Warning, this is easily the most combat intensive chapter of this story. Even stranger, most of it is just the same battle. But given the implications for the future and the fact that the original canon events of the tower of heaven were so important, I felt it justified.

This chapter has been betaed by **justlovereadin’** and checked over by **Michael**.

… When Mira fights, you might want to play Daughter’s of Darkness by Halestorm. Other than that, the Erza Tribute Undefeated when she fights. Now enjoy the chapter!

**Chapter 9: Tower War**

As she had nearly every hour since Ranma had convinced Erza to let him (then, her) take Erza’s place with the Council’s messenger, Erza sat alone at the bar, eating strawberry cake. Or rather, stabbing at the plate with her fork, her eyes locked in a thousand yard stare. She hadn’t even noticed that there was no cake underneath her deadly fork or that the plate itself was in danger of being cracked.

The reason for this lack of cake was simple: about ten minutes before, Mirajane had dared Natsu to switch her plate out with an empty one in an effort to get a response from the redhead. To their astonishment, it hadn't worked.

Erza’s thoughts were still on Ranma and what she had allowed him to do in her stead. She was wondering if the Guild would get in trouble, if the Council would listen to a Ranger, or if there would be some kind of big conflict there when they refused to acknowledge his authority. Given her own dealings the Council, she was not certain if they would bow to anyone, even a direct representative of their king, let alone one who was supposed to act for every king in Ishgar equally and who hadn’t been appointed by King Toma.

She was also just thinking about Ranma: his fight against the demon, their discussions and the way he had seemed to enjoy sparring with Natsu. And then, of course, the fact that he wanted to go out on a date with her. Despite the fact that she was somewhat used to men flirting with her, Erza wasn’t at all used to men actually asking her out. Most of the time their flirting consisted of ways to get her out of her armor, and she ignored them with queenly disdain. Ranma’s straightforward appreciation, good humor, and his skill all interested her.

Nearby, Mirajane had, of course, noticed this lack of reaction and scowled at her little joke having been completely overlooked. Yet her thoughts also twisted to Ranma. She was not happy at all that Erza was interested in him and had to wonder if it was romantic interest, or if she was just intrigued at his strength and wanting a new sparring partner. She looked around the Guild, smiling as she realized that Bisca had left a few hours ago with her possible boyfriend, Alzack.

*She hadn’t looked at all that enthusiastic about it, but willing enough when she handed the request in to me. Hah,* she thought to herself. *At least she has another romantic interest. Whereas me? Nothing! Oh, there are a few boys from other Guilds who flirt with me that are cute, I suppose, but nothing to write home about, really. The less said about that ass, Ren, the better. Can’t believe Jenny tried to set us up. Ugh.*

Nearby she also heard Cana and Lucy talking, and their discussion was also about Ranma, though, from what she was overhearing, they were more interested in his strength than his looks. *Funny, that. I would've thought that Cana would be all over him. But, then again, maybe she saw how me and Erza were acting and decided to bow out? She's always been smart like that about social stuff, though she likes to hide it behind her drunkard exterior.*

As she looked at Cana, Cana looked back and moved over to Erza. “Can’t help but notice you’re trying to kill that plate, Erza. Did it do something to offend you, or are you just angry you finished your cake off and didn’t even notice?”

Blinking, Erza looked down at the plate, then sighed before looking up at Mira. “Another piece of cake, please, Mira.”

“Yeah, sure. Far be it from me to stop you from eating whatever you want,” Mira replied, her tone making Erza’s eyes narrow.

Cana, however brought Erza’s attention back to her quickly. “So, Ranma. He’s an interesting fellow, isn’t he?”

“Indeed. Most amusing, but able to be serious at times. I believe that he will be able to handle anything the Council throws at him with, if not poise, then good humor. And then he will come back here with young Wendy. I’m looking forward to seeing more of his combat style,” Erza replied, smiling blandly, if neutrally.

“I’ll agree to that,” said Mirajane, coming over with Erza's next cake. She set it in front of her rival, smirking at the worried look on her face, and decided to tease her rival to her face this time. “Don't worry. I didn't do anything to it this time.”

Erza leaped to her feet, glaring over the bar at Mirajane and pointing dramatically. “So you admit you have in the past! Foul villain!”

“Maybe you should actually cook your own meals occasionally, then, you armored fatty! You know those cakes of yours go right to your hips, right?” Mira growled.

“Let's get back to Ranma,” Cana said, clapping her hands and speaking slightly louder, although it didn’t carry far thanks to the amount of background noise always prevalent in the guildhall. “So, when I said he was interesting, I meant he was **interesting**,” she said, smirking and giving a meaningful look at the other girls, her eyebrows going up and down dramatically.

Erza blushed but didn't look away, while Mirajane smirked, running one hand through her hair and the other down her side as she returned Cana’s look with her own. “That means you're interested in him? Do I have more competition?”

“Nah, he’s not my type,” Cana said, waving that off before looking at Lucy.

Shaking her head, the blonde replied in the negative. “No, thanks. Oh, he’s handsome enough, but a combat junky like that would be way too hard to get interested in anything else.”

Erza and Mirajane were now looking at one another challengingly. “He's asked me out on a date,” Erza said loftily.

“Oh yes, only after the two of you finish beating one another into submission! That's soooo romantic,” Mira replied with a sarcastic drawl. “Then again, what can I expect from a Neanderthal woman who thinks that armor is the height of fashion? On the other hand, he and I have flirted a lot, he trusted Wendy to me when he went away, and we've already promised to hang out some more and talk about our different magics.”

“We’ll learn about one another’s magic while fighting and then have an actual date if he wins. During which, I would think that flirting would occur, and in a much more romantic setting,” Erza said caustically.

Cana spoke up again just for the sake of adding more oil into the fire. “Bisca was also flirting with him, wasn't she? And he was flirting right back with both you and Erza there too. So, is he a player or just being really friendly?”

“That is a question we should probably ask him, shouldn't we?” Erza asked, looking around at Cana then at Mira. “On the other hand, I still think I'm one ahead, considering he actually did ask me on that date. That seems a little more solid sign of his interest than simply flirting.”

“You wish!” Mirajane scoffed. “Besides which, even if it is, I bet I can take his interest away from you quickly enough.”

“How? By showing him some of those centerfolds pictures of yours?” Erza retorted. “Maybe he’ll lose interest in you if he knows that every man in Fiore has seen your body by this point! And no doubt used your images in their, ahem, private time!”

“Oh, you would know all about private time, wouldn’t you, with those books of yours!” Mira shouted back, the two girls getting in one another’s face.

Nearby, Makarov watched this from on high, rather amused by what he was seeing.  *Add a new boy, and it's like adding gunpowder to a fire! T*hat colorful imagery sprang to his mind because of Natsu and Gray fighting nearby around the edge of the Guild Hall by the dart boards, a challenge between them having gone the way it always did. He watched as another brawl broke out, smaller than normal this time, since none of the other Guild members wanted to come close to the bar where the girls were all gathered, the air about the two gorgeous S-class mages warning them off.

*Mirajane and Erza are so different on the outside, but they are very similar on the inside in many ways.*  Strength was an important thing they both looked for in boys, though admittedly, Makarov didn't think they realized that themselves. Neither of them hung out with most of the Guild members outside of here in the hall, but they did do so with Natsu, Gray, and Laxus…in a way, anyway. Ranma was similar in strength to those three, but more, he seemed to know something about how to flirt judging from a few comments Makarov had overheard, and seemed to be very easy going with all of them rather than either scared or antagonistic.

*HAH! It’s like throwing meat to a few hungry sharks,* he thought, cackling as he watched Mirajane and Erza line up against one another across the bar. He wasn't worried about them coming to blows, however, as he saw a familiar sight racing around the Guild Hall now, heading straight for them.

Just as Mira and Erza were going to come to blows, they were stopped by the arrival of Carla, winging her way between them away from the chasing Happy. “Stop following me, you blasted tomcat! I was just trying to go to the bathroom!”

Carla had changed back into her Exceed body a few hours ago, being in danger of running out of magic. And instantly, Happy, who had seemed a little bemused and bothered by her human form, had started to chase her around again, going so far as to almost chase her into the bathroom.

“No! If I let you out of my sight you’ll disappear again! I don't want you to go!” Happy bawled.

At that heartfelt plea, Carla twisted around slightly the air, still dodging him, but landing lightly beside Mira on the top of the bar. “I'm not about to go anywhere just now,” she said with exasperation. “Both Wendy and Ranma are going to be coming back here after their—or, rather, his—work with the Council is over. Why would I leave?”

“I don't know,” Happy replied, landing across from her and scuffing his toes into the top of the bar. “I don't even know why you left the first time.”

Carla sighed. “I've told you before, I had been seeing Wendy in some of my prophetic dreams long before we left. I had to go with her when she appeared in front of me like that. I knew it was my destiny to be her friend, and it has worked very well over the years. I regret leaving Fairy Tail, I suppose, but these things happen sometimes. You shouldn't take it personally, and you shouldn't still be hung up on it!”

“How can I not be hung up on it?” Happy said, while Erza and Mirajane leaned back, watching this bit of drama unfold and putting their own conflict on the backburner for now. “You’re Carla! You're the only girl for me.”

“Wait, you know what boys and girls do together?” Mira asked, raising her hand just a little. “I know for a fact Natsu doesn't.”

“Hey, I heard that! And I know perfectly well what boys and girls can do together!” Natsu shouted from nearby, where he had just plowed the stripper into the ground headfirst. The fact that Gray had once more lost his pants was almost ignored by the rest of the Guild, so used to the view were they by now. Even the girls, except for Lucy, of course, didn't seem to want to comment on it. And Lucy wasn’t looking in that direction.

Lisanna and Anna looked at Natsu in shock from where they had been moving through the guild and taking orders from people, chorusing, “Wait, you do!?”

“You do?” Lucy asked, followed by Mirajane a second later, though her tone did not match the tones her little sisters’ did. Rather, both of them sounded confused, and shocked in Lucy's case, and rather dismissive or suspicious in Mira’s.

Across from the oldest Straus, Erza simply shook her head, knowing full well that was a lie.

Erza was proven correct a second later when Natsu nodded sagely. “Sure! You the same thing you do with boys. You fight them! Only you can’t hit them in certain spots, and you can't pull their hair, because they get scary if you do.”

Lisanna and Anna both shook their heads and turned away, muttering to themselves. “We’re going to have to take desperate measures!”

“Desperate measures like tying him up or just kissing him out of the blue?” Lisanna muttered back. “I’m getting worried enough to try either! He’s so perfect in every other way. Why can’t he be even a slight bit more normal in this area!?”

“Hmm… Maybe if we take a page from my modeling job…” Anna murmured back. She was more outgoing and confident about her body than Lisanna and had stepped up to join Mira on her modeling jobs after the older girl had been approached by Sorcerer’s Weekly. “If that doesn’t work, then yeah, tying him up or drugging him.”

Nearby, at the bar, Mira decided she really didn't want to hear her two younger siblings talking like this and turned away, looking down at Happy. “So? What would your answer to that one be, Happy?”

“Hold hands, hang out with one another, and fish!”

“That's a little better,” Mirajane said, while Erza chuckled, muttering, ‘like father, like son,’ while Carla simply groaned.

Happy suddenly got a sly look on his face. “If you stay, you can live with Luigi! She's got a great place in town, and it's not like she's using it.”

“I so am, you damn cat!” Lucy shouted. “And just because you and Natsu like to practice your breaking and entering on my apartment doesn't mean you have controlling interest on it! In fact, the last time I found you in my apartment you had slashed my drapes and the side of my sofa and had curled up in my underwear, of all things! What do you think about that, Carla?” Lucy said, suddenly smirking at Happy.

“Disgusting,” Carla said, backing away from Happy. “And go put on some clothes for goodness sake!” she suddenly roared. Happy had stripped back to his normal lack of clothing at some point during the chase, much to Carla’s chagrin.

“I don't understand why you have to have so many different colors of the same thing. And those clothes are irritating and itchy,” Happy muttered, looking around then quickly and whipping out a fish from his magic knapsack, holding it out to Carla. “How about I give you my fish, and you promise to stay?” he asked, his mind still on trying to keep Carla from leaving again.

“I hate fish,” Carla said bluntly. “It's disgusting.”

Mira winced at that, watching Happy’s eyes widen as he stared at Carla. She had been just about to say something along the lines of how Happy's fixation on Carla was like a little boy to his big sister or mother rather than a lover, but, after that remark, there didn’t seem to be any need.

A split second later Happy turned away and leaped into the air, activating his Aera magic to fly away and dragging the fish behind him, shouting, “You monster!”

“Finally,” Carla said, slumping and hopping up off of the bar to land on a stool in order to lean her head down against the bar itself. “Finally, some peace and quiet.” She paused as Gray woke up behind them and immediately launched himself at Natsu, once again ignoring his own nakedness. “Relative peace and quiet, anyway, which I suppose is the best I’m going to see around here. Yet another reason why I want to go with Wendy and her idiotic older brother.”

“That was rather harsh,” Erza said. “Do you not think that was a bit too much?”

“Not at all,” Lucy said with a shake of her head before Carla could speak. “With boys like Happy and Natsu, you have to be harsh, or you won't get through.”

“Oh,” Mira said, with a laugh, “and has that been working for you? I've heard about how often you have to give them your Lucy Kicks, and Natsu is still crawling through your windows or breaking your doors down to see you. It’s enough to make me wonder about his interest in you,” she finished slyly, her eyes glancing towards her younger siblings who had just returned to the bar for more orders. When Mira was behind the bar she routinely did the cooking and pouring, something she was better at than her younger siblings, which she was somewhat proud about, though she would never say it aloud.

The twins stiffened at the implication, looking torn between wanting to cry and to glare at Lucy, but Lucy quickly allayed their fears, waving her hand frantically in front of her face. “God, don't go there, Mirajane!” She then decided to throw the two younger girls a bone, seeing as they had been badly disappointed a few moments ago and looked as if they needed some encouragement. “Can you imagine what he'll be like if he ever does decide that girls are interesting? He’d go about it like a bull in a china shop, all full-speed ahead, battering away.”

Both of the younger Strauss girls blushed at that, and even Erza got a thoughtful expression on her face, while Mira cackled, having said similar things numerous times before. Nearby, Elfman, who had also come to the bar to get a drink, blanched white and raced off, hurling himself into the fray growing slowly around Natsu and Gray. “A real man cares for naught but his fists and doesn’t need such disturbing imagery!”

Lucy concluded her statement by saying, “Besides, he is so not my type.”

“And what type would that be, exactly?” Cana asked, pushing herself against Lucy's back, her breasts squishing against Lucy while she reached around her to fondle Lucy’s larger breasts. “What boy would you like to see get his hands on these beauties!?”

As Lucy turned, trying to get out of Cana’s grip as the brunette began to fondle her rather expertly, the door banged open, interrupting their fun. Those who were not involved with the brawl between Natsu and Gray turned and saw a single Rune Knight standing there, looking a little winded. He gasped in the air for a second and then moved swiftly towards Erza. She stiffened, a feeling of dread filling her, but she did not move away, instead staring back at the man.

He was a tallish, trim man with short-cropped black hair and a slight tan to his features who wore the Rune Knight uniform like one born into it. “Erza Scarlet, I’m Sergeant Doranbolt of the Rune Knights. I was sent by the Council and by Ranma Oceana. We need you to come at once!”

“Of course,” she said simply, standing up. “But may I ask what this is about? Is the guild as a whole in trouble for my and Ranma’s bit of subterfuge?” It did not occur to her to have prevaricated or to have said that it was all Ranma's idea. That was just not how Erza thought.

“I cannot say much. They were still gathering details as I was ordered away, but Mr. Oceana discovered something that brought him to the Council by order of the king himself, and one of them, the young wizard, Saint Siegrain, attacked Mr. Oceana when he confronted them.”

As a mere Rune Knight, and a low ranking one at that, Doranbolt had, of course, not been told about Ranma’s special status. All he knew was that Ranma had been acting on the king’s orders, delivering some kind of ultimatum. That ultimatum had been bad enough to force the traitor’s hand.

“There was a battle, and he was forced to flee from the scene of the crime. We have no idea what why he attacked or what he was trying to cover up in doing so, but we will get to the bottom of this. Yet it was noted by a few of the other Council members that he seemed to take an inordinate interest in you, and Mr. Oceana decided he wanted to question you about it.”

Fear coursed through Erza then, but it was not for herself or even for the guild as a whole now. No, this was fear for her old friends: boys and girls she had been forced to leave behind years ago, the boys and girls who she had lived through the torment of slavery with. The friends she had been forced to leave behind when their own friend, Jellal, changed into the very thing they’d been fighting in his madness. The same friends who Jellal had then held against her as hostages to force her to keep the tower secret.

“Oh, man! It really did come to a fight!” shouted a voice from nearby, breaking Erza out of her momentary stupor before anyone but Mira could notice it. She turned in that direction to see Natsu hop forward from the ruins of half their guildmates piled up behind him, a wild grin on his face that showed off his pointed canines, a sign of his Dragon Slayer heritage. “Hey, did he say anything about me! Ranma promised he'd call me in if there was going to be a fight! It was a promise between Dragon Slayers, man; he can’t have forgotten!”

Natsu said this with conviction, Erza noticed, despite the fact that Wendy and Natsu had been the first ‘real’ Dragon Slayers he had ever met. He was also overlooking the fact he himself had broken a promise he had made with Wendy about not attacking her the other day.

“Um, actually,” the Rune Knight muttered, staring at the pink haired boy in something approaching shock as Natsu seemed to breathe out little sparks of fire from between his sparkling, very pointed teeth. “He did mention you, and I am to take you along as well, though that will slow my speed down a lot. I use Teleportation magic, but the amount of weight I transport hinders how far I can go per jump.”

“I take it we are to go and answer questions from Ranma and the Council?” Erza asked slowly, wondering, *what was going on here? Why had Siegrain run? Was the brother just as evil as his sibling had proven to be, only in a different way?*

A horrified part of Erza also wondered if the two brothers were actually in cahoots and what that would mean for her friends. But with the cat out of the bag, she didn't think that they would be executed, as they would have been if she had spoken out about the tower. *At least, not yet. But if I get involved in this, will they be used as hostages against me, held at gunpoint to force my actions in person? I have to get involved, but I also need to make certain they are safe. And what will the Guild think of me, keeping this a secret from them all, even the Master?*  She held back a shiver at that thought, coupled with the danger to her old friends.

“No, sir. Ranma and his young companion have already taken up the chase. They are heading to a port near where we believe that Siegrain will have left Fiore’s shores.” At the quizzical expression on Erza's face, Doranbolt elaborated. “The Magic Council’s chairman has magic which can allow him to find anyone he has met personally, wherever they are in the country. It could be used to discover the man's location, and Siegrain, of course, knew about it, hence why he simply ran instead of trying to hide.”

That made sense, but at his words even more foreboding entered Erza’s mind. After all, the tower was on an island, and it certainly wasn't part of Fiore. *Could he have retreated to his brother’s place? I thought that Siegrain's hatred of Jellal was legitimate, but I could have been duped. It wouldn’t be the first time,* she thought bitterly.

“Now, wait a minute! This sounds as if it's going to be an actual fight against a truly powerful dark mage, if he was able to gain the Wizard Saint appellations, anyway. I think you might need a bit more firepower if that's the case,” Mira said, hopping up over the bar to land next to Erza, facing the Rune Knight.

“Hey! I’ve got plenty of firepower!” Natsu growled, only to wither slightly as Mira shot him a glare.

“If Wendy has gone along with one of Ranma's mad schemes once more, I certainly am not going to stay here and wait for them! That young man always seems to forget how fragile Wendy truly is,” Carla said, hopping down from the barstool.

Remembering how Wendy had beaten him before, Natsu scoffed at that, but Happy piped up before he could speak up again. “Aye, sir!” That was Happy's way of saying he was coming along too.

“Now, wait a minute,” Doranbolt said, holding up his hands placatingly. “I can't teleport you all like that, not and make any kind of time.”

“We’ll switch off, then,” Carla said perfunctorily. “Myself and the tomcat will fly a few of them along. Both Mira and Erza can also fly under their own power, and they can take turns carrying you.” Even so, Carla was somewhat worried about the idea.

“I think we can do better than that,” Erza said, holding a hand up and looking over at a specific blue-haired girl sitting nearby. “Levy, we have need of you and your new technique…”

**OOOOOOO**

Jellal had arrived safely back in the tower and had immediately begun to order his followers to ready themselves, including all of Erza's former friends. Simon, a large man several heads taller than Jellal, led them in. One of his eyes was covered by an eyepatch, and his jaw had been covered by metal. The others were equally odd looking, but Jellal had no time now to wonder about the why of such things.

“The Magic Council has discovered our plans and is terrified of losing their power in our perfect world,” Jellal said without any preamble. “They are going to send some of their toadies after us, including possibly the great traitor herself!”

At that all of them looked, first worried, then eager, and he smiled grimly. “We have to be ready for them. Tell everyone else what's going on and prepare the tower. Simon, get me a copy of that magical circle you found a few months back. If push comes to shove, and we can't fight them off, we’ll have to run. I'm not going to give up on our perfect world just because those in power rightfully fear what will happen to them when we achieve it!”

He was answered with a cheer from the four people in front of them, though he didn't notice that Simon’s cheer was noticeably less enthusiastic than the others. One of them, Millianna, the only girl among the quartet, stepped forward and gestured to where Jellal was holding his ribs. “Are you hurt? Do you need some healing, nya?”

“That would be nice,” Jellal said, leaning back in his chair. “The individual who outed our intentions broke two of my ribs when I had to flee. I gave as good as I got, else I wouldn't be here,” he said, though he knew that was false. He had severely underestimated Ranma and had already been somewhat tired from using the emergency teleportation array. “But, even so…”

“Right,” said the girl, turning away and racing out of the room. “I'll get one of the healing mages up here.”

The others left quickly after that, and Jellal simply sat there in his chair. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes tiredly while the girl came back with a healer. His ribs had bothered him throughout his flight, and the exhaustion from both the fight and the flight itself was weighing heavily on him now. *Though we’ll have a few days at least. No way could anyone walking keep up with me, and even with Crawford’s magic, they won’t find my trail any time soon.*

*Still, that doesn't mean I can't prepare more,* he thought, standing up and thanking Millianna and the healer politely, getting smiles in turn.

That had been a masterstroke, Jellal reflected as he walked out the door. Convincing the old slaves to go along with things, to take part in the construction of the tower and everything else of their own free will rather than to force them at sword point. The work they had done had tripled, and they all thought they were working towards their own visions of the perfect world that each of them held in his or her head.

*Fools. Only one being is worthy of calling forth the perfect world, and that is Zeref! And I very much doubt that his idea of the perfect world will match any of yours. But, then again, why should that matter? Why should the dreams of the weak matter when they themselves do not, in the great scheme of things?*

Soon enough he was up in his throne room, several levels above where most of his followers were allowed to go. There he found the three members of Trinity Raven, standing up from where they had been sitting around a table to one side of the room as he entered. These were a trio of mages banished from their guild, Death’s Head Caucus of Pergrande.

Honestly, looking at the three of them, you would be hard pressed to think they were assassins at all, but that was what they were. The only one who actually looked dangerous was their leader, the Guild Master, a tall, fit, older man who wore an armored suit with glowing runes stamped into its metal plates here and there and a wide series of weapons hanging from his belt. Jellal, though, knew that those weapons were for show rather than where the man truly got his strength from.

He waved them off for a moment, moving past the throne room to a small hidden alcove where he pulled out a communication lacrima, its crystal a deep, blood red. This was a special lacrima, one that he had been given by his old ally and former teacher. He brought it up to his forehead and intoned, “Brain, we need to talk.”

Guild Master Brain of the Oración Siete was currently hiding, if that was the proper term, with a few of his guildmates in a hotel in the capital of Joya. They were there so that Brain could use his magic, Archive, to access the royal library, ransacking it for knowledge. Of course, the magical locks on the library would have stopped that, but Angel and Racer had used their diverse skills to get in undetected the night before to unlock it. Since they had no wish to start a fight there, they had been subtle about it. Indeed, even Brain was somewhat undercover so that there would be no reason for anyone to suspect the theft had occurred at all. He was posing as an elderly academic from Minstrel; the others, his retinue.

