

I can't draw. That covers everything, really.

Warning! Warning! WAFF inbound. This is a major segue chapter leading up to the battle with Acnologia. There isn't any major combat in it, just tying up a few loose ends and a LOT of WAFF. Oh, and the last lemon of the story.

This was edited by me with Grammarly (except for the lemon, more on that in the afterward) Justlovereadin' and Hiryo. Hiryo helped me with a lot of little polishing things as well as names and attacks, while justlovereadin' pointed out three large mistakes in terms of canon background, and rewriting those portions made the chapter better.

Chapter 41: Even the Ocean Changes

While everyone else had been concentrating on the main source of amusement, that being Ranma and Erza's reunion and the twins introducing Natsu to his children, there was one other, albeit rather one-sided, reunion going on. "CARRLAAAA!!!"

Sighing, Carla dodged to one side but was astonished to see that Happy bounced off the wall in a move reminiscent of what Carla herself would do, forcing her to roll to one side. He surprised her again when he quickly twisted in place, then skidded along the floor towards where she had rolled, forcing her to leap upwards and off one of the barstools, kicking out and moving further away from him. "Stop trying to tackle-hug me, you stupid alley cat! This is one of my better dresses, and I'm not getting it ripped or torn up because of you!"

To her astonishment, Happy bounced up again off of the floor, then landed on a nearby table, Requipping a fishing rod. The string flew in her direction, but Carla sliced it into pieces with her ki claws.

This was just a distraction, and Happy close quickly, zooming forward faster than Carla had ever seen him move. This time, Carla was barely able to figure out where he was coming from, thanks to her limited precognition. She put a chair between the two of them just as one of the guild members who'd been sitting there vacated it to reach across the table to grab at his companion's mug of beer, which had been left behind.

By the time the man sat down, both chair and Happy were gone, one smashed to pieces, the other one rolling through the debris and leaping towards Carla again. "It's been so long, though!"

"And it hasn't been nearly long enough for this to be acceptable," Carla snarled, jumping up and flinging herself through one of the open windows, her long off-white hair flowing behind her like a pennant in the breeze. Happy was on her trail again, and she snarled angrily, hurling

herself up onto the roof. "Of all the things to have changed, why the heck has your persistence seemingly multiplied many times over!"

"Because absence makes the heart grow fonder," Happy answered as he landed on the same roof, racing after her.

That line nearly caused Carla to stumble. "What the heck? Where did that come from?" she exclaimed, shaking her head and then kicking off of the roof to the next roof over, finding herself in the uncomfortable position of once more thanking Ranma in her mind for the training he had given her. *There is no way that Happy, of all people, came up with that line on his own.*

"That's what Ranma's said several times when we were on our way back here about meeting up with Erza again," Happy explained.

Breathing a sigh of exasperation as that minor mystery was solved, Carla turned her mind to more important things, such as shouting, "Stop following me, blast it!" and keeping ahead of Happy. This was what she did for nearly the next hour, by which time her stamina was beginning to give out, but Happy was still going strong behind her.

Realizing with some dismay that Happy had worked on his endurance over the last two years as well as his persistence to a frightening degree, Carla decided to change tactics. She turned on a dime, hopping up and over Happy, which in turn had him plowing into the steeple of the church before boosting herself up and over onto the next roof with her Aero wings. Landing, she twisted around and held up a hand, shouting, "Stop! Fine, if you want to talk, we can talk. Just no hugging or anything!" *The last thing I want to do is to give this idiot the idea that I'm softening on him.*

Pulling himself out with a loud shout of hurray from the Happy-sized indent he'd made into the solid brick of the steeple, Happy moved over to sit across from Carla on the rooftop of the church, not leaping over to land near her, proving that he had at least listened. "What have you been up to? I see you're still spending as much time as you can in your human form, I still don't get that and I've tried it a few times. I'll wager nothing you've done since we left has been nearly as interesting as some of the stuff we've run into in the Blasted Lands. We had forests where up and down were reversed, where things went sideways, and strange crystal fish swam around like they were living in ponds."

Rolling her eyes, Carla actually missed a bit of what Happy had said there, but considered that he still had fish for brains, dismissed it entirely, sitting down herself on the edge of the rooftop where she had landed, tensed and ready to dodge again if Happy tried to cross the intervening distance. "I don't know. I think stopping a plot to take over the kingdom through mental domination of the King and Princess and maybe activating some kind of ancient weapon hidden underneath Crocus was interesting, although I will grant you that happened within six or seven months of you having left. Besides Erza, Anna and Lisanna having children, I suppose the

most interesting thing we've seen is there are two other Dragon Slayers out there, and they have their own Exceed too."

"Wait, what? There's more of us out there?" Happy exclaimed, his eyes wide.

"There are indeed, and both of them are... just as special as you are," Carla said, rolling her eyes, as Happy simply nodded sagely, missing her sarcasm and her dig alike. "The two boys are... young. Which is about as much as I'm going to say about them in their favor. Sting is brash, annoying, and determined to make Lamia scale, the Guild they joined, as powerful as Fairy Tail. Rouge is also annoyingly brash but is also a bit of a chuuni. They keep on coming around trying to challenge Laxus and Wendy to fights, but thankfully, most of the time, they don't even get the chance to because someone else beats them up for us."

The 'someone' in this case was Lucy. She had met the two first, and they seemed to think she was a friend or at least could help them get in good with Wendy.

Carla wasn't about to say to Happy that she felt as if Sting and Rouge, whose looks always caused Carla to scowl in memory of the man they had killed who claimed to be from the future, had crushes on Wendy. Where many of the guild, including Mirajane, the resident bachelorette and matchmaker, thought that it was cute, Carla did not. For one thing, they **both** had crushes on Wendy, and there was no easier way to ruin friendships, in her opinion than for two boys to go after the same girl. Luckily, Wendy was already spoken for, and Seilah had made it very plain to the two youngsters the last time they were around that was, in fact, the case.

But again, Carla wasn't about to say anything like that to Happy. He wouldn't understand or care, so she instead went into detail on the story about how Seilah, herself and Wendy had been called to the palace and Crocus, and had eventually discovered a plot by someone who claimed to be from the future to activate an ancient weapon of some kind. The true nature of what was really buried under Crocus was a state secret, and Carla wasn't about to share it with anyone, least of all Happy.

Happy listened intently, even asking questions a time or two, something that would never have occurred to him when he'd left. He would simply have been interrupting her by asking about what kind of fish she liked or other stuff of that nature or making fun of someone that Carla had mentioned. It seemed as if the two years had matured him to a certain degree.

However, when it became his turn, the first words out of his mouth were, "Well, I mentioned the crystal fish before, but you would not believe the kind of fish you can find in the Blasted Lands. They are so weird! There was one that was like a jellyfish mixed with a fish, and then another that was like a lizard fish in the sky, but it could also dive down into the water and swim, its wings propelling it through the water, too. It tasted like chicken, CHICKEN!"

Only being able to put up with so much talk of fish after ten minutes straight of this, Carla rolled her eyes and stood up. "I think I've humored you enough for one day. There is a

reason why Wendy and I decided not to go along with you lot. Tell me about any of the magic that the others learned. I'm not going to waste more of my time listening to tales of the fish you ate."

"Why do you say it like that? I learned magic too, you know!" Happy exclaimed.

"I saw you were better with your Requip Space earlier, at least. Did Ranma get you to the point where you can use ki claw? That at least I would find impressive," Carla questioned, cocking an off-white eyebrow and crossing her arms under her bust. Which, in her human form, Carla actually had, which was not the least of the reasons why she preferred being in her human form.

"I'm better at my Requip Space, yep, and it's also bigger, too. Ranma didn't really concentrate much on teaching me about ki, but he and Gajeel helped me a lot in figuring out how to do your trick," Happy said with a grin, hopping up to his own 2 feet as well.

"My trick?" Carla parroted, confused.

"Yep! Watch." With that, Happy clamped his hands together and shouted out, "Ninpo Henge: Human Form!"

There was a puff of smoke, which, Carla absently noted, did not occur when she transformed from one form to another. The smoke began to dissipate, and her jaw dropped. Carla's cheeks began to blossom into a reddish color, and her eyes widened. They then tracked down, then up, as Happy spoke, his voice deeper as well. "Oh, drat! I always mess up with the clothing. It's not like I wear any when I'm in my normal body, but still."

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEK!" Carla shrieked before reaching down hastily and ripping out a roof slat, hurling it at Happy. Happy couldn't dodge and it slammed into his forehead, tossing him end over end. The blue-skinned Exceed turned back into his normal body as Carla raced away screaming, trying to ignore her pounding heart and flushed features. *This is a dream. It's got to be! No way can Happy transform into... into **that!***

Behind her, Happy lay dazed on the church roof, staring up at the sky, blinking haphazardly. "What did I do this time?"

OOOOOOO

With Erza easily carrying Ranma over her shoulders, a giggling Enma perched on his unconscious body on top, and Wendy hopping into the air every few yards, hovering in the air to be level with Juvia and Jenny's head, the group made for a very odd sight as they walked through Magnolia. Which wasn't even considering how alike Erza and Irene looked and Irene's choice of clothing. Or the clothing of Jenny and Juvia, which, while covering everything, did not exactly look like normal clothing. More barbarian finery than anything else.

Yet to Irene's amusement, most of the people around them simply ignored them. A few children did point and laugh, while others sighed and shook their heads, but it was very clear that all of Magnolia was used to, in one middle-aged woman's words, "Fairy Tail-style silliness." Indeed, more people shouted in welcome when they saw Jenny and Juvia than commented on Irene, Ranma or the pair's clothes. Juvia wore something that looked almost like a skirt and blouse combo that came from a giant snake, while Jenny's clothing was torn in various places, and her feet were covered in extremely primitive-looking but heavy and durable boots.

"I have to ask," Erza said, looking over at the other two girls and showing her own thoughts had somewhat mirrored her mother's. "Why didn't you stop someplace to get some more clothing? Your clothes look good on you, don't get me wrong. But they also look as if you went to the Stone Age Store and decided to go for the used option."

While Juvia chortled at that, Jenny just smiled, staring at Erza, her eyes nearly hungry. "Well, Mistre-I mean, Erza, we thought about it, but we don't actually have any money. My account at BOI is pretty empty, Ranma wasn't willing to lean on his Ranger status to get us money to shop and Juvia is—"

"Juvia is currently in an annoying battle with the rest of her family over her money," Juvia interjected, looking at her blonde lover in some amusement, shaking her head internally. *Let a little bit slip out there, hmm, darling?* "Juvia's estranged cousins somehow had Juvia declared legally dead while we were in the Blasted Lands, an annoyance which we discovered when we stopped in at a Bank of Ishgar branch in Pergrande. Since finding out about this, Juvia have begun legal action against her, but the wheels of law spin slowly, and despite being provably alive, BOI won't let Juvia access her liquid funds until the legalities are finished. So we decided to return here and lean on you and the money Ranma left with Wendy to go shopping here in Magnolia."

"Ooh, that's good. I've been meaning to um, upgrade my clothing. But none of the others are really good at helping me find out my own style," Wendy admitted. "We tried, but Lisanna and Anna just want me to stay looking like a child. Bisca only knows about her own cowgirl-type style, and, um, Mira's always either pushing me to be goth like her when she was younger or too cutesy. I want to combine the two, but I'm not certain how."

"Agreed, Bisca tried to dress her up like a mini-Bisca... much like I did, I have to admit. I'm good with what looks good on me, but fashion in general? That is not something I've ever gotten into," Erza admitted before nudging Jenny. "Although right now, you and Bisca could probably shop at the same store. Is this going to be your look going forward?"

"HA, no," Jenny snorted before reaching up to her hair reflexively. "Er, maybe the hair? I kind of like it wild these days. The rest, nope."

Wendy led the way up into an apartment complex, then to the same apartment that she and Ranma had lived in for a few seasons. Inside, Irene looked around, her lips quirked in

amusement. The basic layout of the apartment was normal. She'd seen several such, although she had never stayed in a place so small, not back when Irene was Queen of Dragnof or when she was turned back into a human and served Zeref and the Alvarez Empire.

For all its small size, the apartment gave off a very homey feel. Everywhere Irene looked, there were little touches to show that someone truly lived here. Not enough to make it cluttered or to seem too crowded, but just enough to make it feel welcoming. It was also practically spotless.

Added to this was the fact that there were scattered touches all around the main room that spoke of Wendy to Irene, even if she didn't know the young girl all that well just yet. There were several dozen of what Irene would describe as little girl things, stuffed animals here and there, childish games, and some low-level books. However, the one bookshelf, which was set into one of the corners at an angle, also had numerous advanced medical books, the titles of which even Irene, who had spent most of what Irene sometimes could call her new life in the Empire, recognized as being well-known and well-regarded. There are also anatomy books, several magical theory books, and, hidden almost among the multitude of medical books, a few thin math books and geography books.

She found another one, as she followed the others into the apartment, watching as Ranma was laid out on the couch before leaning down and pulling out another thin math book from underneath the couch. Irene held it up to Wendy, who shrugged. "I had to learn math, doesn't mean I ever enjoyed it. I still don't enjoy it now, only Katerina and Edo-Wendy sometimes have me helping them with the bookkeeping over at the café, and I needed to brush up on my math, drat it."

At that point, the complication arose. The door to the terrarium, this small but incredibly densely populated glass garden opened and Seilah appeared, holding a watering can.

When Ranma had left, he had put up what amounted to a permanent tent out on the large balcony along with two braziers, making it into a training area. That idea had gone by the wayside since he had left, with Seilah and Wendy putting up actual glass walls and turning the area into a small garden and a semi-outdoor sitting area. Since it had been lined with long flower beds before, this hadn't been all that difficult, although Seilah had been the one to negotiate with the apartment complex's owner about the glass walls and ceiling. This had proven to be quite difficult, but she had been able to get him to agree.

"Wendy, you are back, good. I was wondering if you had gotten involved in some trouble at Fairy Tail again. If those two young Dragon Slayers came by again and tried to challenge you, then..."

The demoness's words broke up abruptly, and she stood and stared at first the site of Ranma laid out on the couch, then Irene. As part of Tartarus, Seilah had seen numerous reports

on the world's strongest mages, and not just to those within the peninsula of Ishgar. She easily recognized Irene, and seeing her beside Erza caused the demoness's eyes to twitch a little.

For her part, having met two examples before this, Irene's magical senses were well up to the task of telling her precisely what she was looking at. What, not who. "Why is a Demon here? And how are you still alive if Zeref is dead?" She frowned, stepping forward a bit. The idea of a creature created by Zeref's research out of one of his research books being so close to her little grandson did not sit well with her.

Seilah's magical aura flared around her, taking a step to one side out of the doorway, wondering much the same thing of one of the strongest members of the Spriggan. "While Zeref might have created we devils of the book in the past, we were abandoned so that he could move on to his other project, IE, creating the Empire you serve, Scarlet Despair! If you're still obeying that monster even after his banishment, then your story will end here!"

