

A brief warning. This is kind of a monster chapter. I wanted to get all the morning and reacting to events things finished in one chapter, and it wasn't an easy task by any means, despite the fact the time elapsed in the chapter only amounts to a week at best. Despite that, I hope you all enjoy it.

This has been edited by [Justlovereadin'](#) and Hiryo. Thank them both for their work, and I hope you enjoy despite the lateness of my posting this chapter in the month. RL can demand our attention at the most inopportune times.

Chapter 31: A family Mourns, an Oath Sworn

The ship that night was silent as Ranma slowly, and very laboriously thanks to the moving ship, extricated himself from the center of his little family, all of them being as near as they could come with one another, given how many of them had broken ribs. Exhausted magically, physically and emotionally and dealing with being a Dragon Slayer on a moving vessel. Wendy had also begun to blame herself for not doing enough for the wounded. But Ranma and the others hadn't allowed her to think that way for very long. Essentially, they had hugged that idea out of her, and she now lay curled against Seilah, who had not moved more than a few feet away from Wendy since they had reached the ship, with Juvia, Erza and Jenny all nearby, and Carla watching over her from a small perch on the lower mast nearby.

While he had expected the girls' reactions to Wendy's self-recrimination, it always amused Ranma how dedicated Seilah was to Wendy, although he still had trouble figuring out the kind of relationship they had. *Then again, I don't care what their relationship is at this point. She saved Wendy's life in that fight.*

Slowly, Ranma stood up, staring down at Wendy, Seilah and his three lovers, with a faint smile on his face. Not just because of how close they all were, but because after Acnologia's attack, they were all alive. *It was touch and go for a bit but we all are alive. And under the circumstances, I can be... satisfied at least with that.*

Shaking his head, he looked around at the rest of the crew. The Rune Knights were moving around, repairing damage done to the ship, thanks to the waves and errant shrapnel caused by a recent battle with Acnologia which had hit it.

Since it was full night now, the Rune Knights illuminated their work with small glow lamps, allowing Ranma to see many of their faces, most of which held shock or perhaps guilty expressions. Which was fair enough, Ranma reflected even as his stomach grumbled at him. *It isn't every day you find out that not only are you not strong enough to even join a fight but that the aura of the enemy in question was enough to knock you clear out.* Indeed, many of the Rune Knights had simply died, their hearts exploding under the pressure of Acnologia's aura. *Mind you, their anti-magic spheres would've been next to useless against Acnologia anyway. Those things don't work so well on large objects, and even if they had, I don't doubt for a second that Acnologia would have been able to break out of their bubbles.*

Besides the Rune Knights, there were only two other mages awake right now. Even the normally hyperactive Natsu had fallen asleep, utterly exhausted and weakened by the . The two exceptions were Laxus and Mira. Both of them sat near the prow of the ship, With Laxus scowling and smoking a giant stogie made of dragon's Breath as he stared out across the ocean. For some reason, Mira was sitting with the blonde Dragon Slayer, their backs leaning against one another as they conversed quietly. Though they were too quiet for Ranma to hear over the sounds of the Rune Knights and the ocean, by the scowls he could make out on their faces via a nearby lamp, Ranma guessed that it wasn't a very pleasant conversation. Not that there was any room for such at the moment.

Still, the sight of the cigar in Laxus' mouth made Ranma remember his own stash. *Heh, on the way out other, heh, urges kind of helped me deal with the whole transportation thing, but this time, I don't have that luxury,* He thought, remembering how all his girls looked in their bathing suits before arriving at the island. He spent several minutes pulling out his pipe and tamping some Dragon's Breath into it, then breathed deeply his eyes closed as he let the Dragon Slayer specific narcotic do its work.

Entering the captain's cabin, Ranma found Minerva there, staring at her hands in exhausted anger, a large bottle of something alcoholic sitting near her hands. "Aren't ya a little young to be drinkin'?" Ranma joked, smoke still billowing from his mouth as he waved the hand that heled his pipe at the girl.

Minerva was in no mood for it, and she looked up at Ranma, making a rude gesture with both her hands. "Fuck you, Ranma, just seriously go fuck yourself..." she slurred, her face showing she was three sheets to the wind already. "I's didn't do nothin,' me magiiic, my spells, they did nothin' to that big bastard... what was it worth getting all that trainin' fer, for, huh? Ish all me fault we..."

"Oy." Ranma shook his head, then moved forward, pulling the young girl into a hug despite the fact she tried to knee him in the crotch for doing so. *What is it with little girls blaming themselves for shit, huh?* "It ain't your fault Minerva, it isn't anyone's fault. Sometimes shit happens, and it's no one's fault. That's just how life works sometimes, you know? The Only one to blame is Acnologia, that's it."

Minerva sniffled a bit, smacking her fists into Ranma's chest a few times before subsiding. *Ah, rule one of the Ranma Style of Big Brothering (patent pending) proves its worth again*, Ranma thought in a kind of exhausted stupor. After he was certain Minerva had started to recover, he was about to pull back when he realized she calmed down a little too much given the amount of alcohol she had consumed. Picking up the sleeping girl, Ranma put her in the bed to one side, and after making certain the door was locked, for now, took a chair and moved to the furthest corner of the room from Minerva.

There he propped his feet up on the wall, closing his eyes for a brief moment. Then Ranma shook his head determinedly, bit his thumb, and let the droplets impact the interior surface of his Ranger's brooch, activating the communication enchantment.

A moment later, Ranma was surprised to see that the closest king was the King of Caelum, Luke of the House of Afterano. I would have thought San Jiao Shi. Still, it doesn't matter which king is first. They're all going to be getting some good and bad news tonight.

The corpulent man looked back into the communication enchantment, his faint smile caused by the anticipation of good news disappearing almost instantly as he looked at Ranma's exhausted visage. "Why, do I think that this isn't going to be the good news we all hoped for?"

"Because you're smarter than the average nobleman, Your Majesty?" Ranma said, giving the man his title for once, even if it was somewhat ironical. "I need a full King's Council, please. There's no flipping way I will want to explain the shithole we fell into more than once."

The man hissed, shaking his head just once before turning aside, a mutter of, "Of course things couldn't go to plan, when have they ever in the past several years?" Reaching Ranma's ears, while Luke reached out through the connected lacrima to his fellow royals.

Ten minutes passed before the images of the rest of the kings of Ishgar appeared in small bubbles all around Ranma. The King of Seven was accompanied by his wife, who, as Ranma had long ago deduced, was the true power behind the throne. The last to appear was Rose, who, along with the king of Seven and the kings of Stella and Joya, looked as if she might have been asleep.

But at the look of utter exhaustion on Ranma's face, most of them woke up very quickly, and it fell to Toma to ask for all of them. "Alright, Ranger Ranma, we're all here. So what went wrong this time? Please don't tell me they were able to turn the ambush on us again. I can't even imagine how that would be possible... unless... did Ultear betray us?"

"That would be the only explanation," the King of Seven mused. "I know Toma and myself have removed any official that we could discover any hint of corruption of. Indeed, even common information brokers and magical researchers have come under..."

“The ambush went off without a hitch, Meredrain,” Ranma interjected. “And Ultear did her job perfectly. Beginning to end, the ambush was a complete surprise. It’s what happened afterward that has me calling all of you like this.”

Without any further delay, Ranma began to describe the ambush of Grimoire Heart. He explained both sides' overall strategy, how Grimoire Heart's forces had been split up in anticipation of taking on smaller groups of defenders, only to be overwhelmed in detail by Fairy Tail, Ranma, Wendy and Seilah. The news of the utter destruction of Grimoire Heart caused nearly every monarch there to smile. Even Toma and the queen of Seven had to admit that the Dark Heart device's destruction had been necessary. “Given the lack of information on how Hades bonded with the device or even created it in the first place, I suppose we he couldn't have taken the risk trying to capture the heart intact, not without doing the same to Hades, and that would have been far too dangerous.”

“Well, in terms of prisoners, I did take one, Azuma. He was one of the Seven Sins of Purgatory, but on the whole, I think he's just a combat crazy bastard who signed up as part of Grimoire Heart because he has about as much interest in anything but fighting as I do in becoming a politician. I think that Azuma can be rehabilitated, but I'll leave that up to all of you since I don't have much of an idea beyond what Ultear's files said about him on what crimes he's actually committed.”

“That is all well and good, Ranma, and you can consider the upcoming blow softened enough,” Rose cut in before any of the other kings could continue the discussion about Grimoire Heart. “Tell us what went wrong and what it might mean going forward.”

Sighing, Ranma began again. “After I was finished with Azuma, I decided to try to find the most powerful, the most dangerous enemy mage. I'd spotted someone else moving around before the rest of Grimoire Heart arrived, and I figured that he was someone sent forward, like Azuma, so he had to be strong. Turns out I was right about the strength, but not why my target was there. You see...”

At that point, Ranma started to describe his run-in with Zeref, although where before the monarchs had all been relatively quiet, simply listening, now they all began to shout and interrupt Ranma's tale, waking up the nearby Minerva with how loudly their voices came through.

To say the kings were not happy to hear that Zeref had actually been both real and still among the living was an understatement. Despite their best efforts, those who worshipped Zeref as some kind of dark God still occasionally cropped up, enough so that the idea that there might be some reality behind it to terrify them.

However, as the tale went on and they started to understand that Zeref had been dealt with, most of them relaxed. All save Rose and the King of Pergrande. The two of them were still watching Ranma, and eventually, Vicotronious began to speak, his voice cracking with age.

“Fine, so Zeref is gone. I’ll be interested in whatever information you learned through your... normal method of taunting an enemy into madness.” The man smiled wintrily. “And yet from the way you describe it, that battle alone isn’t enough to put the grief and anger on your face I can see there. Indeed, from your description, you were the only one who took much punishment in that confrontation. So what else happened?”

“Acnologia happened.”

Speaking the name of Acnologia silenced everyone, and Toma and Meredrain both flinched as the King of Pergrande just closed his eyes, seeming to sag in despair. The others looked confused, and the king of Stella put their thoughts into words. “That’s impossible. Acnologia is a legend thousands of years old, surely he’s not...”

Rose shook her head and forestalled the words from her colleagues. “Let the Ranger speak. He isn’t the type to just drop a name like that. And if those legends of the black dragon of the apocalypse are accurate, then I think we all can understand why Ranma looks as battered as he does and why he wanted to speak to us all.”

“Exactly. And if anything, the books I’ve found that mention Acnologia underestimated his strength. I think, judging from who he continually targeted during the fight, he came because he sensed how many Dragon Slayers were on the island: Myself, Wendy, Gajeel, Natsu Laxus. Regardless of why he attacked us without warning. And Fairy Tail paid the price.”

“Is Minerva alright!?” Toma asked hurriedly.

“I’m fine, Your Majesty...” Minerva interjected, sticking her head into the pickup, having been woken up earlier and having made her way over to Ranma. “Er, just um, realizing that trying to drink my troubles away was a bad idea...”

“You’re drunk!?” Toma’s voice actually raised a few octaves. “Oh god, Ranma, it’s bad enough you’re having a freaking pipe while talking to us, but you let Minerva...”

“Oy, I didn’t let her do anything, ass. She chose to come in here and down a bottle of what smells like whiskey all on her own. And as for my smoking, it’s either this or throwing up, take your pick.”

“What about dear Wendy?” Rose questioned, wanting to make certain the little girl she was so fond of was alright. *Besides, while Ranma’s a bad influence in some ways, vices are not one of them.*

“Wendy’s fine too, though she’s asleep up on the main deck. Now, if you lot would be quiet, I can actually tell you what happened, okay?” Ranma shot out, pushing the still inebriated Minerva to one side, watching as she plopped down on the floor of the cabin next to him.

With the royals suitably silent, Ranma spoke about how the battle had begun from his perspective, the aura of Acnologia washing out over the island. From there, he described how Makarov had been badly hurt, how every survivor had been battered and wounded, some badly. And he spoke about how Gray had died and how Evergreen and Bickslow had been killed.

Ranma was not sparing of his own part in the battle, how it was only thanks to good fortune and a potion that Hades had intended for Azuma that he was able to take part at all, and then how they were all, from Laxus and Ranma on down, unable to really hurt Acnologia enough to matter most of the fight. He was able to take a lot of our best shots and shrug them off. I was able to eventually drag Acnologia into the ocean. But even there, only my durability and skill in underwater combat allowed me to fight Acnologia on anything like an even footing.”

Pausing in his report, Ranma smirked. “Well, that and his decision to transform into his human body. That allowed us to fight him on a more even footing, in particular me. He was good, but ya could tell he didn’t have as much training or experience in that form as in his dragon body.”

He absentmindedly patted Minerva on the head, withdrawing his hand equally automatically when she went to bite him, going on, “I don’t know why the big bastard didn’t stay to make certain that I was dead. He could easily have finished off the others if he had. Still, if not for Juvia and Minerva’s Territory Magic, I would’ve been killed by his last attack on me. I’m just assuming that Acnologia thinks I’m dead and that he didn’t see the rest of us board the ship.”

Toma shook his head sadly. “Three decently powerful mages dead against a single enemy, a legend come to dreadful life. That is... honestly horrifying.” He shook himself, his jaw firming visibly. “I will cut orders to send the Christina too...”

He looked over at Luke, who gave him the name of a port on Caelum’s southwestern-most island, then turned to Minerva and Ranma. Minerva had popped her head up to explain Acnologia’s initial assault before Ranma joined the fight. “I’ll have healers, and medical supplies waiting for you there too, never fear. Magical healing might be a rare skill, but I do have a few such mages among my islands and transport-specialist mages in droves.”

“Thank you,” Ranma whispered. While thanks to Wendy and the Holy Bird Apus, no one was in danger of dying, Elfman, Mira, Erza and Jenny’s wounds worried him, despite Mira still somehow being awake when he came in here. *Come to think of it, it might be that she couldn’t sleep, despite how exhausted she must be. Even if Wendy healed them down to first-degree burns rather than the third they were before, burns are crazily painful.*

After a few moments, Meredrain cleared his throat. “Um, as, as disturbing as the implications of this battle were, we need to think about the future. First, how likely is it that Zeref will be able to escape the Celestial Realm?”

“It isn’t very likely at all, according to Virgo. Only Virgo, someone she personally invites, or the Celestial Spirit King can enter her personal domain. With her willingness to stay here until he runs out of magic enough to sustain himself, the only one that could bring Zeref back is the Spirit King. And there’s no reason why he would,” Ranma replied.

“That’s good, but that leaves Acnologia. Do you think the Wizard Saints could fight him?” Toma asked the others.

They all shook their heads, with San Jiao Shi going into detail. “No, first we would have to gather them all together. Given their various personalities, that is probably impossible. Second, we would have to find Acnologia in the first place. Tracking something through the air is an impossibility unless you too can fly and you start can keep them in sight somehow. I’m afraid the only thing we all can do about Acnologia is tell the top three.”

“Well, that and pray that he doesn’t attack us,” the old general added, before looking at Ranma sharply. “That being said, perhaps we should ask you, Ranma, what you are going to do about this? I know well enough, I think, to know that you are not the kind of person to let something like this go.”

“I have a few ideas. And I don’t think any of us who were part of this fight will take this lying down. Though you’re right that someone should contact God Serena at least. He’s the Wizard Saint who’s supposed to be some kind of Dragon Slayer God or whatever. I don’t think I’ll want to train with him. I’ve got my own ideas on that point, but if we can tell him about our experiences, maybe he’ll agree to fight the next time Acnologia shows up.”

“That, and if we can get him to the battlefield in time to do some good. Still, we’ve begun to spread around the transportation runes more, so that is possible. So long as God Serena cooperates. For all his power, the man’s attitude has never been short of aggravating to work with,” the King of Pergrande added, coughing between words, covering his mouth with a palsied hand.

Looking at him, Ranma was struck by how much he had aged since Ranma had seen him during the war against the orcs. *Vicotronious’ mind is still there, but it looks like Roland will have to step up to kingship soon. Huh, I wonder what Ikaruga thinks about that. It would make her queen, after all.* “That will do for God Serena, I guess. But don’t look down on Laxus and the rest. By the time we reach Magnolia, I’d bet everyone will have thought up a few ideas of how to train themselves to be stronger. It’ll just be a question of how.”

“Regardless, whatever Fairy Tail wants, I will provide,” Toma promised. “I’ll also look into getting Azuma rehabilitated as quickly as possible. Between myself, Luke and Adam, we should clear up most of the crimes he was personally involved in. I take it you think his abilities will be helpful against Acnologia, seeing as you mentioned the idea earlier.”

“Um, no, not really, as much as Azuma would hate to hear it. But one thing I learned while I was fighting Zeref is that he basically founded the Alvarez Empire.” Ranma had tried to explain away what Mavis had told them about Zeref’s past and his actions as coming out during the battle while Ranma taunted him. The various monarchs had actually not seen through the lie, thankfully. He had no desire to explain Mavis or her weird relationship with the mad immortal.

Now he explained more about Zeref and his connection to that distant empire before finishing with, “I have no idea what they’ll do if Zeref doesn’t come back. So I think you all need to keep building up your military strength, in terms of mages and technology if not numbers.”

The kings, especially San Jiao Shi and Vicotronious, questioned Ranma on this point closely, but after a time, it became clear that Ranma didn’t really have many details to add. Still, the idea of Zeref being some kind of immortal emperor and having personally begun to bring mages powerful enough to stand against the Wizard Saints, was more than enough to get everyone to agree to Ranma’s point. Pergrande, Iceberg and Minstrel, in particular, would continue to build up their military forces and push forward with creating new military-type innovations, while the King of Seven pledged to continue to spread the use of the Bank of Fiore’s formerly secret transportation circles.

“Very well,” Rose said, cutting through the discussion on this point. It was evident that Ranma was practically falling asleep listening to them and had no more input to the conversation. “We have heard your reports Ranma, and I think I speak for us all, that you did as well as could be expected under these incredibly trying circumstances. We do not hold this against you, nor do we think there was any way you could have stopped these losses. We are pleased that the mission we actually sent you on was successful and that is enough. Now, Ranger, go get some sleep. You need it.”

“I’ll tell the princess you’re all right, Minerva,” Toma added as the others began to exit the discussion one after another. “She’ll be greatly relieved to know that her friend is alive.”

Minerva waved one hand weakly, but kept her eyes tightly shut, concentrating on making the world around her stop spinning.

Wordlessly, Ranma nodded at them all, then cut the connection. He then picked up a protesting Minerva, depositing her back on the bunk. With the girl taken care of, Ranma slid down to the deck himself. There he leaned back against the side of the bunk, shaking his head, his voice a whisper in the dark of the cabin as he took another drag from his pipe. “Fuck, what a day...”

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True to Toma's word, the Christina met them at the port town called Treckera, where the Rune Knights ship hobbled into port almost as battered as the mages aboard. But thanks to the magic of the vessel, it had covered the distance within a bare few hours, despite running into a nasty squall just before they caught sight of the island, whose name Ranma never learned during their brief stopover here.

What was more important, waiting outside the Christina on the docks, were the promised healers that the king of Caelum had sent. Five men and two women, they raced forward, quickly shouting orders and suggestions to one another as they split up to see to the wounded who had been brought back up onto the main deck after the squall had passed, while the Dragon Slayers attempted to run them down in their relief at getting off the moving ship.

Of the wounded who had been knocked unconscious by the time the battle had ended, only Makarov had woken up by the time they reached port. But he had yet to say anything. Even more than any of the others, he was taking the loss of three of his children hard. Elfman, Gajeel and Freed thankfully were still unconscious. Wendy's magic had yet to recover enough to do anything more than she already had for them. Gildarts had conked out soon after getting to the boat, and he had yet to wake up, although in his case, he had been moved into his own room so that his snores couldn't wake up anyone. Natsu had also fallen asleep, but now that he was awake, he was busy brooding.

On the healers' heels, the workers from the Christina hustled forward, throwing blankets over people and handing out hot mugs of tea or cocoa. That made Ranma idly wonder why that was one of the first things that everyone did to people who had just been caught up in some kind of disaster. Then he put aside such concerns and moved into the tumult, heading towards the hatch leading down into the ship. *They'll probably need my help to get Gildarts up and moving.*

Coming back up on the deck with one arm around the taller mage's waist, Ranma noticed that despite going about their business relatively well, the Christina's crew looking appalled at the injuries among the mages. More than a few of them were staring at Jenny in particular, pausing in their own work as two healers went to work on her battered ribs and the gash on her leg. One of them seemed to be using magic to help the bones knit back together, a painful process judging from Jenny's grimace, while the other was doing the same for the cut to her lower leg, brows knitted in concentration.

All the people on the Christina had been part of Blue Pegasus, and were now on semipermanent loan to the Magic Council of Seven and its government. The center for magical research, Seven's mages had been given the task to reproduce the Christina, much like the Bank of Fiore's teleportation circle. Ranma had no idea how far along that project was, honestly, although he figured it was almost done after a full season of work on it.

"What the..." Juvia muttered, frowning.

Ranma looked at her, and the water mage shook her head. "Juvia had not realized they could not see Mavis until now." The spirit of Mavis had come with them, of course. With Tenrou Island gone, she had decided to come back to the guild. But not being able to touch the world, she had spent most of the time on the ship with Cana for some reason.

Only now did Ranma realize that he too couldn't see Mavis at the moment. *Huh, what the heck?* On a whim, Ranma reached out and took Juvia's hand, smiling slightly as he saw her blush, then looked back over to where the ghost of Mavis had been a moment ago. As he watched, one of the Blue Pegasus mages walked straight through the form of Mavis, causing many of the Fairy Tail members to twitch and stare, with Natsu breaking out of his funk to snicker as Mavis made faces at a few of the oldest healers. *It's got to be something to do with the guild mark. I'm holding Juvia's hand, touching the mark and so I can see her too now.*

However, watching Mavis zoomed through people and have fun making faces did not take Ranma's attention away from Jenny for very long as two of the Christina workers leaned in, whispering, "Jenny, are you okay? Good grief, it looks like you all went through a war!"

"I'm fine, and um, we kind of did, heh," Jenny unhesitatingly hugged the girl back, looking up at the Christina thoughtfully. "Unless you're going to tell me that Ren, Hibiki or Eve is aboard. In which case, my day is going to get a lot worse."

The girl smiled at the joke but pulled back, staring down at Jenny's leg and her upper arm, where she had taken several light slashes. They weren't very deep, but they were certain to leave a scar, and Wendy hadn't had time to deal with them. "Are you certain? That, that wound on your leg, and um, the, the ones on your arm, those are going to scar, you know?"

Jenny looked down at the marks on her arm and then, with a faint smile, proved she had felt Ranma watching them, turning and sticking her leg out to one side as if viewing the wound on her calf. That this let Ranma gaze up her skirt to see the pair of red panties she was currently wearing was just a bonus.

A social creature of the first order, Jenny was a master of body language and reading other people. She knew that Ranma had been dangerously close to falling into a funk, either about his own part of the battle against Acnologia or the dead she didn't know, but it was there. Wendy not having woken up before they reached the port due to magical exhaustion had taken a toll on both Ranma and Seilah. But now she saw the same smile he had just turned on Juvia and smiled. *That and us getting healing as we are will hopefully be enough to keep him from brooding.*

Turning her attention back to her old friend, Isabel, Jenny shrugged her shoulders. "I'd have preferred to have a win to show for my scars, but at least I survived. Others didn't." Jenny's face faltered a little, and she reached up to touch a few of the scars. "I'm not exactly

happy about them at all, but, well, the alternative would be a lot worse. I'll probably have a cry about it in a few days." *After I'm certain no one else is going to fall into a funk.* "Or, maybe put some lotion on them to decrease the scars or get Porlyusica to give me something that'll work on them. But again, right now, they're just not important."

