas to Gray in that area, then went on to explain a few ways he could use his Ice magic, make it stronger and so forth. There Bisca surprisingly took part, going into the number of long range templates Gray could use, ranging from cannons to pistols and how to use them, while Erza had thrown herself into the discussion on martial arts, agreeing to help train Gray occasionally on the use of different weapons. After about an hour of this, the conversation slowed and Gray nodded and left, intent on his own thoughts.

“And make sure when you get a new arm you get a hidden weapon added to it,” Ranma called after him, causing Bisca and Erza to look at him incredulously and he shrugged. “What? If I lost an arm, I’d want at least some hidden dagger or something to sprout out on command. And you know he’s going to get a replacement at some point, why not get an upgrade?”

Rolling their eyes in unison at that, the two women glanced at one another, before Bisca started to ask a few questions about Ranma and Wendy’s plans going forward. This led to her telling the others about her own plans to take a bounty hunting job that would take her down to Desierto soon, and then Erza shifted the discussion back to the idea of her, Ranma and Wendy hunting down the mountain of BelTar, where Belserion’s memory capsule might still remain.

Erza and Bisca left when it became dinnertime to join the group out by the graves, where Masters Bob and Baba were starting an impromptu service for the dead. But figuring he wouldn’t be wanted in that, Ranma was still there later that night, when Quattro Cerberus’ Goldmine came along with Bacchus, the older man holding out a large tin to Ranma. “Drink?”

Ranma took it dubiously, but shrugged and took a sip before handing it back.

“What, you don't drink?” Bacchus asked, sounding almost shocked. “A wild bastard such as yerself, no way can you be a teetotaler.”

“I can't get drunk and nothing alcoholic really tastes of anything to me, nothing good anyway. Dirty water is the best I can explain it,” Ranma said bluntly. He took another sip before handing it back, leaning back slightly as he looked at the two of them. “You've got something to say?”

“There’re a lot of mixed feelings about you, Ranma,” Goldmine said equally bluntly after he took a long swig from the tin. “All four of us guild masters have a bit of guilt about how this went, we kept on blowing it up and adding bits and pieces to it. But it was your mission originally, and you came to us for help. You put the lives of our mages on the line and you led them into this fight.”

“You think I'm going to try to say I don’t carry some of the guilt from how this went you really don't know me very well,” Ranma said softly.

“Tha’s not what I said. There's a lot of mixed feelings,” Goldmine reiterated. None of us are really blaming you, as you seem to be. You might not know it, but a lot of us were thinking about moving around the magic Council and aiming for the Oración Seis on our own. That mission would've been low-key, but the same mages we sent here would've been on that one, and who knows what would've happened without you, Wendy, Gajeel and Ultear are along. But where Rangers go, battle follows, and that seems to be multiplied by a thousand in your case. Just don't look to any of us for help in the future. Makarov might allow it among his strongest, and Jura always goes his own way, but Bob… Bob’s guild is taking this hard and I don’t know what the future holds for them.”

Ranma looked at him, then over at Bacchus, who shrugged. “I've got your back Ranma. “If you need help, you can call me anytime. Despite Velos’ death, this mission went about as well as I think it could have after so many different enemies decided to stick their oars in,” He said in a far more serious manner than Ranma was used to.

Then Bacchus spoiled this impression by grabbing the tin out of Goldmine's hand and tipping it into his mouth until it was practically empty. “Ahhh, but, but heh, butssss. Eheh, next time I think we should listen to your advice about only bringing along S class mages.”

Goldmine winced at that, looking towards Baba in the distance. “Yeah, there's that too.” After that Goldmine asked a few questions about the mission, about what Ranma's plans going forward were, and what the reception of the mission had been among the other kings. As guild master, Goldmine had been told about Ranma's Ranger status, but he didn't come out and say it.

Ranma simply reported that his employers were happy enough with the outcome, and were following up on the total destruction of the Oración Seis’ spy network along with any other networks they could find. Eventually the two Quattro Cerberus members left to be replaced not five minutes later by Master Bob.

He and Ranma exchanged commiserations as well, although Bob was a lot more formal about it than Goldmine had been, and it was quite obvious that he didn't actually like Ranma all that much any longer. That was fine with Ranma, there was no reason he should be liked at this point.

Next came Baba, who was almost beside herself with grief at Sherry's senseless death. She apologized to Ranma for putting him and Jura in the position of leading Leon and Sherry, repeating much of what Goldmine it said: That while the mission had been Ranma's, how it had evolved from there had been their own fault, and that they all shared in the guilt.

In contrast, when he came around Makarov was much more like Goldmine. He brought a drink, and the two of them sat exchanging it for a time before Makarov spoke. “Guilt is a heavy thing to bear. Ask any leader and they'll tell you that in a second. But this, this wasn’t anything that you should find fault in yourself for. Feel regret, feel the weight of the lives that have been lost, but don't blame yourself for them. **I** was all set to blame you for them I'll admit, I was all set to blame **myself** for them just as much. But after hearing what actually happened, from Wendy primarily, once we arrived here I know that you, while not entirely blameless, really did do everything you could to both protect the wounded and see your mission through.