While the human part of Irene had no issues with what Seilah was saying, the draconic aspect of her flared up. It disliked being challenged, and Seilah's tones and actions both constituted a challenge. Pushing through the rather soft, mushy feelings that Irene had been feeling most of the day since meeting Enma, that side of Irene's personality caused her back to stiffen and her own magical aura to start to seep out of her.

In contrast to Seilah's, which blazed around her like a light green light had suddenly begun to shine through her skin, Irene's was an oppressive black and reddish color. It almost oozed out of her skin, warping the world around them, threatening to push the others away.

However, before this confrontation could go any further, Erza stepped in between them, a pair of swords in her hands, one pointed directly between each of their eyes. Irene noted absently that the one pointed at her head was Belserion. The other sword looked to be made of some kind of deep black stone, striations of yellow running through it, which were currently pulsing with energy.

While much of Erza's training since being able to do so once more after giving birth to Enma had been to build up her magical reserves to a degree where she could use Belserion for longer periods, that wasn't the only thing that Erza had been up to while her lovers and their acquaintances had been in the Blasted Lands. She also, to a far greater degree than any of them would have, benefited from being in Fiore, which, with Seven, was the center for enchanting and magical experimentation. In other words, she had upgraded her gear, even if she didn't go around showing her new bling all that often.

"Enough. The two of you are making a mountain out of a molehill. Given what we know of how Zeref created you and the other demons of Tartarus, Seilah, my, my mother's question," Erza stumbled very obviously on the word mother there but continued on, not noticing the impact that word had on Irene, whose aura disappeared quickly back into her body as she stared down the length of Belserion to the back of her daughter's head, "addresses you on that

score, rather than you the individual. I understand why it worried you if you knew of Irene and the Empire, but there will be no violence here.”

Erza turned back to her mother, glaring at her in turn. “Further, there was no need to take up the challenge in Seilah’s voice. Her very presence here among us should have been enough to tell you that she is not like the demons of Tartarus you might’ve heard before the rest of her guild was destroyed.”

“True,” Irene admitted easily, nodding her head to her daughter. How much of that had been the fact that Erza had addressed her as ‘mother’ a moment ago and how much of it had to do with the laughing squeals from Enma behind her, Irene would never tell. “I apologize, Seilah, was it? Yet you must understand; you’re not the first devil that Zeref created I have met. One of them seems to be handling his death well enough, but the other one is not. Without Zeref around, Bloodman’s mind and control of his magic, the magic that makes up his body, is slowly falling apart to the point that he is little more than the beast he appears to be. I understand that almost all of the devils of Tartarus are more human in appearance, but you are also all based on older research than Bloodman or the other demon I know about.”

While Irene had little remaining loyalty to the Empire now that she could think for herself without the overwhelming pressure of Zeref making her think in far more limited terms, that did not mean she was going to out Larcade as a created being. Nor was his identity pertinent to the question right now. “How is it that you are well still sane and, presumably, with your magic intact?”

“That is a good question and a part of my story that constitutes something of a mystery, one I would like to solve but lack the means to do so. I am the only devil still around in the peninsula. All the others of my guild died years ago in their attempt to spark a war between Midi and the rest of the peninsula when the kings were able to call in the Wizard Saints to help Minstrel’s army. I had lost my sole friend among them, who had proven herself false before that on the mission that let me free of any connection to the rest and connected to Ranma and Wendy.” That was an incredibly simplified explanation, but Seilah felt it covered the pertinent points. “So, I never really cared or researched my own existence. I believe that I was always a bit different in comparison to other Demons of the Book, but how and why, I do not know.”

“To every kind of medical scan we can run, Seilah just seems like a normal person, with added bits,” Wendy said, her words firm and analytical despite the fact that her hair was currently being chewed on by Enma. She looked over at her girlfriend, a small blush suffusing her features. “And not just in how strong her back has to be so she, um, isn’t weighed under by the other additions.”

Seilah chortled at that, while Erza nodded her head sagely. While her breasts were not quite as large as Seilah’s, she’d certainly closed the gap quite a bit since her pregnancy. Since then, Erza had been forced to do a lot more in terms of back strengthening exercises to keep from feeling sore occasionally, despite how good a shape she was otherwise, an issue

emphasized further by the fact so many people argued with her about wearing armor around Enma, stating it made her seem to cold.

"Hmmm..." Irene hummed thoughtfully, sitting down at the table for a moment, glancing around the room. Besides the scattered touches of girly bits, the rest of the room was quite well set up. The bookcase set in the corner was a nice touch; the ladybug lamp, which looked as if it had been put together by a regular lamp and a smaller lamp, was quite nice. The sofa, tables and everything worked together. The only thing out of place was a giant, incredibly soft-looking leisure chair, and she wondered idly where it came from before turning her attention back to the matter at hand.

"So long as you retain all your mental faculties and do not have any kind of design to rule the world or harm those I personally care about, I do not care what race you are. It was my surprise and concern that our intelligence might've been wrong about the fate of Tartarus that caused me to overreact a moment ago. How Zeref knew of it when he also said that he had lost interest in you all, I do not know, but we knew that Tartarus was looking into replication, the magical ability to duplicate yourselves, to the point that they might have been able to simply replace any of you that died."

"I know of the research you speak of, and it didn't really get very far. While the head of my guild was able to discover the means to do so, we never were able to gather the resources needed, unless that was why Mard Geer led the rest of my former guild into taking over Midi. When I left the guild, there was nothing of that sort available," Seilah said, the last vestige of wariness leaving her.

She looked over at Wendy then, gesturing over her shoulder with a slight twitch of her head. "I am afraid that the small flower we added recently is not growing very well. Several of the other plants in there seem to think of it as an invasive species and are doing their best to kill it. We might wish to replant it somewhere else."

The term 'grow' caused Irene to blink, and she tapped her lips thoughtfully with a finger, trying to think through the sight of Enma making happy toddler noises about Red, Blue and Mama. "Growing... why do I think as if I have forgotten something?"

"Didn't you mention that there was someone else who'd arrived with you in Magnolia back at the Guild?" Wendy asked, wincing a little as Enma again tugged at her hair. "How many times are you going to have to try my hair before you realize it actually doesn't taste good, Enma? Er..." she turned back to Irene. "I think you said she was a former apprentice or something?"

Irene blinked for a moment. So much had happened on the emotional level since she had first spotted Wendy and Enma in the sky that trying to remember what she had been doing before than was difficult. Then she blinked, clicked her fingers and stood up quickly. "Brandish. Yes, I had forgotten her." *Something I will never say to her face, good grief, Enma's presence is*

sapping my ability to think. “Yes, she has her own reasons to be interested in someone from your guild, or rather, getting answers from a young woman in your guild about her family.”

“What do you mean?” Erza asked, suddenly leery. What kind of connection could someone in Fairy Tail have with someone from the Alvarez Empire? “Who is this Brandish, and who is she interested in?”

“She is interested in the one called Lucy Heartfilia. The details are not mine to share, but certain circumstances point to Lucy’s family possibly being involved in assassinating Brandish’s mother when she was young, leaving Brandish to be taken in by the Empire’s orphanages. Which is not an easy life, I assure you.” Irene made her way towards the door. “Given all the revelations I have run into today, I hope she hasn’t done anything too precipitous to get answers on that score.”

Her eyes narrowing, Erza followed her. “She had better not, or this whole attempt to get us to agree to help you and your empire is going to die stillborn. We in Fairy Tail do not take kindly to those who attack our family.”

“Hoh? That is a very odd definition of family you have there, my dear, yet I suppose where there is love, there is a way,” Irene quipped, while Jenny, who had also sat down, stood up and hurried after Erza.

The blonde woman had barely taken her eyes off of Erza since they’d met up in the Guild, and Juvia, staring after her blonde lover, had to shake her head. While Juvia had grown into being bisexual thanks to being attracted to Ranma first and then understanding that to be with Ranma, she had to acknowledge the fact that he was with other women, Jenny had been into women before they got together. *Her reaction to Erza’s *ahem* more mature form has been quite amusing.*

That, and I know that Jenny has developed something of a submissive kink. She enjoys bondage, whereas I do not. What had originally been a way to get Erza to agree to let Jenny and Juvia join her, and Ranma’s relationship had gradually changed over the past few years when the three of them were together. But while Ranma could tie Jenny or Juvia up, he wasn’t really a natural dom when it came to his attitude. He just didn’t see the point. So, that aspect of Jenny’s sexual personality had not been fed in the past two years. Rather, it had been teased and denied.

This left Juvia with Wendy, the unconscious Ranma, Enma and Seilah in the apartment. Seilah shook her head and moved into the kitchen, where she refilled the ladle, before giving Wendy a kiss on the forehead before heading back out into the terrarium. This left only three, including the one giggling toddler.

“He is quite a happy little child, isn’t he?” Juvia said, wagging a finger that suddenly became a spout of water that gently splashed Enma in the face, causing his eyes to cross, then

for him to laugh again. "Juvia has not been around many children, especially so young, but Juvia does not think it is normal for them to laugh and grin when there is so much tension in the air as earlier."

"I don't think Enma understands what fear is, let alone with that there is anything that can actually bother him. He's also extremely durable for a little boy," Wendy said, smiling as she watched Juvia begin to play with Enma. "He's got so much energy and so much dexterity for one so young it's insane. Porlyusica gives him his checkups, you know, and several times, she's muttered about that kind of thing."

In point of fact, the healers, both Wendy and her master, knew that Enma was insanely advanced for a child his age, physically more than mentally. He had the energy and coordination of a five-year-old, while his mind was only a bit more advanced than those of Lisa and Anna's daughters were. Yet even odder than that was that Enma literally had no fear, which Wendy said aloud now.

"He doesn't care about loud noises, heat, or about the tension in the air or anything like that, whereas normal babies are supposed to be extremely sensitive to such. Admittedly, Nate and Natalie are somewhat like that, but Enma takes it to another level. Where they just watch and babble to one another, I've seen Enma crawl towards fights in the Guild, ignoring people who accidentally kick him or almost step on him. He even moves to watch or just gets involved in scheduled spars so often it's not even funny. He seems drawn to violence and just likes watching it, which is part of why I've watched him so often."

"That aspect of him certainly comes from his father," Juvia laughed quietly. "And Juvia remembers you saying at one point that he always tried to taste some of Erza's weapons in her room."

"OH! Do not get me started! Enma's a joy to take care of a lot of the time. Erza as a mother, not so much," Wendy opined, shaking her head. "Lexus and Grandfather Makarov had **so much trouble** just getting Erza to agree that she needed to take time off while she was pregnant and for a few months after and then there's her room with how she refused to make it baby-friendly and so many other things."

"That sounds rough. Yet it also seems that the support of the Guild has come through as well as her family, though, in the form of you, Lisa and Anna, who, judging by what we saw the Guild, took to motherhood like ducks to water," Juvia answered with another chuckle.

Wendy blushed a bit at the sincere admiration in Juvia's voice. "Um, well, I er, I like kids and babies, I guess. Um, and like I said, Enma's a great little boy to take care of. Keep him fed, and he's happy just, um, exploring, although you have to watch him all the time like I said. What about you? You did say something about wanting children."

Juvia smiled beatifically, looking back at Enma, who was trying to stand up on the table, falling, rolling and laughing currently. "We will have to see, won't we? After all, Ranma and Juvia have yet to agree to have children." It was bringing up the idea of her and Jenny also having children, which had been the needle to break the camel's back and caused Ranma to fall unconscious. "And now is certainly not the time to broach the subject with what Irene has told us about why she is here and the threat Acnologia poses. Still, eventually? Yes. Juvia would very much like to become a mother."

"Well, I, for one, think you'll be good at it too," Wendy said, smiling. Of all the girls involved with her big brother, Juvia was the most nurturing.

Jenny could be the fun aunt or big sister. Erza can be the voice of authority on big issues. But I know my big brother enough that there needs to be someone who just, well, understands babies and toddlers aren't little versions of adults. Ranma-nii raised me well enough, but I was already past the whole toilet training and other baby-type things. Once Enma and whoever else reaches seven or so, Ranma will be a great dad, even on his own. Before that, well, from experience, Erza's not going to be much help, and I just can't see Jenny being good at things like getting up at night to breastfeed, changing diapers, and just watching over a baby, Wendy reflected, trying hard not to be mean about how she thought about Erza and Jenny. But she had seen Enma try to bite Erza's swords far too often to ignore it.

"Well, that's nice to hear. And, I think you're a perfect example of the fact that Ranma will be a good father, even if Ranma does not think he will be, Wendy. But speaking of Juvia's beloved, do you think we should wake him up?" Juvia asked, turning to look over to where Ranma lay out on the sofa.

"Nope," Wendy chirped, hopping to her feet and leaving Enma on the table with Juvia for a moment. "Ranma should know better than to just fall asleep like that around other people. I think he needs to be punished, both for that and for the whole, well, Enma being here in general."

Juvia raised an eyebrow at that but did not argue. She watched as Wendy pulled out a small tin of what looked like bright yellow paint, the same color that had been painted on some of the crowning around the room. *At least, Juvia thinks that's the term for those strips up top that stick out from the wall.*

With a grin, Wendy brought the small tin of paint back, setting it in Enma's line of sight. The toddler cooed at it, moving over rapidly. "Yellow, yellow!"

"Yep. Now, Enma, what say you take that yellow and make the sleeping one the same color," Wendy said, chortling in as evil a manner as possible. Which honestly wasn't much, but it was the thought that counted.

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Brandish blushed, a state of affairs that had continued off and on since she, Cana, and Lucy had left the pair's apartment. She resolutely did not look in the direction of Cana, knowing that the Cards Magic user would be snickering at her, instead concentrating on Lucy, who was happily chattering to one side. "You'll love it here, I trust me. There's **so much** going on with Fairy Tail all the time that you never get bored, and some of the food stalls around here are to die for! Do you remember that time your mother and mine tried to make apple tarts? Well, there's a place here that sells spiced apple tarts that are even better than those! And don't get me started on the seafood around here. So much better than whatever the cooks could do back in the mansion when we were younger."

Behind them, Capricorn walked, dressed in his normal butler's outfit, hands clasped behind him as he moved. There was a smile on his goat-like face, the Celestial Spirit being very happy about how this day had gone.

Yet Brandish could barely concentrate on Lucy's words or the presence of the man who had given her the answers she had long sought, even if those answers had not been anything like what she had expected. No, she was embarrassed on so many levels it wasn't even funny, and every time Cana smirked at her, the totality of it, even now, threatened to make her brain shut down from overheating.

It had literally been a cavalcade of errors for Brandish since leaving Irene. She'd found where Lucy was living easily, simply asking around at various vendors. Like the rest of the Guild, Lucy was extremely popular among the regular residents of Magnolia.

At the same time Irene had introduced herself to Erza by attempting to destroy Belserion, Jenny found herself wandering along the canal that moved through a portion of Magnolia, watching the small boats go slowly on their way along it. Brandish had always enjoyed watching moving water like that.

After a few moments, Brandish smiled and, feeling an urge to be a bit childish, hopped up onto the top of the safety wall alongside the canal. There, she balanced, walking and smiling faintly to herself as she did.