Nodding, Isabel left her with another tight hug. She moved over to help one of the other healing mages, holding a now woken Freed up by a shoulder as Laxus took the other, letting the healer look at his leg. Meanwhile, a second healer was busy at work on his head, clucking her tongue in annoyed worry. Unlike the other wounded, Freed had taken damage after retreating from the battle to help Mavis prepare the ship for their escape. He had been struck in the back of the head, shoulder and leg from shrapnel and had taken a concussion and a few broken bones, the worst of which, beyond his skull, being his completely shattered lower leg.

Now the healer went to work trying to repair the damage, pushing the bones back together magically and knitting them together. Once more, this seemed a painful process, but like Jenny, Freed took it stoically, gritting his teeth. Once the bones were healed, a second healer came over to push the flesh together so that it could be sutured into place. The healer told him he would never be able to walk without a limp, but the limb at least could be saved, just like his head.

"It isn't broken, thank goodness," the healer behind the rune-user breathed out, pulling her head away. "And I'm talking about your brain as well as your skull, Sir Freed," the woman added, voicing why she had taken so long at her task. "The membrane around your brain was able to reduce the impact. I was afraid... well, never mind. What damage there is will heal."

With Wendy still unconscious through the emotional turmoil and overuse of magic, all of the healers had their work cut out for them like the group around Freed and Jenny, especially the three around Elfman. And with a sigh, Ranma stopped his people-watching, pulling away from Juvia. "Let's pitch in where we can, Juvia."

Ranma moved around, helping where he could, as one by one, the mages of Fairy Tail were helped from the Rune Knights vessel into the Christina. Natsu was doing much the same, as was Master Makarov. He had been healed as much as possible by Wendy, but he was still missing an arm, seared off his body.

Ranma was back helping a grumpy Gildarts moving around sans his false leg when they passed a twosome working on Mira when he heard one of the healers' mutter, "I understand you all had a Ranger with you?"

"Don't know how those rumors got started, but even if one had been there, I wouldn't be able to comment," Mira retorted.

"Which probably proves there was one there. That puts all of this in perspective. Ranger's leave destruction behind them, whatever their missions. I don't know why the Kings

haven't dissolved that moribund system," the man muttered. His tone told Ranma that he was an example of an officious prick, or perhaps a barracks guild lawyer, someone who felt that they always knew better than other people. And who disdained any kind of combat or anyone who enjoyed it as barbaric.

Ranma didn't take his words personally. The last time he'd cared about some stranger's opinion of him had been back when he was in Nerima. Erza, on the other hand, looked up from nearby and was in a flash of magical light was holding one of her swords. It was a sign of her lingering magical exhaustion that it was a simple plain sword rather than one of the hundreds of magical varieties she had. Faster than most could follow, the redhead held the blade in front of the man's eyes, by a bare centimeter away. "If you think for one moment that the Ranger involved was the reason this happened to us, I think you need your head examined, healer."

"Rangers exist for a reason, and that is to find the trouble out there before it can fester and grow," Makarov intoned, moving over to take Erza's hand, gently pushing the sword away from the man's sweating face and then taking the steel sword from her hand, laying it down to a nearby. "Yes, there was a Ranger involved, but every injury you see here, all of them were sustained after the mission we were helping the Ranger on was finished. And if you honestly think that you can accurately predict a force of nature like Acnologia, then please, keep speaking. Otherwise, be silent."

The man started to scoff but then realized who he was speaking to as the wizard's necklace fell out from within Makarov's clothing as he glared up at the man. Then his face paled further as he realized that Makarov was simply telling the truth and he hastily went back to his work.

Ranma sent Makarov a slight nod of appreciation for his words. They hadn't been necessary, Ranma was more furious at his own part of the battle against Acnologia than anyone thinking the actual attack was his fault but at least he had backed the Ranger up.

Makarov waved back and then hobbled forward onto the Christina while the healers continued their work on the others. There he found a small's suite and laid out on the bed, sighing faintly as elsewhere, his children were being helped to other rooms. The Rune Knights would not be coming with them. They would instead continue on with their ship, heading back to the magic country. Minerva would be coming with the Fairy Tail mages to get back faster.

Even as he heard the Dragon Slayers being chivvied onto the flying ship reached him, Makarov closed his eyes, then open to them, holding his one remaining hand above his head. He scowled at it, staring hard, then tried to enlarge it before gasping in pain, releasing his spell. "Too damn old, just too damn old for this. It's time and past time that I step down. But who will take on the position of Guild Master...?"

OOOOOO

Thanks to Toma sending word to the guild, the rest of Fairy Tail knew that the Christina was coming, and Macao, Bisca, Lisanna, and Anna had taken charge in the absence of their seniors. On their orders, everyone had been gathered together, Bisca even recalling a few people had been out on missions. Judging by the tones of the king's bird-message, whatever had happened was bad and the Guild would face its consequences together.

The Dragon Slayer's stumbled out, all of them looking worse for ware, which was so normal that many of the guild mages calmed down from the amount of tension they were all feeling. That tension came back with a vengeance however as Master Makarov stumbled his way down the landing ramp. Bisca was not the only one to gasp at the lack of an arm or the faint burn marks still visible on his clothing and face, as well as the weary beaten looks of the others.

For a moment, their missing members didn't register as people hurried forward, some of them even going so far as to exhaling in relief as they saw the faces of friends and loved ones in the case of Anna and Lisanna. But then, Gray's absence was noted first by Nab, and then Macao followed it up, looking around for Evergreen. Then Bickslow... "Oh no," the older man whispered, as he and the more experienced members realized their fellows were not here and why.

Makarov held up a hand, demanding silence. "As you can all see, we ran into something that we were not prepared for. Acnologia, Acnologia attacked us for reasons that we do not know. Regardless, the bastard cost us three or this guild's precious children. Evergreen, Bickslow and Gray."

There were a series of gasps from those among the guild who hadn't yet connected the dots, and Bisca felt tears welling up as she leaned back against Alzack. Makarov went on. "This has been a dark time in our history. But we will get through this together as a family. I expect to see you all later this evening on the cliffs overlooking the ocean by Fairy Hill. There we will sign our friends to watery depths, as we all always have with our fallen. For now, simply give your friends and fellows the support they need. And..." he smirked, although there was only a bit of humor in it. "those of you who don't own formal clothing might want to fix that oversight."

As the rest of the guild saw to the wounded members, Makarov's voice sounded out once more. "Gildarts, Laxus, Erza, with me. Mira, you're in charge of setting up the funerals."

Mira looked after the other S-class mages, then nodded once and turned to the others. Then she looked down and Minerva, cocking an eyebrow at the younger girl. "What about you? Are you going to stay for the ceremony?"

"I'll mourn with you all at least," Minerva answered with a firm nod, wincing only slightly at the remnants of her hangover from the day before. "Then I'll have to head to Crocus to check in with the king and princess. I'll tell you flat, though, whatever else I think I might be back to at least spar with your mages. There's no reason why my Gravity Magic shouldn't have been able to affect Acnologia. I just wasn't strong enough, and the only thing that can help that is getting stronger."

In among the crowd, Ranma noted that Natsu and Happy had been surrounded by Anna and Lisanna and were now moving out away from the rest. That was good. Since Mavis had gotten him to laugh, Natsu had been doing a bang-up job of trying to keep everyone's spirits up these past few hours, not letting his own grief bring him down into the same melancholy spiral as the rest and Ranma felt that he was deserving of some serious romance time. *So am I*, he thought with a slight snort, *but first things first*.

OOOOOO

Inside his office, Makarov looked up at the three S-Class mages. While her power put her still at the S-class Mark, Mira didn't take nearly as many jobs as these three, busy with her modeling career and preferring to stay home and watch the rest of the guild. Moreover, Mira didn't command respect from the Magic Council as the other S-class mages. *Or rather fear, I suppose, is closer to the mark*, Makarov thought to himself.

"What do you want, old man?" Laxus asked brusquely. "I'd rather be out there organizing the funerals, helping the others through their grief, or sleeping again." None of them were even back to half strength magically speaking, and physically? The majority of their wounds were healed after their stop in Caelum. That was all that could be said for any of them.

"Cheeky brat! Still, you've got a point, so I'll get right to it. Gildarts, what would you do if I asked you to become the next Guild Master?" Makarov asked.

Gildarts burst out laughing, shaking his head instantly. "No chance! First, my Crash magic makes it too dangerous for me to spend too much time near other people and breakable things like towns. So, I could never stay at the guild long enough. For another, leadership just isn't my style, Master Makarov. You know it."

"You do have seniority," the Guild Master replied mildly. "Your age and experience would also make you much more acceptable to the Magic Council and even the king."

"Who cares? Sure, they have to ratify your decision but it's the guild that has to live with it. If I was Guild Master, I'd immediately delegate to Mira and Erza, and even Laxus here, and

have them make the decisions. What would the difference be between that and having one of them simply be Guild Master in the first place? None at all," Gildarts retorted, still chuckling. The very idea of his taking over as Guild Master was a horrifying one to him. As well as damn scary. Gildarts could barely handle the idea that he was a father of two. Leading so many? No way!

Sighing, Makarov shook his head. "I wish that came as a surprise. But it doesn't. That's why I called the two of you in here. Erza, in many ways, you would be my ideal choice. You're powerful, respected..."

"Feared," Gildarts and Laxus both interrupted with a laugh.

"In politics, it's the same thing, brats," Makarov muttered before looking back up at Erza, whose eyes had widened, although she still somehow looked proud at the two men's words, continuing from where he had been interrupted. "Cool, calm and collected. But your organizational skills are nonexistent, and I'm afraid of friction between you and Mira if you become Guild Master. Your rivalry might be lukewarm right now, but it still exists to a somewhat disturbing level at times."

Erza shrugged her shoulders at that. It was true, after all. While they were the best of friends, she and Mira were still rivals in many ways. The two of them had sparred numerous times during the winter and had to be pulled apart each time by Laxus, Makarov or Gildarts.

Of course, that wasn't the only issue with Erza. First, Makarov was deeply worried about the guild's reaction to Erza's love of discipline. She was very much a rule enforcer, someone who would try and force the guild to somehow conform to the Magic Council's rules in public. That would forever put her at loggerheads with Gildarts, Natsu, Elfman, and several others, adding to the issue with Mira.

"Which brings me to you, Laxus. You're arrogant, condescending occasionally, standoffish and aloof. Things I would not wish to see in a Guild Master." Makarov counted points off his fingers, staring at his grandson.

Yet Laxus merely crossed his arms, staring back, his headphones around his neck, and one of his fur cloaks, which he had somehow retrieved before coming in with the others, around his shoulders. But he said nothing, simply staring back at Makarov.

Nodding his head once at that, Makarov went on. "But you're also self-controlled, driven, a good organizer, respected by the Magic Council and the king as an unofficial Wizard Saint, and moreover, just like these two, you love the guild. You show that love in tsundere ways, but I cannot deny the emotion behind it." He waited for Laxus to grunt in annoyance and look away with a faint flush to his cheeks at being called out on that before asking, "So I have a little test for you to see if I can trust you as Guild Master. If you take the position, what would your first change as Guild Master be to how the guild is run?"

Lexus thought about it for a moment, then said slowly, "Well, if we're talking about me taking up the reins in a few days, I'd want to look at the teams that people are all in, call each team in, ask them some questions, make certain that their magics, as well as their personalities, mesh well. I think I'd also instigate a new kind of rating system for our mages. No solo missions for any mage below... call it A-class. I'd also institute some training for everyone, physical training, endurance, that kind of thing every other week. Not everyone's magic has a direct combat application, but I want our guildmates able to watch after themselves if need be."

"You've thought of this before," Makarov stated, a declaration of fact rather than an actual question. "And that's all?"

Lexus merely nodded. "I wanted to be Guild Master for years, longer than I've even known Ranma, Old Man. But yeah, that's all. I won't demand they act appropriately or whatever, but I will demand they try to keep in shape and watch one another's backs. Beyond that, I'll probably add a few incentives to keep like not having people pay for damages done on missions or something. And cutting them off from the guild's drinks if they don't. Beyond that," Lexus shrugged. "Why'd I change what mostly works?"

Makarov chuckled, finding it ironic that while Ranma's influence on Erza made Makarov leery of naming her his successor, it was that impact on Lexus that seems to have softened Lexus to the point where Makarov could honestly say that he was the best choice. He wasn't perfect. He still had many emotional issues, and he wasn't nearly as outgoing with his emotions as Makarov could have wished. *Lexus never grew out of the angsty teenager phase, freaking tsendere*, Makarov grumbled internally. *But perhaps some real responsibility will help in forcing him to ditch that annoying habit.*

"All right," he said aloud, looking up at his grandson. He hopped up onto his desk, then reached out with a small fist, thumping it into Lexus' chest. "You're my successor. I'll announce it in two days. You'll want to spend that time thinking about a speech."

Lexus affected a look of mocking horror at that, but in the main, he wasn't feeling happy or proud as he might have thought at this moment. *Becoming Guild Master is what I have been working toward my whole life, but this sure as hell isn't how I wanted it to go. Fucking Acnologia. I wonder how many volts it'd take to pop his eyeballs like grapes?* Despite his suddenly bloodthirsty thoughts, Lexus then allowed a smile to appear on his face. "Hey, look at it this way Old Man, now that you won't have to deal with all the paperwork and such of being a Guild Master, you might be able to try and woo Porlyusica again."

"Hey, you're right, Makarov's mentioned a time or two how he had a thing for her when he's drunk, hasn't he?" Gildarts chuckled.

"I, I have no idea what you're talking about! I love all women equally!" Makarov retorted, looking away with a flush on his face as the others laughed.

OOOOOO

Outside, Lucy began to stumble, moving away from the crowded area right outside the guild's back entrance to lean against a nearby tree. Cana instantly noticed her girlfriend's distress and moved towards her lover, putting an arm around the other girl's waist. "Hey babe, are you okay?"

"N, no, I don't think I am," Lucy answered, stumbling slightly even in the grip of her girlfriend.

Then Virgo was there, helping her up again. The Celestial Spirit also showed signs of strain, portions of her body fading in and out of being. "Mistress, you used too much magic during the battle with Acnologia in order to continue sustaining me any longer than you have."

The pink-haired spirit then looked over to where Ranma was talking quietly to the oldest of the Fairy Tail crowd, telling them about the battle against Acnologia and what had been going on before. At their feet was Romeo, who looked a little shellshocked at the amount of damage the mages had taken, and at the knowledge that Gray, the only one of the three missing mages he had personally known well, would not be returning.

seemed to sense her looking at him, and he looked over to the three girls, excusing himself from the conversation and moving in the direction. "Are you okay? You want me to carry Lucy for you, Cana?"

"That would be nice," Cana grunted.

She was about to go on, but she was interrupted by Virgo, pushing herself forward as she stared up at Ranma near enough that her dress-clad chest was almost pressing into his. "Master Ranma, Mistress Lucy is tired due to my needing to retain my corporeal form on her heavily weakened reserves. I think that it is time to punish me for that and to use another method to renew my energies at the same time."

At first, Ranma didn't get what she was talking about. But then he did, and Ranma began to blush, backing away quickly.

Thankfully for Ranma, Porlyusica was nearby, talking quietly to Wendy and Seilah while simultaneously writing out instructions for Freed on what kind of exercises he should do to regain movement in his leg as possible. A scowl was on her face, and she had called the healer who told Freed he'd walk with a limp for the rest of his life a, "Useless waste of skin even for a human."

Now she turned to Virgo, staring hard at the Celestial Spirit. "Honestly, I know humans are uncaring brutes, but at least they understand the word tact. Do you really think this is the time to opportune someone when everyone is feeling down about our losses?"

The Celestial Spirit of maidenhood had the grace to look somewhat abashed, but her face firmed quickly. "It might not be the best moment socially speaking, but it is a necessary conversation. Unless you all wish me to return and then have to deal with Zeref being in my realm in the celestial world?"

While she hadn't the full story just yet about what had happened, Porlyusica shivered at the mention of Zeref and understood that there was a real reason why Virgo didn't simply return to the Celestial World. Then she scowled, thrusting out a hand toward Lucy. "Her key. Now."

Lucy shied away for a moment but then unbuttoned her special key pouch, handing over Virgo's Golden key. Porlyusica took it, scowling irately. "Celestial Spirit Magic is based around using these Holder magic-type keys to cast magic through. Even a top-heavy bimbo should be able to understand that others can use a Celestial Spirit's key to lend magical to the Spirit."

Virgo tsked under her breath, as Porlyusica looked around at the rest of the mages, then called out a few names, "Macao, Bisca, Alzack get over here. You three are the strongest mages here with full reserves. Laki make some chairs for them. Normal ones, girl. I've no time for your bizarre affectations."

Laki grumbled a bit but obeyed while Cana and Lucy watched on, Lucy now visibly wilting so much that Cana was nearly being dragged to the ground with her. Seeing this, Ranma moved forward quickly, picking Lucy up in his arms in a bridal carry, holding her there as if she weighed nothing while watching the proceedings.

Unfortunately, at that point, they discovered a problem. The Key had been locked to Lucy's magical signature and refused to absorb their magic. Lucy though simply shrugged, holding up a pen from somewhere. "In that case, we just have to rewrite our agreement to..."

"No Mistress," Virgo hastened to interrupt. "We can't do that. Part of the process of redoing our contract would be for you to cancel the current one, sending me back to my portion of the Celestial Realm before you resummoned me. Can we take the chance that Zeref would not be able to compel me to bring him back?"

Lucy scowled, and Virgo went on, attempting to not sound anticipatory and failing. "Thus, even with the key in our hands, I must resort to the same Tantric method of renewing my reserves as Loke did. Or my mistress must. One of the two."

As Lucy blushed as much as her weakening body would allow, Cana snickered, shaking her head and Virgo glanced around at the others.

“Bah, that just means we have to get creative,” Porlyusica looked around, then glanced at the only other pink-haired person there. Meredy had been introduced to her earlier, the girl having helped the healers in Caelum by sharing – halving – the pain some of their patients felt via her Maguilty Sense: Sensory Link. “You Meredy, can you use your magic to transfer magical reserves from one person to another?”

Hesitantly, Meredy nodded, somewhat in awe and fear of the older woman, which, Ranma reflected, was perfectly understandable when Porlyusica was in Angry Medic mode.

“And when you do, does the magic you transfer take on the energy of the person you are transferring to, or does it still retain the signature of you or the person you are transferring the magic from?”

Blinking, Meredy thought about it, then looked to Ultear, who frowned thoughtfully, then shrugged. “I have no idea. Let’s find out.”

With Porlyusica directing her, Meredy connected herself to Macao, Lucy, and Virgo’s key, the two Fairy Tail mages holding onto the key together. “Good. Now, Meredy will act as the conduit, and Lucy will be the filter taking in the magic and directly it directly into the Golden Key can accept. I’m trusting you to know when you’re starting to feel the strain, Macao. And Lucy, if this is painful, speak out quickly.”

Macao nodded, then sent what he thought was a debonair wink at Virgo. “Pity that your idea about the Tantric ritual didn’t work out. Although this is just a stopgap, so perhaps in the future?”

“Ugh, Dad, don’t be weird!”

While Romeo groaned, Virgo recoiled, shaking her head quickly. While Alzack was somewhat handsome, Macao was far older than she would prefer and Bisca was a woman. As much as Virgo could change her body to match her current Mistress’s desires, there was a limit to how much Virgo could change mentally. So, she did not find girls nearly as appealing as boys. “Thank you, but no. That is a punishment well beyond what I would find interesting.”

As Macao grimaced at the put-down, Ranma chuckled and watched as the Ethernano flowed from Macao, first down the link to Meredy and then from her to Lucy before being sent directly on into the Golden Key.

Faster than Ranma had thought, Macao was sweating and beginning to sway. Instantly, Porlyusica reached forward and ripped off the runic array which had been tied around his hand, shaking her head and ordering Meredy to cancel her magic around the man. “I told you to tell me when you were getting weak, oaf!”

“I, I too have my pride as a mage darn it!” Macao grunted, slumping in his seat.

“Bah, what worth is pride, honestly. Next.”

Bisca and Alzack went, telling Porlyusica when they were feeling weakened. Afterward, she looked over at Virgo. “And how are you feeling, girl?”

“Disgruntled,” the pink-haired maid responded instantly, looking towards Ranma, then back again. “But well enough, I suppose,” she added hastily, feeling Lucy’s glare from that direction and seeing the narrow-eyed glare from Porlyusica right in front of her. *Darn it, I was so close! I am so tired of being called the Virgin!*

“Does she need more?” Ranma asked. “I’ve had a full day to recover, and thanks to taking in so much ocean water, it wasn’t my magical reserves that were exhausted after the battle anyway.”

“I’ll volunteer as well,” Jenny said, coming up behind Ranma and laying her head on Ranma’s shoulder, her arms going around his waist directly below where he was still holding Lucy. Ranma shuddered and tried not to react to the feel of her breasts on his back. But it was very obvious that at some point on the Christina, Jenny had not only changed her clothing but had removed her bra.

Pleased with her bit of flirtation, Jenny moved around Ranma, allowing her hand to trail across his side, ignoring the glare Lucy was showing her, as she moved to take her position next to Bisca. Despite still being somewhat exhausted, Jenny took a while longer, which should have been expected given her S-class mage status.

Then Ranma went, and a few minutes into his offering, Porlyusica ordered them to stop, looking at the Celestial Spirit through pink-tinted glasses. “That’s enough. Virgo’s got more than enough energy to sustain her for a few weeks. Maybe up to a month and a half if I can judge her from the way Loke went through his reserves, although he wasn’t using his own magic during that time, so you might need to watch out after any fight you destructive, smelly humans run into.”

“So you knew Loke was a Celestial Spirit?” Lucy asked in surprise, although making a note that she did need a shower.

“Of course I did. But Loke was also a patient. And there is such a thing as patient-doctor confidentiality. I might hate humans, but I still have my oaths to my patients,” Porlyusica grumbled. Then she pointed to where Ranma was still, despite having also given energy to Virgo, holding Lucy, with Cana smirking at Lucy’s slowly blushing face.

Although she was in a relationship with Cana, unlike Cana, Lucy was at least partially bisexual. And being held in someone’s arms like this, especially someone who didn’t even seem to notice her weight and was so muscled, was beginning to have an impact on her.

"I think you can put her down now, Ranma," Cana teased.

"Yes. Get the girl home," Porlyusica ordered. "You're to sleep in for the rest of the day, girl, and not do anything strenuous for a few days before you build up your reserves."

Lucy began to protest, saying she wanted to be at the funeral. "Gray was a friend, damn it, and we don't, we don't even have anything left of him to bury. But I will by Magic be there to mourn with the rest of the guild."

Porlyusica hesitated, then scowled. "Fine, but first, go take a nap, then eat something heavy in protein. You need to build up your magical reserves again. Right now, any use of magic beyond the barest minimum might actually damage your reserves permanently, although you're not alone in that. Elfman, Freed and even Mirajane are in the same boat."

Lucy agreed with that, while all around them, the guild slowly started to break up, groups heading this way and that. Ranma, Jenny and Juvia met up with Erza inside the guild and remained with her there for a time, talking quietly about what she and the other S-class mages had been discussing. Laxus becoming Guild Master was something that Ranma had not seen coming, but he could see that it made a lot of sense. It had to be one of the stronger mages, Gildarts was too solitary an individual, and Erza, whatever Makarov might have said, Erza was far too strict to become the head of Fairy Tail.