After another long, hard swig, Makarov hurled the now empty tin out into the darkness beyond the slowly rebuilding town. “I blame my son for this. I blame Brain for taking such young people and brainwashing them to do his evil bidding. And I blame the demons for playing carrion crow to this miserable battle. Learn from it, and move on,” he said, looking back at Ranma sternly before hopping to his feet. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need some more alcohol.”

*I wonder how many times I'm going to be told the same exact thing,* Ranma mused as Makarov walked off. *Still, at least this time I think it actually sank in.*

His thoughts broke off however as one of the Rune Knights moved out of the dark to stand before him, saluting. The Rune Knights didn’t know what Ranma was, but they had received orders the morning after Ranma’s return to town to obey his orders so he must have some rank. “Sir, you wanted to know when the Fiorian councilwoman showed signs of waking up. She has just begun to stir.”

**OOOOOOO**

Ultear groaned as she came awake then sat up abruptly, tearing off the thin blanket she found lying over her to stare at her foot in shock and horror, only vaguely realizing that it wasn’t nearly as bad as her last memory made it out to be. She was missing her toes on that foot, and the skin looked red and raw, but it was all there at least. In her memories it had been a black, mangled and twisted thing.

She gingerly reached down and touched it, finding it somewhat tender, but she could still move her ankle and even without toes the rest of her foot still responded. “The whole no toes thing is going to take some getting used to though,” she said aloud in a dazed sort of tone.

“Yeah that can be a bitch I’ve heard,” Ranma said from one side. Despite the words though, his tone was somewhat hard as he looked at her.

After getting over her shock at the suddenness of his announcing himself like that Ultear looked at back at him, then around. “What happened?” she asked.

“You tell me. I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt considering that I don't think if you are going to sell us out, the due has shown up at all, but…”

She looks back at him in shock, then frowned, her eyes shifting as she once more got her mental feet under her with the speed of an accomplished spy. “Hoteye, Racer or Brain. You took one of them prisoner.”

“We converted Hoteye,” Ranma said his teeth suddenly barred. “And **that** was a confession. So you really do work for Grimoire Heart?”

“Worked for, past tense,” Ultear said firmly. “I worked for Grimoire Heart before this.”

“Why past tense?” Ranma asked.

“First how many people know?” Ultear asked, holding up a hand. “I’m not trying to get out of telling you what you want to know, but I think I can be of much more help if my transgression to not come to light publicly.”

“Myself, Hoteye, Erza and the Kings. The others suspect that this is the case, but they don't know for certain that I have confirmed it just now.” For an instant, he wondered if Ultear would try to fight him, but Ultear was a very smart young woman, and knew that despite having woken up from her magical exhaustion-induced coma, she was in no position to fight Ranma, who looked back to fighting fit.

Instead she slowly nodded. “Well, my decision to leave Grimoire Heart starts with some information that I found about Brain: that he was in charge of the Magical Research Institute in Iceberg, where I was born. Where I was sent, because of my immense magical energy when I was younger.” The black-haired beauty’s teeth grit as she went on. “Where I was tortured, experimented on, treated like a guinea pig in the pursuit of science. I never knew Brain had been involved in it until I was assigned the mission of trying to figure out how the Oración Seis were linked to Jellal. Then one of the others mentioned it, and suddenly this mission became very personal for me.”

“Let me guess…” Ranma said with a sigh. “Brain said something to you that indicated that your own, call him your real employer, knew about that connection, and still wanted you to work with him?”

“Oh yes. Oh yes, you might say that…” Ultear began, staring off into the distance behind Ranma as she remembered their confrontation.

Flashback:

Brain and Ultear moved through the forest together Brain in the lead as he led them through the woods. In his hand he held Klodoa, which he used to unerringly pick out the route to where Nirvana was locked away under illusions and stasis spells placed on it by the mages of Seven, Bosco, and Fiore in ages past, along with its own creators, the Nirvit. Brain had explained all this as they walked at first, sounding almost like an academic, eager to share his knowledge of something interesting and unusual with someone else, which Ultear encouraged for a time, believing in the phrase knowledge is power.

But eventually the fell silent as they walked, having next to nothing to say to one another. Klodoa attempted to keep up a running commentary at first, but Brain glared his staff into silence quickly.

Actually, Ultear had a lot to say to Brain, but none of it would help her now and indeed most of it was stuff which shouldn’t be said until she had him dying at her feet. Faced with the man who had been behind the horror of her childhood, Ultear was having trouble controlling herself. But Ultear knew that Brain was a powerful mage, not just in willpower but magic, and she would only get one shot at this. *And the best time to strike at someone is when their guard is down, when they are just about to achieve their mind’s desire.*

Eventually the plain forest of the Woodsea started to be spotted here and there with scattered ruins, the remains of stone towers and wall covered by moss vines and even a few trees. Brain smiled holding out his free hand, his eyes blinking shut for an instant before he smiled. “It’s here!” With that he reached into a pouch and pulled out an ancient crystalized eyeball, holding it in front of him.