The call from his old tool and current ally caught him as he was preparing for bed and was not, thankfully, in public. This meant that he could reply quickly, pulling out his own communication lacrima.

He listened to Jellal's recitation, then rolled his eyes. “You are arrogant, foolish, and possibly suicidal! I have heard of Oceana before. By the gods, I even met the boy briefly when he was much younger, before I met you, in fact. Those Rangers that specialize in magic tend to be incredible fighters, and he is no exception to that rule. And, while you may have fooled the Council into giving you that Wizard Saints label, we all know that that was so much hot air.”

“I realize that now, but I didn't then,” Jellal said, keeping his cool with difficulty. Actually, he thought his Wizard Saint title was well deserved, given his sheer power, but now wasn’t the time to say that aloud. If the Ranger came against him again, though, then he could prove it on Oceana’s dead corpse.

“I realize I made a mistake, but I was able to live through the experience and learn from it,” he said aloud. “The Dragon Slayer’s powers are formidable, as is his inherent durability as a Dragon Slayer. But I think I can overcome that and kill the bastard. But I doubt that he’ll be coming after me alone. The rest of the Council will surely send forces after me, possibly including that traitorous trollop, Ultear.”

“Our alliance with Grimoire Heart was just that, an alliance, and one of convenience. If the girl acted against you in such a manner, I have no doubt that the orders came from the old man, and that her purpose on the Council is yet to be filled, just like yours was,” Brain remonstrated.

Jellal flinched at that. “I still have a communication crystal with her. If she can still convince the council to fire the canyon, we can salvage this…”

“But you would have to hold off a Ranger specializing in magical combat and whatever other forces the Council is sending against you. Hence why you are calling me, I assume.”

“Yes,” Jellal said, biting the word off as he was forced to do so. “I need help here, Brain. I have a lot of cannon fodder, but while I have faith in the strength of the Trinity Raven, there are only three of them. The others have a few little tricks up their sleeves, but nothing that couldn't be overcome by a powerful enough enemy, and I will not underestimate Oceana’s power or abilities again, let alone whoever he brings with him. Hence, my calling you.”

“Your goals were never ours. We two were only ever allied, Jellal. Closely, true, given how I helped train you years ago, and you repaid me by letting me have my pick of the children in the tower. But we are close to finding Nirvana. Any delay or dissipation of our forces could put off our own date with destiny,” Brain said.

“But you would still need to unlock it, and for that you'll need me! The enchantment protecting Nirvana, wherever it is, has to be undone by a Council member, willingly, without duress in his mind or body. Or have you forgotten!?” Jellal shot back.

Brain was silent, scowling, and it was Jellal who once more filled the silence. “I am willing to do that for you later, but I need help now in turning aside whoever they will be sending after me. Is that too much to ask?”

It actually was, Brain reflected, and it was just like the brat to not recognize the real reason why. While Brain himself was relatively friendly with Jellal, seeing in his former tool a powerful, if deluded, colleague, the majority of his guild members could not separate the present from the past.

What not even Jellal knew was that the blue-haired young man had been Brain’s tool long before they had met ‘officially.’ After the disaster at the Department of Magical Development in Iceberg, Brain had investigated numerous places for children whom he could connect to his Six Prayers magic. The Tower of Heaven had been a treasure trove for such, so, while Jellal was being tortured, Brain entered his mind via telepathy and removed some of his inhibitions, whispering to him as if Brain was Zeref.

*What is truly amusing to consider is that that was all I did: just removed his inhibitions. Jellal’s darkness was there all the time, just like it is in everyone. And my spell dissipated after a few months. After that, everything Jellal did is completely his own fault.*

Besides Brain, their newest recruit, and Hoteye, the other four members of Oración Siete had originally come from the Tower of Heaven. All of them had been there under Jellal for a few years before Brain picked them out and knew the truth about his rule and his goals, which Brain had told them as part of his brainwashing them in turn. That meant that, while they would follow Brain’s orders due to loyalty to Brain’s cause, he knew they would not be happy about aiding Jellal.

Unfortunately, Brain knew he did still need Jellal if he was to open the magical lock keeping Nirvana from being found and accessed. The ancient Councilmembers were very good with enchantments like that, and this one was a particularly nasty one, which both hid Nirvana and would kill anyone who attempted to touch it without unlocking the enchantment first. Even millennia later, it was still powerful.

“Very well,” Brain said with a sigh. “I will send you Cobra, Midnight, and our latest recruit.” *Midnight and Cobra are the most rational of the brats and will be able to keep their anger at Jellal at bay.* “They are the only ones who can possibly reach you before any force from the Fiorian Mage Council can arrive.”

“I’m also going to call in Ghoul Spirits and Naked Monkey to give me some more experienced cannon fodder,” Jellal intoned.

“Very well. They should be able to get there in time, and neither guild is strong enough for their loss to bother me. But after this, Jellal, you had best be prepared to keep your end of the bargain. Or else I’ll pull your precious tower down around your ears.” At that Brain cut the connection on his end, pushing away from his hotel room’s desk and moving to the door to give out what would no doubt be some very unwelcome orders.

Back in the tower, Jellal sighed with a scowl on his face. *Still, that went about as well as it could have I suppose. Old fool, once I have awoken Zeref, your Nirvana will be useless!*

Nearby the three members of Trinity Raven had heard all this. These were the former Guild Master of Death’s Head Caucus, Narmenius, the odd owl/human hybrid Fukuro, and the Rocker of Succubus user, Vidaldus. They were all wanted men from Pergrande who had fled their former guild after backing the wrong side of the recent Pergrandian Civil War that occurred a few years back.

Following Narmenius’s lead, the three of them had taken on an assassination job offered by one side of the civil war on General Roland, the king’s younger brother and overall commander of his armies. As such, Roland was a legitimate target, but that wasn’t why Narmenius had taken the job. He had taken it out of spite felt towards the man who had won his guildmate Ikaruga’s heart, when he felt it should have been him who had done that. Fukuro followed Vidaldus into it, while Vidaldus owed Narmenius, so agreed to the job, despite reservations.

They had been unable to kill him, fleeing from his guards and their former guildmate, who was furious at their attempt on her husband’s life. Returning to the guild they found that others who had taken assassination jobs from the disloyal noble side of the civil war had been arrested, and the rest of the guild was willing to turn on the three of them. They fled the country successfully and had plied their trade as best they could since. Jellal had hired them a bare week ago to be his agents in the rest of Fiore, for when he couldn’t go himself.

Now, however, they all exchanged worried looks, having heard the name ‘Oceana.’ “Um, this Oceana fellow?” Vidaldus asked, his voice far more hesitant than it was normally. “What exactly would his first name be?”

“Ranma. Why? Have you heard of him?” Jellal asked, only to frown as all three of them looked at one another again.

“And, um, he’s coming here, is he?” Vidaldus asked, now looking openly worried.

“Yes, as I’ve just been saying! What is the problem, Vidaldus? Surely you’re not scared of the mere rumors you’ve heard of this Ranger?” Jellal asked.

“Rumors, no; reality, yes. I’m out of here,” Vidaldus said, turning abruptly towards the stairwell down into the tower proper.

“Fwhooo! Indeed, no hero of justice can survive if someone rips out their heart and crushes it in front of their horrified eyes. I still remember watching Ranma do that,” Fukuro said. Despite missing the vast majority of his marbles, there was nothing wrong with Fukuro’s survival instincts, and some things did tend to stick in one’s memory. “And he was only, what, twelve then? Fwhooo! He’s no doubt become even stronger since then, Fwhooo!”

“Coming, Narmenius?” Vidaldus asked, pausing by the stairwell. Fukuro had instead moved to a nearby window ledge, and Vidaldus turned in that direction now too. Fukuro could easily carry both other members of Trinity Raven to the mainland if need be.

“Just, just wait a minute, all right?” Narmenius asked. He too looked worried at the idea of facing Ranma in a fight, but he also looked desperate, almost feverish. It wasn’t just his money that had brought Trinity Raven to Jellal’s service. No, Narmenius was interested in what else Jellal was offering: their wishes fulfilled by the Dark Wizard Zeref. “You, you’re certain that Zeref would be able to make my dream come true? To make Ikaruga mine and erase Roland from her mind and body?”

“Yes, of course. Nothing is beyond Zeref’s power. And you will be well rewarded for your service,” Jellal said without a hint of hyperbole or doubt in his voice.

“Then I’m staying,” Narmenius said, nodding his head sharply.

“I wish I could say it’s been fun, then, Narmenius, but I can’t. Sorry, old friend, but I prefer my skin in one piece too much to take on what I know is a losing proposition.” With that Vidaldus hopped onto Fukuro, who activated his jet pack. An instant later the two semi-dark mages were out and away, heading for the horizon.

Watching them, Jellal scowled, irritated at the loss of the other two members of the well-known assassination team. *Still, the loss will be a minor one when the three Oración members get here. But I need to study that spell array that Simon found,* he thought, stand standing up and nodding to the remaining member of Trinity Raven to follow him to the stairs. *I can't simply abandon the tower. That would set us back decades! We are so close, so close to completion. Just another few months for the tower to be finished and ready. And then, and then Zeref would be resurrected! If we have to run, I need to prepare the entire tower to be moved if I can. On top of that, I can set up a charm to access the tower’s Magical Drain enchantment and use that to drain enemies and allies alike. That could well prove the difference between victory and defeat.*

Neither man noticed Simon sneak away from the doorway, his darkness spell covering him in a deeper than normal shadow. After they passed, he swiftly raced for a window, where he began to climb down several stories, entering another room soon after. The large youth had never been convinced of Jellal’s story about Erza abandoning them, and even after that he had looked rather askance at how Jellal had twisted the former slaves around, making them think they were the bosses and that there was something noble about the tower’s purpose; that it was only the methods the former owners used which had made it horrible.

What he had just heard confirmed some of Simon’s worst fears. *Still, this attack Jellal's anticipating coming could be the opening I've been looking for. I hope that the time has finally come that we can break the chains in our minds like we did the chains on our bodies.*

**OOOOOOO**

At the same time that Jellal was preparing for Ranma’s assault, Ultear sat with the Council going over everything they had found in Siegrain's chambers, trying to discover what he had been interested in, what he had researched, what orders he had given out as a Councilor, what jobs he had posted or backed, and everything about his past they could discover. But most of what they had discovered was…nothing.

There was nothing there, nothing substantial, anyway. All the paperwork was there, and he did have something of a paper trail, but once they actually sent people out to question individuals living where Siegrain was supposed to have come from, they didn't find anything. It looked as if they had all been completely and utterly fooled by someone who was, at best, a thought projection seventy percent of the time.

Worse for all of the Council members, King Toma had already been informed by Ranma about what had happened, Ranma having done so before setting off with Wendy. After which, the king had gotten in touch with them.

Normally an affable, laid-back, and, above all, hands-off sort of king who had a sense of childlike wonder about magic, King Toma had ripped the Council into pieces with his words and had come close to stripping the Council of some of its powers entirely. Instead, he had determined that he alone would be in charge of nominating new council members, something which the council had been doing among itself before.

Toma would be doing so immediately after Siegrain was either arrested or otherwise taken care of. The three most senior members of the Council, Crawford and two others, would all be relieved of their duties following this, though they had been given a final task by their king in order to save some face. If they could do it, he would let it be known that they were simply stepping down, rather than fired. This task was to create a spell or enchantment to detect Thought Projections.

“Of course, the rest of us aren't exactly getting off scot-free,” Ultear said to herself, leaning back and stretching, thrusting out her chest in such a way as to make the two guards by the door gulp audibly. She smirked at that, keeping it hidden with difficulty before going back to her work.

*Hopefully, this won't last long, but I wish I could've convinced the king that I should be sent after Ranma to help him against Jellal. But whatever can be said about his attitude towards magic and its administration, King Toma is a very shrewd little dwarf, much like a few others of similar height I could name. He's concerned about my background too and the fact that I joined the council only a very few months after Siegrain did, despite my having worked my way up the ranks, while he did not. Still, I can leave that in Mister Hades’ hands.*

Looking back at her work, she began to scribble some notes, even though her mind turned to Ranma. *Handsome, down to earth with a decent sense of humor, eyes that you could drown in, and he was fascinatingly powerful. He took on Siegrain as if he was enjoying it, too, which tells me a lot about his personality. Indeed, Ranma reminds me a little of…*

She shook that thought off violently, shaking her head so much that one of the other Council members at the table looked at her quizzically. But she didn't reply to his look, simply waving him off and staring down at the paper, unseeing. *No! No! Azuma and Ranma can never be allowed to meet! One combat junky is bad enough, but two?! Ugh! Think happy thoughts, Ultear. Maybe if things play out right you’ll have a first row seat to Jellal getting his just deserts. And after, maybe I can contrive to get away from here for a bit to…get to know Ranma more deeply.*

**OOOOOOO**

It took about a day and a half to cover the distance between Magnolia and the port where Ranma and Wendy had gone to see if they could find a trail leading to Siegrain’s location. They had traveled via a mix of the Rune Knight’s teleportation spell and the adroit use of Levy’s new skill with her Solid Script magic. While the Rune Knight rested, they would all sit on Levy’s cloud formation. Happy and Mira or Carla and Erza would provide them direction, Natsu would provide them thrust. This way they kept going all the time, and they didn’t even really tire themselves out, save for the Rune Knight, who had never transported so many people at once before.

After arriving in the port, it took them about an hour to find the two Dragon Slayers. The two of them were posing as wandering minstrels in one of the hostels. Indeed, as Erza and the others entered the inn where they had been told that a young blue haired girl and a red-haired woman—or a black-haired, young man; they had asked questions about both—were staying, the two of them were in the midst of putting on a play. Ranma was doing the singing, while Wendy had created dancing dolls and other imagery via Light magic to go along with the story that Ranma was telling. And, to the surprise of all save Carla, Ranma’s singing voice was actually quite good.

Looking up from where she had been bowing and shaking hands, Ranma noted their arrival and nodded at them, though she looked a little confused when her eyes rested on Mira and Levy. Despite that, she smiled as she moved over to them. “Glad you lot could make it. And Natsu, I'm glad you finally decided to notice how great of a supporter Levy could be to a Dragon Slayer.”

Levy flushed at that, while Wendy cocked her head from where she had moved behind her Onii-chan the moment the show was over. She didn’t like being put on the spot like that, but Ranma had convinced Wendy to take part in order to build their cover. “I thought you said you were on a team called Shadow Year or something with those two other boys. Where are they?”

“We had to leave them behind. For a trip this long, adding more people would've only slowed us down,” Erza said, while Levy winced, remembering the conversation, if it could be called that, which Erza had had with her two teammates to convince them to stay behind.

Natsu scoffed, reaching up to pat Happy where he was lying in his hair. “I've already got a support partner: Happy! I’ll admit Levy's magic is kind of cool, but she's got her own team, and I've got mine. So, do we have any time to spar before we get on the business here?” he asked, changing subjects to something far more interesting to him. “I mean, you fought a Wizard Saint, man! How cool is that!?”

“It was rather disappointing rather than cool, in my opinion,” Ranma replied with a giggle, causing Natsu to flinch and mutter about the curse and how weird it was while Ranma looked over at Erza. “What did the Rune Knight tell you all?”

“He told us what happened but not what caused it or any of the other background information. Can you tell us now?” Erza asked.

“Not here,” Ranma replied, gesturing for them all to follow as she nodded at Mira. “Mira, good to see you, though I'm surprised you came along, really.”

“I might not take that many jobs lately, but that doesn't mean I've lost the urge to fight. I'm still an S-class mage.” Mira shot back.

“I can understand that, of course, and I wasn’t commenting on your abilities.” Ranma said with a wave of his hand. “You just didn't seem the type to be all that interested in sticking your nose in other people’s troubles.”

“Shows what you know,” said every other Fairy Tail mage there, even Erza. Mira pouted at that, but Erza spoke up, overriding whatever she was about say. “You might not have realized this, but this silver haired witch is actually one of the most nosy and bossy people within the guild.”

“Now, nosy I can take,” Mira growled, thrusting her face into Erza’s space. “But bossy? Coming from you!? That’s worse than the pot calling the kettle black; that’s like, like…a dwarf star calling Natsu dense!”

“None of that!” Ranma interjected, grabbing both their shoulders and pulling them along. “Come on, we’ve got to talk about more serious things.”

Natsu and Levy both stared in shock, but the two girls actually subsided, following after Ranma quickly, letting Ranma pull them along as Wendy and Carla followed, talking to one another. “She/he interrupted their fight and didn't get whacked? Have we entered some weird alternate dimension or something like that stuff Lucy writes about?” Natsu whispered.

“I don't think so. There was no flash of light or anything. Maybe they’re actually tired from the trip? Or maybe Erza is more worried about what's going on here than she lets on?” Levy surmised. With that they both nodded at one another, then raced after the others.

In Ranma’s room, Wendy, Carla, and Happy sat to one side, with Carla continuing to fuss over the girl before being pulled into Wendy’s lap. There the girl started scratching behind her ears at just the right spots, and Carla subsided while Happy looked on in shock. Carla had never let anyone in the guild do that to her bar Lisanna, and, even then, rarely. But Wendy had just done that without even any preamble, as if it was an everyday thing.

“Before we start,” Ranma said, holding up with a hand and intoning a Requip spell. The armor she’d borrowed from Erza fell into her hands, and she held it out to Erza. “Here you go.” After handing the armor over, Ranma then pulled out a bottle of water, which she heated before dumping it over her head, changing back to his normal body now that they were out of sight.

“Thank you, Ranma,” Erza said, taking the armor from him with a smile. “This is one of my favorite sets. The armor I’m wearing currently is the older version of my everyday armor and is rather uncomfortable in certain areas.” An instant later, she had once more placed the armor into Requip space before pulling it right back out, transforming from wearing what she had been wearing to her more normal set.

She didn't notice Ranma and his eyes flicking down to her chest. *Yep, she really does fill that a lot better than I do.* To one side Mira had noticed this bit of eye movement and scowled, but didn’t say anything. There would be a time and place later to flirt with the Ranger.

Gesturing for the three girls to sit on the bed, Ranma sat on the floor, leaning back against the wall near where Wendy and the two cats were sitting. Natsu sat across from him, the group making a sort of triangle in the small, spartan room that Ranma had rented for his and Wendy's time here.

“Okay, since that transportation guy didn’t give you all enough of the background, here it goes. Like I told you, I wanted to deliver a message to the Council, mainly from Toma and from the surrounding countries. They’ve all become a little irritated at how much, or how many, I should say, of your dark guilds tend to range over onto their own nations.

“After proving I was sent by the king, I demanded to speak to all the Council members in person. It turned out that a lot of them were using Thought Projection, including Siegrain, though none of the others realized he could use that magic. Later on, as I'm pushing for more and more information about how a lot or resources—gold, food, stone, lacrima crystals, wood—are going missing, Jellal attempts to kill me. After a short fight he runs away, and Wendy sees the direction he's running in.”

“… That is a very short description, I feel,” Mira said. Natsu was too busy staring at Ranma in something like hero worship. Telling the council what to do, then starting a fight with one of them? That was a dream for the rowdy Dragon Slayer.

For her part, however, Erza was in something like shock.  *A thought Projection!? He was using a Thought Projection? For how long, for how many years? Why!?* With that bit of information, the last clue Erza needed to realize that the two ‘twins’ were actually one and the same person occurred to her, and she now knew what to do. *I can’t run anymore. I have to face my past, take a chance, and get my old friends out from under his thumb any way I can!*

“After Wendy and I arrived here, we asked if anyone had seen a shooting star in the sky of late, since that’s what Siegrain looks like when he’s flying. We had to be careful since I was afraid he might have agents here. But if he does, they haven’t done anything to make me notice them. He went out to sea from nearby in a straight line. So, somewhere out there is his hideout.”

There Ranma paused, looking at Erza. “I have no idea what his plan for those resources was, why he was on the council, or what could be out there. That bit of background is why I asked for you to be brought here, Erza. Everyone on the council agreed that Siegrain seemed to have taken an inordinate amount of interest in Fairy Tail and you personally. Do you two have some kind of history that could help us figure out his overall plan or where out there he's hiding? If he was just heading out to a ship out of sight of land, we’ll never find him again without some clues.”

“Oh, we will,” Erza said with a cold look on her face. “We will, because I can lead you right to him, I think.” Licking suddenly dry lips, she went on, looking around at her guildmates. “First, you and Mira have both heard some of this before, but not the entire thing. I have, I have kept my past secret before now, fearing what could happen if I did not. For that bit of distrust, I ask you to forgive me.”

All three Fairy Tail mages’ eyes narrowed at that, but they also all nodded instantly, forgiving her before she even told them about what she had been hiding or why.

“I met the individual known as Jellal—I think that is his real name, not Siegrain—when I was a slave at a place that its owners called the Tower of Heaven. I never realized they were one and the same until just now. The tattoo was on the wrong side and Siegrain seemed to care about appearances and power, while Jellal only cared about serving the dark mage Zeref as best he could.

“The two of us were leaders among the children who made up about a third of the slaves in the tower, and he and I were actually respected by the adult slaves too. While there, we learned magic from an old member of Fairy Tail, named Rob…”

From there she told the sad history of the Tower of Heaven and her part in it. How Erza and Jellal had attempted to lead a slave rebellion, only to be overcome. How they had both been tortured separately, during which Erza had lost her right eye. How she had somehow pushed through the pain to access her magic to a far greater degree than before, and how she had led a second rebellion on the heels of the first which succeeded, only to discover that her friend had changed. Instead of wishing to escape or tear down the tower, he had decided to keep the work going. He had come to worship Zeref, just like the cultists who had enslaved them all.

“At that, I tried to fight him, but was overcome. After that I tried to flee, to tell the others about the change that had come over him, but Jellal caught me. For some reason he didn’t want to kill me. He said he wanted me as a tool, a sacrifice for later. But neither was he going to let our friends go. I have no idea what lies he’s told them over the years, but I have no doubt that our friends are still there under his thumb, hostages to my keeping it a secret, and as workers for the tower, too. Yet, given how this has come about, their safety can no longer reside solely in me staying silent.”

She fell silent for a moment, then continued. “When I first met Siegrain, I thought he was Jellal, of course, but he convinced me somehow, I can’t remember how, that they were different people. I was suspicious of him, of course, and could tell Siegrain was just as ambitious, if not as evil, as his twin, but with his own plans. He dropped little hints that he was looking for his brother occasionally and even that some of our, our old friends had been seen here and there in Fiore. Or rather, that their bodies had shown up. Mostly the adults, but once or twice the bodies of former child slaves that I, that I recognized. These were signs that Jellal was still out there, but that my friends were still safe, yet in danger, so I, I could do nothing but continue to keep the secret.”

After listening to Erza's history, Mira and Levy looked sad, putting their arms around their friend. Wendy also got in on the act, hopping up and over to wrap her arms around Erza’s middle where she sat on the bed.

Natsu and Ranma on the other hand were just pissed off, incredibly furious. Natsu was furious because of the mental torment his guildmate had been going through and how evil this bastard must be to have done that to her. Ranma was pissed off about that on top of the fact that this group had been using slaves to do their dirty work. Slavery was one of a few buttons that would always set Ranma off, and this time it sounded even worse. It sounded as if Jellal had somehow persuaded the former slaves to remain.

“Your friends, they could've been lied to, of course,” he said. “But the other prisoners, you mentioned some of their bodies being found, but not a lot of them. So how likely is it that Jellal was able to convince them all to stay, to work on this tower willingly instead of as prisoners?” he asked after letting the Fairy Tail mages have a few minutes to compose themselves.

“I would estimate it at quite high. Jellal was always persuasive, even before his personality twisted,” Erza said, a wistful look on her face.

Mira noticed this and leaned in slightly. “There's a story behind that, isn't there?”

Erza rolled her eyes, but couldn't help a small blush coming to her cheeks. “I might've had a bit of a crush on him when we were young. He was the most handsome boy there and also the strongest one, willing to stand up both against me and the guards.” She shook her head quickly, dispelling that memory. “But that feeling has long since faded.”