Unfortunately, unlike Makarov, Ranma had neglected to keep that last thought inside his own head and swiftly felt a smack upside his head as Erza growled. "What do you mean by that?"

"Kind of proving my point for me there, love," Ranma retorted, causing his other lovers to laugh. "I mean, you would constantly be fighting even more than Makarov to force the guild to conform to some kind of..." Ranma affected a shudder. "Lawful standards."

"Juvia must agree with Ranma, Erza. Erza's proclivity for enforcing the rules is rather well known," Juvia added, leaning against Ranma's other side, squishing his arm into her chest.

Erza scoffed. "Don't blame me for trying to enforce normality on the mages of this guild. Some of them need a firm hand."

"And you're know all about that, wouldn't you?" Jenny murmured wickedly, causing the other girls to flush as they remembered the moment the three of them had shared on the island.

Wendy was also there but still was in no mood to join in the laughter as she leaned against Seilah. The demoness girl's arms were around her. The look on Seilah's face seemed to indicate contentment with where the two of them were and the message that if anyone even tried to annoy or irritate Wendy at the moment, she would cheerfully flay them alive.

Which is just fine by me, Ranma thought. Hell, I'd probably hand her the knives.

Seeing his little sister made Ranma remember what Makarov had said earlier about dressing up for the funeral. With that in mind, he extricated himself from Erza and Juvia with some difficulty. Now was his turn to let his fingers trail across Jenny's side, gripping her rear for a moment unseen by the others, causing her to blush and grin softly, but he ignored her, moving over to Wendy and reaching down with one hand. Wendy looked up, and Ranma smiled wanly. "Come on, you and I need to go shopping. The last time you went anywhere formal, you were around nine, so I doubt your dress from back then still fits, and your Song Silk dress probably isn't formal enough."

"You might wish to speak to Katerina. She has been in every clothing shop in Magnolia and is also something of a seamstress herself," Seilah intoned before glancing down at her own body. "And I think I might wish to join you."

Ranma nodded at that, looking over the other girls. All three shook their heads, indicating they had clothing fit for the funeral, but Erza did have something to add. "**Don't** wear somber colors. While the mood of the funeral is going to be somber, Fairy Tail doesn't do that very well." She looked around, only just now noticing that Natsu, Anna and Lisanna had left a while ago. "And if you can, find Natsu and drag him to the men's store too."

Wendy and Ranma sniffed the air, then pointed in the same direction, intoning as one, "He's that way."

This won a giggle from Wendy, the first one that she had made since the battle with Acnologia, and Ranma leaned down, lifting Wendy into his arms and onto his shoulder, sitting her there. "Come on, little one, let's get started. Seilah, we'll meet you at your bookshop in a bit."

Seilah seemed reluctant to leave Wendy's side, even for a short time. But she nodded, and the group broke up, with Erza leading Jenny and Juvia to Fairy Hills, where they would get ready for the funerals and Ranma and the others heading out into the town.

OOOOOO

Elsewhere, it had already occurred to Lisanna and Anna that Natsu did indeed need some new clothing for the funeral. "I'm thinking we keep the white pants, but pair it with a light gray shirt," Anna mused.

“Ooh, yes. I think a vest for certain too, something to match his salmon-colored hair,” Lisanna enthused, careful not to call Natsu’s hair ‘pink.’ Both girls were using the idea of taking Natsu on a shopping trip to push through their shock at Evergreen, Bickslow and Gray’s deaths. The twins had been friends with all of them, although they had been closer to Gray, of course. But they refused to let that bother them now, not when it was obvious to them both that Natsu needed something to take his mind off their losses.

The Fire Dragon Slayer looked at them both, a haunted look on his face that had nothing to do with the recent disaster. While he had loved most of what he was learning about this whole relationship business, Natsu had learned long ago that shopping with women was a special kind of torture.

And he was not in the mood for it. Because Natsu wasn't grieving, he wasn't just sad or guilty at the fact that his best friend died to defend him. No, he was **furious!** On their trip back to Magnolia and the brief stop in the islands, Natsu had tamped it down, and even after they arrived, he hadn't let it out, dealing with the guild. But even now, with Anna and Lisanna, his two most precious people - Happy was a close second, the two girls tied for first - it was boiling inside, and instinctively Natsu knew he had to get away from them and release it. *And shopping isn't going to help, that's for sure. I know they are trying to help, but it isn't what I need.*

Glancing around desperately, Natsu saw Panther Lily walking by the store they had just dragged him into with Gajeel, and an ingenious idea occurred to him. Swiftly Natsu grabbed Happy from where Happy had been laying out on his head, holding the Exceed out to the two girls. “I think that sounds good, but what about Happy? He only has that one pair of pants he’s wearing, after all.”

Before either girl could say anything, he had thrust Happy into Anna's hands and turned, opening the clothing store's door quickly. “Hey, Panther Lily! The girls need your help for a second. They want to get Happy in some formal clothing, and they'll need an Exceed’s opinion.”

Since coming to Earth Land, Panther Lily had been taking missions as fast as he possibly could since joining Fairy Tail, rarely at the guild for more than a night here and there. Beyond his ability to shift into his combat form, Panther Lily didn't have any inherent magic and so had wanted to buy a magical weapon like his old Buster Sword. But such weapons were darn expensive, as Erza would be able to tell anyone who asked. So far, he had bought himself two bracers that could change into shields at need, an expanding pouch which contained hundreds of small throwing stars, and had commissioned a sword, but he was still short of the final price.

Now he looked up from his conversation with Gajeel and nodded his head firmly. “I’ll help, of course.”

“Fine, but Natsu, I expect you to actually wear whatever we buy you,” Lisanna said sternly.

She had to raise her voice to be heard over Happy's shout of, "Traitor! I'll get you for this, Natsu! It's dead fish under the pillow time for you!"

"Yes, dear," Natsu answered Lisanna, ignoring the words from his little buddy. Then greatly daring, he moved forward and kissed Lisanna on the lips. Despite their being in public, Natsu pulled her against him, feeling some other instinct other than anger welling up for a moment. But the anger was still there, and Natsu needed to let it out.

So he pulled away, kissed her on the cheek, and walked out of the clothing store with Lisanna staring after him with a blush on her cheeks and Anna standing next to her with a faint jealous scowl on her face. "Darn it, I call the next one."

Gajeel looked at the clothing shop then down to Panther Lily as he entered before glancing up as Natsu exited, hopping over Panther Lily. The two Dragon Slayers stared at one another, and Gajeel nodded his head almost imperceptibly. He could smell the fury within Natsu and just nodded his head, holding out his fist for a fist bump. "See you later," he said in his normal taciturn manner.

Natsu smacked his fist on Gajeel's and then raced off, heading towards the nearest woods.

OOOOOO

About five minutes after Natsu had left, Ranma and Wendy arrived at the same shop, entering to find Gajeel arguing with Lisanna and Anna about clothing styles and colors for some reason.

"It's got to be dark blue," Anna said firmly. "Trust me on this one."

"I'd be willing to if you actually told me why" Gajeel grunted back. "I prefer black or dark orange and black if I can't get away with solid black mixed with metal gray. I get what Makarov said about not wanting somber colors and shit, for all that's my normal clothing, damn him. But why are you pushing blue?"

"It will go well enough with your black hair, but more importantly, it will match what Levy will be wearing," Lisanna replied.

"Why is that so important?" Gajeel asked quizzically. "I mean, I know she was my partner and all for this S-class thing, but still..."

He trailed off at the looks the two girls were giving him. He got a little annoyed as they sighed in unison. "Hey! What's that look for, huh?!"

"It's best to just get it over with, dude," Ranma said, patting the other Dragon Slayer on the shoulder companionably. "Fighting girls about clothing is a losing battle however you try to fight it." With that, he turned away, looking at the clothing all around them. "Now, the question is, should I be in my female form because it's close to the ocean, and it's almost certain I'll get wet, or in my male form and dare fate to do its worst?"

Almost absentmindedly, Ranma snagged Happy out of the air as the blue-furred Exceed tried to make a break for it. Looking around, he didn't see Happy's normal partner and asked about, "Where's Natsu?"

Gajeel grunted, shaking his head. "He needed some alone time."

Ranma looked over at the other Dragon Slayer, then slowly nodded. "I'll want to check in on him in a bit. Wendy, you stay here with the girls and get started. I'll tell Seilah and Katerina that you're here."

Thanks to roof-hopping, this only took him a few seconds. Alter-Wendy also came along, wanting to get some new clothing for herself. And upon her arrival, Katerina was a major help. The soft-spoken Edolasan belle understood that shopping like this was not for boys, and she quickly finished the work on the suit for Gajeel and equally quickly helped Ranma find one, alter it, and finish. Then she smiled down at Wendy, holding out her hands to the little girl. "Now, are you ready for some good girl-type fun?"

Wendy looked at all of the dresses all around them, then up at Katerina and nodded, a small smile on her face as she took another step forward from the grief of losing friends.

Smiling faintly, Ranma left the store, then frowned, looking up at the sound of distant thunder or some kind of explosion. The store was situated near the town's edge, and Ranma turned in the noise's direction, frowning. *Hmm... now should I do this the hard way or the easy way?* After a moment, he shook his head. *Meh, I've already chosen to tempt fate, and I don't want either of us too badly battered for the funeral.*

With that in mind, he stuck his head back into the store. "Seilah, I hate to ask, but could I borrow you for a bit?"

Seilah was about to refuse, but Ranma went on, "I might need your Macro powers."

"Go on, Seilah," Wendy cut in, hugging the demoness around the waist before heading deeper into the shop.

The devil girl watched her move off, then scowled and headed to the door which Ranma was holding open for her. "Let's get this over with."

By the time Ranma found him, Natsu had been alone in the woods for around forty minutes or so. This was more than long enough for him to leave a trail of destruction, and Ranma discovered him in a large crater that he had somehow gouged out of the stone with his fire magic, raging and roaring. It's not fair, dammit! Gray was mine to beat! My rival, my punching bag!"

"My friend," Ranma interrupted, and Natsu's blows on the ground slowed until he turned. Ranma looked back at him, seeing Natsu in a far more draconic mode than before. Indeed, he almost looked somewhat demonic, his eyes glowing red, his entire face covered with scales, his fingers turning into claws as Ranma watched.

Yet there were also tears dripping down from those eyes, and the knuckles of those claws were raw from where he'd been pounding them into the ground.

"It hurts, I know," Ranma said, moving forward. "It always does when you lose someone. But does this help?"

Natsu growled fairly and leaped towards Ranma, but Ranma dodged. "I'm not going to fight you, Natsu."

He dodged and dodged and dodged again, even as he spoke calmly. "Come on, Natsu! You're better than this. Where is the guy who was trying to keep up spirits on Christina? You gave everyone else some help then, don't give in to your anger now. Control it, direct it!"

But Natsu wasn't listening. He kept attacking, throwing out fists and kicks almost wildly, with none of the hard-earned skill Ranma had beaten into his brain. Shaking his head, Ranma continued to dance around him then decided enough was enough. "Seilah."

Seilah moved around a tree at the edge of Natsu's trail of destruction, having watched the confrontation. Now she looked at Natsu, her eyes narrowed as she stared at the Fire Dragon Slayer. Something about his current looks had struck a chord within her for some reason she couldn't fathom. *He, he feels almost like another Demon, how strange.* Pushing through her momentary confusion, Seilah raised a hand, directing her Macro power. "Macro: Freeze in place."

An instant later, Natsu froze. He tried to fight it, but Seilah's Macro was absolute. "GRAAAHHHAHA, let me go you, you bastard! I'll kill you!" he roared, a fiery aura appearing all around Natsu.

"That's your anger talking, not your brain Natsu. You just want to lash out at the world right now, but that's dumb. Control your fire, damn it!"

With that, Ranma moved around the still-frozen Natsu, then grabbed Natsu's outstretched arm with one hand and wrapped his other hand around, forcing Natsu's neck and below his other arm. Then he pushed the outstretched hand into a tree. "Direct it," he repeated. "Focus it."

At his nod, Seilah, who was still watching Natsu with a mix of confusion and curiosity, released her Macro from the Fire Dragon Slayer. *Hmmm... was he not as wounded as the rest of us? I do not even see the light bruising that the rest of us are still dealing with.*

Instantly Natsu tried to get out of Ranma's grip, but even one-handed, Ranma had locked in the chokehold hard, and Natsu couldn't move his hand back far enough to get at Ranma, and every time he tried to kick, Ranma simply dodged. As powerful as he was and as astonishingly durable, Natsu just didn't have the grappling experience that Ranma did. "I'm not telling you rage is wrong. I'm not telling you that you shouldn't let it out willy-nilly. You knew that since you came out here in the first place. So put all those emotions into one attack and let rip one more time."

Finally, Natsu began to understand what Ranma was saying, and slowly, the draconic features on his face and hands disappeared. The glowing eyes stayed for a while, which Seilah noticed. Natsu then began to concentrate his magical powers again in one hand, and he shouted out, "Fire Dragons Grieving Flame!"

From that hand came a torrent of fire so hot and looked almost like a solar flare had come to life from the hand. When it passed through the tree, the entire tree turned to ash within an instant, and the beam of fire continued through the woods, creating a ruler-straight line of pure fiery destruction. So hot that even the grass underneath the beam several feet in every direction under the beam burst into flames. When it crashed into a distant rock, there was a concussive booming noise, as rock and fire fought, and rock lost, exploding in every direction from the sudden heat and impact of the flame.

The spell cut off after a second, and Ranma gestured with one hand, summoning up a wave of water as he murmured out his own attack of Water Dragon's Claw. That attack followed the trail of fire, putting out all of the little flames here and there before they could spread, as Natsu slumped in Ranma's arm, his magic now totally exhausted. Ranma could still see the embers of fury there, but the kid could control it now.

"Does," Natsu coughed, then Ranma released him, and he stumbled away before turning to look at Ranma. Does this get any easier?"

"Self-control or losing people?" Ranma inquired not to be snarky but because he genuinely wondered which one it was.

"Both."

Ranma winced. "I, I don't think I've actually ever lost anyone that I was as close to as you and Gray were. I've friends, and I've many acquaintances, but I haven't ever actually lost any of them. I've lost people on missions, of course, but that's not the same thing as losing a close friend. I'm afraid we'll have to ask Gildarts or Makarov about that one. I could give you platitudes, but that it'd be all they were. "

For some reason, that made Natsu smirk, but not from any pleasure, only at the actual words. "What the heck is a platitude? It sounds like an animal or something."

Ranma rolled his eyes and patted Natsu on the shoulder. "It means empty words and rhetoric. Things I learned from book mainly."

"Rhetoric?"

Again, Ranma rolled his eyes and Natsu actually grinned at him. "I see you're feeling better."

"What about my other question, then?" Natsu asked, becoming a little more serious. "I, I still have this, this rage inside of me. I can feel it there. This helped," he said, gesturing around at the destruction he caused. "But it's still there, and I'm afraid..."

"You're afraid it will consume you rather than be released? It's a concern. But just like anyone with a temper, you have to keep working on controlling it. That's something that only you can do. I can teach you meditation techniques, I can teach you some self-control, but you're going to have to put in the work. I will say, though, that since you're aware of it, you should be able to fight the anger back until you can later release it like you did here."

Natsu scowled. "You wouldn't have a problem with me doing stuff like this? Until my anger goes away?"

"Eh, Makarov might care about how much of the forest you're destroying, but I consider a bunch of useless acres of trees a small price to pay. Do you think you'll be able to take part in the ceremony?"

Natsu thought about it for a moment, then slowly nodded. "I'll be there. I'll probably be a bit late, but I'll be there. Just don't expect me to sit around and act all formal."

"I'm not. In fact, I think formality is the last thing this guild needs, know what I mean?"

That caused Natsu to laugh, and he smiled. "in that case, do you think you can help me out with a plan? A funeral isn't how I want to say goodbye to Gray. We need something else..."

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Later that day, the Fairy Tail guild gathered at the small beach situated at the bottom of the cliff Fairy Hills sat on. Along with the Fairy Tail mages, Wendy and Ranma were both in attendance, along with Minerva, Ultear and Meredy. Minerva would be heading off with the other two to Crocus after the funeral. The king still had to go through with fully pardoning Ultear for being part of Grimoire Heart, and Toma wanted to make certain that they had dealt with all the Dark Guilds who had looked to Grimoire Heart as the last member of the Balam Alliance. Meredy was just along for the ride.

All of Fairy Tail was there, except for Natsu. His girlfriends had looked for him since they had finished helping Wendy and Happy get ready for the ceremony, but he wasn't at any of his or Happy's usual haunts, so they had to stop unless they wanted to be late for the funeral too. Not that either Anna or Lisanna blamed him. As much as they had fought and gotten on one another's nerves, Gray had easily been Natsu's best friend among the guild. And judging by what they had been able to piece together of the fight against Acnologia talking to the others, Gray had died giving his life for Natsu. That had to leave a mark.

Ranma and Wendy stood with Seilah and the other non-Fairy Tail members near the back of the crowd. Wendy was dressed in an extremely pretty bright yellow formal gown with a white sash around the middle. For once, her hair was done in a formal braid down her back, and she wore, shockingly, a necklace of small golden ringlets, with a pendant of a sapphire set in the middle. No one bar the two Dragon Slayers, and Carla knew where it had come from, Wendy not being the type to enjoy dressing up, but the whole ensemble was amazing and matched that worn by Carla but hers was white with a yellow sash.

Seilah also wore a new dress, although unlike Wendy, she looked somewhat uncomfortable thanks to its bright white color with a few tiny purple highlights. Not covering her shoulders or arms, the dress fell directly from the nape of her neck on down, tight, but not obscenely so, although the way the dress was tight around her legs seemed to be designed to force her to take small steps or risk tripping. Along its length from the waist down were frills here and there, and it was paired with long white gloves, which covered much of her arms, leaving only her shoulders bare.

In contrast to the two girls, Ranma's clothing was somewhat plain. Good black pants coupled with a striped blue and white shirt, with a comedy tie. The reason it was a comedy tie was due to the fact it was a piece of Song Silk Ranma had bought once that was enchanted to show a slew of different phrases, like 'too pretty to go home alone,' 'not the face,' and 'best big brother ever,' all of which was written out in various colors, including glitter. Ranma had picked it up when he was going through the famous embarrassing older sibling phase and felt it worked quite well for that purpose.

"I thought you got rid of that, that thing, Ranma-nii," Wendy muttered, watching as the words changed once more to show 'Touch the tie, get done, son.' *Now that one, I can actually see Ranma-nii saying.*

"I could have sworn I had turned it into so much mince," Carla added. She had been rather uncharacteristically silent since waking up after the battle against Acnologia, and even now, there wasn't nearly as much bite in her tone as normal. Still, that wasn't exactly unusual at present, and Ranma had decided to let Carla work out her own issues since he doubted the prickly puss would accept his help anyway.

"Heh, I switched it out with another black-tie, knowing you would probably destroy it. Then I hid it in my Requip space."

"Grrr... that, that thing is an abomination!"

"I'll find it later, Carla, don't worry," Wendy soothed.

"Are you ever going to tell me how you can get into my Requip space?" Ranma asked, his tone lowering as Makarov moved to stand in front of the crowd. Wendy's smug smile was the only answer he received, and he shook his head with a sigh. "Not giving up a way to prank me and a general advantage, huh? I have taught you well, my apprentice."

Giggling, Wendy leaned against her brother with a sigh, smiling as she held Seilah's hand with her off-hand.

At the front of the group, where she had just moved to join Master Makarov, Erza heard this exchanged and allowed herself a small smile before turning back to the ocean as Makarov began. "This guild was founded on the pursuit of three things. Building a place where everyone within the guild could call home. The idea that with magical strength comes a responsibility to use to help others. And to cultivate the imagination and will to search for the unknown in our members. Do fairies exist? Do they have tails? This guild was built on dreamers, dreamers who wanted to always imagine what was over the horizon, both in terms of their own magic and the world around them."

"Today, we come together as a family to mourn the passing of our own. Three young people, taken far before their time. But setting aside their youth and how they died, we should not dwell on their passing. Rather, we should remind ourselves that they lived their lives as they wished, striving to always go forward with their own dreams. That journey has ended in this world, but knowing the souls of these three as we do, never doubt that in the next, they are still striving forward. And so, while we mourn the fact, they are no longer among us, we also should cheer for what they might discover on the next great adventure!"

Beside Makarov, the S-class mages stood resplendent in their best clothing. Gone was the usual cloaked punk look that Laxus normally wore. In its place was something almost like a

uniform, a changpao from Minstrel done in dark yellow and gray. His hair was slicked down, and he wore a piece of jewelry around his neck with the Fairy Tail Mark resting at its center.

Though he wasn't using his Crash magic at the moment, Gildarts had also changed. He wore tuxedo pants and a tuxedo undervest, complete with a tie. The tie was black, but the jacket was a light blue, and the pants were gray.

But Erza was more colorfully resplendent than either, wearing the formal Farewell Fairytale Armor. Composed of simply two hanging plates, the main breastplate was somewhat plain. But it was paired with a long, ruffled skirt, reaching down to Erza's knees and covering her greaves. The gauntlets were equally plain, with only the shoulder plates showing anything unusual, taking the form of wings. The color in this outfit and what made it special lay in the lance she carried, on the tip of which a flag bearing the mark of Fairy Tail flew. Two laurel ribbons hung from the lance elsewhere on its length. Her tabard was a dark blue color marked by a gold design of two fairies facing one another, and her cloak was wide, its inside colored crimson, its outer side an equally dark blue.

In stark contrast to her rival, Mira wore an almost plain white dress with golden highlights and the guild mark on a long cape around her shoulders. It was the fact that she was in her most powerful form, Halphas, underneath that caused Mira to stand out equally to Erza, her tail twitching under the dress, her scaled horns gleaming as if Mira had polished them, and the rest of her scales as well.

Now, as Makarov began to end the funeral, Erza and Laxus and Mira pointed out into the ocean, firing out a display of magic, while behind them, the rest of the guild prepared to do the same.

As he finished his ringing oration, Makarov allowed a long moment of silence before speaking once more. "Now we shout their names to the sky, as we celebrate our love for our guildmates, and whatever adventures they are on now in the next life, they will not be forgotten in this by those who stay behind."

"Evergreen!"

"Bickslow!"

"Gray Fullbuster!"

As Gray's name echoed over the waves, and the combined magics of the guild created a display to put the greatest of firework displays to shame, Natsu's voice rose from behind the crowd on the beach, where he's stood on the top of the cliff face. His voice was more a roar of a dragon, drowning out the merely human voices below for a moment. "Sadness is bullshit!"

Everyone but Ranma started to glare at the other young man while Ranma simply shook his head with a sigh. *Good idea, but very poor beginning Natsu.*

"Goddammit brat, can't you just for once..." Makarov began to shout back.

But he wasn't cut off as Natsu's voice roared out again. "Gray Fullbuster was my rival! He used ice, and I used fire, and some might say that was why we always rubbed one another wrong! But that was only part of it. The other part is our personalities! I hated his stripping, I hate these little ice circles, I hated the way Gray looked at me! Gray was the biggest pain in the ass in the guild! And he was my best friend!"

At that declaration, the growling and angry muttering of the guild began to subside, even Makarov's anger and Natsu went on shouting about their first adventure together, way back when had first joined the guild, and how both of them had challenged one another four or five times a day for a few weeks, and then an adventure where Erza had taken it upon herself to make certain that Natsu had been bathing properly.