The air shimmered and suddenly a vast screen of nearly translucent purple, orange and gold magic appeared, spreading up and to either side out of sight, the shape above them shifting into what might be a dome, but the dome was almost too high for Ultear to see curve begin. The magic directly in front of Brain shifted into the shape of three large locks. Each of them was made of different colors of magic, and a second after appearing they began to pulse in uneven intervals.

Brain quickly scanned the trio of locks, then moved to the side and inserted the eyeball into one of them. Then, as that lock dissipated and the orange color started to leave the dome, he held up Klodoa. “Now Klodoa!”

“Yes, Master Brain!” the loud, semi-sentient staff burst into a flare of purple light which flashed out from his eye and mouth sockets into the corresponding lock. This time the whine of released magic was audible, and the thin veneer of magic became even thinner, the illusion aspect of it dissipating.

Now ahead of them Brain and Ultear could see a small city stretching away from them. It wasn’t very big, but it was entirely made of stone, and seemed to be surrounded by eight large, odd looking v-shaped statues of some kind. In the distance Ultear could now see a ziggurat of some kind set in what she assumed was the center of the city.

However, the gold portion of the dome of magic remained, and its pulsing was now becoming almost constant, a whine building up in the air. Brain quickly turned to look at Ultear full, gesturing her forward. “Now! Place your head inside the lock!”

While this had been going on, Ultear had thought about attacking Brain right now, but he had always kept one eye on her, and seemed prepared for any kind of treachery on her part. So she wordlessly stepped forward, placing her head, and more importantly, her eyes, within the visible manifestation of the ancient Fiore Council spell.

Something that was mostly unknown to many was that joining the Magic Council of any country wasn’t as easy as simply winning an election or proving yourself adept at both magic and bureaucracy. It involved becoming privy to both secrets and magics that most peoples didn’t even know existed. This included having a spell-key put into your eye by the council in order to access certain restricted areas or spells. The spell-key never changed, and was mostly invisible unless in use, and Ultear had been infuriated to learn that there were actual levels to the spell-key, which had blocked her from accessing FACE and the Etherano Cannon.

She was rather dubious that her level one spell-key would work on this protective enchantment, but evidently the spell-key having levels was something that hadn’t existed when Nirvana had been sealed away. Her eye glowed with a series of concentric gears, and the golden dome disappeared, leaving Nirvana open to them.

“Thank you my dear,” Brain said with a smile. “Now, come. Nirvana awaits.”

Walking through the city didn’t take that long, and soon they were on top of the Ziggurat, facing what was obviously a series of controls of some kind. Brain moved forward, and looked them over for a few minutes, then began to push buttons here and there, a book popping out of his pouch and hovering in front of him for a moment under Klodoa’s control.

As Brain’s movements became frenetic and his smile became something almost gleeful and even Klodoa busy and not looking in her direction, Ultear knew the time to strike had come. Without a word she lashed out with her Arc of Time magic, shifting the ground beneath Brain and around him through several thousand years, eroding them instantly. She had aimed for the entire top of the ziggurat, but the controls had somehow fought the effect.

At the same time, she used her glass orb, hurling it toward Brain, the orb flowing through a spell circle as it left her hand. “Luminous Minutes!” The orb became serval dozen beams of purple light, lashing out toward Brain.

But despite his enthusiasm for his current project, Brain was not as unaware as he looked. Dark Hurricane!” he shouted even as he fell into the hole. Around him a series of concentric whirling blasts of black and purple energy appeared, blocking Ultear’s attack for just the moment needed for him to avoid them. While Darkness magic didn’t lend itself to defense very well, this let him survive her initial assault, and he lashed out viciously in turn. “Dark Capriccio, Klodoa, attack her too!”

From his hands Brain lashed out with twin spiraling drills of black and purple magic, lashing up towards Ultear, who dodged them adroitly, before having to dodge another such attack shot at her from Klodoa. “Did you honestly think I wouldn’t be waiting for your inevitable betrayal my dear?” Brain shouted up through the hole, even as he lashed out with another spell, “Dark mages always betray one another, you might say it is a failing in the breed. Dark Gravity!”

The ground beneath Ultear caved in, intending to drop her down to his level, but that didn’t work because she lashed out with her Arc of Time spell Restore at the rock underneath her, reverting it back to its undamaged form even as it took the damage, blocking Brain’s attacks utterly. Then she leaped away, and lashed out again with her Arc of time magic hurling her ball down into the hole after brain. “Parallel Worlds!”