Hesitantly, Levy asked, “Um, so you, um, you don’t have feelings for him in that way any longer, not even friendship? If you did, we’d understand, but it might slow you down if you ever…”

She was interrupted by Erza patting her on the knee, the wistful look gone from the redhead’s grim face. “No, I have no feelings for Jellal any longer beyond loathing. What idiot would still have feelings for someone after so long, and after he threatened to torture and murder all our other friends if I betrayed the fact that the tower where we were all enslaved and brutally tortured was still in one piece, and he was working on it?”

“Right,” Levy said, scooting away from the other girl a little at the look in Erza’s eyes as she recited that. “Forget I asked.”

“Good,” Mira muttered, counting points on her fingers. “So, we know there's an island somewhere out there. We know Jellal's arrogant enough to think he got away clean once he hit the ocean, so he might not have deviated from his course. We know some of what we’ll face and something of his long-term goal. What we still don't know is why he was on the Council in the first place and how that furthered his goal of finishing this tower. I mean, becoming a Council member actually put the limelight on him. Why take that chance when he could have kept out of sight and gathered the resources he needed through other means?”

“I don't know,” Erza replied, “but whatever it was, it would not have been good.”

“True,” Ranma said with a nod, staring out the window where the night sky was pitch black. “It's getting a little late now,” he said. “I will approach the local port commander and convince him to loan us a ship and a crew of Rune Knights. We’ll set out first thing tomorrow.”

He stood up, looking around at the others. “Look, this isn’t going to be a mission like what you might be used to, so I’ll say it plain. Any former prisoners we run into out there can be captured if possible. But any Dark mages, and this includes Jellal, can and indeed should be put down permanently. By which I mean you need to be prepared to kill them.” He watched as Natsu and Levy both shifted uncomfortably, and even Mira winced. Erza didn’t. She simply nodded grim agreement. “If you can’t handle it, you’re free to stay here and wait for us to come back.”

Wincing at Natsu’s roar of, “FUCK that!” which hurt his ears, Ranma sighed. “All right, I’m sorry I said anything now.”

**OOOOOOO**

By breakfast the next day, Ranma had commandeered a local war galley, complete with crew, earlier that morning. Indeed, the locals had been warned to expect him and several accompanying mages, and, though the commander of the ship was not happy to work with Fairy Tail, a guild known to be destructive in the extreme, he was willing to bow to both law and need in this case. The man had also been told about Jellal’s defection, and the idea of fighting someone who had claimed both a Council seat and the title of Wizard Saint was beyond worrying and heading into the realm of terrifying.

Under various disguises, so that if Jellal did have agents in the port they wouldn’t notice what was happening, the group moved through the city in small groups, coming together onboard the ship. Once they left port, they all came out from their various hiding places, meeting up below the mainmast. The ship didn’t technically need masts since it rarely moved under sailing power, instead using a magical steam engine, but the backup was a good idea. And the extra height could help any lookout up there.

Natsu, who, like Ranma and Wendy, had been hit by Wendy’s Troia before they set out, whipped off a long coat and a black scarf he had been using to cover his hair, grinning at Ranma. “Damn, Ranma, that was so awesome! Are you a ninja too on top of being a Dragon Slayer!? That’s so awesome! And you, Wendy, this spell, where have you been all my life? It’s so awesome!!”

“Heh, nah, nothing like that. I’m just me. I’ve learned how to hide myself in a lot of different ways over the years,” Ranma replied, helping to pull a wig off Wendy’s head so as to not pull her long hair.

She, in turn, hopped off a pair of long stilts as she threw off an equally long coat, looking a little bashful as Carla let go of her stomach, where she had been imitating a small belly. “T, thank you, Natsu-san, but I should warn you that if you use Troia too much your body will develop an immunity to it.”

As Natsu slumped, looking like a child who had just been told his birthday gift had been canceled, Wendy craned her head upwards, smiling widely at the crow’s nest high above them.

“None of that,” Ranma admonished. “Let’s start making some specific plans, then you can go exploring.” Wendy pouted, but Ranma had already turned away, looking at Erza. “Erza? I asked ya last night to try and make up a basic map. Did you finish?”

She nodded and pulled out a very, very makeshift map that she had created from the memory of what she could remember from the island.

They all stared at Erza’s map in silence for a moment as her face became redder and redder, then Ranma chuckled, followed instantly by Natsu. “What!?” Erza exclaimed, flushing hotly. “It’s the best I could make!”

“I’m not doubting your memory…” Ranma began, only to be interrupted by Mira.

“What we’re doubting is your ability to draw! My God, Erza, it looks like a five-year-old drew it!”

“All right, then, you do better, I dare you!” Erza shot back.

Mira flushed at that. The only time she ever drew anything was with Reedus’s magic pen. It allowed her to draw somewhat decently, but even so, she wasn't exactly good at it either.

“I can try,” Wendy piped up, moving over to stand by the redhead, pulling out another piece of paper and putting it down by the drawing. “Does the actual shape of the island matter at all, Ranma-nii?”

“Not particularly,” Ranma said with a shake of his head. “Only the size of it in comparison to people, the size of the tower and any other important bits, and where they are in relation to one another.”

Patting Wendy on the head in thanks, Erza looked down at the map thoughtfully. “It isn’t a large island. We won't have to worry about any long march or being attacked for any length of time before we reach the tower. It is just large enough from one end to the other, I think, to make a ship at the end be unable to fire on the tower, but since you can simply sail along the other edges, as I said, that won’t matter. The entire island is rocky. Nothing can grow there; there's no soil, no real dirt even, and the weather was so bad any attempt to make farms would have failed. Everything we ate when we were slaves had to be brought in or grown within the tower itself. I imagine that is still the case.

“The tower itself was around fifteen stories tall when I was there. I have no idea whether that remains the case. It's large, though. I would say around half a mile in diameter? Something like that. It dominates the island, is my point,” Erza said, sighing at the memories that thinking about that cursed tower evoked.

Wendy dutifully colored in the island, looking as if she was having fun doing so, and finishing by making up a large circle that covered half the island, the back of it, from her own perspective.

“Here is where the ports were,” Erza went on as the child finished, gesturing to the leftmost portion of the island to one side of the tower. “It's a little cove, barely big enough for two regular sized ships at once, with a series of steps that lead directly up into the tower itself. To one side of it there used to be an old quarry, but we stopped using stone from there within my first year as a slave. The stone of the island just wasn't suitable for anything beyond the base of the tower, and we were in danger of destabilizing the island, somehow.”

“Do you think that any prisoners or slaves would be kept within the tower itself, or would they be in this old quarry of yours?” Ranma asked.

“Within the tower itself,” she replied without even taking a second to think about it. “That's where we were, in the dungeons underneath it. That is where my old friends have been kept, if Jellal kept his word on not harming them for my silence, anyway.”

“I don't think we’re going to be able to sneak up on him, right?” Mira asked. “Even if he isn't using magic, a person with a spyglass on top of a tower fifteen stories tall is going to see us coming a long time before we come in sight of the island ourselves.

“Agreed. So here's what we’re going to do. I think we should split into groups of three. One team will be the attack team. Natsu, Erza, that'll be you and Happy, I suppose.”

“Heck, yes!” Natsu shouted, throwing his arms into the air as they lit on fire. “Full speed ahead, smashing our way in! That's the Fairy Tail way!”

Rolling his eyes good-naturedly at the younger Dragon Slayer while Mira and Erza laughed but didn’t argue with him, Ranma turned to his little sister. “Wendy, I'll want you and Carla to remain with our ship. Commander, you'll take your ship around the island a few times. See if you can take the tower itself under fire once the fighting on the island gets going. Until then, just stay out to sea and be big and obvious.”

“Oh, you're going to make us bait, then?” Carla growled. “I do not like the idea of putting Wendy in danger like that.”

“I am the Water Dragon Slayer, and this ship’s going to be on the ocean. If Wendy is in danger, I'll do something about it pretty damn quick, you can better believe that,” Ranma said with a sigh at Carla's overprotection.

Despite the fact that Wendy didn't like fighting, she was more than willing to do her part. So she nodded resolutely before saying shrewdly, “You're not making us bait, Onii-chan, you're making us support, right?”

“Yep,” Ranma said with a smile, reaching over and ruffling her hair. “We’re going to have prisoners, ex-slaves, and possibly hostages that we’ll need to remove from the tower before we can really take the fight to them. The ship will be where we store them.”

“Wait a minute; then why are we going at all?” Natsu asked, pointing at himself and Erza.

“You two are the bait Carla just mentioned,” Ranma said bluntly. “You'll be grabbing everyone's attention and stuffing it right down their throats while I sneak in and free the prisoners. *If there are any,* he thought, looking at Erza who was also looking thoughtful and worried as he mentioned her friends.

“What about us, then?” Levy asked, gesturing to Mira and herself.

“You'll be up high,” Ranma said, “able to come to either Wendy's help or Erza’s. The key will be to keep pushing; keep the defenders off-balance and concentrating on you so they don't even notice what I'm doing until I have the prisoners.”

A few hours later, the ship finally began to sight the island in question, which was, as Ranma had predicted, exactly on a straight line following the direction Jellal had been seen from the port. Either he was just arrogant or simply assumed that he had lost anyone following him by that point. Regardless, Ranma was grateful for his lack of foresight.

From ahead of the ship the ‘whump’ of cannons began to sound from the tower, the sight of which caused Erza to gasp in horror. The tower looked nearly complete! It was far larger than it had been, at least thirty to forty stories now, instead of the fifteen it had been. “Jellal, what have you done!”

“Doesn’t matter; we’re here to stop him, remember?” Ranma said. “Assault team, go!”

Erza nodded, then glared ahead of her and roared out, “Requip: Soaring Eagle Armor!” This was a specially made armor that she had designed for herself which could let her move in the air for long distances without draining much in the way of her magical reserves, the cost of using it being barely a tenth of what it would have cost to use her other flight capable armors over the same distance. It lacked much in the way of offensive power, but made her almost as agile as Happy or Carla in the air.

Its look matched the austerity in terms of magical power, consisting of a simple, skintight uniform from head to toe with armor only covering her chest and stomach, leaving her legs bare beyond a set of boots that ended in talons. And, of course, the large wings, each of which were made of equal parts metal and feathers and were the same size as Erza was standing up.

She nodded at Ranma, not noticing his blush at how formfitting this set of armor was. He had blushed earlier too when Mira and Levy had left to head up into the clouds and he had seen Mira’s Satan Soul Takeover form this time with attention to spare on appreciating it. *Damn, these Fairy girls. What the hell do they feed them in this guild?*

“I bet I get there first,” Natsu shouted, followed by a quick, “Aye, sir!” from Happy as they raced to the prow of the ship.

“This isn’t a race, Natsu!” Erza barked back angrily, the sight of the tower having put her in a very dark frame of mind. “Remember what we’re here to do.” So saying, she launched herself into the air after her guildmate, skimming over the deck for a moment, intending to fly nape of the earth—or ocean, in this case—to reach the island. She felt that that would make her a harder target to hit.

The two of them had just reached the prow when Ranma zoomed past them, running faster than either of them was moving. The instant he was between them and under one of Erza’s wings, he pulled the Umi-Sen-Ken around himself, disappearing from sight. To one side of him Natsu and Happy blinked, staring at where he had just been and whispering, “Ninja,” in awed tones to themselves.

Erza simply shook her head. “Despite the fact that I have seen it before, that is still disconcerting.” She could tell it wasn’t quite a magical move; there was no warning, and it was too complete, really, to be any true invisibility technique she had ever heard of. It was like he had simply slipped out of her ability to perceive, somehow.

Shaking her head, she launched herself into the sky, following after Natsu and Happy, who had leaped into the air an instant before her. “Here we go, little buddy! Karyu no Afutaabaanaa (Fire Dragon’s Afterburner)!” Natsu roared, flinging them forward like a rocket.

Ahead of the Rune Knight vessel, three ships moved into view over the horizon between them and the island. Erza banked quickly to one side, dodging both those ships and several incoming cannon balls, a few of the cannons attempting to range on her, though the majority were firing at the Rune Knight vessel. It, in turn, was protected by Wendy and its own cannons, which it could use in defense mode to disrupt the incoming blasts of magical energy.

Erza was just attempting to get to land. Not so, Natsu. One of the ships learned this to its cost when it maneuvered to be directly in front of Natsu and Happy’s course to the island. But, mindful of Ranma's orders to close with the island as quickly as possible, Natsu didn't bother with his normal niceties of fighting everyone aboard. Instead he simply barreled through it like a flaming asteroid. “Karyu no Hishou Keika (Fire Dragon’s Soaring Passage)!” he shouted, slamming into and through the ship from one side to the other, his entire body on fire.

Then he was quickly picked up by Happy on the other side. The Exceed had dropped him an instant before as Natsu ordered him to when his aura began to be too hot for the Exceed to handle. “Awesome, Happy!” he shouted, grinning as he pumped his fist in the air. “Our teamwork is impeccable.”

“Aye, sir! Just don't do any more moving or I'll be forced to drop you to feed the fishies!” Happy replied.

Shaking her head at her friend’s, honestly, rather predictable actions, Erza winged her way around the ships, swiftly landing next to Natsu on the shores of the island.

“Hah!” Natsu bawled out, pointing at her. “I win! A straight line’s always the fastest way to anything.” So saying, he looked around, shivering a little at something he couldn't quite feel or sense. “This place gives me the heebie-jeebies for some reason.”

“Oh, this place will pull every heebie out of you, Natsu, believe me,” Erza said caustically. She banished her Soaring Eagle armor to pull out her normal suit, a sword popped into one hand followed rapidly by another in her second. “Let's get a move on.”

**OOOOOOO**

Above them, Jellal scowled as he tried to find where the Ranger was. His scrying lacrima was far more powerful here on its own turf than any blocking spell that could have been set up on the Rune Knight ship. He had seen them coming long before even a lookout in his throne room could have. But he still couldn’t see where the Ranger had gone!

“Where is he!” Pulling back the view to see more of the growing sea battle, he neglected to actually pull his view higher than the tower itself and so missed the fact that Levy and Mira were actually flying above the island now, staring down at it and waiting to get involved with any fight that occurred there. “He has to be on the ship. He can’t just have disappeared.”

With that in mind, he gave orders to the two remaining, ships both of which had the majority of the Ghoul Spirit Guild on them. “Attack the ship. Keep it away from the island as much as possible. The rest of us will handle the two mages who got by you.”

With that he stood up, looking at his three new allies for this fight. “I trust that you can be trusted to find your own way to fight the invaders? You don’t need me to hold your hands?”

One of his guests, the largest one, simply huffed and turned away, making for the stairs leading down. Of the other two, one was feigning sleep, and the other simply glared at Jellal. He smirked, but said nothing, turning his attention back to his lacrima.

**OOOOOOO**

Erza’s description of the island had been spot on. It was small, incredibly rocky, had no flat place in which to grow crops, and had no soil to do that in the first place. In many ways it was a dead island, like many Ranma had seen before elsewhere, utterly without life. And almost as soon as Natsu and Erza had landed, they began to come under long-range fire accompanied by loud monkey noises, for some reason, in the distance.

Natsu simply ignored the solid musket balls for the most part. They hit his body and then just sort of bounced off, his Dragon Slayer durability well up to the task of ignoring any musket ball sent his way. The magical bullets he knocked out of the air with a lightly flaming hand. Those, he knew from previous experience, would sting if they hit.

On the other hand. Erza didn't even bother letting them touch her. She simply slashed both types of bullets out of the air with her swords as the two of them charged towards where the shots were coming from.

“Dark Guild Naked Monkey,” Erza yelled to Natsu as she spotted one of the shooters where they were hiding in among the rocks. “They use Guns magic exclusively. I overheard Bisca and Alzack mention at one point wanting to hunt them down if the Council would let them.”

“Too bad they won’t get that chance, then, because we’re going to kick their asses right here!” Natsu shouted gleefully, as he uses a Fire magic assisted boost to leap forward and up into the air. He landed in among some of the Naked Monkey Guild members. Fists flashed this way and that, Natsu not even bothering to use his magic for a moment. Happy even leaped off of his head, getting in one of the villains’ faces, his tiny claws slashing at them, though doing nowhere near the damage that Carla would have in a similar case. But even so, for these weaklings, it was enough.

Erza was then in among them too, and the Naked Monkey’s members tried to fall back, break contact, and run, only to find out that these mages were several dozen steps above the kind they were used to fighting.

The only reason none of them died was because the two Fairy Tail mages were holding back just enough to not kill them. Natsu did this automatically. Despite his combative nature, Natsu had never killed anyone and wasn’t even certain he could if he had to. Erza, on the other hand, had killed, not only in the slave rebellions she had led but also on missions occasionally when she ran into rapists or slavers. Pirates, too, occasionally, since they were normally also slavers and rapists, while bandits, in Fiore, at least, were simple robbers, knowing that doing more would bring the guilds down on their necks.

These Naked Monkey Guild members, however, were so pathetic she saw no need to kill them. But bruised and, in many cases, broken, none of them were in any position to realize their good fortune. Even as they were dealing with the Naked Monkeys, however, they were still taking shots from further inland where there were more of the guild along with robe wearing cultists, the sight of which caused Erza’s eyes to widen in shock and horror.

Above them, Mira took that as her cue to get involved. Hopping off of the cloud she and Levy were flying on, high above the tower, she raced downwards, summoning her Satan Soul Takeover magic around her as she did. Above her Levy twisted away, having no wish to get in close. She instead started to fly around the tower, shooting out iron spears made up of the words ‘iron spears’ at the few remaining cannons there. The ungainly weapons were too slow to use against actual people but still did damage, knocking the cannons off their mountings.

“Devil Spark!” Mira shouted, lashing out with her magic just before she impacted the group herself. The dark purple and black blast of magical energies slammed into the gathered mages, hurling them every which way just before she arrived, then she moved close in, hard punches and kicks sending men and women flying. “Pathetic! These punks better not be the best this Jellal guy has to offer, or else this is going to be boring.”

Looking up, she scowled and twisted her head to one side to dodge a glowing magical knife, then leaped aside as a scimitar with a blade larger than her own body slammed into where she had just been standing. A shield, thrown sideways, smacked into her shoulder, sending her spinning, but she recovered quickly, using her tail to lash out and smack an incoming sword away, which dissipated in midair.

Then a blast of magical power impacted her, but she took it on her forearm, barely even moving as she returned fire with her other hand. “Soul Extinctor!” This spell gathered magic into her clawed hand and then lanced out in a beam of purple and black energy.

Purple and black was the color for all of Mirajane’s magic spells. It was a sign of the soul, in this case, Satan’s, that she had Taken Over.

As the two blasts of magic faded, she stared at the man who had attacked her from the entranceway leading into the tower. He, in turn, dispelled a massive spiked shield from in front of him, wincing as he did so.

Mira stared at the man then smirked, straightening out and cracking her knuckles, an odd sound, given the fact her hands had changed into something that wouldn’t have seemed out of place on a demon, complete with scales. “I recognize you from a wanted poster,” she said conversationally, her devilish face giving her smirk a certain dangerous air. “Former Guild Master of Death’s Head Caucus, wanted for the near assassination of several people in Pergrande. I thought you had lost your life against your former guildmate, some kind of the swordswoman, I heard?”

“Nearly,” the man growled. “I **nearly** lost my life against Ikaruga. Stupid bitch, never understood where her place in the world was. Ikaruga was mine, damn it, and that prince came in, flashing his gold and his castle, and she bent over and licked his feet!”

“Really, you're going to say that kind of shit to me, of all people?” Mira growled, her eyes twitching as her devil soul magic flared around her hands and eyes. “You know, I never fought a guild master before. This could be fun!”

With that she charged forward, her wings flaring out behind her as the man quickly conjured up another weapon, this time a massive spear, and charged in turn.

Meanwhile, as the last Naked Monkey mage in front of her fell, Erza turned to address Natsu, only to see that he had leaped over a series of rocks, moving after some of the other enemy mages who had attempted to retreat. She made to move after him, thinking it best to they stay together, but she was interrupted by a voice she had hoped not to hear on the other side of a battle. “Long time no see, Erzy, nya.”

A young woman stood there, looking a few years or so younger than Erza, with oddly catlike features and red marks on her face that looked like some kind of whiskers. Even her hair was done up to look like cat ears. She wore a yellow jacket over an orange and white tube top and a short skirt. On her face, at present, was a small, sardonic smirk, her catlike eyes narrowed and dangerous as she stared at Erza.

“Mi, Millianna, you’re alive! Thank goodness,” Erza stuttered, staring at her old friend in mixed joy and horror. Joy that Millianna, one of her best friends from her time as a slave, was still alive. Horror because of the look on her face and the fact that she was free rather than in prison on the island, which could only mean that she had been brainwashed by Jellal to believe whatever tale Jellal had sold her old friends.

“Heheh. Yep, just like the others, all alive. No thanks to you,” Millianna replied, her almost friendly look fading instantly as she glared at her friend. “You coming back like this, though, makes things easier, traitor!”

“No! I never betrayed you, never! It was all Jellal! He, he changed, Millianna, afteRRargh!…”

Erza’s protest was interrupted by the feel of several dozen small blocks slamming into her side, sending her sideways to slam into a boulder to one side of where she had been standing. “There are two types of men in the world,” a new voice intoned. “Ones who allow their enemies to talk and attempt to undermine them, and those who interrupt them and get the ball rolling like a dandy should.”

Pushing her head from the rock, Erza was able to twist her head around enough to stare at the newcomer. He was a man who looked middle-aged, with some kind of five-o’clock shadow on his face in blue, a chin that looked almost like an ‘L,’ thick lips, and narrow sunglasses along with a hat and a suit. His entire body seemed to be made of blocks or hard angles. Indeed, if Ranma was there, he would have said that the man looked like he had hopped out of the screen of an old Virtua Fighter game.

But the appearance wasn’t what shocked Erza. No, what shocked and, further, appalled her was that she recognized his voice, if not the body around it. “W, Wally?”

“I suppose it is a dandy’s fate to be recognized, not that it matters,” the man said, sighing. “Erza the Betrayer, we were ordered to capture you and bring you to the top of the tower. And that’s exactly what we’ll do.”

“No, wait! Please, you have to listen to me!” Erza said, struggling against the large block like objects that had somehow stuck her sideways to the rock. Normally she would have been able to break out easily, but one arm and leg were pinned against the rock and her other arm was stuck to her body. She couldn’t get enough leverage to actually use any of her strength. “I never betrayed you! It was Jellal! He wanted us to complete the tower, but I refused. I…”

“We know all about it!” Millianna shouted. “How you two found out the real purpose of the tower, how Jellal figured out a way to twist it to make our own ideal world, how you disagreed with him, wanting to turn it over to the Council, the same Council who authorized the project in the first place! And then, when he refused to go along with you, you destroyed the ship which could have carried us all away! We went months without enough food or water to go around because of you before we could rebuild a ship large enough to bring in some! We’ve lost friends, nya, but we’re nearly done, nearly finished creating our own perfect world with the same system the Magic Council had thought to use to enslave the world. Ironic, huh?”

By the end of her diatribe Millianna had calmed down, and she gestured with one hand. “Nekosoku Tube!” From her hand came a glow of sparkly pink magic, and from within the glow a tube of some kind shot out that looked like a cat’s tail complete with fur. It flew through the air in a spiral towards Erza, presumably to tie her up.

But it never reached her. Instead Happy arrived, grabbing the tube out of the air as Natsu thumped down between the two mages attacking Erza. “Never fear; Natsu and Happy are here!” Natsu shouted, slamming his fists out to either side. “Karyu no Kagizume (Fire Dragon’s Claw)!”

Millianna yelped, dodging the flaming claws coming towards her with difficulty, but Wally activated some kind of teleportation magic, disappearing from where he had been standing to land nearby. “What the heck!” Millianna yelped, glaring at the interlopers. “Where the heck did you two come from?!” Then she spotted Happy, and her eyes widened, turning sparkly as she stared. “Kitty!!!”

“What’s wrong, Erza? It’s not like you to be so weak,” Natsu said, laughing and ecstatic that he had been able to help his friend. Erza, even more so than Mira or Laxus, was the benchmark that Natsu wished to surpass, and being able to help her even a little bit was a great sign to him.