Now Erza blushed rosily, shouting out, "Natsu, shut up! We were all kids then! How was I..."

But Mira wasn't having any of that. "Hah, I see the pervert started to head down her debauched path early then!" But before Erza could take umbrage at that, Mira also began to tell her own tale, and if her voice wasn't as booming as Natsu's, it was loud enough. "That reminds me of a time that Evergreen and I were on a mission together. We had just finished clearing these giant frogs out of a hot spring, and somehow Evergreen had snuck in some sake, and she got so drunk, after only a single bottle mind, that she attempted to fight me right there in the hot springs for who was the prettiest among the fairies! We gave a lot of boys one heck of a shock that night!"

"I can top that!" Natsu shouted. "One time, Gray and I had taken jobs that were in the same town, and..."

From there, Natsu and Mira's tales continued for a few moments as the rest of the guild began to laugh, chuckle, and lose their aura of depression and heartache. Soon others started to also share stories of the dead, with Freed leading the charge.

Watching all this, Makarov decided to go with it. It wasn't as organized as he had hoped, but maybe Natsu had a point. With this guild, feelings trumped formality. "That's right! No more sadness. The dead would not want us such. Instead, we will take the memories of their friendship and go forward on our own paths. For we are Fairy Tail and we will overcome!"

Watching this, Lucy nodded her head firmly, then pulled away from Cana, who she had been hugging her from the side, pulling out a specific one of her Celestial Spirit keys. With Virgo still more than topped up for the next few weeks, she was no longer feeling any kind of magical

strain, and Lyra was a silver key she cost Lucy far less than nearly any of her other keys anyway, the only one that cost less being Nikora. *And a migraine later is a small price to pay to help everyone get over their sadness quicker.* "Open, Gate of the Lyre! Lyra!"

A female spirit appeared to one side, one who looked somewhere between Lucy and Wendy in age. Strawberry blonde hair fell to her waist, curling upwards at the bottom, over which she wore a pink bonnet. The round blush marks on her cheek were why those around Cana wondered about the age of this Celestial Spirit, making her seem much younger. She also wore a long dress with heart prints, the kind of cutesy thing young girls liked. On her back, the spirit had small white wings, with a massive harp tied to her body between them.

Lyra grinned at seeing Lucy. "Lucy! Long time no see! You don't call me nearly enough, you know."

"And who's fault is that? Our agreement is I can only call you once a month, after all. If you want to see me more, we can revise her contract," Lucy retorted. This was an old exchange between the two of them but it never seemed to change.

The female spirit tsked, then looked quizzically at Virgo, shaking her head. "Wait you're keeping both of us corporeal, but you don't seem to be feeling much strain, so how is Virgo..." Lyra gasped, then leaned forward, her face taking on a look that wouldn't have been out of place on Cana at her teasing best. "You didn't. You didn't go the Loke route, did you? What a scandal!"

"I did not!" Virgo harrumphed, turning away from the other female spirit, before muttering almost under her breath, "Though not for lack of trying..."

"What does that mean?"

"Ask her later, Lyra," Lucy said firmly, although she too was looking at Virgo. "We need some music. Something upbeat and happy sounding." Although as she ordered that, Lucy couldn't stop herself from wondering how they would continue that treatment going forward without Meredy, since the girl was going to leave with Ultar and Minerva after the funeral. *And whether or not Virgo's getting her magic from other people will change her relationship with me. Once I'm back to normal I can empower her on my own, but not without severely limiting the other spirits I can call on to fight with me.*

Lyra nodded, and the music began quickly, a high, skirling set of chords from the massive harp and the Fairy Tail mages cheered before turning to one another, exchanging tales of the three dead. Every girl in the guild had a tale to tell of Bickslow, who had been in a notorious flirt. Even Anna and Lisanna did, and they might as well have been stamped property of Natsu since well before puberty. Even Erza and Mira, who could have been marked equally as way out of his league.

“It wasn't as if he'd ever done anything muddy. He just acted like the pink fool all the time. Kind of like Loke. And Bickslow took a disproportionate delight in displaying the fairy mark on his tongue for some reason. As if we would be impressed with the length of his tongue and assume it matched the length of his stump,” Laki announced, causing laughs all around despite the odd phrases the girl often used.

In contrast, most of the stronger mages there had tales of fighting Gray or fighting alongside him. Nab, Natsu, Elfman, and Freed dominated those stories, with Erza joining in occasionally as well as Laxus. Not Mira, though. She had beaten Gray once so badly when he stripped during a sparring match that he had been terrified of her ever since, even more than of Erza. And Evergreen had been surprisingly popular among both the men and the women, despite her haughty attitude and Evergreen's desire to be seen as the fairy Queen rather than Erza or Mira.

As this was going on, Ranma pulled out what amounted to enough drinks to start a bar from his Requip space, setting them in a nearby beach area, which Fairy Hills had put up a sort of Tiki bar. Jenny moved through the crowd, high-fiving Ranma as she leaped up over before leaping up over the bar, gesturing to the drinks. “You got any ice?”

Ranma nodded, gesturing down to the buckets at his feet. Those had been his ki space, which had kept them frozen since he had bought them.

“Right, you get ta cooking love, I've got the drinks.” She began to grab the ingredients for a cosmopolitan, making it quickly and easily, before downing the subsequent drink, and shouting out, “We got drinks over here! Let's get this wake going right!”

Jenny hadn't been part of the guild long enough to have many memories with the dead, with Juvia being in much the same position. So as no surprise to Ranma that when he moved over to a nearby fire pit, Juvia met him there, indicating she would help him cook.

Soon the smell of sizzling beef wafted across the beach, and the Fairy Tail guild members congregated around the food and the drinks, still exchanging stories. The atmosphere had now almost completely changed. There was still loss in many of the guild members' eyes, but the funeral had become a true celebration of the lives that the trio of dead mages had lived, rather than merely marking their passing.

Makarov was grinning from ear to ear as he stood on a stool in front of the bar shouting out about how much money Gray and Natsu's continual fights had cost the guild over the years and how he didn't regret a bit of it. Next to him, Mavis's spirit sat, watching everything going on with a smile on her face. Right now, no one seemed to realize she was a ghost, instead thinking she was a child or someone from Magnolia. Ranma was waiting for the moment someone would accidentally pass through her, or one of the people from Tenrou would address her.

Glancing up from his work, Ranma smiled at Wendy, who was now perched on Gildarts' head, doing a little dance to the music there, while Seilah smiled and danced with a few others, even a few of the old guys, who couldn't keep their eyes on her face. Near Gildarts and Wendy, he could see Edo-Cana and Freed talking, with Gildarts occasionally moving over to glare at the green-haired mage. Elsewhere, he saw the flash of darker green that marked Bisca out, as she was talking to her boyfriend, her face a full-body blush at the moment, as he held out a small box to her that Ranma couldn't see from this angle.

Natsu, Anna and Lisanna were now clustered together by the cliffs. Natsu had just dropped down, and the two girls were now remonstrating with Natsu on how he had gone about breaking the atmosphere of the funeral. Still, Ranma bet that they weren't too hard on the guy. He had really given them all the kick they needed to start moving past their shock and heartbreak into the more healthy mourning stage.

And it wasn't something I would have thought of doing, Ranma admitted to himself. Unlike Natsu, Ranma hadn't really been all that close to any of the trio of dead mages, let alone the dozen Rune Knights who had died. He'd known Gray well enough, but they hadn't been close. He was furious and sad they had died because he considered it his responsibility, but he didn't miss them as real individuals, honestly. So even if he had thought of it, Ranma would not have been able to have the memory-type ammo necessary to do what Natsu had.

He looked up as Panther Lily tromped over, holding out several fish. "Here. With this lot, we might need more food."

Ranma blinked in surprise. "Damn, nice catch, big guy."

The big Exceed shook his head. "Don't let the pole fool you. I used this." He tapped the dagger at his belt, explaining as he did. "It has a few different enchantments on it, one of which is to let loose an explosion in a given direction, which I used down into the water just now. The concussion knocked several fish out. It's an old trick I used to use with my Buster Sword all the time." The dagger was a prototype for his new sword the smith at Heart Kreuz had given him gratis.

Ranma nodded, took the fish, and as Panther Lily watched with wide eyes, his hands blurred as he removed the scales, filleted, and prepared them for grilling. Almost instantly, he felt something drooling on his shoulder and glared at Happy as he perched there, his eyes gleaming. "Fish," the little creature cooed, his tone almost that someone would use when talking to a lover.

Ranma flicked him off his shoulder, grumbling as he wiped at the drool Happy had left behind. "Wait your damn turn, cat!" Ranma muttered, then looked around, wondering where the other Exceed was. He saw her not near Wendy as he had expected but standing by Cana and Lucy. The two women were sitting down on a lounge chair, talking to Carla quietly. Their mood seemed a little too somber still, and even from here, Ranma could see the glare on

Carla's face. "Panther Lily, could you watch this for me? Just pull off the fish from the fire before they get burned. I'll put some marinade on them when I get back."

Ranma wouldn't call Carla a great friend exactly. Still, they were united in a few ways, in particular, caring for Wendy. So Ranma felt somewhat obligated to look after the little cat girl when Wendy couldn't. *Although it's probably due to her own wanting to escape the grief, she hasn't noticed anything just yet.*

"... At least you were able to do something! Happy and I were knocked out the moment Acnologia arrived. I was just as, as weak and useless as that he-cat!" Carla growled as Ranma strode up to them. He dropped a plate of food between the three girls, noting absently that Cana had already somehow procured alcohol for them, a large barrel of beer set to one side of where she and Lucy were sitting.

"Is that what's got all three of you looking so glum, chums?" Ranma said, trying to make a rhyme of it.

While the rhyme succeeded, the humor of it fell flat. Lucy and Cana both scowled at him, while Carla absentmindedly turned, twisting her hand and showing her ki claws. "If you've come over here to tell us moronic puns, I'm going to use you a scratching post."

Fighting back an urge to flinch, the only sign that remained of his Cat-fist training after so long around Carla, Ranma shook his head. "No, I came over to tell you not to feel bad about it. Yes, not all of us were able to fight Acnologia. But not even I could fight that monster on an even footing, and remember, I had the freaking ocean right there!"

That honestly terrified Ranma. In a way, the confrontation with Acnologia had happened at precisely the right place it should have to give him the best chance of winning. And still, Acnologia was able to power out of it. The loss of an arm, sure, and Ranma felt that Acnologia not sticking around to make certain Ranma was dead was a sign of how weak the black had become during their confrontation. But still, their survival had more to do with Mavis and her plan than Ranma's abilities.

That rankled something huge, but Ranma already had plans of how to get stronger.

Carla didn't, and the other two were just as sad at how poorly they had performed.

"None of my Celestial Spirits could do anything to him! Heck, I was relegated to helping Wendy with the healing afterward and transporting the unconscious Rune Knights. I was a glorified gofer!" Lucy muttered, shaking her head. "I'm not a combat junkie. I don't always want to get stronger or throw myself at every fight that comes my way. But I would at least like to have done something."

"I'm not a combat junkie either, and I couldn't even land a blow," Cana grumbled. "Hell, I couldn't even get close enough to use Fairy Glitter."

Ranma held up a hand, forestalling whatever Carla was going to say. I understand all that. And I understand why all of you are upset."

"I'm not upset. I'm furious!" Carla interrupted, her teeth bared.

She looked over to where Wendy had hopped off Gildarts' head and was now bounding from one head to another in the crowd, avoiding the girls' heads with ease, to land nearby, coming towards them. She lowered her voice as she turned back to Ranma. "All that training with you for so long, my skill with the ki claws, my desire to help defend Wendy. And yet, in a fight when it really mattered, I was knocked out before it began! Wendy was forced to fight on her own!"

"What am I, chopped liver?" Ranma grumbled as Wendy hopped up to them. She was about to lean down to pick up Carla in a hug when she saw the scowl Carla was wearing and paused, looking between the three of them. Resting a hand on her head, Ranma went on from where he had been interrupted, forestalling anything she might have said. "Then get stronger."

Carla and the two girls looked at him, scowling, and Ranma shrugged. "That's all you can do. Get stronger, get better, fight smarter, so that when you're facing a stronger enemy again, you know what to do." He paused, scratching at his pigtail as he thought about what he had seen and knew about Lucy and Cana's combat abilities. He hadn't ever fought alongside Cana, but he had seen her in action against Jenny during the S-class exams, and he had seen a lot of what Lucy's Celestial Spirits could do, even if he didn't know much about their personalities bar Virgo.

Well, her and Aquarius, but Ranma didn't like the mermaid bitch much.

"While I will say both of you could benefit from training your bodies and your magical reserves, what I think would do you the most good in terms of fighting enemies who are stronger than you would be to not try to close that gap, but to come at it from a different angle. If I run into an enemy that can fight me one way really well, I don't keep trying to do the impossible, I figure out a different solution."

Both girls nodded, as that made sense to them. More, neither girl was the kind to want to fight hand to hand as much as Natsu or the other more powerful mages.

"Now, I don't know much about the Celestial spirits you use, Lucy, but from what I do know, they can help you out in a lot of different ways. That Centaur guy, how much you want to bet he can do more with those arrows than just light them on fire? Or, say use Virgo to create multiple tunnels under the battlefield, then fill 'em up with something explosive. Cana, I bet your cards would be good for that kind of thing. Or use that copy-cat one to try and draw fire."

He shrugged then. "I'd ask your Celestial Spirits for more advice really. How do they think they could be used to change the battlefield in your favor, not just attack head-on?"

"So you're saying that I should be support instead of in the front lines?" There was an equal amount of frustration and relief in Lucy's voice as she posed this question. Frustration because she liked to think she didn't like the idea of being relegated to the backlines like that, but relief because honestly speaking, she didn't like fighting all that much, and the idea of being support, of her and her Celestial Spirits working as a team to take out enemy mages without ever really fighting them straight on, that was kind of cool.

And she was fully aboard the idea of talking to her Celestial spirits more. She knew a lot about Aquarius, Virgo, and her old retainer/trainer, Capricorn. The others, even Taurus thanks to his perverted nature, she hadn't gotten to know as well.

"I'm saying that being able to fight both ways, and to train so you can make that switch easily, could be a good idea." Ranma then smirked, his teeth flashing at her predatorily. "And you might want to hunt down any of those Golden Keys that you don't have yet. I'd wager that would be a help too."

Lucy laughed at that and Ranma turned to Cana. "Cana, you more than Lucy would probably benefit from more physical training and training your magical reserves. But you could also use your Cards Magic in a more roundabout manner. It's not always just about who has the strongest magic, but about how they use it, about who can outthink the other person. And maybe use more magic items, too, to back up your Cards Magic."

"Use more illusion type stuff than cutting stars. Like a stinking cloud or something like that. Knockout gas, or something that blinds the enemy," Cana mused.

"That's the stuff," Ranma enthused. *I doubt any of that would do anything against Acnologia, but hey, I doubt either of these two are really thinking about fighting that bastard again unless they really have to. They just want some new ways to grow.* "See, you're getting it."

He looked down at Carla, who was now looking up at him thoughtfully, which allowed Wendy to pull her into a hug. A second later, both of them squawked in shock as Seilah appeared out of the crowd, leaning down and picking them both up as one, hugging Wendy into her monstrous bosom, where the little girl sighed but then smiled and leaned back.

But her new position as the front of this strange triangle didn't stop Carla from glaring at both Wendy and Seilah before looking back at Ranma quizzically. "What about me? Do you have any advice for me?"

“Fight smarter,” Ranma said with a shrug. “Although in your case, natural strength would probably be a help too. If you and Happy had the magical strength to do it, you might have been able to throw off Acnologia’s aura.”

The blonde-haired cat-girl reached up and tugged at her hair for a moment, nodding slowly. “How would you suggest I go about gaining more magic? I doubt that anyone would be willing to open up my Second Origin just yet.”

“Sparring, fighting, training. Talk to Panther Lily. He might know of a way to throw off any inherent weakness you Exceed might have against oppressive auras like Acnologia’s. He may even be able to help you enlarge your human form to the same size as his. That would be a major help, wouldn’t it?” *Although, come to think of it, isn’t Carla, like the equivalent of sixteen, and he’s in his twenties? Carla might just not yet be fully grown. And her human body is much more, er, human than his.*

As Carla indicated agreement, Ranma grabbed some of the meat from the plate he brought along and chopped it off, pointing at them all. “That’s for later. For now, this is a party, don’t be downers. Cana, you have to have some funny stories about Bickslow, Evergreen or at least Gray.”

“Actually, I have one that involves all three of them,” the lush grinned. “It marks the first clue that made us realize Bickslow might be a pervert, and at the time, we thought Evergreen and Freed were as well. It wasn’t until a week later that we realized that the whole incident had actually been started by a dare from Laxus, one of a few that he had the whole Thunder Tribe pull off.”

Seeing she had a rapt audience, Cana went on. “When Laxus was younger, he liked to get them to prank the rest of the guild and...”

Ranma left them to it, heading back to the food to take over from Panther Lily, nodding in Carla’s direction. Happy didn’t see it, thankfully, or he might have become jealous. *I hope that’s the last serious discussion we have today. I’m not in the mood for any more.*

Just then, he heard the should of, “Wait, she’s who!?” and another shout of “First Master Mavis??!” and smiled happily, turning in the direction of the bar. *That’ll do!*

For once, Ranma’s wish was fulfilled. There were no more serious discussions that day or the next two days, as the guild banded together, talking, laughing, renewing their bonds via tales of the dead and toasts to the same.

Ranma spent most of that time with Wendy in the evenings and mornings. In the Afternoon, he usually sparred with Natsu out in the woods, allowing Natsu to work out his anger in an environment where nothing but trees would be damaged. He brought along Seilah occasionally to these. After she had helped Ranma calm Natsu down that first day, Ranma

trusted her to pull them apart if they got too serious. Seilah agreed, astonishingly, as this let her keep an eye on Natsu. For some reason Ranma couldn't fathom the fire Dragon Slayer seemed to interest her slightly, and Ranma was wondering why, although it seemed to fade as Natsu seemed to get his anger under control.

On the third day, however, this routine changed. First, Ranma received a call that night via his Ranger broach, much to his annoyance...

As Wendy continued to sleep where she was nuzzled into his back between him and Carla, Ranma grumbled into wakefulness as a beam of green light started to impede his dreams. Looking around, Ranma snarled under his breath as he saw that it was his Ranger broach glowing in the dark of the bedroom. Slowly extricating himself from Wendy and Carla, he moved over and grabbed up the broach, heading out into the main room.

Some of his anger disappeared when he noticed who it was on the other end. The elderly King of Pergrande, looking back at him thoughtfully. "I'm sorry, Ranger, I forgot about the time difference," the man said apologetically.

"I suppose it's okay," Ranma grumped. "But why don't you tell me why you're calling quick so I can get back to sleep? And it better not be for something that demands my immediate attention."

"At this distance, why would I call you for something that needed your immediate attention?" Vicotrious shook his head. "No, I was wondering if you knew any gun mages..."

Moments later, Ranma hung up, grumbled to himself, tossed the broach onto the sofa, then headed back to sleep. *So now I'm a glorified messenger boy? Yep, that's definitely as more impetus to the idea of hanging up this Ranger business after we beat Acnologia.*

The next morning, the guild was called together once more, this time in the guildhall, for an announcement.

Looking around at his guild, Makarov smiled sadly as he stood on the bar, looking around at them all. "May I have your attention?" He waited until the guild's rowdies had quieted down, noting absently that it hadn't taken them as long as usual without Gray and Natsu's arguments adding to the background noise.

Shaking that thought off, he began. "Now, I realize that all of you, indeed most of you, cannot even remember having any other Guild Master than me, and I am proud to have led you as long as I have. But there comes a time in any mage's life when he has to realize that magical power can only take him so far when his body is failing him." Makarov made no mention of his injuries, but everyone there understood that the loss of his arm and the overall beating he had taken from Acnologia had been the final thing to push them into this.

"Say it isn't so old man! You still got a lot of life left in you," Natsu shouted. And his voice was not the only one raised in protest. Then Natsu went on, and everyone around him groaned in annoyance. "After all, how am I supposed to prove I'm stronger than you if you're not Guild Master anymore!"

"Quiet brat," Makarov shouted, his hand enlarging as his arm lengthened toward Natsu to slap him down. Many of the people watching saw him grimace, and the hand slowly shrunk back to normal before it reached out far enough to touch Natsu.

Instead of squishing Natsu against the far wall, the punch slammed into his chest and carried him up and through the air, where he rolled, landing on his feet, staring at the old man in shock. "What the... that was just a love tap," Natsu growled, crouching down as he prepared to charge forward. "You're going to have to do better than that old man! I'm going to become Guild Master before the day is out!"

Mira grabbed Natsu by the scruff of his neck, hauling him back upright and slamming him butt first into a chair. "Quiet you! Unless you think you can take Gildarts, Laxus, Erza and me, you still wouldn't be up for Guild Master." *And thank all the powers of magic that Master didn't approach me about that. Too much darn paperwork and trouble for nothing in return.*

"Besides Natsu, if you were Guild Master, that would just mean a lot of paperwork," Anna said soothingly, the younger Strauss sibling echoing Mira's thoughts. "To be Guild Master doesn't mean that you're just the strongest person in the guild. You have to be able to do paperwork, manage a budget, write reports for the Magic Council..."

Natsu's eyes widened at each word and he finally shook his head frantically. "Never mind! I'll just keep proving myself against the strongest in the guild, thanks. Someone else can do all the leading stuff."

"I'm so glad to hear it, you pink-haired fire hazard," Makarov muttered, his arm only just then finishing returning to its normal size.

Macao and a few of the oldsters who had continued to watch him while everyone else had turned to watch the drama around Natsu. And now they all noticed that that arm was shaking. Macao and Wakaba exchanged glances, knowing the signs of the long-term magical depletion. Makarov had literally given his all to help stop Acnologia and would now pay for it for the rest of his life.

But there was no sign of that in Makarov's voice as he spoke, glaring through the crowded Natsu. "Do you have any other interruptions you want to get in while you can, Natsu, or can I continue and announce who my successor is."

"Please tell me it isn't Erza!" Natsu barked in reply, looking horrified at the very idea.

"What is that supposed to mean, Natsu?!" Erza snarled from where she had been standing glared at him.

"You really have to ask that," Cana drawled, shaking her head. "You're too much a disciplinarian Erza, you'd suck all the fun out of the guild." Elfman, Natsu, Macao, Nab, and several dozen other mages who had once or twice gotten on Erza's bad side for how they acted nodded their heads. Even Lucy held up a hand sheepishly, agreeing with everyone else.

Erza actually pouted at that but she couldn't deny the allegation.

"I have thought long and hard this decision for years. I have looked at those among you who could possibly take over as Guild Master, and I have come to a decision. It is not perfect, but it is the closest to perfection as I can make it. I wish you all to join with me in welcoming your new Guild Master, Laxus Dreyar!" With that, Laxus appeared from the second story, having teleported down. He looked around at the rest of the guild, allowing an honest smile to appear on his face as he gave them all a two-fingered salute.

There was a lot of shock at first, then everyone began to clap and cheer. Laxus wasn't as popular as Mira or Erza in the guild. Still, he had more respect among the Magic Council than either of the women, and it was debatable among the guild who was stronger, him or Gildarts. Of course, both men knew Gildarts was actually much stronger but his magic wasn't as adaptable as Laxus' was.

Of course, there was always someone who wanted to question things. In this case, it was Elfman who raised a large hand as he shouted, "Wait a minute! As manly as it is for Laxus to take over from Master Makarov like that, surely Gildarts is the more senior mage! Shouldn't he be Guild Master?"