"Watch out, young lady, you'll fall if you keep doing that," one of the boatmen warned. "It's always just a matter of time," his tone was that of a man who knew exactly what he was talking about.

"Thank you for the concern, but I can handle it," Brandish replied with an airy wave. Right before the universe decided that, no, today was the day she could not.

A motion out of the corner of her eye caused Brandish to twist around just as a young boy's voice reached her, "Dang it, Duncan, control your strength, why don't you? Look out, old lady!"

It was a tossup as to which surprised Brandish more, someone calling her an old lady, or the kickball that slammed into her face just as she was about to take a step. Unbalanced and completely taken by surprise, Brandish could do nothing but cartwheel her arms wildly as she fell off of the safety wall and into the canal.

The watching boatman shook his head, sighing faintly as he began to pull in her direction. "I told you. Although, that was a bit more dramatic than I expected."

Pushing her wet hair out of her eyes, Brandish glared at the man, even as one of his partners reached down into the water, giving her a hand up onto the boat, while one of the other boatmen shifted to the other side of the craft to balance it. Once Brandish was aboard the ship, the man reached down and plucked the ball out of the water as well.

Looking in the direction of the safety wall, Brandish saw several young boys, twelve maybe younger, she wasn't all that good with recognizing the age of children, looking down at her in amusement. One was blushing a bit but still snickering, while the other scoffed, "You should have ducked!"

A third boy piped up then, throwing a fist into the air. "Yeah, you're so slow! Give us our ball back!"

"Little brats," Brandish growled, her fingers twitching with the need to shrink the trio and then use them as dolls for a little while. *See how quick they would be to call me names if I dressed them up as girls and forced them to put on tea parties or something.*

It had to be said that Brandish wasn't actually all that good at using her powers to punish in ways that didn't involve pain. Even as angry as she was now, the idea of causing little boys pain wasn't something that she would go through with, which left her needing to lean on her imagination.

"Bah, that little brat Duncan's always causing trouble. He's a bit of a bully, although I've heard that Natsu's back in town. He or Happy will sort that little crowd out quickly enough, and without, you know, involving actual adults," one of the men aboard the ship said, causing the others to laugh and Brandish to look at them a little quizzically, not getting the inside joke. She then blinked as another man held out a towel to her. With a nod, she wrapped it around herself, more to hide her body than anything else, as the water had made her clothing cling to Brandish like a second skin than because she was actually drying off.

The next moment, the same man who had fished out the ball held out to her. "What do you think young miss, can you bean one of them?"

Smirking lightly, Brandish took it but did not throw it. "No, but I've got a better idea."

Seconds later, the ship pulled into a small dock where a small stairwell led up to the main road. There, Brandish found the young boys waiting for her there, holding out their arms expectantly. She held up the ball, then shrunk it, the ball seemingly disappearing. "Little boys who don't take care of where their toys go lose them," she intoned with some finality.

"Ah, you meanie! Bring it back!" one of them stammered, while the one who had been blushing at her earlier just stared. The one in the center scowled angrily, taking a step forward as if he would threaten her.

"On the other hand, perhaps a bit of pain and embarrassment will teach you more." Brandish flicked her hand upward, and suddenly, the ball was back, then growing and growing, growing until it was around the size of an adult human, before it fell, shrinking again to the same small ball that had hit her moments before.

"With that in mind, I think I feel like bowling for boys. You'd better run..." She intoned with a hint of menace, growing the ball just a little bit more before holding it behind her as if she was indeed going to go bowling with it, releasing it with force.

The one who had been staring at her with a blush seemed also to be a bit more intelligent as well. He immediately turned and ran while the other two paused, looked at one another, then turned and fled. The pair smacked into one another in their haste, then into one of the men from the boat, before she tossed the ball their way, enlarging it again as it left her hand to the point where it filled the street.

"AGGHHH!!!" the one she supposed was Duncan screamed right before the ball smacked into him, rolling him over before doing the same to his companion.

A second later, the ball smacked the wall of a building at the end of the street, where she shrank it back to its normal size. Once Brandish had cast a shrink or growth spell on something, she could cast either again as long as it was within her sight. The ball was soon the original size as the boys groaned and tried to get to their feet. *That will teach those brats to call me old! Honestly!*

"Ahh, I feel much better now. Thank you for your help, I will be going now." Brandish nodded her head to the three men who stared at her askance. She then moved on, deciding to simply get to Lucy's apartment quickly, a little chilled from the cold of the water, which had hit her quite hard despite the fact that it was a nice semi-warm summer day. As she went, Brandish enlarged the towel to the point it looked like a fuzzy cloak, but it still didn't help with her cold, wet clothing all that much.

Despite her discomfort, Brandish soon found the house where Lucy was supposed to live. It looked like an altogether nice place, although expensive looking and Brandish wondered darkly if Lucy had bought it with her family's money. *The Heartfilia girl is still getting a stipend*

from her family's company, is she not, even with her father dead? I seem to remember something about that score.

This was false, but Brandish had no way of knowing that. The report on Jude being dead though was accurate, as he had passed away due to heart failure a year before Acnologia had been spotted in the Empire.

Putting that thought aside, Brandish managed to knock on the door, only to pause as she saw a window open and warm steam wafting out. *Is she preparing a bath, or is she in the bath already?*

Shivering a little as the dampness from her clothing got to her again, Brandish moved in that direction, growing herself to be three times her normal height to reach up to the windowpane. When Brandish pulled herself upwards, shrinking herself at the same time before she fell into the room, landing lightly on her tiny feet as she fell onto a small shelf below the window. When she did, she blushed from head to toe. The towel, now the size of a handkerchief to match Brandish's current size, fluttered away as she stared.

Because Lucy was not alone in the tub. Cana was there as well. Brandish recognized both of them from reports about Fairy Tail. However, those reports concentrated on their magical abilities and past actions. They didn't touch on the more personal side of things, like who was dating whom. So, Brandish could be excused for not knowing that the two women were dating.

Currently, the pair of lovers were making out intensely. Their bodies, wet and gleaming, ground against one another, their breasts pressing into one another as moans and muffled groans filled the room. Cana's breasts were around the same size as Brandish's, while Lucy's were somewhat bigger. Their legs were invisible from this angle in the water around the pair as they moved.

The sight of nipples appearing as Cana moved away from Lucy caused Brandish to lose control of her magic for a moment as she blushed. Now her real size, the shelf Brandish had landed on couldn't handle her weight, and with a wrench and a "Kya!" Brandish found herself falling to the ground by the free-standing tub.

Hearing this, Cana pulled back from the kiss, and Lucy opened her eyes from where she had been moving down Cana's throat to where she could latch onto one of her nipples, only to look past her lover as Cana lurched to the side of the tub. "What the hell?! Who are you!?"

Cana was a veteran of Fairy Tail and never went anywhere, even a bathroom, without her cards. Yet, while she wasn't about to waste time shouting, she had seen several times before she and Lucy got together and after that several members of the guild enjoyed climbing into Lucy's apartment rather than taking the door.

So her first instinct was not to try to use a lethal card, before Brandish could say anything, several Glue Cards were flying her way. "Alright, you, you per..vert..."

Cana's voice trailed off as she realized she'd just thrown her cards at a soaked-looking green-haired girl she had never seen before rather than Makarov or one of the others looking to bother Lucy.

Before the cards could cross the bare few feet between the tub and where she had landed, Brandish snapped her fingers, catching the two cards in a magical field and shrinking them down to the point where they could no longer fly, instead simply falling wobbling through the air.

Before she could do more than stand up as Lucy and Cana tried to scramble out of the tub only to get it one another's way, Capricorn burst through the door. Since he was better at cleaning than Virgo, he was there in the apartment that day while Virgo was off volunteering at a maid café elsewhere in town. It was something that Virgo did routinely, and before this, the switch had never caused any issues. Now, though, he burst in, shouting, "Miss Lucy, are those two young reprobates who are always chasing after Wendy back again!? I swear I will..."

Although a Celestial Spirit, Capricorn, like Leo and Taurus, was a man still. Taking in the view of his Mistress and her lover, he blushed and turned away before blinking and then turning back as he stared at the cause of the noise he'd heard. "Wait, you look like Miss G—AHH!"

Lucy gasped as Brandish glared at the man, shrinking him down to the size of a football and then punting him out the door. "Enough of that!"

Brandish then grabbed Cana's arm, where she was about to reach for more cards, shrinking her to around half her normal size, before doing the same to Lucy with a glare and a slap on her shoulder. "I am wet, annoyed, and have numerous questions, the tone of which has just changed, considering that you own the Gate of the Goat Key. Any thought of giving you the benefit of the doubt is waning dramatically."

She said all this in as harsh a tone as she could manage, but Cana noticed the flush still suffusing the green-haired girl's face and the way her eyes had tracked away from the pair of lovers. So, she interrupted Brandish's threats, putting her arm around Lucy and pulling her into a sideways hug. "Hey now, if you're some kind of estranged lover or her parents promised to marry you to Lucy or something, I'm going to disabuse you of any idea of getting with my girl now! Lucy's mine, and I don't share, even with someone as cute as you, babe."

"Wh... That's not, that's not, I..." Cana had read the green-haired girl's current embarrassment quite well, and now the wizard who had enough magical power to crush an army floundered, blushed and turned away. "That is not what I'm here for! I'm here to demand answers from Lucy Heartfilia, as the only surviving member of that family. Whether or not you remain surviving is in question," she growled, trying to regain her composure.

A second later, Brandish ruined this attempt by sneezing and looking sheepish, giving the two girls an impression of a puppy down on its luck rather than a dangerous mage despite the still-shrunk Capricorn. Lucy and Cana exchanged a glance, then Cana sighed, pulling herself upwards out of the bed bath, stepping over it, causing Brandish to stare for a moment, noting several bite marks on Cana's chest and stomach area. "Why don't Lucy and I get dressed? You get warm, and we can all settle down a bit and talk, okay?"

Nodding her head with some reluctance as she feared Lucy would run away, Brandish agreed and Lucy followed her lover out of the bathtub, grumbling all the while. "I mean, I have a front door, dammit! Why don't people use them! I thought this stuff had stopped when Natsu and Gray... but no, those two idiotic Dragon Slayer brats who sometimes come around to bother Wendy always climb through my window to demand I help them find her just because I was the one who met them first!"

She then paused, cocking her head thoughtfully to one side as she looked back at Brandish, really looking at her for the first time, without the shock of her, you know, being in Lucy's bathroom getting the way. "You, you do look a little familiar... do I know you or, or maybe your mother? I, I remember seeing a painting of a green-haired woman standing beside my mother while she was sitting in a gazebo."

Brandish nodded, then sneezed again, causing Lucy to recoil a bit. "Well, anyway, um, get warm, and I'll have your clothing ready for you when you come out. Aries is really good at drying out clothes and things like that."

This had not at all been the introduction that Brandish had hoped for, and she tried to retain her anger after having a quite nice bath, tried to retain her composure as she remembered what had been happening in that quite nice bath moments before, as she rejoined the other two women in the main room, where Capricorn sat on the table, still shrunken. While he could have perhaps broken her spell by returning to the spirit world, it seemed as if he had no desire to do so, looking at Brandish thoughtfully, an expression of regret on his tiny face that made Brandish grit her teeth.

"I believe that before anything else is said between any of you, I should make introductions," Capricorn began.

"So I was right?" Lucy exclaimed. "She's related to that woman in the pictures and paintings with my mom. Not just one either, I don't think. I seem to remember asking the maids about her a few times. She was my mother's... er, either her best friend or chambermaid? I remember Spetto said she was a really good cook too. Um, something G, I think?" Lucy frowned. "I really wish my long-term memory was better."

"My mother was named Grammi and was Layla Heartfilia's chief chambermaid and lifelong companion," Brandish intoned, glaring at the other woman. "While you were not born yet, my mother left your mother's service to go to the empire to live with distant relatives. I

thought they were friends too until your mother died, and one of her other servants was sent to kill her!”

Lucy flinched at that, her eyes widening in outrage, but before she could say anything or Cana come to her defense, Capricorn held up a hand, speaking up before anyone else could. “That is one of the many things we will have to talk about. Before more heated words are exchanged, however, let me tell the tale from my perspective please. After all, it was Zoldeo, the person who was given my key by your mother, that assaulted your mother, Brandish. I will state now, however, that neither Layla nor Jude had anything to do with that decision.”

The mention of her father’s name caused Lucy to twitch again, this time out of sadness rather than anger, almost shrinking in on herself. While she and her father had a series of falling outs, each one worse than the last culminating in her cutting off all contact with him, Lucy had been stunned and immensely sad when Jude had died of a heart attack a little over a few months after the Fairy Tail Baby Boom, as it was called in the papers at the time. When she had learned of it weeks after his death, Lucy had cried for a whole night before racing back home to take part in the funeral, which had itself been depressing.

“Before that, could you at least grow him to at least half size?” Cana asked while taking her girlfriend’s hand in hers, giving her some comfort even as she tried to lighten the mood. “I just can’t take him seriously like this.”

What followed had been a story utterly unlike any of Brandish’s preconceived notions. According to Capricorn, Grammi had indeed been one of Layla’s closest friends despite technically being a servant. Indeed, the pair had known each other before Layla had married Jude. Eventually, according to Capricorn, Layla retired from being a mage due to ill health and Lucy’s birth, and to take away any temptation, had given her three Golden keys to her closest companions, Zoldeo, Grammi and a servant who stayed at the mansion, Spetto, the only one of the three Lucy knew.

Capricorn’s key had been given to Zoldeo, much to the spirit’s later horror. Grammi had been given the key to Aquarius. However, unknown to Zoldeo, she had given the key back when she had decided to return to the Empire. A move that Layla had actually helped with through the Heartfilia Trading Company.

“I do not know why, but Zoldeo eventually grew obsessed with Layla-sama. When she died, he created this story in his mind that if she had her keys with her, specifically Aquarius, she would not have died. As if he thought that Jude-san had murdered her instead of Layla-sama simply eventually succumbing to her weak health, not knowing she did indeed have all her keys at the time,” Capricorn explained, sighing. “He hunted your mother down and, well, I am certain you know the rest. Thankfully, that was before he used the Forbidden Human Subordination Magic on me, although he had used me to get to the Empire several times. When Zoldeo took over my body, I could see his mind, his memories. That one, his memory of stabbing your

mother, is one of the most horrifying to me personally, given how I knew your mother so well as Layla-sama's best friend."

The butler-like servant bowed so much that his head nearly smacked into the coffee table. "I cannot tell you how sorry I am about not being able to stop Zoldeo from attacking your mother like that. If he had summoned me to do the deed, I could have refused or turned on him but he did not."

Grimacing as the memory of her mother dying out due to being stabbed in the gut went through her mind again, Brandish set her cup aside, crossing her arms over her chest as she glared at Capricorn and then Lucy. "This is awfully convenient! Lucy had nothing to do whatsoever with anything that happened to my mother and me, and her mother was also completely innocent of the fact her favored servant just suddenly took it into his head to kill my mother, who had left her service? Yes, awfully convenient. And coming from a Celestial Spirit known for his loyalty to his master."