“Natsu…” Erza said in relief, then summoned a small knife into the hand trapped against the rock. “Explosive Knife: Little Boomer!” The knife detonated, causing the rock to explode away from her and freeing that arm, the knife shattering at the same time. *Calistraxus Armorers always put too much magic into their weapons, but their ‘free samples’ can still be useful sometimes*. “They are my old friends, Natsu. They’ve been brainwashed, so don’t hurt them. Just knock them out if you can.”

“Right. And you don’t want to fight them because they’re your old friends,” Natsu said with a nod. He frowned as Millianna seemed to be staring at his little buddy almost hungrily now and jumped between them. “Hey, you can’t eat Happy!”

“Eat him?” the odd-looking girl squeaked, looking horrified at the very idea. “I never! No, kitties are for petting and pampering, never eating!” With that she shot forward, two more of the magical tubes popping out of her hands in a swirl of pink magic. “Kitty needs to be mine! Cat Tail Tube!”

“Gah!” Happy shouted, racing away from the cat lover.

At the same time Wally reconstituted himself, pulling his body back together from his use of polygon teleportation. “Polygon Rifle. It isn’t very dandy to interrupt a reunion between friends, boy.” So saying, he began to fire at Natsu, who began to dodge around, a little worried about the odd looking, square bullets the other man fired at him.

Even so, Natsu was able to lash out to one side, slicing one of the tubes apart with another Karyu no Kagizume (Fire Dragon’s Claw). But one of them wrapped around his arm, and suddenly the fiery claw in that hand disappeared. “What the heck!?”

“My Cat Tail tubes can negate magic, nya!”

Seeing that Erza had freed herself of the odd blocks that had been impairing her movement, Natsu rushed forward, ripping the tube of his arm with main strength rather than magic, getting into the weird looking guy’s face and landing a kick. The man had stepped back enough to avoid much damage, but the impact still sent him flying backwards. “Go on, Erza! I’ve got these jokers!”

Erza looked pained for a moment, then nodded. “Don’t hurt them too badly, Natsu! They’re being brainwashed!” With that she rushed off, dodging around a few more of Wally’s strange square bullets before Natsu closed the distance between them. As she reached the entrance to the tower she chanced a glance back at her former friends, then turned and, without another word, raced into the tower.

**OOOOOOO**

Out to sea, the Rune Knight vessel was now within range to fire its own guns at the two enemy ships remaining. As Wendy watched, the knights began to fire on the other ships, twisting their own vessel back and forth to bring its broadsides to bear, one side after another. The accuracy and rate of their fire wasn't all that impressive, but Wendy didn't know that, and she simply watched for a few minutes from her position in the crow’s nest.

Then the attacking ships began to spawn creatures. Sharks which flew through the air, whales who swam through the ocean and raptors and birds began to attack the ship. Carla and Wendy instantly went to work dispelling them. With Carla using her Neko-ken claws to slice the first few birds that tried to attack the deck of the ship, Wendy concentrated on using a long-range attack she had been practicing for several years to destroy the larger summons. “Tenryu no Hishou Kiba (Sky Dragon’s Soaring Fang)!” she shouted, bringing her clenched fists to her chest and then thrusting them out as she raced along the mast and hopped into the air, bouncing there for a moment to launch her attack before flipping back to the nearest spar.

This attack lashed out with a tiny condensed ball of what Wendy insisted on calling ‘squeezed air,’ condensed air that would then explode with violent force when it impacted its target, the size depending on how much magic Wendy put into it. It did a lot of damage for an attack that didn’t need all that much buildup, but it was both very visible in the air and easy to dodge, as it moved kind of slowly. The summons, however, had no idea they needed to get out of its way, and they all were blown out of existence before they could get within grappling range of the ship.

With each such attack she dissipated a summoned creature, frowning as she did so. “I've seen a few traveling minstrels summon up animals as part of their acts; those were cute. These are **so** not cute!” Wendy shouted.

Down below Carla actually chortled, knowing exactly what Wendy was commenting on, while a few of the Rune Knights around her looked up in confusion at that before going about their business. Some of the crew was now armed with their staffs, which created the null magic fields that allowed Rune Knights to fight stronger mages in a group. They targeted the flocks of smaller summons that Carla was also fighting against, though they weren’t doing as good a job of it, in Carla’s opinion.

The rest of the crew, though, were performing far better at their job. Many manned the ships cannons, five guns to a side on limited pintle mounts. The others worked the magical steam engine that drove the ship. It gave the ship quite a bit more speed and maneuverability than any ship that relied solely on sails, and they were now basically sailing around their opponents.

The main threat during this time was the cannons from the tower. But as the battle continued, those started to fall silent for some reason that the Rune Knights couldn’t explain. Still, eventually a few of them got the proper range, and four blasts of fire dropped directly towards the ship.

Wendy saw them coming and hopped up to the crow’s nest again, breathing in deeply. The air around her shimmered white with magic as she concentrated, and then she thrust her hands up and to the side, shouting, “Tenryu no Shahei no Uroko (Sky Dragon's Shielding Scale)!”

Above the ship a shield of condensed air thrummed into being, taking the magical cannonballs’ impact on its outer side. Ranma had taught Wendy the technique of creating a large-scale shield of her element over a series of months. It was one of the hardest things she had ever tried to do with her power, and she could feel its impact on her reserves, but she had eventually gotten it down pat.

This, however, had allowed the enemy summoners on one of the enemy ships time to pool their summoning powers, somehow. The earlier un-cute factor of their summons was multiplied now by fifty, as a giant, dangerous looking squid creature reared out of the ocean, its tentacles flashing towards the ship. Those tentacles were a lot thinner and more disturbing looking than a normal squid’s and also had what looked like spikes on them. Worse, the creature simply appeared, rearing out of the water right in front of the Rune Knight ship. Dozens of its tentacles slammed into the ship, halting it, while dozens more lashed out at Wendy and Carla.

Carla screamed and dodged, her normal poise in sharp abeyance for some reason as the tentacles lashed at her. In contrast, Wendy dodged around and through the tentacles, moving ever closer to the main body of the squid, barely shuddering. “Ugh, tentacles. Still, Ranma-nii gave me training for this kind of situation.”

This was accurate. Ranma had indeed put both Wendy and Carla through training specifically against tentacle-using opponents. Wendy didn't understand why he did, but she was grateful for it now as she closed with the thing’s mouth, throwing her head back as she leaped into the air above the thing. “Tenryu no Hoko (Sky Dragon’s Roar)!”

The blast of Air magic slammed into the creature, then through it, dissipating it as Wendy pulled herself to a halt, hopping in the air and then back to the ship and landing next to Carla. As she did, she groaned as she saw more summoned creatures coming through towards them. “Oh, dear. This is going to be a long fight.”

She looked sharply to her side, however, as she heard teeth gnashing over the sounds of the fight. Carla was literally quivering in rage next to her, glaring out over the ocean towards the ship that had summoned up the tentacle thing. “How dare they? To use such a, such a thing on ladies! Rarrgghh!”

With that final wordless growl of feminine fury, Carla launched herself into the air, her Aera wings appearing swiftly as she zoomed forward. Carla wasn’t very fast in the air, but her rage seemed to lend her speed, and she closed the distance at only about half the speed of a magical cannon blast.

When she closed she twisted her course to the side as ki, not magic, began to gather in her hands. Not that anyone but Ranma and Wendy would have been able to tell the difference. “Neko Claws Attack: A Lady’s Fury!” Carla shouted, making up the name on the spot as her neko-claws, which were normally rather short, grew to several yards in length.

The claws, insanely sharp blades of pure ki, slashed through the side of the steel plated enemy ship like a hot knife through butter, right above the water line. They kept on slicing from one end of the ship to another, and instantly water began to flood in, the ship swiftly starting to sink as its crew shouted in shock and fear.

Carla, however, felt the impact of the move at once and wavered in the air. If it wasn’t for the fact that ki and Ethernano reserves were different, she would have fallen instantly into the ocean as her wings disappeared. But they were different, and Carla was able to wobble back to the ship unscathed. She collapsed next to Wendy, who promptly picked her up and moved her inside the ship before rejoining the battle.

**OOOOOOO**

At the time that Erza and Natsu were dealing with the impotent monkeys, Ranma had already stolen his way into the tower, heading upwards quickly. *This is not good; they still have a lot of jail cells, but none of them look as if they've been used in a while. And a lot of rooms on this tower seem to have been converted into living quarters. Dammit, Jellal really did convince all of the slaves to stay here, then, rather than to try to escape. I suppose it makes sense, considering how much more of the tower’s been built since Erza left. Is that some kind of magic? The gift of gab? Ah, I know. Silver tongue, that’s a better name.*

*That means they’re all being duped, including Erza’s old friends. Well, other than the Dark Guild members, anyway. I doubt Jellal left any of the original cultists alive.*  He wondered if he should report that to the rest of the attacking group but then shook his head. Not only did he not have any way to do so other than sticking his head out a window and shouting, but he knew that with Erza down there, they’d figure it out soon enough.

With that Ranma’s mission changed. Instead of looking for the hostages and getting them out, Ranma moved around the tower, taking out the various cannons and making Wendy's part of the battle much easier as he went. Luckily, there weren’t many of those, but they were well spaced out, and it took a bit to travel between them.

After destroying one such, Ranma paused as a large man with a strange looking jaw made of metal came down the corridor, frowning as he looked around. “I thought I heard something. Dark Moment!” he bellowed, and from magical runes around his hand, darkness spread, swiftly covering the entire area. Behind him several hood wearing cultists moved around the large man into the now entirely darkened corridor. “Take him!”

Ranma, however, didn't need to see. He could smell the incoming people easily and rocketed forward. He was among them before they could blink.

A series of punches later and Ranma was behind the large man before he could even turn around. An arm went under one arm and around the large man’s neck, and then, even as the large man struggled, he was bent over backward.

“Sorry,” Ranma said conversationally, nothing in his tone indicating he was straining at all from holding the larger man at his current unnatural angle, “but I don't need to see to kick your butt. Now you're going to answer some questions for me, my friend. Or else things will they go very, very poorly for you very, very quickly.”

“You won't get me to talk!”

“Was that a challenge? Anyway, save yer bluster until you actually listen to my questions. What's up with this tower? Why is Jellal so adamant on it being built? I've heard some of what went on here before from Erza, but I’d like to know what line that ass fed you lot to get you all to agree to stay here,” Ranma said.

“Wait, you're with Erza? She's here?” the larger man asked, trying to twist his head around to stare at Ranma.

“Hey, man, I'm the one with the chokehold here. That means I'm the one asking the questions, you’re the one answering them. That’s how this kind of thing works,” Ranma said, pulling the man backward to the point of real pain to make his point.

“She returned,” the man choked out, actual tears coming to his eyes, and not from the pain he was now feeling in his back. “That's amazing! Can, can you take me to her?”

“Why?” Ranma asked, loosening his hold slightly. Something in the man’s tone told Ranma that he had more reason than someone who had been brainwashed should have.

“I'm Simon,” the man said. “I'm her friend. I've never really trusted Jellal, not since he convinced us all to continue working on the tower. It all sounded too fishy to be believed. After all, why would Erza suddenly betray us!? But none of the others seemed to be able to think that way for some reason.

“So you just stayed here because the others did?” Ranma asked skeptically.

“No. We've all opportunities to leave the island if we wanted to. I mean, we have to bring in food and other resources. But Jellal, he convinced us that the tower, despite the cultist’s actions, should be built. That they were really trying to do something for the betterment of all mankind, the perfect world. It was just the ruthless way they went about it that was wrong. The others lapped it up.”

“And you're the only one who questioned that?”

“You weren't there!” Simon said, now angry and once more trying to get out of Ranma's grip. “You didn't hear him. It was like…”

“Like magic?” Ranma suggested dryly, now sincerely wondering if Jellal had some power to influence other people’s minds.

“No, it was just the utter conviction he spoke with. That and he was our leader! He tried to lead us in our first rebellion; he took the blame for it; he was tortured for us. Him and Erza. She lost her right eye because of us. Jellal, well, no one knows how they tortured him, but his screaming was even worse than Erza’s.”

Ranma nodded at that. “I am no stranger to life-changing events, but that doesn't excuse what he's done since.”

“I know,” Simon whispered. “He… Jellal, he killed some of the ex-slaves who wanted to leave, when we, when the cultists under his command brought back ships, after he executed those cultists. No one else knows, but I followed him. I saw Jellal killing them so word couldn't get out that the tower was still being built. But the others all hold him in such high regard. No one else could ever manage to convince the others. I didn't even try,” Simon said with a sigh. “There was no proof of my accusations, and he was just so certain all the time!”

That didn’t make any sense to Ranma, but then he looked at the man. “Simon, when did you get that injury your eye? I mean, before or after Jellal took over?”

“During. I lost my eye during the rebellion when we took over. I was going to joke with Erza about it, how we were a matching set, but I never got the chance,” Simon replied with a weak chuckle. “Why?”

“Then that might be why you’re immune to whatever magic Jellal was using. It could have been based on sight. Anyway, that’s beside the point now,” Ranma said, releasing Simon at last. “Come on. Show me where Jellal is hiding. The sooner I take the fight to him, the sooner this can all be over.”

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma was not the only one thinking like that. Having left Natsu behind to deal with her old friends, Erza had raced into the tower, smashing aside several men and women dressed similarly to the cultists who had enslaved them all for so long on the second floor. Thankfully, she had pulled her attacks, fearing that these men and women too had been brainwashed. This turned out to have been a good idea, because when she kneeled down to pull back their hoods, Erza revealed faces she vaguely recognized. The man on the ground before her hadn’t been one of Erza’s friends, but he had been among the older slaves. She shook her head sadly as she leaned over the unconscious body of another old friend, an older ex-slave who had at one point attempted to show Erza how to cut her hair so it wouldn’t get in her way as they worked. *How many more of our old friends am I going to have to fight before reaching you, Jellal?!*

“Erza?”

Turning, Erza saw Levy running up the stairs towards her. “A, are you all right?” Levy asked hesitantly, a little worried at the look on the taller woman’s face.

“I… We’ve seen both Dark Mages and old friends here. I’m just having trouble understanding how Jellal could have convinced my old friends to work with them and even dress like our old captors too.” Erza shook her head resignedly, then straightened her shoulders and gestured for Levy to join her. “How is the rest of the battle going, and where is Mira?”

“Mira’s fighting a Dark Mage outside. I think he’s a wanted murderer or something; Mira recognized him from a wanted poster, anyway, from what I overheard. Natsu’s still fighting two other mages, and Carla, um… Carla just lost her temper on one of the ships they were fighting. I decided I could do better work by taking out the few remaining cannons in the tower. But beyond that, what should we do?” Levy asked.

“We look for Jellal,” Erza said grimly. “He’s the key here. No one else really matters so long as we can take him out of the equation. Once that’s done, we can decide what to do about the tower and the rest of the people here.”

“Right!” Levy said grimly. “We should also smash the cannons they have on the fifth and tenth floors. That’ll make it easier for Wendy and the others.”

“Good thinking. Let’s go,” Erza said, and with that she raced ahead of the short, blue-haired girl.

They ran into two more fights, men and women clothed like the old cultists, racing down to try and get in their way. Erza smashed through them with little help from Levy, who broke off on the tenth floor to destroy more cannons.

The redhead was a little worried about letting Levy go off on her own like that, but Levy was adamant that Erza keep on heading up. “After all, if Jellal knows he’s beaten, he might escape if we give him time, no matter how invested in this tower he is.”

On the fifteenth level the stairwell ended, and Erza had to fight through another group of cultists. A second after the last cultist went down, Levy rejoined her, having used her floating cloud to catch up. “The last of the cannons are gone, and Wendy and the Rune Knights seem to be running rings around the last ship out there,” she reported. “I also think Natsu might be nearly done with his opponents too. I saw him knock out one of them when I looked out a window.”

Nodding brusquely, Erza didn’t slow down, racing along the corridor. The hallway then opened up into a larger area, which looked almost like some kind of pool area. There was a single wooden bridge across the water and what looked like freshwater fish swimming around it, with scaffolds leading off the bridge toward the far walls at set points along its length. That changed the look of the place from a pool area to something like a fishery.

But none of that mattered to Erza. What did was the young man standing halfway along the length of the bridge. He was a thin-shouldered, younger man, somewhere around or possibly below Natsu’s age. He had a very dark tan, blond hair, a tattoo on one side of his jaw, and earrings, though he dressed more like a butler than the bad boy image the rest of his look portrayed.

And Erza recognized him, just like she had Wally and Millianna. “Sho…” she whispered.

“Yep. It’s me, nee-san,” the young man replied, smirking at her. “Where else did you think I’d be after leaving us all behind!” At the last word, the almost friendly smirk on his face morphed into a sneer of rage and anger, and he pulled out five cards in each hand, the cards sticking out from between his fingers. “You left us behind; you betrayed us to the very people who enslaved us! But Jellal will make you pay, and them too!”

So saying, Sho launched the cards forward in a wide arc. Several of them went off immediately, flashing into a bright blast of light that temporarily blinded Erza and Levy. Erza went down to one knee automatically to provide a smaller target, her sword flashing out in front of her in a series or arcs that she had developed after fighting Cana in the last S-class exam. The blade cut through the card sent her way and deflected a series of metallic projectiles that had popped out of two more cards.

Levy fared worse. She was blinded by the flashbang cards and then was nailed right in the chest by another card, disappearing in a flash of bright light. The card fell to float on the water to one side of the bridge, and inside it was a tiny image of Levy, who began to shout and curse irritably at having been captured so easily. “Oh, come on, darn it! And I was doing so well, too!” A second later her hands flew to her mouth as her skin began to turn green, the rocking of the card on the water bothering her for some reason. “Oh, I think I’m going to be sick. Now I know how Natsu feels…”

“I don’t want to hurt you, Sho!” Erza said, leaping to the side and dodging more of Sho’s cards. She leaped from one gantry to another, cards flashing around her into the water. Between one jump and the next she placed her normal sword into her Requip space, pulling out a short hafted spear with a wide head shaped like a lightning bolt. “But I will knock you out if I have to! Shocking Volt!”

Hurling the lightning bolt spear forward, Erza sent it crashing into the surface of the bridge right in front of Sho. Before he could blink, the spear flashed out lightning in every direction, small bolts in a wide arc. Two of them caught Sho, and he twitched spasmodically before collapsing to the bridge.

Sighing faintly, Erza leaped from her present gantry back to the bridge, moving to kneel by Sho. Erza remembered Sho even better than she did Wally and Millianna. Sho had been a younger child who was barely able to survive the horror of their captivity. He had needed more food and had also needed to be shielded on a daily basis from the whips of their captors, though Sho hadn’t been the only one who had of course. Erza had taken him under her wing, the two of them, like her other friends, sharing a cell, and he had called her, ‘nee-san.’

To see him like this, hating her so utterly , the loathing and fury on his face, was even worse than seeing Wally and Millianna’s state of mind. “What lies has Jellal fed you? What did he do to you all to convince you to continue the work on this cursed tower?”

Shaking her head, Erza pushed to her feet, moving towards Levy’s card. She picked it up off the water, noticing idly that Levy was now sitting on a wooden boat made of the word ‘wood,’ the water of the fishery having somehow seeped into the card’s pocket plane. “Levy, duck.”

Squeaking, Levy did just that and watched as Erza used her sword to cut off a corner of the card. There was a poof, and she found herself in midair in front of Erza, who caught her with a firm grip on her belt, setting her down on the bridge before looking down at Sho. “Levy, I want you to take Sho and start evacuating people from the tower. Whatever happens, this tower is going to be destroyed if I have any say about it. We need to get Sho and the other brainwashed people out of here before that. And if we remove them from the tower, we also remove them from Jellal’s immediate clutches.”

“Now, now, that’s against the rules, Erza-chan,” said a voice, causing Erza and Levy to turn.

There at the far end of the bridge stood Jellal, though Erza knew he hadn’t been there a moment ago. *Some kind of teleportation magic?* Erza thought, taking in the appearance of her old friend.

He stood a little taller than her, his blue hair just as messy and spiky as Erza remembered, the tattoo on his face standing out violently against his skin. He wore a long robe of some kind with gold highlights along the hood, which was pulled back, and black pants. On his face was a sneer, though it was only partially directed at Erza. The rest was directed at Sho. “I suppose I shouldn’t have expected anymore from Sho, Wally, and the rest of these pawns. They barely even slowed you Fairy mages down. That’s the power of Fiore’s most destructive guild for you. Though I have to wonder where that damn Ranger who began all this is.”

“Ranma will no doubt make his presence felt when you least expect it,” Erza said, pushing Levy behind her and placing herself between the younger girl and the unconscious Sho. “Jellal… Why? Why all this? Why the tower? Why have you given yourself over to the worship of Zeref, the very thing that made all those cultists enslave us in the first place!? **WHY!**? Tell me why!”

“Why? Hmm…hahahahah!” Jellal laughed maniacally, covering his eyes with one hand, and, when he took away his hand, his face had contorted just as Sho’s had earlier. “Zeref is everything! Everything! This tower, with it completed, I will resurrect Zeref! With his power we will remake the world. All those who wronged us all those years ago, all those who oppose me now, I’ll, he’ll wipe them all out! No more kings, no more council. Just magic, just power! A perfect world!”

“How is that a perfect world!?” Erza bellowed, throwing herself forward, her sword extended.

Jellal met her with his bare hands, his body glowing yellow. Deflecting the blade, his hand slammed out faster than most would have been able to follow. But Erza was an S-class mage for a reason, known as one of the strongest women in the country. She pulled another blade out of her Requip space in less time than a heartbeat, blocking his hand and then sliding it upwards towards Jellal’s face. He flinched back, kicking off the ground as he flung yellow magical bolts at her like shooting stars. She blocked or evaded them, but he was able to put some distance between them.

“Heh. You’ve become strong over the years, Erza-chan. But I wonder how often you thought about this place, how often you thought of your friends and me?” Jellal taunted, rising into the air as he threw off his cloak, revealing that he wore a black, skintight shirt underneath. “When you were safe and sound, and your friends were under my power?”

“Not a day went by when I didn’t think of them! Not a night went by without a nightmare of what you’d became!” Erza shouted. “Black Wing Armor!” she shouted, pulling a new set of armor out of Requip space.

This armor was black with silver crosses and some trimming in places, including the somewhat revealing breastplate. It had plates on either side of her, reaching down to her nonexistent waist guard, leaving her stomach and most of her thighs bare, her groin barely covered by what looked like black panties, of all things. This suit also had two wings and was far more combat capable than the Soaring Eagle armor.

She used that ability now, hurling herself into the air. In her hands her swords were swiftly replaced by two short spears, each of which looked different from both one another and the armor. She whirled them around her in a series of arcs as she closed. “But that nightmare ends now! I’m taking back my friends, and I am putting you down, Jellal!”

Jellal had a bit of a speed advantage, and his Heavenly Bodymagic gave him immense durability almost equal to that of a Dragon Slayer. But he lacked the range Erza’s weapons gave her, and she had far more combat experience. One spear nearly caught him in the chest. The butt end of the other struck him in the shoulder, and as he winced and pulled back, the first one sliced his cheek open, cutting through his magic. A blast from Jellal’s palm hurled Erza away once more, and Jellal cursed. *How is she so strong!? I know I need her as a sacrifice, but did she really become this strong with that pathetic guild with its emphasis on friendship and family while I wasn’t looking?*

Jellal shook his head. *No, she’s still not my match. I just have to use my speed and take out that flight armor of hers.*  With that thought, he activated his Grand Chariot and hurled himself forward like an asteroid. Before Erza could set herself he was on her, slamming her down into the bridge, which shattered under the impact. “You, Erza, you’re strong! That’s good! Your sacrifice will complete the tower’s circuits, and with your soul’s absorption I’ll be able to bring back Zeref!”

Erza gasped as her armor began to buckle under the continual pressure of Jellal’s assault. She Requipped her two spears, replacing them with short swords and slashing at Jellal. But Jellal dodged away, landing near Levy, who had been trying to drag Sho away. “Levy, get away from him!”