“This has nothing to do with being a dark mage, or Grimoire Heart or even your Oración Seis! This is between you and me!” she shouted, lashing out with another, not even named spell at Klodoa. For all its apparent intelligence it wasn’t, technically, alive after all. It had no defense as a living person or animal would to her Lost Magic, and it shriveled and rotted within seconds, the skull falling to dust before it could even scream. The crystal in its mouth survived only to shatter on the stone of the ziggurat’s roof.

Brain grunted in some pain as the thousands of cloned balls slammed into him, but he was made of quite stern stuff and he throw off the attack easily blasting his way out of the ziggurat even as the attack continued, shattering the globe at one point only to watch it reform instantly and then somehow return to Ultear’s hands. *Arc of Time, a truly formidable magic, even if it isn’t a direct assault type of magic. But not powerful enough!*

With that thought he was out in the open again and lashed out with a “Dark Scream!” Followed by a “Zero slash!” as he raced closer to Ultear. This spell created a whip of dark purple and black magic in one hand which he lashed out at Ultear with. “Oh, and what have I ever done to you then?”

“Do you remember the daughter of Ur Milkovich? The one who was brought to you because she had too much magical power!?” Ultear shouted, using her crystal ball now on defense, creating a Parallel World spell that made it always appear in front of any attack that would otherwise have hit her while dodging as best she could, lashing out with the same spell, splitting the spell effects in a way that only a master of magic could do. One attack still got through, hitting her shoulder, but she powered through it, her own magical durability quite high. “Do you remember the names of the children you tortured in the name of science!?”

“Of course I remember, though I am surprised you do, I would have thought Hades would have erased your memory of the past when he decided to take you in,” Brain said almost conversationally, before one blast of magic caught him in the knee, dumping him on the ground.

This opened him up to another attack from Ultear and she hurled her ball into the air. “Flash Forward, Infinite Sphere!” From all around the two of them thousands of crystal balls then blasted towards Brain, smashing him down to the ground.

Brain groaned in agony, but lashed out by pushing his hands to either side of his head aimed upwards towards Ultear. “Dark Rondo!” from his palms came hundreds and then thousands of what looked like lost souls, dark purple and black screaming heads aiming to envelop Ultear.

She leaped way but the spell followed her, and she was forced to use Luminous Minutes to dissipate it. This let Brain regain his feet, though his back, leg and head had paid for it, covered in bruises and with blood coming from numerous cuts. Before he could press his advantage though, Ultear did the last thing he expected: she closed the distance. A blade of light yellow magic appeared from her hands and she took to slashing at him with skill and speed pushing him on the back foot. “What do you mean by that!?”

Without being given the time to conjure up his powerful but relatively slow attack spells Brain was forced to fall back on the Zero Slash, and two long whips of Darkness magic appeared in his own hands. But Ultear was faster, and, though Brain didn’t like to admit it, the better hand to hand combatant, faster and far more precise than Brain, who was really more of a long or mid-range fighter despite his monstrous durability. Her attacks couldn’t do much damage alone, but each attack was painful, and she kept on aiming for his weak points, nose, eye, throat, armpit, and joints. It was only his own skill that kept him from being crippled quickly.

Realizing that within a bare minute of combat, he decided to see if he could get under her skin. “Oh please! That old bastard knew where you came from the moment he picked you up! Hell, he even admitted to me once when we met that he had taken you off my hands, bragged about creating a weapon in you, a girl who I felt was too powerful and unruly to use as one of my keys! I’ve always been amused by how well Hades was able to manipulate you and all those other disparate personalities in Grimoire Heart. Hah, but then again, he did much the same as I did, found you all young and then molded each of you into his tools!”

He hissed as a cut nearly took his ear off and another slice into his side, though not very deeply. Ultear couldn’t do enough damage all at once to put him down, and now her being close worked against her. One of his whips caught her and smashed her away with a cry of pain.

Yet she rolled with it, and thrust out her hands, creating another Luminous Minutes attack, blasting into and dissipating Brain’s Dark Capriccio which he had launched the instant he had time. “You don’t know what you’re talking about! Master Hades, he took us all in, he knows, he, he…”

“He knew what you went through and that I was the one who put you through what you call tortures Ultear!” Brain shouted, knowing his words were having an effect. “And whatever you might think, what Hades is after isn’t a perfect magical world or the source of all magic or anything else! It is simply despair! Zeref will never aid you in whatever your dream is girl! The Dark Mage Zeref will only decay anything that he touches!”

“RAHHH!!” Ultear roared, her magic going out of control her attack blasting through Brains’ smashing him back into the wall of a building behind him. At the same time one of his Six Prayers tattoos disappeared, signaling the defeat of one of his guild members. *What, how!? Damn it that Ranger and his allies must have caught up with us somehow.*

“Does, does the truth hurt?” Brain sneered, lashing out with another Dark Rondo, before jumping to the side and lashing at Ultear herself with Dark Gravity, intending to force her to her knees.