"If we were going by seniority rather than personality, yes," Makarov replied.

But before he could go further, the side of the guildhall burst open, shifting into dozens of cubes as Gildarts walked through, shaking his head and looking around. "I could've sworn the door to the guildhall was on that side. Oh well, we have on there now." He looked around at them all, seeing Laxus and Makarov standing by the bar. "Did I miss it? Sorry, I got lost on the road of life, and there was this pretty flower lady..."

While Katerina and Cana groaned, shaking their heads at their father's display, Elfman nodded seriously, then turned to Laxus and Makarov. "I withdraw my objections."

At that, laughter erupted throughout the guild, and many congratulations were sent Laxus' way, who shook hands and smiled, already showing a marked difference in his normal surly attitude.

Natsu was still staring at Makarov, his hands clenched at his side. Seeing this, seeing his grandfather so weak, caused the fury within him to rouse once more, and his eyes began to gleam before he shook his head, grabbing his newly found control and the promise of further training and fighting Ranma had given him the day before with both hands. Then he felt Anna and Lisanna taking his hands, squeezing them.

He looked down at them and smiled, bringing both into a hug, sighing as his anger left him. *It isn't my fault, it's Acnologia's and we will make him pay.* Natsu repeated that thought several times, and the anger faded, replaced by purpose. *Oh yes, Acnologia will regret messing with Fairy Tail!*

Having moved through the crowd, Laxus now walked up the steps to the second floor, stopping halfway and leaning against the balcony as he looked around at everyone. "Alright, everyone, I realize this is a major change to a lot of you, and while I don't want to rock the boat too much, I do want some things to change around here. First, over the next few days, I will be reviewing the teams that everyone is working with. While I'm not going to stop any of you from working with the people you want to, I want to make certain that everyone is on a team of some kind. That means no more soloing for most of you, and I'm talking about you too, Cana."

He looked over at the girl so named, who shrugged her shoulders. She was normally a loner, but that had begun to fade when she and Lucy hooked up.

Seeing that, Laxus went on. "I don't want anyone to be on solo missions that have even a chance of running into combat any longer. Even with the Dark Guilds smashed, we are still one of the three guilds people call on for monster and bandit extermination missions. And even on peaceful missions, you can sometimes run into trouble, right Shadow Gear?" he teased, looking over at that trio.

Levy and her two primary partners had the grace to look abashed, remembering the last job they had taken before the S-class exam, which had taken them into Stella. First, they had run into an avalanche, and then a simple book appraisal – whether or not an ancient tome was fake or real – had turned into a running fight with a group of bandits and a single cowardly sheriff.

"Further, I will be instituting a broader kind of classification within the guild and when it comes to missions. A-class mages, like Natsu, Elfman and Freed, or you Gajeel, will be able to act and take any missions below S-class without any oversight. B-class mages like Macao will not be able to take all missions unless as part of a larger team. C-class mages, Romeo, Warren, Vijeeter, won't be allowed to take combat-specific missions at all."

There were some grumblings about that, but most of the mages there understood. Laxus wasn't curtailing their freedom. He was simply making certain they could all look out for themselves and knew what they were getting into one mission to the next. Although most of the mages there didn't think that it was really necessary, they weren't going to argue about it.

"This is kind of like locking the barn door after the animals of all escaped," Macao grumbled, shaking his head as he sat next to his long-time drinking companion, Wakaba. The two of them were also loners like Cana, who routinely took assignments on their own. Indeed, Macao had gotten in trouble for just that very thing barely of days before Wendy and Ranma arrived at the guild for the first time.

"There's always pirates, bandits' regular type, and wild animals, like Laxus said," remarked Nab from a nearby table, shaking his head. "While I don't know if I'm in favor of this new ranking system, it could come in handy."

"True, I suppose," Macao grumbled before breaking out into fake tears. "But what was up with him using me as an example of a B-class mage!?"

"Hah! If anything, he was being generous, considering you nearly got yourself permanently transformed into a Vulcan," Wakaba barked back, and the two of them took to fighting.

Nearby, Ranma watched all this with interest, although he concentrated on the little bit of drama around Natsu, pleased to see the kid getting himself under control so quickly, but still seeing the underlying anger. When Natsu headed toward the doors after a few minutes, he was not surprised and made a note to head after him. But then Bisca's voice brought his attention back to his table companions. "Earth to Ranma! You can't just call us over to sit with you, then stare off into the distance."

"Sorry, I was thinking about Natsu." Ranma shook his head, turning back to look at Bisca and Alzack. "Anyway, I called you over because you two are the best gun mages in the guild."

"We're the only gun mages in the guild," Alzack chuckled.

He was still a little leery around Ranma, knowing that he and Bisca had dated a time or two before Alzack had worked up his courage enough to really start wooing her. But Ranma had never shown any sense of jealousy that Bisca had decided to date Alzack over Ranma and had never seemed to try to be competing with Alzack since then to try and win her back or anything like that. *Then again, that might be because he's already got three girls*, Alzack thought, allowing himself a moment of purely male jealousy for just a second, though it never touched his face.

"True, but that doesn't really matter to what I want to say to you. Has Bisca told you that I have friends in Pergrande? They're both smiths and they specialize in guns. They're the chief armorers of the Pergrande Army at the moment."

Alzack shook his head while Bisca nodded. "I do remember you talking about them a time or two, and that little holdout pistol Wendy never uses comes from them. Such a waste, that thing is a work of art too."

Ranma shrugged. "Wendy's never seen the point of using any kind of weapon, including that little gun, although I agree it's a work of art. Anyway, I wanted to ask if the two of you would be willing to take up a commission?"

Bisca frowned, looking over at Alzack, who shrugged his shoulders. "It would have to be the right sort. Both of us are going to stop taking combat missions for a while. We... well, we were keeping it on the down-low for now, but we're thinking of getting married," Alzack confessed, looking at Ranma for any sign of jealousy or annoyance. To his relief, there was not, although there was some shock.

"That's great, I guess. If you both wanted it anyway," Ranma shrugged. "I wish you all the best. But you don't have to worry. This won't be a combat mission."

"What's the commission and who would be paying? And how much?" Bisca asked.

"Ranma frowned, thinking how to put it, and Bisca leaned in to whisper, "I've already told Alzack about your Ranger status after Master Makarov agreed to ambush Grimoire Heart. We haven't blabbed to anyone else. But you can speak about it to us."

"So long as it isn't a combat mission," Alzack hastened to add. "Those kinds of things really would get in the way of our starting a family, you know?"

Ranma nodded. "I called into the King's Council as soon as I could, especially what I learned about Alvarez since that bit is honestly the only segment that they could do anything about. I had to cover Mavis's involvement, but..."

At that point, Mavis appeared, floating down from the second story to land nearby. Ranma couldn't see her and lifted his cup straight through her leg, drinking some of the water within, until the little ghost woman moved to one side, waving merrily at the newly affianced couple.

Ranma didn't miss the way their eyes shifted to look at nothing and groaned. "She's there, isn't she?"

"Yep," Bisca answered, popping the 'p' as she smiled cheerfully at the First Master.

The young-seeming woman had not made any attempt to hide since the incident at the funeral and had been getting to know most of the guild members one-on-one, concentrating on those she hadn't heard much about before this. So it wasn't unusual to see her sticking her nose into random conversations. Indeed, Mavis seemed to be greatly enjoying being around so many people.

"Right. Anyway, I don't know if you all remember, but Alvarez tried to launch an invasion a few years ago. They were stopped by the use of Etherion and the navies of Caelum

and Minstrel. The Kings are worried that the Empire might launch another attack, this one much more serious than that, which looking back on it was more like a probing attack than anything else. And so Vicotronious was thinking of ways to better improve Ishgar's defenses."

Alzack could already see where this was going and frowned, his eyes narrowing. "You want us to work with your gun-makers friends to make guns more powerful? Help Pergrande build up its army?"

"I doubt that It's just Pergrande. While strong, the First Kingdom couldn't defend all of Ishgar, even if it didn't have to defend the Passes leading into the Old World," Mavis interjected. The two gunslingers looked at her and she smiled wanly back at them. "It's a good idea. I honestly have no idea how August, the Spriggan Zeref left in charge of the Empire, will react if they learn of his being stuck in the Celestial Realm. They won't be able to get to him, but they might attack Ishgar in reprisal. Or just for the heck of it."

"What do you mean, 'the heck of it'?" Bisca quoted, aghast.

"Yes. According to what Zeref said to me once, the invasion Ranma talked about a moment ago was launched by a few of the Spriggan for them to prove their worth to him. With Zeref gone, they might want revenge, or there might be an internal conflict that pushes some Spriggans into leading a war. The use of the external threat of Ishgar to retain their power could make sense if the people of Alvarez are not happy to be ruled by a magocracy," Mavis answered analytically. "Zeref never told me enough about any of the Spriggan or the Empire as a whole to make any guesses one way or another, but he mentioned several times that a few of them were always competing with one another."

Alzack shook his head. He was somewhat worried by Mavis's words, but still... "Yet you just said that we don't know what Alvarez might do. And we're just supposed to help Pergrande's military get stronger and assume the current king or his successors won't exploit that power? Guns are just too easy to abuse and I'm not certain I want to be a part of spreading guns that are so much more dangerous than the ones already on the market."

"Not just Pergrande. The king of Pergrande has said that he will willingly sell the plans for the guns to any military and the rest of the Ishgar, and Minstrel is already reverse engineering a lot of the stuff that Midi had built without access to magic," Ranma replied. While he couldn't understand what Mavis was saying without touching someone from Fairy Tail, he could at least hear what Bisca and her soon-to-be husband were saying.

"And honestly, I don't see anyone getting adventuresome. If one nation did, the others would all gang up on them, and the Wizard Saints would be on the side of the majority." Ranma smirked evilly. "So would I and none of the royals would want that."

"While that sounds all well and good, I still don't like it. Guns are so easy to misuse. It's why a lot of mages who use them joined dark guilds. They are just too easy to misuse," he repeated himself, shaking his head again.

"I agree. But, if an entire empire whose lands are reportedly far larger than all of Ishgar combined attacks us, with full force, the Etherion might not be enough to stop them. And if they do land, the various militaries of Ishgar will need to be as deadly as they can be."

"We'll think about it. Leave us a letter of introduction, and we'll follow up on that idea if we decide to," Bisca interjected diplomatically. "Although I don't know what we could do to help your friends, really."

"Experience, magic and knowledge. And you and I have talked about the guns from my old world, Bisca. So you know a lot more about what is possible than my friends in Pergrande."

That caused Bisca to gulp, partly because of the drool that remembering some of the guns Ranma had described to her caused her, and partly because of the way Ranma had described how those guns were used. "I, I suppose. But as much as I would love to own the magical equivalent of what you called an AR-10, I think that makes Alzack's point about not wanting that kind of gun to spread even more important. I'm not turning down the idea since both you and Mavis seem worried about Alvarez, but I think this is something we should think deeply about before making a choice."

"That's fine," Ranma announced, while Mavis nodded in agreement, both with the fact she was worried and his words. He stood up and held out a letter of introduction he'd already written. "I just wanted to talk to you about it before I leave in a few days."

"Oh, where are you going?" Alzack asked while Bisca took the letter.

"If I told ya, you'd probably be obliged to object." He looked over to where Wendy was standing with Carla, gesturing to them to join him, while Anna and Lisanna continued to stare toward the doorway, worry on their faces. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I think I need to go find Natsu."

OOOOOO

Once more, Ranma and Seilah headed out into the woods, with Wendy and Carla coming with them this time to search for the Fire Dragon Slayer. The two Dragon Slayers used their enhanced senses of hearing to discover where in the forest Natsu was currently, the pink-haired youth having pushed deeper into the forest with his destruction every day.

Despite that, Ranma led them through the woods, hopping from one tree to the next the smell of Natsu led them on easily until they started to hear the sounds of explosions and blasts of fire in the distance. Soon after that, they once more came upon an area where Natsu had been going to town on the environment, smashing trees, using massive fireballs to clear whole swaths of the forest. Nearby, Happy watched from a solitary pine tree that had been left alone, looking worried until he saw the newcomers and began to fly in their direction.

“Do meet you wish me to use Macro again to stop him?” Seilah asked quizzically.

Ranma shook his head, gesturing for Wendy, Carla and Seilah to wait. “We did that before. This time, I think I’m going to go for a more hands-on approach.”

With that, Ranma leaped down into the cleared zone, shouting, “Are you happy just beating up defenseless trees, or would you like to fight someone who can actually fight back?”

Wendy winced, shaking her head in some disapproval. “Ranma-nii likes to be a little too confrontational sometimes.”

“Actually, in this instance, I believe this was the proper way to do it. Natsu is someone who doesn’t really learn until someone else makes him,” Carla answered.

Having landed nearby, Happy heard that and added his agreement. “Aye, sir, Natsu’s a blockhead like that.”

Everyone in the tree, even the kindly Wendy, looked at the male Exceed askance at that, but he didn’t notice, staring at the fight as Natsu turned, roared, and launched himself towards Ranma with flames coming out of his feet, Natsu using his own version of the Boosted Step almost automatically now.

Ranma dodged the Fire Dragon Slayer’s mad charge by a bare inch, bringing up his fists into a one-two combo against the younger man’s chest, then ducking under a roundhouse punch, smiling slightly. Natsu hadn’t telegraphed that nearly as much as he would have in the past. Ranma had still seen it coming, of course, but it was a good sign that Natsu was using what Ranma had taught him, even gripped in his current fury. A punch to one of Natsu’s legs as the other rose in a knee jab caused Natsu to stumble, and Ranma followed up with a sweep kick, kicking up off of the ground and into Natsu as he moved back out of the kick’s range.

The shoulder charge smashing into Natsu, sending him tumbling, while Ranma evaded Natsu’s attempt to grapple with them, following up by leaping forward, a kick that would’ve caved Natsu’s face in being blocked by Ranma’s upraised arm.

“Fire Dragon’s Roar!” Natsu howled, lashing out with a quick fireball from his open mouth.

Ranma responded with a “Water Dragon’s Punch!” The steam of the two attacks meeting enveloped them both, so much so that the watchers could no longer see the action. It was so hot, anyone but Ranma would have been reeling away, but seconds later, Natsu came flying out of the smoke, propelled by another water attack that had crashed into his stomach, lifting him up off of the ground and hurling him through the air like a toy.

He crashed through several trees before the attack dissipated, yet he was able to roll to his feet, grumbling, “Hey man, you can’t be angry at me for attacking trees and then just go and do the same thing, you know!”

“The trees died because I smashed you into them, not because I was aiming at them. I would’ve thought that the last time I found you out here would’ve proven that just attacking the environment wasn’t enough to quell your anger Natsu. A spar like this is much better for that kind of thing, and I mean to give you all you can handle,” Ranma taunted, his own tone cool and analytical rather than combative and angry as Natsu’s had been.

Without responding to that, Natsu howled out, “Fire Dragon’s Searing Claw!” and crossed the intervening distance thanks to flames once more shooting out of his feet.

Ranma didn’t move as Natsu had predicted, though. Instead, he simply stood there, waiting, waiting, and then, reaching forward, grabbing Natsu’s outstretched fist, his own covered with water. Once more, steam boiled up around them, but more importantly, Natsu’s arm was now in Ranma’s grasp, and he pulled the pink-haired boy in. Ranma’s other hand smacked aside a blow from Natsu’s off hand, while Ranma blocked both attempts to kick him in the groin before his free elbow came around in a blow into the side of Natsu’s head causing the younger Dragon Slayer to see stars.

An instant later, Natsu found himself airborne over Ranma’s shoulder, slammed to the ground so hard that the breath shot out of his body.

Before Natsu could do anything, Ranma had locked his legs around his body, one leg around his neck, and then the other around his chest, while Ranma pulling the arm that he had recently used as a pivot further out, twisting it hard in his grip as both arms now went around it. If Natsu wanted to get out of this, he’d have to overpower Ranma or break his own shoulder to get out of it. “You ready to give up?”

Not answering, Natsu thrashed on the ground like a wild beast, roaring and howling, as his aura of flame burst out of him. Natsu made it as hot and debilitating as he had against Bluenote, but to his fury, Ranma responded by covering his own body with Water Dragon’s Scales. This defense doused Natsu’s aura where the two bodies met and steam once more spiraled around them while Natsu raged and roared, trying to escape Ranma’s hold.

This would eventually have ended the fight if not for Ranma's sixth sense blaring at him in warning, and disengaged, rolling away quickly. As he did, a giant steel cleaver came down where they had been grappling, followed a second later by Gajeel. "Gihih!"

Once freed, Natsu had desperately dodged the other way, which meant he only got a nick on his bicep for his troubles, though Ranma had been able to escape unscathed. Both of them rolled to their feet, staring at the Iron Dragon Slayer. "Is this a private party, or can anyone join?"

The Iron Dragon Slayer's cool attitudes broke off suddenly, and he ducked under the slicing blades of Laxus' Lightning Blade: Chain Configuration as it passed through where his head had been a moment ago. "Funny, I was about to say the same thing. Although in a cooler manner, obviously." The Fourth Master of Fairy Tail walked out of the woods, pulling the end of his weapon back, then stowing it in his Requip space, as lightning crackled all around him, grinning evilly at the younger teens and Ranma, dragon scales already slowly starting to appear on his chest and face.

Ranma smirked, cracking his neck one way than the other, before crouching down, his hands out to either side as watery claws appeared around his hands. "Let's go!"

With that, all four of them charged forward and a four-way fight began as Wendy watched with her friends. Seilah cocked her head thoughtfully to one side, then looked down at the little girl. "Should we still be allowing this? My Macro should stop all of them for a short amount of time, save Ranma. Certainly long enough to enforce some semblance of peace."

Ranma's Demon Slayer magic made him almost immune to her curse, although normally, the only sign was small markings around his eyes and wrists. Those had become permanent, seemingly, since the fight against Zeref, but Ranma hadn't told anyone what, if anything, the now-fully incorporated magic did.

To Seilah's surprise, Wendy shook her head. "No, they're bonding in a way. We should let them have their fun." She shrugged her shoulders, smiling whimsically. "Dragon Slayers tend to be a little violent."

"Except for you, my dear," Carla replied, smiling and patting her charge's hand, pride in her voice at the fact she had some part in that.

Wendy shrugged, then giggled a bit. "I'm a girl. The only girl Dragon Slayer that we know of, so it's probably a guy dragon thing. My mama wasn't ever violent either."

"Yes, so many problems can be attributed to the male of the species," Carla replied.

Seilah snorted in agreement, while Wendy just shook her head, continuing to watch the battle, her head cocked to one side.

Eventually, Laxus knocked out Natsu, and Ranma slammed Gajeel into the ground enough times to cause him to collapse into unconsciousness too. This left the two older Dragon Slayers staring at one another. "You want to go?" Laxus asked whimsically.

Ranma shrugged. "This was more for Natsu's benefit than mine. As fun as throwing down with you is, we don't need to right now."

Laxus nodded, then leaned down to Natsu, hefting him up onto one shoulder. "Then let's take these two to Porlyusica, make sure that they're not suffering from brain damage."

"More brain damage, you mean," Ranma replied dryly, causing Laxus to laugh.

"I'll do it!" Wendy volunteered, hopping down and moving towards them in a series of long bounds using her Sky Dragon Slayer magic to propel herself forward like she was walking on a trampoline rather than the ground. "You know that Porlyusica would probably not be happy about seeing any 'humans' and why go all that way when I'm right here?"

"Actually, they might be not entirely human at all, so I do not think that concern is valid," Seilah muttered, staring first at Natsu, then Gajeel and the other two, adding, "Dragon Slayers may or may not be truly human any longer considering the transformative nature of their magic."

Wendy turned, looking up at her with a pout and a soulful gaze, causing Seilah to backpedal quickly, putting aside her still vague suspicions about Natsu about how powerful his anger made him and how quickly he was able to heal on his own. It is not nearly as fast as Ranma could with his ki, but still far quicker than either of the other Dragon Slayers. "I, I mean, it is only a possibility, Wendy, you are still all mostly human. They simply have some more animal tendencies, that is all. And of course, you are again an exception to the rule."

Wendy smiled, forgave her with a hug, and turned back to the other Dragon Slayers while Ranma shook his head at the two of them. *It's always funny to see how Seilah, despite being so much older than Wendy, is... Not quite submissive but certainly subordinate to Wendy. And touching too. I still have no idea about their relationship, what kind of heading it comes under, I mean, but it is certainly close.*

For his part, Laxus blinked, staring at Wendy, then around at the destroyed landscape all around them, then back to Wendy as she moved up to them. "Sorry, munchkin," he muttered, ruffling her hair affectionately. "I didn't smell you were around."

Wendy nodded agreeably at that and began to heal the two battered Dragon Slayers. When they were fully healed, Ranma conjured up globes of water in front of their faces, splashing them in the face. "You feel better, Natsu?"

Natsu frowned for a moment as he wiped at his wet face, then slowly nodded. "I, I think so. That helped a lot of my anger, I think. Sorry," he said, looking over at Laxus somewhat sheepishly. "It was just, seeing Master Makarov step down, it sorts of brought it all back, you know?"

"Oh, I do know," Laxus replied dryly, shaking his head. Every time I see Gramps' stump of an arm, I go through the same flash of rage. But as Ranma no doubt has been telling you, you need to control your anger or eventually, your temper will boil over when you don't want it to."

"I see we all came out here with the same idea," Gajeel muttered, looking more than a little annoyed. "I was a little worried about Pinky's anger, but after the funeral, he seemed to get a lid on it up until today."

"I didn't want to show it around any of the guild members," Natsu shrugged. "No one else needs to deal with my temper making everything worse."

"Which shows that you're still under control. But you know what else might be good for control? Doing something about what caused the anger in the first place. And I don't mean just coming out here and wailing on something, training on your own to get stronger. I mean, really devoting yourself to training to do something about Acnologia. And maybe a vow to that purpose. He's the source of your anger Natsu, our hate, and rage, and it's us Dragon Slayers who should be the ones to deal with him, to hunt the fucker down and end him!"

"A vow?" Gajeel questioned, his brow furrowing in such a way that Ranma noticed, for the first time, that one of the studs which had been above his eye had somehow been knocked free, leaving a faint scar.

"A vow. An oath between us that one of us will be the one to end Acnologia. That from now on, until we tear him apart, we will devote as much of our lives as possible to get stronger, to defeat him," Ranma supplied.

The others looked interested, with both Gajeel and Natsu agreeing to the idea immediately, while Laxus was looking annoyed at the same time. "I think it's a good idea, although we won't be alone in this. Gildarts already told me that he wants to get stronger and is in touch with a few Wizard Saints for sparring purposes. I'll probably join him. Perhaps together, we can even get God Serena to bend a bit and train with us. And as for the oath... we'd need some physical sign of it." The older man's face firmed. "And while I will take the pledge, I can't let it get in the way of my duties as Guild Master."

"That's fine, so long as we all take part in the oath and witness it in each other, we can each use our own wording for the specific oath. I'll go first." With that, Ranma conjured up a small claw of water in one hand, slicing open his other forearm with some difficulty.

Instantly his ki healing tried to heal the damage, but closing his eyes, Ranma concentrated, stopping the process, allowing the wound to stay long enough that, once it started to heal, it might leave a scar. "I, Ranma Ocean, vow to devote my life to becoming strong enough to kill Acnologia! To hunt him down when I believe I am strong enough wherever he may hide to bring an end to the black dragon once and for all."