Just as Levy could begin to move, Jellal had her by the throat and began to squeeze, holding the short girl between him and a horrified Erza. “Won’t you ever learn, Erza? Friends are a weakness. The woman I’ve chosen as my sacrifice needs no such.”

He began to squeeze, but before he could apply more than a tiny bit of pressure there was a large crashing sound from above them. This caused him to look up, and in that instant Erza struck. Her spears disappeared in her hands, replaced by a staff, and she closed before Jellal could back away. The staff cracked down on his wrist, causing his grip to twitch open, and Levy fell to the ground. An instant later the staff flashed towards his face, causing him to raise a hand to block it, but Erza simply let go of the staff as he caught the end, twisting around and bringing up a fan, of all things, from her Requip space. “Tempest’s Wind!”

The attack blew both Jellal and Levy away from her, with Levy squeaking in shock as she was hurled directly backwards back into the downward leading stairwell behind her.

Jellal however simply used the momentum the attack granted him to fly backwards towards the wall behind him, then launched himself forward, crashing into Erza with a punch that shattered her armor and sent her reeling backwards. She quickly Requipped another set, but this one didn’t have flight capable magic, and she backed away as Jellal angrily pressed her hard, Requipping two more swords.

Levy wasn’t a fighter. This close brush with death was one of the worst she’d had on any mission. This forced Levy to understand that there was little she could add to the fight in front of her without making Erza’s position worse. But she was also a Fairy Tail mage, and, because of that, instead of running away like her mind was telling her to, she instead turned around and raced down into the tower to search out her guildmates and help as much as she could.

If she had stayed put, she would have seen Jellal laughing as he threw up an arm to block Erza’s swords, which cut down towards him as one. Though laughing, he was having some trouble not falling into the water all around them. “Ah, but this isn’t the proper venue for this fight anyway! Let us take this to someplace more worthy of your final minutes!”

A second later there was a thrum in the air, and Erza, Jellal, and the still unconscious Sho were teleported from the fishery up to the throne room. Though having had no luck in figuring out a way to power the ancient enchantment that would have made the island mobile, Jellal had figured out a few other tricks he could pull inside the tower.

But Erza was undaunted by the change of scenery. She brought up a knee into his stomach, and Jellal had to jerk aside to avoid a cut that would have taken him in the neck. Pushing off the ground, he again brought up his hands, blocking Erza’s weapons and glaring into her furious face. “If you think that you can throw me off by such simple means, think again!” Erza snarled.

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma had gotten about halfway up the tower before running into Simon, and the two of them had nearly made it all of the way up the tower. But as they went, the tower, of course, grew thinner. Eventually they came out of a stairwell into another level where the next staircase up was at the far end. And, just like a few other levels they had seen, this one was composed of a single room. And in the center of that room squatted a giant of a man, wearing what looked like Shinto robes, open on the right. He stood a few inches taller than Simon and was even wider in the shoulders, his muscles even more pronounced. He had white hair stuck up in a rooster cut and deep-set glowing eyes, while around his neck were this world’s equivalent of Buddhist beads, which were several times the size they would have been in Ranma’s original universe.

He sat there as Ranma exiting the stairwell, laughing low in his throat, though it sounded more like a cackle than anything else. “Hahahah! When I heard the name of the Ranger who so messed up that brat Jellal’s plans, I knew it had to be you. I’ve been longing for this rematch for a long, long time, boy. Ever since the day you humiliated me.”

Shrugging, Ranma moved forward, waving Simon back and to one side. “Meh. I’ve humiliated a lot of people over the years, possibly as many as four a week if you don’t count bandits and small fry. You’re going to have to be more specific.”

Growling, the man surged to his feet, glaring at Ranma. “You know me well enough! Or is it so often you steal daughters and apprentices away from people that you cannot remember the name of Jiemma Orland.”

Smacking one fist into his other palm, Ranma nodded. “Oh yeah, I remember you. The asshole child abuser who was beating his daughter? What was it for again? Oh yeah, trying to get back to the village rather than stay and kill all the dangerous animals in the forest.”

**\*Flashback\***

Ranma and Wendy had been traveling overland for once rather than following the roads. Ranma had decided to do that because there was supposedly some old magic-wielding hermit around the borders between Seven and Iceberg in this area, an area too heavily wooded and poor in any kind of resources for the trains which connected Iceberg’s western lowlands and Seven to bother with. Since the man was supposed to be a healer of some repute, Wendy had hoped to learn something from him. It turned out, though, that those rumors were just that: rumors. The hermit in question had died years ago. Ranma had buried the man while Wendy had ransacked his, admittedly, semi-impressive library.

Now they were on their way back to the town they would be spending this winter in, a little place down in Bosco, which had grown since the slavers in that country had been dealt with. It was a nice little place with a river nearby and a view from the top of a nearby butte that Wendy loved, though the local environment reminded him of the Dark Mage guild he’d dealt with. Carla was there, having wished to stay behind to oversee the renovations to the house Ranma had bought and fixed up on the sly. But the interior needed some renovation, and Carla didn’t trust Ranma’s fashion sense.

The two Dragon Slayers had taken shelter in their tent for a time that morning when a sudden rainstorm had come up, and now both were pushing on with their cloaks up, the Song Silk keeping the water off Ranma, the only thing keeping Ranma from transforming. And, thankfully, Wendy had outgrown the need to make Ranma’s life miserable by splashing in every puddle they passed.

Racing along through the woodland foliage, they were making good time until Ranma called a halt, holding up his hand in a fist. Wendy instantly halted, sniffing the air. Almost instantly she smelled it, human blood on the wind, coming from a little off their course through the woods.

The two of them turned in that direction and raced on, wondering what someone else was doing this far away from normal human habitation. Seven wasn’t very populated in this area, and even the ready availability of water wasn’t enough to convince settlers to gather nearby on the Bosco side of the border.

Soon enough they both could hear something too, a girl crying and a man’s booming voice echoing through the woods. “Stop it with those cursed tears! No daughter of mine can be weak, and tears are the height of weakness. Now get out there and… What is this?”

By that point Ranma and Wendy had reached the source of the disturbance, a small cleaning the woods. To one side was a very makeshift camp with an overhanging cloth protecting a fire and little else. No blankets or anything else could be seen beyond the two people there. One was a young girl around Wendy’s age, maybe slightly older, with long black hair trailing down her back and a thin, but powerful body, which was covered with numerous cuts and bruises from head to bare shoulders. Her clothing was also torn and ragged, though might once have been of decent quality.

Across from her was a huge man, towering over her, his white eyes blazing in anger now at Ranma and Wendy’s arrival. “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

“That’s my line,” Ranma began before Wendy pushed past him and raced to the girl, putting her own petite body between her and her tormentor. Ranma simply strode forward, allowing his hood to slip just enough to show the sneer on his face as he stared at the big man. “It looks as if you’re either a child kidnapper or some kind of slaver left over after I smashed the slaving bands in Bosco. Which is it?”

“Bah!” the man boomed, his voice a barely controlled roar. “I am Jiemma, and that pathetic weakling is my daughter, Minerva! Whatever I do to train her to become less than the weak thing she is now is up to me! I will make her someone whose very shout can shake the world, just like mine!”

“Funny, for a world shaker, I ain’t ever heard of your name before, and, frankly, to me you just look like a weakling whose bark is way worse than his bite. Still, I’ll humor you,” Ranma said coldly. He had moved forward by this point to where he was standing directly in front of the larger man, pulling his attention to the side from where Wendy had begun to heal Minerva, who was looking at her and then over Wendy’s shoulder in shock.

“So here’s what we’re going to do. You care about strength, right? Well then, how about a test of our strength? One punch to one punch. If you win, Wendy and I will go our separate ways and never speak of this to anyone. I’ll even throw in our Song Silk cloaks and all the money I have on me. If I win, I take your daughter and deliver her to Queen Rose along with the tales of your child abuse.” Ranma held up a hand, slowly clenching it into a fist. “And if you think you can just defeat me, recall we’re in the middle of the woods, and I bet I could leave you behind easily if I have to.”

Ranma actually just wanted to beat the living shit out of this asshole, whose way with his daughter, what little Ranma had seen of it so far, mirrored what Genma had put Ranma through when he was younger, with even less in the way of breaks between sessions or reason. Beating a child for crying wasn’t something Genma would have done, though he had very often threatened Ranma’s food, taking some for himself for infractions like that, perhaps punch him in the head and mock him for crying like a weak girl.  *But I can’t just kick his ass, not with his daughter right there. Even if the man’s an asshole and she hates him, that kind of thing when she’s so young would be a bad idea.*

“Hah! You may be a fool, but at least you understand what it means to be right. If you wish to prove yourself right, do it through force!” Jiemma bellowed, his muscles swelling even more. “Very well, fool, I’ll humor you.” He raised his fist over his shoulder, a light purple magical light appearing around it. “Ready?”

Ranma replied by doing the same, his magic barely a flicker. “Ready.”

The two men flung their fists forward, slamming into one another. There was a booming noise, and Wendy shielded Minerva with her body, actually snatching up the other girl and leaping towards the nearby trees.

Jiemma’s fist was larger than the person he believed a fool in front of him, and the magic around it was powerful. It should have blown anyone Ranma’s size away easily.

But Ranma was many, many times stronger than his muscles’ size would indicate, and his magic was far more potent than Jiemma’s. Even with his own magic barely covering his fist, Ranma was the stronger man. And he was a martial arts expert well above the norm for this world. He could punch in just such a way that the power of the impact went well beyond the initial point and did not turn into simple impetus. He did so now.

Thus, instead of being blown backwards from Ranma’s punch overpowering his own, Jiemma’s arm took the full brunt of the punch. The bones in his arm shattered in multiple places ,and his wrist practically exploded, numerous bone shards shooting out in a welter of blood.

“GRahhhhh!!!!” Jiemma bellowed in agony, clutching his ruined arm with his one remaining good one, the pain so much that he couldn’t even concentrate on his magic any longer. “Y, you, what did you do!?”

“One punch, I said, asshole,” Ranma said with a sneer. “Not my fault you don’t know how to recognize when your enemy is beyond you.” He turned away, leaping over to the two girls and going to one knee in front of Minerva. “Sorry ya had to see that, Minnie, but I figure this way he won’t be coming after us anytime soon. Erm, that is, if you do want to come with us?”

Minerva had been looking shocked, but now her eyes narrowed, and she kicked out, her tiny foot catching Ranma in the face with surprising force. Now, Ranma could have just taken it and ignored the hit like he would have one of Wendy’s. But Ranma knew the girl needed a bit of a laugh. She had been out here in the woods with her father for who knew how long and had just seen him near crippled, so whatever their previous relationship had been like, she needed to see that Ranma wasn’t anything like her father.

So he took it, then rolled on the ground, whimpering as he held his eye. Luckily the tree’s leaves kept the rain off his face for the brief moment his face was facing upwards. “Ow! You little, gah!!”

“Don’t call me Minnie, hmph!” Minerva replied, turning around to look at Wendy, who giggled.

“Grr… Duly noted, I suppose. But that doesn’t answer my question. Are you fine with coming with us and leaving this a...um, your father behind?” Ranma honestly didn’t know how he would have answered that question if anyone had asked him when he was younger and traveling around with his old man. Yes, he had not liked a lot of the stuff his old man had done to him, and a lot of it was painful. But it was also all he had known, and a lot of it was also fun. Ranma’s love of the martial arts was something he had been practically born with, and, say what you would about Genma, the man had been an amazing teacher.

Thankfully, Minerva’s feelings toward her father were not nearly as ambivalent. She teared up again before quickly wiping them away with the back of her hand, then looked over at her father. Though still kneeling on the ground and holding his useless arm, he was now glaring hatefully at all three of them.

As he did, his magical power began to build up around him in a violent looking light purple aura. His eyes also flared in his face as he pushed himself to his feet. “Never! You may have gotten lucky, but I will prove that my strength is greater than yours, that strength is everything!”

“Please take me away from here!” Minerva shouted at the top of her lungs, terror crossing her face as her father pushed to his feet and charged them.

Thrusting out his hand, a wave of some kind of magical power flashed out towards the trio.

“Right!” Ranma said with a laugh, throwing up a watery shield. By the time Jiemma’s attack had finished dissipating the shield, the three of them were long gone.

**\*End Flashback\***

After that Minerva had stayed with Ranma, Wendy, and Carla for the winter before Ranma took her to see Queen Rose. Ranma had made it clear from the outset that he couldn’t look after another young girl, given his nomadic lifestyle, and Minerva hated camping or traveling, since it brought back bad memories of her time with her father. So she had willingly gone along with the idea of becoming a ward of the crown for a time. Though, from what Wendy and Ranma had found out when they stopped in to see Rose before their job to hunt down Eisenwald, she had apparently moved to Fiore to join a guild there since then.

“Y’know, I would’ve thought having your arm ruined for life would’ve been enough of a sign that maybe ya should be thinking about a career change or how you treat other people, not go full on Dark Mage,” Ranma said, scowling slightly. *Damn it, and here I hoped he’d have the decency to bleed out or be eaten back then. Goes to show, never do your enemy a small injury.*

“Hah! No, I merely found other people who agree with my own philosophy. Dark, Light, legal, illegal. These are just labels, labels put in place by those who wish to curtail those with **power**!” Jiemma bellowed in reply. “And you, fools like you who believe they know true strength, will never understand until you throw off the shackles of those like the idiotic Council and their lackeys. But enough of this. I came here to prove my power on your corpse and that of that girl you traveled with back then.”

Ranma cracked his neck to one side, then lunged forward, crossing the intervening distance faster than Simon could follow. One second he was standing at the far end of the room, the next, Ranma was right on top of Jiemma, his fist flashing out. “Enough talking, asshole! I won’t even let you near Wendy! Soryu no Tetsu Kagitsume (Water Dragon’s Iron Claw)!”

Jiemma brought up his own hand, blocking the blow, the same purple colored magic appearing on his hand. This time both the power behind the magic and the speed with which he brought it out were different, and the light purple magic fought against the dark blue of Ranma’s water claw, blasting some of it away. In return, Jiemma brought up his knee towards Ranma’s lower body.

But Ranma used this as a steppingstone to launch himself further into the air, coming down with an axe kick that quickly turned into a roundhouse followed by several dozen more punches. Only one of them got through, but that was enough to rock Jiemma’s head back.

“Enough!” he roared, sending out a full body blast of energy that threw Ranma away, but didn’t do him any real harm. This was followed, however, by a wave of focused, condensed magic. “Disappear Burst Magic: Blast!”

Ranma grunted as the magic impacted him, hurling him backwards into the wall, but he bounced off the wall and onto the ceiling, his head ringing a little but otherwise unhurt. “Gonna have to do better than that!” he shouted, coming in on the attack again. This time he flipped under the first punch that Jiemma threw his way, which was just as well, since the attack blasted a hole in the side of the tower behind where he had been.

Ranma landed under where Jiemma had just stretched out to attack and, with a sudden surge of magic, hammered a blow up into Jiemma’s chest. The man’s aura blocked some of it, pushing against Ranma’s attack, but instead of deflecting, this simply propelled Jiemma backwards. He slammed upwards, crashing into the ceiling with enough force to shatter it, disappearing through the falling rubble.

“Get out of here, Simon. If Jellal’s anywhere above us, I’ll find him. Link up with Erza and the others. Try to convince your friends about what’s really going on. I’ve got this!” Ranma shouted, leaping upwards through the hole he had just created. From above the sound of renewed combat filtered down, and the whole tower started to shake.

“…Monsters. They’re both monsters. I didn’t even get a chance to use my Darkness magic,” Simon muttered, staring around him at the ruined room. Every time Ranma and Jiemma’s fists or feet had connected there had been a shockwave, and every time Jiemma’s blows went wild or were deflected, his assault has simply continued, smashing the ground, walls, or anything else they touched, which had almost included Simon, but he had ducked back into the stairwell just in time. Staring at the large hole the explosion had rent in the lacrima covered stone of the tower, Simon shuddered. “Right, down it is, then. I might wish us all to be truly free of this place, but more than that, I wish to be alive to see it!”

**OOOOOOO**

Though surprised by Erza's speed and strength, Jellal was still the man who had been skilled enough to convince Fiore’s Magic Council to give him the title of Wizard Saint when only using about fifty percent of his power through a Thought Projection. As such, he quickly began to adapt to his opponent’s skill. The number of blows Erza was landing went down, his Heavenly Body magic’s aura strengthening to block her swords. His speed swiftly came up, and he began to use his mobility more, dodging and ducking around her.

That wasn’t to say that she was completely helpless. Jellal was working for the fight. Even stuck on the ground she remained moving, her swords flashing and stabbing. One of them would occasionally shift to a different weapon, a spear or a different sword, allowing her to throw out longer-range attacks. Lightning, ice, water, fire, and more made appearances as she and Jellal exchanged blows, but his Heavenly Body magic’s aura served him well as armor against all of her attacks.

Several minutes after they began, the entire tower shook again as if from a great blow. Scowling, Jellal gestured forward with both hands, shooting out another magical attack with each hand. From one came the, “Jiu Leixing!” which formed several dozen lightning spears, launching them forwards. From his other hand came, “Dark Mass!” This assault shot out a multi-tentacled mass of darkness that spread out in every direction.

The two spells, together, forced Erza to back away and focus solely on defense. This allowed Jellal to pull out a crystal ball. These were specially treated lacrima, which could allow an individual to scry an image of the area around him or any specific area he wished within that territory or around a paired lacrima. They were expensive as hell, even more so then the teleportation array that Jellal had set up in his office in the Magic Council’s tower. Thankfully, he hadn't had to buy this one. The former owners of the Tower of Heaven had created it instead.

After a brief moment of fiddling with it, Jellal found an image of the older mage, Jiemma, that Brain had sent him to help fight off the Council’s assault. Currently he was fighting Oceana, but the place they were fighting was a mere five floors below Jellal’s throne room.  *“How!? How did he get that far without anyone seeing him! S*canning further away from the fight, Jellal saw Simon racing down the stairs and scowled angrily. “Simon. So you’ve turned traitor. I’ve always wondered if you were free of the hypnotism I used on everyone else. You too will make a fine sacrifice later.”

“Never!” shouted Erza, who had heard his muttering from where she had just finished dissipating the last of the Dark Mass. “You’re never going to hurt another one of my friends!” So saying, she began to cross the distance between them, smashing aside the last of his latest magical attack, her sword out but quickly flashing away in a blast of Requip magic to be replaced by a different weapon. “Shoot to Kill: Snipe Blade!”

The sword she was now holding was short with a very long handle almost as long as the blade itself, which had a very wide, almost spear-like point. As she thrust it forward, the blade extended, shooting forward. At the same time, she hefted her other hand behind her head and Requipped a weapon into that too, the De-Malevo-Lance, her armor changing into the matching set, the Giant armor.

Rather than being large, as its name would suggest, this mostly yellow armor didn’t add to Erza’s bulk over much save in her shoulders, which were built up, the cross-sections forming curved horns to go with the oni-like horns she wore on her head to go with the armor. Each joint was marked by fur, and the yellow armor was marked by blue stripes, crosses, and a layer below that. The armor had a built in skirt made of intricate yellow colored plates to cover her thighs paired with high boots and diamond shaped knee guards.

Jellal dodged the extending sword’s point, but the spear slammed into him, hurling him backward into and through the wall as it exploded with electrical energy. “GRaaah!!!” he roared in agony, but batted it aside, showing that the spear hadn't been able to penetrate his magical aura. Hovering in midair, Jellal threw himself back into the tower, destroying the extending sword blade before it could return to Erza, then closing before she could dodge, his body lit up like a falling star. “Meteor!”

Again Erza was blasted backwards, her Giant armor shattering under the impact. Despite that, she rolled with the blow and Requipped a new set of armor, her Lightning Empress armor. This armor was created after her training with Jellal had finished and was golden and light bluish in color. The breastplate was decorated by golden trimmings and was, in many ways, more armor-like than her previous armor, covering more of her body, including a long, armored skirt around her legs which opened at the front to both reveal her thighs and to allow her ease of movement. Like the name suggested, this armor specialized in dealing with lightning wielders, having speed enchantments and being able to absorb lightning attacks.

Allowing Jellal to push past her, Erza closed from above with him, who had bounced off nothing in midair, coming back towards her while twisting to face Erza. Once again, the two of them exchanged blows so fast that even Mirajane would've had trouble keeping up with them now. “What's wrong, Jellal!?” Erza taunted. “Things not going well for you?”

“Bah! I was simply astonished that Oceana was able to get that far, but a traitor within the ranks explains that away. I'll deal with him and with Simon later! No one—not you, not that Ranger, not that decrepit bunch of geezers you people kowtow to—will stop me! I will revive Zeref and, with his magic, change the world!”

Nearby, Sho had recovered himself from when Erza had knocked him out, and, like any good survivor, he had stayed put as the battle between the two juggernauts nearby went on. From where he clung to one of the gantries he had heard everything they said to one another, and now his face was contorted in an expression of horror and self-ridicule.  *He lied to us. He's lied to us all along! The Jellal I know would never talk about killing Simon! He would never talk so about Zeref, the same evil bastard that the cultists worshiped!*

With the truth laid bare before him, Sho could only cry, his tears falling down his face to land unnoticed in the water of the fishery as he thought about the years spent under Jellal's rule. All that time during which they’d been lied to, all that time he had assumed the worst of a girl that he had looked up to as his role model for so long along with Jellal. A girl who had protected him from the slaver’s whips. Who’d given him food, going hungry herself so that he would have enough energy to keep going. To know that Jellal, who had done much the same thing, had instead been lying to them all and was in fact the real traitor, was a blow to his worldview.

But Sho knew this was no time for self-recrimination. So he pushed through his horror as quickly as he could, slowly moving one hand down his side towards the pouch where he kept all of his Magic Cards.

**OOOOOOO**

In a waiting area on the third highest level of the Tower, Cobra sighed, shaking his head as he absentmindedly petted his giant serpent friend. He was a young man built along much the same lines as Natsu. A little bit taller and slightly thinner, but that was about all the difference in their builds. He had long, maroon colored hair spiked in every direction, tan skin, and slit-pupils set in purple eyes along with prominent canines, which gave him a slight reptilian appearance. This fit Cobra perfectly, considering he was the Poison Dragon Slayer. Though the crystal embedded in him with poison properties wasn't the only thing that set him apart. What had set him apart since he was very young, before he was even a slave here in the Tower of Heaven, was his sense of hearing. It was so acute now that he could use it to predict opponents or, as he was doing now, to take stock of all the battles occurring on and around the island.

The last Ghoul Spirit’s ship had just been struck amidships by several cannon blasts from its enemy, shattering its port side and causing it to list badly. The Rune Knight vessel closed in rapidly, firing as it came, and the last of the summoned animals disappeared as the Ghoul Knights tried to save their ship from sinking to join its fellow. How that ship had been sunk was something Cobra was still shaking his head over. *A little cat could throw out that kind of power?*

As he concentrated his hearing on that portion of the battle, he heard the sound of the Rune Knights using their enchanted armor to fly the short distance between the two ships. There was a noticeable hum as they activated their staffs, creating magic cancellation bubbles as their owners directed. That meant that the battle at sea was over. The Rune Knights, the strangely deadly cat, and the Air magic user with them would soon be able to land and aid their fellows.

*Not that they'll need much help,* he thought angrily. *We severely underestimated the power of these mages and that ranger! Damn it, he crippled the tower’s defense by taking out those cannons.*

The Naked Monkey Guild had been practically wiped out, their members dead or unconscious. Cobra didn't care enough try and listen for their heartbeats. The slaves who had been talked into staying on the island—and, **oh boy**, did Cobra have mixed feelings about that and being back here—were all either taken care of or being taken care of currently. The Fairy Tail Dragon Slayer had just dealt with both of the other former child slaves, Wally and Millianna. They had given him a tough fight using Wally’s polygon-based teleportation abilities to stay out of Natsu's immediate range and Millianna's cattail tubes to try to negate his magic. But in the end he was simply too strong and too fast for them to beat.