Ultear dodged that attack however by leaping into his first shouting, “Ice Make Dahlia! A giant ice flower appeared in front of her blocking and absorbing his attack. She then lashed out with another spell instantly. “Ice Make Bloom!” Several dozen large flower shaped rock projectiles lashed out toward Brain.

He destroyed several of them but two hit blasting him backwards and pinning one arm to his body in an icy grip. Another assault from Ultear’s orbs followed and Brain gasped as he felt himself slowly being pounded under. Even his immense endurance wasn’t up to taking this kind of assault for long, and he had already fought a hard battle today anyway. Worse, Brain could feel his magic starting to flag. *Fuck, she certainly didn’t trick her way onto the magic Council, now did she?*

Just then however, Brain felt his last two keys dissipate, and he instantly felt his alter ego, Zero, slowly started to emerge, his Second Origin magical core opening at the same time, flooding him once more with magic. His eyes turned red, and he lashed out with another spell as he began to laugh crazily. The sphere of darkness flashed forward far faster than his earlier attacks, catching Ultear in the foot even as she dodged to the side, and she screamed in agony. “Yes, pain agony! Give me more, give me everything, I will drown the world in destruction, for I am Zero!!!”

**End Flashback**

“After that, I fought him for something like a minute, then must have collapsed from magical exhaustion and the pain of my wounds. I would've had him!” Ultear growled, smacking one hand down her thighs so hard she actually winced before going on in a slightly more mollified tone. “I would've had him, if not for that secondary personality. It, it utterly overwhelmed me.”

Ranma slowly nodded, digesting what he had been told, and what had been explained. “So are you willing to turn King’s Evidence?”

“No,” Ultear said with a shake of her head. “While you are no doubt following up on anything Hoteye could tell you about the Oración Seis, my own employees also have their own spy network and the most irritating thing about it is that most of it actually isn't technically speaking a spy network. Most of the people who relay information to us simply think they're communicating with an old friend. I don't know who Master Hades was before he became Hades of Grimoire Heart, but he must have been important, because he has connections everywhere. If I turn Kings Evidence, not only will my life be in danger, but Meredy’s will and I refuse to allow that to happen.”

“Meredy?” Ranma asked.

“A young girl I adopted as you adopted young Wendy. She's older than Wendy, around fifteen or so, and comes from Iceberg, as I did. I took her in at one point,” Ultear replied, making no mention that it had been an attack by another Grimoire Heart inductee, Zancrow the Fire God Slayer magic user, who left the girl homeless. This was something she had hidden from Meredy for years, and she saw no point in sharing it with Ranma now. “He won't hesitate to use her to get to me and if he can't do that, he might just decide to kill her or brainwash her entirely against me. No, I have to stay the course, stay hidden.”

“I don't know if we’ll be able to do that, but I’ll get with King Toma and the others. I’ll tell the others that Hoteye was wrong too. Then when I can reach Toma on my own, I’ll tell him the truth. He'll probably use you as a double agent you know. That'll put you in even more danger,” Ranma said, now feeling more than a little pity for the black-haired beauty.

Ultear shrugged. “I have to make amends somehow for being used like that for so long.” *And a small part of me hasn’t yet given up on the idea of reviving Zeref and going back to change my past.*

“You realize there’s no way Toma will trust your word on this?” Ranma asked intently. “He’ll have to put someone in place to monitor you, carefully control what information you have access to.”

Ultear nodded calmly. “I’m used to being watched so that doesn’t matter to me. As for information I shouldn’t’ have access to, tell him when you can that I was entrenched into the Magic Council to learn about their weapons of mass destruction, the FACE system and the Etherion cannon. I have discovered how they use and aim the Etherion cannon, and the safety systems should be changed. I have only discovered the existence of FACE, nothing more yet. Until I do, or until Master Hades discovers something else called the Keys of Fate, I will remain in place in the Council, ostensibly his chief spy.”

Letting out a hiss of air slowly through his teeth, Ranma nodded in turn. “That, that will surely show you’re knowledgeable, trust is doubtful though.”

Ultear barked a laugh. “Hah! Trust doesn’t exist in this game Ranma, I have no illusions there. Just convince Toma to leave me in place until I can get Meredy away from the rest of the guild, and I will cooperate with any request or mission that doesn’t hinder that goal.”

With that, Ultear seemed to lose much of her energy and she closed her eyes. Ranma watched her for a moment, then realized she had fallen back asleep, exhausted by her exertions, before getting up and moving out of the tent leaving her there in peace. He paused as he nearly ran into Lyon. “She’s asleep for now, best to let her stay that way for a bit.”

Lyon paused, but nodded and moved over to sit nearby the tent flap. He wanted to talk to this Ur lookalike, and he was going to do it.

True to his word, Ranma did call Meredrain, leaving the town quietly and finding a tree to sit in as he did so, nowhere near where he had left Seilah, who like the others had mostly recovered over the last two days. But even though he trusted her somewhat, he didn’t think it would serve any purpose for her to hear this conversation.