"The only other spirit I have from my mother who I know was around my mother a lot is Aquarius. I mean, Cancer was too, but not nearly as often since, well, he and my mother didn't get along since they could never agree on her hairstyle. You could question Aquarius about it," Lucy said honestly. "You never told me any of this!" she said, glaring at the spirit.

"You did not really need to know," Capricorn answered with a shrug. "You have made a life for yourself in Fairy Tail and for yourself with Cana in this house that has nothing to do with the past or your family. I had no desire to bring back bad memories of Layla-sama or bring up things that, to my knowledge, no longer mattered."

Further, I have no wish to taint your mother's memory in your eyes, Capricorn added mentally. The real reasons behind Layla's ill health was something he and the other spirits had all agreed needed to stay hidden. There was no need for Lucy or her friends to know how much impact Zeref had in their lives well before they were born.

"Call Aquarius," Brandish nearly ordered, scowling, before her eyes went far away, memories of when she and her mother lived in the Heartfilia mansion coming to her now rather than her mother's horrible last moments. "Two sources are better than one, and well, Aquarius was the key that was given to my mother, which she left behind. I remember her polishing it every day and, at one point, talking to the key as if the spirit connected to it could hear her. I also seem to remember my mother saying Aquarius was your mother's more constant companion. If she agrees, then I will... I will let go of this grudge I have born towards your family, Lucy."

That thought was far easier now than it would have ever been back when Zeref was alive, the pressure of his will pushing down on Brandish's thoughts and ability to change course like that. But even now, it was still hard to realize that all of her preconceived notions about who was behind her mother's death, Brandish's own horrible early experiences in the Empire

before her magical potential became known, were simply wrong. It had not been the act of a vindictive family who had betrayed Brandish's mother but of a single person who had been driven to dark magic in his grief.

"All right, I'll summon Aquarius. Just don't blame me if her first reaction is to try and wash us all away," Lucy said, with Capricorn shifting to the side and disappearing for a moment back to the spirit world. While Lucy could maintain three spirits at once relatively easily these days after years of practicing and growing her magical core, there was no need to do so right now.

Standing up, Lucy led the way back to the bathroom. The sight of the still-full, steaming tub caused Brandish to blush as she remembered the sight she had seen when she came through the window. Cana saw this and, smirking a bit, wrapped her arms around Lucy's waist, leaning in to press her chest into Lucy's back.

"Gah, Cana, what?!" Lucy yelped. *We've been together for more than two years, and Cana's displays of affection still surprise me!*

"What?" Not even Brandish, who had known Cana for barely a few hours by this point, was fooled by Cana's mock-innocent tone. "I'm just giving you some... support."

Rolling her eyes and wondering what her girlfriend was really up to, Lucy turned back to the tub, thrusting the golden key in her hand into the water and twisting it to one side as if opening an invisible doorway. "Open, Gate of the Water-Bearer! Aquarius!"

A second later, Aquarius materialized, her long mermaid body laid out on the ground from the waist down as she glared all around them. "You stupid little girl! I told you not to contact me. I am on a fucking vacation with my boyfriend! Why in the hell are you calling me like this, especially in a tub you've no doubt christened with your brunette whore!?"

Now, let it be said, Aquarius had nothing against lesbian couples, or, indeed, her mistress finding love. She just hated Cana. The two of them had always butted heads, and this was no exception, with Cana actually pushing Lucy to one side to go forehead to forehead with Aquarius. "What was that, you up-jumped fish!? I wager your boyfriend's paid a hell of a lot more to be with you over time than I've ever scammed off anyone, let alone by using my body!"

"Hah, just because you don't know the first rule of romance, it's always the man who pays for it, is no reason to let your jealousy out!" Aquarius retorted. "And as for your body, of course no one would pay for it, when you show off so much for free."

"Jealous of what? The fact you've got a boy wrapped around your finger because there's no other fish in the sea?"

"You take that back!" Aquarius roared, now thoroughly pissed off and more than willing to shift the argument to outright violence.

Before Aquarius could do more than lift her urn, she found it shrinking and falling out between her fingers, landing in Brandish's outstretched hand. A second later, it grew to the size of a small cup as Brandish glared at the spirit. "As amusing as it would be to see you rebel against your mistress and drown her and her paramour, I am not in the mood."

Aquarius blinked, taking in the other girl in the room for the first time, then stared leaning forward to get a closer look. "Little Brandish? What the heck? Are we in the Empire? No, wait, this is Lucy's apartment, what is..."

"I will ask the questions here!" Brandish growled. "Capricorn has given me his version of events. Now I must know if yours match. If they are the truth."

It turned out that they had been. Aquarius agreed with everything Capricorn told them, not giving them any new information, even though she could have. Of all the spirits involved in Layla's final act as a Celestial Spirit Mage, the opening of the Eclipse Gate on this side to let the Dragon Slayers through to the present day, Aquarius was the only one who remembered.

That was the way she wanted things to stay. Like Capricorn, Aquarius felt it wouldn't do her current mistress any good to know that Layla had been involved with a generation-spanning deal with the devil to rid the world of Acnologia. Better to let Lucy remember her mother as she did now, without her image of it tainted by that knowledge, and the fact it had led to her death. Layla's life force had been needed to help power the opening of the Eclipse Gate in this time period, and it had been that which had slowly killed Layla. Yet knowing that, and how little he had been able to do to stop it had effected Jude, was again something Lucy didn't need to know.

Now, without her anger to help her, Brandish simply could not forget what she had seen before questioning the Celestial Spirits. Especially with Cana teasing her every few seconds with how close she walked beside Lucy.

Thankfully, when they entered the guild, Irene's voice helped to cut through her continued embarrassment. "Ah, there you are, Brandish. And unless the image I saw of her in the Fairy Tail dossier is off, that is Lucy beside you, whole and unharmed. Good."

"Once more, reminding people that you read about them in files written by spies is not a good thing, Mother," Erza muttered.

"Mother? What?" Cana asked, gaping between the two redheads.

"Ah, that is a tale. If you tell us what you three were up to, Irene and I will tell you about our, our reunion," Erza requested, glancing over at Irene, pleased as well that no violence had occurred between Brandish and Lucy.

“Deal!” Cana laughed as she began, despite the best efforts of Brandish to hush her without using her magic.

The abridged version of Brandish’s tale had Irene snorting at her younger companion, shaking her head with a laugh. “Well, that will teach you not to go snooping. Going through the front door is always preferable.”

“I know, right?! It’s so useful,” Lucy deadpanned, making a show of her face twitching, causing Cana and several other members of Fairy Tail to laugh.

Then Irene smirked, pointing to one of the corners of the Guild, where Mira was standing on one of the bars. “However, while you might still feel embarrassed and annoyed at how things went, Brandish, I know what can cheer you up. A cat. Look.”

Brandish obliged by turning her head, and then her eyes turned into hearts as she hopped to her feet, rushing over to Happy. “He’s so blue and cute!” she said, hopping to her feet and racing through the crowd, smacking several of the guild’s mages out of her way.

Happy turned away from where he had been questioning Mira on where Carla might have gone after running off earlier as something tapped his back, and he grew, and grew almost to the size where his head was brushing the ceiling. “What the heck? Why did you all shrink? Wait, did I grow big. What the heck happened? I--”

Brandish’s magic froze him to the point where he couldn’t speak any longer, and she sighed and leaned against his chest, her arms hugging him as much of Happy’s large form as she could reach. “Ah, Bliss.”

Watching this, Makarov shook his head, announcing his presence and making Irene twitch a bit as he was perched on the chair that she was sitting in. “There is one of the strongest mages in the world, ladies and gentlemen. And here I thought she was too scary and sarcastic to be cute.”

“Does that mean you won’t try to peek at her again? I remember you and that perverted king laughingly joking about doing that at some point,” Irene said, her tone deadpan but hiding a certain amount of danger in her voice. It hadn’t mattered to her at the time as Irene had simply taken it as a tension-relieving joke. But now, after hearing more about Makarov’s actions, especially since he had stepped down from his position as Guildmaster, she had to wonder.

Where other men might’ve been a little appalled at having had such a conversation overheard, Makarov simply shrugged. “Eh, that was more Toma’s preference than mine at the time. The fact that she can get so mushy and cute makes her even hotter in my eyes, really.”

Erza rolled her eyes as Laxus came over and slapped his grandfather upside the head. "Ignore the moron, he's so senile he can no longer control his impulses or his mouth. Both get him into trouble at least once a week," he deadpanned.

Irene chuckled at that but found her attention drawn back to her daughter as Erza coughed. "Ahem, speaking about impulses and desires, I wonder if I could prevail upon you to do something for me tonight, Mother. Seilah and Wendy might need some help with Enma, and..."

"Ah, say no more! Brandish might think the little Exceed is cute. Enma's far cuter to me. I'll happily help watch over him. Although why do you want me to? Surely you don't think..." She blinked as Erza began to blush, and Irene shook her head resolutely. "You know what, I don't want to be one of those parents who knows everything about what their daughters are up to, particularly with their husbands. You do you, dear."

"I rather think that she's looking for someone else to do her tonight," Laxus said before ducking a hurled sword and roaring at Erza, "You want to go!"

"Heck, yes!" Natsu shouted, leaping up from where he had been sitting and talking to Anna and Lisa as he had since entering the Guild earlier that day. Ignoring their pouts, Nate and Natalie's faces shifting into the typical babe pre-cry face, he charged towards Laxus. "Awesome, I've been wanting to show you all what we learned in the Blasted Lands since we arRRGH!!"

That was as far as he got before Gajeel preemptively jumped on the back of his head, riding Natsu's head down into the ground where he smashed it, then leaped forward himself towards Laxus, his skin turning into a dark, almost brownish metal. "Get some!"

As the babies and their mothers watched on, and Irene calmly began to sip at a bottle of wine, the daily brawl began, and Makarov sighed. "Damn it, I wish I could say this was abnormal, but with Natsu and the rest back, we really have returned to form."

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Ranma was woken up by something smacking his face. This was highly unusual, as normally, his sleep-fu would allow him to dodge anything that was actually attempting to attack him deliberately or had anything like violent intent towards him. The fact whatever was hitting him also felt somewhat wet against his skin made Ranma wonder if he had fallen asleep outside for some reason. Weird, semi-solid raindrops would be small change in comparison to a lot of the things he'd seen in the Blasted Lands, after all. *But no... we're not in the Blasted Lands any longer, right?*

That mental reminder was strengthened by the feel of a soft cushion or something underneath him. *So where the heck am I? And, what am I doing asleep anyway? The last thing I remember... er, I think I walked into the Guild, saw Erza, and...*

At that point, it all came flooding back to them, and Ranma's eyes snapped open, only to find himself looking into the disturbingly familiar blue eyes of a toddler perched on his upper chest. Who was currently slapping Ranma's face while making laughing noises. "Ba, Ba, Yellow, yellow!"

Ranma blinked, then blinked again, and hesitantly raised a finger, poking the little guy in the cheek. The little guy laughed, slapping his finger away, and Ranma noted absently, smearing what looked like yellow paint all over his finger as he did. "Yep, this is real."

"Yep!" Wendy giggled from one side as Juvia moved over to lean down into Ranma's field of vision, giving him a small, chaste kiss on the lips. The brush of her hair against his face caused Enma to giggle, and he tried to grab at it, but Juvia swiftly shifted into water. Forming into a puddle, she then flowed down and away from the sofa shifting along the floor for a second as Wendy continued. "This is real."

Ranma slowly nodded, the kiss having jumpstarted his brain again, and he reached up with both hands this time, poking at Enma from either side. Enma seemed confused as to what to do for a second before he began to bat Ranma's fingers away, laughing. "Game, game!"

"Now, are you talking about batting my fingers away, little guy, or the fact that I think you've been..." Ranma glanced down his body past Enma for a second, then nodded. "Yep, you've been marking me up with yellow handprints. Neat. It's not like paint is hard to get out of silk or anything. I will have my revenge, little sister."

"Hah! Call it payback from Erza," Wendy retorted, sticking her nose in the air unrepentantly.

Watching the little guy's scowl of concentration as he attempted to either catch or bat away Ranma's fingers, Ranma shook his head, trying to grasp the implications of this again. He had begun that process when Enma had been first introduced to them and knew that he was going to do his best for the little guy and that, indeed, a large part of him was ecstatic to have a son. As he looked at Enma, all of his concerns about being a dad came back to him in a rush, as it always did whenever he contemplated the idea.

Oh, in his heart of hearts, Ranma understood that he had been parenting Wendy since the moment that they had met. That was different. For one thing, and to put it bluntly, Wendy had already been fun-sized. She had been old enough to go to the bathroom and look after herself in a general way. She didn't rely on Ranma for everything when it came to looking after herself like a baby or toddler would. Beyond that, Wendy was an easy-going, gentle sort who listened and almost always was easy to please and cajole to do what Ranma wanted her to. Ranma doubted that Enma if he had anything of Ranma in him could be so easy.

And there's a big difference between having Wendy along with me for so long and, well seeing a miniature version of Erza and me combined. The longer Ranma looked at Enma, the

more he could see of both his parents. The eyes were Ranma's, the cheekbones Erza's. The chin Erza's, the grin Ranma's. *How do you start a kid on the road to becoming someone like Erza? How do you start a kid on becoming someone like a mix between Erza and me, without all my, my idiocies? Or, heh, hers. I know I don't have to go it alone this time like I did with Wendy, but still, this is a lot of responsibility.*

His introspective thoughts were interrupted when, instead of going for his fingers, Enma decided to remove the middleman, so to speak. The toddler brought both of his hands up and into Ranma's eyes, slapping his hands down with what remained of the yellow paint on them, laughing.

Getting paint in your eye is kind of painful, and Ranma twitched, then decided to go with it, groaning, "ARGH!!! I am slain!"

Enma just laughed at him and then scooted back along Ranma's body to the tin of paint that Wendy had 'helpfully' stuck right between Ranma's legs. He reached in, coating his hands again in yellow paint, and crawled back up, leaving yellow marks as he went, before slapping Ranma in the face again with it. "Yellow, yellow!"

"Okay, that's enough of that!" Ranma muttered, plucking Enma up by the back of his shirt for a second. Reaching with his other hand to grab the tin of paint, he stuffed it momentarily into his ki space just to get it out of the way. "Yellow is not my color, little guy."

He flipped Enma up into the air, causing the youth to laugh wildly even as the world twirled around him, and then caught the toddler, heading over into the kitchen to wash the tyke's hands off. "Enma, huh? My name and Erza's combined. Neat, although, remind me when she gets here to tell Erza about what the name Enma actually means back in my old dimension. She might get a kick out of it."

In Japanese mythology, Enma was the name of a god. Specifically, the god who weighed people's souls to determine if they went to heaven or hell. Ranma couldn't remember anything of the god's character, but it was certainly an odd name to his formerly Japanese upbringing for a child.

He looked over at Wendy, sending a smile Juvia's way before concentrating on his little sister. "There isn't, you know, anything wrong with him or anything, right? He's not, like mentally slower than any of the other kids? With me as a parent, you never know."