"The losses were from my guild, Ranma," Laxus muttered, slicing open his own forearm with the edge of his Lightning Blade with difficulty, before claspng his hand around Ranma's wound. "I, Laxus Dreyar, vow to get stronger to defend my guild, and to slay Acnologia if he becomes a threat again."

"Hell no!" Natsu shouted, moving forward and slicing open his own forearm, biting at a forearm with his sharp canine, smacking his own hand down on Laxus' injury. "My name's Natsu Dragneel, I am the son of the Igneel the Fire Dragon King, and I vow to devote my life to becoming strong enough to burn Acnologia to ash!"

"Screw that. You're full of hot air, all noise and no substance," Gajeel growled, moving forward to likewise join his arm to the Natsu's. "My name's Gajeel Redfox. I'm the son of the iron Dragon King, Metalicana! And I will be the one to slaughter Acnologia, chop him into pieces. No matter how long it takes, no matter what I have to do!"

In Gajeel's case, it was almost equally ego as it was the loss of a friend talking as he made his vow. "He hadn't had enough time to really be close to any of the fallen bar Bickslow, who he had oddly bonded with about music and how both of them had very poor singing voices. But he also refused to be left behind by Natsu, wanting to step up to the plate and become as strong as Wendy, Ranma and Laxus.

For her part, Wendy looked on at this, her face showing sadness and turmoil. Ranma noticed her hesitation and shook his head at her. "If you don't feel like giving this oath Wendy, you don't need to. That doesn't make you any less a Dragon Slayer."

Natsu was about to open his mouth, and Ranma could almost feel the foot and mouth disease arising within the Fire Dragon Slayer, but Gajeel of all people lifted a foot, grinding it down on top of Natsu's, while Laxus glared the pink-haired boy into submission. His mouth clamped shut, and Gajeel removed his foot as they all finished their vow. "So we swear on our magic as Dragon Slayers!"

Letting his arm fall from the others, Laxus held out his arm to one side, letting the blood from the cut drip as he rummaged into his pocket for a handkerchief, while Ranma held out several to Gajeel and Natsu. "You wouldn't have made that vow if you didn't have an idea of what to do to achieve at Ranma. Lay it on us."

"Travel," Ranma said with a smile. "There are a few places in Ishgar that we might be able to stop, a village I know of where there's some kind of Holy Flame, where Natsu here

might be able to learn some new fire magic or at least find some sparring partners. That's in the northern portion of Stella, where I've never been before, but I've heard rumors of it. Beyond that, I think..." Ranma looked at the three of them, then over at Wendy, Happy, Seilah and Carla. I think that I want to travel into the continent."

Lexus opened his mouth to shout that was crazy but then remembered who he was talking to. Ranma was easily the greatest survivor that Lexus knew, and if he said that it was a good idea, then Lexus wasn't about to say that he couldn't do it. Instead, he just scowled. "You're talking about the Blasted Lands. At least you dream big, Ranma."

The Blasted Lands was the more formal name for the continent of which Ishgar was only a peninsula, protected by the Scar-tooth Mountains, the routes through which Pergrande guarded. As far as anyone knew, the rest of the continent was completely empty of any human civilization. Instead, the land had been blasted and ruined by ancient magical wars. Wars of such magnitude which had seen the use of weapons that made even the Etherion Cannon, itself a relic of that time, seem small-scaled in comparison.

The use of these weapons had left areas of extreme magical decay. These were places where magic had been used so much and so often that it had left a miasma in which no life could exist without being changed mutated one second to the next.

There were even magical weapons and devices like Etherion, which were still somehow working deep in the continent. The orcs that had invaded Pergrande so many years ago and which continued to habitually invade when their numbers grew too great were thought to be a kind of plant-based weapon created by something deep in that zone boiled over occasionally. There were other examples of that, stories that occasional sailors who were forced to land on the continent's shores would bring back stories of moving mountains, giant silhouettes in the distance and even attacks by beasts which sometimes assaulted the ships. No attempt to explore the continent had ever succeeded.

Of course, this was common knowledge. The Dragon Slayers, however, were not so common. So while the normal response to this idea would have been shock and fear, their reactions were very different.

"Man, that sounds so cool!" Natsu shouted a tongue of flame. "Are you thinking we should all go with you!?"

Ranma nodded. "I don't think Lexus can get away now that he's Guild Master, but yes, I wanted to invite all of you."

"Gihiji, Pinky's right, that does sound cool. New enemies, lots of territory that no one will care about to experiment with. Yeah, I can get behind that."

Wendy again looked conflicted, hugging Carla to her while Carla looked like she was about to explode, only the touch of Wendy keeping her calm. Ranma noticed this and moved over to Wendy, putting in arm around her shoulders, and leaning down to whisper into her ear as Gajeel and Natsu both continued to exclaim in delight at the idea, both of them wondering what they would see and do, not really understanding the danger involved as Laxus and Ranma did.

“You don’t have to answer right away Wendy, you can think about it. We probably won’t leave for another day or two. And I want you to make the decision that will make you happy, that will let you go forward with your life and training, not the one you think I want you to, okay? That means that if you decide not to come with me, that’s fine. It doesn’t make you any less my little sister or a Dragon Slayer if want to become a stronger healer instead of a stronger fighter.”

Wendy nodded, then looking up at Ranma, she cocked an eyebrow expressively. “I understand, Ranma, but... when are you going to tell Erza, Juvia and Jenny?”

Ranma winced, then sighed. “Tonight, I think. We won’t be leaving today, although the day after tomorrow is possible. That’ll give you time to make your decision. And me time to work up my courage to tell them about it.”

Wendy giggled, and Ranma scooped her up into his arms, letting her shift from his arms up onto his shoulder and then his head, before looking over at the other Dragon Slayers. Gajeel and Natsu were still looking happy at the idea, while Laxus was scowling at being left behind, but not too much. Training with Gildarts, God Serena – if they could talk the douchebag into it - and the other Wizard Saints would do for him, and frankly, the idea of going just going along with his chief rival’s idea of how to train annoyed the heck out of him anyway. It was a good idea, which also annoyed him. But even so, he had his pride.

Shaking his head, he gestured through the woods towards Magnolia. “Come on, I think we’ve all fought enough for the day, and I think all three of you have things you need to do before you can just hare off on this adventure of yours. More importantly, people to talk to.”

“I just said the same thing,” Wendy said with a giggle, high-fiving Laxus to a groan from Ranma and Gajeel.

Natsu didn’t join in, looking at them all quizzically. “What do you mean? If we go, that’s our choice, right?”

“And you don’t think you’re going away will bother anyone?” Ranma asked, looking at him in astonishment. “Think about how Anna or Lisanna would feel if you just up and left.”

Natsu winced, seeing his point, nodding his head. “Er, I suppose I should think about some way of talking to them then.”

“Duh,” came from every throat there, even Happy’s.

OOOOOO

After the discussion with the Dragon Slayers, Ranma and Wendy had decided to spend the entire day together doing as many fun things as possible to get their minds off the serious stuff. This was another tried and tested Big Brother Technique.

First, they played Frisbee, tag, and Aero-hacky sack, the Anything Goes version of Hacky Sack, where you had to stay in the air while also passing the ball between you. Since they played in the open area between the rest of the town and the Fairy Hills dormitory in the town. Other members of the guild came out to join them occasionally. Then they spent a bit of time working through some more Yoga and Aikido exercises, then Erza and the other girls joined them for a picnic lunch.

During the picnic, Wendy asked, “Ranma-nii, I know that you were thinking about having a big dinner with me and everyone else at the apartment, but I was wondering I could spend the night with Seilah and Katerina tonight. They’re hoping to have their grand opening in a few days and they want my opinion on a series of games that they would be putting out for younger people, as well as books.”

“Besides which,” Carla added from his other side, standing on her tiptoes to whisper into Ranma’s ear, “This way, you and your ladies will have the night to yourselves. Which you have not had since we returned from Tenrou Island. And if you are going to tell them about your desire to leave rather than simply assume they will come with you, it might be a good idea to talk to them alone, don’t you think? You inconsiderate oaf.”

Ranma blinked at that, but he realized the blonde cat-girl was right. While he had indeed intended to bring the topic up, but the idea of having some alone time with his girlfriends hadn’t actually occurred to him lately. *Maybe I’ve been concentrating a little too much on spending time with Wendy lately?*

The three ladies in question were already looking at one another, communicating nonverbally in that way that all girls could with their eyes and facial expressions. They then turned to Ranma and nodded once, although he noted that Juvia was blushing quite heavily. *Still, that probably means she does agree with the idea, so...* “Sure Wendy, that’s fine. But I’ll expect you for breakfast tomorrow. Remember, we still need to talk about what we want to do, you know?” he added, hinting at what the five Dragon Slayers had talked about earlier.

Wendy smiled happily and hugged him, then hopped to her feet. "Thanks, Ranma-nii. But before that, you said this morning you were going to teach me how to dance, right?"

Laughing, Ranma got to his feet and took Wendy's hands in his own. "Fine, although that's always easier with musical accompaniment. We'll start with something simple, a waltz."

As the two of them danced, the three girls fell into a huddle, with Erza's voice rising slightly above the public as she began to get out some orders. "So, we agree?" Jenny nodded instantly, while Juvia took longer, blushing redly before following suit.

Later that day, Ranma was just finishing dressing for dinner when the door opened, and Jenny entered. Ranma had given her a key. Entering, she leaned up, kissing him lightly on the cheek, then the lips, before pulling back. "Hey, lover. I thought I could help you set up the patio for the night. Juvia will be by later to help cook."

Ranma nodded agreeably, and the two of them moved around the apartment, talking cheerfully about Fairy Tail and a few of the dishes she had seen at restaurants before when a prospective swain had been trying to woo her. Yet as much as she loved romance and being wooed, Jenny honestly preferred simple fair. Pasta, for preference, which was something Ranma had already known. It was why he had a dough of pasta already out, ready for rolling.

Beyond that, Jenny also had some good ideas about rearranging things to give the apartment a more romantic atmosphere. For one thing, instead of eating at the main table, she insisted that they eat out on the patio. "You want us to eat on the floor then?" Ranma quipped.

"Nope, but don't worry your poor male mind, Ranma," Jenny cooed, sliding her fingers down his cheek, shivering when he caught it with one of his hands and began to nibble at her fingers. Her next words came out a bit higher-pitched, and a wide smile grew on her face. "You, mmm, you just leave it to us girls. We, hehe, we have planned ahead. Mmm... you can keep doing thaa..." She broke off into a low moan, as Ranma trailed kisses up the inside of her wrist and then further up, smirking a bit before pulling Jenny into a hug.

Erza arrived soon after interrupting their make-out session, smirking and rolling her eyes as she closed the door behind her. "Honestly, you two, starting without Juvia and me? I call that selfish."

"Oh, please, like you would be doing anything different," Jenny drawled, pulling away from Ranma. "Did you find the furniture I asked you to?"

"Yes, indeed." With that, she headed out into the patio and pulled out from her Requip space a new table. It was almost equal to Ranma's table in size, but instead of being square, it was circular. For some reason, that made it a little more intimate.

Erza also brought a few lights that Jenny had recommended, soft muted tones, which bathed the patio and the main apartment in a light yellow and green light, matching with the paint on the apartment wall, which were light blue with a few sketches of trees in green. Wendy, Carla and Jenny had had a lot of fun renovating the apartment over the winter.

Under Jenny's direction, the patio was quickly changed from being a yoga and Pilates studio to being a very cozy, even romantic semi-outdoor dining area. Erza also provided a series of chairs for the new table, two half-circle chairs, which were put to either side of the round table, allowing the people using them to cuddle if they wished. Within fourteen minutes of Erza's arrival, the patio that Ranma had been using to teach yoga and other things to Wendy and the girls all winter-long had shifted into a very romantic area, and Ranma shook his head slightly. "You're really good at this whole interior design thing, aren't you?"

Jenny smiled, kissed him on the cheek, and then moved towards the door as she heard someone rattle the latch. "Thank you for the compliment, Ranma." She opened the door, and Juvia stood there, dressed as normal as Erza was.

She was carrying several grocery bags, so she didn't use her own key, and Ranma hastily took the bags, thanking her. "What were you thinking of cooking, Juvia?"

"Shark fin soup to start," Juvia said, smiling, before kissing Ranma on the cheek and moving around him into the kitchen area. "What were you thinking of as a main dish?"

"Chicken ravioli, although I am still debating about the desert."

"Regardless of the desert, that sounds lovely. I've never had shark fin soup before." Erza smiled before shaking her head. "However, I am going to have to leave for a bit. I have one final errand I have to do before joining you all for dinner. Finding those circular chairs took me too long, Jenny."

Jenny shrugged, uncaring as Ranma reached over to tug at Erza's hair very lightly, smirking at her. "That's fine. It's not like you would be much help anyway since we are only starting to cook right now."

Irritably, Erza swatted his hand away, turning away with a huff as Jenny and Juvia both giggled. Both of them could cook but Erza? Well, she wasn't up to Akane's level of being a kitchen disaster, wherein she created biological weapons of mass dysfunction, but the only aspect of cooking that anyone could trust Erza with really was chopping.

But Ranma didn't let her go away annoyed, taking a quick step to the side and enfolding her in a hug from behind, pulling her back into his chest. Erza looked up at him, and Ranma's mouth leaned slightly downward to meet Erza's, kissing her ardently. She turned in his arms, putting her arms around him, kissing him just as fiercely, even though Erza was still wearing her normal plate armor.

Still, while her chest is guarded by metal... With that thought, Ranma's hands roved down her back and then pulled up her short skirt his other hand, squeezing her rear for a moment. *And oh, my, is she wearing a T-back!?* While she had yet to change for dinner, her underthings were fully prepared.

Erza gasped, then hummed against him once before quickly pulling her mouth away, despite his best efforts and pushing away from him lightly. "None of that! We haven't even eaten yet and I still do have that last errand."

She exchanged a glance with Jenny and Juvia, which caused Juvia to blush faintly, opening her mouth for a second before closing it and turning away. Ranma looked between the three, one eyebrow rising. "I know we still need to eat and everything. I just didn't want you to go away angry. But is there something I should know about?"

"I would've left annoyed, not angry Ranma, but thank you for the consideration." Erza's smile was extremely tender for a moment as a hand raised to stroke his cheek. "However, I do need to take care of this errand and it would be best to do so now. We will talk about it later, though."

Trusting her word, Ranma allowed his arms to fall away from around Erza before stepping back and heading into the kitchen area. "We'll have dinner ready for you when you get back."

"And if you're still wearing that plate mail when you return, Juvia will tear it off you, Erza!" Juvia said tartly. "Tonight is supposed to be romantic. Plate mail is not romantic."

"While that does sound somewhat tempting, you will be certain that I will be appropriately dressed," Erza replied dryly before heading out the door.

Erza returned just in time to join the rest of her quartet out on the balcony for the meal. Juvia had cooked the shark fin soup amazingly, and the smell of it and the chicken ravioli wafted out to her as she made her way through the apartment and out to the patio, the sides of which were still covered with the semi-transparent covering that Ranma had put up during winter. The lights had been turned down now, and Juvia had changed her dress along with Jenny, using the apartment's bedroom.

The redhead was dressed in a long black dress which fell from her shoulders all the way down to Erza's ankles. Along either side there was a slit in the dress allowing both for ease of movement and an almost obscene amount of thigh to be seen.

Juvia had dressed in a light green dress which set off the blue of her hair. It was a backless one piece the hugged her figure all the way down to her hips where it flared out just a bit to allow some movement, while still not leaving much to the imagination. She was the only one of the three girls to bother with jewelry, a pair of gold bracelets. Her hair was currently

down, falling in a cascade down her chest and shoulders rather than curled at the ends as it normally was.

Jenny had dressed in a light blue dress, which, left her shoulders bare, only wrapping around Jenny's neck, while hugging her midriff and chest. The skirt portion ended just below her knee, where it flared out to allow for a wide range of movement.

Indeed, it was the same dress that she had worn when they had met Ren and Hibiki while on a date, although Jenny hadn't put on makeup this time, and the rose in her hair was a dark crimson rather than the pink of that night.

Realizing this Ranma said, "Did my dancing with Wendy put you in the mood or something? I didn't think that we would be working up a sweat that way..."

Jenny laughed, but Juvia blushed rosily, her color deepening as Jenny responded. "Ha, well there's dancing, and then there's dan~cing~," the blonde teased. "A good tango can get your Ethernano flowing, and going from vertical dancing to the horizontal mambo is all too easy."

Deciding to rescue Juvia from Jenny and Ranma's teasing, Erza produced a small recording lacrima from her Requip space, which she sat on the serving cart that was currently holding a covered plater of some kind. "Dancing does sound nice, but I will require that we have musical accompaniment."

Ranma was silent as the music began, staring at Erza, shaking his head as he looked at all three girls. "There ought to be a law against having this much beauty in one place, you know? You're all just so freaking gorgeous! How do I get so lucky?"

"Luck had nothing to do with it. Your character did," Erza said with a smile, leaning up to give him a kiss on the lips before pulling away. Jenny and Juvia followed suit, quickly moving forward to kiss the cook, with Juvia lingering longer, smiling as Ranma murmured again that she was gorgeous against her lips, before moving down to her neck, which was very much a sensual point for her.

As they sat down, Erza pulled out a small pouch that she had been carrying. It held a series of pills, dyed pink and one dyed blue.

She handed Ranma the blue one, and the other two girls got one pink pill each. Instantly Juvia blushed hotly, staring down at the pill but obviously seeing some other vision at the same time, but Jenny took the pill stoically, holding it up and peering at it then at Erza. "Should we take these on a full stomach or with a glass of water before we eat?"

“During the meal is best, from what Porlyusica told me anyway,” Erza shook her head wryly, blushing a bit at remembered embarrassment. “That was the worst conversation I’ve had in a long while. Apparently, we are the first girls to actually ask for these.”

“Truly? Juvia would have thought that Lisanna and Anna...” Juvia paused, then chuckled, shaking her head. “Although thinking about it, perhaps these would indeed defeat the purpose on their minds. And in Juvia’s own...”

Jenny and Erza looked shocked at that, and Jenny was about to speak, but Ranma beat her to it, holding up the blue pill as he sat down between Juvia and Erza. “Excuse me, but I seem to be missing a bit of this conversation. What are these?”

“Anti-fertility pills, the male and female type,” Erza answered bluntly. “They won’t have any impact on sexual desires, but they will make certain that there is no chance of pregnancy for two to six days.”

In the past, when he had been with the girls, and he had indeed gone all the way with Jenny a time or two along with Erza, they had relied on condoms, pulling out and morning-after potions. But these sounded much more certain than even the last option to Ranma. “Why haven’t we been using these all along?”

“Because I really didn’t want to have a conversation with Porlyusica about how I was sexually active,” Erza admitted, scowling and looking away. “That, and I didn’t know that they actually existed. I had gone to her because my regular apothecary was closed, but she said that these worked better than the potions. But only **after** embarrassing me for at least half an hour about being safe, practicing good hygiene and so forth.”

“Ouch, that does sound painful,” Ranma muttered, shaking his head and making a mental note to grab some more of these pills for when they were on the trail. Then he blinked, turning to stare at Juvia. “Wait, what did you...”

“Juvia has told you before Ranma that you have the makings of a fine father. And that Juvia finds that **immensely** attractive. Is it so strange to think that Juvia would like to perhaps start a family with you?” Juvia questioned, emphasizing the word immensely very deliberately.

“It is, considering the timing, Juvia,” Jenny answered, cutting in before Ranma could. “We all know that Ranma here wants to become stronger so that he can fight Acnologia. Any talk of having kids now is silly. Besides that, we’re all young still. Why have kids now?”

She then smiled suddenly at Ranma, winking. “Although after watching Ranma with Wendy, even if we were just looking at today, I would agree with you on the fact that Ranma would be a great dad.”

“Heck yes!” Erza said, digging into her shark fin soup before pointing her spoon first that Juvia, then at Ranma. “This is excellent, Juvia, thank you. And as for you, Ranma, do you think that Juvia is the only one who has noticed how good you are with Wendy. I’ll admit that I am pretty positive that at least fifty percent of that is Wendy’s own personality, but that leaves fifty percent to come from you and if we are all taking this relationship seriously, children should be part of our end goal several years down the line, should they not?”

The other two girls murmured instant agreement, although Jenny once again added the caveat that this wasn’t really the proper time to start on that road. “And I am not going to want to have kids until I’m at least twenty-eight or older.”

“I’m still not certain about all of this, about me being a good dad or anything, my old man was, well, a pretty horrible example of it, and you and I had a talk about this before Juvia. I don’t know if I’ve ever actually had a good example of what it means to be a good father to babies and toddlers and so forth.” Ranma took a deep breath, leaning back from the table and setting his own spoon down, closing his eyes and breathing deeply, before he shook himself, and looked across the table at Juvia, then to his side at Jenny and Erza. “But, if the three of you think that you want kids eventually, I... would be okay with that. Eventually. Not right now. After I’ve grown strong enough to challenge Acnologia and end him. After we figure out whether or not the Alvarez Empire is a threat. Then we can talk about kids.”

“And settling down?” Erza asked innocently, although her eyes were narrowed, even as she continued to eat her soup with relish. “I realize that you have your calling as a Ranger but I also refuse to believe that you are the sort of person to leave us in the lurch.”

“No,” Ranma answered firmly, slapping one hand down on the table with finality. “If we have kids, if we go that road, I will stop being a Ranger, hard stop. I might join Fairy Tail, but I certainly would not want to be pulled away from our family willy-nilly.”

“In that case, I think that we can shelve this topic of children,” Jenny said, tossing the pink pill back before taking a glass of orange juice and drinking deeply. There was wine at the table, but Erza had removed it while Ranma had been talking just now, a nonverbal way of communicating that mixing the two was a bad idea.

“Agreed,” Erza said, pausing in her devouring shark fin soup, which she decided was extremely tasty, to also pick up the pill and swallow it whole. She then almost glared over at Juvia in command, who nodded once and did the same. “But whatever got you on the topic of wanting children right now, Juvia? You have talked about Ranma and fatherhood before, but not specifically wanting children.”

“Juvia spent some time this afternoon with Anna and Lisanna,” Juvia shrugged her shoulders. “They are of the impression that Natsu is going to bury himself in training soon and were thinking of wanting some part of him to themselves while he does it.”

Ranma winced, shaking his head. "Natsu as a dad? The mind boggles. It really does."

"Actually, it shouldn't," Erza chuckled. "He's acted almost like a father to Happy in the past."

Ranma stared at her deadpan. "Is that supposed to be a good example of parenting? Because in my mind, it certainly isn't."

While Juvia and Jenny both giggled, Erza sweatdropped at that, having to concede the point.

"But are they really going to talk to him about it?" Ranma asked, looking over at Juvia.

Juvia nodded firmly. "They were very certain about it."

Wincing, Ranma looked around at the girls. "Well, I don't know if that's a good idea. Considering my own news about training and things."

Erza looked at him quizzically, but Juvia already had an idea of what Ranma was going to say. "Ranma wishes to resume a training journey?" Ranma blinked, smiled at her, and pulled her into a sideways hug, kissing her behind the ear and down to her neck before pulling back. "Am I so transparent, or do you just know me too well?"

"You have been looking thoughtful all day," Jenny supplied. "And you wanted tonight's dinner to be a big family affair, complete with Wendy and Carla, and Wendy's also been looking somewhat thoughtful and sad at times. When she wasn't laughing and having fun with you anyways."