Once connected, he told the two kings that he had cleared Ultear of the suspicions Hoteye’s words had garnered. “It turns out Ultear was acting as if she had been suborned by Jellal in his Siegrain guise in order to get Brain to lower his guard. It worked too, but she wasn’t prepared for his combat-alter ego. She had been planning this for a while, in order to get close to Brain and take revenge on him.”

He went on to describe what Ultear had told him of the fight. That and the knowledge she had been part of Iceberg’s Magical Research Institute cause Toma and Meredrain some winces, but neither could question the woman’s reasoning to play that part.

“So with that cleared up, do you have any new requests or questions for me?” Ranma asked, eager to move on.

Toma was too, happy that Ultear had proven herself trustworthy, which made Ranma wince a little knowing he’d have to tell Toma soon that wasn’t actually the case. Now however, the two kings exchanged a quick glance, and then Toma said hesitantly, “Actually, we don’t want you to take on any new jobs at this time. We would, in fact, much prefer if you could make yourself scarce for a while. And by that I mean, don’t return to Fiore at all.”

While Ranma was reacting to that, Meredrain cut in quickly. “Your missions, while successful, have started to garner some interest from rumor, authority figures you’ve brushed past and other such things.”

“Newspapers and magazines in particular. ‘The new wildcard of Fairy Tail, how COOOL is he?!’” Toma said quite obviously reading off the last sentence from something out of the lacrima’s pickup range. “Your ranger status is not quite known, but it is a very thin line between the rumors and connecting how a single mage could get away with what you have been. So we need you to be out of sight for a good few months, and not attract further attention.”

“I’m dealing with much the same issue, although in my case even my own espionage service is getting in on the speculation despite oaths to the contrary. And I’d rather like you to find Raven Tail’s base as we mentioned before. We know it’s down in Desierto, somewhere near the countries border with Joya, but we have no idea where of course,” Meredrain said.

Toma smiled. “Take a break, see the sights, don’t make waves, please?” he finished plaintively. “If you possibly can do so?”

“Erm, I suppose I can try, yeah,” Ranma said with a faint smile. “In fact, ya might say this works damned well on my end too. I’ve been meaning to get some serious training done anyway.”

Sharing a worried glance at that the two kings turned back to Ranma and said as one, “Just don’t make waves, please!” before signing off, getting the last word in. Ranma scowled at that, having hoped to talk to Toma alone, but the Ranger communications enchantment didn’t work like that. It could only connect to the nearest King, and if that king left the discussion, Ranma was forced out to. *I’ll have to take a bit of a trip into Fiore regardless then. Damn.*

Late that night, indeed as the sky started to lighten in the distance, a low mumble from the tent brought Ranma awake, so low no one but another Dragon Slayer could have heard it. Entering the tent quickly he found Jenny tossing and turning in her bed, raising one hand to her head. Ranma caught her hand lightly, kissing the back of it. “Easy there. Don't try to open your eyes, Porlyusica thinks that you’ll find them kind of sensitive. It's nighttime and you wouldn't see much anyway. How are you feeling?”

“Like someone just used my head as a football!” Jenny grunted. Then her eyes, which she had opened despite Ranma’s words, widened before narrowing as she stared angrily up at the top of the ceiling. “So we won then?” She asked, processing what she could remember with her current situation as quickly as she could.

“Yeah,” Ranma said with a nod. “We won.”

“Who killed that big green-scaled asshole?” Jenny growled her free hand flying to her face and the side of her head, wincing as she found the two scars.

“Me apparently, and that seems to’ve been a near-universal opinion of that guy. I kind of went a little crazy there when I saw you fall. You cut him and he… Torafuzar, was his name, he nearly caved in your head like…” Ranma shook his head.

Jenny thought about that for a moment then smiled. “So my being in danger made you go nuts? That's almost sweet.” Then her hand continued to rise towards her head. “And I remember getting hit in the head very, very freaking hard… though I can’t remember what my favorite food is or what day it is… weird.”

Her fingers were still on the scar on the side of her head before they moved lightly over her face again, tracing the scar moving across her nose. “Can I, can I get a mirror?” she asked softly.

Ranma sighed, but nodded and left the tent, coming back both with a mirror and some food. With him he brought Erza, Mira, Anna and Bisca, along with Wendy and Porlyusica.

After eating some of the food as Ranma filled her in on most of what had been going on (minus Seilah) Jenny expressed joy that even if they had been attacked the wounded back in town hadn’t all been killed as could so easily have occurred. Then she returned to her own issues and held the mirror up, looking at her face this way and that, scowling at the two scars before shrugging her shoulders. “Well, I suppose it could be a hell of a lot worse.”