"Stop that at once!" Juvia intoned firmly before Wendy could say anything, seeing through Ranma's good humor to the real worries underneath easily. "There is nothing like that wrong with you at all. There was never anything wrong with your basic intelligence, only your knowledge in your past life. In this one, you have made up for that, and I will not hear you denigrate yourself further. Not on that score, nor on parenting."

She put an arm around Wendy's shoulders, pulling the shorter girl into her side. Wendy had originally come up to around Juvia's waist or a little bit above that. Now, her head was level with Juvia's shoulder, and there was a goodly nice bit of curvature there. Juvia estimated Wendy was an A cup at the moment, shifting into the B range in another year or so. We have living proof of that right here, as I have said numerous times before."

Wendy nodded firmly, and Juvia went on, determined to stamp out the last of Ranma was worries about his own abilities when it came to parenting. She knew where it came from and why it kept on coming back, but that didn't mean that she was willing to let him continue to think so poorly of himself for even a moment. "Yes, the early years for any child are hard. However, you will have a tremendous support group to deal with such, and frankly, those first few years are the prerogative of the mother more than the father, anyway."

Which will be me soon enough, Juvia added mentally. She was extremely serious about wanting to have children, and the sooner, the better. "We will be able to handle it together with my love. So no more recriminations or self-loathing alright?"

"Heh, right. Sorry, but it honestly is a concern of mine, given how obsessed I can be with The Art and everything," Ranma admitted, reaching up with one hand to tug at his hair sheepishly, noting absently that he might need a haircut. Jenny had seen to the rest of their hair during their time in the Blasted Lands, but that was a far cry from going to a professional who had access to things like shampoo specific for hair, scissors that weren't made out of makeshift parts, clippers and so forth. "I mean, like it or not, but I know I'm not the best mental type learner, and I got no idea how, you know, genetics or whatever work outside the obvious stuff."

He held up Enma, who instantly began to try to wiggle out of his grip, ending up hanging from Ranma's hand instead of actually held up in said hand, laughing all the while. "I mean, I can look at this little guy and tell Erza, and I had a hand in creating him..." He shook his head for a second, still a bit bemused by that idea before going on. "But what's going on in his head, I can't tell you."

"Well, I, as a medical professional," Wendy began, sitting upright and looking as if she was trying to be prim and proper before a grin ruined it. "Can tell you that he is a perfectly healthy, well-developed toddler. He's actually extremely advanced physically for his age, and a good bit mentally too. His vocabulary is growing every day, something that Natalie and Nate, Anna and Lisanna's children, can't say. So you don't need to worry about anything on that score."

"That's good." Then he looked down at Enma, flipping him upright a bit quickly before standing him up on the island. Enma wobbled a bit on his feet, but he stood there, waving his arms and shifting this way and that, staring up at Ranma, then turning around and trying to walk along the island until running into the outstretched arm Ranma set in his way. "So, what training have you been giving him? I'm not talking about martial arts or anything, just hand-eye stuff, you know? It's best to start early."

By the time the others returned, Ranma had Enma chasing a small ball between himself, Juvia and Wendy as the three of them sat in the open area to the side of the coffee table between the two sofas. The little guy was laughing and cheering as he ran from one person to another who would shift the ball around, with Enma occasionally catching it and other times missing it but having fun regardless as he toddled along on his two legs or crawled like a champion.

Seeing this, Erza smiled, although Ranma was quick to point out that she looked a little frazzled. Not harried, but as if she'd been electrocuted recently. "And one of your arms looks like it's got burn residue on it. Let me guess. Fairy Tail decided to throw its daily fight while you were at the guild?"

"You have it in one," Erza said with a chuckle, with Jenny and Irene following her in, along with several bags of groceries being pulled along through the air by Irene's magic.

Juvia hopped to her feet, heading into the kitchen, where she quickly took charge of the groceries. "You sit down and play with Ranma and the baby. Jenny and I can handle the cooking tonight."

Erza nodded, then headed deeper into the apartment, with Irene behind her. She settled down where Juvia had been a moment ago as Wendy obligingly scooted around to let Irene sit across from her on the floor. Irene frowned a little as she did so, finding it somewhat inelegant to sit on the floor like this, but the sight of Enma bouncing the ball and then pushing it in her direction ceased all such higher brain functions.

"I take it that you're bonding with Enma now? Good. I must admit that being a mother has not been easy, but largely thanks to the help I received from Wendy and the rest of the guild, I think that Enma has turned out very well," she said, smiling as Enma caught the ball as Irene tried to pass it to Wendy, then bounced her way, with a shout of 'Mama'.

That didn't make her go all gooey, as Lisanna and Anna described the feeling when their children said it to them, but it was still nice. "And have you taught him how to say daddy yet?"

"Aheh, I don't know. I'm still trying to get a handle on this thing. And er, I never called my father anything but Old man, Pops, or er, lazy 'rear-end', Ranma confessed, shrugging his shoulders as he quickly changed what he had been about to say. While he hadn't been all that good about not cursing in front of Wendy, he still knew that wasn't something you should do around kids. "I really don't want my kid to call me Pops like that, but dad and daddy just sound... well, I'll have to get used to it."

At that point, he looked up at Erza, giving Erza such a tender, loving look that it set her heart to race. "But I will. Get used to it, I mean. Along with, you know, other things. One thing being that since we've got a kid now, I mean... It's kind of out of order and everything, but, um, should we, well, I know I love you, so should we like..." Ranma was having trouble getting the

words out, running into the bad memory of the Wedding Disaster and a few other smaller episodes where one girl or another was dressed as a bride in his past life, which had then led to a lot of trouble or Ranma getting beaten into the ground, but he soldiered through it, albeit clumsily. "Make plans to get married or something? Or would that be bad considering the other girls?"

While Irene looked singularly unimpressed by Ranma's words, Erza simply chuckled. "Jenny and I talked about it while we were out, and unless Juvia has any objections, yes, I will be taking the position as legal wife. We'll all still be in a relationship, but I will be the one in the forefront when it comes to legal matters and social issues."

Ranma breathed a sigh of relief at that as Erza went on. "Which means that yes. Eventually, I think I would like a wedding. Having my ring on your hand and so forth would feel rather good, I think. But that is for after Acnologia is dealt with." She then smirked a little, gesturing to Irene. "Oh, and by the way, somewhat connected to that score is this woman. I don't think you've been formally introduced to her before. This is apparently my mother, Irene."

Ranma gulped a little, turning to face Irene, who slowly allowed a sinister smirk to appear on her face. Her hat, which she still retained even inside, gave her face a dangerous, shadowy cast for a moment, adding to the effect. "So, you are the reprobate who got my daughter pregnant and then ran off to the boonies? If I did not think your words of a moment ago were sincere, young man, I would be doing my utmost to put you ten feet under in such a manner that the very idea of having an open casket funeral would horrify anyone involved."

While Irene thought or wordplay there was quite nice, Ranma was too terrified to notice, nodding his head rapidly. "I never, we never, that is, if I had known that Enma was on the way or even a possibility, I would've turned back the moment I heard! But now, I'm going to do right by him and by Erza, just as much as I will Juvia and Jenny."

"Thanks for that love," Jenny snickered. "Nice to know that me and Juvia won't be forgotten, even if I did agree with Erza that she should be the one to walk down the wedding Isle with you."

"Who is to say that we should not do the same later?" Juvia asked from the kitchen. "While polyamorous marriages are not legal here in Fiore, I believe they are down in Desierto, correct? And marriages which happen in one country are upheld in others throughout Ishgar."

Ranma nodded, just going along with things for now. He'd let the ladies sort out the wedding now that he had offered and that offer had been accepted. Instead, he turned back to Enma, who had gotten annoyed with all the adults talking and had begun bouncing the ball off of Ranma's chest, giggling as Ranma didn't even seem to notice. No, he smacked the ball sideways towards Erza, who caught it, and the game of keep away began again until Juvia and Jenny were done cooking.

As they played with the child, Erza gave Irene a proper introduction, going over everything that she had learned of the woman with Irene's help. The fact that she had willingly served Zeref was something of a red flag to Ranma, although not as much as it would normally have been, given how much she owed Zeref for transforming her back into her normal human body.

Whereas in return, Ranma scored some points with Irene by calling her old husband "An utter douchebag who wasn't worth the title man, let alone husband or King," when she described how she had been locked away as a monster to the point where he had disavowed any connection to her child.

There was still a certain amount of wariness between Erza and Irene, and now Ranma and Irene, but there was no debating the fact that Irene was really Erza's mother and that she practically melted around Enma. It was very evident to the watching ladies and Ranma that Irene had a lot of long-dormant motherly instincts that were coming to the fore with the toddler around.

Still, Ranma was more interested in Acnologia, his depredations on the Empire, and what had been done up to this point in an effort to counter the Dragon of the Apocalypse. It sounded as if Acnologia had grown even stronger than the last time they had met.

When Ranma pointed that out, Erza nodded. "One thing that came to light a few months ago was that God Serena has been missing for quite some time. Gildarts and others searched for him, but it is believed that he challenged Acnologia after hearing that we were able to hurt the monster and was subsequently defeated, and perhaps, his magic eaten."

"That matches with what the Empire believed occurred. To fight a dragon, you need several things: endurance to fight for a long time, durability, and the right magic to stand up against them. While God Serena might've had Dragon Slayer lacrima embedded in him of various types, I doubt his durability was up to the challenge of facing that monster one on one. And frankly, any idea of facing it one-on-one is ludicrous," Irene said, having fought with her own draconic side on that score and won every time. There was no future for someone so stupid as to think that they could one-on-one Acnologia, the strongest creature in the world.

"Even worse, he was a Dragon Slayer, and Acnologia's element is magic. Yeah, I can definitely see eating someone like God Serena being a power-up for him. Although that begs the question, what in the heck is he after in the Empire?" Ranma mused, ignoring the large part of his brain that demanded he challenge Acnologia in just that manner. "If he's supposed to have a hatred for all things draconic, well, there's me, Laxus, Wendy, Natsu and Gajeel. Why would he bother with the Empire?"

"That is a very good question, and one that was still being debated heavily when Larcade and the others agreed to send Brandish and I are here to parlay with Ishgar's Kings," Irene agreed. "Hopefully by the time we get back to the Empire they will have discovered the answer

to that. I already have plans in mind to defeat the monster, plans which include you and the other Dragon Slayers, but new intelligence could change those plans dramatically.”

“Maybe, maybe not. In the Blasted Lands, I fought these draconic things, like... Like pseudo-dragons, almost as strong as the weakest dragon could be, but there were lots of them, hundreds. And one thing I learned in that fight is that plans don’t often survive contact with the enemy.” Well, Ranma had known that for a lot longer, going as far back as his first martial arts match back in his old world. It was simply easier to use the example of the dragons. “That, and raw power matters a lot more at that level than any kind of finesse.

“Perhaps, but it’s always good to have the plans regardless. If you plan well enough, changes to the information you base your plans on is what contingencies are made for,” Irene replied, actually quoting Invel, who had said that or similar things numerous times in his position as the Empire’s Chief of Staff. “We will just have to be flexible. But you agree to accompany us back to the Empire to fight Acnologia?”

Irene was looking at Ranma when she said that, but it was Erza who answered for the pair of them, letting out an unusual curse as she did. “Hell yes. Acnologia killed some of our own, and that is not something that I can forgive as a member of Fairy Tail.”

“Same here. Acnologia is a clear and present danger to the entire world and to me and mine personally. I will definitely agree with you to go back to your Empire and help you,” Ranma admitted.

“Even before we make any agreements with your rulers?” Irene chuckled, holding up one hand to hide her mouth for a moment as she did before shaking her head. “You realize that that strengthens our bargaining position quite a bit, correct?”

“Like I care,” Ranma scoffed. “If the kings are too dumb to not see Acnologia’s a threat we gotta deal with, I am more than willing to ignore them.”

“Well, that is easier said than done, but I can appreciate the sentiment,” Irene chortled before pointing at Ranma. “At any rate, it has been mainly me and Erza who have been doing the talking. Change the subject. Tell me what it is like in the Blasted Lands. I’ve always wanted to go there, but I’m afraid I’m not nearly as durable in terms of resisting the overall background magic of a place as most normal Dragon Slayers. I was worried that in going there, I would slowly start to lose my humanity again.”

This conversation dominated for the next hour before they were called over to the dinner table. It dominated there as well, with Jenny, Ranma and Juvia regaling Irene, Erza and the listening Enma, although he probably didn’t understand most of the words, with their tales of traveling through the Blasted Lands. This was a story that would have to be told over a period of weeks. One simple meal just was not long enough even for an overview. By the time they

were all done eating, the trio had barely arrived at the point in the story where they arrived at the half-buried metal giant.

Part of this was because the tale had been interrupted numerous times by other things. Getting Enma to stop playing with his food, answering questions from Irene, Erza or Wendy, and at one point, surprisingly, taking Enma to the bathroom.

"Hmmm... I know you all said he was advanced for his age, but that is amazing," Irene murmured. "Don't children only start potty training at three?"

"Please," Erza shook her head. "Just like getting him off the bottle and onto solid foods as fast as possible, I had Enma start potty training the moment he could crawl."

"Th, that, I don't think that's how that's supposed to work," Ranma mumbled, even as he took his son to the toilet. He helped the tyke get undressed, but that was all he needed to do. Well, that and remind him to wipe. "Well, whatever," he muttered as he returned to the table. "If it works, it works."

More often, however, as the eating slowed down, the flirting picked up. The glances, the subtle shifts, and touches all began to show up so much that Wendy picked up on it and Irene couldn't stop herself from shaking her head and chortling occasionally at how thirsty it seemed Erza was for her boyfriend/future husband.

Soon Enma seemed to be nodding off in his high chair, having done a number on his own mashed meal, which seemed to be the signal for the meal to break up. Wendy plucked the little guy out of his chair and moved over to give him a little bit of cleaning while Irene stood up, and Jenny moved to clean up after the meal. Irene looked at her daughter, then nodded her way to Enma. Erza caught this and nodded as well, and Irene asked, "In that case, might I have the loan of Belserion for the night? He and I still have to have a little... discussion."

The way she said the term discussion made Ranma think of knives coming out, and he shivered just a bit, shifting away from his quite scary mother-in-law. She'd made no threats his way just yet, probably because of Enma's presence, but Ranma felt it was probably just a matter of time.

Moments later, Irene, holding Belserion in one hand and with Wendy carrying Enma skipping along beside her left the apartment.

Lemon Start

Juvia followed Irene to the door to lock up behind her while Jenny finished gathering up the plates, heading into the kitchen, joking, "Ah, my time as a waitress before I started to grow a real chest comes in handy yet again," as she balanced plates on her arms and head.

"Heh, I bet I could still beat ya though," Ranma said, smirking a bit at Jenny before looking back at Erza.

When Erza stood up, pulling Ranma to his feet, Ranma surprised her by taking the initiative, reaching over and pulling her into a hug. "I missed you so much, Erza!" he whispered, before kissing her hungrily.

For the first time in their relationship, Erza found herself completely overwhelmed for a few moments, her heart beginning to hammer wildly at the amount of passion that Ranma was pushing into that kiss, her mouth opening, allowing his tongue eager entry. It was as if Ranma was trying to show her precisely how much he'd missed her over the past two years in that one kiss.