"Exactly. It did not take a genius to realize that you might have an announcement to make," Juvia replied, sighing happily as she leaned against Ranma's shoulder, reaching for the platter of chicken ravioli. Her own soup was already gone.

Ranma stole some of the ravioli from her plate, chewing on it absentmindedly, looking over at the other two girls. "She's right. I sort of decided that I need to hit the road. Training here is all well and good in building up experience but not **power**."

Erza frowned, shaking her head, and was about to speak when Jenny beat her to it. "Fine, that's all well and good, but that discussion can wait until tomorrow morning. Tonight is about the four of us. Let's let the future alone for the night, okay?"

Reluctantly, Erza nodded, admitting to herself that Ranma had yet to state where he wanted to go. If it was someplace within Fiore, then she wouldn't have any problem with going with him. With the communication lacrima the guild had access to, she could be back here and

helping the rest of the guild out quickly if need be, or even be taking missions while traveling with Ranma. But beyond Fiore's borders? That would force Erza to make a hard decision.

But Jenny's right, I can put that decision off until tomorrow morning. Tonight is about romance and pleasure. As she thought that word, Ranma's hand rested lightly on her leg for just a moment before reappearing to reach for his glass, as he jokingly used his other hand to steal some more of Juvia's chicken ravioli. That touch made her smile, and she leaned against him from his other side, kissing his neck and jawline. "Then she pulled back, and asked quizzically, "by the way, why shark fin soup and chicken ravioli? Does not seem a natural combination."

"Perhaps not, but it is one that worked," Jenny laughed.

Juvia nodded, peering around Ranma to Erza, winking at the redhead. "And if you think this is nice, wait until you see what is under the cover over there." She pointed over to the serving table that Jenny had brought out from the kitchen to hold the cake.

At Erza's questioning look at him, Ranma supplied, "Cherry strawberry and chocolate delight."

Erza's eyes dilated noticeably as she twisted around to stare at the container, and her breath started to come in gasps. "Oh my," she murmured. "That is what I call ending a romantic dinner right!" With that, she turned back to her meal resolutely, putting aside thoughts of the future for now to concentrate on the immediate reward of sweet, sweet cake. *And perhaps even more sweet things afterward, to burn off those calories...*

OOOOOO

Natsu and Gajeel had gone back to sparring against one another for much of the day after the others had left, only coming into Magnolia to eat lunch at the guild and then dinner later on. Now, Natsu was walking back to the hovel that he shared with Happy, the little blue-furred Exceed on his shoulder as Natsu enthusiastically explained about Ranma's offer. "It's the chance of a lifetime, little guy! I mean, think about it, going where **no one** has ever been before? Fighting enemies that **no one** knows about? That sounds amazing, doesn't it?!"

"Aye, sir," Happy laughed. A small part of his mind was concerned about what Carla would be doing, but if Wendy came along with Ranma, as Happy assumed she would be, then that would be great. The two of them would have a lot more time to around one another, maybe enough for Happy to really start impressing her enough to get her to like him back. But most of Happy didn't care so much about that. Where Natsu went, Happy would follow. It was that simple. "Although, I have to wonder if the King of Pergrande will even allow us across."

“Bah!” Natsu waved that away. “Ranma’s Ranger status will probably help us across. Besides, he’s the one in charge, so I don’t have to worry about that kind of thing.”

Happy’s laugh at that broke off as Natsu opened the door to their hovel, only to find Lisanna and Anna there. The two of them were sitting side-by-side on Natsu’s large sofa that was also, Happy’s bed and general chair all in one. They were smiling at him, but there was something about their body language, the faint blushes on their face, and the fact that both of them were wearing trench coats that threw Happy off a bit.

But after a second, he happily flew off of Natsu’s shoulder towards his two mothers, landing between them as Natsu entered afterward, closing the door and smiling happily at his two girlfriends. “Anna, Lisanna! I didn’t expect to stop by tonight.” He paused. “Er, actually, I don’t think you’ve ever been here before. Although I suppose it’s a good thing since I do have something to talk to you about.”

“Is that a surprise, Natsu?” Lisanna giggled, gesturing around with one hand while her other fell to Happy’s head, scratching him behind the ears. “Honestly, even Gildarts has a better place than this, and he keeps destroying his house in his sleep!”

Natsu shrugged at that, and now it was Anna’s turn to giggle. “Well, we had something to do with you too, but you go first.”

With a nod, Natsu sat across from them on the small table that he and Happy used to eat at only occasionally. Both of them mostly ate at the guild. Their hovel was where they went to sleep and where he stored trophies from his various missions. It wasn’t home like the guild was. “Ranma, Gajeel, Laxus and I were talking this afternoon. Well, I say talking, but...”

“They were really fighting,” Happy interrupted happily. “Except for Wendy, the Dragon Slayers fought for about an hour and a half, then after Ranma had knocked out Gajeel and Laxus had knocked out Natsu...”

“Hey, who’s doing this! Me or you, Happy?” Natsu grumbled, never liking to admit that Ranma and Laxus were so much stronger than he was. “Whatever. Anyway, he’s right. Afterward, we made this vow to hunt down Acnologia and Ranma...”

Natsu explained what Ranma had offered, and Lisanna and Anna looked at one another aghast. But it was very obvious Natsu really wanted this, though, and after a few moments of silent communication, Lisanna turned back to her boyfriend. “I understand that you think this is a great idea, but it’s also extremely dangerous. Are you sure you couldn’t just get stronger here, fighting Laxus and Gildarts and Erza and Mira?”

“I could, maybe, eventually,” Natsu said, nodding his head, his face unwantedly serious. “But I don’t know if I could get as strong as I could if I go with Ranma. Ranma’s just as strong or

stronger than most of them, maybe even as strong as Gildarts himself! Training and sparring with him would be great. On its own, but the idea of the unknown it's..."

"It's calling to you," Lisanna sighed. "Master Makarov said it himself, this guild is built of people who want to dream, who want to explore."

Anna sighed in turn, leaning back against the sofa. "If you didn't want to do this, you wouldn't be the Natsu we know and love."

Natsu shrugged uncomfortably. "You could come with us?"

"We probably will, up to maybe the border of Fiore," Lisanna shrugged. "But no longer than that, we sure as heck won't go with you to the Blasted Lands. Lisanna and I know one another all too well Natsu, in that kind of unknown environment, we would be a distraction at best, a weakness at worst."

"But such pretty distractions," Natsu answered quickly, a male instinct he didn't even know he had caused the words to escape his mouth before Natsu realized what he was going to say.

Both girls laughed at that but shook their heads as one before Lisanna looked down at Happy. "Happy, it's adult time. Would you mind heading over to the Strauss house for the night?"

Happy looked between Natsu Lisanna and Anna, nodding his head once and with a flap of his wings, heading towards the door. As he went, he shouted out, "I'll be sure to tell Elfman and Mira where you are~~."

"I'll dye you neon orange if you do!" Anna shouted back, while Lisanna just looked horrified. *The teasing would be horrible! And as for Elfman, he still has problems with the idea of Lisanna and I being with Natsu at all, let alone with the idea of what we do together. But for now...* The twins shared a look and grinned.

Chuckling, Natsu watched his little buddy go, but a rustle of clothing caused him to look back, and his eyes widened, as Anna and Lisanna had unbuttoned their trench coats, revealing the fact that they wore nothing underneath but a matched set of pink and white lingerie, pink for Lisanna, white for Anna. The outfits left very, very little to the imagination. Natsu felt his blood rushing south, even as his eyes widened, his instincts suddenly screaming at him to do unspeakable things to them.

Then, reality intruded, and he looked away from his girlfriends, frowning and scratching at his salmon-colored locks sheepishly. "I, I don't have any of those balloon things left..." He muttered. "If I'd known, I would've picked some up."

"You won't be needing them from now on," Lisanna said, smiling warmly at him. "Trust us."

Natsu frowned at that but staring at his two girlfriends clad in lingerie, what those balloon things had been for completely evaded his mind. "If, if you're sure?"

"We're sure," Anna said, getting up from her chair as Lisanna did the same, moving towards Natsu, their hips, not as wide or as full as Mira or the older girls, swaying from side to side the movements almost hypnotic. "We're very sure."

They could talk about the implications of this decision in the future. Right now, the time for talking was done.

OOOOOOO

Lemon start:

The time for talk was also coming to an end back at Ranma's apartment. The meal had been excellent, Erza and Jenny, both chocoholics, had been in paroxysms of ecstasy from the cherry and strawberry chocolate cake. So Juvia and Ranma volunteered to clean up over Erza's protests. "You were the two who cooked. Surely that means we should be the ones to clean?"

"Nope," Ranma shook his head. "But you can get rid of the table and the chairs."

Moments later, Ranma and Juvia were in the kitchen, putting the food away, almost automatically moving around one another. Despite having bought the apartment for himself and for Wendy as a place to live while here in Magnolia, it had slowly become a sort of communal area for all of Ranma's friends and loved ones. So Juvia knew her way around the kitchen almost as well as Ranma did.

Because of this, the fact that Ranma found himself bumping into her sides or rear occasionally was rather surprising. It took Ranma a few times to realize that Juvia was doing it on purpose, but even Ranma wasn't dense enough to miss it when she leaned away from the sink slightly, her rear catching Ranma's side as he turned away from the Ice lacrima-run refrigerator.

Turning towards her, Ranma decided to see if he was right and moved behind Juvia, pressing her against the side of the sink, his hips grinding against hers for a second. The little giggle he heard from Juvia made it clear that he had been correct, and one arm went around her waist, the other pulling moving to her chin to guide her head backward.

"Naughty girl," Ranma whispered, kissing her on the lips lightly at first, then deeper, allowing Juvia to set the pace since he knew that she liked doing so at the beginning.

Then, when Juvia opened her mouth, and her tongue began to play across his lips, Ranma responded ardently, his own tongue flicking out, sliding along hers and entering Juvia's slightly open mouth. As the kiss deepened, Ranma pulled her tighter back against his body, one hand moving down from her chin to grip the blue-haired woman's breast through her dress. Juvia moaned in delight at the touch, Ranma's hand slowly squeezing, his thumb moving around where he could feel her nipple slowly protruding.

Ranma pulled back slowly and let his hand fall away for a second, looking around to make certain that they'd put all the food away. With that done, both of Ranma's arms went around Juvia once more, pulling her away from the sink. Juvia kissed him again, harder this time, eagerly, and Ranma responded while turning them around within the domain of the little kitchenette, his hand flicking out to shut down the water before returning to her waist.

He lifted Juvia up off her feet and began to move both of them back towards the patio entrance. Juvia didn't let up kissing him, but when Juvia felt her body being lifted into the air, Juvia instantly raised her legs, locking them around Ranma's waist and beginning to move her hips against him. She smiled happily into the kiss as she felt Ranma responding, a little longer, if a somewhat nervous smile on her lips as Juvia pulled back, moving down his neck and kissing him at the pulse point right at the bottom of his throat before they reached the doorway to the patio.

By this time, Erza and Jenny had finished shifting the patio once more. Gone was the table and the circular chairs around it, replaced by a massive futon big enough for all of them. And on the futon, Erza and Jenny had already begun the fun too. Jenny's dress was already gone, tossed to the side as Erza worked on her neck, kissing and licking there, the former model moaning under Erza's ministrations as Erza crouched over her like a tigress over her prey.

She pulled away as she heard Ranma's throaty growl and Juvia going, "Oh my," turning to smile lazily at them.

Ranma turned to Juvia, pulling her into a kiss, then pulling back, leaning her his forehead against hers. He knew that she was a virgin, as Erza had been before their first night together. "Final time, love: are you sure you're ready for this step? We don't have to go all the way tonight if you don't want to, Juvia."

Juvia shook her head, reaching under her skirt and undoing the ties to either side of her panties, letting them fall. They hit with a gentle splat, showing how wet they were. Then Juvia took one of Ranma's hands and gently stroked it up the inside of her thigh to her wet core underneath her skirt, gasping in delight as his thumb gently stroked up and down her vulva, feeling the wetness there, even easier to discover thanks to Juvia not having any hair down there unlike Erza and Jenny, who both preferred to have small strips of very carefully shaved

pubic hair. "Juvia has imagined this for several months now. Juvia is more than ready to become one with you, Ranma."

Smiling in both relief and love, Ranma took Juvia's hand, kissed first the top of it, then the palm, looking up at her the entire time, as he whispered, "As my lady wishes."

"Yes! Your lady, Juvia is yours!" Julia whispered, raw passion and desire in her tone, as she hastily tried to divest herself of her dress, while Ranma did the same, revealing his already rising ardor.

As this was going on, Erza had left off making out with Jenny, hopping to her feet and sauntering towards the two of them.

How Erza had ever learned to walk like that, like sex on wheels, Ranma didn't know, but she looked like some kind of tigress mixed with the sexiest runway model of all time. Then Erza tore off her dress, literally tearing it in two down the middle, tossing the bits to either side, revealing her body in a small pair of panties and a bra that didn't even try to cover her chest, merely displaying her breasts via the cloth underneath them, offering them almost to Ranma. It was one of the sexiest things that Ranma had seen. *Precisely since the last time she and I had some 'us' time*, he thought, meeting Erza halfway.

From her position on the bed, Jenny joined Juvia, watching as Erza and Ranma made out, shaking her head. This wasn't the first time she had seen Erza and Ranma kiss, but still, there was almost always something so aggressive and primal in the way they made out, as both of them were trying to not only kiss one another but to, in some fashion, beat one another. *I know they're both competitive, but shouldn't there be a limit on that kind of thing?*

She then blinked in astonishment as Erza twisted, her arms around Ranma, and almost attempted to hurl him down onto the futon.

Ranma broke her grip around his arms, one arm smacking down onto the mattress, catching his body before he hit even as he and Erza continue to make out. A second later, he rolled somehow, twisting them both so that Erza's back struck the futon. The two of them started to wrestle across the bed, rolling onto Jenny, who squawked in annoyance then grabbed at them both. One of the blonde's hands reached between Ranma's legs to grab Ranma Junior, while the other flashed in between their chests to twist Erza's nipple. "What the hell, are we here to make love with one another or fight to the death?"

As both of them winced, Jenny began to stroke Ranma's rising shaft, biting her lip and shivering in delight at the veiny feel of it. "I don't know about you, but I certainly know which one I would prefer," she teased throatily, then leaned in, kissed Erza on the nipple in apology as the two of them pulled away from one another and then brought her other hand over to Ranma's shaft, working it up and down, smiling up at them both winsomely. "Okay?"

Erza and Ranma both growled a little but shared one more **extremely** aggressive kiss before Erza moved around Ranma, reaching up for Juvia, who had not wanted to tear off her dress as precipitously as Erza had. She had even folded it and placed it in the corner but now allowed herself to be pulled down into a hug with the redhead, who stroked her hair, kissed her very lightly. As she did, their breasts pressed together, and Juvia muttered, "Juvia wonders again how Erza can hide those under so much armor every day. Juvia knows it would cause Juvia's chest to ache something fierce.

Erza's breasts were at least a size larger than Juvia's, if not as full. Then again, both Jenny and Juvia were a bit softer around the edges than Erza. Erza had ripped sixpack and visible musculature on her arms and legs. Jenny had visible muscles only on her legs, her stomach was flat and toned, but she wasn't anywhere near as muscled as the redhead. Jenny and Juvia's nipples were also both lighter in color than Erza's own dark red nipples, with Juvia's being the lightest shade of pink, and Jenny's, for some reason, having a tint of violet to them. Juvia also lacked the number of small scars that Erza had, making her appear somewhat softer and more innocent and while Juvia also had a somewhat flat stomach, her hips and breasts, not to mention her rear, which Erza recalled was quite spank-able, were slightly fuller than Erza or Jenny's.

Remembering that, Erza's hand lowered down Juvia's back, where Erza spanked Juvia's rear as she had back on Tenrou Island.

Juvia whimpered a little, and Erza smirked, seeing some liquid dripping down the bluenette's legs as she knelt on the futon. With that visible sign of the other girl's arousal, Erza became a bit more aggressive, although, beyond a few more spanks, she kept from causing Juvia any more actual pain.

Behind the two ladies, Ranma and Jenny had commenced a truly intense make-out session, with Ranma playing with both of Jenny's breasts, hefting them in his hands, each finger moving slightly differently, with his thumb moving at half-Amaguriken speed, like a tiny vibrator, an experiment he was pleased to note was a complete success if Jenny's whimpers were any indication. Ranma found himself fascinated by Jenny's nipples as they hardened quickly under his ministrations, flicking them with his thumb and forefinger.

Jenny broke off from their kiss, biting her lip and grinning up at Ranma through her eyelashes, and Ranma chuckled, pulling her to him, going from sitting on his haunches to holding her there, then rolling until Jenny was underneath him, the two of them grinding their cores against one another, as Jenny reached down with both hands, and untied the side strings of her panties. Like Juvia, Jenny's panties had been almost normal save for the fact that they had strings on the side like a pair of bikini bottoms, and now they fell away, allowing Ranma's turgid cock to start to slide up and down her already moistening folds.

The high-pitched whine the shaking that occurred when Jenny bucked up against Ranma caused Juvia and Erza to look away from their own make-out session. Erza held Juvia against

her, murmuring into her year, "That's a good, gorgeous, gorgeous girl," as they both watched in fascination as Ranma slowly moved his shaft down until the head of his cock was gently pressing into Jenny's vulva.

But before he could push into her, Erza had a wicked thought. Action followed quickly, and she reached down, placing her hand along his shaft, blocking him from thrusting forward. At this power play from Erza, Jenny's eyes, which had been half-slitted in delight and anticipation, now popped open, and she turned her head to glare at Erza. But the redhead simply smirked, kissed Juvia, very, very ardently, then pulled back, looking at Jenny with one eyebrow arched. "Beg for it."

Ranma grimaced at this but, despite his own needs, decided to let it go as he saw a watched both Juvia and Jenny, interested in what they would think or do about it. *I can always get Erza back later.*

Juvia was a true submissive. Once things got started, she enjoyed simply giving control to the other person, letting them direct their lovemaking. Ranma hadn't anticipated Jenny would be the same and was interested to see what she would do.

It turned out that while Jenny liked a bit of bondage, she wasn't naturally submissive. A hand flashed out, and Erza yelped as once more her nipple was pulled and not as playfully as Jenny had done before. "I'm not tied up, and as much as I like your take-charge attitude, there needs to be a limit, love," Jenny smirked.

"AOOH!" The next instant, Jenny gasped and moaned aloud, her head thrown back as Ranma, with Erza's hand out of the way, slid home inside her. He went going from just having the head of his cock resting inside her tight moist tunnel to slamming his hips down fully, causing Jenny to gasp in utter delight, her hips rising up to keep Ranma within her as he pulled back.

But Erza wasn't about to take this lying down, though, and she leaned over, grabbing at Jenny's hair and pulling the girl's head towards her, kissing her hard on the lips.

With her insides now being slowly turned into mush by Ranma moving slowly in and out of her, Jenny was in no position to fight back, and Erza completely controlled the kiss. A moment later, one hand moved Jenny's body, and gripping the breast nearest her, while Juvia, muttering under her breath about feeling a bit left out, leaned over Erza.

Pressing her own breasts into the redheads' back, Juvia was about to lean down in turn to attack Jenny's other breast, when Ranma's hands left off where they had been holding Jenny down, lifting up to pull Juvia into a kiss that took her breath away and made Juvia moan almost as loud as Jenny was now doing continually.

He then moved to her ear and her neck, biting and nibbling as he whispered, "No one's going to be neglected here, Juvia, never fear. Let Erza and Jenny have their arguments. I can concentrate on two things at once, after all."

Hearing this, Erza hummed in amusement, still attacking or almost devouring Jenny's mouth, while Jenny whimpered under her, her momentary flash of anger dissipating in the pleasure of the moment. Indeed, she was quite happy that Erza was still taking charge, just as she had back on the island before everything had gone to hell.

And this time, there's no paddle involved either. What the hell is it about Erza that just makes me want to push until she snaps? And why do I like that but won't bend over backward to her demands? Weeeirrd... Jenny's thoughts became more scattered as Ranma began to put a circular motion into his thrusts. Think later, enjoy now!

Juvia's thoughts were much less cluttered than Jenny's. Not only was she not as used to this pleasure as Jenny was, the blonde having been with Ranma a few times over the winter like this, Juvia was also, as previously shown, a submissive when it came to bedroom activities. Or indeed, most of life once she found a suitable partner. She didn't want to go the full maid route like Virgo did and become a servant, but she certainly enjoyed someone taking command of her, especially if they were so gentle about it like Ranma was right now.

He seemed to understand almost instinctively what kind of kiss each girl liked, what kind of play each girl liked, reading their bodies as if they were opponents in a martial arts match. And right now, with one hand trailing up and down her spine, and the other gently moving from one breast to another, then trailing down to wedge itself between where Juvia was humping against Erza's rear, Juvia was truly ecstatic he could do so.

Then Ranma slipped a finger into her, and she bucked even harder, almost pushing Erza up and over Jenny. "Mmmm... Ranma-sama!"

Grumbling, Erza pushed back, arching her back, and she pulled away from Jenny's mouth, moving down Jenny's body. Taking a nipple in her own mouth, licking and nibbling at it, before biting down on the hardened nub just enough to cause a flash of pain to go through Jenny, right as Ranma once again bottomed out in her.

When he pulled back, Jenny raised one leg, the leg away from the other two girls, and moving it up around Ranma. This show of flexibility very much interested Ranma, as he wondered how to test it later. But then Jenny pulled Ranma back down into her, urging him verbally at the same time. "Deeper love, harder! I can take it."

Of course, Ranma had no problem obliging her. While kissing and nibbling at Juvia's breasts, the bluenette having shifted herself up and off Erza's back to allow him more access, Ranma started to use shorter, harder strokes, still shifting his hips in a circular motion, causing Jenny to moan in delight. "Yes, yes! There, right there, I'm..."

The next second, her entire body stiffened as she came for the first time that night. Juvia wasn't too far after her, orgasming as Ranma added a third finger to the two that were already playing inside her. This added to the feeling of fullness, and the suddenly rapid movement of that hand, with Ranma repeating his earlier Amaguriken experiment, caused her to scream aloud,

As she came, Jenny clamped down hard on Ranma, so hard that Ranma almost lost himself, but he was able to retain control. And as Jenny continued to spasm in aftershocks, Ranma slowly pulled out of Jenny, leaving her a blushing gasping mess on the futon. A second later, he was pounced on by Erza, who kissed him hard for several seconds before moving back. Gently laying the still slowly recovering Juvia down, Erza laid down on her stomach between the other two girls wiggling her rear at Ranma invitingly, a challenge on her lips as she looked over her shoulder.

Ranma needed no second urging, and within a few seconds, he slid home slowly into Erza, slowly enough to cause Erza to mock glare at him. That only allowed Ranma to lean down and kiss Erza this time. The two of them made out for several seconds as the other two girls started to recover.

They joined in quickly, exchanging kisses, the first time Juvia and Jenny had done so. Then without any kind of communication, they began to move down the redhead's body, moving underneath her to play with Erza's swaying breasts. Jenny was a little more aggressive, squeezing hard and biting here and there, causing Erza to yelp, while Juvia was tender and soft, getting underneath Erza fully and rubbing her breasts up against Erza's as she nibbled and licked at Erza's neck.

In response, Erza bent down and kiss the other girl, while a part of her mind idly wondered how the hell they had all gotten to this point, all of the powerful, strong women loving Ranma and then one another. *It is certainly not a position I ever expected to be in real life. Not that I'm complaining!*

Then Ranma finely started to piston in and out of her faster and deeper, and any thoughts beyond the pleasure of the moment left her mind entirely. Then she tried to concentrate on Juvia, her hands fondling the girl's breasts beneath her even as Ranma began to move in and out of Erza's pussy faster and faster.