She looked at Ranma who was once more looking guilty before she smacked him on the arm as hard as she could laying there in her weakened state, even as her face started to twitch spasmodically here and there. “If you're thinking guilty about this I'm going to get out of this bed and kick you in the balls. It was my choice to come along, you only asked. And I thought I was ready for this kind of mission. And I was right, to a point. I've got the versatility, but I need more magical reserves, or find another type of take over the doesn't take as much of my reserves to use. I don't suppose you have any ideas there?”

Ranma slowly smiled. “So you want to get stronger? You’re not the only one. Gray asked me for advice on that too, and I understand that even with Master Bob thinking about forbidding hard combat missions like against dark guilds the remaining Trimens might want to get stronger too.”

“About time,” Jenny grunted, although inwardly she grimaced at the idea of her guild swearing off harder combat missions. It wouldn’t matter much to their coffers for certain. Jenny knew she had been paid more on a single modeling mission than most S-class mages saw for three jobs. The Trimens brought in money like nobody’s business, even Ichiya had. Despite their poor showing with the girls of Fairy Tail they were immensely popular among the regular population. *But is that the kind of thing I want to do with my life*?

Out loud she said, “On combat missions they've always leaned a little too heavily on Ichiya. Eve in particular.”

“Well to be fair,” Ranma cut in. “Snow Magic? Besides creating a whiteout or burying people alive what could he use magic like that for which an Ice Make user couldn’t do better?”

Ranma chuckled at that, as did Jenny, but Jenny kept on glancing down to the mirror and her reflection. It was obvious that despite her tough talk, the blonde mage/model was bothered by the scar on the side of her face. It wound its way from under her hairline down along the side of her face, ending on one cheek. It wasn't disgusting or huge or anything like that, but it was definitely there, just like the smaller one across the nose. And she didn't like either of them at all.

“You're still beautiful,” Ranma said, flushing slightly at that, moving one of his hands to gently trace her scar. “This, this doesn't matter. If people think that scar messes with your beauty, they're not worth the time to go tell them to screw off.”

Jenny gurgled laughter at that, then gripped his arm lightly and pulled him into a kiss. Despite the people around them he didn’t object, and she smiled happily while Bisca and Erza both scowled, though only one of them understood the feeling that went through them at the sight.

Despite the others being there the kiss went on for some time, And Ranma found himself deepening it, his tongue entering her willing mouth and swirling around Jenny’s tongue, pulling her upper body off the cot as he squeezed her against him.

Eventually though Jenny needed to breathe, and Ranma pulled back, letting her fall back lightly onto the cot.

“So, what are your plans going forward?” she asked, her face flushed and a small, almost lusty smile on her face, but her body was still wiped out, and she didn’t want to take that moment any further at present.

Ranma twitched. “Well, I contacted Meredrain a few hours ago. I’m basically being ordered to get out of Seven and to not return to Fiore for a bit. He and Toma bluntly told me that I need to disappear for a while. The ‘Ranger Ranma’ has become too well known to be of further use as a Ranger, and my skills aren’t needed to wrap things up here.”

“Who would have thought?” Jenny asked, shaking her head, her lips twitching in humor while alas the rest of her face just twitched on its own, something Porlyusica took note of. “You oust a traitor on the Magic Council, defeat a demon, destroy an ancient magical construct that could've well spelled doom for countless hundreds of thousands of people, help in ending a guild war prematurely, and then lead a somewhat successful mission to take out one of the Balam Alliance members, running roughshod over another group that they had allied with. Who would have ever thought that would be enough to gain you a bit of fame?”

As Ranma gave her a deadpan look Jenny laughed. “Now all you need to do is rescue a princess and model in both your forms. Then you might well become the most famous person in Ishgar.”

Wendy giggled. “Does protecting a queen before she was one count? Because Ranma-nii did that before he met me. Or ooh, how about a general trying to be king? That was the time we ran into that weird possessed goat person who turned out to be a Celestial Spirit.”

“Bah, child I’ve seen San Jiao Shin and let me tell you, he would make one horribly ugly princess,” Carla quipped with a small smile.

As everyone else laughed Ranma pouted and tried to change the subject. “Ahem, anyway! I wanted to spend the rest of autumn in Magnolia leading into winter. But if I need to be out of sight out of mind, I can't head to Magnolia. Erza and I have instead decided to go on a journey to, well to find some family heirlooms of hers that we learned about from this memory capsule I found yeas go. That search will take us into Joya I think. Joya and its border with Bell Lake and up into where Bell Lake hits Iceberg. Somewhere in those mountains I'm going to find or at least I hope I'm going to find a clue that can tell me how to conquer my Dragon Slayer magic, so that it doesn't fight my primary magical the time. If I can get there to play nice with one another, I think my power levels will rise tremendously.”