By the time she recovered, Erza found herself pinned against the counter, while Jenny looked on in amusement from where she had begun to wash some of the dishes. The look of amusement in Jenny's eyes, as Erza spotted her out of the corner of her eye galvanized Erza to respond in kind, wrapping her legs around Ranma and squeezing hard, pressing herself up and into his arms, now beginning to give as good as she got as her tongue began to move against Ranma's.

Jenny watched as Ranma twirled them around, until Erza was sitting on the table, still kissing her hungrily as his hands began to work at her clothing, her own hands working at his, uncaring of several of the plates crashing down to the floor, shattering. "Well, it looks like we'll buy be buying more than clothing tomorrow." Jenny's eyes then widened as she saw underneath Erza's shirt. *And looks like someone wasn't wearing a bra. DAMN.*

"That is most wasteful, and Juvia is not exactly on board with the idea of further sexual shenanigans occurring on the same table we just used to eat on, especially since a baby was eating there at the same time, with all the mess that entails," Juvia said firmly, moving to try and pull the two lovers away from the table at the very least. There was a perfectly acceptable sofa within 10 feet of the table after all.

A still somewhat stunned Jenny joined her in this endeavor but then whooped as Erza, pulling away from the kiss with Ranma, reached over and grabbed Jenny by the hair, pulling her into an equally hard kiss. The blonde practically swooned at the mixture of slight pain from her hair being tugged and the sheer domination of the kiss that Erza imparted to her, even as Erza allowed Ranma to finish tearing her blouse apart.

Then Erza was pulling away, turning her attention back to Ranma. The next second, Erza somehow, with just her own weight and her legs around his waist, caused Ranma's legs to buckle, sending him crashing to the floor with her on top. Erza began to grind into him, trying to use his shirt, which she had pulled up over his head, to pin his arms above his head like that. Ranma responded by nearly bucking her off of him entirely despite how hard Erza tried to push down on him, then tore his own shirt apart with a wrench of his arms to either side, before

grabbing her rear in both hands and beginning to kiss and nibble at her underboob as Jenny joined in, kissing Erza and grabbing at her hips.

“Flipping hell, Erza!” she moaned as her fingers dug into her redheaded lover’s chest. “Your tits were bigger than mine before, but now they are as full and as soft as Juvia’s!”

When they had left, Erza had been far and away the fittest of the trio of ladies with an actual six-pack and breasts that, despite being larger in terms of how far they stuck out from her chest than either Jenny or Juvia, were also perky and firm. With motherhood, that had changed. Her breasts now sagged a bit under their own weight, not much, but noticeably, and were bigger around than before. They were also softer as Ranma and Jenny were discovering.

Jenny found out a second later they were also even more sensitive. When her fingers found one of Erza’s nipples the redhead shuddered, pulling back from the kiss to moan aloud, her eyes nearly rolling back in her head as she hit a mini orgasm.

It had been a long two years for Erza. While Jenny and Juvia had each other and Ranma, any kind of sexual endurance Erza had built up in her time dating Ranma had disappeared by this point. Fingers and dildos could only do so much.

Despite that, Erza quickly came back to herself, kissing Jenny again and once more dominating the kiss, but this time, Juvia was there. Once Erza had ridden Ranma into the floor, she had turned to wipe down the table and the floor in perhaps the fastest cleanup to ever occur to mankind. Now she knelt beside where Ranma lay on the floor, leaning down and kissing him ardently, before pulling away as Erza moaned and twitched. With Ranma licking and biting at her neck, Juvia turned her attention to licking and nibbling at one of Erza’s nipples.

“MMMMmm...” Erza moaned again, her legs twitching.

This finally loosened her grip around Ranma’s waist, which in turn allowed Ranma to wrap his arms around her. Pulling away from Juvia’s neck, he lifted Erza up off of him enough to let him get to his own feet. Still carrying Erza as Jenny and Juvia worked her chest and mouth over, he moved towards the door to the bedroom. Leaning in, he whispered into Erza’s ear, “I missed you so much love, we all did!”

“And I, I missed all of you! More than I can say,” Erza moaned between kisses.

How they arrived there, Erza didn’t know, but soon she found herself flat on the master bed, an item of furniture that had largely gone unused. If they wanted to sleep in the same bed Seilah and Wendy did so at Seilah’s apartment above the book nook, and when Wendy was here, she slept in her own bed out in the main room with Carla.

Erza tried to fight back, tried to no longer be a passive lover, her pride rearing its head despite knowing she was at a disadvantage. But Ranma had already worked off her skirt, and

Juvia had helped him get out of his pants. Feeling Ranma's hard, throbbing rod slowly grind against her folds, it was all Erza could do not moan too loudly.

Jenny leaned down and kissed her again, reflecting internally that she would probably have to wait a bit to have Erza go full Mistress on her. It was a pity, but the two years without any kind of lover had apparently made Erza all the more sensitive, and she was already losing the fight against Ranma, even before he slid inside of her.

Still, that was all right. Jenny pulled back from the kiss to lean down and whisper into Erza's ear just as Ranma began to slowly move himself in and out of her, causing Erza to have another mini orgasm, hastened along by Juvia once more latching amount to a nipple. "Tonight is all about you love. Were going to make it very, very clear that we all missed you, mistress."

Ranma did the same thing on the other side of Erza's head, his voice tight and controlled as he tried hard not to come too quickly despite how tight and wet Erza felt around her. "I love you, Erza, and by the time morning comes, we're going to have made the past two years up in full!"

End Lemon

OOOOOOO

While Erza was finding herself the center of attention back in the apartment, Wendy had shown Irene the way to the café with its own apartment up top, introducing her to Katerina and her own alter self. Edo-Wendy still hadn't chosen another name for herself, arguing whenever the topic came up that "As I'm the older model, I should be the one to keep the name Wendy and you should change yours!"

Soon, Irene was ensconced in a leather chair in the corner of the café, with Enma in her lap. The food had made the youth a little dozy, and knowing that it was pushing bedtime for him, Irene had decided to read a children's book to him for a moment until he fell asleep.

Not an hour later, Irene looked down at his face as his eyes began to close, then over to her side where she had propped up Belserion. "You know, I had plans of making you feel all the pain I went through in that dungeon and then as a dragon because you didn't tell me about the downsides of becoming a Dragon Slayer. About the process of turning into a dragon."

Belserion said nothing, knowing that silence was the way of wisdom right now. A part of him wanted to protest. After all, he hadn't known that Irene was pregnant. Thus, whatever pains she'd run into because of that abnormal situation when she turned into a dragon were all on her. However, Belserion knew that wasn't the case. He had indeed manipulated and used Irene despite their being friends. He knew he had a lot of pain coming to him. Besides, to truly fear, he would have needed glands and a heartbeat, and as a spirit embedded in one of his own fangs, Belserion did not have such.

Thus, Belserion was pleasantly surprised when Irene continued, looking down at Enma. "I will never forgive you for that. I will never forget that betrayal. But this? Well, perhaps some things you simply have to accept. It is nothing like believing in fate, but simply understanding what can and cannot be changed." She fell silent then before reaching out with a finger and sending a slight jolt of raw magic into the sword. "Although I will probably torture you just a little bit after Enma goes to sleep."

Despite not having glands, Belserion let out a very un-dragon-like whimper at that, wondering where Wendy had gotten off to. However, Wendy had left Irene and Enma in the store after making introductions, wanting to find her friend Carla. The blonde Exceed had been chased out of the guildhall earlier that day when Ranma had collapsed, and Erza and Jenny reported that Carla had not been at the guild when they went there with Irene later to find Brandish. Nor had anyone else seen her since.

Taking to the rooftops, Wendy leaped through Magnolia's skyline, sniffing occasionally as she tried to pick up her friend's scent. Soon, though, she was distracted by another scent, which led her sideways away from the route she had been following. Soon, Wendy found herself perched opposite one of the better hotels within Magnolia. There, Happy, enlarged to the size of an adult man, was being dragged along the street by a green haired girl that could only be Brandish, although Wendy had yet to be introduced to the second Spriggan. She matched the description that Irene had given her and seemed to be snuggling into Happy's side, dragging the frozen, whimpering Harry down the street, the Exceed seemingly frozen in place by some other minor magic, unable to fight back.

For a moment, Wendy wondered if that was at all comfortable for the Exceed and wondered if she should intervene before shrugging her shoulders. If he'd made any kind of protests about being treated like a giant stuffed animal, Natsu and the others in the Guild might have objected. If they hadn't, Wendy wasn't about to stick her nose in. Her concerns were for her own Exceed companion, not Natsu's at the moment.

Soon, she found Carla's trail and followed it to the house where the Strauss family lived. This house had grown since she'd last been there, with an extremely nice, small added area built into one side of the house. Looking at it as she walked up to the front door, Wendy giggled, suddenly realizing she hadn't been inside the Strauss place since they'd finished the addition. "I wonder if Elfman's been relegated to that area now or if that's the nursery for Natalie and Nate?"

A second later, Wendy knocked politely and smiled at Anna as she answered the door. "Hello, Anna. Is Carla here?"

"Yep," Anna said, opening the door and getting out of Wendy's way to let her inside, shaking her head as Wendy had correctly identified her, something that very few people could do. Especially these days since Lisanna and Anna had been leaning heavily into the whole twin thing even more than normal since their children were born. Yet like all the other Dragon

Slayers, Wendy's sense of smell made it impossible for the two to ever fool her. "You'll find Carla in the kitchen, although she is a little...under the weather."

This proved to be an understatement, although Carla's current well-being had nothing to do with actually being sick. Carla slumped over the small kitchen table, her hair in disarray, her tail twitching spasmodically behind her as a large bottle of wine sat beside her head along with a half-filled cup.

This sight caused Wendy to stare. She had never seen her friend drunk before, and indeed, Wendy knew that Carla held views on women doing such things that were more in keeping with Katerina's thoughts on the matter than anyone else. "Carla, are you okay?" Wendy asked hesitantly, wondering if she should use her healing magic to flush the alcohol out of Carla's system. The process was painful, but quick.

Mira sat across from Carla with Nate in her arms, having been looking at Carla with a certain amount of devilish amusement in her eyes. Now, she snickered, shaking her head. "Carla seems to be suffering from a kind of existential crisis right now. The kind that can only be cured by imbibing in alcohol."

"Can't be, can't be! Happy, blue, blue stupid, blue, not buff..." Carla moaned.

"... What?" Wendy asked, confused. "What's all that mean?"

"Carla and Happy apparently had a little reunion all their own, and Happy, for the first time, transformed into his own exceed human hybrid form. It seems to have shocked our little lady here," Lisanna explained. "I wish I could have seen it."

All three of the sisters laughed, while Carla raised her head just enough to grab at the cup and drain the rest of it before laying her head back down on the table with a thump. As she did, Wendy just stared at her oldest friend, listening to her wail-mumble. "Can't be true! Can't be, can't be attracted to Happy! No!"

With another surge upward, Carla pushed the wine glass aside and grabbed the bottle, taking a swig straight from it before smacking her head down onto the table once again. "No, get out cursed images, out!" she wailed.

"She's been like this for at least an hour and a half, and it hasn't worked yet," Mira said, smiling diabolically. "I think Carla's now in denial. She needs to accept reality to move past this."

"Never for this is not reality but a dream! A nightmare!" Carla shouted, pointing at Mira before slumping down for a third time since Wendy had entered the kitchen.

For a moment, Wendy was, despite her nature, almost tempted to let Carla stew like this. Carla had given her a lot of flak about the fact that Wendy had begun to fall for Seilah and

then had entered into a relationship with the older demoness. The thought was a fleeting one, one that she could put down to Ranma's influence on her over their lifetimes. Instead, Wendy moved over, gently pulled the bottle from Carla's unresisting hand and then lifted the shorter girl up into her arms in a fireman's carry. "Come on, Carla, you've had enough to drink, and I'm certain this will look better in the morning."

OOOOOOO

Ranma woke up the next morning to the sound of someone moving around in the main room of the apartment. Looking around, he saw that Jenny and Juvia were on either side of him still asleep, completely overcome by the endurance monsters that were Ranma and Erza. Despite having made endurance a major point of their training in the Blasted Lands, neither girl had yet to catch up to their other two lovers in that area, as Erza had made that area a priority as well, though they had come a lot closer, aided by the fact Erza remained the focus of their love making the entire night. While Erza's ability to withstand their attentions had faded, she still had more simple endurance than either of the other girls.

That meant that it was Erza who was up, and Ranma frowned for a moment, trying to remember if Erza or any of the others had mentioned that the redhead had learned how to cook in the two years Ranma, Jenny and Juvia had been gone. Realizing she hadn't, Ranma hastily, yet still stealthily, got out of bed and headed into the kitchen without waking up either of his other lovers.

Without even looking up, Erza raised an elegant finger his way, knowing precisely what had gotten him up and out of bed so quickly. "I can at least heat up leftovers, Ranma. It isn't exactly the breakfast of Champions, but I had a hankering for food this morning for some reason." She turned, giving Ranma a positively sultry look. "It seems as if my cardio was lacking these past two years."

"Nothing quite like it," Ranma admitted cheerfully, grabbing the outstretched hand that was giving him the finger, then licking said finger before nibbling down to her wrist and then pulling Erza into a hug. The redhead did not protest this manhandling, giving as good as she got in the kiss that followed before pulling away with some reluctance. "None of that, or else we won't leave the apartment today. I make a point to see Enma at least every day for a few hours, and your arrival is not going to ruin that, especially since we will all be away for at least a week or more dealing with Acnologia soon."

"Sounds like good parenting to me. Well, so long as those few hours aren't spent smacking Enma around until he learns to dodge like my old man did for me," Ranma agreed before gently setting Erza to one side and pulling out some actual ingredients, whipping up some quick and hasty waffles with blueberries.

The moment the waffle mix hit the machine, the smell wafted into the other room, and soon, the other two girls were groaning and moaning but in no condition to move just yet. The

last few rounds apparently had pushed them beyond the realm of endurance, even when it came to waffles, something that the pair had not had access to out in the wilds.

This left Erza and Ranma alone, and the pair talked quietly for a few moments about their plans for the day. They sat close together, brushing elbows and shoulders, both only in their underwear, loving the renewed closeness of the moment after being apart for so long. Despite having actually been with Jenny and Juvia for longer in the Blasted Lands than he had dated Erza prior to that, he had missed Erza dearly and was loving this while Erza had missed him even more.

“Are you sure that you can afford to take Jenny and Juvia both shopping?” Ranma asked between bites as Erza explained what the three of them would be up to. “I mean, I’ve shopped for my girl side before, and I know for a fact that girl clothing is a hell of a lot more expensive than guy clothing.”

“You all might be poor. I am not.” Erza held up a bank card, magically linked to her account at the Bank of Ishgar. “I have continually taken as many jobs as possible since I was allowed to do so after giving birth to Enma, and even before then, I was as frugal as I could possibly be with my money, given that I needed to pay for most of my gear.” She shrugged. “After a few months of not paying for anything new, I’ve built up quite a large balance, which will be more than enough to handle paying for new wardrobes for Jenny and Juvia if they require it.”