“That, and Millianna was distracted at the end there by that damn blue flying cat. Stupid girl,” Cobra muttered, shaking his head as he moved over to the other inhabitant of the room. His best friend, Cubellios, followed him, slithering after him, obedient to his desires even though he hadn't spoken aloud.

The only other inhabitant of waiting area was a similarly built young man with black colored hair spiked up wildly along with bangs of white hanging down his back to go with the overall appearance of a punk rocker, complete with torn off vest, black pants, and black shirt. The look was finished with a line of beads in his hair, dark black lipstick, and a belt-like choker. Though sitting upright on his magic carpet, he was currently asleep.

With a roll of his eyes, Cobra tapped the magic carpet, making it move this way and that. “Get up,” Cobra ordered. “It's time for us to get involved in this, Midnight.”

The so named Midnight scowled, opening his eyes to glare at Cobra. “I thought I told you not to wake me up. Besides, I don't see anything.”

At that point the tower shook below them, and Cobra snorted. “That would be Jiemma and the Ranger who began this mess…or that fucker Jellal and Erza Scarlett. And while Jellal might eventually win his match with Scarlett, Satan Girl Strauss is toying with Narmenius. Once she joins Scarlet, I doubt that Jellal will be able to face them both.”

Scowling, Midnight shook his head, cracking. “So much for the vaunted Trinity Raven. Two of them fly the coop, and the one left is worthless. Remind me to hunt those two down. Traitors deserve death.”

“Don't underestimate these Fairy Tail mages,” Cobra cautioned. “They're not called S-class mages for no reason. I know I wouldn’t look forward to fighting them one-on-one. And that's not even counting the fact that the Ranger’s fighting Jiemma.”

“How's that battle going?” Midnight asked, now fully awake and staring at his fellow guild member.

“I can't tell,” Cobra replied honestly. “I think the Ranger’s winning, if only because his heart doesn't seem to be straining as much as Jiemma’s, and he's so freaking fast! I can sometimes hear his punches suddenly go close to supersonic. The sound is loud even here,” Cobra said, shaking his head. “But Brain ordered us here, and we need to get involved.”

Midnight nodded, moving toward the tower’s windows and staring out. “All right, it looks like the Rune Knights won’t be landing for a bit. I'll deal with Scarlett and Strauss then Jellal and I will join Jiemma. That'll make it three on one against the Ranger. I don't care how good he is, he can’t beat those odds. You keep Natsu out of the tower. Poison him and then meet up with us inside, just in case. We’ll finish their main fighters off, then wipe out the Rune Knights.”

“That Air mage and that deadly little cat might have something to say about that, but I suppose that makes sense. Still can’t believe we’re fighting for Jellal and this fucking tower, though,” Cobra growled, shaking his head as Cubellios hissed in unison next to him.

Both Midnight and Cobra had originally been slaves here in the Tower of Heaven. They, like the others of their guild bar Jiemma and Brain himself, had been sent to Brain as payment for his training Jellal. Brain had then trained all of them too and given them a goal: to find an ancient magical creation called Nirvana that could make all their dreams come true. They willingly followed him after that, plus they all enjoyed the sense of power and freedom being Dark Mages gave them. Angel and Cobra, in particular, saw breaking the law and killing any government flunkies they came across as a way to strike back against those who had caused their years of slavery.

“I know, but we have our orders. And if Jellal dies, didn’t Brain just say we needed his head to find Nirvana? Not anything else?” Midnight asked, smiling sadistically.

“Heh, I like that image,” Cobra snickered. “Still, let’s go. Just remember, head to the western shoreline if things go south. Your magic carpet would never survive the trip to shore.”

Midnight scoffed at that, waving Cobra way. “Please. You know my magic; none of them are even going to touch me.”

**OOOOOOO**

Natsu huffed irritably, shaking his head as he finally came within sight of the entrance to the tower. “Darn it, I spent more time running after those two than actually fighting them! If I get up there and all the fighting’s done, I swear I'm going to challenge Erza right then and there!”

“Aye, she’ll just beat you again, this time in record time!” Happy said from where he was sitting on top of Natsu's head, staring up at the tower.

“Hey!” Natsu growled. “I’m a lot stronger than I used to be! I bet I could beat her now!”

Rather than reply to that, Happy shook his head as an explosion burst out of one side of the tower. “I wouldn't bother thinking that, Natsu. If the towa is rockin’, they’re still afightin’,” he said, trying to imitate either Alzack or Bisca’s accent when they got excited and failing miserably.

“You know one of them would kick your ass if they heard you say something like that, right? And I wouldn’t help you either, not unless you got me some flaming fish,” Natsu said with a smirk, racing toward the entrance to the tower.

“Deal!” Happy said, then gasped. “Natsu, incoming!”

Natsu looked up toward where Happy was pointing and saw someone exit the tower really high up its length before zooming down towards him on what looked like a flying snake of some kind. The snake was huge, easily twice the length of Natsu, and Happy began to shiver at the sight of it, hopping off Natsu’s head and winging away to hide among some nearby rocks. Riding the snake was a man with a long white coat and a feral grin on his face.

“Awesome! It looks as if the fight’s coming to us, Happy!” Natsu shouted, his hands lighting up with his magic fueled fire. Throwing his head back, he pointed his head upwards, bringing up his hands to either side of his mouth as he shouted, “Karyu no Hoko (Fire Dragon’s Roar)!”

Above Natsu, Cobra smirked. “He'll go for a roar first.” Twitching to one side, he sent Cubellios down, to the left and then leaped down, landing lightly on his feet before launching himself forward towards Natsu and Happy. “Dokuryu no Sairi no Kaku (Poison Dragon's Sharp Horn)

Natsu was barely able to cancel out his attack in time to bring up his hand and fist as Cobra’s hand slammed into his forearm, imbuing it with some kind of tactile poison and burning his skin. But Natsu shook that off, kicking out and forcing Cobra to leap backwards.

“What the hell! Another Dragon Slayer?” Natsu growled. “I go for years without meeting any other Dragon Slayer but that ass Laxus, and now I’ve met three in less than a week!?”

“I'm nothing like you, freak! I don't go around telling people I was raised by an extinct species! I bet the other so-called Dragon Slayers are like me and your guildmate, with lacrima embedded in them,” Cobra said with a smirk, taking a combat stance.

“Hah, shows what you know!” Natsu said with a grin, extending his hands to either side and launching himself forward, his hands and feet covered with fire magic. “I'm a real Dragon Slayer, and I'll kick your ass for saying I lie about my being raised by Igneel!”

“You mean you'll try,” Cobra sneered, dodging this way and that. “I can hear your thoughts, fool! You’ll never land a single hit on me!”

Figuring that the upcoming fight with Mirajane, Erza, and Ranma would be a lot tougher than facing the pink-haired Dragon Slayer, Cobra was unwilling to exhaust himself against Natsu through overusing his own magical attacks. Instead he used his aural abilities to hear his opponent’s thoughts, which allowed him to simply dance around Natsu's fists, lashing out as he could. But Natsu in turn dodged so wildly, so instinctively, that most of Cobra’s own attacks missed.

Worse, despite the fact that he could see the attacks coming, that didn't mean he could always dodge them. This was proven an instant after he had just gotten in a good hit on Natsu, making the younger man double up. But instead of trying to launch a headbutt as Cobra had ‘heard,’ Natsu’s entire body lit up with magical fire, and he twisted around on his feet, flinging his hands out to either side as he did so.

*Crap! Have to dodge!* Cobra thought wildly, but too late.

“Karyu no Yokugeki (Fire Dragon’s Wing Attack)!” Natsu shouted, fire flaring out from his arms in the shape of a dragon’s wings.

Having dodged away at the last instant, Cobra was out of range of the majority of Natsu’s attack, but his long coat flared behind him as he rolled, and the tips of the fiery wings caught it, setting the coat alight. Growling, Cobra pulled off his now smoldering white coat and tossed it to the side. “All right, now you've irritated me.”

“Oh?” Natsu said, smirking as he stood upright, his hands still flaring with magical fire. “You’re going to get serious now?”

“You don't even know what serious is, brat,” Cobra growled, ignoring the fact that he was only a few years, if that, older than Natsu. Natsu was part of a legal guild and had been sheltered all of his life, or so Cobra believed, anyway, from the hardships of life. Concentrating briefly, he put his hands together, then thrust them out to the sides, and Natsu watched in astonishment as scales began to appear from Cobra’s elbows down, his fingers changing into claws.

A second later the transformation was finished, and Cobra stood there with the forearms of a dragon, his claws dripping red, the drops sizzling as they reached the ground beneath him. “Dokuryu no Uroko Amuzu (Poison Dragon’s Scale Arms),” Cobra intoned, grinning evilly. “Let's see if you can survive this!”

“That…that’s so cool!” Natsu shouted, sparks flying from his mouth as his eyes sparkled, causing Cobra to skid to a halt as was about to charge forward, gaping at the younger man. “That is so awesome! How can you do that? I wanna have scales like a real dragon like that too!”

Cobra blinked, then blinked again before shaking his head. “You were hit a little too often upside the head as a child, weren’t you.”

“Hey! Those were all love taps! Dad said so!” Natsu shot back.

“That's even worse!” Cobra shouted in response before shaking his head again and charging forward.

The two of them closed once more, throwing punches and kicks, and again Cobra was using his ability to ‘hear his opponent.’ But Natsu was slowly getting better at dodging and trying to see a pattern in Cobra’s own attacks, and Cobra wasn't nearly as good at anticipating his opponent’s ability to dodge, as he was his opponent’s attacks thanks to how instinctually Natsu fought. At one point his magic told him that Natsu was going to try and grab him, but he could see his own attack nicking Natsu’s chin and neck with his poison claws, and, since his dragon scales still covering his forearms were almost as poisonous as his actual nails, he didn’t think that even this idiot would go through with the idea in his mind.

This showed that Cobra did not yet understand Natsu's sheer stubbornness. Even as his hands began to smoke, Natsu still clung on to Cobra’s forearm and twisted, throwing Cobra over his should to land with a crash on the ground. Despite his eyes widening in shock, Cobra kicked out quickly, catching Natsu on the forehead when Natsu went for a follow on blow. He flipped onto his hands and pushed himself up and away while Natsu growled and came after him.

Then Natsu made the mistake of looking away as Happy raced between them, screaming, “No, you can’t! Cat isn’t tasty at all! Go get some fish or something!”

The snake had not joined the battle just yet, instead having caught sight of Happy. Staring at the small furry creature, it slithered towards Happy, who had been slow in noticing the danger. Happy had still been able to get away, being rather agile and very fast on his little feet. But his screaming cost his friend.

“Looking away in a fight? Dokuryu no Hoko (Poison Dragon's Roar)!” Natsu turned back around and caught a face full of the poison-charged attack, which enveloped him from head to toe.

Natsu was flung backwards several yards, rolling over the rocky ground as he clutched at his neck, gasping in agony and having no choice but to breathe in the assault as he tried to push himself to his feet. His skin almost immediately began to turn green, his legs going wobbly under him.

Giving Natsu no chance to breathe, Cobra immediately launched another attack, throwing one hand forward. A miasma of red and black Poison magic gathered around his hand in the shape of a snake’s head, its maw open. The attack flashed forward towards Natsu. **“**Dokuryu no Hitotsuki no Kiba (Poison Dragon’s Fang Thrust)!”

The attack slammed into the wobbling Natsu's chest, hurling him backwards once more to land on his back on the ground. Slowly, he pushed himself to his feet, only to meet a punch in the face, sending him back down. A stomp kick was barely dodged, but he couldn’t could get away from the Poison Dragon Slayer, and when he tried to get off of the ground another kick caught him in the face.

Growling, Natsu roared, “Karyu no Afutaabaanaa (Fire Dragon’s Afterburner)!” From his feet Natsu thrust out his fire magic and as if he was a rocket, Natsu flew backwards across the ground. Then he twisted, flipping himself forwards, and shot his hands forward and out. Magic flared away from him in a wave of fire that dissipated Cobra’s next attack. The two of them stared at one another, Natsu now wobbling on his feet, his whole body trembling from the poison. His arm and his chest also burnt like he had been struck by acid.

By this time, Happy had taken to the air in an effort to escape the giant snake. Then he screamed as the snake sprouted its own wings, which looked like something from a wyvern rather than a bird or angel. With those wings it swiftly chased after the tasty little morsel, more agile in the air than Happy, but not quite as fast.

Happy banked this way and that, trying to dodge, heading back down towards the ground for a second, then rising quickly, but always the snake was there. Seeing the snake's partner standing still for a moment, he shifted his flight in that direction, a cunning plan coming to him.

He raced down towards Cobra, who turned lazily, staring up at him. “Really? You think you’ll surprise me with an attack like that?”

“Aye, sir!” Happy shouted, and then he canceled his Aera magic, trying to aim to land on Cobras face, with Cubellios right behind him.

Or that was his intent. Instead, Cobra simply hopped to one side and lashed out, catching Happy with a chop that sent him flying to the side to slam into a nearby rock. Staring between the now unconscious Happy and the very poisoned Natsu who had just fallen to his knees, Cobra snorted. “Let's go, Cubellios. We’re done here. You can come back for a snack later after we've dealt with the rest of these Fairy flies.”

Hissing sibilantly, Cubellios moved towards her master, allowing him to affectionately pat her on the head for a moment before Cobra stepped onto her back, and the snake once more conjured up its wings, flying into the air. “If this was all a so-called ‘real’ Dragon Slayer could do, I'll take being a fake any day,” he said dryly, waving goodbye to Natsu as Cubellios ascended further up the tower. “Enjoy the next few moments of agony. They'll be the last moments you’ll ever have with that much poison in you.”

Natsu growled, but could do nothing but watch as Cobra disappeared from sight upwards. He pounded the ground ineffectually. Then, gritting his teeth, he laboriously turned over and pushed up off the ground with all fours until he stood upright again. The world wavered around him, and he could feel his body shaking from head to toe now, but Natsu would be damned if he let some poison stop him like this.

“Besides, my Dragon Slayer durability will deal with it. Maybe. Hopefully,” he muttered, growling. “Anytime now…”

Moving slowly, Natsu moved over to Happy, kneeling down, picking him up, and moving him to a nearby rock in the sunlight. “You’ll be safe here, little buddy. I’ll be right back…” Ignoring a second wave of dizziness and weakness, he pushed on, glaring at up at the tower. Slowly, with great deal of pain, he entered the tower and began to look for the stairs.

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma couldn't dodge a punch in time, the blow catching him square on the side of his head, rattling his jaw and sending him skidding back. But he used that intervening distance to bring up his leg in a roundhouse kick that caught Jiemma in the side just under his guard, and he pushed off of that hit to once more leap into the air.

A series of blows rained down on the giant’s head, but Jiemma raised his hands and blocked most, then grabbed Ranma as he was just a second too slow pulling back on a punch. Pulling him in, Jiemma hammered another blow into Ranma and then held on grimly, trying to pound Ranma into the dirt.

In turn Ranma blocked most of Jiemma’s punches, redirecting the force of them even as explosions went off all around them from those blows. The force of those explosions also carried into Ranma’s body, but, despite his issues with his Dragon Slayer given durability and his ki durability fighting and weakening one another, he could shrug off explosive blows like this just like he could take a blow from a devil.

Between one blow and the next Ranma redirected Jiemma’s fist upwards, pulled his own fist back, and thrust it forward into the giant’s unprotected shoulder, shouting, “Soryu no Saiga (Water Dragon’s Crushing Fang)!”

Jiemma gasped in pain, but his body’s durability was up to this attack, the water claw instead flinging him backwards. He skidded to a halt slowly, then brought his hands together in an almighty clap, pointing them towards Ranma. “Explosive Trial!”

“Soryu no Taitan Panchi! (Water Dragon's Titan Punch)!” Ranma shouted in return, and from his own forward thrust fist flashed the watery fist of a giant. It caught Jiemma's magic, shattering it, then moved on, crashing into Jiemma and hurling him back through the wall of the tower.

For all his magic, Jiemma couldn’t fly from this far above solid ground. He roared in panic as he was launched out past the island and over the ocean.

Wiping at some blood that had accumulated on his lip from the blow which had caught him in the head, Ranma felt his ki healing go to the work on a broken rib of his own and a badly twisted knee. Gritting his teeth, he set it again, wincing at the pain of it, then smirked as he stared out over and through the hole he made. “Towers. They just don't make them like they used to.”

Suddenly Ranma saw something within the stone of the tower and crouched down to stare at it, not noticing a magic carpet racing down towards where Jiemma had started to fall through the air. “What the heck? Is that lacrima embedded there?” He punched at the edge of the hole, and the rocks there came away, revealing a thin inner wall of crystal. It had been sandwiched between an outer layer of stone and a much thinner inner one of concrete or brick. “What in the hell is going on with this tower?”

Sixth sense blaring at him, Ranma threw himself sideways as something wide and sharp cut into the ground where he had just been standing. Twisting, Ranma glared at his new attacker.

Behind him stood another mage, younger than Ranma, maybe, looking more like a punk rocker than anyone Ranma had seen since the Death’s Head Caucus mage in Pergrande. “You giving out tickets to a show or something? I'm not exactly a fan of heavy metal.”

“Funny,” the man said with a sneer. “It will be even funnier when I’m standing over your corpse.”

Ranma rolled his eyes. “Right, like I haven’t heard that one before.” Without another word he leaped forward, his hands glowing with magic as he threw them in front of his charge. “Soryu no Doriru Kagitsume (Water Dragon’s Drilling Claw)!”

The other young man simply raised a hand lazily. “Distort Shield.”

To Ranma’s astonishment, his attack reflected back towards him, slamming into him with none of its force having dissipated, turning Ranma into his female form. She grunted in pain as she was thrown back into another portion of the tower’s wall hard enough to crater it, coming away with much of the inner wall lining falling around behind her to reveal more lacrima. “What the hell?”

“The name is Midnight Ranger. Remember it as you die,” Midnight said, swiping his hand forward and pointing with his outstretched index finger. He completely ignored Ranma’s sex-change, having been warned about it by Jellal. “Spiral Pain!”

The air around Ranma’s body distorted and hurled her away, crashing backwards once more into another portion of the wall. But, beyond that momentum, this magical attack, nearly invisible, hit every part of her body like she had just been hit by even more powerful blows than Jiemma’s Explosive Magic. Ranma could feel bruises appear all over her skin, and she fell to her knees, dazed for a moment.

Then Jiemma was back, leaping down from the magic carpet that Midnight had sent to save him before engaging the Ranger. “I don't need your help. whelp,” Jiemma growled.

Midnight smirked. “Not from where I was standing. Or was that someone else I just sent my magic carpet to save?”

Roaring in rage, Jiemma turned away from Midnight and leaped up into the air, his entire body glowing with Explosive Magic before accumulating it in his hands as he brought them down in an overhead hammer blow as Ranma tried to get to her feet. She barely had time for her eyes to widen before Jiemma’s bunched fists smashed into the back of her head. “Explosive Hurricane!”

The blow smashed Ranma into the floor head first, shattering the ground all around her as Ranma grimaced in agony. *Thank God, I've got a hard head! s*he thought as the explosive magic continued to blast into the back of her head, hurling the redhead through the shattered ground and downwards.

Mid-air in a room in the next floor down, Ranma twisted around, pulling out her guns and firing them a few times up into the hole, making Jiemma back away. But Midnight kept on coming, the bullets simply bouncing away from him as he held up a hand and hopped through the hole Ranma’s body had created.

Landing on her feet easily, Ranma pushed herself up off the ground with a “Soryu no Takameru Ho (Water Dragon’s Boosted Step)!” hurling her upwards. Midnight again threw out his hand, but to his astonishment Ranma didn’t cover her hand with magic.

No, while Ranma’s upward leap was being fueled by her magic, the attack wasn’t. Midnight’s magic, Reflector, could twist, warp, or simply block any magic or object he wished, but not living things. The geyser under Ranma twisted, attempting to rear up and hit her, but too slowly. By the time it did, sending Ranma sideways through the air of the tower, her punch had already smashed into Midnight’s chest.

Midnight gasped in agony as the blow hammered into his chest, hurling him backwards up towards Jiemma, who was forced to duck out of the way. But, thanks to her attack having been twisted underneath her, Ranma’s blow was barely more than a tap for him. This allowed Midnight to recover rather than be broken in half, as he might have been otherwise.

He did so, his eyes wide and his breath coming in gasps as he stared at Ranma in fearful rage before shouting at Jiemma. “You fucking oldie, help me out here!”

Jiemma and Midnight then both began long-range attacks, Jiemma’s Explosive Trial and Midnight shrieking, “Invisible Scythe!”

The blunt force of the Explosive Trial hit Ranma as she was recovering from her own magic, once more smashing her out of the air. But she felt the shift in the air of Midnight’s attack coming and desperately thrust herself sideways, rolling away through the dust and debris of the level of the tower she was currently fighting on. It was a relatively normal looking area, with numerous rooms and one long hallway connecting the ascending and descending stairs.

That was all gone now, utterly destroyed by the attacks from the two Dark Mages. Ranma’s own replying attacks were blocked or deflected, even hurled back at her, and Ranma growled. *FUCK, this has suddenly become a lot tougher. What the hell is with that monochrome bastard?! Okay, so that one punch I threw got through whatever magic he’s using to bend my assault back at me, but then… Is it that simple? He can only do that to magic? Only one way to find out…*

Ducking behind one internal wall that had already been struck by the attacks coming from on high, Ranma looked around, beginning to memorize the layout of the area while also waiting for a break in the attacks to make a run for the far stairs leading up. *Or should I just go for one of the holes in the ceiling? Nah, too risky. Going to have to try for the stairs…*

**OOOOOOO**

*“We've been betrayed!”* Sho said telepathically as he held the communication card to his forehead, sending his thoughts out through it towards his friends all over the tower. Indeed, his mental voice was reaching everyone he knew in the tower, both the friends close to his own age and the other ex-slaves who had remained on the island with them to finish the tower. *“Jellal has been lying to us all this time! He never intended to let us all build our own paradise with the magic accumulated in the tower! No, he wants to bring back the same Dark Mage that the cultists worshipped! He's been using us all along!”*

Though he wasn't part of the communication, Jellal could still see Sho with the communication card on his forehead and growled angrily, hurling Erza away for a moment from where the two of them had slammed into one another once more. Raising his hand he thrust out his magic. “That's enough out of you, Sho!”

Rolling from where she had been hurled, Erza could only watch in horror as the magic slammed into and then through her old friend, bursting out his back and leaving a gaping hole where his chest should've been. “No!”

**OOOOOOO**

Ranma looked up from where she had been looking forward to see Natsu coming up the stairs in the other direction. He looked a little out of it, too, and very battered. There was a small fire in one hand made of the word ‘fire’ in one hand, but he wasn’t eating it, just staring straight ahead of him with a thousand mile stare.

He was also not looking around him at all as he stepped into Jiemma and Midnight’s impromptu killing zone. “God damn shit!” Ranma roared, leaping out of her hiding place and racing towards Natsu. She barely covered the distance in time to knock the pinkette out of the way of the near invisible air slash attacks that Midnight was continually launching down at him. They rolled away through the debris, with Ranma pulling Natsu along until they were hidden again, the two Dark Mages halting their attack for the moment.

“What the fuck, Natsu!” Ranma whispered harshly. “Come on, man, you need to be aware of your surroundings.”

“Erza? No, she’s bigger and not as squishy when she tackles you,” Natsu groaned. He tried to push himself to his feet, but Ranma pushed him back down. “Ugh, get off; need to go; need to find that snaky bastard…”

“Natsu!” Ranma shouted, then rolled them both away as the lacrima wall they had been hiding behind dissipated. They fell through a hole in the floor, but Ranma grabbed the side of it and flipped them both away. “You’re in no fucking shape to fight anyone! Fuck, you nearly got yourself killed twice now, and me with it!”

The two of them landed in what looked like a bathroom, while the two Dark Mages began to try to bring the floor above them down. This was a sound move on their part, since both of them knew by this point that Ranma was at his (at present, her) most dangerous in close combat, and the more range they had to play with, the better.

The fact that Midnight was terrified under his angry exterior thanks to the one blow Ranma had already landed on him was also a reason for their desire to keep Ranma away from them. Even now he was only just starting to bring himself under control from his earlier scare.