With Juvia and Erza content with one another, now it was Jenny's turn to sit up and start to kiss Ranma, and she did so eagerly, smiling in delight at him, whispering, "I love you," before kissing him on the lips.

Ranma pulled back just enough to whisper the same back, and then the two of them began kissing them once more, with Ranma moving one arm around her waist and pulling Jenny up and into his side, delighting in the feel of her curves against him, smiling as he felt how wet she still was dripping down where she pressed against him.

With the stimulation of Erza's insides all around him, and having already been close to the brink, Ranma's found himself moving over the top quickly and grunted aloud, pulling away from Jenny for a second, his hands moving from playing with her breasts and rear to gripping Erza's hips, as he thrust harder into her, growling out "And you're certain that that pill is going to work this quickly?"

Erza pulled away from kissing Juvia just loud enough to mouth, "Yes!" and then, Ranma plunged to the hilt inside her one more time, his body spasming as he came, shooting a near torrent of cum into Erza, causing her to orgasm as Jenny was thrown over the edge herself for the second time that night thanks to Ranma's fingers pistoning in and out of her as they had Juvia earlier. She practically collapsed onto Juvia for a second before she slowly started to recover.

By that point, Jenny had recaptured Ranma's attention and was kissing him again before smacking Erza on the side, "Get off," she ordered. "It's Juvia's turn."

Erza might have argued just for the sake of it but for that last bit, which caused her to roll off of Juvia, before leaning down and kissing her again as Jenny and Ranma went to work on Juvia's breasts, kissing and licking, nibbling. Ranma was again astonished at the bright pink nature of Juvia's nipples, a very different color to the dark red of Erza's or the light violet of Jenny's. They seemed almost innocent somehow in comparison. *But then again, she is the only...*

Ranma's thoughts broke off as Juvia whimpered, hefting her hips up against his still rigid cocked, moaning aloud, "Ranma-sama, now! Please! No more teasing!"

Ranma ignored Juvia's demand with a chuckle, instead moving down her body and starting to lick and nibble at her stomach and then down to her hidden treasure. While the other two girls were basically feasting on Juvia's breasts, neck and lips, Ranma did the same below, the three of them turning her into so much moaning putty on the futon.

Eventually, the only words she could say were their names. "Ranma-sama, Jenny, Erza! Ranma-sama, Jenny, Ezra!"

Erza took particular delight in interrupting Juvia's shouts by suddenly shifting what she was doing, causing their names to come out more as whimpers or yelps, while Jenny was a bit more tactical. Her fingers moving to help Ranma down below, flicking Juvia's clitoris just as Juvia was about to peak, causing the sensation to redouble. Juvia's words disappeared into a scream of pleasure. "AAAHHHHH!!!"

As the sound slowly dissipated, Erza pulled back, frowning thoughtfully as she looked around the patio. "I have to wonder, and I realize this is a little late, but is this patio soundproofed?"

“There's some anti-sound magic on the cloth around us, same as the stuff my tent's made out of,” Ranma answered as he pulled away from Juvia's drenched flower, licking his lips in delight. Juvia was a squirter, which Ranma had already known thanks to her occasionally having had trouble retaining her human form during moments like this. But something Ranma greatly enjoyed was that Juvia's juices were honestly delicious. Erza and Jenny had occasionally tasted... not bad, but more powerful and fishy than Ranma would've preferred. Juvia, on the other hand, always seems to taste like oranges and cinnamon.

Which is a good thing, Ranma reflected, as Erza and Jenny moved down Juvia's body, licking at her core as Ranma had done a moment ago, but from the top rather than the bottom, more interested in tasting the girl than bringing her pleasure at the moment. Both of them blinked in surprise, noticing the taste before Erza moved back up Juvia's body to kiss her, and Jenny continued to lick and nuzzle into Juvia's cleft, smirking as she felt Erza's fingers move between her hips and start to play with her own blonde thatch.

However, Jenny was mostly concentrated on the fact that Ranma, despite having come, was still iron-hard, gently running his head up and down Juvia's slit. *Damn, that is so hot!*

As Erza pulled away from the girl, she tried to move so that Ranma and Juvia could see one another, biting lightly at the side of Juvia's breasts, her fingers now moving up and down Jenny's slit noted absently, *the mechanics of having a foursome are quite a bit different than the books I've read had made me think. Elbows, hips, and not wanting to block one person's view to another definitely have more impact than those in the novels.*

Regardless, she tried to not get in the way of Juvia, and Ranma looked at one another. A few seconds into their stare down, Ranma slowly moved his shaft into Juvia's un-plundered depths. Jenny whimpered in pain, trying to hide it, but Ranma still heard her and paused, watching Juvia worriedly. Juvia smiled up at him, biting her lip, as her hands curled on the futon, one underneath Erza's stomach where she laid out on the bed and the other between her body and one of Jenny's legs.

She'd felt a brief stretching there as Ranma had pushed in further than his fingers had previously, but within seconds, all she felt was a sense of pleasure thanks in part to Erza's and Jenny's ongoing ministrations. Jenny's tongue was flicking around the small nub of flesh at the top of her slit. Erza had renewed her assault on Juvia's breasts while multitasking as Ranma had earlier, one hand playing with Jenny's own moist core.

Eventually, Juvia nodded at Ranma, and he moved forward slightly, another inch entering Juvia's pussy. Another. Another. Three more and Ranma stopped stilling, his hands clenched tight on her hips, as he clenched his eyes shut for a second, concentrating as he whispered out, “Juvia! Your so...fuuuu.....ckkk....”

That look: that look of barely controlled desire and lust on Ranma's face, the fact that it had been her body to push him to that ragged edge, caused Juvia to giggle wickedly, feeling

more empowered and beautiful than she had ever felt before. With some difficulty, Juvia extricated her arms from under Jenny and Erza, lifting her hands upward. Ranma obligingly leaned forward, allowing Juvia to run her fingers through his hair as he moved down to kiss her tenderly.

“Juvia loves you, Ranma-sama,” she said simply.

Ranma responded with an “I love you, Juvia,” before sliding the last few inches into Juvia. Their hips rested against one another as Juvia threw back her head and moaned again, a slight trickle of blood now escaping from between their conjoined bodies.

For a few seconds, they just kissed, Ranma showing his nearly inhuman level of body control, waiting until he senses Juvia wasn't in any pain, used to his size. Then while still kissing her, Ranma began to move his hips and Juvia's mind exploded into stars.

How long the two of them made love, Ranma didn't know, but he did know that Juvia shrieked her completion at least twice more, while to one side, Jenny finished at least once thanks to Erza's fingers. As the former model rolled away a bit to rest, Erza began to demand more of Ranma's attention. In response, one of his hands lifted from where it had been holding Juvia's hips to play with Erza's breasts.

That wasn't enough, and Erza grabbed his wrist, moved his down to play with her vulva as he had with Jenny and Juvia. She came soon after, Ranma using his new Amaguriken technique, his fingers wiggling inside of her as if they were a vibrator. “OOHHHH my god, Ranma! Wh, where has that technique been all this time!?”

“Heh, even I sometimes miss how to apply things, you know?”

Rolling her eyes, Erza leaned forward to kiss Ranma again. With that and feeling Juvia still shuddering all around him, Ranma finally lost the last vestiges of his self-control for a second time that night. Ranma thrust fully into the bluenette beneath him, his other hand lifting her hips up to push even deeper into her as he could, as he pulled away from Erza's mouth to let loose a low growl.

Once more cum shot out of his cock, deep into Juvia this time, painting her insides white. Feeling that sent Juvia back over the edge with a shriek, the feeling multiplied by the aftershocks she had already been feeling. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and Juvia's entire body became a limp noodle, collapsing back onto the bed.

Pulling his shaft out of Juvia, Ranma smiled happily down at her, watching her chest heave, her eyes slowly rolling back down in her head, as their mixed juices poured out onto the futon. “So, was it everything you imagined it would be?” he asked, leaning down to kiss her between her breasts before pulling back up, winking at her.

Juvia chuckled throatily, one hand pushing back her sweat-matted hair, then moving down her body slowly to where they had so recently been connected, shuddering in aftershocks. "While Juvia's imagination is quite powerful, it's certainly paled to the reality," she whispered, gazing up at Ranma with adoration in her eyes.

"Good." Ranma leaned down, kissed her very lightly, and then was pulled away by Erza, who kissed him not ardently. She pulled him away slightly from Juvia as Jenny leaned over the blue-haired girl from her other side, kissing her cheek and then moving down to her breasts, where she began to nibble on them again.

As she pulled away, Erza inquired archly. "I hope you're not finished after only two shots, Ranma."

Ranma smirked at her, running his fingers into her hair and then pulling her down into one of their rough passionate kisses, before pulling away, creating a slight popping noise as he did. "You should know me better than that! I guarantee the three of you will be the first to collapse tonight."

"We'll see about that!" Jenny and Erza said as one before laughing. Then Ranma pounced on Erza, pushing her back down onto the futon, where they began to wrestle and make out at the same time while Jenny and Juvia watched on for several minutes. Then as Ranma found himself underneath Erza and she raised her hips before sliding him home, the two women moved forward, joining in.

End lemon

OOOOOO

The next morning, Ranma woke up before his three lovers and started to cook swiftly after, knowing that Wendy would show up soon. After about forty minutes, Erza was woken up by the smells wafting through the apartment, her nose pulling the rest of her head this way and that as she sniffed the air experimentally before waking up fully and trying to remove herself from the cuddle pile. This was somewhat difficult and made worse by Jenny and Juvia waking up one after another since Juvia fought against waking up, grabbing at both Erza and Jenny like they were plushies.

All three of the girls were somewhat sore and limping more than a little as they came out of the bedroom, where they had retired, none of them wishing to try and sleep on the wet and torn futon. And the sight of those limps caused Ranma to wince. "Ah, sorry, did I go too..."

"If you finish that sentence, you will regret it," Erza growled. "Nothing last night that we didn't ask for, although a few times you, um, you leaped a few steps ahead of where we had anticipated. But that was all to the good." Jenny and Juvia made noises of agreement remembering the third or fourth go round, when Ranma of all people had pulled out handcuffs

and then paddled Erza's rear the same way she had done to Jenny and Juvia back on Tenrou Island.

Remembering the same thing, Jenny's eyes going half-lidded and Juvia leaning against Erza, a happy hum of 'Mistress' on her lips causing Erza to smile and put around the other woman. After all of them had exhausted themselves, Juvia had turned out to be one heck of a post-coital cuddler and strangely preferred the softer form of the girls for it, while Jenny and Erza both slept like the dead. Erza had once more wanted a bit of space, while Jenny had imitated a koala, hugging Ranma in such a way he'd had the devil of a time escaping that morning without waking the blonde up.

Ranma nodded, then leaned over, pulling Erza into a hug, letting his hands trail down her back to her rear, where he let his hand rest, even as he nuzzled into Erza's hair. Then he paused, pulling back and whispering seriously, "But are you sure that those pills, I don't want..."

"Don't worry, the pills will work," Erza answered just as seriously. "There's no way that Porlyusica would have given me anything that wouldn't."

Ranma nodded slowly. "Yeah, I can see that. If only because she would hate to see more humans around."

Chuckling, Jenny moved past Ranma to start helping with breakfast. While neither she nor Juvia was as good at cooking as Ranma, they were good enough to help. "Come on, you two, I'm hungry. For some reason, I burned a lot of calories last night."

"But we did it," Juvia said, taking the time to get in her own hug of Ranma before moving to clear the table and put out clean plates. "We three combined were enough to wear Ranma out."

"Tsk, all that means is I need more training," Ranma growled, nipping at the side of Juvia's neck and deliberately leaving a hickey there. "Unless you don't want to?"

The former virgin shook her head rapidly. "No, Juvia has absolutely no problem with that!"

The breakfast was a full Japanese version, heavy on the rice, with several different tamagoyaki available along with braised fish. The smell of the fish met Wendy, Seilah and Carla as they arrived, the little girl having her hair up in an entirely new coif. The younger girl rushed to Ranma's side, hugging him tightly as she described the night she'd had with Katerina, Edo-Wendy and Seilah. Ranma smiled down at her, a bittersweet feeling filling him before he gestured the three newcomers to sit down at the table.

Carla huffed, sniffing the air and muttering, "Well, at least you four degenerates weren't so uncouth as to go about your tawdry business out here. Dare I hope that the tent is similarly unaffected?"

"It is you little prissy puss, along with the rest of the bedroom and the main apartment area," Ranma grumbled, keeping a flush off his face with difficulty. "We spent the night out on the balcony."

A blush on her own face, Wendy asked if they could change the topic. The girls, all flushing at the fact the little girl knew what they had been up to, hastily added their voices to this. Soon, they were all digging in hungrily. While she might have meant it as a joke, Jenny had been serious: all three of the girls had worked up one heck of an appetite, as had Ranma. So hungry were they all that more than once during the meal Ranma had flashbacks of fighting his father for food, his hands and the hands of Erza, Jenny and Juvia flashing out, their utensils smacking into one another to both ward off and take command of the morsel in question.

"So," Juvia said through a mouthful, "you mentioned going on a training trip last night, but you did not tell us where you wished for us to go. And Juvia would request that you do not even attempt to leave her behind. Juvia would merely follow after you and that would be most annoying."

Ranma nodded. "I think there are a few ways that I could get stronger. One is to just stay here and continue training with Erza and the others. But that wouldn't give me as much experience as my other idea, especially in terms of using large-scale area-of-effect spells. Can't really do that in a settled land. After all, people like their forests in one piece, mostly. I want to find stronger enemies, stronger battles to push myself. And I think there's one place I can get them and maybe find some ancient weapon or magic that can even be used against dragons."

Erza's eyes widened. At first, she had feared that Ranma was talking about heading to the Empire to find stronger enemies. But, that bit, about finding ancient magic or weapons, coupled with the need for more space in a place people wouldn't mind him destroying the landscape? That meant one place only. "The Blasted Lands, you want to travel into the continent!"

"T, that's insane!" Jenny shouted in turn. "Nothing returns from the continent!"

"I agree," Erza added firmly. "It's a foolish idea."

Ranma shook his head. "It isn't, not with my skillset. I think that it's something that myself at least, Natsu and Gajeel, could really get a lot out of. Heck, even you Jenny, although in your case it won't be through fighting or interacting with strange magic or metals."

"Me?" Jenny exclaimed, then paused thinking before speaking again slowly. "My Take Over: Mechanical Soul. You said something about ancient weapons. You think that I might be able to get stronger that way?"

Ranma nodded firmly. "Yep."

"Huh... well, I'm not really the kind of girl to enjoy roughing it, but I've been inside of your tent several times before, so that isn't a consideration. Still..." Jenny muttered before smiling. "If we stop off in Seven and get some more camping gear like that, I think that I might be satisfied with the idea of traveling in style. Especially if we get another tent for Natsu and Gajeel." The look in her eye told Ranma precisely why that was a necessity. "But are you sure that we'll find something like that?"

"Positive, no. I just think we might find something useful, that's all. And a lot of tough opponents that will force us to get stronger. That's always a good idea. But mainly, I think Natsu, Gajeel and I would benefit from being able to both really cut loose and interact or maybe even eat new types of our elements."

Wendy had not spoken up yet, and now Ranma looked at her, understanding what was going on. *She's made her decision, I think.* He reached out to ruffle her hair gently, causing the little girl to look up at him, her eyes brimming with tears. "You don't want to go, do you."

He made the words a statement rather than a question, and despite not really wanting to, Wendy nodded ones. "I don't. I, I like traveling Ranma-nii, and I like seeing new things. But I still can learn a lot from Porlyusica. And, and I..." she paused, looking away, almost shame-faced now.

"I told you that you didn't have to make the vow that the rest of us made yesterday, Imouto," Ranma whispered. "Wendy, I've known since meeting you that fighting wasn't your first choice, that you weren't a combat junkie like I am. If you think that you need to stay here to become a better healer, or even that you just want to stay here, I'll stand by your decision."

Wendy pouted, looking away, then back at Ranma before nodding her head. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "But I think that's really the truth. I can learn more from books and research and working with Porlyusica. I've only just gotten used to using the new spells she showed me. I haven't **mastered** them. And then there's Freed and his runes, which I've been learning about too. I think together, we could make them really way more dangerous."

At that point, the young girl paused, breathing in once before moving on, like someone tearing off a Band-Aid. "I also want to work on more control than power, and that's, well... Porlyusica can help with that more than you.

"I'm a little insulted about that last part, but I'll let it slide," Ranma said with a chuckle before picking Wendy up out of her chair and pulling her into his lap, hugging her tightly and

kissing her forehead, causing a happy hum from the young girl. "Never be afraid to make a decision just because you think that I won't like it, Wendy. You've got your own life to live, and if you think that you want to stay, that's fine. Besides," he laughed, "I'm certain that Seilah would love to put you up at their place."

The demoness nodded quickly, causing Wendy to giggle, but her voice was serious when she spoke. "I'm sorry Ranma-nii, but I, I think I want to stay here. I, I might even, well I might even join Fairy Tail."

"Again, Wendy, that's your choice to make. And as to your last point, I'll probably join Fairy Tail myself after Acnologia is dealt with. Despite my misgivings about the Empire, I don't think that the Council will need my particular brand of problem-solving for a long while, and if so, they can call on me as a mage of Fairy Tail rather than Ranger," Ranma replied.

The other three girls smiled at that while Wendy nodded her head happily. Ranma then pulled back, looking at Wendy and Carla. "Why don't you two head into the tent and grab whatever you want to keep? I'll want the tent itself, but everything bar the kitchen area is fair game."

Nodding, Carla and Wendy moved into the bedroom, while behind them, Erza was frowning in sadness. "Are you certain we cannot talk you out of going? I..."

"I will go wherever Ranma goes," Juvia interrupted loyally. "Juvia is somewhat leery of the idea of exploring the continent, but Ranma's ideas of finding a weapon that could perhaps face the black dragon has some merit."

Jenny nodded too, although she looked much more reluctant about the actual journey than Juvia. "Sorry, Erza, you're on your own in this."

"In that case... I am indeed on my own. Unfortunately," Erza sighed.

Ranma winced, holding his hand out to her. He had seen Wendy not wanting to come with them, but Erza too? That **hurt**. "Really? You can't come with us?"

"I have duties and obligations to the guild," Erza reminded Ranma, looking up at him firmly. "The guild needs me now, with our losses and the transition from Makarov to Laxus' leadership. That is not going to be a smooth change, I am afraid. I have to stay here and help that along." Her lips quirked. "Mostly by making certain Laxus isn't too hard on anyone and doesn't play favorites. Especially with you taking Natsu and Gajeel with you."

Put that way, Ranma couldn't really argue. Laxus was a very abrasive sort of person, and although he wasn't as destructive as the older man, he was just as much a loner as Gildarts. It was only a matter of time before his attitude started to cause trouble. *Huh, guess I really should*

have seen this coming, too, then. "I can understand that. I'm not happy about it, but I can understand it."

"I will come with you to the border between Seven and Iceberg. But at that point, I will turn back," Erza sighed. "I'm sorry, Ranma, I really wish I could go with you. As odd as it is, traveling with you as we did into the mountains of Joya was a lot of fun and I would always prefer to be with my lover than without. But my duties come first."

"Heh, I figured that out before you, and I even got involved Erza, just didn't think it would matter right now," Ranma laughed, masking his pain with levity as he had so often in the past. "I'll figure out a way for us to communicate, at least while we're in Seven. No worries. I don't hold it against you or anything like that. That'd be stupid. And hey, at least we'll have the journey to Iceberg together."

True to Ranma's words to Wendy, the group leaving Magnolia was ready within a day of making the decision to leave, supplies gathered, and various other jobs finished. In Ranma's case this meant, as he had reminded himself, picking up those pink and blue pills from Porlyusica, along with quite literally every other medical supply of any sort she had on hand. With Wendy not going with them, they would have to look out for themselves, and Ranma understood all too well that none of his fellow travelers could heal as well as he could.

Other supplies, such as a second tent and so forth, Ranma and Jenny, the richest among the travelers, would purchase on the way, beyond certain spices, which Fiore produced. Beyond the medical supplies, the biggest thing Ranma purchased was a communication lacrima, which would allow him to check in with Wendy and Erza.

The only other thing that Ranma did before leaving was turning his apartment keys over to Erza. Wendy, he suspected would be living with Seilah, but the place was just too nice now that Jenny and Carla had worked on it to be left alone. And he had no desire to sell it off.

The others also picked up their own supplies, mostly clothing and eating utensils for the road, although Ranma was astonished to find that Natsu had brought along a few books for the journey. The pink-haired punk though wouldn't let anyone see their titles, stowing them in a large rucksack the instant Lisanna handed them over.

On the morning of their journey, they gathered at the guildhall, along with their well-wishers. This included Wendy, she and Ranma drew many an 'aww' as they said their farewells. Although Juvia could not keep a smug smile from her face as she took in the scene, thinking, *and he believes he is not father material?*

This was a much more formal goodbye than had ever previously been necessary between the siblings. Ranma was not only going to be gone for a long time, but Wendy had once again been the one who chose to stay behind. It was a sign of her growing independence from Ranma, and while a part of them both was happy to see it, another part of them was

saddened. It was a sign that Wendy was growing up, and a part of her, the part that didn't look around at the women all around her and envy their bodies, was sad because of that.

Ranma was also sad, and a part of him seriously didn't want Wendy to grow up. Regardless, both of them knew this was the right choice. Ranma got down on his knees, noting absently that Wendy had grown again and was now at least a foot taller than he was on his knees. "I'll miss you, kiddo," Ranma said, pulling her into a hug.

Wendy gripped back, fit to break any lesser person's ribs so tight was she squeezing. She knew her big brother could take it and kept squeezing harder. "I'll miss you too! And you better come back all right along with Jenny Juvia, oh, and the boys, I suppose."

"Oy!" Natsu and Gajeel shouted as one while the two siblings exchanged a laugh. Looking up from their own farewells. Anna and Lisanna would travel with them for a time, but that didn't mean Natsu didn't have any other farewells to say. Levy and Gajeel, on the other hand, were looking much more awkward than the rest of them, while nearby Jet and Droy seemed to be crying tears of blood as they glared hatred at Gajeel.

"I promise, Wendy." Ranma took some time just hugging Wendy and giving Carla and Seilah the universal 'watch over her' look. Then he very reluctantly stood up and moved over to Gajeel, grabbing the Iron Dragon Slayer's shoulder. "Come on, Iron boy, let's get going."

Looking around, he whistled sharply, getting the attention of the others who were leaving with him. "Time to go, troops."

Eventually, the group leaving the city was assembled. This included, oddly, all of the Strauss family. Anna and Lisanna would turn back with Erza, but Mira and Elfman would have long since broken off. They were going on their own training journey, heading down into Minstrel. Elfman wanted to fight and Take Over new animals and traveling was a fantastic way of doing that. On the other hand, Mira had a specific destination in mind, although she hadn't told anyone what it was. Regardless, the two of them had gotten Laxus' okay for a trip and would be heading down into Minstrel from Bosco.

After a last round of farewells, the party walked down the street away from the guildhall and out of the city. As they went, Erza's words drifted back to the crowd. "I can't remember, how far can we take the train into Iceberg again?"

"No trains!" was the shout of all three of the Dragon Slayers, causing much laughter from the crowd and even Wendy as they disappeared from sight.

End Chapter