She smirked then, tapping Ranma on the nose with the edge of the card. “Does that mean I’m your sugar mama?”

“Booo, hisss!!!” Jenny and Juvia intoned as they finally made their way out of the bedroom, leaning against one another as they stumbled through the doorway. Ranma, on the other hand, just laughed and stood up, having finished his breakfast. He moved over to help the other two to the table, winking at Erza. “It kind of does, considering you give me plenty of sugar, and you are a mama, even if you’re not mine.”

As he caught a handful of blueberries tossed his way in his mouth, Ranma paused, thinking. “But speaking of that, I’m going to head out and find Enma. I want to spend as much time as possible before we have to leave for Crocus.”

That had come up during the meal last night. Irene wanted to return to Crocus to finalize the agreements with the King’s Council and then get on their way back to the Empire as fast as possible. To Erza, it was happening a little too quickly. Her lovers had just returned from two years away, after all, and she wanted to savor their reunion. Yet Erza understood that lives were at stake and every minute might count. She did not begrudge the time spent last night with Ranma and the others, however. Not then, and not now.

“True.” She smiled, leaning up to give Ranma a kiss on the cheek as Jenny and Juvia wearily reached for the plate of waffles, getting into the world’s weakest game of tug-of-war with it for a second. “I’m curious if he will give you a nickname or start to call you Dad or some derivative. I think we should meet up at the guildhall at around one, then take the three-thirty train to Crocus. That will give me time to get Mira and her sisters to watch Enma for us while we’re away.”

“Yep, still feels weird,” Ranma grumbled, kissing her back for turning, giving Jenny and Juvia kisses, and heading into the bedroom to change.

Outside the apartment complex, Ranma discovered that it was raining, something he hadn’t realized during his conversation with Erza at the table. He stared up at the rain thoughtfully, then shrugged and stepped out into it, letting the change occur. *I spent the entire day yesterday, and the day before as a man, I guess some kind of do. Besides, Enma’s response to this form will be hilarious. I hope.*

It turned out that it was. At first, Enma’s eyes lit up, and he shouted “Red, Red Ma...eh??” And then trailed off as he had with Irene the day before, his little eyes crossing as he had a moment of existential crisis. Up to this point, the only one with red hair that he knew had been his mother, but now? Now, there were two more people with red hair. What was he supposed to think?

Luckily, before that confusion could segue into the typical toddler response to such things, i.e., crying, whining and so forth, Ranma plopped down in front of him, flicking Enma’s nose lightly with a finger. Then pointing to herself explained, “Dad.”

Enma frowned, then pointed to himself. “Deee.”

Ranma snorted, took his finger and pointed it at Ranma. “Nope. Dad me. You Enma.”

“Me not cavewoman,” Irene murmured from nearby, watching this with more than a little amusement. “You don’t have to speak baby talk to them, you know that, right? Even toddlers will get what they can from your words regardless of how you structure your sentences. It is tone, body language and facial language that they understand most of all.”

“Excuse me for being new to this,” Ranma grumbled, then frowned. “Come to think of it, aren’t you new to this too? How do you know that?”

“I worked alongside lots of parents over the years who occasionally have not been able to stop themselves from gushing about their children in my presence. Further, like yourself with young Wendy, I have had several apprentices in the past. Some of whom were quite young when I took them in,” Irene replied, surreptitiously kicking a baby development book underneath her chair.

Rolling her eyes, Ranma turned back to Enma, who was pointing at him, and when he saw that Ranma's attention was back on him, Enma shouted, "Deee Red, Dreddy!"

"Close enough for now. And you've got a good set of lungs on you, kiddo," Ranma murmured, shaking her head and lifting Enma onto one shoulder. He instantly reached into Ranma's hair and grabbed on but seemed no more frightened of being on Ranma's shoulder than he had when in the sky with Wendy the day before. "Well, you and I have to do some bonding. What that might mean when you're so young, I don't know, but I figure finding some food stalls with food that you can eat might be a good start."

"Smoothies will be your best bet," Wendy said from where she was manning the cash register. The café was bustling quite a bit, with Katerina, Edo-Wendy and Seilah all busy taking orders, filling plates and so forth. Katerina's cooking, especially of small pastries and so forth, was by this point quite famous throughout the town, and even beyond, making the café a great breakfast spot, and not just for people who came for the ambiance and the books. Edo-Wendy's drinks were even more famous. "Fruits as well, since he can chew a little. Just make sure that it's in small bites."

Ranma nodded and headed out the door with a wave and Wendy's direction. "Thanks for the help, big sister Wendy." She was out the door by the time Wendy had recovered herself from her giggles at the term. The next few boys who came up to pay for their doughnuts, pancakes or other things of that nature blushed at the happy grin on the young girl's face until Seilah came over and loomed menacingly behind Wendy, making them hightail it away.

Ranma spent the rest of that morning with Enma on her shoulder, moving through the streets in his usual manner by going over the rooftops, then down to stop at a few stalls here and there, occasionally doing flips, jumps and balancing acts with Enma remaining in position on her shoulder. Enma wasn't the neatest of eaters, of course, but Ranma timed those expeditions to when she could hold Enma out and away from her body as they moved so that none of the bits and pieces got on her clothing. All in all, it was a pleasant morning, made better when the rain stopped and the sun came out.

By the time lunch rolled around and Ranma was in the mood for some food of his own, Enma had also taken to calling him 'Reddy,' which Ranma supposed was accurate enough. He kept with that name even when Ranma transformed back into his male body, although for several moments, he called him both 'Reddy' and 'Bladdy'. The actual sex change didn't seem to matter to Enma at all. To his mind, the person carrying him was still carrying him, he/she just looked different.

Leaping down to the street where the book nook was, Ranma found that the café had opened up out onto the streets for the lunch hour rush and that most of the tables were packed. There was even a local girl outside holding up a sign asking people to wait to be seated.

As he landed, someone already sitting at a table there shouted for his attention.
“Ranma, over here.”

Turning in that direction, Ranma saw Bisca sitting with Alzack at a small corner table. He exchanged a slightly uneasy nod with Alzack. Although it had been years since Ranma had been here and then nearly a year since he and Bisca had dated, the two men still weren't exactly comfortable in one another's presence. Ranma could still remember the sadness of that breakup, which happened before he and Juvia and Jenny got together, as well as the bittersweet feeling of always having been Bisca's second option. Alzack, in turn, knew that it had been Ranma and Bisca's attraction to one another that had forced Bisca to, in turn, push Alzack to up his game romantically, pushing him outside of his comfort zone. He'd 'won' but knew that he'd also almost lost, too. The years apart had mellowed that feeling of rivalry, but not to the point it had gone away entirely.

Despite being the source of these uncomfortable feelings, Bisca simply smiled, gesturing Ranma into a chair across from her and Alzack. To her, Ranma was simply someone she used to date. What she and Alzack had built since Alzack finally started to take the romance side of the relationship more seriously than their friendship side mattered a heck of a lot more. To the point where they were now contemplating having a child of their own. It had taken a while before they had saved up enough to get a house, but now that they had, it was time to think about that and for Bisca to move out of Fairy Hills, where she still lived technically even after having married Alzack.

That was the conversation they had been having before Bisca saw Ranma arrive. Bisca wanted to have a baby right away and had for nearly a year. She was older than the trio, who already had babies, and wanted one now so that he or she could grow up with friends. Moreover, Bisca knew that once a woman reached thirty, giving birth and so forth wasn't as easy as it was when they were younger. Even magic couldn't really help some things, and that was one of them.

“If you want to get into the café, don't even bother. Katerina or little Wendy will be out to take your order if you want, but the interior of the café is completely packed during lunch hour with booked guests. Katerina's sandwiches and sampler trays are even more famous than her pastries, and Edo-Wendy's drinks are just amazing,” Bisca explained.

Ranma shrugged. “Well, I can always head back to the apartment for food if I'm hungry enough. I just wanted to see if Wendy was going to get free anytime soon. We, well, there's Irene's news to act on, you know?”

At that, the married couple winced, but Bisca's rapidly turned into a smile as Enma pushed off of Ranma's shoulder, falling down towards the table. He landed on all fours and crawled over towards her, seemingly completely unconcerned with the small drop that he'd just done, causing Ranma to snort. He'd seen Enma do similar things that morning a few times when

he put them down, always amused him. "He's going to be a natural when it comes to Anything Goes Aerial Style. He doesn't have an ounce of fear in him when it comes to heights."

"Or anything else," Bisca and Alzack both drawled, well aware of some of the shenanigans that Enma had gotten up to both in the guild house and Fairy Hills since he had begun to crawl. While Bisca moved to play one-handed patty-cake with the toddler, Alzack looked over at Ranma, trying to figure out what to say to him to make conversation. "So, are you, um, used to Enma yet? I mean I saw it was a shock to your system the other day."

This light taunt made Ranma smirk a little, nodding his head. "Yeah, that was not the welcome home I was expecting. The punch was more along the lines of what I was expecting from Erza. The reasoning behind it though was a shock. I'm just glad that I was able to talk her out of killing me for having left her behind with Enma even being a possibility." His smile waned for a moment as he looked at Enma, shaking his head. "But talk about things that change everything. Your worldview, your plans for the future, how you act, everything."

"And what does that imply for you?" Bisca asked, glancing surreptitiously at Ranma was cloak, where a small pin lay. "I don't think... certain jobs... are things that a father should continue to pursue."

That was as open as Bisca was willing to be about the fact that Ranma was a Ranger in public. They were supposed to be entirely unknown after all, the better to perform their jobs for the King's Council. In fact, Ranma was way more open about his status as a Ranger than any other had been for decades.

Ranma understood and scowled. He hadn't thought that far ahead, but Bisca was right. He'd enjoyed being a Ranger and some of the fights he'd gotten into because of it. Yet one aspect of being a Ranger that would severely hamper any attempt to be a dad, which Ranma had hated already, was being tugged this way and that by the demands of the King's Council. He understood it and knew that for a lot of the problems he was called in on, Ranma was indeed the best choice or the one with the least downsides. But now?

Nope, my priorities have changed. I'm not just a wandering martial artist looking for cool fights while taking care of Wendy. I've got a toddler here, and, well, living in the Blasted Lands cured me of my wanderlust for at least a few decades. "Yeah, that's going to be a bit of an issue. One I think I'm going to see to when we arrive in Crocus. One last job, and then I'm done with wandering for a good long while."

OOOOOOO

As Ranma was thinking about him, Acnologia's own thoughts were somewhat wrathful as he pulled away from another forest, snarling bitterly. Pushing himself into the air, he ignored the shattered, ruined encampment of at least a few thousand regular imperial soldiers he left behind him along with a half dozen manmade flyers, the smoke from the fires he had begun

there joining that from the fire of the nearby forest. *My prey is at least awake but seems to know I am hunting him. It is getting harder and harder to find a trail with every passing day. There was just a hint of draconic magic around that forest, but nothing was there, absolutely nothing!*

As that thought hit him, Acnologia roared, releasing a tongue of flame for a moment in rage even as he flew on. *The last hint I truly had was when that artificial creature attacked me a few days back. Killing one of Zeref's Etherious is always an amusing pastime, but it drew me away from the forest there for a bit, and by the time I returned, the smell of my prey was entirely gone.*

That was frustrating to Acnologia and spoke to him not only of the fact that his enemy was now consciously trying to hide himself from the black dragon's magical senses but also that Acnologia didn't know enough about his current target's magic. *Is Aldoron simply leaving small impressions of himself throughout the forests of the Empire and actually hiding somewhere else? That almost reminds me of that one dragon that I wounded but who was able to get away due to leaving so many of her 'children behind. They were no threat, but the surprise of it and the fact I was fighting several other dragons at the time was enough to let her get away.*

Shaking off thoughts of past battles, Acnologia flapped his wings as he continued on, concentrating on what he had heard of Aldoron before becoming a Dragon Slayer and what he had sensed since starting this hunt. *His element is wood or, rather, plants in general. He likes to sleep, and... that is it. Blast, I don't know enough about the limitations of his magic, especially in light of how long it has been he has been hiding within this continent. Could he have discovered some means of hiding the scent of his magic or breaking it up and, I don't know, creating some kind of funnel leading from him to forests throughout the continent so that the scent of his draconic magic always comes out where he is not?*

His stomach rumbling took Acnologia out of his thoughts several wingbeats later, and he growled, looking around. The forest he had just torched had actually been near the southernmost edge of the Empire, and to his east currently he could see the blue of the ocean, which Acnologia knew from experience would be bitterly cold this far south. The continent on which the Alvarez empire sat spread farther below the equator than above it, which put its southernmost edge barely a few hundred miles away from where the pole was so cold that the ocean itself froze.

Deciding to cut his hunt for the true prey short, Acnologia winged his way out over the ocean, staring down into its depths for several minutes before he spotted a creature come up to the surface. Within an instant, he dove down, striking the large creature in the water with claws and fangs alike.

Moments later, with a blast of magic, Acnologia pushed himself back up out of the water, impossibly high, using his magic to propel himself further than mere physics or his admittedly quite large wings could have allowed him to, especially considering his burden at

present. A large humpback whale rested within his talons, a large chunk of its head already having been torn away, blood dripping into the water below. As he flew and munched on his meal, Acnologia pondered.

I know my quarry is somewhere on this continent. But I cannot pinpoint precisely what forest Aldoron is hiding under. I thought I could at first, but to keep using the same analogy as before, Aldoron has created more funnels, and that has created smaller, more diffuse traces of draconic magic. And now, come to think of it, even that, the idea of him hiding under a forest could perhaps be a trick. I must expand my circle of destruction. In fact, I must rather make it a spiral, one that includes everything within, not just the forests of this continent.

The smile that came to the large dragon's face at that thought was in no way pleasant and would've had any other animal, predator or prey, running for the hills. Moments later, Acnologia settled down onto the beach, the coldness of the weather here not bothering him at all. Tossing the carcass of the whale in front of him, he lit it on fire, grilling the entire thing in a few seconds. Tearing off chunks of it, Acnologia continued to think.

A spiral search pattern that covers the entire empire and beyond. Burn every copse of tree I see larger than a personal garden, and even some of those. Spiral inwards from the outside, as I have been doing subconsciously, but enlarge my search to far smaller forests and to cities and towns near them as well if they have anything growing in them at all. While I dislike killing weaklings, if I cannot rouse my prey out of the grass, then I can at least do similar to the Empire's mages. With Zeref gone, they are leaderless and not a threat, but that fight that they organized, with that one woman who could stop time, that was interesting, at least. Well worth the annoyance of killing a few hundred thousand weaklings. So either I find my quarry, take him and consume his magic, or I defeat stronger enemies and eat them. Either way, I win.

With that, Acnologia decided to turn his attention entirely to his meal. He would start his new search tomorrow. And hopefully, it would bear fruit, one way or another.

OOOOOOO

"We sacrificed at least three infantry divisions completely destroyed to give you the data you needed, Wall. Tell me it was worth it, at least," Larcade ordered, stalking into the empire's command-and-control center.