“Gotta, gotta go! Fairy Tail mages don’t give up! I ain’t si, sick; I’m just hungry, that’s all!” Natsu growled back, trying to push Ranma away.

Ranma frowned, staring into Natsu’s eyes. As weak as his body was, there was nothing weak about the glare Natsu was giving him. *Huh, this kid’s will is something else. Really, what do they feed their mages in Fairy Tail? R*anma thought for the second time, if for an entirely different reason.

“In that case, maybe you should eat that fire in your hand before you keel over, huh?” Ranma said, pushing to her feet. “You said something about a snaky bastard?”

Natsu blinked, looking down at his hand, which still held the word fire that was made of fire. He had run into Levy earlier, who had first tried to help him, but they had, in turn, run into someone else: a huge guy whose name Natsu hadn’t registered. There had been something else, the big guy looking up at nothing and then words were exchanged as Natsu moved off deeper into the tower. Then Levy had run up to him, pressed the fire word into his hand, and raced off, moving back to the big guy.

“Hmm, his name’s Cobra, I think. He attacked me and Happy outside. Knocked out Happy and poisoned me, then ran off before we could finish the fight,” Natsu said, growling the words as he chomped down on the fire, eating it all in one gulp. “Mmm, tasty.”

Looking up, Ranma scowled as the noise of shattering masonry came closer. Her scowl turned into a full on frown as something began to drain her magical reserves into the crystals all around them. Then Ranma looked on in shock as Natsu, who had also felt the drain, only worse than Ranma, grabbed up the nearest bit of crystal and bit into it. “Natsu, what’re you…”

“Dragon Slayers can eat other elements sometimes if they need a quick power up,” Natsu growled, now finally pushing himself to his feet. “And I need it now.” He nearly stumbled, scales began to appear on his face and hands, pressing through his skin, almost, or maybe his skin was just morphing. Ranma couldn’t tell.

Ranma, of course, knew that, since she had experimented with eating both Laxus’ and Wendy’s power. Eating Wendy’s hadn’t made Ranma as wiped as Laxus’ had after the initial power up, but it hadn’t been fun either, and his/her ki—she had been male when she tried it with Laxus and female when she tried it with Wendy—had not liked the infusion of draconic magic **at all**. *Still, that’s for later. And maybe eating the lacrima won’t be as bad as eating another element raw?*

“Fine,” she snarled, making Natsu back up rapidly, as she sounded more than a bit like an angry dragon just then. “But that means we need to get you past these assholes. Fuck.” Ranma looked around, then shook her head. “I’m going to draw their fire, Natsu. You sneak over to those staircases; use them to get past these assholes. Don’t try to engage them; just get past them, understand?”

Gulping, Natsu nodded, staring across at the distant stairwell.

This was why he missed the moment when Ranma hopped out of their hiding space to the rapidly widening hole in the ceiling Jiemma and Midnight were making. “Moko Takabisha!” she shouted, a cerulean and gold sphere around the size of her torso shooting upwards. An instant later four more spheres followed, then they were joined an instant later by a Soryu no Tachi Kagitsume (Water Dragon's Cutting Claw).

Midnight waved his hand only to scowl as the attack didn’t bend away nearly as much as it should have. The attack still missed, but not by as much as it should have. On the heels of that attack were others. Midnight tried to twist them away, but, while the water one bent away as it should have, the others again fought his control, causing Midnight to panic and wave his hand this way and that, trying to force his magic to work and twisting the attacks wildly around.

Seeing this, Jiemma backed away from their vantage point to get out of the way of any errant attacks. This helped him, but also meant that he, like the panicking Nightmare, missed Natsu racing across the lower floor to the stairs leading up.

However, Natsu’s troubles didn’t end after he was past the two Dark Mages. The stairwell ended abruptly in a wall of rubble, forcing him to figure out his own way up. And as anyone who knew Natsu also knew all too well, he didn’t do subtle…

**OOOOOOO**

Erza attacked wildly, faster and stronger than she had before, but her fury at Sho’s death had caused her to go berserk. More and more holes were appearing in her defense, and Jellal began to beat her back, hard.

A blow caught Erza on the nose, shattering it and spraying half her face with blood. As she tried to stab Jellal through the chest, he dodged and lashed out again, hitting her on the shoulder. Her armored pauldron cracked, but Erza remained unhurt. Her return attacks were so wildly telegraphed that Jellal had no problems dodging them, even though he was still having a bit of trouble with the fact that Erza kept on changing weapons on him. The number of different speeds, different ranges, and blade types threw him off something fierce, yet, as she was now, Era could no longer truly use that to her advantage.

A kick caught Erza in the center of her chest, doubling her over, and another kick flashed around, catching her in the head. She stumbled to her knees, wincing in pain as she attempted to rise, but Jellal stomped on her back, slamming her back down to the ground. “Ha! If I knew that killing off a friend of yours in front of you would've made you this predictable, I would've made a far greater effort to kill that blue haired girl at the beginning of our fight.”

Erza growled angrily at that, trying to push upwards, but Jellal pushed her back down, his magic enhancing his strength. He reached down with his free hand to grab her hair.

“Get away from her!” A blow Jellal never saw coming caught him in the side of his face, smashing through his magical armor and nearly breaking his jaw. It did succeed in shattering several of his teeth and hurling him backwards, despite the magical aura around his body.

“W,fhat, whgho…” Jellal gasped through his ruined mouth. He then put one hand on his jaw and swiftly backed away, scowling angrily as Mirajane stood there.

Fighting the former guild master had been irritating, more than anything else. He had been very experienced and could teleport around the place thanks to some spells embedded in his armor. But despite his ability to create weapons on the fly and manipulate them telekinetically, to Mira it had simply been a matter of time before he was dealt with. After that she had flown to the tower and entered it at the topmost level, figuring to start at the top.

“Aw, look at that. Sorry I ruined your pretty boy looks, there,” the Devilish woman said with a wicked smirk on her face. She turned slightly, glaring down at Erza. “Heh, that’s a good look for ya, ginger. But being beaten up by the pretty boy? That’s not like my old rival at all. Not that I can’t understand why you're angry,” she said, her eyes flicking over to Sho’s dead body. “But if you keep on acting all wild like this you’ll never get anywhere, iron princess.”

Erza glared up at her, but slowly brought herself under control, pushing to her feet, wincing at her injuries and dabbing at her nose. She then straightened it with a snap, causing Mirajane to wince at the sound, before wiping away the blood on her face. She then Requipped a new set of armor. This time she wasn't pulling any punches. She summoned up her Heaven’s Wheel armor, and swords began to flash all around her for a moment before disappearing once more, now cocked and loaded in her Requip space, ready to be launched as she willed them. In either hand was a sword with wings on it, matching the wings covering her back. “You're right, Mirajane, and I apologize for my loss of control. But now let us finish this!”

Jellal backed away further, looking between the two S-class mages, very, very worried for a moment. Luckily for him, help arrived in the form of Cobra flying in on Cubellios before the two S-class women could charge. At his command, Cubellios flew towards Mirajane, who turned quickly, fist lashing out at the snake, which pulled up abruptly.

At the same time, Cobra launched an attack at Erza. “Dokuryu no Hoko (Poison Dragon's Roar)!”

Erza adroitly brought up her sword, flashing out a wind strike that cut through Cobra’s attack, and then began to launch more swords both at him and Jellal, causing both of them to dodge backwards. Those first few were joined by hundreds more in an instant. Each of them flew forward as fast as a bullet, the entire wave of them under the control of Erza’s mind and each moving separately from its fellows. This caused merry hell for Cobra, since it was like trying to hear a single voice in a crowd to pick out which sword was going to attack him or Jellal, and he was forced to fall back on his instincts.

“Finish off that snake! I’ll hold these two off!”

“Don’t order me around, Red! Devil Spark!” Mirajane shouted, and a ball of purple and black magical energy blasted out from her hand, nearly catching Cubellios in the face. The snake dodged to one side, hissing, as the blast of Satan magic flashed past its face close enough to sear her scales a little. Then it had to wildly flail around, trying desperately to stay away from the punches and kicks that Mirajane was throwing at it with her clawed and scaled hands.

Despite its surprising amount of agility, the snake couldn’t dodge a kick to the chest and then with a shout of, “Soul Extinctor!” a large black and purple beam of power caught Cubellios in the center of her back, hurling her away.

Cobra had been forced to concentrate on Erza, though he had believed this a good idea too, believing that Erza was exhausting herself further after a hard battle. But once more under control and with her favorite combat armor on, Erza quickly proved that to be wishful thinking. The blades she sent at them continued to flash, appearing and disappearing, hurling themselves at Cobra and Jellal from every direction, their edges sharp enough to mark even a Dragon Slayer’s body or Jellal's aura of magical armor. Indeed, it was Jellal who was slowly succumbing to exhaustion. Cobra could hear that in his hated ally, loud and clear, whereas Erza’s mind was still as sharp and deadly as her blades, even if her feelings were obscured by the number of blades she was moving around.

Luckily for the two Dark Mages, Cobra was almost fresh despite having fought Natsu earlier. He quickly began to take center stage in the fight, allowing Jellal to back away, hurling out his own long-range attacks in an effort to defend against the vast swarm of blades. “Dokuryu no Uroko (Poison Dragon's Scales)!” This forced Erza to use her swords to absorb or redirect the poison scales coming towards her and Mira.

This in turn allowed Mira to go on the offense, now that Cubellios was down. “Evil Explosion!”

An enraged Cobra was still able to correctly sense the first attack coming and dodge, but even though he sensed the next one coming he was too slow to avoid the blow that followed, though his claws also caught Mira on the side, the two of them blasting one another apart in a duel of “Dokuryu no Tsuinkiba (Poison Dragon’s Twin Fang)!” and “Satan Blast!”

As the Poison Dragon Slayer fought Erza and Mira, Jellal backed away with alacrity, racing backwards towards his throne, which had remained untouched during the battle. There he slammed his hands down on the armrests, activating an enchantment that he had added to the tower for just this purpose.

Cobra grunted as another Darkness Stream got through his defense, causing him to be hurled backwards once more. He was about to turn and shout at Jellal for help when he suddenly began to feel a drain on his magical reserves. He watched as both of the attackers also felt it, Mirajane stumbling to one side, and Erza actually gasping, nearly going to one knee and having to use one of her winged swords to stay on her feet. At the same time, the stones all around them began to shiver and quake, the covering rocks sloughing off to reveal the lacrima underneath.

Jellal laughed wildly, twisting himself around and launched himself forward into a Meteor assault. He caught both Mirajane and Erza, hurling them into the center of the room before skidding to a halt himself and bounding away, shouting, “Activate!”

Cobra watched in something approaching shock as a magical circle appeared in the center of the room, all around Mirajane and Erza. The draining effect he was still feeling must've been multiplied in that circle several times as both women began to gasp in pain, before pushing themselves up and out of the field with difficulty.

“You bastard!” Cobra growled, staring at Jellal. “That was some of my power you drained! Midnight’s and Jiemma’s too!”

“Worry about that later. We have to win this fight first!” Jellal barked back, racing forward once more to engage Erza. Having absorbed the magic of those within the tower, he was almost back to being fresh again, and now Erza was the one getting tired.

Grimacing, Cobra understood the inherent logic of Jellal's position and even understood why Jellal had set something like that up. That didn't mean he had to like it, and it was just one more thing about Jellal that made him think longingly about betraying the bastard and sticking a knife in his back. *Still, he’s right. We have to concentrate on the fight right in front of us.*

By this time Mira had pushed up and out of the central draining array and was closing swiftly, firing off an “Evil Spark!” that caught Cobra in the side, him being too busy glaring at Jellal to use his Sound Magic. He could feel his skin searing and a few ribs going. *Dammit, even drained she is so strong!* he thought, glaring first at Mirajane then at Erza. *Is this the strength of an S-class mage of Fairy Tail?*

Concentrating on Mira now, Cobra activated his Sound magic, which made dodging easier but not always certain. Mira was much stronger and faster than Natsu and seemed to compensate for his ability to hear her attacks coming within a few seconds of their exchanging blows. Worse, her forearms were covered by heavy scales that seemed to ignore his poison powers.

But then Cobra saw Cubellios slowly lifting her head from where she had been hurled by Mira’s earlier spell.An idea came to Cobra’s mind then, and he began to give ground, moving around in a circle until Mirajane’s back was towards Cubellios. He took a few more hits than he might have otherwise, his forearm scales searing off in places and his shoulder getting heavily bruised, but it worked.

Mirajane didn't feel her danger until it was too late. Behind her Cubellios reared up, thrusting her head forward and biting deeply into Mirajane's thigh right above where her thigh high bootsended. This opened her up for a blast of Cobra’s magic, and he capitalized instantly. “Dokuryu no Saiga (Poison Dragon’s Crushing Fang)!”

Even with Cubellios’s venom now doing its dirty work in her body, she was able to throw up her forearm, taking his attack on it before returning a wide angle blast that would have caught him from below if he hadn’t heard it coming. The “Darkness Stream!” acted more as a defense, forcing them apart.

Still, the damage was done. Cubellios’s venom was much, **much** more powerful than Cobra’s poison, and Mirajane staggered backwards. She kicked Cubellios away, sending the snake flying, but her vision blurred as she did. Mira then slid to one knee, her thigh now red and green, pulsing with the poison.

With Cubellios once more returned to his side, Cobra nodded at his snake, and both of them breathe in, preparing a dual attack. Just as Cobra was about to launch his attack he heard a sound, and he pushed off of the ground. “Cubellios, fly!”

The floor underneath him shattered from some kind of pressure below. From out from the hole Natsu pulled himself up slowly, growling as he glared daggers at Cobra. But something was different from the last time Cobra had seen him. Natsu looked almost feral now, crouching there on the ground, his eyes smoldering, and little scales were appearing on his face as Cobra watched in thunderstruck amazement. “You, you should be dead by now! What the hell!? I pumped you full of enough poison to down an entire town!”

Growling, Natsu reached down and grabbed up a chunk of the Lacrima of the tower, chomping down on it. A second later the scales on his face expanded, and one of his eyes turned almost reptilian, even more so than Cobra’s.

From nearby where he had crossed blades with Erza again, Jellal gasped. “He is taking in some of the power from the tower! Dragon Slayers can eat elements and other things like that, but I've never heard of one being able to eat lacrima!””

Erza spared her friend a glance of concern, noting how feral and wild his appearance was. But then Natsu almost disappeared from her senses, crossing the distance between himself and Cobra in a single flashing bound. A howl that made Erza’s ears ring accompanied the move. “Karyu no Hougou (Fire Dragon's Howl)!!!”

It was much worse for the target of that howl. Cobra reeled, his hands flying up to his ears as he screamed in pain. “GAAHHHH!!”

Despite the poison affecting his body, despite the fact that his mind was being affected by the exertion of his taking in the magic of the lacrima he had been chomping on, Natsu had devised an actual plan to deal with Cobra. Cobra had boasted during their fight that he could hear his opponent’s thoughts and had, indeed, seemed to dodge Natsu’s attacks before he even launched them a lot of the time. This told Natsu that his hearing was even more acute than a normal Dragon Slayer’s. It then stood to reason that a loud noise would work on him even better than it would have on Natsu.

Natsu’s howl completely flooded Cobra’s ability to see his opponents’ attacks coming and almost entirely paralyzed him. He couldn't dodge as Natsu finally slammed into him, roaring out, “Karyu no Reijingu Tosshin (Fire Dragon's Raging Charge)! Round two, bastard!” His charge slammed Cobra back through the wall of the tower and out into the air, now grabbing him by the front of his shirt and pummeling his free hand into Cobra’s face.

Flying towards the tower, Wendy and Carla saw them plummeting out of the tower, Natsu’s pink hair distinctive as they closed. The Rune Knight ship had finally docked with the island, and Wendy had decided to make her way towards the tower, thinking the others might need her healing ability, if nothing else.

Now seeing Natsu and another man plummeting down followed by a giant snake, she decided to interfere. “Tenryu no Yokugeki (Sky Dragon's Wing Attack)!” she shouted, flashing her hands forward and sending blades of air towards the snake. It saw them coming and dodged wildly, showing an agility in the air that Wendy could scarcely credit.

Meanwhile, Cobra had regained the upper hand. His face was bleeding from numerous cut, his jaw was swollen, and his nose was a smashed and shattered mess along with a long gash from his hairline down his chin, which had nearly cost him his eye. But he had replied to all this by nearly gouging Natsu’s eyes out with the claws of one hand, and he had sunk the claws of his other hand into Natsu’s side, Natsu’s feral mindset messing with his ability to defend himself.

And while the odd infusion of magic he had taken from the lacrima had allowed his Dragon Slayer durability to beat off the poison, it hadn’t spread throughout his skin yet. Now Cobra pulsed his magic through that contact. “Dokuryu no Akugeki (Poison Dragon’s Grip Strike)!”

This blew Natsu away from him. Now apart, they continued to plummet downwards, with Natsu slowly losing consciousness, his draconic scales disappearing as his consciousness faded.

Seeing this, Wendy shouted, “Carla, go help Natsu-san!” With that she unlatched the series of buckles that connected Carla to her back, dropping free and racing down through the air, her hands spread out to either side as she used one spell to slow her descent before launching her breath attack at Cobra. “Tenryu no Hoko!”

The blast of hurricane force, magically infused air crashed into Cobra, whose ears were still bleeding from Natsu’s earlier assault. He cried out in pain as he was slammed into the side of the tower, thrusting out his hands desperately. But like Natsu, Cobra had no spell designed for defense beyond his passive Sound magic. He was still a Dragon Slayer, though, so instead of ripping his arms apart as the attack might well have for most mages, it simply opened up a few gashes in a few places from finger to shoulder, then did the same to his bruised chest. But the attack continued as Cobra continued to fall.

An instant after the attack began he came down on one of the openings that had housed a cannon before Ranma had destroyed it. Desperately, Cobra pushed himself off the top of the mangled cannon and back into the tower, rolling away.

Huffing, Wendy began to hop down through the air, wondering if she should go after whoever that was. *And did I hear him use a Dragon Slayer’s attack earlier?*

Her attention was pulled away from that idea by Carla’s shrill cry. “Wendy, Natsu’s been poisoned, **badly**! He needs your help right away!”

With that Wendy immediately turned around, hopping towards her falling friend and Natsu. As she did, she noticed out of the corner of her eye, Happy flying up towards them. Even the blue-furred Exceed looked wrung out from the fighting.

Gasping as he lay on his side inside the tower somewhere, Cobra shook his head wearily, staring down at his battered body. While his attacks were dangerous, even deadly, Cobra’s Poison Dragon Slayer powers hadn’t elevated his durability to anywhere near the level the two other Dragon Slayers in this fight seemed to have. *Maybe that girl won’t be as durable, but I’m in no shape to find out.* On top of the thin, bleeding lacerations that marked him in various places from the waist up, Cobra had felt at least one rib go during his battle with Natsu just now, and his face was throbbing from chin to hairline.

That was enough, Cobra decided. *No way in hell am I going to fight to the death here for this fucking tower!*

He whistled audibly through his teeth to call for Cubellios, then limped away, moving through the tower towards the side facing the open ocean past the island. *Time for us to get out of here, whatever that bastard Jellal wants!*

**OOOOOOO**

Elsewhere, Midnight would have questioned that decision, considering that he believed he and Jiemma were winning right now. They continued to randomly throw attacks down from their vantage point through one of the many holes that had been created in this section of the tower every time they saw a glimmer of movement in the floor below, thinking it was the Ranger. And though rather worried about the one blow Oceana had landed on him, Midnight was still confident that his magic, Reflector, would keep him safe.

But Ranma had long since disappeared under the Umi-Sen-Ken once again and was actually now moving up behind them after having covered for Natsu earlier.  *With the way my body’s feeling, I need to make this attack count. My ki healing’s kicking in, but I’ve already been pushing it against Jiemma.*  Whatever magic Midnight had been throwing around had felt to Ranma like she had been pressed down by the crushing depths he had trained in with Typhon without any of the defenses she had built up to it. Even Jiemma's explosive powers didn't hurt nearly as much, because most of the time those powers were concentrated and able to be slightly redirected or dodged. Ranma hadn’t been able to dodge this and had barely been able to see it coming at all. That made it deadly, and she needed to do something about it.

Because of that, Midnight was her target.

For his part, Midnight was still dealing with the terror of someone being able to actually hit him as Ranma padded up behind him. “Where is he!? Does he have some kind of invisibility spell?”

“He wasn't using it against me, brat,” Jiemma growled, irritated both by Midnight’s mere presence and the fact that earlier they had both felt some of their magic being drained by the lacrima structure of the tower. “Just keep looking; he's down there somewhere. We have to crush them before meeting up with Cobra and the blue-haired psychopath!”

“This whole job is fucking with my head,” Midnight muttered, shaking his head while voicing some of his fears. “What the hell was that attack he used earlier? And, more importantly, how did he get that hit on me before?” That was still freaking Midnight out, frankly.

“Like this,” Ranma said, coming out from behind, the Umi-Sen-Ken disappearing as she took the final step between her and Midnight, that opening having just been too good for Ranma to ignore.

Midnight turned with desperate speed, taking the blow that would've caught him in the back on his forearm, not that this was the soft option. Unlike Jiemma or Cobra, Midnight had no real defense against Ranma's sheer physical strength even when it wasn’t coupled with his magic or ki. Midnight’s forearm shattered like a dry twig, and he was hurled backwards into the hole between that floor and the one below, screaming in pain.

But Jiemma turned, showing speed that was unusual for such a large man, catching Ranma hard in the side with an Explosion-Magic aided punch, hurling her backwards. She grunted in pain, that blow having hurt a lot more than anything else she had felt during this fight due to her accumulated injuries from the hits she’d taken covering Natsu. Her durability was now slowly giving way as was her ki’s ability to heal her wounds. *I will seriously need to figure out a solution to that issue!*

This momentary weakness allowed Jiemma to get in another uppercut, and he empowered it with as much of his magic as he could, like he had the double overhand blow that he used to slam Ranma through the floor in the first place. “Explosive Uppercut!”

The blow landed on Ranma’s chin and threw her through the air, slamming her into and through the ceiling, and then it kept pushing her upwards. Ranma shook her head angrily. *Dammit, that'll teach me. In a serious fight I have to ignore verbal openings like that.*

As Jiemma closed in, Ranma twisted, her legs flashing out to grab Jiemma's head between them. She then flipped them around and, grabbing at Jiemma with her hands, broke the grip of her legs as she flipped them both around until Jiemma was above Ranma with her legs facing downwards. There was a large flash of blue magic around her legs, and Ranma shouted, “Soryu no Buusuto Suuho (Sky Dragon's Boosted Steps)!” From her feet flashed a geyser of water, thrusting both of them up, crashing through over a dozen floors.

Jiemma tried to break free, tried to bring his fists to bear, tried to use his explosive aura to push Ranma off. But Ranma clung to him like grim death with one arm, using the other to ward off his blows and ignoring the damage Jiemma was doing to her with his explosive aura, because she was more concerned with removing Jiemma from where Midnight had fallen than trying to finish Jiemma off at the moment. The older man's durability was no joke, and Ranma knew that if she stopped and tried to pound Jiemma under, it would take too long and would give Midnight time to recover and rejoin the fight.

As they ascended, Ranma was able to look ahead of them where the ground of the next few floors had already been shattered. She smiled grimly, then, as she saw something coming down towards them.

**OOOOOOO**

Despite the initial draining on her reserves, Erza was still going strong, pushing Jellal hard, never more thankful for her training with Laxus than she was at that moment. Further, Erza had spent practically every day of her life since leaving the Tower of Heaven fighting in one form or another. Jellal had not. He might have earned the Wizard Saint appellation due to his magical strength, but in sheer experience and combat ability, Erza the Titania was his better by far. And once again as the fight wound on this began to tell. Further, Jellal could also understand this and feel it happening, her blows slowly beginning to wear him under, his reserves of magic slowly dissipating with every slash and cut.