“I’ll need to shop around in a town at some point for a few supplies for myself, but beyond that I am ready anytime. I am… most interested in finding this link to my family, regardless of how long ago that link had been forged,” Erza said, a small smile on her face as she remembered the message from the woman who must in some fashion be her ancestor. *I refuse to believe she’s my actual mother, ugh, I’ve read far too many fantasy novels to want to contemplate the idea of time travel. No, Erza’s just a, a traditional name, that’s right.*

“That makes sense. Still, if you're going to kill two birds with one stone why not three?” Bisca asked, speaking up for the first time since the entered the tent. While she and Jenny had been friendly towards one another during the festival, they hadn’t even met before that, so she had let Ranma and Mira do the talking. “You're supposed to find this Raven Tail base right? Well that's in Desierto, and I’m a Desierto native.”

When Ranma nodded, the green-haired cowgirl went on. “Plus, I told you I was thinking about taking a job bounty hunting a group of criminals that have headed down there according to the government that the Magic Council wants back. We can hunt them down, see to the Raven Tail Fortress and then move back up into the mountains of Joya to search for this mountain**.”**

“That works,” Ranma said with a nod. “Our tent is certainly large enough for more people.” Wendy also agreed, saying she’d like Bisca’s help to actually start training on her tiny holdout pistol, something Ranma had kind of neglected since they had received it.

Erza cocked her head thoughtfully staring at Bisca hard, while Bisca stared back just as challengingly. Eventually the redhead nodded. “I have no objection to having another traveling companion. It should be most interesting in many ways.”

Smiling thinly, Bisca replied, “I’ll teach you to ride a horse Erza, you’ll like it.”

Ranma coughed at that, grateful that none of them knew about what his name translated to from Japanese to English back in his old world. But the idea of the two learning to ‘ride a horse’, with him being the horse, was still enough to make him both blush and curse his now all-too active imagination.

At the same time, Jenny made a ‘tsking’ noise in the back of her throat. *Crap, all that time together, on the road admittedly, but with both Ranma and Wendy, and I’ll be stuck here. Darn it. Still, it won’t be the first time we’ve been separated for a long while.*

Just then, Master Bob came in and quickly began to shoo all the non-Blue Pegasus mages out politely but firmly. He wanted to talk to his mages alone, and Jenny needed her rest. Ranma stole a final kiss and whispered a promise to stop in to see her before heading on to Magnolia then left the tent, looking at his companions. “So, I’m thinking of leaving tonight. The sooner we get out of here, the sooner I’m out of sight as Meredrain wants me to be.”

Erza nodded while Bisca looked a little surprised but also nodded. “I’ll round up some horses for me and Erza, and maybe Wendy would like to learn how to ride too…” she paused as Ranma’s face turned white and he seemed to blanch, causing her lips to twist into a frown. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, um, nope, nothing, just a, a random thought. Yeah, um, that sounds like a good idea. Erza, you need to check in with Makarov right?” Ranma said, desperate to change the subject. *Damn you imagination!! Going to need some serious brain bleach for that one.*

“True, I shall go do so. Although I won’t tell the others we’re leaving, I don’t think any of us want Natsu to tag along, do we?” Erza asked.

“No,” Wendy replied firmly smiling as she thought about the idea of learning to ride a horse, something she had only done rarely and very poorly before this. “I think the first time he tried to pick a fight in the tent I’d be forced to hurt him.”

“You done talking to Porlyusica then?” Ranma asked, kneeling down next to his little sister, rubbing the side of his head against hers. “We can afford to stay here another day or so if you want.”

“Nope,” Wendy said nuzzling back and smiling happily, as her older brother’s smell and presence filled her senses. “Nope, Porlyusica-san and I talked while she helped heal Jenny, and we will talk again when we return to Magnolia. I know what the mystery was about, and her connection to mama, that’s enough for now. She’s got some spells to teach me when we get back though, that should be fun!”

When asked if he had any objections to Erza and Bisca going with the Dragon Slayer siblings, Makarov grumbled, but didn’t forbid it, just demanding they take a few messenger birds, handing off several of them to Erza for her use. Mira, the only other guild member told about their leaving looked a little irritated by it all, and shared glances with Erza and Ranma, the meaning of which Bisca couldn’t figure out, but that didn’t matter.

The trip down into Desierto would take them about a week or so, by first traveling into Bosco then across the straits into Minstrel. There they would travel into the north of Desierto, which, according to Bisca, was a very different area in comparison to the south where Ranma and Wendy had been before. Once they reached that portion of their trip, she would take over choosing their route as they hunted down both information on where Raven Tail’s base was and the group of Fiore natives who had escaped to Desierto.

That night after the funerals Ranma, Wendy and the two ladies of Fairy Tail, mounted on horses, left the outskirts of the still quite wrecked town. They oddly headed south of the town at first away from the road for a bit, with Bisca looking at Ranma and the others quizzically. “Um, not to put too fine a point on it, but where are you leading us?”

Ranma blanched a little, unseen in the dark. “Erk, well, that’s quite a tale to tell. Um, let’s just say that we have one more person that will be going with us and one more reason why I wanted to get out of sight…”

**End Chapter**