Behind him, Ajeel limped, bruised and battered and covered in bandages, but also answering the summons to the Command and Control Center despite what had occurred between him and the prince earlier that day. Despite the issue with Acnologia, he had still been trying to play office politics behind closed doors against Invel in an effort to take over and use Larcade as a simple figurehead, and Larcade had finally had enough of it that morning. So, while Invel and Wall had pushed forward a plan to at least allow them to discover more about Acnologia's motives, Larcade had taken Ajeel out and sparred with him until the other young man could hardly move.

He hadn't said anything afterward, simply leaving Ajeel there and heading off to a meeting with the PR department. He hadn't needed to. The point was proven. In the Alvarez Empire, the final arbiter of anything was how much magical power someone had. It was how the emperor had created the empire in the first place. In beating Ajeel so easily, Larcade had just proven that he was the Emperor's son in truth. *I might not want to rule, but I will not be someone else's pawn as they reign, either.*

This was incredibly true. Larcade was lazy by nature, extremely laid back and almost easygoing. He was also the most peaceful of the Spriggan, being extremely slow to anger and act in general. But first, the apparent death of his father on one of his frequent trips abroad had removed the head of the Empire, forcing more work on all the Spriggan the longer he was gone, the more rumors spread about his death. Then Acnologia had arrived, piling disaster onto unusual circumstances. The Empire needed a leader, and, with Larcade becoming certain his father had died, he had nearly fallen apart. Without Irene stepping in as she did, he would not have bothered with the battle for control Invel and Ajeel had begun. But now, now that meant he had to lead, to make decisions, and Larcade did not like that at all. *It is just that the alternatives are worse.*

"Thanks to the sacrifices our men made in that ambush, the sensors laid out in preparation for Acnologia's attack on that forest were able to pick up what we were looking for," the Machias answered quickly, tapping the metal spikes visible through his synth skin along his jawline. "There is indeed some kind of energy transference going on. We were able to detect it and then detect a lessening of that energy during the attack by Acnologia on the forest. With that information, I believe we can trace it back to its source."

"Furthermore," another young scientist spoke up, gesturing to his own data. Unlike the strange vibrating wave thing that Wall had been looking at in a lacrima-hologram, Larcade had seen the like of this before. "There is also something going on underground. Look at this data we detected, my lord! Seismic activity. I went back and looked at the records, and at every point that Acnologia attacked, there have also been reports of seismic interference. Small two-point zero or below quakes in areas below or nearby where Acnologia attacked! It was hard to discern the pattern of that movement below the impact of those attacks, but it's clear now. Something is moving underground."

"But not something large, right?" Larcade murmured, staring at the data. "Not like a dragon or anything of that nature."

"No. If I would liken it to anything, I would liken it to someone moving a rope underneath the sand," the seismologist answered, shrugging his shoulders. "The rope is lying there quiescent, yet can be 'twitched' at any time. It doesn't match any natural data, but it's there."

"Ropes or... or maybe roots?" Ajeel offered, interjecting for the first time.

Looking his way, the silent Invel tried hard not to smirk at the condition the other Spriggan was in, before freezing a little as he felt Larcade's gaze on him. It was clear that Larcade was fed up with him too. Even if Invel had the right of it, his continual rise to Ajeel's provocations had annoyed Larcade. The Chief of Staff subsided, bowing his head towards the new emperor, in fact, if not in name just yet, and Larcade turned his attention to Ajeel.

"Roots. You think it's a connection to why that black-scaled bastard was targeting forests?"

"Acnologia is known to attack dragons and Dragon Slayers, not random forests," Ajeel answered with a shrug as if it was obvious. "There must be something going on there; just don't ask me to explain what it could be. Frankly, the idea of a dragon having a wood element or something like that is ridiculous."

"Right, so we have two points of data. The magical emissions present in the forests that Acnologia targets and then gone afterward, and the underground movements of whatever is below," Larcade scowled, gesturing to Wall and the other scientists and then over to the massive map of the empire that dominated one of the room's walls. "I refuse to think there's more than one source of these things. Find me where they are coming from," Larcade ordered.

As Wall and the scientists nodded, Larcade turned to Invel. "I'll contact Irene and Brandish while you make a plan to try to lure that monster to where his real target is. We're not going to try to fight Acnologia again, but if we can find out what he's after, we can figure out a way to bring Acnologia to battle where we want him to be once we've gathered enough force to actually challenge him, or simply kill the dragon he's after and convince him to leave the empire that way."

OOOOOOO

"I'm sorry, could you say that again?" Toma asked, frowning and stapling his fingers as he leaned back in his chair. Around him, the lacrima-created holograms of the other kings and queens also looked surprised or annoyed in the main.

Rose of Bosco didn't. She had simply leaned back and was looking at Ranma thoughtfully, no sign of what she was really thinking about what Ranma just told them showing on her face. The same could not be said for Roland, the King of Pergrande. Rather, he looked generally approving. The King of Minstrel simply nodded sagely, stroking his long, white beard, as the King of Caelum, Luke Afterano, did the same with his many chins. Whereas the kings of Stella, Joya, Seven and Iceberg all looked annoyed.

"I said I quit." Ranma held up the Ranger's brooch, tossing it onto the table in front of the King of Fiore. "I don't want to be a Ranger anymore. Acnologia, dealing with that big bastard will be my last job. After that, I'm retiring."

"You can't just walk away from being a Ranger. You have to be dismissed! You just can't quit a job like this," the King of Seven, Meredrain, said, snorting, while his wife, who Ranma had long suspected was the one with the real brains between the two and who was always involved in meetings like this, nodded her head firmly. She was practically glaring at Ranma as if Ranma had personally insulted her.

Ranma glared right back before letting his gaze sweep over the rest of the kings. He respected most of them, especially Rose and Roland. Rose had turned her nation entirely around from a nation of slavers and salt mines to actually being a somewhat normal nation. Similarly, he knew Roland quite well from his time in Pergrande, and San Jiao Shin was an old general. Neither of them seemed at all confused or angry that Ranma had decided to hang it up. *And that old fat bastard of Caelum always looks like a Buddha crossed with a frog, like he knows more than what he's letting on.*

"I just did. I agreed to become a Ranger because I thought it was the right thing to do at the time, but I never liked being jerked and tugged around by you all. I went along with it because I liked traveling and because I knew that you would only be sent for me if shit had really hit the fan and if others who couldn't handle it, like the Wizard Saints, weren't anywhere nearby or couldn't due to political reasons." That was a slight dig at the two Wizard Saints currently present, Wolfheim and Draculos.

Warrod was also around the place, but Ranma had yet to meet the guy and didn't know if he wanted to. Everyone who knew him said he was quirky, and when people like Makarov and Irene agreed on something like that, Ranma became legitimately worried. Something the King's Council evidently agreed with, as they had not asked Warrod to be part of this meeting or any of the official meetings with the two Imperial 'delegates'.

Wolfheim growled angrily at him while Draculos stared at Ranma coldly as if Ranma's actions with the Ranger brooch had been a personal affront to him just like it had been to the Queen of Seven. "I've got obligations of my own now. I'm not going to let you all just pull me back and away from that anytime you want to. I figured, with Acnologia the next big job, now was the time to tell you all at once."

And frankly, I think you all had fallen into a rut, ordering me around. I'll admit most of the time, I was the only person who could handle things but there were a few instances when sending in a Wizard Saint or two should have happened instead of calling for me. What's the point of the Wizard Saints if the rest of us are the ones doing all the work? Ranma added internally. *I'd hoped that the past two years without me around would break them of that habit, but either it hasn't, or more of this lot are prone to think with their pride and not their brains than I thought.*

"These new obligations would have to do with Erza Belserion's baby, wouldn't it?" Toma asked shrewdly. While none of the others would come out and admit it, Toma and several of the other kings had known that Ranma was in a relationship with Erza Belserion (formerly Scarlet)

and he had wondered about that. In fact, he had bet on it. The King of Bosco had thought that perhaps Erza and her former master Laxus had gotten together, assuming there was something there. An idea that Queen Rose was quick to point out pointed to why the King of Bosco was still unmarried despite being the oldest of the serving kings at present: he had no idea of romance or women in general.

"It does. I've got a kid to take care of and maybe a few more on the way if... well, That's none of your business. I've also got a wedding to plan and..." Ranma shrugged, some of the answering anger to the affront and anger on the faces of a few of the king's faces fading from his body language and fading as he did so. "It's just time to settle down. Let me walk. You all can find a new anti-devil, anti-occult Ranger."

That did not stop the protests. Several of the kings shouted that a Ranger served at their leisure, that it was up to the King's Council to agree or disagree to remove a Ranger, and, in fact, that it rarely happened outside of some kind of disability or death. One of them, the King of Joya, put it into the most condescending terms as he glared at Ranma. "You will only be allowed to walk away from the Ranger's Brooch and all it entails when we allow it."

Growling, Ranma allowed just a bit of his aura to flare up. Just a tiny bit of his Dragon Slayer's power but even that little bit was monstrous. His time in the Blasted Lands had not been for nothing, and Ranma was far more in tune with his Dragon Slayer side than he'd ever been before.

When Wolfheim and Draculos looked at him now, as that magical pressure pushed down on them, they found themselves not looking at Ranma but at a dragon ready and willing to strike. It was a feeling the two of them had felt before in the presence of God Serena. Only Ranma seemed even more powerful, something that horrified and worried Draculos immensely as Ranma growled out, "I am not your puppet or tool. I was your agent, but I have new responsibilities. It's a matter of perspective and mine's changed."

"And yet raising Wendy didn't halt your abilities to act as a Ranger," the King of Iceberg shot back. As he and the rest of them weren't physically present, they weren't nearly as affected as the two Wizard Saints and King Toma by Ranma's aura.

Ranma snorted, shaking his head, letting humor diffuse his anger for a second. "That was Wendy, and I still see most of my ability to raise her right has more to do with her personality than mine. Erza sure as heck isn't going to want to travel, and I'm not going to take my son away from his mother." *That, more than anything else, I'm not going to do*, Ranma thought, shivering a bit at how much like Genma that act would make him. "And the other girls I'm involved with have all informed me over the past day that they're done traveling, too. I've had enough of living on the road, of living rough, and I've had enough of being always on call. **I'm done.**"

Toma exchanged a glance with Rose and Roland, while several of their other counterparts growled and made threats at Ranma before Toma tapped the table gently. "I believe that this is within our power to grant ladies and gentlemen. Your arguments about precedence, rules and so forth are really beside the point. With Zeref gone, none of us have seen reports of any flare-ups of demonic worship or cultlike activity in the past few years. There hasn't been a need to call for Ranma's specific talents as a Ranger. Once Acnologia is dealt with, that state of affairs should continue. We do not use a war hammer to crack an egg, ladies and gentlemen."

That wasn't quite true, Roland reflected. His army had dealt with several small-scale devils, the type of devils created by worship rather than specific dark magic, in Sin. Enca had been a hotbed for cult activities, but none of it had been devoted to Zeref. There had also been a single more powerful devil sighted that had called for Mirajane to be dispatched. But that was it. And frankly, given how much Ranma had done for Ishgar as a whole, he deserved retirement far more than several of the Wizard Saints, in Roland's opinion. So when Toma called for a vote, Roland instantly seconded it, beating out Rose by a mere instant.

The votes were tabulated until finally, Meredrain was the only one who had not voted just yet. The King of Caeelum had said nothing up to this point but voted in favor of letting Ranma walk away from his Ranger status, as did Rose, San Jiao Shin, Roland and Toma, while the kings of Joya, Stella, Desierto and Iceberg had all voted against it. If Seven voted against, it would be a hung vote, and would need to be redone at a later date, with the ruling merchant houses of Bellum called to provide a monitor to add their votes just in case.

For once, Meredrain won the argument with his wife, and as he voted in favor, Ranma very carefully did not allow himself to smirk at the words that had finally swayed her, having heard them with his enhanced Dragon Slayer hearing. *Allow me to retire and possibly call on me if need be in the future rather than make an enemy out of me now. Politics and egos, who would ever want to be king or anything like it? It seems as if putting on a crown removes your common sense. I'll still be around, just not as easily called on, and if you do, you better be calling me in for something serious.*

"The motion is carried. Ranma, we thank you for your previous service and look forward to your report on the battle against Acnologia being your last to this body," Toma said smoothly as the motion was finally passed.

Just in time, too, because as the brooch disappeared into one of Toma's pockets, Irene came through the door to one side. His eyes narrowing, Toma looked at her thoughtfully, then around Irene's deliciously full figure towards the open doorway. "Diplomat Belserion, I could've sworn I had guards out there," he said formally.

"You do. They are all in one piece. Frozen at the moment, but all in one piece," Irene said, striding forward. "I have received news from the Empire. There have been a few developments, and we need to hasten this process along." She looked over at the others,

including the King of Stella and Caelum. "I believe some of the objections towards me speaking for the Alvarez Empire were that the Alvarez Empire had no Emperor when I was dispatched, correct? Some of you feared that any agreement with me could be repudiated once the problem was dealt with and a new emperor was crowned or if Zeref ever returned."

Having heard of how Zeref was dealt with from Ranma and Erza, Irene had a hard time keeping a snicker from her voice. Locked in the area of the Celestial Spirit Realm devoted to Virgo, the only way that would happen was if Virgo herself headed back there and brought him out. Which the pink-haired Celestial Spirit was not going to do.

It was a way of getting rid of someone who was supposedly immortal that would never have occurred to Irene but she felt it had indeed worked, which she was altogether pleased about at this point. "Well, I now speak with the authority of Emperor Larcade, Emperor Zeref's son."

She ignored the look of confusion on Ranma's face, and he kept silent as she gazed around the room. *Yes, he is not a natural son, as that would have been impossible for Zeref, given the curse on him by the god of death. But that is not important right now.*

"In return for aid from the people of Ishgar against the common threat known as Acnologia, we are prepared to sign full, uninhibited trade agreements, as well as a nonaggression pact with Ishgar as a whole." She held up several scrolls that her two aides had carefully, painstakingly gone over in very little time with the scribes back home in the Empire. "There is quite a bit of room for further negotiation, but I believe that these will suffice for now. And if they do, I believe that we need to start moving. At this point, spending further time here means more thousands of lives lost in the Empire." While Irene no longer cared so much about the Empire, she still felt obligated to do her part for it as well as she could.

The kings all looked at one another, some of them somewhat poleaxed at this sudden reversal and unilateral statement. Irene could relate. She had been looking forward to taunting the kings about how Ranma and all the other Dragon Slayers had agreed to help the Empire already, thus undercutting their bargaining power. But now, at Larcade's demand to get a move on, she couldn't, as there was too much of time crunch to allow for further negotiations.

Eventually, Toma recovered and said mildly, "Well, in that case, Diplomat Belserion, please have a seat and unfreeze my guards so I can send for my scribes. If these agreements are as thoroughly as you seem to think they are, we shouldn't take too much longer to finalize them."

End Chapter

I'm still not satisfied with the lemon. I may go back and rewrite that scene a bit before posting the chapter over on fanfic for Valentine's Day.