However, Jellal still had a slight edge in speed, agility, and magic power. He used this to his advantage, getting in between Mirajane’s collapsed form and Erza. With a sudden twist he turned, racing towards Mira, seemingly eager to finish her off where she lay, overcome from Cubellios's poison. This caused Erza to react, quickly donning her Flight Armor to zoom around Jellal and get in front of him again. Jellal smirked, then shifted his stance just slightly, bringing his arms up to smash into her again via Meteor.

The cheetah armor, after all, didn’t have any real armor to speak of, being simply a breastplate that was more of a barely armored cheetah-patterned top and some fur lining the lower edges, which exposed her stomach and some cleavage. There was no waist guard, the armor’s top instead being paired with short, black shorts and a belt holding a cloth hanging behind and somewhat over Erza's left leg.

“HA! Who would have imagined that Erza Scarlet would have an exhibitionist streak! Still, if you want to die in that bikini of yours, who am I do deny you!” Jellal shouted, closing quickly.

But Erza knew that, and brought out a heavy axe made of stone, of all things, to offset her armor’s lack of actual armor. She slammed it into the ground of the tower right before Jellal could crash into her. Jellal skidded to a halt and glared angrily as more of the tower’s floor collapsed. “By Zeref, what is it with you fucking Fairy Tail mages and destroying my goddamned tower?!”

Erza didn't reply, instead hopping down through the hole with Mirajane in her arms, intent on removing her friend and rival from the battlefield for a moment.

As she did she looked downwards and saw Ranma and a giant middle-aged man in her arms being thrust upwards. Somewhere along the way Ranma had been transformed into her female body, but that hardly mattered at this point. Ranma saw her too, as well as Mirajane in her arms, and winked over the giant man's shoulder. “Switch off!” she shouted, confusing Jiemma, who couldn’t turn his head far enough to see above him as Ranma continued to propel them upwards.

Erza grinned evilly and without another thought tossed Mirajane to one side, ignoring the girl’s groaning protest at being tossed around like a piece of luggage and switching out her armor once more. “Purgatory armor!” she shouted, her entire form flaring in Requip light once more.

A bare heartbeat later the Requip light faded and Erza was revealed once more. She now wore a black and gray metal dress with shoulder guards the same color as the rest with large spikes protruding out of them. The arm guards had three large spikes jutting out, each smaller than the last. The leg greaves started just below her hips with three more progressively smaller spikes protruding, starting at the knees. Around her neck was a small necklace of black, diamond shaped jewels, dropping into her cleavage, which was revealed somewhat more in this outfit than most. A single horn, for some reason, also poked out of a headband from under her hair.

She hefted a massive mace as Ranma flipped Jiemma to one side, passing by Erza and grabbing Mirajane out of the air, then propelling herself sideways with a blast of water from one hand to land in a ruined doorway on that floor. The room beyond was relatively intact, though, somewhat surprising Ranma. She took a look inside and blanched at the odd looking room, which looked like a cat lover with really bad taste had been allowed to run wild within. “Can't say much for the decor, but I suppose you'll be safe here anyway, Mira-chan,” she muttered, racing forward to lay her gently on the bed, shaking her head at how oddly good the other girl smelled and felt in her arms.

With that done Ranma took a brief second to pull out a bottle of water, heat it, and douse herself, changing back to his male form. *Probably going to need more reach for this fight from now on.* With that accomplished, Ranma twisted around and launched himself upwards, scaling the interior of the now open tower by bouncing off of the inside of the tower here and there at the wrecked sides of the hole, which had basically grown now to be made out of each and every hole that had been made in the tower up to this point.

Jiemma, for his part, had barely a second to wonder why Ranma had let him go just then before Erza’s giant mace slammed into him and shattered through his durability, which had been reinforced over the years by his Explosion Magic, his body needing to toughen up against his own magic’s sudden pounding. Despite that, this blow nearly pulped one of his arms and shoulders. He roared aloud in agony as he was hurled downwards through the tower once more.

After that blow Erza ignored the large man, assuming the blow would finish him. Instead, she Requipped her Heaven’s Wheel armor and flew back towards Jellal, who had been grateful for the breather. He had attempted to reactivate the draining enchantment, but unfortunately that spell had been rather slapdash and had faded instantly after the first use. Even the magical absorbing circle in the center of his throne room was now inoperative, much of its surface having been damaged.

By the time she arrived, Ranma and Jellal were already going at it hammer and tongs. Jellal had no agility or speed advantage against Ranma, and Ranma, though exhausted, sore, and with his ki healing no longer working as quickly, was still slightly fresher than Jellal was. “Ya’know, you could have made this a lot easier for all concerned if ya had just stuck around after trying to kill me. Not that I’d have let this place stand, but at least ya would have been spending a nice few days in jail living off the government’s dollar. Now you’ve gotten that pretty boy face ruined, and, are you missing some teeth?”

“Silence, Oceana!” Jellal roared. “You will never beat me! My ambition, my dream, Zeref will be resurrected no matter what you do!”

A Soryu no Kagitsume (Water Dragon's Claw) caught Jellal in the center of his chest, hurling him back and to the side. “Yeah, I don’t think so.”

Jellal tried to zoom up into the air, but Ranma turned with him, leaping up to reengage him, their fists flying, and suddenly Jellal found his arm gripped, Ranma turning into his reach, and an elbow seeking his face. He ripped his arm out of Ranma’s grip just in time to get his own arm up to block, wincing at the blow and replying with a point-blank Shooting Star (Jiu Leixing) attack into Ranma’s face.

This attack was supposed to be nine lightning-like swords, which was the way Jellal had used it before against Erza to try to offset the sheer number of weapons she was using. But this time it came out as just a near-formless mass of lightning magic.

Ranma, however, dodged it, flipping in midair and bringing his foot down in a way that only a true master of the Aerial Style of Anything Goes could've done. Jellal barely saw the blow in time, only just twisting out of the way to take the blow on his shoulder rather than the top of his head. But he moved with it, slamming down onto the ground and then kicking off and away.

In return he shouted out, “Pleiades!” Six rays of light flashed out from above him at Ranma, who dodged them all as Erza arrived on the scene.

“And now your days going to get even worse!” Ranma said with a laugh.

For her part Erza had no breath to waste on banter. She simply waved her hands, first in front of her and then to the side. “Dance, my blades!” she shouted once more, hurling them forward. The swords followed her movement as they appeared from her Requip space, shooting forward as if from out of a shotgun. This attack wasn’t nearly as random as the assault she’d used before against both Jellal and Cobra, but its stopping power was even higher.

For a moment, watching that, Ranma was reminded of an anime he had seen once.  *But Erza’s a lot prettier than the blonde asshole who was using that technique.*

Grunting, Jellal threw up a shield of magic in front of him, twitching as each sword embedded itself in the shield. With each blow the magical power of the shield dissipated. *How?! How is she still going?!*

“Explosive Trial!” shouted Jiemma, as he and Midnight rose from behind Ranma and Erza. Both of them leaped to the side, with Erza halting her assault as the two newcomers arrived. For a moment the three of them looked at one another, then Ranma pointed at the two newcomers. “I'll get those two. Can you handle Jellal?”

Erza snorted. “I would have it no other way,” she said, glaring at Jellal. There were no remaining feelings of guilt or anxiety in that look, simply hard, cold resolve, and that irritated Jellal for some reason he couldn’t fathom. He charged forward with a roar, and she did the same, the two of them clashing in midair as Ranma turned in the opposite direction towards Jiemma and Midnight.

As he charged, Ranma's magic disappeared from around his hands and feet, and he smirked at Midnight. “You can't bend my power against me if I don’t use it!”

“I don’t need to use your magic alone, Ranger!!” Midnight shrieked. Jiemma had forced him to come along, since Jiemma had needed Midnight’s magic carpet, and it wouldn’t respond to the older man. If it had been up to him, Midnight would have already run away. But now that he was once more forced to face Ranma, he did so wildly and as forcefully as possible.

He slashed one hand forward, trying to grasp the air around Ranma, and Ranma grunted as he was again seized by a grip of air and crushed. But he sent out a Soryu no Hoko (Water Dragon’s Roar), and Midnight, with only one arm left to direct his spells, quickly used his magic to divert it, breaking the hold or whatever it was that he had used on Ranma a second ago.

Midnight had simply sent the attack to one side, nearly smashing it into Jiemma beside him, but the old man took a step backwards just enough to dodge. Midnight desperately turned his attention back to Ranma, lashing out with the same attack as before. “Spiral Pain!”

But Ranma had finally begun to see the trails through the air of that particular spell and rolled to the side, diving both away from that attack and towards Jiemma. Jiemma, by this point, was barely on his feet, all his willpower being used just to keep himself from collapsing. Half of his body was a ruined mess from the blow Erza had dealt him to go with the ribs Ranma had broken earlier. One of his eyes was just gone, having exploded from the impact, and he was missing most of his teeth on that side thanks to the mace of the Purgatory armor breaking through his already weakened defense.

But he was an immensely powerful man as well as a prideful and wrathful one. A man who, further, was fixated on making Ranma pay for his humiliation years ago. Which he stated now. “I've trained my body for years, pushed my magic beyond the breaking point, and joined with that madman Brain and his coterie of children all for the sake of finding and killing you, Ranger! You will pay! **You will pay!** Pay for my humiliation; pay for taking my legacy from me!”

Ranma hurled out a water attack towards Jiemma, but was not surprised to see Midnight thrust his hand that way, then backwards towards Ranma. He ducked under the watery assault, flipping through the air and landing on the side of the tower before kicking off and closing with Midnight.

Midnight saw Ranma and quickly bent the air around him, hopping backwards and disappearing. Now, covered like that, Midnight began to hurl out his barely visible scythe attacks at both Ranma’s current position and at Erza.

This took some of Erza’s attention away from Jellal, costing her as he closed. A blow got into her side, but she rolled with it, dissipating much of the force behind the blow.

The goth-looking mage blinked, however, as Ranma did the same thing, disappearing behind the Umi-Sen-Ken just as he ducked under a blow from Jiemma. “Where did you go, you little rat!”

Now wrapped in his invisibility, Midnight moved around, continuing to throw out his scythe assaults.  *If Ranma attacks anyone, it will be one of the visible opponents, since he can't see me regardless of his own invisibility.*  *This way I can win this fight without taking any more hits! How, how dare he? How dare he hurt me like this!? But he’ll get his! Yes, now that I’m invisible, now that he can’t hurt me, but I can hurt him!*

“I can still smell ya,” a voice said from directly in front of him, disabusing Midnight of that notion. Midnight’s instincts caused him to twitch wildly away from that voice, which was the only thing that saved him from having his head pulped. Instead Ranma’s blow simply shattered his jaw, and the next blow came in before he could recover, catching him in the chest and hurling him backwards. He had moved just enough to negate much of the force of that, but it still left him bruised.

The next blow caught Midnight on the side of the head, hurling him away to hammer against one of the few sections of wall still upright in the throne room after having crashed through Jellal’s throne. He slumped there, unconscious.

But Ranma's attention on Midnight had allowed Jiemma to close, and he grabbed Ranma from behind around the chest with his one working arm. “Explosive Crush!” he roared, his Explosion Magic blasting out from his arm and chest into Ranma’s body from both directions. The Blast Magic’s vibrations damaged Ranma more than it ever had before this, given how exhausted he was, and the fact that it was coming from two directions simultaneously caused the impact to multiply the longer it went on. Ranma could feel more of his ribs go and coughed blood as something else inside popped. Despite that Ranma concentrated through the pain and summoned up his strength once more, ripping an arm free as he twisted as best he could in Jiemma’s grip. If Jiemma had been able to use both hands for this, he might have been able to hold Ranma still. As it was, he could not, as he just wasn’t strong enough.

Ranma thrust his hand upwards, the magic in it blasting out into a small, extremely concentrated magical blast. “Soryu no Tsukisasu Shita (Water Dragon’s Piercing Tongue)!”

Jiemma had concentrated all his remaining magical power into crushing Ranma, and his body’s natural durability had been overcome utterly by this point. Because of this Ranma’s magic crossed the few inches separating Ranma’s actual hand from his throat and crushed Jiemma's larynx before going on to shatter his neck. The dead man fell forwards, his head flopping at an unnatural angle, dead before his body hit the ground and burying Ranma underneath him.

Pushing the giant off with a grumble, Ranma turned to look at where Erza and Jellal were still fighting before pushing himself to his feet and moving in that direction. Jellal had just gotten in another blow, which had shattered some of the sword blades on Erza’s back, and another blow to her side, which had crushed the armor there, the damage making its ability to fly useless. In return her sword had cut off one of his ears in a welter of blood, and her other blade had nearly gutted him, instead opening up a slash across his lower chest. As Ranma saw this, he once more gathered water around his hands.

The blue-haired man had barely a moment to look up before a hammer blow of water crashed down on top of him, shattering the floor and hurling him down into the hole which now dominated the tower’s interior for seven stories. “Damn it!” Jellal roared, halting his fall and rushing back towards Erza. *Where are those damn Oración mages!? Curse their incompetence!* Jellal didn’t know that Midnight was unconscious and Jiemma was dead, having had to concentrate solely on keeping Erza from his throat for the past few minutes.

Erza stared down at Jellal as he slowly rose towards her, staring back at her. When he was in range enough to see her entire body, Jellal oddly began to cackle, seeing her armor’s badly battered form, unmindful of the blood flowing from the stump of his ear or his chest. “You have no more armor, Erza, and what is a knight without armor! What is a fairy that cannot fly?!”

“A Fairy Tail mage still, a knight still,” Erza said, making no move to correct Jellal’s assumption. Erza actually did have a few more sets of armor, though they were more prototypes rather than completed sets. Regardless, she had no need to use them here.

Requipping out of her shattered armor, she replaced it with another set of clothing which none of her friends in Fairy Tail had ever seen before. It wasn’t even armor, really, just being a regular sort of outfit consisting of a long red colored skirt with a gold flame design on the sides and the breast bands she wore underneath her armor. She called it her Clear Heart clothing, but even that was more a made up name than anything. The blade in her hand, on the other hand, was very special indeed.

The hilt of the blade was composed of a long handle, the pommel of which was covered in gold, a short dark blue rope adorned with three big red pearls coming out of it. The sword's blade was shaped like a standard katana, but the blade was a bit thicker than a traditional katana. Shaped with flower-like edges, the hilt was guarded by a square guard. This was the demon blade Crimson Sakura, one of the three deadliest weapons in Erza’s collection.

But even more deadly was the cold, purposeful stare with which she returned Jellal’s mad glare. “I don't need my armor anymore, Jellal. I have friends, a family who accepts me. I don’t need to hide myself from anyone. I don't need to defend myself from anyone, certainly not you, not anymore. You are a shade of the past, Jellal, and it is time to exorcise you.”

Once more seeing this woman who he had tortured, who he had tried to break beyond all others, even the ones in the tower, standing there unbroken and strong, something in Jellal snapped. He roared incoherently, gathering all of his remaining magic and thrusting himself upwards through the hole towards her, charging wildly with his final attack. “Grand Chariot!”

In reply, Erza leaped down towards where Jellal was flying towards her, raising her sword above one shoulder. She focused all her remaining magic into it, creating a visible wake of golden magic behind her as she fell, before bringing it down as they intersected.

There was a spurt of blood, and her side lit up in agony, her elbow mangled along with her ribs on that side and her hip bone, so badly bone shards could actually be seen sticking out of her skin. Yet at the same time her blow struck true at the weakened Jellal. Where her side and arm were now in agony, Jellal gaped as his guts spilled out, his body sliced nearly in two.

The light in his eyes swiftly began to fade as he fell. “Zer, Zeref. No, this…no. Not what I was…”

At Cobra’s order, Cubellios flew from where they had been hiding in a ruined room nearby. A second later he stared down at Jellal’s dying face impassively, then behind him at the unconscious Midnight, who he had grabbed a moment ago to be placed further down his friend’s coiled length. *Brain isn't going to like this,* he thought, before swiftly beheading the dying man than gesturing for Cubellios to turn and retreat out a nearby hole into the open air beyond. *Then again, we still have Jellal’s head, so it’s not a total loss, kekeke…*

From the ruined throne room, Ranma stared out after them, a scowl appearing as he watched the surviving Dark Mages flee. A second later Wendy alighted next to him. With Wendy once more out of her harness, Carla was able to aid Happy in grabbing Erza out of the hole in the tower before she could fall very much further.

Wendy stood next to her brother for a second, staring at Jiemma’s body, recognizing the large, mean man before turning her attention to the rather pretty flying snake in the distance carrying the two Dark Mages. “Do you want to follow them, Ranma-nii?” she asked.

“No,” Ranma said after a moment, feeling his various wounds and his mental and physical exhaustion. “Let them go. Besides, you’ve got healing to do, imouto.”

The two Exceeds landed nearby with Erza, who Wendy quickly began to heal. Once the process was over she thanked the trio before gently asking them to help Mira. As they did she moved over to where Ranma was still standing, staring out after the two retreating Dark Mages who were just about over the horizon by that point.

She didn’t spare them a glance, instead touching Ranma’s shoulder and gently turning him around. “Let them go. They are a problem for another day. Today, we have to finish what we began here.”

She gestured down towards the bottom of the tower where many of the once more freed slaves were gathering, moving slowly away from the massive construction towards the Rune Knights from the ship. “We need to help my friends and the others get relocated, then we need to do something about this place. I, I’m not certain what. The tower’s so large it would take hours to destroy it even if I used my remaining armors, which I don’t have many of.”

“Leave it to me,” Ranma said grimly. “I’ll take care of it.”

“By yourself?” Erza said skeptically, a small smile appearing on her face. It was a weak, watery thing, that smile, but it was real, too. “Far be it from me to say a Dragon Slayer wouldn’t be able to break something, but this seems rather beyond you at present.”

“Erza, I’m the Water Dragon Slayer, and we’re on an island in the middle of the ocean. My body might feel like one big ass bruise right now, but once I touch the ocean, I’ll have power to spare,” Ranma said with a low laugh. “This place needs destroying, and I’ll see to it.”

Several minutes later Erza carried the body of Sho out, trying not to look at Wally, Millianna, or Simon’s face as she did so. Killing Jellal did not make up for not being able to protect Sho from him, and it would haunt her for the rest of her days.

She nodded solemnly at Ranma, then over at the crowd of ex-slaves who were gathered around the port, slowly boarding the Rune Knight’s ship. It would be very crowded, but it would get them back to port. Ranma nodded back, then asked Simon, “Is everyone out?”

Simon looked away from Erza and the body of Sho, sighing sadly. “Everyone's out. I still don’t know what you’re going to do, though. The tower is just too damn large.”

“Hah, no it isn’t,” Ranma said with a deep, exhausted sigh. This fight had pushed him more than any fight since his bout with the demon in Iceberg. “Now get on the ship and get out of here.”

He waited there as it pulled out of the small cove, heading out to sea, before hopping out onto the ocean himself. Once there he knelt down, touching the top of the ocean waves, concentrating and reaching down, down into the depths. As he did, he leaned down, slurping at the water of the ocean, feeling it invigorate him, filling his magical reserves even as he continued to make demands on it.

Moving away from the island, Wendy, the weary Erza, and the rest of her friends along with a few other ex-slaves gathered at the back of the ship, staring at the island. It was Wendy who noticed first. “Look, is that water moving weirdly?”

Erza blinked, and then looked at Wally, who was the only one of them who knew anything about the ocean. He in turn called for the ship’s captain, who took one look and then shouted orders for the magical engine to be powered to full speed. “That’s not a current, that’s some kind of, of abyss…”

It took Ranma about five minutes before he was able to spread his control through the water around the island enough for his attack to work. It began far below where any watcher could see and then spread as he powered it: a massive whirlpool that soon sped up far beyond anything found in nature. “

“Metsuryu Ogi! Kagirinai Kuufuku no Fuchi no Daiyon'i (Dragon Slayer's Secret Art! Maw of the Endless Hungry Depths)!” Ranma howled, somehow still floating on the water.

The onlookers looked on in shock as they saw the whirlpool slowly change shape into a Dragon's maw. This maw’s open gullet became a hole in the ocean which the island slowly dropped into, the maw closing over it, shattering the island as it was pulling it down, down into the depths of the ocean.

The Rune Knight vessel, the name of which none of the mages had bothered to learn, were just out of range, but they were still rocked badly from the resulting wave as the island disappeared. Not that any of its passengers noticed, too busy staring at the utter destruction of the place that had been the cause of such sorrow for them all.

Moments later Ranma, now in her female body, hopped up onto the deck of the ship, groaning as she landed. She moved over to join Erza and the other mages, including Erza’s friends. “Well, that should do it. Now, who’s up for a vacation? I think there’s some kind of vacation resort near that port we stayed at, right?

Erza nodded, looking over at her still gawking friends. “Akane Resort, yes. It would be a nice place to unwind, reconnect, and, and mourn, I think.”

After a brief consultation they all nodded, but Mira looked at Ranma quizzically. She was awake now thanks to Wendy but still felt as if someone had run over her with a train several times, as did Natsu, who was even worse, since Wendy couldn’t do anything about Ethernano poisoning. “What about seeing to questioning the survivors? In fact, won’t these people also have to be questioned?” she asked, jerking a thumb toward Simon and his friends.

“Meh, that kind of thing is best done by peons, look, we have a whole ship full of them, and we’re going to land in a port with even more,” Ranma said dryly. “I deal with the Dark Mages, the direct threat, as it were. Unless the cleanup is going to mean more combat, I leave it to other people. Besides, brainwashed is brainwashed. It’s a perfectly acceptable defense.”

“Especially considering that the individual who tricked them all also tricked the Council, possibly without using any mind altering magic,” Carla said caustically to Ranma’s weary chuckle.

**OOOOOOO**

Shock. Pure shock was the reaction felt by Ultear and the rest of the watching Council. Thanks to their scrying crystals connected to every Rune Knight Ship and garrison, they had seen the action around the ship throughout the battle. But they hadn’t been able to see much occurring on the island until the ship came close enough. Now they watched the ship moving off and away, still in shock about what little they had seen.

“Not only did Siegrain build the R-system,” Yajima said, spitting the words, “But he also worked with one of the Balam Alliance! This is horrifying. Not only for the Council’s prestige, but for what it means in the long term. The Balam Alliance might well be far more active than we have been able to discover so far.”

While Ultear was torn between giggling and wincing at that statement, one of the others, Org, spoke up quickly. “We need to know what just happened there. It's obvious our side won, but that last spell, what was that? And how bad was it? The casualties, the survivors, why did all of those prisoners come so willingly? We need more information, particularly about anything the Dark Mages let slip in battle about why Siegrain was working with the Oración Siete.”

“And what was that last spell?” said another member of the Council, scowling. “That level of destruction, that is not normal, even if those Fairy Tail mages were there!”

“While I would be the first to say that Fairy Tail mages are hilariously good at destroying things in the pursuit of a mission, in this instance my money would be on the Ranger,” Ultear said. “He is a Water Dragon Slayer, after all. And didn't that look something like half of a dragon's maw we saw in the image there?”

“That makes sense, but Yajima is right. We still need to know what happened,” said the acting head of the council, the female mage, Leiji. She would not stay in that role for long—the king had made that very clear to them all—but she would do what she could for now.

“I'll go,” Ultear said with a nod. “The coach should get me there within, what, eighteen hours?”

“Do so. Question Oceana about all of this. We need something to tell our people, even if he will be making a report to the king personally. Besides, he’ll want to know what we discovered on this end of things.”

“Oh, I will,” Ultear said, licking her lips at the idea of getting to know Ranma further as well as figuring out what made him tick. *Given his combat ability and the fact that he might be staying in Fiore for a time, that might be very important.* “Oh, I will.”

**End Chapter**

… I think my opinion on Jellal being mind-controlled, forgiven and everything that sprang from that is plain here so I won’t go into it. Hope everyone liked his end however.

The combat scenes in this chapter gave me a hell of a lot of trouble: I am having a great deal of difficulty matching up the canon movements and spells to my own interpretation and shifting to the written form away from the visual. Ugh. I also think I was playing with too many different characters, each of them with their own different types of magic and being active elsewhere all at the same time. Either I need to get better at that, or I’ll need to figure out a way to cut down on the number of characters in any given combat scene. Which, given the battles to come… Well, yeah, I just need to figure it out. Ugh. Anyways hope you all enjoyed this!